

THE WILD CHRONICLES

by Tim Pompey

The Wild Chronicles have been revised and expanded from previously published works. These works include:

Last Chance Bookstore

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Other Works by Tim Pompey:

Last Chance Bookstore
The Far Edge of the Western Slopes
Mrs. Parsley and the Tale of Mossel's Farm
Dream-scape
One Side Leads to the Other
Down the Road
Burnt by Sun
Find Walter
Freeland
Blindspot
Deep Down
Dr. Bart's Lonely Soul Collection
The Perilous Paintings of Lily Day
Primitive Terrain
Nightfly

Published by Tim Pompey

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PROLOGUE

—

It's tough out here.

Most people have houses, family, friends. I have none of these. I survive by my skills—hunting and otherwise—which I've honed over a long period of time. Yes, some may say she's just a girl, too young to live out here at her age. She needs a decent home. Then again, I didn't have a choice. One day, I just had to grow up on my own. Fight or die. That's the motto out here. Nobody feels sorry for me. Nobody has offered me anything different.

Of course, I started living out here as a young girl. Now I'm a young lady, or so I assume as my body and mind change and I get stronger and smarter.

Strong, smart, the key words. You won't make it out here unless you learn quick and stay sharp. The law of nature will eat you up in a hurry. Between soldiers, outlaws, and the Wild Ones, I have your hands full. And that's before I eke out something to eat and some place to sleep.

Today, for instance, the weather is awful—sweltering, muggy—the game is scarce, and I've got a bunch of soldiers with nothing better to do than give me grief. You'd think they'd have better things to do. Why bother to chase me around? I'm a nobody in this land, one

woman. That's it. One woman against everyone. And now I've got to avoid these mucks as if they were a swarming hive of bees.

Right now, I've got my eyes peeled over a small ridge, waiting for them to circle around and come back. I gave them the slip once today and led them on a merry chase. I doubt they're too happy about it. Not too smart, these guys, but they're persistent and they have the weapons to make my life miserable.

There they are. Not terribly subtle, this bunch. Kind of clumsy if you ask me. And noisy. Normally I would have no trouble ditching them. These guys, though, they're on a mission. I don't know why, but here they come and I'm their target. I think someone has ordered them to catch me. Ha. As if that will happen. There's one shooting at me now. Time to move out.

What I really worry about are the drones. Those pesky little snoops who can see like an eagle. They're everywhere, like the bees I talked about. They have eyes in the back of their head, and in the front, and on the side. They're awful.

This is rough country. Not a lot of trees or rivers. Not so many places to hide. It's hard to know where to hang out so they won't find me. How to fool a drone. Is that even possible? Yeah. I've done it, but it's not easy.

As I said, I've lived out here for years, managed to get along with most people. A few have taken shots at me. Of course, they might have their reasons. I'm not saying what I do is always honest, and they're just as hard up as me. But what I do is no big deal, either. It's just day to

day. We're all fighting for our lives. What do I take that matters so much to them?

A grove of bushes. Quite handy when you need them. And trust me, I need them now.

It bears repeating. It's tough out here on your own, but I do all right. Food is where you find it, and most of the springs and creeks have been pointed out to me by friendlier neighbors. They don't seem to mind if I tag along and talk occasionally. It's all in how you ask the question and whether you can offer anything in return.

So. A little good news. Those pesky soldiers seem to have lost my trail. I told you they weren't too bright. Still, I've wasted time on them that I could have spent hunting.

Dinner tonight. Probably rabbit again. I've lost count of how many rabbits I've eaten. I'm surprised the rabbits haven't banded together to hunt me.

I'm a survivor. I'm also someone you don't want to mess with face to face. I don't mind a good fight if my back's to the wall. Don't test my patience.

Overhead. Another drone. They never stop. They know they'll find me. If not today, in a week. But I won't stop either. Never. Because. I know this place. I know how to hide. I know how to hunt. There isn't a rock or ridge that I can't use to my advantage. And I want to live. Don't ask me why. Can't say I have a bright future. Still. Life is life. When you have it, you hang on tight. It's always a good day when you can say good night and still be breathing.

Let them come if they want. I'll never quit. I'm tough, real tough. I don't plan to surrender. I don't plan to let

them catch me. I don't plan to be here in this same place tomorrow. That's the way I live. I just . . . won't . . . quit. Never. Never.

For heaven's sake. Another drone. Oh well.

That's it. That's my life. Take it or leave it. Now. I'm done talking. Gotta run. As you can tell, I'm a really busy woman.

Stick it up your tailpipe, you bunch of morons. Hope you get mauled by scorpions.

Good night.

I.

1.

Last Chance Bookstore

On a winding road through a wide plain consisting of dirt, rock and broken asphalt, with the sun beating down like a giant torch, a town whose crumbling sign read: Last Chance. Deserted for some time I imagine, filled with dilapidated buildings and small wood houses, all burned and looted.

Last chance for what? I wondered. As if my young life hadn't seen enough trouble already, and this was, what, a warning? An information stand? A tourist draw? Was this my last chance to see an old ghost town?

Whatever the reason, I considered the sign to be good news. Here was a town that offered at least one chance to see something human, even if what I saw was only hanging by a wire.

I had walked for weeks across this deserted country dodging all sorts of terrible things. Mostly soldiers determined to stick me in a cage. It felt as if the land had rejected any hope I valued and thrown everything human and otherwise into some massive secret grave.

All except for me. Girl. Orphan. Vagrant. Through no choice of my own, a wandering, motherless woman. And

why me? Why only me left to stare at this sign? A question without clues.

Looking down the town's main street, it seemed that the same chance extended beyond the town as before the town, which is to say, no chance at all. No hills or mountains to speak of. Just the average dusty terrain I had been traveling for years on end, and only the soldiers were left to hunt me down, point a gun, and threaten my soul with damnation.

"Guess I should take my chance while I still can," I mumbled to myself. Then I added, "Whatever that last chance is, I hope it involves food and water."

Yes. A strange sight indeed, and an even stranger thought: What shall I do? Do? Do? As if there was anything to do but keep walking. And if this indeed was my last chance, it seemed the same as all my other chances. What did I have to gain? Then again, what did I have to lose? Nothing that hadn't already been stripped from me. So it was that, having surveyed the scene, I did what came natural. Anyone would have done it. I walked forward.

Not exactly in a straight line. I veered off here and there to poke my nose in a window or a door. After all, I was curious about the whole town and thought perhaps there might be more to it than just a main street.

There was, of course, but nothing that stood out. Little shops, a small bar, even a hotel in the center of town, which for the life of me, I couldn't understand, at least for a town this size. No traffic. No people. But there it stood. Elk Lodge in big bold letters on a sign suffering with

cracked white paint. The sign hung catacorner, perched on its wall by a single desperate screw. Then again, from the looks of it, all signage in Last Chance must be desperate.

I started with the guessing games. A town this old: How long had it been since anyone even whispered a word here. 25 years? 50 years? Maybe longer.

How fitting in this terrain. A town filled with ghosts, the quiet kind who won't give you a clue as to what happened here. Just wind and empty streets and the occasional squeak of a rusted door or a hinge on a shutter.

Seems that Last Chance has had its last chance, I concluded and kept on moving down the street.

—

I saw it. Right in the middle of town. Dressed up as if it was still in daily use. It was a long, rectangular brick building, one story, in tip-top shape. It seemed out of character with the rest of its surrounding. A well-manicured porch and a sign — this one pristine — attached to its front. It defied what my eyes told me about Last Chance. Someone lived here. Still. Someone was taking advantage of their opportunity to live in Last Chance.

Impossible, I thought.

It's been my experience, having lived for years on my own, that if you travel in this wilderness long enough, you see a lot of strange things. But this. Nothing was as strange as this.

When you see something this unusual, you immediately become apprehensive. You start to make excuses. Your sight is playing tricks on you. It's just the heat, the dust, the unbearable craziness of a single lost traveler. Slowly I approached. Slowly I stopped. Slowly I read.

Last Chance Bookstore.

Good Lord, if this didn't beat all. The strange town just got stranger. The door itself was closed, but welcoming: flower patterns painted on the upper half, a mat that welcomed me with some type of obscure symbols, and a notice in the window that read Open.

It was late afternoon and because I was hot and tired, the Last Chance Bookstore appealed to me, made me believe that I had found an oasis.

Only a bookstore, yes, but compared to the rest of the scenery, it might as well have been a first-class hotel. For all I knew, this place might carry some enchanted food and water. Why else would it stand here among its fellow relics to welcome me?

I stood for several minutes just making up my mind. Perhaps it took that long for my brain to kick in and make the simple decision. Perhaps I doubted my senses, my sight, my intuition.

It had been years since I had even stepped inside a structure this attractive. I hesitated for some unknown reason. Maybe I was trying to remember what it felt like to enter a bookstore. Indeed, was it still an option for a vagrant like me? Would somebody stop me? Throw me back into the street?

Reality trickled down my neck in the form of sweat and then logic. From the hot sun, I sought shelter, and here it stood. Yet here I stood. Why was I such a doubter?

These are the kinds of thoughts that run through your head when you've lived alone for so long. I took a deep breath and walked up the steps, eased inside the door, and shut it carefully.

Sure enough. My mind had not deceived me. My senses were intact. My brain was functioning. I was not hallucinating or suffering the final stages of exhaustion. What I saw was real. I could touch the walls and feel the floor. Front to back, I could see everything in its place. Clean and cozy. Well organized. Books sorted neatly on rows of shelves.

Whoever ran this place had an eye for detail and a desire for neatness. Everything ready for customers to browse and buy. It was indeed a bookstore, and precisely now, I was its only customer. That in and of itself made me feel very proud. Yes, I had found an unoccupied bookstore in the middle of nowhere, which meant that everything I saw, I owned.

—

The effect of books on a shelf created a cozy feeling. There were boundaries to my travels, walls for comfort, an enclosed space that offered protection.

"Golly Joseph," I said out loud, my voice bouncing off the books and back so fast I almost ducked.

Behind a counter on my left, there were windows to let in light, and a narrow corridor that stretched much further than I had imagined, and down that corridor, more windows, more light.

It was so clean, with two aisles of shelves filled with volumes of books. A rare mind had worked to put all this together. Categorized. Labels on the shelves. Filed alphabetically by author. I walked cautiously down one aisle and brushed my fingers along the spines, turned a corner, and walked up the other aisle.

I noticed some books I had heard of, while others were unknown. I asked myself: How long since I even picked up a book? What would it be like to sit and read again?

Some memories came back to me.

Afternoons with my mother sorting through pages filled with animals, magic, knights, dragons, rabbits. Rabbits. Something about a young girl chasing a rabbit down a hole. Another about a rabbit being chased in a garden.

But that had been long before the partitions, the reprisals, the sorting of the loyal from the disloyal, the enforcement of the oath.

Books, too, had gone through the same sort of review and rejection. I couldn't even remember the last time I had seen a book. Yet here they were, stout and recognizable, defying the odds and the powers that be, so numerous and . . . inviting.

"Hello," I called out, sure that someone must be around. Were they hiding? From me? Not that I would

blame them. In the wilderness, the dangers were too numerous to count. Not only the sight of a house in such good condition, but the contraband, the works in this store that defied the will of the Order. The whole store could be confiscated. Just standing here among all these books was probably illegal. Especially for me.

—

As I stood by the counter, I heard something thump in the back. I spun around and yelled out, “Hello?”

Still no voices, but definite sounds of movement.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said, throwing out a sympathetic offer.

Easing my way to the rear, I noticed, off to the right, a small nook, perhaps a reading room. It was tucked in the far corner of the store, out of sight of any passing customers.

There was whispering – a tiny voice I distinctly heard say, “Hush, Horner.”

“I know you’re there,” I said. “You can come out. I won’t hurt you.”

Peeking around the corner, I saw two people. One, a child with brown skin, the other an elderly black man. The child was dressed in a print dress, her hair pulled tight in frizzy pigtails. The man’s white kinky hair stood straight up on his head, as if he had been struck by lightning. He was thin and gaunt. From his lips, he emitted a small whimper. In age he was old. In mind, he

acted the same as the child. They were holding each other for protection.

I stood openly in their doorway. They crept as tight as they could into the furthest corner of the room.

“Hello,” I said.

The little girl did not speak.

The old man stuttered in a fragile voice, “P-p-please don’t hurt us.”

I understood their terror. I had seen enough, experienced enough, to realize its depth. This was a land of terror, with no quarter given, and always ripe with the meanness of strangers.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said.

The little girl let go of the old man. In a deep drawl that I took to be old U.S. South, she inquired: “What’s your name?”

“Bridget,” I replied. “Bridget Seegraw.”

Once I spoke, she let go of Horner and stared at me. “Mine’s Harrieta Murcomb. And this is my friend, Horner Wilson. He’s old and a little feeble in the head, but he’s good people. Me and Dakota take care of him. Right, Horner?”

Horner mumbled something.

“Pleased to meet you, Harriet and . . . Horner,” I said as gently as I could. Manners had been long forgotten in this land. It took me a second to remember mine.

We watched each other for a while. It was awkward, just knowing what to say to perfect strangers. It’s not often out here you meet new people, and no one is to be

trusted at first glance. The girl, however, brimming with curiosity, broke the tension.

“How old ‘er you?”

“I don’t know,” I said and hesitated. “I’ve lost track of days. Don’t even remember my birthday.”

“I’m eleven,” said Harrieta. “Ms. Dakota keep a good calendar. We always celebrate our birthdays. All of us. Even Horner.”

“Where do you all live?”

“Right here, ma’am. We’re waitin for Dakota to come back. It’s gettin dark. Time for . . .”

Her voice faltered and again I understood. Nighttime. The time of the Wild Ones. But why were these two hiding here? They might as well be standing in the middle of the street. A Wild One could hear anything for miles around. There were only a few ways to escape them, and I doubted that hiding in a bookstore was one of them.

As I thought about this, I heard the rapid open and close of a door. I spun around and stood straight against a back window. My fear kicked in, that overwhelming desire to escape and hide.

“Harrieta?” a woman’s strong voice called out.
“Horner?”

I could hear footsteps on the floor, urgent steps.

“They’re okay,” I answered, hoping to avoid any surprise or unpleasant confrontation. The last thing I wanted was to fight.

A large woman in a long brown dress and a white blouse slipped around the corner. Older. Skin tanned from the sun. Maybe early 50s. Round in all ways. Hips.

Bosom. Face. Hair bun wrapped on top. She was carrying a sack which she hurriedly deposited on the floor.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I said. “I noticed your bookstore, and your sign said Open, so I walked inside.”

“Who are you?”

“Bridget, ma’am. Bridget Seegraw, from the east country, but I’ve been traveling for months, even years. Fact, I’ve been walking so long, I don’t even know where I’m at, other than the town’s sign. Last Chance. And this bookstore.”

The woman eyed me sternly, searching for a lie in my body language.

“Truly, I meant no harm,” I said, “and the sign did say Open.”

She relaxed and let out a deep sigh.

“Well, for sure you gave me a start. Whatever the sign said, I don’t get any visitors any more, not friendly ones anyway.”

“I apologize if I scared you. And your name is . . .?”

“Dakota. Dakota Robishaw. Manager of this bookstore, and caregiver to these two lovely people.”

I bowed slightly and said, “Nice to meet you, Ms. Robishaw.”

Dakota looked me up and down. “Call me Dakota, please.”

She glanced out the window where I leaned. “You know it’s getting late outside. Where do you plan on spending the night?”

The surprise must have shown on my face. "I don't generally go to sleep at night. Much too dangerous. Only today, I couldn't sleep. Too hot and no shade for miles. I only found you by accident."

Dakota looked at me firmly. "There are no accidents at this bookstore. Only the outcomes of your intentions."

Her statement stunned me into a moment's silence. I had to give her reply some thought.

"Well," I said, "that may be, but I can promise you, nothing about today was intentional, except me walking."

"Intention is a two-sided sword," she said. Clearly, she was a woman who understood the meaning of life. "We all play our role when it comes down to it."

"Yes, ma'am," I said like a good student. "But I can't say I was thinking about too much today except for food and water, and maybe a little shade. I haven't seen anyone in a long time, especially a lady like you running a bookstore. So, if it's all right, I won't argue your point, if you just show me a little kindness."

Dakota looked over at Harrieta and Horner. I could see her calculating the risk.

"Of course," she said as if I was a potential customer. "We are always welcoming. We here at the Last Chance Bookstore pride ourselves in giving the best service. I suppose the fact that you walked in during our normal hours of business means we should be friendly. So, if you wish, if you'd like a decent meal, you may stay here for the night. I apologize for not being here to greet you. I was just out retrieving some canned goods from around

town. There's still some good scavenging if you know where to look."

"But how do you stay out of sight, out of hearing, of the Wild Ones?"

"I assure you, we are safe here," Dakota insisted.

Safe? Here? Then I retraced my thoughts. If Dakota and Harrieta and Horner were confident, why shouldn't I be? After all, the very name of the store suggested that being inside this building was one of those "last" chances that I should seize.

This town, this store seemed to be extending a rare gift, and I was no fool when it came to accepting what was generously offered. Take the gift, ask questions later.

"Thank you," I said. "That's very kind."

The room went quiet. The sound of muffled noises came from somewhere in town. I knew those noises. The Wild Ones preparing to hunt.

"Come, Harrieta," Dakota commanded. "It's time to prepare for the evening."

Harrieta jumped to attention and began pulling down the window shades. She changed the direction of the sign from Open to Closed and bolted the door.

Dakota announced from the other side of the room, "Supper tonight is a lovely combination of canned peaches and chili beans,"

I sat next to the wall under the window sash, in a daze, not understanding what coincidence (or non-coincidence) had brought me here or what fate might save me from the outside world, at least for tonight. All I could do was watch as the two women went to work.

Horner eased over next to me and took my hand
“Everythin be all right,” he assured me in a voice as light
and gentle as spring rain.

I looked into his eyes and believed him.

—

The smell of a hot meal was welcome. As a daily scavenger, usually I went with what could be eaten outright as a scrap or directly from a can. That and whatever game I could shoot with my bow and arrow. The pistol I kept strictly for self-defense.

As I waited for the meal, I kept my hand on my preferred weapon: my bow and arrow. The threat of Wild Ones outside made me wary of their attacks. Dakota, carrying a pot of beans in one hand and some mismatched spoons in the other, noticed my alertness.

“I see you’ve battled these creatures,” she said. “Your survival instincts must be quite good to have lived as long as you have out there.”

“I can take care of myself,” I said, focusing on the front set of windows.

“Yes, I imagine you have a weapon or two in your bag just for that purpose.”

She carried the beans over to where Harrieta and Horner sat by the back wall. It seemed customary that they murmur a quiet prayer among themselves before eating. Each of them also had their own metal bowl and spoons.

“You’re welcome to join us,” she offered.

“I don’t understand,” I declared. “The Wild Ones are so close. You’re not concerned?”

“Always concerned,” she said, “never worried.”

I heard a long howl and a rustling on the store’s porch. Instinctively, I squeezed my weapon and waited for the windows to start breaking, the door to crash open. Perhaps if we died, we would all die together, but not without a fight.

What’s more, I never imagined I would have anything or anyone to protect. Still, if this was the end, I supposed this was as good a death as I could hope for – being someone’s guardian.

“We are safe,” Dakota stated as a matter of fact. “Come and eat.”

Not wanting to appear rude or skeptical, I eased myself over to the pot of chili beans.

“I brought you a bowl,” said Dakota, “and a spoon.”

I took both and with one eye on the door and began to eat.

In silence, we all ate until the pot had been cleaned. Then Dakota brought out the peaches and we finished those as well.

In the darkness, we listened to the commotion outside. Some dusk still showed through the windows. I could hear the restless shuffling of Wild Ones.

Human, and yet not. Men and women, but not in the civilized sense. They had been set free from their inhibitions and turned loose to follow whatever desire inhabited their soul. Most of that desire included death

and hate and the will to carry that out in whatever fashion they could imagine.

They were considered cleansers of the land by those who ran the country. Purveyors, they were called. They assumed that justice and death were one and the same for those who lived outside the boundaries of Aether, their great city in the east.

The Wild Ones were their legal system, their means of cleaning up vermin like me. Dangerous yes, but also tragic in their descent into madness. Sometimes at night I could hear them crying. For what reason I could not tell, only that something in their soul was alone and void of anything good. They lived in a darkness of their own making.

“You are worried?” said Dakota.

“Yes,” I said as if aroused from a daydream.

“I can understand,” she said. “You seek an answer.”

“No, not really. I have no answers anymore, and I don’t care to think about it. I only care about what I can see and hear.”

“You choose to believe what you see.”

“Always.”

“You see us, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And we are not afraid, at least not tonight.”

I hesitated. “No.”

She shifted her legs and leaned toward me as if to hone her point. “Then choose to believe what you see.”

I simply gawked at her, uncomprehending.

She took note of my apprehension.

"How sad," she murmured.

"Who's sad?"

"You. Like the Wild Ones, who only choose to believe what they see and hear."

At that point, a hand struck the window above us. All of us jumped. Horner dropped his bowl and Harrieta grabbed it quickly before it clattered on the floor.

"That what I hear is dangerous is a matter of fact," I replied with a trace of smugness.

"But it's only part of the story," she said.

"And what other part of the story is there?"

"Not just story. Stories." She swept her hand across the room. "Look at where you are. You are surrounded by them."

What could I say, for she, too, had stated a fact.

"Time for bed," she said. A mother to her children. I assumed that also included me.

As if on cue, Harrieta and Horner scurried around the room and pulled bedding from a shelf. They all gathered on the right-hand side of the store, an area without windows, wide enough for all of them to stretch together. They huddled like a pile of puppies and waved to me.

"Come join us," said Harrieta. "In here, it's safe."

Like a puppy myself, I walked to the edge. Their arms reached out for me and held me tight, held each other tight. For the first time in ages, I was warm with human companionship. I stopped worrying about anything. Food. Wild Ones. The mystery of this place.

In a matter of minutes, I drifted off to somewhere serene and distant, far removed from the chaos and

trouble that had been my previous existence. A place of solace and comfort. A place where knowledge was encouraged. A place for the lost to find themselves. Here, nestled in a bookstore, with a woman who knew all about books and people, with Harrieta and Horner as my companions, I was safe.

2.

The Code

I woke in the early morning hours and listened to the clamor outside. It had grown fierce, as if the Wild Ones, sensing prey, were angry that none was found. Dakota was right. Our scent, our presence, was shielded by these brick walls. How? I wondered.

And what about me? Hidden from view, yet equally wild. After years of living on my own, I also had become a creature of the darkness. In every sense, a hunter. I was young, but not inexperienced with death. I knew where to strike, how to pounce quickly and melt into the darkness. The Wild Ones served me no purpose except to kill as necessary. But in this, I had grown quite accomplished and even sporting.

There was some moonlight shining through the store windows. Every so often, shadows brushed against the glass, along with yipping, cursing, and manic laughter. The dare of the Wild Ones. If you're alive, come on out to play.

Yet, here I lay, wild child not so different from those outside. Only tonight, protected and sheltered. The irony was not lost on me, the fact that, residing with humans for

just a night, I felt protective. Dakota, Harrieta, Horner. Why? After all these years caring for only myself, it didn't seem reasonable to think I owed them anything except a thank you for a meal and some sleep.

My churning thoughts fed my restlessness, as if the Wild Ones were not the only ones seeking the hunt. Since I had lived such a solitary existence, their own wild nature had become part of my soul. I would not admit this openly to Dakota, for fear of being tossed out. But here I was, lying on my back, thinking about the prey that sought me.

Quietly, I slipped out from the huddled group and searched through my pouch. The bow and arrows were still there. Menacing. Deadly. Also a form of entertainment. The Wild Ones and I were competitors, our goals the same.

Fitting the bow in my fist, grasping a handful of arrows, I slipped to the front door and peeked down the street. No doubt, if game was what I sought, I could take my pick.

It remained a mystery to me how these Wild Ones appeared from nowhere. How did they stray so far from civilization? Where did they hide during the day? I had tried many times to catch their trail and track them to their hideouts, but without success. It was as if they vanished like ghosts into the daylight.

Now, however, within the protection of this building, I had the upper hand and I intended to use it. I knew from experience there were far more of them than me. Nonetheless, whoever I could kill would give me great

pleasure. I could kill and slip back inside where they refused to pursue. A distinct tactical advantage.

They were human. This was murder. I never questioned that small bit of morality. But it was also a fair fight. The two of us paired off. To the victor went another day of living. In my years on the run, this had become my obsession. Their death, my survival; life bare knuckled and lacking any other solid purpose.

I looked down at the sleeping pile and suffered a moment of bewilderment. Here were three people so much different, living, even prospering inside a bookstore, indifferent to this threat.

And then there was me and the Wild Ones. You couldn't draw a picture with more contrast. Not daring to poke this idea too deeply, I grasped the knob on the front door, opened it quietly, and slipped outside. I had a birds-eye view of the game at hand, and I was confident that I could win it.

—

I considered myself an accomplished huntress. I knew how to stay out of sight and sit so still that I could become part of the scenery. Many Wild Ones passed by and sniffed, as if they suspected something was nearby, but with me being hidden in plain sight. they only groaned and protested. Maybe Dakota was right. Maybe they knew this bookstore was more than just a building; that its power kept them at bay and left them frustrated.

All animals, human or otherwise, succumb to habit. By now, they probably expected that no one would be waiting for them. This was my advantage. I could kill without being seen. In my recent life, this was how I measured success.

As two Wild Ones turned their backs and huffed at the moon, I slipped an arrow in my bow and raised it. Not even the string squeaked as I prepared my deadly attack. My fingers pulled the shaft easily back. The bow and arrow and I were now one in intent.

From my side, a hand extended and lowered my weapon. My fingers were startled and the arrow shot directly into the ground. It skidded across the street and landed harmlessly near the two Wild Ones.

Dakota sat next to me and put a finger to her lips.

The Wild Ones jumped and wheeled on us. They knew there was someone looking at them, but from where?

Dakota threw a thin sheet over us. Not made of cotton, of some other fabric I had never touched. Metallic. Silver. Large enough to cover our full bodies. Transparent enough to let us see the Wild Ones' response.

Realizing they had been attacked, they prowled around the front of the store looking for the shooter. They no longer spoke as humans spoke. Rather, they grunted, growled, hissed, and howled. Without warning they ran toward the front store window, slapped the glass with their palms, and screamed a cry I had only heard in great mountain cats.

We both flinched and drew ourselves in a tight ball against the store wall. They stood within a foot of our hiding place. If they had reached their hands down or extended their arms, they would have struck us. Then what? Would Dakota's sheet save us?

Dakota held me firm, not just for protection, but to avoid any unnecessary movement on my part, any willingness I might have shared to stand up and fight back.

Finished with their prowling and threats, the Wild Ones walked off down the street laughing. They knew. We all knew. They had come close. Tomorrow, perhaps, they would strike pay dirt.

Sliding slowly to the right, Dakota gripped me as she moved patiently toward the door. Then, in one simple movement, she slid us inside and deftly locked the door.

Releasing the sheet, she folded it squarely, placed it on a shelf, and stood before me like a school mistress about to address an unruly pupil. I knew by the look on her face, it was better to take my punishment than argue back.

Near the counter, Harrieta and Horner cowered, their expressions lit up with curiosity.

For all the kindness they had offered, I had brought them danger. My instincts were not their instincts. My life not their life. I was as much animal as I was human.

It was then that I realized. This bookstore was not just a place for books. It was a different way of living. I knew just from this one experience, if I was to stay with them, I had to find a new way of thinking. The old Bridget had

come face to face with a new civilization. I could no longer be the old Bridget and stay here.

And so it was a choice for me. Having found food, comfort, and a different way of thinking, what would I decide? To remain as the Wild Ones or grow into someone else? To stay here or continue as a life-long drifter?

Because this in a sense was my last chance. Beyond here, only what I had known remained. The same chaos. The same means of survival. The same life and death struggle. The same Bridget, young now, but eventually grown old and lonely and unable to protect herself. With Dakota, Harrieta, and Horner, I had a chance for new life, perhaps even a new soul.

I waited for Dakota to speak. I looked at her squarely and wondered whether I would be given a second chance.

Dakota held me in her gaze, not unkindly, but straight and firm. Her eyes were like knives that cut into my brain. She was a woman self-assured – of herself and of the truth she was about to speak. Her expression was not that of a belittling bearer of bad news. Rather, it was thoughtful, seeking the best way to speak the truth to someone as unruly as me.

“We have a code here,” she said evenly. The daylight had started to creep across the room. Her face began to light up like a warm lamp. “We do not kill unless attacked, and we leave the Wild Ones in peace.”

Code? I thought. I knew of no code except the code of survival. I was a free young woman not subject to any parents, authorities, or for that matter, opinionated

bookstore owners. What I had done, I had been doing for many years without complaint from anyone. It was as natural to me as breathing.

“I have no code,” I replied, “and I’m not aware of any such thing as a code. I’ve been on my own for many years and survived more than you can imagine by keeping my wits and striking first, before trouble found me. That’s the way I’ve lived.”

Dakota loosened her stance and spoke with understanding. “I can see that,” she said. “I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through out there on your own. But I believe you are smart, alert, teachable, even kindhearted, and here in this building, in this store, we do not condone murder in any form or fashion. That is our code.”

“They are Wild Ones,” I said firmly. “They live to kill. I live to kill them so they will not kill me tomorrow. None that I’ve crossed have had any good intention toward me. If I don’t kill them, they will surely attack and kill me, or someone else. You, for example. And I want to live. Whoever they are, whatever they are, they’re not human, not really. They’re like wild animals. They are what I call them: Wild Ones.”

“They are human,” she argued. “They have simply been given a different path. And some were not given any option except to be exactly what they are. That is not their fault. And so, we forgive them. We do not kill them.”

She paused and let her words sink in.

Her statement surprised me. I had never heard anyone refer to them as anything but dangerous, like bears or snakes.

She continued, a little more resolute. "More to the point, and something I think you can surely understand, you could kill them by the dozens and how many would return?"

I remained silent.

"There is a reason behind what we do here. Last Chance. Last Chance Bookstore."

"Which is?" I said suspiciously.

"We few who remain are here for redemption."

Now she had me confused. Redemption? I didn't even know the meaning of the word. Who on earth needed redemption out here? Food, water, a place to hide. None of this required redemption.

"You cannot kill your way out of this," she said emphatically. "You are one woman. They are hundreds, even thousands. Two dead tonight does not mean two less Wild Ones tomorrow night. It only means you have eliminated a bare few and even worse, brought murder to your own soul. And if you kill them, then you are just like them."

"Me? A Wild One?"

"Yes."

I waited and pondered. The Wild Ones had only been like game to me. I had never thought we were connected.

"I already spoke. I don't have a code."

"I believe you do," she said. "I believe you simply have not talked to anyone about it. Living alone, how could you possibly have any idea of what is or isn't your code?"

"I've had long days and nights to think about a lot of things, but a code, out here, in this place? Who needs one?"

"You do," she emphasized.

"Well, I don't see why." I could feel my muscles tighten. My whole body resisted her.

"You have come to a bookstore. You have entered a place filled with the foundations of our code. The power of the word. It's what separates you from the Wild Ones."

Her truth penetrated my tough sunbaked hide. She stood patiently and waited for my response. Of course, she had led me to the obvious question: "And what is your code?"

Dakota kneeled and took my face in her hands. Her fingers were firm but easy.

"We do not murder," she said. "We may kill in self-defense, and I have done that to protect these two whom I love, but only if necessary. We do not seek the hunt. We live peacefully and rely on the strength of this place and the protection it affords."

"And what is this place?"

"As it's named," she declared. "The Last Chance Bookstore. We live to learn and to be humans, as humans once were, before the division and the Order turned those it cast out into savages."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"Of course not," she said tenderly. "You just arrived. This is your first lesson in being human. You are Bridget Seegraw, a young woman ready to claim her place as one of the few true women left in this world. A woman of

distinct civilization. You have come here for a reason. What, I'm not certain, but that is what we'll discover together. Your reason for being. My reason for helping you. Harrieta and Horner's reason for treating you like a sister. If you do not want that, then go as you please and live your life as you have. But I can tell you. If you are traveling west, there are no more towns out there. Only . . ."

"Only?" I challenged. This I wanted to know. This would be the reason for my choice to go or stay.

"Nothing," she said slowly. "There is nothing out there but death. At least until you reach the mountains. Then, there is a different kind of life, but if you're alone, it's the same end. You will die there also as surely as you breathe and speak."

What I had thought earlier now reflected in the fingered rays of approaching daylight and the clear words of Dakota Robishaw, who appeared to me as both a mother and a prophet.

"And what of my weapons?" I pleaded in a last-ditch defense.

"They are yours to do with as you please. But from here on, your choices are based on our code. You no longer have a reason to murder. That is our code. That is your choice to make. That is your reason to stay or go."

Against the wall, I sat quietly letting the new day stream across my hands and legs. Without a word, I looked up at her. She looked back, her face calm, her demeanor unfazed by any of my arguments.

In this way, we looked deeply into each other's souls. I felt a hint of warmth creep into my heart, something I had not felt for many years.

But I was not ready to make an all-out confession of loyalty. I had spent too much time on my own and certainly practiced no code when it came to the Wild Ones. The idea of thinking of them as human still perplexed me. They did not act human, and I knew how dangerous and unpredictable they could be.

Between her and me there passed a time to choose. She presented me with an option. I presented her with an obstacle. Neither of us gave an inch. Until. I decided. In my own self-interest, no doubt, but still I decided. Better to agree than be hungry and without shelter.

In my mind, she held the high card and I was smart enough to see it. She saw it, too, but in a slightly different light. She offered hope. She stood for the right principle. She had the better motive. All the more reason, at least in the short term, to surrender.

"Okay, so the code. You win for now."

Dakota relaxed. "You always have the right to make your own choice."

"We see things differently," I admitted.

"We do, for now," she said, "but there's always time."

The room was hazy and peaceful. The Wild Ones had disappeared into the daylight. The rising sun proclaimed that all were safe. And the code. Today, it had prevailed.

"Now," she proclaimed, "who wants breakfast?"

I knew without a doubt all this thinking had made me hungry. "I would be most grateful," I said.

“Then we shall all eat together,” she replied and went to the stove to prepare our meal.

After she left, Harrieta sat next to me and took my hand. I was overwhelmed with the speed of my so-called civilization and was grateful and relieved for a moment of tenderness. The breath in my chest passed like air released slowly from a balloon.

“She’s a good woman,” Harrieta whispered. Horner nodded in agreement.

All my arguments otherwise disappeared in the warm, bright sunlight.

3.

A Fresh Start

On the surface, the town of Last Chance was deserted and forlorn, but in fact it was not without amenities.

My first morning with Dakota, Harrieta and Horner, we walked down a street and then to the edge of town to an underground bungalow. Somebody must have been preparing for the end times with a survival bunker. It was equipped with a well for fresh water, a small wood burning stove to heat that water, and a room with a door and a bath tub in which to pour that water and take a bath.

We all shared a turn, heating, draining, pouring, and cleaning ourselves with actual bars of soap and shampoo. Dakota brought an armful of clean white towels she pulled off a shelf to dry ourselves.

While we waited for each other, she entertained us with stories about magic animals and ancient spells that she claimed could turn rocks into bread and trees into soft beds with velvet sheets and gold pillows. She spoke of a lizard who could sing and a dragon fly with wings strong enough to carry a horse.

When we asked her about Last Chance, she had even more stories.

“I was told this town used to be lively with folks,” she said. “People would come for miles to hear someone play the piano or the violin and fine dinners would be served at the hotel for those who could afford it. Dignitaries would travel through and spend the night. The streets were paved. The town also had a sheriff and a mayor, a grocery store, an ice cream shop, and a hardware store for tools. It was a fine town. And then . . .”

“What happened?” I asked.

“What happened to all the midlands,” she said wistfully. “The Order starved the towns and let violence overwhelm the region. Those who resisted the Order were killed. Those who fled were captured and beaten. Now all that remains is what you see, and some of what you don’t see. The few of us that are here, we live quietly, as out of sight as possible. But still, we remain.”

Her story piqued my interest. “How did you come to this town?”

Dakota sighed. “Believe it or not, I came on the back of a white buffalo whose fur was as soft as goose down. I could sleep on it day or night, whenever I was tired. It brought me from the north where giant forests covered the earth and the lakes were sparkling and clean, the size of small oceans.”

Such a strange story, I thought. Was it real or imagined?

“But . . . why come to a place like this, so lonely and dangerous?”

Her eyes looked at me as if they were sparkling diamonds. “Because I still sensed life here, though the place looked the same as when you found it. I sensed it, and a few people shared stories with me about it, stories I’ve shared with you. And besides, Bridget.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “As I’ve learned, you cannot escape danger anywhere you live. It’s part of the landscape. As for loneliness, well, lucky for me several years ago, I found Harrieta and Horner not far from this place, abandoned by another party that had been crossing the midlands. So, now they have become my family. And then, there’s the books.”

Her face grew pensive.

“When I first saw the store, I had never seen anything so precious. All these words, and the powers they held. It was unthinkable to me that there was no owner to claim the place. The store was sitting idle, well-tended, but no one had touched it in decades. I don’t claim to be the owner, only the caretaker. It is as alive as me, just in a different way. That you will have to learn for yourself. And today it remains as clean as when I first found it. It was, as I’ve told you, protected. It has a mind of its own, but I found its presence welcoming, even nurturing. Here, together with my two friends, I found a home. And now . . . there is you.”

My mind flooded with questions, too many to share with Dakota all at once. But one thing I did ask: “The bookstore. Do you think it likes me?”

“You would not be here otherwise,” she vowed.

—

Eventually, it was my turn to take a bath. It took longer than I thought, with all the grit and dirt I had accumulated. Dakota gave me a bristle brush to clean my fingernails. It took some extra hot water and a lot of effort. I was offered a hair brush to untangle my locks and nail clippers to even out my fingers and toe nails.

“She dirty,” I heard Harrieta whisper before Dakota could shush her.

She was absolutely right. I hadn’t thought of it until I tried to clean myself up. I was more than dirty. I was filthy.

When I emerged, there was something else waiting for me. A piece of cloth I was not familiar with. No, a piece of clothing.

“I have a whole collection of clothes in a house not far from here. I’ve fixed it up like a little clothing shop. I use it when I need it for myself, for Harrieta, for Horner. Sometimes I sew as well. Looking through the place, I found the perfect dress for you.”

“A dress?” I said skeptically.

“Yes, my dear,” she said with a chuckle. “That is what we women call a dress. You are a young woman and this is what young women wear. I wear a dress, a skirt, other things appropriate for my age. This is a gift for you.”

A gift again, and again, a person who remained unappreciative. “Who cares about dresses?”

“We as women do because they are what defines part of our womanhood. Not always, but sometimes. Today, I

thought you'd look nice in a dress. Humor me, for today anyway."

"What's wrong with my old clothes?"

"They're old," she said, "and I burned them, just so you wouldn't argue with me."

"So from now on . . ."

"I'll find you other things, comfortable things, but for now, you're going to wear a dress."

"And how does a woman normally look?"

"Well, what do I look like?"

"So you're what I'm supposed to be?"

"Uhh, yes. Think of me as a role model. Think of me as, well, a woman."

"But . . . dresses? What's the point? Who cares if I wear a dress?"

"I do," she said. "Harrieta cares. So, try it on. See what you think."

"I don't understand."

"I know. Why wear clothes at all?" She held back a laugh.

"It keeps the sun off," I said, "and the bugs from biting."

She couldn't help it. She giggled and my face turned red from embarrassment. My reply had been thickheaded.

"Your life is different now," she said. "You're a young woman, not a savage. Trust me and I'll help you understand."

She showed me how to wear the dress. Then she took me to a mirror to show me off. The person who stood there looked as different as a rock from a stream. The

gritty Bridget, the caked dirt Bridget from years on the plains, the ratty-clothed Bridget, had disappeared, and in her place, a clean, pretty woman in a dress, with hair that ran smooth down her back.

I noticed for the first time that I was tall. My face was thin but shapely. My eyes were blue. A memory flashed. I recalled my mother. I remembered because we looked similar and standing in front of the mirror, her face, her sandy hair, stared back at me. It turned out my own hair was a cross between brown and red. There were colors in my hair that I had never seen before. Clean colors.

“Do I look like a woman?” I couldn’t help but wonder if all this really made a difference.

“You do,” she enthused.

“And how does this help me?”

“Clean and beautiful affects the mind,” she said.

“Now we polish your thoughts like we polish your hair and body.”

She was unknown to me, this version of Bridget, but not unpleasant. I might even learn to like her.

Even Harrieta commented: “She don’t look like the old girl.”

And Horner. It surprised me when he said shyly, “You purty.”

As we returned to the store, the breeze kicked up and the sky became as blue as a lake. Was this because I had taken a bath? Had the world changed with me? Had the land grown cleaner? I thought about all these things as we crossed the street and went back to our home in the bookstore.

—

As the days passed, I fell into an established routine dictated by the needs of our little party. Requests were made by Dakota and I helped as best I could. I scavenged among the buildings for food. I also picked through the ruins and found some useful items: a drawer of silverware, some chairs stored in a basement, a nice gold pendant for Dakota.

There was also some housecleaning which I admit I was not fond of. Still, I worked under her guidance to carry out what was necessary for us to live together.

True enough, the thought of settling down and staying in one spot was difficult. I was a wild child transforming to a young adult. I was a young adult not used to staying in one place or helping a family or doing what someone else asked.

The restlessness was most difficult at night when I would have been active in my hunting and travels. I found it hard to sleep and often laid for hours looking at the ceiling, wondering if I could make the change and work my way into believing the code. Meanwhile, I heard the Wild Ones outside. I could swear that some of them called my name.

Sometimes I would walk to the far west edge of town and sit by the side of the road. Even after I stared for hours in all directions, the sight of Last Chance was where I always ended. Now I knew. In Last Chance, there was a boundary here, and a point of no return. I either was or wasn't a part of the bookstore. There was no in between.

Whereas there had been no clear choices for me to make other than to survive, now the presence of the bookstore and Dakota and Harrieta and Horner pulled on me like iron to a magnet. I could leave, just get up and walk away, but not without considering what was best – being on my own or living with them, having the comfort of a home or wandering freely with nothing but risk and danger to think about.

I never thought it was possible to live a life other than what I had learned in the wild. I had shed the strings of humanity and grown to become either predator or prey.

So why did I struggle with such a choice? On the surface, it seemed the most logical and certainly the safest, but instincts are instincts and mine did not enjoy being cuffed to this town or these friends. And yet I stayed. Purely for my own benefit, or was there something more to it?

—

Weeks later, on a late afternoon in my usual hiding spot off the road, I saw a rabbit stretched dead just a few feet from where I sat. He had been dead I guessed for just a few hours. Maybe a Wild One had grabbed him early this morning and wrung his neck just for the pleasure of it. Maybe some other animal had attacked and left him to die.

Death had sprung out of nowhere and left him stranded without any dignity or compassion. This was the world I was used to. This was what I had ingested like a

piece of food, and that food had grown to become my bones and flesh.

In that instant, I saw a picture of me: lonely, filthy, and always in danger of dying. This was the real story of Bridget in a nutshell, and beyond these borders, beyond my last chance, this was the inevitable outcome.

The rabbit lay dead, and someday, on my own, so would I. No one out here escaped death. You only fought until you had no life, but eventually all your fighting could not avoid the fate of this rabbit.

I walked over and picked him up. Torn and limp, his blood spread on my hands. I don't know why, but I buried him off the side of the road directly next to where I sat. I used my hands to crumble the dirt and give him a grave. The fresh dirt was no more than a foot from my own hiding place.

"Rest in peace, Mr. Rabbit," I said.

Rest in peace. Rest in peace. There was no rest for me. I was still alive and kicking.

But wait. I had been offered something different. I had been offered a chance to live in peace. After burying this rabbit, I realized the graciousness of this offer. I realized that it might only come once in my lifetime. What was my complaint? That I just wanted to be free? That seemed like a weak excuse.

I sat blankly and thought about what it meant to live as Dakota lived, and to have a family as Dakota offered. Was it better than the life of this rabbit? Was it better to live with someone than die alone?

I sat until sunset pondering these questions, even running the risk of dealing with the Wild Ones on my way home. At this moment, I was young enough and smart enough to make my way back safely. But why was I willing to run this risk?

Because this was my nature. I was a fighter, pure and simple. I welcomed conquest and adventure more than peace and safety. More to the point, I simply didn't understand what it meant to be safe and peaceful. There was no memory for me to fall back on. All I had known for many years was fighting.

As I stood to go home, I saw the shadows of the Wild Ones. For the first time in my life, I recognized them as the lost souls that Dakota had described, and I recognized myself as one of them, a slightly different Wild One, but nonetheless, the same. We were fellow humans without any kind of code to comfort us.

As I approached the bookstore, one of them approached me. A woman in a ragged print dress, snarling and in attack mode. In another time, I would have dropped her like a stone and stepped over her body.

Now I waited. She was in my face when something stopped her. She sniffed and looked at me bug-eyed as if I had changed costumes and she didn't recognize me. Looking alarmed, she stepped back and hissed. Then she turned and fled. Now what could have caused that?

When I entered the bookstore, Dakota gave me a hug. "Where were you?"

"Thinking," I revealed. "I have a spot now where I do that. My thinking spot."

Dakota's expression changed from stern to understanding.

"A Wild One ran up to me," I continued. "She didn't bother me. Fact, I think she was afraid of me. I've never seen one run like that, but that's what she did."

Dakota wrapped her arm around my shoulder. "Thinking is good," she said. "I have my own spot where I go."

"Why did she run?" It perplexed me, a Wild One not acting wild.

"I don't know," said Dakota. "Maybe she saw something different in you, a change from the old Bridget."

I shook my head. "I can't imagine what that would be."

Harriet walked up and hugged my waist. "Ms. Dakota got us some veggies for dinner," she announced.

"Sounds good," I said. "Where on earth did you get veggies?"

"This town has all kinds of resources," said Dakota.

I shrugged. "I have to say. This town is one big mystery."

"You still have a lot to learn, but I'm glad you're here. You're smart. You're going to be a big help to us."

And that was the key to my door. She believed that I belonged here. I had a part to play. Last Chance had become home. Dakota and Harrieta and Horner my family. It was a relief to know that we would have veggies for dinner and sleep together without fear and

live our lives peacefully without worrying about Wild Ones or death or loneliness.

My choice was to live. My choice was to stay. My choice was to learn a civilized life, whatever that turned out to be. Being here meant a different kind of code, one which I would grow into and live by. The code was mysterious, but it seemed to make these people happy. My choice then was to try and be happy with them. Better with than without. Better happy than wild. That seemed to be the choice presented.

And maybe, after living a different life, I wouldn't end up like Mr. Rabbit in his hole in the ground, at least not without somebody to notice that I was missing.

—

I grew to like the new Bridget. She felt lighter, happier, more at ease in mind and body, and I grew to love my new family. Harrieta would tell me stories and Horner would show me card tricks.

Dakota was happy to give me some of the chores she had previously handled. Most notably, she taught me the basics of cooking.

She also gave me books to read and the time alone to read them. She was surprised at how educated I was for someone who'd lived so long on her own. I took to books as if they were another meal beyond breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Words I had not used in a decade came back to me. The more I read, the more I wanted to read and the better I became at it.

There were basic books such as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Anne of Green Gables. Adventure series like The Chronicles of Narnia and scary books like Frankenstein. There were books about magic such as the Harry Potter series and westerns like Lonesome Dove.

I also spent time reading to Harrieta and Horner. Shorter books like Where the Wild Things Are and Charlotte's Web. Then some books a little larger like The Little Prince. They would sit wide-eyed and attentive as if I were the writer sharing my story for the first time.

As I read each of these books, my mind expanded and my thoughts put down seeds and sprouted little green shoots that I imagined would become full ears of corn and tall sheaths of wheat. I looked at my own world a little different and felt less prone to anger.

And something else that was noticeable. The bookstore itself, in its quirky, invisible way, became my friend. A building to be sure, but something beyond just brick and wood. A live presence that sometimes infiltrated my sleep and spoke to me in my dreams.

Dakota was right. This place was as real as any of us living here. It had a heart and soul and sheltered our thoughts and our bodies from too much darkness.

While Dakota grew to be my mother and Harrieta and Horner my family, the store, without my understanding how or why, became my creator, the spiritual angel that led my steps into the light. From Bridget Seegraw the itinerant drifter to Bridget Seegraw the young, intelligent woman that Dakota believed me to be. I believed more in

myself and had increased confidence to think and act as an adult.

We shared stories about ourselves and stories we created from our imaginations. Harrieta, for instance, had an amazing ability to talk about her home and the legends she had heard from her family.

“My grandma knew all kinds of stories,” she would tell us after dinner. “I love them just like I loved my grandma.”

Horner would always get excited when he thought there might be a new story coming.

“Story, story,” he would yell in his Horner voice, his pupils wide as a pair of full moons.

And Harrieta never let us down. In her world, alligators could talk and fish could sing. The owl was the ruler of the swamp and the snake was always trying to cheat people out of their money. People rafting on the water saw ghosts, demons, trolls, and sometimes angels.

Harrieta said she missed her home. She missed her mother and father, her grandpa and grandma. Most of all, she missed her little sister Amy.

Her whole family, she said, had been ambushed by thieves. Horner, she explained, was her best friend. She and Horner just happened to be playing together when the thieves attacked their convoy and killed their families. They hid in a wooded area nearby and would have died from starvation and attacks by Wild Ones if Miss Dakota hadn't happened upon them.

And then, it was Dakota's turn. "Tell us a story," I begged her one night after the dinner dishes had been cleared and the Wild Ones wandered and wailed outside.

Dakota was a wonderful story teller and convincing enough that I often didn't know whether her stories were made up or true. After all, if she crossed the prairie on a white buffalo, what else might she have done with her life?

Dakota thought for a moment and searched her mind for something new.

"Once there was a great river that flowed from the north to the south," she began, "flowed as wide as a sea and as long as a million people stretched head to toe."

I tried to figure out how long a million people might stretch, further than I could imagine.

"This river was the king of its domain and fed and quenched the land so that trees would grow and animals would have water to drink and green grass to eat; so that fish could play and people in boats could ride from town to town. Fingers of other rivers flowed into it, making the river the father and mother of all fresh waters, giving all sides – north, east, south, west – the chance to live and thrive.

"One day a mighty wind blew across the land and said to the river: 'If you do not pay homage to me as the greatest wind in the world, I will suck you dry and leave your whole land and everything that lives in it to die of thirst and starvation, for no one dares defy the wind.'

"The wind roared a great roar, pulling up trees and throwing them a hundred miles in all directions.

“But the river said, ‘If you suck me dry, all the waters I have shared will roar back to fill me up, and your great wind will simply disappear, for wind can come and go, but the water in this river remains forever.’

“‘We shall see,’ said the wind. Then he huffed and raged, and the river was blown north and south and east and west, leaving only a long, wide pathway where the water had flowed. When the wind had finished, what once was an enormous river was only dry land.

“The animals began to panic and wail because their great beloved river had disappeared. ‘Where will we drink?’ they cried out. ‘How will we eat grass and find cool shade from the hot sun?’

“The wind looked down triumphantly. ‘There,’ he proclaimed. ‘I am now the ruler of everything I see. I am the mightiest wind in the world.’

“But the waters, both north and south, east and west, rose up into the clouds, and the clouds became great thunder storms, and it rained heavy rain, and that rain pelted equally hard on the wind, even creating its own winds, until the great wind was blown back across the land and to the ocean from where it came.

“There it swirled around aimlessly trying to return to land, but the ocean, which needed the river for its own waters, held it captive, releasing it only in small breaths, so that it would never again threaten the river.

“The waters of the rain returned to the river, and the river flowed again, smoothly without boasting, once again in charge of its domain.

“And that is what we know about the great river. It belongs to the land and the land belongs to it, and we all thank the river for being generous and great. For from that river comes all our waters on which we depend. And it keeps us alive. Water, land, and life live together. We are all part of each other. For without the river and the waters that flow into it, there is no life.”

The room was breathless. Even the Wild Ones had settled down.

“And now, it’s time for bed,” she announced.

We all rose without saying a word and went to our sleeping quarters.

It took me a bit longer that night to go to sleep because I thought about her story. I recalled in my travels how I crossed several different rivers, one of them especially wide and long. Was this the river she talked about?

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought: Perhaps I might find the river in a book. Perhaps, but not tonight. Tonight, I would sleep and dream that I was laughing and floating on that same great river without any boat, just gliding along with my feet as I stood tall on the surface of the gentle waters.

We all seemed lucky to be under the care of Dakota Robishaw as we ate our meals, did our chores, and lived under the protection of her and the bookstore.

I wondered how long all this would last, but I had no crystal ball, and so I enjoyed what I could and slept at night, though not without some bad dreams, and sometimes when I could not sleep, I would listen to

Dakota, lightly snoring. I would tell my own stories to myself and repeat over and over: This was as good as it was going to get. I should not worry. But I had lived long enough on the wide prairie. I knew that eventually something would change. It was only a matter of time.

Still, what could I do but take each day and see what it brought? As of this moment, it was serene. Tomorrow, who could guess? And what I gained from this was far more than what I had lost before coming here. It was a living benefit, a life that was steeped in more than just loneliness and misery. For a little while, days, weeks, months, I had security.

4.

Trouble, Trouble

I often wandered through the town searching for stuff that might be useful to us. Cooking utensils. A can of soup. Old books. Dakota would sort through my items and thank me for my effort. I was especially pleased if I brought something that made her smile. I knew then that I was doing good things to help our family.

Last Chance was bigger than it had first appeared to me. I carefully picked my way through many homes. There were family pictures hidden in old chests, pianos with beat up keyboards, broken down cars parked in garages, tattered clothes in closets. I found a gun once without any ammunition.

As I put together a picture of the town, it was evident that something evil had swept through and ripped it apart. When I asked Dakota about what happened, her eyes welled up with tears.

“Special forces from the Order,” she said. “They came through without mercy many years ago. Killed some, kidnapped others, took them God knows where. Ransacked the town. They were ruthless.”

“Who were they?” As if I didn’t already have a good idea from my own personal experience.

“You don’t want to know,” she shuddered, “and you don’t want to meet them either.” She refused to take any more of my questions about soldiers or the Order.

What kind of special forces? I wondered. I had seen many types of soldiers, some of them local to towns, a few that I could not identify, and some that I had run into by accident. But these special forces, they must be completely different. And why would they simply arrive and tear a town apart?

Not that violence out here was unusual. In the midlands, we saw nothing that indicated any kind of law and order. Dakota sometimes shared rumors about Purveyors who were part of the Order, but in the weeks after I arrived, I saw no one outside of the Wild Ones. Dakota said there were other residents, but I never saw a soul.

Still, something dreadful had attacked Last Chance and left it in ruins. These forces must be awfully fierce and cruel, I concluded.

And so I was extra careful as I scavenged through the town not to attract attention. I took my backpack and I took my weapons. Who knew what else might be out there watching us? All of this filled me with a sense of dread. It took a lot of reading and cooking to turn my attention elsewhere.

One day, on the edge of town as I rounded a corner, I met my first resident. A man, tall and sunburned, wearing

only an old pair of coveralls. We practically ran right into each other.

“Oh,” I gasped and jumped back.

The man stood still as he leaned on a shovel and eyed me. He was tall and rather handsome for an older man. Clean shaven with gray hair full on his head. His face was rugged but not dirty or wrinkled. Neither did he strike me as angry or sad. In fact, he was unusually neat and quite at ease with himself.

“Morning,” he greeted.

“Morning,” I said as if I was winded.

“You must be the new girl.”

I found this unnerving because there were no other people who had seen me come through. How would he know who I was?

“I’m Bridget Seegraw,” I said.

“Bridget,” he enunciated as if he was chewing on something. “I’m Leon.”

“Leon?” I must have looked puzzled.

“Spelled L-e-o-n. Pretty simple.”

His tone irked me. I spoke only because I had been surprised. But insulting my intelligence did not sit well with me.

“You’re with Dakota,” he said.

He knew who I was, where I was staying. What else did he know?

Leon stood for several minutes and just watched the horizon. Not moving. Not talking. Not paying attention to me. Just looking at something in the distance.

“I grow a garden,” he said, breaking the silence, “in there.” He pointed toward a fenced off area that looked more like a military fort. “That is, if the Wild Ones don’t get to it first.” His eyes continued to search. “Dakota and I,” he said with hesitation, “well, we share stuff. I give her vegetables. She gives me books.”

Ah, that was the source of our carrots and potatoes, but I had never seen her take any books out of the store, and I had never seen him come inside. I tried to understand how these two managed to meet each other.

I finally spoke up. “Where do you live?”

“Right here.” He pointed to a small house that was ramshackle at best and missing part of its roof. “Well, actually, I have a basement, and a trap door. Keeps those pesky wild things out.”

“How come I’ve never seen you before?” I felt awkward being so nosy, but he had stirred my curiosity and I couldn’t help myself.

Leon gave me a steely stare. “Maybe because I didn’t want you to.”

That shut me up.

He returned to scanning the horizon. I turned my eyes in the same direction, but saw nothing.

“What are you looking at?” I piped up.

He stood for a moment with his chin on his shovel handle.

“Trouble,” he said. “Big, big trouble.”

“Trouble as in . . .”

“Do I have to spell that, too?”

I took a step back. "No sir. I know what it means, and I know how to spell it."

"Then that's all you need to know."

"Yes, sir."

He came back to full attention. "Well, then. Pleased to meet you . . . Bridget."

Then he turned and went inside his house. I could hear him walking down some steps which I assumed led down to his basement.

"Pleased to meet you too . . . Leon spelled L-e-o-n," I murmured.

I should have hurried back to the store, but I stood for a long while and looked where he had been looking.

Trouble he had warned, but I could see nothing unusual, nothing moving toward us, no other sign of life.

What trouble? I wondered. He was a very unusual man.

I peered over his fence and saw a nice green patch growing. I knew enough about gardening to recognize the shoots of carrots and potatoes and other things that were growing out of the ground, like the red shapes of strawberries.

"Stay out of my garden!" he yelled from his basement.

I guess he must have had some way of watching me below ground. I turned and headed back toward the store. Two things I had learned today. Leon was in town and trouble was coming. I was anxious to find out if Dakota knew anything about either.

“So, you finally met Leon,” said Dakota as we talked over dinner.

“Leon. Who’s that?” Harrieta inquired.

I was astonished. “You’ve never met him either? What does he do, make himself invisible? Does he only come out at night? How can he live here and not be seen? The town isn’t that big.”

Dakota’s mouth turned sly. “There are ways to move through this town without being seen.”

“Like what? Tunnels?”

“Leon knows every nook and cranny in this town. He’s also very shy. My guess is, if you met him, he had a reason for being seen.”

“He said there was trouble. He was looking out across the plains, like he saw something. Me, I couldn’t see a thing, but he seemed to notice something, or maybe he’s just crazy.”

Dakota found this humorous and grinned. “No, he’s just a regular guy.”

“Regular grumpy puss if you ask me.”

“Yes, I know. He’s not exactly the friendly sort, unless of course, he’s talking to me. I think he quite likes me.”

“Because . . .”

“What can I say?” she said. “I’m a woman. I’m likable.”

“Oh.” It took a moment for me to catch on. “Oh, yeah, that.”

Dakota paused and peered at a wall like she was trying to see through it. "I don't suppose he said what kind of trouble he was talking about?"

Harrieta suddenly grew frightened. "Is there bad men coming?" she whined. "I don't like no bad men. They come, they gonna hurt us." She backed into a corner, her face on the verge of tears.

"No dear, I don't think that's what he was talking about." Dakota moved swiftly over and comforted her.

I felt a little guilty for having frightened the poor girl. She was skittish about these kinds of issues. I had the feeling she must have suffered terribly when she was abandoned.

Horner listened from the back of the store. He kept mum, as if to ward off evil spirits.

"We don't know what he meant," Dakota said, but her voice was not convincing.

"Who's Leon?" I persisted.

"Leon is my friend," said Dakota, "and a longtime resident of Last Chance."

"He said you guys trade vegetables for books."

"He borrows books, yes, which he always returns. And in exchange, he gives us some of his goodies. I imagine, if you were at his house, that you noticed he grows a garden."

"Yeah, it looks more like a fort to me."

"Yes, it's well protected."

"How come we've never seen him?"

"As I said, he chooses when and where he wants to be seen. And he chooses his appearances sparingly."

"He knew I was living here."

"He knew because I told him."

"You told him? When have you seen him?"

"I've known him ever since I came to town. As I said, we have a long friendship. We enjoy each other's company. He's a learned man. He appreciates good conversation, and he loves books."

Dakota was being evasive, and when she chose to do that, it was like trying to penetrate a mountain. Leon wasn't the only one who gave out information sparingly.

I eyed her suspiciously. "What does he mean by trouble?"

"As I said earlier, I don't know," she responded. "I guess I'll have to find out . . . the next time I see him."

"Do you think I surprised him? I think I caught him off guard."

"There's no such thing as surprising Leon," said Dakota.

"Well, he wasn't what I would call friendly. He yelled at me to stay out of his garden."

"Well, then, be a dear and stay out of his garden."

"Well, I wasn't in his garden to begin with, and he didn't have to be rude about it."

Dakota curled her hand through Harrieta's hair.

"Leon is Leon. There aren't many people he's chatty with, and his garden, if you must know, is our lifeline for food. Now that you know about it, I'd say lesson learned and let it go."

"But he talks to you."

“Yes, that’s true. I told you, he seems to like me. I can’t imagine why.” More humor in her face, more than she was willing to let on.

I pressed her. “Does he get crabby with you?”

“Crabby is a strong term, dear. No, I wouldn’t say he gets crabby with me. We get along quite nicely. I prefer to call him patient, and observant, and he’s a collector of information that’s very valuable to us. A man like that knows about things long before they happen. He knows this country, and he notices any little change. I’ve come to appreciate him for his wisdom, and his vegetables.”

“What kind of trouble would he be talking about?”

“You keep asking me that and the answer is the same. I don’t know.”

And that was it. She surrendered no more details, nor did she talk anymore about Leon. But I did notice how she drifted off, as if his words had given her food for thought. She sat for a long while and gazed at the floor.

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In my mind, trouble in these parts could mean anything, but I had the feeling that she and Leon had a particular type of trouble in mind. Beyond daily survival. Beyond Wild Ones. Something invisible (except to Leon) that might threaten Last Chance.

My guess was that it had to be men of some sort, maybe from the east, maybe bandits, maybe Purveyors. But it was just a guess based on nothing except my own intuition.

When we went to bed, it took me a long time to fall asleep. That old familiar dread welled up in me, the kind I used to feel daily. I knew that trouble in the midlands always hid right around the corner. For years, I had lived with it and worked keenly to avoid it. This time, however, I had no choice but to let it surprise me, and I was not the type who welcomed surprises, even if Leon did give us vegetables.

5.

The Dream

Talk of trouble trailed me into my sleep. It's not often I remember my dreams, but to this day, this one still torments me.

I found myself in a river of some sort, not of water, but of grainy material, maybe sand, thick and rough and flowing like a sea of mud.

It was pitch black and I was all alone. Not a single soul around me. Not a single soul in the world to touch me or talk or sing or just be there to comfort me. I thought perhaps I might be in hell.

I felt a set of wide jaws ease up to me on my side and close loosely over my body. I knew immediately the teeth were sharp and the power of its bite could rip me in half. But eating me was not its intention. Rather, it was carrying me somewhere, perhaps to someone. I hung easily in its jaws with no fight in me. I knew this was my end and there was nothing I could do to escape. Whatever fate had come, all I could do was wait. The despair I experienced ran through my body like electricity.

While I drifted lazily downstream, music played in the background, a tune foreboding with a rhythm that

suggested the tempo of drummers watching a human sacrifice. Electric noise thrummed chords to the beat. Bass rumbled through my ears.

Then, as if on cue, it all stopped and grew eerily quiet. That was what I most remembered. How my solitude ripped through me, the emptiness of a soul abandoned.

From the blackness around me, I saw an eye emerge from the river. Yellow like the eye of a giant crocodile. It rose slowly and watched me, in no hurry because I was going nowhere. The sharp teeth of his jaws reminded me of that fact. This was death, total and complete without the slightest hope of ever seeing light again.

The wind began to whisper as a voice: "The face of death."

No words could ever describe my sheer terror for the moments when I was fixed and frozen by the eye. There is no fear so jarring as fear without hope. And then I woke screaming and thrashing.

Harrieta and Horner ran for cover and held each other in the corner of the closet.

"What's wrong with her?" Harrieta cried out. "Is the devil in her?"

Dakota rolled over in shock and stared at me. Just as quickly, she grabbed me up in her arms and held me tight.

"It's okay, Bridget. It's okay. It was just a dream."

Was it? To this day, I'm not so sure, but I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't speak except to utter the same word over and over: "Trouble."

“She saw something,” Harrieta said and began to cry. This time it was Horner who tried to comfort her.

Dakota rocked me until I calmed down. She did not bother to inquire about what I had seen. She knew it would have been too awful to repeat. For now, she shushed me and rubbed my back as a mother might do to make her child go to sleep, but I could not. The eye was still haunting me.

“Trouble,” I kept repeating. “Terrible, terrible trouble.”

And, as it turned out, I was right.

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My dream seemed to throw a cloud over everyone in the store. Harrieta would not go outside. She and Horner stayed in the back and kept each other company. Dakota maintained a watchful eye on everyone. Her usual jovial nature was subdued and serious.

As for me, I saw myself as the cause of it all. It was my dream, after all, that had set everyone on edge, my dream that brought foreboding to our little household. As a result, I kept quiet and stayed to myself as much as possible. I was afraid that bad luck would rub off, that my nightmare would start a cycle of terror and drag the whole group into the sucking sands of death.

I began to spend whole days away from the store, sitting in some dark corner of a building, staring off into the distance and wondering when the trouble would come. Our dinner conversations were spare, with hardly a word spoken before, during, or after the meal.

At dusk one evening, as I sat on the porch and waited for the Wild Ones to appear, Dakota came out and sat with me. Harrieta and Horner also snuck out and tucked themselves against the porch wall.

Dakota eased into a conversation. "You've been very distant lately. We miss you."

I rubbed my hands together. "I'm afraid I might have brought you guys bad luck."

"Why?"

"My dream. It seems to have frightened all of us, especially Harrieta and . . . me."

"Yes, it was frightening, but why keep thinking about it?"

"Trouble is coming, and it's all because of me."

"You think the dream is going to cause us trouble?"

"Yes," I said and felt the tension in my head release.

"Your dreams don't predict the future," Dakota said gently.

I gazed up and down the street, thinking that if I spoke about it something awful might happen.

"How do you know?" I questioned.

She took several deep breaths. "I don't know, actually, but it seems to me that trouble as we've talked about it is caused by our choices, and to some extent by luck.

Trouble happens because of the world we live in, not the dreams we share."

"Seems to me they could be connected."

"If you choose to assume that."

"And?"

“You could choose not to assume that. Life has its own quirks, and trouble is just part of that. You don’t have to feel like it’s your fault.”

“Then why would I dream such a horrible thing?”

“I believe in dreams,” said Harrieta. “I believe they tell us what’s in our heart.”

I gave Dakota a nod, as if Harrieta was proof of my own assumption. My dream was trying to tell us something, and it was speaking through me.

Dakota gave this some thought. “Well, do you deliberately dream bad things?”

“No,” I said. “Why would I, if I had a choice?”

“Then a dream is just something that happens,” she stated.

“But don’t dreams connect to the spirit world?” said Harrieta.

“I don’t know,” said Dakota. “I have no idea if spirits and people talk to each other. I don’t believe in ghosts. Maybe I don’t believe in spirits either.”

“Oh, I do,” said Harrieta. “My grandma used to talk to spirits all the time. Everyone who wants to know about their dead ones always come to her.”

Dakota stopped for a moment and gave this some thought. “Well, maybe your grandma had a gift. I don’t know, but Bridget can’t help what she dreams, and what happens to us happens, dream or no dream. Maybe trouble is coming, but I don’t think Bridget’s dream has anything to do with that.”

I scrunched myself into a ball on the porch. “What if it’s my fault? That trouble comes?”

“It’s not your fault. You’re not going out and seeking trouble. If it finds us, it has nothing to do with dreams. Maybe the dream is warning us, but that’s not your fault. That’s the dream. You’re just telling us the dream. We do with it what we want. It’s no one’s fault. It’s not even the dream’s fault. It’s just a dream, or a message, or something for us to think about.”

“But . . . it was so real,” I said, “like I was actually there.”

“Yes, that part I saw. For all I know, you might have been there. Sometimes dreams take us to places we don’t want to go.”

“Haven’t you ever had those kinds of dreams?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I let them be and moved on with my life. I don’t know if they caused me trouble or not. They were just, well, dreams.”

“Then what am I supposed to do with this?” I pleaded.

“Nothing. That’s what I’m trying to say. You had a dream. Now, let it go and we’ll all let it go and see what happens.”

“You won’t blame me? If trouble comes?”

“No, and neither will Harrieta or Horner.”

I turned to look at them. They both shrugged. I wasn’t sure what to make of it, but at least one person was on my side.

A Wild One drifted past and caught sight of us.

“Time to go,” said Dakota. She hustled Harrieta and Horner in and I followed behind.

As I closed and bolted the door, Dakota turned to me and whispered, “This is where you belong, dream or no dream. And we’re going to stay with you, no matter what.”

Those words seemed to strike home. If I wasn’t the cause of the trouble, then I could live with the dream as it was. If I knew Dakota cared for me, I could take that dream and place it on a back shelf.

But I could never forget it, and something inside of me still believed that it was a warning: about the future, about Last Chance, about all of us living happily in this bookstore. It gnawed at me. Whatever happiness we had was going to be interrupted. I didn’t speak of it anymore, and I didn’t let it draw a cloud over everybody else. I just waited because, as Leon had observed, trouble was coming. Like the signs of an approaching storm, I could feel it in the air.

6.

New Identity

Three days later, a man in uniform drove into Last Chance. His clothes were solid black with a red stripe running down the sleeve. His hat, also black, was an unusual shape, round at the brim, the cone on his head shaped like an upside-down V.

He was driving a vehicle built for desert terrain. Huge round tires, topless, with a sleek body design, also black. The bars that stood in for the roof were shaped like rainbows. On the doors, the same insignia as was on the man's hat.

I was inside reading. Harrieta and Horner were playing a game on the porch. Dakota was doing housekeeping.

We could hear the tires crunch along the street, a sound unusual in our town. Everyone looked up. Dakota and I came out. When she saw who was driving, she pushed me behind her and her face grew tight.

"Morning, there, Ms. Dakota," the man spoke as if he was an old family friend.

"Captain," she acknowledged, her voice flat.

The Captain eased out of his vehicle and stood directly in front of Dakota.

He was a tall man, impressive in his uniform, with broad shoulders, an angular face, a well-groomed beard, and a gaze that was in my mind a cross between a fox and a snake. My instincts told me not to trust him.

“Been a while,” he said.

Her voice remained placid. “No reason for you to come this far. Quiet as always out here, except for the Wild Ones.”

He held her in his gaze for a moment.

“Always something going on out here,” he replied. “Don’t know why you stay in this place. Pretty risky if you ask me.”

“We cause no problems and we have no problems. That’s our way. No need to worry as long as we keep to ourselves and mind our business. Besides, the bookstore is home. It takes care of us all.”

Her voice remained calm, steady, a match to his inquisitiveness.

“Well, that’s not quite true,” he said with a grin. “In fact, right now, I’m chasing some troublemakers out here. Wondering if you’ve seen anything unusual.”

“Such as?”

“Such as strangers, wanderers, itinerants of any sort. You know, the usual bandits, thieves, escapees, people on the run. I’m not saying you would help them. Don’t get me wrong. But you are the only bookstore out here. If someone is looking for food, shelter, company . . .”

She paused and slipped her hand in mine. Her reply was simple. "No."

He peeked around her left. His long finger pointed at me. "Someone new?"

Dakota caught my eye, then turned back. "Yes, but you know I find people stranded out here sometimes. She was starving and near death. I nursed her back to life. She's none of what you described. Just a woman in distress."

This was a tall tale to be sure, but I let it go. No use correcting her in front of this stranger. No point in helping him at all.

"Seems to me she's doing well," he said.

"She is. Thank you."

Sliding over a couple of steps, he decided to talk to me. "What's your name, darling?"

The hair on my neck rose. No one called me darling. I was no one's darling. Sensing my resistance, Dakota squeezed my hand. I read the grip. No arguing.

"Bridget, sir. Bridget Seegraw."

"You get lost out here?"

I knew that what I told him was important, not just for me, for all of us.

"Abandoned, sir, by a traveling party. They left me to die, but Dakota saved my life."

"How old are you?"

"Can't really say, sir. I was out there quite a while. No calendar, no way to know how much time passed."

He sorted through my answer. I could see him deciphering every syllable.

“Good piece of luck, you finding Dakota.”

“She found me, sir. And yes, I’m lucky to be alive and fortunate to be in Last Chance. It’s my home now.”

“Really? Life in a bookstore? This doesn’t look like much of a home.”

“It’s better than what I had, sir. Much, much better. And the company is welcomed. They’ve all been more than kind to me.”

The Captain ambled up and down the front of the porch.

“Harrieta,” he greeted. Harrieta said nothing.

“Horner,” he called. Horner scrunched up against the wall and hid his face.

“Nice to see you, too,” the Captain quipped.

He ambled back to Dakota. “Lot of fugitives out here. I might be careful who I took in if I was you.”

“I’m always careful,” said Dakota. “I know the difference between dangerous and desperate.”

“Sometimes they’re one and the same,” the Captain noted.

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m careful to see the difference.”

Something in his expression changed. I took it as suspicion.

He walked backed to his car and eased inside. “You and I know this is not private property, Dakota. The Order owns everything out here.”

“I know that,” said Dakota.

“You and I have a truce, so far.”

“We stay peaceful, Captain. You have nothing to fear from us.”

“Everyone has something to fear,” he said grimly.
“Unlike you, I trust no one.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Captain. Must be difficult to live that way.”

“It keeps me alive.”

“Well then, we support you.”

“Yes, well, some people are not what they appear. It means that I have to rely on my good friends out here for information. We are friends, aren’t we, Dakota?”

“Clearly, you can trust me, Captain. I’ve told you everything I know so far.”

He cast a glance at me as if etching out a final glimpse of memory. Then he turned his vehicle around and drove off, peering into the windows of houses as he drove out of town, in search of – Fugitives? Outlaws? Maybe Leon?

When he disappeared over the horizon, Dakota let go of my hand. All of us sighed together in relief.

“Who’s that?” I demanded.

“Ranger, part of the Purveyors that work with the Order, supposedly the law out here, but he’s more dangerous than most bandits and outlaws.”

“Will he come back?”

“That depends.”

“On what?” I insisted.

“On what your real story is,” she murmured and went back inside to finish her housework.

The mood during dinner was tense. The Captain's visit had put everyone on edge. Even Horner ate little and retreated to a corner where he rocked himself like a frightened child.

When the dishes had been cleared and the four of us were sitting quietly, it was Harrieta who broke the silence with her characteristic bluntness.

"Where you really from?" she blurted, the question aimed at me.

I knew this was coming. The Captain's encounter had set me thinking. Truly, any memories of my childhood were faint at best. Living as I had for years on my own, my family connections had faded into the dusty plains from where I had emerged.

Dakota looked at me sympathetically. "I think probably she doesn't remember where she's from." She gave me a moment's reprieve. "Bridget?"

In truth, my life, the images of my identity, were as shifty as the wind: rolling in my head, changing directions, traveling erratically.

Where was I from? More to the point, who was I?

And then, from the shadows, another surprise emerged. Leon.

As he stepped into the light, our heads all turned in his direction.

"Welcome, Leon," said Dakota.

He remained stoic, his sight fixed on me.

The pressure of everyone's attention made me cranky. I didn't like being called out, especially if my life was being questioned.

I gave him a hard stare. "You going to yell at me again?"

"Not if you stay out of my garden," he growled.

"I was never in your garden."

"Not technically, but you have to admit. You were tempted."

"I was curious."

"Curiosity is the source of temptation."

What could I say? He was right, technically.

"You're here for a reason, Leon," said Dakota, as if to get to the real purpose of his visit. Any other argument was just useless jawing.

Leon collected his thoughts.

"I know who you are," he said to me. "What I don't know is how you made it this far from home. I'm willing to fill in one end if you can work on the other."

"Why does it matter?" I complained.

Dakota put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "The Captain's visit was no accident, Bridget. Leon suspects he was looking for you."

"Me?"

"Yes. You," he said.

The conversation skidded to a halt. All heads turned in my direction. It appeared that everyone was waiting on me. But where to begin? I thought hard and tried to dig up images of my childhood.

"I remember my mother," I began. "She's the one who taught me to read. I remember a city, a house. I think there was a dog in there somewhere."

"What about your daddy?" said Harrieta.

I tried to remember but drew a blank. "Not a clue."

Dakota jumped in. "What else?"

"I remember a war of some sort and the two of us escaping."

"That would be the second Civil War," Leon interjected.

I digested this new bit of history and kept going.

"We found a group headed west. I remember some of my friends. And then, and this is where it gets hard, I woke up one morning and everyone was gone. Even my mother. It was just me in the camp, alone. Everybody else just . . . disappeared."

"I've heard similar stories," said Leon. "Soldiers, Purveyors, kidnappings."

"How long ago?" Dakota asked.

"I don't know. I can't remember time now. I know that someone in our group taught me to shoot a gun and use a bow and arrow. That was before they disappeared. It's how I survived. I was good at it, and I was pretty smart for my age, so, that's how I got from there to here. Every so often I would cross paths with what I thought were groups of soldiers, but I learned how to be invisible. They never knew I was there."

"But that's not the whole story, is it?" said Leon.

"What else do you want?" I snapped.

Leon crossed his arms. "You're wanted," he said. "You're an outlaw, fugitive, whatever you'd like to call it. And you being here means they're going to come back. They know who you are. They know what you've done. It's just a matter of time before they come and get you."

The words slapped me in the face.

"Your name's not Bridget, either," he continued. He held up a large poster with my face on it. My very young face. My little girl face. "Laura Becker," he declared, "wanted by the Order for murder and theft."

The room went quiet, so quiet that I could hear the Wild Ones from miles away.

"Like I said, you're trouble," he grumbled. "If it were up to me, I would send you packing. Otherwise, the Captain is going to come back, and he isn't going to be so friendly next time."

Dakota rubbed my shoulder. "We don't give up on people that easy, Leon. Don't forget your track record."

I glanced at her, then at him. Maybe I wasn't the only one who had a past.

He grimaced and set his jaw. "I don't have someone out there hunting for me. My face isn't on a poster."

"No," she said forcefully, "because just like her, you've settled here under the radar. But you know, if any breeze of your life got out, it wouldn't go well for you either."

Now it was Leon's turn to be still.

Dakota switched back to me. "What I need to know is, what happened out there? I know it's a tough place to

live, and not a fair place either. So, tell me your side of the story.”

I lowered my chin on my hands and knees.

“It was . . . it was after everyone left. I was sifting through the camp, trying to find something to eat when a soldier rode up in his car. I don’t know why he was there. Maybe he had been part of whoever took the rest of my group. He jumped out, grabbed a gun, and fired. Lucky for me, he missed, but not by much. I panicked. I was near a trailer and ducked inside for cover. My bow and arrows just happened to be nearby. When he approached the trailer, I don’t think he expected me to be armed. I shot an arrow through the trailer window, and I didn’t miss. Right through the head. He dropped like a rock, and that was it.”

Dakota took my hands in hers. “And why did you change your name?”

“I knew if I didn’t, someone would report me. I knew that killing the man was going to get me in deep trouble. He wore a uniform. He was somebody official. But he was going to kill me. It was him or me. If I had the choice, I’d do it again. He had no right to fire at me for no reason.”

“And the thievery?” said Leon.

I crossed my arms in self-defense. “I took his gun, the one he tried to kill me with. And his ammunition. If that’s being a thief, so be it.”

“That’s your story?” he said, as if I made it all up.

“Other than having to make my way west and not starve to death, or get killed by Wild Ones, or avoid capture, or have other people take shots at me just for

showing up on their doorstep. I certainly took stuff, stuff that didn't belong to me, but it was mostly food, things that I needed to live. I don't steal for just any reason. You try living out there on your own and see how it goes."

Leon shifted uncomfortably.

"Leon knows what that's like," said Dakota.

"Then we're on equal ground," I concluded.

"I never murdered anyone," he shot back.

"Did someone shoot at you for no good reason? Did someone try to kill you?"

Now he crossed his arms, a man cornered. "No."

"Then don't point fingers at me."

Dakota served as the peacemaker between us. "This is a harsh place. All of us have done things we don't want to talk about just to get by, myself included. But this is Last Chance, where we've come to make peace and change ourselves. This bookstore is a living example of that. Now isn't that right, Leon?"

Leon opened his mouth to counter, but Dakota had stripped him of any resistance. "Yes, ma'am," he said meekly.

"Bridget? Laura?"

"Yes?" I said.

"Is Laura your real name?" Harrieta demanded.

Well, time to speak up. If I had been forced out of the closet, I needed to step all the way out.

"Yes," I said. "Leon's right. My name is Laura Becker."

"Daughter of Rebecca Becker," Leon added, "the daughter of Henry Highsmith."

I wasn't sure if this was supposed to mean anything significant. To me, these were just names he recited.

"Rebecca's your mother," he said. "In case you wondered."

"The Henry Highsmith?" Dakota gasped.

"One and the same," Leon affirmed.

I had a hunch this person was connected to me.

"Who's Henry Highsmith?"

Dakota took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The High Priest of the Order," she revealed. "From the city of Aether. Apparently, your grandfather."

7.

The Tribe of Wolf

I lay sleepless as restless thoughts ran through my head. The thoughts repeated constantly. The urge for me to just sneak out and be on my way. The idea that everyone in Last Chance was at risk for my sake.

On the other hand, returning to my old life, my Bridget life, was also unbearable to consider. I had learned to love people again and to be part of a town. This bookstore was my sanctuary, Dakota my mother, Harrieta and Horner my family. I owed them my life. But at what cost to them?

My old anxieties returned – my restlessness, my urge to fight my way out of trouble. The years I had spent on the plains tormented me and whispered in my ears: Troublemaker.

What other options did I have? Run or fight. It was what I had grown into, from youth to adult. It was what Dakota had been trying to help me overcome, but some habits are hard to break. Some habits are built into one's soul. For the moment, as I lay here sleepless, my habits were coming back to haunt me.

I stood up and went over to look out a window. The moon was shining like a white eye. I could see the Wild Ones skulking around the store, wandering up and down the streets like black shadows.

And then I spotted something, or someone, tall, but not Leon. From the light in the street, I could tell he was young and different from the other riff raff. He stood in a hollowed-out storefront, concealed from all but me.

Now my restlessness turned to nosiness. He could be another town resident, or he might be a soldier of the Order. It would be risky to venture out and stalk him. Yet I couldn't stop watching him. I spied out the window for a few minutes as if trying to read my future in the tea leaves. For me, however, curiosity always wins. That, too, is part of who I am.

I grabbed my arrows and slipped out the door. Laura Becker, for this time and place, was Bridget Seegraw again. I was once again as wild as the Wild Ones. Standing on the store's porch, I waited patiently for him to move. I was in hunting mode. Time stood still, and so did I.

I saw him walk down the street in full view of the Wild Ones, but none of them approached him. He seemed to be immune to their attentions. Sight, sound, smell. They didn't seem to notice. He was bold. I granted him that.

Slipping to the side of the bookstore, I carefully followed him down the street, darting in and out of corners, hiding in alleys, keeping close to walls and gates. When I spotted him again, he was standing on the edge of

town next to the old city sign. It appeared he was waiting for someone.

Trying to move closer, I stepped off a porch, stumbled, and fell flat on my face. My cries, the groans I made when I hit the ground, echoed up and down the main street and some Wild Ones veered. I knew they would be swarming soon, more than my arrows could manage to fight off. I cursed under my breath for being so clumsy.

The man also noticed. "Who's there?" he said in a deep voice.

Now I was trapped on two sides. More muttering and cursing on my end.

He walked immediately to where I lay and stood over me like a brooding angel.

"It's dangerous out here," he said. "You shouldn't be out on these streets at night."

The approaching Wild Ones staggered and halted.

"Neither should you," I chided, embarrassed that I had been caught so easily.

"You were following me," he said. "I have to say, if you were trying to be sneaky, you're not much of a prowler. I saw you back there. I was waiting for you to catch up. I didn't think you'd be so noisy about it."

I couldn't argue his point. Living in the comfort of Last Chance had robbed me of my stealth. To him, I must have seemed like an awkward girl playing hide and seek.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Since you're tailing me, you go first," he shot back.

I jumped up and dusted myself off. "I'm . . . Bridget, Bridget Seegraw." How easily I slipped back into lying. Had living with Dakota taught me nothing about the truth?

He looked at me doubtfully. "You're not a very good liar either. I can see it in your face."

"Really?" I challenged. "You read faces for a living?"

"I do, actually, especially if they're stalking me."

The Wild Ones crept a few steps forward. They seemed uncertain of their prey. The girl or the guy. Who would make the better victim?

The man stood firm, his face smooth and unhurried.

"Well," I said, "are you going to kill me or tell me who you are?"

He seemed unfazed by my challenge. "I'm Dominick, of the tribe of Wolf."

My thoughts were thrown off balance. A man named Dominick. A tribe called Wolf. All news to me. What was he doing out here at night, and what tribe was he talking about? Dakota had never mentioned anything about a tribe living here. What kind of tribe? And why was he in town? He raised a bucket full of questions, and not an answer to be found.

"That's all you're going to say?" I sputtered.

He never flinched. "That's enough, for now."

I sized him up. A tall fellow with sandy brown hair that curled across his head. Slim, athletic, probably a good runner. He carried himself with great confidence for such a young man. I could tell he was unafraid of the night. His eyes in the moonlight shone dark. His hands had long

fingers. He was dressed in black, but not a uniform like the Captain. His clothes were old, his feet bare. From what I could tell, he carried no weapons.

“Okay,” I confessed. “For real, I’m Laura, Laura Becker.”

“You brought arrows,” he noticed. “Those could be useful, but not in a street fight with Wild Ones. They would just outnumber you.”

“What have you brought?” My tone did not reflect what I really felt – admiration for his courage to stand out here unarmed at night. I was simply trying to save face.

“I don’t need weapons,” he responded. “These Wild Ones know me. I’m no threat to them.”

“They know you?”

“Yes, I’ve lived with them all my life. I would be a Wild One if not . . .”

“If not?”

“It doesn’t matter. You need to go home.”

“Why, if I’m safe with you?”

“The Wild Ones are the least of your worries. The bookstore provides protection that I cannot. I’m just . . . visiting for the night. You should go back.”

“Not before you tell me what you’re doing out here.”

Dominick looked at me curiously. “You’re very bold, aren’t you?”

“I am when I want to know something. What’s going on that you need to come here at night?”

“Preparing,” he said.

“For?”

He spoke in a firm voice. "Go back. Go back and stay safe."

"Why?" I persisted.

He blinked several times but did not reply.

I pressed him. "Someone said trouble is coming. Do you know anything about that?"

He ignored my question. Instead, he said, "The Wild Ones. I have told them to leave you alone, but they have short memories. I wouldn't waste any time getting home."

"Tell me who you are."

"I already have. No use in repeating it."

Stepping backward, he kept sight of me until he eased forward and began jogging out of town. Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Despite the Wild Ones' presence, I stood by myself, so many questions buzzing in my head. But he was gone, and he was the only one who could give me protection. No point waiting out here. I knew he was not coming back.

When I headed for the bookstore, I saw the Wild Ones part to the left. It seems Dominick could talk to them after all. They let me pass without a murmur of protest.

Back with the family, I kept running his name through my mind. Dominick of the tribe of Wolf. I realized that what Dakota had told me earlier was true; that beyond the Wild Ones, beyond this bookstore, beyond this tiny family and even Leon, we were not alone.

8.

Even More Trouble

Out on my usual scavenging duties, I walked to the south end of town and found a small shop that I had yet to explore. The faded sign fallen on the ground read “Apothecary.”

This was a new word to me, one that made me curious. What did they do in an Apothecary?

I entered cautiously and was amazed. Bottles everywhere with antique printed labels, some of which I had to pronounce out loud: Iodine, Chlorbutol, Anodyne, Peptropomine, Castor Oil, Herb of Avery. The store also contained lots of old household items such as glassware, utensils, cups, and jars.

Most of the items were broken and dusty. Time and weather had left the whole place as desolate as a ransacked tomb. Still, the cutlery would be useful, and there might be other things I could salvage beneath all this dust.

As I browsed further, I noticed something out the window. Actually, a someone. A man, in a similar uniform to the Captain, except he was haggard and dusty,

his clothes tattered. I doubted he had eaten much in the last week.

He was a smallish man, his skin bronzed and dirty, with a bony face, long mustache, bushy hair, and hooded eyes. With the uniform and a long-barreled rifle, he might have been a soldier once, but not today. Today he was on his own and just like me, he seemed to be searching for something useful.

I froze and watched him through a window as he eased up to the back of the building and peeked around the corner. His look hinted that he intended to use the rifle to get what he wanted. I knew immediately, there was no escape for me. There was only the one door in. If I made a run for it, he could surely shoot me; that is, if he was any type of decent shot. There was nothing for me to do except be still and wait.

I backed away from the window and eased carefully behind a counter. The dust and cobwebs made my skin crawl, but concealment was my only friend. I sneezed twice, but quietly.

I heard the man walk around the side of the building, step onto the front porch and push the door open. His old boots thudded on the floor. He talked to himself as he poked around the store.

“What have we here?” he drawled.

He pushed some items around on a shelf and stepped across the boards, exploring as he went. “Good Lord,” he proclaimed. “Junk, mostly.”

Then he stopped. From the sound of it, he might have leaned his rifle against the side of the counter, turned around, and gave the whole building a good going over.

“Dang,” I heard him mumble. “Nothin, nothin, nothin.” His final assessment of the place.

I thought perhaps I might be in the clear. Not finding anything useful, he should have grabbed his rifle and left, except for one tiny problem. Having inhaled another nose full of dust, I sneezed.

The man jumped, grabbed his rifle, and yelled, “Come on out of there, whoever you be.”

I didn’t move. Not by choice, you see. My body had simply frozen from panic.

A loud gunshot crashed in the store and a jagged hole appeared in the wall a foot above me. I screamed and covered my ears.

“Next time, I won’t miss,” he shouted. “Now git out here.”

“Stop shooting,” I shrieked and stood up straight to look him in the eye. “Geesh, I’m just doing the same thing you’re doing.”

“Which is?” he challenged.

“Looking for stuff, trying to take something useful back home.”

“You live around here?”

“Yes, but why does that make any difference?”

The man considered my question.

“I need food,” he said. “I ain’t et in a week. What you got?”

“What do you want?” I snapped back.

“Like I just said, somethin to eat, and I ain’t picky about it. You look healthy. S’pose you got enough for me?”

I glanced at the hole behind me, then sighed and said, “Probably a meal or two, if you promise not to shoot anyone.”

“Who you with?”

“I live with a family at the bookstore in town.”

“Bookstore?”

“Yeah, bookstore. As in, we have lots of books.”

“I ain’t interested in books.”

“We live there. That’s where we have our food.”

He looked unsure. “What’s your name?”

The questions were rapid fire, like shots of ammunition.

I gave myself time to catch my breath. “Laura. Laura Becker. What’s yours?”

“That ain’t none of your concern.”

“I told you mine.”

“I asked and you answered. That’s your problem. Now.” He pointed his rifle toward the door. “Let’s take a walk . . . to the bookstore.”

Turning sideways, he waited for me to come out from behind the counter. Not expecting any trouble, he stood his rifle on the floor.

I seized my opportunity and grabbed a glass jar that had been gathering dust on a nearby shelf. Hurling it like a ball, it hit him directly in the head. He crumpled on the floor like a loose cloth, moaning and cursing.

In two seconds, I was out the door and running like a chased rabbit, hoping that his aim would be worse than the speed of my legs. Just for additional luck, I ran zig zag.

I headed directly for Leon's hideout in hopes that he might hear the commotion and come to my aid. I knew this strategy was a tossup, given how Leon felt about me. Still, one must always think positive.

Behind me, I heard the soldier yelling as he stumbled out of the Apothecary. I doubled my zig and zag and reached Leon's place as the soldier gained ground. Throwing myself behind Leon's fence, I cried frantically, "Leon!"

I heard Leon clamber up his basement steps. "What?" he said as he hurdled out his back door.

"In . . . coming," I huffed in half breaths. "A . . . man . . . with . . . a rifle!"

Leon reached inside his door and brandished his own weapon. A different type of long barrel. Scanning the horizon, he spotted my pursuer and aimed his gun. The crack echoed in my ears and I raised my hands in self-defense.

All went quiet. The air felt stifling and I was sweating with fear.

"You can come out now," he said.

I looked up. He was staring at me from above the gate.

"Where is he?" I gulped.

"Dead," he said flatly.

"You sure?"

"Sure as I'm sure that a man hit in the head with a bullet usually is what I say he is."

I stood up and dared to peek over the garden fence. Sure enough, the man lay flat on his face on the ground.

"Huh," I said. "Good shot."

"Thank you."

We both stared blankly at the dead soldier.

That Leon shot the man dead raised doubt in my mind. "You and Dakota ever discuss her code?"

"Many times," he said.

"And?"

"Really?" he complained. "Isn't seeing believing?"

His face was craggy and sour, as if my questions were annoying and silly.

I took several more breaths, still not recovered from my latest sprint across the prairie.

"Okay. So now what?" I exhaled.

"Now you help me bury him. He's your problem. Might as well put some elbow grease into getting rid of him."

"My problem?" I said.

"He was chasing you, right?"

"Yes," I said, more than a little exasperated.

"Then he was your problem. Good thing I helped you." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

I eyed him through narrow slits. "Yeah. Good thing."

"So, say thank you and grab a shovel." He went indoors momentarily and came out with two shovels.

I took a handle and we walked together to where the dead man lay.

Leon picked up the man's rifle. "Good one," he said. "Military issue."

"Who is he?" I wondered out loud.

"Hell if I know. I'm guessing a deserter from somewhere nearby. Not good news. Means the Order has troops camped somewhere."

He rolled him over and checked his pockets for anything else that might be useful. He pulled a large hunting knife from a sheath in his belt. Then he put the knife in his own belt and pointed his shovel at the ground.

"Start digging."

"Me? A grave digger?"

"Your problem. Your grave."

I reluctantly took the shovel. "You going to help?"

"Soon as you get the ground good and broken."

He started to strip the man of his clothes.

"What are you doing?" I gasped.

"Gotta burn this uniform. He goes in the ground with nothing on him. The Order finds him shot as a soldier, even a deserter like this varmint, there'll be hell to pay."

My shovel bit the hard-baked earth. In a few minutes, I had a good grave site started and a good sheen of sweat.

Leon pulled the naked man to the edge of the hole and began to help with the digging.

"Trouble, trouble," he mumbled to himself.

I said nothing, conceding his point. I ran through explanations in my head and considered how I would explain this to Dakota and family. It would make for an interesting evening of dinner discussion.

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The incident with the soldier made us more cautious about going outdoors and wandering too far from the bookstore. Still, what happened in broad daylight a few days later came quickly and without warning.

Harrieta and Horner had been doing their usual routine as they entertained each other on the porch.

Dakota was in the back of the store doing some chores.

I was doing my best to stay alert, but I was still thinking about the dead man we buried. Not to mention Dominick, who had impressed me so much with his courage and his ability to deal with the Wild Ones.

He had occupied my thoughts constantly since we met, or perhaps I was simply daydreaming or bored on a beautiful day when I had nothing better to do. I watched a bird fly across the rooftops and drank in the warmth of the sun on my face.

I heard the engine first and came out of my fog. Turning to look down the street, I saw a trail of dust and a vehicle like the Captain's speeding toward us. It was one of those cases where something happens so fast, you freeze in your tracks. Reaction was simply not an option.

The vehicle was filled with several men in uniforms carrying rifles. The same uniforms as the Captain. The same rifles as the dead man. Worst of all, those rifles were aimed directly at us.

"Store," I yelled to Harrieta and Horner, but they were as surprised as me and did not move, did not speak.

Jumping to my feet, I shouted again, "Store! Inside!"

By then, the men had skidded to a stop in front of us, piled out of the vehicle, and grabbed Harrieta and Horner. The two of them stammered and screamed in protest, but within a matter of seconds, the soldiers were in the vehicle with my friends in tow. They sped off, making a donut turn in the middle of the street and plowing in the opposite direction out of town.

I stood on the porch in a daze, the hush bouncing off my ears. They were gone.

I sat on the porch's edge. A hot numbness poured over my body. My head started to pound with fear and I grew short of breath. Right in front of me, my friends had been kidnapped. And me, I had done nothing to stop it.

Dakota came sprinting out of the store.

"What happened?" she asked, out of breath.

I sat still, unable to speak.

"Laura!" she commanded as if to snap me out of a daydream.

I looked up at her and stuttered. "G-g-gone."

"Who's gone?"

"Harrieta and Horner. They took them."

"Who took them?"

"S-s-oldiers. Men with guns. I think they were probably from the Captain."

"Which way did they go?"

"That way." I pointed. East.

Dakota searched the street, her expression desperate.

"They just took them?" she said incredulously.

"Yes, yes. Snatched them off the porch and took off."

Dakota stood with her hands on her hips.

“Why?” she kept repeating. “Why would they do that?”

I sat with my head between my legs. “Because they can,” I said.

“Bastards,” she hissed. Her tone was not peaceful or forgiving. This was a different Dakota.

“What do we do?” I said in panic.

Looking sternly at me, she shook her head. “We go inside.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured and started to cry. “I’m so sorry.”

Leaning down to hug me, Dakota breathed in my ear, “This is not your fault.”

“I should have grabbed them and hurried indoors. I shouted at them, but they didn’t move. They just . . . sat there.”

She pulled me up and embraced me with a giant Dakota hug.

On a porch in front of a bookstore, in front of anyone who might be passing through, two grown women cried their eyes out.

9.

The Siege

That night after dinner, Dakota sat next to me with her arm around my shoulder.

"I'm going to show you something," she said and rose from the floor. She motioned for me to follow her.

On the far side of the store, she pointed to the wall. "I'm going to show you how Leon and I meet."

She opened a small door which had been disguised. Had she not shown me, I would not have guessed it. Bending down, she held my hand and led me through. Then she closed the door so that it would remain hidden.

A ladder led down into the ground. A tunnel. A passageway to Leon's basement. It was just tall enough for us to walk through without hitting our heads. I imagined that Leon had to tread carefully with his back slouched.

"We're going to pay Leon a visit," she said. "We're going to make a plan to get our family back."

"Who dug this?" I asked.

"I don't know. It's been here for decades. No idea why. Maybe someone needed to move around town secretly. Maybe it was part of an old mine. Don't know,

but it's useful to get around at night. No Wild Ones down here."

The musty smell filled my nose. It had the odor of an old grave. I expected to see bones sticking out of the wall.

A few minutes passed. We found another door out of the passageway. Dakota knocked three times. The door moved on hinges away from the tunnel. Leon stood in the frame with a large flashlight.

"Evening," he said and walked away.

As we both emerged, Dakota carefully shut the door.

What I saw amazed me. Computer screens, various pieces of equipment, even a radio. This was more than just his basement dwelling. This was his laboratory.

Dakota pushed me forward into the middle of the room. It was lit by several small light bulbs. He had electricity down here. Where did that come from?

"Leon was a former security director for the region of Agoura, near the southwest border of the Eastern territory."

Leon sat in an old office chair slowly pivoting in circles. "Got in a little jam," he explained. "Some folks decided I needed to be eliminated. I decided they were wrong and took my office with me. I guess, technically, you would consider that theft."

He looked dog faced, a man caught in his own net.

"Uhh, you're wanted, too?" I gloated. "And you were giving me grief?"

"Wanted? Not so much anymore," he said. "That was a long time ago and a long way away. I'm good at covering my tracks. Wouldn't surprise me if they've just

forgotten. Don't even know my name anymore. Old Leon just . . . disappeared. Poof."

Dakota chimed in. "Leon also has his connections, don't you?"

For the first time, I saw him grin. "I got friends, that's true. There's more out there than meets the eye."

I took in the whole room, marveling at what he had stuffed down here in such a small space.

"So," said Dakota, as if there was an agenda for a meeting. "Where are they?"

"Who? Your friends? My guess is about 25 miles east. That's where the Captain and his minions are camped anyway."

"Within driving distance."

"Sure, but I wouldn't be so hasty. Don't know what sentries they have posted or what radar devices they've planted along the road. They're not going to just let you walk in unannounced."

Hope drifted in and out, up and down, like a moth searching for a light. Dakota found a chair. I just made myself at home on the dirt floor and sat cross-legged.

"Why do you think they took them?" said Dakota.

"I believe it's a warning shot," he figured. "I believe they want you . . . er . . . Laura . . . to surrender."

"And if we she doesn't?"

"Well, they've got the manpower and the firepower, as they've demonstrated. They'll just come and take her, and probably you as well. Either that or they'll just snatch her and torch the place with us in it."

"Can you help us?" I blurted out.

“Help you . . .”

“Get them back.”

Leon and chair came to a standstill. His sockets drilled a hole in the ceiling. “No, probably not.”

“Then why are we here?”

His came around to face me. His jaw was set. His eyes were skeptical. “You want me to walk into the middle of that dog pile and just politely say, ‘Please give us back our friends.’ And of course, you expect that they’ll just apologize and hand them back. No harm, no foul. Right? Tell me if I’m misunderstanding what you want.”

I frowned at him. “You already said that wouldn’t work. I’m just throwing out ideas, which I assume you also have, since we’re the ones sitting here listening to you jibber jabber.”

“Then what would you suggest, O brave one? Given they’ve got all the weapons and we have three of us without much more than a couple of guns and . . .”

He pulled up.

“And?” I demanded.

“We’ve got something they want.” He peered sharply at me. “You.”

“What, you’re just going to give me away? Trade tit for tat?”

“Exactly.”

I looked helplessly at Dakota.

“Leon?” she said, her question open-ended.

“Well, we don’t have to exactly give her away. Just make it look like that. And your friends, well, we just have to know where they are and create a distraction.”

“You mean,” she said hesitantly, “we’re going to let Laura walk into the middle of this dog pile?”

“You got a better idea?” he challenged.

“Yeah,” I butted in. “Why don’t you walk in? They want you, too, you know.”

“I’m small potatoes,” he said. “You’re part of their divine Order.”

Dakota jumped into the conversation. “What kind of distraction are we talking about?”

Leon grinned evilly. “You let me take care of that.”

For the first time, I felt like Leon was going to help us, or at least he was going to enjoy it. Giving me away, that is. Didn’t that sound exactly like Leon? Was I happy about it? Hmm.

“How do we get there?” I asked. “25 miles is no small walk.”

“We drive,” he said.

“Drive?” I exclaimed. “We have a car?”

“Someone does.” He zeroed in on Dakota.

Her dimples danced. “All right. Going old school.”

I had to admit. They both had me bewildered.

—

Dakota did indeed have a car, or rather a truck which she kept in an old garage on the north end of town. She rolled up the garage door and there it was.

“Some type of Ford,” she said proudly. “An old one. Someone left it years ago. I’ve only driven it a couple of times. They left it with the keys in the ignition and a full

tank of gas. No idea how long she's been abandoned, but she works."

I could tell immediately it was rusted. At one time it was probably painted red, but it was hard to tell in the dark.

What impressed me was the fact that Dakota knew how to drive. I never thought of her as a car person, not when she swore she rode into town on a white buffalo. I laughed and said, "Where'd you learn to drive?"

She nodded. "Leon taught me, didn't you?"

"We both survived," he quipped as he loaded some gear in the back.

"But, trucks and cars, especially these old things, they're noisy, aren't they? Won't they hear us coming?"

"We'll drive slow, headlights off, keep the roar to a minimum," he said. "Despite all the dings and scrapes, whoever owned this took good care of it."

I hadn't seen a car or a truck, save for the Captain's and the kidnappers' vehicles; not since I left home during the so-called Civil War. This, this was from the ancient past when motor vehicles ran on gasoline, and right now gasoline was as scarce out here as diamonds. No one used it anymore. And besides, everything driven now was electronic. Batteries and computers.

"Wonder how he got the gas?" I muttered as I walked around and inspected the vehicle.

"Black market," Leon said. "If you've got the money, you can get anything . . . including this." He held up some equipment. From all the markings, I assumed it was military.

“Grenade launcher,” he told us, “used before the Order. Old but useful as a distraction.”

“Does it work?”

“We’re going to find out, aren’t we?”

“More black market?”

“Surplus. They made millions of these before the war. They’re easy to find.”

“That’s our plan? Drive up in a truck and launch grenades. I doubt they’ll see that coming.”

“Pretty simple.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He loaded the launcher in the back, jumped in the truck bed and patted twice on the fender. “Fire it up.”

Dakota and I climbed in the cabin. She turned the ignition key and it fired up. We sat for a moment, fixated by the windshield, the dashboard, and the purr of the engine. It was like stepping into a time machine.

“Ready?” she said.

“I guess.” Truthfully, I had my doubts. This didn’t seem like much of a plan, especially the part where I entered the camp and said, ‘Hello.’

We rolled slowly out of the garage, lights turned off, and eased down the main street toward the camp. Wild Ones passed us as we crawled out of town. Leon lay flat in the truck bed with a tarp over his body. Dakota drove carefully, pushing some Wild Ones out of the way, swerving gently to avoid others. It seemed to baffle them, this rolling vehicle, but beyond an occasional grunt and moan, they let us pass without incident.

My mouth was dry, my throat scratchy; understandable since it was us driving toward the enemy and it was my life they wanted. What we wanted, well, that would remain up in the air for the moment.

I focused on Harrieta and Horner. Determination surged through my body. We were going to get our friends back. Instead of cowering in a bookstore, we were taking it to them. Sort of.

—

As we drove down the road, Dakota and I seemed lost in thought. She, perhaps considering if we would come back to Last Chance, if we would see her beloved bookstore again. Me, thinking of my family from a previous life, my grandfather against whom we were battling, my mother and how she had disappeared from my life. She was the missing piece which Dakota had tried to restore. But some holes you just can't fill. She had vanished. I missed her. That wouldn't change.

I glanced at Dakota. "Do you ever think about your family?"

Dakota chewed on a knuckle, her hand lightly covering the top of the steering wheel. "I don't think much about them anymore. I've been gone so long, they hardly cross my mind. Guess time has a way of softening the blow, making them seem, well, less real."

We drove several more miles before she continued. "Sometimes I miss where I grew up. Don't get me wrong.

I'm happy here. The bookstore is a gift. But every so often, I wish I could take it home with me, back north."

"Why don't you?" I suggested. "You're the one that came down here on a white buffalo."

"Ah," she chuckled, "you don't believe me, do you?"

"I'd like to meet the buffalo who carried you. Where'd he go, by the way?"

She said nothing, merely joined with me as we looked out the front window again. The question about the bookstore, however, seemed to absorb her.

A few miles later, she said, "You know, moving away, leaving the bookstore. Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind. But there's Harrieta, Horner, and now, you."

"Well," I said. "You could load the store on the buffalo."

"Ah, ha, funny. But the books, maybe I could find a way to take some of them with me. A good wagon, or, you know, a truck." She winked at me. "I'd have to ask Leon."

"You've been thinking about this, haven't you?"

I could tell I had struck a chord. She started singing a song in another language, a tune that was gentle and flowing.

We drove for what seemed like hours. I thought surely it must be close to dawn. I waited for the faint blue light to crack the horizon. When Leon tapped on the side wall, Dakota braked the truck and we all got out.

"This is where you start," he said to me. "Just follow that road. Dakota and me, we're going to take the back route."

He put his arm on my shoulder. "I'm going to pin this small device on you. It looks like a broach, a small one. It's a radio transmitter. All you have to do is talk. We can hear you. Let us know when you find them."

He pinned a small black dot on my shoulder and put on a sleek pair of headsets. "Say something."

"Something," I said.

He winked. "Good. You're on."

The three of us stood in a circle reluctant to part company.

"Well," I acknowledged. "I guess it's my turn to take on the dog pile."

"Just keep moving," Leon encouraged. "They'll have sentries. They'll find you soon enough."

"And of course, no one will shoot me, right?"

"No, of course not. You're royalty. Why would they?"

"Good plan, Leon. What could possibly go wrong?"

"It'll work. Have a little faith."

I gave him my best scowl.

Turning east, I hiked briskly down the road. I didn't stop to look back at them. I was afraid if I did, I wouldn't keep moving. It took all my strength to walk one step at a time toward whatever fate awaited me.

—

Dawn was breaking. I heard the clatter of soldiers waking up to their daily routine. My heart picked up tempo. I started walking faster, anxious to get this party started.

“Approaching the camp,” I announced, hoping Leon was listening.

I don’t know who was more startled as I walked up to a soldier and said, “Good morning.”

Dressed in his black uniform, in the early morning darkness, he looked like a moving shadow as he grabbed his gun and shouted, “Halt!”

Several more soldiers rushed to his side.

“Name,” he demanded.

“Laura. Laura Becker. I think your boss would like to talk to me.”

In the faint light, I could see him squint. First a stranger, and now this, as if I had scheduled an appointment. He radioed someone and stood by for a response.

“Let her through,” said a squawky voice. “Make sure she gets escorted to the Captain’s quarters.”

“Looks like I’m just in time for breakfast,” I said.

He was not appreciative of my humor. “This way,” he ordered.

We walked through a camp filled with large tents and soldiers scurrying to take care of their morning chores. Some of them gawked at me as I passed. Unusual sight, I imagined, especially this early in the morning.

The camp was like its own town. There was an area for eating. A small post office. Training grounds for weapons. All the usual military setups. I hadn’t imagined it to be so large. I tried to think what on earth Leon might have planned. A few grenades wouldn’t put much of a dent in this place.

"This camp is huge," I said.

"No talking," the soldier snapped.

"Just saying. You could fit a city in this place."

He turned on me and lifted his weapon to my chest.

"I said . . . no talking." A serious threat.

There were lights flaring across the camp. I could even make out a small airfield in the distance with planes and drones. Some memories flooded back from when I was younger and my mother used to take me to the airport for an afternoon picnic.

"Huh," I said under my breath. I had no clue where that memory came from.

My escort marched as if he was doing drills. He amused me: his seriousness over a woman in a flower print dress. One stiff and rehearsed. The other watching in wonder as she took in the sights. Then I stopped. He noticed and marched back to me.

"What's the problem?" he barked. "Keep moving."

I couldn't. My legs wouldn't move.

He followed my line of sight. A look of comprehension swept across his face.

Harrieta, Horner, hanging by their necks from noosed ropes tied to a metal pole stretched across makeshift gallows. Their faces twisted, their bodies motionless.

Surely this was not the truth. My head screamed for them to come back to life, but there was no mistaking this picture. It was them, or used to be them. Now they were just lifeless dolls at the end of a rope.

"You killed my friends," I blurted out.

“They were spies,” he responded. “You’re a spy. If you’re not careful, you may be next.”

“They were just people,” I cried. “A little girl? An old man? Spies? What kind of idiots are you?”

The soldier took his rifle butt and struck me across the face. The pain flashed through my body. I fell flat on my back and inhaled mouthfuls of dust.

“No . . . more . . . talking,” he ordered.

I lay motionless, looking at my friends, wanting to cry, but forced to stay quiet. If I had had my bow and arrow or my pistol, I would have reacted swiftly and left this barking piece of horse crap sprawled in the street as lifeless as my friends. No amount of Dakota’s code would have held me back.

The soldier reached down to grab me by my collar. I scrambled out of reach and warned him. “Don’t . . . touch . . . me.”

He pointed his rifle at me and prepared to shoot.

“Don’t do that, soldier,” said a voice behind him. It was the Captain. “That’s the granddaughter of Henry Highsmith you’ve struck. Any more damage and it will not go well for you.”

The soldier bolted to attention, his rifle by his side.

“At ease. You can go back to your post. Try to stay out of trouble, would you?”

Looking back and forth between us, the soldier saluted and hurried off. He was anxious to be rid of me, this woman spy pest.

“Captain Brian Becker at your service,” the Captain said in an official tone of voice.

"Becker?" I said hesitantly.

"That's right."

"I'm Laura Becker."

"I'm aware of that."

I gawked at him.

He leered back at me. "Curious, huh? What are the odds, you and me with the same last name? Coincidence?"

"You killed my friends," I shot back.

He glanced up at Harrieta and Horner. "Oh, that. Yes, I did indeed. They had served their purpose. No use keeping them around. Just more mouths to feed."

"They were harmless," I said as my voice choked.

"They were tools, a means to an end."

"For what purpose?"

"To bring you to camp. Far as I can see, my plan worked."

An early morning wind started to blow across my face. As dawn cracked, the full light of the sun revealed Harrieta and Horner, mute and pitiful.

I shook my head. "You'll pay for this," I promised.

Captain Becker's face was as steady as a canyon wall. "What say we stop with all this threat nonsense and go in my tent to talk."

"Talk about what?" I hissed.

"You, of course. I told you, I needed you in camp."

"Why? Why not just ask me nicely?"

"You wouldn't have come. You and that bookstore freak. She's a little off her rocker, I think. I had to figure

out some way to motivate you. Looks like you're plenty motivated now. What's say we go in and talk about it?"

"Dakota? A freak? She's a beautiful woman."

"Tomato: Fruit or vegetable? What's the answer? And the winner is: Who cares? I've got you, that's all that matters. She's just a bit player."

"What on earth do you want with me?"

"Oh, come on, now. The name, Becker. That doesn't ring a bell? You, me?"

I gave this some thought.

"Are we family?"

"Bingo. I'm your uncle."

"Uncle?"

"I don't have to explain what that means, do I? Well, in any case, my brother married your mother."

"So, we're family? Uncle Becker? And you have been sent to retrieve me for the high priest? Oh, now it's starting to make sense."

"Not really, not to me. Can't see why he wants you, not after all these years living like an animal, but I'm under orders, and since the high priest gives those orders, it's my job to get you back home safely because . . . your grandfather, in spite of all the trouble you've caused us, would like for you to come home. And beings as how we're related, he made me your official escort. All in the family, so to speak. But it's taken me forever to find you. You are one slippery fish. I'll give you that. Now, can we please go inside and discuss travel arrangements?"

"I'm not going back," I retorted.

“Oh now, let’s not get ornery, shall we? This has been hard enough, and I’d like to go home to my own family. There’s no point arguing about it. I always thought that once I found you, getting you back home would be the easy part. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Surprise,” I said.

Looking at two sentries next to his tent, he ordered them to cuff me. They pulled my hands backwards and secured them. Next thing I knew, I was sprawled in Becker’s tent, face down on the ground. Once again, I was breathing in dust. It was starting to annoy me, the fact that people assumed they had the right to just toss me like a coil of rope. Just because they wore a uniform.

Captain Becker entered and sat in an old swivel chair. He lit up a cigar and smoked peacefully. The full sun began to fill up the tent with light.

“Welcome home,” he said.

His voice suggested otherwise.

—

I lay on the tent floor crying. “Why?” I repeated.

“Why ask why?” he said. “Life is just one big mystery. The rich eat the poor. The big swallow up the weak. That’s just the way the cookie crumbles. They’re gone. Get over it.”

“They were harmless,” I sobbed.

“They were tools, means to an end, that’s all.”

I cried for several minutes. He didn’t seem to mind. His thoughts were otherwise occupied.

I rolled over and faced him.

“You can sit in a chair if you want,” he offered, “that is, if you agree to behave.”

Spotting another swivel chair, he picked me up and sat me down eye to eye. My face, hands, and legs were dirty and scraped. My cheeks were streaked with dust and tears.

“Now,” he said as a pronouncement. “We need to clean you up and get you ready to go back east. Grandpa has been informed and he’s anxious to see his granddaughter.”

I grimaced and squirmed in the chair. “Can I get out of these cuffs?”

He glanced at me slyly. “You promise to cooperate? I know you’re a bit of a Wild One, maybe wilder than the Wild Ones.”

“I’ve been on my own for a long time. It comes with the territory.”

“Guess that makes sense. Still, I need your word.”

“What harm can I do? I’m just a girl.”

He grinned. “Ohhh no. Not just a girl. Not anymore. Then again, I can guess that Dakota has been trying to tame you. She’s big on manners. Can’t say if she’s had much success, but I sure wouldn’t bet money on it.”

“True,” I said. “I’m a work in progress. I don’t mind a good fight. Dakota, she’s a little different, a little more civilized, though I’m not sure how she’ll take it when she finds out you hung her friends.”

He puffed his cigar and did a complete turn in his chair.

“Touché, little lady. Guess we’ll have to wait and find out. I know she’s out there somewhere. Did she bring a tribe?”

“Another whole army. I can’t wait to see you up there on that pole after she shows up.”

He laughed, hard for a man who was so gruff and mean. I had said something that made him step out of character, or maybe he was just being arrogant. Maybe he found me amusing.

“My gosh,” he exclaimed, “who’s the real villain here? If you had shown any sign of cooperation, none of this would have happened. They’re dead because you don’t know how to behave. You’re like a feral cat, always hissing and clawing.” He continued to chuckle. “Can’t wait till grandpa gets a sight of you. I give you a week before he cuts you up and buries your sour puss in an unmarked grave.”

“Better than sitting here with you,” I grumbled.

“You don’t like my company?”

“The way I like weeds and horse manure.”

We glared at each other for several moments.

“The cuffs?” I reminded him.

He stood up, reached behind, and set me free. Then he jumped back as if he was letting a wild lion out of the cage.

“Run if you want,” he warned. “You won’t get far. I’ve got this place on lock-down and your face is enemy number one, plastered everywhere so no one misses you. If they value their lives, they’re not going to let you loose.”

I rubbed my wrists. Once again, tears welled up. "Cut them down, please," I begged. "We'll give them a proper burial."

"They'll be ashes by sundown. Don't you worry. For now, I've got to figure out how to get you back home. Maybe by tonight, you'll be sitting in grandpa's living room. I'd like to be a fly on the wall when that happens. Yap, yap, yap. He'll probably send you back and make me finish you off. Wouldn't that just be my luck?"

Again, we eyed each other like bears sizing each other up.

Someone squawked a code over a radio on his desk. The voice sounded urgent.

"Well, gotta go," he said abruptly. "I got a camp to run. Don't go anywhere, please. You'll just make it harder on yourself and your friends. That's a wide pole out there. Plenty of room for company." He smirked at me and then slipped out the door.

I sat and wondered if Dakota or Leon had heard this. I hashed out my own plan of escape, ready at a moment's notice if those grenades started to pound the camp.

But what I wanted most was to bring Harrieta and Horner back. The fact that they still hung out there made the blood rush to my head. One way or another, I was determined to see that they got justice.

The Storm

I had no intention of sitting idly until the Captain returned. Peeking out through the tent, I noticed that no sentry stood by. Odd, considering how he had just bragged about his security.

Moving a few steps outside his headquarters, I could see movement in the distance – soldiers scurrying toward one part of the camp – but no signs of any attacks from Leon.

“Leon,” I murmured, “if you can hear me, I’m outside the Captain’s tent and everyone seems to be headed in one direction. If that’s you, get ready. They’re coming.”

A voice spoke behind me. “That’s called a distraction.” It was Leon.

My mouth dropped open.

“A few of my good friends showed up,” he bragged.

“Who?”

“The Wolf Tribe.”

“You know about them?”

“They’ve shown up a time or two around town.

Usually when there are soldiers nearby. I took the liberty

of inviting them along. They don't like the Order any more than we do."

"I met someone named Dominick."

"Yeah, he's the head chief's son."

I shook my head furiously. "No one ever tells me anything around here."

"I would have told you, if I'd known you met, but right now, no time for chit chat. We gotta go."

"What about Harrieta and Horner?" I glanced at the gallows, only to notice that they were gone.

"Already managed. We're taking them home. They're already in the truck."

"Wait," I implored. "Where is everybody? Where's all the soldiers?"

"Chasing the wolves, and I can promise you, they'll be busy most of the day. Those guys are ghosts."

He grabbed my hand and hurried west toward the camp entrance. "Come on. We're not waiting for an open invitation to get out of here."

We both ran, though Leon was a bit gimpy. I stayed close in case he needed help.

I gestured to him. "Where's the truck?"

"Dakota has it. Hopefully, she'll be sitting at the camp entrance."

A series of explosions rocked the ground.

"Oops," said Leon. "They found the land mines. That's good news for us."

Gunfire in the distance and the buzz of aircraft.

"Keep moving," he commanded. "No sense getting caught in the crossfire."

Leon was out of breath. "Too many cigarettes," he huffed. "Run, run and I'll catch up."

"I'm not leaving you," I said.

Shots rang out. Closer this time.

"They're coming," he bellowed. "Run!"

Two men wearing wolf headdress ran out to the road carrying Leon's grenade launcher.

"Ah," Leon cried. "Cavalry has arrived."

He began to limp forward. I followed close behind. We passed the men, one of whom was kneeling while the other loaded. Shots pumped out. Explosions went off nearby.

More gunshots. The wolves disappeared, but the grenades kept popping out.

We crossed the camp entrance, where, despite all the hubbub, a sentry had kept his post. He aimed a rifle in our direction and fired, hitting Leon in the back. Leon flew forward and lay still on his stomach. Slowly, he motioned me to keep running. Then he groaned and died. I ached to help him but knew instinctively that he was gone.

Freed up, I now spun around and ran like an antelope.

The soldier fired again but missed, barely. The shot whizzed just over my head.

I heard a vehicle approaching. In a matter of seconds, I saw the truck and the face of Dakota behind the wheel. She hit the brakes and slid sideways not more than twenty feet from me. I covered the rest of the distance in three strides and jumped into the truck bed. There lay the bodies of Harrieta and Horner. They startled me and

made me fall backwards. I hit my head on the rear of the truck bed. Their bodies bounced as the vehicle prepared to escape. Harrieta flew into my arms and caused me to scream.

Dakota hit the gas and spun in a half circle. The Ford threw gravel and accelerated, tossing me side to side with each bump. It was as if I had fallen into a rocket ship spinning out of orbit.

A small object, perhaps a drone, flew overhead. It kept pace with us as we dashed along the road.

“We’re being followed,” I said.

Dakota looked out her window and shrugged. “No secret where we’re headed.”

A trail of smoke whizzed across the sky and the drone exploded.

“Wow,” she said. “Those wolves are good shots.”

No other plane or drone followed us. I breathed a sigh of relief. We were headed home. Down three people, but alive.

I wondered if what we had done was worth it. Were the lives of our friends payment enough for those who survived? I felt nauseous and vomited over the side. Death all around me. Death yet to come. We were going back to Last Chance, but was it truly our last chance?

Whatever Dakota believed about the bookstore, I was not a convert. I didn’t think we stood much of a chance, two women against a mammoth army. Running away only gave us a breather. Soon the soldiers would return like angry wasps – the Captain and his death squads.

I watched the sky pass above me. It seemed so serene compared to our truck on this bumpy road. How could one not be affected by the other?

I let my mind wander to happier thoughts, days and nights with Horner and Harrieta. But mostly, I just lay blankly and waited to get home.

—

As we approached Last Chance, the sky started to change from bright blue to ominous gray and then greenish black. An approaching storm, but what kind of storm was this? It was charging and changing by the second. I could see flashes of lightning in the clouds.

Racing through the downtown area, Dakota skidded to a stop in front of the bookstore. She jumped out of the cab, ran around the truck, and grabbed my hand.

“Help me,” she urged.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Move these bodies behind the bookstore. We’ll cover them with a tarp and bury them later. We have to secure them. This storm’s going to be pretty fierce.”

“What about the soldiers?”

“Don’t worry about them right now. They’re about to have hell unleashed on them. First things first.”

She pulled down the tail gate and grabbed Horner’s legs. “Come on, let’s get him moved.”

I grabbed his shoulders and eased him down the ramp. We carried him around the corner of the store and hurried back for Harrieta. She was like carrying a feather.

I had to choke back a sob, her lifeless body empty of that curious, playful spirit.

After we staked down the tarp, the storm was upon us. Droplets started to fall, then heavy rain. The street turned into a river of mud.

“Into the bookstore,” Dakota cried.

She opened the door and both of us ran in. Together we breathed a sigh of relief. Then she stood by the door peering out the window. I sat in front of the counter and cried.

The lightning began to flash and crack so loud, I covered my ears and cowered against the counter.

“Don’t worry, dear. This is not meant for us,” said Dakota.

I looked at her, confused by her words.

“I told you,” she said. “We’re protected. This bookstore is our savior.”

“You mean . . .”

“Yes,” she replied calmly.

Despite the daylight, the storm shut out the sun. It grew so dark that the Wild Ones appeared in the streets. As the waters increased, Wild Ones began to flow past like small boats. Drifting with the current, they cackled and howled in protest.

Despite the fact it was a warm day, I shivered.

“Come stand with me,” she said. “If you need faith, just look out the window and watch.”

As I stood next to her, she put her arm around me and held me tight.

A bolt of lightning hit the street directly in front of us. I jumped backwards and screamed. I had seen storms on the plains, but nothing this powerful. The wind, rain, thunder, and lightning formed a vortex of power that had me cowering next to Dakota.

“Will the store hold?” I hollered over the din of the squall.

“The store is the source,” she said. “Yes, it will hold. Our Mother is mighty.”

“Mother?” I repeated.

She squeezed me tightly. “She is THE Mother of us all.”

Some form of belief washed over me. I cannot explain it. I said I was a skeptic. I remain a skeptic to this day about stories that claim to be otherworldly, but this was right in front of me. What doubt I had was being buffeted by the power of Mother, a brick building filled with books. Average to the simple man and woman. Not average at this moment. Terrifying and enormous. I held onto Dakota as if she were my anchor. I knew whoever was out there without protection would surely be in grave danger.

And if the Captain and his crew suffered her fury, so much the better.

—

The storm lasted for hours. We grew tired and lay in our corner. The intensity never wavered. It pounded the earth like a full-blown hurricane. All day, all night, the

wind and rain tore through Last Chance, pushing over buildings, heaving wood and metal, creating the turbulence of an angry god. We listened to the town being pummeled and torn off its foundations. All except the Last Chance Bookstore, which seemed immune from it all.

By some miracle, the two of us together created comfort and slept. When we awoke, it was quiet outside and the sun was shining. The sky had returned to its normal blue without so much as a wisp of a cloud.

We stood on the porch and surveyed the damage. Total devastation. Not a single building left standing. The street was littered with Wild Ones drowned while they howled at their impending deaths.

From the porch, Dakota and I surveyed the damage.

“Geesh. Not much left,” I said.

Dakota grimaced. “No, I think this is the end of Last Chance.”

“What now?”

I couldn’t imagine surviving out here with nothing left to eat or drink. Leon gone. The garden demolished. No place left to scavenge.

“I don’t know,” she said wearily. “I just don’t know.”

As if in response to this question, Dakota grabbed a chair from inside and set it on the porch. She pulled out a long pipe, packed it with what I assumed was tobacco, lit it with a match, and puffed. Deep in thought, she remained in her own solitary confinement.

I walked around town looking for anything that might have survived. Because all the structures were gone, I was disoriented. Where was Leon’s house and

garden? Where was the edge of town? The sign had been blown away. All the usual evidence of habitation was gone. Last Chance was gone

And to think. A single building, a bookstore no less, was the lone survivor, and the two of us – Dakota, Laura – were the last ones left. The end had come.

I felt like a fist had punched me in the stomach. The loss of so much in so short a time. I couldn't help but observe the cruelty of life and the people who lived on this Earth. The remnants of my dream returned. Maybe this was evidence of its prophecy. You can find happiness, but evil is always looking to tear out your heart. The proof was all around me. I wanted to shut my eyes and never open them again.

And yet a constant reminder in my thoughts. Mother had protected us. Destroyed the town, leveled the place, but we had survived. And the Captain's army, the one which had hung our good friends? It was an odd thought, thinking of the code, realizing the extend of the destruction. How did these fit together? Maybe that was what Dakota was trying to understand.

When I returned, she had not moved. Was she in a trance? I couldn't tell. The only sign that she was breathing was the puff of pipe smoke. I let her be and went inside. With nothing more to do, I pulled down some books and browsed. In this way, I occupied my time and my mind for the rest of the day and let Dakota ponder our fate.

11.

Recovery

Toward late afternoon, I heard the crunching sound of wheels on the street. I jumped and ran to the doorway. It was the Captain's vehicle, battered and covered in mud. Captain Becker, in street clothes – no hat or uniform – shabbier than when we had last met. Dakota came out of her reverie and stood next to me.

"Should I get my arrows?" I asked.

"No, dear, I don't think you need them. I think he's unarmed."

"All the better," I groused.

Dakota held me tight around my shoulders. "Not this time."

As if there might come a day when I could.

The Captain stopped as he had previously in front of the store. Sitting in his seat, he observed us for several minutes before easing out of the cab.

"Good morning, ladies."

Neither of us returned his greeting.

"Well, I see the storm leveled this place, too, all except for that damn bookstore. Now isn't that just crazy, or maybe coincidence. What do you say, Ms. Dakota?"

“Not coincidence,” she said. “I don’t believe in coincidence and neither does she.”

“She, now? I’ve heard about the hell of a woman’s fury, but this?” He shook his head and rubbed his stubbled chin. “You know. I agree with you. This was no accident.”

He leaned against the car. “Ah well, I suppose now you can hold that over my head. Payment in full for your friends. Congratulations.”

“You come to help us bury them?” I said harshly.

He thought about it. “Sure, why not? I’m the one who killed them. Might as well pitch in and finish the deed.”

Dakota stood straight. Then, without a word, she motioned to us and we proceeded to all work together to dig two graves in the back of the store.

When we finished, we stood over the mounds of dirt. Dakota sang a song in a language that lilted, rose, and fell like the flight of a hawk. When she finished, we stood mesmerized.

Returning to the store front, she proceeded to sit back in her chair and relight her pipe. The Captain turned to me as we both sat on the edge of the porch.

“She always this calm?”

“Yes,” I said, “except when you kill her friends.”

She broke in. “Leon is still out there. Want to help us find him?”

The Captain glanced at her. “Not likely. Washed away just like most of my soldiers, plus the camp, not to mention whatever we had stored. Storm pretty much took everything. No. It’s just the three of us living on top of a

big flat mud hole, and maybe a few wolves. Don't know where they ran off to."

"I'd like to make it two of us," I threatened.

"You're welcome to try."

"Stop it!" Dakota commanded. "Both of you. Enough death has hit us today, don't you think? Are we going to just keep killing one another?"

Her voice froze both of us.

She puffed harder and returned to her meditation.

The Captain leered at her. "I imagine you had something to do with this," he said.

"I had nothing to do with this," she retorted. "You on the other hand . . ."

"Ah, that would make sense, except . . ."

They traded hostile glances.

"Never seen a storm like that, not out here," he stated. "Out east they have hurricanes, but this was a monster like . . ."

"She is not a monster," Dakota interrupted.

"Okay, you get my drift."

"I had nothing to do with it," she repeated.

"Your bookstore then."

"The power of the word," she said. "Books are the symbol. The word is the life. She is our Mother."

The Captain sat still, lost in thought. Then he came back to life and caught my attention. "Don't suppose I could coax you to go home."

"There's nothing there for me," I said, "at least nothing that I value. You've pretty much convinced me of that."

“Ah,” he scoffed again. “I can’t say I blame you. Living out here in the wilderness. Probably wouldn’t know what to do with yourself, wallowing in the lap of luxury, being the heir to a very nice inheritance.”

“Yeah, I’d probably just make a fool of myself and embarrass my family, like I embarrass you, right?”

“Lord have mercy,” he said, “Scratch, scratch, scratch. My little feral cat.”

The conversation ground to a halt. He stood and gave us each another long look. “Well, my career’s in the toilet. Our friend Highsmith will probably put my head on a pole, so I guess I’ll be moving in the opposite direction. Or maybe I’ll go south and see if I can get lost in the swamps. Pretty hard to find a man down there who doesn’t want to be found. Just ask Leon, except, he isn’t here to ask anymore, now is he?”

“I hope you drown,” I said.

“Thanks. I hope you wander in a cave, a really dark one, and fall in a hole.”

“At least we’re clear about each other.”

“Clear as a bell. No doubt.”

Captain Becker jumped off the porch and strode to his vehicle. Without a word, he spun the car around and headed out of town. Dakota and I watched him until he had completely disappeared.

“Anger will eat you,” she said to me thoughtfully.

“Maybe, but it might keep me alive, too.”

She remained pensive and puffed her pipe.

A discussion to be continued.

—

In the morning, I was surprised to find Dominick gathered outside the bookstore with what I assumed was part of the Wolf Tribe.

For a moment, I was alarmed. "Dakota?" I cried out.

She hurried up front, but her face relaxed when she saw who was there.

"Ah, finally, they've arrived."

"The Wolf Tribe? You know about them?"

"Of course. They're usually around in the dark, and always available to help us, as you saw."

"Is this the whole tribe?"

"No, only part of them. See, there's Dominick. He's going to lead you."

"Lead me where?"

"Out west where there's a chance to start a new life. The west is not the east. They live differently. They welcome outsiders. But you have to cross a great, grass prairie to get to the mountains, and without some help, you would die."

"Why would I go west? Are you coming?"

"No, I'm going back north."

"Why can't I come with you?"

"Because you are not northern."

"I'm not eastern either, so why would I think I would be any less northern than western or southern, or any other direction?"

"I have thought long about this," she said like a prophetess. "Your direction is west."

"You're just going to leave the bookstore? Who's going to take care of the books?"

"The bookstore is its own mistress. She will call someone when she is ready. I'm not the owner. I only stayed here because she let me. Now, she's telling me I'm free to go home."

"But . . ." I choked back a sob. "Who will be my mother?"

"I will, always, in spirit if not in body. And the Wolf Tribe will be your brothers and sisters. They will become your family."

"What if I just want to stay?"

"You'll die out here. There's nothing left except the bookstore and she is perfectly capable to taking care of herself. We scraped by when the town still offered us something and Leon was available to help us. Now, it's all gone. It's time to move on."

Dakota opened the door. We walked out together. Dominick stood in front of the tribe.

"Here are your weapons," she said. She handed me my gun and arrows. "Use them wisely. Try to see reason and peace first. It's what I've taught you."

"I admit, I'm not always the best pupil."

"You're young. You will learn. Hopefully something I said will help you along the way."

As I walked down the steps, the tribe parted and then surrounded me.

"You're in excellent hands," she said, her parting words before going back into the store.

I turned in a complete circle and saw all the different faces. I was surprised to see women and children. If the trip was going to be that hard, why would they come?

Dominick called out, "Peace to you, sister."

"Thank you," I said. "Glad to see you survived the storm."

"We know how to survive. We know all the high ground, and we have shelters everywhere."

"Really?"

"Yes, we are Wolf. And so shall you be."

Curious eyes surrounded me. Mine were equally curious. It would make for some interesting stories as we traveled.

"It's good to meet you in the daytime," I joked.

He looked amused. "Do I look any different?"

"Not so much, but at least I don't have to sneak up on you."

"Ah," he laughed. "Is that what you call it? Well, then, it's good that we're friendly. I didn't want to hurt you after you fell off the porch."

"You knew I was there, didn't you?"

"Well, let's just say it would have been easier and safer if you had just called out. We could have walked out of town together."

"Well, that's what we're doing now, so I guess we're all right."

"Oh, this is just beginning. We're going to see a lot of each other."

That thought—the fact we would be walking for weeks, months, staying close to each other—that thought

pleased me. He was someone I would enjoy spending time with.

Without another word, we walked slowly west toward something unknown, toward mountains that I had never seen, and a land that offered the promise of a new life.

And then I saw it, standing in the grass, as majestic as anything I had ever witnessed. He lowered his head and snatched a mouthful of grass and dried weeds. Chewing contentedly, he watched us pass, a sign that our journey was blessed.

It was the white buffalo.

II.

12.

A New Tribe

Who can tell why things happen the way they do? My life, for instance. A conundrum of wealth, poverty, magic, and this – traveling west to somewhere unknown with Dominick and his Tribe of Wolves. Not that I'm a woman who likes to think much about the meaning of life. After all, I'm still young without much past to consider.

Still, as the miles converged from one long day to the next, I had more than my share of time to think about my life, and I had to admit, the why of it all still baffled me. Where had I come from and where were we going? How had I ended up in Last Chance? Why had Dakota and Harrieta and Horner given me, a wild child, such a warm welcome? And why did they all have to disappear?

Then there's the bookstore, that mysterious and marvelous little building in the middle of Last Chance. Last Chance Bookstore. What to make of its perceived powers? Who was this protector? And did I simply leave it all behind, or was the spirit of the place, what Dakota described as our Mother, still with me? So many questions. So many days to think about them.

We had crossed into virgin territory the likes of which I had never seen. It was as if we had roamed into the middle of a long rug of grass that had no beginning or end, no road to and from somewhere, just an undisturbed stretch of greenery. We walked like ants across the floor of a banquet hall, our pace slow compared to the size of the building.

“You’re thinking again,” said Dominick.

His comment startled me out of my meditations.

“Don’t I always?” I said. “Seems the thing to do out here all by our lonesome. Got plenty of time on my hands and nothing out here but grass, grass, and more grass. If I were a horse or say, a white buffalo, I’d be jumping for joy. But I’m just a woman with lots of time, so, I think.”

We moved some distance together before he replied, “There is much to observe out here and much to accomplish, if you know what to look for.”

“Well,” I said. “Since I have nothing better to do, why don’t you clue me in?”

He motioned for the group to stop. Then he turned to me. “For one thing, as part of this journey, we would welcome you into our tribe.”

“To be what, a wolf girl?”

“A member of our family,” he said. “Now that Dakota has moved on, you might want to stay with us.”

“Well,” I stated drily. “Where else would I go?”

His brow furrowed, little crow’s feet dancing from the edge of his eyes. The wind blew his hair into tangled ribbons. I could tell, my words had startled him. He was not used to my customary bluntness.

“You have a choice. We have a choice. The reason to go west is not simply to walk. We’re searching for a new home, a place to settle in peace. You could find that place with us.”

“You mean you’re not just playing nursemaid to my little tale of woe?”

He blinked for several seconds. “I don’t know what you mean.” He paused again and shook his head. “Sometimes your words are strange, and perhaps a little sharp.”

“Perhaps I’m joking and you’re just a very serious man.” It was a lame attempt to backtrack. I knew he was right, but giving an apology was not my strong suit.

Again, he blinked. “Perhaps we have to learn a common language.”

“Other than just talking?” I suggested.

“Yes,” he said and began to walk again.

The land was unsparingly flat, with grass plains that rolled for miles in all directions. It was welcoming and rich to anyone who would choose to live here. But in me, a restlessness grew that could not be quieted. A yearning for something that I could not recognize or put a name to. It made me, as Dominick described, sharp. Perhaps rude would be a better word. I knew Dakota would not be pleased.

Make an effort, I heard her say.

“Okay,” I said to no one but her.

Catching up, I tried to soften my stance. “I’m sorry for my sharp words,” I said. “Your idea is a good one. What should I observe while we’re walking here?”

Dominick stopped again and eyed me, as if searching for my sincerity. Then he scanned the horizon and pointed.

“There is water off to the south, probably a river of some sort where we might consider camping. You can tell from that line of trees.”

I stood next to him, mesmerized by the rhythm of his voice. Despite my edgy banter, I found his presence comforting.

He changed positions. “And to the west, I see a small patch of dust. Something stirs there.”

Moving in a half-circle, he pointed east. “And there,” he pronounced, “something or someone is following us. I’ve been watching for several days. I can hear it, though I can’t say what it is exactly, but I’m guessing, probably human.”

He rotated and looked at me. It was an invitation.

“You’re right,” I said to him. “I never noticed any of this. Turns out that while you were observing all these things, I’ve been daydreaming. To tell the truth, I feel kind of lost out here. Not sure where I’m going, or even why, for that matter.”

He smiled at me in a way that was gentle and disarming.

“You were born to dream. It’s who you are.”

“That’s not the way I see it.”

“No?”

“No, and besides, you don’t need a daydreamer. This is a tribe. You’ve got work to do.”

“Daydreaming is included in that tribe.”

Was he understanding what I said? We seemed to be speaking two different tongues.

I made an offer. "Well, here's a thought," I said. "Is it possible that while I'm daydreaming, I might also be useful to someone. Maybe work on something that would help the tribe?"

He looked pleased. I think he appreciated the effort. "We can talk about that."

"But I have to pay attention, right? Is that your point?"

The wind blew between us. A rare moment of tranquility.

"We start where you start," he said.

Fair enough. At least we start.

He rejoined the tribe and walked to the head of the group, where he remained for the rest of the day.

As for me, I tried to pay more attention to what was going on around me. For the first time in weeks, I noticed a bird singing.

"Huh," I said and shrugged my shoulders. "Wonder where that's coming from?"

I noticed a young boy watching me. He sat so still, he blended perfectly into the grass. I recognized him as part of our tribe. Even at such a young age, his skill at being quiet and observant was already highly developed. Mine, on the other hand, was a work in progress.

I drifted off again into my daydream world. Who can say why I was on this trip? Still, I tried to think about what Dominick was saying, what our common language

was. Pay attention, I thought to myself, and you might just learn something.

—

I camped with a small group of women at night. Since it was still warm, we stretched under the stars and kept each other company.

Sometimes I enjoyed laying in the grass with the bright lights of the night sky and the flow of the moon across the horizon. I could easily believe that the spirit of the bookstore, what Dakota described as Mother, watched over us. Tonight was one of those nights. Clear and serene.

Suddenly, a shadow stood beside me. As if his thoughts penetrated our sleep, the other ladies woke and formed a circle. He put his finger over his lips. As Dominick stood still, we all heard something. A tinny whirl of some sort.

Pointing his hand in the opposite direction, Dominick slipped off and the others followed as subtle as an owl in flight. I tried to imitate their movements as best I could.

The whole tribe had gathered in the center of our camp. Dominick made some hand movements, speaking a language without words.

Together, the tribe moved north. Everything in the camp had been folded into packs. Only the small circles of our extinguished campfires remained in place.

As we hurried away, the noise grew louder. There was a flash of light in the sky. The first thought that hit

me: Drones. Purveyors at work. The Order had not given up their search after all. We kept moving, with one scout keeping watch in the rear.

Dominick rushed up to me and grabbed my hand. "Hurry," he whispered. "We have a hiding place up ahead."

As the light flashed closer, I was surprised to come upon a long, brushy lean to. Where had this come from? Somebody had obviously planned for just such an emergency. I began to understand and respect the cleverness of the tribe. There was a reason why they could not be caught. They were truly as smart as wolves.

The tribe sprawled underneath its wide canopy and laid flat on the ground. The noise of the flying spy grew louder and its lights flashed across our outer shell. Could it tell the difference between grass and shelter? I grew still and tried not to breathe.

One of the women, whom I had come to know as Aurora, crawled to my side and held my hand. A tall woman, wiry and brown, her grip strong but not fierce. Her bright blue eyes and firm touch told me that she would not let me fall into the hands of the enemy.

We waited for hours. The drone was persistent, something in its networking convinced that we were in the area. I wondered what message it sent to its troops and where they might be stationed.

And then another surprise. A searing flash of light across the sky and a small explosion. I tried to stretch my neck to get some glimpse of what had happened.

The voice of Dominick rose above the explosion. "Move out," he said and everyone crawled from under the canopy and formed a straight line. I ended up in the middle between Aurora and another tribesman.

"Run," Dominick repeated and the whole line broke into a full-fledged sprint. Aurora pushed me in the back and encouraged me to keep up.

"Where are we going?" I sputtered between short breaths.

"Cave," she responded.

I dared not say more. Our lives depended on my ability to run.

I was a good sprinter, but long distance, I felt my legs ache and my chest start to burn.

"I don't know if I can keep this up," I said.

"Not long," cried Aurora. "Keep going."

"Up ahead," said Dominick.

And then I realized. They knew this land. They had probably traveled this route for decades. They knew every river, every tree and crack in the Earth. They were prepared to escape. What I thought was their first adventure was really a well-established tradition. I just had to move along and trust them.

More whirring approached and in the distance behind us, another flashing light. Another drone.

"Hurry," Dominick urged.

I wondered if there would be another flash and explosion. But not this time. This time we were running for our lives.

The land rose in front of us like a large beast with its mouth wide open. We entered the mouth at full speed and to my amazement, kept running deep into the bowels of the prairie.

Finally, we all stopped, stood still, and grew quiet. We could hear the whining drone pass over head.

“Up against the walls,” said Dominick as he passed down the line.

As if responding to captain’s orders, everyone simultaneously backed up against the wall, including Dominick.

A beam of light shot across the entrance and then, in a matter of seconds, silence.

Dominick held up his hand to wait. No movement. No talking. Nothing to betray our location.

We waited for the drone to disappear. In a few minutes, the night grew quiet. We all breathed a sigh of relief as Dominick lowered his hand.

“How long are we safe here?” I murmured to Aurora.

“Not long, I imagine,” she said, her face lined with worry. “They can read this land with their machines. They probably know that we’re here. Getting to us, that’s another matter. We’re about to go deep.”

I tried to catch my breath, steady my nerves. This trip, in which I had only recently been daydreaming, was more dangerous than I had first imagined.

“Don’t worry,” said Aurora. “We’ve escaped far worse.”

Small comfort when you're trapped inside a cave. I stood against a wall, collected my thoughts, and wondered if Dominick truly had a plan to keep us alive.

Trust him, I thought to myself. This from someone who trusted little and questioned everything. Trust him, I kept repeating in my head, thinking that if I said it enough, I might just convince myself, or so my fear urged me.

The Cave

A quick break for food and water and a convergence of Dominick with his small band of leaders. They huddled together and talked among themselves.

Dominick stood and everyone hurried around.

“As most of you know, we are in the Miner’s Tunnel,” he announced. “Some of you have been here before. For those who haven’t, it’s important that we stay together. Do not wander away from the tribe. A wrong turn and you could fall into the deep cave. We are lighting lanterns for you, but the line should stay straight and each person should follow the one in front of them. I will lead. Rashan here will be my second. Finish your meal now. When we start again, we will be moving for some time without a break.”

Rashan, a large man with arms the size of full-grown trees. I had only chatted with him once or twice. He kept mostly to himself, except when Dominick needed his assistance.

Gathering in line, we all prepared to navigate the tunnel. Lanterns were passed out. Everyone could see the person in front of them.

“All right,” Dominick ordered. “Walk slowly and pay attention to your lead.”

Aurora was behind me, a young boy named Rony in front. I thought I recognized him as the boy who had been watching me from the trail.

For several hours, we hiked, pausing only once at a fork in the cave. As I followed Rony to the left, I heard a large rock scraping the floor.

“What’s that?” I asked Aurora.

“Protection,” was all she stated.

I glanced at her, but she shooed me on. “Keep moving,” she ordered.

The hours passed and the air inside the tunnel grew cold and damp. I shivered and wished I had some type of warm coat.

Was it daybreak yet? I realized how easy it was for my mind to drift off course. In this case, that could be fatal. I tried counting, then reciting names of people in the tribe that I had come to know. Anything to keep my mind on what I was supposed to be doing.

As we passed further underground, I noticed something on the wall’s interior. It grew brighter as we moved closer, until the whole passage was glimmering.

I caught Aurora’s attention and gestured to the wall.

“Gold,” she said.

Gold. The metal of kings, but out here, or rather in here, it was just part of the wall. Worth nothing more or less than the rest of this rock.

After an endless trek on a winding path, Dominick called out, “Stop.”

Up ahead, a small beam of shining light. Daylight, I guessed. Maybe a secret entrance out of sight of the Purveyors.

“We’ll rest,” he announced, “and advance by night from here on out.”

Aurora and I sat together against the wall. She rolled out a rug in front of me. “You should sleep,” she said.

But rest was not what I was thinking about.

“What is this place?” I blurted out before Aurora had a chance to sit down.

“It’s a very old cave,” she said. “Long ago, other settlers searched here for gold, but they kept making wrong turns and falling in the shaft that Dominick warned about, so it’s reputation as a dangerous place grew. Eventually the miners refused to come in. They said it was cursed.”

“But there was gold,” I declared.

“Yes. Lots. But they never found it. Good for us that they didn’t or this tunnel would be torn to bits.”

“What was that scraping noise I heard?”

Aurora settled into her spot and laid her head against the wall. “We have a stone that we roll across the tunnel. It passes for a wall to those who haven’t come here. Again, they make a wrong turn, they fall in the hole.”

“How long have you guys been traveling through this area?”

“Who knows?” she said. “Our tribe is very old. We tell stories about this journey. We’ve been moving through here for many, many generations.”

I let her words sink in. I tried to imagine all the tribes who had used this tunnel, perhaps also to escape their enemies.

“We know the land,” said Aurora. “Even if the soldiers have machines, they don’t know this place like we do. We use it to our advantage.”

Dominick came back to see how I was doing.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I have Aurora to help me, and you know what you’re doing, so all’s well.”

He patted my hand before walking further down the line.

“That grenade launcher,” I called out. “Left over from Leon?”

Dominick looked sheepish. “Part of his legacy.”

“How many more?” I said.

He grinned. “Enough to get us through the trip, if we’re careful.”

He walked out of sight as Aurora and I relaxed.

“He likes you,” she said, her voice secretive.

My skin grew warm. I tried to hide my embarrassment. “How can you tell?”

“I just know,” she replied. “There are many women in the tribe who would welcome his affection, but he rarely gives them any clue about what he thinks. You, on the other hand . . .”

“What, just because he patted my hand?”

She looked at me knowingly, a mind reader if I ever met one.

“He likes everyone,” I said, my thoughts a scatter of different feelings.

“He likes you,” she repeated and laid on her rug.
“Trust me on this one.”

In a few minutes she was fast asleep.

I like him, too, I thought to myself as I joined her on my rug. For reasons I could not quite identify, it took me much longer to fall asleep.

—

When I woke up, my small group was eating dinner. As I rose from my rug, they welcomed me and offered food. Aurora handed me a bowl. No utensils. Strictly finger food. A mixture of some type of meat and bread.

“Welcome back,” she said between bites. “You were pretty tired, judging by how long you slept.”

“I guess,” I said, “and now I’m hungry.”

I immediately dipped into my food. Whatever it was, it was tasty. I made it disappear in a matter of minutes.

Aurora introduced me to more members of the tribe. Rony. Rshan. Two sisters: the older, Rena, near in age to me, and the younger, Blaneé, probably in her early teens. Their father, Bilban, long and lean, and their mother, Willow, a pretty woman with long black hair and amber eyes.

“What time is it?” I noticed there was no light shining through the entrance.

“Probably right at moon rising,” said Bilban. “We’ll be leaving soon.”

“Leaving?”

“Yes, night travel. Less likely to be spotted.”

A thought struck me as I finished my meal. "Does anyone know where we're going?"

It was a question I had longed to ask ever since we left Last Chance. It hung in the air like a bird in flight. There was a momentary silence among the group, as if they were hesitant to give away a tribal secret.

Bilban spoke. "To the far edge of the western slopes. A long mountain range. We are going there to establish a new tribe, away from the pursuit of these army men. If we succeed, the rest of the tribe will soon follow."

I was thinking out loud. "How far is that?"

Bilban's face grew thoughtful. "Probably fifty suns or so; that is, if we don't have any more problems. More soldiers. More drones." He glanced at his wife and daughters. "It's a risk, to be sure. I worry about my family. None of us have ever gone that far. We've heard stories, that's all. Not a clue what we're going to find once we get there."

The faces of the group shared the same anxiety as Bilban.

The revelations about the trip made me even more inquisitive. "Why? Why are you leaving your tribe?"

"We're not leaving," said Aurora. "We're scouting. Where we live now, it's grown too dangerous for us. Too many soldiers and bandits. Sometimes, you can't tell who's who. Several of our tribe have been captured and tortured. We think the soldiers would like to kill us all."

There was another pregnant pause.

"Soldiers are scum," said Rena, long black hair, amber eyes like her mother. She was a small woman who made

up for her size with a ferocious attitude. She spoke with scorn. "They killed my uncle."

Her words fell on us like a cold chill. I noticed how she had grown sullen.

"They're all over our territory," she continued. "Mostly, they're looking for you." She gave me a look of disdain.

The why question. There it was, laying like an open book in front of all of us. The why question. They had chosen to take me on their journey, and by doing so, my presence had put them at risk. Even worse, some of them blamed me for the trouble, as if I had invited the Purveyors to attack us.

Willow gave Rena a sharp glance. Rena glared back in defiance. Their amber hues clashed.

"Well," Rena huffed. "It's true."

"She is welcome among us," her mother retorted. "She did not cause this problem. The Purveyors were here long before she came, and they've caused us trouble for years. Hush now. We all travel for the same reason, to live in peace."

"Well," Rena shot back. "Everyone knows it was Dominick's decision. Nobody really asked the rest of the tribe. We're just wondering what this woman means to us. I can't understand why she's here. And I know from talking, I'm not the only one who thinks this."

"We all agreed," said Bilban. "Not just Dominick." He turned to look at me. "You are part of our tribe."

“We did not all agree,” Rena argued. “I know I didn’t. Then again, I’m just a girl. What do I know?” Irritated with the conversation, she stomped off.

I laid down my bowl and tried to sort through my thoughts.

Bilban spoke gently. “She does not speak for the tribe,” he said, “nor for our family, only for herself and whoever else is gossiping about this.”

I glanced at Blaneé, but she averted her eyes and said nothing.

Enough with the questions. I realized that I was probing into areas I really didn’t want to know about.

All right, then, I decided. Now we know.

I picked up my bowl, finished my dinner, and slid next to Aurora.

“You are welcome here,” she insisted. “Pay her no attention.”

“Thanks,” I said, “though you have to admit, she’s hard to ignore.”

I drew back against the wall. My curiosity had uncovered a stripe of dissension. Now I knew I must be careful about whom I trusted and what I said. Probably best to keep to myself.

I wondered what Dominick thought about this. I ached to talk to him. But I understood why he was being careful to keep his distance. I’m sure he knew what the tribe had discussed. If Rena was one example, who else felt the same?

My thoughts rolled like stones in a brook. I was anxious now to keep moving. The movement would help

me channel my thoughts into something useful, at least more useful than throwing out questions and learning what I never should have asked. When the call came to leave, I breathed a sigh of relief. Motion. Distraction. Both movements highly welcomed.

14.

The Choice

The moon had indeed risen. A half-moon to be exact, waxing yellow in the lower night sky. Throughout the night we moved steadily across the prairie. Cautiously, we kept an eye out for drones. For hours we escaped notice as Dominick lead the way.

At his command, we entered a riverbed with a small stream winding to the northwest. He informed us that this would be our trail for the next several days. Plentiful water. Good cover. Many places to stop and rest.

Headed upstream, I hurried to catch him as he loped with that long angular gait I found so appealing. He was a man who knew exactly where he was going and how to get there.

As I passed several people, they looked curiously at me. Despite all the invitations of welcome into the tribe, I knew that I was an outsider. I wasn't sure if I would ever be considered truly Wolf, and whether my relationship with Dominick, such as it was, would be questioned. My identity, my connection to the Order, must surely have been the center of talk in family circles.

Dominick greeted me warmly. "Hello, there, Laura."

“Hello yourself,” I said. “Grand leader and fearless wolf wizard.”

I wanted to slap my forehead in protest. Another Laura joke gone flat. “Really,” I declared. “We have to find a way to make each other laugh.”

He cracked a small grin. “Ah. Now I get it. And you, high priestess and great wolf tracker, I’m glad you found me. Unfortunately, we have no sidewalks tonight for you to dive off.”

I snickered, then burst out laughing. “There you go. That’s a good start.”

“Wouldn’t want you to think I’m a slow learner.”

“Not at all. Just keep at it.”

“I will, I promise.”

We walked casually for several minutes.

“We seem to have lost the Wild Ones,” I observed.

“They’re south of us. They’re not explorers by nature, so they’re not usually the wandering type. They stay where they’re familiar. The tunnel took us several miles north of where we entered. This area here by the river is pretty safe. I’ve never seen one up this far.”

“Free from snoopers?”

“Hmm, well that’s a maybe. They’ve been hunting more than I expected. I think our encounters in Last Chance must have stoked their fire. Plus, you’re wanted by a very important person. He’s not given up by a long shot.”

“Yes, I think that’s pretty clear.”

“Well, we know all too well what it’s like to be hunted, so don’t take it personally.”

“You think we can stay out of sight?”

“We’re wolves,” he said. “That makes their job difficult. And now that we know their tactics, they’re going to have to work even harder.”

“I wish they’d leave us alone,” I complained.

Dominick looked up at the stars. Checking the familiar? Looking for drones? I could not tell.

“Uh, as far as leaving us alone, that’s not likely,” he said. “You have to get used to it. You can’t help what family you belong to. We can’t help being Wolves. Our paths have crossed and now we’re in this together. It’s not a matter of wishing. It is what it is, but having you along, what we hope is to offer you a choice.”

There was that word again. It kept popping up in our conversations. “Choice?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure I have much choice at this point. It’s either go with you or be dragged back east to do whatever the great Henry Highsmith chooses for me.”

“Well, then,” he said, “you choose the option you have. Sometimes it’s one choice. Sometimes it’s many. All I can tell you is to take what’s there, whatever choice you have, and run with it. Regret is a waste of time.”

How did he do this? Keep his words short and to the point. Make them sound so easy to understand, so inviting to follow? I had to admit, it struck me as good advice.

Still, I wondered about him. “And what about your choice?”

“My choice?”

"Yeah, you have choices, too."

"I tend not to think much about them. I'm an instinctive creature. I choose what's necessary for the tribe. That's why we're wolves."

"You chose to go west," I said.

"That was a tribal choice. I was asked to come."

"You didn't have a say in the matter?"

Dominick looked perplexed. "You mean would I choose not to do what my tribe asked?"

"Yes."

"No," he said firmly. "That's not a choice I would ever consider."

"Then it is a choice," I said. "You simply choose to lead, the same way I choose to come. We're both following the options given us, or should I say option, as in the one choice we have."

I was surprised that he looked impressed.

"You know," he said, "for someone not a wolf, you have wolf instincts."

I tried not to give away my pleasure. I believed this was a compliment. At least I took it that way. "Thank you, I think."

"You're welcome."

He resumed walking and appeared to grow lost in thought.

I was aware that we were now being watched by all the tribe members. Some were even following our conversation as if this was some schoolroom lesson between teacher and pupil.

Dare I continue the conversation? Would this appear as a challenge to his leadership? Was a woman even allowed to talk to him like this? Being curious and not always proper, I pushed it a step further.

"There might be other choices, too," I said hesitantly.

He broke from his meditation. "Such as?"

"Your tribe is moving, relocating, as I've been told. You're trying to establish a new wolf community."

"Yes?"

"I'm not a Wolf. Why am I here on this journey?"

"Were you not invited?"

"Yes."

"Did we not promise to take you west and ensure your safety?"

"Sure, but where I end up, who I end up with, that's still up in the air. When we reach our destination, do I have that choice, to leave . . . or stay with you?"

His face brightened, as if he understood the path of my train of thought.

"So sometimes, when we make one choice, others come to be."

"What's that mean?"

"One choice leads to another, and when there are other choices to be made, we will make them."

"Can you make them?"

"I can," he said, "and in due time, I will."

"So I'm here because . . ."

"We chose to take you. You chose to come. That seems to be a mutual choice."

"You're avoiding my question."

He looked at me slyly. "Am I now? Then perhaps you ask a question that has no answer . . . yet. So, its answer is still unfolding. Which means, I will answer the question when the question has an answer. Until then, there is no use saying anything more. If regret is a waste of time, so is trying to guess the future."

If it had been anyone else, I might have been annoyed or even hurt. But Dominick was not a man who spoke carelessly. Until he was ready to talk, I knew this was as far as I would get, at least tonight. And he had left the door open. I just had to be patient. Again, not my strong suit.

"You should find Aurora and keep her company," he said.

I guessed from his tone that this was an order. I watched him as he hurried to join the men at the front of the tribe. I wondered if I had offended him, but following his advice, I didn't waste time worrying about it.

—

I found Aurora near the back of the line. We walked closely together for companionship. I felt that, like Dakota, she would be a woman who kept me safe and hopefully out of trouble.

"I see you talked to Dominick," she said.

"You heard already?"

"We are a tribe and every member is connected. It's the way we survive."

"He's a very mysterious man," I confessed. "Tight with his words."

"As he should be when he speaks for the many."

"Even more when he speaks for himself."

"Yes, I think you're right."

"You said he likes me. What did you mean by that?"

She looked at me with amusement.

I let the conversation drop and we strode peacefully together for the rest of the night.

Not that my mind was peaceful, but I knew I had tested the tribe's limits and thought it best to just keep my thoughts to myself. That was my own advice, and I thought it probably the smartest thought I had had all night.

—

As dawn broke, we settled under a grove of trees to camp for the day. We set up shrubbery and leaves as camouflage to avoid detection.

The river continued northwest. How far we would follow, I had no clue. Maybe to the far edge of the western slopes, wherever that might be.

Looking over the horizon, I saw no hills, no slopes, barely a ripple in the depth of the landscape. The good news was that I also saw no drones or soldiers. No dust. No sign that we were being followed.

I had barely settled in when a murmur went up through the camp. Looking down the line, I saw Bilban

and Willow talking excitedly with Dominick. Their faces were not happy.

I turned to Aurora. "What's happening?"

"Don't know," she replied, "but it's not good. I can tell you that."

Dominick quickly gathered us in a tight circle, taking care to stay away from open space.

"Rena is missing," he announced.

A gasp went up from the group.

"Kidnapped?" someone blurted out.

"We don't know," said Dominick. "She was last seen early this morning. I can't really explain what happened, only that her parents have reported her missing."

Bilban said nothing, but his body language spoke of anger. Willow stood beside him looking numb.

"Maybe she just went for a walk," said someone else. "I know she likes to get away sometimes and clear her head."

"No," said Bilban. "Whenever she does that, she always tells us where she's going. We can't find her, anywhere. Trust us, we've looked."

By accident, I happened to glance at Blaneé. She had shuffled to the back of the group and had her head bowed.

Does she know anything? I wondered.

The wheels in my head started to spin. I knew wherever Rena went, it couldn't be far.

"We'll form a search party and spread out," said Dominick.

"I'd like to come," I said without thinking whether my offer was appropriate.

Dominick searched my face for a reason why I would volunteer.

"I lived for years on this land by myself," I offered. "I've hunted people and animals. I'm a good tracker."

"Then we'll be happy to have you," he said, though I couldn't help but notice his doubtful look. I wondered if I would ever outlive the moment when I fell off the porch.

A few in the group stared back at him, as if my presence was a questionable omen.

We gathered a group of five together. Dominick drew a circle in a sandy bar by the river and assigned each of us a direction.

"Move quickly. Move quietly," he said. "If she's kidnapped, we don't want to alert the raiders."

Offering a moment of reflection, he said abruptly, "Go."

I was assigned to search directly south.

As I passed, Aurora pulled me aside. "Be careful. She's good at hiding and probably won't want to be found. You'll have to out think her."

"You mean, she left on her own?" I said softly.

"More than likely. I'm guessing she wants to go back home."

I stood and waited for an explanation.

"The only reason she came was because of Dominick."

Then it hit me. Her hostile attitude. Rena considered me a rival. I would probably be the last person she would care to see.

“Right,” I said. “Thanks.”

So, south for me. But as I left camp and combed the ground for signs of tracks, I decided to take a moment, sit on my heels, and consider my options. I tried as best I could to get inside Rena’s head. These were my thoughts.

If I were willing to run back home, which way would I go? Southeast to the tunnel? Directly east toward Last Chance?

If she were trying to avoid us, would she take a path that none of us had followed? Not likely, if this was her first trip west. She was not familiar with the terrain or the usual direction of the trail, and I doubted she would wander far off course.

Young woman. Angry. Knowing she would be followed. Trying to avoid tribe members. She would have to be an expert to keep from being found. She would also have to know that her tribe would be desperate to find her, and if she fell into the hands of soldiers, they would use her as leverage against us. The more I thought, the more uncertain I grew. Why would Rena just decide to disappear? What had driven her to leave?

As I stood up and moved slowly in a circle, I tried to form a picture in my mind.

While deep in thought, Dominick came up and stood next to me. He let me gather my thoughts.

“Care to share?” he said.

“Well . . .”

“Go ahead.”

“If she’s smart, she would sneak away at night and hide somewhere close during the day. Otherwise, it’s too

dangerous to be out in the open with no cover. She would be a sitting duck for a soldier or a drone. So . . .”

“Continue,” he said.

“She’d have to know that. She’d also have to know we’d search for her, and in the daytime, she would not be hard to track. Your tribe are experts, and they’re fast. I doubt she could move quickly enough to outrun them. She’s only been gone a few hours at the most.”

“So?” he said.

I hesitated. Any suggestion I made could lead us further from her. Most of the search party had already left. What if my guess was wrong? But he sought my advice. So, I gave it.

“I would say, she’s still near the camp,” I concluded. “She’s avoiding us until nightfall. Probably going in a circle hoping to stay out of sight. That’s when she’ll move out for good.”

Dominick looked over the horizon thoughtfully.

“She wants to be near you,” I added. “Even if it’s only from a distance.”

His head turned slowly. I definitely had his attention.

“She was angry with me for coming on this trip,” I confessed. “In the tunnel, she expressed her unhappiness. I think she wanted you to notice her and that maybe, well, I was getting in the way.”

Rubbing his forehead, there was something telling in his face. Like a solution that had popped into his head after working on a very vexing problem. Also he seemed very annoyed with the answer.

"It makes sense," he said. "If I had paid attention, I probably could have figured this out sooner, but my mind was elsewhere, and you've helped me refocus. So much for watching the horizon, huh?"

"And there's something else," I said.

He looked alarmed.

I gave him the bad news. "I'm guessing she probably had help."

"From?"

"Maybe her sister? I would be willing to bet she knows where she's at."

Dominick grew very tight lipped. I surmised that he was upset about all the distractions that had bogged down the journey. He stood motionless for a moment and looked down at the grass beneath his feet.

"I was right about you," he mused. "You're a very good thinker."

"I'm a woman," I said, as if this somehow qualified me to know what happened.

"Right," he said. "A smart woman."

He arched his back as if loosening the worries he had collected. "Well," he said, "Let's go find her. Start with Blaneé and see where that gets us."

"Okay," I said.

"Good job," he added. "I never would have thought of this."

"You would have, sooner or later. I just got lucky, that's all."

"Not luck," he countered. "Wolf thinking."

Wolf thinking, I said to myself. That's good. Maybe now he'll forget I fell off the porch.

—

It didn't take long for Blaneé to break down and confess. Young, bewildered, she had not yet mastered the art of deception. Blaneé had been her lookout until she could make her escape.

As I suspected, Rena had slipped off during the early morning hours and was probably hiding somewhere near the river until she could sneak away at night.

As the sun peaked in the sky, we estimated she had been missing for a half day and was probably close enough to track down. Her plan was simple. Go back home the way we came. What we didn't know was whether she would return to the tunnel. And since the tunnel had been blocked by a rock wall, what would she do if she reached the barrier? There were ways around the rock, but they were extremely tricky.

All of this meant that the entire expedition had come to a halt and a series of discussions had begun between Dominick, his tribal leaders, and Rena's parents.

If Rena had intended revenge for Dominick's lack of attention, her plan had certainly worked. The question now: Who would go find her?

As I learned from the meeting, it was Wolf tradition to defend anyone in the tribe, no matter the reason for their action. Wolves did not leave other wolves, even for desertion. But the talk was heated and Dominick was

taking the brunt of the punishment, particularly since some of them claimed this had happened on my account.

Now I knew. My inclusion had not been without controversy. Whether Dakota knew about this, Dominick must certainly have been aware and taken on the risk. He was enduring these conversations for my benefit.

As the conversation grew more heated and the tribe split into factions, I thought it necessary to speak up. I raised my voice. "Dominick." The tribe immediately ceased talking. He nodded for me to speak. Dozens of eyes burned my face.

"Since this is a tribal journey, and I am not a Wolf, I will go find her. You can continue on and I will track her down."

One tribal member, a man in his early 20s, immediately objected. "You can't be trusted to bring her back safely."

I tried to recall his name. Elster, I thought.

"I can be trusted," I shot back, "and I've had years of experience in tracking and staying out of sight. If anyone knows my story, you can be assured. I'm capable, and trustworthy."

Another objected. "She won't come back with you. You're the source of the problem."

"If she won't come back," I argued, "then I'll take her home. Either way, I'll find and protect her, and the journey can continue."

"We don't send strangers to save Wolves," an older woman added. "We protect our own."

“Then send someone with me,” I said. “Use my skills and send someone who knows the way of the Wolf.”

There was murmuring. Dominick fixated on me as if digesting my words.

“If you stay here too long,” I continued, “the soldiers will find you. You have to keep moving to reach your destination.”

Dominick hesitated. “How will you find us?”

“I know the direction you’re going. I can find you easily enough.”

The talking stopped. The debate had finished. Now someone, Dominick perhaps, would decide.

Another voice spoke up. “I will go with her.” Aurora rose and faced the tribe. A gasp went through the crowd.

“You’re needed here,” someone in the back demanded. “You’re the leader of our women.”

“The women can handle themselves,” she said firmly. “Plus, I have no family and I also have skills that I can bring. Persuasion for one. I know Rena. We are close friends. She will trust me as a voice of reason.”

“It’s just not the way of the Wolf,” Elster said.

“What isn’t?” Aurora protested. “Someone, a Wolf, goes to find another Wolf. Laura has skills we need. Who says we can’t work together as a team? Isn’t teamwork one of our most valued traits? And nobody understands teamwork better than women, Elster, or have you forgotten who raised you? Your mother, grandmother, sisters, myself. Surely you remember them as your family?”

Dominick gazed for a moment at Elster, then faced the tribe. "Any other objections?"

None.

"Then go find her, and may your mission be successful. Laura, you are not Wolf by birth, but in heart and head, you are as much a part of this tribe as any of us. I give you my blessing and my support, and no one in this tribe shall ever question your courage. On this I speak as Dominick, tribal leader and Master Wolf."

Again, he turned in a circle to reinforce his point. Aurora came over and hugged me. Together we went to gather our things.

In a half hour or so, we were headed east along the river to find a lost Wolf.

15.

Bears

We hoped that we might find Rena before she ventured out again at sunset. With that in mind, we hurried along the river, tracking her as if she were a deer. Aurora took one side of the shore and I took the other.

“Does she know her way back?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It’s her first trip west and her skills are more domestic. She’s never been interested in tracking or hunting. I doubt she’ll be that hard to find.”

But as we searched along the shore, we grew more apprehensive. Two hours from the camp, we discovered her hiding place, a brushy area under a large tree. The surrounding grasses had been flattened, and she had left some signs of scattered food. If she was trying to cover her tracks, she wasn’t very good at it. What’s worse, she wasn’t here. She had disappeared toward who knows where.

It concerned us because roaming around this time of day made her very vulnerable. Drones, soldiers, any stranger for that matter could spot her. It was a risky move.

We slowed and searched carefully for signs. And there were plenty to be found. Not only hers, but others as well. Many others, as in a group of people moving with her. Large people from the footprints we found.

I took a moment to analyze and think.

“Somebody’s found her,” I concluded. “They’re definitely moving quick. Probably trying to outrace us.”

“Who do you think?”

“No idea, but they’re big and there’s plenty of them. Not good news for Rena. Looks like she’s been taken.”

So that was another issue. Who had she gone with? How much of a head start did they have? One thing for certain. We would not catch them by surprise.

The sun was setting. Tracking her in the dark would be difficult. Should we wait the night out and start again in the early morning? The urgency of her safety was now the big concern.

“I vote we keep moving,” I said. “She could be in trouble. We’ll keep our eyes and ears open. Sometimes sounds can travel for miles. I’ve learned to hear things long before I see them.”

“Let’s stop and eat,” Aurora suggested. “A quick meal can help us.”

Before I could say otherwise, she had laid out a blanket with some food items. Dried meat and fruits. We gathered water from the river to drink.

As we sat together, my mind wandered to my hunting companion, Aurora. Who was she? What was her story?

I chewed on a piece of meat and watched her hands. They were beautiful, the type that created art, tapestries,

weaving. Nimble fingers, easy movement. I wanted to know her history.

“Where’s your family?”

She picked up a piece of fruit, her blue eyes drifting to the horizon.

“My parents are dead. They grew sick and passed quickly. Left me as the older sister. I have a brother back in the Wolf camp out east. Evan. He’s younger than me by several years. I basically raised him. He and Elster are good friends. So, by raising my brother, I spent lots of time with Elster. I’m like one of his aunts.”

“You never married?”

Some powerful sorrow washed over her face. “I did, when I was younger. His name was Ricard.” She took another bite and swallowed. Her pain was visible. “A soldier killed him several years ago. Soldiers have been moving in on us for a while. I know we have a reputation as Wolves, but it only goes so far when you’re being constantly hunted, especially by drones. It’s one of the reasons I decided to move west.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Thank you. I wanted to come. It may take some time to get where we’re going, but I plan on starting over. New home. New life. Fresh start.”

“New husband?” I regretted it as soon as I uttered the words.

“No,” she said reluctantly. “There’s only one Ricard.”

I knew I had hit a sore spot and wished I could take it back.

After we finished the meal, she quickly packed up. I could tell that she was a woman who knew how to live on the run. She moved gracefully in the dark. I also suspected that I had touched a nerve. She seemed anxious to get going.

“Would you like to keep covering the other side of the river?” I offered.

“I think now that it’s dark, we’ll do better if we work together.”

We moved forward, both of us as quiet as rabbits. Occasionally I would stop and listen. I could swear I heard movement, but it was distant, and the sound I picked up was only a low murmur. Human or machine, I couldn’t tell.

“I hear something,” I said, “coming from that direction.” I pointed east.

Aurora looked perplexed. “Why there, I wonder? You think she’s strayed in that direction? That’s not anywhere near the river.”

We kept searching, pausing often to get our bearings. For the moment, the river was our road.

It was completely dark and the edges of a moon began to rise. Light to help us.

The sounds began to grow clearer, but they were away from the river. A decision had to be made.

“I hear it better,” I said.

Both of us stood still, our minds working together.

“I hear it, too,” she confirmed, “but I don’t know if it has anything to do with Rena.”

“What else would be out here?”

“I don’t know. It’s my first trip west, so I’m at a loss.”

We kept to the river, noticing as we did that the noise would occasionally increase like thunder and then lower to a rumble.

At the turnoff, the point where we first found the river after leaving the tunnel, I suggested: “Let’s head for the cave.”

Aurora nodded in agreement.

This was not a good plan, even at night. I had no doubt drones would be flying in search of us and we could easily be taken off guard. Still, Rena’s fate was up in the air. Time to take chances.

Slowly we slipped south and east, looking for the large mound that turned into our tunnel.

We were now on high alert, looking for any sign of Rena or her kidnappers, keeping our heads on a swivel in case any shining light came flying overhead.

I tried once more to make sense of Rena’s reaction, why she would endanger herself and others because of a quarrel. Then again, I found people in general hard to understand. I had lived for years in solitude. I was not skilled in understanding human thinking. In my heart, I was as much an animal as a human. The complexities of love and life had only begun to work their way into my thought process.

Dakota had been my teacher in this regard, but she was gone and I struggled to make sense of human behavior. Rena in particular. Why did she feel so strongly that she had to leave her home tribe, her parents, her sister? Was love this hard to manage?

“You’re pondering,” said Aurora.

I realized I had lost my focus. “Yeah, I am.” I shook my head. “I don’t understand why she would do this.”

Aurora put her arm around my shoulder. “You’ve never been in love?”

I thought about it and frowned. No man had been available to me. The only ones I’d known, I’d avoided. And the only ones who had shown me affection were Dakota, Harrieta, and Horner. “No,” I said, surprised at how little I had thought about the question.

“Then be patient,” she said. “When you are in love, you will better understand her.”

“Well, hopefully, I won’t have to run away to find this so-called love.”

“No,” she said with a slight grin. “I doubt you’d ever run from anything, although love might confuse you. As you can see. It’s not easy to understand. It might cause you to step back a bit.”

“You’re right. I don’t usually run away when there’s a fight. Is that love?”

“It can be,” she said. “But then you make up and move on.”

“I would run from a drone,” I said.

“I would, too. So maybe love and drones. We can agree on that.”

“Maybe,” I conceded.

As we moved southeast, the thunder we had heard eventually died. The moon rose and covered the landscape with a blanket of cool white. We walked for

long lengths without speaking. Surviving this leg of the trip required our full attention.

As the rays of dawn broke, I spotted something ahead in the grass. Lying flat like a human, but not full. Approaching it, I knew immediately it was bad news.

“It’s a dress,” I said.

Aurora stood reverently as if to acknowledge the bleak news. She picked it up and ran it through her hands. “Definitely Rena’s.” She inspected it closely. “And it’s torn.”

As in torn right off her body. Wrenched by a fist, or fists. Removed by her kidnappers. Fear struck us like a hammer.

I immediately began to search the area and found more evidence.

“The whole area is trampled,” I remarked. “No boot marks. Probably not soldiers. Men, I would guess, barefoot, but large. They weren’t trying to hide, that’s for sure.”

Aurora stood still as a statue. Something had grabbed her attention. She closed her eyes and put her hands on her head.

I tried to break into her thoughts. “Aurora?”

She shook her head. “Can’t be,” she mumbled to herself.

“What can’t be?”

“They’re from the north,” she added. “Way up north. Never been seen down here.”

“Aurora?” I repeated, growing more anxious.

“The soldiers. The Purveyors must have driven them south.”

“Who?” I demanded.

“Black Bear. Another tribe. Very dangerous.”

“You think they’re down here?”

“Well, it took me a moment to remember. There are many tribes still in this country, but we’re spread out and mostly we stay out of each other’s territories.”

“What makes you think it’s Black Bear?”

She shuddered and gripped my shoulder. “Laura, I have to prepare you.”

“For what?”

“Rena is probably dead, and if she isn’t, I can promise you she wishes she was.”

Her words were like fire. Dead. Rena. Black Bear. They all ignited at once in my head.

“How do you know this?” I asked weakly.

“That way,” she pointed. “A few steps. Tell me what you see.”

I did so. Several feet to the south, a long shaft had buried its tip in the soil. A spear. I walked over and pulled it out.

Aurora asked, “What’s it look like?”

The light was growing. I could just make out some markings. I ran my hand across the rough surface. She watched me work.

“Is there a bear at the top?”

I examined it carefully. Roughly hewn and carved, but I could make it out. “Yes.”

Aurora's face went pale. She circled the horizon looking for something, squinting and shading as if she had spotted a hawk in the distance.

"We're in grave danger," she said. "We have to decide. Either go back or head for the cave. The cave I think is closer, but they can find us there as well. There aren't a lot of good choices here."

My mind raced. What would Dominick do? His words echoed in my head: You choose the option you have. Sometimes it's one choice. Sometimes it's many. All I can tell you is to take what's there, whatever choice you have, and run with it.

In this case, run was the operative word.

"The cave," I said. "At least it gives us a chance to hide."

Then a thrum broke over the plains. Warriors. Black Bear. In a matter of seconds, we were running for our lives. In the background, the yowl of approaching voices uttering an unknown language. Then the ping of arrows and the slicing sound of spears in the air.

I had no idea how far the cave was, but it was our only chance. We had made our one choice.

From a distance, the echo of thunder. Off to my right, storm clouds approached.

The bookstore, I thought. I remembered how Mother had rescued us before. Could it be possible, this far west?

With the threat of the Black Bear hot on our heels, I hoped she had noticed soon enough to rescue us. Was the storm proof of her existence? It was a thin hope, but in the most desperate times, any hope is welcome. This was

another choice to make. Believe in her. Believe in Mother. The alternative was a much less happy thought.

—

As daylight increased, Aurora and I strained to see what was ahead of us. Any sign of a cave. Any opening. Neither of us had a clue as to where we were going, except away from this marauding horde.

Arrows whizzed close. Whistling spears poked near our feet.

There comes a time in any event when the beginning and the ending join, and the unformed conclusion lies in front of you like an open question. Those who are involved hold their breaths to see how things will break. Winner and loser hang in the balance.

This was one of those moments. Two women running for their lives. Another already taken. Black Bears in pursuit. Weapons drawn. Chaos roaring in our heads.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I whispered a prayer and hoped that Mother would hear me. Once before I had seen it happen. She had stepped in and wiped away the enemy. Could lightning strike twice?

Lightning. That was a strange thing to think about. I would have preferred wind and rain again, a giant torrential output that would sweep these Bears all the way back to their camp. I guessed by now, they had been the source of the murmuring and pounding I had picked up by the river. Good guess.

Lightning. It crossed my thoughts again as if a voice had spoken the word out loud.

Suddenly, Aurora stumbled and cried out.

I pulled up and rushed over to help her. An arrow had pierced her shoulder. She was bleeding and writhing in pain. The Bears approached.

Here again, another open question. Leave her and escape or stay and come face to face with death. A terrible death. I recalled what she had said about Rena. Should I also welcome a similar death, or was there a worse fate for all of us?

Open question. Winners. Losers. Thunder. Lightning. Shouting. Black Bears. Mother.

The voice I had heard in my head commanded me to stand and face my enemy. As I wheeled around, I could see their bearded, hungry faces. They looked like vicious bears ready to tear my flesh apart and swallow my bones. They were broad-chested, hairy, with some type of dark paint on their faces. They wore skins that I assumed had been torn from the same bears that had given up their lives for these beasts. They were terrifying.

As Aurora lay bleeding on the ground, I slid in front to protect her from any further arrows or spears. Then I did something that had no rhyme or reason to it. I raised my arms straight in the air and from down in my lungs, I screamed.

My voice surprised me. It didn't sound like Laura. It rolled across the plains; no, let me say, it exploded across the plains. The Bears heeled in their tracks, stopped, if you will, by the wall of my voice.

The storm clouds now hovered overhead with thunder booming. I pointed a finger one by one at several Bears. To my shock, lightning struck and dropped them like apples from a tree. They lay motionless, smoke ascending from their bodies, the smell of their flesh acrid and foul.

The Bears beheld me as if I were a god who had descended from heaven. Their mouths open, they gaped at me, then their dead brothers, then back at me. But looks could not hurt me. I didn't care if their eyeballs popped out of their heads. I simply glared back, twirled my fingers in the air and prepared my next shot.

They didn't need to be reminded of what I had done. The remaining herd turned, dropped their bows and spears, and ran back the way they came. Instead of roaring in defiance, they yipped out of fear and tried to run over each other to get out of the way of my electric fingers. I zeroed in on several more. Struck by lightning, they fell like stones, their bodies scorched and lifeless. It seemed that they had gotten the message. They would not bother us anymore.

The land returned to its serene state. The storm disappeared. The wind blew playfully across the grass.

Aurora groaned, her shoulder dark with blood. I sat by her side and held her head up.

She studied me. Whether amazed or puzzled, I couldn't tell. "What did you do?" she wheezed, her words creating more pain in her body.

"I'll explain later," I said, not wanting to see her suffer any more on my behalf. She was pale as death. I feared she would die in my arms.

Half-rising, she pushed me away, took the shaft of the arrow with its tip ripped through her shoulder, and yanked. Even as she ranted in pain, the arrow came out. She raised it straight in the air in triumph and gave a victorious yelp. Then she gave a very tenuous Wolf howl and collapsed.

"The dress," she said in an uneven whisper. "Give me the dress."

I ran several steps back and retrieved it.

"Water," she ordered. "In my carry bag."

I snatched it out of her bag and handed it to her. She drank deeply, then splashed her wound to clear it out.

Sitting up straight, she began to fire off orders and I found whatever she requested.

She used a flint with a small bundle of kindling to light a fire. All this she did while tottering from a crippled arm.

We started to boil some water. She put together a salve from the materials I had given her, then commanded me to wash the wound, pack it with the salve, and tie it off with the remaining parts of the dress. When we had finished, I helped feed her and make her comfortable in front of our fire. With the remaining hot water, I made some tea.

The sun was hot and I could tell she was exhausted. I encouraged her to sleep, which did not take much persuasion. In a matter of minutes, she had passed out.

I sat by myself throughout the day occasionally getting up to do a security check. I also examined the dead bodies to see if they had anything useful. I admired the construction of the bows and arrows. The spears I could use to build a perimeter around us. I didn't trust their food stores, but the bear skins they wore might be useful to keep Aurora warm at night. I left two dead bodies naked on the plains.

Aurora passed in and out of consciousness. She often moaned and sometimes called out for her husband. I wondered if she had crossed into the land of the dead and recognized him.

I repeated the process she had shown me with the salve, the packing, and the use of the cloth skirt.

I sat and waited, refusing to leave her for very long.

Three days I stood vigil until she returned to consciousness and with a weak smile, thanked me for being such a good nurse.

On the fourth day, we talked about our plan. Either go back to camp or continue the search for Rena. We agreed to go as far as the cave to investigate.

Day five, she was strong enough to stand and walk.

We combined our traveling packs, lightened what we could, and walked away from our camp. The thought of Rena's suffering held us tightly together. We hoped we had chosen wisely, and that if there was any hope left in our battered minds and bodies, we might find her alive, or dead, but at least we would find her. Either way, we could explain to her parents and Dominick what had happened.

Helping her as best I could, we limped along for several miles until we spotted it. The cave mouth. It was as if we had come home.

Heartened, we hurried our pace until we reached the cave, fell flat on our backs, and spent the next few hours falling in and out of sleep. Not the sleep of the dead. The sleep of the free, those who have escaped disaster and have no other worries other than dreaming and knowing we would wake.

The Long Ride Home

When I came to, the cave was black. Nighttime had fallen. The moon had not yet risen.

I rolled over and saw that Aurora was still out.

Then I heard a rustling noise. Something or someone in the cave. I rose, alarmed that a Bear tribesman or a wild animal might have slipped in to ambush us.

It turned out to be neither. It was Rena, covered in one of the skins, eating our food. She appeared to be dwarfed in the hide like someone living in the belly of a bear. But as my sight adapted, I recognized her face. Her scarred face.

"Rena?" I called out.

She halted a moment before her slim hands dropped the food and pulled the hide over her. She hoped, I imagined, to disappear into the bear itself.

"Rena?" I repeated.

"Go away," she said, her voice veiled by her protective barrier. "I don't want you to see me."

I reached over and shook Aurora. She was slow to wake, her wound still draining her energy.

When she came to, she looked at me without recognition, as if her dreams had carried her to a different land.

“Laura?” she said, still in a daze.

“Yes. It’s me. Look who’s here.”

When she saw the bear hide, she jumped back in alarm.

“No, no, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Look, inside the hide. It’s Rena.”

The hide slid further against the wall. Rena said nothing.

Slowly, gently, Aurora pulled back the hide to reveal our escapee. What we saw horrified us.

Rena’s face was disfigured by bloody scars. One of her eyes was severely damaged. There were burn marks and bruises all over her body. She grabbed the edge of the hide and pulled it back.

“I said, ‘Don’t look!’” she screamed.

We let her remain concealed. Aurora had been right. If there was a fate worse than death, Rena had suffered it. I wondered if we could convince her to come home.

“Go away,” Rena yelled and began to slide further down the tunnel. In a moment, she had completely disappeared.

“Rena, come back,” Aurora pleaded and stood up. She was woozy and stumbled. I reached out to catch her. She sat back down. Her head slumped and she moaned in pain.

I launched down the tunnel to catch Rena before she could vanish. I knew if she plunged too deep into the cave, we would never find her.

In the blindness of the dark, I tripped over her and fell flat on my face. Reaching for the hide, I tried to yank her toward me and hold on tight, but she pulled away and lay naked in the dark.

“Leave me alone!” The pitch of her voice now wavered with pain and grief. As she threw the hide at me, I could hear her retreating down the tunnel. I lay flat on my back, the hide on my chest, and listened as her footsteps faded. I knew she was gone, and I was convinced she would never come back. She would die before she let anyone see her again.

“Rena,” Aurora groaned, but the words only struck pitch black. She began to weep.

I threw off the hide and hurried back to comfort her. My arms around her waist, I leaned in and rocked her as she wept for what seemed like hours. Her grief was not just for a missing girl. Rena was part of her family. The Wolf family, yes, but more personally, her own family. Rena was the daughter she never had, the little girl she had cared for and watched grow into a woman. I had not put the connection together until we shared that moment.

For a long period, we sat in the darkness and grieved. Then, as if exhausted from all we had encountered, we once again fell asleep.

It was the sunlight that woke me, the bright orb shining directly on my face. To my left, Aurora had fallen in a heap.

A rustling noise caught my attention, beyond the cave door, just to the right. The swish of grass and something . . . eating that grass. A horse?

I rose quickly and snuck toward the edge of the cave door. I took a quick peek around the side and dipped back. What I saw shocked me.

Another white buffalo, similar in size to Dakota's. For all I knew, it might be Dakota's, except Dakota was nowhere to be seen. It munched on grass, stopped to take a long look at me, and continued munching.

"Aurora," I cried joyfully. "Look at this." I waited for her to appear. She did not come.

"Aurora," I said again impatiently.

She lay still and unresponsive.

In a panic, I ran to her side and tried to roll her over on her back. I lowered my head to listen for breathing. I put my head to her chest. Nothing. In shock, I acknowledged. She was gone. My friend and companion had died sometime in the night.

Now I was doubly defeated. No Rena, No Aurora. What would I tell Dominick? Bilban and Willow? Did it make any sense for me to return to the tribe empty handed? What would they say to me about a crazed daughter, a dead friend, a failed mission?

The buffalo grunted and walked up to the cave entrance. Its black soulful eyes stared at me. It's thick horns and ruffled fur looked ferocious. But the white also

drew me in, as if the color was meant to soothe my frazzled nerves. White, the color of clouds. Peaceful drifting clouds.

“Do you know Dakota?” I said, as if expecting the big animal to explain himself.

The beast never moved. It might have been a statue, or it might simply have been frozen by some magical word. The only clue that it was alive was the shoosh of its breathing and the occasional twitching of its nose and tail.

I approached and petted its boulder sized head. Again, it simply stood and let me rub my hands up and down its side.

It’s a rare occasion to see a white buffalo. One had to wonder if there was a specific reason it had shown up. A sign from Mother? Maybe a message from Dakota? But since the buffalo wasn’t talking, its purpose was left to my imagination.

“I don’t mind telling you, I’ve got problems here,” I said, perhaps as a conversation starter. “So, if you have something to show me, now would be a good time.”

The sun was rising and the arcing light lit up the buffalo like a heavenly angel. For all I knew, it might have been a mighty spirit from Mother. I didn’t know much about religion, but my experience in Last Chance had taught me to keep an open mind.

Lurching forward, it tiptoed its way into the cave and snuffled at Aurora. Then, like a mighty truck, it lowered itself to her side and waited.

I knew immediately, we were going home together. I would bring a Wolf home to be buried. Better than leaving her here alone.

I used all my strength to lift Aurora onto the buffalo's back. She swung head first and lay belly down, her head on one side, her feet on the other.

I made one last attempt to retrieve Rena.

"Rena," I called out, my voice desperate. "We're going home. Please come with us."

I listened carefully for any response. I thought seriously about lighting a torch and going in to find her. But I had escaped here once with people who knew the route. If I went farther in, the odds of my returning were minimal. I had been told the cave was deadly. Now I knew why. What would the tribe gain if both of us disappeared?

"Home, Rena." I said to the dark. "The white buffalo will take us home."

I waited another moment. Nothing.

The buffalo watched me with a great deal of patience. I could tell he was going nowhere without me. Resolving to get back to the tribe, I grabbed Aurora's pack with what little food was left, boarded on his back, and held lightly to Aurora's long hair. The buffalo rose slowly. I could feel the tightness of its muscles. Yet, even with two people saddled to its back, it just loped out of the cave, nonchalant about the weight.

When it left, I gave it no directions. It simply went where it wanted. Who was I to give orders to a buffalo who had been skirting these plains for who knew how

long? I just assumed he knew where he was going. If he belonged to Dakota, then I knew that he would not fail me. Dakota, the white buffalo, they were as sure a chance as you could take. Just sit back, let them guide. Relax.

“Don’t mind me,” I said in jest. “You’re the driver.”

—

As we headed for home, I heard a shout and glanced back.

It was Rena running and stumbling, her wounded legs barely able to stand. She was crying pitifully, as if the thought of my leaving had jolted her from grief. Living alone in a cave was an ending I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, let alone one of our tribe members.

Hearing her call, the buffalo pulled up and dropped to its knees.

I jumped off and held her in my arms for as long as she needed. Whatever anger she held toward me had been ripped out of her and in its place, desperation. I spoke with reassurance that I would make sure she returned safely to the tribe. She grew calm and nestled in my arms.

I pulled a dress out of Aurora’s pack. Because of her injuries, Rena put it on slowly. I helped where needed. With some encouragement, I invited her to board the buffalo and eased her up. I jumped on and gave the beast a slight kick. It seemed to understand and headed west.

Its route wound loosely from moment to moment, and it didn’t head anywhere near the river. The ground we

covered was unknown, and often, we would change course several times during the same day. We only got off occasionally to stretch our legs, eat the leftovers from Aurora's pack, and return to our journey.

This went on for four rises of the sun. I slept occasionally, the fur back being an especially comfortable bed. Though I worried I might fall off, the buffalo's gait was so smooth, I never wobbled for a second. I slept soundly, the comfort of Aurora and Rena holding me steady.

On the fifth day, we spotted the tribe snaking parallel to us. From the sun's direction, it appeared they were moving northwest. I tried to get the beast to hurry up, but its pace was unshakeable. The party greeted us happily, but when they saw Aurora and Rena, their joy turned to grief.

Dominick settled me in a tent and shooed off well-wishers for the time being.

At last, I lay in a bed surrounded by twilight. I was ready to sleep. My body unloosed its tension. I was being poured into darkness. I didn't hear another word from the heavens or the earth and slept like a woman in a coma. But I was happy, more than happy to be back within the safe confines of the tribe of Wolf.

Toward the Far Edge

When I woke, Dominick was sitting quietly in a corner of our tent. I noticed him looking off into the distance, as if the tent had a window. His thoughts were occupied. He heard me stir and came to attention.

I was lying on a blanket, clothed and covered. How I had gotten here, I had no clue. My exhaustion had robbed my memory for the last few days. Staring at him sleepily, I asked, "How long have I been out?"

"On and off for two days," he said as he walked slowly over and sat by my side. "Long journey."

"Rena?" My memory was returning. Her name popped straight into my head.

"She's alive, thanks to you."

"How's she doing?"

"Healing," he said, his brevity a clue that there was more to tell later.

I looked around the tent and gathered my thoughts. "Will she stay?"

He nodded. "For the moment. She has penance to do for the trouble she's caused. That at least, will keep her around for a while."

“Penance?”

Dominick grew serious. “You don’t run away like she did and expect no consequences. We are a tribe, after all. She is a part of that tribe. Her choices have created some trouble for us. We’ll have to figure out what that means for her.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know yet. There’s no hurry. For the moment, her parents are sheltering her. She’s recovering. We’ll let some time pass.”

“And Aurora?”

“We sent her ashes to the sky where they will dwell with the heavens. She’ll be missed, no doubt, especially by you.”

I laid on my back and stared at the ceiling. I wished in some way I could join her. Imagine, living with the stars and the sun, perhaps even meeting Mother. No soldiers. No Bears. Just dark, warm peace.

He leaned over and searched my face. “And you?”

“Me? I survived,” I said. “I guess that’s good news.”

Dominick’s smile returned. Was it a sign he was happy to see me? I wondered exactly what he was thinking, but he gave no clue other than his warm expression.

“I don’t mind telling you,” I continued, “I had my doubts for a while.”

“Rena said you were attacked by the Black Bear Tribe?”

“Yes. Not anyone I’d like to see again.”

“A fierce group. They usually stay far to the north. They prefer solitude and cold weather.”

“And maybe a little human flesh for dinner.”

“Well, not really, but they don’t mind roasting someone over an open fire. To them, that’s a good day’s entertainment.”

“Really? A human campfire?”

“Yes,” Dominick affirmed. “Far worse than the Wild Ones. Their name fits them well.”

“Bigger, smellier, way louder.”

He sat cross-legged and folded his arms. “You have a story to tell, I think. That’s what I hear anyway. Maybe you’ll share tonight around the fire.”

I looked at him, intrigued.

“Well, when you’re attacked by Bears,” he noted, “you don’t usually live to tell about it. You’ve got the whole tribe wondering. And Rena has been passing along a pretty wild tale. Time to hear from you. Give your side.”

“Rena talks too much,” I scoffed. “And besides, even if I told them, they wouldn’t believe me.” I took a moment to roll on my side. “Hard enough just to explain about Rena. The other stuff, maybe we’ll just keep that between you and me.”

“You don’t think we believe in such things?”

I rubbed my face, trying to wake up. The whole story as I knew it sounded to me like a fairy tale. I wasn’t sure what I believed, let alone the tribe.

“I think it’s a bit more than I can manage at the moment.”

He seemed to be amused.

I looked at him crossly. "Did I say something funny?"

"Yes, but all that will be discussed in good time. For now, we need to get you going again, and get the tribe started back on its journey."

Sighing, I laid down my head. "Are we making progress? Just tell me, how much longer we're going to be on the road?"

"Come see for yourself." He stood up and held open the tent door.

I followed on wobbly legs. He held out his hand and steadied me. His fingers were long and strong, yet gentle.

I stepped through the tent door and we strolled to a nearby ridge.

He motioned west. "Look over there."

It was midday, the full height of the sun perched in the sky. The blue was pristine, cloudless, the kind of day where you can see forever.

I followed his finger. There in a long outline was a row of black peaks.

"Home," he said.

I was spellbound by the view.

"The far edge of the western slopes," he said, as if declaring it territory for the Wolf Tribe.

The distance, the mountains themselves, impressed me. "How far?"

"Ten suns at most, at least to the foothills where we're going. The mountains themselves are quite a bit further. That's a journey for another time. The weather is changing and we must get ready for winter. We'll settle nearby and see how it goes."

“Home,” I breathed. A single syllable. A pleasant sound.

“Yes. The home of the Wolf.”

“You think we’ll be left alone?”

“Well, if anyone wants us, they have a long journey to get there. I haven’t seen any signs of soldiers or drones lately, or Bears. I think we’re headed for the right spot.”

We watched the mountains for some time. He reached out his hand and took my fingers. “You’re a part of us now.”

“Wolf lady,” I joked. “I like the sound of it.”

“So do I,” he said. “And the sound of ‘home.’”

He grew solemn and kept his eyes on the mountains. “Home,” he repeated.

—

The weather was changing. Nights were crisp and getting longer. Daytime was chilly on some days, warm on others. The tribe was straining to reach the foothills before full cold set in. They wanted to have a chance to prepare for winter.

I missed Aurora terribly. My grief pushed me to spend hours alone, sometimes wandering away from the tribe, sometimes wishing I could have just one last conversation with her. Instead, I stayed within myself and gave little time to cultivating other friendships.

To their credit, most of the tribe simply let me be. I was free to come and go as I pleased. I had no regular

assignments for work. The fact that I had rescued Rena was reason enough to leave me alone.

For the moment, we had passed out of view of the Purveyors. No sign of drones or soldiers. I had a hard time believing they would simply give up, but what use was there in worrying about it? If they came, they came. As it was, I was happy for the peace and quiet.

The terrain grew hillier, the mountains clearer. The far edge of the western slopes. Rocky. Cold. High in the air. It was as if they were giant barriers warning us to mind ourselves and pay homage to their strength. No crossing would be tolerated. They were like a great banner with bold letters telling us that we were coming to the end of our trip.

Indeed, as we continued west, we all anxiously waited for Dominick to declare where we would stop. When and where he spoke the word, we would establish a new Wolf camp. There was anticipation among us that we were close to our destination.

Dominick was preoccupied with this, sending out scouts to give reports about clearings, trees, water, game supply, all the things we would need to survive. I saw little of him, heard even less as his time was consumed consulting with tribal groups to decide where to settle.

One night, after dinner, I wrapped myself in a blanket and took a stroll away from camp. We were surrounded by forests and I was happy to wander among them. It was a joy to watch the stars blink through their branches. Their leaves had thinned and the view of their spindly arms stretched toward the night was enchanting and a

little sobering. I was thinking of the cycle of life and death and how someday, like Aurora, my own ashes would rise. Maybe I would be lucky to fly to the moon when it was full. Maybe the night lights in the sky would welcome me.

As I stepped into a clearing, I heard a branch snap. My senses focused. Someone else was out here with me. I let my eyes and ears do my thinking. I leaned as flat as I could into a tree and remained completely still.

I stayed patient. I knew what I'd heard, knew that I was being watched. If a waiting game was what they wanted, I could remain here all night or simply slip my way back into camp. But I was determined to let the visitor make the first move.

A voice spoke from the darkness. A man's voice. "I will not hurt you."

He walked into the clearing in full view.

He was a young man, near my age. Stout with long dark hair dangling down his back. He was from the camp, but I had not learned his name.

"Who are you?" I said boldly.

"Hopper," he replied. "From the family of Gastof and Bri. I am their oldest son, and a cousin to Dominick."

I was surprised. Someone this close to leadership was not prone to wander alone in the dark. "Why aren't you back in camp with the tribal elders?"

Hopper took a few steps forward. His face became clearer to me. Round like the moon with a high set nose and large, green eyes that lit up in the moonlight. His posture was relaxed as if this was just a normal night's walk.

“The elders have settled for the night. I am young and still waiting for my turn at the table. Tonight, I’m not so consumed with their work. It’s a full moon, a good night to get away and clear my head. Perhaps you’re doing the same. I notice sometimes you like to walk at night. We have that in common.”

I did not move an inch. After all these months, I was still skittish as a deer. Any sign of trouble and I would disappear into the dark. Besides, his behavior was not normal. Most men I knew in the tribe preferred to sit by the fire among other men and talk.

“And of course, you just happened to find me,” I said, my voice offering no invitation.

Hopper gave me a sheepish grin. “Not by accident, no. I admit. I saw you leave and followed you.”

“Well at least we’re clear on that.”

“Why are you here?” he challenged.

My words stuck in my throat. I was not sure what to say, how much to reveal of myself.

“Like you, I enjoy walking at night. The darkness calms me, and I’m happy to see trees again. The forest is where I feel at home. We’ve been living so long on the plains, I’d almost forgotten what a tree looks like.”

“I feel the same,” he assured me. “A love for the forest, especially in the dark with the stars as my guests. I think we also share this in common.”

I was unsure of his intentions, but I guessed one thing. He had followed me here, admitted it, and he certainly had no plans to leave without talking to me. In turn, he had succeeded in getting me to talk to him.

My reaction was not Hopper's fault. Of strangers in general, I was reluctant, and of him at this moment, I felt doubly so. I did not like to be surprised in the dark, especially by a man.

"Do you intend to keep following me?" I said.

"Are you afraid?" His words probed my own question and forced me out into the open.

"No," I said. "Surprised, yes, but not afraid."

"I've noticed you since we left Last Chance. But to talk to you is difficult. If I'm offending you, then I'm sorry and I will go back to camp. But at least you'll know my name, and perhaps at another time, you may talk to me. I hear you have stories to tell."

"I am difficult," I admitted. "I'm not a member of the tribe, and I've lived alone for many years. It's not easy for me to talk to people I don't know."

I surprised myself. This was a very personal confession. Whether he realized it, it was more than I intended to share, more than I had even shared with Dominick. But his easy presence pushed the words right out of my mouth.

"Then you know who I am," he said. "From now on, I am no longer a stranger."

"I know your name. That doesn't bring you any closer."

"Not now, but maybe later. Maybe time can help us."

I came out into the open and revealed myself. "You remind me of your cousin."

"He's a good man. I take that as a compliment."

We squared off and looked at each other for a long time. If knowledge was shared, our thoughts were zooming across the chilly air and being absorbed into each other's minds.

"I'll go now," he said. "Thank you for not running away."

What of this encounter? And of his words? They seemed sincere. He simply wanted to introduce himself, and even if by sleight of hand, he had accomplished his purpose. I had to admire him for that.

"You're welcome," I said. "Perhaps you can talk to me next time without catching me off guard."

"Perhaps," he said. "Then again, you may notice me and feel free to talk."

A few more quiet moments and he disappeared into the dark, this time without breaking a branch.

I rested in the clearing as the moon rose. Something clicked in my head. Did I now understand a man more than I had previously? Was it something that Aurora had shared? I was a woman. He had noticed me. This, too, was part of the cycle of life and death. Man, woman, children, parents, family. I knew eventually I would have to decide about all the above. I could not stay wrapped in my blanket of solitude forever. Hopper had taken a chance and brought me out into the open. Other men might do the same.

I thought of Dominick and whether he had ever thought about these issues, whether he could think of me as more than a tribe member. Was his role simply to lead? Was he attracted to a woman? Was he pledged to

someone? Rena had been enchanted by him, even risked her life. Did other women feel the same? Did I?

It was clear to me that one day I would have to choose and be chosen. The great bright moon helped illuminate that crooked and complicated path.

I missed Aurora. I missed Dakota. I missed having someone I could talk to woman to woman. But they were gone. My life had to move on without them and the same decisions had to be made regardless of whether I ever found someone else to talk to in the forest.

I sat down in the clearing and let these thoughts wander as they pleased. For the moment, the moon was my best friend. I was not anxious to go back without giving him ample time to keep me company.

Much to my surprise, as I lay back against a tree and the moon smiled down on me, I fell asleep.

Becker Again

When I woke, the bare traces of morning were beginning to crawl across the sky, midnight blue against a sun preparing to rise.

I shook myself awake and stretched. Then I rose and stretched again. I wondered if anyone had missed me last night. I hoped that no one had gone to the trouble of looking for me. If Hopper had returned to the camp, he surely would have let them know I was out here. Hurrying through the forest, I anticipated finding the camp.

As I neared the edge, a hand grabbed me and held me back. Hopper put a finger against his lips to keep me quiet.

My eyes wide with curiosity, I mouthed the words, "What's happening?"

He motioned for me to follow him as he whispered, "Keep quiet."

We approached the camp as if we were stalking game. Stepping carefully. Taking great care to stay hidden in the surrounding shrubbery.

I heard voices. Not from the Wolf Tribe. Someone else giving orders. Other people scurried around searching the camp.

Hopper hid behind some trees and pointed to the ground. Together we laid on our stomachs and listened to the activity. His finger circled to the camp. I saw him mouth the word, "Gone."

Gone? What did that mean, and who were these people within the camp? I watched intently. Not soldiers. No uniforms or logos. What other options were there?

Hopper tapped my shoulder and motioned to someone. Immediately, my stomach went south. It was Becker. Apparently, he had gathered another small army to do his bidding. Not soldiers exactly. Probably deserters, thieves, drifters, to whom he offered some kind of payoff.

Right now, they were frustrated that the Wolf Tribe had melted into the forest. I could hear Becker cursing.

"Where are they, damn it?" His next question brought me to full attention. "And where is she? How can one woman be so hard to find?"

I knew that woman was me. His obsession had driven him across the plains and into our settlement. He wanted to find me in the worst way.

I gave great thought to my next move. It would not be difficult to slip away, but how would that help the Wolf Tribe? It wasn't them he wanted. It was me. If I remained free, he wouldn't stop harassing the Tribe. Even worse, I was certain that if he ever caught someone from the Tribe, he would use them as leverage in the same way he used

Harrieta and Horner. But if I showed myself, perhaps he would leave them alone. And if he hoped to be rewarded for my return, my safety was not in doubt. He needed me alive.

Two risky propositions. One to remain hidden. One to give myself up. Which would best help the Tribe to escape?

Becker's crew was riffling through the camp, tossing everything sideways, scattering belongings everywhere. If I didn't act soon, there would be nothing left to salvage. The Tribe would have to face winter and start from square one. I made my decision. Despite Hopper's murmured protests, I broke cover and walk to the middle of the camp.

"You're looking for me, I presume?"

Becker froze in his tracks and slowly turned around. He caught me in a hunter's stare. I couldn't tell if he was angry or relieved.

"Well, if it isn't the little princess," he scoffed. "Have you had your fun watching me tear up your camp? Seems your Wolves have thrown you, well, to the wolves."

"I'm guessing you've had a long journey," I said, "with not a lot to show for it."

"More than you could ever guess," he said. "But la de la, here we are. A real family reunion."

"Well, let's just say I've had my own long journey. More than you could ever guess."

"Looks like we have a lot of catching up to do. Time to sit around the fire and tell our tales."

"I guess."

He whistled for his group to assemble. They came from all directions, about a dozen of them. A motley crew, men who had lived in the wilderness without many creature comforts. The dust of the road covered their faces. Their clothes were tattered. They looked hungry.

I kept needling him. "Couldn't be that these are my grandfather's soldiers, are they?"

"Used to be," Becker snapped. "Now we work our own missions. One mission in particular. You can guess what that is."

"Is there money on my head? Imagine that."

"Yeah, quite a pile of it, in fact, but keeping you alive, delivering you back in one piece, that's the big payday."

"Wasn't enough for you to get washed down the river last time, huh? I would think you might learn a lesson or two about messing with me."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten, trust me. I'm here to convince you, not grab you away."

"Things haven't changed, you know. The bookstore still protects me."

"Then I'll treat you very nicely."

"It's my choice, you know. If I decide to fight, things will not go well for you."

He looked as if he remembered something. "Was that what I saw back there on the plains? Some of those guys I ran across were burnt to a crisp. So now you've moved from flood to fire?"

"What can I say? She's determined to keep me alive."

"Well, I don't want to hurt you. I just want to take you back home."

"I don't want to go home. This is home, and the Wolf Tribe, they're my family. We've come out here to live in peace. I think you're wasting your time, but who am I to argue?"

"Time spent with you is never wasted."

I gave him my loudest raspberry. "Oh please. Spit it out. What do you want?"

"Simple. You come home. I get rich. We all go away happy."

"Did I not say it loud enough? I don't want to go home. Going home will not make me happy."

Becker caught me in a sorcerer's stare. I could tell he was hiding something, maybe an ace up his sleeve. It made no sense to me. With what he knew about my life, why would he think that I would go back?

"What about your mother?" he said slyly, as if offering a trail of bread crumbs to a bird.

My thoughts exploded. My balance reeled.

"What about her? She's dead, long gone."

He gave his best pregnant pause. He knew he had scored a big one.

"She's not dead. She's living under the care of your grandfather. She's been waiting for us to bring you back. And the most mighty Highsmith wants to bring you two together. A sweet family reunion, just like we're having now."

"Where?"

"Where else? To the holy city of Aether back on the East Coast."

"You're lying."

“I swear, I’m not. He gave me this to bring to you.”

“What is it?”

“A letter, signed by Highsmith himself.” He handed me a small envelope with some type of wax seal on it.

“Open it. Read it out loud.”

I wriggled open the envelope and pulled out a piece of grainy paper. In neat cursive. Written with a pen. I began to read:

Dear Laura:

It has been years since we searched for you. I’m hoping this letter finds you well and in the care of my loyal Captain Becker. I wish to inform you that your family waits for you back home in the city of Aether. This would include your mother, Rebecca, your father, Howard, and two siblings: Breta, your sister, and Eckard, your baby brother.

We hope to convince you to return to your home and once again be a part of our most high family. Please be reassured we will welcome you with open arms. You must also know that your heritage is royal and that if you return, you stand to gain much upon my passing. Let my words implore you to come and rejoin us. We have missed you terribly.

Signed:

Henry Highsmith, High Priest of the Order

Howard Becker, Chancellor of the Order

Rebecca Becker, Mother to Laura

“Well?” said Becker.

I held the letter between two fingers as if it were on fire. I wished I had something to burn it.

“You’re telling me my whole family is alive?”

“Yes,” said Becker.

“What about the Civil War? My mother disappearing? My father killed?”

Becker was smug. “Guess you’ve been a little out of touch,” he said with an evil chuckle. “So. Family is good. Highsmith is making his best offer. All is forgiven. Please come home.”

“And what do you get out of this?”

“I get paid to bring you back.”

“And these other men?”

“Oh, they’ll be rewarded as well. Handsomely, or they wouldn’t be out here living like dogs. Me either, for that matter. Short-term suffering, long-term gain.”

“What about what I want?”

“What else could you possibly want? You get to live like royalty. You get your whole family back. You get Highsmith’s blessing. My god, child, what else is there you could possibly desire?”

“Just one thing. I want you to leave the Tribe of Wolf in peace.”

“You mean the people who slipped away and left you stranded here? Those people?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I bear them no grudge, though they did do some damage to my soldiers. That’s considered a high crime and treason. They might have to do some begging to avoid the Priest’s wrath.”

“They were protecting me.”

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that. And I appreciate that they’ve taken care of you this far. So, as a peace offering, let’s call it even. They go their way, keep heading west, stay out of our hair, and we go ours. As far as I’m concerned, they can dig holes in the snow and piss in them till the camp turns yellow. Let sleeping dogs lie, literally, I guess.”

His words smarted. I felt as if he’d done nothing but insult the Wolves, all as his way of bargaining me into his little corner of the world. I did not want to go. Everything in my being strained against it, this life of so-called luxury and royalty. But the Tribe was not responsible for my family and I shouldn’t keep them in harm’s way.

Handing him back the letter, I said, “Okay.”

He appeared surprised. On the one hand, I had consented. On the other, I had returned the letter. I could see in his face his troubled thoughts. He folded the paper and returned it to his pocket. He sighed, “You are one strange woman.”

Jumping into action, he clapped his hands and exclaimed, “Well, we’ve got to get you to a landing site so you can hop a plane and make haste to mommy and daddy.”

The sun was breaking over the forest. The trees were looking down at us as if we were foreigners. Their bare limbs puckered at our presence.

As Becker led me along a path headed east, I used my last moment here to survey the camp. I caught sight of Dominick deep in the bush. He was watching me steadily.

Out of sight of Becker and his crew, I waved goodbye as tears rolled down my cheeks. I knew the impact of my decision. I took some comfort that I had kept the Tribe safe and that they could live peacefully out here.

As for returning to Aether, I wished I had died from the Bear Tribe, or fallen deep into the cave. Every step I took, I felt my feet tear from the ground. Yes, I was going to see my family, but I was not going home. Home was with the Tribe of Wolf.

As I moved east, I took my last glimpse of the mountains. I swore to myself that I would come back someday or die trying. I caught sight of Dominick again, then hurried to catch up. It was too hard to waste more time looking back. I had made up my mind. Time to deal with it.

—

Where were we going? The question kept repeating in my head. Was there an airport out here, or were we going to walk all the way back to Aether? Given what I knew about our location, I couldn't imagine either scenario.

Becker, however, didn't seem the least bit worried. If anything, his confidence led me to believe he knew exactly what he was doing.

The weight of returning to my family was like pulling a wagon full of bricks. As I walked slowly east on a trail that I had never seen before, the choice I had made felt like the wrong choice and nothing could convince me to change my outlook. It became clear that I didn't want to

go to Aether or see my family or live in the lap of luxury. I preferred being exactly where I was, and the further I moved from my starting point, the more unhappy I grew.

But what were my options? And would the Wolf Tribe be in harm's way if I decided to go back?

Dominick's words returned to me, our discussion about choosing:

Sometimes it's one choice. Sometimes it's many. All I can tell you is to take what's there, whatever choice you have, and run with it.

So, I reasoned. What choice is here now, in this moment? Walking with Becker isn't really a choice as I see it. More like a reason to keep the Tribe safe. But is that a choice?

Still, we moved east on foot, his soldiers prodding me along. Our progress slow but steady. All I had to amuse myself were my own thoughts. Becker interrupted those thoughts as he drove slowly by in a well-worn vehicle that he had salvaged from his former days working for the Order.

"You're awfully quiet."

"Am I?" I said. "As if you could care."

"When you're quiet, I worry."

Exasperated, I said, "Why?"

"It means you're thinking about something, and that something is something that might worry me."

His question annoyed me. "I don't know why you would be worried. You got what you wanted."

"And, of course, you're getting nothing except the keys to the kingdom."

“Do I really have a say in this matter?”

He returned my annoyance and shook his head. “You know, I’ve never met someone who complained so much about being handed a gift.”

“Am I complaining?”

“More or less.”

“You just told me you’re worried about me being quiet. How is that complaining?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “I just get the feeling that you being quiet is louder than a dog barking to get in the house when he’s hungry.”

“I’m not a dog. I don’t want in the house.”

“Right. Bad use of images maybe, but you get my drift.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. This conversation had us running in circles, our words bouncing off each other like hail on grass.

“So am I trying to get in or trying to get out? I don’t see where you’re going with this story.”

“Well one thing’s for sure,” he groaned. “You don’t want to be here. Not in my company anyway.”

“Ah,” I concluded. “Finally, you make sense. Yes, that part is true. I know you’re my uncle, but we don’t really seem to have much in common. It’s not like we’re family or anything.”

“What’s your problem with me? I am your family. You should be happy to see me.”

“Nnnnoo . . . not really.”

“Ouch. That hurts,” he said, stone faced.

“Not as much as you’ve hurt me. You killed my friends. Your army killed Leon. You’re forcing me to return to someplace I don’t want to go. You think you’re hurting?”

The conversation ended abruptly. He drove off, leaving me to choke in his dust.

I wanted to kick myself, mainly for my tendency to speak plainly and not think about the consequences. Everything always ran through my mouth first before reaching my brain. It was not one of my better qualities, especially when I was trying to stay out of trouble.

The proof revealed itself an hour later when a burly group of sentries walked up, picked me up by the armpits, and hustled me to an outdoor cage about the size of a small room. It was connected to the back of a large truck; a moving cage if I had to describe it. The animal in the cage happened to be me. I wasn’t large, but the outcome was the same. Imprisonment.

Throwing me inside, they locked the door and walked away.

Five minutes later, Becker strolled up and grinned.

“See, if you could just be nice for a while, I wouldn’t have to worry about you hightailing off somewhere back to your little wolfie boyfriend and leave me with nothing. It’s called trust, and you my dear, are completely untrustworthy.”

I sat down in the cage and rested my hands on my lap. “Yes, I agree. Probably smart to keep me locked up.”

He gave me an evil grin. “There now. We do agree on something.”

"Just remember, though. Mother always takes care of me."

"Mother? That bookstore thing again?"

"The storm didn't convince you?"

"You think she was protecting you?"

"More or less. Sure looked like it from my point of view. You're the one who lost your army."

"And I got it back."

"These guys? Not much of an army, but I take your point."

"You're the one locked up."

"For the moment. But seems to me you're the one asking for trouble."

"I'm asking for a little change of heart. I'm asking for a little cooperation. Is that too much for you, I wonder?"

"Way too much."

His grin disappeared. "I hope I can get you to his highness in one piece, but by God, you're testing my patience. I'm deciding if his reward is worth your risk."

"Tough decision, considering what he's offering. I'd hate to be in your shoes."

He eyed me as if he was thinking of the damage he could inflict and still keep me alive.

"Good night, my dear. I can't wait to see how you get along with Sir Henry."

"Me either. If I'm being truthful, he doesn't sound like much fun. We'd probably argue a lot."

"Yeah, no doubt, but once I turn you in, it's his problem, not mine."

Becker marched off. I sat alone in the cage.

I wondered if Mother would reward such bad behavior. At this moment, even I found myself obnoxious.

Well, I thought. Here's one choice I made. Wonder what other trouble I can stir up?

I had to admit, I had a gift.

—

The cage was cold. Winter approached and with no blanket, I curled up on the floor in a tight ball. On and off I slept, sometimes dreaming, sometimes just shivering. During the day, I ate what food was offered and kept to myself.

Soldiers would walk around and look at me as if I was on display. I wasn't sure why they wanted to see me, what possible interest a girl in a cage could be. Then I remembered Hopper and wondered if the fact that I was a woman in a cage was the real point of interest.

Some of them would stand by the bars and try to get me to talk. Nothing too deep. Just basic conversation, but I kept my mouth shut. Disgusted, they would curse at me and saunter off. A few of them threw rocks against the cage to rattle me.

As I stared out the back, it appeared that we were headed to a rendezvous point. For the moment, I was a prisoner living in a prisoner's cage. If I thought too much about it, it just made my head hurt. And if indeed Mother was watching and thinking about offering any assistance, she was being awfully discrete.

—

Two days in, a heavy fog fell, a white blanket so thick I could not see the bars around my cage. Occasionally, I would catch glimpses of shadows, but it was eerie how I could see but not see, how forms and shapes simply appeared and disappeared. I might have been a thousand feet in the air or at zero ground level. I might have seen birds or soldiers. With this mist, there was no way to judge.

As I peered anxiously into the fog, I could hear noises around me: footsteps, voices, the clunk and clang of machinery. Then the truck stopped. For a brief time, I concentrated and tried to discern what was happening. Movement of some sort. Human and otherwise. But whatever was going on was completely walled off.

There was fighting. Men shouting. Guns firing. My first instinct was to duck and cover. As the battle continued, I crawled across the floor of my cage and pushed against the door. To my surprise, it squeaked and opened. Somebody had left it unlocked. Somebody mysterious and very invisible.

When did this happen? I would surely have noticed if the cage had been unlocked. Yes, I had slept some, but not enough to miss this. Yet here it was. The gate swung as wide as the cage itself. This time I did not argue with the gift. I slipped from my prison and landed softly on my feet.

Still, where was I going? The fog was pea soup and my sense of direction wasn't working.

No need for questions. Crawl if I had to. Follow the road. Just move away from my cage.

Pressing my back against my old quarters, I brushed the ground and felt around. Bare space here. Grass there. Dirt and ruts. The outlines of what I guessed were trees. In my head, a line formed and I slowly pulled away and crawled across the road.

Quickly, I heard a familiar sound. The engine of a vehicle, the crush of wheels on dirt. It was coming straight toward me. I heard it long before it appeared. In desperation, I jumped sideways and rolled.

As the vehicle hurtled at me, I rolled directly into a tree. The vehicle zipped by and threw wind in my hair. I was close enough to smell the oil and grease from the tires and engine. It was a faint black shadow speeding rapidly toward . . .

I heard the crash and saw the road become an orange blotch. Had I not escaped, perhaps I would have been engulfed in those flames. Whoever was driving had intended to kill me.

My heart racing, I decided that staying on the road was too dangerous. I reached around the tree. My body followed. I sat with my back perched against the bark. As the motion of battle spilt around me, I curled up and hid as best I could.

Who knows how long I stayed there? The fog destroyed all certainty of time and space. I was simply floating in the mist, a loose leaf plucked from a tree, lying on the ground.

Eventually the battle ceased and silence took over. Against the smell of things burning, the flash of flames, the moan of human suffering, that same silence hovered over my head.

The mist disappeared. As quickly as it had come, it dissipated. When I looked around, all was clear to me. I peeked around the tree. The soldiers, their vehicles, all their tools of the trade, had been destroyed. No sign of anything living. The convoy was a wreck. And me, I was out in the open with no clue as to what to do.

Where was Becker? Where was his rag tag army? It seemed that they had been removed by some great stealthy force, and I was left to assess the damage. Gathering my courage, I stepped out onto the road and surveyed what I could. The sun was in the sky. The trees remained stationary. But fire was everywhere.

A voice startled me.

“You’re safe.”

I spun and gasped.

It was Hopper.

From all sides, more members of the Tribe of Wolf emerged, including Dominick.

“What?” I said, the only word my surprise could muster.

“We must go,” Hopper insisted.

“Go where?” Even in this moment of revelation, I was determined to know what happened.

“Home,” he said, “which will remain your place for as long as you want.”

I glanced at Dominick. He nodded in agreement.

What was foremost on my mind: “Becker?”

“He will not bother you,” said Dominick. “But that doesn’t mean we’re safe. They were meeting someone. I don’t know if they’re close or far, but we need to go.”

“Is he . . . ?”

“Yes,” he said simply.

“And the army? Who did all this?”

“Never underestimate the Tribe of Wolf,” Dominick stated with authority. “We know how to fight, especially when we want our Wolf back.”

A thought flashed through my head. “Leon again?”

“His legacy,” Dominick joked.

“And you want me to come back?”

“That’s why we’re here.”

Something in his voice released my fear and relieved me of my burden, the bricks that I had been carrying. Home was a welcome term, as welcome as freedom. More important. I belonged to the wolves.

“We must move, now,” said Hopper. He reached for my hand. I took it willingly. As suddenly as the mist had come and gone, we also disappeared into the forest.

—

We moved parallel to the road, keeping out of sight as best we could.

Dominick was right. Somebody had picked up our trail. The drones were back. This told us that the Purveyors had known what Becker was up to and were now trying to complete his mission.

No one felt worse about this than me. Again, I had put the tribe at risk just because of the family that I belonged to, the family I had not seen in so long. And if the Tribe of Wolf wanted me, so did the Order. I wondered why. After all these years, what could my return possibly mean to them?

Perhaps they assumed I had been kidnapped and held hostage. Perhaps they thought that it was their purpose as a family to reunite me with my parents and siblings. What was most frustrating was that I could not talk to them and share my story. I could not let them know that I was happy exactly where I was, and because of that, who else in the Tribe of Wolf might be hurt?

As I waited with Dominick in the dark, my curiosity overwhelmed me.

“Why did you come back?” I asked.

“I saw it when you left,” he said. “It was in your face. I knew why you were going, but we are the Tribe of Wolf. You have become family. Family is what keeps us together and alive.”

“But I’m not Wolf,” I said.

“You are Wolf.”

“How?”

“Because we have all agreed on this as a tribe.”

“Really?”

“Yes, all of us. Even Rena.”

“So . . .”

“Stop asking the question,” he said firmly.

Rashan appeared at his side. “Small army coming, about a mile or so east. Purveyors, I think.”

Dominick's wheels were spinning. "What are they carrying?"

"Small arms, vehicles. Nothing too heavy. I think it's a search party."

As he talked, a drone flashed overhead.

"They're assuming we're traveling west," said Dominick.

"They assume correctly," said Rashan, "at least for now."

Dominick summed up the situation. "They'll be carrying infrared, I imagine."

"Yes," said Rashan.

"South," he ordered, "about fifty yards or so. Find trees and cluster around them. Break out the robes."

Rashan disappeared. Dominick held my arm.

"Time to go," he said.

"Robes?" I questioned.

"Yes, a product of the Purveyors. Something we recovered when we were in Last Chance."

"Oh," was all I could say before he leaned on me and pushed me into the woods. "Talk later. Move now."

Move I did until we were all gathered under a thick grove of trees.

"Robes," Dominick said to everyone.

There was a rustle like leaves and something was tossed my way; what looked like a cloth, grey, large enough to hide a person.

"Cover yourself," Dominick ordered.

Within moments we had thrown the robes over us and sat like statues, barely breathing.

They were lighter than I expected, made from a material that felt sturdy, like metal, yet able to carry air flow. I could breathe easily. I could also see through them.

And then it occurred to me where I had used these. Dakota, on the porch of the bookstore while we hid from the Wild Ones. The Wolves must have shared them with her.

We could hear the army approaching. They were making no effort to sneak up on us. Orders were barked. Radios echoed. Flashes of light flew overhead.

We held our breaths and let them out slowly. Mist leaked from our mouths.

We waited. How long? I wondered.

The search party passed and kept moving. The light and the noise dimmed and diminished, then vanished completely. I guessed they had missed us and headed west.

Dominick slowly removed his robe and the rest of us followed suit.

“Probably best to stay here for the night,” he said. “My guess is, they’ll return in a few hours. Take your blanket and go back under the robe. We’ll decide in the morning what’s our next step.”

Again, the robes rustled as tribe members settled in for the night.

As I prepared to sleep, I felt someone settle next to me.

“I’m here,” said Hopper.

At first, I was frightened, and a little put off by an intrusion of space. Then I realized that his intentions were

good. It was me who needed to be generous and grateful for his attention.

“Thank you,” I said.

I could feel his weight against my back. It added to the warmth of the blanket.

I thought of Dakota, Harrieta, Horner, how being with them had comforted me at night, how we had slept together and become a family. Now I had a new family, and even if I was only adopted, this did not feel like adoption. It felt sturdy and unbreakable.

“Good night, Hopper,” I called out.

“Good night, Laura,” he breathed.

Hopper. Dominick. The tribe.

I could be very happy here.

And Even More Bears

We woke to the clash of people fighting, weapons firing, the chaos of battle. Instinctively, we laid low. The skirmish was down the road, perhaps a mile or two. Hopper reached for my hand, a sign of assurance.

“Purveyors,” I heard Dominick say.

But that was only half the problem. If the Purveyors were fighting, and it wasn’t us they were fighting, then who?

A familiar battle cry let us know.

“Black Bears,” I said. “I recognize their call.”

Dominick agreed.

The Black Bears had returned after all, smarting from their previous disaster, but still loose and probably seeking revenge on whoever was unlucky enough to cross their path. Fortunately, the Purveyors were their first target.

“Up,” Dominick commanded. “If they’ve spread out, we’ll be next. Time to move, maybe circle around them.”

The tribe was ready within minutes. Marching in our usual stealthy manner, we headed further south, deeper into the forest.

The Bears were in a full attack mode as we slipped away. Maybe more of them had joined up for this conquest. Above us, we would hear jets rushing in to help. I had no doubt they would make quick work of them. The question was, would they also make quick work of us? Our one advantage was the remaining darkness, but, as we neared daybreak, even that was only temporary.

We sprinted for quite a distance before huddling in a small clearing and figuring out our next move. Dawn was just beginning to crack the sky.

“Rashan,” said Dominick. “Can you and Hopper move west, do some scouting?”

Rashan grabbed Hopper by the shoulder and disappeared into the darkness.

The rest of us sat solemnly and took note of our surroundings. The battle had receded. Nothing moved overhead. No drones or planes. For the moment, we had managed to stay out of the line of fire.

Water was passed around and a small bit of food to keep up our strength.

I pressed Dominick. “How much longer are we going to wait?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “We’re off course right now. I’m thinking that somehow, we’ll have to move north. I’ll have a better idea after Rashan and Hopper report back. They’re excellent trackers.”

The calm covered us like dew. Occasional outbursts of war, but from a much further distance.

As we sat together, Dominick surprised me. "You and Hopper?" Nothing escaped his observation.

I opened my mouth, but words deserted me. I was not at all ready for this question. "Uh, you and Hopper . . ."

"He seems . . . what . . . taken? Is that the right word?"

I could see no sense in avoiding what Dominick already concluded. "If you mean is he interested in me, then yes, he is."

"And you?"

"As far as I know, I'm not taken by anyone," I said stubbornly. "You've just told me I was part of the tribe. I'm still trying to wrap my head around that."

"Then, you don't . . ." He hesitated. I squinted at him.

"I'm in the middle of a forest running from Purveyors on one side and Bears on the other, the same guys who, incidentally, tried to kill me not too long ago. Call me crazy, but right now I'm just trying to stay alive."

Dominick's face was one big question. He appeared to be doing some kind of wolf mind reading trick. At least that was my guess. Who knows why else he would choose this moment to probe into my love life?

"What do you want to know?" I said, as if to bounce his mind reading straight back into his curious brain.

"Nothing," he responded.

"Nothing, smuthing. Am I crazy or are we really talking about this now?"

"It appears so," he said, looking amused. "And it does appear that I'm crazy." I could see that he was having fun at my expense.

"Your timing is off," I protested.

“As is usually the case when it comes to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“As you said. My timing is off.”

“Hopper and I . . .” I couldn’t continue. What exactly was Hopper and I?

He never took his eyes off me, and he was still grinning.

“Stop staring,” I grumbled. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Nervous?”

“Yes. Nervous.”

“I would not imagine a woman who has faced down Bears, thrown fire from the sky, and survived great storms, could ever be nervous.”

“You imagined wrong.”

“Then I shall stop. Making you nervous. That is, if I can figure out how.”

“Try changing the subject.”

“Consider it done,” he said. And still he was grinning.

“Stop grinning,” I ordered.

“Was I grinning?” He was.

“Yes.”

“Then I shall stop that, too. That is, if I can figure out how.”

I shook my head in mock disgust.

We both waited for any sign of Rashan. And Hopper. To whom I was or was not attracted.

As I had so helpfully pointed out to Dominick, he wasn’t the only one whose timing was off. When it came to men, mine wasn’t much better.

—

When Rashan and Hopper returned, the news was not good.

Purveyors to the north of us, moving in weaponry and equipment.

Bears to the west and south, spread out like a long fence.

If we were going to get home, we'd have to find a hole in their defenses. At any rate, staying put was not an option. We were literally in the middle of the battle lines for both sides. Stay where we were and one side or the other would certainly find us.

As the men debated strategy, a question popped into my head: "What if we use the robes?"

The group looked perplexed.

"You know. Just put them on and see if we can sneak through. Be like ants crawling through the forest." I'm not sure if that was the best way to describe it, but it was effective. I helped illustrate by using two fingers walking. "You know. Follow each other single file."

I kept hoping they would understand, but I could tell, some of them were struggling. Others, maybe not so much. I peeked over at Dominick, but his face was deep in concentration.

"Just a thought," I concluded.

Hopper was the first to speak. "And a good one," he said. "We have enough robes for everyone."

Dominick came to life. "Very wolf like," he said. "Good thought."

He turned to Rashan. "How far would we have to go?"

Rashan gave the question some thought. "Probably a mile, maybe two. If we travel a bit further south, we might find a crack in their flanks. The bulk of the Bears are up by the road trying to out muscle the Purveyors. Typical Bear strategy. Run over whatever moves the most. But I know that some are trying to sneak around the side and come at them from the east. Those are the ones we must worry about. And it's daylight, so we would have to be careful about how we move. Maybe we could use some branches to hide the robes."

"Let's do it," said Dominick.

It was a signal and everyone jumped into action. As the sun broke over the horizon, a strange gathering of branches began inching south in a single file, just as I had said, like ants in the forest. A good idea. And, it turned out, an even better description. For a moment, I felt proud of myself.

—

Dominick was at the head of the ants. I was behind him. Hopper directly behind me. No doubt, both men were intent on keeping me safe. I have to admit. I was enjoying the attention.

We moved south, then began a slow trek west, slipping our way among the trees. Soon enough, we began to hear Bears around us. They crashed through the woods without a care for sneaking up on anyone, which

made them easy to avoid. Their plan was to simply mob whomever they encountered. It made our job much easier.

As we crept along, Bears drew within five feet of us, thrashing the brush with their clubs and spears. A wrong turn and they might just catch the surprise of their lives. Dominick kept us lined up behind trees, each of us pressing as close as possible to a trunk.

One Bear literally smacked his club on a tree directly over my head and howled. I thought for sure he had found me, but he was just blowing off steam. He stepped past me without a clue as to who was hiding just inches from his big, gnarly feet.

Our progress was measured in yards, then feet, then portions of a foot. It was exhausting but necessary. Absolute quiet. Absolute stealth. Only a Wolf could be this vigilant. Now I understood why they were so hard to catch. Their patience was as steady as a rocky peak.

The hollers of more Bears above us were encouraging. We must be gaining ground as we moved through their main line.

And then it happened. One Bear, lost in thought, crashed over one of our tribesmen. He fell in a heap. His club sailed up in the air and clocked another concealed Wolf, who muttered a groan.

The Bear was confused. Brush like a tree trunk. Voice like a human. What madness was this?

The brush like a tree trunk was Bilban. Even though he had laid flat on the ground, the Bear's foot had managed to catch his head. The club had sailed to his left

and hit Gastof. Both held their breaths and stayed concealed, but the Bear was suspicious.

Dominick had left his cover and was standing nearby. I could see his outline through my veil.

The Bear stood up and searched the ground, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Would he notice a flat line of bushes? He huffed and searched for his club. It was lying within inches of Gastof's head.

Picking it up, the Bear continued to scour the ground. He had tripped over something. He had heard a voice. As of now, he was only puzzled. What would it take to seriously trigger his suspicion?

I heard an arrow whiz through the air. It struck the Bear, who let out his own groan and fell directly on top of Gastof. Dead.

A sharp bird whistle split the forest. A signal from Dominick. The other Wolves flew out from underneath their robes, pulled the Bear off Gastof, and hid him under a load of brush. They had their bows and arrows ready in case of battle.

Rashad let out another whistle and pointed north. Another Bear. This one in full view. He turned to run, bellowing a call of alarm. Another arrow took him down within two steps, but our cover was blown. It was time to run.

Dominick pointed west and the tribe took off at a frantic pace. Wolves by nature and training are fast. I realized this as I tried to keep up and found myself falling behind. Hopper stayed with me and made sure that I remained attached to the group.

The cries of Bears began to fill the forest. It was a noise that put fear in my heart. I wondered if other Wolves felt the same. Hopper and I kept a steady pace, even though we were behind the others. His presence kept me encouraged.

We ran into a clearing and saw no one. Another whistle from Dominick and we headed for the other side of the forest.

The familiar hum of spears began to fall. We only had moments to gain cover. As we crashed into the forest and fell on our faces, another group of Wolves let loose a barrage of arrows. Several Bears were felled, but more came. They were gaining speed and gathering force. Our small tribe would be overwhelmed if we stayed where we were.

Once again, I prayed to Mother for help. I hoped for another miracle, perhaps from the trees themselves. As if possessed by her mind, I rose and faced the Bears. They were now halfway across the clearing and would be upon us within moments.

Without thinking, I stepped from the forest, raised my arms and shouted at them with all my strength. My voice boomed across the empty space. I was surprised at how it broke like thunder. Still the Bears kept coming.

A spear drove straight toward my chest. With my right hand, I reached out and caught it before its tip could impale me. Then I hurled it back at another Bear. It drove straight into his head and he fell like a chopped tree.

As he dropped, the whole Bear tribe skidded in their tracks. Some grunted skeptically. Others fell back a few

steps. Some probably had not seen my former work with the lightning. I was young and half their size. How could such a small lady threaten them?

The thought crossed my mind as well. I saw no storm. I heard no thunder. Did Mother have anything else to give me?

“Come, Mother,” I murmured. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dominick and Hopper ready to pounce and pull me back.

I began to spin my arms backward like a windmill. As I did, I could feel the air stir. The tops of the trees began to sway back and forth. Faster and faster I whirled my arms and the wind began to blow like a windy day, then like a gale. It swirled into a large tornado that picked up Bears and blew them back into the trees, over the trees, miles from where they stood. They hurtled like boulders into the distance until not one of them was left standing. The clearing was empty.

I slowed my arms and the wind died. I stood still for a moment, taking in what had just happened. Had I caused this? No, I concluded. Not me. Mother. My protector.

The sun shined in the meadow. The birds returned to singing. Each Wolf member came out to witness the empty space where just moments before, a roaring herd of Bears had threatened our existence.

“No doubt, you have special powers,” said Dominick, as he stood on my left.

“No doubt,” I responded. “They’re useful in a pinch.”

Hopper came up and stood on my right.

“Wind?” He let a breath pass. “You are a magician, a queen, a witch . . .”

“None of the above,” I said. “I’m Laura Becker, a member, make that a proud member of the Tribe of Wolf. Fortunately for you, my protector is Mother, who dwells in the bookstore in Last Chance. As you can see, she has made the trip with me.”

Hopper let out a deep breath. “Mother?”

“Yes, that’s what we call her.”

“A spirit of some sort?”

“I know who she is, but I’m not sure what you would call her. I guess spirit is as good a word as any. And she takes good care of me.”

“Lucky for us.”

“Not luck,” I said. “She is real and watches over all of us.”

“Lucky for us,” he repeated.

“Time to go,” said Dominick. “We can tell stories when we get home. Let’s make sure we get there first.”

“Agreed,” I said and we all vanished into the forest.

As we hurried away, I noticed that the other tribe members kept peeking at me.

“Let’s go home,” I urged.

I knew none of them would argue with that, but I was willing to bet there would be much talk around the campfire tonight.

The Mountains

Somewhere west we finally got the all clear. Perhaps the wind had done double duty: damaged the Purveyor's equipment and set sail to the Bears. For us, their loss was good news.

Once the Bears and Purveyors were left behind, we settled into traveling by night and sleeping during the day. We used the robes as tents. In the darkness, we hurried to make good time. We were all anxious to get back to the tribe.

When we arrived at the old camp, it was deserted. The rest of the tribe had moved on, probably somewhere further toward the mountains and long out of sight of the Purveyors. But, being Wolves, they had left us a trail to follow. We continued our journey through the forest, taking stock of the clues and making guesses as to how far they had gone.

Given the season, the cold had now set in. Would the tribe be prepared for what Winter had to offer? All this tracking and battle had taken up valuable time and resources. Much of the manpower had gone east with Dominick. The preparation had been left mostly to the

women. Yet from what I knew, they were equally capable of running a camp. Nobody in our tribe seemed worried.

In the meantime, the ongoing attention from Hopper and Dominick kept me busy. I was certain that at some point I would have to declare a winner, but I wasn't ready to give in just yet to either of them. I valued my independence and hadn't quite figured out what they expected of me. If we were debating love, I still found that a great mystery. Should I pick someone and declare it openly? Should I let my heart decide? Should I talk with some of the women? Too many thoughts. Too many questions. What I really wanted was to get to the camp and maybe, just maybe, have some time to myself.

Three days beyond our former camp, we found the rest of the tribe, and their fortunes had been good. Though they had to traipse further into the hills, they found a large cave that would serve us well. It was high enough for us to keep a good watch and big enough for individual families to have their own space. Some of the smaller tunnels within the caves could be used for storage or housing for the younger Wolves.

The tribe welcomed us and we were delighted to see the results of their hard work. There was food stored and wood enough for fires throughout the winter.

Families reunited and caught up on the news. Word spread quickly of my last encounter with the Bears. Wolves enjoy a good story, so there were several occasions I was called upon to tell my tales.

The Wolves shared my love of stories. I think some of them would have been happy to tour the bookstore, and

who knows? I might have spent time reading to them. Like Dakota, I would gladly have shared my gift – the love of words, their power, their ability to express my thoughts and feelings.

I found a small cave off the main hub for myself. Though it was no bigger than an average bedroom in a house, it was big enough for me. I used my robe as a curtain to cover the main entrance.

Reclaiming my bow and arrows, I managed to do a little house decoration and made the room cozy. It was far and away the best shelter I'd had since living at the bookstore. The only thing I missed were the books themselves. I missed reading. I missed running my hands across the titles. I missed roaming down the aisles and feeling the books shadow my face.

The fulfillment of our mission meant that now the Wolves could spend time talking about and planning a new village in the spring. Dominick explored the area around the caves and consulted me a few times on how I might approach the project. He respected my intelligence and included me in some of the tribal meetings around the campfire. He was also careful to include other women so as not to raise jealousy and cause tribal divisions.

In this way, I was glad to see that women were elevated to positions of leadership within the community. It was a recognition by the men that the women had proved themselves worthy. If I could lead, so could they. As I learned, wolves were practical and willing to change to make their lives better. Bringing more women into the

mix had proved useful, and I had pointed that out by example.

Above everything else, that made me feel as if I was indeed a Wolf. A powerful she Wolf willing to help my other matrons find new places in the tribe. An independent she Wolf not yet ready for love. Not even sure what it meant. But a she Wolf who belonged here among the men as their equal, as part of the Wolf Tribe who had survived a long, arduous journey and earned some time of rest. For me, this was my new home. I doubted no more that I belonged to the Tribe of Wolf.

—

One night, I heard someone knock on my mantel. "Come," I said as I worked by candlelight on designing a new bow, something stronger and more powerful than the smaller one I had carried in my youth.

I was surprised by Rena, whose wounds had recovered as much as they ever would. Her face and body were still disfigured, but much of the damage had healed and she was less shy about her appearance.

"Good evening," I said and kept working.

"Good evening," she said as she curiously followed my busywork.

"Sit, please," I offered.

She sat and laid her candle next to her leg.

For a few minutes, we both simply dwelled in the peacefulness of my little room. Away from our previous danger. Comforted by the people we dwelled with. Happy to be in our new home.

Then she spoke. "I've been given a mission," she said hesitantly, even cautiously, as she closely gauged my reaction.

I gestured for her to continue.

"First," she said, "I must apologize to you for putting your life in danger, and for the loss of your good friend, Aurora."

Her words cut me. I had not thought of Aurora in weeks. Her memory touched a spring of sadness in me. I was surprised that it brought me to tears. I put down my work and wiped my eyes.

"I'm truly sorry," she said. "Both of you saved me at great cost."

I could tell this had been on her mind for a long time. She struggled to find the right words. Perhaps she had been coached. It didn't matter to me. At least she spoke sincerely.

"She was a good friend, even for such a short time," I said. I was surprised that my voice was so raspy and that the grief for Aurora was still raw. "And she was brave. Rather than be sorry, take her life as an example."

The silence between us was heavy.

"But you are forgiven," I added, hoping to keep the conversation positive.

"Thank you," said Rena. She rubbed her finger across a scar on the side of her face, a permanent reminder of her own pain.

I returned to work, busying my fingers to avoid remembering Aurora.

"I have a request also," said Rena.

This too was a struggle. Her attention wandered to the sides of my cave as if she wished her body could float away. Her words seemed stuck in her throat.

“Speak,” I said.

She refocused and looked at me. “I was wondering if you would tutor me.”

Again, I was surprised. “Tutor you?”

“Yes.”

I looked at her intensely. “In what subject?”

She plunged in. “You’re the only one in camp who can read.”

I held my breath. I swear, I could feel the presence of Dakota peering over my shoulder, and she was smiling.

I had to consider this for a moment. The request had come out of the blue. “You know, I’ve never would have guessed that anyone in the tribe was interested in reading.”

“It’s important,” she said. “Some tribe members have discussed this, how reading could be taught. We concluded. You’re the only one who can help us.”

I paused my work and gave this some thought.

“All right. So . . .?”

“I’m required to bring together a young group, work with them, work with you, so that all of us can learn to read.”

“You mean you want me to start a school?” I hoped I didn’t sound harsh. It’s just that I had never considered the idea, never thought myself capable of being a teacher.

Rena smiled. "Yes, I suppose so. Those in our camp think you're very smart, and part of that is that you know how to read."

Again, I pictured Dakota behind me kicking me in the ribs. She knew. I knew. I wanted to kick back. She wouldn't let me. And Rena was right. The gift had been given to me by my mother and encouraged by Dakota. Words had transformed my thinking and opened a door into my soul, and now the gift was being requested by someone else. Dakota's patience and teaching had come full circle. Now I pictured her walking across the room and standing behind Rena. She had her arms folded waiting for my reply. How could I possibly refuse?

"Sure. I would be happy to," I said. "But we need books to read from."

"We have them," said Rena.

"What exactly do you have?"

"We have the books we need. Dakota gave them to us years ago, and we brought them along when we heard you were coming. We thought they might be useful. She had been working with some of us already, but we need a lot more help. I would really like to keep going."

Now I was floored. All this time, Dakota had been waiting to pull back the curtain. Surprise, I could hear her say as she laughed.

"And one more thing," said Rena.

"More?"

"Yes."

Even more surprises.

“I would like to learn to shoot a bow and arrow. Most women don’t care about that kind of stuff, but I see you do it, and I’d like to try.”

Teach her to shoot. Teach her to kill. The latter was disturbing, more so since it now came so easily to me. Still, it was a useful skill and something else I couldn’t deny her.

“Okay. But there’s plenty of people to teach you that. You don’t need me.”

“They want you, and they want me to practice this skill. It means you’re my teacher and I’m the student. It means I commit to learning and commit myself to you. It’s the way of the Wolf.”

“But why me?”

“You saved my life. The least I could do is appreciate your skill and be a good student.”

Ah. Now I knew someone in the tribe had been talking to her. Penance. I remembered Dominick sharing how this would be worked out in the long run. This must have been quite a discussion.

“Well, I don’t want you to do it because someone is making you. That’s no fun. Do you want to do it? That’s the most important question.”

She took a breath and let it out slowly. “Yes. Very much. And having a woman teach me would make it easier. Most men don’t have the patience.”

“Oh, you think I’m patient?”

She looked at me so sincerely. I was afraid that somewhere down the road, I might break her heart.

Perhaps the challenge was as much mine as hers. Still, the tribe spoke. Again, how could I refuse?

“If Dakota were here now, she would be rolling on the floor.”

Rena was perplexed. “Would she not approve?”

Oh the innocence. Long had I ventured from my own brush with knowledge when I walked into the bookstore. Time to start repaying my debt.

“No,” I said with a measured amount of dignity. “She would just be beside herself. Laughing. Me, patient. That’s a good one.”

Rena looked confused. I tried my best to reassure her.

“Sorry, Rena. Inside joke. Yes, of course, I will be happy to teach you, and I will try to be patient.”

So this was penance, I thought. Make the penitent learn from the offended. Make the offended work with the penitent. Both must learn to work together. A two-way street. Everything benefitting the tribe. Smart. Dominick smart. Wolf smart.

“Well,” I said as I eased out a gentle breath, “it looks like we have a lot of work to do. I’m fixing up a bow even as we speak. I could make one for you, too. Then we can start training in the spring.”

For the first time, she relaxed.

I imagined Dakota behind her, her pupil now the teacher. The so-called patient one. I knew she was proud in her own unique, rascally way. In that sense, we were both so similar, except she was patient. I would have to pick up her skill over the winter. I would have to picture

Dakota as my instructor. I tried to imagine what that would feel like. I came up blank.

“You’ll do well,” I said, adding that typical last word of Dakota encouragement. I knew she was in my corner giving instructions and that the circle had closed.

—

And so, the winter flew by. I was busy: teaching students to read, preparing for bow and arrow lessons, attending tribe meetings. So much for quiet time in my room.

There was also the attention of Dominick and Hopper. In all this bustle, when did I have time for love?

I tried to avoid casual conversations and stick to business. Hopper was the most persistent in finding ways to talk to me. Casually, but deliberately. I felt like my life was on display when he was around, everyone watching to see what I would do. His parents, Gastof and Bri, were especially courteous to me.

I did talk to other women about dealing with men. Their husbands, their sons, what the tribe expected. Slowly a picture formed in my mind of typical womanhood, motherhood, wifeness, and I wondered exactly how I fit in that picture. I could see it in other people, how natural it came. It was more difficult seeing it in myself.

Because of my work with Rena, I grew close to her mother, Willow. We had long talks in private. Sometimes she would come to my room and we would sort through

my feelings. She was a kind woman. If anyone was patient with people, it was her. I hoped that by spending time together, some of her good nature would rub off on me. I hoped also that she might talk to Gastof and Bri and thereby relieve some of the pressure coming from Hopper.

On the other hand, Dominick was smart enough to keep his distance. He was not going to pressure me, and he knew that I would not pressure him. If we had anything as a connection, it was our willingness to see each other from a distance.

Even our casual conversations were short, though occasionally we would sit by the main cave entrance and watch the snow fall at night, sometimes after everyone else had gone to sleep and the cave had darkened. We never talked about anything personal. We just sat and stared into the dark. The snowfall fed our need for stillness.

We were alike in our desire for peace and quiet, and I learned that solitude could be shared, if the other person chose to respect the silence. Together. If that makes any sense.

—

Spring arrived and we were all busy outside preparing to build a new village and claim our stake to the far edge of the western slopes.

I thought I had found a home and a place to live out my days. I thought I had found family and

companionship. I thought these mountains would serve me well as a place to feed my soul. I never realized how quickly all that could change.

The plans we made over the winter went better than expected. A river was nearby, and its cold waters proved an excellent resource. There were plenty of trees to use as poles for our village shelter.

There was a buzz among the tribe members, who were thankful to be outdoors hunting, scouting, and generally making progress on a new Wolf home.

Spring was now in full bloom, the snows gone, the trees and landscape in full formal dress. The village took shape in a nearby clearing. Square structures lashed together; the robes used as coverings. Each family had their own place. I was given a smaller one, but I was happy with it. It was near the trees. I could hear the birds and the music of the river nearby.

By now, the reading lessons had taken root and many of the children, plus Rena, were moving rapidly through their lessons. Some were already taking books back with them to read. Simple books, books appropriate for children.

On the other hand, Rena was able to handle more advanced writings. She particularly enjoyed books like *The Call of the Wild* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. She was smart and determined. She reminded me of myself not that long ago. And now that we were able to begin lessons with the bow and arrow, it turned out that she was a quick learner, skillful with her hands, and with a sharp eye for a target.

All this probably accounted for our lack of vigilance when it came to the Purveyors. Nobody expected them to care about anything this far west. As for me, after all the trouble I had caused, surely they would not be interested in pursuing me. With all their losses, they would have to have a darn good reason to keep up the hunt.

They did. As I learned, Henry Highsmith was determined to retrieve his granddaughter for reasons I couldn't have discerned. Who could blame us for not knowing this? None of us had ever met Highsmith, and most of us only had limited contact with his army. They were faceless enemies to be avoided, fought against, and generally cast off as intrusive soldiers.

On these issues, we were wrong and understandably overconfident in our location and our skills. I say all this with the benefit of hindsight. No one in the Wolf Tribe was to blame. It was simply a lack of knowledge. Even Wolves have their blind spots, and so did I.

A Tribe Split

After all the spring and summer activity, the disaster fell on us like a landslide. Out of nowhere, an army of Purveyors raided the village.

Rena and I saw them while we were out practicing on our targets. She had no idea who they were, but I recognized the black uniforms and the insignias. They were on foot and in vehicles. They were well-armed. Planes flew overhead. They were everywhere like a plague of flies.

From over the clearing where our homes were built, the thrum of helicopters cut the sky. Blades spinning over a round body with a long tail. The black Purveyor logo painted clearly on the front and side. They fell straight from the air and dropped in the middle of our village.

And so, the siege began. Shots fired. Other weapons. I heard people yell, some screaming in pain. Women crying. Military voices barking commands.

“What’s happening?” Rena shouted over all the commotion.

“We’re being attacked,” I shouted back. Pulling at her, I ordered. “To the cave. Run!”

Instead, I saw her grab a bow and arrow.

“Rena!” I insisted. “Run!”

She did not. She took the bow and arrow I had made for her and without hesitation, stood in front of an approaching army, took aim, and shot. One man fell to the ground with an arrow in his chest. Another soldier pulled down his rifle and fired, missing both of us by a fraction of an inch.

I yanked at Rena. “Run!” I said. “You can’t win this battle. Back to the cave!”

We both took off at top speed.

As we neared the cave, I saw people lying dead on the ground. Wolves. Men and women. Even children. The Purveyors were showing no mercy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hopper sprint toward me; he, too, headed for the cave with soldiers hot on his heels.

Hopper hustled through the smoke. As he reached us, I saw him jerk up and arch his back. He fell next to us, his eyes still open. I knew he was dead.

A split second. That’s all it took for him to go from breathing to dying. I screamed, but I knew we only had seconds to run for safety.

This time it was Rena who grabbed me and we dashed toward the cave. We went from daylight to darkness as quick as a snap of our fingers.

The helicopters were now on the ground surrounded by soldiers.

The first question that crossed my mind: Where was Dominick? I asked a few people who were hiding in the

darkness. They all shrugged their shoulders. And then that moment forever seared into my memory.

The shooting stopped. The smoke cleared.

A group of soldiers carried someone on their shoulders. As I adjusted to the contrast between the cave and the daylight, I recognized the body. It was Dominick.

Marching through the village, another band of soldiers followed behind and torched our dwellings, making sure that nothing was left of our new home. No leader. No buildings. No place for Wolves to settle.

As the soldiers approached the cave, they stopped and dropped Dominick to the ground. He lay sprawled in an unnatural position, an animal who had been cut down and left to rot in his dead space.

Then I saw what appeared to be a procession leaving the helicopters: an older man with what I assumed was his wife, a tall sandy haired woman and her escort, a stout man with dark hair and an official uniform. Was this . . . ?

The party stopped about ten yards or so in front of me. I did not reveal myself, nor did anyone from the tribe hidden in the cave.

The pain in my chest was like hot oil on my body. My rage was boiling in ways I had never thought possible. If Mother's powers were intact, there was no doubt I would call on her. But even deeper in my soul was the unbearable loss and confusion over the destruction of my Wolf family and the possible exposure to my real family. I emerged from the cave entrance and took a few steps forward.

The older man spotted me. "Ah, there you are," he said, as if nothing was wrong with the scenery around me. Did he recognize me? He certainly treated me like I was familiar to him.

"And who are you?" I demanded.

He stood stunned for a moment. "You don't know?"

"Not a clue," I said, a bald-faced lie.

"My dear," said his nameless wife. "This is Henry Highsmith, High Priest of the Order, commander of these soldiers. I assume you've at least heard of him."

"Every once in a while, but not enough for it to matter much."

Nameless wife appeared startled.

"Oh, well," Highsmith huffed. "I'm sure we'll be getting very well acquainted."

"I think you assume wrong."

He mirrored his wife's bewilderment. Perhaps such high authority was not used to such plain talk from one of his subjects, even if that subject was his granddaughter.

He started over. "Are you not Laura Becker? Because if I'm mistaken, and you are just some smart-mouthed wolf girl, I'm afraid it will not go well for you."

"I am Laura Becker, of the Tribe of Wolf, and you should be aware that with all you've done today to my friends and family, it may not go well for you."

His arrogant grin warned me that he was amused by it all. Perhaps he thought of me as an untamed horse in need of training. Perhaps he thought of me as a mouthy granddaughter who hadn't yet learned to behave in a

royal fashion. What I thought of him, well, that also could not be spoken out loud. At least not yet.

“Come, come, child,” nameless wife urged. “Enough of this. You may not be aware, but your parents have arrived to take you home. Come, now. You must meet your family.”

She motioned for the other couple to step forward.

“May I present to you your mother, Rebecca Becker, and your father, Howard Becker. They have come a great distance to meet you.”

I stared them down as they approached me. My father dressed officially in the manner of the Order. My mother beautiful in her royal gowns. When I saw her face, I knew she was my mother. But even all this royalty could not hold back my anger.

“Stop right there,” I commanded. They froze in their tracks. “How far you’ve come is not my concern. What you’ve done to the Wolves, that is what I care about, and you, claiming to be my family, should know that my real family is lying dead all around you. That is my biggest concern.”

The high priest frowned. He could tolerate some frivolity, but my behavior was insolent, and how much he would allow was an open question.

“Laura,” my mother said. It had been forever since I had heard her say my name. I recognized her voice, even after all these years. Something in me began to break.

“Mother,” I said, my voice welling.

“Come down, dear. Please.”

For a moment, I felt my knees buckle. Something instinctive made me flinch. The call of mother to daughter. The moment of reunion.

A minute of conversation with her and I might have succumbed to her wishes. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I opened them and saw the dead around me. I saw Dominick spread-eagled and lifeless in front of me. I saw Hopper just a bit further back, also dead. Another breath and I stood my ground.

“No.”

She pulled up, her face haunted by something in her past that blew like a shadow in front of her. A daughter and yet not. A stranger, a savage, a woman of her blood, but not of her kind. Highsmith intervened.

“You are treading on dangerous ground here, my little one. If you were not my family, you would be laying here with this wolf man. Of course, I assume he was your leader. Dominick? Poor man. Not a Wolf anymore.” He pretended to give him a sympathetic glance before eyeing me. “Well, speak carefully or this could be your fate.”

My throat swelled. A tear dripped from my eye. “I could only wish,” I said, “that you had shot me through the head. I would die happy. As for you, what you have done is a crime for which I can never forgive you.”

Highsmith frowned. “You’re saying you want to live like a savage, rather than return to your family?”

“Was it the Wolves who first attacked you and killed your soldiers?”

Highsmith was taken aback. "We came to save you from these wolf beings." His tone triggered something volcanic in me. His disrespect of my real family.

"We lived peacefully, without harm to anyone," I argued. "Did I come to you, even when my half-wit uncle tried to kidnap me? Did he ever tell you how I escaped and left part of your army floating in mud?"

"I've heard some of the story."

"Did you know he died trying to bring me back to you? He died in part because I didn't want to go. Did you know that? That his sorry excuse for an army was blown off by a giant wind? Do you know where that came from?"

Highsmith remained silent.

"The powers that are my gift come from my spiritual Mother. The Mother who watches over me. With her help, I sent his army to their deaths. I sent the Bear Tribe reeling when they tried to take me. Once with lightning. Once with wind. If it's not clear by now, you should hear it from my own mouth. Nobody takes me without my permission. Not. Even. You."

"So," said my father. "You would prefer to die in this wilderness with savages? Because if that's true, I myself would kill you with my own hands."

My mother turned to her husband. "Howard!"

He roared, "Can you not see, as I told you before, she is hopeless. She is a feral cat, a wild dog, an animal." The last word he spit out with disdain.

The words from my father stung. It took me a moment to catch my breath.

"I'm none of the above," I spit back. "I'm a proud member of the Tribe of Wolf. I'm a woman of skill and intelligence. I'm a teacher. I'm dangerous when threatened. I know myself much better than you do. I help lead a proud people. We have moved west to live in peace here in these mountains. If anything, for what you have done to us, you are the savage."

"Yes. You are my daughter," my father seethed, "a child gone to seed who lives like the dogs you call yourselves. Wolves!"

I stood for a moment, drinking in his words. The confusion. The pain. His words hit home. What was I, really? I had lived on the plains for many years as an abandoned orphan. I had learned to love again with Dakota as my guide. I had gained family through the Tribe of Wolf. How could any of this be bad?

Now my anger began to trim its wick. I slowed my heartbeat. I drew down my breath.

"You should leave," I warned. "If you want to go back to your precious Aether, I will allow it, you and your thieving army. But you should leave now, before this mountain begins to come to life."

Highsmith drew back his chin in a proud stare. "You will come with us, either as a daughter or a prisoner. Your choice."

There it was again. Choice. All these months it had come down to a series of choices about my life. One after the other, they had piled up and brought me to this. This one choice. To stay or go. To fight or surrender. So many of my choices had been difficult and bewildering. But not

this one. All my choices had led me here, and this choice I knew was the right one. For all the people who had suffered and died to help me become part of a bigger family.

“I choose to stay,” I declared.

From behind me, someone, perhaps Rena, put a bow and arrow in my hand. It fit like a glove. The army was surprised at my swift stance and my quick shot.

Highsmith never saw it coming. Never guessed how soon he would transform from High Priest to Dead Priest. Never saw the arrow fly from its bow string and strike him straight through the heart. He dropped like a stone.

“And this, too, is my choice,” I proclaimed.

My mother and father froze. Highsmith’s wife looked stricken. Her hands covered her face and she squealed in agony.

The army stood stunned. The air whistled through the trees in memoriam. The whole of the village grew deathly somber.

From somewhere deep in the mountain came the rumble, and a panic that set in among the Purveyors, who turned and fled.

Stones shot from the sky. The Earth roared to life. Trees flew down the side like spears. Nameless wife was buried in rubble.

As the quake began, I saw my parents flee toward the helicopter. Within moments, they had jumped inside. It sprang to life, rose on the wind and hurled itself east, back I assumed to Aether. The Order would now be

looking for a new high priest. Hopefully they would stay occupied long enough to allow us to escape.

The rest of the Purveyors fled as best they could, but most were caught in the chaos of the mountain's anger. They were crushed and buried under tons of rock and dirt. They vanished as quickly as they appeared. Those of us standing in the cave thought for certain our end had also come, but the opening held and the sides of the walls did not budge. Within this cave, the Wolf Tribe was safe.

As the roar ebbed down and the ground settled, what had once been our peaceful home was covered in rocks, earth, trees, and other types of debris. It was no longer a Wolf village. It was a graveyard for Wolves and Purveyors – and one unexalted high priest.

Rena came up to hold my hand.

The word came to me, slowly but deliberately. "Home," I said. How often I had murmured this with Dominick's support. Now I said it in loss, as if what lay in front of me was the large jumble of my life come to taunt me. For me, there was no home. Not anymore. No parents. No family. No village. Just death and destruction.

None of us could think of anything else to say. Life, death, chaos, battle, had left us speechless. The Wolves would have to regroup.

As for home, that would be a memory from which we would have to recover. I wondered, for myself, if I would ever say that word again.

In the aftermath, all of us had to come together to decide what was next. I was certain of one thing. Howard Becker would return for revenge. I was willing to bet that by now there was a large price on my head and an army being organized to retrieve me. This time there would be no happy invitation to join them as family. More than likely, he was planning to hang a noose around my neck.

The remainder of the Wolves were uncertain. Their leaders had been murdered and what men and women remained did not feel safe staying in this spot. Like me, they suspected that the Purveyors would strike again. The Wolves would have to decide where else to go. Go back to their home tribe, a long and difficult journey east, or a trek further west, across the border and into unfamiliar territory.

But first there was the dead to tend to. Dominick, Hopper, and the rest of the village who had been shot and murdered. We worked day and night to dig them out and retrieve their bodies. It was backbreaking and often discouraging, but we would not allow a single Wolf to go untended. This was our way.

After the retrieval, we gathered to give them funerals and send them off to the stars.

For Dominick, we pieced together a ritual that would honor him as our leader. As the flames gathered under his body, I wanted to jump in the fire and follow him. I wanted to run with him among the clouds and stars. But I had to show courage, as did those of us who were left.

The grief of the tribe had to be absorbed and people comforted. We all had to regain our strength and find

faith in the future. Still, I spent a good deal of time in the woods, and this time nobody followed me. I was left to sort out my own feelings as best I could.

And always in the background, the looming threat of the Purveyors. Our time was limited. Grief had to quickly give way to making our exit. Necessity pushed grief aside and forced us to consider the question: What comes next?

That question, above everything else, was always in our thoughts. The past is the past. Grief is grief. But survival. Nothing was more important than survival. Survival was our best form of revenge.

—

After long discussions around the cave fire, there was still much indecision. But everyone knew the Purveyors would soon be returning. It was now late summer and time still allowed the tribe to move. If they waited much longer, that precious time would run out.

One major question: Who would lead the group?

To my surprise, some dared suggest me, and perhaps I might have considered it, except for one factor: Gastof.

In a meeting around the fire, it became clear that he blamed me for the death of Dominick and Hopper.

“You are cursed,” he said openly to the tribe, “and everything that we have is gone because of you. Our village. Dominick. Our son, Hopper . . .” His voice broke from sorrow.

Bilban rebuked him. "You can't possibly think that she is responsible for these soldiers. They have been hunting us since long before we knew her."

"But she is their family," he ranted, "not ours. She is the reason they have come this far, and if she stays, they will return and kill all of us."

Everyone turned to me for a response.

I knew the truth and told them. "Yes. I'm cursed."

A groan went up among the tribe.

"My son loved you," said Gastof, "and you treated him like a pet. He gave his life for you, and what do you offer? Are you sorry? Do you mourn him? Does your love for him leave you lost? No. He's just another casualty of your dark spirit."

"Gastof!" said Bri. "You speak from grief, and that has nothing to do with her."

She gave me a kind look. "Do not listen to him. Hopper was not your responsibility and his death is not your fault."

"His death has everything to do with her," he warned. "She should not lead us, she should not stay, she should not even be living. We should throw her on a fire and let her die just like Hopper and Dominick. That is my opinion."

The other tribe members remained undecided. Our leaders had disappeared. There was no one else to guide the discussion. The tribe was lost without direction and suffering from that loss. No one defended me. No one defended Gastof. Instead, our darkness only deepened. I left the group and went to my room.

Gastof's words haunted me. I knew he was right about one thing. I had a target on my back. If I stayed, the Wolf Tribe would also be square in that target. I simply could not put them at risk. Not anymore. Not after all the Purveyors had done to us, and most of that on my account. A small group like this could move quickly and maintain a low profile. With me added, their chances of being exposed doubled, maybe tripled.

I decided Gastof was right. They had to move on without me, move further west, perhaps into territory that the Order dared not invade, or could not because of the mountain range behind us. Maybe there was such a thing as too far for the Purveyors. At any rate, the tribe had to start over. Without me.

—

Within the next few days, Bilban was chosen as their leader. A good choice, I thought. He was a wise man and his wife Willow would be of immense strength to the women. They would bring the Wolves together again and work at finding a crossing into the mountains, over the mountains, down the other side. Perhaps they might find another spot where they could live at peace beyond the reach of the Order.

On the other hand, as if by fate or perhaps by the will of Mother herself, my path was chosen for me. As I eased out of my room one morning and caught the sunlight at the cave entrance, who should I see standing in the debris outside the cave but the white buffalo.

“Well, hello,” I said, as if the animal could understand my voice. He was so mysterious, I had no doubt that he just might.

The animal huffed and chewed on some grass that had grown between the cracks of the rocks. Rena came out and saw him as well.

“Whoa, look who’s back!” she exclaimed. “Last time I saw him, we were trying to escape trouble. Do you think he smells us when we need him?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Trouble and the buffalo seem to follow me pretty close.”

That night, I went to Bilban and Willow to tell them I was leaving. My hope was to sneak out of camp without any notice. I would simply disappear into the forest.

“You are brave,” said Willow. “I only wish we could be your home.”

“I don’t think that’s my destiny,” I said. “If it weren’t for your kindness, I might agree with Gastof and call myself cursed.”

“I would call it fate,” said Bilban. “You are called to help people. You helped Dakota. You helped us. Now you can continue that journey.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but the truth was spoken and I had to learn to live with it. Bilban called it fate. I had a few other choice words, but none of that mattered now. I had another choice to make. If Dominick was here, he would certainly push me to stay. Now my one choice led to other options, and they were not with the Tribe of Wolf. Worst of all, none of those options

would lead to him. For me, that was the dark spot in my soul.

The white buffalo. Mother. These were my choices, and tomorrow they would lead me somewhere else. To another door. Another bookstore. But not Dominick. That choice had disappeared into the smoke. As I sat alone by the cave door, I found myself reaching out for his hand and grasping empty air.

—

Rena came into my cave late at night after the rest of the group had gone to sleep. This time I was working on nothing except counting holes in the ceiling. There was no sleep for me tonight. She was welcome company. She sat in the darkness, her breath rhythmic and even. I sat on the edge of my bed and listened.

“I’m coming with you,” she declared.

“No!” I said. “What about your sister, your mom and dad?”

“I’ve already told them and they agreed. Traveling alone is not good. A friend is needed to help you find your way.”

“Hmm. Not such a good idea. As Gastof so helpfully pointed out, my friends don’t always fare so well. Most of them are dead. I would think you’d want something better to look forward to.”

She stayed still for a moment. I imagined I could hear the workings of her thoughts echoing off the cave walls.

“Death stalks us all,” she asserted. “I lost friends, too, in that battle. Dominick, Hopper, even little Rony.”

“Yes,” I said simply. I tried to imagine her grief as well. The whole tribe had suffered loss. Who was I to think mine was any different from theirs?

“It’s hard to imagine you leaving your family,” I said.

“You’re parting from us,” she said. “We’re your family. If I come with you, then we remain family.”

Point taken. She had won this round of debate. I didn’t carry on.

“I’m going with you,” she said again. “And somewhere down the road, you’ll thank me.”

“How about I thank you now?”

“Then you’re glad to have me?”

“More than glad. Lucky, if you want to know the truth. I’ve got no one else to talk to except that old buffalo, and all he does is grunt.”

She slid over to where I sat and squeezed my hand. Her arms slipped over my shoulders and held me close. It was a moment so tender, I wondered if this was as close to love as I would ever get.

Who would have guessed that she would be the one to ride with me on the white buffalo? She who ran away and hid in the cave, scorned me over Dominick, tried to sow seeds of discord. We would be sealed by a common journey that only this large beast knew about. We would sit on top and let him carry us in any direction he chose. We would surrender to him our freedom, and in return, he would be our guide and protection. Our independence would be bolstered by his dependability.

It wasn't long before I fell sound asleep. Rena slept with me. In that moment of peace and bonding, we were sisters.

—

Who can tell why things happen the way they do? My life, for instance. A conundrum of wealth, poverty, magic, and now this: traveling again to somewhere unknown, this time with Rena at my back.

Another long journey perhaps. But this time, the white buffalo would be there, and Rena, and Mother, and somewhere in the distance, in spirit and presence, Dakota, smiling and chuckling. I could hear her voice teasing me: You can't have him forever. He's only borrowed.

Borrowed, yes, because someone knew I needed him. And I knew. If we were traveling where he led us and we had much to journey through, when it was all said and done, when Rena and I settled down in our new home together, I had no doubt she would let me keep him.

III.

Solitary

I had never seen such darkness. The absolute absence of light. Even my eyes, adjusted to my cave, or cell, or whatever I was locked in, could not distinguish anything. This was black the way you have nightmares in your dreams, without any trace of illumination, without any hope.

I had been here a while. Time passing in large pieces. Nothing in order. Nothing that resembled the moving of a clock. Nothing that would give me a sense of whether it was day or night. Just long segments with occasional noise, a plate slid through a slot for meals, and the pain of waiting for nothing to happen.

At various times, the space in which I was entombed would suddenly spray water from all angles. It was inescapable, especially in the dark, and cold as a mountain stream. I was naked and felt every pellet sting me with its blast. Sometimes it would fill my mouth until I was sure I would drown. My only protection was to force my head down and curl into a fetal position. When the water stopped, I would sit and shiver. Then the cell would drain. The damp air would return with its smell of

garbage and human waste, and I would wait for it to go off again. That, to me, was the passing of time.

From the food delivery, I could surmise there was a door and people moving past it. I was a prisoner of someone. I could even hear occasional weeping and shouts. But the darkness was so complete, it disoriented my sense of thought and logic. It was not just the physical lack of light, but light within my own thoughts. Worst of all, I had no memory of how I'd come here. One day, night, afternoon, I woke and here I'd been ever since.

My mind would occasionally drift to Rena, the white buffalo, Dakota. They were like ghosts drifting through my skull. I could recall their names, even their faces, but the moment of departure, the moment when I sailed from there to here? That connection was gone. It was as if a fuse had blown in my head. The moment of my departure from point A to point B had been stripped away and wiped clean.

And so I lay on my back on a hard surface—maybe rock, maybe something else—and looked at what I assumed was the ceiling. Timeless. Placeless. Lightless. A tomb, though I was still breathing. The food would keep me alive. The foul air I could breathe. But I assumed that this kind of existence was death, the kind where you were stranded in the unknown, woke up alone, and had no clue if it would ever change. All I could do was wait in the dark, make prayerful pleas to Mother, and keep my legs and arms from throwing me against the walls. And wait. For. Something. Wait.

—

I had a visitor.

I knew something was up because there was a loud clap, as if metal had fallen, and a voice. Young, but clear in its pronunciation. The sound of someone educated and self-assured. The voice of a young woman.

“You are Laura Becker,” she declared. The metrics of talking surprised me. Vibrations hit me in the face. Words filled my ears with thunder.

It had been days, even weeks, since I’d had a conversation. My throat ached. My head was dizzy.

“Yes,” I rasped and coughed from exhaustion.

There was a long pause. My desperation grew keen. I wanted her words like a someone lost in the desert and desperate for water.

She finally spoke. “I was told you shot Henry Highsmith . . . with an arrow.” Her tone was accusing and unforgiving.

I was taken aback. Was I on trial? Was this the Order’s way of coercing a confession? Catch me off guard and throw the truth bluntly in my face?

Then I remembered the event and realized what I had done in front of everyone in Highsmith’s party. All of it public. There was not much use in lying. Perhaps the news had spread across the city. What she knew, everyone knew.

“Yes,” I said. “I shot Henry Highsmith . . . with an arrow.”

“You don’t deny your sin?” the girl said like a judge overseeing my case. Her tone went a little higher, startled perhaps by my directness.

“There’s no need to deny it,” I said weakly. “I did it in front of my own parents, and their company of soldiers, and members of the Tribe of Wolf. Everyone who was there can testify against me.”

The wait was pregnant. The truth was startling for everyone who had seen it, and for the two people talking at this moment. That it was stated so matter of fact made it truth and reaffirmed the charge. Murder.

I remembered Dakota and her conversation with me about the Wild Ones. “We . . . do . . . not . . . murder.” Her ghostly voice floated through my head.

But I had. Even since our conversation. Beyond what Mother had brought down, beyond even the battles with the Purveyors. I had made a deliberate decision. Not in self-defense. Rather, out of rage and grief.

In this case, I murdered Henry Highsmith, my own grandfather. Deliberately and with malice. In revenge for the death of Hopper and Dominick and all my Wolf kin. Plus Harrieta and Horner and Leon. An endless list of lost friends. Yes, I had taken justice into my own hands. I had tossed the code aside because I believed Highsmith had to die.

The girl’s voice came back, a little quieter. “Why? Why shoot him?”

Of course, how could I explain the whole story in one easy sentence. And was there really a good answer to this question? Ever?

“He attacked our tribe,” I said simply. “His army killed my friends, Hopper and Dominick. His captain hanged Harrieta and Horner. The simple truth is, in war you kill, and we were and still are . . . at war.”

Another pause. I didn’t blame her for thinking about it. No more dancing around. Death, murder, revenge, it’s a lot to think about, and whatever justification you can piece together in your head, the guilt can never be explained away. I was Laura Becker, the killer of the head of The Order. I would forever wear that title and she would forever be the first to hear my confession.

She had leveled an accusation, and who could deny it?

“You could have come home,” she said. “You were invited to be with your family.”

I knew then that she was closely connected to the Highsmiths. She knew the whole story, at least from their side. She knew part of my story. She was part of this drama.

“Are you . . . my sister?” I said.

The voice wavered. “I . . . am . . . Breta.”

I fought back a sob. Here in this cell, I realized that I had finally come home. I was probably somewhere in the bowels of Aether, and she had come to find me, to hear me tell about her grandfather.

Now I understood what lay behind Dakota’s code. Once crossed, the consequences could drive nails in your heart. Here was Breta with Dakota’s hammer to pierce me and secure the sharp ends of my story.

The silence continued.

I uttered the words that I never thought I would say and that now, considering the evil I had done, rung hollow.

“I’m sorry.”

And back she came to me with the harsh truth. “You are not.”

This was true. I was not. I was sorry I had been confronted. Sorry I might have to pay a price for my actions. Sorry to be here in this prison. But the fact that my friends had died under Henry Highsmith’s command didn’t allow me to feel true sorrow. Guilt. Anger. Hatred. Even happiness. No sorrow.

The metal I heard earlier clanged again. It echoed briefly in the room and disappeared, as did she, and my fragile connection to someone human.

I heard Dakota's voice again. This time declaring the absolute truth of her code: We do not murder.

But I had, and that, I realized, would never change. Ever.

—

In one of my dreams, I saw images. Rena. The white buffalo. The green plains and the mountains that we skirted. I saw sunshine and small rivers. I saw flowers and trees, and small insects buzzing through them. I saw the far west mountains in the distance, black and jagged. It was as if I were back on the white buffalo moving through the hills.

Then I saw the shadow of something ominous. Its outline fell over all of us. Something large, flying. Not a bird. Much too big to be a bird. I heard myself wonder. What is that? I looked up but my eyes never reached the sky. The shadow turned black and I was terrified.

I woke up in a sweat, panting and holding my chest, as if someone had just tried to pull out my heart.

"Dakota!" I cried in terror. My voice fell flat against my prison walls.

Then the sting of water penetrated and instinctively I curled up. Compared to my nightmare, the cold, wet spray was a blessing.

—

A voice. A whisper. A name. My name.

“Laura.”

I sat up and listened. Probably my imagination. Being locked away in the dark will do that. Make you believe in things that aren't there. Make you wonder if your life has become a living nightmare. I heard something click and squeak. If I didn't know better, I might swear it was the sound of a door opening.

Again the whisper. “Laura.”

This time I believed the voice.

“Who's there?” I murmured suspiciously.

“Come,” the voice invited.

I was not buying it. What trick was I hearing? What mind game was being played on me?

My shoulder felt the touch of a hand. Someone pulling me.

I jerked away in panic. “Who are you?” I said loud and harsh.

“Shhhh,” the voice cautioned.

It was a standoff. I knew a presence stood next to me. For all I knew, it was a ghost or a demon. It could not possibly be human.

“Come,” the voice pleaded.

“Who are you?” I protested.

“Help,” the voice responded. “I've come to get you, but we have to go . . . now. It may already be too late, but we have to try.”

My mind registered numbness, weariness. Most of all, desperation. Even if I were dreaming, could I not take a chance and have a good dream? One where I threw off the darkness? What was holding me back? Nothing but

my own fear. Still, that's what my life had become. Darkness and fear. It was like being at the bottom of a river holding my breath. I couldn't swim up and break the waters.

"Come," said the voice, a little more urgently.
"Please."

When my hand was grasped, I did not resist, but my legs refused to cooperate. A pair of strong hands picked me up and carried me. They allowed me to follow the flow of the dream. Across the floor. Out the door. Into a hallway. All this was a guess, since I could see nothing. But I could picture it in my mind: the idea that I could leave this place and be free. Such a pleasant thought.

A noise, loud and jarring. My head pierced with the sound of a million insects.

"Ahhhhhh," I screamed. "Make it stop."

The hands held on. There was the drum of feet beating the floor. I went limp and curled myself like a child submitting to her father.

Red lights flashed up and down the hallway, throwing thin beams against the walls. The beams exposed us, pulsed through our bones, and screeched down the hallway searching for anyone out of their cage. Now it dawned on me. This was no dream. We were trying to escape.

"Put me down," I wailed. "Let me run."

But the hands held me and kept hurdling through the lights.

It was hopeless. If someone watched us, as surely they must be, where would we go? If every flash of light, every

harsh warning meant another soldier or a guard hurrying down the hall, we were outnumbered and hemmed inside. No one could possibly make it out with this much light and noise.

The consequence. If they caught me, what would they do to a girl who tried to escape? Less food? More cold showers? Perhaps a box or coffin where I would simply be left to die?

Suddenly, I was falling. I knew because of the wind in my hair and my stomach in my throat. We plunged into water. A river. A cold river. Real water and this time, a real chance to come up for air. My instincts served me well and I swam for the surface. Not as deep as I imagined. I could touch bottom. I gasped and choked as I broke through and flailed in the icy current. The water moved rapidly, but the shorelines were narrow. Someone reached down and pulled me out. I sat on wet sand and gasped for air.

When I looked up, I was surrounded by people. They urged me to follow them but my legs simply would not work.

“I can carry her.” The familiar voice in my cell. A man’s voice. “She’s too weak to walk.”

His familiar hands picked me up again and the group hurried down the shore into something I never thought I would see—daylight. But only briefly. We turned, disappeared into a tunnel, and once again plunged into darkness.

For what seemed like hours, we followed one tunnel after another, burrowing deeper into the ground and farther away from my tomb, the alarms, the river.

"Where are we?" I said.

"Beyond the city," my rescuer replied.

I could make out his face now. A tall man, muscular, long dark hair. Young. Most surprising, he was the spitting image of Dominick.

"Dominick?" I said hesitantly.

"No, not Dominick."

My hope was crushed.

"I'm his twin brother, Salvador."

I shot him a surprised glance and my eyes must have been large. He chuckled.

"Don't worry. We're very different. You won't get us confused."

"No more than I already am," I gasped.

"All will be explained, in good time," he said, his eyes focused on the tunnel.

I took him at his word.

Salvador spoke thoughtfully. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just woke up from a month's worth of naps," I said.

"That sounds like a good thing."

"I could use a bath. Something warm. Not a river."

"And probably something to eat."

"And some sunlight."

"All that is possible now that we've gotten you out."

"Where was I?"

"We call it the Dead Zone."

I let the words sink in. The Dead Zone. As the name implied, probably a place to simply lay down and die.

“It’s where they manufacture the Wild Ones.”

I wasn’t sure I heard correctly. “Manufacture? You mean like a factory?”

“Yes. They turn people into Wild Ones.”

Again, he read my face.

“Later,” he assured me.

At that moment, we emerged into daylight. The sun on my face warmed me. It also revealed that I was naked, starved, and dirty. I saw Salvador, truly the twin of Dominick. Darker haired, but the same long girth.

I saw woodlands around me and heard birds singing. Lovely music. Lovely freedom. Lovely, warm nakedness.

“Not far now,” he said.

Not far to where? Maybe heaven, and for me, this was as close to heaven as I could picture myself. Dare I utter the words again?

“Home,” I said.

“For the moment.”

For the moment. Maybe longer than a moment. For as long as they would have me. Home would be wherever Salvador the beautiful twin brother of Dominick landed.

Wolf Tribe East

In a small clearing, I sat with a group which included Salvador. They covered me, fed me, and led me down to a small creek to wash myself. They gave me new clothes and tended my sores. Now we all watched each other around a small fire, sizing each other up in the dark shadows and glint of flames. Our faces glowed with questions.

I was introduced to Salvador's parents, Fleet and Endra. Fleet was the chief of the eastern branch of the Tribe of Wolf.

I saw the resemblance of Salvador and Dominick to their parents. Fleet being tall and lean like his sons, a man with deep set blue eyes and graying hair. Endra, a smaller woman, more delicate, but with Dominick's gentility and a face full of compassion. Her dark eyes, much like Salvador's, were offset by gracefulness and intelligence.

I tried to start a conversation, but it was painful. Memories flooded my head, images of other tribe members in the west. Dominick. Hopper. Dead.

What had happened to the rest of the tribe? Of course, there was his son Dominick. How could I bring up that subject? Fleet spared me the trouble.

“The tribe in the west is doing well,” he said, as if reading my mind. “Bilban and Willow send their greetings.”

I watched him curiously. “Did they establish a new camp?”

“They did indeed, further north and deeper into the foothills, and so far, no soldiers have returned. Everything remains peaceful.”

“I’m so glad.”

“The same cannot be told of us,” he said. “The Purveyors are determined to kill us all.”

My chest tightened.

“They have captured many of our tribe,” he continued, “and our camps are always being attacked.”

I sat pensive, mostly out of shame and guilt. After all, this was my family who was responsible for this destruction.

“Your father seems more determined than ever to make the Wolf Tribe pay for the death of their High Priest.”

Heads nodded around the fire.

“Why?” I said hesitantly.

“Because you killed Henry Highsmith, and because, in our eyes, and theirs, you are Wolf. You are guilty. We are guilty.”

His words sunk in. I had indeed changed sides. Dominick and the western tribe had assured me of who I

was, and I accepted that as truth. Now I had to accept the consequences.

“And we still haven’t located Rena,” he stated. “We think she remains in the same prison as you. If indeed she hasn’t already been turned.”

“Turned?” I said.

“The Dead Zone. Where they turn humans into Wild Ones. That would have been your fate had we not found you.”

The Wild Ones again. I grew more interested in how they fit into this picture.

Fleet seemed lost in thought. “The city is in turmoil right now.”

I could almost guess what was coming next.

“Your father is seeking to be the new high priest, but there is trouble among the residents. Some would prefer he not be chosen.”

The fire crackled as small embers rose in the air and scattered like a flock of insects. The embers crisp pop seemed to enchant us all as we sat mesmerized by the light.

Fleet spoke again. “Some would prefer your mother.”

“My mother?” My voice broke the air and surprised some of the tribe. “Why would my mother want to be a priest?”

“That is a good question,” he said and fell silent. As did all of us.

Of course, if you considered family bloodlines, Rebecca Becker was the true daughter of Henry Highsmith, which technically made her the direct

successor in line to the priesthood. But it didn't help with my question. Did she really want to be high priest? Would they even let a woman hold such a high position? Apparently, some supported this idea.

I wondered how he managed to stay so well informed. "How do you know all this?"

"We have friends in the city," he revealed. "The same friends who, like our tribe members, often get captured and sent away to be Wild Ones."

Now my head truly ached. The connection of the tribe to the Wild Ones was starting to make sense, and now I understood why Dominick seemed to hold their attention. They were not just animals to be killed. They had been friends, family members, tribe members.

"They are cruelly treated," said Fleet. "Sent into darkness, given something in their food, driven mad. Worst of all, they are not given any sort of reason for their imprisonment. They are pulled off the street, thrown into this darkness, and transformed."

What could I say? Perhaps Dakota knew this as well and had simply chosen not to tell me the whole story. Perhaps she believed that I first needed to learn her code for the sake of the code itself. Lord knows, when she met me, I was little better than a Wild One. But all along, she had reasons for her belief. She knew the full story.

"But some have survived," Fleet added. "Some have been rescued . . . by the Tribe of Wolf."

The silence grew more intense. All of us now leaned into the fire, some with their hands next to their faces.

“As we rescued you,” he said, “and we continue to rescue others. Perhaps that is why the Order wants to end our existence.”

Something about Fleet’s words seemed to bring the tribe back to attention. Now all eyes turned to me.

Fleet spoke again. “You, I am told, have special powers.”

“Me?”

“Yes, the stories have been spread throughout our tribe. Some by Dominick, others by those who have spoken with the western tribe members, as word regularly circulates now between us. ‘Search for the girl,’ some have said. ‘She knows how to call down fire and wind.’”

The tribe waited for my response. Now I had their full attention.

“Oh, you mean Mother.”

Fleet also leaned in.

“I wouldn’t say it’s my power,” I said. “It’s a power that helps me when I need it, when I call for it. Dakota and I simply call the power Mother.”

“Would it help us?” Fleet asked.

“Well,” I said and hesitated. “It already has.”

“So we have heard.”

“Of course, if the power of Mother chooses, she can help all of us.”

“And would she choose to help us . . . again?”

His question caught me off guard. How could I know the answer to something so unknowable, and where was she now? She certainly hadn’t helped me in the Dead

Zone. Which led me to another line of thinking: Why was that? Had I done something to offend her? Did the fact that I killed Henry Highsmith affect my status with her? For all I knew, she might have abandoned me to my own willfulness and stupidity.

To the tribe, I said hesitantly, "I . . . don't know."

Disappointment spread across each face. I tried to clarify.

"You have to understand. You call this my power, but it's not mine, as if I owned a shoe or a dress. So far, when I've needed her, she's helped me."

"Would you be willing to call on her?" Fleet pressed.

"I can only promise to try. She does what she wants. But maybe there are other ways I can help."

He sat back, perplexed. "Such as?"

"I can try to find Rena. That is, with your help. She's like a sister to me."

Fleet was pleased with this possibility. So was Endra.

"And," I added. "If you can get me into the city, I can try to talk to my mother. The last we spoke, she wanted me to come home."

This, a point they had not considered. As a direct descendant of Henry Highsmith, maybe I could use this pull to my advantage.

"At any rate, I will help you," I promised. "As best I can. With whatever powers I have. I owe that to you . . . and to Dominick and Hopper. They called me a tribe member. I consider myself to be . . . Wolf."

The faces around the fire didn't seem so sure.

“So be it,” said Fleet, as if heading off any doubts or objections.

The tribe rose and left for their campsites. The fire died as I sat and watched the coals consume the last of the blackened wood. Maybe my life as well would end this way. Maybe not. Maybe Mother would help me. Maybe not. What did I know about the future? It had always been in front of me, that great yawning unknown of life, death, pain and pleasure. But now it had been narrowed. Now it included the Tribe of Wolf. I was not just a girl searching for food and living alone. I had been connected. To Dakota. Harrieta. Horner. Dominick. Hopper. Aurora. Rena. My present had been joined to their past and future.

As the fire died, I did not move. I simply went to sleep where I sat and remained there until morning. When I would start again. And Mother, somewhere in the distance, might hear me again. If I confessed my sin and sought forgiveness. If I lived by Dakota’s code. If I was able to be more than just the wild Laura Becker. If I could grow into a wise woman. If. If. If.

—

Dreams. Dreams. So many dreams. As I recovered from my imprisonment, they haunted me, often woke me up, always disturbed me. Strange dreams, maybe visions. I could not tell.

I was walking down a road and saw a child standing by herself. Perhaps eight or nine years old. A young girl shivering in the dark. Crying. Frightened.

As I walked up to her, I tried to speak kindly and offer some words of comfort, but a terrible noise came out of my throat. Growling like an animal. Terrified, she spotted me and started to run up the road. I chased after her, feeling misunderstood, wanting to reassure her that I was safe.

“It’s okay. I’ll help you,” I thought I said, but the rumble from my lungs only growled louder.

Then I realized. I wasn’t safe. I wasn’t going to help. I was hungry and angry. I wanted to crush the girl between my teeth. She was embarrassing me. She was tormenting me by trying to escape. She was warning people that I was dangerous. Worst of all, she wanted nothing to do with me. I was a monster.

I caught up to her, grabbed her by the arms, and held her so tight, her bones snapped. Again, she screamed and begged me to stop. I didn’t. I tore her apart and threw each limb into the brush by the side of the road. I transformed her from a child to a pile of broken, bloody parts.

Then a mirror appeared out of nowhere and flew in front of my face. I saw myself—spiked teeth, horrid face—looking like Laura, but wild-eyed and ferocious. No longer a human. A beast with a human body.

I frightened myself and began howling, alone in the dark. Like the young girl, I was hopelessly lost and knew that no one would ever love me again. This was my curse. To be a Wild One, to be left to my own devices, searching the road for my next victim. Worst of all, I understood that this was no dream. This was my real life. Laura

Becker had become what Dakota warned about: a murderous human no longer tied to any code, any family, anything that would be considered decent. I had become a Wild One.

—

When I woke, startled, I was still sitting next to the burned-out fire. A set of arms pulled me to her chest. A woman. Endra. I leaned into her and began to cry. She rocked me like a mother and held me tight.

“What’s wrong with me?” I sobbed.

Endra remained calm and reassuring.

Emptied of emotion, I collapsed backward and stared up at the soft blue sky. No sunlight yet. Just the promise of the day coming.

Endra spoke in hushed tones. “You were in the Dead Zone,” she said solemnly. “You were being turned to a Wild One.”

“Nooooo,” I protested and held my hands against my temples.

“Yes. And while this is not your fault, what they’ve done must be undone, and that, I’m afraid, will take some time.”

“How long?” I begged.

“I cannot say.”

“So what am I now?”

“Some part of you is wild. Those thoughts must be redeemed. We can help you with that.”

I wanted to push her away and hold her at the same time. "Am I still a Wild One?"

"Yes, in your deepest thoughts. Those thoughts haven't yet been transformed, but you must be patient and work through them. With us. We will help you."

I raised up and focused on what was left of the ash and coal in the fire pit. My own heart felt similar. Black. Cold. Lifeless.

"How do I do that?"

"Not to worry. We have rescued many. We have a group that will support you. They can share their stories and help you remember yours."

So, the Wolf Tribe did rescue Wild Ones. Perhaps that's why I met Dominick that night. That was at least a hopeful thought.

"I myself had been captured," she confessed. "In fact, many years ago, Fleet and the tribe pulled me off the road and gave me a new start."

I looked surprised by her statement.

"Yes," she continued. "That was before Fleet and I married. But he was part of the tribe that salvaged me."

I absorbed the shock and asked. "Do you still have nightmares?"

"Sometimes," she said. "But Fleet knows how to help me. And my friends give me strength. In turn, I help where I can. And that's why I'm here with you. To help you regain your life. Perhaps, in time, you will learn to do the same for others."

I thought of Dakota, of her code, and how she helped me.

“Dakota gave me a code,” I said. “I was not a Wild One, but I was living like one. She took me in and taught me to be, well, she gave me books to read and a home to live in.”

“She knows the truth. She knows the Wild Ones. One of them was her sister.”

My mind took in this next idea reluctantly.

“She has a sister?”

“It’s the reason she came south.”

One surprising revelation after the other.

“She nursed her back, with our help, and the help of the bookstore. Eventually she sent her home. But she stayed, that is, until she was finished helping you.”

Now I noticed how quiet the morning had become. Not a sound from anywhere. Not even a bird.

“She pulled Harrieta and Horner out of the clutches of the Wild Ones. She also helped them return to a life of love and happiness. Their lives, unfortunately, did not end well. But you know that already.”

I closed my eyes. A tragic memory.

“How did I end up in the Dead Zone?”

Endra fixed her eyes on the last star shining in the morning sky.

“The Purveyors have a special air vehicle built for capturing people. You were caught in their net and airlifted to Aether.”

“A net?”

“Yes.”

“But . . . the white buffalo? And Rena?”

"I don't know about the buffalo, but I'm guessing Rena is still in the Dead Zone. At least that's our hope. You were lucky in a sense. We were looking for Rena when we found you."

"Why can't I remember any of this?"

"They drug you to sleep after capture. Makes it hard to remember what happened."

"Do you know where Rena is?"

"Not yet." She sighed. "But we will keep looking."

"I want to help you."

"Yes. I believe you can. I believe you will. But first, your own healing."

Daylight grew. The promise of a sunrise.

"So where do I start?" I was a penitent seeking her redemption.

"Start with helping me make breakfast. I will be your close friend for the next several weeks, and we will spend time together talking or just enjoying the day. But stay near. I can help you if you have any more bad visions."

After my last nightmare, seeing a sunrise and gaining a friend seemed to break the spell of my curse. It was such a relief to know that I was not murderous. Not yet anyway. And I was not alone.

The promise of a friendship with Endra was reassuring.

Now, my one major goal. To find Rena. To give her the same support I received. And then, in some form or fashion, to find my mother, who might indeed be the next high priest of the Order.

—

My recovery was difficult. It included many nights with nightmares and hours spent crying and screaming. Endra was always by my side, along with other women such as Kenta, Rose, and Daja. Women older but experienced in caring for Wild Ones returning to their human side. Even Salvador would check in time to time and talk to me.

It seemed amazing that people who were not my family would take time to care for me with such faithfulness. It reminded me of Dakota and made me appreciate even more what she had done to help me become more civilized.

Meanwhile, the tribe was constantly on the lookout for Purveyors. Several times we moved camp, always keeping one step ahead of them.

We circled the city, keeping within a day's journey of its roads and gates. It became clear to me that the tribe was determined to find any Wolves captured and locked up in the Dead Zone. Above everything else, they valued Wolf. A Wolf was a Wolf, and no one should be left without other Wolves to save them.

A month or so passed. After constant tending, I began to recover and regain my health. I also gained confidence that I was Laura again, the woman who lived with the Tribe of Wolf and carried on their legacy. I joined them regularly around the fire to hear the news and reconnect with my fellow tribe members.

As information came in, it would be shared. The Wolves seemed to be well connected to other citizens in the city. For a tribe numbering no more than 50 people at best, they had a spy network that was impressive. And always, someone from the tribe was slipping into the city to bring back news.

Tonight, the latest was that a council had been assembled to pick a new high priest. The candidates were Drewman Newbaus and Daki Forsgard, both of whom had served under Henry Highsmith, along with Howard Becker. No word about Rebecca Becker, but rumors had been flying that she would appear as a last-minute candidate.

After the gathering around the fire, when everyone had returned to their campsites, Fleet called me aside. Salvador sat next to me.

“We may have a clue about Rena,” he said.

The news thrilled me. “Really. Where?”

“She’s deep in the Dead Zone.”

“Is she . . .”

“Alive,” he said. “But I can’t guarantee how she is, what she might be like, nor if and when we can carry her out.”

“You think . . .”

“Yes. She may be completely turned. Our word is that they’re ready to release her.”

“When?”

“Possibly early tomorrow morning.”

“Do we know where?”

“Yes,” he stated as he lowered his eyes. His shoulders slumped. “There is what they call a dumping ground on the south side of the city. But this . . .” The words caught in his throat. “This is a worst-case situation.”

“Why?”

“She will be hard to pick out. She will be surrounded by hundreds of Wild Ones. And . . .”

“And?”

“She will be guarded by Purveyors. She may even be hauled away from the city. They always try to vary their routine. They know some people will be watching, waiting to see if their family is being released.”

“So?” I glanced back and forth between the two of them.

“We have to decide,” said Salvador, “either to go in tonight and take a chance or wait to see what happens. Either way, we’re short on time. We may not find her in her cell or we may miss her when she’s released.”

We each stopped talking, as if our hearts were waiting to catch up to our thoughts. The three of us knew how much I wanted Rena back in camp. The fact that she had followed me out of the west put the burden of her capture on my shoulders. I bore a heavy responsibility for her suffering.

Fleet seemed even more burdened. His long frame and blue eyes leaned like a tree heavy with snow. His face, so much like Dominick’s, rested heavily on his hands.

I pushed the conversation forward. “Do you know where she’s at in the Dead Zone?”

Fleet stirred from his thoughts. "Salvador knows this place better than me. He thinks he can find her."

"I have a good idea of where she's at," Salvador said, trying to reassure his father. "If she's still there, I can find her."

"Then let's go together," I suggested. "As a backup, leave someone at the south side, just in case."

"It's a hard job," Fleet said. "Very hard." He looked at me solemnly, his words bearing the weight and risk of losing two of his best young tribe members. "I don't know at this point if it's worth it."

My arms and legs began to stiffen. "Rena is worth it."

"And if I lose all three of you?" Now his solemn gaze caught both of us.

"She is worth it," I repeated and let my words fall at his feet.

Again, there was silence between us. A heavy decision must be made.

"Then go," Fleet said. "And please, if the odds turn against you, come back." He glanced at Salvador. It was hard to imagine him losing a second son to the Purveyors.

I looked at Salvador. His face was guarded. He didn't know me well. Perhaps he wished he could go alone.

"I'll help you," I said.

His voice was kind. "I know."

We left in the dark. He carried a light pack on his back. I carried nothing but myself and my own thoughts. He didn't have to remind me of what Fleet had warned. This was difficult. Very difficult.

Rendezvous

I was surprised that Salvador led me to his tent. Even more surprised that we waited by the door. He had something to share with me. Something which didn't involve Fleet and Endra.

"I know what my parents told you," he said. "But there's a different plan we're following. I couldn't tell them because I think they would have questioned my judgment."

This was news to me. "And what would they say?"

"My father, especially, he would have put his foot down. I can hear him now. 'Too difficult.'"

"More than what we discussed?"

"Possibly. There's also a chance it could be safer. I thought it was worth the risk."

"What's the plan?"

"We're going into the city."

"The city, as in Aether?"

"Yes. Right now. And I need you to trust me on this."

"Because?"

"You ask a lot of questions and for the moment, I need you to cooperate."

“Without questions?” I looked at him skeptically.
“Really?”

“I can tell you some things on the way out, but tonight time is valuable, so for now, let’s keep moving.”

This was a different Salvador, one I had yet to meet. But the idea of going to Aether intrigued me. And Salvador as a conspirator intrigued me.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“We’re changing clothes,” he said. “You go first.”

“Changing clothes? For a difficult mission?”

“Yes, we can’t just go into the city dressed as Wolves. It’s a high-class place. You and I are going out . . . as a couple.”

“Man and woman?”

“Yeah, like we’re together.”

“Together?”

“How hard is this to understand? Man. Woman. Boyfriend. Girlfriend. Husband. Wife. That sort of thing.”

“We have to dress to do that?”

“You’re going to a different world. Again, maybe trust me on this.”

Trust. For me, an even more difficult assignment. Not likely.

He did not back down. “Problem?”

More questions. “Aren’t we on a mission? A rescue mission?”

“Yes, and this is part of it. You’ll see once we get into the city.”

“Going out? As a couple?”

He grew impatient. "Just go inside and play along. I hope you like what I picked out."

"The clothes. Inside, you mean?"

"Yes. Inside."

No, not easy to trust at all. A curve too far.

"How'd you get my size?" No doubt, I was pushing his patience.

"You are just full of questions, aren't you?"

"Usually, yes."

"Okay. Here's the rundown. My tribe is excellent at sewing. And I happen to be good at fashion design. I've watched carefully over the years and taken notes. Given my tribe's genius and my drawings, I'm willing to bet that they've sized you up better than you could have guessed, even going to a store."

"You guys make clothes? For women?"

"We're wasting time. Please. Go in and change."

He pointed again, a little more urgently.

For his sake, I stepped in. The man did rescue me, after all. Was trust too much to ask?

A young woman, my age, was waiting inside to help me. Her name, I think, was Dorcas. She took me by the hand and led me to a table. My outfit had been laid out. A pair of pants in a material I had never seen, a dark green blouse with a high neck and sheer long sleeves, and a white pair of shoes. The fit was perfect right down to the inseam on the pants. Very simple. Very comfortable. I liked the style, even if I had never seen anything like it. But how did they know what I would or would not wear? Were the Wolves also mind readers?

Dorcas seemed pleased as she led me out of the tent. She gave a nod to Salvador and slipped off into the darkness.

“Your friend?” I smirked.

“Yes,” he said without expression. “She’s one of the best in the camp at sewing.” Salvador also looked pleased. “Now that looks very nice.”

“How on earth would you know what to pick for me?”

“We sneak in and out of the city on a regular basis. We follow current fashion so that we can blend in. This style is really popular right now. Classic Cut is what they call it. A return to a former century. I like it, especially on you.”

I blushed with pleasure. “Okay. So you’re a good guesser. Tell me. What am I wearing?”

“That’s a chiffon blouse. Very light and comfortable. You look good in that color green, by the way. And the pants are jeans. They’re made from a fabric called denim. And the shoes are simple walking shoes. Canvas. Lightweight. Easy to slip on. Good for running, too, if we need to make haste.”

“Hmm. Chiffon, denim, canvas. I’ll remember that.” I tried to pose as stylish. “Well thanks. You guys are good with clothes. Maybe I can learn some things when I go into the city.”

He stepped back and eyed me. “Yup,” he said. “That’ll do.”

“Your turn,” I said.

He was quick about his change. When he stepped out, I was equally impressed with his fashion sense.

“Okay. Give me the rundown,” I ordered.

“Remember, I’m learning.”

“The shirt is called linen,” he said. “These little round things are called buttons.”

“You like black?”

“I do. It’s a very formal color. Good for all occasions when I go into the city.”

“And the pants?”

“Chinos,” he explained. “Again, good for any style. I’ve seen lots of men wear them in Aether.”

“And those shoes?”

“Just a straight pair of tennis shoes. Long ago, you paid good money for a pair of these shoes like this.”

“Where do you get all this stuff?”

He did not volunteer that bit of information.

I stood for a moment and returned his look. As he eyed me, so I eyed him back. I had to admit. We made a very good couple. Correction. Two good looking people, a fashionable couple, going into the city to . . . rescue Rena. That train of thought didn’t pan out to me, but I decided to trust him. At least for the time being.

“Okay,” I said. “So. Dressed fashionably and . . . walking?”

Salvador grinned. “No. Not walking. Follow me.”

He held my arm as we skirted together down a path for a mile or so.

“Where are we going?” I groused. My curiosity was getting the best of me.

“Wait,” he commanded and didn’t say another word.

We approached a wide tent structure with an equally wide flap door stretched from corner to corner. With a brush of his hand, he whisked back the door. I jumped back in surprise and laughed.

“Golly Moses,” I exclaimed.

He stood in front of a vehicle like a proud father.

“A car?” I gushed.

“Not just any car. This is an electric Pugh, brand new. Very quiet, but it can fly when I step on the pedal.”

It was bright red with a v-shaped nose, large black tires, and lights I sometimes saw when the Purveyors flew their drones over us. It could have been a flying machine for all I knew.

“And you must have bought this car on one of your many trips into the city.”

“As a matter of fact,” he confirmed.

“Paid for by? Arrows and spears?”

“Nope. Just walked in and drove it off the lot. Paid in cash.”

I gave him a suspicious look. Wolves were on the run from Purveyors. How could the tribe afford this vehicle? And the clothes? And the tennis shoes?

“I know,” he said. “Long story. Good conversation for a trip into the city.”

He stepped around to the driver’s side, jumped in, and pulled it next to me.

I followed suit. “Where’s the roof?” I said as I adjusted my legs.

“Stored in the back,” he revealed. “No need for one tonight. It’s warm. I won’t go too fast.” He threw me a floppy wide-brimmed hat. “In case you’re worried about your hair.” He looked like he was having fun.

“So, in our new clothes and bright red car, we’re trying to keep a low profile?”

“Yes. In Aether, people won’t even blink when they see us.”

“Really?”

“It’s a wealthy town. Trust me. No Wild Ones walking the streets. Just the rich and famous, and us.”

“Will we make a good impression?”

“If we’re lucky, no one will even notice us.”

As we drove down a road and entered a highway, I was not sure about that last statement. Then I saw the lights and buildings of Aether and realized. He was probably right.

—

The city was unlike anything I had ever seen. Gleaming with lights and full of skyscrapers that rose into the upper clouds. Everything polished to a high gloss. Surrounding it all, a wall made of metal and glass that glimmered and reflected the lights of the city. The wall swarmed with the offices of Purveyors who had a bird’s eye view of everything that went on outside and inside Aether.

The highway led to a large gated area, one of the city's official border crossings through which all incoming traffic passed.

"Don't panic, don't say a thing unless he asks," Salvador instructed. "Try to look happy. Remember, we're married. You're Lily Riley and I'm your husband John Riley. We've been married ten years and have two kids. Tonight we're just out having fun."

Happy? Married? Kids? Not sure I could remember all of this. Why not just tell me to paint a smile on my face? Maybe that's what he meant, so I practiced smiling.

He grimaced and rolled his eyes. "Less like a cat, more like a mother."

My eyes narrowed. "Less like a numbskull. More like a husband."

He got it.

At the crossing, Salvador chatted up the guard and looked like a man out for a night with his wife. I leaned on his shoulder and looked like someone pleased to be out on the town. Sitting next to Salvador, the act came surprisingly easy.

Salvador surprised me when he pulled out some cards from the glove compartment and showed them to the guard. The guard perused the cards and handed them back. "Have a good evening," he called out and raised the gate.

Salvador drove through without incident. As we cleared the crossing, he commented, "Good job there, Mrs. Riley."

"Thank you, Mr. Riley. I hope I passed the test."

"You did. He was looking you over."

"Meaning?"

"He wished he had a wife who looked like Mrs. Riley." His face lit up with a broad smile.

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yes," he said emphatically. "That's an excellent thing."

"Doesn't say much for his wife, does it?"

"No, but it makes me feel lucky." Again that impish grin.

I grinned back. "Well, then, we're both lucky."

He smiled in agreement. "Yes, we are."

—

I relaxed as we drove into the city. The sights and sounds were fascinating, and the people equally so. Salvador was right. Dressed in our fashion, driving in our car, nobody gave us a moment's notice. It was a society built to be wealthy and we were in the thick of it.

"Where to now?" I said as I looked up at the passing buildings and multicolored signs.

"Soon," he said.

He shared the sights as we drove through the city. Government buildings, monuments, museums, sports stadiums. Then we drove in sight of what he termed the "High House."

He explained how it was made of classic marble with an architectural style like an ancient civilization called the

Greeks. The house had tall columns with various designs running top to bottom.

So imagine my surprise when we pulled up to the outer gates of the High House, bordered by a large lawn with fountains and elaborate statues. Plus gardening. Plants of all shapes and sizes. Trees. Shrubs. All neatly packaged into a setting fit for a High Priest.

"What are we doing?" I demanded.

"Our mission," he said calmly.

"What's this have to do with Rena?"

"She's in there. Your goal is to bring her out."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"You have an appointment."

"With?"

"Your mother."

I started to shake with confusion and panic.

"Are you turning me in? Changing me for Rena? Is that how this game works?"

"No. I'm taking you to your appointment. I've been assured of your safety. Your mother wants to trade time with you for Rena. I'll be here when you come back. Hopefully with Rena in your arms."

"Are you serious?"

"Never been more."

"You set me up."

He looked shame faced. "Yeah. I did."

"And you want me to trust you? Isn't that what you asked? Just trust you?"

He wouldn't look me in the eye. I knew, and he knew, that this would end in a long discussion, and not a

pleasant one. But not now. At the moment, we were deep in enemy territory with our backs against the wall. And maybe the fate of Rena in our hands.

“Who’s going to let me in?” I demanded.

He pulled over and parked the car. “He is.” His finger pointed out someone sitting in a small booth. “Right through that gate, down that path, someone will be there to meet you.”

“How’d you know about this?”

“Through back channels. Your mother sent us a message. We couldn’t say no. At least, I couldn’t. My mother and father don’t know about this, and if they did, they would be against it. So, I decided to run my own operation. Yes, I planned this behind their backs.”

“So, she’s not being released as a Wild One?”

“Not at the South Gate. But she will be released, if you meet with your mother.”

“They’re going to kill me, you know.”

“I don’t think so. I think your mother misses you and just wants to meet her daughter. As you may recall, the last time didn’t go so well.”

“And what about my father?”

“I don’t know about him, but I think your mother can handle him. I suspect he’s also being kept in the dark.”

Two lines extended between us. One was a mission. The other was betrayal. I seemed to be sitting square in the middle of both, not sure which line was mine.

“She’s waiting,” he said gently, “as I will be waiting when you return.”

“If I return.”

“When you return.”

“You seem awfully sure of yourself.”

For a moment, I caught a trace of doubt in his eyes.

“You’ll be fine.”

“When you return.”

“When I return.” His voice grew quiet. “I promise.”

“You promise. That’s rich. My husband promises his wife he’ll come back. Right.”

I scowled at him one last time and jumped out of the car. I slammed the door and started walking toward the guard. Salvador slid off into the night, his lights disappearing down the road.

“Welcome home,” I said to myself as I approached the gate.

—

The guard appeared startled. I could tell his night routine didn’t include many visitors.

“Yes?” he said, less than friendly.

“I have an appointment. My name is Laura Becker. I think Rebecca Becker is expecting me.”

“Becker? The Rebecca Becker?”

“Yes.”

He took a moment to digest this. His brain was busy connecting the dots.

“Do you have any I.D.?”

“I.D.?”

“Identification.”

The word meant nothing. The concept confused me.

“You want to know something beyond the fact that I just told you who I am?”

The guard blinked back at me, equally confused.

“You need I.D. to get in. You know. Something that proves who you are.”

“Does this mean you don’t believe me?”

A scowl gripped his face.

“Nobody gets in without I.D. Those are the rules.” He seemed determined to hold his ground.

I tried to remember what Salvador had said earlier, about smiling, about looking happy. I was not happy, but I knew I had to adapt. It had worked nicely with the first guard. Maybe I should sweeten the pot a bit. I stepped into the light so he could get a good look. A lesson learned. Guards liked pretty women. Use it to my advantage.

“Look,” I said as sweetly as I could muster. “My husband told me that Rebecca Becker wanted to meet with her daughter. Which is me, Laura Becker, uh, Riley. That’s my married name. He just dropped me off and my mother is expecting me shortly. She has a nice dinner planned, and then we’re going to talk about the baby. She just got the news and as you can imagine, she’s jumping with joy. You see, I don’t live in this country. I’m here for a visit. So, I really don’t want to disappoint her. Plus, my husband’s gone and he won’t be back for at least an hour. If you don’t let me in, I’m going to be sitting in the dark by myself. Seems a shame, when all she’s doing is waiting for someone to let her know I’m here.”

I could tell he was softening, but not quite convinced.

“Why don’t you have I.D.?” He seemed to assume that this was the norm, and looking at it through his eyes, I understood his concern. Salvador had showed it to the guard earlier tonight. Seemed everyone had it except me. You would think he would remember this before dropping me off at a guard gate, especially one this important. I would have to inform him of his error the next time I got a firm hold and pinched his ear. But this reminder would have to wait. Plan B. I started to cry.

“I don’t know. I think I left it in the car, and he’s gone now. As you can see, I’m a little looney right now, the baby and all.” Now the tears came full force. This seemed to push the stranded boat off the shoreline.

“All right, miss. All right. Let me make a call.”

The tears were genuine, but angry. This cockeyed plan was going to get someone killed if I didn’t come up with a better idea. I pictured myself kicking Salvador in the shins. It seemed to help me be more convincing.

He picked up a device and held it to his ear. He talked to someone. I wondered how he could do that when no one else was here. The guard put down the device and stepped out of the booth.

“It’s all right Miss, uh, Becker Riley. Someone will be right out.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

The next few minutes took my breath away. A man in a car. Me riding in the back seat. Another man who met me at the huge doorway, hustled me through a sparking house so large I imagined it would fit comfortably inside a mountain. Up a set of stairs wide as a river. And then

through a door and into a large room filled with books, chairs, curtains, modern lights, and, my mother. Rebecca Becker. The woman I had only caught a glimpse of in the mountains before she had been whisked away.

Dressed in a gown with her hair long, a similar shade of brown to my own, well cared for. Her eyes blue and dazzling. Her face thin but shapely. Her arms and legs long. From the books I read, she reminded me of a queen. No crown. No royal garments. But still. In her manner, the way she carried herself. I took a moment to watch her and absorb the idea that this was my mother. My actual mother.

“Laura,” she said softly. Her eyes welled up. So did mine.

“Mother,” I answered.

We moved slowly forward and remained embraced for a long time.

“Please sit,” she offered. I chose a nearby chair, blood red and plush. It let out a small breath when I sat in it.

She sat near me on a seat wide enough for three, maybe four people. Was she expecting someone else? Would my father also decide to make an appearance? Would Rena also come in?

“You look . . . hearty,” she said, choosing her words carefully.

I was struck by the luxury surrounding us. It was a change I could never have imagined. All this was what I had been avoiding, preferring instead a much simpler existence. But when I decided to stay with the Wolves, I had no visuals to choose from. All I could see was the

pain and death of my friends. Up close and personal, I was dazzled by my surroundings.

I tried to regain my wits, to remember my mission, to remember that this was the origin of Purveyors and killers of Wolves. In this setting, it all seemed so far away, so easy to forget.

"I'm . . . fine," I said and left it at that.

We broke into an easy conversation. She was a charming woman, polite to a fault. I had so many things I wanted to know, but it was hard to think straight when she looked at me so lovingly. It took several minutes for me to accept the fact that I was her daughter.

There was a moment when I doubted, even questioned, what I had been afraid of, why I had fought so hard against coming home. After all, this was my family. Hadn't they tried to welcome me? In return, I had shot an arrow through their high priest.

As she offered me refreshments and explained highlights in the room she called the library, I thought of how all these books could be mine in a room that was fit for royalty. Maybe Mother royalty. Maybe that's why Mother was absent. She had chosen instead to live here and leave me to my cave. It was a wonderful setting for someone equally powerful. Mother and mother.

All I knew was that, if it were up to me, I could spend the rest of my life alone in this room, eating sweet things, drinking this tasty brown liquid they called tea, laying on what they referred to as a couch, and just reading books.

My eyes browsed the titles. I even thought that it might be wonderful to invite Dakota to stay with me for a

while, if I could find her. She and I could share so much together. I might even recommend a few additional titles. Something borrowed from the Last Chance Bookstore.

A thought brought me up short. I had been dragged to Aether, imprisoned, and forced to live in a dark cell for months. The memory of all that loneliness made me shiver. I had been rescued from a bare existence, an existence fostered by this family, by their officials. I had been visited by my so-called sister and left to die. This room covered that up so nicely. But the memory, the experience of being abandoned, had not left me.

My mother must have noticed. Her face grew concerned. "Are you all right?"

I tried to poke through her sincerity, but my eyes could not leave her face, my mother's face, the one who entertained me, the one whom I so closely resembled. These thoughts ricocheted through my mind. I took my eyes off her and gazed around the room. I was under a spell that I couldn't escape and couldn't accept.

"You're upset," she said, alarmed at the change in my expression. Jumping from the couch, she pulled me to her and enfolded me in her arms. "It's okay, dear. You're safe now."

I did what anyone would do if their mother ran to her. I cried, in fact, sobbed. It took several minutes for me to regain my composure.

She took a moment to brush my hair with her hands. "I imagine it must have been difficult living so long out there with those . . . wolves."

Wolves. Yes, that's what I was. I had almost forgotten. I was a Wolf. The word reverberated in my ears. It was said with disdain. It was said as if I had been living with bad people. Dirty. Ignorant. Uncivilized. Those . . . wolves.

I remembered my mission. I remembered Dominick, Hopper, and Salvador. Most of all, I remembered Rena. I was here to find Rena. The thought sobered me.

I stood up and strolled to the couch. It, too, breathed when I sat down.

My mother gave me a moment. She watched me carefully. I wiped my eyes and sat up straight.

"Would you like to meet your family?" she said.

She hurried to the door and called out. In walked two young people, a girl and a boy. The girl in her late teens. The boy slightly younger.

"This is your sister, Breta, and your brother, Eckard."

They walked to the side of the couch and stood aloof, sizing me up with the cool of royalty. Breta in particular. We were close in appearance. Thin face. Reddish-brown hair. Blue eyes. Yes, we were definitely sisters.

"We have met," she said as if we had passed casually on the street and gotten acquainted.

"What?" Rebecca gasped. "Oh, Breta, you didn't."

"I did," she snapped back. "I had to see who killed grandfather."

My mother was speechless.

"I'm Eckard," my brother said. He walked over and shook my hand. His face was sober, but not unkind. He stood tall for his age. A face more like my father's.

Squarish with a wide mouth. Fair skinned. Black hair.
Black eyes.

"I'm pleased to meet you," I said. What else was there to say? Was I pleased? The jury was out on that one. But I tried to play my part as best I could.

"Why are you here?" said Breta, intent on pinning me to the wall and leaving me to hang.

The mood in the room grew chilly. Her mother gave her a look of rebuke.

"I was invited," I said. "Mother wanted to see me."

Breta looked at her mother, unconvinced. "You invited her?"

"She is my daughter," Rebecca snapped. "AND your sister."

"She's also a killer," said Breta. "AND she's no sister to me."

"Stop," said Rebecca. My mother's words were meant to bring her up short. She was only partially successful.

"Why?" said Breta.

I thought about her question. Why stop the accusations or why was I invited? Maybe she meant both.

"We're family," Rebecca shot back, "and she is here as our guest."

"Honestly? Is she really my sister?"

Was this some kind of accusation? I was confused. Was there some doubt about whether I belonged to this family?

"Yes," said Rebecca. "She is."

"I don't know. I have my doubts."

"She is your sister."

“Living like a Wolf,” she snarled. There was that word again, spoken as if it tasted sour.

The mood in the room was eerie. Breta had managed to suck out all the oxygen. None of us dared take another breath.

“You may go now.” My mother dismissed her by royal proclamation. I could tell Breta’s defiance had exhausted her patience.

Eckard wasted no time escaping. Breta held me in focus.

“Try attacking us again,” she challenged. “I’ll chase you down myself and put an arrow through your heart.”

“Breta!” Rebecca ordered.

She glowered at her mother, glowered at me, and stomped out. Her gait told me everything I needed to know about her.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Rebecca.

I sat and gathered my thoughts. “I don’t blame her. She’s right. I shouldn’t have done what I did. I’ve given it a lot of thought. Not that it changes anything I’ve done, but . . . I’m sorry.”

“You were provoked,” my mother said in my defense.

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever you think of me as a Wolf, I was taught better by someone I really cared about. She would not have been pleased.”

Rebecca sat and chewed on my words. “Well, then, thank you, and thank this person who taught you well. I accept your apology, though sadly, it has caused more trouble than you can imagine.”

“Probably. I regret every inch of that trouble. But then, sitting alone in a cell, there’s lots of things in your life you come to regret.”

“Your life has been hard.”

“Sometimes, but the hard part is accepting where I belong. People keep trying to change my mind. I’m happy where I’m at. I’m happy . . . being a Wolf.”

At least I was before I landed here on this beautiful couch.

We seemed to run out of things to say. We both sat as if someone had beaten us on the head and left us senseless. I wondered if my brother and sister were listening through the door. I cleared my throat.

“The reason I’m here,” I said, as much a reminder to myself as to my mother.

“For your friend,” she acknowledged.

“She is like a sister to me.”

My mother looked at me curiously. “More than your own family?”

It was a question I’m sure she had wondered about many times in the late-night hours. Why her daughter kept to the Wolves. Why she simply didn’t come home. How could I explain? I couldn’t. Better to just speak honestly.

“As someone I have lived with and grown to love, yes.”

She considered her next question carefully. I suspect it had been lingering in the back of her mind.

“Would you consider returning and visiting me here in Aether? There’s so much more I could tell you about your family.”

“Would you consider leaving the Wolves alone?” A proposal off the cuff. Improvised. Then again, it was clear we were bargaining. Why not try to solve both issues at once?

Another round of silence.

She shifted her body ever so slightly and pushed back her hair. “I see we both have things to consider.”

“And father,” I reminded her.

“Yes, your father as well.”

I kept to the plan at hand. “Right now, the offer I heard was for Rena.”

Rebecca hurried to the door.

Two servants carried Rena in on a blanket and laid her at my feet. Rebecca lounged next to me.

“She is sedated and sleeping,” she said. “I don’t know what you’ll encounter when she wakes up. But she is yours to take.”

I looked her over: skin and bone, hair ragged, feet black and bruised as they fell out of the blanket.

“Judging by her face, she has had some hard luck,” said my mother.

I approached my beloved friend and gently stroked her hair. “No thanks to me. But I promise you, we will take good care of her. If you know anything of Wolves, we take care of our own.”

I lifted her across my shoulders. She was as light as a bird. I hoped when we got her back to camp, she would still be alive.

My mother's eyes widened. "You are strong."

Walking across the room, I opened the door, carried her down the stairs and out the front, where a driver picked us up and carried us past the front gate. Salvador was waiting. I eased her in the back, hopped in, and said, "Drive. We've got to get her home before she wakes up."

Salvador accelerated and we hurried away.

"You did well," he said, scenery rushing past.

"And you are a liar," I said abruptly. I regretted it immediately. My brain was whirling from all the events of the evening. His face fell. He did not respond and remained mute for the rest of the trip.

As we sped out of the city, I drifted off in thought, recalling my mother, my rude sister, my little brother. How did we all fit together? Did we? Would I ever return to this glamorous city on a peaceful mission? Such a beautiful place. What was I missing by choosing to live out in the wilderness?

So much to think about, so little time. I heard Rena groan in the back.

"Better hurry," I said.

"I'm going as fast as the law will allow. We don't want to get pulled over."

No, we didn't. That part was true. But within the law, our speed was just too slow. I only wished that I had one of those Purveyor helicopters right now. Then again, no speed on Earth could get me back to camp quick enough.

No speed on Earth could wipe out the images that Aether had painted in my head. As we drove out of the city and wound our way back to the garage, I asked myself: Which way was home?

Have a Little Faith

The rescue of Rena caused a stir in the camp. Our methods were called into question by Fleet and Endra, but they couldn't argue with the result and eventually their anger blew over.

As for Rena, I rarely left her side, so the bulk of the disagreement about our trip was lost on me. My focus was on her well-being.

She was nearly dead when we put her in a tent. The ladies of the tribe began to wash her down and prepare for her an awakening or a funeral, whichever came first. They prepared a variety of potions. They wrapped her tight in blankets until only her head was showing. They seemed to be prepared for whatever would happen. Then they waited.

When she came to later in the morning, her eyes were wild and she fought like a cat to be freed. She screamed and uttered curses. She cried and pleaded for her freedom. She went in and out of consciousness. She suffered from terrible nightmares and woke up crying as if someone was about to stab her with a knife.

I was amazed at the patience the Wolves showed. They took none of what Rena said personally. They knew she had been transformed into something wild, even beyond wild.

Would she come back?

“With time,” they told me, but they didn’t look convinced.

Fleet and Endra checked in on a regular basis. Salvador too. It was as if all of us anticipated the outcome. All on edge. All anxious to hear some piece of good news. But the recovery was long and tedious.

I stepped out of her tent several nights later just to get some fresh air. I sat on a log at the edge of the camp and took in the stars and the small sliver of a moon coming over the horizon. As I let my mind wander, I saw Salvador approach.

“May I?” he said as he motioned to sit down.

“Sure,” I invited.

We both let the dark enfold us. It wasn’t the time for words. The spirit of the night needed to share some of its healing power with both of us.

After a long wait, he spoke, hesitantly, as if he was interrupting some type of magic spell.

“She is . . .”

“ . . . the same,” I said.

He nodded.

The experience of being Wild and being tamed was daunting to me. “What will you do if she doesn’t change?” I asked.

“Release her,” he murmured. “Far from here, where she might have a chance to survive.”

“Survive? How will she . . .”

“Their instincts have been heightened. They are excellent hunters, tough and built to be . . . outside.”

“Like Wild Ones.”

“Exactly.”

The idea of such an isolated existence settled into my thoughts. I knew exactly what that life was like. I had come to learn that being human, being with people, was what I had longed for all those years on my own. But my life before Last Chance. I wondered if Rena would feel that same kind of loneliness and need to be recivilized, like me.

“When I was at the bookstore, I thought they used to torment us at night,” I recalled. “Then again, sometimes I thought I heard them crying. I wasn’t sure if they were human or not. I think now I understand.”

“They are wild,” said Salvador, “but not beyond human. They are . . . exiled.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. “Exiled,” I repeated. “That was me, but I was too far gone to know what that meant. Dakota helped me return. I didn’t need the help that Rena needs, but she knew what I was and she was patient.”

“She was a wonderful person,” said Salvador. “I met her a couple of times. She was closer to Dominick, but I was impressed with her.”

“She was . . . special.” My heart ached. I missed her. I needed her comfort. But she was so far away and my good friend Rena was . . .

“You lied to me,” I scolded.

Salvador winced like someone struck with a rock. I had ambushed him. He hadn’t seen it coming. Then again, neither had I.

“Why?” I questioned.

He held his tongue. Was he guilty? Was he hiding something?

“Tell me,” I demanded.

He put both hands on the log to support himself. His head lowered. I could barely hear his voice.

“I wasn’t sure . . .”

“Yes?”

“When the message came, I knew we had an opportunity to rescue Rena, but I wasn’t sure you would go to see your family, not after what happened in the mountains.”

“You mean that I killed the high priest and sent the rest packing?”

“Yes.”

“So you had to lure me into a trap?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Okay. So how would you tell this story?”

Salvador had to retreat for a moment. I could tell his defenses were wavering. His reply was halfhearted. “I would say . . . you were persuaded to help. You just didn’t know the whole story.”

“Ah. So you’re saying you only half lied?”

Salvador hesitated and rubbed his nose. "I had to be sure you would go."

"And the part about visiting my mother, that was just accidentally left out?"

"No," he admitted.

"Okay. You say you didn't lie, but you didn't tell me the truth either."

"That's fair."

I continued to press him. "Am I Wolf?"

He paused. "Yes."

"Would you do this to another Wolf?"

The question hit home. I waited for a response. I wasn't sure I was going to get one. Not tonight anyway.

"Just to fill you in," I said. "I would have gone, especially if it meant getting Rena back."

Salvador did not reply.

"You can trust me, you know." It was as close as I could come to tenderness. A kind of tender anger.

Then I let it go. At least for the moment. My point had been made. I refocused my thoughts on the stars and moon. I let out a long breath and closed my eyes. If I could fly away, I would be so happy to find a place as familiar as Last Chance or the far edge of the western slopes. Or to . . .

I was surprised that images of Aether crept into my thoughts. Really? Could I ever feel at home there, with my family? With my mother. Breta. My father. Eckard?

It took me a moment to realize that a hand crept across the log and covered mine. Salvador the accused was trying to salvage our friendship. This, I assumed, was

what men did when they wanted forgiveness. Or was this something more?

He gripped my fingers firmly.

“Don’t ever lie to me again,” I said. Ah, and this was Laura’s soft and sweet way of saying that I understood and forgave him? I would have to chew on this for a while.

He kept his hand in place and I let him. In fact, I let my hand sink inside his wide palm.

But only for a moment. Not too much. Not too close. I wasn’t about to go soft.

I stood up. “I have to go back.”

He smiled at me and I smiled back, ever so faintly, as little as I could muster, but a smile still. It slowly crawled across my face. His eyes would not let me escape without it.

Something sweet passed between us. Unspoken, of course. Who could talk about what they didn’t understand? Both of us were like rocks colliding in a river.

I strode off with his eyes burning a hole in my back. The heat felt good.

26.

Revolution

The news came fast and furious.
Something going on in the city.
Word of a shakeup.
Someone imprisoned.
A Becker. Rebecca. Mother. And children.
Someone new chosen as High Priest.
Not a Becker.
Not a Becker? What could that mean?
Troops pouring out of the city.
Plans for a hasty exit from camp.
Everyone packing.
Leaders huddled in Fleet's tent.
Rena in a daze.
Someone new chosen as High Priest.
James Highsmith, Henry's brother.
Someone executed.
A Becker. Howard. Father.
As night fell. The hum and echo of Purveyors.
Only one option.
Escape.

—

Desperation dogged us as we trudged west. Decisions had to be made—what to keep, what to leave behind. The exit was swift. Then more decisions, sometimes on the fly: from being near the city to, what, a day, a week beyond? How far exactly did we need to go? And still, I was torn between staying and going.

My family, in trouble, but what could I do, what should I do? And why should I do anything? They weren't particularly attached to me. Breta had made that abundantly clear. My father was dead. My mother imprisoned. Maybe Breta and Eckard as well. The reign of the Highsmiths would continue, but with it, probably a warrant for my arrest. And if they caught me, perhaps an execution, or perhaps back to the Dead Zone.

Under darkness, we moved with stealth. During the day, we camped under trees. Planes occasionally flew overhead, search planes looking for refugees like us. The land was overrun with people in flight.

I cornered Salvador the night after we left as we hurried down a creek.

"Where are we going?" I demanded.

He hesitated. It made me even more impatient.

"Salvador. Speak. I have to know."

His response: "We don't know, yet."

"We . . . don't . . . know?" I grew more agitated.

"What would you like to hear?" he said. "We haven't decided. Right now, we're just moving west. How far, how long, nobody knows that . . . yet."

“We can’t outrun the Purveyors,” I countered. “They have an army, planes, weapons. We have to do something more than just move.”

For the first time, I saw Salvador’s face tighten. His jaw, his cheek bones. I had managed to push a button. Now I waited for the eruption.

“We need time to discuss it,” he pleaded.

“Well, when will that happen?”

“You want a date, an hour, a day of the week?”

“Yes. That would be helpful.”

“Fine. Go find Fleet, if you can get him to slow down long enough. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re kind of busy.”

His eyes hardened and he stood straight as a tree.

Yet I refused to relent. “You have to know, there’s no escape. Not really. They tracked us at Last Chance. They tracked us in the west all the way to the mountains. There’s no where they won’t search. Running only stalls the battle.”

He rubbed his cheeks and his eyes, then brushed back his hair.

“Laura, there is no battle. It’s either find a way to escape or be slaughtered. Take your pick.”

“Is this the Wolf talking?”

I was now as close to him as I could stand without knocking him over. I found that I was conscious of his body. My fists were clenched.

He looked down at me as if I were an insect buzzing around. “The Wolf?” He looked baffled. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“We are the Tribe of Wolf. Wolves are smart and courageous.”

“Thank you for pointing that out.”

“Wolves don’t run. They fight.”

“Smart wolves know when to fight and when to run. And I say that for right now, we’re being smart.”

“Because you don’t know, what, how to fight?”

“Who said we didn’t know?”

“You did. You don’t know where we’re going. You just know that we’re laying low and avoiding contact. That seems to mean that fighting is not an option. Or did I not understand you the first time?”

My question cornered him, and unlike our current situation, he could not escape.

But he was not subdued. Not by me. Not by my arguments.

“And your idea would be, what, fight the whole army of Purveyors? With, say, maybe twenty Wolves if you throw in some younger folk.”

“Fight smart, like we always do.”

“With what?”

This time it was my turn to be cornered. It was a good question. Logical. Clear. Typical Salvador.

I admired this trait in him, knew it was probably a better plan than what I proposed, but there was that pull again. My family had been imprisoned. For whatever reason, I harbored a sense of obligation. To take on the Purveyors. To take on The Order. Head on. To forsake reason for passion. What did I propose? Now he awaited my response.

To his inquiry, I wilted. I had blown whatever steam I had into the air, and now all that remained was a gnawing sense of emptiness. All my losses started to pile up and press down on my shoulders. Dakota. Harrieta. Horner. Dominick. Hopper. Aurora. Rena. Why was I still here?

“I don’t know,” I said.

Salvador took my hands. “We will discuss it later,” he suggested with more than a fair share of tenderness. “And you can be a part of that. After all, you said, and we were told, you have gifts.”

“I had gifts,” I said. “I don’t know if they’re still mine.”

“Whatever you have, we’ll all work together. That is the way of the Wolf.”

I broke free, my back turned. I heard the rest of the tribe milling around. Somewhere up there, Salvador’s family moved steadily forward as wolves should do.

I was the one enraged, out of control, losing my true Wolf identity. This was Laura the lonely girl, lost on the plains, without confidence or companionship. This was the old Laura before she knew anything about Mother, bookstores, Dakota, Wolves, or Last Chance. Whatever wisdom I had gained was simply tossed to the roadside.

“I’m sorry about your family,” said Salvador.

I took a few steps and turned around. “And who exactly is my family?”

His eyes searched my face for an answer. He did not say a word.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

I kept walking, more rapidly, until Salvador fell far behind.

Who was family? Well, that was an excellent question. Best to think about it on my own.

From walking one road to another, like the time in my life before there was a bookstore, I was back to where I started.

—

We moved two days west and found a secluded grove of trees in the middle of a deserted patch of land. Exactly what we needed, a place to sit and think. The Wolves needed time to catch up to their current plight. To plan their next move. To get used to the idea of being on the run . . . again.

Days passed, then weeks. We settled into a new routine, taking care to remain hidden. We hunted. We gathered at night, but without camp fires to give us away. What fire we used was to cook and boil water. We kept it covered to cut down on the light and smoke.

I spent more time with Rena, hoping that she would start to come around and show some signs of progress. She appeared the same, only more listless and withdrawn. Whatever they had given her in Aether stayed firmly planted in her mind. The look on her face reminded me of a wild animal who knew they had been caged. An animal without hope of tasting freedom. Ever.

I would sit and talk with her. I reminded her of her life, the things we had done, the cave, the white buffalo. None of it had any impact.

I begged members of the tribe to loosen her bindings. The only time they let her free was to clean her and change her clothes once daily. I hoped that they would encourage her with less wrapping and more leeway. But they were cautious. Lose her now and there would be no search party. She would be released into the wild permanently.

One night, as the two of us sat alone with each other, I heard her voice. Weak but clear. For the first time since we had been snatched off the buffalo, I saw recognition in her eyes and the focus that comes from two humans talking to each other.

“Laura,” she whispered.

I thought I was hearing voices. Drifting in thought, I assumed it was just one more of my many disturbing dreams.

“Laura,” she repeated.

I came to attention. “Rena?”

“Laura,” she said a third time.

I slid across the tent floor and looked her in the eye. It was Rena. Small, thin, tired. A shell of her former self, but still, it was her. My heart ached when I thought about how much she had suffered.

“Laura,” she said again.

“Rena,” I responded.

“Let me go,” she said.

I knew at that moment that she was suffering in a different fashion. She was a prisoner in her own tribe.

"I can't do that," I said. "You need to get better."

"Please," she begged.

I looked deep in her eyes.

"You're improving," I said, "and this is a good sign. You're coming back to us. Maybe as you get better, we can trust you more."

The word trust seemed to strike home. I had put the real issue out in the open. She was more a Wild One than a Wolf. She couldn't be trusted.

"I'm dying," she said. "Please, let me go."

The statement shocked me. She was weak, fragile, but I had never considered her life at risk.

"You're not dying," I said. "You're just ill. You need time to get better."

"Dying," she insisted.

I shook my head. "No. Not dying."

"Yes."

"No."

We sat glumly for a moment. Why was I arguing with her? Did she not understand herself better than me? If she said she was dying, maybe she was right. Maybe being wrapped and held in this tent was death.

"Go to sleep," I urged.

"Sleep . . . death. They're all the same."

"Why are you saying that?"

"Let me loose," she pleaded again.

I dropped my head. My eyes searched the dirt for the right response. Nothing new came to mind. What was

wrong with letting her go? If she was a Wild One, she could take care of herself. If she wasn't, she would stay with her family. Either way, she would be free. But my hands would not move. The truth is, I didn't want to lose her. She was my friend, my sister. She was my family. Whatever was happening to Rena, I simply did not want to face it.

"I . . . can't," I told her.

"Why?" Her breath was ragged. Was she crying or was she really dying?

One of the tribal women came in. EVELDA. A wonderful woman, very patient. Also sharp-eyed and observant. "Did I hear you talking?"

I glanced at Rena, but the look of recognition was gone. She had slipped back into her shell. Perhaps experiencing the true sleep of the dead. Had I imagined our conversation?

I threw out a distraction. "I was talking to her to see if she would respond." I waited to see if she believed me. "I do that when I spend time with her. I think she hears me. She just hasn't awakened yet."

EVELDA gave me a kind look, the sympathy you give when you don't fully believe what someone says. The patience to look past the illusion.

"She will get better," EVELDA hummed with a soft voice of assurance. As if I was also being watched and treated for an illness. Rena. Laura. Both in need of supervision.

I pointed to her clothing. "Why is she bound so tight?"

“So she can’t hurt herself . . . or others who take care of her. She’s a Wild One. She can fight if we’re not careful. It keeps everyone safe.”

“But . . . she’s . . . tied up. And she’s a Wolf, not a Wild One.” I looked at her desperately. “Can she even breathe?”

“Yes, she can.” Evelda’s voice was comforting. “We’ve been doing this a long time. We know how to treat her. Trust me. She’s fine.”

“If she comes to and recognizes us, is that better? Could we let her have some freedom?”

Evelda watched me carefully. “Has she said something?”

I weighed my words and what they might mean for Rena or myself. I decided it wasn’t the right time to tell her. Not yet.

“No,” I lied.

Evelda searched my face. “Then, if she does, you let us know and we’ll talk about it, with you and with Rena.”

She needed convincing and Rena said nothing to plead her case.

“All right,” I said.

We all sat together as if preparing for dinner or having a family chat. It seemed so normal, except for the woman across from us wrapped like a dead body. But I knew she wasn’t dead. She wasn’t sleeping either. She was waiting on us to give her a gift. Freedom. Death. One or the other. She waited and I waited with her. I could assume her fate and decide for her. But I sat and waited. We all waited, for something.

Evelda laid down in the tent and fell asleep. I sat next to her and watched Rena for other signs of life. Where was she? Was there another world she escaped to? If I freed her, would she thank me?

Carefully, noiselessly, I slid over to Rena and tilted her into my arms. I held her tightly and breathed the words: "Stay with us, sister." I kissed her forehead. I could swear that her head worked its way into my chest like a nestling baby.

Sleep. The comforting kind. One person to another. Bodies entwined and protective of each other. Sleep. Not death.

I heard her say softly, "Turn me loose," but when I woke and checked, she was still dozing.

The Plan

The next morning, I crept out of Rena's tent and found Fleet, Endra, and Salvador sitting outside eating breakfast. They invited me to dine with them.

I took a bite of bread. "Any news?" I asked. It was a careless question thrown out without much hope. What I heard was exactly what I expected.

"No," said Fleet. "Our communication in Aether is basically gone. Everyone we know has been thrown out of the city. Some have even been killed. It's a new day in town. A new high priest. No room for Wolves."

The world was now what we saw around us. A small piece of land with settlers camped on it. The sky above. The dirt beneath our feet. The birds in the trees. That was all we knew. It was as if the universe had shrunk.

In addition, we were surrounded by Purveyors who came from a much different world. Their world and our world would soon meet up, and then what would happen? What would become of this land that we occupied, and the tiny group of people living on its soil? I tried to push this thought out of my mind, but the future lingered like a butterfly just out of reach.

“Have we decided what to do?”

Every day. The same question. I’m sure they grew tired of hearing it. To their credit, they endured me with great patience.

“No,” said Fleet. He resumed eating.

Salvador watched me and tried to read my thoughts. Did he wonder what I was up to?

In fact, there were things I was mulling, an idea forming, but I had shared nothing with anyone. Such was the level of trust I had toward my family of Wolves. It made me feel guilty and yet, I took no chances. I changed the subject.

“I spent the night with Rena.”

“How is she?” said Endra. Endra, who seemed to care for everyone, including me.

“I think she’s better.” This was my attempt to deliberately express optimism in the face of reality. “I think any day she’ll come out of her trance and be her old self.”

Salvador’s face did not change. I was right. He was wondering, or maybe the better word was suspecting.

“What do you think about staying here?” he said, a question I did not take seriously. It sounded more like a test, a probe to gain some clue as to my own plans.

“I’m willing to discuss it,” I said, more to Fleet and Endra than Salvador. “Whatever the tribe thinks is best.”

Good political response. Best not to unsettle the ranks. Until I had made up my mind about my own plan. I had to admit. Salvador was on to something. He smelled it, like a hunter to its prey.

“We’ll talk about it tonight as a tribe,” said Fleet,
“And of course, you’re welcome to share your thoughts.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

“Good,” he concluded and finished his meal.

Fleet and Endra excused themselves.

Salvador stayed. He wasn’t finished with me yet.

I wasted no time probing him as well.

“You’re upset with me? You’ve been so moody. We haven’t talked . . . since . . .”

“Busy,” he claimed.

“We’re all busy. Not too busy to talk.”

“Did I upset you?” His tone so casual, you would have thought we were chatting as old friends. Not so. We were volleying back and forth. Probe, probe, probe. My turn.

“No, I was upset with what was happening, not with you.”

“Well,” he said and hesitated. “Here we are.”

“Okay.”

What did this mean?

“I know you’ve been thinking,” he said.

“Yes. I do that on a regular basis. You know me well. And of course, I have a lot of questions. Always, always, questions.”

My best tools. Sarcasm and deflection. How I used them like a fine chisel to chip away at someone. Someone who perhaps didn’t need to be chipped. Maybe a better approach might be kindness, but usually I saved that for a special occasion. Was this occasion special? Food for thought.

Salvador didn't flinch. He had grown used to my tactics. He carried on.

"You want me to be angry, don't you?" He knew he was on to something.

"No, why?" I blatantly threw out this falsehood as if I were skipping rocks across a river.

"Because, like the rest of us, you're frightened, but unlike the rest of us, you always wonder if we will hold on to you. It's your instinct to escape, even when you're with friends."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If I had grown up without parents and been forced to live on my own in the wilderness, I'd probably feel the same."

"You're not making any sense."

"No?"

Now I was annoyed, not just that he was right, but that he was invading my ultra-private space. He had read my thoughts and punctured my barrier. Still, I continued to pretend.

"I'm not mad at you or anyone else in the tribe."

"But you're not talking to us, either."

"It's you not talking to me, remember?"

"Right."

He was measuring me, deciding how far to push. Having penetrated, would he go easy on me and wait for another opportunity or zero in? Perhaps he realized, as I did, that time was not on our side.

He exhaled, as if coming to a decision.

“Whatever you do,” he urged, “don’t do it without me.”

“What are you talking about?”

He tilted toward me. “I want to be part of your plan.”

Now it was my turn to take a breath. A. Careful. Breath.

“Okay,” I said oh so breezily. “I’ll send you a note when I’ve made up my mind.”

Again, the sarcasm. But, in fact, I took him at his word. If he knew me at all, I assumed he would understand. He wanted in on my thoughts. It was an open invitation if I ever heard one but slipped under the table like a note to a friend. So, would I accept that invitation?

“Good,” he said and rose to leave.

He reached for my hand and pulled me up. Then, surprise, he bent down and kissed me on the cheek. He was quick about it, out of sight before I could react. It left me short of breath in the morning sun.

“Well, okay, guess I’ll get busy, too,” I said to nothing and no one. Sarcasm continued even after the audience had left.

How busy was I? That was to be determined, after I made up my mind about what my suggested plan was. I sat down again and tried to regain my train of thought. Hard to do when you’ve just been kissed.

Alone in my tent, I dozed off and caught myself dreaming about Dakota, the white buffalo, Horner and Harrieta. I dreamed they were walking with me through the middle of Last Chance on a sunny morning, the sky as blue as a fresh ocean. We were laughing and carrying on as if there were no Wild Ones, no Purveyors, not a worry in the world. The bookstore was within sight. The walls started glowing and we all recognized that it was the presence of Mother.

A voice caught the clean breeze blowing down the middle of town. "Bring the family home."

I came up short. We all did. Dakota looked at me. I looked at Harrieta and Horner.

"Bring the family home," the voice said again.

"But . . . we are home," I said, as if the fact that all of us were in the street was self-apparent.

"Bring the family home," she said a third time. It grew dark, as if the sun had disappeared. The resulting night sky was blank. No stars.

The four of us gazed up, caught off guard by the change, the store still glowing like a lamp. We covered our eyes. Then, the sky transformed and bathed our bodies in a soft, pink light.

"Miss Dakota, I'm skeered," said Harrieta as she grabbed Dakota's arm and clung tightly.

Horner whimpered and followed suit with the other arm.

Dakota found me, her eyes reflecting the light.

“You have family,” she said. “Bring them home.” Both arms, freed of Harrieta and Horner, circled and pointed east.

The white buffalo clopped up to me and kneeled in the street. Reluctantly, I climbed up on the big beast. He stood up and headed out of town.

“Goodbye,” I said to all my family.

I watched as they waved to me, as they disappeared, as the sun returned to its bright blue sky, as we passed the old beat-up sign for Last Chance.

I woke up and gasped, my heart racing.

Mother had spoken and I finally understood what she wanted. She had sent me on a mission. It was time to bring the family home. So. The command. And now the plan. Whatever that was.

—

The tribe was meeting. Ideas were being proposed and discussed. The future of the Wolves was at stake. But I was not there.

No. I was sitting next to Rena making my own plans. As Salvador had discerned, I was moving forward without him.

Rena still slept. She had been changed, wrapped, and prepared for the evening. All was as it should be. Except.

I reached out and touched her face.

“Rena,” I said gently. No response. “I’m going to set you free.” Still no response.

I reached around and began to loosen her wrap. It fell off, leaving her completely exposed. Her body. Her scars. Her placid face. Her arms fallen to her side and her head slumped over her chest.

“Rena,” I called out.

I pulled out a dress I had brought and slipped it over her head. It fell comfortably over her body and brushed the ground. It was a woven cloth made by the tribeswomen, an off shade of white. In the dim light, it might have been a wedding dress. If only Rena had been engaged. But this was no wedding. This was an escape, and the escapee was not even conscious.

There was a stir at the tent door and I jerked around to see who was coming in. The flap flew open. It was Salvador.

“Here you are,” he said, his face calm but determined.

“Don’t you have a meeting to go to?” My voice reflected my irritation. Perhaps also my guilt.

He gave me a stern glance. “Don’t you?”

“I’m not a leader,” I replied and turned away. I gripped Rena even tighter.

“It’s a tribal meeting. Everyone is invited.”

“Well,” I said, trying to appear low key. “Here I am.”

“And?” he asked.

“And?”

His eyes pierced me, then turned to Rena, then back to me. I read the curiosity in his face.

“She’s loose, I see.”

“She spoke to me,” I said. “She begged for her freedom.”

Salvador waited.

"Rena is conscious," I continued. "She knows she's being held prisoner."

"Prisoner?" he mused.

"Yes. Prisoner."

"She's being cared for, is she not?"

"Yes, but she's not free."

"As I recall, we brought her back from her prison."

"And yet, she still remains a prisoner."

"No."

"Yes."

He paused, if only to catch his breath, and perhaps to consider his strategy.

"So," he said, "you're just going to set her free?"

"Yes. To stay here or go be what she is. A Wild One or a tribal member, whatever she wants."

"You want her to live with that? That you kept her from getting better?"

"I want her to decide for herself."

"That's not much of a choice."

"Better than having no choice at all."

"She's not a prisoner."

My look told him otherwise.

"Okay," he conceded. "And then?"

His question took me off guard.

"And then what?" I said angrily.

"You're going to set her free . . ."

Now it was my turn to be put off, but he was persistent.

“Come on, Laura. You’re a smart girl. I know you’ve got something else planned.”

“Like?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Again. My turn to collect my thoughts. Perhaps his question was meant to reveal what exactly I had been thinking. Or sort of been thinking, thoughts being loosely defined into something vague that was like a cloud before a storm. First the gathering, then the action. And finally, the vision. But what exactly was the plan? And was it something like a storm?

“I’m not sure . . . yet.”

He stepped closer. “But you’ve been thinking,” he said, exasperated.

“Yes,” I said.

“Thank you. How hard was that?”

“More difficult than you’re giving me credit for.”

“Because?”

“Because if I acted on my plan, I . . . would be leaving.”

Salvador’s eyes narrowed. “Leaving.”

I tilted my head up to speak. “Yes. Leaving.”

Salvador raised his body and ran his hands through his hair. “You can’t leave. It’s too crazy out there, and you belong here. You’re a Wolf.”

“I can leave, unless I’m a prisoner, too. And you know as well as I, given my history, I’m only sort of Wolf, and maybe sort of . . . not.”

“What, you need a document or something? Our word is not good enough?”

"It's not like that at all."

I tried to look as if I was convinced. I tried to appear as certain as my words let on. But my body gave me away. I slumped and held Rena close to my chest.

"I have to leave," I said defensively.

"Why?" he demanded.

I hesitated. How much should I really share? How much should I trust the man who was asking me to stay?

"I can't tell you, exactly."

"Because . . ."

"You would try to stop me."

He came up short. There was a change in his expression. He had noted something, something urgent. Sharp man, Salvador. I suspected he just might be a mind reader.

"You know something, don't you?"

I let out my breath. "Yes."

"A plan?"

"Sort of. It's kind of coming together."

"And you have to follow this plan?"

"Yes."

"Because . . ."

"Mother told me."

"Mother. Your invisible spirit friend."

"Yes."

His mouth set. "And Mother told you to leave?"

"Yes."

"With Rena?"

"Maybe. If she wants to go with me. Otherwise, I go alone."

“Rena, who’s still sleeping on your chest? This Rena?”

“Well, I told you. I haven’t figured it all out.”

Salvador didn’t seem convinced, but he wasn’t opposed either. He seemed to be on the fence. I took this as a good thing.

He came back to me, a little gentler. “When are you going?”

“I don’t know. Maybe tonight.”

“You’re going back to the city.”

“Uhh, probably.”

“This has something to do with your real mother, not your spirit friend, right?”

“Well,” I said, “it actually has to do with both.”

He lowered his head and held it between his hands. His hair flowed down into his face. “Aye,” he groaned.

The air had gone out of the tent. Our lives were balanced at the tip of a point. Any sudden motion and we might fall off, him on one side, me on the other. Fall off into darkness, never to see each other again. I realized that I really cared for Salvador. It made my decision even more difficult.

He shifted his body, as if he had come to his own decision.

“Okay. I get it. You do what you have to do.”

He relaxed and flexed his arms, as if he had suddenly been released from a very tight grip, from his body being squeezed into a tiny space. Now he was free and preparing to fly like a bird. Perhaps fly from me for good.

Without a word, he stepped through the door and disappeared. This time, no kiss.

Turning my attention to Rena, I stroked her face and spoke tenderly.

“You’re free, my friend. I’ve done my part. Now it’s up to you.”

I felt her release me. Outside the tent, the space would open. The mission would become clear. The desire to rescue my family would take shape and become a reality. Now it was my turn to step through the door, into the night, ready to bring my family home. And if Rena chose to help me, so much the better.

—

To my surprise, as I moved outdoors, Salvador waited, pack in hand as if he’d known all along this trip was coming.

“Well, here we are,” he said as if his presence was just run of the mill. “Are you ready?”

“Ready?” Yes. Perhaps. But not for this.

“Your mission, whatever it is. I volunteer.”

“Are you ready?” I challenged.

“Let’s leave and see what happens.”

“What about your family?”

“They’ll be here when we return.”

“If we return.”

“I’m willing to make that bet.”

So Salvador had committed to my plan, at least with the bare knowledge he had. More like a developing plan, a plan on the fly, a plan in the making. Not much of a

plan really, but here we were, as he stated, ready to jump in. He looked at me and gave a conspirator's grin.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I said.

"At this moment, immensely."

I gestured toward the tent. "What about Rena?"

"I assume she comes with us. Either we carry her or she wakes up and walks. Whatever she chooses, or you choose for her, is fine with me."

"The point is to let her choose," I said.

"Well then," he said in a slightly louder voice, as if making an announcement to the community. "Rena, what say ye?"

"I'm coming," said a voice behind me. Rena, in her wedding dress, a bit shaky, but standing on her own two feet.

I spun around and embraced her. She hugged me with equal fervor.

Her voice thin and breathless, she asked, "Where are we going?"

I hesitated. How fragile was her mind? What would she say when she discovered my unfolding plan?

"To find my family," I said. "My mother, my brother and sister."

"And they are where?"

"I suspect . . . they're in the Dead Zone."

Rena's face went pale.

"You know this place," I said calmly, "as do I."

She winced, but she didn't topple. After a moment, I could see resolve in her hideously scarred face. Even in the dark, I thought I saw something like fire in her eyes.

"I will help you," she said confidently.

"And Mother will help us," I added.

"Mother?" said Salvador.

"Do you need faith?" I inquired, as if I had become a priest.

"No," he said. "I think mine is fine, thank you. If Mother decides to offer up her help, then so much the better."

Now that the journey was on us, I realized that the next step of my plan was a bit foggy. What should we do? That big next step?

"Hmm," said Salvador. "Now that I think of it, I think we could use some help to find that darn Dead Zone. Someone needs to get us there."

On that, he was correct.

"And, since this is not my first trip to that awful place, I suppose that someone should be me."

His importance to our quest hit me, and the reason he was so insistent on going.

"Yes," I said. "I agree."

"Well, then, ladies. Follow me. We have a lot of ground to cover. Fortunately, unlike someone I know, I took the trouble of planning for this trip. So, tonight we leave. I've got a trail in mind. At sunrise, we eat and rest."

He picked up his canvas sack and proceeded to hurry east. Rena and I were amazed by his eagerness.

"Coming?" he said.

We both came out of our stupor and began the long trip back to the Dead Zone. Rena and I held onto each other.

Salvador kept a slight distance ahead.
I suspected that he enjoyed being in charge.

The Road In

It was a long journey by foot. Days turned into weeks. Except for the sun and stars, we lost track of time. We traveled by night, rested by day. We avoided Purveyors as best we could. We shared rations. Salvador hunted when necessary.

It was a slow trudge because Rena was in no condition to take such a long trip through the wilderness. Yet, as we moved closer to Aether, she seemed to gain strength. For all her frailty, she showed remarkable spirit and determination and proved to be an inspiration to both Salvador and me.

“We will find your family,” she said repeatedly. “We will bring them back.”

Her encouragement kept my spirits from sagging.

Every night as we moved closer to Aether, a hush fell over us. Even the land around us seemed to appreciate what we were about and gave us the proper respect. We talked little and as soldiers in training, trekked with a purpose.

“You know this route,” I said to Salvador one night as the three of us huddled together for a brief rest.

“Yes,” he said, “probably better than most. I’ve been down this road more times than I can count.”

“Your family as well? In the Dead Zone?”

“One of my sisters, years ago, and a cousin. Lots of tribe members. Our branch of the Wolf Tribe has many who were captured, many who’ve been rescued.”

Salvador grew lost in thought. “I came here because I was restless and curious. Same with my brother. That’s caused us some trouble over the years. My parents have had more than their share of worries.”

“Yes, I can imagine,” I said. “I first met Dominick at night. I tripped and fell flat on my face right in front of him. He never let me forget it.”

“Ah, yeah,” said Salvador. “He could be merciless.”

The memory of Dominick sobered us.

“Dominick was my partner on many of these trips,” Salvador recalled. “We would be gone for days, even weeks.”

“I remember some of this,” said Rena, “before our tribe moved west. Your parents were very worried.”

“Yeah, I regret that. Pretty thoughtless of us.”

He paused.

“I remember we found a series of caves one day that stretched under the city. Like boys, we thought we had hit the jackpot. Dreams of buried treasure, all that young boy crap. What we found was anything but.”

I spoke up. “What was it?”

“Hundreds of people like you – Wolf Tribe and otherwise. Some had already died, so you can imagine the smell. Some we realized were far beyond rescuing. Wild

Ones. Fully turned, ready to be loosed. But then . . . there were those that we knew, like my sister, Bondi. But the question was, could we get her out? She was starved and crazed and not in any condition to travel.”

“Well, you couldn’t just leave her there, could you?”

Salvador stared at me as if I had offended him. “Well, what would you suggest?”

I had offended him, opened my mouth and shared an opinion that was misplaced.

“I’m sorry,” I offered. “I don’t have any idea what you could do.”

“We could do nothing,” he said bitterly. “That was the end of it. At least at that moment. So, that was where I started.”

“What about Bondi?”

“Well, this is the strange part of the story. We did return, out of hope that we could help her and others. And each time we returned, we found a few cells left open. Bondi’s was one of them. Despite her condition, we brought her back and gave her treatment. Eventually she recovered and moved west. She’s still there, last I heard. Married with two little cubs.”

“And that’s how you rescued me?”

“Yes. Someone, I suspect a friend or fellow family member, left your cell unlocked. We had worked out a sort of timing when we would visit. He caught on and helped us. Mind you. Never too many. Just enough to rescue without causing too much attention.”

Salvador was caught in the memory. He seemed to move in and out of consciousness, as did Rena and me.

Like prisoners in the Dead Zone, we were locked in our thoughts for quite a long time. That is, until a word hit me. I spoke it as if it was a magic spell.

“Eckard.”

“Who?”

“My brother. He would have access to keys. He might have told my sister where to find me.”

Rena nodded in affirmation. “That’s who that was. He would visit me, too, bring me things that I could eat. He even sat with me and sang songs. Very quietly. He has a nice voice.”

“He’d been assisting you,” I affirmed.

“I suppose so,” said Salvador.

“I wonder if Breta suspected?”

“Or your mother,” he added.

“Good question,” I continued. “How much did they know? Guess we’ll just have to find out, if they’re willing to tell us.”

“Maybe someone who knew turned them in,” Rena mused.

I aired my suspicion. “If anyone, that would be Breta.”

Salvador’s face absorbed this. It was as if an equation had been solved.

“That is one amazing story,” he concluded.

“It is,” said Rena. “I can believe it.”

“Me, too,” I chimed in.

“And now it’s our turn to rescue them,” Salvador concluded.

“But . . .”

Salvador caught my eye.

“But?”

“If he’s locked up, who’s going to open the cells?”

A breeze blew through our hair, as if the wind was thinking about our quandary.

“I think you might have the solution to that,” he said.

“Solution, as in . . .?”

“Think about it.”

I did, and I began to realize that his plan had been much more elaborate than I had first thought. His plan stretched back to my rescue and even before. Now I knew why he wanted to come, and what my part was in this whole affair.

“Mother,” I said.

“Yes. Mother.”

“Mother,” Rena murmured.

“We’re not just going to rescue my family, are we?”

Salvador was evasive. “Uhh, they’re in there with the others, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then your family is included. Then again, so is mine, and anybody else inside.”

“You think that . . .”

“You asked about my faith.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“My faith is fine,” he said. “The question is, what about yours?”

Here it was. An arrow to the heart. My faith? A bit weak at this moment.

“So we’re going to empty the Dead Zone?”

“Clean it up good,” he said. “Or at least put a good dent in it.”

We resumed walking, this time without comment.

“Mother,” I heard Rena say.

It appeared that her faith was also fine.

—

As we neared Aether, the afternoon sun dipped toward the horizon. Traffic coming in and out of the city grew thicker and the presence of Purveyors was ominous. Our pace slowed because of who we had to dodge. Hiding as we did around the outskirts, we zigzagged our way along the city boundaries until we found ourselves on the west side, where we knew the cave entrance was located.

Something about this place put Rena and me on alert. We could feel it tingling in our bodies. Our hearing was heightened, our vision sharpened. Even Salvador noticed and commented how we looked different, acted different. With our attention razor sharp, we were like hunters looking for prey.

Salvador located a path, a tiny thread of a road that wove its way through ragged trees, bushes, rusted fences, and around abandoned industrial areas once devoted to factories. He called this the old Aether, the pre-Purveyor city that existed before the Order took over.

As we soon learned, we were not the only ones here. Moving carefully, we noticed gatherings of Wild Ones, or rather, they noticed us. While we expected them to cause

us trouble, they kept their distance and followed us like pilgrims. We wondered if they knew that we were friendly, attached to them by our imprisonment. Whatever our rehab results from the Dead Zone, it had not changed the basic chemistry we had picked up in the caves. In body and mind, we were connected.

On a deserted stretch of the road, we came across a small group of half a dozen or so who blocked our way. They appeared unexpectedly and formed a barricade.

“Be still,” said Salvador.

I commanded my body, but my lips just wouldn't obey. “Do they know us?”

“Yes, sort of. They know you, and Rena. They know me as well.”

As if to confirm this, Rena stepped out toward them.

“Rena,” I pleaded, but she ignored me.

There was communication between them, whimpers that sounded like dogs. I tried to go after her, but Salvador held me back.

“Wait,” he commanded.

The group circled Rena and for a moment she was immersed by Wild Ones.

I pushed against Salvador, but his arm tightened.

“Wait,” he repeated.

The group opened and Rena emerged.

“They were released,” she said. “Not yet turned. Half wild. Half human. They can help us.”

We stood in shock.

“How?” said Salvador.

“They know the caves. They know where the prisoners are located.”

“They . . . know? How?”

“They’ve been running rescue missions.” Rena folded her arms. “I think we should trust them.”

Salvador stirred and let me go. “If anyone would know, it would be them.”

“But how do you know, Rena?” I insisted. “How do you know they’re telling the truth?”

“Because I can hear them,” she said. “I can hear their thoughts.”

“Hear them? They’re talking?”

“Yes. You can hear them, too, if you listen.”

I was dumbfounded.

“Yes,” she said, “because you are . . . Wild.”

The silence once again surrounded us. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Suddenly, within the deep recesses of my head, I could hear them. Soft murmurings, but clear words. Sentences. Complete thoughts.

“You’re right,” I admitted.

Salvador put his arm around me. “This is no accident. I believe these people have been searching for us. They’ve read your thoughts across who knows how many miles. They’ve been expecting us.”

Rena nodded in affirmation.

I was still stunned. My legs felt attached to the ground. I could barely breath.

“Can you hear them, Salvador?”

“No, but they can hear me. They know we’re friends.”

As the sun dripped color across our faces, we began to understand that our arrival was no coincidence. Somehow, we had been beckoned and these Wild Ones were our welcoming committee.

“Okay, then,” I said to whoever was listening. “Let’s get moving.”

As if to agree with us, the group of Wild Ones began climbing up the path. Salvador and Rena as well.

It was now a small search party who prepared to retrieve my family, and soon, we would be going into the cave.

—

There were outposts along the way. Purveyors on duty. Standing guard, keeping watch. I wondered why. People escaping out? People sneaking in? Perhaps they were simply there to be there. After all, they were Purveyors. They watched everywhere and everything.

Salvador knew all of this and used his experience to keep us out of harm’s way. As for the Wild Ones, they seemed to move like they were invisible. By instinct, they knew how to stay out of sight and remain undetectable.

We also had to keep watch for the aircraft that constantly patrolled the city. It appeared the Purveyors were expecting some type of invasion from a large foreign army. It was nerve wracking, the amount of patrolling they did in and out of Aether. Fortunately, Salvador had had the foresight to bring robes, the kind we had used in the West to hide from the Black Bears. They served the

same purpose here. Maintaining our cover, we moved slowly, patiently, and kept within sight of the Wild Ones.

It was now either late at night or early in the morning. Hard to tell because the darkness was so thick, as if the Purveyors had added something to the air that made it seem impenetrable, starless, and moonless. The terrain had also grown rugged and hindered our progress even further. The Wild Ones stopped and waited for us to catch up. When we all gathered, they pointed toward the city wall.

In the dark, we had difficulty understanding what they wanted, but in our thoughts, we heard the word quite clearly. Salvador also seemed to understand. Cave. Singular.

Salvador browsed through a brushy outcrop and pulled back some shrubs. There we saw the faint glow of an open hole. The reflection of light from inside.

"It's the cave," he said, "but this entrance is new to me. I've never been here before."

Rena moved closer to the Wild Ones. One in particular. A man, young, dark haired, very much in charge. She took his hand.

"This is secret," she said. "They have worked for many months to open this up. The Purveyors don't know about this. They use it to rescue Wild Ones."

"Rescue?" I said. "You mean they've been working to get them out?"

"Yes," Rena confirmed. "Now more than ever. The Purveyors have stopped releasing them. They're now

trying to kill them off. They created them. Now they're trying to get rid of them."

"Why?"

Rena replied, "They were experiments, an attempt to create another army." She glanced at the young man. "They changed the chemistry of their brains." She waited again, as if translating. "But they couldn't make them cooperate. Instead, the Wild Ones turned on them. They wanted freedom. They. . . refused to fight."

"An army gone rogue," said Salvador.

"Yes," said Rena. "Exactly."

The young man went to the entrance and pointed again.

"It's time to go," said Rena.

"Where does this lead?" said Salvador.

"To the main level of the prison." She took the hand of the young man again. "This is Assac."

Rena looked at me. "He says your mother is in here. Also his mother and brother. Many, many others, many Wolves as well. They want them all released. Before the Purveyors decide to wipe them out."

"How much time do we have?" said Salvador.

Assac was visibly upset.

"The time is now," she said. "We may already be too late."

And the Doors Opened

The cave itself was rough-hewn but passable. The Wild Ones had designed this branch with a concealed entryway into the central corridor. The main cave was well used, with a floor surface that seemed to be pressed down from the tread of human feet. It reminded me of the imprints of steps to a building. The steady flow of traffic had left its long history.

Even though this was a cave, a light source existed somewhere, perhaps somewhere within the walls themselves. As we hurried down the tunnel, it continuously illuminated our steps in a soft glow that reminded me of moonlight.

Were we being watched? If Purveyors were known for anything, it was watching. Everywhere. Everyone. Surely, this must be so. They would not leave a single inch unguarded. I always pictured the Purveyors as all-knowing, all-seeing. Faultlessly so.

Assac and his group moved faster than us, running interference and keeping watch for any trouble that might approach from down the tunnel. But to our surprise, no one stopped us.

As we drew further into the cave, voices began to infiltrate my head. Sporadically at first and then in waves—hundreds, maybe thousands—desperate voices that pleaded for help. Voices that knew we were here.

We rushed down the corridor believing that we would see prisoners, prison cells, evidence that people were being held captive. But as we progressed, nothing changed. For an hour or so, we walked and walked and saw nothing but cave walls glowing like underground moonbeams.

“Why is there nothing here?” I kept repeating to the group.

Assac turned to me and clearly argued back: “There is. They are here.”

We kept moving but the scenery never changed. Another hour, another futile search. More cave walls. More mysterious lights.

“I think we’re lost,” I concluded.

Suddenly, red lights began to flash and a high-pitched beeping flooded the corridor. All of us knew the inevitable. If they missed us before, they surely could see us now and they would come shortly. Armed and prepared to kill.

The beeping seemed to be a signal for something else. When the noise started, the Wild Ones cornered me. So did Salvador and Rena.

“Why is everyone watching me?” I asked.

“It’s time,” Salvador encouraged.

Time?

“Time for what?”

“What we came for.”

I stood as wobbly as a young tree in the wind. All this traveling and I had forgotten our previous conversation. The whole discussion about faith and Mother. The weight of the moment fell on my shoulders, but I had given no thought to carrying it out. I had not even anticipated needing Mother.

“Wait, you think . . .”

“Yes,” he said.

“But you don’t know, I don’t know . . .”

“It’s either that or die.”

“But . . .”

They all stood anticipating what I could do, what I had previously done — call down the power of Mother — as if she lived in the bowels of this cave. But had I really believed that? Had I not shared my doubts and warned them about the potential for failure?

“Mother,” Salvador pronounced like a priest at a ceremony.

The noise echoed like a high-pitched drum beat and the lights darted across our bodies like bloody wires.

“I don’t even know what to ask for,” I protested. “I mean, where are the prisoners? Where is my family? What do I need to do? I don’t even see any doors.”

I heard Assac’s voice in my head. “There,” came the pronouncement.

“Where?” I asked. “All I see are walls.”

He put his hand on a wall. “In here,” he spoke.

Rena touched my shoulder in solidarity. “You can do this.”

“What? What am I supposed to do?” The panic ran like electricity up and down my body.

“Call Mother,” she implored. “Call her now, just like when we were being chased by the Bear Tribe.”

“Well, that was a long time ago, and Mother hasn’t talked to me in months. I don’t even know if I believe in her anymore.”

“I believe,” she said. “Salvador believes. Assac believes.”

“And how’s that supposed to help me?”

“It’s up to you, sister. It’s up to your faith, now.”

“Oh, gee. Thanks for the encouragement.”

The beeping stopped. The red lights disappeared.

“See?” said Rena. “It’s already beginning.”

“I . . . don’t . . . think . . . so,” I said, my fury powered by what I perceived as an ambush, from both the Purveyors and my friends.

More lights flashed, bright ones from sources other than the cave walls. Flashing lights and voices. Purveyors running down the corridor.

And then they were beside us, yelling at us like criminals. They forced us to kneel and put our fists over our heads. Wrapping our hands with some type of straps, tying them tightly behind our backs, they kicked us to the floor and held their weapons to our heads.

Too late, I thought to myself. The voices in my head continued crying for help. Did I detect a whiff of disappointment? Did they realize that no one would be coming to help them? Then a familiar voice spoke from behind me.

"I knew sooner or later I would catch you," she said. "I knew someday you'd come back and try something like this. Now, just like you did to our grandfather, I get to see you die."

I knew that voice, even if it was faint. It crawled across my skin like a nest full of spiders.

Breta. Not a prisoner after all. She was part of this new rulership, apparently commanding a battalion of Purveyors.

I knew instantly that all of us were in danger, maybe fatal danger. There was no escaping this level of evil. If Mother didn't deliver us, then truly this would be the end.

I cried out from the bowels of my head, only one word, but it rolled off my tongue and bounced off the cave walls. It brought everybody, including Breta, to a standstill. It was as if my voice had been taken over and another had replaced it. Someone powerful, authoritative, not afraid of Purveyors: Mother.

—

The cave went black. Not just dark. A black like the absence of the sun, the stars, the moon, any celestial light familiar to us. All I could hear were the voices in my head and the shuffle of bodies around us: Breta barking orders, soldiers yelling, pandemonium in a very tight space.

"Salvador?" I hollered and heard him give me assurances not more than six inches from my ear.

“We’re all right,” he murmured. “Just keep your head down.”

“What’s happening?”

“No idea.”

Breta continued to scream orders, but their lights were disabled and their ranks were completely chaotic. Somebody fired a gun in the darkness. The shot was deafening and someone else cried out in pain.

Then the crack and squeal of metal. Multiple cracks. Locks breaking. Hinges creaking. The squeak of doors opening.

“What’s that?” I yelped in a state of panic.

Salvador pressed his voice in my ear again.

His reply was reassuring: “Mother.”

Mother? Yes, Mother.

My straps loosened. My hands were freed. I rubbed my wrists and called out. “Salvador? Rena? Assac?”

A pair of hands pulled me into another cave, perhaps another jail cell.

“Where are we?” At this point, I was completely disoriented.

“One of the prison caves, I think,” said Salvador. “I heard the door open next to me.”

And then the sound of human traffic: feet on the floor, bodies rushing by. The angry sound of Wild Ones being let out of their cages. Soldiers crying in protest. Their voices carried down the corridor like bodies in a rushing river.

Salvador held me tight. We both laid flat on the cell floor. In a few minutes, the main cave was completely empty and quiet as a crypt.

Finally, I raised my head. "Salvador?"

"I'm right here," he said and gently reached for my hand. Finding it, he stood up and pulled me with him.

"Rena?" I called out. No Rena.

"Where's Rena?" I said urgently.

Salvador did not respond.

"Where's Rena?" I demanded.

"I don't know," he said.

"Assac?" Once again, I called out. Again, no answer. No voice.

Salvador broke in. "I think they were carried down the corridor."

"What about my mother, my real mother?"

Salvador was speechless, and I couldn't blame him. I was launching questions rapid fire that no one could answer. As we stepped into the corridor and gathered our thoughts, the obvious question came to mind: Which way out?

With no light and no clear sense of direction, I realized it was possible that we could wander down here for weeks without getting out.

For a moment, I lost contact with Salvador. His absence sent me into a new state of panic.

"Salvador?" I cried.

"I'm here," he said, though his voice was somewhere down the cave. "I'm just searching around for . . . got it!"

A beam flashed.

“Found a light source,” he announced.

He shined the light on his face. “Now we need to know. Which way’s out?”

He lowered the light and scanned it along the floor. As an afterthought, he shined it in one of the cave cells. He froze for a second, and then lowered it again.

I read his face, those dark sad eyes.

“The dead.” he replied.

“Dead?”

“In the cells. A lot of dead.”

He walked toward another set of doors and shined the light in another cell. Same result.

“I think we were just in time.”

“More?”

“Many.”

Returning to me, he illuminated the cave walls and turned in a complete circle.

“Still don’t know the way out.”

So this was the end of our mission? To be stranded here until . . .

“Mother helped us,” I concluded.

“Yes, she did,” he concurred.

“And now? Can she show us the way out?”

“You tell me.”

As if to help us, the glowing lights returned.

Both of us looked up and down the tunnel.

“Lucky day,” I concluded.

Salvador pointed right, then left. A 50/50 chance.

“I’m betting this way,” he said and started right.

“I’ll take that bet,” I replied.

“Lucky so far,” he confirmed.

I followed and hoped that we were still under Mother’s protection.

—

Our choice was confirmed when we came across dead Purveyors strewn along the cave walls. Perhaps overpowered by Wild Ones. Perhaps simply trampled to death in the melee of escaped prisoners.

We gathered a few of their weapons and picked up the pace. It was a hopeful sign that we might stumble upon Rena and Assac.

A voice echoed through the cave. Someone groaning and cursing.

We located the voice and shined a light in their face. We both gasped. It was Breta. Hurt. Angry. Not happy to see us. Sprawled against a wall, one leg twisted backwards. Blood on her forehead. The young sister I had seen in Aether looked years older, her face as distended as one of the Wild Ones she had imprisoned. It took all my will to remind myself. She was my little sister and still in many ways a child.

“You won’t escape,” she hollered. “My army will find you.”

“Your army?” I said. “Your army is dead, in case you wondered.”

“It’s a big army,” she said, “and they’re on the hunt for you. They know where you are. It’s just a matter of time.”

Was she serious or just spouting words to try and scare us? I gathered, since it was just the three of us, it was the latter. It made her plight even more pitiable.

But what I needed at this moment was information.

“Where’s my mother?”

She gasped as she spoke. “Dead. In prison. I don’t care. I hope she rots somewhere in the dark.”

“Why? She’s your mother, too.”

“She’s a traitor. I knew it when you came to the house. I knew where her loyalties were.”

“So you did what, turn her over to the bad guys?”

“She got what she deserved.”

“What about Eckard?”

“He’s with her. Little scum bag used to sneak down here and hang out. He thought it was our secret. But Purveyors know. They know everything. I made sure of that.”

“Not quite,” I said.

She gasped again, her breath faltering.

“They didn’t know about us,” I said.

“Oh. We knew,” she countered. “We knew the moment you entered the cave.”

“But you didn’t.”

Again, she looked curious.

“You didn’t know about the escape plan. You didn’t know about the secret entrance. You didn’t know about Mother.”

Again she looked confused.

“No,” I said. “You didn’t. You don’t know anything about her. Not my mother, the Mother of us all.”

Her eyes began to flutter, as if her life force was sputtering.

“And did you know about Assac and the Wild Ones who helped us?”

She did not speak.

“No, there’s a lot you didn’t know.”

Salvador pressed his hand on my shoulder. “You want to bring her?”

Now I had to debate: In this situation, given the fact that she hovered between life and death, what would Dakota do?

Then I realized how Dakota’s hand had guided me even long after she had gone home. The old Bridget would have left her to die without even thinking. Might even have put an arrow in her face. But this other woman, this Laura that stood in front of her little sister, the one who had grown older, wiser, more aware of the larger world around her, this Laura had come to grips with the value of human life, even if that life was a belligerent little sister.

This was Dakota’s influence. This was the Dakota who forbid me from killing Wild Ones for sport. And now, I stood before my sister, the one who would have stabbed me through the heart if the situation had been reversed, and tried to be fair-minded. That was the new Laura.

“Take her,” I said. “At least till we get out of the cave. If we need to, we can leave her for the Purveyors.”

“You’ll regret this,” she snarled.

“Probably,” I said. “Then again, we’re family.”

“We’re not family,” she argued. “You don’t belong here. You’re not a Highsmith. I don’t know why our mother still wants you.”

“You know, it’s a mystery to me, too,” I said. “But I don’t know why she wants you either. You’re worse than your uncle. How come you guys are so angry? You grew up with everything. You lived a life of royalty. How strange that it didn’t make you smarter, or at least nicer. But there you have it. What a family.”

“At least I’m not living with dogs.”

This comment rattled me. What was it about this family and its inability to tell the difference between dogs and humans? I had to take a breath and regain my composure.

“Well now, let’s be clear,” I declared. “I don’t live with dogs. Salvador here is not a dog. Wolves are not dog people. They call themselves Wolves because a wolf is worthy to be admired. And Salvador, he’s a man worth three times your family fortune. So, just for the record, I belong to the Wolves. Wolves are honorable and know how to treat people kindly. And frankly, I’d rather be a Wolf and live in the wild than be like you.”

“You’ll die,” she continued. “You, the Wolves, the Wild Ones.”

“Eventually, yes,” I said. “But I’m not going to have you on my conscience.”

“Not yet, but soon.”

Another deep breath. For the moment, I regretted my decision to live by the code.

“Let’s go,” I said to Salvador, “before she wears me out.”

Salvador picked her up ever so gently. Even so, she howled like a dying animal and fought him with everything she had left. Fortunately, her weakened state didn’t allow for much resistance.

“Someone’s going to notice,” he said wryly.

True enough, but our hope was that the someone who noticed for would be Assac, or Rena, or maybe somewhere in the passing crowd, my family.

Mother Makes Her Choice

When we reached the cave entrance, it was fully dark. Breta had passed out, so we were able to sneak off and move cautiously down the path. We stopped for a moment to get our bearings and to look for any evidence of the Wild Ones. No sign of Assac or Rena. Fortunately, no Purveyors either. It was surprisingly quiet. The city seemed asleep. The usual air traffic and buzz of urban movement was completely absent. It was so quiet, it hurt my ears.

"Where is everyone?" I wondered. I tried to pick up any words or thoughts. "It's like everyone has just disappeared."

"No, not disappeared," he said. "They're waiting for something."

"Waiting for?"

Salvador lowered Breta to the ground and stretched his shoulders. Then looking up at the sky, he said, "Battle."

"Battle?"

"Yes."

"Battle as in . . ."

“War. Armies. Like Breta said, a big army.”

“You can tell?”

“I can sense it, yes.”

The idea of war set me to thinking about all the people I cared for. I ached because I was so far from home, so far from anyone who was close to me. Most of all, I missed Rena.

But now was not the time to feel sorry. I tried to focus on the present, on what we could do in the short term.

“So, where do we go?”

“That’s a good question,” he said.

“And what about Breta?”

Salvador glanced at the sleeping girl. “I think we’ll have to leave her.”

“You mean . . .”

“We can drop her at a Purveyor station. Someone will eventually return. But we have to hurry.”

“Why?” When the question came out, I realized how silly it seemed. And yet, it was important to know. What did Salvador think would happen? And what were we going to do as our part?

“This war is your war, my war, the final reckoning, I think. And your job is not done, not yet. Mother still must help us.”

“To do what?”

“To win the battle.”

“Against the Purveyors?”

“All these questions. We’re wasting time. Let’s move forward. I think it will be clearer to us as we get closer.”

“Nothing’s clear to me right now.”

“Then you and I know the same, which is nothing, so, let’s hope help comes soon.”

He picked up Breta and moved down the path at a brisk pace. I decided, for once in my life, to be cooperative.

—

As we neared the front of the city, Salvador picked out a Purveyor guard station and slipped in. We were both surprised to find that it was empty.

“Guess it’s the on-call alert,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Everyone’s been called to battle. They’re throwing everything they’ve got into the plan.”

“The plan?”

“I think they plan to run a major front. Perhaps overrun any resistance.”

“Wait. Who’s resisting? It seems kind of silly to gather such a large army when there’s no one really to resist.”

Depositing Breta at the watch station, Salvador turned to me. “Maybe we don’t see it, yet. Maybe the Wild Ones are gathering.”

Breta stirred. “Who’s there?” she said weakly.

“We are,” I told her. “The same two who rescued you.”

“You going to kill me?”

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. “Not this time, but don’t push your luck.”

“Cowards,” she cursed.

We all stared at each other. No words seemed appropriate. Anything spoken between us was just a waste of air. Still, Breta was not the same person. The arrogant sister was now a small girl railing against the inevitable. Strange how I could empathize. Being trapped, hurt, helpless. The irony of my previous imprisonment struck me.

“Not cowards. Survivors,” I said. “That’s the difference between us. I’ve spent my life learning how to survive out here. Not that you could appreciate that. So, now it’s your turn. It’s something you’ll have to learn the hard way. I’m afraid the good life is over, Breta. Time to grow up.”

A light went out in her face. I think the truth hit her hard.

“You’re just going to leave me to die?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe your army will help you. We’re leaving you here, assuming a Purveyor will come sooner or later.”

She shook her head and spoke solemnly. “Nobody’s coming,” she said. “They’re all gathering at the gate.”

It seemed that Salvador had guessed correctly.

“You know this how?” I asked.

“Because I helped plan it.”

Her statement gave us pause. We stood astounded in the heavy darkness. I pressed her for more information.

“Why are they gathering?”

“The enemy has come.”

“What enemy?”

“Your people.”

“Wolves?”

“Wild Ones.” Her breath began to grow shallow.

“My people?” I fretted.

“Yes, you’re part of them.”

The truth struck me square. I was part of them. I could hear them, talk to them. I understood who they were and where they came from. Most of all, there was chemistry between us.

“Of all things,” I muttered. “Breta . . .”

Salvador held her head and brushed the hair from her face.

“She’s dying,” he pronounced.

Breta glanced at him. “Looks like you’ll get what you want.”

He spoke as a friend to the dying. “Don’t be angry, Breta. I wouldn’t wish this on anybody. Least of all family.”

“You’re not family,” she growled.

Salvador flinched, but remained calm. “Well, for now, we’re all you’ve got.”

Breta stopped resisting, stopped moving. We knew the time was near.

“You won’t die alone,” he said. “Best we can offer.”

Her face changed from desperation to gratitude. All in the space of a few dying breaths. Perhaps his kindness finally registered. Perhaps she knew what was coming. Perhaps it was the strong arms that held her. Salvador’s natural gift of comfort.

“Thank you.” Her breathing eased, then ceased. She was gone.

"Well, that solves that problem," I said.

Salvador looked at me sharply.

I returned his anger with my own defiance.

"She's your sister," he declared.

"Don't tell her that."

"I'm not telling her. I'm telling you."

"As if I need to be reminded."

"Apparently, you do."

He held me in his gaze for a moment, long enough to make me feel ashamed.

"I don't need to argue about it," he continued. "I just want you to acknowledge. This is your family."

"The Wolves are my family."

"She is your family," he insisted.

A wave of hot flame rolled up my face. I knew he had pinned me down. There were no words to retaliate. Everything that needed to be said was out in the open.

"Okay. Fine. She's my family."

He looked relieved. "We'll bury her."

"Right," I said. Whether I agreed or disagreed made no difference. For now, I was letting him make the decisions.

We spent the next hour gathering stones and preparing a grave site. When we finished, we stood reverently for a few minutes.

"Family is always family," he proclaimed. "That is the Wolf way."

From Dakota to the Wolf Tribe to Dominick to Salvador and back. It seemed the progression of wisdom was being carried on, and that I still had a lot to learn.

Was this another part of the code? I only wished I felt grief toward her, but something held me back. All I could do was keep mum and let the moments take care of themselves.

“Now we go,” he ordered.

Off we went down the hill, preparing ourselves for the worst. Wild Ones. Wolves. Purveyors. Who knew what else awaited us?

The good news. Mother had indeed shown herself. Now we waited to see if in some form or fashion, she would arrive to help us at the final battle.

—

As we hurried down the path, the sun began to set. We were caught among the rusted, broken buildings, old growth trees, and the height of the wall along which we ran.

Something changed in the atmosphere. Like the click of an alarm clock, we heard the echo of giant pieces of machinery. As we moved faster, the echo began to move toward us. And then, as if the wall had doors, Purveyors poured out and swarmed over us.

“The battle,” said Salvador. “It’s begun.”

“We’re too late,” I said. “There’s nothing we can do.”

The war for us was over in matter of moments. We were surrounded by soldiers. A commander bound us and led us back through the wall.

The wall. It was really a hive of activity and we were part of a small caravan that progressed from floor to floor

for what seemed like hours. Past other officers, past machinery and screens and a wide bureau of people at work, busy with coordinating what we couldn't see or understand.

After miles of walking and being passed off from one group to another, Salvador was thrown into one office with the door locked and I was thrown into another. My hands were secured to a table and I was left to wonder about our fates and, in this huge hive, why we even mattered. Why weren't we simply killed?

All these questions and all I had now was time. Time to wonder. Time to fret. Time to do nothing but look at the door, the walls, the ceiling. Too much time and yet not enough. I put my head on the table, tried to clear my mind, and, of course, forget about time.

—

The door opened. A man with a suit walked in and sat down. He was tall, even handsome, with white hair flowing over his ears, a square face, and glasses. On his suit was some type of pin which I assumed gave him the authority to come in and sit down.

"Laura Becker?" he said curtly.

"Who wants to know?" I shot back.

As he looked at me, unblinking, I could tell he was making calculations. For all I knew, he had the power of life and death. I should have been more guarded, but I was angry, frightened, and showing my usual ability to run my mouth.

“My name is Wendell Dolan,” he said. “I am the official counselor for our high priest, James Highsmith.”

“The high priest needs a counselor?” I goaded. “He can’t make up his own mind about what he wants to do with me?”

“I’m his legal counselor,” he emphasized.

“And I should care because?”

“Your life is on the line. That’s why.”

So I was right. People above me were deciding my fate. Perhaps I should talk less, pay more attention. Perhaps.

“All right. I’m Laura Becker, daughter of Rebecca Becker. That means I was the granddaughter of Henry Highsmith. Whom, as you must know, I killed. So, that means I’m a murderer and probably on someone’s hit list. Yes, Mr. Counselor, I know all this. You probably know all this. And now Mr. James Highsmith is in command, and I assume he knows all this. We all know everything, so let’s stop pretending this is a first-time meet and greet. Now. What can I do for you?”

As if I were the one in charge.

He was not impressed. “You have an appointment.”

He stood up and signaled to someone. The door opened and I was unchained from the table.

“Follow me,” he ordered.

Another long trek from department to department, up flights of stairs and into a moving box which I was told was an elevator. More shuffling past guards, more passing through doors, until we entered a large office that

was elaborately decorated. I assumed that this belonged to someone high up in rank.

Dolan seated me in a cushy chair in front of the desk and sat catacorner from me. He crossed his legs and waited. Motionless. Expressionless. Like a statue or a guard dog.

The large doors opened and through it marched another man in a costume of some sort. He was robed with a decorative hat and lots of shiny metal objects on his chest and shoulders. He was old but moved like a much younger man. White hair that sat wildly on his head. A solid face with a haughty gaze and a long nose. His mouth was chiseled and he had a well-trimmed beard. It startled me because, as my memory recalled, he was a replica of his brother. Henry Highsmith. He sat behind his large desk for several minutes. Dolan remained a statue.

“You look like your mother,” he said in a deep voice.

“You look like your brother,” I said.

“Hmm. Seems we’re both right.”

Another moment of awkward silence.

“So you’re Laura Becker,” he said.

“So you’re James Highsmith,” I mimicked.

He gave me an eyeful but kept his composure.

“Yes. I’m James Highsmith, the newly ordained high priest of Aether.”

“Yes again. That much I guessed.”

The conversation broke off. More waiting. More staring.

“Would you like to see her?” he said.

“See who?”

“Your mother.”

The conversation stalled again. More calculations. More risk for me.

Highsmith restarted it. “She’s in this building.” He made a few clicks on his desk and whirled a screen around. “There you go.”

The screen revealed a woman lying in a cell, ragged, starved. She did not move. I thought perhaps . . .

“Is she alive?”

“Barely,” he said. “She’s not fared well these last few weeks. Unlucky and uncooperative.”

I scoured the screen as if drinking in her last moments.

“And you thought she was in the cave,” he remarked.

I kept watching her.

“All a waste of your time,” he continued. “Then again, if you had come in good faith and knocked on our door, I could have saved you a lot of heartache. As it is, we both lost a lot. And those savages, thanks to you, are on the loose.”

I glanced at him, then back at the screen.

“And perhaps your sister would still be alive.”

This caught my attention.

“Oh yes, we watched it all. We know where she’s buried. We know what you did. We have all the evidence.”

I was left speechless, a rare moment indeed. What to make of all these accusations? My thoughts turned to my brother.

“Where’s Eckard?”

“Oh, he’s around. Not much better off. I’d say he’s probably got another couple of days left. Your mother, too, from the looks of her.”

My heart leaped in my chest. I was surprised by the emotion that welled up. How odd that I was so moved by a woman I barely remembered. But, as Salvador reminded me, this was my family. My mother, or what was left of her. What I lacked in sympathy for Breta seemed to be overflowing for Rebecca. Her presence was what I had secretly yearned for most of my life.

“I can tell by your interest. You’d like to help her,” said Highsmith.

Something in my face must have given me away.

“You help me, I’ll help her. All of you can go live together somewhere remote, out of my hair.”

I crossed my legs and dusted my lap, all a vain attempt to appear disinterested. “What kind of help?”

“Whatever you used to destroy my prison. That was impressive. I assume you have power of some sort, power that we could use in our quest to be rid of these so-called Wild Ones. Not to mention the other Wolf pests that you hang out with.”

It was a devil’s bargain and assumed the worst about Wolves, Wild Ones, people in general. But it pounded me with doubt. Was it a done deal that Aether would keep going as is without so much as a flinch? That Wild Ones and Wolves would continue to be hunted, that a city would live at the expense of everyone around it—without any consequences? That some people would continue to

live richly while others would be imprisoned? That nothing like fairness would ever take charge in the world?

I cringed. No justice. No mercy. Just the threat of raw power. Highsmith assumed this was the state of the world, and he also assumed that I would believe it, at least if he made the pot sweet enough.

I hung again between two threads. I sat with the power of Mother at my beckon—the power of good—but also recognized the power of evil in the world. In the push and pull between Mother and the Order, good and evil, did it all end up in a stalemate?

I was overwhelmed. Then again, I remembered what Mother was capable of, how the Order had fallen to pieces against her will, and in that moment, I was uplifted. Her power. Her voice. On my side. It rushed through me like wind. I felt my entire body rise.

“What do you believe in?” I said.

Highsmith seemed surprised by my question.

“You’re a priest. A high priest of some sort. What do you believe in?”

“You want me to explain my theology?”

“Yes, in terms that a poor girl like me would understand.”

Highsmith glanced at Dolan. It was a question to which he should have been accustomed, but it seemed to startle him. He took several moments to reply.

“We are a chosen people,” he began. “It is the reason why we have come to rule this rugged land filled with, well, barbarians. We believe in the god Aether, and it is Aether’s desire that we bring the Order to the world.”

I took note that he seemed pleased with his explanation. He was supremely confident in his powers of reason.

“Our goal is to create a civilization that reflects the teachings of Aether and the Order. As servants of that Order, we work to ensure that the will of Aether is carried out.”

He seemed to be reciting a statement of faith. Very rote. But I was curious. There was more to this than just simple lines of doctrine.

“That doesn’t really tell me what you believe,” I said. “It tells me what your mission is, but what about what you really believe?”

“I just told you.”

“No, you haven’t, really. What does Aether have to do with an army like the Purveyors, with creating Wild Ones, with hunting down other people who have nothing to do with you? Why do you have to be cruel to my mother, my brother, to the Wolves? What makes you kill people just because they are different from you? Does Aether make you do all this?”

Dolan stirred as if to object to my line of questioning, but Highsmith motioned and he remained seated.

“If you bear Aether in your soul, then you are part of the Order,” he said. “If not, then you stand outside of the will of Aether and must be disciplined.”

“So, you carry out the will of Aether, whatever that is, but since you’re the only ones who carry out that will, you get to make the rules and decide who lives or who dies? You don’t bother to explain yourself to anyone or

understand why people may not think like you? If they're not you, even if they don't believe in Aether, then they deserve to, well, die."

Highsmith took this in. "That's a blunt way to put it."

"What other way should I say it? Am I missing something?"

"No," he remarked. "I think you understand."

"And if I help you, then I'm doing the will of Aether?"

"Exactly."

"And if I don't, then you're going to kill me. Laura Becker. Your own family."

"Yes. I'm impressed."

I let out a deep breath. "Glad I understand. You see, in your eyes, I've been unfortunate because I've lived with a group of people who help each other and live peacefully. Not people of Aether. But good people."

Highsmith's face was blank.

"Yes," I said, "you wouldn't understand that because . . . you're only concerned with the will of Aether, and Aether doesn't seem to be concerned about people other than you. It seems that Aether is only with the rulers of Aether. The rest of us just get chewed up and spit out. Because, of course, they deserve it. Some people are born this way. I guess that just makes them unlucky, or, again, in your eyes, unholy unlucky."

Dolan stirred again, anxious to object, but I cut him off.

"Well, that's just silly, and that's why I wouldn't help you for any price. I don't care about your Aether. I

certainly don't care about the Order. So, why would I want to be a part of it?"

"Maybe to save your life?" said Highsmith.

"Well, that's where you've made a mistake."

"Excuse me?"

"You see, I don't believe in your Aether, but I do believe in Mother."

"Who?"

"Yes, you wouldn't understand, being an outsider and all. Doesn't seem fair, does it? You don't know about Mother, and yet here I am doing her will, and you're the one that has to pay the price. The difference is that I'm not interested in making you believe in her. But I am willing to defend her, and the people who need my protection. And I'm willing to put her power up against Aether any day. Then we'll see who comes out on top. One on one. What do you say, Highsmith? Let's duke it out."

Dolan jumped up as if he were going to tackle me. I jumped up to defend myself. But I had to have the last word.

"You see, when you die, Aether dies. But Mother exists, whether I live or not."

Now Highsmith circled his desk, his face hardened as if it was flint. He threw his shoulders back and pointed at the screen. "This is your mother, and she's not going anywhere. You, the daughter, will perish with her, and that will be the end of your little drama. And Aether will carry on as if you never existed. That is the will of the Order."

He marched up and spread his garments as if to perform his standard priestly functions. "I sentence you to die," he said and stamped out of the room.

Dolan approached me. I stood with my palms open. "Go ahead. It won't change your fate."

Dolan led me out of the room. After another journey through what seemed like acres of corridors, he ushered me into a cell where I was locked up. Again. But this time I was not alone. In that same cell was my mother.

—

This moving around, as if my life was spinning in circles. In one cave. Out another. In one office. Out another. Now back to a prison cell, my head whirling with distress. And in the middle of the floor, my real mother, barely conscious, barely clothed, barely alive.

Looking around the room, I was aware that we were being observed. A real-life nightmare played out before an audience of hundreds, maybe thousands. Still, my mother needed me and at this moment, I also needed her.

"Mother," I spoke softly and rubbed her shoulder.

She groaned.

"Mother, it's me," I said. "Laura. Your daughter."

Her eyes opened. "Laura?"

"Yes, it's me."

She reached out a hand and I grasped it. "You're alive?"

"Yes," I said. "For now anyway."

My mother rolled on her back. "They told me you were dead."

"Who told you?"

"James, the others. They said you all died in a cave-in. An accident."

"No. They were lying. There was no cave-in, but there was a breakout. We freed the Wild Ones. I was down there looking for you. I didn't know they'd moved you."

"They just brought me up here not long ago. I can't remember. Did you see Eckard?"

"No, I didn't. But . . ."

I hesitated. When was a good time to tell her about Breta?

"Never mind," I said. "We'll talk more later."

She held my hand tightly. "I'm so glad to see you." Then she faded and fell asleep.

"Me, too," I said. I gently put her head in my lap and massaged her hair. "I'm so glad."

My back against a wall, I held my mother for as long as I had strength.

The lights were intensely bright, the walls smooth as stone and white as snow. There were blinking cameras around the ceiling, but no windows. It was like being in a well-lit box. Even so, I slumped down on the floor, pulled my mother next to me, put my arms around her, and dozed off.

I dreamed restlessly of lights in my head that were hot, making my brain hot. And then I dreamed that there was a river of white that carried me downstream. I was in a world without color and my body ached. My tongue

was as arid as a piece of dried grass. That dream carried on for what seemed like days and weeks. Nothing but white, the color white, the pure holy and unquenchable brilliance of white. Instinctively, my mind fought to wake up. It was a losing battle until I heard a voice.

“Laura,” the voice said tenderly.

I turned to see who it was.

For the first time, I saw the face of Mother. Brown skinned, fiery eyes, long black hair swirling, a small round face, and ears with hoops dangling from her lobes. She carried a staff carved with strange markings. It bore the language of another universe. She was terrifying and yet warm with her body language. I was looking directly into her eyes.

I welcomed her presence like the balm of a warm summer day. Even though I saw her, I knew her presence could not be confined to one place. She was in front of me and yet all around me. The word that came to my mind. Eternal.

Her presence buoyed me, as if I was being pulled from darkness into her beautiful light. And something else. I was consumed by a conviction that washed over me. I knew that we were going to be released. From the white room. From Aether. We were not alone. She who I had defended was there to defend us. No Purveyor or priest from the Order could hold us back. We were going to leave here and I would process with her right out the gates of Aether. Not just me. My mother, Salvador, Eckard. We were going to make it.

—

When I awoke, I found my real mother holding me in her arms. Somehow, things had reversed and I was the one being nurtured. She was frail but her arms felt strong, bound together by her desire to comfort her daughter.

“You were having nightmares,” she said. “I tried to wake you.”

“Not nightmares,” I said. “Visions.”

“Visions?”

“Yes. Visions. The good news is, Mother is with us.”

“Mother?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m your mother.”

“My spiritual Mother. She’s going to help us. We are all part of her. You’re my physical mother, but she belongs to all of us. She is my great protector, the eternal . . . Mother.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. Soon.”

Rising, I stood in the middle of the room, a little shaky, but strong enough to hold my own. I spoke to the cameras.

“Listen, you who watch us. This is the moment when your reign stops, your cruelty ends, your power crumbles. This is the moment when your religion, such as it is, falls before the real power of good in this world. This is the moment when Mother has come to be with us and we are no longer going to be imprisoned. And for you,

Aether, for everyone who thinks Aether is the real god, this is the end.”

Fearful, my mother backed into a corner and covered her chest. Maybe it was my voice. Maybe it was the idea of me channeling some powerful being. Whatever the reason, I knew that I spoke with authority as I raised my hands in front of me.

The energy in my fingers began to tingle like a thousand fires. My body elevated and then, with a burst, light shot from those same fingers and hit the wall in front of me. I heard the echo of drums fly through the walls, across the rooms, out across the city, and into the corridors of every house and building. It was not energy as in the power of a street light. Rather, whoever encountered that energy was immediately judged and held accountable for their actions and their life. In simple terms, this power was the power of judgment.

As for me, I knew Mother was in my bones. I felt her in my head. I felt her in my fingers and feet. Most of all, I felt her in my chest and in my heart. The great insights of Mother flowed through me and across the land in which we lived. The power terrified me and yet held me safely in her arms. I knew if I remained in those arms, I would be protected. But the powers that had dogged us and trapped us and betrayed us were exposed and demolished.

And then, as quickly as it came, the power stopped. I dropped in the middle of the floor and lay like a crumpled rag. My mother rushed over and held me in her arms, fearful that I had died. She cried out and repeated

my name many, many times. But I was not dead. On the contrary, I was very much alive. I grasped her hand and smiled.

The door to our cell eased opened. As we both watched, the room grew quiet. There were no other noises from the outside. No talking. No machinery. No official Order business transmitting in the corridors. As we stood and walked to the door, peered around the room, there were no people.

We walked out of our cell. Some daylight from the windows penetrated the gloom. We walked to a window and looked out across the city. There were specks of people here and there wandering about, dazed and confused. There were others who walked from the wall and seemed equally confused. But their numbers were small, like ants displaced from their nests. Ants who had lost a queen and had no other purpose. Ants who had nowhere else to go.

But what we noticed more than small groups of people was the tranquility. What would have been a busy day in the city was lacking any noise, any transportation, any movement that hinted we were in a city. Even within the wall, the silence let us know one important thing: The Purveyors were gone. Vanished. Eviscerated.

No one was there to imprison us or force us to do something against our will. No priest threatened us. No soldier brandished their gun at us. In short, we were free to move about as needed. We were free to travel wherever we pleased. Most important, we could, without any resistance, go home and live in peace.

The Tribe Resettles

The two of us were also disoriented, like animals who had just been freed from their cages.

“What did you do?” my mother gushed.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said. “The power of Mother did this. She has freed us from the Purveyors.”

She shook her head in amazement. “Why didn’t I disappear?”

That was a question I would ponder for years.

“I don’t know. You were with me. But beyond that, only Mother knows. I’m glad you’re here. I think she might see in you the good that still exists.”

She sat down and started to cry. I stood next to her and put my arms around her shoulder. Together we comforted each other for a long time.

When we gained our bearings, she led us through the wall on a long journey. It was familiar territory to her and she expertly navigated us until we came to the front door of the entire operation and strode into the surrounding courtyard.

The sun was setting as we found a bench and sat together for a few minutes. The golden rays bounced off the windows and created a warm glow around us.

My mother put her arm around me. "How did you know about . . . all this?"

"I learned a new code, a new way to live from my good friend Dakota, far west of here in Last Chance."

"You survived all those years," she said. "I never could have imagined you being so strong."

"They were hard." My breath faltered and tears welled up. "I was lonely and lost. Dakota helped teach me how to live differently, how to be respectful of life."

"She was your other mother."

"Yes, for a brief time. I miss her. I think she would be very proud of me."

"I'm sure she would. I know I am."

We let the setting sun surround us with glorious hues.

"Can I go with you?" she said. "Can you take me back to Last Chance?"

I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't thought of where I would go if I managed to escape. It never occurred to me that the Purveyors would ever be out of my life or that I would be free. And Last Chance as home? I gave her question a lot of thought. It mingled with my other questions: What about Salvador, the rest of the Wolves, my friends in the mountains? What about Rena and Assac? And Eckard? For the moment, however, my mother had my full attention.

"You're welcome to come with me or go anywhere you want. You're free. You're forgiven. You've been

given a second chance. If I were you, I'd make the most of it."

"Listen to you," she said, "sounding so wise and grown up."

I laughed. "Trust me, I've been given many chances. If anything, I speak from experience."

"Then I'll have to learn from you."

Again I laughed.

She pulled me up and we embraced. The love I had sought finally flowed between us. It quenched a thirst. I felt happy.

"Let's go home," she said, as if she knew where home was.

I gladly followed her as she found a main street and searched for an abandoned vehicle with the keys in it. It didn't take her long. We both rode through the streets of the city, excited to be headed somewhere besides a cell or a dark cave.

As we approached the main gate leading out of Aether, we saw someone familiar. Salvador and Eckard waiting for us. We cried in relief as we hugged each other. Salvador seemed especially grateful.

"I didn't know if you'd made it," he said. "I've been out here all day hoping."

"Where'd you find Eckard?"

"He had the same idea. About his mother. We found each other and joined together to make sure we kept an eye out."

A family reunion. That was why we came and that was what we got. The four of us jumped in the car and

left the city without any regrets. Salvador drove us and we anticipated that soon we would be among friends, Wolves, family, free to go about our lives.

We drove in the dusky light and saw, stretched out along the highway, dead Wild Ones. Probably some Wolves and other foes of the kingdom. It made me grateful that we were alive.

I thought about my mother's idea of returning to Last Chance, the place where my real journey had started. She had implanted the seed and I was determined to make it flower. In the back of my mind, I wondered if I might see Dakota; if, upon entering this little community of hope, I might see her white buffalo waiting for us, chewing grass, and proving that the power of Mother and the life of the code would stand long beyond our existence; that we might create a small town devoted to her memory, a town with many books and many days and years of wonderful reading. That was what I thought about as we journeyed down the highway, all of us together as family.

The Dance

They stretched across the road. Thousands of Wild Ones lined up and watching as our car slowed and then stopped. They stretched down each side of the road. They stretched for as far as one could see in the dark with the only illumination a single set of headlights. There were probably more stretched beyond the road that we couldn't see.

And in the middle of it all was Rena and Assac.

"What on earth?" my mother exclaimed.

Salvador sat in the driver's seat as if he were an audience member in a theater. Stating the obvious, he said, "Wild Ones."

"What do we do?" Eckard asked.

"Are they going to attack us?" my mother added fearfully.

"No," I said. "They're not angry. They're here to greet us."

"Greet us?"

"Yes. I can hear them in my head. We helped rescue them. They're happy to see us. You can't tell because of who they are, but that's what they're thinking."

"You can hear them?"

"Yeah. I can hear them. I am them. I'm . . . a Wild One."

My mother raised her hands to her lips. In shock.

"Are they going to let us pass?" said Eckard.

"Eventually," I answered. "But first, the dance."

"The dance?" said Salvador.

"That's what they're saying."

"What's the dance?" He looked at me in bewilderment.

"I don't know. Guess we'll find out."

Rena stepped forward with her arms extended. I took this as an invitation and jumped out of the car.

We ran together and hugged as two sisters who had been separated by tragedy should hug. Joyfully. Thankfully. We had survived a terrible ordeal. We had suffered together. We had fought together. And we had won.

"Are you all right?" I said with tears in my eyes.

"Better than all right," she said. "I found a new tribe."

I looked at her with astonishment. "A new tribe!"

"Part of the old one, but part of a new one. Wild Ones. Wolves. People who've been let out of prison. People who were released from Aether. We call ourselves the Freed Ones."

"And Assac is part of this?"

"Assac is the leader. And he wants me to help him."

"Help him do what?"

Rena turned me toward the new tribe as exhibit A. We stood arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder. "He wants to

help them be freed from their Wildness. He wants them to become what he calls Beyond Wild. He wants these people to be at peace. With themselves. With their neighbors. With their families.”

“He’s going to help them?”

She circled back to me. Her eyes were serious. She pointed at me as if to make a promise. “You’re going to help them.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You and Mother.”

“Wait . . .”

“We’re all going to Last Chance.”

Wonderful news to me. I gave her another hug.

“You’ll see,” she said. “And we’re going to finish what you started. Assac and myself. Now tell me if you agree with what I’m about to say. Dakota would be so proud.”

I was speechless. But she was right. If Dakota could see this, should would be more than proud. She would be clapping loudly.

The others in the car eased out and walked to the front of the vehicle.. They joined us in a quiet celebration. All these Wild Ones, Wolves, whoever else had come, I could hear them thanking us. I could hear their happy thoughts. A steady stream of thank yous. So unusual coming from a group that I had openly scorned. Now we were joined together as tribes and families.

“We’re going to Last Chance,” my mother said with enthusiasm. “Would you care to join us?”

“We would,” said Rena. “We’ll meet you at the bookstore.”

Suddenly Assac came forward. Facing us, he smiled and raised both arms in the air. I could hear him. It was a loud declaration to the crowd at hand: “And now. The dance.”

It began, spontaneously and widely and vigorously. Thousands of them spinning and happily dancing all around us. There was a sea of them all moving separately, yet together, in some type of movement that reminded me of the joy one might have after a wedding or a great feast. I had never seen anything like it, and probably will never see it again on this grand scale.

Even with no music, no instruments, there was a rhythm to it and the howls and whoops of people who had just been freed from their captors. Their feet, their arms, their legs, all gyrating to their own inner music, their thoughts, their praises. Such a scene is rarely witnessed. Perhaps once in a lifetime if you’re lucky. Perhaps once in a generation, or a century.

If you weren’t aware of their thoughts, you might be desperately afraid of what they would do once they finished. Certainly my family was terrified, at least in the beginning. My mother held Rena closely. Eckard jammed in behind me, but even he eventually got in the spirit. He understood because he had been in the caves and seen the death and desolation. Now he was a witness to their redemption.

“How long will they dance?” said Eckard from safely behind me.

“Who knows?” I said. “As long as they feel like it.”

“As long as they want,” said Salvador. “They’ve earned it.”

We stood silently and let them have their moment of forever and a day.

Eckard seemed amazed by the jubilee. “Are they going with us?”

“I hope so,” I said.

“Good. I’d like to learn to dance like that.”

We all turned to him and smiled.

“What?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t we all,” I told him with great sisterly love.

The dance continued, long, long into the night.

None of us were in any hurry to leave.

EPILOGUE

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It was a warm spring evening as I sat with my young daughter, Sofia, on the porch of the expanded and refurbished Last Chance Bookstore. The store had become more than just a place of business. We had built it out to include room for our family: Salvador, me, and of course, Sophia, our frisky six-year-old daughter. Sophia, fiercely independent and curious, just like her mother; intelligent and kindhearted, just like her father.

This was one of those well-earned moments for us to enjoy the sounds and movements of life around us.

The Wolf tribe, transplanted west, was taking advantage of the increasingly long days within the city limits of Last Chance. They had gathered when we returned from Aether and, under the leadership of Fleet and Endra, moved west and made this village their home. No more trouble from the Purveyors. We had all found a place for peace and enjoyment.

Children played hide and seek in and around the new buildings that had been added over the last few years. Stores for business. Tribal homes. Community meeting places. From a bleak and deserted area, Last Chance had become vibrant and full of life. And with it, little faces peeking around corners had turned a deserted town into a thriving village.

Eckard lived directly across the street from us. I took pleasure in watching his young wife, Natalia, cook dinner in their house. My mother had moved in with them. She assisted and nurtured the soon to be new mother. Eckard himself sat in the living room playing a game with one of the young Wolves he had befriended. He had become a town favorite because he could sing and he was joyful to be around. My brother, the exact opposite of me, and yet we couldn't have been happier to get to know each other.

The expanded Becker family had been adopted into the tribe and given the warmest of welcomes. They in turn were enjoying their new family.

I took in all of this and thought thankfully of the blessings that Mother had provided me, from young wanderer to a mature adult, mother, wife, sibling, and friend of the Wolf Tribe.

As we sat together, Sofia asked, "Mommy, why does this store have so many books?"

Why indeed? Who knew how Dakota had gathered all these volumes into such a small space? Indeed, we had been reading the wonderful book *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White. Where had this come from? What was its back story?

I thought of Dakota and how she had worked to create this oasis in the middle of nowhere. Dakota, who had wrestled with desperation and turned it into such a peaceful place. Where was she now? Would I ever know how she had started this book store?

"It's a long story, dear," I said. "It started years ago when my good friend, Dakota, came here and collected all

these books. When we moved back here, I took over the store. I feel like I'm helping to carry on her work. People are reading. People are learning to read. And best of all, I get to share these stories with you."

"Was she a nice person?" my daughter inquired.

"She was more than nice. She helped take me off the streets and gave me a great home, until I moved to the mountains."

"Where is she now?"

"She left to go home, sweetie. Up north. At least, that's the last time I saw her, when she was going home."

"Do you miss her?" My daughter's face looked so much like Salvador. I could only laugh at the resemblance.

"Yes," I said, "I miss her very much. I would love to see her again."

"Maybe she'll come back," Sophia said. She was anxious to encourage me, and I appreciated her thoughtfulness.

"Maybe," I said to her, more as a prayer than an actual reply to a question.

Just then, Salvador approached. Sophia ran to her father and he hoisted her up on his shoulder. She squealed with delight and gave him a tight hug. The two of them. They were thick as thieves.

"Something I thought I'd show you," he said to me.

"Show me?"

"I found something just on the other side of town. Knew you'd want to know right off."

"What?" I insisted.

“Well, now, you have to see it to believe it.”

“Oh, come on,” I said as I grinned and stood up.

“Come on,” he mimicked. “How about you stop being a pest and walk with me.”

We strode together as a family down the main street of Last Chance, greeting neighbors basking in the waning sunshine.

I took pleasure in the evening and the life that had come to this town. New Wolves arriving every day. The tribe finding a common place to settle and grow old together. Salvador’s family happy in their house on the outskirts of town. My own mother living with Eckard and Natalia and enjoying a simple life of domesticity. Far from her regal roots, she was quite happy to be at peace.

In the shadows as we passed, Wild Ones who had settled around Last Chance. Some of them came for help. Some of them just came to be near us. They were wild, but they kept their distance. They respected our boundaries.

The Wolves had set up a special compound just out of town to bring them in and help rehabilitate them.

Among those who had moved to Last Chance—Rena and Assac—who had gathered remnants of the Wild Ones outside of Aether and came west when the tribe relocated. Assac had undergone treatment and regained his ability to talk. He and Rena had married and now had two children of their own: Barson and Sheba.

We arrived on the edge of town where a replica of the old Last Chance sign had been placed, the same weather-beaten fixture that had once hung by a lone, thin wire. We

kept it as a reminder of what we were and where we were going.

Salvador stopped. Sophia looked around curiously.

“So, what is it?” I said.

“You can’t see it?” He pointed. “Look.”

I peered down the road.

Sophia also found it. Or rather, them. “Who is that?” she said.

For a moment, I was stunned. I had never thought I would see this again, nor the person to whom it was attached.

Sophia pulled on my dress. “Mommy, what is it?”

I had to catch my breath. “That my dear is a white buffalo. And that person, standing beside it, is my friend, Dakota.”

Both stood in the shadows and began to approach. Dakota with her arms extended. The buffalo lumbering along, his head turned sideways, as if he was unsure if he really wanted to leave the tasty clump of grass on which he had been munching.

“You mean . . .” Sophia said loudly, her voice bouncing up and down the street.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s her.”

This was the vision of Mother, the vision she had shared with all of us, that family could be blood, could be friends, could be those whom we came to trust in good times and bad. Again, the story had found its ending, as do all books in Last Chance and elsewhere. In the town where I had first begun to understand my own story, my own life’s book, it seemed that this chapter was complete.

It was the whole family reunited. That small girl dream had become a reality. And now I knew, after all the traveling and troubles that we had endured, Last Chance had become my mysterious home.