

CHAPTER ONE



THE RAIN OUTSIDE FALLS IN THICK SHEETS THAT MAKE IT seem like it's trying to wash us away, and all I can do is cower in my tent and wonder how the cold sank deep enough inside my body to turn my blood to ice. And how the hell I ended up here to begin with.

Forge A New Frontier!

The company slogan was just upbeat enough to trick me into signing on the dotted line, and the next thing I knew, I was on a train headed west. Now I realize how idiotic I'd been, but at the time it seemed like an adventure. The load of cash they'd promised probably had a little something to do with how blind I'd been as well. It's damn hard to see straight when someone dangles that many dollar signs in front of your face, especially when your life has been a pile of shit for as long as you can remember.

Of course, the asshole who recruited me failed to mention that most of these trips ended with half the crew dying of things like cholera or dysentery. Illnesses no one should have these days, not even in the cities where the air is thick with pollution and garbage lines the streets. Out here, though, where civilization slipped away decades ago and has stayed extinct, anything goes.

The tent flap gets shoved open, letting in a burst of rain and wind, and Daniel ducks inside a second later. "It's comin' down like a monsoon out there."

He yanks his hat off and shakes it, throwing drops of rain across the tent, and shivers shoot through my body.

"It's wet enough in here, you asshole," I grumble and pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders. "Should have kept my ass where I was."

Daniel drops at my side and flashes me teeth the color of the weak tea my mom used to drink, courtesy of the chewing tobacco he can't go a second without. He's only a little older than my twenty-seven years, but he looks like he has at least a decade on me. A jagged scar runs up one side of his face, from his jaw to the corner of his eye, and poorly drawn tattoos cover most of his arms. He's also missing a front tooth and the little finger on his right hand, almost like he's falling apart one piece at a time.

"Just a little rain," he says in a voice that wheezes its way out of him. "I been through worse."

I don't doubt it—for him, this trip wasn't optional; it was this or jail—but I keep my thoughts about how he probably deserves worse to myself.

"Yeah, well, my life has always been shit, but at least I was usually dry," I say, wondering if jail could possibly be worse than sitting in a mud puddle in the middle of nowhere.

"Everybody's life is shit these days." Daniel's mouth scrunches up like he's about to spit, but he stops when I pin him with a glare icy enough to freeze the devil in hell.

He isn't wrong. Things haven't been good for decades. The plague that killed off most of the population seventy years ago is long gone, but we sure as hell haven't recovered. I've seen movies about the old west and pioneers who braved savage people and wild, untamed lands, and the scenario

isn't too far from where we are now. In fact, if it wasn't for the technology left over from the old days, I'm sure we'd be right back there.

Not that it does the average person a lot of good. The cars still running are reserved for the wealthy since oil production is slow and expensive, and electricity comes and goes most of the time. Growing up, a night with no lights and no heat wasn't uncommon, and I should be used to freezing my ass off the way I am, but this trip isn't anything like I expected.

This damn trip.

I shake my head thinking about it. The railroad company promised me a decent chunk of money up front and a shit ton when I returned home, and it had all seemed so simple when I signed up. Even now, hunkered down in a shitty tent while it pours buckets, I'm not sure where I went wrong. We go out in a group and repair the train tracks damaged from years of disuse. No problem, right? Except there's only one working train, so they had no intention of leaving it with us. We could have used trucks, but these days gasoline is more valuable than gold, which means we've been traveling across the country in wagons pulled by horses. Another detail conveniently left out of the company's sales pitch.

"Should have stayed back in Baltimore," I mutter to myself.

Daniel hoots like it's the best joke he's ever heard, and I stifle an urge to punch him.

I'm in the middle of glaring at him when a shout rises up outside. It's barely audible over the pounding rain, but the whinny of the horses is loud and clear despite the storm, and it has my back stiffening as thoughts of wild animals flip through my mind. I heard a rumor that the last group had an altercation with a pack of lions. The cats aren't indigenous to the area, but before the plague, parks displaying all kinds of exotic animals dotted the country, and a lot of them were released when people realized the end was near. Some species have thrived in the wild, especially out here where there are no humans left.

I've never seen a lion in person, but I've seen pictures, and the last thing I want is to have one of them sink their teeth into me. So I stay where I am and pull my blanket tighter around my shoulders like the thin fabric will keep me safe.

More shouting breaks through the air, this time angry, even violent sounding. There's something distinctly feminine about the voices, which makes no sense because there are no women on this trip, and even though I don't want to get my face eaten off, I find myself getting to my feet.

"What do you think is goin' on out there?" Daniel asks, not bothering to drag himself up off the ground.

"No clue."

Part of me thinks I should go check it out, but the idea of getting soaked again when I've barely gotten dry sounds as unappealing as getting eaten by a lion. Even when more yelling joins in the ruckus, I don't move. My feet stay rooted to the semi-dry floor of my tent while my heart pounds harder and harder with each passing second. Someone lets out an agonizing howl, and the sound raises the hair on my arms even higher than the goose bumps did, but I still don't move.

"What the—"

Daniel's words get cut off when the tent flap bursts open. I stumble back, but it's the sight of the person who leaps inside that knocks me on my ass. It's a woman, all right, but like none I've ever seen. Animal hides wrap around her body, secured by leather strips that crisscross over her chest and waist. They wind around her legs, too, giving off the impression that with a simple tug her clothes will fall to the ground. She towers over me, the muscles in her arms straining against the leather when she raises a bow. She has her dark hair slicked back, not from the rain but with mud, and black paint covers most of her face. Intelligent, pale blue eyes sweep across the inside of the tent, going from Daniel to me and back again, taking in every detail in less than a second before she releases her arrow.

It flies through the air, piercing Daniel in the heart before he has a chance to blink. He opens his mouth, and a wet cry bubbles up, joined a moment later by blood spraying from his lips and running down his face and neck. His body drops to the ground.

Then the woman is on me, her bow somehow gone and in its place a knife carved from bone, its blade long and pointed enough to prick the skin on my neck with little effort, drawing blood. I let out a low hiss of pain but don't move an inch.

"You are healthy?" the woman asks in a dialect as foreign as she is.

She has her knees planted firmly on my chest, her feet on each side of my torso to steady herself. Blue eyes narrow as they take me in, reminding me of the way starving children stare at cakes through bakery windows, and my pulse quickens at the predatory expression.

"Yeah," I whisper, barely moving my lips, terrified she'll slice my throat open.

"Yes?" Her voice goes up in a questioning tone like she doesn't understand.

"Yes," I clarify.

Her head bobs once, and she gets to her feet, pulling me with her. Even standing, I have to strain to look up at her, because she has to be well over six feet, and her firm grip on my arm will most definitely be leaving a purple handprint behind.

"You will come," she says, dragging me toward the flap of the tent.

I do as I'm told, and her grip doesn't loosen as she drags me forward, my feet tripping over blankets and other items. We step outside, leaving the relatively dry tent behind, as well as Daniel's body, and the wind and rain pound against my face. I'm not wearing shoes, and the muddy earth is cold beneath my bare feet. The woman holding me doesn't let go, but she does change positions. She keeps the blade at my throat while moving behind me, her free arm around my chest and the knife still against my throat.

"Walk," she calls over the rain.

Several of the other tents are torn open, their sides now gaping holes that flap in the wind. Most of the lights seem to have been extinguished in the scuffle, but the few still working reveal a bizarre scene where primitive women dressed in leather hold men at their mercy. Through the rain and darkness, I count six other men, all of them kneeling in the mud with their hands tied behind their backs. Four women stand over them, loaded down with homemade bows and spears, while three more gather the horses.

"One more," the woman at my back calls.

When we reach the others, she kicks the back of my knees, and I go down, relieved that the knife seems to have disappeared from my neck. I hit the ground, and mud squishes under my knees, and a second later my arms are yanked behind my back and tied around my wrists and at the elbows, making the muscles in my shoulders ache.

"Do not move," the woman behind me says before releasing my arm.

To say I'm too shocked to do anything is an understatement. I search the darkness, trying to find the men in their group, but there are only women. Eight in all, and every one is muscular and broad, reminding me of the prizefighters I used to go see and how they would dedicate every free second they had to lifting weights, knowing it was the best way to escape the poverty they'd grown up with. But these are women, and this isn't the city, and I doubt they're on their way to a ring to beat the shit out of each other.

The women talk back and forth while they go about gathering things. Their words are slow, overly pronounced, their dialect making them sound simple even though they're clearly intelligent and organized. They dig through tents and wagons, and toss away things like food and money and shoes, but take common items like glass jars. Nothing they do makes sense, but they seem to have a purpose in everything, and they work together like a finely tuned machine or the cogs in a watch, winding around and around, hour after hour in perfect harmony.

The only issue comes when they discuss the wagons. Two of the women, the tall one who grabbed me and another one with skin the color of coffee beans, want to load the supplies onto a wagon, while the other women want to leave it behind.

A woman with gray, stringy hair lifts her hands before the discussion gets too heated. "I am Elder Warrior, and I will choose," she calls. "It cannot make the trip up the mountain, and we do not want anyone coming after it. We will leave the vehicle behind."

The other seven women turn their backs on the wagon like her decision is law.

When they head our way, I stiffen and for the first time wonder what our fate will be. These women kept the seven of us alive for a reason, but what that reason is, I can't even begin to guess. Are they hoping to hold us for ransom? If so, they're going to be disappointed. The men who signed up for this detail did it because they had no money, no family, and no hope. We are worthless in the eyes of the rest of the world.

"Stand," the woman with the dark skin says when she stops in front of us. "We will go now."

I struggle to my feet, finding it difficult to maintain my balance with my arms tied behind my back the way they are. The ground is slick with mud, and two men actually slide and start to lose their footing, but the women are there to brace them before they have a chance to fall. With the heavy rain coming down, it's tough to make out the faces of the men at my side, and the two I can see, I can't put names to. We've been on the road for a couple weeks, but I've been too miserable to take the time to get to know anyone other than Daniel, and that wasn't by choice.

"Move," a woman at my back barks.

She shoves me, but it isn't hard enough to make me fall, just enough to get me moving. I walk, cringing when cold mud squishes between my toes, and follow the other men and women toward the horses. There are half a dozen animals, but eight women and seven men, and I can picture the women riding the horses through the rain as they lead us behind them, tied together by rope. But that isn't what happens, and I watch almost dumbfounded as one by one the men are helped onto the horses.

When it's my turn, one of the women holds me steady while another laces her fingers together and kneels and motions for me to use her hands as a foothold. I slip my mud-covered foot into her hands while the woman at my back gives me a push and the one in front hoists me up, and I find myself sprawled across the horse on my stomach. Some careful maneuvering by the women fixes that, though, and once I'm straddling the animal, the broad woman who killed Daniel climbs on with me.

I sit behind her, my arms still behind my back and my body shivering from the cold. A leather strap is tied around our waists, securing me to the woman, and someone throws a thick blanket of fur over my shoulders.

All around me, the other men are in the same positions, already on horses or being helped onto one. The women are silent, focused on their task. They gather the items they salvaged from our wrecked camp and tie them into bundles, attaching them to the horses. The aroma of wet fur is heavy in my nostrils, along with the salty scent of body odor from the woman in front of me. The smell isn't sweat or filth, which is how the vagrants in the city smell, but earthier. Dirt and rain and pine, with a hint of perspiration. Not pleasant, but nothing to cringe away from.

When everyone is seated, we take off, moving in a line. There are twelve of us on horses, the front horse holding two men instead of one prisoner and a woman, while three women lead the group on foot, carrying bundles of stolen goods and weapons. The woman in front of me rides like a pro, using the horse's mane and a gentle press of her heels to lead it where she wants it to go. The pace is slow, but with the fur around my shoulders, I'm surprisingly warm.

It isn't long before the rain tapers off, but even once the deafening noise of the storm is gone, no one talks, and the only sound is the steady beat of the horses' hooves against the ground as they squish through the mud. There's nothing but darkness upon darkness as far as the eye can see. Even the stars have been blotted out by the thick cover of clouds, and with the never-ending blackness in front of us, I can't help wondering if these women are dragging me to hell.

After an hour or so of riding, my ass already hurts. It'll be numb by the time we make it to wherever these women are taking us. It's still night, but in the distance something has begun to form, pulling itself from the blackness like a rat climbing from a sewer. It's a continuous shape, swallowing up the horizon. A mountain, maybe, or a forest. It's hard to tell with the thick darkness hanging over us.

The woman in front of me is as stoic as she is muscular, so I doubt she'll tell me a thing, but after hours of riding in silent suspense, I find it impossible to stay quiet. "Where are we going?"

"Our village." She doesn't even look back, and she doesn't elaborate.

A million other questions go through my head, but I say nothing because I'm too afraid to hear the answer to most of them.

We go back to riding in silence.

The rain may have stopped, but the air is still wet, and my body is covered in goose bumps, thanks to my damp clothes. Even the fur draped around my shoulders can't block out the chill in my bones, and I bounce back and forth between sweating and freezing as, in the distance, the sky turns orange. In the dawn of a new day, I'm able to see I was right and the massive shape looming in front of us is, in fact, a mountain.

The light also helps me get a better look at our captors. They're wild, the very definition of savage, and their leather clothes homemade, as are their weapons. The fur draped around my shoulders isn't a blanket, but a pelt that looks like it was peeled right from an animal's body. Still, in the light of day, there's something beautiful about these women. About their strength and power and the way they carry themselves with their heads held high. Wherever they're from, it's obvious they've been secluded from the outside world for a very long time. Possibly since the plague.

When I glance over my shoulder, the eyes of the woman on the horse behind me bore into mine. Her skin is the color of coffee beans and her irises only a shade lighter, and she has her hair shaved to the scalp, revealing every follicle on her head, and muscled forearms that flex with each step the horse makes. She'd be beautiful, with defined cheekbones and full lips, if there was anything soft about her at all. But there isn't. She's as hard and unyielding as steel.

In that moment, with her gaze holding mine, a new and terrifying possibility occurs to me, and the shiver that shakes my body has nothing to do with the dampness sinking into my bones. These women could be cannibals. Those groups existed, back in the early days after the plague when food was scarce and life was hard, and though it's believed they all died out years ago, it's possible some still remain. Hidden away from civilization, wild and savage like these women.

When a second shiver moves through me, I pull my gaze from the woman and hunch my shoulders like it will make me invisible. More than ever, I wish I hadn't let that damn railroad company sucker me with promises of good fortune. I should have known shit like that doesn't exist anymore, especially not for a guy like me.