

THIRTEEN YEARS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

Mark shivered with cold, something he hadn't done in a long time.

He'd just woken up, the first traces of dawn leaking through the cracks of the stacked logs that made up the wall of his small hut. He almost never used his blanket. He was proud of it – it was made from the hide of a giant elk he'd killed just two months ago – but when he did use it, it was for the comfort of the blanket itself, not so much for warmth. They lived in a world ravaged by heat, after all. But maybe this was a sign of change; he actually felt a little chilled by the morning air seeping through those same cracks as the light. He pulled the furry hide up to his chin and turned to lie on his back, belting out a yawn for the ages.

Alec was still asleep in the bunk on the other side of the hut – all of four feet away – and snoring up a storm. The older man was gruff, a hardened former soldier who rarely smiled. And when he did, it usually had something to do with rumbling gas pains in his stomach. But Alec had a heart of gold. After more

than a year together, fighting for survival along with Lana and Trina and the rest of them, Mark wasn't intimidated by the old bear any more. Just to prove it, he leaned over and grabbed a shoe off the floor, then chucked it at the man. It hit him in the shoulder.

Alec roared and sat up straight, years of military training snapping him instantly awake. "What the—?" the soldier yelled, but Mark cut him off by throwing his other shoe at him, this time smacking his chest.

"You little piece of rat liver," Alec said coolly. He hadn't flinched or moved after the second attack, just stared Mark down with narrowed eyes. But there was a spark of humour behind them. "I better hear a good reason why you chose to risk your life by waking me up like that."

"Ummmmm," Mark replied, rubbing his chin as if he were thinking hard about it. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, I got it. Mainly it was to stop the awful sounds coming out of you. Seriously, man, you need to sleep on your side or something. Snoring like that can't be healthy. You're gonna choke on your own throat one of these days."

Alec grumbled and grunted a few times, muttering almost indecipherable words as he scooted off his bunk and got dressed. There was something about "wish I'd never" and "better off" and "year of hell", but not much more Mark could make out. The message was clear, though.

"Come on, Sergeant," Mark said, knowing he was about three seconds from going too far. Alec had been retired from the military for a long time and really, really, *really* hated it when Mark called him that. At the time of the sun flares, Alec had been a contract worker for the defence department. "You never would've made it to this lovely abode if it hadn't been for us snatching you out of trouble every day. How about a hug and we make up?"

Alec pulled a shirt over his head, then peered down at Mark. The older man's bushy grey eyebrows bunched up in the

middle as if they were hairy bugs trying to mate. “I like you, kid. It’d be a shame to have to put you six feet under.” He whacked Mark on the side of the head – the closest thing to affection the soldier ever showed.

Soldier. It might have been a long time, but Mark still liked to think of the man that way. It made him feel better – safer – somehow. He smiled as Alec stomped out of their hut to tackle another day. A real smile. Something that was finally becoming a little more commonplace after the year of death and terror that had chased them to this place high up in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. He decided that no matter what, he’d push all the bad stuff from the past aside and have a good day. No matter what.

Which meant he needed to bring Trina into the picture before another ten minutes ticked off the clock. He hurriedly got dressed and went out to look for her.

He found her up by the stream, in one of the quiet places she went to read some of the books they’d salvaged from an old library they’d come across in their travels. That girl loved to read like no one else, and she was making up for the months they spent literally running for their lives, when books were few and far between. The digital kind were all long gone, as far as Mark could guess – wiped away when the computers and servers all fried. Trina read the old-school paper kind.

The walk towards her had been as sobering as usual, each step weakening his resolve to have a good day. Looking at the pitiful network of tree houses and huts and underground burrows that made up the thriving metropolis in which they lived – all logs and twine and dried mud, everything leaning to the left or the right – did the trick. He couldn’t stroll through the crowded alleys and paths of their settlement without it reminding him of the good days living in the big city, when life had been rich and full of promise, everything in the world within easy reach, ready for the taking. And he hadn’t even realised it.

He passed hordes of scrawny, dirty people who seemed on the edge of death. He didn't pity them so much as he hated knowing that he looked just like them. They had enough food – scavenged from the ruins, hunted in the woods, brought up from Asheville sometimes – but rationing was the name of the game, and everyone looked like they were one meal a day short. And you didn't live in the woods without getting a smear of dirt here and there, no matter how often you bathed up in the stream.

The sky was blue with a hint of that burnt orange that had haunted the atmosphere since the devastating sun flares had struck without much warning. Over a year ago and yet it still hung up there like a hazy curtain meant to remind them for ever. Who knew if things would ever get back to normal. The coolness Mark had felt upon waking up seemed like a joke now – he was already sweating from the steadily rising temperature as the brutal sun rimmed the sparse treeline of the mountain peaks above.

It wasn't all bad news. As he left the warrens of their camps and entered the woods, there were many promising signs. New trees growing, old trees recovering, squirrels dashing through the blackened pine needles, green sprouts and buds all around. He even saw something that looked like an orange flower in the distance. He was half tempted to go and pick it for Trina, but he knew she'd scold him within an inch of his life if he dared impede the progress of the forest. Maybe his day would be good after all. They'd survived the worst natural disaster in known human history – maybe the corner had been turned.

He was breathing heavily from the effort of the hike up the mountain face when he reached the spot where Trina loved to go to escape. Especially in the mornings, when the odds of finding someone else up there were slim. He stopped and looked at her from behind a tree, knowing she'd heard him approach but glad she was pretending she hadn't.

Man, she was pretty. Leaning back against a huge granite

boulder that seemed as if it had been placed there by a decorating giant, she held a thick book in her lap. She turned a page, her green eyes following the words. She was wearing a black T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans, trainers that looked a hundred years old. Her short blond hair shifted in the wind, and she appeared the very definition of peace and comfort. Like she belonged in the world that had existed before everything was scorched.

Mark had always felt like she was his as a simple matter of the situation. Pretty much everyone else she'd ever known had died; he was a scrap left over for her to take, the alternative to being forever alone. But he gladly played his part, even considered himself lucky – he didn't know what he'd do without her.

“This book would be so much better if I didn't have some creepy guy stalking me while I tried to read it.” Trina spoke without the slightest hint of a smile. She flipped another page and continued to read.

“It's just me,” he said. Half of what he said around her still came out sounding dumb. He stepped from behind the tree.

She laughed and finally looked up at him. “It's about time you got here! I was just about ready to start talking to myself – I've been reading since before dawn.”

He walked over and plopped down on the ground beside her. They hugged, tight and warm and full of the promise he'd made upon waking up.

He pulled back and looked at her, not caring about the goofy grin that was most likely plastered across his face. “You know what?”

“What?” she asked.

“Today is going to be a perfect, perfect day.”

Trina smiled and the waters of the stream continued to rush by, as if his words meant nothing.