

WARRIOR WITHIN

SURVIVING THE DEAD: BOOK THREE



JAMES N. COOK

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Part I

Today is victory over yourself of yesterday; tomorrow is your victory over lesser men.

-Miyamoto Musashi
The Book of Five Rings

Chapter 1

Black and Blue

The first light of dawn was just creeping over the horizon on a clear, cloudless morning. Rays of sunshine pierced the gloom, illuminated like diamonds on a carpet of frost-covered grass. In the distance birdsong filled the air, flittering through the tall, majestic trees that surrounded the field known, not affectionately by those familiar with it, as the Grinder. The morning would have been idyllic if not for the grunts, muffled curses, and dull thuds of flesh hitting flesh from the people struggling around me.

There were sixty-six in all—mostly men, but a few women as well—dressed in a motley assortment of outdoor wear as they punched, kicked, heaved, and grappled with one another. Thick wisps of steam rose from their heads like ghostly flames as they worked up a sweat in the chill September air.

As I had done every day for the past six weeks, I spent an hour teaching them new techniques both in striking and in groundwork, before turning them over to Gabriel for drills and sparring. It was the last week of their first phase of training, and Gabe was pushing them hard in preparation for phase two. I glanced at my watch, counting down the last few seconds of the round. The readout ticked down: three, two, one...

“Time,” I said.

Gabe grabbed the whistle dangling from a cord around his neck and blew three shrill notes. The recruits fell out of their fighting stances, released holds, and untangled themselves as they got up from the ground.

“Sixty seconds. Hydrate and switch partners,” Gabe called out, his deep baritone washing over the field. He turned his flint-eyed gaze toward me and reached out a hand for the stopwatch.

“Rotate in on the next round, Eric,” he said. “Take on Sanchez first, then Flannigan. Hit ’em hard and put some heat on them. I want to see how they react.”

I nodded, feeling the muscles in my jaw tense. Flannigan I wasn’t too worried about. She was tough but lacked experience and was only about half my size. Sanchez was a different matter altogether.

The recruits finished drinking from their canteens and began returning to the sparring area in twos and threes. Some of them lingered by their packs a bit longer than Gabe felt was necessary and, never being one to tolerate laziness, he let the offending parties know that if they didn’t hustle their asses up, *he* would be their next opponent.

That got them moving.

After slipping on my old six-ounce MMA gloves and washing off my mouthpiece, I called out to Sanchez and motioned him over. He frowned, his ink-black eyes darkening, and complied.

Sanchez didn't look like much. He stood a shade over five-foot-seven, and was maybe a hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. Lean and wiry, he had narrow, boyish features that reminded me of every surly kid I had ever seen busing tables at a crappy restaurant. He was an unassuming guy, not the kind of person who would ever start trouble. But someone, somewhere, had taught him the sweet science of boxing, and had taught him exceedingly well.

Gabe knew Sanchez's story, but despite my frequent inquiries he had refused to share that information. His reasoning for this was that he didn't want it to affect the way I trained Sanchez, or any other recruits for that matter. Consequently, the first time I sparred with Sanchez, I had learned the hard way just how quick and accurate he was with his fists. It was not a pleasant experience.

Sanchez trotted to a halt in front of me. "You need me, sir?"

"Yeah, you're with me this round."

He narrowed his eyes slightly, fists tightening in his gloves. It had been a week since we'd last fought, and I had gotten the better of him then. I could tell he was itching for a rematch.

Gabe called out, "Touch gloves, get your hands up. Protect yourself at all times."

I assumed a fighting stance, as did everyone else on the field. Hands up, chin down, elbows tucked, knuckles just below my line of sight. My feet separated shoulder width apart, weight distributed evenly between the balls of my feet—pure muscle memory.

Sanchez took a similar stance, his base narrower than mine. Where my footwork tended to be precise and deliberate, not wasting any motion, Sanchez was animated and bouncy. Constantly moving and shuffling, never staying in the same spot for more than a second. He was an annoying opponent, but that was a good thing. As his trainer, I wanted him to be dangerous.

Gabe signaled the start of the round and, as always, Sanchez lit into me before the piercing note of the whistle had faded into the air. I backed off and circled, giving ground and absorbing shots on my forearms and elbows, amazed again at the kid's speed. I'm not slow by any stretch, but Sanchez is in a different league. I managed to snap off a few counter-punches, but the kid either slipped them or simply batted them aside. If this had been a boxing match, I would have been hopelessly outclassed.

Lucky for me, it wasn't a boxing match.

Sanchez overextended on a jab, blew the timing on a follow-up cross, and gave me the opening I needed to close the distance and clinch with him. I slipped an overhook around one of his arms, grabbed him by the back of the head, and started launching knees rapid-fire into his midsection. His breath went out of him with the first strike, but his expression never changed. He accepted the blows without complaint and started working to improve his position.

Just as I'd taught him, rather than instinctively dropping his arms to block the knees—which would have only made things worse for him—he postured up and stepped closer to me, closing the gap that allowed me to throw knee strikes in the first place. Now the fight had become something similar to a Greco-Roman wrestling match, albeit without rules.

Using a jiu jitsu technique called *pomo*, which I had drilled extensively with him and the other recruits in previous weeks, Sanchez started fighting his way out of the clinch by reversing the hold I had on his arms. He managed to work one arm loose, backed off enough to avoid the hip toss I attempted, and twisted away from the clinch.

In a surprising bit of innovation, he faked a jab-cross combination, stepped back, and launched a Muay-Thai kick at my midsection. It was a good kick, with the right amount of snap behind it. But it was also a mistake.

One of the worst things that can happen to you in a fight is for your opponent to know what you're going to do before you do it. The moment Sanchez dropped back from that lazy cross I knew what was coming next. When the kick came, I simply hopped back. His boot whipped past my midsection close enough to tug at my shirt. The momentum spun him around and exposed his back, taking him off balance for a second. That was all the time I needed.

Keeping my head low, I executed an old wrestling trick called a drop-step and shot in for a takedown at Sanchez's legs. The only counterattack he had available was a spinning back-fist, which he sent whistling over my head. I ducked the blow and committed my weight to the takedown. My shoulder hit his upper thighs, my arms hooked around behind his knees and, with an explosive lifting and twisting motion, I swept him up from the ground and planted him on his back, landing with me in side-control.

From there it was only a matter of time. It's hard enough to fight a skilled grappler under the best circumstances, but when said grappler outweighs you by fifty pounds and has seven more years of training than you do, it is simply impossible. Less than a minute after we hit the ground, I had transitioned from side-control into the full mount, softened him up with a few punches to the face, isolated an arm, and rolled into an armbar.

With his arm stretched out straight, caught between my legs and hands with my hips threatening to dislocate his elbow, he had no choice but to grit his teeth and tap out. Tap or snap, as my old sensei used to say. Not that I would have actually finished the technique and broken Sanchez's arm, but I could have if I'd wanted to.

I released the hold, rolled away, and stood up. Sanchez ignored the hand I extended to him, the wooden brown of his face darkening into an angry shade of purple, and got to his feet.

"Again," he said.

"Again, what?" I challenged, glaring.

He glared back for a few heartbeats. "Again, *sir*."

I motioned for him to step back, and he fell into a stance.

"Go."

The word was barely out of my mouth before he was on me again. The second bout went even quicker than the first; the kid was pissed off and making dumb mistakes. My own temper began heating up at his recklessness, and I started turning up the pressure, hitting him harder and using my strength to my advantage.

It was frustrating—I had taught him better than this, and he should have been able to put up a better fight. He knew not to let his temper get the best of him, but he was letting it happen anyway. As the round went on, he continued to fight well below his potential, so I continued to make him pay for it.

All too soon, Gabe blew the whistle. I had taken Sanchez's back and was applying a chokehold when the round ended. The kid glared sullenly when I reached down to help him up, but this time, he took my hand.

"Listen, man, you have got to get that temper under control," I said as I hauled him to his feet. "I know you can fight better than that. I've seen you do it."

He paused, searching my face for sincerity. After a moment, he let out a sigh and ran a hand through his dark hair.

"*Tienes razon, señor. Disculpa.*"

I shook my head. “Apologies won’t keep you out of a pine box, Sancho. Get it together.”

He nodded tersely, glancing up. “You’re bleeding, sir. Want me to get a medic?”

Just as he said it, I felt something drip out of my nose. My hand came away red.

“No, don’t worry about it.” I waved him away. “I’ve had worse.”

As he jogged away to get some water, I pulled a tissue from my shirt pocket and ripped it in half, stuffing the two pieces into my nostrils. Gabe came over to check on me while I pinched my nose to stop the bleeding.

“You all right?” he rumbled.

I nodded and jerked a thumb toward Sanchez. “I’m fine. We need to work on his ground game.”

Gabe glanced in his direction, frowning. “There’s no time. We only have three more months to train, and weapons and tactics are more important right now. Just do the best you can.”

The big man patted me on the shoulder and walked back to the Grinder, hustling recruits along as he went. My nose didn’t start leaking when I pulled the tissues out, so I figured I was good for another round and called out to Flannigan. The blond spitfire looked at me, touched knuckles with someone she had been talking to, and began jogging in my direction.

A former marathoner, Flannigan was quite possibly the most physically fit person I had ever met. Her remarkable endurance, paired with a sharp mind and a relentless appetite for training, had quickly made her one of my favorite students. She stood a little taller than Sanchez, albeit with a much lighter build, and had short hair that stood out at odd angles, framing her freckled, oval face.

“I got you figured out, sir,” she said with a smile as she took her stance opposite me. “You’re going down.”

I fought the urge to smile, and kept my expression neutral. “Don’t sing it, recruit. Bring it.”

The whistle blew, and for a couple of minutes, I began to wonder if Flannigan’s bravado was just her way of psyching up for the fight. Things certainly weren’t going any better for her than they had for Sanchez. But unlike the fiery Mexican, rather than getting frustrated when I caught her in a choke (and it was always a choke; I hate hitting girls), she seemed to learn a little something, always making the next bout harder for me than the last. Even so, I wasn’t having too much trouble handling her. I relaxed and trusted my long-ingrained technique to carry the fight.

And, as is usually the case, that was when I screwed up.

When I stepped into an outside reap that I had taken her down with many times before, Flannigan slipped out of it, making it look easy. I had half a second to realize that she had been baiting me before her elbow slammed hard into my shoulder, knocking me off balance. Gripping my lapels, she twisted her torso into a throw called the *uchi mata*. The throw was nearly perfect, but she had left too much space between us and was trying to muscle my weight over her shoulder instead of relying on technique. Had she been stronger, it might have worked, but the laws of physics bend for no one.

I dropped my weight and slipped to the side, forcing her to release my shirt and abandon the throw. She turned back into me, closing the distance until we were face to face in an over-under clinch.

Using my weight to my advantage, I started shoving her side to side with my shoulders trying to open up her stance. Flannigan, rather than trying to fight her arms free, stepped closer, pressed her chest against me, arched her back, and touched her lips to my ear.

“I like it when you choke me,” she whispered, making me break out in goosebumps. “It makes me wet.”

I froze up, cheeks burning. I must have blushed from my toes, all the way up to the tips of my ears. It only took me a second to get ahold of myself, but it was a second too long. Her mouth curved into a carnivorous grin just before her knee hit my solar plexus with all the gentleness of a car crash. Breath whooshed out of my lungs, hunching me over and opening up my neck. Flannigan followed up with a hammer-fist strike to my brachial nerve that turned my legs into limp noodles and forced me to lean into her to keep from falling down. This time, when she spun into the *uchi mata*, there was no slipping out of it.

My view went from earth to sky as she flipped me straight up and over, pulling on my lapels to make sure that I hit the ground with as much force as possible. Thankfully, there was no air left in my lungs when I landed, otherwise it would have been driven out all over again.

Relentless demon that she is, Flannigan planted a knee into the bottom of my sternum, slid her fingers down through the neck of my shirt, and twisted the tough fabric into a collar choke. Even though my back was in agony, I was still cross-eyed from the brachial strike, and my lungs were too stunned to draw a breath, I somehow had the presence of mind to cross my forearms between hers, bridge upward with my hips, and break her grip. She pitched forward when I did so, allowing me to shimmy out from underneath her, throw a leg over her hips, roll on top, and pin her face to the ground.

She let fly a stream of curses as I flattened her out, pulled up on her head, and slipped a forearm over her throat. Normally I felt bad about cutting off her air supply in such a manner, but today, I found myself a little less than sympathetic toward my star pupil. Just as I began to squeeze, Gabe blew the whistle.

I got off her and struggled to my feet, hands planted on my knees, hauling in deep draughts of air. Flannigan's eyes held no sympathy as she got up and dusted herself off.

"I almost had you that time, sir," she said, spitting the words out.

I rasped a wheezing laugh. "Flannigan, you didn't have shit. You hurt me that last bout, but I seem to recall choking you out four times before that. Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. Next time, if you have a plan to beat me, do it on the first try. Marauders do not observe the fucking tapout rule. Got it?"

She opened her mouth to say something, hesitated, then bit down on it. "Yes sir."

I watched the anger and defiance drain from her face, a smoothing of expression that left her looking small and disappointed. I felt like a shithead for pushing her so hard, but I wouldn't be doing her any favors by going easy on her. She needed to learn how to fight, and she needed to do it fast.

"Go on and get some water," I said, motioning toward the others. "Get ready for the next round." She nodded wordlessly and left.

As she went, I wondered how many other recruits she was going to try that particular trick on, assuming I was the first victim. Thinking about it, I came to the conclusion that I probably wasn't. Flannigan likes to plan ahead and set traps for her opponents. She had probably tried it out a few times, and when it worked, decided to use it against me. The only problem I had with that strategy is that she didn't use it at the outset of the fight.

As I had told her, marauders don't give second chances.

Chapter 2

Whirly-Bird

The walk home from the camp was more painful than usual that morning.

Flannigan's throw had done something unpleasant to my back, and one of my eyes had swollen nearly halfway shut. I touched the tender skin around it and wondered how that one had happened. I didn't remember getting hit there.

Not that this was surprising. The adrenaline rush of fighting often kept damage from registering until long after it had been inflicted. Over the past six weeks, not a day had gone by that I had not noticed a bruise or a cut in the mirror and wondered where the hell it had come from. The damage was beginning to take its toll, but I figured if the recruits could take it then so could I. Youth was still on my side, at least for a few more years.

I reached the north gate and stopped at the guard shack to check in my weapons. Judging by the guards' wide-eyed expressions and stiff posture, I must have looked even worse than I felt.

"You all right, mister?" one of them asked, a younger guy that I didn't recognize.

"I'm okay," I said, smiling through swollen lips. "You should see the other guy. I wrecked the shield out of his fist."

He shook his head and motioned for me to follow him, leading the way to one of the small, hastily built shacks just inside the gate. As a safety precaution, anyone returning to town from outside the wall had to undergo a strip search to check for signs of illness or infection. Two buildings had been constructed, with sniper stations on overwatch, to allow people to do this in privacy. Brett Nolan, one of the nurses who worked at the clinic with Allison, was on duty when I came in.

"Jumping Jesus Christ, Eric," he said, looking me over. "What happened here? You get run over by a truck?"

I let out a sigh. "Nope. Just reaping the fruits of my labor."

"Taught those kids a little too well, did ya?" He grinned through his bushy red beard. "They kicking your ass now?"

I held up my arms so that he could look them over. "You know, as much as I love a little banter with another dude while I'm standing buck naked in the cold, I've got stuff to do. Maybe you can keep the jokes yourself and get this exam over with so I can go home?"

"Don't get your panties in a twist," he said. "I'll be done in a minute. Spread your feet."

I grimaced and did as he asked. After shining a flashlight over my legs and nether regions he pronounced me clean of infection, snapped his gloves off into a waste bin, and left me alone to get dressed. When I stepped outside, Mike Stall was waiting for me with my weapons, a cup of shitty instant coffee, and three ibuprofen tablets. God love him.

“Tough day at the office?” he said, as I downed the pills.

“Brutal.” I managed a smile. “Thanks for the coffee.”

The caffeine and the pain meds did their jobs and, by the time I got home, I felt almost human again. I got a fire going, heated up some water, and scrubbed off the dirt and grime from the morning’s work. Checking out my injuries in the bedroom mirror, I could see that I was going to have some nasty bruises for the next few days, but that was nothing new. The swelling over my eye was an annoyance, but thanks to the anti-inflammatory effects of ibuprofen, it was already starting to go down. By tomorrow, it would be just another black and yellow stain on my face.

I had a few hours to kill before guard duty that afternoon, so I brewed some tea and sat down at the kitchen table with a hot mug and a John D. MacDonald novel. Allison was at the clinic looking after a woman who had just given birth to a healthy baby girl, so I had the house to myself.

The two of us had practically moved in together, but I still had a room at the house that Gabe and I had shared until a few weeks ago. The big guy never said anything about it, but after being cooped up together in a cabin for nearly two years, I don’t think he was sad to see me move out. He was finally getting some well-deserved peace and quiet.

I was halfway through my tea and just turning the page to chapter two of *The Green Ripper* when a knock echoed from foyer.

Son of a bitch, I thought. *I never get a moment’s peace around here*. I got up to answer the door, and when I opened it, Steve stood on the front porch wearing a mischievous grin.

“You know what today is?” he asked.

I blinked. “Uh. ... Saturday?”

“Yes. But more importantly, it’s market day.”

“Okay, and what does that have to do with anything?”

Steve’s smile widened. “I have a surprise for you. Come on, you’re gonna love this.”

I stood there staring at him for a moment, noticing that his uniform was different than usual. Normally, he wears Army ACUs with no insignia, something to do with him being a Special Ops guy. Today, however, he had on a more traditional-looking uniform. He was wearing his beret, which he never wore, claiming it didn’t breathe worth a damn and felt like wearing a wet sock on top of his head. The captain’s bars on his collar were self-explanatory, as were the nametag and the ‘Special Forces’ rocker on his shoulder, but the rest of the ribbons and shiny metal things pinned to his chest were a mystery to me.

“What’s with the fancy duds?” I said, pointing.

“That’s part of the surprise. Come on, we’re wasting time.”

I sighed. It was a mile out of Steve’s way to swing by my house, so I figured there was no way I was getting out of this one.

“Let me grab my coat.”

I walked with Steve toward the corner of Mill Street and Duncan, where the local farmers and tradesmen sold their wares every Saturday morning. Money was a distant memory, but the barter system was still alive and well.

Bullets, toilet paper, soap, hygiene products, and any kind of alcoholic drink had become valuable enough to be a form of currency, but just about anything was fair game if you could find someone

willing to trade for it. Most of the trading on market day was just the locals selling food in exchange for valuable items, or more commonly, hours of labor.

Although trade goods might have been scarce, something everyone around town had plenty of was free time. 'Will work for food' no longer held a negative connotation. The local farms were productive enough to feed the entire community and then some, but they lacked personnel. Without gasoline to power their machinery, the farmers had to do everything by hand. And with the massive amount of work that goes into tending crops and raising animals, there was no shortage of openings in the fields.

Since most of the local farms were outside of the twelve-foot protective wall encompassing the central part of town, security was a major concern. Wandering ghouls were bad enough, but raiders from a rogue militant group calling themselves the Free Legion had been harassing those brave souls who provided their community with its livelihood.

In response, Walter Elliott, the local sheriff and one tough old son of a bitch, had recruited people to provide security for the farms in exchange for a percentage of everything they produced. Part of it went to the municipal emergency supply, and the rest was used to compensate the guards. Although it cost them a chunk of their harvest, the farmers had gritted their teeth and taken the deal. Unless they wanted to end up captured or killed, or have their livestock stolen and their fields burned by the Legion, they had no choice but to accept.

Even with the extra security, the Legion's raiders were still doing a fine job of making themselves a pain in the ass. Recently, they had begun a campaign of hit-and-run attacks on farms in broad daylight and had started taking potshots at guards along the wall. Usually, they fired off a few shots and then melted back into the trees before we could go after them, but on one occasion they made the mistake of shooting at a certain Marine Corps scout sniper of my acquaintance.

Gabriel often volunteered his services to the night watch in the hopes of catching the troublemaker in the act, and always brought along his .338 Lapua magnum sniper rifle. Capable of taking a man's head off at over a thousand yards, the powerful weapon was the stuff of nightmares—especially in the hands of one of the most highly trained snipers in the world.

On the night in question, Gabe had taken position on the westernmost guard tower and was watching the hills in that direction, just under the setting sun. He knew the raiders liked to use that time of day to attack because, with the sunset in the guards' eyes, it was when they would be the hardest to see. Gabriel had used the same technique himself many times.

He didn't catch any movement—they were too far away for that—but when they started firing, Gabe got a lock on their position. They were shooting unsuppressed rifles and, even from that distance, Gabe could make out the muzzle flashes. He estimated the range at about five hundred yards, made a quick scope adjustment, and sent three rounds downrange as fast as he could work the bolt.

They were dead before they knew what hit them.

When a team went out to retrieve the corpses, two of the gunmen were nearly headless. Afterward I asked Gabe to remind me never to piss him off.

Other than that incident, the town's security forces, such as they were, had not made any headway against the Legion. They had enough people to man the wall and keep the farms safe, but going after the Legion in the hinterlands simply stretched them too thin. This meant that the Legion could operate with impunity as long as its members kept their distance, giving them control of the caravan routes between Hollow Rock and the Mississippi River. This had caused trade—the life's blood of Hollow Rock—to grind to a halt.

Obviously, something had to be done.

Determined to take the fight to the Legion, the mayor of Hollow Rock had asked Gabe to help build a small but well-trained expeditionary force to reopen the trade routes and eliminate anyone that got in their way.

Well ... to say that she asked him to do this may not be entirely accurate. My presence in this town was precipitated by a skirmish with the Free Legion and a rather nasty bullet wound in my side. I was unconscious by the time my friends hauled me through the northern gate and put me on an operating table. My girlfriend, Allison, who also happens to be the town's only medical doctor, operated on me while I was in a near coma and saved my life. Save for a big ugly scar on my side, I made a full recovery.

The buoyancy I had felt at surviving my first foray into the world of gunshot wounds was tragically short-lived. It turned out that the mayor charged a fee for any non-resident taking advantage of the town's services, like visits to the doctor. One might call it a visitor's tax. Once I was on the mend, the mayor had called Gabe to a meeting and laid out our payment options. Either we could give the town a third of our medical supplies, which were considerable, or we could stay and help defend the place until the threat posed by the Legion had been eliminated.

I should take a moment to mention here that Elizabeth Stone, the duly elected mayor, just so happens to be a pretty, doe-eyed brunette who is single and close to Gabe's age. I should further mention that Gabe has not gotten laid in a really long time.

Like, years.

Not surprisingly, he chose the second option.

"Looks like they're already here," Steve said, bringing me back to the present.

I looked up. "Who is?"

He pointed ahead to the square at the center of the market. Mayor Stone and Sheriff Elliott were mingling with some of the farmers at their wagons, smiling and doling out handshakes. A small platform had been erected at the intersection where the largest stalls met, visible to everyone in the market. Someone had even pinned a few red, white, and blue banners to it like the ones people used to hang from balconies and windows on Independence Day.

"What's going on with that?" I said, gesturing to the podium.

"All part of the surprise my friend, all part of the surprise."

I glanced over at him, and his grin had simmered down into a little self-satisfied smirk. *Smug bastard.*

The sheriff saw us coming and motioned us over. He was a tall man, well into his sixties but still hale and strong. He cut quite an impressive figure with his wide-brimmed hat, uniform, and pearl-handled Colt Python in a polished leather holster.

"Glad you could join us, Captain," he said, reaching out to shake hands with Steve. "How are things at Central Command?"

"As of about nine this morning, everything was running on schedule," Steve said. "Bird is inbound. Should be popping up over the horizon any time now."

"I'm sorry ... bird? What are you talking about?" I asked.

Elliott jerked his head in my direction. "There any particular reason you decided to bring him along?" He didn't bother looking at me.

“Eric here has been helping Mr. Garrett train the new militia,” Steve said. “I thought it would be a good idea to have one of the instructors on hand for the supply drop.”

The sheriff eyed me up and down, clearly not liking what he saw. “All right, fair enough. Mayor’s gettin’ ready to make her speech. You might want to go ahead on up there.”

“Will do.” Steve turned and clapped me on the shoulder. “Hang out here for a few minutes. It’s gonna be a hell of a show.”

As he walked off toward the podium, Elliott continued to stare silently at me. From his expression one would think that I had just pissed on his children. I turned and stared back.

“Something on your mind, sheriff?” I said, letting irritation bleed into my voice.

I had been putting up with the sheriff treating me like something he’d scraped off his boot for nearly two months now, and his condescending, dickhead attitude was starting to wear on my last nerve. He glared wordlessly for another moment, then turned on his heel and stalked away.

“Always a pleasure, Walt,” I called out to his back. He kept walking, not bothering with a backward glance.

Prick.

I wandered over to a stall not far from the podium. A guy that I had seen before, but whose name escaped me, was selling baskets of eggs and live chickens in wire cages.

“Nice mornin’, eh?” the farmer said cheerfully. I nodded, feigning interest.

“You have any idea what that’s all about?” I said, making a vague gesture toward the podium.

He pushed back his straw hat and squinted at the mayor. “Not sure. Mayor said she had some kind of important announcement to make today. I reckon it has something to do with that treaty we voted on.”

A brief squawk of feedback sounded from the stage. Mayor Stone was testing the microphone on a PA system connected to a car battery. She was wearing a sleeveless white dress with an intricate blue pattern swirling down the sides that clung to her figure and emphasized her ample curves. Her arms were covered by a light blue cardigan, and tastefully applied makeup brought out the warm darkness of her eyes. It struck me how much of a contrast she was to Allison.

Allison is a petite little thing with small, delicate hands and a cute pixie face. The mayor was tall and athletic, her shoulders broad for a woman, and she had a generous curve to her hips. Not fat at all, just bigger than average. Carefully curled hair cascaded down her shoulders and framed her face, all high cheekbones and a broad smile. Looking at her, she could have been in her late twenties, but in truth, she was actually pushing forty. Whatever she was doing to take care of herself, it was working.

“Can everybody hear me okay? All the way in the back?” she said.

A scattered round of acknowledgments sounded from the tents as throngs of people wandering among the carts stopped to listen.

“All right, fantastic,” she went on. “Now folks, I don’t know how long the juice on this thing is going to last, so I’ll have to make this quick.”

She paused for a moment, allowing the crowds to go silent. I noticed that the mayor was letting a little bit more of her Southern accent creep through than she normally did. Curious.

“As y’all know, we’ve been requesting federal aid from Colorado Springs for a number of weeks now. Captain McCray here has been working diligently to obtain supplies, equipment, and reinforcements to help in our ongoing efforts to protect our community. It’s been slow going, and I

know things haven't been easy, but today I'm happy to announce that our patience has been rewarded and that help is on the way."

The mayor beamed as the crowd broke into enthusiastic applause. She directed her smile at Steve for a moment, who flushed ever so slightly and smiled back, giving a single nod.

The mayor continued, "As we speak, there is an Army transport helicopter coming this way to make the first of several supply drops we'll be receiving over the next few days. It should be getting here within the hour, and Sheriff Elliott will be organizing a volunteer work crew to help sort everything out and get it where it needs to go. Now I know y'all are honest folks, but I still have to remind you that everything in those transports is city property and should be treated as such. Once again, I want to thank each and every one of you for your support and hard work, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the day."

The mayor stepped back from the microphone, flashing her dazzling white smile and waving at the applauding townsfolk. I didn't know if the warmth and sincerity she radiated was genuine, or if it was an affectation, but the townspeople certainly bought it. Her charisma was undeniable, and I could certainly see why she inspired confidence. But I was still reserving judgment.

She was, after all, a politician.

When the helicopter arrived, it was every bit as spectacular as Steve had promised. A massive twin rotor CH-47 Chinook, machine guns bristling from the side ports, and two impossibly large bundles of cargo dangling underneath, it roared over the treetops in a maelstrom of wind and flying debris to deposit its cargo before flying away and touching down in an open patch of field.

As it landed, I walked over to where Steve stood near the now empty podium. His expression was placid, as though watching a gigantic helicopter flit delicately about the market square was the most normal thing in the world. For a guy like him, maybe it was.

"Question for you," I said.

"Shoot."

I pointed at the helicopter. "Where the hell did they get fuel for that thing?"

"Strategic reserves would be my guess," Steve said. "Treated and stored properly, just about any kind of aviation fuel can last for over a decade."

That shook a memory loose, and I vaguely recalled something I read in college about strategic oil reserves. Possibilities began to swirl.

"Any idea where they keep it?"

He shrugged. "The government had about as many doomsday plans as Washington had lobbyists. There's shit stashed all over the country. Supposedly, the President and the Joint Chiefs know where all of it is, but they've only recovered a fraction of it."

I paused to consider that for a moment. If the government could provide us with tanks and air support, what did that mean for the fight against the Free Legion?

"Come on," Steve said, motioning me forward. "Got some people I want you to meet."

The drone of the helicopter's engine had faded from a high, keening whine to a lower, more

tolerable pitch. The massive twin rotors slowed, no longer kicking up blinding clouds of dust and debris. Six figures exited from the open door on the side facing us, marching purposefully toward Steve.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sheriff Elliott and Mayor Stone break off from the crowd and try to catch up with us. Steve set a quick pace, and we managed to reach the newcomers before they caught up.

Three of the men looked like regular Army grunts, but battle-hardened ones. They strode forward with the casual confidence of veterans, handling their carbines with practiced ease. Walking in front of them was a tall, stone-faced man with eyes like granite and a shiny silver star pinned to his hat. Strangely, he looked familiar. I could have sworn I'd seen him before.

Behind him, quietly blending into the background, were two men in black fatigues with large, square cases strapped to their backs. One was tall and lean, with a nose like a hawk's beak and sharp, vaguely Asian features that spoke of Native American ancestry. The other man was shorter, broad shouldered, and had a face like a cinder block, all square lines and blunt angles.

Steve snapped a salute to the man with the star on his hat, who returned his salute and reached out to shake Steve's hand when he drew near.

"Good to see you again, McCray," he said.

"Good to see you too, General. How was the trip?"

The older man grimaced. "I thought the 'Ghan was the shittiest shit I'd ever have to suffer through. Fate has once again conspired to prove me wrong."

Steve grinned. "Sir, this is Eric Riordan, the man I spoke to you about earlier. Eric, this is General Phillip Jacobs. He's in charge of Special Operations Command."

The old soldier snorted. "Such as it is these days. Pleased to meet you, young man."

I shook his hand and looked him in the eye. General Jacobs had a strong grip and a firm, steady gaze with just a faint glimmer of mischief hiding in the background. I liked him immediately.

"Likewise, general," I said.

"Call me Phil." His eyes shifted to a point behind me, and I turned to see the sheriff approaching with Mayor Stone close behind. The mayor's body was doing all kinds of interesting things under her low-cut dress as she jogged toward us, and the effect was not lost on the men around me.

"Welcome to Hollow Rock," she said, stopping in front of General Jacobs and flashing that heart-stopping smile. "I'm Mayor Elizabeth Stone, and this old fellow here is Sheriff Walter Elliott. I'm so glad you could make it."

The general took her hand, simultaneously trying to rip his eyes up from her cleavage. "Well, Mayor, it's nice to finally put a face to the name." he said.

"You must be General Jacobs."

"That's right."

"I'm sure you gentlemen must have had a long trip. How about we all head over to the VFW? We've set up a nice lunch for you there."

The general smiled. "That's sounds like the best idea I've heard all day. Lead the way, ma'am."

Her dress swirled around her as she took the general by the arm and turned to walk toward a horse-drawn wagon waiting at the edge of the market. I pointedly ignored the sheriff's disapproving glare as

Steve and I followed the general's entourage.

I glanced over at Steve as we walked, and the yellow-eyed bastard was still smirking. When this dog-and-pony show was over, he had some explaining to do.

Lunch was everything the mayor had promised. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, biscuits, black-eyed peas, and an assortment of cooked garden vegetables—a traditional Southern meal. My mouth was watering before I even made it through the door of the VFW hall.

Thankfully, the sheriff had stayed behind with the two guys in black combat fatigues to organize the work crew sorting out the supply drop. The sheer mass of the stacked crates that the Chinook had carried to us was staggering.

During the reception, the mayor mingled among the newcomers, taking time to talk to each one and learn a little bit about them. Occasionally, she would shoot a glance my way, and then look meaningfully at Steve. I began to get the impression that it wasn't her idea to invite me along.

While the mayor and General Jacobs were at the bar getting a shot of scotch from the mayor's personal stash, I grabbed a plate and got in line next to Steve at the buffet table.

"Were you planning on at some point explaining to me why the hell you dragged me out of my house this morning?" I said, keeping my voice low. "I mean, I appreciate a free meal as much as the next guy, but I get the feeling I'm not exactly welcome here."

"Eric, I promise that all will be made clear, just not right now. Don't worry, everything's cool."

"You sure about that? 'Cause the mayor wouldn't piss on me if I was burning, and the General's bodyguards keep looking at me like I'm fucking Scarface."

Steve chuckled. "I told you, everything's fine. Just eat your food, keep your mouth shut, and be patient. Trust me, it'll be worth it."

Against my better judgment, I did as he said. The food was good, which made staying quiet an almost enjoyable task. Once everyone was settled down at the banquet table, the mayor gave a short speech about how grateful she was for the government's help, how humbling it was have earned Central Command's trust, and blah, blah, blah. General Jacobs stood and gave an equally insincere and meaningless speech, but delivered it with less affected verve than the mayor had. Nevertheless, everyone gave him the same polite little golf clap that we had given the mayor.

After lunch, the volunteers who had put our meal together brought peach cobbler around to everyone at the table, and even topped it off with a dollop of fresh whipped cream—a rare treat indeed. It would have been great, except for the fact that I detest peach cobbler. The Army grunt sitting next to me devoured his in less time than it takes to say the words, so I offered him mine. He seemed to hate me a little bit less after that.

Just as I was eyeballing the side exit, and seriously mulling over how I could make my escape without drawing too much attention to myself, General Jacobs stood up and motioned to his men.

"Well mayor, I certainly do appreciate the hospitality," he said, "but I need to get back to the chopper and get on the horn to Central Command. Is five o'clock this afternoon still a good time to for the conference?"

"Absolutely."

The mayor smiled, stood up, and walked the General and his men out to the parking lot, where a wagon waited for them. She said a polite round of goodbyes as the horses strained at their tethers, and the wagon creaked off down the road, leaving me, her, and Steve all standing out in front of town hall. Once the wagon had disappeared over a hill in the distance, both Steve and the mayor turned and regarded me silently.

“So. Someone mind telling me what’s going on?” I said.

The bright enthusiasm that Mayor Stone had displayed all morning dissipated like a fog under the noonday sun. She swiveled her gaze over to Steve.

“You really think he’s the guy for the job?”

Steve nodded. “I’m sure of it.”

“Okay people, I’m standing right here,” I chimed in. “Could you please explain to me what the hell you’re talking about?”

Steve suppressed a smile and gave me a warning look. “The mayor has asked me to help her out with a special project, and to pick someone qualified to take the lead on it.”

“What kind of project?”

“The kind that saves lives and makes this town a safer place,” the mayor said.

I stared at her for a moment. I was pretty sure it was the first time she had ever spoken to me directly.

“Okay,” I said. “What did you have in mind?”

“We should go into my office. This is a matter best discussed in private.”

She turned and walked into the town hall without a backward glance. I looked at Steve. He winked at me.

“What are you getting me into, man?”

“Come on, let’s go inside.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, cursed under my breath, and followed him in. One thing I had to give this town. Life was never boring

Chapter 3

Trojan Horse

The mayor's office was exactly as Gabe had described it to me. Small, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the front lawn, bookshelves, the requisite collection of college degrees and plaques hanging on the walls, and a massive oak desk that looked like it had been there since the Taft administration. The mayor sat down behind it and motioned to the two chairs in front of her.

"Have a seat, gentlemen."

I sat down in a comfortable leather chair next to Steve and watched while the mayor sorted through a few pieces of paper. She kept me waiting long enough to let me know she was keeping me waiting, and then slid two forms side-by-side on the desk in front of her.

"Captain McCray tells me that you've had extensive paramilitary training. Is that correct?"

I glanced over at Steve. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"At his behest, I spoke to Mr. Garrett about you. He told me that in addition to possessing significant unarmed combat skills, you're an expert rifleman, you have a strong grasp of combat tactics and wilderness survival, and that you're a serviceable sniper. Is all that true?"

'Serviceable' sniper. That sounded like something Gabe would say. "I'll have to defer to Gabe's judgment on that."

She smiled then, slight dimples forming at the corners of her mouth, white teeth showing through full lips. It was a practiced smile, and she knew exactly what kind of effect it had. But that didn't stop it from being charming.

"If Mr. Garrett's assessment is correct, then it seems there's more to you than appearances would suggest."

I wasn't sure quite what that was supposed to mean, but found myself smiling back anyway. "Thank you. ... I think."

She looked over at Steve. "Captain?"

He turned his chair to face me. "I've seen what you can do Eric, and I have confidence in your abilities. The reason you're here today is because we need someone to infiltrate the Legion, and I think you're the man for the job."

I went still, and blinked at him a couple of times. "I'm sorry, you want me to do what?"

"Think about it," he went on. "We've been spinning our wheels against these assholes for months, and what do we have to show for it? The last thing this town needs is a prolonged fight that will use up resources and cost lives. If we can get someone on the inside, feed us intel on where they hide and how they operate, we can use that to pick them apart."

I stuttered, stammered, and held up a hand. “Whoa, wait a minute. Here’s the thing—I’m not trained for that. I can hold my own in a firefight, but I know jack shit about espionage.”

“I can work with you on that.”

“Really? When? You spend ninety percent of your time running around in the woods looking for Legion raiders.”

“And for all that, I’ve accomplished next to nothing. I think it’s time to switch tactics.”

I waited another beat, trying sort out all the reasons why this was a bad idea. There were a lot to sift through. “Okay, what about the militia? They still have three months of training ahead of them.”

“This plan won’t go into effect until they’re finished. I’m bringing it up now so that we have time to get you ready.”

“Steve, what makes you think I’m even willing to do this?”

“Because I know you, Eric. You’re nosy. If there’s one thing you hate, it’s being out of the loop.”

I frowned at him, and fought the urge to smack that goddamn smirk off his face. The mayor stayed quiet at her desk, watching.

They had planned this, the two of them. They had set up an ambush, and I had walked right into it. This, in and of itself, did not bother me. What did bother me was the fact that Steve was right. I do like being in the middle of things, sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong, and generally getting myself into trouble. Damn him.

“Okay.” I sighed. “One more question. Why me? I mean, fighting ability aside, what makes you think I’m the guy to do this?”

“You’ve read my intelligence reports,” Steve replied, “so you know that the Legion is growing. What those reports don’t say is that some of those people are survivors from the small towns around Hollow Rock and Bruceton.”

“How do you know that?”

Mayor Stone interjected, “He showed me photographs. I recognized some of the people in them.”

I turned to stare at her, suspicious. “How is that possible? You’re telling me you recognized people from all over the county?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I grew up in Hollow Rock, Mr. Riordan. My family, those who are still alive, all live here. In my first election, I did my campaigning door to door. I’ve been the mayor of Hollow Rock for eight years, and I’m on a first-name basis with over half the households in Carroll County. I know the rest of them by either their tax records or their rap sheets. So yes, Mr. Riordan, I recognized people from all over the county.”

I nodded, getting the idea. “Okay then, why aren’t these people joining on our side? The Legion isn’t exactly known for their fairness and hospitality.”

“That’s the problem,” the mayor said. “We just don’t know. It’s not as if we wouldn’t welcome them here; we need all the help we can get. But ever since the last election when Ronnie Kilpatrick defected, no one has attempted to join our community. Not one single person.”

“Until you, that is,” Steve said.

Now we were getting somewhere. “So you need me to find out how the Legion is sourcing their troops.”

Steve nodded. “That, and we need to know where they’re operating from. There has to be

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