

*With the loss of a prominent A.N.G.E.L. fresh in their minds, can the team focus on enough to get Angel without losing anyone else? Meanwhile, the Sullivan family faces a life-altering event of their own. With hearts breaking, can they look beyond their circumstances to figure out how to unite?*

## **Divine Legacy Series: Hearts United** by C.J. Peterson

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# HEARTS UNITED

BOOK THREE

DIVINE LEGACY SERIES



C.J. Peterson

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First Edition

This book is dedicated to my loving husband, Trevor, who is my heart. I am grateful God united our hearts together! I love you!

It is also dedicated to my dear family who love and support me. You all mean more to me than you will ever know.  
Thank you!

This is especially dedicated to my parents, Gene and Sue, who are celebrating 65 years of wedding bliss this month.  
May God grant you many more happy years together!

A portion of the proceeds of this series will go to Airborne Angel Cadets of Texas – a non-profit group of hardworking volunteers who send care packages to our soldiers overseas. You can find them at: <http://www.airborneangelcadets.com>

This book is also dedicated to the men and women of our military. You are not forgotten. You are in my prayers until the last one of you comes home!

To learn more about C.J. Peterson, you can find her online at:  
<http://cjpetersonwrites.com/>  
‘While the stories are fiction, the journey is real!’

## Summary

With the loss of a prominent A.N.G.E.L. fresh in their minds, the team focuses on trying to get to Angel without losing anyone else. Angel is doing her best to fight Cassius, Calliope, and Korax in complete isolation, with only God's strength to pull her through. Already tortured, how much more can she endure?

In the meantime, Jerrod's battles with the ghosts of his past become overwhelming. Will he be able to see past them to find his future?

As the A.N.G.E.L.s converge for yet another memorial service, Jesse struggles with feelings of anger and resentment. Knowing Angel's choice triggered this loss, he fights within to reconcile his feelings.

With emotions at an all-time high, ricocheting all over the place, the team is more divided than ever. Will they be able to focus on God enough to center themselves and carry on their legacy? Will they continue to be divided or will they become *Hearts United*. (Book 3 of the *Divine Legacy Series*.)

**Proverbs 4:20-23** *“My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”*

## Table of Contents

Prologue - God Is The Strength Of My Heart .....	9
Chapter 1 - Above All Else, Guard Your Heart .....	25
Chapter 2 - Be Strong And Take Heart .....	62
Chapter 3 - Love The Lord Your God With All Your Heart .....	76
Chapter 4 - The Lord Is Near The Broken Hearted .....	100
Chapter 5 - Trust In The Lord With All Your Heart .....	120
Chapter 6 - You Will Find Me When You Seek Me With All Your Heart .....	139
Chapter 7 - I Will Give Thanks To The Lord With All My Heart .....	159
Chapter 8 - May He Give You the Desires Of Your Heart .....	178
Chapter 9 - Create In Me A Pure Heart .....	201
Chapter 10 - The Lord Looks At The Heart .....	219
Chapter 11 - That We May Gain A Heart Of Wisdom .....	235
Chapter 12 - Hold Fast To Him And Serve Him With All Your Heart .....	257
Chapter 13 - With All My Heart, I Have Sought You .....	273
Chapter 14 - I Will Give Thanks To The Lord With All My Heart .....	287

Chapter 15 - Your Words Have I Hid In My Heart .....	307
Chapter 16 - Blessed Are The Pure In Heart .....	325
Chapter 17 - My Heart Will Not Fear .....	346
Chapter 18 - Our Heart Is Open Wide .....	355
Chapter 19 - Chained Hearts .....	363
Epilogue - Chains Broken .....	385

## Chapter 1

### Above All Else, Guard Your Heart

“I hate it when they make us do this at night,” Alexander Bennett said to his passenger, Paul Green, as their Humvee bounded down the dirt road. The convoy travelled deep in Iraq in a line of five Humvees. “I mean, I understand *why*, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“I don’t really think there *is* a good time for this,” Green said, watching for any sign of movement near them. Their vehicle was the second in a line of five. “However, Captain said we had to move. When we’re given orders, we go. It’s a little easier for us to operate in the cover of darkness,” he said, tapping the night-vision goggles on his helmet. “During the day, you might as well paint a target on us.”

“Are you scared, Bennett?” Charles teased. He was in the back with Hernandez and Adams, who chuckled in response.

“Not necessarily. While I realize there’s strength in numbers, a friend of mine got blown to bits two weeks ago on a night mission. Driving around at night, convoy or not, *really* has me on edge.”

“Don’t let Cap hear you say that,” Charles warned.

“I won’t.”

“He’ll make you do extra night duty if he thinks you’re scared,” Hernandez said, reminding him of the lecture they

received prior to their takeoff from Camp Pendleton almost nine months ago.

“Yeah, he’s sadistic like that,” Adams pointed out.

“Do you think he’s there this time?” Charles asked.

Green shrugged. “Intel says he is.”

“Is the intel good?”

“Let’s hope so, or this will be a colossal waste of time,” Adams said. “Hey, Green? How’s your girl?”

“I heard from Jenny the other day,” Green said, with a boyish grin.

“Oh yeah?” Bennett glanced over at him, surprised. “Why didn’t you tell me? How’s she doing?”

“Great! She’s finally over the morning sickness. She sent me a pic,” he said, taking his helmet off. Pulling the photo from his helmet, he held it up for Bennett to see before passing it to the back of the vehicle for the others. In the green hue of the vehicle lights, they saw a very pregnant Jenny Green.

“She’s a beaut!” Hernandez commented, handing it to Adams.

“Definitely a looker!” Adams said, handing it back to Green. “Does she have a sister?”

“No.” Green chuckled, accepting the photo back. Then, turning to Bennett, he said, “She *did* say she has a friend she wants to introduce *you* to when we get back next month.”

“Really?” Bennett asked, heart skipping a beat in excitement.

“Yep. She’s got great taste in helping hook people up,” Green said, returning the photo to his helmet. As he replaced the helmet back on his head, he explained, “She’s helped at least –”

*BOOM!*

In a flash of blinding light, an explosion rocked the ground under their vehicle. With the crushing metal, yelling and screaming of the guys, and the roar of the blast, it was difficult to distinguish any sound. The ringing in Bennett’s ears overpowered any other noise.

...What seemed like minutes, was only a few precious seconds. To him, it could have been an eternity as memories from Bennett’s life flashed through his mind. There was his first ten-speed bike he got for his tenth birthday present. It was a top of the line red one with thin white stripes. Then, there was his first date with Erica when he was fifteen. She was also his first girlfriend. Erica was only about 5’3”, but the sweetest girl he knew.

Bennett felt his body leave the seat, throwing him all over his position in the cab. The Humvee flipped, landing on the roof. As his arm was trapped in the collapsed roof, he felt the metal carve into his wrist before blood from his wrist created a warm river down his arm.

...The next memory was of the first touchdown he scored in a varsity game as receiver at seventeen. It was the first of many in his football career. Then, there was his high school prom with Erica as his date. Unfortunately, it was also their

last date, because that night she found out he joined the Marines and broke up with him. She insisted that she wasn't cut out to be a military spouse. This memory was closely followed by his high school graduation. His parents beamed as they took plenty of photographs to document the occasion.

The vehicle went for the second roll. The Humvee landed on the driver's side, pinning his legs. He felt metal slice his body in multiple areas as the front of the truck collapsed around him.

...His graduation from boot camp was another proud moment for him, as well as one of the worst things he ever went through up to that point. The brutality strengthened him, but also took a toll on him. He would wake up before the sun came up, and wasn't allowed to go to bed until well after sunset. The drill sergeants would work them night and day, until they were satisfied that the recruits were ready. Then came his graduation from technical school, which was the same day he was assigned to a unit. Being officially assigned to the unit was an exciting day in his life. Within that unit, he found fellowship, learned valuable lessons, and learned to work as a team. On that unit, he found his family. The next memory was standing in line with his unit, loading into the C130 for Iraq. While everyone's nerves were completely on edge, they knew what they had to do and why. This was what they signed up for. As he took his seat among his fellow military members, he looked around with pride. He thought sure at that moment, if they tested his blood, it would be red, white, and blue. He knew he was where he was supposed to be. He was a patriot. The last memory he saw, was a conversation with Doc, Green, Hernandez, Adams, and Charles, where they were laughing while playing poker a few nights ago.

Another flip crushed the sides of the vehicle into him. His body jolted as the vehicle rotated again, landing on Bennett's side of the truck. It rocked back and forth before coming to rest fifty yards from its original position.

As much as he tried to focus on any one memory, the intense pain jetting from his legs and arm, along with his lack of oxygen, and the constant ringing in his ears, prevented him from zeroing in on only one. When the concussion wave passed through Bennett, it felt like a vacuum sucked out all the air around him. He had a difficult time catching any breath of air. Any air he did inhale was laced with the taste of dirt, gunpowder, and blood.

Bennett's arm hung in the air, wrapped in a piece of metal from the roof. Unable to release it, he did his best to see around the sheet of roof that separated him from his best friend, Sergeant Paul Green.

When the truck stopped moving, the chaos that suddenly erupted sent shockwaves through Bennett as he did his best to process what was going on around him. "Green!" he shouted for his friend. Barely hearing his own voice, he shouted several more times. It sounded like an echo to him, but he continued to shout for his friend. The sound of gunfire flew around them at an alarming pace. Bennett was desperate to hear an answer from Green...really from anyone at that point. "Hernandez! Adams! Charles! Green! Anybody!"

"I'm here," Adam's groaned. "My leg is trapped. Hernandez is unconscious. I already checked on Charles. He's gone."

"C-can you see Green?"

“No.”

Tugging the portion of the roof that separated him from the others side of the cab with his free hand, he could barely move it to see the starry night sky through the thick, black smoke. Shouting again in a voice that was barely audible to his own ears, he was desperate to find any of them, but especially his best friend. “Green!”

After a moment, unable to move from his captured position, he moaned and groaned in pain, joining the faint chorus of Adams and Hernandez in the back. When the reality of what his body experienced hit him, he rested his head back, doing his best to get the pain under control. Hearing the shouts and yells of the fellow members of his unit from the other Humvees was a relief. They not only scrambled to get to their men, but also returned fire to the enemy who surrounded them. He couldn't fully comprehend, nor could he hear what they were saying over the ringing. The blasted ringing was getting to him.

“Bennett, man, don't move,” Pierce, his Captain, said, sticking his head through where the windshield used to be.

“Green?” Bennett asked. He sounded weak to himself.

“Barlow's with him.”

“Charles is gone. Adams and Hernandez are hurt.”

“I need you to focus on my voice, Bennett,” Pierce said, scaring himself at how calm he was despite the pandemonium that besieged the convoy. Ducking a few bullets that strayed in their direction before ricocheting off the vehicle, he kept low as he yelled to Bennett, “They've called for help. They're

on the way. Just focus on me. There's a lot of blood on you, so I want to make sure you stay with me."

"What happened?"

"IED. They created a choke point. We're returning fire, but we're waiting on air support before we go after them. We don't know who all is out there."

"The other vehicles?"

"Some are still searching the wreckage, while others are keeping the enemy at bay."

Hearing gunfire in the distance, mixed with the shouts of other men, Bennett begged, "Don't leave me, Cap."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Adams, are you and Hernandez okay back there?"

"Think my leg's broke, but other than that, I'm just shaken up...and cold," Adam's voice responded from the darkness. "Hernandez is barely conscious. I don't want to move him."

"Don't. Where's Charles?"

"He was right behind Green," was his only response. From where Adams was, he could clearly see the empty space where the passenger seat used to be.

Pierce shook his head at the devastation around him, at a loss for words. Seeing movement to his left, he noticed the man wore the gear of their enemy. He whipped out his gun and fired off three rounds. When the body dropped to the

ground motionless, Pierce looked to the sky, and yelled, “Can we catch a break here?”

“I can’t feel my legs,” Bennett moaned, bringing Pierce back to him.

“One of mine’s on fire,” Pierce said, glancing at his own leg, which had tourniquet strapped just above where a piece of shrapnel impaled his thigh.

“I-I can’t breathe, and I-I think I’m going to be sick.”

“No. Please don’t do that. We’ve got enough going on.” Taking another good look around, Pierce placed his gun on his lap before resting his hands on either side of Bennett’s face, forcing him to look at him. “You need to focus on me, and work on slowing your breaths.” Glancing up at Bennett’s arm, he shook his head. The amount of blood soaking Bennett’s clothing deeply concerned him. He feared what Bennett’s arm would look like once the compression was released. He wasn’t sure that Bennett would make it out of this one alive.

“Green’s wife is pregnant. Is he okay? He needs to get back to Jenny. Sh-she’s due any day. He needs to get back to her before their baby is born.”

“Focus on me, Bennett. I need you to worry about yourself. You’re —” Pierce swore again as more gunfire neared their position. Aiming into the darkness, he emptied his weapon. After a moment, the gunfire abruptly ceased. Reloading his gun, he watched in the distance at someone maneuvering through the vehicles, to see Jerrod coming toward them. Pierce turned back to Bennett, “Doc’s coming. Just focus on me. Okay?”

“I’m trying, Cap. I can’t feel...Ahhhhhh!” He shrieked when his arm dropped from its metal encasement, doused in blood. As it landed on his chest, he clearly saw that his hand was missing from just below his wrist...and Bennett completely lost it!

“Just breathe, Bennett!” Pierce yelled over Bennett’s shrieks and shouts. “Focus on me, Marine!”

Wide-eyed and frantic, Bennett shouted, “Cap! My arm! Where’s my hand? Where’s Doc? Why isn’t he here yet? What do I do? Help me! Find my hand and put it back! What do I do? Do something! Help me!”

“Bennett! Focus on my voice!” Pierce shouted.

“It’s okay. I’m here, Cap,” Jerrod said, running up to the truck, sliding in front of Pierce. “How bad?”

“Make him comfortable,” was all Captain Pierce said. “As for the back, Charles is already gone. Adams has a broken leg. And Hernandez is semi-conscious, but –”

“Adams! Does Hernandez have a pulse?” Jerrod called to Adams, cutting Pierce off while applying a tourniquet to Bennett’s arm in an attempt to slow the bleeding. By the amount of blood loss already, he wasn’t sure how much more time Bennett had, but he would fight for him.

“Just a minute,” Adams said. After feeling the pulse in Hernandez’s neck, he confirmed, “Yes. It’s weak, though. He’s going in and out of consciousness.”

“Which is he right now?”

“Unconscious.”

“Okay. Don’t move him.”

“I won’t. Hey, Doc?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m stuck back here. I’m not getting out without help. The seat has crushed my leg. Pretty sure it’s broken.”

“I’m sure. Just do me a favor and...Bennett?” Jerrod asked, glancing down to Bennett, who closed his eyes. “Bennett? Bennett, can you hear me?” he asked, looking into Bennett’s eyes with a penlight.

Shaking his head to wake back up, Bennett glanced down at his arm and started panicking again. “M-my arm! Doc, it’s gone!” he shouted, wild-eyed. “Where’d my hand go? You need to find it and put it back! Help me! Ahh! It feels like it’s on fire!”

“I need you to calm down,” Jerrod said, doing his best to get further into the vehicle to find out the condition of Bennett’s legs. By the looks of the vehicle, unless there was a pocket open for Bennett’s legs, he feared the worst. He also needed to assess as to how much it would take to get him released.

“My-my legs! My hand! Help me, doc! I’m going to die! I don’t want to die! You need to help me!”

“*You need* to calm down, Marine!” Jerrod ordered. Hearing helicopters in the distance, he said, “The cavalry’s coming. I need you to stay with me, okay?”

“I don’t know what to do! My hand! Look at my hand, Doc!” he said again, holding it up in the air. “It feels like it’s

on fire! Please put it back on! Help me, Doc! I don't want to die!"

"Calm down," Jerrod gently said.

"My legs! There's pain, but I can't move them."

Trying not to get hit by the hysterical Bennett, Jerrod wiggled back out of the Humvee. "Relax," Jerrod coaxed, giving him a shot of Morphine for the pain, and Valium to calm him.

"I-I..."

"You can do this. Think of home. Think of Buck, your puppy back home. He's waiting for you," Jerrod said, shaking his head as he kept count of the beats of Bennett's pulse for five seconds. He counted for five, and then multiplied it by twelve to get the approximate pulse rate. Due to multiple patients, he didn't have time to count the full ten seconds for a more accurate heart rate.

"He-he's with my sister and her family."

"Good. That's a good place for him. There ya go," Jerrod encouraged, feeling Bennett's pulse slow. He didn't want it to go too slow, but as fast as it was when he reached him, he was sure Bennett would bleed out before he could be extricated from the vehicle. "Buck's waiting for you. Think about playing with him in your backyard. You need to focus on something good. Where was Buck's favorite place to go? Where did he like you to take him? Somewhere you both relaxed," Jerrod said as he bandaged Bennett's arm.

"He loves the beach, like I do."

“Think of the beach,” Jerrod said, putting his hand to check the pulse on Bennett’s neck to keep track while he searched the skies for reinforcements. Seeing the helicopters nearing their position, he turned back to Bennett and said, “Think of the waves. Imagine sitting there on the beach in the bright sunshine. I’m sure you threw the ball for Buck to chase?”

“Yes.”

“Close your eyes and pretend to toss the ball for Buck on the beach. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Stay there for me while we work on getting you out of here,” Jerrod said, feeling Bennett’s heart rate beginning to calm.

Bennett nodded as he closed his eyes. “Oh. Okay.”

Jerrod kept his fingers resting on the pulse of Bennett’s neck. “We need to get him out of here,” Jerrod said in a low voice to Pierce. “Choppers are here. He needs to be the first one out if he is to have a remote chance of getting through this. I also need to get to the others in the back as soon as possible.”

“I’ll go grab a couple other guys.”

“With what? You can’t walk on that.” Jerrod pointed out. “I don’t even know how you got all the way over here in the shape you’re in,” he said, before he swore under his breath. “Seriously, I’m surprised *you* haven’t bled out. Where’s your common sense?”

“Watch it, Lucas!” Pierce snapped. Then he shouted out, into the darkness, “Murphy! Garcia! Grab a couple guys and get over here! We have to get these guys out!”

In an instant, there were six guys at their side. Together, they extricated Bennett carefully from the truck while the gunfire slowed around them. A couple men chased after the stragglers so the others would be safe. Meanwhile, after they got Bennett out, they headed inside the vehicle to get to the others.

Two helicopters landed, while two others hovered in the air, keeping an eye overhead. They fired where they would see flashes from gunfire, and knew they weren’t friendlies.

“Over here!” Jerrod shouted as the two Corpsmen got out of the helicopters.

“What do we have?” asked one of the Corpsmen, running up to what was left of the mangled Humvee.

“His left leg is crushed, and the right arm is missing about the mid-radius and ulna,” Jerrod said quietly to the Corpsmen, as he finished bandaging Bennett’s arm. “He hasn’t lost consciousness, but he’s not all there either. He’s lost *a lot* of blood. He also keeps asking about his partner, Green. Green is DOA. There’s another DOA in the back, Charles, along with at least one unconscious, and one with a broken leg. They’re working on getting the others out.”

Stunned for a moment, the Corpsmen only nodded in response. “You take him. I’ll take care of the others,” the Corpsmen told Jerrod. He then went over to where they pulled the others from the vehicle to start on them, while Jerrod stayed with Bennett.

After they loaded him onto a stretcher, Jerrod ran with them to the helicopter. He made mental notes on all he would tell the Corpsman in regards to Bennett's condition once they landed. As he started an IV on Bennett, he looked up to see a couple guys load a covered body on a stretcher next to Bennett in a body bag.

"Who is that?" Bennett asked.

"Green," one of the men said, not thinking.

"Green! Paul!" Bennett panicked. Trying to grab at the bag, Bennett yelled, "That's Paul Green! What happened to him? Why is he in there? They only do that if they're dead. You have to help him, Doc. He can't be dead. He needs to see his baby. Jenny's due any day. Please help him, Doc!"

"Great!" Jerrod groaned, giving up as he injected another dose of morphine into Bennett. He wouldn't be able to do anything in the state Bennett was in until he was calm. If the pain and the status of his hand and legs weren't enough to freak him out, the fact that his best friend laid dead right next to him was the final straw that through him over the edge. "Calm down, Bennett. I need you to calm down *now!*"

While he waited for the morphine to kick in, amongst Bennett's shouts of pain, agony, and panic about Green, Jerrod feverishly worked on getting the blood flow from Bennett's arm back under control before moving back to care for his legs.

After a moment, as another Corpsman neared the helicopter with Adams, Bennett's body suddenly went limp and the screaming abruptly stopped. Jerrod jerked his head up toward Bennett, to see his eyes wide open with a faraway

look to them. Other than that, there was no muscle movement. “No-no-no-no-no-no-no-Nooooo!” Jerrod shouted, scampering toward the head of the stretcher. “No! You come back here!” he yelled, feeling the side of Bennett’s neck for a pulse with his glove-covered, blood-soaked hand. “Bennett! You *cannot* die on me! I’ve worked too hard!” He shouted.

“Nooooo!” Jerrod yelled, sitting straight up in the back seat of his Jeep. Sweat poured off his face as he tried to catch his breath, almost hyperventilating. The trio of Nico, Jerrod, and Jon were deep in the Outback of Australia, on a dirt road several hours outside of Alice Springs in the middle of the night. They were en route back to the others in the Tanami Desert with the Jeeps.

Nico snapped to attention in his Jeep, as it was his turn to keep watch. Running over to Jerrod’s Jeep, grabbing his face so he would look at him, Nico said, “It’s all right, mate. You’re safe. You’re not there anymore.”

“But, he –”

“I have a pretty good idea what happened t’ him, but I need you to snap out of it before you wake –”

“I’m up,” Jon said, coming over to the Jeep, cutting Nico off. “Don’t worry about me,” he said, sitting in the driver’s seat. “Worry about him. You don’t *want* to know how he’s feeling,” he said. Sometimes Jon’s gift of feeling what others felt was a curse, and sometimes it was a blessing. In this instance, it was a curse. If Jerrod didn’t calm down, there would be no way for Jon to get any sleep, and Jon only got to sleep an hour ago, after being up for over twenty-four hours.

“No, I don’t, and nor do I want to,” Nico acknowledged before he turned back to Jerrod. “Jerrod, mate, come on. Who am I?”

“I...I...” Jerrod shook his head.

“*Where are you?*” Nico pressed.

Looking around for a moment in a daze, he shook his head again.

“Jerrod Lucas!” Nico shouted. “*Look* at me, mate! Who am I?”

“I don’t...” He shook his head again.

“Let me take a crack at it,” Jon offered.

Nico shook his head. “I dunno.”

“Which one of us literally knows how he’s feeling?” Jon asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Too true,” Nico agreed, switching places with Jon.

Taking his hand, Jon knelt on the floor of the backseat of the Jeep. Positioning himself in front of Jerrod, Jon calmly said, “Jerrod, I’m Jon English. You’re in the Outback of Australia, not in Iraq. Can you see me?”

Jerrod just looked at him blankly.

“Let me try this another way,” Jon said, getting a little closer. “Jerrod, you did your best,” he encouraged, praying for the words to come from the Spirit. “You helped those you could before returning to base. You then went into the

bathroom and washed the blood from your hands, safe, out of the nightmare you just experienced.”

“How do you –?”

“Shh!” Jon cut Nico off. Turning back to Jerrod, he continued, “After you washed your hands, you collapsed on your cot, and drifted off to sleep. That was years ago. Now you’re in the Outback of Australia with Jon English and Nico Sullivan. Do you know who we are?”

Looking at Jon and Nico, Jerrod slowly shook his head, before he nodded after a moment. Still in a bit of a daze, he looked around at their surroundings. Turning back to them, he let out a slow breath of air and asked, “What happened?”

“You had a night terror,” Jon said, moving back to the driver’s seat, giving Jerrod some space. “Do you know where you are?”

“Sort of. No. Not really. Give me a few,” he mumbled, looking around the landscape, hoping to get his bearings.

“Want some water?” Nico offered.

“Yeah.”

After getting him a bottle of water, Nico leaned on the Jeep up next to Jerrod’s head, crossing his arms. Over his shoulder, he told Jon, “Go back to sleep. I got this.”

“Thanks,” Jon muttered, shuffling sleepily back to his Jeep, grateful they got Jerrod’s emotions landed for the moment.

“All right, mate,” Nico said, turning back to Jerrod. “Is it always that bad?”

“Sometimes it’s worse.”

“Who was Bennett?” Nico asked. When Jerrod looked at him wide-eyed, Nico asked, “Did he live?”

Slowly shaking his head no, not taking his eyes off Nico, Jerrod admitted, “His name was Alexander Bennett. His injuries and blood loss were too much. I couldn’t save him. He lost part of his arm in the blast, and his legs were crushed. How did you know his name?”

“You shouted it in your sleep. Look, mate, you’re not God. You can’t work miracles. You’re only human.”

“His best friend, Paul Green, died in the blast. Green’s wife was pregnant at the time – due any day. I found out later she had a boy, and named him Paul Alexander Green, after the two of them. Bennett was in a body bag right next to Green. He didn’t know it was Green, until one of the guys said his name, and then Bennett completely lost it. There was no bringing him back from that one.”

“I’ll bet,” Nico said, trying to process how he would feel.

“You have no idea. We were on a mission to take out one of the leaders at the time. We had intel of his position, and had to move right away. It couldn’t wait until daylight. We knew it was a risk, but letting him get away again, was a risk we weren’t willing to gamble. I was in the Humvee behind them. A couple more seconds and I would have been in Green’s position. There were five of ours killed on that day,” Jerrod said, holding his stomach, as he curled up in the seat.

“When the smoke cleared, it was a mangled mess. Captain Pierce had a lacerated leg, but he crawled off to their vehicle, while a bunch of us did our best to take cover from the weapons fire that immediately ensued, and returned fire. We had to take out those firing on us before we could even *think* of getting to the wounded.”

“Wow.”

“When it slowed enough, the others sent me to Bennett’s Humvee. By the time I got there, Bennett was already losing it. He already knew he lost part of his arm,” Jerrod said using his hand to show where Bennett’s arm was taken off, “and his legs were crushed from here down. I have no idea how the guys got him out of there, but they did it quickly enough for me to give Bennett a chance. When the choppers landed, I went with Bennett. He was the worst one there. Green and Charles were already dead. Adams’ leg was crushed. He just thought it was broken, but he ended up losing part of it. We lost Hernandez and another one in the firefight. It was a cluster –”

“I got it,” Nico said, cutting him off.

“I played poker with all of them just the night before. I *knew* them. *All* of them. As a Doc, you don’t just come in at the last minute. You are part of their unit...for better or worse.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“If it was only the one instance, I would probably be able to process it, but it wasn’t. We were pretty much on edge twenty-four hours a day for seven days a week for months on end. What I don’t get is when we live like that, and then

return, or get out of the military, civilians just expect us to *get over it*,” he said, shaking his head. “There’s no getting over watching good men die. There’s no getting over living with the threat of being blown up or shot at any time. They even hid bombs in stuffed animals or toys that the kids carried. Can you *believe* they sent kids in to their deaths just to blow us up? And we were trying to *help* them!” Taking a deep sigh, Jerrod looked up at the vast amount of stars that filled the sky. He was amazed at how many more were visible away from the lights of the city. He took a deep, cleansing breath in hopes of clearing his mind. “That’s amazing,” he said, hoping to get lost in the stars.

Deciding that sidetracking Jerrod’s train of thought would be the best approach at helping him, Nico said, “That’s what happens when you’re out of the city. You can see all of God’s creation in its splendor. When we’re on the station, nighttime is actually my favorite time of the day. It’s cool, and there are a billion stars up there. When you’re in the city, you can’t see them as well, but they’re always up there.”

“I feel like my mind’s all over the place,” Jerrod said.

“That’s understandable. Look, you got five hours of sleep. You can try for another hour, or you and I can talk some more?” Nico offered. “We take off in a couple hours. I may give Jon a bit more time to sleep since his sleep was interrupted.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to apologize to him when he wakes.”

“No, you don’t,” Jon called from his Jeep. “Just relax so I can get back to sleep.”

Nico and Jerrod laughed, as they admired God's majesty above, lost in conversation, while Jon drifted back to sleep.

\* \* \*

"Mum!" Rachel grinned. Tears instantly stung her eyes when Kit walked into the house, dragging her suitcase behind her.

Upon seeing her daughter on the couch, Kit dropped her suitcase and coat at the door, and ran over to her. Gently sitting on the couch next to Rachel, Kit wrapped her arms around Rachel's neck and hugged her tightly.

"Mum...can't...breathe!" Rachel finally said.

"I'm sorry," Kit said, pulling back, wiping the tears out of her eyes before she wiped the few tears on Rachel's cheek away as well. "I just missed you so much. To hear you had been hurt made my heart drop into my stomach. Knowing Angel's still in danger, and that Josh is still out there in possible danger as well, terrifies me. I was so relieved when your Dad told me you were here. And then hearing your voice..." Kit's voice trailed as Rachel cried a little harder. "It's okay, Rach. Really. I'm here. I *did* bring someone with me, though. She wouldn't let me leave without her," Kit said, gesturing toward the door.

When Rachel saw Leah, she couldn't hold the tears back anymore, and they turned into sobs as Leah ran over to her. Getting on her knees next to the couch, Leah grabbed her twin sister without shame or embarrassment, and they both burst out in tears of joy at being reunited.

"There are two of them?" Kai asked with his thick Irish accent, eyes wide and mouth gaping. He and Cori were

standing in the doorway of the basement, with Charm (Cori's seeing eye dog) leaning on Cori's leg.

"Shut your mouth," Cori whispered.

"How'd you know my jaw was dropped?" Kai asked, glancing at her sideways, as he stood there with his arms crossed. "You're blind."

"Probably because I *know* you. You don't have to have sight to know that you've seen a gorgeous girl...let alone two a' them. I assume by your reaction that they're identical?"

"Yes. Seriously! How are there two a' them?"

Katia walked over to Kai, and using two of her fingers, she pushed up his chin, shutting his mouth. "Not nice to stare," she pointed out, her Russian accent still thick within her English.

"Way to go, Katia," Cori said with a grin.

"Seriously! How did all the good genes end up in one family?" Kai asked. "The girls are gorgeous, and there are two of them. Delaney thinks Josh is hot, and I *know* there are two of him too. I've seen them. Seeing Nico, and now Kit? It makes perfect sense. Even with as old as she is, she's still pretty."

"Hush!" Cori reprimanded him.

Giggling, Katia moved to the opposite side of the doorway from Kai and Cori, leaning against the wall. "You are funny, Kai."

“Glad you think so, but I’m serious!” Kai defended himself.

“Beauty is only on the outside,” Katia reminded him.

“And, from what I’ve seen of Rachel, she’s just as pretty on the inside,” Kai pointed out.

Suddenly, the group heard a scream from upstairs. “Liliya!” Katia breathed out, before bolting up the stairs to her sister.

“I’m afraid it’s been this way every few hours since she got here,” Casey explained when Kit gave her a questioning look. “I want to talk with her, but I really need her to get some decent sleep first. Unfortunately, she’s not getting any.”

“Mind if I speak with her? It’s been almost a year since they’ve seen each other, so I’ll let these two get reacquainted,” she said, gesturing toward Rachel and Leah, who finally let each other go enough to make sure they were really looking at each other. When Casey nodded, Kit stood and asked, “Would you please boil some water for a tea for her. Pete makes a tea that helps one sleep, and he sent me with a few baggies. She won’t be able to fight it.”

“Sounds good,” Casey agreed. “Her room is upstairs. At the top of the stairs, go left. It’s the second room on the right,” Casey explained. “In the meantime, I’ll boil the water and get breakfast for these two, so we can get homeschool started,” she said, ushering Allie and Callie to the kitchen.

Allie and Callie were on another couch with Charlie, listening to a story Charlie was telling when Casey went to

pick up Kit and Leah. Charlie followed Casey and the girls into the kitchen to lend a hand.

“Too many twins,” Kai said, shaking his head as he finally turned to go back down the stairs. He followed Cori and Charm, leaving Leah and Rachel alone in the living room to catch up privately.

\* \* \*

“Knock, knock,” Kit said, sticking her head in the doorway, to see tears slowly crawling down Katia’s cheeks as she held Liliya. Liliya was crying and rocking in place, her face pale.

“Does she speak English?” Kit asked, knowing they were from Russia.

“Yes. We both do.” Katia nodded, her heart breaking for her sister. Wiping the few tears that escaped, Katia curiously watched every move Kit made.

“If we get anymore tears in this house, we’re going to need a mop,” Kit said with a smile as she walked into the room. Taking the chair next to the bed, she gave Liliya some space to breathe. “Your name is Liliya?”

Liliya sniffed, wiping her cheeks. “Yes.”

Shaking her hand, Kit said, “Hi. I’m Kit. I’m Rachel’s mom.”

“You do not sound like her. Little different,” Katia pointed out, with her head cocked to the side, studying her.

“That’s because I was born and raised in America. I didn’t live in Australia until I was in my twenties. While I *do* have somewhat of an Australian accent, it’s more of a southern American accent. You tend to pick up certain parts of speech when you move to a different place.”

“Yes. This happens,” Katia agreed.

Moving her chair closer to the bed, Kit retook her seat. Leaning forward, with her elbows on her knees and her hands together, she said, “Liliya, I understand you’ve had quite an experience.” Liliya only nodded in response. Reaching up, Kit went to move part of Liliya’s blond hair out of her face. Initially, Liliya pulled away, but then she allowed Kit to touch her. “There ya go, sweetheart.” Kit smiled warmly. “May I sit on the bed with you?”

Liliya nodded. She and Katia moved to make room for Kit, as Kit moved onto the side of the bed.

“Casey tells me that you’ve had some trouble sleeping?” Kit asked.

“Yes. Very scared,” Liliya admitted, as she sat there looking like a terrified animal, cowering on the bed.

“You know you’re safe, right? The man who took you is probably locked away in some freezer in Siberia,” Kit explained, praying Sergei was getting his due justice in prison for what he did not only to Liliya, Angel, and Elena, but also to the other girls...or would be as soon as he got deported back to Russia. “Or he will be as soon as the Russian authorities get their hands on him.”

While Katia smiled at that, Liliya didn't. Taking a moment to form the thought in her head, Liliya then explained, "It is not Sergei who frightens me. It is the evil in the cave. It is fear for Angel. She is in danger."

"Aww, honey," Kit said, resting her hand on Liliya's arm. "God has you in the safest place possible on this earth. The Haven is surrounded by His angels. Trust me, they won't let anything get to you here. That's probably the only reason Rachel's been able to get some sort of rest here. Trust me," Kit said, tossing her long auburn hair over her shoulder, "you are perfectly safe here."

"Can they find me at school?"

"The Devil and his minions are everywhere on this planet," Kit admitted, much to Liliya's horror, "but – and this is a big *but* – but God is bigger than anything here on earth. He didn't just *create* this planet and its inhabitants. He only had to open His beautiful mouth and *speak* them into existence. Trust me, you are on the right side of this."

"Then, why is Angel still there?"

"Knowing what Nico told me, and knowing Angel the way I do, I'm pretty sure it's because she knows where she's going when she dies. She wanted to give the rest of you a chance to live your life. You and Katia have had one doozy of a life so far," Kit said with a gentle smile. "You are now in a safe place. Casey and Mark will look after you as one of their own. You may not have been born to them, but you are now theirs. You will have many doors here in the States open to you. As to what you want to do with your life, it's completely up to you. Katia has looked after you as much as she could, and has done an amazing job at it, I must say," she said,

smiling at Katia, who nodded in appreciation. “But, now she has her own path she must follow. She’s given you the gift of being here at the Haven while she moves forward. In the meantime, she’s fixin’ to go out to fight for, and with, the others. God has an amazing plan for both of you. Did you know that when I was in college, I was kidnapped as well?”

“You were?” Liliya asked, as both she and Katia looked at Kit wide-eyed.

“Oh yes,” Kit assured them. “There was a sadly misguided man who thought I was meant for him. God had a different plan, though. While I was being held captive, the one verse that allowed me to keep my sanity was Jeremiah 29:11. It says, *‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.’* God had an incredible plan for me. He sent Mark to help me out of another mess too. He, along with my husband, Nico, whom you’ve already met, finally got me out of all of that. Now we have lived in God’s grace and mercy on Serenity Wells Station for years. He gave us the gift of twin boys, Joshua and Caleb, and twin girls, Leah and Rachel, as well. He also gave us the blessing of, when a young neighbor girl of ours got pregnant out of wedlock, having the opportunity to save the baby’s life. The parents wanted the girl to have an abortion because she was too young.” When she said that, both girls gasped. “I know, but God had a better plan for that little baby. She was born into that family and raised by the young girl’s parents. And now, that beautiful little baby has grown into the young woman my Caleb married. He and Willow run the station now. And, the little girl who got pregnant is married with three children of her own. She’s also a doctor.”

“Really?” Liliya asked, stunned.

“Yes. See, despite all the bad, God had a plan, and He knew who needed to be there for it to come to fruition. We may never know the why, but we know the Who...God. We know that no matter what has happened, that God is still there, looking out for those of us who are His. He’ll never leave you now that you are one of His.”

“But...still scared,” Liliya admitted, as Katia still had her arm protectively around her sister.

“You will be. That’s natural and understandable,” Kit explained. “You’re mind and body will continue to battle what all has happened for a long time. Thankfully, though, you are in a safe place, surrounded by safe people. There is only love and protection here,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I won’t lie to you, though. In 1 Peter 5:8, we are reminded to, *‘Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walketh about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.’* I’m not telling you that to scare you. I’m telling you so you stay on your toes. We don’t fight against flesh and blood. You’ve seen firsthand what we’re fighting. I *know* you know what’s out there. However, in this moment in time, you need to relax, and rest in the fact that you are safe. In order for you to work through what you’ve been through, you *have* to get some rest. Now, I’ve brought a tea from our station doctor for you to drink so you can get some sleep. Will you drink it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Liliya agreed.

“Wonderful,” Kit said, getting off the bed. “I’ll go get it. I’ll be back as soon as it’s finished. When was the last time you ate?”

“She ate a little dinner last night,” Katia explained.

“Right-oh,” Kit said in a sigh. “I’ll bring ya up some breakkie too.”

“Breakkie?” Katia cocked her head to the side again. “What is this breakkie?”

“No worries.” Kit smiled gently. “That just means breakfast. I’ll be back in a tic,” she said and left.

When she was out of earshot, Katia looked to her sister, and they spoke in Russian. “We are out of there, little one,” Katia encouraged Liliya.

“I know that. I do not know if it is okay to rest, though. Every time I do, I see those creatures,” Liliya said with a shudder.

“You have to rest. You are safe. I trust these people.”

“You do?” Liliya asked, wide-eyed. “You do not trust anyone!”

“I know. God has shown me amazing things in my dreams. I know these A.N.G.E.L.s are good people. I know God is bigger than any of this, or you wouldn’t be here. I also know without sleep,” she said, lifting Liliya’s chin so she would look at her, “you will not get any better.”

Looking down for a moment, Liliya organized her thoughts now that her head was a little clearer than when she woke. When she looked back up to Katia, she explained, “You are my sestra. You are the only person on this planet that I love.”

“As are you *my* sestra, but you know you are not the *only* person I love.”

“There is another?” she asked, stunned.

“Three. They are God, Jesus, and the Spirit. One day, little one, you too will know these as I do. Right now you are young in the Lord. Allow Kit to help you. Let her show you who Jesus is, and the sacrifice He made for you. Let her give you insight into Who the Father is. Let her tell you of the Spirit and His guidance. You will grow, much like the wonder twins downstairs,” Katia said, smiling at Allie and Callie’s nickname. “If you trust me, and you trust Jesus with your life, then you must trust Kit to help you.”

“I will,” Liliya agreed.

“The dreams will continue,” Katia said, resting her hand on the side of Liliya’s face, gently lifting it so she would look at her with her big blue eyes, “but they will become less and less with time. With each one you conquer, you will be slowly released from this nightmare. For now, though, know you are free from living the nightmare you were in.”

“I know. Thank you for coming for me.”

“Of course! I will come every time. Just like God, I would move heaven and earth to find you. As Kit said, the angels of the Lord are protecting us here. You will need to eat, and drink the tea so you can sleep. You have not slept for days.”

“Yes. The last time was when I was taken from that horrible house and drugged,” Liliya admitted.

“You are too young to have such problems. It was my hope to keep you from them.”

“The world is cruel.”

“Not here. Here you have a fresh start.”

“Thanks to *you*.”

“No, thanks to God, little one. Thanks to God.”

\* \* \*

“Seriously, that last one was a soup sandwich!” Jerrod said as they talked about a new plan with the others when the group finally got together deep in the Tanami Desert. It was about midday, and a hot one at that. The closer summer came, the hotter and dryer it got.

Laughing, Joe asked, “Okay, what’s a soup sandwich?”

“It’s something that’s a mess...a disaster,” Mark explained with a smile on his face. “I haven’t heard that in a *long* time.”

“Oh, I’m full of them!” Jerrod grinned.

“I’m sure you’re full of *something*,” Jon added with a smirk. When Jerrod smacked his arm, he was laughing too hard to respond, so Mark continued.

“Okay,” Mark said, still smiling, “here are the previous points marked on the map.” With the map on the ground in the middle of the group, he explained, “We can’t go in with the same plan we had last time. It’s too predictable.”

“Not to mention virtually impossible to get to now because it’s blown to smithereens,” Jacob reminded them.

“This is true,” Mark said, stroking his chin in thought.

“We go this way,” Amarina said, pointing to the other side of the caves. “There is an exit there too.”

“Wait! What?” Nico looked at her stunned. “There’s another way out?”

“Yes,” she said, not sure why they were all looking at her in shock. “What is wrong?”

Groaning, Derek dropped his head on his hand as he explained, “Because we thought there was only one entrance. We haven’t been watching the other side.” Looking up at her, he added, “They could have taken her out the other side, and we won’t know because we weren’t watching there.”

“Oh,” she said, kicking herself on the inside for not mentioning it before then. “I did not think of that. I am sorry.”

“You didn’t know,” Josh said, hoping to ease her conscience. “Now that we know, we’re going to have to have two plans of attack.

“We were going in thinking they were in there,” Nico continued, “but they may be gone. If they aren’t, then they may very well be waiting for us to show up again, and will attack us outside the caves on the way in, or could very well seal us in there before we get out.”

“I see the problem,” Amarina said in understanding. “I am sorry.”

“Seriously, you have been invaluable,” Mark pointed out. “There is no way you should have thought to tell us that. It just means we need to change our strategy going in. We’re going to have to have a few in, and the rest outside cautiously

moving in, looking for traps all the way in. Jacob, you are mission critical. You are to stay outside. I need your eyes on the ground. You know what to look for, because you set them all the time.”

“True,” Jacob agreed.

“At the same time, I need you to stay near, so when we come out you can set them off at a moment’s notice.”

“Consider it done. I’ll need some help mixing stuff and setting them up. You got everything on the list, right?”

“Yes,” Nico chuckled. “Not sure why you need part of this stuff, though.”

“Well, for the toilet paper I just need the rolls. Then I’ll use the rolls, the sugar, and the potassium nitrate to make smoke bombs. Those are going in with you this time,” he said sternly. “They’ll fill the cavern, giving you a chance to get out without losing anyone.”

“The bucket? The PVC pipe? The ammonia?” Jon questioned.

“Dude! You’ll find out. You asked me to make something that will explode. Trust me. It *will* blow.”

“While I don’t doubt that, moth balls and diesel gasoline?” Nico raised an eyebrow.

Jacob sighed, crossing his arms. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then, trust me. You want it to blow? It’ll blow. You want to blow the entire cave system? I can do that for you too,” Jacob pointed out. “You want to fill the entire thing with smoke? I can do that. You want to blow a tree stump, or sufficiently blow a vehicle sending them both a fair distance? I got that covered too when you need it. Don’t doubt me, though.”

“Never,” Jesse said, ruffling his hair. “You’re too smart.”

Shoving his hand away, he grumbled, “I hate it when you do that.”

“No you don’t,” Jesse said knowingly. “You only like complaining about it,” he said ruffling his hair again. Ducking, he missed it when Jacob took a swing at him. Jesse grabbed him, taking him to the ground as they play wrestled.

“Can we calm the testosterone down a bit, and focus on getting Angel and the other man out?” Delaney asked, trying to be the voice of reason, putting a halt to the wrestling.

“I need at least until tomorrow,” Jacob said, as they got off the ground, brushing the dirt off. “One of the explosives has to settle before I can pull out what I need.”

“Done,” Mark agreed. “Now,” he said, directing everyone back to the map, “Amarina, the other entrance is *where exactly?*”

Pointing on the map, she said, “Here.”

Marking the spot on the map with an ‘x,’ Mark asked, “Are there any trees or hills on that side?”

“Oh yeah!”

Looking up at her, surprised again, Mark just sighed as he shook his head.

Amarina blushed. “Oh. I did it again. Didn’t I?”

“It’s okay,” Derek assured her. “This is new for you.”

“Yes. I usually just go on walk-about...not looking to pull someone outta danger.”

“It’s just a matter of adjusting your line of thinking,” Mark explained. “Okay, if I give you a couple pieces of paper, could you draw what the other side of that hillside looks like?”

“I can draw what it looks like before Jacob gets his presents ready. I can have it for you in the morning,” Amarina offered.

“Can you get it to us sooner than that?” Mark asked. “I can’t do anything until I know what it looks like.”

“In a couple hours?” Amarina proposed.

“That’ll work,” he said, looking toward Derek, who went to the Jeep to get pencil and paper.

“I’ll make it quick,” Amarina said, accepting the paper and pencils.

“Take your time, but hurry up,” Mark added. “We have to come up with a plan. In the meantime, the rest of us can keep watch, and help Jacob as much as possible.”

\* \* \*

Groaning from the pain, Angel woke to her living nightmare. “Ohhh, why can’t this just be a really bad dream?” she said aloud.

“You are awake,” the angel said, as he got off the ground. Still translucent, he kept a vigilant eye and ear to everything around him.

“You’re still here? I didn’t imagine you?”

“No. I am still with you. I am not a figment of your imagination. God sent me here to stay with you so you know you are not alone. While I am here doing my best to keep you focused on God, you need to do your part and guard your heart against what the other side is trying to do,” he said. Standing around six foot, with blond hair, and royal blue eyes, he was dressed in a chiton, with a belt around his waist that carried his sword. His wings hung loosely on his back, while he kept his hand on his sword at all times, on alert.

“How do I do that?” Angel asked, exhausted.

“You follow the words of Proverbs 4:23. It says to, *‘Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.’* You committed your spirit and heart to the Lord before you passed out. Do you remember that?”

“I *vaguely* remember that,” Angel admitted. “Did Allen really give up?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” The angel nodded. “As for guarding *your* heart, you do as you did last time, staying focused on the Lord and His words, and you will do well.”

“Will I make it out alive?”

“That is not known to me. I am ordered to stay by your side. I will die before I leave you.”

“Thank you,” Angel said, appreciatively. “Do you...do you think they’ll be back anytime soon?”

“I know you are hungry, because you have not eaten in two days, but remember to whom you belong. You are a daughter of the Lord God. They will use food and drink to tempt you.”

“Man does not live by bread alone,” Angel said, remembering when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.

“Exactly!” the angel said with a smile. “You can do this, Angel!” Suddenly turning to his left, he looked toward the entrance to the cavern for only a moment before he disappeared right before her eyes.

“Ohhhh, you are awake!” a demon hissed, walking into the cavern, wringing his hands in delight. “Deliciousss! Time for another round!”

## Chapter 2

### Be Strong And Take Heart

“Cori, if I copied this for you to listen to on your computer so you could do your thing to it that you do, would you take a listen?” Kai asked, taking off his headset. They were down in what had become affectionately known as the cyber cave. The cyber cave was located in the basement of the Haven, and contained all the equipment Cori and Kai needed to do their thing. They were only on one side, though, knowing eventually the other team’s IT people would use the other side.

“Sure. What is it?” Cori asked.

“I just picked up some chatter, but I can’t separate things enough to distinguish what I’m hearing.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Tsk!” Kai clicked his tongue. “Is that really a question?”

“*How* did you get it?”

“I thought we didn’t ask that question around here either. Now be a good lass, and take a listen, yeah?” he said, putting the thumb drive securely in her hand.

“Fair enough.” Taking it from him, she inserted it into her computer, and then picked up her headset and put it on. After only a moment of tapping on her computer and listening, she

whipped them back off. “Go get Casey, Kit, Rach, and Charlie.”

\* \* \*

“What’s going on?” Casey asked, coming downstairs with Kit, Katia, Kai, Rachel, and Charlie, while Liliya stayed upstairs with the twins.

“We have a problem,” Cori explained.

Kit raised an eyebrow. “Could you be a little more specific?”

“Kai gave me something to listen to. Have a listen for yourselves,” she said, unplugging her headset from the computer before she played the recording.

At first, there was a sound of very loud white noise, along with a lot of indistinct voices.

“Too loud!” Kai shouted over the noise with his ears covered. Everyone else immediately covered their ears as well.

“Sorry,” Cori said, adjusting the sound before she started playing with the program to cut out the white noise.

As it cleared, everyone took their hands off their ears to hear Korax say, “We have Allen. We need to get Angel as well. If we get her on our side, then we will have the A.N.G.E.L.s right where we want them.”

“We cannot risk moving,” Calliope pointed out. “They will see us. We are well hidden here.”

“We have to. Our other choice is to sit here and be taken out by those blasted A.N.G.E.L.s!” another female argued.

“We need the time to work on her,” Calliope pointed out. “They do not call me the muse of heroic poetry for no reason. *I* can get her to rethink her position as an A.N.G.E.L., or at least get her ready for you to come in and change her mind.”

“I do not want her to change her mind *or* get her to rethink her position. I *want* her to turn on them completely, and join *our* side. Anything less than that is unacceptable,” Cassius growled.

Tapping the computer to turn the recording off, Cori turned in the direction of the others and said, “That’s all I got. Well, technically, that’s all *Kai* got.”

“How did you get this?” Casey asked, taking the portable drive out from the computer tower.

“In the cyber cave, we are under a *don’t ask, don’t tell* policy,” Kai said with a smirk. Crossing his arms, he leaned on Cori’s desk.

“Okay,” Charlie said, taking a deep breath. “How do we get ahold of them?”

“We can’t.” Kit shook her head. “It’s too far out. There’s no cell out there.”

“*We* can’t, but *they* can,” Rachel said knowingly, looking toward Cori and Kai. “Can’t you?”

“Well...” Cori said hesitantly.

“We *have* to tell the others. Angel may not even be there,” Katia pressed.

“Or worse yet, they may be walking into a trap,” Casey pointed out.

“Give me a minute,” Cori said, turning to her computer. Tapping feverishly, the group watched as one screen after another flashed on the monitor. After several minutes of everyone holding their breath, Cori used her computer to dial a phone number.

“Hello?” Delaney said, answering her phone.

“Delaney, this is the Haven,” Cori explained.

“Okay, and *how* are you doing this?”

Cori chuckled. “Don’t ask a question you don’t want to know the answer to, love.”

Hearing her giggle before she spoke, Delaney said, “Gotcha. What’s going on?”

“I’m going to play something for ya, but you need to put it on speaker with the others around.”

“Will do. Just a sec,” she said.

As she gathered the others around her, Cori booted up the recording. After they listened to it, Mark said, “Thanks for the head’s up.”

“Mark, you are caught between a rock and a hard place. There’s no telling if Angel’s there or not,” Casey said, stress evident in her voice.

“I understand, sweetheart. Angel’s strong.”

“But even strong people reach their max,” Casey reminded him.

“Thankfully God doesn’t have a max for *Him* to reach,” Mark pointed out. “And, she’s not alone.”

“I know. How are we going to find her if they’ve moved her?”

“We’ll let God lead. Until then, we’ll go forward with the plan that she’s right where we left her.”

“I’m worried for her,” Casey confessed.

“So am I.”

“Keep an ear out,” Nico said. “If you hear anything else, let us know.”

“You know our ears are to the ground on this one now that we’re set up properly,” Kai assured him.

“Thanks,” Derek said. “We’re working on things over here. We should be ready in the early morning.”

“Just know we’re here praying for you,” Kit said.

“We’re counting on it, love,” Nico responded over the computer phone line.

“Be careful,” Rachel added before the team in Australia hung up.

\* \* \*

Out in the Tanami Desert as they hung up, Nico turned to Mark, and said, “Look, I know it sounds bad, but your daughter is strong.”

“I know,” he said, deep in thought. “I also know Allen was a pastor, and he obviously fell.”

“Pastors are men too,” Jon reminded them. “Yes, they are to be held to a higher standard, but maybe the temptation was too great.”

“Then we need to pray that it’s not too great for Angel,” Jacob said, turning back to work on his explosives. Joe and Val were helping him.

“Amarina? Do you have that drawing yet?” Mark asked, visibly on edge.

“Yes. Here,” she said, gathering the papers off the hood of the Jeep. As she handed them to him, she mentioned, “If she is anything like her father, she is strong.”

“Thank you. Come on guys,” he said to Nico, Jon, Josh, Derek, Jesse, Amarina, and Jerrod.

As the group went off to themselves, Mark spread the papers out on the ground near the fire so the others could see. Delaney and Sasha were keeping watch while the others took care of their various assignments.

“This is where the other entrance is.” Amarina pointed it out on her drawings.

“This is where Jacob blew the ground,” Jerrod explained, pointing out several areas. “I saw him plant the IEDs.”

“That leaves this portion of the hill open,” Derek said, motioning to a portion with his hand. “It’s heavily treed up here, and a rock hill down there, so we have to be careful on how we go about this.”

“Yes, or we could find ourselves in the middle of another...what did you call it?” Amarina asked Jerrod.

“A soup sandwich,” Jerrod offered.

“Yes. That. Now,” Amarina directed everyone back to the map, “here and here are good points of lookout.”

“We can’t follow the same pattern we did last time,” Jerrod disagreed. “That will set us up for failure. We hit them hard last time. I *highly* doubt they’ll not be expecting something like that again.”

“Okay. My vote is that only three go in,” Derek suggested. “That’ll leave three at the Jeeps, three inside, and leaves seven outside.”

“Who are the three going in?” Mark asked.

“I’m going in this time,” Derek said firmly. “I was at the Jeep last time.”

“Wouldn’t want to miss out on the fun this time?” Jerrod remarked, as a grin spread across his face. “I would have never pegged you for an adrenaline junkie.”

“I don’t get to do the fun stuff all that often anymore.” Derek shrugged. “Besides, this could be my last shot. I *am* getting older.”

“You’re not *that* old, old man,” Jesse nudged him.

“Glad you think so, because you’re going in with me,” he said to Jesse.

“Me? Why?” Jesse asked, wide-eyed.

“Because it’s *your* sister.”

“Then I’m going in too,” Jon volunteered.

“Me too,” Mark said.

“I’m not a math whiz by any stretch of the imagination,” Jerrod said, “but I’m pretty sure that’s four, and not three.”

“Fine,” Jon said. “I’ll hang back outside.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Derek agreed. “We need to be quiet. Jesse needs to be on the inside, so we don’t get caught by surprise like you guys did last time. With Jesse’s gift, he can tell whoever goes in how close the other side is to us.”

“The other’s need to be spread out in these two regions,” Amarina explained. “This will give them a clear view of the opening, but still hidden in case there are surprises.”

“Do you honestly think we’ll get surprised?” Jesse asked.

“Why not?” Jerrod shrugged. “There’s more chance of them breaking any type of former rules of engagement, than there is the off chance that they’ll follow them. They’ve already shown that by taking Aden Knight out in broad daylight in London, and when they attacked and killed Stepan in a park in Russia – both of them out in the open. There are no rules, here, folks. To think anything else would be naïve. You are delusional if you even *remotely* think they are still

playing by the rules they played by before Black Rock. That was a turning point in this battle.”

“And one, it seems, that has completely changed how they operate,” Mark agreed.

“Whatever, or *however* they played before, you can throw out the window,” Jerrod went on. “We’re dealing with an anything goes situation.”

“Then, we need to play by the same rules,” Jesse said.

“With the exception that God is our gauge,” Derek added. “We may be able to change *some* of the rules, but there are still some hard and fasts.”

“Agreed,” Mark said. “Okay, let’s rethink this. We need Jacob and Jerrod outside, but close.”

“We need at least three at the Jeeps. There are four Jeeps they have to keep safe. We need to make sure there are enough people to cover all four,” Jerrod pointed out.

“After Black Rock, that needs to be a priority,” Jon agreed. “That’s our only means of escape out here.”

“Okay, that’s five,” Mark said.

“I *am* a bit quieter than you,” Derek pointed out to Mark.

“Right, so you’re inside,” Mark agreed.

“We should really make sure Jesse’s inside as well,” Derek reasserted. “You guys got caught last time. We need his gift inside.”

“That leaves one more opening,” Mark said, writing the names down to keep track of where they were assigning people. “We need someone we know who won’t freeze.”

“Honestly, I think Josh needs to go this time,” Jesse said. “He’s the other team lead.”

“While that’s a good point, we have to look at the gifts we have,” Nico said, stroking his chin in thought. “Doesn’t Sasha have Jesse’s gift, *and* the gift of premonitions?”

“Yes, but we’ll need him outside so we don’t get surrounded,” Jerrod pointed out. “I’m going to suggest one a little less conventional.”

“Really?” Mark asked. “Who?”

Turning to Jesse and Derek, Jerrod asked, “Would you be opposed to taking Val in?”

“*Who?*” Jesse asked, stunned.

“Did you say *Val?*” Derek asked, shocked.

“What? Who?” Josh asked, surprised.

“What? Did I hear my name?” Val asked from where he worked with Jacob and Joe.

“Working on something. Just keep working with Jacob,” Jerrod dismissed him.

When Val turned back to the explosives, Mark looked at Jerrod and asked, “Have you lost your mind? He’s the biggest pacifist on both teams! While there’s nothing wrong with that, I have a *huge* problem with potentially sending him in

somewhere that he'll be *forced* to kill. Pretty sure that goes against everything in him."

"Hear me out," Jerrod said, trying to calm everyone. "What is Val's gift?"

"Spiritual sight," Jon answered.

"Derek is extremely quiet. Jesse's big, so he makes a bit of noise. Val's quiet as a church mouse, *and* has spiritual sight. If they've moved her from her original position, Val would be the first one to know."

"You should *really* take someone who's already been in there," Josh disagreed.

"Katia's not here. She has the most knowledge of what that place looks like," Jon pointed out.

"Right, but after Jacob's bombs, that place could look entirely different," Jerrod added. "Again, this is where Val's spiritual sight will come in handy. He's just as trained as everyone else...with the exception of Delaney and Sasha, who we're not sure of how strong they really are."

"Do you think he'll do it?" Jesse asked.

"I *think* he's part of this team," Josh said confidently, realizing Derek was right. "He'll go where he's needed."

"Okay then. Are we agreed that Derek, Jesse, and Val go in?" Mark asked. When everyone nodded, he went on, "We're also agreed that Jerrod, Amarina, and Jacob need to be outside, but near the caves?" Everyone nodded again. "Okay then, who's staying with the Jeeps?"

“I think if we’re not going in, you may need the muscle nearby, so Josh and I should be outside,” Jon said.

“Joe was by the Jeeps last time with Delaney. They should be closer this time,” Derek suggested.

“That leaves Sasha, Mark and Nico,” Jerrod pointed out. “Are those the ones we really want left at the Jeeps? Mark and Nico bring in a lot of experience.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Derek shook his head. “If something happens, we need someone who can think on the fly nearby.”

“Not to mention the muscle of Mark, Sasha, *and* Nico,” Amarina pointed out. “Besides, we said Sasha should be outside so he would know when other side is near, yeah?”

“Good point. Okay,” Mark said, taking a deep breath before slowly blowing it out. “The Jeeps will be about a half-hour walk out. Whomever we leave, we need to make sure they can handle themselves.” After gathering everyone over, Mark explained the dilemma. When he finished, he asked, “Any suggestions?”

“Are you really sure I should go in?” Val asked hesitantly.

“For the reasons that Jerrod pointed out...yes,” Mark said firmly.

“I’ll stay at the Jeeps again,” Delaney volunteered. “I know I was there last time, but I think others that are more skilled should be closer in this instance.”

“Thank you,” Mark said appreciatively.

“I could stay at the Jeeps too,” Amarina offered.

Mark shook his head. “We need you so we don’t get lost.”

“Right-oh.”

“You need me outside, right?” Joe asked.

“Definitely!” Jerrod said.

“Maybe,” Mark countered.

“With Jesse going in, if he’s not outside, we could get caught by surprise,” Jerrod objected.

“While I agree with that, he may be needed at the Jeeps so those at the Jeeps don’t get caught off-guard. Sasha may be a better idea to have outside with Josh,” Mark pointed out.

“Fair enough. I’ll be at the Jeeps. Look, since we know where we are, Delaney and I are fixin’ to go on lookout,” Joe volunteered.

“Go ahead,” Mark agreed. “I’ll fill you two in after we finalize the plan.”

“Sounds good,” Joe said, and then he and Delaney took off for the boulder they used for lookout.

“I’ll stay with the Jeeps,” Nico offered.

“Thank you,” Mark said. “That’ll put you, Delaney, and Joe at the Jeeps. I think you three are more than capable to head off any attack on them.”

“Okay. Can I go back to the explosives? I need a couple guys with me,” Jacob said, standing. “I know what I need to do.”

“Take Sasha,” Mark said. “The rest of us need to work on this.”

“Let’s go,” Jacob said to Sasha, and they left.

When they were gone, the remaining group poured over the map, as well as the plan for the morning. They decided to go early in the morning, around dawn. That was the only way to remotely catch the other side off guard. Then they prayed for the next few hours over the mission, and for safety for everyone, especially Angel.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Love The Lord Your God With All Your Heart**

“You know to keep an eye in every direction, right?” Mark asked Delaney and Joe, knowing Nico already knew to do so.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“And, once again, Jacob’s got us covered, yeah,” Delaney said, nodding toward the makeshift bombs in the back of the Jeep they were standing near.

“Good,” he said. Chuckling nervously as he rubbed the back of his neck, he admitted, “Have to say that I’m a little anxious on this one. I’m not completely sure what we’re walking into.”

“I understand. Know we’re with you all in spirit, and will continuously be in prayer...as is the Haven,” Nico added.

“I appreciate that.”

“Not to cast another shadow, but I have a bad feeling,” Delaney mentioned. “It’s the same feeling I had when you went in last time.”

“We’ll leave it to God to guide and direct us,” Mark said confidently.

“Just gently reminding you that one of her gifts is discernment,” Joe pointed out.

“I understand,” Mark said, taking deep breath as he continued to rub the back of his neck. He wouldn’t admit to the others, but he was just as nervous as they were. He had a sick feeling in his stomach from the time Cori played the recording for them, even up until that moment. For sake of leadership, though, he had to stay focused on the mission, and brushed off his concern regarding his daughter.

“Please don’t make me have to make that call to Casey again, mate?” Nico added. “That was hard enough to talk t’ Casey last time. She and the girls are waiting for *everyone* to come home this time. And, I *know* Casey wants to hear *your* voice on the other end of that phone after this, and not mine.”

“I know,” Mark said. Taking one more look around, he sighed as he said, “Time to go.”

Leaving the trio at the Jeeps, the others hiked through the tall grass, going parallel to the path they took last time, but followed a path that went lower on the hillside. They figured with their other path marked by the destruction from Jacob, that the other side probably laid traps on it so they wouldn’t be able to use it again.

Hiking in two groups, they spread out along the way. They dropped off Amarina at the second lookout with a radio, and instructions to turn it on in fifteen minutes. Jacob followed the rest of the team in so he could set up his explosives as they maneuvered through the bush.

Then they dropped off Jerrod about halfway between Amarina and the others. He settled into an alcove out of sight. His position was close enough that if something happened he could be there in a matter of minutes, yet far enough that if

something happened he wouldn't get hurt. Resting his medical bag at his side, he tucked in, safely out of sight.

Once the others reached the allocated position, they stopped. "We only have two radios," Mark explained. "I'm going to keep one with me and Jon. Josh, I want you and Sasha to have the other," he said, handing it to him. "I have the lower lookout with Jon. And Josh, you're in charge of the radio for you and Sasha. We'll give you some time to set up before sending Jesse, Derek, and Val in. Are you all ready?"

"Ready as we're going to be." Josh nodded. "We're bathed in prayer, and Angel's waited long enough."

"Agreed. Let's go get her," Mark said, and they disbursed into three groups.

Josh and Sasha headed to the high terrain to make sure they could pick off anyone coming out, while Mark and Jon were to watch the lower. Once Josh and Sasha were in place, Jon moved to where he had a clear shot of the entrance behind a boulder, and Mark had a good view of the lower terrain, positioned behind a tree lying flat on the ground. Both Mark and Jon were positioned at the top of a hill, slightly lower than the cave entrance, in order to duck if someone exited the cave. Derek, Jesse, and Val were near Mark until Jacob was ready.

Once the guys were in place, they watched as Jacob snuck up to the doorway and placed explosives on either side of the entrance. To his left, just past where he buried his explosive, he brushed a little dirt, and cocked his head to the side. Looking toward Josh, he narrowed his eyes. He took a moment before he made his way over to Josh. "Something's fishy."

“What do you mean by fishy?” Josh asked Jacob.

“The dirt around the entrance has been moved recently...and not by me.”

“Did you see anything buried?”

“No, but —”

“Then it’s probably just from them going in and out. We would expect there to be dirt disturbed if this is the only way in or out.”

“Are you sure? It doesn’t look right. I could dig a little to make sure. There may be explosives underneath.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re just being paranoid. We need to get to Angel. Go finish up and get back to Amarina,” Josh ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Jacob said, and went back to the entrance.

Mark clicked the radio, and Josh looked at him. When he did, Josh just shook his head that nothing was wrong.

Once Jacob got his explosives set up, he slowly made his way back to Amarina. From his position, he would wait until he saw them come out before he set his explosives off.

“Now or never,” Mark said to Derek. “You got this, my friend.” Mark gave Derek a brief hug. “Take care of my boy, and bring my girl home.”

“I’ll take care of them and Val with my life.”

“Let’s not go there. Just get Angel, and get out.”

“I will. We’re *not* leaving her behind this time.”

“Thanks, man,” Mark said appreciatively. As he retook his position, Derek, Jesse, and Val took off for the entrance.

Hearing them doing radio checks as they left, Val asked, “We’re going to be okay, right?”

“God’s got this covered,” Derek said confidently.

“Good, because if He didn’t, I’m not sure I would be here.”

“Knowing you, I *know* you wouldn’t be here,” Jesse chuckled nervously. “You don’t tend to look for a fight.”

“No. Not really.”

“Jesse?” Derek asked, as they neared the cave entrance.

“Of course there are some here,” he said. “That’s a no brainer.”

“How close?”

“We have a bit,” he said confidently.

“Val?”

“Nothing new,” Val said, silently praying as they maneuvered their way toward the entrance. “She’s in a cavern of some kind, but we already knew that.”

“They’re breaching the entrance,” Mark said into his radio from his position.

\* \* \*

“What do you want now?” Angel grumbled, as a demon came in to where she was being held. The demon had drugged her when he finished torturing her earlier.

“I *want* you to agree to come to our ssside,” the demon hissed, slowly walking around Angel. “Haven’t you had enough pain?”

“Guess not,” Angel said with a shrug, “because I’m not giving up on God, and there’s nothing you can do to me to make me change my mind.”

“Allen sssaid the sssame thing.”

“I’m *not* Allen.”

“Oh no. You are one of the archangel’s preciousss A.N.G.E.L.sss.”

“*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,*” the angel with Angel whispered Mark 12:30 to her.

Nodding, Angel said, “Take your best shot. You haven’t got a prayer.”

“Ohhhh, you are a brave one. Aren’t you?” the demon hissed. Then, getting into her face he added, “We’ll ssee how brave you are when *I* am finished with you.”

“*Cast all your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous be shaken,*” the angel whispered Psalm 55:22.

“Do what you want. I will *never* bend.”

“Never sssay never, my friend,” the demon hissed, and then cackled with an evil laugh.

\* \* \*

“It’s time to start praying,” Casey said, looking at the clock that said it was one o’clock in the afternoon where they were near Reno, Nevada. “They should be heading in.”

Kneeling in the middle of the living room to pray, the entire group, except Cori, Kai, and Rachel focused their efforts on those in Australia. The group prayed for continued safety for Angel, along with God’s hands of protection around the remaining A.N.G.E.L.s. They prayed that this time the rescue would be successful. They prayed most of all for *all* of the A.N.G.E.L.s to return from this mission safely. With the loss of Danny Hawk so fresh, they didn’t want to have to add anyone else’s name to the boulder.

While they were praying, the trio in the cyber cave worked on being able to see what was going on in Australia. When they finished, Kai popped his head out of the basement door, and announced, “I have the satellite view downstairs.”

“How’d you do *that*?” Kit asked, her green eyes wide.

“That’s a question we never ask around here,” Kai pointed out, as they made their way back downstairs to Rachel and Cori.

“Why not?”

“Plausible deniability,” Casey explained. “They do what they do. Frankly, being able to see and talk to them this time is a blessing. I don’t care *how* they do it.”

“Okay, this is Joe, Delaney, and Dad,” Rachel explained, pointing them out to the others. “They are with the four Jeeps.”

“Right. And that must be Amarina,” Kit pointed to the lone person standing on the hillside, as another slowly neared her, stopping periodically. “And that must be Jacob.” What they saw had a green hew to it. The people were lighter blobs, indistinguishable except for their position. “This must be Jerrod,” Kit said, pointing to another small blob off by itself, right before it disappeared. “He must be near a cave.”

“Right. That means these two are Josh and Sasha,” Charlie pointed out the two on the upper portion. Pointing to the two lower down the hillside, he added, “And these two are Mark and Jon.”

“The other three have already gone in,” Rachel said, nibbling on her nails as she watched. “While this is nerve wracking, at least we get to see what’s going on this time.”

Suddenly there was a flash of light near the cave, followed by multiple other bright flashes.

“What was *that*?” Casey asked, wide-eyed as her heart raced.

“*That* was an explosion,” Kai explained, jumping on his computer to see if they could get a better view from another satellite. He was unsure if it would be possible due to the time of day. “Looks like it took out the hillside,” he reported.

“Mark! Jon!” Casey gasped.

They watched in horror as one bomb went off after the other. It looked like one bomb triggered Jacob's two bombs at the entrance, which in turn set off the others.

"Oh, dear Lord, help them!" Kit whispered.

"Jesse," Rachel whispered, dropping to her knees, feeling like she would throw up. "God," she said, unable to look away from the screen, "Please help them all. Please send the archangel, and Your angels of protection to surround them. Please say it isn't too late."

\* \* \*

One explosion after another occurred around them. What was calm only moments before, suddenly burst into a chaotic rain of debris and explosions that echoed in their ears. The trio inside the caves felt the blast blow through their bodies as dirt and stone rained down on them.

"What was that?" Derek shouted, ducking, as he turned toward the entrance. When the mouth of the cave collapsed, the trio looked at each other, horrified. The roof of the cave slowly disintegrated right before their eyes. "Run!" Derek yelled, and the trio took off in a full sprint down the tunnel.

When they turned left, another explosion went off above their heads, and the roof caved in, landing on top of them, pounding their bodies with rock, debris, and dirt.

\* \* \*

The original explosion created a chain reaction, setting off all of Jacob's explosions in succession. Mark and Jon watched, wide-eyed, as the explosion created a landslide around them. When the small boulders, rocks, and rivers of

dirt headed toward them, they ran, only to be caught up in the landslide when the ground gave way under them. The river of dirt swept them off their feet, sending them sliding down out of control. Bounced around by the rocks and boulders, the cuts and scrapes were the least of their worries, as they each heard a loud crack of bones breaking.

\* \* \*

Ducking the flying debris as they hid behind a giant boulder and tree, the wind was knocked out of Josh and Sasha, and they hit the ground. Feeling the air sucked out around them, as the air from the blast washed over them, they couldn't see or feel anything for several moments. The ringing in their ears overrode anything they could remotely focus on as they inhaled mouthfuls of dirt. Disoriented, they struggled to find their way to each other.

\* \* \*

Amarina and Jacob watched in terror at the devastation that appeared from seemingly out of nowhere. "I didn't do this!" Jacob said, horrified, as the bombs went off, one after the other. "That wasn't me! I swear!"

Placing her hand on his shoulder, Amarina said, "While I know this isn't you, we have a problem."

"We need to get to everyone," Jacob said, heart racing, "...fast!"

\* \* \*

"This isn't right!" Joe said, alarmed at the amount of debris that suddenly filled the sky. "They weren't in there long enough!"

“I agree,” Nico said, recovering from the shock. Grabbing the explosives Jacob left them, he went to head toward Amarina and Jacob.

“Nico! We can’t leave!” Joe grabbed his arm.

“That could be what they want,” Delaney added.

“We can’t leave them. We don’t know what shape they’re in,” Nico argued.

“I get that,” Joe said. “However, if we leave here and they get control of the Jeeps, we’re stuck here. We learned the importance of an exit vehicle in Black Rock. If we let them get ahold of the Jeeps, we’ll have to walk out. If any of them are seriously injured, we *need* these Jeeps to get them out.”

“Walking to the nearest town is *not* an option,” Nico agreed. Sighing, he set his pack down. “Not sure what t’ do here. I was never trained to stand by and wait when people were in danger. I was taught to act on instinct.”

“I know, but we need your talents here,” Delaney explained. “We’re not trained for any of this yet.”

Getting on his radio, he called Amarina and Jacob, “Eagle one, this is the nest.”

“Go ahead,” Jacob said in response.

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Looks like they set off one or two presents, which set off a chain reaction of mine,” Jacob explained. “This *wasn’t* me.”

“I know.”

“What do we do now?” Jacob asked.

“Can you two come here, so we can get together and figure out how to get to the others?”

“Be there as soon as possible,” Amarina said over the radio.

“We’ll be a bit. Remember, we’re twenty minutes out,” Jacob explained. “But we’re running.”

\* \* \*

“What do we do now?” Casey asked, pale. “No one’s moving, except Amarina and Jacob, who were away from the blasts.”

“Why are Amarina and Jacob going back to the Jeeps?” Rachel asked.

Kit looked at the screen, wide-eyed. “Why aren’t they all running to help the others?”

“Give me a minute,” Cori said, and feverishly tapped on her computer. In a few minutes, she said, “Nest, this is the Haven. Do you read?”

“Go ahead,” Nico’s voice came over Cori’s computer.

“Nico, what happened?” Kit asked, adrenaline pulsating through her entire body.

“They blew Jacob’s presents. We can’t leave yet. We can’t leave the Jeeps unattended or we could be stranded.”

“Want me to call the station and see if we can get y’all some help?”

“Go ahead. See if Pete can get ahold of Amarina’s clan to get help here a little quicker. Afraid we’re not sure what the status is on the others. Eagle one’s team is coming to meet us. We’ll come up with a plan when they get here.”

“We will,” Rachel said. Then she asked, “Have you been able to reach the others yet?”

“Haven’t tried. Just a sec...” Nico said, and then he continued, “Nest to Eagle 2 or 3. Come in.” After white noise, he tried again, “Nest to Eagle 2 or 3. Come in.”

“Does not sound like they are responding,” Katia said, with a nervous edge to her voice, as she played with a portion of her hair. “Try again.”

“Nest to Eagle 2 or 3. Please come in.”

“Nest, this is Eagle 1, they are not responding. The radios *are* working,” Jacob said into his radio.

“Can you two double-time it?” Nico asked. “I think we need to get there sooner rather than later, and I want your partner here with the nest team.”

“*We’re going!*” Joe objected.

“I need ya here with Amarina and Delaney,” Nico explained. “You three need to watch these. You convinced me how important they are, and I agree.”

“We’ll be there in another ten,” Amarina responded.

“Anyone know Jerrod’s status?” Leah asked.

Realizing that they had someone near, Nico asked, “Eagle 1, were you able to see Jerrod?”

“Negative,” Jacob said into the radio. “Now, quit talking to us. We run faster when we’re not talking.”

“Copy. Thank you,” Nico said. “Haven, did you copy?”

“Yes,” Cori said into the microphone at her desk. “Haven will contact Serenity,” she said, and Kai nodded toward Kit to go call. “We’ll keep this line open.”

“That would be appreciated,” Nico said with scenarios running through his mind on what to do once they reach the teams while he waited.

Running up the stairs, Kit’s heart was racing. When Willow answered the phone at the station, Kit explained what happened and that they needed help.

“We’ll get in touch with Alice Springs,” Willow explained. “We’ll get rescue sent up there immediately.”

“I don’t know if we want to involve the authorities. That may take a bit more explaining than we have time for,” Kit pointed out. “Just have Pete get word to the clan, and send some of the bigger ranch hands. There’s a lot of debris from what we could see.”

“Are ya sure?” Willow asked, doubtful. “I think the rescue teams would be more effective help.”

“We would have to explain *way* too much. Remember the stories of all that happened when the kids were younger?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s what is going on. We need to handle this ourselves.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll tell Caleb.”

“Thank you,” she said and hung up. Dropping to the couch, she rested her head on the back of the couch. “Lord, I don’t know what to do here, but I know You have a plan already in place, and I trust you.”

\* \* \*

“I just want to sleep, and you’re getting on my last nerve,” Angel snapped at the demon. With the exception of when they drugged her to move her, every time Angel tried to rest her eyes over the last twenty-four hours, the demon would start back up again with questions. The demon seemed to avoid hurting her anymore. For that, she was grateful. She was struggling with collecting any type of clear thought after not having any food or water for those twenty-four hours as well.

“By now, your precious A.N.G.E.L.s are buried under a pile of rubble,” the demon hissed, as it wrung its hands in delight once again.

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, confused.

“We drugged you, and moved you after you passed out. You are no longer in the Tanami Desert.”

“Where am I?” Angel asked, heart racing. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked the angel, who was still invisible.

“Why would we tell you anything?” the demon asked.

*“I am sorry. I was too worried about your condition, and did not want to worry you further,”* the angel whispered. *“You are not in good shape, Angel.”*

“How am I supposed to fight until they get here, when they don’t even know where I am?” Angel demanded.

“I do not want you to fight,” the demon pointed out. “I want you to give up and join uss.”

*“You fight with a strength that is not your own, no matter your location,”* the angel whispered.

“Fine,” Angel snapped. “What do you want from me?”

“Oh, it isss not what *I* want from you. You will be in the handsss of Calliope,” the demon hissed.

At the sound of her name, Calliope appeared in the mouth of the cavern. “Hello, Angel. We meet once again.”

“Where am I?” Angel demanded.

“That is of no concern. What *is* my concern, is your mental state. You have not been yourself lately.” Resting her hand on the side of Angel’s sore face, Calliope explained, “You seem distraught. Lonely maybe?”

“Nope.”

“Well, if not now, you *will* be. You don’t seriously think the A.N.G.E.L.s will forgive you for the loss of one of their founding fathers, so to speak, do you?”

“What are you talking about?” Angel questioned, anger in her eyes. Glancing at where the demon once stood, she was

shocked to see Danny Hawk standing there instead. “What’s going on?”

“Because of *your pride*, I lost my life.” The creature had taken the shape of Danny Hawk, including his mannerisms and voice. Angel shook her head to clear it before she looked back into the face of Danny, who continued to speak, “How many more A.N.G.E.L.s will lose their life because of your actions?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You chose to go after Liliya all by yourself, to prove to the others that you were worthy to lead. Because of that, you got captured. Once captured, it was the responsibility of *all* the A.N.G.E.L.s – young and old – to come rescue you. You do not seriously think we would leave you in the hands of the demons and Cassius, do you?”

“Well, no.”

“So, instead of working with your team, you chose to go after Liliya all by yourself. That is the sin of pride.”

“Oh,” Angel said, mulling over the demon’s words.

“Do you *seriously* think Josh will *ever* be able to love you after you cost one of his mentors his life?”

“I..no,” Angel said, dropping her head in shame.

“How can anyone love you if they have to keep cleaning up your messes?” the demon demanded. “You know you are almost too much to handle, right?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“How are you supposed to lead a team, when you can’t even get out of your own way?”

“I-I didn’t do it on purpose!” Angel defended herself.

“Really?” he asked, crossing his arms. “You are *really* going to tell me that you did not go after Stepan without the others on purpose?”

“I...” She shook her head, beside herself. The more the demon spoke to her fears, the worse Angel felt.

“You *know* Rachel is a better leader than you, right? That is why Val said he was going to change teams,” the demon said knowingly.

“He did,” Angel admitted, “But –”

“But nothing! The archangel even replaced you already. Did he not?”

“He did,” she said, as her heart sunk.

“Why did God choose you when all you do is keep failing Him? What use are you to Him *or* the Kingdom?”

“Please stop?” Angel begged. The more he talked, the more her heart broke. The more her heart broke, the more the tears stung her eyes.

“Who will want to be on your team now?” the demon pressed. “You have royally messed up. You know that, right?”

“I did.”

“Your looks, which were your *only* redeeming quality, are even in question right now. Look at all those scars up and down your body. How do you expect Josh, or anyone else for that matter, to love someone with scars all over their body?”

“I...” Angel went to object, but she hung her head instead. Unable to stop them, the tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

“Josh said you were at least pretty on the outside, but you are not even that anymore. You are now as ugly on the outside as you are on the inside,” the demon pointed out.

Angel just shook her head.

“*Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her,*” she heard the Spirit whisper through her mind Luke 1:45.

“No,” Angel moaned, shaking her head.

“*Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles, or the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight,*” Angel heard the Spirit whisper 1 Peter 3:3-4.

“*Stay focused on the Word,*” the angel whispered to Angel. “*You are beautiful on the inside, and the outside.*”

“It does not matter what you *think* you look like on the inside,” the demon continued, speaking to her fears again, contradicting the Spirit’s attempts. “Josh already told you what he thought of your inside. You *are ugly* on the inside,” the demon pressed. “How do you *ever* expect to be worthy in

the sight of God with your hideous appearance inside *and* outside?”

“*I do not think he can hear me,*” the angel whispered.

“Oh, yes, I can!” the demon said, and immediately shifted back to its creature self before slashing through the middle of the angel.

Taken by surprise, the angel appeared and fell back to the wall of the cave. In that instant, the demon jumped on the angel, killing him with its bare hands, ripping out its insides, tossing them to the side.

Shock replaced the despair, as Angel watched the horrific scene unfold before her.

“Look,” Calliope jumped in. “See? You have done it again. This time it cost God one of His precious angels. You think the archangel is already angry with you for the loss of Danny Hawk? Wait until you deal with your God for getting one of His angels taken out as well. He was sent to protect you, but obviously you are such a screw up, that an angel cannot even protect you.”

Angel just shook her head in response, as she watched the angel who had been with her the entire time, die right before her eyes.

“Remember what Josh said?” Calliope continued. “He said the packaging is good, but the inside is not. You have created *such* a mess! And now, your fellow team members are getting blown to smithereens...all because of *you!*”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know those nifty little presents Jacob likes to plant?”

“Yes,” Angel said, heart racing.

“Well, we figured out a way to set them off...while your friends were still there.”

“*What?*” Angel asked, stunned, as she turned pale.

“They went in to rescue you. Want to see?” she asked. With a wave of her hand, a cloud appeared, and then transformed into a screen. Watching the group separate, she was beside herself and horrified at the same time, to see Derek, Jesse, and Val enter the cave, and moments later, the cave entrance blow out.

“Oh, we are not done,” Calliope said, full of glee. “Watch.”

As soon as the cave entrance blew, she watched as each of those set off two more of Jacob’s bombs. The landslide swept Mark and Jon off their feet. Watching Mark and Jon ride the river of debris, she saw the rocks beat them up on the way down. Settling at the bottom of the hill, to her horror, they weren’t moving.

Then the next scene she saw was Josh behind a boulder, and Sasha behind a tree. When the bombs went off, both stood, looking toward the entrance, just in time to have two more bombs go off near them, blowing them off their feet, throwing them back, over ten yards. As the debris showered over them, both curled up in a ball. When the debris settled, she saw them lying there, not moving.

The next scene was inside the cave. Seeing the front entrance blow, she watched as Val, Jesse, and Derek ran for their lives, only to have the cave collapse on them when another bomb went off. Seeing no one move, Angel thought she would throw up.

“Let’s not forget this one, shall we?” Calliope said, as Angel watched one more scene.

Jerrod was tucked into an alcove. She saw the momentary alarm on his face before a bomb went off near him. All she saw afterward were the bottom of his legs sticking out from the rubble.

“What do *you* think they will do now? They have possibly lost eight more. Do you *really* think they will make *another* attempt after this? You have already cost them too much. If it were me, I would cut my losses.”

“That’s the difference between you and us. We *never* leave a man behind,” Angel said through her tears.

“You did at Black Rock,” the demon pointed out. “You left Rachel *and* Jesssse behind. Did you not?”

“I did,” Angel admitted.

“And then you fought with the others on whether to go back or not,” Calliope reminded her. “Do you honestly think they will be jumping at the chance to come after you again after all of that? If it were me, I would just be happy you are finally not my problem to deal with anymore. You *do* know you are nothing but trouble, right?”

“I’m sorry,” Angel said, shaking her head, remembering those on the team who weren’t moving. The scenes continued

to flash in the cloud as it slowly dissipated. Once it was gone, Angel admitted, “I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Pain and stress seem to follow you. Neither the A.N.G.E.L.s, nor the archangel, know what to do with you. But *we* do. You want to be a great leader, right?”

“I want to lead where *God* wants me to lead,” Angel countered.

“You cannot lead as an A.N.G.E.L., though. The archangel already overruled that by placing Josh and Jon in charge,” Calliope reiterated. “You know I am right. Tell me I am wrong. Go ahead. Just tell me that the archangel has the utmost confidence in you and I will leave you alone.”

“He-he gave the team to Josh and Jon,” Angel admitted.

“You are a *complete* screw up! What makes you think they will want you back? You were not even able to rescue Liliya by yourself,” Calliope went on. “But, *we* know just how strong you *really* are.”

Resolve setting in once again, Angel narrowed her eyes. “I am strong enough to fight you.”

“Really?” Calliope gestured toward the now dead angel across the cavern. “Do you not think one of God’s angels is strong enough?”

Unable to come up with an argument, Angel just shook her head.

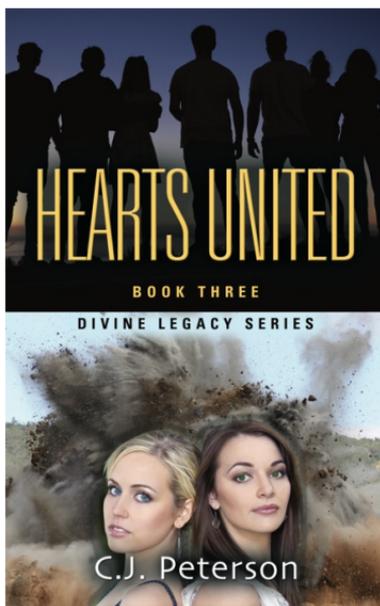
“Get it out of here,” Calliope ordered the demon. “I will continue to work with her to allow her to see the truth.”

Grabbing the dead angel under the arms, the demon dragged the angel out of the cavern. When they were out of earshot, the angel turned into another demon. “How wass that?” the demon who was the angel asked the other.

“Brilliant! Now, what are we going to do with the *real* angel?” the other demon asked.

“That iss up to Cassiusss. And personally, I would *not* want to be that angel,” the demon said, and then let out a cackle of laughter, as the pair went down the tunnel, delighted that their plan worked.

**2 Corinthians 11:14** – And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.



*With the loss of a prominent A.N.G.E.L. fresh in their minds, can the team focus on enough to get Angel without losing anyone else? Meanwhile, the Sullivan family faces a life-altering event of their own. With hearts breaking, can they look beyond their circumstances to figure out how to unite?*

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