

# ADVERSARIES

THE COLOR OF FEAR - BOOK 3

Lyndi Alexander

*Brody had grabbed Eddie's shirt by the shoulder and shoved him back into the broadcast room. Eddie hit the desk and knocked some of the equipment awry. Brody took aim and shot up the largest machine.*

"I said down on the floor!"

Terrified, Eddie dropped to his hands and knees.

Several other men, heavily armed and dressed like SWAT guys, came into the room, firing in what looked like random directions. The broadcast console crackled, then went silent.

One of the men came around the desk and stepped on Eddie's back, slamming him to the floor. His ribs hurt like hell, and it took a while before he could draw a full breath. Shouting continued, with Beck barking commands to the others.

*I've got to get word out about what's happened. I need Charlie...or the Sandman...or someone...*

When he tried to get up, the same person slammed him down again, and this time Eddie heard a crack as pain stabbed through his midsection. He curled up in a ball to protect himself, eyes clenched shut, trying not to moan.

Brody continued bellowing orders amid the stamping of booted feet.

"Boss says grab the dyke, too! He'll teach the homos of this country a lesson."



The Color of Fear Book 3

# ADVERSARIES

LYNDI ALEXANDER



ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS



AUSTIN TX

2020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

ADVERSARIES

© 2020 by Lyndi Alexander

ISBN 978-1-61271-291-8

Cover design © Sheri L. McGathy

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

“Zumaya Thresholds” and the dodo logo are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX, <https://www.zumayapublications.com/>

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Alexander, Lyndi, 1956- author.

Title: Adversaries / Lyndi Alexander.

Description: Austin TX : Zumaya Thresholds, 2019. | Series: The color of fear

; book 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2019019365 | ISBN 9781612712918 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781612712932 (epub)

Classification: LCC PZ7.A37753 Adv 2019 | DDC [Fic]--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019019365>

*For those who continue to fight the good fight, in the face of slim odds, convinced that the only way to win is to give their all. Here's wishing that we can all be that hero or heroine when the call comes.*

No hay arma más potente que la  
verdad in los manos de los buenos.\*

— Juan Bosch

*\*[There is no weapon more powerful  
than the truth in the hands of the  
good.]*

# CHAPTER 1

*August 10*

*The family house in Cherokee, St. Louis*

*Mid-morning*

Jin Piao stretched lazily in the twin-sized bed, savoring the few minutes of quiet. Pale gray light came through the window, announcing the arrival of dawn. Weeks now since the arrival of his caravan, which had started as travelers from disparate areas of San Francisco before gradually uniting as they came cross-country, he'd begun to feel a part of this motley family. Certainly, they welcomed him, sharing meals, playing games in the evenings. He even enjoyed their late-night exchange of conversation in the family room.

No one knew the real reason he was here.

The Ministry of State Security had sent him after Lin Kwan with her packets of Chinese herbs. He'd left Hong Kong, traversed the Pacific Ocean, and come across the United States—what was left of it, anyway.

Kwan had traveled here to find her scientist father. Once they reunited, Piao would be in a position to complete his mission and end the hope of America recovering its former status as a world leader.

So his Chinese masters thought, but there was much they did not know about this land. They'd assumed that during the Second Holocaust, after Cambodian terrorists released the virus that killed White people—first in California, then across the States, then around the world—that the U.S. population would be decimated and therefore easy to conquer. While they hadn't started the fight, they were certainly happy to finish it.

Piao, however, had discovered that not only had many Whites survived, thanks to mixed racial lines, but that the country had a solid base of citizens of Hispanic and African-American heritage, especially here in St. Louis.

This new capital of the States served as a magnet, drawing more survivors every day, the vast majority being people of color. The America his masters had known might no longer exist, but the country was by no means a dead enemy—with or without the herbs.

Lin Kwan had been cagy of late, but he had seen her packing her meager belongings. He gathered she intended to leave for the East, to Ohio, wherever that was. He knew because her traveling companion Valery Paz had none of the privacy reservations of her friend. She told everyone everything. The departure was planned for this week. Once they left, Piao would follow and complete his mission.

He smiled at the thought of being able to return to his wife in China, and his newborn son Hu. They awaited him at the assignment's end.

Lifting his head from the firm pillow, he listened for foot traffic outside his door. It was quiet. Quieter than it should be. A thrill of alarm zigzagging through his stomach, he twisted out of bed, then opened the door to get a better idea of what was happening.

A dozen people shared this house owned by Eddie Garrick, the radio personality and friend of Xi San. It should be noisier. Several voices came up the polished stairway from the kitchen, one floor below, none of them belonging to the two women.

He hurriedly pulled on the clothing he'd tossed on the floor the previous night, then slipped out into the hall. Kwan and Valery's room was to the left of his, the door standing open. He peeked inside, finding their bags gone and beds made.

*Damn. I've missed them. How had that happened?*

Barefoot, he padded downstairs to the kitchen, arriving as Xi San and Eddie Garrick came in the back door. Marie Westbrook, their unofficial housemother, set out a fresh tray of biscuits. Her red hair was well-coiffed, and her face perfectly made up, as always, even at the crack of dawn.

"Did the girls get off all right?" she asked, eyes bright.

San nodded, his jaw tight.

Piao studied the former Enforcer, a man who'd lost everything but his life before he'd decided to become a vigilante crime fighter on the streets of San Francisco. San was hard in every way possible—muscle, attitude, and heart. Or he had been, before he met Kwan.

"They're gone?" Piao said, trying not to sound too alarmed. His mission could be totally lost.

Eddie studied him. "Didn't know you were so interested in them, buddy."

Piao realized he needed some excuse for his sudden concern.

"Kwan said Valery was staying here. *I* was to go with her."

“Really?” Eddie grabbed a biscuit and took a bite, continuing with his mouth full. “Never said that to me.”

San’s dark eyes pierced the lie. “Or me.”

Marie looked from one to the other of them, eyes narrowed as she tried to suss out the cause of the tension.

“I’m sure we’ll hear from them soon. Kwan, at least, will follow up with news. She’s such a good girl. I just hope she finds her father.”

“We all do,” Piao said. He felt like he was still under scrutiny from San and Eddie, who’d gone to the beverage area of the kitchen, so he moved close to admire Marie’s baking. “Are these for anyone?” he asked.

“Absolutely. Help yourself. Water’s hot for tea.” She went to the doorway and called upstairs for her roommate. “Jack. Breakfast!”

Piao made a show of setting a plate with two biscuits on the nook table, piling them with sweet berry preserves. The other two men began talking about San’s job search and lack of success, and eventually, they wandered out to chat elsewhere. Piao hardly noticed, his mind already making plans.

If the girls had left just within the hour, he could likely catch up with them. The interstate highways were clear to the east; he’d heard people talking about it. A man alone could make good time.

He listened for the footsteps of the others, but no one came. The smell of the biscuits he hadn’t even wanted called to him, and he held one up to his nose, taking a long sniff. After that one moment of sheer enjoyment, he ate them down to the last crumb. The warm bread was flaky and delicious, a novelty to him. They didn’t have such things in China. The closest thing he could compare it to was a biscuit roll, a thin rolled pastry much more like a cookie than this bread.

The jam, too, was full-flavored and delectable.

Even though he’d tried to keep active, teaching martial arts to children at the neighborhood center, he’d gained more than eighteen *jin*, or twenty pounds, since he’d crossed the ocean on the huge tank ship. Fortunately, his activities had allowed some of it to remain strong muscle.

Marie returned with pudgy old man Jack on her heels. Jack poured them both coffee as she prepared a plate of biscuits; then they headed for the table where Piao sat. It was a perfect chance to escape without drawing attention.

“Please,” he said, giving up his seat, holding the chair for Marie as he’d seen Jack do.

“Oh, you don’t have to go, honey,” she said. “We’d be happy to join you.”

“Yes, Piao,” Jack chimed in. “We haven’t seen you nearly enough since you’ve been teaching.”

Piao bent in a slight bow. “So kind of you, but again I have an early class. Thank you for the breakfast, *mou chan*.” He turned and left the kitchen.

“Have a good class!” she called after him.

Piao slowed as soon as he was out of sight, wanting to see if anything more was said about the departure of Kwan and her friend, but all he heard was an affectionate, “He’s so sweet” from Marie before Jack launched into a discussion of the medicinal herbs they’d have to harvest that morning.

He bolted up the stairs, closing his door after he entered the room. He pulled on heavy black boots. His brown leather jacket would protect him from the wind while riding his motorcycle, even if it would be too warm by the late August afternoon. Sorting through his remaining belongings, he decided to abandon them. He’d learned to travel light.

*Ha! On this trip you came with only the shirt on your back!*

His ego still burned at the way Kwan’s sensei Li Zhong had bested him on the docks in Hong Kong. Piao could have killed him, and the girl, and disposed of the damned herbs over the side of the boat, and no one would have been the wiser. Who’d have guessed the old warrior still had a few tricks left in him?

The last thing he packed was a shiny silver-barreled gun he tucked into the side pocket of the pack for easy access. He’d scrounged it in one of the small towns the group had passed through on its way from California. He preferred hand-to-hand combat, but he had to assure the success of his mission.

Once he found Kwan, her traitor father, and the herbs all in the same place, he could destroy them all. He’d end this threat to his country at last, and go home to hold his son.

He grabbed his backpack, then closed the door as he went out, hoping to delay discovery of his departure as long as he could. His bike was parked in the rear of the house. He hopped on, started it with a single kick, and headed off to find the highway.

## CHAPTER 2

*August 10*

*Cincinnati, OH, outside the former home of Tzu Shin*

*Late afternoon*

Valery Paz's lips twisted into a mocking pout. "Now what are we going to eat?"

Tzu Lin Kwan sat hunched in the passenger seat of Valery's big red truck, belated guilt making her blush. Being here on the Cincinnati street where her father had lived, learning he was alive but had been transferred to a lab in St. Louis, had caught her off-guard. When the neighbor woman asked for the bag of groceries she'd bought to share a meal with Tzu Shin, Kwan had blindly given it to her.

That left Kwan and Valery with nothing.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think."

Valery laughed and punched her lightly on the arm.

"I'm totally kidding you. We have to stop for gas anyway, so we'll pick up something. Come on, let's go." She started the truck, then drove toward downtown once again. "Since your dad's already in St. Louis, we'll just head on back. We can be in New St. Lou by noon tomorrow, if everything's clear."

St. Louis. The thought made Kwan smile. About her father. And San.

Her emotions welled up and bubbled over. So much she'd hoped for was so close now. The mission her father had given her, to bring the *zi su ye* herbs to America, would be completed soon. He would save the people, and make the world whole again.

She'd followed her defector father to San Francisco, then to Cincinnati, only to find him gone. But now, at least, she had a positive site where he could be found.

Her pride in the promise of completing this mission brought the memory of her now-dead mentor, Li Zhong. He had given up his quiet life in

Hong Kong to chaperone her voyage. She, too, had put aside her own desires and wishes, perhaps the largest her own sacrifice in denying herself the right to love Xi San, when everything in her heart told her they belonged together.

Could she really have her father *and* San, along with a real life?

“Oh, no way. No way. Look!”

Valery slammed on the brakes, pulling over to the curb. Kwan clutched the dashboard, her breath half stolen by the sudden screech.

“What? What?” she gasped, heart pounding. She peered desperately around for a child in the road or some justification.

“*Mira!* It’s a taco truck!”

Her face split by a huge smile, Valery bailed out. She ran to the open window of the large white panel truck, spewing a string of Spanish. Nodding and waving her hands, she exchanged words with someone inside, then called to Kwan.

“Come on, *chica*. I’m about to change your life.”

Still rattled by the sharp halt, and unsure if she could handle any more life changes at the moment, Kwan slid out of the cab. Keeping a watch around them, she walked slowly to the food truck. Inside, she discovered a young couple who spoke excitedly to Valery, hardly taking a breath as they laughed and conversed. Kwan hung back, feeling excluded.

“Oh, my God,” Valery said to Kwan. “These two are from back in King City! Their parents ran La Potranca, a place I used to practically live at, *pozole* to die for. I swear.”

Kwan glanced at the grinning couple, who piled food into some folded flatbread, and then into a white bag.

“They left town when the virus first hit, and brought all their mama’s recipes along. This is just a temp deal until there’s enough local resources and money to open a restaurant.” She accepted the bag from the young woman, reached inside and handed Kwan a greasy, paper-wrapped bundle. “Eat.”

It was Valery; no point in arguing.

Kwan peeled the paper back from the closest end of the handful, and was greeted by a wave of pungent scent. A bite brought her creamy cheese, spicy meat, a crunch of greens and smoky sauce. It was one of the best things she’d ever tasted.

“Mmm,” she sighed.

“Told ya.” Delighted, Valery devoured one, her eyes closed in overwhelming satisfaction. “*Que bueno!*”

She asked the couple a question, and they quickly prepared another bag of treats for her. She paid them from the coins and bills Eddie had

given them for the trip, still chattering, and then reluctantly dragged herself back to the truck.

“So unreal. I can’t believe I could find someone from home all the way out here. It made me feel...” She clutched the paper bags, her face working. Suddenly, she was in tears.

“Val?” Kwan reached out to smooth back her companion’s auburn locks, stunned at the strong woman’s disintegration. “What is wrong?”

“La Potranca was one of my mom’s favorite places, too,” she said between sobs. “We ate there just before...just before...” She couldn’t go on.

The walls that contained strong feelings only held so long. Kwan slid closer to Valery and slipped an arm around her shoulders. So often during their journey from San Francisco, Valery had been the pillar of strength that held up both of them. She’d come along on this jaunt to Cincinnati to find Kwan’s father only to support Kwan. The least Kwan could do was repay the debt.

When Val had cried herself out, with a few empathetic tears from Kwan, both sniffed and scrubbed their faces with brown napkins, then dug into the bags, toasting each other with tacos before starting the engine and heading down the road again.

Kwan checked the notes Eddie had prepared. “Route Fifty is only a few miles from here. We can get gas just before that.”

“Eddie typed his fingers off getting us ready to go.” Valery’s smile was wistful. Her eyes teared up again.

“You’ll see him soon,” Kwan reminded her. *And I’ll see the men I love.*

They filled up with gas at the station Eddie had told them was safe, and then Valery turned toward the interstate. Kwan caught the sign for the highway out of the corner of her eye.

“But we took US-Fifty out here. That road was approved by the team.”

Valery rolled her eyes. “Look, *chica*, it’s almost dark. It’ll take six hours or more to get back to New St. Lou. We’ll get there a lot faster on the interstate. Don’t you want to get there fast?”

So much waited for her there...

“Of course.”

Kwan looked away, startled to find San’s image in her mind instead of her father’s. *No. Not yet. You’re still on your mission. You can’t indulge yourself until you’ve delivered the herbs.*

“Well, then.” Valery floored the gas pedal, and they zoomed up the ramp onto I-71, headed south.

Unlike the highways of the West, this interstate was less cluttered with abandoned vehicles, and those were mostly pulled off to the right side of the road.

“We’re going to make great time,” Valery commented, fitting their truck into the sparse line of vehicles taking the middle route down the dividing line of the two lanes.

Kwan studied the bicycles, motorcycles, and to a lesser extent, other cars that shared the road. People here had committed to making a life for themselves again, using as many of the tools as they could keep working. Several drivers eyed the shiny red truck with hungry avarice as it passed them. Valery had proudly cared for and polished the vehicle every day since they’d liberated it from a garage outside Lake Tahoe on their journey east.

Surely, the theft can be forgiven if the family it belonged to wasn’t around to use it.

As many times as Kwan repeated Val’s justification for keeping the truck, the concept did not sit comfortably in her heart. Taking what wasn’t yours was stealing. This lesson had been drilled into her, black and white, since she could remember. Her aunt Ehuang, even in their hardest times, had insisted that they not fall to the common level of street thieves.

But there was no question that having a vehicle made life much easier. Without it, would they have encountered Xi San and his traveling group? Could they have come to St. Louis? Or ever made it to Cincinnati? Now the trip to find her father would take only hours instead of days or weeks walking. Perhaps it was possible that fate had brought their path together with that of the red truck, a gift from the gods to help them on their mission.

It still felt wrong.

Kwan shook the gnawing guilt from her mind. It served no purpose. She turned her attention instead to the impending sunset. A cornflower-blue sky spawned streaks of lavender-and-violet clouds. Vehicles on the road around them turned off, headlights shining, to the side roads. Once it was fully dark, it was miles between sightings of another car. The countryside was dotted with the occasional glow of generator-driven lights from homes in the distance, their randomness making them quite noticeable against the otherwise black landscape.

The monotony lulled Kwan into a state of drowsiness. She laid her head on the back of the seat and closed her eyes, letting her mind sink into memory.

Valery hummed one of her musical tunes. Kwan recognized it as a refrain Valery and Arik Logsdon had sung together in the community apartment building Eddie Garrick had established. Shortly after they’d arrived in St. Louis, the neighborhood had hosted a block party to meet the newcomers. Singing something about “Sisters,” Arik and Val had waylaid Kwan in the hallway and steered her into the room she shared with Val...



“Wait till you see what we’ve got for you, *querida!*” Valery giggled as she pulled her into their room. Arik closed the door behind them, beaming.

Her traveling companion had a certain look in her eyes, and Kwan recognized it as the one that always led to mischief. But unlike some of the other times, this one didn’t seem geared toward trouble.

“What are you up to?” she asked.

Her friends dug into the closet.

“Look at this!”

Valery whipped out a red silk jacket trimmed in black, with a mandarin collar. The short-sleeved jacket was delicately embroidered in gold. Kwan thought she’d never seen anything so beautiful.

Arik mock-swooned. “Oh, honey, it’s to die for. And size two. I’m jealous.”

After she slipped on the jacket and a pair of dress black slacks, Arik encouraged them both to sit at a table covered with makeup and hair doo-dads, and he dolled them both up. Valery enjoyed the attention, but Kwan had never experienced such fuss over how she looked. Certainly, she’d never worn such makeup and even false eyelashes. They pulled at her skin and tickled. But Arik waved away her protests.

“It’s about time *someone* looked glam around here!”

“You have enough to do,” Kwan interjected feebly.

“This isn’t stressful at all, love. Believe me, this is something that relaxes me. You’re the one doing me a favor.”

He finished and admired his work, then he clicked his tongue. “Oh lawd, lawd. I know two young ladies who are gonna get their bones jumped tonight. I’ll bet my sweet ass on it.”

Valery snorted. “Tease.”

“Shut up, sister woman. Artiste at work.” Arik chuckled. “Perfect. Go get your duds, Val.”

Kwan studied the unfamiliar face in the mirror, realizing she might well be a movie star with all this added to her skin. She’d never looked like this, ever. It was uncomfortable, but she had to admit she liked it.

Valery slipped into a black-beaded jacket Kwan knew she hadn’t brought with her.

“Isn’t this fabulous? I found it stuffed in a box in the attic. A huge pile of vintage clothing up there. I think we’re going to recycle it for the new community theatre.”

Valery finished dressing, topping off the outfit with a pair of black platform shoes that she wobbled on the first couple of times across the room.

Arik offered Kwan a pair of high heels, but she shook her head. She knew her limits. She wore her usual black flats, the ones that looked like dancers' shoes.

"Mmm-mmm," Arik said. He pulled them both over to look in the recently acquired full-length mirror. Kwan saw not two girls who'd traveled through some of the roughest country in America, who'd survived a shootout in Kansas, but two grown-up women who'd found their place in life.

Arik and his partner Mark escorted them to the event, making sure no one saw them until their grand entrance, which caused even the garrulous Eddie Garrick to stop mid-punchline. He stumbled through the rest of his conversation, eyes on Valery.

San's face when he saw Kwan walk into the banquet room reflected everything Arik and Val had promised. They'd sat together at dinner, and he kept reaching out to touch her, as if she were a dream. She'd felt part of that dream, too...



Now she could live it. She was on her way back to St. Louis and San.

A warm feeling of satisfaction coming over her, she sat up and opened her eyes.

"Should we try to contact them? Ask them to be waiting?"

Valery grinned in the way Kwan recognized as the expression that meant Val was throwing caution to the winds.

"Let's hope they're having a great time and letting go for a change. They've been so uptight about getting us where we needed to be. Nice that they can just be boys for once." She smiled wider. "You know...that means we could be wild women on the way home. We could stop at a strip club or something—"

"Val!" Now that her path was clear, the last thing Kwan wanted to do was stop anywhere at all. "Can we please just drive?"

Valery laughed. "I'm just teasing you, *querida*. I wouldn't keep you away from either of your men for a second longer."

Distracting herself, Kwan concentrated on her father's memory instead. The adrenaline of discovering his whereabouts had begun to wear off, and she rolled her shoulders to dispel the tension.

"I still can't believe my father is so close."

Her face ghostly pale in the reflection of the dashboard lights, Valery stared out the front windshield and chewed her lip.

"I'm praying he is," she said, her tone fading to a serious one. "I don't want you to get too crazy excited about this, sister mine. Remember, we had good word he was in Cincinnati."

Kwan refused to allow doubt to cloud her hope. “He *was* in Cincinnati. That woman actually knew my father. She knew who I was. Somewhat.”

*So she called me Kay Lynn.* It was close enough.

“She’d seen him before he left here.” She nodded, more to reassure herself than Valery. “Once we get back, we just have to find him in St. Louis.”

“That might not be such a big issue. I know someone who’s a pretty big radio star in the city, you know. If he puts the word out, you’ll hear from your dad in no time.”

Those words were like a warm blanket for Kwan, who took them and held them close. They’d be back in St. Louis before the night was over; and first thing in the morning, she and Val could talk to Eddie about making an announcement over KMOX.

How much easier could it be?

“Do you think we could listen to KMOX now?” she asked.

“Probably.”

Valery poked at the dash, and the radio came to life.

“—children of the night,” came the sultry alto voice of Isis, as it had every night during their travels. “We have a whole pile of messages going out to those wandering our highways and byways this fine evening. I’ll get to those in a minute, but I wanted to let everyone know that, here in New St. Lou, we’re expecting a visit from representatives from Washington DC. Rumor has it they will bring presumptive President Eartha Osman. Perhaps then we will be able to help the city acquire some funding to help get things up and running again.”

Valery snorted. “Maybe.”

Kwan frowned at the cynicism in Val’s tone. “Is Washington not your former capital? Surely, they will be able to help.”

“Uncle Dave used to have a cartoon posted on the refrigerator saying ‘We’re your government, we’re here to help.’ Everyone was standing there holding a rifle on some poor little immigrant kid. It was scary as hell. He never trusted the government to do anything.”

Kwan thought back to some of the corrupt politicians she’d heard about in Hong Kong after the Second Holocaust, people who took bribes, people cowed by the military into cracking down hard on some of the poorest people in the city.

Zhong, too, had been with the government at one time, and he had often worried they’d come after him. The government couldn’t be trusted, he’d always said.

“My father thought that America was a better place, though. That the government was free and—”

A figure dressed in white waving its arms suddenly appeared in front of the car, standing in the middle of the road, captured in the headlights.

“Hold on!” Valery yelled. Brakes squealing, she swerved the truck toward the far side of the road. The wheels ground to a stop.

Kwan’s head hit the side window at the angle of the swerve, but she was otherwise unharmed. She unlatched her seatbelt, her gaze swiveling back to the dark in the center of the road, searching out the “ghost” they’d nearly run over.

“You okay?” Valery asked, leaning down to pull her gun out from under the seat.

“Yes.” Kwan checked to see that her long knife was in her boot, then slowly opened the door, trying not to make any noise. She caught a brief look at Valery’s face before the overhead light went out. Val’s jaw was set tight. Not the time to remind her this was not the chosen route home.

Valery scooted out her door, her movements large and friendly-appearing. “Hello? Can I help you?”

No one answered, but Kwan caught a hint of movement in the dark on the far side of the shadowed median. She kept to her place, hidden by the bulk of the truck’s bed. Valery’s advantage was the gun; Kwan’s would be surprise.

A querulous female voice came from the median.

“How far to Cincinnati?”

Kwan saw Valery’s outline in a pale sliver of moonlight that came through the clouds. She moved around the cab of the truck, keeping it between her and the voice.

“About twenty miles.”

“They’ve hospitals running, right?”

“As far as I know. What’s your situation?”

Kwan inched closer to the back of the truck, wishing the moonlight were bright enough to verify how many people waited for them in the night. This wasn’t what she had expected, certainly. Usually, there were a lot more threats, followed by even more shooting.

But that didn’t mean they weren’t in lethal danger.

“My granddaughter’s having a baby. She’s been in labor for two days. It’s breech.” The tears in the old woman’s voice sounded real. “She’s bleeding now. We come from Frankfurt, and we run out of gas. We just gotta get her there.”

Val didn’t answer right away. Kwan guessed she was weighing the odds it was a trap. Only one way to find out.

Kwan dashed to the left, taking cover behind another stalled car, then made her way silently across the two lanes of the highway. She hunkered down, making herself small. A faint light came from a parked car on the other side of the highway. A woman appeared to be lying down in the back

seat and another leaning over from the front. From this vantage point, Kwan could dimly see the woman who'd been speaking. She wore a long dress or robe, no hat on her head. Her hands were empty.

"Kwan?"

"I think she's all right." Kwan stood up, placing the woman between herself and Valery. "She's unarmed."

The woman took several steps back, visibly alarmed at Kwan appearing so suddenly.

"Please, don't hurt us! We're just three women trying to save this little one comin."

Valery came out from behind the truck then, and dug in the cab for a flashlight. She shined it on the woman, who covered her eyes from the sudden brightness.

"You need a ride into town?"

"Oh, yes, miss, thank Jesus for you. Thank Jesus."

The woman in the worn housedress beckoned for them to follow her. Kwan jogged across to meet Valery, still not totally reassured.

"They could have men..."

Valery nodded. "I don't think so. Let's check it out."

They crossed to the parked car, Valery keeping the light moving, showing them the ground as well as checking out the area around the car. Nothing untoward appeared.

In the car, they found a very young woman, her face white and drawn, abdomen distended with child, barely conscious. Kwan didn't know much about the birth process, but she had seen people die. This woman was about to leave the earth.

Valery ran back for the truck. She pumped it into gear and drove it over the lumpy median grass. Kwan helped the older women load the younger into the truck bed, the three of them holding her to try to cushion her from too many bumps and bruises on the ride. For a brief moment, Kwan was reminded of the day they'd found the Enforcer, after his encounter with the snake, and the ride that had allowed them to really speak to one another for the first time. Val's driving, too fast and too furious, wasn't too different, either.

The women spoke softly to the girl between swerves and bumps, half-shaken to bits themselves by the transit. If the breech baby didn't kill this girl, Valery's driving might.

Kwan didn't know how Valery managed, but she found a hospital with a half-lit emergency room sign out back. She bailed out of the truck and ran inside, returning with several white-clad orderlies with a gurney. They made a quick business of transferring the girl and her womenfolk back inside, and suddenly, it was just the two of them again.

“*Chale!*” Valery yelled. “Our good deed for the day. We should be, like, Boy Scouts. Out rescuing the injured of America...” She trailed off. “Like your man San.”

Kwan nodded. “I was reminded as well.” She couldn’t help but smile at the thought of San’s face. “So, we should get back on the road home, then?”

“The road. Yes.” Walking with a spring in her step, Valery went to jump back in the cab. “And I know what you’re going to say.”

Kwan, following her, sat demurely and fastened her seatbelt. “What am I going to say?”

Valery snorted. “You’re going to tell me that I should have taken the other road. And you’re right. That could have been a very different situation.” She sighed, then smiled. “But maybe we saved a life. Two lives.”

Kwan agreed. “Perhaps fate led us down that road on purpose. But all the same, couldn’t we take the interstate now?”

“Your wish, dear sister, is my command.”

Valery hit the CD player, and the rugged voice of Willie Nelson rolled out as they left the driveway and headed back toward St. Louis, on the road once again.

## CHAPTER 3

*August 10*

*The group house in Cherokee, St. Louis*

*Mid-morning*

San leaned against the door frame, eyeing his bed. For all the good he was doing in St. Louis, he might as well spend all day there between the sheets. The one bright light in his days had been Kwan. Now she was gone. The house was filled with her absence.

Logic argued that Cincinnati wasn't too far to drive any time he wanted to see her. Now that the survivors of the terrorist attack were gathering, services restored, and the new order moving forward, the roads would no doubt become safer. Perhaps public transportation would begin to run again, although it would take a while before they had planes in the air. Jet fuel wasn't the kind of thing one could siphon from an underground tank with a garden hose and a little bit of suction.

In San Francisco, at least, he'd had a purpose. As the Enforcer, he'd been a vigilante keeping the streets of his Pacific Heights neighborhood safe when the police failed. St. Louis had a competent, fully-staffed police force. Sure, people he knew on the force welcomed his participation, but only along the lines of their new bureaucracy.

*That's not how I work best.*

He prowled the perimeter of his ten foot-square room, tension vibrating under his skin like a taut rubber band ready to snap.

"It'll take time." That's what everyone said. Society was rebuilding, recreating itself, hopefully in a new mold. The survivors of the Second Holocaust had been given the chance to start over. With luck, they wouldn't make the same mistakes.

He had the chance to recreate himself as well. He'd been a dedicated student on his way to medical school, prepared to care for his parents as

they aged, find a nice girl, start a family...then he'd lost it all. The only vocation he had in St. Louis so far was Best Friend and Sidekick of Eddie Garrick, Wunderkind. Not that this was bad—he cherished the opportunity he'd had to reunite with the friend he'd never expected to see again, his last tie to his lost life.

*I need more.*

Frustrated, he jammed his legs into a worn pair of jeans and grabbed a blue polo shirt, one of a dozen Eddie had left in his drawers. *Business casual, dontcha know.* He'd go into the city today and maybe find something useful to do.

As San finished lacing up his black military-style boots, Eddie popped his head in the doorway, his dark hair curly and wild. His brown eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Good, you're dressed. C'mon, we've got to head downtown to council.”

San looked up from his boots, trying to deduce the subject of Eddie's animation.

“I thought you were taking it easy at the station today.”

Eddie snorted and waved an arm. “Yeah, so did I. Just got a call from the mayor. We've got visitors. From Washington.”

That straightened San up. “Washington, as in DC?”

Eddie grinned. “The same.”

“Government people here?”

Implications sank in. New St. Louis had done everything to set itself up as the new capital of the country, being centrally located, and a natural gathering place, enhanced by KMOX's presence and its reach. A representative of Acting President Eartha Blake Osman had announced that the executive and legislative functions of the government would be set up in New St. Lou.

Not only was the city functioning closest to 100 percent of normal of anywhere else in America, the empty downtown buildings provided potential space to relocate what was left of federal agencies. President Osman, nearly a local girl herself, was said to be very much in favor of “coming home.”

“Of course we haven't heard from her directly. But it seems like a good choice.” Eddie shrugged. “All the station chiefs are going to this meeting. Cops'll be there, just in case. We might even see Charlie Archer.”

The mention of the former Utah state trooper with whom San had butted heads all across the country nearly made him turn down Eddie's offer. He settled for dry sarcasm.

“Great.”

“Let’s go, before we miss Jeff telling the DC guys to shove their requests up their collective pinstriped asses.” Eddie straightened his dress shirt and gestured anxiously.

Dress shirt? Khakis? When had Eddie gone conservative? Back in San Fran, the kid had been a tree-hugging, granola-eating bleeding heart, always decked out in tie-dye T-shirts plastered with irreverent sayings.

More than just the country had changed.

“Allright, let’s go.”

The two thundered down the stairs. The smell of fresh bread came from the kitchen. No doubt Marie was taking care of her “family.”

The group had evolved over the past weeks from a bunch of weary strangers dragging each other forward along a deadly trail to a well-established domestic unit. They traveled together, ate together, met to discuss issues of the day in the kitchen or the living room at the top of the steps. Marie played mother, her partner Jack played father, and they all took care of each other.

“Those buns smell wicked good,” Eddie said, planting a kiss on Marie’s cheek.

San stepped out the back door just long enough to note the absence of Valery’s red pickup. Eddie joined him on the step for a moment, then punched him in the shoulder.

“Come on, Sandman. They’ll be back. Or we’ll go there. We’ve gotta batch it up, right? Have a hot time. Pretend it’s not hell.”

A streak of sadness flashed through his eyes.

San suddenly felt the depth of Eddie’s loss as well as his own. Eddie and Valery hadn’t been as reserved as he and Kwan. While Kwan had held him at a distance, professing she couldn’t commit to anything knowing she intended to go to Cincinnati, Val intended to return to St. Louis after she’d delivered Kwan safely to the care of her father. She and Eddie had spent many nights on the roof of the building, which Eddie owned, watching the stars and growing closer.

“Right. We’ve got plenty on our plates.”

They returned to the kitchen, and Marie handed each of them a cup of tea.

“Did the girls get off allright?”

San nodded to Marie, finding his throat too tight to speak.

“They’re gone?” Piao asked.

Piao’s sudden intense interest piqued San. Curiosity bordering on jealousy filled his gut in a hot red flash. Piao was a recent China transplant, like Kwan. San hadn’t missed the fact that she and Piao had shared much conversation on the journey east, but he’d never noticed much particular interest or preference for Piao other than polite friendship.

What was going on?

Eddie turned to eye Piao, too. San felt a little vindicated. *It's not just me...*

"Didn't know you were so interested in them, buddy," Eddie said.

Piao looked away. "Kwan said Valery was staying here. I could easily have gone with her."

"Really?" Eddie took a biscuit, and inhaled its aroma before he took a bite. "Never said that to me."

Something wasn't right. San focused on the man.

"Or me."

Marie looked from one to the other of them, unflappable as usual. "I'm sure we'll hear from them soon. Kwan, at least, will follow up with news. She's such a good girl. I just hope she finds her father."

"We all do," Piao said. He took some biscuits, loaded them with jam.

He didn't say anything else about Kwan, and San tried to release his concerns. Back in San Francisco, he'd successfully shut off his emotions. Meeting Kwan, protecting his group, and finding Eddie again had broken down that wall.

Sometimes compassion and concern could be a real inconvenience.

He and Eddie took their breakfast onto the front porch, sitting on the top step to eat. The neighborhood had bloomed since their arrival two months before. Children played in the yards, as they must have done before the Second Holocaust. The majority were dark-skinned. St. Louis had been mostly black Before; the demographics were closer to 80% now.

Which reminded San of their other problem.

Gabriel.

The white supremacist cult leader still remained out on the Plains, challenging the leaders of New St. Lou and catering to many of the white survivors of the plague via his pirated radio station WITE. Once San's group had navigated the prairie and gained the city limits, it had been comfortable to place his existence on a back shelf of the mind, but it didn't make him vanish in reality.

"You think the feds are here to help with Gabriel?" San asked.

Eddie snorted in derision.

"That would be useful, right? So, probably not. I think they're just looking to take whatever we have that's good and make it theirs."

"Maybe it can at least be part of the discussion?"

"It should. Totally."

Eddie shoved the last huge bite of biscuit into his mouth, then set his empty cup on the thick porch rail. He mumbled something unintelligible through the mouthful.

“What?” Lost, San finally laughed. That was the awkward, inelegant Eddie Garrick he remembered.

Eddie choked down the food and got up. “Let’s go!”

San remembered something he’d meant to ask Marie. He’d left it a couple of days now; while he was thinking about it, he decided to follow up.

“Hang on a minute, Eddie. I’ve gotta—”

He went inside to the kitchen.

“Marie, have you seen some mail that was left for me? Kwan said it was on the table in the common room.”

Marie’s forehead scrunched up as if it was helping her think.

“I remember seeing it—addressed to the ‘Sandman,’ right?”

San’s lips curved in a sheepish grin. *Sandman* had always been Eddie’s nickname for him, as *Spaghetti Man* had always been his for Eddie. Unfortunately, Eddie’s moniker for San had surfaced on the radio broadcasts, and he’d never been able to shake it after that.

Marie frowned. “Hmm. Terry was here yesterday. We were all upstairs...” She shook her head. “I can’t remember seeing it after that.”

“What would Terry want with my mail?”

“You know Mr. Teremesha Johnson would be horrified that you implied he stole something,” Marie said.

“Yeah, I know. I don’t mean that. Not really.”

Uneasy, San shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. Terry had been a stalwart companion in their trek across the country, despite some serious provocation from Charlie Archer and others.

But it was damned odd...

“Where are you boys off to?”

“Downtown. Some kind of meeting with DC reps.”

Marie’s eyes widened. “Well, then. Important guests shouldn’t be kept waiting.” She shooed him with her hands. “Go on, now. You’ll be back for supper?”

“Yes, *mou chan*,” he replied, using a Chinese word for a respected elder woman. He patted her arm, then returned outside to where Eddie waited, already astride his motorcycle. He climbed on his, and they headed into the city.



Traffic into downtown was fairly heavy; San was glad they’d taken the bikes. Regular gasoline service had been partially re-established through rationing, and buses were running, but what really mucked things up was that government people appropriated cars for in-town travel. Nothing made the bureaucrats feel more important than zipping past the masses of pedestrians.

Motorcycles, however, could bob and weave more easily, and certainly took up less space to park. Most of the folk in Eddie's building had one.

So many of the buildings they passed were not formally in use. Their dark windows resembled disapproving eyes staring down on the streets, dripping blame for their abandonment. Compared to what the city had been a year before, prior to the Second Holocaust, certainly it was much different.

Their continued emptiness wasn't for lack of trying.

Eddie and his co-workers at KMOX continued to send out on-air invitations to those who wanted to help rebuild the country to come join them. New St. Lou grew in population by perhaps five hundred people a day, if the clerk's numbers were accurate—and that was just those who officially registered at the courthouse as part of the ongoing census. San suspected the existence of a layer of refugees living below the radar who could easily find a flop for a week or two in an empty building without running water or bathrooms, then move on when they'd trashed the space. Those would be a problem, eventually.

Much better to have some regulation and accountability, in San's mind.

New St. Louis had appropriated the former city hall, a huge French-inspired pink granite building on Market Street, to use for nearly all government functions. The building had four floors and 150 rooms, more than enough space to handle the smaller scale operations that were current city government. The Board of Public Service Chamber was the new government meeting place, and this is where Eddie and San came to watch the historic meeting between the old and new governments.

Charlie Archer was, in fact, in attendance. The city's new lieutenant-chief of police nodded to San and Eddie from his position just to the right of the dais set up for the New St. Lou officials. He looked older after their long journey. His hair had grayed at the temples, and he carried dark bags under his eyes. His new uniform, though, was spotless and crisp. San had the impression Charlie wore it like a suit of armor, it holding him up rather than the man carrying the suit.

"Charlie!" Eddie called out, probably to draw attention to himself. Sure enough, several heads in the room turned, and the popular radio DJ was soon surrounded by fans.

San stepped back, leaning against the wall, trying to be unobtrusive. The wall clock indicated thirty minutes remained until the meeting would begin. He was more interested in finding a spot where he could see everything than vying for popularity.

Several minor officials milled about the table, setting chairs and place-cards in position. The chamber's audience seating was nearly full of chat-

tering spectators. The high ceiling provided excellent acoustics. San kept moving along the wall until he reached the closest window and propped himself against the sill. The sun shone brightly, casting long shadows into the room. He stared out at the street below, thinking of Kwan, and hoping she'd arrive safely in Cincinnati and find her father.

Although he hadn't known it then, he'd loved her from the moment they'd met on the dangerous streets of Pacific Heights, in post-apocalypse San Francisco. So shy, yet so fierce, her spirit shone through the enforced grime and protective attitude. It had taken him a thousand miles to realize it, and by then, they'd both acknowledged there was no point in taking action on what had come to be a mutual love.

Not until she'd completed the mission that had driven her across the sea.

Not until they were both safe in a country still staggering on new, wobbly legs.

Not until they'd rid themselves of Gabriel.

A buzz swept the room as the mayor, Jeff Bailey, entered with his usual coterie of security and assistants. He could have been any one of a thousand Ivy League graduates, expensively dressed, as always, in a dark-blue suit and tiny-patterned tie, briefcase in hand. He settled in his usual seat at the head of the council table, the other officials taking theirs along the sides.

San studied Bailey's face—the lack of a smile as he greeted Archer, as Eddie bounced into his proximity long enough to get a brief handshake. The mayor gave far more attention to the chamber doors.

*He's worried. Is it possible these Washington politicians can wrest government from local hands? Surely not.*

But San wasn't sure he could convince himself.

"I'm not cut out for politics," he muttered. "Better a hand-to-hand fight in the street. At least you know what you're up against."

A soft, deep-throated laugh came from beside him. "We agree on that, Sandman."

The voice echoed inside his memory, all the nights he'd spent listening to her in his ride across the country, stirring something deep within him.

"Isis," he said, turning to greet the strongly-built middle-aged DJ from KMOX. Today she wore thick glasses with tortoiseshell frames and denim bib overalls, her short hair spiked, with a new royal-blue stripe.

"You can call me Peggy, you know."

Her merry laugh brought a hangdog grin to his face. He'd fantasized about her before Kwan had joined his journey. He'd become her friend, through Eddie, but somehow, he could never think of her by any name but Isis, the Queen of the Night.

When he told her so, she pushed his shoulder gently. “You’re sweet.” Uncomfortable, he turned back to the room, now occupied to standing room-only.

“Are you here to cover the event?”

Isis nodded. “Eddie planned to run it live, but staff convinced him we’d better hear what they wanted first. No sense in causing a riot. People here like the government they have.”

“Certainly.”

The volume of conversation rose the longer they waited, until it filled the chamber. The appointed meeting time came and went. Eddie concluded his glad-handing lap of the room and joined them, disappointment etched on his face.

“Maybe they chickened out,” he said.

“Maybe.” San studied the current government officials—they also had become somewhat agitated. Then, a uniformed man with a radio leaned in to the mayor, speaking quickly. Bailey frowned and glanced toward the door.

“Something’s happening,” Eddie said.

Charlie Archer headed for the door, but it swung open before he got there. A dozen men in suits entered, followed by twenty security men in blue uniforms—all white men, an oddity post-SH. A murmur through the audience indicated they’d recognized the anomaly.

The men hesitated only a moment, getting their bearings, then marched up to the council table.

“Mr. Mayor,” said the tallest and whitest one, his suit impeccable, navy blue with a red tie, white shirt and a flag pin on his lapel. “Thank you so much for seeing us.”

The mayor activated the sound system. “I am Jeffrey Bailey. And I’m glad to make time for survivors from Washington.”

The DC man’s incandescent grin didn’t even flicker.

“There are quite a few survivors from Washington, Mr. Mayor. Moving them here to St. Louis—that’s what we’ve come to discuss.”

A rumble of discontent went through the crowd.

Eddie groaned. “Oh, boy, here we go.”

The security men scanned the crowd, steely-eyed. Threat was obvious in their regard. The mayor stood and nodded to Archer, indicating the DC security team.

“I’m going to ask you to send your men outside, Mr., ah...?”

The first chink in the man’s emotional armor showed, but it was a brief stumble.

“Tim Spencer. White House Chief-of-Staff.” He didn’t offer to shake the mayor’s hand. “About the—”

The mayor looked him in the eye. “Mr. Spencer. Outside.”

“These men are here for your protection as well. We’ve heard stories of the lawlessness on the borderlands—”

Without a word, the mayor gestured again to Archer. He stepped closer to Spencer, now standing between the two.

“We have effective lawmen here, sir. You don’t need to worry for your safety.”

“They’re fine,” Spencer insisted.

The mayor smiled and gathered his papers. He stepped away from the table, then left the room through a door behind the podium. His personal aide took his place.

“Mr. Spencer, we’d be glad to set another meeting for you with the mayor after you’ve had time to adjust.”

“Adjust to what?” Spencer sputtered. “I’m here on behalf of the President. You all are the ones who need to make an adjustment.” He looked around in confusion, his voice tightening. “We’ve come to give you a reality check!”

San sensed a shift in the room, a tension that wrapped around his spine. He instinctively looked for a door, in case escape was necessary. Isis and Eddie hunched up against the wall behind him.

But Eddie’s face was a mask of excitement. He was enjoying this. “Give ‘em hell, Charlie.”

The unhappy roar from the gathered crowd nearly drowned out Archer’s next words.

“That’s it, pal. Out. Now. All of you.” One gesture from the chief, and Archer’s men gathered behind him, slowly moving forward, forcing Spencer and the others to retreat toward the door.

Spencer snorted in disgust, standing his ground next to the council table.

“Fine. Fine.” He gave the order for the security force to leave the chambers, which they did, expressions even more hostile than before. Only two of his lackeys remained. He turned once again to Archer.

“Alright, get him back here.”

Archer’s lips nearly allowed a smile.

“That’s not how it works, son. He’s the mayor—for all intents and purposes, the king around here. I don’t give him orders.”

Frustration written on his face, Spencer conferred quietly with his men, then turned back to Archer, who waited patiently.

The crowd buzzed with anticipation, the battle lines drawn. San observed the scene with muted amusement. He knew Archer’s stubborn nature inside and out.

If the mayor meant for these men to go without a meeting, they would leave disappointed. San could admire that trait when it was directed against others. *It was a royal pain when it was turned against me...*

Eddie snickered. "Care to bet who's going to win this one?"

"Not in the least."

Isis just leaned against the windowsill, looking out, and crossed her arms. "I wonder how many more of those soldiers they brought. We may have an established police force and some National Guard types, but we aren't in any position to take on an army."

San nodded, turning his attention to the discussion. The mikes were still hot. Archer suggested that Spencer and his team set a new appointment. Spencer continued to insist that the city fathers should bend to the emissaries sent from Washington.

Archer rolled his eyes and looked to his security staff.

"Then there's no point in you being here, son. We follow the Constitution in this city, and also Robert's Rules of Orders. Only thing that applies is what the mayor wants to do. Whenever he wants to do it." Archer crossed his arms, feet set wide. "There you have it."

San chuckled. *End of discussion. I recognize that one.*

Spencer steamed, but Archer wasn't budging.

"Fine. We'll be back this afternoon. Three p.m."

Archer's face relaxed into a grin, and he winked at the mayor's assistant. "We'll see if he's available."

"He'd better be."

Spencer took his minions and marched out of the council chamber.

Eddie grinned triumphantly. "I knew they were up to no good."

Isis nodded. "Seems that way." She stirred uncomfortably. "They believed we'd just defer to them. When they never lifted a finger to help us all these months."

"Right."

San could see Eddie was itching to head back to the station and tell the world. He, meanwhile, couldn't stop his mind from considering the similarities between the government man and Gabriel, considering the lily-white group that had traveled here with Spencer. Did they still believe that only white men should rule everything? Was Eartha Osman, the President, even aligned with this group? Or were they trying to avoid her authority by coming to St. Louis without official authorization?

What if the two outside forces were to gang up on New St. Lou? How would the independent city survive?

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

[Buy Now - Amazon](#)

[Buy Now - B&N](#)

