

Flames of Perdition Book 2

HELL BECOMES HER

"...a dizzying hybrid of sci-fi, superhero, and good ol'-fashioned private eye fiction, tied together by the noblest pursuit of all: the preservation of innocence."

— Joe Clifford, author of the Jay Porter thriller series

B.A. MCCANDLESS

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“Please remember that. No harm
will come to the child.”*

ALSO BY R. A. MCCANDLESS

Tears of Heaven
Company of the Damned (2018)



FLAMES OF PERDITION BOOK 2

HELL BECOMES HER



R. A. MCCANDLESS



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

2017

AUSTIN TX

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HELL BECOMES HER

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*To Lillian Akish Buhler (McCandless).
The first angel I ever met.*

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CALCULATIONS

The cold steel of a rifle barrel pressed hard into the side of Del's neck. Her muscles went taut and her heart rushed, pumping adrenaline through her system.

"Hands," a man ordered from behind her. He wasn't holding the gun pressed to her flesh

Two assailants—maybe more, Del thought and lifted her hands.

Normally, raised hands would have been a good thing. At chest height, she'd be much closer to her weapons and the weapon pressed against her neck. There would be options. But the plastic grocery bags she held were almost as good as handcuffs. Loaded with the four food groups and adding weight to her arms, they'd require an extra second to drop. That was all the warning the gunman would need.

"In. Now."

There was no patience in the man's voice, but Del noted a touch of fear.

The weapon against her neck shoved her forward. Marrin, his girlfriend Jane, and her adopted daughter Jordan were already on their knees on the floor, hands behind their heads. Six men in combat boots, dark fatigues and obvious body armor were armed with mean-looking H&K G36 assault rifles. They stood at the ready around her living room. Their fingers rested on the trigger guards, which meant they didn't want to kill anyone yet. But the weapons were trained on her little family.

"Kneel," the man behind her ordered.

The pressure from the muzzle against her neck disappeared. She took the two steps forward and knelt down next to Jordan. The thirteen-year-old looked up at her, eyes wide with fear.

"Mom?" Jordan asked.

“It’s okay, Jordan,” Del told her. “It’s going to be okay.”

“It’s okay,” Jane said.

The middle of a crisis wasn’t usually the best place to comfort a child, but Jane had taken the chance. Del loved her for that effort.

Del hadn’t known what to make of Jane except as an operative for Joshua Smalls. They’d met a year ago, when Del and Marrin were on assignment in Salt Lake City. Jane had arrived in Detroit six months ago to see if she could find out anything about his “father” Jaccob. She and Marrin hit it off and they’d been a couple ever since, but Del was never much for making friends. She knew too many stories that ended with someone stabbed in the back by a loyal and trusted confidant.

“Mom?” Jordan asked again. Tears ran down the child’s face. Immediate rage filled Del. She fought down the urge to throw caution away, pull her guns, and start blasting at the men who had threatened and scared her little girl.

“Quiet,” the man ordered. Jordan gave a small sob, but was otherwise quiet. She was a strong little girl, stronger than most mortals.

Her little girl.

In her home.

It was too much. She began to let the grocery bags slip.

“Del,” Marrin said. His voice carried sympathy, warning, and caution. He was telling her they were caught, and caught good. Fighting was worse than stupid. If their captors wanted them dead, they wouldn’t have bothered with the intimidation. Bad guys in the movies tended to spill their entire evil scheme in a two-minute monologue. In the really real world, they put three shots in the back of your head and went out for a microbrew. Wasting time with evil laughter was a Hollywood delusion.

Marrin was enough to calm Del down, but it didn’t save him. The gunman behind him slammed the butt of his H&K into Marrin’s side with cold efficiency. There was no anger from the man. He placed the blow where it would cause the most pain and do the least damage. Marrin fell onto his shoulder with a groan.

“Keep your hands behind your head,” the man ordered. “Shackle him.”

The gunman swung his weapon on its strap behind his back and freed his hands. He placed his knee in the small of Marrin’s back and pressed his weight down. Strong as Marrin was—supernaturally strong—he couldn’t overcome the complete lack of leverage. He went down face-first with a grunt onto the floor. The gunman clicked shiny, thick, hinged handcuffs onto Marrin’s wrists and squeezed them tight. He stood and pulled the Marrin by his linked hands back into a kneeling position.

Some of Marrin's long, blond hair came free from his scrunchie, and he blew it, annoyed, from his eyes. The gunman swung his weapon back down and retook his position.

Quick, smooth and efficient. Professionals.

"Stay quiet," the man instructed.

Marrin gave Del a sideways grin. The blow had hurt, but not as much as biting back the obvious retort she saw. She caught Jane's gaze and gave her one nod. It was thank you and understanding at the same time.

"The women, too," the man ordered.

The grocery bags were removed from Del's grasp and disappeared. Hard metal pressed around her right wrist. She didn't fight it. Rough hands pulled her arm down behind her back in the same smooth, efficient movement. A moment later, she was handcuffed as well.

She gave the chain a test tug, and was pleased to feel a little give. These weren't cold-forged iron. Probably high-carbon steel, or maybe even some titanium alloy. Great if you wanted to restrain a mortal, no better than loose rope if you were trying to hold a Nephilim. Their enemy had made a grave mistake. That must have been another part of Marrin's smile. Del hid hers.

"Keep your weapons on them," the man ordered, and came around to stand in front of her.

He wasn't as tall as Marrin—few men could reach the seven-foot Nordic giant's height—but he wasn't off by more than eight inches. Everything about him was thin and angular. It was like he had been stretched. Even his tailored gray suit couldn't hide his fragile frame. His face was made up of long lines and prominent cheekbones that gave him a gaunt, fragile look. Long honey-brown hair hung in loose curls over his ears, across his shoulders and chest, and down his back.

"My name is Alfred Waru," the man said. His voice was deep, powerful, and tickled her ears. "I'm the head of security for the Gold Park Mining Company out of Battle Mountain, Nevada.

"I know that you," he continued, nodding toward Del, "are Omedelia Azazel. And that you," he said to Marrin, "are her partner, Marrin Enkidu."

He looked at Jane for several long, quiet moments.

"I don't know who you are," he admitted. "Are you Nephilim?"

Jane gave her head one quick toss. The shoulder-length twists of her hair made small rain-patters against her leather jacket. She stared at the man with her mouth firmly closed.

"That's unfortunate," Alfred said. "Three would be...fortuitous. Most fortuitous." He nodded to the man standing behind Jane. "The backup, if you please."

The ripping sound of Velcro was followed by one of the gunmen moving behind Jane. He grabbed the woman's arm and pressed it with the needle of a syringe. Jane's skin divoted from the force; her mouth made an "O" of shock.

"What the burning hell—" Del started to say.

Pain blossomed in both of Del's sides. Two quick strikes hit her so fast they were nearly one. The floor slammed against her cheek. Stars burst in front of her eyes. She wheezed and gasped for air. After a few moments, the pain ebbed until she could breathe. Jane lay on the floor next to her, eyes closed but breathing. She was unconscious.

Alfred's face appeared in front of Del, and she realized he'd knelt beside her. If she was fast enough...

"A sedative," he told her. "Not powerful enough for Nephilim by itself, but quite enough to handle a mortal. I have something stronger for you and Marrin. Please don't test my men any more. They've taken oaths that are older than you."

Del took a moment to try to process the information, but something was wrong with what he'd said. If he knew her name, even incorrectly, and he knew she was Nephilim, how could his men be older than her? There were gaps in Alfred Waru's knowledge.

"All will be explained, Omedelia," he said. "But not here."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick, cream-colored business envelope. He set it down in front of her face on the floor.

"I want to assure you, the child won't be harmed," he told her.

"That's enough!" Del yelled, and hoped Marrin took that as the sign.

Alfred nodded to the gunman behind her. She ignored him for the moment.

Del half-stood and turned. Her anger fueled her strength, and she pressed her hands into fists. Metal squealed as it was twisted beyond its intended form and snapped. She thrust out a kick in the gunman's direction, and impacted with something that spun her a quarter-turn. A leg swept her from her feet, and she smashed hard into the floor. Immediately, the weight of a gunman pressed against her, and pulled her left arm, with impressive strength, into a hammerlock.

Del struggled and tried to regain some momentum. A sharp needle went into her left arm, and a flood of familiar heat blossomed out from her chest. The weight on her back disappeared. She pulled herself to her knees, but felt weak and shaky. Her bones felt like they'd been removed from her body and she was a shapeless, inert mass.

"You have my word," Alfred said. "Please remember that. No harm will come to the child."

He patted her shoulder with reassurance.

“Del!” Jordan cried.

There was movement to her side, as a gunman moved next to the little girl. Del made a grab for him. Her hand lashed out, but caught only air. The gunmen’s boots thudded on her hardwood floors, retreating back through the door. A haze descended over her vision. She blinked to clear her eyes, but her lids became heavy. She forced them up and made out the small figure of Jordan slung over one gunman’s shoulder, being carried past.

“No,” she said. Weakness flooded her. “No.”

Del reached out at hand toward the retreating figures. She pushed herself forward as the door closed. The last of her strength rushed out of her. The floor smashed against her shoulder and face as the world went dark.



“Jordan,” Del mumbled.

The sound of her own voice, harsh in her ears, woke her. Her eyes opened to the harsh light of late-afternoon sun. She closed them, but smears of red cut through the black of her eyelids. Her mind was lost in a fog. Somewhere a fly kept buzzing at her. She opened one eye partially, and swatted near her face.

Part of a blanket landed across her mouth and cheek, and she closed her eyes again. Her feet were cold, but she was too tired to pull the blanket down, and the bed wasn’t comfortable.

It felt like she was lying on the hardwood floor of the front room.

Her bedroom had no windows.

“Jordan,” she said again.

Her memories flooded back in a flash. Red anger filmed her vision. She reached under her arm for one of her SIG .45s but stopped when she touched the weapon. There was nothing to shoot.

Fear was added to the mix as she remembered the last sight she’d had of her daughter. She tried to sit up, but only managed halfway before her head began to split open from the sudden pain. Del pressed clumsy hands against her temples, which seemed to help. She’d managed to keep her skull from erupting all over her nice, hardwood floors.

“Marrin?” she moaned. “Jane?”

“Marrin is still out,” Jane said. She sat on the couch a few feet from Del. “Whatever they gave you wasn’t the same as what they gave me. I’ve been up for an hour. Groggy, but not in nearly the same state. I don’t know what happened to Jordan. She was gone when I came to.”

“They took her.”

Del kept one hand pressed firmly against her head and used the other to lever herself to her knees. Her stomach cramped, and pain shot from her abdomen through her chest and legs. The air left her lungs at the sudden onslaught. Darkness swam in front of her eyes, and all sound was lost as static filled her ears.

“Burning, rutting Hell,” she swore.

“Try to breathe,” Jane offered.

Del bit back a caustic remark and sucked in a small amount of air. Her vision and hearing returned slowly. She breathed through the pain as it receded back down into her abdomen. A few moments later she was mostly whole, but the world felt shaky.

She decided to chance moving and placed both her hands on the arm of the nearby chair. She paused in the motion, remembering the many nights she’d held Jordan in that same chair after the little girl had a nightmare.

“Let me help,” Jane said.

Del resisted the urge to hit the other woman. She didn’t want help. She wanted Jordan. She wanted her daughter. She wanted to empty two full magazines into the smug, angular face of the bastard who’d taken her and let Jordan know nothing like this would happen again.

But she was tired, weak and in pain. They’d taken Jordan, and she didn’t know who to hit or who to shoot. She wasn’t certain if she was capable of either in her current state.

She started to wave Jane off, but the other woman’s strong hands slid under Del’s arms and took enough of her weight to help. Del was able to get into the nearest chair and sit somewhat normally in one burst of effort.

“Burning, burning Hell,” she swore again. “How long?”

“A little better than four hours,” Jane said.

“Damn it,” Del muttered.

Any time at all was too much. Four hours could put the attackers and Jordan on a plane and across the country by now. If it was a charter flight, or if the arrangements had been well planned, they could be on their way to anywhere in the world.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said.

She pulled one of her SIGs and aimed it at Jane. She kept her finger off the trigger, resting on the guard. The mortal woman froze where she stood, slightly stooped over and uncomfortable. The concern on Jane’s face melted into anger and fear. Del didn’t care if the woman

hated her right now. She gestured with the gun for Jane to stand up straight.

“Tell me,” Del ordered, “and be honest. Were you in on it?”

Jane tensed. “Are you serious?”

Del narrowed her eyes.

“Life isn’t a movie where everyone wears white hats and black hats,” she said. “Even if we did, they’d be all different shades of the rainbow. Everyone has an agenda, and it only rarely lines up with mine. You’re here. Armed men break into my place. I’d be a fool not to see a connection.”

“I’m here because of a connection made six months ago,” Jane said through clenched teeth. “A connection *you* made. You agreed to me coming to Detroit. You gave me safe passage. Joshua didn’t have to ask. It’s a free country. He did it as a courtesy because this is your town and we want to stay in good standing with you.”

Del’s finger curled off the guard and onto the trigger. She wasn’t completely certain of her aim in her current state, but she focused on Jane’s right shoulder. A gunshot wound there would cause plenty of pain, immobilize the right-handed woman, but otherwise shouldn’t be deadly.

At the moment, Del didn’t care if Jane did die. Marrin would be upset, but that was a bridge she’d cross and burn later. Jordan was all that mattered.

“Answer the rutting question,” Del replied.

Jane changed tactics. Her face softened, and she gave Del a small smile.

“Del, listen—”

Del cocked the SIG’s hammer with an unmistakable click-click of finality. It was completely unnecessary on the semi-automatic, but the sound was scary to most people. A scary sound could be better than a litany of threats.

“Jane, listen.” Del repeated Jane’s words back to her. “I’ve been assaulted, threatened, handcuffed, drugged, and my daughter has been kidnapped. I’m so...tired right now. I’m tired, I’m angry, and I’m armed. You know who I am. You know what I am. I know you can handle yourself and you like to sleep with Marrin. That doesn’t make us besties by any stretch.”

Jane put her hands up and took a step toward Del. It was a good tactic. If Jane could get close enough, put Del off her guard, she might be able to disarm or draw down on her. More anger and frustration flooded into Del.

“Do you really want to test me?” she asked and shook the SIG for emphasis.

Jane froze.

“Answer. The. Question.”

“No,” Jane said. She shook her head. The honey-brown twists of her hair added depth to the motion. “I had nothing to do with Jordan being taken. I don’t know who those men are, and I don’t know what they want. Put the gun away so we can stay friends?”

Del searched Jane’s eyes for any hint of deception. She didn’t have a talent for it. Some Nephilim did, but all of Del’s genetic traits were for violence. Violence and, oddly, make-up and clothes. If she ever met her father, he had some explaining to do.

Del’s lie-detection system was developed over generations of experience with mortals. None of them were as good at lying as they thought, but some were impressive. She didn’t see anything in Jordan’s face that suggested a less-than-honest answer. Del sighed deeply. She blew the air out of her lungs and felt like a deflated balloon—limp, lifeless and useless.

“I want Jordan back,” she said. Tears brimmed in her eyes, ran down her cheek, and plopped onto her shirt.

“I know,” Jane said.

Del burst out in sobs. She couldn’t remember the last time the anger and frustration of inability had taken her over so completely. She was supposed to be tough as nails—chewing up rock for breakfast and spitting out a six-lane highway by lunch. She felt powerless.

Jane stepped to the side, out of the line of fire, and plucked the gun from Del’s numb hand. She used the de-cocking lever to return the hammer to its safety position, knelt beside Del’s chair, and pushed the weapon back into its holster. She opened her arms and pulled Del against her.

Del collapsed. She rested her head against Jane’s shoulder and let the tears fall. Jane patted her back and muttered soothing words.

After a few minutes, she pulled back and looked at Jane.

“I’m...I’m sorry.”

Jane smiled, squeezed Del’s shoulders and nodded.

“Unusual circumstances. We’re all doing our best.”

Del’s blood thumped against her skull and tried to force her head to burst like a dam. She leaned her elbows against the arms of the chair and cradled her head against her hands.

“Water?” Jane offered.

Del thought about the question for a moment. She tried to sense if it would help her body or cause her to be violently ill. She came back without a good answer. Her body felt like porcelain so thin touching it would cause it to shatter.

“Yes,” she replied at last. “I’ll try some water.”

Jane moved out of the large front room of the loft and into the kitchen area. Water filled a glass, and the other woman returned. She pressed the drink into Del’s hand, her fingers cool again Del’s skin. The glass clinked when it bumped against the unfamiliar metal bracelet still around her wrists.

Del looked at the broken handcuff for several long moments. Cold-forged iron would have held them much better, but the few extra seconds it had taken to break the restraints had been more than enough for Alfred Waru and his men to subdue them.

Was it planned that way? she wondered.

She glanced to the side. Marrin still lay stretched out across the floor. Two blankets were spread over his large frame. Del gave a small smile at the concern. She sipped some more water. The hammering in her head eased.

“Thanks, Jane,” she said to the other woman. “For all this.”

Jane pushed several strands of her dark-brown hair behind her ear and smiled.

“I’m sorry you got dragged in,” Del said.

“Boyfriends,” Jane said with a nod toward Marrin. “Whaddya going to do?”

“Oh, are you two going steady now?” Del asked, and gave a wink that didn’t *quite* hurt. “Maybe I should get a girlfriend. Do you have an evil twin back home?”

Jane smiled broadly. “I *am* the evil twin.”

Del lifted her glass of water in salute and sipped a little more. The water was tap-warm, but she didn’t mind. Her stomach rumbled, ached dully, but didn’t cramp. She took another sip.

“You’ve called Joshua?” Del asked.

Jane’s smile faded, but remained.

“As soon as I could safely dial the number.”

“And?”

“He wants me back in Salt Lake.”

Del took a small sip from the glass.

“I understand,” she said. “We put you in danger.”

“It wasn’t your fault, and Joshua doesn’t own me,” Jane replied. “I’m here on his business, but we both knew it was a long shot. You weren’t joking that Ahadiel was hard to contact.”

Del hadn’t seen Ahadiel since the night she signed the adoption papers for Jordan. She didn’t like to dwell on those events for too long. Now that Jordan was her daughter, the thought of losing her, even in retrospect, made her shudder.

The anger rose again, and she had a sudden need to do something, anything, to get the little girl back. Get her back and punish those who’d been arrogant enough to take her. A mortal mother might defend her children like an angry bear. A Nephilim mother would pull down the pillars of Heaven.

Adrenaline surged through her, and she tried to stand. Her legs shook, and the glass dropped to the rug. The little water that remained sloshed free, beaded on the surface before it spread into the fabric. Del sat back down in the chair.

“Damn it,” she muttered. “What in Hell did they give us?”

“At a guess,” Jane replied. “Heroin. Massive dose. It’d kill a mortal.”

Del thought for a moment. She remembered the warm, familiar blossom of heat in her chest.

“Yeah,” she agreed, “it felt like heroin.”

“You would know—”

“Twenty-odd years,” Del cut off the woman. “So, yeah, I’d know. How did *you* know?”

“Jacob and Joshua made certain we knew things,” she told Del with a shrug. “On the off chance.”

“What ‘off chance’ would that be?” Del asked.

“A few scenarios come to mind.”

“Do you always carry enough heroin for a distribution charge on top of possession?”

Jane smiled, shook her head and patted the left side of her leather jacket where Del knew a Beretta 96 was nestled snugly under the woman’s arm.

“I’m a big girl,” Jane told her. “I can take care of myself.”

A thousand reasons why that wasn’t true flooded into Del’s mind. The first of which was that, even as a Nephilim, she had found herself close to dying on more than one occasion. There wasn’t much worse than rogue demons, but even mortals, ones that otherwise were small and weak, had nearly killed her. Strength, courage, skill and even luck had seen her through. If Alfred Waru had wanted Del and every other one

of them dead, they would be lying in pools of their own blood. Jane was trained, skilled and sharp. Sharp enough to cut.

Del looked at Jane. The woman seemed confident, but there was fear around her eyes and in her words. She was a young mortal, and even though she'd seen fighting, she probably had never been taken so utterly unaware. Combat training was one thing. Home invasion and assault were something else altogether. There was no defense for a bullet to the back of the head.

"You *are* good," Del said to reassure her. "When the big men go to sleep." She gestured toward where Marrin still lay sleeping off the drugs.

"He'll be okay, right?" Jane asked. For the first time, Del could see some of the cracks in her armor. "I mean, you'll both be okay from the drugs?"

"The Smalls didn't teach you that?" Del asked. She shook her head to indicate the answer didn't matter. "Our metabolisms run too fast for most mind-altering substances to have a lasting effect. We burn straight through them. It takes something fairly potent, like heroin, to do anything. We'll suffer some aftereffects, like this ten-alarm migraine of mine. But a day or two, and you won't even know."

"And addiction?"

"For Nephilim, addiction is a choice," Del told her. "Marrin's smoking—it's an emotional habit. It's like your obsession with coffee. You like to have it every morning, you may even claim or joke that you need to have it. But the truth is, if every coffee bean and ground in the world suddenly disappeared, you'd be okay. You'd miss the habit of going to your favorite place, smelling the smells and tasting the tastes. But you wouldn't go through withdrawal or con your granny into credit fraud for another coffee fix."

"Speak for yourself," Jane joked, but her relief was obvious. "I'm homicidal without my morning cup from House of Brews."

Marrin saved Del from any further discussion on the topic. He moaned and rolled onto his side. His hands came up to hold his head together, and Del sympathized.

"Jane?" he said. "Jordan?"

Del wasn't certain if she was disappointed he'd asked about the mortal first, or pleased that he'd thought of both.

"I'm fine," Jane told him, coming to his side.

Jane helped him into a sitting position. He rocked slightly from side to side, and most of his long blond hair had come free. It draped around

his face like curtains and cut off his gaze from Del. She said nothing, giving him time to get to his senses as she had.

He held out a hand in front of his face and watched as his fingers shook.

“Rutting Hell,” he mumbled. “What *was* that?”

“Heroin. At least we think so,” Del said and indicated Jane. “A dose large enough to put us out of the game for four or five hours. No way to be certain, but that’s what it felt like. Doesn’t really matter anyhow, unless you’re thinking of taking it up as a hobby.”

Marrin looked up from where he sat; his ice-blue eyes gave her a flat, no-nonsense stare. Del snorted, and favored him with a half-smile. Unlike her, Marrin didn’t indulge in attempts to drown his sorrows through chemical means. Even his smoking was an affectation. What little nicotine actually got into his system wasn’t worth mentioning. He liked his lighter and the tricks he could do with it. He insisted on the soft-pack cigarettes because he liked the crumpled film noir look when he pulled them from his pocket. He even liked formal occasions when he could use his silver-chased black leather cigarette case and matching lighter.

Like his movies, and his penchant for quoting them, it was all theatrics. Marrin didn’t indulge in things that actually hurt his body. Anything that would make him less of a warrior was out the door. He’d made it one of his goals to “help” Del do the same when Ahadiel made them partners.

His flat stare told her all of that in spades.

“Fine, fine,” she said and held her hands up in mock surrender. “No. That’s all you had to say to me. Just no.”

“No,” Marrin replied.

“Well, isn’t someone Mr. Grumpy-Pants after he’s assaulted at gunpoint, handcuffed, and drugged into submission,” Del said.

“Jokes, Del?”

“I’ve already cried and tried to shoot Jane twice,” Del replied. “Humor is my last coping mechanism.”

“Your gravestone is going to read, ‘Died of Sarcasm at the Wrong Time,’” Marrin replied.

“Wait,” Jane said. “What do you mean ‘twice?’”

Del shrugged, which almost felt normal.

“The first time, I didn’t pull my gun.”

Jane’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t say anything.

“What about Jordan?” Marrin asked.

Jane handed Marrin a glass of water, and he drained it in a single gulp. If his stomach bothered him, he didn't show it.

Del's gaze fell to the floor, and she couldn't help finding the spot where Jordan had dropped a full glass of purple grape juice and stained the expensive rug. At the time, Del hadn't been mad at all. She'd laughed at the cliché of a child ruining something nice. Looking at the stain now, she had to fight to keep from bursting into sobs a second time. She didn't trust herself to speak. She shook her head in response to Marrin's question.

"There's an envelope," Jane said.

"There's an envelope?" Del asked. She narrowed her eyes at Jane.

"It wasn't addressed," Jane replied.

"But you knew it wasn't for you," Del said. She fought down the urge for violence a little more easily. It helped that there was something she could do.

"It's on the table, laid out," she said. "Airplane tickets, car rental receipt, an itinerary, and a map. That's it."

Del stood up, picked up the fallen glass, and moved to the kitchen table. She tried very hard not to be angry with Jane for the violation. It wasn't much, and in the same position, Del would have peeked inside as well. But she wasn't in Jane's position.

"Tickets to where?" Del asked as she looked at the papers.

Jane had placed the tickets and the printed papers in neat rows. The map, an old gas station type printed by Amoco, was left folded. Its bright-yellow text claimed to show all of northern Nevada.

"Reno," Jane said. "Then Elko, Nevada."

"What's in Elko?" Marrin asked.

"The car rental agency," Jane provided. "The map has a route highlighted to Battle Mountain, which isn't necessary. I-Eighty is the only reasonable road between the two."

"*The Battle Mountain?*" Del asked. "The Armpit of America?"

Marrin gave her another flat stare, but she didn't budge.

"I'm not making this up," she told him. "Battle Mountain is a nothing town sitting in the middle of nowhere. Some major paper had a contest to find the worst town in the US. Battle Mountain won. That's how I know about it. I think the residents have to fight off the coyotes on a regular basis for control of the town limits."

"Are you really saying," Marrin asked, and he crinkled his eyes with some small mirth, "that if there's a bright center of the country, Battle Mountain is the furthest thing from it?"

This time Del gave him the flat stare. It was a quote. She knew it was a quote. It tickled her brain, but she couldn't come up with the television show or movie it was from.

"Alright," she said cautiously, "yes. That's what I'm saying."

"And it's in the desert?"

"The High Plains desert," Del replied.

"Jane," Marrin said. "Why haven't you told me about this place sooner?"

"Don't get delusions of grandeur, laser-brain," she told him and ran her hand from his shoulder down his chest. Her dark hand made a stark contrast with Marrin's light shirt. "I might know what's there—what's so important it's worth kidnapping Jordan and making enemies of us."

"Us?" Del and Marrin said at the same time.

Jane gave Marrin a broad smile, "Well, I'm not going to let you get all the credit and take all the reward."

Marrin's smile was so wide, Del thought it might reach around behind his head.

"The two of you," she said. "I might have to shoot you both."

"What's there?" Marrin asked.

"The Ljosalfar," Jane said.

"Juice owl far?"

"Close enough," Jane replied.

Del looked at Marrin, whose eyes practically twinkled.

"English?"

"Elves," Marrin replied. "Straight out of Norse mythology."

CHALLENGE

“Elves?” Del asked. “They’re a myth.”
“You’re a myth,” Jane replied.

Del narrowed her eyes at the other woman before she realized Jane wasn’t doing a grown-up version of I-know-you-are-but-what-am-I.

“Fair point,” she said. “But elves? Like live in a tree, sing songs, make cookies, elves?”

“Those are Keebler cookie whores,” Marrin replied. “They aren’t real elves.”

“Do they sing songs?” Jane asked him.

“Focus,” Del ordered with impatience. “It’s all I can do right now not to start *running* to Nevada. I know that’s insane, but that’s where Jordan is, so that’s where I need to be. She didn’t go a single night without nightmares for three weeks after Salt Lake. She still has them from time to time. She’s tough and resilient, but she’s twelve years old and she doesn’t deserve this. Let’s try to keep the conversation short, sweet and to the point.”

“The Ljosalfar,” Marrin said in a perfect, melodic accent, “are Light Elves, sort of like Tolkien’s elves, but with fewer Rings of Power. They aren’t warriors, either.”

“Light Elves suggests...” Del let the thought hang.

Marrin nodded.

“Right. The Dokkalfar. Dark Elves.”

“That sounds racist,” Jane said.

“You’ve been living in the US too long,” Marrin said, “but they *are* separate races.”

“You try being a minority, in a minority, in a country that would prefer homogenized skin tones,” Jane defended herself.

Del gave her a sympathetic look. She could understand the sentiment of being outcast through no fault except existing.

She looked back at Marrin. “How?” she asked. “How are there not one but two separate sentient races?”

“The suffix *alfar*...” He said the word as if he’d invented it. “...more easily translates to *spirit*. So they’re—”

“Light spirits and dark spirits,” Del interrupted. “Got it already. That’s not what I’m asking. How are there elves, of any color, running around and I don’t know about it? And don’t start saying, ‘There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Del...’ I swear I’ll find something dull to stab you with.”

Marrin held up his hands to ward off the threatened attack.

“The Choirs and mortals weren’t the only sentients the Throne created. There was some dabbling in the early days. Quite a few mythical creatures aren’t mythical at all. Although most don’t exist anymore. They’re extinct—or nearly so.”

“Like us,” Del said and shook her head. “Typical Throne policy. But how don’t I know about these Viking elves?”

“*Viking* is a job title, not a people,” Marrin scolded, but he smiled after he said it. “How much time have you spent in the Nordic countries?”

“Some, but I’ve never been a fan of the cold,” Del replied. “I went there for assignments and left when I was done.” She turned to Jane and asked, “You?”

“A bit,” Jane said. “But my...education...comes from Jaccob and Joshua. We had rumors of a tribe in Northern Nevada. They’re either incredibly good at information control, or they aren’t doing anything out there worth notice. Jaccob favored the latter, and Joshua figured why go looking for trouble. There’s plenty in our region to sort out. We didn’t need to borrow more.”

“Oh, wow,” Marrin said suddenly. He bounded off the floor fast enough it made Del’s head hurt. The big man practically bounced into his room.

“If we’re going in for Ljosalfar,” he said, his voice muffled by the walls, “I’m glad you talked me into this.”

Del looked a question at Jane. The other woman shrugged in confusion.

Marrin re-emerged from his room carrying a leather shoulder harness with a pair of heavy-looking revolvers sticking out of the holsters and three boxes of ammunition. After the events in Utah, Del had made

a point of insisting he update his firearms. Previously, it'd been a chore to get him to carry more than his sword.

Nephilim, except for Del, generally loathed change and often didn't update their weapons with the times. It was a combination of their divine half that didn't have to adapt, and their human half that didn't want to take the chance. Del's cousins ended up a few decades to a few centuries behind the times, often with tragic consequences. Humans might fear change, but for Nephilim it was downright deadly.

Before Salt Lake, Marrin had conceded the argument by compromising with an archaic Broomhandle C96 Mauser and an original issue Colt M1911. Neither of them was less than a hundred years old.

She'd insisted he keep them well-maintained, but didn't like that he had to carry two kinds of ammunition for outdated weapons with disadvantages compared to more modern handguns. It had never become an issue, but Del had made a much stronger argument that, in the future, it could. You didn't want a misfire at a critical moment in a fight, and almost everything was critical when going up against rogue demons.

As far as she knew, he hadn't settled on a weapon.

Marrin grinned as he pulled on his shoulder harness and worked the straps into place. The leather was old, age- and use-darkened, which suggested it was the one he'd used to tote his Mauser and Colt; but the holsters were new and customized to fit his updated weapons.

"You got the Matebas," she noted.

The grin on Marrin's face was contagious. He looked like a little boy with a new puppy.

The Mateba Autorevolver was one of the few weapons of its kind. Del easily admitted it was a beautiful piece of weapons engineering, as far as such things went. Far more aesthetically pleasing than her utilitarian SIG .45s, the Mateba solved a problem that didn't really exist, but did so elegantly.

Revolvers require the owner to physically cock the weapon for the next shot using the hammer, the trigger or in some cases both. That crafty Italian Emilio Ghisoni had figured out how to use the same firing recoil semi-automatics did to rotate the cylinder and cock the gun. The Mateba also had a dropped barrel that lined up the muzzle with the bottom cylinder instead of the top. With this configuration, Ghisoni had managed to reduce the muzzle flip that most normal revolvers suffered. The weapon fired as fast and clean as Del's SIGs, even if it only shot six rounds at a time.

That was great and all, and the stopping power of the .44 Mateba was impressive, but not why Marrin had ultimately selected the weapons.

He certainly liked the uniqueness of the handguns, the archaic-update of revolver appealed to his own outdated sense of place, and he was easily strong. But the primary reason was a show called *Ghost in the Shell*. Jane had given him the complete set of DVDs, and they'd devoured them together. One of the characters, whose name Del couldn't remember, carried an impressive-looking hand-cannon based on the Mateba, and that had to be what sold Marrin.

Del shook her head.

"This is because of that damn cartoon, isn't it?"

"Anime," Marrin and Jane said at the same time.

"It's all about us, anyhow," Marrin protested.

"You keep saying that," Del replied.

"If you'd just watch it—"

"How about we save Jordan first, and then I can tell you where and how far to stick those discs? Mm-kay, Maid Marrin?"

"Deal," Marrin replied. "Merry Christmas."

He handed her one of the boxes and gave Jane the other. Del looked at it.

"I have plenty," she replied, and started to push the box back into his hands.

He stopped her. "These are different."

Del slid the box open and pulled out a round. The copper jacket looked no different from hers. She looked the question at Marrin.

"Iron," he replied. "I had them made special."

"It won't work," Del said with a sigh. She replaced the round in the box and closed the lid. "It's been tried, and the bullets aren't big enough to damage the chakram fully. Besides, we aren't going after rogue demons."

She held the box out to Marrin. He pushed it back at her.

"Seriously, you need to watch more movies," he said. "Some *Supernatural* wouldn't hurt you at all. The Ljosalfar and the Dokkalfar aren't like faeries. They're the basis for all those myths. Iron is poison to them. Lead is about a tenth as effective as it should be."

Del pulled the box of ammunition back to her.

"I want more," she said. "At least five boxes, if we can get them."

Marrin held out his hands, palms up.

"I didn't know we'd need them at all. This was a just-in-case kind of thing. Usually, we fight bigger and badder toughs."

"How hard can it be?"

Marrin shook his head. It took Del only a moment to catch up, and she put it down to the drugs still in her system, her shock at being taken so unaware, and her worry over Jordan.

“Of course,” she said. “They can’t be smelted at all. Like our spikes, they have to be cold-forged and shaped on a hand-turned lathe. This is some serious old-school artisan ammunition.”

Marrin nodded and gave her a gesture with his hands that said, *There you have it*. Del hefted the box of rounds.

“It’s a start,” she said. “But it’s not much. I don’t have anyone to shoot yet. We need something else. Something more.”

“I might have your something,” Jane said. She set her box of ammunition on the table and separated one of the pages from the rest.

“We fly commercial to Reno,” she continued, “and then board a charter. But the distance between Elko and Battle Mountain is negligible in a plane. It has to fly in roughly the same direction until it’s about fifteen or twenty minutes out, and then it diverts one way or the other.”

“I don’t see how that helps us,” Marrin said.

“Wait, cutie, and see what your woman is cooking up,” Jane replied. “Driving from Elko will take you a good hour or two depending. But Battle Mountain is an uncontrolled airport. Someone has to be told a plane is coming in before it’s manned. If we divert, do a quick touch-and-go, we could effectively roll out unwitnessed and be there hours ahead of schedule.”

“Won’t the, umm, FAA or someone be concerned about a plane diverting like that?” Del asked.

Jane nodded. “Normally, yes. We could find ourselves in all kinds of trouble. But in this case, it’s easy to explain the lost time due to weather, winds, or something else.”

“Wait, you said touch-and-go,” Marrin began. “Does that mean what I think it does?”

“If we land, the plane loses more time,” Jane answered. “Enough that it might get suspicious. But if we jump out, we avoid all that.”

“Sounds unnecessarily dangerous,” Del replied.

“Says the nearly-immortal,” Jane responded and smiled. “*You* might get a bit banged up. *I’m* the one who has to worry about broken bones, paralysis and disfiguration of the money-maker.” She swept her hand in front of her face with a smile. “This is what I’ve got to offer. I grant it doesn’t buy you a lot, and it comes with its own complications. You don’t have to take it, but this is what I see from what we’ve got.”

Del looked at Marrin.

“Pilot,” she said to him, and held up a finger for each point, “transponder, radio, the jump, and transportation. Did I miss anything?”

“You’re not seriously considering—”

“I’m willing to entertain alternatives,” Del replied. “Do you have a way to reverse time or teleport us to this flyspeck?”

“Del,” Marrin said, “is it worth the risk?”

He looked at her. He looked hard—his gaze bored into her with a mixture of concern and seriousness. It was his preacher-mode, when he gave up the mask of being a light-hearted, bubbly blond who knew all the people in their neighborhood. The last time he’d used it, he’d tried to shove a glass of absinthe down her throat and ended up pressed flat to Del’s dining table, his arm in a painful hammerlock.

It didn’t help that he’d been right. Sometimes the guy with the dislocated shoulder has truth on his side.

Del was tempted to put him back in that position. Marrin reached up and rubbed his shoulder, possibly thinking the same thing. She considered the fact she didn’t another sign of growth. She wasn’t certain what to say, so she said nothing.

Moments ticked by, and she blinked several times.

“I’m not challenging your decision,” Marrin said at last. “I defer to your authority on this. I’m asking if you’ve thought through everything. Is the benefit of a couple hours head start worth the risk? You know better than I do.”

He pointedly looked and nodded at Del’s right arm. The one she’d broken in Salt Lake City too many times in too short a period. The arm that should, by all rights, be useless.

Del took a deep breath, held it for a count of five, and slowly released it.

“I hear you, Marrin,” she said. “Five by five, loud and clear.”

She took another deep breath and let it out as a heavy sigh.

“Here’s the thing,” she told him. “A year ago, I’d put two in your knees for standing between me and the door and asking me to think something through. Five years ago, I’d have been sorely tempted to kill you outright.”

Marrin shifted his feet slightly, his shoulders squared, and he hooked his thumbs into his leather belt. Del kept the smile from her face. It was an old warrior’s maneuver. He’d moved his hands to within inches of his weapons without it being a direct threat. She’d have liked to take credit for that, but Marrin had been a swordsman before he’d ever held a firearm. The move translated perfectly, with no adaptation required. She approved of his actions.

“I’m not a hero,” she told him. Her gaze flicked to Jane, whose face had become an impassive mask. Del had no doubts where the mortal

woman would side if a fight between the two Nephilim started. “I’ve made bad choices. Very bad. Some of them out of pure anger and spite that did more harm to me in the long run. I’m hardly a diplomat and do my negotiation out of the barrel of my guns. Preferably smoking. You’re right to ask me to calm down, to try to think things through. I am...I’m not built for the long view. I’m great at putting holes into others, but not at seeing the consequences.”

Marrin’s shoulders dropped as he relaxed.

“So, we aren’t—”

Del held up a hand to cut him off.

“That I haven’t put two in your kneecaps—or yours, Jane,” she said, looking past Marrin to emphasize the point, “is mostly due to Jordan. Oh, I admit you’ve had an influence on me, Maid Marrin. It’s exactly what Ahadiel wanted. I’m a kinder, gentler assassin.

“But the very fact I’m sitting here, without a gun in my fist, screaming at the top of my lungs, is because that little girl needs me. More than that, I need her. I’ve survived this long on a great deal of hate and no small amount of luck. Those days all ran together in a blur of more drugs and more alcohol punctuated by sudden violence. I’m not going back to that.

“I like you, Marrin,” Del told him. “Rutting hell, I may even love you. You’re the annoying little brother who tags along as an escort to the movies. I want you to have my back, and I hope that never changes. But, Jordan?” she said, and shook her head in disbelief. “Jordan is a breath of pure, clean air after nearly drowning and gasping my last. She may need me, but I need her more. So, forgive me if I don’t take the word of armed strangers who broke into our house, drugged us, and abducted my little girl at gunpoint to ensure my compliance. I mean to do whatever is in my power, and take any advantage I can find, to end Mr. Alfred Waru and bring my baby girl home.”

“Yes,” Marrin replied. “That’s all you had to say. ‘Yes, Marrin, I’ve thought everything through, and this is the best choice for us.’”

He looked at her, and his best-friends-forever mask slid back into place. He liked everyone, and everyone liked Marrin. It was the worst kind of sitcom. They could walk to the convenience store, and he’d have a warm greeting and fifteen-minute conversation with someone Del had never seen before and likely wouldn’t see again. She could count the number of people she considered warm acquaintances on one hand and still have digits left over.

“Don’t poke the sleeping bear,” Jane said to him in a stage whisper.

Del nodded to her with a half-smile. It was good advice.

“Gear up,” Del said, and pushed herself from the chair. Her head swam a little, but she didn’t pass out or fall over. “We’re going hunting, so pack extra socks.”



“Don’t think of it as an uninhabited flyspeck in the middle of the desert,” Jane told her across the small aisle created by the plane’s seats, which faced each other. “Think of it more as a *sparsely inhabited* flyspeck in the middle of the desert. There’s bound to be a truck or four-wheeler nearby we can...acquire for transportation.”

The twin-engine prop charter plane hit another air pocket and jerked suddenly up and to the right before it swooped back down and left most of Del’s stomach about two feet above her head. There might have been correct names for the motions, but all she cared about was keeping her last meal from reappearing.

She slapped her hands down hard on the seat’s armrests. One of them bent under the force.

“Fine, fine,” she muttered. She immediately wished she hadn’t said anything. The effort of making the words caused her stomach to contract and heave.

Jane reached over the aisle and handed her another unused airsick bag. Del pressed it to her mouth. Most Nephilim didn’t care for flying. It had to be some mix-up in the combination of their genetic code and their divine nature. A lovely parting gift for children who never asked to be born, yet had to suffer for the sins of their parents’ lust.

Marrin, as par for the course, couldn’t have been happier.

“Burning, rutting hell,” Del swore around the airsick bag, “I miss trains.”

“Don’t let her have a drink,” Marrin called from the cockpit.

Del glanced at Jane and shook her head. Her usual cocktail of Dramamine, Tylenol PM and a double-double gin and tonic was not appealing. That was a pre-flight ritual that wouldn’t work once she was this far gone. Her stomach clenched at the thought, but didn’t attempt to bring anything else up.

“You know,” Jane said conversationally, “being half-angels...”

Del shot her as withering a look as possible with her mouth still inches from the used airsick bag.

“Yeah, rutting irony can be pretty ironic,” she growled. She closed the top of the bag, folded it down and sealed it. “*Angel* also comes from the Latin, Greek and Persian meaning *messenger*, but we have trouble using phones, too.”

“Marrin explained,” Jane replied. “That’s why we text.”

Del nodded. She leaned out of the comfortable charter-plane seat and dropped the airsick bag into a larger sack. She looked up at the co-pilot, who was as comfortable as they could make him with the handcuffs secured to the arms of his chair. She was glad the threat of violence alone had convinced him to cooperate.

The commercial flight from Detroit to Reno had been mercifully without incident and almost completely placid. Marrin had helped get Jane’s handgun, an older M-43 Firestar, through security so nothing had to be checked. Del liked the 9mm. weapon. It was perfectly appropriate for Jane’s smaller hands and mortal strength. Nephilim could get away with larger handguns and take advantage of their increased stopping power. Mortal women were at a disadvantage, as most guns were made with a strictly male clientele in mind.

But the older Firestar was originally meant as a backup weapon. It was compact, reliable, and had a slim profile that made it perfect for concealed carry.

Del had the impression the weapon carried some sentimental significance for Jane—a modern handgun with composite materials would be lighter than the solid-steel Firestar. But she wasn’t up to sustained conversation at the moment, and didn’t feel they were close enough yet to broach the subject.

Jane had carried herself well. It helped that she’d had military training. The pilots and the single flight attendant hadn’t expected any trouble with their three passengers. Marrin took point, with Jane right behind him clearing the door and the opposite direction down the passenger cabin in case there were some additional surprises they couldn’t see. Del brought up the rear, and kept their backs safe. Taking the plane had been a matter of moments, with Marrin using his Voice to persuade the crew with careful instructions. This included a very softly worded suggestion regarding any attempts to squawk, even momentarily, the hijacking code.

To the casual or ignorant terrorist, adjusting the transponder was one more set of random dials and numbers amid a confusing array. This was exactly why setting the transponder to 7500 would immediately tell everyone the plane had been hijacked. Marrin’s Voice provided plenty of reassurance that all was well, and the guns were only for show.

It was a perfect sweep and clean. The flight attendant had been left to cool her heels on the tarmac, while Marrin took the co-pilot’s seat and kept his Mateba carefully pointed at the pilot, finger on the trigger guard.

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions about Marrin?” Jane said.

Del turned her head to peer at the other woman. “I’m not really in a position—”

“Sorry, I get chatty when I get nervous,” Jane replied. “Did you ever watch *Scrubs*? Marrin and I have been streaming it. Great show. I’m not exactly Elliot Reed, ya know, for obvious reasons of skin color, race, not being a doctor—but I do tend to talk when I get nervous. Something about filling all that space.”

Del’s stomach clenched. She held up a hand and took a couple slow, deep breaths. Jane remained silent, and the nausea faded. Del leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

“I haven’t really known Marrin all that long,” she told Jane.

“Okay, but...well, you know him better than anyone else I can talk to,” Jane replied. “And, well—”

“Doesn’t this break some kind of Bechdel rule or something?” Del asked. “I heard Marrin going off about how women shouldn’t talk about a man?”

“We’re not lesbians going to a movie,” Jane said. “Or at least I’m not. It’s cool if you are.”

Del shrugged. “Nothing against them. I think everyone should have a lesbian friend or two.”

“So, Marrin...?”

Del shook her head slowly, rubbing the back of it against the very soft leather of the seat. She was keenly aware that any quick motion could push her into another bout of vomiting.

“Here’s what I can tell you that you probably already know but need a second opinion to verify,” she said. “Marrin is sweet, he’s loyal to a fault, he’s rarely in trouble, and he’ll have your back if you ask him.”

“What about the whole...angel thing?”

“What about it?”

“He’s different from you, yes?”

“Fundamentally, no,” Del replied. “Except that he likes flying and stupid cartoons, we have mostly the same strengths and weaknesses of our people.”

“Higher tolerances for heat and cold,” Jane listed, “greater stamina and strength. Near immortality.”

Her voice shifted with the last words. Del opened her eyes and looked at the other woman. She peered into Jane’s deep-brown irises, holding the other woman’s gaze. She didn’t blink or say anything for several long moments while the plane remained relatively level.

“That’s right,” she said slowly. Her voice sounded thin and tired in her ears. “We’re as immortal as you can get without being a member of the Choirs. We can die of violence, but barring that, age and disease have no effect. I’m one of the oldest, as far as these things are measured, and you can see I’d pass for a mortal in her late twenties. And that, Ms. Jane, is the crux of the problem for Nephilim.”

She paused when the plane made a little diving motion and closed her eyes until it settled.

“We’re better, in almost every way, than you mortals,” she went on. “That’s not a brag. Just fact. You may have a nicer chest and better ass than I do, but beyond the aesthetic, we’re better. The Throne didn’t count on us, and yet we showed up. I’m guessing you know the impact we can have with the divine gifts our parents passed to us while they were screwing their brains out. I’m also guessing Marrin told you how our cousins became heroes, warlords, villains and tyrants. When they’d wreaked enough havoc, when the Throne had finally seen enough blood spilled, it was everyone out of the pool. Either we served, or we died. Some of us served and died. But the choice was removed. We became assassins. Hitters for the Throne.”

She leaned forward across the aisle and placed a companionable hand on Jane’s knee. If the movement surprised Jane, she didn’t show it. It surprised Del, but she left her hand there.

“As a side note, we weren’t allowed to have children. Not of our own biology, no matter how watered down with mortal genetics.”

“But, Marrin—”

“Marrin was born before the Throne’s interdiction.” She gave Jane a wry smile. “He’s also unique. Both his parents were Nephilim. He was grandfathered in.”

Del leaned back in her chair and placed her arms on the rests. She kept from squeezing as hard as she wanted. Jane’s face was unreadable as the information soaked in.

“The point is,” Del said, “if you have any illusions about children and Marrin, lose them now. You can have children, or you can have Marrin. But you can’t have Marrin’s children.”

“Never?” Jane asked, her voice resigned.

“Not in your lifetime,” Del replied. “They’ll kill Marrin. They’ll kill the child. If you’re lucky, they’ll kill you, too.”

She held Jane’s gaze with her own. A tear ran down her cheek and plopped from the line of her jaw onto her jacket. Jane’s own eyes welled in response. She sniffed and batted at her nose with the back of her hand.

“Do you really think I have a nice ass?” Jane asked.

It took Del a few moments to put the question into context. She gave Jane a soft smile and nodded.

“As far as such things go,” she said.

“I’m honestly jealous of your breasts,” Jane replied. “Mine tend to get in the way, and since I lack that whole forever-young option, they’re going to sag.”

“There’s always some nip-tuck.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Jane said. She arched her chest forward and pushed her fists into her back to stretch. “Sometimes they’re so... heavy.”

“And useless,” Del added.

“But men are obsessed.”

“So, *we’re* obsessed,” Del said with a sigh. “Or maybe we’re obsessed and so they’re obsessed?”

She had a sudden urge to take off the combat bra she was wearing and replace it with a tasteful set of matching underwear. Something in soft pastels, perhaps with a floral pattern. For some women it might have been social integration, or vanity. For Del it was pure genetics.

She shook her head to try to clear the thought.

“Marrin doesn’t seem to care one way or the other,” Jane said.

It was a little more information than Del actually wanted, but Jane was sharing, so she nodded in agreement.

“Marrin is...” She let her thought trail off as she searched for a word.

“Unique?” Jane supplied.

“Unique,” Del agreed. “Fabulously, annoyingly unique.”

Her stomach suddenly lifted up into her throat as the plane angled down.

“We’re fifteen minutes out,” Marrin said from the cockpit. “Tell me you’re ready to go.”

“Damn,” Del said. They were supposed to have changed into their bail-out gear.

“Almost,” Jane yelled back.

The plane dipped again. Del grabbed the armrest. It creaked, groaned, and came free in her hand. She gasped, eyes wide with sudden panic. She grabbed hard with her other hand, flailing with the armrest as if she were in freefall. Jane grabbed her arm in both her hands, mumbling calmly.

“Hurry up,” Marrin called. “I don’t want to leave most of my favorite skin smeared across the landing strip.”

PLAN OF ATTACK

The drogue jump was simple. At altitude, they'd have had a dozen issues to contend with, but this was a touch-and-go cargo drop. Each of them would throw a drogue parachute out the open door and let physics do the rest. If everything went right, they'd be pulled out the door to a gentle landing on their feet.

The only difference was, cargo was packed tightly in strong containers meant to roll around, if necessary. They had bones that could break and internal organs that would go squish when bounced off the asphalt of the landing strip.

In Del's experience, plans never went right—even the simple ones.

The military used these kinds of drops all the time. It allowed the transfer of strategic supplies without worry they'd be blown off-course, seized by an enemy, lost in a river, or destroyed on impact with a random tree. A good insertion could even drop a fully-manned armored vehicle into an enemy zone. It would kick up Hell's own dust storm, but such a sudden, aggressive attack was impressively scary no matter where you were sitting.

Except the military used a rear-hatch cargo plane, and their little charter flight didn't have one. They had to use the side door, right behind the wing and the propeller, in its emergency mode, completely removed from the fuselage. They had a good chance, but there was plenty that could still go wrong.

"Jane," Del said.

She hesitated when the other woman looked at her. Took a deep breath. They were dressed in jumpsuits, with helmets, elbow and kneepads. She was holding the carefully folded length of her drogue parachute in her lap. There wasn't enough time for the chutes to release and

catch the wind. Each of them would have to toss their chute out the open hatchway in turn and hope for the best.

Now, Del looked at Jane, steadied herself where they sat at the back of the plane near the closed hatch, and tried again.

"I'm not really good at this," she said. "I'm...I have a hard time connecting with people. Even my own people, but especially mortals. Your lives are...I'm different from you, so it's hard to relate. You're so fragile, and you're a part of time in a way I don't experience. My life has always been apart from you."

Jane narrowed her eyes, and her forehead crinkled in confusion. Del shook her own head.

"I'm not good with words," she said.

"You're good with the shooting," Jane replied, and gave her a wry smile. "So, shoot. What's on your mind?"

"This is dangerous," Del said. "This is beyond dangerous—dangerous for mortals who know what they're doing and have experience doing it. It's even dangerous for Marrin and I. A broken neck, and *we're* as dead as Great Caesar's Ghost. But anything less than lethal, and we'll survive, recover, and never know the difference."

Her left wrist ached dully with remembered injury. She resisted the urge to rub at the break. It was phantom pain—the break had healed completely—but it reminded her of the difference. Her wrist should have been broken and remained useless. It should have cost her everything.

"I have reasons for doing this, Del," Jane told her, and shot a meaningful glance toward the cockpit. Del looked in the same direction and saw Marrin, Mateba still in hand, chatting amiably with the two pilots.

He'd used his Voice, a variation of what Ahadiel and his fellow angels could do, to convince the men that everything was okay, that no one was going to get hurt, that they only needed to "borrow" the plane and take it a little off-course. Marrin's Voice, and his natural, good-natured charisma, had been more than convincing. Both pilots now occupied their proper seats, and the co-pilot, whom they'd earlier handcuffed to a chair, laughed like Marrin was his long-lost BFF.

It wasn't that Marrin could make friends during a hijacking. His Voice was one of his genetic gifts. Del could kill people really well, better than most. Marrin's combination of good looks, natural charisma, and his Voice from the Throne, passed through from at least one of his parents, meant that, given enough time, he could sell veggie burger subscriptions to a Hell's Angels biker club. Not one of the more reasonable Hell's Angels clubs, either.

Del turned back to Jane. “I understand that—”

“It’s about more than impressing a cute guy,” Jane said. “Although he’s damn fine, and sets the bar an order of magnitude higher than most other men. But even if Marrin wasn’t such a fine kisser, and even if I didn’t have orders from Joshua, I’d still do this.”

“Joshua wants you to help us?”

Jane shook her head. “He wants to know about the Nevada Ljosalfar and why they’re kidnapping children. Maybe it’s you specifically, or maybe this is something larger. They’re close enough to our sphere that he wants boots on the ground.”

Del frowned.

“It doesn’t hurt that we may end up owing him,” she said.

Jane shook her head again. “Exactly why I didn’t tell you. This is pro bono. Joshua didn’t have to give me orders. I told him I was going.”

“But this is more than putting boots on the ground,” Del continued to argue. “You could hit the plane’s rear stabilizers, or your line could get tangled. That happens, and you’re going on a very exciting and very short ride to your own memorial service. That’s if we find your corpse in the desert before the coyotes get to it. You could as easily stay on the plane. Walk down the stairs with the pilots to Elko, and drive in. We’ll try to not have any fun until you get here, and Marrin won’t hate you for it.”

Jane’s look said everything. Del had lost already.

She wanted Jane’s help. She needed it. Getting her daughter back was the priority, and the more guns she had at her disposal, the easier it was going to be. She’d have taken a Marine Recon Force to Battle Mountain if she’d had the pull. A host of Nephilim or angels wouldn’t have been overkill to Del. Lay waste to the town and sow the ground with salt so nothing grew there for a thousand years was her first instinct.

Jane was trained and better than competent with firearms in a tactical situation. She was loyal, at least to Marrin. Perhaps she loved him, or perhaps she mistook the lust for something deeper and more lasting. Mortals did it all the time. Some of their best stories were based on the confusion of the two emotions.

The difference didn’t matter to Del. She was using the woman as she’d used others in the past. That this time it was for a noble reason didn’t make the guilt sting less. But Del could deal with guilt. Her daughter was in danger, and Jane had told her she didn’t mind being used.

“Time to go,” Marrin said as he walked calmly down the cabin aisle. He held his own drogoue parachute pack in his arms. An oversized duf-

fle, twice the size of the packs she and Jane carried, was strapped to his back. “Arch and Rick will hold the plane as steady and as slow as they can. They’ll give us as much runway as this mud-puddle offers, and the rest is up to us. We get one shot at this. More than that, and someone is going to wonder why these flyboys are buzzing the town so early in the morning.”

He looked from Del to Jane and back again.

“Did I miss something?”

“Arch and Rick?” Del asked.

“Yes?” Marrin replied. His tone questioned Del’s intelligence and sanity in a single syllable.

“I think she’s surprised you’re on a first-name basis with men we held at gunpoint and forced to violate a half-dozen FAA laws,” Jane supplied.

Marrin shrugged. “These guys are nice. They’re only flying for a friend of a friend. Rick is actually an ER doc, and Arch is the principal at a junior high. They do weekend jobs for a little getaway adventure. This time they got more than they bargained for. They aren’t black hats.”

Both Jane and Del gave him the same flat look.

“What?” he protested. “I’m friendly. You should try it some time. What’s the jump order?”

Del shook her head with a heavy sigh and looked at Jane. The other woman nodded.

“Jane first,” Del said. “You second, and I’ll bring up the rear.”

“There’s a joke in that,” Marrin said with a wide grin.

“Go ahead and make it,” Del growled her reply.

Marrin thought for a moment and nodded. “The order works. Let the twitchy one go last.”

“Yeah, you’re friendly, all right,” Del said.

Marrin stuck out his tongue at her.

“Save it for the hotel,” Jane told him with a wink.

Del caught motion from the cockpit. The thin pilot was making his way down the aisle. He used the backs of the seats to steady himself as he approached them. His thin face was very serious. Her first reaction was to pull a gun and put several loud, big holes in the man. She checked herself right before Marrin put a firm hand on her shoulder. The pilot didn’t notice the danger.

He’s not a threat, she told herself. He’s not a threat. Marrin already told you that.

“Heh.” He chuckled to himself. “You folks ready for this slice of insanity?”

“You bet, Rick,” Marrin replied. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a gangster roll of twenties wrapped with a rubber band. He tossed it to the thin pilot, who caught the money out of the air and nodded seriously at him.

“No need for this,” Rick said, and made to toss the roll back.

Marrin held up his hand.

“We’ve caused you some potential trouble,” he said, “and we’re about to damage the door of this plane permanently.”

“True, true,” Rick replied. “It’s also going to make it hell to fly, especially in this weather. So, thanks for that, too.” He pushed the roll into his pocket, and patted it. “Heh. It’s not enough, you know, but, hey, the story is good.”

“Did you come back here for anything else,” Del asked, “or just to complain?”

“Complain? Who’s complaining?” Rick asked. “It’s not like I have a wife and children back home. A crippled wife and two growing, starving boys who fish pennies out of the gutter to help pay for the rags we wear.”

“You can still get out right—”

“Rick, you have something for us?” Marrin cut Del off before she could finish the threat.

“Yeah, right. It’s raining pretty hard. Good storm going. Lots of lightning. It seems the gods of flight favor your jump. I know you’re pressed for time, but these are the worst conditions for this kind of thing. I was a loadmaster on a C-Seventeen, and I’m telling you—even on a cargo run with no lives on the line, we still would think twice about this kind of drop. Copy?”

“Five by five,” Marrin replied. “But the LT says jump...” He jerked a thumb toward Del. “...and we grunts just say how high.”

“Roger that,” Rick replied. “You’ve got five minutes right now. Once you pull the door, you won’t be able to hear anything. So, when I call one minute, I mean one minute. As in sixty seconds and you better hit the silk. Arch will flick the interior lights when it’s time. That’s the best we can do. The three of you can get out if you go every two seconds. One-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, jump. The runway isn’t long enough for more than that. Got it?”

“Roger that,” Marrin repeated.

Rick’s eyes crinkled as he grinned at the three hijackers. “If any of you get hurt or die, yell really loud. We’ll be right back around to pick you up.”

“Sounds good,” Marrin said and laughed.

Rick laughed again and turned away from them. He bobbed back up the aisle to the cockpit and sat down in his seat. The plane’s engines started to whine, and they angled downward for their decent.

“What was all that?” Del asked. “You didn’t serve in the military.”

Marrin made a shocked face at her. “I, ma’am, am a patriot and a veteran. I most assuredly have served king and country.”

Del shook her head, and was glad to focus on something other than how her stomach was trying to rise up through her throat.

“Not a modern military,” she replied. “Not in this country and not in the last...hundred years.”

“Formally, no,” Marrin agreed. “I did some work in Norway and Finland in the forties. But a soldier is a soldier. Band of brothers, and all that. The uniforms may change, the weapons update, but it’s still a grunt’s work to do and die.”

“Fair enough,” Del nodded. She preferred to work alone as a matter of practice, but she’d stood with the rank-and-file and held the line when it mattered. She understood the sentiment Marrin conveyed.

“We’re all one big happy family.”

“One minute to jump,” Rick yelled from the cockpit.

Jane tugged the straps on her helmet one last time, grabbed the handles on the hatch, pulled and jerked the door open. Immediately, the wind whipped into the cabin of the plane. A perfectly-timed round of lightning illuminated the otherwise pitch-black ground and made it appear to be rushing past at an impossible rate. Del could barely make out the shiny black tarmac where the plane should normally be setting down.

Jane lifted the hatch from its hinges and passed it with some effort to Marrin. The big Nephilim took the forty pounds of dead weight from her with one hand like an empty carton of milk and set it on the floor between two rows of seats. The plane’s engines, coupled with the wind and the pelting storm, made talking impossible.

Fear gripped Del’s throat and froze her arms and legs. Claws of pain and death pulled at her chest as she looked into the dark hole left by the missing hatch. She tried to breathe, but could only manage a small gasp. It was painful to draw air into her lungs while thinking about going in, through, and to whatever waited beyond that black hole in the side of the plane.

The lights in the plane flicked on-off, on-off. It was time to jump.

Jordan, she told herself, and steeled her body against the fear. *This is for Jordan. This is for my daughter.*

The fear remained, but it withdrew enough she could breathe. She blinked, and Jane threw her drogue parachute out the door and was pulled into the darkness.

For Jordan, she told herself. She made herself stare out into the dark maw of the night. *For Jordan*.

Marrin grabbed Del's shoulder and gave it one long, hard squeeze. With his grip, he could have crushed her collarbone, but he was trying to pass strength to her. A moment later, he let go, knocked on her helmet and moved to the hatchway.

He casually tossed his chute out into the darkness as lightning split the night. He grinned back at her and gave her a thumb's-up and was pulled out the hatch.

For Jordan, she repeated. She could feel the ghost of Marrin's fingers pressed against her. She forced her legs to move forward toward the hatch. It was only two steps, but it seemed like a marathon's-worth of effort.

One Mississippi, she thought.

She pushed herself the rest of the way, and got ready to toss her chute. Thunder crashed, loud and close enough she felt it in her chest. In her mind the plane rocked from the impact with the sound. She might have screamed, but over the storm, the wind, and the plane's engines she couldn't have heard a Howitzer going off next to her ear.

Two Mississippi.

Burning, rutting hell, this is where I die broken and spitting teeth!

She shoved her drogue parachute out into the darkness, stared at the black for a moment, and felt the tug on her harness. The wind opened her chute, pulled the lines that ran to her harness and jerked her fast and hard. Del spun halfway around, and her shoulder slammed against the hatchway. Her feet were pulled out from under her, and she swooshed through the air and into sudden darkness.

She screamed.

She couldn't hear herself, but she knew she was screaming because she was out of breath and her throat ached. Her hands, coiled in the straps across her chest, cramped with effort as she squeezed them. Rain and cold covered her exposed face and hands as she came out of the plane.

The engines took on a new roar, growing louder and distant as the Doppler effect kicked in and Rick and Arch made their ascent once more into the night, back on course toward Elko, Nevada. A pulsing red-blue light strobed the area, but only cut the darkness sporadically.

Wind and rain thrashed around her. They beat at her face while the drogue parachute pulled her and the storm raged around her. In the darkness, she had no sense of direction. Vertigo made her stomach churn. She vomited. Most of it splashed down her jumpsuit. She flailed and kicked her feet uselessly.

Lightning cracked the sky open and let her see the ground rushing past her at an alarming rate for a few moments. She was somewhere between ten and a hundred feet in the air with no way to be certain of the distance.

Burning, rutting, burning, rutting, she swore.

Thunder boomed impossibly loud, an explosion that rattled her teeth. The drogue parachute should have put her on the ground almost immediately, but the wind of the storm pulled her backward and kept her airborne. The blue-and-red strobe made it clear she had left the air-strip and was flying over the mud and scrub of the high-plains desert.

Sagebrush and cheek grass reached out to claw at Del's boots and the fabric of her jumpsuit. A long cacophony of sheet lightning showed impossibly tall and thick branches that looked strong enough to break bones at the speed she travelled.

"Burning, rutting Hell," she yelled.

She lifted her knees up to her chest to avoid the first wave of sagebrush. The drogue parachute was only meant to slow her down, arrest her fall, and keep her from dying horribly mangled. It had been the unlucky conjunction of the storm winds with the jump from the plane that had put her in the air at all.

Rain lashed at her face, thrummed against her helmet, and soaked her to the skin. A branch scraped her back. She craned her neck to look over her shoulder, but the landscape was unending dark. No lightning struck to let her see the ground. More branches slapped at her feet and legs.

Spitting blood and teeth, she thought. *That's how I'll die.*

A sage bush grabbed her thigh and spun her, breaking with her weight. The parachute caught on something, and she impacted with the ground hard enough the air whooshed from her lungs. Bright spots filled and swallowed her vision until all she could see was whiteness where the dark night and storm had been.

The wind caught the parachute, lifted her for a moment, and slammed her back down. Her shoulder hit the ground, and she found herself being dragged through the mud, over cheek grass and through sharp grease-wood that tore through her flimsy clothes and into her skin. She gasped, but could only draw a shallow breath of air.

She slapped at the chute release several times, but the mechanism refused to open.

Bloody hell, cut the lines, she told herself. She made herself let go of the harness and fumbled at the zipper pockets on her chest.

“Del!” Marrin called over the storm, his voice distant. “Cut the lines!”

Wish I’d thought of that.

She tried to breathe, and managed to draw air in deeper. The pain in her chest subsided some, but didn’t let go. Her finger cramped painfully from the crushing grip she’d maintained from the moment she left the relative safety of the plane.

Another gust of wind tugged the parachute, and Del was scraped along the mud and brush again. With numb fingers, she finally grasped the pull on her zipper, tore it open, and ripped it from the fabric of the jumpsuit. The folded knife tumbled from the hole she’d made in her haste, but her free hand lashed up and caught it. Lightning cut jagged lines across the blackness, and thunder crashed a moment later.

Del fought the blade open and sawed at the lines that held her to the parachute. The wind tried to take hold of her one last time, but she spun where she sat in the slick mud, dug her feet into the thick, waterlogged limbs of a sage, and braced herself against the storm. Her strength was a match and more for the wind, and she grabbed the lines with her right hand and slashed with her left, severing the parachute from her harness. The sudden release of tension sent her tumbling backward into the water and muck.

“Del?” Marrin called.

“Del?” Jane echoed, some distance from him.

Del lay on the ground and let the rain and the wind wash over her. She drank the air into her abused lungs, and let the effort and tension from the last few minutes flow out of her.

“I’m here,” she said weakly. The words barely carried to her own ears. She took a deep breath, licked her lips, and tried again. “Here,” she yelled, “I’m here!”

A few moments later and Marrin’s grinning face appeared, soaked with rain and dripping water down onto her.

“What a ride,” he said with a laugh. “The Throne has smiled on us this day! Anything broken? You look fine. Are you hurt?”

It was hard to tell if he was concerned, with the sheer joy that suffused his perfect, Nordic features. Even with the rain dripping through his blond hair, he managed to make bedraggled look good. His jumpsuit clung to him like a second skin, sculpted to the muscles of his chest and

stomach in a way that made her want to reach out and see if they were real. She knew, in part, why Jane had fallen for Marrin, and she could hardly blame the mortal woman.

“Are you hurt?” he repeated.

Del felt exactly like she thought she looked—dragged through the mud by a desert storm.

“Only my pride,” she told him.

Marrin threw his head back and laughed like some kind of ancient god.

“Stop it,” Del ordered.

He shook his head like a wet dog, sending hair and droplets of water flying in all directions.

“Well, then,” he replied, and held out a hand to her.

She looked at the mud and muck that covered her arms, legs and body, mentally shrugged and reached out with her free hand. The big Nephilim pulled her easily up off the ground and set her back down on her feet with a squish in the mud.

“Welcome to Battle Mountain,” he called over the storm.

Lightning punctuated the greeting with horror-film poignancy, sheeting across the black sky with thunder following a moment later.

“I hate it,” Del told him. “I hate it, and I hate you.”

Marrin laughed again and slapped a heavy hand against her muddy back. She was forced to take a squishing step forward. Jane appeared through the dark and the rain, looking as spectacular in weather as Marrin. Her long, honey-brown twists weren’t at all affected by the storm, and she looked magnificent with the sheen of water on her dark skin.

The storm god and his goddess made the perfect couple.

“I hate you too,” Del told her, and stalked toward the airfield.



“Thank the Throne,” Del said as she stared into the nondescript doorway she had opened. “They have a shower.”

“A shower?” Jane called, her enthusiasm obvious.

“Finders keepers,” Del said. She stepped into the small bathroom, shut and locked the door behind her.

She immediately stripped off the ruined jumpsuit. She scraped the mud off her boots as best she could with the light fabric before she deposited the mess in the undersized wastebasket. The hot water turned on with a squeal of protest, and the pipes shuddered to life with a groan, but sprayed mostly clear water.

“Del,” Marrin said through the door, “I think we’ve got wheels. Also, there’s a line out here.”

“I’m not on vacation,” Del told him.

She stepped into the too-hot stream and let it course over her body, washing away the cold and stinging her skin at the same time. She closed her eyes and let the frantic pace of the last six hours fade for a moment in the cascade of stolen water. She cleared her mind of all thoughts except the sensation of the shower, her feet pressed against the cheap fiberglass, and the slightly dank smell of the poorly ventilated bathroom.

As Del stood in the shower, she could hear the wind of the storm outside, and the occasional rumble of thunder echo in the small space. She couldn’t tell if it was getting worse or moving past the little desert town.

Normally, she liked the rain, provided she was inside with a decent fire. The dark moodiness of a storm suited her own personality quite well. But the last storm that had come through Detroit had scared Jordan right into Del’s bed, and no amount of coaxing could get the little girl to leave.

Being a mother wasn’t all sweetness and light. Jordan was both a joy and a terror, and not always in equal measures. Del had learned patience, slowly, painfully, over the past months, when the little girl had alternately decided to test boundaries, or believed she really didn’t have a home with the Nephilim. It became a matter of setting restrictions while reinforcing that Jordan was safe, was loved, and was cared for.

Del clenched her teeth and made a fist.

“Safe,” she said. She pounded the side of the shower with her fist hard enough the cheap plastic cracked.

Del was Nephilim, one of the first and now one of the last. That made her one of the strongest. She was a survivor, genetically adept with any weapon the mortals could come up with. She’d been alive for millennia, seen the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires and whole peoples. Jordan should have been safe with her. Of all the places, of all the people on the whole of the Earth, the little girl should have been most safe with a half-angel who could rip through walls and bulls-eye rogue demons.

Instead, it seemed she’d put a target on the child’s back and set up a glowing “Kidnap Me!” blinking neon sign.

There had to be a better way.

Del opened her eyes, turned off the water, and stepped out onto the cold, cheap linoleum. Wisps of steam trailed off her body and dis-

appeared into the air. She dug into her backpack, pulled out a set of black BDUs and dressed quickly. She checked that her weapons were in place and pulled on a denim jacket. Satisfied, she grabbed her still-muddy boots and opened the door.

“That was fast,” Marrin said.

“Jordan is waiting,” Del replied. “Where’s our transportation?”



The Bronco wasn’t much. A late ’80s four-wheel drive with a lot of special “modifications” for use on the airfield, including only one working windshield wiper on the driver’s side. It didn’t have to be much, though. The GPS on Jane’s phone said it was 6.4 miles from the airport to the center of Battle Mountain. They rumbled down into the dark, little town to its main drag, appropriately named Front Street. A giant, glowing Shell gas sign welcomed them, its yellow light cutting through the night, except the light on the “S” was burned out so that it read “HELL”.

“Seriously?” Del asked no one.

“Where to?” Marrin replied as he navigated the semi-flooded streets, potholes, and mud.

“Don’t stop,” Del told him. “Go on through. Let’s see what we can see first. Get a lay of the land.”

They passed a few cars going in the opposite direction, headlights muted by the rain and dark of the storm, but there was nothing like traffic. Every store they passed was closed until they came to a block dominated by a brightly lit combination restaurant and casino—The Nevada Hotel Fun & Food—was doing a brisk trade. Every parking space in front of the single-story building and across the street was filled. People stood outside the entrance, clinging to the side of the building where the eaves and overhang provided some protection from the rain, as if they were waiting to get into Studio 54. Del checked the digital clock on the truck’s radio. It read 3:10 A.M.

“That seem strange to anyone else for a weekday?” Jane noted.

“Yeah,” Del said. “Keep going.”

Battle Mountain boasted a single stoplight where Front Street made a T with Broad Street. Due to the storm, the light had defaulted to blinking red in all directions. They continued through and passed a defunct grocery and a deserted motor inn called The Uptown. The entire town felt like it was on the brink of collapse, as if one good, economic crisis would end it all and everyone would close shop without bothering to board up the windows or even lock the doors.

“Pull in there,” Del said.

Marrin slowed and turned into the last hotel along the roadway, another motor inn called The Big Chief. He stopped under the portico in front of the office, turned off the lights, but left the motor running.

“What’s the play?”

“Base of operations,” Del said. “We have about two or three more hours before we’re supposed to arrive. Jane, you’re on transportation.”

She reached into a zipper pocket of her pack, pulled out a small plastic bag of cash, mostly hundred-dollar bills. She passed it to Jane.

“Ditch this truck somewhere it won’t attract attention. In a town like this, a vehicle stolen and recovered probably won’t elicit much excitement. Get us something similar, though—SUV, four-wheel drive, reliable. After that, I don’t care what it looks like. Except pink. Do not get it in pink.”

“Sure,” Jane said. “I take it I’m also being ditched?”

“You are,” Del said, “but it’s not personal. You’re serving as backup.”

“That means we’re taking point?” Marrin asked.

“Right again,” Del replied. “You saw this town. Their main street isn’t exactly Grand Central Station. It’s mostly struggling, failing, or abandoned businesses except that casino and restaurant we passed. It doesn’t strike me odd that it’s succeeding. It strikes me odd that it’s packed to capacity during a heavy downpour on a weekday at three in the morning when everything but the sidewalks have been rolled up.”

“You’re sure you don’t want one more set of eyes on this?” Jane asked.

“Marrin is the extra set of eyes,” Del replied. “You’re in case we both miss something. Two hours. No more and no less. After that, you kick down all the doors and come get us out. I mean that. I don’t want to be tied up in a back room with my wrists all chaffed up because you decided to give us a little extra time.”

“Or a bullet in your head,” Jane supplied.

“Or that,” Del agreed.

Jane looked at her watch. “Two hours,” she said. “Let’s get to work.”