



# DESTINATIONS

*Lyndi Alexander*



**The Color Of Fear 2**

# DESTINATIONS

**LYNDI ALEXANDER**

*ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS*

2013

*AUSTIN TX*

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.

DESTINATIONS

© 2014 by Barbara Mountjoy

ISBN 978-1-61271-264-2

Cover art and 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 colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX. Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Alexander, Lyndi, 1956-

Destinations / Lyndi Alexander.

pages cm. -- (The color of fear ; book 2)

ISBN 978-1-61271-264-2 (print/trade pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-61271-265-9 (electronic) -- ISBN 978-1-61271-266-6 (electronic/epub)

I. Title.

PZ7.A37753Des 2014

[Fic]--dc23

2014019568

*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.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With thanks to my Pennwriters critique group, who listened to many versions of this story as it evolved, especially the Fellowship of the Quill folks, Kathy, Kevin, Christy, Todd, Amy, Terry, Lynda and more, and especially Dave Szymanowski, whose brainstorming helped crystallize our journey from West to East.

Thank you to my family, who always encourage me to keep writing and sharing the stories that keep me awake at night.

A special thanks to the cast of the movie version of *Rent*, whose soundtrack I listened to so many times while writing this story that the music will appear in my mind when I read certain passages. You were truly inspirational.

Thanks to my Internet “family” who always came up with great suggestions when I got stuck with factual issues. You may not be sitting at my table each evening, but you’re no less important to me, with all your love and support. This means you, too, Kellie.

Also special thanks to Jonah Foxman and Stacy Garrett, who helped shape and forge The Splendid Expedition of Eddie Garrick, Esquire, Eddie’s blog of his trip across the country:

<http://lyndiaalexander.wordpress.com/the-splendid-expedition-of-eddie-garrick-esquire/>

Most of all, heartfelt thanks to my editor and publisher, Liz Burton, for sharing this journey with me. This is truly the book of my heart, and she’s given me the gift of writing it, expanding it, and bringing it to a much wider audience than I could ever have imagined.

I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can  
adjust my sails to always reach my destination.

— Jimmy Dean

# CHAPTER 1

Gabriel was God's favorite angel.

Or so he liked to believe.

"He" being plain old Bernard Ellison, former ordained minister and woodworker, discarded by so many of his former associates and society. They'd laughed at him, reviled him and called him deprived.

Who was laughing now?

"Not a one of 'em," he muttered to himself.

He surveyed his current quarters, finding them lacking. The South Dakota farmhouse had been built more than a hundred years before. It creaked, its bones old and tired. Its white paint peeled and flaked away in the dusty wind like a heavy winter snow. Its chairs and thin cotton curtains smelled of mildew and mold. Dust coated the windowpanes and any surface that remained bare.

He'd been better provisioned in the survival bunker back in Great Falls, with its years' worth of food, water and supplies to feed him and the rest of his Angels. They hid in safety, waiting out the worst of the Second Holocaust that had wiped out the majority of the white men and women in the country, then the world. Waiting till the air was clean and he could breathe free again.

They'd done it, those crazy A-rab bastards. Them and the Asians that had given the terrorists the ship to bring that poison 'cross the ocean. They'd come down on these United States of America and destroyed it all.

Six months he'd waited underground, constantly monitoring the air-waves for signs of recovery. When news never came, he'd sent men out to test the situation. Once they started coming back alive, he'd decided it was safe.

Outside, he'd discovered vast tracts of Montana abandoned. He'd claimed it. Then, as he gathered more people, he moved them on through South Dakota, claiming more land.

Some “claiming” was easier than others. Several times, they’d found people of color—brown, red or yellow—on the land that had been given by God to white people. Gabriel had...persuaded...them to move along. Some went voluntarily; others became food for carrion birds.

So many towns and cities they found empty. Millions had died in the Second Holocaust. Millions. But Gabriel had survived.

He knew he’d been spared for a reason.

Pausing by the window to survey his flock at work, Gabriel was pleased. They scurried about, maintaining the trucks, sorting equipment, obedient to their orders. His orders.

*Daddy always said I wouldn’t amount to much.*

A memory of his father—worn striped overalls, his weary gray eyes—came to mind. A small farmer living north of Atlanta, Frank Ellison had borrowed and borrowed to survive the droughts, the floods, until the bank had taken the farm. His father and mother had moved to the city, where his mother cleaned rooms at the Motel 6. Daddy just sat and stared out the window, imagining those green fields that would never be his again.

“Look how much land I have now, Daddy,” Gabriel whispered. “Are you proud of me yet? I’ll make you proud. I will.”

He dropped the curtain and ran his hand along the smooth leather of the manager’s chair, set behind a huge polished wooden desk he’d found in Rapid City and hauled along as they’d moved south to Mitchell. It sure made him feel like somebody.

He was somebody, too. In a land turned to chaos, he provided a voice of reason. He had a plan, and resources. People needed someone in charge who had a plan. They wanted to follow someone who told them what to do, who gave them purpose, who made them feel safe. His flock was growing. Perhaps this group of a few hundred wasn’t an army yet, but one day soon it would be.

Then he’d be in a position to fulfill God’s plan for him.

The archangel Gabriel was God’s messenger.

He’d been called now to spread the word, not only in America but to the rest of the world, if he could. The new gospel spoke of the need for white people to take back what belonged to them. Stand up and take it. Take it back.

*Yes, Lord, hallelujah.*

The words fell into a natural rhythm, as they always did. Gabriel had that gift.

*Amen.*

Striding around his office, arms waving in exhortation, he let his sermon for the night come together, his voice slowly rising in crescendo until the windows rattled.



“There is a reason, my friends, that we have white skin. We are pure, we are the inheritors of this earth. The blacks, the Mexicans, the Asians—they are tainted, they are dirty, their skin is a mark. The mark of Cain! God colored their skin so we would know them and sweep them from our lands!

“We, my friends, have the full armor of God surrounding us, to resist the spiritual wickedness our enemies fling at us—the filthy, the foreigners, the terrorists. His armor will protect you when the government of man has failed.

“Those who oppose us will not survive. They will be hunted down and punished by the Righteousness of the Lord! Lo, though they walk the woodland paths or the open road, the Lord will smite them!

“Brothers and sisters, we stand together, cloaked in the white robes of God!”

The dust he’d stirred up in his dramatic delivery slowly sifted back to the floor, spinning in the sunbeams that peeked through the curtains. It wasn’t enough to preach to his desk or even his fancy chair. He needed a bigger pulpit.

The people in St. Louis had chosen their side, standing firmly against him, espousing the old ways, the soft, liberal path that had led the country to the slaughter grounds. They had their trumpet—that KMOX station, from which they blasted their rhetoric day and night.

He needed his own instrument. When he could reach out to like-thinkers across the nation, how much stronger would Gabriel’s Angel Army become?

The thought of armies, his own power growing, himself at a tall podium in a pulpit, looking down on the faces shining and radiant with the enlightenment of his words. He’d lead them to the Promised Land. The cleansing of the world would begin, and all those responsible for dragging it to its knees would pay with their lives.

He’d bring the United States of America back to its former glory, he and his people. Then the new republic would begin. Most Holy Reverend Gabriel, Defender of the Faith. Maybe President Gabriel. Perhaps even King Gabriel.

He thought about those pasty-faced deacons in his Minnesota church, the ones who had fired him because of some thin allegations by attention-seeking young harlots. They were likely dead or holding on to those values that said everyone was equal in the eyes of the Lord.

The thought galvanized him, and he slapped the desk with his flat hand.

“Seems like God showed us that’s not the case, right, boys? Who’s laughing now?”

## CHAPTER 2

### *I-80 East of Sacramento*

Lin Kwan obsessed for many miles after she and Valery Paz left Sacramento, sure they were being watched. Bicycling the empty open country across California exposed them to many dangers, and surely more men like those they'd met on the road awaited them. If Valery's expertise with a gun hadn't saved them both, they'd have been raped or worse.

That was bad enough. The threat in Sacramento had been even more depraved.

Those closed communes, whose powerful warlords felt entitled to capture those passing through to add to their conscripted "families"? How dare they? The Second Holocaust had destroyed so many people and their way of life. What could drive those who'd survived to such immoral choices?

In the city, threat is expected. She'd learned that fighting the gangs in Hong Kong and San Francisco, and her personal radar zeroed in on potential trouble in a matter of seconds.

In the city.

Once she and Valery had left San Francisco, headed for Cincinnati to find Kwan's father, the *zi su ye* seeds she'd carried across the ocean carefully packed in her bag, she'd been unable to relax the vigilance that had saved her life so many times.

The landscape invited her to do so as each mile brought them closer to the mountains. They filled the horizon, their peaks crowned with snow even in summer. The thought of traversing them thrilled her. Hong Kong had been crowded and noisy and closed in. Even San Francisco, post-Holocaust, was a dark place fraught with stress, peril around any corner.

Here, overwhelmed by sky, wind and open road, Kwan thought she could really breathe for the first time in months.

If she could only shake the nagging sixth sense that something terrible would stop her from doing what she'd come so far to accomplish.

She asked again, "Are you sure we should ride on the highway?"

Valery rolled her eyes.

"Girlfriend, we've been through this." She pulled up to the guardrail at the side of the road, opened her water thermos and took a long drink. "We're on bikes. Cross-country in the high desert is a real bitch. At least the interstate is paved, and it's on a beeline directly east. That's what we want, right? The fastest road east to your dad?"

Kwan conceded the point. She scanned the horizon in all directions, but nothing appeared threatening. Nothing appeared, period. Other than a few birds, there were no signs of life.

The white dome of a building shone from a nearby hilltop, its three-story height majestic in light brick and granite. The black-and-bronze clock in the clock tower had stopped at 4:50; what day was anyone's guess. Maybe as far back as the SH, more than a year before.

Stopped like so much of American life.

But Kwan couldn't just stop. Her father's long-delayed letters had begged her to bring Chinese healing herbs to him as a last hope to save what was left of humanity. The terrorist bio-attack on San Diego might have been directed at—and killed—millions of Caucasians; but as viruses tended to do, this one mutated and began attacking other races. Unless a way was found to defeat it, the disease would eventually wipe humanity from the world.

In the foothills, they arrived in the historic city of Colfax. Feeling incongruously like a carefree tourist as she walked her bike through the vacant streets, Kwan sensed the empty echo of lost hearts in the houses they passed.

Valery insisted they stop to peruse the remains of travel literature at the Chamber of Commerce, housed in a blue-green Southern Pacific train car parked on a raised wooden platform in the center of town.

"Isn't this so cute?"

Perhaps it was. Kwan couldn't see much point in reviewing the glossy tri-fold brochures. They depicted panoramas foreign to her—huge parks with mountains to climb, camping facilities, information on the scrubby high desert, verdant green valleys lower down the mountains.

At the same time, the pine-scented breeze lifted her mood.

She held out a postcard with a photo of a tree so huge cars could drive through a hole in its trunk.

"Is this real? Or Photoshopped?"

Val studied it intently.

“No, hon, they’ve got trees this big and bigger, especially out by the coast. They’ve been there for hundreds of years—they’ll outlive humanity for sure.”

Kwan marveled at the photo, wondering if she’d ever be able to travel back to see these sights. Perhaps, if her father succeeded, they’d have the chance to see everything this wide country had to offer.

“Oh, my God!” Valery squealed, staring at another brochure. “Look at this. We have so got to stay here.”

“Stay...here?” Kwan’s features tightened into a frown. “We have far to go—”

“Just for tonight, chica. I love looking at the stars, camping out with you, but my aching bum also loves sleeping in a real bed.” She handed over the advertisement.

Kwan examined the photos of the cream-colored Victorian house with the blue trim, surrounded by flower gardens. It looked magical, like a castle built to attract the seven daughters of the Jade Emperor.

Valery jabbed her finger at the picture.

“They’ve got a veranda. A real *veranda*.”

The word unfamiliar to her, Kwan deduced a veranda must be some sort of railed porch.

“It also says high tea from eleven until two. It takes three hours to make tea? Quite a long ritual.”

Val laughed. “It doesn’t take three hours. High tea was a Brit tradition. The rich used to eat meals a couple times a day, like, breakfast and dinner. About halfway through the day, the ladies would get faint from hunger and being squished by those damned corsets and so they started a tradition, more like what we’d call lunch.” She took the brochure back. “You know, they have, like, finger sandwiches—”

“Finger...sandwiches?” Kwan gasped. The thought brought flashbacks of the ocean voyage with Zhong. People had eaten many things to survive.

“They don’t put real fingers in them, silly.” She pointed out the menu. “Kind of prissy ladies’ lunch with tea, fruit, scones...that stuff.” She sighed. “Although something tells me there won’t be table service today.”

Kwan considered the pictures of the three guest rooms, two with four-poster beds and cozy teddy bear themes, the other a watercolor brush of white and pale blue with a sea motif. She hadn’t slept on such a soft mattress since before her parents had left Hong Kong. At her aunt’s, she had slept on a futon and, at the Hsus’, on a thick mat. The thought of a real bed appealed to her, too. Very much.

“The owners may have survived. We don’t have the right to invade their space.”

“Agreed. We have some money, some other things to trade. If they’re there, we can pay. If not...?” Valery shrugged. “Then it’s fair game.”

“Where is this place?”

The two studied the map on the back of the brochure and figured the bed-and-breakfast was about a half-mile farther north, off the main road. Away from the highway. The thought of a full night’s sleep out of the open certainly sounded like a wise choice. Kwan’s lips twitched in a smile as she pedaled after Valery.

They parked their bikes to the side of the house and crept up the steps, weapons easily accessible. The homeowners might have survived, locked inside for safety. Worse, someone with less than benevolent intentions could have already commandeered the space.

Valery spied through several windows along the edge of the porch then knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again, harder. Kwan heard no response—no movement, no scrambling. The building was most likely abandoned.

She walked to the end of the porch that overlooked the profusion of wildflowers, in every shade of red, yellow, blue and pink, in the side yard. She didn’t know their names, but they were beautiful. Tall spiky stalks bearing rows of star-like white flowers stood guard in the rear of the yard. Insects buzzed a low tone in the background. She inhaled sharply, taking in the assorted perfumes.

“This is amazing. It is no wonder people would come here to get away from the city.”

Valery’s eyes narrowed. “Now, just a minute, Nature Girl.” She jumped off the edge of the porch and marched back to examine the spikes more closely. “Yeah, thought so. Poison!”

Kwan raised an eyebrow. “But they’re so pretty.”

Valery laughed. “So am I, true? And I think I’m, like, at least a little dangerous.”

With a small piece of cloth from her pocket, she picked off one of the flowers, careful not to touch the petals, and brought it close to show Kwan.

“See these pale green hearts on the petals? This is a death lily. Poisonous from top to bottom, like Mata Hari.”

What was Mata Hari? Was there anything Valery didn’t know? Kwan studied the delicate white flower before the other girl tossed it aside.

“Why would they cultivate such a blossom?”

“Probably didn’t. They’re wild all through this side of the Rockies, up into Canada. My guess is this spring the yard just took off with the natural habitat, including all the things a regular gardener would take out.” With a sudden, self-mocking smile, she vaulted onto the porch. “And I thought Girl Scouts wouldn’t be any use when I grew up.”

She moved along the porch, trying each of the windows till she found one unlocked then slid it open.

“Eureka,” she said softly. “Ready?”

Kwan nodded, taking her knife from her boot. Just in case. Valery lifted one leg over the sill and went in. Kwan followed.

The sickly-sweet smell stopped them. An exchange of glances showed each that the other recognized it. It waited in the house. Death.

“Gross,” Valery said, turning a little pale.

Kwan steeled herself. In San Francisco, she’d often found dead bodies in her searches of abandoned houses. The city fathers had asked that any house where a body was located be marked with a white X on the door so crews could claim them. She didn’t know the policy in Colfax, but she hadn’t seen any such marks.

She led the way through the downstairs, the bright frilly décor almost a mockery of the grim search. The living room led to the kitchen, but no one was there. Through the kitchen were the personal quarters of the family who ran the establishment, also empty. Nothing seemed out of place. As she passed, she kicked up dust from a layer that had clearly accumulated over some time. No footprints but hers marked it.

Valery closed and locked the window they’d come through then waited by the bottom of the stairs for Kwan to finish her sweep before they went up. She shrugged at Kwan’s curious eyebrow.

“I don’t want any surprises while we’re upstairs.”

Kwan agreed. Surprises usually turned out bad.

She and Val inched up the once-polished wooden stairs. Framed pictures matted with dried flowers hung on the walls, and she focused on their composition. Anything to distract her from what she knew she was about to find.

At the top of the stairs was a hallway with five doors. Kwan took those on the right, Valery the left.

The first door opened onto the ocean room from the brochure. The tall bed held a thick mattress, stripped down awaiting guests. Small trinkets in sea colors and jars of sea glass adorned the tables, and the view out the broad window was directly into the garden. No one was there.

She moved to the next, a linen closet full of bright white sheets and downy comforters. She closed the door and continued to the last room on the right.

The room was cozy in calico and teddy bears, the bed also stripped. She stepped in, determined it was empty then stiffened at a scream from across the hall.

She found Valery frozen, staring at a pile of bodies, part-flesh, part-skeleton, lying under the window—two adults and two children macabrely

dressed in bright flannel pajamas. The bones were almost intertwined; they must have huddled together for comfort when their end came.

The stench was overwhelming. Kwan moved past her friend to open the windows, letting in fresh air.

*They must be prepared so we can bury them with honor. I can do this. I can.*

This bed still had linens, and Kwan removed the flat white sheet, trying to blank her mind the way she often had on the nightmare ship from Hong Kong. She'd survived that; she would survive this.

She laid the sheet on the floor next to the skeletons. What next? There seemed no way other than to touch them. She took a deep breath.

Valery had recovered some presence of mind, her face still pale as the sheet on the floor. She ducked into the bath and pulled a mop from the small closet. Hesitating, she finally shuddered, handing the mop to Kwan.

"I can't, chica. I just can't." She retreated to the doorway.

Kwan took the mop head in her hands, using the handle to wedge between the bones, to flip them over onto the waiting linens. When the bodies moved, something splooshed, and a cloud of flies flurried into the air with an angry buzz; both she and Valery stepped back, covering their faces. The insects milled around in a thick cloud, eventually finding their way out the window.

Armed with sheer determination and glad her stomach was empty, Kwan maneuvered the rest of the remains onto the sheet. They rattled and fell apart as they hit the floor. She used the business end of the mop to make sure most of the bits that flaked away landed on the linen wrapping. Then she tucked the mop in with them, folding the fabric into a makeshift shroud.

Valery finally moved when the bones were concealed.

"I should be stronger than that. I'm supposed to be a frelling nurses' aide. Here, let me help."

She took one end of the sheet and Kwan the other. They carried their sad burden down the stairs and out into the garden. They found a shovel in the shed behind the house, and an hour later, they had placed their hosts in the ground.

"We should say something," Valery said. Her nose scrunched with concentration, she shared some words in a language Kwan didn't understand, but they sounded like part of a ritual. Kwan added a prayer in Chinese, the same one she'd said when Zhong was laid to rest. They set some rocks and bright flowers to mark the grave.

Dusk hung on the horizon like a filmy curtain. Fortunate it was they had stopped early that afternoon, or they wouldn't have been able to inter the bodies before dark. If they were going to stay here, though, Kwan wanted to scrub the space upstairs, for safety's sake.

“We should wash. Perhaps we can find some disinfectant for the room,” she said quietly.

“I don’t want to go back in there. Talk about Technicolor yawn, mama.” Valery shook her head. “I’ll check the basement and see if there’s any way to get power or running water.”

Kwan nodded and went upstairs. The flies—and the smell—had dissipated, thanks to the open window. A yellow liquid in the bathroom, its scent vaguely citrus, made further improvement. When she’d finished, she closed the door to the hall. Two other rooms remained they could sleep in. They had done their duty by the dead.

The sound of an engine starting up, very close, following by Valery’s triumphant screech sent her flying downstairs to discover what trouble had befallen them now. She found Valery jumping up and down, her smile aching wide.

“You won’t believe this. They’ve got a generator, probably for the winters when they get snowed in! I’ve got it working—the hot water heater is plugged in.”

It took a moment for Kwan’s focus to shift from the scene upstairs to her companion’s implications.

“What?”

“Hot water. We get a bath! A real bath.”

“A bath?”

Kwan honestly couldn’t remember when she’d last soaked in a hot bath. Not since she’d left China. Her aunt hadn’t been able to afford such luxury. The Hsus had a shower, when the water worked. But nothing like this.

“Awesome, right? You want to go first?”

Kwan shook her head. She needed more of a transition between the burial and the future.

“I’ll walk outside and see the flowers.”

“Seriously?” Valery hesitated only a moment. “I won’t argue. I’ll hurry. Don’t touch anything you don’t know what it is!” Raising a scolding finger to Kwan, she grinned and went through the kitchen to the family quarters.

Letting the delicious thought of a tub full of steaming water slowly tease her mood to a positive one, Kwan walked the length of the yard several times, until she’d memorized the deepening shade of cornflower blue of the eastern sky as evening approached.

She wasn’t alone. Several rabbits burst from their burrows, racing across the yard. She even sighted a small herd of deer in the distance, as curious about her as she was about them. She’d never seen deer in the wild before. She wished they’d come closer, but they seemed satisfied to watch from the edge of the woods. The longer she listened, the more the silence filled with sound.



Birdsong floated on the breeze from every direction. Insects buzzed through the flowers, crickets sang under the porch. It was a moment immersed in the peace of nature. She let it cleanse her, as Zhong had taught.

*Zhong.*

The sudden stab of loss stole her breath. His absence was still a massive emptiness inside, as if an organ had been ripped from her. He might have begun as her martial arts teacher, but he'd been mother, father, protector and friend to a girl who'd left everything she knew behind in Hong Kong when she struck out to fulfill her father's urgent summons. In the end, his gruff exterior had cracked open to reveal a man as lonely as she was. They'd meant everything to each other.

But he'd been murdered by the gangs in San Francisco. He was gone.

Spotting the Emperor Star faintly twinkling in the north, she offered a silent prayer for Zhong, knowing he'd been a hero in his time with her, no matter what his past might have been.

She'd scarcely finished when Valery came onto the porch, wrapped in one of the largest blue terry towels Kwan had ever seen.

"Your turn. You won't believe how good this feels, babe. They've got everything in there, soap, bubbles, the works." She tossed Kwan some bath oil. "I set out some fresh towels. After you're done, we can wash our clothes and hang them out here. Not quite the Laundromat, but it'll do. Who knows when we'll find running hot water again, you know?" She grinned then whistled off to get dressed.

Still feeling like an intruder, Kwan walked through the empty rooms, but the sight of the steaming water waiting for her in the Victorian-style footed tub allowed her to set aside any guilt. She stripped off her clothes and gently let herself slide inch-by-inch into the water.

*Heaven.*

She soaked until the heat of the water began to fade then scrubbed until the stink of fear and the dirt of the road were well gone. She released her hair from the band that had kept it neat on the trip and washed it with a floral-perfumed shampoo. Afterward, she dried herself with another of the thick blue towels, feeling like a queen. She dug clean clothes from the top of her bag, sitting near the open window to brush her hair till it was smooth and dry.

When she returned to the kitchen, Valery had set out a little buffet of assorted canned goods, some Kwan had never heard of—like capers and Greek olives—prepared apple pie filling and Ritz crackers, a jar of apricot jam and dinosaur cookies, cans of tuna and salmon, along with a small jar of real mayonnaise. She'd also heated water for tea. Several kinds of tea-bags, exotic flavors like peppermint spice and raspberry, waited on the counter with sugar and two cups.

Kwan smiled. “So much food. Is this a party? For just the two of us?”

“Bathing day. Write that in your diary, chica.” Picking up a small paper plate, Valery helped herself to the delicacies. “I’m starved,” she said. “Aren’t you? Come on—bring your dinner out to the veranda.”

Kwan joined her on the wide porch, choosing a blue-cushioned wicker chair. The evening sounds combined in an orchestra fit for any swanky city restaurant. Sunset colors swirled across the western clouds in mauve and mulberry with underpinnings of gold then faded to a deep blue.

A glance across the yard at the fresh-turned earth made Kwan grateful she’d had a way to repay these benefactors from whom she was taking a night’s stay and dinner. It seemed more honest, somehow, than some of the thievery she’d done to survive back in the city.

Stars poked through the clouds as they finished, and Kwan figured it must be nine o’clock or later. The thought of a soft mattress and cushiony blankets was very enticing, maybe even a book to read.

Valery was having none of it.

“This should be like a real sleepover.” Her eyes glowed with excitement. “I’ll come in your room, or you can come in mine. We’ll eat cookies in bed and tell scary stories and stuff.”

Kwan shook her head. “We should rest for the road tomorrow.”

With a snort, Valery gathered her cup and plate and took them back inside.

“What fun is that, babe? You only live once. Most of us are on borrowed time already, right?”

They turned off the generator and the lights; then Kwan lit some candles and led the way upstairs. She chose the sea room, and Valery had the room with the teddy bears. They opened the windows, letting sweet fresh air flow in. When Kwan would have retreated to her own room, Valery insisted she come visit her.

Kwan reluctantly followed her down the hall, taking a seat on the cedar chest and watching with mild disapproval as Valery jumped on the bed. The coverlet slowly drifted to the left as the young woman sprang into the air, bouncing like a gymnast on a trampoline.

“Didn’t you ever do this? OMG, we always used to, my mom, my brother and me, when we’d go to a motel for the night.” Valery giggled and finally settled down, sitting cross-legged on the bed. She eyed Kwan. “Spoilsport.”

She sighed. “I’m not in the mood for ghost stories, not after...”

“We could sing!” Valery broke into a grin. “What’s your favorite Broadway song?”

“I don’t know Broadway songs.”

“Of course you do.” She sang the first lines from half a dozen tunes. Kwan recognized snatches of them from her time on the Internet, but none were familiar.

“For the pete of sake, Lin Kwan. Your education has been seriously neglected. I’ll teach you one.”

That soft bed calling to her, Kwan protested, but Valery simply talked right over her.

“Come on, this is an easy one from *Bye Bye Birdie*, about how a famous rock star gets drafted into the Army, like Elvis Presley? You know Elvis Presley?”

Kwan had heard the name but couldn’t put it with a face. She shook her head.

Valery grunted in disgust. “Big music star...like...”

“Michael Jackson?” Kwan suggested helpfully.

“Michael Jackson?” Valery twitched a little. “Not. But, yeah, a big star like that.” She laid on her stomach on the fluffy comforter on the bed, her stocking feet in the air. “The girls love him. So, they sing this song. It’s really easy. You have to sing with me.” She pointed a finger at Kwan. “You have to.”

She didn’t wait for agreement but started singing.

“We love you, Conrad, oh, yes, we do. We love you, Conrad, and we’ll be true...’”

“Val—”

“Anyone can sing this. Come on.”

She sang the tune again and again until Kwan surrendered, singing softly at first then finishing with the same enthusiasm Valery demonstrated. Embarrassed, Kwan hid her face behind her hands as Valery laughed and clapped, passing out cookies.

“You’ll be the next Madonna, chica.”

There was a baby’s wail from outside. Then, a male voice called, “Hello? Is someone there?”

## CHAPTER 3

*Home of Pha Hang  
Fresno, California*

Xi San took a break from his mission to reach St. Louis and stayed another day with the Hmong boy Pha Hang in Fresno. Although the boy spent most of his waking hours at the Radio Shack, he'd also set up in a house a few blocks away. He'd hooked up a generator so there was even running water, hot and cold, and intermittent refrigeration--three times the luxury San had enjoyed back in his San Francisco efficiency.

The boy's ingenuity amazed him. For a thirteen-year-old kid, Hang knew volumes about subjects San had never considered. But what San appreciated most was his knowledge of radio.

Hang had been in the seventh grade when his parents died, his sister three years younger. He and his father had been radio hobbyists since Hang could remember. Without electricity, their setup at home had been useless, and the boy had had no way to lug a generator out to the suburbs. Downtown, it had been easier to scrounge what he needed.

They shared a meal on the deck of the stucco house, listening to the evening chorus of the neighborhood birds. Hang had channeled his power into a hotplate to prepare a boxed noodle meal, adding two cans of tuna and a can of carrots. San thought the mixture smelled like a chef's specialty.

"You know how long it's been since I've had cooked food?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" The boy looked puzzled. "Everyone cooks. Don't they?"

San shook his head.

"I never used power." He shrugged. "Didn't seem worth the effort." He took a deep sniff. "Now I wish I had." He smiled at the kid and pulled two foam plates from a plastic bag on the shelf.

Dinner was oddly relaxed, a feeling he had not enjoyed since his vigilante days on the Heights. Hang was the first person since Eddie had left with whom he'd wanted to spend time one-on-one, talking and sharing.

Except maybe Lin Kwan.

He hadn't seen her after that night in his apartment, but he hadn't forgotten, either. He hoped she and the others on the Heights could survive without him. The bangers would have gotten him eventually—it was inevitable—and the residents would have had to cope without him anyway. His leaving the city had just moved the date up a week, a month... maybe a year.

But he wished he had seen her again.

"Here we are, my man, hot off the fire." Hang beamed proudly and handed a steaming plate to San. "Cop a squat." He grabbed a chair at the chipped dinette table and dug in.

San held the plate close to his nose and inhaled the aroma for several seconds before he finally joined the boy. The processed meal, together with some tomatoes he'd found on the way from Modesto, was delicious. Both ate seconds and thirds as they talked, two people who hadn't been in the company of others for some time enjoying the give-and-take of normal conversation.

"No one's found me since... since they got Pila." Hang looked away. "I've watched people pass through town; they've come in and out. Dogs got some of them."

San nodded.

"Met a couple of those." He shared his afternoon's adventure.

"They're damaged, those dogs. Never been the same since the Holocaust. Short-circuited somehow in the attention-span department. I fed them for a while till they forgot who I was. I killed two of them, one in August last year that was foaming at the mouth and limping. One about Christmas time because it wouldn't leave the store." He sighed.

"All this, not their fault. The humans may deserve to lose their former lives, but animals..." San shook his head.

"So, what was your former life?" A teasing twinkle flashed in the boy's eyes. "Before you were the Green Hornet. Or was that Kato?"

San bristled but swallowed his pride as he realized the boy was jerking his chain. *Remember humor? Seems a long time since I've used it... maybe since Eddie.*

The thought of his missing friend tugged at San's lonely heart.

"You know—the usual American dream, college for pre-med. I lived at home with my mother and father. When they died, I took care of other people instead." After a companionable silence as the crickets began their

song, San asked, “What family do you have in Minneapolis? How did they get there?”

“My father’s sister and her husband lived near here after we all came over from Laos. She followed her husband to be with others of his clan in Minnesota. Hmong were being elected into government, she said, less hatred from the community. More of us—nearly fifty thousand of our people—a real voice in our own freedom.” He smiled. “I’m anxious to see her again.”

San hesitated, not wanting to dampen the boy’s enthusiasm.

“Let’s see what we find in St. Louis before we get ahead of ourselves.”

The ham radio operator from Arizona’s warning about the militia group was still cogitating through his brain. White supremacists on the lookout for yellow, black and brown people concerned him.

Eager as a puppy out of a Christmas box, the boy gathered up the plates.

“I’ll do dishes,” he said. He tossed San a can of cool beer. “You’re cooking tomorrow.”

He ran to seal the trash in the garage so the dogs didn’t find it.

It was almost like a normal life again.



Later that evening, San arranged blankets on a chaise on the deck, now used to sleeping in the open air. The Ranger perched on the deck’s peeling wooden rail, and he turned it on, ready to listen to the voice of the woman who’d soothed him to sleep since he’d left San Francisco.

As he settled in, the boy’s voice broke into his thoughts.

“Who’s that? Regular radio? Not ham?” Hang went over to adjust the dials.

“Hey! Don’t touch that!” San moved to protect his territory.

“Chill, homeboy.” Hang grinned as the opening guitar riff from “Dust in the Wind” started to play. “Oh, man. Didn’t know real radio was still around.”

“Yeah, well, it is.”

Somewhat embarrassed by his extreme reaction, San stoically returned to his makeshift bed. The boy dragged a futon onto the deck and curled up on it. They contemplated the starry heavens in silence as the song played to its haunting conclusion.

*How true that is*, San thought. Money hadn’t saved anyone from the infectious “dust” in the air, not in the Second Holocaust. Bankers and millionaires had died side-by-side with hookers and welfare moms. He’d lived for more than a year, traveled hundreds of miles, without need for dollars or even gov-scrip.

“Dust in the Wind”...a metaphor for this whole society lost to the schemes of those seeking ultimate power.

As the song faded, the voiceover was a familiar one.

“Salutations, children of the night. This is Isis, your beacon in the darkness. We here in New St. Lou hope wherever you are, you are safe tonight, and with someone who cares. If you’re alone, remember I’m here with you, and I’ll be on till the wee hours keeping you company.

“Before we share our words across the miles, Council wants to congratulate the team at water treatment for getting the system back online. Yes, my children, New St. Lou has potable drinking water again. Nice work, guys and dolls. Another brick of civilization back in place. Can Bloomingtondale’s be far behind?”

She punctuated her jibe with a soft laugh.

San closed his eyes, wondering what she must be like. He tried to picture her in her control room, headphones on, kicked back in her seat, envisioning all those souls in the darkness across the country hanging on to her every word. He hoped once again Eddie could introduce them.

“Remember, a new shipment of food items from the depot in Cleveland arrives Wednesday for distribution to families with a blue ration card. Soulard opens again June twelfth, when government services will be extended to that area. Those wishing housing allocations in Soulard, please enter your bids at city hall.

“Local weather: temperatures tomorrow in the mid-eighties and sunny. Same for the next several days, with lows at night near sixty.”

San caught the boy’s gaze, which held an intently amused expression.

“What?”

“That’s her, isn’t it? The one you want to call? You haven’t moved a muscle since she started talking.” Hang clapped gleefully. “You’ve got the hots for her.”

“Shush.” San stiffened on his chair.

“The answer is yes. If she’s on a radio, I can get her.” The boy grinned.

“Good. Tomorrow.” San took the radio from the rail, setting it on the table next to him.

“...Susie Homemaker sends her love to her friends in the Ohio Valley and adds ‘The package arrived safely. The Southern Gentleman invites those of the high-stakes poker persuasion to a friendly regional game at the Westin Peachtree complex in Atlanta next Friday. All firearms to be checked at the door. Abilene Sam says I-Forty is clear from the east through Texas and ready for business.

“Same is not true, my children, of Interstate Ninety through and around the Dakotas, and Eighty south of that. We’ve heard from several sources

about trouble along those routes and the north-south corridors in that neck of the woods. They're well-trained survivalist types, from what we're told. Armed patrols taking some prisoners and shooting the rest dead.

"There's a heavenly bent to this bunch, my children, believing they are powered by the might of the Lord. Gabriel's Angels sound war trumpets against anyone who isn't a Christian white man. Be careful if you're coming that way. We don't want to lose our devoted listeners—few enough of them as it is."

So, they did know about the danger the ham radio operator had shared. San was a little relieved but a little disturbed as well. The route he planned to take was well south of those two interstates, but he didn't know how many men this Gabriel had, or how much territory he could control. If that trouble spread, he and Hang would have to move faster than they could on foot. Finding wheels would be the number-one priority tomorrow.

He let his mind drift back to the broadcast as Isis introduced a song "guaranteed to get you on your feet and dancing the blues away." Van Morrison started crooning his forty-year-old hit "Brown-Eyed Girl," and San's curious thought was how Morrison would get paid his royalties. He looked over, and Hang was asleep.

Settling in, he let his eyes close, the wind in the trees and the soothing words of the radio DJ his lullaby.



In the morning, the kid had cereal—fruity bits and cocoa bits topped with crunchy nuggets, drowned in milk from some sort of shelf-safe package.

"So, we gonna call her today?" he asked, smirking at San.

San ignored that, making a face at the mish-mash in the bowl.

"How can you eat that?"

"With a spoon."

Hang was clearly delighted to share his meal with someone and to take advantage of the fact his companion was not yet fully awake.

San rolled his eyes.

"Is there hot water? Or do you have tea?"

"Tea? Sure, dude."

Hang pointed to a cupboard on the far side of the kitchen and hooked up the hotplate again. Twisting the lid off a pint of bottled water, he poured the contents into a pan. The water glugged as it drained. San crossed to the cupboard, taking a look out the window and finding nothing. Inside the unpolished wooden door, he discovered several boxes of peach and kiwi herbal teas and some "antioxidant-boosted" green, if the label was accurate.



*None of this fruity madness is tea*, he thought with annoyance.

All the way in the back, he found two lone bags of Darjeeling wrapped in purple foil. He took one and closed the door as Hang handed him a cup. He put the teabag in the steaming water and took several long moments to savor the aroma.

“By the way, I probably can’t get voice-to-voice direct to Isis, but other ham operators can relay a message to the station.” Hang poured a second bowl of cereal. “You know her?”

“No. A friend of mine works at the station. He said if I’d get word to him, they’d get me messages on the road conditions, dangers ahead, so on. Like the kind Isis sends at night. I hadn’t found a way to transmit the message till now.”

“Ohh.” The boy shoved in the last two bites of cereal and drained the milk from his bowl then set the bowl in the sink. “No prob. We’ll have to go back to the store.”

“Then we should go. We also have to make better time to get east before that militia group spreads. Are there farms north of the city? Ranches where we could find a car, or maybe an all-terrain vehicle or truck? Motorcycles would get the best gas mileage.”

Hang shrugged. “Probably. My father worked for some grower out on Highway Forty-one at Bonadelle Ranchos Nine, and he had a whole fleet of stuff, if I remember. Lot of farms, little ones, but everyone’s got an SUV or a bunch of ORVs.”

“All right.” San finished his tea and went to gather his belongings. Hang had packed the night before. Fastening the Ranger radio onto the outside of his backpack to recharge the battery, he considered what message to send. Then, he went inside to wash with hot water once more. Just for the luxury.

They left dishes in the sink and slung backpacks across their shoulders, walking to the store without seeing anyone. Hang powered up the ham radio as San noted the signs of wear-and-tear on the carpet and wall and wondered how many hours the boy had hidden there, in touch with the rest of the world only through shadowy voices on the airwaves. At least he’d be able to keep those friends when he moved on.

“K-two-JJB, this is KC-five-NXS, come in.” Hang shoved a pad and a pencil at San. *Message*, he mouthed.

San sat thoughtfully on a crate, considering what to say. Better to be clear and brief than too detailed and lose the point.

He scribbled down his message and handed the pad back to the boy.

“KC-five-NXS, this is K-two-JJB, how’s your morning, son?” The same man’s voice, deep and full with a hint of country twang, greeted them.

Feeling like he was interrupting an intimate moment, San moved over to keep an eye on the front door.

“We’re good, Johnny. Getting ready to head north. But don’t worry, I’m taking the set with me, so we’ll stay in touch.”

Johnny’s voice fairly prickled with concern.

“Who’s ‘we?’ The drifter that came in yesterday?”

Hang glanced over at San with a wide grin.

“He’s not a drifter. He’s a doctor from San Francisco.” San made a face of disbelief, and the boy chuckled. “He’s got friends in St. Louis, and he’s gonna make sure I hook up with my aunt and uncle in Minneapolis.”

“I never—”

Hang shushed San with a wave.

“We’re going through Yosemite, then into Nevada and up Ninety-five. No worries at all, John. Really. He’s a good guy.”

A long silence was followed by a grudging: “Be careful, son. Can’t take people at face value, you know that.”

“I checked his driver’s license. He looks honest.” Hang made a face at San, who stood, glowering, by the door.

“You’re jerking me, boy, and I’m just trying to look out for you. Your daddy would jump out of his grave and disembowel me if I let anything happen to you! We both fought in the war, we know how bad times can get.”

John continued to rant, but Hang’s face showed he’d heard this all before—more than once, most likely, as it had the rhythm of a regular litany. He rolled his eyes at San.

“You lied to him,” San said quietly. “He has a right to be angry.”

The boy waved off the criticism and waited till he could get a word in.

“Johnny...John!” He tapped on the microphone hard till the man stopped talking. “A done deal, bro. We’re going. Now, can you send this message for me?”

After some resentful grumbling, the man agreed.

“Go ahead.”

Hang smirked and read what San had written.

“This goes to KMOX radio in St. Louis. ‘Eddie, it’s the Sandman. Got your package. Fresno north through Yosemite to Nevada, I-Seventy across to Denver, then St. Louis. Hope to hear from you.’”

Eyes twinkling with mischief, the boy added something that hadn’t been part of the original.

“Give Isis my best. Can’t wait to meet her. Sandman out.” Hang grinned and pointed at San’s outraged face, obviously pleased. “That’s it, Johnny. I’ll check in when we stop. KC-five-NXS signing off.”

Annoyed at the boy’s teasing, San stalked out into the front of the store, tripping over the display case he’d destroyed the day before. The clatter as

it scraped and bent across the floor brought a round of dogs barking outside. But the exertion released the tension.

Something heavy scraped in the back room, and Hang stepped out. He eyed San from the doorway.

“You’re mad. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Without turning to him, San nodded.

“I know. You thought you were helping. But those are private thoughts and feelings, not meant for sharing with strangers.”

“You won’t leave me here because I said that, will you?” Panic tensed the boy’s voice, and he ran to grab San’s arm. “Please, don’t leave me! I promise I won’t evereverever do that again! Please, San!”

The boy’s beseeching eyes tore at San’s heart. He sighed.

“Of course not. We’ll go. Together. Are you ready?”

Hang nodded, his chest still heaving.

“Radio’s packed. I wish we could take the gennies.”

“Not without something to carry them in.” San returned to the store-room, took a final look around. He heard the sound of something tearing, turned to the front of the store to see the boy ripping large lengths of duct tape. “What are you doing?”

“Passing on the news, bro.” Hang stuck the tape on the storefront window, spelling out *KMOX*. “Can you imagine what would happen if everyone in the country got on the same wavelength? We should do this everywhere.”

“Sure, why not?”

The kid was a real optimist. San helped put up the station numbers.

“What’s the fastest way to Route Forty-one?”



He and Hang walked the first few miles to the city limits, where they found a small motorcycle repair shop with half a dozen various Japanese brands parked inside the garage. After verifying no one remained in the building, San broke the window to gain entrance. Two of the three had keys, were in complete repair, and full gas cans sat nearby.

*At last. Perhaps luck does change.*

He chose two with the largest saddlebags, loaded what he could in them, and eyed the boy.

“Can you ride this?” He gestured to the smaller one, a Kawasaki Ninja 250.

Hang shrugged and climbed on. Even though his legs were short, the seat was low enough for him to straddle it with his feet on the ground.

“Our neighbor used to have one. You start it...” He frowned and studied the controls a minute. “Here.” He put his hands on the grips, squeezed

the clutch and stepped down hard on the starter. The motor revved up nicely. He grinned. "Guess I can."

"Good."

San did the same to the Honda Nighthawk he'd selected, and they rode out slowly, their joint technique a little shaky. By the time they reached ranch country, they were more practiced and comfortable, and they stopped only to check a few farms for gas.

With an extra five-gallon can shoved into their travel gear, the sun shining and a cloudless sky, San felt he was on his way at last.

## CHAPTER 4

*A bed and breakfast  
Colfax, California*

A chill marched up Valery's backbone. She leaned over and blew out most of the candles.

"He can't get in—I locked the door," she whispered.

"He could break the glass," Kwan said. She slid along the wall to the window, trying to peek out. A light flashed in as she crouched under the windowsill. Startled, she jumped back as Valery crawled over to join her.

A man and a woman stood under the window, illuminated in faint moonlight. They were dressed in similar flannel shirts and denim jeans, nearly black hair pulled back into ponytails. The woman held something wrapped in a blanket. The man studied the window to the room they were in, dark eyes glittering in the moonlight.

Valery leaned back against the wall, letting it support her.

"They look Native American. There's a big enclave down by the casino in Placer County." The sudden appearance of the Indians puzzled her. "What are they doing here?"

"What are we doing here?" Kwan asked quietly.

The crying spiked then faded to a whimper.

"The child is in distress," Kwan said. "We should help."

Valery tried to get a long view down the side of the house. She couldn't tell whether the couple was alone. Or if what the woman held was even an actual baby. An infant's cry was a sound anyone would react to with sympathy.

Wasn't it the perfect bait?

"What if it's an ambush? They could have twenty more guys around the corner."

“True. But they may be people who simply need help.”

Torn, Valery grabbed her gun and holster from the nightstand and went into the next room to peer out the window. She saw no one. She went to the third door, the room where they’d found the dead family, and paused with her hand on the doorknob. She couldn’t bring herself to open it.

They’d have to take their chances on that side of the house.

“Hellfire,” she muttered, and she returned to the first window, fastening on the holster. “Who’s down there?”

“Allan Pachu’a. This is my wife, Malia. P-Please, our son is sick. Do you have any milk?” The man looked up at the window, his voice choked.

“Milk?” Valery had been expecting something else entirely. A demand to come in. Some assertion that she and Kwan had no right to be there. She’d seen so many cans in the pantry, she couldn’t remember the inventory, exactly.

“Did you see milk in that cupboard?” she asked Kwan.

“I don’t remember.” The other girl’s brow furrowed. “There was...something.”

She took off, running down the steps, then disappeared into the kitchen. Valery followed her gun in hand. In the pantry, they found several cans of evaporated milk.

“Should we open the door?” Kwan asked.

Valery mulled the decision then nodded.

“If they wanted to break in, they’d just have done it by now. Maybe it’s legit.” She scouted out the glass panels on either side before opening the door. “Come in,” she said softly. “Are you sure no one followed you?”

Allan shook his head and hurried his wife up the porch steps, his arm around her shoulders. She stumbled, and he reached out to support the baby, who had stopped crying. Both of them waited while Valery relocked the door, the picture of genuine desperation.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you.”

Memories of her own loss icing the pit of her stomach, Valery tucked her pistol in her pocket.

“Come in the kitchen. We have milk. Other food, too, if you’re hungry.”

They didn’t respond; their expressions were tight and grim. The blanket-wrapped bundle in the woman’s arms didn’t make a sound, and that made Valery uneasy again. Had they been tricked?

Kwan had candles lit under a small pan.

“I diluted it with water,” she said, “but we have nothing for a baby to drink from in the cupboard.”

Allan dropped his dusty black knapsack on the counter and rummaged in it. A pistol fell out, but he didn’t seem to notice. Valery grabbed it and

set it out of his reach. He didn't seem to notice that, either, focused as he was on something in his pack.

He finally pulled out a baby's bottle and handed it to Kwan.

As Kwan washed and filled the bottle, Valery studied the pair. The man's face was drawn, hollow eyes so brown they were nearly black, leaving not much more than raw emotion. The woman had no expression at all, her features numb.

Hand trembling, he took the bottle and handed it to the woman, nudging her several times before she took her attention from the silent child. She gently pulled the blue blanket back to reveal a tiny pale face with closed eyes. The baby didn't move when she set the nipple to its lips.

*That is not a good sign.*

Valery glanced at Kwan, whose expression was solemn. It wasn't fair, after all the moments of joy the two young women had shared so far that day, to end it with this kind of sadness. Valery's jaw set against the possibility.

"Come on, Baby," she whispered.

After much urging from his mother, the baby drank at last. Valery sighed with relief.

"Which way did you come?" she asked Allan.

"We're from Placerville. While Ayao was ill, we'd stayed at a home just outside town for several days," he said, not looking away from his child. "We hoped to reach Canada. One of the tribes is gathering in the faithful and has a tribal doctor."

"Anything away from the coast would be a good idea, I think."

Valery felt a pang of regret at her earlier reluctance. The intensity of these parents' concern for their sick child seemed quite genuine. How sad to lose a life so young...

Kwan asked, "What made him sick?"

Her tone was a little pointed, and made Valery uncomfortable.

"Kwan, I—"

"The virus could have mutated again. We could all be at risk."

That thought hadn't even occurred to Valery. Her gaze flicked to Allan.

"Is that it?"

He smoothed his wife's hair while she urged the child to take more. He shook his head.

"He hasn't been strong since he was born three weeks ago. We couldn't find a doctor in our area who could diagnose him. We were just hoping that...that he'd hold on until we did."

The infant hardly looked big enough to live. Valery hadn't seen many babies come to the hospital, but those she had hadn't usually survived.

None of them passed without at least one nurse's tears wetting their blanket.

After a long silence, even the feeble sucking of the baby hardly heard, Kwan suggested, "I can make up the back room for them."

Valery stiffened. One thing to feel pity for them but quite another to invite the strangers to stay with them. They seemed harmless enough. But they knew nothing about the family at all.

Could anyone be trusted?

She frowned, and whispered to Kwan, "All right, but I'm keeping the gun."

A little smile coming to her lips, Kwan slipped out to set up quarters for the Pachu'as. Left alone with the little family, Valery fidgeted, feeling like she was intruding on a private scene.

"Hey, how about a sandwich?" she said. She ducked into the pantry and came back with arms full of canned juice, tuna fish and other items that she set on the counter.

The three hadn't moved.

She busied herself getting out paper plates and cups, wishing there was more she could do for them.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

He shook his head. "We need nothing. Thank you for taking us in. May the Spirit bless you."

He grabbed for her hand and squeezed it. The sudden gesture touched her heart.

"You've got to keep up your strength," she said, realizing she sounded like an old Jewish mother. "Kwan's made up a room. You should stay. There's plenty of food—there's even hot water if you want it. I can turn on the generator."

"That won't be necessary. Our needs are not great. Just..." His eyes turned back to the baby.

She nodded and crossed her arms, guessing his thoughts. Just for his child to live. It didn't seem to be asking so much, did it?

She gestured to the rooms from which Kwan was emerging.

"It's not our place, either. We're just passing through. Please stay the night, rest. In the morning..." She hesitated, unwilling to offer false hope.

He lifted his shoulders. "It is beyond our hands."

"Yes. Our prayers are with you."

She gave one last look at the blanket-wrapped child then tucked the gun Pachu'a had dropped into her belt and her own into her holster. No harm in holding the gun for him. Just in case. In the morning, if they left, he could have it back.



At least for now she'd have control of the firearms in the house.

She took Kwan's arm and led the way upstairs.

"Let's go to sleep, *mei-mei*."

The earlier silly mood had been spoiled, and each retreated to her room. Valery closed her eyes, luxuriating in the fresh white linens and the cushion beneath. It took very little time, even with strangers in the house, to drift into dreams.



First downstairs in the morning, Kwan went for the basement to start the generator then to the pantry, searching out something for breakfast. The door between the kitchen and the family quarters stood open. Without intending to eavesdrop, she overheard Allan pleading with his wife to let the child go.

"Malia, please. Let us commit him to the earth. His soul has flown." The man's voice vibrated tight as violin strings. "Give him to me."

Kwan sighed. Fate had taken the child, born after the Second Holocaust and not strong enough to survive. She laid out packaged cookies and opened a can of fruit, then made a pot of tea, which she left on the stove.

Allan came out holding a folded white pillowcase that must have held the body of his son. He looked at Kwan, then at the bundle. His eyes ached with emotion.

Her heart broke at his expression.

"I am sorry, Mr. Pachu'a. If we—"

"I will bury him now. Please leave my wife to rest."

Kwan watched from the window as the baby was interred next to the grave she and Valery had made the day before. As lovely as this home was, it had become a place of death. The cold chill that skittered up her back was indication they should move on, very soon.

She washed her hands in the steaming water. The emanation of hot water at the turn of a spigot—it seemed like a miracle now, although it had been an everyday fact of life until last year. How quickly she'd forgotten...or had too much that was horrible happened for her to remember?

Valery came up behind her and cleared her throat. Kwan turned off the water, a little self-conscious.

"I was just..."

The other girl smiled. "Forget regret, *chica*. After what this world's been through, all we can count on is this moment and ourselves in it." She poured herself some tea. "We shouldn't feel guilty for really appreciating whatever we find. Every little thing is a marvel." She ticked off examples on her fingers. "Real food. A clear road. A glorious soft bed."

“Hot water. A real bath.”

Valery looked out the window, watching Allan Pachu’a.

“Finding peace.”

Kwan crossed to stand beside her.

“Peace.”

“So, we’re leaving this morning?”

“I think that’s best.”

“Should we take them?”

“Take them?” Kwan hadn’t thought that far ahead. “They’ve just lost their son.”

Valery shrugged. “They’re in no condition to defend themselves. Even if —when— I give their gun back,” she added sheepishly.

“We can ask.”

Allan fell to his knees when he finished piling the dirt on the pitifully small grave. Kwan’s throat caught, and she choked down tears.

“It must be unspeakable to lose a child.”

“The worst.” Valery helped herself to some pears and peaches, using a real silver fork. “But remember when all this first happened? After that first wave, the vulnerable went next. Babies, old people, people with compromised immune systems. I haven’t seen a baby outside the hospital for... gosh... like, months.”

“So, he was a miracle already.” Kwan chose a powdered sugar cookie with her tea.

“Absolutely.” She poured some canned milk into her cup.

Allan came up the porch and into the kitchen. He looked at them a moment then down at his dirty boots.

“Shall I take these off?”

Kwan didn’t really know what the protocol was for such things. It wasn’t her home, after all. She shrugged gently.

He hesitated then removed his boots, leaving them side-by-side next to the door.

Valery snagged a cookie.

“We’ll be leaving soon, heading east. You’re welcome to come, if you want.”

The man looked at her blankly.

“We’d been waiting for our son to heal and thought of little else.” He glanced toward the family quarters. “Malia is not prepared for travel.”

Knowing they should travel east as fast as they could with their precious cargo, Kwan felt a guilty twinge. These people clearly would take days to recover from their grief, and she could not deny them that. But could she justify a delay to her conscience, and to the rest of the world?

“Right,” Valery said. “At least you’ve got a safe place here, with food and running water. Take your time, Mr. Pachu’a. Things will get better.” She nodded to Kwan. “Fifteen minutes?”

Kwan looked at Allan Pachu’a, who finally absorbed the situation. He nodded.

“We will be held in the hands of the Great Spirit. May your road be safe and shorter than you expect.”

Reluctantly, Kwan offered him the pot of tea and the pantry so he could select something to eat. They retrieved their packs from upstairs; Valery set the man’s gun next to his pack. Fifteen minutes later, they were back on their bikes, heading east.

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

[Buy Now - Amazon](#)

[Buy Now - B&N](#)

Check [www.zumayapublications.com](http://www.zumayapublications.com) for other retailer links.

