

## Prologue

They usually moved in pairs or sometimes in threes, and always at night as they had done for almost seven years. No creature on either land or sea would tempt them. Humans were easier to catch—neither swift like deer nor slippery as fish. But the supply was dwindling, forcing them further east from the foothills of the ancient mountain range. Desperation descended upon them, but though the stretches of hunger grew longer, pushing their mental and physical limits, they could never change their ways.

From time to time they would meet others by chance and either fight to the death straightaway, or band briefly together, only to ultimately turn on each other in a frenzied bloodbath.

They never used guns. Bullets had grown too scarce, and their brains were unable to focus on finding anything beyond finding their next kill. Crude weapons were used instead: heavy rocks, large branches broken into clubs, or perhaps the odd metal pipe or fire iron. But they would always have a blade or knife of some sort to cut through the flesh once the deed was done.

## Chapter 1

*January 2024*

Nataliya's feet were blistering. The boots she wore—made from Italian leather once exquisitely soft—were entirely impractical for the journey she had embarked on. Aspen was miles behind her as she headed east.

Alone in the elements, she moved slowly along the highway. She had made it just beyond Denver when her car ran out of gas. Now the miles stretched before her as she cursed each step. She stopped every so often to sit on the side of the road and remove her boots and socks to let her blisters breathe until the wind chilled them. She would not, no matter what, allow herself to cry.

Interstate 70 stretched all the way to Chesapeake Bay two thousand miles away, but she didn't know that. She had no map. Nor food or water. She had left Aspen before dawn impulsively and without a plan. All she knew was that she needed to leave Aspen and go east. One way or another, she was going home.

Half a day passed, and as the sun's rays descended behind her, Nataliya became gripped with fear. For the first time in her life, she felt repentant.

"I did this," she muttered to herself over and over, sometimes in English, other times in Russian. "I did this."

No cars had passed by all day. She walked another mile until she saw a building ahead on the right. It was a church, a solitary structure alone on the highway. Without another thought, she stepped off the pavement and marched determinedly toward it. When she reached the front doors and pulled on the handles, they miraculously opened.

There was no one inside. The interior was traditional. Rows of pews on the left and right of a long with a center aisle and marble columns rising upward into arches high above.

Nataliya stepped further inside and took a seat in a pew at the rear. She sat for several minutes,

unmoving. A single tear escaped her eye, and she brushed it away with the back of her hand.

“Stop it...”

The doors to the church suddenly opened, and she ducked behind the pew, concealing herself. She heard muffled voices and stayed perfectly still as they passed by. Only afterward did she dare to peek. A young man and woman. She watched as they reached the altar and—to her surprise—they knelt down and made a motion with their arm. The Sign of the Cross.

A hymnal that had been resting precariously on the edge of her pew slid off and hit the ground. The noise shattered the quiet, and the two strangers looked back. They had seen her.

“Who are you?!” the young man shouted as he and the woman rose to their feet.

“Sorry!” Nataliya held up her hands. “I—I just needed to rest.”

Feeling unsteady, she firmly grabbed the pew in front of her as the two approached. They didn’t appear angry or afraid; there was only concern.

“What happened to you?” the girl asked calmly.

Omitting many details and elaborating on those that would garner the most sympathy, Nataliya told her tale of woe. They responded with both pity and generosity that materialized into gifts of food, water, and a car full of gas.

Before climbing into the vehicle, Nataliya looked back at her guardian angels and smiled. “Thank you so much,” she said in a tone that almost approached sincerity.

“God bless you,” the girl replied and her male companion subsequently echoed.

Driving away, Nataliya glanced back in her rear-view mirror. A self-satisfied smile spread across her face. “Idiots.”

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The waves reached the tip of Andy’s boots. Though appropriately dressed for the weather, the ocean wind and winter chill managed to penetrate to her bones. She shivered but remained still as

the light of a new day emerged beneath a thick layer of clouds.

“Hey, you ready?”

Andy turned around. She gave Susan a nod. “Yeah, I just need to pee first.”

“Ok, I’ll be in the truck.”

Andy made her way to a nearby clutter of boulders on the beach and squatted to relieve herself for the third time that morning. Once finished, she headed inland and beyond the beach house she now shared with Maria and Carmen. The others lived mere yards away in neighboring homes. There had been plenty to choose from.

“You okay?” Susan asked as Andy slipped into the passenger’s seat.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Susan didn’t answer and put the truck into drive. They headed along the single street that ran along the length of the thin strip of land called Topsail Island. Part of North Carolina’s shoreline, the island was farther south than where Andy had landed with Morgan and Charlie nearly two years earlier.

Thirty minutes later, they arrived at the southern edge of a former game preserve that had become their primary source of food since arriving months earlier. Susan parked the truck in a makeshift parking lot. Andy got out first and grabbed a rifle from the backseat.

Susan locked the truck. “Which way should we go?”

“Let’s check the traps first,” Andy replied, referring to the small game traps they had set to catch rabbits and squirrels. “Let’s hope this fog clears soon.”

“You want me to carry that?” Susan asked, eyeing the rifle.

“No, I got it. I’m pregnant, not an invalid.”

Susan pressed her lips together and turned away. She started off along a footpath that headed toward the center of the preserve. Andy followed, keeping an eye out for deer. They approached the

first of several traps, found it empty, and moved on to the next. Out of ten traps—simple cages with a single entry door that shut when activated—three were occupied by one rabbit each.

“This guy is too small,” Susan declared at the final trap. She opened one end of the cage and kicked on the other to encourage the tiny creature’s exit. When the frightened rabbit finally understood that it was free, it zipped out of the cage and sped off.

“So only two rabbits,” Susan remarked, looking at the bag on the ground containing the animals, both dead after a quick snap of their necks.

“And maybe a deer,” Andy said in a hushed voice as her eyes caught sight of a doe over Susan’s shoulder and through the bare trees, just visible through the vanishing fog. She prepared her rifle as Susan stepped out of the way. “Don’t you move,” she mumbled, then put her finger to the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot was followed by the whooshing sound of dozens of birds flapping their wings and headed for the sky. In front of her, Andy lifted her head and watched the doe fall to its knees.

“Nice shot,” Susan said and walked toward the fallen doe first while Andy cleared her rifle. Beneath her coat, Andy reached for her push-to-talk radio clipped to the waist of her jeans.

“Charlie. Andy. You there?”

A brief pause, then, “I’m here.”

“We got a doe. She’s not huge, but we’re far from the truck and might need some help getting her back.”

A longer pause this time. “Andy, you’ll have to leave her for now. We need you back here.” It was Brian’s voice.

Andy stared at the radio incredulously. “Leave her here? Do you know how long it’s been since we got a deer? Weeks! And I don’t want someone to come by and steal it.”

“Andy, I’ll go back later with you, but you need to come back as soon as you can.”

“What’s happened?”

“There’s been some kind of attack. Just get back as soon as you can.”

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“My brother didn’t say anything?”

“Nope,” Andy replied once they were heading back. “Just to get back as soon as we could.”

Susan drove much faster going back. Both she and Andy were sweating, as they had ignored Brian’s advice and had hauled the doe together back to the truck. Andy had insisted.

Upon arriving back at their neighborhood, they were greeted by Brian and Morgan in the street. Brian immediately noticed the doe in the back of the truck.

“I told you to leave it for later,” he admonished Andy.

“Well, we didn’t,” she retorted before looking at anyone but Brian. “Now what’s going on?”

“Let’s go to Michael’s house,” Morgan said gently. Katie was attached to her mother’s hip.

“Everyone is already there.”

“Fine.” Andy led the way. She walked quickly, not waiting for anyone.

Michael lived just a few houses away from Andy. He was a native of the area, having survived the virus with his younger sister. They had welcomed Andy’s friends to the area while she was still languishing in Sing Sing.

Jim and Charlie were already inside Michael’s house where more than thirty people had already gathered. It was a beach home similar to everyone’s in the neighborhood.

Though lacking the infrastructure of Aspen, this coastal strip of land had become a comforting place for Andy and her friends. People looked out for each other but kept to themselves. And so far, there were no strings attached to living in a place with more mild winters, access to fresh lakes, and plenty of fishing and hunting.

Jim gave Andy a nod as she stepped inside, and she led the others to his area of the living room.

“What’s going on?”

“I’d tell you but it’s best if you hear it from the source.”

The ‘source’ was a small girl of no more than eleven or twelve standing next to an older boy; probably her brother from the resemblance. He stood behind her protectively in the center of the room. The girl’s face was pale, almost sickly, and her left forearm was heavily bandaged. Even so, blood had seeped through the gauze.

“Do you know them?” Andy asked Jim.

“No, but I think Carmen knows her a little.”

The room got quiet as Michael emerged from the kitchen where he’d been talking quietly with a few of his close friends. He was the tallest person in the room, and his pick-up basketball games were popular in the neighborhood, even in winter. But basketball was the last thing on Michael’s mind today. Normally a laid-back person, his face was full of uncharacteristic worry.

“Thanks for coming. I’m sorry for alarming everyone but Jessie was attacked this morning while checking traps in Holly Shelter.”

Andy exchanged looks with Susan. They had just returned from Holly Shelter Reserve.

“Someone tried to grab her, but she was lucky and got away,” Michael continued. “Now, everyone can do what they want, but I’d suggest that if you’re going hunting, don’t go alone. Take someone with you, and take two weapons.”

Michael said to Jessie, the girl with the wounded arm, “Can you tell us what happened?”

Jessie looked apprehensively from Michael to her brother, then down at her arm. “I didn’t see them. They came up behind me...two of them. At least I think two. One of them grabbed my wrist. Then I saw the knife. I tugged hard and got away. Then I just ran as fast as I could. I thought they’d catch me since they were probably bigger than me, but they didn’t. I didn’t even know I’d been cut until I got back.”

“What did they look like?” someone in the room asked.

“I didn’t see them. They must’ve been hiding behind trees or something when they grabbed me. I didn’t hear them at all. It happened so fast.”

“Were they male? Female?” another asked.

“Male, I think. But maybe just one of them.”

Jessie looked up at her brother. She didn’t have anything else to say. But the room had more questions.

However, Michael tactfully cut the conversation short, first explaining that Jessie needed rest. “I just wanted everyone to know what happened so you can all take necessary precautions. We don’t know who these people are or where they’re from, so be on the lookout.”

The room dispersed and people slowly filed out of the house. As they did, Michael caught Andy’s attention and pulled her aside. “Can you take a look at her arm? I don’t think she or her brother know how a bandage works.”

“I noticed. I can look at it now.”

“Great, I’ll tell her to come by.”

On the walk home, Andy got into it with Brian.

“You could’ve just told me what happened. I didn’t need to come all the way back here to hear that.”

“Hey, all I knew is that there was attack in the preserve and that you guys were there. I thought you should get back as soon as possible,” Brian explained.

“Brian, I can take care of myself. I don’t need everyone treating me like I’ll break or something.”

“I’m not always thinking about you,” he snapped. “I was worried about my sister.”

But as he said the words, his gaze shifted toward Andy’s belly. Agitated, he looked away and walked off without another word.

She watched him go inside his house. It had been like this since she revealed her pregnancy a month after her escape from the prison. Brian had not taken the news well, and she lacked the will to mend things between them.

Her own house was empty. Maria and Carmen were in Miami visiting Julio, and in that moment, Andy was glad for the solitude. She went to her bedroom and grabbed her medical kit, then waited in the kitchen for Jessie to arrive. She spread out her equipment, which included suturing needles and surgical thread, various types of gauze, and a small blow torch for disinfecting needles.

A knock on the door interrupted her. Expecting it to be Jessie and possibly her brother, Andy found Morgan instead.

“What was that between you and Brian?” she asked, passing through the doorway.

“Oh, just the usual.”

They went into the kitchen where Andy finished her preparations as Morgan sat at the table.

“I still can’t believe it—you pregnant.”

“Me neither,” Andy muttered.

“We’ve got to be the most futile women on the planet. The first time for both of us.”

“You can’t count that as your first time.”

“Well, it was, technically.”

Andy conceded. “Do you still think about it?”

“Everyday. But then I look at Katie and the pain goes away.”

“But before?”

Morgan gazed at the instruments on the table. “There was one day early on where I almost asked you to get rid of it. But then I thought about all the bodies surrounding us and decided that I couldn’t handle another.” Then looking up at her friend, “And there was no way I could ask you to do that.”

“Well, I would’ve done it if you’d asked. Not that I knew *how* to do it, but...”

She stepped away from the table to grab a small bucket of water near the sink and brought it to the table. Finished, she let out a sigh and took a seat across from Morgan.

“I’ve thought about it too. Getting rid of it.” Her eyes met her friend’s.

“Because of what happened to Ben?”

Andy hesitated. “Yes, because I would always be reminded of him—of losing him. But then if I had the child, I’d always have a piece of him.”

“So what will you do?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t wait much longer. I’m past three months.”

Morgan just nodded. She understood completely, which gave Andy comfort. “Well, love, you have us. You know that.”

“I know. I’m just still stunned.”

Jessie arrived then, alone. Minutes later, her old bandage was gone, and Andy was inspecting the wound while Morgan observed. The cut was on the outside of the left forearm, three inches in length and terribly deep as blood pooled just below the surface of the skin.

“I’ll stitch it up, and you’ll be good as new,” Andy assured the girl and snapped on a pair of latex gloves. She then readied the needle with disinfectant.

Jessie smiled through her pain. “Okay. It’s throbbing.”

As she had done many times over the years whenever Andy stitched up children, Morgan moved closer to the girl for support. “That just means means it’s healing. Right?”

“Right,” Andy echoed. Using gauze, she soaked up the excess blood and began the arduous task of closing the wound.

Jessie grit her teeth as Morgan held her free hand. She shed a few tears but remained strong and pulled her hand from Morgan’s to wipe away the tears. In the process, she smeared a small spatter of

her own blood across her face.

“Oh, let me wipe that off for you.” Morgan grabbed a towel from the kitchen counter.

“I got some in my mouth before,” Jessie muttered with a grimace.

“Not very tasty, is it?” said Andy absently, her focus squarely on the girl’s arm.

“Like metal,” Morgan added with her nose pinched.

Jessie stiffened. “That’s what they said to me.”

Andy stopped. “Who—what?”

“The people who grabbed me. They said I looked ‘tasty’.”

Andy exchanged worried glances with Morgan. “What did they mean by that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did they say anything else to you?”

Jessie shook her head. “No. I just ran as fast as I could. But they smelled...bad. I remember that.”

After fixing up the girl’s arm, Andy sent her on her way with extra bandages and some long-expired antibiotics.

“‘Tasty’? That’s an odd thing to say, isn’t it?” Morgan remarked once Jessie left.

Andy shrugged. “Yeah. But you know how men can be.”

“Don’t I?”

“Sorry. But you know what I mean.”

“Except she didn’t remember if they were men or women. And if they weren’t trying to rape her, then what?”

Frowning, Andy stared hard at the kitchen table. “I don’t know. There were those rumors you all told me about when I got here.”

“What rumors?”

“About people hunting other people.”

“Bloody hell, Andy. You don’t really think that could be true?” Morgan laughed but it was forced. “Cannibals? No.”

“Why not? It’s possible.”

“But why not just hunt animals?”

“C’mon, you know how difficult it is to actually kill an animal. Something that will feed you for a while, like deer. And people don’t run as fast. We can’t escape as easily. And we definitely have a lot more meat on us than a squirrel or rabbit.”

“Maybe. But...people *eating* each other? Even that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

“Well...not everyone has adapted like we have.”