

Chapter One

Sergeant Jackson Martel

JUNE 3, YEAR 06
(Six Years after the Ash)

“What street is this?”

“Fuck if I know.” I study the map. Half of the buildings in Charlotte are down, or at least so shelled out I can’t tell what they were. Traffic lights are long gone, as are most of the road signs. I bunch the map up and stuff it in my breast pocket. “All right. Let’s head on down this way. Looks like some of the buildings are still standing.”

The three of us keep our rifles ready as we move past the blown out windows and piles of bricks that used to be buildings for any signs of life. The street is wide enough to have been a four-lane road, once. There is only one set of lines painted down the center, though, so the curb was probably used for parking. I catch a flicker of green, and then it’s gone. I raise my fist, signaling *freeze*.

Holub and Stevenson scan the rubble until Stevenson raises his hand to his brim. He takes aim, while Holub and I inspect the area for other signs of life.

Stevenson fires, and the guy in the green parka goes down.

“Yeah! How ‘bout that Martell?” Stevenson holds up his hand for a high five, but I ignore it.

“Celebrate later. Make sure he doesn’t have friends.”

The three of us keep our rifles raised as we move toward the fallen figure. We round the side of the weather stained garage, and there huddled next to the fallen body is a kid, no more than five I’d say. He doesn’t cry, but his face is mottled up and he’s looking at the fallen man like the worst thing in the world has happened. I’d bet my ass that’s his dad.

Holub takes aim, and the kid's eyes go round as he flinches back.

"Holub!"

He starts. His eyes question me.

"What the fuck? Kid's like five. He's probably never seen the sun."

He shakes his head. "Orders, man. Kill the scraps, all of them. No one said anything about leaving kids."

He's right, god damn it. I rub my hand over my forehead. "Get out of here, kid. If your mother's still around, tell her to get out of Charlotte."

The kid scrambles to his feet and takes off.

Stevenson raises his rifle and I give his shoulder a shove.

He glares at me. "Jesus, Jax, what are you doing? They're a bunch of goddamn cannibals!"

"I agree, but a kid that age didn't kill anyone. He has no idea what he's eating."

Stevenson seethes. "I'm reporting this, Sarge."

I thin my lips. "Make sure you spell my name right on the report. Now get moving. We have that entire block to cover."

Shit. This is my one chance to get out of security detail, and I can't afford to fuck up here. These men are under my charge, and they're reporting me. This won't look good on my record.

Three hours later, I've scored two kills and Holub one. Stevenson holds the best score at four.

It's my job, I remind myself. I don't give a shit if I kill a bunch of flesh-eating freaks. As far as I'm concerned, the moment they took their first bite out of a human, they became the meat. Little kids, though. I mean, little ones. They don't get to choose. I'm a sick bastard, I know

that, but I'm not a monster.

We've been sent by the men in the Arc, a top-secret complex built into Mounts Craig and Mitchell in North Carolina. So far as I've been able to figure out, a bunch of old-moned bastards got wind that something was going down with Yellowstone long before it happened and began construction immediately. Then they proceeded to save the right people. Billionaires like themselves, scientists and engineers with staggering IQ's, whatever they thought it'd take to rebuild after everyone else died. But only the ones that met their criteria.

I got lucky. I ran into one of them during the bombing of Charlotte and gave him an escort to the mountains. In return, he allowed me and my companions to serve in their exterior security. I've never been inside the Arc, but we have a comfortable bunkhouse and three square meals a day, so I consider I'm luckier than most, and now they're giving me a chance to prove myself for something better. I oversee four teams of men, three to each team, and we wipe out the freaks in the former Elizabeth, Cherry, Dillner, and Myers Park areas. Problem is identifying where the hell we are. A couple years back, right before the U.S. government fell, they bombed Atlanta and Charlotte in an attempt to get rid of the rising cannibal problem. Now all that remains are some high-rises uptown and a vast area of half-demolished buildings. Maps are useless.

We approach a block of offices and banks. Some of these still stand, a testament to the contractors who spent the extra bucks to build something decent.

I point to one of them. "Stevenson, take that bank. I bet a vault is a great place to hide."

Probably impossible to break into, as well, so that should get rid of the shit-bag for a while.

He shifts his stance and scowls at me. "I'm not going in there alone. What if they have

weapons?”

“You’re wearing a Kevlar vest.”

“Fuck that.” He spits. “There could be a dozen people in there.”

“It’s an order.” I jerk my head. “Holub, go with him.”

“You okay, boss?” Holub has no problem killing kids, but apparently he still respects authority.

I raise my eyes to the sky – a dark gray mass of clouds that never clears. “I’m covered. I’m headed to the office building over there.”

Stevenson looks me up and down, then pivots and heads for the bank. Holub follows.

The sign on the front of the four-story office reads National Association of Agricultural Engineers. The windows are all smashed out, and from the debris spilling out the east side, I’d bet it took a direct hit. This wouldn’t shelter anyone, not from the cold anyway. I almost move onto the next building, but I pick up a soft thump.

I gotcha, you flesh-eating prick.

I move quietly, careful not to step on any broken glass or pieces of brick, and peer into each window. Through the first one, I observe a large hole in the ceiling and a patch of sky is visible at the top. I was right, the east wall is half gone, and with half the roof missing, the interior is lit by an unusual amount of light. I get to the fourth window and stop. A mess of useless computers are piled in one corner. Paper and files are strewn about the edges of what I estimate to be a fifty-by-fifty foot room. The center space is clear, except one slight figure. She’s dancing. Ballet, not that I know much about that shit. It has to be with those sweeping hand motions and dainty pointed toes.

It’s ...well, beautiful. I haven’t seen anything but snow, weapons and blood in five years.

I almost forgot things like this existed.

But she's a scrap. If there's someone out here other than a soldier, I'm to shoot it. I can't afford any more exceptions, not after that kid.

I raise my rifle and position it against my shoulder. I didn't know anyone's back could arch like that. She does this arcing hand thing, drawing them close to her body while she sinks low. Fuck. Every movement is perfectly smooth. Not crisp, but with each motion moving fluidly into the next.

I take a breath and adjust my stance, and she does this leap that makes her tits bounce. Holy shit. No bra. They're pretty average, actually, but with the rest of her so tiny, it's hard to miss'em. I'm getting hard.

Her waist is tiny and the ass on that bitch is fucking phenomenal. I'd definitely hit that.

Hell. I've got a raging boner now, and I adjust myself.

What a waste. She's dirty. Her hair is hanging about her in actual strings. I remember passing the homeless back before the Ash. They stank like old piss. She's got to be just as bad, if not worse. Just another scrap.

I raise my rifle.

How can anyone balance like that? How can she raise her leg that high without popping a joint? I peer through the scope and find her face. She can't be more than twenty. She's thin to the point of being gaunt. High cheekbones, arched brows and a small, pointed chin. And those lips, Jesus. Full and soft looking. Instantly picture those lips wrapped around my cock.

How the fuck am I supposed to shoot that?

Damn it. I blow this, and I can forget ever rising above security guard. I went to Cornell, goddamn it. On scholarship. I roll my shoulders and reposition myself. I peer through the scope

and take aim at her head. She's just rising from some bendy thing, and she's wearing this smile. One tooth is slightly crooked. She's not perfect. She's human. A canni –

She looks up and spots me. She freezes.

So do I. The breath stops in my chest as I look into wide blue eyes, so dark they're almost navy, and framed by the thickest set of lashes I've ever seen. They widen, and she recoils with this desperate pleading, defeated look on her face. I can't move. I fucking can't move. It's happening. I feel my heart beat against my chest and the hair raise on the back of my neck. I clutch my hands around my weapon, but I have no intention of firing. I'm fixed on her, the sweet outline of her tits, that graceful bend, and those eyes. I'm not just hard. I'm gone. I need to fuck her. I need to run my tongue over those peaks, I need to feel her legs wrapped around me. I need to bury my cock in her so deep she'll never forget she's mine.

Jesus Christ. Not again.