

CHAPTER 1

Safe.

That's the word Alvin used to describe this place.

Safe.

THE RUSTED OUT WAREHOUSE and its parking lot were overgrown with weeds, and there wasn't a single pane of glass that wasn't at least cracked if not completely shattered. It really seemed, to Wednesday, like it belonged in a post-apocalyptic nightmare under a moonless black sky. It was the kind of place that was the furthest thing from safe she could imagine. The worst part about it, in her opinion, was that she'd been to many far worse places than this in her brief nineteen years. Depressingly, she'd lived in more than a few of them.

Alvin hid his more salt than pepper hair under the hat that matched his stolen police uniform as they rolled up to the large metal doorway in the unmarked former police cruiser. His thumbs tapped nervously against the steering wheel as he waited for Josefina's man, Sample, to open up and let them drive in. So far, Sample had been good to his word. The car had been waiting for them at the hotel where he said it would be, and the room he'd rented for Alvin to stay in before driving down to Mexico for the rendezvous tomorrow had not only been paid for, it was even in the right name. Now he was almost at the finish line. Wednesday was almost through having to run and hide just to stay alive.

Wednesday Valentine was nothing like anyone Alvin had ever associated with, not even back before he'd enlisted. From her wildly

rotating hair colors – none of which appeared in nature – to her bizarre taste in clothes, to her complete detachment from the human race. This girl was still a completely alien creature to him.

She had innocent bright green eyes and a tiny frame with a foul mouth and violent short temper. She was dangerous and fragile with no regard for the world around her. Over the last two weeks he had watched her grow, really grow, as a person, and he'd seen her regress, truly break down, and fall apart. He was worried about her, of course, but in reality there was nothing he could do for her that he hadn't done already. He'd given up his life for her, given up everything just to try to keep her safe. This was the final step.

Inside the warehouse office, Boyle's thin form was crouched low over Sample's dead body, holding the large metal box with the door controls. At this point, he'd spent the last ten minutes in the still, dark silence of the control room looking down over the warehouse. From his position, peering out the office windows, he had a clear view of the entire warehouse floor.

The only sound in the empty ten by ten room had been the tiny liquid pops from the blood slowly dripping from the tip of Sample's nose to the dusty, blue linoleum floor. The sound had gone from distracting to maddening. Boyle knew that it normally took about fifteen minutes for blood exposed to open air to coagulate. He couldn't be more thankful his targets were there on time. Another five minutes of this tedium and his blood might well have been flowing out too. He had to steady his nerves before he let them inside. Everything was about to get fast and messy.

The door jerked, then creaked loudly, as it began rumbling slowly to the side. Alvin looked back at Wednesday in her black and white Webb County, Texas jumpsuit. She looked so tiny to him now – so young, so small. Her hair was such a bright shade of red it looked almost plastic in the dim light of the backseat, and it was almost as if she'd retreated into herself so far that she'd actually aged backward.

He stared long enough she assumed he was making sure she was ready. She raised her hands to show him that she'd locked herself into the matching bracelets and pulled hard against the links between them. She couldn't stop repeating the word *safe* in her head to try to reassure herself.

As the car pulled slowly into the building, Wednesday's eyes darted in every direction, taking in every detail around her. The stacks of crates and pallets of boxes wrapped in plastic towered over them like a bizarre cityscape in miniature. The would-be skyscrapers stretched up into the darkness above the bent and worn metal light fixtures that dangled down from the ceiling. Only a quarter of the lights were even on, making the cavernous room seem a bit more ominous than it should.

The car's tires chirped slightly as Alvin stopped alongside the large Mexican Police transport vehicle Josefina told them she'd procured. He knew Sample was around here somewhere; he was supposed to drive Wednesday across the border and meet with a crew of corrupt Mexican cops on Josefina's payroll. Alvin would drive down and meet up with her tomorrow.

Alvin got out and walked around the car to open the back door. He offered Wednesday his hand to help her out of the car. She looked at him incredulously, but for once, she didn't fight him. She took his hand and stepped out fighting a little grin. He was winning. He was breaking down her walls, her defenses, and worst of all he knew it. He was reshaping her, and she was letting him.

They stood in the center of the warehouse looking around for the man they were supposed to meet. One had his hand on the pistol at his side and the other was in a pair of handcuffs. Boyle couldn't hear what they were discussing as Alvin bent down to put the ankle cuffs on Wednesday, but he could tell she was protesting, even if he couldn't quite make out their words. Now, he figured, was as good a time as any as he slid the bolt into place on his rifle and looked down the scope.

Safe repeated in Wednesday's head as she looked around the open space again, feeling anything but. Alvin knew better than she did. He'd already proven it. He'd managed to keep her alive this long despite the sheer number of killers Klein had sent after her. He said it was safe, so it had to be safe, even if the hair on the back of her neck was standing on end. She looked into his eyes for reassurance and found that she felt better but still ill at ease.

Alvin saw the fear in her eyes and gave her a nod to try to reassure her. He knew she'd been through a lot, and he'd do anything to soothe her. This had to be done. He only wished it could be done faster or be over already.

"Now the chain of these leg cuffs," Alvin said, holding them up in front of him. "It locks into the floor of the prisoner transport, so let's go ahead and get them on you."

He took his hand off his gun for what felt like only an instant as he turned his back to the perch that Boyle had chosen. Boyle smiled broadly. This was like getting a present, and it wasn't even his birthday.

Alvin had clapped the cuff around Wednesday's right ankle when she stopped him again.

"If I'm going to wear them, and if you want me to believe I'm actually safe, you're going to give me a key," Wednesday said, eyebrow raised and hand extended toward his face.

He rolled his eyes as he looked up at her. He opened his mouth, but before he could protest, Alvin felt the burn of the bullet. The report followed a fraction of a second later. He slumped forward, falling at Wednesday's feet.

"Fuck!" she yelled, shaking.

She immediately dropped to her knees at his side – eyes wide, face pale. Alvin leaned up to her and squeezed the key into her hand as a second round whizzed over their heads.

"Run!" Alvin yelled back at her as the second report echoed through the warehouse.

"I'm not leaving..." She was cut off as he smacked her.

"Run like hell, kid," Alvin said, as his body shook from another round in his left side. He collapsed again to the floor while the room was booming.

Boyle had switched to automatic fire and stood up. The muzzle flashes above them looked almost like a flamethrower in the dark as his rifle threw round after round down at them.

Panic washed over her like a house fire hitting its flash point. It was as if her body exploded with the heat of the flames licking every inch of her. The palm print on her face stung, pins and needles assaulted her limbs, and she knew that the second shot that hit Alvin would have been in her belly if he hadn't stopped it. This was all too much. His blood was splattered dark crimson all over the black and white stripes she wore. He was right. She had to run.

Wednesday bolted up fast, sprinting and uncuffing herself as she went. She tore off across of the large open room and forced her way

out onto a loading dock. Chunks of the concrete floor popped up all around her as she went; Boyle's shots barely missing their mark.

Once she was in the parking lot she knew that unless there were others around here somewhere, she had a hell of a head start. Boyle knew it too. He started running down the flights of stairs that separated him from the floor of the warehouse. He jumped three and four steps at a time, but there was too much distance and she moved liked a cheetah. She was gone, a ghost in the blackness of the night.

She ran, gliding over the unfamiliar ground, moving faster than she could ever remember running before. She screamed out at the sky as she went. "Nothing's ever fucking safe!"

* * *

"I'm not trying to make you feel sorry for me, or take my side," Alvin said, and then reconsidered his words. "I'm not looking for any big show of compassion..."

A deep and ragged breath shook Alvin's chest as he was wracked with a thick wet cough. The eighty-degree heat of the Laredo night was lost on him. The only thing he could feel was cold.

"Shut up and die, old man," Boyle said sharply.

He was silhouetted from the overhead lights, making him look, to Alvin, even thinner than he was, but the darkness did little to diminish the glint off the polished pistol in his right hand. As he crouched down closer, Alvin could smell him – a unique blend of body odor, cigarette smoke, and cheap scented body spray. He was a poor excuse for a nightmare but an unarguably effective one.

Alvin was on his back on the hard, smooth concrete floor looking up at the hardwood platforms and walkways above him. His .45 was next to him on the floor, empty. At least it had kept Boyle from getting out the door after her. Alvin had managed to pin him down until he'd run out of bullets.

For a moment, Alvin's thoughts were completely incoherent as he laid slowly and painfully bleeding out where he'd fallen. He was dying, and he knew it. He couldn't let himself go out like that. He had to focus.

"Boyle? You're Boyle, right? You're Klein's up-and-comer... the