
CHAPTER

Three

The musket ball sailed right over him. David hit the ground hard, flat on his back in a tangle of twigs and leaves. The air whooshed out of his lungs. He tried pulling it back in, but it wouldn't come.

Gotta move! Get up! Go!

Gasping for breath, he scrambled to stand. Not easy with only one good arm and the weight of the cast on the other one. He fell back again. His head smacked the ground—a

rock, it was so hard. He realized the light around him was not from the sun. His eyes focused on a lamp mounted to a ceiling.

The antechamber. He was home.

Something struck his leg, a hard kick to it. “Xander?”

But it was the door, closing, dragging his legs with it. He remembered the baseball bat that had broken in two between the door edge and the frame when Mom had been taken. He pulled his legs up quickly, and the door slammed.

He rolled over and pushed himself up on one arm. Foliage fell off him.

“Xander?” he said again, wheezing out the word.

The room was empty. He lowered himself back down, resting his face against the wood planks. He put most of his weight onto the right side of his body, feeling his broken arm throb between his chest and the floor. He closed his eyes and breathed.

Wind hissed into the room, causing the twigs and leaves to flutter, then fly into the air. He watched them zip into the crack under the door. The largest twigs got stuck, and leaves piled up behind them. The twigs cracked and splintered. As they did, they disappeared, along with the leaves, all of it heading back where it had come from—heading back to *when* it had come from.

David stood and stared at the portal door. He didn’t expect it to open. He didn’t expect anything. His eyes simply

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needed a place to rest while he came out of a mild daze, as if awaking from a deep sleep. Having brushed that close to death, his emotions should have been raging. Instead, he felt numb. It was as though his mind had said *Enough already!* and flipped a switch. He was thankful for the break.

Slowly, he began to move again. He pulled the canteen's strap over his head and set it on the bench. He dropped his shoulder, allowing the jacket to slide off, and slipped his good arm out of the sleeve. He opened the door and walked into the hallway. He hoped Xander, Dad, and Toria, his nine-year-old sister, had fared better at getting rid of the cops than he had at rescuing Mom.

But when he emerged from the secret doorway on the second floor, he found Xander and Toria hiding in the short hall, peering around the corner toward the grand staircase. Voices drifted up from the foyer.

"I told you," Dad was saying, "you can't search my house. Your warrant or whatever this is limits you to *servicing* eviction papers, not *enforcing* them."

"We're not evicting you, sir," a voice said. "We're taking you in for assaulting a police officer."

"Assault? I didn't touch you until you bumped into my hand, trying to come into my house without my permission or the authority to do so. Wait, wait, wait . . . my kids are in the house. You can't take me. It will leave them alone."

"Then call them down," another voice said. "We'll take them with us."

“Kids, stay where you are!” Dad called.

Xander held up his hand and gave David a quiet, “Shhh.” Then he looked past David, hope and worry on his face. “Where is she?” he whispered. “Tell me you found her, Dae.”

David shook his head. “General Grant recognized me. I had to run, like you did. I didn’t even get to the tent you told me about. But, Xander . . .” He gripped his brother’s arm. “I saw the message she left.”

Love for his mother and disappointment at not finding her welled up from his chest. It dried his mouth and wetted his eyes. So, the emotional numbness had been only temporary, he thought. It was like getting punched in the arm so hard you couldn’t feel it for a while.

Xander’s sadness showed in his eyes, but he nodded and smiled. *Trying to be the big brother, the brave one*, David thought.

Toria whispered, “Who are you talking about? Mom? What message?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Xander said. “Now *sbbb*.” He looked at David and nodded his head toward the voices. “They’ve been going at it like that for a while. Dad read the court papers, something about the house being unfit to live in.”

“I agree,” David said.

Xander scowled at him. “They weren’t supposed to get us out of the house, just serve the papers.”

“So why don’t they just go away, then?”

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“Dad asked how much Taksidian paid them to get us out of the house, and that *really* ticked them off. Now they want to take him to jail.”

Taksidian’s deep voice rolled like thunder up the stairs. “Officers,” he said, “Mr. King is correct. You can’t take him and leave the children here alone.”

Why would Taksidian be pleading their case?

But that wasn’t what the man had in mind. The next thing he said was, “Why don’t I go get them for you?”

Toria took a step back. Her hand clasped David’s.

“Hey,” Dad said loudly. “He can’t—”

“Sir!” a cop said. “We’re handling this. Bill, take Mr. King out to the car.”

“No! You can’t do this!” Dad yelled.

There was a lot of banging going on down there. David imagined his dad, hands cuffed behind him, getting pulled backward out the door while he kicked out at the cops, at Taksidian. His heels would be striking the floor, hitting the door frame.

Xander started around the corner. David pulled his hand out of Toria’s and reached for him. His fingers brushed his brother’s shirt, then got a grip on his waistband.

Jerked to a stop, Xander snapped his head around. He was what Mom would have called fightin’ mad.

David shook his head. “You’ll just make it worse.”

“They’re taking Dad.”

“But you heard him. He wants us to stay here. They’ll just take you too. Then where will we be?”

Xander looked from David to Toria. Something in her expression softened his. He flipped a stray strand of hair off her face with his finger and said, “It’ll be okay, Toria. Don’t worry.”

She lowered her head. “First Mom, now Dad.”

Below, Taksidian said, “Just give me five minutes.”

“Can’t let you do that, Mr. Taksidian,” the remaining cop said. “It’s not your house, sir.”

David expected the man to say *Not yet* . . . but what he did say was worse.

“But, Officer Benson,” Taksidian said, “there’s no place they can hide where I can’t find them.”

Xander looked over his shoulder at David, his eyes wide.

Outside, Dad was still yelling. David heard their names, but the words were being snatched away by the breeze and the trees and the distance as the cop pulled their father away from the house.

Taksidian wasn’t finished. He said, “In the interest of the children’s welfare, officer, I can make it worth your while.”

“Step outside, sir,” Officer Benson said.

David thought the cop sounded angry. Maybe after Dad’s accusation of the cops taking money to help Taksidian, this new attempt at a bribe had—finally—grated on the cop’s sense of duty.

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Slow footsteps echoed downstairs, moving from the foyer to the hollow-sounding planks of the front porch.

“Alexander King, David King, Victoria King,” the cop hollered, obviously reading their names. “Last chance to come now.” He waited. “We’ll return with a court order to remove you by force, if necessary. It’s for your own safety.”

Silence. Then: “We’ll send a car back to wait outside tonight. If you change your minds, go out to the officers. They’ll take care of you.”

His footsteps took him to the porch. The door closed.