

## CHAPTER ONE

The air-raid sirens wail discordantly, unendingly, as Dakota Rivers bulls her old, much beloved truck down the snowy highways and byways leading out from Rapid City. The noise rises above the howling wind, the shriek of metal on metal as cars and trucks plow into one another at high speed, even the panicked screams of men and women running for their lives. *Music to end the world by*, she thinks, squinting through the heavy lines of snow blowing directly at her.

The sound of the sirens drills into her ears with such wicked persistence that she feels she must surely go mad. A quick look at the devastation around her, and she wonders if she's already there. She brakes as she sees a man dressed in a heavy parka and boots running up the middle of the highway, dodging overturned trucks and mangled cars, waving his hands and screaming for help. Behind him, two men, less well dressed but infinitely more sure-footed, march grimly after him. As she watches, one raises a rifle. The sound of the shot is buried beneath the wailing of the sirens, but its effect is readily seen as the man, his arms still high over his head, does an almost graceful swan dive onto the snowpacked road, dead before he hits the ground.

"Fuck," Koda mutters as the men, and their weapons, turn her way. Her hands tighten on the steering wheel and she guns the engine, which causes her tires to spin uselessly. "Come on, baby," she whispers. "Come on, you can do it." She eases off the gas, then gooses the pedal a little, grimly staring through the snow at her calm assassins. Her headlights catch a wink of metal around one's neck, and she bares her teeth as the wheels continue to spin and spin, the heavy chains doing little to help. "C'mon, *cantesukye*, just a little more...a little more..."

The right side of her windshield suddenly exhibits a starburst pattern, and she gives up all pretense at gentleness. "Go, you bitch! GO!" The heavy engine growls as the chains finally catch, and she sluices ahead like a horse just out of the gate. Her shooter and his companion don't move an inch as she heads right for them. She doesn't have to hear the sounds of the slugs hitting the body of her truck to know that they are, in fact, adding to the vehicle's already rustic charm. Yelling out a battle cry, she doesn't even slow as she plows into both men, bearing them under her truck and shredding them with the tire chains.

The sirens continue to wail as she slips between two cars, their hoods accorded by a head-on collision. She swallows sickly as she rides over the dead body of one of the drivers and continues, faster than she dares. Her sense of urgency, the overwhelming need to see to her family right now is the only thing that keeps her on the road. If she must die, and all the signs are pointing in that direction, she will do it among people she loves.

She pulls up on the narrow divider to get around an overturned semi, and, like an answer to a prayer, sees that the way beyond is clear. The traffic, what little of it is still moving, is going in the other direction — toward the city and its flaming wreckage. She wants to yell at these people, to demand that they turn around and run, to tell them that they will be infinitely safer in the wild lands than they will be in the carnage she has just left, but she knows that even if she tried, her words would fall on deaf ears. Panic is a strange taskmaster, and logic falls prostrate in the face of it.

"*Ina, Até*," she whispers, her words plumes of smoke that linger in the air, fogging her windshield. "Please wait for me. I'm coming home."

**Scrambling around her** townhouse, Kirsten shoves clothing and the bare necessities of travel into her duffel bag: soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, a bottle of aspirin. Her computer and other equipment are already packed in her SUV, and she needs no more now than will keep her warm and well until she can reach her goal.

She listens to the screaming of sirens that sound as if the city is under attack around her. Not surprising; it is, and defenses are doubtful at best. She has to get out. Fast. As she grabs a heavy coat off the rack by the door, she chastises herself for not having anything ready sooner. She has had a bad feeling for months, and now she knows she has been right all along. Not that that is any comfort.

Carefully she opens the door, peering out to be sure the parking lot is empty. Satisfied that it's safe, she steps outside and pulls her door shut behind her. She crosses the parking lot at a dead run, Asi keeping pace beside her as she dodges in and out among the cars sitting in their orderly ranks. Two rows to go. One. She pulls up before her truck, fumbling with the keys already in her hand. Almost out. Almost. As she slips the key into the lock, the rattle of automatic fire echoes between the buildings of her apartment complex. The shooting is somewhere out in the street, too near for safety.

*Shit.* The adrenaline courses through her body as she manages to key the truck unlocked and get inside, clambering into the seat with the duffel bag flung heedlessly down behind her. Asi, whining, settles beside it, his gaze quizzical. "It's okay, boy," she pants. "It's okay. Just keep your head down and stay quiet."

Kirsten takes her own advice, her hand on the big dog's scruff, as two police cars whip by with lights and sirens blaring. Drawing a deep breath, Kirsten starts the truck and pulls out of her parking space. This

will be the last time she will see her home, or at least what she has called home for the last three years. Her real home, her family— But she cannot think of them now, only of the urgency of her escape.

This will be forever burned into her mind as the day her world ended.

She drives slowly down the street, trying to look as normal as possible. The last thing she wants to do is call attention to herself. Getting well away from the city is the only hope she has. And she knows it. Kirsten turns left onto a side street lined mostly by small businesses. She needs to keep out of residential areas, out of the range of their sensors. She hears still more sirens and something that sounds like muffled gunfire. Her foot presses down slightly on the accelerator. Discretion is the better part of valor; even her soldier father says so.

There is a growl from the back seat, and Asi, contrary to all good order and discipline, raises his head. "Easy, Asimov. It's okay, boy. We're getting the hell out of Dodge."

The dog climbs over the back of the seat and takes his regular place in the front across from his favorite human. Kirsten reaches over and give him a scratch on the head. "We're gonna be okay, boy. I promise."

Despite the sounds of fighting the streets are deserted. And somewhere in the back of her mind, little voices whisper that that can't be good. *Hard to please, aren't you, King?* The thought sneaks its way into her consciousness. Streets full of gunmen are not good. Streets full of dead gunmen are worse. As she makes another turn, speeding up to get past a large apartment complex, Asimov raises his head and begins growling in earnest. She watches him as he faces the window and barks furiously.

Suddenly the truck impacts against something and Kirsten's head jerks up as a man rolls onto the hood. He is still alive, panicked and obviously running for his life. "Help me!" he screams as he pounds on the windshield with his hand. "For God's sake, please help me!"

Kirsten slams the brake and he slides drunkenly to hang half on, half off the hood. Asimov's barking grows more intense and she knows what she has to do. Looking the man directly in the eye, she says, "I'm sorry."

Throwing the truck into reverse, she backs up quickly. The force of the acceleration throws the man from the hood to the ground. Hitting the gas, she speeds past him. In the rearview mirror she can see three of them moving in on him, one of them pointing a rifle at the man's head. The blast seems to follow her as she speeds up and heads for the freeway that will take her away from the madness.

**Dakota's truck**, a decades old campaigner who has been with her since she learned to drive, growls low and moves with confident speed over the packed and blowing snow covering the roads. The sound of the chains rattling as they cut through the icepack can be heard even over the fiercely blowing wind.

In this part of South Dakota, where distances between neighbors are often-times measured in miles instead of yards or feet, she knows that at the very least, under optimal conditions, it will take her a half hour to reach her parents' house. With the blizzard, the more likely estimate is forty five minutes, minimum.

She glares at the racked mic of her dashboard CB, listening as static, very much like what was on the television, hisses at her. It is the only response to the constant calls she's been putting out. Her parents have a big base unit in their home, and her youngest brother, Washington, an absolute radio fiend, is never more than three steps away from it.

"You bastards better not have hurt my family, or I'll rip you apart with my bare hands."

It's pretty impotent as threats go, but a part of her feels better for having said it. Without bothering to signal, she makes the looping left turn that leads her to her parents' road, hoping against hope that time is still on her side.

**Two hours later**, Kirsten finally slows down and takes a moment to breathe. Her route has taken her off the freeway and onto two lane state highways, less frequently used and completely desolate in some places. Pulling onto a wide spot on the road, she puts the truck in park and takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Asimov sits up, his tongue lolling and his ears perked. "Bet you need a break, doncha?" She nods, answering for him, and ruffles the winter fur around his neck. "Okay, but make it quick."

Getting out of the truck and walking around the front, she can see spots of blood on the grillwork. Sick to her stomach, she reaches over and grasps the handle of the passenger door and lets the dog out. While Asimov paces the road shoulder, sniffing at the edge of the asphalt and at the fence posts that run parallel to it, Kirsten leans against the truck and takes a deep breath. Looking up into the night sky, the normal twinkling of the stars gives her a sense of security that she knows is false. "God," she sighs, looking down at Asimov, now done with business and waiting patiently in front of her. "Well pal, it's just us, and it's going to be that way for a while, I think. We have to stay low and try to figure out how to stop this insanity."

Suddenly all of the adrenaline coursing through her during her frantic escape from the city is gone, and exhaustion sets in. "Tonight, we sleep in the truck. Tomorrow, we head to the facility and try to get some answers."

Opening the door, she motions for the dog to jump in. Once he is inside, she gets back in and pulls the truck into a thicket of trees just off the road. As she shuts off the lights and the engine, her head slumps forward to rest on the steering wheel. "I'm tired, Asimov. You get to keep watch tonight."

She crawls into the back of the truck, shoving and pulling her supplies around until she finds her sleeping bag and pillow. Asimov remains in the front seat and watches as his human settles down to try to sleep. Before she feels completely safe, Kirsten removes her gun from the duffle bag and snicks off the safety. She knows it probably won't stop them, but if her aim is good, it might at least slow them down.

"Sleep," she mutters. "I need sleep. It'll all be better in the morning."

**Dakota leaves the** motor running and the lights blazing as she jumps down from her truck and starts toward the front door.

The lights being on likely saves her life, as she is able to see the rifle barrel poke out of one of the front windows seconds before it goes off, bullet piercing the air where she'd been not a split second before.

"Who's there?" comes the quavering sound of a young man's voice, caught in a quandary of puberty and terror.

"Damn it, Phoenix, is that you, goober?"

"Koda?"

"Yeah, it's me. Now do you wanna put that gun away before you blow my head off?"

"Sorry."

Dakota takes no more than two steps toward the porch when the door flies open and her mother, a short, stocky woman, rushes out into the snow, her arms flung open. "Dakota! My daughter, you're home! I was so worried."

The younger woman takes her mother into her arms and returns the crushing hug, chilled fingers tenderly stroking the thick, silver threaded black hair that is tied back in a fat braid. "I'm home, *Ina*. It's okay, I'm home." After a moment, she pulls away, large hands descending on her mother's broad shoulders. "Let's get inside. It's freezing out here."

"But your truck..."

"Leave it that way for now. We need to talk."

Stepping inside the huge ranch house, she is immediately comforted by the sounds and scents of home, a place she has done no more than visit in the past five years. Her brothers and sisters, seven in this bunch, surround her in a tight press, hugging and touching and talking, all at once. Dakota finally wriggles her hands free and holds them up in a gesture of calm.

"One at a time. One at a time."

They look at her with shining, hopeful faces. Though only the third born, she has always been their rock, and their love for her is boundless. In turn, she is fiercely, utterly, devoted to them, like a mother bear protecting her newborn cubs.

Looking around the room, she notices that two family members are conspicuously absent. "Where's *Até*? And *Tacoma*?"

"They're both down at the MacGregor's ranch. Kimberly called, screaming for help. I couldn't understand her, and she hung up before I was able to know what was wrong. Your father and brother went out there."

Dakota stiffens. "How long ago?"

Her mother looks at the clock. "No more than ten or fifteen minutes. With the storm, they probably just got there." Reaching out, she clamps her daughter's arm in a very strong grip. "Dakota, what's going on?"

It's a demand, not a question. Koda answers, "I wish I could tell you, *Ina*, but I just don't know. Something's happening, something big, I think, but I need more information to go on."

"I won't accept that, Dakota," her mother replies, deep black eyes flashing with a light she knows only too well.

Dakota smiles, just slightly, and lays a gentle hand over her mother's. "You'll have to, Mother, if for just a little while longer. I need to get to Father and *Tacoma*."

"Are they in danger?"

Dakota considers lying, but in the end, just can't bring herself to do it. "I don't know," she says softly.

Her mother releases her arm immediately, drawing back just a step. "I'll let it go then. For now. Do what you need to, and bring them both back safely."

"I'll do my best."

Smiling, her mother pulls her head down for a kiss, then releases her. "I know you will."

Turning to leave, Dakota is surprised when a small missile — in the shape of her youngest brother — launches itself into her arms. "I wanna go with you, Koda! Can I, please?"

She hugs the ten-year-old close against her, taking in his young boy scent. "You can't, Wash. Not this time."

"But I wanna! Please?" He draws the last word out and looks at her with big, pleading dark eyes. "Please?"

"Washington."

The young boy stiffens in his sister's arms at the sound of his mother's voice.

"Wash, I need you here to man the CB. You're the only one who knows how to work the da — ah — darn thing, right?"

Washington reluctantly nods.

"And if I need help with Father and Tacoma, who do you think I'm gonna call?"

"Me?"

"Of course you. You're the only one I can count on with this, and you know it."

The boy smiles, his narrow chest puffing out with pride. "I won't let you down, Koda."

Grinning, Dakota releases her brother and swats him on the behind, which earns a yelp and a scowl.

"See you guys later."

With a wave and a grin, Dakota is gone.

**The morning sun** is too bright and very warm when it shines directly into Kirsten's eyes. Yawning, she rolls over to feel a kink in her neck. "Well, it's not my water bed, that's for sure." Lifting her head, she looks to her furry companion. "You okay, buddy?"

Asimov yawns too, and rests his head on the back of the seat.

"Okay, let's dig out the map and see where we need to go."

Rifling through a computer case, she removes the map and unfolds it. "Okay, we're here. And we need to be..." she follows a route with her finger, "...here. Looks like about sixteen hundred miles." She sighs. "Well, that sucks. It's going to take days to get there, and we need to be careful. Maybe it won't be as bad as we head out west."

Even as she speaks the words, she knows she's lying to herself. They are everywhere, and no one is safe. She has come to the conclusion that her parents are dead. They had three of the monsters in their house and could never understand Kirsten's demand that they get rid of them. She couldn't make them understand what she knew. There was no way to make anybody believe it.

She remembers her mother tending her rose garden and her father trimming the hedges and what she considered an almost idealistic way to grow up. She had been an only child, and her parents had encouraged her and given her the support she needed to follow her dreams. She realizes that eventually she will have to go to Georgia to find out if they're alive, but the incessant ringing of her parents' phone has given her all the answers she really needs.

Folding the map, she tosses it into the front and crawls into the driver's seat. She looks over to Asimov. "You don't want to drive, do you?"

The dog squirms in his seat and lays his head down to get some sleep.

"I didn't think so."

Starting the truck, she pulls back out onto the road and turns left toward her destination.

**She knows the** roads between the two ranches well, and before too much time has passed, Dakota has parked her truck behind a high bank of snow, lights off, engine shut down to silence. She can see her father's large, burly body propped against another snowbank overlooking the valley where the ranch house sits sprawled like a dog sunning itself.

She hoots low, twice, using a call learned from the man propped against the snowbank. A hand is raised, slightly, and she moves forward, taking care to keep her head below the level of the bank. Within seconds, she's laid out carefully beside her father, whose sheer size dwarfs her own not inconsiderable height, being a couple inches over six feet without her boots on.

Her oldest brother, Tacoma, lies on her other side. He shares his father's height but not his girth, instead sporting a swimmer's build that is all the rage in the few scattered nightclubs around town. Women literally fall over themselves trying to get his attention. Unfortunately for them, he's as gay as old dad's hatband. Still, he doesn't mind the attention. It's a source of great teasing in the Rivers' household.

"Hey," Dakota whispers to them both. They reply with silent nods. Both are armed. Her father carries a Winchester Black Shadow rifle, and her brother, a Black Shadow pump action shotgun.

Feeling the cold bite into her even through several layers of clothing, she eases her head up just slightly to peer over the top of the bank. What she sees causes her jaw to tighten, muscles bunching and jumping.

Ian MacGregor, a big, bluff, and kindly Scotsman, lies dead, half on, half off of his large wrap porch, his wide eyes staring blankly into whatever eternity exists for him. His two adult sons, both strapping like their father, lie one to either side of Ian, a gruesome trinity.

Dakota has known them all since she was in the cradle, and the sight of their lifeless bodies twists something deep inside her guts. Her face, likewise, twists, into a grimace she's not aware of displaying. The door to the house is splintered to kindling, and if she listens hard enough, she can hear the faint sounds of screaming above the howling of the wind. "How many?" she asks her father.

"I don't know," he replies, shifting his heavy bulk on the packed snow and ice. "Was like this when we came."

A shadow passes over the threshold, and a moment later, a tall, broad shouldered male strides out into the cold, holding two screaming young girls by their long, dark hair. They're trying their best to break free,

but it's as if the man doesn't even notice he's holding them; the kicks, gouges and punches have absolutely no effect whatsoever. He turns and faces the house, as if waiting for something within.

Dakota lets out a breath that sounds like a growl and reaches out a hand. Her father hands over his gun willingly. Then she turns to her brother. "Can you still shoot the balls off a gnat at a hundred yards?"

"Yeah," Tacoma replies with no pride in his voice.

"Trade me, then." Grasping the shotgun, she trades for the rifle.

Though he knows his father keeps his guns immaculate, he checks the rifle over carefully, a habit he hasn't lost since his Army days, seemingly a lifetime ago. Satisfied, he nods to her, eyebrows raised to his hairline.

"All right. When I say 'go,' I want you to wing him. Shoulder, arm, it doesn't matter. Just don't hit those girls."

"But..."

"Listen to me, Tac, 'cause we don't have much time. Just get his attention. Make him turn, maybe loosen his grip a little, all right?"

"If you say so, sis."

"I do."

Tacoma looks over at his father, who nods. He nods back. "Okay. I'm ready."

Taking off her gloves, Dakota flexes her fingers, then eases them around the pump action of the shotgun. "All right. Ready? Go!"

Tacoma rises up in a perfect marksman's stance and eases the trigger back. The sound of the rifle firing is almost insignificant, but the bullet hits its mark, and the man spins. The two girls stumble off their feet, still tethered to this man by their hair. Both scream in agony.

Dakota jumps to her feet, shotgun socketed and ready. "Let them go, you bastard!" The last word hangs in the air, only to be obliterated a split second later by the huge roar of the shotgun's blasting. Most of the man's face disappears, and he topples back into the snow. "Katie! Kelly! RUN!"

They try, but they're still in the unyielding grip of the man's hands. Screaming in terror, they finally find the strength to pull away, leaving sizable hunks of brown hair behind.

"RUN!" Dakota starts forward, shotgun aimed and ready. Sinking into thigh-deep snow with every step, her gait is slow and plodding. Everything seems preternaturally bright as she moves forward, keeping a wary eye on the fallen stranger.

A moment later, a second man darts outside. He's armed with an Uzi, which he immediately fires, spraying bullets all over the compound. Dakota drops into the snow an instant too late. She can feel the hot bloom of pain welling up from her side. She doesn't know how badly she's hurt, but her body freezes, stunned for a brief moment, and she loses her grip on the gun. "Shit!"

"Dakota!"

She can hear the screams of her father and brother, but the sound of Tacoma's frantic rifle fire is drowned out by the noise of the Uzi firing again and again.

"Stay down!"

She thinks she's screaming, but the sound is only a gasp. She struggles to move, but the snow has her cocooned, and her body still isn't ready to work the way it should. Long fingers, reddened and chapped from the icy snow and bitter wind, scramble desperately for the gun she's lost.

"DAKOTA!"

Rounds of fire streak over her head. *It sounds like a war zone, and in a way, she muses, that's exactly what it is.* She knows her father and brother are pinned down by the Uzi fire. To move forward would be suicide, but she also knows that either one would willingly risk his life for hers. And she would do the same, without hesitation.

*Dear God, let them be safe. Please let them be safe. If I have to die, fine. Just...don't take them too, okay?*

*Finally!* Luck puts her hand in the path of her shotgun, and with a spastic, clamping grip, she drags it through the snow to cradle against her chest. She can't really feel it; her hands are blocks of wood, but her finger finds the trigger by pure instinct, and she waits, eyes open to whatever fate awaits her.

She can hear footsteps, and knows they're coming from the wrong direction. Her already tense body tenses even further, causing fresh blood to gush from her wound, staining the snow a garish red.

*Snow cone, anyone?*

Gallows humor makes its appearance right on time, as always. A face and the muzzle of an Uzi make a simultaneous appearance within Dakota's reduced field of vision. The face is completely blank; no emotions can be read in those shining, soulless eyes.

She sees him hesitate, and it's all the opening her body needs. Levering her shotgun's muzzle up, she pulls the trigger. "Eat shit, you bastard!"

The force of the blast blows him off his feet, and she forces her body to roll up to a seated, and finally standing, position. She sways for a moment, then walks steadily toward the prone figure lying in the deep

snow. She can sense her family closing quickly, but this is something she has to do for herself. White teeth flash in a wolf's smile and she points the gun downward. "Die, you miserable, stinking piece of shit."

A pull of the trigger, and the face is totally obliterated. A pump of the action, and she places the muzzle against the shoulder joint. Another blast and the arm disintegrates from the shoulder. A third blast takes the second arm. Finally satisfied, she relaxes slightly, still staring down at the mangled figure in the snow.

A warm hand clasps her shoulder, and she turns her head to look up into the concerned face of her father. "I'll be all right. Are you guys okay?"

"That was some shooting, sis," Tacoma remarks, grinning. Then he notices the blood on her shirt and his smile disappears. "Shit, Koda, you got busted."

"I'll live," she replies dryly, though now that the fight is over, her pain begins to make itself felt. "We need to go up to the house and see if anyone else is still alive."

Reaching down, her father picks up the Uzi, then straightens. "Your brother and I will take care of that. You just get back to your truck and wait for us there."

Though many years from her childhood, Dakota knows an order when she hears one, and nods. "Yes, sir."

A rare hint of a smile crosses her father's handsome face. "You did well, Daughter. I'm proud."

*Funny, even after all these years, how good that still makes me feel.* Even so, as she watches her father and brother enter the house, she resists going back to the warmth of her truck. Clamping a hard hand on her wound to help staunch the sluggish bleeding, she stares down at her handiwork. The figure is twitching. The legs are moving in slow motion, like a dog dreaming of chasing butterflies. That fierce grin comes again, but she doesn't raise her gun. *Not yet. Not yet.*

*"I might not be able to kill you, you bastard, but I can make damn sure you don't ever hurt anyone again."*

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL