

THE LIGHT OF HIS SWORD

ARCHANGEL: BOOK 1

ALAINA STANFORD

By Alaina Stanford

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Chapter One

The shadows writhed and churned, darting between the white frame buildings of the rural compound. They beckoned to the young mother slipping slowly into the darkness. Alyssa grabbed her six-year old daughter, Samantha's, hand and crept slowly past the tallest building known as the gathering hall. A low unearthly hum came from within. It slowly sucked all hope out of the air. It was a familiar sound. A sound that said the elders were deep into their worship.

An unearthly moan came from inside the gathering hall as Alyssa pulled Samantha toward the far end of the building. A chill ran through her that sank into her bones. A scream of desperation filled the air. Alyssa's eyes filled with tears. She brushed them away. This was the only time they brought the dogs in from the perimeter. The only time they took them into the sanctuary. It would be an entire month before the dogs were pulled inside again. There was nothing she could do for the others. She had to push on.

The wind bit at their ears and tried to shove them back toward the compound. Ignoring it, they rushed across the open area between the living quarters and the tall, razor wire fence. They stopped at a tall tree near the fence. Alyssa used the tree for concealment as she removed a large clump of grass revealing a shallow hole under the fence. She used a forked stick to force the fence up. Alyssa helped Samantha slip underneath, and followed her. They crouched low and ran across the meadow. Rising as they reached a small line of young trees, Alyssa took hold of Samantha's hand and ran as fast as her child could manage through the tall grass.

It wasn't long before Samantha began to whimper. She pulled her mother's hand wanting to stop. Alyssa forced herself to pause and point out a star as it shot across the sky. Samantha stood next to her mother trembling in the cold autumn air. Draping her arm across Samantha's shoulders, Alyssa forced herself to smile despite the intense urge to run through the darkness. She gazed into Samantha's big, blue eyes and said, "Isn't it pretty? It looks like the star is chasing a fairy across the sky."

Samantha's eyes opened wide with wonder forgetting the cold, damp air that caused her threadbare dress to cling her bone thin form. "Could it be an angel?" She whispered.

Alyssa's eyes grew dark with anger. She whispered back, "Angels aren't real."

She began to move again, pulling Samantha along behind her. They stumbled through the thick layer of leaves trying not to trip on the holes and stumps hidden beneath. The meadow offered no protection against the winds forceful onslaught. Yet Alyssa pushed on, knowing they had to put as much distance between them and the compound as possible. Once the alarm sounded, they would have only minutes before the search began.

It had seemed like hours before they reached the shallow creek that marked the edge of town. The tall grass was thick with thorny weeds. Alyssa wrinkled her nose at the foul smell of the stagnant water and jumped as a slimy creature slithered past her foot. "We just have to reach the trees." She told Samantha.

The scent of rain quickly pushed away the sour smell of the creek as they moved deeper into the forest. The wind whipped Alyssa's long, blonde hair across her eyes, making it difficult to maintain a quick pace. She glanced toward the tall evergreen trees up ahead. The trees offered shelter from the approaching storm and would mask their passing, unlike the trampled grass they left in their wake.

When they reached the tree line, Samantha began to whimper again. "It's so cold mommy; my fingers are stinging, and my legs itch."

Samantha wore a smaller version of the short-sleeved, gray, cotton dress. Alyssa knelt and rubbed Samantha's bare legs. Pulling several burrs from Samantha's sock, she ran her hand down the length of her daughter's long, golden hair. It was full of burrs and weeds. Reaching in her pocket, Alyssa pulled out two dark black ribbons. She tied Samantha's hair back in a ponytail, and then did the same with hers. "It's okay sweetie. Bury your hands inside the collar of my dress. That will warm them up." Alyssa picked Samantha up and hurried deeper into the woods. It was past midnight; the ceremony would soon be over.

Despite the bumpy ride, Samantha fell quickly asleep on Alyssa's shoulders. By the time she reached the sidewalks of the small town located several miles from the compound, Alyssa was exhausted. She fought for breath as she placed Samantha on her feet urging her to wake. "Samantha, we are almost there, and I'm a little tired. I need you to walk."

"No, mommy, I want to sleep." Samantha yawned and rubbed her eyes. Her pale cheeks and tiny nose were rosy from the cold.

“It’s a little further, and then we can stop and rest.” Alyssa cooed, kissing Samantha’s cheek and giving her a quick hug. Alyssa chastised herself for her recklessness. It was careless to allow her urgency for to escape to interfere with her judgment. She should have grabbed a blanket to wrap around Samantha.

The rural town was no more than a few short blocks of small, boxy houses and a handful of stores. The main street through town stood before them. A short row of stores lay directly ahead. Taking Samantha’s tiny hand in hers, Alyssa led her toward the nearest building where the sidewalk began. The town was dark and quiet as it should be at the late hour. Leaves and small debris skittered across the damp pavement as they rushed across the narrow street deeper into town.

An occasional raindrop spurred Alyssa to move faster. The last thing they needed was to be caught in a soaking frigid rain. The only building that offered any light beyond the occasional lantern style streetlight was the small brick post office that sat in the center of town. That was their destination.

No one was around to see them slip through the glass doors into the post office. The short counter inside the one room office was locked behind a chain-link security gate. On the far side of the room was a small alcove lined with Post Office Boxes. Alyssa went directly to a small box in the center of the main section. She pulled a key from her dress pocket and opened the little door. Please let it be there, she thought. If it wasn’t, then their escape had been for nothing. Inside was an envelope addressed to Resident. Her hand trembled as she pulled it out. Glancing around the vacant room, she felt ridiculous assuring herself they were alone. Ripping one end open she pulled out a small amount of cash, a credit card, a set of car keys and a note.

Alyssa sighed relief forced away the fear as she read the note, then stuffed the items back in the envelope. All the planning and midnight trips into town had finally paid off. It took her nearly two months after she received word that everything was in place to build up her courage and risk the escape. She only hoped the car was still waiting for them. Alyssa turned to her daughter. “We’re all set, four adventure. The car isn’t too far, but we have to walk a little bit more to get there.”

“Oh no, mommy,” Samantha whined, “My feet hurt. You said I could rest.”

"I know baby. I'm so sorry," Alyssa picked her up and headed for the door. "I'll carry you; everything is going to be just fine." She forced back the tears. It was so hard to take Samantha out into the cold night air without a jacket. The elders were the only ones allowed to wear jackets or coats. The women and children weren't allowed outside in the winter. Therefore, there was no need for coats. Shoes were considered unnecessary and therefore prohibited until the winter months. Even then, the shoes they provided were more like slippers. Her shoes were nearly worn through from the walk through the damp woods. The lack thereof and the poor quality of the shoes was one of the many ways the compound kept them away from the outside world.

The outside world was barely more than a dream to Alyssa. She remembered when her parents brought her to live at the compound. Alyssa was the same age as Samantha. The elders greeted them with smiles and hugs when they arrived. Despite the high fence that surrounded the complex of white framed buildings, it appeared to be a passive farming community. Yet a few days later they took Alyssa's dolls away, put her in a gray cotton dress, and made her sleep with the other children away from her parents. She'd been so frightened sleeping on the pile of rugs in such a dark room next to the other children.

Then one night her father came to take her home. They climbed through a hole he dug under the high fence and rushed across the same meadow she and Samantha passed through. But they never reached the town. The elders found them as they entered the trees. Her father fought with all his strength, but there were too many. Alyssa remembered screaming and clinging to her mother as they beat her father unconscious. The elders locked Samantha in the children's room and took her parents to the sanctuary. She never saw her father again. Weeks went by before she was allowed to see her mother. Even then they were closely supervised in the great room of the gathering hall. All her mother could do that day was hold Alyssa and cry.

Not long after that, unspeakable things began to happen. The elders came in one night and chose a child. All the children hid beneath their covers and tried to act invisible when the men came, hoping they would not be chosen. You didn't want to be chosen. No one could speak of what happened once they got you alone. Alyssa had never been more afraid in her life.

Alyssa's body trembled at the thought of Samantha, who would reach the age to be taken in only a few weeks. Soon they would come to take Samantha from her room and move her to the children's building. Alyssa vowed she would die before she'd let that happen. She could still see the faces of the children that had been taken. Their blank expressions, dead empty eyes void of all life. They would not play and hardly ate. They never spoke again. Then, one by one, on the night they were taken, they would not return.

Lightning flashed across the sky, jolting Alyssa back to the present as she headed down the street toward the far end of town. The last two buildings on the edge of town were a rustic second-hand store and a four-pump truck stop with a 24-hour diner. The note said the car was two thousand paces from the diner hidden in a barn. Samantha shivered in Alyssa's arms. She glanced around as the diner appeared in the distance and considered stopping to warm up.

The sound of men's voices came from behind them. Alyssa froze as she turned slowly to follow the source. An old house with tall peaks and rounded corners sat at the far end of the block. Several men in dark coats appeared out of the shadows of the large tree in the front yard, just as a gentle rain began to fall. The Elders!

Alyssa was grateful she'd kept to the shadows so close to the buildings. Sinking further into their dark protection, Alyssa kept her back against the cold brick wall of the storefront. Moving quickly, keeping as close to the building as possible, she ducked into a doorway and glanced back toward the elders. They stood on the far sidewalk glancing around and pointing, obviously discussing where to look next.

She dashed out of the doorway, rushed to the side of the building and disappeared around the corner. Sprinting across the street in the direction of the diner, Alyssa shivered as the rain penetrated her dress with its cold, wet touch. Alyssa ran down the alley behind the row of homes. Just keep going, don't stop! She told herself. This time she didn't look back; instead, she concentrated on speed.

The jostling movement woke Samantha, and she began to whimper. "I'm getting wet!" She moaned, raising her head to see what was going on.

"Hush, hush, my darling," Alyssa cooed. "We are going to stop soon to get warm."

The end of the alley came quickly. Alyssa could see the diner across the narrow side street facing the main boulevard. The Elders were somewhere behind her. If they were still

on Main Street, they would see her enter the diner. She hoped they had moved on. She also hoped there were enough people in the diner to keep the elders from confronting her if they hadn't.

Alyssa forced herself to walk quickly across the street not wanting to draw attention. She shifted Samantha in her arms, opened the glass door to the diner and went inside. Samantha buried her face in her mother's shoulder hiding from the bright light of the diner. The rush of warm air and aroma of hot food was intoxicating. Alyssa's stomach growled as she glanced around. She was uncertain of what to do.

A long counter with red vinyl stools ran across the far side. A row of red booths lined the windows. The diner had stark white walls and silvery metallic tables with a gray speckled floor. One solid red stripe ran around the edge of the counter. Alyssa glanced at the chubby brunette waitress with the strange blue streak in her hair who was talking to a man sitting at the nearest booth. There was a young couple in a booth at the back of the diner staring intently at each other. No one approached or even glanced in their direction. Alyssa moved slowly to a booth at the center of the diner.

"I'm thirsty," Samantha announced, stretching her arms and allowing her mother to place her on the seat in the booth beside her.

The waitress came to their table and said, "I bet this little one would like a hot chocolate with marshmallows."

Alyssa stared at the waitress not knowing what to say. The waitress glanced at their clothing and her smile vanished. She glanced out the long row of windows. Then turned back and added, "And a cup of coffee with cream and sugar for mommy? Perhaps a bowl of soup to warm your bones?"

"Yes," Alyssa said softly.

The waitress disappeared behind the counter and into the kitchen. Alyssa followed her gaze out the window. It was so bright in the diner she couldn't see any farther than the dimly lit parking lot that held the gas pumps. A dark blue semi-truck with a large white trailer blocked the view of the street. She glanced at the man that sat in the booth near the door. He wore blue jeans and a green flannel shirt; he must be the truck driver. Their eyes met for a brief moment causing Alyssa's heart to jump. He was beautiful. His light brown

hair, and deep blue eyes were striking. He had high cheekbones and a square jaw covered in a thin beard as if he hadn't shaved in several days.

Alyssa forced her eyes away from him and glanced back to the parking lot as an old tan Buick pulled in and stopped. Three men in gray shirts and black pants climbed out of the car and glanced around. Alyssa ducked down in the booth and grabbed hold of Samantha. She glanced toward the rear of the diner as the waitress returned with their drinks. Noticing the look of panic on Alyssa's face, the waitress looked out the window at the approaching men. She motioned toward the rear of the diner and said, "Head to the back; there's a door past the bathroom that leads to the alley. I'll keep them busy."

Without another word, the waitress hurried to the front door to block the men's view of Alyssa's escape. The truck driver sat silently watching as Alyssa disappeared into the short back hallway. He turned slowly to gaze at the three men who entered. Casually rising, he left cash on the table, picked up the sugar dispenser and nodded at the waitress. He locked eyes with the oldest of the three men. He was tall, had dark hair speckled with gray at the temples. The truck driver flashed the man an innocent smile, pushing past him. He returned it with an icy glare.

"No, I haven't seen anyone like that in here tonight." The waitress' voice echoed behind him.

The truck driver walked slowly to the back of the rusty Buick and flipped down the license plate at the rear of the vehicle. He emptied the sugar dispenser into the gas tank, then casually walked to his truck.

Alyssa held onto Samantha and ran across the back of the diner toward the two-lane highway that led out of town. Exhaustion made her arms and legs feel slow and heavy like lead. She stumbled, nearly falling. She wasn't going to make it; she wasn't strong enough. Oh, grandma, I was such a fool to think I could do this! Her mind screamed.

She glanced down at her daughter's frightened face looking up at her searching for comfort. A voice inside her urged, Keep going. Don't stop, you're nearly there. Suddenly a burst of energy flowed through her. She didn't stop running until she found the remnants of a small white barn sitting alone in the center of a field. The barn leaned precariously to one side. Running around to the rear through the deep mud that sucked the shoes off her feet,

she sat Samantha down and pulled at the wide wooden door sliding it sideways to reveal a car hidden inside.

Alyssa smiled in relief. "We did it!" She whispered to Samantha. "Now you can rest, and soon we will be safe."

The barn smelled of straw, animal musk and manure. The scent was so strong Alyssa could almost taste it. She pulled the envelope from her pocket and found the key. Unlocking the car door, she slid behind the wheel and sat Samantha on the cold vinyl bench seat beside her. When she closed the car door, the lights went out, and Samantha gasped in fear.

"It's okay sweetie," Alyssa pulled Samantha against her and opened the door to turn the light back on. "Remember when I told you grandpa brought me to the compound. We came in his truck. He used to let me sit on his lap and steer."

Alyssa pulled the note from her pocket and read the instructions about the car. She studied the console searching for the spot where the key should go. Finally, she found a small opening on the steering column and wiggled the key until it slid into the narrow slit. She turned the key, and the engine started. Alyssa thought her heart would burst with excitement as she wiggled the shift lever until it slipped into reverse. She pushed lightly on the gas pedal.

The car lurched backward much faster than she expected and bounced across the grassy field. Alyssa stomped on the brake with her left foot and jolted to a stop. Samantha slid from her seat onto the floor and began to cry.

"Oh, baby!" Alyssa said reaching for her. She pulled her near and kissed her cheek asking, "Are you hurt?"

"No mommy," Samantha said quietly, adding, "Just don't do that again. Maybe you should go slower."

Alyssa laughed and said, "Thank you; I will do my best."

She took a deep breath and searched for the knob that turned on the headlights. When she located it, and the lights came on, she smiled at Samantha and put the car into gear. The car jerked as she struggled to move toward the highway. A dark blue semi-truck sped by as she reached the road.

Alyssa pulled gingerly out behind the semi-truck and followed it down the road. Its taillights disappeared into the distance as she began to pick up speed. Her spirits soared as

the distance grew between them and the compound. She glanced down at Samantha, who stared out the windshield into the darkness before them. They had done it! They escaped Walton's clutches! Samantha was safe! They were both safe and on their way to their new life!

Samantha would never have to endure the evil of the sanctuary. Tears filled Alyssa's eyes at the thought of the other children she was forced to leave behind. She had been one of those children not so long ago. She was spared the worst of it. She was never taken to the sanctuary. She was taken to the high elder Walton instead. She gave birth to Samantha at age 15, still a child herself. She would never allow that to happen to her baby. Once she reached the safety of her grandmother's farm; she would see to it no other child suffered at the elders' hands again. She would find a way to rescue them.

Alyssa reached out to play with the knobs and buttons on the dash that appeared to be a heater. She slid one knob into the red zone and flipped a switch. A surge of warm musty air poured through the vents in the dash. Samantha smiled up at her and reached out to warm her hands in the gentle flow of air. Alyssa reached over and stroked Samantha's hair. They were together and safe. Alyssa was determined to keep it that way.

However, Walton was not one to give up easily. Alyssa forced herself to stay awake and drive until the purple glow of dawn caressed the horizon in front of them. Her fingers ached from clutching the steering wheel tightly for so many hours. Luckily, Samantha fell asleep shortly after the car filled with warmth. Her tiny head lay nestled on Alyssa's lap. Just keep driving, she told herself. She pulled the envelope from her pocket as the sun's soft light filled the car. Reaching inside she pulled out her grandmother's note. It not only listed instructions about the car, but which highways to take to reach her farm.

It was a long journey. It would take at least 4 days to drive from northern Idaho to Indiana because they were going to drive straight south first, then turn east once she was certain they were not being followed. Walton would be extremely angry at her escape, so she had to be careful. Glancing at the note, Alyssa checked the first two highways listed. She glanced up at the signs they passed to verify she was on the right road. Yes, there was a road sign. She was doing fine.

When the sun rose higher in the sky, the car began to grow too warm. Alyssa turned down the heat and rolled down her window a tiny bit to allow the moist morning air to fill the car. Samantha rubbed her eyes and sat up glancing around.

"I'm hungry, mommy." She said with a yawn, gazing at her expectantly.

Alyssa stretched her arms and leaned forward, trying to stretch the sore muscles in her back. She was exhausted and sleepy. A large sign up ahead said *Travel Center*. Alyssa pointed at the sign and said, "There is a place we can stop. It says it's for travelers, and that's who we are today."

Samantha glanced at the sign and smiled. "Can I get a sweet biscuit?"

"Of course, they might even have chocolate." Alyssa smiled and turned into the large parking area filled with cars and semi-trucks. Gas pumps sat under a tall canopy that surrounded the large main building. Alyssa glanced down at the panel on the car and noted the gauge was pointing toward the *E*, which must mean it was nearly empty. They would need gas. She hoped she would be able to figure out how to do it. She parked next to a row of cars in front of the diner.

The moist concrete was so cold on Alyssa's bare feet. She glanced down at her mud-caked toes as she pulled open the door that said *No shirt, no shoes, no service* and tried to control her breathing as they went inside.

The store was filled with food, clothing and a small variety of toys. Soft music rang through the store. Alyssa and Samantha gazed at everything in awe for only a moment before Samantha began to dance. "I have to go potty." She whispered, glancing nervously around the store.

Alyssa saw a sign with a silhouette of a man and a woman that said *Restrooms* and headed toward them. The bathroom held so many stalls Alyssa hesitated at first, then walked quickly to the first stall and took Samantha inside. There was only one other woman in the restroom when they came out of the stall. Alyssa watched as the older woman pushed a button on the box for soap then held her hands under the faucet. Alyssa gasped, amazed as the water rushed out onto the woman's hands.

Following suit, she and Samantha giggled as the water appeared magically on command then stopped when they pulled their hands away. The box with paper towels did the same. Popping a towel out when they reached toward it.

A small display case of pastries was located at the back of the store. Samantha chose several and placed them in a small white box. A long row of refrigerators with glass doors held drinks and other snacks. Alyssa pulled out a small bottle of chocolate milk and handed it to Samantha. They walked down each aisle in the store amazed at the food and assortment of toys and other unknown items displayed. Finding a small shelf that held soaps and perfumes Alyssa grabbed a pair of sandals marked as discounted. Alyssa chose a couple bags of assorted nuts and cookies then headed to the cashier.

Intent on keeping Samantha by her side Alyssa didn't notice the truck driver from the diner standing in line in front of them until he turned around. His hair was damp, and he smelled of soap. Alyssa gazed into his deep, blue eyes and felt that same lurch in her stomach as in the diner.

He flashed a surprised smile, adjusted several energy drinks and bottled waters in his hands. "Good Morning, ladies! It's nice to see you again. Traveling far?"

Alyssa pulled her eyes away and glanced at the floor. "Yes," she answered in a quiet yet annoyed tone. She forced her eyes to rise and focused on placing her items on the counter as he moved aside.

He glanced at the pretty little girl beside her, then back to Alyssa. She had dark circles under her eyes; her dress was slightly torn. Both of their clothes held stains and splashes of dirt. His gaze lingered on Alyssa's muddy bare feet. He said, "It looks like you could use this more than me." He handed her one of the energy drinks, "It's not a drug. It's full of vitamins and caffeine. It's like having 4 cups of coffee all at once. It will keep you awake for several hours."

Alyssa paid the cashier with cash and glanced up at him as she accepted the can of liquid. He had a very kind face. His eyes were sincere and beckoning. "Thank you," She said in a soft tone.

"My pleasure and you might be interested in the farmers market a couple miles up the highway if you are looking for some fresh fruit." He winked at the child, then turned and headed out the door.

Alyssa pulled the food from the counter, took hold of Samantha's hand and followed him outside. He stopped to open one of his bottled waters just outside the door. Alyssa took a deep breath and approached him.

“Excuse me,” She began, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m not very mechanical, and I’ve never owned a car before.”

He turned to gaze down at her.

She added, “Could you show me how to put gas in my car?”

A huge smile crossed his face, and he chuckled softly, “My pleasure, why don’t you pull the car up next to the pump and I’ll give you a hand.”

Alyssa’s heart pounded as she slowly backed up the car and pulled in next to the gas pump. She felt like a fool inching her way backward then moving slowly toward the pump, but she didn’t dare go any faster in fear of hitting the pump. She smiled nervously at Samantha, who was perched high in her seat overseeing her mother’s progress.

“You’re doing it, mommy,” She encouraged, “You’re almost there.”

She stopped the car and got out, as the truck driver moved to the back of her car. Alyssa came up beside him, followed quickly by Samantha. He offered her his hand and said, “My name is Gabe.”

Alyssa shook his hand and answered, “My name is Alyssa, and this is my daughter Samantha.”

“Nice to meet you.” He offered Samantha, his hand. She grinned from ear to ear and shook it eagerly.

Gabe said, “Your tank access is here under the license plate. Just screw off the cap and choose regular gas. You can use a credit card or pay cash inside.” He showed her how to choose her options and how to use the pump. When Gabe was done, he added, “If I were you, I’d avoid traveling at night. Two pretty ladies such as you are much safer traveling in the light of day.”

Alyssa could see the sincerity in his face. He was the first man she’d ever known other than her father who was kind and helpful without expecting something in return. “Thank you for the advice.” She answered, “You’re very kind.”

“My pleasure,” He smiled at Samantha, adding, “Take care.”

Alyssa pulled out of the Travel Center. Samantha sat beside her and ate the pastries. She offered her mother one, and then offered her the energy drink Gabe had given them saying, “You look really tired. Don’t fall asleep; this car is too big for me to drive.”

Accepting the drink, she pulled the tab and took a sip. It was sweet but tasted strange. Shortly after she forced herself to finish the drink, her hands became a bit shaky. Her thoughts began to race as fast as her pulse. She reached over and turned the knobs on the console that appeared to control the radio. A thrilling, fast-paced song rang through the car. Alyssa tapped her fingers against the steering wheel in beat with the tune.

The energy drink was as Gabe described. It kept Alyssa alert for the next few hours. The next time they stopped at a gas station, she bought sandwiches and two more energy drinks. Finally, as the sunset turned pink and orange, she pulled into a small, rural roadside hotel. Alyssa went into the office and checked in with her grandmother's credit card. She took Samantha into the small restaurant located just off the lobby.

Samantha ate chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs while Alyssa dined on meatloaf and mashed potatoes. The food was spicy and salty, but it felt wonderful to have a hot meal. By the time, they reached their room Alyssa was exhausted; the energy drinks had finally worn off. She gave Samantha a bath then took a quick shower. She used the bar of hand soap to wash their dresses and undergarments in the bathroom sink, then wrung them out and draped them over the shower bar to dry. She yawned and crawled into the bed to curl up next to Samantha, who was already fast asleep under the covers.

Her thoughts went to the road ahead and the truck driver's words. It never occurred to her that the long trip to her grandmothers might be dangerous for a woman and child alone. She glanced at the solid white door leading into the hall then rose and pushed the small safety bar into place. She climbed back in bed, rolled over and inhaled the musty scent of the thin pillow. Regardless, nothing was going to stop her from getting Samantha to safety. They would travel only during the daylight from now on and stop only for gas and food.

Her mother communicated with her grandmother for years using that Post Office Box. Her mother was the one who risked discovery and punishment by sneaking out at night once a month to fetch the letters from the post office. She never brought them back with her but always told Alyssa what they said. They spoke of her love, concern, and constant offers to help them escape, but her mother was too frightened to try again. When her mother fell ill a few months ago, she gave Alyssa the key and told her of a weak spot in the

fence. She explained where the writing supplies and stamps were hidden. Alyssa was to write to her grandmother and plan an escape.

Alyssa pictured her mother's pale face in her mind. She'd grown weak so quickly. At first, Alyssa thought; she had a bad case of the flu, but she never recovered. Her short brown hair began to fall out in clumps, and her stomach cramps were so strong she doubled over in pain. No one ever came to check on her, not even the night she died. She and Alyssa were alone when her mother took her last breath. In those last moments, her mother wasn't afraid anymore. She was calm. Her face nearly glowed. She made Alyssa promise she would do everything in her power to get Samantha to her grandmother's farm.

As soon as Alyssa promised she would escape with Samantha, her mother relaxed and managed a weak smile. The grimace of pain left her face and her eyes glazed over. She whispered, "God has a plan for you. He will be with you on this journey."

They never spoke of God at the compound. Punishment at the tip of a whip would happen if you dared even mention God, Jesus, or Heaven. The elders believed in other deities whose names twisted your tongue and could only be whispered in the darkness of the candle lit sanctuary.

Alyssa stared up at the ceiling and considered her mother's words. Her last conversation with Walton leaped into her mind. Instead of comforting her upon her mother's death, he smiled and said, "It's best to forget the dead. They're part of the past and have nothing to do with your destiny. We need to concentrate on Samantha and ensure she is always with us. The prophecy says those closest to Samantha will be spared from the lake of fire when the end of days arrives. She is the future; she is our destiny, and we shall never be parted."

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