

# **The Defiance of His Conviction**

Archangel, Book 4

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## Chapter One

The wind cut through Alyssa's hair with icy fingers, forcing it back from her face as they ran. She glanced at her daughter who ran effortlessly beside her. Samantha turned eighteen that spring. Her long blonde hair was pulled up into a high ponytail. She wore a dark- gray wool headband that covered her forehead and ears. Samantha flashed her mother a fierce smile. She pointed to at a large elk as it crashed through the brush less than a hundred yards to their right. It bounded up a rise to disappear into the dense brush beyond.

Alyssa pulled a stocking cap from the pocket of her fleece jacket and stuffed it on her head. "Should we follow?" she challenged her daughter.

Samantha laughed, and slowed her pace as the elk sprang into the air out of the brush and darted east across the ridge. "No, I think we've already scared the life out of it."

Alyssa stopped to catch her breath, "If you'd brought your rifle, we certainly would have."

A distant howl filled the air, followed quickly by a chorus of the same. Neither one spoke as the elk spun and bolted toward the west along the ridge, back the way it had come. Samantha's big blue eyes locked with her mother's. She gasped, "Wolves!"

Alyssa grabbed Samantha's hand and glanced around. A ridge of snow-capped mountains surrounded them on all sides. Dense trees and tall grass lined the edge of their narrow trail. Deep in the Alaskan wilderness was the last place she wanted to have an encounter with a pack of wolves. "Why didn't we bring our guns?" she whispered to the sky.

"The ATVs are at the trailhead," Samantha took charge, squeezing her mother's hand. "The wolves are after the elk, not us. We can make it. It's only a mile."

Alyssa nodded. They took off down the trail at a fast run. Another chorus of howls filled the air. They were close, too close. Samantha shot Alyssa a desperate look, and they increased their pace. Alyssa whispered a breathless prayer, "Lord, don't let us die out here today. Not like this."

A figure darted out of the shadows to their right, and Samantha slammed into her mother, shoving her off the path. "Get to the trees!" she screamed.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alyssa caught a glimpse of a flash of gray fur bolting from the trees to their left. “Climb!” Alyssa yelled at Samantha, and snatched up a fallen branch as they reached the tree-line.

Alyssa spun to face the wolf. It wasn’t alone.

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Gabe split the log twice then tossed the four sections into the wheelbarrow. He glanced toward the house to find his daughter, Vada, scurrying after a loose chicken. He chuckled and said, “You’ll have to run faster than that. Peta is a fighter. She was born to free-range.”

His spry ten-year-old had his wavy blonde hair and her mother’s blue eyes. She shot him a look full of daggers, and he set the ax on the ground next to the stump he used to cut the wood. “All right,” He feigned a moan of exasperation and added, “I’m coming.”

Gabe’s long legs took only a few short strides to reach Vada’s side. He shot past her and began herding the brown and red chicken back toward her. The chicken squawked and flapped its wings as Vada dove at it. She landed on top of the bird. Gabe winced and asked, “Did you get her? Is she alive?”

Vada rolled onto her back, clutching Peta to her chest, and smiled up at him with her big blue eyes. “Of course she’s alive,” she giggled and offered the chicken to her father.

He clamped onto it with both hands and stuffed it under one arm. Reaching down with the other, he pulled Vada to her feet. “Good job, sweetie.” Gabe pulled the hood of her coat up over her head to cover her red ears. “Now go find Cody, and you two check the chicken wire and patch up Peta’s escape route.”

“He went hunting again,” Vada frowned. “He’s always hunting.”

“He’s good at it.” Gabe smiled at her, “We’re on our own out here. There’s no grocery store. Cody puts meat on the table. That’s his job. You watch over the chickens and help Mom milk the cows. Met should be back any minute with some salmon. Would you like to help us smoke the salmon this time?”

“Eeew! No!” Vada’s face screwed into a knot. “That’s so yucky! Slimy guts and fish stink; no, I definitely do not want to help you.”

Gabe chuckled, and pointed toward a pail of grain that sat on the front porch of the small log cabin they called home. “Then why don’t you grab the feed and I’ll help you patch Peta’s escape route?”

“My fish don’t stink!” a deep voice called out from the tree-line.

Vada turned and shouted at Met, “Yes, they do, and so do you!”

Met’s dark green eyes scowled at her from underneath the hood of his navy down parka. His white-blond hair snaked out the sides of the hood and trailed down his chest. He flexed his arm, causing his parka to tighten around his huge, rock solid biceps and broad shoulders. Without his wings, his oversized muscled gave him an ominous appearance, resembling something more akin to a demon instead of an angel. He roared, “If my fish stink, then so shall you!”

Vada screamed and darted behind her father as Met rushed toward her, waving his catch in the air. Bo, their border collie, came trotting around the side of the house. He barked and ran toward Met when he saw the fish. Met began to dart around the yard, chasing Vada while trying to keep Bo away from the fish.

Gabe laughed and slapped his leg, calling for Bo to no avail. Then, suddenly, he froze. The breath caught in his chest. Met dropped the fish where he stood, and the men exchanged glances. Gabe tore at the snaps on his coat as Met wrenched free of his parka. Met’s wings exploded from his back in a flutter of pale orange, green, and blue. Gabe’s pearl-white wings burst through his flannel shirt, and he turned to Vada as Met shot into the air. “Go inside, take Bo, bolt the door, and don’t open it until we get back.”

Vada nodded and ran for the house, Bo trailing close behind. Gabe waited until the door shut behind her then shot into the sky after Met.

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Half a dozen wolves surrounded the tree as Samantha scrambled up into its branches. Alyssa was certain there were more hiding out of sight. Samantha reached down from the tree branch toward her mother. “Throw the branch at them, and jump. I’ll catch you!”

But it was too late. The nearest wolf charged. It was large, a head taller than any full-size dog Alyssa had ever seen. She beat at it with the tree branch, barely able to keep it at bay. A

growl of frustration came from Samantha, and she dropped to the ground beside her mother, clutching a small knife in her hand.

An arrow zipped through the air from behind the tree, narrowly missing Samantha. Then a second, and a third. The two nearest wolves yelped in pain, falling to the ground as the arrows struck their torsos. A shadow darted past them, and more arrows filled the air. A lanky teenage boy with jet-black hair shot three more wolves, with such deadly accuracy they died where they stood.

The wolves scattered to the edge of the clearing, then stopped and turned as one. More appeared from the trees behind them.

“Get up the tree!” the teenager shouted. He threw his empty quiver on the ground and pulled a machete from his belt.

“Cody!” Samantha screamed. “No! There’s too many!” She started after him as he charged the pack.

“No!” Alyssa grabbed at her arm and missed. Her heart caught in her throat as Samantha attacked the nearest wolf, with her small knife in one hand and a tree branch in the other.

Cody let out a war cry. He swang a homemade machete honed from an old lawnmower blade and a handgrip of leather straps. Cody hacked at the wolves, dancing around them in a deadly ballet... a ballet he wasn’t going to win. Samantha stabbed the first wolf in the side, and it darted off, yelping in pain. Another wolf leapt in and took hold of her arm. Samantha screamed in pain and dropped the knife. Alyssa shouted and pounded on the wolf with the branch. It released Samantha, and turned on Alyssa with such ferocity she stumbled backward and fell.

Alyssa raised the branch defensively as the wolf dove on top of her. Suddenly the air was filled with blood. The wolf dropped onto her chest. Its head rolled to one side. Alyssa shoved the wolf off and stared up at her husband.

Gabe whirled around her like a winged cyclone of death. His sword slashed through the wolves like they were paper dolls. She could see Met a few yards away, standing next to Cody. His sword was raised high over his head. He growled like a grizzly at the terrified wolves as they scattered back into the trees.

“Samantha!” Alyssa gasped, scrambling to her feet. Samantha was a few yards away, leaning against a tree, cradling her arm.

Alyssa wrapped her arms around Samantha and wept. Gabe’s arms surrounded them. Met was at their side in an instant, dragging Cody firmly by the scruff of his shirt. “Tell them,” Met ordered him. “Tell them how this is your fault.”

Gabe released the girls and stared at Cody in surprise. Cody gasped, “Dad, I’m so sorry. I was hunting.”

Gabe snapped, “Not here. Vada’s home alone and Samantha’s hurt.” He turned and touched Samantha’s arm. The bleeding stopped. He wrapped his arm around Samantha’s waist then opened his other arm for Alyssa. She slid against him, and he shot into the sky.

Met scowled at Cody and said, “I warned you. It’s one thing to risk your own life on these insane hunts, but I won’t have you risking the girls. You’ve got to get this under control, and now. Hunting is not a game.”

Cody met his glare boldly. “I didn’t know they were out here. I was chasing the wolves deeper into the woods.”

Met sighed and explained, “My point is that your father strictly forbade you from hunting predators. Your job is to supply the family with meat. That’s it. If Gabe or I thought the wolves were getting too close the cabin, we would have chased them off ourselves. Do you have any idea what almost happened here? Samantha is wounded; she could have died. Any of you could have died. Wolves aren’t pets; they are dangerous animals that would just as soon rip out your throat as look at you.”

“I saved her life. I saved both of their lives.” Cody returned Met’s scowl. “Why do you always go to the worst-case scenario? You never see the truth of the situation.”

Met’s silent stare nearly unnerved Cody. He cast his eyes down and shuffled his feet. The anger vanished from Met’s eyes, replaced by a glimmer of compassion. He sighed, and reached out to grab hold of Cody’s shoulder. The boy flinched and stepped back. Met said, “You forget who you’re talking to, Cody. I do see the truth, but sometimes my emotions cloud the big picture. You’re right; sometimes I focus on the what-if instead of the actual results, but, in this case, the what-if is a lesson you cannot ignore.” He stepped closer and added, “You are a fearless

young man, you're too bold. You rush in when you should be cautious. The lecture is over. Yes, you did save the girls. You risked your life to save them. A lesser man would have run off and left them to their fate, but that's not who you are. That's what I like about you, Cody; you are fiercely protective of Samantha and Vada. I have no doubt of your devotion and love for those girls and your parents."

"I'd die for them," Cody whispered.

"I know," Met replied softly. "Now let's go find their ATVs and get back to the cabin."

"Dad's going to kick my ass for this, isn't he?" Cody mumbled, turning toward the trail.

Met chuckled, "Maybe, but you can handle it. Just don't lose your temper."

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Gabe landed lightly in front of the cabin. Vada yanked open the door and rushed down the steps. Samantha's wound had already closed, and was nearly gone from Gabe's healing touch, but her blood-soaked jacket drew Vada's eyes. She gasped and rushed to Samantha's side, "Sissy, what happened?"

"It's nothing, Vada," Samantha said quickly, hugging her. "It was a wolf, but Cody killed it."

"Cody?" Vada's eyes opened wide with fear. She glanced around then looked up toward the sky. "Where is he? Is he okay?"

Gabe mussed Vada's hair and said, "He's with Met. They'll be along shortly. Why don't you take Samantha inside and warm up some of Mom's soup for her? She needs to rest."

Vada took Samantha's hand and pulled her toward the steps. Alyssa called after them, "Let Samantha stoke the stove."

Gabe waited until they were inside to ask Alyssa, "Did you know Cody was hunting near the trail?"

"No," Alyssa could see the concern in his eyes. "He was supposed to be on the other side of the ridge. We spooked an elk in his direction, and then we heard the wolves. I think they were tracking the elk, and we just got in the way." She slid her arms around his waist and leaned against him. "He saved our lives. If he hadn't appeared when he did, they would have had us."

Gabe wrapped his arms around her. “Met’s worried about him. He says he’s taking unnecessary risks.”

Alyssa smiled up at him, “That’s what sixteen-year-old boys do. They’re all hormones. They think they’re invincible.”

Gabe frowned down at her. “But he’s not invincible. I want to take Cody on a camping trip. Met comes down pretty hard on him sometimes. I’ve been so busy just trying to keep this place going, I haven’t spent time with him in months.”

Alyssa agreed. “Why don’t you take the canoe and go over to Castor Island? Its time; we’ve waited too long. He loves rappelling from the cliffs. Maybe you should do some hunting and have some fun.”

His expression turned dark with concern. “I’m afraid hunting has become something more to Cody than merely supplying us with food and furs. I could see it in his face when we arrived here. I’ve seen that look before, on the faces of seasoned warriors. The battle becomes more important than the victory.”

Alyssa pulled away from him. “He’s a good boy. He may not be our flesh and blood, but he’s still our son. I don’t care what happened in his past. He’s not evil.” Gabe reached for her, but she pushed his hand away and said, “Promise me you won’t do anything drastic.”

He locked eyes with her. “You know me, Alyssa. I’ve protected Cody since he was five years old. I will always protect him. If it weren’t for me, Mike and Met would have sequestered Cody in some monastery long ago. In ancient times, Mike would have killed Cody, thinking it a mercy to free him from a future of darkness. I have sworn an oath to keep Cody on the path of light and glory. That’s why we need this trip. He needs to gain a fresh perspective, that’s all. He needs to be reminded of why we are here, what we are fighting for, who we are protecting, and, most importantly, what we are facing in the future.”

The next morning, Gabe and Cody set out for Castor Island. The ATVs made good time through the rolling hills and grassy fields. They left their rides on the rocky shore and climbed into a canoe to row across the lake to Castor Island. The wind sent whitecaps rushing across the water, turning their faces red from the chill.

The island sat at the center of Castor Lake, a lone sentry covered with tall trees rising to greet the mountains in the distance. They pulled the canoe up onto the rocky shore, pulled on their packs, and headed deep into the trees.

They reached a small rocky rise, and Gabe pointed toward a sheer cliff. "That's our target. We should be there by sunset."

"Are there any bears on the island?" Cody asked, sliding his sunglasses on to shelter his eyes from the wind as much as the sun.

"Might be," Gabe shrugged. "Elk swim across the water to reach the island to feed. It's possible a bear could do the same."

"Could we hunt one?" Cody surveyed the landscape.

"That's a lot of meat to carry back. I thought we were going rock climbing," Gabe answered casually, climbing down the rise and heading back into the trees.

"Could we do both?" Cody replied. "Vada has grown a couple of inches this summer; I'd love to give her a bearskin rug for the foot of her bed."

"Bear hunting season is in October. If you still want a bear then, I'll take you on a hunt," Gabe offered. "I thought we'd climb the rock face and do some fishing. There's a good stream not too far from the cliff. Maybe we can catch some trout in the morning."

Morning came quickly. They climbed the rock face and spent the day fishing in the stream that ran through the far side. When the sun began to sink in the west, Cody hooted with delight as they rappelled next the narrow waterfall. "Who needs wings to fly?"

Gabe chuckled and said, "Just don't let go of the rope."

They cleaned the catch in the pool at the base of the falls then made their way back toward camp, with nearly a dozen trout ready to cook. After they had fried up the fish with some onions and carrots from their packs, the darkness closed in quickly around them. Gabe added a few logs to the fire, and they huddled next to the fire as the night grew cold.

Gabe gazed across the fire at Cody and asked, "Do you want to hunt some caribou tomorrow?"

"Sure," Cody's head snapped up. "I brought my bow."

“We’ll head out beyond the cliffs, to the glen on the other side, before dawn. I know a good spot.” Gabe smiled, “You did a good job today on the rock face. You’re a strong climber.”

“I love being out here,” Cody admitted. “I don’t mind the cold at all. It makes me feel alive.”

Gabe kicked a stray log back into the fire. “It’s going to get down to freezing temperatures tonight. I can feel it. So stay close to the fire.” He looked at Cody again and added, “I’ll whip up some of that latte coffee mixture you like before we head out. Lots of cream and sugar will help the caffeine wake you up.”

Cody chuckled, “Mom adds a drop of vanilla.”

“You’re a wuss,” Gabe laughed.

Cody smiled and added, “This sounds like a good time to mention I’m building a motorcycle out behind the barn.”

Gabe stared at him in amazement. “Why a motorcycle?”

A mischievous grin covered Cody’s face. “Mike always looks so cool on his bike. He’s so free, so invincible.”

His father smiled. “Mike *is* invincible. Where did you get the engine?”

Cody laughed. “The engine was easy. I swapped two marten pelts to Old Man Perkins for an old Harley engine he’s had lying around for years. The frame was the hard part. It cost me two more marten pelts, three beavers, and a lynx. I also had to repair his barn because he had to travel to Barrow to pick it up.”

Gabe sighed, “So that’s why you’ve spent so much time hunting lately?”

“Yeah.” Cody lay down and sank deeper into his sleeping bag. “The lynx was the hardest. It was still alive in the trap. I felt so sorry for it. Trapping isn’t like hunting. The animal doesn’t have a chance. I haven’t had the heart to place any traps since.”

Gabe nodded. “Death can be a violent act. Hunting with a bow or rifle is done at a distance. The prey is usually dead before you approach. With trapping, it’s not always the case. Ariel, as the angel of natural resources, hates trapping, but it’s necessary sometimes for food or population control. Living out here, it’s become a part of our lives.”

“The first time I killed a deer, I cried,” Cody admitted. “I hid it from you because I wanted to be cool.”

“I know,” Gabe answered softly. “It broke my heart. I should have expected it, but I thought you’d be excited and triumphant.”

Cody gazed into the fire. “I guess I never thought of the deer as alive until I killed it. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” Gabe replied. “It’s called growing up.” He leaned forward and studied Cody. “There’s something I want to show you tomorrow before we head back to camp.”

“What is it?” Cody glanced up at him.

“Something I’ve been working on for the last few years.” Gabe lay down and slid deeper into his sleeping bag.

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