

“If I call today, Toba, my manager, can have portable housing in place within a week. I can charter a plane to take them there, and we can keep the whole thing quiet. No one will even know they aren’t still in those jail cells. You can send along some police officers to monitor them until I can set up permanent security. I’ve no desire to put my homeland at risk either. They’ll require medical screening and may have to be vaccinated. You’ll have to deal with passports and immigration, but if they’ve been convicted of a crime, it won’t work. I have some sway with the people in power, but I can’t make them accept convicted criminals. So, the carrot I’ll hold up for these members’ help is a new life and immunity from prosecution if they can help me find the Prophet.”

“Are you insane?” The words shot from her mouth. “These people aided and abetted in the murder of four women and the kidnapping of four others. One of them may even be the man who murdered your sister, and you want to give them a ‘get out of jail card’ and a home in a tropical paradise? They’re criminals. At the moment, by refusing to cooperate with us, they’re hindering prosecution, too. We can’t just reward them with a better life.”

“Why not?” he asked calmly, disconcerting her. Why weren’t Rob and Trevor backing her up on this?

“Doesn’t the DA do the same thing when he makes a deal with a mobster who provides evidence against his employers? Isn’t a new life and a new identity what your witness protection plan promises? I may live in Australia, Munroe, but I do read the papers and watch television. I’ll wager those criminals committed far greater crimes than the former residents of New Horizon. You said there were, what, sixteen prisoners? How many are men?”

“Four,” she admitted.

“And were they armed? Did any one of them have the knife that slit my sister’s throat?”

“No,” Rob answered for her. “We haven’t found that weapon yet.”

“And to the best of your knowledge, did those particular men try to kill anyone?”

“No. They weren’t armed that night. According to the intel we had, they simply did the heavy work on the farm, but there were additional weapons in the house.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that they could’ve taken up arms under different circumstances, but how can the women be held accountable? Didn’t you tell me they had no rights, that they were treated like second-class citizens, animals really?”

“More or less,” she said belligerently, knowing instinctively where he was going with this and hating it.

“Then, Agent Munroe, how can twelve women be held accountable for obeying orders? For doing what they were told to do to avoid being punished? If there’s one thing I remember clearly about my uncle, it’s that he enjoyed watching people punished. Remember what my uncle did to me when I opposed him. One of his men may have wielded the whip, but he watched every one of those lashes rip open my back and chest.”

“But they’re still accessories,” she maintained mulishly, more because she needed to forget how helpless she’d been at the hands of the Faithful Followers of the Word. In the FFOW, women had been powerless to do anything but obey. She hadn’t seen any punished, but every now and then, one had disappeared for a few days at a time. They’d come back, pale and quiet, and she’d assumed they’d been ill. How foolish of her. People tended to see what they wanted to see, and apparently, so did she. Those long, brown robes would’ve hidden a multitude of marks.

“Like Eloise was? Look what happened to her when she defied him. The only thing that fits about my sister’s murder is that my uncle discovered she was planning to leave the country and ordered her killed. No one defies him and escapes unscathed. Fear is a powerful weapon in controlling others, and if he added drugs to the mix ...”