

Chapter One

Alex kept his anger in check as he stared across the abandoned graveyard. The spot didn't look any different from the rest of the forest, save for a slight meadow. "I can't believe I'm doing this." He tossed his folding shovel against the loamy granite outcrop beside an old oak. The blade gave a dull *thunk* before landing in a thick matt of dead leaves.

"You just have to go through the motions, damn it," the black man beside him drawled in a thick Appalachian accent. He leaned on his mahogany walking cane and drew in a deep breath. "Moonville, Ohio. Thriving coal town in the way back when. Nothing left now. Not even the headstones." He pushed back his wide-brim hat and scratched at the silvered hair beneath. "Excepting that old train tunnel up ahead."

And there you go, on about your damn trains again. Granted, the old forest ranger seemed half-hobo himself despite the crisp tan uniform. At least his clothes were in better shape than Alex's. His desert camouflage jacket, faded plaid shirt and jeans were barely enough to fend off autumn breezes. At just under six hefty feet, he wasn't about to find something that fit in the general store either. Even his boots were the same ones he'd trudged across Afghanistan with.

Alex ran fingers through what remained of his brown hair, the brush cut's military practicality keeping him from looking like a complete bum. Maybe, after all this ridiculousness was over, he'd have money for decent clothes. He just didn't need the family insanity attached to Granddad's Will.

"You only have to dig a hole, Alex. Shouldn't take a big pain in the ass like you much time. Not a whole lot of work considering what you're getting."

"A farm full of junked locomotive parts," Alex muttered. *Okay, that and the considerable Kiefer fortune.* "You're the executor, Snaps," he said with a relenting sigh, picking up the short shovel.

The man's name was Frank Edwards, but he preferred the nickname. Leastwise, that's what Dad kept calling him. The two had been thick as thieves when it came to anything railroad. Alex zipped up his jacket against the morning's chill. He sank the shovel into the earth below the pancake-shaped rock, the spade scraping on a mix of roots and stone bits. Frank didn't like him. Fair enough. He didn't like the man either, but that wasn't particularly special. He didn't like anyone these days.

Alex was four shovelfuls into the work when a new ugliness intruded on already bleak thoughts. He stared at the small indentation in the forest floor. This was a graveyard after all. "I hope this isn't what I think it is."

Snaps put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Need to get that notion out of your head. Nobody buried your parents here. Believe me, I'd of damn sure known. One of the first places we searched."

"Yeah, they got lost in the woods and ate by bears or something." He drove the blade deeper into the muck.

Still, the man wasn't kidding about trying to find the real truth behind their disappearance. Snaps led the hunt those seven years past. He knew this area better than most and was the last to give up the search. Of course, Granddad had voiced his own theory. They'd been murdered by the Hamiltons. Most around here would believe that. Feuds in these foothills tended to span generations. Granddad's credibility lasted until he opened his mouth about some magical world called Hobohemia where they were killed. The search ended up being a short one. Save for Snaps, nobody wanted to waste time on a bunch of crazy Kiefers. He only received word himself after his first Middle East deployment. The hard part was having to admit to himself how much he missed them.

Alex kept digging, wondering what Snaps really thought of Ralph Kiefer's wayward son. Ungrateful bastard? Undeserving asshole? Both descriptions fit. Snaps and his father had been fast friends, but he doubted any warmth extended his way. Not after all his fights with Dad. Snaps was the kind of guy who saw things through to the end. A respectable virtue, even if the man didn't respect him.

He paused to stretch out muscles hardened by scrambles up and down mountains half a world away. No sense in not trying to be sociable. He had few friends out here. "Still running that railroad restoration outfit in Mount Vernon?"

"Yep."

“Fixing up some Pullman sleeper car, right?”

“Yep.”

Alex kept his next utterance to himself. Fine, the old fella would rather not talk. Trouble was, he did want to. The locals just laughed him off much as they did the whole family. The Veterans Administration sent him to some moon-eyed counselor who practically read from a script. “Do you have any feelings about suicide?” More like homicide listening to such crap. Well, this old bastard was going to listen whether he wanted to or not. Especially if he threw in a carrot or two. Alex put the shovel aside to work out a stubborn knot of roots. “I heard you asking Dad about taking that junk in the field.”

He wrenched out the interfering gnarl and kept digging. Three feet deep. The shovel rasped against more loose rock. The cold soil smelled like old shoes. Another foot and he’d call it due diligence and ask for the house keys. “You’re welcome to haul it off,” he continued. “Free of charge.”

That seemed to get through to Snaps, who nodded in return. “Much obliged. That junk, as you put it, is what remains of a line of old Hudson steam locomotives. Your great granddaddy designed them and couldn’t just stand by and watch them all disappear. Enough parts there to build a new one.”

Snaps couldn’t keep the scorn out of his voice even when he was being handed something. Next would come the lecture about family heritage. Alex decided to cut that useless argument off before it started. “There’s a boiler in the barn to finish it off. Bunch of track out back you’re welcome to as well.”

“Meant a lot to your father.”

Alex slammed the heel of his worn military boot against the shovel’s blade. “I know. Most kids get bikes for their birthdays. Not welding masks and fairy tales.” He paused to catch his temper. “Come on, Snaps. Dad was nuts. So was his father.” He threw up a hand to encompass the thicket around them. “Jesus, look at us. Out here digging up some...” He waved his fingers. “*Secret* plans that would be his ticket into some damn fantasy land Granddad invented. Come on, man. You know this is insane.”

“Your grandad’s last will and testament is pretty clear on this point,” Snaps reminded, tapping his cane on the granite marker. “Let’s just get it done.”

Shaking his head, Alex turned back to digging. The latest in a series of useless adventures. He’d run off to the army in order to escape this lunacy. And yet here he was. Right back in the shit.

The funny thing about being in the military. Especially the outfit he’d been in. You got to know certain sounds. Like the difference between clicking branches in the wind and a round being chambered. *Small arms. Pistol. Behind them.*

He slowly raised his hands, dropping the shovel. “Easy, Snaps. We have company.” He had his survival knife in a jacket pocket. All he needed was opportunity, a commodity bought by staying calm and clear headed. This wasn’t his first rodeo.

They both turned to face three figures moving through the trees. Two of them were rough looking sorts. Not as big as himself, but not the kind you’d turn your back on either. Torn military jackets suggested they were veterans too—the kind you tossed out with a Dishonorable. Blue-and-white bandannas, along with yellow “Freight Rider” badges above the pockets suggested gang affiliation. The tough on the left had the pistol, which he brandished with relish judging from the grin on his pock-marked face. The other looked to prefer ham-sized fists.

What scraped Alex’s nerves was the tall woman they flanked. Her escorts may be back-alley chaff, but she could’ve stepped out from a board meeting in that tailored blue coat of hers. A real possibility since she ran the Central Transportation Systems Railroad. The CTXR was of one of the largest railroads around. She didn’t look any older than Mom, but something inside him placed her closer to a great aunt. Either way, the family resemblance was there. Jet black hair and pointed chin much like his mother.

“Hey, Aunt Chessie,” he greeted, his voice dripping with venom.

“Alex,” she returned with a wolf’s smile.

Chessie Hamilton liked having a demeanor undecided between boredom and explosive violence. With her hair severely pulled back into a knot, and narrowed dark eyes, she seemed inclined toward the latter. Especially with her right hand buried in the coat’s pocket. He guessed another pistol.

Alex glanced at her henchmen. “This going to be civil, or your usual schizoid self?”

“Tried to talk to you at the funeral,” she said in a nonchalant voice, ignoring the barb. “Hard being sociable with your side of the family.”

“You were kept out for a reason. Granddad hated your guts. Can’t say I’m happy to see you either.”

She nodded. “I know, but then you weren’t particularly popular either. Got into a fight with two of your cousins during the memorial service if I recall.” Chessie eyed Snaps. “Really, Frank. I thought we had an understanding about this.”

“Just following his grandfather’s wishes,” Snaps replied slowly, not taking his gaze off her either.

She rolled her eyes. “We both know what he’s digging up.”

Snaps clasped his walking stick’s brass knob. “This isn’t what your sister would want.”

Chessie’s narrow cheeks quivered. “Leave Cassandra in peace,” she hissed. “Old man Kiefer despised that marriage as much as I did.”

“Granddad also said your family killed them,” Alex said coolly, seeing this conversation going south fast. Might as well push her over the edge since he hated the sight of her anyway. People who couldn’t think straight made mistakes. He just needed to get that gun she held on to.

Instead, his aunt’s dark eyes softened. “Alex, you’re the only thing I’ve left of my Cass. I may have had a few words with that father of yours, but I never wanted to hurt her.” She kicked loose twigs into the hole at his feet. “I couldn’t save your mother, but I will damn well save the only thing I’ve left of her.” She held out her left hand and a diplomatic smile. “I could use a chief security officer at the company. Especially one with your credentials. Leave this be. Please.”

Kiefer working for a Hamilton. Yeah, she was nuts all right. How many times had she tried breaking up his parents? His father should never have allowed her on the farm to see Mom, let alone put up with the shit she said about him. Alex jammed the shovel deeper into the hole. “Serve everyone right if this ended up being a jar of pennies.”

Her attention turned back to Snaps, switching from angelic to acidic. “Please tell me you haven’t been filling his head full of all this Hobohemia nonsense too.”

“No, ma’am,” Snaps replied. “He’s got enough to live down without you and your bunch adding to it.”

Alex straightened. The pistol punk to her left raised his barrel in turn, until he earned a withering glance from his boss. “How about everybody just shut the hell up, unless either one of you want to do the digging?”

He brought out another helping of moist dirt and rock, wanting to throw it into both their faces. Damn it, had Snaps fallen for Dad’s lunacy too? Fine. One more shovelful, and he was calling it quits. Alex dwelled on his first impulse, an idea forming should he actually find something. The way Chessie kept that hand in her pocket made his decision all the easier to stomach. She came out here to play hardball with her thugs. Well, he knew the game too.

His spade made contact with something other than dirt. Something spongy. He set the tool aside. Dropping to a knee, he probed the wet earth with his fingers. Plastic? He pushed aside clumps to reveal a muddy garbage bag. He tugged. The sack barely budged, but one good pull would solve that. He had both leverage and Aunt Chessie conveniently looking over his shoulder. Good. Deal with the closest threat, then haul ass and hope the hired help hadn’t been to a gun range in a while.

He grabbed a knot of loose black plastic and wrenched the briefcase-sized mass free, letting the arc of his momentum send the whole thing into his aunt’s face. She dropped like a stone.

He turned to Snaps. “Go!”

The forest ranger was much quicker on the uptake than Alex expected, launching himself across the thicket without hesitation. “This way, Alex!”

He does know the area, Alex reasoned, shoving the sodden bag inside his jacket. He took off after him in a dash toward the main trail.

He figured he and his father’s friend had a good twenty yards distance when those little firecracker pops started going off. Chips flew from the tree bark around him. “Where we going?” he shouted to Snaps as they raced onto the park’s hiking path.

“Tunnel,” the man gasped.

“That’s no cover, Snaps. Tunnel’s too damn short. We need off this trail!”

“Trust me, son.”

“Trust you for wh—” He didn’t get to finish as a solid impact bored into his left shoulder. Swearing, Alex recovered his balance enough to keep going, shoving the burning pain and shock aside. Three combat tours and he was going to buy it *here*?

“A little further,” the black man encouraged, grabbing Alex’s unhurt arm.

Snaps half-dragged him toward an archway whose mossy brick façade framed the tunnel’s dark entrance. It shouldn’t have been so hard to see inside. Moonville Tunnel was a short jab through a hill. This thing looked to go on forever.

Alex took the opportunity for cover over questioning his senses, especially with sparks and chips flying off the old bricks. He compartmentalized his disbelief in the same box as the burning numbness along his shoulder. Figure things out later. Right now he needed to ensure that there would be a later. Snaps fled into the beckoning darkness. Alex followed.

His foot banged into a moldering railroad tie that shouldn’t have been there, sending him sprawling into the older man’s back. They fell forward, barely avoiding the massive iron knuckle of a caboose’s coupler. Something else having no business in the tunnel.

He stared at the obstruction. “Where in the hell this come from?” He didn’t wait for the answer. Cover was cover. Maybe more. His training taught him how to improvise while hurting like a son-of-a-bitch.

He forced himself up on the caboose’s back patio, the car’s features reduced to shadows in the tunnel’s twilight. Those guys would be on them in moments, and he was tired of running. Trouble was, he had the proverbial knife in a gun fight. He needed something more.

“No time for sightseeing,” Snaps said between breaths, climbing up next to him.

“Any chance this thing got one of those fire axes?” Alex banged open the door and searched overhead with his fingers. He’d seen a few old cabooses in his time, courtesy of Dad’s obsession with steam trains. Sure enough. His hands closed over a handle. Wincing, he lifted the axe from its hooks and motioned toward the back. “Let’s go.”

This time Snaps did the following as Alex ran through the black interior, banging his knee against some chair. Swearing softly, he plunged on through a sleeping compartment and pushed the rear door open. He jumped off, ballast crunching beneath his boots. He hefted the axe, hearing the sound of footsteps. Chessie’s boys had reached the caboose.

“Far as I go,” Snaps said from above.

“You get hit?” He could hardly see the man.

“Not going back. Not again.” A hand smacked him on the head. “Now *git!*”

Snaps’ statement made about as much sense as the rest, but Alex took his determined tone to heart. “I’ll draw them off,” he offered, feeling his way along what might be a locomotive’s tender. Whatever it was, the thing blocking the passage was huge, forcing him to squeeze between it and the tunnel’s hewn rock.

Alex banged his axe against the rail, hoping Chessie and her hounds would stay fixated on what he carried and leave Snaps alone. The Will’s mention of secret plans wasn’t so funny now. Alex kept adjusting the package inside his coat to keep it from sliding out. The bag felt like it contained either a briefcase or leather satchel. Sure, he could just throw the damn thing at them and end this. Trouble was, his aunt pulled this stunt in plain view of a witness. Granddad’s story about how his parents died sounded less insane by the moment. Supposedly, they were killed because of the same thing he now carried. No way would Chessie get her hands on this. Not without answering questions.

He saw daylight ahead, peeking around the outlines of one really big locomotive. How’d this thing get stuck in here? *Reason later*, he reminded himself, pushing and scraping his way past the tender. Next came driver wheels nearly as tall as he was, encompassed beneath a streamlined bullet of an engine. Alex glanced back, hearing no further gunfire or ricochets. Just echoing shouts and footsteps as Chessie and her pals negotiated the tight confines.

Alex rounded the engine's front side and glanced up at the machine's bulbous nose. Robin-egg blue? Something about the bold paint job seemed vaguely familiar. He put aside imagining what his father would've thought at the sight of this thing. Ahead of him wasn't so pretty. Tracks arrowed down a ravine whose steep embankments ran thick with vines for several yards. A natural shooting gallery with him as the clay pigeon. He was screwed.

He jerked the sack from his jacket and threw it underneath the engine's silver front fender. Let the bastards search for it. He pressed himself against the cool metal prow, raising his axe despite the pain. Like it or not, the fight ended here. Wherever here was. He hated to think he already knew the answer.

Fortunately, his pursuers weren't trying to be quiet. Heavy footfalls in the ballast, yes, but snarls? Had they brought dogs?

He didn't expect monsters. *Real* monsters. There wasn't much else he could call the writhing blackness extricating itself from the shadows. It was man-shaped. Enough for him to imbed the pointed end of his axe in what he hoped would be its heart.

The thing screeched. Long obsidian talons etched deep lines into the axe handle as it fell back. The shock of pain along Alex's left shoulder from his swing allowed the weapon to slip from his grasp. Staggering, he heard the clatter of metal on stone. He spied the dropped pistol and bent to grab it, only to feel another's barrel against his skull. Alex glanced up to see a nickel-plated forty-five held by his aunt.

"You should've stayed where you belonged," she growled. "Not here. Never here."

All he could do was straighten slowly and step back, trying not to look horrified at what he saw. Her hair spun and whirled of its own accord, much like the creature at their feet. Her eyes... he couldn't even see them. Just the same awful miasma making pits in her skull. "What the hell are you?"

Another seething shadow came around the corner. It paused, red eyes staring down.

Alex glanced at his victim. No more black tendrils or claws. It was the pistol guy, his ratty army jacket thrown open to reveal the axe buried deep in a bloodied chest.

"Get that thing out of him, Harry," Chessie ordered, motioning to her remaining cohort. She held her gun in quivering hands. "See what happens when you come here, Alex? This what you want? To end up like me? Damn your grandfather and his schemes. He should've known better." She stepped over the body. "Now where's that bag?"

The dark pits dissipated enough for him to see her eyes. He wished he hadn't. There was crazy, and then you had cornered badger. She'd managed both. "Chessie, what's happened to you?"

"This place is what happens to me. Tried to keep you protected, but no. You had to be just like your damn father."

The other monster started looking human again as he wrenched the axe free, sending it clanging down the tracks. The almost-man picked up the other pistol, an ugly look crossing his face as he rose. "Boxcar Bill's gone."

She whirled, her bared teeth enough to make her minion jump back. "He got what he deserved! I said not to shoot him, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her focus returned to Alex, Chessie's fury vanishing as quickly as it came. "You're bleeding. Give me the bag, and I'll get help. I mean it."

"Then put the gun down," he suggested, not sure how long he'd be in a bargaining position. Not with the way his jacket dripped red dots. Alex shook back the dizziness of shock catching up with adrenalin. Time to scrounge for another opportunity while he was still on his feet. "I threw it up into the cab."

Her finger curled around the pistol's trigger. "Not with that shoulder. Do you even know what you're risking your life for? Do you?"

He wasn't about to give her a moment's satisfaction if he could help it. He hadn't a clue what was in that bag and didn't much care at this point. He injected something meaningful into the conversation. "Kiss my ass, lady."

He expected a bullet, not the ragged grin she gave him before withdrawing the pistol from his forehead. She pointed at the body. "You owe me. Tell me where the blueprints are, and I'll get you away from this awful place before it kills you too."

“Don’t owe you... shit,” he managed as the shakes took hold. One question to maybe make everything worth it. “Who killed my parents?”

She shuddered. “It was...”

His aunt never finished. One moment she stood there as if ready to collapse herself, and the next instant he was thrown against the engine by a blast of wind. He dropped, instinctively throwing his hands up to shield himself from an explosion that never came. Instead, there was just subsiding gusts. He lowered his arm, watching a roiling fog come down the ravine as if someone had popped a smoke grenade.

He brushed off bits of rock and twigs. Chessie and her henchman were nowhere to be seen. Probably just inside the tunnel taking cover themselves. Seeing his chance, he reached under the engine’s fender for the mystery bag.

“Run!”

Sounded like a little girl’s voice in the wind. No need to be told twice. Alex staggered to his feet and plunged into the moist fog. Another convenient impossibility to stack with the rest. He ran until he couldn’t. Stumbled until he couldn’t manage that either. Then came the only thing left he could do. Fall.