

Chapter 20

COBRA:

Rita, Henry, and Chris sit in silence, each lost in their own thoughts about what might happen to them. Suddenly a huge concussion wave and a thunderous boom fill the lounge. They all flinch and bend over, covering their heads as the white acoustic tiles drop from the ceiling, crashing onto their backs and arms.

When the tiles stop falling, Henry reaches over and grabs Rita's arm. "The earthquakes are getting worse!"

Chris stands from his chair. "That was no earthquake. It was an explosion. Let's go see what happened."

They step out from the lounge into a cloud of gray dust. They carefully make their way across the floor as the haze slowly clears, and see the device lying on the floor, covered in shattered pieces of gray concrete.

Rita looks up at the ceiling. "There's a hole in the roof. Something up there must have exploded. Maybe a storage area."

Chris studies the hole in the side of roof. "I don't know. That's a strange place to store explosives."

Henry feels his heart rate increase with a sense of hope. "Perhaps we can climb up to those rails and see if it is a way to get out."

Chris looks up at the overhead. "I can get close, but we could never make it from the rail to the opening. It's just too high."

Henry grabs Chris's arm. "I do not want to stay in here. I must get out! Could you go up and make sure?"

"I can do that. Just step back in case any more debris falls down."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, my friend."

Chris walks across to the steel ladder mounted to the wall and starts to climb. When he reaches the top and steps onto the rail, he's able to use the one-inch steel rods supporting them from the ceiling for balance. Unfortunately, they are spaced six-feet apart and he has to let go of one to grab the next one. He realizes it will be very difficult for Henry to navigate. He continues until he's directly below the opening, and stops to look up. It's just as he thought. The opening is four-feet above his outstretched arm.

Henry shifts from foot to foot as he nervously watches Chris approach the hole. "Is it a way out?"

Chris feels bad as he looks down at Henry. "It might be a short tunnel, but I don't see any light. We can't get into it anyway because it's beyond my reach. I'm sorry, Henry."

Alex and Okana turn their faces away from the roiling cloud of dust spewing out from the tunnel. It takes several minutes until it begins to dissipate and they can look inside, but the light from their flashlights can only illuminate ten-feet further ahead.

Alex notices that the dust isn't moving out from the tunnel. "We may not have blasted our way through. I don't see any air movement. Let's find out what happened."

Okana brings up the radio. "We're going back inside, Spencer. See you in a few minutes."

Henry lowers his head in defeat, his brief sense of hope now shattered like the concrete on the floor.

Rita notices Henry's dejection and starts to reach out to him, but he suddenly glares at her with a look that warns her to stay back. She tries to rationalize her reason for kidnapping him, but her actions seem so sinister in retrospect. He wasn't much help anyway.

Chris is carefully making his way back to the ladder when he catches a flash of light in his peripheral vision. He spins back around and looks up at the opening. Flashes of white light appear to be bouncing around the interior, and he cocks his ear toward the opening when he hears a quiet voice, but it stops. He strains to listen and can barely hear the sound of grinding rock, then he hears a male voice say, 'it worked'.

His heart rate increases and he yells down at Rita and Henry. "I hear voices! Someone's coming. It must be a tunnel to the outside of the mountain."

Rita stares up at Chris. "Who is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe the guards found a way in."

A moment later, Henry hears a familiar voice and smiles. "It is Alex! He has found me!" He stares up at the opening and starts to shout as loud as possible. "We are here, Alex! We are here!"

Alex is almost to the opening when he turns his head and grins at Okana. "I hear Henry." He steps to the edge and stares down at Henry's smiling face a short distance from the lower wall. "Are you okay, Doc?"

Henry thinks his heart will burst. "Oh, Alex. I am so glad to see you again."

"You have to turn off the Device. It's creating a lot of problems."

"It is not the device, Alex. Whatever they were doing in this facility is causing the problems."

"I know. It's a meteor they brought back from the moon that's causing the earthquakes." He stares at Rita. "One of the frequencies you're using cracked its shell."

Rita looks up at Alex, but ignores his glaring eyes. "That last earthquake happened without our help. It did it on its own."

Alex holds his rage in check. "Right. Let's get you out of here, Doc."

Chris is standing below on the railing, listening. He steps away enough to look up at Alex. "Do you have any rope?"

Alex looks down at the stranger. "No, and who are you?"

"I'm Chris, one of the guards."

"You're part of this kidnapping?"

Chris feels his face flush. "For my part, I am, and I'm sorry. I didn't really know Henry before now."

"That's a poor excuse for a kidnapping."

Henry knows Chris was just doing his job. "He is a friend, Alex."

Alex is less than convinced. These two are going to pay for their heinous crime if he has anything to say about it. He looks down at Chris. "Can you give Henry a lift up to me?"

Chris feels a sense of relief and gives Alex a grateful smile. "You bet I can." He turns and begins

working his way back to the ladder and hollers down at Henry. "I'll meet you at the top."

Alex watches as Henry climbs the ladder, followed closely by Rita. Chris helps Henry keep his balance by grabbing the next rod and reaching back to take his hand to help him across. When they reach the area below the opening, Alex squats on the ground and reaches down, ready to grab Henry's hand.

Chris grabs the nearest rod for balance and stoops slightly to extend his thigh. "Henry, I want you to grab my hand and climb onto my knee, then step up onto my shoulders." He sees the hesitation in Henry's eyes. "Come on, you can do it. Do you want to get out of here?"

Desperate to get out of this bomb shelter, Henry steels himself for the task and grabs Chris's hand. He places his other hand on Chris's shoulder as he stands on his knee, but cannot tell if it is himself shaking or Chris. He continues up onto his shoulders, using Chris's strong arm for balance. "Now what do I do?"

"Just hang on while I stand up, okay? You should be able to reach Alex when I do it. Here we go."

In one swift movement, Henry feels hurled into the air. He reaches up and grabs Alex's hand, and is instantly hauled up over the edge into the tunnel. He rolls onto his back while he tries to stop shaking. "I am so glad to see you, Alex. Thank you for coming for me."

"You're welcome, Doc. Let me help you up so we can get out of the way. Okana can help the others get out."

"Yes, of course."

Once Henry and Alex move past him in the tunnel, Okana looks down from the opening at Chris. "How far up can you reach?"

Chris stands on his toes and reaches up for the opening. "That's it."

Okana lay prone and reaches down. "You can make it if you jump, but you're going to have to trust me."

"What about Rita?"

Okana glares down at the woman who harmed his friend. "What about her?"

Rita's anxiety suddenly soars. "You can't just leave me, Okana."

"Sure I can. You kidnapped my friend and almost got him killed, and *that* I cannot forgive." He looks down at Chris. "Are you ready?"

Chris hesitates. "I'm not sure how I feel about this."

"I don't see that you have much choice. You're welcome to stay where you are."

Alex moves back to the opening. "What's the hold up?"

Rita stares up at Alex. "He won't help me out of here!"

Alex stares at her for a moment. "You know that you and your compatriot are going to be arrested for what you did to Henry."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I realize that now. I'll take my punishment, but just get me the hell out of here!"

"Where's the other device, Rita?"

"I don't know. Steve just said he'll have it delivered here." Alex just stares back. "Honest, Alex. I don't know."

Alex looks at Okana, who shakes his head no. "I know how you feel, but I'd prefer not to have her death on my conscience right now."

Okana sighs. "Okay." He turns back around to Chris. "All right. Hand her up."

Alex turns and notices Henry trying to walk down the tunnel, and quickly catches up with him.

“Wait up, Doc. We should wait for the others first.”

“I cannot wait, Alex. I must get out of here!”

Alex glances over his shoulder at Okana, still reaching over the edge. The ground suddenly heaves up, tossing him and Henry off their feet onto the floor. Large rocks slam down into the tunnel and he spins back around. Huge boulders from the collapsing ceiling are hammering down on Okana, still lying face down on the ground.

He spins around, searching through the roiling dust until he sees Henry lying on the ground under a small pile of rubble. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Okana’s leg move, but he’s torn between trying to save him, and saving Henry. “Damn!”

He grabs Okana’s foot and begins pulling with all his strength, desperately trying to drag him back from the opening, only to slip and fall on the loose rocks. He scrambles onto his feet and grabs the leg again as more rock crashes down on Okana’s back, making it even harder.

The ground heaves up again, slamming him against the wall. Stars erupt in his vision as a searing pain rages in his head. He loses his balance, toppling backward onto piles of rock.

The shaking suddenly stops, but when he manages to look back, the ceiling above Okana has collapsed, burying him alive. “NOOOOOO!” Alex screams in outrage.

He beats his fist against a boulder, chastising himself for caring about Rita. *I should have just left her to die! If I had just ignored my damn conscience, Okana would have made it!* “DAMN YOU RITA!” he roars.

Chris stares up helplessly as the dome crashes down, driving him backward off the rail. He catches a glimpse of Rita tumbling from the railing before his mind goes blank.

The last thing Rita sees as she falls through the air is Okana’s arm protruding from the ceiling, then everything blinks out.