

# Sent Rising

*Dove Strong Trilogy #3*

Erin Lorence

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## **Sent Rising**

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## *Dedication*

To my Brooke. Your laughter keeps me smiling. Your hugs give me strength. Thanks for sharing your joy with me!



*Dove Strong Trilogy*

Dove Strong  
Fanatic Surviving  
Sent Rising



# 1

My fistful of carrots flopped onto the pasture's dead grass. I paused with the spear's red-stained tip two paces from my heart.

A couple dozen pointed poles and pronged branches stuck out horizontally from the giant juniper bush at the edge of the forest, positioned to impale the unlucky trespasser who stumbled too close. While I'd harvested the summer's early vegetables from Wolfe's backyard, my brother had been busy beefing up Micah Brae's home security.

I scratched the red wooden point with my fingernail. Not blood. Beet juice...from our garden patch.

"Gilead, this paranoia of yours is stupid. We're here to live peaceably with these people. Not skewer them."

His humming dropped off, though he continued to secure another spear. "Don't stand there hollering in the open, Dove. You'll attract the enemy. On second thought, keep hollering. I wouldn't mind trying out his new defensive boundary while it's still light."

Trinity paused in the act of hanging what appeared be a glass wind chime above Micah's prickly doorway. She jingled it at my lifted brow. "Burglar alarm. To wake Micah if anyone tries to sneak in while he's sleeping. Plus, it's the color of smoke."

"And the color of your eyes. Subtle." I snorted. Trinity had strewn reminders of herself everywhere in

our neighbor's cramped, juniper-bush dwelling—from a corn silk pillow the exact hue of her hair to duplicates of her tattoos scratched in the forest floor. She'd planted these subliminal messages in hopes that he would stop being blind to the fact that he liked her in the same way that she liked him.

Gilead fastened a spike next to the wind chime. He paused suddenly, and his expression threw daggers at the pole in my hand. "Sky alive, Dove! You didn't dismantle the defensive perimeter I put up at our place, did you?"

"Only a few spears." I didn't add that I'd tried to remove all of them but hadn't been able to wrestle them off the shelter that he, my cousin, and I shared. "You put them up, so you get to take them down."

"Don't be an idiot. We need them intact."

"I'm the idiot? Your perimeter won't stop fire. Arson is our biggest threat."

He bent to straighten a pronged stick. "It's too dry this season for intentional arson. Even the most brainless demon from this town will think twice before turning our shelter into a fireball. They'd burn up their own homes, too."

I couldn't argue. Even now, the brassy sun seared my exposed skin like a cooking fire and stole the moisture from my lips. "Fine, Gil, but your spikes won't stop any dogs. You've positioned them too high."

"My second perimeter—the outer one—will take care of any dogs or creatures without foot protection. Haven't you noticed the burr rings I've set in the weeds? They begin ten yards out and get thicker the closer you get to our place. The hounds will go limping home if they try to nose around."



I'd spent a painful hour this morning digging a barbed spike-ball out of my palm. My brother had planted the tiny, torturing bits of nature near our front door on purpose? I swung the blunt end of my pole at his shaggy head to thump some sense into him. He caught it without looking.

The glass tinkled above Trinity's upstretched arms. "Not cool, Gil. I had to cut half my braid off to get two burrs out yesterday. Keep it up, and I'll end up looking like her." She thrust a piece of wind chime in the direction of my blonde, chopped-to-shoulder-length hair.

Micah aimed a pair of wistful eyes at me.

I let go of my tug-of-warring pole and pointed in the direction I'd come. "Gilead, you and Trinity should have been waiting at our place today. What if you all missed Uncle Saul when you were messing around here? You were supposed to be on the lookout for him."

"He'd check here at Micah's—or at *his* place—before giving up on finding us. Isn't that where you were? *His* place?"

Gilead meant Wolfe's property. Since relocating to Sisters, he had yet to call my non-Christian friend by name.

I gazed at the treetops to the east, in the direction of my family's out-of-sight home in Ochoco. "Saul said he'd bring us news from home every Saturday. It's been three Saturdays since we saw him...I think."

Gilead shrugged, but Micah disappeared inside his juniper bush.

"Eleven...twelve...thir-thirteen..." His labored counting continued. The Brae guy kept a tally of each day in this enemy territory where we'd agreed to live

for a year as part of the Christian Sent.

His dark head poked out and set the wind chime jingling. "Twenty-two. Twenty-two days since Saul's last visit. You're right, Dove. You're absolutely right." He eyed me. A dog wanting a pat from its master.

Gilead secured another horizontal pole to the prickly bough. "Well, did *he* give you any useful information about what could have stopped Saul? Any report of accidents? Wildfires between here and Ochoco? Attacks?"

I shook my head. Wolfe didn't like to relay bad news. What I knew about the famine, high food costs, and the devastating nation-wide drought, I'd learned from his kid sister, Jezebel. She reported information better than our radio back home.

My brother pulled out his hunting knife and began to whittle a branch's tip. "What a good-for-nothing guy. What a worthless, waste of a human—"

"Probably your uncle went crazy again. He probably forgot where you live now." Jezebel popped up from behind a boulder where she'd been spying. "He'll show up when he remembers. But Dove and I'll go ask my brother if he's heard anything...since the rest of you are too chicken to leave your forts to find out."

In three strides, Gilead towered over the girl. He cracked his knuckles. "OK, Spy. Let's find your brother. Now!"

Trinity dropped the vine supporting her glass pieces. "Chill, Gil. She's like five years old. Anyway, my dad's not crazy."

"Who's five?" Jezebel's bottom teeth clamped over her upper lip in a fierce underbite while she rolled to her sandaled feet. The brown grass clump from her hand rained against my brother's earth tone pantleg.

“C’mon, Dove.”

Trinity came to stand at my shoulder. “I’ll come, too. Micah? Want to go check why my dad’s delayed?”

“No. No, I’ll, uh...I’ll finish up here. I’d like to find out what’s going on, but I’d better finish the perimeter. The perimeter is the most important part of security. But you could bring me some corn. Or some strawberries.”

Strawberries. Trinity’s dreamy, wide-set eyes crinkled in a smile. She touched her wrist where years ago she’d inked on the strawberry plant. A matching drawing ran the perimeter of his shelter’s floor.

“It’s working,” she mouthed.

Gilead, gripping a whittled branch, marched through the center of the field with Jezebel instead of slipping through the bordering foliage toward the paved road that led to the Picketts’ home. He barreled through a herd of cows, slapping one on its bony rump. *Who’s a coward?*

Trinity and I followed, staying closer to the forest’s edge and away from the vast, gray roofs of the godless houses that loomed through patches of dying vegetation. As we passed by our own shelter, we were careful to avoid my brother’s planted burrs.

My eyes narrowed at my temporary home. Trinity’s swags of dandelion chains and old-man’s-beard moss drooped in artistic intervals around the top of our bushy enclosure. Gilead’s wicked spikes encircled the entire copse of arborvitae trees at chest and throat level, complete with a jagged, teethlike collection of poles at our semi-secret entrance.

Had the Heathen who lived in those boxy homes noticed the unnatural changes—poles and flowers— to this arborvitae copse? How long until a resident of

Sisters guessed that this tight knit group of abandoned landscaping trees in the field housed three people?

I hopped the cow fence and faced signs of Heathen life in Sisters. Enormous homes. Sleek cars. And staring humans.

We stepped among them. I no longer searched for hiding spots like I used to when I walked the nonbelievers' turf. I was part of the Sent, and we Sent weren't in the Enemy's territory to hide. We were here to represent Christ for our nation's spiritual revival—a type of nonviolent war fought by us showing our love of Christ.

I alone of my cousin, brother, and Micah—also the Sent—ever remembered our mission.

Gilead marched along with stiff, raised shoulders. Uncomfortable and on guard. Trinity shuffled behind, hunched over with her eyes darting up to the sparse trees like mine used to.

Nowadays, I focused on the pavement in hopes I wasn't recognized as the girl from the television show. My family was clueless about my two-week survival in the Texan desert last spring—all for Heathen viewing pleasure. They'd never travelled the road out of town, so they didn't see my face on the billboard. They blamed Wolfe for the extra attention I received from nonbelievers.

"Rainbow," Trinity muttered. "Ten o'clock."

To my right, a nonbeliever aimed a jet of hose water away from himself. Defensively. As if to force us to keep our distance from his dripping, squashed-egg car. The faded arc of colors wavered from the hose's blast that splattered from the edge of our path.

He hooked a finger at Jezebel. "Hey, kid. You know you're walking with freaks? Why don't you get

away from—hey!”

The water trickled to a stop. *Clunk*. Gilead tossed the hose he'd knotted onto the front of the vehicle and glared down into the stranger's flushed, pop-eyed face. The man's factory-made shoes stayed rooted to the wet pavement, but his upper body bowed backward, retreating from my brother's fierce bulk.

I jerked Gilead's arm to get him walking. “You may as well go back to Mom and Grandpa if you're going to pull stuff like that. We're supposed to be likeable, not jerks—ow!”

Unexpected sharpness jabbed between my shoulder blades. With a sharp exhale, I whirled around.

A familiar female with purple irises stood with feet apart, levelling an arrow from a medieval bow weapon at my collarbone. My brother yanked me away from its trajectory. “Beat it, Diamond. I've no time for your games, so step aside.”

She adjusted so its lethal tip pointed at my brother. “You should really listen to that smart man, Jezebel. Stay away from freaks.”

## 2

Diamond, Wolfe's neighbor who'd eagerly beaten me to a pulp in the past, now seemed to hesitate to murder me, my brother, and my cousin. She blinked in the bright sunlight and threw a glance at the man whose knotted hose dangled from his motionless hands.

"Walk." Her crossbow shepherded us into the gloomy shadows next to Wolfe's boxy home.

Not a surprise. Satan's minions prefer, if given a choice, to act against Christians in the veiling darkness. This was the reason I retreated to my hidey-hole tree copse with my family before each sunset to remain until sunrise.

"Halt."

Our feet crunched to a stop in the cropped, brown grass. I kept my hold on Trinity, so she wouldn't make a running fly for the forest beyond our garden. Of course, at any moment now, my brother's arm would strike and relieve Diamond of her weapon. At any moment...

Diamond's index finger continued to rest on the trigger. "It appears you've got nothing else to do other than grow beans and poison people's property. So? Which of you destroyed mine? Or was it a group activity? It was you, wasn't it?"

The arrow's point swung toward me.

"Don't think I don't understand how you work—

tricking people like my cousin and the Picketts into believing that you're harmless. Using Wolfe as a shield. Always cozying up with him any chance you—"

There was a blur of movement. Gilead now held the crossbow.

He directed its trajectory at Jezebel's brother, who emerged, laughing, from the sunlit corner with the little girl. "What kind of cozying have you been doing with my sister?"

"Wha...what? Nobody's been cozying. No cozying." Wolfe tripped backward to get out of the projectile's range.

"Watch your big feet, Woof." Jezebel scrambled up and galloped to face my brother. The arrow now pointed at the small bit of pale scar peeking from the top of her skimpy shirt.

Her hand found her hip. "Because you're huge, you think you're scary. Well, you're wrong. Dove's other boyfriend is a lot bigger giant than you and has more muscles. And I hit him in the head with a banana slug. Hard. *Bam-o!*"

Jezebel extracted the bow from my brother's frozen grip. Wolfe chuckled.

Carrying the vision of a slimy mollusk entwined in the traitor's ashen strands, I smiled and left the shade for the sunlit vegetable beds. Jezebel's unexpected word-bomb about Stone Bender had blasted away the paralyzing current of suspicious hate holding everyone.

Gilead caught up to me when I stepped off the brittle grass and into the ankle-high, green blades at the perimeter of my garden. "Another boyfriend, Dove? Who is this other loser? I don't like the sound of him."

Jezebel scampered up the triangular woodpile. Balancing like an oversized weathervane, she aimed the arrow-less crossbow at Diamond. "And Di, for your information, no one's poisoning your garden. You're just a total delinquent at growing things."

Her neighbor's face flushed beet-juice bright. Diamond pulled a miniature knife from her back pocket and began to hack shavings from a piece of kindling.

Gilead drew out his own six-inch hunting blade from his waistband and copied her. His glare flickered between us.

Jezebel stomped her foot so hard a wedge of wood tumbled off the stack. "I'm sick of it! Sick. Of. It. Even all the way to California it's the same thing. Everyone is all mad at Sent people like Dove, who are minding their own business...digging in the dirt and growing potatoes. And then, Dove, your people get all fired up because radicals like your uncle go missing. And they break people out of the CDTCs...which is, OK, sort of cool, but not helpful to me when I want everyone to get along. So, you all need to cool it. That's all I have to say. Dove, go help Diamond grow potatoes."

I paused in plucking a worm off a berry leaf and met Diamond's eyes. *Help you grow potatoes?*

*Offer to do that and you'll find this wood impaled somewhere in your body,* her purple irises promised.

Wolfe tripped between us, snapping a young corn plant in half. "Oops."

Trinity growled, an anguished sound. She wandered to the swirl of marigolds whose sunshine heads grew like heavy oranges. My cousin's artistic mastermind revealed itself in the layout of the small garden Wolfe's grandma allowed us to keep on her



property. The complicated design of colors, leaf shapes, and plant heights depicted a fire-breathing dragon.

Wolfe quit trying to prop up the severed corn stalk and extended his arm, as if to fit it around my shoulders. "Is it true? Your uncle still hasn't shown up? I thought he had. I mean you never said he hadn't, and—"

My brother wedged himself between us, his knife aloft. "Move back from my sister."

"No. You move back." Diamond flung herself in front of Wolfe. Her blade hovered near my brother's blonde, bearded throat.

"I said cool it!"

Both razor-edged weapons lowered at Jezebel's command.

Wolfe craned over Gilead's shoulder. "Is it true about your uncle?"

I nodded. "And is it true, what Jezebel said about other Christians going missing between here and California? That it's not only my uncle who's disappeared?"

He bit his lip.

"Wolfe. Don't be a spineless slug. Tell the truth."

His shoulders sagged. "OK. Fine. Yes. I figured there was no need to mention the missing-Christians stuff since your uncle had shown up. The disappearances are happening up in Washington state too. And what the brat said about your people breaking into the Christian Terrorist Detention Centers wasn't a lie either. Not that they've found any of the missing believers there...but the attacks on the centers have been pretty regular lately."

I pictured the pink cracked walls from the week

I'd spent in the detention center for religious terrorists last spring. Was my uncle there right now? Had he been arrested by nonbelievers for some trivial illegal deed? Was he now stuck inside with no hope of getting out?

Gilead returned his knife to the rope loop he used for a belt and hummed a few bars of my grandma's favorite hymn. His fingers shot out, gripped Wolfe's black shirt, and reeled him in. "Where is Ochoco's closest detention center? Give me directions for the fastest way to get there."

Diamond stuck her knife between her teeth pirate-style. But before she could launch herself onto my brother's back, Trinity's calm voice piped up from the flowers.

"Or...my dad's merely at home. Resting and recovering from the flu or a busted ankle. Before we go bashing down the door of the Heathens' detention center to free him, we'll check home first. If he's not there, Grandpa will know where to look."

Gilead's grip relaxed at my cousin's obvious wisdom, and Wolfe was able to yank his shirt free. As the potential for a fight passed to nothing, excitement drained from Diamond's eyes. She straightened from her crouch, wiped the spit from her switchblade, and moved back to the woodpile.

I scrubbed my dirty palms against my home-sewn pants that used to be Gilead's and headed toward the front of the painted home where the familiar white Jeep waited. "You're driving us, Wolfe. I mean...uh, please?"

"On it." The keys jangled in his tanned fingers. He swung past me to open the ancient vehicle's dented door. "First stop for doughnuts?"

I groaned. No more doughnuts. I'd ingested more of that sweet pastry in this town than I'd eaten squirrel my whole life growing up in Ochoco.

"No. First stop is Micah's place." Trinity clambered past me into the backseat area. One hand cradled red strawberries.

"Right." He began to whistle my brother's hummed hymn.

I planted myself at the Jeep's open door. With a sigh, I shook my head. "Gilead, get in. Jezebel, get out."

Still whistling, Wolfe extracted his struggling sister from the seat next to Trinity.

She kicked the air and writhed to break his grip. "Lemme go, Woof! It's not fair! I'm coming to Dove's house, too!"

"Not this time, brat. You're not invited." He thrust her at Diamond, whose wiry arm came around the little girl's scrawny middle like a snare.

I crossed my arms. "Gilead? We're waiting on you. You were the one in the big hurry to find Uncle Saul."

My brother quit studying the distant treetops and frowned. "Not in that death trap, and not with him driving. If you and Trinity had any decency, you'd refuse his ride, too."

I plunked down on the hot seat and slammed the door.

His lowered head filled the window's opening. "Fine. Micah and I will meet you at our property in a couple days. Wait for me there."

"Fine." I hit a button and the glass rolled up.

Wolfe quit whistling and leaned over. He spoke in a low murmur. "Maybe this is bad timing, but the guy called Lobo left a message for you. He'll be here

tomorrow morning to collect you with Jessica. He hinted about werewolves, gators, and a dead voodoo princess. Which means ten-to-one your next survival is in the Manchac Swamp. That's Louisiana. You have experience dealing with haunted swamps, I hope?"

"Shish." I glanced back, but Trinity was in her own world of shapes and colors. Her slim fingers held a heart-shaped berry in the sunbeam. The red glowed like a ruby. "How would I know about swamps? You know I've been in Ochoco all my life and haven't gone anywhere else. Well...except Texas. And New Mexico. And Colorado, Utah, and Idaho."

Being God's messenger had made me quite well-traveled, when I actually listed the places I'd been. But I hadn't been to Louisiana.

What would it be like there? A swamp with alligators? The werewolf and voodoo stuff...not a big deal. I faced Satan's obstacles every day as part of the Sent. Did it matter what form evil came in? A dead voodoo princess or Diamond with a crossbow? Nope.

I shrugged. "It'll be Lobo's problem tomorrow. Not mine. If I'm not here, I'm not here, and I can't go."

Wolfe guffawed. "Sure. No problem. And when you're arrested for breach of contract again, I'll just come bust you out of the CTDC like the rest of the Christians are doing."

I rolled my eyes. Still...

I bit my lip. Jessica was coming here. I'd been watching for her in town all June, and now she arrived tomorrow. Jessica and Diamond were cousins, and the only true difference between them was that Diamond glared and threw pointed elbows...whereas Jessica glared and threw out pointed questions, revealing a burning curiosity to know more about the true God.

If I found my uncle at home today, Wolfe could have me back in town in time to go to Louisiana for *Fanatic Surviving*. If my uncle wasn't at home...

I strapped the safety belt around my waist. God alone knew whether or not I'd be here in Sisters tomorrow to meet Jessica and Lobo. So why whine about it?

"Wolfe? Are you driving me home sometime today? Please?"

"Sure." He turned on the engine and peeled his gaze from my brother, who loomed next to his window.

Gilead continued to drag a slow finger across his throat. His message was clear.

*Touch my sister...I kill you.*