



To escape the lethal trappings of dystopian America,
they must evade government patrols and cross a desolate landscape
where brazen predators threaten their survival.

KIM MCMAHILL

DEADLY
EXODUS

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Kim McMahon

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DEDICATION

To all those who follow their dreams and believe in the
power of love.

CHAPTER ONE

Nyla Ward's grandmother was born in Pennsylvania. Her mother was born in Mississippi and she in New Mexico. The country was in transition and the Ward women had migrated west to stay ahead of progress, but the wishes of the politicians had prevailed. The direction in which the country was destined to follow was set, but the game was far from over.

The Ward women appeared to be beaten, but their spirit hadn't been broken. Some days were more difficult than others, but Nyla refused to be the generation who gave up on the American dream of old—the dream her grandmother had lived, her mother had tasted and she now craved.

Nyla's vision of the America her grandmother had experienced as a young girl was shattered as she eased her bubble-shaped car off the empty highway and pulled into the scorching lot. She parked and sat for a moment, looking at the drab prison looming before her. The facility emerged from the desert like a barren concrete island surrounded by a vast sea of sagebrush and unforgiving cacti, teeming with scorpions, tarantulas, serpents and other predators of

uncertain intent.

The prison looked like a mirage as heat vapors from the desert rose in eerie waves, blurring the lines of the surrounding buildings and landscape. Nyla wished the structure was just an illusion, but it wasn't, it was her reality. Though she was free to enter and depart the dismal fortress as long as she followed the rules, its existence made her feel shackled and desperate.

"Ignition off. Door unlock. Maximum window tint," Nyla demanded of her tiny two-door solar-powered vehicle.

She stepped out of the car and was hit by the stifling heat of a typical July day in southeast New Mexico. The wind blew, but brought no relief as it whipped her shoulder-length blonde hair into a tousled mess and scoured her eyes with dust. No matter how oppressive the heat or how uncomfortable the gusting wind, she would've rather stood in the elements all day than go into the Facility, as it was known around town.

As Nyla approached the bulky gate, she looked down at the scar on her palm and resentment consumed her. She forced rebellious thoughts out of her head and encouraged herself into a positive frame of mind. It wasn't an easy task, but one she had mastered.

The gate granted the only access through the wall ringing the Facility. A laser barrier and poison-injecting darts lined the top of the barricade and gate, preventing anyone from attempting to scale the outer wall. To Nyla's knowledge, no one had ever tried to escape, but she figured the intimidating design had

more to do with breaking the spirit of the inhabitants and frightening visitors than preventing anyone from attempting to breach the impenetrable obstacle.

Nyla passed her hand in front of the scanner's red eye and the solid-iron gate eased open. She entered and cringed as the gate clicked shut behind her. She paused, took a deep breath and followed the path leading to a heavy metal door. At this entrance, she stared into the retinal scanner and pressed her thumb into the mold, waiting for her print to be verified and her iris to be recognized. Within seconds the door opened and access was granted.

She slowly walked the length of the windowless hallway. The corridor was dark and depressing, but climate controlled to provide a gentle transition from the extreme heat outside to the numbing chill of the building's interior. A familiar musty odor filled her nostrils, making her want to turn and leave the dreary confines of the inhumane space, but duty made her press on.

Nyla always used the short time she was entombed in the hallway to prepare herself mentally. The sound of her own footsteps echoing through the sterile emptiness created such a lonely sensation that she was able to emerge looking relieved and grateful rather than hostile, which was how she actually felt. But, the facade usually lasted only long enough to elicit a moderately polite response from the monitor and was quickly replaced with feelings of loathing.

"Have a seat in the waiting room and I'll let the attendant know to retrieve Rachel from her cell," stated

the woman behind the glass window.

Nyla wasn't sure how much longer she could continue to do this, but most of all she didn't understand why no one else saw how fundamentally wrong the Facility was. The prison held thousands of people who would have been free just several decades ago. Their crimes weren't crimes. They were simply trying to live the life America claimed to offer and at one time, the country had been exactly that place.

She sat and bowed her head, rubbing her temples, trying to force back the headache she generally got while inside the Facility. Perhaps the fluorescent light was too bright or the air too stale, but no matter the reason, the pain crept behind her eyes as she settled in for the long wait. Nyla imagined the authorities wanted visitors to feel the chill of the windowless room, to contemplate the silence and the dismal gray concrete walls, ceilings and floor. She figured the depressing décor was meant to discourage any free person from breaking the law and having to be incarcerated. The lack of human contact, color, warmth and sound was unnerving, and it provided too much time to think, making the electrocuting sound of doors opening as footsteps approached an almost a welcome distraction.

"You came," whispered the tiny woman clad in a baggy fluorescent green jumpsuit.

The appreciative voice interrupted Nyla's dark thoughts. She stood and smiled the warmest smile she could muster when her heart ached so deeply. Nyla wrapped her arms around the woman's narrow

drooping shoulders and held her tight, not wanting to ever let go, but knowing she must since personal expressions of emotion were strictly prohibited.

The woman cried while Nyla held her, the sounds muffled in her embrace. Every visit began the same way, but it never seemed to get any easier. Nyla suppressed her own urge to release the pain and anger bottled up inside and continued to hug the woman until she had her own emotions under control.

Nyla heard the monitor clear her throat, issuing an unspoken warning to break the physical contact. Nyla forced a smile back onto her lips, repressed the evil thoughts swirling through her mind, released the woman and stepped back to the required distance.

“Hello Mother. I’ve missed you.”

CHAPTER TWO

Ethan Brand collapsed into an ergonomically correct chair in the control room and dropped his knee-high snake boots to the floor next to him. He could take care of the problem himself, but decided to wait for Jared while he enjoyed a few more minutes of the air-conditioned room.

He dreaded the short summer recess. Unlike the rest of the students at the academy, the break held little relaxation. The only upside was that he and Jared were able to spend more time with their two best friends, Nyla and Claire.

The door swung open and a gust of hot air flooded into the room. Ethan squinted as sunlight poured in, hoping it wasn't his mother who invaded his sanctuary. Relief washed over him as his friend strolled into the room already wearing his tall Kevlar boots.

"What now," Jared asked.

"The system wouldn't activate, must be a clog somewhere. I've initiated the laser scan through the system's pipes. The diagnostics should be done in a few seconds."

They watched the row of monitors until they

spotted a small red dot in sector two indicating something live blocked one of the outlets. Ethan locked down the system, changed the password so no one could turn the water on until they had a chance to locate and fix the problem, pulled on his boots and followed Jared out of the control room.

The new plants were struggling in the oppressive mid-summer heat. As Ethan looked out over the spindly seedlings thoughts of sabotaging the crops just to challenge Vera's authority crossed his mind, but he knew he could never do it. He loved the land. He found peace and contentment in the fields and satisfaction in coaxing crops to flourish in this harsh, yet fragile desert environment.

Manual labor on farms was a thing of the past. Fields were plowed, sowed, weeded and watered with mechanized equipment run from a centralized control room. Despite technology the system wasn't perfect, especially the irrigation component. Clogged pipes were manually cleaned which involved pulling out ambiguous material, or worse, encountering the rattlesnakes which had proliferated under government protection.

"Holy cow!" Jared bellowed as he jumped back at the sight of the obstruction protruding from the open end of the pipe.

"What is it?"

"How in the heck are we going to get that out?" Jared shrieked.

"Wow, I've never seen a snake that big or with so many rattles," Ethan calmly replied.

“What do we do? Should we call someone? We’ve dealt with lots of snakes, but nothing like this.”

“Who would we call? I imagine we have more experience handling snakes than anyone. I say we cut through its hide and wait for it to bleed out, and then bury the evidence.”

“But what if we get caught? Killing any form of wildlife is punishable by three years in the Facility. I know you like Nyla’s mom, but do you really want to see her every day?”

Ethan shook his head as he looked at his friend with concern. They had never been afraid to break the rules, but he had noticed lately that Jared was becoming less sure of himself and was starting to conform to society just like everyone else.

“Why don’t you go back to the house and get cleaned up? We’re going to meet Nyla and Claire in a bit and I don’t want to fight with you for the shower,” Ethan offered. “Kicking your butt has become way too easy.”

“Thanks for trying to make me feel like less of a coward. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’m becoming such a wuss.”

“You said it, not me.” Ethan slugged Jared playfully on the shoulder.

“I used to follow you into any stupid or illegal situation no matter what the consequences. Now I worry too much about my freedom, but I’m not sure I even know what that is anymore.”

Ethan watched his best friend walk away, shoulders slumped and head hung low, making him

look shorter than his six-foot tall frame. When Jared was out of sight, Ethan took out the old pocketknife he had found in the cave and opened the blade. He treasured the find. It was illegal to possess anything resembling a weapon, but that was probably what made it so special to him. The only one who knew of the tool's existence was Jared, and despite his friend's weakening spirit, Ethan was certain he could still trust Jared with his secrets and with his life.

A distinct buzz brought Ethan's focus back to the problem at hand. With one quick motion, he sliced through the reptile's tough hide. Standing back a safe distance, he watched the tail flail wildly as the serpent struggled to back out of the pipe. The harder the snake writhed, the more it became wedged in the small opening and the more it bled.

When the snake stilled, Ethan cut the rattles off and stuffed them in his pocket. He wasn't sure why he always saved the rattles from snakes he killed. The practice had become somewhat of a ritual—maybe it was his silent protest to the mind-numbing number of rules governing his day-to-day life.

He grabbed the snake and carefully pulled it out of the pipe. The snake began to move once free. Angry and desperate, the viper searched for whoever dared to challenge its dominance over the desert. Ethan jumped back and waited for the serpent to quit moving again, amazed at its reluctance to die gracefully. As the snake thrashed, a tiny rabbit peeked out of the opening. The animal waited, nose twitching, ears searching for danger, its warm, brown eyes glued to the convulsing

snake. The rabbit's gaze darted between Ethan and the snake, trying to determine if it could elude both potential predators blocking its path. After several seconds of quivering indecision, the rabbit darted to safety.

Ethan buried the snake, kicked dirt over the blood, cleaned his knife and headed back toward the control room. He had helped another creature escape the lethal serpent, which made him feel good, since he had no use for snakes. He didn't believe any species should be driven to extinction, but he feared the authorities had gone too far in protecting certain predators. No one seemed to care that the innocent rabbit was in more danger of extinction than the serpent that preyed ruthlessly on the harmless animal.

Back in the control room, Ethan unlocked the system, flipping the switch to lift the dam bringing water to the pipes to irrigate the vegetables. As he reached for the button on the intercom to notify his mother that the system was back up, he noticed dried blood on his hand and wrist. He was relieved no one else was in the control room or he would have had some explaining to do. No one at the farm would care that it might be his own blood from an injury sustained while doing a dirty job—they would only be interested in catching him breaking the law.

Ethan washed his calloused hands and inspected his clothes and arms to ensure he'd missed no more blood. As he stared at his hands, the small scar on his palm caught and held his attention. Whenever he saw it, he thought about the predator. The more he thought

about the predator, the more he feared the trusting citizens of America had become its unwitting prey.

CHAPTER THREE

Claire Riley watched her reflection in the mirror as she finished the last brush stroke through her long, straight, brunette hair. She did a pirouette and admired the pale green shorts and white top she had chosen. On the surface, the evening was a simple gathering of friends at the local coffee shop, but to her, any time she saw Jared Lynch was a special occasion and she wanted to look her best.

Satisfied with her appearance, Claire crept down the hallway. She peered around the corner and could see the front door. She listened for any noise indicating her mother was nearby—nothing—the coast was clear.

“Where are you going?” Katherine Riley demanded, stepping out from the kitchen and into view.

Claire stopped, but took her time turning around, dreading another confrontation with her mother. Their strained relationship was draining and Claire was tired of fighting. She had so little in common with her mother that she often wondered about her father. Claire felt certain she took after the man who would never be a part of her life. Most likely, he was dead by now.

"I'm going to meet friends at the Java Joint like I told you yesterday." Claire reached for the doorknob.

"Which friends?"

She knew how her mother felt about her friends, but Claire didn't intend to give up the most important people in her life.

"Nyla, Ethan and Jared." She watched her mother's expression twist into an ugly configuration, lips pursed, nose wrinkled, eyes squinting and glaring. Claire was fed up with the melodrama, but knew there was no way to avoid a scene. She leaned against the wall, crossed her arms in front of her chest and tilted her head to the side, signifying she was ready for the lecture, but not in the least bit interested in what her mother had to say.

"I so hoped you would make more appropriate friends once you entered the career prep program. The fact you associate with that Ward girl after what her mother did puts me under scrutiny at work. We dedicated employees of the State Law and Information Commission are trying to protect society from people like Rachel Ward."

"You're just an administrative assistant at SLIC, not an operative, so get over yourself, Katherine. Your agency doesn't protect anyone from anything. You and your cronies simply harass innocent citizens and get involved in people's lives where you have no business being."

"How dare you? If it weren't for us, society would be in total chaos. And, as long as you live in this house you will call me Mother."

Claire knew it annoyed her mother to be called by her first name, so she threw in the insult every chance she got. And, her acronym for her mother's workplace was another button she liked to push. Against her better judgment, Claire forged on.

"If by chaos you mean people would be free to choose their companions, express their opinions and emotions openly, experience new and exciting things, move about when and where they choose, than I suppose you're correct, Katherine. May I go now?"

Katherine clenched her fists at her side. She took several deep breaths and counted to ten, like all the digital parental guides had instructed, before answering her daughter. "Go, but those farm boys had just better be friends. You know committed personal relationships of the archaic nature are strictly prohibited. If men and women reverted back to marriage and such, we would be no better than the uncivilized countries of the world or the misguided generations before."

"Isolationism has turned out to be really great," Claire mumbled sarcastically.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing you'd understand," Claire replied as she slipped out the door.

Claire wasn't sure when her mother had lost her soul, but she was determined to find out what it was like to make personal choices. The law prohibiting marriage had come about because the government didn't know how to deal with the often violent clashes over who should be allowed to marry and what

benefits they should receive. She wondered if people would have left others alone if they knew the alternative was no unions of any kind and no public expressions of love.

As her house disappeared from view, Claire slowed her pace to a casual stroll. The evening was warm and pleasant, but something didn't feel right. She looked around at the cameras mounted on every building and light post, slowly rotating back and forth, scanning and searching. She was sure the equipment had always been there, but tonight the cameras seemed to follow her, making her feel naked and vulnerable.