

THE
DOVE STRONG
TRILOGY
1

DOVE STRONG

ERIN LORENCE

Dove Strong

Dove Strong Trilogy

#1

Erin Lorence

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Dedication

To my husband and best friend, Brian.
I never would have succeeded without your love and
fierce support.

1

I had two choices.

Either ignore my brother, Gilead. Or knock him out of the tree.

Then, the limb under my feet tried to buck me off.

“Quit it.” I snatched at an iffy branch near my ears while widening my stance.

How dumb of me not to have acted quicker. So what if a major reason I was about to risk my life trekking across the enemy’s territory was to save my brother’s? It would be kind of pointless if I killed Gilead now. But at least he wouldn’t be here, twenty feet in the air, annoying me.

The shaking lessened some, but I still grappled with the branches next to me.

“So help me, Gilead, I will tell Grandpa if you break my neck. What’s more, breaking my neck won’t help my survival rate for the trip. I’ll jump when it’s time, and it’s not time yet, so go home.”

As the shaking eased off, I squinted through the sunlit greenery at my brother.

A foot taller than me, he perched on nearby limbs in the shade at the oak’s trunk with one foot still planted on my branch. His arm, one that could haul me over his shoulder without trying, gestured at a limb below us. It was the first step in a climb down into dead bushes and the water I’d soon land in.

A scream echoed overhead.

We both ignored it. Gilead tried to bully me out of the tree with his dagger eyes. And I pretended he'd reharnessed and taken the zip line back home.

Another scream. Only blue jays scuffling for territory in the foliage. Birds speckled the forest's canopy and summer sky. Everywhere except *down there*. In all the hours I'd watched, nothing feathered had touched that oblong of water.

Yeah. That water definitely had something off about it.

I sniffed again but still didn't catch any telltale stink from the giant, freak puddle in the middle of a waist-high bunch of grass. Only the ho-hum smell of baking pine needles and sun-scorched dirt.

According to my brother it was a pond—and the best entrance point into our neighbors' underground home.

The leaves next to my shoes quivered again. A threat.

"Climb down then, Dove, and run for it. Since you're too scared to jump."

I glanced over. His chosen limb seemed sturdy enough for any job. A lot like him.

"It's safe." He spoke through a jaw that had been clenched for the last six months. His frustration bled through the reassurance of his words. Frustration that *I'd* been called for this journey. Me. Not him.

"And you've got speed now...well, for a girl. For sixteen...I mean, they're far enough away that they won't catch you if you run flat out like I've taught you." His tone melted to clover honey. "Don't be scared, lil' Dove Bird."

He was goading me with...what? My supposed

fear of those stupid dogs?

"Tchah." I stayed focused. "Genius plan, Gilead—"

"They always are."

"If I run, I lead those beasts to the Braes' door. And every Heathen in Oregon will know where they live. Nice." My eyes flickered to a shadowed spot between some half-buried boulders at the pond's farthest edge—the Braes' hidden entrance—before returning to the too quiet puddle...pond.

"Or I could throw you?"

Wooroo. Wooroooooooo.

The hounds hunted far enough away, although they sounded more excited now, which probably meant they'd caught my family's scent.

Maybe they were under our home's maple trees, balancing on their hind legs. Clawing at the rippled bark and baying up at my grandpa who'd use the buckets of water if he got fed up with it.

No. Scratch that. Today he'd keep them from Gilead and me—no doubt baiting them, holding them there.

A home built in the tree canopy—like ours—was pretty safe, even if not hidden. A home carved out from the ground like the Braes'...

No way would I lead the beasts there. I clenched my fists at the pure evilness of the idea.

There was only one way I wouldn't leave a scent trail for the enemies' dogs to track. And that was straight down from this providential, jutting branch into the suspicious water below. I'd reach the entrance from there.

"You're killing me, Dove. We're losing light, and I'm worn. And you're sun damaged if you think I'm going to camp out here all night while you gape at the

water. Plus, I'll have to check the zip lines all over again in the morning if vandals mess with them. No joking. I'm gone."

I released my breath and raised a hand at the trunk. "See you, brother."

But he slumped against its bark with crossed arms instead of reaching for the harness. It dangled from the taut wire that stretched to a pine's trunk, a stone's toss away.

I shrugged off my disappointment. A stupid reaction. I might never see my only brother again because...well...no one promised I'd make it back. But I'd received his half hug and rundown on staying alive back when the sun was high. He was free to fly back home. I wished he would.

"Dove—"

I thrust my palm outwards. It was the sound I'd waited for—an abnormal hush as the wind died. The whispering leaves became moth wings. The screaming jays muted.

Then came the clear directive from Heaven.

Have faith.

The oak branch groaned behind me, and Gilead's commands retreated into the sky. "Eyes on target. Feet together. Chin down. You will come back to us."

Rushing air. Painful water. Gasping—lots of gasping. The next terrible minute of my life blurred. But in the end, three things stood out.

I jumped.

I sank.

And I drowned.

2

I drowned, but I didn't die. Not all the way.

Dying would've been giving up.

Dying would've been easier.

I'd expected a jolt on surface impact...but not for my eyeballs to sizzle in their sockets. The water jammed up my nose became a fire trail. And proof.

The unruffled pond...no bugs...no birds.

Poison.

I flapped my arms and scissor-kicked my legs. I did it the way Gilead trained me a million years ago, when I wasn't drowning in poison.

Another wave of panic twisted my gut when I imagined the invisible Enemy stepping out from the bushes, eager to play his favorite game with me: Time to Torture the Christian.

My splayed fingers broke the water's surface. Sharp grass materialized under them. And the fragile stalks broke before I tasted air.

I kicked, lunged up, and grabbed another handful. Again, it disintegrated. I made a third attempt. Failure.

He laughed—a being a thousand times more powerful than me, a breakable, human girl.

My feet sank into the boggy bottom and stuck. *No, no, no*, my slow-firing brain objected. *My calling. Grandma's dream. I had to reach the mountain. The Council. To save my family...Gilead...some others. I couldn't die.*

~*~

I awoke in a tomb. When I lurched up and smacked my head against packed dirt, a shovelful showered my face. I shielded my eyes in the impenetrable darkness.

But I could sit, so I guessed I wasn't dead. And since I wasn't up a tree, Gilead hadn't done the saving.

My hand leaped to the waist of my pants under my tunic and patted around until the papers there crackled inside their protective plastic. I let it fall. Both prayer results. I hadn't lost my family's and our neighbor's votes for peace regarding the war. The votes God had commissioned me to deliver to the Council.

Grit coated my tongue and teeth, so I spat between mouthfuls of soupy air. I felt around, discovering my loss. My backpack—the one I'd been wearing. It was gone.

My eyes ached while my nose cringed, rejecting the intense earth smell that carried hints of other stuff. Decaying leaves. Animal fur. Burnt wax. I eased onto my knees like my arthritic grandma would. *Sky alive*, I hurt. Groping in blind arcs, I searched for the burnt candle whose odor filled the space...but I ended up knocking into cool metal that rolled.

I snatched up the flashlight. My cold thumb jammed down with still enough life to trigger the heat sensor. An ultraviolet circle flared—a tiny sun in a world that'd never known light. Tears rushed into my eyes, but I squinted around them.

I crouched in a dugout—a large burrow that a

giant rabbit might hunker down in for the winter. The hard earth I'd knocked into created the walls, ceiling, and floor.

My backpack!

As I scrambled for it, better air wafted through a half-circle wall opening, brushing the sweat on my temples. The breeze carried a muffled snatch of a song. A voice.

My haphazard flashlight hit on a single word scratched high on the wall.

Shalom. B.

Beneath it, a crooked dirt arrow pointed to the tunnel's opening.

Shalom. The familiar greeting of Christians written in Amhebran, the relaxed form of Hebrew we spoke as well as English.

And the *B*.

Well, that was brainless enough. *B* for Brae. And proof I crouched in the right place.

Perfect. I'd go now. I'd follow this arrow, locate these Braes, and find out who I'd be traveling with so I could get on with this suicidal mission.

I continued to crouch in the dirt, gripping my pack. The battle in the poisoned water. I'd lost...*no*. Somehow, I'd won.

I closed my eyes and held my breath.

Lord?

Yes, my Best Friend was present. Here to protect and guide. He hadn't abandoned me—as if I doubted for a moment He would.

A light tap of pressure, like a kiss, landed on my forehead above the line of freckles there.

I found my feet, and invisible arms began to nudge me forward.

I swallowed hard, gripped the smooth light, shouldered my pack, and allowed myself to be prodded into the pitch-black tunnel ahead.

~*~

Mealworms. A whole mess of them.

A hiss from the corner distracted me from the half-filled bowl. Another drip from the skewered, charred meat hit the embers with a hiss, and my stomach twisted.

I leaned against the stump, which served as a table in the center of this fire-lit burrow, and picked out a crispy-brown larva from the woven bowl. The toasted skin crackled between my fingers when I crushed it. A musty tang hit my nostrils. Horrible.

I smiled. Eating bugs was hardcore survival. This Brae family was tough. And toughness was as crucial to survival as a beating heart in my own family.

A muted murmur wafted from behind. As I pivoted with a stumble, a different one answered from a partly hidden tunnel opening. I plunged into it, leaving the grubs and dripping meat behind. Ahead, someone began to laugh.

Goosebumps pricked my arms. No sane person could be so glad in this human-sized rodent home.

Maybe these people weren't tough. Maybe they were crazy.

3

A blast of brightness bludgeoned me back into the tunnel's shadows. After a few seconds, I peeked through my fingers, forcing my pupils to adjust.

Fighting my wobbly knees, I strode out into the fake, blue light flooding the dirt. The space expanded before me like a flat desert or farmer's field, except with a bumpy dirt ceiling so low I had to duck.

I passed the topsy lantern on the ground and zeroed in on the Mr. Brae from my memories, now kneeling and jamming the pointy end of a wooden spear into the ceiling. As he repeated this senseless activity, a trickle of dirt showered his upturned, cheek-splitting grin.

I jolted and froze.

I hadn't seen this bearded face in six years—not since a year after the last Council meeting when I'd perched on a fir branch next to our garden.

At ten years old, I'd been fascinated by Mr. Brae. The crow-black of his hair. The ashy-whiteness of his cheeks. His bulky patchwork clothes. And his tears.

A man crying. How funny.

My dad's hand had rested on his shuddering back while moonlit drops had traveled down the paleness into the wild beard. And when Mr. Brae had opened his swimming eyes, I'd seen the grief. The torment of loss.

So now, six years later, I forced myself forward. And told myself not to be weirded out because Mr. Brae had recovered so well from his son's death.

Get a grip, Dove. People smile.

"I'm up now, sir. Who's the messenger coming with me? Because we need to get going." I braced myself for those haunting eyes. But Mr. Brae remained focused on his ceiling and his half-buried pole.

Without warning, enough dirt to bury a toddler rained down. I lurched backwards.

"Whoo, baby doll!" Through the grit storm, his eyebrows zinged up to his hairline in excitement. The enormous, skewered potato waved back and forth before my eyes. "Did you ever see such a beauty, Dove? Hello, my beautiful baby."

He didn't mean me. He meant the vegetable he rubbed against his bearded cheek.

Unexpected hands from behind yanked me back. "Better keep out of his way. You'll do better with me."

The boy I shook off was crow-haired too. Younger than Gilead, it appeared—around my age—and with half my brother's muscles.

After hesitating, I followed his bare feet toward a heap of soil that pressed against the ceiling. The cleanish areas on the backs of the boy's hands glowed pale with a bluish, bruised tinge. My own were too sun-stained to reflect the fake light.

Two specks-of-girls with Mr. Brae's eyes dug at the mound's base. One of them pulled out an odd-shaped dirt clump.

Thud. She tossed the earthy object into a cracked bucket. Some sort of vegetable, maybe.

Not one of them, OK God? Please don't have called one of them to come with me on this trek. I'd rather swallow

every mealworm in this place than drag a whiny little kid across the world with me to the Council.

"You can't communicate with my dad when he's harvesting. But me, I can tell you anything you need to know." The boy stared at me, forgetting to blink. But it didn't matter. Although I *did* care about the way he rubbed his dirt-stained palms together, promising great plans in store for me. For *us*.

Or him, God, I aimed at Heaven. Not him. If You truly love me, God. Please, please. Don't have called him.

"So? You pulled through OK? Got your bag and flashlight?"

I was alive and holding both. I blinked.

Skink-boy's eyes traveled in that same rude way from my blonde hair to my woven shoes. "Good."

Skink.

Why did the comparison of him to that lizard pop into my head? Well, skinks are smallish...as far as reptiles go. They don't blink. And young ones are blue marked.

I bit my curling lip, dirt gritting on my teeth. "Good enough. But how about some water?"

"Water? You want more water? What we left you wasn't enough? Or wasn't good enough?"

Was he personally offended by my thirst? "Not *more* water. Water. I haven't had any yet."

Still, he made no move to round up some—didn't even drop a hint about where to find it. "It was good stuff, you know. None of that poisoned crud I saved you from."

I crossed my arms. "Listen. I'm not dumb. Or blind. There was no water. Not a cup. Not a wet puddle on the ground. None. Nada."

"Not my fault, not my fault. Hey! Worm!"

The runt of the tiny diggers, who'd been spying, froze with her twig-like arms tensed.

"Whatever happened to that water you were supposed to leave our guest, Worm? You think she's part scrub bush—doesn't need to drink for weeks? Yeah, you better run."

He kicked a dirt clod that exploded against the tattered fur racing for the tunnel's entrance.

Oh, yeah. Skinks bite.

"Twinsies, Micah!"

Mr. Brae's shout caused me to slap a hand over my prayer result papers.

He held up what looked like a weird, V-shaped potato. It was actually conjoined twin potatoes. "Have you ever seen anything like it? I'll call this half Micah and that side Melody. But don't think because they're your namesakes you two get to hog the potato to yourselves."

He waggled a finger and set the potato in his bucket as if it were an egg. He lunged at the ceiling with his pole.

His son—Micah—leaned closer. "I know about you. You're Dove Strong. Your Uncle Saul went with my brother to the Council last time. So. Did he—your uncle—ever turn up?"

"No-pe." I let the *p* pop in the silence. "Dead." We'd never had physical proof of this, but it was our obvious conclusion to why he'd never returned home from his journey. The same one I was about to take.

"Er...well. And...and how's your father, Dove?" His skinny chest puffed out, and he became all-knowing again. "Your dad's Jonah Strong. Yeah, I know all about him too. Terrifying when crossed. Commands wasps to fight for him. See? I'm not so

clueless. And I'll bet—"

"Dead." My dad would be dead three years in October. Shot by a trespassing vandal he'd confronted.

I waited for Micah to finish stuttering. "My cousin had a pet raccoon once named Berry. It's dead too, if you want to ask about it. Buried it under a pine."

His toe twisted in the dirt. "It's not my fault I didn't know...about your dad. I'm never allowed out. So, what?" His large eyes narrowed. "It's like you and a bunch of kids swinging around in the trees, then?"

"Don't be a lamebrain. My mom's fine. And my aunt and grandparents. Enough with the interrogation. I need to get going. So tell me—who's been called to go to the Council?"

Skink boy blinked. And then glared past his dad at a woman and girl on the other side of the space—his mom and sister, no doubt, and perhaps Melody. His twin and the potato's other namesake, since she seemed about his size. Both mom and daughter prodded the ceiling with sticks like Mr. Brae, only less excited-like.

"We—my dad and I—haven't...a hundred percent decided yet. It's complicated...lots of things to consider about who should go."

Another obstacle. And all I needed was to be out of here.

My cheeks ignited like torches. Hot waves pulled at my body, filling my muscles with strength. Making them swell until I was sure I loomed huge and terrifying—like Gilead. For the first time since I opened my eyes underground, I didn't tremble like a newborn calf attempting to walk.

"You haven't decided? You—your family—has known for seven years—has had seven years to pray

for God's direction! For His answer. *His* answer, not yours. The decision of who's traveling with me isn't yours to make. It's God's. So don't say *you* haven't decided. At least..."

Calm down, deep breath.

I obeyed myself so I didn't explode like the kicked dirt clod. I relaxed my clenched fingers, which oddly still showed up skinny and weak as clover stalks. "Have any of you paid enough attention to hear God's answer about peace?"

He stayed silent, but I didn't bother to clarify. Even cut off down here in these tunnels, he had to know I referred to *the Reclaim*—the hearsay about a future war between Christ's followers and Satan's. A battle to reclaim America.

No, it'd be more than a mere battle if it happened.

It'd be a bloodbath.

Those of us who didn't believe that God had promised this war—which was every person I knew except my bloodthirsty brother Gilead—referred to the Reclaim as *the Rumor*. Because that's what it was.

The Rumor. Unbiblical. No heavenly signs supporting it. But it got respect since it was almost as ancient as my grandparents, who were alive when it cropped up over sixty years ago—right after all true Christians were exiled from pagan American society.

In my mind, this proved that the Rumor—or *OK, fine...*the Reclaim—was a lie. Or, more kindly put, a dream. Fabricated by some of our people who weren't satisfied with their lives. Christians determined to make something better of their futures here on earth.

But even those of us who scoffed at the Reclaim still prayed for God's clear direction for peace...or for whatever else He wanted. Because every seven years,

God chose a member from each Christian household to make the risky trek through the Enemy's territory to his or her nearest Council, most often hidden on a mountain. For us, we hiked to Mount Jefferson—sixty miles from home as the crow flies, according to my grandpa.

This year, God had appointed me.

I'd become one messenger of hundreds...or even thousands...starting a journey for one of the fifty Councils meeting in our country. On September fifteenth, a month from now, the Councils would tally our nation's votes. After coming to a consensus, they'd announce the new decision. Unite and reclaim our land by force? Or peace.

Of course, the decision was peace. It had always been peace. It would always be peace.

Why did God appoint messengers every seven years? Perhaps He knew if He didn't allow that consistent seven-year timeframe to address taking back the land, the least content of us would have taken measures into our own hands long ago.

For sure, the idea of the Reclaim squashed the amount of random violence cropping up on our side. It kept our revolutionists patient and preoccupied, busy crossing their fingers and dreaming of a different future.

Micah snatched up a spear from the soil. "Yeah. Peace."

He harpooned a nearby parsnip on the ground, and it burst open revealing its frosty center. Before I could grab it to suck out the moisture, he'd kicked both fragments at the dirt-clump pile.

Seven more years of hiding. Of letting the devil's workers dump poison and garbage on our doorsteps