



THE
DOVE STRONG
TRILOGY
2

FANATICS SURVIVING

ERIN LORENCE

Fanatic
Surviving

Dove Strong Trilogy #2

Erin Lorence

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Fanatic Surviving

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Dedication

To the real Savannah, who would offer her last water
bottle to anyone in the desert.

Your loving heart inspires me.

Dove Strong Trilogy

Dove Strong
Fanatic Surviving
Sent Rising

1

Thunk. Gilead's blade sank into the X scratched on the pine. Dead center. A breath later, Micah Brae's steel nicked the trunk's bark and scuttled, disappearing in the frozen groundcover.

My brother's grunt of disgust reached me up in the crow's nest where I huddled out of sight. "Pathetic, Brae. Keep your knife horizontal to your target until you release it. Like this."

Thunk.

I focused on the sunlit branches overhead instead of my brother's and neighbor's knife-throwing session—their way of preparing for the Reclaim. The war's first attack on the godless Heathen was broadcasted for May 15, a month and a half away. And they thought this would make them ready?

Next to me on the snug lookout platform high in the maple, my grandpa surveyed the tree-filled horizons in his systematic way. I leaned my elbows back on the woven blanket, evidence he'd slept up here, despite the biting Central Oregon nights. My mom said he slept in the tree to be extra cautious—with the war between us Christians and Satan's people approaching. But that wasn't the real reason. Grandpa was obsessed with sighting his missing son, my Uncle Saul, who I'd discovered back in September, alive,

crazy, and nearby, roaming the Oregon Cascades.

"If Uncle Saul wanted to come home, he'd have done it years ago, Grandpa. You know that, right?"

He grunted.

My frown fell on the barkless, white pole in the distance. A dead tree with an eagle's nest on top, marking the corner of our property. Next to it ran the rutted path on which Wolfe Pickett had driven me home. Wolfe, the Heathen teenager I hadn't seen in six months, two weeks, and five days, who'd changed my mind about the nonbelieving population.

My frown deepened into a squint.

Under the third bleached branch from the trunk's bottom, a woodpecker had whittled out a bird-sized hollow. Did another note wait for me there? Could I check before sundown without my family noticing? Wolfe had already left me two secret messages in this hole.

Hey, Dove. I'm better and up for a visit. How about next Saturday? Su casa. Let me know. Wolfe

And then...

Dove, I know you got my note. Is this about the bean plant I killed? Tell me when it's good for me to come see you. No killing this time. Wolfe

I'd taken the notes but left no response. *Stay away, Wolfe.*

He wouldn't shed any more blood because of me. Last September my brother had stabbed him on our property for hugging me. Gilead would have killed him if I hadn't blurted out that I loved this unsaved guy and his intense little sister, Jezebel.

I rested my warm cheek on my knees.

So what if I loved a couple of pagans from the town of Sisters? Didn't *love* mean I didn't want them to

die? At least the Spirit reassured me it was fine to love nonbelievers even if my family didn't applaud this.

"Being equally yoked in marriage is God's will, Dove. It's biblical. You marry a lost soul, and you'll bear a burden you won't be able to carry."

"Amen," my aunt had agreed.

Why did my mom keep blasting me with this spiel? Marriage? How dumb. I was only seventeen. Gilead's nineteen. Had she ever cornered him to give the "equally-yoked" talk? I was willing to bet my year's quota of honey-roasted squash she hadn't.

I grabbed a promising pinecone and cracked it against the platform. After a few taps, its nuts knocked loose.

"Here, Grandpa. Eat."

With a grunt, he picked out a couple from my palm. We sat in the sunshine, chewing and spitting hulls while knives clattered and thudded below. Maybe this squirrel food would hold my stomach until dinner. Then I wouldn't have to leave this hidey-hole or my grandpa, the one family member who never referred to my unexpected relationship with nonbelievers that kept me awake at nights.

"Dove!" My cousin Trinity's voice sang from close by, no doubt from inside our tree home, since it was too clear to be from the junk piles. "Dove, Gran wants you!"

Grandpa extended his hand for the rest of the pine nuts. Making sure not to knock against the giant emergency bell that hung within reach above our heads, I climbed on branches to my home's larger platform.

Once in our main living space, I took a backward step toward the open doorway. I should have taken my

time in the branches and not rushed to get here. I took another step back.

My grandma faced me, spider-web fragile in her willow chair. Mom stood behind her, clenching the chair's straight back, an odd, tight smile pulled across her sun-stained face.

I braced myself for the marriage spiel.

Gran heaved herself to her feet, revealing bulkier homespun apparel than what she usually wore to shuffle around on the platforms. "Dove, child, go find your backpack. We're going to fix the blasphemous mistake. God wants peace and not war. He knows it, you know it, and I know it. We're heading back to the mountain to get it straight with that Council. Obey, child. I have no time for your gaping at me. Go get that pack so we can leave."

The mountain? The Council? My past failed mission came crashing down so hard I staggered.

Last summer, I'd been commissioned as God's messenger for peace. I'd traveled to Mount Jefferson, Oregon's Christian Council, and carried my family's and a next-door neighbor's prayer votes for peace. And on September 15, the fifty Councils had tallied America's Christians' votes. Despite my best effort to obey God, a decision for a war we called *the Reclaim* had been made.

A human mistake. God didn't want a war.

Before I'd left last summer, Grandma's vision revealed me reaching Mount Jefferson, and my own dream later showed the importance of halting the startling red that flooded the nation. I wasn't brainless. I knew what the growing crimson color meant. The red meant massive bloodshed—specifically our people's blood. And as God's special messenger for peace I

should have stopped this bloody threat by getting to my Council. But my journey's successful arrival at the mountain with votes, my arguments against violence with fellow messengers, and all the hours on my knees among other prayer warriors hadn't stopped it. The Councils had announced war.

And now I had to make the trek again.

I glanced over my shoulder to the green, fuzzy canopies beyond our property and then squeezed my eyes shut.

Travel back into the devil's territory? My hands shook. But not because I was scared of his attack. Satan would strike—using snakes and hunters to do his evil deeds— and I would handle them. Bring on the snakes! No. I trembled because of a secret knowledge—an unknown threat—that kept me awake at night.

Lord, there's a pull I'm too weak to fight, even wearing Your armor. Part of the world out there draws me—like a heaping pile of compost draws a fly. Will the pile collapse on me this time? Trap me so I can't escape? Will I choose not to escape? Is that what happened to Uncle Saul? Almost eight years ago, he left on the same journey to the Council. Maybe I'll end up haunting the nonbelievers' roads and towns too...maybe Sisters? Will I never return to my family if I leave?

Should I tell Gran no?

I sighed at His reply. My feet traveled two steps forward.

"Yes, Grandma."

2

“You murderer! Look at your hair! You massacred it.” Trinity pounced and gathered my now collarbone-length strands into a short tail and attempted to coil it. I’d left the rest of my blonde hair on the floor near my hammock next to the ancient scissors and family mirror.

I sniffed. It didn’t look that bad. But I glanced down at the factory-made blue pants and black, zippered jacket I wore. Should I have not...?

I squared my shoulders, which were weighed down with my bag, and returned my mom’s and aunt’s stares. “It’s smarter to blend in out there. So we’re not spotted and attacked so easily.”

I spoke the truth. My last trek into enemy territory had taught me the safety of blending in. Not that I was about to offer to search the junk pile for some castoffs for my grandma to wear instead of her homemade clothing. Or suggest she cut off her long, coiled hair like I’d done.

Mom drifted nearer to me, holding out her hands. “Dove. Daughter. You want to be a...camouflaged Christian? And look like a...a worldly woman? I don’t think it’s wise—”

A *thump* sounded, and I crossed my arms.

Gilead stepped onto the platform trailed by Micah. “Whoa!”

A crowd of chattering, little-boy cousins swung in from different limbs. At least my grandpa, following in back, didn't react to my changed appearance. Instead, he scowled at the black radio dangling from his hand. The bottom half was missing except for some wires, which he jiggled so they danced. "Radio. Seems to have got broke. Somehow."

I shrugged. Other than the initial news of the Reclaim date, our radio hadn't announced anything worth hearing. The radio had been a gifted provision from the Council to each departing messenger so families could receive important information and stay united. It blurted out news of sporadic attacks cropping up in Portland, where I assumed the Christians who broadcasted were stationed. Last week a believer hurled a rock into an enemy's truck. The projectile had struck the pagan driver and caused the vehicle to flip. But the radio reported no more Council news.

Gilead slouched closer. "The radio was the first casualty of war. My bad. Almost as bad as...this." He flicked my zipper and started to hum.

Micah, glancing at me every third word, stuttered about how the electronic got crushed during his and Gilead's sparring practice. It had been an accident. A freak gust of wind that had knocked it into their path was the real culprit. And all the while, Trinity watched him with a satisfied smile, as if she'd finally discovered a person too perfect to improve upon.

I gagged behind my palm. How could my talented, artistic cousin fall for our skink-boy neighbor who'd shown up a few months ago and wouldn't leave? But I'd spotted her newest piece of artwork at our garden's perimeter. The sculpture depicted a

familiar, angular face with dark, Brae irises and spider-leg lashes.

Grandma cut Micah off with a slashing hand motion. "Gilead, you do realize that this demolished radio is our only communication with our people about the Reclaim? This is no humming matter."

He jerked up as if surprised at her scold. "What's left for us to know? We attack May 15. That's what the radio people said."

"Don't be so sure, Grandson. Dove and I are going to see that the decision is changed. We're heading back to the Council at Jefferson for the true ruling, and it may take us longer than mid-May to return. So how will you know what to do come May 15?"

My brother's brow cleared. His lip twitched—almost a smile. "If God wants me not to fight, then He'll have you home before the fifteenth with the good news. Or He'll fix the radio. I still have faith, Gran. Even if some of your other grandkids have lost theirs...and want to dress up like Jezebels." He knocked my zipper again.

I bit my tongue because Gran brought her knuckles to her hip. "Gilead Jonah Strong. You will not fight in sin."

We Strong kids don't argue with the adults, but Gilead did...and almost crossed the line of disrespect this time with his typical, pigheaded fierceness. He wouldn't be the only Christian not to fight on Reclaim Day. Gran and I would make it home before then with a changed answer if God's will was for peace. He wouldn't even agree to wait for us in case we were a few days late.

In the charged silence that ensued, my aunt whimpered. My grandpa stepped forward with a

straighter spine than was natural for him and cleared his throat twice. But what could he do? If only he was the powerful grandpa he'd been years ago. Back then, he could hold both me and Gilead in place with one arm. Or if only his son, Jonah, had lived. If he hadn't been murdered, my dad would still be scrappy enough to knock some sense and respect into my hulk of a brother.

"You're a lamebrain, Gilead." I moved to the top of the ladder and began to climb down. "But it's a deal. We return with the Council's new answer for peace...and you lay down your knives and leave the godless alone. Now come help Gran down so we have a chance to get there and back before you make yourself a dead lamebrain."

~*~

Mount Jefferson filled the horizon faster than it should for an arthritic old woman and a homesick seventeen-year-old. How had we come so far in four days? Last August it'd taken me weeks to get this close.

The painstaking length of that summer trek must have been Melody Brae's fault. Melody, Micah's twin sister and the Braes' family messenger, empowered with her spiritual gift of being ultra-alert to danger, had led us on zigzagging detours through the farmland and high desert country. Her panic had dragged us off course and wasted time.

But I wouldn't lie and pin the whole difference in journey on Melody. My grandma and I weren't making a pit stop at Mount Washington this time for a

Christian “warrior” to accompany us. We would stay far away from the mountaintop villagers—or MTV—and avoid the closest town of Sisters with all its godless citizens, including the Picketts.

“Good,” I told the cicadas’ electric buzzing in the sagebrush. “The last thing I need is to run into Wolfe or Jezebel now.”

“Amen.” Four shambling steps ahead, my grandma picked her way straight through the piles of red lava rocks, as if following an invisible beacon.

“Keep away from the unsaved, Dove. Especially the male ones. I always knew you had brains somewhere in that skull of yours.”

My toe scuffed against the rocks, and I faltered. “Well I don’t plan to pick up any males of our kind either, Gran. The last ones about killed me.”

She didn’t reply. She probably understood that I referred to Reed and Stone Bender, the macho Christian brothers from last September who’d tossed around violence as easily as throwing around pinecones. Although Stone had disobeyed his warrior brother’s last orders to silence me. And he’d made a kind offer...

I trudged toward the snow-capped peak. It towered as a sky-reaching reminder of how I’d failed my last mission of peace, of how the prophetic red grew. I glanced behind, eastward, toward home.

“What are they’re doing now, Gran? At home?”

“Praying.”

“Even Gilead?”

She didn’t reply to my stupid question. It was daylight. He’d be running drills and doing target practice.

“You think we’ll make it home with a new

decision in time? To stop him and Micah from attacking?" Why couldn't I shut up?

My grandma plunged into a stream's weak current without seeming to notice it. It was the only response I got.

3

Governor Ruth, the silver-haired leader of the Oregon Council, waved at us from the slope's crest. Behind her lone, cloaked figure, the dense forest continued to climb until defeated by higher crags and snow.

My body slumped, and I exhaled until my lungs were empty.

Thank You.

God had taken care of my impossible problem of how to get Gran to the Council's quarters. The last stretch into the hidden crevice included rock climbing with ropes and possible rappelling. But instead of providing us with ropes and super-human strength, God sent the person we'd come to meet to us in the foothills. I tried to picture the woman tottering toward us with her arms spread wide, making the climb herself. I couldn't picture her.

"Oh, my Sarah. My Sarah," said the woman.

Millions of wrinkles flowed across both faces as they hugged. The governor guided my grandma to a mossy log.

Gran motioned to me. "Dove, this is my childhood friend, Ruth. We've known each other a long time. Together we survived the chickenpox, failing the fourth grade, and later on...persecution." From her tunic, Gran pulled out the half-heart necklace she always wore, touching it to the ornament Ruth lifted

from her own neck. The two charms made a whole heart.

“Uh-huh. I remember the governor.” I moved away from their weird display of kindergarten affection to find a decent tree to rest in. But first, I’d scout in case anyone else lingered in this part of the Jefferson wilderness.

This part of the forest was silent and still. The various tracks from human feet etched in the mud and grass were days old. I kicked a skinny trunk. It wasn’t as if Melody and Stone, who both lived here at the Council, had known I was arriving at their doorstep. But I’d sort of...hoped? I’d hoped that God had whispered something to them, and they’d be here.

Dumb, Dove. Few people bothered to listen to God the way I did. Plus, we’d made our relationships clear on our last day together in September. Melody had rejected me when she’d refused to travel home with me. And I’d rejected Stone by refusing his unexpected proposal that we stay together forever.

I quit kicking downed limbs and wandered on...thinking about a hand that broke skull-sized chunks of lava rock into pieces. A hand that had reached for mine.

I ran my fingers over my cheek muscles, erasing my dumb grin.

A few-yards’ meander brought me into an unexpected, property-sized clearing—the type of clearing Heathen make with their bullying machines while desecrating nature. But they weren’t responsible for this one.

Hundreds of heavy feet had trampled the ferns and grasses around the axe-hewn stumps. A smoky tinge clung to the area where target cutouts shaped like

human bodies leaned against taller tree remains. With a glance at the empty tree line bordering the clearing, I crept toward a chopped stump. My bloodless fingertip traced a bullet hole.

I whipped up straight, my palms beginning to sweat. This was a training camp. The kind Gilead dreamed of. The bullet holes announced that the believers training here for the Reclaim had moved past knives and clubs to more deadly, forbidden weapons.

I recognized Warrior Reed's work. This spot testified to his passion for violence and vengeance on a large scale. He wouldn't be satisfied training up a handful of soldiers. He'd want hundreds. Maybe thousands.

A shadow of his battle cry echoed off the evergreens as it had that night around the campfire six months ago.

"Brothers and sisters in Christ. A heavy satanic force descends. The time has come to defend not only ourselves, but our land and our Council. Our enemies dare to attack us on this land set aside by God for His people. So I charge you to be brave. Be bold. Be the first believers to fulfill the Reclaim to take back our land, starting with this mountain."

I backhanded the target, knocking it from its perch. Riddled with holes as if termite damaged, the flat wood burst into fragments on the dead weeds. I destroyed four more nearby targets, kicking the pieces to sawdust before moving back in the direction of my grandma.

Gran must've heard the wood splintering, but when I approached, she didn't look away from her friend.

"We've a better chance now than ever before, Sarah," Governor Ruth said. "Our leader on Jefferson

who has been gifted in strategy and fighting has motivated the others across the nation. We're leading our nation's uprising in a way I never thought possible. The troops' zeal is relentless. But there's unrest and disagreement across the nation, too."

"You question your resolution for war? You feel it was a mistake?" My grandma's eyes bore into the councilwoman's.

"Yes." Governor Ruth hesitated. "And no. We Council leaders believe God calls for war—but a different type. A spiritual war. The vote was too close last fall—divided straight down the middle, half for peace and half to fight. We leaders were staggered by the number of young delegates called as messengers. We'd never seen anything like it before. And we believe the tied vote...and the hordes of young messengers...are a sign."

The governor unwound her arm from her cloak and pointed it at me. "The young believers. We feel God wants them to come out of hiding and to mix with the pagans. To live among the godless and teach them God's truths."

"No!" My grandma banged her walking stick against the ground and struggled up. "No. Not among Satan's people. Not to live without family."

"Our youth are strong enough, Sarah. God has His reasons. He wants them—we in the Councils understand that now. And I won't question His decisions or authority."

"Then you believe we made a mistake? During the Purge all those years ago, you think believers shouldn't have gone into hiding? Better to have stayed and been persecuted? Killed?"

Governor Ruth lifted her bundled shoulders. Both