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# SILVER ELITE

## DANI FRANCIS



PENGUIN BOOKS

# CHAPTER 1



I grew up in pure, unceasing, suffocating darkness.

I'd like to say that's an exaggeration, but it's not. I was only five years old when my uncle smuggled me out of the city and took me to live in the Blacklands, the place of children's nightmares. A forest of perpetual darkness. I remember my eyes widening when I first saw it: the ominous black mist rising from the earth and hovering far above the top canopy of the trees. I remember bone-deep dread and then throat-closing panic when we were engulfed in the pitch black. I remember how, less than an hour into the trek, I tripped over a skull. I knelt to examine what made me stumble, and although I couldn't see a thing, I could feel the gaping eye sockets, could run my fingers over smooth, weathered bone.

When I asked Uncle Jim what it was, he said, "Just a rock."

Even at the age of five, I wasn't that easy to fool.

It wouldn't be the last skeleton we came across in the three years we spent in the Blacklands, but by the time we returned to civilization, fear and I were old friends. These days, a predator could lunge for my throat, and I wouldn't blink. A Command jet could drop a bomb on our house, and my heart rate would remain steady.

When you're petrified on a daily basis as a child, there aren't many things left to fear as an adult.

Except, perhaps, awkward conversations.

I would rather fight a cougar barehanded than subject myself to an uncomfortable exchange. Truly.

"Where are you going?"

Damn it. I'd been doing my level best to sneak out of bed without alerting my companion.

The young soldier's voice is thick with sleep and a hint of lingering seduction. I fix my gaze downward as I button my jeans. I know he's not wearing anything underneath that thin sheet.

"Oh. Um. Nowhere. I was just getting dressed because I'm cold," I lie, smoothing the front of my black tank over the jagged stretch of scar tissue on my left hip.

My burns, which dip below my waistband and stretch midway down my thigh, are a permanent reminder of who I am and why I can't be in this guy's presence longer than necessary.

I told him the scarring was the result of an accident. A pot of boiling water spilling on me when I was a child.

That wasn't entirely a lie.

If he knew what the mangled flesh hid, though, he probably wouldn't have been stroking it with such infinite sympathy.

"Come back here. I'll keep you warm," he promises.

I fake a smile and meet his eyes. They're nice. A deep brown. "Hold that thought? Now that I'm up, I need to use the bathroom. You said it was around the corner?"

Do I sound too eager?

I think I do, but I'm itching to escape. It's late. Much later than I promised I'd stay out. I was supposed to stop by the village for a quick drink and to say hello to some friends at the Liberty Day festivities. Not hook up with a Command soldier, of all candidates.

There aren't a lot of things worth celebrating in the Continent. None of those idyllic-sounding holidays you read about in the history books. And let's be honest—it's probably some sick irony to have a bunch of Modified people dancing, drinking, and screwing to cele-

brate the anniversary of an event that led to their own slaughter. But Mods do like to dance, drink, and screw, so . . . might as well do it when we can, no matter the occasion.

"You're not going to run out on me, are you?" He's teasing again, but there's an undertone of unhappiness. Shit. He knows I'm preparing to bail.

"Of course not."

I pretend to concentrate on zipping up my boots, deciding this was a terrible idea. I try not to make a habit of falling into bed with anyone in the Command, the Continent's military, but their impermanence is a major draw. Soldiers can only leave the base three times a year, which means they'll never be anything but temporary.

"Good. Because I'm not ready to let you go yet," he says with a smile. He's twenty-five and was so gentle when his hands were roaming my body.

Is it awful that I can't remember his name?

I pick up my rifle and sling the strap over my shoulder. I notice him watching me.

"What?"

"You look like pure smoke right now," he says, biting his lip.

"Really."

"Yes. You don't see girls with guns in the city."

He's right. You don't. That's the main reason my uncle settled us in Ward Z, as far west as you can get. It's one of the asset wards, where professions tend to be ranching and farming, and citizens are allowed to own weapons. All registered and fully accounted for, of course. You can't get a license without extensive testing to prove your competence, but that wasn't a problem for me. I received my weapons approval when I was thirteen. I'm beyond competent, more than the testers were even aware. Uncle Jim warned me to "tone it down" on test day.

"Comes in handy out here," I tell him. "I've got white coyotes trying to kill my cows every night."

He laughs. "I'll have to come to your ranch one day, see whatever it is you get up to out there."

The nonchalant remark raises my suspicions. Why does he want to come to the ranch? Was that an innocent comment, or do I need to worry?

When it comes to the Command, I err on the side of paranoia, so I quickly open a path to prod at his mind. His shield is thicker than steel. I could probably find a hole in it if I tried long enough, but it's too strong to penetrate on the spot. Not a surprise. One of the first things soldiers like him are taught is how to shield themselves from Mods. And they're right to do it. Primes don't have enhanced gifts. They also don't experience any physical signs when someone infiltrates their thoughts, whereas Mods feel it like an electric shock. People like him *should* be on guard.

I sever the path. It was worth a try. The only time his shield wavered tonight was after our clothes were off, but his thoughts then were an amalgamation of *don't stop* and *yes*.

It was a nice ego boost, I won't lie.

"Any reason you're taking your gun to the bathroom?" He raises a brow.

"All registered weapons must be on your person at all times," I dutifully recite from the handbook every weapon owner is given after certification. "Keep the bed warm for me. I'll be right back."

I will not be right back. In fact, I'm forcing myself not to sprint out the door.

"I'll show you where it is," he offers.

I start to object, but he's already climbing out of bed, sliding a pair of pants up his trim hips. At least he's not wearing the navy-blue standard-issue Command uniform. Not sure I could've mustered up any arousal if he'd been wearing that. Outside the occasional ale-induced soldier romp, I hate those assholes, and most of them hate me right back. They're dedicated to wiping out people like me. The Aberrant, as they call us. Or silverbloods, when they're feeling nice.

The only aberration around here is General Redden and his irrational hatred for Mods. We didn't ask to be this way. Some thoughtless war a hundred and fifty years ago released the toxin that made us like this. We didn't have a choice in the matter.

Despite every cell in my body pleading for escape, I allow the sol-

dier to guide me out the door and down the burgundy carpet of the inn's second-floor hallway. We turn the corner and keep walking.

"Here you go." Like the gentleman he is, he opens the bathroom door for me.

"Thanks." I force another smile. "I'll meet you back in your room."

"Shout if you get lost and I'll come rescue you, keen?"

In the bathroom, I stand behind the door and listen to the sound of his footsteps. I exhale in a rush, waiting until those footsteps retreat. The reflection in the mirror shows a flush to my bronzed skin, but sex will do that to you. My eyes reveal my impatience. The soldier lauded their color several times tonight—honey brown specked with yellow gold.

My uncle claims I have my mother's eyes, but I don't remember her face, and it bothers me that I can't. I was five when she sent me away, old enough to have formed concrete memories of her. I *should* recall her eyes. Sometimes I think I can remember her voice, her smile, but I never know if that's just my imagination filling in the blanks.

I wait another full minute before emerging from the bathroom. I want to make a run for it, but I'll have to pass his door to reach the stairs. I'll need to tiptoe.

Holding my breath, I turn the corner and creep along the worn carpet. I'm nearing the end of the hall when I see his doorknob turn.

As the door inches open, I act on instinct, throwing myself into the nearest room and closing the door behind me.

Barging into a stranger's quarters probably isn't the smartest strategy, but it was a split-second decision—and one I deeply regret when a muscular arm locks around my chest.

"Don't move," a male voice says.

Once again, I act reflexively. My fist slices upward and connects with a hard jaw.

The owner of that jaw doesn't even flinch. He disarms me faster than I can blink, smacking my rifle onto the floor. Then he spins me around and pins me against the back of the door. His tall frame moves menacingly closer, his arm like a steel bar against my breasts.

"Who the fuck are you?" he growls in my ear.

My heart batters my rib cage. I suck in a breath, licking my dry lips. "I'm—"

The words die when I lift my gaze to his face.

Oh.

I think I picked the wrong candidate for tonight's activities.

This guy is . . . inconceivably attractive. I don't think I've ever seen a better-looking human, male or female. I'm momentarily lost in his cobalt-blue eyes, peering down at me from beneath thick lashes. His hair is dark, swept away from flawless, symmetrical features that could've been chiseled out of stone. Just the right amount of stubble shadows a strong jaw, and one corner of his mouth bears the indentation of a dimple. I wonder how pronounced it gets when he smiles, although judging by the cold, dangerous glint in his eyes, I get the feeling he doesn't smile often.

"If you're here to kill me, you're not doing a very good job of it."

"Kill you?" I echo, snapping out of my thoughts. "That's not why I'm here."

"No?" I hear a clattering sound and realize he's kicking my rifle away. It takes serious effort not to lunge after it. "You sneak into my room in the middle of the night with a gun and I'm supposed to believe your intentions are pure?"

"Believe whatever you want." I push against his grip. It's a futile attempt. His arm isn't budging. "I'm not here to kill you."

"So this is a social visit?" His tongue comes out to moisten the corner of his mouth. Eyes gleaming, he lowers them to the cleavage that peeks out from beneath the strong band of his arm. "I appreciate the gesture, but I'm not interested. I've already gotten my fill tonight." His lips curve. "You should've stopped by earlier when my guest was still here. Could've made a party out of it."

My jaw drops. "Seriously? I'm not interested in that, either. I'm hiding, asshole."

He flicks up a brow, intrigued. "From who?"

"None of your damn business. Can you please move your arm? I can't breathe."

"No. And you seem to be breathing just fine."

I'm not. There's no air. Each time I inhale, I breathe in the scent of

him. It holds tones of pine, leather, and a hint of spice. It's sort of incredible. And his body is surreal. Big, broad, and sleekly muscled, his biceps flexing as he holds me in place. I bet he looks spectacular naked.

"Let me go," I order. "I'm sorry I barged into your room, but I assure you I'm not a threat."

"Why are you armed?"

"I'm a rancher. I have a license for the gun."

His gaze examines my face, briefly focusing on my mouth. Although my heartbeat stutters under his thorough scrutiny, I try to capitalize on his distraction by thrusting my knee up toward his groin. He reacts without even blinking, grabbing my leg before I can make contact. Next thing I know, I'm landing on my ass with a thud. My bones rattle as his heavy body slams on top of me. Long legs pin me to the floor, and I have his forearm pressing into my windpipe. Now I *actually* can't breathe.

Gasping for air, I bat at his shoulders with both hands, but he doesn't budge. That mocking gaze peers down at me.

"That wasn't very nice," he mutters. "Going for the groin like that."

I can't answer, because he's cutting off my air supply. I take another weak swing at him. God, he's strong. I *thought* I was a skilled fighter. My uncle's been training me since I was five. But here I am, flat on my back, unable to do a thing while he crushes me with his body.

No, that's not true. I can do *something*.

Another important lesson my uncle taught me is that in battle, you must gain the upper hand any way you can. With men, there's a sure-fire way to achieve that.

"Can't say I regret it," I wheeze out. "Considering the result." My voice is hoarse from the lack of oxygen.

His is laced with suspicion. "The result?"

"It got you on top of me."

I offer a tiny, unapologetic smile, and note the flicker of heat in his expression.

"Doesn't feel like a bad position to be in," I add, then manage to suck in a shallow breath. "I wasn't interested before, but now . . ."

I rock my hips in invitation.

He stiffens, lips parting. For the briefest moment, his hips respond in kind, his lower body moving slightly.

Then he begins to laugh.

"Nice try." He brings his mouth close to my ear, and my pulse skitters. "If I let you up, do you promise to keep your hands and knees to yourself?"

"Do *you*?" I spit out.

Still chuckling, he moves off me and goes to pick up my rifle. I stand, indignantly straightening my shirt as I watch him study the serial number. I take the opportunity to finally examine my surroundings, but there's not much to see. The bedsheets are tousled, probably thanks to whatever he and his "companion" were doing earlier. I don't know if I'm jealous of the girl or—with his charming personality—feel sorry for her.

There's a comm on the night table, a black jacket draped over a red armchair under the window, and a pair of black boots near the door. That's it. No other clues to shed light on who he is. I didn't see him out in the square earlier celebrating with the others, which is odd. Why is he in Hamlett if not for Liberty Day? It's rare for travelers to just be passing through. Everything west of Ward Z is underwater, and there aren't any communities on the coast. Every time the Company tries to rebuild out there, another earthquake hits and destroys an entire town or village.

I glance back at him and try to read his mind, but he's heavily shielded. Interesting. Most Primes don't have shields, or if they do, they're easily penetrable ones. Which means this man is either Modified, a soldier, or a civilian Prime who for some mysterious reason has mastered the skill of protecting his thoughts.

He holds my rifle in one capable hand but doesn't train it on me. He simply stands there watching me with those dangerous blue eyes.

"Will you run the serial number through your comm already so you can confirm I'm not an assassin and I can move on with my life?"

"Or I can just kill you and move on with *my* life," the asshole says.

"Oh no, I'm so scared of you." I plant both hands on my hips. "Do it. Shoot me. Either way, my torture ends."

He tips his head, still eyeing me. "What's your name?"

I'm startled when someone else answers that question.

"Wren?"

Or rather, someone is out in the hall hunting me down.

"Wren? You still here?"

I hear the soldier's footsteps pass the door, growing fainter as he walks around the corner.

My stranger taunts me. "Better go now, *Wren*. Might be able to make it to the front door before your boyfriend catches you."

"He's not my boyfriend, and I'm not going anywhere without my rifle."

After a beat, he flips the rifle by the barrel and hands it to me butt-first.

I shove the strap over my shoulder and march to the door. "Nice meeting you, asshole," I mutter without looking back.

His chuckle tickles my shoulder blades.

I take advantage of the empty corridor, racing down the stairs to the main floor. No sooner do I reach the exit than I hear my name again.

"Wren, wait."

I swallow a groan. The soldier is halfway down the staircase.

"You promised you weren't going to run off on me," he says on his approach. Disappointment flickers in his eyes.

"I'm sorry." I release an exaggerated sigh and construct a suitable lie. "I'm just not good with goodbyes."

His features soften.

"And anyway, I really do need to go. One of our fences came down during a storm the other night, and my uncle will kill me if I'm not up at the crack of dawn tomorrow to mend it."

"I have to see you again. Maybe I'll try to get leave next month?"

"You know where to find me," I say lightly, because chances are he won't get leave again for a long while. By then he'll have forgotten all about me.

Hopefully.

There's always the risk he'll become so besotted, he'll find a way to swap assignments with another soldier and get assigned to my ward. But I don't think I'm *that* good in bed.

“What’s your ID?”

I reluctantly provide it, watching as he enters the digits into his comm. A moment later, the sleek device in my pocket chimes softly.

He flashes a dimpled smile. “That was me.”

I pull it out and save his ID. I detest this thing. We’re required to carry it at all times, but I only ever pay attention to my comm when a Company dispatch comes in. The rest of the time, I maintain obligatory correspondence with Uncle Jim or my friends. Nothing significant, of course; we have other means of communication for the real stuff. No Mod in their right mind would use a Company device to communicate, not when every word spoken or typed is recorded, a roomful of Intelligence agents monitoring every exchange. Same goes for the Nexus, our online network. We’d be fools to rely on either method to speak openly.

“I’ll walk you out,” he says.

I hear the din of voices beyond the inn doors. The fast tempo of the band, playing a song I don’t recognize. I assume it’s on the list of Company-approved melodies from the Communication Board. All media needs to be run by them before it’s released to the citizenry.

We step out into the courtyard, where the breeze is as balmy as it was before we ducked inside the inn. The aroma of grilled meat and buttered corn on the cob permeates the night air. The village square is all lit up tonight. Crowded and noisy, frequent bursts of laughter rising above the music.

Unease washes over me at the dozen soldiers milling about. Liberty Day is the one time of year when many of them are able to return to their wards and see family and friends. Most of them seem harmless, but there are too many blue uniforms here tonight for my comfort.

I wish they’d go back to the city and leave us the hellfuck alone. Nobody here enjoys faking smiles and playing nice. Even Primes detest the heavy-handedness of the General, the way he controls every aspect of our lives. Or at least most of them hate it. There are certainly die-hard loyalists willing to betray their own mothers for a brisk nod of approval from that man or his sycophants. Some Prime jerk in my own ward literally turned his mother in when he discov-

ered she was Modified. Nearly two decades of successfully hiding her gifts from him and then *one* slipup, one careless moment of mind reading without pulling her sleeves down, and her only son was reporting her. Last I heard, he’d been promoted to run his own unit in the Command.

Although I suppose that isn’t as bad as Mods who turn against their own, the sympathizers who serve Redden in Sanctum Point, our capital city. Those traitors live cushy lives out there. Loyalty to the General certainly pays.

The joyous shrieks of children capture my attention. I turn toward the noise and smile. Several hundred yards away in a grassy clearing, there’s a game of Chase happening. Village children scream and laugh as the chaser, a skinny girl with bright-red hair, races around trying to tag someone.

“Wren!” a happy voice calls out.

Tana Archer comes ambling over to us. Eyes bright, cheeks flushed. She’s clearly been sampling her own supply. Tana’s father, Griff, runs the only drinking establishment in the square.

“I was wondering where you’d disappeared to.” With a knowing look, she glances between me and the soldier. Even as she grins at the two of us, I feel her trying to link with me.

All telepaths have their own unique signature. When I was a kid, my uncle described it as your essence, a surge of energy exclusive to you. It’s almost impossible to explain unless you feel it yourself, but after an initial connection’s been formed, you automatically recognize the other person’s energy when they ask to link.

“Someone’s been busy,” Tana silently teases.

Her voice in my head always holds a lower pitch than her speaking tone. I asked my uncle about that once, why people’s telepathic voices sound so different from their audible ones. “Have you ever listened to yourself on a recording and thought, *I don’t sound like that?*” was his response. “That’s because to your own ears, you always sound different. When we speak telepathically, I hear your voice the way *you* hear it. When you speak out loud, I hear your voice the way *I* hear it.” It made a strange sort of sense when he explained it like that.

“You’ve gotta stop screwing the soldiers, babe.”

"Hey, it's the only thing they're good for," I tell Tana, and she turns her head to smother a laugh.

I know her veins are rippling beneath her long sleeves, hidden from nosy eyes. With her dark skin, those veins tend to look even brighter when they're glowing compared with lighter-skinned Mods.

Me, I'm in a tank top and don't need to worry. Just another thing I used to hassle my uncle about, because it was confusing to see the luminous surge of silver beneath the skin of his arms each time we used telepathy. Why did *my* veins remain normal? I was an annoying child, always peppering him with questions. Back then, he didn't have a good answer. He simply shrugged and said, "It's been more than a century and there's still so much nobody understands about people like us."

That's the tricky thing about the Modified—there's no tried-and-true formula with us. Yes, the majority are the very definition of silverbloods, the veins in our arms glowing when we're using our powers. A rare few, like me, don't fit that mold. Whatever the reason for the anomaly, I can't deny it makes me . . . well, not to be cocky, but . . .

Invaluable.

A Mod who can wield her powers without transmitting her actions to her enemies is a major asset for the Uprising.

When the network first tried to recruit me, however, my uncle said hell no. He was adamant. *Wren doesn't put her life at risk. Period.* Once I was a teenager, it became harder for him to stop me. I'm stubborn. I love Uncle Jim to death, but I'm my own person.

We started running missions when I was sixteen. Small supply runs. Drop-offs. Using our ranch to hide Mods who were smuggled out of the city or the mines. It always boils my blood how many of us are still held prisoner in the labor camps scattered throughout the wards.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Tana says. "I've barely seen you tonight. You can't go!"

My soldier smiles. "That's what I keep telling her."

"I have to," I answer with a shrug. "You know my uncle. He's probably pacing the porch right now, waiting up for me."

As if on cue, I feel a hard poke in my mind. Jim's signature. He's asking to link, and I let him.

"It's late. Come home." His voice is a rumble.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "On my way."

"Stay for just one dance?" Tana begs.

"I really can't."

Truthfully, I would stick around and hang out with Tana for a while if this soldier weren't glued to my side. Ugh, what is his name? I think it's Max. Or maybe it's Mark?

Given what we did earlier, I feel bad asking, so I touch his arm. "Okay, ah . . . honey . . . it's been fun, but I have to go now."

Tana looks ready to erupt with laughter again.

"Honey?"

"Shut up. I couldn't remember his name. Is it Max or Mark?"

"His name is Jordan!"

Oh. I was very far off.

"The more important question is—who is the gorgeous jackass staying at the inn?" My heartbeat is still a bit off-kilter from that explosive encounter.

"I know nothing of a gorgeous jackass. I didn't see anyone other than soldiers checking in today. Or maybe I did see him and just forgot? Was he a soldier?"

"No idea. But trust me, you would remember this face."

It was a remarkable face. And totally wasted on a jerk like him.

"Eh. If I'm going to be dazzled by a face, it has to belong to a gorgeous woman, otherwise I'm blissfully oblivious."

"Let me take you home?" Jordan interrupts our silent conversation, his hopeful gaze locked on me.

"I'm good. I've got my bike."

Tana steps away to give us the moment of privacy that Jordan clearly desires.

He cups my face in his hands. "So difficult," he chides playfully. "At least give me a kiss goodbye." His thumb sweeps the corner of my jaw as he brings his mouth to mine.

I let him kiss me despite the impatience gathering in my chest.

We break apart at the screams of children.

A second later, pandemonium hits the square. Tana comes running over.

“What in the hellfuck?” I say as the three of us race toward the source of the chaos.

From what I can discern in the darkness, there’s a kid on the ground, but all I see is the frenetic blur of arms flailing and legs kicking. Other children stream away from the clearing, shouting for help.

“It’s that damn white coyote!” Tana curses. “He’s been prowling the woods on the outskirts of the village all week.”

Shit. The same wolf-coyote hybrid has been a menace around the ranch, too. I found one of my heifers dead in the south pasture two mornings ago. I don’t know how that beast made it through the fence.

“He has him!” a little girl screeches at the adults crowding the edge of the grass.

Another scream rips out, one laced with terror and agony. My heart flies to my throat, pulse careening. Across the clearing, the boy is on his back now, the white coyote on top of him. The animal is huge.

“Robbie!” a woman screams. It’s Rachel, a teacher at the schoolhouse. Which means the boy in peril is her eight-year-old son.

It’s too shadowy to tell from this angle, but it doesn’t look like the animal’s teeth are on the boy’s neck. I think they’re gnawing into Robbie’s arm and—holy shit, it’s starting to drag the boy away.

I don’t hesitate whipping up my rifle.

“Wren!”

Despite Tana’s cry of protest, I take several steps forward, getting Robbie and the white coyote in my sights. Several men run across the grass. They’re halfway to the boy, but he’ll be dead by the time they reach him.

“No! Stop her,” a panicked Rachel yells.

I take aim, rifle propped on my shoulder.

“Stop it, Wren! You’re gonna hit my baby!”

I ignore her and take the shot.

## CHAPTER 2



A feeling of foreboding shivers through me at the tall, bearded man’s approach. Controller Fletcher was the first to reach the boy after I shot the predator. Several other men tail the controller, one of them cradling Rachel’s son.

“Give him to me!” She lunges at the group, reaching for the boy whose clothing is soaked with blood. “Where’s Betta? Someone needs to find Betta!” Tears stream down Rachel’s cheeks.

“Nina already ran to wake her,” her sister Elsie assures her. “It’s okay, sweetling. Take a breath. Betta will be able to help him.”

Betta is our doctor. Rachel is damn lucky she’s nearby, because not every village has one. The citizens in our neighboring town have to come to Hamlett for medical treatment.

Tana and I push forward to take a closer look at the sobbing boy. The fact that he’s awake and able to feel enough pain to cry is a good sign. Despite the copious amount of blood, it seems most of the damage is isolated to his left arm. Tana winces when she notices the ragged teeth marks and a flap of flesh hanging off the gaping wound.

“Is he going to be all right?” she asks urgently.

Elsie is now pressing a rag to the young boy’s arm. “The bleeding seems to be slowing down. He’ll need quite a lot of stitches, though.”