

ANGELA
WHITE



THE
CHANGE

The Bachelor Battles Trilogy

The Change

A Novel by Angela White

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Prologue

Recovery Zone 12

Southern Ohio
494 AW (2507)

1

“**T**here they are!”

Hiding in the charred, hollow trunk of a lightning-struck tree, the two thin fugitives froze as riders crested the adjacent hill. If they were caught, the teenage boy would be added to the yearly roundup. His father, wanted for crimes against their rulers, wouldn't be taken back alive.

In an apocalyptic landscape framed by early summer, the single road into town became obscured with dust from the three dozen horses. On these foaming animals were some of the most intimidating defenders the Network employed. The cold banner, a glaring red arrow outlined in black, was held high in warning of who they represented. Behind the riders was a line of bound men and boys on strong leashes. Forced to run or die, the slaves were barely getting enough air.

Heavy hooves and harsh coughs echoed to the town ahead of them, where the single sentry called a late warning.

“Network riders! Network riders!”

As the horses cleared the trees to enter the farmland, locals laboring there were showered with dust. They winced at the cruel treatment of their crops and of the enslaved males, but they didn't interfere. The citizens of New America had learned not to challenge their rulers. The price was usually more than they could pay.

Shaking with fear and impotent anger, the two fugitives in the hollowed trunk watched from the concealment of the trees. They couldn't challenge the riders, but the father kept a scarred hand on the boy's thin shoulder to prevent him from trying anyway. The emotions of youth didn't always allow for logic and the man wasn't going to risk his last son in a futile battle they couldn't win. However, he would risk both their lives in a fight for freedom with different players and different odds. This was the beginning of that plan.

“Network riders! The Ring is coming!”

Inside the three-street town, shutters began slamming. Doors locked as young boys cowered behind defenseless, pink-eyed women. In some of the salvaged homes and barely surviving shops, terrified males were hurriedly shoved into clever slots behind wall panels to keep them from being taken. This was the yearly roundup, a month early.

As the riders advanced, their leader, Rankin, waved the crew into a defensive formation. Always sent on these runs, the team had earned the nickname because of the circle they made over

Network lands each year to collect slaves. They were also called demons. That whispered insult was well earned. All of the women were ruthless. Their leader worked directly for the Network—both in the pristine dome and here in the deadly wastelands. In her matted red hair was a braid for each male that she'd broken. They covered her back in thick, dusty proof of her brutality.

The riders formed a V as they reached the town, weapons ready in case the females here chose to fight for their slaves. The Ring had a list of specific males to bring in, but Rankin would also take any appealing targets they ran across—to account for the percentage who didn't survive the trip. Rankin always made her quota.

“These slaves will be surrendered immediately, by order of the Network. It's roundup time!” Rankin began calling names from the list, pointing at homes. Most of the women here owed a son in payment for a debt or fine, but a few were also being punished for their lack of financial support to Network causes.

Rankin's riders went to the residences and dragged the males out, not letting goodbyes be said or pleas be voiced. Few of the mothers fought, but those who did were cut down. It was against the law to refuse an order of surrender. The penalty was immediate death.

Screams and wails of grief began to echo across the tiny town.

While the riders gathered the newest lot of slaves, the males already on leashes dropped to their knees, grateful for the break. Fathers comforted sons and exhausted men bound bleeding foot wounds with what remained of their shirts, but those were the luckier ones. Some of them didn't move at all, but they weren't cut loose. Rankin would still receive a half credit for each of their mangled bodies.

“Runners!” One of the hulking defenders shouted, pointing. “We have runners!”

To the west, a small group of guys had made it through the tall crops. They were almost at the edge of the thick trees, where the first two fugitives were still hiding.

“Dogs!”

The huge black and brown hounds padded forward at Rankin's shout. Canines had suffered the same biological changes as humans, making them larger, angrier. Their eyes flamed when triggered, breath becoming noxious. Some of them could even snort fire and they would attack any target, no matter how big or small. Menacing, the fire hounds ran at the rear of the slaves to keep them from escaping—unless there were runners.

Spotting the fleeing men, the hounds gave chase without being ordered to do so. They'd been bred for this purpose.

Fresh screams echoed through the area as the large dogs quickly caught up to the slaves. Those who stopped, the dogs escorted with slobbery

nudges and growls. The men who kept fleeing or tried to fight, the dogs ate. Rankin's updated roundup system had been designed to keep their animal escort fed without the extra weight of carrying nourishment for the trip. Their rulers had embraced it eagerly.

"That's all of them from town," Lena, second in command, told Rankin. Nearby, four of the sentries were binding crying boys to leashes as the townswomen reluctantly brought them out.

"We require one more male!" Rankin demanded loudly. "Give us a gift and we won't torch your homes." Rankin scanned the shacks. Last year she hadn't asked for a bonus from this town. It was their turn to pay homage to her mercy.

When no one came forward, she growled. "I can smell them, you know! If I have to come in and sniff around, I'll kill every one of you and still take your males!"

A door was snatched open across the street, revealing a stern lady with huge arms. She shoved two trembling boys onto the dirt walk. "Took me a minute to catch them."

Other townswomen scowled at the orphanage keeper, but Rankin reacted happily. "Two! Very nice."

Rankin made the motion for her riders and dogs to hurry, not sure what was delaying things with the few runners. "Thank you for your cooperation. May you all have a Network day."

“Same to you,” came the muttered, expected reply.

It was a dismissal. The women who had been waiting for it left Rankin’s sight. Those hiding guys in cramped, mousey slots tried to remember how to breathe.

“Next?” Rankin demanded.

“The next location is...” Lena scanned their sheets. “Hey, a blond. That’s a double credit!”

Rankin snatched the papers, annoyed at not getting the exact answer she had requested.

“Daniel: blond, paid for, priority.” Rankin kept reading, unease growing. “Owner provided address for pickup. Approach location with caution.”

Rankin recognized the address and the name. “Pruetts!”

Her riders sat up straighter, scanning the town. Pruettts meant blood.

“Not here, you idiots!” Rankin snapped. “They have the boy. Get ready while we wait for the dogs.”

“Do we fight them?” one of her newer riders asked quietly. “We have the same boss.”

“We’ll eliminate them if we need to,” Rankin answered in mock confidence. She ignored the instinct that demanded she mark the boy’s name off as dead and flee. “They’re bounty hunters. We’re killers.”

Her crew snickered in agreement, reminded that they alone of the Network employees had

permission to kill. Even the legendary Pruett family didn't have that authority automatically.

The shabby street had become deserted around the waiting pink-eyed troops. Peppering the shops that lined the empty street were lists of items that people were forbidden to have (radios topped every one), prices that were to be charged, and Wanted posters that covered entire front walls. One in particular, a tall male with blond hair and a scar over his hand, was shown more than the other escaped males. Simon was the current leader of the rebels who had been trying to oust their rulers. There were also advertisements for the Bachelor Battles on these walls of death. Each laminated photo featured a bloody, victorious female clutching a terrified man as her prize.

Near the edge of this oppressed town, a thin blond boy barreled from a slimy home put together with toothpaste and fishing wire. He slipped painfully down muddy rocks that were the hovel's stairs.

"They know where to search, boy!" his mother shouted cruelly from the makeshift home. "Pruett hunters can't save you!"

Heart pounding, Daniel ran awkwardly through the piles of rubble that edged the road, then detoured into the thorn trees that bordered the adjacent property. The poison branches reached for him, but he ducked in perfect time to their swipes and made it through untouched.

Weapons clanged over grunts as Daniel neared an opening in the trees and burst into the front yard. The four black-cloaked people there were working on a fighting routine, moving in tandem with beautiful knife slashes, spins, and leaps. Their long, black cloaks flared out together in a stunning, unintended visual effect.

“Candy!”

The sweaty family stopped and lowered their weapons, staring at Daniel with sympathy as more screams sounded from town. The Ring was moving again. The bounty hunters could hear the heavy hooves and chilling cries of individual slaves. Rankin had finished.

“You know the law!” Candy’s mother, tall and thin, answered the boy fearfully. “We can’t hide you.”

Daniel ran to the other child, his friend, in terror. “Help me!”

“Get out of here!” Candy yelled, shoving him toward the tree line. The little girl was in shock. “Don’t let them spot you!”

“My family sold me!”

“Sold?” Candy repeated in horror, young mind spinning into a hazy rage. It was their worst fear.

“We have company,” Candy’s father stated softly from her mother’s side.

Sentries were reaching their driveway. The thorn trees lining it were poisonous and carnivorous, with vivid red and green coloring.

Thick limbs reached hungrily for the excited riders, but they weren't noticed.

Candy scanned the homestead, already knowing there was no place she could hide him. Her home was a white dome buried mostly in the ground. There were sheds and a storage building, and two heavy-duty mopars for traveling the apocalyptic lands. The Pruett's were better off than most, but none of it could save Daniel.

"Mother?" Candy asked for help in that one word, dazed with the pain. *They sold him!*

Candy's mother winced, but didn't answer.

"I'll be alone now," Daniel moaned brokenly, shaking. "They'll hurt me!"

"You're mine!" Candy growled, hugging him in useless comfort. "I will find you!"

"Promise me!" Daniel demanded, panicking.

Candy kissed him softly, stealing his first taste. There was no doubt that she would lose everything else. Her eyes were red when she pulled back, sent into the first stage of the disease early. "On my life, Daniel. I will come for you!"

"There he is! Release that male," Rankin ordered arrogantly from her horse. "His family has transferred ownership to the Network."

"You can't keep him, Candy," her mother warned shakily. "You know that. You can only die and kill the rest of us with the attempt."

Candy's anger became more pronounced as her mother tried to force them apart. Both kids struggled wildly.

The thorn trees tried harder to reach the observing riders, drawn by the emotions.

Tiring of the drama, Rankin kicked her horse forward to drop a leash around Daniel's neck. When he reached up to take it off, she grabbed his wrists and tied them to the waiting straps on the rawhide tether.

"No! Candy!"

Candy raked her new claws down her mother's arm to get free. She ran after Daniel.

Rankin spun around and punched the girl in her shoulder. The defender didn't like kids.

Holding her aching arm, Candy determinedly rose, glowering with teary red orbs. "He's mine!"

Angel, Candy's cousin, rushed to help. The two girls fell into their training, spinning and slashing the air with their knives.

Spooked, Rankin's horse reared up and almost unseated her.

Trying to calm the huge mount, Rankin got too close to the hungry thorn trees and a branch slipped eagerly around her neck.

Fighting to keep from being punctured or thrown, Rankin snatched the knife from her belt. She sliced through the thorn going for her throat. Then she used her fist to snap off the branch.

"Only Pruetts would have these...things!" Rankin sneered, flushed as she manhandled her huge horse into submission.

Her riders smirked, but when Rankin told them to advance, they obediently surrounded the small family while Rankin retrieved the end of the leash.

Candy's mother wrapped her up tighter this time and the family slave, Candy's father, grabbed Angel.

"If you weren't so useful tracking down trash, I'd slit all your throats!" Rankin waved at her riders to proceed, viciously yanking Daniel's rope to make him stumble and fall.

"Help him, mother!" Candy shouted, fighting to get free. "Help *me!*"

"You can't take over this family if you're dead," her mother sadly insisted, holding her with iron strength. "Pruetts never openly oppose the Network."

Candy realized she wasn't going to get help from her parent and the full change of Rage Walker's disease spiraled through her small body. Her muscles swelled, ripping her clothes. Her black hair shot out and down. Her claws extended and her black pupils became crimson flames as she attacked her mother.

The thorn branches in the driveway withdrew to their proper places in shocked disapproval.

"Help! Candy!"

Candy spun from her mother's bloody face as the riders left with Daniel being pulled along behind Rankin. She took off running, executing an amazing snatch and jump to grab her fallen

weapon and clear half the distance. Knife ready, she leapt again.

Rankin sensed it coming and shifted to kick the child in the head with the bottom of her boot.

Candy dropped to the ground in a heavy pile of pain, puking. The other signs of the disease faded, but her eyes remained crimson. They ran red with tears.

Candy's mother and father hurried toward them as Rankin glared down without compassion. "He belongs to the Network now. If you want him, come fight for him in the games." Rankin gave Candy's mother a knowing sneer as the couple reached them. "Don't wait too long. You're a changeling now, stage one, and Pruetts burn out fast."

Staggering to her feet through the misery, Candy wiped her mouth and snarled, "Pruetts will send you all to hell!"

Startled at the words from a child, Rankin kicked up dust to coat the family as she turned toward the driveway. "Heaven and hell don't exist. There's only been the Network for four hundred years."

"That is going to change!" Candy vowed, glaring. "Someday, I'll take the power from them, the same way they've taken something that I love! I won't stop until you're all gone!"

Her family gasped at the open defiance, expecting harsh retribution.

Rankin snorted, but didn't stop. On a slow day, she might have executed them all for such blasphemy, but she was busy and even a burnt-out Pruett with her slave and whelps was dangerous. It would interrupt the roundup and their rulers wouldn't tolerate that. Another time, however... Rankin dragged Daniel through the gate, indifferent to his pleas as she mentally added this family to her death list. If she got this chance later, she would certainly take it.

Candy hissed at her mother as Daniel was torn from her life. She didn't speak, but her expression screamed with furious betrayal.

Candy's mother lowered her chin in shame, causing the four ugly gashes on her cheek to resume dripping blood over her neck and chest. "No."

The icy façade she would become known for settled over Candy in a sheet that would never completely thaw. She turned from her mother without providing the expected forgiveness. She wasn't capable of it.

Back on the road now, the thundering hooves and screams of the roundup echoed hauntingly.

"I will come for you!" Candy promised, staring at Daniel, who was already struggling to keep up and breathe through the dust. "*All* of you."

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