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## PULSE: WORLD GONE DARK BONUS PDF ANDREA'S EPILOGUE

JULY 11, SIX MONTHS AFTER THE PULSE

Here with the Martins, I am living a second life, a life forged by the EMP and my father's death. When I think of it, how he died on the way here to the farm, it seems like he died for his country like a soldier, or, if not the country, at least his family. He was trying to get us to a better place where we could survive. He didn't intentionally sacrifice his life, but I think he would have if the choice had been his.

I wish I could tell him that his sacrifice made all the difference in the world for us. That it was worth it. I look back and remember our life after the EMP like a person who almost drowned. I mean, really we were drowning in hopelessness and the threat of starvation. We couldn't save ourselves, couldn't swim against those currents. Now we've been saved. And I know that God was behind all of it, because not only was our family saved but I ended up saving Mr. Martin's life! (To my own surprise!)

My whole family is transformed, less on edge, despite having lost dad and the constant threat of other dangers. Desperate, armed people roam the streets, but we live without police or ambulances or hospitals. Maybe someday soon the hospitals will open up again—I hope so.

We've all learned a lot, not only about farming and animals and stuff, but about God and the Bible. I guess it will sound cliché, but at the heart of it all, this is how I

feel: **SAVED!** This doesn't mean everything is hunky-dory. Here are the worst things about life as we know it now.

1. No going anywhere. The roads aren't safe, period. There's nowhere to go anyway, and no way to get there but horseback or horse-drawn wagon. We don't have any gas-powered ATVs or the gas to run them with. And we don't dare take a bike outside the compound, though Lexie and I have biked around the house and riding corral a lot. Mr. Martin says when the first wave of violence subsides, people will begin to work together again, and the world should get safer. It may even be a better place if people really learn to help each other. But for now, this farm and property is our life.
2. No entertainment! No TV, no music, no internet, no movies or podcasts or video clips. (Sob!) On the plus side, I've discovered that low tech games are fun, like board games and playing cards. My favorite board games are Parcheesi and chess. My favorite card game is 500 Rummy. Mrs. Martin said she played those games when she was young. It certainly feels like a return to the past.
3. No cell phones. Aargh! (No phones, period. Mr. Martin has his broadband, but we girls don't get to use it for joy calls, that's for sure.)
4. **NO GUYS.** Unless things change, I think I'll be an old maid, assuming I live that long. We still haven't heard on the broadband of any government aid or help, or about law and order being restored. So we're on our own here, and that means no guys for me.
5. No fast food or ordering out. Right now, the fries at Mickey D's would taste luxurious, like a feast. Not that my mom's or Mrs. Martin's cooking isn't great, but we're sort of conditioned to love all those food additives and chemicals, I think. That's probably what I'm missing, not the actual potatoes in the fries.
6. No shopping for anything. No new clothes. This is a major bummer. I *love* shopping. My family was well-to-do, so I never had to think twice about getting new things. The closest thing to it now is when I get to raid the food storage with Lexie, but usually we're on a mission to find certain items, like beans for the night's meal. Nothing exciting. (I saw there are storage buckets marked "Goodies." They're on my radar now, so it's only a matter of time...)

7. No formal education, and even I know I need more education. The Martins have a great library, though, and a lot of homeschool curriculum, which is great. I was paging through an elementary school history book and learned things about the founding fathers that I'd never been taught in public school. Why did they stop teaching this stuff?
8. No showers, no water for anything, except what is rationed. The Martins have a well and a great water filter, the type that missionaries bring to third world nations, but there is no *running* water, except what comes out of that filter. Which must be refilled every night and sometimes more than once a day. That is hugely a pain. I shouldn't complain after having to haul in snow for weeks and boil it. But, wow, do I miss running water.
9. Which reminds me—laundry. Oh, my gosh, what a *chore!!* I *hate* laundry day.
10. Keeping eternal vigilance, because we can't trust anyone. This should have been number one on my list, I guess. It would be number one on Mr. Martin's list, for sure.
11. No medical care that we know of. Maybe it's coming.  
So that's my list of the worst things about having no power. There are PLENTY more, believe me, but those are the worst. But there are also good things about this, so I'll list those, too.
  1. I'm closer to Lexie than ever before. She's like a sister to me now. And her parents are so caring that in time, I will probably start to feel like they're my parents too! Mr. Martin goes out of his way to ask how I'm doing and checks on me a lot. I think he feels very conscious that I lost my father, and is trying to be a positive and caring male authority. (I'm glad!)
  2. Learning to grow food. Okay, really this is a lot of work, and not something I would ever have done willingly before. But when those first edible things grew, like our lettuce and green beans, wow! I could see how gardening might get addictive. Lexie warned me that some things are harder to grow and don't always do so well, but right now, I'm psyched on growing food.
  3. Learning to be self-sufficient and hopefully, not to trust a government—any government—to take care of us.

That was my list, all I could think of, until I asked Lexie to help me. She reminded me that we have fun doing jigsaw puzzles, are learning to knit, and we're all getting good at reading aloud. We take turns reading from a novel or other book at night, around the stove or fire if we have one going, for entertainment. I have become a better reader, surprisingly enough, in the short time I've been doing this.

Lexie is a good thinker and came up with a bunch of other positive things about life now, so I'll mention those, too.

1. (This is sort of a repeat.) More family time and togetherness. (She said this was sometimes an annoying thing, and I agreed, but overall, it is great. We are becoming close, like a tight-knit family.)
2. Time to read all those books we always meant to read.
3. Time to read books we never meant to read but will probably learn a lot from.
4. Time to focus on God and our need for Him.
5. Time to pray like we mean it.
6. Time to learn new skills. (I mentioned knitting and growing food, but there are more. I've learned to shoot, to ride horseback, to milk a cow, care for chickens, and make cheese and butter! I can't believe the list! The most surprising thing is I like doing it all. Especially horseback riding.)
7. Lexie pointed out that there's more time for many good things, but LESS of many bad ones, like abortions, car accidents, and pornography.
8. Less fast food and junk in our bodies (which is good and bad, in my book).
9. More physical activity. Our lives now have unavoidable, built-in daily exercise.
10. Less carbon footprints, fuel consumption, manufacturing waste, ETC!!!
11. Returning to more of the old ways that got people from time immemorial to today (such as herbal remedies and better self care).

Oh—Lexie just thought of another. She says because big agriculture won't be able to use their machinery, millions of acres of farm land will not be doused with toxic pesticides and herbicides. "And the land will get a Sabbath rest," she added. I chuckled when she said that. I mean, since when does LAND need rest?

“No, even soil needs rest,” Lexie said emphatically. I realized she was serious. “That’s what ‘fallow ground,’ is,” she said, “land that’s resting and recovering. It’s a biblical principle.”

“C’mon,” I said. “The Bible doesn’t say to let your land rest.”

She smiled. “Actually, yes, it does.”

I didn’t believe her. I never thought of the Bible as something like the Farmers’ Almanac, you know?

“Listen, listen,” she said. She had picked up her Bible and was flipping through pages. She said, “I highlight everything having to do with land, gardening, farming, and food, in green.”

I nodded. I didn’t ask her why. I figured it was because Lexie’s a farm girl. Farm girls are different. I should know, I’m becoming one, but I still have a ways to go. But I couldn’t imagine underlining all those verses in green. Anyway, she read a few verses to me that blew my mind. Then she dictated one so I could copy it into my journal. (I was shocked this was in there. But I guess it’s no big jump to think God cares about the soil. He made it!)

“As long as (the land) lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it.”

So that’s the end of our list. The land shall have rest.

Since coming here, we Pattersons are having something of a rest, too. Everything we have living here with the Martins, food and water, friendship and fellowship, hope for the future—it’s all a gift from God.

The Martins say that someday technology will be back and society will come out stronger. I don’t know how, but I believe it will. I’m looking forward to that.

ONE MORE THING Um. I have to say a word about Blake. Blake Buchanan is a year older than me and Lexie, and actually very cute. I got the feeling right away that Lexie didn’t want me messing with him. Problem: I couldn’t help but like him. (Plus, he’s the only guy we know right now besides his brother, who is only fourteen.) I’m being good for Lexie’s sake and not flirting with him. But it takes effort. At school I flirted with any guy, even when I knew a friend of mine liked him. I don’t know why, I just did. Blake is sort of flirt-proof to begin with (don’t ask how I know) and after all

Lexie has done for me and my family, I couldn't ever get in between her and him. But I came clean and apologized to Lexie about trying to flirt with him. Want to know what she said? (This is so Lexie!) When I told her how he refused to flirt back, she gave a huge grin and said, "Thanks, Andrea!"

I think she's in love. I'm a little jealous of what they have, but I'm so busy with all the new chores, I hardly have time to think about it. When I do, it's a little hard not to be the one with the boyfriend, but I shouldn't complain. I shudder to think how I could have ended up with MR. HERMAN!

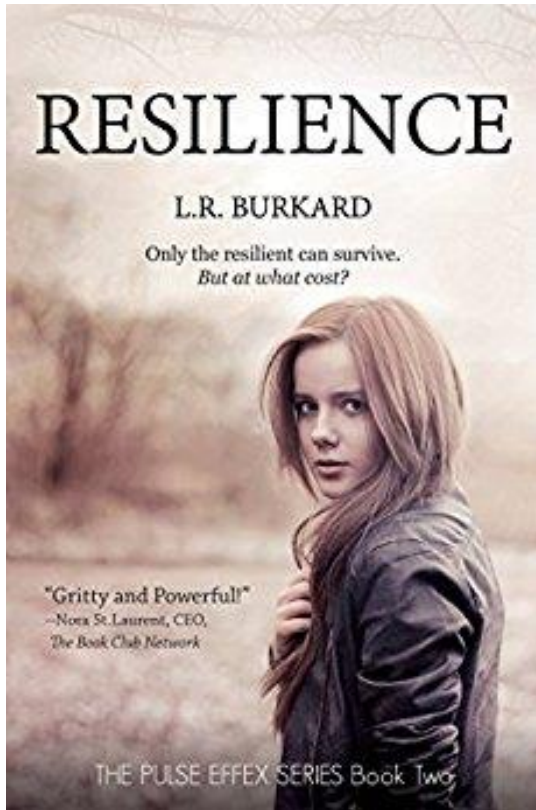
I told God even if I end up being single for the rest of my life, it's okay. And I almost meant it, too.



KEEP READING for a BONUS EXCERPT of the EXCITING SEQUEL to PULSE:

*RESILIENCE: SEEKING THE LIGHT*

*Only the resilient can survive...but at what cost?*



# RESILIENCE: SEEKING THE LIGHT

## The Pulse Effex Book Two

### BONUS EXCERPT

By L.R. Burkard

*The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness.*

Revelation 16:10

*It is worth being in the darkness to see the stars.*  
Harriet Beecher Stowe

## SARAH

*MAY 11, FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE PULSE*

I knew before we left that something was wrong, but Richard never listens to me. It was dusk, time to get moving. We travel at night because most people stay in after dark. It's safer this way. People are the primary threat. Not regular, normal people like your grandmother or neighbors, or kindergarten teacher; those people are mostly gone. All the nice ones, gone! The ones left? They're the reason we move at night.

"We don't have time, Sarah." I looked up at my brother, my only family in the world I know for sure is still alive now that the EMP sent our country into the dark ages.

"Almost done."

He frowned. I hurried to scribble a few more lines in this journal, one of the meager belongings I've held onto from the time life was normal. Since before the EMP—the electromagnetic pulse that took down the power grid of the nation.

We were in an abandoned barn, where we'd slept on old, musty hay. It was far cleaner than other places we'd spent the night recently. Richard brushed hay out of his hair and pulled a comb from his back pocket. I have to hand it to him—he's grown a beard, but still manages to stay neat and groomed. His hair is short—he shaved his off not long after I shaved mine and for the same reason—lice. But unlike me, he looks good with the crew cut, like a military guy off duty. Except Richard is on duty. He's always on duty. Life is too dangerous to ever relax, ever let down our guard.

"C'mon, time's up." My eyes met Richard's and I sighed, shutting my book and letting him pull me to my feet. He was right. I could hardly see what I was writing in the fading light. I shoved my journal and pen into my purse, strung it around my neck and tied it across my torso, close to my body. I shook hay off and pulled on my coat and zippered it, hiding the purse. Richard had already replaced his knife into its ankle holster, checked the pistol in his pocket, and was ready to move on. He slung the military-issue daypack over his back, then his rifle, and nodded at me.

Sometimes it was hard to remember this was Richard, my brother who had gone off to college and come home thinking guns should be banned. Or that building a strong military was foolish. Now he looks for firearms *all the time*. Sometimes we find them on fallen bodies... that's all I can say right now about that.

"Ready?" He peered outside at the gathering darkness. "There'll be little moonlight. We might be able to stay on the road."

My heart rose. I was sick to death of traveling across fields and brush and woods. I never disliked nature particularly, but I never dreamed I'd be stuck out in it in all kinds of wind and weather, trudging through woods and fields at night where no one was really meant to walk. Following a trail would have been easier, but we didn't dare. We had to forge our way, relying heavily on a topographical map Richard picked up once at a much-looted hardware store.

The map helped immeasurably, but it couldn't help us avoid the myriad little brooks and streams that dot Ohio, making our progress towards Aunt Susan's house in Indiana slow and cumbersome. We might have been there by now if we didn't have to follow waterways until we found a good crossing. Roads were so much easier.



Civilized—as long as you didn’t run into other people. Starvation was a constant threat, but people were the scariest one.

Aside from other human beings, nothing creeps me out the way it used to. We’d come across wild dogs, coyotes, deer, foxes, raccoons, corn snakes, and the occasional skunk numerous times—but the sight of a wild critter was welcome. It might mean dinner. I try to keep my distance from snakes, sure, but ever since Richard caught and cooked a few, I lost my horror of them.

I am definitely no longer a normal American girl. How can I be? There is no longer a normal America.

This is my life every night: A long, hard hike with few breaks and precious little to eat or drink.

Richard helped me get my large daypack on my back. I adjusted the straps until they weren’t digging into my shoulders, and we moved to the door of the barn. I waited while Richard peered out. He looked in all directions, then stepped out and looked around again. He turned to me and nodded.

I took a deep breath and walked out. We’d been safe and relatively comfortable in the barn. Would we find another refuge by morning?

I’d only gone a few feet when I started feeling it. Something wasn’t right. I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Rich—I don’t want to go tonight.”

“Why not?”

I looked at the scrubby field of grey stubble around us. Normally by this time in May, the fields would be rich brown, plowed and ready for the new year’s crops. Soon the scene before us would be a rolling swell of greenery. Instead, it was barren, dotted only with weeds. Most farm machinery had died with the EMP, so there was little large-scale planting. Bare farms like this were common. But it wasn’t the desolate field that had my attention, giving me pause. It was the sky. Dusk was usually yellowish-brown, sometimes blue brown, but tonight it had an eerie greenish glow.

“I think weather’s coming in.”

Richard surveyed the sky. “I think it’s from that.” He pointed to my right. A plume of smoke was visible, rising above the tree line. We’d seen it the day before

when it was much stronger. We'd seen lots of houses burning since we hit the road. Dark plumes were depressingly common. It seemed to be one of the new dangers since the EMP; out of control fires. Anyway, I didn't think the greenish sky had anything to do with that fire.

"No; it's the whole sky, especially that way." I pointed west. But as I said, Richard never listens to me. He took an impatient breath.

"I've told you, Sarah, time is everything. If we don't reach Aunt Susan's before summer, there won't be time to grow food. If we don't grow food, we don't survive next winter. We have no choice. C'mon."

I knew he was right, but I felt sure we were in for some kind of storm. "Just one night! I'm tired."

"Look, if we don't move, we starve. And I don't mean next winter. We've got enough provisions for two more days. The fact we've not already starved is a small miracle. I'm not going to push our luck. We have to keep going while we can, while we've got something to nourish us. If we run out of food before we get there, we're dead. You understand? Dead."

Sometimes Richard's laser focus on getting us to Indiana was helpful. Having Aunt Susan's farm as a goal, a place to look forward to—even if we were living in fantasy land—helped my spirits when the weariness set in. And it did, making me want to give up, collapse, die on the spot. Why not? Mom and Jesse had died, my father was probably dead, my previous life was a faint memory, like a childhood book I'd read and enjoyed, but which was never real—but Richard's quiet talk about how our lives would improve when we reached Aunt Susan—it gave me hope.

Hope is a powerful thing. Like food, it could get me moving.

Tonight I wasn't thinking about hope, or the future, or anything other than that ominous looking sky. The last storm we'd been caught in left me miserable for three days because that's how long it took for my shoes to dry. I didn't want that to happen again.

But I followed my brother. We usually went to the edge of fields just inside the brush line, out of sight, staying west as much as possible. We did that tonight. Richard said we had to wait for thicker darkness before hazarding a road. After a while

I thought maybe I'd been wrong about bad weather coming in. Maybe the sky just looked greenish sometimes and I'd never noticed it before.

Then, little by little, a breeze picked up. By the time we'd gone maybe a mile, it was strong. I tried to ignore it. I didn't want to say, "See? I told you so," because Richard is such a good brother. Except for not listening to me, he is a much better brother now, than before the EMP.

But as the wind increased, dark clouds—visible even in the night sky—scudded with increasing speed across it. A jagged bolt of lightning revealed the greenish glow I'd seen earlier. Sudden, heavy rain pelted us, and I got cold—fast. I'd lost my hat the week before and was sorrier at that moment than ever; my head, with only two inches of stubby hair, was unprotected. And the wind was gaining force. The trees to our right were bending low and sounds of snapping branches surrounded us.

"C'mon," Richard called. He motioned me away from the edge of the brush-line, deeper into the stand of woods. The brush and trees we came to for shelter were now alive with energy, snapping, twisting and hitting us in the face and arms and legs. I covered my head with my hands, trying to protect my face.

"I'm looking for shelter!" Richard called, much to my relief. He was no more than a foot away but I almost hadn't heard him above the wind. Walking felt more and more difficult, like fighting an ocean tide. This was no thunderstorm like any I'd ever experienced!

Then, we heard it. At first, it was a low rumble like a distant train. Soon it sounded like a roaring crowd at a packed stadium. We stopped, squinting into the wind and dust and stood there, gasping, gaping at the incredible scene before us. The sky was alive, reeling and churning. Branches and other objects too dark to recognize were swirling eerily aloft as if being played with by some giant, invisible hand. We were looking at the growling belly of the storm, approaching like a snarling dog.

"It's a tornado!" Richard yelled. His words terrified me. I felt paralyzed, leaning hard into a wall of wind, fighting to keep myself from flying backwards like a dandelion scattering in the breath of a child. Even my weighty backpack offered no extra resistance against this force.

Richard grabbed my hand and pulled me. "C'mon!"

“We’ll never outrun it!” I panted, feeling heavy and defeated. Panic was sapping my strength. I tried to unstrap my pack, I wanted to be lighter, but he cried, “No!” and yanked me along.

“This way!” He dragged me after him behind a huge old tree, and shoved me unceremoniously to the ground, against the trunk.

“Put your head down! Maybe the tree will shelter us!”

“Trees aren’t safe in a storm!” I yelled. “They’re lightning magnets!”

“It’s not lightning we have to worry about!”

As we huddled behind the tree, I looked past Richard’s head and up into the green sky. The top of our tree swayed above me like a dancer taking a bow. My eyes widened. Richard couldn’t see it. He was facing down. I stared, horrified but unable to look away. How far would it bend?

Around us the woods were alive, dancing like demons, the trees possessed of a passionate dark tune that threatened to engulf us forever. We’d be killed at any moment, I just knew it! Amidst the awful swaying was a continual ripping and cracking of trees and limbs and branches—a symphony of terror. Then, *thud!* Something landed beside my head. *How long could we survive?*

Above us, outlined against the green sky, the treetop bent lower like a witch hunched over her cauldron. Lower, lower, she stooped.

“It’s going to break!” I gasped. Richard didn’t hear me.

The roar was louder still. The tree held, but something inside *me* snapped. My sense of peril was unbearable. I felt a spurt of energy, pure adrenaline I’m sure. I jumped up and ran.

“Sarah!” There was no time for me to reason with Richard, and I couldn’t stop anyway. In seconds I could feel him behind me, glad he was there, and kept going, not knowing how long we’d be able to run before the snarling twisting mass in the sky would bowl us down like ants on a sidewalk. I hardly noticed the branches whipping my face or arms now. I didn’t care. That living, moving, howling force behind us was what frightened me.

I usually struggled to keep up with Richard during the nightly hikes, but now I ran like wildfire. We’d been living on fumes, dreams of food, for so long I guess my

body was used to functioning on practically nothing. We came to a sharp drop, a ravine which held a narrow brook and I froze at the precipice.

“C’mon!” Richard jumped. I wouldn’t have moved, but he’d grabbed my hand and so I flew over the edge with him helplessly. A sudden flash of lightning revealed every line on his face. His eyes were wild. We were in the air for only a second, but it felt like slow motion. I heard a cry as I went and knew faintly that it was me.

Richard had forced us off the edge where the ground sheared away into darkness. I hit the dirt—hard, falling against the bank, landing on rocks, roots, mud and whatever else was there. The roar was deafening. My heart pounded painfully through my whole being but all I heard was that ferocious roar.

“Keep your head against the bank!” My brother’s muffled yell was unnecessary because I was already huddled against the earthen wall as small as I could make myself while terror coursed through my body. Holding my eyes shut fiercely, I stifled a scream. Just when I thought I might pass out, Richard threw himself over me. His weight felt crushing.

I knew he was trying to protect me.

## LEXIE

*MAY 12, FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE PULSE*

The sound of a shot, piercing the silence and my lovely dream, woke me. I blinked awake while an uneasy feeling saturated my being. Something was wrong. Then I realized: *A shot!* I came fully awake and went into autopilot, grabbing my rifle from its high perch on my dresser and rushing to the window. Carefully, so as not to give someone a target, I stayed to one side, peering out from behind the curtain.

Dawn had broken. The landscape surrounding our farmhouse was a sultry, foggy cloud, leftover moisture from last night’s storm. Anyone could be hiding out there. What I needed to know was who had fired that shot? *Was it us, or them?*

I saw nothing. Taking a quick peek at the top bunk to see if Andrea had heard it, I saw she was up already, her bunk empty. For a moment I wavered between

throwing on clothes or keeping my lookout. Since I hadn't heard more fire, I hurried to slip on jeans and a light sweat top. It would be chilly until the sun got higher in the sky.

Just last night at the council meeting we'd been warned: Every day as the weather warmed more people were on the move, people who would come our way. They were not to be trusted. Some, it's true, were harmless; others, possible allies, maybe even future members of our compound. But we couldn't assume anything. And if they'd fired first, that told us all we needed to know. They were "number fours"—threats.

An even greater threat than number fours was the possibility of foreign military. Rumor on the AR (amateur radio—my dad's a ham operator) had it that enemies of the US were using the EMP to try and take over our country.

There'd been sightings of guerrilla outfits on our soil. So far, we hadn't seen any, but how long would it be until we did? Even worse, how would we ever fight them off? Our little compound of thirty or so people could hardly put up a resistance to trained soldiers. Most had no experience with firearms. The very idea terrified me. I tried not to think about it.

Number fours were bad enough, marauders who roamed the land and stole food and supplies from people, often killing those they'd just robbed. Our compound had successfully fought off more than a few bands of such people.

Have I mentioned the compound before? Probably not. I stopped journaling because I had no energy at the end of the day. Chores are all-consuming. And time with night-lights is rationed—oil and batteries run out and we never know if we'll get more. Most nights I'd rather read than write, anyway. It seems like a lifetime ago that we had electricity, though it was only four months.

Anyways, the compound started out as a small community of Christian preppers, but we'd grown, taking in others who brought skills or knowledge we needed. They in turn got food and shelter. My science teacher would say it was a symbiotic living arrangement, a way for all of us to survive in a world gone dark and dangerous.

At first it was just us and the Pattersons. They hadn't done any prepping but we took them in, mostly because Andrea is my best friend and I knew her family needed us. Plus, we felt led in prayer to help them. Then the Buchanans joined us, whom I'll talk about later; and slowly, other people. Many of them had only survived since the EMP by the skin of their teeth, barely keeping starvation at bay. But we all knew we're vulnerable individually, even those of us who stored food and supplies. There's safety in numbers. Banding together was really the only solution.

Some people didn't want to leave their land or home to join us. There were arguments about where to build, whose property was the best for defense, for farming, and for water. But we had the best land assets of anyone else—a high hill (which is a natural vantage point for lookouts), a well with a manual pump, a running stream, flat farmland plus some woods, not to mention chickens, rabbits, a cow and horses—so in the end our farm was chosen.

I was glad it was chosen because it meant we didn't have to leave everything and start new somewhere else. And there's something comforting about the sounds of work going on around us. The pounding of hammers, the steady rhythm of saws making logs and beams from downed trees; even the shouts of men as they talk and work together. It means we're not under attack. But privacy, and our old way of life is gone. It was gone anyway due to the EMP—and it's a blessing to have other people in our lives, people we can trust and form close relationships with. But Mom sometimes looks out at the work sites, the clearing of brush and trees, and looks wistful. I miss having our house and land to ourselves, too.

Except for the Buchanans! Blake's family started building a cabin behind our barn shortly after we brought Andrea's family here. Their livestock was raided so often they got critically low. When their last rooster got stolen they decided to join forces with us. (We have a few roosters. You don't need a rooster for eggs, but if you want to keep getting eggs for years and years, then you do. A hen only lays well for a couple of years and then you need a younger one.)

Anyways, with the birds disappearing and the increasing foot traffic on their road, the kids weren't able to play outside anymore. Their house was on a main road. So they will have more cover here, more protection. And so will we.

I feel bad they had to leave their home but it gives me a happy feeling to know Blake will be close by now. Everyone knows Blake and I will get married one day—as long as we can stay alive that long. (He hasn't formally proposed, but I know it's coming.)

Andrea entered the room, nonchalant, not acting like we were under attack. She saw me with my rifle and said, “Oh. It's okay! It was a warning shot and they've gone.”

I peered out at the misty fog hanging over the land, giving even the detached garage, adjacent to the house, a ghostly demeanor. “How can they be sure? We can't see anything out there.”

Andrea smiled. “Jared's on duty and says so.” Andrea likes Jared. He's new to the compound, ex-Army, and came with a lot of surveillance tips and defense practices and other know-how. His word is sort of law. If he said it was all clear, then it was all clear.

I put my rifle down and considered returning to bed. I didn't have to be up so early as morning barn chores were Andrea's today. If I could sleep in, I liked to. But I thought of the coffee that was probably hot in the percolator (which had a permanent spot on the woodstove these days) and my mouth watered. I didn't used to drink coffee. Now I'll drink anything that's available. Nothing edible or potable is ever taken for granted.

By the straw clinging to her jeans, I could see Andrea had already been to the barn, so I asked, “How's Rhema?” She met my eyes. Andrea's a pretty brunette who used to wear heavy makeup. Since coming to live with us, she's changed. The new Andrea hardly wears make up, doesn't complain about clothes that haven't been washed properly in weeks, doesn't do her nails or hair, and has basically become a lot like me. Actually, I don't miss the old Andrea. I always liked Andrea, but I guess I did think she worried about all that girly stuff too much.

“She's good. Wanna ride today?” We both loved riding. I was teaching Andrea but I usually managed to get in some time with my horse, Rhema, too. We need riders because none of our vehicles work (except one small diesel tractor, which we'll use until we run out of fuel. That was dad's least favorite piece of farm equipment—until the pulse!) Anyways, sometimes we have to search out new supplies. So Mom



designated “Horseback Riding” as a new school subject. And she appointed me, the best horsewoman in the family, to teach Andrea.

“I’ll ask Dad.” We both knew it wasn’t on our schedule. Everyone in the compound had to follow a schedule, even we teenagers. And, while homeschooling was important, running the compound had to come first. Without electricity, almost everything we do takes more work, more time, more planning.

The door opened. Aiden, one of Andrea’s little brothers, came bouncing into the room, followed swiftly by Quentin, his twin.

“Don’t come in without knocking!” Andrea scolded. “How many times have I told you that?”

Aiden’s face fell but Quentin was unfazed. “I heard a shot before,” he said. Gleefully he added, “Did we kill anyone? Did we kill anyone?” His eagerness was eerie and, not too long ago, would have been unthinkable.

Andrea frowned. “You should be happy because no, we didn’t have to kill anyone.”

“Oh.” They spoke in unison, the way twins sometimes do. Disappointment slumped their shoulders.

“C’mon, you guys,” I said. “Your sister’s right. It’s GREAT, we didn’t have to kill anyone!”

They looked at each other. Quentin looked back at us. “We just want there to be less bad guys,” he said, his eyes big and earnest. “If there’s no bad guys, we can play outside like we used to.”

Andrea and I exchanged glances. She got on one knee in front of the boys. “You still get to play outside,” she said, softly.

“Only a little. Not as much as we used to.”

“It’s summertime,” added Aiden. “We used to play outside a lot more in summertime.” He dragged out the last syllable, *tiiiiime*.

“It’s only spring,” Andrea said. “And nobody gets to play as much as we used to.” The boys nodded. Aiden sniffed. “Are you gonna take us outside today?” he asked. I spoke up. “I am.” It was part of our rotation on the schedule. After two hours we were supposed to spend on lessons, we shifted between childcare, nursery, kitchen

chores, and livestock chores. Kitchen chores could be lots of things, but the other stuff was fairly routine. I liked doing childcare, whether playing with the kids or leaving them to their own devices. When they were happily entertained among themselves, I could read. They were never happily entertained without me for long, but it was something.

When the boys didn't even crack a smile, I added, "Well, I'M glad I'll get to play with *you!*" When they remained silent, Andrea turned to me with a sheepish grin. "They like it when it's my turn because I raid food storage for treats we haven't had in a long time."

I gasped. "Andrea!"

The boys giggled.

Andrea put a finger to her lips. "Shhhhh!"

"We know," said Quentin. "It's a secret."

"My folks would kill you if they knew you were doing that!" It made me angry too. I liked the treats from food storage as much as anyone. There hadn't been any shopping since the EMP. That meant the only chips or chocolate bars or packaged cookies we ever got to eat came from storage. And there wasn't a great amount of that stuff. My mom had concentrated on nourishing food when she did the storing. I made a mental note to get down to the main storage area and check the buckets labeled "GOODIES." The only way Andrea could be scavenging for treats was from those buckets. I was surprised she'd discovered how to open them, but they were like gold, now. I'd reseal the ones she got into and hide the bucket opener.

Suddenly we all jumped at the sound of a barrage of fire. It sounded close.

"Get down!" Andrea pushed her brothers to the ground. Aiden started whimpering.

"Get under the bed, now!" I ordered.

Quentin said, "It's okay, Aiden. We'll get the bad guys. Maybe we'll get them all!"

Aiden quieted. Andrea grabbed her rifle and the two of us crouched beside the windows. We peeked furtively outside. The fog was lifting. I gasped as I saw a figure

holding a handgun dart out of the brush on one side of the house, heading towards the back.

“We’ve got company, all right! Number fours!”

“Company?” called Quentin. “Who’s here?”

I raised the window enough to take a shot if I got one, frowning as I did so. I had no idea who was there, but it wasn’t military so that left four possibilities and three of them had just been eliminated. A non-threatening person didn’t go darting about one’s property, holding a firearm. Jared had obviously messed up. He’d said all was clear; but all wasn’t clear. Someone was out there, and probably lots of someones—looters rarely came alone—and they were after our animals, at the least. At worst, they were after us.

“Who’s out there, Lexie?” Quentin asked, again.

“Bad guys.”

I heard our dogs barking from behind the house. *Someone, please, get the dogs inside!* Pets, we’d learned the hard way, were fair game for hungry looters. We’d lost our beautiful, harmless golden retriever, Kasha, last month during a raid. How anyone could eat someone’s pet—my thoughts were cut off by another volley of fire ringing out, coming from the back.

“They’re at the barn or the coop!” Andrea said, turning to rush from the room.

“No, stay here!”

She looked at me, questioning.

“My dad and the others will be in the back. We need to be here so if they retreat back this way, we can give them grief.”

Giving them grief was not an accurate way to put it. We were supposed to shoot anyone who had shot at us while trying to steal our animals or supplies because these people, if not stopped, were dangerous and would always come back. So far, I’d never had to shoot someone for stealing or for trying to. I prayed I never would.

Andrea returned to her window. We heard more shots, still from behind the house. And then just as I leaned my rifle down for a moment to put my hair up with a stretchy band, a sudden ping at my window, right near my head, had me scrambling to get back in position.

“They’re back out front!” I gasped. Andrea already had her rifle at the window, leaning it on the sill as she took aim at something. In her slow, calm voice—Andrea was almost mystically calm during dire moments like this—she said, “No. They’re not. There’s just more of them.” She glanced at me. “We’ve got to hold them back.”

Worriedly, I looked out. A line of ghostly figures, just visible through the lifting fog, were emerging from the brush that faced the street side of our property. Andrea was right! There were a lot of them, and they were armed. One had a raised shotgun. And with a skirmish already going on in the back, I feared she and I were alone to contain this second wave of marauders.

I wasn’t sure I was up to it.

## SARAH

The earth shook. I sobbed, numb with terror, and begged God to protect us. Richard’s arms tightened around me as I felt us both being lifted. I had unknowingly grabbed hold of something which I now clung to for dear life. Richard’s hold on me increased while I felt the terrible pulling trying to sweep us away. Then, without warning, he let go! He lifted off me and was gone!

I screamed but didn’t let go of my hold, fighting the pull that had whisked him away like words on the wind. With every bit of strength I possessed, I dragged my body into a crevice where my head had somehow found its way. I hadn’t even realized the crevice was there; either that, or it had just been created when the embankment shifted from the force of the storm. Clinging to what felt like a large tree root, I huddled in the fetal position while the world around me screamed in protest, cracking and lashing and pounding.

The crevice shuddered as the embankment felt the power of nature’s fury, taking the pummeling. I tasted dirt, wondering if it would cave in around me, on top of me, leaving me buried. And then, as quickly and surprisingly as it had come, the force suddenly lessened. A few seconds later it was gone! It was like the air had been let out of a giant balloon. The roar moved on.

Blinking away soil, I lifted my head, withdrawing it from the crevice. The sky flashed. I saw I was next to a jutting root system, part of which had formed my crevice. If the trees to that system had been uprooted, I'd have gone right along with them. But the air felt charged, electric. I heard the rumbling again, the warning sound we'd heard right before the tornado hit. The sky flashed and I saw another wall of sky, twisting and alive, coming my way! Was it a second funnel? Or had I been in the eye of the storm?

The roar increased quickly, and I dove back into my crevice, this time clawing at the wall of dirt, trying to get deeper. I felt the embankment jump, heard the same awful snapping and tearing of trees and branches struck by the swirling madness. I covered my head with my arms and prayed. An indescribable sound filled my ears as the wind wreaked havoc on the brook and the opposite bank, and then its awful scream grew more distant. The train wreck of nature had passed, this time for sure. The only pounding left was my heart, echoing in sharp thuds throughout my body.

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I crawled backwards from the crevice and sat on my haunches, taking deep breaths and getting my bearings. Our tree, that stooping witch during the storm, had unbent itself. The creaking, groaning, and rain had ceased, leaving a silence so deep it was eerie. Distant lightning blinked, and I saw the crevice again. It was the sort of hole which normally you couldn't pay me *ten thousand dollars* to stick my hand into! The thought that I'd crawled into it without even thinking about it, folding myself up like a dinner napkin, seemed unreal. Yet it had saved my life. But Richard! How would I find him?

Darkness was deep, broken only when an occasional flash from the sky revealed a greenish-brown atmosphere, more brown than green, now. But only one thought filled my shaking, weak-kneed body: Where was Richard? And, when I found him, would he be alive?

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When I felt strong enough to rise, I took a few tentative steps and called Richard. My voice was weak but, desperate to find him, I kept calling. I hoped, by some miracle, he was close by.

I climbed up the opposite embankment. When I reached the top and made my way through a flattened thicket, I saw the path the storm had taken through the trees. Then lightning jagged the sky about a half mile away and I saw the next grove of trees bowing like meek subjects before the furious gale. More lightning. And there! The plume! Before we'd been too close to see it clearly but now I did, a gigantic, rotating black thing, wider at the top, writhing along at its condensed bottom like an enraged, twisted demon, clearing all in its path.

I fell back down. All I wanted to do was sit and cry. I did not want to be alive if Richard was not. He was all I had left in the world. I reflected how he'd lifted off me like a moth in a fan's breeze. Would it be possible for him to be alive? I had once read accounts of people who had survived tornadoes after being caught up in the air, sometimes traveling for miles before landing somehow, somewhere. These stories were from people who had survived. Richard might have, too.

I couldn't tell if my hope was reasonable or born of desperation—maybe even starvation. Maybe I wasn't thinking straight. But the thought that other people had survived such storms gave me hope and I got up. I slung off my pack and dug inside for the flashlight. We considered it almost sacred, this flashlight. We didn't use it for convenience. If we had, it would have died long ago. We saved it for only the direst circumstances. To my mind, finding Richard fit the bill. As I groped inside, my fingers came across the last piece of a granola bar I'd been saving. I grabbed it and ate it quickly, trying not to think about the fact that Richard had been carrying the rest of our food, meager as it was.

The one good thing about not having light most of the time was that now using the flashlight felt magical. It raised my spirits, and I began calling out to my brother, moving in the path of the storm, working my way around debris and brush.

The wake of the storm was obvious, for trees in its path were mostly stumps, some as high as my waist; but following it was another thing. Limbs, broken branches, and trunks littered the path. Trees half-pulled from the ground leaned at odd angles. I had to watch my step to keep from walking into them or getting tangled or falling. Seeing the wide swath of destruction, I realized that the force which had snatched Richard from me probably wouldn't have deposited him anywhere close. But just in

case, I moved slowly, calling Richard and searching trees that were intact for his body. I half expected to find him hanging lifeless from a tree limb, high in the air. But I fought against such thoughts and trudged on. I resolved to search as long as it took.

There was nothing else for me to do.

I couldn't go on without Richard.

## LEXIE

The band of marauders crept closer, and I panicked. "Andrea, let's pray!" She was zeroing in on one of the intruders, getting ready to shoot, and didn't answer.

"What if they're friendly?"

"Lex, they just put a bullet in your window! That could have been your head!"

She let out her breath and I saw her finger squeeze the trigger. The shot made me jump though I knew it was coming. I turned and ran to my dresser. I threw a pair of protective earmuffs at her and put down my rifle to position my own pair. I'd been in skirmishes before which had left my ears ringing for hours and I hated that.

Back at the window, I announced triumphantly, "Some of them have turned back!" Andrea's shot must have reached its mark. But others, I now saw, were scattering to the sides. Andrea kept shooting while there I was, taking stock of the situation like a bystander, not a soldier. I am supposed to be a soldier. We all are. We have to be.

Finally, I crouched and aimed. I took a single shot and then suddenly Blake knelt beside me.

"How's it going?" he asked, his gaze quickly scanning the view out front. More of our people entered the room to get to our windows, which gave a good vantage point for the front. Jared dropped down beside Andrea, falling into position to shoot. It seemed to be as natural for him as breathing.

I felt better having the guys with us. But then I heard the sound of a window crashing in below us.

“They’re getting in the house!” I cried. Jared and Blake’s eyes met. They jumped up.

“We got it,” Jared said.

“Be careful!” I whispered to Blake. I grabbed his hand and he gave mine a squeeze. “Lock the door behind us.”

As I did, I said, keeping my voice low, “I wish we’d gotten the kids to the safe room.”

“This is more fun!” Quentin’s muffled voice came out from below the bed. I had hoped the boys wouldn’t hear me. Andrea and I shook our heads. What kind of boys would the twins grow up to be if they thought armed encounters were fun?

“He doesn’t understand,” Andrea said. “To them, we’re playing cops and robbers.” We heard a shot from downstairs, then another, then another. My heart was in my throat.

“I see movement!” Andrea cried. I spun back to my post in time to see two people who had just emerged into view from the porch beneath us. A second later she took a shot and one fell. Andrea is an amazing shot—it’s a natural skill for her, like horseback riding is for me. I have trouble staying calm and focused when it comes to hurting other people—even when we are under attack. Andrea seems immune to misgivings about it. Like she’s trained not to see marauders as people. I have to sternly remind myself they mean us harm, that they’re the enemy, or I can’t handle fighting. While I mused and tried to get the other guy out there in my scope, Andrea took the shot and felled him. Downstairs we’d heard a few more shots but it was quiet now.

We stayed at the windows watching. Minutes ticked by and all was still. Andrea turned to me. I hurriedly lifted my ear protection. I could have heard her with it on, but it looked like she had something important to say. “What?”

“Why didn’t you shoot one?” Her voice was calm, but in her eyes I saw something lurking. I just stared at her a moment. I hadn’t meant NOT to shoot.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. You got it done.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” she said, heavily. Turning back to the window, she added, “You’re not a bad shot. You could have taken one of them, too.”



I bit my lip, staring at the front. So maybe it did bother her, having to kill people. I had let her do the dirty work. I'd let my dislike of shooting at human targets stop me. I loved shooting as a sport—but it wasn't fun, anymore. It was deadly serious.

I gave her my feeble defense. "They were leaving. I can't shoot anyone in the back."

Andrea's eyes widened. "They came to kill us and steal! To take everything we've got! You know we can't let them get away after they shoot! You know the rules, Lex! They'll come back! You can't pick and choose who to fight when they start it. If you do that again, I'm gonna tell your dad!"

"I'm sorry. I'll do better next time." I could hardly stand to look into Andrea's large, reproofing eyes at that moment.

Quentin and Aiden crawled out from under the bed. "We can come out now, right?" Quentin asked.

"No!" Andrea's sharp cry startled them. I saw Aiden's lip quiver, but his brother said, "C'mon, Aiden. It's okay." They backed under and were out of sight.

Feeling guilty, I looked at Andrea, trying to come up with an explanation. To my surprise I saw her cheeks were wet! Andrea was rarely emotional after a skirmish. I felt helpless. I didn't know how to comfort her.

"I'm sorry," I said again. She ignored me. But then we heard two shots from outside. It wasn't over!

Coming to attention at her window, she said, "C'mon! There's more of them. Help me this time!"

I did. I bit my lip so hard I could taste blood. I saw people out there grow blurry and realized I was crying. I wiped away the tears quickly so I could focus, but I couldn't deny I hated having to live defensively with rifles practically attached to our bodies. We went nowhere unarmed. I wanted to be a normal teenager again. Not a soldier in this civil war where survivors fought survivors.

If there really were foreign troops on the ground, wouldn't it be better for everyone if all Americans came together to resist them? But instead we had to constantly be on the alert for the ruthless "number fours" whose existence meant we were never safe. And there seemed to be a lot of them today.

I could hear shots hitting the house but fortunately our people downstairs and at other strategic places on the grounds were giving return fire. Shots rang out for the next fifteen minutes, on and off, and at least two more men out there fell within our view. The “bad guys” were hurting. I heard my mom, evidently from the room beside us at her window, cry out, “Take that, you rascally varmint!”

Andrea and I giggled through our tears. When my mom got emotional, she reverted to southernisms from her youth. No doubt “rascally varmint” was a favorite saying of her grandma’s or grandpappy’s. We’d tease her about it later. We laughed too much—I think we were slightly unhinged. It was taking an emotional toll on us, living this way.

There was sporadic crossfire for a few more minutes—then, silence. *Thank God, silence.*

Andrea and I had no choice though, but to stay as lookouts for as long as it took until we heard an official “all clear.” We saw no more intruders, and after about half an hour, sounds of normalcy, children’s voices, came from below. During a skirmish, children are hurried to the safe room and kept there until it was safe to come out. I was sure we could hear my little sisters and other kids below—which meant the threat had to be over. Shortly after that, my dad finally popped his head in to give the all clear. Andrea and I sighed with relief.

“Next time, Dad, could you send someone up here sooner?”

“Sorry, honey. There was a lot going on.”

We woke the boys who had fallen asleep, lulled by having to keep still. Downstairs, I hugged our German shepherd, Bach, while Mozart, our Great Dane, enjoyed Andrea’s attention. We learned that Jared had taken two guys with handcuffs, the ones who broke the window, I supposed. (Handcuffs: One of many “interesting” accessories Jared brought with him to the compound.) Their capture was supposed to be good news because it meant we could get information from them. When the attackers were organized in a group, we wanted to know who was in charge, how they’d organized, what their targets and plans were. Were they just passing through or did they plan on scavenging the whole area?

Andrea and I were just starting to tease my mom, calling her a “rascally varmint” when we saw Jared marching the prisoners toward an out-building. The smiles vanished from our faces.

We knew what awaited those men.

## SARAH

I found Richard face down on the grass. I thought my heart would stop.

I was sure he must be dead. I approached him feeling like I was a foot off the ground, like walking without feet. I couldn’t feel them. I’ve had lots of scary things happen since the pulse, and I’d been searching for Richard for hours—I don’t have a watch so I can’t say how long—but this felt like the scariest yet. Because if anything happened to Richard, I’ll never make it on my own. I wouldn’t even want to.

Dawn was rising. I fell to the ground beside my brother and shook his shoulder. Amazingly, his backpack was still there. I unlatched the strap circling his waist and gently drew it off him. Again, I tried nudging him awake. When he didn’t answer, I started crying. I was too dehydrated to shed tears, but my body shook with sobs. I pounded on his back.

“Don’t be dead, Richard!” Stupidly, I didn’t think of checking for a pulse; I just assumed the worst. But an amazing thing happened after I pounded him: Richard moaned!

I gasped and tried to turn him over. He is as skinny as can be, but I still had trouble turning him. He was like dead weight. I finally got him turned over. He blinked at me. I removed my pack and found the only water we had—a plastic bottle we’d been refilling from any source we could find. This water was from a little trickling spring, so we’d already treated it with an iodide pill—a miraculous concoction we picked up from a military guy (I’ll explain later about that). I didn’t want to waste a single drop of this precious water, so crouching down next to him, I raised his head and carefully placed the bottle by his mouth. He managed to take a sip, then another.

“Are you okay?” His voice was croaky.

“I’m fine. Don’t talk.” I gave him another sip and then let his head rest on the ground. I took a shirt from my pack and folded it up and put it beneath his head.

“I gotta get up,” he said. “Gimme a hand.”

“Don’t you think you should rest?”

“No. Help me up.”

But he hadn’t moved. A new fear washed over me. What if Richard had broken his back? What if he couldn’t walk? “Can you feel your legs?”

He blinked at me again. In a second, I saw his feet rise, first one, then the other.

“Thank God!”

“C’mon, help me up.” He lifted an arm towards me, so I got to my feet and braced myself to help pull him up. We got him to a sitting position.

“I can’t believe it—the storm took you, and you’re okay!”

He nodded, pulling in a deep breath. “I know.” He started to rise, so I hurried to help him. He plopped back down heavily, saying, “Wait. Sit down.”

I sat beside him. “Are you dizzy? Is your head hurt?” A slew of worries stampeded into my brain. Richard could have a concussion or hidden internal bleeding. He might have major whiplash from his tornadic ride. He might collapse on me. I have a long habit of cataloging things to worry about, and right now it was in full force.

“I’m okay.” He grabbed his pack, rummaged in it, and then pulled out two MREs, “Meals, Ready to Eat,” issued by the military, originally for the armed forces. These are the best food we’ve found anywhere since we hit the road. I don’t mean they taste the best—but they’re dense in calories. We need all the calories we can get. Like our single flashlight, we treated MREs like gold. We’d eaten a few before but resisted these last two since we’d gotten them. I didn’t like to think about how we got them. (How we got a lot of Richard’s gear, and even a couple of things for me. I’ll write about it one day...but not today.)

Afterwards we each took a few sips of water. That was more nutrition and liquid than we’d allowed ourselves in days. Richard suddenly popped up, literally jumping to his feet. He winced in pain.

“What is it?”

“Just sore. I think I hit a tree before landing here.”

“I knew it! That’s what I’m afraid of! What if you have a concussion?” I stared at him but he only shrugged. “Did you? Did you hit a tree?” We looked around. There was no tree close to where we were, and my fear went down a notch. “What was it like? Being swept away by a tornado?”

He looked at me a moment, thinking. “You know, I remember letting go of you. I was afraid we’d both get taken. I felt this tremendous wind against me...and then...nothing. Like I was floating on air. And then...” he lapsed into silence, searching his memory. “I don’t remember how I got down. I feel like I hit something. I must have hit something; I feel sort of like a train wreck...sore all over. But otherwise I’m okay.”

“You realize, God spared your life.”

He looked away, moving his jaw as though stretching his jaw muscles. But he didn’t answer.

Suddenly, I felt the long night’s ordeal catching up to me. I was exhausted. I lay back, closing my eyes.

“Sarah, c’mon, we’ve eaten. We should get moving.”

“I’m tired.”

“We’re always tired. But we have to go.”

“I can’t.” We were in the middle of a field, adjacent to the swath of disorder left by the tornado.

“We can’t stay here. We have to at least find somewhere with cover.”

I let Richard pull me to my feet. Minutes ago, I’d had to help him. Right then I felt like it was impossible to move. The sudden rise in blood sugar had the opposite effect on me as it had on Richard. He’d gotten instant energy whereas I only wanted to sleep. I mean, I *longed* to rest. I felt drunk with the need. My body wasn’t used to getting quality nutrition, and I’d been up all night in dread of finding him dead. “I am really...tired.”

“I know,” he said. “C’mon, we’ll find a shelter.”

END OF EXCERPT

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