

L.R. BURKARD

AN EMP
SURVIVAL THRILLER
Book Three

DEFIANCE

BATTLE THE DARK

"Action, adventure, and suspense will captivate readers!"
—MARK GOODWIN, author of *The Days of Noah*

EXCERPT

DEFIANCE: BATTLE THE DARK

Book Three in *The PULSE EFFEX Series*

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DEFIANCE: BATTLE THE DARK

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Published by Lilliput Press, Ohio

3rd edition

ISBN 978-1-955511-50-6

ISBN (ebook) 978-1-955511-99-5

1. Apocalyptic—Fiction 2. Post-Apocalyptic—Fiction 3. YA Futuristic—Fiction

4. Christian—Fiction

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BONUS EXCERPT

DEFIANCE: BATTLE THE DARK

CHAPTER ONE

SARAH

I saw him through the morning fog, appearing like a phantom out of the haze. You'd think the sight of a man approaching through the field would send me scurrying to the house in alarm. You'd think it would have me shouting for Angel and Tex to come with rifles at the ready. But I knew who it was. I recognized the wearied determination. That deliberate walk.

But not at first. I'd been out at dawn fetching the morning's water at the pump, and I froze when he came into sight, my heart thumping. People were about the scariest thing you could encounter these days. Then I recognized him. *Richard!* He'd left me here at Tex and Angel McAllister's homestead three weeks ago. When he left without a word, the McAllisters let me move from the barn loft to their living room so I wouldn't be alone at night.

See, the McAllisters took us in, letting us sleep in the barn. After the EMP knocked out the electric grid in the dead of winter seven months ago, we were forced from our apartment by a fire. At first, we'd taken shelter in the town library—everyone from our building did. But the library was dirty and crowded, and we were slowly starving. I lost my mother and baby cousin Jesse to starvation.

As soon as the weather allowed, we took off to make our way to Aunt Susan's farm. It was a treacherous journey and we never got there—instead, we ended up here with Tex and Angel. They were wonderful to me and extra kind since Richard took off. But I missed my brother.

A huge lump filled my throat when I saw how defeated and beaten he looked. I swallowed it, slammed down my half-filled bucket, and ran. I barreled into him, crying on his shirt.

"Hi, sis." He wrapped a weak arm around me. Poor Richard! He must have endured a lot out there. I couldn't talk. I'd been afraid I'd never see him again, that he'd disappear like Dad and Jessie and Mom. I didn't realize until seeing him how convinced I'd been of that.

Finally, I pulled my head back to study him. My normally handsome brother was disguised beneath a coat of mud and grime, out of which dull eyes returned my gaze.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He stared, saying nothing, filling me with alarm. *What happened to him?* I knew we'd get the details eventually, so I forced myself not to ask. From the house, the dogs barked with excitement—they knew it was Richard, too. I heard the door open and, turning to look, saw Tex and Angel emerge while the dogs spilled out at their heels. Tex carried a rifle in one hand. I came apart from my brother and smiled as the couple approached. They searched Richard's face, unsmiling. Weren't they glad he was back?

Richard hadn't welcomed their Christian evangelizing, true, but he was a good hand on the homestead. He chopped and stacked wood and had been learning to hunt and process meat. He fished, caught frogs, and set traps for small game. He plucked a newly-slaughtered chicken faster than Angel, and he dug holes for garbage—the stuff that wasn't biodegradable and had to be disposed of somehow. He'd even been the one who always checked the pit (the one I'd fallen into) and the snare that sent him hanging upside down when we first got here. He made sure the traps were set properly and checked to see if anything was in them.

"Hello, Richard," Tex said, in his heavy voice. Tex had the build and look of a tough motorcycle gang member, but he was a lot less scary than he appeared. Angel, petite but stocky, nodded her greeting at Richard, her green eyes softer than her husband's.

While Richard tried to deflect the eager attention of all three dogs as they greeted him, she said, "We're just getting breakfast. Come on in."

Tex hesitated. He studied my brother. "Why'd you come back?"

I didn't think he was sorry to see Richard; I think he wanted to know what made him return when he'd run off like a scared rabbit only weeks ago. Richard sniffed and swallowed. He looked down for a moment. "I had to."

We turned towards the house. "I'll get the bucket, you go ahead," Tex offered, bending down to grab it when we reached the pump. But suddenly the dogs barked differently. They'd come alert, ears perked, and were staring hard across the field to the woods—the direction Richard had come from.

Half-hearted yaps could be ignored, or even a couple of barks by one of the animals. And sometimes the dogs barked at nothing—maybe a bird taking flight, or an animal they could sense or smell that we couldn't see. But before we could stop him, Kole was off, barking furiously, running toward the wood line. Angel grabbed Kool's collar and I got Kane's—just in time.

Tex shouted after Kole, but the dog was off like a thoroughbred at the races. Nervously, I fingered my pepper spray—danger was never far these days. Besides looters and marauders, there were foreign guerrillas on our soil to worry about. Even with Kane at my side I never went out without it. It was the only

weapon the McAllisters would trust me with until I submitted to more shooting lessons. For my own safety, they said.

I wanted to learn gun safety and how to shoot; I just couldn't find a good time to do it. Whenever Tex or Angel were ready to spend time on it with me, I had something else to do or was in the middle of something I didn't want to quit. Deep inside, I guess I didn't want to learn. If I knew how to shoot, I might have to use that knowledge. *I might have to kill someone.* I'm glad Angel and Tex have guns but I don't think I could live with myself if I had to use one on a human being. I still avoided the memory of the time I put a knife in a man's back to save Richard's life—I could hardly bear to think about it. I couldn't imagine having to deal with more such gruesome memories. So, I just kept putting off lessons.

Tex stared hard after Kole, who had disappeared into the tree line. And then we heard a shot.

"Oh, no!" Angel's voice broke with emotion. "Someone's shot Kole! I just know it!"

"Everyone to the house," Tex ordered, "Until we know what's coming!" He dropped the bucket to pull his rifle, which he often wore slung across his back, into both hands. He cocked the barrel, giving me goosebumps.

Dragging an unwilling Kane by the collar, I said, "Maybe it's just somebody hunting." I hoped this was the case. "Someone who got frightened by Kole."

"Hunting on our land!" Angel said, her face hard with grief and anger. She doubled her grip on Kool's collar. He was the smallest of the three dogs, a muscular Husky.

"We'll see," said Tex. "We don't know for sure yet that Kole's been shot. We don't know anything but let's not take chances."

As we hurried toward the house, I remembered the bucket—we'd left it there, half-filled with the morning's water. But I was spooked by that shot and no way was I going back for the bucket. Before coming to live with Tex and Angel, Richard and I had encountered ruthless marauders and worse, foreign guerrillas—I didn't want to come face to face with either.

"Sarah, you have GOT to learn to handle a firearm!" Angel scolded, as we neared the house. I felt a stab of conviction—she was right, of course. Life wasn't about doing what felt comfortable, it was about staying alive. Surviving. And learning to shoot might be the most important survival skill of all if we got overrun by a gang. Or by a truckload of those foreign soldiers.

Watching my brother ahead of me, I realized we were lucky to have Richard back—just in time—if this was going to be a battle! At least, I thought it was lucky. Until we got in the house and Tex turned suspicious eyes to my brother.

“Did you come alone?”

Richard scowled. “Of course.” Tex stared at him a moment as if trying to read his thoughts.

Angel was at the side of the window, carefully poking aside the curtain with the barrel of her rifle. “I just want to see Kole come out of those woods,” she said and bit her lip. Kane and Kool hadn’t ceased barking and ran to the windows eagerly the moment we released them in the house. Both dogs had their paws on the sill. They stopped barking only to emit mean, snarling growls, while their eyes searched the outdoor scene.

If we’d let them, they’d run out there like Kole. They were real guard dogs. But we always brought them in if we feared intruders were about lest they’d get killed or taken for food. I tried to silence thoughts that this may have been Kole’s fate. We needed our pets. In my heart, I knew it was more than just needing them. We loved them.

Suddenly Angel gasped. “It’s a group! They’re coming! And I don’t see Kole! I’m sure they shot him!”

Tex joined her at the window, his eyes narrowed. I hurried over too. We looked out past the field to the woods where Kole had disappeared. Sure enough, in the distance, a group of people had emerged from the tree line into the field. They were coming from the same direction Richard had come from. Tex turned accusing eyes to my brother.

“We’ve got company,” he said, heavily. “And something tells me you’ve been expecting them.”

Heart pounding, I realized Tex thought my brother brought this gang! I started counting them. With the fog almost gone, it looked like maybe fifteen people. They carried things—weapons!—and were definitely coming toward our cabin.

Richard came up next to me and looked out. Turning to Tex, he cried, “I didn’t know they were coming! I don’t know who they are! I didn’t bring them here!”

Tex eyed him grimly. “You’re a traitor, Richard.”

For a moment I thought Tex would send my brother out there, banish him. I mean, what else could he do, right? But his next words not only ruined that hope but sent a wave of horror down my spine.

“You’re a traitor. And traitors deserve death.”

CHAPTER TWO

SARAH

I wanted to scream, *Are you crazy? Richard is not the enemy!* But no words would come.

“I’m *not* a traitor!” Richard growled.

“He would never do that!” I finally choked out the words. Bile rose in my throat. The dogs ran from the window to the door and jumped against it, barking savagely. I told them to hush but they ignored me. I felt heart-stricken by Kole’s disappearance but having Tex suspect my brother of treachery was worse.

Tex studied the approaching gang with a grim look. He turned to Angel. “We need to lock up. This ain’t a social call.” Glancing toward my brother, he told her, “Stay with Richard while I shut things down.” To me, he said, “C’mon, Sarah! Secure that back door! Get it bolted! We’ve got no time to spare.” Richard looked poised, ready to help, but Tex told him, “You just stay put with Angel here. While I decide what to do with you.”

“I could be helping!”

Biting her lip, Angel watched my brother but her face and eyes were sympathetic. It was just how I felt. I shot him a look that I hoped told him so as I passed. Richard’s face glowered. He was slumped in the chair as if he’d given up trying to reason with Tex. But as I hurried towards the back I heard him say, “You’re just gonna sit here and wait for them to reach us?”

Then, Angel’s voice: “We can lock this place up really good. What would you have us do?”

“Fight!” my brother said. “Start on ‘em, now, before they get here! Let them know we’re not just sitting here waiting to go down!”

I heard Tex closing shutters in the master bedroom as I reached the door. They weren’t shutters at all really, but special steel sheets which could be manually lowered by a crank to cover the window completely in a steel shell.

The cranks were folded inside small recesses in the walls, so I hadn’t noticed them right away when Richard and I first got to the cabin. But like other preparations Tex and Angel had in place, the window coverings were sheer genius.

In fact, I now knew about all the defenses they’d built into the cabin; things that made it extra secure against threats like this approaching band. Things that weren’t visible to the eye at first but which I’d discovered over time or been shown by Angel. So instead of the normal log cabin I thought it was (albeit one with a great deal of nifty survival gear) now I knew there was nothing normal about it. It was a specially crafted survival home—and we were about to find out if the extra defenses were going to keep us alive!

I found the back door locked as it was supposed to be. We kept it that way so we didn't have to worry about anyone entering without an invitation. So all I had to do was slide the bars across it and lock them into place to secure it further. From the outside, it looked like a regular wooden door but it was reinforced with rebar in the wood, extra-large steel screws in the frame, and with seven steel bars across it, there was no way it would be breached.

The cabin had other built-in defenses, too. The logs of the walls were also reinforced with steel bars and metal wiring. As I said, brilliant. But I'd never seen the cabin in full lock-down before and with each steel shade that Tex lowered, the interior grew darker. It felt like we were getting sealed up in a tin of sardines. Yet, despite a mild sense of claustrophobia, I felt reassured—especially when Angel lit a battery-powered lamp so we could see better.

I was struggling to lower the shade over the storage room window when Tex joined me and finished the job. I started to apologize for needing his help, but he said, with a wink, “The crank is meant to work without electricity—not without muscle.”

As we returned to the main living area, Richard asked, “If you close up every window, how are you gonna know what they're doing out there?”

Tex, ignoring him, proceeded to lower the last metal shade over the window that faced the on-comers but stopped when it was halfway down. Daylight—our last connection to the outside world—filtered through. He turned to my brother. “If they want to talk, I'm listening. If they shoot, I'll lower that shade and we'll be like snug bugs in a rug.”

“But blind as bats!” Richard said.

Angel and I stood by tensely.

“Are you worried about your friends out there?” Tex asked.

Richard, sighing, shook his head. “I don't know those people! I don't know anybody out there!”

Tex, standing to one side of the window, peered out carefully. “Maybe we should send you out there and find out.”

“No!” I shouted.

Tex eyed me with regret. “I'm sorry, Sarah, but you know yourself these people came on his heels.” He stared outside for a moment. “Looks like about twenty of them.” To Angel, he added, “This may be too many for us, even with our precautions in place. Get ready for Plan B. But first—” He looked at Richard. “You betrayed us.”

Angel, wide-eyed, scurried to the kitchen. “Plan B—already?” she asked, as if not wanting to believe it. She grabbed an insulated cooler that we used when

gathering garden produce and shoved it at me. “Empty whatever you can from the icebox into this, quickly.”

Richard, frowning, said, “If you were smart, you’d be taking shots at them by now! *Why* are you letting them get close?” Angel and Tex ignored him.

Angel asked, “You really think we need Plan B? They can’t get in, hon! That was the idea, wasn’t it? Being able to stay up here as long as possible, even through an attack?” Her face twisted as she pleaded.

My eyes met Richard’s. I knew he was wondering about this mysterious “Plan B.” Neither of us had been trusted with that information but I was highly curious. I began doing as Angel said, filling the insulated tote, but I found myself moving slowly. It didn’t make sense to me to stop and pack a bag; it felt useless. Sure, food was precious, but how could we carry it? And where did Angel think we could run to? It seemed stupidly time-consuming if what we needed to do was run. Tex, meanwhile, was looking back and forth from the oncoming mob to my brother, his eyes creased with concern.

“I didn’t betray you; I swear! I’m telling you to start picking them off! Would I do that if I was their friend?”

Tex answered slowly. “I don’t know what you do to your friends, Richard. That’s the problem right now, isn’t it?”

“THEY are the problem!” Richard said, nodding his head towards the outdoors. “You need to start shooting! Now, before they get close!”

I took a quick peek to see how far they were and saw—no one! “They’re gone!” I cried, in relief.

“They’re not gone, they’ve dropped down. They’re crouching and crawling towards us,” Angel said, sardonically. She’d been periodically watching their progress while stuffing kitchen supplies in a huge duffel bag. At the window, the dogs whimpered because the gang had gone out of sight. They ran to the door, sniffing intently along the bottom and side to keep the scent. Low, guttural growls came from their throats. Tex set his rifle down, letting it rest against his leg, and pulled out a smaller gun from a waist holster. I watched in mute horror as he pointed it at Richard!

“I didn’t betray you!”

“I think you did, Richard. But that’s not why I’m doing this. I’d settle for banishing you for treachery—but I don’t dare open the door now. And I can’t let you see what we do next. Our backup plan has got to stay secret—from that crowd.” He nodded back towards the approaching gang.

“I didn’t bring them! I came back alone! I even checked to make sure no one was on me!”

“How do you explain that?” Tex asked angrily, jerking his head towards the intruders. “They came right on your tail.”

“I didn’t bring them!” he insisted. “I was running FROM them!”

Tex sighed heavily. “You ran them right to us.”

Richard looked bewildered. His face fell. “I didn’t mean to,” he said, quietly.

My heart went out for my brother. He’d tried to be careful, but unwittingly had led them to our homestead! Surely Tex would understand he hadn’t meant to!

“Fine. Go on; do it,” Richard said, grimly, eyeing Tex’s handgun. I gasped. My heart flew to my throat.

“I didn’t mean to bring them, but I guess I did.”

“No!” I shouted. “He didn’t bring them! It was just”—I groped for words. “Bad luck!”

“I don’t believe in luck, good or bad,” Tex said. He was staring at my brother, never taking his eyes off his face.

“You may as well let him shoot me,” Richard said to me. “We’re dead anyway, by the looks of it. Because we should be picking them off right now but we’re all sitting here like zombies doing nothing.”

“No!” I cried again, looking from my brother to Tex, while all the agony I felt sent hot blood to my face. My heart pounded in my ears and suddenly I was the old Sarah, the one who fainted when things got horrible. I sat quickly and put my head down, taking deep breaths. How could Tex be willing to shoot my brother? I knew it wasn’t something he wanted to do, but if push came to shove, Tex did what needed doing. I prayed he would realize this was *not* one of those things.

Angel touched my arm gently. She said to Tex, in a coaxing tone, “C’mon, hon, leave him be. Richard didn’t mean to lead anyone here.” My brother looked into her face, and I saw something in his eyes waver, as though a sliver of hardness fell away. Sudden hope filled my heart—Angel believed Richard.

I raised my head and stared imploringly at Tex. “He would never lead a mob to you—or to me,” I said. Hardly realizing it, I was clenching my fists.

Tex stared at Richard—I found out later he was praying silently, asking God to tell him what to do!

Suddenly from outside the eerie sounds of hoots and hollers and whoops descended on us. They were bone-chilling sounds, battle cries! We were like pioneers facing savage Indians on the warpath. I was grateful for the extra defenses of the cabin, but it spooked me that Tex didn’t seem to put much stock in them. He was ready to move to his mysterious Plan B.

“Sarah, you’re wasting time!” Angel scolded, turning on me. “You should have emptied that icebox by now!”

“I need to know he’s not going to shoot my brother!”

“Instead of worrying about me, you could have been taking down *that* crowd,” Richard, said, nodding towards the howling intruders. “We could have wiped them out by now!”

And then, while Angel and I looked imploringly at Tex, he nodded at Richard, while returning his pistol to its holster. “Okay,” he said. He turned his gaze to Angel as if his next words were for her benefit. “We’ll take your word for it, Richard.”

His slow, heavy voice never sounded sweeter! I had an urge to run over and hug him. Instead, I took a shuddering breath deep with relief and went back to stuffing supplies into the insulated tote bag. Richard sprang into action. He fell to his knees and pulled out one of the AR-15s Tex and Angel kept beneath the furniture, and then, scrambling to his feet, rushed toward the window.

“What’re you doing?” Tex asked him, his face creased in concern.

Richard gritted his teeth. “Defending this place!” And in the next second, he’d sent a shot out, and then another and another. My ears ached, my heart raced, but I kept grabbing supplies. I filled the insulated tote and grabbed a box, filling it with blankets, an axe, oil lamps, anything that I deemed useful, though I had no clue how we’d actually manage to bring it all if we did end up following a backup plan.

Angel dropped to her knees in front of the bookshelf and pulled out another AR. “I’ll get all the guns.” She pulled a few more rifles from hiding places, as I half-watched and half-worked, hardly knowing what all I threw into the tote.

The dogs threw themselves at the door, barking viciously. And then a burst of gunfire blasted through the half-open window, sending shards splintering into the room. Tex rushed over to the right of the window, even as the barrage continued. Angel and I fell to the floor. As I lay there helplessly covering my ears with my hands, I knew what it meant to have your heart in your throat. I literally could not swallow.

Richard fired until he’d emptied the magazine of his rifle. Looking around, he threw it aside and grabbed one that Angel had dragged out, checked that it was loaded, and sent more shots out the window. He’d become well versed in using guns—unlike me—since he had practiced often.

I was unable to do anything now except lay there in frozen terror and misery, my head exploding from the noise. My few shooting lessons had been with a small-caliber pistol—outdoors. Here inside, the AR was deafening, going through my whole being.

Angel nudged me and put something in my hands. “Put them on,” she said. “It’ll help.” I looked down and saw two small orange foamy things. Earplugs. I stuffed them in as firmly as I could.

Tex had been trying, between dodging bullets and returning fire, to lower the metal shade. Outside, the awful cries and whoops continued, seeming to circle the house now, though I couldn’t be sure. My throat tightened again. It seemed certain than ever that we’d never be able to escape the cabin and go to any backup plan! They had us surrounded! Why hadn’t Tex and Angel realized this would happen? How had they expected to escape?

Richard said, “If you close that up, we can’t fight back.”

“I don’t want to fight back if I don’t have to,” said Tex. “I just want to keep us safe.” But even as he spoke more gunfire sounded, hitting the walls of the cabin and the door.

“Tex!” screamed Angel. “Move away from there!” He moved aside slightly, still determined to lower the metal. I saw a splotch of red appear on his side. He’d been shot!

As he struggled with the crank, we realized the sheet was not going down.

“Look, it’s damaged!” Richard cried, pointing with the barrel of his rifle to a bubble in the metal right near the side groove. It was a warp caused by a single bullet, but it was enough to prevent the sheet from going down. Meanwhile, their shooting continued. A picture on the wall behind me lurched and fell with a crash.

“That settles it!” Tex said. “Time for Plan B.”

“This window is only one opening!” cried Richard. “We can use it against them.”

“I say we run,” said Tex. “We were supposed to be safe here—heck, invulnerable, with every opening fortified. This is a break in our defenses and that’s all an enemy needs—one opening, one weakness.”

“But it’s also a strategic advantage for us—it gives us a way to fight back instead of just sitting in here and doing nothing!” Richard cried. “We shouldn’t run without a fight!”

I thought my brother was heroic at that moment considering he was already battle weary and exhausted even before this attack. He’d come home grimy and tired, and yet here he was, his eyes blazing with conviction, championing a fight. I felt proud of him—even though I liked Tex’s idea, too—of sealing up the cabin and hunkering down in safety while chaos raged out there. But much as I detested the noise and cringed at the danger, I too believed fighting was our best hope. After all, Plan B was doomed. It had to be. I couldn’t understand how Tex

and Angel could be foolish enough to think we could possibly escape—they were so smart about everything else!

Tex eyed Richard. “My plan was to rely on our defenses when the time came to do so. But when I see what’s out there—and this weak spot—this opening—I can’t do it. I need Angel safe.” Tex’s eyes were usually either sparkling with humor or absolutely unreadable. But as he spoke now, he swallowed, and his eyes revealed a turmoil I’d not seen in him before. When Angel’s life was on the line, it brought out his heart, loud and clear.

“We’ve got *great* defenses everywhere else!” Richard cried. “The four of us can defend this one window! No one is gonna get over that windowsill alive!”

“You think we have a chance against a horde like that? They’ve got axes and hammers—they’re gonna tear this place apart!”

“We’ve got cover. They don’t,” Richard said. “Are there any hidden traps around the property?”

“They got past the traps—thanks to you,” Tex answered, heavily.

“No, not the ones out there, I mean closer traps—ones I don’t know about. Don’t you have any close to the cabin?”

“No, they’d endanger the dogs! But look—all that crowd needs to do is throw in a few burning torches—or tear gas—and we’re sunk. We’ll be overrun in minutes.”

“If they had tear gas, they would’ve used it already,” said Richard. “But what have you got besides rifles? We need something like...grenades.”

Tex shook his head. “We’re not like them out there,” he nodded towards the outside. “We didn’t plan on ways to hurt people. Just ways to stay safe. If you notice, we caught you and Sarah by trapping you—not harming you.” He looked at his wife. “What do you say, darlin’? Do we run—or keep fighting?”

Angel frowned. She glanced from Richard to Tex and back again. “I agree with Richard,” she said. “I think we should fight. Then if we *have* to, we’ll go to Plan B.”

That settled it for Tex, who started issuing orders. “Drag all that stuff down the hallway,” he told Richard, motioning at the duffel bags and other totes that Angel and I had filled.

“Just leave them in the hall?” Richard asked, surprised.

“Yes!” Tex’s voice was sharp. “And hurry! If we’re gonna do this—defy this invasion—we need to get at it!”

I watched Richard hurry the bags down the hallway. Now and then I’d seen Angel pile things up there, things that later disappeared but didn’t end up in the storage room. I figured it all went to the *mystery* storage area—the one Angel hadn’t let me see yet. But how could we take that stuff anywhere now? With

marauders circling the place! And why bother bringing it to the hallway at all? If we did eventually have to make a run for it, baggage would only slow us down.

Angel had leashed the dogs after the window shattered, circling the leashes around a wooden post away from the broken glass. They submitted with surprising docility to being leashed. I sensed they were tired from all the excitement since their fierce barks had degenerated into occasional shrill yaps, though they kept up a stream of suspicious snarls, eyes glued to whichever direction the outside noises came from.

Tex and Richard overturned the coffee table and lined the sofa cushions against it. The four of us crouched behind this like soldiers in a trench, guns at the ready—except for me, since I don't shoot.

Angel spotted the blood on Tex's shirt and gasped. "You've been shot!" She dropped her rifle to take a better look, but Tex gently removed her hand.

"It's just a flesh wound," he said. "Glass got me, not a bullet." Then he turned to me. "Sarah, you need to be armed, dumpling."

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. Angel took a handgun out of a side holster and handed it to me. "We're gonna need you, Sarah."

"I—I've only had a few lessons," I said, weakly.

She placed the heavy pistol in my hand. "Just aim and shoot when you need to," she said, quietly. "It's already chambered. Remember what we taught you—when a bullet's chambered, it's ready. Don't aim it until you're gonna use it and *don't* put your finger on the trigger until you're gonna shoot."

"Here they are!" Richard cried.

The gang of marauders appeared, descending upon the cabin with hoots and shouts that made my blood curdle. I held up the gun with a sense of unreality. How could this be happening? It couldn't be, because I, Sarah Weaver, did not take part in real battles. Sarah Weaver was an anxious, fear-filled teenager with enough insecurities for ten girls. I was the one to have panic attacks when alone; the one who'd been taking anti-depressants for two years—until the pulse stopped that. But I took the pistol, heart pounding in my parched throat.

I saw a dark figure approaching through the jagged window. Brief blurs rushed past as the hoots and shouts picked up. Tex and Richard were taking shots, deafening blasts that made me wince despite the earplugs. Then we heard whacks at the doors—axes hitting the wood from both the front and back of the cabin! Tex said, "That ain't gonna work; they'll hit rebar. And we got three-inch screws in those joints. Nothing's gonna break those doors in."

His words did not remove my fear or the pounding of my heart. But as I raised the cold metal gun with shaking hands, I knew: This was reality now. This was

life, and there was no room for the old Sarah. I could not allow myself to crumble in weakness or fear.

“Can we pray?” I gasped.

“I *am* praying,” breathed Angel.

Richard looked at me. I felt myself blush, knowing how he scoffed at God and prayer. To my surprise, he nodded and then said words that amazed me.

“I’m praying, too.”

CHAPTER THREE

SARAH

The four of us remained hunkered down behind our makeshift protection while Angel prayed aloud.

“Amen,” I said, afterward, followed by Tex, and then—to my delight—by Richard! My heart glowed with the thought that for some reason, though he’d had to return to us beaten, admitting defeat—his attitude to the Lord had somehow softened. I couldn’t wait to hear his story but right now the unnerving sounds of axes and hammers—or whatever they were using—pounding the walls and doors made it hard to think of anything except what was happening outside. My whole body seemed to throb with each whack.

Suddenly we heard more metallic thuds instead of the sharp whacks or sounds of wood splintering.

“They’re hitting the rebar,” said Tex.

Around the windows we also heard whacks and thuds—they were trying every possible opening to get inside. At least the gunfire had ceased. When I asked why they weren’t shooting, Tex said, “I don’t think they have bullets to spare—that’s good news for us.” Then, after another minute of waiting, he said, “I’ve got an idea.” He rose cautiously and disappeared down the hallway.

I peeked above the top edge of the table and saw, from time to time, an intruder rush past. Each one looked fierce, holding some kind of weapon such as an axe or shovel, and with faces painted in camo or black. They held things I didn’t recognize too. Whenever a blur rushed past, Richard sent shots out after it.

“They’ve got men down,” he said. He quickly drew the mag from his rifle and pulled another from a side pocket and shoved it into place. “Maybe they’ll start to have second thoughts.” There were whacks still coming against the wall between the window and door. Peering outside carefully from beside the window, Richard suddenly stuck out his head and let loose with the gun, aiming right toward whoever was out there against the house.

He took three shots and then hurried to pull himself in again. To my horror, I saw he had just dodged being hit by a heavy axe which whammed down on the windowsill where it became lodged. I’d been frozen in position, still holding the gun. It never even occurred to me to pull the trigger when I saw that figure. My head and my hands were miles apart. But Angel was also in firing position, and no sooner had Richard pulled himself out of the way than she took her shot, dropping the would-be assassin with a thud.

The axe remained eerily in the wood. I heard women’s voices shouting, which surprised me. Somehow, the idea of murderous marauders had always been of men. But it wasn’t just men—there were women in this raiding party, too! A sickening feeling grew in the pit of my stomach.

While I stood there reflecting, Richard called to Angel for another mag. Suddenly the axe in the window moved—someone grabbed it! Angel rushed forward, her face grim and determined. When she took her shot, I wasn't surprised to see the axe handle sway unsteadily for a moment—and then fall.

“Good shot,” Richard said, nodding at Angel. She looked disturbed. I could tell she hated having to shoot someone.

Tex finally returned holding a bullhorn in one hand. He stopped by Angel. “Maybe I can talk some sense into these people,” he said.

Richard shook his head. “They're losing men and they're still coming at us. Your bullhorn isn't going to stop them.”

Ignoring him, Tex went beside the window, peering out as best he could. Richard went over to the door, listening intently to the sounds of hacking that were still coming from outside. He raised his gun and aimed—at the door.

“You could hit rebar,” said Tex, “and have that bullet bounce right back at you.”

Richard said, “No. Look.” He nodded at the door, where the head of an axe was just beginning to splinter through. When it was pulled out for the next whack, Richard aimed right at that small opening and sent two bullets out in quick succession. The axe didn't reappear.

Tex nodded, but he said, “Cease fire for now. I'm gonna try and reason with them.”

Richard sniffed and drew back. Tex turned to us. “Stay behind the table there in case they start firing again.” Turning back to the window but keeping to the side, he pointed the bullhorn out.

Attention! Stop your assault! You have lost men and will continue to lose more. This structure is reinforced with steel—you will not be able to take it down.

I liked how his voice took on extra authority through the bullhorn. Tex had a powerful voice to begin with. It may have been hiding a big heart, but most people would never know it. Through the bullhorn, he sounded formidable.

Be aware, Tex continued, we are prepared to use chemical weapons that will wipe you out. If you do not cease and desist, we WILL use these weapons! He paused. We heard nothing in response, so he added, Turn around and go back the way you came, NOW. He waited two beats and added, You will have NO survivors!

Turning to us he said quietly, “If this don't work, we're bailing out of here.”

“You mean give up?” Richard asked. “I thought we agreed not to give up—we can fight!” He paused. “And there's no way we can get away from here—they've got us surrounded by now or they're idiots.”

“If they keep hacking at these walls, rebar or not, they will get through,” said Tex. “We are not impregnable.”

“If they hack at the walls, we shoot them through the walls.”

“That sounds good, Richard, but if they breach a wall, get inside, we are bound to get hurt—or killed. I can’t have that.”

I had a horrible thought. “What if they burn us down?” I’d never forget the somber memory of how Richard and I had been burned out of a wonderful, food-rich home. Before that, we’d been burned out of our apartment—right after the pulse happened—and then out of that well-supplied house, which was like a sanctuary. The burning of homes and businesses seemed to be the new order of the day. That last house had been filled with stored food and other supplies—things marauders would want—but foreign soldiers had heartlessly burned it. This band wasn’t military but what if they resorted to the same tactic? No amount of steel-reinforced walls could save us, then. We were so packaged up inside this place that we’d burn right down with the house. We were trapped like rats.

Angel had been watching through the window. “Wait a minute, I think they’re leaving!” she hissed.

I glanced outside. “They are!” I counted ten people walking quickly away from the cabin, back the way they’d come. Only a small circle of them remained, two men and a woman wearing a green knit hat. They stood, glancing back and forth at us, conferring. I wondered why anyone would wear a hat in late June but had no time to think about it further because Tex’s voice boomed out again.

You have been warned! You have ten seconds to retreat! This chemical agent will rapidly cause death! He started a countdown. *Ten! Nine! Eight!...*

The circle of marauders glanced at us but continued their little pow-wow. One man seemed to be the leader, as he was doing the talking. I felt breathless with anxiety as we waited to see if Tex’s bluff would work. What if they didn’t buy it? What if they set fire to us? Could we really fall back on their Plan B? What sort of plan could possibly help us out of such a jam?

Five. Four.

The leader gave a mock salute. And then, right before our eyes, they started away, back toward the woods, the way they’d come. Angel peeped, “Praise God!”

But I froze in a stupor of confusion and sorrow. That man’s salute—it was exactly the gesture my dad used to give me when I argued a point with him successfully. Most of the time I didn’t win an argument with either of my parents, but if I had a really good point—such as why the family should make a certain purchase or not go on a particular vacation—my dad would concede defeat with a mock salute. In the past, it made me or Richard smile—it conveyed

a measure of respect, even if only a small measure. Now, the gesture filled me with a stab of grief. If only that stupid man hadn't done that! It made me think of my father and remember, with a hollow ache, that I missed him terribly.

Richard touched my arm. He'd seen the salute, too. "It's okay," he said, as I blinked tearfully at him. "Don't let it get to you. It's just a coincidence."

"Don't worry, Sarah, they're *leaving!*" Angel repeated, not understanding what upset me. I heard Tex give out a big sigh—he was as relieved as any of us. But then, while we watched, three men appeared from around back.

Three! Two! Tex resumed his count. I noticed I was covered in a cold sweat. Was I about to have a panic attack? After months without one—the worst months of my life and with more reason to panic than ever—I'd stopped having attacks. But right now, I felt one coming on. I wasn't really surprised. Even though I was no longer that old Sarah, the new me couldn't handle this! *A real battle, with real guns and people dying—and an eerie reminder of my father!*

As the men argued, Tex barked out, *ONE! Your time is up!* I held my breath as we watched. And then, oh, the relief, as the stragglers, the last of them, turned tail and took off running. The leader and the woman in the hat had lingered, waiting for these last few men, motioning for them to follow the others. They now joined the line of retreat, the woman in the rear.

"Thank God!" I said. My hands and head were clammy, and my stomach, queasy. But they turned back! And they didn't burn us down. And we didn't have to resort to the mysterious Plan B. We were alive and well.

Except, perhaps, for Kole.

I pulled out my earplugs and glanced at Richard. I tried to give him a smile but knew it wavered. I wanted to curl up and cry tears of relief, really. But suddenly a shot, so close and loud and unexpected that I gasped and fell, shattered that small window of relief. It was Angel! For a moment I could only gape, scowling at her in shock, while my ears rang. She, in turn, was frozen in shooting position, her rifle still pointed out, poised as if to shoot again. She had a look on her face like I'd never seen before. And then she seemed shaken, blinking back tears.

Tex stared at her in consternation, and then back out the window. "Hon! They were retreating! And you hit a woman!"

"Why'd you shoot?" I cried.

While we watched, the leader and another man turned back, holding their hands up in a gesture of surrender. They bent over the fallen figure. In a moment they lifted her to a sitting position and then the second man hauled her up and over his shoulder. The leader stared back at us scowling, it seemed to me. I didn't

blame him—Angel had gone against Tex’s word. Even though they were retreating, she’d shot one of them.

Angel wiped away a tear. “That woman was wearing Doris’s hat! That means they’ve killed Doris! She would never give up that hat willingly!” I’d met Doris and her husband Tim, old friends of the McAllisters. They were the nearest neighbors to the right, after a quarter mile of woods. They were not as prepared as the McAllisters with defenses but had stored a lot of beans and rice and other food. They knew how to bypass the traps and reach the cabin safely but hadn’t been by lately. Angel had expressed concern about them since we hadn’t seen them for a couple of weeks.

“I’ll bet they cleaned them out and that’s why they came to us, now!” she cried, still wiping a tear from her face.

“No, hon; they followed Richard here.”

“That was Doris’s hat!” Angel insisted. “I just know she’s been killed!” Her voice broke, and Tex put an arm around her. The four of us continued to stare out, watching as the last of the marauders disappeared into the woods.

Tex pulled Angel into an embrace. “We’ll check on Doris and Tim when it’s safe.” He paused. “Let’s just hope this band suffered enough here not to come back.”

Richard stared silently out at the now empty field. “They didn’t suffer enough.” He shook his head. “We should have wiped them out before they even got close.”



Angel came to us tearfully that night, holding her Bible against her chest. “I’m sorry I shot that woman,” she said. “It’s God’s job to get revenge, not mine. I shouldn’t have done it—that hat just made me sure they’d killed Doris!” She shook her head, and a few tears ran silently down her face.

“How do you know it was Doris’s hat?” I asked.

Angel looked at me with somber, tortured eyes. “Why would anyone be wearing a hat now, in June, unless they just got it?” She paused. “Besides, I can tell it’s Doris’s.” She shut her eyes, holding back tears. “I made her that hat.”

“Well, you didn’t kill her,” I said, trying to help. “I saw her moving when they picked her up.”

Angel shook her head. “Injuring her might be even worse. They can’t exactly take her to the nearest hospital! I’ve made them mad.”

After a heavy pause, she added, “Now they’ll want revenge—and it’s my fault.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SARAH

We took turns keeping watch, staying in the house for the rest of the day except for a tense hour while Tex and Richard checked to see if we had any chickens left. The barn had been locked but was broken into. It worried Tex that the marauders had seen Daisy the mule.

“She was loose,” he said, “which means they tried to take her. I scratched behind her ears and sweet-talked her; got her tied up again.” He looked at us. “Thank God she’s ‘stubborn as a mule,’ and won’t go with a stranger—or we’d have lost her.”

We were all glad Daisy was still with us. But Tex figures that gang wasn’t starving—or they’d have killed her for meat. Maybe they still planned on returning to do that.

Out of all our chickens, only three were found. Two were missed by the marauders because they’d been foraging in dense shrubs behind the cabin, and one was on top of the coop. Angel was downcast about losing the rest. Eggs were an important part of our diets and, unless we found a rooster somewhere, the three hens would eventually stop laying and we’d be out of luck.

It was hard to see Angel, who was mostly a happy person, walking around with a frown. She’d come through the EMP—which meant the loss of so much like electricity, transportation, communication, and technology—without losing her customary optimism. But somehow the attack on the cabin had chipped it away. Kole hadn’t returned and the loss of the chickens, the damage to the house and the close call we’d had with marauders—plus that Doris and Tim were likely dead—were all taking their toll. I told her how sorry I was. She looked surprised for a moment and then searched my face.

“It’s O.K., Sarah. I’ll bounce back.” Her smile was sad. “I always do. I just need to get alone with God for a while. The Lord has a way of changing my perspective about things.” She took a deep breath. “And I’m thankful, really, that we’re alive.”

Towards evening we spotted a new black plume in the sky in the north. Tex estimated the fire was within a mile or two of us. That made me nervous because I had to wonder if those foreign soldiers were in the area. Like the ones that burned up the last house Richard and I stayed in. But Tex thinks the fire is a sign of that gang who attacked us, still in the vicinity.

Anyway, Tex and Richard moved the three last chickens and their nesting boxes into the back storage room of the cabin. Tex said they’d build a shed right up against the house for the animals so it would be easy to take them inside in the future.

“Bring the mule in the *house*?” I asked.

“Only when we have to.” He chuckled at my astonishment. “You know, in Jesus’s day, the residents of a house slept in the upper floor and the roof—while the ground level was for animals, to keep ‘em safe from thieves at night. Looks like we need to go back to first century practices to keep our animals safe. But see, it ain’t that unusual.”

“It will be, for you,” I said. “You don’t have a second floor. I’m used to barn smells from sleeping in the loft—so is Richard. But I think you’ll have some adjusting to do.”

Angel smiled. “I can do that. It’ll be worth it to keep our last livestock.”

“In the meantime,” said Tex, “we’ll only let them out where it’s fenced.” We had a large fenced-in area behind and to one side of the cabin that was primarily “dog domain,” a place for them to be outdoors without us worrying about them taking off. That reminded us of Kole, who had not returned.

Tex looked at Angel. “I’ll take a look for Kole tomorrow.”

She shook her head. “No, you won’t. If he’s alive, he’ll come back. If he’s not—there’s no sense risking your neck.”

“We’re going out to lay new traps, so I’ll just keep a look for him while we’re out there.”

I hope Kole is alive! Even though the cabin is more crowded than ever with chickens in the storage room, and the hallway crammed with boxes and totes we moved to make space for them. I’d been sleeping on the sofa at night since Richard left—and now I was gladder than ever about that. The cabin withstood the attack, but the barn hadn’t. The industrial, heavy-duty lock on the barn door had held despite being tampered with, but they’d got in anyway, by hacking a big hole right through a wall. I wouldn’t feel safe out there anymore.

Now I’d be sharing the front room with Richard, I supposed, because he wouldn’t be safe in the barn, either. I’d always found it strange that the cabin had only one bedroom. I once asked Angel why they didn’t have at least two and she said the cabin was built as a “getaway” house, not a place to entertain friends or family. Angel and Tex had lived elsewhere before the pulse. I tried to get her to talk about it, their home, and where they’d come from, but all I got was an impression. The impression was that they’d had plenty of money, more than one home, and had built this safe house “just in case.”

When the EMP took down the grid, that “just in case” became home.

The totes from the storage room remained in the hallway, which looked like a loading dock. It still defied reason to me, because I saw no means of ever getting all that stuff away from the house if we had to make a run for it. But I did get a chance to read labels I’d never seen before such as, “Work Gloves, Cleaning Supplies, Extra Socks.” Others were full of things I did know about, like tissues

and toilet paper and napkins—precious as gold now that stores weren't around. The totes were wonderfully reassuring because their contents made the difference between feeling like primitive campers or comfortable ones. But what if we had to leave the cabin? We'd be on the run again! I dreaded the thought.

We'd had to survive, Richard and I, for months without paper goods or any new supplies, without decent food or enough water. It was blissful not to live like that anymore. I admired the McAllisters for their foresight—but I wished I knew how their “Plan B” could help us keep it all.

While Richard and the dogs kept watch, Tex hauled in some water—using a plastic bucket because our steel one had vanished, and Angel began to prepare a simple supper of beans and rice. I set the table. We were all trying to pretend things were normal, but nothing felt normal.

As if reading my mind, Tex said, “We'll get the critters into a new shed as soon as possible and move you and Richard into that room.” He paused. “For tonight, you'll both have to make do in the front room here.”

Richard had grabbed everything remaining of our meager belongings from the loft, but I'd already moved my important stuff into my backpack, which I always kept near me. Even before the attack, I was still in an “apocalypse mentality” you might say, and I wore my backpack if I went anywhere on the property. In addition to its holding my two-way, I just felt like every little thing was precious. I didn't want to risk losing anything.

It had grown heavy, and Angel admonished me more than once that I wasted energy carrying it all around when I already had so much work to do. But I wanted all of it—my water bottles, granola bars, tissues, flashlight, extra batteries, pepper spray, needle and thread, scissors, band-aids, antibiotic lotion, my journal, a pen and a pencil, a ponytail holder, nail clipper, matches, and floss. The floss was for fishing line but now and then I couldn't resist the urge to clean my teeth. I have a toothbrush that I keep in the cabin (thanks to Angel) but on those rare occasions when I floss—ah!

Richard still had things in the barn that he hadn't taken with him when he left us—an extra shirt and socks, and I don't know what else but it was all there. The marauders hadn't bothered with the loft, probably because most held nothing but hay.

Tex spent more than an hour trying to flatten the bubble in the metal shade that hadn't worked during the attack. He couldn't seem to get it flat enough, or something else was preventing it from working. Finally, he nailed some boards across the opening. “Tomorrow,” he said to Richard, “we brick up this window.”

“Oh, hon, that'll make it so dark in here!” cried Angel. “We'll have to use up more candles and batteries just to see what we're doing.”

“Dark and safe,” he said. But he nodded towards Richard, and we saw that my brother had fallen asleep at the table. He hadn’t even made it over to the corner of the room where we laid his sleeping bag. His head was on his arms, his face to one side, and he was sleeping like a baby.

“He’s exhausted,” said Angel, softly. “Think about it—he got home this morning in bad shape and then he fought with us and went out with you to the barn—my goodness, he probably needs a week of sleep to catch up.”

“Well, he can’t sleep for a week,” said Tex. “He can’t sleep more than a night. I’ll need his help tomorrow. We’ve got repairs to make, and that shed to build.” He paused, took a sip of water, and added, “Besides rigging up a whole lot of new traps. I don’t trust that bunch to stay gone for long. Not when they got all those chickens here and saw the mule.”



By the next morning I felt less imperiled—daylight does wonderful things for even the worst problems—but we stayed on “red alert,” watching and listening for signs of intruders. After breakfast, we finally got to hear Richard’s tale of woe. I wanted to know everything.

“So what happened out there to make you come back to *us*?” Tex said, as though he understood it could not have been Richard’s ideal course of action. We all knew he’d high-tailed it out of here as if he couldn’t wait to get away from all the “God talk.”

Angel and I were clearing dishes to soak in the sink, but we went to the table to listen. Tex had tried to get the story before we ate but Angel had clucked her tongue and said, “I want to hear, too, but Richard needs to eat, first, hon.”

Richard nodded at her. “Thanks.”

“You’re still not lookin’ too good,” she told him cheerfully. She served us fried eggs and corn cakes in a cast iron griddle still smoking from the woodstove—making the room “hot as Hades,” as Tex said; but we all ate like people starving, Richard especially.

Afterward, he told his story. He’d gone away to get to our aunt’s farm—that much we knew already. He said he not only wanted to see if Aunt Susan was still alive but to find out if by some chance our father had made his way there. He needed to know—he admitted a little sheepishly—if there was another place where he and I could live.

Angel surveyed him sadly. “You didn’t even say goodbye.” I realized I wasn’t the only one who felt abandoned. Richard and I needed the McAllisters a heck of

a lot more than they needed us, but I was glad to see that Angel had come to care for my brother.

Richard was silent a moment, eyeing her with surprise. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“He didn’t say goodbye to me, either,” I piped in, hoping to make her feel better. I gave Richard a brief scowl to show I resented that.

Tex said, “Go on.”

Richard took a deep breath. “Going was slow. Gangs just popped up out of the blue. One minute I’d think I was alone and then in the next, I’d be running for my life. I didn’t take much food with me and I ran out fast. That wouldn’t have stopped me, but I knew the trek was getting longer each time I had to detour to avoid a gang—or once, even a couple of army trucks.”

“United States Army?” Angel asked, hopefully.

Richard shook his head. “I don’t think so. I had to duck out of sight so I couldn’t really watch. But Sarah and I saw lots of those trucks in the past and I don’t think they’re good news.”

We’d already told them about the refugee camps, so they nodded, but Angel said, “Oh,” with disappointment in her voice.

“So, anyway, I had to keep leaving the roads in order not to be seen, and walking at night wasn’t helping—seems like there’s a lot of activity now at night. People are using torches as well as flashlights, and I kept finding myself in the middle of scratchy bushes or marshy ground to get away from them. And the bugs! They were eating me alive.”

It was true. He had red bumps everywhere. “I’m good at dodging,” Richard continued. “Most of the time no one ever knew when I was near.” He sounded proud of that fact even though he’d come back with a gang at his heels.

“Evidently this last time I was wrong—I guess they were on me. But I swear I didn’t know, I thought I’d lost them. Usually, they stick together and aren’t stealthy so I would have heard them following. I don’t know how they did it without my hearing them.”

“Probably had a tracker. So most of them would have hung back far enough for you not to hear,” Tex said. He took a gulp of coffee. I shuddered for Richard, recalling not only the gangs of marauders we’d seen before coming to the McAllisters’, but also at the memory of the garish, painted faces. I was soooo glad they hadn’t caught my brother—even if he had led them here while they tried.

“Why would they follow him?” I asked. “They didn’t know he’d lead them to a homestead with supplies.”

No one had an answer to that.

“What else are people up to?” Tex asked.

Richard took a deep breath and shook his head. “The ones in the camps just mill around a lot or stay in their tents. The ones on the road seem to be on the move like I was. Moving in camps, heading south from what I could tell.” He paused, thinking. “I wanted to join one.” His voice fell as he remembered. “They were heading west, mostly men. I only saw a few kids and women.” He glanced pointedly at me and Angel. “I don’t know if the women stay put while the men look for food and supplies—or if fewer of them survived.” He looked at Angel as if she might solve the riddle. “But since there were a lot more men than women, I figured they wouldn’t want any more.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“So anyway, I was skirting around this one camp when someone saw me and started shooting.” He looked ahead, lost in the memory, and said, “I’ve got two bullet holes in my backpack from that.” His eyes darted to survey us. “Two bullet holes—they went clean through my pack and didn’t even graze me!”

“Praise the Lord for that,” said Angel.

“I don’t know why they didn’t hit me.” He shook his head. “I must have been moving in such a way that my pack fell to one side and that’s when the bullets went through.”

“I know why they didn’t hit you,” Angel countered, with eyes softly shining. “God was watching out for you.”

Richard met her gaze evenly but said nothing. He swallowed and then continued the story. “I thought they just wanted to scare me off because no one chased me that I could tell. I ran for a long time just in case. After about a mile I had to slow down.” He was pensive for a moment. “I guess you could say I collapsed. I thought it was good Sarah wasn’t with me.” He looked from Tex to Angel, and with a very uncharacteristic sheen in his eyes, added softly, “I was thinking it was a good thing she had you.”

They nodded. I wondered if they knew those words hadn’t come easily for my brother. He was not especially strong in the praise or thanks department.

“I was hungry and thirsty and getting nowhere fast, so I decided to head back.” In a gruff tone, he said, “I realized out there how amazing it is that you took us in.” Lowering his eyes, he said, “Thank you for that.” He raised his gaze. “Thank you for everything.”

Those words seemed to break the ice and suddenly everything felt cozier, as if Richard had never left, almost like we were a happy family. I must have been grinning from ear to ear because Richard glanced at me and broke into a sheepish grin of his own.

“You’re smiling!” I reached my arm across the table to pat his arm. Even as unkempt and rough as he was, he looked sweet and cute when he smiled. “I like

to see you smile.” Everybody was smiling now if you could call Tex’s sparkling eyes a smile. He isn’t a smiley sort of person. But his eyes were happy.

“Well, Richard,” Tex said. “We’re glad to have you back. I know you need to catch up on your rest so you can turn in early again, but first, we’ve got a lot to do.”

I figured Tex was referring to the usual amount of cumbersome work it took to run the homestead, but he wasn’t. Richard had carefully bypassed all the booby traps on the property—the ones Angel and Tex had set against wandering marauders—showing the gang how to do it, too. Now they were probably useless, at least against this group. Some could be moved. Others, such as the deep pit I’d fallen into, had to be duplicated.

When Richard told Tex they also needed to find barbed wire and dig a trench around the cabin, I knew one thing for sure. They expected more attacks.

END OF EXCERPT.

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