

L.R. BURKARD

AN EMP
SURVIVAL THRILLER

Book Two

RESILIENCE

INTO THE DARK

"Gritty and powerfull" — Nora St. Laurent, CEO

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

An EMP thrust the United States into a dark age, and now Andrea, Lexie and Sarah must survive as society collapses and marauding gangs increase. FEMA camps might be reassuring except the military is forcing civilians into them! Those who've survived the first months are nearing the end of their resources or wits. *Desperate choices must be made, no matter the cost. Can faith and hope survive?*

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RESILIENCE: INTO THE DARK

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RESILIENCE: INTO THE DARK

CHAPTER ONE

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. Most people stay in after dark, which is why we travel at night. 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.

"Almost done."

He frowned as 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. Before the EMP—the electromagnetic pulse that took down the power grid of the nation and sent us into a new dark age.

We'd slept on old, musty hay in an abandoned barn. It was far cleaner than other places we'd spent nights. 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 in 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 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 into the growing gloom. We'd been safe and relatively comfortable there. 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.

"Richard--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 a 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 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 bluish-brown, but tonight it had an eerie green 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 and 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.

But I wasn't thinking about hope, or the future, or anything other than that ominous 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, heading 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 before.

Then, little by little, a breeze picked up. By the time we'd gone maybe three miles, it was strong. I tried to ignore it. I didn't want to say, "See? I told you so," because Richard is 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 now and sounds of snapping branches rolled toward us like a squadron of marching soldiers.

"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 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.

“What’s happening?” I screamed.

“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 backward 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 and black sky. The top of our tree swayed above me like a dancer taking a bow. My eyes widened. Richard couldn’t see it. His head was over me, 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 very trees possessed of a passionate dark tune that threatened to engulf us forever. We’d be killed 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 that I guess my body was used to functioning on practically nothing. We came to a sharp drop, a ravine that held a narrow brook, and I froze at the precipice.

“C’mon!” Richard jumped. I didn’t want to move but he grabbed my hand. As I flew over the edge after 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 body 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.

CHAPTER TWO

LEXIE

MAY 11

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 me. 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 just 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. We categorized them by number, one through four. Some were possible allies, maybe even future members of our compound, number ones. Others, it's true, were harmless, number twos. Some were suspicious—number threes. But we couldn't assume anything. And if they 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. We didn't know if they were Chinese, Muslim, or Russian, but there'd been sightings of guerrilla outfits.

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 idea of a confrontation terrified me. I tried not to think about it.

Number fours were threatening enough for me; marauders who roamed the land and stole food and supplies, often killing those they 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—and most nights I'd rather read than write. It seems like a lifetime ago that we had electricity, though it was only four months.)

Anyways, I write when I get a break during the day. The compound started out as a small community of Christian preppers, but we've grown from taking in people who brought the skills or knowledge we needed. They in turn got food, shelter, and community. 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 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 survived since the EMP only 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, and 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 are 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 wistfully out at the work sites, the clearing of brush and trees. 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 that 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 increased foot traffic on their road, the kids weren't able to play outside anymore. Their house was on a main road. They'll 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 is close by now. Everyone knows Blake and I will get married one day—if 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 use 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. Since coming to live with us, she’s changed. The new Andrea hardly wears makeup, 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 cross the property or 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 to Aiden, one of Andrea’s little brothers, who 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’d spoken in unison; the way twins sometimes do.

“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. Besides the 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!” I felt 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.

A sudden barrage of fire from outside made me jump. 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 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, also 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 back there. 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 to fire.

"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 at the front. 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.

CHAPTER THREE

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 was 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 out of 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 and I dove back into my crevice, this time clawing at the wall of dirt, trying to get deeper. I felt the embankment jump and 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.

AFTERWARD

I crawled backward 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 and 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, 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 by occasional flashes from the sky revealing 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?

When I felt strong enough to move, I took a few steps and called him. 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 on 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 about people who survived tornadoes after being caught up in the air, sometimes traveling for miles before landing somehow, somewhere. These accounts meant people had survived such things. 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 snatched Richard from me probably wouldn't have deposited him anywhere close. But just in case, I moved slowly, calling him 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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 left my ears ringing for hours, and I hated that.

Outside, Andrea’s shot must have reached its mark because the intruders scattered, some, back the way they’d come! Hoorah! Andrea kept shooting while there I was, taking stock of the situation like a bystander, not a soldier. But I am supposed to be a soldier. We all are. We have to be.

I returned to my position, 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 what sounded like 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 men 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 emerging 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 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. “What?”

“Why didn’t you shoot one?”

Her voice was calm, but in her eyes, I saw something lurking. I just stared at her. 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, Lexie. 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! 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, reproving 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. I was still feeling guilty and 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 on the defense 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 cross-fire 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.

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, and 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 towards an outbuilding. The smiles vanished from our faces. We knew what awaited those men.

CHAPTER FIVE

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 exactly how long—but this felt like the scariest yet. Because if anything happens 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 gently 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 came at me, settling on my mind like locusts on a field of grass. Richard could have a concussion or hidden internal bleeding. He might have something like 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 and 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 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.)

Afterward, 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, though.

"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."

CHAPTER SIX

LEXIE

Two shots from the outbuilding sounded as I peeled the last of the potatoes from last year's harvest for dinner. I stopped, disturbed by what I knew had taken place.

"Mom, can I go upstairs for a few minutes?"

She was at the sink, half-filled with hauled in water, doing dishes. She took one look at me and understood.

"Sure, honey, you go ahead."

Knowing two more had died on our compound, even though they were "bad guys," made me want to be alone. I needed daily prayer time, anyways. Sometimes I prayed about what a pain life is these days. Everything takes so much work! Work, work, work. Today, when I got upstairs, I just sat on my bed and cried.

I told God that none of this is right. Teenagers should be going to school, studying, making friends, having fun. We shouldn't have to live like soldiers! I've told this to the Lord before. *You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.* That's Psalm 60, verse 3. It helps to tell God how I feel. But I came away with the same conclusion I always get. The United States is apparently under judgment, and judgment is bleak. In Zechariah 1, it says, *The Lord All Powerful did as he said he would do, he punished us for the way we lived and for what we did.* I know our country deserved this. But I don't feel like we did, personally.

My hope is for our nation to be restored—but I don't see it happening. I think we need to repent, first. How do you get a whole nation to repent? Only God can. But it takes time. And in the meantime, people are still desperate and violent. And what if some marauders catch us off-guard one day? What if we run out of ammunition?

Jared brought thousands of rounds, as well as an impressive collection of firearms. (My dad wanted to know how he got it all, but Jared would only say, “It was waiting for someone to take it. Better us than them.”) And even my dad stockpiled thousands of rounds over time, building his stores. He made bullets (“casting bullets” he calls it) as well as buying them. It was a hobby. I often found him outside his workshop with a messy set-up of folding tables holding all kinds of strange equipment, melting lead, and with scads of used bullet casings which he cleaned in some solution. He found this relaxing. (Proof that guys are a mystery. But I guess it’s no different than how Mom would hum away in the kitchen while she baked or cooked.)

Anyways, he can’t make bullets indefinitely. He can re-use the cases and melt lead for bullets—but he can’t make his own primer or propellant. So even though we have a good amount of ammunition, it won’t last forever.

And what if the government gets its act together and sends out troops and confiscates our weapons? They did that after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Dad says it was totally unconstitutional, but they did it anyways. They took legally owned firearms from people—just when they might need them most! And get this—they don’t confiscate firearms from the bad guys—they can’t. There’s no purchase record if you don’t buy a weapon legally, and the bad guys don’t. It makes me so mad! We’ve had to defend ourselves numerous times since the pulse. I don’t think we’d still be alive or have any supplies left if we didn’t have the means to defend ourselves.

I was talking about this to Andrea once in the kitchen when Jared came in seeking coffee after his lookout shift ended. He overheard me talking and came over.

“What are you worrying about?”

Andrea smiled. All he has to do is come near us and she’s smiling. Personally, I find Jared on the creepy side. He always looks grim. Anyways, we told him.

“If your weapons are from local gun dealers, don’t worry.”

“Why not?” I did not subscribe to the “what Jared says is law” belief system Andrea lives by. I wanted a reason to take his word for it.

“There’s no gun shop records to lead them here,” he said. “We can only be traced through their files. And there’s no files.”

“What happened to the files?” I asked. For the first time since I’ve met Jared, a smile curled his lips. He leaned his head back, thinking. He seemed to be considering whether to tell us or not, but evidently, the answer to my question amused him.

He looked back at us. “Shops got burned down. Apparently, some people don’t like the government overstepping their bounds.” He paused. “That’s where I got a lot of my gear.”

“From a burning gun shop?” My question made him level a stare at me. I didn’t like what I saw in Jared’s eyes. Challenge? Defiance? Had my question angered him?

“Why not?” He asked. “Someone had to take the stuff.”

“So there’s no federal file with those records?”

“S’not supposed to be. No paper trail, no electronic trail—not that anything electronic is working. Including most of the government, by the way. But they’re not the only ones who might want gun records. Did you see ‘Red Dawn’?” Andrea and I shook our heads, no.

“In the movie, the Russians try to take over the western United States and the first thing they did was go for gun owners and guns, using those records to trace them.” I felt a chill go down my spine.

“How do you know for sure those records got destroyed?” This time the question came from Andrea. I did not see the same suspicion on Jared’s face as he answered her.

“The shops burned to the ground. Nothing left.” He tipped an imaginary hat at us and went to fill his empty coffee cup. Andrea smiled at me. “He’s great, isn’t he?”

“He’s an arsonist and a thief!” I hissed, whispering so he wouldn’t hear me.

Her face dropped. “You don’t know he was the one who burned those places down.”

“So, he just happened to be there when they did and was able to help himself to the goods?” I gave her a sardonic look. “Really?”

She wavered a moment, but then her face hardened. “Lighten up, Lex! He did it to protect us! I’m glad he got rid of those records.” She paused, staring at me. “Aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

“He did us a favor. We need all the favors we can get.”

THE NEXT DAY

This afternoon Andrea and I got a rare break from chores. Seems the adults were talking about how we kept our posts at the bedroom windows during that skirmish yesterday and thought we should be rewarded. I grabbed Butler the cat and we headed upstairs to lie down and read or do nothing. Doing nothing is a luxury. I climbed up my bunk with my Bible and journal. Andrea was resting on the bottom bunk.

“You like Jared, don’t you?” I asked.

“Can you tell?”

I could hear a smile in her voice. I tried not to laugh. “Um. Yeah! You break out in a big smile every time he’s around.”

“He’s cute, isn’t he? Like in a cowboy kinda way?” Jared was tall and lanky, wore camo clothing, combat boots, and, often, an army-issue cap. He didn’t look anything like a cowboy. But I didn’t want to hurt Andrea’s feelings, so I just said, “Well...maybe if he didn’t always look so sinister; like he’s angry at the world.”

“Everyone’s angry at the world, Lex.”

“But Jared looks extra angry.”

“I don’t think he looks angry. Just intense. He thinks a lot.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No. He doesn’t have to. I can tell.” I turned over, hanging my head down to get a glimpse of her beneath me.

“Blake thinks a lot, too. But he doesn’t give me the creeps when he’s doing it.”

“Jared gives you the creeps?” She stared up at me, wide-eyed. I nodded.

“What do we know about him, anyway? When he got here, he had stuff normal people don’t have.”

“Like what!”

“Like a new front door for the house.”

“I can’t believe you’re complaining about that! Your door was all smashed up by Roy’s gang. You said yourself; it was a constant reminder of that whole horrible episode.”

“It was, but still. Where’d he get a beautiful new front door?”

Andrea shrugged. “Maybe he salvaged it from one of those burning houses. It would’ve been destroyed anyway, so it’s good if he did.”

“IF he did. And how do you know he didn’t burn that house just like the gun shop?” I had to pull my head back up because it was heavy from being upside down.

“You’re letting your imagination run away with you! How do you know he didn’t take it from his mother’s house? Lots of our people dismantled things from their own houses to use for building.”

“Only expendable things. Not their front doors! And his mother’s house was old; she did NOT have that beautiful new door. It’s an expensive door.” And it was. It was made of reinforced steel but painted a deep blue-grey. It complemented the farmhouse look of our home. It also strengthened it, being made of steel. I guess I should have appreciated that Jared brought it. But at the moment, all I could think of was reasons to distrust him.

Jared’s mother was a neighbor down the road with a little old house much like Mrs. Preston’s, only smaller, and in need of upkeep. Before the pulse, Jared was mostly away, as he lived in Hawaii. But if he was so wonderful, why hadn’t he kept up his mother’s house better? Mrs. Preston’s son had hired help for his mother before he’d gone off to

Europe on a business venture. Why hadn't Jared done that for his mother?

Andrea was silent, thinking. "You want me to ask him where he found the door?" Her voice was doubtful. Like she was hoping I'd say not to.

"My dad already did. He says he just finds these things. That he's not taking them from anyone who needs them. Like the windows and mirrors, remember?" He'd even offered to replace our shattered hutch with a new one—but my dad told him severely that going around to gather furniture was foolhardy. Leaving the compound was always risky. No one was to do it for the sake of getting unnecessary stuff. Only food, fuel, and vital housing materials were worth venturing off the property for.

"You never know. So many people are gone..." I knew what she meant. Gone, as in dead. "Jared is probably taking stuff from abandoned houses."

"No kidding. That's what I mean." I couldn't see Andrea, but I swear I could feel her glaring at me. Her next words confirmed it.

"Even YOU took stuff from Mrs. Preston's!"

Blake and I had gone to Mrs. Preston's to scavenge anything useful, but I did it knowing she would want us to.

"That is so totally different! She would be GLAD we took it. And we labeled her things. If her son ever returns, he'll get it all back! That is nothing like looting the homes of strangers!"

I heard her let out a breath of frustration. "I'm taking a nap," she announced, in a voice that said, "conversation over." But suddenly she added, "EVERYONE else is doing it! If Jared didn't take it, someone else would have!"

"That doesn't make it right."

But she'd reminded me of Mrs. Preston, and now I felt sad. I missed the old lady. We'd buried her on the hill (which, sadly, I now think of as Burial Hill) but I've always wondered if she'd prefer to be on her own land. My dad says it's too late: he's not about to go dig her up

when she didn't have a coffin, and besides, the extra work is about the last thing he needs right now. Life is work. Speaking of which, when we got to Mrs. Preston's house, we could tell other people had been there—and trashed the place. Her nice little house. I could understand hungry people looking for food, but what I don't get is why they have to destroy every place they loot. The mess really bothered me. Blake reminded me that lots of homes got burned down after being looted so leaving a mess wasn't really too bad.

But I couldn't leave it. Blake and I cleaned it up, spending hours. We threw broken furniture on Dad's cart, canning equipment, pots and pans, and some gardening tools from the shed. There was no food left, not even a ketchup packet from fast food. She'd been thoroughly cleaned out. I blinked back tears when I passed the empty tray in the hallway where she used to keep chocolates. I miss Mrs. Preston. But I'm glad she's in peace.

I still treasure Butler for her sake, since he was her cat. I pet him as much as he'll let me, though he isn't the most affectionate of cats. Moppet is far more of a people cat, but the girls like to claim her as theirs. I don't begrudge her pets their food allowances, either, which reminds me of the last reason I don't trust Jared. He said feeding the pets is only worthwhile in case we need to eat them one day!

I hope Andrea will be cautious about Jared. I don't feel any better about him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SARAH

Old, weathered barns seem to be our lot in life. We were fortunate the one we found had hay to sleep in. Sometimes with no animals in residence, hay would be cleaned out too. But we never slept in a barn that had animals—they were usually guarded, for one thing; and we didn't know what kind of people might discover us if we overslept and they found us. It could mean our lives.

I woke up long before dusk, but as usual, Richard wanted to wait for nightfall to get moving so we stayed put, resting and conserving our energy. I marveled as I stared out the opening at the surrounding countryside. You would never know a tornado went through yesterday. The sky was blue and cloudless, sunny and warm. The countryside looked so peaceful! If only... If it was, we wouldn't have to do our moving at night.

It used to be hard for me to rest when I didn't want to—but I fell back asleep easily until it was finally growing dark, and Richard woke me.

NIGHT

We were making good time, using Richard's compass and heading steadily toward the Indiana border. Well, steadily as much as was in our power. I've learned when you're walking in the woods, it's not much different, direction-wise, than having to take roads somewhere. Meaning, as Richard says, we can't walk as the crow flies. But instead of following a winding road, we had to wind around ravines, impassable brush, and houses and fields. All while trying to stay westward. We'd learned, if Richard didn't check the compass every so often, we could

get surprisingly off-kilter. Tonight, he thought we were getting near the state border.

Fortunately, the population was sparse over here. Small towns were surrounded by hundred-acre farms—now defunct and weedy, but unpopulated. So we could avoid the towns, sticking to the edges of farmland and woods, skirting pastures as usual. Even through the darkness, we saw those ever-present plumes of smoke in the distance. A large, dark plume was due west, in our path. It looked like a giant inferno as we drew closer.

When we finally reached the area, we saw an entire row of houses burning. All these fires! Why were there so many? I could understand in winter when everyone was doing anything to stay warm, including building indoor fires which got out of control. But I don't understand why there are so many now when the weather is much warmer. Granted, it still isn't hot at night. But it's hard to believe so many fires could be started by carelessness.

It seems like there's always smoke in the sky rising from somewhere just out of view. Always plumes of smoke. Sometimes they remind me of the tornado—except they are fainter as they rise.

We walked through the night, eating one-half of our rations. But we'd run out of water. Seeing a lone farmhouse with a pond in front, Richard stopped to study it. The place looked forsaken. Like so many other homes, it was probably abandoned. And yet we never knew for sure because most houses looked rundown even if they were still occupied. The lack of power mowers and other power equipment, combined with the struggle for just plain survival, meant no one kept up their property any longer.

Worse, even if it was abandoned, it could be home to opportunistic looters (I never thought of Richard and myself as such) and they could be dangerous. Or the homeowners might be jumpy and take a shot at you just for being on their property.

Richard came to a decision. "We can fill the water bottle here."

He looked around warily, then told me to lay low while he went to the pond. I stayed behind a large bush and tried to watch but Richard's outline faded into the dark night quickly. I heard a sound and saw a man carrying a lantern emerge from the front door of the house.

"Richard!" I didn't know if he'd heard me or not. "Watch out!" In his other hand, the man held something I couldn't identify but I was sure it was a weapon. And then I saw Richard coming into view carrying the bottle, trying to cap it as he hurried towards me.

Behind us the man yelled. "Get out of here! We got nothing here!"

"We were just getting water!" Richard yelled back. When he reached me, we turned to leave, automatically taking the road though we usually avoided them, because it was clear and easier to manage. We'd gone maybe five feet when the man was there, on top of us. He'd come out through an opening in a hedge. He had a rifle in his hands and a ferocious look on a weathered, wizened face.

We froze. Richard grasped my arm painfully, shoving me behind him. The man, only a foot away now, held up the lantern, searching Richard's face. Then he stretched around Richard to get a good look at me. I held my breath, thinking he was surely going to do us harm.

Richard held up our water bottle. "I was just filling this. That's all we wanted."

Again, the piercing, suspicious look was fastened on my brother. Then he spoke. His words were gruff and ominous. "You can't drink that water."

Richard and I were mute. Was he saying he wouldn't let us keep the measly bottle of water?

"You'll get sick," he added.

Richard replied, "We can treat it."

"How?"

"Purification pills. I've got a few left; hopefully enough to get us to Indiana."

"Why? What's in Indiana?"

"Our aunt. She has a farm. We have nothing left here."

He eyed Richard again, thinking as if trying to decide whether to speak. Finally, he said, “How d’ya know your aunt’s still there?”

“We don’t.”

Now he shook his head, muttering something to himself.

“I’m Richard Weaver and this is my sister Sarah—”

“Don’t tell me your names! I don’t-want-to-know-your-names!” In a strident tone.

He looked regretful after saying that, shook his head some more and then said, “If you need water, I have some. It’s about all I have, but I can give you some before you go.”

Richard and I looked at each other. This was the first time anyone had shown us kindness since we’d been homeless. From the time we left our town, no one had given us anything, not even spoken nicely to us!

We followed him toward the house, but Richard whispered in my ear behind the man’s back, “Stay alert.” I noticed he’d taken his pistol and put it in his front coat pocket. As we walked, the old man stopped every few feet to study the ground, holding out his lamp with a look of deep perplexity. Often, he’d move us to one side or the other before continuing. He gave no explanation, but we followed his lead, especially after he said, “Follow my footsteps EXACTLY—or you’ll live to regret it.”

As we walked, Richard asked, “Where do you get your water?”

“Stop! This way!” he barked suddenly, pulling Richard’s arm hard, moving him sharply to the right, and then watching for me to follow. As we moved on, he said heavily, answering my brother, “From a well. I have a hand pump. It’s old-fashioned.” He turned and smiled, which surprised me. “We old-timers have a good amount of information you young people have no clue about. We know how to survive.”

As we entered the house, he stopped to face us. “That is, if we’re left to do it. People keep trying to kill us, though. Don’t they, Martha?”

“They do,” said a voice, to our left. And there, on her feet in a little side room stood “Martha,” the littlest old lady you can imagine. She had

on a nightgown and robe, and an old-fashioned sleeping cap from which white curls stuck out on the sides. She would have been cute, like anyone's grandma—except she glowered in our direction and held a shotgun—pointed right at us.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEXIE

This morning we woke to a new dark plume in the sky to our south. A big one. I tried to ignore it and headed to the barn to tend the animals. While I was there, Jared and another of our newer residents, a young black father by name of Mr. Washington, came in to get Molly the mule. Molly came to us with Mr. Washington and his eleven-year-old daughter. I felt queasy as soon as I saw them saddling her because I knew why they were doing it.

“How’s your horse?” Mr. Washington asked, pulling me from my musings. I’d been shoveling hay into her stall, not realizing I’d stopped working to watch them. “What’s ‘er name again?”

“Rhema.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“It means Word of God.” I watched for his reaction. He nodded, but I figured he was being noncommittal, not wanting to show he thought it was a weird name. I guessed he was trying to distract me from their grisly business. See, there is so much work to be done on the compound without any power tools that we can’t bury the dead marauders—the fours. There is simply too much manpower necessary. I knew they were gonna put the bodies on Molly’s back, take her for a long walk, and dump them in a ditch somewhere off our property. They’d throw brush and leaves over them and then return. I understood—it needed to be done. I just hated thinking about it.

While Jared readied the mule, Mr. Washington came over to pet Rhema. I took a good look at him—smooth, light mocha skin, short black hair—he was handsome, younger than my folks, and wore jeans and cowboy boots. He and Andrea’s mom are good friends. Andrea

resents him; she says her mother flirts with him. He's a widower, and Andrea's mom is a widow, so they have that in common. But Andrea's dad's only been gone a few months, so their friendship upsets her. She really loses it when she sees them near each other. Anyways, it's great having a mule, and Washington's daughter, Evangeline, plays very patiently with both sets of twins. They are a good addition to our community.

Jared finished saddling up Molly and nodded darkly at me as they left.

After they'd gone, I thought about the four kinds of people in the world now. I never got to explain this in my journal, so here goes: The first type, the number ones, are people like us. Survivors who have made it this far by living off their ingenuity and stored supplies. Most are homestead preppers like us or urban preppers—meaning they didn't have land or livestock, but they stored a lot of provisions and it kept them alive. Urban preppers are valuable to a compound because they usually know how to garden—even if they've only done it on a balcony—and how to purify water; many of them are trained to protect themselves with a firearm, too.

Most of the people in our compound are number ones who were running low on resources and needed a place to live where they could work and eke out a living—but the main thing about number ones is that we mean no harm to others and only fight to defend ourselves. That is important! We deplore the violence of our attackers, and we deplore having to be violent in return! I never told my folks this (not even Andrea. Blake alone knows about it), but I got sick after we fought off Roy and his gang. I still feel sick about shooting at people. I worry that I'm weaker than the others, but really, there is something very wrong with us teenagers having to fight for our lives.

Anyways, number ones can be self-reliant with the proper tools. But if we lost our home and property, we'd be about as helpless as the unprepared. Some number ones are true survivalists—they're like preppers on steroids! —and can live off the land without a home or

property of their own. They're often loners and keep to themselves, which is good because Dad says if they're not friendly, they could be as dangerous as number fours—maybe worse because they're often well-trained in combat.

And then there are the number twos. These are folks who have survived the first wave of death, but just barely. (Blake once called it “mass extinction,” but I asked him not to say that because it sounds so horrible.) Number twos don't have the know-how of preppers and their survival is more miraculous, in a way; but they're at the end of themselves. They can't make it through another winter without help. Unlike number ones, they're clueless about long-term survival; they don't know gardening or food preservation, and they have no necessary skills for the compound.

There aren't a lot of number twos, simply because most people without food storage or survival skills didn't make it through the winter. The ones that survived are not usually a threat, but they can lead number threes or fours to us. But mostly they're just regular people who are scared. They roam in pairs or small groups, wearing backpacks and looking like emaciated hikers who've been on the trail too long. They come in all kinds of weather, morning or night. They see the flickering light of our oil lamps or smell our grill fire, or see someone heading from the barn to the house and they come.

We sometimes give small amounts of food or water to such people, but we can't take them in. I hate to be around when my dad or someone else turns them away. It's heartbreaking! But I know the reason, I know it's necessary. Because if we let them join us, we'd deplete our stores and soon we would be in no better shape than they are. Our only option for long-term survival is to follow FARMSEC (farmstead security) rules, which say we can't open our doors to these people.

Everyone in the compound gets instruction in FARMSEC, from the youngest to the oldest. (It's a play on words from OPSEC, a military term meaning Operational Security. Survivalists and preppers took the term for themselves so that OPSEC means any type of security measure

taken to protect one's home or compound, or farm—you get the idea.) Anyways, FARMSEC means border security so we can keep operating; keep milking, keep growing chicks and kits (baby rabbits), and keep up a survival garden. We have to be our own little army. We are the military inside our compound and any stranger—no matter how innocuous they may look—is a civilian. And civilians are automatically suspect. I hate to see people this way—as immediate needs for threat assessment. But that's what many people are—a threat.

Most number twos would starve before killing another human being, no matter how desperate and destitute they are. I wish we could help every single one of those people. I have to accept that we can't.

If a number two approaches the farm, a single warning shot from a lookout will turn them away. Sometimes that isn't enough. Then we know they aren't a number two at all. They're either a number three or four.

Number threes are a bigger threat than number twos, a more insidious threat, because, like Roy the bus driver, they look normal. They act innocent like they're a number two, a miraculous survivor who just happened to make it this far. They approach us with their hands up (so we can't shoot; they count on us not being heartless, and we're not); but when we turn them away, they retreat only far enough to be out of sight. We've learned they'll wait for an opportunity to take something, to sneak up on us. Sometimes they creep up behind the brush line and then charge the chicken coop or make a dash for the barn.

Number threes aren't necessarily willing to kill us for what we've got, but they're more than willing to relieve us of some of it. Sometimes they will open fire. Most of them don't want it to come to that. They aren't well organized, and they don't want a full-scale battle; they're looking for the easy targets, and often when they realize we're not one, they go away.

But then, there are the number fours. These are the most dangerous because they're reckless, ruthless, and vicious. They don't come alone. Like Roy and his gang, they're organized. They've got leaders and

followers and they're armed and ready for battle. Other than the foreign troops we hear about, I fear them most. They have no moral compass, and the only life they respect is their own. They are the ones who stole Kasha, our dog—probably for food. They are the main reason we maintain FARMSEC. Why we continue to have target practice, security drills, and other things; the reason Dad painstakingly removes lead casings from old wiring and pipes and melts it into new bullets.

I still feel bad for people who need help. But it's hard to feel bad when some of them just want you dead.

I was almost done with my chores. When I'd emptied the chicken manure into the garden, glad for the spring air, I remembered Dad's warning that all types of people would keep coming until next winter set in. The tricky thing was every so often we might get someone (or a family) who would be an asset to have with us. For instance, take our infirmary. It's a tent, nothing like a true infirmary as far as supplies go, but we have a D.O., Mr. Clepps, who came looking for handouts. A D.O. is just like an M.D., so he stays. (The other day we picked up an obstetrical nurse and her husband. But I'll write about that later.)

All our families brought valuable supplies or skills. Andrea's didn't, but it turned out she is a sure shot; she even saved my dad's life. We have a woodworker, an ex-timber guy who is invaluable when it comes to downing trees for timber, and Mrs. Schuman, who can sew clothing by hand. She brought fabrics—lots of them. All the skilled people we get are Godsend.

Even Blake's family, though they are probably the closest friends my parents have (and have known each other for ages) brought their own homesteading skills and tools and animals and know-how. Being fellow Christians didn't hurt, either. We have Bible studies every week again now, and on many mornings, we meet for devotions and praise while breakfast is being prepared.

I really appreciate Bible Study even though I'm not always in the mood for it. Questions arise for me when I'm reading my Bible and, while commentaries help, the study is the perfect place to air my

questions. And I do. I'm not taking anything for granted. I'm not a Christian just because my parents are. I'm a Christian because I've felt the presence of God, and I've heard His voice, and I know He's real. In some ways, I think I'm closer to God now than I used to be. Devotions and group prayer used to be sporadic in my family. Not anymore.

Some people think Christians shouldn't defend themselves; that we should just give up our stuff to those who want it. But there is a time for everything— "a time for war and a time for peace." Like it or not, it is a time for war. (Even Jesus told his disciples once, "If you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." That's Luke 22:36. There is a place for self-defense in the Christian's life.)

Anyways, as I thought about this stuff, I realized we have nothing less than a new class system in America. It's a threat assessment system, but it works pretty much like a class system if you ask me. The fours are the lowest class—the ones we don't bury.

LATER

After my chores were done, I ran into Blake in the kitchen on my way to get school supplies. Andrea would be bringing the children in soon, and I had to get their snacks ready, too.

"Council meeting, tonight."

I met his gaze. "Okay. Are you going?" We teens didn't always attend the council meetings; sometimes it was all about administrative stuff that we didn't need to be in on. Other times we would be ordered to attend, as when FARMSEC rules would be gone over.

"Yeah. Did you hear?"

"About what?"

"A radio contact from Indiana reported seeing soldiers. A military unit that wasn't American. I guess we'll hear more about it tonight."

END OF EXCERPT

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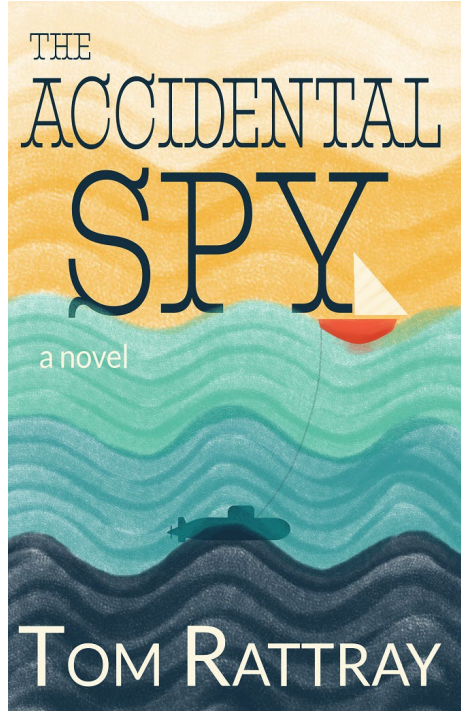
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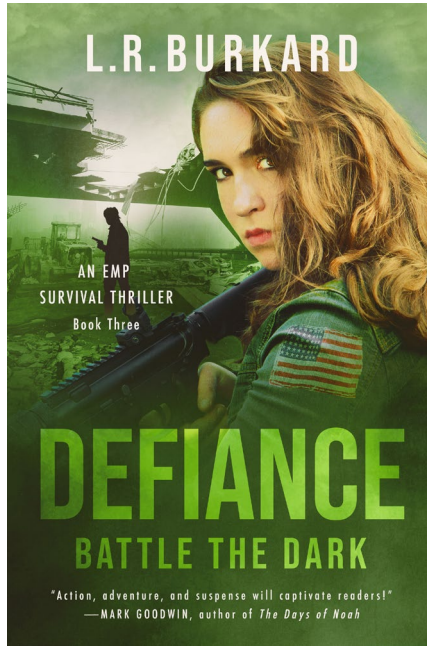
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