

SURVIVING THE END BOOK FOUR

BURNED WORLD



GRACE HAMILTON

SURVIVING THE END

Crumbling World

Fallen World

New World

Burned World

Ruined World

Stormy World

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

RELAY PUBLISHING EDITION, OCTOBER 2023

Copyright © 2023 Relay Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. Published in the United Kingdom by Relay Publishing. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Grace Hamilton is a pen name created by Relay Publishing for co-authored Post-Apocalyptic projects. Relay Publishing works with incredible teams of writers and editors to collaboratively create the very best stories for our readers.

www.relaypub.com



BURNED WORLD

BLURB

The apocalypse is over. But the struggle for survival has only just begun...

A hard-won peace has been earned by the McDonald family's Georgia settlement, Hickory Falls. The rural community offers shelter, food, and safety. At least for now...

But in the aftermath of the solar flare, and the fall of the old world, danger takes many forms. It begins with a drought that threatens crops. Then a flood of refugees arrives, driven from their homes by a raging wildfire. They've lost everything, and the inferno is spreading.

Taking in the dispossessed means more mouths to feed—but it also means willing hands to do vital work. And one refugee in particular has valuable skills. Greyson was a firefighter, and he's got a plan to make Hickory Falls safe from the encroaching fire.

But there's something a little off about the man. Beth, the McDonald matriarch, doesn't trust him—though she can't say why. But, like it or not, he's part of the community now.

Will his preparations save Hickory Falls? Or plunge the community into fiery doom...

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

End of Burned World

[Thank you](#)

[Make an Author's Day](#)

[About Grace Hamilton](#)

[Sneak Peek: Ruined World](#)

[Sneak Peek: Rising Anarchy](#)

[Also By Grace Hamilton](#)

[Want more?](#)

Greyson loved the metallic scrape and snap of the Zippo lid whenever he flicked it open. It satisfied some itch at the base of his skull. Almost as satisfying was the harsh click when he pushed the lid shut with his thumb. He stared into the distance and lost himself in a kind of trance to the *click-snap* of the lighter. Only the setting sun finally pulled him out of it.

He snapped the lid shut again, bounced the lighter in his hand a couple of times, then angled the side into the burnished orange sunlight. The side of the Zippo had a raised design of a leering skull with red glass eyes. He ran his thumb over both eyes before jamming the lighter into the breast pocket of his denim shirt.

The high grass on the hilltop was moving in waves with the wind. He could see the ripples down the hillside and across the broad meadow below. It made him feel like he was standing in hip-deep water, somehow poised on top of a wave. No, not a wave. Rather, a storm surge pushed in advance of a great hurricane, and its target stood in the distance, a sad collection of brick and wood buildings standing in a nimbus of orange light.

Though he couldn't quite make out the people from this distance—all he could see were gray and brown rooftops among the trees, a few narrow roads, and dead vehicles scattered about like detritus—he could sense the citizens. They called it New West Point, a name that was stuck in his brain like a thorn. Greyson began to pace, kicking through the high grass, feeling some hot, hateful thing rising up inside of him.

The town was little more than a wart on the side of an insignificant country road west of Macon, but only if one viewed it objectively. Greyson knew it now as a vicious little camp of petty elitists.

Oh, they were there, lurking in their homes, in their precious little community center, in their weedy gardens. He saw thin tendrils of dark smoke from cooking fires, and it made him smile.

Sort of ironic, he thought. Cooking meat.

Greyson couldn't help it; he pulled the lighter out again and began to flick it open and shut again. All the ways those people had wronged him were rooting through his mind, and he had been unable to rest for weeks. Sleep eluded him. Dreams tormented him in the darkest hours of the night. He fixed his gaze on the community center, with its multicolored rooftop of mismatched tiles—the product of storm repairs. One of the trails of smoke came from the fenced playground in back, where he knew the local mayor kept a large barbecue grill. He couldn't see the playground from this angle, but he could picture it well enough.

His final humiliation had happened there.

“I did nothing but help you,” Greyson muttered. The emotion in his own trembling voice disturbed him, so he took a moment to collect himself before speaking again. “Nothing but help you.” Yes, that was better. A cool and collected voice. Even in his solitary moments, he liked to maintain control. He needed it. “And you silenced me. Turned me out. Took my things. Took my home.” And then, quietly, in little more than a whisper, he added, “How dare you.”

He began to pace, kicking through the high weeds on top of the hill, his obsessive need to flick the lighter insatiable. Finally, he began tossing it in the air and catching it, if only to have something else to do. Occasionally, he held it tightly and ran his thumb along the skull's red glass eyes for a minute.

A conversation was playing over and over again in his mind. He'd been sitting in the front row in the little meeting room at the community center. Folding metal chairs with thin plastic

seat pads that had cracked in many places. In the lack of air-conditioning, the room was warm and muggy and smelled like dirty people. The room was full, and everyone was restless. He could hear their chairs creaking and popping...

The mayor stood at his podium, leaning on it so heavily with his huge corpulent forearms that the podium was tipped forward. The accusation in those beady little eyes had been enough to make Greyson want to pick up his chair and heave it at the man.

“All I’ve tried to do is help this damned loser town.” Yes, Greyson had lost his cool for just a second, but he’d quickly pulled it back. “Didn’t I help set up the community garden? Didn’t I bring the wagon and coordinate the clearing out of abandoned houses? Didn’t I inventory the communal storehouse? Why am I being treated like a criminal?”

Even then, he got at least a few nods. He’d had at least a few allies left in the town, but the majority made it clear they’d turned against him.

“At every turn, you’ve helped *yourself* more than you’ve helped others,” the mayor said.

“How dare you say that.” Greyson managed an even tone that time. He sounded so calm, even though he was raging inside. “After all the work I’ve done.”

“You’ve helped yourself to whatever you wanted,” the mayor said, speaking right over him. “You’ve picked over the supplies and cooked the books to hide it. You’ve manipulated others and taken advantage of them.”

Voices behind him. Greyson looked over his shoulder and saw row upon row of accusing eyes staring back at him. All these grimy, dirty backwoods weirdos. The memory of that meeting made him so furious that his stomach hurt. He’d done his best to defend himself. He’d only taken his fair share, after all. But they’d eventually all ganged up on him. Even the few who had supported him in the beginning became hostile by meeting’s end.

And now here he was, standing alone on a hilltop beyond the boundaries of the high, makeshift fence that encircled the town. The simple fact that he'd been able to walk out of town with his dignity, resisting the urge to lash out, was an achievement in itself. So what if he'd taken a few things along the way for himself? Hadn't he earned everything he'd taken?

Shut up, shut down, and shut out. That's what they'd done to him.

A faint echo of laughter reached him then, carried on the wind. It went right through him, and he shuddered. He felt a trembling in his guts, and it was almost more than he could stand.

They don't care what happens to me, he thought. They'd have killed me if they had the guts to do it. Listen to them laugh while I'm cast out like a leper. I deserved better.

He flicked the lighter open one more time, but this time he left it there. His thumb slid down and rested on the wheel, feeling the rough texture. It had been a dry season, warm air devoid of moisture coming from the west. He felt the stickiness of his sweaty shirt against his back, against his shoulder, his belly.

"The only justice left in the world is the justice we take for ourselves," he muttered.

And with that, he spun the wheel, and the wick burst into a single, perfect flame. He held it up in front of his face so that the flame became a veil standing between him and the distant community. If there was any hesitation at all in that moment, it was like a single flickering of that flame. Greyson bent down and touched the flame to the tips of the high grass around him.

The fire caught fast, as he suspected it would. The land had prepared itself for his judgment. He began walking along the top of the hill, dragging the lighter through the grass and weeds. As he did, he heard the crackle and pop of fire behind him. When he reached the far slope, he made his way down the back of the hill, still moving the lighter through the grass.

The wind would carry it east, toward the town, and since there wasn't a cloud in the sky, there was little chance that any

natural phenomenon would stop it. Eventually, he stepped out of the high grass onto an old country road, and he came to a stop. The Zippo had become uncomfortably hot against his fingertips, so he snapped the lid shut.

Then he turned to survey his handiwork. He'd left a line of angry fire in his wake, and it was already spreading. The dry grass was like kindling. Within minutes, the whole top of the hill was crowned in angry red flames, thick, black smoke rising into the slate blue sky. The heat was unbearable against his face, forcing Greyson back across the road to the ditch on the other side.

In the last seconds, when judgment is bearing down, you'll regret what you did, he thought, casting his hateful thoughts toward the townsfolk.

Even then, as the fire turned into a great wall stretching along the road, catching in the trees, his thoughts went back to that last fateful town meeting. The moment they'd all turned against him. The moment when he'd realized he was truly alone. But this time, he saw one individual in particular. That greasy-haired fellow with the pale-pink skin. A relative newcomer to the community by the name of Ryan. And, in Greyson's estimation, a hardcore socialist nutjob loser.

"People working for their own advantage, that's the reason I had to leave my hometown," Ryan had said. And then he'd pointed one of his long, crooked fingers at Greyson and continued. "If you let a guy like this stay here, he'll worm his way into the mind of every person in town sooner or later. He'll turn us against our own collective interests. I've seen it happen. I saw one family do it. They basically took over my hometown, and that was the end of it. Cast this guy out now while he's still weak and unliked."

You can burn with your ideas, Ryan, Greyson thought.

Oh, Ryan had told all kinds of interesting stories about his former hometown. Some new community on the east side of Macon near the Ocmulgee River. Greyson had listened to all of his stories. He'd tried to indulge Ryan, if only to keep him malleable, and what good had it done?

Ryan's hometown had weathered an attack by some biker gang, apparently, and their current mayor had killed a bunch of them in the street like dogs. Or so the story went. Despite Ryan's complaints, it sounded like the place was thriving, even in his absence.

A gust of wind swept over Greyson, rustling his oversized denim jacket which he had worn for far too many days. He tucked the lighter back into its breast pocket and moved back a bit farther. The wind caught the growing flames and pushed them into a small stand of trees. Within seconds, the leaves caught fire and began to smolder. Then the branches turned into dozens of blazing torches.

The sight of it produced such a deep, aching sense of satisfaction that tears sprung into Greyson's eyes. He wiped them away, laughed, and forced himself to turn from the sight. If the townsfolk hadn't seen the wall of fire rising to the west, they would soon.

As much as he wanted to watch the show, Greyson didn't dare risk being caught. He cinched up the straps on his backpack, scratched at his whiskery cheeks and chin, and turned southeast. The road he was standing on took a meandering course south of Macon before hitting a highway near Rutland. From there, he could turn north and reach this other community within a day or two.

Thanks to Ryan, he knew enough about the community to have some advantage there. It was worth a shot, and he'd learned a few important lessons about dealing with people, thanks to the humiliation of New West Point. With a rising heat behind him, and the growing roar of fire sweeping across field and trees toward the town, Greyson set off down the road, fighting the tears and laughter with every step.

Jodi hoisted herself out of her chair, her back crying out in protest. She winced but bit back any complaints. The fact that her body just didn't seem to want to fully heal made her resent the pain and discomfort. It had been two years since the shooting and the motorcycle accident, but her arm still throbbed sometimes, her back almost always ached, and she got frequent headaches. Nothing seemed to help. Even so, life had to go on, so she pushed herself constantly, day after day. She told herself it was all to build a better world for her daughters, Violet and Kaylee.

As she crossed the living room, she heard the voices of her loved ones in the backyard. It sounded like they were having a debate. She rounded the dining room table and saw them out back. The yard was twice as big now as it had been. They'd pushed the fence back about twenty yards into the empty field behind the original property line. Jodi had no idea who owned the property, but it didn't much matter now. That was the old world.

About half of that new space had been used to expand the garden, and most of her family was gathered there now. Her mother, Beth, was standing near the far corner of the garden plot, gesturing with broad sweeps of her arm. Jodi's husband, Shane, was standing in front of his mother-in-law, arms crossed over his chest.

Violet and Kaylee were currently kneeling among the rows of the garden, pulling weeds. As Jodi stepped outside, she felt the

warm, dry air. It had been an unpleasant spring, but her memory of air-conditioning was fading.

“Are we figuring out all of the world’s problems?” Jodi said as she approached. Her brother, Mike, was seated on a plastic stool in the grass nearby, and Corbin stood leaning back against the fence.

Beth stopped mid-sentence and turned to her. “Jodi, dear, I thought you were resting.”

“I’m rested,” Jodi replied. She moved toward her husband. Shane briefly put his arm around her, but it was too warm for a lot of human contact. She delicately wiggled free and gave him a brief smile. “It sounded like a heated debate was going on out here.”

“Not heated,” Shane said with a shrug. “Just the usual problem, my dear. Our community is growing fast, and we need to expand the crops—both the community garden and the private gardens.”

“It’s so late in the season,” Jodi said. “There’s not a lot we can plant this late that’ll thrive.”

Beth had been gardening before the talk, and she still had her gardening gloves on. Her red flannel shirt was dirty, and her short gray hair was messy. She tapped her chin a few times, then said, “We’d have a lot of options if we had a place to plant them. Kale, brussels sprouts, cabbage, peas, lettuce. But every square inch of garden space in this town is planted and growing. We’ll need to clear and prepare the crop plots first, and that’s going to take time.”

Jodi’s brother, Mike, spoke up then, sitting up in his seat. “So we probably wouldn’t get anything planted until summer. Surely there’s some hardy vegetables that can be planted in the summer.”

“Sure,” Beth said. “Lots of things can be planted in the summer in time for a fall harvest. I’d also like to plant some garlic, though that’s thinking long-term. We could plant garlic in the summer or even as late as the fall, and it’ll grow.”

This produced a subdued response. Everyone looked around at each other.

“Wonderful,” Mike said, with that trademark sarcastic tone of his. “Let’s feed everyone garlic. Just plates and plates of garlic. That’ll keep them healthy and stink up the whole town at the same time. Two birds with one stone.”

Jodi considered this. There was still room to expand the garden here at the house, and there was a bit of room to spread out at the community garden beside the old tent camp. “Garlic has a lot of uses,” she said. “It can certainly be added to existing food stores to stretch out what we’ve got. I say let’s go for it.”

“Creating new plots will be tough work,” Mike said. For some reason, he seemed unenthusiastic about this project. Jodi figured it was mostly just his own discomfort and weakness. He was over his cancer, as far as they could tell. He’d even had his old chemo port removed, but like Jodi, he’d never fully recovered his strength. A big project like this probably seemed exhausting to him.

“You’re not wrong,” Jodi agreed, and as she said it, she felt a slight twinge in her back. “It’ll be tough work for sure, especially in this heat.”

Kaylee rose from the garden then, dropped a trowel she’d been holding, and picked her way down the row. She was just over nine years old, and she’d adjusted well to this new world. Indeed, Jodi thought she had an advantage. The sun had wiped out the modern world when she was six years old, so she’d accepted the changes more readily than some of the adults. At nine, she was a bit gangly, had a lot of Jodi in the shape of her face and the hazel of her eyes, and loved to be involved in everything.

“A chicken tractor,” Kaylee said, brushing the dirt off her knees and the seat of her pants. “Mom, we need to build a chicken tractor to help us get the crop plots ready!”

“A chicken tractor?” Jodi said with a smile.

“Sure, I read all about it in Grandma’s book,” Kaylee said, and when she smiled back, she showed a big gap where some of her baby teeth were missing. “It’s like a chicken coop on wheels. You just push the chickens along the ground, and they fertilize the soil for you, and it does a lot of the work of making the plots ready.” She ended her explanation with a big dramatic shrug.

“Well, I think that’s a great idea,” Jodi replied. She reached out to pat her daughter on the back, but that made the old bullet wounds in her arm twinge with discomfort.

I’m broken, and I’ll never be my old self again, Jodi thought. Kaylee’s idea, at least, would save them a bit of work, and for that, Jodi was grateful.

“It’s a good idea, Kaylee dear,” Beth said. “We’ll need to get to work on this right away, and we’ll need volunteers from the community. Let’s announce it at the big dinner tonight. Is everyone on board?” Beth looked from face to face.

Jodi nodded, as did Shane and Corbin. Mike shrugged and said, “I happen to like a bit of garlic now and again. Maybe we should grow some mint, too. Our breath will need it.”

“That’s settled, then,” Beth said. “I see chicken trucks in our future.”



The old American Legion building near the sheriff’s office had been turned into a community center. It had seemed like a better place to have big gatherings, and the auditorium in the high school carried bad memories of the earlier fighting before the community had achieved peace. Plus, it was closer to the city park, which had been largely transformed into the community garden. Through the small window across from her seat, Jodi could see the rows of cabbages, mustard greens, and lettuce that dominated one corner of the garden.

The interior of the community center was a simple open space with a terrazzo floor that probably dated to the 1950s, thin, poorly insulated walls, and rows of small windows. All of the

windows were uncovered to let in as much natural sunlight as possible, but the late afternoon sun was being aided by numerous small oil lamps set at regular intervals on the long folding tables.

The tables were set in rows, with a variety of folding chairs placed on either side. The tables and chairs practically filled the room and made for tight quarters, especially during communal dinners, when most people showed up. At the moment, there were probably close to five hundred people packed into the room. Dinner was arrayed in various pots, pans, and dishes on round tables at the front of the room, rather like a church potluck on a large scale. A wooden podium had also been installed on a small platform in a corner. These meals were a way to build community, but they were also a way to get everyone in the same room when something needed to be announced or discussed.

At the moment, most people were in line, getting their food, but Shane had insisted on serving Jodi. Sometimes, she fought him on this. She didn't want to feel helpless, but this evening, she'd given in. Violet was the first to return. On her right hand, she balanced a plate piled high with mashed potatoes and gravy, cubed ham, corn on the cob, and mustard greens. Her other hand held the harness for Ruby, her guide dog, who led her dutifully back to her seat across from Jodi.

"Do you want me to set your plate down for you?" Jodi asked, though she knew what her daughter would say before she asked it. Despite being visually impaired—or perhaps because of it—Violet hated being babied. She was as self-reliant as she could get away with being, and she didn't accept help from anyone, other than Ruby, unless it was absolutely necessary.

"I'm fine," Violet replied. She let go of Ruby's harness and felt along the edge of the table. Then she set her plate down, pulled back her own chair, and sat down. Ruby curled up on the floor beside her.

"Of course you are," Jodi replied. "I don't know why I ask."

"Because you're a mom, and moms always ask," Violet said. She had her hair pinned up in a nice way, and she was wearing

one of her nicest dresses. Jodi was glad to see her oldest daughter thriving. The transition to the new world had been especially difficult on her.

After a moment, the young man, Corbin, sat down beside her. His plate was almost overflowing with food. He'd been particularly generous with the mustard greens, and conversely, had only a tiny dollop of mashed potatoes with no gravy. The boy had unusual tastes.

"At least we got really good cooks around here," he said, before promptly scooping up a large forkful of greens.

Shane soon appeared, bearing a plate in each hand. He set one in front of Jodi, then took the seat beside her. Jodi's husband certainly knew her tastes. Generous on the mashed potatoes, light on the ham that had come from a jar. She thanked him with a smile and a nod and picked up her fork.

The rest of her family returned one by one with their plates, and all told they took up a large section of the table nearest the western windows. Her tribe. It felt good to be surrounded by them, good to see they were all doing well, and that everyone seemed to have a healthy appetite. Only Beth didn't join them. She was eating with Mayor James Cooley and a few other elected officials at a table near the podium.

"Mom, I drew a design for the chicken tractor," Kaylee said, slathering fresh butter on her corn on the cob. "I used the book's design, but I changed some things."

"That's great, Kaylee," Jodi replied. "When you get a chance, show it to Grandma and get her feedback, okay?"

"Okay," Kaylee said.

People were taking their seats all over the room, and the chatter of families and friends was getting louder. Jodi saw Mayor Cooley rise from his seat near the lectern and lean down to say something to Beth, who nodded in reply. Then he stepped up to the lectern, picked up a small stack of papers, and shuffled through them. He waited a second longer, then picked up a small gavel and rapped it on the lectern.

The chatter died down, and people turned in their seats toward the mayor.

“Folks, I hope you’re all enjoying this New Thanksgiving dinner,” he said, “and I hope you’ll forgive me for intruding. Please feel free to continue eating, but first...” He stepped over to the table and picked up a glass of wine. He brought it back to the podium and held it aloft. “I think it would be appropriate to raise a toast to everyone we’ve lost along the way. Here’s to the ones we loved and always remember.”

This caused a wave of somber replies, as people throughout the room raised their own glasses.

“To those we’ve lost,” he said and took a sip. Others did the same. Jodi picked up her glass of tea and took a drink. “We thought it might be nice to name their names,” the mayor continued. “Not just those who died, but those who left the community, and not just the people, but the beloved pets, too.” He lifted a piece of paper and held it into the light of a nearby window. Clearing his throat, he said, “First, we’ve got our sweet little dog, Bauer.”

He looked up and scanned the crowd until he found Kaylee. Jodi’s daughter looked like she was about to cry, so Jodi reached out and patted her gently on the shoulder.

“A sweet little puppy dog,” Mayor Cooley continued. “Died in her sleep one month ago. She was a loyal companion through all of our struggles, and I know she’s missed.”

He paused a moment, then nodded and continued. “Next, we’ve got Libby Holton, sister of Amelia, who left us for another community with her new fiancé. Doctor and Mrs. Yates went with her, as well. They are all missed, but we hope they are thriving.” He raised his glass again.

In fact, there’d been no word from any of those who had left. There simply was no functioning postal system these days, and as far as Jodi knew, no courier system either. It seemed like a problem that someone should resolve. There had to be a way to get messages from town to town, but that wasn’t something she could worry about it. There were more pressing needs.

“We also want to remember our dear friend Claire,” the mayor continued, “who passed from a liver disease six months ago.”

The mayor’s list continued for a bit. Indeed, the community had lost quite a few. Many had died, some had left for other places. Every family had been impacted, and the weight of it was heavy in the room. Yet it also made Jodi feel closer to everyone. All of the hardships had brought people together, as had the group efforts to provide for their many needs.

The mayor went on to explain some of the projects being done in the community, including the late-season expansion of the park garden. He even worked in a mention of Kaylee’s chicken tractor, at which point the nine-year-old perked up and gave her parents a big gap-toothed grin.

Finally, Mayor Cooley reached the last piece of paper in his stack, and he held it up. “One final piece of business,” he said. “The town council has been in discussion for a while now about giving a name to our new community. There were a lot of great suggestions from many of you, and we’ve considered them all. I’m proud to announce that we have finally made a choice.” He lifted his gaze and gave a dramatic pause.

Finally, Mike, raised a hand and made a little spinning gesture, as if to say, “Get on with it.” Mayor Cooley noticed this and smiled at him.

“Henceforth,” he said, “our little community will be known as Hickory Falls.”

James Cooley fanned his forehead and cheeks with a handkerchief, but it did little good. Opening all of the windows in the building didn't seem to help with this hot, dry air much. If anything, the arid breeze just made it harder to keep his papers in order. At the moment, he had a large map opened on the table in front of him, and he had to weigh down the corner with rocks to keep it from sailing away.

"Take a look at this, my love." He tapped a spot on the map where Beth had made some sketches. "So this is where we're expanding the community garden. We'll have to remove the old playground mat and haul off all of the old wood chips there."

"That's correct, honey," Beth said. "I've already got a team of volunteers working on it."

"Of course you do," James said, and gave her a smile and a gentle pat on the arm. Beth was always a step or two ahead of him, for which he was incredibly grateful. Most people in this town were usually three steps behind. "I can always count on you." And with that, despite the uncomfortable heat, he went in for a quick kiss on the lips.

Just then, he heard voices coming from outside of the small government building that served as the mayor's office. A group of about a dozen local men and women soon appeared in the foyer; they filed into the room and made a beeline for him.

“Good morning, friends,” James said. “Please tell me you’re bringing good news.”

The leader of the group seemed to be an old white-haired man in overalls. He had the leathery skin and callused hands of a man who had worked hard all his life. James knew him, of course. By now, he knew almost all of the residents of Hickory Falls. Winton Bray was an old farmer and the patriarch of a large family that lived on a nice piece of land on the eastern edge of the community.

“Mayor, we got us a problem,” Winton said, revealing a mouth with about seven teeth in it. “I hope you feel up to taking a little walk today, because we gotta show you something.”

James glanced at Beth, but she merely shrugged. “What is it, Winton?”

“We’ll tell you on the way, Mayor,” he replied, beckoning him with one rough hand.

James pushed his chair back and rose. In truth, he didn’t mind being pulled away from his work. The office was hot, stale, and stuffy. He always preferred being out and about.

“Lead the way,” he said to Winton.

The old farmer turned and led his group out of the building, James and Beth following behind. Somehow, it was less warm outside, even in the direct sunlight. James was only wearing a loose-fitting, short-sleeve shirt, and jeans. He had a baseball cap on his head, but he took it off and fanned his face with it.

The big community garden was across the street from the mayor’s office. James could see rows and rows of growing vegetables, and about two dozen people working in the area. He thought maybe Winton was going to lead him there, but instead, they headed down the road toward the residential area. They’d walked for a couple of minutes when Winton finally slowed a bit to walk beside James and Beth.

“I just can’t have a normal conversation in a stuffy old building like that, sir,” Winton said. Though he was probably ten years older than James Cooley, he always spoke to the man respectfully. “The thing is, we all came together here” — he

gestured at the other locals walking with them — “mostly just to talk about our gardens. Every family is trying to grow as much as they can, sharing when they’re able, and so on. My family’s got probably the biggest private garden—well, Beth, you might give us a run for our money—but I need you to see it, sir.”

“Is there a problem with your garden?” James asked.

“Sir, I’d really like you to see it for yourself first,” Winton said. He smoothed back his wispy white and turned down a side street. “You’ll pardon me if this is a terrible inconvenience, but then again, maybe the ol’ mayor enjoys a chance to stroll about his community.”

“I don’t mind,” James replied. And he meant it. This was far better than dealing with maps and plans and paperwork. He even dared to hold Beth’s hand as they walked. She seemed to be enjoying herself, as well, and the exercise was good for her. It was important for her health, especially with her heart problems. Before he left town to live with his wife’s parents, Dr. Yates had recommended regular low-impact exercise, like gardening and walking.

They walked through the winding neighborhood streets, crossed a bridge over the dry creek, and finally came in sight of the Bray residence and some other more rural houses. The big fence they’d built along the community’s border was visible in the distance. Winton’s home was a large ranch house set in the middle of about six acres of land. Two of those acres had been transformed into a large garden, of many rows behind a low, white fence. Winton headed straight for the garden.

He stepped over the low fence and gestured at the nearest row of large leafy green plants. James thought they looked like zucchini.

“Do you see the problem here?” Winton said, with a sweep of his arm. He looked at James, then at Beth. “Now, ma’am, I know you’re a bit of a gardening expert. Surely, you can see it.”

James examined the garden before him, and it didn't take long to see the problem. A lot had been planted here, a great variety of vegetables, and almost none of it was thriving. Many of the plants were withered and undergrown, quite a few leaves turned brown, and a few places had just a few small sprouts.

"Has something poisoned the garden?" he said. "Is it pests of some kind?"

Beth laughed at this and gave him a playful pat on the chest with the back of her hand. "Oh, James, you're not the gardener here, that's clear."

"A lot of gardens across town are like this," Winton said. At this, some of the people who had come with him voiced their agreement. "We're struggling, doing our best, but nothing thrives in this heat. The community garden is doing a bit better, and I'm sure that's mostly up to Beth's involvement. She seems to know what she's doing, but she can't visit every garden in town every day and help us keep our plants alive."

"It's the heat," Beth said. "And a lack of water."

"Yes," Winton said, with a dramatic nod. "It's hardly rained in a month. And this drought is driving the game away, too, so hunting and trapping aren't going well either. We just don't know what the heck to do."

James was out of his depth, and he knew it. He turned to Beth with a helpless look and a shrug.

"I'm afraid we'll need to take a bit more of a walk," Beth said. "I'd like to take a look at all of your gardens and see if some are doing better than others. We'll take note of how each of them is doing and figure out what our next step needs to be."

Winton breathed a big sigh of relief and swept his hair back again—it didn't like to stay in place. "Well, I'm glad you was there with the mayor, ma'am. Sounds like you're the one we need."

"She's the one, for sure," James said.

Beth looked at the garden again, nodded to herself, then said, "Okay, we've got our work cut out for us. Let's go."

It turned out to be quite a bit of walking. First, they headed all the way back to the mayor's office to get a leather binder with some paper and a pen. Then, they went from house to house to check out each family's garden. James carried the binder and took notes about each garden as directed by Beth. Many of the gardens were suffering under the heat, but they found a few, especially those planted near bodies of water or forested areas, that appeared to be thriving.

James felt a growing sense of stomach-churning dread. Even with every garden thriving, they were still struggling to produce enough food to feed their growing community. This was going to be a serious problem. As they walked through town, going from house to house, more people joined them. Before long, they had almost a hundred people on the garden tour, and James could see the same fears he had written on many of their faces.

Beyond the plants, they also had chickens to worry about. There were numerous coops in the community, and people depended on the chickens for eggs. Chickens that needed to be fed, too. After a while, people began to voice their concerns directly to James and Beth.

"Something has to be done about this," someone said. "We can't just let all of our food wither up in the sun!"

"We've all been learning to make do, but with this, we're on course for a real famine," said a particularly distressed woman. "And then what'll happen to our children?"

James knew he had to say something to assuage their fears, even if he wasn't sure what they were going to do. At that moment, they were cresting a hill in a nice neighborhood of large homes. He came to a stop and turned to face the crowd. "Folks, we're not just going to sit idly by and let a famine sweep through Hickory Falls. Now, didn't we just have a nice Thanksgiving dinner the other night?"

"We have food for now," Winton said. "The storehouses are full from last season, when we had better weather. What we're thinking about, sir, is the near future."

James glanced at Beth, and she nodded. “We’re not going to starve,” she said, swiping some dust off her shoulder as if swiping away their problems in a single stroke. “I’m a firm believer that the land in this area will continue to provide for us the way it always has in the past. There’s nothing to worry about. We may have to adjust our late planting and tend the struggling gardens more carefully, but the land won’t let us down.”

“We need rain,” someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

“I don’t suppose either of you know how to do a rain dance,” Winton said, with a nervous look. James couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“I’m willing to learn,” James said with a halfhearted chuckle. And he meant it. If he knew of a rain dance that had even a slight chance of working, he would have learned the damned thing.

“We don’t need that,” Beth said, with a thoughtful look. James could tell a plan was brewing in her head.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

Beth smiled. “Well, there’s still plenty of water in the creeks, ponds, and lake in this area. It’s a lot of work, but we can build more irrigation and bring the water to us. It’ll help us now, but if we build a good system, it’ll help us for years to come as well.”

“Is that really possible?” Winton said.

“There’s a lake almost due south of the town,” Beth said. “We can build irrigation channels, run pipes, whatever we have to do. Dig a reservoir here in town, fill it up, and we’ll have all the water we need right here. James and I will put together an engineering team to figure it out.”

She turned suddenly and looked at him, grimacing slightly. Clearly, she felt like she’d just overstepped her bounds. James was, after all, the elected mayor of Hickory Falls. But he hadn’t taken offense. On the contrary, he was extremely grateful for her input.

“Yeah, we’ll head back to my office right now, Beth and me,” he said, “and we’ll start drawing up plans for this, folks. Never you fear, we’re not going to let any of your families go hungry.”

“When can we expect to hear some concrete plans, sir?” Winton asked, and he gave his wispy hair another good stroke, even though there was no need this time. Sweat had plastered every strand to his leathery head.

“Let’s say the next town meeting,” James said. That gave them a week. Was it too soon? He didn’t know, but he also didn’t think he could take it back now. And it seemed to satisfy the crowd.

By the time the crowd dispersed, and James and Beth headed back to his office alone, he had a long list of every garden in town, with notes about the condition of each one, scribbled in his binder. He was still worried. His stomach felt like it was tied up in knots, and he grabbed her hand, needing a bit of comfort. When that wasn’t enough, he leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Even a hint of a famine was terrifying. But Beth still didn’t seem all that concerned. He waited until they were out of earshot of anyone else before asking her about it.

“You’re really not worried about the drought, are you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’m telling you, James, I’ve lived here for many years, and the land has never let me down. I don’t think it’s going to start now. We just have to work with what it’s provided us. If that means bringing in the water from the lake, so be it.” She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “We’re part of this land now, and it’s part of us. We need each other.”

It was some highfalutin talk, but he decided to let her confidence rule the day. If she believed it, that was good enough for him.

Shane adjusted his position and raised the binoculars to his eyes. The watchtower creaked beneath him, and he felt a moment of vertigo. The design of the tower was sound, and he'd taken his time to do it right. Even so, the narrowness of the platform was always a bit disconcerting at this height. They'd built just behind the western fence right beside the highway.

He'd spotted movement in the distance, and now, as he gazed through the binoculars, he found the source of it. Far to the west, a large group of people was parked in the middle of the road. In the bright morning sunlight, he saw about two dozen large tents, evidence of a campfire, and various people moving about. It looked they were preparing a meal, but at the same time, a small group was taking down the tents. They were a desperate and dirty lot, and he saw many anxious faces and emaciated bodies. And, as Shane watched, two men stepped to the edge of the camp, gazing east at the high fence that marked the boundary of Hickory Falls. One pointed, then the other, and they both nodded.

Headed this way, he thought. A group that large will move slowly, but they'll reach the gate in an hour. And then what?

He lowered the binoculars, then set them on a shelf that had been built behind the wall of the watchtower. He proceeded to climb the ladder to the ground thirty feet below, then headed back into town. Thus far, outsiders and refugees had mostly trickled into the community—single families, or individuals.

This was the biggest group he'd seen, and he doubted they were just passing through.

Shane made his way to the mayor's office, where he found James and Beth in a meeting with some locals. They were seated around a table, heads bowed over some paperwork. When Shane entered, Beth looked up first, and something about the expression on his face seemed to communicate the gravity of his intrusion. She patted James on the shoulder, and he set his pen down and looked up.

"Shane, weren't you on the watchtower?" James said.

"We need to call a town meeting," Shane said, dabbing the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve. "Right away. Ring the bell and get people to the community center. Come on." As he turned, James and Beth both rose from their seats.

"What did you see?" Beth asked.

"About a hundred and fifty desperate people headed this way," Shane replied, and promptly walked back outside.

He headed for the community center, which was about two hundred yards south of the mayor's office. They'd mounted an old church bell in a metal stand in the front yard. It was the only reliable way to summon the whole town to emergency meetings. By the time Shane approached the bell, he heard the group from the mayor's office catching up to him.

He didn't wait. There wasn't time. Shane grabbed the rope and began pulling it, turning the wheel which began swinging the bell. The sound was quite loud and sharp, and it carried far and wide. When James and Beth reached him, he paused a moment in the ringing.

"Did they look dangerous?" James asked.

"They looked..." Shane considered this. "Determined. Hungry. And definitely headed this way."

James reached for the rope. "Let me ring the bell some more. You head inside with the others and start setting out the chairs."

Shane went inside the community center. All of the folding chairs were currently stacked against the side walls between the windows. He began unfolding them and setting up rows. Beth and a few others joined him. Within minutes, other townsfolk began filing into the room, drawn by the bell. Jodi came with Kaylee, Violet, and Mike. Owen and Amelia appeared a few minutes after them, pushing their little toddler, Katie, in a stroller.

Within twenty minutes, the room was full, and the crowd was buzzing with anxiety. A sudden meeting on a bright Tuesday morning could only be bad news, and they all knew it. Finally, Shane joined James and Beth at the chairs behind the lectern. James waited a few more minutes as some stragglers came in. Then he rose and approached the lectern, signaling for the crowd to quiet down.

“Folks, I’m sorry to get you all out here so early,” he said, his strong voice filling the room. “I’m going to let Shane here tell you what he saw from the western watchtower this morning.”

He beckoned Shane, who rose and took the mayor’s place at the lectern. Hundreds of anxious eyes peered at him. The room was packed. Almost the entire town was here.

“Well, folks, I’ll just get to the point,” Shane said. He didn’t quite have the presentation skills of the mayor. It was always a bit awkward. “We’ve got a big group of refugees approaching our community from the west. At least a hundred people, maybe more.”

This caused ripples of alarm to go through the crowd. Immediately, people began asking questions, speaking over each other, and James had to step up beside Shane and signal people to silence.

“We can’t respond to everyone all at once,” James said. “Shane, why don’t you describe this group a little more. What did they look like? What were they doing?”

“Breaking camp,” Shane replied. “They must have arrived and set up their tents in the middle of the night because the watcher on the wall didn’t report seeing them yesterday evening. I only saw adults, no kids, but they looked pretty

desperate and dirty. And definitely hungry. They were maybe a mile or two west of the gate when I saw them.”

Mike raised his hand and spoke then. It looked like Jodi’s brother had just gotten out of bed. He was wearing a white T-shirt and sweatpants, with a baseball cap pulled over his messy hair. “So what you’re saying, Shane, is that we’d all better arm ourselves and prepare for invasion?”

Shane glanced at James. The mayor answered. “Arm yourselves, yes, but we’re not going to open fire on these people just for approaching the town.”

“I didn’t say open fire,” Mike replied. “But we’ve dealt with dangerous intruders before. Most of them riding motorcycles, but still...whoever these people are, they need to know right up front that we’re ready to defend our property and loved ones, right? That’s how we set the tone.”

Jodi was seated beside him, but she rose and said, “It’s entirely possible that they’re just starving and looking for help. We should expect refugees, especially now that so many of the old sources of food are gone.”

Way back in the back row, Winton rose and raised both hands over his head to draw attention. James gestured at him.

“Why, we can barely feed ourselves, sir,” he said. “We just don’t have the means to feed a hundred more people. I’m sorry, it ain’t what I learned in church growing up, but we just gotta turn them away.”

“Keep them out,” someone else shouted. “They’re not welcome here.”

Jodi raised her hand again. “Shouldn’t we at least hear what they have to say before we turn them away? What if they want to make a trade? What if they have some news that we need to hear? What if they have people who are dying? Can we just sit here and let them die?”

That seemed to sway some of the crowd. Shane could see sympathetic looks, some nodding, especially the mothers and grandmothers of Hickory Falls. But Winton wasn’t finished.

“Sir, I don’t want to sit here and watch my own children die because we got even more mouths to feed,” he said.

This got a few cheers and applause from about a third of the crowd, somber nods of agreement from quite a few more. And that, in turn, led to people speaking over each other again, which quickly rose into shouting. James patted the air in an attempt to get people to settle down, but finally he had to pound his fists on the lectern a few times. That did the trick.

“Okay, folks, here’s what we’re going to do,” he said. “I’m going to send a small delegation to meet with these refugees and see what they want. We’ll keep them from entering our town for the time being, if they’re amenable to that. Then we’ll meet again tonight and take a vote on what to do with them. Does that seem fair?”

“I just ask that you all think of the kind of world we’re creating if we don’t err on the side of compassion,” Jodi said, before sitting down with a grimace. Shane could tell her back was hurting her.

“What kind of world are we creating if we let outsiders take the food right out of our children’s mouths?” Winton said, before he sat down as well.

“No further debate,” James said, with enough intensity that it ended all residual discussion. “Now, we have a plan, and you can discuss this in your homes. We’ll ring the bell again at sunset and take a vote. That’s it, now. That’s all we can do.”

As for Shane, he felt conflicted. Jodi had always been compassionate to a fault, while he’d typically leaned more toward Winton’s way of thinking. He wanted to protect his own above all else, but did Jodi have a point? Maybe. What sort of message would it send Kaylee and other youngsters if they let a group starve to death right outside of their gate?



In the end, it was Shane, Beth, and James who went to meet with the refugees. They were all armed, of course, just in case. James had his old service pistol holstered at his side. Shane

had his trusty Glock, and Beth carried a .38 in her jacket pocket. After the crowd dispersed, the three of them headed through town toward the western gate. The watchtower rose above the treetops near the gate like a silent sentinel, gazing upon an outside world that had become something of a mystery to the residents of Hickory Falls.

Through gaps in the fence, he could see people milling about. The refugees were close, but they hadn't tried to breach the gate or climb the fence—not yet. James was wearing a button-up dress shirt and khaki pants now in an attempt to appear somewhat formal. He'd explained that he thought it might affect the way the outsiders responded to him. Shane had done the same, but Beth didn't seem to think it mattered. She was wearing the same flannel shirt and dirt-stained jeans as she often did.

The gate was latched on the inside with a large wooden beam reinforced with scrap metal. Before raising it, Shane peered through a gap in the boards at the group beyond. It seemed they had gathered in the middle of the road about fifty yards from the fence. They were all huddled there now, men and women, and some kids, he could see now, too, in filthy, tattered clothing. It was a miserable-looking collection of people.

“We're going to approach them like friends,” James said, “but I want you each to be ready in case they turn hostile on us. We may have to fight our way back inside the fence.”

“I'll be ready,” Beth said, patting the bulge in her pocket.

Shane patted the holster at his belt. James nodded, then grabbed the wooden beam and slid it aside, unlocking the gate. He swung the gate open, the hinges creaking ominously. Shane saw the old road stretching off to the west, already pitted and overgrown. Nature was encroaching into the old places fast.

The refugees were mostly sitting or lying on the ground, some on the road and some on the gravel shoulders. But two men were standing. One was tall, shockingly thin, and mostly bald, dressed in a T-shirt so dirty, its original color could not be

determined. The other was much shorter, with a long mop of unruly black hair and scruffy beard of tight black curls.

As soon as Shane, James, and Beth passed through the open gate, the two men approached. The tall one had a pronounced limp; the other walked hunched over, as if his back hurt. They both looked like they hadn't eaten in weeks.

The tall one spoke first, extending a dirty hand. "Greetings, friends."

Shane really didn't want to grab the man's hand, but James didn't seem to mind. He shook his hand vigorously.

"Friends, my name is Laird," the stranger said. "This fellow here is Millard. I can't tell you how grateful we are that you've come out to speak with us." He sounded exhausted, constantly out of breath. "We could see a community on the other side of the fence, but we weren't sure how to get your attention."

The shorter guy named Millard started to speak, then coughed drily a few times, and tried again, "Look, it's clear you're some kind of leaders here." As he said it, he gestured at Shane, and Shane thought, *Dressing up worked!* "We're not here to hurt anyone or take anything. We just need help."

"What's your story, guys?" Shane said.

"Where did you come from and how did you wind up in this condition?" Beth added.

Laird bowed his head. "We're from a town west of Macon. We called it Haven. We were already struggling, but we stuck together and helped each other. The desperation you see now, it's not just a lack of food. Actually, we just barely escaped a wildfire that burned out of control and swept through our town in the middle of the night. We had to leave most of our stuff behind to escape it."

"The fire's still burning," Millard said. "It's going like crazy west of Macon. Burning due south at the moment. We can't go back."

"We're so tired, and we barely have any supplies left," Laird said. "We already had to leave some people behind who were too weak to continue."

“We’re not here for handouts,” Millard said, furiously scratching his thick beard. “We’ll do anything to earn our keep. We’ll work our fingers to the bone. We just need food and water, or we’re going to die.”

Shane looked past the men at the group gathered in the distance. They were all watching this exchange with wide, fearful eyes. Perhaps they felt like Hickory Falls was their last hope. It got to Shane. He felt sorry for them. This was true human wretchedness. Then his gaze went past them to the distant horizon. And did he sense just a slight brown haze there, as of smoke coming from very far away? He thought so, but it might have been an optical illusion.

“We have nowhere else to go,” Laird said. “We won’t make it to the next town.”

Shane traded a look with Beth, who sighed and nodded. She felt it, too. Sympathy. Or perhaps, more accurately, empathy.

“Okay, listen here, fellas,” James said, after a moment. “I can’t just let you into the gate, okay? Our settlement is a democracy, so we’ll have to call a town meeting and take a vote. And whatever the people decide, we’ll abide by it.”

Laird nodded sadly, and Millard grunted.

“We understand,” Millard said.

“We’re not going to storm the gate,” Laird said. “We’ll be out here, praying for your mercy.”

James shook his filthy hand again, then motioned for Shane and Beth to follow him back through the gate. Shane turned to leave, but Beth hesitated a moment and then said, “We’ll have emergency water and food brought to you as soon as possible. Even if the vote doesn’t go your way, you’ll get a little relief. Mark my words.”

She glanced sharply at James, as if daring him to challenge her, but he just shrugged and headed back into town. Shane and Beth followed after.



Beth was as good as her word, and Shane even helped her. Before the town meeting that evening, they delivered a few gallons of boiled water from the creek and some basic food supplies, enough to give the group one good meal. The food came directly out of Beth's own storehouse, so she wasn't stepping on any toes to do it.

Later, when the whole family headed to the town meeting, Beth told the others what she'd done.

"I think it was right," Jodi said, and as she said it, she patted Kaylee on the back, as if to emphasize the moment. "We take care of ourselves, but that doesn't mean we sit by and watch people starve to death without an ounce of pity."

Kaylee seemed to consider this, tapping her fingers against her lips for a moment. "If everyone votes to keep them out, they'll starve anyway," she said finally. "Will we sneak food to them or something?"

"We will plead our case as best we can," Jodi said, "but in the end, we will abide by the vote. That's how democracy works."

When they arrived at the community center, they found it even more packed than it had been earlier. Word had traveled, clearly, and every seat was full. Some people were forced to stand along the walls or sit on the floor. A few were there in wheelchairs or using walkers or braces. And already a cacophony of voices filled the room and echoed out into the town.

James went alone to the lectern this time. He typically didn't let any of his friends join him when there was a vote. It was a way to avoid any appearance of favoritism, though Shane found it unnecessary. As for Shane, he wound up sitting between Jodi and Beth on the second row.

"Folks, we're going to get right to it," James said. "We've met with these refugees camped outside the western gate, and it seems they've fled a wildfire that burned down their town. They told us they don't want any handouts. They'll work and earn their keep. At least, that's what they said, but their story seems believable. Wouldn't you agree, Shane? Beth?"

He looked at them in turn. Shane nodded.

“We’ve already argued this issue, so we’re just going to vote now,” James said. “Either we let these people into our community, or we keep them out. That’s the decision. All in favor of keeping them out, raise your hands.”

Shane glanced around the room. He saw a lot of troubled expressions. Clearly, this wasn’t an easy decision, and hands went up gradually. Winton was one of the first, then others followed suit. Soon, it seemed close to half the room had their hands in the air. James’s lips moved as he silently counted them, then he made a mark on a piece of paper on the podium.

“Okay, then,” he replied, “all in favor of letting them in, allowing them to work and earn provisions, raise your hands.”

Hands went down, and other hands went up. These seemed a bit more enthusiastic, at least. Shane raised his own hand, as did most of the rest of his family. He noted, however, that Corbin didn’t vote either way. The young man was sitting in his chair beside Violet, a slight scowl on his face, with his arms crossed. When Violet raised her hand to let the refugees in, he glanced at her, but he did not join her.

James counted again and made another note on his paper. Then, with a sigh and a nod, he said, “Well, it was close, but the results are clear. By a vote of two hundred and twenty-eight to two hundred and seventeen, we have decided to let the refugees into our community.” This caused a few disgruntled murmurs, and Winton rocked his head back on his shoulders. “I’ll put together the welcome wagon to coordinate their introduction. Folks, I’ll make sure we handle this the right way.”

Corbin finally raised his hand, as if to cast a late vote. However, when James motioned at him, he rose and said, “What about the wildfire? If a fire burned their town, it might spread. Is it visible yet? Do we know if it’s a danger to us?”

Shane rose and answered him. “I thought I could see a slight haze, but it might have been a trick of the light. The refugees said it’s mostly spreading south. I think we’re safe.”

Corbin didn't appear to be satisfied with this answer. Lips pursed, he sat down again, but he said nothing else.

"It's settled then," James said, drumming his hands on the lectern. "We open the gate."

This was right up Jodi's alley, even if her body didn't want to cooperate fully. The refugees had been taken to a large open field not far from the community center, and as she stood in the open flap of the large triage tent gazing upon them, she thought she had never seen such a more miserable or pitiful group of people in her entire life.

Fortunately, many in the community had volunteered to help with the arduous process of tending to them. Even many who had voted against letting them in were now working hard to help. At the moment, there were locals setting up tents, while others went among the refugees, figured out who everybody was, and sent the injured and sick to the triage tent. It was a large-scale effort, but Jodi was pleased to see everyone working together.

At the moment, she watched as Violet knelt beside a small family, Ruby at her side, and quietly chatted with them—a mother, with a teenaged daughter and a much younger son. After a moment, Violet gestured at the daughter, rose, and said something to Ruby. The dog began leading her toward the triage tent. The daughter glanced at her mother, who nodded, then proceeded to follow Violet.

As they approached the open tent flap, Jodi stepped to one side. "Who is your new friend, Violet?" she asked.

The question was mostly to alert her visually impaired daughter to her location, but Violet perked up and said, "Her name is Yukari. She's got a really bad stomachache, Mom. It's

been hurting for a couple of days, so she needs to get checked out.”

Indeed, Yukari’s face was twisted in pain. She appeared to be about thirteen or fourteen, with shoulder-length black hair that was cut very simply. She had a round face, sad eyes, prominent ears, and she wore a plain checkered blue dress that was absolutely filthy with dirt, and full of soot from the wildfire. She smelled strongly of smoke.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Jodi said to the girl as she followed Violet into the tent. “We’re going to look after you now.”

Yukari just grabbed her belly in both hands and whimpered. Inside the large tent, the townsfolk had set up about a dozen cots as makeshift hospital beds, and every single local person with any sort of medical background was in there to help the sick and injured. Doctors, nurses, dentists, EMTs, pharmacists—any medical background would do. About two-thirds of the beds were being used, and a few of the people lying on them were in critical condition. Fortunately, the town had access to medical supplies, though they really could have used some electronic equipment to monitor vital signs.

Violet brought Yukari to one of the nurses and began to speak with her. Jodi knew the young refugee was in good hands now, so she turned and looked out across the field again. She’d spent most of the day moving from group to group, acting as a kind of organizational manager to coordinate various forms of help. As she gazed across the field, she saw her mother, Beth, struggling to unload a large crate, while a few refugees attempted to help her. They seemed to be having trouble, so Jodi headed in that direction.

She’d taken a couple of ibuprofen, so she wasn’t hurting quite as badly at the moment. As she made her way across the field, she saw numerous groups moving about. Some were dishing out food or clean water. Most of the refugees were as good as their word, working hard and contributing as much as they could to the effort, despite looking ragged and exhausted.

When she got close to her mother, Jodi realized she was attempting to unload some rather large bundles of fabric,

which had been carefully packed with paper inside a large, handmade crate. One of the people trying to help her was the short, bearded refugee leader named Millard, and the two people helping him seemed to be his wife—also short with jet-black hair—and his teenaged son, who had the first scruffy beginnings of a dark, curly beard like his father.

“Mother, is there a problem over here?” Jodi asked. “Could you use a little more help?”

Beth had a big tightly folded bundle of fabric in her arms, but she was struggling to get it out of the densely packed crate. She grunted and let go, and it slid back down. Then she dabbed her cheeks with the sleeve of her flannel shirt and turned to Jodi.

“Our dear friend Winton donated a ton of fabric,” Beth said. “I guess his wife makes their clothes, and she has a huge stockpile. He thought we could use some of it to make new clothes, blankets, and whatever else for the refugees.”

Jodi approached the crate and looked down inside. Winton’s wife clearly believed in economy of space. She had packed as much fabric into the crate as humanly possible, and tucked what looked like butcher paper into the small gaps.

“So much of what we have is smoke damaged,” Millard said. The poor man really needed a bath. He was just grimy, and when he began to sweat, it turned the dirt on his face into muddy drops that left tracks as they fell. “The town almost got surrounded by the fire, and we just made it out through a gap on the east side.”

Jodi considered the tightly packed crate. Trying to dig the folded stacks of fabric out of there was a good way to wrench her back and make her arm hurt. “Mom, I’ll find someone with a crowbar to help you get this unpacked,” she said. “Hold tight.”

She turned and scanned the crowd. After a moment, she spotted Corbin, who was just finishing setting up a big blue tent. He was a strong young man, and he’d only gotten stronger in the last year. At the moment, he was dressed in a short-sleeve green T-shirt, and he’d rolled the sleeves up to his

shoulders. His hair, which had grown out, was combed back and tied into a short ponytail, and he had a deep tan—all indications of a young man who worked outside frequently.

Jodi approached him just as he was rising, having driven the last tent spike into the ground. He tossed the rubber mallet he was using into the air, let it spin a couple of times, then caught it again. Only then did he notice Jodi's approach, and he quickly tossed the mallet onto the ground.

"I don't know who's sleeping in this tent," he said, "but it's ready. It's pretty nice. It's a Eureka Copper Canyon, not another one of those cheap dome tents."

"I think these people are thankful for any tent right now," Jodi said. "Anyway, the tents are temporary. We'll work on getting them into more permanent housing as soon as we can."

"I'd almost prefer the tents," Corbin said with a shrug. "Better than a poorly ventilated house sometimes, especially without working HVAC systems."

She laughed. "You're free to set yourself up in one. I'm sure someone would appreciate the actual bed you sleep on. Hey, Beth really needs your help right now. Would you do me a favor and grab a crowbar? She needs you to unpack an overpacked crate."

He looked past her shoulder, spotted Beth and the big crate, and saluted Jodi. "You got it," he said. "You know," he added, "you don't have to run yourself ragged. You could let other people do a bit of their own problem-solving. It would be good for them, and you wouldn't break your back."

"Thanks for the advice, Corbin," she replied.

He saluted her again, picked up the mallet, and headed off toward the small tent where they'd stored a bunch of tools. He'd made a good point, she had to admit. Jodi couldn't help trying to coordinate all of the teams. Someone had to keep the big picture in mind, and no one else had stepped forward to do it. Still, she was already reaching her limit, and she could feel it in her body. Ibuprofen could only do so much.

She turned around, looking for something else to do, and spotted Violet and Ruby coming out of the triage tent. She went to meet them. Violet clearly shared Jodi's natural tendency to make sure stuff got done. Ruby saw her coming first and turned Violet toward Jodi, and Jodi cleared her throat to give away her location.

"Mom, that girl's going to be okay," Violet said. "They think she has gastritis, so they gave her some Pepcid, and now she's resting."

"You're doing a great job, Violet," Jodi said, giving her daughter a hug.

"There are just so many people to help," Violet said, "but it sounds like everyone is pitching in."

"Why don't we join forces?" Jodi said. "I'll let you take the lead. How does that sound?"

Violet shrugged one shoulder, but she smiled. She was very independent and didn't like to be coddled, so Jodi had chosen her wording carefully.

"Okay, that's fine," Violet said after a moment.

"Great, what would you like to do next?" Jodi asked. "Your choice."

Violet tapped a finger against her lips. She'd dressed very practically today, in a long-sleeve T-shirt and jeans, with a kerchief over her hair. She'd also chosen to put on a pair of sunglasses to cover her eyes, something she hadn't done for quite a while. Jodi assumed it was a self-conscious act caused by all of the new people.

"You know, Mom, I heard Dad and some other people talking about housing these people in the community," Violet said. "I think I'd like to be part of that conversation. Maybe we could invite a few to live with us, just until more permanent places are ready."

"We don't have a lot of room," Jodi replied.

"We could take one person, Mom," Violet said, tipping her head to one side. "Come on. We took Corbin, didn't we? It's

the nice thing to do.”

“Okay, maybe one,” Jodi said with a sigh. “Let’s go find your father. I’ll suggest it.”

They set off across the field. It didn’t take long to spot Shane. He was standing with a small group of men and women near the tool tent, and they seemed to be deep in conversation. James, Winton, Owen, Amelia, and the tall refugee named Laird were there. As they drew near, Jodi overheard the conversation.

“I don’t want another tent camp in the town,” Shane said. “It’ll become a logistical problem, an environmental problem, and it will create a caste system in Hickory Falls.”

“There just aren’t enough houses left for all of these people,” James said, “and many of the empty homes have fallen into ruin. At least if they’re here in tents, they’ll be in one place, where it will be easier to look after them.”

“But it needs to be a temporary solution,” Shane said. “If we’re going to take them in, they need to be assimilated into the community. Otherwise, there’s going to be a sense that they’re outsiders, and that could create tension.”

Owen was currently holding his squirming toddler, Katie, who clearly wanted to get down and run around. “I could put together a team to start building cabins,” he said.

“That’ll take time, especially if we do it right,” Shane said.

Violet let Ruby lead her right up to the group, and she inserted herself between her father and the mayor. She cleared her throat to draw attention and spoke. “The hospitable thing to do is to take people into our own homes. If every household took in a few people, then we wouldn’t need this tent camp. And people would get assimilated fast.”

Her sudden arrival and participation seemed to catch everyone off guard. They all turned to her slowly, and then Shane smiled and patted her on the back.

“Well, truth be told, I didn’t want ’em here in the first place,” Winton said, with a sideways glance at Laird, “but they’re here, so that’s that. I’m not letting folks sleep on the ground

like animals. I have a guest house on my property. It's a little one-bedroom thing near the creek. As long as they're willing to earn their keep, I could take in a whole family."

Jodi winced at the man's opening insult, but Laird didn't seem offended. "We'll earn every meal and every cup of water," he said.

"Taking people into local homes," James said, fanning himself with his hat. "It's not a bad idea, as long as locals are willing. It'll make the newcomers feel like they're part of the town."

Jodi stepped forward then. "We don't have a lot of room left in our house, but we could take one or two. We'll fix up the garage as a bedroom or something like that."

"One or two at most, yeah," Shane said. "Preferably just one."

Laird nodded and ran his hands over his greasy hair. "I wouldn't expect anyone to take in more people than they can handle."

Just then someone cleared his throat behind Jodi. His shadow moved over Violet as he approached the group. Looking over her shoulder, she saw a young man. He wore a denim jacket and jeans, with black boots. His hair was dark and curly, flopping over his forehead and ears. His face was pleasant enough, with a strong, straight nose, lips that seemed perpetually curled into a smile. But there was something anxious in his eyes. Clearly, he'd been through trauma, too.

"Pardon me for listening," he said. "I know I wasn't invited to this group, but I happened to be passing by."

"It's not a closed group," James said. "We welcome any input."

"Oh. Great," the young man said, rubbing his hands together. "Well, it's just that..." He nodded at Jodi and Shane. "You guys said you had room for one person, and, well, I'm all alone now. Lost all my family after the...you know, the Big Event. Good news is I don't eat much. I'm a hard worker, and I'm neat and tidy. Put a cot in the garage, and I'll be content." He held up his hands in what looked like a plea for mercy.

Jodi felt sorry for him. There was something sad in his expression. She traded a look with Shane, who shrugged and nodded.

“I think that would be okay,” Shane said. “If you’re willing to work, you can help us transform the garage into a decent living space.”

“I’ll work hard every day, I promise,” the young man said.

Shane extended his hand. The young man glanced at it, then smiled, and shook hands with him. Jodi extended her hand, and he took it next. He had a firm, dry handshake, and she didn’t get any bad vibes off him.

“I’m Jodi McDonald,” she said. “My husband is Shane. This is Violet here, our daughter, with her guide dog, Ruby. And over there, we’ve got my older son, Owen, with his wife, Amelia, and their little one, Katherine—we call her Katie.”

As she introduced them, the young man nodded at each person in turn. Finally, he said, “Well, I want to thank all of you for your hospitality. It’s been a rough few weeks, I can tell you that. My name’s Greyson.”



It only seemed right to get the young man settled. He’d been on the road with the others long enough, sleeping in fields and forests, eating whatever scraps they could find. While the others continued working in the camp, Jodi met up with Beth and Corbin, who’d finally gotten the crate unloaded, and the three of them took the young man to their house. All of his worldly possessions fit in a small backpack, which he carried on his right shoulder.

As they walked there, Jodi felt just a light, momentary concern. She’d agreed to take this young man into her home awfully fast. Her first impression was positive, but was it enough? He only reinforced that impression during the walk, but she still wondered if she hadn’t committed a bit too hastily. Of course, she wouldn’t back out of it now. That would be cruel.

It seemed the best course of action was to get to know him and see if her initial impression held up, so on the way, as they walked through the streets, she began chatting with him.

“So, Greyson, what did you do in your former life?” she asked.

Jodi was walking on his left side, Corbin on his right, with Beth leading the way.

“Actually, I was a firefighter,” Greyson replied. He was gripping the strap of his backpack tightly in both hands. Jodi could see the bulge of some small rectangular object in his breast pocket. “I know that’s ironic considering what happened to us, but I just didn’t have the resources to save my town. It had already burned through New West Point and some rural homes, but we didn’t know how fast it was moving. Believe me, I did what I could.” He spoke softly, as if the memory of the wildfire still hurt him deeply.

“Did you make a firebreak to slow the fire?” Corbin said.

“We didn’t have much time,” Greyson replied. “Mostly, I just tried to get people out of town before the flames swept over us. I wasn’t very successful, I’m sorry to say. Anyway, we joined up with these other refugees on the road. Their town had burned, too. We were going to head north first. There’s a religious community living in Whispering Pines. They’re like Amish people or something. We’d heard they’re very generous, but most people didn’t want to go there, so we came east instead.”

“To my knowledge, there’s never been an Amish community in Macon,” Beth said.

“No, I said they’re *like* the Amish,” Greyson said. “You know, super religious. They probably would have taken us in, but we didn’t want to go there.” And then, as if to change the subject, he said, “Are there any firefighters here in Hickory Falls?”

They were passing the mayor’s office. The community garden was in sight across the street. A small group of locals was working on the garden expansion at the moment. When one of them glanced in their direction, Beth raised a hand in greeting.

“I’m afraid we’re all out of firefighters,” Beth said over her shoulder. “There used to be a small volunteer crew that served the community, but they either died or they never came back to town after the CME. The old firehouse is still standing. It’s a small, metal pole barn near the sheriff’s station, but it’s abandoned.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” Greyson said. “The wildfire that burned our town is still raging out there west of Macon. It’s so hot and there’s been a lot of wind lately. You guys could be in trouble.”

Jodi felt a quaver of disquiet in her stomach. Of the many, many things she’d fretted about in the last year, wildfires simply hadn’t been on the list.

“It’s west of Macon,” Beth noted. “It would have to burn its way across the entire city, or encircle it from the south, to reach us. I think that’s quite unlikely.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Greyson said, “but I’ve never seen a wildfire this wild before.”

“Beth is right,” Corbin said, almost cutting him off. “A fire that could burn all the way across Macon would be historically unprecedented. Even in this heat, it seems very unlikely. Anyway, we’d see it coming long before it got here. We could create firebreaks and keep it away from the town. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Greyson gave Corbin a sideways glance, as if appraising this rather confident and intense young man. Jodi didn’t blame him. It had taken her a while to warm up to Corbin when she’d first met him, as well.

“I sure hope you’re right, man,” Greyson said, after a moment. “I really do.”

He seemed like a decent enough young man, but he was clearly shaken by his recent experiences. And he had a lingering fear about the fire that had driven him and the other refugees east. Beth thought maybe that was a good thing. As they made their way back to her house, she considered the real risk of this wildfire. It just didn't seem likely that it would get this far east, but then again, she couldn't ignore the possibility. Maybe it was a good thing that they had a firefighter in their community now.

As they came in sight of the house, she pointed it out. These days, Beth's old home had a high fence surrounding the entire property, which was now about an acre and a half, and even a watchtower posted in one corner of the yard. Greyson whistled.

"It's like an old Civil War fort," Greyson said.

"A Civil War fort would have trenches and rifle pits," Corbin pointed out. "Not to mention a wall with parapets, curtain walls, and a bridge with a sally port."

Greyson glanced at him again, but gave him a weird expression. Corbin caught the expression and said, "I mean, I would love to have all of those things, but we just never got around to building them."

"Well, hey, if you guys decide to build them, count me in," Greyson said. "I like to do hard work."

"That's good," Beth said, "but we won't need any Civil War-era fortifications. I think the days of invading biker gangs and

hostile locals is behind us.”

“You’re probably right,” Greyson said.

They reached the gate, which Beth had left unlocked. Hickory Falls felt safe enough these days, especially with the town fence surrounding them. She swung open the gate to reveal Mike’s glorious old Ford LTD, which had long-since run out of gas. It sat now as a relic and memory of the olden days. Greyson whistled in amazement as they walked past the car, bending down to look in the windows.

“Plush red carpet on the inside,” he noted. “Fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror. Man, it looks comfortable in there.”

“A whole circus could sleep in there, with room for the funnel cake stand,” Corbin said.

It was a strange little joke that fell flat, though Beth thought that was largely due to Corbin’s awkward-as-usual delivery. Instead of going through the front door, Beth began the house tour in the garage, since that was where they planned to put their guest. With Corbin’s help, she raised the garage door and led the group inside. One wall was stacked high with boxes, and there were some shelves and a worktable covered in tools and assorted junk, but about half the garage was now clear. Additionally, a large scrap piece of carpet had been laid down over the concrete floor.

“What do you think?” Beth said. “If we insulated the outer door a bit, maybe added a window, and some creature comforts, do you think you could live here for the time being?”

Greyson looked around, scratched his head, and finally said, “Sure, it’s a lot better than sleeping on a highway. Ma’am, you’re not going to get any complaints from me about accommodations. I’m not an ingrate, and I’m not spoiled.”

“That’s good to know,” Beth said.

“I hold on to things very lightly now,” he added. “When your whole life burns down in front of your eyes, you learn to do that.”

Beth glanced at Jodi. “Well, we’ve done a lot of work to make Hickory Falls a livable community. You should feel comfortable settling in here. We’re about as safe as we can be here.”

Greyson cocked his head to one side, seemed like he was considering whether or not to say something, then finally said, “Safe is an interesting word to use, under the circumstances.”

He was about to say more, but just then, the gate at the end of the driveway swung open again. He turned toward it, and Beth did as well. It was James Cooley, fanning himself with his hat as he came up the driveway. His button-up shirt had big sweat rings around the armpits, and his mustache was wilted like an oversoaked plant. He’d thrown himself into his role as mayor with a passion. Sometimes, Beth wished he would slow down a little.

“I just wanted to check on our guest and see how he’s adjusting,” he said, as he stepped into the garage. He gave Beth a quick hug and a kiss on the temple.

Corbin spoke before Beth could answer. “He doesn’t think we’re safe from the wildfire here, and apparently, he’s a former firefighter.”

James glanced down as he stepped onto the carpet, then set his hat back on his head and looked at Greyson. Beth noted that the young man had one hand pressed against his breast pocket.

“Son, I’ve spoken to Laird and Millard and about two dozen other refugees,” James said. “None of them seem to think the fire’s a danger to us here.”

“They’re not firefighters, sir,” Greyson said, and then added, “With all due respect.”

Beth could see the problem developing. If she let it take root, it was going to cause all sorts of problems. This young man was clearly traumatized by the burning of his former town, and the wildfire had become a sort of boogeyman in his mind, something pursuing him no matter where he went.

“I’ve spoken to Laird and Millard as well,” she said. “They told me the fire swept into their community from the north,

and once they fled, it kept moving south or possibly southeast, blown by the wind. We're due east, on the far side of Macon, and at least a hundred miles away. If it doesn't burn itself out, we'll see the smoke long before it ever gets here."

"I think I agree with Mom," Jodi said. "We have people posted at the western gate all the time. They'll see the smoke if the fire moves in this direction, but I have a hard time believing we're in any real danger. Has a wildfire *ever* burned that big in Georgia?"

"It's unprecedented," Beth added.

James grunted and crossed the garage. There was an old bench for a weight set near the stacks of boxes, and he sat down here. "It's *not* unprecedented, Beth, as you should know. The Bugaboo Scrub Fire burned over half a million acres of Georgia wilderness back in 2005, and that started by nothing more than a lightning bolt. As I recall, it burned for two months."

"James, that was all the way down in Okefenokee," Beth said, "and it wasn't just a lightning strike. There was also a downed power line. Do you really think that's what we're dealing with?"

"I have no idea," James said. "I wasn't in the fire. The refugees were."

Beth could feel the anxiety becoming a hard knot in her stomach. If they started bending all of their efforts toward stopping a fire that was very, very unlikely to move in their direction, it was going to derail their current plans for assimilating the refugees and expanding the gardens. Every able-bodied person in town was already giving their all.

"It's a waste of manpower," Beth said, finally, letting a bit of her irritation slip out. "We're facing a food shortage, a water shortage, and we're dealing with a refugee crisis. There's no smoke on the horizon. Clearing the forest to make a firebreak would be a massive undertaking for something that's not even a danger to us yet...and probably never will be."

Everyone was quiet for a few seconds. Greyson had a grimace on his face, and he kept shifting from one foot to the other. He still had a hand pressed to his breast pocket. After a moment, he cleared his throat and said, “I wasn’t trying to cause tension, and I’m not telling anyone what to do. I don’t think it would be that hard to clear a strip of land west of your fence, especially with some help from us newcomers, but this is your town. I’m new here. You do what you think is best.”

Beth fixed her gaze on James. He was the mayor, after all. It would be his decision. James kept fanning himself for a bit, before he finally groaned and said, “I think this is bigger than us, my dear. The whole town needs to weigh in on this.” He rose and put the hat on his head. “We’ll gather the community, go over what it would take to prepare for the fire, and then we can vote on it. We’ll go from there.”

Beth bit back her first angry response and tried one more time. “James, we could use your help with the refugees and the late-season planting. We need the townsfolk working on these things, not voting on something that probably won’t happen. If the fire starts heading our way, then we can make it a priority.”

She saw Greyson fidgeting out of the corner of her eye, and she glanced at him, knowing the irritation must be visible on her face. He met her gaze, his eyebrows climbing his forehead, then quickly averted his eyes. She’d hurt his feelings, but even knowing that, she couldn’t help being frustrated at him.

“Beth’s a bit of a curmudgeon,” Corbin said, a hand to the side his mouth, as if he were whispering a secret to Greyson, though he said it loud enough for everyone to hear. “She’s like a porcupine. Avoid the quills, and you’ll learn to like her.”

Greyson chuckled, but he was clearly uncomfortable. And Beth found herself at a loss for words. Corbin wasn’t wrong. She was a grumpy old lady, and she was letting this distraction get to her. Embarrassed, Beth held up her hands and said, “I’m sorry if I came across as rude. Greyson, you did nothing wrong. You’re just trying to help. We can spare the effort to discuss the fire. It’ll be fine.”

She nodded at James, and he took it as his opportunity to leave. He headed out of the garage and down the driveway.

“I’m not trying to cause trouble,” Greyson said.

“I know,” Beth replied. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t you tell us all about your firefighting experience. Come on inside. We’ll sit in the dining room and have something to drink. You can tell us what you know. How does that sound?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. “It sounds good. I just want to help.”

Once again, the community center was jam-packed with people, but now they were mostly dirty and sweaty, and the whole building reeked. James was sitting alone behind the lectern, a notebook resting on his thigh. As he watched people filing into the room and taking their seats, he tapped a pencil against the edge of the notebook.

There were a few refugees in the room, but mostly, they'd been encouraged to rest and heal. Even though the community had welcomed them, James was a bit concerned about creating tension if the newcomers tried to vote. He waited a few more minutes to make sure no one else was coming. Then he rose, approached the lectern, and set his notebook on it. He flipped open the notebook to the right page and set his pencil down.

"Okay, everyone, I know you're all tired, but thanks for coming today," he said, his gaze scanning across the audience. Beth was sitting with her entire family. There were so many of them that they took up almost an entire row: Beth, Shane, Jodi, Kaylee, Violet, Owen, Amelia, Mike, and their guest, Greyson, plus a dog and a toddler.

"What's this all about, Mayor?" someone shouted. "It's right in the middle of dinner."

"You just started ringing the bell," said another. "What is it now?"

James held up his hands. "Folks, I'm getting to that. As most of you know by now, the newcomers in our community are survivors of a wildfire that burned through their town. For all

we know, that fire is still burning. Now, granted, it's quite far away, but we thought it couldn't hurt to come up with a plan for dealing with the fire if it turns this way."

Winton had positioned himself closer to the front this time, and he said, "Mayor, that fire's burning all the way out by Lizella and West Point. That's gotta be a hundred and twenty miles! It'd have to burn all of Macon to the ground to reach us!"

"True, true," James replied, "but even if we work on this and the fire doesn't come anywhere near us, it'll help us be prepared for future disasters."

"We have enough to worry about," someone shouted.

"We don't have time to deal with fire prevention," someone else said.

"Yeah, Mayor, you've got us assimilating refugees, planting late-season crops, *and* we've got harvest for the early crops coming up," Winton said. "Our plates are dangd full already!"

"I know, folks, believe me," James said. He glanced down at the sketches and notes on the open page of his notebook. He could feel the resistance in the room, even though most of the people hadn't spoken yet. Sometimes, it felt like most of what he did as mayor was referee arguments in the old American Legion Hall. "I'm not just going to pull everyone away from the important work they're already doing."

A woman raised her hand near the back of the room, a mousy little woman with glasses balanced on the end of her nose. Zoe, the local librarian, was dressed in gardening clothes, including overalls and high boots. "We've got a drought, we're having to ration water, and there's a lack of wildlife in the area. Aren't those enough things to worry about?"

"Zoe, I hear you," James said. "I hear all of you."

"We just don't have time to prepare for all possible problems." And that was another local woman, Marna. "It's not like the olden days, where we had appliances and electricity. We have to do everything by hand, and there just aren't enough hours in

the day. We can't take on another big project, Mayor. We just can't."

It wasn't unusual to field these kinds of debates, but this was different for some reason. James felt tension in the air. More than that, he sensed fear on all of the faces looking back at him. He glanced at his notes again.

"Well, you'll all be pleased to know that I've come up with a plan that won't require a massive effort," he said. "It would require a small team of strong individuals to clear some trees and debris west of town, and then we'd have a small training about fire preparedness for the community. That's about it."

"A hundred and twenty miles away, Mayor," Winton shouted. "And we've already got a giant firebreak to the west. It's called Macon."

James looked at the people on the front row. Beth and her family were naturally his strongest allies in the town, and under normal circumstances, he would have expected some of them to jump to his aid, especially Beth and Jodi. However, they were sitting there in stony silence. Beth, in fact, had a slight scowl on her face and was staring at the floor.

Finally, James locked eyes with Jodi and gave her his most helpless look. She elbowed her mother in the side, then leaned over and said something to her. With a frown, Beth nodded, then rose and turned to face the crowd.

"Hey, folks," she said, "I had my own hesitation about this at first. There's just so much work to be done with the planting, and we're also trying to get the refugees settled and put to work. I know one more big task seems like too much on your plate."

"Beth, it *is* too much," Zoe said. "I haven't been able to spend time in the library in about a week."

"Right, I get that," Beth replied. "Look, the chances of this fire reaching Hickory Falls are very low, in my estimation. Even so, it wouldn't hurt to take one hour out of a single day just to talk through some fire preparedness. A little training so that, on the off chance the wildfire moves in our direction, we'll

know what to do. That's not going to ruin the harvest or the late planting, and the refugees will be fine."

Murmurs went through the crowd. James saw a lot of crossed arms and restless head shaking.

"Look, we don't want to wind up in the same situation as the refugees, do we?" James said. "Even if there's a small chance of it happening, we don't want to find ourselves taken by surprise, fleeing, leaving most of our stuff behind."

"That's fearmongering, James," Zoe said, waving him off. "We have enough to worry about. Let's take the vote, so we can all go home, eat dinner, and sleep. Tomorrow's going to be another long day."

"A fire could get us," Winton said. "A tornado could get us. Heck, a hurricane could get us. All of these things are possibilities here, but the more immediate threat is having enough food to eat. Let's focus on that, for now."

The murmuring got more intense. Many people nodded at Winton's words. James could feel just how little control he had over the group. Beth looked like she might say more, but instead, she shrugged apologetically at James and sat down again.

"I understand all of your concerns," James said to the crowd. "I really do. Believe me, I'm just as busy as you guys. Maybe more so. But I just feel like this is something we should do. The firebreak team will be small, a few able-bodied people. That's it."

Winton finally swiped both of his hands in the air, as if shooing flies, and stood up. His rather large family stood up with him. Like Beth's family, they took up almost an entire row: his wife, his mother, his stepmother, and five children of various ages.

"I'm sorry, Mayor Cooley, sir," he said. "I can't sit here and talk nonsense any longer. We've got to get these kids fed and bathed and put to bed. I've got a heck of a lot of work on my garden tomorrow. You'll have to excuse us."

And with that, he turned and walked out of the building, his large family trotting after him. Another family followed his lead. Then a third. Zoe and her boyfriend got up and left. Then a few single people. James watched helplessly. He was tempted to end the meeting right then and there, but Beth made a little spinning gesture with her hands: *Keep going!*

“Well, I can’t make anyone stick around if they don’t want to,” he said. “We’re still going to take a vote, and we’ve got over half the town in the room. That’s a quorum.”

One more couple left, and then the tide seemed to stop. Shane raised his hand then and said, “James, let’s not debate the issue further. Just share your plan and let’s vote on the thing.”

“Okay, good idea,” James said. He smoothed out the pages of his notebook. “So my intention is to be proactive about dealing with the problem, without taking away too many vital resources or people from the other work that’s being done. Now, we’ve got some trees that grow up close to the fence on the west and southwest boundary of our town, and I propose we put together a team of three or four strong young men, or possibly women, to start cutting them down. The gap needs to be about fifteen feet across, all the way to the dirt and rocks so the flames can’t jump the gap.”

In the middle of his talk, another couple got up and walked out. He glanced up, but Beth motioned again for him to continue.

“Folks, let me remind you,” he said, “being reactive to a potential problem is how we got into big trouble a few years ago. Surely most of you remember that little incident. That’s why we’re doing it differently this time. And that means, yes, we’re also going to have a fire preparedness meeting for the whole town. I think we’ve got a young man among our refugees who can help us with that. Now, that’s it.”

There was more he could say. He’d written quite a few details, but he was afraid of losing the quorum if he kept talking. He shut his notebook. “That’s my proposal, and that’s what we’re voting on. So, let’s just get right to it. All in favor of implementing my plan, please raise your hands.”

He was pleased to see Beth's hand go up first. After all, she'd offered her own resistance to his plan earlier that day. The rest of her family followed suit, hands going up down the line like reverse dominoes. Then other hands went up throughout the room. Some seemed reluctant, and at least one changed his mind and lowered his hand again after a second.

"Okay, freeze," James said, if only to keep from losing more votes. "Give me a minute to count."

He began counting them, marking off the votes on a blank page of his notebook. Like so many things they voted on in the town, it looked like it was close to a fifty-fifty split.

"Looks like a hundred and eighty-three are *for* the fire preparedness plan," James said. "Okay, now, everyone who is *against* it, raise your hands."

The first hands went down, and quite a few immediately went up. Then more. Then a few at the very back. Oh, yes, it was definitely going to be close to fifty-fifty. James began counting, and as the number got closer and closer, he began to feel embarrassed. Clearly, he hadn't made a strong enough case, and that was a leadership failure on his part.

"All right, that's a hundred and seventy-eight *against*," he said. He'd won the vote, but clearly, only because a third of the room had left and not participated. If the whole town had been there, he would have lost. That hit him hard, but he tried to stay positive. "So we go with my plan then."

"Only because Winton and his family left," someone grumbled loudly.

"Well, he could've stayed and voted," Beth said over her shoulder. "They all could have. No one's forced to vote if they don't want to."

"We had a quorum," James said. "The issue is settled. I'll put together a firebreak team tomorrow morning. Go ahead and have supper and rest, folks. That's it."

He brushed his hands at them, and people began to rise and walk out of the room. The town had more readily voted to accept a hundred refugees than the plan to prepare for a

possible wildfire. James didn't know what to make of that. In fact, the amount of resistance had caught him off guard, and as he stepped away from the lectern, notebook tucked under his arm, he wondered if he hadn't become out of touch.

I need to keep my finger on the pulse of the community, he thought. Something that shouldn't have been a big deal really riled them up.

As he headed across the room, Beth moved to intercept him, laying a hand against his chest and patting him gently.

"You handled it well, honey," she said. "Don't look so downcast."

Her family was gathered in the aisle behind her, quietly chatting. The toddler was giggling and running around. Well, at least one person in the room was having a good time.

"I don't know why everyone is so darn resistant to this," James said. "Beth, you spent *years* as a prepper getting ready for a catastrophe that most people said would never come. But it did. The worst-case scenario happened one afternoon when the sun decided to wipe out modern civilization in one fell swoop. Sometimes, extremely unlikely things happen, so why don't more people want to think about the fire burning out there?"

Beth gave him a sad look and grabbed his shoulders. "Speaking from experience, most people are overwhelmed with the number of things they have to worry about on a daily basis here in Hickory Falls. Plus, I've got a bad ticker, so stress isn't good for me. And this is just one more thing to fear."

"Maybe it's one more thing we *should* fear," he said.

"Yeah, and the vote went your way, so you can get started bright and early tomorrow morning," Beth said. "Hey, look on the bright side, some of the refugees brought a lot of tools and supplies with them, and all the healthy ones are pitching in. We're getting work done faster and more efficiently."

"I don't have time to look on the bright side," he said with a bitter laugh. "I've got voters to appease."

“Don’t appease,” Beth said. “Just do what you think is right and let the chips fall where they may.”

“You make it sound so easy. Politics doesn’t work that way, my dear.”

Violet wanted to feel good about being accepted onto the firebreak team, but Mayor Cooley had been very clear about wanting “strapping men and possibly women.” She considered herself useful and clever, but she definitely wasn’t what anyone would call “strapping.” Even so, when she’d made the request, the mayor had accepted her, and now she was standing in a line with the rest of the team.

Does he really think I can contribute to this effort? she wondered. Or does he just like me? Is the whole town looking at me standing up here and thinking, “Oh, come on, Mayor. Her?”

She heard the buzzing of the crowd in front of her. The firebreak team was comprised of Owen, Violet, Corbin, another local girl named Tess, and Greyson. Ruby was there, too, of course, and Violet held fast to her harness. The grooves of her right palm and fingers had been worn into the leather handle after year of constant use.

“Okay, now, folks,” Mayor Cooley said. “Thanks for turning out this morning. We’re missing a few families. Maybe they slept in.” The mayor laughed at his own joke—no one else did. “Anyway, this young man here is Greyson Kelly. He came to us with the other refugees from the west, but it just so happens, he was a firefighter in his former life.”

Greyson made a soft, satisfied sound. Actually, he made a lot of weird, soft little noises. Most people didn’t seem to notice, but Violet was hyper-aware of such things. She found it a bit

off-putting. She could also tell that the crowd was restless and tense, though that wasn't surprising. Most of the people in Hickory Falls seemed annoyed by this whole fire preparedness plan.

"Now, since Greyson here was a firefighter," the mayor said, "I've talked to him about my plan, and he's helped me make some adjustments. I thought I'd let him share a bit with you. Greyson, why don't you go ahead and tell them what you told me."

Violet heard Greyson step forward. There was a slight whiskery sound that she recognized as fingers rubbing against denim, and a softer metallic sound of some small object within his pocket. Maybe a metal lighter? He cleared his throat quietly then spoke.

"Hey there, everyone," Greyson said, with just a bit of hesitation in his voice. "Um, well, the main goal is to make it harder for the flames to spread. One reason why my former town caught fire so fast is that we'd let the wilderness grow right up to our borders, so that's the reason for the firebreak. You need to make it really hard for the flames to jump across the gap."

"How fast can such a small group get that done?" That was Zoe, the librarian, who was also Violet's friend. Violet loved the braille section of the local library, and she often read when she had the free time to do so.

"We'll get it done in a few days, I think," Greyson said. "I mean, you've got trees and brush and stuff growing close to the fence, but it's not that dense." He paused a moment, seemed to shuffle his feet, then said, "The thing is...*if* the fire gets beyond the fence, we need to make some changes to the community that will slow its spread *inside*."

"What are you suggesting?" And that twangy voice was definitely Winton Bray. "Are we supposed to build firebreaks here inside the town? How's that going to work?"

"Well, no, no, not that," Greyson said. "It's just that...well, you have so much wild growth inside the fence, so many untrimmed trees and brush and stuff. Heck, there's a big

orchard of apple trees just inside the fence near the gate, and the trees are all clustered together like that. If a fire got inside here, it would roll over the whole town in an hour. Some of the greenery has to go. It just has to be thinned out.”

Violet heard the crowd growing restless, heard the complaining and murmuring. Greyson’s idea had gone over like a brick.

“We’re *already* dealing with food scarcity,” some shouted. “We need the apples.”

“Mayor, you just started us planting more, and now we’re supposed to chop down a bunch of fruitful trees?” someone else said.

“It defeats the point,” Winton said. “Mayor, do you support this idea?”

“It makes sense, yes,” the mayor replied. “We can afford to lose a few apples trees if it’ll keep fire from spreading. Apples aren’t really a dietary mainstay for us, not like the vegetables and grains. I think it’s a reasonable tradeoff.”

“And we’re supposed to do all of this while working on the other projects?” Winton said.

Someone else stepped forward then and turned to face the crowd. Violet thought it sounded like her mother, and when she spoke, her suspicion was confirmed.

“Actually, I think we should pause the other planting projects,” Jodi said. “We’re rationing water, and the irrigation work has a long way to go. Adding to the gardens is putting a strain on our existing water supply.”

“Mommy, does that mean the chicken tractor, too?” That was Kaylee’s little voice, with the sharp edge it took on when she was whining. “The chicken tractor doesn’t take that much water.”

“And the new crops?” And that was Marna.

“Well, I’m not in charge around here, but that’s my suggestion,” Jodi said. “I’m sorry, Kaylee honey, but it’s only

a pause, just until we can replenish our water supply. There hasn't been a lot of rain lately."

"So we're just supposed to eat less?" someone grumbled.

"Rely on staples," Jodi said. "That's my recommendation. It's a temporary situation. We're diverting water from the lake to the town. Once that's done, we'll be fine."

Everyone was talking now, and they all sounded so unhappy. Violet didn't like the talk about thinning out the orchard. In fact, the orchard was a project she had promoted and worked on herself a couple of years earlier. But she didn't want to step into the debate. She already felt tense and trapped. She really didn't like standing up in front of the whole town while they were loudly complaining. It made her feel vulnerable, and she was sorely tempted to ask Ruby to guide her out of there. Only sheer stubbornness kept her in place. She would not let a rowdy crowd keep her from doing the work she'd volunteered to do.

One hot, dry month is all it took to make them a bunch of whiny little babies, she thought.

Nobody was starving. They still had plenty of basic food. Violet wished she could tell them all to grow up. But she held her tongue, even as she maintained her death grip on Ruby's harness. Finally, Mayor Cooley raised his voice and shouted the crowd to silence.

"Come on, people. Come on!" he said. "Can we stop yelling and discuss this like civilized people?" That did the trick. Other than a few lingering murmurs, the crowd settled down. "Thank you. Now, look, nobody is going to starve, not in this town. We have plenty of staple foods, and we'll get the aqueduct finished in time for a good harvest, okay?"

"Can you promise that, Mayor?" Winton said.

"I can and I am," James replied. "So let the firebreak team do their job, and let's not kick up such a fuss. Now, this young man here was trying to share the plan with you, but you all interrupted him. Go ahead, Greyson. Continue."

“Uh...” Greyson’s voice quavered slightly, as if the crowd had made him nervous—though Violet, who couldn’t see his face, thought it almost sounded like the edge of laughter. Why was he so weird? Did anyone else notice his odd sounds and movements? “Well, I didn’t mean to upset anybody, but the fact remains...the town orchard is the biggest fire hazard inside the fence, and there’s a lot of overgrown plants and trees in people’s yards, too. I’m not trying to take your apples away, but we need to thin out that orchard big time. The trees shouldn’t have been planted so close together anyway, because it’s just a big field of kindling. A few embers wafting over the fence would find plenty of places to land. Anyway...sorry about the apples, but...”

Violet winced. Since she’d been on the original planning team for the orchard, if it was overgrown, or the trees planted too close together, that was largely her fault. She felt embarrassed and hoped nobody remembered it. She bowed her head just in case her face was flushed.

“For the record, I agree with Greyson,” Mayor Cooley said. “Yes, it means the community will take a small hit to some of our communal food supply, but no one’s surviving on apples, anyway. In fact, I wouldn’t mind taking that whole orchard down, just to be safe.”

That jolted Violet out of her embarrassment, and she blurted out, “No, not the whole orchard! No way!” When a few people chuckled softly in the crowd, she caught herself, her cheeks on fire. Quieter, she added, “We just worked so hard on it, and... and think of all of the apple pie and cobbler.” But that just made more people laugh. Fuming, Violet pressed her lips tightly together and stopped talking.

“Fair enough,” the mayor said. “Not the whole orchard. Maybe we can spare some of the trees.”

Beth cleared her throat then and spoke. “Some of the apple trees are young and small enough that they could be moved to a greenhouse for now. Once everything is settled, and we’ve got the water flowing, we could relocate them to a new orchard in a better location. Violet, what do you think?”

Violet just nodded. She was sick of this whole discussion and didn't want to say anything else.

"So, then, we'll just cut down the more established trees," Greyson said. "We'll spare the saplings."

"Good," the mayor said. "Now, folks, that's it. We've wasted enough time. I just wanted you to hear from this young man, but I think we've talked it all to death. I'll set the firebreak team loose now."

Violet listened to the crowd dispersing, but her enthusiasm for the day's work had been deflated. She was embarrassed about her outburst, sad about the orchard, and she still wasn't sure why they'd let her on the firebreak team. Soon, her small team was headed through town, led by Greyson. Violet let Ruby guide her and didn't pay much attention to their surroundings.

"We should pick up some tools from the tent first," Owen said. "Greyson, I guess you know what all we need."

"Oh, yeah, I've scribbled a little list," Greyson replied. "Just follow my lead. I was a firefighter for, like, seven years. We fought all kinds of fires and saw some crazy stuff. I know what I'm doing."

"I sure hope so," Owen said.

Violet could tell they were cutting through the town park to reach the refugee camp. She'd been walking near the back of the group, but she heard someone drop back to walk beside her. It was Corbin, of course. She knew the way he walked all too well.

"Hey there, Vi," he said, in his winningest voice. "You're not too bummed out, are you?"

"Well, I'm not happy about gutting my orchard, if that's what you mean," she replied.

"Yeah, I hear you." He lightly patted her on the back. "I guess I'd be bummed if one of my big town projects was being messed with. If they decided to tear down one of my watchtowers, I'd be livid."

"I'm glad you get it," she said.

“Of course,” Corbin said. “But you understand why they’re doing it, don’t you?”

“Uh, no,” she said, a hard edge in her voice. “Actually, I don’t. We’re basically tearing down the whole entire orchard and moving a few tiny saplings to the greenhouse. The orchard will be gone, and I have to help do it. That seems like overkill, if you must know. One orchard is not going to make the difference if a wildfire reaches us.”

“A nice thirty-yard gap on the inside of the fence is a good idea,” Corbin said. “Greyson knows what he’s talking about. You can trust his judgment on this.”

His attempt at comforting her had turned into a tired exercise in mansplaining. Violet felt a sudden surge of anger. “I know *why* we’re doing it, Corbin. I’m not stupid. I don’t have to *like* it. Now, will you please stop talking to me.”

“Come on, Vi. Don’t be like that.”

It was the final straw. She couldn’t take it. Violet bent down to Ruby and said, “Ruby, take me home.”

The dog immediately changed course, leading her in a different direction.

“Where are you going?” Corbin said.

“Violet, are you okay?” Owen added.

“I’m *fine*,” she shouted over her shoulder. “Leave me alone!”

And thankfully, none of them tried to follow her as she walked away from the group and headed off on her own. Good old Ruby, she always put Violet first, even if no one else did.

Shane watched the deer racing down the eastbound lanes of the highway, headed straight for the gate without slowing, as if they expected someone to open it for them at the last second. He was standing once again at the western watchtower, scanning the distance with binoculars, when he first saw them coming. Rather than leaping out of the woods, they appeared at a bend in the road and came straight on, as if they had been following the highway for a while.

Reaching down, Shane picked up the Mauser M18 rifle that had been donated by a local for the watchtower guards. He set the binoculars down and looked through the rifle scope. The deer kept coming straight for the gate, two full-grown does and a yearling. At the last second, one of the does veered off to the side, but the other two actually leapt at the gate, as if they thought they could clear it. Of course, they didn't come close. They both hit the gate hard, and the drumbeat echoed into the town.

Something's got them spooked, Shane thought. Why would they act like this?

The one that had veered off went racing into the woods, headed south. The two that hit the gate rebounded, crashed onto the highway, and scrambled to get back to their feet. Then they turned and raced after the other, though the yearling seemed to be limping slightly.

Shane set the rifle down and picked up the binoculars again, scanning the far distance. He could see a very slight gray haze

on the horizon. The fire was out there somewhere, had no idea which way it was moving, if it was growing or dying. Short of hiking out there and taking a look, there was no way to know. But trips outside the community were dangerous.

Shane heard someone on the ladder, and he set the binoculars down. When he turned, he saw a young local man named Jaime climbing the watchtower. He was short and thick-limbed with a mop of black hair. His family had come to the community about eight months earlier, travelers on the road looking for a safe place to settle, like so many others.

“Is it two o’clock already?” Shane said.

“Pretty close to it, sir,” Jaime said, pulling himself up onto the platform. “Have you seen anything weird during your shift?”

“Yeah, animals going nuts,” Shane replied. “Like they’re desperately running from something.”

“Oh, gee, that’s disturbing,” Jaime said.

“You got it from here, kid,” Shane said, lowering himself onto the ladder. “Remember to ring the bell if there’s an emergency.” He pointed to the small brass bell hanging from a corner of the ceiling of the watchtower.

“Yes, sir,” Jaime said, saluting him.

Shane climbed down and went to inspect the gate. The force of the deer impact had caused a small crack on one of the gate’s rails, but it was minor damage. He turned and headed back into town. The community had spent the morning on fire training, which had annoyed many of the participants. Violet, Owen, and Corbin were working with the firebreak team. Shane considered heading home to see who was there, but he decided to make a report of his watch shift first.

When he reached the center of town, he saw a sizable group of people working in the community garden, far more than was necessary for the expansion. Currently, the garden took up about an acre and a half, covering ground that had once been a town park and some additional space near the creek that wound through Hickory Falls. Shane could see people clustered together back by the creek. Winton was there, as

were Beth, Jodi, Mike, and Kaylee, along with about two dozen others.

As Shane approached them, he heard a heated conversation, voices speaking over one another. Were they fighting about the garden expansion? Things were so tense lately, but surely this was one project they could all come together on. Winton was waving his hands over his head, and Beth was pointing at something across the creek. All of the people seemed to be gathered around something, and a few were staring down at the ground in their midst.

And then Shane glanced to his right at the long, growing rows of vegetables, and he saw the damage. A path appeared to have been carved through the cabbages and zucchini, as if someone had come through with a machete, running north, and just swung the blade wildly back and forth. However, a few of the plants also looked uprooted. It was a troubling amount of damage.

“What the heck happened here?” Shane said, moving toward his wife.

Beth and Jodi turned to him. Kaylee ran over and gave him a hug. As they did, the crowd parted, and Winton pointed dramatically at something on the ground. Two small animals with coarse, black hair, stumpy legs, long snouts. They lay in pools of blood on a patch of tilled ground for the new garden.

“Feral hogs,” Shane noted, giving Jodi a questioning look.

“Yeah, and that’s not all of them,” Jodi replied. She had a kerchief tied over her hair, and she was wearing gardening gloves and a checkered long-sleeve shirt. Judging by the dirt on her knees and hands, she’d been hard at work when this happened. “There were at least eight or nine of them. Most got away, but a bunch of people drew their guns and fired at them as they were trampling through the garden. We only got two.”

“The others crossed the creek and disappeared in the brush on the other side,” Beth said, pointing off across the muddy creek.

Indeed, the pigs had torn a path through the brush beyond the creek.

“How did they get through the fence?” Shane asked.

“There are ways,” Beth said. “There are gaps where the creek flows in and out of the town. There are other places where they might have dug under the boards and gotten in. No wooden fence is ever truly impenetrable.”

Winton kicked one of the dead pigs. Shane could see at least three bullet wounds in its side.

“I had some kind of animals in my garden before sunrise,” Winton said. “They tore up my melon patch, and the melons were just about ready to harvest.”

“So what do we need to do about this?” Shane said, turning back to look at the damage. It was bad. A single pass through the garden had destroyed a lot of plants. “I guess we’ll have to reinforce the fence, fill all the gaps.”

“Do you realize how big of a project that’s going to be?” Jodi said. “It took us months to build the fence.”

“Maybe we could drive the wild animals out of our garden if we hadn’t spent all morning learning fire evacuation routes,” Winton said, grabbing the straps of his overalls.

“I had a big buck run through my backyard in the middle of the night,” Zoe said. For some reason, the librarian was clutching a big zucchini plant that had been uprooted. It hung from her right fist like evidence from a crime scene. “Caught him in the lamplight. He trampled my petunias. Fortunately, it wasn’t my vegetables, but I still liked those petunias.”

Shane traded a look with Beth. The animals were spooked. He’d seen that with his own eyes, and there was only one likely cause. Even so, the smoke had appeared really far away, barely visible on the horizon.

“So what are we going to do about this?” Mike said. He had dragged a small three-legged stool from somewhere and was sitting on it right in the middle of the pig trail, fanning himself with a large seed packet. “We can’t just let the animals keep stampeding through town and wrecking our food supply. Forget planting crops, we have to save what we’re already growing.”

Shane could see the answer, but it meant more work on top of more work. He wasn't in charge, but he cleared his throat and spoke authoritatively anyway. "I think we have to start harvesting the crops and salvage what we can. The wild animals aren't just trampling the gardens. They're looking for food, and they're anxious, probably because of the fire to the west."

"They're spooked by a fire that's a hundred miles away?" Winton said with a snort.

"Wild animals get spooked by anything on the horizon that's out of the ordinary," Shane said. "You're a hunter. You know that."

But Winton merely shrugged.

Beth held up a hand to draw attention then. In James's absence, she was the de facto leader around here. People tended to defer to her because of her age, her wisdom in preparing for the EMP, and her earned respect through many ordeals. "Shane is right," she said. "We have to harvest what we can while we can. All the work we were doing to expand our gardens and plant crops, put it into harvesting early. That's all we can do."

"It's still so early for some things," Zoe said, shaking her head sadly. "My poor rutabagas. I only planted them a month ago."

"Well, there's good news in this," Beth added. "We've got wild animals getting through the fence, so let's hunt and trap them. Heck, we've got two pigs right here that need to be dressed and butchered. Smoke or cure the meat to preserve it, and it'll more than make up for the lost vegetables in terms of protein."

The crowd had been so busy worrying about the damage that they clearly hadn't considered the other side of the coin. The prospect of so much fresh meat caused murmurs of excitement, and people began looking around at one another.

"I'll take care of these hogs," Winton said. "I'll get all that meat cured and bring it to the community food bank. Then I'm going hunting, and please don't call me for no more fire safety

town meetings. Thank you.” And with that, he tipped his hat at Beth, turned, and headed off, followed by two of his teenaged sons and a daughter.

“Well, I guess we should put some teams together,” Beth said. “Who wants to harvest, and who wants to hunt?”

Shane considered his options, but nothing appealed to him more than the prospect of fresh meat. He was quite sick of the steady stream of meatless meals. He glanced down at the feral hogs. “I think I’d like to put together a small team to make a pig trap. Think about all of the meat if we caught that whole passel of pigs!”

From his stool, Mike raised a hand. “Count me in, bro. I’ll catch every pig from here to Tifton. Bacon for months!”

Jodi looked like she was about to say something, but then she winced and wobbled. Shane caught her by the arm.

“My back is killing me,” she said in a pained whisper.

“Okay, that’s it. We’re getting you home, so you can rest.” He put an arm around Jodi and pulled her against him. Then, without another word, he nodded at Beth and headed off. He heard the others still chatting, forming up groups to garden, hunt, or trap. By the time he reached the road, passing in front of the mayor’s office, Mike had caught up to them. Jodi was moving slowly, stepping lightly.

“I’m so sick of being in pain,” Jodi said. “Will I ever heal from that stupid motorcycle wreck? It’s been *years!*”

“I’m sorry, honey,” Shane said. “You just can’t push yourself. You have to take it easy.”

“I *can’t* take it easy,” Jodi said. “There’s so much to do!”

When they got home, they found Owen sitting with Amelia and the little one on a bench in the front yard. It turned out the firebreak team had finished their work for the day due to sheer exhaustion. At the moment, Owen was slumped over and sweating as he chatted with his wife. He had a couple of bandages on his hands, but he sat up as Shane and the others approached, giving his father a questioning look.

“Hey, son, how would you like to trap some wild, delicious hogs?”



They settled on a small clearing past the brush on the other side of the creek. Owen pushed a wheelbarrow full of supplies for the trap, while Shane lugged a toolbox and Mike brought a smaller bag of supplies. As they passed the garden, they saw a small group still working there, and the harvest had already begun. It was a disheartening sight because Shane knew they were going to lose a lot of the plants in the process.

They crossed the creek and pushed through the brush, following the narrow trail torn by the hogs until they came to the clearing. Here, they dumped all of their supplies.

“You know, I’ve never built a pig trap before,” Mike said, setting his bag down. “The ones I’ve seen are usually big metal things that drop down around the pigs.”

“We’re going to attempt something similar,” Shane said. “The basic idea is the same, but we’re going to use this roll of fencing and wood. I’ve never done this either, but I understand the basic concept. We create a large pen with a wooden gate, put some food inside, and have a heavy door that drops down once they’re in the pen.”

“How do we ensure we only get pigs and not deer?” Owen asked, as he began unloading the wheelbarrow. They had a bag of shelled corn, a roll of vinyl fencing, some wooden boards, and a couple of large sheets of plywood—all supplies taken from the old abandoned hardware store in town.

“There won’t be a roof on the thing,” Shane said, setting the toolbox down. “The fencing is about four feet tall. Deer will be able to jump over and escape, but not the feral hogs. We’ll use a rooster stick as the trigger mechanism.”

“Wow, how did you come up with this idea?” Mike said. “Did you get the design from a book or something?”

“No, I came up with it on my own,” Shane said. “You know I used to be a nuclear scientist, right?”

“Oh, yeah. I forget about the old world sometimes. Some of us were smart back then, weren’t we?”

They went to work creating the pig trap, first marking off an area about eight feet across, then driving stakes into the ground. From there, they attached the vinyl fencing to the metal stakes, leaving a gap for the door. They constructed the framework for the door from the wood boards, then joined two sheets of plywood to give the door some bulk. The door was slotted through a gap at the top of the frame, then held up by a wedge-shaped wooden pin, which was attached by a long, thin rope to a rooster stick that they stuck in the ground in the center of the pen.

Along the way, they had to do some creative problem-solving to figure out certain design elements, but in the end, they tested the trap door and found that it worked well. Once it was set, they dumped a bunch of the cracked corn around the rooster stick. Finally, they stepped back to admire their handiwork.

By then, it was late afternoon edging toward evening, and they’d worked a few hard hours. Mike was leaning against a tree, clearly at his limit, and Owen was soaked with sweat. Shane was proud of the work they’d done.

“You think it’ll work, Dad?” Owen asked.

“Yeah, the pigs have to eat,” Shane said, “and the corn there is a lot easier than digging up gardens. I wouldn’t be surprised if we come back in the morning and find the trap full. But that’s not going to happen as long as we’re standing here, gentlemen, so let’s go home.”

He grabbed the handlebars of the wheelbarrow and headed back toward the creek, as Mike and Owen fell in behind him.

The weight of the handcart strained Owen's arms and shoulders as he pushed the full load down the road. It was stacked with logs, the remnants of trees that had been chopped down to create the firebreak. Owen had come back out after the firebreak team ended their morning's work. And it was hard work. Corbin seemed to have limitless energy, but the rest of them wore out pretty fast, and poor Violet spent most of the time being frustrated at her lack of contribution.

Still, work was progressing. As Owen passed his house, he paused and called out to Amelia. She appeared after a minute, pushing the little one in a stroller. It was still hot and miserable, and he was sweating like crazy again after another morning of hard work. At least there was a breeze blowing. That was better than still, stale air. As Amelia pushed the stroller, little Katie was eating some homemade apple chips out of a bag and playing with one of her dolls. She was fairly quiet and easygoing for a two-year-old, especially when she had a snack and a toy to occupy her time.

"I wish I could do more to help," Amelia said. "You're out there working so hard, and I'm mostly stuck doing laundry in the creek or changing dirty diapers and stuff like that."

"It's okay," he replied. He would have hugged and kissed her if he hadn't been so drenched with sweat. "You have your hands full taking care of Katie."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to trade places some morning," Amelia said. "It'd be a nice change of pace to chop

down some trees.”

“I guess I’d be okay with that,” he said, though in all honesty, he didn’t relish the idea of being stuck at home with Katie while everyone else was doing manual labor. He supposed Amelia didn’t either. In fact, Owen’s wife had been quite the athlete in high school, and he knew she missed the physical exertion.

They made their way to the community’s firewood pile, which was little more than a large tarped area in the middle of a cleared field. Greyson had already directed some of the refugees to clear debris along the edges of the field, calling it a “tinder box.” Owen unloaded the logs here, adding them to the stacks that already existed. Amelia helped a bit, until the little one got fussy and demanded a drink of water. They passed around a water bottle, then headed back the way they’d come.

“I have to go back outside the fence and get another load,” Owen said. “One more should do it for today.”

“I haven’t been outside the fence since it was first built,” Amelia said. “Is it safe out there?”

It’s fine,” Owen replied. “Haven’t you heard, all the wild animals are inside the fence these days?” He chuckled at his own little joke. “Heck, we got six feral hogs in our trap yesterday. Dad’s curing the meat as we speak.”

“I can’t wait,” Amelia said, shutting her eyes for a moment at the thought. “We had cubed ham from a jar for Thanksgiving, but I would love a nice, fresh pork tenderloin. Oh my gosh, Owen. It’s been too long.”

They worked their way back through the neighborhood, eventually passing their own house, then following the winding road that led to the western gate. As they did, they passed a few teams who were working hard on various projects. Some were harvesting gardens, others were looking for wild animals, and one group was clearing the orchard.

“All those apple trees coming down,” Amelia lamented in passing. “What a shame.”

“And the sad thing is, it’s probably not even necessary,” Owen said. “I’ll miss all the apple pies and apple cakes and apple strudel. And I know Katie will miss her apple chips.”

“Don’t mention it to her, please!” Katie was currently sleeping in the stroller, clutching her empty apple chip bag.

He leaned heavily against the handcart, trying to alleviate some of the soreness in his back and legs. He’d worked hard for days, and he was approaching his limit. Still, he would keep pushing as long as he could. They passed the dying orchard and rounded a bend in the road, coming in sight of the fence. Here the watchtower rose like a makeshift sentinel, looking out at the unfriendly world beyond Hickory Falls. Owen had closed and barred the gate after bringing in the previous load, something his father had insisted upon: “Never leave the gate unlocked.”

And now, as he came to a stop a few yards from the gate, the wooden handcart rattling, his breath hitched in his throat. A shocked Amelia reached over and grabbed his arm.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Owen, look at all of them!”

Through the slats, he saw movement, lots of movement, and he knew immediately what it was. Owen let go of the handcart and stepped past it, drawing near the gate. He peered through the slats and saw at least two hundred ragged-looking people on the highway. Twice as many as the previous refugee group, and they looked just as downtrodden and weary.

“They weren’t there when I brought the loaded handcart inside,” Owen said over his shoulder. “So they must’ve just walked up.”

Indeed, they hadn’t set up camp, and only a few of them were sitting down. Most were just standing there, staring at the gate. Just then, Owen heard someone climbing down the watchtower ladder, and he turned to see young Jaime descending. The young man was sixteen, barely five feet tall, but fast and agile. He reached the ground in seconds and came running toward Owen.

“These people just showed up a minute ago,” he said. “I signaled for them not to come any closer, but either they didn’t understand me or they ignored me. I was about to come and get one of the town leaders. Should I have rung the bell?”

“The bell is for emergencies,” Owen said. “This isn’t an emergency...yet. You stay here and keep an eye on them, okay? If they try to break through or climb over, *then* you ring the bell like crazy. I’ll go report this to Mayor Cooley.”

Jaime saluted him and ran back toward the watchtower. Within seconds, he was scampering back up like a squirrel. Owen turned to Amelia, who was standing behind the stroller.

“This means another town meeting, doesn’t it?” she said with a frown. “I hate them. I hate those meetings. Everyone is so rude and annoyed lately. I wish we just had a chief or queen who could make all of the decisions unilaterally.”

“Sorry, my dear,” Owen said, stepping away from the gate. “The EMP didn’t destroy democracy, not yet. Let’s go tell the others and get this over with.” And then, he muttered, “No one’s going to be happy about this.”



This time, about a third of the locals just skipped the meeting altogether. Apparently, with everything going on, they were done discussing problems. Even ringing the big bell outside the community center for a solid fifteen minutes didn’t draw them all. A couple dozen refugees showed up for the meeting, including Greyson. Even so, there were empty chairs all over the room.

Owen had a clear view of the entire audience because he was sitting up in front beside the mayor, and the people looked restless and annoyed. Too many town meetings in the last week, that was the problem. The mayor was making some notes in his notebook, but people didn’t wait for him to approach the podium. The first to speak up was a girthy chap in the third row who went by his initials, J.D.

“We can’t march down here every single evening, Mayor,” he said. “It’s too much! We’re working all day trying to keep up with all of the additional tasks, and now you’re ringing that damned bell every afternoon.”

“I finally found some time to sit in the library, and then that bell, that damned bell, started up,” Zoe said. The mousy little woman was furiously fanning herself with what appeared to be a large bookmark.

“I’m about ready to melt that bell down and use the metal to make horseshoes or something,” Winton said from his familiar place in the back row.

Even Owen’s own family, all seated together on the front row, seemed thoroughly frustrated with another town meeting. Shane had his arms crossed, his chin tucked against his chest. Beth was restlessly tapping a foot and fanning herself with a magazine. Amelia was trying to keep the little one seated and calm, but Owen could feel the tension all around her like a cloud. Mike was half-asleep in his chair. Corbin, Violet, Jodi, and Kaylee weren’t even there.

Finally, with a world-weary groan, Mayor Cooley rose and went to the lectern, slapping his notebook down with particular force. “Folks, I know you’re all tired of these meetings, but the point of calling them is to make sure your voices are heard. I want everyone to get a say in what we decide to do as a community, okay?”

This just caused a bunch of disgruntled murmuring, people shifting in their seats. An old woman in the far back corner actually got up and left at that point.

“If we need to vote on something, let’s hurry up and vote,” Winton shouted. “Do it right now. No more long-winded speeches or debates.”

“Well, I’m sure word has gotten around by now,” James said, “but we’ve got another camp of refugees parked outside of the western fence. Owen here brought me the report, and I went out to personally speak to them—through the fence only, mind you. There’s a little over two hundred people out there, and it’s pretty much the same story as last time. They want in. They

promise to work hard and earn their keep. There are quite a few skilled people among them: carpenters, welders, farmers, a couple of doctors, a nurse, and so forth. They're bringing a few supplies with them, but their situation isn't great."

"The answer is no," Winton said, speaking over his last sentence. "No, they can't come in. We're full. There are no more empty seats in Hickory Falls. Send them south to Ripley or something."

This caused general grumbling, and Owen couldn't tell how many supported him and how many opposed. All of them seemed irritated. Finally, Beth rose and turned to the crowd. Just her rising caused the crowd to settle down.

"Now, let's be fair," she said. "The last group of refugees haven't caused a strain on our community. Maybe at first, when we were getting them settled and treated, but they brought supplies, and they've been working hard on projects throughout town ever since."

"Surely we're close to critical mass," Zoe said. "Hickory Falls can't fit an infinite number of people."

"One more group isn't an infinite amount," Beth said, then eased herself onto her seat again.

"It's two hundred," Winton said. "We'll have to spend a whole day getting them triaged and settled, right when we're trying to harvest and hunt."

"And the refugees who are already here will help make up for the lost time," Beth said, shouting it over her shoulder.

Owen sat up front with his arms crossed. He felt conflicted. Honestly, he didn't want to let the second group through the gate, but at the same time, he knew it might be the right thing to do. All of those new people made him nervous. Refugees were close to outnumbering the original residents. Then again, Beth was right. The previous group was doing a lot of important work already.

"Just vote already," Winton cried, raising both hands in the air. "For gosh sake, Mayor, let's vote!"

“I was going to have Owen make a report about initial contact,” James said, looking over his shoulder, “but under the circumstances, I guess you all know enough to go ahead and vote.”

Owen breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing he wanted to do was get up in front of this agitated, frustrated, overworked group of people.

“We have quorum, barely, so let’s just do it,” James said. “All in favor of letting this second group of refugees into our town, raise your hands.”

Hands started to go up, but Owen thought they seemed mostly reluctant. Even his own family took their time. Shane and Beth were first, then Mike and Jodi. His wife, Amelia, notably did not raise her hand, but continued interacting with the restless toddler, who didn’t want to stay seated. Owen felt torn. Should he vote with his wife, or should he vote with his parents? James began counting the raised hands, making little marks on his notebook. Then he turned and looked at Owen, and in that moment, as if by sheer instinct, Owen raised his hand. Amelia glanced at him, and gave him a disappointed look. It stung, but he couldn’t take back the vote now.

“Okay, then, I’ve got one hundred and fifty-one votes *for* bringing in the refugees,” James said. “All opposed, raise your hands.”

These hands went up a lot faster, and Amelia’s was among the first of them. James counted, then grunted, shook his head, and counted again.

“Well, what’s the result, mayor?” Winton said.

“It’s a damned tie,” James said, pounding a fist on the lectern. “A hundred and fifty-one *for*, and a hundred and fifty-one *against*.”

“James, the mayor acts as tiebreaker in the event of a tie,” Beth said, gesturing at him. “That’s in our community bylaws.”

James bowed his head. “Yeah, yeah, I realize that. Give me a second, folks. I don’t take this lightly.” And then he proceeded

to stand there with his head bowed for almost a full minute. It kind of looked like he was praying, and if so, Owen didn't blame him. He could use a little divine assistance considering the tension in the room.

Finally, he raised his head and said, "I vote *for*."

Many began to grumble, shake their heads, and roll their eyes. James held up his hands, and when that didn't work, he hit the lectern a few times.

"I know you're worried about the strain," he said, "but I'm not ready to abandon our basic human decency. We're not at the breaking point. I don't think we're close to it. If it comes to that, then I'll keep the gate barred, but for now, we're still going to err on the side of compassion."

"Err is right, mayor," Winton said, "but if you can live with it, I guess I can, too. Only...you've got to figure out how to house and feed and treat all of their injured."

"Many of us have already taken in guests," Zoe said. "Where are we supposed to put these people?"

"We can't spend another full day doing triage and setting up camp," someone else yelled.

"It's too much," an old man shouted.

James motioned the crowd to silence, though this took almost a full minute. "Look, everyone had a chance to come here tonight and vote," he said. "Some didn't show up. Those who did voted, and I've counted the vote. I broke the tie, and that's the result, okay? We're still a democracy in Hickory Falls, and we're going to abide by the result."

Jodi raised her hand then, and he motioned at her. "I just wanted to say, I voted for, but that doesn't mean I don't have concerns. Housing, feeding, and caring for all of the injured isn't going to be easy."

"We can't take in the whole world," Winton shouted from the back. "I know we voted already. Fine, let them through the gate, but tell them they've got to plant their own food and build their own homes!"

With a grunt of obvious discomfort, Jodi rose and turned to face the crowd. “Look, these meetings have been tense, and I get it. We’re not eating enough. We’re all overworked and sore and worried. I’ll put together a small team to deal with the new refugees so the rest of you can focus on whatever you’re already doing. How does that sound?”

This caused some grumbling, but also a lot of nodding heads, and finally Winton said, “That sounds awfully neighborly of you, ma’am.”

“Folks, we’re going to have another communal meal soon to share some of the meat that’s been brought in,” Mayor Cooley said, as Jodi took her seat again. “Jodi’s right. We’re all overworked. Be sure you’re drinking enough water. And, Jodi, I thank you for volunteering. I’m going to leave the processing of the new refugees in your capable hands. Just let me know what you need.”

Jodi shrugged and gave him a look that suggested she needed far more than he could possibly give.



In the end, Jodi found willing participants in Amelia and Violet. Amelia had grown sick of just watching her child all day while everyone else worked hard, so she traded places with Owen—though Owen hadn’t seemed excited about this. Violet wasn’t currently working with the firebreak team and seemed excited for a change of pace from the backbreaking work of chopping down trees and clearing brush.

The three of them became the team leaders for welcoming the new refugees, working with a much smaller team of volunteers than last time. This wasn’t going to be a full-town effort, despite the fact that they were dealing with almost twice as many refugees this time. At the moment, Amelia was pushing a small handcart with medical supplies and water, while Jodi and Violet walked on either side of her. Behind them, maintaining a comfortable distance, was a group of young men who’d been brought along as “muscle,” in case there was

trouble. Greyson and Corbin were among them, but they'd been strictly ordered to stay back. Jodi didn't want the refugees to feel threatened.

As they approached the western gate, she saw restless bodies moving through the gaps. They'd been camped on the highway for more than a day. Mayor Cooley had had about a five-minute conversation with their leaders, but otherwise, there'd been no direct contact. Jodi felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach. Every outsider they interacted with felt like a roll of the dice, and she feared they would eventually roll snake eyes.

"You'll do most of the talking, right?" Amelia said. Jodi's daughter-in-law dressed comfortably at all times in loose-fitting, oversized T-shirts and sweatpants. Jodi didn't blame her. Taking care of a toddler in a post-civilization town was no easy feat.

"Yeah, I'll do most of the talking," Jodi said, "but you girls have to back me up. James said these people seemed nice enough, but you just never know what you're dealing with."

"I'm not afraid to say something," Violet said, adjusting her grip on Ruby's harness. "Especially if they get pushy."

As Jodi approached the gate, she saw two people break away from the pack and approach. Amelia pushed the handcart to one side, then she helped Jodi slide the enormous wooden beam out of the way. Jodi grabbed the handle and eased the gate open. As she did, she glanced over her shoulder and saw the group of young men standing back about ten yards, trying to look tough but not hostile. Corbin was the least successful at avoiding the latter, with a furious scowl on his face, his arms flexed and held at his sides, right hand not far from the holster at his hip.

Jodi rolled her eyes and turned back around. The African American couple walking toward them were a haggard pair, with gray hair and filthy faces, clothes that were absolutely covered in dirt or soot or both. They both had wedding rings and walked close to each other, as if comforted by their

proximity. Jodi stepped up the gate to meet them, Violet following right on her heels.

“Greetings, friends,” Jodi said. “This is Hickory Falls. Where are you coming from?”

“Oh, a few different towns to the west,” the woman said. She started to extend her hand—her palm was dirty—then seemed to reconsider. “My name is Tasha. This is my husband, Deon. I’m sorry. We’re just looking for a safe place to camp. It’s not safe out here. If you’ll let us through the gate, we’ll give you all of the supplies we brought, and we’re willing to do any work you might need.”

“We have some injured folks that could use a doctor’s care,” Deon said. When he spoke, Jodi noted that his incisors were broken, and he was missing one of his canine teeth. “It’s hard trying to survive out here. You have no idea what we’ve been through, but we’re good, decent people. Just trying to find some safety, that’s all.”

“I understand,” Jodi said. “And the good news—”

Violet spoke up then. Ruby, at least, wasn’t reacting badly to the newcomers. That was a good sign. “What have you been through?” Violet asked, with particular boldness in her voice.

The man and woman glanced at each other, and Deon lowered his head. Jodi saw a glint of something in his eyes and knew what it was instantly: trauma.

“Well, first of all, there’s the fire,” Tasha said. She held her hands up, showing Jodi her palms and the soot caked into them. “It’s burned through a few towns west of Macon, and it almost swept over us while we were camped one night. It’s still burning because there ain’t nobody to put it out!”

“We went to another town first, but they were some kind of weird cult,” Deon said. “We met a couple of their people on the road after we fled the fire. They offered to take us in, but they creeped us out big time.”

“I know it sounds crazy,” Tasha said, rubbing her hands on the sides of her jeans. “These people say the fire is the work of some kind of sun god, and he’s cleansing the land or

something. It's nuts. We didn't want to have anything to do with it."

Greyson had said something about a religious community living near Whispering Pines. Jodi only knew Whispering Pines as a neighborhood of meandering streets and decent homes built around Lake Wildwood. The idea that a cult could be operating near there was truly bizarre. But it certainly didn't seem worse than the fire.

"Which direction is the fire moving?" she asked.

"Well, actually, it changed direction," Deon said. "With the wind, I suppose. It was moving south for a while, after it burned through Lizella and West Point, but then it turned southeast, headed toward Interstate 75 south of Macon. I don't even know *where* it is now."

That's still a long way from us, Jodi told herself, but she felt an uneasiness growing in her.

"One good day of rain would surely help," Tasha said, "but we got no clouds and no hope. We'll die out here on our own, ma'am. Won't you please help us?"

Jodi stepped to one side, and gently moved Violet as well. "In fact, the town has voted to let you in. Amelia here has some emergency food and water on her cart, and we have doctors and nurses in our town to treat your wounds."

Deon clasped his hands in a prayerful gesture, tears springing into his eyes, and Tasha let out an exhausted, relieved laugh.

"Oh, thank you, ma'am," Tasha said. "Thank God for you!"

"You'll need to tell our mayor the story you just told me," Jodi said, "but you're all safe now. Come on. I'll lead you to the refugee campsite."



Once again, the campsite was a mad bustle of activity. Fewer townsfolk were helping this time, and there were a lot more refugees. That made things quite a bit harder to coordinate, but

Jodi did her best. Amelia ran the provisions tent, passing out food, water, and other necessary supplies to the refugees, while Greyson and Corbin set up tents and shelters for the influx of dirty, bedraggled people. Violet coordinated the triage tent for the wounded, with a lot of help from Ruby.

And that left Jodi in charge of directing all of the teams and volunteers. At least when she was busy, she thought less about her aching back and sore arm. Deon and Tasha clearly had the trust and respect of the refugees, so they worked with Jodi to get people moved about and settled. It turned out, many of the people had burns that needed treating. Others had illnesses of various kinds, and some had injuries. They were underfed, malnourished, and weak. Children were listless, adults traumatized and quiet.

As Jodi led a woman with her sick children toward the triage tent where Violet stood firmly in the door, she glanced to her left and saw Owen playing with little Katie nearby. Jodi's son was a big, strapping boy, so he was usually doing manual labor. Under normal circumstances, he would have been setting up shelters with Corbin and Greyson. However, because Jodi had drafted Amelia, Owen was relegated to watching after the little one.

At the moment, he was playing catch with her using a large, yellow foam ball. Katie was squealing and dashing about, clearly having the time of her life. With her long blond hair, her bright red cheeks and blue eyes, she was the mirror image of her mother. Owen kept glancing toward the camp, in the direction of the supply tent, and even from a distance, Jodi could tell he was annoyed. The other young guys were working hard, and the frustration was evident on his face. He made little effort to hide it, and Jodi hoped Katie didn't notice. But she made a mental note to talk to her son about it later.

Playing catch with your daughter is not some form of punishment, Owen, she thought. Let Amelia take a break from parenting for a while.

Oh, he was going to get an earful later, for sure.

Corbin still didn't know quite what to think of this guy Greyson, but he found him at least interesting. He was certainly different, didn't respond to situations like other people, and that made him unique in Hickory Falls. At the moment, they were building a crude shelter for the refugees—the first step in what Corbin hoped would eventually be a small wooden hut—driving beams into the ground and stretching a tarp over the top as a roof.

At the moment, Greyson was standing on a ladder, driving one of the beams into the ground with a mallet, while Corbin used a post-hole digger to make a spot for another beam.

“That’s pretty wild, huh?” Greyson said. “What the refugees said?” News had spread pretty quickly with the report of what Tasha Higgins, the lady in charge of this new group of refugees, had said.

“Are you referring to the wildfire changing direction or the cult?” Corbin said, jamming the post-hole digger deep into the ground. “Neither one is particularly weird, if you ask me. People form cults all the time, especially when life is uncertain. It’s just normal human behavior, really, even if I find it silly as heck. As for the fire...” He shrugged. “I mean, it’s burning out of control. There’s no telling what it’ll do or where it’ll go.”

“Yeah, I was mostly talking about the fire,” Greyson said, testing the stability of the beam he’d driven into the ground.

“It wasn’t headed this way for days, just burning its way south, and now it might have turned east.”

“*Might* have turned east,” Corbin remind him, setting the post-hole digger aside. “She actually said southeast. We don’t really know what it’s doing.”

“Exactly,” Greyson replied, hopping off the ladder. They had a pile of wood beams in a large flatbed cart nearby, and he went toward it. “It seems like everyone around here is just crossing their fingers and hoping it won’t reach us.” He hoisted up another beam and set it over his shoulder. Greyson was clearly quite strong, and Corbin couldn’t help but wonder which of them was the stronger. “I’ve been thinking it might be a good idea to go and scope out what’s happening with the fire. Scout the landscape, you know? That makes more sense than just sitting and waiting and hoping, don’t you think?”

Corbin went to the cart and picked up a beam. He tried to hoist it up onto his shoulder as easily as Greyson had, and he thought he almost pulled it off. But, in truth, the beam was damned heavy!

“Yeah, that actually does make sense,” he replied. “We have no satellites, no one on the outside to track and tell us what’s going on, just the occasional reports of these refugee groups. Better to see for ourselves what’s happening. We should suggest it to the mayor.”

“I want to be the one to go and scout it out,” Greyson said, setting the next beam in its hole. “I can move fast, avoid danger, and get back here with the report in a day or so.”

“I’d like to go with you,” Corbin said, setting his beam in its hole. “It might be kind of fun. I haven’t been outside of this town except to create the firebreak in more than a year. It’s starting to feel a bit stifling, to be honest.”

“Okay then,” Greyson said, pulling his work gloves off and jamming them under his belt. “Let’s go talk to the mayor right now.”

“Right now?” Corbin said. “Shouldn’t we finish the job first?”

“Nah,” Greyson said, waving him off. He was always smiling. This guy seemed to enjoy everything that happened. “We can take a little break to talk to the mayor. We’ll come and finish after we get his approval.”

Corbin hesitated a moment, then shrugged and said, “Okay, fine.”

He’d hardly finished speaking when Greyson went trotting off across the camp. Corbin rushed to catch up with him, weaving around the tents and the clusters of people spread across the field. The mayor was quietly standing near the triage tent, just kind of looking around. Since Jodi had taken charge of the new group of refugees, he didn’t have much to do.

Greyson began speaking when he was still a distance from the mayor, raising a hand in greeting. “Hey there, Mayor Cooley, Corbin and I have a great idea for you. We’d like to get your approval on it *tout de suite* if possible.” He extended his hand as he strode up to the mayor and gave him a vigorous handshake.

Before the mayor could respond, while Corbin was still catching up, Greyson pressed on. “We just thought it would make sense to send a couple of scouts out west of the town to get a good look at the fire. These people said it changed directions. Shouldn’t we see for ourselves? I think so, and I’d like to go.”

Corbin stepped up beside him. “I’d like to go, too, sir. We won’t be gone long. Not more than a day or two, and we won’t get too close to the flames.”

Mayor Cooley frowned at them. He brushed out his enormous mustache with his fingers, then said, “I don’t know, boys. We really can’t afford to spare any hands, especially with this new group of refugees. There’s so much work to be done, and you two are just about the most capable workers we’ve got.”

“Sir, I understand what you’re saying,” Greyson said. He gestured a lot with his hands when he spoke. Corbin found that both amusing and strange. “But there’s a lot of anxious talk right now about this fire, and it’s been whipped up anew by

these newcomers. Shouldn't we just take a good look for ourselves so we can put their minds at ease?"

"All whipped up?" the mayor said, glancing around at the various groups in the field. "Are people really getting scared about this? The fire is so far away."

"We'll be gone one or two days at most," Greyson said. "Just enough to see where the fire is and how it's moving. Heck, we can work twice as hard when we get back to make up for it."

"We're not going to linger out there, sir," Corbin said. "We'll just take a look, make some notes, and rush back. Plus, Greyson could teach me some of his firefighting skills and knowledge while we're out there. I'd be able to help out the community even more when I get back."

The mayor took his hat off and fanned his face. Then he jammed it back on his head and said, "Okay, fine, I hear what you're saying. Maybe it's a good idea, after all. As long as you go armed, take provisions, and don't linger too long out there, you've got my approval. Corbin, you'll need your family's approval, too."

"Will I?" he replied. He was tempted to point out that he wasn't technically related to any of the McDonalds by blood, that he was now an adult, and that he'd never given them a reason to doubt his judgment, but he let it go. "Fine. I'll make sure they're okay with it, but we'll set out soon."

"Right away, if we can," Greyson said. "Thank you, sir. We won't let you down. Trust me!"

He shook the mayor's hand again, then promptly turned and strode away. Corbin started to follow him, but he saw a familiar figure moving toward him. The mayor was standing close to the triage tent, and Violet was standing with her guide dog in the tent opening. However, she must have overheard the conversation, because she was moving to cut him off. Corbin stopped and turned to her, reaching out to touch her arm.

"Hey, there, Violet," he said. She looked quite lovely this afternoon. Her cheeks were sun-touched, her hair pulled back loosely to frame her face, and she was wearing a simple blue

dress that flattered her figure. “You’ve had to ferry a lot of sick and injured people today, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, a lot,” she replied. He started to take her hand, but she pulled away. “I heard what you said to the mayor. Are you actually leaving town and heading out into the wilderness to track this fire?”

“Well, we’re not really going to track it,” he replied. He tried taking her hand again, and this time, she let him. “We’re just going to take a look and see if it’s any sort of threat to Hickory Falls. That’s all. We’ll be gone one day, maybe two, and then we’ll rush right back.”

“So you two just decided this without consulting anyone else?” she said. She tightened her grip on his hand. “You didn’t want to talk to your girlfriend or your family about it first?”

“Oh...uh...” In fact, it hadn’t occurred him that he should talk to her about it first. He’d just been caught up in the conversation. “Yeah, I was...I was going to talk to you, but we needed the mayor’s permission first.”

She gave his hand one last fierce squeeze, then let go. “Fine, then, I don’t think you should go. I think you should stay here. It’s not safe beyond the fence. We’ll see plenty of smoke long before the fire gets to us. You don’t need to go out there and spy on the flames.”

“Well, I’m not going alone,” he said. “I’ll be with Greyson, and we’ll both be armed. If we run into any bandits, we can handle ourselves. You know that. And we’re not going to get too close to the fire. We’ll be just fine.”

“I don’t like it,” Violet said. “That’s my official feedback, Corbin. I think you should stay here.”

“Are you forbidding me from going?”

She blew her breath out and rocked her head back on her shoulder. “Oh, gosh, I did *not* say that. Don’t put words in my mouth. I just told you how I feel.”

Corbin felt caught. He really wanted to go. He yearned to get out beyond the fence for a little bit and do something exciting.

Plus, he'd already committed to going. Now, his girlfriend didn't want him to go, and he had no idea how to handle it.

Finally, he reached out and took her hand again. "I promise I'll be safe. I won't take any unnecessary risks, and I'll hurry back. I promise, Violet."

"You can't promise any of that," she replied sharply, "but I can see your mind's made up. No sense telling you how I feel about it. Doesn't seem to matter. Well, fine. Have a good time."

"Don't be like that," Corbin said.

"Don't be like *what?*" she replied. "Rational? Reasonable? Okay."

And with that, she pulled her hand free again, shook Ruby's harness, and headed back to the triage tent. Corbin considered going after her, continuing to plead his case, but he was afraid it would only deteriorate into a real fight. Finally, he turned to walk away. When he did, he saw Greyson standing a few feet behind him, shaking his head, his hands on his hips. Annoyed, Corbin walked toward him.

"That was awkward," Greyson said. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but you guys were talking kind of loud."

"Don't worry about it," Corbin replied. "She just gets nervous. Violet has been through some really traumatic stuff. Come on. Let's go tell Jodi what we're doing."

As they headed across camp, Corbin was fuming. He hated any kind of tension between him and Violet, and it had deflated his enthusiasm.

"You know," Greyson said, "as people get older, they just tend to grow apart in their relationships."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Corbin said.

"Well, you and Violet have been dating for quite a while, haven't you?" Greyson said. "Seems like it to me."

"A few years, yeah."

Greyson nodded sympathetically. “You were both really young when you got together, then. Do you suppose you’re just growing apart a little bit. I don’t mean to pry or anything. It’s just my observation.”

Greyson’s question didn’t seem malicious, so Corbin resisted the urge to get defensive. There was some truth to it, though, wasn’t there? Violet and Corbin were still a couple technically, but were they really all that close?

“I don’t know what’s happening between us,” Corbin, said finally. “Most of the time, I can’t tell what the state of our relationship is. And it’s not like I have anyone I can talk to about it. Who am I going to confide in? Her parents? Her brother? Her little sister? No way.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Greyson said. “But, hey, if you ever need to talk to someone about it, you can talk to me. I swear to God I know how to keep a secret, and I’m a bit older than you. I’ve learned a thing or two about relationships in my time. I might even be able to provide some useful advice.”

Corbin glanced at him. Greyson seemed sincere, and he’d come to like the guy. They got along well, and Greyson never seemed put off by Corbin’s peculiarities.

“Thanks, man,” Corbin said, after a moment. “I really appreciate it.”

Corbin was surprised at how wild and untamed the land outside of Hickory Falls was. They'd gone maybe five miles due west of the gate, and already nature was eating away the highway, growing into all four lanes and leaving only a narrow, cleared path where others had trodden down the new greenery—nature's relentless encroachment in the absence of humanity's constant battle against it. It was remarkable just how quickly the façade of modern civilization had been stripped away.

The old abandoned vehicles were turning into rusted-out vine-covered shells, and houses and other buildings were being covered by greenery, crushed by weather, and ground into the ash heap of history. It was kind of breathtaking. At the moment, they were cutting their way through a narrow path in the greenery at the shoulder of the old highway, looking for some place to get a good view of the distant landscape.

Greyson had an enormous camouflage backpack over his shoulders with a sleeping bag tied to the top. In his right hand, he wielded a machete, which he used frequently to slash through vines, branches, and saplings. Corbin followed behind, keeping well clear of the blade. He'd brought a machete as well, but he was more comforted by the Glock holstered at his hip. His own backpack weighed heavily on his shoulders, loaded down with water, food, medicine, an extra set of clothes, and his own sleeping bag. In all, it had been a decent little hike thus far.

“You figure we can see the fire yet?” Corbin asked. There did appear to be a slight gray haze hovering just above the horizon to the west.

“Yeah, if we can find a high place,” Greyson said over his shoulder. “I’m not super familiar with the area, and there’s so much greenery blocking everything.”

“I scouted this whole area in the days before we built the fence,” Corbin said. “I know exactly where we are. There used to be a gas station right there.” He pointed to the right. The small truck stop was still there somewhere, but it seemed the building and sign had both collapsed at some point. He could see the shape of it, but bushes and vines had mostly covered it.

“That won’t work,” Greyson said. “We need to get up above the trees.”

“Behind the old gas station, there’s a hill,” Corbin said. “It used to be cleared, and there was a fire lookout tower on top. We should get a good view from up there.”

“Okay, then,” Greyson said, turning to the right and slashing a small sapling out of their way. “Let’s make our way toward it.”

As they cut their way toward the gas station, Greyson revealed the bent signpost under some large bushes, then they found the rusted shells of the gas pumps. Eventually, they cut past a brick wall with broken windows.

“Any place without people looks like this nowadays,” Greyson said. “The earth is just trying to eat everything human beings ever made.”

“It’s only been three years,” Corbin said. “Amazing how quickly things are disappearing completely.”

Beyond the gas station, the trees and brush opened up a bit, revealing some gaps that led up a steep slope.

“This is it,” Corbin said.

Greyson lowered the machete and turned to Corbin. “Hey, good job, Corb,” he said, with his winningest smile. “You really *do* know this area, don’t you? That’s great. Come on.”

He started up the hill, moving at a brisk pace. Corbin did his best to match him, but Greyson seemed to have boundless energy. As they reached the top of the hill, they stepped out of the trees. The crown of the hill was surrounded by an old chain-link fence that was crushed and broken in many places, and the ground was covered in gravel. Again, nature was encroaching, but it hadn't yet reached the dilapidated building at the very top of the hill.

The roof of the building had collapsed at some point, but the outer frame was still standing. Faded letters above the front door indicated that the building belonged to Bibb County. There was a small metal watchtower next to it that had somehow survived the last three years of abandonment and neglect.

"There's that fire lookout tower," Greyson said. "Good job. I didn't know they had one this close to East Macon. I knew there was one on the west side."

Greyson sheathed his machete under a strap on his backpack and jogged toward the watchtower. Corbin did the same. As he drew near, Corbin studied the watchtower. It was metal, painted white, with steps spiraling up to a platform about thirty feet up. He saw a bit of weather damage here and there, but it appeared intact and stable. Even so, Greyson didn't hesitate. He clambered over the gate at the bottom of the steps and hurried up.

"It feels a bit rickety," he said.

Corbin climbed over the gate and followed him, but he felt the steps creak and shift under his boots.

I told Violet I would play it safe, he thought, feeling a twinge of guilt. *This is not playing it safe.*

As he neared the top, he could feel the watchtower swaying slightly, and he clutched the handrail in a death grip. When he stepped through an open hatch onto the platform at the top of the tower, he saw that the handrail had been damaged in a few places. The floorboards creaked and groaned beneath him.

“We may be the last people to ever use this watchtower,” he noted. “Feels like it’s going to come crashing down any minute now.”

“We’re fine, as long as we don’t go nuts,” Greyson said, moving toward the damaged western handrail. He had a pair of binoculars around his neck, and he raised them to his eyes now.

Corbin got as close to the handrail as he dared and gazed off to the west. The haze above the horizon was clearer now, and it was definitely smoke. A lot of smoke. It lay upon the land to the west like a choking blanket.

“My God, that’s bad,” Greyson said, then whistled softly. “That’s a heck of a lot of fire.”

He lowered the binoculars, then slipped the strap over his head and handed them to Corbin.

“Take a look, Corb.”

Corbin raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the distant horizon. Smoke was rising in a long line, like a brown-gray wall, across the landscape to the west. It cut across trees, a few small roads, even what appeared to be a residential neighborhood. And it was massive.

“I didn’t expect it to cover so much ground,” Corbin said. “That’s a huge freakin’ fire, man!”

“Yeah, how far away do you think it is?” Greyson said. “What, maybe seven miles?”

“Yeah, seven or eight,” Corbin replied, lowering the binoculars and handing them to Greyson. “That puts it about twelve miles from Hickory Falls.” He shuddered. “That’s too damn close.”

Corbin pulled his pack off and gently set it on the floorboards beside him. He unzipped the big pocket and pulled out a notebook and a pen. Flipping to a blank page, he sat and began making a quick sketch of the path they’d taken, marking the location of Hickory Falls, the road to the west, and the approximate location of the fire. As he did this, Greyson resumed gazing at the fire through the binoculars.

“Okay, tell me if this looks accurate to you,” Corbin said, holding up the hand-drawn map.

Greyson lowered the binoculars and grabbed the notebook. He gazed at it for a few seconds, nodding slowly, then handed it back.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said. “I think we need to get closer, though, to see exactly how it’s moving and if it’s growing or stalling out. Don’t you think?”

“As long as we don’t get *too* close,” Corbin said, shoving the notebook back into his pack.

“Nah, we’ll turn back before we’re in any real danger,” Greyson said.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled something out. Corbin didn’t see what it was at first, but then he thumbed open a metal lid and revealed it to be an antique Zippo lighter. Greyson flicked the lid a few times, then suddenly seemed to become self-conscious. He glanced at Corbin, smiled sheepishly, and shoved the lighter back into his pocket.

“Sorry, this whole situation is making me want a cigarette badly,” he said, patting his pocket. “I had a bad habit for years, but I finally gave it up. Couldn’t get rid of my grandpa’s lighter, though. What do you do to control nerves?”

Corbin zipped up his backpack and rose. He certainly understood the struggle of dealing with nerves, and he’d tried cigarettes himself when he was younger. Fortunately, he’d never picked up the habit. “You can mostly control nerves through diet and mindfulness. Master your mind and you master your world, you know?”

“You make it sound easy, man,” Greyson said, shaking his long, curly hair back and turning toward the stairs. “Let’s go check out this fire and make sure our town is safe.”

He headed back to the stairs, and Corbin went after him. The sheer size of the fire had shaken Corbin. This was a much bigger problem than he’d realized. Now, of course, it made sense why hundreds of refugees had turned up at the western

gate. Every town and every neighborhood in that direction was under threat.

As Corbin picked his way down the stairs, he felt the tower swaying around him. About halfway down, one of the metal steps snapped beneath him, and he threw himself against the handrail to keep his foot from going through. But the handrail bent against his weight, so he flung himself forward, landing awkwardly on lower steps.

“Careful there, Corb,” Greyson said from behind him. “Watch where you’re stepping. We don’t need any casualties on our mission.”

“This damn thing isn’t safe anymore,” Corbin said.

Greyson offered him a hand, but Corbin waved it off and picked himself up. They continued down the steps, and then Corbin hurried away from the watchtower and started down the hill. He couldn’t get away from there fast enough. Greyson caught up to him and then passed him.

“How close are we going to get to the fire?” Corbin said. “I’ve heard wildfires can move really fast. If the wind pushes it toward us, we won’t be able to outrun it.”

“Just close enough to determine which way it’s moving and how fast,” Greyson said over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, man. I’m not going to put us in danger. I’ve been in dozens of fires—in houses, warehouses, forest, all kinds of places—and I’ve never gotten hurt.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” Corbin said.

He appreciated Greyson’s boldness, though it had become clear to him during their mission that a lot of the guy’s enthusiasm and energy was actually driven by anxiety. He was twitchy, always moving and speaking, gesturing with his hands. He seemed to have trouble sitting still for more than a few seconds, and it was all nerves. Corbin could appreciate a guy who had learned to channel his own worst tendencies in a more positive direction.

They headed back down the hill, following the path they’d hacked before. Then they walked past the broken-down gas

station and turned to the west again. The stretch of road west of the gas station was so overgrown that the road disappeared almost entirely in some places. Grass had grown up through cracks in the asphalt. Saplings had popped up on both shoulders and all over the center median, and enormous bushes of various kinds were encroaching from all directions.

A clear path had been chopped through, probably by the previous groups of refugees, but Greyson recommended that they move to the shoulder of the westbound lanes and cut through the heavy growth there.

“It’ll widen the path,” he said. “That’ll make it easier to beat a hasty retreat, if it comes to that.”

Corbin moved up beside Greyson, keeping a safe distance from his swinging machete. They began hacking their way through, widening the path.

“I just can’t believe how quickly everything is disappearing,” he said. “Maybe we should send out teams from time to time to keep these roads clear, just in case we ever need to use them.”

“Well, from the look of it, the fire might clear the roads for us,” Greyson said, taking another swing at a big wall of brush in front of him.

Corbin was walking along the north shoulder of the old road, cutting low to reveal the gravel in front of his feet. The image of that great wall of smoke loomed in his mind. Maybe Greyson was right. Maybe this fire was going to sweep over the whole landscape and clear everything. It was a disturbing thought.

We’ve worked so hard to build Hickory Falls, he thought. Where the heck would we go if we lost it?

Perhaps because of his distracting thoughts, he realized Greyson was getting closer. To avoid the blade, Corbin shifted direction a bit. Cutting through brush, his right foot came down on what looked like solid ground—vines and low-lying bushes on top of the gravel shoulder. But the heel of his boot went right through it, and then kept going. As he fell, he

realized that the ground north of the shoulder was actually a steep drop into a heavily overgrown ravine.

Corbin just managed to curse loudly and drop his machete before he fell. He scrabbled at the branches, but they tore loose. As he broke through the brush, he saw that the steep hillside went down well over ten feet into a pit full of broken logs and rocks.

Oh, this is going to hurt, he thought.

But then a strong hand grabbed a fistful of his camouflage jacket, and he came to a sudden, jarring stop. He hung there a second, staring down the steep hillside, his jacket pulling against his chest and belly. And then he was hoisted backward, ripped through brush again, and dumped onto the cracked and pitted lane of the highway. He looked up and saw Greyson standing over him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“Oh, man, did you see my reflexes there?” Greyson said. “Damn, dude, you were almost gone!”

Corbin was shaking. The fall probably wouldn’t have killed him outright, but he could easily have broken a bone. And then he would have been as good as dead out here.

“Thanks, man,” Corbin said. He started to rise, then felt his shaking limbs and sat down again. “I knew there were some gullies around here, but I didn’t intend to step off the shoulder. Damn. I thought I was going down.”

“I was mid-swing, man,” Greyson said, squatting in front of him. “It was just instinct kicking in, I guess.”

He offered his hand, and Corbin took it and allowed the guy to help him to his feet. Once he was upright again, Greyson even gave him a hearty pat on the back and a reassuring smile.

“You’re fine, Corb. Shake it off. Sorry, I guess I got us too close to the shoulder. We’ll move back to the left a bit, okay?”

Corbin nodded and readjusted the straps on his backpack. Somehow, it had stayed on his shoulders in the fall. As he did that, Greyson stooped down and grabbed something out of a twisted cluster of vines. He rose and thrust it at Corbin, revealing it to be his machete. Then he resumed walking.

Corbin was shaken, but he felt a moment of genuine gratitude for Greyson.

“Hey, man, for real, thanks,” Corbin said, and felt really awkward for saying it. Genuine expressions of these kinds of emotions didn’t come easy to him. “It’s nice to know you’ve got my back.”

“We’re in this together, buddy,” Greyson said, and gave him a slightly awkward but seemingly sincere thumbs-up. “I’ll watch your back, and you watch mine, okay?”

“Okay.”

They resumed their westward trek, following the road. Corbin knew it would eventually cross Route 404 and then pass over the Ocmulgee. Indeed, as he got his bearings again, he recalled this particular stretch of road. The Macon Downtown Airport wasn’t too far from here, though it was hidden behind all of the overgrown vegetation.

“You know, we’re really close to the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park,” he said. “We could probably find a small clearing in there and rest for a little while, maybe even camp for the night. To be honest, I’m a bit shaken up.”

“I can see that,” Greyson said. “Okay, that’s fine with me. Lead on. Heck, if the mounds are high enough, we might even be able to track the smoke from on top.”

Corbin was on the lookout for a small familiar road that led into the national park. He almost didn’t see it. A large rusted husk of a truck pointed the way. It looked like an old Land Rover that had died just before turning onto the highway. Corbin led Greyson down the small access road, which took them into the park. The old parking lot was just barely visible as a few gray patches, but grass and weeds had split the pavement in a hundred different places. A few cars had been left here to die.

From there, they followed the old path into the open field where the mounds were located. The grass was high and wild, choked with enormous weeds, and trees had encroached on the border. Corbin climbed the highest of the mounds. His legs

still felt rubbery, but he pushed through the discomfort. At the top, they weren't quite above the trees, and it wasn't nearly as good of a view as they'd had from the watchtower. Even so, when he turned west, he saw the smoke clearly, billowing up against the setting sun in streaks of translucent black.

"It's still a few miles away," Greyson noted, dumping his pack at his feet. "And I can't tell if it's moving toward us or not. But this clearing should buy us some time if the flames close in during the night. We'll have to keep our eyes open."

"Should we set up camp right here on top of this mound?" Corbin asked, setting his own pack down.

"Sure, why not?" Greyson replied. "I doubt there are any tribal representatives around here to get offended." He chuckled at his own joke as he unzipped his pack.

Over the next thirty minutes, they built a small campfire at the very crest of the mound and unrolled their sleeping bags on either side of it. Then they each ate a can of beans and had some filtered water for dinner. Not the tastiest meal of all time, but Corbin didn't much care. Food was mostly utility to him anyway.

Afterward, when the sky was fully dark, they lay down. Corbin thought he could see a faint glow above the treetops to the west, but it was just barely visible. Still, he intended to sleep very lightly.

"If the smoke is darker in the morning, we'll know it's headed this way," Greyson said. "And if it's headed this way, then Hickory Falls is in trouble."

The thought of evacuating Hickory Falls, of leaving everything behind, of trying to get everyone to abandon their homes and gardens, was so overwhelming, Corbin could scarcely bring himself to consider it.

"If it comes to that, we'll have a hard time getting some of those people to leave," Corbin said. "You've seen what town meetings are like. People argue over every little thing. Heck, they bickered about planting garlic."

Greyson was on his back, his arms tucked behind his head, gaze fixed on the darkening sky overhead. Their little campfire was crackling and popping between them. Corbin didn't need the heat. It was warm enough on this late May night, but he found the sound comforting somehow.

"I'm going to say something that I've been thinking lately," Greyson said, after a moment. "I hope I don't offend you when I say it, because I'm not trying to be rude. Just honest."

"Well, I prefer honesty," Corbin said. "I don't like it when people tiptoe around their real thoughts and feelings, so go for it."

"I'm glad to hear that," Greyson said. He rolled onto his side, facing the fire, gazing at Corbin through the flames. "I think maybe the wrong people are in charge in Hickory Falls. No offense. They're all nice and friendly, and I really appreciate how they welcomed me in, but I don't understand why you don't have a leadership role there."

It was something that had bothered Corbin for sure, but he hadn't allowed himself to dwell on it. Hearing Greyson speak it so openly made him feel awkward.

"I guess because I'm younger," Corbin.

"Being old doesn't make someone a good leader," Greyson replied with a laugh. "It just makes them old. You're levelheaded, bold when it's called for, and decisive. What else do you need in a leader? I'm sorry, man, I just had to say it. Why aren't you running that place?"

Corbin sighed. "I don't know. I never really put myself forward, I guess."

"Because you're humble," Greyson said. "Heck, even your family treats you like you're just some hired muscle. They've got you doing manual labor, and that's it. Like that's all you're good for. Surely your own family knows you should be doing more."

"Well, actually..." Corbin hesitated a moment before saying it. "I'm not technically related to anyone in Hickory Falls. Violet's dad liberated me from a juvenile boot camp, and I've

been living with them ever since. As far as I know, I don't have any blood relations left in the world."

"Ah," Greyson said softly. And then, a few seconds later, "That explains it, then. I'm not trying to stir up trouble, my dude. It was just on my mind. Leaders should lead. That's all I'm saying." And with that, he rolled the other way, putting his back to the fire.

"No problem," Corbin said. "Thanks for being honest."

Soon enough, it sounded like Greyson was sleeping, but Corbin was wide awake now. He watched the embers of their campfire rising into the sky for a good hour, troubled by too many things to sort through. Greyson was right, of course. Corbin had little to do in Hickory Falls beyond manual labor. He wasn't on any committees, and he certainly had no leadership role.

And even Violet doesn't trust my judgment, he thought. She didn't want me to scout the fire. She'll probably sulk and be mad at me when I get home.

He sighed and shifted his gaze to the west. He could sense the fire over there, the great wall of it threatening the whole region. And if it came to the town, what then? Greyson was right. Corbin did long to be a leader, not to lord it over people but because he felt he had some decent decision-making skills. But how would he prove his leadership ability if the fire threatened to destroy all they'd built?

"Hey, Greyson," he said. "Are you asleep?"

Greyson snorted and sniffed, and said sleepily, "I was close. What's up?"

"Tomorrow, when we resume the hike," Corbin said, "would you teach me what you know about fire safety and fighting wildfires? I mean, I learned a little bit when we were clearing trees, but I feel like I need to know so much more."

"Heck yeah, man," Greyson replied. "I'll teach you everything I know."

"Great. Thanks." And then Corbin added, because he wanted to test Greyson's response, "I think the fire is moving this way,

and I think it's moving pretty fast.”

Greyson didn't say anything for a couple of seconds. Then he sighed and said, “Yeah, you may be right. On the other hand, it might start dying out overnight. Tell you what, tomorrow, instead of setting off again, let's stay here in the camp and see if it gets closer to us. I'll spend the time teaching you what I know. Master and apprentice. Sound good?”

“Sounds good,” Corbin replied.

In the absence of Greyson and Corbin, Jodi took over the firebreak team, recruiting a few more people to help with the work. First, she swung by and got Amelia, who was quite willing to be recruited again. Jodi found her working in the refugee supply camp, while Owen watched little Katie nearby. When Jodi approached Amelia, Owen gave his mother a hard look, but Amelia, who was scribbling on a clipboard in front of shelves of tools, looked up suddenly and smiled at her.

“Please tell me you’ve got more work for me to do,” Amelia said, setting the clipboard down.

“I could use your help for a few hours today,” Jodi said. “Do you mind? Things seems pretty quiet here in the camp at the moment.”

Amelia glanced at Owen, who just stared back at her. “I think so. Yeah, I’d like to.” And with that, she picked up a pair of work gloves and stepped around the counter inside the tent. Amelia was already dressed in jeans and a blue work shirt.

“Really?” Owen said, rolling his eyes. “So I’m just supposed to stay here and watch Katie all day?”

Poor little Katie pulled a sad face at this, and Jodi felt instantly furious. She rounded on her son, and the look on her face made him wince. “Oh, gee, Owen, spend a few more hours hanging out with your dear, sweet daughter who loves your company?”

Owen looked down at his daughter with a guilty grimace. “I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t mind spending time with Katie

Bug. Of course, I don't."

"Well, good," Jodi said, "because it's good for both of you."

"I know," Owen said softly.

And with that, Jodi turned and stormed off. How could he? How could he express his frustration right in front of Katie? She was old enough to pick up on his tone of voice, and she'd clearly been hurt by it. Jodi knew she had to get away before she said something to her son that she would regret. Amelia caught up to her, pulling her work gloves on.

"He's just not used to watching her during the day," she said. "He didn't mean anything by it."

"I don't like his attitude," Jodi said. "He should feel blessed and lucky to spend the day with his daughter. The world's not going to stop spinning just because he doesn't break his back working today."

As they made their way through the camp, Jodi stopped now and again to ask for volunteers among the healthier refugees. Most were perfectly willing to join up. Then she made her way to the center of town, where she found a large group of locals milling about the food bank and the garden. It turned out, there'd been a very successful deer hunt that morning, and the meat was being distributed to households. Jodi spotted her mother, Beth, with James, waiting in line to get their share at the doorway to the big pole barn that served as the community food bank and supply center.

Jodi worked her way through the crowd, asking for volunteers for a firebreak team. She found Violet in the garden, sitting with Ruby on a concrete ledge, but she was surprised when Violet declined.

"We could use your help," Jodi said.

Violet was petting Ruby. She had a braille book from the library resting on her lap, unopened. "I just don't really feel like it today."

"You were on the firebreak team before," Jodi said. "Are you sure?"

“Mom, please stop asking me,” Violet said, bowing her head. “I’m busy. I’m...going to read this book here in a minute.”

It’s about Corbin, Jodi thought.

She decided to leave her daughter alone. In the end, she got a small group of volunteers, many of them from the second group of refugees. There was an older, well-built guy in an old dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up past his elbows. His black hair was slicked back, and he had a long goatee. He introduced himself as Ollie. Then there was a middle-aged woman with leathery skin. She introduced herself as Lynette and said she’d been a yoga instructor in her former life. Twin teen boys named Braden and Kayden also joined them. They were hulking rednecks in sleeveless black shirts and tattered baseball caps. Even some of Winton’s adult children joined them, including his oldest son, Chance, who was tall and gangly like his dad.

Once she had about a dozen volunteers, Jodi brought them back to the community supply center. She gathered them in the parking lot out front, stepped up on a concrete step, and turned to address them. Jodi was, as usual, sore and aching, yearning for a soft recliner, but she pushed through the pain. She’d gotten good at that.

She signaled for Amelia to come up and stand beside her. Once she did, Jodi spoke.

“Okay, folks, we’re the firebreak team today,” Jodi said. “We’re going to continue the work that our friend Mr. Greyson started. I’m going to send one team out to continue cutting down trees and clearing any underbrush and wild grass that’s growing close to the fence. We have a few grazing animals in town, sheep and goats, and we can use them to help clear the grass. Amelia, would you be willing to lead this team?”

Amelia seemed surprised to be put in charge, and she did a little double take before responding. “Yes, of course. We’ll head to the old firehouse and pick up a few axes and tools.”

Jodi selected eight strong men and women from among the volunteers, including the twins and the yoga teacher, and sent them off with Amelia. As for the other volunteers, Jodi had

come up with a plan of her own, and she was quite proud of herself for thinking of it. She led a group of about ten people, including Winton's son and the old tough guy named Ollie to the southern fence.

A group had been working on building a simple aqueduct that ran from an artificial pond through a gap in the southern fence and all the way to a nearby lake. The project wasn't complete, but quite a few barrels had been collected and stored under a large tarp near the gate. Jodi's back was killing her, but she did her best to ignore it. Standing in front of the gate, she turned to face the group again.

"Okay, folks, thanks for coming here with me," she said. "Here's what we're going to do. The aqueduct isn't complete, so water's not flowing from the lake yet, which means there's nothing in the pond yet. So, we're going to load up these barrels here and push them on handcarts out to the lake. We'll fill them, bring them back, and stash them in various places around town."

Winton's son immediately raised his hand. Before Jodi even called on him, he spoke. "Does that mean the fire is for sure going to come here to Hickory Falls?"

"No, it doesn't mean that," Jodi said. "We have some people scouting out west of town right now. They're going to track the fire and report back to us very soon, okay? We'll know more then. But whatever the case, we want to be prepared."

But Winton's kid raised his hand again. Jodi nodded at him. "It's just that...well, ma'am, if a big wildfire is headed this way, then all of our work is in vain, isn't it? We'd be better off creating an escape route and putting together enough supplies to take with us, because running like heck is the only real way to survive a wildfire. Isn't that so?"

Jodi felt a knot in the pit of her stomach, but she shook her head and said, "I don't think that's necessarily so. We're going to do our best to protect the town."

She thought he might raise his hand again, but he didn't. She waited a few seconds, then finally nodded, and gestured toward the tarp. "We've got a few handcarts there. Let's load

the barrels on them, and then we'll head for the lake. It's a bit of a walk, folks, but we'll take rest breaks along the way."

My back will insist on it, she thought.

The group set to work immediately. Ollie stepped right up to the tarp. His sleeves were already rolled up, and he wrapped his arms around a barrel and hoisted it off the ground with a loud groan, then carried it to the nearest handcart. The others followed suit, though the rest of them had to work in pairs to lift the big wooden barrels onto the handcarts.

Once all of the handcarts were loaded, Jodi got Winton's son to help her unbar the gate, and she swung it open. Beyond, a small country road headed off across a lush, overgrown landscape. The lake was half a mile from the gate, and Jodi could see the partially constructed aqueduct trailing off beside the road. They'd used mostly PVC pipe, mounting it on a wooden framework. Once finished it would feed water directly from the lake into an artificial, stone-lined pond in Hickory Falls, which would be far more convenient than lugging water by hand.

Ollie wasted no time. The mustachioed gentleman, who looked a bit like a strongman from a circus out of some bygone era, grabbed the handles of the lead cart and leaned into it.

"You know, I was a family doctor in my former life," he said to Jodi, "but I always kept up my gym membership. Even after the Big Event, I kept working out. Looks like it all paid off, eh?"

And with that, he got the lead cart moving. Four large barrels rattled and thumped as he pushed them through the open gate.

"Okay, let's follow his lead," Jodi said. "Some of us will need to double up and push in pairs, especially on the way back."

She decided to set an example, so she went to the nearest handcart after Ollie. Zoe was already there. The local librarian had abandoned her books again for the day. Zoe was a small woman, and Jodi wasn't in great shape.

“You think we can handle this?” Jodi said, grabbing the cart’s long handle on the left side.

“All the way to the lake?” Zoe said, with a wry smile. “Oh, sure. We may need a shot of adrenaline to get up the hill, though.”

“Okay, here we go,” Jodi said, bracing herself.

She took a deep breath and began pushing, anticipating pain in her arm, in her back, and those uncomfortable tingles all down her legs. Fortunately, the handcart seemed to be sturdy, and the wheels were well-greased. It moved with minimal effort as they pushed it out from under the tarp and down the little country road. They headed through the open gate, following Ollie. Other pairs of volunteers formed a line with their handcarts behind them.

This close to the wall, the road had been cleared by the aqueduct team, but Jodi could still see many, many places where plants had broken through the asphalt, and trees and bushes were taking over the shoulder and center island. The ground beneath the aqueduct was clear for the most part. It had been built just off the shoulder and followed the road as it twisted and turned.

After a few minutes, Jodi glanced back at the line of handcarts behind her. Six in all, with four to five barrels on each cart. It wasn’t enough water, not if she intended to stash it all over town to fight fire. They would need to make a second trip. Jodi groaned at the thought. Already, she was starting to feel sore in all of her familiar places.

“Jodi, level with me,” Zoe said, already out of breath. “Do you *really* think we’re going to need all of this water to fight the fire? Is it really going to come to that?”

Jodi considered the question. She didn’t have to weigh her words because she wasn’t sure how she actually felt about the situation. “If I had to place a bet, if real money was on the line, I’d bet that the fire will burn itself out before it gets here, and it’ll probably head south of us anyway.”

“Then why are we doing all of this work to prepare for it?” Zoe said. “We could put the effort toward something that actually matters.”

“We’re doing all of this work because, on the off chance that I’m wrong and the fire *does* come this way, we’ll have a heck of a fight trying to save the town,” Jodi replied. “After all we’ve been through, as a community and as individuals, I just want to be prepared. If there’s even a one percent chance that the fire will reach us, I want to have everything in place to drive it back. And I know the other town leaders feel the same way.”

“At least we’ve got that young firefighter with us now,” Zoe said. “That seems like convenient timing, you know?”

“Greyson? Yeah, it’s good he’s here.”

Ollie had gained some distance on them, and he crested a small hill about a hundred yards ahead of them. He pulled his handcart to a sudden, squealing stop and lifted a hand to shield his eyes as he gazed into the distance. Jodi and Zoe were struggling to get up the hill, but Ollie stood there for a minute, as if waiting for them. Finally, he lowered his hand, grabbed a wooden block out of the cart, and set it behind one of the wheels. Then he turned and came back down the hill, waving at Jodi.

“What’s the problem?” she asked. *What could it be now?*

A few of his black hairs had broken loose and were sticking up in various directions.

“You might want to halt the line for a minute,” he said, gesturing at her handcart. “Come up here and take a look at the lake with me.”

Jodi glanced at Zoe, who glanced back at her with wide, anxious eyes. Finally, they set blocks behind the cart’s wheels.

“Wait here,” Jodi said. She signaled to the carts behind her to wait. Then she motioned Ollie up the hill. “Is it something bad?”

“You just need to take a look at the lake,” Ollie said. “I think it’s best if you see it with your own eyes. Tell me, do you

come out here very often?”

“Me personally? No, hardly ever,” Jodi said. “We have teams that come out and get water, most of it for irrigation and drinking. The aqueduct should be done in another day or two, and then we won’t have to send teams out anymore.”

As she neared the top of the hill, she saw the end of the aqueduct. The pipe that would carry the water came to an abrupt end, with a few more lengths of pipe lying on a tarp nearby. The wooden framework continued a few more feet, then ended as well. Jodi was actually quite impressed with how far they’d made it in just a couple of days.

She paused to admire their handiwork, but Ollie beckoned her with both hands. She kept going all the way to the top of the hill, gravel and young plants crunching beneath the soles of her leather boots. She reached Ollie’s cart and came to a stop.

“See?” Ollie said.

The hill was actually a rise, a slope up to a broad flat space. The road took a big, gradual curve to the left here before disappearing into deep woods. However, the lake sat ahead to the right. It wasn’t terribly big as far as lakes go, maybe eight or nine acres. There were no camping or picnic facilities, never had been, though locals had occasionally fished here.

Jodi froze in her tracks and went cold. “My God, how did it get like this? We’re supposed to be rationing water.”

The lake was lower than it had ever been in her life. She could see the rocky banks on all sides. The water was down almost ten feet by the look of it, exposing a lot of old rocks.

“You haven’t been out here in a while,” Ollie said. “The drought has taken a lot of the water, I’m sure. From what your people tell me, it’s just been this miserable heat day after day for weeks. And then we’ve got teams filling barrels of water for irrigation, for drinking, for the animals. It’s not a real big lake to start with.”

It made sense, of course. A community of five hundred people that had recently grown to almost eight hundred, and all of their water came from the same small lake. A lot of it went to

the gardens that were planted throughout town, but they also used it for drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, and everything else. On top of that, it hadn't rained in a month.

“At this rate, we're going to run out of water,” Jodi said. “We have to cut back even more on our water usage. We just have to.”

“What about all of these barrels?” Ollie said, gesturing at them.

Jodi looked back down the hill at the line of handcarts below, the empty barrels waiting to be filled. The sight of them now made her sick with worry. Did they really need all of this water to fight a fire that probably wasn't going to be a problem?

“Well,” she said, after a moment, “let's fill half of the barrels, and I'll pass the word along to Mayor Cooley. Everyone's going to have to use less water. That's all there is to it.”

After a few hours of lugging water-filled barrels back into the town and depositing them in key locations around town, Jodi tracked down Amelia and her crew. They were working hard in a large field behind an older neighborhood, clearing it of every green and growing thing. It was a tragedy to behold, but the field was just easy kindling for any flames that might pass through.

Jodi was tempted to put her team to work helping Amelia's team clear the field, but she could see they were exhausted. Instead, she told Amelia to meet her outside the community center. Then she led her own team back to the center of town to rest. She felt bad giving them fresh water to drink. What would they do if the lake ran dry? The next closest source of water was the Ocmulgee River, and it was a few miles to the southwest.

She was sitting on a curb in front of the community center, troubled by her thoughts. Ollie, Zoe, Winton's son, and the rest of her team were chatting quietly, sharing snacks. They seemed content, pleased with a hard day's work, certainly not as troubled as she was, by all appearances.

Will it be fire? Will it be our water supply drying up? Will it be the death of our gardens? Which of the possible catastrophes will be the end of this community?

She hated that line of thinking, but she couldn't drive it from her mind. She saw Shane and James through a window in the community food bank, preparing and packaging meat from the

latest successful hunt. Spooked animals kept invading the town, leaping over the fence, digging under it, or squeezing through gaps. Even with the crying and bleating of animals being caught or slaughtered inside the fence, they kept coming.

Finally, she saw Amelia leading her team toward the community center, and she went to meet her. It seemed Amelia was actually quite good at coordinating a team, a skill she'd no doubt picked up during her years in high school as a volleyball team captain. She fit the role well, and her team looked tired but happy. She'd clearly kept morale high.

"Amelia, we have food and water here," Jodi said, gesturing toward a large open crate nearby. "There's dried meat, potato chips, some granola bars, filtered water."

Amelia instructed her people to sit in the small grassy strip in front of the community center. Then she passed out food and water. Once they were all eating, she poured a small cup of water for herself, grabbed a granola bar, and sat down with Jodi on the curb.

"Well, I think the west side of town is in pretty good shape," Amelia said. She produced a handkerchief from a pocket and dabbed her sweaty cheeks and forehead. "We cleared a bunch of overgrown fields and yards, and of course, the orchard is already cleared."

"We need to make it practically impossible for a fire to spread to the fence," Jodi said, "and if it reaches the fence, then we need to make it impossible for it to move from the fence to the buildings."

"You got all of those barrels of water, right?" Amelia said, then took a big drink. "We could soak the fence with water and make it harder for it to burn."

"There's not enough water for that," Jodi said. "We brought in less than half of what I intended. The lake is so low. I had no idea. Nobody has reported the lake level." Jodi started to open a granola bar, then decided she was too anxious to eat. She jammed it in her shirt pocket instead. "It's just not enough. If that fire comes here, it won't be that hard for it to leap the gap,

get the fence, and then jump to the houses. A strong wind could do it. We'll just have to cross our fingers and hope for the best."

"It's all just precaution anyway," Amelia said, taking another drink. "Just to make us feel safe."

"Right."

"I did have one idea," Amelia added. "When my team and I were walking through the firebreak. The previous team cut down quite a few trees, but the stumps are still there. Fire could easily spread along the stumps, but I was thinking, what if we dug a big trench between the trees and the fence? Originally, I thought we could fill it with water, but maybe that's not an option."

"Digging a trench around the entire town would be quite a task," Jodi said.

"We've got the tools," Amelia said. "Plenty of shovels in town. Plus, it's a job that almost anyone could do. It doesn't take any particular set of skills or training to dig with a shovel. Heck, if we put every able-bodied refugee to work, we might be able to get it done in a couple of days, and flames would have a really hard time leaping over a big trench."

It made sense and seemed reasonable, but Jodi just couldn't decide if it was really worth the effort. She was still indecisive about the real threat of the fire. Maybe Corbin's report would clear things up once he returned.

"Why don't you go ahead and start putting together a team to dig the trench," Jodi said. "I'll speak to James. I'm sure he will approve of it, and most of the new refugees are just sitting in the triage camp waiting for something to do."

"Okay, great." Amelia gave Jodi a joking little salute and smiled. "You know, it's nice doing some real work for a change."

And with that, she took a final gulp of water, handed the empty cup to Jodi, and hopped to her feet. Then she turned and promptly headed off, leaving her team to continue relaxing in front of the community center.



Jodi sent her team home in the early afternoon. They'd worked hard enough, and most of them had their own responsibilities at home that needed to be attended to. Then she went promptly to the medical tent in the refugee camp and took a couple of ibuprofen to ease the pain in her back. She was hurting badly, and she was tempted to head home and lie down for a while. But she couldn't bring herself to do it while so many others continued to work.

Someday, we're going to run out of ibuprofen, she thought, and that's going to be a really bad day for me.

Instead of going home, she decided to check on Amelia. However, as she was headed back through the refugee camp, she spotted Owen sitting dully on a blanket, as Katie scribbled in a notebook nearby. Poor Owen had the look of an abandoned puppy. Despite her earlier frustration with him, Jodi decided to do him a favor, so she approached.

"Grandma," Katie cried as she approached. "Is it snack time?"

Owen looked up at his mother, started to say something, then bit his lip instead.

"Have you two had a nice day together?" Jodi asked.

"It's been pretty good," Owen said. "I feel bad kind of sitting here. Like I'm relaxing while most people are hard at work."

"Well, son, allow me to make your day," Jodi said. "Why don't you take Katie to Beth. Let great-grandma watch her for a while. And, yes, Katie, it might even be snack time."

Katie didn't need to hear more than that. She flipped her notebook shut and bounded up to her feet. Owen rose, brushing off the seat of his pants. He seemed both excited and perhaps a little guilty, and Jodi thought that was a reasonable response.

"Find your father and meet me outside the western gate," Jodi said. "You're itching to work, so I'll put you to work."

And with that, she set off. She didn't wait for his response. She intended to have a nice long talk with him later, whether he wanted it or not. Now was not the time. She made her way to the western gate, trying to ignore all of the aches and pains that cried out to her with every step. Jodi just didn't have time to nurse her broken body. When she came in sight of the gate, she saw that it was open. A very large group of volunteers was hard at work on the other side, spread out on either side of the road. It was quite a big job, and she heard Amelia's voice barking out occasional orders.

"Ten feet deep, people. That's what we're aiming for. Look out for roots and rocks. Try not to damage the shovels!"

When Jodi stepped through the gate, she realized Amelia was shouting instructions while she was herself working hard. They'd been working for maybe an hour, and already they'd created a huge scar that stretched about a hundred yards along the fence.

However, Jodi realized that some of the volunteers were actually digging into the shoulder of the road and chipping away at the cracked and pitted road. That seemed like an odd choice, so she approached Amelia and then beckoned her to one side so they could speak privately.

"Are you digging up the road, too?" she asked.

"Well...sure," Amelia said, dabbing her forehead with the back of her work glove. She had the handle of a very old shovel in her other hand, a tool salvaged from an abandoned home—like so many of their tools. "The ditch won't really do its job unless it encircles the entire town with no gaps. That's what I figured. Otherwise, we're leaving a path for the flames to get to the fence."

Jodi glanced back at the road. Indeed, a group of four strong young men were making quick work of the road.

"If you dig up all the roads leading out of town, it's going to make it very hard for us to get out," Jodi said. "What if we have to flee the fire? How will we get everyone out? How will we lug all of our supplies? I think we should have discussed this first."

“We’ll make the ditch shallow in front of the gates,” Amelia said, with a sheepish shrug. “People will still be able to get through it.”

Jodi turned, hands on hips, back toward the gate. Suddenly, this felt a whole lot like dealing with a contractor working on a house. She saw Shane and Owen approaching, and she waved them over. They both glanced at the road in passing, and Shane frowned at the young men chipping away at the asphalt.

“What in the world is going on out here?” he asked. “It looks like they’re wrecking the road.”

“People can get out. People can get out,” Amelia said, clearly frustrated. “They’ll just go through the ditch. The sides won’t be that steep!”

Owen went to her, as if he intended to give her a hug, but she stepped to one side and avoided it. This seemed to annoy him, and he made a little face as he went back to stand with his father.

“For able-bodied people, it won’t be a problem,” Jodi said. “Getting carts through will be harder, but anyone who has difficulty walking, like our seniors, may find it impassable.”

“Okay, well...” Amelia turned away, gripping her forehead. “I thought I was put in charge of this task, I thought I had approval, and I thought you trusted my judgment.”

It looked like she was about to storm off, so Jodi reached out and gently grabbed her hand. “Of course you’re still in charge of the project, Amelia dear, but now that we realized this issue, we all have to figure out the best way to approach it. Under normal circumstances, we would have drawn up some plans for this project first and *then* gotten approval.”

“We could build bridges, maybe,” Owen said with a shrug. He looked extremely annoyed at the moment.

“Okay, but that doesn’t address the larger issue here,” Shane said. He had clearly come from the community food bank. He smelled a bit like smoke, as he’d been smoking meat all morning. Fortunately, he was wearing an old T-shirt and sweatpants, so he hadn’t ruined nice clothes. “We’re taking a

scattershot approach to preparing for this fire. Greyson's not even here, so we don't have any experts. Perhaps we should do a bit of research before we continue with some of these projects."

Finally, Amelia swung around and said, "Fine. *Fine*. I should have thought this through, I guess. Actually, I *did* think it through, but maybe you're right. Maybe we should have another town meeting and discuss it and take a vote. Everyone loves town meetings, right? Let's just go ahead and do it."

She seemed embarrassed more than frustrated. Jodi wanted to give the poor girl a hug, but she thought that might only make her feel more embarrassed in that moment.

"I'd rather avoid another town meeting," Jodi said. "We already have broad approval for the firebreak team, so let's leave it at that. God help us if we have to bicker with Winton and his ilk again. Amelia, I encouraged this project because I thought it was a good idea, and I *still* think it's a good idea. Maybe we need to do a bit more research first about fighting fires, or wait until Greyson gets back."

"Well, how are we supposed to do research on fighting fires?" Amelia asked.

"I worked with Zoe all morning," Jodi said. "The poor woman would much rather be sitting behind her desk at the library, but she hasn't gotten many visitors lately. Let's head down to the library and see if there are any books on the subject. Amelia, you can stay here and continue with your project, keep people working. Just hold off on destroying the roads for now, okay?"

Amelia laughed awkwardly. It seemed to pull her out of the embarrassment. "Yeah, that sounds good."

And with that, Jodi beckoned Owen and Shane and headed back into town. She didn't trust either of these men to not make Amelia feel bad about her project. Shane was too blunt and critical, and Owen was still in a bad mood.

Jodi marched back into town. Many of the volunteers glanced at her in passing. Clearly, they'd overheard at least some of the disagreement, and they seemed confused. A few had even

stopped working, as if waiting for further instructions. However, as soon as Jodi had led Shane and Owen back into town, she heard Amelia barking instructions again.

“Okay, we’re going to stop digging at the shoulders of the road there,” she said, speaking loudly. “You guys there, can I move you down the line, please?”

Jodi was proud of her. The whole situation had been tense and awkward, but Amelia hadn’t given up or walked away from the project. Jodi wasn’t sure if the trench would even matter in the end. Research might clarify that for them, but at least it gave Amelia a chance to really take charge of something and see it to completion.

“Shouldn’t we have waited for Corbin and Greyson to get back before we started digging everything up?” Shane said.

“Even if this fire doesn’t reach us,” Jodi replied, “it wouldn’t be a bad thing to prepare the town for future wildfires. It’s a hot, dry season, and there will be other hot, dry seasons in the future.”

“Shouldn’t I be digging with the rest of the team?” Owen said. “Why are we walking back into town?”

“Because you two are going to help me research fire safety,” Jodi said, “and you’ll survive. Plenty of time to dig later.”

Owen grunted unhappily and said no more. Neither her husband nor her son seemed particularly interested in this little task, but to their credit, they kept following her all the way to the library without complaint. Jodi even stopped by the food bank on the way and got Kaylee, knowing that her youngest daughter would love this task.

“Kaylee, sweetheart,” she said, taking her daughter’s hand to lead her. “We’re going to look for a certain kind of book at the library.”

“Ooh, a book?” Kaylee said. “I know how to use the old card catalog. Miss Zoe showed me.”

Kaylee was dressed in a pair of old, faded jeans and a pink long-sleeve T-shirt. She’d been playing all morning in the camp, so she was dusty and dirty. Not the best for picking

through library books, so Jodi took a final detour to one of the fire barrels near the mayor's office to wash her face and hands.

Finally, they got to the library and walked inside. Jodi could tell Shane and Owen were governing their tongues, trying not to say anything negative. They found an exhausted Zoe sitting behind the librarian's desk, nursing a big bottle of water and a plate of cookies. She seemed shocked when they walked through the door, and she sat up suddenly, almost spilling her plate of cookies.

"Goodness, Jodi, are you here to draft me for some other wild and crazy task?" she said.

"Nope, you earned a nice long break today," Jodi said. "Point us in the direction of the card catalog, please!"

Zoe practically squealed with delight as she hopped up from her seat. "Oh, my goodness, someone actually wants to find a book! A whole group of people! It's been so lonely in here lately, and I made that card catalog myself, with my own hands."

She led them to a small display case that she'd turned into a makeshift card catalog. "It's just like the real, old-fashioned card catalog from my childhood. If you need any help finding anything, any at all, please let me know."

And then she turned them loose. They went to work, but Jodi was careful to let Kaylee lead. Her daughter was proud of her ability to use the card catalog, so Jodi and Shane suggested topics, and then Kaylee went and found the appropriate card. Once they'd identified a number of books related to firefighting, fire preparedness, and similar topics, the group split up to go and find the books.

They met after a few minutes at a table in a study room near the back of the library.

"Good job, everyone," Jodi said, as Kaylee sat down beside her. The little girl had a big, beaming smile on her face. "Now, we're going to look through these books and see if we can find any information about protecting a town from a wildfire, okay?"

Owen was still staring glumly at nothing in particular, but Shane seemed to be in a better mood. He immediately began picking through books, smiling and chatting with Kaylee. Jodi passed a few books to Owen, some of the easier books to Kaylee, and pulled others toward herself. And then they spent the next two or three hours gathering information, making notes on scrap paper. Kaylee was having the time of her life, laughing and clapping every time they found some new piece of helpful information.

Finally, when they'd gone through every book in the stack, Jodi spread out the pieces of scrap paper.

"Okay, so we got a lot of useful information from these books," she said.

"Hooray for the library!" Kaylee cheered.

Shane patted her on the head and even managed a smile. Only Owen remained in the gloom of his own personal prison.

"So digging a ditch is a good idea," Jodi said. "Owen, your wife was right about that. It can stop the flames from jumping across the gap. Making the ditch encircle the entire town is also a good idea, but we'll need to span the gap so everyone can get out, if it comes to that. We did some research about building bridges, but it looks like it might be quite an ordeal to build a permanent bridge. But this..." She turned one piece of paper to show a quick diagram that she'd made. "This seems like a reasonable compromise. A portable bridge based on Leonardo DaVinci's old design."

The bridge was self-supporting, requiring no nails, no cement, no fasteners of any kind. Simple notches in logs allowed the arch-shaped bridge to support itself. According to one of the books they'd read, engineers had tested DaVinci's bridge design and found that it worked quite well.

"Once the ditch is complete, we'll place a self-supporting bridge at each of the gates," Jodi said. "That way, we can leave the ditch in place for future fire protection, but we'll be able to come and go with ease. Now, how does that sound?"

“I think it sounds great,” Shane said. “We should probably tell the mayor and make sure we have his approval.”

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem,” Jodi said. “And see that, Kaylee? That’s how you solve a problem. You put your heads together, do your homework, and figure out a solution.”

“We did it together,” Kaylee said. “And now the fire can’t get us!”

Shane could see right through Jodi. She'd been going and going all day long, walking back and forth across town, pushing carts and carrying items, and through it all, she hadn't uttered a single word of complaint. She hadn't whimpered or whined, and she took only a brief rest here and there. She was mostly upbeat, encouraging everyone, but Shane could hear the strain in her voice. He could see the tightness in her face and the careful way she moved.

His wife was in terrible pain, but for some reason, she was trying to hide it. He knew her well enough to know that a direct confrontation wasn't a good way to go. Even so, if he didn't say something soon, Jodi was going to either collapse or do permanent damage to herself.

After leaving the library, the four of them headed off to begin gathering materials to build the bridges. They recruited a few additional people along the way, and then they went to the town's lumber yard, where raw wood was stored in a large, dry building. Although the design of the bridges was pretty straightforward, they were going to require quite a few logs, so they took one of the town's biggest handcarts and began loading it up.

"A bridge with no supports?" That was Ollie, one of the refugees. He worked with Owen to hoist a large log off a pile. "I can't wrap my head around it, even after seeing the diagram."

“It will support itself,” Jodi said. She was standing behind the cart, marking a list of supplies as people loaded it up. “Each set of beams will be resting on another set of beams, and when weight is applied to the bridge, it will actually strengthen these bonds by pressing them against each other.”

“It’s the darnedest thing I ever heard of,” Ollie said.

Shane got busy loading the cart, but he kept glancing at Jodi. When she didn’t think anyone was looking, she seemed to let her guard down a little, and in those moments, he caught a grimace or a wince of pain on her face. When she stooped down and helped a young refugee girl set some boards on a pile, he’d had enough. Shane walked over to Jodi and leaned in close.

“Hey, wifey, could I talk to you for just a minute?” he said.

She looked into his eyes and didn’t seem to like what she saw there. “Shane, can it wait? I really need to make sure we get everything we need.”

“It’ll all be on the cart,” Shane said. “Just count it and make your marks on the paper when we get back. It won’t take more than a minute.”

Jodi frowned, sighed, and handed her clipboard to Kaylee, who was sitting on a box nearby. “Just keep an eye on this for me, sweetheart. Don’t write on it.”

Shane didn’t give her a moment to reconsider. He led Jodi away from the cart to a quiet corner of the building, glanced back to make sure everyone was still working, then turned to his wife.

“It’s ironic,” Jodi said, as if attempting to lay the groundwork for the conversation. “Greyson’s firebreak team provided all of the fresh logs we need to build the first bridge, and it’ll be a really sturdy one.”

“And there are plenty of people to load up the cart and build it, too,” Shane said. “But look, darling, you are pushing yourself to a breaking point. I can see it. You hide it well, and others might be fooled, but not me.”

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “That’s all. I’ll sleep in tomorrow and make up for it.”

“Jodi, why are you doing this to yourself?” He reached for her hand, but she pulled away. “I can see the pain in your eyes. Why are you pushing yourself so hard? There are other people in town who can take over for a while. You started early this morning hiking to the lake, and it’s late afternoon, and you’re still going.”

Jodi glanced over his shoulder at the people working. “I just...” She shook her head, then stepped through the big open double doors and moved away from the building a few feet. Finally, she came to a stop and turned to him again. “Shane, it’s debilitating. It’s so damned debilitating.”

“What is?” he asked. When he reached for her hand again, she didn’t pull away. “Please, talk to me.”

“I’m worse than you realize,” she said, tears filling her eyes. “My left arm aches all the time. My back hurts all the time. I feel tingling in his legs, in my hands. The injuries never healed, and if anything, they seem to have gotten worse.”

“Then why don’t you rest?” he said, holding her hand to his chest.

“Because if I give in to this pain, I’ll never be the same,” she said. She began to cry and laid her cheek on his shoulder. “It’s like...if I don’t keep moving forward, I’ll lose momentum, and I may never get it back.” She groaned. “Shane, I’m in such pain. You have no idea. Ibuprofen only does so much.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “We can try to find you some stronger medication. Just level with us. Let us know what you’re feeling. I want to help.”

“I don’t want to be the weak one in the family,” Jodi said. “I want to be able to lead when needed.”

Shane had been upset with her, but now he just felt sad for her. “Honey, you *are* a leader. Always. But you’re also a wife and mother. And you’re an individual who deserves a break now and then so you can take care of yourself. No one is going to think less of you if you slow down a little and leave the

grueling labor to other people. I love you. Your family loves you. We'll pick up the slack when needed, okay?"

She answered with a sigh. Shane pulled back and kissed her on the temple. She'd stopped crying, but her eyes were red, and now that she wasn't trying to hide the pain, she clutched his shoulders and held on for dear life.

Figures appeared in the distance, stepping around the corner of a nearby fenced yard and coming down the road toward the lumber yard. Shane's first thought was to protect Jodi in her moment of vulnerability, so he started to turn, intending to block her from sight. Then he realized who it was. His brother-in-law, Mike, shuffling along. He, too, had his own physical limitations, but unlike Jodi, he rested when he needed to. Even now, he was walking slowly. At his side, Violet was walking with Ruby, holding the harness and letting the guide dog lead the way.

"We've got company," Shane said softly.

Jodi quickly wiped her eyes, sniffed, and turned to face them. Mike raised a hand in a dramatic greeting, and he started to smile, but he quickly appraised the situation. Both the hand and smile collapsed.

"Whoa, what's wrong?" he said, as he stepped onto the gravel parking lot in front of the lumber yard. "Beth told us we'd find you here, but you look like you're in grief or something."

"Mom, are you okay?" Violet said. Violet had been in a pretty bad mood since Corbin left on his scouting mission, and even now, her voice was softer than usual.

Jodi glanced at Shane, clearly seeking encouragement. He nodded and motioned for her to continue.

"Mike, Violet," she said. "I have to level with you. I have to level with the whole family. I'm doing a lot worse than I appear to be. I'm..." She seemed to struggle for a second, clearly fighting tears. Shane gently rubbed her back. "I'm in bad shape, and I've been trying hard to hide it. My old injuries just torment me constantly."

Violet let go of Ruby's harness and stumbled forward, reaching out with both arms. She hugged her mother. "Mom, you don't have to hide anything. Please, we just want you to take care of yourself."

"Oh, sis, you've always put everyone before yourself," Mike said, shaking his head. "But I get it. Believe me, I get it. I tried my best to keep working, to help out, until I just collapsed. My body forced me to respect my limits. Maybe you need to do the same."

"Yes," Violet agreed. "Can we just go home for today? Mom, can we just go home?"

Jodi looked at Shane again. Not seeking permission, he thought, but wanting to make sure she wasn't going to leave him in a bind. "I'll take over here," he said. "We'll get those bridges built. At the very least, we'll get started on one of them today. Trust me. You've earned a quiet evening at home."

Jodi looked like she might cry again, but instead, she just nodded sadly. She turned to Violet, motioned at Mike, and headed off down the road in the direction of their home. Shane watched them until they rounded the corner. It was a relief, but he was troubled still. He knew it must've taken a lot for Jodi to admit her own limitation.

She's in bad shape, he thought. Somehow, things have to settle down around here so she doesn't feel compelled to help all the time.

Shane finally headed back into the lumber building. People were still loading the cart, but a few of them paused and looked in his direction.

"We're fine," he said. "Let's keep working. Jodi was called away on another assignment."

This seemed to satisfy them, and they resumed their work, as Shane moved to join them.

Corbin might have expected to feel a sense of excitement, or at least relief, when they came in sight of the town's fence. Instead, he just felt dread. There was a confrontation with Violet in his immediate future, and he hated it with all of his heart. Relationship tension was more uncomfortable than a raging fire. They were a mile from the gate when they rounded a bend in the road and saw it standing there. He'd spent most of the morning saying very little. Greyson, on the other hand, was a little chatterbox. The guy never ran out of things to say, and Corbin thought he was doing it, in large part, to keep his spirits up.

"Now, look there," Greyson said. "The fence is still standing. It looks like the firebreak team has been hard at work. Everything didn't fall apart in our absence. That's a good sign, isn't it?"

Now that he'd said it, Corbin saw the big trench that had been dug just outside the fence. It stretched in both directions as far as he could see, disappearing around the bend. It must have taken a lot of people with a lot of shovels to dig up that much earth in just a couple of days. He was impressed.

"Well, that's an idea we hadn't thought of," Corbin said. "Digging a big trench like that. Not a bad idea."

"I did think of it," Greyson said, "but I was afraid to bring it up. Cutting down all of these trees was backbreaking work. I was afraid if I suggested digging a huge trench around the entire town, people might balk. I don't want to overwhelm

people with too much work, you know? I guess they drafted all of those new refugees.”

Corbin glanced back over his shoulder. He thought he could still see a faint brown haze hovering on the horizon.

“Hey, Corb, can I make a suggestion?” Greyson said.

Corbin turned back around and looked up at the watchtower. Someone was posted up there. He thought it was the young man named Jaime. Corbin raised a hand in greeting.

“What’s your suggestion?” he asked.

Jaime moved fast, scrambling down the watchtower ladder.

“As soon as we get in town, people are going to start asking us what we saw,” Greyson replied. He pointed at Jaime, who was already working to slide the bar and unlock the gate. “Starting with that kid. He’s, like, thirteen or something. A kid like that would love nothing more than to be the first one to carry the report throughout town. I don’t think we should say anything. Have the mayor call a town meeting, and we’ll give the report to everyone at the same time. That’ll prevent gossip and mixed messages, you know? And it’ll make us more visible, which isn’t a bad thing. What do you think?”

“That’s fine with me,” Corbin replied.

“And when we tell them, we’ll stand together,” Greyson added, “so they know we’re on the same page.”

“Sure.”

Jaime pushed opened the gate, then stood there anxiously, waiting for them. As soon as they were close, the questions began.

“You’re back,” Jaime shouted. “What did you see? Is the fire coming? Is it close? Did you see any burned bodies and stuff like that?”

“Later, kid,” Corbin said, waving him off. “There’s going to be a town meeting, and we’ll tell everyone what we saw then.”

“Aw, but why?” Jaime said, kicking the dirt. “Can’t you at least tell me if it’s getting closer to us?”

“Back in your tower, kiddo,” Greyson said, pointing up at the watchtower. “Do your job. When you hear the bell ringing, you can come and hear everything, along with everyone else.”

Jaime grunted angrily but did as he was told. Corbin was a little irritated that they’d left a big ditch in front of the gate. He had to step down over rocks and dirt and climb up the other side to get in town. That didn’t make any sense.

“They’d better be planning to put a bridge here,” he said. “Otherwise, this is poor planning.”

“They should’ve waited until we got back to do this,” Greyson said. “Seems like they needed our expertise.”

Corbin shut the gate and set the bar, and then the two of them continued on into town. As expected, people came running when they saw them. And they all wanted to know the same thing. Corbin let Greyson handle it. He seemed pretty good at that. As for Corbin, he was dreading a certain encounter, and his gaze kept flitting about looking for her. Violet would be upset. He’d been gone two and a half days, longer than he’d said he would.

When he finally saw her, they were passing the refugee camp, and he saw her in the distance, standing at the triage tent. Ruby actually lifted her head, sniffed the air, and looked in Corbin’s direction. This made Violet bend down and whisper something to the dog, but Corbin quickened his pace.

By the time they reached the center of town, they had an entourage of about a hundred people following them. They’d been asked the same questions dozens of times by now, but Greyson had given the same answer every time. The man certainly had no trouble telling people no. He didn’t sound bothered by it in the slightest.

They went straight to the community center and finally stopped in front of the big brass bell in the front yard. The entourage stopped a few yards away, as if waiting for them to do something. Corbin glanced at Greyson, who gave him a mischievous look.

“What do you say, Corb? Should I go ahead and ring the bell?”

Corbin actually regretted being back. It had been different out there. It had been exciting. He'd had a real purpose, none of this stifling domestic busywork. He looked at the crowd gathered nearby. Most of them were refugees from the camp, but he saw a few people he knew.

"Can someone go and get the mayor?" he asked.

But as he said it, as if on cue, the man pushed his way out of the crowd. James looked like he'd been gardening. He had on a pair of leather work gloves, knee pads, and filthy boots. A small trowel was tucked under his belt, and he had a bit of dirt smeared on one cheek. Beth followed right behind him, similarly dressed for gardening work. They'd probably been harvesting vegetables.

"When did you get back?" James said. He addressed the question to Corbin, but Greyson answered.

"Mere minutes ago, sir. We were thinking about ringing this bell so we could tell everyone what we saw."

"Would you like to speak with me privately first?" the mayor said, giving Greyson a hard stare that seemed to turn the question into a statement.

But Greyson didn't get the hint. "Corb and I thought it would be better if we told everyone all at the same time. That'll prevent miscommunication." He glanced at Corbin. "Right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Corbin replied.

The mayor seemed to consider this. Actually, Corbin could tell he was annoyed. But then he reached out and grabbed the bell rope and, scarcely giving anyone time to cover their ears, he began to ring it. Beth gave him a playful smack on the back of the head before covering her ears. That damned bell was loud.

It didn't take long for people to start streaming toward the community center from all directions. As James continued to ring the bell, Greyson beckoned Corbin and headed inside. He seemed to be enjoying this thoroughly. Corbin was glad at least one of them enjoyed dealing with people. As for Corbin, he was just daydreaming about being out there in the wilderness again. The community center's chairs were still set

up from the last town meeting a week earlier, though the rows were in quite a bit of disarray, as people had left the previous meeting somewhat hastily and in frustration.

Corbin went to the chairs behind the lectern and sat down, but Greyson went straight to the lectern, resting his arms on top, as if preparing to give a speech. Townsfolk entered the building and began filling the rows. After a few minutes, Corbin saw Shane and Owen walked in. Then Amelia. But there was no sign of Violet or Jodi or Mike. Indeed, Violet never turned up at all.

Does she know I'm at this meeting? he wondered. *Is she avoiding me?*

He'd been dreading their reunion, but now his feelings were hurt. It seemed unnecessarily rude. Was it really such a big deal that he'd decided to go on a scouting mission, an important one? Was she really going to hold that against him?

The mayor finally entered the room and shut the doors behind him. He made his way down the aisle and approached the lectern. When he saw Greyson there, a brief unhappy look crossed his face. He came to a stop beside Greyson and turned to face the audience. Everyone in the room looked filthy and sweaty and tired.

“Okay, folks, as you can see, our scouts have returned,” James said, fanning his face with his hat. It was indeed smotheringly warm in the room, though Corbin really didn't mind. “I know you're all anxious to hear what they have to say. I haven't had a chance to debrief with them. Seems they just got into town a few minutes ago, but...well...” He looked at Greyson. “Do you want to give your report right now?”

Greyson nodded rather dramatically, then made a show of turning and beckoning Corbin. As Corbin rose and moved up beside him, James took a seat. Greyson put an arm around Corbin's shoulders briefly, then clapped him on the back.

“Hey, why don't you deliver the news?” Greyson said. “After all, these people know you a little bit better than they know me. You're the natural leader here.”

The compliment was flattering, and Corbin chuckled awkwardly. Greyson stepped to one side and made room for him behind the lectern. Corbin looked out at the audience. It was strange. He'd only been gone a few days, but he almost felt like he was looking at strangers. And why should that be?

“Okay, well, Greyson and I hiked to an old fire lookout tower, and then we camped at the Native American mounds,” he said. “From there, we got a good look at the fire, and I have to say, it looked pretty bad. There was a line of smoke maybe a mile wide in the hills just south of Macon.”

This caused some whispers and murmurs of alarm. Greyson quickly and forcefully motioned the crowd to silence. They responded to him better than they usually did to Mayor Cooley. Then he gestured for Corbin to continue.

“Thanks,” Corbin said. He glanced down at the lectern, as if he had notes there. Mostly, he was just gathering his thoughts. “Anyway, we waited a whole day at the mounds, and then we hiked as close to the fire as we could safely get. We just wanted to make sure that we could gauge its strength and direction accurately, and...well, I'm happy to report that the fire seems to be stalling out.”

He looked up, expecting to see relief on their faces. But mostly, people seemed confused.

“Stalling out?” Winton asked. The gangly old redneck was sitting near the end of a row, his long legs thrust out into the aisle beside him. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah, we could see the burn path,” Corbin said. “Up close, it became clear to us that the path is cone shaped, getting narrower the farther it moves. Also, it's heading to the southeast right now, so it's not moving directly toward us. If things continue the way they are, the fire will burn itself out, but even if it doesn't, it seems unlikely it will turn in our direction. So, I guess what I'm saying is, I think we can stop worrying about the fire. We're going to be okay.”

And this finally seemed to break through the confusion. There were long, loud sighs of relief. People patting each other on the back. A few clasping their hands as if in prayer.

“How close did you get to the fire?” Shane asked from the front row.

“Uh, really close,” Corbin replied. He didn’t want to tell them exactly how close they got to the fire because he knew it would get back to Violet, and he didn’t need another thing to fight with her about. “Close enough to tell for sure what the fire is doing, and it’s definitely stalling out. We’re both pretty confident about that.”

Winton actually rose from his seat then. “It’s a damn good thing we sent these boys out there. We’ve wasted so much time on these fire preparations. Now, we can all get back to our usual work and finish the early harvest. Thanks, boys! This is the best news I’ve heard in months.”

A few others rose then, as if they were all going to leave, but Mayor Cooley rushed forward and stepped in front of the lectern.

“Wait a minute, folks,” he said. “Just wait a minute. Corbin’s report is very encouraging, for sure, but it’s not a guarantee. The fire is getting smaller, and it’s not heading directly for us, but that doesn’t mean we’re completely in the clear. Fires can regain their strength, and they can always change direction. I don’t think we should abandon our fire preparations until the fire is gone completely.”

All of those sighs of relief turned to grumbles and groans.

“For God’s sake, James,” Winton said, smacking his own thigh. “Trust the boys. They say we’re in the clear! We’ve spent hundreds of hours on fire prep. We can’t keep it up.”

“We’re all just trying to survive,” another man shouted from the back.

“We’ll starve to death preparing for a fire that’s already dying out,” said a woman on the other side.

Shane glanced at Beth, grimaced, then rose from his seat. He walked up to stand beside James.

“James has a good point,” he said. “And anyway, we’ve done most of the hard work preparing for the fire, right? Why not finish it? We’ll get those bridges installed, finish the ditch,

finish clearing the town of brush and debris, and that's it. We'll still have plenty of time for all of the other work."

Corbin felt awkward just standing behind the lectern while people were bickering, and he wasn't sure what to do. Should he interrupt the argument and assert some authority—which he technically didn't have? Greyson began fidgeting anxiously, patting his breast pocket, scuffing his shoes.

"Mayor, if you like digging that ditch so much, pick up a shovel and have at it," Winton said. "You have wasted a spectacular amount of our time on these projects. We've got a young man here, Greyson, who was a refugee from one of these burned towns, and he's telling us now that the fire is dying. That settles the matter, as far as I'm concerned."

"They didn't say the fire is dying," Mayor Cooley said. "They said it *appears* to be stalling out. Not the same thing. Now, I'm not asking you to do more than just finish our existing projects."

Greyson reached over and tapped on the lectern, then gestured at Corbin to say something. It was the last little nudge Corbin needed. He cleared his throat loudly and spoke, even though the mayor was still in front of the lectern.

"I did say 'stalling out,' but I meant the same thing as 'dying,'" Corbin said. "The fire appears to be dying. That's what I meant."

Winton smacked his hands together. "There you go. Mayor, you're a smooth-talking manipulator, that's what I think. I'm done playing your games."

"Hey, hey, now, wait a minute," the mayor said. "These kids brought us a report, but it's up to town leaders to decide how to act on it. There's still a fire out there, and a fire is unpredictable."

Greyson's fidgeting was ramping up. The poor guy looked like he was about to snap. And this whole stupid meeting was getting on Corbin's nerves. Why was the mayor fighting about this? It felt so petty. He couldn't stand it any longer.

“Mayor, you don’t listen,” Corbin said, with a bit more ferocity in his voice than he intended. “You didn’t listen when we first asked to go out and check on the fire. You didn’t want us to do it. And now we’ve brought you an eyewitness report, and you still don’t listen. You don’t listen to Greyson, and you don’t listen to me!”

“There you go,” Winton said. “What more needs to be said? Mayor Cooley doesn’t listen.” He waved both of his hands in the mayor’s direction. “I’m going home. Don’t ring that damn bell again, Mayor. And as for the rest of you...” He made a broad sweep of his arm, taking in the rest of the people in the room. “I suggest you go home and tend to your business. Ignore this crackpot old fart. He was a sheriff for years, and he’s coasted on a lot of goodwill because of it. Not anymore.”

And with that, Winton kicked his chair for good measure and strode out of the room. A whole row of his family members got up and went with him. And then about half of the room departed, grumbling and complaining all the way out the door. It was clear that at least some of the people in the room were on the mayor’s side. They kept their seats and waited, but the feeling in the room was intense. And yet, on some level, Corbin felt satisfied that he’d stood up for himself.

He glanced at Greyson. His friend’s fidgeting had quieted a bit. He met Corbin’s gaze briefly, nodded, and smiled at him. Shane and the mayor were still awkwardly standing there in front of the lectern, as if they thought the meeting would resume after a short interlude. But Corbin was done with it.

“Anyway, that’s our report,” he said. “I guess we’ll leave it at that.” And with that, Corbin stepped out from behind the lectern. He didn’t wait to see how the mayor would react. Actually, he was a bit anxious about the confrontation, so he simply headed for the door. By the time he got there, Greyson had caught up to him, and they left the community center together.



In the end, he knew he couldn't avoid meeting with Violet forever. The longer he went without speaking to her, the worse he felt about it. At the same time, once the crowd dispersed from the community center, they brought the tension with them, spreading it throughout the town like a viral infection.

"I don't know why town meetings always have to become so unpleasant," Greyson said. "We brought them good news. That should be the end of it. All these people do is argue and fight."

"Yeah, there's a lot of incompetence in this town," Corbin said, "and a lot of ulterior motives."

They had initially been headed for the refugee camp, because it was the last place Corbin had seen Violet before setting out on his mission. But something told him she wasn't there. So he veered toward home instead.

"This town lacks strong leadership," Greyson said. "I hate to say it again, my dude, but it's true. Mr. Cooley might be a decent enough fellow, but he doesn't always know what he's doing."

"Every single town meeting is the same," Corbin said. "James is practically family. I mean, he lives with Beth, and she's the one who took me in. I feel bad about confronting the guy in front of the whole town."

"You shouldn't," Greyson replied. "Speak up for yourself more often. Exert more control over your life, man. It'll do you some good."

As they approached the high fence that surrounded Beth's property, Corbin heard voices coming from the yard beyond. He knew them, of course. Jodi, Amelia, and Violet. They were having some kind of deep conversation. Suddenly, he felt a surge of anxiety. Was Greyson right? Did he need to exert a bit more control over his life, including his relationship with Violet? Was it a toxic relationship? It certainly felt stifling at times.

When he rang the chimes at the gate, he heard someone come running.

“Hey, uh, I’ll probably need to spend some time with Violet,” he said to Greyson. “You understand, right?”

“Of course,” Greyson replied, tipping him a salute. “Get your house in order, friend. I’m going right to my little garage and take me a big old nap.”

The gate slid open, and there she stood. Violet. She wasn’t holding Ruby’s harness. Around the house, she didn’t need the dog’s help. Greyson scurried past her and headed straight for the garage.

“I heard the chimes,” Violet said. “You went to a town meeting first thing when you got back?”

Corbin stepped through the open gate and pulled it shut behind him. Then, instead of answering right away, he gave her a hug. In that moment, he resisted the urge to push back, to resist her concern. What was the use? He’d already alienated one friend today.

“Sorry, Violet,” he said. “I had to tell them what we saw. The fire is stalling out. We saw it with our own eyes.”

He started to pull away, but she held on. “I’m just glad you’re safe. There are a lot of dangerous people out there in the world.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” he said. “The thing is, the mayor had a minor mutiny on his hands. He still wants people to keep doing the fire safety stuff, despite our report. A whole bunch of people walked out on him. Winton was rude and insulted him. It got ugly.”

Violet finally pulled away. “And what did you say? Did you agree with the mayor?”

“No, of course not,” Corbin replied. “The fire is dying. It’s not headed toward us. We can focus on other things now. That’s what I think, and I told him so. He...uh, didn’t like that.”

When Violet just stood there saying nothing for a second, he knew he was in trouble. He grunted and stepped past her, headed for the house, but she reached out and snagged the hem of his jacket.

“The mayor’s never steered us wrong,” she said. “You shouldn’t be fighting with him, especially not in a town meeting in front of everyone.”

“Of course you would say that,” Corbin grumbled.

“What does that mean?” she said, shuffling after him. “Am I wrong?”

“Just forget it,” he said, opening the front door. “Let’s talk about someone else.”



Corbin found Greyson sitting on the weightlifting bench, idly flipping the lid of his Zippo. When Corbin stepped into the garage, he looked over his shoulder, snapped the lid shut, and shoved the lighter in his pocket. So far, neither Violet, Jodi, nor Amelia thought the mayor was wrong to ignore their report. They all seemed relieved at Corbin’s report, but they shrugged off its significance. And Corbin really didn’t feel like fighting over it. At least Greyson understood where he was coming from.

“You know, I’m the one who told them to start preparing for the wildfire in the first place,” Greyson said. “Even the mayor was somewhat reluctant. You’d think they’d all be fairly relieved when we come back and say they can stop.”

“It’s because *I* gave the report,” Corbin said. “Nobody really listens to me around here. They still see me as some punk kid they broke out of a juvie, even after all of this time. I’ve never earned any real respect around here. I’m practically invisible.”

Greyson reached over and gave him a friendly punch on the arm. “Hey, man, don’t be so hard on yourself. I’ll tell you what, I’ll have a chat with the mayor when I get a chance, and I’ll talk you up a bit. You definitely ought to have a bigger role around here. And you’ve earned my respect, at least, if nobody else’s.”

“Thanks.”

The smoked and cured meat took up a nice big section of the community food bank, and more than that, it smelled great. James needed some low-impact work this afternoon, and having an excuse to wander among the delicious aromas of the food bank was enough. He had a clipboard in one hand, a pencil in the other, and he double-checked the list as he walked the aisles.

They had a whole row of sausages hanging from hooks along the back wall of the building, both pork and venison, then some entire shanks which were still being air-cured. Long strips of dried meat packed in butcher paper were stacked up high on nearby shelves. It was a lot of food, even after they'd already given away roughly a third of the meat to local families and refugees. All of the wild animals passing through the town had made easy targets.

The inventory on the clipboard was accurate. It was meticulous. He could see every single piece of meat that had been given away, which families or individuals had taken them, and exactly what remained. Additionally, there were a few things marked as "for pickup." He made sure those were tagged.

You're just killing time, he told himself, as he returned the clipboard to the nail where it normally hung. You're avoiding people because everyone is frustrated with you.

And so what if he was? Hadn't he earned a little escape from the stress of leading Hickory Falls? That stupid wildfire had

proved to be the bane of his existence. He turned and headed back through the supply building. A couple dozen rows of metal shelves filled most of the old pole barn. Some contained tools and hardware, others dry goods. There were also kitchenware, bolts of fabric, and blankets.

People could take what they needed and leave what they wanted to share, as long as everything was documented. Indeed, James had encouraged a generous policy for the most part, except when lack had demanded restrictions. Sunlight cast a long hazy band down the aisle from the open door at the front of the building, the light bisected by the shadows of a service counter that was set up near the door. Beth was out there somewhere. She was helping locals load a cart. He heard her moving around as he started down the aisle.

I can't wait until that damned wildfire fizzles out to nothing, James thought. Then we can stop talking about it. At least we'll be prepared if another one starts up again.

He was passing the shelves with the dry goods when he heard something tumble. It sounded like a heavy sack sliding off a shelf and hitting the concrete floor. Unfortunately, vermin had been an occasional problem in the food bank, though his first thought was some sort of 'possum or raccoon. They loved to get into the sacks of flour and grain.

"Now, you get out of here," he said, wheeling in the direction of the noise. He reached for the revolver at his hip, but he knew that was crazy. He wasn't going to start shooting at some small animal here in the food bank. That was just as likely to damage something useful as it was to kill a critter.

A small burlap sack of buckwheat lay guiltily on the floor, as if it had just tossed itself off the shelf out of some wily need to misbehave. Thinking there might be an animal on the shelf, James rushed ahead and bent down. There were a few other sacks of grain nearby, but otherwise the shelf was bare. No animals lurking about.

"Now, that's a strange thing," he said.

He bent down and grabbed the sack, hoisting it back onto the shelf. Then he gazed down the aisle. There were actually a

series of shelves in a long line here, with various aisles crisscrossing in between. However, he saw nothing moving in that direction. He did, however, spot a distinct impression in a bit of dust and flour on the concrete floor. When he moved closer to get a better look, he was sure of it. The imprint of a heel from a hiking boot, and it looked fresh.

James felt a little twist in his guts.

Not an animal, but a thief, he thought.

He rose up swiftly. As he did, he sensed movement behind him. Then he heard the footfalls of someone stepping light and fast. James grabbed his handgun and started to turn, just as a shadowy shape rose up behind him. Then he felt the impact. Some solid object slammed into the side of his head, filled his visions with stars and color, his nostrils with a coppery smell.

The room spun, and he realized he was falling. As the dusty ground rose up to meet him, he lost all sense, and darkness took him.



Beth shifted the stack of firewood to make plenty of room for the tools in the back corner of the handcart. Tasha and Deon, the leaders of the second group of refugees, moved a few of the tools around, arranging them in neat rows.

“We’ll have all of the tools back in a few days,” Deon said, reaching out to shake Beth’s hands.

“Clean and unbroken,” Tasha added. “We’ll make sure our people take good care of them while we renovate the homes.”

“That’s right,” Deon said. His white T-shirt was ringed with sweat around his armpits, back, and belly. He’d already been working hard all day with his wife, but Beth had never seen such a tenacious and unrelenting group. They kept working beyond the point of exhaustion. They were currently hard at work repairing some abandoned homes as housing for their people.

“When you guys came to Hickory Falls, you said you wouldn’t be a burden,” Beth said. “And you haven’t been. You’ve given a lot more than you’ve taken, and I thank you for that. We’re always here to support you, okay?”

“Got it,” Tasha said.

Then Deon and Tasha each took a handle of the cart and headed off, pushing it away from the food bank and back down the street. Beth watched them for a minute as they headed toward one of the older and emptier neighborhoods in town. Actually, they were working on a street not too far from Beth’s home.

Beth was standing at a back corner of the supply building. It had been a quiet but stressful morning. There was still tension all over town from the previous meeting. People were clearly annoyed that they had spent so much time and effort getting ready for a fire that was now supposedly dying out. Beth didn’t blame them, but frankly, she was exhausted from all of the bickering.

Beth’s health wasn’t great anyway. She tried to treat her heart condition with diet and exercise, but she just didn’t have much energy. Even so, she tried to stay busy so she didn’t have think about it. Once Deon and Tasha were well on their way, Beth turned and headed for a small bench set alongside the building. She’d just started to sit down when she heard a loud thump and clatter coming from somewhere inside the building.

It sounded like something being dropped hard on the floor, maybe a few items toppling off shelves. She scarcely had time to think about what it was before a voice began to shout.

“Help! Help! Someone’s been hurt! Come quickly!”

Beth felt an immediate twist of fear in her guts as she pushed away from the bench and headed to the front of the building. She rounded the corner and saw Greyson standing in the open doorway of the supply building. The young man was frantic, dancing from one foot to the other, his hands dug deeply into his curly black hair. When he saw Beth, he rushed toward her, his eyes wide with fear.

“Oh, my gosh, ma’am,” he said. “I just came here to borrow some nails. That’s all I did. And I went in, and he was right there. He was right there!”

He began gesturing with his hands toward the open door. Beth knew James was in there conducting an inventory check, and the twist in her guts tightened. She made her way to the door, glancing around as she went. The supply building was in sight of the community garden and the mayor’s office. A few people working in the vicinity of both places had apparently heard the shouting, and they were looking in this direction.

“What happened?” Beth said. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson replied. He stumbled toward the door and caught himself on the frame, as Beth moved past him. “I just went inside and found him there. It scared me, so I didn’t stick around. We need to get help!”

As soon as she stepped into the room and looked past the service counter, she saw a pair of legs sticking out into the aisle straight ahead, and she knew those jeans, those boots. With a gasp, she pushed past the counter and went to him. James was crumpled on the floor, face down, his head resting on his arm.

“Oh my God,” she cried, dropping down beside him. She felt a twinge of discomfort in her chest, but she ignored it. She leaned in close. He was breathing, but she saw a trail of blood running out of his hair and down his cheek. “James, my love, speak to me!”

She got no response. She patted his cheek gently. However, movement caught her eye. Turning, she saw Greyson anxiously pacing in the aisle behind her, furiously chewing on a thumbnail. Her suspicion was immediate. She’d heard a thump and then, seconds later, the young man shouting for help. Beth’s fear curdled into something dark.

“You just walked in and found him like this?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. “We need to get help. Tell me what to do? Who do I get?”

He sounded suitably scared, at least. Honestly, he seemed on the verge of panic, and the fear appeared genuine. Even so, the timing was hard to ignore.

But why would he do it? What would he have to gain from attacking James? If he meant to steal from the food bank, he wouldn't have called for help immediately after attacking him.

Either way, the young man was practically fidgeting and pacing like mad. A sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead. And Beth knew there was nothing she could do about her suspicions now anyway. James needed help.

“Run to the garden,” she said. “See if Shane or Owen are there. We have a few people with medical experience as well. Bring whoever you can find. Hurry.”

Greyson saluted her. “Yes, ma’am, I’ll go as fast as I can.”

And with that, he turned and raced out of the building. Beth was relieved when he was gone.

But if he attacked James, why wouldn't he attack me the second we were alone in the building together? It would be the best way to cover his tracks.

No, it didn't make any sense. Not the attack, not the possibility of Greyson's guilt. It was all strange. She looked around swiftly, trying to make sure no one else was in the building. The room was whisper-quiet.

“James, say something, dear,” she said, gently patting his cheek. She ran her fingers through his hair and found a large knot behind his left ear. Her fingers came away slick with blood.

He moaned softly then and took a deep breath. His eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

“James, who did this to you?” she asked. “Can you say something?”

She got little response. Fortunately, within seconds, she heard people approaching. Soon, they were flooding through the door. Shane was there. Owen and Mike. The mustachioed refugee named Ollie, who had been a family doctor in his

former life. About a dozen others. They quickly crowded around her.

“See?” Greyson said. “We found him just like this! I don’t know if he fell down, or if someone attacked him, or what!”

As Beth rose, she gave Greyson a hard look. He was pacing again near the back of the group, as people crowded in around James. Shane took Beth’s arm and helped her to her feet, then gently pulled her backward.

“Are *you* hurt?” he asked her.

“No, Shane, I’m fine,” she replied. “Just help James, okay?”

Shane and some other men got their arms under James and carefully lifted him. They bore him aloft and carried him back down the aisle toward the door. As they carried him away, Beth struggled to keep up, following them out of the building and across the street toward the mayor’s office. There were a few rooms in the old city hall building that had been set aside as a makeshift clinic.

As they crossed the street, Beth found herself walking with Greyson. The young man was shaking his head, breathing fast, arms crossed tightly over his chest. Either he was genuinely freaked out, or he was the best actor she’d ever met. Something about this whole situation just didn’t make sense. Some piece of the puzzle was missing.

The crowd went into the building, carrying James through the foyer and down a side hall. The old offices were located near the back of the building. Desks and office chairs had been replaced with cots and shelves of medical supplies. James was laid down on one of the cots. Beth could scarcely get to him, but she saw Ollie examining his head. Others retrieved supplies.

“Okay, guys, let’s clear out,” Shane said, pushing a few people toward the door. “Let the doctor treat him. Most of us are just in the way.”

Beth stepped aside as people began filing out of the room. Ultimately, only Ollie, Shane, and Mike remained. Beth

entered the room to join them, but Greyson lingered in the hallway.

“Well, it looks like he took a blow to the back of the head,” Ollie said. He was bent over the cot, gently cleaning the wound with some antiseptic and cotton balls. “It’s possible he fell and hit his head somehow. Hard to tell.”

Fallen and hit his head. That was a possibility she hadn’t considered. James had indeed been running himself ragged, and with all of the tension in the town meetings lately, he hadn’t been sleeping. Just then, James moaned loudly and tried to roll onto his back. Ollie restrained him.

“Just lie still there, friend,” Ollie said. “You’ve got a goose egg on the back of your head.”

“He’s gonna be okay?” Greyson said from the hallway, still pacing.

“Yeah, I think so,” Ollie replied.

“Oh, good,” Greyson said, with a big sigh of relief.

And for some reason, that sigh just rankled Beth to the point that she couldn’t stand it. She rolled her head around, as if trying to get rid of an itch she couldn’t reach. And in that very moment, when she felt like she was about to crawl out of her skin, the town bell began to ring. It echoed through the town with a haunting cry.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” she snapped. “I’m going to disconnect that bell, haul it out of town, and throw it in the lake!”

Shane and Mike came toward her.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Mike said. “We’ll check it out. You stay here with James and the doc.”

Shane and Mike pushed past her and headed out into the hall. Greyson lingered in the hall. And as the bell continued to ring, Beth felt her frustration turning to real anger. But it was an unfocused anger, because she didn’t know who to direct it at. She glanced back at the cot, where Ollie was currently bandaging James’s injury.

“I think he’ll be fine,” Ollie said again. “I’ll give him something to help him rest, and I’ll stay here with him.”

Beth smacked the doorframe, even though it made her hand hurt. “I’m going to this damned town meeting. I’ll be back as soon as possible.” She turned and gestured at Greyson. “You should come, too. There’s no reason for you to hang around here. You reported the injury and got him help. That’s enough. Let’s go.”

“You got it, ma’am,” he said. He nodded at her and trotted off down the hall.

As Beth tromped after him, she tried to get some control over her emotions. It was all too much. Too damned much.

James fell, she told herself. It’s the most likely scenario. There’s no reason for anyone to attack him. There’s nothing to be gained.

And yet she couldn’t shake her suspicions. Greyson’s timing was just too odd. She let him get well ahead of her. Under the circumstances, she just didn’t feel comfortable walking beside him. Outside, the bell was even louder, and that echoing ring went right down her spine. As she made her way toward the community center, she saw people streaming in from other directions. Shane and Mike had joined up with much of the rest of her family.

The one ringing the bell was the young man named Jaime. She didn’t know him well. He’d been an early refugee to the town, but she knew he volunteered a lot of time at the watchtowers. He was ringing the bell with all of his might, swinging his whole body back and forth as he pulled the rope. Beth made a beeline for him and signaled for him to stop.

“It’s enough. It’s enough,” she said. “Everyone has heard it by now.”

Jaime frowned and let go of the rope. Then he turned and dashed off toward the door. By the time Beth got inside, most of the room was already full. She saw Winton sitting with his big family in the back row. Tasha and Deon were there with some of the newer refugees. Her own family took up almost

the entire front row. Hundreds had turned up, and the tension in the room was palpable.

As she made her way down one of the outer aisles, her son-in-law, Shane, went to the lectern with Jaime. Beth took a seat at the end of the row beside her daughter.

“Jodi, what is this all about?” she asked. “Must there be a town meeting every single day?”

“I don’t know. The kid just started ringing the bell,” Jodi replied.

“Maybe that bell needs to be behind a lock and key,” Beth said.

“Jaime was at the western watchtower,” Jodi replied, then she turned and looked at her mother. “Shane said something about James falling and hitting his head?”

Beth waved it off. “Later. He’ll be fine.” She glanced past Jodi and saw Greyson sitting at the other end of the row, talking quietly to Corbin. He still seemed freaked out.

By now, the room was almost full, so Shane approached the podium and loudly cleared his throat. As people continued to trickle in, he spoke loudly.

“Hey there, everyone,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the lectern. “Sorry, our esteemed mayor couldn’t make it. He’s had a little accident, and the doctor is tending to his injury at the moment.”

This caused some whispers and murmuring and even, to Beth’s irritation, a few faint chuckles. She was tempted to swing around and find the culprits and throw something at them, but she bit her lip and kept her seat.

“Anyway, he’ll be okay,” Shane continued, with a brief glare at someone in the audience. “Sorry, I know most of you were probably busy at work, but our young volunteer called this meeting. Jaime, would you come up here and tell the people what you saw?”

Jaime was lingering in the corner. When Shane beckoned him, he shuffled forward and moved up behind the lectern. He was

just barely visible over the top of it. Though he was sixteen, he was quite small for his age.

“Hello, uh...” Jaime glanced up at Shane, who gestured for him to continue. He cleared his throat and looked out at the audience again. “Sorry for ringing that bell so much, but I was up on the tower this morning, and I...uh, well, we have another group of refugees. Like, maybe a hundred people, and they’re camped right on the other side of that big ditch that we dug. They waved at me and tried to get my attention, but I climbed down and came here instead.”

The crowd reaction was an immediate and heated cacophony of groans and sighs and even some cursing. This despite the fact that quite a few refugees were in the room. Winton stood up in the back row and shouted, “Let’s take a vote. Let’s take a vote right now. We don’t even need to discuss it!”

Shane held up his hands. “Now, hold on a second, Winton.” He spoke sharply, clearly lacking the tact of the mayor. “Everyone quit whining for a second, would you? Our mayor’s not even here.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Winton shouted. “We have quorum, and you can fill in for him. Let’s vote right now!”

This caused some cheers in the crowd. A few people even stood up and clapped.

I’m so sick of these people, Beth thought. I’m so sick of these meetings. I’m so sick of voting.

“Okay, all right, all right,” Shane shouted. “We can’t vote on a damned thing if you people won’t be quiet for a second.”

The crowd finally settled down. Winton and the others took their seats. Shane shook his head, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“Fine, let’s take a vote, then,” he said. “Obviously, we have to decide if we’re going to let these people through the gate. So all in favor?”

A few hands went up. Not many. Jodi raised her hand. Beth started to raise her hand, then just sat there. Her daughter even glanced at her, but Beth just couldn’t do it. Not at the moment.

Not with James recovering from a head wound. A hundred more people was just overwhelming. Shane counted the vote and shrugged.

“Okay, that’s thirty-one votes in favor of letting these new refugees inside,” he said. “Now...” He hesitated, glancing at various people in the crowd. “All opposed?”

Most of the hands in the room went up, including Owen and Corbin. Even Tasha and Deon, the refugee leaders, raised their hands. Greyson hadn’t voted one way or the other.

Shane counted, although it took a couple of minutes. Finally, he sighed and said, “Okay, that’s almost three hundred votes *against* letting them in. I guess the results are clear. I’ll go break the news to these people that they’re not welcome in Hickory Falls.”

His comment caused Beth a twinge of guilt, but it little mattered now.

James will be disappointed when he wakes up and finds out about this, she thought.

Shane let Jaime race well ahead of him. He wasn't in any hurry to carry out this particular task, even if he didn't entirely disagree with it. Mike had agreed to come with him, even though his brother-in-law clearly needed a nice nap. The poor guy didn't have a lot of energy, even three years after his brutal chemo treatment and cancer surgery. Still, Shane appreciated the company.

"Maybe we should just plant a sign in front of the western gate," Mike said. He was walking slow, dragging his feet, but Shane kept pace with him. "It doesn't have to be rude. It could just say something like, 'Sorry, we're full!' You think that would work?"

"I don't know," Shane replied with a sigh. "We're right in the middle of the highway. People heading east or southeast from Macon are going to run into our fence."

"That's why we need the sign," Mike said. "A big sign with bright red letters. Clearly, this town isn't willing to take in more people, and I don't blame them. Heck, even the refugee leaders voted against letting these people in."

"Yeah, do you want to take the lead on that project?" Shane said.

"I'm not much of a painter," Mike said.

"Anyone can paint a bunch of giant letters. Don't worry about it. I'll find someone else to do it."

They came in sight of the gate, and Shane saw people through the slats. They were all clustered together in the road just beyond the brand-new fire ditch. They didn't even have tents. It was just a ragged group of people in filthy clothes. Shane couldn't think of any nice way to do this, so he was just going to be blunt and to the point.

As he approached the gate, his hand brushed the gun at his hip. He was always armed. Always. Just in case. There was a ladder behind the fence, and he picked it up and set it against the back side of the fence. Then he motioned for Mike to wait below and climbed to the top. From here, he could see over the gate, across the ten-foot-by-ten-foot ditch, to the wretched group gathered in the street. A hundred hungry and miserable souls. As soon as Shane appeared, one of the people stepped forward, an old man with an impressively long gray beard. He raised a hand in greeting to Shane.

"My friend," he called. "May we pass?"

Shane felt sick with guilt. There were whole families in the group, and they looked like they'd been through hell. But this was a democracy. The people had voted, and he had no right to refuse their will. He cleared his throat, cupped a hand beside his mouth, and spoke loudly enough for the words to carry.

"Sorry, folks, we can't open the gate," he said. "We're struggling to survive as it is. Resources are increasingly scarce, and it's not safe for outsiders. You'll have to turn back!"

"But sir..." the man started to reply.

Shane couldn't bear continue the talk, so he waved at the man and climbed back down. Even so, as he set the ladder aside and stepped back, the group didn't budge. The old man was still standing there. Shane turned to Mike, shook his head sadly, and headed back into town.

"We might need to set some additional guards here at the gate," Shane said.

"I don't think those people could fight their way out of a wet paper bag," Mike muttered. "They're not much of a threat."

“Desperate people are always a threat, no matter how wretched they look,” Shane said.

He was so preoccupied with this current dilemma that it took him a second to realize someone was running toward them at full speed. He appeared from behind a distant storage shed, rounding the corner of a small property and sprinting down the highway. It was Greyson.

“What the heck is this?” Shane grumbled, as he came to a stop.

When he drew near, Greyson stumbled to a stop, out of breath and wheezing. He bent over, his palms pressed to his thighs.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, speaking between breaths. “I ran here as fast as I could.”

“What is it now?” Shane said.

Greyson rose up, dabbing sweat from his forehead and cheeks on the sleeve of his denim jacket. He looked truly freaked out. “I went back to check on the mayor. That doctor guy, Ollie, says you have to come there right away. I already told some of your other family. It’s an emergency!”

Shane glanced at Mike, a queasiness in his belly. “Did he say more than that?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, but he was freaking out. I think it’s bad. Real bad.”

“Mike, don’t try to keep up,” Shane said. “Get there at a safe pace.”

He didn’t wait for Mike’s response. Shane took off at a sprint back toward the center of town. He ran past the refugee camp, down a street where a big group was repairing some old, abandoned homes, and then passed the food bank and community garden—all without slowing down. As he approached the mayor’s office, he saw that the front door was wide open. He glanced back and saw Greyson about a hundred yards back, struggling to run after him.

Shane went inside the dim building and hurried down the hall. His heart was pounding, his breath burning in his throat, but he

kept going. At the end of the hall, he saw Beth and Jodi standing in the doorway, holding each other. As Shane approached, Jodi heard him coming and turned. Tears in her eyes, she reached for him, and he took her hands.

“What in the world is going on?” he said. “Greyson said it’s an emergency!”

Ollie was sitting on a stool beside the cot, bent over James. But he rose now and turned to face the family. He took a step toward them, his jaw working up and down, as if he were struggling to get the words out.

“My God, I’m so sorry,” he said, voice thick with emotion. “There was internal bleeding. I had no way to know. It’s not like I have an MRI or even an x-ray machine. I couldn’t see inside. He looked like he was doing okay.”

Beth uttered a loud sob and stumbled forward. Ollie caught her and guided her into a chair. Shane was so shocked that he had almost no reaction at first. He just stood there, gripping his wife’s hand. He glanced down at the cot. Only then did he realize the sheet was pulled up over James’s face.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. “He *died*? Is that what you’re saying?”

Jodi was crying now, and he pulled her into an embrace, though he felt numb.

“Bleeding on the brain,” Ollie said. “A lot of it. But I had no way to know. Even if I had, there’s not much I could’ve done, not here. Not in a place like this.” He gestured at the small room around him. “I’m so sorry. He’s gone.”

Beth was weeping bitterly, her head in her hands. Shane couldn’t bear the sound of his mother-in-law crying. It was such a bleak and horrible sound. He pulled his hand out of Jodi’s grasp and stepped back. She gave him a questioning look, even with tears streaming down her face.

“I should...I should tell the rest of the family,” he said numbly. “Owen, Amelia, Mike...they all need to know. I’m not even sure where they are.”

“Owen and Amelia left the meeting with Katie,” Jodi said. “They might’ve gone home.”

Shane nodded and turned, but as he gazed back down the hallway, he saw Greyson approaching. The young refugee looked like he’d been crying. His eyes were red, his hair was all messed up, and he was out of breath. Shane was actually annoyed to see him there. Didn’t he realize this was a private family moment?

As he approached, Greyson dragged his feet and gave Shane a sheepish look.

“Did you want something?” Shane said sharply.

Greyson stopped a few feet away, head bowed. He glanced at Jodi, at Shane, then looked at the ground.

“I’m so sorry, sir, but I...” He cleared his throat. “I don’t want to say it, but I’m afraid I have to.”

Shane waited a second, but the boy didn’t say anything else. Finally, he snapped his fingers at Greyson. “Come on. Say it. What is it?”

Jodi grabbed Shane’s arm and squeezed, her way of telling him to calm down and be nice. Shane wiped the scowl off his face.

“Go ahead, Greyson,” Jodi said.

“You’re not going to like what I have to say,” he said, glancing at her, “but I’ll just say it. There was someone else in the supply building. He went in there a few minutes before me.”

Beth stopped crying almost instantly. Shane heard her stand up and approach the doorway.

“I really don’t want to say this,” Greyson continued, “but...but it was Corbin. He was coming out as I approached the door.”

“Corbin,” Beth said, in a soft, shocked voice.

“Wait,” Shane said. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not trying to suggest anything, sir,” Greyson said. “I’m just telling you what I know. I’ve spent a lot of time with Corbin lately, as you know, and he’s been acting...well, really

weird. He's really unhappy with how things are going in the community, especially the leadership. He complains a lot about the people in charge. I'm...so, so sorry. I didn't want to say this, but...well, that's it."

Shane couldn't believe what he was hearing, what Greyson was suggesting. It sounded absurd, but when he looked at Jodi and Beth, he realized both of the women were staring fixedly at Greyson. Beth's grief had given way to a dark and troubled look.

"I know he's family," Greyson said, "and I'm pretty much a stranger. If you don't believe me, I understand that, but I just decided I had to say something. A good man has died, and if I didn't say something, it would really eat me up inside."

Shane had no idea how to respond to this, so he just stood there waiting for some kind of punchline.

"Corbin's not really family," Beth said, after a moment. Her voice was hoarse from all of the crying. "He's a kid Shane rescued from a juvenile boot camp after his mother murdered a camp guard."

"Mom, he's lived with us for three years now," Jodi said. "We've all been through so much together."

"Doesn't change what I said," Beth replied. "Three years isn't really that long, and we don't know him all that well. Let's be honest. He was a troubled young man from the beginning, and he hasn't changed all that much."

"I wish I didn't have to say anything," Greyson said, still hanging his head. "I'm so sorry."

Beth suddenly pushed past Shane and Jodi and waved Greyson aside. "I want to find Owen, Amelia, Kaylee, and Violet. They need to hear the bad news. And where's Mike?"

"He was behind me" Shane said. "He'll be here in a minute. You know it takes him a little time."

"Ollie, please do what you have to do to prepare the body," she said. "We're having a funeral for James. The whole town is going to pay their respects to this man for all he suffered on

their behalf. Thank you. Now, I'm going home to tell the rest of my family that we've lost James Cooley, my love."

And with that, she started down the hall. Greyson shuffled to one side, his head still down. The young man looked like he was being eaten alive with guilt. Shane grabbed Jodi's hand again and started after Beth. As he passed Greyson, he turned to him and said, "Please, let us have private time with our family. Thank you."

"Yes, of course, sir," Greyson said. "I'm so sorry, sir."

They were headed through the foyer, and it looked like Greyson was going to follow him. But suddenly, he sighed, veered off the one side, and sat down at a table in the middle of the room. Shane glanced at him on his way out the door and saw tears glistening in his eyes.



Shane mostly felt shock. It seemed to vibrate from somewhere around his stomach, radiating outward to his extremities and making his whole body tremble. When they got back to the house, Corbin wasn't there. Indeed, they hadn't seen him at the garden or the refugee camp. However, they rounded up as many family members as they could find and gathered around the dining room table to break the news.

Owen and Amelia were there, trying to corral a restless and tired Katie. Violet was there, and she'd already picked up on the bad vibes. She was slumped over in her chair, furiously petting Ruby. Beth sat down with a huff and covered her face with her hands as Jodi tried to comfort her. Mike just kind of sat there, staring at the tabletop and picking idly at the shiny surface. That left Shane to break the news.

"Why all the secrecy?" Owen asked, trying to snag Katie's arm as the little girl squirmed in her mother's lap.

"Not secrecy," Shane replied. "We just didn't want to break the news until everyone was here."

"Sounds like something bad," Violet said.

“It is,” Shane said. He took a deep breath and went for it. “James Cooley is dead.” This caused audible gasps from everyone. Even little Katie stopped fidgeting and sat still.

“What?” Owen said. “How?”

“He sustained a head injury while working alone in the supply building,” Shane said. “We got him to a doctor right away, but there was internal bleeding. The doctor had no way of knowing. We just don’t have that kind of medical equipment anymore.”

Beth was dabbing her eyes, and Jodi held her. Violet clapped a hand to her face. Katie had a troubled look on her face, and she glanced up at her mother, as if looking for some kind of clarification. But Amelia just wrapped her arms around the child.

“How did he get a head injury?” Owen said, speaking slowly, softly, as if afraid to ask.

“Well, at first we thought maybe he fell and hit his head,” Shane said, “but it seems more likely that he was attacked, and in fact...” He didn’t want to say it. For Violet’s sake, for his family’s sake, he didn’t want to say it. “There’s been an accusation. Someone has come forward to say that Corbin was alone in the building with James at the time of the attack.”

“No,” Violet said immediately, forcefully. “No way. You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I don’t believe anything right now,” Shane said. “I’m just telling you the situation.”

“Corbin and James were family,” Violet said. “There’s no way in heck Corbin would attack him. It’s not in his nature.”

Beth sat up then, shrugging off Jodi’s arms. “I think you’re forgetting who Corbin really is. He’s not related to us, Violet. He’s your boyfriend. There’s a difference.”

“So you think he’s guilty?” Violet said.

“I didn’t say that,” Beth replied. “I don’t know who did it, but I will consider all possibilities. If you’ll recall, we first found Corbin in a juvenile detention center. We can’t assume he’s not

capable of this, but that doesn't mean I'm sure he did it. Maybe it was someone else, but he's at least one suspect."

"I don't care," Violet said, furiously wiping away tears. Her cheeks and forehead were flushed with anger, and her voice was shaking. "None of you know him the way I do. He would *never* do something like this. He doesn't have it in him."

"He's never had a problem killing people that he perceived as his enemy," Beth said.

"He's saved our lives more than once," Violet said, practically shouting. Ruby rose and looked at her, the guide dog clearly distressed by her owner's tone of voice. "He rescued Owen from those bikers. He protected our home. Have you forgotten *everything*?"

"I haven't forgotten a thing," Beth said, "and that's my point. Did Corbin do this? I don't know, honestly. I don't trust his accuser. But is he capable of it? Yes, he is."

"Does anyone else agree with her?" Violet said, gesturing wildly with both hands at the people around the table.

"I told you, I don't believe anything yet," Shane said.

"I don't want to believe it," Jodi added.

"Maybe someone else killed him," Violet said. "Maybe the accuser killed him. Who was it? Who accused him?"

"It was Greyson," Shane replied. "To be fair, he didn't outright accuse Corbin of murder. He just reported the suspicious behavior that he witnessed."

"Greyson? Dad, you said yourself you don't trust him! What the heck do we know about Greyson anyway? I just *know* Corbin would never do this; I don't care what any of you say!"

Beth dabbed her cheeks again and then tossed her handkerchief onto the table. "We're having a funeral for James, a public funeral so everyone can see what happened."

"That's probably not a good idea, at least not right away," Shane said. "Things are tense right now in the town, and they're going to get even more tense when people learn that the mayor has been killed."

“I agree with Shane,” Jodi said. “We need to wait on a funeral until things calm down. At least until we know we’re safe from the fire.”

“Oh, didn’t you hear Corbin’s report?” Beth said, with an angry wave of her hand. “The fire is dying down. He saw it with his own eyes. Everyone can go back home and forget about it.”

“We’ll wait until we know for sure we’re safe,” Shane said. “Give it a few days, Beth; then we can talk about the funeral. By then, our circumstances will be clearer.”

When Jodi tried to put an arm around her, Beth pushed her away. Then she pushed her chair back and rose, angrily snatching her handkerchief off the table. “Well, fine, do what you think is best. I’m going to stay with his body and watch over him. Maybe I’ll have the casket brought here to the house. He can lie in the garage until we can bury him properly. And when we do, the whole town is going to see it and know what’s been done.”

Jodi started to rise with her, but she seemed to reconsider. She sat back down as Beth made her way across the room.

“Mother, shouldn’t someone go with you?” Jodi said.

“No, I don’t want any company right now,” Beth said tightly. “Don’t follow me.”

And with that, she stormed out of the room, across the living room, and flung the front door open so hard, it hit the wall with a bang.

It was a long, sad walk to the western gate, and Mike thought that if cell phones still existed, he might call in sick and let Jaime fill in his shift at the watchtower. He'd had trouble sleeping the night before, and his mind was all foggy. He didn't have much energy to begin with these days, so the lack of sleep only made him feel that much worse.

On top of that, there was the question of James's death. No one had seen Corbin, and Greyson had made himself scarce as well. Mike couldn't stop his troubled mind from going to disturbing places.

What if they were in on it together? They both brought the report. Corbin did most of the talking, but James was refuting them both. What if they argued with him outside of the meeting, and anger turned to resentment? Is it possible?

By all accounts, Greyson had cried over James's death, and he'd cried again when he'd reported his suspicions about Corbin. Could the tears have been fake? Mike didn't know, but he did know one thing: Corbin was indeed capable of sudden violence. And when the kid set his mind to kill someone, it didn't bother him all that much. This had been to the family's advantage in the past.

"You just can't fully trust anyone these days, can you?" he muttered.

As he came in sight of the watchtower, Jaime was already clambering down the ladder. For once, the kid seemed in a hurry to leave his post. Through the slats in the fence, Mike

could see a whole bunch of people. Apparently, the most recent group of refugees hadn't departed despite Shane's disinvitation.

As Jaime reached the bottom of the ladder, Mike touched the strap of the rifle around his shoulder. He'd brought the Tikka today, a nice hunting rifle with a good scope on it. He liked the feel of this particular gun, even if there was already a rifle stored in the watchtower.

"Sir, sir, there's a problem," Jaime said, running up to him. The teen was dressed in an oversized black T-shirt that hung almost all the way to his knees, and it had numerous food stains down the front. His hair was messy, as usual, and he was badly in need of a bath. The kid clearly preferred sitting in the watchtower for endless hours to basic hygiene and cleaning.

"What's the deal here, kid?" Mike asked.

"Those refugees never left," Jaime said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "They've just been getting more and more worked up, and now they're all gathered on the other side of the ditch. It looks like they're planning something."

Indeed, as he gazed through the slats again, Mike realized the kid was right. A bunch of people had lined up just on the other side of the big fire ditch, and they seemed agitated.

"Do me a favor," Mike said, patting the youngster on the back. "Head into town and round up a few trustworthy armed citizens. Bring them back here." And when the kid looked terrified, he added, "Just in case."

And with that, Jaime took off into town. Mike headed for the watchtower and climbed the ladder, the rifle thumping rhythmically against his back. He pulled himself up onto the platform, slung the rifle onto a nearby bench, and leaned out over the low wall. Looking beyond the wall, he saw the ugly ditch cutting through the land between the fence and the trees, and there, gathered across the old highway at the edge of the ditch, was the latest group of refugees.

The old man with the long, filthy beard was standing in the middle, gesturing at people, and he seemed to be shouting

instructions. However, someone standing near him spotted Mike and pointed, and the old man turned. For one chilling second, Mike locked distant eyes with the old man, and he shuddered.

“We will *not* stay out here and *starve*,” the old man shouted, his coarse voice cracking from the strain. “Do you *hear* me? Bring someone to the gate *now!*”

Mike cupped his hands on either side of his mouth and shouted a response. “We can’t take in any more refugees. I’m sorry, Gandalf. You shall not pass! You’ll have to go somewhere else. We voted on it and everything!”

But the old man shook a fist at him. “I will *not* stay out here and watch my people *die!* Three of them were found dead in their sleeping bags just this morning, and we will not lose any others! We demand *food!* We will work for it, trade for it, pay for it, but we *demand food!*”

“It’s not up to me, Dumbledore,” Mike shouted back. “We took a vote. No more refugees!”

“We do *not* accept your decision.” The old man raised his hands above his head and made a little gesture.

Suddenly, the crowd surged forward, clambering down into the ditch. The bridge hadn’t been installed on this side of the town yet, but it didn’t seem to matter. The people rolled and climbed and tumbled over each other down to the bottom of the ditch, but they kept coming. Almost a hundred of them, they made their way across the ditch and started up the other side, moving in a close, tangled pack. The old man moved in the midst of them, shouting for them to keep going.

Oh, gosh, what do I do now? Mike thought.

He looked back over his shoulder, hoping to see Jaime returning with a bunch of armed townsfolk. But there was no one in sight. He was alone on the watchtower. Mike grabbed the Tikka rifle and flicked off the safety. He really didn’t want to have to shoot anyone, least of all these pitiful people, so he just held the rifle up and let them see it.

“You’re not getting through the gate, folks,” he shouted. “I’m sorry!”

But the first line of refugees was already pulling themselves out of the near side of the ditch and clawing their way toward the gate. The old man rose up, shaking his fist at Mike.

“We just want *food*,” he cried. “Do you hear me? We have to eat!”

The first people threw themselves at the gate. Some tried to climb, grabbing and clawing at the slick boards. Others beat against the gate, as if they thought they could break through with their bare hands. Some tried to wedge themselves through the narrow gaps.

Heart racing, Mike aimed the rifle. He didn’t want to hit the gate, and he really didn’t want to hit any people, so he aimed right above it. He squeezed the trigger and fired off a couple of shots. One clipped the top of the gate, casting out a spray of splinters. The other hit a tree on the far side of the ditch, tearing into the bark.

“You’re a *monster*,” the old man shouted. “We’re coming in! Will you kill us for the sin of starving?”

He said something to a man beside him, and the man stepped up to the gate. Instead of beating against it or clabbering against smooth boards, he slid both hands into the gap and wedged them in place. Then he planted the sole of a shoe against the fence and pulled himself up. To Mike’s alarm, the man actually managed to start climbing the gate, slowly but surely making his way up.

“I really don’t want to do this, Merlin,” he shouted, lowering the rifle, aiming it through the gap where the man was climbing. “Call off your people!”

“I will *not*,” the old man cried.

The guy was halfway up now, and Mike panicked. He pulled the trigger. He hit the board just inches from the man’s hand, but the man kept climbing. Mike took more careful aim, his eye to the scope, and fired again. The bullet hit the edge of a board, and the man lost his grip. Both hands slipped out of the

gap, and he fell. People below caught him and bore him back down into the ditch.

“You monster,” the old man shouted. “Have you no compassion? Have you not a *shred* of humanity left!”

“I told you, you’re not coming in,” Mike replied. “Now, get back from the gate, all of you!”

The old man began waving his hands, and the people stopped their rioting. They turned and dropped back into the ditch, the old man following them. Mike watched through the scope as they made their way back to the other side. However, inside of climbing back up onto the highway, they scattered into the forest, dashing like a hundred little squirrels into the shadows beneath the boughs. The old man lingered last, turning at the trees to face the watchtower.

“I will not let my people starve,” he shouted. “We *will* have food!”

And with that, he disappeared into the forest and was gone. Mike stood there for a minute longer, gaze fixed through the scope. His hands were trembling, so he propped the rifle against the low wall of the watchtower. Finally, when there was no more sign of them, he stepped back. Then he heard voices behind him, and he turned.

Jaime was trotting back toward him, Shane and Owen following. Mike slung the rifle over his shoulder and started down the ladder, moving slow to compensate for his trembling weakness. By the time he reached the ground, Jaime, Shane, and Owen were close.

“I heard gunshots,” Shane said. “What’s going on?”

“That damned group of refugees rioted,” Mike replied, wringing his hands. “They were trying to climb over the gate. They’re hungry as heck, like a bunch of zombies! I had no choice but to fire at them. I’m pretty sure I hit one guy. I hope not.”

Owen moved past Mike, drawing his handgun and aiming it at the gate. “Where did they go?”

“They scattered into the woods like vermin,” Mike replied, “but that old wizard-looking weirdo said they would be back. They’re out of their minds with hunger. They’ll eat their way through that fence given a chance.”

Owen holstered his weapon and turned to his dad. Jaime was bouncing from one foot to the other, clearly restless.

“They were working themselves up for a while,” the teen said. “I could tell they were about to do something. I wanted to ring the watchtower bell, but I was afraid people would be mad at me. People hate bells.”

Shane scratched his whiskery chin, gazing in the direction of the gate. After a moment, he said, “If they said they’ll be back, we should take them at their word. I know everyone is going to hate it, but I think we need to call a town meeting. We have to talk about this and figure out what people want to do.”

“We could always just give Gandalf a cartload of food,” Mike said. “Maybe it would appease him, and they’d go away.”

“That’s a decision to make together,” Shane said. “Come on. Let’s get this over with. Jaime, do you mind staying in the watchtower a little longer?”

“No, sir,” Jaime replied. “Well, maybe a little bit, but I’ll do it.” He saluted Shane and dashed off toward the watchtower.

As the others headed back into the town, Mike found that his trembling only got worse. All the adrenaline was surging through his body. It had been a few years since the last violent confrontation, and it was bringing back a whole lot of bad memories. He idly reached up and touched the big scar on his neck from his old cancer surgery.

“You know, Jaime’s right. If we ring that bell, people are going to be furious,” he said. “Hardly anyone’s going to come. People hate town meetings now.”

“Yeah, but we still have to ring it,” Shane replied. “We have to address this problem.”

“Has the word about James gotten out?” Mike asked.

“It has,” Shane said quietly. “Not in the way Beth wanted, but it has.”



As Mike predicted, people approached the community center with scowls on their faces, some covering their ears, others complaining loudly about the sound of the bell. Mike stood beside the open doors, watching Owen ring the bell and people streaming toward the building. It was, as expected, a smaller group than usual, but still a few hundred people. Quite a few of the refugees came this time, including Deon and Tasha. They were scowling too. Winton was there, of course, with his big family, and he found his familiar place in the back row.

Mike finally went in and found a seat on the front row with the rest of his family. Beth wasn't there, Corbin and Greyson were both missing as well, but the rest of them had come. He wound up sitting beside Jodi and Kaylee at the end of the row.

“Uncle Mike, what's going on?” Kaylee asked.

“Oh, just some more crazy people to deal with,” he replied.

Shane was standing at the lectern, and he looked thoroughly miserable. Once the room was mostly full, and the flow of people into the room had become a trickle, he rapped his knuckles on the lectern to draw attention.

“What happened to our mayor?” someone asked.

Shane held up a hand. “Folks, most of you have heard about James by now. Sadly, yes, he passed away yesterday, but this meeting isn't about that. We have another problem to discuss.”

Mike heard a few audible groans in the crowd. Another problem to discuss. That was not something people wanted to hear. Shane beckoned Mike, so Mike rose and approached him. He stepped behind the lectern and turned to face the crowd.

“Let's get right to this,” Shane said. “I don't want to be here anymore than the rest of you do. Mike, tell them what you saw.”

Mike was still feeling a bit freaked out from the encounter, so he took a moment to try to gather his thoughts and settle himself. So many hostile eyes staring back. “Yeah, okay, so... you guys remember how we had another group of refugees parked outside the western gate?”

“We sent them away,” Winton said.

“Correction, we *told* them to go away,” Mike said. “But they didn’t go. And this morning, they rioted and tried to get through the gate. They want food, and they’re determined to get into Hickory Falls. I took a few shots at them. I think I hit one. And then they scattered into the woods, but not before the Gandalf-looking old man who leads them promised to return.”

The caused a lot of angry cross talk.

“I think if we gave them some food, they would go away,” Mike added. “They offered to make a trade, though I don’t know if they have anything we want. This is the saddest-looking group I think I’ve ever seen.”

“Drive them away,” someone shouted.

“Keep them out at all costs,” said another.

Winton raised his hand, and Shane pointed at him.

“We already voted on this crap,” Winton said. “We said they can’t come in. That settles it, doesn’t it? Just because they tried to break down the gate doesn’t invalidate the vote. Come on, man!”

And then Tasha raised her hand. The refugee leader seemed troubled. Shane motioned for people to quiet down—which kind of worked—then motioned for Tasha to speak. She rose from her seat, smoothed out the long skirt she was wearing, and cleared her throat.

“We agreed with the vote not to let them in,” she said, scanning the crowd as she spoke. “We were afraid it would cause bad blood and resentment here in town, but the truth is, we understand what it’s like to be out there and starving. Actually, some of us got separated from family during our journey, so for all we know, we’ve got loved ones in other refugee groups who are out there now. I guess what I’m trying

to say is, maybe we could share a little bit of food with them. I think my group would be willing to share out of our own supply.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Winton said. And the tall, lanky man rose from his seat now, towering over those around him. “We’re not going to reward these damned people just because they tried to break through our gate, are we? That’s ridiculous. If you reward bad behavior then you encourage more of it.”

“I know we already voted on letting them in,” Tasha said, “but maybe we should take a vote on giving them a little bit of food.”

This caused widespread complaining. Although, Mike noticed that a lot of the refugees from the second group seemed sympathetic.

“I’d much rather send them a little food than shoot them all,” Mike said. “Seems like the humane thing to do. Maybe just a sack of rice or something.”

“Take a vote then,” Winton said, shouting so loud his voice practically echoed. “Go on. Take a vote! But I don’t think Tasha’s refugee friends should get to vote on this. They’re compromised. You heard what she said. They’ve got family out there! Their loyalties are divided!”

“My loyalties are not divided,” Tasha replied angrily, giving Winton a stare of death. “I’m just expressing some basic human decency.”

“Basic human decency is taking care of your own damned family,” Winton replied, “not rewarding rioting crazies from the hinterlands. If we’re going to vote, let’s first vote on whether or not the refugees get a say in this decision. There you go. Vote on that, Shane!”

The crowd didn’t wait for Shane to call a vote. Immediately, dozens of hands went up.

“No say,” someone shouted.

“We vote no say for the newcomers,” said another.

Dozens of hands became a couple hundred, a clear majority in the room.

“No vote, no food, no more people,” said someone else.

“Well, go on, then, Shane,” Winton said. “You see all the hands that are up. Count them. See how many don’t think the refugees should get a vote on this. I think we have the majority.”

“For God’s sake,” Shane muttered, just loud enough for Mike to overhear. “I’m not even the damned mayor.”

“Well, if that’s the way it’s going to be, then I don’t think we need to be here,” Tasha said. She gestured at the people sitting around here. “We’ll go back to working on our houses. Maybe next time we hear the bell, we’ll just mind our own business.”

And with that, about a hundred people, mostly from the second refugee group stood up. As Tasha and Deon headed out of the building, they all followed.

“There you go,” Winton said, when they were all gone. “The people have spoken.”

“Well, *you’ve* certainly spoken,” Shane said. “As always.”

“Isn’t that my right?” Winton replied. “In a democracy?”

“Look,” Shane said, ignoring Winton’s question. “We’ll do what we can to keep this latest group of people away from the gate, and let’s leave it at that. Everyone go home, okay? I hate these damned meetings as much as you do. I’m not James Cooley, and I never will be. We can elect a new mayor when everything has calmed down. In the meantime, let’s just go on about our business.”

And with that, he gestured for the people to leave. Winton led the charge, guiding the long line of his family out the door. Others followed, until only Shane’s family remained. Mike was exhausted, so he went to the nearest chair and plopped himself down as the rest of the family gathered around the lectern.

“What did you think was going to happen?” Jodi said, hugging Shane.

“It seemed like the right thing to do,” he replied, “even if I knew how it would go. It’s what James would have done.”

“Let’s go home,” Jodi said. “Forget about this meeting.”

Mike groaned and pushed himself to his feet. “I guess I should head back to the watchtower and relieve Jaime. The kid already did a full shift.” He grabbed the strap of his rifle. “Hopefully, I don’t have to shoot any more starving people.”

“Uncle Mike, do you want me to go with you?” Owen said. He was standing with his wife and daughter, currently holding the squirming Katie against his shoulder. Was he just trying to get out of family time?

“Nope, you’ve got your hands full,” Mike said. “I’ll handle this. If you hear gunshots, you can come running.”

And with that, he waved at his family and promptly headed out of the building. It had been a dour and even disturbing town meeting. Clearly, whatever sympathy the residents of Hickory Falls had once had for refugees was dried up

If we have another vote for mayor, they might just elect Winton, he thought.

With that unpleasant thought lingering on his mind, he headed back through town. It was a warm afternoon, as always, with few clouds in the sky. But as he walked along, he noted that the sky seemed just a bit hazy. More than that, he caught a distinct whiff of something in the air. And Mike knew that smell all too well. He’d sat at a thousand campfires in his life. Burning pine, oak, hickory, maple.

I hope that’s from someone cooking nearby, he thought.

But as he rounded a corner on a residential street, he came in sight of the big bare field that had once been the town’s orchard. He saw the haze in the air, a brownish-gray hanging heavily above the horizon to the west. He came to a stop, shocked at what he was seeing. Smoke. A blanket of it in the sky, and the smell of burning trees sweeping through the town.

“Oh, gosh, the wind has shifted.”

Mike turned and saw Owen standing behind him. He had followed Mike anyway.

“The fire is coming this way,” Owen said. “Corbin was wrong. Look at all of that smoke. It’s huge!”

Indeed, the blanket of smoke had spread far to the north and south, a vast wall. This did not seem like a fire that was stalling out, and the smell burned in his nostrils.

“How close do you think it is?” Owen asked.

“Way the heck too close,” Mike replied. “We’d better go back and tell the others.”

He turned and started back the way he’d come, his heart racing. The reality of the fire hadn’t really sunk in. It had seemed like something abstract, little more than a probability exercise. Now, it was a stark and stinking reality, and suddenly starving refugees at the gate seemed like the least of their problems.

As they passed by the food bank, he saw a family frantically loading up a handcart with bags of flour and rice, bottled water, and dried meat. It was a short, stout little man with curly hair with his wife and kids. Millard. That was his name. One of the leaders of the first group of refugees.

“Hey, what are you guys doing over there?” Mike asked, as he passed by the building.

“Are you kidding me?” Millard replied. “Don’t you smell it? The fire is headed this way! We’re getting our fair share of supplies and leaving town. Heading east. You should do the same.”

Mike traded a concerned look with Owen. Before he could say anything else, Millard grabbed the handles of the cart and began pushing it away from the building, headed for the nearest road east.

“Are you supposed to be just taking things out of the supply building like that?” Mike called after him.

“Everyone is doing it,” Millard called back. “Other groups are leaving. We’re just taking our fair share.”

Indeed, Mike spotted another family farther down the road, and they were pushing one of the town's handcarts as well.

"Someone would normally be staffing the supply building," Mike said. "It's not supposed to be a free-for-all. People are looting the community food bank and fleeing town. This is bad, Owen. Real bad."

"Do we shoot them?" Owen asked. "Looters get shots normally, don't they?"

"That's a Corbin response," Mike said. "This is more of a gray area, but we'd better find your parents right away."

It didn't take long to find the others. Shane, Jodi, Amelia, and Kaylee were all lingering in front of the community center, deep in conversation. As Mike approached them, he spotted a third group pulling a wagon and headed east.

"Shane, Jodi, they're stripping the supply shelves," Mike said, as he rushed toward the group as fast as his shaky legs would take him. "People are fleeing town!"

Shane and Jodi both turned to him. By the troubled looks on their faces, it seemed they were already somewhat aware of the situation.

"I smelled smoke as soon as I stepped outside," Jodi said. "It's turned toward us, hasn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Mike said. "People are panicking, looting stuff, and fleeing. What do we do?"

Shane shook his head in a gesture of resignation. The poor guy seemed overwhelmed with everything. The endless flow of refugees, James's death, the accusation against Corbin, the hostility of Winton and his local contingent, and now the fire turning toward Hickory Falls. It was enough to make anyone despair.

"I'll tell you what," Mike said, wanting to alleviate some of the burden from Shane. "I'll organize some volunteers to guard the food bank and make sure no one leaves town with anything that doesn't belong to them. Owen, you can help me."

Owen nodded, and Shane said, “Thanks, Mike. Be careful. If people are panicking, things might get crazier.”

“I know how people can be,” Mike said. “Trust me.”

And with that, he turned and headed off to see it done.

Nothing more had been done about the accusation against Corbin. Violet was glad for that, but annoyed that her family had even entertained the possibility that it was true. Beth seemed to believe it, others seemed unsure, but no one had accused him to his face. Violet just knew it wasn't true, and she was determined to make sure Corbin was safe.

During the ringing of the town bell, when the rest of the family headed off to attend the meeting, she lingered in the backyard and waited until they were gone. Then she went in search of Corbin. Though Ruby wasn't a bloodhound, she gave her one of Corbin's T-shirts and let her smell it.

"Now, go find Corbin," she said. She had no idea if it would work, but she figured it couldn't hurt. Then she shook the harness, and Ruby set off.

First, the dog led her across the front yard to the gate. Violet fumbled with the gate latch for a moment and finally got it open. Then Ruby led her onto the street and turned east.

"That's a good girl," Violet said. "Find Corbin. Remember his smell."

They wandered through the neighborhood for a bit. Violet smelled smoke in the air. It was quite strong, as if someone were burning trash nearby. Maybe another firebreak project? She didn't know. Eventually, she heard voices to her left, and she shifted Ruby's direction toward them. It really was nice being able to walk through town without worrying about vehicles on the road. She almost always felt safe.

She heard a somewhat familiar voice among the others and walked up to the person.

“Excuse me,” she said. The toe of her shoe felt a curb, and she stepped up onto a sidewalk.

“Can I help you, honey?” It was Tasha, the leader of the second group of refugees.

In the background, she heard the tapping of hammers, people shouting instructions at others.

“Have you seen Greyson or Corbin?” Violet asked.

“Honey, they’re two houses down,” Tasha replied. “Working on the back deck.”

“Thanks.”

Violet shook the harness to get Ruby going again. The dog led her across the front yard, around some obstacles, and then across a second yard, where the grass was all the way up to Violet’s knees. Finally, she heard more voices talking, hammers and other tools. She followed this sound toward a house, then through an open gate. She reached her hand out and felt a brick wall on her right side.

And then a familiar voice broke through the others. He sounded subdued, but not particularly troubled. As she rounded the corner, she called to him.

“Corbin, is that you? Are you here?”

She heard him toss some kind of heavy tool onto the deck, then rise and come toward her. “Violet,” he said. “What are you doing here? Where did you come from?”

He took her gently by the shoulders.

“I came to find you,” she said. “Where have you been? You’ve been missing!”

He hesitated a second, then guided her across a backyard, away from the group working on the deck. She sensed shade, as if they had stepped under a tree. “I’ve been working,” he said. “There’s a lot to be done in the community, and I’m sick

of sitting around. I'm not going to wait for people to give me something to do."

"You didn't come home last night," Violet said. "No one has seen you."

"I worked late," he said. "The refugees have a dozen different home renovations going on all along this street. There's a lot to be done, and it got really late, so I slept on one of the porches. I didn't think it was a big deal."

"Didn't you hear what happened to Mayor Cooley?" Violet said.

"Yeah, I heard about it," he replied. "It's awful. He fell and hit his head, right?"

She reached out and grabbed his arm. "Don't you think you should've come to the house and expressed your condolences or something?"

Violet heard someone approaching, kicking through the grass. He was making some kind of soft whistling sound under his breath. Fidgeting. Always fidgeting. Of course, she knew immediately who it was.

"I'll express my condolences at the funeral," Corbin said. "Why is this such a big deal?"

"I hope your grandmother is doing okay," Greyson said. He moved up behind Violet. She didn't like it, so she turned to one side.

"No, she's not," Violet replied. "She's really upset."

"Man, Corb, you should probably go talk to her," Greyson said. He actually stepped closer, as if he intended to come between them. "It's kind of important that you do."

"She doesn't want to talk to me right now," Corbin said. "I had a fight with her boyfriend the day before he died."

"Oh, I know," Greyson said. "Why do you think she suspects you of doing him in?" Greyson's breath hitched, and Violet heard him clap a hand to his mouth. "I didn't mean to say that. Forget it."

“Wait...suspects *me*?” Corbin said. “What the heck does that mean? Suspects me of killing the *mayor*?”

“I misspoke,” Greyson said. “It was a joke. Forget you heard it.” And then, he grunted and said, “I’m going back to work, pal. You and your girl probably want to be left alone.”

Violet listened to him walking away, but she was seething.

“Your friend Greyson is the reason they suspect you,” Violet said. “He said something. I don’t know what exactly, but...” She was still holding his arm, but he twisted out of her grasp.

“The fact that Beth would even *entertain* the idea that I killed her boyfriend offends me,” Corbin said. “How many other people think I did it?” He grabbed her shoulders again, not lovingly this time. “Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” Violet replied. “Just the family, I guess.”

“The whole family thinks I killed him?” His voice was getting angrier and coarser. “This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, Violet. Did Greyson tell them I killed James?”

“He didn’t outright say it. According to Dad, he reported suspicious behavior, and I guess they put two and two together.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Corbin said. “Why didn’t you come to me right away and tell me?”

“I...I thought you would come home,” Violet replied.

“And why didn’t you defend me?” he said, furious. “Why didn’t you tell them how absurd it is? If I haven’t earned their respect by now, then they’re all insane.”

“I *did* stand up for you,” Violet replied. She reached up and grabbed his wrist, but he twisted free again. “I swear I did. Right to Beth’s face. I told her you would never do such a thing.”

“But they still suspect me?”

“Well...I don’t know. Maybe some of them. Not all of them.”

Corbin was breathing loudly. It was a tense and uncomfortable sound. “So clearly you didn’t defend me strongly. Do *you*

think I did it? Do you think I'm even capable of doing it?"

"No, of course not," she said. She reached out to him again, laying a hand against his chest. "I know you would never hurt James. It doesn't matter what happened in your past."

"My past," he snarled. "That's what this is about. Beth and all of these people are supposed to be my family, but I've never earned their trust. I defended you all. I fought by your side, but it doesn't matter. They all still see me as just some kid who broke out of juvie."

"I don't see you that way," Violet said.

"You'll always pick your family over me," he said. "You're actually related to these people. You're not just some ex-con sleeping in their guest room." He pushed her hand away and stormed off.

She assumed he was going back to work, but she heard him moving across the yard, slamming the gate shut behind him. Violet felt sick to her stomach.

"Ruby, take me home," she said. "Take me home right now!"

That was something the dog understood. She led Violet back across the yard, through the fence, and then back down the road. Violet didn't want to be seen crying in public, but she couldn't help it. Stupid Greyson, why did he have to say anything? Violet had never liked the guy, but she felt a burning hatred for him now. He was to blame for all of this.

She shook the harness to get Ruby to move faster. The smell of smoke was even stronger now, almost unbearable, and Violet had an alarming thought.

It's not a campfire. Nobody's burning trash. This is something a whole lot bigger.

When she got close to her house, she heard faint voices from beyond the fence. She rang the windchime like crazy, and soon the gate swung open in front of her.

"Violet, where have you been?" It was Jodi.

Violet stepped through the gate. "Corbin ran off. I don't know where he went. He was really upset. Someone has to go after

him!” She sensed other people in the yard and moved toward them. “I need someone to go and find Corbin. He found out about the accusation, and he got really upset and ran off. Please!”

For a few seconds nobody spoke, then Jodi was at her side, guiding her toward the front door. “I’m sorry, Violet, but we can’t do that right now. We’re in the middle of an important discussion. Come on.”

Despite being nearly frantic with worry, Violet let herself be guided inside the house and across the living room. As she sat down at the dining room table, she heard the rest of the family sitting around her. Kaylee was on her left, Amelia on her right.

“This is bad,” Violet said. “This is really bad. He thinks we hate him.”

“Violet,” Shane said, somewhat forcefully. She clamped her mouth shut. “Corbin’s report was dead wrong. The fire is not stalling out, and the wind has turned. It’s headed right for us. I’ve been to the western gate. The smoke is thick and dark in that direction, and it’s growing.”

“We have to get out of town,” Kaylee said, a whiny edge to her voice. “Mom, we have to load up a wagon with our stuff and get away from the fire, before it’s too late!”

“We have a firebreak surrounding the town,” Owen said. “I know because I helped cut down dozens of trees. And we’ve cleared a bunch of places, too. The orchard is just a dirt lot now. Plus, Amelia’s team dug that giant ditch. Surely, it’ll be enough.”

“Is that really a game we want to play?” Uncle Mike said. “The smoke wall is so big, it looks like the end of the world. The fence is wood. If it catches fire, it will encircle the town, and we’ll be cut off. Do we really want to bet our lives on the quality of our firebreaks?”

“What’s the alternative?” Owen said. “We can’t leave everything behind. We’ve put so much work in this house, the gardens, the community buildings. I’ve got a little one here. She can’t survive out there on the road. It’ll be like hell.”

“No, hell is fire,” Mike said, “and that’s what’s coming toward us. Anyway, people are already leaving. I’ve got guards blocking the door to the food bank building, and people are leaving anyway. Some are leaving with barely any food. They don’t want to burn up. They’d rather take their chances on the road.”

“This is insane,” Owen said, smacking the table so hard it made a coffee cup dance on its saucers. Who was drinking coffee at a time like this? “Why did we do all of this work protecting our town from the fire if we’re just going to run away the first time we smell smoke?”

“It *is* insane,” Shane said, with a deep, soul-shaking sigh. “I’ve seen the smoke, as well. Mike, to answer your question, I really don’t want to gamble with our lives, no.”

“We’re not staying here,” Jodi said. “Even if the firebreaks work, and I hope to God they do, we’re not going to sit here and find out. Shane, there’s no debate here. We have to load up as much stuff as we can and hit the road. We can come back and check on the town after the fire has burned itself out.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Shane said. “I’m sorry, Owen. I think we have to get as far from this fire as possible. We’ll hope the town survives, but we’re not going risk our lives.”

Violet had heard enough. Furious, she grabbed the edge of the table and shook it. “I can’t believe you people! Corbin is right. You really don’t care about him! Has it ever occurred to you people that Greyson might not be all that reliable? Did you consider the source of the accusation? Huh? I don’t trust him. I trust Corbin. He’s one of us. He’s part of our family, whether you guys recognize it or not. We can’t leave town without finding him first! I won’t do it!”

And for good measure, she shook the table again, making the coffee cup rattle. Finally, someone picked it up to rescue their drink. It sounded like Amelia.

“Violet, we don’t want anything bad to happen to Corbin,” Jodi said. She laid a hand over Violet’s hand, but Violet pulled away. “We haven’t assumed Corbin’s guilt, and we don’t fully trust Greyson either. Quite frankly, we hardly know Greyson.”

“Nobody really knows what happened to James,” Shane added, “but Corbin made himself scarce. We haven’t been able to talk to him, so we don’t really know what’s going on.”

“Well, I talked to him, and he’s hurt that we think he did it,” Violet said. “He was so upset that he ran off, and who knows where he went? But we can’t just leave him here. He *is* part of our family, no matter what anybody thinks, and we have to find him.”

“I don’t know that we can,” Jodi said. “We don’t have a lot of time. The whole town reeks of smoke. The flames must be close by now. We have to load up and get out of here.”

“Yes, right away,” Shane said.

Violet heard movement in the living room. Someone was approaching. Chairs creaked as people sat up at the table to see who it was.

“Mother, you’re here,” Jodi said.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Beth replied, “and I heard enough of your debate.” Her voice was rough. She sounded like she hadn’t slept for days. “I want you all to hear me loud and clear. I am *not* leaving my home. It has kept us safe so far, and it will continue to keep us safe, fire be damned.”

Greyson opened the door as gently as he could. He'd heard the arguing from the far side of the yard, and he knew what it was about. As he stepped into the foyer, he tucked his work gloves under his belt, smoothed out his wild hair as best he could, and knocked some dust off his sleeves. Then he made his way across the living room.

The whole family was in the dining room. Most of them were sitting down, but Beth was standing in the corner near the old telephone table. He felt a bit of trepidation. He thought he'd laid a pretty careful groundwork with these people, but you just never knew. Violet, at least, didn't like him, but he figured he could always cast her as hysterical, if it came down to it.

"I'm telling you, under no circumstances will I leave my home," Beth said. She was leaning against the table, ashen-faced and sweating. "We will be safe here. We will be much safer here than on the road somewhere. That's how I feel, and that's it."

"Have you seen the smoke?" Shane said.

"I've smelled it," Beth said. "I know there's a lot of fire out there, and I don't care. It doesn't change my mind."

Greyson stood in the living room, hoping they would notice him. Violet, despite being blind, turned her face in his direction, as if she'd heard or sensed something, but she didn't speak. Greyson cleared his throat. Beth whipped around, startled. Jodi and Shane sat up straight. Owen turned in his seat.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Greyson said. “The smoke got so bad, we called off the job. I’m not sure what to do. I’m not sure how to help.” The tone of voice was just right. The slight sadness, the shaky edge, as if he were just barely keeping it together, didn’t sound forced.

The family just stared at him for a second, every single one of them, and they didn’t look particularly friendly.

Uh-oh, maybe the groundwork is a bit shakier than I thought.

It was Violet who spoke first. He flinched, expecting hostility, but he got desperation instead. “Greyson, did you see Corbin? Did he come back to the work site?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Greyson said. He took another step toward the dining room, then came to a stop. It felt right to keep his distance.

Violet actually rose from her seat, pushing her chair back. Her seeing-eye dog stood up from the floor, as if expecting to leave. “Look, Greyson, I know you care about him,” she said. “Despite everything, I know you guys became friends. Corbin ran off somewhere, and I’m worried about him. I’m worried that he won’t come back.”

Greyson could see where this was leading. It was awkward, but it was also a good opportunity to shore up that foundation. “Say no more. Folks, I’ll go and find Corbin. I know some places he likes to hang out. I promise, I’ll find him.”

“Thank you,” Violet said, and took her seat again.

Notably, the rest of the family didn’t thank him for this.

Boy, maybe they really did believe the accusation, Greyson thought. That’s kind of wild.

He nodded gravely, then turned and headed out of the house without another word. He’d just stepped onto the porch when the argument resumed behind him.

“Mom, I don’t want to leave you here alone,” Jodi said.

“I’m not asking for permission,” Beth replied.

But Greyson pulled the front door shut and headed off across the yard. He'd heard enough, and he had a pretty good idea of where Corbin would be. As he dashed across the front yard, he caught a strong whiff of smoke again, and he was amazed all over again. The work of his own hands. When he'd started the fire, he'd never imagined that it could grow this much or last this long. Of course, he'd given it an additional boost along the way. Even so, it was shocking.

It's like I set the spark that's going to purge the whole world, he thought. But he didn't accept the full blame. The leaders of New West Point had pushed him to it.

He tried to put it out of his mind as he opened the gate and left the residence. Better to focus on what was right in front of him, not what had come before. As he made his way through town, he saw a couple of families making their way east with carts loaded high with their personal possessions. For some reason, Greyson found it highly amusing. These people had worked for years to create a town that looked something like the old world, and now they were just walking away from it all and heading out into the brutal wasteland.

They turned away those refugees, and now they're becoming refugees, he thought. *If that's not poetic justice, I don't know what is.*

He made his way through the neighborhood where Tasha and Deon's group was renovating their homes, saw lights flickering in the windows, and kept going. Eventually, he reached the old refugee camp, which had been largely abandoned. A few tents were still up, and a few crude huts. One of those huts was slightly bigger than the others, and built a little better.

The doorway had only a blanket covering it like a kind of curtain. From beyond, there came a soft, muffled cough. Greyson approached boldly and swept the curtain aside, revealing the lone figure sitting on the bare wood floor beyond. He had his back to the far wall, his backpack in his lap.

“First place I looked,” Greyson said. He pulled out his lighter and flicked it, creating a bit of light. He held it aloft, letting the faint light dance over the room for a few seconds. “I thought you might be in here.”

“Careful,” Corbin said, in his surliest voice. “This hut is made of untreated wood.”

“Right,” Greyson replied, snapping the lighter shut. “What are you doing out here, my dude? Your family is worried about you. Well...no, mostly Violet is worried about you, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

“I’m just so sick of those people,” Corbin said. “What did you say to them that made them suspect me of killing James Cooley?”

Greyson feigned shock. “What did *I* say? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Apparently, you’re the reason they think I killed James Cooley.”

“I have no idea where they got that idea, my dude. I swear to God, I never said you killed him. Maybe I said something about you being frustrated with James, but that’s it. I never meant anything more than that. Let’s go back to your family right now, and I’ll clear everything up.”

“No, not now,” Corbin said. “I don’t want to see them. Anyway, they’re not my family. Not really. I almost believed the illusion, but they’ve never seen me that way. And I knew it. Even if I lied to myself, I knew it. I’ve always been an outsider to them. I saved their lives more than once, but I’m still just some weirdo with a crazy mom.”

“You don’t really think it’s as bad as that, do you?” Greyson said. He entered the small hut and sat down against the wall across from Corbin.

“The fact that they’re even willing to entertain the idea that I would kill James Cooley tells me everything I need to know about them,” Corbin replied.

“Well, to be fair, they *have* seen you kill some people,” Greyson said.

“Yeah, bad guys,” Corbin said. “People who were threatening us. People who were out to get us. People...” He sighed. “Whatever. I’m just sick of the McDonalds. I don’t want to be around them right now.”

“I’m sorry about all of this. I know it sucks,” Greyson said, “but if it’s any consolation, you’ve always got at least one ally. I don’t have any family left either. They’ve all died, some during the Big Event, and some in the years since then. Some I lost contact with and never heard from again.”

“I didn’t have much family to begin with,” Corbin said. “And these people...we were mostly thrown together by circumstance. It was silly to ever think I had a real connection with them.”

“Sometimes we grab onto those illusion and hold tight, man, because it’s all we’ve got in the world,” Greyson said. “The way I see it, we’re a lot alike, so I say we stick together. It’s not quite the same as family, but maybe it’s the closest thing we’ll find.”

Corbin nodded sadly. Then he stuck his fist out, and Greyson fist-bumped him.

“I don’t know what happens now,” Corbin said. “We both looked at the fire. It seemed like it was stalling out. You agreed with me about that, right? I wasn’t nuts.”

“I think maybe it *was* stalling out at the time,” Greyson said. “I guess the wind picked up and shifted direction and breathed new life into it or something. It’s a wildfire, Corbin. They’re super unpredictable.”

“Now I seem like an idiot to everyone who was at that town meeting,” Corbin said. “Who cares? Who cares what they think?”

“Exactly,” Greyson echoed. “Who cares? We’re the ones who went out there, took the risk, and got a close look. You gave an honest report. At the time, it was true. Things change. And now we’ll just deal with whatever comes next. But I’ll tell you this, the old lady, Beth, she’s not going to leave that house for anything. You should’ve heard her.”

“Yeah, that house is sacred ground to her,” Corbin replied. “She’ll stand right there in her precious subbasement, clinging to her jars and cans, while it all burns down on top of her.”

“She sounds kind of crazy,” Greyson said. “I’m not trying to be rude. I mean, she did agree to let me sleep in the garage, so I owe her for that.”

“You’re not wrong, and the truth is never really rude,” Corbin replied. “Still, I thought I’d earned her respect after all we’ve been through, after everything I’ve done for her and her family. She doesn’t even know me if she thinks I’d hurt the mayor over a minor disagreement.”

“I’m sure it was useful having you around the house,” Greyson said. “You can do a lot of work that she can’t do. I’m sure that’s why she let me in the garage too. That doesn’t make either of us family, though.”

Greyson could feel the rising tension in the room. Corbin was shifting from self-pity to anger, and it was tangible. And Greyson was stoking the flames. The cause-and-effect was so direct and so easy that he found it fascinating, like watching a science experiment work out even better than he’d hypothesized.

“Maybe this whole town deserves to burn,” Corbin said. Then he smacked his knee and said, “I didn’t mean that. It’s just that...after all I’ve done for those damned McDonalds, I hardly feel like I know them. I’m not close to anyone but Violet really. They just never really warmed up to me. I was useful. You’re exactly right about that, man. I was useful, and that’s about the only thing that mattered to them.”

“Don’t take it back,” Greyson said. He saw the chink in the armor, the weak spot, and he couldn’t help going for it. “You said it. This whole town deserves to burn. That was your honest feeling. Hold onto it.”

Corbin rose then, slinging his backpack onto the floor. “Nah, I don’t want to think like that. The old Corbin was like that. He made a lot of mistakes and did dumb stuff. I feel like I’m still paying the price for that guy.”

Greyson took a deep breath and held it for a second. This was it. This was the moment he'd been building toward. He'd laid a careful foundation, but at some point, he had to play his hand and hope for the best.

"Hey, Corbin," he said, in an almost plaintive voice. "I need to tell you something. You said you've made a lot of dumb mistakes, and I told you we're pretty much the same, you and me. Well...I made a pretty big mistake myself, and I've been terrified to admit it to anyone. I think I can trust you, but I'm still scared. I just need to get it off my chest."

Corbin turned to him, still standing in the middle of the room. His face was mostly a well of shadows, but Greyson sensed those intense eyes staring at him. He made no response, so Greyson let the awkwardness linger for a few seconds.

Go for it, he told himself.

"If you hate me for what I'm about to say, I won't blame you," Greyson said. "But...I'm the one who started the wildfire. It's my fault."

It was quiet and tense for a few more seconds, and then Corbin said, in a low and dangerous voice, "What? Say that again."

"I started the wildfire," Greyson said, bowing his head. "Look, I really didn't mean to cause such a big blaze. I had no idea it could get out of hand so quickly, and the guilt is eating me up inside." Corbin was just staring at him, so he kept going. "You understand why I couldn't say anything about it before, right? I thought maybe I'd get lynched, but I have to get it off my chest, and I think—I hope I can trust you. I'm sorry, Corb. I really am."

Corbin took a step toward him, and Greyson inadvertently flinched. Maybe he'd misjudged the situation. Maybe this kid was about to turn on him.

"Why did you do it?" Corbin said. "Are you a firebug?"

"No, nothing like that," Greyson replied. He resisted the urge to stand up and get into a fighting stance, even though he felt like he was about three seconds away from getting assaulted. "Look, I'm going to tell you everything, and then you can do

whatever you want with it. The truth is, I was getting revenge on another town. New West Point, the leaders there were abusive, cruel. They punished people out in the open, shunned others, refused food if they didn't like you, even if you'd worked hard and earned it. I put up with the abuse for months, but they ran off all the sane people. Finally, after another public humiliation during a town meeting, I just snapped. I set a field on fire. I think I just meant to scare them, but it got out of hand."

Corbin just stood there again. His near silence made Greyson's skin crawl.

Come on, Corbin. Say something. Respond. Attack me, if you must.

"Is that everything?" Corbin said, after a long, uncomfortable moment. "Or do you have more to confess?"

"More...like what?" Greyson replied. "You hate me. I knew you would, but I just had to tell someone."

"I didn't say I hated you," Corbin replied. Why was he speaking in such a low, quiet voice? "I didn't say *how* I felt. We all make mistakes, especially guys like us. I got into trouble when I was younger because I let my anger get the best of me, so I get it. But I want to know if you have more to confess. What else have you done?"

"Well, I didn't start any other fires, if that's what you mean," Greyson said.

Corbin took a step to his right, positioning himself closer to the curtained doorway. Was he getting ready to flee? To block Greyson's escape?

This isn't going quite the way I hoped, Greyson thought. *Too bad.*

"When I almost fell into that ditch by the side of the road," Corbin said. "On our scouting mission. Did you know the ditch was hidden there? You eased us off the shoulder of the road. Were you trying to force me into it, like a deadfall trap?"

"If I'd wanted you to fall into a ditch, I wouldn't have grabbed you, now, would I?" Greyson said.

I didn't want you to fall, dummy, Greyson thought. I wanted to save you from falling. You're smart, Corbin, but not smart enough.

“What about Mayor Cooley?” Corbin said. “Did you do anything to him?”

There it was. Greyson slowly stood up, trying not to spook the kid into running or lashing out. He crossed his arms over his chest so it didn't look like he was going for a weapon. And now what?

Might as well spill it all, he thought. Provoke a real response and see what he does. You're in the thick of it now, Grey.

“I had a brother once,” Greyson said, trying to sound sad. Maybe the right tone would soften the impact. “You probably met him. His real name was Richard, but he adopted the name Pike after he joined that stupid biker gang. Rumor has it James Cooley killed him and dumped him out in the wilderness somewhere. When I got here and realized who he was, I knew I had to do something. I mean, yeah, my family was crazy, but it's still my family. Pike was still my brother. You get it.”

“No, I don't get it,” Corbin replied. “Pike was garbage. James dragged him out into the swamp and fed him to a gator, and he deserved it.” Corbin paused, then said, “The fire was stalling out. It was. We both saw it.”

“Yeah, it was,” Greyson said. “You weren't imagining things. While we were camping the night before we headed back, I sort of...went out there and gave it a boost.” He pulled the lighter out of his pocket again and bounced it in his hand. He ran his thumb across the raised, leering skull. “I know you must be furious at me, Corb, but I meant what I said. We're the same. You and I, we're kindred spirits. Fellow outcasts. You were wronged by the McDonalds. I was wronged by a whole bunch of people, too, including the mayor. I *know* you get it.”

Corbin nodded, and Greyson felt a moment of hope. Maybe he'd read the situation right, after all.

Come on, Corb. Don't let me down. Don't force me to change tactics.

“I don’t think we’re alike at all,” Corbin said, and he practically laughed when he said it.

As he said it, his right hand went to the holster at his hip, and Greyson felt a little shudder of fear. Greyson uncrossed his arms and let his own hand wander closer to his own holster.

“Well, what’s it going to be then, friend?” Greyson said.

Corbin hesitated. “I’m going to warn my family and get them away from this place before it burns. That’s what I’m going to do. You’re a psycho and a loser. How about that?”

And with that, Corbin turned and flung the curtain out of his way. Greyson was tempted in that moment, when his back was turned and his hand was away from his holster. Corbin was about the same size, probably just as strong, but quick on the draw. It seemed like an even match—odds that Greyson generally didn’t care for.

You’ll get a better chance later, he told himself. Let him go.

And with that, he watched Corbin leave the hut and listened to the crunch of his footfalls as he marched off across the camp.



The shock of the reveal was bad enough. More intense was the embarrassment at his own utter lack of discernment. As he hurried across the camp, Corbin kept looking back over his shoulder, expecting Greyson to appear behind him. For some reason, despite the confession, he’d let Corbin leave without a fight.

Don’t trust it, Corbin thought. He’s staying back now, but who knows what he has planned. You’ve got to be on your toes.

How had he failed so spectacularly at reading Greyson? It was something he would never forgive himself for. By the time he reached the street, night had fully fallen, and Corbin saw a red glow along the western horizon. The fire was closing in fast. Too fast. Was it too late for them to leave safely?

People were fleeing. He saw them. Some moved in groups, some alone. Some pushed wagons loaded with supplies, others carried backpacks, suitcases, or less. But they were all headed the same direction, and Corbin knew where they would go. East to the intersection and then south. The south gate was the only one that had a completed bridge. Corbin even saw Tasha and Deon leaving. The refugee leaders had been working on renovations just that afternoon, but the growing smell of smoke and the red glow seemed to have gotten to them.

He killed James Cooley, Corbin thought. Of course he did. We should have seen it. Why didn't I realize what kind of person he is? Damn, I'm off my game.

A big group of refugees was coming down the street, at least twenty of them. They were pulling a large metal flatbed cart stacked with boxes and bags. Laird was among them, the other leader of the first group of refugees. Corbin moved to one side of the road to let them pass.

“The fire’s stalling out, is it?” Laird said. “So much for your report. It looks to me like the whole sky is on fire.”

“Then I guess you’d better get out of town instead of standing around making sarcastic comments, you gangly weirdo,” Corbin said bitterly. As Laird huffed and puffed, Corbin pushed past their group and kept going.

“Where’s your friend?” Laird called after him.

“What friend?” Corbin replied, under his breath. “I don’t have any friends. Just enemies.”

Beth watched from the front door as the rest of her family loaded up the handcart. She couldn't resent them for it. The sky was glowing with a bright red light. It was a haunting sight. A wall of fire bearing down on them. Shane heaved a large suitcase onto the handcart, and Jodi put another suitcase on top of it. Owen and Amelia, working together, got a large plastic tub full of grain sacks onto the handcart.

Kaylee was standing beside the stroller, watching little Katie fuss and whimper. Beth could tell her granddaughter was trying hard not to cry, trying to be as serious and responsible as the adults. Shane turned and started back to the house, but he met Beth's gaze and stopped.

"We can't stay here," he said. "You know that. Look at the sky. We'll die if we stay here."

"You have to come with us," Jodi said. "It looks like the fire will be here by morning."

Some part of Beth wanted to stop them from coming back into the house. If they couldn't load the cart, then they couldn't leave. And if *they* didn't leave, then they couldn't make Beth leave. But she knew this was irrational. More than that, she wouldn't put their lives at stake.

"Go ahead," she said, stepping to one side. "Load up. Do what you think is best. I just don't understand the panic. What about the firebreak? What about that big ditch? What about all of the cleared fields? Don't we trust them to protect the town?"

“Quite frankly, no,” Shane said, moving past her into the house.

Jodi grabbed her mother by the shoulders. “Mom, look at the sky. The wildfire is huge! Corbin and Greyson were wrong. Not only has the fire not stalled out, but it has grown. If we stay here, we’re putting our lives at risk.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Beth said. “I just...can’t...” She pulled out of Jodi’s grasp and wandered into the living room. She’d already lost James. Was she now going to lose everything else? Years of hard work preparing for the future. Years. And it was all going to burn up. “No, I can’t lose the house. God help me, I can’t lose everything we’ve built here.” She felt the sting of tears and angrily wiped them away.

She went all the way to the kitchen and turned back just in time to see Shane and Jodi lugging more stuff out of the house.

I can’t leave. I won’t leave, she thought. I have to stay here and fight the flames. Save the house.

Owen and Amelia came back into the house then. Beth couldn’t watch. She turned away, but she saw the open basement door. Even here, inside her own house, she could smell the smoke. It was so strong, it made her eyes sting, her throat tickle. She coughed and went to the sliding door.

“Mom.”

She turned and saw her daughter standing there in the archway between the living room and dining room.

“Mom, you’re not really staying here, are you?” she said.

“The house will survive,” Beth said. “I’ll see to it. Jodi, you’re not going to force me to abandon my home. You’d have to drag me out of here like a prisoner, and you know I’d never forgive you for it.”

Shane came up behind Jodi. Then Owen and Amelia. Finally, Mike appeared, lugging a big canvas bag over his shoulder. They all stood there staring at her, and it annoyed her.

“Are you asking us to leave you here?” Shane said. “You’ll die, and we’ll never forgive ourselves.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Beth said. She pulled a chair back and sat down at the dining table. “I’m telling you my choice. Please, continue to load up and get out of here. The fire will pass, and when you return, you’ll see the house still standing. Then we’ll be able to have a real funeral for James and begin to rebuild. Heck, the fire will fertilize the soil. Our gardens will grow fast.”

She could see they weren’t buying it, but they seemed resigned. And that was good enough. The truth was, Beth would much rather stay here and burn with the house than leave it.

“James is here,” she added. “He’s in his casket in the garage right now, waiting for a proper burial, and he’s going to get it. Mark my words.”

Jodi had tears in her eyes, but she shook her head and stormed off. Owen and Amelia followed. Only Shane and Mike lingered.

“You might as well go with your wife,” Beth said. “She knows I can’t be talked out of it.”

They stood there for a second longer, and she could tell they knew what they were up against: an insurmountable wall. She hated to put them through it. Suddenly, Kaylee began shouting from the front yard.

“Mom, Dad, look at that! Hurry! Look!”

Shane turned and raced across the living room, but Mike stayed put.

“Mike, you’d better get going,” Beth said.

“You know how bad we’re going to feel leaving you here, Mom?” he said.

“Do it anyway,” she replied. “I’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

But now she heard the adults shouting from the front yard. They sounded frightened. She made her way through the living room and stepped out onto the front porch. Shane and Jodi had gathered around Kaylee. Amelia had scooped up Katie.

To the west, Beth saw the tips of flames rising into the sky. The fire was here. Maybe just beyond the wall.

“We have to go now,” Shane said. “Owen, help me with the cart.” He ran toward the cart, then turned and looked at Beth.

“Go now,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

Jodi looked like she wanted to run to Beth, one last urge to drag her mother away against her will. But Owen and Shane had taken hold of the big cart’s handles, and they were pushing it down the driveway. Kaylee sat down among the bags and boxes. Amelia held Katie tightly and hopped up on the cart beside Kaylee.

“Damn it, Mother,” Jodi said finally. “I love you! Be safe!”

“I love you, too, and I will. You’ll see. Be careful out there. Everyone’s going to head for the southern gate and the bridge. It might be a problem.”

“Just take care of yourself,” Jodi said.

And with that, tears flowing down her cheeks, Jodi followed her family. Beth watched them push the cart through the open gate, then turn it east, heading down the street. They were moving fast. Hopefully, it was fast enough. Beth lost sight of them behind the fence, but she listened to them as they moved away. She heard other people in the distance. Many of them. They were shouting and screaming. It was the mad scramble for those who had lingered.

She glanced in the direction of the fire again. The flames were rising high. She felt the heat against her face. Beth stepped back into her house and shut the door.

“Oh my God, what have I done?” she muttered.

She looked around. Suddenly, she couldn’t quite convince herself that the firebreak would save her. She went to the basement door and pulled it shut. Then she went to the garage door and peeked inside. Greyson’s sleeping bag was still set on the ground. The casket containing James’s was resting on an old coffee table against the wall. The smell was overpowering.

James would never have allowed me to stay here, she thought. He would have carried me over his shoulder, if he had to.

A pang of grief drove her away from the garage. She shut the door and went to the sink instead, peering through the window toward the neighbor's house. Her breath caught in her throat. Flames burning through the trees on the far side of the neighbor's property. The fire was a lot closer than it had seemed.

It's already gotten past the fence, she thought. Her heart began to pound. She grabbed her chest and stumbled backward, dizzy and sick.

"The damned firebreak did nothing," she thought. "The fire must've jumped the ditch. It's already burning through town."

She bent down, bracing herself against the counter, and grabbed the fire extinguisher that she kept under the sink. But when she raised it, she realized the absurdity of the gesture. It was too late to save the house. It was too late to save Hickory Falls. The firebreak had proved to be a joke. All she could do was save herself.

Beth hurried back across the kitchen, bumping against the dining room table in passing. The fire extinguisher was tucked under her arm. She considered going to her bedroom to grab some things. Pictures, items of sentimental value. But she decided against it and went to the front door instead. She flung the door open and stepped outside, and the heat against her face was fierce. She could scarcely stand it. The fire was like a great orange-red wall rising up to the west.

Beth ran to the open gate and moved out into the street. Here the heat was even worse. She could see trees burning, houses burning, great sheets of flame rising up, even a twisting cyclone of furious red flames just a few blocks away. She turned east and took off running as fast as her fragile heart would allow. The fire extinguisher was too heavy, so she let it fall into the gutter.

Screams echoed across the town, but the growing roar of the fire was quickly overtaking them. Beth made it to the end of her street and caught herself against the pole of the street sign.

Looking back, her heart fluttered. Mrs. Eddy's old house was burning. A long tentacle of fire had moved through the sparse field beyond and climbed the wall.

The fire wasn't moving like a wall. Rather, it was advancing in an irregular pattern, sweeping forward in some places, holding fast in others. She saw bright red moving to the north, racing down a street a few blocks in that direction. Not knowing what else to do, Beth pushed off the stop sign and headed southeast, moving as fast as she could.

Ahead, she spotted a lone figure stumbling down the street, bent over slightly. He wore an old blue golf shirt and gray sweatpants.

"Mike," she called. "Mike, is that you?"

He looked back over his shoulder, then rushed back toward her.

"Mom, for God's sake, what are you doing out here?" he said. He put an arm around her and began guiding her down the street, but he seemed to need the help as much as she did.

"The fire is here," Beth said, struggling to catch her breath. "It's in the neighborhood. My house is going to burn, and poor James is in there. He's still in there!" She wiped away fresh tears. "Why are you walking by yourself?"

"It's chaos, Mom," he said. "Panic. I couldn't keep up, and there wasn't room for me on the cart. I made them keep going for the sake of the kids. I'm not even sure where we're going. Where does this street lead?"

"To the pond and the southern gate," Beth said. She was having trouble catching her breath, but she pressed on.

Soon, she spotted others. A family. A few scattered locals. She saw the librarian, Zoe, running with others. They were all headed the same direction. Ollie was lugging a big cloth bag over his shoulder and running at an impressive clip.

"This is it," Beth said. "The end of Hickory Falls. The end of everything we built."

She couldn't stop the tears this time, and soon she was weeping bitterly. Mike guided her, kept her moving.

"Whatever you do, don't look back," Mike said. "Our whole street is burning. You don't need to see it."

"I can hear it," she replied. And indeed, the roar was loud in her ears.

After another block, they came in sight of the small irrigation pond that had been dug in recent days. The aqueduct emptied out here, and water was trickling from the end. The project had just been finished the day before, and the stone-lined pond was already mostly full. The street they were on ended at a cul-de-sac just before the pond, but a dirt path had been worn through the field, carving a new way south around the pond. It was the only easy way to go. There were trees growing right up to the edge of the pond on the north side.

"Did Shane and Jodi come this way?" Beth asked.

"They must have," Mike replied, struggling to speak through pained breaths. "I lost sight of them pretty quickly. Shane and Owen were really pushing that cart. I'm sure they'll head to the lake."

Beth stumbled to a stop and took a deep, heaving breath. And then she dared to look over her shoulder. The fire was so close. It was sweeping around to the south, and she realized it was following the line of the fence.

"Mom, if we don't keep moving, we're going to be surrounded," Mike said.

"Okay, okay," Beth replied. She took another deep breath and resumed walking, heading toward the cul-de-sac and the path around the pond.

As Beth approached, she spotted another lone figure crouched along the water's edge, and this time, it sent a spike of cold terror right down her spine. A small person. A child. She seemed to be considering whether or not to jump in the water. Thinking her eyes must be tricking her, Beth squinted and tried to see more clearly.

"Mike, surely that's not..." She pointed at the child. "Am I seeing things?"

"Holy crap, Mom," Mike replied, smacking the side of his head. "What the heck is *she* doing here?"

Beth pushed away from her son and rushed toward the water's edge. A sudden surge of adrenaline seemed to strengthen her heart. The girl at the pond heard her coming and rose, turning in her direction. In the red light, Beth could see she had been crying.

"Kaylee, what in the world are you doing here?"

Kaylee ran toward her and threw her arms around Beth. "Grandma, there were a bunch of other families gathered at the pond, trying to get around it, and we got caught in a traffic jam. Then I fell off the wagon, and I don't know if anyone saw me. I couldn't get up with all of the people, and when I finally did, they were gone. They just kept going!"

Indeed, Beth could still hear them. The screams and shouting from earlier were all centralized at some spot on the other side of the pond. It was as they'd predicted. The hundreds of people who remained in town were all trying to leave at the

same time, and most of them were headed for the southern gate and the bridge.

“Okay, Kaylee, you’re fine now,” Beth said, disentangling herself from her granddaughter and grabbing her hand. You, me, and Uncle Mike are going to stick together and get out of here. Come on.”

Mike came up on the other side and took Kaylee’s other hand, and they turned toward the well-worn path that circled the south side of the pond. In the rush to leave, people had dropped a lot of stuff. Beth saw shoes, articles of clothing, bags, tools, and other detritus littering the path. One whole handcart had tipped over by the side of the path and been abandoned, with numerous containers strewn around it.

“Your parents are going to be frantic when they realize you’re gone,” Beth said. “They’ll probably come looking for you.”

As she pulled Kaylee onto the path, the bright angry red burned in her vision. The heat was almost too much, but Beth didn’t want to look at the fire again. By now, her house was ablaze, everything she’d built and prepared over the years was being destroyed, and James’s body was being incinerated. And all she could do was deflect the terrible feelings for the time being.

However, as they started down the path, Mike pulled Kaylee to a stop and pointed off to their right. “Oh my God,” he cried over the roar of the fire. “We’re in big trouble!”

That got Beth to look. She shifted her gaze to the right and saw a great sheet of fire bearing down on them. It was racing along the wooden fence that surrounded the town. All of those dry wood boards had proved to be easy fodder for the flames, which were spreading along the high fence from west to east. And since the fence ran close to the pond, that meant the flames were sweeping toward the path.

Beth turned and put her arms around Kaylee to shield her from the heat. She felt it against her back. The air was thick with smoke and hot as furnace exhaust, burning in her throat.

“We can’t get around the pond,” Mike said. “The fire is coming this way!”

When Beth gazed back across the town, she saw fires burning all over the place. The western side of Hickory Falls was a sea of red flames and thick, black smoke. It was like looking straight into the heart of hell.

We’re not getting out of this alive, she thought.

“The water, Grandma,” Kaylee shouted. “We have to swim!”

Beth looked toward the pond. Angry red light was glinting on the surface. It was fairly deep, a rough circle ringed by stones, with trees on one side and the path and wall on the other. Beyond, she could see more houses, a highway heading south, and the aqueduct, which passed through a gap in the fence and approached the pond.

She didn’t have long to consider their escape. The wall of fire swept past her, following the fence, like a curtain being drawn along the southern border of the town. She grabbed Kaylee’s hand and headed for the water’s edge.

“Okay, into the pond,” she said, motioning for Mike to lead the way. “Take your shoes off first so you can swim better.”

“Oh, man, I can barely swim anyway, and they made this thing deep,” he said. Even so, he pulled his shoes off and tossed them aside. Then he rushed toward the water, pinched his nose shut, and jumped in. He sank beneath the surface for a second, then resurfaced, and swam away from the stone edge.

“Kaylee, you go next,” Beth said, gently pulling her granddaughter in front of her. “Hurry!”

Kaylee kicked her shoes off and leapt into the water. That left Beth. She wasn’t a great swimmer either. She’d learned how to swim many years earlier because it had seemed like a good skill to have, but she certainly hadn’t kept up with it. Even so, the sharp heat against her back, which seemed already to be singing away the ends of her gray hair, drove her into the water. She stepped over the stone ledge and pulled her hiking boots off. Then she dropped, sinking beneath the surface and getting water in her nose. She paddled, kicking and flailing her

arms until she broke the surface again. Then, sputtering, she pushed off the stone wall and drifted into deeper water.

She struggled to tread water, and finally just drew in a deep breath and leaned back, floating on the surface. When she looked for Mike and Kaylee, she saw them treading water in the middle of the pond.

Beth spat out water and said, “Keep going! What are you waiting for?”

“Mom, it’s too late,” Mike replied. “We’re surrounded!”

She looked beyond the large pond and saw fire sweeping around on the far side. It had spread from the fence to the wooden frame of the aqueduct, cutting off their escape. They had fire on three sides now, and trees on the fourth. Beth kicked her legs and moved closer to Mike and Kaylee. Her skin felt sunburned, her hair singed, and that damned roar filled the whole world.

Beth heard a splash just behind her. She paddled and managed to turn. When she did, she saw some animal swimming across the pond. A fox. Another animal soon followed. A rabbit. They both headed for the trees on the north side of the pond.

“I can’t keep swimming like this, Grandma,” Kaylee said. “We have to get out!”

But the aqueduct was fully on fire now, burning brightly all along its length, and some of the embers had been blown into the nearby branches. The trees would start burning soon.

“Kaylee, we have to stay in the water,” Beth said.

“I’m getting tired,” Kaylee replied.

“Stop treading water,” Mike said. “Do what your grandma is doing. Take a deep breath and lean back. You’ll float.”

Kaylee took a deep breath and leaned back, but she immediately slipped beneath the surface.

“Oh, God,” Mike said.

“I’ll get her,” Beth said, rolling onto her stomach. She tried to feel the bottom of the pond with her feet, but it was too deep.

She reached down in the place where Kaylee had sunk, swiping her hands back and forth. But this only got water in her mouth and nose.

“I’m going after her,” Mike said, with a grimace. “Mom, this is bad. This is all really bad.”

“I know,” Beth said, her voice breaking. “I’m so sorry, Mike. We should have left the house a lot sooner. Forgive me.”

“Not your fault,” he replied. “I love you, Mom. Be right back.”

Mike dove beneath the water, disappearing under the flickering surface. And then Beth was alone, still trying to float on the surface. The pond was strangely calm, as brutal heat and light encircled the stone wall. Fire was spreading through the branches now, even as the fox and rabbit fled into the trees.

Seconds continued to pass, and Beth felt a terrible panic rising in her. She swiped her hands back and forth in the water again, trying to feel for someone. But it seemed like Mike and Kaylee had both dissolved.

“Please, God, not like this,” Beth wailed. “Don’t let it end like this!”

There was another splash, and Kaylee reappeared. She surged above the water all the way to her belly, as if she had been launched, then sank back down. Beth grabbed her arm and pulled her close. Wrapping her arms around the girl, she held her breath again and tried to float. She was just buoyant enough to keep her mouth and nose out of the water.

“I think it was Uncle Mike,” Kaylee said, sputtering and crying. “He grabbed me and pushed me up.”

Mike hadn’t resurfaced yet. Beth kicked her legs back and forth, hoping to bump against him.

“Where is he?” Kaylee said.

Beth couldn’t respond without getting a mouthful of water again. She reached down into the water with her left hand, feeling around.

Come on, Mike. Swim up. You can do it.

But seconds passed, and he didn't reappear. And then it had been a full minute, and still he didn't break the surface. Fire was all around them now, blazing tree branches leaning out over the edge of the water.

"Grandma, where's Uncle Mike?" Kaylee wailed. "Why isn't he coming back up?"

But then Beth heard another splash just to her right. Thinking it was Mike, she almost said his name, but another voice spoke.

"Beth, my God, you have her! You have Kaylee!"

Beth looked to her right and saw Amelia in the water. Her hair was frizzy, as if the tips had been burned, and her cheeks were bright red. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot.

"Amelia, Mike is down there somewhere," Beth said. "Please, find him."

“I can’t believe you found her,” Amelia said. She was absolutely beside herself. As a lifelong athlete, however, she was having no trouble treading water. Although she’d had to remove her hiking boots, tossing them onto the bank near the path. “When I realized Kaylee wasn’t on the cart, I lost my mind. Owen tried to stop me from running away, but I slipped through the crowd. I hope he stays with Katie.” She looked in the direction of the burning trees. “I went through the trees there, and the fire almost got me. It was so close.”

“Later. Explain later,” Beth said. “Get Mike!”

She’d said it before, but Amelia hadn’t realized what she meant. *Get Mike. Mike is under the water!*

“Where did he go down?” Amelia asked.

Beth gestured with her head to her left. “Right there. Kaylee went under. Mike went down to rescue her, but he never came up again.”

The poor woman’s voice was shaking so badly. Fortunately, Amelia was a very good swimmer. She swam over to Beth’s left, took a deep breath, and dove under the surface.

The pond water came straight from the lake, and it was murky. Even with the fire burning above, visibility was very low. Amelia swam down, kicking away from the surface. She got down about twenty feet and still didn’t feel the bottom. They’d dug the damned thing to be a reservoir, so it was deeper than a natural pond.

When she finally did feel the bottom, her fingers sank into the muddy ground. She could see nothing now. The water was dark and cloudy, so she felt around, swinging both arms back and forth in a scissoring motion. She kept this up as she swept along the murky floor of the pond. The cool water actually felt good against her skin. She fully expected to find some first-degree burns on her face, neck, arms, and hands when this was over.

Come on, Mike. Where the heck are you?

She kept searching, sweeping back and forth, until her lungs were burning. Finally, she had no choice but to swim for the surface. As soon as she rose above the surface, she felt the heat on her face again. She took a heaving breath of warm, smoky air. Kaylee was crying.

“Did you find him?” Beth cried. She was still floating, her face barely above the water, with Kaylee in her arms.

“No, but he’s got to be down there somewhere,” Amelia said. “How long has he been under?”

“A few minutes, at least,” Beth said. “Please, find him.”

Amelia took a deep breath and dove again. It was a big pond, too deep, and she felt like an ant searching for a crumb in the ocean. She swam down to where her ears hurt and the water was cold, and began swiping her arms back and forth again.

Come on, Mike. Where are you?

Her hands scrabbled along mud and rocks, swiping through the muck. She did not find him, and soon her lungs were burning for air again. Even so, she continued to struggle in the dark depths. Her clothes made it more difficult, limiting her maneuverability. It felt like many minutes passed, and her need for air became a sharp pain in her chest. She was reaching her physical limit as well, but she took a few more swipes with both arms, trying to find him.

He must be down here somewhere, she thought, desperately. He simply must be.

A darkness driven by lack of oxygen began creeping into her thoughts. Amelia had no choice but to shove to the surface

again, back into the heat and smoke.

“I don’t know,” she said, gasping for air. Her arms and legs were sore, her thoughts foggy from the exertion. “I don’t know where he is. The water is so deep and dark. I can’t find him. Oh, gosh, I don’t know if I have it in me for one more dive, but I’ll try.”

“No, don’t do it, Amelia, or we might lose you, too,” Beth said.

“I’m sorry,” Amelia said, feeling miserable. “I tried. I looked everywhere. It’s so dark down there, so hard to move around. I really tried.”

Now Beth began to cry, wrapping her arms around Kaylee. “It’s been too long anyway,” she said. “More than ten minutes. Too long. He’s gone. Dear God, we lost Mike.”

“I failed,” Amelia said, tears stinging her eyes. “I could’ve saved him, but I failed.”

Mike’s death felt like a gut punch. Amelia’s relief at finding Kaylee had been immediately followed by terrible loss, but she could see Beth and Kaylee sinking into despair. And if that happened, they were all in even bigger trouble. There was fire on all sides, burning above the edge of the pond, all along the fence to the south, all along the aqueduct.

“Beth...Grandma, listen to me,” Amelia said. “We can’t focus on his death right now. We have to grieve later. Right now, you have to focus on surviving and helping Kaylee. We’re in trouble here.”

Kaylee’s crying had devolved into whimpering and moaning. The poor girl. Mike had died to save her. Amelia couldn’t imagine the burden that was going to become for her... assuming they got out of this alive.

“I should have left the house with everyone else,” Beth said. “He’s dead because I lingered.”

“If you hadn’t lingered, Kaylee might be lost,” Amelia said. “I only found you because I heard your voices.”

Beth was having trouble staying above the water, especially with the added weight of Kaylee, so Amelia swam closer to them. She tried to help, putting an arm under Beth, while treading water with her legs. Embers were dropping from the burning trees into the water, and the smoke seemed to be getting thicker along the ground. More than that, the heat was intense.

“Grandma, it’s so hot,” Kaylee whimpered.

“Splash water on your face,” Beth replied. “Keep your skin and hair wet.”

Kaylee scooped up water and rubbed it into her face and hair. The fire was like a wall around the pond now. Amelia went beneath the surface for a couple of seconds just to get away from it.

“Are we going to burn up?” Kaylee said.

“Not as long as we stay in the water,” Beth replied. “Just keep calm, dear. Don’t think about the fire. Don’t think about anything bad. When you feel the heat, put more water on your face and hair. We’re going to wait it out.”

Amelia was genuinely impressed with Beth’s ability to regain control of her emotions. She’d gone from sobbing despair to calm command within seconds. As for Amelia, it felt like sitting in front of an open oven door with the burners cranked up. Every few seconds, she had to dip below the water again just to get a bit of relief.

How long can we actually keep this up? she wondered. What if the fire burns all night?

To make matters worse, she could feel the water in the pond getting warmer. Already, it was pretty uncomfortable. The trees on the north side were like torches now, the aqueduct a wall of fire, the fence a red curtain, and even the grass on the west side and the sparser trees blazed with furious light.

We’re going to end up boiling to death in this pond, she thought.

But then, after what felt like an interminable amount of time, she went down to cool her face and came back up to lesser

light. The grass was all burned away to the west. The aqueduct framework had collapsed into a heap of glowing embers. Even the fire on the fence and in the trees seemed to have diminished.

Beth was still floating on her back, her face barely above the water. Her eyes were closed, and from time to time, she turned her head in one direction or the other to wet her cheeks. Kaylee was still in her arms, her hands over her face.

“Fire’s dying,” Amelia said. “We could probably crawl out of the pond on the west side.”

Beth opened her eyes and looked around. “It’ll be hot on the ground. We’ll have to stay on the narrow dirt path there.”

Kaylee uncovered her face then and said, “Did Uncle Mike ever come back up?”

And no one had the heart to answer her. Amelia grabbed the sleeve of Beth’s shirt and began swimming toward the west side of the pond. She pulled herself up onto the surrounding stones, though they were almost too hot to touch. Then she helped Beth and Kaylee climb out of the pond. The residual heat made the air feel thick and soupy, and it hurt to breathe it.

Their boots, thankfully, had somehow all ended up amongst the rocks, soaking wet, the laces singed but still usable. Amelia stooped down and picked up her hiking boots, pulling them on one at a time. They were uncomfortably warm yet soggy. She stepped onto the dirt path, but she could sense heat through the soles. The field on the west side of the pond was black all the way to the nearest houses, and those houses were collapsing piles of glowing embers.

“It’s gone,” Beth said, softly, as she too pulled her boots back on. “It’s all gone.”

And then, as if to punctuate her point, there came a faint but distinct rumbling, and Amelia saw a flash of light through a break in the smoke to the west.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said. “Grandma, those are storm clouds rolling in.”

“The wind that blew the fire through Hickory Falls was the front edge of a storm system,” Beth noted. “That’s a brutal irony.”

“The rain will put the fire out,” Kaylee said. She pulled away from Beth, wiping her face off, and gazed up at the clouds. “It’ll save the town.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Beth said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “The town is gone. Now, put your shoes back on. The ground is a little too warm for bare feet.”

That got Kaylee crying again, but she picked up her shoes and pulled them on. As she did, Amelia spotted Mike’s shoes lying there in the dirt. They would never be worn again. She quickly turned away.

“We should get away from here,” Amelia said. “See if there are other survivors.”

“Amelia, where were the others?” Beth said, turning to her. Her face was bright red, as if she’d gotten a nasty sunburn. “When did you last see them?”

“There was a crush of a crowd trying to get through the southern gate,” Amelia said. “Shane was determined to keep the cart, even though Jodi wanted to leave it. It was madness, and then I realized Kaylee was gone and went after her. The last time I saw the family, they were being pulled apart by the crowd. Shane was holding onto the cart. Jodi was trying to hold onto Violet. Owen wanted to come after me, but he had Katie in his arms. And we never saw Corbin. I have no idea where he went. Greyson never brought him back.”

Beth nodded sadly, her gaze going to the pond again. “We have to try to find them. Hopefully, they got out of town safely. South to the lake, that seems like the best way to go. We’ll probably find them there.”

Amelia’s arms and legs were aching. She couldn’t imagine how tired Beth and Kaylee must be. “I don’t think we should try to go anywhere yet. The fire is still burning east of the pond. We should sit here and rest for a little while.”

Beth looked like she wanted to argue, but after a moment, she merely sighed. Kaylee leaned against her shoulder. Amelia was gazing at the lightning flashes in the sky far beyond the smoke. The shock of the evening's events was starting to wear off, and she felt a terrible hopelessness taking root.

"You know, maybe Kaylee is onto something," Beth said, after a while. "Maybe at least some of the town survived. Maybe my house survived. We cleared that field in the back. We dug up the grass in Mrs. Eddy's yard. The flames might have missed us. Even if it got damaged, the food probably survived down below. Don't you think?"

No, Amelia didn't think. The fire had been like a mountain of destruction rolling through. She couldn't bring herself to burst her grandmother-in-law's bubble, so she just didn't say anything.

"I could get the kettle and make us some tea," Beth continued, after a few awkward seconds. "We have ointment that'll help our burns. What do you say?"

Amelia's shirt and jeans were soaking wet and muddy, her hair clinging to her face. "Grandma, I wouldn't count on the house surviving the fire—*any* of the house. Not even the subbasement."

"Once the fire burns out, the family will come looking for us," Beth said. "Where do you think they'll go? The house of course. Of course." Her voice was thick with grief, and she wiped her eyes again as she set off west back the way they'd come.

Kaylee followed without hesitation, but Amelia hesitated. The truth is, there was nowhere to go. She looked back at the pond, hoping against hope that perhaps Mike would have surfaced and somehow survived, but the water was still. And on the other side, the world was still burning. Amelia turned and trotted off after Beth.

Jodi was running, still running, one hand holding tightly to Violet's forearm. She heard the crackle and pop of the town's massive fence behind her, the scattered cries of families around her. Hundreds had tried to leave in the last minutes, as the fire swept through town, and most of them had headed for the southern gate. Jodi assumed they wanted to get to the lake, thinking all of that water would make them safe from the flames.

"Mom, we have to wait for everyone else," Violet cried, not for the first time. "Where's Ruby? I lost my grip on her harness!"

Looking back over her shoulder, Jodi saw the great curtain of angry fire spread across the entire southern border of Hickory Fall. The fence was burning. People were scattering in all directions, but some had gotten trapped on the other side of the gate.

Owen was right behind her, little Katie clutched in his arms. He had tried desperately to get back into the town to go after Amelia, but the flames had stopped him. Getting too close had singed his bangs, turned his cheeks and forehead pink, and even singed some of his eyebrows. His face was twisted in despair.

"They're still inside," he cried. "Mom, the rest of our family is still inside! They'll get burned!"

"Do you know that for sure?" Jodi replied. "Did you see where Shane went?"

“No,” Owen replied. “Someone in the crowd grabbed the cart, and then I got shoved away. I tried to go back for Amelia, but I couldn’t get back through the gate. What do we do?”

Jodi felt a skin-crawling sense of desperation. “What do you mean? We can’t *do* anything, Owen, damn it. The town is a hellscape, and the flames are still spreading!”

Indeed, flames weren’t just inside the town. They were also burning the trees south of the town. Jodi kept moving, fighting the scream of grief and terror that wanted to escape. She followed the road, heading up a slope alongside the aqueduct. About a hundred people had chosen this route. Hundreds more had turned southeast, racing across an open field. Carts and wagons, bags and boxes had been abandoned all over the place.

“Ruby wouldn’t run away from me on purpose,” Violet said, struggling to keep up with Jodi.

“The fire spooked her, honey,” Jodi replied. “Her instinct will be to find a hiding place. She’ll look for us later, I’m sure, or we’ll find her.”

But Violet jerked her arm and managed to break free. As soon as she did, she stumbled to one side, trying to get distance from Jodi.

“I’m going back for her,” Violet cried, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Jodi was forced to stop in her tracks. When she reached for Violet, her daughter must have heard her for she backed up swiftly.

“There’s no way back,” Jodi said. “Can’t you feel the heat, Violet? It’s all burning! The fire has spread everywhere.”

“If I get closer and call for her, she’ll come to me,” Violet said, still backing across the lanes of the old highway. “She’ll come out of hiding and find me.”

“She’d have to run through the flames,” Jodi shouted.

Violet swiped both of her hands back and forth around her, as if feeling for any obstacles. Then she started back down the

highway.

“I have to try, Mom,” she said.

But Owen stepped in her way, and Violet ran right into his chest. Katie was tucked in the crook of his right arm, but his left arm was free. He wrapped it around Violet and hoisted her off the ground.

“You’re not going back in there,” he said. “Stop it.”

Violet thrashed, but couldn’t break free. Owen carried her as he walked up the slope, and Jodi fell in beside them.

“Please, Owen, let me go,” Violet wailed, weeping loudly. “Everyone is inside the town. Ruby’s in there. Kaylee’s in there. Grandma and Uncle Mike are in there. Dad’s in there! We can’t leave them.”

“If anyone’s going back, it’s not going to be you, sis,” Owen said. “Now, just stop it!”

At that, Violet finally gave up. She slumped in his arm, and he released her. Jodi quickly grabbed her hand. In truth, Jodi understood exactly how Violet felt. A frantic and desperate desire to go back. If not for Owen, Violet, and Katie, Jodi most certainly *would* have gone back. She would have run right through the flames dancing across the open gate and tried to find the rest of her family, even if she got killed in the process.

They finally reached the top of the hill, and she saw the depleted lake in its rocky bed. The aqueduct had been blocked after the town’s artificial pond had filled, and she considered unblocking it. Would it help to stop the fire? She wasn’t sure. In fact, it seemed likely that the aqueduct would burn down.

“Shane’s no fool,” she said, standing there and staring dully at the lake. They’d made it but what should they do now? “If he got trapped inside the town, he’ll find the others and get them somewhere safe.”

“He’ll try, for sure,” Owen said.

Jodi looked back and saw fire spreading along the treetops. She also saw something else, something truly unexpected: a

flash of light above the smoke far to the west. Was that lightning?

“Down into the lake bed,” she said, guiding Violet with her.

The lake was so low that the big rocks at the bottom were exposed in many places. Jodi picked her way down, losing sight of the town in the process. It didn't matter. She could still smell the smoke. Violet came with her, no longer fighting, but she was now sobbing bitterly. When Jodi finally came to a stop and squatted on a large shelf of flat rock, she saw Owen trying to comfort Katie. The toddler was crying again as well, kicking in his grasp as if she, too, wanted to break free and go looking for her mommy.

“I can't believe she ran off like that,” Owen muttered. “What was she thinking? Amelia left Katie with me and ran back toward the flames. She's lost her mind. Why the heck would she do it?”

“She was worried about Kaylee,” Jodi said.

“We all were,” Owen said. “Everyone lost their minds when the fire reached the town. Everyone went nuts! I'll never understand it.”

Jodi didn't know what to say to this. Violet was kneeling on the rocks, her head down as she continued to cry. Owen paced back and forth, rocking Katie, patting her back, but constantly muttering under his breath. He was furious. Jodi could see that. Not just scared, not just concerned, but truly angry. There was a dark glimmer in his gaze that troubled her. She only caught a few of the words he said.

“Irresponsible...reckless...completely insane...don't get it... never understand...”

The first drops of rain began to fall soon after. Jodi looked straight up and let them fall on her cheeks. She heard a rumble of thunder.

“Mom, the rain will put out the fire,” Violet said, rubbing her eyes. “Then we can go back and find Ruby and everyone else.”

“The rain will certainly help,” Jodi replied. Feeling rain on her face almost seemed miraculous, as if some providential force was reaching out to help them. She rose, and Owen stopped pacing. Violet stood up and held her hands over her head. “If they just found some open ground away from the fire, if they can hold out a little longer, they might outlast it. Violet, stay right here. Don’t go anywhere.”

Violet stood there, her hands raised to feel the raindrops. Jodi moved back up the rocky slope to the edge of the lake bed. When she did, she saw groups of people still rushing away from the town. She strained to see if any of them were her family members, but the fire was behind and below, casting most of the people in silhouette.

Despite the light rain, the fire was still spreading through the trees south of the town.

More rain, she thought. We need more rain. A lot more. She gazed up at the storm clouds and willed them to let loose.

When she lowered her gaze again, she saw a silhouetted figure moving up the slope just beside the aqueduct’s framework. He was coming directly toward the lake, directly toward Jodi. And the shape of him was familiar. Sturdy, muscular but not as big as Owen, broad shoulders, hair pulled back in a short ponytail, a backpack slung over his shoulders.

“Where the heck have you been?” Jodi shouted.

As he got closer, she could make out his face. He was scowling darkly, his fists clenched and his arms bowed slightly.

“Corbin, I said where the heck have you been?” she cried again.

As he drew near, she thought for a second that he was going to charge right into her and shove her backward into the lake. However, he stopped suddenly a few feet in front of her.

“I finally found you,” Corbin said. “When I got to the house, the fire was already in the neighborhood, so I turned back.”

“Beth was there,” Jodi said. “Did you go inside the house? Did you see her? She stayed behind.”

He shook his head. “The fire was only about twenty yards from your fence,” he said. “I figured you were all smart enough to leave.”

Jodi chose to ignore the slight against her mother. He wasn’t wrong, after all. “We got separated from most of our group. There was a big crush of people at the southern gate.”

To her surprise, Corbin held up a hand and motioned for her to stop talking. “Listen to me, and listen to me very carefully, Jodi McDonald.” Using her full name? That seemed weirdly formal.

Something in his tone must have bothered Violet, because she didn’t run to him. She held back, almost as if she were too shy to approach. Owen was still struggling with Katie, but he was giving Corbin a hateful look.

“Greyson is a liar and an evil piece of garbage,” Corbin continued. “He’s been manipulating us the whole time. He lied about everything. He confessed a bunch of stuff to me tonight, and he’s really a sick, twisted individual.”

Jodi sighed. “Corbin, we don’t really have time to worry about Greyson. I don’t want to talk about him right now. I’m worried about my family, hoping this rain will pick up so it can kill some of the fire. That’s it. That’s all that matters right now.”

But Corbin rushed forward, reaching for her as if he intended to grab her shoulders. Owen quickly moved in the way, blocking him, and Corbin stopped mere inches from Owen, glaring up into his face.

“Back off, Corbin,” Owen said. “I think we’ve had enough trouble from you.”

“Let him talk,” Violet said, shouting right over her brother.

Owen glanced at her, still scowling, but stepped aside.

“Greyson started the fire,” Corbin said. “It *was* stalling out, just like I reported, but he went out there while I was sleeping and fed the flames with a Zippo lighter. Then the storm winds started blowing, and that was it. Oh, and here’s another stomach-turning little detail: he’s related to Pike. Remember Pike? Our favorite little biker gang member? Yeah, him and

Greyson were brothers. Greyson is a vindictive little rat, which is why he murdered James Cooley, and he's got it in for your whole family. Do you hear me? He's extremely dangerous. Have you seen him?"

"He went to find you," Violet said, "but he never came back."

"Then there's no telling where he is now," Corbin said, "but he'll be hunting your family members. We have to find him and stop him. Owen, you're strapped. So am I. So is Jodi. That's three people who are armed. We can overpower him, if we find him, and we need to. Do you hear me? I know the town is burning. Yes, that's bad, but it won't stop Greyson."

Jodi was numb. How had they not seen it? Greyson had always been friendly, just a bit too friendly, but also fidgety and restless. Corbin's revelation wasn't all that surprising, but she couldn't believe she hadn't seen it before.

"He accused *you* of attacking the mayor," Jodi said.

"Of course he did," Corbin said. "He wanted to alienate me from the family and then try to make me his little lackey in his psychotic games. Rain is falling now. The fire will start to die. We need to find Greyson right now and put him down like the rabid animal he is. Owen, are you with me? Jodi? Violet?"

"I have to find the rest of my family," Jodi said. "If you're right and he's hunting us, then we're sure to find him along the way. I think it's safe to say we'll have to kill him on sight."

"We might," Corbin replied, in a flat, emotionless voice. He patted the gun at his hip. "Maybe I should have done it when he made his confession, but it all caught me off guard. Anyway, he'll be in our hands before the sun rises."

Corbin hadn't felt such a dark, all-consuming hatred in many years, and even then, it had never been this strong. His whole body felt like it was thrumming with the violence of it. The fire burning through Hickory Falls had fed the feeling in him until it took over everything. An electricity buzzed in his fingertips, and it took monumental effort to focus on the task at hand.

The rain was picking up as he made his way back down the slope, but the town was still a field of fire. Even so, as he marched down the hill, he spotted a place where a large section of the surrounding fence had collapsed into the surrounding ditch.

The firebreak meant nothing. It hadn't stopped the fire, hadn't slowed it, hadn't done anything. He glanced back and saw Owen walking right behind him. He'd passed Katie to his mother, and Jodi was walking with Violet a little farther back. Violet hadn't said much to Corbin. Maybe she sensed his mood. He knew she was really good at picking up verbal cues. If so, he appreciated it. He wasn't in the mood for friendly conversation.

"How are we supposed to find him?" Owen said. "He could be anywhere."

"Are we going to march back into town?" Jodi said. "It's still on fire."

"The fire is dying out on the west side of town," Corbin said. "Anyway, Greyson will stick close to the fire, preferably

inside the town where he can watch the houses and city buildings burn. I know of a few places he might go. Heck, we *prepared* a few places for him by clearing trees.”

Most of the townsfolk had evacuated by now, fleeing into the woods, to the lake, or across fields to the east. However, Corbin spotted what appeared to be charred bodies in the open gateway of the town. Some people hadn't made it. A few of the bodies seemed familiar, including one tall gangly figure that was either Laird or Winton. All of his clothes had burned away, and his flesh was lobster red from head to toe.

“I can't go in there with you,” Jodi said. “I have the baby, and I have to stay with Violet. It's not safe.”

“It's not safe for any of us to be separated,” Corbin said. “He'll pick us off, like a lion targeting the lone zebra. Stay close. I'll keep us safe. You guys doubted me before. Now, I'm asking you to trust me.”

As he drew near the gate, the flames became unpleasant again. He already felt lightly cooked, so he left the highway just before the firebreak and headed west. The big collapsed section of the fence was about fifty yards in this direction. The fallen boards were no longer burning, though they still looked hot. Nevertheless, it was the safest way into the town. The strength of the rain was growing, as if preparing the way for them. Corbin picked his way down into the ditch, carefully avoiding the glowing pieces of the fallen fence boards. He half expected Jodi to flee with Violet and the toddler, but when he looked back again, she was still there.

“Why did Greyson make us do all of this fire prep work, if he wanted the town to burn?” Owen said.

“I don't know,” Corbin replied. “He enjoys manipulating people, I guess. I can't imagine all of the people he's hurt and all of the property he's destroyed. He's a twisted soul.”

He clambered up the other side of the ditch and slipped through the gap. He could see many buildings still burning in the rain, especially to the north and east. Embers glowed everywhere, but most of the flames were dying to the west.

Trees and houses had been reduced to black skeletons and smoldering heaps.

Corbin mapped out a path in his head that would take him to the familiar places where he'd spent time with Greyson: the refugee neighborhood, the old camp, Beth's house, the orchard, and the western gate.

"Please, keep your eyes open for other family members," Jodi said.

"They're in here somewhere," Violet said, clutching the back of Jodi's shirt. "They have to be. Ruby's probably looking for them right now."

Corbin gave Jodi a thumbs-up to acknowledge what she'd said, though he'd already spotted about half a dozen charred bodies lying among the heaps. Most of them were burned beyond recognition, and any of them could have been family members. It seemed best not to point this out. They cut through the ashes of burned yards, between two houses that were now black heaps radiating a shocking amount of heat.

They reached a street, and it was familiar to him. These were the houses that the refugees had been renovating, but they were all smoking husks. It was a sad sight, but Corbin hardened himself. He would not grieve now. No, only anger, rage, and bitter determination. Those were the only emotions that suited him now, and he had a lot of experience in burying unwanted emotions. However, he heard Jodi crying quietly behind him, Katie whimpering against her shoulder, and Owen breathing loudly through his mouth.

"I don't think Greyson is on this street," Corbin said. "Too dangerous. Let's keep going."

The rain was turning the ashen ground to mud now, and the mud was running into the street. Corbin tipped his head back and let the rain cool his face.

"You haven't seen any of our people, have you?" Jodi said. "I've been looking, but it's all such a jumble. Beth, Kaylee, Mike, Shane, Amelia, any of them?"

"Don't forget about Ruby," Violet said, her voice trembling.

“I haven’t seen any of them,” Corbin said. “Not yet, but we’ll find them.”

He reached the end of the refugee neighborhood and turned toward the old campsite. His boots were now tromping through inch-thick mud, and the relief brought by the rain was souring into a new kind of misery. Rain had mingled with ashes to create a slime on his skin. The campsite was all gray sludge now. The tents and huts had burned to the ground, and rain was puddling all over.

“Maybe he’s not in town,” Owen said. “Maybe he fled when the fire reached us.”

“He’s either here in the town or close by,” Corbin said. “He watched it burn, and he enjoyed it. Trust me.”

He turned toward Beth’s house.

Of course, he thought. Not the camp, not the renovation projects. He’s got it in for me and the McDonalds now. He would want to see our house burn most of all. That’s where he’ll be headed.

He continued on toward Beth’s house, but as he rounded a corner, moving past the hissing shells of old houses, he became aware of a figure ahead of him. Someone walking down the middle of the road. A man in a denim jacket with his hands in the pockets, a gray hood pulled over his head. Corbin looked at Owen and touched a finger to his lips. Then he took off running, moving as fast and lightly as he could.

He tried to be quiet, but he heard the footfalls of the others behind him as they struggled to keep up. As he ran, Corbin reached for his holster. He had closed the gap to about twenty yards when the man ahead of him stopped in his tracks suddenly and turned. Greyson’s face was streaked with mud and rain, but he was smiling.

“Hey, there’s Corb,” Greyson said with a laugh. “I figured you’d come looking for me sooner or later. What an exciting evening! Let’s keep it going.”

Corbin started to draw his gun, but Greyson took off running. He was lightning fast, like a rabbit darting away from a hawk.

He raced to the edge of the road and leapt behind the blackened spine of a burned tree. Corbin got his gun out and went after him.

“You’re not getting away from me,” Corbin shouted.

He ran for the tree, pointing the gun ahead of him. As he did, he saw Owen moving to his right, as if to circle around the other way. But Greyson laughed and pushed off the tree. Corbin caught a glimpse of him, and he lurched to the left, trying to get a clear view. Greyson dashed into the blackened shell of the house.

“God, he’s fast,” Owen said, shifting direction and moving toward the house.

“Try to cut him off,” Corbin said, gesturing for Owen to go around the east side of the building.

As for Corbin, he aimed for the nearest charred opening in the house’s front wall, leaping burned bricks and landing on a muddy concrete floor beyond. He heard footsteps near the back of the house, and he made his way toward them, weaving through what was left of a bedroom, a hallway, a den. As he reached the back of the house, he saw a shadowy figure leap through a gap in the wall.

Corbin almost fired. Almost.

No, try to take him alive, he thought. Maybe he’s seen the others. Find out what else he knows. Then look in his eyes while you kill him.

He chased the figure, shoving his way through the gap, and landing on a muddy back porch. A second-story deck had collapsed in the yard, leaving a big pile of charred beams that were still hissing and popping in the rain. The backyard was small, surrounded by a chain-link fence, and beyond it, he saw skeletal trees and, alarmingly, what remained of the town’s southern wall.

Greyson was headed for the wall, which was half-collapsed, leaving plenty of gaps. Corbin ran around the fallen deck and took off at a sprint. He spotted Owen briefly to his right, coming around the west side of the house, but Owen quickly

fell behind. Greyson was laughing. Corbin caught snatches of it as he ran after him.

Soon, he was at the fence. Greyson had already jumped through a gap, and he was clambering up the far side of the ditch. Corbin didn't hesitate. He jumped after him, fell into the ditch, and landed hard on his hands and knees. In the process, he dropped his gun, which went skittering and bouncing along the muddy ground. It took a moment to retrieve it. Corbin shook off the excess mud and scurried up the far side of the ditch after Greyson.

He could hear him crunching through the underbrush between the trees. Corbin raced across the gap and plunged after him. The tops of the trees were singed here, but for the most part, this area had been untouched by the fire. For long minutes, he followed the sound, the occasional laughter. And then, Greyson went quiet. Corbin kept going, weaving between the trees, forcing his way through dense underbrush, as branches and vines clawed at his clothes. Suddenly, he crashed through a net of vines and found himself in a small clearing. The ground here was dominated by a large dome of granite that rose from between the trees like some ancient artifact.

Greyson was perched on the apex of the rock, breathing heavily, his legs crossed. He had a smile on his face, and he was bouncing that damned Zippo lighter in his right hand. Corbin stumbled to a stop at the base of the rock and went to one knee, gasping for breath.

“That was fun,” Greyson said, shaking his head to get his curly hair out of his eyes.

Corbin looked around. He didn't hear Owen, and he didn't recognize this spot. They'd run deep into the woods. Rain was falling hard now, making the tree leaves dance above them.

“Owen is a slowpoke,” Greyson said. “A big, lumbering brute with the first signs of a dad bod. I'm sure we lost him.”

Corbin raised the gun. It was still dripping muddy water. “If you get up again, if you try to run, I'll kill you right here and now.”

“Hey, Corb, I stopped running, didn’t I?” Greyson said. “I didn’t ambush you, and I didn’t even try to hide. I sat down and waited for you. I’d have stopped sooner, but I figured we needed a bit of privacy.”

“So you surrender?” Corbin asked.

Greyson tossed the Zippo in the air and caught it in his breast pocket. “You’ve got a gun trained on me. My opportunity to ambush you has passed.”

“You burned down the whole town,” Corbin said, shaking with rage. “Every house. Every tree. There are dead bodies on the ground. You’re a monster.”

“Well, let’s be honest, nature helped,” Greyson said. “I had nothing to do with that stormfront blowing in and pushing the fire. But, yes, I’ll take most of the blame. I guess I got everything I wanted, really. There’s not a single building left in Hickory Falls. Everything burned.” He shrugged. “I won, Corb. Sorry. I know it stings, but that’s the truth. I won, you lost, and all the revenge in the world can’t undo it.”

The sight of her house pushed Beth beyond despair and grief into a dark place that was very still and very cold. She might have preferred if it had collapsed all the way to its foundations, leaving nothing but a field of black residue. Instead, it was like a sad, bent shell of itself, with much of the framework blackened but still standing. Windows had shattered, some of the walls had collapsed, and the roof was mostly gone, but the shape of it was still there.

The fence was gone. Only the metal reinforcements, hinges, and latch of the gate remained. Mike's old Ford LTD was burned out. And after the loss of Mike, that was an extra cruel blow. Beth stood in the street facing what was left of her house, and her heart was like an open wound. She'd poured her whole life into creating this homestead, a haven for her family to weather catastrophes. Years of food, a massive garden, tools, solar-powered batteries, weapons—everything they needed. It was her security, her identity, her hope, and now it was all gone. All gone. And her son was lost to her.

"Dear God, what do I do now?" she said, brushing away tears. "I don't even know who I am without this place."

Amelia came up behind her then, holding Kaylee's hand. They stood beside her, staring at the remains of the house as the rain fell hard upon them. Kaylee had cried nonstop from the pond all the way here, and she was still sniffing and rubbing her face with her free hand.

"I'm so sorry," Amelia said.

“This was our hope for the future,” Beth said. “This was the roof over our heads, the food on our table, for all of us.”

Beth started up the driveway, stepping over the metal pieces of the gate.

“Grandma, don’t go in there,” Kaylee cried. “It might not be safe. The floor might break or something.”

“I have to look inside,” Beth replied. “You stay here with your sister-in-law and keep an eye out for the others. They may come back here looking for us.”

Amelia grabbed Kaylee’s hand, as Beth continued toward the house. The front door was gone, so she stepped through the big hole into the foyer. Even with the rain, the interior of the house was stiflingly warm and the smell of smoke was strong. Interior walls had fallen, and big beams had dropped from the ceiling. It took a moment to pick out a path through the living room, and she had to duck under a fallen beam. However, when she reached the dining room, she was forced to stop. Most of the floor in the dining room and kitchen had fallen into the basement. Beth knelt and peered down.

“I should have built the whole thing out of steel, concrete, and gypsum,” she said. “Stuffed the walls with asbestos, mesothelioma be damned.”

It was dim below, but she could see that the collapsed floor went beneath the basement. The force of the floor and furniture seemed to have actually broken through into the subbasement. Beth’s stomach sank. She couldn’t bear to see any more, so she rose and picked her way out of the house.

When she reached the foyer, she heard voices coming from the street. She hurried outside and spotted Amelia and Kaylee talking to a small group of people who were gathered around a small handcart. The man holding the handles of the cart was familiar to her, though as she got closer, she realized his big mustache was singed. His clothes were muddy, and his hair was all in disarray.

“Ollie,” she said, as she drew up beside Amelia. “Where did you come from?”

Some of the people gathered around him had burns on their hands, faces, and arms. Beth recognized most of them as members of the second group of refugees.

“We came back into the town to see if there was anything we could salvage,” Ollie said. He gestured at the cart, where a few singed backpacks and a partially melted plastic suitcase were piled. “We haven’t found much. Some clothes, a little food, not much else. Oh, and this...” He reached to a lower shelf of the cart and produced a canteen. “We found a few bottles and canteens with fresh water. You can take this one.”

He handed it to Beth, and she took it. Somehow, that small gesture broke through the despair. Most of the townsfolk had survived, and some of them were still kind, still helping each other, despite everything. She felt a moment of overwhelming gratitude, and she just held the canteen in her hands, as if it were a sacred object.

“I don’t expect to find much else,” Ollie said. “The fire was very thorough. Do you want to come with us? We’ve been refugees before. We’ll just find another town and try to settle there.”

Beth traded a look with Amelia. “We have to stay here,” Beth said. “We’re waiting for the rest of our family to show up.”

“You didn’t happen to see any of them, did you?” Amelia asked. “Owen, Katie, Jodi, Shane...any of them?”

Ollie pulled a face, mouth twisted to one side, then shook his head sadly. “No, I’m afraid not. Most people kept going once they got through the gate. You’ll probably find them out there somewhere.” He looked at the people around him and nodded. “Well, we don’t want to linger here. Too many bad memories from tonight. Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

“We can’t,” Beth said.

Ollie nodded again and began pushing the cart. “In that case, good luck. If I see your other family members, I’ll send them this way, but...” He hesitated a moment, as if unsure whether or not to continue the thought. “We saw quite a few bodies.

You might want to check them. Sorry, I just had to point it out. I'll hope and pray for the best."

His group fell in behind him, as they headed east down the road. Beth watched them leave, wondering if she'd just made a big mistake. Finally, she unscrewed the cap on the canteen and took a sip. Then she handed it to Kaylee, who also took a sip.

"How long do we wait?" Amelia said, taking the canteen from Kaylee. "They might be out there somewhere, like he said."

"I don't know," Beth replied, sitting down on the curb. "A little while, at least. I'm not ready to start checking bodies. I just can't."

Kaylee sat next to her, then leaned her head against Beth's shoulder. Amelia took a sip from the canteen, then screwed the cap back on and sat down.

"It's like a dream," Amelia said, after a minute. "I can't believe it really happened. Mike is gone. Our family is scattered. The whole town burned down. No more Hickory Falls. All in one evening, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

"We can't leave him in that pond," Beth said. "We'll have to go back and..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. *Retrieve his body*. So she left it unfinished. It was too awful. Too sad.

She heard noises come from her left, from the direction of Mrs. Eddy's old house. She turned and looked past Kaylee and Amelia and saw a flashlight beam shifting back and forth. Another group of people coming from the burned field beyond the neighbor's house.

"Who is it now?" Beth said, standing up.

The man holding the flashlight had a long gray beard, and he was wearing filthy rags. He looked a bit like a wizard out of some old fantasy novel. Twenty or thirty people followed him. Beth raised a hand in greeting. He looked right at her, but he didn't greet her in return. Instead, he fixed the flashlight beam on her and came to a stop in the middle of the neighbor's yard. His people spread out in a line behind him. It felt like a threat, and Beth motioned for Amelia and Kaylee to stand up.

“I think this is the last refugee group,” she said, “the one we didn’t let in. The leader there matches Mike’s description.”

“They don’t look nice,” Kaylee said.

The old man turned and said something to the man standing at his right shoulder. Then he cried out, a weird and wordless animal sound. And with that, he charged forward, and his people followed, all of them running.

“Go. Now,” Beth said to Amelia and Kaylee. “Run!”

She grabbed Kaylee’s hand and helped her to her feet. Despite being physically exhausted, her diseased heart drumming against her ribs, Beth made herself run.

“Stop now,” the old man shouted. “Surrender anything and everything! Anything and everything!”

Beth didn’t bother to look back. She fixed her gaze on the road and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. They headed east, Amelia quickly taking the lead, guiding them deeper into the ruins of the town, as the wild man howled behind them.

Amelia still had energy. In fact, the sudden burst of adrenaline at the sound of that crazy old man's cries stirred up some deeper well of strength. She would have had no trouble outrunning the group of emaciated refugees, but Beth and Kaylee were clearly struggling. They ran to the end of the street, where it stopped at a T-shaped intersection. Amelia glanced back and saw the wild group still coming.

"We won't lose them in the streets," Amelia said to Beth. "Follow me. Please, push through whatever pain you're feeling, because I think those people might tear us to pieces if they catch us."

At this, Kaylee whimpered, but Beth just nodded and motioned for Amelia to continue.

"Where are the weapons?" Amelia cried. "Do we have a gun?"

Beth struggled to answer. "The handguns...were carried by Shane, Jodi, Corbin, and Owen," she said. "The rifles...on the cart."

Just one of those guns would have turned the tide. Amelia glanced back and saw the refugees still bearing down on them, like a crazed pack of wild dogs. They had to lose these people somehow. She turned right and hopped a curb, approaching what had been an overgrown field.

"Where...are we going?" Beth said, between gasping breaths.

The field stretched into the distance, passing close to a burned house before approaching what was left of the southern wall.

Amelia pointed ahead. Most of the big fence had collapsed, and the few boards that remained were charred and shriveled sticks.

“How long do we have to run?” Kaylee wailed.

“Don’t think about it,” Amelia said. “Just keep going.”

When they approached the fence, she saw that some of the boards had fallen outward over the ditch. The boards were burned, so she couldn’t tell if they would hold any weight. Otherwise, they might have made a nice bridge. Instead, she slowed down, motioned for the others to stop, then started picking her way down into the ditch. Beth lost her balance on the way down and fell, sliding on her hands and knees in the mud.

“My heart...” she said, pressing a hand to her chest.

“Come on, Grandma. You can do it,” Amelia said, reaching down and grabbing her arm. “Just a little farther.”

She helped Beth up and started across the ditch. The lunatic howling of the old man echoed in the town behind them. The far side of the ditch seemed daunting now. Instead of trying to climb up here, Amelia grabbed Beth’s wrist in one hand, Kaylee’s in the other, and followed the ditch to the west.

The flashlight beam was dancing wildly behind them, so she looked back. She could see the burned boards fallen over the ditch. Light was swaying back and forth across them. And then the refugees appeared. The wild old man came first, running on long, lean legs, his beard flapping back over his shoulder. He seemed to think the fallen boards were sturdy, a makeshift bridge, and he charged right across them, as did the people behind him.

The boards snapped almost immediately, and a dozen of the refugees fell into the ditch. They landed hard, crashing down on top of each other. The others behind them couldn’t stop in time, and they slipped and slid in the mud. They rolled down the steep side of the ditch, arms and legs flailing about. The cries of anger and hunger became moans of pain. It put an end

to the chase for the time being at least. The few that hadn't been hurt began tending to those who were.

Amelia dared to slow down a bit for Beth's sake, but she kept going, following the ditch in its gradual curve. Eventually, she spotted a shallower way out, and she moved them in that direction.

"Do you think they'll keep following us?" Kaylee asked.

"I don't know," Amelia replied. "Let's assume so and keep going."

She led them to the shallow slope, and they made their way out of the ditch away from the town. Before them lay more trees, a dense wood. Fire had swept through here, but the rain had stopped it before it could completely destroy the trees. Some were blackened, others still relatively intact. The ground was all mud and slime as the rain continued to fall hard.

"I have to find...a place to stop and rest," Beth said, a pained grimace on her face. "I'm hurting real bad."

"Okay," Amelia said, making her way into the woods.

It was very dark here, with hardly any light left, so she had to let go of Beth's hand to feel her way along.

"Here. Over here." A soft voice speaking from the shadows to her right. It startled her badly, and she stumbled, catching herself against the nearest tree. The trunk was still warm.

"Who is that?" she said.

"It's me. Zoe."

And then she recognized the voice. The town librarian. Amelia headed toward the voice, and as she did, she picked out some kind of ditch or depression in between two trees. There were people huddled down there. As she picked her way down, she realized it was a narrow gully, partially protected from the rain by the canopy overhead and some roots sticking out of the ground. Kaylee and Beth followed, but Beth was breathing hard.

Amelia was close enough now to see seven people gathered in the gully, with bags and suitcases piled in their midst. All

locals. Most of them from the second group of refugees.

“We found each other in the woods,” Zoe said, speaking in a whisper. “We’re just trying to wait out the rain. Are you being chased?”

“We were,” Amelia replied. “That third group of refugees. They’re like a pack of coyotes or something.”

Beth shushed them then. “They might resume the chase.” She sat down on a large tree root, leaning back.

Amelia found a relatively dry spot and sat down. Kaylee sat beside her, and in the darkness and silence, they waited. As time passed, Amelia began to feel more pain. She had definitely been singed by the fire. The right side of her face, in particular, throbbed. When she examined it with her fingers, she didn’t feel any damage. No skin hanging off. So the burns were slight. Even so, they hurt. The backs of her hands hurt, as well.

My Katie, my sweet Katie, where are you? she thought. How will I find you? How will I find Owen? When will this nightmare end?

Beth was taking deep, slow breaths, and gradually her pain seemed to ease. She lowered her hand from her chest and took a long sip from the canteen. Kaylee fell asleep leaning against Amelia, and a few of the refugees began to snore softly. There was no sign of the attackers as the night stretched on.

All of this is going to look so much worse when the sun comes up, Amelia thought. We’ll have to see the devastation with our eyes, our wounds and burns and scars, the bodies. I wish the sun could just take a break for one day and leave us in the darkness.

Jodi had given up trying to stay with Owen and Corbin. Carrying Katie and pulling Violet slowed her down, and both girls were terrified. Katie kept squirming and saying, “Grammy, I wanna go home.” Every time she tried to get out of Jodi’s arms, Jodi had to pause to comfort her. Even so, she heard Corbin and Owen ahead of her, heard the occasional echoing laugh from Greyson, so she followed as best she could.

Soon, they were moving outside the town and back down into the ditch.

I wish we’d never dug this damned ditch, she thought. It’s just an obstacle now, and it did absolutely nothing to stop the fire.

She carefully picked her way down the slope.

“I wanna go home,” Katie cried again. “Grammy, can we go home?”

“We have to find the others first, sweetheart,” Jodi replied, reaching the bottom of the ditch. “And then we’ll figure out what to do. Now, you just rest your head on Grandma, okay?”

“I’m hungry and firsty,” Katie said. “I wanna go home.”

“I know,” Jodi said. “Me, too.”

“We never found Ruby,” Violet said, glumly. “I don’t know why she didn’t come back to me. She always does.”

“I’m sure she will eventually,” Jodi said. “Her sense of smell will lead her right to us.”

She picked her way up the far side of the ditch, struggling to get traction on the mud. She heard crashing bodies in the woods, and she stepped into the ash-smelling net of trees. Katie finally fell asleep against her shoulder, whimpering occasionally in her sleep. Long minutes passed, but Jodi kept hearing sounds in front of her. And then, she heard shouting voices to her left. She turned and made her way toward them.

Suddenly, she stepped out into the gloom of a small clearing. A pale dome of rock dominated the clearing, and here she found Greyson. He was crouched on the apex of the rock, flicking the metal lid of a Zippo lighter open and shut over and over again. Corbin stood at the bottom of the rock, clutching a muddy handgun. Owen had moved around to the other side, cutting off Greyson's escape.

"You caught him," Jodi said. She had no choice but to sit down on the muddy ground and lean back against a tree.

"Nobody caught me," Greyson said, flicking the lid of his lighter shut. "I sat down and waited."

"Owen and I were debating what to do with him," Corbin said. "Part of me wants to shoot him in the head. The other part wants to tie him up and torture him for information."

"He deserves to be beaten to death," Owen said. "After everything he's done to us, I really want this punk to suffer."

"Owen is right," Violet said. "He should die slowly."

Jodi thought Greyson's smile faltered for a second, but he quickly recovered it. His mocking confidence was a mask, that was clear to her. Even though she had Katie sleeping against her chest, Jodi reached down and drew the Glock holstered at her hip and aimed it at Greyson. Best to have as many guns trained on him as possible, just in case.

"I'm not really interested in torturing anyone," she said.

"He might have information," Corbin said.

"I don't care about information," Owen said. "If we shoot him in the head, he'll die in seconds, and that'll be the end of it. He'll end his life knowing he destroyed everything we ever

built and split our family apart. That's not good enough for me."

"Fair enough," Corbin said. "I'm with Owen. Majority has voted.."

Jodi considered fighting it. She really didn't feel comfortable with the idea of torturing someone, even this evil guy, but she just couldn't bring herself to fight it. And anyway, a long debate just gave Greyson more time to escape.

Corbin slung his backpack onto the ground with his free hand and unzipped the big pocket. He dug around inside and finally produced a bundle of yellow nylon rope.

"If he makes any move at all, shoot him," Corbin said to Owen, as he holstered his gun and ascended the rock.

"Oh, I will," Owen replied. "Don't you worry about that. I'll aim low so he feels it."

As Corbin approached, Greyson pocketed his lighter and rose, holding his hands out to either side.

"Hey there, pal, I'll give you a third option," Greyson said.

Jodi expected him to fight back, but when Corbin grabbed his right wrist and spun him around, he didn't resist. Corbin pulled both arms behind his back and began tying an intricate knot to hold them together.

"Where are you going to go now?" Greyson continued. He was speaking fast, fumbling over his words, clearly struggling not to let his real feelings break through. "With the town gone, the food supplies gone, you're in real trouble."

"Yeah, thanks for that, *pal*," Corbin replied, tightening the knot, then running the long end of the rope around Greyson's torso.

"No, no, I'm not rubbing it in," Greyson said. "If you spare my life, I'll tell you about a safe place to the west. It's practically a haven. Plenty of food and fresh water. They can treat your injuries. You're all burned from the fire. Your wounds need to be treated, and these people have their own hospital."

“I don’t believe you,” Corbin said. “You never mentioned this haven before.”

“Actually, I did,” Greyson replied. “When I first got to Hickory Falls, I mentioned it. You just forgot. It’s not even that far away, but it’s on the other side of where the fire started. I’m telling you, these people are living like kings. Spare my life, and I’ll tell you how to get there. And if I’m lying, then you can kill me later, right? How can I stop it?”

Corbin began rooting through his pockets. He found two folding knives and took them. He took the lighter, which made Greyson grimace and grunt. He found a wad of cash which he pocketed. Jodi was racking her brain trying to remember if Greyson had, in fact, mentioned a haven to the west.

“There’s no way in heck we can trust anything he says,” Owen said. He holstered his gun and started up the rock. “Anyway, we’ve seen how fast this guy can run. He’d escape the first chance he got.”

“That’s true,” Corbin said, turning Greyson to face him again, even as Owen came up behind him. “I’ll give you a B-plus, though, for attempting one more lie.”

“I want to hurt him now,” Owen said, cracking his knuckles.

But it came to Jodi then, and she snapped her fingers to draw their attention. “Yes, he did mention it. When we were taking him to our house the first time. He told us there was some sort of religious group that he thought about visiting. You compared them to the Amish.”

Greyson gave her a big, forced smile and nodded dramatically. “Yes, that’s it. You’ve got a great memory there, ma’am.”

“I’m not interested in joining a cult,” Corbin said. “Good try, buddy.” He found a third folding knife in an inner pocket and handed it to Owen.

“Okay, yes, it’s a religious group,” Greyson said. “But they’re not a violent cult. I don’t go in for religion. That’s why I didn’t join them, but they’re pacifists. If you can put up with a little church now and again, they’ve got plenty of food, water, and

medicine, and they're generous with outsiders, as long as you're respectful."

Under the circumstances, it didn't sound bad to Jodi, and quite frankly, what choice did they have? Hickory Falls was gone. Utterly gone. If there was an Amish-type community that would take them in, feed them, heal their wounds, then a little church attendance would be a reasonable cost to pay.

"How far is this place?" Jodi said.

"We could get there with a full day of walking," Greyson said. "Not that far at all. They built their community near an old neighborhood called Whispering Pines. I'll draw you a map. Just let me live."

"A whole *day* of walking?" Violet said in a distressed whisper.

Jodi gently laid sleeping Katie on the ground and rose, brushing off the seat of her pants. "I don't want you to draw me a map. I want you to lead me there yourself."

"No, Mom," Owen cried. And with that, he shoved Greyson hard with both hands.

Greyson went flying off the top of the rock. Unable to arrest his fall, he slammed into the ground below on his back, his arms beneath him. He cried out in pain and did an awkward somersault, then both legs slammed into the trunk of a tree.

"You killed him," Corbin said.

"So what?" Owen replied.

Greyson lay now on his stomach, moaning. Corbin climbed down the rock, bent down, and grabbed the nylon rope. With it, he hoisted Greyson off the ground and set him on the rock in a seated position. Fresh cuts and scratches filled the man's hands and forearms.

"You practically broke my arms," he moaned. "Come on, man. I'm trying to help you here."

"We don't want your help," Owen said, marching down toward him.

Corbin held up a hand and shook his head. “Listen to your matriarch, Owen. The second we catch this guy in another lie, you can gouge his eyes out and slit his throat, but Jodi wants his help. So let’s do what she says.”

Jodi came toward them. Greyson looked dazed. The fall had hurt him badly. That was clear.

“If this haven really does exist, and if you lead us there,” Jodi said, “I’ll spare your life. In chains, maybe, but alive. If not, then these young men can do whatever they want to you. Is that clear?”

“It exists, I swear to God,” Greyson said, speaking through pain. “My arms are broken, man!”

“Good, I’m glad,” Owen said.

“You’ll stay bound for now,” Jodi said. “At first light, you’re going to lead us there. If it exists, then we’re going to come back, find the rest of our family, and lead them there, as well. I’m not interested in joining a cult either, but we’ll do what we have to do to survive. Until we figure out our next steps.”

Owen moved around in front of Greyson. “Fine, Mom, but don’t you think we should rough him up a little more so he really can’t escape?”

“I’ll show you how to forage for food along the way,” Greyson said.

But Owen punched him in the mouth. It was a solid blow, a fierce right hook. Greyson’s head flew back and slammed into Corbin’s arm.

“I have to admit, that was fun to watch,” Corbin said, patting Greyson on top of the head. When Owen raised another fist, Corbin shook his head. “You could kill him that way. One punch was enough.”

Scowling darkly, Owen backed away. Greyson’s upper lip was split, blood running down his chin and dripping onto his jacket. He looked at Jodi with pleading eyes, but she shrugged.

“You’ll lead us there in the morning,” she said. “At first light. Your life depends on it. Corbin’s going to tie you to a tree so

you can't go anywhere in the night. Surely you know if you make any effort whatsoever to escape, these boys are going to rip you to pieces, and next time, I won't stop them. So, for your sake, I hope this haven exists."

"It does. It does," Greyson muttered, spitting blood as he spoke. "I swear to God it does!"

"We'll find out tomorrow," Jodi said, sitting back down beside Katie. Violet sat down with her, shaking her head sadly. "If it's any sort of trick, if you're leading us somewhere dangerous, into a trap, toward some bandits, or anything else, then your real suffering will begin. We have plenty of ways to make you hurt, Greyson. You came against my family and made yourself our enemy forever. Give up your games and keep your word this time."

"Yes, yes, right, you've got it," Greyson said, bowing his head and shutting his eyes. "I'm hurting, man. Owen's got a mean punch. Damn."

Beth lurched out of sleep in the first pink light of morning, and the horrors of the night before came flooding back to her immediately. She sat up, the realization washing over her anew. She looked around and saw people all clustered together in a narrow rain-washed gully, roots curling out of the sides above them. Kaylee was still sleeping, her hands tucked under her cheek, but Amelia was awake.

“Well, the crazy old wizard didn’t find us and kill us in our sleep,” Amelia said. “I guess that’s a good thing.”

“It’s a good thing,” Beth replied. “But the town’s not safe. Not with that group roaming the area.”

Some of the sleepers began to stir. Zoe sat up, rubbing her face and brushing mud and leaves off her shoulders and out of her hair.

“We have to stick close to the town and wait for family, don’t we?” Amelia said.

“I don’t think we can,” Beth said, though she hated to say it. Hated to think it. “It’s not safe to stay near the town, and I hope the rest of our family is smart enough to get away from here. I hope Shane and Jodi will take them somewhere safe, at least for a while.”

“So we just give up looking for them?” Amelia said. “My baby is out there somewhere.”

“No, we don’t give up,” Beth said. “We’ll follow the path they took out of the town and try to find them somewhere out in the

wilderness. I just don't know what else we do, Amelia." Beth felt the hopelessness of it all fall upon her, and she sat there in misery.

Zoe was moving around, digging through the bags and suitcases that were stacked in the gully. Others were now waking up. It was a warm, damp day.

"I got so comfortable," Beth said. "So complacent. I'd built my fortress and had food and fresh water for years. We were expanding the garden, the whole town was surrounded by the high wall, and we were safe. I believed it."

"Who could have predicted the wildfire?" Amelia said.

"That's not my point," Beth replied. "I mean to say, my security and my hope were all tied up in that house. My identity. Everything. And now it's all been taken away from me. Years of food in the subbasement, the big garden, everything. And I can't rebuild it. The resources no longer exist. All we have now is family, and that's it."

She didn't want to get up, but she felt like she needed to. It was morning, and she didn't want to linger in this stupid pit any longer. Kaylee groaned, rolled over, and opened her eyes.

"Kaylee, dear, time to get up," Beth said. "We have places to go."

"Will we really find them?" Amelia said. "There's just so much ground to cover."

"I think we will," Beth said. She extended a hand to Kaylee and helped her up. "I have to believe we will. Family is what we have. Family is what we are. Not the town. Not the house. Just family."

Amelia rose, though she seemed reluctant. She also seemed dubious, and Beth didn't blame her. How in the heck were they going to find the rest of the family when everything had been scattered? It seemed like an impossible task, but it was their task. No sense giving up.

"How's your...?" Amelia tapped her own sternum. "Hurting?"

“Better this morning,” Beth said. “Good enough for the walk, anyway.” She turned to leave, but Zoe rose suddenly and came toward her.

“Wait, Beth,” she said. “Wait!”

Beth turned and saw the woman lugging a small canvas suitcase. “I’m sorry, Zoe. We just have to leave. Our family is out there somewhere, and we’re going to find them.”

“No, that fine. I understand,” Zoe said. She set the suitcase on the ground in front of Beth. “Please, take this with you. It’s got some food, some tools, and other supplies. I can’t send you off without anything. Take it, please. This stuff came from my own house.”

Beth reached down and grabbed the handle of the suitcase. First Ollie and now Zoe. The kindness of other survivors surprised her. Of course, they’d all helped each other and worked together when building Hickory Falls, but to see that same kindness even when the town was an ash heap deeply moved her.

It was always the people. Not the buildings, the gardens, the walls.

“Thanks, Zoe,” Beth said. “I had so much stuff ready to go, but it all burned up. What you’ve given me here are all the possessions I have in the world now, except for the clothes on my back.”

“Good luck out there,” Zoe said.

Beth nodded, turned, and started out of the gully, pulling the suitcase behind her. Kaylee and Amelia fell in on either side of her as they made their way back up into the forest. It was terribly quiet this morning. The wind had died down. The rain was gone. There was no howling of madmen, no roar of flames.

“What if we’re the only three people left?” Kaylee said. It was a thought Beth had had, though she hadn’t dared speak it. “Uncle Mike died. What if everyone else died, too?”

“We’re not going to think like that, Kaylee dear,” Beth said. “We’re going to be hopeful that we’ll find them again. And

someday soon, we'll have a real funeral for James and Mike, and we'll remember them fondly, and we'll be happy again somehow."

No one said anything after that. They made their way through the forest in silence, except for the squishing of their shoes on the soft ground. Finally, Kaylee said, "I hope you're right, Grandma."

Jodi wasn't entirely comfortable with her plan, but she didn't know what else to do. As she walked west, she tried to convince herself that it was the best and safest course of action. She'd finally had to hand Katie to Owen so she could give her arms, shoulders, and back a rest. He was currently holding her in the crook of his right arm, while she ate a fruit bar from Corbin's meager supplies. Corbin was holding the end of Greyson's rope, goading him from time to time to keep him moving.

"Mom, what do you think happened to the others?" Owen said, patting Katie on the back. "What do you *really* think happened? Did they die in the fire?"

"No, I don't think they died," Jodi replied. Of course, she had no real reason to think that, but she couldn't bring herself to accept the worst-case scenario.

"There's no way Ruby died in the fire," Violet said. "She's too smart a dog for that. She would have run to a safe place, waited it out, and then tried to find us. Maybe she'll even catch up to us."

"I think it's entirely possible," Jodi said. "I think everyone got out of the town, but they got scattered. That's what I choose to believe. We're going to find this religious community, see if Greyson told the truth about them, and then we're going to come back and find our family."

"So we can all be Amish together?" Owen said.

“I suppose so,” Jodi said with a sigh. “And it’ll be a heck of a lot better than starving out in the wilderness.”

Corbin grunted unhappily, but held his tongue. Greyson was walking hunched over. His wounds looked a lot worse now. His hands and forearms were all scraped up and bruised, some of his fingers swollen, his upper lip bisected by a scab, and he was limping.

“If we walk up to the gate while I’m still tied up, they’re going to be weirded out,” Greyson said. “What are you going to tell them about your captive?”

“The truth,” Corbin replied, and with that, he smacked Greyson hard in the back of the head. “The only words I want to hear out of your mouth are directions. Got it?” And to confirm the point, he jabbed the barrel of his handgun against the back of his neck.

Greyson had led them to the western highway, so they were moving around the south side of Macon. In the bright sunlight, Jodi could see that their hands, arms, and faces were speckled with burns. Nothing major, but definitely noticeable. Additionally, their clothes reeked of smoke and were dirty with ash and dried, caked mud. They were a truly wretched-looking group of people.

“Now, it’s our turn to beg at the gate,” Jodi said. “We don’t have much to offer in trade except a willingness to work, and that’s what we’re going to offer. Somehow, we have to secure a place for the rest of our family as well. If that means we have to attend church services, that’s what we’re going to do, and I don’t want any trouble from you guys. My own church attendance was really sporadic before the EMP, but we can’t turn up our noses at it, okay?”

“Who knows what these people believe?” Owen said. “But if all I have to do is sit in a pew, sing a few songs, and listen to a long-winded sermon now and again, I can grit my teeth and bear it. I *do* have faith in a Supreme Being, you know.”

“I hope they’re not *too* weird,” Violet said.

“Let’s just take it one step at a time,” Corbin said grimly.

And then, as if to punctuate their concerns, Katie said, “Daddy, I wanna go home.”

“You and me both, sweetheart” Owen replied.

As the morning passed, and the distance to the charred ruins of Hickory Falls grew, Jodi felt a growing despair. She was so far from her family, and who knew what had become of them? What if they were suffering? Starving? Dying out there in the ash heaps? She began to doubt her decision to find this religious community first.

It’s a mistake, she thought. I should have spent another day or two looking for my family. What was I thinking?

She even considered turning back, but they’d come so far. Indeed, they were moving fast. Every time Greyson stumbled or tried to slow down, Corbin gave him a smack or a poke in the back or a kick in the seat of his pants.

“Sort of ironic that this is the path we took during our scouting mission,” Greyson said, at one point. “Looks a lot different now.”

Indeed, the fire had passed this way, and so much of the natural woods and fields had been badly burned. It was a truly hellish landscape. But Corbin grabbed a fistful of Greyson’s hair and jerked his head from side to side.

“Let me beat the heck out of him for a few minutes,” Owen said. “That’ll shut him up. Someone take Katie from me for a minute.”

“No, because if we rough him up too much, he won’t be able to walk,” Corbin said. “I’d rather not have to drag the guy, quite frankly. Well, I *won’t* drag him, let’s put it that way.”

And what are we actually going to do with him? Jodi wondered. It was a question she didn’t like dwelling on because the answer seemed dark. If they brought him into the religious community, he would just try his tricks again, and he might be able to manipulate the people there. If they let him go, he would cause more mayhem.

Ahead, the highway curved to the right, crossing an old interstate which was littered with burned-out shells of long-

dead vehicles. However, Jodi spotted a couple of figures in the far distance. They were easy to pick out because they were dressed in light-colored clothing. They appeared to be walking down the highway, headed east.

“Be on your guard,” Corbin said.

“Always,” Owen replied, drawing his gun.

“What is it?” Violet said.

“Just a couple of people headed our way,” Jodi said.

As they got closer, Jodi realized these people were wearing robes. The robes were a very light beige, almost off-white, loose material, clearly handmade. They fell to just above the ankles and were belted around the waist with simple leather belts. A man and a woman, they looked plain, unadorned. Ordinary faces, knapsacks over their shoulders.

“I’d put your guns away,” Greyson said. “I think these are a couple of your religious pals right there. Might want to untie me, too, while you’re at it. Make a good impression.”

Corbin drove a knuckle into the small of his back, and Greyson gasped in pain. “Every time you open that mouth, you get pain.”

“Put your guns away,” Jodi said.

Corbin and Owen did as she told them, though they were clearly reluctant. The robed figures appeared to be smiling and chatting as they approached, and the woman raised a hand in greeting. Jodi raised a hand in return and moved in front of Corbin and Owen.

“Let me do the talking, please,” she said.

“Probably for the best,” Corbin replied. “I’ve got nothing nice to say right now.”

The man was tall and thin, with a pinched face and a little puff of thinning black hair on his head. The woman was athletic, with a broad face, and brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. As they drew near, they came to a stop, still beaming at Jodi as if they’d just run into an old acquaintance.

“Greetings,” the woman said. “Are you friend or foe?”

“We’re friendly, for the most part,” Jodi replied. “As you can see, we’ve just been through a lot.” She gestured at her filthy clothes.

“You came from the fire,” the man said. Not a question. “You passed through the flames and survived. That’s admirable.”

“Is it?” Jodi replied with a shrug. “Well, it’s better than the alternative anyway.”

“My name is Taiyo,” the woman said, gesturing at herself with a weird spin of her hand. “This is Ghama. We were actually sent to investigate the land after the fire, to see what happened to the communities east of us.”

“We’re missionaries, you could say,” Ghama said, grabbing the strap of his knapsack. “Our scouts were aware of at least a few towns south and east of Macon, right in the path of the fire. Which one did you come from?”

Jodi hesitated a second. Taiyo looked past her, right at Greyson, and for a second, her eyes narrowed.

“We’re from Hickory Falls,” Jodi said finally. “The whole town is gone. The fire hit us directly, jumped the firebreak easily, and swept right through. We got separated from our family, and as you’ve noticed, we’ve got a criminal with us. That’s the reason for the rope.”

“He started the fire,” Corbin said. “This little punk right here. The reason he’s alive is because he was leading us to you.”

“Well, then, he was successful,” Taiyo said. “We’ll bring you back to our community. Believe it or not, we have plenty of food and water, plenty of rooms and beds, clean clothing, medicine and medical care. We are thriving, even as the world dies around us.”

“When you say clothing, you mean beige robes?” Corbin said.

“Yes, we’re a plain and simple people,” Ghama said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine,” Jodi said. “We need your help, so we’ll take what we can get. And then, if you don’t mind, we’d like to come

back and search for our family.”

“We’d like to come back *very soon*,” Violet added.

“Yes, of course,” Taiyo said. “And we’ll figure out what to do this with sad, broken soul right here.” She gestured at Greyson. “Maybe he can be redeemed.”

“Doubtful,” Owen said, then seemed to catch himself and clamped his mouth shut. Katie had begun to squirm in his arms as if she didn’t care for the strangers.

“And if he can’t be, then he can’t be,” Taiyo said. “Come. We’ll lead you home.”

She beckoned Jodi and turned. Ghama gave her a big smile that split his whiskery face, then turned as well. And Jodi had a fierce moment of indecision. Did she go with these people and hope for the best? Or should she turn back and keep hunting the wilderness for her family?

They’ll have food, water, and medicine, she told herself. Your family will need all three. As soon as you get there, you can load up, turn right back and around, and come looking for them.

She wanted to believe it. She needed to. So she turned to Corbin and Owen, saw their troubled looks, and nodded at them each in turn. Then she took Violet’s hand and hurried to catch up to Taiyo and Ghama. They walked with a bounce in their steps, as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Jodi found this odd. How could anyone feel so carefree in a broken, burned world like this? This was an emotion that belonged to some other era, a time long ago. Now, it felt alien.

“Things are going to be better soon,” Taiyo said to her. “You’ve suffered so much out here in the world.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Jodi replied.

“It’s been so horrible,” Violet said.

Ghama gestured into the sky then. “Aren’t you so very thankful that the clouds have parted, and the sun came out. I can feel it shining behind us. Look at our long shadows stretched out in front of us. Pointing the way.”

It was such an awkward comment that Jodi wasn't sure how to respond. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the sun above the eastern horizon. Actually, the unclouded sky was burning away the cool of the previous night's rain, and heat was rising again.

"It's certainly going to be a sunny day," she said.

And then, in unison, Taiyo and Ghama raised both of their hands and chanted. It sounded something like, "*Matahari hnuh inti rana la! Prasansalu! Prasansalu!*" It seemed rehearsed, something they had said many, many times, despite being unintelligible. They said it a second time. "*Matahari hnuh inti rana la! Prasansalu! Prasansalu!*"

And then Taiyo gave a little moan, almost of pleasure, and said, "The sun. The sun. The heat. The light. The sun."

"The heat. The light. The sun," Ghama added. "The sun. The all. The everything. The sun."

And then they smiled at each other.

Jodi glanced back at Owen with a look that said, *What the heck was that?* He shrugged, but Corbin had a look of both amusement and disgust on his face.

"Mom?" Violet said softly, clearly disturbed.

"Was that...did that mean something?" Jodi said.

"It meant everything," Ghama said. "Everything. Come on. There's a better life waiting for you and everyone you love, and it's just a little farther ahead."

Shane rolled onto his side and supported himself on his good arm, feeling the crust of dried mud that coated most of his body begin to crack and flake. He glanced around and found himself lying in a large clearing surrounded by tall trees. The trees had only just barely been touched by the fire. He could see blackened branches near the top, but apparently, the rain had come along and saved them.

The previous night was mostly a frantic blur. He'd gotten caught in the press of people around the southern gate, trying his damndest to hold onto the wagon of supplies, even as screaming and crying people had slammed into them from all sides. With hundreds of people trying to leave at the same time, and the fire quickly bearing down on them, everything had become chaotic. He remembered losing sight of Jodi at some point, crying out to her, then getting knocked down.

Then someone had tried to steal the cart, so he'd given chase. Eventually, he'd realized he was alone, his family scattered, so he'd given up on the cart and turned back to find them. His biggest mistake had been heading back into the town to find them. Indeed, the memory of flames dancing all around him was the most vivid thing. Shane raised his right arm and examined the worst of the damage. His sleeve was missing at the elbow, the frayed edge blackened, and his exposed forearm had some large, ugly burns between wrist and elbow. Mostly first-degree, he thought, but some spots were clearly second degree.

Already, his arm hurt like heck. He sat up. He was pretty sure the burns had happened while he was trying to get back out of the town, but there had been so much heat. It was hard to tell. He reached up and felt his cheeks and forehead. His face was tender to the touch, like he had a bad sunburn. He felt his hair. The tips were singed. His eyebrows were mostly gone.

When he stood up, everything seemed to spin around him. His mind was foggy, which made it hard to think or figure out what to do. So he just began to walk, hoping that he might come upon other survivors who could lead him to his family.

They got out. They made it through the gate. They must have. Surely, they must have. We were right there.

Sunlight filtered down through the branches, bright and warm. The storm had passed, and the heat and humidity of previous weeks was returning. That made it even harder to think clearly. Shane felt something slam into his side and realized he'd walked right into a tree. He pushed off and changed direction.

It was all the smoke, he thought. I breathed so much damned smoke last night.

Indeed, his throat still hurt, and his mouth tasted like ashes. He had nothing on him. Not a canteen, not a scrap of food, just the clothes on his back and nothing else. And he was so thirsty, he ached with the need.

The lake, he thought. That's where Jodi will go. To the lake. It was the safest location in the area.

But which direction was the lake? Shane had no idea where he was. Every tree was alien to him, and the longer he walked, the foggier his mind got. Finally, he came to a stop and sat down on a fallen log.

"Just a few minutes," he muttered. His voice was harsh, not his own. "Just until my mind clears a little bit."

But for some reason, sitting down didn't make him feel any better. He thought he might pass out, but the constant throbbing pain of his right arm kept him awake. He bent over, put his face in his hands, and tried to work through the murk. It was no secret what had put him in this state. He was

feverish, hurting, and delirious from the burns and smoke inhalation. He was dehydrated because he hadn't had a drink of water in more than a day. And he'd slept only fitfully on the ground.

"Gotta get to that lake," he told himself. "Get up. Keep moving. Find the lake. Jodi's waiting for you there."

He stated to push himself off the fallen log, but his legs wobbled and he went right back down.

Okay, a few more minutes.

As he sat there, he examined the ugly red burns on his forearm. In a few places, the top layer of skin had sloughed off in patches. In others, big blisters had developed. It looked worse now than it had in the morning.

He tried to stand up again. This time, when his legs folded up, he fell forward, landing on grass and rocks. It knocked the wind out of him, so he rolled onto his back and just lay there, trying to catch his breath. He stared at sunlight dancing through the branches overhead. Blackness crept into the edges of his vision, so he quickly rolled onto his stomach again. He couldn't afford to pass out again. Not if he was going to find the lake and be reunited with his family.

Using his left forearm, he pushed himself up, then got one of his legs under him. From there, he was able to rise to a kneeling position, but the world began doing crazy loops and spins around him. He swooned, turned, and caught himself against the side of the fallen log.

"Can't do it," he muttered. "Can't do it."

His hand slid off the log, and he collapsed onto the ground again. As he lay there, he felt the darkness encroaching again, and he knew he couldn't do anything about it. However, he heard something moving through the underbrush nearby. An animal. A wild creature come to eat him, perhaps.

He turned his head to the right, looking for it. After a moment, he spotted a shape crashing through some vines. It stepped into a beam of sunlight, and he saw the large, lean figure of a chocolate lab. The poor animal was muddy and filthy, but still

wearing a leather harness with a long U-shaped handle. The dog whimpered as she raced toward Shane.

“Ruby, my gosh,” Shane said. “How did you find me? Where did you come from?”

The dog stood over him, whining and barking, as if trying to rouse him. Trying to keep him awake. Trying to get him moving again.

Sorry, girl, I don't think I can, he thought. Actually, he *meant* to say it, but for some reason, he couldn't get the words out.

As Ruby bent down and licked his cheek, the darkness won out, and Shane felt the world around him fade to nothingness.

END OF BURNED WORLD

SURVIVING THE END BOOK FOUR

Crumbling World, November 13, 2019

Fallen World, December 11, 2019

New World, January 8, 2020

Burned World, October 11, 2023

Ruined World, November 8, 2023

Stormy World, December 13, 2023

PS: Do you love post-apocalyptic fiction? Then keep reading for exclusive extracts from ***Ruined World***, ***Rising Anarchy*** and ***Broken World***.

THANK YOU

Thank you for purchasing 'Burned World'

(Surviving the End Book Four)

Get prepared and sign-up to Grace's mailing list

to be notified of my next release at

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com.

Loved this book? Share it with a friend, www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com/books

MAKE AN AUTHOR'S DAY

There's nothing better than reading great reviews from readers like yourself, but there's more to it than simply putting a smile on my face. As an independent author, I don't have the financial might of a big NYC publishing house or the clout to get in Oprah's book club. What I do have as my not-so-secret weapon is you, my awesome readers!

If you enjoyed this book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a quick review. Simply [TAP HERE](#) or just leave a review when prompted by Amazon at the end of this book. Alternatively, head over to the product page for this book on Amazon and leave a review there—look for the WRITE A CUSTOMER REVIEW link.

No matter the length (short is fine!), your review will help this series get the exposure it needs to grow and make it into the hands of other awesome readers. Plus, reading your kind reviews is often the highlight of my day, so please be sure to let me know what you loved most about this book.

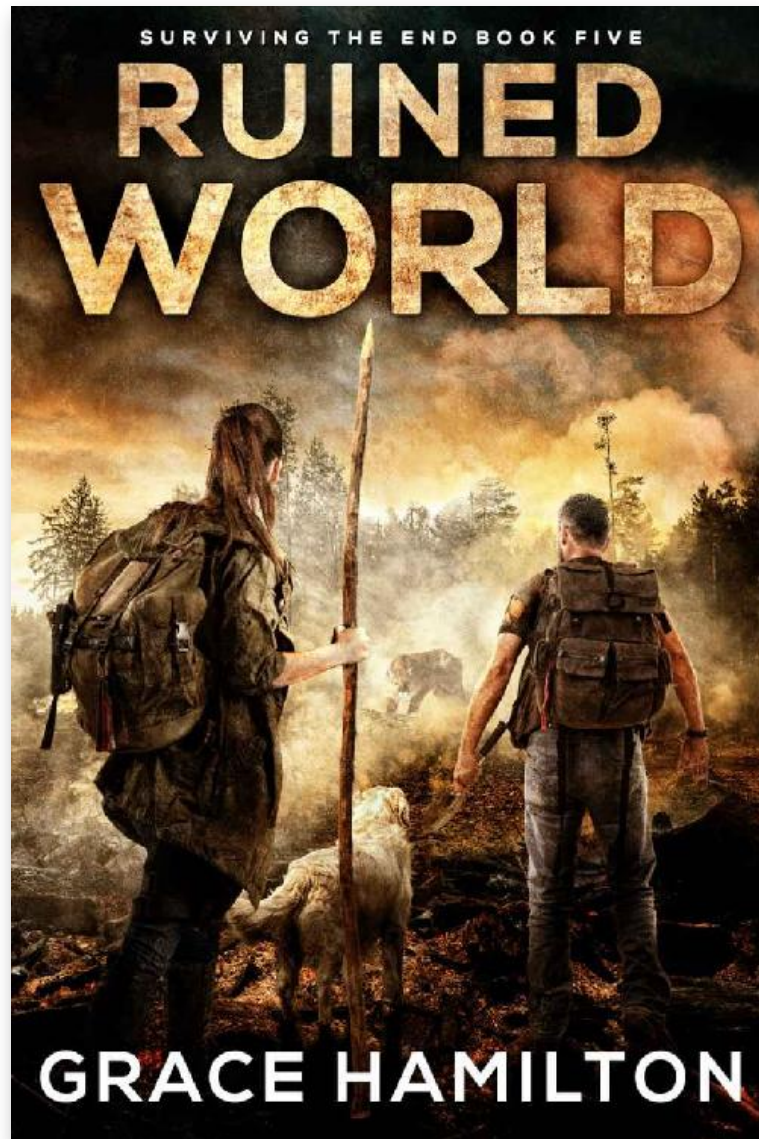
ABOUT GRACE HAMILTON

Grace Hamilton is the prepper pen-name for a bad-ass, survivalist momma-bear of four kids, and wife to a wonderful husband. After being stuck in a mountain cabin for six days following a flash flood, she decided she never wanted to feel so powerless or have to send her kids to bed hungry again. Now she lives the prepper lifestyle and knows that if SHTF or TEOTWAWKI happens, she'll be ready to help protect and provide for her family.

Combine this survivalist mentality with a vivid imagination (as well as a slightly unhealthy day dreaming habit) and you get a prepper fiction author. Grace spends her days thinking about the worst possible survival situations that a person could be thrown into, then throwing her characters into these nightmares while trying to figure out "What SHOULD you do in this situation?"

You will find Grace on:





BLURB

Trust is the first casualty of war...

Disaster has struck the McDonald family. Everything they've built since the fall of civilization has been destroyed by a devastating fire. They've lost their community, supplies, and even loved ones. The death of Mike and James hits hardest of all. The other survivors are scattered. There's nothing left.

All that remains is the indomitable will to survive. Jodi is lucky enough to have several family members survive the fire as they take to the road to find their new home.

In this harsh new world, other survivors are often the greatest threat and trust must be earned. But the dangers of traveling America after the EMP force their hand. The missionaries of

Helios seem to have good intentions and offer the weary group safe refuge in their enclave.

But Jodi's unease grows as they move farther from the burned village, and the missionaries reveal their zealous ideology. Soon, Jodi will discover just how far the missionaries will go to control their new guests.

And by that time, it may be too late to escape

Get your copy of *Ruined World*

Available November 8, 2023

(Available for Pre Order Now!)

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



EXCERPT

Chapter One

Shane knelt beside the creek and reached down into the water. The motion of stretching down to the ground caused a sensation like hot needles rushing down from his elbow to his wrist. Though the burns on his arm were no longer blistered or swollen, the skin was a dark speckled red, and some small patches had scabbed over. It looked bad, really bad, and he was terrified of infection. All of that exposed, damaged skin was just asking for bacteria to move in and take over.

He scooped up some water. The creek was flowing fast and clear down a rocky slope. Shane would have preferred to boil it first, but he had nothing to boil it in and no easy way to start a fire. He would have to take some chances. He sipped water from his hand. It was crisp and clean, though that didn't mean much. When he rose, he saw Ruby lapping up water from the creek's edge a few feet downstream.

“Well, if we get sick, we get sick together,” Shane said, trying to lift his spirits with conversation, even if it was one-sided.

Ruby looked at him, her tongue hanging out. She'd stuck by his side for the last few days. She kept him going, rousing him when he fell unconscious. He'd awakened to her licking his face or barking at him on more than one occasion. She'd even tried to help feed him, bringing him burned carcasses of small animals from time to time, which he had politely declined to eat.

Shane heaved himself up to his feet, stepped across the creek, and sat down on a large stone on the other side. Ruby hopped the water and padded over to him, then sat down on a soft patch of ground. Shane reached down to pet her, but that just made the world spin.

"I really wish you could lead me to Violet," he said, massaging his temples. "She's been without her guide dog for a few days now, and that can't be good."

The dog lay on her side, her legs spread out toward the water. This exposed her paw pads, which were still pink with burns. They were quite a pair, Shane with his burned arm and Ruby with her burned paws. The night of the fire was a jumble of terrible images in his mind, as he'd fled Hickory Falls, then returned, then fled again. He could still feel the smoke in his nostrils, his mouth, his lungs. He could still taste the ashes.

"Okay, enough sitting around," he said, rousing himself with a gentle slap to both cheeks. "Today we're going to get somewhere, damn it. No more lying around."

He heaved himself to his feet again, took a few stumbling steps backward, then turned and caught himself against a tree. The burns needed treating, but he had nothing to treat them with. Ruby rose and came to him. She never let him get far.

Shane started walking, moving from tree to tree. He'd spent almost two days just lying around, hoping that somehow his family would find him. No one had ever appeared, and he was sick of waiting. He followed the course of the creek, hoping it would lead him to the lake. That seemed the most likely place to find his family. It was the only real landmark in the immediate vicinity.

He followed the creek around a bend, where it largely disappeared into a deep, narrow ravine. Surrounding him, all he saw was burned trees, blackened branches, and the blue sky beyond. His gaze dropped again, and he spotted a curled figure in the distance. The body was on its side, tucked between two trees near the ravine, as if he'd been trying to get to the water below.

“Hey, you there,” Shane said, approaching. “Are you alive? Are you okay?”

But as he got a better view, he realized that this person was not going to respond. His clothes were mostly burned away, leaving only scraps, and the exposed skin was a patchwork of blackened char and dark red. There was some indication on the ground around him that he'd crawled to this spot. Shane carefully eased himself down beside the body. Ruby, however, kept her distance. She seemed troubled by the sight of the body.

Enough of the man's clothing had survived to make out that he'd worn overalls and cowboy boots. He seemed very tall, thin. His face was pressed into the crook of his arm, but even so, Shane knew who it was.

“Winton,” he said. The old farmer had lived with his big family out on the borders of Hickory Falls. “How did you get all the way out here? Where's the rest of your family?”

Shane reached out but caught himself and drew his hand back. Winton was clearly dead, and had been for a while. Shane started to rise. There wasn't anything he could do for the guy anyway. But he spotted a small shape poised on the edge of the ravine, a strap clutched in the man's hand. Shane worked it out of his grip and pulled it away.

It was a small backpack. It had gotten singed, but it looked like Winton had mostly protected it. Shane drew it into his lap and unzipped the big pocket. Drawing it open, he was delighted to see some MREs crammed inside.

“Sorry, Winton, but I'm going to take these,” Shane said, zipping the backpack shut again. “I hope you don't mind.”

One strap was burned through, but the other was still intact. Shane slipped it over his shoulder and rose. However, just the simple act of taking the backpack had caused the pain in his burned arm to flare up. It hurt more than ever.

Once he stepped away from the body, Ruby came close again. Shane stood there a moment longer, staring at the body on the ground. Winton had been a pain in the butt at town meetings in Hickory Falls, but he'd also been a hardworking guy who took care of his family, grew plenty of food that he shared with the community food bank, and never shirked his duty.

Where were his kids? Where was his wife? How had he died alone like this? Shane had no answers for any of it, but he felt bad just leaving the man's body lying here in the wilderness like a bit of discarded charcoal.

"Rest in peace," Shane said. It was all he had to offer.

He turned and started away, resuming his slow slog along the creek's edge. After about a hundred yards, the ravine disappeared as the creek went underground. All Shane had before him now were burned trees and no remarkable landmarks to pursue. Ruby came up beside him, panting.

"We have to find that lake, girl," Shane said. "I'm going to slather some cool mud on these burns and hope it'll ease the pain. Maybe we'll crack open one of these MREs and have a meal, too. That's about all I can do. What do you think?"

He looked down to find Ruby gazing up at him expectantly. Shane kept moving, but already the heat and the burns were making him thirsty again. He looked around for some source of water, but the creek was well behind him now. Finally, he saw a glint of sunlight off to his left, and he went toward it. He found a small ashy puddle in a shallow depression between some blackened trees.

He knelt down beside the water, debating with himself whether or not to drink it. If the flowing creek wasn't safe to drink, then this dirty water definitely wasn't safe, but Shane's thirst was so intense, he could scarcely think straight. He scooped up some water in his left hand and held it there for a few seconds. Then Ruby came up and lapped from the puddle.

“Well, if you’re okay with it, then I guess I’m okay with it,” Shane said. He drank the water in his cupped hand. It helped, but it tasted of ashes and dirt. He wouldn’t risk a second handful, so he rose again. The landscape around him was unremarkable. It looked the same in all directions.

Am I walking in circles? Where the heck am I?

He’d hoped to keep following the creek to avoid doubling back, but it was gone now. All he could do was to keep moving forward, putting one foot in front of the other.

“Ruby, I don’t suppose you could lead us out of here, could you? Do you smell anybody familiar? Any of our family members?”

He glanced down at the dog, but she just looked up at him expectantly again.

“Oh, I’m supposed to do all the hard work, am I?” he said. “I guess your job is to wake me up and keep me going. That’s enough. Come on.”

He beckoned the dog, though it was entirely unnecessary, and pressed on. His head was pounding, his arm throbbing with sharp pain. Sometimes, he felt like he was walking in a dream, but the pain kept him alert enough to keep going. In truth, he had no idea where he was headed, or how close or far he was to Hickory Falls. Somehow he’d gotten turned around, but surely he had to find something soon. Another town, the Ocmulgee River, the lake, something. Anything.

Get your copy of *Ruined World*

Available November 8, 2023

(Available for Pre Order Now!)

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com

Rising Anarchy

BLURB

When the entire world collapses, there is no escape...

When an EMP ends life on Earth as she knows it, Deb is lucky enough to fall in with a group of hardworking survivors... or so she thinks. But her good fortune quickly turns into a nightmare, and soon her only goal is to escape. But can she keep herself and her friends from being captured by Mike, and dragged back to his group of human traffickers?

Deb reluctantly takes the mantle of leadership, and it falls to her to make the tough decisions. The harsh terrain and weather are merciless. A single mistake could lead to people getting hurt, or worse. And Mike's traffickers are a constant threat.

Their only hope of survival may come down to the kindness of others. But Deb has been betrayed before. Is it possible there really are people willing to help?

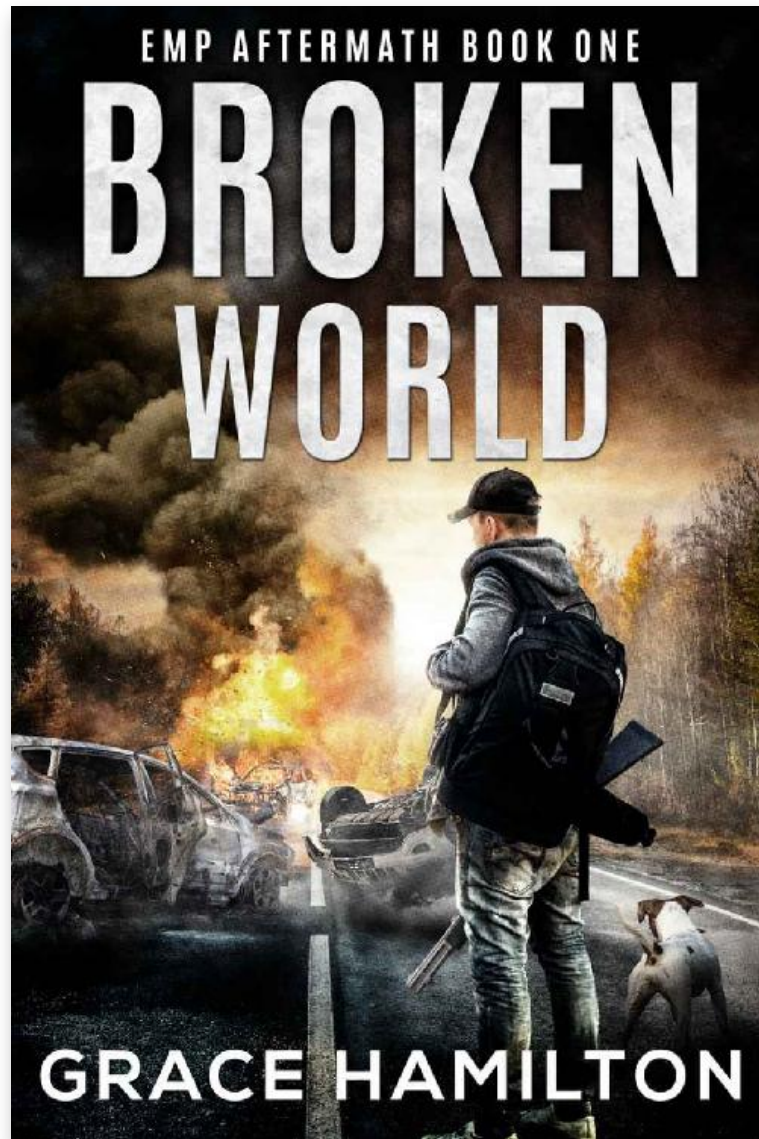
And can Deb let her guard down enough to trust them?

Get your copy of *Rising Anarchy*

Available March 13, 2024

(Available for Pre Order Now!)

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



BLURB

No power. No law & order. No safety net. The world as everyone knows it is over.

Laurel is stabilizing a patient in the ER when the power goes out. As she struggles to keep her patients alive, she faces an ugly truth—the world as everyone knew it is over. The smart thing to do is run and try to survive, but Laurel refuses to leave her patients behind—least of all her sick mother. There's only one choice to make. She'll have to stay and fight.

Bear is done fighting. War and PTSD have cost him everything—his job, his self-respect, and his wife - Laurel. But when he can no longer deny the old world is gone, he

gains a new purpose. Laurel is hundreds of miles away from his mountain cabin, but he knows she needs him.

After so long being a lost soldier, he finally has something worth fighting for. The highways are clogged with dead cars. Frantic survivors want his truck, his tools, his supplies. He'll face treachery, desperation, and endless miles of unforgiving wilderness, but he's going to find his wife. Together, they can survive anything.

He just has to reach her.

Grab your copy of *Broken World* (EMP Aftermath Book One) from

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



EXCERPT

Chapter One

LAUREL

“What have we got?” Laurel rushed forward, clutching the tablet she hadn't gotten used to using yet. Casting a hurried glance at the triage area, she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and pinched it between her thumb and index finger. Too many patients, not enough staff. South Minneha Hospital was supposed to be different, yet just a week after opening, they were running into the same old problems. Plus some new ones.

In front of her, a female paramedic gestured to a gurney. Laurel couldn't remember her name. A young male was strapped to it, barely conscious, eyes rolling as he grappled for the oxygen mask on his face. Blood trickled from a gash on his forehead, which clearly wasn't his biggest problem.

“Twenty-three-year-old male, Tommy Jones, front passenger seat, collision with a truck, signs of internal bleeding.”

As the paramedic reeled off the boy's stats, Laurel's mind was already three steps ahead. “He's going to need a chest tube,”

she said loudly. “Bay Three!” She gestured to the biggest of the empty bays as her team gathered around her. Two nurses and a resident. Allison Park. Not the worst resident she’d ever worked with, but not the best either.

As Laurel pulled on a gown and gloves, Park took the tablet and started to swipe at it. She was attempting to enter the patient’s information. A step suggested by the bureaucrats who ran the new, extra high-tech hospital that Laurel had found herself working in.

“It’s not connected—”

“Leave it,” Laurel snapped. “You think we have time for that? Gown up, Park.”

Taking a second to gather her breath, Laurel made herself look at the boy in front of her—really look at him. For just a second, she allowed the weight of the responsibility she held to crush her. Then she shook it off, opened her palm and said, “Scalpel.”

A longer-than-usual beat passed. Laurel looked up.

“I can’t find—” One of the nurses, Janet, was scrabbling in an instrument drawer. “It’s not where it’s supposed to be.”

“Help her,” Laurel gestured for Park to look too, but as the resident moved away, a series of alarms began to sound. “He’s in v-fib! Crash cart!”

Laurel started compressions, heaving her entire body weight into the movement, thankful—not for the first time—that she still worked out six days a week.

“Where is that crash cart!” She looked up, over the top of her glasses. Park was staring wildly around the room as if the cart might appear from somewhere.

“It’s not here. I thought we were supposed to have one in every room?” Park’s expression froze as the color drained from her face; she was beginning to panic.

“What is *wrong* with you people!” Laurel glared at Park. “Take over,” she growled, then ran from the room. There was a cart in Bay Two, she’d used it yesterday.

As fast as she could, she lurched out of Bay Three, into the bay next door, and grabbed the cart. When she returned, the alarms were still ringing. At this rate, they'd lose the kid before they even got him to an OR.

“Charge two-hundred,” she yelled, slapping pads onto the boy's chest. “Stand clear!”

After the third charge, the alarms stopped. Instinctively, Laurel held out her hand and, this time, Janet pressed a scalpel into it.



With Tommy finally on his way to surgery, Laurel put her hands on her hips and marched back into Bay Three.

“That was an absolute disaster!” she yelled. “What was that? We could have lost that kid, all because no one knows their ass from their elbow! I shouldn't have to run out of the room to grab a crash cart. It should have been there. *One of you* should have noticed it was missing.” As Janet, the two other nurses—Sandra and Maggie—and Park blinked at her, Laurel continued. “I was a field medic in Iraq for three years, and never had to put up with performance as dreadful as this.” She paused. Janet was shaking her head. Park looked like she was about to cry, Sandra and Maggie were blushing. She was being too harsh. This wasn't her usual management style. She was good with people. She didn't shout or scream. Something about this place, though, was getting to her. Just a week in, and she was beginning to realize that South Minneha wasn't as shiny and perfect as she'd been promised it would be.

Opening her mouth to speak, Laurel noticed Janet narrow her eyes a little. The gesture made her stop, press her lips together, and leave before she said anything else.

Twenty minutes later, she was waiting in line for the coffee cart when Janet lightly touched her elbow. “Tough day?” she asked, raising an eyebrow to indicate she was not sympathetic.

Laurel sighed. “Coffee?” She'd reached the front of the line.

Janet nodded and allowed Laurel to buy her a double-shot latte, and then the two of them headed over to a bench nearby. Positioned under a large tree, looking out at the impressive fountain at the front of the hospital, it was a beautiful place to sit. Yet, somehow, it made Laurel uncomfortable.

“I think I’m having a hard time adjusting,” she said as Janet sat down beside her. “All this.” She gestured with her coffee-holding hand to the neatly manicured lawn, which had clearly been designed to convey the idea that South Minneha was not a run-of-the-mill hospital. This place was something special. Something *new*. “I said no to another tour so I could work here.” Laurel shuffled uncomfortably in her seat and sighed a little. “I’ll admit it, I was swayed by the Board’s proposal. Brand new equipment. State of the art facilities. The kind of resources I’d only ever read about in medical journals.”

“But—” Janet added, pausing for effect.

“But it’s so different from what I’m used to. I used to enjoy my work, but here it feels like I’m fighting fires I shouldn’t have to be fighting. Does that make any sense?”

After sipping her coffee, Janet nodded. “If you don’t like it, why don’t you leave? You don’t *have* to stay here.”

Laurel hesitated for a moment. She hadn’t told anyone about the real deciding factor in her move to South Minneha.

Watching her, Janet sighed, then straightened her shoulders and sucked in her cheeks. She was a friend, but not the kind of friend to tolerate poor behavior or excuses.

“Look,” she said, folding her arms in front of her plump stomach. “You made a choice. You *chose* to come work here because the money’s good and because they promised you a bunch of shiny toys.”

Laurel nodded, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

“From where I’m sitting, that’s exactly what you got.”

“What’s the use of shiny toys if we can’t get the basics, right?” Laurel almost laughed.

“Okay, so some things need work. We’re *all* new here, Laurel. But I’m telling you now—you’re not going to make any friends if you carry on like this.” She paused, softening her tone slightly. “Let’s be honest, there’s no way you’re quitting. You’re not that kind of person. So you should probably start thinking about taking a different approach. The nurses are doing their best. Even Park is doing her best.” Janet stood up, clearly not in the mood to sit and make further conversation. “You’re in charge of the ER. You want things done differently? Then screw the Board and do them differently. Just don’t take it out on us.”

Laurel was about to apologize—a sincere apology—when a noise near the entrance interrupted. Following Janet’s gaze, she rose to her feet.

“Great,” Janet said through gritted teeth. “Looks like more inmates have arrived.”

“More?” They started to walk back toward the entrance, watching as a prison transport pulled up and three large guards piled out onto the sidewalk.

Banging a fist on the side of the van, one of them yelled. “Shut up! We’re here. No nonsense or we’ll take you straight back.”

The van doors opened just as Laurel and Janet drew level with them. Inside were two gurneys, each with a prisoner handcuffed to it.

“We were told there’d be a maximum of six per week but that’s got to be...” Laurel trailed off as she tried to recall how many had arrived yesterday and the day before. Janet was chuckling. “What?” Laurel turned to her. “What’s funny?”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” Janet stopped and looked up at the imposing white building in front of them. “The only thing the people in charge of this place care about is *money*. They didn’t build this hospital because they wanted to use the wonders of modern technology to help people. They built it to bring in big bucks from big donors, big pharmaceutical companies, and big-pocketed patients. More prisoners in the inmates’ wing equals more *money*.”

“If you’re so skeptical, why are *you* here?” Laurel asked, folding her arms in front of her chest, tilting her head as she waited for Janet’s answer.

“Same as you. Money. Fancy equipment.” Janet glanced back toward the coffee cart. “And I like the coffee.” Without offering a smile, she tossed her empty takeout cup into a nearby trash can and stalked back inside, sashaying a little as she walked.

As Laurel finished her own coffee, she watched the prison guards wheel the inmates inside. Straight through the main entrance, despite Robert Sullivan’s promises about them being kept completely separate from her ER.

Taking out her phone, she flicked to Robert’s name and typed out a quick message: *Need to talk ASAP.*

He’d avoid her, of course he would, but she wasn’t going to let him get away with this. Janet was right; Laurel was in charge, so she darn well needed to act like it. Normally, she’d never even dream of kowtowing to someone like Robert—nice but, ultimately, interested more in the hospital’s bottom line than anything else. The problem was, after everything Robert had done to get her mother into the trial—the only one in the country getting results for her type of cancer—she felt indebted to him.

Somehow, she needed to draw a line between the two things. Robert did her a favor, but she did him a favor too by agreeing to head up his fancy new ER. She was good, and he knew it, or he wouldn’t have gone to the lengths he had to secure her. It was about time she reminded him of that.

Grab your copy of *Broken World* (EMP Aftermath Book One) from

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com

WANT MORE?

