

T.L. PAYNE



SURVIVING
FREEDOM

DESPERATE AGE SERIES BOOK THREE

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T.L. PAYNE

Surviving Freedom

Desperate Age Series, Book Three

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Preface

Real towns, cities, and institutions are used in this novel. However, the author has taken occasional liberties for the story's sake, and versions within these pages are purely fictional.

Thank you in advance for understanding an author's creative license.

Prologue

ANNIE GILLESPIE

Freedom Prairie Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day of Event

Annie Gillespie swiped loose strands of gray hair from her face as she rode her horse along the top of a deep, red-walled canyon. It was calving season and predators were on the prowl, seeking an easy meal. It had been a challenging few days, to say the least, and Annie was exhausted. “Why do they insist on calving in the most inhospitable locations?” Annie asked as she brought her horse to a stop next to her ranch manager, Mitch McDonald.

Mitch dismounted his quarter horse and took hold of Annie’s reins. “So you’ll have something to complain about.”

Annie Gillespie held her Western-style hat down as a gust of wind whipped across the plain. At sixty-five, many had advised her to retire, but she was nowhere near ready to slow down, let alone stop doing the one thing she loved—ranching. It was in her blood. She’d stop when they buried her in the family cemetery, not a day before.

Nestled in the open range country of northwest Oklahoma, Freedom Prairie Ranch had been in Annie's family for four generations, having been established by her grandfather after the Oklahoma land run of 1889. Upon her father's death, Annie had become the matriarch of her fifteen-hundred-acre cattle ranch and had set out not only to make it profitable but also to conserve the land for future generations.

Annie and Mitch slowly made their way into a draw and worked their way down Jackass Canyon to retrieve the calf and coax its momma back toward the barn, where the two would be safe from coyotes and other predators. Mitch moved ahead of Annie, sliding most of the way toward the rocky bottom with practiced ease.

"Stay there, Annie," Mitch called up the canyon. There was a note of concern in his voice.

"Why? What's wrong?" Annie asked, proceeding quicker toward the bottom, expecting to find a dead calf.

"Stop, Annie! There's something down here."

Annie came to an abrupt halt, slung her rifle around, and shouldered it. "Where are they?"

As she drew nearer, she saw a pile of tattered clothing on the ground. Mitch stood over them.

"What is it?" Annie asked.

"It's a dead body," Mitch said.

She glanced up at the top of the canyon wall. She knew a fall from that height would kill a person. "Are you sure they're dead?"

"He's dead." Mitch walked around the body, and Annie got her first glimpse of the man's face, or the lack of one. He was

an unrecognizable skeleton. Mitch knelt and somehow managed to retrieve a wallet from the dead man's pocket. He opened it and then glanced back at Annie. "It's Harry Gladwell—or what's left of him."

"Harry?" Her neighbor had been missing since last summer. Sheriff Parkhurst had said law enforcement had no leads in his disappearance. It was like Harry had just up and vanished off the face of the earth. But now they at least knew where he was but not how he'd come to be there on her land. "What was he doing wandering around out here?"

The Gladwells' land bordered the Freedom Prairie Ranch. However, Annie could think of no reason for Harry to be on her ranch.

"Somehow, I don't think he was wandering. Harry was shot."

"Shot? What makes you think that?"

"The hole in his skull where his face should be," Mitch said.

Annie scrunched her face in shock. "Holy cow! You think someone dumped him here?"

"He didn't shoot himself. There's no gun."

"You're sure he was shot?" Annie asked, moving closer to the grisly scene. "He could have smashed his face on rocks on his way down."

"They used a shotgun at close range is my guess," Mitch said. "It exploded his skull like a watermelon hit by a sledgehammer. I don't think a fall could do that. Also, there's a hole in his jacket that looks like a gunshot to me."

"Jiminy Cricket! Who would have done such a thing?"

“Outsiders,” Mitch said without hesitation. He stepped away from the body.

Annie adjusted her stance and glanced up the wall of the canyon. “Here on my ranch.”

“It’s not clear whether he was shot here. I’d have to investigate and see if I can find any spent rounds or shotgun shells.”

If he wasn’t shot here, why would someone dump his body in my canyon?”

“They probably hoped he’d be devoured by coyotes and never found.”

“Or they wanted it to look like I killed him,” Annie said.

“That would mean they knew you both and that there’d been bad blood between the two of you.”

Annie narrowed her gaze. “Everyone knew that. But your first thought was that outsiders killed Harry. Why? What gave you that impression?”

“Because everyone around here is too afraid of the Gladwells to do something like this.”

“Everyone but me?”

“Yes,” Mitch said in his usual blunt manner.

“We need to tell the sheriff...” Annie glanced down at Gladwell. “And his family.”

Mitch turned toward the draw. “I’ll bridle Jack and Jill and bring them down here. I’ll need the mules to pack his body out of the canyon.”

Annie turned to face him. “I think we should wait for the sheriff. We don’t want to disturb a crime scene.” The last thing

she needed was for Sheriff Parkhurst to charge her for tampering with evidence.

“You’re probably right. I’ll drive into town notify the sheriff and then stop in and tell the Gladwell family.”

Annie and the Gladwell family hadn’t always seen eye to eye, and they’d had their share of shouting matches over the last thirty years, especially since Harry had taken over his family’s ranch, but she felt for his kids. No one deserved to die like that.

“I’ll send Victor over to stay with you while I’m gone. Probably not a good idea to be alone out here with a killer on the loose.”

“I’m not alone. I’ve got MacArthur and Patton.”

Mitch reached a hand out to help Annie climb out of the canyon. “What are they gonna do, Annie? Lick the killer to death?”

Her Australian kelpie cattle dogs were great companions, but they were downright awful guard dogs.

Annie rolled her eyes at Mitch’s running joke. “At least they’re good about letting me know when someone’s around the house.”

Mitch grabbed hold of one of the invasive eastern red cedar trees they’d yet to eradicate from the ranch and pulled himself up another step. “All the same, I’d feel better if you let Victor come stay with you until we get this worked out.”

“Fine. If that’ll ease your mind, but I’ve been taking care of myself for sixty-five years,” Annie said, moving up beside him.

“I know. You’ll need a hand with the calves while I’m gone anyway.”

“The calf! I forgot about rounding up the cow and calf,” Annie said.

“I’ll rope the calf, and we’ll lead it out. Hopefully, his momma will follow,” Mitch said.

ONE

Brooke

Melton Farm

Dodge City, Kansas

Day 11

“Brooke, wake up!” Daniel yelled from the doorway.

Brooke Spencer bolted upright in the bed and threw back the covers. “What is it? Are we under attack?” She sprang to her feet.

“It’s Ethan!” Daniel said, smiling.

“Is he...”

Daniel nodded. “He’s waking up. Vivian wanted yours to be the first face he sees.”

Brooke ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time, and headed for the master bedroom where her husband, Ethan, had lain unconscious for the last twenty-eight hours.

He’d been captured by the outlaw gang that had seized control of Dodge City, Kansas. The gang’s boss, Natasha, had targeted Ethan as her brother’s killer and attacked him with a bullwhip. He’d had his feet ripped out from under him and hit

his head on the pavement. The expression on the woman's face when Brooke shot her was forever etched in Brooke's mind.

Brooke rushed to Ethan's side and grabbed his hand.

He was moaning, but his eyes were still closed.

"Ethan, I'm here, sweetheart. I'm here. Everything is all right. You're safe."

One eye fluttered open and then closed again.

"You're safe. We're at Finlay and Vivian Melton's farm in Dodge City, Kansas. Remember?" Brooke glanced up at Vivian, who was standing on the opposite side of the bed.

"Can you open your eyes for me, Ethan?" Vivian asked.

Brooke could see his eyeballs moving below his lids.

"He may need a little more time," Vivian said.

"Ethan, it's Brooke. Can you open your eyes for me?" she asked, desperate to see his beautiful hazel eyes.

Both lids opened briefly and then closed. The corners of his lips turned up slightly.

"Hey, you. You've been asleep long enough. You need to wake up now."

Vivian took his pulse and placed his hand back on the bed.

"This is a good sign, right? He's going to be fine?" Brooke asked, her eyes pleading. "Isn't he?"

"We won't know the extent of his brain injury until he's fully awake, and I can check his motor reflexes and ask him some questions," Vivian said. She smiled. "But, yes, this is a very good sign."

The door opened, and Finlay entered. “I hear someone is finally awake.”

“He opened his eyes for a moment,” Brooke said, placing Ethan’s hand on his bare chest.

“That’s great news!” Finlay said, crossing the room. “I’m heading into town. I’ll be back by dark.” He gave Vivian a peck on the cheek and turned toward the door.

“Are you taking Daniel?” Vivian asked.

Finlay stopped in the doorway. “He’s my deputy. He should be there for the hanging.”

“Hanging?” Brooke said.

“We found a few stragglers from that gang of outlaws. They were hiding in a house. The town voted to hang them. As the newly appointed marshal, it’s my job to see that the sentence is carried out.”

“Dinner is at six. I hope you’ll have Daniel home by then. That boy can’t afford to miss a meal. He’s lost so much weight already.”

“I’ll do my best,” Finlay said, closing the door behind him.

“I better go check on Luisa,” Vivian said.

“How is she today?” Brooke asked.

Daniel’s sister, Luisa, had taken a bullet trying to rescue Brooke, Ethan, and Jarrod from that brutal gang. Ethan had been captured after going into Dodge to retrieve medical supplies to save her.

“She’s sitting up. I want to get her walking a few steps today. I might need Daniel to help encourage her. She’s in quite a bit of pain.”

“They still haven’t found any pain medication?” Brooke asked.

Vivian sighed. “Just the few boxes that Jarrod had, but they’re just for mild-to-moderate pain.”

Brooke and Ethan had met Jarrod Hearst and his Shetland Sheepdog, Lexi Lou, back in Colorado after they’d had the run-in with the guys whose GMC truck they’d stolen. He’d been by her side providing emotional support ever since Ethan’s attack at the casino. Brooke was grateful that he’d stuck around to see them through this.

“We haven’t been able to locate anything stronger than Tylenol. That gang popped every pill they could get their hands on. Daniel and a few others even checked some outlying areas without success.” Vivian poured water from a pitcher into a bowl on the bedside table and washed her hands. “Let me know when he’s awake,” she said, moving to the door.

“How long after he wakes before we can head home?” Brooke asked.

“I won’t know until he’s fully conscious,” Vivian said.

“Okay. Thank you, Vivian—for everything.” Brooke settled into the chair beside Ethan’s bed, placed her hand on his, and stared out the window.

Gone were the young fighters who had previously gathered at the farm to prepare for the battle to retake their town. They’d returned to their homes in Dodge City. A few now rotated in and out, caring for the two hundred head of cattle grazing on dead grass in the nearby fields. The grain from the feedlots had been brought out, but the military had taken most of it, and what was left wouldn’t last forever. Still, the folks in Dodge were lucky to have such a resource.

“I was thinking,” Brooke said, talking to Ethan as if he were awake. “On our way home, we should go through Pawhuska and see if Joe Redeagle still has that old farm equipment.” Ethan’s eyes moved beneath his lids. “We’re going to need to sow grain to feed our livestock.” Brooke took Ethan’s hand and chuckled. “Can you imagine it? You and me as farmers? You wearing a pair of those old, bibbed overalls and some muck boots? Are you ready for that?”

Ethan squeezed her hand.

Brooke leaned over and placed her mouth next to his ear. “Please wake up now, honey. We need to get back on the road. Ollie and Amelia need us.”

Ethan opened one eye and then the other. He stared up at Brooke, and she smiled down at him. “There you are.”



It took three more days before Ethan was fully awake and able to dress and feed himself. If it weren’t for the partly shaved head and a bandage covering the gash on the side of his head, you wouldn’t have known that he’d been injured.

“He just needs a little more time. His vitals are strong,” Vivian said after examining him. “Most of his pre-injury memory is intact. Of course, he doesn’t remember what happened or anything from that day. That part of his memory may never come back, but he remembers you and the twins and talks a lot about your ski vacation in Colorado.”

“But nothing about after the EMP?”

“Not really. He can’t make sense of what he recalls of that period of time.”

“He remembered me,” Jarrod said.

“Like I said, his memory is choppy.”

“How long before he can travel?” Brooke asked.

“He’ll need to take it easy for a while longer. His brain took quite a blow in that fall.”

That wasn’t the news Brooke wanted to hear, but the fact that her husband was awake and not badly hurt was a blessing she didn’t take for granted.

While Vivian wrapped up her examination of Ethan, Jarrod led Brooke outside to the driveway where he’d parked the GMC—the vehicle she and Ethan had taken from the three men who’d had attacked them back at Kit Carson, Colorado.

Kirk was in the driver’s seat as they approached. He smiled and turned the key. The truck started right up. Brooke placed a hand on her chest and swallowed hard as her eyes filled with happy tears. Kirk revved the engine. Brooke had never heard a more beautiful sound. Ethan was awake, and the truck was running. They could go home. Soon she’d see her children.

Clay peeled back a heavy tarp. “I tarped and tied it down. It’ll make stealing the boxes a little harder.”

“I can’t thank you all enough,” Brooke said, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Really.” She touched Clay’s shoulder, and then threw her arms around Jarrod.

The big guy smiled. “We’re glad to help.”

“I hate to ask, but I need one more favor,” Brooke said.

Kirk turned off the engine and climbed out of the truck. “Sure. What can we do?”

Brooke cleared her throat and gave him a half-smile. “Teach me to drive a stick shift.” She wasn’t sure how she’d convince Ethan to let her drive. She’d thought of just having Jarrod drive them, but he wasn’t going all the way to Tulsa.

Kirk and Jarrod looked at one another. Kirk stepped back and gestured toward the driver’s door. “I can do that.”

Brooke attempted to learn how to drive the GMC but it wasn’t easy. By the time she and Kirk got back to Finlay’s driveway, his knuckles were white from gripping the dash. The truck died twice more before they reached the house. Brooke was worried at this point. She rested her head against the steering wheel. “How am I going to drive this thing three hundred miles?”

Kirk was quiet for a moment. “I think once you get going, you’ll do fine. You’re all wound up right now, and it just seems like a lot of new information.”

Brooke glanced over at him. He was right about one thing—she was feeling overwhelmed. Although Ethan was awake, he still wasn’t one hundred percent. When he had woken up from the coma, Vivian said he might need at least a week before he would be able to operate the truck due to his dizziness. However, Brooke didn’t want to wait. Her twins might not have that long. She somehow had to be able to drive her and Ethan home herself.

“Maybe you should wait a day or two longer,” Kirk said.

Brooke turned to stare out the driver’s side window. She had to do this. She had to be ready to get them home as soon as Vivian cleared Ethan to leave. Her family was depending on her. As much as she wanted to believe she could handle

whatever came at her, the experience thus far had taught her that running into trouble was a foregone conclusion. She needed Ethan to be one hundred percent, but they didn't have that kind of time. She'd have Jarrod for the first part of the trip, but once he set out on his own to find his daughter, Brooke and Ethan would be on their own. With Ethan not fully recovered, she'd be the one to have to protect them from whatever dangers they encountered. Brooke was torn. She couldn't shake the thought that her children were in danger and needed her. It was all-consuming.

"Thank you, guys. I'm going to go and talk to Ethan and then to Vivian and see when she thinks Ethan can leave," Brooke said, opening the driver's door.

Kirk climbed out of the truck and walked her to the house. "I know you're concerned about your kids, but you won't be able to help them if you're both dead."

His words were blunt, but Brooke couldn't deny the truth in them. They weighed on her as she made her way through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bedroom. Sitting in the chair beside the bed, Ethan smiled as she entered.

Vivian put her stethoscope around her neck and handed Ethan his shirt.

"How is he?" Brooke asked.

"Ready to get back on the road," Ethan said.

Brooke glanced over at Vivian. "Really?"

Vivian nodded. "In normal times, I'd say he needed to rest and take it easy for a few more days at least, but..."

"These aren't normal times, and I need to get my wife home to her babies," Ethan finished, standing and wrapping his arms around Brooke's shoulders.

Warmth spread through Brooke's chest, and her heart kicked up a beat. "When can we leave?"

"As soon as you can get packed, I guess?" Vivian said.

TWO

Ethan

Melton Farm

Dodge City, Kansas

Day 14

It took Brooke all of fifteen minutes to throw their gear into the back of the GMC pickup. Ethan stopped and stared into the bed of the truck. The memories of the last two weeks were slow in returning, but he did recall meeting Jarrod and loading the boxes of food into the GMC.

“We’re so grateful, Vivian,” Brooke said.

“You just be careful getting home to those twins,” Vivian said, handing Brooke a bundle wrapped in a kitchen towel.

Brooke peeled back one corner and held it to her nose. She inhaled the heavenly scent of the biscuits and cornbread. “Wow! Thank you!”

“Now, Ethan.” Vivian turned to face him. “You still need to take it easy. Get as much rest as you can, and whatever you do, avoid any more blows to the head. It could be fatal next time.”

“I’ll be careful, but I don’t think I’ll rest much with Brooke driving,” Ethan said.

Brooke glared at him, and he forced a smile even though he wasn’t kidding. There was no way he could sleep, knowing she’d never driven a stick shift before. He was relieved to have Jarrod along again to help him look out for obstacles and other dangers. Ethan planned to convince Brooke to let him drive once they were away from Finlay’s farm, despite Vivian’s advice to the contrary.

After hugs and saying their goodbyes to everyone, Brooke climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine. Jarrod lowered the tailgate, and he and Lexi settled in among the boxes.

“Finlay, Brooke tells me you saved my life and your town,” Ethan said.

“Not just me.” Finlay waved his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“Well, I wish you luck. I’m sure that Dodge is in capable hands.” Ethan pointed to the silver star badge pinned to Finlay’s black vest. He couldn’t recall what had occurred in Dodge City, but from what he’d been told, the residents were grateful to have their town delivered from the hands of an outlaw gang and Finlay in charge of its law and order.

Kirk pulled open the passenger side door and held it for Ethan. He gestured to the truck. “Jarrod and I checked her over, and she’s in pretty good shape. There are a few tools and extra parts in the bed—just in case she gives you any more trouble. The gas tank is topped up, and there are two additional full cans of fuel. You should be able to make it to Tulsa without having to stop for gas.”

“I appreciate that—and everything else you’ve done for me and Brooke,” Ethan said, climbing into the pickup’s passenger seat. After they waved goodbye a final time, Brooke put the truck into gear and headed toward the road.

The GMC died as Brooke attempted to back the truck down the driveway. Ethan did his best to instruct her on the procedure, but by the time they reached the first intersection, Brooke was frustrated. She stopped in the middle of the road and rested her head on the steering wheel, taking deep breaths to calm herself. Ethan opened his door, climbed out, and walked around to the driver’s side. “Let me,” he said, his tone soft and low. “I can drive, Brooke. I’m fine.”

Brooke glanced up at him. “But Vivian said...”

“I can drive, Brooke. We’ll get there a lot faster if you just let me.”

“Why don’t we just have Jarrod drive? I’ll ride back there.”

“I said I can drive, Brooke.” Under normal circumstances, there was no way Ethan would climb behind the wheel of a vehicle so soon after suffering a head injury. He was still dizzy at times and a little disoriented, but it wasn’t like they would run into traffic on their drive home. There weren’t any working vehicles on the roads anymore. Ethan held his hand out to help Brooke out of the truck.

“Okay,” Brooke said, taking his hand and climbing down from the vehicle.



Ethan turned the truck and headed south along Highway 183 toward the border with Oklahoma. An hour later, they were nearing Protection, Kansas. Driving through the open plains, Ethan could see for miles. Every so often, there was an oasis of leafless trees that farmers had planted around their homes to block the wind. The roadway was free of abandoned vehicles, and sparsely populated.

“Twenty-six miles to Buffalo, Oklahoma!” Brooke said, pointing to a road sign.

Ethan smiled. “We’ll be home by dark!”

He accelerated through an intersection and pegged out the speedometer, bumping over the relatively smooth, straight roadway. In minutes they saw the sign for Sitka, Kansas. As they passed a grain elevator, Ethan glanced into the rearview mirror. “Oh shit!” he said as an older model red and white Ford truck pulled out behind them.

“Ethan!” Brooke shouted as the truck sped up to catch them. Ethan glanced into the rearview mirror and then his side mirror. There was no mistaking that the people in the truck were coming after them. He glanced down at the rifle wedged between the door and the seat. He knew he couldn’t drive and shoot, so he unholstered the 9mm pistol Finlay had taken off one of the outlaws and placed it in his lap. “Hold on, Brooke. I’m going to try to outrun them.” He glanced back at Jarrod. He’d spotted them as well and was taking aim with his rifle.

The truck screamed and whined as Ethan pushed it past its limits. He almost lost control when they approached a sudden curve. The GMC pitched left and then right. Ethan glanced back to ensure they hadn’t tossed Jarrod from the bed. The big guy had lost his balance, but was still in the back.

Brooke held her pistol in both hands and pointed at the footwell. "Ethan! They're right behind us."

The Ford was close enough now that Ethan could see the occupants. Two men sat inside the truck, and one more stood in the bed, his head poking above its cab with a rifle resting on the roof.

Boom!

The shooter fired, and Ethan yanked the wheel to the right. The round missed, but the Ford was still gaining on them.

"Ethan, do something!" Brooke yelled.

Jarrold returned fire, but Ethan couldn't tell if the rounds were striking the Ford. It just kept coming.

Boom!

Boom!

The shooter fired again, and Ethan heard the loud metallic ping as the rounds struck the GMC. Jarrod ducked behind the tailgate as Ethan swerved back and forth from lane to lane, attempting to stay out of the rifle's crosshairs.

"Go faster! Go faster, Ethan!" Brooke yelled.

Ethan's gaze bounced between the road ahead and the rearview mirror. "I can't! The pedal is on the floor!"

"He's coming up too fast," Brooke shouted.

"Brace yourself!" Ethan said.

Brooke lowered the rifle to her lap and reached out both arms to brace herself against the dash.

Ethan's neck snapped from the force as the Ford rammed their bumper. He felt momentarily disoriented and feared he

might black out. “Hang on!” he shouted, bracing for another impact.

The Ford rammed them again and then again. Brooke’s neck whipped with such force Ethan feared it would sever her spinal cord. He held his arm across Brooke’s chest and swerved into the opposite lane. But the pickup followed, ramming them again. Ethan fought through blurry vision and a pounding headache to stay conscious. He changed lanes twice more and then swerved back into the northbound lane.

Think Ethan! Think!

He slowed suddenly, causing the Ford to pull ahead by half a car length. Ethan could see the driver through the Ford’s side window. He was young, maybe in his early twenties. He wore his ball cap backward, and the sleeves of his flannel shirt were rolled up nearly to his elbows. He looked normal—like Shayne had. The memory flooded back. Shayne had been a stone-cold killer. Was that what these men intended? Clearly, they didn’t want the GMC—they had a much better truck. Was it the tarp draped over the boxes of food that had attracted their attention? There was no way they could know what was in the bed of that truck. Were they just curious? Or did they have something else in mind—something insane or evil?

“Okay, Brooke, be ready.” He wouldn’t let them hurt her. He wasn’t going to let that happen again.

The Ford accelerated and steered into the northbound lane, its front bumper inches from the back panel of the GMC. Brooke twisted in the seat, turned, and began cranking down her window. She took aim at the truck through the opening. But before she could get off a shot, Ethan heard the rifle boom. “Brooke, get down!” The back glass shattered, sending glass into the cab of the GMC.

The Ford accelerated again and raced ahead of GMC a few hundred feet. Ethan mashed the clutch and pumped the brakes, trying to slow down without killing the motor. As the Ford in front of him stopped in the roadway, Ethan stomped on the gas pedal, swerved into the northbound lane, and bolted past them. He eyed the shooter standing in the bed of the pickup, his rifle resting on the cab's roof.

Boom!

Boom!

Rounds peppered the GMC's tailgate.

"Jarrod!" Ethan shouted. Relief washed over him when he saw the big guy pop his head up and return fire.

When Ethan returned his focus to the roadway, he realized both lanes were blocked with dead vehicles. They were going to crash into them.

"Brooke, hold on!"

Ethan gripped the steering wheel tight, locked his elbows, and then stomped on the clutch and brakes at the same time. As the tires bit into the asphalt, the momentum of the stop caused Brooke to fly forward against her seatbelt. Her forearm struck the passenger side door, and she cried out. The GMC's engine stalled, but Ethan kept his focus on the vehicle behind him.

As it swerved to avoid the collision, the Ford pitched sideways, causing the shooter's body to fly from the bed. He landed on the pavement, bounced, and rolled several times.

Ethan glanced at his side mirror, watching as the Ford skidded to a stop inches from the ditch.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked as he cranked the engine over and accelerated, shifting through the gears.

“Yes. Just a sore arm. Are they still coming?” She twisted in her seat to peer out the shattered back window. “I don’t see Jarrod!”

Ethan checked his side mirror just as Jarrod sat up. “There! I see him.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Brooke said. “Are you okay?” she shouted through the shattered window.

Jarrold gave a thumbs-up. “I’m out of ammo!” he yelled back.

The other driver wasted no time in restarting his truck and reversing back onto the roadway. Ethan stared into the rearview mirror as the Ford swerved to miss the shooter’s body, and in seconds, he’d nearly caught up to the old GMC. Ethan knew he couldn’t outrun them. The GMC was just an old, neglected farm truck. The vehicle on their tail had been restored, likely with much better parts than the original. The way the driver had avoided hitting them and recovered from the abrupt stop so fast was also telling. It was clear this wasn’t his first rodeo.

THREE

Ethan

Highway 183

Sitka, Kansas

Day 14

“Are they after our supplies or hoping we have gas or something?” Brooke asked as she shook glass from her shoulders and the locks of her long, black hair.

“I don’t know,” Ethan said. “Where’s your gun?”

“On the floorboard. I can’t reach it without taking off my seat belt.”

“Roll down your window, then grab your rifle and be ready.”

“What are you going to do?” Brooke asked as she cranked the handle.

“I’m going to pull up, and I want you to unload that magazine into the cab of the Ford,” Ethan said.

Brooke shouldered the rifle, poking the barrel out of the open window. “Okay,” she said.

“Now! Shoot them, Brooke! Shoot them!” Ethan smashed on the gas, shifted, and accelerated.

Brooke squeezed the trigger, and rounds struck the driver. He swerved to the left, smashing into the right front panel of the GMC. Ethan let off the gas slightly, allowing the Ford to move into their lane while Brooke continued sending rounds into the cab, now through their back window.

The passenger twisted in his seat, and Ethan spotted the pistol in his hand. A bullet impacted the Ford’s hood, and then another before Brooke’s rifle rounds struck the man in the head. The Ford’s driver swerved all over the roadway in front of Ethan before leaving the pavement on the left side, plowing into the ditch, and rolling the truck on its side. Ethan slowed as they passed and saw the driver hanging halfway through the windshield.

It was over. They’d won.

“We did it!” Brooke said, slapping her knee. “We showed them!” The wind whipped her hair around as she threw her head back and laughed in triumph. Then she lowered the rifle and cranked the window up, but the wind still ripped through the cab of the GMC from the shattered back window.

Ethan accelerated, putting distance between them and the men who’d meant them harm, his heart racing. They’d traveled less than one hundred miles from Dodge City and had already encountered trouble. He’d chosen this route, hoping they could avoid danger by bypassing cities like Wichita, Kansas, but that was delusional thinking on his part. Peril awaited them around every turn. They had to be better prepared for it. Ethan wasn’t sure what more he could have done back there, but maybe if he’d had his mind on watching for threats, he might have seen them sooner and...” *No! Stop*

it! He couldn't look back. He had to keep focused on the dangers that lay ahead.

“Brooke, I want you to keep your pistol in your hands and your eyes on your side of the road ahead. Call out if you see anyone, okay?”

Brooke dropped her magazine, examined the rounds, and slapped it back into the weapon. Racking the slide, she said. “Aye, aye, captain.”

Brooke's cavalier attitude surprised Ethan. Had they experienced so much violence that she was no longer affected by it? Would it hit her later, after the adrenaline rush had subsided? Or would it be weeks or months down the road, after they were home and settled into their new normal? They'd both have to come to terms with all the violence they'd witnessed and everything they'd done to survive and make it home.



Ethan was relieved when they crossed over the Cimarron River and spotted water flowing below the bridge. He'd feared that southwestern Kansas and northwest Oklahoma would be as dry as Dodge City had been. And then he remembered the five-gallon container of water in the bed of the GMC.

“We need to stop,” Ethan said.

“Why?” Brooke twisted, looking over her shoulder.

“I need to check the food and water. I know several rounds struck the bed. I want to see if it struck the water. If it did, this might be our last chance to get more.”

“But...” Brooke twisted in the seat and glanced behind them. “What if...?”

“They’re dead, Brooke. We need to make sure we have water.”

She started to protest, but Ethan stopped her. He reached over and touched her shoulder. “We have to be prepared for anything and everything. We have to consider the possibility that we’ll be back on foot soon.”

Brooke frowned and then nodded. “Okay. Okay. We’ll stop and check on the water. I have to pee anyway.”

While Brooke left the roadway to relieve herself, Ethan and Jarrod undid the ratchet strap that held the fuel cans and water container. “Shit!” Ethan ran a hand over his growing beard and then through his hair. The rounds had gone through the tailgate and struck the five-gallon water jug, which was emptying quickly. Ethan lifted it from the bed, tipped it back, and dried the side with his shirt sleeve. Could he plug the hole somehow?

“Do we have duct tape?” Jarrod asked.

Would duct tape stop water from seeping out? Ethan wasn’t sure, but he had to try something. They needed that water.

After placing the jug on the ground by the back driver’s side tire, Ethan examined the boxes of canned goods stacked closest to the tailgate. He counted six holes. Two rounds had struck the case of quinoa, kale, and red lentil soup. He opened the box to find two of the twelve were damaged. He closed the lid and turned his attention back to the water, relieved that it wasn’t worse. Losing a few cans of food was a big deal. Two cans of soup meant two more days of life for someone. It

would be difficult to replace them, but it could have been so much worse. They could have lost everything—including their lives. He thanked God no one had been hurt and then picked up the water jug as Brooke returned to the GMC. “Hand me the duct tape from the glove box, please,” he said, again drying the outside of the jug with the tail of his shirt.

“Will that keep it from leaking?” Brooke asked, handing him the tape.

Ethan tore off a piece of tape and slapped it over the hole. “I hope so.” He wrapped several layers around the square jug. “Can you grab my water filter from my pack? We need to get this refilled as quickly as possible and get down the road before anyone spots us. We’re sitting ducks out here.” Jarrod kept watch as Ethan filled the jug. It took much longer than Ethan would have liked, but soon the sealed container was stowed back in the bed and strapped down. He handed Jarrod three magazines for his rifle. “You sure you’re okay? You were tossed around like a rag doll back there.”

“Bruised but not broken. Lexi’s pretty shaken and trembling from the ordeal.”

“She can ride up here with me,” Brooke said, smiling.

Jarrold held Lexi in the air. “What do you say, Lexi? You want to ride with Brooke?” He put her on the ground, and the dog ran to the passenger side and leaped into Brooke’s arms.

“I guess that’s a yes.” Jarrod chuckled.



Just under five miles down the road, they exited Kansas and crossed over the border into Oklahoma.

“Look!” Brooke pointed to the concrete sign welcoming them to the state. She beamed with excitement. “I never thought I’d be so happy to be back in red-dirt country. Welcome to Oklahoma, Lexi Lou!”

But their jubilation was short-lived. Ethan pointed. “Stay sharp. I see a farm up ahead.”

Brooke straightened and gripped her pistol with both hands.

Ethan sped up. “Watch for side roads or driveways on your side of the road,” he said as they approached a red-clad, two-story farmhouse with a large white barn.

“I’ve got a long driveway on my side. Oh, and another house and a small barn,” Brooke said.

“Look for movement of any kind,” Ethan said, doing the same on his side of the road. In his right hand, he held the rifle, the stock resting in his lap and the barrel in the open window. Luckily, there were no threats, and in seconds they’d driven past the houses. Ethan’s left hand loosened its white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, and he rolled up the window. Wind still whipped around the cab, chilling the interior of the truck. Brooke was shivering, and her teeth chattered.

“We need to find a piece of clear plastic to tape over the back window,” Ethan said.

“What about cardboard? We could unload a couple of the boxes,” Brooke said.

“I don’t know. It would limit our vision. At least you could see something through the plastic.”

“You’re right,” Brooke said, pulling her jacket tighter against her chest.

They passed a few more farms before approaching a small municipal airport outside of Buffalo, Oklahoma. Ethan pulled the GMC to a stop one mile before the intersection with Highway 64.

“What are you doing?” Brooke asked, checking her side mirror.

“According to the sign, the town of Buffalo is one mile up ahead.”

“Oh! How are we getting around it?”

Ethan pulled the map out from under his pack, which sat between them on the seat. He opened one fold and pondered for a moment.

“Something wrong?” Jarrod called from the bed.

“Nope, just checking out the route,” Ethan yelled back.

A second later, Jarrod appeared at his driver’s door.

“We’re going to take this gravel road to our left. It looks like we’ll reach a good, black-topped road in six or seven miles.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jarrod said.

Ethan leaned across his backpack and showed Brooke the spot on the map.” We’ll get on Highway 64 and take it all the way to Interstate 35.” Ethan returned the map to his pack as Jarrod returned to the bed of the truck. “You good back there?” Ethan shouted through the broken window to Jarrod.

“Ten-four,” Jarrod said.

Ethan put the truck in gear and turned onto the gravel road heading east.

“How many more towns will we have to avoid between here and the interstate?” Brooke asked.

“Five or six. Only a couple have any great size—as far as I can tell from the map.”

Brooke crossed her arms over her chest and grew quiet.

“We’re only two hundred and fifty miles from Tulsa,” Ethan said, trying to cheer her up.

“Four hours?” she asked, her tone flat.

“Four hours,” Ethan repeated.

FOUR

Brooke

Highway 64

Buffalo, Oklahoma

Day 14

Shortly after turning from the gravel to a paved road, Ethan slowed the pickup five hundred yards from the intersection of Highway 64. Parked on the south side of the highway was an older model motorhome. “What do you see?” Brooke asked.

“I thought I saw the side door open and then close,” Ethan said.

“Can we go back and find another road that leads back to the highway?”

Ethan didn't answer. He leaned over the steering wheel, eyeing the RV. Brooke also took a good look from the passenger side, trying to determine what had caught his attention. The door to the recreational vehicle flew open and then closed again, seemingly all on its own. Ethan sat back. “It's just the wind,” he said, accelerating toward the intersection.

The tension between Brooke's shoulders eased a little, and she leaned back against her seat, but her eyes remained fixed on the door. She wasn't convinced it was the wind, but after spending the last twenty minutes scanning for movement along the sides of the roadway, everything looked like a threat. Brooke was still amped up from the incident with the Ford. She pushed aside the image of the shooter's body bouncing across the pavement and focused on the motor home's door.

"Roll your window down and be ready. We're within firing range of a rifle."

"I thought you said it was just the wind," Brooke said, cranking on the handle.

"We should still be vigilant. Someone could be waiting for us on the driver's side."

Brooke gripped the pistol tight, her eyes trained on the RV. As they neared, she noticed debris on the ground outside the motor home. It looked as if someone had pulled everything from inside and thrown it onto the ground. Suitcases lay open with clothing hanging out of them. Lawn chairs and even a small charcoal grill were in a heap beside the passenger door.

Brooke tried to get a glimpse inside as they rolled into the intersection, but Ethan took the turn onto the highway a little too fast, and she banged against the door. She straightened and leaned to peer into her side mirror. No one had come to the door of the motor home. If there was anyone inside, they were probably just as afraid of the three of them.

"That was a strange place for a roadside rest area. We're in the middle of nowhere. How much traffic could they get?"

"I think it's the perfect place for a rest area. Look around. Where else would you stop to pee?"

Brooke took in the vast open prairie that surrounded them and then nodded. “Speaking of peeing.”

“You just went to the bathroom back at the river when we stopped to get water,” Ethan said.

“I know. I’m sorry, but I drank a lot of coffee this morning. I wanted to be awake and alert. I thought I was going to be driving this thing.”

“No need to be sorry. Let’s put some distance between us and that RV, and then we’ll stop.”

They drove one mile and then two. Soon, Brooke was rocking in her seat, feeling very uncomfortable. “Ethan, I really, really have to go.”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.” He pulled the truck to a stop just before the bridge crossed the Cimarron River.

Ethan exited with Brooke and stood in the roadway next to the bed of the truck while Brooke walked down into a shallow ravine out of view. “You leaving us soon, Jarrod?”

“After what happened back there, I was thinking I’d just ride with you to Tulsa—make sure you get there.”

“That’s fine with us, right, Brooke?”

“Yeah, that’s awesome. The kids will be thrilled to meet you—and Lexi Lou,” Brooke said as she brushed herself off and approached them.

Ethan walked around the back of the pickup, heading toward the driver’s door. “Woods County, Oklahoma,” he said, pointing to a signpost.

“Woods County? Why does that sound familiar? Have we been there before?” Brooke asked.

“Stephen King mentions it in his book, *The Stand*. Two of the book’s characters travel this way,” Jarrod said.

“You’re right. Nick and Tom.” Brooke stared at the signpost and sighed. “They were in the middle of an apocalypse, too.”

Ethan glanced up at building storm clouds overhead and then moved back to the truck.

“Let’s hope we don’t run into Alexander Skarsgård like in Woods County,” Jarrod said as he made his way back to the bed of the truck.

Brooke laughed. “I’d rather meet Matthew McConaughey. He was awesome in *The Dark Tower*,”

“I liked Jamey Sheridan’s portrayal of Flagg better,” Ethan said, starting the engine and pulling back onto the pavement.

“Do you think we’ll ever go to a theater and watch a movie again?” Brooke asked as they crossed over the Cimarron River into Woods County, Oklahoma.

She’d grown up enjoying books, music, movies, and video games. Was all that now gone? Had some foreign power been able to take all that away from them in an instant? Brooke leaned her head back on the headrest.

“Someday,” Ethan said.

Brooke stared out the side window and tried to imagine how the twins’ lives would be growing up without such things. She thought of her grandmother reading her books like *Little House on the Prairie* and *Anne of Green Gables*. Would that be their life going forward?

“Heads up!” Ethan said. He pointed to a building on the left side of the road. Beside it sat several large white tanks.

Beyond, they saw a couple of houses. Ethan rolled down his window and stuck the barrel of his rifle out the opening.

“I don’t see anyone,” Brooke said, her pistol at the ready.

Ethan stomped on the gas and accelerated past the place. Two miles later, they approached a signpost indicating that Cargill Salt was three miles south of the highway. The northeast corner contained a shop and several semis. Ethan slowed to a crawl.

“Why aren’t you speeding past it?”

“I’m looking to see if there is anything useful in the parking lot,” Ethan said.

Brooke surveyed the gravel lot filed with some sort of equipment and newer model trucks. Brooke saw nothing worth risking their lives for and was relieved when Ethan didn’t stop.

They were moving pretty fast as they passed over Moccasin Creek. The road curved to the right, and they were heading south for two miles before the highway turned east again. Tumbleweeds blew across the roadway in front of the truck as they passed a signpost for Alabaster Caverns. She pointed to the sign. “Remember crawling through Ice Stalactite Cave?”

“I remember it rained that night, and all our camping gear got wet, and we had to sleep in the Jeep,” Ethan said. He smiled, and his gaze lingered on her.

Brooke saw something from the corner of her eye and turned her head. “Ethan!”

“Oh, shit!” Ethan shouted as he locked up the brakes. The GMC’s tires bit into the pavement, and then the truck began to skid sideways. “Hold on, Brooke!”

FIVE

Robert

Spencer Residence

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 14

Robert Spencer stared into the bathroom mirror, barely recognizing his own reflection. He could swear his salt and pepper hair had become grayer in the last two weeks.

Two weeks?

Life as Robert knew it had ended two weeks ago. That had been the last time he'd heard from Ethan and Brooke. The pain of not knowing where they were and whether they were even alive was unbearable. It had taken its toll on Nina as well. Robert had heard her crying when she thought she was on her own. His wife tried to remain strong for him and the twins, but Robert knew her heart was breaking. Every day that went by, it became a little harder to believe his son and daughter-in-law would make it home.

As bad as it was for Robert and Nina, it was worse for the twins, Oliver and Amelia. They were really struggling to adjust to life without their parents, modern technology, and

familiar foods. They acted out in ways they would never have before the lights went out. They bickered constantly, whined, and became defiant whenever they were told to do something.

Robert was bone-tired. Lack of sleep, minimal food and constant stress were pushing him to the edge. He certainly couldn't go on much longer like this. Sighing, he did his best to run a comb through his now straggly, greasy hair and pulled on a black T-shirt. After stuffing his pocketknife and an extra combat application tourniquet into the right pocket of his black cargo pants, he strapped on a medical trauma kit containing both pediatric and adult-sized ratcheting tourniquets.

In the last three days, the attacks on their block had increased, and two of his neighbors had been shot. Shelly Wilson's teenage son had died from his gunshot wound, and the Hutchens boy was still fighting for his life. Without antibiotics, he wasn't expected to make it, either.

"You should eat something before you go back out," Nina said from the doorway.

Robert strapped a knife sheath to his left leg and placed his 1911 into its drop holster. "I'll get something later. I'm late."

"I have to go, too. I told Kordell I'd cover for Penny Hutchens while she visits her son."

"How's he doing?" Robert asked.

Nina shook her head.

"Kordell's talking about making a run for antibiotics," Robert said.

"Where? I can't think of any pharmacies that wouldn't have been picked over."

“Newbury said he wanted to try the animal hospital just off 71st Street. They haven’t looked there yet.”

“You’re not thinking of going with them?” Nina asked.

Robert turned to face her. Her black T-shirt was wrinkled, and her jeans had dirt stains on both knees. He hated what this was doing to his wife. The stress and grief showed on her face and in her posture. Dark circles ringed her brown eyes, and her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled into a short ponytail with her gray roots showing, but gosh, she was still beautiful.

“This is important, Nina. What if you or the kids needed that medicine next?”

“Robert!”

“It’s not that far,” Robert said.

Anguish showed on her face. She dropped her shoulders. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Newbury said if we go early in the morning, the troublemakers will still be home in bed, and fewer people will be out on the streets.”

“Antonio Ferretti’s brother was killed at seven o’clock in the morning.”

“Lane was shot trying to break into a pot dispensary,” Robert said.

Nina lifted her chin and crossed her arms over her chest. “What am I supposed to do if you go and get yourself killed out there?”

Robert hesitated for a second. He adjusted his ball cap and then said, “Keep fighting.”

She answered him with a glare. “That’s the best advice you can offer?” She let out a long, shaking breath. “Let me know before you go.” Nina turned on her heel and marched from the room, leaving Robert to contemplate what would happen to her and the twins if her fears came true.

Like most folks, he and Nina had lived paycheck to paycheck before the lights went out, but now, they were surviving hour by hour. Every choice they made had life and death consequences, not only for their family but for every person on their block. The decision to chance the two-mile trip to the animal hospital in search of antibiotics wasn’t one Robert had made lightly. For one, it left them short of bodies on patrol. He’d just come off the night shift where they’d been down one person—Sean Hutchens, the kid who was fighting for his life. Fortunately, they’d only had one person attempt to breach their perimeter. Kordell and Antonio had dealt with them, and everyone had quickly returned to their positions at the roadblock and along the fence lines.

Robert picked up his rifle and slung it over his back before heading for the door. In the living room, Ollie and Amelia sat on the floor by the sofa, reading books. Nina had opened the plywood shutters, and a gentle breeze billowed the sheer curtains into the room. The delicate, sweet fragrance of cherry blossoms wafted in from the two fruit trees in the backyard. Robert felt in his back pocket for his bandana. He knew he’d need it if the temperatures climbed back into the eighties as they had the day before.

Amelia glanced up at him, and then without a word, she lowered her head back to her page. “You two be good for Mimi. I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Robert said.

“My shift starts in thirty minutes,” Nina reminded him.

He stopped near the kitchen island. “Crap!” He’d forgotten. He turned. “Hey, kids, do you want to go play at the Ferrettis’ house today?”

“Robert!”

“I have to go, Nina. We need that medicine. We need food, water, ammo.”

“Let the others...” Nina said.

“I can’t keep letting everyone else take the risks for us,” Robert said, interrupting her.

Nina charged across the room and stopped in front of him with her hands on her hips. “We are taking risks. Every. Damn. Time. We. Leave. This. House!”

Robert reached to place his hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away. He lowered his voice. “Yes, I know. You know what I mean.”

“Go then. The kids and I will be just fine,” she spat. “Just fine.” She spun and stomped off into their bedroom. His gaze flitted to Ollie and Amelia, who were now standing in the middle of the living room. Amelia’s eyes lasered into him. She turned and ran to the kids’ room and slammed the door.

Ollie’s eyes filled with tears. The sight of it ripped Robert’s heart out. “Come here, buddy,” Robert said, kneeling with his arms open wide.

Ollie ran to him and leaped into his arms, nearly knocking him over. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know, Ollie, but I have to. You understand, right? Sometimes a man has to do hard things to protect and care for his family—and this is one of them. We need things. All I want is to take good care of you and your sister.”

“What about Mimi?” Ollie glanced up with concern in his dark brown eyes.

“And Mimi.”

Robert released him and stood. “I’ll be back before you know it. Will you do me a favor while I’m gone, buddy?”

Ollie nodded.

“Will you feed Piper for me and make sure she has water in her bowl?” Normally, the growing German shepherd ate a lot of food, but they’d been doing their best to stretch the fifty-pound bag of dog food Robert had purchased weeks before the lights went out.

“Piper’s food is all gone.”

“The bag’s empty?”

Ollie nodded again, his dark brown hair flopping into his face with the movement of his head. He looked so much like Brooke with her dark features, but he had Ethan’s chin and one small dimple to the right of his lips, just like his father—and Robert.

“Okay, I’ll look for more while I’m out.”

A smile spread across Ollie’s face. He motioned with his index finger for Robert to lean down. “Will you look for candy, too? But don’t tell Amelia. She’ll tell Mommy.”

Robert picked him up in his arms and squeezed him tight.

“You’re squishing me, Pop Pop!”

“Oh, sorry, buddy,” Robert said, giving him a peck on the cheek and placing him back on the floor. “Be good at Mrs. Johnson’s today, okay?”

“I will,” Ollie said as Robert crossed through the kitchen and exited through the door to the garage.

Lonnie Gladwell

Gladwell Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

When Lonnie Gladwell heard Sheriff Parkhurst's 1970s police cruiser coming down his driveway, he stepped outside the barn door, brushed hay from his flannel shirt, and followed a path to his back door.

He heard his wife Glenda welcoming their guest at the front of the house. "Come in, Sheriff."

Sheriff Wayne Parkhurst removed his white cowboy hat and stepped into the foyer as Lonnie entered the other side of the century-old farmhouse. "Lonnie around?" he asked.

"He's in the barn."

"I'm right here," Lonnie said, moving into the living room and gesturing to one of the two recliners angled toward the nonfunctional fifty-five-inch television.

"Can I get you something to drink, Sheriff? Some tea or a glass of water?" Glenda asked.

Parkhurst smoothed his Hulk Hogan mustache with his thumb and index finger, removed his hat, and placed it on the round table between the chairs. “Water, please, Glenda.”

“What brings you out this way?” Lonnie asked, dropping onto the leather sofa across from him.

Parkhurst waited for Glenda to leave the room before answering.

When she was out of earshot, Lonnie asked, “Did you find Mitch?”

“Not yet. I’ve got all my guys out looking for him. I even rounded up Charlie Bunker to track him.”

“His dogs didn’t find anything?”

“Yeah, they found his tracks leading from my barn to the wash. But they lost his scent at the lake a mile away.”

“Did Charlie run them around the entire lake?”

Glenda returned with Parkhurst’s water. “Have you heard anything from the governor or the state, Sheriff? Do you know when the power company will get the lights back on?”

“Those folks in Oklahoma City don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground, Glenda. They’re busy trying to take care of their buddies. They don’t care about us.”

“What are we supposed to do then?”

“What we’ve always done—we take care of one another and do our best to survive,” Parkhurst said.

“Speaking of that, Sheriff. I’d like to donate a few steers to your deputies and their families. You wanna come out to the barn and take a look at them?”

Parkhurst stood. “Thank you for the water, Glenda,” he said, handing her the glass.

“Tell your wife I still have that baby blanket for your new grandbaby. I’ll bring it with me to church on Sunday.”

“That’s kind of you, Glenda. I’m sure my daughter will be happy to have it,” Parkhurst said, moving toward the door.

Once they were outside, Lonnie asked, “Have you checked at Annie Gillespie’s place? She may be hiding him.” Lonnie and Parkhurst moved down the front walk toward the sheriff’s vintage 1970s police cruiser that had once been driven by Parkhurst’s daddy when he was the Woods County lawman.

“I haven’t seen Annie since she and Mitch found your brother’s body.”

“Don’t you think you should search her place for him? I know you two are close and all, but...”

“Annie would have told me if Mitch had returned.”

“You think she’s more loyal to you than Mitch McDonald?” Lonnie scoffed. “You’re fooling yourself, Parkhurst. If Mitch returns to her place with a tale of being arrested for my brother’s murder, she’s going to help him hide out. Do you seriously think Annie would turn Mitch in to you?”

“We wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t decided that dumping your brother’s body on Annie’s property was a smart idea.”

He’d panicked. Harry had pissed him off so badly that he wasn’t thinking straight. At the time, all he could think of was getting his brother’s body out of the house. He’d loaded him into the back of his utility vehicle and driven out to the canyon. But along the way, he’d discovered that some of

Annie Gillespie's cows had escaped her ranch. The fence bordering the property was down. That's when Lonnie had gotten the idea of dumping Harry on Annie's ranch.

"You were supposed to arrest Mitch for the murder. He was the one with a motive."

"You're the one who came up with the plan of pinning the crime on Mitch."

Lonnie had thought Annie would be blamed if Harry's body was found on her property, but Mitch would do. "You were supposed to have my back. That's what I'm paying you for, isn't it?"

"I didn't expect him to come to my house to report the crime. When he did, I arrested him and then tied him up in my barn until I could have my deputies take him and book him properly."

"But Mitch got away. He's going to tell everyone that Harry was shot—not that he fell from his horse, like we planned." Lonnie got in Parkhurst's face and pressed a finger to the man's chest. "If I go down, so do you, and then you won't ever see even one of my daddy's silver coins."

"This plan of yours has been flawed from the start, Lonnie, and the EMP has changed everything. There are bigger priorities than acquiring your brother's land, now," Parkhurst said.

Lonnie saw red. "The land is the only thing that matters!" He glared at Parkhurst. The man just didn't get it. "The ranch is mine—all of it. I earned it. Daddy should have never left any of it to Harry and Gerald."

"You're a fool, Lonnie. You can't eat dirt."

"No, but I can raise cattle on it and eat the beef."

“You have five hundred head of cattle already.”

Lonnie smirked in triumph. “I guess that makes me one of the richest men in America now, doesn’t it?”

SEVEN

Ethan

Freedom Country Store

Highway 64

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

Ethan had only taken his eyes off the roadway ahead for one moment as he and Brooke reminisced about their first camping trip to Alabaster Caverns State Park.

When Brooke screamed, and Ethan returned his gaze to the highway, it was too late. The only way he could avoid colliding with the dirt bike in front of them was to cut the wheels hard to the left.

“Hold on!” Ethan shouted as the truck slid sideways veering toward the ditch.

The next thing Ethan knew, Brooke was shaking him. “Ethan! Ethan! Are you hurt? Speak to me!”

Ethan’s vision cleared, and immediately his thoughts snapped to the kid on the motorbike. “Did I hit him?” Ethan asked, trying to undo his seat belt.

“No,” Brooke said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Relief washed over Ethan, and he glanced back toward the roadway. All he could see were boxes from the bed of the truck. One had come through the shattered glass in the back window and rested on the floor between the seat and the gearshift.

Finally managing to unbuckle his seat belt, Ethan reached for the door handle before discovering the truck was in a ditch and facing the opposite direction. He pushed, but there was only six inches or so between the truck and the embankment. He had no chance of getting his door open.

“Take it slow,” Brooke said.

He turned his head and glanced through the passenger side window. “We need to get out.”

Brooke twisted in the seat and tried to open her door, but with the angle of the truck, she couldn’t get it to stay open. A face appeared on the other side of the glass.

“Are you two all right?” Jarrod said. He yanked the door open, stepped up to keep it open, and then reached his hand out to help Brooke exit the pickup. “Are you injured?”

“I’m okay,” Brooke said, handing Lexi to him. She turned to grab her rifle and pack. After shouldering them, she reached back inside the cab to retrieve Ethan’s pack from the seat, then dropped it on the pavement.

Jarrod held his hand out to Ethan. “Take my hand, and I’ll pull.”

Ethan grabbed hold of Jarrod's arm and gripped the back of the seat as he climbed out of the truck. "You okay, Jarrod?" Ethan said as he stepped onto the roadway.

Jarrold glanced down at a drop of blood on his jeans. "Just a scrape. I'm fine." He turned toward the intersection as the kid picked up his dirt bike and threw his leg over the seat. He kick-started the bike and tore off south along Highway 50.

Ethan turned and stared at the GMC and then followed a trail of boxes into the intersection. Canned goods were strewn about the roadway and into the ditch on the opposite side of the highway.

When he tried to make sense of what had happened, he just felt hazy and slightly disoriented. Vivian was right. He really should have waited another day or two. He wasn't himself yet.

Brooke slid her hand into Ethan's. "Let's find a place to rest a minute and regroup."

As the sound of the dirt bike faded, Brooke and Jarrod led Ethan across the street to a country store, stopping in front of a wooden bench by the door.

"Have a seat. Let me take a look at you. How's your head?" Brooke asked, turning it gently from side to side. She lifted the bandage covering the gash he'd received back at the casino in Dodge City. "Thank goodness. You didn't rip any of the staples Vivian put in."

"I don't think I hit my head. It's my arm that hurts." Ethan held up his left arm. He'd smacked his elbow on the steering wheel when the truck slammed into the ditch.

Brooke dismissed it. "Just a scratch," she said, dropping her pack.

"Feels like it's broken."

“It’s not. You’re using it just fine,” Brooke said, handing him her water bottle. “Drink.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ethan said. After Ethan had drunk half the bottle, he handed it back to Brooke and pointed to the intersection. “We should pick up those boxes and cans before someone hits them.”

“Who’s going to hit them?” Jarrod asked.

“Cars.”

Jarrod gave him a quizzical look. “We haven’t seen a running vehicle—other than the kid’s dirt bike—since that driver attacked us back in Kansas.”

Ethan thought for a moment. “Oh, the one Brooke shot?”

Brooke’s expression flattened. “You’re still a little confused?”

Ethan shrugged.

Brooke took a slow, deep breath and let it out. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you to get back on the road. It was too soon. If we figure out how to get the truck out of the ditch, Jarrod can drive the rest of the way home. You need to close your eyes and chill until we reach Tulsa.”

“I can drive,” Ethan said.

“Ethan, you forgot all the cars had stopped working.”

“Just for a minute.”

“That’s enough. Do you even remember where we are?”

Ethan stared blankly at her for a moment. He wasn’t sure. “Kansas?”

“Oklahoma.”

“We’re in Oklahoma? Are we close to Tulsa?”

“Not yet,” Brooke said, dropping down next to Ethan.

“I’m going to start picking up the food,” Jarrod said.

Brooke placed her rifle in Ethan’s lap and stood. “I’ll help Jarrod. You cover me. Just don’t shoot me. Okay?”

“I can help him,” Ethan said, starting to stand.

Brooke grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back onto the bench. “Sit! Rest! We’ll get the boxes.”

Ethan watched Brooke pick up cans of food and cardboard boxes from the roadway. She moved as if she was in pain. After gathering up an armload, she placed them along the gravel shoulder and returned for another stack. She stopped for a moment as if to catch her breath.

Ethan crossed the parking lot and joined Brooke and Jarrod in the middle of the highway.

Brooke glanced back at the GMC. “How are we going to get it out?”

Ethan shrugged and shook his head. “I just don’t know, Brooke.”

She closed her eyes and placed a hand over her chest. She drew a deep breath and held it before slowly releasing it. Then she opened her eyes and stared off to the east. “Two hundred miles at two miles per hour equals...” She ran her hands over her face. “That’s almost two weeks of walking.”

Ethan took her into his arms and held her tight. “I’m so sorry. We were so close.”

“It’s one step forward and ten steps back.”

Ethan could hear the sadness in her voice. He turned back to the truck. It was possible it would still run—if they could somehow pull it from the ditch. Ethan moved to the side of the roadway and stared down at it. “We should at least put the boxes back under the tarp and strap them down.” One ratchet strap hadn’t been enough to keep the boxes from flying out as the vehicle slid sideways and tipped, but it would keep the tarp down enough to conceal the boxes from immediate view. Not that he really thought it would do any good. If anyone wandered by and was curious, all they had to do was lift up one corner to see the contents.

“What good is that? We can’t carry it on our backs. We’ll have to abandon the food with the truck,” Brooke said.

Jarrold climbed down into the ditch, opened the door, and slid behind the steering wheel. He turned the key, and it took a few times, but eventually, the truck roared to life.

“So, it runs. What good does that do us now?” Brooke asked.

Jarrold shut off the engine and exited the vehicle the same way he’d entered. Back in the middle of the highway, he scanned the surrounding buildings. Spotting a pole barn and shop, Jarrold moved into the intersection.

“What is it?” Brooke said, bringing her rifle up and turning a half circle in the middle of the roadway.

“I was thinking...” Jarrold studied the position of the truck and the nearby tree line. “If we had a rope puller or come-along.”

“A what-along?” Brooke asked.

“Ropes and pulleys—that’s what we need. Four pulleys and maybe a hundred feet of rope.” Jarrold looked up to the

sky, deep in thought, while doing the math. “Four pulleys would give us a five-to-one mechanical advantage, but if we add a friction hitch, it will give us nine to one.”

Brooke moved to his side and turned her gaze to the truck. “Where are we going to get pulleys and ropes?”

Jarrod smiled and pointed to the shop building. “The store might have rope. Might have to tie a couple together, but it would still work.”

“You really think we can get the truck out of the ditch without a tow truck?” Ethan asked.

“I used to help my grandpa pull his tractor out of the mud with a rope and pulley system. It’s worth trying. Anything’s better than walking.”

Brooke ran back to the store, snatched up her pack, and shouldered it. “Ethan, let’s go find the things we need.”

EIGHT

Ethan

Freedom Country Store

Highway 64

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

They'd decided Jarrod would remain with the truck guarding the food while Ethan and Brooke ventured farther in search of a rope and pulleys. They'd struck out at finding either of those in the shop closest to the highway. But Ethan wasn't about to give up.

"Anything?" Jarrod asked as they returned.

"Nothing. I want to check that detached garage across the road from the shop. You okay waiting here with our stuff?" Ethan asked.

"I'm fine. Lexi and I will keep watch over the truck."

"It might take a bit to find everything, but I think you have the right idea."

Brooke stood guard as Ethan slipped inside the garage. From what Ethan could tell, the owners were gone—either

away at the moment or moved on somewhere else, perhaps in search of family.

Ethan broke one of his glow sticks, shook it, and held it over his head as he searched a long bench that ran the length of one wall. Not finding what he was searching for, he moved to a tall metal cabinet and opened its doors. “Awesome,” he said under his breath, pulling a heavy-duty tow strap from the shelf. He’d need one more to work the pulley system, properly, but this was a promising start. Ethan stuffed it into his pack, shouldered the bag, and backed out the door—scanning the workbench a second time just in case he’d overlooked something.

Exiting the garage, Ethan noticed another shop building up a hill. A dog barked and ran toward the fence line that surrounded the adjacent house. Ethan turned back to the roadway, disappointed that the home appeared occupied. They’d need to travel farther down the road to locate any pulleys. He glanced up at the sky. They were wasting a lot of daylight.

So close, but yet so far. He’d hoped that once they reached Oklahoma, it would be smooth sailing. That had not been the case.

“Did you find what you needed?” Brooke asked as he turned toward the highway.

He took her hand, and they moved across the road and into a nearby field. “I found one thing. We need to keep looking. We’ll find it in the next barn or shop.”

“Okay,” Brooke said. “Maybe we should look for bikes and stuff, too, while we’re at it. Even if we get the truck out, we could put them in the bed—as backup for later.”

“Smart. I’ll keep my eyes open for bikes, too.”

As they crested a hill, Ethan spotted a brick-and-stone home off to the left. Behind it was a large red metal barn. “I bet you anything we’ll find what we need in there.”

Brooke cupped her hand over her eyes. “I think I see chickens in the front yard. It’s probably occupied.”

We’ll sneak in from the back, find the pulleys, and get back out before we’re noticed,” Ethan said.

“It’s too risky.”

“How far do you want to walk, Brooke? It could be awhile before we find an abandoned place.” He knew the risk they were taking by trespassing and borrowing things, but the longer that truck sat in that ditch, the more likely it was someone would find it and take their food.

Ethan and Brooke walked along a barbed-wire fence until they came to a six-foot-deep wash that ran within a hundred feet of the back of the barn. “Perfect!” Ethan said in a hushed tone. “We’ll follow this. Stay low, and be as quiet as possible.” He removed his pack and tossed it over the fence, and then helped Brooke with hers. He held the wires apart so she could climb through first. She picked up her pack and dropped it into the red-dirt gulch. Then, shouldering her rifle, she scanned the area behind the barn while Ethan went through the fence.

At the back of the metal barn, Ethan stopped and studied the door. It was large enough to drive a tractor through. He prayed the owner had kept it oiled and that it wouldn’t squeak, alerting the farmer to their presence. “Cover me. I’m going to go over and take a look. You wait here until I get back.”

“Should I go with you? What if they come in from the front and surprise you?”

“I’ll hear them first,” he said, trying to assuage her fears and hoping he was right.

The door opened with only a slight squeak. Ethan slipped inside and removed the glow stick from his pocket. It did little to illuminate the space. Thankfully, the barn had windows along the top of the walls on two sides. It wasn’t bright but allowed enough light inside for him to make his way through without tripping over equipment and hurting himself. And there was a lot of equipment in the space. He was sure he’d find what he was looking for in there. But after a thorough search, all he discovered was another tow strap. It was better than nothing, but it was next to useless without the pulleys. Reluctantly, Ethan moved back toward the exit, moving quicker now around a power washer, some type of agricultural sprayer, several five-gallon buckets of hydraulic fluid, and a portable air tank. As he stepped over a PTO driveline, he caught his foot on something and toppled over onto his side with a thump. He sat up and stared at his feet. “Holy crap! I stepped right over it on the way in,” he said, picking up the come-along and then slipping out the door to the shallow channel behind the barn.

Brooke ran beside him. “What’s that thing?”

“A come-along,” Ethan said, dropping down into the mud. He turned and raised his hands to help Brooke down.

“What’s a come-along?”

“A power puller.”

Brooke gave him a blank look.

“It’s a hand-operated winch with a ratchet used to pull heavy objects.”

“Really? You found what we needed to get the truck out of the ditch?” she asked, excitement filling her voice.

Ethan took off running in a crouch back toward the road. “Almost. All I need now are four pulleys, and we are as good as back on the road.”

As he held the fence wires open for her, she asked, “Another barn then?”

“We’ll find them in the next one for sure,” Ethan said, handing her the winch.

After returning to the highway and strapping the come-along to the outside of his pack, Ethan and Brooke continued north in search of pulleys. They walked two miles before finding another barn. The structure looked promising, but the farmer who exited as Ethan approached did not look friendly.

“I’m sorry, sir. I um...”

“What the hell are you doing on my land!” He reached into the pocket of his jacket.

Ethan raised both hands and began backing away.

“Get your hand out of your pocket, mister. I don’t want to have to shoot you, but I will,” Brooke called from behind Ethan.

“It’s okay, Brooke. He’s just protecting what’s his.” Ethan kept his eyes on the man’s hands. “We’re leaving. No need for anyone to get hurt here.” Ethan spotted a water hydrant and a trough filled with fresh-looking water. “We—we were just very thirsty.” Ethan tried to look desperate. “We’ve been walking for days and haven’t found much water.”

Brooke took his lead and said, “We’ve walked all the way from Kansas, trying to get home to our twins in Tulsa.” She

stepped up beside Ethan and lowered the barrel of the rifle slightly. “Can we please have just a small drink from your trough? We’ll drink and then go. I swear.”

She sounded very convincing. The man’s expression softened. He nodded toward the water tank. “Get a drink, and then get the hell off my property before I shoot you both.”

“Thank you!” Brooke said, sidestepping toward the trough.

As Ethan and Brooke leaned over the livestock tank, Ethan scooped a handful of water and lifted it to his lips.

“I don’t care if he shoots me. I am not drinking from the same water as his cows,” Brooke whispered.

Ethan splashed water on his face and stood. “Thank you, mister,” Ethan said as he and Brooke backed toward the road.

Once they reached the pavement, he and Brooke took off running, wanting to put distance between them and the farmer. They walked for several miles, seeing nothing but oil wells and vast prairie. There were no homes, shops, or barns in sight. Along the way, Ethan questioned whether they should continue, but what choice did they have? If they didn’t get the truck out of the ditch, they’d be walking the remaining two hundred miles to Tulsa. After another few miles, Ethan was about ready to give up and head back to the truck, when Brooke spotted something.

“There’s a mailbox,” she said, pointing to the left side of the roadway.

“I don’t see a house,” Ethan said.

They walked a bit further and spotted a homestead bordered on two sides by rows of pine trees, likely planted as a windbreak. Oklahoma wind could be brutal when it comes

sweeping down the plain right behind the rain. Ethan chuckled, recalling the song he had learned in grade school.

“How far do you think that is?” Brooke asked.

“A thousand feet or so,” Ethan said, staring down the long gravel drive to the white clapboard farmhouse.

“What do you think? It’s a long way.”

“We’ll stay on the opposite side of the windbreak, then cross at the back of the house,” Ethan said. After their last encounter, he almost told Brooke to wait for him on the road, but he knew she wouldn’t.

Ethan surveyed the front of the house through the boughs of the pines as they moved west along the south side of the property. When they reached the back corner of the house, Ethan spotted a gray metal pole barn one hundred yards away. “Wait here. Keep an eye on the back door. You should be able to see if anyone comes around from the front on this side as well. Whistle if you see anyone.”

He climbed over a four-foot field fence that was bent over with heavy vines and had seen better days, then sprinted along the back of the house to the side of the barn. The huge sliding doors on each end of the structure were open. Ethan stepped inside and scanned the interior. This building was used to house animals and consisted mostly of livestock stalls complete with hay, straw, and animal poop. He noted that the smell was barely noticeable. Someone had recently cleaned out the stalls. A wheelbarrow sat in the aisle, heaped high with old bedding, and a pitchfork leaned against one of the posts.

He continued down an aisle between the stalls, moving toward the back of the barn, where he found a tack room. He opened the door and smiled at the sight that greeted him.

Hanging on hooks were several pulleys of various sizes, more than he'd need to pull the truck out of the ditch.

Ethan raced into the room, snatched four of them from the hooks, and stuffed them into his pack. As he turned and stepped through the doorway, a man appeared out of one of the stalls.

NINE

Annie Gillespie

Freedom Prairie Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

Annie Gillespie was in the barn bottle-feeding a twelve-hour-old calf who'd been rejected by its momma, when MacArthur and Patton took off down the driveway barking. A moment later, she heard a rider approaching. She set down the bottle and picked up her .30-30 Winchester before heading toward the door. Patton rounded the corner of the calving barn and flopped down in a pile of hay.

Stepping out onto the gravel drive, Annie looked to the west and watched as MacArthur escorted Lonnie Gladwell toward the house.

“Over here!” Annie called as Lonnie approached the bend in her driveway that branched off to the barns and corrals.

Lonnie removed his Western-style felt hat and waved it in acknowledgment.

As MacArthur joined Patton near the hay bales, Lonnie dismounted his horse. With the reins in his left hand and his

right hand resting on a holstered pistol, he approached the door to the barn. “Annie, I rode over to see if you’d heard from Mitch.”

Annie lowered her rifle, pointing it at the ground. “No. Not a thing. Sheriff Parkhurst was here last evening. He said there’s been no sign of him since he left his house in Alva.”

After not finding the Sheriff Wayne Parkhurst at his office in Alva, Oklahoma, Mitch had ridden northwest to Wayne’s home along Turkey Creek. He’d reported finding Harry Gladwell’s body and had given his statement telling the sheriff he was heading back to notify the family. According to them, Mitch had never arrived at the Gladwells’ ranch. Allegedly, the first the family had learned of Harry’s demise was when the sheriff retrieved the body from Jackass Canyon and delivered it to them for burial.

Lonnie pivoted and glanced out toward the corrals. “It’s almost like Mitch just up and vanished.”

“Seems like it,” Annie said. Over the last two days, she’d covered nearly every inch of her ranch looking for him, thinking maybe he’d decided to come there before going to the Gladwell ranch. There were at least a dozen things out on the plains that could kill a person, but Annie still held out hope he’d be found.

“Did you or your folks find any tracks indicating he made it to your ranch?” Annie was grasping at straws, she knew. She’d heard from nearly every rancher around, and each of them had conducted a thorough search of their property, but to no avail. There’d been no sign Mitch had ever made it back to Freedom.

“Not a trace,” Lonnie said.

“Did the sheriff say why my brother was riding on your ranch?”

Annie had had a long discussion with Wayne about how Harry’s body could have wound up on her ranch. Wayne believed Mitch was wrong and that the holes in body were caused by the fall into the canyon. Wayne had told her that the coroner had examined Harry and concluded the same thing—that it was an accident and not murder. Wayne’s theory was that Harry had been tracking down stray cows. It looked like he died around the time of the big rain that took out part of Annie’s fence bordering Harry’s ranch.

“He didn’t say.” Annie lied. She didn’t want to discuss it with Lonnie until she spoke with Mitch. She trusted his judgment, and he also believed Harry had been murdered. After telling the sheriff just that, he’d disappeared. Annie didn’t know what to make of it except that it was around the time of the blackout. His truck had been found in a ditch, and he hadn’t been seen since.

Annie had racked her brain trying to come up with theories about who might have killed Harry. The perpetrator might just be responsible for Mitch’s disappearance, too.

Harry had been confrontational, which had not earned him many friends. In fact, he had a lot of enemies, but Annie could think of no one who would wish him dead. Freedom was a small community. Most of the locals had lived there all their lives, and generations of families had been raised there. It wasn’t uncommon for disagreements to occur.

Lonnie dropped his horse’s reins and allowed it to walk over to munch on hay. There was a long pause as he stared out toward the canyon.

“Did you really ride all the way over here to ask me about Mitch?” Annie asked.

Lonnie turned his attention back to Annie. “The sheriff mentioned that Mitch had caught a couple of outsiders sneaking around his shop the day before Harry went missing. He reported missing some tools at the time.”

“He did? Mitch never mentioned it to me.” Annie thought for a moment. Mitch had said that he thought Harry had been killed by outsiders. At the time, the statement hadn’t made sense. They didn’t get a lot of outsiders in their community.

“You think Mitch might have had a run-in with someone on his way home?” Lonnie asked.

Annie shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s possible, I guess but the sheriff hasn’t found any evidence of anything. There wasn’t any sign of a struggle around Mitch’s truck.”

Lonnie stared at his boots for several seconds before responding. “Might be that he tried to walk home and got jumped by those folks.” He lifted his head and stared at Annie. “Maybe Mitch decided to just run off somewhere.”

Annie took a step back. “Mitch?” She laughed out loud. “No. No way. Why would he?”

Lonnie stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know.”

Annie had known Mitch all her life. If he was going to leave the county, he would have said something. It was no coincidence that they find Harry’s body and then Mitch goes missing. Harry’s body was never meant to be found, and the killer probably thought Mitch knew more than he did. Annie took another step toward him, both hands gripping her Winchester now. “He was last known to be heading to your

place notify your family about the murder. We only have your guys' word that he never made it there.”

Lonnie stepped back, his hand moving toward his pistol. “You accusing me of something, Annie Gillespie?”

Annie shook her head, squared her shoulders, and lifted the barrel of her rifle. “I’m just stating facts—unlike you.”

After several tense seconds, Lonnie lowered his hands to his side and then turned toward his horse.

“My brother had a tragic accident. If you repeat what you just said, I’ll sue your ass for slander.”

Lonnie climbed back into his saddle and rode back the way he’d come.

Until that moment, Annie hadn’t considered that a member of Harry’s family might have killed him. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

TEN

Robert

Spencer Residence

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 14

Robert stepped outside his garage and pressed his back against the door. He closed his eyes, wishing he didn't need to go, his heart heavy from his conversation with Ollie. His grandson reminded Robert so much of Ethan at that age. "Where are you, son?" Robert muttered to himself as he shouldered his rifle and stepped onto the path leading to the street. He knew how difficult parenting could be. He'd done it before. But parenting his grandchildren in these horrific circumstances was gut-wrenching.

The twins missed their mom and dad fiercely and had been traumatized by all they'd seen and heard over the last two weeks. Nina's words played in his head as he turned toward Kordell Johnson's house on the corner. *What am I supposed to do if you go and get yourself killed out there?* Maybe he should have insisted on leaving after the incident with Roy Blackburn at the LaFortune fishing pond. He didn't know anymore.

“Hey, Robert!” Layla Williamson yelled as he passed her house. She was leaning over her flower bed with a trowel in her hand.

“Planting flowers?” Robert asked.

“No! Lettuce and spinach.”

Robert nodded. “I see. Smart. It’s good you had the seeds.”

“Antonio got them from Southern Agriculture. He passed them out to everyone yesterday.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Nina was the first to ask for some.”

“She didn’t mention it,” Robert said.

“I get it. Seth and I haven’t seen much of each other lately either, and when we do—all we do is fight.”

Robert wondered if the Williamsons had heard his and Nina’s heated conversation, and then he recalled that all the windows were open.

“I better get to stepping,” Robert said.

“You guys going to the animal hospital?”

She’d heard.

“Yeah,” Robert replied.

“Good luck,” Layla said with a wave of her hand.

“Thanks.”

As Robert made his way up the Johnsons’ walkway, he comforted himself with the knowledge that Nina wouldn’t be alone if something happened to him out there. She had their community. It had taken a minute or two, but their block had pulled together for the common good. They’d put aside petty

differences and no longer bickered about fence lines and blaring music. Their focus was on surviving—they didn't have time for anything else.

“You ready, Robert?” Kordell said. He stepped through the side door to his garage carrying his pack and rifle in his hands.

“Ready,” Robert said.

“Kordell!” Temperance Johnson yelled. She emerged from the garage holding a pistol in her index finger and thumb as if it were something nasty. “You forgot your pistol.”

“I left that for you, Temperance. I told you that this morning.”

“I...”

“Just leave it on the kitchen table.”

“But the kids.”

“The kids are seventeen and eighteen years old. They know how to handle a weapon.”

“I'd feel better if you locked it in the gun cabinet.”

Kordell spun around. “Now, Temperance, what the hell good is it going to do you in there?”

“I won't need it.” Temperance waved her hand in the air. “We have all these patrols. They have guns.”

Kordell raised his voice. “And if someone gets past them?”

Temperance said nothing.

“I have to go. Just leave the pistol on the table,” Kordell said, turning toward the street.

When they reached the end of the driveway, Temperance called out. “Be careful. Both of you.”

Kordell turned and walked backward. He blew her an air kiss and said, “I love you, Temperance Johnson.”

“How’s the Hutchens kid?” Robert asked Kordell as they walked.

“Temperance said it’s touch and go, but I think he lost too much blood. We argued about wasting antibiotics on the kid.” The big guy sighed. “You know her. She has her head in the sand and still thinks the cavalry is going to ride in with a mobile hospital and save us all.”

“She’s always been a very positive person.”

“Yeah. I know, but it’s starting to be a problem. We have to face facts here. Not everyone is going to survive this. If we want to be one of the few that do, we have to be smart—not waste valuable antibiotics on someone who has zero chance of recovering.”

Robert stopped as they approached Newburys’ driveway. “Maybe we should take that decision out of her hands.”

Kordell cocked his head to one side and eyed Robert. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we don’t let her make that decision—or you. We could have someone else be in charge of dispensing medicine.”

Kordell looked at him quizzically. “Like who?”

“Nina.”

Kordell glanced back over his shoulder toward his house. “Nina? I’m not sure how well that would go over. Nina’s not a nurse.”

“But she’s practical, compassionate, and impartial,” Robert said.

Kordell started up the Newburys' walkway.

"Something to consider," Robert said.

"Let's see what Newbury and Antonio think about it," Kordell said.

"Think about what?" Newbury said, appearing at the gate of the privacy fence.

"How about we discuss it on the way to the animal hospital?" Robert asked.



"If you guys have room, would you mind picking up a bag of sensitive stomach and skin dog food?" Elena Newbury asked, stepping back from the Chrysler Pacifica parked across the sidewalk and up against the Merketts' fence—one of four vehicles the block was using to keep looters out of their street. "Since we've had to feed Groot the cheap stuff from the grocery store, he's been itching so bad," she continued.

"We'll see what we can do," Greg Newbury said, giving Elena a peck on her cheek.

"Be careful out there, okay? No hero stuff. Groot and I need you back here in one piece," Elena said, handing Greg the keys to the Pacifica.

Newbury unlocked the rear passenger door, then gestured for Antonio Ferretti to climb inside. The seats had been stowed on the floor, making it easier to climb through the vehicle and out the other side—easier for Antonio and Robert, who were both of average height and weight, but not so much for Kordell.

Kordell stood in the opening with both hands resting on the law enforcement duty belt he'd acquired on one of his scavenging runs. Robert hadn't learned all the details, only that they'd come across a deceased police officer. Kordell had arranged the belt with a Glock 19 on his right hip and a Glock 17 situated for cross-draw on his left. Unfortunately, the officer's body armor didn't cover all of Kordell's large torso, but it was better than no protection, which was what Robert and Antonio had.

"You need a hand?" Robert asked.

"Nah, man. Just take my pack, and I'll crawl through," Kordell said, handing Robert his backpack.

Robert, Antonio, Newbury, and Kordell sprinted across Sheridan Road and ran north through the Farm Shopping Center parking lot. Robert was shocked at how quickly his energy ran out. He supposed that was what happened when your body wasn't getting enough nutrients to sustain itself.

After weaving through the shopping center, they turned east and hurried along 51st Street. This route added an extra mile to the trip, but they'd chosen it to avoid conflict with a group who'd claimed the area near the 61st and Sheridan intersection. Kordell, Antonio, and Newbury had all been this way before. This would be Robert's first outing so far from home.

ELEVEN

Ethan

Rocking JK Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

Brooke whistled just as the man bolted from the barn. Ethan chased after him, believing he was going to retrieve a weapon or alert someone inside. He needed to reach Brooke and get her out of there before the man succeeded. When Ethan reached the barn doors, he saw the man sprinting west away from the house, not toward it. Had he disturbed him as he was trying to steal from the owner? He must have thought Ethan was the farmer to bolt the way he did.

Ethan took off running toward the windbreak where he'd left Brooke, but made it no more than ten steps.

“Stop right there!” a young male voice yelled.

Ethan stopped and was in the process of turning when Brooke yelled his name.

“Ethan! Gun! Get down!”

Ethan dropped and crawled on all fours toward a chicken coop.

Brooke fired, but her shot was high, and it struck the barn with a loud ping. Ethan couldn't see the kid, but he knew Brooke wouldn't have fired unless he was in danger.

Ethan rose to a crouch and moved toward the south end of the hen house to get a better view of the yard and house. When he reached the corner, he stood and pressed his shoulder against the painted plywood structure. As he leaned forward on the balls of his feet, Ethan heard the frightening sound of a shotgun being racked behind him.

"Drop that piece," a woman said. "Or I'll drop you where you stand. Don't think I won't."

Ethan dropped his pistol to the ground.

"Now lift the sling over your head nice and slow."

As he complied with the woman's demand, Ethan's eyes scanned the windbreak, searching for Brooke. He couldn't see her through the pine boughs.

"Now turn around slowly," the woman said.

Ethan rotated to face her with his hands in the air. "I'm sorry. I'm not here to hurt you or your family." Before him stood a woman in her late sixties. Beneath a dark brown, Western-style felt hat, she wore her long, silver hair in a ponytail over one shoulder. The legs of her pants were rolled up, and her muck boots were muddy.

"But you're here to steal from us, though, ain't ya?"

"Yes, ma'am." There would be no use in lying about it. He was caught red-handed. If the woman checked his pack, she'd find the pulleys from her barn, along with the items taken from other farms along the road.

“Were you after eggs or the chickens?” the woman asked, nodding toward the chicken coop.

“Neither. I took four pulleys from your barn—that’s all.”

The woman threw her head back and laughed. “That’s all? What in the dickens do you plan to do with pulleys?”

“Get my truck out of the ditch.”

“You got a running truck?” the woman asked, shifting from foot to foot and lowering the shotgun slightly.

“Yes, ma’am. My wife and I are trying to get home to our young children. A kid on a dirt bike ran out in front of us, and I had to brake to miss him. The truck ended up in a ditch across from the country store.”

“That would be Jimmy Crouch,” the woman said.

A teenage boy rounded the back of the coop and approached the woman. He looked to be in his late teens, dressed in coveralls that were covered in grease and dirt. “You okay, Gran?” the boy asked, aiming a hunting rifle at Ethan’s chest.

“Fine. I’m fine. The man was just telling me that the Crouch boy ran him off the road, putting his truck in the ditch across from the Freedom Store.”

“You come here for help getting it out?” the boy asked.

“Sort of,” Ethan said tentatively.

“He came to borrow some pulleys,” his grandmother said.

“Oh, I see. You got a winch on the truck?”

“No. I was going to use a series of ropes and pulleys with a come-along.”

“That should work—if you got something sturdy to pull from.”

“There’s a tree a few feet away.”

“You need help?”

“Um—I guess I could use some help. I got a friend back at the truck to help me, though.”

He turned to his grandmother. “I almost finished all my chores.”

“Did you finish mucking the stalls?”

“No. Grandpa said he’d finish that while I chopped wood for tonight.”

Seeing the boy point toward an impressive wood pile, Ethan scanned the treeless fields around the home, wondering where the trees had come from.

“Go check with Papaw and make sure he doesn’t need no more help. If he says you can go, then it’s all right by me,” the woman said, lowering the shotgun to her side. The boy spun around and trotted off toward the barn.

“I—I don’t really need his help, ma’am,” Ethan said.

“He’s a good boy. We brought him up right. It’s the Christian thing to do—helping strangers and entertaining angels.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ethan said.

The boy screamed his grandfather’s name, and Ethan’s heart just about leaped into his chest.

TWELVE

Robert

Woodland View Animal Hospital

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 14

Loaded down with weapons and ammo, it took twenty minutes just to reach Memorial Park Cemetery.

“Did you know that Roy Clark is buried here?” Antonio asked as they neared the chapel.

“Yeah, and along with a few other famous people,” Kordell said.

After hopping over the short gate spanning the entrance, the scavenging team moved south through the cemetery, where several members of Robert’s family were buried.

“We’ll cut through the industrial park and pick up the flood control channel that runs along the north side of the Woodland Hills Mall,” Kordell said, sounding a little winded.

“Doesn’t that run through neighborhoods?” Robert asked.

“It does, but that’s why we’re out so early. There’s enough daylight to move around without flashlights, yet it’s still dark

enough to slip by without being seen.”

Robert was relying on Kordell’s experience in this instance, and it made sense. “Lead the way,” Robert said.

As they fast-walked through the industrial park, past a sign company and collision repair center, Kordell brought up Robert’s proposal about where to store any antibiotics they found.

“You all know I love my wife to death, but she’s not entirely accepting the reality of the situation here. Her heart is too tender, and she just wants to save everyone—even those who don’t deserve saving, in my opinion.”

“I’m not sure we can afford that kind of thinking anymore,” Antonio said, stepping over a concrete barrier and into the drainage ditch.

“I agree with Antonio, but is that our call? I mean, who gets to decide who lives and who dies?” Newbury asked.

“God,” Antonio replied.

“In that case, why do anything? Why not just leave the injured where they fall and let God sort it out?” Newbury said sarcastically.

“These are the types of decisions made in a mass casualty situations. Limited time and resources force medical providers to prioritize treatment for those with the best chance of survival,” Robert said. He stepped into the flood channel and walked backward a few steps to gauge their reactions. “Ethical considerations aside, in triage, it’s about saving groups of people instead of just an individual. We should be in triage mode. We have to consider the group—the residents of our block—beforehand. Only if we have a surplus can we consider helping outsiders.”

“Outsiders?” Newbury asked, his voice pitching slightly.

“Yes,” Antonio said. “Anyone outside our perimeter is an outsider—not one of us.”

“So, we’ve reached the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ stage?” Newbury said.

“We reached that stage pretty much from the first night,” Kordell said.

As they approached an apartment complex, the team grew quiet. Once they passed it, Kordell continued. “We all decided to wall ourselves off from anyone that didn’t live on our street. We all chose between ‘us’ versus ‘them’ regarding food, water, and security. What Robert and Antonio are saying is that we need to apply the same principle to our medical supplies.”

Newbury said nothing.

As they walked behind the Walmart store, the scavenging team returned to the street. Robert could still smell the charred remains of the burned-out stores in the strip mall adjacent to the box store. They sprinted across Memorial Avenue toward another shopping center parking lot and hurried south for half a mile to the animal hospital.

“Crap!” Newbury said as they approached the front of the building.

The doors had been smashed. Someone had beaten them there.

“There still might be some antibiotics left. The folks who did this may have only been seeking pain meds,” Antonio said.

“I doubt it, but we came all this way. Might as well go in and check it out,” Kordell said, stepping through the broken

glass and entering the lobby.

Robert, Antonio, and Newbury followed him into the animal hospital and through a door to the clinical side of the office. They passed the exam rooms and a surgical suite and proceeded to the back, where the meds would have been kept under lock and key. Kordell went in first and then reemerged, proclaiming that the coast was clear. “There’s still some good stuff here. Forceps, scalpels, needles, suture kits, things like that.” Kordell removed his oversized backpack, plopped it onto a counter, and filled it with medical supplies.

Robert moved deeper into the room and examined the supply cabinet, while Newbury knelt and picked up something from off the floor.

“What do you think this mallet is for?” Newbury said, holding up the stainless steel hammer.

“No idea,” Antonio said.

“Something to do with bones,” Kordell said, taking it from Newbury and dropping it into his open pack.

“Think we might need this?” Antonio held up a package labeled “Gigli Saw Wire.”

Kordell took it from him. “It’s for amputations,” he said, shoving into his expanding pack.

Newbury scrunched his face in horror. “I hope we never need that.”

“It might be the only way to save a life sometime. If you get shot in the arm or leg, and the bone is broken, there’s no way to do surgery to fix it. The only way to stop the bleeding could be to amputate,” Robert said.

“I don’t know, man. I don’t think I’d want to live without an arm or leg—not under these circumstances. I’d just be a burden to my family.”

“So you’d want us to decide whether you live or die?” Antonio asked.

Newbury stared at him for a moment and then nodded. “I’m making the decision. I’m telling you that I don’t want to live if I’m only going to be a burden. If I survived something like that without bleeding out, what good would I be to anyone without a leg or arm?”

“Shouldn’t you discuss that with your family? They might feel differently about that,” Kordell said.

Robert would want to try everything if it were his family member. He’d want to save Nina or the twins no matter what. He was sure that Ethan and Brooke would feel the same way. He returned his attention to the medicine cabinet.

“But what about the good of the group versus the individual argument?” Newbury asked.

Robert returned a package of heartworm medicine to the shelf and turned to face him. “That was what I was getting at by saying Nina should be in charge of the antibiotics, and we should all have a say in who gets them and when.”

“Sounds like socialism,” Newbury said.

That made Robert pause. Was that what he was proposing? Under socialism, citizens were supposed to share resources equally. He wasn’t proposing they pooled all their food, water, and other supplies. Just the medical resources—solely because they had one person in their group with medical training.

“Does that mean you want Temperance to continue making those decisions alone?” Robert glanced over at Kordell. “No

offense, Kordell. She's a very good nurse."

"I got you. I understand where you're coming from. This issue is something the entire block needs to discuss. But this ain't the place and time. We need to grab what we can and get back before it's too light out."

Robert moved over to a cabinet that had already been ransacked, and some of its contents were strewn on the floor. He didn't expect to find anything useful for humans inside it. He pushed the door wider and inhaled deeply. "I found it!" He lifted one of the bottles into the air for everyone to see. As he turned, he caught movement in the corridor outside the room.

"We're not alone," Robert said, dropping the antibiotics on the counter and pulling his pistol. The others did the same as they moved toward the door. "It looked like a kid. She couldn't have been more than twelve years old," Robert said as they all stacked up behind Kordell.

"How many?" Kordell whispered.

"Just one—that I saw."

They all listened for a moment.

"I've got left," Kordell said.

"I'm behind you," Antonio said.

"Robert and I will take the right," Newbury said.

Kordell rushed into the hall. "Drop it, kid! Drop the weapon!" he yelled and immediately began firing.

"Did you hit her?" Newbury asked, ducking into the exam room across the hall.

"I don't know," Kordell said, moving down the corridor to the next open door.

“Where did she go?” Antonio asked, following Kordell.

Kordell pointed to a room at the end of the hallway.

From his position in the doorway of the medical supply room, Robert could see the door that Kordell indicated was partially open. On the floor near the threshold were several blood droplets. “She’s hit.”

THIRTEEN

Brooke

Rocking JK Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

Brooke had spotted the man running from the barn and moved to the next tree to get a better view of the door. Her heart raced, and a lump the size of Texas formed in her throat as she waited for Ethan to emerge from the building. Relief washed over her as he rounded the metal structure and headed back toward her. She caught movement to the left of Ethan, and a teen boy appeared. She gasped when he raised his rifle, aiming it directly at Ethan.

Brooke fired but missed the boy. She moved out from the tree line to set up her next shot, but the boy had disappeared by then. She crept to her right along the fence, but several outbuildings obstructed her view. Rusty barbed wire snagged on her vest as she climbed through the fence. She flinched and lifted her head, causing the wire to scrape her scalp and entangle her hair, ripping a handful from its roots as she fell forward on her hands and knees.

Scooping up her rifle, Brooke sprinted toward the barn—the last place she'd seen her husband. She stopped as he came into view. Before him stood the boy and an older woman. They seemed to be having a cordial conversation. The woman held a shotgun, but it was pointed at the ground. The boy's rifle rested across his forearms. Ethan's hands were in his pockets. Ethan was talking his way out of the situation. Brooke moved to her right out of their line of sight and skirted a row of hay bales while attempting to get behind the elderly woman and boy.

As she moved alongside a rusty tin shed, the kid screamed. Brooke darted toward Ethan. When she neared the chicken coop, Ethan and the woman were running toward the barn.

“Gran! Gran! Come quick! Papaw's bleeding bad!” the boy shouted.

Brooke sprinted and closed the distance between the coop and barn, falling in beside Ethan just as he entered the barn. Ethan raced down the aisle and stopped facing one of the stalls. He stepped back and glanced at the older woman scrambling as fast as she could toward him.

“Gerald! Gerald!” the woman yelled. She stopped beside Ethan. Her hands flew up to cover her mouth. The woman let out a blood-curdling scream as she dropped to her knees, her hands grabbing at her husband's shirt.

“Do something, Gran. He's bleeding real bad,” the teen begged.

Ethan raced into the stall. “Get out of the way!”

Ethan grabbed the man and dragged him into the aisle. Brooke could tell he was gone from his lifeless stare and blood-soaked flannel shirt—too much blood. She moved

behind the woman and touched her shoulder as Ethan began CPR. The woman took Brooke's hand, squeezed it tight, and prayed softly.

After what seemed like an hour, Ethan stopped compressions and scooted away from the body, pressing his back against the wooden stall, exhausted, and sweating hard. "I'm so sorry," Ethan whispered as the grandmother and boy whimpered softly. "There's nothing I can do."

"I think not!" a voice boomed from the doorway. "You sick bastard." A tall, skinny man rushed toward them. "You stab a man to death and then feign trying to save him?" The man pointed a finger at Ethan. "That's sick, man!"

Ethan stood, his hand dropping to his holster, but his pistol wasn't there. Brooke spun, reaching for the Glock on her hip, and aimed it at the man.

"What are you talking about, Lonnie?" the woman said through tearing eyes.

"He's the one who killed your husband."

"I did no such thing." Ethan pointed back at the man. "You. It was you." Ethan shook his head. "I saw..." Ethan drew out the words. "I saw you coming out of that very stall. I startled you, and you took off across the field." Ethan stared at the woman and the boy. "He did this—not me. You have to believe me. I did not do this!"

The man raised a pistol—the same 1911 that James Cannon had given Ethan before he and Brooke left Colorado—the one Ethan had dropped outside.

The man aimed the pistol at Ethan. "You're a liar and a murderer. You killed Gerald. Now I'm going to kill you."

“No!” The elderly woman stepped in front of Ethan. “You’ll do no such thing, Lonnie. You put that gun away. If this man killed Gerald as you say, then he’ll stand trial, and you can tell the judge what you saw.”

Brooke placed her finger inside the trigger guard. “Put the gun down or so help me, I will blow your damn head right off your shoulders!”

The man’s eyes whipped left and then down to Brooke’s hands. She stood with her back to one of the stalls, feet shoulder width apart, with the pistol gripped firmly in both hands—just as Ethan had taught her. For a moment, Brooke thought the man was going to turn and shoot her. Her finger twitched, but he lowered the gun. Brooke let out a loud breath of relief and took her finger off the trigger—but she kept the pistol trained on the man.

“We should go, Ethan,” Brooke said, not taking her eyes off the man.

“You’re not going anywhere,” another gruff voice said.

Brooke spun to her left and aimed at the two men standing in the doorway at the front of the barn.

FOURTEEN

Lonnie Gladwell

Rocking JK Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 14

Sheriff Parkhurst loomed over Lonnie as he sat on the tailgate of Gerald's pickup truck. "What the hell happened this time, Lonnie?" Parkhurst asked through gritted teeth.

"Lower your voice, Sheriff," Lonnie said in a calm, measured voice. "You're going to give yourself a stroke."

"Tell me, Lonnie. How did your knife get stuck in your brother's chest?"

"I told you. That outsider startled him, and he must have panicked and stabbed Gerald."

It had been an accident. Lonnie hadn't meant to kill him. He didn't need to. All he had to do was wait and let nature take its course. Without his heart medication, Gerald would be dead within a month. His wife, Jeanette, would be joining him as soon as her blood pressure, cholesterol, and thyroid meds ran out. He would have easily convinced Graddy to allow him to run Gerald's ranch. But Gerald had got in his face. He'd

downright accused him of murdering Harry. Lonnie had snapped. He'd worried for a split second that he'd screwed himself, but when he'd backed out of the stall and seen that guy standing near the tack room, he'd known his luck hadn't run out after all.

“And how did this stranger get the knife your daddy gave you for your tenth birthday?”

Lonnie smiled. “Easy. I loaned it to Gerald. The killer must have found it lying on the shelf below the pulleys he intended to steal.”

“You can continue acting smug and blowing this off, but you're in a world of hurt here, Lonnie. I can't keep fixing shit for you.”

“What's to fix?” Things couldn't be going any better. It was almost like fate had intervened and placed that Ethan guy in the barn the second Lonnie decided to rid himself of his meddling brother. “You've got your killer, Sheriff.” Lonnie slid off the tailgate, put his hands inside his pockets, and nodded toward his ranch across the road. “I have chores to do if you don't need me to do your job for you.”

“You're going to have to testify, Lonnie. Judge Miller will want to hear this from your own mouth, so you damn sure better get your story straight. I'm not going down because of you.”

Lonnie removed his hands from his pockets and closed the distance between them. He got right up in Parkhurst's grill. “You better pull yourself together and remember who you're talking to, Sheriff. Remember, I know where the bodies of all the people you've killed over the last two decades are buried. I'm sure Judge Miller would find one in particular quite interesting.”

Lonnie had been a love-sick sixteen-year-old boy out looking for a place to park with his girl when he'd stumbled upon Parkhurst and one of his deputies disposing of a body. They hadn't known he was there. After they left, Lonnie had climbed down into the canyon and discovered all the bones. It wasn't until years later that he'd revealed to Parkhurst what he knew. That piece of information had kept Lonnie out of jail on assault charges. Parkhurst had let him off with a warning to get his anger under control.

Parkhurst's eyes narrowed. "Just because the world's gone to shit doesn't mean your killing spree will go unnoticed. Some people in Freedom aren't going to buy that the young couple killed Gerald, especially if Mitch shows up and tells everyone how Harry had a bullet hole in his skull."

"It's your job to see they do."

Parkhurst glared at him. "After this trial is over, I'm out. I want to collect my money, and I'm heading south. You can clean up your own messes when I'm gone."

"Fine," Lonnie said, although he'd never intended to hand over his daddy's silver coins. He'd need those if things didn't turn around and the lights stayed out. "After the trial and when Mitch and the outsiders are dead, you'll get your money."

"I hope the town believes you and not that young couple," the sheriff said. "For both our sakes."

FIFTEEN

Robert

Memorial Park Cemetery

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 14

“I can’t believe I shot a kid,” Kordell said from the doorway. He was pressed up against the open door facing the room where the young girl had fled. “She had a gun. She raised it. It was her or me,” Kordell said in a rush.

“Hey, kid. Are you hit?” Newbury asked.

The young girl said nothing.

“No one out here wants to hurt you. We’re all dads,” Antonio yelled.

Silence.

“Damn, I hope she’s not dead,” Kordell said.

“We want to help you. Kordell has a girl a little older than you. I have a five-year-old daughter. No one wanted this,” Antonio called to her.

Still nothing.

“Let us help you before you bleed out,” Newbury said. “You don’t want to die alone in there.”

Robert moved across the corridor and into the exam room with Newbury. “She might not be alone. There could be others in the room or elsewhere in the clinic.”

“Robert’s right. We should get the meds and go,” Antonio said.

“We’re just going to leave her?” Newbury asked.

“You gonna go in there and check on her?” Antonio asked.

Robert reentered the hall and ran to the exam room across from the door the girl had entered. With his shoulder pressed into the door jamb, he peered through the opening. He saw nothing. He moved back into the corridor and motioned for Antonio to cover him as he approached the half-opened door. Robert kicked the door open the rest of the way and then pressed himself against the wall outside the room. He turned to his left, and with his pistol leading, he swept his view from the right to the left inside the room but saw no one. “Cover me,” he whispered, gesturing for Antonio to follow him.

Once he was inside, he could see the room was empty. He moved to a broken window and peered down at a smear of blood on the windowsill. “She’s gone,” he called, backing out of the room.

“Crap!” Kordell said. “I can’t believe I shot a kid.”

“You didn’t have a choice,” Antonio said. “She was scared and drew on you. Nothing you could have done to avoid it.”

“We need to get the meds and go, guys. Those shots could be heard for blocks. And whoever the girl was with might want revenge.”

Antonio moved swiftly into the medical supply room and swept all the meds from the cabinet into his bag, not taking the time to sort through them. Robert knew nothing would go to waste. There were several pets on their block. That's when he remembered Piper was out of dog food, and Newbury's wife had asked for a special brand for her Newfoundland.

There was no way he could carry enough dog food to really make a difference. They'd need to return with a wagon to haul enough food to last more than a couple of days—and no one would take that kind of risk for a pet. As they passed through the lobby, Robert paused long enough to stuff as many cans of dog food as he could into his pack. It was heavy and caused the pack to pull on his shoulders even after he adjusted the straps. He wondered how many people had given up trying to feed their pets and just turned them loose. Robert considered it. At least Piper would have a chance of catching a squirrel or rabbit.

No way! Nina would send him to the park to live before she'd dump Piper there.

"Heads on swivels, guys. The sun is up, and half the city probably heard those gunshots," Antonio said.

"And the people with that girl might still be in the area," Newbury said.

"I think she was alone," Kordell said.

"Why?" Newbury asked.

"They didn't come to check on her."

"I wouldn't want to rely on that. I think we should expect they're out there somewhere close by."

"Let's just keep our eyes open for any sort of threat, okay?" Antonio said.

Robert's head whipped back and forth as they exited the vet clinic and ran north through the parking lot of the strip mall. He wasn't looking forward to traversing the flood control channel back to their neighborhood. The trek through the drainage channel between houses and apartment buildings on the way here had been scary. Someone had been taking potshots at people near Woodland Hills Mall over the last few days. With all the big box stores and other retail establishments, it had attracted a lot of looters. But all the stores had been thoroughly picked over—nothing useful remained. The restaurants, too. The only people who remained in the area were those like Robert who'd yet to venture out in search of supplies. Now, it was too late.

Deciding it might be safer for their scavenging team to spread out some and make it harder for anyone to take potshots at them, Antonio led the way across Memorial Drive and back onto 66th Street between Walmart and a neighborhood. Kordell waited until Antonio was on the other side before he sprinted in that direction. By the time Robert and Newbury crossed, Antonio and Kordell were several yards ahead. They ran east along the north side of Walmart. Robert was feeling the weight of the medical supplies and cans of dog food now.

Newbury, being at least fifteen years younger than Robert, sprinted past him with ease. He passed Kordell and then Antonio as the team ran down the middle of the street. As they approached a pile of shopping carts in the road, Newbury moved toward the south side of the street near the sidewalk.

Robert quickened his pace and came up alongside Kordell. "Were those carts there when we came through earlier?"

"I don't remember seeing them."

“Newbury! Wait!” Robert yelled a second too late.

A man stepped out from behind the concrete wall that separated the store’s parking lot from the street. Then a second man ran out. Both of them were dressed in black hoodies, jeans, and sneakers. In their hands, they held pistols aimed directly at Newbury. The first man fired, and Newbury fell to the ground. The second man—taller and heavier set—aimed down the street toward the rest of the team aiming his pistol sideways the way gangbusters did in the movies.

Antonio moved to his right, dropped down to one knee behind a tree, and returned fire.

Robert followed his lead and ran toward the trees near the concrete wall. Suddenly, he tripped over the curb, rolled, and crawled toward a small tree. Determining that it would provide little cover or concealment, Robert moved to the next one, dropped to one knee, rested his arm on his leg to support his shot, and aimed at a third shooter who had just rounded the corner of the wall, firing an AR-15 rifle.

Kordell took aim at one of the gangbusters and fired—the round struck the man in the abdomen. He took two steps back but continued firing at them as he ducked back behind the wall.

The heavysset man ran over, scooped up Newbury’s pack, and began backing toward the parking lot. Robert couldn’t get a good shot at him without striking the pack filled with lifesaving antibiotics. Robert lowered his aim and squeezed the trigger, striking the heavysset man in the thigh causing him to collapse to one knee. The guy twisted and raised his pistol, shooting back at Robert. Kordell stepped forward and fired, striking the man in the neck. He crumpled to the side and dropped the pack.

Antonio rushed forward, grabbed Newbury's pack, and pivoted to his right—sending rounds in the direction of the remaining gangbanger. Kordell and Robert joined him as the man ducked behind a car and disappeared.

Kordell turned and ran back to Newbury. “Antonio, come grab his legs!”

“I'm done for, Kordell,” Newbury said.

Robert covered the parking lot while Antonio rushed over and dropped to a knee beside Newbury. He felt for a pulse.

“He's gone, Kordell.”

Kordell picked up Newbury's wrist and felt for himself. “Let's get him home.”

“It's too dangerous, Kordell. We need to have our weapons ready. We can't do that while carrying a body. We'll stash him and come back with more people—and the wheelchair,” Antonio said.

Kordell stared at Antonio for a moment in shock.

“We need to go, guys,” Robert said. His head was pounding. He understood Kordell's “no man left behind” philosophy, but they were sitting out in the open. Antonio was right.

“Where can we put him?”

Antonio pointed. “The city transit bus.”

While Kordell and Antonio carried Newbury onboard the city bus, Robert surveyed each window overlooking the drainage channel, expecting to be shot at any moment.

“Just doesn't seem right leaving Newbury like this,” Kordell said.

“I know, bro, but it’s only for a few hours,” Antonio said, stepping down from the bus.

Kordell closed the door and gave it an extra push to make sure it stayed shut. “It’s a heck of a thing to be gunned down like that.” He joined Antonio and Robert at the side of the road and the trio hurried toward home.

By the time they reached the parking lot of the collision repair shop, Robert’s head felt like it was about to explode. Every muscle in his body was tense from being on high alert.

Kordell’s chest was heaving in and out as he bent, his rifle dangling on its sling and his hands on his knees. “I’m too out of shape for this,” he said through gasps for air. “I haven’t run like this since my college football days.”

“I didn’t know you played,” Antonio said.

“Yep, but now all I do is sit behind a desk and do people’s taxes. If I’d known the world was going to go to shit, I’d have hit the gym more.”

“How did you not know the world was going to shit?” Antonio asked.

Robert shouldered his rifle and stepped off the curb, eager to keep moving and avoid the political debate he saw coming. “I’ll take point through the cemetery,” Robert said.

Robert led the team over a short fence, across a field, and past Memorial Park Cemetery’s Lake of Enchantment. “Guys,” Robert said in a hushed tone. He pointed to several drops of blood on the walkway near the doors to the chapel. “Could be the guy with the rifle back there...”

“Nah, he ran west. I can’t see him beating us here,” Antonio said. “Could be the girl, though.”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine a kid willingly running into a cemetery,” Kordell said.

“You think we should check it out?” Antonio asked.

Before anyone could answer, Kordell was moving up the walkway. He stopped at a set of glass doors and then stepped to one side.

“Remember, she’s armed,” Robert said.

Antonio moved to the opposite side in a crouch and then peered through the glass.

“She’s in there. I see her ponytail hanging over the arm of the sofa,” Antonio said.

Kordell peered inside and called out, “I didn’t mean to shoot you. We have a nurse. My wife’s a nurse. She can fix you up.”

The girl rolled off the sofa and dropped to her knees. As she did, Kordell flung open the door and rushed inside. Antonio was two steps behind him. The girl screamed in fear before her pistol dropped to the floor and she fell flat on her face next to it.



With the young girl clutched in his arms, Kordell raced toward home, leaping over headstones and through a short gate onto 51st Street. “Hang on, kid. We’ll get you fixed up. Just hold on there,” he repeated to her over and over as he ran.

Kordell ran the entire mile back to their neighborhood carrying the girl. By the time they turned into the subdivision, he was so winded he was unable to speak. “Quick! Open the car door!” Robert yelled as he ran behind Kordell. Elena

Newbury fumbled with the keys for a moment but then threw open the Pacifica's passenger side rear door, crawled through, and flung open the driver's side just as Kordell tripped and dropped to his knees.

Antonio stepped forward. "Grab her legs!" he said, scooping her up from the ground and poking her feet first into the vehicle.

Elena pulled while Antonio pushed, and they got her to the opposite side. She was on the grass next to the Pacifica when Robert crawled through. He stood over her as Kordell exited the vehicle. "We need to get her to Temperance," Kordell said through gasps.

"Who is she?" Elena asked.

Seth Williamson ran over and pointed his rifle down at the girl. "Why the hell did you bring her here?"

Antonio knelt and scooped her up. "It doesn't matter. She's here, and we're taking her to Temperance," he said turning toward the street.

"I'll fill them in," Robert said as Kordell followed Antonio and the girl.

Delivering the news of her husband's death to Elena went as Robert had expected.

"This is your fault. Going to get antibiotics was your idea. You practically guilted him into going. If you hadn't, my husband would still be here with his family."

"We're all so very sorry for your loss, Elena," Antonio said.

Elena glared at him. "Are you? Are you really? Then why did you leave him out there in the street like a dog?"

Antonio said nothing.

She jabbed a finger into the air. “Don’t just stand around here. Get back out there and get my husband’s body so we can bury him,” Elena said.

“We’re heading that way now,” Kordell said, reaching out and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Elena shrugged his hand away. “Go then. I have to figure out how to tell my children that you go their father killed.”

As Robert walked away, Williamson led Elena across the street to her house to help her tell her young kids.

SIXTEEN

Annie

Freedom Prairie Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

“First Harry and now Gerald,” Annie said, handing Sheriff Parkhurst a glass of water. “What’s going on, Wayne?” Annie eased herself into one of the two white rocking chairs on her wraparound porch. It was common knowledge around town that Annie and Wayne would occasionally spend time together. Annie had never married and didn’t have children. Ranching was a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week job, and she’d never had much time for a social life. Wayne, thrice-divorced, had been busy running the sheriff’s department. Neither complained when the other had to cancel a date at the last moment. The arrangement worked—mostly.

MacArthur and Patton settled in at her feet as Annie stared out toward Jackass Canyon, where she and Mitch had found Harry Gladwell’s body four days earlier.

“Lonnie says it was those outsiders who killed Gerald. He claims he caught them in the act, they drew on him, and he had to run for his life.”

“You believe him?” Annie asked, taking a sip from her glass.

“Jeanette and Grady confirm they found them sneaking around their property at the time of the murder. Funny thing though, Jeanette doesn’t think they did it.”

“Did she say why?” Annie asked.

“Well, we all know there’s no love lost between Jeanette and Lonnie. He and Gerald had been in a bitter feud ever since their daddy’s passing. Bill’s estate still hasn’t been settled.”

“Lonnie came to see me—did I tell you that?” Annie asked.

“He did.”

“He rode all the way over here to ask me if I’d heard from Mitch.”

“He said you accused him of murdering Harry,” Wayne said.

“I accused him of doing something to Mitch,” Annie said.

“He said you still think that Harry was murdered and insinuated he had something to do with it.”

“I just said that Mitch disappeared on his way notify him that his brother had been murdered. That’s what Mitch believed happened. He said it looked like Harry had been killed by a shot gun blast at close range.”

“This isn’t a good time to stir up old feuds, Annie. People in town are talking. The gossip train is running away with the news that a body was found on your property. Everyone knows you and Harry hated one another. We don’t need the town getting in an uproar over something that never happened. Harry had an accident. That is the official cause of death.”

“Until this happened, I never gave a shit what people around here believed.”

“It’s a difficult time for sure,” Wayne said, taking the last gulp of water. He was sweating profusely. His uniform shirt was soaked. Annie wondered whether it was from the heat of the sun. Or perhaps he knew more about Harry’s death and Mitch’s disappearance than he was telling her? Whatever the case, she knew Wayne well enough to know she’d get nothing out of him by being confrontational. She decided to take a different approach. “How is your office handling law enforcement under these circumstances?” Annie asked, refilling Wayne’s glass from a pitcher on the table.

“Well, with only five deputies to patrol on horseback nearly nine thousand people spread over twelve hundred square miles—not so good. Especially after the warden at the correctional center released all five hundred inmates from the drug-offender work camp.

“He did?” Annie’s mind was reeling. Could a prisoner have been responsible for Mitch’s disappearance? Could that have been who Mitch had found in his barn?

“Where did all the prisoners go?” Annie asked.

“Who knows? We did our best to encourage them to move on, but some got caught stealing from homes near the prison. We’ve been picking them up as we find them.”

“What are you doing with them all? You can’t be housing them in the county jail?”

“We’ve been taking them down to near Fairview, Oklahoma, and releasing them with a warning to never come back to Woods County.”

“I can’t believe the warden just released them into the county with no way to get back home,” Annie said. “He had to have known there’d be trouble.”

“I don’t think he cared. He couldn’t get the guards to show up for work. He asked me to assign my deputies to the prison, but I refused. We had our hands full just trying to reunite the college kids with families and keeping folks from looting at the Walmart and other grocery stores.”

“Looting?” There hadn’t been any of that type of behavior in Freedom. She’d expected it places like Oklahoma City and Tulsa, but hadn’t expected it in a town the size of Alva which had less than five thousand people.

“Yeah, it’s a problem. There’s no way to stop hungry people from finding food where they can. Alva’s mayor and town council talked about confiscating the food and other necessary supplies from businesses and distributing them, but they never got that chance. Things spiraled out of control too quickly for Alva’s police force to get a handle on the situation.

“Is the judge coming here, or are you transporting that young couple to the courthouse in Alva?”

“Frank’s coming here. His place is closer to Freedom than Alva’s. He hasn’t been coming into town much. If you want to know the truth—I think he’s ill. He didn’t look all that good yesterday when I went to notify him we had another murder.”

“He’s probably off his medications. He had high blood pressure and some other health issues, I believe,” Annie said.

“Likely so. We’ve lost quite a few of our elderly for that reason—and a couple of young folks. There was a diabetic kid at the college who, once she ran out of insulin, went into a coma and died,” Wayne said.

“That’s horrible,” Annie said, standing. “I should go check on the calves. I had a cow in labor before you arrived.”

“Sorry to hold you up.” Wayne turned to go but stopped. “I forgot to tell you what I came here about.”

Annie stopped on the bottom step and glanced back at Wayne.

“Jeanette wanted me to ask you to represent those kids at the arraignment tomorrow.”

“Me? Why me?” Annie and Jeanette had grown up together and been friends in school, but after they’d both gone to college, they’d grown apart. When Jeanette had married into the Gladwell family, it had become even more difficult to maintain a friendship.

“Because you’re the most honest and fair person she knows.”

“She said that?”

“And you worked in that attorney’s office after college.”

“That was thirty years ago, Wayne.”

“You, me, and the judge are the only ones around here with any knowledge of the legal system, and I can’t very well represent them. If you don’t do it, they’ll appoint Bart or Leon,” Wayne said.

“Bart? He’s a bank manager, and Leon runs a bar.”

Wayne shrugged. “I guess they could represent themselves.”

Annie sucked in a tight breath, tilted her head back, and exhaled. “Okay. I’ll do it. What time is the arraignment?”

SEVENTEEN

Ethan

Freedom Jail

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

Jeanette Gladwell had been a professor of history at Northwestern Oklahoma State University in nearby Alva, Oklahoma. The retired grandmother was a fourth-generation Oklahoma rancher, and along with her recently murdered husband, she'd raised three sons. Ethan learned this information during his arrest on the charge of murder in the first degree in the death of Gerald Gladwell.

Ethan felt as if he was living a nightmare. He was guilty of trespassing onto the Gladwell land, entering their barn, and stealing the pulleys. Still, despite all his protests of innocence in the death of Gerald Gladwell, the testimony of the real killer, Lonnie Gladwell, the victim's brother, had been overwhelmingly convincing to the sheriff.

"How're the ribs?" Ethan asked as he threw his legs over the twin-size bed's sagging mattress. He stood and walked over to the iron bars that separated him from Brooke.

“Okay,” Brooke said.

“Do you think Jarrod is still waiting at the truck? Maybe he’s out there somewhere getting ready to bust us out of here.”

“I’m sure he would have waited as long as he could for us to return, but there’s no way he could know what happened to us. We can’t count on him coming to our rescue, Brooke.”

“I think I might be able to pry the bars off this window. The concrete holding it inside the blocks is cracked already.”

Ethan had no doubt they could somehow escape the jail. It had never been built to house prisoners. From what they’d been told, he and Brooke were the first. Ethan thought they should get a plaque posted on the building for that alone. Instead, the Freedom Jail had originally been the town’s well house, although it must have been filled in because Ethan saw no sign of that now. He could use some cool, refreshing water. So could Brooke. Her face was flush from the heat. Instead, the tiny red brick building was for show—used to complement the town’s old west theme. The elderly woman who’d brought them sheets for the bed and for Brooke’s cot had been proud to tell them that thousands of people visited the town each year during the rodeo.

“They’ll hear you if you break a window,” Ethan said. Two guards had been posted just outside the door. The two men had passed the time antagonizing and taunting Ethan and Brooke, calling them murderers and thieves. The men laughed as they’d told them they’d be seeing the judge in the morning. They explained that Judge Miller and Gerald Gladwell had been close friends.

“This should be good. I might make popcorn for this show,” the husky man with his flannel shirt unbuttoned down to the top of his beer belly said.

When they'd got bored with that, they'd talked crap about the town's leaders. As the two men grew more intoxicated, they'd begun expressing concern about the recent rash of murders, including that of Gerald's brother, Harry. Ethan grimaced. *Surely the judge will be able to put two and two together and realize the man I saw backing out of the stall was the one responsible for both killings.* He certainly intended to bring it up—at his arraignment.

Brooke paced the floor of the tiny space. "If we don't do something, we're going to die in here. We won't have to worry about being strung up by the townspeople. We're going to roast to death in this heat."

In weather typical of Oklahoma, according to the gauge hanging on a building near the jail, the temperatures had climbed into the low eighties after a chilly night. Ethan wiped the sweat from his brow and stood. He immediately felt dizzy and sat back on the twin bed.

"Ethan! Are you okay?" Brooke asked, standing and placing her hands on the bars of the cell. "Talk to me."

"I'm fine. I stood up too quickly."

"You need water." She spun around and banged on the window, attempting to get the guard's attention. "Hey! We need water!"

Ethan heard keys rattle, and then the door opened. The husky man shoved a plastic milk jug of water into Brooke's chest and then slammed the door shut again. Brooke turned, stared at the jail cell, and then banged on the window again. "I need a cup. The jug won't fit through the bars."

"Murderers don't need no water. He's gonna die tomorrow anyways."

“He’s innocent. He didn’t kill anyone,” Brooke yelled.

“Yeah, right? He was caught red-handed, missy.”

Brooke moved to the door and banged her fist on it. “My husband is innocent!”

“Brooke! Calm down, sweetheart. It’s going to be okay,” Ethan called to her, but she ignored him. She was losing it, and there was nothing Ethan could do.

“Let. Us. Out. Now! Or I’ll...”

The door opened a second time, but instead of the husky guy or the skinny man, a woman in her late fifties appeared in the opening. “Hello,” she said, smiling. “I’m Annie Gillespie. I’m going to represent you at the arraignment.”

“Are you an attorney?” Brooke asked in surprise, dropping her hands to her sides and stepping back.

Annie stepped inside and moved around the small cot where Brooke had attempted to sleep. “No. I worked as a paralegal a long time ago. That’s the closest you’re going to get to an attorney here in Freedom. But don’t worry. This will all be over soon.”

“Yeah, they’ll be hanging from a tree by tomorrow evening,” the husky man said.

“Burt, shut the hell up and go get my clients something to eat,” Annie snapped.

Burt scoffed. “Clients? You should be in there with them, Annie Gillespie. Everyone knows you whacked Gerald’s brother. His body was found on your ranch, and now, your ranch manager is missing. Did you kill him, too?”

Without a word, Annie turned, walked out the door, and closed it behind her. Ethan heard footsteps on the old wooden

porch and then the very distinct sound of a slap.

Brooke rushed to the window. “Oh my gosh. She slapped him good. He’s going to wear her handprint for a week.” Brooke glanced over her shoulder at Ethan with a broad smile. “I like her!”

EIGHTEEN

Nina

The Edgewater Residence

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 15

“Does someone want to say a few words over the bodies?” Seth Williamson asked. He moved alongside Greg Newbury’s grave and stood by his wife. Seth and Antonio had retrieved Greg’s body while Kordell and Robert were helping Temperance attempt to save the girl Kordell had shot at the animal hospital. She hadn’t made it.

Seth pushed a round pair of glasses up the bridge of his nose and stepped back toward the Edgewaters’ children’s play set. Their yard had been chosen as the block’s cemetery because they’d had dirt and rocks brought in for landscaping before the lights went out. It made it easier to dig graves.

Seth’s wife, Layla, stepped forward, holding their ten-month-old daughter in one hand and a bouquet of silk flowers in the other. “Um—I didn’t know Greg all that well, but he was among the first people to welcome us when we were new to the neighborhood.”

“He was the first to volunteer when we formed our block watch,” Kordell said. “He pulled double shifts and put his life on the line to protect this street. He was a brave and selfless man.”

Greg’s wife, Elena, sobbed into Temperance’s chest.

Nina stepped forward and pushed the stem of a silk rose into the freshly dug grave of the young girl Kordell had shot. “I don’t know her or even her name, but she was someone’s daughter and grandchild. She could have siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins out there somewhere. I pray that someday, somehow, they are able to retrieve her body from this backyard and give her a proper burial where they can visit her and grieve.

“Amen!” Temperance said.

Kordell was silent, but Nina knew he was still beating himself up over what had happened. Both Nina and Robert had tried to ease his guilt. Robert had told Kordell that it could have happened to any one of them, but Nina wasn’t sure she could have shot a kid—even to defend herself.

As everyone drifted away to go about their day, Antonio remained behind. He had carved pieces of wood for markers and driven them into the ground at the heads of the graves—next to the Wilson and Hutchens kids. The Edgewaters’ backyard cemetery was filling quickly, and Nina feared more lawns might have to be used for a cemetery before things calmed down. She was worried their neighbors would soon succumb to dehydration or, eventually, starvation. She prayed for rain—and lots of it. But food was even harder to come by now.

Everyone was dangerously low on food, and there was talk about making another scavenging run soon to locate some.

Robert would no doubt volunteer, just as he had for the trip to the animal clinic to find antibiotics.

“Nina, would you mind watching Bree and Jordan for an hour or so? I want to go to the park and do some foraging,” Layla Williamson asked. “I’ll take Nicole with me.”

Nina did mind. The Williamsons prescribed to a permissive parenting style, meaning their children could be little terrorists. “Sure, Layla. No problem.” What was she going to say—she had plans? She did. They were called Ollie and Amelia. The twins were a handful on their own. The shifts that Nina and Robert had been working provided little opportunity for family time, and the kids talked incessantly about their parents, and when they were coming home.

“I’ll share what I find with you,” Layla said.

“I appreciate that. We are really low on food.”

“We are, too. I was so happy to see the warmer temperature. The dandelions, purple deadnettle, and several other edible plants have started coming up. We’re supplementing our rations with foraging for what most call weeds, along with grubs, crickets, and even ants.”

Nina gagged at the mention of eating bugs. “How on earth are you getting your kids to eat bugs?”

“They don’t know they’re eating them. I grind them up and put them in with other foods.”

“Whatever works, I guess.”

“This is about survival now—not taste or pleasure. When we run out of flour, the kids will have to eat the bugs and foraged plants by themselves.”

“You still have flour?” Nina asked, her mouth watering at the thought of homemade bread.

“That’s about all we’ve lived on for the past week. Fortunately, I had just purchased a twenty-five-pound bag of flour to bake my cousin’s wedding cake. I was going to do a couple of practice cakes in advance. Now, I have flour, salt, and a little lard, and that’s all, so we’ve been eating Indian fry bread with the bugs ground inside, along with the greens I forage.

“How do you make your fry bread?” Nina asked. Brooke usually made some for their holiday parties, but Nina had never asked for the recipe.

“It’s just flour, baking powder, salt, and water, fried in lard,” Layla said. “The lard belonged to the Edgewaters. They had a one-gallon bucket of it. I guess it was too heavy to take with them when they left.”

“Mimi? Ollie won’t let me play with the slingshot,” Amelia whined.

“Amelia is calling me. I better go. Just bring the kids by when you head out to the park,” Nina called over her shoulder as she exited the Edgewaters’ backyard.



Two hours later, there was a knock at the door. Amelia rushed over, turned the lever lifting the wooden barricade, and invited the Williamson children inside. As the kids ran off to the twins’ room to play, Nina and Robert spoke with Seth and Layla about “wildcrafting,” as they called it.

“Harvesting plants from the wild is a forgotten skill. Layla has taken numerous classes over the last few years, and I trust that she won’t poison us,” Seth said, pointing the wicker basket Layla was carrying.

“I don’t forage for mushrooms because so many are dangerous, and I’m just not skilled enough to know which ones are edible. I only select plants I know and have eaten many times.”

“I imagine all the fish have already been taken from the LaFortune ponds. I wish we were close to a lake like Grand or Fort Gibson,” Robert said.

“I saw ducks on the pond yesterday morning,” Layla said.

“Really?” Robert perked up. “I could go with you guys and check it out. I might be able to bag a squirrel or something.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Seth said. “I didn’t even try because I wanted to keep a low profile.”

“I’ve got my mini crossbow. It’s quiet.” Robert thought about Roy Blackburn. He’d been worried about returning to the park since he found the man dead under such mysterious circumstances, but there had been no sign of the Blackburn family at all. They would have come for him by now if they thought he’d killed Roy.

“Let me get my bow, and I’ll go with you if you don’t mind.”

“More the merrier. Safety in numbers and all that jazz,” Seth said.

Robert stopped halfway across the living room and turned. “If we don’t get any game there, I was thinking about going back to the cemetery. I saw a rabbit when we were passing through on our way to the animal clinic.”

“Ewww,” Layla said. “I don’t think I could forage where dead bodies are. That’s too creepy for me.”

“That’s exactly why I think it would be a good place to hunt and forage. Maybe other people are as creeped out by it as you are. Less competition,” Robert said.

Seth glanced over at Layla. “He’s got a point. Let’s go there first, and if we don’t fill your basket, we can head to the park after.”

NINETEEN

Lonnie Gladwell

Freedom Town Hall

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

“You better do something,” Lonnie spat as he entered the mayor’s office.

Sitting behind the desk was Sheriff Parkhurst. He’d been using the Freedom Town Hall as his office ever since Mitch and Annie had discovered Harry’s body. A brisk breeze blew in through an open window, causing the mini blinds to flap against the casing. Parkhurst rose and walked to the window, and after closing it, he spun around to face Lonnie. “I am doing something. I’m running my department, which isn’t easy since I have all my deputies out looking for Mitch.”

“You need to stop Annie Gillespie. You should have never let her anywhere near those outsiders.”

“Annie doesn’t know anything. Having her represent those two gives this fiasco of a trial some semblance of legitimacy. Folks in Freedom respect Annie. She’ll put on a good defense, but in the end, it will be that couple’s word against yours.”

“Not if Annie spins some tale about Mitch going missing and turns the town and the judge against me,” Lonnie said. He glared at Parkhurst. “We need to find Mitch before this whole damn thing blows up in our faces,” Lonnie said.

“I said, I’m working on that.”

“Not hard enough. Mitch could walk in here at any moment.” Lonnie felt a rush of heat in his cheeks.

“I’ll handle it, Lonnie. Calm down. Your temper always gets you in a heap of trouble. Just go home and let me and my deputies do our jobs.”

“I heard rumors that some of your deputies are complaining. They want to be home with their families and don’t understand why you have them out looking for Mitch when he doesn’t want to be found.”

“They’ll follow orders,” Parkhurst said.

“Will they?”

“They’ll find him and notify me. They’ve been told to only hand him over to Deputy Wynn or me.”

Lonnie paced the floor. “You better hope no one sees them bringing him in.”

“They won’t bring Mitch here. They’re to meet me at the old schoolhouse once they find him.” Parkhurst rounded the desk, pulled out the chair, and took a seat. “Now, go home. Carry on as if you weren’t a guilty man trying to cover his tracks.”

Lonnie stopped pacing, placed his palms on the desk, and leaned in close. Parkhurst sat back and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “You can’t intimidate me, Lonnie. You may

have been able to surprise your brothers and kill them, but you don't scare me."

"No?" Lonnie said, anger flushing his face. He straightened. "Maybe not, but I'm still the one holding the purse strings and your ticket to Cabo San Lucas."

"Don't fool yourself, Lonnie. I'm a resourceful guy. I'll make it there with or without your money."

"Are you reneging on our deal, Sheriff?"

Parkhurst placed his hands on the desk. "Not at all. I just want you to know that I won't be manipulated or intimidated into doing anything stupid."

"How about motivated?" Lonnie asked. "Can you be motivated to resolve this issue with Annie Gillespie?"

"There is no issue with Annie. I told you. I've got this covered."

"Then why don't I trust you?"

"Sounds like a personal problem, Lonnie."

"I want results, Parkhurst. I'm willing to pay extra to get this resolved quickly. There doesn't need to be a trial. You can make it look like they tried to escape, and you had to shoot them."

"I don't think that's necessary. Besides, it would still leave a significant portion of the population of Freedom convinced you killed both your brothers."

Lonnie was starting not to care what people thought. Once he had control of all the land and cattle that were rightfully his, he'd have the largest spread in northwest Oklahoma and all the power and influence that went along with it. He just needed to figure out how to leverage it. That young couple had inspired

him with their tale of the events in Dodge City, Kansas. If the military was seeking cattle, maybe the rest of the government would be as well. They would pay—likely in gold or silver. When this thing ended, he'd be one of the richest men in America. He'd grow wealthy like the business titans after the Great Depression.

“Okay, Sheriff. We'll play it your way for now, but if Annie starts spouting off about me, I may just have to shut her up myself. Permanently.”

TWENTY

Brooke

Freedom Jail

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

Annie Gillespie, Ethan's appointed representative, set a plate of beans and rice on the table in front of Brooke, and another by Ethan before sitting down opposite them. Somehow, Annie had convinced the powers that be—whoever that was—to move them to the saloon so she could discuss the case with them there. The place was dimly lit and smelled of booze and stale cigarette smoke. The table where they were seated rocked back and forth on the uneven wood floor as Brooke retrieved a glass of water.

“We want to know what's going on here,” Ethan said.

Annie opened a binder and took out a pen. “Here's what I can tell you.” She drew in a deep breath and looked them both in the eyes. “As you know, Gerald Gladwell was murdered in his barn yesterday afternoon. Ethan, you were seen coming from the barn moments before he was found. Lonnie Gladwell, Gerald's brother, claims he witnessed you stab his brother to death.”

“Yes, I know. I was there,” Ethan said impatiently. “I didn’t do it. Lonnie did. I saw him coming out of the stall. I spooked him, and he ran off. What I want to know is how do I prove it?” Ethan raised his voice. “And get the hell out of this town.”

One of the two cowboys who’d replaced the night crew rushed over and put a meaty hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “Calm down, or I’ll be forced to restrain you.”

The second guard, a man in his late twenties dressed in a Western shirt, jeans, boots, and a cowboy hat, held up a rope. “Don’t make me tie you to this table.”

Brooke’s eyes went wide. Ethan placed his hand on hers. “Mrs. Gladwell didn’t seem to believe her brother-in-law,” Ethan said, returning his attention to Annie. “Why?”

“There must be some backstory here that will shed light on the situation,” Brooke said.

“There is always a backstory to every family drama.” Annie put down her pen and leaned back in her chair. “Well, as you can see, Freedom is a small town in a small county. Everyone here knows one another. Our families have had dealings with each other for generations. Not much happens that isn’t widely known by the end of the day.”

“I want to know about the Gladwell family—namely, any bad blood between Gerald and Lonnie,” Ethan said, trying to speed things along. “That’s what this is, right? Some type of family feud between brothers.”

“Yeah, you could say there was bad blood between them. While the other two boys went off and saw the world, joined the Army, and went to college, Lonnie Gladwell stayed and cared for the family ranch and his aging parents. He did so,

believing he would inherit the farm when his folks passed. He wasn't happy when the will was read, and his father left the ranch to all the boys equally. To get their individual shares, the farm would have to be sold, or one of them would have to buy out the others."

"Okay, so they quarreled over the land. Evidently, Gerald decided to farm his share, so it wasn't sold. Lonnie killed him to get what he thought was his?"

"It's not as simple as that, but it really doesn't matter what the motive was. Gerald is dead, and Lonnie killed him. The problem is he and his boy are pointing the finger at you and Brooke—and the two of you are outsiders here."

"But everyone knows there was a feud going on between the two brothers," Ethan said.

"There's been a feud between the three brothers for a decade—why kill them now?"

"Three? You're talking about the man found on your ranch. The other brother. The one that guard accused you of killing?"

"Harry Gladwell's body was found in one of the canyons on my ranch five days ago. He'd been missing since last summer. His land borders mine. The sheriff believes Harry rode overlooking for one of his own cows and fell from his horse."

"Okay—so how do we prove that Lonnie killed them both?" Brooke asked.

"There's going to be a trial. Lonnie will tell his side, and then we'll get a chance to cross-examine him. I intend to ask him about Harry and what he was doing in Gerald's barn on the day he was killed. I'll remind the judge about the bad

blood between them—including all the threats Lonnie made over the years. We'll call Gerald's widow and grandson to testify about how you tried to save Gerald."

"You think the judge will acquit Ethan with that testimony?" Brooke asked.

"I think you both will have to testify." Annie picked up her pen and wrote their names on separate pieces of paper. "Now, tell me how you came to be in Freedom on the day of the murder?"



Ethan and Brooke spent three hours telling Annie about their trip from Estes Park, Colorado, to Freedom, Oklahoma. Brooke teared up as she described the attack at the casino in Dodge and the long hours spent waiting for Ethan to wake from his coma.

"Wow!" Annie said. "I had no idea it was that bad out there. We've been fortunate here. Other than the inconvenience of not having electricity or modern technology, life hasn't changed all that much—other than the Gladwell murders, that is."

Annie focused on Ethan. She studied him for a moment. Her gaze made him uncomfortable, and he looked away. He glanced over at the two cowboys. They looked bored. One tapped his boot on the hardwood floor, while the other picked at his fingernails. Ethan imagined they had better things to do than babysit "outsiders," as Annie had described them.

"You said you were in a coma just three days ago."

“He was out over for twenty-four hours. He has staples in his scalp from the fall,” Brooke said, reaching up and lifting the bandage.

Ethan was surprised he was self-conscious about his half-shaved head. He reached up and took Brooke’s hand, placing it on the table. “Why? Is that important to my case?” His focus wasn’t on the past. All he wanted was to be acquitted of the murder charge and get out of Freedom and on the road.

“It could garner sympathy with the judge.”

“It sounds like you’re grasping at straws. Tell me we have something better than that,” Ethan said.

Annie avoided his gaze and stared out the open door.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Brooke asked.

Annie gathered her things and stood without answering. She turned to the guards. “You can take them back to the jail now.”

Brooke stood. “Just like that? We’re done? We don’t have a defense yet.”

Ethan grabbed Brooke’s hand to keep her from going after Annie. The two guards started toward her, but Annie lifted a hand to halt them. “I’m doing everything I can. I’ll know more in the morning,” Annie said.

“More about what?” Ethan asked.

Annie walked out the door without answering.

Brooke spun to face him. “Ethan! What are we going to do?”

Ethan pulled her in close and wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll think of something,” he whispered in her ear.

The two cowboys came around behind them with their pistols drawn. “Okay, folks, let’s march. No funny stuff, okay. I really don’t want to have to shoot you two,” the younger cowboy said.

As they were led back to the tiny brick building that served as the jail, Ethan tried to engage the men in conversation in hopes of learning something about the town or the people that might help him either beat the charges or escape the town.

“Hey, you guys get a bunch of fires out this way, don’t you?” Ethan already knew the answer. Northwest Oklahoma usually had several big grass fires every year.

“Yes,” the younger guy said. “Over four hundred thousand acres were burned in Oklahoma and Kansas a few years back. The winds tend to whip up a fire, spreading it quickly.”

“What’s the plan to deal with them now that your fire fighting vehicles are inoperable?” Ethan asked.

“Most of the big ranches around here have old equipment we can use. We do prescribed burns most years and are quite experienced at putting out fires.”

Ethan noted the businesses they passed on their way back to the jail. With its buildings clad in cedar planking, the town had the Old West feel he’d expected to find in Dodge City, Kansas but hadn’t.

“Ethan is a firefighter in Tulsa,” Brooke said.

“Oh yeah. That’s where you’re from?” the taller of the two cowboys asked.

“It is. We were out in Colorado when the EMP happened, and we’ve been trying to get home ever since,” Ethan said.

“We’re trying to reach our twins, Oliver and Amelia. They’re four years old,” Brooke said in a somber tone.

“That’s a long trip.”

“It has been,” Ethan said. “Listen, what can you tell me about this judge? Will I get a fair hearing, or does he dislike outsiders?”

The man grimaced. “Judge Miller?”

“What’s that face for?” Brooke said, stopping in the middle of the road.

“Nothing!”

“No, really, what’s that face about? Tell me he’s a fair man and doesn’t hate city folks.”

“Well.” The man dragged out the word. “Um—I can’t really say.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Ethan asked.

Ethan turned to the second guy. “Help me out here. Am I up Shit Creek, or what?”

The guy shrugged. “I think you’re gonna need a paddle.”

TWENTY-ONE

Annie Gillespie

Main Street

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

Sitting astride her horse, Annie Gillespie crossed Main Street in search of the sound she'd heard while interviewing the young couple accused of murdering Gerald Gladwell. She had her suspicions, but she needed proof before confronting Wayne.

Her worst fears were confirmed when she directed her horse around the corner at the park. Felix Weald and Alvin MacKaye, both friends of Lonnie Gladwell, were indeed building gallows. The area between the merry-go-round and the pavilion was filled with a stack of lumber and a half-completed platform.

Annie crossed the park and approached the men. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Alvin glanced up with a nail between his teeth and lowered the hammer he held. "What's it look like, traitor?"

Annie glared back at him. Traitor? She didn't let their opinion bother her. Of course, they'd side with Lonnie. They were so far up his rear they could see out his nostrils.

"Who ordered you to do this?" Annie asked, ignoring the jab.

"Ordered? We were asked," Alvin said.

"By whom?"

"Your boyfriend, Sheriff Parkhurst."

"Really? Not the town board?"

The town board had been mostly absent in regard to legal matters since the lights went out. They'd failed to pass any new ordinance to address the situation.

Neither of the men spoke.

"Not Judge Miller?" Annie asked.

"We don't need your permission," Felix said.

Annie glanced back at the stack of lumber. "You might want to build that a little taller for the real person responsible for the crime spree around here."

"Crime spree? The only criminals around here are you and those outsiders you're supporting."

Annie turned her horse toward Freedom Town Hall. She was done speaking to people who didn't matter. She'd take this directly to the one responsible. Wayne had some explaining to do.

Sally Winslow was sitting on a wooden bench outside the town cafe. She threw a hand in the air and waved as Annie passed by. "Morning, Annie. Nice day for a ride."

Annie stopped near her and nodded to the restaurant. “Are you serving lunch today?”

“Not to the public. The sheriff asked me to fix supper for him and his deputies. I’m making a nice stew. I’ve got a pie in the oven for Judge Miller. He loves my apple pie. It’s from a can, but the crust is homemade.”

“That’s nice, Sally. Could I get you to send a couple of bowls of stew down to the jail later?” Annie asked.

“I’ll have to check with the sheriff. He told townsfolk to stay away from the jail. He doesn’t want the jury pool tainted, he said.”

“I’m headed to the town hall to speak to him now. I’ll ask for you. I can deliver it if it’s a problem.”

“No problem for me, Annie. I just don’t want to get crossways from the law here.”

“That would never happen, Sally.”

“I don’t know. Seems like things are changing around here, and maybe not for the better.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, outsiders coming in and killing folks in their barn and Mitch going missing. Things like that never happen around here.”

“We don’t know they killed Gerald. That’s what the trial is for.”

“Who else would have done such a thing?” Sally said.

“Well, it could be someone that had a grudge against him or something to gain by his death.”

Sally's mouth dropped open. "You're saying that his brother killed him and is pinning it on that young couple?"

"It's a possibility considering this isn't the first brother of his to find an untimely death."

"But Harry fell from his horse. Sheriff Parkhurst said so."

"That he did."

Sally stared back at her with one eyebrow raised. "You don't believe him?"

"I just know what I saw. And that's not what Mitch thought, either."

Her mouth formed an O shape.

"And now Mitch has gone missing," Annie said.

Sally stood, brushed crumbs from her dress, and stepped off the curb. "What are you going to do? How are you going to prove all that?"

"I don't know yet. First, I need to go speak with the sheriff about the gallows going up in the park."

"Is that what they're building over there? I thought it was a new slide or maybe another cowboy monument."

"Gallows—to hang those young people," Annie said.

"Is it true they got twins over in Tulsa?"

"Yes, they're only four years old." Annie hiked a thumb over her shoulder. "If they get their way, those kids will be orphans by this time tomorrow."

"That's sad. You have to stop them."

"I'm going to try. You could help."

"I can? How?" Sally asked.

“Talk to Pastor Duncan and ask him to visit them to hear their side of the story and then spread the word about how they’re being railroaded to the gallows.”

“I don’t know.” Sally reached up and smoothed back loose strands of gray hair, tucking them into her bun. “I don’t think the sheriff would like that. I might get in trouble. I don’t want to wind up in jail with those kids.”

“Think about it, okay? Think about those poor, soon-to-be orphaned twins.”

Annie nudged her horse and trotted off to the town hall. She found Wayne in the town chairman’s office.

“Why did you authorize the building of the gallows before we even had a trial? Are you trying to taint the jury? Is there even any point in having a trial since you’ve already painted them guilty in the minds of the people?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The gallows. The ones Felix and Alvin are constructing in the park.”

“They are? I authorized no such thing.” Wayne stood and rounded the desk. “I said to gather the supplies and place them in the park but not for them to start construction.”

“Well, they’re doing it, and the whole town can walk by and see it.”

“I’ll go tell them to stop,” Wayne said.

“Tell them to take it down. You aren’t going to need it—not unless you intended to hang Lonnie, which I don’t see happening—not with half the town supporting him,” Annie said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“They might be needed at some point. But I agree, not right now. I don’t see Judge Miller sentencing them to death under these circumstances. More likely, he’ll order them held in the county jail until a proper investigation and trial can be held.”

“Which is what should occur, but with Lonnie and his posse applying pressure, I fear what might happen to that young couple.”

“I’m sure you’ll do your best, Annie. The rest will be in the judge’s hands.”

“When’s he arriving?” Annie asked.

“I’m told he’s on his way now. Lonnie sent a horse and carriage for him.”

“He did? Where are you putting the judge up for the night?”

Wayne smiled. “I thought he might enjoy the view from your porch.”

“Really?” Annie laughed. “Lonnie is going to freak.”

Wayne shrugged. “I’ll let you know when he arrives.”

TWENTY-TWO

Robert

Memorial Park Cemetery

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 15

Robert scanned both sides of the road, not wanting a repeat of the scenario that had gotten Greg Newbury killed. He lagged fifty feet behind Seth and Layla Williamson and their ten-month-old daughter as they made their way along 51st Street toward the cemetery. His old bones had two decades on the young couple, and they appeared to be better nourished. than Robert. For the last five days, Robert and Nina had been existing on one can of soup per day, trying to stretch out their meager food rations, yet still provide the twins with enough food. Robert knew they couldn't continue to eat that way much longer. If they didn't start getting enough protein and carbs in them, they wouldn't be able to do what they needed to survive.

Robert could feel himself slowing down. He had very little energy, and it was becoming an enormous struggle to complete all the labor-intensive tasks that were now required on a daily basis. Unless he found a significant source of protein soon, he

would be forced to venture out of the city to hunt. But doing so would leave his family at risk from the roaming bands of looters. He was counting on this hunting trip paying off. With any luck, others hadn't thought about looking for food in a cemetery.

Layla hurried ahead as they approached the entrance, already spotting a food source. As she knelt with the baby on her back to dig dandelions, Robert scanned the grounds, searching for something with a few more calories. The redbud and maple trees were leafing out, but the oak trees the squirrels preferred had only begun to bud. It would be easier to spot them in the canopy.

"I'm going to start at the lake," Robert said, moving in that direction.

"Shouldn't we stick together?" Layla asked. Concern laced her voice.

"No offense, but successful hunting requires absolute quiet. A baby crying or any sudden movements will just cause potential game to scatter."

"We understand," Seth said. "We'll catch up with you in a bit."

Layla was off plucking purple deadnettle before Robert even responded.

"One hour?" Robert asked.

"That should be plenty of time for Layla to fill her basket."

Robert inserted a bolt into his mini crossbow and crept toward the graveyard's east side, scanning the grounds and tops of trees for small game. He'd gone no more than a quarter mile before he had to stop at a bench to rest. He tried his best to avoid looking at the gravestones. Thinking about death

wasn't on his agenda. He'd remain focused on survival—his and the people depending upon him.

This is just another hunt. This is no different from stalking the woods down at Deep Fork.

As he waited to catch his breath, Robert removed a spotting scope from his pack and glassed the area. Twenty feet away, a squirrel ran down a tree. Once it hit the ground, it flicked its tail and darted off to an adjacent tree. Then it scurried up the trunk about five feet and stopped, flicking his tail again and barking to warn him off. Robert aimed and fired. “Yes!” Robert punched the air in triumph and walked over to retrieve his squirrel.

Robert waited a few more moments on the bench, watching out for others. Seeing none, he continued across the cemetery to the lake, where shortly, he spotted the ducks along the bank grazing and eating bugs. Unfortunately, he was only able to bag one. As soon as he'd fired, all the other waterfowl flew into the lake. Robert didn't want to risk losing one of the few bolts he had, so he followed the stream to a larger stand of trees.

When Seth and Layla caught up to him an hour later, Robert had bagged four squirrels and a duck. He was on cloud nine as they headed toward the entrance. He handed a squirrel to Seth. “Do you know how to skin one?”

“I've seen it done.”

“When we get home, you can watch me. It's a skill you'll need to learn. I think the small game will become a staple food for us all.”

Robert pointed to Layla's basket. “That's some haul. How many calories would you say you have there?”

“Not much. Like regular salad greens, these don’t have a lot of calories, but they’re nutrient-dense and have the vitamins we’re lacking by eating bread almost exclusively.”

“Well, tonight, you’ll be able to have squirrel and dumplings.”

Seth raised the rodent into the air. “I can’t wait. Thank you so much.” He pointed to the mini crossbow strapped to Robert’s backpack. “I really need to find me one of those.”

“We’ll have to put that on the list of items we need to locate. I really could use some better bolts. After today, I’m thinking I might modify some with broadhead and turkey feather fletchings. I wish I’d practiced more with this mini bow before the apocalypse. Now it’s a matter of trial and error.”

“You know more about it than me. I feel like I’m at a huge disadvantage not knowing how to hunt.”

“It’s a vital skill. I’d be happy to teach you sometime,” Robert said, scanning the intersection.

He stepped off the curb and turned west. “We need to find ammo and hunting gear. I’m sure all the stores have been picked clean of all that sort of stuff by now.”

“Where would we look for it then?” Seth asked.

Robert shrugged. “I just don’t know.” He moved into the middle of the roadway and stepped around a compact SUV. As they approached the back bumper, Layla cried out. “Seth!”

Robert spun around with his rifle raised, searching for human targets. There were two, but Seth and Layla were in the way. A middle-aged man dressed in Dockers and a button-down shirt had his arm wrapped around Seth’s shoulders.

Behind them, a second man, similarly dressed, held Layla by the ponytail.

“I’ll take this,” the first one said, taking the squirrel from Seth.

The man holding Layla yanked the basket from her arms and shoved her to the ground. The baby began wailing loudly. At the same time, Robert felt something hard press against his back and stale breath on his neck. “Don’t,” a third man said, reaching around and grabbing Robert’s rifle.

“Layla!” Seth called out and dropped down beside her. “Take them and leave us alone,” Seth said, glaring at the two men.

The men said nothing. Their focus was now on Robert. “We’ll have that duck and those squirrels you got hanging from your pack.”

The man in the white button-down shirt rushed over and grabbed Robert’s pack. Then the man behind Robert moved around him to the front. Robert recognized him at once. “Doctor Edmonds?” He never expected to see his dentist out stealing from people.

“I’m sorry about this, Robert. We have families. They have to eat.”

“I have a family. You’re taking food from my grand babies’ mouths,” Robert said. He pointed to Seth, Layla, and their child. “They have a ten-month-old and two other small children.”

Doctor Edmonds shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what to say. We’re all doing what we can do to survive now.”

Two more men approached the intersection from the north carrying baseball bats and golf clubs for weapons.

Robert's mouth dropped open. "Paula McGirt?" Paula ran the daycare center at the church Ethan and Brooke attended. She'd been to Ethan's home and eaten food at their barbecues.

"Robert. Sorry to see you in these circumstances," Paula said.

"You're with this group? You're robbing people of their food?"

"Mostly, we take from looters."

"I'm not a looter."

"We have people depending on us," Paula said.

"This reunion is nice and all, but we need to get back," the man in the white shirt said.

"Can I have my pack back, at least?" Robert asked.

Paula looked at her companions. "See if there's food inside. If not, give it back to him."

The man removed the mini-cross bow, stuffing it under his arm while he unzipped Robert's pack and rifled around inside before tossing it to the ground near Robert's feet.

"You should probably stay away from this area. It's not safe," Paula said.

"No shit! Not with thieves like you running the streets," Robert said through gritted teeth. Rage boiled inside him, knowing they were taking the food he'd worked hard for and desperately needed.

"We're only taking your food. The people he's warning you about will take your food, gear, and your life."

"Or make you wish you were dead," Doctor Edmonds said. He pivoted to go and then took a step back. "We're tame

compared to the group moving into this area. They've looted and burned whole neighborhoods and left no survivors."

Robert had seen the thick black smoke but hadn't known the cause.

"Where? Are they moving this way?" Seth said, helping Layla to her feet.

"They're like locusts spreading through the city. We're stocking up and preparing to leave. We don't have the weapons or ammunition to defeat them—there's just too many of them," Paula said.

"Where are you going?" Layla asked.

"South. I hear there are some farms in Bixby where people are setting up camps," Doctor Edmonds said.

"Isn't that too close to the city?" Seth asked.

"I think so. That's why we plan to regroup and then push farther south in a week or so before the weather gets too hot," Paula said.

Layla was wide-eyed. "Maybe we should do the same, Seth."

As the well-dressed bandits trotted off with their food, Seth pulled his wife into his arms and turned toward home.

Robert watched as his dentist and the daycare director disappeared from view. He shook his head in disgust. The apocalypse was no respecter of persons. It took its toll on the wealthy and the poor alike, and even pious men had been reduced to common thieves in the fight for survival.

TWENTY-THREE

Brooke

Freedom Jail

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 15

A little after dark, the sheriff and two deputies arrived at the jail. Brooke's first thought was that they were going to take them out away from town and execute them.

“If you try anything, I'll have to shoot you 'cause I'm too damn old to be chasing down suspects, and Finch and Waters are both too lazy,” Parkhurst said.

“Where are you taking us?” Brooke asked as the deputy, who bore a marked resemblance to Jeffrey Dahmer, cuffed her hands behind her back.

A second deputy, who reminded Brooke of a young Timothy McVey with his buzz-cut hair and high cheekbones, gestured for Ethan to turn around. “There have been threats made against you both. We need to move you for your safety,” he said as he applied handcuffs to Ethan's wrists.

The sound of their boots slapping the sidewalk echoed off the buildings, and the huge ring of keys that dangled from

Dahmer's belt rattled as he walked. In the distance, a coyote yipped, and dogs barked as the sheriff and deputies led them up Main Street and into the town hall.

They stopped outside the first office, and Dahmer opened the door. McVey shoved Ethan inside the room and motioned for him to take a seat on the floor at the desk. Ethan glanced back into the hallway before sitting. McVey unlocked Ethan's handcuffs and then placed one side around the leg of the large wooden desk.

"Can you remove the handcuffs?" Ethan asked.

"No. You're a flight risk," the sheriff said as McVey exited and closed the door.

Dahmer grabbed Brooke's arm and started down the hall. She resisted, trying to pull her arm free from his grasp. "Where are you taking me? I want to stay with my husband."

"Brooke!" Ethan shouted.

"Ethan!" Brooke called back. "Why can't I stay with him?"

"Shut up!" Dahmer said, shoving her forward. They led her next door to a conference room and handcuffed her to the table leg as well.

"Why are you separating us?" Brooke asked.

"You'll see one another again in the morning," the sheriff said. "At your trial."

"We didn't kill anyone, Sheriff. We're just trying to get home to our babies. I know it was wrong to take those pulleys from the barn, but my husband didn't kill that man."

The sheriff and his two deputies backed out of the room. "You have to believe us. Please, sheriff. We aren't criminals!"

“That’s what they all say,” Dahmer said, closing the door and leaving her in the dark. She hugged herself, fearing what might come next.

A few moments later, McVey returned with a pillow and blanket. “I’ll be just outside this door, so don’t try to escape.”

One-handed, Brooke pushed the pillow under her butt and then did her best to wrap the blanket around her shoulders. She planned to spend the night trying to think her way out of the situation. Although Annie had assured them she would do her best to get them released, Brooke had seen what the men were building in the park across from the jail.

With the victim’s brother set to testify that Ethan had killed Gerald Gladwell, they stood little chance of escaping the noose. He’d be convicted of murder and she of committing a crime resulting in death. There had been no talk about what punishment they’d receive when sentenced. But the construction of a gallows indicated what the outcome would be.

Brooke refused to accept that fate. She kept going over and over what she knew of the people involved and their family drama. Annie and the widow of the victim believed Ethan. Annie said she intended to cross-examine Lonnie about the Gladwell family drama and expose his motive for killing his brother. Under normal circumstances, Brooke might have been somewhat hopeful, but this would not be a normal trial. They were being denied their basic civil liberties, and who knew what the judge would decide?

The silence was more profound just sitting there in the dark. Unlike the previous night, she heard no talking from the guards. It was completely silent—almost like there weren’t any sentries outside the room at all.

Brooke wiggled into a more upright position. Her wrists hurt, and she felt her legs starting to cramp. Her back and ribs ached from sitting on the cold, hard floor. She was also concerned for Ethan. He'd only had a few days to heal from his head injury. Vivian had warned about the dangers should he hit his head again.

"Brooke!" Ethan called through the wall. "Are you there, Brooke?"

"I'm here." She twisted toward the sound of his voice. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. My butt is sore from sitting on this floor, though."

"Mine too," Brooke said.

"I'm sorry," Ethan said.

"It's not your fault. It's theirs."

"I'm going to get us out of this. Don't give up," Ethan said.

"I know. I won't."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Brooke."

"Yes."

"I love you. I'm so proud to be your husband. You're the strongest person I know."

Brooke swallowed hard and drew in a deep breath. "I love you, too. You're the best thing that ever happened to me—you and our twins."

There was a pause.

“Thanks,” he finally said.

Several minutes passed in silence. Brooke thought about the twins and what might happen to them if she and Ethan never returned. And then she thought of Jarrod searching for his little girl. Had he simply given up on them when they hadn't returned? Maybe he'd found another way to remove the GMC from the ditch. Jarrod could be halfway to Mexico and reuniting with his daughter. Brooke hoped that was the case. Children needed both their parents now, more than ever.

“I hope Jarrod finds his daughter,” Brooke said.

“He will. He knows where they're heading. He just has to get there before they cross the Rio Grande. If he got the truck out or found another ride, he could be holding his little girl now,” Ethan said.

“I can't wait to get to your parents' place and hold the twins,” Brooke said. “Yeah, it's going to be great.”

Brooke pictured their reunion. “I bet they've grown a whole inch while we've been gone.”

In her mind, Ethan's parents' neighborhood looked just like it had the day she and Ethan left on their ski trip. That wasn't realistic, she knew. Brooke just prayed it didn't look like the neighborhoods she'd seen back in Denver with burned-out homes and bloody bodies lying in the streets.

“We'll be back on the road tomorrow,” Ethan said. “Annie will convince the judge we didn't do this.”

“I know she wants to help.” Brooke adjusted the pillow beneath her and stretched out her legs. “There's no love lost between her and Lonnie, but so much could go wrong. We know nothing about her. She could make things worse.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Brooke

Freedom Jail

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

“Tell me again how you came to be in the county?” Sheriff Parkhurst asked. The middle-aged lawman’s uniform shirt was unbuttoned to the center of his chest and pit-stained.

Brooke wiggled in her seat, trying to move into a more comfortable position where her handcuffs didn’t dig into her wrists, and her shoulders didn’t burn. It wasn’t working. For the second time that day, she and Ethan had been removed from the jail and paraded down Main Street. This time, they had been taken to city hall. Ethan was in one room, and Brooke in another. After an hour of being asked the same questions repeatedly, Brooke was fed up.

“I’ve told you three times now. We left Dodge City, Kansas, two days ago. A kid on a dirt bike pulled out in front of us, and our truck went into a ditch. We were looking for supplies to pull it out. That’s why we were at the Gladwells’ farm.”

“You claim that outlaws have taken over Dodge City?” Sheriff Parkhurst asked.

“Listen.” The handcuffs dug into her wrists as she leaned forward. “I’m not claiming anything. I don’t care whether you believe me. That has nothing whatsoever to do with whether my husband stabbed an old man to death here in Freedom, Oklahoma,” Brooke said, vibrating with impatience. She bit down on her lip and tried to restrain her anger. She knew yelling at the sheriff wouldn’t help matters.

“What happened after the military showed up?”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “In Dodge? They loaded up the cattle and headed to the front lines.”

“To repel an invasion.”

She pulled in a deep breath. “Yes. That’s what they said.”

“I’m supposed to believe that a foreign army is right now invading the greatest nation on earth?”

Brooke glared at him, ignored his question, and asked one of her own. “Do you have working radios in this county? Any ham operators?”

The sheriff glanced over his shoulder and then back at Brooke. “We have a guy with a ham license. His equipment was fried with the rest of the electronics.”

“Too bad. If you had a radio, you might be able to find out if those foreign fighters are heading this way.”

“Is that what the army told you?”

“The special forces soldier we met back in Colorado Springs told us to be watchful for it.”

“And he was with this 10th Special Forces Group—Green Berets?”

Brooke lifted her head back and exhaled. “Sheriff, I mean no disrespect, but I don’t understand why we keep going over things that aren’t material to my husband’s case.”

“It goes to your credibility and truthfulness.”

She coughed out a laugh. “Truthfulness? You think I’m making stuff up—like I’m crazy?”

“I didn’t say that, Mrs. Spencer. I’m just trying to piece together a timeline.”

“Did you find the boy who ran us off the road? He can give you a timeline of when he ran out in front of our truck.”

“He confirmed your story.”

“It’s not a story! It’s the truth!” Brooke retorted, barely keeping control of her temper now.

“It doesn’t change the fact that you and your husband were at the Gladwell farm at the time of the murder.”

He had her there. He had everything he needed to convict Ethan of murder. He was in the barn, and it was Lonnie Gladwell’s word against Ethan’s as to who had murdered Gerald. If the jury was going to give anyone the benefit of the doubt, it would be a local who’d been born and raised here over strangers passing through. Brooke and Ethan were the outsiders. She knew who they would believe.

After a fourth time of asking the same questions and receiving the same answers, Sheriff Parkhurst excused himself from the room, leaving Brooke sitting in the hardback chair with her hands cuffed behind her back. A moment later, she heard voices in the next room. The sheriff had moved on to

interrogate Ethan. Parkhurst must have been growing frustrated with Ethan's answers as he'd raised his voice a few times. Brooke couldn't hear Ethan's responses. He was doing a better job of remaining calm and unemotional than she was.

Brooke stared out the window, watching pedestrians walking by. Some would stop outside the window and listen. They spoke in hushed tones. More and more were gathering outside until a deputy went out and yelled at them to move on. They were likely members of the jury pool that would decide their fate. She hadn't allowed herself to think about what that might be. One of the men guarding the jail had said the punishment would be hanging. Was that even legal? Was any of this legal? Brooke wasn't sure how the legal system would function in an apocalypse.

The door banged open, and two guards rushed inside. "Stand up!" they demanded. "Turn around."

Brooke complied. One of the guards moved in behind her and ran his hand up and down her arm. He leaned in, and she could feel his warm breath on the side of her neck. Brooke stiffened, and then hot rage sent blood rushing into her cheeks. She lowered her head and then jerked it back, crushing the bridge of the man's nose. He stumbled back, cursing. She smiled darkly in satisfaction.

The deputy in question buried his hands in Brooke's hair and yanked her backward, causing her to stumble into his chest. As she stared up at him, his blood dripped onto her cheek. The deputy's hands tightened into fists. Brooke tensed, preparing herself for the blow. He raised his arm and...

"Stop! Stop that right now!" Annie rushed into the room. "Let go of her!"

"Do you see what she did?" the deputy whined.

“She was resisting, ma’am,” the second deputy said.

“Resisting?” Brooke stared him down, unblinking. “Hell yeah! I resisted him putting his hands on me,” she spat.

Annie squared her shoulders and pointed to the door. “Get out!”

“We have orders...” the deputy started to say.

“I don’t give a...” Annie pursed her lips, inhaled slowly and let it out. “I need the room. I want to speak with my client.”

“I don’t have the authority to—”

Annie stabbed the air and raised her voice. “Wait outside!”

The two deputies turned to go, but Annie called them back before they reached the doorway. “Uncuff her.”

The deputy with the broken nose glared at Annie as the second officer rushed over, inserted his key, and removed the handcuffs.

Brooke rubbed her wrists as the two deputies exited.

“Thank you, Annie,” Brooke said as Annie set her notebook on the mayor’s desk and took a seat in his chair.

“Please sit down, Brooke. I’m sorry that happened to you. I will make sure to take that up with the sheriff. We don’t need officers like that around here.”

“I thought we couldn’t be interrogated without you being present,” Brooke said.

“Technically, I’m not your attorney, so... I’ve spoken to Way—Sheriff Parkhurst about that matter. He’s taking it under advisement.”

“He wouldn’t let you sit in as he questions Ethan?”

“No.”

“We’re not going to get a fair trial, are we?”

“As fair as we can manage under the circumstances, but some rights can’t be accommodated at this time.” She held a hand up. “I have reached out to try to find you actual counsel, but no one from Alva will come here to represent you.”

“They don’t want to upset the locals by representing outsiders?”

Annie leaned back and placed her hands on the desk. She steepled her fingers and then glanced down at her binder. “Something like that.”

Neither spoke for several minutes while Annie went over her notes.

Finally breaking the silence, Brooke asked, “What happens after we’re convicted?”

Her answer came strained. “I’m going to do my best to stop that from occurring.”

“And if it does?”

Annie pinched the bridge of her nose and then shrugged. “I’m not sure. It will be up to Judge Miller to sentence you.”

Brooke leaned forward and braced herself on the desk. “What are his choices?”

Annie stared back at her with a blank expression.

“The people of Freedom aren’t going to want to feed us and stand guard at the jail for years on end as we serve out our sentences, right?”

Annie dropped her gaze to the desk. “Probably not.”

Brooke’s voice cracked. “So they’ll kill us?”

Annie's head whipped up, and her eyes locked with Brooke's. "I'm not going to let that happen!"

Brooke cast a glare across the desk. "And how are you going to stop them, Annie?"

Annie didn't have the chance to answer before the door flew open, and the sheriff entered.

"Annie? What are you doing here?"

Annie leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Talking to my client. You said I couldn't be present at the interrogation. You said nothing about me conferring with them when you weren't questioning them."

Sheriff Parkhurst dropped his chin to his hairy chest and shook his head. He glanced up and rubbed a hand over his five o'clock shadow. "I have a few more questions for Mrs. Spencer, but you can stay for those—if you want a counselor."

"Ask away, Sheriff," Annie said. She gestured for him to take a seat at one of the two chairs pushed up to a round, bistro-type table.

Sheriff Parkhurst raised an eyebrow and then let it fall before crossing the room and pulling out the chair and placing it next to Brooke. Then he reached over and spun her chair around to face him with their knees touching. He leaned in close, and Brooke could smell bacon on his breath.

"Mrs. Spencer, exactly how many people have you and your husband killed since the lights went out?"

TWENTY-FIVE

Robert

Johnson Residence

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 16

Fueled by rage at having his precious haul of small game stolen by his former dentist and the daycare director from Ethan's church, Robert ran most of the mile home. He passed his house and went straight to the Johnsons. He needed to talk to Kordell. Their situation was becoming cataclysmic. It was imperative they found out whether there was any merit to Doctor Edmonds's warning about a new, more dangerous group moving into their area. So far, their block had only dealt with attacks from three or four looters at a time. But if Edmonds was telling the truth about the huge gang roaming the streets, Sheridan Road could be overrun quickly.

"They said they'd had problems with the larger group. I think we need to find out if there is an imminent threat from these people."

"And what would we do with that information, Robert?" Kordell asked.

Robert stared back at him. What would they do? He hadn't thought that far ahead yet. What could they do about a large group swarming their neighborhood like locusts? They lacked the people or weapons or physical strength to defend themselves.

"We have decisions to make. We need information to decide whether we stay and fight or pack up and go, as so many have already."

Kordell waved his hand in the air. "We both know this place isn't sustainable. We're all going to have to leave at some point!"

Robert lowered his head and nodded. "I've known that since the start. Convincing Nina to go has been an issue for me. Even after she finally accepted no one was coming to help us, she's still refusing to leave until Ethan and Brooke make it home."

"That's a hard one. You could leave your son and daughter-in-law a note," Kordell said.

"And tell the bad guys where to find us as well?"

"You've got a point."

"I need to know just how accurate the new information is, how much time I have to prepare, and how long I have to convince Nina to leave. We'll starve to death here or be killed by some other group. We have to go. There's really no other choice."

"This is crazy, isn't it? It's almost like we're on some episode of *Survivor*, with every group preying on the other to survive."

"We haven't done that," Robert said.

“Yet. The twins still have food in their bellies. Others aren’t as fortunate. Think about it. When they’re starving to death, what will you be willing to do to save them?”

Robert didn’t have to think long. “Whatever it takes.”

“What if it takes robbing another group and causing their children to go hungry?”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that kind of thing. That’s why I want to leave now while I still have the energy to do so. I’m hoping to find somewhere with good hunting and fishing to keep us fed. When Ethan and Brooke make it home, then we can work on finding a place to grow a garden, and Ethan and I can get some larger game to feed us through the winter.”

“You believe that crap? Do you really think you can keep your family fed by running off to the woods to hunt and fish? Bro, those woods are literally going to be crawling with people trying to do the exact same thing.”

Kordell was right about the competition for wild game, but Robert was counting on the fact that many folks in town were already so malnourished that the trip to get to good hunting grounds would be too much for them. “What’s your plan?” Robert asked.

Kordell didn’t answer. But Robert knew he was way too smart not to have one.

“We should call a meeting and see if we can get volunteers to go find your dentist’s group and then size up the situation with the new gang they say is moving into the area.”



Antonio led the way west across LaFortune Park. The destruction of the shops and businesses was as Robert expected, but what he saw once they'd passed them sent a chill up his spine.

"How long do you think she's been dead?" Antonio asked, leaning over the body sprawled face down on the grass just outside what had once been a multimillion-dollar home located on the Southern Hills golf course. Smoke still smoldered from the ashes. It had happened very recently.

"A day, maybe," Kordell said.

Only the larger homes had been spared.

Robert watched as young men and women entered and exited a home near one of Arnold Palmer's favorites, the twelfth hole. "They're carrying stuff inside, not out?"

Kordell poked his head above the row of shrubs. "Looks like they're making it their headquarters."

"I bet there's a spectacular view of the greens from that second-story balcony," Antonio said.

Robert dragged himself backward away from the shrubbery lining a side yard. "I've seen enough. They're way too close, and I counted at least fifteen people lounging around the pool."

"Do you see any guards or sentries, Kordell?" Antonio asked.

"One. He's standing in the second story of the cabana," Kordell said. "Wait, there's another. He just came out onto the balcony." Kordell dropped down. "He's glassing the area. He might have seen me."

“Let’s get gone before they discover we’re here,” Antonio said.

“We need to get back and inform the others. We have to be prepared to leave—and soon,” Robert said, turning to low crawl back to the roadway.



They held their meeting at one of the two roadblocks. Antonio had agreed to guard the east roadblock while Robert and Kordell told their block what they’d discovered at Southern Hills.

“You don’t think we can hold our own with this gang?”

“We need more people,” Kordell said. “We can’t hold off large groups with just us.”

“We could strengthen our defenses. I can sharpen more sticks. We could find more nails,” Temperance Johnson said.

Kordell threw up his hands. “We’ll need more than punji sticks and bear boards to stop a hoard of hardened criminals from running through here and taking everything. You don’t get it, love. They killed two occupants and burned their homes up at the golf course.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Nina asked.

“Be prepared to bug out,” Seth Williamson said.

Layla nodded. “That’s what we’re doing. We’re not waiting around for some gangbangers to kill our children and burn down our house.”

“Where are we supposed to go, Layla? How are we going to get there? The streets are dangerous. How would we be

better off out there?” Nina asked.

“We’re planning on packing what we can and heading south as far from the city as possible,” Seth said.

“And then what?” Nina asked. “Do you plan on sleeping under the stars and eating dandelions?” Her words had an uncharacteristic bite to them. Robert sensed fear in her tone—fear bordering on terror.

Layla glared at her. “Yes. That’s exactly what we plan to do. Anything that will keep my children alive for another day.”

“It’s not permanent, I know. But once we’re away from the city, we’ll look for somewhere to hole up and maybe plant a garden until someone gets things back under control,” Seth said.

Robert hadn’t known how naïve Seth and Layla were. Did they think they could take their children on a stroll through the countryside, find some abandoned house, and plant a garden? That was their plan? Robert scanned the room. In his heart, he knew that his own plan wasn’t any more realistic. No one had anything better to offer them. They were all in the same sinking boat.

“It wouldn’t hurt for us all to be prepared. You know, have a bag packed—just in case,” Kordell said.

“As I said, where can we go that has food, clean water, and safety?”

After a long pause, Temperance spoke up. “Mexico.”

Kordell scoffed. “Sure, we’ll all load onto buses and drive down to Cancun or Cabo San Lucas.”

“Do you think Mexico wasn’t hit by whatever caused this?” Layla asked.

“That’s what Ashland Edgewater believed. I’m not sure how accurate their information was, but he said the range of the EMP likely didn’t extend that far south.”

“Was that where they were heading?” Layla asked.

“No, they had what they’d called a bug-out location northwest of Oklahoma City. They said they chose a sparsely populated place,” Temperance said.

“That’s a long way to walk,” Nina said.

Robert knew it would be next to impossible to convince Nina to leave before Ethan and Brooke arrived home, but everything was pointing to the choice being taken out of their hands soon.

“I think we need to put extra guards on duty tonight,” Kordell said.

“Yes, we should post someone on the west side of LaFortune Park. We’ll need the extra time if we have to flee in the middle of the night,” Robert said.

“Flee? In the middle of the night?” Temperance asked.

Kordell took her hand. “Southern Hills is less than three miles from here. They’ve already begun going through the neighborhoods between here and there. They could pick us next.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Temperance said.

“Well, believe it or not, they’re coming. Maybe not tonight, but soon, and we don’t have enough people or bullets to stop them,” Robert said.

Nina’s eyes were wide with terror. They filled with tears, and she reached out for Robert.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. We don’t have a choice,” he said in a gentle voice.

TWENTY-SIX

Ethan

Freedom Jail

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

After Sheriff Parkhurst interrogated Ethan, he returned to the next room to question Brooke again. At first, Ethan couldn't work out why Parkhurst spent so much time asking them about things that had occurred before they'd arrived in the town of Freedom, but he was beginning to understand. The man was trying to catch them in an inconsistency. He was grasping for anything he could to discredit them, but why? He didn't need to do that. He had Lonnie.

Ethan heard heavy footfalls in the corridor outside the room he was in and then a hard knock on a door.

"What is it?" he heard Parkhurst yell.

He couldn't make out the words clearly, but they must have been important as there was a sudden flurry of activity in the hallway.

"Not here, you idiot! Outside!" Parkhurst said, and then there were more footfalls on the tile floor.

The sheriff and the deputy must have forgotten that the windows were open. If they had recalled, they would have taken their conversation elsewhere.

“It’s Mitch. He’s gone,” the deputy said.

“How the hell did that happen?” Parkhurst asked.

“Yardley said he went to take a leak, and when he returned, Mitch had managed to break the zip ties. He clocked Yardley, knocking him unconscious. When he woke up, Mitch was long gone.”

“I knew I couldn’t trust you, clowns. Now, look what you’ve done. You screwed us all now,” Parkhurst said.

“I’ve got all our guys out looking for him, but it’s like he vanished into thin air.”

“You best find him. We’re all done for if he shows up here—alive and talking, and all our hard work will have been for nothing.”

“We’ll find him, boss.”

“Judge Miller will be here in the morning. We can’t have Mitch showing up here during the trial. We need those city folks convicted and hung before sundown. After their deaths and we have our money, we can all head south to Mexico. It won’t matter then what story Mitch tells.”

Ethan’s chest tightened as he realized just how dire their situation was. The sheriff and his deputies were in on the cover-up. They intended to have him and Brooke hung.

“I’ll take care of it, boss.”

“What are you standing around here for then? Get to it!”

Ethan had to do something. If he didn't act now, he might never get another chance. It grew quiet outside for a moment, and then he heard footsteps approaching the door. It opened, and the sheriff entered. Parkhurst took a few steps into the room and stopped just as a gust of wind blew through the window blinds, causing them to flutter and make a scraping noise. His gaze jumped between Ethan and the open window. Realization showed on his face. Parkhurst stiffened for a moment and then recovered.

“I believe we're done for the day. The judge will be here in the morning.” Parkhurst moved toward the door and stopped. “You just tell him what you told me, and I'm sure you and that lovely little wife of yours will be back on your way to Tulsa by the afternoon.”

“Sheriff, you and I both know that's not going to happen. Lonnie is going to lie and say I killed that man. You're not after justice. You're interested in covering up a murder.”

For a brief moment, their eyes met.

The sheriff's face contorted in rage, and he raced across the room, striking Ethan with such force that he knocked him from the chair. Ethan rolled onto his side and curled into a fetal position to protect his organs for what he anticipated was coming next. As the sheriff placed his boot on Ethan's neck, a deputy called through the door.

“You okay in there, Sheriff?”

“Fine. Just knocked over a chair. Go find Lonnie and get him over here,” Parkhurst said.

The moment the sheriff reached down to grab him, Ethan thrust his arms up and caught him on the chin with the metal cuff. The sheriff fell back against the desk, striking his head on

the corner. Ethan was on top of him in an instant. He spun around behind the big man, threw his right arm over his head, and applied a choke hold. Parkhurst clawed at Ethan's hands, scratching him, and pounding on his arms, but Ethan refused to ease up. Ethan's arm burned from the pressure he was applying to the sides of the Parkhurst's neck, but he couldn't let up. He was all in now!

Ethan held tight until Parkhurst's body went limp. Then he released the sheriff, and his body slid to the floor. He checked for a pulse and was relieved when he finally found it. Ethan removed the sheriff's service revolver from its holster, stuffing it into the waistband of his jeans. He grabbed the man's keys, fumbled until he found the right one, and then unlocked his handcuffs.

Massaging his wrists, Ethan rushed to the door. Then he stopped and listened. The deputy had said the whole department was out looking for this Mitch person, so the hallway should be clear of law enforcement officers. All he needed to do was convince Annie that the sheriff had released them. He would simply get Brooke and calmly walk out of the building. His plan was sketchy from there, but he didn't have time to come up with a better one. The sheriff could wake at any moment. He'd have to come up with something on the fly. The important thing was to get out now before the sheriff came around.

Easing back the door, Ethan pulled his shirt down over the stolen pistol and scanned the corridor before stepping out. He hurried down the hall to the room marked as the mayor's office. Without knocking, he wrenched open the door and entered the room.

Brooke jumped to her feet when she saw him.

“Ethan!”

Despite the adrenaline rush coursing through his veins from the battle with the crooked law enforcement officer, Ethan tried to appear calm. “Hello, Annie. I came to tell Brooke that Sheriff Parkhurst said we were free to go.” Ethan crossed the room with the sheriff’s keys behind his back.

“He did? Just like that? No trial?” Annie said.

She wasn’t buying it.

“He said they found evidence that Lonnie killed Gerald.” Ethan glanced over at her. “And that guy, Mitch, has turned up. Sheriff said you’d want to know. They’re headed out to the Gladwells’ place to pick him up.”

“What? They found Mitch?” Annie moved closer. “Was he injured? Is he okay?”

“I think he might have been injured. I’m not sure. The sheriff thought you’d want to know.”

Annie ran to the door and stopped. “He just said you could go?”

Ethan nodded. “Yep. He was in a hurry to get to the Mitch guy. He said he was the key to everything.”

Without another word, Annie ran down the hall and out of the building.

“They’re really letting us go?” Brooke asked.

“We’ll talk about that when we’re away from here.” Urgency pulled at him. “Right now, we need to get the hell out of this town.”

Ethan led Brooke to a rear door and into an alley that ran behind the buildings along Main Street. Removing the pistol

from his waistband, Ethan gazed across to a row of houses. "This way!" Ethan said, taking Brooke's hand. They ducked into one of the backyards, sliced through the bushes, and ran along the side of the house to the next street. Ethan glanced right and then left, trying to determine which way to go next. He looked to the sky, trying to get his bearings. The sun was to his right, which meant they were facing north. They needed to go east to get to Tulsa, but the deputies would expect that, so Ethan turned right, and they ran for two blocks before turning and going south along the tree line behind a school where one block over, their gallows were being built.

Ethan and Brooke zig-zagged through a salvage yard before hopping a short fence and heading through the leafless woods before approaching a grove of the invasive eastern red cedar trees. Using the evergreens for concealment, they ran less than a mile before emerging near a small municipal airstrip. Ethan and Brooke walked in silence, moving south along the tree line, keeping in sight of the road for another quarter mile before the trees thinned, and eventually, they were back out in the open. Not good! Thankfully, there were no houses along that stretch of the road. "There," Ethan said. "We'll stop there and catch our breath."

"We can't stop now. We're too close still," Brooke said.

"I see a river or stream up ahead. We need to drink some water. There's no telling when we'll have another chance."

"Are you sure? I really want to get the hell away from that town."

"I have to get my bearings and make a plan, Brooke. We need to know where we're going."

"We're heading home to Tulsa."

“Yes, but we must have a plan as to how we’re getting there. We can’t take the highway now. They’ll be looking for us there.”

Ethan led Brooke down an embankment into a small creek with pockets of water from recent rains. He lay on his stomach, cupped both hands together, and scooped water into his mouth.

“But you said never to drink untreated water. You said I could die.”

“I said there’s a chance you could die from untreated water. Diarrhea and vomiting from waterborne diseases are nothing to mess with, but in this instance, we don’t have a choice. We could die of dehydration running in this heat. We have to take the chance. “

“Okay. You’re right.” Brooke knelt and drank. After they’d had their fill, Ethan pointed to where the creek ran under the roadway. “Wait for me there. I’m going to check something out.”

“What? No. I’m going with you.”

“Brooke.” Ethan stopped and threw up his hands. He was too tired to argue his point. “Okay, but tread lightly and try not to step on any branches. We don’t want anyone hearing us coming.”

They moved slowly along the creek and emerged into a field several paces away from a metal barn. Ethan scanned the area and didn’t see any homes nearby. He moved toward the barn door, listened for a moment, and slid it open. “I think it’s empty. Wait here. I’m going to check it out.”

Ethan slipped inside, the pistol leading the way, and moved quickly through the building. It looked like it hadn’t been used

for years. There were no fresh animal droppings, and the farm equipment was rusty and covered in a thick layer of dust. The deputies would search barns and outbuildings in the area, especially ones that weren't being used any longer. He knew they couldn't stay there, but he hoped to find something to carry water in or find some food. Also, materials to make a basic shelter as well. Something like the old tarp they'd found and used to cover the bed of the GMC back in Dodge City.

Ethan stopped in the aisle and thought about the truck. He doubted anyone had gone to the trouble of pulling it out of the ditch. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the keys. They were no good to him without the pulleys and rope he'd scavenged. Searching for those things had been what had got them into this mess in the first place. Ethan dropped the keys back into his pocket, resigned that the GMC was no good to them now but not quite ready to give up on it. He didn't have time to feel sorry for himself. He had to devise a new plan that didn't involve getting strung up for putting the county sheriff in a choke hold.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Lonnie

Freedom Town Hall

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

“Our deepest condolences, Lonnie,” Ellen Hubble said, stepping back to allow Lonnie into the foyer. She smoothed back loose strands of her silver hair. She looked less put together than was customary for the elderly retired teacher.

Lonnie moved from the foyer into a sitting room located in the front of the old Victorian-style home where elderly twin sisters Ellen and Helen Hubble had lived together all their lives. The house, which their father originally built five miles north in the old town of Freedom, had in 1918, along with the rest of the town, been disassembled, loaded into wagons, and hauled to its present location. Moving the town close to the railroad saved the town.

“Can I offer you some coffee?” Helen Hubble gestured to a pot sitting on top of an old wood stove.

“Coffee would be nice,” Lonnie said.

“Sister and I just could not believe that something like that could happen in our quiet little town,” Ellen said.

“It’s disturbed a lot of folks, for sure,” Lonnie said, lowering himself into a chair by the wood stove.

Helen poured coffee into an antique bone china cup and handed it to Lonnie. “How is Jeanette holding up?”

“About as well as could be expected,” Lonnie said.

“Please send her our sympathies,” Ellen said.

Helen handed Lonnie the cup. “We wanted to go out to the ranch and pay our respects, but our automobile wouldn’t start.”

That was the precise reason Lonnie had moved Jeanette and Grady to his place. The last thing he needed was his sister-in-law spouting off to half the town about how he’d actually been the one to kill Gerald. Lonnie sipped his coffee and then got to the point of his visit. “Judge Miller will be conducting the trial at the schoolhouse today. He’s asked me to notify as many folks as I can. He wants this unprecedented process to be witnessed by as many townspeople as possible. The judge believes that is the only way to ensure the accused receives a fair and open trial.”

“Oh my!” Ellen said. She smoothed wrinkles from her floral print dress. “I’m not sure sister and I can make it.”

“It would mean a lot to me and my family, Miss Hubble,” Lonnie said, trying to look as somber as possible.

“Well...” Ellen turned to Helen. “What do you think, sister?”

Helen touched a finger to her lips. “I suppose we could do our laundry tomorrow, sister.”

Lonnie stood. "Great, ladies. I'll see you there." He placed his coffee cup on a side table and hurried to the door. Lonnie still had several more houses to visit in order to ensure that the right people came to the trial. He needed the more influential residents of Freedom on his side for this to work. Eventually, he'd be in charge of the town, and they'd been helpful in rallying folks behind his leadership.

Lonnie whistled a tune as he set out toward his next stop. He rehearsed the testimony he would give that afternoon as he strode up the walkway toward Myron and Tillie Hallett's place. He'd just stepped onto their porch when Burt came running around the corner.

"Lonnie, come quick," he said, through rapid breaths.

Lonnie moved back toward the sidewalk and approached him.

"Mitch escaped, and the sheriff has ordered everyone out looking for him. I'm heading out to your ranch to help now."

"What the hell? Yardley was supposed to be guarding him," Lonnie said. "Where's the sheriff?"

"At town hall with those prisoners," Burt said.

"Grab Palmer, and Timmons and find Mitch. Don't stop until you locate him. When you do, I want him gone for good."

"But the sheriff..."

"After today, Parkhurst won't be the law around here; I will. And I want Mitch McDonald dead."

Burt hung his head and shook it. He exhaled loudly and looked up. "All right, Lonnie. I'll tell everyone to shoot on sight."

“I’ll head that way after I speak with the sheriff,” Lonnie said, crossing the street.

As Lonnie hurried up the alley behind the town hall, he was nearly trampled underfoot by Annie’s horse. “Watch it!” he shouted as Annie raced away. He wanted to ask what her hurry was, but then it dawned on him—she must have heard about Mitch. Everything was falling apart, all because of Parkhurst’s incompetence. He had to get to the sheriff quickly and get a handle on this before it all unraveled.

Lonnie found Parkhurst sitting on the floor in the mayor’s office. “What the hell happened to you?”

Parkhurst glanced up with blood dripping from a gash on the back of his head.

“Where is he? Where’s Spencer?” the sheriff asked, getting to his hands and knees.

Lonnie shut the door. “What do you mean? You let him escape?”

“He attacked me,” Parkhurst said, rubbing his head.

“You let him escape?” Lonnie repeated, heat rising in his cheek.

Parkhurst stumbled to his feet, wobbled, and caught himself with a hand on the desk. “I didn’t let anything. He overheard one of my deputies telling me that Mitch had gotten away. He started yelling about me trying to cover up a murder, so I approached him to shut him up, and he attacked me.” He pointed to his head. “I think he hit me with something.” Parkhurst dropped his hand to his holster. “Shit! He took my service weapon.”

“Great! He’s running around town armed and knows about Mitch. That’s just wonderful. You’ve done a great job here,

sheriff.”

“This is your mess, Lonnie. You are responsible....”

Lonnie flew into a rage. He wrapped his fingers around one of the mayor’s rodeo trophies and crossed the room with lightning speed. Parkhurst never even knew what had hit him. Lonnie dropped the horse-shaped award to the floor beside the sheriff’s bloody body. “You’re useless. I’ll have to handle this by myself.” He turned, crossed the room, and opened the door. Lonnie drew in a deep breath. “Help! Help! Someone help, please.”

Les Cox yanked open the front door to the town hall and raced down the corridor. “What? What is it?”

“Annie Gillespie and those two prisoners attacked the sheriff.” Lonnie stepped aside and pointed into the room.

Les stepped forward, gasped, and ran into the room. He knelt next to Parkhurst and felt for a pulse, and then glanced back over his shoulder. “He’s dead.” Les picked up the trophy and studied it for a moment. “He’s been murdered.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

Brooke

Anderson Creek

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

Brooke grew more anxious by the moment as she waited for Ethan to clear the barn.

He appeared in the doorway. “It’s safe, but keep your voice low in case someone comes looking for us.”

It grew darker as Ethan led her deeper into the barn. “Look for anything we can use to carry water or to make a shelter—rope, tarp, saddle blanket, or similar. I want to check out a toolbox I noticed in the back corner.”

The barn was full of junk. It looked like a place pickers would love to search for trash or treasure items. Brooke was sure they’d find something useful. She picked up an old wooden box and brushed off a thick layer of dust. She sneezed, and her gaze shot toward the door, afraid someone outside might have heard it. To her relief, no one burst through the doors to arrest them.

Brooke placed the box back on the heap with the rest of the small tools, paint cans, and scraps of wood and metal. She moved to her left and shifted a cardboard box. Beneath it she found a coil of paracord and some thin wire. Brooke grabbed them and looked around for something to carry her finds in. The best she could come up with was an empty feed sack. She dropped the cord and wire into the bag and moved to another stack of items. She picked up a roll of Tyvek house wrap. "Ethan," she whispered. Do you still have your pocketknife? We can cut a couple of pieces of this, and if we find some tape, we could make a cover for our shelter."

"They took my knife, but I saw a pair of shears back there," Ethan said, moving to retrieve them. He hurried over and cut several sections of the synthetic woven plastic. "This is a good find," he said, handing her the strips.

"I found cord and wire, too."

He smiled. "That's awesome. We have our shelter taken care of. All we need now is something to carry water in."

"I'll keep looking," Brooke said, folding the wrap and stuffing it into the animal feed bag.

A few moments later, Ethan held up a two-liter bottle. "Bingo!"

"Do you think it's safe to use? What if it had weed killer or some type of poison in it before?" Brooke asked.

Ethan unscrewed the lid and sniffed the opening of the bottle. "Smells like Dr. Pepper to me."

"Great!" Brooke said. She moved to the back corner, where an old antique dresser was piled high with junk. She rummaged through the drawers and was elated when she

finally found a roll of duct tape. Cord. Wire. Duct tape. All common items that they could use to survive and get home.

“Keep an eye out for something we can use to make a fire. We’re going to need to boil water.”

“So we’ll need a pan, right?”

Ethan held up a box of plastic freezer bags. “Nope, we have these.”

“You can’t boil water in a plastic bag. It’ll melt.”

“You can, actually.”

“But it will leach dangerous chemicals into the water.”

“We put them in the microwave and reheat food in them. I think it’s fairly safe.”

Brooke wrinkled her nose.

“I know how you feel about chemicals but dehydration from bad water will kill you faster—just saying.”

“I’m still not convinced you can boil water in a plastic bag, but okay.”

“It only has to come to a rolling boil for one minute.”

“That’s if we can find something to start a fire with,” Brooke said.

“There are always sticks. I could make a bow drill, but that takes time, and I haven’t done that since boy scouts.”

“We better find a lighter, then.” Brooke smiled.

They each searched for several minutes without finding anything to start a fire. They gathered their finds into the feed bag. Ethan poked holes in the sides and strung paracord through the sack to create a makeshift backpack. After

strapping it to his back, they exited the barn, easing the doors closed. Ethan held up a feather duster.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Use it to brush away our footprints.”

“You’re so smart,” Brooke said.

“And good-looking,” Ethan shot back.

Brooke smiled and stepped behind him. “And good-looking.”

They were on their way back toward the road when they heard a car engine in the distance. Ethan turned to her, a look of alarm flashing across his face. “Back. Get back to the barn!”

The color drained from Brooke’s face. “Is it them?” A tight knot was forming in the center of her chest.

“Go, Brooke!” Ethan said in answer to her question.

Brooke whirled around, raced toward the building, and barreled through the door. Once she was inside, he quickly used the feather duster to conceal their footprints and then closed the door. “Are you sure it was them?”

“Everyone will be looking for us, Brooke. Do you understand?”

She nodded nervously.

Ethan took both her hands in his and pressed his forehead against hers. “Brooke.” He paused. There was something in his voice that terrified her. “The sheriff didn’t let us go. I—I knocked him out with a sleeper hold.”

She stepped back and pulled away. Her voice pitched high and tight. “You did what?”

Ethan glanced back at the doors. “Lower your voice.” He returned his focus to Brooke. “I don’t have time to explain right now. We have to hide. The whole town could be looking for us.”

“You attacked the sheriff? Why would you do that?” Her mind was spinning. They’d been forced to do things that went against their moral code in order to survive, but attacking law enforcement was on a whole other level. “I need to know why, Ethan. You had to know that they’d never let us leave if you did something like that.”

“I can’t explain now, Brooke. They’re coming. I only have six rounds in this revolver. I can’t take on a group of heavily armed deputies. We need to find somewhere to hide,” Ethan said. He glanced around. Ethan moved a stack of old suitcases and pointed at a hole in the floor under a card table. “Get under there.”

Brooke could hear the voices moving closer as she dropped to her knees and crawled into the space. She barely had room to turn sideways. The concrete floor was cold and damp, making her almost instantly begin to shiver. Once she was inside, Ethan began moving the suitcases back into place. “What about you?” Brooke asked, poking her head into the small opening at the top.

He pointed to a stack of lumber. “I’ll be behind there.” Ethan picked up the last suitcase and was about to place it on the stack, totally concealing her from view.

Brooke held her hand out to stop him. “But we can’t know that it’s the deputies.”

“We can’t be sure it isn’t,” he said, lowering the suitcase on to the others. “We can’t afford to be seen by anyone.”

As she sat scrunched under the table, Brooke tried to imagine what could have transpired to make Ethan choke out the sheriff. She replayed the last moments before they'd escaped. Ethan had told Annie the sheriff had released them due to new evidence and a witness. What was his name? Mitch? He was Annie's ranch hand. What did he have to do with Gerald Gladwell's murder? Had he also been in the barn that day? If so, why was he just now coming forward? Brooke had more questions than answers. She needed to get out from under that table and find out what the hell was really going on.

Time passed slowly as Brooke waited for Ethan to give her the all clear. The sound of the engine had long since faded. She wasn't sure why they were still hiding if the threat was gone. She had cramps in her legs and needed to pee. When she could wait no longer, she pushed one of the suitcases back. The sun had gone down, and the barn was now dark.

"Ethan!"

"Over here," he whispered. "Don't come out."

"Why? They're gone. I haven't heard a car engine in a long time."

"Shh! They're searching the creek bed. Just remain quiet and stay hidden."

TWENTY-NINE

Annie

Main Street

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

Annie's first stop had been at Gerald Gladwell's place. When she'd discovered no one there, she'd ridden across the road to Lonnie's ranch, where she'd found Jeanette and her grandson Grady tied up on the floor in one of the bedrooms.

"What's going on here, Jeanette?" Annie said, rushing to her side and removing the duct tape from her mouth. "Did Lonnie do this?"

"Yes. He doesn't want me to tell the truth at the trial today."

"Where is everyone?" Annie asked, moving around behind her.

"They're all out looking for Mitch."

Annie unsheathed her knife and began cutting the duct tape wrapped around Jeanette's hands. "Looking for him? I thought he'd been found."

“He was never missing,” Jeanette said, rubbing her wrists.

It all became clear to Annie. It was as she’d suspected all along. Mitch had gone to Lonnie’s to notify him about finding Harry’s body, and Lonnie had held him there at the ranch.

Annie moved to Grady and cut the tape, binding him. “Is Mitch all right? Is he hurt?”

“He’s pretty banged up. I was surprised he was able to overtake Yardley in his condition,” Grady said, getting to his feet.

“Yardley?” Richard Yardley was a jailer at the Woods County jail and a close friend of the sheriff.

“Yardley’s been guarding all of us,” Grady said.

“All of you?”

“There’s a big guy and his dog in the next room. If it wasn’t for him, Mitch would be dead right now,” Grady said.

“I don’t understand. I was told that the sheriff was going to be here, and Mitch had information that proved Lonnie killed Gerald.”

Grady helped his grandmother to her feet. “I don’t know about that. We only spoke with Mitch a few minutes before he escaped from the room where we were all being held. After he got away, they moved Grady and me in here,” Jeanette said.

Grady opened the door slightly and peeked through the crack.

“No one’s here. The door was standing open when I arrived,” Annie said.

“Let’s get out of here then. We need to get to town and tell everyone what’s going on. We have to round up folks and stop

them from finding Mitch,” Jeanette said.

Grady ran to the next room and kicked the door open. Annie followed him inside. She gasped at the sight of the huge man sprawled out on the floor.

“Is he dead?” Jeanette asked from the doorway.

The man stirred and tried to sit up. “Lexi! Lexi Lou!”

“There’s someone else here too?” Annie asked, scanning the room.

“Lexi’s his dog,” Grady said, taking the knife from Annie and cutting the massive flex cuffs from the man’s arms and legs.

“Did you see her?” he asked as he stood and moved toward the door.

“The dog?”

“Yes. She’s a Shetland Sheepdog.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see a dog.”

“Lexi,” the big guy called as he moved across the hall and down the stairs.

A second later, Annie heard a little dog barking.

“I’m going to get you two back to your place and go find Mitch,” Annie said.

“No, we need to go into town with you. People need to know what Lonnie and the sheriff have done and what they’re about to do to those precious young parents.”

“The sheriff? What does Wayne have to do with this?” Annie asked as they moved down the stairs together.

“Everything,” Jeanette said.

“Sheriff Parkhurst is working with Lonnie to cover up my granddad and Uncle Harry’s murders.

“Wayne? Is he working with Lonnie Gladwell? Why?”

“The oldest reason on the books—greed,” Jeanette said.

“Lonnie promised the sheriff half of Grandpa’s gold and silver if he helped him cover up the murders.”

Annie didn’t know what to think. She’d known Wayne for years. They’d shared a bed, but she’d never known him at all.

“We have to get to town and save my friends,” the big guy said, petting a little dog.

“This is Jarrod, by the way,” Grady said, pointing to the man.

“And this is my dog, Lexi Lou. I thought I’d lost her forever.”

“Ethan and Brooke are your friends? You were with them?” Annie asked.

“I stayed behind with the truck after it went into the ditch. After I saw all the police cruisers, I thought something happened to Ethan and Brooke so I walked toward town. That’s were couple of guys rushed out of one of the buildings, nabbed me, and brought me here.”

“You helped Mitch escape?” Annie asked.

“They were going to kill him. That Lonnie character said he knew too much and that he’d never live to tell anyone. I’d gotten my hands free and was working on my feet when they came to take Mitch out. I grabbed the guard’s head and slammed it into the wall. I told Mitch to run and that I’d get these two free. But other guards came before I could free my legs.”

“Let’s go get my buggy, and we’ll ride into town for help,” Annie said.



They met Judge Miller’s horse-drawn carriage on the road into town. After briefly filling him in on what she’d learned at Lonnie’s ranch, she and the others followed the judge into Freedom and stopped in front of the town hall.

Town Chairman Steve Robbins ran out to greet her. “The sheriff’s been murdered. That young couple killed Sheriff Parkhurst and escaped.”

Annie rushed inside and found Wayne on the floor in the mayor’s office. She didn’t know what to believe. Ethan had been the one to tell her that Mitch had been found and that Wayne was heading to the Gladwell ranch. Ethan had said that Mitch had information that exonerated him. Annie just didn’t see Ethan as a cold-blooded killer. Something else had to have occurred there. Whatever the case, Mitch was still out there and in danger. She had to find him before Lonnie’s men did. Annie rushed back outside and helped Judge Miller from his carriage.

“He’s dead for sure. I just don’t believe that Ethan Spencer is the one that killed him. But I can’t stay here and find out, Judge. Mitch is out there, and he needs help. I have to round up some folks to help me look for him.” Annie turned back toward her buggy, and as she did, she glanced up Main Street toward a group of riders entering the town. “Mitch!” Annie yelled, running toward them.

After dismounting and following Annie and the others inside the town hall, Mitch explained how he’d escaped and

found his way to Lonnie's neighbor, Anthony Gilchrist's ranch. "We had to sling some lead to get him here," Anthony said. "Most of the dudes Lonnie sent after Mitch are dead. Two others took off. I suspect they'll be dead by morning, and the coyotes and buzzards will pick their bones.

"I need to see the sheriff's body and the crime scene," Judge Miller said, turning toward the mayor's door. After the judge confirmed that Wayne was dead, he asked where Lonnie was.

"He rounded up a posse to look for that couple. They're armed and dangerous," Chairman Robbins said.

"They're not the ones that are armed and dangerous—it's Lonnie and that posse of his," Jeanette said.

"Lonnie killed Harry and Gerald, Judge," Mitch said.

"Parkhurst said Harry died from a fall from his horse," the Judge said.

"A fall from a horse does not cause bullet wounds to the head and chest. He was murdered. After reporting finding the body to Parkhurst, I rode over to Lonnie's to notify him. He pulled a gun on me and would have shot me if Deputy Yardley hadn't shown up."

"How did he know where to find you?"

"I told the sheriff I'd go inform the family."

"And he knew how Lonnie would respond," Annie said.

"Yardley told Lonnie he was sent to take me into custody. He cuffed and locked me in one of Lonnie's spare rooms. I heard Parkhurst and Lonnie arguing about whether to kill me or not. Parkhurst ordered Yardley to guard me until he could figure something out. He said it would look too suspicious if I

turned up dead after reporting Harry's body—and Annie knew where I'd gone—she'd seen the body.”

“The sheriff couldn't be sure who else Mitch and I had spoken to about finding Harry's body. That's why he stopped by days later,” Annie said. Annie recalled the visit. She'd had no idea he was involved or that he knew where Mitch was. She felt so betrayed.

Mitch wrapped his arm around Annie's shoulders. “Lonnie wanted her dead too, but Parkhurst refused. He threatened to kill Lonnie if he hurt Annie.”

Annie tried to wrap her head around how the kind man she'd known for so long had been involved in something like this.

“Robbins, round up everyone you can and go stop Lonnie from killing anyone else. The rest of you, in the conference room now. I want to hear everything from the beginning,” the judge ordered.

THIRTY

Ethan

Anderson Creek

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

Ethan listened as the men exited a vehicle. At first, he could barely make out their voices above the wind. They must have concentrated on the northeast side of the road before coming to check out the barn because so much time had elapsed before he heard them again that he almost thought they'd left.

When the sun began to set, and the barn's interior started to grow dark, he'd been sure they would call off the search for the night, but then he heard someone whistle and several voices. As they moved closer to the barn where Ethan and Brooke were hiding, he began to hear their conversation clearly.

From what he gathered from the men, Lonnie Gladwell, Ethan's accuser, had organized the search for them. Residents of Freedom were being asked to join the manhunt. The townspeople were busy looking for them in town as well, going door to door searching their homes and businesses.

“They took the sheriff’s revolver, so they’re armed and dangerous, guys. Stay on your toes and call out if you see any sign of them,” a gruff voice called out.

“You two take the south door. Darren, you’re with me at the north doors. Remember, Lonnie wants the guy alive.”

“What about the woman?” another man asked.

“We don’t kill women, stupid.”

“What if she takes a shot at us?”

“Duck,” the leader chuckled. “Wound her if you have to, but I don’t want to answer to Annie for killing her clients.”

Ethan moved to his right to obtain a clear view of the doors on the north side of the barn. These men weren’t trained lawmen but likely were hunters and had weapons experience. His plan was to take out the leader first. Ethan was banking on these guys being regular Joes who, once they encountered resistance and a real gun battle ensued, would run away rather than fight. It was a long shot but the best he could come up under the circumstances.

A tiny flicker of light shone through the crack above the door. At least one of the men would be holding a flashlight or have a light mounted to their weapon. He was hoping it was the leader. He’d be his first target. Ethan had considered just remaining concealed and allowing them to search the barn. With the amount of junk piled inside, they’d likely never find them, especially in the dark. But Ethan couldn’t risk them finding Brooke in her hiding place. There’d be no way he could defend her against four armed men. He had to make the first strike and pray the others would run off.

“What’s happening, Ethan?” Brooke whispered.

“Stay inside. No matter what, Brooke, don’t come out.”

“Ethan!”

“Shh. They’re coming!”

The light grew brighter, and then the door squeaked open a crack. The guy hesitated, shining the light through the opening before pushing the door open wider. Ethan fired, and the man dove inside and hit the ground. His flashlight rolled in the opposite direction and then shone in Ethan’s direction. No longer hidden, Ethan stepped out from behind the stack of lumber and ran in a crouch along the back of an old sofa seeking targets. The second man had dropped back behind the door, the beam of his flashlight directed at the ground. Ethan considered shooting at him through the door, but it was flanked by two eight-by-eight-inch posts, and he couldn’t be sure he’d hit the man. He didn’t have rounds to waste.

Ethan eased his head above the sofa in search of the leader who’d rolled behind a large dresser.

No shot.

Gripping the revolver in both hands, ready to fire, Ethan turned his focus to the south-facing doors, anticipating them opening in a moment and the two other men rushing inside. He waited, but they never appeared. He returned his attention back to the man behind the dresser—their leader. Ethan could hear clothes rustling as the man moved behind the large piece of furniture.

“Josh, are you hit?” the man behind the barn doors called out.

“No! Get in here and help me take this asshole.”

“I thought you said Lonnie wanted him alive?”

“He does. Just cover me!”

The beam of the man's flashlight inched forward, illuminating the entire doorway. Ethan took aim at the dresser. A second later, the man with the flashlight rounded the door and illuminated his now-standing leader.

"Shit!" the man spat and dropped just as Ethan fired. Ethan couldn't be sure if he'd struck the man or not. He spun and turned the weapon toward the second man, but he was gone. His flashlight lay on the ground in the doorway. Ethan rushed around the sofa with the sheriff's revolver leading the way. He moved quickly toward the dresser, searching for signs of a blood trail leading to the location of the leader. All he found was the man's rifle on the ground beside it. Ethan scanned the illuminated area behind the piece of furniture as he squatted to pick up the weapon.

"Is he dead?" Brooke asked over his shoulder.

"Brooke, get down. He could still be armed," Ethan said.

"Where are the other men?" Brooke asked, crouching behind him.

"Gone. I think." Ethan shoved the revolver into her hands. "Stay down!"

Ethan poked his head around the dresser, searching for the leader. He found him hiding behind a plastic trash can filled with clothes hangers. "We don't want to kill you, mister. We just want to leave this town," Ethan said.

"That's not going to happen. You killed Sheriff Parkhurst, and you murdered Gerald Gladwell. You have to pay for your crimes."

"I didn't kill Sheriff Parkhurst. He was alive when I left him. And I didn't kill Gerald Gladwell.

“Lonnie found Sheriff Parkhurst dead a few minutes after you told Annie Gillespie he had released you both.”

Ethan’s mind was reeling as he tried to make sense of what he was hearing. He was sure Parkhurst was alive when he left him. Ethan’s head hurt as he tried hard to recall the fight. The sheriff had hit his head pretty hard on the desk. Was it possible he’d obtained a significant head injury? Was he indirectly responsible for the sheriff’s death? Either way, he had to find a way out of this. If he let these men take them back, they’d hang them for sure now.

“Your sheriff was as crooked as the day is long. He was working with Lonnie Gladwell to frame me. Lonnie killed his brother, not me. Even Gerald’s widow knows that.”

“You can tell all that to the judge when you stand trial.”

“And he’s going to take my word over a local? Not likely.”

“You can’t escape. Everyone in town is looking for you. There’s no place to hide. You might as well turn yourself in and pray for mercy.”

“Mercy?” Brooke spat. “You people have already determined we’re guilty. From what we’ve seen here so far, we’d never get a fair trial, and there would be no mercy. You mean to hang us for something we didn’t do.”

“There were people in town that were on your side and didn’t believe Lonnie—until you went and murdered the sheriff, that is. Now everyone is looking for you.”

“They better be ready to die because we won’t go down without a fight,” Brooke said.

“Listen, we were framed by Lonnie and the sheriff. I did what I had to do to save my wife and get home to our four-year-old twins. You would have done the same thing in a

similar situation. There was no other way. Once that Mitch fella was found, we were never going to live to see our day in court.”

Ethan nudged Brooke and nodded toward the open door. “I’m going to cover you. On the count of three, I want you to jump up and run out that door,” Ethan whispered. “Keep running. I’ll catch up with you.”

“No. I’m not leaving...”

“I’ll be right behind you. Now get ready.”

Ethan shifted his weight and prepared to stand and move behind the dresser.

“What does Mitch have to do with this?” the leader asked.

Ethan hesitated. Was there still a chance he could get out of there without having to kill the man? If there was... Ethan shook his head. He had enough blood on his hands. “I overheard the sheriff and one of his deputies talking about a man named Mitch who’d escaped custody. They were very concerned he would talk and reveal their scheme—which I believe was their attempt to frame me—though I can’t be sure.”

“The sheriff had Mitch in custody? For what?”

“I don’t know. They were very upset that he escaped. The sheriff said Mitch could ruin their whole plan, and they’d never get the opportunity to go to Mexico.”

“Mexico?” The leader laughed. “Sheriff Parkhurst wouldn’t run off to Mexico. Why would he do that?”

Ethan gestured for Brooke to stay put and then moved back away from the flashlight’s beam, around the front of the

dresser, with the intent of sneaking in behind the man and surprising him.

“Because the EMP didn’t affect Mexico,” Brooke said. “They still have power and running cars.”

“You can’t know that,” the leader scoffed, his tone sarcastic.

“There’s going to be a flood of refugees heading that way. We saw that for ourselves in Dodge City, Kansas. Thousands of people are on the move.”

“The sheriff is planning to abandon Woods County?” the leader asked.

“Along with some of his deputies,” Ethan added, stepping out and pressing the rifle’s barrel against the man’s back. “Don’t move. I don’t want to shoot you. I’m not a killer.”

“I don’t believe you,” the man said, lifting his arms above his head.

THIRTY-ONE

Brooke

East of Freedom

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 16

After hog-tying the guy back at the barn, Brooke and Ethan ran into the night, searching for somewhere safe to hide from the posse that was coming for them. They followed the creek with the men's flashlights clutched in the palms of their hands, trying to illuminate only a few steps in front of them without lighting up the night like a beacon and giving away their position.

“Here,” Ethan said, moving toward the highway. They crossed over the pavement and dropped down on the opposite side. Ethan stopped long enough to check the rifle. “At least it has a full magazine. Check your pistol.”

Brooke dropped the magazine, and Ethan shined his light on it. “Three rounds left.”

“We won't need them. We'll be far away by the time Lonnie and his henchmen return,” Ethan said.

Brooke and Ethan continued walking, following the dry creek bed northeast for a mile, hoping it would eventually lead to a road east toward home.

As they neared an oilfield, Brooke's flashlight went out. She banged it against her palm a few times, but it didn't turn back on. "There's just nothing out here but oil rigs. There's no place to hide even if we see them coming."

"There's plenty of gullies and washes," Ethan said.

The dry creek eventually opened up into a narrow, steep-walled canyon, the floor of which was rocky, making traveling slow and dangerous.

Brooke tried her best to take careful steps, but it was difficult. When she stepped over a rock, her foot slipped, and her ankle twisted. "Ouch!" she said, dropping to one knee.

Ethan stopped and spun around. He knelt beside her. "Are you okay?"

"My ankle," she said through gritted teeth.

Ethan ran a hand down her right shin. "Do you think it is broken?"

"No. I don't think so. That's the second time I've twisted it tonight, though. It's so sore."

Ethan glanced around. "We should stop until daylight. This is too dangerous."

"Stop? We haven't gone far enough. They could be on our trail."

"We can't outrun them with broken ankles," Ethan said. "We'll hear and see them coming long before they reach us. We'll have time to give them the slip."

“I don’t know, Ethan. I’d like to get as far away from this place as possible.”

“Me, too. Let’s just rest for tonight. We’ll gain much more ground if we’re rested. We’ll leave just as the sun comes up.”

“Fine,” Brooke said, scooting back toward the wall of the canyon. Ethan moved over beside her and shut off the flashlight. Brooke leaned her head back and stared up at the stars. She’d never seen anything so beautiful. In the absence of manmade light, millions and millions of stars decorated the sky. “Remember lying under the stars at Alabaster Caverns State Park?” Brooke said, pointing to the sky.

“I do. It was amazing.”

Although they’d made the trip to tour the cave, Brooke had been excited about visiting the park for the stargazing. According to the brochure, it was one of the darkest places on earth—making for amazing night-sky viewing.

The ground they were sitting on was damp, and the temperature had dropped, causing Brooke to shiver.

“Are you cold?” Ethan said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her close.

“Do you think it’s too cold for snakes and scorpions?” Brooke asked. She was almost as afraid of running into a rattlesnake or a striped bark scorpion as she was of the group chasing them.

“Yeah. Snakes and scorpions don’t like nights this cool.”

“What about tarantulas? Do they come out on cold nights?” Brooke imagined that the arid and rocky terrain of northwest Oklahoma was crawling with Oklahoma brown tarantulas. There could be one hiding under the rock inches from her hand. She lifted it from the ground and placed it on

her lap. Brooke shivered as she recalled driving through a massive tarantula migration as a kid.

“Spiders don’t like the cold either,” Ethan said, but he sounded less convincing now. Spiders were the one thing Ethan feared.

“How low do you think the temperature will get?” Although the daytime highs in Oklahoma could climb into the high seventies to low eighties that time of year, the nights were still quite chilly and could even dip below freezing. If that happened, they could become hypothermic—again.

“This is likely as cold as it will get,” Ethan said.

“You’re just trying to keep me positive, aren’t you.”

“Is it working?”

“Not really.”

Brooke’s teeth began to chatter. She hadn’t been this cold since they’d gone into the icy Barker Meadow Reservoir to rescue Wade and Mindy.

“I wonder how Tank and the kids are doing?”

“They’re doing fine. They are probably in one of the best places possible to survive this. They have electricity, running water, food, and people who will love and care for them,” Ethan said.

“We don’t really talk much about what things might be like for the twins,” Brooke said.

Ethan was quiet for a moment. “Mom and Dad won’t let them go hungry.”

“What do you think their neighborhood is like now?”

“Hard to say. There are some really fine people on their block. They’ll pull together to get through this.”

“I can’t stop thinking about them. I worry—about their future and how we’ll all survive over the long term. We’re not farmers or military like Christie, Evan, and the others back in Colorado. We don’t have a group or a compound.”

“We have one another and my parents. We’ll manage. We’ll survive together.”

One thing that the last few weeks had taught Brooke was the lengths they were willing to go to reach their kids and make sure they were safe. But first, she and Ethan had to figure out a way to survive Freedom and make it home to them.

THIRTY-TWO

Robert

Spencer Residence

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Day 16

“Where are we going, Pop Pop?” Ollie whined. His short legs dangled over the edge of his bed. In his tiny hand, Ollie held one of Piper’s dog toys.

“We’re going on a little adventure.” Robert stopped shoving clothes into Amelia’s backpack and turned to face his grandson. “You like camping, right?”

Ollie’s eyes lit up as he nodded. “Do we get to sleep inside a tent?”

“We do,” Robert said, turning his attention back to packing the twins’ things.

“I hate camping,” Amelia chimed in. “I hate bugs.”

“It’s okay. You and Mimi can sleep inside a cabin.”

“Where is Mimi?” Amelia asked.

“She’s in the attic.”

“Why?”

Robert shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

He had an idea as to why. Nina had snapped at him when he’d told her she couldn’t take framed photographs with them. He’d headed for the garage to pack their camping gear. She’d followed him and proceeded up the ladder to the attic, where they stored all the mementos from Ethan’s childhood.

Amelia hopped down from the bed and stood beside him. She tugged on the tail of his shirt. When he glanced down, her big brown eyes were filled with tears. “What about Mommy and Daddy? How will they find us?”

Robert had thought about that a lot over the last ten days or so. But at the time, he hadn’t known where they would bug out to, so he had worried that leaving a note telling Ethan and Brooke where to find them would also put them at risk. “We’re going to leave them a note.”

“I can’t wait to swim and climb trees,” Ollie said.

“It’s a little too cold yet for swimming,” Robert said.

“Will Pastor Henson and Miss Paula be there?” Amelia asked.

“I don’t know,” Robert said. He didn’t want to tell the twins that the director of their daycare was a gun-toting road bandit.

“When are we leaving?” Ollie asked.

“First thing in the morning, before the sun comes up.”

“How are we getting there since the cars won’t start?” Amelia asked.

Robert zipped up Amelia's backpack and tapped her on the shoulder, gesturing for her to turn around. "We're going to walk."

"Is it a long way?" Amelia asked as she slid her arms through the straps.

"It will take us a few days to get there."

Ollie slid down from the bed. "Can't we ride in the wagon?"

"I'm afraid not. We'll need to use the wagon to haul all our stuff." Robert picked up his pack and handed it to him.

"I don't like walking," Amelia said.

"Could we ride our bikes instead?" Ollie asked.

Robert thought for a moment. "That's a great idea, Ollie." It would be much faster with the kids on their bikes, with their training wheels. When they grew tired, Robert and Nina could tie a rope around the bikes and pull them. They had their baskets and racks to hold their packs.



The twins had fallen asleep on the sofa, curled up next to their German shepherd, Piper. Nina was still in her closet, going through clothes, trying to decide which items to take. Robert had the wagon packed with all the food, water, and ammo they had. He'd cleaned all their weapons and made sure they were loaded. He'd even strapped the kids' packs to their bike racks and filled their water bottles. The Spencers were as ready as they could be.

There was a tap at the side door to the garage, and then Kordell filled the frame. "We're just about packed.

Temperance is going through Keisha's baby books and trying to squeeze as many photos into her suitcase as possible."

"Nina did the same thing. Now she's in her closet trying to pick clothes that will fit in the rest of the space."

"Priorities," Kordell said.

"Yep, priorities."

Kordell pointed to the bikes. "That's smart thinking."

"Ollie's idea."

"He's a smart kid. How are they taking the news?" Kordell asked.

"They're concerned their parents won't know where to find them."

Kordell walked over to Robert's workbench, knelt, and grabbed a can of orange spray paint.

"I know how to fix that." He walked outside and through the gate into the backyard. He shook the can and began to spray letters onto the wooden privacy fence. He stepped back and asked, "What do you think? Is that big enough?"

In two-foot-high letters, Kordell had informed Ethan where to find them. "Gone fishing."

"They couldn't miss it."

Next to the letters, Kordell drew a five-foot-tall cross and, beside it, a triangle. "Do you think they'll get that it's a tent?"

"I think Ethan will know right where to find us."

"But what if he doesn't go into the backyard?" Nina asked, approaching them.

“He will.” Robert couldn’t be certain, but what more could they do?

“I should get back to guard duty. We’re shorthanded with Elena Newbury and Shelly Williamson leaving.”

“They left already?” Nina asked.

“The women didn’t want to wait around, what with the run-in with Doctor Hammond and Paula McGirt today and then learning the group they warned us about is only a few miles away,” Kordell said.

“I’ll grab my rifle and take a shift at the east roadblock,” Robert said.

“Are you all packed?” Nina asked Kordell.

“We’re ready to roll out of here come zero dark thirty.”

“I’m so glad you and Temperance will be going with us,” Nina said.

“Antonio and his family have agreed to go as well,” Kordell said.

“I feel so much better knowing we’ll be traveling together,” Nina said.



Robert hadn’t been at the checkpoint long before Antonio came to replace him. “I’ll take this shift. I can’t stand to be at home right now. My wife is driving me crazy with the way she’s packing.”

“Are you sure?” Robert said. “I’m all packed. I can stand guard....”

“Robert, do you smell that?” Kordell said, running toward him. “I think there’s a house on fire a few blocks over.”

“Go check it out. I’ll have my boy help me stand guard,” Antonio said.

“Be ready to push those cars out of the way if it’s that group from Southern Hills,” Robert said, climbing through the Pacifica and taking off after Kordell.

Robert and Kordell ran south along Sheridan Road and turned west at 56th Street. Robert could see the flames as he rounded the corner. He stopped in the middle of the road. “I think it’s the school.”

“The kids!” Kordell said.

Several families from their subdivision had moved into the high school. They’d claimed its block construction made it easier to defend. Obviously, it hadn’t been enough.

Gunfire rang out, and Robert saw a group of people running from a house near the end of the block.

“We’re out of time, Kordell! We have to go now before they reach our street!”

“I hope it’s not too late,” Kordell said.

Robert and Kordell sprinted back to their street and yelled for Antonio and his son to push the Pacifica out of the way.

“We have to go. Now!” Kordell said, hopping over the top of the hood and running past them.

Robert heard screams coming from somewhere on their block. He raced down the street and spotted a young man wielding a bat while chasing after Layla Williamson. Robert screeched to a halt, dropped to one knee, and took aim just as the man raised the bat. He fired a moment before the bat came

crashing down on Layla's head. The man's eyes grew wide in shock. The bat dropped from his hands a second before he fell dead in the street.

Kordell ran into the street, firing in the direction of the Williamsons' home. One of the gang members stepped into Robert's view, his pistol aimed at Kordell. Robert fired, dropping the kid before he got a shot off. Without a word, Kordell turned and sprinted toward his house, yelling his wife's and daughter's names.

Robert ran across the street, past the Newburys' house, and rounded the corner of his garage. Robert's heart nearly stopped when he saw that the side door was open. A shot rang out inside, and he heard Nina scream as he raced into the garage and through the kitchen door.

"Nina!" Robert yelled. "Nina!"

"In here! We're in here," Nina called back.

Robert ran down the hall and into their bedroom to find a boy in his late teens bleeding out on the floor half inside their safe room. Nina and the children were inside. Nina stood over the kid with her rifle still pointed at his chest. She looked up. "I think there are more inside. I heard voices."

"Pop Pop!" Ollie shouted.

Robert spun and raised his rifle. Coming through the door were two more men. Robert fired at the first, striking the young man in his abdomen. As he fell, the second man ducked and raced down the hall. Nina ran past Robert, stopped in the doorway, and fired round after round. Robert ran to her.

"I think he's down, Nina." Robert touched her shoulder and shouted over the sound of the rifle. "He's dead. Stop firing."

She lowered the gun, turned, and fell into his arms.

“We have to go, Nina. Grab the twins and meet me in the garage.”

Robert collected the three men’s weapons and spare ammo before moving down the hall, clearing rooms as he went. Satisfied no more gunmen were in the house, Robert moved into the garage. Nina and the kids arrived seconds later. “Put them on their bikes. I’ve got the wagon,” Robert said, finishing the knot he was tying and attaching one of the bikes to his waist.

“Robert? It’s Antonio, Robert. Don’t shoot,” he called before appearing in the doorway.

“Okay!” Nina said.

“We have to go!” Antonio said, rushing over and grabbing Amelia’s bike. “I’ll pull her.”

“I can pull Ollie,” his son Lucas said.

Robert untied the rope and handed it to Lucas.

“Have you seen Kordell? Are he and his family ready?”

“They’re at the roadblock keeping it clear,” Antonio said.

Antonio lifted a frightened Amelia into his arms. “Time for our adventure.”

Amelia held her arms out for Nina. “I want Mimi!”

“Let Antonio carry you to the street, and then you can ride your bike,” Robert said.

Robert tossed Nina her pack. “Hurry! Put it on and let’s go!” Robert ran his arms through the straps of his loaded-down pack, grabbed the wagon’s handle, and hurried to the door. With Lucas and Antonio carrying the twins and pulling

their bikes, Robert and Nina followed them, running toward Sheridan Road.

“I’ll cover you guys until you get to the corner,” Kordell said, motioning toward 51st Street.

THIRTY-THREE

Ethan

East of Freedom

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

Ethan was startled awake by the sound of hounds baying in the distance. At first, he was confused as to where he was and had to shake off the confusion.

“Ethan! Is that Lonnie?”

“I don’t know. It could just be someone’s dogs out hunting up breakfast,” Ethan said, although that was wishful thinking.

“Stay down. I’m going to climb up and take a look,” Ethan said, standing. He grabbed the rifle and walked several feet back the way they’d come until he found a spot with rocks he could use to climb up to the surface. Once he neared the top of the canyon, he slowly poked his head up and took a look around.

His heart sank when he saw the beams of lights bouncing back and forth across the plains. He couldn’t be sure how many of them there were, but he counted at least three, maybe four. Another dog joined the first, and the two bayed as they

tracked Ethan and Brooke's scent. Ethan estimated their pursuers to be maybe half a mile away. They'd been on them in minutes.

Ethan dropped down and landed hard, nearly twisting his knee. But he didn't have time to be concerned about that as he raced back to where he'd left Brooke.

"They're coming. You have to go. Move farther into the canyon. Find somewhere to hide," Ethan said as he searched for a boulder to crouch behind. He had thirty rounds. He would need to make each one count. He needed a spot where the walls narrowed, and they'd have to come through one or two at a time.

"What? No! I'm staying with you. We'll fight them together!"

Ethan grabbed her arm. "Brooke, there's no time. One of us has to make it home. They want me, not you. I'm the one they think killed Gerald."

"They charged me with the murder too, you know."

The barking dogs grew closer. "Shit!" Ethan's chest rose and fell with rapid breaths. He grabbed her arm, and they ran deeper into the canyon until it narrowed and bent at a right angle.

"Here," Ethan said, shoving Brooke behind a waist-high boulder flanked by cedar trees. "You only have three rounds, Brooke. Don't shoot until I tell you to, okay?" He meant for Brooke only to have to fire as a last resort. He prayed it wouldn't come to that. He had no intention of dying in that canyon.

The dogs announced their presence at the mouth of the canyon, and Ethan could barely hear the men's conversation

over them. “Stay here with the dogs. Rick and I will go down and check it out,” one of them ordered.

“Awesome,” Ethan whispered. “I like those odds a lot better.” He waited, watching the light bounce off the red-dirt walls of the canyon as the pair moved toward his ambush. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach as he waited. The beam of light grew brighter, and the man’s rifle came into view. Ethan drew in a breath, placed his finger inside the trigger guard, and searched for his target. He watched as first a hand and then a forearm appeared. He waited, itching to squeeze the trigger and end this.

Not yet. Not yet. Wait! Wait!

The man was now in full view, but Ethan couldn’t fire yet. His shoulder was tense, muscles ready as he waited a few more seconds for the other man to move into the kill zone.

Bingo!

When the first man turned toward the boulder, Ethan squeezed the trigger, sending first one and then two rounds into the man’s chest. He went down, and his flashlight dropped to the ground, lighting up the floor of the canyon. The second man reeled back in surprise, but tripped on a rock and stumbled. He tossed his flashlight aside, but it was too late. Ethan had already trained his weapon on him. Ethan cranked off two shots. The man whirled to his right just as Ethan fired. The man lifted his rifle and returned fire, sending nearly continuous rounds Ethan’s way as he backed away out of view.

“Rick’s down, and I’m hit,” the man called to his compatriots.

Ethan heard the dogs again. “They’re coming.” He knew they’d lost the element of surprise, but they had advanced

knowledge of the terrain they'd just traveled through. Ethan had his back to the wall and the boulder for cover. Whoever remained of the crew could go around and fire at them from the top of the canyon. If so, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. He and Brooke would no doubt lose in that situation. They had to move. They needed to go while the men were coming up with a plan of attack.

“We need to find a way out of this canyon.”

“And then what? It's all open country. There's no place to run to and nowhere to hide.”

Ethan glanced back to the top. It was a lose-lose situation. They'd need to shoot their way out. He rose, looking over the top of the boulder for the man's rifle. Shoving his own gun into Brooke's hands, he said, “Cover me. I'm going for the man's weapon.” Ethan didn't give her a chance to argue. He popped up and ran toward the first man. He glanced to his right, searching for the second man as he scooped up the rifle. His foot hit the flashlight on the ground, and it bounced off a rock. The canyon went dark for a moment as Ethan fumbled to flick on the rifle's mounted light. The moment he flicked it on, the second man fired, sending rounds whizzing past Ethan. Brooke screamed and stood. She fired round after round toward the shooter, but her rounds only sent flakes of rock raining down on him.

Ethan spun toward the second man's position and fired. The man dropped to his knees and then slumped over. Ethan had pivoted to move back to the boulder when he spotted a third man moving fast toward him. He swung the rifle in the man's direction and fired as he moved toward Brooke and the boulder. As he neared Brooke, a light shone down on her from above. They were surrounded.

“Put down the weapons!” another man shouted down at them. “Put down the guns and raise your hands over your heads. Do it now, or I’ll shoot you both right here, right now!”

THIRTY-FOUR

Brooke

East of Freedom

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

Deputies Dahmer and McVeigh stood above them, rifles trained on Brooke and Ethan. Brooke's chest seized in fear. Was this it? Were they going to die there? She had no doubt these two men would want them dead for killing Sheriff Parkhurst.

“Okay. Okay. We're putting down our weapons,” Ethan said, bending to place the rifle on the ground.

“Brooke, just toss it,” Ethan said. “She has nothing to do with this. I'm the one you want. She has babies at home. Just let her go, and I won't give you any problems. “

“If you do, I'll put a bullet in her gut and watch her die a slow and painful death,” Dahmer said.

Brooke kept her gaze on the deputies as she tossed the rifle away. She heard it strike a rock. She took a step back, fearing it might go off somehow. When she did, her right foot came down on top of the sheriff's stolen revolver. She recalled

placing it on the ground after Ethan had shoved the rifle into her hands.

Three rounds and two deputies. Impossible odds.

But she might be able to take out one and then dive for Ethan's rifle to take out the other. She was still trying to cling to the hope that they could somehow make it out of the situation alive. She let the scenario play out in her mind for a moment as the two other deputies discussed their next move.

"I'll stay up here and guard them while you climb down into the canyon and secure them," McVeigh said.

"Me? Why me? You climb down into there. This is my only clean uniform, and I want to look nice for the hanging tomorrow. Susie Timms will be there. You know I've had my eye on her for months," Dahmer said.

"I'm a better shot, Casanova. Go back to where we tied up the dogs and go in that way. You shouldn't get dirty."

"Why can't you?"

"Gosh, you're as stupid as the sheriff said you were. You can't shoot for shit, that's why. You failed to re-qualify last month and had to be put on desk duty, remember?"

"It was these damn allergies making my eyes water, is all."

"Just shut the hell up and go down there to secure those prisoners. I don't want to be out here all night. I haven't had my supper, and I'm starting to get cranky," McVeigh said.

As Dahmer left to make his way into the canyon, Brooke shifted her weight and pushed the revolver behind her with the heel of her boot. "Ethan," she whispered. "The sheriff's gun is behind my right foot."

"Don't, Brooke. We can't hit him from here."

McVeigh had moved between two trees and was now partially concealed by cedar boughs. All Brooke could see of him was the light mounted on his rifle barrel.

“What are we going to do? We can’t let them take us in. They’re going to hang us now for sure,” Brooke said.

“We need to wait until we’re out of the canyon. Just follow my lead and be ready to run.”

The next minute or so played out like an episode of Laurel and Hardy as McVeigh came stumbling through the canyon, tripping over rocks and fumbling with his rifle on his way to secure his prisoners. His lack of agility gave Brooke hope. Maybe they could make it out of here after all.

“Step away from the girl,” McVeigh said, holding a pistol in one hand and rubbing his knee with the other.

“Just do what they say for now,” Ethan whispered as he took a giant step to his right.

“Okay, now back toward me, nice and slow. Don’t try anything, or my partner will shoot that pretty little wife of yours. Got it?”

“Don’t shoot. I’m not going to resist,” Ethan said.

The deputy holstered his weapon and retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his belt. “Hands behind your back,” he ordered.

Brooke kept her gaze on Dahmer, who had moved closer to the rim of the canyon wall. His focus was on Ethan. Brooke inched left slightly and glanced toward the revolver at her feet. It was too dark on the canyon floor to see it. She moved to her right, feeling with the toe of her boot until she located it again.

McVeigh pulled Ethan back toward the canyon wall and shoved him to the ground. “Prisoner secured. You got him?”

“He moves a muscle, and I’ll send one through his skull,” Dahmer replied.

“Okay, now you missy,” McVeigh said. “Turn and face away from me.”

Brooke complied, her breaths quickening as she turned. She broke out in a cold sweat as she timed her next move.

“Step to your right and then back toward me,” McVeigh ordered.

Brooke lifted her foot as if she was complying and then kicked the revolver forward. At the same time, she pretended to trip and fall. She landed on top of the weapon, found the grip, and wrapped her hand around it just as Dahmer shifted the barrel of his rifle, illuminating her with its light.

“Get up!” McVeigh said, taking two steps toward her.

“I tripped. I twisted my ankle on the way in here. These rocks are hard to walk on,” Brooke said, training her gaze on Dahmer as she slowly rose to one knee, concealing the revolver with her jacket. The second his focus returned to Ethan, Brooke raised the revolver and fired. Her first shot knocked Dahmer back a step, but with the second, he tilted forward, falling head-first to the canyon floor. His rifle bounced off a rock and landed a few feet from Brooke. She dove for it, rolled and sat up, aiming to turn to shoot but Ethan had charged McVeigh from behind, knocked him to the ground and pounced on top of him.

“Get his gun, Brooke. Hurry!” Ethan said, pinning McVeigh’s right wrist to the ground with his knee.

Brooke slung the rifle's sling over her shoulder, crawled over on her hands and knees, and attempted to wrestle the weapon from McVeigh's grasp.

Brooke grabbed hold of the deputy's hair, yanked his head back, and slammed it hard against the rocks beneath him. "Let go of the gun!" she yelled at the deputy.

The second McVeigh's fingers relaxed, Brooke retrieved the pistol from his grasp, squeezed the trigger, and sent one round into the man's brain.

The canyon grew quiet. The battle was over. They were going to get away. They'd won.

Ethan scrambled to unclip the deputy's key ring as Brooke returned to them.

"Let me," Brooke said, reaching for the ring. After trying several keys to unlock the handcuffs, Brooke finally found the right one, and Ethan's hands were free. Immediately, he ran to where Dahmer's body lay. He scooped up all the rifles, while Brooke rolled McVeigh over to check his duty belt for extra ammo.

"Drop the rifles!" a voice boomed. Light flooded the canyon from every direction, blinding Brooke. She raised her hand to shield her eyes, and then suddenly, she was struck from behind and knocked to the ground. Someone very heavy was on top of her, shouting for her to remain still.

"Don't move! Stop resisting!"

He shoved her face into the ground, and Brooke's mouth filled with dirt.

"Ethan!" she shouted, but it only came out muffled. Brooke couldn't see or hear her husband. She arched her back and tried to struggle but nearly blacked out with the pain from

her broken ribs. A wave of nausea washed over her, and bile rose into her throat. They'd failed. There were too many of them now. There was no way out of this.

The twins! My poor babies!

The man yanked Brooke's right arm behind her back and then her left. A second man dropped down near her shoulder, and her hands were secured with zip ties in seconds. The heavy plastic dug into her skin as she was yanked to her feet.

Ethan was still on the ground with a large man kneeling on his back. He struck Ethan's hand and arm repeatedly with his flashlight.

Brooke screamed. "Stop it. Stop, you'll break it. Stop! Please, stop!"

A large, heavysset man rushed over and grabbed the flashlight from Ethan's attacker. "Not here, Palmer. Not here. The boss wants him alive. He has to stand trial for his brother's and the sheriff's murders."

"He killed Sheriff Parkhurst. We all know it. There's no need for a stupid trial. Lonnie just wants to put on a freaking show," Ethan's attacker said, pushing himself to his feet.

A third man appeared around the bend and rushed forward to secure Ethan's hands behind his back. Ethan stirred and moaned.

Relief washed over Brooke. "Ethan. Are you okay? Talk to me?"

"I'm okay." He grunted as the young man hoisted him to his feet. "Did they hurt you?"

"No. I'm okay too," Brooke said. But she wasn't. Not at all. Every inch of her hurt, especially her ribs.

“Time for Bonnie and Clyde here to pay for their crimes,” the heavysset man said as Ethan and Brooke were led back out of the canyon, past the all the men they’d killed in their bid for freedom.

THIRTY-FIVE

Ethan

Canyon East of Freedom

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

Unlike the men that Ethan and Brooke had killed in the canyon, the ones leading them out weren't law enforcement. They were members of the posse Lonnie had sent to capture and bring them back to stand trial for the so-called murders. These men were pawns in some grand scheme Ethan had yet to figure out. He understood why the townspeople would side with Lonnie. He was a local. Lonnie had grown up in Freedom, and the people there had known him and his family all their lives. If he claimed to have witnessed Ethan murder his brother—why would they question his testimony?

That only deepened Ethan's concern and was the reason he'd chosen to run instead of staying and fighting to prove his innocence. He doubted he'd be given a chance to escape again. He was going to hang for a murder he didn't commit. Not that he was totally innocent. He did have blood on his hands. He was starting to lose count of the people he'd killed in the last

two and a half weeks. The only one he didn't regret was Shane.

As they moved toward the entrance of the canyon, Ethan tried to think of a way to save Brooke's life this time. They couldn't fight their way out. There were too many of them. The men had taken their weapons and restrained their hands with zip ties. Ethan knew he had until the morning to come up with a solution, and so far, he had no idea how he would convince the judge and the town to release Brooke and spare her life.

The slick soles of Brooke's boots caused her to stumble and trip several times. With her hands tied behind her back, she struggled to get back up. Ethan dropped to Brooke's side to assist her to her feet. That landed him a kick to his already bruised ribs. He tumbled over and rolled onto his side. Now neither of them could right themselves. Ethan rolled back to his left in time to see Brooke close her hand around a flat rock. What was she planning now? With her hands restrained behind her back, she could do nothing with it. But it showed that she wasn't giving up. He admired her for that, but he feared she'd make a reckless move and get herself killed.

After one of the men pulled Ethan to his feet, Ethan pretended to stumble and bumped into Brooke. "Don't try anything," he whispered. Brooke let the rock fall to the ground.

"Stop talking!" the man said, yanking Ethan away. Ethan recognized him from back at the jail. Burt had been one of the two men who'd stood guard the night he and Brooke were arraigned on murder charges. Burt had bragged that they were going to hang them for killing Gerald Gladwell. He'd sounded

gleeful about it. Burt had also been the one to accuse Annie Gillespie of killing Lonnie's other brother, Harry.

Ethan had spent a considerable amount of time trying to piece together what was happening in that town and make sense of how he and Brooke had gotten wrapped up in it. They had two dead brothers. It was obvious to Ethan that Lonnie had killed them both, but how would he prove it? With some folks in Freedom believing Annie Gillespie had something to do with Harry Gladwell's death, she had a motive to expose the truth. It made sense why she had involved herself in Ethan and Brooke's defense. The whole thing was such a jumbled mess; Ethan knew these types of crimes were never wrapped up as cleanly as they were in the movies. But this was no Hollywood movie set, and the men leading them back to the jail in Freedom weren't paid actors. This was real life—his and Brooke's lives were now at stake.



When they reached the mouth of the canyon where the deputies had tied the dogs, Ethan got his first glimpse of all twelve members of the posse Lonnie had sent for them. Four men held the reins of the posse's horses. They hadn't stood a chance. Even if they had heard them coming in time, there would have been no way to outrun the men on horseback. Ethan hung his head. He had so many regrets—most of all, he wished they'd never taken their romantic ski vacation. He'd had to talk Brooke into going. She'd never wanted to leave the twins. She'd even suggested taking them to Colorado with them. Ethan had finally worn her down and convinced her that their marriage needed the time away.

If only.

He'd said that to himself so many times in the last forty-eight hours. He couldn't accept that he'd broken his promise to get Brooke home to their kids. Tomorrow might be his last chance. He might not be able to save himself, but he'd do whatever he could to convince them to spare her. He thought of Annie. Could he somehow get her to help Brooke escape? Could she use her influence in the town to persuade them to show mercy on a young mother? Ethan wasn't sure what he could do. His head ached so badly, and he was dizzy. He remembered Vivian's warning about an additional head injury. He was lucky he hadn't been hit in the head by those men.

"Over there," Burt barked, shoving Ethan toward the horses.

"Tie them to that cedar tree. We'll wait until sunrise and then head into town. I don't want to risk injuring a horse," one of the cowboys said.

The heavysset man dressed in similar Western attire produced a rope and ran one end of a rope around their zip ties. Then he attached the other around the trunk of an eastern red cedar tree. "Sit there," he said, pointing to the ground. He positioned Ethan and Brooke back to back. The heavysset man grunted as he knelt beside them. "Give me your foot," he said. Brooke mumbled something through her gag. The man reached up and yanked the duct tape from her mouth and then removed the handkerchief. "You got something to say, little lady? Unless you want my sock in your mouth next, I suggest you keep quiet." The man reached for her leg, grabbed her boot, and unzipped it. After he removed Brooke's boots, he moved around to face Ethan. "If you try to run off without your boots, you will regret it. The rocks, yucca plants, and the tumbleweeds can do a number on the soles of your feet."

As the posse set up camp for the night, complete with bedrolls and campfire, Ethan tried to reassure Brooke that he'd find a way out of this. "There odds are not in our favor tonight. That guy was right. We can't run off into the dark barefoot. We wouldn't make it a hundred feet before they set the dogs on us and tracked us down. They might decide that it isn't worth taking us in, too," Ethan whispered.

"So we do nothing. We just let them drag us in and hang us tomorrow?"

"We'll keep alert for any opportunity to get away, but I think our best shot is back in town. They'll likely lock us back in the jail. We can come up with a plan from there. We might be able to convince Annie to help us escape."

"She won't help us now. You killed the sheriff. No one in Freedom will be on our side now."

"I didn't kill him, Brooke. He was alive when I left him. I don't know what happened between the time we escaped and he was found, but I know I didn't kill the man."

"Annie won't believe that."

Ethan grew quiet. Brooke was right to blame him. He'd done the only thing he could at the time. He had been sure the sheriff was going to kill him.

As the night wore on and the posse slept, Ethan worked through several possible scenarios, trying to come up with a plan. He'd resigned himself that he might have to sacrifice himself for them to get away. Ethan was anguished at the thought of never seeing the twins or his parents again, but at least they'd have their mother.

THIRTY-SIX

Ethan

Canyon East of Freedom

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

The night was long and cold. Neither Ethan nor Brooke slept, and by the time the men stirred and readied them for their trip back to Freedom, Ethan was exhausted. He'd spent the entire night working through scenarios but was no closer to figuring out a plan to save them from the gallows. Burt tied the opposite end of one of the horses' reins to the rigging ring of his horse's saddle. "Here, little missy," he said, grabbing hold of Brooke's arm. "You'll be on this one. You better not try anything funny, or we'll just drag your ass back to town. Lonnie didn't say you had to be uninjured—just alive," Burt said.

"Why are you doing this? We did nothing wrong!" Brooke said, attempting to pull away.

Burt got in her face. "Nothing?"

Ethan jumped between them. "Brooke, stop. Don't say anything more."

“We did what we had to,” she said, ignoring him.

“Brooke, please be quiet. We need to be able to appeal to them for mercy. It’s the only way I can save you,” Ethan whispered.

Burt yanked on Brooke’s arm and dragged her over to his horse. Brooke struggled, trying to resist him. “Grab her, Timmons,” Burt said, pulling a bandana from his back pocket.

Timmons dropped his bedroll to the ground and rushed over to assist.

“Open your mouth!” Burt ordered.

Brooke shook her head violently as the two men tried to shove the handkerchief into her mouth.

Ethan pleaded with her. “Brooke, stop fighting them. You’re going to get hurt.”

She relaxed and allowed them to place the gag into her mouth and secure it with a strip of duct tape.

“We’ll drag your skinny ass all the way back to town if you give us any more trouble,” Burt said. He yanked on the rope, pulling Brooke forward into his arms. “Or we could have a little fun before the hangman wraps a rope around your pretty little neck tomorrow.” He ran his hand up her shirt.

Ethan screamed and lunged toward them. “Get your hands off my wife!” Something hard struck Ethan in the back, and he fell forward, stumbling and falling to his knees. “Don’t!” Ethan looked up and stared at each of the men. “Please! Please, don’t let him hurt her.”

“Let her go, Burt,” a tall, fit man dressed in a long duster-type coat and cowboy hat said.

Burt glared at him.

“Let her go, or I’ll tell my sister.”

Burt dropped his hands to his side. “I was just funning with her. I wasn’t really gonna do nothing, Les. You know me. I like to kid around. Don’t tell Lorie.”

Burt backed away from Brooke, and she dropped to her knees. Ethan quickly crawled over and leaned his head against her back. “It’s okay. You’re okay. He’s not going to hurt you.”

“Get up,” Burt said, grabbing Ethan by the arm. It took two men to pull Ethan to his feet.

Les, the man in the duster, helped Brooke stand. He led her to the horse. “I’m going to cut the zip ties. Don’t try anything, or I might cut you.” Les removed the restraints and pointed to the horse. “Climb up.”

Brooke grabbed the saddle horn and put her foot into the stirrup, but she couldn’t pull herself up and into the seat. Les gave her a boost and lifted her up into the saddle. “Give me your left hand,” he said. She glanced back at Ethan and then complied. Les took her hand and wrapped a zip tie around it and then ran another through it, securing it to the ring of the tie strap holder. “Someone get him on a horse so we can get back to town. I have animals to feed and wood to chop before the trial,” Les said.

No one moved.

Les glanced back and cursed. “Timmons, help him on his horse.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because I told you to,” Les said.

“Who made you the boss, anyway?” Timmons said. “We ain’t at the salt plant. You can’t tell me what to do when we

ain't at work."

Les jumped down from his saddle, yanked Timmons from his horse, and threw him to the ground. He planted a boot in the man's chest and pointed a pistol in his face.

Timmons's eyes grew wide, and he moved his hands up to cover his face.

"I'm sick to death of your freaking whining, Timmons. You can do what you're told, or you can join these two and that big guy at the gallows tomorrow."

Big guy? Could it be Jarrod? Had he tried to rescue them and gotten caught?

"You too, Burt. I don't care if you're married to my sister. You put your hands on my prisoners again, and you'll hang with them." Les holstered his pistol and stood.

"Fine," Timmons said. "You're the boss. Let's just get them back and let the deputies deal with them."

Timmons freed Ethan's hands and then pointed to a horse. "Climb up. I ain't lifting you."

Ethan grabbed hold of the saddle horn and mounted the horse. Once he was in the saddle, Timmons secured his hand to the saddle. They traveled without speaking until they reached a black-topped road. It was Timmons who broke the silence.

"Who's going to conduct the trial now with the sheriff dead?"

"Bobby, I imagine. He's the chairman of the town board. He's the closest we got to a prosecutor."

"Annie's not going to still defend these two, is she?" Timmons asked.

“No. No way. You saw how she reacted when they discovered the sheriff’s body. She probably won’t even come to the trial.”

“I think she should hang next to them. We all know she and Mitch killed Harry. He was found on her ranch.”

“Sheriff said he fell off his horse and hit his head on the rock.”

“Deputy Chandler said he looked like he’d been shot. He had a hole in his sternum. How does a rock do that?” Burt asked.

“All I know is the sheriff said the medical examiner ruled his death to be from an accidental fall.”

“Why would Chandler lie?” Burt asked.

Timmons answered him with his own question. “Why would the sheriff?”

“To cover up for Annie. You know they see each other.”

“You think Mitch knew what happened to Harry? You think that’s why someone killed him?” Timmons asked.

“Mitch isn’t dead,” Ethan said, surprised he’d said it out loud.

“Oh yeah? What the hell do you know about Mitch?” Burt asked.

“I overheard the sheriff and a couple of his deputies talking about him. He said some fella named Yardley had been holding him, but Mitch got away. They were worried that he’d come to the trial and that would cause trouble for them.”

“You heard Sheriff Parkhurst say that?” Les asked.
“Maybe he had arrested Mitch for his involvement in Harry’s

death, and Yardley was guarding him.”

“But Parkhurst said it was an accident. Why arrest Mitch?” Burt said. “I don’t buy it. This guy’s lying. Mitch ran off ’cause he’s guilty.”

“Well, we can’t ask the sheriff now because this guy killed him. Now we’ll never know what really happened to Harry,” Timmons said.

“There’s an easy way to find out. Exhume Harry’s body and look for yourselves,” Ethan said.

“Whitley, Turton, and Richards saw the body before the sheriff had it taken to the morgue. They don’t think he died from a fall,” Burt said.

“You’re saying Annie and Mitch killed Harry then dumped his body in Jackass Canyon and Parkhurst lied to cover it up?” Les asked.

“That’s what I think,” Burt said.

“Maybe we need to put them all on trial and get to the bottom of what’s happening around here. But first, we need those three outsiders tried for killing Gerald—that we do know to be the fact. Lonnie caught them red-handed,” Les said.

“You said three outsiders,” Ethan said. Ethan glanced over at Brooke.

Could the big guy they’re referring to be Jarrod?

“That big fella that was with you. We caught him sneaking into town, no doubt to shoot up the town and break you two out of jail. The sheriff took him into custody so Judge Miller can arraign him on an accessory to murder charge cause he was with you two when you committed the murder.”

Brooke twisted in the saddle and mumbled something.

“Jarrod wasn’t with us at the Gladwell farm. He stayed with the truck. He has nothing to do with this mess at all.”

“Well, the judge didn’t see it that way. Today, the three of you will be tried, convicted, and hanged for all the murders you committed in Freedom.”

Ethan’s mind raced as he imagined Brooke and Jarrod with nooses around their necks. He couldn’t let that happen to his wife and friend. His head pulsed, and bile rose in his throat. There had to be something he could do. He had to figure out how to save them both.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Annie

Main Street

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

Annie was relieved when Judge Miller ordered Chairman Robbins to round up a posse to locate Lonnie and stop him from killing Ethan and Brooke. But Robbins didn't get far before finding Lonnie. Deputy Franklin, one of the few Woods County deputies that Annie and Judge Miller trusted, found Robbins, along with the two men and one woman that he'd recruited to go after the posse, dead behind the church. When the deputies tried to arrest Lonnie, his supporters rallied around him and prevented him from being taken into custody. When he met with the judge in front of his supporters, Lonnie promised to bring Ethan and Brooke in unharmed so they could stand trial for their alleged offenses. He agreed to come back to the town hall and talk further about it with the judge.

“Okay, Lonnie. We'll conduct a trial and hear out all the evidence. I will be the one passing judgment and setting the sentence. You agree to abide by my ruling?”

“I will, Your Honor.”

“What about that mob you’ve assembled outside?” Judge Miller asked.

“I will assure you that they will respect your decision,” Lonnie said.

“All right. When your men find that young couple, bring them to me. I want to make sure that they understand their rights before I begin the trial.”

“I don’t think it’s right for Annie to represent them—not with half the town suspicious that she was culpable in the murder of the sheriff.”

“Only because you filled their heads with such nonsense,” Annie said. “Once I have a chance to testify, we’ll see who they believe. You or me.”

Lonnie turned his back on Annie and addressed the judge. “I just want justice for my brother and the sheriff, Your Honor.”

“And I’m here to make sure that the proceeding is done according to the United States Constitution and the laws of the state of Oklahoma,” Judge Miller said.

“That’s all I ask, sir,” Lonnie said.

Annie was livid by the time Lonnie excused himself to meet with his supporters to gain their cooperation.

“I can’t believe he could look you in the eyes and spout such lies.”

“He doesn’t know that we have Jeanette, Cody, and that big guy...” The judge snapped his fingers. “What’s his name?”

“Jarrod Hearst. He was traveling with the Spencer couple,” Deputy Franklin said.

“Yes, Jarrod—and his cute little dog,” Judge Miller said.

“I’m concerned that Lonnie won’t bring the Spencers in alive,” Annie said.

“He will. Don’t worry about that. He’s orchestrated this charade, and he’ll stick to his own script until it plays out,” Judge Miller said.

“For the life of me, I cannot figure out what he’s up to. Why would he want a trial that might implicate him? He knows that I intend to tell the town that Harry didn’t die from a fall from his horse and that he was shot twice and thrown into a canyon on my property.”

“He doesn’t know that we have Mitch to confirm your story. He hasn’t had contact with his men at the ranch, and I intend to keep it that way,” Judge Miller said. “When he brings the Spencers in, I will make him believe that I intend to put them on trial. Once I get him away from that mob he’s surrounded himself with and the posse he sent out, I want Deputies Franklin, Gifford, and Beaton to take Lonnie into custody.” The judge turned to address the deputies. “Franklin, I want you to take Lonnie back to Alva and put him in county lock up. We’ll have his trial there—as it should be.”



As the night dragged on, Annie became more and more concerned for Ethan and Brooke. She’d hosted Jeanette, Grady, Mitch, Judge Miller, Jarrod, and his dog, Lexi, at her ranch. Annie had been both surprised and relieved when word came the next morning that Lonnie’s posse had captured the Spencers and they were on their way back to Freedom.

A tight knot formed in Annie's stomach as everyone loaded onto wagons and Judge Miller's horse-drawn carriage for the trip into town. Lonnie had done an excellent job of turning the town against the young couple. She feared that things could get out of hand before the deputies could secure their safety and arrest Lonnie. Jeanette looked equally nervous as she wrung her hands. As Mitch turned the team of horses and the wagon onto the paved road and turned south toward Freedom, Annie reached over and placed her hand on Jeanette's knee. "By the end of the day, everyone will know the truth about what happened to Gerald, and he'll be locked away for good."

"I hope you're right." Jeanette glanced over her shoulder toward her grandson, Grady. "I fear for his safety if Lonnie is allowed to go free."

"We won't let anything happen to either of you. I promise." Annie prayed she was able to keep her word. She turned her gaze to Mitch. She had feared she'd never see him again, but there he was—battered and bruised but still very much alive. She hoped that seeing him and hearing his side of things would sway the townsfolk who had bought Lonnie's lies, but only time would tell.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Ethan

Main Street

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

Ethan was weak from lack of food and dehydrated by the time Lonnie Gladwell's posse led him and Brooke into town. Instead of stopping at the jail, they paraded them up Main Street, past the park where the gallows were being constructed. The carpenters had taken a break for the night, and the street was quiet except for the sound of the horses' hooves striking the pavement. The door opened as the procession approached the saloon, and Lonnie Gladwell stepped outside onto the walkway. Lonnie sucked on a cigarette and blew out the smoke.

Les and the rest of the posse stopped their horses in front of the saloon.

"Take them to the town hall. The judge is waiting." Lonnie took one last drag, dropped the cigarette on the ground, and then stomped the butt out with the toe of his boot. "No one goes near them, especially Annie Gillespie!"

Ethan was glad they'd be taken back to the town hall. He was familiar with the layout of the building. At least he would have that advantage, though he doubted they'd be so lax in their security as to leave him unguarded this time, not after the way he'd managed to subdue the sheriff.

"Yes, boss," Les said, starting to ride off in that direction.

Lonnie stopped him. "Leave Burt, Palmer, and Timmons to guard the prisoners, and then the rest of you go to the ranch and feed the cattle."

"We don't get to see the hanging?" one of the other cowboys asked.

"It won't be until this afternoon. Judge says he'll start the trial around noon after everyone has time to make it into town," Lonnie said, lighting another cigarette and taking a long draw.

"Where's he going to hold it? The town council room won't fit but a few people," Les said.

Lonnie let out a ring of smoke. "At the school football field. They got the bleachers, and it's right next to the gallows."

"Sounds good. We'll see ya there," Les said.

The procession stopped outside the town hall. While Burt and Palmer climbed down from their horses, Les and the other cowboys continued up Main Street, presumably to the Gladwell ranch.

Timmons stopped his horse, pulled his knife from its sheath, and cut the zip ties around Brooke's hands. As he reached up to assist Brooke out of the saddle, she stared down at him with disdain. Ethan willed her not to try anything, but his wish wasn't granted. As Brooke slid off the horse, she

dropped her shoulder and then rammed into Timmons, causing them both to tumble to the ground.

“Brooke!” Ethan yelled as Burt cut his hands free. He started around his horse toward her, but Burt caught his arm.

Palmer was on her in moments, sinking his hands into her hair and yanking her to her feet. She twisted and balked, but the man was too strong for her to pull away.

“Brooke, stop! Please, quit fighting them. You’re only going to get hurt,” Ethan said.

Brooke glared at Ethan with tears in her eyes. He lowered his voice and pleaded with her. “Please, sweetheart. Let’s just go inside and talk to the judge.” She stilled, and the man lowered his hand to her biceps. Brooke tilted her head back, shrugged off the man’s hand, and walked toward the door.

Inside, they were led into the conference room. The only thing in the room was a long wooden table with ten rolling office chairs around it. Burt walked around the table and pulled a chair out. He shoved Ethan into a chair and secured his hands around one of the legs of the table. He left Ethan hunched over and moved around the table to the opposite side.

Timmons nudged Brooke toward a seat across from Ethan. “Hold out your hands,” he said.

Brooke balled her fists.

“Don’t give me any trouble,” Timmons said, moving around behind her and grabbing her by both forearms.

Burt joined him and grabbed her right wrist so Palmer could apply the zip tie.

“Can you remove the gag?” Ethan asked. “She needs a drink of water. We both do.”

“What do you think this is—a restaurant? What will you want next, a steak?” Burt asked.

“Just water—for now,” Ethan said. He forced a smile. “Please.”

Burt laughed and unzipped his pants. “I’ll give you a drink.”

“Stop that right now!” Annie yelled as she entered the room. “You’re a pig, Burt. I can’t for the life of me understand why Lorie married you.”

Burt grabbed his junk and smiled at her. “Cause she wanted a real man.”

“That will be enough, Burt,” came another voice. “You three can go now.”

Ethan glanced past Brooke. In the doorway stood an elderly man dressed in a black robe.

“You sure, Judge? They killed the sheriff and already escaped once.”

Three deputies entered and stood just inside the door.

The judge nodded over his shoulder toward the lawmen. “They’ll take over from here.”

After Burt, Palmer, and Timmons had left the room, the judge turned to Annie. “You’ve got ten minutes,” he said and then left the room.

Annie spun around to face the deputies. “You can wait outside.”

The lawmen ignored her.

Annie placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side, looking annoyed. She exhaled a harsh breath. “I need

to speak to my clients alone.”

“Sorry, Miss Annie. We have our orders. We aren’t to let them out of our sight,” a broad-shouldered deputy said. He shoved wire-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose. “One of us has to stay.”

“Fine, you stay, Franklin.”

Franklin gestured toward the door. “You two get Miss Annie and her clients a pitcher of water.”

“Yes, sir,” one of the deputies said, and the two lawmen exited the conference room, closing the door behind them.

Franklin stood with his back pressed against the wall as Annie rounded the table and took a seat at the head of the long wooden table several seats away from Brooke and Ethan. She folded her hands in her lap and stared down at the table at Ethan, studying him. “Did the posse do that to your face?”

Ethan wasn’t sure what she was referring to exactly. He’d been in so many battles over the last two weeks, and cuts and bruises on his body were in various stages of healing. He doubted he’d even recognize himself in a mirror at that point. Ethan shrugged and touched the bandage on the side of his head.

“It was less than you deserved for what you did to Sheriff Parkhurst,” she said flatly.

Her words stung. He’d hoped that her presence meant she didn’t believe he’d killed the lawman. “I didn’t kill the sheriff, Annie. He was very much alive when I left him.”

Annie knit her brow. “So, he slit his own throat.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “I didn’t do that. I didn’t even have a knife.” Ethan’s pulse quickened at the memory of the attack.

Ethan raised his left hand. "Listen. Please. I didn't kill Sheriff Parkhurst. This is what happened..." Ethan glanced over his shoulder toward the deputy and drew in a breath. He turned his gaze to Brooke. Even she didn't know the entire story. He hadn't had time to tell her.

Ethan turned back to Annie. "Do you recall that as the sheriff was interviewing Brooke, a deputy came to the door, and he left the room?"

Annie leaned back, crossed her arms over her chest, and said nothing.

Ethan continued, explaining how he'd overheard the sheriff and a deputy talking about someone named Mitch and how the sheriff realized the window had been open and that Ethan had heard his conversation after he returned to interview him.

"He attacked me. I truly believed he intended to kill me to keep me from talking. But I did not kill him!" Ethan lowered his head. "He attacked me, we struggled, and I placed him in a choke hold." Ethan glanced up at Annie. "While he was unconscious, I stole his keys and revolver. I lied to you and Brooke, and we escaped." Ethan stared into her eyes, hoping to see any sign that Annie believed him.

She didn't.

Annie stood and walked toward the door. She nodded over her shoulder toward Brooke. "Take the gag off. I'm going to go have a conversation with the judge." The deputy stepped aside and opened the door. Annie stopped in the doorway and leaned toward the deputy. "I told you Lonnie killed Wayne."

Franklin closed the door behind her. As he crossed the room to remove Brooke's gag, there was a loud commotion

outside the windowless room. People were shouting, but Ethan couldn't make out their words. The deputy rushed back and opened the door. The voices grew louder.

“Grab her! Grab Annie!”

It was Lonnie. Ethan was sure of it, but why was he after Annie? Had she confronted him about killing the sheriff?

Franklin unholstered his pistol and stepped into the hall. “Stop! Stop right there. Get your hands off her, Burt. Do it now, or I will drop...” The deputy stopped mid-sentence and lowered his firearm. Palmer appeared behind him. He pressed the barrel of his weapon against Franklin's back. “I'll take that,” he said, removing the pistol from the deputy's hand.

Palmer shoved Franklin forward. “Go!” And both men disappeared down the corridor. Ethan heard scuffling and then a gunshot. Annie screamed Franklin's name.

“Get her out of here before the judge gets back. Take her to the ranch,” Lonnie said.

Ethan heard footsteps and then a door open and close. There was more scuffling, and then Jarrod appeared in the doorway. Palmer shoved him into the room.

He stumbled forward. “Ethan! Brooke!” Jarrod said, straightening.

“Enjoy your little reunion because you're about to swing from the gallows,” Burt said before slamming the door.

Jarrod turned and simultaneously dropped his arms to his sides. A pair of oversized plastic flex cuffs fell to the floor. He smiled and lifted a knife in the air. “I'm glad to see you guys!”

THIRTY-NINE

Ethan

Town Hall

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

“Where did you get the knife, bro?” Ethan said as Jarrod freed his hands.

“It’s an Outland Kryptos, and I carry it inside my belt. They didn’t make me take it off,” Jarrod said as he handed Ethan the compact fixed-blade knife.

“That was a big mistake,” Ethan said.

“Free Brooke. I’ll clear the way outside.” Jarrod spun and quickly moved to the door. “I’ll meet you in the alley behind the building.”

“Wait for us, Jarrod. They have guns,” Ethan said as he squatted beside Brooke.

“I have to find Lexi Lou. They’ve got my dog. I’m not leaving here without her.”

Ethan slid the tip of the knife between the zip tie and Brooke’s hands. As soon as her hands were free, she yanked

the tape off her mouth and removed the bandana. “They’re going to kill Annie,” she said. “Lonnie is going to kill her.”

Ethan took Brooke’s hand and moved behind Jarrod. “You open the door,” Ethan said. “I’ll jump Burt, and grab his gun. I’ll take out anyone in the hall while you two head toward the door to the alley.”

“I told you, bro. I’m not leaving without Lexi,” Jarrod said.

Ethan stepped in front of Brooke and pressed his ear against the door.

“Have you been here in this building the whole time?” Brooke asked.

“No. Annie brought me here with her this morning in an old horse-drawn wagon. They took Lexi from me when we arrived. She jumped from the guy’s arms and hid under the reception desk.”

“Shh, I can’t hear. I need to know how many of them are out there,” Ethan said in a hushed tone. They quieted, and Ethan listened for several minutes before straightening. “I don’t hear anyone.” He sidestepped and pressed his back against the wall next to the door handle. “The door opens in, so Jarrod, you’ll yank it open quickly, and I’ll move to my left into the hall. That’s where I think Burt is standing. If he’s not, you tackle him and pin him to the wall while I get his gun.”

“That’s the best you got?” Jarrod asked.

“Can you come up with something better?” Ethan whispered.

“Nope.”

“We’re all going to hang if we don’t do this,” Ethan said.

Jarrood gave him a thumbs-up gesture. “Okay, you go left, and I’ll go right.”

“What am I doing?” Brooke said.

“Run like hell to the back door,” Ethan said. “Hold it open because we’ll be moving fast.” He gestured for her to move in behind Jarrood.

Jarrood placed a meaty hand on the doorknob. “On the count of three?”

Ethan nodded. “On the count of three,” he said and held up three fingers. When he reached three, Jarrood wrenched open the door. Immediately, Ethan saw that his assumption had been wrong. Burt was not to his left. He was standing directly across from the door. Burt looked up, surprised, as Ethan bolted from the room.

Ethan launched forward and drove the knife right into Burt’s stomach. He jerked the knife out and then buried it into the side of the man’s neck. As Burt slid down the wall to the floor, Ethan leaned on the handle, driving the blade closer to the man’s jugular vein.

Ethan yanked the knife free, and a geyser of blood spurted from the man’s wound. Burt’s hands flew up to cover his neck. Blood oozed from between his fingers. His eyes were wild with terror. He knew he was about to die. Burt opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Quickly rolling him onto his side, Ethan removed Burt’s pistol from its holster.

Brooke screamed his name, and Ethan straightened. He glanced to his left toward the front of the building as Timmons came racing down the narrow hallway toward them.

“Drop the weapon!” Timmons screamed a second before firing. The round missed Ethan and struck Burt. He went limp.

Jarrold pivoted toward Timmons, dropped his shoulder, and charged the man, knocking him back several steps. With his left hand, Jarrold grabbed Timmons’s right wrist and pinned it against the wall. They momentarily struggled for the gun until Jarrold landed a solid punch to Timmons’s ribcage. The man folded, and the pistol dropped to the floor. Jarrold drove blow after blow to Timmon’s head as Ethan ran over and retrieved the man’s weapon.

“We need to get out of here. Lonnie and the others would have heard that shot,” Ethan said.

Jarrold drilled Timmons in the side of the head with two quick and powerful punches, finishing him.

Ethan handed Timmon’s pistol to Jarrold and then hurried down the hall toward Brooke.

Lexi barked from somewhere in the front of the building.

“Lexi. Let’s go, girl,” Jarrold said.

A second later, the Shetland sheepdog came running down the hall, leaped over Timmon’s body, and ran past Jarrold.

“Lexi!” Brooke said, scooping her up.

“Move! Move, Brooke! Out the door! We have to go!” Ethan yelled.

Ethan ran past Brooke and Lexi and exited the building, scanning left and then right down the alley behind the building. He stepped right to allow Brooke and Jarrold to exit the doorway, and then the trio ran up the alley. As they approached the northeast corner, Palmer appeared around the building. He looked shocked to see them free. Before the man

could clear his pistol from its holster, Ethan raised Burt's gun and fired. Palmer dropped to one knee, still reaching for his weapon. Ethan fired again, this time striking him in the neck. He fell sideways, grasping his wound. Jarrod rushed past Ethan and removed Palmer's gun from the holster. As Ethan and Brooke arrived at his side, Jarrod handed the pistol to Brooke.

Jarrod landed a final, devastating blow to the man's face with the toe of his boot. "Which way?" he asked.

They ran north down the middle of the alley, intending to move away from the crowd of people that were supposedly gathering at the school to watch them hang. As they approached a small, detached garage situated close to the alleyway, a man-sized shadow cast on the ground and then another.

"Stop right there!" a voice behind them yelled.

Ethan didn't turn to see if they were armed. His focus remained on the two men stepping out from behind the garage five feet away from him. The larger of the two men closed the distance, and before Ethan could raise his weapon, the guy pounced on him, drilling Ethan's body with balled fists. Ethan was knocked to the ground. All he could do was curl into a ball, trying to protect his vital organs as blow after blow rained down on him. He bucked and fought as the man grabbed him by the hair and hauled him to his feet.

Ethan stumbled back a few feet. The guy charged him again, fist raised. Ethan ducked the guy's punch and then drove the heel of his boot into the side of the man's ankle, causing his knee to buckle. Ethan's head popped up, searching for Brooke, but he didn't see her. He spotted Jarrod several feet away, engaged in his own battle with two attackers. As

Jarrood was pulled forward, one man tried to put him in a headlock. Jarrood shook free of him, but the second man tackled him from behind. Jarrood stumbled forward a few steps and spun, grabbing the man by his shirt. He slugged him in the ear and then grabbed a fistful of his hair. He threw the guy to the ground and landed a kick to his abdomen and then his chin.

Ethan pivoted, searching for Brooke. As he turned, he was body-slammed to the ground face-first. The edges of his vision blurred, and Ethan thought he was going to black out. The man pounced on top of him and began pounding Ethan in the ribs. Ethan bucked and threw his head back, headbutting the man and crushing his nose. The guy dropped forward. Ethan bucked him off and rolled to his feet. The man rolled around on the ground holding his broken nose. He was out of the fight.

Jarrood was standing and moving in the opposite direction. Past him, Ethan spotted Brooke. She was being dragged toward them by Lonnie.

“Let her go!” Ethan yelled.

Lexi ran around them, barking fiercely, and dodged Lonnie’s kicks.

Lonnie stopped and bent forward, taking aim at the dog. Brooke took advantage of his momentary inattention and drove her elbow into the bridge of his nose. Lonnie loosened his grip on her arm, and Brooke took two steps back. She screamed and ran toward him, landing a palm punch to Lonnie’s solar plexus, sending his diaphragm into a spasm. Lonnie let out a big *oof* and folded, instantly hitting the ground. Jarrood rushed over, pounced on him, and drove an elbow into the back of Lonnie’s skull. His body went limp.

Brooke scooped Lonnie's pistol from the ground, and the second that Jarrod stood and backed away from the man, she sent a round into the back of Lonnie's head.

"We have to go!" Ethan said, rushing over and grabbing her hand. As they turned to head back north, several armed men and women rounded the building in front of them, blocking the alley.

Annie appeared in the doorway of the town hall with a rifle in her hands. She stepped out, and her gaze moved to Lonnie's body. "Is he dead?"

"Yes," Ethan said.

"You killed him?" she asked.

"I did. I killed him," Brooke said, her tone defiant.

"Good," Annie said.

Lexi barked and ran to Annie. The little dog jumped up and down and danced around her. Annie shouldered her rifle and bent to pick her up. "It's over then," she said, snuggling the dog. A man dressed like a rodeo cowboy approached Annie. "Mitch, go tell the crowd to go home. No one is going to be hung today."

FORTY

Brooke

Freedom Prairie Ranch

Freedom, Oklahoma

Day 17

It hadn't been easy to get Brooke to rest after their battle at the town hall. She'd been ready to get straight back on the road and put Freedom, Oklahoma, behind them. Knowing she and Ethan were still over two hundred miles from home, Brooke didn't want to waste any more time.

After Brooke and Ethan finished explaining to Judge Miller what had happened at town hall and in the alley, Mitch led them between buildings and back to Main Street. Annie waited for them next to a dusty horse-drawn carriage. As they approached it, Lexi Lou leaped from Jarrod's arms and danced around Annie's feet.

"Lunch at my place?" Annie asked. "You can clean up, eat, hydrate, and then we can round up some food and supplies for you to take with you on the last leg of your journey."

Ethan took Brooke's hand. "We can start walking home soon as the sun sets."

Brooke frowned. "If we leave now, we could be ten or twelve miles down the road by sunset."

Ethan reached up and rubbed his temples.

"Is your head hurting?" Brooke asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. "How's your vision?" Vivian's words replayed in her mind. *Another blow to the head could kill him.*

"I think it's more the dehydration than anything," Ethan said.

"Ms. Annie makes a mean stew, and the water from her well is as pure as any I've ever tasted," Mitch said.

"We could all use the rest. I know you didn't sleep last night either," Ethan said.

"Miss Annie is a good cook," Jarrod said. "She's a Lexi-approved chef."

"We'll leave as soon as the sun goes down?" Brooke asked.

"Yep," Ethan said.

Mitch held out his hand, and Brooke climbed into the carriage. An hour later, Brooke, Ethan, Jarrod, and Lexi were sitting in rocking chairs on Annie's wraparound porch staring out at the amazing view of her ranch.

Jarrod filled them in on everything that had happened with him and Lexi after Gerald Gladwell's murder.

"I was just sitting on the bench at the store where we wrecked the truck when an old police cruiser sped by and turned in the direction you two went. I just knew something had happened with you two. I got my answer when about an hour later, that same cruiser drove past with you two in the back. I hid out behind the store until dark and then made my

way into town. Unfortunately, I didn't make it very far. Lexi started barking at some dog, and a couple of guys rushed out of one of the buildings and nabbed me."

"We never saw you at the town hall, and they didn't put you in the jail with us. Where did they take you?" Brooke asked.

"Some cowboy said that due to my size, I need to be kept someplace more secure than they had in town. I was taken to some ranch. That's where I met Mitch McDonald. They kept us hog-tied in the back of the house with two guards outside the door."

"I'm glad you got away and showed up when you did. You saved our bacon, brother," Ethan said.

"Yes, thank you, Jarrod," Brooke said, stroking Lexi's fur. "After all that happened here, have your plans changed?"

"I still thought maybe I'd travel to Tulsa with you guys. I've heard so much about your twins and Ethan's parents. I'd like to meet them. I'll need time to round up supplies and find a vehicle I can get running. It's a long drive to Mexico. I'm not likely to make it without gearing up properly."

"You're welcome to stay with us as long as you need," Brooke said. They'd only known the big guy for a few days, but to Brooke, Jarrod and Lexi felt more like family. She knew they'd eventually head off to be reunited with Jarrod's daughter, but she was glad to have them with her for a little while longer.

Lexi jumped from Brooke's lap and curled up at Mitch's feet. He stopped rocking, leaned forward, and scratched the dog behind the ears. "Jarrod tells us that you traveled here from Colorado Springs, where you came into contact with the

military,” Mitch said. Lexi playfully chewed on the leather fringe of his chaps.

“We caught a ride down the mountains with a special forces unit,” Ethan said, taking a sip from his glass of water.

Mitch removed his Stetson and placed it in his lap. “So, it’s true? We’re at war?”

“I’m afraid it’s true. Enemy troops attacked in Florida and out on the West Coast, from what I overheard. Sergeant Cannon, the Green Beret I spoke to, thought they could repel them before they reached the Midwest. Apparently, we’re still flying B-52 bombers out of Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri. As I said, he wouldn’t share much detail with me other than our military is still functioning.”

Brooke hadn’t had time to process that piece of news. She didn’t have the mental bandwidth to concern herself with any battle but her own.

“That’s good to hear,” Annie said, standing in the doorway. “Who’s ready to eat?”

The meal was fantastic, and the moment Brooke put the piping hot stew into her mouth, all regret about not getting on the road immediately vanished. After everyone had eaten their fill, Annie disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later carrying a plate of cookies.

“Oatmeal raisin?” Mitch asked, glancing up at her.

“Your favorite,” Annie said.

Mitch stood and removed a few from the plate. He stuffed one into his mouth and then removed a bandana from his pocket. After wrapping the remaining cookies in the handkerchief, he placed it in the front pocket of his shirt. He nodded to Annie. “I’ll be right back.”

A short time later, he called for Ethan, Brooke, and Jarrod to join him on the porch.

“We have something in the barn to show you before you leave,” Annie said, smiling.

Jarrold and Lexi stepped down from the porch behind Mitch. “What can it be, Lexi? Baby cows?”

Ethan wrapped his arm around Brooke’s shoulder. They followed Mitch and Annie to the horse barn. “I saddled your horses already,” Mitch said, nodding to the two geldings and a mare. He pointed to three pack mules each with two hay bale bags strapped to their sides. “There should be enough hay to get you home if they’re allowed to graze on spring grass along the way.”

“These are for us?” Brooke said, a lump forming in her throat.

“If you want them,” Annie said.

Brooke threw her arms around Annie’s neck. “We can’t thank you enough.”

Ethan shoved his hands into his pockets and wrapped his fingers around the gold coins Brooke’s Uncle Eugene had given him back in Estes Park, Colorado. He pulled them out, stared down at them for a moment, and then extended his hand toward Annie. “For the horses,” he said, uncurling his fingers.

Annie glanced down at his hand. “I don’t want those.”

“They’re real.”

“I don’t care. I don’t need payment. They’re a gift. I can’t keep as many horses now. Without access to the feed store, I can’t feed them through winter. I’m going to struggle to get

enough hay in to feed the cattle. I can't feed a bunch of horses and mules besides."

Ethan returned the coins to his pocket as Mitch grabbed a three-step mounting block and placed it beside a stunning buckskin quarter horse mare. "Here you go, Brooke," he said with an outstretched hand.

Brooke stared at him for a moment. "I may be able to get up in that saddle using the block, but with my sore ribs, how am I going to get down and back up again without it when we stop?"

Mitch smiled and turned to Annie. "She could use the lie-down mount."

Annie shook her head. "Calypso can do it, but Brooke would need training. How about we just send the mounting block with her?"

"I vote for taking the mounting block," Brooke said. "I've seen that lie-down mounting trick before, and it isn't as easy as it sounds."

She'd seen someone do it when she'd gone to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, to watch her cousin barrel race in the Cherokee Nation All-Indian Rodeo. The trick riding had been fun to watch, but Brooke knew there was no way she could learn to do it under such circumstances.

Brooke thought again of her grandmother's farm as Ethan climbed into the saddle of a sorrel-colored horse and turned him toward the gate. She longed to return to Tahlequah with Ethan and her children. If anyone could survive without modern conveniences, it was her grandmother and the elders of her tribe. Her nana had shunned modern conveniences while raising Brooke's mother and had reluctantly embraced

them again when bringing up Brooke. Nana would know how to cook, do laundry, get water, gather, and grow food without them now. "I'm on my way home, Nana," Brooke said under her breath.

Jarrold stared at a sixteen-hand chestnut gelding. "I might need to use that mounting block myself," Jarrold said. "With my bad knees, I'm not sure I could climb into a saddle without one.

"Oh, I forgot. I told you I had something to help with that," Annie said. "Let me run inside and grab it." Katie disappeared from the barn for a moment and when she returned she held a small bottle in her hand. "Apply this to your knees three to four times a day. It should help with the swelling and pain."

Jarrold took the bottle from her and unscrewed the lid. "What's in it?"

"It's my grandmother's herbal remedy. She had bad arthritis."

"Oh yeah, but what's in it?" Jarrold repeated.

"Roots and leaves from plants I've gathered from across the United States."

Jarrold stared at her for a moment.

"Trust me. It will do wonders for the pain."

"Okay," Jarrold said. "I hope it doesn't cause my hair to fall out or grow boobs."

Mitch laughed. "Here you go, big guy," placing the mounting block near Jarrold's feet.

Jarrold handed Lexi to Brooke and climbed the steps of the block. Brooke followed Ethan through the gate of the corral as Jarrold mounted his horse with Lexi Lou. They waited a

moment for Mitch to strap the mounting block to one of the mules and then hand Jarrod the lead rope of the pack mule string. Annie and Mitch stood by the watering trough and waved goodbye as Ethan, Brooke, Jarrod, and Lexi Lou rode down the driveway toward the road. Brooke glanced up at the sky. From the position of the sun, they still had a few hours to ride before dark. By then, they'd be fifteen miles from Freedom.

In less than thirty minutes, they rode past the spot where they'd wrecked the GMC. No one knew who had pulled it out of the ditch and gotten away with all their food. It was just gone, and no one in town would admit to taking it. That had been difficult for Brooke to accept. They'd be returning to the children empty-handed.

A man and woman waved at them from the country store. Lexi barked a greeting as Brooke returned their wave, turned her face toward the rising sun, and exhaled, glad finally to have the town of Freedom, Oklahoma at her back. They'd survived Freedom, but still had over two hundred miles to ride before reaching Tulsa. They'd been through so much during the last seventeen days, but Brooke knew that danger still lay ahead for them. She was no longer the naïve person she'd been when they'd started this journey back in Estes Park, Colorado. She now knew what it was going to take to make it in this grid-down world, and she was fiercely committed to their survival.

Thank you for reading *Surviving Freedom*, book three in the *Desperate Age* series. The story continues in book four, *Trouble in Tulsa*. [Pre-order your copy today at Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08K9K9K9K)

If you enjoyed *Surviving Freedom*, I'd love to hear from you. Please consider leaving a review on Amazon. Doing so helps me find new readers who might enjoy the book.

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Afterword

Retired Deputy Marshal Charlie Meade

The button panel chimed, and the number one lit up as the elevator doors slowly slid open, revealing an image before me that instantly caused a smile to sweep across my face. I stumbled toward the breakfast bar rubbing the sleep from my eyes, partially in disbelief at the sight of the man standing next to a dining table talking with an elderly couple having breakfast. As I veered toward the coffee pot, still monitoring the situation, my jaw must have dropped open or something because the man looked at me and gave a friendly wave.

“I’ll come by and talk with you in a moment,” he said.

His name was Charlie Meade, an eighty-seven-year-old, real-life U.S. Marshal, sporting a cowboy hat and boots, a red bandana tied around his neck, and a shiny U.S. Marshal badge pinned to his vest. I had literally stumbled upon a uniquely genuine character that morning, ready-made for the story I was there to research. It was the first of two research trips to trace the route that I intended Ethan and Brooke to travel from Estes Park, Colorado, to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for this book series, and I was off to a very good start.

Aside from Charlie's everyday outfit, out of place in the Holiday Inn Express breakfast nook, to be sure—even though I happened to be in Dodge City, Kansas, it was something more than that which burned his image into my memory. The confidence with which he spoke, his wide stance and grizzled features, and his five-foot-two (give or take) height seemed incongruous. My mind struggled to reconcile the calculation. Regardless of his physical lack of elevation, Charlie seemed to tower over the mythical and gargantuan Marshal Dillon from the old Gunsmoke television series that brought fame to Dodge City in the 1950s. My mind had instantly put it all together in a glance, and translating my experience and transferring it to paper would be the inevitable result.

As I spoke with him that morning, and more at length when I stopped for a second visit and a tour of the city, I realized just how fortunate I had been to meet this real-life Dodge City treasure. Wearing his gun belt and ancient ivory-gripped, single-action Colt Peacemaker, he brought Dodge City's history to life. The Marshal Meade I met and got to know briefly was as kind and genuine as his smile declared, though also rough and capable as a special U.S. Deputy Marshal must be. He was as upright and caring a lawman as you'll find in any wholesome old-west TV series or motion picture—a true professional, knowledgeable lawman, through and through. His pride for his city and the interesting life he had led there as a Dodge City Marshal for so many years was obvious. His caring opinionated, forthright, and genuine demeanor served as an intentional mentored counsel for many of the positive changes Dodge City has experienced throughout the years.

I knew I had to write a forward for this book about Charlie because he was everything I would ever seek to develop in a

character and more. I honestly don't think I could have developed a character as perfect and well suited for my story as Marshal Charlie Meade—just as he was that cold and windy February day.



Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday are long since gone from this earth, though their legions live on. But Charlie Meade—a living legend—still walks the streets of Dodge City greeting tourists, providing personal tours, and spreading his own infectious legendary lore unaware.

Special Deputy U.S.
Marshal, Retired
Deputy Marshal,
Dodge City, Kansas,
Charlie Meade

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I am very grateful for your tremendously valuable feedback and suggestions.

Also by T. L. Payne

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[Getting Out of Dodge](#)

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[Trouble in Tulsa \(Coming soon!\)](#)

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About the Author

T. L. Payne is the author of several bestselling post-apocalyptic series. T. L. lives and writes in the Osage Hills region of Oklahoma and enjoys many outdoor activities including kayaking, rockhounding, metal detecting, and fishing the many lakes and rivers of the area.

Don't forget to sign up for T. L.'s VIP Readers Club at www.tlpayne.com to be the first to know of new releases, giveaways, and special offers.

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