Least of These

by Kevin D. Hendricks

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Preface

I've always wanted to write novels but I never got around to it. In 2004 I discovered the novel-producing pressure-cooker known as National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). The idea is that you write a 50,000-word novel in only 30 days. There's no time for excuses, plotting or whining. Just write. Write, boy, write!

That arbitrary pressure enabled me to write my first novel, and ever since I've done NaNoWriMo every two years. In 2008 I sat down to write my first ever sci-fi novel, *Least of These*, which you now hold in your hands.

Post-apocalyptic stories have always held a special place in my heart. You can probably thank Mel Gibson and *The Road Warrior*, hands down the greatest post-apocalyptic film ever. There's some endearing combination of stripping away the details of life and this Lord of the Flies mentality. You could probably psychoanalyze me and say a lot about my love for post-apocalyptic fiction, but whatever. I love it.

So I wrote my own.

To be frank, I'll freely admit this isn't a brilliant novel. Writing sci-fi is no easy task and doing it in 30 days makes it even harder. I'm making the case even worse by presenting *Least of These* in its barely edited form. I fixed a few typos and glaring errors, but for the most part you're seeing it in all its NaNoWriMo glory, warts and all.

So thank you for putting up with all of that and reading anyway. You're a true hero. I hope you'll be able to look past my mistakes and amateur moves and embrace the deeper ideas that embody post-apocalyptic fiction. What the genre is really asking is when it's all stripped away, who are we?

Least of These is my poor, first attempt at tackling that question.

Thanks,
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Chapter 1

"What do you think?" I asked. Brick shrugged, frowned slightly, but then his face went blank again.

"Let's go." I looked him in the eyes, held his gaze for a second and he nodded, understanding my meaning. His massive frame trudged forward, adjusting his pack and getting his arrows ready.

I waited at the crest of the hill, watching Brick descend the slope ahead, towards the crossroads below. Behind us James still struggled up the slope, trying desperately to keep up, as always.

"Do you think today might be the day?" he spoke in a rush, winded from the brief climb. I looked down at him but didn't say anything. He scampered up the final few feet and we stood eye to eye. Color burned in his cheeks, his dark, curly hair blowing in the wind. James had a few treasured beads woven into a few strands of his matted hair. He bent over slightly, breathing hard, and pulled at his faded brown tunic. He looked up and smiled at me.

"I have a feeling, Kara. I think today may bring us good news."

"Traders," I said, gesturing with my head down the hill towards the crossroads. James' eyes lit up, his smile stretched. He stepped forward in delight, but I put a hand on his bony shoulder and held him back. He was easily several years older than me, but that didn't matter.

I spoke slowly in his ear, emphasizing each word: "Wise as serpents."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, his mouth agape. "Innocent as doves." Then he stumbled forward and I let him go. Some days I'd prefer to deal with the serpents and beasts, but they didn't have what we needed. So we dealt with the traders.

I looked back down the hill we had just climbed, over the valley and the opposite hill. The sun rose higher, mid-morning. We made decent time since the dawn, but we'd have to be careful

after encountering the trader. There were surely more people around. And you never knew if they were serpents or doves, as James might say.

I caught up to James and Brick as we came to the flat land and went forward together, towards the trader. A north-south path cut across the land and intersected with our east-west path ahead. As usual, a trader had claimed this intersection and set up camp. A desolated building sat a few yards removed from what had once been the corner. Tents were set up in the intersection itself, sheltering tables piled with goods. Scattered bits of concrete and asphalt remained here and there, but plants had sprung up and taken back the surface.

I cast a wary eye at Brick and he nodded and kept plodding forward. If Brick sensed any immediate signs of danger we'd stop. He stepped forward a few paces and slowed, then looked back over his shoulder at us and nodded.

The place seemed safe enough. No other travelers seemed to be here, and there weren't any especially threatening signs. The last trader we came across had a gallows prominently set up in the center of the intersection, with the limp bodies of two children hanging from it. Traders frowned on stealing.

We went off-road and trekked around that trader. Such violence could also mean safety. Some said humanity couldn't continue if theft were allowed to continue unchecked in the next generation. But others, like old Dom, told me that humanity couldn't continue without the next generation, whether or not they were thieves.

I gave James a menacing look and then raised my eyebrows when he didn't respond. He nodded and we continued forward. I wanted this to go smoothly.

"Welcome!" The trader stepped out from behind a tent flap and we all stopped. I could see Brick's body tense, his hand steady on his bow under his cloak. The man was old, his face wrinkled. Late 30s, maybe, though you could never tell. He wore black overalls and a dark overcoat, plenty of pockets and places to conceal a weapon. The traders were crafty folk. They had to be. No doubt there was another, a partner somewhere close. Nobody worked alone.

"You got goods to trade?" the man asked, his eyes wide and greedy. But as he looked us over his greed faded a bit. Brick

looked strong and intimidating, his sheer size and bulk meant that we ate well enough, but James and I—James especially—didn't complete the picture of a well-fed band of travelers that could offer a good trade. If anything it made Brick look like a slaver.

Of course that's what we intended.

Brick nodded and I stepped forward, easing my heavy pack on to the trading table. I opened it and stepped back and the trader came forward to examine our goods. Mostly furs, skins and meat. Nothing incredible. The trader nodded as he pawed through our trade.

"I think we can do business."

"Flour, meal, cloth," Brick said, reciting our supply list. He hesitated and then added, "Pair of shoes." James smiled and held up his foot, revealing the pathetic waste of what was left of his shoes. We could make clothes well enough, but shoes required more skill than we had. I glared at James and he put his foot down, offering me only a shrug.

"Take a look around, find what you need," the trader said, motioning with a sweep of his hand to the tents. He added in a deeper voice, "Thievery will not be tolerated."

We ignored his last comment and stepped forward to examine his merchandise, splitting up and spreading throughout the tent. I went for the supplies we needed, James wandered around looking for anything unique or interesting, and Brick feigned interest in some harnesses and saddles, but really he kept watch.

"Do you have any news from beyond?" the trader asked no one in particular, though it seemed to be directed toward Brick.

"Only the good news we carry with us," James answered from across the open tent. The trader rolled his eyes and looked to me and Brick for anything further, but we ignored him.

"A few gents passed through here a few weeks back," the trader offered. "They spoke of seeing a plane in the sky."

"A plane?" James asked. "Flying?"

"Indeed," the trader said. I shook my head and continued to search through piles of fabric, looking for something suitable.

"Which way was it headed?" James asked.

"East." James smiled and shot me a look, but I ignored him.

"And lo, the sun rises in the east and behold: the land I have promised to you," as James spoke he cast his eyes heavenward.

The trader raised his eyebrows and then grew quiet, probably hoping like Brick and myself that James would keep it to himself. Which for once, he did. James found a small stack of books and lost interest in the conversation. Brick continued to keep watch and I found the needed supplies and carried them to the trading table.

The trader came up behind me and I could hear him mumbling. He reached out to count the furs and skins, but then stopped and cast a leery eye on me. He put one hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear: "And what about you, girl?" He reached out with his calloused hand and grabbed for my chest.

Before he could touch me I grabbed his hand, slammed it onto the flat trading table and with my other hand drove a knife straight through the back of his hand and into the table.

He howled in pain. Brick turned. When the trader tried to hit me with his free hand I twisted the knife. His free hand clenched into a fist and he bit his finger, trying to fight the pain. Brick had an arrow drawn and was pointing it across the tent towards the decrepit building.

I leaned into the trader and whispered in his ear: "Lechery will not be tolerated."

"Please," he moaned. James had finally torn himself away from the books and looked up to see what was going on.

"Now, do we have a fair trade?" I motioned toward the stack of goods. "We'll need a bag of meal as well."

His eyes grew wide and he looked at me incredulously. I think he expected to be robbed.

"Thievery will not be tolerated," I reminded him. I reached into the bag slung across my shoulder and pulled out a ball of gauze and a dark bottle.

"Hold still," I warned and jerked the knife free from the table and the trader's hand. He winced, but didn't back away. I wiped the blood on the edge of my cloak and sheathed the knife safely under my wrist. I poured a small wad of orange sludge into my hand from the bottle, took the trader's hand and worked into the oozing wound on both sides of his hand. His mouth gaped open, but he didn't say anything. The sludge would be calming the pain by now, and I think he realized what I was doing. Then I tore off a three-foot section of gauze and wrapped the trader's hand carefully.

"Change the bandage and clean the wound every day for the next week. If you keep it clean you should be fine."

"Why..." he stammered.

I ignored his question and gathered up our new supplies. I reminded him about the bag of meal and he walked away shaking his head and holding his wounded hand close to his chest. Brick still kept his arrow trained on the building, but kept a watchful eye on the trader. But I knew we were safe. He wasn't going to try anything.

He came back with a small bag of meal, handed it to me and his eyes fell to the dirt.

"I am sorry," he said. "I haven't seen a girl in..." he trailed off.

"Those girls are your daughters," I said, speaking words that Dom had once told me long ago. "But I forgive you. And I am sorry as well." He looked at the bandage and back to me and I knew that the words were not necessary.

"Thank you," I said and gathered up our things to move on. Brick relaxed his bow, but kept the arrow at the ready. He stood by as I led the way toward the east, James following silently, and then Brick taking up the rear.

The trader watched us go, but didn't say any farewell.

As we went down the next hill and lost sight of the trading post, James finally spoke.

"Whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."

"Should I have given him the other breast, James? Is that what you're saying?"

"They will beat their swords into plows," James said, "And I'm not the one who says it."

I stopped walking and turned to James, letting the anger flash in my eyes. Brick kept walking, still bringing up the rear and keeping a watch behind us. "Doesn't it also say if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off? I'd say I showed him mercy."

James grew silent and we kept moving.

"Daughters, James." I reminded him. "That's what Dom taught us."

Again, he didn't say anything and we trudged on, into the noon hour and the afternoon. We'd stop for a meal soon, but we didn't dare stop so close to the trader, especially after what I'd just done. Sorrow and forgiveness may have been spoken, but hearts grow cold and foolish when danger passes. We have to be as wise as serpents, as innocent as doves. I hated quoting it, but on that point James' book had been quite right.

Chapter 2

We broke for lunch at mid-afternoon on the top of a rise. It offered the safety that we could see anyone coming, but it can also be dangerous that anyone can see us. But right now I think Brick preferred to be able to see who was coming.

"I think we'll be all right," I told him as I set my pack down and he continued to scan the horizon. He nodded, but frowned all the same.

I shook my head and sat down to find food. I tossed a crust to James and handed one to Brick, who took it without looking. I bit into my own and savored the nourishment. It didn't taste like much, but it didn't matter. It was food. Dom told us that once long ago, before the End, food was flavorful and delicious. He spoke about people craving something called chocolate. He said he had once tried it when he was a young boy. Sweeter than any fruit, it made his teeth ache.

But that was back when you could still scavenge and find something among the rubble. Today anything like that had long since been found by somebody or something. Nature may have reclaimed it by now, like it reclaimed much of what once had been.

Finding food didn't worry us. Game was plentiful and Brick knew how to find it. The processed foods, the flour, the meal—those were harder to come by. That's why we traded. Wanderers like us didn't have the luxury of growing crops.

Dom. He was probably dead by now. I could still see his scarred, black face, watching us as we left, the last members of the Wendell Community. We didn't have much choice, and Dom knew it.

"I'll go with you as far as the river," he had told us. "But no farther."

We left under cover of darkness and made it to the river before dawn. He helped us cross and then stood on the opposite shore and watched us go. I remember turning back to see his solemn face lit by the moon. He waved his hand but his expression remained blank. It reminded me of Brick. Though they looked nothing alike—Dom old, squat, dark-skinned, walked with a vicious limp; Brick young, strong, pale.

Dom had lived a long life. It was fitting that he would die at the community, though dying alone seemed ironic.

"Then you are leaving?" he asked that fateful morning.

"Yes." It was a forgone conclusion then. There was nothing left for us at the community. The last of the elders, aside from Dom, were dead. Jonas had died that morning, the last of the Searchers.

I remember when we sent them out. It was years ago now. I had been perhaps 12. I didn't understand all the reasons, but it was clear our community was too isolated. Food and provisions were hard to come by. Hunting parties had to go too far and came back with too little. The crops were doing poorly. We didn't have enough people and enough trade. The marauders didn't help.

The Searchers left the spring I turned 12. Maybe half a dozen of them set out, leaving an even dozen of us behind, though we were mostly young. It took them four years to come back, and then there were only three. Half of them had been lost to the wild. And the three that returned were in sorry shape.

But as odds go, they faired better than us. We had numbered 12, but by the time they returned we were only four. Accidents, disease, hunger, slavers. We were no match for the forces out there. We were too few to maintain and defend the community.

"We can wander the wasteland or we can waste away here. It doesn't really matter, does it?" I remember talking with Brick the night before Jonas died. We both knew what was coming. And we had a decision to make.

"We can be nomads, letting our fortune rise and fall with where we are. Or we can put down roots and be bound to the land—and we rise or fall with whatever happens here."

Brick nodded as I laid out the options, his lips curled and his eyebrows furled as he tried to process it all.

"Either way," I finished, "Death will find us."

"We could hide," Brick offered, after a moment's pause.

"Death will find us, Brick, even if we hide."

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

"We can either stay here not knowing, or we can head out there and not know. At least out there we have a chance of finding... something."

"What do you think we will find?" He asked, his face relaxing as he pondered the possibilities.

"Nothing. But maybe something." His face seemed to darken a little. "I don't know, Brick, but I think anything is better than saying here."

"And James?"

"You know James: 'To your offspring I will give this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' He thinks we're going to find the promised land." I shook my head and smiled, dropping my eyes to the ground. I never understood James' unwavering belief. Brick's expression didn't change.

"And Dom?"

"I think he's staying here." Brick bowed his head at these words. I bowed my head as well. It would indeed be a loss, but I think we both knew it was coming.

The next morning, after Jonas died, Dom asked me if we were leaving and I told him we were. Dom bowed his head.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" he asked when he finally looked up.

"No."

"I do."

"And what's that, Dom?"

"You seek what we all seek: Hope. But you will not find a gleaming city on the hill, a sanctuary where humanity has rebuilt. We are the least, the last, the lost. We are in decline and there is no second coming. Hope is lost."

It was the closest thing to wisdom Dom had ever said. He may have been the patriarch of our little community, but he wasn't some wise old sage. He was an old, broken man who told

stories and lived life. We learned a lot from Dom, but rarely did he impart anything approaching wisdom.

"I still have to look."

"You do," He spoke as if he hadn't just warned me not to go.

"There has to be something out there."

"Oh, there's plenty out there. I will go with you as far as the river. But no farther."

And that was it. Three days later we left, crossed the river, and I looked back on Dom for the last time. That was a year ago, give or take. I imagine he returned to the Community, closed the gate behind him, and went on with life. He either withered away as the food ran out—though we tried to leave him as much as we could—or someone else came. He wouldn't have stood a chance.

I shuddered at the thought. Sitting at the top of that hill with Brick and James, eating crusts of bread, I visibly shook. Neither of them noticed, Brick still keeping watch and James fingering the beads he wore around his wrist.

I remember when the slavers came. It was during those years when the Searchers were gone and we were vulnerable. At midmorning we saw them coming in the distance. There was no where we could go. They rammed the gate. Our arrows and spears were useless. They had guns and held them high daring us to keep up the fight.

Dom stepped forward—he told us stories of guns and what they could do. But ammunition was scarce and had mostly been scavenged. He called their bluff and the leader shot him in the leg. It knocked Dom off his feet and I remember seeing him lying on the ground, his face registering shock that the gun had actually fired more than it showed pain.

They took two of the younger girls, Alex and Savannah. We watched them go, knowing that fighting meant death. I remember telling Brick later that our only hope was that they could later escape. If we had charged and fought back they would have massacred us all. He eventually relented, but I don't think he took much comfort in my words.

As Dom slowly healed over the days and weeks he told us stories of days gone by. They may have seemed like stories told with the intent to rally us, but they weren't. They were just old tales. Tales of women lost to history.

But the one thing he told us that did strike true was that humanity needed daughters.

I was the last girl in the Wendell Community after that. I cut my hair short like a boy's and started wearing a knife on my underarm.

Chapter 3

We finished our meal and continued east. We didn't talk much as we trekked along. Brick led the way, following an old roadbed, though the concrete had mostly been broken up and it hardly resembled a road today. James followed, again fingering his beads, and I came last, cautiously checking over my shoulder.

That night we camped in a grove of trees, just out of sight of the roadbed. James told stories recollected from his beloved book while Brick listened intently and I added yet another patch to my pants. They had once been jeans, but were now more patches than original material. Despite the many patchings, they held up well and fit just right. It was easier to patch them than to try stitching a new pair.

We went to sleep that night with Brick on first watch. James took the middle watch and I took the last. A watch wasn't strictly necessary, but whenever we encountered someone like a trader it seemed safer to watch our back. James was nodding off when I replaced him, desperately trying to finger his beads and stay awake. I heard him mumbling as well, probably reciting passages to himself. There had been a book back at the Wendell Community, but James had committed most of it too memory and thought it would be safer to leave it behind anyway.

"It's time to move," I said to Brick's still body in the morning. His eyes opened, he nodded, and then rolled over to wake James. Dawn would break soon, the early light coming quickly and with it warmth. And danger. But danger never really left us.

As a child I feared the dark. But now I knew that in darkness we were all equally blind, those who wished us harm as well as those who wished us well. But in the light we could all see and there was nowhere to hide. The light illuminates our faces, but obscures our hearts. Death can hide behind a smile. In fact, it usually does. Wise as serpents, innocent as doves.

"Do you think today will be the day?" I could hear James asking Brick his daily question behind my back. He had learned

long ago to stop asking me. But Brick offered the shrug and blank eyes that could mean anything, and for James it meant certain and total hope: We would find the promised land.

We didn't find the promised land that day. But we found something else.

As we set off that morning, the darkness finally giving way to a cold, blue light, Brick paused and looked off to the north. A doe scampered across the field, followed by a fawn. James and I paused and watched. Then the deer went into a thicket and disappeared from view.

I remember the deer. They're not as common as they once were, back when humanity was too busy with war and collapse and the deer population exploded in the absence of predators. Those were the stories Dom told, fields of deer, too many to count. They seemed to compete with the grasses and weeds to see who could take the place of humanity. But the natural ecosystem came back into balance as wolves and other predators returned.

But I remember seeing another fawn, a while back. We were three months out of Wendell Community. We came upon our first town. Most major cities had been completely destroyed in the war. Some nuked. Some bombed. Some burned and plundered and destroyed when their own citizens rioted in the streets, ready to kill for a chunk of bread or a some way to keep warm. Those major urban centers were dead zones. In the initial destruction they weren't safe. But in the aftermath they couldn't provide reliable food or water, and the crumbling infrastructure proved hazardous, with buildings catching fire from lightning, gas tanks exploding, debris collapsing. Nature had since reclaimed those urban areas. Where rats and squirrels once had their dominion, now deer and wolves lived.

We still stayed away from those cities. Food was easy enough to find, but water was usually contaminated with the waste, the heavy metals, the radiation left behind. But many small towns and subdivisions escaped the brunt of the war's destruction. Unfortunately they succumbed to the further collapse of civilization. The roots that caused the rioting and pillaging that plagued major cities were everywhere. People needed food and water and shelter, and they took it any way they could get it. Some towns and communities found a way to band together, like Wendell Community. Many did not. Suburbs, with their

sprawling houses and buildings proved even harder to protect. Houses and fences provided better cover for marauders and raiders.

But that was all years ago. The subdivisions crumbled and fell, much like the cities, only faster. The earth reclaimed the tract housing and now it was hard to distinguish a rolling meadow from a former housing development. As you got closer you'd find the bits of asphalt that made up the road, the ruined houses with their foundations and debris of metal pipes and plastic bits. But nothing resembling shelter. Nothing resembling a home.

That first town we came upon was different. It was still standing, for one thing.

As it came into view we all stopped and stared. Brick had already drawn an arrow and we moved forward slowly and cautiously. We could make out a tower and several buildings. James kept opening and closing his mouth, as if to speak, but then thinking better of it. I knew what he was thinking—that this might be the promised land—but he dared not speak it out loud.

"Should we split up?"

Brick nodded, took a quick look around, and then trotted to the nearby tree line.

"If there's anybody dangerous, won't they have been watching?" James asked as we started forward again.

"That's a chance we have to take." Splitting up as we approached people had been a strategy the Searchers employed. And many marauders as well. At the very least it gave us options if something bad happened. Not many options, but if James and I were taken at knifepoint by kidnappers, I'd rather have Brick out there able to do something than at our side with a knife at his throat as well. It might not matter in the end; his valiant rescue effort might come to a sudden halt just as Dom's had. But just as we watched the slavers take Alex and Savannah and hoped against hope that they'd have a chance, splitting up as we approached gave us that kind of chance. I knew it was the barest of hope if things went sour, but it was better than nothing.

James and I walked steadily forward towards the settlement. I quietly reminded James not to scan the trees for a glimpse of Brick—it would reveal our plan and would prove fruitless anyway. Brick knew how to hide.

As we came closer it was clear the town had once been larger. There were ruined remains on either side of the roadbed, buildings that had given in to the onslaught of nature. Though some of these appeared to have been helped along. Some were burned to blackened remains, others had only low concrete walls remaining that looked to have been chiseled and hammered down to size.

Any community that hoped to protect itself had to see potential danger coming, and that often meant clearing out hiding spots. This was no town abandoned after the End. This was a community that once may have thrived in the After.

"If anyone is here they surely see us now."

"And could kill us now," I said, giving James an uneasy glance. But they hadn't killed us. We kept on, and I realized how quiet it was. No sounds of activity. No braying of stock animals. No footsteps or movement. Just a subtle breeze that made the leaves dance on the trees. The sun shone high—it was early afternoon—but there were deep shadows around buildings and plenty of places to hide.

James and I stopped about 20 yards from the first building. There were eight buildings, five on one side of the road and three on the other. The middle building had a tower that rose up a story or two above the other buildings, and a steeple that rose even higher. A lookout post had been added on to the steeple, like a steel cage tacked on. It was empty.

"No one is here," I said. James bit his lip. No noise. No footprints. Nothing. The grass and weeds were just as tall along the road as it ran through this town as they were anywhere along the roadbed. That meant no one stayed here long enough to trample them down. A ghost town.

I looked toward the woods to the north and raised my hand. I turned back to James.

"Brick will keep watch. Let's look around. The place looks abandoned enough, but there may be something we can use."

"I'll take the tower," James said, stepping forward.

"Let's both check the tower." If there was anything of interest, I guessed it'd be there.

"Listen close—Brick will warn us if anyone comes," I hesitated. "And we should wear masks."

James stopped and turned.

"You think..."

"Better safe."

He nodded. We both pulled the bandanas that hung loosely around our necks up over our faces to cover our noses and mouths. It made us look like old time bandits. This was another bit wisdom from the Searchers, though I don't think it saved any of them.

In the chaos of the End there were many plagues; where there is death, there is disease. And then more death.

James took the lead and started up the concrete steps of the building with the tower. The brick building once had walls on either side of the steps, but they had crumbled away. The bricks on the façade of the building itself were deteriorating into chips and pieces, littering the ground. This building wouldn't last much longer.

James looked back at me, still standing at the base of the steps, and I nodded. He reached for the heavy metal door and tugged at the handle. The door scraped open and light streamed across the dirty threshold.

Then James stumbled back and fell on his ass. I already had my hand on my knife and started to draw when I saw what James had seen. A fawn stepped gingerly through the doorframe. It paused and looked at us with its black eyes, hesitated for a moment, and then continued on. It went down the steps, leapt from the second to last one and trotted off through the grass towards the trees.

James still lay on the steps.

"You OK?" I remember trying not to laugh.

"I—I thought I was dead." He struggled to stand up and I climbed the steps two and at a time to give him a hand. I pulled him up and he dusted himself off, looked me in the eyes and exhaled.

"For thou hast delivered my soul from death," he mumbled to himself. "That I may walk before God in the light of the living."

"You're OK."

"Thanks be to God."

"It's just a deer." I peered inside the open door. A small entryway opened into a rectangular-shaped gathering space, and the entire back wall was gone. It opened to the yard behind the building. "It probably got inside and confused, couldn't figure out how to get out."

"It's not that," James explained, wiping his forehead. "It's-"

"I know," I said, cutting him off. I thought we were dead, too. At that time we had only been wandering in the wilderness for three months, but the Searchers had told us enough stories. Danger lurked, waiting to strike when your guard was down.

"Come on, let's take a look and get out of here."

James nodded and we walked inside. The town was indeed empty, save for the fawn. I left James in the building with the tower and checked out the others on my own. He needed to catch his breath. When I came back he was kneeling on the ground, facing the open back wall of the room.

"I found these in a backroom," he said, turning and looking up at me. He held out a string of beads with a cross at the end. "I think this was a church."

"A church?"

"Well, at least it was before the End." It had been a command post and guard tower for this community, that much was clear. I didn't dare climb the makeshift platform attached to the steeple to get a view—whoever I could see would also be able to see me—but I was sure it offered a vast and unimpeded view of the surrounding countryside.

"And now it's a church again," I said, watching as James stood up. He didn't say anything.

"Let's go." We walked out of town gaining nothing but the beads—and James had a new appreciation for life. We met up with Brick a quarter mile outside of town.

"Empty?"

I nodded.

"What do you think happened?"

I shrugged. Rarely had I ever used fewer words than Brick.

That first town wasn't the promised land, nor were the many others we've encountered in the many days since.

We watched the doe and fawn disappear into the woods and we kept moving. As James fingered his beads I'm sure he too remembered that first encounter with a fawn.

And that day as we set out we wouldn't encounter the promised land, but we would encounter a man with a promise.

Later that morning we came over a ridge and saw a man sitting by the side of the road.

Chapter 4

The man waved at us. It was too late too split up or try some stealthy strategy, so we just continued on towards him.

Brick had a hand on his bow and kept a wary eye on the thickets on either side of the roadbed. Sometimes I hate that we've become so untrustworthy, but it's a lesson we've learned the hard way.

"Hello," the man called from a distance. "Are you going to kill me?"

We stopped cold. Brick looked at me, confusion clouding his face. James mumbled to himself.

"Are you going to kill us?" I called after another moment's hesitation.

"I hope not," he called back. "But that's really up to you." We continued forward, not exactly at ease, but not especially frightened either. Encounters with others were always a bit tricky. They were like chess matches, each side trying to determine the other's intent and keep themselves protected. I felt a little less unease because the man hadn't promised to do us no harm. Whenever a stranger we met in the wild made that promise they almost always broke it. Or at least tried to.

"Have a seat if you like," he said as we came within 30 feet. He sat on an old stump and there were several more close by. He looked older than us, probably in his twenties. He seemed strong, sure of himself—he'd hardly bothered to look toward us and properly size us up—maybe even a bit cocky. He held a stubby knife in one hand and a small bit of wood in the other. He was whittling.

"Name's Paul," he looked up as he said it, then turned back to whittling his block of wood. He had shaggy dark hair, a beard and wore a dark leather coat that touched the ground as he sat on the stump. As we came closer I could see that his eyes were a deep blue. A pack sat on the ground next to the stump, and behind the pack was a rifle.

We stopped about ten feet from him. I looked at Brick and he just shrugged.

"In a civilized society when someone introduces themselves you do the same."

If he was going to hurt us he would have done so by now.

"I'm Kara. This is Brick," I motioned with a tilt of my head towards Brick, "And this is James," and then towards James. As if there was any doubt which one was named Brick.

I stepped forward and sat on the stump directly across from Paul. We were five feet apart. I could really see his blue eyes now. They were deep. And inviting.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"A traveler," He looked directly at me and then up at Brick and James who were still awkwardly standing. "Much like yourselves, I'd gather."

"We seek the promised land," James said, suddenly bold. I rolled my eyes. Brick didn't react. Paul smiled.

"Do you now?" he said, looking up at James and taking in his tunic and the beads wrapped around his wrist. "Then perhaps we can be of help to one another."

"Do you know where it is?" James asked, stepping forward and bending down on one knee.

"I do not." The glow faded from James' face a little. "To be frank with you, I'm not entirely sure it exists."

James sat down on another nearby stump, crestfallen. Brick alone still stood, and I noticed he kept an eye on the road ahead and behind us, as well as the trees. Always watchful. I could count on that.

"At least it doesn't exist yet," Paul said.

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"Let me ask you this: What do you think the promise land is?" I sighed at this. We found ourselves a religious nut. Another religious nut. "But before you answer that, James, I sense you're not all on a quest for the illusive promised land." He looked directly at me. "What about you, Kara, what's your quest?"

"I don't have a quest."

"You're wandering, right? What are you looking for?"

"I'm just trying to stay alive."

Paul nodded. He shaved off a splinter of wood from the block in his hand before speaking again. "And is that enough for you?"

I scowled. Who was this guy?

"And what about you?" Paul asked, looking up at Brick. He shrugged.

"I see." Another splinter of wood. "Well, James, back to my question: What do you think the promised land is?"

"It's the city on the hill," James said, his eyes gleaming. "It's the land flowing with milk and honey. It's the land where we'll be blessed and multiply and repopulate the earth. It's the place God has gone ahead and prepared for us, the lion will lay down with the lamb and they'll beat their swords into plows and they'll be no more death or disease or hunger and... and..." He was nearly breathless.

Paul smiled. "And you believe this place exists now, that you could happen upon it any day now?" I didn't understand where he was going with this—but I kind of liked it. These were words I had wanted to say to James, but could never quiet get there without breaking his quiet grip on reality.

"I do," James said simply.

"Well," Paul said, reaching out to slap James on the shoulder, "I applaud your belief. But I think you are mistaken." Then he stood up and reached for the rifle leaning against the stump behind him.

Brick drew and notched an arrow, taking a bead on Paul. My hand went for my knife, but I didn't draw. James fingered his beads.

Paul stopped and chuckled, one hand on his rifle, one gesturing for Brick to lower his bow.

"Easy now, we don't want to put anyone's eye out." He held the rifle by the barrel, like a staff, and jabbed the stock into the dirt at his feet. Brick lowered the bow, but kept the arrow tight and ready.

"This rifle hasn't been fired in ages," Paul said as pulled the rifle towards himself creating a gash in the earth. "I doubt it still works, though I wouldn't know—I've never tried to fire it myself. Doesn't matter anyway: I don't have any ammunition."

Then he reached into his coat and pulled out a bag that hung around his shoulder. I noticed Brick tense again out of the corner of my eye, but he relaxed again as Paul reached inside the bag and pulled out a small handful of something that looked like grain. We all watched him, transfixed.

"Unless you consider the power of these seeds to be some sort of weapon," he said with a smile, sprinkling the seeds into the hole he'd created with the rifle. "I think they can be a weapon against future hunger, calamity, strife. I'm not here to kill you as you may have assumed when you first saw me. No, I'm here to give life."

He pushed the dirt back with his foot and gingerly tamped it down.

"Swords into plowshares," I heard James mumble to himself.

"This, my friend James—can I call you a friend?" James nodded faintly. "Is what I believe to be the promised land. It's not a far away land that we shall discover with much walking and wandering. The promised land is here and now—but we have to make it the land of promise we believe it to be."

"Who are you?" I asked, looking up at Paul's blue eyes. They flashed with a certain fire as he spoke.

"I have told you I am a traveler," he began, "And that much is true. But I also travel with a mission. I have much to tell you..."

He trailed off and his eyes went to the ridge where we had come from.

"...But now may not be a safe time for talk." In a quick motion he raised the rifle to his shoulder, holding it like a working rifle this time, and he looked through the scope mounted on top of the rifle.

"Damn," he said softly, lowering the rifle slightly. "We must go."

In another quick motion he grabbed the pack next to the stump, slung it over his shoulder and set off toward the thickets closest to the roadbed. Brick, James and I watched him in confusion for a second.

"You should probably come with me," he said, looking back. "Unless you'd prefer to keep company with those raiders."

We sprang to our feet and ran after him, Brick taking up the rear and casting an eye toward the ridge. I couldn't see anyone yet, but that mattered little. In the back of my mind I wondered if this had been some trap all along.

Paul slid into the thickets quickly and quietly. He went far enough to be out of site and earshot, then took a wide circle, sweeping back towards the roadbed and the direction the raiders were coming from.

"What are you doing?!" I hissed, tugging at his coat.

"If you prefer to keep running, then do so," he said without stopping. I came up short and James ran into me. Paul continued ahead another 20 paces and then dropped to the ground behind a rock. He aimed the rifle and peered into the sight again.

I turned to Brick. He looked confused, quickly scanning from left to right and then back again. Then it seemed to click, he smiled and stepped forward to join Paul. He crouched down next to Paul, his bow at the ready.

James and I reluctantly followed. As we crouched behind the rock Paul raised a finger to his mouth. He then held up five fingers, then made a fist, then five fingers again: 10. There were 10 raiders down there.

I peered over the rock for a look and realized what Paul had done. As the raiders closed in we had doubled back and were now peering down from them on the ridge they had just come from. We were still off the roadbed, protected in the trees and bushes.

It was a good plan.

From this vantage point we could see what they would do and where they would go. We now knew how many they were and could likely see how well equipped they were. We were also positioned in the location they'd least expect to find us. If they came after us we'd know, and if they figured out our doubleback we'd know. If we kept running we'd never know if they were still

coming, how many they were or if they'd even bothered to turn from the roadway at all.

I looked back to the raiders below. They were a ragged looking bunch, wild hair and torn clothes. They held weapons at the ready: spears and arrows and jagged metal clubs. One pushed a cart with big stubby wheels, probably designed to be easy to push over the uneven terrain.

But they weren't stopping, or even turning aside. They kept going on going past the stumps we'd just been sitting on and continued down the roadbed. If they'd been following us they certainly weren't paying much attention.

Brick relaxed his bow and I exhaled, shaking my head as the raiders disappeared from view. James continued to finger his beads, his head bowed. People like those were the ones James had expected when the fawn leaped out of the doorway.

We'd come across them before, not only at Wendell Community, but out here in the wild.

"That could have been ugly," Paul said. "I could have asked them the same question I asked you, but I'm afraid I already knew what their answer would be."

He gave a weak smile.

"And I'm not sure a bow and a knife would have been enough to fend them off."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you've got something besides a rusty rifle and no ammo, right?"

This time he chuckled.

"There are different ways of wandering and different ways of living."

"Meaning what?"

"I carry no weapon, Kara. Well, I do have a knife as any sensible traveler must, but I mean that I have no weapon that I would turn on another human."

"And them? They're still human?"

"We're all still human. Some are more lost and broken than others, but we're all still human."

His words hung there and I couldn't help but doubt them. The End and the After had changed people. I always reckoned that the end of civilization had driven the humanity out of many of us. The slavers and marauders and raiders were proof enough of that.

"And when they put a knife to your throat?" I finally asked.

"Well, that will be an interesting day, won't it?" Paul said. "But for now, I'm content to avoid that day."

He stood up and shouldered his bag and rifle. Brick, James and I still crouched behind the rocky outcropping.

"Would you care to join me?"

Chapter 5

And that's how we became four.

We had no reason not to. James, of course, hung on Paul's every word, trying to decipher what it meant and determine how it fit his dogma. If Brick and I declined Paul's invitation, I half expected James would jump ship and join him. But it didn't come to that. Brick shrugged, which was as good as yes. For all my reservations, I had nothing either of them would understand. He seemed like a liability—a man who refused to defend himself. But he had proved himself by avoiding the raiders, keeping all of us safe.

So we set off with Paul. He led the way southeast, thinking it not wise to follow the raiders. We'd likely encounter other dangers, but knowingly following danger was foolish.

As we walked I hung back with Brick, enough paces that we could talk. Or at least I could.

"What do you think?" I asked. I let the question hang in the air for several steps. I knew he wouldn't answer right away. We kept walking and I didn't say anything.

A flock of birds took off from a clump of trees as we came over a rise. We could see rolling hills in the distance and fields of golden grasses. Clumps of trees had grown up here and there, the forest reclaiming what had once been a farmer's field.

"I think," Brick finally said, "we should trust him."

"Why?"

"He's not like the others."

Brick had a point. In our year outside of Wendell Community we'd come across more than a few people. None had ever been like Paul.

Once a long time ago we awoke in the middle of the night, rain pouring down around us. We were huddled close together around the base of a tree, and in the light of the moon we saw slavers. They were going along the roadbed, a group of people in chains pulling a wagon, slavers walking on either side and a few riding in the wagon. They pulled a cow behind the wagon. We froze as we watched, horrified at the mere sight of people in chains. The light of day would have shown us how truly horrifying they were.

Another time we encountered traders who had packed up for the day. They didn't see us and we held back for a moment. That moment saved our lives. As we watched one of the traders turned on the other, slashing his throat and spilling his blood in the dirt.

But the slavers and traders and raiders were at least predictable. The lone wanderers, like us, were the most dangerous, the most prone to unpredictability.

Once we came upon an older woman with a baby. She didn't seem to notice us as we approached. James offered her a piece of bread, but as she reached out to take it we realized that the baby was dead.

James froze.

I drew my knife and had it at the woman's throat.

But Brick saved us. He dropped to the ground and fired two quick arrows. An old man staggered out from behind a tree, an arrow in his shoulder and another in his chest. He stumbled and fell to the ground.

The woman never reacted. Even as I held my blade to her throat she didn't wince. She just sat there, clinging to her dead child. She'd been the bait for some kind of trap, but she clearly had lost touch with whatever hold on reality she once had. She was unwitting and unknowing bait.

We eventually had to just leave her there. She wouldn't speak, wouldn't answer questions, wouldn't look at any of us. James left the piece of bread in her lap, but I don't know that she ever took it.

I remember another time when we came upon an older man and a young boy. We were going opposite directions and met each other on the same road. The man had a machete at his side and the boy had a slingshot drawn and ready, the high-powered kind that could bring down small game. Brick had his bow ready as well, but held it low, not quite as threatening. We approached each other slowly and cautiously.

"Just passing through," I said.

"You keep that arrow aimed low, boy" the old man said, "Or it'll be the last thing you do."

"Take it easy," I said.

"Who are you? What do you want?" the man asked, his eyes cold. The boy kept the slingshot aimed ready but kept shifting his aim from me to Brick.

"We're just travelers, we're passing through—who are you?"

"What does that matter?"

"It's a fair question," I replied, indignant. "You asked us."

"I ain't telling you backstabbers nothing."

"Backstabbers! We haven't done anything!" I remember the anger rising. I wanted to show him what a backstabber could do. I wanted to Brick to let that arrow fly, but slingshot boy would hurt somebody.

"Then let's keep it that way," the old man said.

We circled each other warily and then went our separate ways. Encounters of complete distrust. I hated it, but I didn't know what else to do. Like the woman with the baby or the traders, letting your guard down can kill you.

Paul was indeed different. So we followed him. But I wasn't convinced we should trust him yet.

"So what's your deal?" I asked him when we took an afternoon break. "Are you some kind of Johnny Appleseed?"

He leaned his rifle against a tree. We were in a small clearing in a thick forest, the towering trees overhead blocking out much of the sky. We were off the beaten path, but that really didn't matter. Few paths were beaten anymore.

"I guess you could say that." He dropped his pack to the ground and reached inside. He pulled out an apple. We all stared. It's not like fruit had gone extinct, but you couldn't exactly pick it up at the corner store. We'd come across a few apple trees in our travels, but they'd usually been picked over or it was too early or too late in the season.

Paul noticed our salivating, took out his whittling knife and sliced the apple into quarters. He tossed each of us a piece.

"What have you been eating while you're out here?" he asked.

"We hunt," I said. "Meat is our most reliable staple while we're on the move. We also gather when we find stuff. When we do find stuff that's in season we'll hang around and gather as much as we can. Otherwise we trade for our flour and meal, whatever vegetables we can afford."

Paul nodded as I spoke. It seemed fairly typical to him. When I finished we sat there quietly, munching on apple.

"And that," he began, "is the problem with wandering. You're dependent on whatever you can find. If you can't find anything, you starve. You get desperate. You get dangerous. So why don't you stay put?"

"We tried that," I explained. Brick nodded. "But if you stay put, you're reliant on whatever is in reach and whatever you can protect. If there's not enough in reach or you can't protect it, you starve."

"And I take it that's what happened to you? It became too dangerous, too desperate?" Brick solemnly nodded. I didn't answer. James stirred, and finally spoke up.

"But it's not about how dangerous or desperate it is," he started. "Both situations are fraught with peril. It's about finding the promised land. It's about risking everything to find the treasured pearl."

"And that's why I do what it is I do, James," Paul said. "If food is too difficult to protect while you stay put, then don't protect it. And if food is too scarce to find while you wander, then make it less scarce."

"So you wander the land planting food so those raiders can find it?" I asked.

"If they do, so be it. That's one less meal they acquire by slitting a throat and raping a child."

James' eyes flashed: "You're civilizing the savage!"

"You could say that," Paul said. "I'm also providing sustenance for travelers like yourself. Or the animals. Or the slavers, raiders or whoever. It's a resource freely given and freely taken. The goal is a land flowing with milk and honey, wherever you are."

"The promised land," James said with a smile.

"Exactly," Paul answered, pointing at James. "We bring the promised land here and now. We turn this broken wilderness into a land of promise. A land where good men no longer starve, where fair men are not forced to steal, a land where savage men are given an opportunity to become less savage."

"That's quite the speech," I said.

"Well, I've had a lot of time to practice." We all chuckled at that, and then we gathered our things and continued on. But before we left that clearing, Paul jabbed his rifle into the ground, spread a handful of seeds, and turned the earth again.

Chapter 6

We had been traveling for a year on our own, just the three of us. Brick, James, me. We weren't always the best company for one another. But we were a family of sorts. We'd been together since the beginning.

I never knew my parents. I grew up an orphan at the Wendell Community. Brick and James were like brothers to me. I remember when Brick and his mother first came to the community. He was so quiet. I thought he'd never talk. He was another playmate, an older, larger playmate who never said anything. His mother died a little while later, taken by disease. I saw him sitting outside in a chair when everyone else slept. I went outside and sat next to him, told him I was sorry about his mommy. I remember his very first words to me were, "Look at the moon." He pointed up at the night sky to the full moon that bathed the compound in light.

James had been at Wendell as long as me. His mom died when we were young—killed in a raid (perhaps another reason he reacted the way he did to the fawn). His father was one of the Searchers who didn't return. I always suspected his motivations for going out into the wild were tied up in his parents, at least subconsciously. Wanting to find his father, revenge his mother, even abandon Dom as the symbol of the community that had failed his parents, and ultimately him. But that's probably not giving him much credit. Brick would scowl at me if I told him that theory. James may be a lot of things, but he's not foolish enough to think he'll find his father or avenge his mother (his horror at my stabbing the grabby trader more aligns with Paul—refusing to fight back).

Brick, James and I had traveled many miles, slept huddled together through many cold nights, shared many meals that were far too small—together.

And now there was Paul.

We barely knew him, hardly understood him, but the more I asked the more cryptic and fanciful his answers seemed to become. It was like talking to James, only Paul seemed to understand my skepticism and could find ways to poke at me that actually struck home.

"So where are you going?" Paul asked late in the day after we'd seen the group of raiders. "I assumed a detour would be wise to avoid the raiders, but we've surely put them behind us. Do you have a route to get back to?"

"We were heading east," James said plainly as he walked.

"Just east?"

"Well, yeah," he paused, "Towards the rising sun and the promised land."

Paul nodded but didn't respond. We continued walking, Paul and James up front, Brick and I coming up behind.

"The directions are kind of vague," I admitted.

"I see. North or south doesn't seem to matter? Either way as long as it's east?"

No one spoke. This had been a bit of a sore spot we tried to avoid. James wanted to go east, based on vague prophecies that didn't tell us anything. I didn't think it mattered which way we went, so I let him have that victory. But it meant we were somewhat aimless.

"What about you?" I finally asked. Paul looked back at me and gave a shrug.

"All of this wilderness is potential promised land waiting to be redeemed, so it doesn't much matter where I go."

"So you don't have any kind of plan or direction?" I asked skeptically.

"No. Should I?"

"You just seem to have this great mission," I said, adjusting my pack as I walked. "I'd expect a map or something with areas you've covered crossed off or something. Maybe working your way across the land in some sort of pattern."

"The way I see it, as long as I keep moving and keep doing my work, the mission is accomplished. It doesn't matter if I'm orderly or haphazard." He paused and cast a glance to Brick. "Besides, I find it more interesting to be haphazard."

"So that's it?" I asked. "You just keep wandering and planting?"

"Should there be something more?" And then came his poke. "You yourself said you're just trying to stay alive. I'm doing that and more. I would expect you of all people to be content with that."

I admit it; he irked me.

"Shh..." Brick whispered, holding out his hand for us to stop. We froze, a bit panicked at first, but then Brick pointed to a cluster of deer not 50 yards away. We were on the edge of a tree line and the terrain must have kept us hidden. The wind probably carried our voices and any scent away from the deer, giving us the drop.

We needed fresh meat.

Brick motioned for us to get down and he started moving in. I don't know where Brick learned it or how he picked it up, but he was meant to be in the wild. We crouched down in the grass, watching him pick his way forward towards the deer. It helped that game was easy to come by, but Brick was easily the reason we didn't starve.

Brick's arrow flew. The deer scattered. And someone shouted.

Paul strode forward, I grabbed at his coat to pull him down, but he kept going. James and I stayed low, but followed. Brick, tense but steady, had drawn another arrow.

As we approached two men stepped out of the bushes near Brick. One had a rifle and the other a bow and arrow, both drawn and ready as they moved in.

"What's the big idea!" the man with the rifle shouted. He was older, hair graying, his skin worn and tired. His eyes were hollow, his frame slender under a thick, threadbare jacket.

"Let's all take it easy," Paul said as he approached. The rifle swung in our direction. Paul came up next to Brick and motioned for him to lower the bow. Brick did. I cursed under my breath. James frowned at me and started fingering his beads. "What is this?" said the other man, the one with the bow still aimed at Brick. He looked just as spent as his partner, with ragged clothes. His eye twitched as it darted from Brick to Paul to me and back to Brick.

"My friend here was just hunting," Paul said.

"Yeah, well so were we!" the rifle man said. "And your friend just cost us a meal."

"I understand how you would jump to that conclusion, but it doesn't have to be the only solution to this situation."

"And what do you mean by that?" Rifle Man scowled as he spoke. Paul smiled.

"My friend has lowered his weapon, we clearly mean you no harm. It would be polite for you to do the same."

Rifle Man looked over at the twitchy one and they both slowly lowered their weapons.

"That's better," Paul said, his voice becoming warmer. "Now I believe you were worried about a lost meal because my friend shot first and scared away the rest of the deer?"

"Yeah, that's about right," Rifle Man said, turning to spit.

"At the moment the meal is lost to everyone—the deer staggered off. But I'm quite sure my friend had a lethal shot and it only needs to be tracked." Brick nodded, looking off in the direction the deer had gone. I knew he wanted to get moving and find it.

"Yeah? What about us?" the twitchy one asked, his eyes bulging.

"There's certainly no reason we couldn't share this meal with you," Paul said. I cursed again. James glared at me. Rifle Man and Twitchy exchanged confused looks.

"You'd share that deer with us?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't we?" The question hung in the air for a moment, the kind of question that seemed so ridiculous it didn't deserve an answer.

"But... we—we didn't kill it," Rifle Man stammered. And Paul had him. The ridiculous question was pretty brilliant. I hated to admit it, but Paul was on to something. These men expected ill treatment from us and so responded with the same: weapons

drawn. But they weren't really bad men. They had just been conditioned by the need for survival.

But his words betrayed that conditioning: we didn't kill it. Therefore it's not rightfully ours. They weren't as ruthless as they thought they were.

"True," Paul said. "But that hardly matters. We're still willing to share it."

The men again exchanged glances.

"If you feel you need to work for your meal, you could certainly help my friend track the animal."

That seemed to settle it. The men agreed and Brick and the twitchy one began looking for signs of the wounded deer. They found the trail and set off and the rest of us followed not far behind.

Rifle Man insisted on coming last. I cast a wary eye over my shoulder. They may not have been as ruthless as they thought they were, but they were clearly hungry.

Brick and Twitchy set off on a hurried pace and we followed maybe 50 paces behind, first Paul, then James, then me and Rifle Man bring up the rear. It was getting late in the afternoon, the sun starting to sink faster and faster. We had several hours of daylight still, but we'd need to find a place to camp soon. Hopefully nowhere near these two.

We followed Brick and Twitchy into the forest as they tracked the wounded deer, stopping to study tracks and drops of blood. It didn't take long until they caught up to the deer, its side heaving as it struggled to get up and continue on.

Brick drew an arrow to finish the job and that's when it happened.

"Down!" I yelled. Brick crouched to the ground and turned to watch as an arrow whizzed over his head. Twitchy had turned on Brick, trying to get him while he concentrated on the deer.

But Brick had turned and let his arrow loose when he saw Twitchy firing at him. Brick's arrow sunk square in the ragged man's chest. He dropped to the ground clutching at it.

The moment I shouted and dropped, I turned to see Rifle Man already aiming his gun. I drew my knife and threw it as he fired. The gun wheezed and shuddered, a smoking misfire—had it fired correctly Paul would have been dead.

My knife lodged in his throat. Rifle Man sputtered and coughed, dropped his rifle and fell to his knees.

"No—" Paul moaned, looking from the dead Twitchy to the mortally wounded Rifle Man. He dropped his pack and sprang to his feet, bounding over a fallen branch and approaching Rifle Man.

Panic filled the man's eyes. He reached for his throat and fell forward, catching himself with the other hand. Then Paul reached him and rolled the dying man over on his back. Tears welled up in Paul's eyes as he fumbled for the man's jacket, trying to staunch the bleeding.

"No, no—I'm sorry," he rambled again and again, kneeling next to the man.

James still crouched on the ground where he had dropped, his mouth agape. Brick had stood and checked to make sure the twitchy one had stopped twitching. I fell back from knees where I had thrown the knife, breathing a sigh of relief. I could hardly believe I hit Rifle Man, much less killed him. Brick and I had practiced some knife throwing, but I didn't expect to be lethal. I'd hoped for an injury, or at least surprise, and planned to rush the man. I hadn't thought ahead farther than that, but it didn't matter now.

I could still hear the wounded deer heaving—but a low thud silenced it. Brick ended its suffering. Then Rifle Man's eyes glazed over and it was finished.

Chapter 7

Brick pulled out his knife and got to work gutting the deer. James still sat on the ground, his knees pulled up to his chest and his head bowed. Paul still knelt next to the dead Rifle Man, his hands covered in blood.

I stood up and stepped forward. A bird called in the distance and the sun hung low in the sky. I stopped behind Paul.

"It didn't have to end that way," he said.

"But it did." I stepped forward to retrieve my knife, but Paul held up his hand. He reached forward and closed the eyelids of the dead man, then pulled out my knife, wiped the blade on the man's shirt and handed it to me.

"I told him we didn't intend to hurt him, and I meant that."

"If that shell hadn't misfired you'd be dead."

Paul looked up at me and for the first time I saw anger in his eyes. He stood to his feet, picked up the dead man's gun and aimed it towards the setting sun. He squeezed the trigger and fired.

Once.

Twice.

The third time misfired.

Four.

Five.

Click. Empty.

Paul dropped the rifle in the dirt and turned back to me. But he didn't say anything. He walked back towards where James still sat, stepping over a fallen log. He picked up his own rifle, came back to the dead man and started to dig.

I watched him for a moment and then turned away.

A few hours later Brick and I were roasting venison over a fire while James and Paul finished burying Rifle Man. Brick's eyes flitted between the roasting meat, the burial in process, and the other dead man still laying on the ground a dozen yards away.

"He would have killed you," I said quietly. Brick's eyes turned to me and then back to the slowly turning spit. Then he shrugged.

In all our travels and all the dangers we'd faced, neither of us had ever killed someone before. We had certainly caused harm and injury. We may have put someone in a situation that would have killed them. But neither of us had ever directly killed another person.

"What else would you have done?"

Brick shrugged again.

"Four bullets fired in that gun. Even with the misfires and the arrow you ducked they had enough to kill each one of us. We didn't have a choice."

Brick kept his eyes on the fire. A stone's throw away James and Paul had finished burying the man and I could hear James saying a few words.

"We could have given them the meat."

"All of it?" I asked. Brick nodded. Then he turned to me, his eyes wide and questioning. "Yeah, we could have—if they gave us that option. But they fired first."

Brick turned away: "Mutually assured destruction," he said quietly. I sighed. That was the End in a nutshell. We bombed them, they bombed us, everybody bombed everybody. It didn't really matter who fired first because nobody was left to sort it out. Just us wanderers alone in the wild.

"But we weren't destroyed, were we?"

Brick didn't answer. He pulled the meat out of the fire and avoided my gaze.

When Paul and James came to the fire Brick stood up, looked Paul in the eye and held out his hand. Paul studied him for a moment, then handed Brick his rifle. For the next hour Paul and James sat silently in front of the fire, Brick dug another grave for the second man, the one who tried to kill him, and I

tried to sleep. Each time the stock of the rifle slammed into the earth, I winced.

I woke early in the morning, before the others and made my way through the still dark to the Rifle man's grave. It was a dark mound of earth and they'd planted his rifle at the head of his grave, barrel down. A stick had been tied to the rifle horizontally, forming a cross.

I don't know how long I stood there. But then I heard a whispered voice just behind me: "You OK?"

It was James. He stepped forward and stood next to me. Neither of us said anything for a long time.

"I don't want to be a killer, James."

"We're all killers, Kara. Whether we throw the knife or we stand idly by." The dark night began to lighten around us, the dawn coming. "There is no one righteous, not a one." He laid a hand on my shoulder, paused for a moment, and then turned back towards the others. After a few more minutes I followed.

We had breakfast and set out that morning in silence. Brick led the way, toward the east, and we walked in single file with me bringing up the rear. After an hour or two we came upon a creek trickling through a valley and we stopped to fill canteens. Paul planted his seeds in several places around the creek without a word.

The sour day grew uglier when we were working our way down a steep incline and I lost my footing. The loose gravel gave way and I slid to my knees and then the weight of my pack flipped me over and I went tumbling down the hill. I took James and Paul down with me, but Brick managed to dodge the landslide by sidestepping flailing limbs and clinging to a stray root.

When the dust cleared we were a mess. My patchwork pants were ripped and my leg scraped up. I had a gash under my eye and my knuckles were raw. I bit my lip and tried not to scream.

James had a few bruises, but he was OK. Blood dripped down Paul's face, but it looked worse than it was.

Brick came to my side and tried to help me up, but it was too early for that. The pain seared in my leg.

"How 'bout we take a break?" Paul said, holding a rag to a cut across his nose. "This is a lovely spot." He chuckled to himself, and we all turned to look at him. He shrugged and wearily sat down on a boulder.

Brick began tearing some strips of cloth to bandage my wounds and James helped pour water and clean out the dirt and rocks. Paul just sat on his rock looking thoughtful.

"What's on your mind there, Appleseed?" I asked, spitting in the dirt.

"Some days are better than others," he said, turning towards me. He pulled the rag away from his face and gingerly checked to see if it had stopped bleeding. Then he continued, "I've been out in the wild a long time. Years." He paused and took in the surroundings. The grey sky, sullen and overcast. We sat at the bottom of a ragged drop off, the rolling, grassy hills suddenly broken and rocky, a flat open space of scrub bushes and brown grass where we sat, then descending into a scraggily forest of pine trees, the forest floor orange with pine needles.

"I planted my first seed a decade ago. I'd been in a community—like yourselves—and we were raided. They burned us to the ground. They raped our daughters and enslaved our sons. I don't know how I escaped. I didn't deserve to survive, but I did."

He paused again. Tenderly, he dabbed his wound. Brick busied himself spreading the bright orange paste across my scraped leg and then carefully wrapped it in strips of cloth.

"I remember standing in the smoldering remains of our community. I didn't know what to do or where to go. I was shell shocked."

"And then a man came. A fellow wanderer. A believer. He believed in things so fully and firmly—things that I had given up on and watched burn to nothing. He convinced me to join him and together we wandered. I probably would have curled up and died if he hadn't come along. That or—or take up a blade and seek vengeance, become a raider myself."

"The day he found me I stood and watched while he planted a few dozen rows of seed in the ashen remains of my former home. He didn't say anything. He didn't explain himself. He just did it. When he finished he pushed me along and left without looking back." Paul paused again. James handed Brick a damp cloth and he dabbed at the cut below my eye. I winced and bit my lip again.

"For a year I watched him plant seeds along roadbeds and next to creeks and in the most random of places. I never understood until we returned to my community. I didn't even realize we were there at first, but then the landscape suddenly became familiar and it all came rushing back to me."

"But there in the open space where we had played and danced and lived—the space where I had watched my loved ones die in agony—there grew plants. Rows of wheat, corn, rice and barley, scatterings of vegetables. A few apple saplings stood several feet high—years from producing any fruit, but they were a start. A vine covered in berries had climbed a stone wall."

"Some had clearly been harvested. The corn had been picked and shucked, apparently eaten on the spot. There were a few corn cobs here or there. Some of it had been animals, but clearly people stopped here and found an unexpected and undeserved bounty. They found sustenance and moved on. And that garden continued, turning wild without any gardener, but still producing food for the next hungry wanderer."

"My life changed that day." Paul finished and took a long drink of water from a bottle in his pack.

Brick and James pulled me to my feet and I gingerly stood, putting weight on my bruised and bloody leg. It stung, but it'd heal. Walking would be painful for a while, but I also needed to get moving or it'd just get worse. Paul stood up and held his rifle out to me.

"It might help to lean on this," he said, then reached down and took my pack. "I'll trade you for a while."

We started out again, heading east, each step sending pain shooting up my leg.

"So what's with the story time?" I asked, grimacing. It helped to focus on something else.

"I realized that you didn't know me from those men we encountered yesterday. If we're going to wander together, if I expect you to trust me when I trust men who turn out to be so untrustworthy, then you deserve to know who I am."

I paused for a moment and leaned on Paul's rifle.

"Is that who you are then?" I asked.

"It's a start."

We kept moving, Brick leading the way, then me limping along, then Paul and James last.

It had started as a sour day and it got worse from there, but our moods started to lift and the sun began to melt away the overcast gray. My cuts and scrapes and bruises hurt less with each step.

Then, we came over a hill and saw a fence cutting across the land below. Beyond that were buildings, huts, a dirt road. A settlement.

Chapter 8

"May I?" Paul asked, reaching for his rifle. I handed it to him and leaned on Brick's shoulder, trying not to put too much weight on my leg.

Paul put the rifle to his shoulder and looked through the scope at the settlement below.

"It's empty," he said, lowering the rifle. "Probably deserted, but not long." He handed the rifle to Brick and gestured for him to take a look, but Brick just handed the rifle back to me for my crutch.

"Should we split up?" James asked. Paul raised his eyebrows. "Sometimes in a situation like this we split up and one person watches from a distance. It keeps us safe." Paul nodded.

"No, let's just go in," I said. Brick nodded in agreement. James seemed genuinely surprised at our lack of caution, but he didn't say anything. We walked forward towards the quiet settlement.

I felt tired and defeated. I didn't have much patience to be cautious. A voice in my head kept telling me this was how troubles compounded. Carelessness breeds carelessness. But another part of me wanted to trust Paul.

As we came down the hill a path developed in the grass and then turned into a dirt road. The wooden fence crossed the road with a gate, but it had been left open and half the boards of the gate were gone. We entered the gate and kept moving. The main buildings seemed to be clumped a few hundred yards away.

The sun shone down directly on us from above when we stopped in the middle of the settlement. Leaning on the rifle I lowered myself and sat gingerly on a stone wall. I set the rifle down and we took in our surroundings.

There were four concrete buildings, surviving remnants from before The End. They looked battered and beaten, but they had been well cared for. They were clearly of solid construction and this community probably sprung up around them. There were at least a dozen newer buildings, huts and lean-tos.

The stone wall I sat on surrounded a pump and a pool of water. A tower had been build around the pump with a turbine at the top. They had used the wind to power their pump and draw water. Even in this calm breeze the turbine still spun and drew water.

But it was all empty. Empty and eerily quiet, like the deserted community where James and I found the fawn. People had clearly thrived here. Depending on the water supply there could have been 30 to 50 people here.

"Where did everybody go?" James asked. Nobody answered, but we all felt his unease.

Then, as if in answer to James' question, a horse stepped out from behind a building and strode forward. It came slowly at first, but then more confidently. The horse wore a saddle, but no reins or bit. Its flanks were a rich brown, its hair even darker brown. It came around to an opening in the stone wall and trotted inside, helping itself to a fresh drink of water.

"I'd say not everybody has left," Paul remarked, watching the horse with interest. The horse eyed Paul right back, but didn't seem to be bothered by him. The horse finished its drink, gave us one more look, and then went back the way it came.

Brick started moving to follow the horse without a word. James followed and Paul helped me to my feet and we came a few steps later.

The horse led us between two of the ancient concrete buildings, across a grassy field, and then through a smaller gate in the fence. There was no path to this gate and it seemed to be a back entrance of sorts. The gate had been left open and swung back and forth lazily in the breeze.

The horse kept walking along at a pace slow enough for us to keep up, as if it knew we were following, but it never once looked back. The horse entered a pine forest and after a few paces we knew what happened to the settlement.

Bodies were strewn everywhere. Some riddled with arrows, others mercilessly hacked, others bludgeoned to death. Dried blood stained the ground. Gruesome didn't begin to describe the

scene. They were mostly men, but a few women, too. A few children as young as 10 or 12 we among the bodies as well.

"Raiders?" James asked, holding a bandana to his face.

"Or slavers, who knows?" Paul said, kicking a body over with his foot. There were a few aggressors among the dead as well, whether they had been raiders or slavers. Not nearly as many, but the community had clearly put up a fight and taken at least a dozen down with them. But that was the problem, they'd lost everything. The empty settlement a field away was a quiet testimony to their lost cause.

The people of the settlement were plainly dressed in practical peasant clothing. Simple pants and shirts of brown, white, tan. I stepped over a man clutching a garden hoe, its blade dark with dried blood. He had at least managed to inflict some kind of damage before he went down.

"This way," Brick said, motioning us forward. We had slowed significantly as we took in the scene of the battle, but the horse that had led us this way kept going. The flat forest of pines with its carpet of orange pine needles started to go downhill, then transitioned to brambles and thickets as it plunged sharply downhill.

The pain seared in my leg as I tried to keep my footing. Paul turned back and offered his hand. I took it and together we eased down the hill. At the bottom the tangle of brush suddenly opened into a secluded gully, branches hanging over head and a trickle of a stream flowing at the very bottom. On the other side of the stream the terrain was rockier, with a cliff of bare rock that went up 30 or 40 feet.

Brick and James were a few minutes ahead of us and they stopped at the stream, looking across at the rocks on the other side. The horse had continued across the stream and stood standing next to a boulder that stood nearly as tall as the horse.

It gave a soft whinny and there leaning against the rock was a bloody mess of a man. He opened his eyes—well, one eye, the other was swollen shut—at the noise of the horse and slowly turned his head to look at us.

His face didn't register any emotion, but with great effort he moved his arm and swung a gun in our direction. You could hardly call it aiming as his mangled arm could barely hold up the firearm.

Brick and James dove to the ground trying to find cover. I fell backwards, catching myself on a tree branch. But Paul held up his hands and stepped forward.

"We're here to help. Put the gun down." The man's arm wavered and the gun shifted from covering us to the trees above to the horse to us again. He seemed to be fighting to keep it trained on us, but didn't have any intention of putting it down.

Paul kept moving forward, slowly and steadily. The horse eyed us with little interest.

"We're here to help you. We saw what happened to your community, to your friends." Paul kept talking as he moved forward, stepping right into the stream and on to the other side. Then in a few short steps he was kneeling in front of the old man, his gun aimed squarely at Paul's chest.

"You can shoot me if you like, but I don't imagine it will help you much."

The man eyed Paul for a moment, then let his arm fall to the ground, the gun slipping out of his grasp and clanging on a rock. He seemed to be relieved of the effort. Paul didn't touch the gun, in fact he completely ignored it. He looked over the man's wounds and then offered him a drink of water. The man gladly took it, drinking greedily from Paul's water bottle. Liquid dribbled down his chin, creating a path of clean skin where there had been dirt and grime and blood. He coughed and Paul took the water back.

The man must have been in awful shape. Sitting here next to a stream it seemed like he hadn't had a drink in days. He may not have been able to move, though it must have taken him some effort to escape the battle and climb down that descent.

Brick crossed the stream and joined Paul, pausing to pat the horse on the neck and scratch behind his ears. The horse flicked his tail and seemed pleased with himself. James helped me down to the stream and we sat on rocks across from the wounded man and Brick and Paul, not wanting to crowd the man too much.

After the man had another drink, Paul offered him a piece of bread, which the man quickly ate and then closed his eye and leaned back against the rock. For a moment I thought he had died, but then he opened his eye again and looked up at the four of us.

"Forgive me," he started in a gravely and hollow voice. "I thought you were them, come back to finish the job." He paused at the effort and Paul offered him another drink. He sipped the water and then continued.

"I've been here for two days and I'm starting to see things," he chuckled and then coughed a deep, painful cough.

"What happened here?" Paul asked.

"A gang of ruthless swine," the man said, turning away to spit. "They showed up at our gate and made threats, demanded payment. But there numbers were too few and we turned them away. When they came back with greater numbers we retreated to the pine forest up there, knowing we couldn't defeat them in the open. We hoped they'd plunder our community and leave, and we could at least rebuild in peace without burying our dead. But they discovered us and charged the forest, killing or kidnapping every last one. They left me for dead and went back to take what they could from the village. With Charlie's help—" he motioned to the horse, "—I managed to crawl away before they came back to search the dead." The man grew silent and took another drink. I hated to imagine what he left out, what he could hear sitting down here while the gang searched the bodies.

Paul didn't speak, but reached out and put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"My daughter." He spoke suddenly, a new urgency in his voice. "They took her." His eye was wild, darting back and forth to each one of us.

"What's her name?" Brick asked. The man's eye locked on Brick. He gazed at Brick for a moment with a fiery intensity, but then dropped his gaze and whispered in that hollow, pained voice, "Miriam."

Chapter 9

We spent the night in the empty community. It seemed dangerous—we always tried to minimize our time in these kind of settlements. They tended to attract scavengers. But Paul pointed out that with the raiders' recent attack it was likely to be safe enough. Besides, the sun was setting by the time we climbed out of the ravine and we didn't have many options. Camping with the slaughtered or the dead man in the bottom of the ravine didn't seem appealing.

We stayed with the man most of the afternoon as he told us his story, but there was nothing we could do for him. He died while telling us about Miriam, describing her golden hair and sweet laughter. His head fell back and his eye rolled upward in mid sentence. And he was gone. After a moment Paul reached forward and closed his eye.

He told us his name was Graham. We sat in the bottom of the ravine for a while in silence, and then we stood up make the ascent.

Charlie, the horse that had led us to Graham, led the way up the ravine through the thickets and back to the community. The horse had a certain personality. Either that or the animal had been so accustomed to people it now found itself lonely. In many ways it seemed like a good host, leading us back to the little village. It went straight to a thatched-hut building that must have been the stable. Brick unlatched the door and let the horse in. Charlie went straight for the trough of hay and eagerly munched on supper.

We set up camp next to the stone wall surrounding the water pump. Even with all the empty buildings, we felt safer outside. It also seemed somehow more respectful of the dead.

That night we sat around a small campfire, chewing on venison. We were quiet, like the night before, but this time it was a different kind of quiet.

"We need to save her," James said, his voice quiet but sure.

"Miriam?" Paul asked. James nodded. No one said anything for a moment.

"What man, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, will not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one which is lost?"

I frowned and then grudgingly spoke, "But James... we don't even have the 99."

"That makes the one all the more valuable, doesn't it?" Paul said it, but I saw both James and Brick nod in agreement.

"OK," I conceded, "But how are we going to do that? We're not exactly the cavalry?" Again nobody spoke. I watched the flames flicker and light up their faces, each of them lost in the dancing fire. They were somber and serious. Very serious.

"I'll go." It was Brick. He spoke without looking at any of us, his eyes still locked on the fire. "At first light I'll take Charlie and find their trail. I'll scout out where they are and come back for you."

"Brick, no..." I started, but he turned and gave me a look that meant there was no convincing him otherwise.

"This is good," Paul said. "We'll take it one step at a time and see what we can do. It's probable that we'll be no match for them and have little chance of rescuing Miriam. But we'll do what we can." He didn't look at anyone in particular, but I knew his words were meant for me.

And so Brick set off in the morning. Before he left he paused and knelt next to me. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I opened my eyes. He smiled at me and nodded. Then without a word he left.

Our task for the day was to bury the dead. It hardly seemed worth it, but none of us in good conscience could leave them. I couldn't imagine rescuing the girl and telling her we left her father dead in a ravine for the animals to pick apart. He'd already been butchered. No need to make it worse.

James and I started digging a mass grave in the forest and Paul climbed down the ravine to dig a solitary grave for Graham. James had found a shovel in the stable and I used Paul's rifle. It seemed ironic that this former weapon served so many purposes now: a shovel, a plow, a crutch—none of which offered death.

"He'll be OK," James said, pausing after tossing aside a shovel-full of dirt.

"I know." In the past year we had rarely separated. There were hunting trips, the occasional encounter with people or settlements when we split up. There was a time when we came upon a small, secluded lake. We couldn't resist the chance to take a bath and wipe the grime from our tired bodies. Even though we had slept next to one other, dressed and undressed next to one another for months and months, James and Brick insisted on giving me my privacy while I bathed.

I don't know where they went, but they disappeared for several hours while I stripped and swam naked in the cool, refreshing water. I bathed with a stick of soap we'd made from ash and washed my hair.

I remember how good it felt to be clean, but after a while the silence seemed deafening and I began to wish Brick and James would come back.

I didn't like to be alone. And I didn't like knowing that Brick was out there alone.

By late morning Paul returned from the ravine, sweaty and tired just like us, and we took a break. He handed me the gun Graham had wearily waved at us before deciding we weren't the enemy, along with a small leather pouch of ammo.

"This was all he had," Paul said. "I think you should have it."
"Me?"

"It would be useless to me, and I assume James doesn't want it either." James shook his head.

I turned the pistol over in my hand, studying it. A cartridge in the handle held a dozen shots, but there were only three left. I wondered what had happened when the gang attacked that his three shots went unused.

I opened the leather pouch and seven more bullets spilled into my hand. Ten shots total, no guaranteeing any of them worked. And I'd never fired a gun before. It seemed foolish to waste any of the ammo on target practice. But it also seemed foolish to go into a fight with a weapon I'd never used.

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know," Paul said with a sigh. "You could leave it behind if you like. That was my initial inclination. But if we're going to rescue this girl it might come in handy."

"I'm not sure how," James said. "It didn't do Graham any good."

"No, maybe not," Paul answered. "Though I imagine if he used every one of those shots they wouldn't have left him half dead and enabled him to crawl away and survive to tell us the story. Maybe it's nothing, but maybe it has a part to play still."

"And you want me to decide when to use it?" I asked. All I could think of was the other day when I flung a knife into a man's throat.

"I'm trusting you to keep it safe, and if a time comes to use it, yes, I'm trusting you to make that call."

I stared back at Paul who met my gaze, but then dropped his eyes and sighed again.

"You think I'm some brave pacifist, don't you? That the reason I don't carry a weapon is because I don't believe in them or some self-sacrificial, self-righteous trip?"

He paused while James and I exchanged glances. That had been precisely what I thought, and I expected it to get him killed.

"I don't carry a weapon because I don't trust myself." His words hung in the still air. "It's too easy to kill a man just because you can out here. I've seen terrible things. Things that make me want to lash out and take vengeance."

"But that's not the way: an eye for an eye. It leaves everyone blind," Paul stood up at this point and started to dig again. "While I believe that with all my heart, I am weak. The only way I found I could live out that belief was by not carrying a weapon. If I had no weapon to fall back on, then I was forced to find another solution, whether avoiding danger or confronting it. I've taken my chances—you've seen that. It doesn't always work out. But in the end I do know that I have overcome that need for retribution, or at least stifled it. That victory means a lot to me."

He didn't say any more, but kept digging. James and I joined him and we dug a wide, shallow pit and buried 22 bodies. Before we left Paul took his rifle back, dug a stretch of earth and planted more seeds.

It wasn't a good grave and they deserved better, but we didn't have time to spare. We didn't know when Brick would return and we had to be ready to go. The gang of raiders that sacked this town had a two-day head start on Brick. By the time he came back for us that lead could be four or five days. When I stopped to think about it, the whole thing seemed insane.

"What else can we do?" James asked as we wandered from building to building in the deserted community, looking for anything we could salvage.

"I don't know. But why us? Why now? Why this kid?"

"Why not?" James sat down in a chair in what could have been a kitchen. I rummaged through drawers and cupboards, not eager to sit across from James and argue this out. "I mean, what are we doing out here?"

"We're trying not to get killed," I said, slamming a drawer shut.

"To what end?" he asked quietly. I turned and looked him in the eye. He held his beads in his hand again, fingering each tiny one and then moving on to the next one. "I mean, I think Paul might be right. What if there is no actual promised land that we're going to stumble across one day as we come over a rise?"

"You really want me to answer that?"

"I'm just saying that maybe instead of all this searching for the promised land, maybe we should be working to bring it into existence. Maybe we should be planting food and leaving it for others, welcoming strangers with warm hands instead of pointed weapons—maybe we should go rescue this lost sheep."

I gave up and sat down in the chair across from James. If anyone was the brave pacifist, it was James. Perhaps not so brave, but definitely eager to avoid a fight. I always chalked it up to his skinny frame and runty size. But this idea, this rescue plan, this took some fortitude. He'd come along way from that day when he fell on his ass to avoid a menacing fawn.

"If you have two coats, share with him who has none," James quoted, his eyes locked on his beads. "If you have food, do likewise."

"And what about old dying men who ask you to rescue their kidnapped daughter? What's it say about that?"

"Well, there is the story of a man beaten, robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. People pass him by and leave him for dead until a slaver comes by and binds his wounds, gives him food and takes care of him."

"But nothing about a trio of wanderers rescuing a kidnapped child?"

"No, nothing quite like that."

I sighed and scratched at my bandaged leg.

"Dom always did tell us we need to take care of the daughters," I said. James smiled at me and nodded. I still wasn't entirely convinced. I'd be a reluctant rescuer. It just seemed reckless to take off across the wild chasing bandits we'd never seen to save a child we'd never met. But I could also appreciate the idealistic rationale of both James and Paul. In light of their arguments it seemed risky to just keep on doing what we were doing and look out only for ourselves. There had to be more than that.

Later that night we heard rapid hoof beats coming from the east. James and Paul stood to watch as Charlie rode into the light of the campfire with Brick atop the saddle looking winded. He hopped down before Charlie stopped.

"A dozen men, walking, about 30 miles to the east."

"Let's go," James said. We started immediately. Paul and James took off at once. Brick and I waited for Charlie to get a long drink and munch some hay before we followed, catching up to them as we went through the gate and left the settlement behind. My leg had healed nicely from the fall the day before, but I could still feel the soreness. We loaded Charlie up with our packs so we could move lighter and faster. After trotting with Brick all day, the slow pace and lighter load must have been a vast improvement.

Before we caught up to Paul and James I asked Brick a question: "Do you think we should do this?"

He nodded.

"Do you think we can do this?"

He shrugged.

Chapter 10

Three long days later we came across our first sign that we were on the right trail. We'd been walking all day and most of the night, pausing only a few hours to sleep. We'd trade off riding Charlie throughout the day, giving each of us a moment's rest, but it really only offered a different kind of soreness.

After two days we came to where Brick had caught up with the raiders and spied on them long enough to count them and be sure of where they were going before he raced back to us. But as they kept moving we'd have to catch up.

On the third day we came across two bodies. They'd been viciously hacked down and left to rot. Belongings were strewn about in the grass: spare clothes, bits of cloth, a small pocketknife.

"What do you think happened?" James asked.

"Who knows," Paul said, "But we need to keep moving. Why don't you three keep going and I'll stay back with Charlie and bury these two. Charlie and I will catch up in a few hours."

Brick nodded and started forward, but I stalled for a moment.

"Are you going to ask me if we should bury every dead soul we come across?" Paul said, with a little of that anger that so rarely crept into his voice. "Because I think you'll know my answer."

I shook my head.

"I was going to ask if I could do it."

Paul stopped, his face softening. He nodded and handed me his rifle without a word. James gave a small wave and followed Brick and Paul forward.

I watched them go and gave Charlie a pat on the neck. He flicked his tail and blinked at me. Then I started digging.

I remembered a time long ago at Wendell Community when I overheard Dom talking to another one of the older adults.

"That Brick sure is a big boy, isn't he?"

"Yeah, quiet though," Dom remarked.

"It's too bad about his mother. I'm worried he's not going to take that well."

"He'll do all right," Dom said. "He's strong. I'm worried about all of these kids. Who's going to protect them?"

Their frankness surprised me at the time, but as I grew older I realized they were right to worry. They couldn't protect any of us. We had to take care of ourselves, and that's what we had done. But as I dug that hole for two men who hadn't been able to take care of themselves, I wondered if it was enough—taking care of yourself.

Paul and James and Brick didn't seem to think it was. I had my doubts still, but I feared they may be right. How long can we wander? How long can we be lost?

I finished the shallow grave and paused to take a drink and wipe the sweat from my forehead. It was noon and warm. I dragged the two bodies into the hole. Looking down at them, I realized this was the moment when James would say a few words. I didn't know what to say.

Instead I stood there silently for a minute. Then I bent down, scooped up a handful of dirt, and slowly sprinkled it over the two bodies. I stood silently for another minute, then started shoveling dirt back into the hole.

When I finished I climbed up on Charlie and we set off after the others. They were a couple hours ahead, and I figured we could catch them in an hour if Charlie could keep up a brisk pace. And assuming we could follow their trail easily enough.

But it didn't go that easily.

As we galloped along I let Charlie lead the way. He seemed to have an intuitive sense of where to go. But Brick had also tied tiny bits of cloth to tree branches and bushes along the way, so I knew we were on the right track.

We'd been going for an hour and I was sure we'd be running up on the others any moment.

And then it happened. A flash of movement ahead in the distance. Something flying towards me—searing pain in my left arm. I cried out and clutched my arm, practically falling off Charlie. He instinctively veered and kept me balanced. I looked to the right and caught a glimpse of Brick. He had just fired an arrow. His large, muscular body was framed in the branches and I could barely see his face, but he held his bow out in one hand and had clearly just fired.

Brick shot me with an arrow.

Charlie kept moving. I managed a glimpse at my wounded left arm without falling off. A scrape. Deep and painful, but he'd nicked me. Six inches to the right and I'd be dead.

Brick intentionally missed.

Nothing else made sense. If Brick wanted to kill me, which in itself didn't make any sense, he could have done it right then and there. Brick wouldn't have missed, unless it was purposeful.

Which meant something had gone wrong. Maybe he didn't want me to follow anymore. But then he could have just told me. Or left a handy stop sign in the forest—instead of a flying arrow and a gash in my arm. No, someone had forced him to kill me. Well, to try to kill me.

Charlie had slowed, but my mind kept racing. It seemed likely that the others had caught up to this gang of raiders and somehow been captured. They also seemed to know I was coming—or maybe heard me; a trotting horse isn't silent.

I took the reins and steered Charlie back to the right. All I could think of was to circle around behind them. They'd probably expect me to turn around completely and go back the way I had come.

Charlie walked through the forest as if he knew the danger of the moment, treading lightly and making as little noise as possible. We walked around as far as I dared and then closed in as much as seemed sane. With some thickets and low hanging branches for cover we stopped so I could dress my wound. I tore a strip of cloth from my shirt and wrapped it around my arm, tying it as tightly as I could with my teeth. The bleeding had mostly stopped and it'd need more attention, but that was enough for now.

I took a quick look around. Mid-afternoon. Warm. Still. The forest had that eerie silence that doesn't bode well. I couldn't even hear birds. Despite my fear, I noticed that it smelled fresh and damp, like rain. I like the rain.

I slid my pack off my shoulder and undid the clasp. Inside I pulled out a cloth wrapped package. It was Graham's gun and the leather pouch of ammo that Paul had entrusted to me. I loaded the gun—all ten bullets—and tucked the gun into my belt.

I didn't have a plan. It hardly seemed wise to ride into their camp firing my gun and expect to get anyone out alive. But it also seemed foolish not to use the gun. Or at least not have it ready to use.

I shoved the pouch and the cloth back into my pack and readjusted the pack and Paul's gun on my back.

And then I remembered Paul's gun. I swung it off my back and raised it to my shoulder, looking down the site. This would be helpful.

I swung down from Charlie. I took my pack off and tied it down on the saddle.

"I'll be back, Charlie. You stay here."

He blinked at me, but stood still.

I leaned against a nearby tree and took a deep breath. I glanced down at myself. My brown jacket would be decent enough camouflage. My patchwork pants weren't much help, but I hoped they'd be low enough not to matter. My face was another story. My tan skin wouldn't stand out nearly as much as Brick's pale white face, but it could be enough.

Kicking at some leaves I knelt down and spit in the soil. I mixed some mud with my finger and spread it across my face. Not solid, but wide stripes here and there so if anyone caught a glimpse I wouldn't be immediately recognizable. I felt stupid. This kind of thing was Brick's domain. He'd know exactly what to do.

Then I set out into the forest, keeping low and heading back in the direction where Brick had shot the arrow at me. I guessed the rest of them were somewhere in that vicinity, and if I'd planned it right I'd come up right behind them.

Brick had said there were a dozen men. I had ten bullets and a knife.

After 15 minutes of walking I'd gone as far forward as I dared. I turned to the left and started a zigzagging path, hoping to cover ground but not miss a small group clustered together. I kept trying to map the forest in my head and not lose my bearings when I heard voices.

I ducked to the ground and crept forward to a tree. Raising the rifle, I looked down the scope. Two men. Shabby clothes. Blood stained. One had a bow in his hand, but he held it loosely, not at the ready. The men spoke briefly and then the man with the bow stayed where he was and the other walked away. A guard.

I watched the guard for a moment and then snuck around to follow the messenger. I kept my distance, wary of walking into another guard or stepping on a stick and announcing my presence. But the man walked noisily and didn't seem to give any thought to stealth. These men must not have ever needed it. It didn't take long and he'd returned to the others.

They were camped out in a clearing. A group of three or four people were huddled in the middle, gagged and bound. I could see Brick, his face bruised and bloodied. James was another. I didn't recognize the other two. I scanned the area through the scope on Paul's rifle. There were seven men in the clearing, plus the messenger who had just returned. That made eight, nine including the guard. And it seemed likely they had at least one more guard. That'd be ten. There could still be two more, if Brick was right about seeing a dozen of them.

I didn't see Paul.

I watched for ten minutes, as long as I dared, and then slung the rifle over my shoulder and carefully made my way back to Charlie. He'd been waiting quietly, pawing at the ground and chewing on bushes.

I had a plan. It didn't seem like a great plan, but it was the only plan and the longer I thought about it the more likely I'd chicken out. I needed to act.

I considered tailing the gang and waiting for a better opportunity, but I didn't know if one would ever come. I kept remembering the men I'd buried that morning and Graham's village, and I knew I didn't have time to spare.

I took Charlie's reins and started leading him forward. And that seemed like the worst flaw in my plan. I couldn't imagine getting very close to the raiders with Charlie.

And then it started to rain.

Chapter 11

They were big, soaking drops. First a few, then a downpour. This was what I needed. Charlie and I surged forward in the rain. We crept up as close as I dared to the camp. I swung the rifle from my back and checked once more. There were eight raiders in the clearing still. And then the plan went into motion.

Charlie crashed through the bushes and erupted into the clearing. He reared up on his hind legs, kicking his front and giving a ferocious whinny that could be heard over the pounding rain. Then he took off straight for a clump of three raiders, sending them diving for the ground. Charlie kept running back into the forest and the muddied raiders sprung up and went after him.

I watched from the edge of the clearing as the three raiders hurried after Charlie and one more joined them. Four down, four to go. The prisoners were huddled to my left and three of the raiders were clustered to my right. A fourth raider was beyond the prisoners, his back to me.

With the rifle in my left hand and the pistol in my right I stood up and strode into the clearing. I fired three quick shots to my right.

Turning to my left I saw the raider turn around and raise his blade in the rain. I held up my rifle and he hesitated.

I looked back to the right where I still had the pistol trained. Two of the raiders were on the ground but a third was coming toward me raising a bow. I motioned with the pistol and he stopped.

Back to the left. The raider let out a scream and started running forward. The prisoners were between us. He raised the blade like a scythe.

What to do? The rain streamed down my face as I stood there in the clearing; my wounded left arm straining to hold an empty rifle trained on a psycho about to butcher a group of bound prisoners; my right arm aiming a pistol with seven shots left at another raider, momentarily held off, but the screaming charge of his companion emboldening him.

I dropped to the ground. An arrow sailed over my head. I turned the pistol towards the prisoners and the raider with the blade, ready to fire. But the arrow sunk into the raider and he fell backward.

I turned back to my right and the raider with the bow. But he'd already charged and was nearly on top of me with a snarling growl. I dropped the pistol and drew the knife on my wrist, plunging it forward as the raider tackled me. We both fell to the mud, his tremendous weight knocking the wind out of me. I gasped and rolled and thrust my knife again. The raider tumbled off of me like rag doll and I realized my knife had done its work.

Four raiders were down, but the four who had gone after Charlie would surely turn around when they heard the gunshots. The tremendous pounding of the rain could hardly mute those piercing shots.

I fumbled to my feet, turned back for the pistol, then leaped over the body of the dead raider and ran toward the prisoners.

Wide eyed, James held out his hands to be cut free, but I went for Brick first. Mistake. I sliced the ropes from his wrists and legs, but he just tumbled to the ground. He hadn't even looked at me as I freed him and I realized too late that he wasn't in any condition to help.

And then the sudden and dull thud of an arrow.

One of the other prisoners convulsed and let out a low whimper. An arrow stuck out of their chest. I pushed James and the last prisoner to the ground and aimed the pistol in the direction the arrow had come from.

Two raiders stood on the opposite side of the clearing in the open. One had a bow and was aiming to shoot again.

I raised the pistol and fired. Once. Twice. Three times.

Then two more raiders sprung from the forest behind us, blades swinging in the air. I turned and shot one, but the other was on top of James before I could do anything.

But James had my knife. He must have cut himself free when I wasn't looking. As the raider dove for James he managed to grab the raider's wrist and the raider grabbed his wrist. They were locked in a wrestling match in the mud, just managing to keep the others' blades from gutting him. James wouldn't win this battle.

I picked up Paul's rifle and swung it like a baseball bat. The raider crumpled and James pushed him off. Eight men down. The guard remained. And maybe three more out there somewhere. Three bullets left.

I looked up just in time to push James back to the ground. An arrow sailed over my head through the rain. The guard had returned. I dropped Paul's rifle, snatched my knife from James and ran for the guard. I leapt over Brick's swollen body and charged, brandishing the pistol in one hand and the knife in the other. The guard struggled with a second arrow, but he panicked. He kept looking up at me to see how much closer I was instead of just fitting the arrow and finishing me. Then the arrow slipped again, fell to the ground and he gave up, turning and sprinting into the trees.

I followed him, pumping my arms and breathing hard. The rain kept coming, but I hardly noticed. The guard had a 20-foot advantage and could probably out run me.

But then Charlie reared up out of nowhere, blocking the man's path and pushing him back. He turned to run left but slipped on a wet log and slammed to the ground. I was on top of him, pistol aimed and knife raised. Charlie stepped up behind me, pawing at the ground.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head and lunging for my knife. I pulled the knife back and swung with the pistol, clocking him awkwardly on the side of the head. He let out a howl and rolled over. I stepped on his back and brought my blade to his neck.

"Mercy?" I asked.

He didn't answer but struggled under my foot. I pushed the blade into his neck and he stopped.

"Mercy," I said. "Now get up, back with the others." I stepped off him and let him stand, keeping the gun trained on him and the knife raised.

"Why don't you just shoot me?" he growled.

"Keep it up and I will." He turned and trudged back to the clearing, my gun aimed at his back, and Charlie coming up behind me.

James had freed the fourth prisoner, sat Brick back up, and was gathering the wounded raiders. Four were still alive, including my captive the guard. The one who fought with James and took the butt of Paul's rifle to his face was still out cold. Two others had been shot and probably wouldn't make it. I bound the guard and pushed him down with the others and stepped back to survey the carnage I'd wrought.

Of nine vicious raiders, five were dead. I had killed four, three with the pistol and one with my knife. The fifth had been killed by the arrow fired from one of his own. Three more were wounded and the last was held captive.

Of the four prisoners, only one had died. Though James was nearly gutted and Brick still seemed barely with us. The third prisoner was still bound and looked to be knocked out.

"Are there any more?" I asked James. He shook his head and we both stepped into each other's embrace. We held each other for a long minute as the rain still came down and then stepped back. I turned to Brick and dropped to my knees next to him.

"What happened?" I asked, gingerly touching his swollen face. His eyes were reduced to slits and his face was raw and puffy. Someone had beaten him savagely just before I arrived.

"I'm sorry I shot you," he whispered, his voice distant and weak.

"You missed." I dabbed at his face with my sleeve.

"I know." I wrapped my arms around him and he groaned, but feebly pat my arm in return.

I stepped back and turned to James: "Where's Paul?" James' head dropped. "He's dead."

"What?" I could hardly hear James in the deafening rain.

"He's dead." He motioned to the far side of the clearing. On the ground, next to a pile of backpacks and supplies was a body. I ran across the clearing and stopped. It was Paul. Cold and lifeless, a gaping and messy wound in his chest, awash in blood and rainwater. He looked calm and peaceful, letting the rain splash on his face. It looked like he'd been dead for a while. Whatever happened, it happened before I charged out of the forest. No wonder I hadn't seen him with the others.

Then a scream echoed across the forest. I turned in shock, drawing the gun again. The third prisoner had come to, cut himself loose and was swinging a blade wildly at the remaining raiders. He chopped and hacked like he was carving a path through a jungle.

"No!" I cried, leaving Paul and rushing across the clearing. "Stop!"

The man I'd knocked unconscious with Paul's rifle had been hit first, unable to protect himself. Another of the wounded guards took one blow, then another, unable to roll out of the way. The guard I'd taken prisoner had thrown himself to the ground, narrowly avoiding the next swipe.

"Stop!" I screamed, holding the gun high in the air and firing.

The shot echoed despite the rain and the prisoner turned to sneer at me, blood and rain dripping from his blade. I aimed the gun and yelled for him to stop once more, but instead he turned and charged the guard lying on the ground.

I fired again. The bullet struck the prisoner in the back and he threw his arms in the air and collapsed forward. When he fell I could see the guard behind him, lying in the mud, his eyes wide, his bound hands held out in front of him. His head dropped back in the mud, his body heaving a sigh of relief.

I swore as loud as I could manage and dropped to my knees. Tears came to my eyes and mixed with the rain and the blood and it all washed over me.

Chapter 12

The rain finally stopped before nightfall. We build a roaring fire in the middle of the clearing, desperate to dry out, get warm, and figure out what had just happened to us.

There were now seven dead raiders in the clearing. I had shot the eighth raider and he likely wouldn't make it through the night. The ninth raider was the guard I'd taken prisoner, the only one unharmed. The two prisoners held with Brick and James were dead, one shot with an arrow, one shot by me when he went on a wild rampage, extracting vengeance from the wounded raiders.

And Paul.

Ten dead bodies in the clearing. Four alive. And Charlie. I was still amazed at the way he'd come through. I was never sure if he'd smash into the clearing like I'd hoped and cause enough ruckus for me to get in. But he did just that, managed not to get killed or injured himself, and stopped the escaping guard for me.

And that proved to be crucial.

"My name's Drisco," he said. Since I'd shot the prisoner and saved his life he'd become much quieter and less combative. But we still tied him to a tree, far enough from the fire that he wasn't comfortable, but close enough that we could keep an eye on him.

"Do you want something to eat?"

He nodded. I put a chunk of bread in his hand and he managed to lower his head enough to eat while still bound to the tree.

Back at the fire it was me, James and Brick. The three of us, alone again.

Brick's face still looked awful. I smeared as much orange goo on him as I could manage and wrapped what we could. He'd heal eventually, but he'd be pretty sore and ugly for a few days.

"I leave you guys alone for a few hours and all hell breaks loose."

Brick smiled, then winced. James fingered his beads.

"What happened today?"

James breathed a long sigh and started from the beginning.

"We caught up to the raiders all right. There were a dozen of them, like Brick had said. They had the two prisoners," James motioned with his head towards the bodies of the dead prisoners, "and Miriam."

The girl's name sounded strange and distant, as it should. I'd never met the girl in my life or even knew what she looked like. But I'd just killed a mess of men, risked my own life and the lives of my friends on her account.

"But they'd seen us coming. They had us surrounded. They brought us back here and tied us up with the others. But we must have spooked them or something. They decided to send three on ahead with the girl."

"On ahead? To where?"

"We don't know. But it sounded like this group was just a raiding party and they were meeting up with the rest of their gang somewhere nearby. They must have thought it awfully strange that we tracked them down and it freaked them out enough that they opted to get the girl back to their camp."

"Why? What's so special about this girl?"

"We don't know," James shrugged. "She's a girl." That could have been reason enough. There was a reason that trader got touchy with me so many days ago. There was a reason I lashed a knife to my wrist.

"Well, them freaking out is a good thing."

"How so?"

"They didn't see me coming. How do you think I was able to get in here without getting slaughtered? James, I've never fired a gun in my life."

"You're a quick learn," Brick interjected. I gave him a wry smile.

"Lucky. With the rain and with Charlie I was able to catch them by surprise and they must not have expected some girl flying out of the woods to be a threat. But hitting as many of them as I did with so few shots—that's lucky."

James didn't answer. He looked down at his beads as he counted them off.

"It's damn near miraculous, James."

"I'll take it as a mercy and ask for forgiveness."

"Forgiveness?"

"Thou shall not kill—it's kind of basic."

"You telling me I shouldn't have done what I did?"

"No. I'm thankful. You did what you had to do. You saved our lives." He paused. "But that doesn't make it right."

"No, it doesn't." Death surrounded us. While I prickled at James' response, he was right. Exacting vengeance on these raiders wasn't the solution.

"So three of them were preparing to take off with Miriam," James continued. "That's when Paul stood up."

My heart caught in my throat. I knew this moment would be coming and I'd been waiting since first laying eyes on Paul's dead body for an explanation, but now I didn't want to hear it.

I watched a log give way in the fire and the burning wood settle, sending sparks into the night sky.

"We were all gagged and bound and one of the raiders came over when Paul stood up. But the raider laughed at Paul, mocked him, and kicked him in the knee. Paul struggled to his feet and this time another raider came over to see what the deal was."

"They removed the gag from his mouth and Paul spoke, asking to go with the girl. They laughed at him again, but seeing how serious Paul was, they asked him why. He said he wanted to keep her safe and her spirit strong. They laughed again. And then he quoted—"

And Brick spoke up again: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."

James paused and we both turned to Brick. But he'd gone silent again, his eyes lost in the flickering fire.

"Paul quoted from the book, and he added 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,' That really sent them over the edge. They mocked him, taunted him to 'fear this evil' and struck him. They were merciless."

"But then Miriam stood up. They had her on the opposite side of the clearing, bound like us, but not gagged. And they seemed to give her free reign. She's young. Maybe six? I'd never seen such a downcast child before, though she clearly had reason to be."

"She stepped forward, intently watching Paul. And then he said it again, louder: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

The words echoed in my head. Paul's final mantra.

"I think he must have said those words for her benefit. And it seemed to work—her face lifted. I saw the hint of a smile that I hadn't yet seen in that little girl."

James paused again, I thought I knew why. The end was coming.

"That pushed them over the edge. They spit in his face and punched him. But he didn't recant or step down. He just stood there and took it. And then one of them pushed the others aside, drew his blade and taunted Paul: 'Welcome to the shadow of death.' And before he plunged the blade into Paul's chest I heard Paul say, 'I forgive you.' It was quiet, but I heard it, and the raider with the blade heard. He hesitated for a second, and then struck with a renewed vigor."

"That's how Paul died," James finished. I tried to hold back the tears, but it wasn't any use. I'd hardly known the man for a few days, but he was the kind of man worth shedding tears over. We sat there in silence, listening to the crackle of the fire. After what seemed like an eternity I broke the quiet.

"And the girl?"

"Three of them took her right after that. They left heading east. I don't know how anything Paul said could have overshadowed what they did to him, but she did seem to be holding her head a little higher as she left. But maybe that's just wishful thinking on my part."

"And what happened to you, Brick? Did you stand up and quote ancient words too?" Brick smiled but let James tell the story.

"They heard Charlie coming and realized we'd left you behind to catch up. So they forced Brick to shoot you. He not only didn't kill you, but he managed to warn you."

"Yeah, thanks for the warning, Brick." He smiled sheepishly again, but didn't speak. My left arm was still sore, bandaged and packed with what little of the orange goo we had left after attending to Brick's face. I'd practically forgotten about it after the battle with the raiders and James had to point it out to me.

"Well, they weren't too pleased with Brick. I imagine if he'd completely missed they would have killed him on the spot. Instead they pummeled him without end. But they clearly didn't expect you to come back. They joked that you'd ride until that horse gave out. I'm glad you didn't."

I smiled and cast a glance at Charlie who stood half asleep on the other side of the fire.

"That says something, doesn't it?" I asked.

"What's that?"

"They don't expect people to fight back. As vicious and as nasty as they are, they don't expect anyone to stand up to them. So that's what we'll have to do."

"Miriam?" Brick asked.

"We'll get her back. But we have some things to do first."

"What about him?" James asked, gesturing to Drisco, still tied to the tree and drifting off to a fitful sleep.

"He can help us dig graves tomorrow," I said, "And then we let him go."

"Let him go?"

"Yeah. I don't know what else to do with him." We considered this in silence for a minute.

"I suppose he would be a liability," James said.

"He could be an asset, too. He could lead us to Miriam and the rest of his gang. But I don't suspect he'd do it willingly. And I don't think we want to persuade him." James nodded solemnly.

"Well," I added, "I might want to persuade him, but I don't think that's a good idea."

Chapter 13

The next morning I woke with a start. It was early. Mist on the grass. Death in the air.

Drisco?

Gone.

Damnit.

I sat up and crouched on my feet. He wasn't tied to the tree where we left him last night. Brick and James were both still out, sleeping right next to me. I knew we should have had a watch last night. What happened? We must have just drifted off to sleep as we talked and caught up. Like old folks reuniting after ages apart.

Where was Drisco?

I scanned the clearing. Charlie stood a few dozen feet away. He seemed content, not stamping or snorting. Paul's body. The dead raiders. There!

I drew my knife and the pistol and slowly stood, approaching Drisco from behind. He was on his knees perhaps 40 feet away. I closed the gap carefully and quietly. I couldn't see if he had any weapons and the pistol only had one shot left. He knelt next to the last raider left alive, one of the ones I'd shot and wounded.

"He's dead." Drisco spoke when I was maybe ten feet away. Neither of us moved.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I moved to Drico's right, maintaining our distance and keeping the pistol trained on him.

"I'm unarmed," he said.

"I'll be the judge of that." I'd moved 90 degrees from Drisco and I could see he didn't have anything handy. But that didn't mean he wasn't armed. Or dangerous. "Why did you treat his wounds?" Drisco finally turned and looked at me, pointing at the orange goo and bandage around the dead man's stomach.

"The same reason I didn't slit your throat when I had the chance."

"And what reason is that?"

"Maybe I'm dumb. Why didn't you run?"

"You might be crazy, but you're not dumb." I shrugged. This was an odd conversation to be having.

"You can bind my hands again if you want, but it's not necessary."

"I'll decide that."

"You can put the gun down, too. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Yeah. OK. Have a sudden change of heart overnight?"

"Something like that." This time Drisco shrugged. "Look, I'm going to stand up and get some breakfast. Get the fire going again, warm up some food. Try not to shoot me, all right?"

He stood up and I kept the gun trained on him. He walked over towards the fire and knelt down on the side opposite where James and Brick were still sleeping. He started blowing on the coals and adding some sticks and twigs to get the fire going. I followed him but kept a good dozen paces between us.

"You seemed a lot more trusting last night," he said, looking up from his work.

"You were tied up."

"That didn't last, did it?"

I didn't say anything, but moved a few steps closer. Brick and James were starting to stir.

"What's going on?" James mumbled, then saw Drisco only a few feet away, stoking the fire. James sat bolt up right and scooted back a few feet.

"It's OK," I said. I stepped forward and sat down next to James. "Drisco wants to make us breakfast." Brick woke up next, his face swollen and blue, but not quite as bad as yesterday. He turned to see Drisco on the other side of the fire, then me with the pistol.

"Morning," he said.

In a few minutes Drisco had a small fire going. It was still gray and early, the sun hidden behind an overcast sky. The air was crisp, but not too cold. We didn't really need a fire, but we did still have work to do in that clearing. Might as well get a solid breakfast.

"I've got some meat in my pack over there. I'm going to go get it, if that's OK with you," Drisco said, rising to his feet.

I nodded and kept the gun trained on him. Brick, James and I all watched him walk across the clearing to the pile of packs and supplies from the raiders. He knelt down, pushed one pack aside and started rummaging through another.

"He could be finding a weapon," James whispered.

Brick shook his head.

"He could have killed us all in our sleep," I pointed out. "I don't think he's going to hurt us."

"But you've still got the gun aimed and the knife ready?"

"Call me cautious," I shrugged.

We watched as Drisco found the food he was searching for and came back to the fire. He placed a few packets among the coals and sat back on the ground opposite us.

"So what's your story?" James asked.

"Me? I'm not sure if I know anymore."

"What's the deal with your gang?" I asked.

"What do you think?" Drisco said with a curl of his lip, "Survival. Just like everybody else."

"Not everybody," Brick said quietly.

"Well, not your lot," Drisco admitted. "What's your story anyway?"

"Let's stick with you," I said.

"Fair enough."

"Where were you headed?" I asked.

"Before we play 20 questions, what do you plan on doing with me?"

I paused, turned to Brick and James, and then back to Drisco.

"We were going to ask your help in digging graves and then let you go."

"Ask my help?" Drisco let out a cruel laugh. "You don't take prisoners often, do you?"

"No," Brick answered. That silenced Drisco, and for a moment he looked sheepish. It was as if he thought he were joking with his old mates for a moment and then caught himself.

"Where were you headed?" I asked again.

"We were meeting up with the rest of our gang."

"For what?" James asked.

"It's what we do," Drisco said with a sigh, poking at the fire with a stick. "We roam the countryside finding resources and every so many weeks we meet up and pay tribute."

"You mean taking resources, don't you?" I asked. Drisco didn't answer. "What's this tribute?"

"The girl, she was our tribute."

"What does that mean?" James asked, looking aghast.

"We're a raiding party. We keeps most of what we find for ourselves, but every time we meet up we have to bring something back for the rest of the gang. This time it was her."

"What will happen to her?"

Drisco shrugged and didn't look up.

"What will happen to her?" I repeated.

"The boss decides, OK? He might keep her for himself or pass her off to one of the gang lords." He poked at the fire again. "It's not my problem."

"It is now," I said, the anger rising in my chest.

"What will this boss or these gang lords do to her?" James asked, fumbling with his beads.

"Look, I don't know," He paused, braved a quick glance up at us and then looked back to the fire. "You might not have noticed, but there's kind of a gender imbalance out here. Present company excluded, of course. Maybe his tent needs a woman's touch. Look, it's not my problem." "Or maybe he wants to touch a woman? But that's not a woman, it's a little girl. Damn it!" I jabbed my knife into the ground next to me.

"And maybe she'll grow up to be Mrs. Boss," Drisco said, reverting to the jocular tone he used a moment before. "I don't know. I don't care."

"And maybe they'll violate her and toss her aside like all the dead bodies you left in your wake."

"You think I like it? You think I approve?" Drisco demanded, looking us in the eye for once. "It's just what I have to do."

"No, it's not," Brick said in a quiet voice.

"If I want to survive it is."

"I don't accept that," I said, pulling my knife from the earth and putting it back in its sheath on the underside of my wrist.

"Well, then why don't you go over the next hill and tell the police what the mean old gang is doing and they'll make sure everyone stays in line and acts all civilized and proper." The tone and sneer had returned to Drisco's face. His ability to snap back and forth from was unnerving. "Look, I don't know what kind of do-gooder trip you're on, but this is the real world—what's left of it anyway. And this is what real people have to do to stay alive."

Standing up, I looked down at Drisco. He sat there in the dirt, his arms wrapped around his knees, holding a stick he kept poking in and out of the fire.

"If that's what you call living then you're not a real person," I said. "You're an animal."

And I walked away. The anger still burned inside me and I needed to put it to good use before I flung myself across the fire and sunk my knife into Drisco. Maybe this is the kind of righteous anger Paul had seen in himself and prompted him not to carry a weapon.

I picked up Paul's rifle and sunk it as far into the earth as I could. It felt good to work off my anger. Maybe this is why Paul planted so many seeds across the countryside.

An hour later I had Paul's grave dug. Both James and Brick tried to help, but I pushed them away. Like the two wanderers we found dead, I felt like this was a grave I needed to dig myself. I shoved the rifle into the mound of dirt and knelt next to Paul's lifeless body.

I carefully went through his pockets and pulled out a short, stubby penknife and a half-carved block of wood. He also had a pouch around his shoulder that hung loosely at his side, usually hidden by his coat. His seeds. I threaded the rope strap under his arm and carefully raised his head and lifted it free. Then I put it around my own neck and tucked it away under my poncho.

I looked at Paul's face one last time. Calm, sure, serene. I didn't understand why he did the things he did, but I wanted to. Deep within I wanted to know how he could be so selfless. Planting seeds across the country for unknown strangers. A fool's errand. So idealistic and heart-strong. And it got him killed.

"Goodbye, Johnny Appleseed," I whispered in his ear. I was about to stand up and let James and Brick help me move Paul's body into the grave when I stopped and reached inside his jacket pocket. I found an old and worn sheet of paper, folded over a few times. I carefully unfolded it. The paper seemed to be torn out of a book and had the following words printed in faded ink:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I folded the sheet of paper over and held it to my chest as tears came to my eyes. It hit me how deeply Paul believed these words, that we were all lost sheep in need of a shepherd. Brick and James realized I was done and came over to move Paul's body. I stepped back and let them do it. The three of us stood at the foot of Paul's grave. I handed the sheet of paper to James.

"I found this in his pocket."

James took it and his eyes grew wide as he realized what it was. He read the words aloud and we each took a handful of dirt and sprinkled it over Paul's body. Drisco sat by the remains of the fire, his head bowed in respectful silence. He didn't offer to help, but I took it as reverence rather than insult or laziness. I wouldn't have let him help anyway. We had plenty more grave digging to do, and Drisco could help bury his own.

Chapter 14

We spent the rest of the day digging graves. It didn't help that we only had Paul's rifle for a shovel. Brick managed to fashion another one from a downed branch, but it still meant only two of us could work at a time.

When Brick and James finished burying Paul and set the rifle down to get a drink, Drisco strode up and took the rifle and began digging the mass grave for the rest of them. None of us said anything, we just watched Drisco take the rifle, walk over to an open space on the opposite end of the clearing and shove the stock of the rifle into the ground.

Late in the afternoon we were dragging bodies into the shallow grave—the second mass grave we'd dug in only a handful of days—and I grabbed the arms of the prisoner I'd shot when he tried to beat the wounded raiders. Drisco came up beside me and grabbed the other arm and together we pulled him over to the open pit.

"Why'd you do it?" Drisco asked quietly.

"Do what?"

"Stop him," he said, tilting his head towards the dead prisoner as we set him in the grave. "He would have killed me and the other one. Why not let him do it?"

"Because that's not how real people live."

"I hate to break it to you, but people just as real as flesh and blood live like that all the time."

"You may think that's living, but that's just being alive," I said, laying the prisoner's arm across his chest.

"Then what about me? Why am I still alive?"

"We don't always get what we deserve," I said as I walked away.

Drisco took a few minutes to absorb my words, then joined me as we drug the next body without saying anything.

"Who were those other prisoners?" I asked. "More tribute?"

Drisco nodded. "Maybe slaves. Maybe sport. Who knows? It's always up to the boss. The girl was the big prize, but it always helps to pad the pockets a bit."

"So who is this boss?"

"What is it you think you're going to do?" Drisco asked as we pushed another body into the pit.

"What do you mean?"

"Am I going to tell you about this big bad boss and you're going to hunt him down, too? Bust into his camp with your guns a blazin'?"

"I don't know," I told Drisco honestly, looking him in the eyes. He seemed taken aback. "All I know is we watched Miriam's father die while he told us about his beautiful daughter—his daughter who had been taken from him. We're going to get Miriam back."

Drisco just stared at me incredulously.

"Right now she's walking through the valley of the shadow of death, but we're going to make sure she has no evil to fear. I don't know how we're going to do it, but we will."

I left Drisco standing there while I walked across the clearing to get a drink of water.

After burying the rest of the dead we sorted through the remaining packs and gear to salvage what we could. We loaded up Charlie and prepared to set off.

Drisco rescued his own pack from the pile, but didn't stop or even say anything while we sorted through the belongings of his dead comrades. There really wasn't anything especially personal or valuable. Some food. A few utensils. Random keepsakes that hold special personal significance but are otherwise worthless.

Before we left I took Paul's rifle and dug a few quick rows in the dirt, reached into the pouch hanging at my side and sprinkled seeds into the broken earth. I tamped the soil back down and we were ready to go.

"So what's it going to be Drisco?" I asked.

"What do you mean? I thought you said you were letting me go."

"We are. But I noticed you hadn't left yet." He glared at me but didn't say anything. It was mid-afternoon, though the sky was still gray and overcast. We wouldn't get very far today, but we knew we had to at least get started.

"You've got a choice, Drisco."

"I do?"

"Everybody has a choice. You could go out into the wild on your own..."

"Or?"

"You could come with us."

"Do you even know where you're going?" he asked, looking up with a sneer.

"We found you, didn't we?" He grew quiet again, but stood up, threw his pack over his shoulder and walked over to us.

"I've been out there. I'm not doing it alone."

"So you'll join us?" James asked.

"Look, I don't know what crazy crusade you freaks are on, and I don't want any part of it. But I will travel with you."

"Fair enough, let's go."

Brick led the way and we left the small clearing in the woods, leaving behind two burial mounds and more than enough energy and heart. It seemed hard to believe how many people we'd buried in the last few days. It seemed even harder to believe that yesterday Brick fired an arrow at me and I stormed into the camp of a bunch of raiders and killed so many.

Paul's words rushed back to me, but I had no response. He had died merely trying to give a little girl the strength to carry on. I didn't know what my death possibly could have done for Brick and James. So instead we forfeited the lives of a bunch of raiders. It seemed blood always had to be shed, it was just a question of whose blood. Paul always seemed to want to avoid it at all costs, and I understood his idealism, but I just didn't know how that worked down here in the real world.

Brick followed the path the three raiders and Miriam had taken and paused every so often to look for traces of their trail. It wasn't easy, with the rainstorm from the other night, but Brick was good. I suppose Drisco could have spoken up at any time and

told us which way to go, but I took it from his silence that we were going the right direction. I wasn't sure whether or not trust him, just as I wasn't sure if we could trust Paul at first, but I felt like something was happening to Drisco. He had managed to untie himself the other night and could have killed us all. Or slipped away quietly and been miles gone before we awoke. No, I didn't think he meant us harm. In fact, I think he was intrigued. I think he felt ashamed that he alone hadn't been killed, and my act of mercy when I stopped the rampaging prisoner seemed to gnaw at him.

Whatever the reason, Drisco seemed conflicted and not eager to return to his marauding ways. I didn't know how long it would last or what would happen when we returned to his gang, but for now it seemed welcome and I'd take what we could get.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Brick as we walked along. His face showed every shade between black and blue, and it made him look that much more intimidating.

"OK."

"I'm sorry about Paul."

"Me too."

"I just can't believe he's gone," I said. "It was only a few days ago that we came upon him sitting in the road." Brick nodded and we walked along in silence.

"He was right," Brick said.

"Yeah, I think he was." Brick's face was steady and sure, beneath all the bruises.

As we walked we eventually left the forest and entered an expansive prairie of grassland and low bushes and shrubs. It'd be getting dark soon, but we pressed on. In the distance we could see the remains of a massive roadbed snaking over the hills and across the countryside. Dom had said they were called highways, a kind of super road that carried lots of traffic at high speeds. They were much like the regular roadbeds we often followed that had bits of concrete or asphalt and had the remnant shape of path, except they were bigger, broader, and had two strips of roadbed, usually separated. Dom said each strip would carry cars in a different direction.

Honestly, it all seemed bizarre; The thought of thousands and thousands of cars driving up and down these ribbons of concrete. The very thought of thousands and thousands of people to drive those cars seemed insane. The evidence of life before the End was all around us, but it still seemed hard to believe. Life in my world was quiet and man's voice seldom heard, his footprint rarely felt.

I guess in the After we were all dealing with the aftermath of humanity's footprint. After all, it was the war and the collapse and the climate that man had caused. But as we spiraled towards extinction we seemed smaller and smaller as a species. Nature took over those massive concrete ribbons, nature brought down our cities and towns, eagerly moving in when we had moved out, sometimes not waiting for us to take our leave.

"You're pretty quiet," James said, walking up beside me.

"Aren't we always?"

"I guess. It's just been a strange few days."

"It certainly has. Is this the promised land you were looking for?"

James smiled and shook his head.

"You know, a week ago I would have been rattled and annoyed at you for taking a swipe at the promised land like that."

"I'm not taking a swipe at anything."

"I know. But a week ago you would have. And I would have taken offense."

"So you're growing up?" I asked with a smile. Now I was taking a swipe.

"Has to happen eventually."

"What about me?" I asked.

"What about you?"

"Does that mean I've grown up?"

"You grew up a long time ago," James said. I readjusted my pack and looked back to be sure Charlie was still coming up behind us. At this point it seemed inhumane to lead him along like some chained up animal, so we just let him come at his leisure.

"I don't know about the promised land, Kara. But I do know about this—what we're doing, trying to save Miriam. This is

right. This is what we're supposed to be doing, no matter the cost."

"And that's just the kicker, isn't it?" I said. "What's it going to cost?" Neither of said anything, but I knew we were both thinking about Paul. It had cost him everything and it didn't seem to bring us any closer to success. What higher price could the rest of us pay? We walked on in silence.

We finally stopped late in the evening well after it had grown dark. The moon shone down high above us, silvery and ephemeral as it poked through an opening in the clouds. Brick and James went to get water while Drisco, Charlie and I stayed back. I sat down on a log for a quick meal and Drisco sat down next to me.

"You've been quiet today," I said.

"Is that a problem?"

"No, no problem. We're usually pretty quiet. How about you, are you usually this quiet?"

"It doesn't matter much, does it? How quiet I usually am? There's not much more 'usual,' is there?" He picked up a twig off the ground and started playing with it, flipping it over in his hand and picking at the bark.

"I just thought I'd ask." I pulled some venison from my pack and offered him a piece, but he declined. I watched as he fumbled with the stick, tore at the bark and broke off small pieces.

"Back at the clearing this morning, just before we left—what we you doing? Those rows you dug?"

"Johnny Appleseed," I replied, with a cryptic smile.

"Huh?"

"That's what I used to call the man we buried back there, Johnny Appleseed. He's been wandering the wild for longer than any of us and as he goes he plants seeds along roadbeds and in clearings, in old towns and wherever he thought to do it."

"You serious?"

"Completely."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard."

"I know."

"Why? Why did he do it?"

"Well, he had this idea that life in the After wasn't going to get better until we made it better. So he started making it better, planting some food so hungry people could find it."

"So other people could profit from his work?"

"If that's what it took. Sometimes you get things you never deserved. But there they are, free for the taking."

"What a crazy bastard."

"Yeah," I said with a smile, "That's about right."

"No wonder they killed him." Drisco tossed the stick to the ground and stood up, walking away. I watched him pace across our little campground, busy himself with something in his pack, and then sit down by himself.

Chapter 15

The next day we were up and moving before sunrise. The dark of night had just begun to turn a bluish gray and it gave barely enough light for Brick to find the trail and we set out again in pursuit of the three raiders and the little girl named Miriam.

Brick led the way, followed by James, then Drisco, then me and Charlie coming last. The morning dew clung to the grass and sparkled as the sun peaked over the horizon. In a few hours time we were crossing over the crumbled remains of the highway we'd seen the day before. There was substantially more concrete than a typical roadbed, some of it still in decent shape and almost forming a road. But there were cracks and depressions and holes everywhere, the weeds and grass and even a few trees working to break it all back down into sand.

On the edge of the road sat the rusted out carcass of a car. The brown rust had consumed the entire thing and bits of it seemed to flake away in the wind. James reached out and touched the rusty metal, then tore a piece of it away with his fingers.

"Where moth and rust destroy," he commented to no one in particular and we kept moving. Wasted cars like this weren't a rare sight. Sometimes we'd come to an ancient town and find old roadbeds lined with rusted out cars. But more often then not they'd be spread out, abandoned and alone like this one. They had been someone's escape route, driven until they failed and left behind to rot.

"So what's your story?" Drisco asked as we trudged along, slowing his pace enough so I caught up and we could walk side by side.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why are you three wandering together? How did that come to be?"

"That's a long story," I told him.

"I've got time."

And so I told Drisco our history. I told him about Wendell Community and how we'd been attacked and raided and couldn't continue to hold our own. Drisco listened quietly, not saying anything. He seemed to bristle at the mention of the slavers, but I continued with my story. I told him how we sent out the Searchers and only half of them returned and then how the three of us set out looking for something.

"And did you find anything?"

"Yeah," I said, "I think we did."

"The promised land, Drisco," James said, looking back.
"That's what I set out to find."

"Did you now?" Some of the contempt crept back into to Drisco's voice.

"I did. Tell me, you've surely traveled this wild farther than us. What's out there?"

"There's no promised land, I can tell you that much." Drisco ran a hand through his close-cut hair and readjusted his pack. "There's only lonely wanderers like yourselves, dying communities and empty ruins."

"And vultures," Brick said without looking back.

"If that's what you want to call us," Drisco called back.

"Would you have a better term?" James asked.

"Look, we were just people trying to stay alive. Survival of the fittest."

"At too great a price," James said.

"Well, you can bicker over that when you're dead."

"I imagine we will," James answered, looking back to Drisco.

We continued on in silence for a ways and then Brick abruptly stopped. He held his hand up and turned back to me, motioning with his hand. I strode forward and Brick pointed in the distance to two shapes moving along. I handed him Paul's rifle and he took a closer look through the scope.

"Travelers," Brick said, lowering the rifle.

"You sure?"

Brick shrugged and handed the rifle back to me. I noticed him checking his bow string and making sure an arrow was handy. We kept moving and as we closed in the travelers spotted us. They'd already crossed our path but stopped when they saw us and Brick veered to meet them.

"Hello, strangers," one of them called when we were still a ways off. Brick raised his hand and waved but didn't answer. When we were about 30 feet away the taller of the two people held up his hand.

"What's your business?" he asked.

"We're tracking three raiders who kidnapped a child," Brick answered.

The man started laughing. "Are you now?"

"If you've got no word or trade then we can just be on our way," James said.

"Now take it easy there, young man," the old man said, leaning on a staff. He looked tired, his face covered in a gray, frizzled beard. "You'll have to forgive an old man, I've just never heard of anyone intentionally tracking raiders before."

Nobody answered.

"Fine, fine, suit yourselves then. I just have to wonder how plausible that story is. You don't get to be my age by trusting every traveler you come across." The man tugged at his beard. The other traveler shifted uneasily.

"What about him?" the old man pointed at Drisco. "He doesn't look like the rest of you." He was right. Drisco dressed in leather, pants and a jacket that weren't threadbare or covered in patches. His clothes didn't look quite as shabby as ours. In fact, he still looked like a raider.

"I'm not on board with this cracked rescue caper, if that's what you mean," Drisco called.

"Ah, division in the ranks. You are a curious bunch." The man turned to his companion and then motioned us forward. "Well, come, come. Let's have a word."

Both parties walked forward and we formed a sort of circle. The old man stepped forward and offered his hand. "I'm Irving," he said. "This is Maya, my daughter." James stepped forward and shook Irving's hand and introduced himself, then each of us in turn. Maya stayed a step behind Irving and merely nodded at each of us. I suspected Irving meant 'daughter' in a figurative sense, much like Dom used to use it—she was much darker skinned than he. It didn't necessarily mean anything. Of course it could also be cover for a slaver, though the didn't seem to fit the profile.

"I take it you've already had an encounter with these raiders then?" Irving asked, pointing a finger towards Brick's bruised face and casting a glance towards my bandaged arm.

"We did," I said. "They captured three of our own and we had to fight our way out."

"Survivors, eh?" Irving said. "Well, maybe this child you seek has a better chance than I thought."

"And what about you?" James asked.

"We're just wanderers, Maya and myself. We passed an old town a few days to the west, were able to find some water and a few provisions, but it had been picked over pretty well."

"Any sign of raiders?" I asked.

"No, you're the first folks we've encountered for over a week now. I have to tell you, it's good to see other folk."

Behind him Maya nodded in agreement and spoke softly, "Tell them." Irving turned back to inquire of her and then seemed to nod in agreement himself.

"A most curious thing," he began. "Two weeks back and many miles to the west we were walking along an old road and we came upon a garden."

"A garden?" Drisco asked with a sneer. He had sat down on a stump a few feet outside of our circle and seemed to be ignoring our chatter.

"Well," said Irving, "I'm not sure what else to call it. There were all kinds of vegetables and grains growing up right on the side of the road."

"Much of it was not ready to harvest, but we were able to take some green beans," said Maya, seemingly suddenly bold.

"Green beans," repeated Irving, "Can you believe it? I remember eating green beans out of a can as a boy, rations salvaged from before the End."

I stepped forward and put my arms around Irving, giving the old man a hug. He laughed and awkwardly patted my back and then I gave Maya a hug that she warmly returned.

"Do you like green beans then?" Irving asked, more than a little mystified.

"It's not the green beans," I said, "It the confirmation of an idea."

"It's the promised land," James said in earnest. "He was right!"

"The promised land, did you say"? Irving repeated.

"Yes, I did. Do you believe?"

"Well I've heard tale and rumor that such a place might exist in the great beyond, but I can tell you in my long life I've never come close to such a place."

"But you have!" James said. "You have seen and experienced the promised land."

"This garden? If a few beans on the side of the road are the promised land then the stories have been vastly inflated." Irving said with a laugh.

"Like you, I envisioned the promised land as a far off place where the hardships of this wilderness and life in the After were forgotten," James explained. "But I've come to believe that the promised land is not a place to travel to at all. Instead it's the wild right here in front of us, if we choose to make it the promised land."

"Why that's preposterous," Irving said. "How can we turn this empty land into the promised land?"

"But you've seen it. At least one small manifestation of it. Those seeds were planted by a person with the specific intent that they would be of aid to travelers like yourselves."

"I don't understand," Irving said.

"Johnny Appleseed," I said simply. I looked over my shoulder to Drisco who appeared to be digging at the dirt with a stick, scowling, seemingly ignoring our conversation.

"Do you mean to say that someone is traveling this wilderness planting food for travelers to find?" Maya said.

"His name was Paul," I said nodding.

"What do you mean 'was'?" Irving asked.

"He died two days ago in our encounter with the raiders." A familiar sadness came over Irving and Maya and neither said anything. We all paused for a moment of silence.

Then Brick spoke up: "There are others."

"What do you mean?" Irving asked.

"Paul isn't the only one," Brick answered simply.

"We didn't know him long—only a few days," James explained. "But he did tell us that another man taught him about planting the seeds."

"Disciples, so to speak," Maya said, nodding her head.

"Like us," I said, taking Paul's rifle from my shoulder and holding it before me. Irving and Maya gave me a puzzled look and I set my pack down. I stepped a few feet away from the circle and drove the stock of the rifle into the ground. I dug a quick trench and then took a handful of seeds from the pouch hanging at my side. I sprinkled the seeds into the open earth and then closed it again as Irving and Maya watched with interest.

"And they will beat their swords into plows," Maya said, raising her hand to her mouth. James flashed a proud smile.

"Fascinating," Irving said.

"It's crap is what it is," Drisco called from his seat on the stump. "Wild grain to save the peasants. How many travelers do you think this random planting actually helps? You're fattening the squirrels is what you're doing."

"I take it he doesn't agree with you on much then, does he?" Irving asked with a smile. "He does raise a fair point though. I can't imagine random gardens on the side of the road will do that much to change the life of a traveler."

"Green beans made you smile," Brick said.

"That they did," Irving replied.

"But it's more than just produce lining the road," said James. "It's about a different attitude, a different outlook. It's about not simply looking out for yourself, but caring for the concerns of others—even strangers you've never met."

"And the raiders? Or the slavers?" asked Maya.

"Paul told us a well-fed raider would see little need to attack a traveler," I said.

"But then aren't you just appeasing the oppressor?" Irving asked.

"The goal would be to see a change of heart," James said.

"Well," Irving said, "You've had a close encounter with these raiders. Did they have a change of heart?"

None of us answered, but I turned to look at Drisco. Irving noticed and started laughing, slapping his knee.

"You're not serious, are you?" he asked. "His group of raiders attacked you and killed one of your own and now he freely travels with you? And has he had a change of heart?"

"We haven't had to kill him," I said. Drisco snorted. As much as he wanted to ignore our conversation, he couldn't help reacting and adding his own two cents.

"My, my," said Irving. "This is truly something I have never seen before. It's scandalous."

"And it's beautiful," Maya said softly. All eyes turned to her. "It's said that anger and fear and distrust and selfishness led to the great battles and wars of the End. As we wander the wilderness it seems as though we only repeat those mistakes. But these disciples dare to live in opposition. If humanity is to survive, this may be the only way it can happen."

"It's beautifully stupid," Drisco said, finally unable to stay out of it. "People take care of themselves. When you start worrying about some stranger, that's when you end up dead."

"And what about you?" Irving asked. "It seems to me you're still alive because of their kindness."

"Their weakness is more like it," Drisco retorted.

"Yet you're still with them," Irving said.

"People take care of themselves," Drisco said with a shrug. "Right now that means sticking with them."

"All this talk of the promised land here and now means giving someone the benefit of the doubt instead of assuming the worst," James said, with an eye on Drisco. "But you still have to be smart." "Well, well. Much to think about here," Irving said. "I do wish you the best in recovering this kidnapped child. But before parting, perhaps we could trade?"

Irving inquired about meat and we gladly traded some venison for spare medical supplies. Irving joked that we'd probably need it more than him, but I didn't laugh. He was probably right.

We said our goodbyes and moved along, watching Irving and Maya get farther and farther away.

"I have to say," James said, "I don't remember having that relaxed of an encounter with anyone in a long time.

Chapter 16

We kept walking late into the night thanks to the silvery light of the moon. We finally stopped to sleep in a patch of trees in the middle of a field. Drisco and I went to look for water and found a small stream not too far from our camp.

I knelt down to fill up the water bottles and Drisco stepped over the stream and sat down on a large rock.

"So," he said. "Do you really buy all that crap about the promised land here and now?"

"I don't know. Do you really buy all that crap about people only looking out for themselves?"

"It's the way we are. It's human nature. Self-preservation."

"Perhaps," I said. "But sometimes self-preservation isn't enough."

He shook his head and bent down to fill his own canteen. I capped Brick's water bottle, slipped the strap back over my head and began filling James'.

"If self-preservation is so great," I asked, looking up at Drisco. "Why are you sticking with us?"

"I told you back in the clearing, I've been out there alone, and I'm not doing that again. Even if it means traveling with your lot."

"But that's not really it, is it?" I asked. Drisco looked up at me, his face somber. "You can't go back to your gang, can you?"

"And why can't I?"

"Because if you could you'd be gone already. But they won't take you back when they learn what happened to the rest of your raiding party."

Drisco shook his head and tried to give his usual sneer, but it didn't have quite the contempt it usually did. I was right.

"Even if you were right—and you're not—what does that have to do with my self-preservation? Seems to me I'm working the self-preservation pretty well if I'm avoiding the gang that won't take me back and mooching off your lot."

"But by sticking with us you're only catching up with the gang, not avoiding them. And given our purpose, you'd much safer traveling alone. No, this isn't about self-preservation any more. You're still with us for some other reason."

Drisco screwed the cap on his canteen and slung it over his shoulder, standing up in a huff.

"And what reason is that?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"You're full of it."

"Maybe," I said. "But all I know is you're not acting out of self-preservation any more. You left that behind back in the clearing when I woke up to find you untied and kneeling next to the body of your dead comrade."

Drisco swore at me and walked away. I capped James' canteen and started filling my own, watching Drisco go. Back at the camp he was his usual quiet, forlorn self. We shared a meal, but Drisco declined. The next day we'd find out where Drisco stood.

In the morning we set off for the east before daybreak, Brick in the lead followed by James, Drisco, myself and Charlie. Maya had commented on what a gentle beast Charlie was, admiring the way he stood by while we talked, without being tied down or looked after. When we woke up Charlie wasn't in the camp, but had wandered down to the stream for a drink. He came sauntering back as we loaded up to leave.

After a few hours walk the sun had come up over the horizon and dried the dew from the grass. We were still walking across prairie with trees scattered here and there, giving us a sweeping view of the land.

Then as we came to the top of a rise Brick dropped to the ground and motioned for us to stop. I crawled up to this side and handed him the rifle.

"There," he said, pointing across the prairie, perhaps a mile away, to a clump of figures. I don't know how he saw them, but in

the scope I could just barely make out four figures. Three tall, one short. Miriam.

"What do we do?" I asked. "They'll see us coming in this open land." Brick nodded and the three of us sat on the ridge debating what we should do. Drisco kept his distance. Charlie chewed on some grass and twitched his ears, swatted his tail. After a few minutes of deliberation we made a hasty plan.

I handed James the rifle and took Charlie's reins.

"Well Drisco," I said. "What's it going to be?"

"I'll just keep right on walking and you nuts can do whatever you want to do. Don't mind me."

"All right then," I turned to James and Brick. "Let's go."

I climbed up on Charlie and galloped off ahead, veering a wide circle and eventually Brick, James and Drisco and the raiders ahead disappeared from view. Brick and James both took off in opposite directions.

I rode Charlie hard and he seemed to love the feeling of running fast again. We galloped through the prairie, a hill or two out of view of the raiders and hopefully passing them up.

We splashed through a stream and up a hill and then started to veer back, making our circle. We slowed our pace as we came up each rise and I took a careful look and then we kept going.

Then on the third rise I saw them. They were a good mile away, coming slow and steady straight across the prairie. Charlie and I went back down the hill, keeping out of site, and we moved a bit to the left to ensure we were in their path. Then we went back up the side of the next hill and found a good spot where a lone tree stood on the top of a hill. I tore a strip of cloth and tied it to one of the branches, and then hid behind the tree to watch. Charlie went down the back side of the slope, out of sight, and chewed on some grass. Sometimes I swear that horse could understand our plans.

And then we waited.

A good 20 minutes later I saw the three raiders and a young girl coming over the opposite rise. Then men looked tired and weary, their heads downcast. They'd clearly been on the move as long as we had, but didn't quite sense the danger of their predicament. Miriam alone had her head held high, though her

hands were bound in front of her and she was being led by a rope one of the raiders held.

Then three arrows whistled through the air and sunk into the ground around the raiders, one after the other. As always, Brick had timed it perfectly, waiting until they were in the valley at the lowest and weakest position.

The raiders threw off their grogginess and were alert, weapons drawn and looking around. Two of them had the same kind of wicked looking blades we'd seen back in the clearing, but the third had a bow and arrow himself. That made things more complicated, but we figured it'd go that way.

James stepped forward from the opposite side, holding Paul's rifle at his side.

"We're here for the girl," he called. "You three can walk away."

And the raiders laughed. They had the same sneer and ugly heckle as Drisco, but theirs rang true. They hadn't been ambushed and shown mercy in a way that cracked their veneer.

"Nobody walks away," the raider with the bow said, raising it and taking aim. But before he could fire a shot a fourth arrow sailed down and landed between the raider's feet.

"I believe that's called a warning shot," James said, an easy smile across his face. I smiled in spite of myself. The raider hesitated, but raised his bow again.

A fifth arrow sliced across the prairie and went through the raider's wrist. He screamed, dropped the bow and fell to the ground.

And that's when things got ugly.

Miriam had the good sense to drop to the ground, and that was the only thing I could be thankful of.

As the raider with the bow cursed and writhed on the ground, the other two got serious. One drew a gun and fired at James, dropping him like a rock as the third raider turned and took an arrow in the chest.

The one with the gun plucked Miriam off the ground and turned towards Brick, placing the girl between himself and the direction the arrows had been coming from. He started backing away and shouted for the raider with the bow to pick himself up and get moving. The arrow still lodged in his wrist, he did as he was told.

That's when Drisco appeared. He came up behind the raiders before Charlie and I had a chance to swoop down like we planned. He called to his friends and motioned for them to join him. They turned, startled to see him, but started moving his way. They turned back towards Brick and now me as I had mounted Charlie and started down the hill towards them, shocked and furious that Drisco had chosen this moment to turn on us.

And then the raider with the gun howled in pain, dropped the gun and the rope and tried to clutch his back but fell to the ground. The other raider with the arrow through his wrist turned in surprise as Drisco slashed him with a knife and he too toppled to the ground.

I came riding up on Charlie and jumped to the ground to catch Miriam as she ran away.

"It's OK, it's OK," I called out, stopping her in my arms. "We're here to help you."

She buried her face in my chest and I looked up to see Drisco finish off the final raider and stand triumphantly over them. His sneer was gone, but it was replaced with something else, something I couldn't quite place. But it made me uneasy.

"James!" I cried out, suddenly realizing that he'd been hit. I stood up to run to James, but when I went to take Miriam's hand I realized her hands were still bound. I turned, dropped to a knee and drew my knife. The girl cowered when she saw my knife, but then realized my intent and held out her hands so I could cut the rope around her wrist.

"Is your friend OK?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I answered. "C'mon, let's go." I took her by the hand and we rushed over to James. He was sitting up, his hand covering his shoulder.

"I'm all right," he said, but I wasn't so sure about that. His face was white and his coat was soaked in blood. Miriam stopped a half dozen feet away and I went forward and dropped to my knees next to James. Brick came to my side a minute later and together we patched up James as best we could. The bullet went

clean through his shoulder, but an injury this severe could be lethal out here in the wild.

"I know you," Miriam said a few minutes after Brick walked by to help James. "You were with that man." Brick nodded and gave the girl a little smile.

"And him, your friend," Miriam said, "He was with that man, too."

Brick nodded again.

"Are you Goodness?" she asked. A confused look came over Brick and she turned to James, "Are you Mercy?" Now James was confused.

"That man, he told me 'Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,' and you two have been following me."

We started laughing then and it was Miriam's turn to be confused.

"Yeah, kid," I said. "We're here to take care of you."

And then Drisco walked up behind us and the smile faded from Miriam's face.

"I know you, too," she said quietly. She took my hand and took a step behind me.

"I thought you were just going to keep walking," I said coolly.
"I did."

"That's a piece of work you did over there," I said, looking past Drisco to the two dead raiders lying the grass, one stabbed in the back and one with a cut throat.

"And you were going to save the girl? Sweeping in on the horse?"

"We'd have managed, yeah," I said.

"Or you all would have gotten shot," Drisco scowled. He paused for a second, and then seemed to brighten. "Hey, the girl's safe, none of you are dead, what are we complaining about?"

Drisco shrugged and walked away.

I watched him go and then felt a tug at my side. Miriam.

"He's one of them," she said.

"We know."

"Is he with you?"

"I don't know," I said looking down at Miriam. I cast a glance to Brick and James and we stood there in a valley in the prairie, having rescued the little girl we set out to save.

Chapter 17

That night we camped early. For the first night in a long time we weren't in a rush to get on the trail and track someone down. Brick shot a rabbit and we made stew.

We sat around the campfire and told jokes. Miriam started it, pestering Brick to say something, finally breaking through his stony silence with a knock knock joke. How can anyone remain silent in the face of a 6-year-old's knock knock jokes? It went on from there with everyone telling their favorite joke.

Drisco even threw one out and it wasn't a mood-breaking, awkward failure of a joke like I expected. It wasn't crude and disgusting either.

But Miriam didn't laugh.

Drisco could tell she didn't trust him and he kept his distance. He sat on the opposite side of the fire and didn't say much.

"Did it hurt?" Miriam asked, looking up at James.

"Did what hurt?"

"Your shoulder," she said, blinking. "When they shot you."

"Yes, it hurt very much," James answered, looking down at Miriam. She sat between me and James. Brick was on the other side of me, drying the rabbit skin by the heat of the fire.

"Why did you let them shoot you?" she asked, tugging at her pants. I hadn't noticed before, but her jeans had little flowers stitched into them at random points.

"Well, that wasn't the plan," James said, "But we knew it could happen."

"But why did you just stand there and take it?" she asked.

"You mean why didn't I hide behind a tree or some other cover?" James asked. Miriam nodded.

"Well, I wanted to give those men the opportunity to do the right thing."

"But why?"

"Everybody deserves a chance. Even a second or third chance to do the right thing."

"How many chances do people get?" Miriam asked, tugging at her dirty blonde hair.

"I don't know. I guess that depends on how many chances we're willing to give them."

"Is that what that other man did? Was he giving them a second chance?"

"You mean Paul?" James asked. "The man back at the clearing?"

"The one who talked about goodness and mercy?"

"Yes, that was Paul," James said, pausing for a moment. "And yes, I think he was trying to give those men a second chance."

"But they didn't take it, did they?"

"No, I'm afraid they didn't." James looked down and fingered his beads with his good hand.

"Giving someone a second chance can get you hurt, huh?" Miriam asked. I could almost see the gears spinning in her head as she worked through all of this.

"Sometimes," James answered, looking at Miriam again.
"But sometimes it works out."

The Miriam went quiet and stared at the fire for a while. But I noticed her eyes kept darting just above the flames to sneak a peek a Drisco and then back down again like she hadn't done anything.

As we got ready for bed Miriam walked up and said goodnight to each of us. First me, then Brick, then James. She hesitated, but then walked up to Drisco and said goodnight. He gave her a half smile, said goodnight and then quickly looked away.

Miriam settled in next to James, sharing his blanket, and I could hear him quietly whispering the words long written down on that scrap of paper Paul carried with him:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Miriam was asleep before he finished.

Brick and I still by the fire, watching James and Miriam fall asleep. Drisco had laid down on the opposite side of the fire, always keeping his distance. I couldn't tell if he was awake or not.

"We did it," I said. Brick nodded.

"What do we do now?" Brick shrugged.

"We're going to need more supplies for her," I said.
"Blankets, clothes, food." Brick nodded wearily and scratched his head.

"After the past few days I couldn't imagine thinking about that kind of normal stuff."

"What's normal?" Brick asked. Now it was my turn to nod. Nothing seemed normal anymore.

Brick headed to bed, crashing next to Miriam. I stayed up a little while longer, watching the fire burn down and thinking how our wandering band had grown from the three of us to four and now five.

I watched Drisco sleeping across the fire. Now that the flames were lower I had a better look at him. When he stepped into view behind those raiders I thought for a moment that he had turned on us. It didn't make any sense though. If he had

turned on us he probably would have taken Brick down, the only one of us with a formidable weapon (I did still have one shot left in that pistol, but I hoped I never needed to use it again).

Still, I couldn't shake the image of Drisco stabbing that raider in the back. Literally and figuratively. I just couldn't get a feel for Drisco. His involvement certainly ended that encounter quickly and with minimal damage for us, but why didn't he just join us from the start? We could have planned something better, maybe avoided James getting shot.

But that seemed to be how Drisco did things, cruising along with the flow, only speaking up or taking action when he could no longer avoid it. And always when it benefited him. Minimal risk, maximum gain.

I finally shook the thoughts and lay down next to Brick to go to sleep.

The next thing I knew I heard birds. I opened my eyes and it was light out. The sun had already risen, maybe half an hour ago. We hadn't slept in this late in a while.

Drisco.

Miriam.

Gone.

Damn it. Not again.

I shook Brick awake and got to my feet, drawing the knife from my wrist. Our camp ground was empty. Drisco's blanket and pack were gone. Charlie stood half-asleep a few paces away. I rushed over to him and checked my pack. The gun with the single shot was still there. At least Drisco hadn't gone for that.

"Gone?" Brick asked a moment later, on his feet and looking around. I nodded and swore. James woke up by now, slowly and groggily, visibly wincing as he tried to move his arm and shoulder.

"What's going on?" he asked, then it seemed to dawn on him. "No! She was next to me all night..." He trailed off and seemed to be trying to remember the night.

"He duped us all," I said to no one in particular. "Don't blame yourself."

But we all did. We each blamed ourselves for trusting him, for not being on guard. But how could we know? Despite his

hostility, he had earned that trust. I wasn't sure of much, but I was sure Paul himself would have agreed with that assessment.

Brick had taken off away from camp finding Drisco's trail and James began hastily packing so we could get on the move. I mounted Charlie and flung Paul's rifle over my shoulder. I leaned forward and slapped Charlie on the neck a few times, whispering to him.

I urged Charlie forward, following the path Brick had taken.

"Which way?" I asked when we caught up to him. He pointed ahead, to the east, and I took off before he could say anything. There was no debating, no arguing this. I think Brick knew that, which was why he didn't say a word.

Charlie and I rode hard across the prairie. At every rise we stopped for a moment and I scanned the horizon with the rifle scope. We rode for an hour, two hours, and it seemed unlikely that we'd find them. Drisco could have turned off at any point. He'd be foolish to go straight east. He could have gone to the north and disappeared in the trees in the distance. I hadn't been painstakingly tracking their trail like Brick would have done. I only hoped Brick and James were doing just that behind me.

We came to one last rise in the prairie, an impressive vantage point and again I scanned the horizon, Charlie heaving underneath me.

There!

I spotted them, kicked at Charlie and we were off. I almost dropped the rifle Charlie took off so fast, like he knew the urgency of the situation. They were at least a mile away, moving quickly. Drisco had thrown Miriam over his shoulder—which made me worry that he had drugged her or knocked her out—and was running.

Part of me wanted to use that last single bullet and just shoot the bastard in the back. My near-perfect accuracy not-withstanding, I didn't think I could actually hit him with the pistol from this far away. Too bad I didn't have any ammunition for Paul's rifle. With the scope it seemed much more likely, though with Miriam over his shoulder it'd still be too risky.

But shot in the back—it seemed appropriate.

Charlie raced across the prairie. We closed on Drisco. He turned and saw me coming and kept on going. He didn't change

course, he didn't try to make me stop by threatening Miriam. He just kept going, charging forward toward a line of trees.

But we'd get to him before he made it to those trees.

A quarter mile. I could see the unmoving form of Miriam bouncing on his shoulder.

500 feet. I could see his face when he turned back to see how much distance remained between us.

50 yards. I could see his eyes.

100 feet. He began frantically shouting, realizing by now that he wasn't going to make it to the tree line and whatever safety he hoped to find there.

And then an explosion.

It hit just to the left of us. I landed in the grass, rolled over a few times. I heard Charlie whinny, imagined him rearing up. I wanted to just lie back in the grass and let the pain wash over me. But I couldn't.

I got to one knee and watched as Drisco reached the tree line with Miriam still over his shoulder. And out stepped dozens of raiders. Behind them, between the trees I could see more. I could see tents and wagons and animals.

A whoop went up among the raiders gathered on the tree line and Drisco turned. For a split second our eyes locked. Tired, weary and exhausted as he was, his eyes weren't filled with the cruelty I expected. They were full of fear.

The raiders charged forward and I had seconds to save myself. I turned around and ran, sprinting away from the raiders and calling Charlie's name. The explosion had rattled him, but in the few seconds since he hadn't gone far. He galloped towards me and I grabbed the saddle as he went past. There was no time to slow down, no chance to gracefully hurl myself into the saddle. I just clung to the horn of the saddle with my right hand, managing to get an elbow onto the saddle. With my left hand I grabbed the edge of the saddle and tried to pull myself up, to keep my legs from falling under Charlie, trying to get a toe into the stirrup.

Finally, after at least a hundred yards, I got my toe into the stirrup and finally pulled myself up into the saddle. Looking back I could see the raiders swarming across the prairie. There were

dozens of them and they flooded out of the trees and down the hill and towards us. A few arrows had sailed past when we were closer, but we were out of range now. The throng of raiders slowed as they realized I'd stayed on the horse and they weren't going to catch us. They either didn't have horses of their own or we weren't worth the bother. At any rate they had the girl. We'd failed.

I slumped forward in the saddle, exhausted and crushed. And Charlie galloped on.

Chapter 18

That night we camped in a cluster of trees next to a rocky outcropping. It was secluded enough that we could light a fire without fear of it being visible. We kept watch that night for the first time in a long time.

Charlie had ridden straight back the way we came. It was a good thing, too, because I practically passed out in the saddle and didn't pay any attention to where we were going. Brick and James did indeed track Drisco's trail and after an hour or so we ran into them. I fell out of the saddle into Brick's arms, crying and trying to explain what happened at the same time. I remember seeing James run his hand through his hair and then flop down on a rock and begin to tick off his beads one by one.

The next morning I awoke early, flustered and crabby and unable to sleep. While Brick and James slept I took Paul's rifle and wandered away from the camp. Charlie followed me. A pale blue morning light covered everything.

I found a clear spot and dropped the stock of the rifle into the dirt. I dug a long trench, took a handful of seeds and carefully sprinkled them into the open earth. Then I went back with the rifle and pushed the dirt back into place, tamping it with my foot.

I did one row. And then another. And then another.

When I finished the third row Brick came up behind me. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, watching me finish the row. Finally I gave in and walked up next to him. He put his arm around me and we stood there for a while in the morning light, not saying anything.

"Breakfast?" he asked, eyebrows raised, after we'd been standing in silence for a while. I smiled and nodded and together we walked back to the camp, Charlie following us like a dog. James already had breakfast cooking over the fire.

We ate breakfast without saying much. I quickly became lost in thought.

I remembered years ago when the Searchers hadn't yet come back to Wendell Community and things were slowly collapsing. I remember the anxiety in the air. One time Brick and I went on a long hunting trip. We had to go increasingly farther away from home each time to find game.

On this particular trip we'd wandered farther away from our little community than we'd ever been. Brick finally caught the trail of some grouse. He spotted them and dropped one with an arrow, then a second, then a third. They were small, little birds, smaller than a chicken, but it was meat. We couldn't complain. Brick strung up the three birds, tossed them over his shoulder and we started walking back home.

It was already late afternoon by now and as the daylight faded we realized we weren't going to make it home before dark. We found a place to hole up and slept through the night.

I remember waking up in the early morning, the stars still twinkling in the sky. Brick was already awake, and when he saw me awake he tapped my arm lightly, raised a finger to his lips and then pointed to the south.

A line of slavers was going by. A wagon rumbled past when I looked up, a two rows of slaves pulling it from the front and two rows of slaves pushing from the back, probably 40 total. Five slave masters towered over them from on top of the wagon and a few dozen more walked along beside the slaves, with whips in their hands and blades at their sides.

Brick and I were only 40 feet away, tucked away in the trees and hidden by the darkness. But if it had been a few hours later we surely would have been seen in the morning light.

We did the only thing we could do: Sit there quietly, not moving, until the procession had passed.

"You don't think they..." I started to ask, but Brick shook his head. We waited a few more minutes and then gathered our things and took off for home before it was light.

Brick didn't think they had raided our community, but we didn't want to stick around and wonder.

"All those people," I said as we walked. Brick just nodded. It was becoming less and less safe to be a community of people, trying to struggle through and build up a new life.

As I sat at the fire not eating my breakfast with Brick and James I remembered how for so long we'd been at risk from people who rose up to challenge us. We had no protection, no defense and in the end we lost. The same thing had happened to Miriam. And countless others like her. The End had brought humanity to the brink, and now in the After we were doing it to ourselves. Man vs. Man. It had to stop.

"What do we do now?" James asked, breaking the silence and solitude of my thoughts.

"We stop them," I said. "I don't know how, but we stop them."

"Rescuing Miriam now isn't going to be like when you set us free," James said.

"I know."

We sat in silence again.

"We are going to try, aren't we?" Brick asked a few minutes later.

"Yes," James said simply. But none of us had an answer. How can three people fight back? Never mind that we're three people not eager to hurt anyone. We were three people wanting to bring the promised land, not just more death. Even if we had the strength we couldn't confront the raiders and mow them down. That would be stooping to their level. That's not the way.

We packed up camp to leave, but when it came time to set out, Brick didn't know which way to go. We didn't have a plan. We were wandering again.

But then James stepped forward and started towards the south. He walked forward confidently and with assurance.

"Do you know where you're going, James?" I asked.

He turned back and shrugged, looking a little sheepish.

"If you don't know where to go, sometimes you just have to set out and see what happens."

"Really?" I said. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Do you have a better idea?"

I didn't. And we kept heading south with James in the lead. We walked through the forest and into the morning. Nobody said much. And then something happened. Screams. From the other side of the hill. We had stopped for lunch and were sitting in a circle, quietly eating. We leapt from our seats and ran up the hill, coming over the top to see two raiders attacking a couple of travelers.

And we sprang down the hill towards the action. Brick had arrows flying while I swung into the saddle and rode Charlie down the hill. One of the raiders had a traveler around the neck and he tossed her aside as we came surging forward.

The other raider pulled a gun and Brick fired, dropping the raider with an arrow through the chest. The first raider pulled a knife as we closed in and circled around him.

"And who are you, the cavalry?" he snarled.

"Close enough," I said from on top of Charlie.

"You're a raider," James said, crossing his arms and standing directly across from the raider.

"If that's what you want to call me."

"And there's only two of you?"

"There's plenty more of us."

"We know. And you're going to tell us all about it," James said. The raider looked confused, but then took a step back, into the arrow Brick had pointing at his back. He swiveled around and hit Brick's hand, sending the arrow flying into the distance. He slashed at Brick with the knife and then knocked Brick back with the other hand. He turned the knife on me, hoping to make a run for it, but he turned into a swinging branch and dropped to the ground.

One of the travelers had picked up a hefty branch and swung it like a baseball bat right into the raider's face. He crumpled like a paper cup. The traveler dropped the branch and reached down to help Brick up.

"Thanks for your help," she said, rubbing her neck where the raider had been trying to strangle her.

"Thanks for your help," I answered, climbing down from Charlie.

"Happy to return the favor," she said, walking over to help her companion up. "The two of them came on us quickly and we didn't have a chance to fend them off. But with your extra numbers we were more than enough for them," she said. "I'm Bella, by the way. This is Johnson."

Bella was tall and strong looking, probably in her late twenties. She looked like she'd been out in the wild and fending for herself for a quite a while. She had a scar across her face and long, brown hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail.

Johnson looked to be about the same age, just as weathered, though it was hard to tell for as much as the raiders had roughed him up. His hair was short and blond, he was dressed in a long leather jacket.

Johnson hadn't come through the fight quite as cleanly as Bella. He had a jagged cut up one arm and a serious bruise on his face. He was still shaking it off when James helped him to his feet.

"Thanks," Johnson mumbled, rubbing his jaw.

"Let's take a look at that cut," I said, stepping forward and pulling out the bright orange goop. Johnson sat down and we started dressing his wound.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's a medicinal ointment that will help you heal and keep the wound clean," I answered.

"Where did you come across that?"

"We traded for it a couple days back," I replied, "But only because it worked out easier that way. When life is a little less hectic I usually mix it up myself."

"Yeah?" Johnson said, nodding his head. "That's impressive."

"Well, you've got to be prepared out here."

"And apparently have some friends, too," Johnson said with a smile.

"Those can be hard to come by," I said, thinking of Drisco and his turn around. "But yeah, you can't do it alone."

"Have you come across this kind before?" Johnson asked.

"We've had more than a few run ins with raiders, yeah." I said. "Especially in the past week.

Johnson nodded as Bella came up behind him, wrapping your arms around him.

"Are you OK?"

"I am, my love," Johnson said.

"Are you two together?" I asked.

Johnson and Bella looked one another in the eye and beamed.

"We are married," Bella said.

"Married?" Brick asked. James, who had been looking at the two dead raiders looked up, as did I.

"Yes," Bella said with a laugh, "That old tradition is not completely lost."

"Some of us old fools still like the idea," Johnson added, leaning forward and kissing his wife. A wife! I had rarely seen a married couple, together, alive and well, especially in the wilderness. I think James' parents had been married, though his mom died when he was young. Even if people do get married in the After, simple survival is the supreme obstacle. It's rare enough that two people can commit to one another for a lifetime, but rarer still is that two people actually survive that lifetime together.

"And we can continue to be old fools, thanks to you," Bella said.

"Seems to me we just distracted them long enough to give you a chance," I said.

"Even that is help enough," she said. "We're lucky you came along."

"How did you happen in this direction?" Johnson asked. "Where are you headed?"

I was about to answer when James spoke up.

"I believe we came this way because we had to," he said, standing up. He held something in his hand. "We've been on a journey for many months, a journey with no known destination. But in the last week that journey had turned into a mission."

"A mission?" Bella asked.

"Yes," James said. "We seek the promised land. But it's more than you think," he held up his hand to Bella and Johnson and continued. "The promised land isn't the great here after somewhere over the horizon. It's the here and now when we make it the way it should be. When love can blossom within a marriage without being threatened by survival and death. Where people can eat without having to turn on one another. When daughters—and sons as well—are protected, cherished and loved. The promised land is a world where raiders and slavers have no room to thrive."

"That's a beautiful dream, my friend," Johnson said. "But how can that come to be?"

"It will happen when what just transpired today becomes commonplace," James said. "We heard distress and we came to your aid."

"And we thank you for that," Bella said. "But so few are that selfless."

"That's what needs to change," James said. "And it starts now."

He held up a sheet of paper. He had taken it from the dead raider and it was a map of the country we were in.

"I believe we're going to see the promised land come to pass," James said, "Because we were led to rescue you, and that led to finding this map."

He laid it out before us and it was a raider map. It showed communities and traders and routes. And best of all, it showed their meet up points and dates. We poured over it together as we realized what it meant.

"Miriam," Brick said. James and I looked up and the three of us exchanged glances and nodded.

"Miriam?" Bella asked.

"She was the little girl who set us on this mission," I said. "The raiders took her. And we got her back. And they took her again."

Bella's jaw dropped and she grasped Johnson's hand.

"And we're going to get her back."

Chapter 19

The mist swirled over our feet. It was early and cold. A few hundred feet ahead was a trading post, bustling with activity—well, as much as anything in the After could be considered bustling. There were at least two merchants supervising the trades and probably half a dozen customers. It was a regular Saturday at the market.

The three of us stepped forward, Charlie walking behind us. We each had a pack on our backs, Brick had his bow at the ready, I had Paul's rifle in my hands and James stood in the middle, armed only with his beads.

"Hello, strangers," one of the merchants called. "Do you come with something to trade."

"We bring news," James called.

"Come, come," the merchant answered, scratching at his chin. "What news do you have?"

"Raiders are coming," James said plainly, without a hint of panic in his voice. The bustle and noise of the shoppers instantly silenced. "Heed our warning if you want to live. But if you want more than that, if you want to discover the promised land, join us."

Murmuring erupted among the people, chattering over our warnings and James' bold words.

"And how do you know this," the merchant called out, stepping forward and still holding a bottle of flour in his hand, preparing to make a trade and balance out amounts.

"There is a raiding party in the area and this trading post is targeted," James explained. "Two days back we stopped two raiders from killing a couple, and we retrieved this map." He held up the map and the people rushed forward to see the evidence. This wasn't the mad ravings of three wanderers, or even the questionable ranting of three grifters. We were telling people to get out with their lives or join us.

It may have helped that Brick still bore the bruises from his beatings at the hand of the raiders. He was an intimidating fellow just standing there, but to see him bruised and beaten and to know that he had faced off against the raiders and still stood was heartening.

Some of the people at the trading outpost weren't ready for the kind of challenge James issued, but they did take off with their lives. They moved and were on the watch for raiders. But others opted to join us. The merchants understood the promise of what we offered. Raiders were constantly shutting them down and had them on the move. And you can't move product and cater to customers if you're always on the lookout for raiding parties.

We waited while they packed up their shop, loaded their tents and prepared to leave. We didn't know when the raiders were coming, a fact we plainly shared with the people, we just knew that the raiders knew of this outpost. And that meant it was only a matter of time. Eventually the time would come and the raiders would come to pick this plumb.

"Thank you," the merchant said later as we set off, leaving behind an empty crossroads. "My name is Julio and I have listened for news of the promised land for many years."

I watched James listening to Julio as they walked, James nodding his head and smiling, finally able to share his stories of the promised land and have them be more than mere story or prophecy.

As the last of the people cleared out I took Paul's rifle and drove it into the ground, digging a long trench. I sprinkled seeds along the length of it and then pushed the dirt back in place.

When the raiders came they wouldn't find anything worth taking. The people and the loot had moved on, one step ahead of them and suddenly and unexpectedly empowered. And as the raiders walked over this land, below them would dwell the seeds of promise and hope.

I mounted Charlie and trotted after the group. Charlie slowed to walk next to Brick. He looked up and smiled at me.

That afternoon we split up and sent groups of two in every direction. We set up a central location where we'd all meet up in three days. We left James and Charlie there to set up a base camp and welcome the new arrivals.

"You'll be OK?" I asked.

"Yes," James said, "I'll be good." He nodded and smiled and I put my arm on his shoulder. We leaned in and our foreheads touched.

"It's happening," he said, "We're going to get to the promised land."

"You were right all along."

"Well, not the way I thought I was."

He put his hand on my shoulder and we hugged briefly. Brick stepped forward and shook James' hand and we left. It was another rare moment when the three of us had been separated. It seemed so odd to be walking away without James.

But for once we were on to something. We had a plan. We had a mission. We had a destination in mind. In all my life in the After, in all my time wandering in the wild, I had never had such a feeling of purpose.

It felt good.

Brick and I headed to the northwest. We hoped to hit three targets in three days and make it back to the rendezvous point with James and hopefully many others.

That afternoon we came upon a community. From a distance we saw several buildings clustered together in a circle, a fence set back from the buildings. As we walked along the road in full view our appearance caused sudden activity within the community. As we approached the gate a small, heavily armed group was waiting for us.

"What's your business?" a gruff, bald-headed man called out when we were a safe distance from the gate.

"We come bearing news," I replied. The group at the gate murmured among themselves.

"What kind of news?" the bald man asked.

"News of great joy," I answered, "Or great peril, depending on how you respond. We bring a warning." Brick and I stood there patiently waiting. I had Paul's rifle slung over my shoulder and Brick's bow was over his shoulder. We appeared as least threatening as we could, while still showing that we were strong and able to defend ourselves. "All right then," the bald man called out. "Come to the gate and keep your hands where we can see them." We kept our hands at our sides and walked forward, willing to prove that we weren't a threat, but not willing to be completely cowed into fear.

"What is this warning?" the man asked when we stood before the gate.

"We've had encounters with raiders. You're not safe here."

The murmuring continued and some of them pointed to Brick's still bruised face.

"And how do we know we can trust you?" another man asked. He was older, with graying hair and strong arms.

"Are you going to let us in so we can share this news as peers, or do we have to continue to stand at the gate with weapons drawn?" I asked. "Because I have no more stomach for that."

"You'll need to leave that rifle with one of our men," the bald man said.

"It's no longer a weapon of war," I said. "I have no ammunition and I doubt it would fire anyway. But if you still wish to take it you may." The bald man considered this, but then shook his head. The crowd at the gate lowered their weapons, stepped back and the opened the gate for us. We walked forward into the community and the bald man walked next to us.

"Welcome to Cottersville," he said. "My name is Khdar."

"Thank you, Khdar," I said. "My name is Kara and this Brick." I paused for a moment and then launched into our message. "I'll get right to it: Your community is in grave danger. There's a band of raiders in the area and they have your community targeted. We don't know when exactly they're coming, but I can assure you they will come and few will live through it."

"That's a rather bold pronouncement," Khdar said. "You'll have to forgive me for asking what proof you base this information on."

"We encountered a pair of raiders a few days ago and found this map on them." I handed the sheet of paper to Khdar and he looked it over, noting the other marks clustered in the area.

"And what are these other marks?" he asked.

"Traders, merchants, other communities, known crossroads," I explained. "It seems they've been spying in the neighborhood and determined who is vulnerable and worth exploiting."

We were approaching the center of the community now, and more and more people were coming out to take a look at the visitors. If I had to guess I'd say there were 20 or 30 people here. In the center of the grassy space between buildings was a well with a hand pump. A large and rusty sign hung near the pump that said "Cottersville" in large block letters. It reminded me very much of Miriam's empty and desolate community, cleared out after the raiders had come through and slaughtered nearly everyone.

"I thank you for the valuable information you've shared, my friends, and we'd be happy to repay that debt," Khdar said. "This warning will give us time to prepare to defend our village."

"No," I said and Khdar turned back to me with raised eyebrows. "There is no defense. From what I've seen of your battlements you won't stand a chance when the raiders sweep through."

It was the first the rest of the villagers had heard of raiders, and they very mention send whispers throughout the group. Some looked around in fright, as if they expected the raiders to attack at any minute. And for all we knew they could be prepared to do just that. We only had a map, we didn't know their plan or schedule of attack.

Khdar smiled at me warmly, but in a condescending manner. "Kara, I can assure you we know how to defend ourselves from intruders. We saw you and your friend coming a long way off and could have stopped you if we felt the need. We can handle these raiders."

"Can you?" I asked. "A week ago we came upon a community very much like this one. It had an outer defense gate, much like yours, a cluster of buildings much like these, and a well in the middle of town. But the raiders came through. We buried the entire village, save for one little girl—about his age." I pointed to a small boy on the edge of the crowd holding his father's hand.

"And what happened to her?" an old woman in the crowd asked.

"They took her," I said, looking the old woman in the eyes, but then dropping my gaze to the grass at my feet.

"We'll get her back," Brick said and all eyes turned to him. He hadn't yet spoken and it almost made him invisible.

"And what do you propose we do then?" Khdar asked.

"Join us," I said looking up. "We are gathering the people—contacting each location on that map. Your fellow neighbors need your help, and you need theirs. We are gathering."

Khdar seemed taken aback. He didn't speak at first and his silence prompted the others standing around to start talking among themselves and asking questions.

"Are you going to fight these raiders?" the old woman asked incredulously.

"We already have," I said. "Three times."

That was the clincher. Suddenly we had their respect and trust.

"What is this?" another man asked. "You two against a gang of raiders?"

"It's not just us," I said. "I told you—we're gathering more. And together we will make the wilderness a place where the raiders no longer have dominion."

"The promised land," Brick said. Everyone suddenly hushed and spoke in whispers.

"I will need to speak to my elders and come to a decision," Khdar said. He stepped forward and spoke with me privately, asking where we would meet and what our plans were. I showed him the location on the map and told him we were meeting in three days.

"I don't know what the people will decide to do when we meet. I can't promise anything for them. But I can promise that we're going after those raiders, if only to get back the girl."

Khdar nodded and turned to walk away, preparing to gather his elders. I reached out and took his arm.

"Khdar," I said. "Even if you're leery of joining us or don't want to take part in some crusade—heed our warning. The raiders will come, and they will kill whoever they find and take

whatever they want. Even if you don't want to join us, don't be here when they come."

Khdar grasped my hand and nodded, then turned and walked away.

Brick and I sat down in the middle of Cottersville, waiting to hear word from Khdar and the elders. The old woman who had spoken before approached us.

"You speak of the promised land, boy," she said. "Have you been there?"

"The promised land is not a country with a border you can cross," Brick said. "It's a place that you create by the way in which you live."

The old woman's eyes widened. She looked from Brick to me and then back to Brick. She didn't say anything, but slowly raised her mouth to her hand and then backed away quietly. As she turned around I saw her grasp at a string of beads around her neck and begin to finger each one while whispering something.

I turned to Brick.

"You're starting to sound like James."

He smiled and looked down at his feet.

Chapter 20

We bid Khdar farewell at the gate to Cottersville. We shook hands and told him we'd see him in a few days. The community had voted to join us.

They were packing their supplies and moving out that evening. They invited us to stay and get some rest, but we explained that we had a duty to warn others like them. Khdar smiled warmly, and this time it felt sincere.

We had another trading outpost to warn and a major crossroads. The crossroads would be the most difficult because we couldn't expect to find people waiting there. We'd only find people passing through, and that meant waiting for them to come. Which is likely what the raiders would do. It complicated matters and meant we'd have to find a hidden place to keep watch and pray the raiders weren't doing the same thing.

We hoped to hit the trading outpost first and then spend the remaining time we had before our rendezvous watching for travelers at the crossroads.

We set out for the trading post, cutting across the countryside to make up time. I felt encouraged by Khdar and the people of Cottersville, as well as the merchant and the few folks at the trading post the day before. Not only did we have a mission, but we were no longer alone in it. We weren't just struggling to survive, we were finding a way to live. The air bristled with excitement, or at least that's the way it felt.

But the feeling vanished as we came out of the dense woods and into an opening where we could see the trading outpost from a distance. Smoke rose from the spot. Brick and I paused while I took in the view through the scope on Paul's rifle.

"They're gone," I said. "Damn it." I handed the rifle to Brick who looked for himself. I turned and picked up a rock and threw it as far as I could.

"Come on," Brick said. We trudged forward knowing we at least had to check and see if there were any survivors. It seemed unlikely, but Graham and Miriam had both survived an attack, if only momentarily for Graham.

As we approached the smoldering remains of the outpost, we guessed there wouldn't be anyone left. One body hung from a nearby tree, swinging in the breeze. A tent had been burned to the ground and a wagon had been ripped apart and the supplies strewn across the ground.

We stood in the middle of the ruined trading post, taking it all in. There were easily half a dozen dead, spread around and in various states of massacre. I kicked a dented pot and watched it bounce along the ground.

"Here," Brick said, reaching for Paul's rifle. We didn't have a lot of time, but we could at least give the dead a small measure of respect. Brick started digging the grave and I started dragging the bodies over.

A few hours later Brick was tossing the last shovelfuls onto the grave. He handed me the rifle and I walked a few paces away to start a row for seeds. I dug the trench, sprinkled the seeds and pushed the dirt back in. Then we kept moving.

Now that we'd seen the raiders strike we knew the map was for real. We were more alert, but at the same time it didn't seem to matter. We'd already faced them and knew what to expect.

I also couldn't help looking for them, not out of a sense of self-preservation, but because of Drisco. I kept an eye out for him. I wanted to know what was going through his head, what possessed him to stick with us for as long as he did and then suddenly and painfully turn on us.

As near as I could figure, it was the only way he might get back in the good graces of his gang. They'd know the group had been attacked and he wouldn't be able to explain how he alone got away. Something told me that giving in wouldn't be acceptable. And if the girl had been freed and he came back it'd be even worse. But if he could come back with the girl, he could tell whatever story he wanted to. Nobody else would be alive to correct him. He could make himself out to be the hero and faithful raider (if there was such a thing). He could spin the gift of the girl any way he wanted for the raider boss.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Drisco is a raider. That's what he does. He'll stab a traveler in the back just as soon as he'd stab a fellow raider in the back. There's no honor among thieves.

"Our life is what we make of it," Brick said abruptly, interrupting my thoughts.

"What's that?"

"You're thinking about Drisco, aren't you?" he asked as we walked along. It was beginning to get dark, but we decided to keep moving all night in hopes of reaching the crossroads as early as possible.

"How did you know?"

Brick shrugged.

"I just wonder what made him do it. He could have killed us in our sleep. He could have just left us in our sleep and made a break for it. He could have joined up with those raiders, he could have done any number of things."

"He did what he did."

"I suppose that's all he knows. He found a way to save his own skin and that's what he did."

"But he did do a little more than that," Brick said, suddenly looking thoughtful.

"What do you mean?"

"He could have killed us, and he didn't."

"Yeah?"

"All he knows is killing, but he didn't do it."

"You think that means something?" I asked. Brick nodded. "What does it mean?" Brick shrugged.

And so we kept walking, through the woods and the dark, hoping to make it to the crossroads before the raiders.

We finally had to stop early in the morning a few hours before dawn. It was too dark to keep wandering and we were afraid we'd go right past the crossroads. So we hunkered down against a tree, leaning our backs against the tree and one another for support, lightly sleeping.

We awoke to hoof beats in the distance. We both jolted awake and hands went to our weapons. But they weren't raiders.

It turned out we were a few hundred yards from the crossroads. We rushed through the woods and out to the old road bed just in time.

A single rider was coming towards us. He saw us burst out of the woods and I think he took us for marauders. At first he beat the reins and tried to spur the horse on, but he realized we'd easily cut him off before he could get past and he slowed up and reached for a blade.

But we held our hands up and didn't reach for our weapons and the man on the horse slowly came forward.

"Greetings," I called, "We have news."

"News, aye?" the man called back.

"Raiders," I said. At that single mention the man's head quickly whipped around, expecting them to come leaping out.

"And how do I know you're not the raiders?" he asked.

"Would we still be talking if we were raiders?" This seemed to convince the man and he flicked the reins and his horse walked closer.

"What news do you have of these raiders?" He asked when he was a dozen feet away.

"They're planning to hit this road. We've come to warn any travelers," I said, finally relaxing a bit.

"That's a mighty bold thing for the two of you to do. Why? Why would you risk your own necks like that?"

"Because no one deserves to be cut down like the raiders would do," Brick said. The man turned and looked at Brick, considering him for the first time.

"Aye, that's true," the man said. "Well, I thank you for the news. I'll be cautious. But I must keep moving."

"There's one other thing," I said. "You could join us."

"Join you?" the man said with a laugh. "And what am I joining? Are we going to sit here and have tea and warn every passerby about the coming raiders until they finally come?"

"Well, the tea is optional," I said with a smile. "We've been gathering folks from all around, from wherever the raiders are going to strike, warning them and rallying them to join us and stand up."

"Are you now?" the man said, raising his eyebrows and running his hand over his beard. I nodded. "That's even more bold. That's the kind of bold that'll get you killed. Why would you go and do a thing like that?"

"The promised land," Brick said.

"Ah, you're one of those prophetic types, are you?" the man asked. "No thanks. I've traveled this land from end to end and I've not come across no promised land. Just more raiders and travelers and folks trying to make it. But no where that the making it gets any easier."

"That's because you're looking for a place," I said. "But you're not making a place. That's what the promised land is: It's the land that you make by how you live your life."

The man didn't answer, but he looked intrigued.

"If you're just passing through a land and letting the raiders go about their plundering and let the folks struggle, then you're leaving behind a land of peril. But we have a chance to leave this land something better."

The man stroked his beard again, considering my words.

"And I'm not one of those prophetic types," I said, casting a glance at Brick. "I can only speak for myself, but this isn't about some religious foolery for me. It's about practical living."

"You make a solid case," the man said. "How would one go about joining your little party?"

Brick smiled at me and we told the man where and when to meet. He explained that he had to continue on and finish his errand, but he promised to join our gathering and would spread the word as he traveled. We thanked him and wished him well on his journey. His name was Holland.

From there Brick and I walked back to the actual crossroads, having overshot it by a few hundred feet in our attempt to cut off Holland and give him our warning.

Two ancient roadbeds full of cracked pieces of concrete and asphalt met at the crossroads. They barely resembled roads as the grasses and trees had grown up in the absence of so much traffic. But there was enough traffic across them that paths sprang up and the grasses and weeds seemed to stay out of the main trail. A dead tree stood at the very center of the crossroads,

having pushed its way through the concrete, buckling and cracking so much of it with its powerful roots over the years and then dying, and turning to bare, dead branches that swayed in the breeze and would one day fall and rot and return to dust, further burying any memory of the once busy thoroughfare.

There was a clump of trees set back from the crossroads that would make for a good place to watch. Unfortunately we couldn't just camp out at the crossroads and wait. We'd be too enticing of a target for the raiders. But it also seemed likely that the raiders would be doing the same thing we were doing: Camping out a few hundred feet away from the crossroads and waiting for unsuspecting travelers to come by. So we opted to leave the clump of trees open and set up even farther back. There was a mound covered in grass that gave us a perfect vantage point. With the scope on Paul's rifle we could see three of the four approaches to the crossroads and could keep an eye on the clump of trees that the raiders would likely hide in. It seemed as good a spot as any.

The only problem was that we'd look rather sketchy running down to the crossroads when we saw someone approaching. That seemed more likely to scare people away and we wouldn't get anywhere. We finally settled on a solution and put our plan into motion. Which meant waiting for travelers to come by.

And we waited. We had another two days before we had to be at the rendezvous. We could probably stay here all of one day and part of the next before we had to head back.

It was mid afternoon before we finally had any action. From the clump of trees near the crossroads I could see Brick signaling from the mound farther back. He waved a branch to the left, signaling that travelers were approaching. At least he thought they were travelers. You never could be sure. And it'd make a fine plan for raiders to approach the crossroads as travelers in case anyone was already there, and then hide out once the coast was clear.

But Brick's branch waved to the left and that at least meant a raiding party wasn't swooping in. Then the branch went back and forth three times. Then it pointed to the north. Three travelers approaching from the north.

I stepped out from the clump of trees and made my way down to the crossroads. I walked slowly and steadily so that when I came into view I wouldn't cause any alarm.

The travelers approached warily and we exchanged greetings. I told them about the map and about the danger on this roadbed. They seemed grateful and I told them about the gathering and the location, about the promised land and our goal of stopping the raiders. They seemed amazed, though a little wary. I wished them well and they were off, saying they would consider the invitation to join the gathering. But if I did not see them again they would at least be careful and pass the warning on to any others they met along the way.

I made my way back to the clump of trees and waited some more.

No one else came that day and Brick and I fell asleep hidden away behind the grassy mound, huddled together to keep warm. We didn't dare risk a fire with the potential for raiders to come at any moment.

We woke before dawn and started our vigil again. We decided that at noon we'd have to head out.

At mid-morning another pair of travelers came and I gave them the same warning. They kept their distance but thanked me for the warning and continued on. They wouldn't be joining our gathering.

I returned to my clump of trees and waited some more. Just when I was about to give up I saw Brick waving the branch to the right—raiders. He moved the branch a few more times. Six of them, approaching from the south.

I didn't have much time. I kept low to the ground and ran to the north. Then I cut across to a line of trees to the west and it wasn't until I'd reached them and thrown myself to the ground that I dared to look back and see if I'd made it. They weren't in view yet. Safe. For the moment. I'd have to circle all the way around to get back to Brick.

I waited for a few tense minutes. And then they came into view. Definitely going with the raiding party look. They had blades drawn, a few with bow and arrows—part of why I wanted to move so quickly. We decided to leave the rifle with Brick so he could use the scope and see anyone coming. That left the bow and arrow, but I couldn't shoot it worth a damn. Which meant I

was unarmed. I did still have the pistol and its single remaining shot, but that wouldn't be much good against six armed raiders.

I watched them come to the crossroads and take stock of the situation. They stood around for a few minutes, pointing and gesturing, and then finally moved for the clump of trees where I had just been.

I started moving then, slipping through the trees and keeping an eye on the raiders. They stayed at the clump of trees for a while, but they were ancy and a few of them were on the move again. Two of them headed towards the mound where Brick was.

I started rushing through the trees now, trying to keep quiet and avoid stepping on sticks and making too much noise. I should have been completely out of view, but I also didn't know if the raiders had binoculars or what and might be able to spot a streak of movement here or there. It wouldn't take much and I'd have given myself away.

But Brick.

He had the scope and should have seen them coming. He also had the bow and arrows and could protect himself if it came to that. Hopefully he was long gone.

I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and take stock of the situation. The four raiders were hunkered down at the clump of trees, keeping watch and ready to pounce on any travelers. The two raiders were halfway to the grassy mound.

I kept moving, jumping over fallen logs and ducking under branches. Then something grabbed my hand and I turned sharply, almost falling flat on my face. I spun around and reached for the knife at my wrist—but it was Brick. He caught me and kept from falling, then held his hand up and put a finger to his mouth. He motioned with his head for us to get going, leaving the raiders behind.

I hesitated.

"We can't just leave them there—a trap ready to be sprung on whoever comes along."

Brick frowned and raised his eyebrows.

"I don't know what we can do," I said, looking around as if I could find a solution on the forest floor around us. "There must be something."

Brick thought for a moment. I could see his mind churning, trying to come up with something. If we had the forethought we could have placed warning signs from every direction before we left, but we didn't have time for that now. Besides, the raiders likely would have seen them when the approached and known something was up. We didn't have many good options.

Then Brick smiled.

"What?" I asked.

"Fire," he said simply, still smiling. He motioned with his fingers, pointing both index fingers down a few inches apart, and then moving them in a circle so both fingers ended up where the other finger started.

That was bold. But it was about the only plan we had. A ring of fire encircling the raiders. Chances are it would eventually burn out, but with any luck a little wind would drive it forward and possibly threaten the raiders. At the very least the smoke would give ample warning to any passing travelers.

Brick and I quickly made a plan and he bolted for his position. He'd have to go the long way around to avoid being seen, but the plan was to take up a position roughly opposite from me with the six raiders in between us. We'd have to fudge it a little bit to account for the raiders in the clump of trees and two hiding behind the grassy mound. But it might work.

While I waited for Brick I found a branch that would work as a torch and started shearing off the excess branches and twigs. I wrapped it with a piece of cloth and waited for Brick's signal.

I saw a flash from the woods opposite and I stuck a match and lit my torch. I looked up to see Brick's torch blazing and we took off. I held the torch to the ground and started the grass and sticks on fire. I gave it a few seconds and then started moving, holding the torch to ground, burning as I went, pausing every few feet to make sure it was starting. I moved in a quick circle, towards where Brick started. I came to the clearing and this would be the tricky part. We planned our circle just far enough away from the raiders that we should be able to make it across the open space and back into cover before they could reach us. Hopefully.

And I started running. I held the torch low behind me, letting the flames lick at the grass and they crackled and burned nicely. Across the way I could see Brick doing the same thing and making good progress.

Then the raiders started yelling. They'd seen us. I kept moving. I shot a glance towards Brick and he was on the move, burning as he went. The circle of flames was starting to take shape now. I hadn't expected it to ignite so quickly, considering how fast we were moving. But it was roaring. A wall of flame had developed where I started, perhaps five or six feet high. This might work!

I had another 100 feet to go before I reached Brick's starting point and another wall of fire.

And that's when the raiders figured it out. They charged for that open spot and together we raced for it. I had them beat by a good 50 feet, but that was too close for comfort when the flames were just starting and they had weapons.

The gap closed to 25 feet. I'd have them easily beat, but I wasn't sure if the flames I was putting down would be enough to hold them off. If we both made it at the same time they could easily leap over the fire I had just started and continue the chase.

Brick's flames were going strong ahead of me, climbing the trees and igniting the shrubs. They actually started coming towards me and helping to close in the gap. I could feel the heat from the wind and could see three of the raiders charging for me. One had a bow, but he kept fumbling with the arrow. He'd realized too late what he needed to do. Another one had a knife and the third had a sword.

I reached the other wall of flames just in time and kept going. I tossed the torch over my shoulder, hoping to help that meager wall of flames along and kept running. At the very least I had Brick's longer burning wall of flame between me and the raiders now. I heard an arrow but it sailed through the fire and missed me by a wide margin. They couldn't see through the flames to get a clear shot. I heard a scream and looked back to see a raider falling to the ground, his pants on fire. He'd made it over the flames, but barely. At any rate he wouldn't be able to chase me down.

I kept running and met up with Brick a few hundred yards back from the flames. Brick had ash across his face and was sweating. The two raiders at the mound caught on quicker and he really had to run for it. But the plan worked. In the open field below there were six angry raiders at the center of a circle of fire. The wind had whipped the fire up and it would easily keep the raiders contained. Whether or not it would burn inward and kill them I didn't know, but it was out of my hands. They wouldn't be trapping any travelers at this crossroads.

Brick put his arm around me and gave me a hug as we set out for the gathering. Our war against the raiders was about to begin.

Chapter 21

When Brick and I finally reached the gathering we were late. We came over a hill to see a several dozen people gathered in a clearing, with tents pitched, animals milling about and general chaos in an open field.

I had never seen so many people gathered in one spot in my life. Brick and I turned to one another and smiled. This could work. We could stand up to the raiders

The crowd was gathered around a lone tree. I could see Charlie off on the side of the clearing. He came trotting over when he saw us. I nuzzled his ear and slapped him on the neck.

The crowd of people parted way as we approached, stepping aside to let Brick and I through. I saw Holland in the crowd and waved to him, Khdar and some of the people from Cottersville. Brick shook hands with the merchant Julio and I nodded at Bella and Johnson.

James stood at the front of the gathering, directly in front of the tree. The three of us embraced, glad to be reunited again. He turned back to address the crowd.

"It's time civilization returned to the wild," he said. "We're going to find a way to stop the raiders, to stand up to them and put a stop to the killing, the rampaging, the pillaging that has kept communities from taking root, that has forced people to be on the move, always trying to stay one step ahead of danger."

"But how are we going to stop them?" a man in the crowd shouted out.

"We're no army," another man called out.

"We don't have any weapons."

The crowd was restless. James gave both Brick and I a look that said the crowd had been turning on him.

"We'll find a way," James spoke out over the murmurs. "There's always a way."

"A way to get killed!" someone shouted.

"And what's your plan?" Another man shouted out. "Are we just going to keep on running?"

"It's better than dying!"

"That's no way to live!"

"At least it's living! I've seen what those raiders do—I'll do anything to avoid being caught by them."

"How do we know the raiders are even going to come through?"

"Yeah, maybe they're gone by now!"

"They could have moved on. Why would they bother coming back now that we were gone? We can go back home and we'll be safe!" a woman from Cottersville shouted.

"There is no 'safe'!" I shouted, raising my voice above the crowd. I grabbed the remains of a singed metal sign Brick carried and clanged my knife against it to quiet everybody. "There is no 'safe'!" I repeated, tossing the sign at the feet of the woman from Cottersville.

She bent down to pick it up and cried out when she realized what it was. It was the metal sign that hung in the center of Cottersville with the name of the community spelled out in large block letters. Only half the sign remained and what was left was beaten and burned.

"On our way back to the gathering we passed through Cottersville—or what was left of it." I said, my voice echoing across the valley.

"The raiders sacked it. Every building was burned to the ground. The fence was knocked over. The water pump in the center of town had been ripped up, leaving a puddle of a mess. They didn't leave anything behind. If you had stayed, you'd be dead."

The crowd whispered and murmured and the ones from Cottersville held each other, the reality of their transient existence finally sinking in. It's one thing to leave your home and hope for the best—to hope that Dom was still alive, somehow. But it was another thing entirely to get news from afar and know that there is no more hope.

"And we can find a way to fight them," I called out, getting the crowd's attention again. "Just today we were waiting at the crossroads—the same place we stopped you, Holland—and the raiders showed up. We'd been warning travelers about the raiders when that was exactly who showed up. But instead of letting them continue to raid and pillage whoever happened by, we stopped them. We lit a ring of fire and left them to either succumb to the flames or at least give warning to any coming travelers. We ruined their plans."

"And is that what we're going to do to all the raiders?" someone asked. "Light a fire and hope to scare them away?"

"We've done it before," I said. "The raiders held these two for an afternoon and I was able to rescue them. We can fight back. We can push the raiders back. We can restore order and humanity to the After. We don't have to be lost."

"I told you before about the promised land," James broke in. "It happens by doing what Kara is talking about. We have to bring about the promised land. We can't expect to wander over a hill some day and find it. We have to make it happen. And it starts by stopping the raiders."

"But how?" a man shouted. "How are we going to stop them?"

"We took away their purpose in fighting the past three days when we warned everyone in their path. Everyone we were able to warn got out of the way, at least with their lives, and we left behind nothing worth taking. Nothing worth what justifies the raiders' existence. As we gather together and organize they'll find that we are stronger than they are. We can fight them without becoming them."

"We'll cause a revolution without raising arms and we will bring the promised land into existence in the After," James finished.

The crowd cheered. It wasn't the best of speeches, but it would do. We made a plan to set out the next day and confront the raiders. None of us were exactly sure how that was going to happen, but one way or the other it would.

Late that night Brick, James and I gathered around a fire, like we had done so many times in the past year. We told James about our efforts, about the last encounter with the raiders,

about the burned out trading post. He told us about the people who had arrived and the building excitement and worry.

"What's the plan?" I asked James.

"I don't know," he said. "I think we're going to have to see what presents itself."

"I will fear no evil," Brick said solemnly.

"I think we're going to need a whole lot of that," I said.

"The real danger here is that we don't stoop to their level to defeat them," James said. "If Paul's entire idea of the promised land is going to work, if it's actually possible, we have to find a way to defeat them without slaughtering them."

"We can't become a monster in order to defeat a monster," Brick said. James and I nodded, though the unanswered question remained: how exactly do we do that?

That night I slept fitfully, tossing back and forth and strange dreams coming in an out. I dreamed of Miriam and her dying father Graham. I dreamed of Drisco, stabbing me in the back. I dreamed of Charlie, riding like the wind across the wild. I dreamed of Paul, planting seeds along a long forgotten roadbed, looking to the west for travelers who would one day find sustenance and strength from the food he was planting.

When I woke up Brick was sitting up next to me, watching me sleep.

"What?" I asked. He just looked back at me, a mix of concern and understanding on his face.

We set out later that morning, the entire group moving as one mass pilgrimage. I still marveled at the size of it. We left an incredible path in our wake, something that would cause passing travelers to scratch their heads and wonder what massive group had come through. It was like a human migration, only instead of seeking warmer climate, we were forging a better world.

Or so we hoped.

As we traveled we kept sending scouts ahead. The last thing we wanted to do was for the raiders to flip the tables and attack us when we least expected it. If we weren't organized and ready it'd be a slaughter.

After a day of travel we sent Brick ahead with Charlie to search out for the raiders and find where they were. I watched

Brick go, bouncing along as Charlie moved at a slow trot, and I hoped he'd make it back. He always did, but since that day when we lost Paul, the day when Brick fired an arrow through my arm—which had healed nicely, though I would always bear the scar—and when Brick's face was beaten so black and blue, since that day I've realized how very much we are flirting with death.

Living in the wilderness in the time of the After is a constant dance with death, but now it was an intentional dance. Before we laid low and tried to avoid any confrontation with a raider. But now we were seeking them out. It was a death wish.

Which seemed somewhat ironic considering we were doing it to preserve life. I guess you have to risk what you love in order to have it at all.

And so Brick set out early one morning while the camp was quiet and the dawn hadn't yet broke. I rose and pulled a blanket around myself and followed his path out of camp, towards a row of trees and stopped just shy of a guard on watch.

It was Bella, the married women we'd met a few days before as we were preparing to gather the people.

"Hello Kara," she said warmly, turning to see me and then looking back to her watch. She had a good view of a broad plain with scattered clumps of trees here and there. I nodded to her but didn't say anything.

We stood there in silence for a while, two women of the wild. There were many unspoken things between us, a certain kinship and a certain wonder and a certain curiosity. Women were not quite rare in the wild, but we were certainly outnumbered. As women have been victimized throughout history, so was our gender victimized in the After.

"So this little girl..." Bella began.

"Miriam."

"Yes, Miriam," Bella said. "What's to become of her?"

"Well," I began, a little unsure. "When we get her back she won't have any people. Her father and the entire community were killed by the raiders."

"That's a hard place to be."

"It is, " I nodded in agreement.

"Though I suppose at some level that's the story of humanity in the After." Again I nodded.

"Whatever happens, Kara, when we take on these raiders, I want to thank you."

"For what?" I asked.

"For what you and Brick and James are doing. You have pulled all of these people together. You've created civilization out of chaos."

"That's a overstating it a bit, isn't it?"

"It may be just the beginnings of a civilization, but that's certainly what it is."

"I guess."

"What else would you call this many people banding together against all odds?"

"A gang." My words dripped with pessimism and Bella turned to me, taking my hand in hers.

"If we slaughter the raiders and leave the land dripping in their blood, if we torture them and do unspeakable things—then you can call us a gang and we've simply scourged the land of one plague and replaced it with another. But we will do no such thing."

"I hope not."

"You have to do more than hope."

"I don't know if I can, Bella." I said, looking her in the eyes. "The anger rises up in me. When I watched Drisco stab his own men in the back, part of me knew. If he could do that to them, there was no telling what he could do to us. Perhaps he spared us, taking Miriam away in the middle of the night like he did—he could have killed us."

"But he didn't."

"But he still took Miriam."

"He did," Bella said. "And we'll get her back. And the raiders will get what's coming to them. Justice is not yours to dole out. That's just vengeance. And vengeance only begets more vengeance and it never really ends. This isn't going to end by drawing raider blood with that knife you keep strapped to your wrist."

I breathed deeply and sighed.

"I know."

We stood there in the morning silence for a while longer, feeling the sun come up behind us and begin to burn the cold of night away.

"He'll be back with us tonight, you know." Bella said. "He'll be OK."

"You mean Brick?"

"Yes."

"I know." I looked at Bella and she beamed back, then turned her eyes back to the surrounding plain. She gave me hand a squeeze and I let go and turned back to the camp.

I knew Bella's words were true. I knew Brick would come back OK. He always did return. But I wondered about what she said about my knife. I put my hand to the knife, feeling the wooden handle and checking the bands that held it to my wrist. I'd carried this knife for a long time. And part of me really wanted to sink it into Drisco's back.

Chapter 22

Brick returned to our caravan early that evening. The sun had already gone done but there was still a faint blue twilight to light the air. We heard the hoof beats coming, Charlie riding hard, and we knew it was probably Brick since our guards and scouts hadn't sent up any warning.

I was walking next to Bella, about a quarter of the way back from the front of our column. I watched as Brick rode up, dismounted and breathlessly told James—who led the column—what he had found. Another man came and took Charlie back towards the rear of the column to get some water. Brick fell in next to James and the whole caravan continued without stopping.

When he had finished giving James his report I watched as James clapped him on the back and Brick gave his usual nod but said nothing. He looked over his shoulder and caught my eye, giving the slightest flick of his head, acknowledging me. I smiled. In spite of myself I turned to look at Bella and noticed she was watching the entire exchange with a look of amusement.

Two days later it was time to put our plan to work. Brick had scouted ahead and found the raiders' own gathering place. It was where Drisco had run with Miriam, the ridge dotted with trees that Charlie and I had charged, only to be turned back by a shower of arrows and dozens of charging raiders.

Only I hadn't seen much more than that ridge and the coming surge of raiders. Brick had circled the camp and kept careful watch. It seemed there were always raiding parties coming and going, bringing back loot and food, and then heading out again to pillage some more.

I couldn't image what they found to pillage.

It sounded like this encampment was a temporary stop. We imagined the main group would plunk down somewhere and send out gangs to pick away the land until it was clean, and then the main group would pick up and move somewhere else. It

wasn't a bad plan. Like everyone else, they were nomads. But they stayed in one place long enough to make it worthwhile, maybe even planting some food and tending crops—though we couldn't be sure. This was all speculation.

At any rate, we knew where they were. And we were coming.

Two days after Brick had scouted the raiders' camp, the three of us returned. We didn't approach the tree-lined ridge that I had seen so many days before. Instead we followed a broken road bed straight into the raiders' camp. We walked in a line, James in the middle, me to the right and Brick to the left. Charlie followed a few paces behind.

The old road bed cut a path through a wooded glade. Even though the cars were long gone and the concrete road broken up, the trees had not yet reclaimed the road bed itself. The road rose slightly, meeting the ridge that curved around and was lined with trees. Beyond the ridge the road dropped into a meadow with the ridge on two sides and a thick forest on the other two sides. The raiders had made camp in the meadow, setting up road blocks at either end of the road bed, staffed with guards, as well as a watch along the ridge and even more throughout the forest.

It was evening. Sunset on the end of an era. Tomorrow a new day would dawn. Or at least we hoped it'd be a new day and not just another day of more killing and death out in the wilderness. It reminded me of something James had quoted the other day when talking to the gathering people, trying to convince them:

"He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun."

He had hoped to inspire the gathered with those words and tried to link them to the hope of the promised land. I don't think it worked. Some people heckled his fierce optimism. As much as I wanted to believe in the idea of the promised land that James so relentlessly believed in and Paul had given his life for, I wasn't sure that was the rallying cry to use. So many knew this land as anything but promise, and the idea that we could turn it into something else was practically laughable. But I kept these thoughts to myself. I wanted to have faith.

As we came up the road neither of us said much. But as we approached the guards and they pointed at us and we reached that point where we could no longer turn back, Brick spoke up:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."

James turned to Brick and smiled and nodded. Then he turned to me and did the same. Together we took a deep breath and continued forward.

There were half a dozen guards gathered at the gate and they seemed at a complete loss. Rarely would anyone ever come sauntering up to their gate who wasn't one of their own. That's who they thought we were at first, but it became clear as we drew closer that we weren't raiders.

At first they were suspicious. Bows were drawn. Blades in hand. But we didn't present a threat. Paul's rifle was still slung over my shoulder and I made no move to reach for it. Brick's bow was over his shoulder as well. James didn't even appear to carry a weapon.

Then the guards at the roadblock thought it was some kind of joke. We must have been courageously stupid or something, to waltz into the lion's den. The sun was steadily sinking, but they could make us out clearly enough.

When we were 15 feet away the main guard, a taller man with a heavy black coat covered in fringe with what looked like small pieces of bone tied to the end, raised his palm and called out to us:

"That's far enough. Who are you?" His voice was gruff and mean. But I heard a hint of fear. His fellow guards stood by uneasy, shifting on their feet and hands clutching their weapons, tightening and then easing.

"We're travelers, just passing through," James said in a cheery voice. The guards burst out laughing. I almost laughed myself. It did sound completely ridiculous.

The main guard held up his hand and silenced the others guards.

"You're not passing through," he said, shaking his head.

"No, you're right." James admitted. "We're not passing through." He paused for a moment and the guard looked at him with curiosity and a mix of dread. He knew something was coming, but he didn't know what.

"We bring word from Cottersville."

"Cottersville?" the guard asked, taken aback.

"Yes," James answered, and he pulled that charred and broken bit of the Cottersville sign from his pack and tossed it forward. It landed with a thud in the dirt and all the guards seemed to flinch. They recognized it immediately, perhaps not for the town itself but as evidence of the work of their gang.

"And what word is that?" the guard asked with a sneer, his patience beginning to be stretched and realizing that this was turning into something beyond himself.

"The promised land is coming," James said, not quite so cheerful now. "Turn from your evil ways and you will be spared."

This really got the other guards laughing, but the main guard scowled. He knew this couldn't be good. I watched him considering for a moment and then he barked an order. The laughing stopped. The gate opened and four of the guards streamed out. They surrounded us, weapons drawn. They prodded us forward, including Charlie, and we entered the raiders' camp.

As we stepped into the gate and stood before the main guard, James held out a piece of paper in his hand.

"You'll want to show this to the boss, I imagine." The guard reached out cautiously and could hardly contain his anger when he took the piece of paper and realized what it was. Our plan seemed to have worked. Our efforts thwarted one raiding party and it had enraged these raiders. At least this guard knew of the trouble and perhaps pain we had caused. But we weren't finished.

"Oh, and give Drisco our regards. I imagine he'll want to see us again."

The name of one of their own sent murmurs through the other guards standing in a circle around us. And the name seemed to crack the anger in the main guard and break into bewilderment. Not only did we seem to be behind or at least connected to an odd string of encounters a recent raiding party had, but we seemed to know Drisco, and I imagine his story had spread among the raiders with no great measure of triumph. It was possible they had even killed Drisco for his party's failure, but I imagine he spun his story well enough and had come back with the girl—enough penance to spare his life anyway. But his story would have spread, first that the entire rest of the raiding

party had been lost, but then that Drisco alone had somehow managed to return. No matter what story he told it seemed likely that there'd be plenty of distrust. By merely mentioning his name we were watering those seeds.

At this the main guard barked another order and set off, three of the other guards prodding us to follow. We walked towards a series of large tents clustered in the middle of the meadow. A few free range chickens wandered about and I saw a few farm animals—a cow and a pair of pigs—tied to stakes in the ground. There was a wagon parked next to a tent and piled with wooden boxes. Several clusters of raiders gathered around small cooking fires watched us with great interest, speaking in low voices to one another.

On the far side, close to where the ridge rose up there was a large tree with four or five huddled masses under it, ropes or chains of some type seeming to lead from each of them to the tree. It was hard to see in the growing darkness, but I assumed they were slaves.

Brick, James and I said nothing. We just followed the main guard. Charlie came along beside us, snorting occasionally—clearly not as on board with the plan as we were. Especially since the raiders kept eager eyes on Charlie.

We stopped outside the largest tent and the guard went in alone. He didn't come back out but another raider opened the tent flap and motioned us inside. Charlie had to wait outside, something none of us wanted to do but it couldn't be helped. Brick turned and nuzzled Charlie's neck and he seemed to put up with parting with us for a few minutes.

It was a makeshift tent created from scattered tarps and wooden poles. The tarps went all the way to the ground on every side and lanterns were lit through and hung from the ceiling to light the tent.

In the center of the tent was a flimsy camping table with maps spread across its surface. Food hung on strings on the far side of the tent, various dried meats and nets full of fruit. A pair of guards stood at the door, rifles tipped with knives in their hands, and another pair of guards at the back of the tent.

Leaning over the table with his back to us was a man. Sitting on the table next to him were the burned metal remains of the Cottersville sign and the scrap of paper bearing the red X's where the raiders were going to strike but for the most part weren't able to.

The man turned around and looked at us.

"James. Kara. And you, of course, are Brick," he said, sizing up each one of us. He looked older, maybe in his 30s. He actually reminded me quite a bit of Paul. He had a wearied look about him, tired and old. A few scars covered his face, one sticking out as a bare spot in a close-cropped mess of a red beard. The man's hair was short and dark, his skin seemed red in the light of the candles and lamps burning in the tent for extra light. He wore a button down shirt and no jacket or coat. He had on a pair of dark blue jeans that seemed new and a pair of brown work boots. His shirt was tucked in and he didn't seem to be carrying a weapon.

He actually didn't look like a raider. His clothes seemed foreign, though not just for a raider. I don't think I'd ever seen anyone wearing clothes that looked so new and weren't covered in dirt or patches or holes or frayed edges. I suppose the boss of a raiding gang like this got the best.

"Drisco has told me all about you," he said. "And I gather you were involved in this fiasco." He held up the map and started chuckling to himself.

"The fire. That was a good idea," he said. "I've used that one myself." I noticed Brick shifting uneasily.

"But now you just come walking right up to the front door. I can't imagine this bodes well for me and mine, now does it?"

"That's up to you," James said.

"Ah," the man said. "It always is." He wandered across the makeshift tent to a net of fruit hanging from a tent pole. He pulled out an apple and offered one to us. James shook his head.

"Drisco told me you were preaching all kinds of crap about the promised land. I know the drill. And I don't care."

"But you do care," James said. "You care about what happens here and how you and yours can continue to survive."

The man stepped forward and took a bite from the apple. He stared James down as he chewed and then turned to walk around the tent.

"Here's how this goes down," he said. "You're going to tell me what you want. I'm going to tell you that you can't have it. You're going to make me a deal. The deal's not going to be good enough and I'll ask for more—I'm a greedy bastard like that—and then you'll pull your trump card."

He paused for a moment and took a bite of apple, looking up to see if any of us would interrupt. We didn't and he continued.

"I know what you want. You want the girl and you want us to move along."

No one spoke.

"Mighty kind of you not to kill us in our sleep, by the way," he said. He began pacing the tent again. "You can't have the girl and we're not going to move along. Here's where you sweeten the deal—and I can tell you right now it involves leaving that one behind—" he motioned to me, "and giving that one another beating—" he pointed to Brick, "Oh, and the horse, too. We don't have many horses 'round here."

Still, no one spoke.

"And of course you don't like that deal, and here's where you play your trump card. So let's just get to it: what's your trump?"

"Why don't you take a look?" James said.

The man stared back at James, a bit dumbfounded.

"They haven't told you yet?" James asked. "Well, they will soon enough. But I'll save you the embarrassment. You're surrounded. We've gathered an army to come against you and now the choice is yours."

"I think I've heard this one before," the man said. "You must think I'm stupid. Let me guess, the trumpets sound and the torches ignite and oh, dear god, we're surrounded!" He threw his hands to his open mouth in mock alarm.

"Something like that," James said with a shrug. And then it happened. Shouting outside the tent and then a man sprang through the tent. He whispered in the boss' ear and then orders were barked and the four guards left us alone in the tent with the boss.

His weariness had been replaced with anger and he had a new fear evident on his face. It had been there all along and he seemed eager to hide it with his soaring pride, but he couldn't anymore. It has swelled with the news. "You can fight and you'll die," James said. "Or you can lay down arms, set captives free and make amends. There is no deal where you just move on to spread your terror somewhere else. It ends here."

The boss had been leaning over the table and when James finished he turned with his eyebrows curled and his lip turned into a mocking sneer. And it was his final expression.

An arrow sank into his back with a thud and he fell over the table dead. He never even told us his name. So much for the big scary boss man.

But this wasn't exactly part of the plan either.

We turned to see where the arrow had come from and there—no real surprise—was Drisco. His usual sneer was gone. He looked scared and frightened. Blood dripped from a gash on his forehead.

He stumbled into the tent and I surged forward to catch him. Or kill him, I wasn't quite sure. But I ended up catching him, mostly because he was almost dead already. He had an arrow sticking out of his chest and one in his shoulder, a gash across his other shoulder and his pants were wet with blood.

He fell to his knees in my arms and sputtered, "You again?"

I rolled him onto his back. Brick checked the tear in the tent Drisco had come through and then went to the door, his bow at the ready.

"What did you do?" I asked, looking down at Drisco and holding his hand in mine.

"Haven't you ever seen a coup before?" He sputtered blood again and I knew we didn't have much time.

"Where's Miriam?"

"Far tent," he gasped, struggling for air, "Hurry."

I turned to go but he squeezed my hand. I looked back.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. His face was caught in a grimace of pain but his eyes were searching, yearning. They were long past the pain now.

"I forgive you," I said, placing my left hand on his chest. The knife strapped to my wrist was actually rest on him, but it wasn't a gesture of death or vengeance. I felt the tears coming, both of relief and sorrow and anger. Part of me wanted to finish him and part of me wanted to pick him up and carry him along.

But I squeezed his hand one last time and left him there. I joined Brick and James at the door to the tent. Chaos reigned in the darkness of the meadow. Tents were on fire, supplies were burning, raiders were hacking down other raiders.

In the distance there were indeed torches burning in the night, creating a ring around the campground, but the gesture hardly seemed necessary. Whatever insurrection Drisco had started or been a part of, it was ripping the raider camp apart, without our help.

I saw Charlie, standing in the shadows of the tent, pawing at the ground and snorting as arrows sailed past. He was on the verge of panic, wanting to gallop away from all the commotion, but I think he was waiting for us.

I pushed past Brick and James towards Charlie.

"Wait, where are you going?!" James hollered.

"Miriam," I said over my shoulder and continued on.

Chapter 23

I threw myself onto Charlie, still pulling myself into the saddle as we set off across the meadow towards a lone tent on the far side.

Battles raged all around us as we galloped past, raiders shooting arrows at one another and charging with vicious blades held aloft. Flaming arrows or balls thrown from slingshots would fly through the air, exploding when they hit the ground, sending clumps of raiders scattering, some on fire.

I could see the torches on the ridge and in the forest completely encircling the camp. It gave an eerie light to everything an ominous feel that there was no escape. I knew they were the residents of Cottersville and the merchants and traders, Julio and Khdar and Holland, Bella and Johnson, and the many others. But they still seemed frightening and not reassuring. It may have been an old plan, but it seemed more than effective.

We hadn't counted on Drisco's coup, and who knew where things would have gone without that, but it didn't matter now. All that mattered was Miriam.

I kicked at Charlie's side, driving him on. He leaped over a burning fence and a flaming arrow sailed just over my head. The raiders were completely disoriented, fighting one another and hardly paying attention to us.

Charlie skidded to a stop in front of the tent and I leaped down before he even stopped. I tore into the tent with abandon ready to fling myself at anyone who stood in my way. But the tent was empty. I went to the back of the tent, turned around and cursed. I was about to storm out of the tent when I heard a small cry.

A cot. Against the wall. I dove to the ground and lifted up the blanket that hung down from the cot.

Miriam.

We lunged for each other and she was in my arms.

Safe.

"You came for me," she whispered. "I knew you would."
"Always."

I pulled her back and looked her over quickly. She seemed unharmed, though her clothes were tattered and she was dirty. I pulled her close again and held her.

"Goodness!" she cried out, looking over my shoulder towards the entrance of the tent. I turned to see Brick standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the burning night behind him. His face was smudged with black and he held a sword in one hand and his bow in the other. But a smile broke out when he saw Miriam, safe in my arms.

"Mercy!" Miriam cried out again as James appeared next to Brick. His face looked just as dirty and there was a slash across his chest. He too beamed at the site of the girl.

"Let's go," James said and the four of us left the solitary tent. The battle raged on around us. It had moved towards the tent we'd just left behind, as if the raiders had followed after me. And maybe they had.

Brick hoisted Miriam up into Charlie's saddle and then pushed me up after her. Arrows were flying towards us and a small contingent of raiders had broken away and was charging us.

I looked down at Brick as he still held my hand. He looked me in the eyes, a mix of fear and strength in his face. "Go!" he said and slapped Charlie on the backside.

Charlie took off up the ridge toward the torch bearers with James and Brick running after us. I clung to Miriam in front of me in the saddle and bent as low as I could as arrows continued to sail past. I looked behind us to see Brick pushing James up the hill in front of him and the raiders surging forward just behind them.

I kicked at Charlie and we galloped up the hill towards the torches and I realized they were also coming down the hill towards us, running. I recognized faces and as we reached the line and it parted to let us through I saw Bella. I pushed Miriam off the saddle into Bella's arms and then turned Charlie back into the fray. It happened in a moment and I didn't want to do it, but

I squeezed Miriam's hand and left her. I knew she'd be in good hands and I just hoped she knew that too.

Charlie and I rode hard down the hill, past the moving line of torch bearers. I saw James running flat out and just behind him Brick, fighting off a raider with a sword. I charged them and

Charlie reared up, kicking at the raider who was quickly joined by three more. I pushed Charlie forward between the coming raiders and Brick and he climbed into the saddle behind me and Charlie turned at the same time and we were heading back up the hill. Arrows and flames engulfed us and I don't remember what happened next.

The torchbearers from the ridge had come down to meet us, just as Charlie, Brick and I turned to surge up the hill. We made it out of harm's way and the raiders were pushed back with flame and fear.

Brick told me what happened later, how he had to hold me in the saddle as we went back up the hill to keep me from falling out, but when we reached the top and safety I seemed to come to. And that's when I remember sliding off of Charlie and holding Brick in one hand, grasping for James in another and then Miriam wrapping around all of us. We collapsed into the dirt on the top of that ridge, Charlie and Bella looking on and both beaming at us (if a horse can smile).

Exhausted and tired I couldn't believe that we'd done it. We'd rescued Miriam. We'd stopped the raiders. And it seemed that we'd done it without tremendous bloodshed. Maybe James and Paul were right. Maybe the promised land could actually happen here and now in the wilderness of the After.

The dawn broke early the next day and the sun rose over a smoldering meadow. But it was a new day.

Drisco's insurrection had decimated the raider gang. The infighting had killed most of them. A few dozen had tried to charge the ring of torchbearers in a few places, but they never made it through. When the group came down to meet Brick, James, Miriam, Charlie and myself that was the only fighting between our group and the raiders.

Miraculously none of our group had died. There were some injuries. A few arrow wounds, but nothing fatal. The group that had actually engaged the raiders were armed with torches and

swords and only a few of them had any scratches. James had a slash across his chest but it mostly cut apart his coat and shirt. There was a thin, shallow cut across his chest where the blade had just nicked him, but he'd be fine. Brick had a few cuts and scrapes, and a gash in his arm that would need stitching.

But considering that three of us, four including Charlie, had just walked into their camp and come out with Miriam, it was amazing none of us were killed and there weren't more of us injured.

You could easily chalk it up to luck. Anyone who had doubted our ability to take on the raiders had every right to blame our victory on good timing and a lucky break and they'd be right. But we'd take it anyway.

We thanked Drisco for it. We'll never know what he intended. If he actually knew we were coming and planned the coup as a diversion. Or if it really was a lucky break. We didn't know if he'd been in on the planning or if it just happened to work out. We didn't have any answers.

I still wanted to know why he'd turned on us. And then seemed to have turned back. I wanted to know if he was a person of character, if there had been motive behind all that madness, or if it was just constantly shifting self preservation and he'd been caught in too many traps and forced to turn back too many times.

It didn't matter now. Drisco was dead.

In the morning we collected the bodies and volunteers came to dig a grave. A few grumbled at the prospect, but we insisted and the reservations quickly died away.

"We're not like them," James said. "How we treat the dead, any dead, is one of the ways we prove it."

Spare shovels were found and groups went to work. In the end every one pitched in, rotating in and out and the mass grave was ready in short order.

But while the rest worked at that, I walked away by myself and started digging a single grave with Paul's rifle. Soon Brick came along to help, with Miriam holding his hand. James joined us as well.

"He wasn't one of them," I explained as simply as I could. He wasn't quite one of us either. He walked a fine line going back

and forth from savagery to civilized, unsure of where he stood. I think he made mistakes along the way, mistakes he regretted, but ultimately he served as a force for good. He helped usher in the promised land, something he would still probably scoff at.

I held Miriam's hand while Brick and James carried Drisco's body to the grave and gently laid it in the soil.

"That's the man who was with me through the valley," Miriam said. I nodded, thinking she meant the valley where Drisco had killed the other two raiders and rescued them, or perhaps the time Drisco took her and I tried to chase him down. Later I realized she was referring to the lines of scripture that Paul had repeated for her, the ones Brick had seemed to memorize. She meant the valley of the shadow of death. And somehow, in some incomprehensible way, Drisco had kept her safe. It certainly wasn't the easy way around, but she was safe.

We each sprinkled a handful of earth over Drisco. Then Brick used the rifle to push the pile of loose soil back in to the grave and finished the job. When he handed the rifle back to me I dug a long trench in the earth around his grave. I pulled Paul's bag of seeds from under my coat.

Miriam looked up at me and I gave her a handful and Brick a handful and James a handful, and together the four of us sprinkled seeds along the trench in the dirt.

It was the promised land here and now in that very meadow in the wilderness of the great After when the spark of humanity flickered on.

Epilogue

A year later the three of us parted company once again. We stood on the top of a hill at a crossroads. Brick and I followed James as far as the crossroads to wish him farewell.

Miriam stayed back with her momma and papa—Bella and Johnson, who it turned out weren't able to bear children but joyfully accepted Miriam as their own—and had already cried and pleaded and begged for James (whom she still called Mercy) to stay behind.

"But there are other children out there in the wild who need to be rescued, who need someone to walk with them in the valley, who need a shepherd to forsake all to rescue them."

She nodded her head and wiped back the tears and wrapped her arms around James. He wiped away his own tears and kissed her forehead. He was fingering his beads as he walked away from her.

Brick and James embraced and held one another for a long time. They stepped apart, tears in both their eyes, and it was my turn. James came at me from the side, to get around my pregnant belly and still get both arms around me and not squish the baby. We laughed and we both cried.

James stepped away from me and Brick came to my side and took my hand. I held out Paul's rifle and the bag of seed to James.

"I think you always should have carried these, right from the start," I said.

"No," James said smiling, "I think Paul wanted you to carry them for a while. Brick and I, we were both predisposed to believe in the promised land as Paul described it and would have worked to make it happen from the start. But you..." he trailed off.

"I needed some prodding?" I offered.

"Maybe," James said, "But more than anything I think the idea of the promised land had to win over your heart. It never would have happened without you."

I blushed and didn't say anything.

"You take care of that daughter," James said.

"And you be careful out there," I answered. "But not too careful."

James nodded and he set out into the wild to spread the promised land as far as it would go.

Brick and I clasped hands and headed back to Paul's village, the community we had started in the ashes of the raiders camp, the place where our first daughter would be born.

Postscript

Thanks for reading this free PDF version of *Least of These*. You can read more about the process behind this novel, the author's reflections on the post-apocalyptic genre and discover more from this author online at KevinDHendricks.com.