

RECLAMATION

THE DURANGO CHRONICLES

BOOK ONE



AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRUNO MILLER

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In the rugged, snow-capped mountains of Colorado, a new dawn breaks over a world reshaped by the apocalypse. This first book in the Dark Road spin-off series follows Ben and his family after returning to the heart of the San Juan Mountain range in Durango, Colorado to rebuild their lives after a harrowing cross-country journey. But survival in this new reality is anything but simple.

As the group settles into their mountain homestead, they face relentless challenges—harsh weather, dwindling resources, and the ever-present threat of hostile factions vying for control of the surrounding territory. Tensions rise when a nearby militia offers protection in exchange for allegiance, forcing Ben to weigh the cost of safety against the price of freedom.

For Joel and Allie, young love blossoms amid the chaos, but their growing independence clashes with Ben's cautious leadership. Meanwhile, Emma, Brad and Sandy carve out their own paths, discovering untapped talents that could make or break the group's survival.

As external threats mount and internal dynamics shift, the family must unite against forces that seek to exploit the fragile peace they've built. Their fight is no longer just to live—it's to thrive, preserve their freedom, and forge a future worth fighting for.

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Reclamation: The Durango Chronicles Book 1

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PROLOGUE



Ben stood on the wraparound deck overlooking the driveway and front yard, coffee mug in one hand, rifle slung over his shoulder, staring out over the valley below. The crisp morning air bit at his exposed skin as the sun crested the ridge to the east, casting long beams of golden light across the frost-coated pines. The scent of woodsmoke clung to his clothes, mixing with the ever-present smell of damp earth and pine resin. From this vantage point, their land stretched out before him, an expanse of forest and meadow that had once felt like freedom. Now it felt like an insufficient buffer between his family and the fractured world that waited beyond.

They'd been back at the homestead for a few months now, but the memories of the cross-country journey—the dangers, close calls, near misses, and people they'd encountered along the way—lingered just beneath the surface. It showed in the way his new family moved, in the way they spoke, in who they were becoming.

Emma was no exception, and Ben feared she'd been the most negatively impacted. She hadn't fully let go of what they'd seen. None of them ever could, but at nearly thirteen, Emma tried to act older, tougher—but the nights still gave her away. The nightmares came often, creeping into her sleep and pulling her awake with a gasp or a muffled cry. And when they did, she never stayed in the loft.

Even though she shared the upstairs space with Allie, her little brother Brad, and her older brother Joel, Emma almost always made her way down the creaking stairs and curled up on the bench in the mud room just outside Ben and Sandy's bedroom.

She said it was warmer downstairs. Said it was quieter. But Ben knew the truth.

He wouldn't have been surprised to find her wedged between them in bed one morning. After everything they'd survived, he couldn't fault her for it.

Sandy was no stranger to losing sleep, thanks to recurring nightmares of her own. She rarely talked about them, but Ben didn't need the details. He saw it in the way she woke with a start, breathing hard, eyes distant, as if some shadow from the past had reached into her dreams. She carried it differently than Emma, more quietly, more privately, but it weighed on her all the same.

She didn't care to join them on their infrequent trips into town either. Said she preferred to stay behind with the dogs and hold down the fort, but Ben knew better. Sandy had seen enough bad things on the road to last her a while. Towns made her uneasy now—the crowds, the desperation, the shifting eyes sizing up their every move. Up here, on the mountain, things were harder in a lot of ways, but at least they made sense. Up here, you saw what was coming. Or sometimes you could at least entertain the illusion that you might be able to.

Brad, at just ten years old, had weathered the cross-country trip like it was some grand adventure—at least on the surface. He talked about it the way someone might talk about a movie they'd seen. The cities they passed through, the potential for danger lurking around every bend in the road, the close calls with raiders and looters. He recounted it all with wide eyes and an eager tone, like a story he couldn't wait to retell. But Ben knew better. He saw the cracks.

Sometimes, when Brad thought no one was watching, he'd sit by himself and trace the barrel of his rifle with his finger, not like he was afraid of it, but like he didn't quite understand what it had cost him to carry it. There were nights when Ben caught him staring out the window, eyes narrow, jaw clenched, quiet and still like he was trying to will away whatever images were playing behind his eyes. Ben worried that Brad had learned too quickly to hide the parts of himself that hurt.

To pretend.

The boy laughed a little too loud at the dinner table and shrugged off too many moments that should've rattled him. But the world didn't allow for

childhood anymore, and whatever innocence Brad had left was fading under the weight of everything he'd seen.

Joel and Allie, both seventeen, had endured the same road, but where Brad escaped into imagination, they had been shaped by reality. Hardened by it. The long drive across the country and back through the collapsed remnants of what used to be America had sharpened their instincts like blades honed on stone. Every town they passed reeked of abandonment: burned-out vehicles, boarded windows, the stench of death and decay seeping from buildings that hadn't seen life in months. They'd picked through those husks carefully, learning to read the silence, to feel the shift in the air when danger crept close.

Joel had become situationally aware—to a fault. He noticed every unnatural shadow, every broken branch along a trail, every flicker of movement on a ridgeline. He didn't relax, not fully, not even here. Ben was proud of his oldest son and the man he was becoming, although the feeling was tempered by a healthy dose of guilt.

Allie was the same. She moved with a quiet precision now, her rifle always within reach, her voice steady even when things went sideways. Long gone were the days of reminding any of the kids or Sandy to carry their weapons.

Joel and Allie's bond had grown stronger through it all, forged in shared fear and quiet resilience. But Ben sometimes caught them in rare, unguarded moments—like when Joel traced the scars on Allie's forearm with a fingertip or when she leaned her head against his shoulder after a long day without saying a word. Those were the moments that reminded Ben how young they still were.

They shouldn't have had to become this. But the trip had demanded it of them. The world had taken their youth and traded it for survival. And now, every time Ben looked at them, he saw not just who they were but who they'd been forced to become.

The trip to Maryland and back had tested every fiber of who they were—physically, mentally, spiritually. It had pushed them to the edge more times than Ben could count, forced them to make impossible choices, to live on instinct and prayer, and to face down the worst of what humanity had become. And yet, by the grace of God, by more luck than he'd ever admit out loud, and through the unshakable bond they'd formed by refusing to leave one another behind, they'd made it home.

Sometimes, Ben still couldn't believe it. On certain mornings, when he slept in after spending half the night pacing the yard in restless worry, he would wake in that fragile space between dreaming and reality and momentarily forget where he was.

He'd lie there in the silence of his room, hearing the wind move through the trees, the slow creak of the old house settling, and for a second, his mind would go back to the road—the smell of diesel and burnt rubber, the distant echo of gunfire, the taste of ash in his mouth from a fire they barely outran. He'd wake with his jaw tight and his hand already reaching for the rifle that now lived beside his bed like an old friend.

And then he'd hear the clatter of breakfast being made just outside the door. The low bark of Sam out in the yard or Brad arguing with Emma over something small, something wonderfully normal. He'd smell woodsmoke and coffee, hear the familiar scrape of a chair on the hardwood floor. Those little sounds reminded him that they were home. That somehow, against all odds, they'd made it.

The road had left its mark, carved something permanent into each of them, Ben included. It had jaded him in ways he didn't always recognize until they caught up with him—ways that made him question the good in people or brace for a fight when there wasn't one coming. But for all it had taken from him, it had also left something behind: gratitude. A deep, bone-level thankfulness for every morning he woke up under this roof, for every meal they ate together, for every time he saw the kids laughing—really laughing—in the light of a fire or out in the yard with the dogs.

Because in a world that had taken so much, what they had now was everything. And Ben would never stop fighting to keep it.

He grabbed the French press off the deck railing and poured the last of its precious contents into his mug as he paced a few slow steps across the porch. His eyes followed the driveway out to where it met the county road that bordered their land to the north. Saddle Trail was the only way in or out by vehicle—a narrow, winding stretch of dirt road that dead-ended less than a mile past their place at the edge of land belonging to the BLM, the Bureau of Land Management.

He liked that. The limited access. The natural barriers. The fact that the nearest paved road was all the way at the bottom of the mountain. That was why he bought the place to begin with. It felt tucked away and protected—a

kind of sanctuary, the last sliver of peace in a world that had largely fallen apart. But solitude wasn't guaranteed. Not anymore.

They'd had a few strangers make their way up the mountain this fall, bold enough—or desperate enough—to test their luck. Most didn't make it past the property line, thanks to the dogs. The trio had become an extension of the family's security system, just as vital as the weapons stashed near every exit and the perimeter checks Ben did religiously at first light and before bed. Gunner and Sam were always the first to raise the alarm, their warning barks slicing through the quiet air long before anyone ever laid eyes on a stranger, and he was grateful for their help even when the stranger turned out to be a curious black bear.

Gunner had proven himself over and over again. The burley, thick-chested Chesapeake Bay retriever was protective, intelligent, and fiercely loyal. He rarely left Joel's or Allie's sides and had a sixth sense for reading tension, stepping between people when things got heated, or standing sentry at night when something didn't feel right. During the road trip east and back again, he'd tangled with more than one threat—human and otherwise—and had the scars to prove it. He was a guardian in every sense of the word.

Sam, the yellow Lab, had a more easygoing spirit, but when it came down to it, she wouldn't hesitate to put herself between the family and danger. She'd spent the trip alert, her nose always in the air, and she had an uncanny knack for alerting the family to things long before the rest of them noticed.

And then there was Bajer, the medium-sized brindle-coated mut that was skittish around strangers and quick to retreat at loud noises. But when Emma was cornered by the pack of coyotes in the desert that last night on the road, Bajer had launched herself into the fray without hesitation. She saved Emma from certain injury, taking a wound herself in the process. She was healing nicely but would probably never lose the slight limp or the cantered angle to her run. But what she lacked in grace these days she more than made up for with her friendship with Emma. She might not have the size or the confidence of the other two, but when it mattered most, Bajer had stood her ground. Emma hadn't let go since.

Ben had no problem working a little harder to make sure all three of the dogs had enough to eat. In his eyes, they'd earned it a hundred times over. They weren't just watchdogs or camp alarms. They were part of the family—loyal, brave, and as scarred by the trip as the rest of them.

Ben took another sip of coffee as he eyed the Honda FourTrax ATV near the detached two-car garage. Its faded red body stood out against the colors of the autumn landscape. Ben's jaw tightened as he glanced at it. Joel had begged for it. Said it would be better on fuel, easier to take into town, and a big help around the homestead.

He'd worn Ben down with logic and persistence, and in the end, they'd traded one of the hunting rifles they'd acquired on the road trip, a box of MREs, and two hundred rounds of .223 to an old rancher at the barter market in Santa Rita Park. Ben hated parting with the rifle and the ammo even more. But the truth was, he was sick of MREs anyway.

Now, a couple of months later, he still wasn't sure if they'd gotten the better end of that trade. The FourTrax had yet to run, at least for more than a few minutes, while Joel manipulated the throttle to keep the ATV sputtering along. The thing needed carburetor work and a few other things they were keeping an eye out for on their trips into town, scavenging what they could and trading for the rest at the barter market.

Ben leaned from side to side, stretching out his back as he watched two bushy-tailed fox squirrels chase each other up the side of the house and across the roof. The log home stood three stories tall if you counted the daylight basement that was fully exposed on the southern side but hidden in the back by the slope of the mountain. Nestled among the trees against the edge of a steep incline, the log home blended in well with its surroundings. The sharply pitched, dark green pro-panel roof, designed to shed the heavy and plentiful snowfalls, was almost invisible from the road through the evergreens.

It was a sturdy home. The full-cut logs that made up the main structure provided excellent insulation qualities and could withstand the worst nature could throw at it: deep snow, bitter cold, and relentless wind, all of which they saw plenty of at an elevation of nine thousand feet. But Ben wasn't sure how much longer it could withstand all six of them living on top of one another. Finishing the build-out of the basement was high on his list of things to do, but there would be plenty of time for inside work come winter.

The log home had originally been built as a vacation retreat—something the previous owner, a man from Texas, had intended to use for winter getaways filled with skiing and snowmobiling. But when his kids grew older and began craving the convenience and social buzz of town life, the family had packed up and moved closer to Durango.

That decision had likely cost them their lives.

And in a bitter twist of fate, it had saved Ben's. Saved all of theirs.

Now the cabin wasn't just a place for escape. It was *home*. The only home they had left. Not that Ben had ever owned more than one, but this place had a finality to it. A sense of permanence born of necessity, not choice. It wasn't a backup plan anymore. It was the only plan.

The main floor housed the kitchen, dining area, and living room, all open concept, centered around the woodstove that kept the worst of the cold at bay on the coldest of winter nights. The master bedroom was tucked off to the side, with doors that led out onto the large wraparound deck that spanned the front two sides of the house, facing Saddle Trail at an angle.

The second-floor loft held two small bedrooms and a cramped bathroom, space that had once felt cozy but now felt crowded. Joel and Brad shared one room, which was quickly proving to be a mistake. Allie and Emma had the other, though most nights, now that the weather was turning, someone ended up on the couch downstairs with a collection of dogs scattered around the woodstove.

The basement was where Ben planned to focus most of his energy once winter set in. There were other priorities for the time being, but his mind wandered there often. Below his feet sat an unfinished space full of potential and purpose. It held the six-thousand-gallon cistern that stored their potable water pumped in from the well and the small workshop he'd carved out of a back corner—a cluttered mess of tools, gear, weapons, and his reloading equipment crammed onto an overburdened workbench.

There were also building materials stacked and waiting, supplies Ben had left over from the bathroom he'd built down there last year, as well as additional materials he'd gathered back when his plans for the basement were still just that: plans. Enough lumber, drywall, and hardware to frame out a larger workshop and decent-sized office. The office would give him a secure space for his gun safe, which was currently crammed into the corner of his crowded workshop, and serve as extra storage for overflow inventory from the shop. He hadn't touched the materials since the world changed, but with the help of the solar panels on the garage roof and the portable generator, it would all take shape soon.

The basement was also home to nearly everything they'd managed to collect during their long journey. Ben had made it a rule early on: leave nothing of value behind unless the risk of taking it outweighed the reward.

That mindset had served them well. He and the others had been meticulous, stopping to gather weapons, ammunition, and gear whenever the opportunity presented itself. They'd sacrificed comfort in the vehicles to make it work, cramming bags into footwells, stuffing supplies under seats, and riding elbow to elbow—or sometimes elbow to tail—for hundreds of miles. But in the end, the tradeoff had been worth it. Now they had a small armory's worth of supplies.

The kids weren't getting any smaller. And he might have been getting ahead of himself, but someday, maybe not long from now, Joel and Allie would want space of their own. They were already spending more and more time together—and apart from the others whenever they could manage it. Not in a way that worried him, but in the quiet, certain way that allowed people to build something between them. Ben wasn't blind. He'd seen the shift in their glances, the way they moved in sync without thinking. The kind of closeness that came from having survived something together.

He didn't expect them to live under his roof forever.

But maybe, just maybe, if he could give them a piece of it, something real, something that felt like theirs, they wouldn't feel the need to look elsewhere too soon. Not that there were many options. The world wasn't exactly handing out starter homes and happy endings anymore. Still, Ben knew the pull of independence, especially in people like Joel and Allie. Capable. Strong. Determined to stand on their own feet.

He couldn't stop that. Wouldn't try to.

But if he could make the basement more than just a cold concrete storage room, if he could carve something livable out of the bare walls and dim light, it might be enough to keep them here a little longer.

And that, he had to admit, was partly selfish.

Because keeping them here—safe, under his roof, where he could see them, talk to them, make sure they were okay—meant something. More than he could say out loud.

Ben shifted his weight, the worn deck creaking softly beneath his boots. His coffee had long gone cold, but he still held the mug loosely in one hand, staring down the dirt road that snaked past their property. The sun had just crested the eastern ridgeline, casting a warm golden glow across the frost-laced clearing that surrounded the homestead. The tall pines beyond the fields caught the morning light, their dark green tips glowing where the light hit them, as if the forest itself was slowly waking.

It was going to be a good day—weather-wise, at least. The sky was crisp and cloudless, and the breeze barely rustled the trees. The kind of fall day Ben used to love, the kind that made you want to split firewood just to warm up. But seasons didn't mean the same thing they used to. Winter wasn't just cold anymore. It was scarcity, risk, desperation. And as that long stretch of bitter months crept closer, it pushed people further into corners—people who might once have been decent but were now hollow-eyed and desperate. Ben had seen what that urgency did to folks. The sliver of humanity that had survived the collapse was fading, peeling away under the weight of need.

The front door creaked open behind him.

"All right, go on," Sandy said gently, her voice cutting through the quiet as she ushered the dogs out onto the deck. Sam, the yellow Lab, bounded through first, tail wagging, her nose in the air. Gunner, heavier and more deliberate in his movements, followed behind, his amber eyes scanning the tree line even as he moved. Bajer came last, the medium-sized mutt pausing in the doorway, giving Sandy a hesitant look before trotting outside.

Ben reached down and scratched behind Sam's ears as the dog brushed past, then gave Gunner a solid pat on the ribs. "Keep 'em out of trouble, will ya?" he muttered.

Sandy stepped onto the deck, a fresh mug of coffee in hand. Steam rose from it, curling into the cool morning air. She held it out to him.

"I figured yours was cold," she said, her eyes tired but kind.

Ben took the mug and nodded. "Thanks."

Sandy tucked her arms around herself, rubbing her hands along the sleeves of her sweater. "It's colder than I thought," she said, stepping up beside him. Her breath fogged in the air as she exhaled. "I hope today's quiet. Maybe folks are finally hunkering down."

"Would be nice," Ben said, taking a sip of the fresh coffee. It was hot, strong, and almost painfully bitter, but it grounded him. "We could use a stretch without strangers wandering up the mountain."

Sandy made a quiet noise of agreement. "I don't miss town. Not one bit. Seen enough hungry eyes and forced smiles to last me a while."

Ben didn't reply right away. The two of them stood there in silence, watching the dogs sniff their way across the yard. Frost crunched beneath their paws in the areas still out of the sun's reach, and Sam's nose led her to the edge of the driveway overlooking the meadow to their south, where she

paused and barked twice—just for show. Gunner ignored her, pacing the perimeter like he always did, slow and deliberate, every movement purposeful. Bajer, thinner-furred and unimpressed with the cooler temperatures, didn't venture far before turning back toward Sandy with hopeful eyes.

"You go on in," Ben said, placing a hand on Sandy's back. "Take Bajer. I'll stay out with Gunner and Sam for a bit."

She hesitated, her fingers brushing over his hand briefly. "Don't stay too long. I'll have breakfast ready soon."

"I won't," he said, though he probably would.

Sandy called softly to Bajer, and the dog followed her willingly back inside, her paws tapping the wood. The door clicked shut behind them, and the sounds of the world narrowed again—just the distant caws of crows, the occasional breeze in the trees, and the rhythmic crunch of Gunner's slow patrol around the yard.

Ben turned his attention back toward the road. Nothing moved down there, but that didn't ease the pressure in his chest.

His thoughts shifted—inevitably—to Slade.

Victor Slade and the Faction. A group of predators, dressed in the scraps of the old world's colors, preying on whoever was weakest. They operated out of the valley north of town toward Hermosa from a commandeered cattle ranch turned fortress. Slade's people had left the homestead alone so far, likely due to its isolation and the fact that Ben's place wasn't easy pickings. But Slade was ambitious, and ambition didn't care about boundaries.

Ben's hand tightened slightly on the railing as he scanned the distant tree line, then the bend in the road beyond the clearing.

He knew the quiet wouldn't last forever.

But what gnawed at him just as much, maybe more, was Caldwell and his so-called La Plata Raiders.

Caldwell claimed to be restoring law and order. Claimed to be protecting the towns and ranches still trying to make it. But everything Ben had heard suggested that protection came at a cost—and people did not always pay willingly. The Raiders were organized—trained even—and well-armed, but the line between order and occupation was growing thinner by the week.

They called themselves the good guys. But the world wasn't that simple anymore.

Slade was a known evil. Caldwell was a question mark. And Ben had no love for either.

His breath fogged as he exhaled slowly, the weight of responsibility heavy across his shoulders.

He'd survived worse. They all had. But the months ahead felt like they were closing in, narrowing to a point. Like the air was getting thinner. There was no room for mistakes. The weekly trips into town in an effort to bolster their supplies for the coming months were getting riskier by the day.

Ben took another sip of coffee and turned back to watch the dogs. Gunner paused near the edge of the driveway, his ears flicking toward something in the woods. Ben followed his gaze, but whatever the big dog had heard didn't repeat itself.

Still, Gunner didn't bark. Just stood there, perfectly still.

That, more than anything, made Ben uneasy.

A long winter was coming.

And it wasn't just snow they needed to be ready for.

CHAPTER ONE



The air at the tail end of October was crisp, carrying the earthy scent of fallen leaves and acceptance of the colder weather to come. The San Juan Mountains surrounding Durango were alive with a patchwork of fiery reds, oranges, and golds as the aspens clung to their last bits of color before winter claimed the land. It had been just a little under five months since Ben and his family arrived home from their harrowing cross-country journey. But who could keep track? Life had begun to settle into something resembling a routine, but the unease of the world's collapse lingered like a hungry wolf, ready to snap at any moment. It made counting the days feel like watching an hourglass lose sand.

Ben stood on the porch, a steaming mug of coffee in hand, his eyes scanning the tree line at the edge of the property. The dogs—Gunner and Sam—rambled through the yard, sniffing at the recent path made by a small herd of mule deer that had grazed their way through the somewhat domesticated section of yard last night while migrating to the lower elevations in response to the recent cold spell. The canine duo eventually gave up any hope of finding the long-gone trespassers and resumed chasing each other in lazy loops. For a moment, the scene was almost idyllic. And the current sip of coffee held more than caffeine; it held the promise that today would bring something better, something Ben had hoped for, although he wasn't sure what that was anymore.

Behind him, the house was alive with the quiet hum of morning activity. Sandy had recruited Emma to help her sort supplies at the kitchen table and create a list of what they might need in the coming weeks, their voices low

as they assessed their dwindling supply of empty jars and loose lids. They'd already used most of the canning supplies that Ben, Joel, and Allie had acquired on their trips into town, another of which they were making today. Ben was currently taking a break from prepping for the excursion. It wasn't so much the gear and tradable supplies that required his planning, though; it was what they might find in town. Or, rather, who they might find.

Brad was at the wood pile, determinedly swinging an ax that seemed almost too big for his ten-year-old frame. Every so often, the sharp crack of splitting wood echoed across the clearing, a reward for his carefully balanced and controlled swings. Ben had recently felled a dead-standing aspen, cutting the logs a bit shorter than usual. The softer, less dense wood was perfect for helping his youngest hone his wood-splitting skills—and boosting his confidence with every successful strike.

Ben walked to the corner of the wraparound deck and watched Brad lop a piece of aspen in two. “Looking good, buddy. Try keeping your feet apart. Like this,” Ben said, demonstrating. “And don't swing so hard. Let the weight of the ax do the work.”

Brad nodded, gripping the handle tightly as he mimicked Ben's stance. His first swing sent the ax into the log at an awkward angle, but it still split in two. He grinned, looking up at his father.

“Not bad.” Ben nodded. “Keep it up and we'll have enough wood to last through February.”

Brad let the eight-pound splitting maul rest on the chopping block and looked up, wiping a trickle of sweat from his face. “Thanks. I'm getting hot, though.” He shed his vest and readied himself for another swing.

“That's the thing about firewood. It warms you twice,” Ben joked.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Brad huffed.

Ben let Brad have at it while trying not to hover and surveyed the muddy mess the backyard had become. There were picks, shovels, various hand tools, and piles of dirt and rock here and there. Joel and Allie were busy preparing for the next stage of the root cellar project—a labor they'd thrown themselves into over the past couple of months. The two had taken ownership of the effort, and although Ben, Sandy, and the others had pitched in by hauling countless buckets of dirt and rock away from the site, Joel and Allie had done most of the digging. The cellar stretched nearly ten feet into the slope behind the house, with a width of about eight feet. It might have been deeper if it wasn't for the car-sized boulder the kids had

run into at the back wall. Carving it out of the rocky hillside had been slow, grueling work, but they were proud of how far it had come.

The cold storage was nearly ready. They had reinforced the walls with carefully chosen young lodgepole pines, stripped and straightened to brace the earthen walls and prevent collapse. Leftover insulation and salvaged building materials from Ben's basement remodel had been repurposed to line the ceiling and walls, adding a layer of protection against the damp and fluctuating temperatures.

Today marked a major step forward. Joel and Allie planned to install shelves they had built from scavenged scrap wood, turning the rough space into usable storage. The final touch would be fitting the heavy door they'd found during one of their foraging trips. It was an old exterior door from a farmhouse that had seen better days, but with some patching and reinforcement, it would do the job.

Once the door was hung and secured with a lock, the cellar would finally be ready to store canned goods, vegetables, and anything else they could hunt, gather, or barter for before winter set in. Provided, of course, they could find enough supplies to fill it.

Due to its cooling properties, the root cellar project had felt like a bigger priority during the warmer months, but as winter approached, its importance hadn't waned. Just because the outside temperatures would soon drop well below freezing didn't mean food storage would be simple. Sub-zero cold could spoil canned goods, ruin preserved foods, and damage meats just as much as heat. The cellar would provide a stable environment, shielding their supplies from the harsh fluctuations of mountain weather—and the wild, four-legged neighbors that prowled the woods.

There was another benefit, too. The basement area around Ben's workshop, once a tidy, organized space, had begun to resemble a prepper's paradise, packed with jars, bags of dried goods, and other things they'd bartered for. It wasn't a bad problem to have, but space was becoming scarce. Moving supplies into the root cellar would free up room for other projects that Ben would have to tackle during the frigid months ahead, when working outside wouldn't be a viable option.

"Looking good, guys," Ben called out to Joel and Allie as they emerged from the cold cellar.

"Thanks," Allie said, her face already smeared with dirt.

“We might have it buttoned up today, maybe before the trip,” Joel reported.

“And not a moment too soon.” Ben glanced out over the mountains, at the graying sky toward New Mexico. “Weather’s changing fast.”

Joel and Allie both nodded in agreement and got back to work as Ben returned to the section of porch overlooking the front yard, sipping his coffee and keeping an eye on the dogs. He was anxious to get back to work, but his mind was preoccupied.

Colder days were approaching fast, and while they’d made progress preparing for the leaner months ahead, there was still so much to do. Winter in the mountains could be harsh under normal circumstances. And this would be no normal winter without the assistance of modern-day creature comforts. There were hard times ahead. They all knew that but chose instead to leave their worries unspoken for the most part, although there was no denying that life here at five thousand feet would test their preparedness—and their resilience.

Ben let out a sharp whistle in an effort to reel the dogs in a little, the sound mimicking the cries of a bird of prey circling high above on the morning thermals. The sound wasn’t accidental; he’d perfected it over the years, a subtle trick to avoid drawing unwanted attention in the woods. Although they were miles from civilization and over half a mile from their closest neighbor, it still felt wrong—dangerous, even—to make unnecessary noise. They were home now, but that was no reason to let their guard down.

Ben swallowed the last of his third cup of coffee, a luxury he’d allowed himself today for no particular reason. Staring out toward the dirt road that ran past their property, he thought back to the day they pulled into the driveway after the cross-country journey that had nearly killed them all on more than one occasion.

Life was better now, but there was an underlying current of concern in the air that couldn’t be ignored. Winter was coming, and while they were no longer fighting off highway bandits or crazy cult leaders, all was far from well with the world. There were factions in town laying claim to the void left behind by the lack of law and order in Durango. Ben imagined that was the case in many small towns across the country, although this one was his only concern.

They’d enjoyed the relative safety of what passed for a civilized town these days, but trouble was brewing. Ben saw it coming. A power struggle

between those who had and those who did not. Winter would not be kind to those without provisions or shelter, and that was a recipe for disaster at best and a revolt at worst. The change of seasons would flush out the weak and the desperate. And Ben knew all too well what desperation could do to a man. He and the others had seen it on the road and escaped the consequences of those human traits by the grace of God and their wits.

Ben blew out a deep breath of cool morning air. It felt good to be home in the Rockies and back on familiar ground, but it was somewhat bittersweet considering what they faced. He'd never discount the incredible fortune he'd been given—all of his kids, safe and here with him. But the reality of their futures remained uncertain.

The temperatures were noticeably cooler these last couple of weeks. There was even a slight dusting of snow on the higher peaks to the west. The seasons were changing, and that meant more than just a change in weather. The post-apocalyptic world they'd been forced to embrace was changing, too. There had been a sense of community to some degree when they first arrived back in Durango. Many had chosen to support their neighbors when they had the means. But that sentiment was fading fast as supplies dwindled and the realization of the cold, dark winter ahead seeped into the forefronts of their minds.

Hardship was unavoidable and impending. Everyone in town knew it. You could see it on their faces, in the way the people looked at Ben and the kids as they made their way through town, looking to barter for goods and supplies. Today would be no different when they attempted to trade some of Ben's silver coins for chickens. Word had it that there would be a man in Santa Rita Park this afternoon looking to unload some livestock he could no longer feed. A smart move with winter approaching, and Ben was hoping to capitalize on it.

But they'd have to be careful today. They always were, but the deteriorating weather and the nature of the deal they hoped to negotiate were good reasons to take extra precautions. But that's why Ben had insisted on Sandy coming with them today. Joel and Allie were almost always up for a trip into town, but Sandy did her best to avoid the place. The memories of her past life were too fresh to confront. Too raw. Ben didn't push her. If he could have avoided town, he probably would have, too.

He didn't like seeing the burned-out storefronts, particularly his old shop, which was now inhabited by an ever-changing assortment of homeless survivors who were using the remains of the building as a camp near the center of town. He didn't begrudge the survivors what meager shelter the skeleton of a building provided. It was the loss that hurt him the most. He'd worked hard to build a business to support his family. And now there was nothing left of his dream except a few hats and T-shirts around the house bearing the store's logo. Nothing lasted forever. Just like the small window of time they had to get into town and get back before dark. All the more reason to get back inside and finish preparation for their trip into Durango today.

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CHAPTER TWO



The mid-morning sun filtered through the building clouds to their east, casting long shadows across the gravel driveway as Ben hooked up the flatbed trailer and made sure they had everything they needed to barter for the chickens he hoped to bring home. The chill of the October air hadn't relented much this morning. The sun's warming rays struggled to penetrate the looming gray skies that were settling in over the mountain. Ben's breath lingered in front of him in soft plumes as he hooked the trailer's safety chains to the Blazer's hitch.

Joel and Allie stood by the porch steps, quietly exchanging words while checking over their gear. The AR-15 Joel had built for Allie was slung across her shoulder, while Joel himself stuffed a couple of Nalgene's full of water into a backpack and then adjusted the custom Colt 1911 that his grandfather Jack had given to him. The brushed nickel finish and mother-of-pearl grip inlaid with the gold Coast Guard emblem glistened even in the dull light of the morning.

Ben watched as Joel tightened the leather holster around his hip, the polished revolver catching the morning light. It was a fine piece—too fine for the world they lived in now. Joel had his pick of firearms, but of course, he gravitated toward the one that stood out the most.

Ben couldn't help but shake his head. The black Smith & Wesson 9mm, practical and discreet, was hung on Allie's hip. A better fit for Joel, Ben thought, but his son saw things differently these days.

He's not a kid anymore.

That fact settled heavy in Ben's chest. Joel would be eighteen soon—strong, capable, and determined to prove it at every turn. Ben trusted him, but it didn't make the knot in his gut any easier to ignore every time they left the property.

Joel caught him watching and offered a small nod, one that said, *I can handle this.*

Ben nodded back, even though he wasn't sure either of them believed it.

Sandy emerged from the house, wrapping her sweater tighter around herself. "You sure about this?" she asked, eyeing the cloudy horizon as she stepped onto the porch. "Feels like the weather's turning."

"We need the chickens." Ben brushed dirt from his leather gloves. "If we wait, we might not get another shot at them."

Sandy folded her arms and glanced at the graying sky again, but she didn't press further. They both knew better than to miss an opportunity like this. In the world that remained, hesitating could mean the difference between a warm meal or nothing at all.

Ben left the Blazer and walked to where Sandy was standing, lowering his voice. "Emma and Brad will be fine with you here. Keep the dogs close. We won't be gone long."

"I know." Sandy gave him a small smile. "Just be careful. There's more of them around lately."

Her eyes shifted to the tree line, where the world felt vast and empty—yet not empty enough. Strangers had been sighted near the outskirts of their land over the past few weeks. Always at a distance, but the tension was growing.

Ben leaned in and kissed her forehead. "We'll be back before dark."

Joel and Allie hopped into the truck as Ben slid into the driver's seat, the worn vinyl creaking under him. He half-expected Joel to ask him to drive, but his son didn't like navigating the steep dirt trail down to the main road with the trailer in tow. Ben didn't care for it either, but they had no choice today if things went according to plan. They'd need the trailer to haul the chickens home. He was hoping to leave Santa Rita Park with a dozen of the birds, but he'd be happy if they ended up with half that. A dozen chickens would put a strain on the feed they had stockpiled in the garage thanks to Joel and Allie's foraging trip a few weeks ago.

They had found an old barn, the only structure left on a farm farther up Florida Road, and scored the feed, along with several bags of seeds and

fertilizer. If they started to run low on food for the chickens, there was a solution to that problem, albeit one the younger kids wouldn't appreciate.

Ben twisted the key in the ignition, and the engine coughed before settling into a steady rumble. Another small victory. Every time the truck started without trouble felt like a gift these days. Vehicles that still ran were rare. Durango's streets were littered with abandoned cars and trucks, long since stripped of batteries, tires, and anything else that could be scavenged.

Finding gas was becoming just as difficult. The ethanol blends left in most stations were a gamble Ben wasn't willing to take. Ethanol pulled moisture from the air, and after months of sitting in abandoned tanks, there was a good chance it was more water than fuel. They'd learned that lesson the hard way.

A few weeks back, Joel had filled up the Jeep's tank from a place outside town. At first, everything seemed fine—until they were halfway home and the engine sputtered to a halt. Joel coasted it onto the shoulder, but they couldn't get the engine to turn over again until Ben spent half the day tinkering with the carburetor and fuel filter. He swore off ethanol-blended gas after that.

Since then, they'd relied on a small, out-of-the-way gas station up near Lemon Reservoir. It catered to boaters and off-roaders back when the world still functioned and kept a supply of ethanol-free gas in an underground tank. That stash had kept their vehicles running, but it had started to feel like they were operating on borrowed time. The fuel had been sitting for months, and Ben knew the risk increased with each passing day.

He and Joel made a habit of replacing the cap and locking the underground access after each trip, but they weren't the only ones drawing from that well. More than once, they'd discovered the filler cap left open, along with tire tracks in the dirt. So far, no one had tried to claim the gas station outright, but Ben doubted that kind of luck would last through the winter. All the more reason to stay on the property. Not that they needed another one.

He eased the truck into gear, glancing toward Joel and Allie in the cab beside him. They were ready, supplies packed, weapons within reach.

Limit the trips into town. That had been the plan. But plans didn't always line up with reality. And Ben wanted—needed—these chickens.

As the truck rumbled down the washboard-riddled dirt road, Ben glanced in the rearview mirror, catching sight of Sandy standing on the

porch, flanked by Emma and Brad. Gunner, Bajer, and Sam sat obediently at her feet, watching the truck disappear down Saddle Trail.

Normally, Durango was a ten- to fifteen-minute drive into town, although it felt longer these days. But that was because they had to drive slower. The lack of traffic on the roads had emboldened the local wildlife, primarily elk and mule deer, which no longer considered the two-lane road much of a threat. The same could be said for the streets and sidewalks in Durango. The once-bustling town had become a hollow shell of itself. The burned-out storefronts, faded road signs, and skeletal remains of civilization told the same story Ben had seen in every town they passed through on the way across the country.

He made the right at the bottom of the hill and pulled out onto the blacktop. The smoothness of the recently paved road was a reminder of what used to be, and for a brief moment, Ben allowed himself to imagine that they were headed out to go fish the Animas River or just running down to the shop. But the burnt remains of several houses in a nearby development they were passing brought him back to reality quickly.

“Think the guy will still be at the park?” Joel asked, breaking the silence. His eyes were fixed ahead, scanning the narrow road as it wound down toward the paved main access into town.

Ben nodded. “Word is he’s trying to offload livestock he can’t feed. If he’s got what we’re looking for, we’ll make an offer.”

“And if someone else gets there first?” Allie chimed in from the back seat.

Ben tightened his grip on the wheel. “Then we’ll figure something else out.”

Allie sat back, quietly gazing out the window as the trees blurred past.

Durango eventually crept into view, the outskirts dotted with scattered remnants of homes and businesses that had survived the fires but had been broken into and picked clean. As they crossed onto the main drag, Ben slowed the truck.

The town felt heavier now. The few people they passed eyed the truck warily from behind broken glass windows or from porches where rifles rested against doorframes but within reach. A thin veneer of lawlessness had settled over Durango, though it hadn’t fully erupted into violence—yet.

They turned onto East Third Avenue and headed toward the far side of town and Santa Rita Park just beyond. Ben avoided taking Main Street

when he could. It was a hangout for the desperate and the dangerous, and it was getting worse.

“Whoa, he’s a nice one. I’d like to see him in our yard next time we’re running low on meat.” Joel leaned forward in his seat and eyed the massive buck who was more interested in feeding than watching the Blazer.

Several does from the buck’s harem paused their hunt for food, heads lifting to watch as the truck rumbled past. Their dark eyes followed it for a few moments before they returned to foraging, crunching on fallen acorns, intent on fattening up before winter set in.

Up ahead, Santa Rita Park stretched along the Animas River. The grass was overgrown, the playground rusting and empty, but the park had become a common gathering point for trade on the weekends.

Ben pulled across Highway 160 and into the parking lot, keeping his hand near the KelTec 12-gauge stuffed between his seat and the center console. They hadn’t had any trouble at the barter market yet, but that was no reason to be lax. The place drew all types, and there was trouble lurking here among the traders and thrown-together shanties.

“Stay sharp,” he said. “We don’t linger.”

Joel and Allie nodded.

As they stepped out, Ben scanned the area. A handful of makeshift tents and shacks had been set up along the park’s walking path. Small knots of people shuffled from one trader to the next, bartering for anything from canned food and ammunition to clothes and survival gear of all kinds.

Near the edge of the park, an older man stood beside an old Ford pickup with a makeshift wire enclosure in the back that held a dozen scraggly chickens and two small white ducks. His flannel shirt was worn thin at the elbows, and the brim of his hat sagged low over his eyes, casting a shadow across his weathered face. Despite his rough appearance, the modified AR-15 slung over his shoulder gleamed with care. The gun was clean, the metal oiled. His gaze swept the park with quiet vigilance, the kind born from years of knowing trouble could show up at any moment.

“That’s our guy,” Ben muttered.

Joel led the way, cutting across the grass. The man’s weathered face lifted as they approached, his expression neutral.

“You selling these birds?” Joel asked.

The man chewed his lip, then nodded. “Depends. You got anything worth tradin’?”

Ben cleared his throat and gave a subtle nod toward the front of the man's well-worn pickup. Joel and Allie followed his lead, circling around to the hood of the old Ford. Ben wasn't exactly eager to flash silver coins in front of the drifters meandering through the market.

Once they had a bit of relative privacy, Ben produced five silver coins from his pocket. He'd brought ten of the silver pieces with him but was hoping to get the chickens for much less than that, although he hadn't expected the ducks, which could stay as far as he was concerned. He was no chicken farmer by any stretch of the imagination, but his knowledge of ducks consisted of how to call them in over a spread of decoys and knock them out of the sky with his 12-gauge. Other than that, he had a few good recipes for the gamey waterfowl.

The man's gaze flicked to Ben, then to Allie, who stood a few steps behind them. "Silver's good," he said slowly. "But I need ammo more than metal."

Joel shifted on his feet. "What caliber are you looking for?"

The man tapped his carbine, then his hip. "Need .233 and .45. I'd take some .308, too, if you got any of that."

"We've got plenty of .223 in the truck," Joel blurted out.

Ben shot his son a look before interjecting, hoping to convey his disappointment in Joel's negotiation skills. "We brought two hundred rounds with us to trade."

The old man's face brightened at the prospect of getting his hands on two hundred rounds of ammunition. "I want all two hundred. You can have the ducks, too," he stated, eager to make the deal.

"I'm not sure we want the ducks, though," Ben said.

The words were barely out of his mouth when he felt a hand squeeze his elbow. It was Allie. He turned to see what she wanted.

"Please get the ducks. They're worth it, I promise," she whispered.

The old man's gaze drifted to Joel's ornate sidearm as Allie and Ben talked. "'Course, I'd let them all go and the last two bags of feed I have for that there."

Joel took a step back, his excitement replaced with a look of concern.

Ben laid the silver coins on the hood of the faded Ford, putting one of the five coins back into his pocket. "Four coins and two hundred rounds of .223 for the chickens, the ducks, and the feed. Take it or leave it. We've got other things to do today."

The man's eyes narrowed as he mulled over the offer. Meanwhile, Ben checked their surroundings for any suspicious characters and noticed two men near the riverbank who were watching from a distance, leaning against an old park bench. They didn't look like traders. He swept his hand across the hood of the pickup, scooped up the coins, and put them into his pocket with the others.

"Hey... hey now. I'll do it, I'll do it. Take it all for five coins and two hundred rounds."

Ben left the silver in his pocket. "We'll settle up after we bring our truck over and get the chickens loaded." He glanced at Joel and Allie. "Maybe you two can find canning supplies and some of the other things on the list."

"I'll be right here. Better hurry back before I change my mind." The man tipped his hat at the trio as they walked away. But Ben was too busy watching the men by the bench to reply.

"Keep your eyes peeled," he said quietly.

Joel and Allie glanced over at the men and looked away quickly.

"Faction scouts?" Allie asked.

"Looks like it," Ben answered. "I'll deal with the chicken man while you two get the rest of the stuff if you can find it. Then we'll get out of here. And try to be discreet." He gave Joel a stern look.

When they reached the truck, Ben opened the back and separated four twelve-ounce food cans for the chicken deal, each filled with fifty rounds of .223 ammunition. He grabbed three more and handed one to Allie and two to Joel.

"That should be enough to barter for the rest of the things on the list." Ben glanced over his shoulder toward the bench where the two men had been sitting—only to find it empty.

A part of him wanted to call it a day, load up the chickens, and head straight home. But leaving now felt too much like retreating, and they couldn't afford to show that kind of weakness. The rest of the items on the list were just as important. Winter was closing in fast, and once the snows buried the town, Ben doubted this barter market would last. This might be their last shot at gathering supplies until spring.

He adjusted the strap of his rifle and gave Joel and Allie a nod.

"Let's finish what we came for," he said, more to himself than to them.

CHAPTER THREE



The weight of the old feed sack shifted on Ben's shoulder as he walked toward the trailer, the dull rattle of chickens echoing with each step. The birds weren't happy, but they'd settle down soon enough. At least he hoped they would. There was a rooster in the mix, not exactly what Ben wanted, especially with the noise he would make. The crow of a rooster at dawn in the Rocky Mountains at nine thousand feet would stand out like a kazoo solo at a symphony.

But there was an advantage to having the black and white speckled rooster among the flock—babies. Ben hadn't considered the option before, but like their long-distance friends, Ed and Julia outside Fort Wayne, Indiana, he needed to think long-term when it came to the fowl they'd just purchased. He'd already planned on building a chicken tractor for the half acre of graded front yard they had. That was if he could keep the chickens, and now the ducks, alive until then.

Joel and Allie approached the Blazer, but his attention was on the river that ran around the park. He'd wanted to go fly fishing while they were so close to the river today. He wasn't against the idea—fresh trout was always a welcome treat at the dinner table—but he was having second thoughts about spending any more time than necessary away from the homestead today.

Joel wrestled a large mesh bag of potatoes, carrots, and onions onto the front of the trailer, along with a five-pound bag of curing rice, setting all of it down by the coop to a chorus of clucks and quacks. "Pretty good haul today, but no salt."

Ben tried not to sound too disappointed. “Maybe next time,” he said, but he wasn’t sure there would be a next time this season.

Allie carried her bartered goods to the Blazer’s tailgate and proudly laid everything down. “Two dozen jars and extra lids for the ones at home.” She waved her hand over the goods as if she was presenting them as a prize on a game show. “And check these out.” She opened the box underneath the box of small jars and lids, revealing four one-gallon hinged-lid jars with built-in gaskets.

“Nice. But what did it cost us?” Ben asked.

“Everything.” Joel’s smile faded. “But we brought the cans back.”

Ben looked over the goods for a moment, then cracked a smile at the kids. “Worth it, I think. Good job.”

“Thanks,” Allie said, while Joel nodded.

Ben repositioned the feed sack on the flatbed and wiped his hands on his jeans, casting a glance back toward the trader’s truck. The old man was already busy breaking down his setup, likely keen to get out before things turned rowdy, as they sometimes did here after dark. Smart.

Joel and Allie loaded their barter for goods into the back of the Blazer, then helped Ben check the tie-down straps on the trailer. Ben pulled the rope tighter over the wire cage holding the chickens to another round of nervous clucks. The trailer creaked slightly as the load shifted, but everything seemed tight.

“That’s not going anywhere.” Ben ratcheted the tie-down strap one more notch for good measure. “We got everything?”

“I think so,” Joel replied, though the tension in his voice was impossible to miss. His hand rested on the Colt at his side.

Allie closed the tailgate. “Those two guys are back,” she said softly.

Ben adjusted Joel’s items at the front of the trailer and felt it—the weight of someone’s gaze lingering too long. He didn’t turn right away. Years of experience had taught him not to be obvious about spotting a tail. Instead, he straightened slowly, letting his eyes drift to the edge of the park.

There they were. The two men from the bench were lingering near the far side of the park, partially hidden by the drooping branches of a cottonwood tree. One was puffing on a cigarette, the faint curl of smoke trailing into the cold air. The other just stared in their direction.

Ben grunted. “They’ve been hanging around too long for my liking.”

He wasn't surprised that buying up the old man's chickens and ducks had drawn attention. The birds were the most valuable trade at the market today, and he'd known from the start that whoever walked away with them would catch eyes—especially someone who could afford to buy the entire lot. Still, the payoff was worth it. The eggs alone would more than justify the coins and ammo he'd traded.

But the attention... that was something he could do without.

"Think they're just watching, or are they waiting for something?" Joel asked.

"I don't plan on sticking around to find out," Ben replied.

He climbed into the driver's seat, turning the engine over with a low rumble. The Blazer settled into a steady idle. Allie slid into the back, keeping her rifle within easy reach, while Joel hopped into the passenger seat.

Ben's jaw tightened. This was the price of coming into town. The birds would make life easier back home, but now they had more than livestock in the trailer to worry about. They had unwanted attention following close behind.

Ben's hand drifted to the 12-gauge resting alongside his seat. He had no intention of starting trouble, but if those two decided to follow them out of town... Well, he wouldn't lose any sleep over it.

He eased the truck forward, rolling slowly through the park's overgrown grassy area along Camino Del Rio. The two men watched them go but didn't move, their eyes tracking the vehicle's every turn.

As they pulled onto the main road, Joel twisted to look out the rear window. "They're still watching us."

Ben didn't respond right away, focusing instead on the stretch of road ahead. The highway leading out of town was lined with skeletal remains of cars and trucks that had been left to rot. What hadn't been stripped for parts was left rusting in the ditches, an eerie graveyard of abandoned vehicles. But there were parts and pieces left behind that could puncture a tire, something they couldn't afford to let happen, especially today.

By the time they passed the old train depot, Joel spoke up again. "I guess fishing is out," he said with a sigh.

Ben had mentioned taking 550 through town on the way home, with a possible stop at Oxbow Park. The Animas River snaked through the area, carving deep channels around the sandbars. Ben knew those cuts held some

decent-sized trout, and with winter closing in, fresh fish would be a welcome addition to their stores.

It wasn't much of a detour—just a quick stop to see if the river would offer up anything easy. When they were done, they could pick up East 32nd Street to Florida Road and be home in fifteen minutes or less if they had to, but fishing wasn't in the cards today thanks to their new friends.

Ben caught it in the rearview mirror. A plume of dust rose in the distance, trailing behind an old, weathered blue Dodge pickup weaving through the remains of traffic.

"They're following us."

Ben tightened his grip on the wheel, heart thudding. "I see them."

Allie shifted, pressing her face close to the glass for a better look. "Maybe they're just heading the same way."

"Doubt it." Joel moved his AR-15 from between his knees and held it in his lap with the barrel ready to go out the window. "They want the chickens or the rest of the ammo in the back."

Ben's mind raced. They were still a few miles from the turnoff that would take them home. And once they made the turn, it would be narrow two-lane roads until they reached the bottom of the Durango Hills subdivision. And with the trailer in tow, they'd be in no position to lose a tail. If those two men intended to press their luck, they'd do it soon.

"Hang on."

Ben took the next right, pulling onto a side street that would run through a neighborhood that had been mostly leveled but would connect with Florida Road in a mile or so.

Joel's head whipped around. "This isn't the way home."

"I know," Ben said calmly. "Let's see if they're really following us."

The Blazer rattled over a patch of uneven asphalt, the tires crunching over scattered pebbles and leaves. Ben's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

The pickup turned after them.

Joel's posture stiffened. "No question about it now."

"I was afraid that was the case," Ben replied.

He pulled the KelTec shotgun from its place alongside his seat, flicked the safety off, and slid the barrel up onto the sill of his window, his eyes never leaving the road.

Allie spoke quietly from the back. "They're gaining on us."

Ben pressed his foot down on the gas pedal, but towing the trailer made acceleration sluggish. The pickup edged closer, maybe fifty yards behind now.

“Brace yourselves. There’s a hard right coming up after this bend in the road and I’m going to take it. It’s our best chance to lose them.”

Ben readied his hand on the wheel. He hoped the poorly built chicken coop they’d inherited with the birds was more durable than it looked. Holding off on hitting the brakes, he downshifted the Blazer into second gear. The exhaust roared in protest as the truck was forced into a tire-squealing right-hand turn, then again as they cut a hard left just twenty yards farther ahead.

The trailer jostled wildly behind them, clipping a stop sign and bending it over almost ninety degrees on the last corner of the dog-leg maneuver. Ben finally hit the brakes when the back end of the trailer was several yards past the corner and the fallen road sign.

All eyes were focused out the Blazer’s rear window to see if the truck had followed them, but all Ben could see was a flurry of feathers and upset birds flapping about wildly inside the coop, which now leaned heavily to the right. The last turn had pushed the trailer and the birds’ enclosure to the limit.

Ben jumped out of the driver’s seat with the KelTec ready for work. He had the bullpup-style 12-gauge loaded with double-aught buckshot and was fully prepared to unload the weapon if the Dodge turned the corner.

Joel spilled out onto the street opposite Ben and shouldered his rifle while Allie set up over the rear seat of the Blazer and aimed out the back window with her carbine.

The rumble of the approaching pickup grew louder. The sound of its engine echoed off the rubble pile behind them that had once been an apartment building. Ben stepped back to the driver’s door and reached inside the Blazer, killing the engine. The eerie quiet settled heavily around them, blending with the ominous weight of the gray clouds overhead as they waited, muscles tense, to see if their evasive maneuver had shaken their pursuers—or only delayed the inevitable.

Ben’s grip on the KelTec tightened as he heard a shift in tone from the Dodge pickup’s exhaust.

The Faction scouts were slowing down.

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CHAPTER FOUR



Through the alley and a small stand of scorched-bare pine trees, Ben saw the faint outline of the pickup crawl by, both men inside craning their necks to scan the area.

“They saw us?” Allie’s voice was calm but full of concern.

“Yeah. They made the turn,” Ben reported.

Joel sidestepped away from the truck, crossing the street in a matter of seconds, and took a cover position behind a charred utility box, the barrel of his rifle pointed at the intersection behind them.

The brutal reality of their cross-country journey had shaped them in ways nothing else could. Survival wasn’t just a skill anymore—it was instinct, sharpened by every mile of that hellish trek to Maryland and back. The scars they carried weren’t just physical; they were woven into who they’d become, hardening them as individuals and forging them into something stronger as a unit.

Ben no longer had to give generic orders to initiate protocol for a situation or drive the older kids into action. Those days were long gone. Joel, Allie, Sandy, even Emma and Brad—each of them had learned to read danger like a second language. They didn’t flinch at the shadows anymore; they watched them, waited, and, when necessary, stepped forward without hesitation.

Avoiding conflict was always the goal, but meeting it head-on had become second nature. In this world, hesitation wasn’t an option. They either stayed prepared or they didn’t survive.

Ben adjusted his grip on the KelTec, the shotgun's stock firm against his shoulder as he moved away from the Blazer. He made for what was left of a telephone pole jutting out of the ground, its length shortened by half from the nearby fire. They had the advantage, thanks to the narrow street and the element of surprise, but Ben hoped to avoid trouble. Aside from concerns over their own safety, the last thing he wanted was to lose half the birds they'd just given too much for in a firefight.

Then again, dead chickens would be the least of their concerns if things went wrong.

The truck slowed as it rolled through the T-shaped intersection. The driver made eye contact with Ben just a few moments after passing the battered sign. The surprise at finding the trailer-toting Blazer just yards from the intersection was evident in the man's eyes and actions. The old Dodge pickup squealed to a stop, throwing both the driver and the passenger forward just short of bumping their heads against the windshield.

The driver put the pickup in park, sliding out of the driver's seat and onto the road like the snake he was. His hand rested lazily near the revolver strapped to his thigh. Ben caught the sharp glint of steel from the weapon's worn handle, polished smooth by years of use.

The only sounds were the ticking of the Chevy's hot engine cooling against the onset of cooler air, the settling clucks of the chickens, and the soft idling of the Dodge. The driver's finger hovered just outside the trigger guard, disciplined but ready, as he squared up on Ben.

Allie remained hidden behind the back seat of the Blazer. Only her weapon was visible to the trained eye, her attention focused down the scope of her rifle.

The heavyset driver, in a Carhartt jacket, adjusted the worn brim of his hat with his left hand as he looked around and realized there were three weapons trained on him. His gaze lingered on Joel, the last of his discoveries. The driver's realization was lost on his accomplice, who stumbled out of the truck more eager to light another smoke than face the realities of the situation they'd created. The Dodge's passenger quickly realized the nature of their predicament and dropped his cigarette in his excitement, surprise etched deep in the lines of his face.

"You!" the passenger's voice cut through the dense air, hoarse and unfriendly but also carrying a hint of fear. "I see you back there." The wiry

man in faded overalls was looking at Joel as he fumbled to remove the rifle from his shoulder.

Ben kept the shotgun aimed at the driver but kicked at an empty bottle near his feet, sending it skittering across the road toward the passenger, who was nervously working his way around the hood of the Dodge.

"I'd leave that weapon right where it is if I were you," Ben said sternly.

Allie cleared her throat from inside the Blazer, getting the passenger's attention as well.

The man forced a smile that didn't match the sharp tension in his eyes. He took a step back toward the Dodge as he let go of his rifle and let it hang from his shoulder by the sling again.

"You were at the market." The passenger curled his lips into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Didn't catch your names."

Ben and Joel glanced at one another across the street and rolled their eyes. The passenger was either high, drunk, or stupid.

Joel's rifle didn't waver. "We weren't giving them out."

The driver looked at his partner, clearly disgusted by his choice of backup. "Easy now. No need to get jumpy. We're all just trying to get by."

"Then why are you following us?" came Allie's sharp voice. She'd moved into the rear cargo area of the Blazer and had her AR-15 propped up over the tailgate, her finger resting lightly on the trigger.

The wiry man stepped forward, boots crunching on the debris-strewn road. "Maybe we were curious." His eyes flicked to the trailer. "That's a lot of birds for one family. Figured you might have some to spare."

Ben didn't move. "They're not for sale."

The passenger's grin thinned. "I wasn't talking about buying."

Joel shifted to the other side of the utility box, adjusting his stance so he'd have a better position on both men. But the muzzle of his rifle stayed trained center mass on the passenger.

"You know how this ends," Joel warned, his voice cold. "Just get in the truck and drive away."

The man's smile vanished, his expression hardening into something far more sinister. "That so, boy?" he said, his voice low and cutting. "You got a lot of mouth on you for someone barely outta diapers. Don't he, Logan?" His cold eyes flicked to Allie, lingering just a beat too long. A slow, leering grin spread across his face. "Bet she's the one who knows how to use that gun," he added, his tone mocking.

The driver, Logan, chuckled darkly, the sound rolling out like distant thunder.

Allie's grip on her carbine tightened, her knuckles pale against the black metal. Her eyes locked onto the passenger, unflinching. "You want to find out?" she shot back, her voice sharp and unyielding, like the snap of a trigger about to be pulled.

The grin disappeared from the passenger's face as the tension spiked, the air between them heavy enough to choke on.

Ben felt it—the razor-thin edge between words and violence. One wrong move, one twitch too fast, and they'd all be knee-deep in something no one would walk away from clean.

It was time to put an end to this standoff.

The Faction men were testing their resolve. The two scouts knew that Ben and the kids had the upper hand, but they were pushing to see how far they could get with intimidation. Unfortunately for the scouts, they had no idea who they were dealing with.

Ben stepped forward slowly, shotgun unwavering. "There's no win here for you."

The driver glanced over at his partner, calculating. The wiry man's fingers hovered just an inch too close to his holster.

Ben's heart thudded in his chest, but his voice stayed calm. "You think we walked out of the market with all those birds by accident?"

The driver hesitated, considering.

"We didn't survive this long by being easy targets," Ben added, lacing each word with steel. "If you want to press it, we'll see how things shake out. But I promise you, win or lose, you won't be standing at the end of it."

Silence stretched between them, as heavy as the storm clouds above.

Finally, the wiry man scoffed, shaking his head. "Not worth it."

The driver lingered a moment longer, his lips pressed tight, before giving a slow nod. "Maybe next time."

He stepped back toward the Dodge, his partner trailing reluctantly behind, throwing one last glare in Joel's direction.

"Let's go. Slade's not gonna like this one bit." The passenger scooped his dropped cigarette off the ground, his voice carrying just enough venom to make the name linger in the air.

Ben's jaw tightened at the mention of Victor Slade. The name was familiar, though unwelcome. Slade wasn't just the Faction's leader—he was

the kind of man who thrived on others' misery, a predator in a world that had already gone feral. Ben forced himself not to react, keeping his expression neutral, even as the weight of the man's reputation pressed against the moment like an unseen hand tightening its grip.

The two scouts climbed into the Dodge, the engine revving louder than necessary. A rooster tail of gravel and dirt sprayed out from the truck's back end as the vehicle lurched forward, its tires clawing at the ground for traction. The scouts didn't look back, but the sense of unfinished business lingered in the air like a bad smell.

Ben exhaled slowly, easing his grip on the shotgun slightly as the pickup disappeared down the road. The mention of Slade wasn't just a threat—it was a warning. One he couldn't afford to ignore.

Joel finally stepped out from behind the charred electrical box, lowering the AR. "Next time's going to be sooner than we'd like."

"Yeah," Ben agreed, glancing up the empty street. "But not today."

Allie stayed put, letting her rifle lean against the tailgate, eyes still on the road. "We need to get moving. If they double back or go get help..."

"They won't." Ben flicked the safety and placed the shotgun back between the driver's seat and the center console. "They'll go lick their wounds and get high before working up the courage to tell Slade how they outsmarted an old man and two teenagers. But they will be waiting for us the next time we head into town."

Joel frowned, his hand resting on the strap of his rifle. "So what now?"

Ben climbed into the Blazer. "Now we go home."

Joel and Allie exchanged glances but didn't argue. Joel joined them in the vehicle and slammed the door. He was still running a little hot from the encounter, and rightfully so. The two scouts were easy to hate, but this wasn't the time or place to make a stand. Their priority was getting these birds home—and themselves.

As they pulled back onto the road, Ben's gaze drifted toward the darkening sky. There was a storm coming, and with it came the weight of new threats.

One day at a time.

CHAPTER FIVE



The Blazer rumbled up the battered washboard of a road. The sound of the tires crunching gravel mixed with the steady clucks and quacks from the trailer behind them. Ben went as slow as his patience allowed, trying not to rattle anything loose on the truck or lose a filling. Charlie, the unofficial head of the nonexistent HOA of the Durango Hills subdivision, used to keep the road in decent shape with his grader. But Charlie's house was nothing more than a pile of charred beams and ash.

Ben glanced to his left as they passed Sagebrush Trail. Charlie's place wasn't visible from the road anymore—not since the fire had claimed it. Ben remembered the day he'd first ventured out from the safety of their property after returning from the road. He'd quietly hoped that resourceful people like Charlie might still be around. Instead, he'd found the scorched antique Caterpillar grader and the remains of Charlie's homestead, including his gutted F-350. Nothing but ruins and silence, another reminder of how much the world had taken from them. Ben shook his head and focused on the winding dirt road ahead.

The tension from the standoff still clung to the air like a fog, but Ben did his best not to dwell on all the ways the encounter could have gone wrong. The faint whiff of pine and damp earth filtered through the cracked window, but it did little to calm the knot tightening in his chest.

Joel sat beside him, his rifle resting between his knees, one hand gripping the door handle against the jarring ride up the hill. Allie sat sideways in the back seat, her eyes scanning the road behind them every

few seconds. They hadn't said much since leaving the standoff, and Ben preferred it that way. Quiet was good. Quiet let him think.

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel as his mind wandered to the Faction and Victor Slade.

The name alone was enough to stir anger and unease in Ben's gut. Victor was as charismatic as he was ruthless, a predator dressed in the guise of a savior. A former local businessman turned survivalist, he'd gathered a loyal following through a mix of promises, fear, and force.

Slade emerged in the weeks after everything fell apart, a self-proclaimed leader who had capitalized on the chaos to seize power, according to the grapevine. At first, he'd been just another opportunist with a silver tongue and a small group of loyal followers. But Slade was smart, and he was ruthless.

It wasn't long before he'd gathered a sizable force made up of those desperate enough—or brutal enough—to follow him. His faction started small: securing abandoned stores, hoarding supplies, and offering “protection” to those who had little choice but to accept. The deal was always the same: hand over what you had or face the consequences.

Some called it a militia; Ben called it a racket.

He'd encountered people like Slade before. Men who thrived on fear and manipulation. The difference was that Slade wasn't content with just surviving. He wanted control, and Durango was his prize. Bit by bit, he was tightening his grip on the town, claiming it as his territory. And if you didn't fall in line? You disappeared.

“Those guys,” Joel said, breaking the silence. “They were Slade's men, weren't they?”

Ben glanced at him, one eyebrow raised. “What do you think?”

Joel exhaled sharply and nodded. “They were planning to take the chickens from whoever bought them.”

Ben grunted his agreement. “That's how Slade works. Keeps his people hungry, makes them take what they can. But he's not stupid. He doesn't want a war with us... yet.”

Allie leaned forward from the back seat, her voice steady but questioning. “You think it's just about the chickens?”

Ben's grip tightened on the wheel again. “Today? Probably. But they were testing us, too. Slade's men want to know what we'll do when they push.”

The weight of those words settled heavily in the cab.

Ben's thoughts shifted to Victor Slade himself. He'd seen the man once, from a distance, during one of their early trips into town. Slade had been standing on the steps of the old courthouse, surrounded by a half dozen men armed to the teeth.

He'd been smiling, shaking hands with a local farmer, an act that looked like diplomacy but felt like dominance.

Even from across the square, Ben had seen it in Slade's eyes: the cold, calculating stare of someone who didn't see people, only assets. Someone who always knew how to grease the wheels to get what he wanted, whether through money, well-timed charitable donations, or the kind of threats that left no paper trail. The latter was never proven in court, but everyone who dealt with him understood.

Victor Slade didn't need to raise his voice or make direct threats. His reputation did the work for him. Crossing him came with consequences, the kind that didn't end up in police reports but left scars and broken lives in their wake all the same.

The Faction wasn't just a group of thugs; it was an organism, growing and adapting. Slade was the brain, but his scouts, enforcers, and loyalists were the limbs, reaching out to claim more ground. And now, it seemed, their attention had turned toward the outskirts—toward families like Ben's.

Slade was running out of people to steal from.

Ben knew exactly what Slade's scouts were doing in the park today. They weren't there to barter or trade; they were there to watch, listen, and take inventory of who had what. Anyone who stood out, anyone who showed they had more than the bare minimum, became a target. And sometimes, it didn't even matter if someone had much at all.

Being in the wrong place at the wrong time was reason enough to become their prey.

Ben flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of Allie. Her rifle rested across her lap, her fingers lightly drumming the stock, while she kept her gaze fixed on the road behind them, scanning the distance for any sign of pursuit.

The girl sitting behind Joel was nothing like the one Ben had first met months ago. Allie had grown so much in such a short time—more than any seventeen-year-old should ever have to. The uncertainty and reluctance he'd once seen in her were gone, stripped away by the harsh realities of their

world. In their place was someone sharper, harder. Someone who didn't flinch under pressure.

She hadn't just adapted—she'd thrived when survival demanded it. She was calm, focused, and unyielding. Her aim was deadly, and her hands were steady in the heat of battle. Ben had seen less grit in men twice her size.

Allie had become a pillar in their group. She was an asset, no question, from the moment she'd joined Ben and Joel on that fateful day in June. But Ben saw more than just her usefulness in battle. Beneath the armor she'd built, there was still a trace of the girl she used to be—someone who wanted more from life than just survival. He saw that side of Allie from time to time, mostly when she and Joel were doing something together. And Ben worried about how much of that girl would be left when the dust finally settled. If it ever settled.

Joel wasn't much different. He'd grown stronger, more self-assured, but there was a sharpness to him now—a fire that sometimes burned too hot for its own good. Ben could see the weight his son carried, the fierce need to prove himself, to protect the family from a world that seemed hell-bent on destruction.

But that fire, as noble as it was, could also make him reckless.

Ben recognized it all too well because Joel was a reflection of himself at that age—determined, headstrong, and raw with emotion. The difference was that Joel carried an additional burden: the loss of his remaining youth and the dreams of a normal life. They'd been ripped away before they had a chance to take shape. That kind of loss could harden a person—or break them. And Ben worried it was a line Joel might one day cross without realizing it.

Ben sighed quietly, his mind circling back to Slade. “He's not going to stop.”

“What do you mean?” Joel asked, his tone wary.

Ben hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “Slade doesn't care about chickens or ammo. He wants control. And the more people push back, the harder he'll come down.”

Joel frowned, his jaw tightening. “So what do we do? Just roll over?”

“No,” Ben said firmly. “But we don't pick a fight we can't win either.”

Allie's voice cut in, soft but steady. “He'll come for us eventually, won't he?”

Ben's silence was answer enough.

He made the right onto Saddle Trail, and their homestead came into view, nestled against the backdrop of towering pines and distant mountains. The sight should have brought relief, but today, in this moment, it only served as a reminder of what was at stake.

As they pulled into the driveway, Ben parked the Blazer and killed the engine. For a moment, no one moved. He wondered if they were all thinking the same thing.

How much of what had happened in town would they tell Sandy and the kids?

Finally, Ben turned to Joel and Allie. "Unload the trailer. Let's get those birds settled."

Joel nodded and stepped out, but not before glancing at his father. "You think we'll ever have to deal with him directly?"

Ben's eyes hardened as he reached for the KelTec. "Not if I can help it." But deep down, he knew the truth.

Victor Slade wasn't the kind of man you avoided forever.

CHAPTER SIX



The fading light of late afternoon cast a warm, golden glow over the homestead as Ben and Joel carried the last of the chickens into the makeshift winter coop they had set up inside the detached garage. The clucks and soft murmurs of the birds echoed off the concrete walls, mixing with the occasional quack from the ducks.

Nearby, Allie knelt beside Gunner and Sam, introducing them to the newest members of the homestead. Gunner sniffed the air, his tail wagging slowly as he cautiously approached one of the Pekin ducks. Sam, more curious than hesitant, leaned in closer, her ears twitching at the soft quacks. Gunner and Sam had both retrieved plenty of waterfowl in the field before, but this was something new altogether. Bajer, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with any of it. She lingered in the shadows near the garage door, her body language clear: the birds were not her problem, and she'd rather stay far away from the clucking, quacking, wing-flapping critters that had taken over the garage.

Ben couldn't blame the old dog.

With his Jeep still stranded up at Vallecito Reservoir, there was plenty of space in the two-car garage for the flock to ride out the winter. Initially, Ben had wanted to keep either the Blazer or the Scrambler indoors, but the vehicles would handle the cold better than the birds. And keeping the animals inside meant they wouldn't have to worry about coyotes, bears, or anything else that might be tempted by an easy meal.

The coop itself was solid enough, built from leftover lumber and repurposed fencing, with a thick layer of straw spread across the concrete

floor to help insulate it. The nesting boxes, hastily fashioned from salvaged wooden crates, lined one side of the enclosure, while the ducks had their own small corner with a shallow water pan and a bundle of straw for bedding. It wasn't fancy, but it would do the job.

Ben stepped back to wipe his hands on his jeans and survey the setup as Sandy came through the side door with Emma and Brad close behind.

Brad's face lit up as soon as he saw the chickens. "Whoa, we got all of them?" He darted forward, his excitement bubbling over.

Emma trailed behind, more cautious. She wrinkled her nose at the cacophony of clucks and quacks. "They're loud," she observed, her tone dubious.

"They'll settle," Ben replied, though he wasn't entirely sure.

Sandy stepped closer, her arms crossed as she looked over the coop. "This is quite the setup. We're really doing this, huh?"

Ben shrugged, glancing at the birds. "It's an experiment, for now. If they make it through the winter, we'll see where it goes."

Emma edged closer to one of the ducks, her curiosity getting the better of her. "What kind are they?"

Allie straightened from where she'd been crouching with the dogs. "Pekin ducks. They're supposed to be good layers. Plus, they're hardy."

Brad leaned against the coop, grinning. "Can we name them?"

"No," Ben said quickly, his tone firmer than he intended. "I mean, It's probably not a great idea."

Brad blinked, surprised. "Why not?"

Ben sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Because we don't know how many of them are going to make it. And... some of these birds might end up on the dinner table if things get tight."

The words hung in the air, heavy and uncomfortable.

Emma's face fell, her earlier curiosity now tinged with unease. Brad frowned, looking down at the floor. Even Sandy seemed disappointed, her lips pressing into a thin line.

"I'm just being honest," Ben said, his voice softer now. "This isn't a petting zoo. These birds are here to help us survive. Eggs, meat—whatever we need."

Sandy stepped in, placing a hand on Brad's shoulder. "It's better if we don't get too attached, okay? That doesn't mean we can't take care of them."

Brad nodded slowly, though the excitement in his eyes had dimmed.

Ben felt a pang of guilt but pushed it aside. It wasn't about being cruel; it was about being realistic. In a world like this, sentimentality could be a dangerous luxury.

"All right," he said, clapping his hands together to break the tension. "Let's make sure everything's locked up tight for the night."

As the family worked together to secure the coop, Ben kept an eye on the kids. Emma stayed near Sandy, helping to organize the feed bags, while Brad eventually warmed back up and started scattering scratch feed for the birds.

Allie finished adjusting the latch on the coop door and stepped back to survey their work. "They'll be safe in here," she said confidently.

"From predators, yeah," Ben replied, glancing at the garage door. "But we'll still need to check on them regularly. Cold's coming in fast."

Sandy nodded, her gaze lingering on the birds. "Let's just hope they're as hardy as everyone says."

Ben didn't say it out loud, but he was hoping for the same thing. He wanted this project to work—not just for the practical benefits but for what it represented. A step toward stability, toward building something that might last.

As they all headed back toward the house, the sound of the chickens and ducks settling in for the night followed them. It was a small, hopeful noise against the vast quiet of the approaching winter.

Ben's mind, however, was still on Victor Slade.

The tension in the park earlier and then the confrontation in the alley on the way home had been a warning, a reminder that their growing self-sufficiency had painted a target on their backs. Slade's men weren't just watching for opportunities; they were gathering intelligence, noting who had resources worth taking.

Ben stopped at the top of the stairs to the deck, his gaze falling on Joel, who was now checking the locks on the garage door. His son moved with the quiet confidence of someone who'd seen too much too young. The boy he'd been was gone, replaced by a young man with a steady hand and sharp instincts.

"Joel," Ben said, his tone soft but firm.

Joel glanced up. "Yeah?"

Ben hesitated, waiting for the others to file inside the house. Then he chose his words carefully. “You did good today. Back in town. You kept your head.”

Joel’s expression softened slightly. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure if you were going to call me out for mouthing off.”

Ben’s lips twitched in a faint smile. “You were pushing it, but you held the line. That’s what matters.”

Allie climbed the stairs to the deck alongside Joel. “You handled it better than me. I thought we were about two seconds from getting into a fight.”

Ben sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “You both did what needed to be done. Just remember, Slade’s people thrive on baiting folks into a fight. Next time, we might not be so lucky.”

Joel nodded, his jaw tightening. “We’ll be ready.”

Ben wished he could share that confidence, but he didn’t say it out loud. Instead, he patted Joel’s shoulder as he passed, heading toward the open door.

The sky was darkening, the stars beginning to wink into view one by one. The mountains loomed in the distance, their silhouettes stark against the twilight. This was home—a fragile sanctuary in a world that seemed determined to unravel.

“All right,” Ben said, turning back to Joel and Allie. “Let’s call it a day. Get cleaned up, grab some dinner.”

They both nodded as they passed him and went into the house.

Ben glanced back at the garage once more, listening to the muffled sounds of the birds settling in for the night. It was a small victory, but in a world like this, small victories were everything.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The morning air was crisp, the frost glinting like shards of glass on the tall grass surrounding the homestead. The mountains stood silent in the distance, their snow-dusted peaks illuminated by the pale light of the rising sun. The sight reaffirmed Ben's concerns of colder weather looming right around the corner.

Inside the house, Sandy and the younger kids moved quietly but purposefully, each working to prepare for the tasks of the day after a breakfast of oats and dried fruit. Allie had checked the nesting boxes this morning in hopes of finding a few eggs, but nothing yet. The kids were disappointed. Ben wouldn't have minded eggs for breakfast either, but he wasn't too worried yet.

The chickens and ducks were probably still a little shaken up from yesterday's relocation. The drive up the side of the mountain over the potholed and washboard-modeled dirt road to the house was likely enough to put them off laying for a couple of days. The birds would need a few days to acclimate, although Ben couldn't help but be a little concerned. Had he just traded some of his last silver coins and two hundred rounds of ammunition for what amounted to several chicken dinners?

He stood by the woodpile, splitting a log with a smooth, practiced motion, the sharp crack of wood echoing through the crisp morning air. He paused to wipe a bead of sweat from his brow. Over in the garage, he could hear the faint murmur of Joel's and Allie's voices as they worked, interspersed with the clucks of the chickens and the quacks of the ducks.

The birds weren't shy about letting the kids know they were hungry, their raucous chorus rising every time Joel or Allie refilled a water pan or added feed to the trough. Joel's voice carried through the air, a mix of gentle commands and quiet grumbling about the mess the birds had managed to make in such a short amount of time. Allie's laugh followed, light and fleeting, as she teased him about his overly careful handling of the ducks.

For a brief moment, everything felt almost normal.

Then Ben heard it.

The distant rumble of engines reached his ears, faint but unmistakable. He froze, the ax poised mid-swing, his pulse quickening. He tilted his head slightly, straining to listen. The rhythmic growl of multiple vehicles could be heard climbing the hill toward the house.

Ben's stomach tightened as the sound grew louder, more distinct. He split the last log, leaving the ax buried in the chopping block, and turned toward the garage.

"Allie! Joel!" he called out, his voice cutting through the morning stillness.

The noise of clucking and quacking quieted as Joel and Allie stepped out of the garage and closed the steel door behind them, their expressions shifting at the tone in Ben's voice. Joel still had a feed scoop in one hand, while Allie held a rake.

"You hear that?" Ben asked, nodding toward the road.

Joel's brow furrowed as he tilted his head, listening. "Engines?"

"Yeah," Ben confirmed, his voice low.

Allie set the rake down quickly, her sharp eyes scanning the tree line. "How many?"

Ben shook his head. "Hard to tell yet. More than one."

Joel was already moving back into the garage. He emerged with his rifle instead of a feed scoop. Allie followed, grabbing her AR-15 from the other side of the door and slinging it over her shoulder.

Ben put his hand on the ax handle, then hesitated. He let it go again, opting instead for the KelTec shotgun he'd left leaning against one of the four-by-sixes supporting the porch. The weight of the weapon in his hands was both familiar and sobering.

"Stay sharp," Ben said, his voice steady but firm. "Let's see what we're dealing with."

The three of them moved into position—Joel near the corner of the garage, Allie at the top of the stairs to the deck, and Ben near the woodpile. His eyes locked on the curve of the dirt road, where the sound of the engines was growing louder.

Whatever was coming, it wasn't just a casual visit.

He let out a sharp whistle, the sound cutting through the cool morning air. Sam and Gunner were roaming the property somewhere, and he needed them close. Bajer, as usual, had chosen the warmth of the house and was likely curled up by the woodstove with one eye on Emma.

It didn't take long for the whistle to do its job. Within seconds, both dogs emerged from a stand of sapling pines, their lean bodies weaving through the trees. Their tongues lolled from their mouths as they panted heavily, each puff of breath forming small, visible clouds in the crisp air. Sam, older but not to be outdone, trotted toward Ben first, while Gunner, the younger and more excitable of the two, darted in wide, playful loops before joining his partner.

"Good dogs," Ben muttered, reaching down to reward them both for their obedience with a few well-placed scratches. They weren't just pets—they were an extra layer of protection, and Ben was grateful for their presence now more than ever.

"All right, guys. Inside." Ben reinforced the verbal command with a pointed finger.

Both dogs dropped their heads as though they'd done something wrong and began to reluctantly climb the steps. Ben wasn't taking any chances, and for now, inside was the safest place for them, along with the younger kids.

Sandy stepped out onto the porch just as Gunner and Sam approached the front door, her face pale. "Visitors?"

"Uninvited," Ben said grimly.

As the convoy rounded the bend of Saddle Trail, two vehicles came into view: the Dodge pickup from yesterday and a black Ford Bronco with tinted windows that gleamed ominously in the morning light.

Ben tightened his grip on the KelTec. He was familiar with the blacked-out Bronco and had seen it around town on more than one occasion.

The vehicles turned into the driveway as Sandy slipped back inside with the dogs. Ben didn't have to ask her to keep Brad and Emma inside; she knew that much was a good idea on her own. The trucks came to a stop

about halfway up the driveway before men spilled out, their boots crunching on the frost-covered ground. At the head of the group stood a man Ben recognized immediately: Marcus Kane, Victor Slade's right-hand man.

Kane was a towering figure, his bulk clad in a thigh-length leather coat and worn jeans. His cold, gray eyes swept the homestead with the calculating air of a predator. He carried himself with the easy confidence of a man who was used to getting what he wanted—and making others regret it when he didn't.

Behind him, five men flanked the vehicles, each armed and watchful. Two of them, Ben realized with little surprise, were familiar faces.

It was the same Faction scouts who'd followed them out of town and tried to intimidate them just yesterday. The heavysset driver stood with his hands shoved into his jacket pockets, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. The wiry passenger was chewing on a toothpick, his gaze flicking between Joel, Allie, and Ben with thinly veiled contempt.

Kane stepped forward, his hands resting casually at his sides, though Ben noted the bulge of a pistol holstered under his long jacket. He stopped just outside the porch steps, a thin smile spreading across his face.

"Morning," Kane said, his tone deceptively friendly. "Hope we're not disturbing you too early."

Ben took a step forward, shotgun over his right shoulder. "You are."

Kane's smile didn't falter. He gestured broadly to the house, the yard, the garage. "Nice setup you've got here. Cozy, out of the way. Plenty of room to stretch out."

Ben's eyes flicked to the two scouts from yesterday's standoff. They leaned against the truck, their postures relaxed but their eyes sharp. The sight of them here made Ben's stomach churn.

"What do you want, Kane?" Ben asked, his tone flat.

Kane feigned offense, pressing a hand to his chest. "Straight to business, huh? No coffee, no small talk? Shame. But fine. Let's talk."

He motioned to his men, who spread out slightly, their postures casual but their hands never far from their weapons. The thin man's smirk widened as he stepped a few feet closer, his hands busy lighting a cigarette.

"Here's the deal," Kane continued, his voice smooth. "Slade's got his eye on the area. Wants to make sure everyone's safe, secure, taken care of. You know how it is. World's gone to hell, and people need... order."

Ben made his way around the hood of the Blazer, pulling the shotgun from his shoulder and holding it across his torso with the other hand on the weapon's forward grip. "And what does that have to do with us?" He glanced at the two scouts from yesterday, who no longer looked as comfortable as they had been just a few seconds ago.

Kane's smile widened, but his eyes remained cold. "We're offering protection. You give a little—resources, loyalty—and in return, you get peace of mind. Nobody messes with you, your family, your... chickens. A man of your talents could prove useful to the Faction. Mr. Slade takes care of his assets quite well."

Ben's jaw tightened, his shoulders stiff with tension. He didn't know how—or what—Slade knew about him, and right now, he didn't care. What mattered was the implication behind Kane's words. He'd had the audacity to suggest that Ben, his family, and his home could somehow become an "asset" to the Faction. The very idea made his blood simmer, but this wasn't the time or place to let his temper get the better of him.

He locked eyes with Kane. His voice was steady, but it carried the weight of his growing anger. "And if we don't want your protection?"

The air between them seemed to thicken, the quiet sounds of the woods amplifying the tension. Kane's smirk faltered ever so slightly, but the men flanking him remained motionless, their hands resting near their weapons, a silent reminder of what refusal could mean.

Kane tilted his head as if considering the question. "Well, that'd be... unfortunate. Out here, things can get messy without someone looking out for you. Supplies go missing. Fires start. People... disappear."

Ben smirked. "We're pretty good at cleaning up messes around here."

Joel emerged from the garage's shadow, his rifle no longer slung over his shoulder but held across his body in the collapsed low-ready position, his expression as hard as the ground they were standing on. Allie stepped out against the deck's railing above them, her AR-15 in hand, her stance no longer relaxed.

Kane's gaze flicked to them, his smile turning sharper. "You've got a smart-looking family, Ben. Seems like you've taught them well. But teaching's not enough. The world's changed, and folks like Slade? We're the ones keeping it from falling apart completely."

Ben thumbed the safety on the KSG into the fire position with an audible click. His voice was steady but as sharp as a razor blade. "We don't

need your protection. And we sure as hell don't need Slade."

The smile slipped from Kane's face, replaced by a colder expression. He held Ben's gaze for a long moment, the tension crackling in the air like a live wire.

"You've got guts," Kane said finally, his voice low. "I'll give you that. But guts only get you so far."

The heavysset driver from yesterday let out a low chuckle. "You remember us, don't you? From the park?"

Joel snapped the rifle up to his shoulder, taking a bead on the driver of the Dodge, his knuckles turning white. "Yeah, I remember. You didn't get what you wanted then, and you won't get it now."

The man's smirk faded. "That so? We'll see about that."

Kane held up a hand, silencing his lackey. "Easy now, Knox. No need to get jumpy. We're just here to have a conversation."

Knox stopped peeling his coat away from his holstered weapon, but the sour look on his face remained. Joel kept his weapon trained on the man.

"You call this a conversation?" Ben asked, his voice laced with steel.

Kane's eyes narrowed. "It's an offer, Ben. One that you'd be smart to take, for your family's sake at least."

Ben didn't flinch. "Not interested."

Kane studied him for a long moment, then laughed through his nose. "Suit yourself. But Slade's not a patient man. He's not going to wait for you to come around forever."

Ben glanced at Joel and Allie. "There's nothing to wait for. You have our answer."

"We'll see about that." Kane turned to leave, motioning to his men.

Knox and his friend from yesterday lingered for a moment longer than the other three, their eyes full of unspoken threats.

"Knox, Peters, we're leaving." Kane's tone was unwavering.

Knox and Peters were eager to settle the score from yesterday's incident, but they broke away and climbed into the Dodge without further warning from their boss.

As the vehicles rumbled away, Ben felt the knot in his chest loosen slightly, though he knew the reprieve was temporary.

Joel lowered his carbine, his expression grim. "They'll be back."

"Yeah," Ben said quietly. "And next time, they won't be asking."

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CHAPTER EIGHT



Ben could have cut the tension in the room with his pocketknife. The weight of Kane's visit pressed down on everyone like the snow-heavy clouds gathering over the mountains to the west. Inside the warmth of their log home, the family gathered around the living room, their expressions somber. The flickering flames in the woodstove licked at the glass panel, leaving trails of soot, their crackling the only sound for a moment, apart from the occasional creak of the old log beams.

Sandy sat on the couch, her arms crossed, her eyes fixed on the fire. Emma and Brad sat on the floor near her feet, their earlier laughter and chatter now replaced with silence. Emma ran her fingers through Bajer's thin fur to the tune of soft, steady groaning from the pot-bellied dog, while Brad fidgeted with a small piece of kindling, running his fingers over its rough edges.

Ben leaned against the wall and gazed out the window, the shotgun leaning beside him. He wanted to make sure Kane and his men had truly left. Joel and Allie were seated on the other couch, their rifles close at hand. Allie was staring out the window as well, her jaw tight, while Joel absentmindedly ran his thumb under the single-point sling he was wearing.

Finally, Sandy broke the silence. "I don't like this, Ben. That man, Kane, he didn't come all the way out here just to talk."

"No, he didn't," Ben agreed, his voice low. He glanced at Joel and Allie, both of whom were still tense, ready for a fight that hadn't come—yet. "That was a warning. Slade's way of letting us know he's paying attention and that yesterday's run-in with his men hadn't gone unnoticed."

“And what happens when they come back?” Sandy pressed, her voice rising slightly. “What if you’re not here? What if none of us are here? Or worse, what if they catch us off guard?”

“They won’t catch us off guard,” Joel interjected firmly, sitting up straighter. His grip on the harness tightened. “We’re ready. We’ve handled worse.”

Sandy’s eyes flashed, her voice sharp. “Have we? Joel, these aren’t desperate scavengers or people we can reason with. These men are organized, and they’re looking for a fight.”

“They’re looking for control,” Ben corrected, his tone measured but grim. “And they think intimidation is the fastest way to get it.”

Emma looked up from her pillow, her voice barely above a whisper. “Do you think they’ll hurt us?”

“No,” Ben said quickly. “Not if we’re smart and stay ahead of them. That’s why we’re going to make some changes around here—starting today.”

Sandy’s brow furrowed. “What kind of changes?”

Ben pushed off the wall and straightened, his gaze sweeping the tree line outside. “We’re tightening up the property. Building out defenses. Traps, trip wires, early-warning systems. Anything we can put in place to give us an advantage if they decide to come back.”

Brad perked up slightly at Ben’s declaration, his eyes widening with curiosity. “Like booby traps, with pits and sharpened sticks?”

“Something like that,” Ben said with a faint smile. “But a little more modern and safer—for us, at least. We’re not looking to hurt ourselves in the process.”

Joel nodded, his earlier tension giving way to determination. “I’ve been thinking about this since we got back from the market. We need more than just a clear line of sight. We need choke points, ways to slow intruders down before they even get close.”

Ben nodded in agreement. “Exactly. Flares, noisemakers, anything to alert us if someone’s sneaking around and maybe even act as a first line of defense.”

Fortifying their property had been on Ben’s mind ever since Sandy and the kids had spotted people in the woods last week. There was no confrontation with the strangers eyeballing their property, but it was a reminder that they weren’t alone up here. And after today, securing the

perimeter of the property had just skyrocketed to the top of Ben's priority list.

Allie finally turned away from the window. "We can use those old emergency flares we have left over from the trip. We could tie them to fishing line or maybe that spool of wire I've seen on the shelf downstairs and run it low through the trees. If anyone trips it, we'll see the light and probably hear it."

"We can take it a step further and rig a few shotgun shells into the trip wires." Ben raised his eyebrows. "I've got a box of Camp Safe popper rigs down in the basement—leftovers from the shop. They're designed for blanks, mainly to scare off bears, but they'll work with any 12-gauge shotgun shell. It wouldn't hurt if our warnings packed a little more punch. If Slade's men come snooping around, we need to make it clear right from the start that we're not an easy target."

He turned back toward the window, scanning the yard and driveway, already mapping out where to position the first lines of defense.

"What about the dogs?" Emma asked, her voice cutting through the planning session. "We don't want them getting hurt or accidentally setting off one of the trip wires."

At the mention of dogs, Bajer lifted her head briefly, her ears twitching in faint curiosity. The medium-sized gray dog let out a long, low grunt, as if to voice her agreement. A moment later, she dropped her head back onto the carpet, content to let Emma's steady hand resume its scratching. Gunner and Sam remained oblivious to the conversation, dead to the world, sacked out around the woodstove.

"The dogs are too smart. They'll step over anything we set, especially if we make sure they know where it is," Joel suggested. "Well, I'm not sure about all the dogs." He shot Emma and Bajer a glance.

"The dogs will be fine if we're smart about it." Allie gave Emma a nod.

"We'll make sure of it, Em. I promise. We'll set all our charges high, and like Allie said, we'll be smart about how we go about this," Ben added with a wink at his daughter.

But he was worried about more than just the dogs. If one of the kids or Sandy had a lapse in memory, even for a moment, and wandered through one of the traps by accident...

He shook his head at the thought of it.

"What?" Sandy must have read the expression on his face.

“We’ll have to create no-go zones around the perimeter once we set these areas up. They’ll be off limits to everyone except for maintenance, by me or as a group.” Ben looked around the room to make sure they were all paying attention, especially Brad and Emma. They both liked to wander around the property with the dogs. He wasn’t a fan of it, but up until now, he hadn’t said anything. He hadn’t planned on it either, as long as they continued to take their weapons with them and stick together.

The kids were already stuck here at the property for the majority of the time. Taking away their ability to explore the woods around the house felt too much like taking the rest of their childhood from them. But there might be no choice in the matter now, thanks to Slade and his Faction thugs.

Sandy frowned, her concern evident. “And what about the driveway? That’s the most obvious way in. But we need to be able to use it, too.”

“The BLM land back behind the house is loaded with saplings that would make a perfect fence,” Joel suggested, his mind already racing. “You said you wanted to build a gate across the driveway. They’d work for that, too.” He looked at Ben.

“It’d be a lot of work, but that’s a good idea, Joel. We could do a simple, self-supporting, zigzag-style fence or maybe some type of split rail setup and get twice the wood from the trees.”

“The whole perimeter.” Brad’s eyes widened at the prospect.

“Wouldn’t need to, really,” Joel said. “Just where our property runs along Saddle Trail. That’s our weak spot and really the only way in by vehicle.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too,” Ben replied. “We’ll set up a spike strip near the curve in the road. Something we can pull across if we hear engines. It won’t stop them completely, but it’ll certainly slow them down and put them on foot.”

Emma shifted uncomfortably. “Do we really need all of this? What if... What if they don’t come back?”

“They will,” Joel said firmly, his voice leaving no room for doubt. “Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week. But Slade doesn’t let things go. He’ll send someone to check on us—see if we’ve changed our minds.”

Ben placed a reassuring hand on Emma’s shoulder. “This isn’t about living in fear, Em. It’s about being prepared. We’ll do this work now so that we can sleep better at night, knowing we’re ready for anything.”

Brad looked up at his dad, his expression serious. “What can I do to help?”

Ben smiled faintly, ruffling Brad’s hair. “You can help me run the trip wires. That much we can get done today in case they come back sooner rather than later.”

Brad nodded eagerly. The prospect of contributing had clearly lifted his spirits. Emma looked less enthusiastic but gave a small nod of agreement.

“Joel and I will grab the wire and some hand tools,” Allie volunteered.

“Sounds good. You’ll see the box of trip rigs on top of the safe. Grab those, if you would, and a case of 12-gauge 2.5-inch birdshot.”

Joel nodded.

“All right,” Ben said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get started. If everyone chips in, we’ll be done with some basic perimeter defense in no time.”

Gunner’s tail whacked Sam in the face repeatedly as the big Chesapeake Bay retriever keyed in on the newfound excitement in the room. Sam was slower to her feet but way ahead of Bajer, who doubled down on her spot by the woodstove with a lengthy stretch, her nails digging into the carpet.

“Oh, just stay here, Bajer, and enjoy the fire.” Emma shook her head as the dog rolled over, exposing her belly, and threw a paw in the air, begging for just one more rub.

Joel and Allie exchanged a glance, their expressions resolute. Sandy still looked worried but content that they had a plan. The younger kids, while subdued, seemed to draw some comfort from getting to work on something outside with Joel and Allie.

As the family began to disperse, Ben lingered by the window. His eyes drifted from the tree line to the incoming storm clouds. There was no weather report to pull up on his phone, but if he was a betting man, he would put money on snow tonight. They could prepare all they wanted, but there were some things they couldn’t avoid facing, like cold weather and Victor Slade.

The man wouldn’t stop. Ben knew that. Men like Slade didn’t just take no for an answer. They pushed, tested, chipped away until they got what they wanted—or until someone pushed back hard enough to make them think twice.

Ben wasn’t looking for a fight. But if one came to his doorstep, he’d be ready.

For now, though, there was work to do. He turned away from the window, his resolve hardening like the ground outside. Colder weather would be here soon, and with it, the promise of harder days ahead. But they'd face it together, prepared for whatever came next.

And if Slade's men wanted a fight, they'd learn soon enough just how far Ben and his family were willing to go to protect what was theirs.

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CHAPTER NINE



By the time they'd gathered the supplies and devised a rough plan for the layout of the trip wires and alarms, the mid-morning sun was losing its battle against the storm clouds gathering over the mountains. Its fleeting rays filtered through the tall pines like beams of light in a dark room. A biting wind whistled through the trees, carrying with it the unmistakable chill of an impending snowstorm.

The family was gathered around Emma, who sat cross-legged on the ground with her sketchpad balanced on her knees. Her pencil scratched steadily across the page, the rough outline of their property taking shape as she carefully mapped out the plan.

"This is the driveway," she said, pointing to a dark line that wound up the page. "And here's the tree line where we talked about running the first set of trip wires, just past where you said the fence would go." She added small X's to thin pencil lines on their side of the fence, marking potential locations for traps and alarms.

Ben crouched beside her, nodding as he studied the map. "Good work, Em. This'll give us a solid guide to follow. It might seem silly now, but after a few weeks, I have a feeling we'd forget where everything is exactly."

Sandy stood nearby, holding the spool of wire they'd decided to use for the trip lines. Gunner sat beside her, his tail thumping rhythmically against the ground. Sam roamed a few yards away, sniffing at the base of a pine tree and occasionally casting curious glances back toward the group. Bajer had opted to stay inside by the woodstove. Her vocal protests against moving too far away from the woodstove were comical but determined.

Joel and Allie stood shoulder to shoulder, their eyes on the map as Emma added a few more details.

“We’ll start from the driveway and work our way out from there,” Ben said, standing and brushing his hands on his well-worn jeans. “That’s the most obvious entry point, so we’ll make it the first line of defense.”

Emma looked up. “What about the back tree line? If someone comes through there, we won’t see them until they’re right on us.”

“That’s all BLM land. Anyone coming from that direction would have to hike their way in or work their way through from the road,” Joel stated.

Ben gave her an approving nod. “It’s still a valid point. We’ll run a line along there.” He pointed to the map, then turned to look at the spot on their property. “For now, let’s get the front along Saddle Trail set up. Once you’ve got the hang of it, we can split into teams and cover more ground.”

“Let’s get moving,” Joel said, grabbing a hammer and a handful of nails from the toolbox.

Ben led the way to the edge of the driveway, with Sandy and the dogs close behind. He stopped at a sturdy pine tree and held up one of the nails, turning it so everyone could see. “Here’s how this works,” he said. “We’ll drive these nails into the trees at about shin height.” He pounded one of the sixteen penny nails halfway into the tree, then hammered it over sideways, forming an open loop with a gap at the top. “The wire runs through the loops, and that keeps it from sagging or catching on anything.”

He knelt by the tree and tapped the nail into place the rest of the way with the hammer, leaving just enough of it exposed to form a small guide for the wire. “Once we’ve got the wire in place, we’ll attach the poppers. They’re designed to go off if the line is tripped, but they’ll only work if the wire stays taut. That’s why the loops are important—they keep everything steady.”

Joel crouched beside him, threading the wire through the first loop and twisting the end over the running section to secure it in place. “How tight should it be?”

“Just enough to stay straight,” Ben said, watching as Joel pulled the wire snug. “Too tight and it could snap when it gets cold. Too loose and it won’t trigger the poppers.”

Allie stepped up to the next tree, a hammer in hand. “So we just repeat this all the way down the line?”

“Exactly,” Ben said. “Once we’ve got the wire run, I’ll handle attaching the poppers to the trip wire with a secondary piece of wire. That part needs to be done carefully.”

He held one of the devices up so they could all see. “These are simple,” he explained, his tone calm but serious. “You attach the wire to this trigger here, run it down the tree, and when someone trips the main wire, the spring-loaded pin releases and strikes the shotgun primer. Normally, these are used with blanks to scare off bears, but we’re loading them with birdshot shells. The sound will be loud enough to wake the dead, and if anyone’s too close...” He left the rest unsaid, the meaning clear.

Sandy handed the spool of wire to Joel, who began unrolling it as they moved to the next tree. Allie drove another nail into place, and Brad followed behind, tapping the bent nails into the tree just enough to close off the loop after Joel ran the wire through at each stop. Then he darted ahead, eager to be part of the process.

“Here,” Ben said, motioning for Brad to come over as he handed him a small handful of nails. “Let’s tackle this tree line while Joel and Allie head that way. You can help me set the next few loops, but be careful—watch your fingers.”

Brad grinned, his earlier tension seemingly gone as he took the nails and followed his dad to the next tree.

“Right here.” Ben marked a spot on the tree with his finger.

“This is kind of cool,” Brad said, holding the nail steady as Ben watched him tap it into place.

“It’s not just cool,” Ben said, his tone serious but gentle. “It’s important. These wires could give us the edge we need if someone tries to sneak onto the property.”

Brad nodded, his face set with determination.

The family worked steadily, moving from tree to tree along the edge of the property. The wire stretched in a somewhat straight, unbroken line, running low enough to be inconspicuous but high enough to avoid being triggered by small animals.

Emma guided Gunner and Sam along the route, pointing out the wire to help the dogs become familiar with the hazard. The two dogs followed her dutifully, sniffing warily at the strung wire and occasionally glancing back at Ben, who trailed a few steps behind.

He moved methodically, securing the Camp Safe poppers to the wire at regular intervals. Each popper was fitted with a 12-gauge shell loaded with birdshot—not enough to kill, but more than enough to make a loud bang and send steel shot flying. He made sure to position the devices at a height and angle that would strike an adult in the chest. This precaution was as much for safety as it was strategic; it reduced the risk of Gunner or Sam accidentally triggering one while also making the traps effective against potential intruders.

The birdshot wouldn't be lethal—not without the focused force of a shotgun barrel—but it would still deliver a painful, incapacitating blow. Anyone unlucky enough to trip the wire would feel it. That wasn't the primary goal, though. The real benefit of the devices was in the sound: a sudden, deafening blast that would alert Ben and the others the moment someone crossed into their territory. Injuring an intruder was just an added bonus.

Emma crouched a few steps ahead, her hand hovering over the wire that ran low through the trees. She beckoned Gunner closer, her tone calm but firm, and pointed to the wire. "See this, Gunner? This is bad. You stay away from it, okay?"

The big Chesapeake Bay retriever sniffed it cautiously, his ears pricked forward in curiosity. He let out a low huff, his nose hovering over the wire as if he was trying to understand what she meant.

Emma gently tapped his collar to get his attention, then pulled his head back from the trip wire. "No," she said more sternly. "Bad. Stay back."

Gunner lowered his ears and stepped back as Sam trotted over, her tail wagging slowly at first but then faltering as she picked up on Emma's serious tone. The yellow Lab sniffed at the wire, her nose twitching.

Emma shifted her focus to her, her hand gesturing to the wire again. "Sam, no. Bad. Stay away from it, girl."

Both dogs looked at her, their eyes flicking between her and the wire. Gunner backed up even farther, tilting his head slightly as if processing the new boundary. Sam lowered her head as if she'd been scolded, her tail giving a hesitant wag as she took a cautious step back.

"That's right," Emma said, her voice softening slightly but staying firm. "Stay back. You don't go near this, got it?"

Ben watched from a few steps behind, torn between wanting to chuckle and feeling quietly impressed by Emma's patience and focus. She'd always

had a natural way with animals, a calm yet commanding presence they responded to. But this was different—this wasn't just about teaching them a new trick. It was about their safety, and she was taking it seriously, her determination evident in every word and gesture.

“Good work, Em,” Ben called, his voice carrying a hint of approval. “Keep reinforcing it every time they're near the lines. They'll get it.”

Emma glanced back at him, gave a small nod, and returned her attention to Gunner and Sam. “Come on,” she said, gesturing for the dogs to follow her down the line.

As they moved to the next section, Gunner kept a respectful distance from the wire, his head turning to Emma as if checking for her approval. Sam followed close behind, still curious but clearly picking up on the seriousness of the lesson.

Ben straightened from his work for a moment, watching his daughter with the dogs. His hands were dirty, his shoulders tense from the repetitive motion of setting the traps, but seeing Emma so focused and Gunner so attentive made him feel a small, fleeting sense of reassurance. They were doing what they could—taking precautions, working together. In a world where the odds always seemed stacked against them, that had to count for something.

In addition to managing the dogs, Emma kept sketching as they worked, updating her map with new lines and X's to indicate the trip wire routes and the placement of the shotgun shells in the trees while adding notes in small, neat handwriting.

By the time they reached the end of the property line bordering Saddle Trail, the sun was completely hidden behind the clouds, the air growing colder with each passing minute. Sandy rubbed her hands together, her breath visible in the chilly air.

As Joel and the others continued setting up the trip wires, Allie's voice cut through the quiet. “This isn't going to be enough, is it?”

Ben turned to look at her, his expression unreadable. “It's a start,” he said after a moment. “But no, it won't be enough on its own. That's why we're planning the gate and the fence next.”

Joel straightened, spinning a hammer in the palm of his hand. “Speaking of the fence, the Honda would make hauling saplings a lot easier. I've almost got it ready to run—I think. I just need to get it all back together.”

Ben's jaw tightened at the mention of the four-wheeler. He'd helped Joel barter for the 1986 Honda TRX350 four-wheeler weeks ago, but his feelings about it were complicated. On the one hand, it was a useful tool—efficient on gas. And with its full-time four-wheel drive, it would be perfect for hauling trees down from the mountain. On the other hand, it was a potential escape route for Joel and maybe Allie—a way for them to leave the property whenever he wanted.

And with his eighteenth birthday just around the corner, Ben knew it was only a matter of time before Joel started pushing for more independence.

"That four-wheeler will be useful," Ben said, carefully choosing his words. "But you're not taking it anywhere without letting me know first. Right, Joel?"

Joel's eyes narrowed slightly, but he nodded. "I know, I know. It's not like we're gonna go joyriding on the thing."

Ben let the comment hang in the air for a moment before nodding. "Good. Let's focus on getting the defenses set for now. The fence and gate will come next."

Just as they finished the first section of the trip wire, the sound of hooves crunching on gravel drew their attention. Ben stood, his eyes narrowing as he turned toward the source of the noise.

Two riders emerged from the tree line, their horses moving at an easy pace. The man in the lead was broad-shouldered, with a square jaw and weathered features that spoke of years spent outdoors. He wore a Carhartt jacket and a well-worn Stetson hat. Behind him, a woman with auburn hair pulled into a braid rode a chestnut mare. She was lean and sharp-eyed, her rifle resting in a scabbard at her side.

"Morning, Ben," the man called out, tipping his hat.

Ben relaxed slightly, recognizing the riders. It was Luke and Sarah Holden, their nearest neighbors. They lived on a large parcel of land about two miles down the hill in the next valley over. The families didn't cross paths often—partly because of how reclusive Ben and his family had been since returning home and partly because people tended to keep to themselves these days.

"Morning, Luke, Sarah," Ben replied, stepping away from the tree to meet them.

Luke pulled his horse to a stop a few yards away, his eyes scanning the driveway. "Looks like you're getting ready for trouble."

"Something like that," Ben admitted.

Sarah glanced at the wire in Joel's hands, then at the box of shotgun shells Ben was holding. "Slade?"

Ben nodded grimly. "His men were here this morning."

Luke's jaw tightened. "Figures. They've been making the rounds, testing everyone's patience. We told them to get lost a couple days ago."

Joel joined them, wiping his hands on his pants and adjusting the rifle slung over his shoulder, giving a polite nod to the Holdens.

That was when Ben noticed Luke and Sarah's daughter, Grace, riding up behind them. Grace was Joel and Allie's age, maybe a year younger, with long, dark copper hair that tumbled in loose waves around her shoulders. Her bright green eyes sparkled with curiosity, and a scattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks only added to her charm. When her gaze landed on Joel, a shy smile curved her lips, and her cheeks flushed a shade that matched her hair.

"Hey, Joel," Grace said, her voice a little too bright.

"Hey," Joel replied, politely but with hints of reservation.

Allie, standing a few feet away, crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow as she watched the exchange. She didn't say anything, but the tension in her posture was unmistakable.

Luke cleared his throat, cutting through the moment. "If you need a hand with any of this, let us know. Slade's not just your problem. He's all of ours."

Ben nodded, grateful for the offer. "Appreciate it, Luke. We might take you up on that."

Sarah glanced at Sandy, who had joined them with Gunner close at her heels. "You holding up okay?"

"We're managing," Sandy said with a sigh and a sideways glance.

Luke and Sarah stayed for a few more minutes, exchanging updates and offers of assistance before turning their horses back toward the trail. Grace lingered a moment longer, her eyes flicking between Joel and Allie before she finally rode off after her parents.

As the Holdens disappeared into the trees, Ben turned back to the others. "All right, let's get back to it. We've still got a lot of ground to cover."

Joel and Allie exchanged glances, but neither said a word as they returned to their tasks.

Ben couldn't help but notice the faint scowl on Allie's face as she hammered the next nail into place. He filed it away for later. Right now, they had more important things to worry about.

And in this world, small victories were everything.

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CHAPTER TEN



The afternoon had grown colder as the clouds thickened, casting a gray pall over the homestead. The air felt heavy, charged with the kind of stillness that often came before the first flurries of snow. Ben stood near the woodpile, ax in hand, splitting logs for the fire. He preferred to split fresh wood when time allowed rather than taking from the covered wood storage. Lately, though, he felt like he lived out here by the chopping block, the routine of splitting and stacking wood consuming more of his days than ever before.

Still, the effort wasn't wasted. And they'd made good progress on the preliminary perimeter defenses earlier that day. With those safeguards in place, Ben felt a little better about turning his attention back to their everyday chores and their never-ending list of tasks.

Technically, they could run the generator to power the furnace and use the house's central heat. The natural gas tank behind the garage was still more than half full. But Ben had long since resolved to save that resource for emergencies or special occasions. Once the gas was gone, it was gone for good. No more refills.

Solar was an option, but it didn't last very long, especially for high-energy-use items like appliances or the furnace. And with the days growing shorter as winter approached, they hadn't banked much power from the small panels on the garage roof. In hindsight, Ben wished he'd sprung for a larger solar panel array, but he couldn't complain. The panels and electric disconnect had saved the house from the initial EMP surge. So for now and

the foreseeable future, when they needed heat, they'd rely on the woodstove.

He hefted a piece of cherry onto the chopping block, driving the ax down all the way through the dense log in one swing. The split wood landed in two neat halves, and he added them to the growing pile in the caddy. Another log or two would be enough to get them through the night, thanks to the newer, more efficient woodstove he'd installed a couple of winters ago. It had been an expensive purchase, but the upgrade was worth its weight in gold now.

The old stove that came with the log home had been a 1920s Windsor parlor stove. Ornate, with nickel-plated accents, it looked like something out of a museum. The previous owners had been proud of it, and to their credit, the thick twelve-inch log walls of the house had helped keep the place warm enough that they could afford to use it, supplementing with the furnace and radiant floor heating. But Ben had quickly realized that relying on the stove was a losing battle. It went through wood faster than an ambitious beaver, thanks to its poor airflow control. But that was a costly and unsustainable option, something Ben had decided long before the EMPs dictated how they would live their lives.

The rhythmic crack of splitting wood echoed across the clearing as Ben added the last log to the wood caddy. Gunner lounged nearby, chewing on a piece of bark as if the chill in the air didn't exist. The dog seemed almost immune to the cold, his thick, curly coat and dense underlayer making him perfectly suited for the weather. Ben envied the retriever's contentment.

As he stood still for a moment, he could hear the older kids in the garage. Joel and Allie worked in companionable silence. The soft clucks and quacks of the chickens and ducks drifted out through the open rear door just several feet away. The birds seemed calmer now, settling into their new accommodations, though the occasional squawk or flutter of wings was a reminder that the garage wasn't exactly home. Not yet, anyway.

Ben walked toward the open garage door, drawn by the low hum of conversation and the occasional metallic clink of tools. He stopped just shy of the threshold, staying out of sight, and peeked inside. The warm scent of straw and sawdust mingled with the faint tang of gun oil and grease. The late afternoon light filtering through the small windows of the large overhead door cast dim shadows across the garage floor, where Joel was squatted beside the half-dismantled Honda TRX350 four-wheeler. The ATV

was parked a few feet from the chicken coop, among a scattering of tools and parts that littered the concrete around him.

“Can you pass me that small socket wrench in the red toolbox?” Joel asked as he wiped his hands on a grease-stained rag.

Allie, perched on a stool in front of the workbench, glanced at him over her shoulder. “You know, you could say please,” she teased, but her eyes softened as she reached into the toolbox.

“Please,” Joel said, grinning.

She tossed the wrench over her shoulder without hesitation. Joel caught it midair and smirked. “Show-off.”

“You’re welcome,” Allie replied, turning her attention back to the rifle she was cleaning for the second time that week. She ran a clean patch through the barrel, her expression thoughtful. “Do you really think you’ll get that thing running?” she asked, nodding toward the ATV.

Joel glanced at her, his grin slipping into mild indignation. “It’s close. Just needs a few more adjustments. If I can get the carburetor dialed in and clean the fuel filter, it’ll run like new.”

Allie raised an eyebrow, setting the rifle down on her lap. “Or it’ll blow up the first time you take it out.”

Joel scoffed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Just keeping you humble,” she said, a playful smile tugging at her lips.

Joel stood, stretching out his back with a groan. “Humble, huh?” He leaned in behind her and jabbed his fingers into her sides, making her squeal and twist on the stool.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” she laughed, swatting at his hands.

“All’s fair,” Joel replied, grinning as he finally backed off. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before stepping toward the chicken coop.

Allie rolled her eyes but smiled, her attention returning to her rifle. “What would Grace Holden think about how you treat people, Joel Davis?” she teased. Her tone was light, but it carried the hint of an edge.

Joel groaned. “Grace isn’t my girlfriend, Allie.”

“Maybe not, but she’d like to be,” Allie shot back, smirking as she adjusted the sling on her rifle.

Joel ignored the jab, stopping in front of the coop to study the birds. The chickens pecked halfheartedly at the feed laid out for them while the two white ducks huddled in a corner, their feathers fluffed against the chill.

“We’re not getting any eggs yet,” Joel said, frowning. “Think it’s too cold in here for them?”

Allie glanced over. “Could be,” she said thoughtfully. “They’re probably still stressed from the move, too. Might take them a while to settle in.”

Joel wiped his hands on the rag again, his brow furrowing. “Dad’s not going to sit around waiting for them to freeze before we see results. He’ll want to do something about the cold.”

Allie chuckled, picking up her rifle to inspect her cleaning efforts. “No kidding. If I know your dad, he’s already got a plan.”

Joel nodded, his lips twitching into a faint smile. “He always does.”

It was true. Ben had already been considering repurposing the old Windsor parlor stove, installing it in the garage to take the edge off the winter chill. If they expected the birds to be reliable egg producers, they might need to make them more comfortable. Otherwise, he worried, they might have bartered away precious resources for nothing more than a few loud, feathered dinner options.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching the two of them. Joel’s determination and Allie’s sharp wit reminded him of the bond they’d built—not just as a couple but as partners who truly had each other’s backs. Ben allowed himself a small smile but quickly shook it off, guilt creeping in over his silent eavesdropping. He turned to leave, giving them their space.

But before he could take another step, a sharp, deafening *CRACK* shattered the quiet, the sound echoing across the property and reverberating through the walls of the garage.

The chickens erupted into a cacophony of panicked clucks, wings flapping against the wire enclosure as they tried to flee in every direction at once. Even the usually unbothered ducks quacked loudly, shuffling frantically to the far side of their pen.

“What the—” Joel froze, his grin vanishing as his hand shot to his rifle leaning nearby. His easy-going demeanor was gone, replaced by a tense alertness.

Allie was already on her feet, rifle in hand as she made her way to the large overhead door at the front of the garage and peered outside. “Was that one of the trip wires?” she asked, her voice low but steady.

Joel nodded grimly. “Had to be.”

Ben stepped into the garage, the KelTec in his grasp. “We’ve got company,” he stated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

“You think it’s Kane and his men from this morning?” Allie stayed glued to the window.

“Didn’t expect them to be back so soon,” Joel added.

“I doubt it’s Kane himself, but I’m willing to bet it’s some of Slade’s men, including our two friends from town the other day, Knox and Peters.”

Ben’s grip tightened on the KelTec as he motioned for Joel and Allie to keep a lower profile by the row of windows set at head height along the overhead door. His heart thudded steadily in his chest, his mind racing through possibilities. He doubted Kane himself had returned, but the timing of the trip wire going off felt deliberate—too deliberate.

“Allie,” Ben said, his voice calm but firm, “head back to the house. Let your mom know what’s going on. Tell her to keep Emma and Brad inside, Sam and Gunner too, and don’t come out until she hears from one of us.”

Allie hesitated, her gaze flicking between Joel and Ben. Her jaw tightened, but then she gave a sharp nod. “Got it.”

Slinging her rifle over her shoulder, she bolted for the rear door, skipping two of the four steps to the landing, her boots crunching over the gravel just outside. The sound of her retreating footsteps gradually faded, leaving Ben and Joel in the stillness that had settled over the property like a shroud. Even the ducks and chickens had quieted down, save the occasional low-pitched coo.

Joel shifted closer to the window, his eyes darting along the tree line. “You think they’re testing us?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ben kept his eyes fixed on the area where the trip wire had been set. He exhaled slowly. “Could be,” he murmured. “Or worse. Either way, we’re not taking any chances. Not with the Faction.” He took a step back from the row of windows, his gaze flicking to Joel. “Come on. Let’s check it out.” His tone was calm but left no room for hesitation.

Joel followed as Ben headed for the door at the back of the garage, the creak of the wooded steps sounding louder than it should in the quiet. Outside, the cold air hit like a warning. The wind had picked up, carrying with it the faint scent of snow and something else—a tension that prickled at the edges of Ben’s awareness.

Gunner was no longer lounging near the woodpile. The big Chesapeake Bay retriever was on his feet, his entire body rigid. His ears stood tall, his

nose pointed into the breeze, quivering as he sniffed the air. The dark brown fur along his back bristled, and a low, rumbling growl rolled from his chest. His gaze was locked on the edge of the property, in the direction of the tripped alarm.

Ben followed the dog's line of sight, his own pulse quickening. His hand tightened on the KelTec shotgun as he took a step forward, trying his best to limit the noise his boots made in the gravel.

"Gunner," Ben said quietly, his voice calm but firm. The dog's growl deepened in response, his posture unmoving.

Joel came up beside him, his rifle held low but ready. "You think it's a bear?"

Ben's jaw tightened. "No," he said simply.

He'd wanted to hope for something mundane—a black bear looking for food or a coyote drawn in by the smell of chickens and ducks in the garage. But deep down, he knew better. The timing was too coincidental. And he trusted Gunner's instincts.

If the dog was uneasy, there was a good reason.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The snow had begun to fall—light, lazy flakes swirling down from the gray sky—but the tension crackling in the air made it hard to notice the first snow of the season. Ben kept his steps slow and deliberate as he moved toward the tree line, Joel just a pace behind him. Gunner stayed at Ben's side, his growl low and steady, the hackles on his neck still raised. All of Ben's instincts told him this wasn't just an animal stumbling across the wire.

"Stay sharp," he muttered, barely audible. Joel nodded, his grip on the rifle tightening. But then Ben stopped dead in his tracks. "Wait here for Allie. Post up off the corner of the garage and watch the driveway for any movement. When Allie gets here, have her take cover behind the boulder at the edge of the parking area."

"I should go with you," Joel argued.

But Ben wasn't interested in having a discussion, nor did they have time. "We can't have her wandering around out here when she comes back. Besides, if it is Slade's men and there are more than a couple of them, we need to protect the house."

Joel's shoulders dropped and he nodded in reluctant agreement.

Ben nodded back and turned his attention to the wooded section of property in front of him. He knew Joel wanted to help. He always did, and Ben was grateful for that, but this time his reason for the older kids staying back to keep an eye on things close to the house was motivated by more than a concern for their safety. If Slade's men managed to slip past him in the woods somehow, there was no telling what they might try. Visions of

Faction scouts lobbing Molotov cocktails at the house flashed through Ben's mind. That sounded like something Slade and his flunkies would try as a way of forcing Ben and the others to capitulate to their demands.

Ben shook the thought from his head. He wouldn't let the Faction get that close.

With Joel headed back toward the garage and Gunner still at his side, he made for a section of the property where the trip wire had been set, his eyes scanning the pines for any movement. His breath fogged in front of him while some of the larger flakes landed on the back of his neck, stinging his skin like tiny cold needles as he neared the first line of traps.

The wire, strung low between the trees, was still taut, but several yards down the line, one of the poppers hung in place, half blown from its mount on the tree with the firing pin sprung. The shell casing was blackened, the smell of burnt gunpowder still lingering faintly in the air.

Ben crouched down to inspect the wire while Gunner sniffed at the ground around the base of the tree the popper was dangling from. "Easy, boy. No." Ben reminded Gunner of the trip wire while he surveyed the property from a lower vantage point just a couple of feet off the ground, hoping he might catch a glimpse of the culprit or maybe a pair of legs moving through the trees. "Gunner, no, boy. Bad." Ben was forced to repeat his warning as the dog persisted in investigating the ground near the trip wire.

Then Ben saw what had Gunner's attention. There was blood splatter on the bark of the tree and the pine needles around it. He reached into the pocket of his vest and pulled out his headlamp. He tended to keep the little light handy these days. Without electricity or functioning lights, he often needed it both inside and outside the house.

The sight of blood on the bark sent a ripple of unease through Ben's gut. He flipped on the red light of his headlamp, the dim crimson beam highlighting the intruder's blood against the graying foliage and fading light. The snow had increased in volume in a matter of minutes, and the storm clouds were doing their best to blot out the remaining daylight. Gunner's nose hovered near the dark burgundy streaks, his growl now replaced by a soft whine. Ben gently pushed the dog back, murmuring a quiet, "Easy, boy."

There wasn't a lot of blood—just a spattering on the ground in a very small area, likely where the 12-gauge shell had been aimed. Now Ben

wished it had started snowing earlier, making his job of tracking the trespasser easier. He flipped his headlamp back on and then back off after following a couple of drops of blood that ran to his right, along the wire.

Whoever had tripped the wire wasn't just scouting anymore. They were wounded and likely desperate. Whatever the intruder had come here to do was now secondary to their lust for revenge. If they were smart, they'd move cautiously, not knowing if or where there were more traps set up.

Ben adjusted the KelTec shotgun in his hands, its dual magazines loaded with double-aught buckshot. He liked using the bullpup-style shotgun around the property because it was compact enough to carry while working without getting in the way and because the double-aught buckshot would tear through any limbs or branches between Ben and his target and still find their mark.

He rose to his feet, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the woods ahead. The faint crunch of dried leaves under his boots was the only sound as he moved among the trees, Gunner at his side. Every few steps, Ben would pause, holding his breath and listening for anything out of place: a broken twig, labored breathing, or whispered voices.

The woods remained unnervingly quiet, save for the occasional rustle of wind through the pines. It was the kind of quiet that accompanied a decent snowstorm, but tonight, the deafening silence set Ben's nerves on edge. Slade's men weren't amateurs; they'd know how to move with some degree of stealth when they needed to.

About twenty yards further into the trees, Ben spotted something—a dark shape slumped near the base of a pine. His heart kicked up as he raised the shotgun, the muzzle trained on the figure. But as he stepped closer, it became clear that it wasn't a person. It was a jacket draped hastily over a fallen log, the bloodstains on the fabric dark against the muted colors of the dwindling daylight.

A decoy?

Ben's pulse quickened as he crouched low, his eyes darting in every direction. Whoever had set the jacket there was trying to buy time—time to regroup, time to escape, or, worse, time to flank him.

"Smart," Ben muttered under his breath. But not smart enough.

Gunner let out a low growl, his head snapping to the left. Ben followed the dog's gaze, catching a glimpse of movement—a flash of brown in the

gap between two trees. He rose to his feet but remained low as he moved toward the direction Gunner indicated.

Every so often, Ben spotted a drop of blood, faint but visible, as he weaved through the trees along the trail, every step measured, every sense heightened. He knew he was walking into a potential ambush, but he also knew he had the upper hand. Whoever was out here wasn't expecting to be hunted, not by someone like Ben.

Another ten yards in, he heard it—a faint rustling, followed by an audible wince and a muffled curse. Ben froze and turned to face Gunner, giving the dog a silent command with his free hand: one finger up in a closed fist. Then Ben's finger went down after Gunner was seated, indicating he wanted the dog to stay put as well. Gunner would be close enough to help if needed, but Ben didn't want them both walking into a trap, and he'd be quieter on his own.

As soon as he was sure that Gunner would play along, Ben brought the shotgun up to the high-ready position. He dropped to one knee behind a mature pine, peering around its wide trunk, letting the shotgun barrel lead the way.

There they were.

Three men crouched behind a tuft of scrub oaks. The wounded one—Ben recognized him as Peters, the wiry scout from the park—leaned heavily against a large rock, his face pale and slick with sweat. Blood seeped through his fingers where he clutched his side, the crimson staining the dusting of snow that had begun to accumulate on the ground beneath him.

The other two men were busy talking in hushed tones. One had his rifle in his hands, while the other had his weapon slung across his back as he rifled through a small bag. The larger of the two wore a heavy jacket and a scowl that seemed permanently etched into his face. Knox. The man with the gun at the ready was younger, maybe in his early twenties, with a nervous energy that was impossible to miss.

"We should've come here tonight," the younger man whispered, his voice trembling. "Knox, this is bad. Real bad."

Knox shot him a glare. "Shut up before you give away our position, Danny. We're not leaving him here. Help me wrap this bandage so we can stop the bleeding."

Danny hesitated, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "What if he's coming? You heard what Kane said about this guy. He was a Ranger man. I

was a security guard at Alpine Bank before all this.”

Knox stopped attending to his wounded friend and grabbed Danny by his jacket, growling low in his throat. “You knew what you signed up for. And do you really think I care what Kane said? Just keep watch. I’ll handle Peters.”

Ben stayed perfectly still, his mind racing. He could take them out—two quick shots from the KelTec would handle Knox and Danny before they could react. God knew they probably deserved it, but Ben was no executioner. Besides, if he was going to get his message back to Slade, he’d need someone to deliver it.

Gunner let out a low, guttural growl. Ben could hear it from his position and pictured the dog sitting through the trees to his left, hackles up and bristling with the desire to chase after these three. But that wasn’t the move here. Danny was likely to shoot at the slightest provocation.

“Easy, boy. Not yet.” Ben willed the dog to stay put for now, hoping Gunner would adhere to his last command and remain hidden.

Peters shifted on the ground, groaning as Knox tightened a makeshift bandage around his torso. “I told you to slow down but you wanted to get to the house first,” he muttered, his tone full of irritation. “Now look at you.”

Peters let out a weak laugh. “You always have to be in charge, don’t you?”

Gunner grumbled again at the sound of their voices.

Danny’s head snapped up suddenly, his eyes scanning the trees. “Did you hear that?”

Ben didn’t give them a chance to react further. He stepped out from behind the tree, the KelTec raised and steady in his grip.

“Don’t move,” he barked, his voice cutting through the stillness like a knife.

All three men froze. Knox’s hand drifted to the pistol at his hip, but Ben moved a few steps closer, eliminating the last of the obstructions between them, and leveled the shotgun at Knox before he could draw. “Don’t even think about it.”

Danny’s hands shot up immediately, his rifle swinging on its strap as he stumbled back. “Whoa, whoa! Don’t shoot, man!”

Knox glared at Ben, his jaw clenched. “Big man with a big gun. What’s the plan here, huh? You gonna shoot us in cold blood?”

Ben didn’t blink. “That depends. What are you doing on my property?”

Knox smirked, though the tension in his posture betrayed him. “Just passing through. Didn’t mean to trip your little booby trap.”

“Funny,” Ben said coldly. “I don’t recall inviting you to ‘pass through.’ You and your friends seem to have a habit of being where you’re not welcome.”

Peters coughed weakly, his head lolling back against the log. “You’re making a big mistake, Davis,” he slurred. “Slade’s not gonna like this.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed, his finger brushing the trigger. “Slade’s not here. And you’re in no position to make threats.”

Knox’s smirk faded as he got up and retreated to Danny’s position, several feet closer to the road, abandoning Peters. “You’ve got no idea who you’re messing with.”

“Maybe not.” Ben moved up to Peters and stripped the handgun from the wounded man’s holster while keeping the shotgun trained on Knox’s chest. “But I know how to handle trespassers.”

Ben tossed the handgun well out of reach and kept pushing the men back toward the road. He wouldn’t kill Peters, but he was going to make an example of him.

Danny took a shaky step back, his hands still raised. “Look, man, we don’t want any trouble. We’ll leave, okay? Just... let us go.”

Ben glanced at Danny, his eyes cold. “Start walking. Now. And leave the rifle here.”

Danny didn’t need to be told twice. He dropped his weapon and bolted, his boots crunching against the dead leaves as he disappeared into the trees.

Ben turned his attention back to Knox, his grip steady. “You’ve got one chance to explain what you’re doing here.”

Knox stared him down, his expression defiant. “We’re just Faction scouts. You think taking us out changes anything? Slade’s coming whether you like it or not.”

Ben didn’t flinch. “Then you can tell him to send better men next time.”

Before Knox could reply, Ben heard the faint crack of a twig behind him. He spun just in time to see Peters lurching to his feet, a knife glinting in his hand. Without hesitation, Ben pulled the trigger. The KelTec roared, and the blast of double-aught buckshot hit Peters square in the chest, sending him sprawling over backward to the ground, motionless.

Knox took advantage of the momentary distraction, lunging for his weapon, but Gunner had already lost his patience waiting in the wings and

had broken protocol. A dark brown blur of fur covered the distance from the tuft of scrub oaks to Knox's position in a single bound. The big man threw his arm up for protection as the ninety-plus-pound ball of teeth and claws came crashing down on him. Gunner sank his teeth into Knox's arm, and the man let out a scream that matched the terror in his eyes.

Ben shucked another round into the KelTec's chamber as he swung the short, black shotgun around, aiming it at Knox's head.

"Call off your dog," Knox pleaded, his voice strained as he struggled against Gunner's weight.

"Gunner, here," Ben said firmly.

Gunner gave Knox's arm one final shake, then backed off with curled lips and bared teeth.

Ben's gaze was ice. "You're lucky he didn't rip your throat out. Now get up, slowly, and lose the weapons."

Knox complied, his movements deliberate. Ben motioned with the shotgun. "You've got ten seconds to get off my property. After that, you're next."

Knox glared at him, his face twisted with rage. "This isn't over."

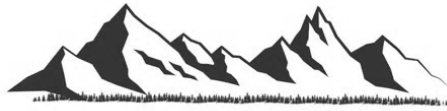
Ben didn't respond, his finger tight on the trigger as he watched Knox retreat into the trees.

When the woods were finally silent again, Ben exhaled, his grip on the shotgun relaxing slightly. Gunner trotted back to his side, his tail wagging as if nothing had happened.

"Good boy," Ben murmured, scratching the dog behind the ears. Then he turned, his eyes scanning the trees once more.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The snow was falling harder now, the earlier light flurries replaced by thick, steady flakes that clung to the trees and began accumulating on the ground. Ben used to love the first snowfall of the year as much as the kids. There was nothing better than sitting by the woodstove with a cup of coffee, tying a few flies, and watching the snow drift down among the evergreens.

Winter had always held a special place in his heart. The mountains took on an entirely different personality during those months, rugged and serene. Though he appreciated the warmth of summer, there was something about the stillness and beauty of a snow-covered landscape that he found deeply calming. Winter also brought activities that set it apart: skiing, snowboarding, and fishing in the icy rivers.

He wasn't as good on skis as he used to be—age had caught up with him—but he could still hold his own. Snowboarding had been a more recent endeavor. He'd taken it up to bond with the kids, and to his surprise, it had been a success. These last couple of winters, he'd spent more time in the snow with Brad, Joel, and Emma, watching them carve through waves of powder or catch air off the natural jumps they found or the ones they built. Brad loved nothing more than trying to pull off tricks, grinning ear to ear whenever he stuck a landing. Ben, however, had kept things simple. His knees couldn't handle too much these days, and he found he was happiest when snapping pictures of the kids or just soaking in the moment.

He tugged his hat lower, blocking the big, wet flakes from landing in his eyes. This year, the first snowfall brought a different set of emotions. Winter wasn't just about snow-covered peaks and time spent outdoors

anymore. This winter would test them in ways they'd never faced before, a season of survival rather than recreation. Yet, even with that weight pressing on him, Ben promised himself he'd let the kids enjoy it as much as they could.

Their property was perfect for sledding and snowboarding. The mountain behind the house offered a solid half-mile downhill run through bare aspens and snow-covered spruce. It wasn't a ski resort, but it was theirs, and the kids had always been willing to hike up in snowshoes to earn the ride back down.

And there was still fishing. Winter fishing wasn't for the faint of heart, but for Ben, it was almost spiritual. The sculptures of ice along the riverbanks, the stillness of the snow-covered wilderness, and the wildlife that seemed less wary without the usual crowds of people—it was a kind of peace he couldn't find anywhere else. It didn't hurt that the fishing itself was often good, even if it required layering up under his waders and knocking ice from the guides on the fly rod every so often.

He smiled faintly, remembering the moments he and the boys had shared on those frigid mornings. There was the time they'd watched an otter wrestle with a fat brown trout on the far bank, the slick creature's victory met with cheers from the boys. Or the time they'd witnessed a friendly scrap between two coyotes over a field mouse they'd flushed from the tall grass on the opposite bank. The mouse didn't last long, but the scuffle itself was a sight to see—the coyotes snarling and circling each other, neither willing to back down.

But in the end, a red-tailed hawk was the real winner, swooping down between the dueling canines and snatching the mouse for itself. The bird's triumphant cry echoed through the air as it flew off with its meal, leaving both coyotes standing there in stunned silence. The boys had howled with laughter, and even Ben had to admit it was one of the most amusing things he'd ever seen in the wild. The memory forced a grin as he approached the edge of the driveway.

No matter how tough this winter got, he vowed to find ways for the kids to have fun. They needed it. Cabin fever was real, and he wasn't about to let the isolation and the constant tension of survival drag them down. Their world was dangerous, yes, but that didn't mean they had to stop living.

This winter would be a fight, but it didn't have to break them. And if the kids could find joy in the snow, even for just a little while, maybe it

wouldn't break him either.

Ben raised the headlamp over his head and flashed the light before stepping out from the trees. He expected Joel and Allie to be on edge and waiting at the opposite end of the driveway with their rifles at the ready.

"They see us, boy. Let's go." Ben pushed his way through a low-hanging spruce branch and hit the gravel, Gunner sprinting ahead toward the kids. When he arrived, he found Allie leaning against the refrigerator-sized boulder that marked the stretch of driveway running alongside the house near the basement door. Joel was crouched nearby, brushing snow off Gunner's back as the dog playfully squirmed and wagged his tail, doing his best to turn the chore into a game.

"It was them," Ben said, his voice low but firm. "Peters, Knox, and another guy named Danny. Peters was wounded, but he won't be coming back. Knox and Danny got away."

"What did they want?" Allie asked.

"Nothing good." Ben heaved the large canvas bag Slade's men had brought with them from his shoulder and laid it at Joel's feet.

The longer rifles he'd taken from the Faction scouts pulled the bag over, exposing two bottles with rags stuffed into the tops.

"There's a couple of handguns in there, too," Ben added.

"They were going to try and burn our house down?" Joel's jaw tightened, his hands gripping his rifle a little harder.

"They didn't, though. Our trip wire worked. And one of them paid with his life for it. Speaking of which, we've got a hole to dig tomorrow." Ben glanced at Joel.

Joel and Allie looked at each other, their anger over the assault turning to somber acceptance. What Slade's men had tried tonight came as no surprise to any of them, aside from the fact that it had happened so quickly.

"At least they know we mean business now. Right?" Joel started looking through the bag.

Ben nodded grimly. "They do. But that doesn't mean they're going to back off. Slade's not the kind of man who takes no for an answer, especially when he's got a small militia of expendable idiots willing to do his dirty work. They'll be back. And next time, it won't just be a few of them."

Allie stood, brushing the snow off her jeans. "Do you think they'll hit us tonight?"

“Not tonight.” Ben glanced at the darkening sky. “The snow’s picking up, and they’ll want time to regroup. But we can’t count on more than a day or two before they try something again. We need to be ready.”

The three of them moved toward the house together, the crunch of their boots on the snow-covered ground the only sound. Inside, the warmth of the woodstove greeted them, along with the familiar scent of burning wood. Sandy was waiting in the living room, her face pale, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

“Everything okay?” she asked, her voice edged with worry.

Ben hung his hat by the door and shrugged out of his vest, the snowflakes melting into dark patches on the worn fabric. “For now.”

Sandy’s brow furrowed as she glanced at Joel and Allie, who had settled into chairs near the woodstove. “What happened out there?”

Ben sat down heavily on the arm of the couch, running a hand through his hair. “One of the poppers went off. Peters tripped it—he was hurt, but he wasn’t alone. Knox and another one of Slade’s men were with him. I sent them packing, but it’s only a matter of time before they come back.”

Sandy’s lips pressed into a thin line. “And when they do?”

Ben’s gaze was steady. “We make sure they regret it.”

Emma and Brad were seated on the floor near the hearth, their earlier play with the dogs forgotten, replaced by quiet, worried expressions. Emma fidgeted with the hem of her sweater, her hazel eyes darting to the window every so often as though she expected trouble to come charging in at any moment. Brad was absently stacking pieces of kindling into a small pyramid on the rug. His hands moved with restless energy, but his face was tight with concern.

Emma’s gaze settled on Ben. “Did they try to hurt you?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ben glanced at Joel and Allie, not because he was deciding what to say but because he regretted having to say it. He’d always been honest with the kids, even the younger two. In a world where information could mean life or death, sugarcoating the truth wasn’t an option.

Brad spoke up before Ben could answer, his brow furrowed. “Did they come back with more guys? Are they still out there?” He glanced toward the door, his shoulders tense, as though he might spring into action at any moment.

Sandy, seated in the armchair near the woodstove, rubbed her hands together, her face pale but her expression steely. “Are we safe for now? Should we be boarding up the windows or something?”

Ben exhaled deeply, his shoulders relaxing just slightly as he tried to reassure them. “We’re safe for now,” he said firmly, though his voice carried a weariness that didn’t go unnoticed. “But they’re testing us, looking for weak spots. That much is clear.”

Emma’s fingers tightened around her sweater. “Are they going to keep coming back? What if they try to break in at night?”

Ben crouched down to her level, his tone softening as he placed a reassuring hand on her knee. “Listen, Em. That’s why we’ve set up the trip wires. We’re not going to let anyone hurt us. You just need to trust me on that.”

Brad looked up from his pile of kindling, his jaw tight. “Maybe we should do more, like set up traps that kill them instantly. Not just scare them off.”

Sandy shot him a sharp look. “Brad, let your dad handle this.”

Ben held up a hand to stop the brewing tension. “He’s not wrong, Sandy,” Ben said, his voice measured. “We’ll do what we need to. But for now, let’s stick to the plan. We’re not looking for a fight—we’re looking to protect what’s ours.”

Brad glanced at the KelTec on the table, then back at his dad. “If they come back, I can help. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“You’re not.” Ben stood up and ruffled Brad’s hair before Brad ducked away with a small scowl. “But there’s a difference between being ready and rushing into things. Let’s not forget that.”

Emma hugged her knees to her chest, her voice quiet. “I just want things to go back to the way they were.”

The raw honesty in her words twisted Ben’s heart, but he forced a reassuring smile. “Me too, kiddo. Me too. But we’re going to make the best of what we’ve got, and we’re going to do it together. Deal?”

Emma nodded hesitantly, her eyes still wide with worry, while Brad returned to poking at his kindling. He was quiet but he wore an expression of determination.

For now, the storm outside was matched by the storm of emotions inside—but they couldn’t afford to let fear rule the day. There was still work to be

done, and their strength as a family would have to carry them through the challenges ahead.

“I need to check on dinner.” Sandy stood up and headed into the kitchen, looking happy to have something to occupy her troubled mind.

“So what’s the plan for tomorrow?” Brad tossed his small pile of wood back into the kindling bucket.

“I say we get started on that fence. The gate, too. That would let us add more traps,” Joel said, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

Ben nodded. “We’ll get started early tomorrow hauling saplings from the back property to build the fence along Saddle Trail. Joel, I know you’ve been working on the Honda. Think it’s ready?”

Joel hesitated, then nodded. “I think it could be. Maybe I can finish the last few things tonight and have it ready by morning.”

“Good,” Ben said. “That’ll save us time.”

Emma pulled her sketchpad closer, flipping to the rough map she’d been working on earlier. “I can keep track of everything so we don’t forget. And I’ll add spots for the new traps.”

“That’s a good idea, Em,” Ben said, his tone softening as he glanced at his youngest daughter. “It’ll help.”

Sandy returned to the living room, locking eyes with Ben, her worry still evident. “And after all of this? What then? What if they keep coming?”

Ben met her eyes, his expression grim. “Then we keep fighting. This is our home, Sandy. I’m not going to let them take it from us.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The snow had fallen steadily throughout the night, leaving a pristine white blanket over the property. Its stillness was beautiful, a sharp contrast to the chaos of the night before. As Ben walked through the shin-deep powder, pulling his hat lower to block the flurries blowing off the pines, the events of the previous evening replayed in his mind.

He found himself especially grateful for Emma's map of the trip lines. The fresh snowfall had completely camouflaged the wires, making them nearly impossible to spot. It was a stark reminder of the challenges they'd face as winter settled in. The accumulating snow made Ben question how effective the perimeter defenses would remain in the weeks ahead.

Adjustments would be inevitable as the snow continued to build up and harden into a packed layer. Clearing the wires and maintaining the traps through the season would be tedious, and come spring, the cleanup would be a monumental task. Still, it was a small price to pay for their security—and for keeping Slade's men at bay.

By the time Ben reached the end of the driveway, Joel was pacing off the distance between two lodgepole pines that framed the entrance to the property, just twenty feet back from Saddle Trail. The trees were robust and mature, standing about eighteen feet apart—ideal for anchoring the gate they planned to build. The natural supports would add durability and, with any luck, help the gate stop a vehicle if things ever escalated to that point.

Joel moved with purpose despite the cold, his shoulders hunched slightly against the biting air. His boots crunched through the snow, which was already worn down to patches of dirt in the area he'd been pacing.

Nearby, Gunner lay sprawled in a snowdrift at the edge of the driveway's culvert pipe. The big Chesapeake retriever was half-buried in fresh powder, chewing contentedly on a stick. His tail wagged vigorously as Ben approached, sending up a flurry of snowflakes that sparkled briefly in the early morning sun.

"Here, try this." Ben tossed Joel a tape measure.

"Thanks. This won't stick around for long," Joel said, putting the tape measure to immediate use.

"Not with skies like these." Ben tipped his head toward the horizon, where the federal BLM land behind the house rose sharply in elevation. The sun was just beginning to crest the mountains, streaking the purple dawn sky with bright orange rays that fanned out like fingers. He couldn't predict the forecast with certainty—no one could anymore—but the clear skies held the promise of a bluebird day. With any luck, the snow would melt by noon, leaving the ground workable for their fence project.

Ben had asked Joel to meet him here before the others got moving, and not just to plan the fence. They needed to take care of the body left behind from last night's confrontation. Ben would have done it alone, but time wasn't a luxury they could afford. Together, he and Joel could get it done quickly and move on to the long list of tasks that needed their attention.

There was always a chance the two men Ben had chased off—Knox and Danny—might come back for their dead comrade. Knox seemed like the type who'd return, though Ben doubted the younger man, Danny, had the nerve. The kid had been all but falling apart last night, and for all Ben knew, he was still running. Slade was clearly recruiting anyone willing to set their morals aside, regardless of competence. That made the Faction unpredictable, which was dangerous in its own right.

The attack had shaken everyone. Sandy, Emma, and Brad had tried to mask their unease, but the tension in the house was palpable. Even Joel, who rarely let his emotions show, had been quieter than usual. But fear wasn't a luxury they could afford. There was too much work to do.

"Looks like we've got our hands full today," Ben said, stepping up beside Joel. He clapped a hand on his son's shoulder, offering a faint but encouraging smile.

Joel nodded, his jaw tight. "We'll get it done."

Ben studied him for a moment. He recognized the tension in Joel's posture—the tightness in his shoulders, the way he avoided eye contact.

“You okay?”

Joel shrugged, his gaze fixed on the ground. “Yeah. Just... ready for whatever comes next.”

Ben felt a pang in his chest. Joel wasn’t just ready; he was bracing himself. Ben wanted to say something reassuring, to tell him they had things under control, but the words wouldn’t come. The truth was, they didn’t know what came next. Slade wouldn’t stop. That much was certain. And while last night’s skirmish had sent a message, it hadn’t bought them peace. It had only bought them time.

Ben glanced up at the snow-dusted pines, his breath fogging in the chilly morning air. “We’ll take care of what needs doing today,” he said finally, his voice steady but quiet. “That’s all we can do.”

Joel nodded again, but the look in his eyes said he already knew that.

Ben was grateful for the day’s work. It wouldn’t erase what had happened—or what was coming—but it would keep their hands busy and their minds occupied. There was something comforting in the rhythm of hard work, something grounding about having a task to focus on. And while the reason for their labor hung over them like a shadow, at least it gave them purpose.

Still, Ben couldn’t shake the thought that everything they were doing—building fences, setting traps, reinforcing the property—was preparation for a storm they couldn’t avoid. He shoved the thought aside as Gunner bounded over to them, dropping his stick at Joel’s feet and wagging his tail with unrelenting enthusiasm.

Joel bent down, giving the dog a rough scratch behind the ears. “Guess he doesn’t care about the work ahead,” he said, a faint smile breaking through the tension on his face.

Ben chuckled softly, grateful for the brief moment of levity. “Dogs never do.”

Joel straightened, his expression hardening again as he glanced toward the lodgepole pines. “We should get started.”

Ben nodded. “Let’s take care of the body first. The last thing we need is it drawing attention—animal or otherwise.”

Joel’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t argue. He pulled on his gloves and grabbed both shovels he’d brought, his movements brisk and deliberate.

As they walked toward the spot where the confrontation had ended the night before, the weight of what lay ahead settled over Ben like the snow

weighing down the branches around them. The quiet crunch of their boots in the fresh powder was the only sound, a stark contrast to the tension that hung between them.

“Where did you say he—it—is?” Joel asked, his voice low. He stopped just a few feet from where Ben had left the body the night before, his eyes scanning the ground.

But the body wasn’t there.

Instead, a lone set of footprints, fresh and clear in the snow, came and went from a frozen depression in the dark red snow. Gunner crept up to the bloodstain, sniffing cautiously around its edges before trailing the footprints with his nose. He paused, lifting his snout to the air and drawing in deep breaths, as if catching the scent of trouble on the wind.

“Knox came back for his friend,” Ben said after a moment, his voice steady but edged with unease. He felt a small, fleeting sense of relief that he and Joel didn’t have to deal with the body themselves, but the realization that Knox had returned sometime during the night made his gut twist.

They were on the county side of their property now, some twenty yards from the trip wire. Still, Knox had risked sneaking back in the dark to retrieve Peters.

“He must’ve been good friends with Peters to take that kind of chance,” Joel said, glancing around the snow-covered woods. His shoulders were tense, his hand resting instinctively near the sling of his rifle.

“Or he’s desperate to stay in Slade’s good graces,” Ben replied, scanning the tree line. “Either way, I guess we can scratch this off our to-do list.”

“I’m good with that,” Joel said, his mood lifting slightly. “I’m ready to test out the Honda.”

Ben placed a hand on his son’s shoulder, turning to head back toward the house when a sudden shriek shattered the quiet morning.

“Allie!” Joel shouted, his eyes widening as he dropped the shovels and broke into a sprint through the snow.

Gunner took off after Joel, kicking up snow and wet leaves in his wake.

Ben’s heart pounded as he chased after Joel, possibilities flashing through his mind. “Joel, the trip wire!” he yelled.

Joel skidded to a halt just before a small pine tree, narrowly avoiding the wire. He veered sharply, adjusting his path as Ben called out again.

“Gunner, here!” he barked, stopping the dog mid-run. Gunner froze, then obediently turned and trotted back toward Ben. His tail wagged in confusion, but he was nonetheless excited.

“This way. Come on, boy.” Ben called the dog to follow him up the driveway as he chased after Joel.

“Eggs—we have eggs!” Allie shouted, holding two large white eggs triumphantly over her head, one in each hand, as she strutted down the driveway toward Ben and Joel.

Ben caught sight of the wide grin on Allie’s face, but it took him a moment to process what was actually happening. His pace slowed to a jog, and he slung the KelTec back over his shoulder with a sigh of relief.

Behind her, Emma and Brad emerged from the garage, each carrying a few smaller brown eggs, their faces bright with excitement.

“Seven eggs this morning!” Allie announced, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

Joel stopped in his tracks, his breathing labored as he bent over, hands on his knees. “We thought... you were... We thought...” He couldn’t finish, still trying to catch his breath.

Ben finally reached the group, panting hard. He paused to inhale deeply, his chest heaving as he rested his hands on his hips. It had been a long time since he’d sprinted like that—especially at this elevation.

Allie, oblivious to the panic she’d caused, beamed at them both. “Look! Aren’t they perfect? This one’s a duck egg,” she said, holding the eggs up for them to see.

Ben straightened, wiping the sweat from his brow despite the cold air. “You scared the crap out of us,” he said, his voice a mix of exasperation and relief.

Emma giggled, holding up her own collection of eggs. “Sorry! We just got excited when we saw them.”

Joel stood upright, still catching his breath but managing a weak smile. “Next time, try not to sound like you’re being attacked, okay?”

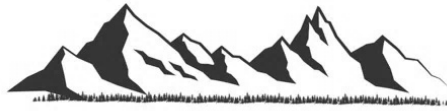
Allie grinned, clearly unapologetic, as she turned to head toward the house. “Sorry. But hey, eggs!”

Ben shook his head, watching as the kids headed back inside with their newfound treasure. These eggs represented more than just breakfast; they were a symbol of self-sufficiency, of hope amid the challenges they faced. Ben’s heart was still pounding as he exchanged relieved smiles with Joel. It

wasn't the danger Ben had expected, but seeing the kids' excitement reminded him how important moments like this were—small victories that made everything they were fighting for worthwhile.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



After a breakfast of hard-earned eggs, Ben and the others stepped outside into the slowly melting snow, ready to start work on the gate at the entrance to the driveway and the fence that would run along the property's border with Saddle Trail. The morning felt lighter, the tension of the last few days momentarily softened by the sunshine filtering through the pines.

Ben's prediction of a bluebird day had come true. The snow was already beginning to shrink under the sun's warm rays, and with a bit of luck—and Joel's newly restored four-wheeler holding up—they might make real progress today.

The old Honda FourTrax had roared back to life late last night after Joel and Brad had spent hours tinkering with it in the garage. Brad had mostly been there to hand tools to Joel and hold a flashlight, but his enthusiasm was infectious. Around eleven o'clock, Ben had heard the unmistakable sound of triumph: the smooth purr of the Honda's 350cc air-cooled four-stroke engine. He'd stepped into the garage just in time to see Joel's proud grin and the younger kids cheering him on.

The four-wheeler burned a little oil, judging by the faint blue puff trailing from its exhaust, but it seemed ready to pull its weight. And with its full-time four-wheel drive, it was perfect for hauling saplings and fence materials down from the slopes behind the house.

The morning's work was off to a good start. Joel and Brad hauled several saplings at a time behind the Honda while Allie and Emma helped strip branches from the wood and sort the usable pieces, stacking the rest for future kindling. Ben directed the operation while doing much of the

heavy lifting, driving the stakes into the ground with steady, methodical strikes of a sledgehammer. Everyone moved with purpose, driven by the knowledge that this fence was more than a physical barrier—it was a symbol of their determination to hold the line.

About thirty minutes in, Ben paused, wiping the sweat from his brow despite the crisp air. The rhythmic crunch of hooves in the snow echoed faintly in the distance, drawing his attention toward Saddle Trail. His body tensed instinctively, his hand brushing the grip of the pistol holstered at his hip.

Joel, a few yards away, froze mid-step, his eyes darting toward the sound. Allie straightened up from the pile of saplings, her hand drifting toward the rifle propped against a tree nearby.

“Hold up,” Ben said softly, raising a hand to signal caution.

The sound of hooves grew louder, and moments later, two riders emerged from around the bend in the road. Ben relaxed slightly as recognition set in. Luke and Sarah Holden, their closest neighbors, approached at an easy pace atop their sturdy quarter horses. The couple waved as they neared, their breath hanging in clouds in the cold air.

Ben returned the wave but stayed on edge, his gaze scanning the road behind them out of habit. A moment later, another rider appeared, trailing a few paces behind. Grace. Her auburn hair caught the sunlight, gleaming like polished copper against the white backdrop of snow-covered branches bent low over the road. She sat tall in the saddle, her green eyes bright as she scanned the worksite ahead.

“Morning, Ben,” Luke called out, his deep voice carrying easily over the crunch of snow beneath the horses.

“Morning,” Ben replied, stepping forward. He turned to face the others. “Let’s take five.”

Sarah pulled her horse up beside Luke’s, her expression warm but tinged with concern. “We heard shots last night and saw fresh tracks this morning. Everything all right?”

Ben nodded tightly. “Had a little trouble with Slade’s men. They tripped one of the wires we set up and didn’t take kindly to the outcome.”

Luke’s jaw tightened. “Did they try to force their way in?”

“They didn’t get that far,” Ben said. “One of them won’t be coming back for sure, but I’m betting the others aren’t done testing us yet.”

Sarah shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Slade doesn't like to let things go. You know that as well as anyone."

"That's why we're out here." Ben gestured to the beginnings of their fence. "Trying to stay ahead of it. The more work we put in now, the less likely they'll see us as easy pickings."

Grace guided her chestnut mare a little closer, her gaze flicking between Joel and the fence project. "Looks like you've got your hands full." Her voice was light, but her attention lingered on Joel, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Joel, leaning on his ax, glanced her way. "Yeah, we've got plenty to do." He kept his tone neutral but couldn't completely hide the flicker of pride as he moved to the four-wheeler and took a seat on the machine sideways.

Grace dismounted smoothly, looping her reins over her saddle horn. "Mind if I help? I'm good with a hatchet."

Before Joel could respond, Allie stepped forward, wiping her hands on her jeans. "We've got it covered, but thanks for the offer." Her tone was polite, but the sharpness in her eyes wasn't lost on Grace.

Luke dismounted as well, walking his horse closer to Ben. "If there's anything we can do, just say the word. You don't have to face this alone."

Ben nodded in appreciation. "Thanks, Luke. I'll keep that in mind. Right now, we're just trying to get this fence up before the snow melts too much."

Sarah leaned forward in her saddle, her voice quieter now. "How long until the Faction boys come sniffing around again? Any guesses?"

"Hard to say," Ben said grimly. "But they'll be back. Slade doesn't like to lose, and last night probably bumped us to the top of his list."

Luke's expression hardened. "Then we'll keep an eye out. We've got enough trouble without Slade throwing his weight around."

Ben gave him a faint smile. "Appreciate that."

Grace, undeterred by Allie's earlier tone, had wandered closer to where Joel had resumed stacking saplings. "So, did you get that four-wheeler running by yourself?" she asked, her voice casual.

Joel nodded, still focused on his work. "Yep. Just got her put back together last night."

Grace tilted her head, her smile growing. "Nice. Bet that took some doing."

“It did,” Allie interjected, stepping between them with a pile of branches in her hand. She gave Joel a pointed look before turning to Grace. “We’ve got a lot of work to do today. We better get back at it.”

Grace raised her eyebrows but didn’t push further. Instead, she stepped back, brushing snow off her gloves. “Maybe you could give me a ride on your four-wheeler sometime. I’ve never been on one of those, but they look like so much fun.”

“It’s for work. We can’t afford to waste fuel going for joyrides,” Allie chimed in again, loudly dropping her branches on a larger pile.

“Yeah, probably not a good idea,” Joel agreed reluctantly.

Grace’s smile faltered, but she nodded. “Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything.”

Joel shot Allie a glance, his expression unreadable, before returning to his work. Allie didn’t say anything, but the slight smirk on her face spoke volumes.

Luke and Sarah lingered for a few more minutes, exchanging updates and offering their help if it was needed. Grace climbed back into her saddle with a lingering glance at Joel before the family turned their horses and headed back down the trail.

As the sound of hooves faded into the distance, Ben turned to Joel and Allie. “Let’s get back to it. This fence isn’t going to build itself.”

Joel nodded, his expression neutral, but Ben didn’t miss the amused glance he shared with Allie as they returned to work.

Even with neighbors like the Holdens looking out for them, Ben knew their best defense was being prepared. And as the sun climbed higher, melting away the snow and revealing patches of bare earth, he resolved to make every moment of daylight count.

The Holdens’ visit had got Ben thinking about more than the Faction. His mind was already turning to the next challenge.

Supplies. Food. The cold creeping into his bones and making his fingers stiff was a reminder that winter wasn’t just coming—it was here. And while they had enough to last a couple of months, the deeper into winter they got, the harder it would be to find anything.

The thought of one last trip into town crossed Ben’s mind again, the same way it had been nagging at him for the last several days. After the run-in with the Faction scouts, he’d been quick to swear off going into town for the rest of the season, but that resolve was beginning to thaw. There were

still things he wanted to add more of to their reserves: salt, fuel, root vegetables if they could find any for barter, and anything else they might scavenge along the way. Fishing the river on the way back could also fill the cold cellar with smoked trout, a welcome addition to their winter stores.

The fish weren't strictly necessary for survival, but having something other than mule deer—or elk, if they got lucky—would bring some much-needed variety to their diet once the world outside froze solid. But the risks weighed heavy. Slade's men were out there somewhere, and Ben couldn't justify taking everyone into town. Joel and Allie could handle themselves, and maybe Gunner could go with them as extra protection.

But Brad? The thought of sending his youngest son into danger didn't sit well with Ben. Brad was eager to help, and he was turning into a skilled fisherman. The boy would be useful, and they'd fill the baskets faster. But if anything happened to him...

Ben shook his head, trying to push the thought aside.

There was another layer to it, though. Brad would hold a grudge all winter if Joel went to catch trout without him. Ben knew that much for sure.

"I'll think about it," he muttered to himself, pulling his hat lower as he turned back to the work at hand.

The day passed in steady, grueling labor. They hauled saplings, hammered stakes, and strung wire along the property line. It was the kind of physical work that kept their minds too busy to dwell on the threat of Slade. Toward the end of the day, Sandy and Emma retreated inside with Sam and Bajer, drawn to the warmth of the woodstove. Emma wanted to work on her map in comfort, carefully updating their sketches of the perimeter and trip wire.

Brad, however, refused to call it quits, even as the temperature began to drop. He stayed out with Ben, Joel, and Allie, darting back and forth with bundles of smaller branches. His youthful energy was a welcome boost as they started to feel the day's effort in their muscles.

Ben suspected Brad's willingness to brave the cold had more to do with avoiding kitchen duty than anything else, but he didn't mind. The boy was keen to prove himself, and that enthusiasm made the work go faster.

By the time the sun kissed the mountains to the west, the fence was halfway finished. But as the long shadows crept over their property, Ben felt the familiar unease creep in alongside the cold. The dropping temperature seemed to magnify the sense of vulnerability.

Walking the perimeter with Joel to inspect the day's progress, Ben frowned. The fence looked solid so far, but it didn't feel like enough. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were still unprepared.

"You think we're gonna get this done before they come back?" Joel asked, breaking the silence.

"We'll finish it," Ben replied, though his voice lacked conviction.

Joel glanced sideways at him, his brow furrowed. "Even if we do... it's not going to stop them, will it?"

Ben paused, looking at the stretch of newly placed posts and wire. The fence was strong, but it was still just a fence. "No. But it'll slow them down. Maybe make them think twice. That's the best we can hope for right now."

Joel nodded, but the tightness in his expression remained. "What about town? You've been talking about a trip for days. Are we gonna do it?"

Ben stopped walking and turned to face his son. "I've been thinking about it," he admitted.

"And?" Joel pressed, his tone careful but insistent.

"And it's risky," Ben said. "I can't leave the homestead unguarded. Not with Emma and Sandy here. If Slade's men decide to come back while we're gone..." He trailed off, his jaw tightening at the thought.

Joel's face softened with understanding. "You think they'll hit us again that soon?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. But I'm not willing to take that chance. If I'm wrong and something happens while I'm not here..." Ben shook his head, unable to finish the sentence.

Joel nodded slowly, though his expression remained serious. "So you're sending me and Allie?"

"I'd need you to go," Ben said. "You're careful, and you know how to handle yourself out there. Allie can watch your back. Gunner could go with you, too. But..." He hesitated, glancing toward the house, where Brad was helping Allie tidy up the tools. "Taking Brad—that's the part I'm not sure about."

Joel caught the hesitation in his father's voice. "So Brad stays here."

Ben chuckled out loud. "Yeah, that'll go over like a lead balloon. I'd rather face Slade's men than deal with the likes of your brother after telling him you're going fishing and he's not invited."

Joel flashed a smile, but it faded fast, his voice quieter now. “Brad’s not a little kid anymore. You know that. If you’re sending us out there, I’d feel better if he came, too. He’s good at keeping an eye out, and we’ll fill the baskets faster with him helping.”

Ben sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s what worries me. He’s ambitious, and that’s a good thing... but he’s still just a kid. If something went wrong out there...”

Joel frowned, glancing at the mud- and snow-covered ground before meeting his father’s eyes. “You’ve taught us well, Dad. All of us. You know we can handle ourselves. You know I’m going to be eighteen soon?”

“I know.” Ben smiled as he studied his son, noting the quiet confidence in his posture. Joel wasn’t wrong. He would be a man soon, not that he wasn’t already. And Ben *had* taught them well. But even with that, the thought of sending them into harm’s way was a hard pill to swallow.

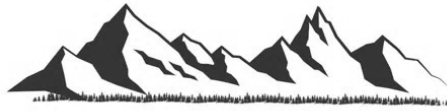
“I’ll make my decision tonight,” Ben said finally. “We’ll talk it over at dinner and see how everyone feels. But if we do this, you leave early and keep it quick. No messing around, no unnecessary risks.”

Joel nodded firmly. “Got it.”

As they walked back toward the house, the sky above them deepened into shades of purple and gold, the last light fading from the snow-covered peaks. Ben’s mind churned over the possibilities, the risks and rewards of the trip battling in his head.

The trip could make all the difference in their preparations for winter. Or it could go terribly wrong. Either way, Ben had to decide soon. The snow wouldn’t wait, and neither would Slade.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The dining table was set simply, as it always was these days. Each place had the bare minimum: one bowl, one spoon, and one cup. Using as few dishes and utensils as possible had become second nature, a practical habit born of their new reality. With no running water unless the generator was fired up or the solar battery bank was switched on to power the well pump, washing dishes was a chore that required planning, just like getting a hot shower these days. Ben made sure the generator was run sparingly; every bit of fuel mattered, and he didn't want to waste it on something that could be managed with a little effort and forethought.

Sandy had implemented the practice early on, insisting that everyone rinse their plates and silverware immediately after meals, making cleanup as quick and efficient as possible. Of course, the dogs were all more than happy to help out with this chore when dinner was something they could eat as well. The kids had grumbled at first, but even Brad had eventually come around, understanding that keeping things simple wasn't just a matter of convenience—it was survival.

Tonight was no different. The last of the venison and potato stew was ladled into their bowls as the delicious smell of meat and vegetables mingled with the faint scent of woodsmoke from the stove. The mood at the table was quiet but not somber, a mix of reflection and anticipation as they sat down to eat. The simplicity of the table reflected the reality of their lives: everything had to be deliberate, measured, and done with purpose.

Outside, the final light of the sun, nothing but a dim glow, fell below the western horizon. Its efforts today had not quite melted all the snow that had

fallen, especially in the shadows. Allie lit a gas lamp that hung from a wrought iron bracket mounted just below the loft railing. The lamp and hanger were housewarming gifts from the Holdens, the hanger made by Luke in his amateur blacksmithing shop. Luke had hoped to become proficient enough at smithing to shoe his own horses. Now it was a necessity. The dangling lantern reminded Ben of easier days as it added to the warm glow of the woodstove, basking the living room and kitchen in a soft yellow hue.

Ben sat at the head of the table, his hands resting on the rough wood surface, calloused and worn like the furniture itself. Joel was still riding the high of his success with the Honda four-wheeler and had an appetite to match. The little ATV had come in handy today, finally justifying the gear they'd traded to acquire it. Allie sat beside Joel, eating slower, her mind clearly elsewhere. Even Emma and Brad were quieter than usual, though Emma occasionally glanced at Ben as if waiting for him to say something.

The air felt heavier than it had during breakfast. Perhaps it was the fatigue from a day of hauling saplings, or maybe it was the unspoken question hanging in the room like smoke. Would they be making the trip into town tomorrow?

Ben waited until the first wave of eating had calmed before he spoke. He glanced around the table, taking in the faces of his family. "All right," he said, his voice steady but serious. "We need to talk about this trip into town."

That got their attention. Joel set down his fork, his brow furrowing slightly, while Allie shifted in her seat. Emma leaned forward, her eyes wide with curiosity. She was joined by Brad, who perked up immediately, his quiet demeanor replaced with an eager intensity.

"Are we going tomorrow?" he asked, his tone teetering on excitement. "Am *I* going?"

Ben leaned back in his chair. "I've been thinking about it, and as much as we need to get this done before the weather gets too bad, I think we should hold off. At least for another day." He looked at Brad and sighed. "And yes, you're going."

Brad's face lit up as though he wanted to shout with excitement but somehow managed to contain himself.

Joel nodded slightly, his expression thoughtful. "Why wait?" he asked, his voice calm but probing.

“I’d at least like to finish the perimeter defenses,” Ben said. “That fence and gate are priorities right now. We’ve made progress, but we’re not where we need to be. If Slade’s men decide to come back while you’re gone, I want this place as secure as we can make it. It won’t stop them, but it will buy us time to deal with whoever the Faction sends up here.”

Sandy, seated at the opposite end of the table, nodded in agreement. “He’s right. The last thing we need is to be caught off guard while half of us are away.”

“Wait. You mean you’re not going with us?” Brad’s tone was reserved, his excitement clearly tempered by the realization that Ben wasn’t planning on making the trip with them.

“No. We can’t afford to leave this place unprotected. No offense.” Ben glanced at Sandy and Emma.

Sandy put her hands up. “Oh no, you’ll get no argument from me.”

“I think you should definitely stay here,” Emma added.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea for Brad to go? Maybe no one should be going into town.” Sandy sat up straight in her chair and leaned in toward the table. “Do we really need anything that bad?”

Brad shot Sandy a look that could have peeled paint.

Ben jumped in before his youngest had a chance to say something he might regret. “We could use the fish. And according to what Luke’s heard, the barter market is going to shut down any day now and won’t come back until spring. That means no new vegetables, salt, rice, oats, flour, or coffee. What we have on hand is what we have to get us through the next six to seven months.”

Allie leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Which is why I was thinking sooner would be better.”

Ben shrugged. “A day won’t kill us.”

“And what if Slade’s men are watching the roads?” Joel chimed in.

“They probably are,” Ben admitted. “That’s why, at the bottom of the hill, you should head east on 240, toward Vallecito. You can go the long way into town through Bayfield and stop to fill up the Blazer and the spare tanks one more time while you’re out by the place with the ethanol-free gas.” He took a drink of water as he thought about what he’d just said.

It would make for a longer trip, but it would keep the kids off Slade’s radar and make Ben feel a whole lot better about them going at all. He was afraid that if he thought about it too much longer, he might side with Sandy

on the whole thing and tough the winter out with what they had. In his gut, though, he knew that he would regret that decision. He just hoped he didn't regret the one he'd already made.

"So the day after tomorrow, we'll want to leave early." Joel eyed Brad.

"I'll be ready," his brother answered.

"One more day will give us a chance to gather ourselves, make sure the property is as ready as it can be, and take care of something else that we need to do," Ben noted.

"What's that?" Emma asked, her brow furrowed.

"Put some meat in the root cellar." Ben slid his spoon into the empty bowl in front of him. "Better to do it now before we're trudging through the woods in waist-high snow. It'll be easy tracking at the higher elevations thanks to the dusting we had, and if all goes well, we can bring back a mule deer by mid-morning. That'll take some of the pressure off our stores."

"What time?" Joel asked.

"I'd like to be out of here and in position before sunrise. We'll set up above that spot I showed you. If we get lucky, I think you might be able to get up there with the ATV and haul the quarters back," Ben added.

"Sounds like a boys' trip to me." Allie smiled. "Especially if we're planning on an early morning the day we go into town."

Ben looked at his youngest. "What do you say? You up for a hunt?"

Brad's eyes lit up. "Yessir."

THE HOUSE WAS SILENT AS BEN PULLED ON HIS JACKET. THE FAMILIAR creak of the floorboards beneath his boots sounded like shotgun blasts in the silence of the early morning. He moved carefully, not wanting to wake the girls or the other dogs.

Gunner, however, was already up. The Chesapeake Bay retriever had seen this routine enough times to know what it meant—gear being gathered, rifles being checked, boots being laced up. His tail thumped quietly against the wall, eyes bright with anticipation as he waited to see if he'd be joining this hunt.

"I'm sorry, boy. Not this time." Ben took a moment to crouch down near Gunner and give him some attention.

The deer would smell Gunner from a mile away, and today, Ben wasn't taking any chances. This wasn't a sporting trip; this was about survival and putting meat in the cold cellar.

Joel and Brad were waiting in the mudroom, both bundled in layers of wool and fleece. Joel leaned against the wall, his rifle slung casually over one shoulder, while Brad fidgeted with his gloves, his excitement barely contained. Gunner took a spot at their feet, his ears perked and tail wagging slowly as he made one more silent plea to be included.

“Sorry, Gunner, but we can’t take you with us.” Brad patted the dog’s head with a gloved hand before slipping the sling of his weapon over his shoulder.

Ben had given Brad the .270 short magnum they’d picked up during their travels—a rifle with manageable recoil but plenty of stopping power. It was more than capable of dropping a mule deer at five hundred yards. If necessary, it could even take down an elk.

After returning to Durango, Ben and Brad had spent time ensuring the rifle was properly sighted in, making adjustments until it was dead-on accurate. Once satisfied, Ben had officially handed the rifle over to Brad—for hunting only.

Ammunition was limited; they had just four boxes of 150-grain rounds, so every shot had to count. But with that grain weight, it was an honest-to-God hunting rifle that gave Brad the credibility he so desperately wanted, along with the ability to take down just about any large game animal these mountains had to offer.

Outside, the world was cloaked in pre-dawn darkness, the air sharp and biting with the promise of a cold morning. Ben tightened the strap of his Remington M24 against his jacket and adjusted his hat. He held the door open for the boys but closed it on Gunner, who sat inside the mudroom, looking out through the window, his tail still now.

“Ready?” Ben asked, his voice low.

Joel gave a sharp nod. “Ready.”

Brad grinned, his eyes wide with anticipation. “I’ve been ready since last night.”

Ben chuckled softly and locked the door with his key. The girls wouldn’t be up for a couple more hours, and he was already reluctant to leave them here alone. If Slade’s men were coming back, though, they would have done so during the night. At least that’s what Ben told himself this morning. “Let’s get moving. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover before sunrise.”

The three of them stepped into the icy darkness, their boots crunching softly in the remaining layer of snow that had hardened overnight as they made their way into the woods behind the house. Ben got them started on the trail with the help of the red light on his headlamp, but as they moved deeper into the forest, he switched it off, letting their eyes adjust to the dim light of the waning moon.

Hunting mule deer wasn't just about skill with a rifle. It was a test of patience, preparation, and understanding of the animal's behavior. Ben had been hunting these mountains for decades, long enough to know the habits of the deer that called this rugged terrain home. Mule deer were creatures of routine, moving with the rhythms of the land and the changing seasons.

At dawn, the does often emerged from the thick timber to feed in open clearings, where fresh shoots of grass and low shrubs peeked through the snow. And with the rut in full swing wherever does were present, bucks would soon follow. However, if the opportunity presented itself today, a good-sized doe would be fair game. There was no need to apply for a limited license through the big game draw and no antler point restriction or any of the other hunting regulations normally imposed by the state. Today was nothing more than a trip to the grocery store. Their currency: skill.

After a few miles of hiking, Ben led them to a natural vantage point he'd scouted years ago—a rocky outcrop overlooking a meadow bordered by dense pines. It was a spot mule deer frequently passed through, drawn by the mix of cover and forage. The trio moved quietly, stepping carefully to avoid snapping twigs or crunching snow unnecessarily. Even the slightest noise could carry far in the cold, still air.

"Stay low," Ben whispered as they approached the edge of the outcrop. He crouched behind a stand of scrub oak, motioning for Joel and Brad to follow. "We'll wait here. The wind's in our favor." Ben looked up toward the still-visible stars as if he could see the wind. "Blowing north. That should keep our scent away from the clearing."

Joel settled in beside him, scanning the meadow with sharp eyes. Brad knelt on Ben's other side, his rifle cradled in his gloved hands. Ben leaned his weapon against the scrub oaks and sat down with his back against the immature stand of trees. This was the hardest part—the waiting, the keeping still and quiet as the cold settled into your bones and wore you down. But the payoff would be worth it. If they were successful today, they wouldn't have to worry about finding protein for a while.

The minutes stretched, the forest around them slowly waking as the first hints of dawn touched the sky. A faint rustling in the pines signaled the movement of unseen creatures, and the occasional call of a bird broke the stillness. Ben kept his gaze fixed on the meadow, his body still despite the cold seeping through his layers. Hunting was as much about having patience as it was about taking the shot, and he was doing his best to teach Brad the importance of that lesson.

Brad shifted slightly, adjusting his position for a better view. “You think they’ll come through here?” he asked in a hushed tone.

Ben nodded. “I’ve seen them here before. It’s a good spot. We just need to have a little patience.”

Ben glanced at Joel. His oldest knew the drill and knew that success at bagging a deer meant long periods of sitting still while being quiet and attentive at the same time. He was immersed in the gravity of the hunt, clutching his rifle tightly, his breath visible in the faint light as he scanned the clearing for any signs of movement.

Brad shifted again, snapping a twig underneath him. The noise earned him a dire look from Joel.

Ben leaned closer to him. “Patience, Brad,” he murmured. “They’ll show. Just stay ready.”

As the first light of dawn crept over the distant mountains, casting a soft, golden glow across the clearing, Ben caught a flicker of movement. He narrowed his eyes, watching the shape just beyond the tree line. For a long moment, he said nothing, studying the silhouette with quiet scrutiny. The early morning light had a way of playing tricks on you, turning shadows into false hope, making the mind see what the heart wanted. But as he watched, the shape shifted again—slow, deliberate, unmistakable. This time, there was no doubt.

“There.” Ben nodded at the far edge of the meadow. A mule deer stepped cautiously into the open, its large ears swiveling to catch any sound.

It was a doe, her coat thick and grayish brown, blending seamlessly with the shadow-rife landscape. She paused and sniffed the air before taking a few tentative steps toward the center of the meadow. Ben’s pulse quickened. He’d been in this position countless times before, but the satisfaction never dulled—the quiet triumph of blending into the land, moving as part of the wild rather than against it. There was a deep, primal fulfillment in knowing he had outwitted his prey, reading the landscape and

the wind as naturally as the deer themselves. Out here, instincts mattered more than words, patience more than speed. It was a game as old as time, and he never tired of playing it.

“Do I shoot?” Brad whispered, never moving from behind his scope.

Ben leaned toward Brad again. “Not yet. Let’s see who she’s traveling with.” Ben and the boys had discussed who would take the shot during their hike up that morning. Despite a nagging doubt that he might have made the wrong call, Ben had ultimately decided to let Brad take it. He wanted his youngest to feel like he was truly contributing—like he had an important role in providing for the family.

Brad’s success today would go a long way toward building his confidence in his abilities. In the world they lived in, this wouldn’t be the last high-stakes shot he had to take. Next time, it might not involve an animal.

“There’s no way she’s alone,” Joel breathed.

Ben had never been one to turn down an opportunity, especially when survival depended on it, but they’d already put in the effort this morning, and patience might reward them with something bigger. This could be their last easy hunt of the season. Soon, the deer would start moving down into the valleys, following their instincts ahead of the deep snows that would bury these elevations until spring. If they could take down a larger doe—or, better yet, a buck—it would stretch their meat stores for another week or two. With three hungry dogs and a house full of growing kids, that kind of security wasn’t just practical; it was essential.

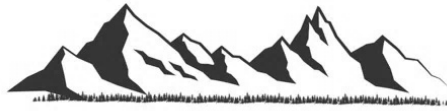
A larger, second doe emerged from the trees, trailing behind the first. She moved carefully, pausing to graze where the sun had melted patches of snow, her ears twitching at the faintest sound.

“Now?” Brad whispered.

“We wait,” Ben answered.

Out here, patience wasn’t just a virtue—it was a requirement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The crisp morning air held still as the three of them watched the deer, their breath coming in slow, measured exhales. The two does continued grazing as several others filtered out of the shadows nearby, their dark eyes scanning their surroundings between bites. The larger doe took the lead, her slender body silhouetted against the golden light of dawn.

But it wasn't the does Ben was watching.

He had seen the flicker of movement behind them—a subtle shift in the trees, maybe a wag of a black-tipped tail that most wouldn't have noticed. Years of hunting had trained his eyes to spot the smallest changes, and his gut told him to wait.

Then, just as expected, he stepped into the open.

A mule deer buck.

And not just any buck—a big, mature one. His thick coat rippled with muscle as he moved forward, his wide, symmetrical rack catching the morning light. He was cautious, keeping to the shadows just beyond the clearing, his head high as he tested the air for any signs of danger. He wasn't in a hurry, confident in his place at the top of the herd's hierarchy.

Ben barely breathed. A buck like this was a prize in any season, and in these times, he was a gift from the land itself. His antlers alone told the story—at least a five-year-old deer, heavy-bodied, built for endurance through brutal winters. He was a contender for the Pope and Young Club and must have weighed at least 350 pounds. There were bound to be plenty of his offspring roaming the nearby mountains for years. Of course, they'd never know any of that for sure, but it didn't matter.

“Brad,” Ben whispered, keeping his eyes on the buck. “Take your time. You’ve made this shot before on the range, and you’re all dialed in.”

Brad exhaled slowly, adjusting the rifle against his shoulder. Ben saw the boy’s hands tighten, but to his credit, they didn’t shake. He had been waiting for this moment, and despite his young age, he looked the part of a seasoned hunter.

Ben shifted his gaze from Brad to the buck standing broadside some two hundred yards away. The deer couldn’t have presented itself any better.

The shot rang out, cracking through the cold air like a whip. The buck jolted, his front legs stiffening as the bullet hit home. He took one desperate bound forward, then stumbled, his hind legs giving out as he collapsed onto his side in the meadow. The silence that followed was thick, save for the echoing report of the rifle fading into the hills.

Brad held his breath, his scope still trained on the downed deer. The buck kicked once, then went still.

“You got him,” Ben said, a quiet note of pride in his voice.

Brad exhaled sharply, his breath puffing white in the cold. A grin started to spread across his face when—

Crack.

Another shot rang out, startling Brad enough that he flinched, his head jerking up from his weapon’s sights and toward the sound.

Joel had fired.

Ben whipped his gaze back to the clearing just in time to see the larger doe drop to the ground where she was standing. A perfect heart shot. The animal crumpled instantly, her legs kicking twice before falling completely still.

Ben turned to Joel as a mix of surprise and something close to admiration settled over him. His oldest son hadn’t hesitated.

Joel ejected the spent cartridge from his .308, the casing landing in the snow with a faint hiss of steam. He stared down at the clearing, his jaw set.

“Figured we might as well make the trip worth it,” he said with a nonchalance that was almost concerning.

Ben didn’t answer right away. His first instinct was to remind Joel that one deer was more than enough work for the day, especially with everything else they had to do. But he couldn’t argue with the logic. Two deer meant twice the meat. Twice the security. With winter tightening its grip, every extra pound of venison would be the difference between comfort

and hardship. Yet the second deer solidified the need to go into town for more salt, if they even could find it.

Between these two kills, they'd come close to using all the salt they had on hand, especially if they were going to save the hides, too. Smoking was always an option, but that meant a lot more work. It also ran the risk of attracting predators.

Ben gave a slow nod. "You're not wrong."

Joel glanced at him, searching for any signs of disapproval. When he found none, he simply nodded back.

Brad, however, was still wide-eyed from both his kill and the unexpected second shot. "You got one, too?"

"Yeah," Joel said simply, although Ben was glad to see him breathing heavily. He was still excited to be here but was trying to hide it for some reason.

Brad let out a breath of laughter, shaking his head. "Man, this is gonna be a long morning."

Ben clapped a hand on Brad's shoulder. "That's the price of success. Let's get moving. We need to field dress them and haul the meat back."

"I'll go get the four-wheeler," Joel said, already slinging his rifle over his back. "I think I can get up here without too much trouble."

Ben nodded, watching as his oldest son turned and disappeared into the timber, moving with practiced ease down the trail they'd taken that morning. That was another luxury they'd lose in deeper snow. The Honda was a workhorse and boasted full-time four-wheel drive, but there were limits to what it could handle.

"Grab the roll of paracord from the garage—and the limb saw and hatchet," Ben called after Joel. He'd only planned on hauling one deer out, but now they had two, and they'd have to figure something out. His mind was already working through the logistics as Joel rounded a large boulder and disappeared down the trail.

"Got it," Joel's voice echoed back, but he was already gone.

Brad was still staring at the buck, a mixture of awe and satisfaction on his face. "That was... incredible."

Ben chuckled. "It was a good shot. But the real work starts now."

Brad straightened his shoulders and tightened his grip on his rifle, nodding. "I'm ready."

Ben led the way down the ridge, carefully picking his way through the snow-covered rocks to reach the meadow below. As they got closer to the buck, the size of the animal became even more apparent.

Brad knelt beside him, reaching out tentatively to touch the thick fur of the deer's neck. "He's huge."

Ben crouched down beside his son. "Big-bodied buck, probably a trophy buck when..." He stopped, not wanting to finish the sentence and ruin the moment. "This is a really nice deer, Brad." He slapped his son's shoulder and smiled approvingly.

Brad beamed back. "Thanks, Dad."

Ben unsheathed his 2.5-inch Benchmade skinning knife and held it loosely. "It's your kill, so you're gonna learn how to do this part."

Brad swallowed hard but nodded, determination written all over his face.

Ben made the first incision, cutting cleanly around the anus of the deer to isolate the lower digestive tract, then ran the knife up along the pelvis and between the hind legs just deep enough to cut through the hide. He went a little deeper into the meat several inches past the belly, causing the gut to herniate and expose itself from the hide.

The smell of warm blood and musk filled the air as steam rose from the cavity. Brad wrinkled his nose but didn't flinch.

"Two fingers like this. Trick is not to cut too deep. Don't want to risk nicking anything." Ben showed Brad how to pull the hide up and away from the deer's entrails as he continued slicing the hide open. "Everything has to come out clean so the meat doesn't spoil."

Brad watched closely, nodding.

"Everything below the rib cage is digestive, and everything above is cardiovascular," Ben explained as he worked, pointing out the internal organs and their potential uses.

He always thought learning how to do something should be more than just a set of instructions. The whys and the hows deserved to be explored along the way. This was part of life—and death. Besides, this was the closest thing to an education Brad was getting as of late. Ben and Sandy had discussed making some changes in that regard, at least for the younger two, but they'd been so busy. That would change when bad weather set in.

Ben let the boy handle the knife for part of it, coaching him on where to cut, how to extract the organs, and how to puncture the diaphragm and

expose the cardiovascular system. Ben took his jacket off and pushed his long-sleeve shirt up to his elbow before reaching inside the chest cavity. In one motion, he extracted the cardiovascular system and showed Brad the damage done by his bullet.

By the time they finished draining the blood and bodily fluids from the buck, Brad's hands were covered in blood, but his grin was unshaken.

"That was... kind of gross," Brad admitted, cleaning his hands in the snow. "But also kind of interesting."

Ben chuckled. "You did good. Maybe you can do a little more on the next one."

They moved on to the doe, repeating the process with the same efficiency. The second time around, Brad was more confident, his hands steadier and his mind full of questions and comments.

As they finished up, the distant hum of the Honda's engine reached their ears.

"Joel's back," Ben said, standing up and stretching his stiff legs.

A few moments later, the faded red four-wheeler came into view, kicking up slush and dirt as Joel maneuvered it carefully through the meadow. The small utility basket on the back was packed with straps, a spool of rope, the paracord, the limb saw, and the hatchet Ben had asked for.

Joel pulled up beside them, cutting the engine. He swung a leg over the seat and surveyed the field-dressed deer with an approving nod. "Looks like you guys had fun."

Brad grinned. "I got my hands dirty."

Joel smirked. "Good. You earned it."

Ben wasted no time. "Seeing as how we have an extra deer, we're going to need to build a sled."

"Oh, I thought you were going to quarter the deer up so we could get them back," Joel stated.

"Nope, I want the hides. If nothing else, it's something we can trade with in the spring."

"So we're making a sled right here?" Brad wrinkled his brow.

"Sort of." Ben grabbed the saw, chose two saplings close by, and cut them down into two poles that were a little taller than he was.

"Take the hatchet and clear the limbs off those." He handed them to Joel. "Brad, you come with me. We need a few lateral pieces."

After just a few minutes of searching, Ben and Brad had found five sturdy branches that needed little modification and returned to Joel. Ben took the materials, laying the two long poles in the shape of an A, then lashed the part where they intersected at the top with paracord. Brad brought him the branches one by one as Joel held them in place, and Ben tied them onto the main framework, working their way down toward the bottom of the A like a ladder.

“It’s kind of like a stretcher.” Brad stood back, eyeing the contraption when they were done.

“Pretty much.” Ben picked up the small end of the makeshift stretcher, pushed it into the Honda’s cargo rack, and used more paracord and the last branch to secure it to the ATV, leaving the wide end to drag behind on the ground.

Together, they heaved the carcasses onto the stretcher, securing them with rope before Joel fired up the four-wheeler again. The machine growled as it started pulling the heavy load, cutting a path back toward the house.

As they followed in its wake, Ben felt a rare sense of satisfaction settle over him. They’d done well today. The work was far from over, but this was a win.

A good hunt, a good lesson for Brad, and more security for the months ahead.

Now all they had to do was get it processed, but if the weather stayed this cool, he felt comfortable letting the deer hang while they tended to the trip wires and the fence. Despite the work that needed to be done, he wondered when Slade’s men would make another appearance and wrestled with the guilt that was already eating away at him for sending the kids into town on their own.

Ben exhaled, watching his breath curl into the cold air.
One thing at a time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The late morning sun hung low in the sky, peeking in and out of the cotton-ball-shaped clouds drifting lazily east as Ben, Joel, and Brad made their way back home. The sound of the four-wheeler's engine hummed steadily through the crisp air, pulling the makeshift stretcher behind it. The hastily built device made from pine saplings and paracord dragged a deep groove through the mix of frozen slush as it carried the weight of the two deer.

Joel kept his hands firm on the handlebars, guiding the ATV carefully over the uneven ground, while Ben and Brad walked alongside, each watching for any weak spots in the setup. The morning hunt had been a success—better than Ben had expected. The buck was a prime animal, and the doe only added to their winter stores. A hunt like this, on top of what they already had, would give them security well into the deeper months of winter.

But success came with its own price. The hunt had taken up a good part of the morning, and now they had more work ahead of them. The deer needed to be hung, the perimeter still needed reinforcing, and Ben couldn't shake the feeling that their time was running out.

As Ben, Brad, and Joel emerged from the trees, the house finally in sight, the dogs were the first to greet them. Gunner was already bounding toward them at full speed, his deep, excited bark echoing through the crisp morning air. Sam wasn't far behind, tail wagging furiously as she closed the distance. Bajer followed at a slower pace, her stocky frame moving with determined strides. The little gray and tan brindle pit bull mix couldn't match the speed of the others, her old leg injury giving her a slight limp.

But her nose twitched with keen interest, ears pricked forward as she homed in on the excitement.

Brad hopped off the makeshift stretcher he'd been stealing rides on, barely able to fend off Gunner as the big Chesapeake Bay retriever leaped up to meet him. "Easy, boy!" Brad laughed, dodging the enthusiastic greeting. Sam circled the stretcher, sniffing eagerly at the two deer, while Bajer gave a deep, approving grunt before pressing her nose to the buck's flank, where she promptly sneezed.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I got the buck," Brad announced proudly, waving the dogs off as they tried to investigate further. "And no, you're not getting any of it yet."

Ben chuckled as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and shooed Gunner away from the stretcher. "Looks like we're not the only ones who appreciate a good hunt."

Joel smirked, nudging Sam back with his boot as the dog tried to lick at the bloodied hide. "Better keep them away unless you want half the meat gone before it's even hung."

Bajer let out a low grumble, as if hoping for a change of heart. But Gunner wasn't as patient—his tail thumped against Brad's legs, his eyes locked onto the deer with unshakable determination.

"All right, enough." Ben stepped between the dogs and their prize. "You'll get your share when it's time."

With some reluctance, the dogs pulled back, though their noses never strayed far from the scent of fresh venison. Ben shook his head with a grin. He had to admit, they weren't wrong to be excited. This was a haul worth celebrating.

Sandy stepped out onto the porch, squinting against the morning sunlight, her gaze immediately locking onto the deer. "Looks like it went well," she called.

Ben nodded, reaching up to adjust the sling on his rifle. "Better than expected. We've got a big buck and a good-sized doe. Should be more than enough to stretch out our stores for a while."

Sandy smiled, but there was something in her eyes—a flicker of concern that Ben caught immediately. He knew what she was thinking. They were already spread thin, and now there were two full animals to process.

Joel killed the engine, stretching his arms before dismounting. "I'll get the gambrel hooks and rope," he said, heading toward the garage.

Allie appeared from the side of the house, her brow furrowed. "Two deer. That's a lot of processing."

She'd helped Joel with the last mule deer, which he'd taken with his bow about a month ago, in early fall. A buck, but smaller than Brad's, although it was still a fair amount of work to butcher and skin.

"They need to hang for a while anyway," Ben said, leaning his rifle against the deck post. "If we process them before rigor mortis passes, the muscles will tighten up and make the meat tough. Now that we've got the cold cellar, we can let them hang for a week or more if needed."

Brad's face fell slightly. "So we're not doing anything else with them today?"

Ben shook his head. "Nope. Once they're hung, we're focusing on the fence and trip wires."

Sandy, who had been watching quietly from the porch, let out a quiet breath, visibly relieved. "At least we have time," she said, rubbing her arms against the cold. "And maybe, somewhere in all of this, we could try to work on the basement. I hate to bring it up, but I'm sure the kids are tired of bunking up."

Ben sighed, rolling his shoulders as he looked at Sandy. "Yeah... we'll need to make time for that soon, which we'll have plenty of once it really starts snowing."

Sandy gave a small smile, shifting her weight against the porch railing. "Good. Because if I have to play referee over whose turn it is to use the loft bathroom one more time, I might just move into the garage."

Brad smirked. "I call the basement when it's done."

Allie scoffed. "In your dreams. Besides, I already have half my stuff in the bathroom."

Brad grinned. "Guess you better start packing, then."

Allie rolled her eyes. "You wouldn't last a week down there."

Brad crossed his arms. "Why not?"

"Because," Allie said, smirking, "basements are dark, and you're afraid of the dark."

Brad opened his mouth to argue but hesitated just long enough for Joel to chuckle as he strolled over from the garage with more rope and gambrels.

"She's got you there," he said.

Ben shook his head with a small smile. At least they hadn't lost their sense of humor. Yet.

Within minutes, the deer were strung up between two trees near the cold cellar. Ben would move them inside after the remaining blood had drained from the carcasses.

Brad cleaned his hands in another pile of snow and wiped them on his hunting bibs, looking at the deer with clear satisfaction. "Feels good knowing we've got this much meat."

Ben clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Yeah, it does. Thanks to you."

By late morning, the family was back at it. The fence along Saddle Trail needed finishing and so did their defenses, as well as the gate and a few other things.

Ben worked alongside Joel and Brad, securing cut saplings into place and stretching wire between the stakes. The fence wasn't meant to be an impenetrable barrier—it could be climbed, after all—but it would create a defined perimeter, allowing them to run their trip wires consistently.

Eventually, Ben hoped to electrify the wire using solar power, like their friend Ed had done back in Indiana. But for now, the barricade would serve its purpose, making it harder for anyone to approach from the road without being seen.

Allie and Emma were gathering the stripped branches into piles for use later while Gunner lay in the snow nearby, watching everything with quiet attentiveness, ears twitching at every unexpected noise.

Joel wiped sweat from his brow, despite the cold. "You really think this is enough to keep them out?"

Ben tightened a length of wire and tested its resistance. "Not entirely. But it'll slow them down. That's all we need: time to react."

Allie tossed another branch onto the pile. "And if they come with more men?"

Ben met her gaze. "Then we make sure they regret it. We know how to play by those rules, don't we?"

Allie gave a small nod, but she didn't need to. Ben already knew—knew that she, Joel, and the others would do whatever it took to protect their home. There was no hesitation in them, no second-guessing. They had seen worse men than Slade. They had dealt with worse. This was no different.

On the long road to Maryland and back, they had witnessed the full weight of what the world had become. Desperation, cruelty, the brutal truths

of survival. They had walked through it, lived it, bled for it. By the time they finally made it home, they weren't the same people who had left. They were hardened travelers, shaped by the miles and the choices they'd had to make. The willingness to kill had been forced upon them, carved into their bones, etched into their hands.

That edge hadn't disappeared, not completely. It had just been tempered by time, buried beneath the routines of daily survival. They had learned to move forward, to build something worth protecting. But the instincts they had sharpened on the road—the awareness, the resolve, the willingness to do what had to be done—still lingered beneath the surface, waiting.

And if Slade and his men pushed too far, they wouldn't just be defending what was theirs.

They'd be fighting for it.

The work continued in silence for a while, each of them focused on their task. Ben was about to cut into a protruding branch with the saw when something caught his ear.

A sound that didn't belong.

The rhythmic crunch of hooves in the snow, too many to be the Holdens.

Ben's head snapped up, muscles tensing as he laid the saw down and moved his hand closer to the Desert Eagle at his hip. He rarely carried the hefty .50-caliber pistol—its 4.5-pound weight made it impractical for everyday use—but today was different. With so much work to do, hauling the KelTec around wasn't ideal. Besides, the woods were thick with black bears this time of year, scavenging for acorns to pack on the last few pounds before hibernation. And after all the strange animal behavior he'd witnessed in the last few months, he wasn't about to take any chances.

"Do you hear that?" Joel asked, pausing mid-swing with the sledgehammer.

Allie straightened, her eyes narrowing. "Horses," she murmured.

Brad froze, gripping a bundle of branches, his wide eyes darting toward the driveway.

"Everyone, stay calm," Ben said quietly, his voice firm. He gestured for the others to stop working and abandon their tools for their weapons.

Moments later, the first rider appeared over the crest of the hill. The horsemen were coming from an odd direction. Saddle Trail only ran past the house about a mile or so before dead-ending at BLM land. And there was

only one other property beyond Ben's place, a vacation cabin owned by a family from Texas who only came up a few times a year. Whoever they were, they'd made their own way here through the mountains from the northeast.

The man was tall and lean, wearing a faded green military-style coat and a cowboy hat pulled low over his weathered face. Behind him, a dozen more riders fanned out, their horses moving in a loose but deliberate formation. Snow kicked up under their hooves as they approached, the sight both intimidating and oddly out of place, like something from another century.

Gunner let out a low growl as he got up from the ground, forgetting all about the stick he was chewing on.

"Easy, boy. Sit." Ben held out his hand. "Now stay."

At the center of the group rode a man on a black horse, its sleek coat gleaming in the scattered sunlight. The man sat tall in the saddle, a rifle strapped to his back. His graying hair was cropped short, and his piercing gray eyes scanned the property with practiced authority.

"Major Caldwell." The man raised a gloved hand in greeting, but there was something calculated in the gesture—friendly on the surface, but with an undercurrent of authority. "Mornin', folks," he added, his deep voice carrying easily over the distance. "I expect you've heard of me."

Ben didn't need an introduction to know exactly who he was dealing with. He'd heard the name in town, always spoken in tones laced with either respect or wary caution. Caldwell's group, the La Plata Raiders, had taken up residence in the vacuum left by the collapse of law and order. They were rumored to be mostly veterans, ex-lawmen, men who had once worn a badge or a uniform—men who had seen combat, knew how to handle themselves, and, most importantly, knew how to impose control.

Compared to Slade and his Faction, Caldwell and his men had a better reputation. They weren't known for raiding homesteads or terrorizing families, at least not outright. Some in town even saw them as the closest thing left to law enforcement. But Ben took little comfort in that.

The problem with men like Caldwell wasn't just that they took power—it was that they *believed* they were entitled to it.

The old world had fallen, leaving behind nothing but uncertainty, and in its place, a handful of men had stepped forward to claim the remnants. Some, like Slade, wanted to rule through brute force and fear. Others, like

Caldwell, operated under the guise of *order* and *protection*—but protection always came with a price.

Caldwell and his Raiders skirted a blurry line between menace and savior. They were survivors and pragmatists, men who saw the world for what it was and shaped it to fit their own vision. And Caldwell's vision was simple: control Durango and everything around it.

And Ben had no intention of falling under that control.

Ben stepped forward, keeping his posture steady. "I've heard some things."

Caldwell brought his horse to a stop at the end of the driveway and dismounted, his boots crunching in the snow as he approached. His men remained on horseback, their hands resting casually on their reins—or on their rifles tucked into scabbards by their saddles.

"I'll get straight to the point," Caldwell said, his voice friendly but firm. "We've been keeping an eye on things in this area. Slade's been stirring up trouble, and we heard you had some the other night. Figured we'd stop by, make sure everything's all right."

Ben kept his expression neutral. "We're managing."

Caldwell surveyed the fence in progress, then looked toward the house. "Nice setup you've got. Better than most. But Slade's not the kind to give up. Trip wires and some fencing won't keep him from trying again."

Ben took off his gloves. "I wasn't counting on it."

Caldwell's tone shifted slightly. "That's where we come in. My men and I can keep you safe—make sure Slade and his scouts don't bother you again." The major paused, letting the words sink in. "All we ask is a little cooperation."

Ben crossed his arms, letting his brow furrow with skepticism. "What kind of cooperation?"

Caldwell smiled faintly, but it didn't reach his eyes. "A share of your supplies—whatever you can spare. And in return, we'll keep a couple of my men stationed nearby, make sure no one gives you trouble. Down the line, we might ask for something else—help with a project, maybe. Or a commitment from your boys here." He gestured toward Joel and Brad.

The silence that followed was thick and heavy.

Ben's jaw tightened. "Commitment?"

Caldwell nodded. "We're rebuilding, Mr. Davis. The world's not what it used to be, and it won't get better unless men like us step up. Your boys

look capable. They could be valuable to the cause. Not right away, of course. Let 'em grow a bit first. But in a year or so... I'd expect them to contribute. Protecting folks from raiders, keeping the roads safe, all that takes effort—and resources.”

Joel shifted, his grip tightening on the sledgehammer as he laid it over his shoulder. Brad glanced nervously at Ben, his youthful confidence clearly wavering under the weight of the conversation.

The awkward silence was shattered by Sam, who broke into an aggravated fit of barking, with Bajer providing backup. The two dogs had been inside with Sandy but had followed her out onto the porch, her expression hard and unreadable as she eyed the men on horseback from the house and held Sam at the top of the stairs leading down to the driveway. The dog's ears perked, hackles up.

Ben turned his attention back to Caldwell and finally spoke, his voice calm but firm. “I appreciate the offer, Major. But we're fine on our own.”

Caldwell's smile faded, replaced by a look of mild disappointment. “I admire your independence, Mr. Davis. I really do. But don't mistake it for invincibility. Slade's not gonna stop, and when he comes back, he'll bring more than just a couple of scouts. You've got a family to think about. You sure you want to bet their safety on pride?”

Ben stepped closer, meeting Caldwell's gaze head-on. “This isn't about pride. It's about keeping what's mine. I won't hand over my kids—or my supplies. Not to Slade and not to you.”

Caldwell studied him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. “Fair enough. But think it over. I'll give you a week to decide. After that... Well, I hope you don't regret your choice.”

“Is that a threat, Major?” Ben's posture stiffened.

“Not a threat. Just some friendly advice.” Caldwell turned, mounting his horse in a smooth motion, signaling for his men to fall in. As the Raiders pulled away, one of them lingered a second too long, his gaze sweeping over the property like he was memorizing it, until his attention settled on Allie.

Joel stepped between Allie and the raider's gaze.

“Duncan,” Caldwell grumbled at the man.

Duncan let out a dry chuckle, shaking his head before tugging the reins and turning his horse away, dismissing them without another word.

By the time Caldwell and his men had vanished into the trees, Sandy had made her way to the fence line where the others stood, her grip firm on Sam's collar. The yellow Lab strained against Sandy's hold, her muscles rigid, a low growl vibrating in her throat. A few paces behind, Bajer lingered in uncharacteristic silence, her usual happy-go-lucky demeanor absent as she watched the retreating raiders with wary eyes.

Sandy's face was set, her expression a mix of anger and resolve. "We're not doing it," she said firmly, her voice unwavering despite the tension lingering in the air. "Not you. Not the boys."

Ben looked at Sandy, then at the kids, seeing the same resolve in all their faces.

"No," he agreed. "We're not."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The sun hung low on the horizon, stretching golden light across the snow-dappled ground as Ben and the others made their way back to the house. Their breaths came in slow, measured puffs of condensation, exhaustion settling into their muscles after a long day of hard labor. But the effort had been worth it.

A continuous fence line now ran along the edge of the property bordering the county road. It wasn't perfect—the rocky soil had made for difficult digging, and the snow that speckled the ground only added to the challenge—but they had finished. The fence stood tall, reinforced with trip wire along the top and bottom rails, creating an early-warning system that would buy them precious seconds if someone tried to approach from Saddle Trail unnoticed.

The gate had been completed as well, heavy and solid, made from the straightest trees they could find, though Ben still needed to build a proper latching mechanism against one of the lodgepole pines that framed the entrance. For now, they'd secured it with chains and a padlock, a temporary solution but a strong one.

Ben rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the stiffness that had settled in from the relentless work. Every muscle in his body ached, but he welcomed the discomfort—it was proof of progress. The physical labor had kept his mind occupied, giving him little time to dwell on their earlier run-in with Caldwell and what it might mean for the days ahead.

Once back at the house, Ben made the call to fire up the generator for a while. The familiar hum filled the air, and for a brief moment, life almost

felt normal again. With power on and a working water pump running, the water heater kicked on, and they all took turns scrubbing away the day's sweat and grime.

By the time they reconvened in the kitchen and living room, the warmth of the woodstove had settled into the cabin, filling the air with the scent of pine and lingering traces of soap. Everyone chipped in to get dinner on the table, moving through the motions with the quiet efficiency that came from months of living in survival mode.

Tonight's meal was simple: rice and beans seasoned with dried herbs and a small rabbit Brad had taken last week. It was filling but uninspiring, a stark reminder of why they'd been up before sunrise hunting mule deer in the first place. The lackluster meal also drove home another hard truth. Another run into town while the weather allowed it, and while the barter market was still operating, was equally important.

Ben glanced around the table, taking in his family's weary faces. They'd done good work today. But the hardest choices were still ahead of them.

The relative silence that hung over dinner like a dark cloud spoke volumes of the encounter with Caldwell today, the major's words replaying in Ben's mind like the echo of an unspoken threat that refused to dissipate. The family had faced threats before, but this was different. Slade and his men were predictable in their brutality—raiders, thieves, men who took what they wanted by force. Caldwell, on the other hand, played a longer game. His offer of protection wasn't a gift; it was a leash. And once you let a man like Caldwell stake his claim on your life, he wouldn't let go.

WITH DINNER CLEARED AWAY AND THE LAST OF THE DISHES DRIED AND stacked, the family drifted toward the warmth of the living room. The woodstove crackled softly, radiating heat into the cozy space, the scent of burning pine mixing with the lingering aroma of their meal. The dogs had sprawled out near the hearth, their bodies stretched across the floor in lazy contentment, while the rest of them settled into their usual spots, drawn together by routine but weighed down by the day's events.

Ben remained at the dining table, absently running his hunting knife over the whetstone, the slow, deliberate *shhk-shhk* of metal on stone filling the silence. His mind was far away, replaying the encounter with Caldwell over and over, dissecting every word, every glance, every implication.

Sandy stood near the counter, arms crossed, her eyes fixed on the darkened window above the sink. She wasn't really looking at anything, just lost in thought, her lips pressed into a firm line. Allie leaned against the opposite window, arms folded, staring out into the yard, her expression unreadable.

At the table, Joel sat across from Ben, elbows propped on the wooden surface, his attention fixed on the notepad in front of him. He had started making a list for the next day's supply run into Durango, but now, the pencil in his hand remained motionless, his mind elsewhere.

On the floor near the couch, Brad shuffled a deck of playing cards between his fingers, tapping them idly against his knee. He wasn't really playing, just fidgeting. His usual energy was subdued, though not entirely dampened by the tension that had settled over the house like a thick, heavy snow cloud.

Emma was the only one missing from the group. She had curled up on the couch in the loft, sketchbook open in her lap, though it didn't seem like she was drawing much of anything. Every now and then, she would glance down at her book, her pencil hovering over the page before lowering again.

For a while, no one spoke.

Then Sandy finally broke the silence.

"We're not doing it." Her voice was firm, cutting through the quiet like a blade. "Not you. Not the boys."

Ben didn't look up from his knife. "I already told him no."

Sandy exhaled sharply, shaking her head. "A man like Caldwell doesn't just take no for an answer and ride off. He's giving us a week to change our minds, but what happens when we don't?"

"They come back," Allie said from the doorway. She didn't turn around, didn't move, just stated the fact as though she had already made peace with it.

Joel set his pencil down, finally meeting Ben's gaze. "They will. And if we don't give them what they want, they'll take it."

Ben placed his knife on the table and leaned back in his chair, leveling his son with a steady look. "Then we make sure they don't."

Sandy turned to him, frustration tightening her jaw. "Ben, this isn't just about us. It's about Brad and Joel. You heard him. He wants them for his militia. Maybe not today, maybe not next month, but he's already claimed them in his mind. Do you really think he'll just let that go?"

"I think it's kind of insulting he doesn't want me," Allie quipped, finally turning around, a wry grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "I bet I could outshoot half of those guys."

"I don't find any of this amusing," Sandy shot back, her frown deepening.

Ben sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He had been thinking about that ever since Caldwell rode up. The man was planting a seed. He wasn't demanding anything outright—yet—but he was setting an expectation. Letting them know that Ben and the others weren't outside his reach.

"I won't let that happen," Ben said finally, his tone firm.

Sandy let out a bitter laugh. "And how do you plan on stopping it? Caldwell's got trained men. Horses. Supplies. We're just—" She stopped herself, biting back the words.

"We're not just anything," Ben countered, his voice quiet but unshakable. He looked around the room, meeting each of their gazes. "We've been through worse than this. We've fought worse than this."

"We were running then," Joel pointed out. "Now we're standing still."

Ben nodded slowly. "Which means we need to be ready."

Brad sat up straighter. "So... are we still going to town tomorrow or not?" His shoulders slumped as he braced for disappointment.

Ben hesitated, his eyes flicking to Sandy. He had already agreed to send Joel, Allie, and Brad in the morning, but now he wasn't so sure. What if Caldwell's men were still nearby, watching? What if they intercepted the kids? Slade's scouts were already a concern. Adding the La Plata Raiders into the mix made the whole thing even riskier.

"We need the supplies," Joel pressed, reading Ben's hesitation. "And we need the fish."

"We need a lot of things," Ben muttered, running a hand through his hair. He hated the idea of sending them now. But if they didn't go before the barter market shut down for winter, they might not get another chance.

"I don't like it," Sandy admitted. "Not with Caldwell sniffing around. And not with Slade still out there. But if we don't go, we'll regret it later."

Ben hated that she was right. "You're still going. But you leave early, and you don't waste time in town."

Joel nodded. "That was already the plan."

Brad grinned, but Sandy shot him a warning look. "This is going to be a quick trip. I think we need to limit the time spent catching fish to a couple

hours, even if you don't have any luck. Back by noon at the latest," she said, looking to Ben for agreement.

"Back by noon," Ben confirmed. "Sooner if possible."

"We always catch fish," Brad promised, his excitement undeterred.

Ben sighed, his gut twisting. "We'll go over the plan again in the morning before you head out. I want all three of you well-prepared: sidearms and rifles, plenty of ammunition. And Gunner goes with you."

"Of course," Allie said, reaching down to scratch behind Gunner's ears. The dog wagged his tail but didn't lift his head, content to enjoy the attention.

Up in the loft, Emma shifted. She hesitated, then leaned against the railing, her hands gripping the smooth, stripped pine branches that framed it. "What if something happens while they're gone?"

Ben exhaled, considering the possibilities. "Caldwell won't be back until next week. And as far as Slade goes, if his men show up, we'll deal with them."

"But there's a lot of them," Emma pointed out. "And it'll only be the three of us."

Ben glanced at her, then at Sandy. "Then I'll even the odds." He stood, stretching the stiffness from his back. "I'll set up the big gun tonight."

Sandy's expression darkened, but she didn't argue.

The M249 SAW had been stored in the master bedroom since they returned from their cross-country journey. It wasn't Sandy's favorite piece of furniture, but she understood its purpose.

Ben had built a mount for the belt-fed LMG on the corner of the deck, right outside the master bedroom French doors. From that position, he had a commanding view of the driveway, the eastern side of the property, including the garage, and the cleared meadow that stretched out from the south side of the house.

But mounting the gun felt like admitting something Ben had been trying to avoid—the fight was coming whether they wanted it or not. He was grateful they had the LMG, but setting it up on the deck wasn't just a precaution; it was a shift in mindset. It meant losing all hope of finding stability in this unstable world. In the bedroom, the weapon was out of place, but that at least meant they didn't need it. All that had changed in the last few days, and it was disappointing, to say the least.

Ben exhaled slowly, glancing out the window into the darkened woods beyond their property.

It didn't matter.

If war was coming, they wouldn't be caught unprepared.

Ben glanced at Sandy, then back at the kids. "All right, let's get some rest. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day."

THE HOUSE WAS SILENT WHEN BEN'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN.

For a second, he wasn't sure what had woken him.

Then he heard it.

A distant boom.

Then another.

Gunfire. Not just a single shot but multiple, spaced out and deliberate.

Ben was on his feet before his mind fully caught up. Years of training—months of survival—had ingrained the instinct in him. He was pulling on his pants, buckling his belt, and reaching for his fleece before his pulse had even settled into its rapid, steady rhythm.

Sandy stirred in the bed, then sat up with a sharp inhale. "What's going on?"

He yanked back the curtain covering the French doors that led to the deck. The cold glass sent a chill through his fingertips as he peered through the darkness toward the Holdens' property. No lights, no movement—but the night was deep and the trees were thick.

Another shot cracked through the distance, followed by a volley of gunfire.

Ben's stomach tightened.

"The Holdens are being attacked."

He didn't wait for a response. He was already securing his sidearm and reaching for the KelTec as he moved toward the bedroom door.

By the time he stepped out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, the house was awake.

Joel, Allie, and Brad came bounding down the stairs in half-dressed urgency, their eyes sharp with adrenaline. Emma peered over the railing of

the loft, her face pale in the low lamplight. Brad rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs, breathless, his hair sticking up in wild tufts from sleep.

“Did you hear that?” Joel asked, already moving toward the mudroom.

Ben nodded. “The Holdens.”

Allie muttered something under her breath, hopping on one foot as she struggled to put on her boots.

Joel didn’t hesitate. “They need our help.”

“And they’ll get it,” Ben said, his voice firm. “But we don’t go down there half-cocked. We gear up first.”

His mind was already calculating, prioritizing. The Holdens lived close enough that they could make it fast, but they’d be exposed if they rushed in blindly. If Slade’s men were hitting them, this wasn’t some random act of violence. It was calculated. Coordinated. Which meant it could be a distraction—or, worse, an opening move.

Ben turned to Joel and Allie. “Basement. Now. Put on the armor-plated vests. Grab at least five spare magazines each, one of the two-way radios, and a couple headlamps. I’ll be right down behind you.”

Joel and Allie exchanged glances but did as they were told and headed down to the basement to gear up.

Ben pivoted, heading back through the master bedroom. He’d mounted the SAW on its bracket last night, setting up a defensive position on the corner of the deck. Before leaving Sandy and the kids here alone, he wanted to make sure the SAW was ready for action. He stepped outside, the cold biting against his exposed skin as he unfastened the bungee cords holding the tarp over the weapon.

Belt loaded. Weapon charged and ready to rock.

If Slade’s men were thinking about paying Ben and the others a visit tonight, they’d be met with more than just trip wires.

Behind him, the door creaked.

“What about me? I can help.”

Ben turned to see Brad standing in the bedroom doorway, his expression set with stubborn determination.

Ben clenched his jaw. He’d been expecting this.

“Yes, you can help,” he said, his voice level but firm. “By staying here and protecting the house.”

Brad’s face tightened. “But, Dad—”

“No arguments,” Ben cut him off. “I need you here. We don’t have time for this.”

Another burst of gunfire crackled in the distance.

Brad flinched, but he didn’t back down. “I can fight, too.”

Ben stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I know you can. That’s why you’re staying. You, Emma, and Sandy are the last line of defense. If anything happens while we’re gone, you don’t hesitate. You understand me?”

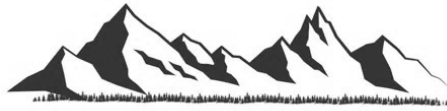
Brad swallowed hard, but he nodded.

Ben clapped a firm hand on his shoulder, squeezing once before stepping away.

“All right,” he said, waiting for Brad to nod back. “I’m counting on you.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



The basement was colder than the rest of the house, the chill creeping through the concrete floor and unfinished walls. It was the kind of cold that settled deep, a forewarning of the crisp night air waiting for them outside. The temperature had been dropping faster this year, and Ben still wasn't sure if he believed the theories floating around—or even his own. People swore the EMPs had affected more than just the power grid. Weather patterns had shifted. Animal behavior had changed. Maybe it was all in their heads, although he'd seen proof of both firsthand. But standing in the basement now, he knew one thing for certain.

Winter was coming hard and fast.

They'd have to insulate the rooms well down here once they finished building, but that wasn't a concern tonight.

A single lantern flickered as it hung from a nail in the wall, casting long, distorted shadows across the space as Ben made his way to the back room. The faint scent of cold metal and old wood filled the air, mingling with the ever-present smell of stored supplies. The unfinished space, partially framed out, was meant to serve as an armory of sorts—eventually. Right now, it was just the most secure place for the weapons and ammunition they'd acquired on their cross-country trip.

Joel and Allie were already there, moving with practiced efficiency. No wasted motions, no second-guessing. Just action.

Ben joined them, hands moving on instinct as he worked through a mental checklist. His movements were quick but measured, years of experience keeping his pulse steady despite the adrenaline seeping into his

veins. The Holden ranch wasn't far, but from the sound of things, the situation was already bad. The urge to rush was strong, but that was how people got killed.

Ben decided on the MP5 in addition to the KelTec he was already carrying. He tossed a few magazines for the blacked-out Heckler and Koch submachine gun into the backpack Joel and Allie were loading and stuffed two into his back pockets before seating one in the weapon's magazine well with a crisp *click*. He ran the cocking handle and made sure the safety was on before clipping it to the single-point sling that would allow for quick transitions. His Glock 19 rested snug in the holster at his hip, two spare magazines already secured in the pouch beside it.

Ben grabbed a small med kit from the shelf and added it to the bag.

"We'll take the Scrambler and pick up the old trail at the end of the road," he said. "That'll bring us out near the big stand of aspens by the Holdens' barn."

Joel secured the straps on his armor-plated tactical vest, checking the fit before sliding a fresh magazine into his AR-15. He chambered a round, his movements steady and controlled. He might not have had military training, but months of survival had transformed him into something just as lethal.

"That trail's overgrown," Joel said. "It's gonna be tight."

Ben nodded. "It's the best option. We can't come in from the main entrance. If we do this right, whoever's attacking the Holdens won't even know we're there until it's too late."

Ben watched as Allie tightened the straps on her ballistic vest, rolling her shoulders like she was trying to settle into it—but he didn't miss the way her fingers lingered a little too long on the fabric. Her AR-15 was slung tight across her chest. The rifle had become an extension of herself, but she kept adjusting it, like she needed the reassurance of its weight. Her sidearm rested against her thigh, secure in its holster, but her hand hovered near it for just a second longer than necessary as she checked the holster's strap.

She was ready. He knew that. Allie had proven herself in combat, but Ben could see the tension in the way she moved, the way she exhaled just a little too deliberately, steadying herself. This wasn't just another close call or a tense moment; this was a fight, and they all knew it.

He reached out and gave her shoulder a quick squeeze. Not much, just enough to let her know he saw her. She didn't say anything, just gave a short nod and pulled her rifle in tighter. The nerves were there, but so was

the resolve. Ben looked between the two of them. They were young, but they were sharp, and they were ready.

“Radio check,” he said, pulling one of the two-way radios from the charger and clicking it on.

A faint crackle responded.

“Sandy, you copy?”

A brief pause. Then her voice came through, firm but calm. “I’m here.”

“We’re heading out. Keep the dogs inside, and don’t open the door for anything unless it’s us.”

“You just make sure it *is* you coming back,” Sandy replied.

Ben managed a half smile. “That’s the plan.”

He moved toward the basement door, unlocking the heavy deadbolt and easing it open. The cold hit him immediately, seeping through his jacket, carrying with it the faint scent of pine and frozen earth. Gunfire still echoed in the distance—sporadic but deliberate.

They needed to move.

Ben stepped onto the gravel driveway, his boots crunching softly. “One of you, drive. I’ll set up in the back.”

Joel held up his hand, and Ben tossed him the keys.

Joel caught them and nodded. “I’ll get us there fast. I know the trail pretty well.”

Ben was already moving, lowering the Scrambler’s soft top to give himself a full field of view on the drive in. The Jeep was their best option tonight—small enough to navigate the narrow, overgrown trail leading to the Holden property and capable enough off-road to handle the rocky terrain. That backcountry route hadn’t seen much use in years, except for the wandering livestock or the occasional horse, but that was about to change.

He just hoped they wouldn’t run into anything unexpected. They were already pushing their luck—and the Holdens’ luck. Every passing second felt like one too many.

Joel climbed into the driver’s seat, Allie took shotgun, and Ben swung into the back, staying on his feet, bracing himself against the roll bar as the engine rumbled to life.

The headlights stayed off as they rolled toward the newly built gate at the end of the driveway.

Ben hopped out before they reached it and unchained the heavy lock. The cold steel bit against his fingers as he worked quickly, pushing the gate open just enough for the Jeep to slip through.

Joel didn't hesitate, rolling forward at a steady pace.

As soon as they were through, Ben swung the gate closed behind them, looping the chain back into place and closing the lock before jogging to the Jeep and hauling himself into the back.

"Go."

Joel pressed down on the gas, and the Jeep lurched forward, tires crunching over the gravel as they headed out. At the end of Saddle Trail, Joel veered right instead of following the dirt road to the left. To the untrained eye, it would appear as though they were about to drive straight into the woods, but several yards in, the trail opened up, and the headlights picked up a faint hint of a path as Joel flicked them on momentarily to confirm they were in the right place.

The trail was rough, barely wide enough for the Scrambler, with overgrown branches scraping against the body of the Jeep as they wound through the trees. The Scrambler's tires clawed over hidden roots and small boulders, but Joel kept his practiced grip on the wheel.

Ben crouched low in the back, eyes scanning the trees for movement, MP5 at the ready. The cold air whipped past him, but he barely felt it.

Then, ahead, through the tangle of bare aspens, he caught a flicker of orange light.

Fire.

They were close.

Joel cut the headlights and slowed as they reached the tree line overlooking the Holden ranch.

The scene below was chaos.

Muzzle flashes lit up the Holdens' house, each burst of gunfire snapping through the chilly night air. Smoke curled above the property, illuminated by the flickering glow of a spreading fire. One of the equipment sheds was fully ablaze, casting an eerie orange light over the scene. Shadows moved between the outbuildings—dark figures darting from cover to cover, their silhouettes briefly visible as they fired toward the house.

The Holdens were standing their ground, but they wouldn't last much longer without help. Neither would their ranch if the fight dragged on.

"Kill the engine," Ben ordered, his voice low but firm.

Joel obeyed without hesitation. The sudden silence was almost jarring, making the sharp cracks of distant gunfire feel even closer. Ben's grip tightened around his weapon, his Army training stirring like a bear roused from hibernation—slow at first, then sharp and hungry, ready to tear into whatever threat lay ahead. His mind plotted as he assessed angles, cover, and the rhythm of the gunfire ahead.

The last thing on earth Ben wanted was to put Joel or Allie in danger. Every instinct he had as a father raged against it. But ignoring the Holdens' fight—leaving them to fend for themselves—wasn't an option. His sense of duty wouldn't allow it. And he couldn't do it alone.

Luke Holden wasn't some nameless survivor. He was a man just like Ben, doing everything he could to keep his family safe, to keep his wife and daughter out of the hands of men like Slade and his Faction boys. The Holdens weren't just in need of help—they deserved it.

But this was about more than the Holdens. If they and Ben's family didn't stand together when it mattered, they would fall alone. Having like-minded neighbors nearby was a rare thing, a fragile kind of security in a world that had turned ruthless. That sense of community, the unspoken understanding that they had each other's backs, was something worth fighting for.

Tonight, Ben would do whatever it took to make sure that didn't change.

He just prayed that bringing Joel and Allie along wouldn't be a decision he'd live to regret.

Ben pulled up his binoculars and scanned the scene.

The trespassers were spread out, using the trees and outbuildings for cover. At least half a dozen, maybe more. They had the Holdens pinned in their home, trying to force them out.

Luke and Sarah Holden were holding their ground. Ben could see muzzle flashes from the second-floor windows, shots fired in steady, controlled bursts. They had ammunition, but it wouldn't last forever.

And to make matters worse, two of the men had gathered near a bale of alfalfa and were attempting to light it on fire. If they could get it rolling toward the house, it was game over for Luke Holden and his family. Although it would take more than two of the gunmen to get it moving, Ben couldn't let that happen.

"All right," he whispered, his voice calm, controlled. "Here's what we're gonna do."

He turned to Joel and Allie, outlining the plan in quick, efficient detail—how he'd flank the attackers, where he expected the kids to take cover and shoot from, how he planned on moving through the gunmen from left to right. He didn't want this to end in friendly fire. It was bad enough that the Holdens wouldn't know they were here. Something he needed to remain aware of until the kids could get to them.

"All right, let's go. Shoot to kill, and no heroics. We're a team." Ben's gaze lingered on Joel, who nodded.

Allie stood poised, her rifle steady, finger resting lightly near the trigger. In the cold night air, her breath came in quick, visible bursts, betraying the tension coiled inside her.

Ben met her gaze, his voice low but firm. "Just like we talked about. Stick to the plan, and make your first shot count. It'll be the only one you get uncontested." He forced a smile. "We got this."

She gave a tight nod, swallowing hard before breaking off into position.

Ben watched for a moment as Joel and Allie crouched low in the waist-high alfalfa, their dark silhouettes blending into the shifting shadows. The long-overdue crop, brittle and half dead, provided decent cover, rustling softly as they moved. Beyond them, the real advantage lay ahead. Their path led toward a cluster of massive rolled alfalfa ton bales, each weighing close to fifteen hundred pounds.

Those bales would stop a bullet.

If Joel and Allie could reach them without being spotted, they'd have a solid position to cover the house and let the Holdens know help had arrived. With their fire coming from a new angle, it might shake the intruders' confidence just enough to throw them off balance.

Meanwhile, Ben would work his way around the flank, staying low and moving fast. He didn't know if these men belonged to Slade's Faction or another opportunistic group looking for an easy target. It didn't matter.

There'd be time for questions later—if any of them lived long enough to answer.

Ben took a deep breath, letting cold night air fill his lungs and slipping into the shadows as he ghosted forward, his MP5 raised.

The hunt was on.

CHAPTER TWENTY



The night pressed in around Joel like a living thing—cold, heavy, and filled with the electric tension of impending violence. His breath formed short clouds in the near-freezing air as he crouched lower in the brittle alfalfa, his rifle tight against his shoulder. The field stretched before him in shifting shades of black and gray, the wind stirring the dead stalks with soft whispers. Every rustling leaf, every gunshot made his pulse hammer harder.

The volley of gunfire hadn't let up. Muzzle flashes flared intermittently near the house, brief bursts of light against the suffocating dark. The Holdens were still fighting, still alive—for now. But Joel knew that wouldn't last, unless they acted soon.

He swallowed, adjusting his grip on the AR-15. His fingers, half numb from the cold, curled tighter around the composite handguard. The ballistic vest he wore felt too snug now, constricting his chest with every breath. He wasn't scared exactly. No, this wasn't fear. It was something heavier, more profound. A weight pressing down on him, a voice in the back of his head whispering, *This is real*.

This was the fight.

The shed that had been burning collapsed in on itself, sending a fiery ball of hot cinders and flame a hundred feet in the air, snapping Joel back to the moment.

He turned his head slightly and met his father's eyes. Even from ten feet away Joel knew the look. Ben's gaze was sharp, focused, unshaken. A quiet command without words: *Move. Now*.

Joel inhaled slowly, then exhaled through his nose. His heartbeat steadied.

He glanced at Allie beside him. She was tense, gripping her rifle so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Her breath was uneven, but her eyes... Her eyes were locked in, scanning ahead, the nerves fading into pure determination.

Joel nodded once. "We go together," he whispered. "Stay low."

Allie swallowed, then nodded back.

They started forward, their movements slow and deliberate. The alfalfa crunched faintly beneath their boots, masked by the wind and the distant gunfire.

The massive ton bales loomed ahead, their rough, fibrous surfaces absorbing the dim orange firelight. Joel aimed for them in an all-out sprint, his entire body focused on reaching that cover, only breaking concentration occasionally to make sure Allie was right behind him. If they made it, they'd have a solid firing position—and the Holdens would know they weren't alone.

Gunshots rang out, closer this time.

Joel dropped instinctively, pressing himself into the ground. Allie did the same. His heart pounded in his throat. Had they been spotted?

No. The gunfire was still directed at the house.

He lifted his head slightly, scanning the field. No one had seen them.

Joel exhaled and started moving again, closing the last few yards to the bales.

When he reached the nearest one, he pressed his back against it, pulling Allie in beside him. The hay smelled damp and earthy, the rough edges poking through his jacket.

From here, they had a clearer view of the house. Shadows darted between the outbuildings, their movements sporadic but coordinated. Joel counted at least six figures, possibly more. Two men were hunched near one of the remaining bales farther out, working at something. A flicker of orange light betrayed their intent.

They were trying to set it on fire, but the recent snow had made the alfalfa damp.

Joel's jaw clenched. If they got that bale burning and pushed it toward the house, the Holdens were done for.

He tapped Allie's arm and pointed. "We take those guys first," he whispered. "Then we move to the ones at the barn."

Allie nodded.

Joel stood up, his body tight against the bale as he lined up on the man. "I got the one starting the fire. You get his friend."

"I'm ready. On you." Allie balanced her rifle on the bale, below Joel. They both knew this was the end of their anonymity. But it was time to get in the fight.

BEN MOVED THROUGH THE TREES LIKE A MAN POSSESSED. SLOW AND smooth, his MP5 ready, every step careful but swift.

The night had always been his ally. In the darkness, the world moved differently: slower, quieter. Visibility was limited, but instincts were sharpened. It was a predator's domain. And in moments like this, the things Ben knew how to do didn't feel like a burden he carried. They were necessary; they were valuable.

That should have been a comfort.

But it wasn't.

Because deep down, beneath the urgency, beneath the fear for the Holdens, for Joel and Allie, for everything he was trying to protect, there was something else.

A part of him liked this.

The cold precision. The clarity that came with knowing what needed to be done and doing it without hesitation. The rush of adrenaline that drowned out the hesitation and the doubt, the way his mind locked onto the task at hand, shutting out everything else.

That scared him more than the men they were here to stop.

Not because it made him reckless and dangerous—because it brought out something he'd tried his best to hide from the world. It reminded him of a past he couldn't escape.

He kept low, circling wide around the attackers, his boots barely making a sound against the hard ground as he chose his steps carefully. He had counted six men, but there could be more. If Slade was behind the attack, there could be a lot more.

He'd have to keep his head on a swivel.

Ben's first priority was the two men trying to ignite the alfalfa bale and roll it toward the house. If they succeeded, the Holdens wouldn't stand a chance. And if they did survive, they'd be homeless. But he didn't have a clear shot—not yet.

To reach them, he'd have to go through some of the others first.

He set his sights on a man crouching behind an old tractor and taking slow, deliberate shots at the house with his lever-action rifle. The machine hadn't moved since the bombs fell last June, its tires half-deflated, rust creeping along the edges of its faded red paint. But it made good cover for the man taking shots at the house, his rifle braced against the metal frame.

Ben kept low, weaving his way along the side of a horse trailer that had long since been abandoned, weeds swallowing its wheel wells. His grip on the MP5 was steady, his finger resting on the trigger as he advanced. One step at a time. Slow. Deliberate.

A direct shot would be easy, but it would be loud. And he didn't have the full scope of the situation and didn't know the exact number of men involved.

He needed to be sure there wasn't anyone else close enough to return fire the second he took the kill. Or better yet, he needed to take the guy out silently.

Because like he'd told Allie, after the first shot, his presence would be known. His stealth blown.

The man was too focused on his task. Too distracted with covering his friends as they tried to set the bale ablaze.

Big mistake.

Ben exhaled through his nose and let the MP5 hang from the sling as he drew his knife, creeping closer with every step.

The steady crack of gunfire masked Ben's approach, allowing him to slip through the darkness unnoticed. His pulse was steady, his movements smooth and controlled. The man behind the tractor had no idea death was creeping up behind him.

Ben closed the distance in a single fluid motion, his left hand clamping over the man's mouth before he could make a sound. His right hand followed a heartbeat later, driving the three-inch blade deep into flesh. The steel met resistance—muscle, arteries—but he didn't hesitate. He drew the

knife across and back at an angle, feeling the give as it severed everything in its path.

The man tensed, jerking in a last, desperate struggle, but his strength drained away with his blood. The fight lasted a few fleeting, frantic seconds before his body sagged against Ben's grip, the man's weight growing heavier as his life slipped away.

Ben held on, steadying the body, waiting until there was nothing left but stillness. Only then did he lower the man onto the cold ground, careful to keep him behind the tractor, out of sight.

He wiped the knife clean on the man's clothing, then studied his face in the dim glow of firelight.

Did he recognize him?

No.

Just another faceless threat, another man who had chosen the wrong side of the fight.

Ben exhaled through his nose, stowed the knife, and took up the MP5.

One down.

Now for the rest.

Ben didn't linger. He moved forward, slipping through the shadows with practiced ease, his focus locked on the men behind the alfalfa bale.

Then he stopped short.

Something was off.

Both men lay motionless on the ground, their bodies sprawled unnaturally in the flickering firelight. At first, Ben thought they were taking cover, but that wasn't the case. They weren't moving.

They were dead.

Maybe one of the Holdens had gotten lucky. But given the angle between the bale and the house, it was far more likely that Joel and Allie had taken them out.

Ben exhaled, tightening his grip on the MP5.

Knowing that his son and Allie had killed them was a sobering thought, not that this moment needed any more weight.

The smell of burning wood and gunpowder thickened the air as smoke from the collapsed shed curled upward into the night sky.

Another man was now in Ben's sights, tucked behind the corner of the barn. His muzzle of his semiautomatic weapon flashed repeatedly as he took shots at the group of bales close to the house.

He was shooting at the kids.

Ben lined up on the shooter and squeezed off several rounds from the MP5. Some chipped away at the wooden barn, but most found their target. The man stumbled forward out of the shadows, and one of the Holdens finished him off as a loud report from the house resulted in the man going limp and crumbling to the ground.

Shifting to another target near the barn, Ben lined up on a shooter. The man was turning in his direction, rifle rising—too slow.

Ben fired again, another controlled burst from the MP5. The rounds hit center mass, staggering the man and sending him reeling backward. His weapon clattered to the ground as he gasped, clutching at his chest, his other hand fumbling desperately for the sidearm on his hip.

He never made it.

A single rifle shot cracked through the night, its sharp report unmistakable.

The bullet caught the man broadside, just under his arm. Ben watched as the round punched clean through his ribcage, a violent spray of blood and tissue misting into the cold air. The force of the impact twisted the man sideways before gravity took over, slamming him into the dirt with a heavy thud.

Ben didn't have to guess who had taken the shot.

Luke Holden's 7mm Browning X-Bolt was a precision rifle, one that had put more deer on the Holdens' table than Ben could count. He'd seen the antlers mounted on the side of Luke's barn—trophies earned over the years with the same rifle that, tonight, had served a deadlier purpose.

And for that, Ben was grateful.

He exhaled, lowering his weapon just slightly, but his eyes were already scanning for the next target. There was no time to celebrate their progress. There were still shooters among the shadows. But now they knew they were under attack from multiple angles. They'd backed off some as their comrades had fallen, but they were still out there, taking shots at the house and the rest of them now.

Gunfire erupted near the house as Joel and Allie opened up from their position behind the ton bales. Their shots were precise, methodical—good. The attackers hesitated, caught between two threats.

Ben pressed forward, weaving through the trees that bordered the driveway up to the house, flanking the remaining hostiles.

One of the men near the burning shed broke from cover, sprinting toward the house, maybe hoping to reposition himself. Ben tracked him for half a second, leading his shot, then fired. The man dropped mid-stride, his body hitting the frozen ground with a muted thud.

Five down.

As far as Ben could tell, there were two men left, and they were taking cover near one of the Holdens' farm trucks, using the dead piece of machinery as protection. They were pinned down, but they weren't out of the fight.

Ben could hear them shouting over the gunfire. They didn't know how many shooters they were up against, and they were scared.

Good.

Fear made men sloppy.

Ben moved quickly, keeping low, circling toward their position. The flickering firelight made visibility tricky, but he didn't need perfect clarity. He needed angles.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement near the house. Luke Holden appeared in the second-floor window, rifle in hand. He hesitated, spotting Ben below, then nodded in understanding.

Reinforcements had arrived.

Ben refocused. He was almost in position.

The two men near the truck were still trading fire with Joel and Allie, their focus entirely on the alfalfa bales.

Ben raised the MP5 again.

One controlled burst.

The first man jerked violently as the rounds struck home, his body slamming against the truck door. A dark smear of red streaked down the white paint as he slid lifelessly to the ground.

The second man spun toward the sound, eyes wide, his rifle coming up.

Boom.

The single shot punched through the night, reverberating across the yard.

Luke's 7mm found its mark, driving through the man's chest with brutal finality. He collapsed where he stood, hitting the snow in a spreading pool of red, steam rising from the fresh wound.

And just like that, the fight was over.

Silence fell over the ranch, save for the crackling of the fire.

Ben exhaled, scanning his surroundings. No more movement. No more threats.

He remained behind cover for a moment longer, his breath controlled, eyes still working the shadows. Smoke curled upward in thin tendrils from the burning equipment shed, the glow painting everything in flickering hues of orange and black. Bodies lay where they'd fallen, some with their weapons still clutched in lifeless hands.

It was over.

For now.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Ben rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the tension still coiled in his muscles. The fight had lasted minutes, maybe less, but his body felt like he'd just run ten miles with a full pack.

A rustle in the alfalfa made him snap his weapon up, but he relaxed an instant later when he saw Joel and Allie emerge from behind the massive bales, rifles still up, scanning the area just like he'd taught them. They'd proven themselves again—not that Ben had ever doubted them.

"All clear," Joel called out quietly.

"Yeah, that's all of them," Luke agreed from his perch on the second floor.

Ben stepped out from behind the farm truck, his boots crunching softly against the frozen grass as he walked toward them. Joel and Allie made their way toward him in the yard, checking a few of the bodies as they moved, their faces flushed from exertion and the bite of the cold night air.

Joel's hands were steady on his weapon, but his breathing was fast. He was coming down from the adrenaline rush—that post-battle crash that could leave a man shaky if he wasn't used to it. But Joel held himself together, scanning the yard as he spoke.

"We counted six," Joel said, glancing at the unmoving forms scattered across the field. "You?"

Ben motioned toward the tractor with a nod. "Make that seven."

Allie exhaled slowly, her breath unsteady as she nudged a rifle away from one of the bodies with her boot. She rolled her shoulders, as if trying to shrug off the weight of what had just happened.

“They were setting fire to the hay,” she muttered, glancing back at the two men she and Joel had taken out. “They were gonna burn the Holdens out.”

Ben studied Joel and Allie in the dim firelight, his grip loosening on the MP5. They were standing tall, chins up, rifles steady, but he could see the aftershocks of the fight still running through them. Their breathing was quick, their fingers flexing slightly at their sides, muscles still wired from adrenaline. They were trying to mask it, but Ben knew better. Knew the way combat left a tremor in your bones, how the rush of survival made you feel invincible—until it drained away, leaving you raw and exposed.

They had done everything right tonight. They had moved with precision, kept their heads, and held their ground. No hesitation. No second-guessing. They’d been nothing short of warriors.

And that scared the hell out of him.

Because they weren’t supposed to be warriors.

Joel should’ve been worried about whether the fish were biting tomorrow, not about how many rounds were left in his magazine. Allie should’ve been getting on Ben about fixing the basement, not rolling a dead man over with the toe of her boot to check for supplies.

It wasn’t fair.

But fairness had died along with the old world, and Ben knew better than to dwell on it. This was survival. And survival meant adapting. The problem was, the kids weren’t just adapting anymore. They were becoming something else. Something closer to what Ben had spent years trying not to be.

Joel, checking the bodies like it was some mundane task. Allie, adjusting her grip on her rifle like it was a natural extension of herself.

It was necessary. It was life now.

But it still felt wrong.

Ben joined the kids, their attention drifting toward the house. The flickering firelight barely reached it, but he could see the damage now—cracked windowpanes and bullet-riddled walls.

The Holdens had fought hard.

And they were still alive.

The front door creaked open, and Luke stepped onto the porch, Sarah right behind him, cautiously cradling a rifle in her arms.

Ben and the kids met Luke at the bottom of the steps.

“You guys okay?” Ben asked, scanning them quickly for any signs of injury.

Luke let out a sharp breath, nodding. His face was drawn, the lines around his mouth tight, but his eyes were clear. “We’re in one piece.” He gestured toward the house. “Can’t say the same for the ranch.”

Ben surveyed the property alongside him, both men taking in the damage. There were bullet holes in just about every surface and no shortage of cracked windowpanes. It could’ve been worse.

Luke turned to Joel and Allie. “You two okay?”

Joel glanced at Allie, who gave him a nod before he answered. “We’re fine.”

Ben turned to Luke. “Slade?”

Luke shook his head. “Don’t know. None of them were talking. They came in fast, started shooting before we even knew what was happening.” He exhaled sharply. “I thought they wanted the horses, but...” He shook his head again. “They were trying to burn us out, Ben. If you hadn’t shown up when you did—” He cut himself off, jaw tightening.

Ben didn’t need him to finish the sentence.

The front door opened, and Grace crept out onto the porch next to her mother, wrapped in a thick quilt. The girl looked frightened to be outside. Her eyes, red-rimmed and damp from tears, darted from one body to the next.

Luke joined his family on the porch, where they all embraced. “It’s over, Grace. I promise.” He pulled his daughter close. “Thanks to our friends here,” he added.

Grace swallowed hard and nodded, but she didn’t look convinced.

Luke turned back to Ben. “We owe you guys.”

“You don’t owe us a thing,” Ben said, offering a reassuring smile. “We’re here for you anytime.”

Luke nodded. “Likewise.”

Ben felt for the Holdens’ daughter. He hated to admit it, but this kind of thing had become almost second nature for him—and for the kids. They had been forced to confront the worst of humanity out on the road, witnessing brutality and desperation in ways that had hardened them. But not everyone had lived through that kind of trial by fire.

For Grace—and maybe even for Luke and Sarah—tonight might have been the first time they had truly seen what survival demanded. The first

time they had watched men die in their own front yard. The first time they had pulled a trigger with the intent to kill.

Ben had no words to soften that kind of reality. He just hoped, for their sake, they never had to get used to it the way he had.

Before he could say anything more, one of the horses let out an irritated snort from the barn, followed by a high-pitched squeal.

“The horses.” Grace’s voice was unsteady, her wide eyes darting toward the barn.

Ben’s instincts flared again. The fight was over, but that didn’t mean they were safe.

He looked at Allie and Joel. “You two stay here with Sarah and Grace. Make sure there aren’t any more stragglers lurking around.”

Joel started to protest, but Ben gave him a hard look. “I need you here at the house with them.”

Joel clenched his jaw but nodded.

Allie gave a reluctant sigh, but she didn’t argue either.

Ben turned to Luke. “Come on.”

The two men moved quickly but cautiously across the yard. Ben swapped out the MP5 for the KelTec on his back. The double-aught buckshot he had loaded in the short, black shotgun would penetrate just about anything a man could use for cover in the barn, especially at close range.

As they got closer, both Ben and Luke noticed that more than a couple of errant bullets had lodged themselves in the barn’s faded red siding, a few of them cutting clean through the planks.

“I hope the horses are all right,” Luke whispered, reaching for the door.

Ben stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder and readied his weapon. “Nice and slow,” he murmured.

Luke eased the door open while Ben took point, slicing the pie through the KelTec’s sights, clearing each section as he moved inside, low and steady. His grip tightened on the shotgun as he scanned the dim interior, clearing each section with methodical precision.

The barn was dark, except for the thin shafts of flickering light seeping through the bullet holes. The smoke-laden air was thick with the scent of hay, sweat, and manure, but beneath it was something sharper—the metallic tang of blood.

The horses shifted uneasily in their stalls, hooves scuffing against the wooden planks. Their ears were pinned back, nostrils flaring as they picked up on something unseen.

Ben's gut tightened.

Something wasn't right.

Then a weak cough broke the silence.

Ben pivoted sharply, weapon snapping toward the sound.

There, slumped against the far wall behind a stack of feed sacks, was a man. His dark clothing blended into the shadows, but his labored breathing gave him away.

Luke found a lamp, lit it within seconds, and hung it on a nail nearby.

Blood soaked the front of the wounded man's jacket, pooling beneath him in the straw-covered dirt.

"Whoa," Luke muttered, rifle still aimed.

Ben kept his weapon trained on the man as he approached cautiously. His face was pale, lips trembling from blood loss, but his eyes were still sharp, darting between Ben and Luke.

Ben crouched near the dying man, his fingers pressing into the fabric of his blood-soaked jacket. The man's breath was ragged, each inhale a struggle, each exhale weaker than the last. His eyes flickered, pupils dilated from pain and blood loss, but there was something else, too—something deeper. Recognition? Guilt? Fear?

Ben tightened his grip on the man's collar and leaned in closer. "Who sent you?"

The man blinked sluggishly, his lips parting, but no sound came out.

Luke loomed over them, rifle still trained on the dying intruder. "Was it Slade?"

A slight twitch ran through the man's jaw, and for a second, Ben thought he was about to answer. Instead, his throat worked in a feeble attempt to swallow, his fingers twitching against the dirt floor.

"Come on," Ben growled, shaking him slightly. "Talk. Now."

The man's breath hitched, his chest shuddering under the weight of impending death. His cracked lips moved, shaping a word that barely carried.

"R—" A breath. A slow blink.

Ben leaned in, pulse spiking. "Raiders?"

The man's fingers curled into the straw-covered ground. Another wheezing inhale.

"C-Cal—" His eyes flickered, and his body trembled.

Ben's stomach twisted. Caldwell. Was that what he was saying?

"Caldwell?" Luke pressed, stepping in. "What about him? Is this his doing?"

The man's throat convulsed, his breath coming in short, shallow bursts. He tried again, but the word died before it could fully form. His head lolled back against the wooden beam, his gaze unfocused, drifting.

Ben shook him harder, frustration boiling under his skin. "Say it!"

The man's lips twitched into the barest hint of a smirk—just a flicker of something smug before the light left his eyes completely. His body sagged, his last breath rattling through his chest before fading into silence.

Ben let go, letting the body fall against the wall.

Luke exhaled sharply, stepping back and adjusting his hat. "Caldwell... You think he was saying Caldwell's name? You think these guys were La Plata Raiders?"

Ben pushed himself to his feet. "Or maybe that's what Slade wants us to think." He looked down at the body, at the final smirk frozen on the man's face. That wasn't just the face of a dying man; it was the face of someone who believed he'd still won, even in death.

Ben knelt by the body and began searching through the man's pockets. He wasn't expecting much, but what he wanted was proof. Something to confirm what he and Luke already suspected. Or something to contradict what the man had said.

His hand brushed against fabric.

Ben frowned, pulling a tattered strip of cloth from the man's jacket. He held it up in the warm, yellow lamplight, the faded stars and stripes unmistakable.

"They're Faction," Luke growled, his voice thick with fury. "I knew it."

Faction boys always carried a piece of the American flag—usually tied around their arm, sometimes stitched onto their gear. It was their twisted badge of allegiance, their mark. The only thing they wore with any consistency, besides that same arrogant sneer, like they owned the world and no one could touch them.

Ben exhaled sharply, jaw tightening as he turned the fabric between his fingers.

This was Slade's doing. No question about it. But Slade didn't want them to know he was behind it. Why else would these men have hidden their colors?

Outside, Ben and Luke found Joel and Allie searching bodies and gathering weapons from the dead. When the kids spotted them, they stopped what they were doing and jogged over to meet them outside the barn.

Joel held up a tattered piece of flag, its frayed edges glowing in the light of his headlamp. "Not that we didn't already know," he said through heavy breaths.

Luke glanced around at the carnage. "This is just the beginning."

Ben clenched his jaw, scanning the tree line. He knew Luke was right.

Slade wasn't just testing them anymore—he was playing a deeper game. This wasn't just about intimidation or brute force; it was calculated. He wanted to sow doubt, to drive a wedge between Ben and Caldwell's group. By staging this attack in just the right way, Slade was hoping to make it look like the work of the La Plata Raiders, pushing Ben toward an alliance he might have otherwise refused. It was manipulation at its finest—using fear and desperation to steer his enemies exactly where he wanted them.

And Ben had a sinking feeling that whatever came next would make tonight look like a warm-up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The morning after the attack felt different.

The dry, chilly air pressed in sharper than usual, creeping through the layers of Ben's clothing as he stood on the porch, staring out over the land. He lifted his coffee to his lips but didn't drink right away as he savored the aroma, the steam from his cup curling into the air in lazy tendrils before vanishing into the pale light of dawn.

He could still smell the fight.

Not here, not in the safety of his own yard, but on himself. The faint trace of smoke, the acrid scent of burnt wood, and the stink of whatever else Luke had stored in the shed clung to his jacket. He swore he could still taste the gunpowder in the back of his throat. The Holden ranch was at least a mile away, but a thin, hazy smear of smoke still hovered on the horizon, a reminder of the burning shed and the destruction left behind by Slade's men.

Ben exhaled through his nose, his grip tightening around the rapidly cooling mug in his hands.

It wasn't over.

He knew it. Luke knew it. Even the kids knew it.

Slade had made his move, and it hadn't been about stealing supplies or taking hostages. This was about manipulation. A test. And if Ben and the kids had shown up just five minutes later...

His jaw tensed. No. He wasn't going to think about that.

Ben turned away from the horizon and stepped inside.

The warmth of the woodstove hit him immediately, the air thick with the smell of frying venison and eggs. The familiar sizzle of the skillet and the rhythmic *shhk-shhk* of a blade against a whetstone drifted through the quiet house. In Ben's opinion, the mule deer they'd taken yesterday morning weren't technically ready to process, but he'd carved off a few slices of meat for this morning's meal anyway. With the day they all had a head of them, they'd need the protein, whether it was a little tough to chew or not.

Sandy stood at the stove, flipping eggs in a cast iron skillet, moving with an ease that suggested she was focused on the task but thinking about something else entirely.

Brad was already at the table, shoveling food into his mouth between lazy scratches behind Gunner's ears. The big brown dog sat at his feet, drooling and hoping for more than just attention but otherwise content. Emma was at the far end of the table, half-hidden behind her sketchbook.

She hadn't touched her food, to Sam and Bajer's dismay, who were patiently waiting for leftovers nearby.

Her pencil moved in slow, deliberate strokes, shading something in the margins of a page, her brows drawn together in quiet concentration. But Ben knew better. She wasn't lost in her art—she was processing.

Near the fireplace, Joel sat in a chair, running his knife over a whetstone in slow, deliberate strokes. His face was calm, focused, but Ben could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his grip on the handle was just a little too tight.

Allie stood by the counter, arms crossed, a mug of coffee cupped in both hands. She wasn't drinking it, just holding it, like she needed the warmth to keep her grounded.

They were all quiet.

Not uneasy, not tense. Just... thoughtful.

Ben set his coffee down on the table with a soft *clink*. "You sure about this?"

Joel didn't hesitate. He wiped his blade clean and slid the knife back into its sheath. "We need supplies. If we don't go today, we might not get another chance before the barter market shuts down for winter. This also might be our last chance to get fuel for a while."

Ben knew he was right. But that didn't make the thought of sending the kids out into an unforgiving world any easier to swallow.

His eyes flicked to Sandy, but she was already looking at him, her expression steady and unyielding. She had made peace with this decision before he had. They discussed it at length last night after Ben and the kids returned from the Holdens' ranch.

"Breakfast first." She slid a plate toward him. "Then you can hover and give them instructions for the hundredth time."

Brad snorted into his eggs.

Ben sighed, sitting down. He wasn't going to fight her on this. They did need supplies. And as much as he hated sending the kids off so soon after last night, it was unavoidable.

He just wished his gut wasn't telling him this was a bad idea.

After breakfast, everyone gathered outside, the early morning sun barely cresting the mountain range to the east as the kids made their final preparations for the trip under Ben's watchful eye. Frost and the remnants of the most recent snow clung to the ground in thin, brittle patches, crunching beneath their boots. The antique SUV rumbled to life as Joel checked the gauges, the sound breaking the quiet stillness of dawn.

Ben tightened the straps on the empty jerry cans in the back, the metal clanging against the Blazer's frame in a way that made him wince. Everything felt too loud in the silence of morning, as if the world itself was waiting, holding its breath.

But maybe that was just him.

Sandy was worried, too, but she managed to hide it today. Maybe it was her way of coping with things beyond her control. Or maybe it was just sheer exhaustion taking its toll. They'd been pushing their limits for weeks, not just physically but emotionally as well. After the sleepless night following the attack, they were all running on autopilot to some degree. And it showed.

Ben double-checked the gear, but this time, he tried not to let Joel or Allie notice. Some of it was for trade, but most of it was for protection. Hopefully, they wouldn't need it. Hopefully, today would be just another supply run, a quick trip into town and back before noon. But Ben didn't believe in hope anymore, at least not when it came to things going to plan.

Gunner, Sam, and Bajer took one final romp around the yard together before Joel made Gunner load up into the back seat with Brad. The big dog glared over the back seat at Ben, letting out a low *whuff*. He knew

something was off but was too excited about being included in the activity to let it damper his enthusiasm.

“Gunner, share the seat.” Brad fussed at the dog while Ben closed up the back of the Blazer and the older kids loaded up.

Joel shut the driver’s door with a solid clunk, then turned as Ben stepped up to the window, one hand resting on the wheel. “We’ll be back by noon.”

Ben nodded but didn’t step back yet. He reached out, gripping Joel’s shoulder firmly. “You see anything you don’t like, you turn around. No hesitation.”

Joel met his eyes, his jaw tightening slightly. “I know.”

Ben turned to Allie next. “Stick close. You watch each other’s backs.”

“Always do.” She smiled casually, but there was concern in her eyes.

“Good luck fishing,” Emma shouted from the deck.

Brad, still wrestling for space in the back seat with Gunner, shouted back, “We don’t need luck to catch fish.”

Ben stepped back as Joel put the Blazer into gear. The tires crunched over the gravel as they pulled away. Sam and Bajer barked in protest as if they’d suddenly realized they were being left behind.

Ben didn’t head back to the house. Instead, he walked toward the gate, his boots scraping against the dirt as Sandy, Emma, Sam, and Bajer followed behind him.

Emma hugged herself tightly, her breath fogging in front of her face as she stared at the back of the Blazer, watching it go. Bajer whined and pressed against her leg, while Sam let out a disappointed bark, finally realizing she wasn’t going with the kids this time.

Sandy was silent beside him, hands tucked into the pockets of her coat.

Ben didn’t say anything as he unlatched the gate, swinging it open just enough for the Blazer to pass through. Joel rolled forward without stopping, and Allie raised a hand in a casual wave as they pulled out onto Saddle Trail.

The second they were gone, the stillness returned.

Ben exhaled slowly, turning toward Sandy. “Time to get to work.”

She nodded, but her eyes lingered on the empty road a second longer before shifting to him. “You’re heading to Luke’s?”

Ben ran a hand through his hair and adjusted his hat. “Yeah. I wanted to skin those deer today, but last night changed things. There are bodies to deal

with.”

Sandy exhaled, shaking her head. “Emma and I will keep an eye on things here. Just take one of the radios with you.”

Ben nodded. “I’ll be back in an hour or two.”

She gave him a knowing look—the same one she gave him last night, the one that said, *Don’t make promises you might not be able to keep*.

Ben didn’t try to reassure her.

Instead, he gave her shoulder a squeeze before turning toward the house to grab his gear.

As he walked, he caught the faintest trace of smoke on the wind. It clung to his jacket, to the cold air curling through the trees. The Holdens’ burning equipment shed was long out, but the scent lingered.

It was a reminder.

Last night wasn’t over. Not really.

Ben stopped halfway up the driveway, turning to watch the Blazer disappear around the bend in the road.

He hated this.

Watching them go. Letting them go.

It didn’t matter that he’d promised himself not to second-guess the decision. It didn’t matter that Joel was sharp, steady, and careful or that Allie had proven herself more than once. It didn’t even matter that Brad had Gunner with him. The dog’s instincts were keener than most men’s.

It still felt wrong.

Beside him, Sandy crossed her arms, her expression unreadable. But Ben knew she felt it, too.

“They’ll be fine,” she said, though her voice held the same doubt.

Ben swallowed hard and gave a slow nod. “They better be.”

Sandy let out a quiet breath, rubbing her arms. “You should head to Luke’s. The sooner you get those bodies taken care of, the better.”

Ben nodded, but his eyes lingered on the empty road a second longer before he turned back toward the house.

“Well, I guess you guys have the place to yourselves for a couple hours, then,” he said, casting a glance toward his daughter.

Emma was already near the porch steps. Bajer and Sam were anxious to get back inside to the warmth of the house and were waiting by the front door for her.

“Yeah,” she said flatly, the hesitation in her voice betraying her attempt at a smile.

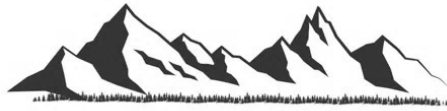
She tightened her arms around herself and cast one last glance down the road where the Blazer had disappeared. She was just as worried as he was—about Joel, about Brad, and especially about Allie, who had become the big sister she never had.

Ben gave Emma’s shoulder a squeeze as he passed. “Keep the radio on. If you need me, I’ll be right down the road.”

With that, he grabbed his pack and the KelTec he’d left leaning against the railing, then climbed into the Scrambler. Normally, he would’ve walked the mile or so to the Holdens to save fuel, but today was different. He needed to get back to the house fast if anything went wrong.

As Ben headed down the driveway, he glanced in the rearview mirror, catching a glimpse of Sandy and Emma watching him leave. He hoped he wasn’t making a mistake by leaving the girls here alone. But considering he’d just sent Joel, Allie, and Brad into town, that was the least of his concerns.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The Blazer rumbled steadily beneath Joel's hands as they followed the long, winding road away from town. They'd taken the safer route to avoid trouble, if that was even possible anymore. But this way would add an extra twenty miles to their trip, cutting into their fishing time. At least they'd get fuel for their efforts, and if he was going to keep the four-wheeler running this winter, he'd need it.

Thankfully, his dad hadn't given specific instructions on which way to come back, and Joel had already decided: they'd take the short way home.

The sun was climbing higher in the sky, but the cold still clung to the land, frost shimmering in the patches of shade that stretched across the road. The heater was barely keeping up against the chill, and Joel could still see the faintest wisps of breath curling from Brad's mouth in the rearview mirror.

Gunner sat beside him in the back seat, ears perked, eyes scanning the trees as if he understood the importance of this trip. The dog was practically vibrating with energy, his head occasionally popping between the front seats, nose twitching.

Joel flexed his fingers on the wheel, keeping his grip steady as he listened to the rhythmic hum of the tires over the asphalt. He had taken this road dozens of times before, to both reservoirs, but it never felt normal anymore. Not since the world had changed.

"Man, I wish we could just drive into town like we used to," Brad muttered, shifting in his seat. "Stop at Bread and grab a sow your oats

cookie and a hot chocolate and not have to check every shadow for some lunatic trying to kill us.”

Joel didn't answer, just kept his eyes on the road. Brad wasn't wrong.

Allie, riding shotgun, adjusted her grip on her rifle where it rested between her legs. “You miss cookies, Brad?” she asked, a small smirk playing at her lips.

“Heck yeah I do,” Brad said, looking out the window. “I'd trade a full mag for one of those right now.”

Joel shook his head. “No you wouldn't.”

Brad huffed but didn't argue.

They drove in silence for another mile before the old gas station came into view. The squat cinderblock building sat alone against the empty landscape, its faded Marathon sign swaying slightly in the light morning breeze, barely clinging to the rusted pole by a single bracket.

Before everything fell apart, the place had been a routine stop for boaters—a last chance to fuel up with ethanol-free gas at a decent price and grab supplies before heading up to Lemon or Vallecito Reservoir. Now it was just another relic of the past, stripped of convenience and safety, a place where risk outweighed reward more with each passing visit.

For months, they'd been siphoning gas from the underground tanks, but word had spread, and more people were catching on. That meant more desperate scavengers, more chances for a run-in with the wrong kind of people.

So far, they'd been lucky.

But this was the first time Joel had been here without his dad. And that changed everything.

His dad had always been the fallback, the steady presence, the one who had the final say, the one who could handle whatever came their way. Without him, Joel felt the weight of responsibility settle in his chest, heavy and unshakable. He wasn't just looking out for himself. Brad was counting on him. And while Allie could handle herself, she wasn't invincible.

Out here, without his dad at his back, Joel felt more exposed than ever. Vulnerable, not in the sense that he was weak, but in the way that one wrong move could cost them everything. Today, success, not just here but at the market and later on the river, was all on him. Although that was no revelation, now that they were out here, the reality of what they were doing hit home.

Joel slowed the Blazer as they approached the gas station, scanning the empty lot with a careful eye. Normally, they'd circle any stop before pulling in, making sure it was clear. That was the protocol his dad had made them follow on the road. But here, it wasn't necessary. With nothing but open road stretching for a couple of miles in either direction, he was confident they were alone today.

Joel pulled around to the back of the building, parking behind what was left of the cinderblock structure, where the truck would be hidden from view. The old fill pipes, where they ran the siphon hose down to reach the underground tanks, were just past the rear corner of the gutted gas station.

The second the tires crunched to a stop, Joel killed the engine and turned in his seat, his eyes already on Allie.

"ALLIE, YOU'RE ON LOOKOUT. BRAD, YOU HELP ME WITH THE PUMP. Gunner"—he glanced at the dog, who was already sitting up, ears twitching—"don't go far."

Brad rolled his eyes. "Like he understands you."

Gunner thumped his tail against the seat.

They moved quickly, working on muscle memory. They must have done this a hundred times during the cross-country road trip, but today their movements felt slow and awkward. Joel grabbed the small hand pump and the two empty jerry cans from the back of the Blazer, while Brad unrolled the hose across the parking lot with the open end near the fill pipe.

As Joel opened the lid and started feeding the hose down into the tank, he watched Allie take a spot out front where the fuel island provided a good vantage point from cover. She set up with a clear line of sight down the road in both directions and glanced back at the boys after she settled into position, giving a thumbs-up. Gunner chose to stick with Allie, running around the front of the lot briefly before she called him over to sit with her and watch the road.

The rhythmic squeak of the pump filled the silence as fuel sloshed into the jerry cans, the sharp scent of gasoline biting at his nostrils. But Joel didn't turn away from the fumes, not because he liked the smell but because it reminded him of better days.

Days when filling the Blazer's tank meant early mornings on the river and a long day of fishing ahead. Days of saving up just enough cash for gas

so he and his friends could make the drive to Pagosa Springs and get first tracks at Wolf Creek on their snowboards.

Now every drop of gas was survival. And the world felt too quiet this morning.

Joel worked faster.

Just get the fuel and get out of here.

He knew there was a better chance of running into trouble in town at the market, but he felt isolated and vulnerable out here.

Brad fidgeted beside him. "Man, I hate this."

Joel didn't stop pumping. "Then take this back to the Blazer and get it up on the rack for me so we can get this done." He shoved the first full jerry can a few inches toward Brad with his foot.

"Fine." Brad slung his AR-15 over his shoulder and grunted as he used both hands to lift the container. He arched his body backward and headed toward the truck in an awkward shuffle as he struggled with the five gallons of fuel.

"Just get it to the truck. I'll do the rest if you can't get it up there." Joel watched his brother as he finished filling the second jerry can and secured the cap. "Allie?"

"Nothing moving," she called back, eyes still locked on the road.

"Good. The cans are done. Just need to top off the truck." Joel loaded the cans onto the Blazer's rack, helped Brad get his in place, and double-checked the straps.

Joel was tempted to call it good and leave the Blazer as it was. They had emptied the jerry cans into the Jeep first, topping off its tank before using the remainder to add what they could to the Blazer back at the house. Now, with nearly three-quarters of a tank, they had enough to make the trip, and if they were simply heading straight into town, it would have been plenty. But they weren't. The long way added at least twenty miles, and that meant burning through more fuel than he liked. Every drop they could carry mattered.

He put the truck in reverse, easing back over to the filling pipes. Brad stood nearby, watching, waiting with the end of the hose in his hand.

Joel killed the engine and climbed out. "This won't take long."

"Good. I'm ready to hit the river." Brad shoved the hose into the Blazer's fuel tank as soon as Joel flipped the gas cap open.

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, but we're hitting the market first."

Brad groaned. “That’s going to take forever.”

“Or”—Joel smirked—“we could drop you back at the house so you can chop wood.”

Brad scoffed but didn’t argue. Instead, he swung his rifle off his shoulder and wandered toward the front of the property, where Allie and Gunner were keeping watch. “I’ll help Allie keep watch,” he muttered.

Joel turned his attention back to fueling, glancing toward the horizon as he worked. The station was quiet, the road empty. Just the way he liked it.

Then Gunner shifted. The big dog had been lounging near Allie, ears relaxed, head down on a tucked paw. Now, his posture was rigid, his nose held high as he tested the air.

Joel followed the dog’s gaze just as Allie’s stance changed.

She brought her rifle to her shoulder, squinting through the scope. “We’ve got a truck coming in from the south.”

Joel’s stomach knotted.

For a second, he hesitated.

Yank the hose, jump in the Blazer, and get out of here? Or should they stand their ground?

What would his dad do? Was it even possible to grab everything and load up fast enough to get out of here before the approaching truck spotted them?

Joel knew what they needed to do. He just needed the conviction and the courage to follow through with a plan.

“Brad! Find cover—now!”

Joel abandoned the siphon, reaching for his rifle as he moved.

He sprinted toward the front of the property, sliding into position behind the fuel pumps opposite Allie. Brad wedged himself between one of the concrete support columns and the windshield-washing station, his rifle pointed toward the road.

Allie exhaled slowly, her hands steady but her voice tight. “What’s the play?”

Joel didn’t answer right away. His pulse hammered in his ears as he focused on the approaching vehicle. “We stand our ground.”

The truck was kicking up dust as it kissed the shoulder and came down the road, moving fast—but not recklessly. That meant one of two things.

They didn’t know anyone was here.

Or they did.

Either way, things were about to get real.

Joel steadied his rifle against the fuel pump, eyeing the truck as it approached the gas station. The old Ford pickup rumbled toward them from the south and was now starting to slow down.

They had been seen.

Joel's finger slid to the trigger as he glanced toward Allie. She was crouched low, her own rifle braced against the edge of the column. Gunner stood tense beside her, ready for action against the strange vehicle.

Brad was behind the windshield-washing station, his small frame well-hidden between the support column and the rusted metal bin overflowing with broken squeegees stuck in a chunk of blue ice. His hands gripped his rifle solidly, but his eyes betrayed the nerves he was trying to suppress.

The truck rolled into the lot, stopping near the front of the gas station, a good thirty yards from where they were positioned. The engine idled rough, the old Ford sputtering as if it were one bad day away from stalling for good. The doors didn't open right away.

Joel exhaled slowly, adjusting his stance.

Were they scoping the place out? Figuring out how many people were here before making a move?

The driver's door creaked open.

A man stepped out first, tall and lean, his hair tied back in a ragged ponytail. He wore a battered jean jacket, torn at the sleeves, and a pistol sat holstered at his hip. The woman in the passenger seat followed, her dark brown hair streaked with silver, pulled back into a loose braid. A sawed-off shotgun rested casually in the crook of her arm, but she made no move to raise it.

They weren't Faction.

Joel didn't recognize them, but that didn't mean they weren't trouble.

The man let out a low whistle, running a hand along the brim of his faded ball cap as he looked over the lot. "And here I thought we were the only ones who knew about this place." His voice was casual. Too casual.

Joel didn't lower his rifle. "Move along."

The woman let out a quiet chuckle, nudging the brim of her hat up with one finger. "No need to be jumpy, kid. We're just lookin' to fill our tank like you."

"We're almost done," Joel replied evenly. "You can wait until we're gone."

The man scoffed, shaking his head. “Ain’t much left to go around these days. Ain’t much fair neither. A couple of kids protecting what ain’t theirs don’t sit well with me.”

Joel didn’t miss the way his eyes flicked toward the Blazer.

“Fair doesn’t mean anything anymore,” Allie cut in, her voice cold. “You should go.”

The woman tilted her head, studying them like they were something to be measured and weighed. “You kids out here all alone?”

Joel didn’t answer.

The man exhaled through his nose, shifting his weight onto one leg. “Look, how ’bout we make a deal? We take what we need, we let you leave without any trouble. Nobody’s gotta get hurt here.”

Joel’s jaw tightened. These people were testing him. Trying to figure out how far they could push before he resisted.

He could feel the tension coiling tighter with every passing second.

“Not happening,” he said.

The woman let out a slow breath. “Ain’t gotta be like this.”

Joel saw it before she moved—her fingers shifting slightly on the stock of the shotgun.

The man’s hand inched toward his pistol.

Joel fired.

The crack of the shot split the air, and the man flinched as a bullet slammed into the bed of their truck, punching through the rusted metal with a hollow *twang*.

Gunner barked, the sharp sound echoing through the lot.

The man cursed, hands flying up instinctively. “All right! All right! You wanna get yourself killed?”

“You first,” Joel growled, his rifle still trained on them. “Get in your truck.”

The woman hesitated for a half second too long.

Allie adjusted her aim. “Now.”

The woman’s jaw twitched, but she didn’t argue. She stepped back toward the truck, keeping her shotgun loose in her grip. The man followed, muttering something under his breath as he climbed into the driver’s seat.

The old Ford sputtered, belching out a puff of black smoke before turning over.

Joel didn't lower his rifle until the truck reached the main road, tires spitting gravel as they peeled away.

They were gone. For now.

Joel exhaled, the rush of adrenaline leaving him slightly shaky.

Allie turned to him, brow furrowed. "Think they'll be back?"

"Guaranteed," Joel muttered, slinging his rifle over his shoulder.

Brad let out a shaky breath, his grip loosening around his rifle as the color rushed back into his fingers. He swallowed hard, shifting his stance. "We... We showed them, right?" His voice wavered just enough for Joel to hear the doubt in his voice.

Joel slung his rifle over his shoulder and exhaled. "Yeah. This time."

Brad nodded quickly, like he wanted to believe it. But after a moment, his bravado cracked. He sagged back against the fuel pump, staring at the empty road. "I thought they were gonna shoot us."

Joel didn't answer right away. He had thought the same thing. He turned back toward the fuel setup. "Let's get out of here. Now."

Brad didn't argue. He hurried to roll up the hose, his small hands working quickly as he coiled it tightly.

Joel took the hose from Brad and stowed it in the back of the truck with the hand pump while Allie hurried Gunner and Brad into the back seat.

Joel took one last look at the road, scanning the two-lane highway for any sign of movement.

Nothing.

For now.

He slid into the driver's seat and fired up the engine. The Blazer rumbled to life, tires crunching over debris on the pavement as they pulled out onto the road, heading north toward Bayfield and then Durango.

The barter market was next.

And if the morning had been any indication, it was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The road stretched ahead of them, winding its way out of the higher elevations and down into high meadows as they put distance between themselves and the gas station. The Blazer hummed steadily, but Joel's grip on the wheel was still too tight, his knuckles white where his fingers curled over the worn leather. His heartbeat had settled, but the tension hadn't left his chest.

He replayed the last few minutes in his head over and over again.

The truck rolling in.

The man's casual swagger.

The woman's calculating stare.

The slow creep of their hands toward their weapons.

Joel had pulled the trigger first.

And that's what haunted him. Not the action itself—he knew firing into the truck bed had been the right call, a warning shot instead of something worse—but the fact that he hadn't hesitated. The moment he saw the shift in their stances, the moment he caught the flicker of intent in their eyes, he'd acted.

It was instinct. And that scared him.

His dad had always said there was a difference between being prepared to do what was necessary and becoming the kind of person who looked for an excuse to pull the trigger.

Joel wasn't sure which one he was anymore.

He flexed his fingers against the wheel, forcing himself to loosen his grip. The truck still felt like an extension of him, like it always had before

things went to hell. The familiar rumble of the tires against the road should have been comforting, should have settled him. But today, it didn't.

Brad shifted in the back seat, stretching his arms behind his head. "Man, that was intense."

Joel's jaw tightened. "Yeah, well, we handled it."

Brad frowned. "I mean... we won, right?"

"This isn't a game, Brad." Allie turned in her seat to look at him. "They weren't gonna just take the fuel and go. You saw them. That guy was already thinking about stealing the truck."

Brad leaned back again, fidgeting with the zipper on his coat. "Yeah, but we handled it."

Joel exhaled through his nose, keeping his eyes on the road. "It won't always be that easy."

The silence stretched between them for a long moment.

Finally, Brad muttered, "I still think we showed them. And I think Dad would be happy. I can't wait to tell him what happened."

"I'll tell Dad what happened, not you," Joel stated.

"Fine," Brad huffed.

JOEL IGNORED HIM AND PRESSED THE ACCELERATOR A LITTLE HARDER AS the road and the landscape opened up ahead of them. He wasn't in the mood to talk about it anymore. Allie seemed to pick up on that, staying quiet, eyes scanning the road. But Brad... Brad was just a kid. He didn't understand the weight of what had just happened, not fully. Joel had to remind himself of that.

Brad's childhood had been stolen, stripped away before he even had a chance to know what it meant to be a kid. At ten, this world—this broken, dangerous world—was all he knew. No school, no sports leagues, no lazy weekends playing video games without a care. Just survival. And sometimes, Joel figured, that was exactly why Brad acted like they were in a movie or one of the video games they used to play online together. Maybe it was easier to see it that way. To pretend.

And maybe Joel needed to let him.

Because the alternative—the idea of Brad shutting down, retreating into himself, closing off from the people who cared about him, or living in a state of constant fear—was worse.

Joel let out a slow breath and softened his grip on the wheel just a little. *Let him have this, he told himself. For as long as he can.*

By the time they'd reached the outskirts of Durango, the morning sun had broken through the clouds and was heating things up. As they neared the barter market, the landscape changed. More abandoned buildings, more rusted-out cars lining the streets like tombstones of the old world. The familiar shape of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad depot loomed in the distance along the Animas River like a relic from a different lifetime.

Santa Rita Park had always been a lively place before the world fell apart—runners pacing the riverside trail, kayakers shooting the rapids in the whitewater park, families having picnics. Now it was the center of what was left of commerce in the region, thanks to being located at a convergence of roads that led out from Durango to other towns.

But something was wrong.

Joel felt it before he even pulled into the lot.

The market wasn't as busy as it normally was. There was movement, but it lacked the steady flow of barterers and sellers he was used to. The makeshift stalls, usually lining the edges of the park, were sparse. Too many of them were gone, leaving empty spaces where regular vendors used to be.

Joel stopped the Blazer near the edge of the park, leaving enough space to make a quick exit if necessary. "Same as always," he said. "We stick together, we trade fast, and we don't start anything."

Brad scoffed. "When have I ever started anything?"

Allie opened the door. "Want a list?"

Brad muttered something under his breath but followed as Joel scanned the crowd, his instincts on high alert.

"Where is everyone?" Allie muttered.

Brad leaned forward between the seats. "Maybe they already packed up for the winter?"

Joel wasn't so sure.

They unloaded from the truck, grabbing some of the items they brought to trade while making sure their weapons were secured but visible. The rule at the barter market was simple—no open conflict. This was neutral ground, at least in theory. But people carried anyway because rules meant nothing if someone decided they didn't care.

“Gunner, stay,” Joel said firmly, resting his hand on the big dog’s head for a brief second. “Watch the truck.”

Gunner let out a low grumble as he settled into the back seat, his amber eyes locked on Joel, ears back but alert.

That was one advantage of bringing him along—no one in their right mind would mess with a truck that had an eighty-five-pound Chesapeake Bay retriever standing guard inside. Gunner wasn’t just a pet; he was a deterrent. Anyone stupid enough to even look inside would be met with a flash of teeth and a growl deep enough to make a man think twice.

Joel gave the dog one last glance, then shut the door behind him.

They made their way into the heart of the market, weaving through the clusters of people. Makeshift stalls lined the space, set up with tarps and scavenged lumber. People milled between them, bundled against the cold, exchanging goods with hushed voices.

Joel caught snippets of conversation as they passed.

“—another ranch hit—”

“—the Holdens barely made it through—”

He was amazed at how fast word traveled without modern conveniences to drive the rumor mill. But then again, if his dad was right about Slade trying to frame Caldwell and his Raiders, People knowing about what happened last night at the Holdens’ was no surprise.

“—Caldwell’s men are recruiting—”

That last one made Joel slow his steps.

They reached the first few stalls. Most of them looked picked over, but before they could find anything they wanted, Joel spotted them.

Caldwell’s men. They weren’t hard to miss.

A small group stood near what used to be the covered picnic area, their presence commanding more space than necessary. They weren’t wearing uniforms, not exactly, unless you counted the Stetsons, but they all carried themselves the same way. Confident. Armed. Dangerous.

One of them, a broad-shouldered man with a thick beard, was speaking to a handful of wary listeners.

“—telling you, it was Slade and his Faction boys. This wasn’t just about the Holdens or the McCallisters. There were more ranches hit last night. How much longer before it’s you?”

Joel clenched his jaw.

Caldwell was using the attack to gain support. Slade's plan had backfired. And apparently, the Holdens weren't the only ones who were paid a visit last night. The Faction had been busy. Maybe that's why only seven men had attacked.

Slade and the Faction had made their move, and now Caldwell was capitalizing on the fear that followed. A part of Joel wanted to listen, to hear exactly what Caldwell's men were offering. But he knew better.

They weren't here for politics. They were here to trade.

"Allie," Joel murmured. "Let's move."

She nodded, already shifting her attention to the remaining stalls.

Brad lingered a second longer, watching the recruiters.

"Brad," Joel said sharply.

Brad sighed but followed.

They found the first vendor selling something useful near the far end of the lot.

An older woman with silver-streaked braids and weathered hands sat behind a table covered in jars of dried herbs, home-canned vegetables, and bundles of cured meat wrapped in cheesecloth.

Allie selected a few jars of herbs and spices to smell while Joel stood back, scanning the stall. "Got any curing salt?"

She nodded, pulling a small burlap sack from under the table. "Last one I got."

Joel frowned. "How much?"

The woman glanced at their trade items. Brad had the mule deer hide draped over his shoulder and was holding the tin containing Ben's hand-tied fly-fishing lures.

She tapped the tin. "These yours?"

Joel shook his head. "My dad's."

She opened it, inspecting the flies carefully. After a long pause, she nodded. "All right. I'll trade the salt for the flies and the hide."

Joel glanced at Allie. She typically handled most of the haggling while Joel kept an eye on the crowd. She had a way of negotiating, of getting more bang for her buck. And Joel could understand why. He'd never been able to say no to her.

"What's that?" Allie pointed to what looked like a trash bag with the top tied closed.

The woman shook her head. “You don’t have enough to trade to see that.”

Allie pulled her jacket back and produced two fifty-round cans of .223, setting them on the table with a heavy thud. “A hundred rounds of .223 enough?”

The woman pulled the bag up onto the table and untied the knot, revealing a large bag of flour.

Allie leaned in and inspected the contents closely. “These two jars, the flower, and the salt for the hide, all the flies, and the bullets.” She pulled the jars of herbs and spices to their side of the table as though the deal was done.

The woman’s eyes squinted as she thought it over. “I’ll do it,” she grumbled.

Brad and Allie handed over the goods while Joel put the flower, the salt, and two jars into a large rucksack he brought to hold whatever they found today.

After a quick stop at the Blazer to drop off their bartered goods and reload their pockets with more cans of ammunition, they pressed deeper into the market. The crowd had thinned some, but the tension in the air lingered like a bad smell. People moved with purpose, bartering quickly, keeping their conversations hushed.

Allie sifted through a vendor’s dwindling supplies and came away with a small bag of rolled oats, a container of dried beans, and—her best find yet—a glass jar full of honey, thick with crystallized sugar at the bottom. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Joel had better luck near the river. A trader with a tattered awning had a large burlap sack of coffee beans, and after Allie did some haggling, Joel walked away with it, knowing it would make his dad’s day—or his whole winter. The aroma alone was worth the trade.

At another stall, Brad spotted a bag of chicken feed. And thanks to Allie, that was also coming home with them. Without hesitation, Joel handed it off to Brad. “Here, make yourself useful.”

Brad groaned under the weight, adjusting the sack against his side. “Why do I always get stuck carrying the heavy stuff?”

Joel smirked. “Because you need to get stronger.”

Brad groaned as he heaved it over his shoulder but didn’t argue. Everything was more expensive than it had been last time. People were

holding on to supplies tighter, anticipating the onset of colder weather. No one wanted to be caught short.

By the time they had gathered what they needed, their packs were noticeably heavier, but their supply of ammunition had taken a hit.

They were heading back toward the Blazer when they passed Caldwell's men again.

The bearded man was still speaking, but now his voice carried more intensity.

"Slade doesn't stop. You all know that. If we don't stand together, if we don't take the fight to him, he's gonna pick us off one by one."

A murmur rippled through the small crowd.

Joel didn't stop walking, but he caught the way the man's eyes flicked toward him and Allie.

He knew what the Raiders were about. At least he thought he did. It wasn't like he couldn't see the merits in joining up to fight the Faction. Slade and his men were a disease spreading through the region, preying on the weak, taking what they wanted by force. Someone had to stand against them.

But Joel wasn't entirely convinced Caldwell and his Raiders were much better.

Before the world fell apart, he'd thought about joining the Army after high school. Not just for the free college—though that had been part of it—but because he'd wanted to serve, to contribute, to be part of something bigger than himself. He'd wanted to help people, to pay into society instead of just taking from it.

Now? Society was barely holding on.

And joining up with the Raiders wasn't the same as enlisting in a real military. It wasn't structured, wasn't disciplined. It was a militia—a mix of hardened ranchers, ex-soldiers, and men with nothing left to lose. And while Caldwell talked a big game about protecting Durango and making it a safe place to live again, Joel had heard the stories. Stories about how the Raiders weren't above using force to get what they needed. About how some of them treated the badge Caldwell had given them as a free pass to do whatever they liked.

Still... he wanted Durango to be better. To be stable again.

If people could just get through the winter, maybe, by next spring, things could start moving in the right direction. Maybe the barter market

would grow. Maybe more folks would return to their homes and try to rebuild instead of just scraping by. He'd be willing to volunteer if there was some way to help: guard the market, patrol the main roads, even just help with the rebuilding efforts. He and Allie had plans, and they didn't include living with his dad and Sandy for the rest of their lives.

But he knew it was too soon for any of that.

The world hadn't settled yet, and until it did, getting involved in a war between the Raiders and the Faction would probably just get him killed.

And he wasn't ready to die. Not for that.

Joel clenched his jaw, ignoring the Raider who seemed to be raising his voice as they walked away.

Let Caldwell fight his own battles for now, Joel thought. They had what they came for, and it was time to get out of here before some of Slade's men showed up and started trouble.

Back at the truck, they loaded their goods into the Blazer's back seat and secured everything in place.

Allie looked toward the park. "That was worse than I expected."

Joel nodded, unlocking the passenger side door first. "Yeah."

Brad scratched Gunner behind the ears, who was waiting in Allie's spot. "You think Caldwell's right? That Slade's gonna keep hitting people?"

Joel didn't answer right away.

Instead, he climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

The Blazer rumbled to life, steady and familiar.

Finally, he said, "It doesn't matter if he's right. What matters is that we're ready if he comes after us."

They pulled out of the lot, leaving the barter market behind.

The river was next.

And for the first time today, Joel let himself hope that maybe—just maybe—they could have a few hours of normal.

He should've known better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The drive out of Durango was quieter than before. The barter market had given Joel a lot to think about, and the tension in town had been impossible to ignore. Too many vendors were missing. Caldwell's men were taking advantage of the fear spreading through the area. And the knowledge that the attack on the Holdens' ranch hadn't been an isolated incident sat heavy in Joel's chest.

He gripped the wheel as they passed the last remnants of civilization, the empty buildings and charred vehicles that were slowly being taken over by patches of fuzzy brown rust. These roads used to be filled with people going about their day. Now everything felt abandoned, waiting for something to fill the silence.

The Blazer rumbled steadily, its engine a familiar and comforting sound. The back was packed with the bartered items from the market: flour, oats, beans, coffee, curing salt, and a few extra goods they'd managed to trade for. They'd done well today, but it hadn't been easy.

Joel had been relieved to leave.

The market had been a reminder of everything wrong with the world. Every deal they made was another step toward survival, but it was also a reminder that nothing came easy anymore. And Caldwell's men had been too eager, too insistent. The desperation in the air didn't just come from the traders—it came from the so-called protectors of Durango, too.

He exhaled through his nose and glanced at Allie, who was watching the road ahead with sharp eyes. She hadn't said much since they loaded up.

Maybe she was thinking the same thing as him. Maybe she'd picked up on the unease, too.

Brad, on the other hand, seemed oblivious.

Joel kept one hand steady on the wheel, the other resting near his rifle. He should've been more excited about this part of the trip—fishing was always something he looked forward to—but after everything that had happened so far today, it was hard to let his guard down.

The barter market had left a bad taste in his mouth.

The people missing. The hushed conversations. Caldwell's men recruiting right out in the open.

Joel didn't like it.

People were talking—nervous, hushed conversations laced with fear that hung over the town like a storm cloud, thick and unshakable. Slade had made his move the night before, and now the aftermath was rippling through the streets. Regardless of who people were blaming for the raids, the effect was the same: division and mistrust.

Joel was anxious to tell his dad what they'd learned and overheard at the market. Still, part of him hesitated. He didn't want to add to his dad and Sandy's growing list of worries. But they'd find out soon enough. Brad had been with them, and there was no doubt he'd be eager to share everything about the trip to town over dinner tonight.

Joel let out a pensive breath, taking in the fresh air as they put the market behind them. The further they got from Durango, the more his nerves settled, but the feeling of unease hadn't completely left. The gas station incident was still fresh in his mind. The way the man and woman had tested them, how close things had come to going bad.

He glanced at Allie, who sat in the passenger seat, absently rolling a fishing fly between her fingers. She was quiet, but he knew her well enough to tell she wasn't as relaxed as she was pretending to be.

Brad, on the other hand, was practically bouncing in the back seat. "Man, I can't wait to get on the river," he said, pushing Gunner off his lap so he could lean forward. "I bet we'll do really good today. The sun keeps going in and out of the clouds so there's probably some hatches going off."

"Probably." Joel chuckled; Brad always loved to show off in front of Allie.

Brad grinned. "Think we'll catch enough to fill the two baskets?"

Allie finally spoke, her voice lighter than before. “Depends if you can keep the tangles to a minimum.”

Brad scoffed. “I’ll be fine. I bet I’ll catch more fish than you.”

“You catch more *trees* than fish,” Joel muttered, earning a laugh from Allie.

Brad crossed his arms. “I’ll bet you dish duty for a week that I catch the first fish today.”

Allie laughed. “You’re on, kid.”

Joel shook his head, but a small grin tugged at his lips. As much as Brad drove him crazy sometimes, he was glad his brother still had moments like this. Moments when he could just be a kid. Moments when life still felt normal, even if only for a little while.

Joel’s grip tightened on the wheel. They still had to keep their guard up. Slade’s men were out here somewhere. He’d been careful about which way they’d driven, staying off the main roads as much as possible. But trouble had a way of finding people whether they went looking for it or not.

They drove for another ten minutes before Joel spotted the turnoff: a narrow four-wheel drive trail that led away from the road and wound down toward a bend in the river where the current slowed and the water deepened. It was one of their favorite fishing spots, tucked out of sight and shielded from the road above by a thick cluster of pines. It wasn’t gold medal water like the Animas, but the tributary held plenty of trout if a person knew where to cast.

The water flowed steady and clear, cutting through the valley in a winding stretch of blue-green pools and swift riffles filled with multicolored pebbles. The water would be cold, fed by recent snowmelt from the mountains, but the midday sun was hitting just right, making the weather feel more like spring than the beginning of winter.

Joel pulled off and parked under the trees, leaving the Blazer facing the road, a habit his father had ingrained in him. As soon as the engine died, Gunner whined from the back seat, his tail thumping against the vinyl upholstery.

“All right,” Joel said, glancing at Brad. “Same rules as always. Stay close, don’t wander, and keep an eye out. Got it?”

Brad rolled his eyes but nodded. “Got it.”

Allie was already out of the truck with her rifle in hand, stretching. “I’ll take first watch. You guys get started.”

Joel stood on the edge of the open truck door, reaching up to unlatch the rooftop cargo box, pulling out the rods and gear. On the other side of the truck, Gunner leaped out, landing with a solid thud before trotting off after Allie, who was already heading toward a large rock that offered a clear view of the river in both directions. Brad hopped out right behind the dog, jogging around to Joel's side of the Blazer to help with the fishing rods. Gunner's nose worked the air eagerly, tail up, as if he could already smell the adventure waiting by the water.

The river was just as Joel remembered it—clear, cold, and steady. The sound of rushing water filled the air, a familiar rhythm that had always been calming.

Gunner, apparently deciding he'd waited long enough, bounded toward the water. He hesitated at the edge, lapping at the gin-clear water, then waded in, his thick brown coat darkening as the current lapped at his chest. He let out a snort, shaking his head, but stayed in the shallows, wading slowly in a circle before retreating back to shore.

Brad laughed. "Cold, huh?"

Gunner gave a full-body shake, sending water flying in all directions.

"You know, we are trying to catch something here, Gunner." Joel chuckled, turning his attention to his fly rod. He tied on a large elk hair caddis dry fly with a nymph dropper, a combination that had proved itself for him in the past during late-season outings. He glanced at Allie, who was still standing on the bank, watching him expectantly.

"What?" he asked.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be teaching me about this stuff?"

Joel smirked. "You sure? You *do* catch more trees than fish."

Allie narrowed her eyes. "I'm learning."

"All right, but let me set you up with something a little easier to cast." He leaned his rod against the truck and began getting hers set up.

"No, I was just giving you a hard time," Allie protested.

"It's fine. There's nobody out here. We can all fish." Joel shrugged. "Besides, the sooner we catch enough, the sooner we can get back."

"You sure?" Allie slung her AR-15 over her shoulder and slid down the face of the boulder, her hiking boots digging into the soft, dark soil.

Joel stepped closer, adjusting his grip on her rod. "Just like that, thumb up. Like you're swinging a hammer, ten to two on the clock." He swung the

rod back and forth, false-casting a couple of times before handing her the rod. “It’s all about rhythm. You want to feel the weight of the line; let it load up before you move forward. Don’t rush it.”

Allie mimicked his stance, gripping the cork handle of the rod as she attempted a cast. The fly barely made it past the shallows before the line went slack.

Brad snorted. “Nice one.”

“Bradley.” Allie adjusted her stance.

Joel watched as she tried a few more casts, each one slightly better than the last. She was catching on quickly.

After a few minutes, she let out a satisfied breath. “All right, I’m ready to put this to use—without an audience.”

Joel nodded. “Go for it. I’m gonna work my way upstream on the opposite side. You should concentrate on that pool below the rifle. I know there’s a big brown along that cut in the bank.”

Brad was already waist-deep in the river. His insulated waders, starting to get a little too small for the growing ten-year-old, kept him protected from the icy-cold water. Joel watched for a moment as his brother flicked his light blue line out into a deeper pool and Gunner settled into a spot on the shoreline near Allie.

For a while, Joel had no trouble pretending the world was more than just survival of the fittest. He let himself slip into the steady rhythm of fishing—casting, drifting, retrieving, then starting again. The soft hiss of the line, the gentle tug of the current, even the occasional splash of a fish breaking the surface—all of it was soothing. The sun was warm on his back, the scent of river water and damp earth filling the air. For the first time all day, some of the tension eased from his shoulders. The morning had been rough, and the atmosphere at the barter market had been tight with unease, but they’d made it through. The hardest parts were behind them now, and the risk felt distant, like something carried off downstream, away from where they stood.

Brad whooped suddenly, stripping line with his left hand as fast as he could. “I got one!”

Joel turned, watching as Brad struggled but kept his line taut, the rod bending under the weight of the fish.

“Keep the tip up,” Joel called.

Brad fought the fish for a moment longer before finally hauling it into his net. Joel could see the silver flash in the sun from where he was—a decent-sized rainbow trout.

“I *told* you I’d catch the first one,” Brad said, beaming.

Joel shook his head. “Lucky cast.”

“Nice one, Brad.” Allie smiled as she threw out the compliment.

“No dishes for a month.” Brad let out another hoot that echoed through the woods around them.

“Yeah, yeah, keep it down,” Joel shot back in a quieter voice.

They fished for another hour, pulling in a respectable haul. Joel landed two good-sized browns and three chunky rainbows that he decided to keep. Allie managed to reel in a couple of her own. The weather was perfect, there was a hatch going off, and the rings on the water from rising trout stretched their way upstream as far as Joel could see. Everything was perfect, except that it wasn’t. The worry he’d been able to put aside for a while was creeping back into his thoughts. They had a nice haul between the three of them. Maybe it was time to go before their luck wore thin. But this felt so good, almost normal. Joel had forgotten what that was like.

But normal didn’t last. Not anymore.

One more fish and he’d break the news to Brad that it was time to start working his way back upriver toward the truck. Joel had gone upstream a few hundred yards from the Blazer, while Allie hadn’t wandered that far from where she’d started. But Brad had gone downstream to where a series of pools stepped their way down in elevation as the river spilled into the canyon below. Joel remembered many occasions in the old days, before carrying a weapon was mandatory, when he’d been lured farther down the river. It was an easy place to lose your sense of distance while you focused on your footing among the slick rocks and worked the slack pockets of water.

Brad was visible, but just barely: the tip of his rod, a loop of line sailing through the air occasionally. But Allie had a better line of sight on the boy, and from time to time, she caught Joel checking in and returned his concerned glances with a thumbs-up. Even with her reassurance, though, Joel knew it was time to head back.

He watched his fly drift over a promising spot one final time before reeling his line in when the feeling hit him.

A prickle at the back of his neck.

Something was wrong.

He turned slightly, scanning the trees. The hairs on his arms stood up, but he couldn't see anything.

Gunner had been sleeping soundly on a large, flat boulder in a spot of sun, halfway between Joel and Allie, but his head lifted now in unison with Joel's tightening gut.

"Allie?" Joel only spoke as loud as he needed to for Allie to hear him. "Get Brad's attention. We need to go."

Allie's smile faded as Gunner let out a grumble. She turned to relay the message to Brad, but Joel could tell by her expression that something was wrong.

A sharp spike of panic shot through him.

"Brad!" Joel abandoned any attempt at stealth as he reeled in his line and made his way across the river, nipping the fly off his tippet and breaking down his four-piece rod in the process. By the time he reached the far bank, his rod was stowed in his backpack, and he was holding his carbine, ready for action.

Allie spun around as Joel and Gunner scrambled along the riverbank in her direction, her eyes going wide.

"He was just here," she said, already moving.

Joel's pulse hammered in his ears as he scanned the river. But the only trace of his brother was a trail of water leading over the top of a large boulder Brad had climbed over on his way downstream.

The kid had wandered.

Joel clenched his jaw. "We need to find him. Now."

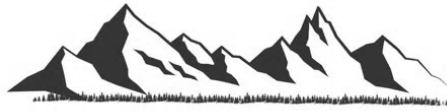
Gunner was already moving, picking up on Joel's and Allie's frustration. The dog had suddenly found his purpose and put his nose to the ground, following the trail.

Joel gripped his rifle tightly. He knew this feeling, the same one he'd had at the gas station.

They weren't alone.

And Brad was in trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Joel's heart pounded as he ran, boots digging into the soft riverbank. His breath came in ragged gasps, cold air burning his lungs. The trees blurred past, and the sound of rushing water faded beneath the sharp ringing in his ears.

Brad was gone.

The realization hit Joel like a punch to the gut. Just moments ago, Brad had been standing on the riverbank, only a few steps ahead, just out of sight around the bend. And now he was gone. Vanished. Nothing but an empty stretch of riverbank where his little brother should have been.

This couldn't be real. Not Brad. Not now.

Panic surged through Joel's chest as a flood of possibilities crashed through his mind. Maybe Brad had slipped and fallen into the river. It wouldn't be the first time his younger brother's eagerness to find a better fishing spot had gotten the best of him. Joel could almost see it: Brad stumbling on a slippery rock, the shock of cold water, the weight of his waders filling up and dragging him down into one of the deep, hidden pools. Fighting. Gasping.

Drowning.

"No," Joel muttered, picking up speed. His muscles burned with every step, but he didn't care. He was too busy scanning the water, desperate for any sign of movement—any sign of Brad.

What if he didn't find him?

What if he had to go back and face his father, not with Brad by his side but with a story about how he'd lost him?

The thought alone nearly buckled Joel's knees. Ben had trusted him. Brad had trusted him.

He skidded to a stop where Brad's footprints ended in the mud. There was no doubt they were his brother's—Joel recognized the wader's lug pattern, hand-me-downs from when Joel was younger. But there were others, too. Larger prints. At least two or three different sets.

His stomach clenched.

"Joel!" Allie came up beside him, panting, rifle in her hands. "Where is he?"

Joel pointed. "Tracks lead up through the trees, back toward the highway. Someone took him."

Allie's face paled.

Gunner growled low in his throat, hackles rising as he sniffed the ground. His head snapped up, ears perked. Then he let out a bark, sharp and urgent.

Joel scanned the woods for any sign of movement but saw nothing. He glanced toward Allie. She had climbed onto a pile of flood debris, a tangle of driftwood and downed trees half-buried in silt from last spring's runoff, and was sweeping the tree line with her scope.

Joel was about to tell her to get down when a twig snapped on the slope above them.

His grip tightened on his weapon. "Allie, get down from there."

Allie leaped from the driftwood pile and landed in the soft riverbank soil with a muffled thud. She raised her rifle, but they were already too late.

"Look out!" Joel yelled, throwing himself toward her.

Gunfire exploded from the hillside, sharp cracks that tore through the cool mountain air. Bullets kicked up bursts of dirt and debris, shredding bark and splintering the dead log they'd dove behind. Gunner let out a yelp as he scrambled for cover, ears pinned back and tail tucked but teeth bared.

Joel popped up at the first lull and squeezed off a round at a shadow between the trees. He caught a flash of movement—a man in a cowboy hat ducking behind a pine. The shot rang out and echoed down the canyon, but he didn't wait to confirm the hit.

More rounds tore through the air in response, zipping past his head with a whine.

Allie fired back through a narrow opening in the brush, but her shot was answered by three more. It was clear to Joel now: their attackers had

numbers.

He pressed himself against the log beside her, breathing hard. “There’s at least three of them—maybe more.”

Allie’s breathing was fast, shallow. “Joel—”

“I know,” he muttered.

He peeked again, fired another shot just to make them duck, then saw it. Brad.

He caught a glimpse, just for a second, between the trees.

A figure being dragged. Small. Struggling. One of the men was hauling Brad toward the top of the ridge, his head ducked low, using the terrain as cover.

“Stop,” Joel hissed, reaching over and putting a hand on Allie’s rifle before she could shoot again.

Allie’s body went still, her knuckles white on the stock of her gun.

“Brad!” Joel called out, louder now, as if raising his voice could change what was happening.

Allie slumped behind the log, staring helplessly at him. Her voice caught in her throat. “We can’t...”

“I know,” Joel said. “We can’t shoot back. We don’t even know where he is.”

In the heat of the moment, they’d reacted like they always did: By returning fire. But this wasn’t like before. This time, Brad was caught in the middle. Firing blindly into the trees now could mean hitting him. And Joel couldn’t live with that.

They were pinned—and worse, they were watching his brother being taken.

Joel’s jaw clenched. His stomach twisted with helplessness and rage.

“We can’t let them get away.” Allie’s voice was quiet, tight with emotion.

“We won’t,” Joel said. “But not like this.”

Gunner was crouched low, muscles coiled like springs, while his eyes remained locked on the slope where the men had vanished. His nose flared with heavy breaths. Joel could feel the dog’s tension like static in the air.

“We’ve got to move,” Allie said. “We’ll lose them.”

Joel nodded. “On my mark. We cut left—use the deadfall to climb up the side.”

She nodded back, her eyes darting to the dead collection of branches and logs, then back to Joel.

Joel exhaled through his nose. “Three... two... one—go!”

They bolted from cover, boots slamming into the soft ground, lungs burning as they sprinted into the forest. Gunner bounded ahead of them, leaping over roots and dodging brush, nose to the ground, barking once to signal he was back on the trail.

Shots sounded, but they were running now, weaving between trees, using the terrain to shield their movements and avoid the incoming rounds that struck a nearby tree.

Joel’s heart pounded in his ears. The forest became a blur of green and brown, the ground rushing beneath his feet. Waders weren’t meant for running, and while the metal studs gave him good traction, the bulkiness of the material fought his movements.

“Brad!” he shouted again.

Just ahead, Joel swore he heard something. A voice. Faint. Far.

“Joel!”

It was Brad.

Somewhere up ahead, his voice echoed back through the pines.

Joel’s heart surged with hope even as another burst of gunfire rang out behind them.

“We’re close,” Allie panted.

They followed the sound of crashing underbrush and the ghost of Brad’s voice until the trail narrowed, cutting toward the ridgeline.

The air thinned as they climbed. The scent of disturbed pine needles and sweat filled Joel’s lungs. Bark scratched his arms as branches lashed out, trying to slow them down.

And then they saw it.

A truck.

Parked at the edge of a trail just above them. Rusted, dented, and familiar. The same rusty, weathered-blue Dodge pickup that had harassed them in town and later ended up at the house.

Slade’s men.

They were loading Brad into the back, his hands bound, his mouth covered with a rag.

Joel raised his rifle, but Allie’s hand grabbed his wrist.

“No,” she whispered. “It’s too dangerous.”

Joel let out a frustrated grunt. There were five of them now. One keeping watch. Three loading supplies and one securing Brad in the bed and slamming the tailgate.

Joel raised his scope and tried to find the driver through the dense vegetation just as the truck's engine roared to life.

They were out of time. If he didn't act now, Slade's men would leave with Brad.

Joel's breathing came in desperate gasps as he struggled to find his target. His finger hovered near the trigger; his vision narrowed to the man in the driver's seat—the one reaching to slam the door shut.

He could take the shot.

One round. That was all it would take to stop them from leaving, at least for the moment. The truck was parked with its tailgate toward Joel and Allie, though. He'd be shooting over the bed of the truck, over Brad's head. It was too risky. Another shot would start round two of the firefight, putting Brad in even more danger. And what if Joel took a couple of them out? If they still managed to get away with Brad, they might take out their losses on his brother.

"Joel," Allie whispered, crouching low beside him, her voice tight with emotion. "There's too many. We can't win this fight and get Brad out alive."

He didn't move. Couldn't. His whole body was a live wire, caught between instinct and logic, panic and purpose. Every cell screamed at him to fight, to run in guns blazing and rip his brother from that truck. But that wasn't what his dad would do.

Ben would wait. Watch. Plan.

Joel swallowed hard, every second stretching into eternity.

"I can get the guy by the tailgate," Allie said, eyes flicking between the truck and Joel. "If we're quick, we could—"

They both knew better than to engage, but Allie was as frustrated as him.

"No, you're right. We can't. Not yet," Joel warned.

A sharp bark got their attention.

Gunner had slipped ahead, weaving through the trees. He let out a warning growl as he crept closer to the clearing, crouched low like he was ready to spring.

"Gunner, no—" Joel whispered, but the dog didn't move.

In the clearing, one of the men turned, rifle slung over his back as he hoisted a plastic tub of gear into the truck bed.

Then Brad made his move.

He kicked out—hard—striking one of the men in the groin. The man staggered, cursed, and backhanded Brad across the face. Joel flinched as if he'd been hit himself.

“Brad!” Allie gasped, too quietly to be heard over the engine.

Brad struggled, kicked again, tried to roll from the bed of the truck, but one of the others caught him by the hood of his sweatshirt and yanked him back in with brutal efficiency.

Joel lifted his rifle again, but the man dragged Brad to the front of the bed and forced him down. Then the tailgate slammed shut.

The driver gunned the engine, tires spitting rocks and pine needles as the truck jolted forward on the rough dirt trail.

“Joel!” Brad’s muffled cries carried on the wind as the truck disappeared through the trees.

Joel leaped to his feet, weapon bouncing against his chest. “Come on!” He wasn’t sure what chasing the truck would accomplish, but he wasn’t thinking anymore. Instinct had taken over.

Allie didn’t hesitate.

They broke cover, sprinting through the trees after the truck, branches tearing at their clothes, their boots slipping on loose pine needles and wet roots. Gunner ran ahead, barking once, ears pinned, tail working like a rudder cutting through the forest.

Joel’s legs burned, and his lungs screamed for air. The truck’s engine roared ahead of them. Joel caught the occasional glimpse of its weathered-blue body through the trees, but it was moving, pulling away too fast.

Too fast.

They weren’t going to catch it on foot. Not here. Not unless it stopped—or crashed. And what would they do if they did catch it?

Still, Joel pushed harder.

Brad’s voice echoed in his ears. That flash of fear on his brother’s face burned behind his eyes.

They crested a rise in the trail just in time to see the brake lights flash red. The truck slowed, bouncing over a shallow dip where runoff had carved a gully into the trail.

Allie started to raise her rifle but stopped. It was hard to resist the impulse to fight.

“Don’t,” Joel panted. “Brad’s still in the back.”

She slung the weapon over her shoulder reluctantly, frustration etched across her face.

The truck cleared the dip and picked up speed again, its tires throwing up loose gravel as it disappeared around the bend.

Joel stopped running, doubled over with his hands on his knees, gasping.

The sound of the engine faded until there was nothing left but the wind in the trees and the ragged sound of their breathing.

Gunner stood a few feet ahead, tail still now, ears pointed down the trail. He let out a low whine, pacing in a small circle, nose to the air.

Joel collapsed to his knees.

Allie walked up beside him, her chest rising and falling with each labored breath.

“I-I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Joel didn’t answer at first. He didn’t trust his voice.

Allie crouched beside him, setting her rifle down. “We couldn’t risk it. Not with Brad in the bed like that. If we’d opened fire—”

“I know,” Joel cut in, voice hoarse. “I know.”

Allie’s hand hovered over his shoulder, then finally rested there.

Joel was certain that neither of them felt okay about what had just happened. Neither of them could shake the image of Brad bound, bruised, and being dragged away. It was an image he would never forget. His mind raced as he replayed the last few minutes of his life, beating himself up with thoughts of what he could have done differently.

“It was them,” he stated.

“Slade?” Allie asked, though she already knew the answer.

Joel nodded. “It’s the same truck. And one of the men, I recognized him from town.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the cool air settling around them like a blanket soaked in ice water.

“We can’t go after them now,” Joel said finally, voice distant. “Not without a plan. Not without help. We’ll just get Brad killed.”

Allie hesitated. “Then we go back. We tell your dad what happened. He’ll know what to do.”

Joel looked at her—really looked at her. “Yeah.”

“We’ll get Brad back. Slade won’t hurt him, especially if he wants your dad’s help.” Her words were genuine, but there wasn’t much conviction in her eyes.

She didn’t blink. “He’s my family, too.”

Joel swallowed hard. “Let’s move.”

They moved in silence as they made their way back through the forest, retracing the rough footpath they’d crashed through in their mad pursuit. Gunner stayed ahead, ears twitching, circling back to check on them every few yards. His tail was low and slow, his amber eyes watching Joel as though he could sense the heaviness pressing down on his shoulders.

The sun was starting to slip behind the high ridge to the west, casting long shadows across the trail and filtering golden light through the trees. It should’ve been beautiful. Peaceful.

But it wasn’t.

Allie walked beside Joel, her rifle slung over her shoulder, her face pale and unreadable. The wind tugged at the ends of her braid, loose strands catching the light.

Joel kept one hand on Gunner’s collar as they walked, more for his own comfort than the dog’s restraint. His other hand clenched and unclenched around the sling of his rifle.

Neither of them had said much since leaving the clearing. There wasn’t much to say. Every step they took away from the river, away from Brad, was another reminder that they hadn’t saved him. That they’d failed.

“I should’ve seen it coming,” Joel muttered after a while, his voice rough from the cold air and the lump in his throat.

Allie looked over at him, her brow furrowing. “Don’t.”

“We were too comfortable,” he continued, ignoring her. “We let our guard down. I knew better than to let Brad wander that far. I knew we shouldn’t have stayed so long.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Her voice was quiet but firm. “Joel, we had no reason to believe they’d follow us. Or that they’d even find us out here.”

“I felt the tension in town today. We should have just gone home after the first few fish.” Joel kicked a rock off the trail.

“You can’t carry all of this on your back,” Allie said. “Not alone.”

Joel stopped walking and turned to face her, eyes wet with budding tears. "He's my brother, Allie."

"I know," she said softly. "And I love him, too. But we both did everything we could. It just... wasn't enough today."

Joel stared at her for a long moment, chest rising and falling. Then he looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

They reached the Blazer a few minutes later, parked just where they'd left it in the shade of the tall ponderosa pines. The air felt heavier here, like it knew something had gone wrong.

Joel opened the rear door and let Gunner hop in. The dog circled once, then flopped down with a grunt, his eyes on Joel the entire time.

Allie tossed her gear in the truck and climbed into the passenger seat without a word.

Joel stowed his rod and pack but stood there for a moment, one hand on the roof of the truck, the other resting on the open door. His eyes swept over the trees. The river in the distance was unchanged, like it was all a bad dream, but the empty back seat where his brother should be sitting proved otherwise.

He forced himself into the driver's seat and started the engine.

The Blazer rumbled to life, the low growl of the old V8 breaking the silence.

As they drove, the sun flashed between the trees, casting long strips of shadow and gold across the highway. The air was getting colder, the heat of the day fading fast. Every bend in the road felt like a step closer to responsibility—to admitting to his father what had happened.

Neither of them spoke, but there wasn't really anything left to say.

They pulled up the driveway to the house just as a cluster of dark clouds began to build in the sky to the north. The cabin stood like a sentinel on the slope, smoke curling from the chimney, a faint glow in the windows. It looked peaceful. But Joel was about to shatter all that.

He shifted the Blazer into park and stared at the house.

Inside, Emma would be at the table, working on a sketch, pretending not to worry. Sandy would be finishing dinner. His dad might be still be somewhere outside, or in the basement, putting together something that might be useful for the winter ahead. He had no idea how he was going to walk in there and say the words.

Allie reached across the cab and put her hand on his arm.

Joel didn't move.

"Come on," she said quietly. "It will be all right."

Joel nodded slowly and opened the door.

Gunner hopped out and trotted up the stairs to the front door ahead of them. Ben was there, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, watching them approach.

He must've heard the engine.

Joel's stomach twisted. One look at Ben's face, and he almost crumbled.

Ben pushed off the post and walked toward them. "You're late," he said. "Everything all right?"

Joel opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Ben's eyes scanned the Blazer. His face changed.

"Where's Brad?"

Allie stepped back, giving Joel space to speak. Her eyes were glassy, red-rimmed. She wiped her face with her sleeve and looked away.

Joel's mouth was dry. He tried again.

"They took him," he said finally, the words barely above a whisper. "Slade's men. At the river. We tried to get him back. We chased them, but... they got away."

Ben's face was still. Too still.

Then his jaw clenched, and he turned toward the house. "Get inside."

Joel hesitated.

"Now," Ben snapped.

Inside, Sandy was already on her feet. Emma stood behind her with wide eyes, Bajer and Sam flanking her legs like sentries.

Ben stormed past them into the living room and began to pace back and forth in front of the woodstove.

Joel followed him in. "What are we going to do?"

"You're sure it was Slade's scouts?" Ben stopped moving and met his son's gaze.

Joel nodded. "It was the blue Dodge that followed us in town and then showed up here the other day. I'm positive it was them."

"That's Knox's truck. He's one of Slade's goons. Probably retaliation for his friend," Ben grumbled. A moment later, his expression shifted. "Then we know where they're taking him."

He started pacing the room again. The plan forming in his mind was almost visible in the bulging veins on his neck.

Sandy stepped in. “Ben, slow down—”

“No.” Ben turned. “They took my son.”

Emma made a small sound, something between a sob and a gasp. Sandy reached for her, pulling her into a tight hug. The girl clung to her, shoulders shaking silently.

Allie stood behind Joel, still shouldering her rifle. Her mouth opened like she wanted to say something—anything—but her voice didn’t come.

Ben turned to Joel. “We need to get everything ready. Weapons. Packs. I want a loadout ready in twenty minutes.”

Joel blinked. “We’re going after him tonight?”

“Of course we are,” Ben snapped back. “They won’t expect us so soon.”

“But... Slade’s got an army,” Joel said.

Allie stepped forward, her voice steady. “I’m going with you.”

Ben turned to her. For a beat, the steel in his expression softened. He gave a single nod—brief but resolute.

Joel felt something shift in his chest. Not quite relief... but close. He hadn’t realized his legs were shaking until now.

Ben turned without another word and headed for the basement stairs. “I need a map,” he said over his shoulder. “And a minute.”

As his footsteps disappeared below, Joel sank heavily into a chair at the table. The weight of it all pressed down on him—the fear, the failure, the guilt.

Allie slipped into the seat beside him. “I should’ve protected him,” he said quietly, his eyes locked on the worn lines in the tabletop.

“You tried,” Allie whispered. “And you’ll get another chance.”

Joel didn’t reply.

The house fell into a heavy silence. Not empty. Charged. As if the walls themselves were holding their breath, waiting between the ache of now and the fire of what came next.

Then came Ben’s voice—steady, low, and full of quiet force—from the basement. Joel turned to see him emerge from the stairwell and spread out a map across the counter, anchoring the curling edges with a pocketknife and an empty jar.

Ben remained hunched over the map, but his eyes lifted toward Joel. “It’s not your fault, Joel. Either of you.” His gaze shifted to Allie. “What matters now is getting your brother back. And fast. We leave for the Faction’s ranch as soon as it’s dark.”

Joel stood up from the table and met his father's eyes. "You can count on me."

Ben straightened, shoulders squared as he looked between the two of them. He took in a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

"Tonight," he said. "This ends."

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EPILOGUE



The scent of roasted venison hung thick in the air, mingling with woodsmoke and something faintly sweet: baked apples laced with cinnamon, the last of it from a pantry that was starting to look emptied of luxuries. Candlelight flickered across the long dining table, illuminating tin plates, mismatched silverware, and a bone-handled carving knife laid neatly beside a wooden bowl of cracked pepper.

Victor Slade sat at the head of the table like a king at court. His chair, a high-backed relic upholstered in dark red velvet, creaked as he leaned back and studied the spread. A single bottle of red wine, dusty but uncorked, sat off to the side. He swirled a glass slowly, watching the wine catch the candlelight in dark crimson waves. It wasn't just dinner. It was ceremony. It was power.

Outside, the wind moved through the valley, stirring the bare branches of the cottonwoods that lined the creek beyond the fence. A line of storm clouds loomed over the ridgeline to the west, bruising the sunset with violet shadows.

Slade took a measured sip of wine. The vintage was forgettable, but it tasted like control.

Across from him, the chair meant for his second-in-command remained empty. Marcus Kane was late. Again. Slade didn't care for tardiness. In this world, where time had lost most of its meaning, respect was measured in the small things.

He set the glass down with a soft clink and looked out the window toward the dusk-covered grounds of what used to be the Sterling Ranch.

The property stretched along a sloping edge of the Animas River valley—an estate built with care and attention to detail, a showpiece of mountain architecture. The original owners had spared no expense. Custom woodwork, Spanish tile, and exposed beams reclaimed from century-old mining cabins gave the home a rustic elegance that held firm even now.

Slade had kept much of it intact. He wasn't interested in tearing down what worked. He was interested in control. The guest cottages now housed his men. The wine cellar had been converted into a secure armory. The greenhouse, once filled with decorative succulents, was now a hydroponic grow operation that his people would need to survive the winter. The ranch hadn't lost its beauty. It had simply been repurposed to serve a new kind of order.

This wasn't a home. It was a fortress. And he liked it that way.

"Sir," came a voice from the hallway.

Slade didn't move. "Enter."

Kane stepped in, boots thudding softly against the hard tile. His duster was unbuttoned, his scarf hanging loose, but the rifle slung over his back was clean and oiled. His eyes flicked to the wine glass, then back to Slade's face.

"You're late. Again," Slade said without emotion.

Kane cleared his throat. "I, uh... Yeah. Sorry about that. But something's come up."

Slade's jaw tightened slightly. "If it doesn't involve a breach in the north fence or a fire in the armory, I expect to hear it after supper."

Kane nodded, then hesitated. "It's... You're gonna want to hear this now."

That got Slade's attention. He gestured with two fingers to the chair beside him. "Sit."

Kane didn't. "It's about Ben Davis."

A long pause. Slade slowly set his fork down. "Go on."

"One of the southern scout teams—Barlow and Knox and two or three of the new guys—they were down near the old bridge off Piedra Road. Said they were trapping and fishing near the bend. Spotted some kids on the river. One of them was..." He hesitated again, then continued. "One of them was Brad Davis."

Silence pressed into the room like a second ceiling.

Slade blinked slowly. "The youngest one."

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“They took him.”

The words fell into the space between them like a lit match into dry tinder. Not loud. Final.

Slade stared at him. “They took him.”

Kane nodded, but now his voice had lost its edge of pride. “Said they figured it was a smart move. Leverage. Thought you’d be... pleased.”

Slade pushed his chair back, the legs scraping loudly against the tile. He stood slowly, walked to the window, and looked out over the darkening field. A wind kicked up, swirling dry leaves into eddies along the porch.

“Leverage,” he repeated.

Kane shifted his weight. “Sir, I didn’t know they were gonna—”

“They acted without orders.” Slade’s voice was calm, but his shoulders had stiffened. “They broke the chain of command. They made a political decision. On my behalf.”

Kane stayed silent.

Slade turned from the window, and his expression was unreadable. He reached for the wine glass again but didn’t drink. “Tell me exactly what they said.”

“They tracked the kids awhile. Recognized the older boy—Joel—and a girl. They were fishing. Kid wandered too far downstream, easy grab. Said there was some resistance—a firefight—but no casualties. They got out clean.”

Slade closed his eyes for a moment. “And now Brad Davis is here.”

“In the barn. Under guard,” Kane replied.

A long silence stretched between them.

Then Slade opened his eyes, gaze sharp. He turned, took a slow step toward the table, and ran a finger along the rim of his wine glass, letting the silence thicken.

“Do you know who Ben Davis is?”

Kane frowned, unsure. “He ran that gear shop downtown, right? Trout and Timber Outfitters, I think it was called.”

Slade’s mouth twitched into a slow smile—more teeth than humor. He let out a quiet breath, almost a chuckle, and shook his head like he was explaining something to a child.

“Ben Davis was a Ranger,” he said, voice low but deliberate. “Highly decorated. Sergeant First Class. Team leader. The man’s skillset extends well beyond catching trout, Marcus.”

He stepped closer, picking up the wine glass but not drinking. “And more than that, Ben Davis is a man of quiet influence. Never flashy. Never loud. But when he talked?” Slade tapped the glass softly. “People listened.”

His tone shifted, darkening.

“He tanked my riverfront project. Rallied the town against it. Made me look like a greedy outsider trying to carve up the Animas for profit.”

Kane raised an eyebrow but stayed silent.

Slade smiled again, colder this time. “Doesn’t matter much now, does it?”

He set the glass down with a sharp, deliberate clink. The sound echoed faintly in the large room, the weight of it hanging there like a warning.

“I had plans to bring Davis in. Not forcibly—eventually. Let him see how much better things were under my control. Maybe even give him a position. Something dignified. Offer him security. He’s useful. He thinks like a survivor. Like a leader.” Slade stepped closer, his voice lower now. “But now?”

Kane swallowed.

Slade didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t have to.

“Now he’s a father with nothing to lose. A father who knows exactly what direction to aim his wrath. And we handed him a reason to come knocking.”

Kane’s gaze flicked to the window. “Should we... move the boy?”

“No.” Slade’s tone was hard. “We treat him well. We keep him safe and keep him fed, but we don’t move him. If we start playing scared, we lose control of the board.”

“And if Davis comes?”

Slade smiled—but there was no humor in it.

“Oh, he’ll come. And when he does, I want every man ready. Every rifle loaded. Every guard post doubled. Go to an eight-on, eight-off routine. Nobody leaves the ranch—even off duty—until this thing kicks off.”

He stepped past Kane, snatching the bottle of wine off the table on his way past.

“We’ve stirred a sleeping bear, Marcus. I hope those boys understand what they’ve done.” Slade opened the door to the hallway, then paused.

“Have Barlow and Knox report to me directly first thing in the morning. Tonight, we need every man ready.”

“Yes, sir,” Kane answered.

“Follow me,” Slade instructed as he turned and walked out, boots echoing on the tile.

Outside, the wind howled louder now. The storm was coming in faster than expected, racing down from the ridge like a thing alive. The temperature had dropped sharply since sunset. The scent of smoke from the watchtower firepits drifted in through the eaves, mingling with the smell of dinner. Slade walked the corridor at a measured pace, taking a drink from the bottle as he went.

Marcus Kane followed silently, falling into step a few paces behind.

Slade didn’t speak again until they passed through the arched doorway and entered the old study. The room was warmer than the grand dining hall, thanks to a low-burning fire crackling in the hearth at the far end. In the center stood a large table, its surface covered by a canvas map of the region. Topographic lines traced the mountains, showing valleys, roads, and rivers, while key homesteads, fuel stops, and known rival groups were marked with colored pins—an organized grid that resembled a war room layout. Slade had originally commissioned the map for a development project, but now it served a far more strategic purpose: tracking his conquests, past and future.

Slade stepped to the map and stared down at it. His expression was calm, but his mind was coiled tight. “You remember what I told you last year about leverage?”

Kane nodded. “A tool, not a weapon.”

“Exactly.” Slade pointed to the center of the map—Durango proper. “The town’s fractured. Caldwell’s little cowboy militia runs point on the roads west. That group from Aztec is always sniffing around the river corridor. And now Davis...” His hand moved east toward the jagged edge of the La Plata Mountains. “Now we’ve given him a reason to unify people. Not through speeches or promises but through fear. Rage. That’s how leaders are forged.”

Kane watched him, saying nothing.

Slade tapped the map again, more forcefully this time. “He’s the kind of man who might’ve stayed neutral. Protective and defensive, sure. But he

wasn't rallying people. Not yet. That changes now. Because when you take a man's blood, you give him purpose."

Kane exhaled slowly. "Then we hit first?"

"No." Slade's tone was deliberate. "We prepare."

He moved around the table and opened a drawer beneath the surface. Inside were rows of schematics—layouts of their outer perimeter, security stations, fallback points. He spread them across the table. "Double the patrols on the north and east fences. Set a rotation of our best marksmen in sniper positions on the ridge overlooking East Animas Road and give them radios. Anyone who falls asleep on post loses their food and alcohol rations for three days. I want everything locked down."

Slade left the map and took the bottle of wine with him to the hearth.

"He's coming," he said softly. "And I want him to see exactly what he's walking into."

Kane ran a hand over his stubbled jaw. "You want a standoff?"

"I want a statement," Slade said. "We don't just control the river valley. We *own* the fear that comes with challenging us." He took two large strides back to the map and picked up a pin from the edge of the table, sticking it into the map where their compound sat: the former Sterling Ranch. Another went on the Davis homestead. The distance between them wasn't great. Not in miles.

But in resolve?

That was another matter.

THE BARN SMELLED LIKE OLD HAY, DIESEL, AND DAMP, SPLINTERED WOOD. The kind of smell that clung to your clothes and filled your nose even when you tried not to breathe too deeply. Brad Davis sat hunched in the corner, knees drawn in tight, hands zip-tied at the wrists, and his right ankle shackled to a thick timber post. The chain rattled softly every time he shifted. It was heavy, rusted, and he could feel its coldness through his waders. It looked as old as the barn itself.

He had tried not to panic when they put it on him. Tried to stay calm, remember what his dad had taught him about staying still, staying quiet. He was pretty sure he could get out of the zip ties if it would have done him

any good. His dad had shown him once how to do it. But the cuff around his ankle—there was no getting out of that.

He leaned back slowly, the sharp straw of a half-broken bale poking through his sweatshirt and digging into his skin. It didn't matter. He needed something solid against his back. Something that made him feel like he could hold his ground, even here. Even now.

His heart was still pounding, not as hard as before, but steady, like a drumbeat in his chest. He'd stopped crying a while ago. Maybe an hour, maybe longer. He didn't know. The sky had gone dark through the cracks in the wall, and it was getting colder. Much colder than he was dressed for.

But at least his lip had finally gone numb. The sharp, throbbing pain from where one of Slade's men had backhanded him had faded to a dull ache. The skin was split and swollen. He could feel the open cut with his tongue and taste the blood, some of which had gotten on his light gray sweatshirt. But he was alive.

Scared, miserable, and alone, but he was alive.

The barn creaked around him as the wind picked up and howled through the rafters. Somewhere above, a loose shingle flapped like a forgotten flag. The only light came from a pair of lanterns strung near the tack wall. One of them swung gently, casting distorted shadows across the floor. The flickering light made everything seem like it was moving, even when it wasn't. Every shifting shadow made Brad's breath catch. His imagination ran wild with what could be hiding in those corners, just out of sight.

He'd watched the sky on the way here, forced to lie down in the back of the truck, trying not to move or speak, the bed cold and hard beneath him. The clouds had been thick and low, darkening fast. They were headed east, he thought. Maybe toward the valley. His dad would be proud of him for noticing that. Even now, even scared, he tried to think the way his dad would.

Brad sniffed hard, his nose cold and runny. He blinked back the sting of tears—not fresh ones, just the remnants. His eyes scanned the barn slowly. The heavy wooden door was shut tight. The voices he'd heard earlier outside were gone now.

Were they going to leave him here all night?

His legs ached. His waders were damp and clammy, trapping in the chill. Every movement was stiff now, like his body was starting to freeze from the inside out. He couldn't stop shivering.

What were they going to do with him?

Would they come back?

What if they forgot about him?

Or worse... what if they didn't?

He didn't want to cry again, but the questions wouldn't stop. Where was his dad right now? Had Joel and Allie made it out okay? He heard gunfire at the river just after he'd been grabbed. He didn't know what happened after that. He didn't know if they were alive. Or if he was the only one left.

His throat tightened. He couldn't let those thoughts take control.

He hated that he was afraid. Hated that his arms were tied and his leg was chained and all he could do was sit here like a scared little kid. But the truth was, he *was* scared. The kind of scared that made your stomach hurt and your thoughts spin until everything felt like it was slipping out of your hands.

Brad drew a deep breath and forced himself to stop shaking, just for a second. He closed his eyes and imagined home. The kitchen. The woodstove. Gunner sleeping by the fire. Emma curled up with a book. Joel trying to show off some stupid knot or fishing fly. His dad sipping coffee with that tired-but-alive look on his face.

He imagined Allie handing him a bowl of stew and calling him "kid" like she always did.

Brad was just about sick of stew, but right now, he'd give anything for a bowl of Sandy's venison stew at the table with everyone. He held onto that image for as long as he could.

Because even though the barn was cold and dark and full of things he couldn't see or fight or even understand, he knew something else, too.

They were coming for him. They had to be.

The chain around his ankle rattled as he shifted, the cold biting deeper now. He pulled his arms in close, chin tucked against his chest, as he prepared for what could be a very long night. His lip still stung. His wrists ached. But he wasn't crying anymore.

Not because he wasn't scared—he was.

But because he knew something. Something the men who took him didn't know. He'd seen his father backed into a corner before, and it never worked out for the other guys.

Ever.

His dad would come.

Not with words. Not with mercy. With the kind of silent vengeance that crept in like a shadow and made men regret who they were.

And when it broke...

It would tear this place apart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruno Miller is the author of the Dark Road series. He's a military vet who likes to spend his downtime hanging out with his wife and kids, or getting in some range time. He believes in being prepared for any situation.

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