



THE SKY
GREW DARK

The End of the Golden Age
Book I

E. L. Montclair

Annotation

The unthinkable has happened. Biological warfare has been unleashed on Americans and it seems their only choice is to flee or die. Struggling to survive, a family takes refuge in a cave by the sea.

Without enough time to properly prepare, they are running out of food and supplies far quicker than they had planned. It seems that all hope is lost until they discover there might be another way.

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E. L. Montclair
THE SKY GREW DARK

*To my husband, my children, and my fellow
Americans.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my wonderful husband, who has constantly supported my dreams. Always encouraging, always uplifting, reminding me to persist when I feel like giving up, and reminding me to stick to my story when I start to stray. To my sister and mom, who help with editing and story content, reading and re-reading. Lastly, to my boys. When I have my head buried in the laptop they give me my space.

Prologue

We worked as quietly as we could in the darkness. Sweat was running down my back on this cold night, the moon's bright rays giving plenty of light for the task. Adrenaline coursing through our veins, we worked quickly, hoping we wouldn't be seen.

I barely had time to feel remorse, knowing the time would come for that soon enough. When the hole was deep enough we hid the shovels and went for the body we had hidden nearby in some underbrush. We pulled it out; clothed with only a pair of underwear, we lowered him into the ditch.

We had only a moment. I looked across the darkness, searching my mom's face. I had never seen her this thin or haggard in my life. She looked at me, tears making white trails down her dirty cheeks. She loved him as well as her own son.

I wanted to say something, to somehow honor this man we both loved, but I knew we shouldn't risk it. Tears blurred my vision as I silently retrieved my shovel. As quickly and quietly as I could I began burying my husband.

CHAPTER ONE

5 months earlier

I hurried to the car with my groceries in tow, feeling pretty good now that the morning sickness had passed. The sky was cloudy and grey on this humid September day in Southern California. I anxiously looked around, hoping I had time to finish my errands before another storm hit.

I loaded up the car, quickly checking my cellphone to see if I had any texts or missed calls. I noticed something strange. My reception flashed from full bars to a circle with a slash, over and over again. I turned on the car, and began pulling out of the parking lot. I slowed to take in what I saw. A man staring at his phone. I glanced around. Everybody I could see was stopped in their tracks, looking at their phones with concern.

I started trembling uncontrollably. It was happening. I took a deep breath and tried to focus. I drove as quickly as I could to the house and tried to round everybody up. We all knew what the plan was. Anybody that couldn't be tracked down within thirty minutes was left behind. They could try to meet up with us later but we needed to get to the shelter as soon as possible.

We grabbed the kit we had packed, a few necessities, and piled into the two cars. The cloud cover broke minutes after we got into the car, rain soaking the ground in seconds.

Hitting the freeway as fast as we could, we wound up the coast for about two and a half hours to the spot we had found. We unloaded our supplies and made our way down the steep side of the cliff to the large cave, hidden completely out of sight from an aerial view by trees and bushes. According to our plan the guys hid the two cars, one twenty miles away, and the other two miles, both driven off the road and covered with branches and leaves. We didn't know how long it would be before we used them again.

We assembled in the cave and went over the plan.

The group consisted of; me, my husband Ian, our two sons; Seamus and Gaiden, with another on the way, my mom Sherry, my step dad Frank, my sister Lisa, my brother Joey, and my grandpa Emil.

We were part of an organization that was preparing for an attack. We weren't preparing for Armageddon, we were preparing for an eminent attack. A friend in international communications had come to find out that a secret alliance had been made between Iran and North Korea.

We had tried to warn others, but many either chose to disbelieve or didn't put feet to their fears. With all the 'doomsday' preppers around it was hard to talk to people about something like this seriously.

Based on the intelligence collected, aerial attacks were what we had planned for. We had only visited this cave once, not wanting to draw any attention to it, and we had prepped it as much as we could on that single visit.

The expected form of attack was biological warfare. Knowing this, we would have to be contained for three to six months, depending on how things went on the surface. We planned to wait it out in the cave for one month, not leaving for any reason, to avoid any contact with the contaminated air.

After one month, we would send one person to scout the area and see what was going on. At the three month mark, there was a designated meeting place to inform the refugees of any further information that had been obtained.

The plan had been to set up several areas that were stashed with supplies, but we hadn't really had time for all that. This had happened much sooner than we expected. We only had one area prepped, and that was about eight miles away.

We quickly stashed our supplies and proceeded to close up the door of the cave as best as we could. Ian and Joey used a large camouflage tarp and tacked it to the side of the mountain. Then they covered it with branches and dirt and snuck in under one corner. This cave had been chosen for its proximity to the ocean; we hoped contaminated air would pass by us. It was also very large, going so deep into the mountain we hadn't yet found its end.

The chart that the organization had made showed us how much water to bring, so we should have a sufficient amount of water to last us until the one month mark, then we could go find water. We didn't bring wood because it wasn't quite cool enough to require a fire, and if we all huddled together we should stay warm in the cave inside our sleeping bags. We had brought propane and a camping cook stove to cook our food on. We had

figured if we only ate one hot meal a day, and conserved the propane lantern light, we should be able to make it last six weeks.

Then we waited.

We immediately set to work, trying to make this cave into a decent living space. The opening was about five feet wide and eight feet high. The opening faced the ocean, and was positioned on the side of a mountain. A steep cliff was just above us, and the freeway several hundred feet above that. The area where we were was mostly flat, and had a steady decline until it reached the water.

The cave had a wide opening that went into the mountain for about twenty-five feet, then it split off into four different directions. One ended immediately, while the other three we had not explored. Living in a cave wasn't my first choice, but obviously it was better than trying to build something out here.

I had Seamus, who was seven and Gaiden, who was five, begin collecting any debris on the floor of the cave. Leaves, sticks, moss, and rocks, and sort and stack them against one wall. Seamus was tall for his age, and thin, and seemed to be eating everything in sight these days. He had short brown hair and hazel eyes, just like me. In fact, he looked exactly like me at that age. He was sweet, and very smart, but didn't talk much.

Gaiden was the spitting image of my husband. He had lighter brown hair and pale blue eyes. And he never stopped talking. I was concerned about him being out here and the fact that we would need to keep quiet sometimes. He argued with everything I said, always thinking he knew what was best.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on what needed to be done around here instead of worrying about the kids. There were a few things that needed to be taken care of right away. Namely, what we were going to do about a bathroom. We selected the arm of the tunnel that ended to designate as the place, and dug a hole about three feet deep. Every three days we covered it and dug another in that area. Problem solved. It really didn't smell that bad.

Another item on the list: we had brought rabbits and chickens. Since we really didn't know how long all of this would take, we had brought them to start providing additional food in the future- meat from the rabbits, and meat and eggs from the chickens. We had them in two little dog carriers, but that wasn't going to work after a week or so. My brother Joey decided to

dig two different tunnels in the wall. He made them U-shaped, and big enough that he could fit his body all the way through, if barely.

For now we would keep all the hens together and the rooster in the dog carrier. After a bit we would let him fertilize some eggs if we needed to. The same would go for the rabbits. The male would stay separate of the female unless we needed them to breed. We used the leaves and mosses the boys had collected to line the rabbits' and hens' nests.

Our other supplies consisted of matches, a few tools, seeds, two hand guns, fishing poles, sleeping bags, lots of canned food, water, a bag of chicken feed, a bag of rabbit pellets, one set of dishes/utensils per person, and one change of clothes per person.

We noticed almost immediately that the propane was running out faster than we had planned. We cut down the time we used artificial light, relying on the dim light that came through the cave door for any activity, and going to bed as soon as night fell. We also decided to eat cold food one day a week.

Then there was the fact that I was carrying a baby. We had tried to pretend we were all ok with it, but everybody was a little nervous. I had a few minor complications with each of my other pregnancies, but nothing big. The delivery was always fine, and I was pretty sure I could do it without an epidural. One of my cousins had all three of her kids at home, and I felt we could handle it. I had brought a book about home birth, and I proceeded to study it as often as I could, preparing Ian for what part of this was his responsibility.

When the Strike happened I was 23 weeks. We had just found out we were having another boy, so we focused on names. My brother thought we should name him something significant, due to the fact that life as we know it would probably never be the same again. Something that sounded straight out of a Tolkien book, like Aragon. That would be a no.

My husband, on the other hand, wanted to name him Axel. Seriously? I didn't care that we were in the middle of nowhere, and we could actually change his name if we wanted to later, Axel wasn't going to happen. I made a few suggestions, but then the oversized boys got stuck on another name: Maximus. We left the name thing alone and focused on other things.

It had been determined that we should leave our cellphones and chargers in the cars, in case they could be traced. Not that they would do us

any good if we had them with us. It was unbelievably odd to be without any kind of electronics. No games, weather, news, movies; nothing.

Everything seemed to be going well. The chickens were laying eggs. The rabbit was pregnant with her first litter, and should deliver within two or three weeks. Even though I longed for a hot bath, things really weren't that bad. We ate, we drank, and most importantly, we lived.

The day before the one month mark I started having contractions. This was not good, putting me at only 27 weeks. I went on unofficial bed rest. Basically, I didn't do anything, but tried to drink plenty of water. With our water being rationed out, that was a little bit of a problem.

I quickly found something to do. I had the boys bring me leaves and branches from the cave, and I bundled them tightly together for use as fire-starters later on. I also had a little secret. I had stashed my violin in my blanket roll, and hid it as soon as we got into the cave. I wanted to have something to bring some comfort and pleasure if we were out here for a while. There was so much unknown before us. We could be out here for weeks or even months, and I wanted to have something to enjoy.

We all slept near the mouth of the cave. My dad and Ian closest, the women and children in the middle, and Joey and Grandpa on the opposite end, toward the belly of the cave. The first few nights I had difficulty sleeping. All I could think about was spiders. It was pitch black, and there was no option of light unless I wanted to use up the propane. I tossed and turned and freaked out at anything I thought or thought I felt all night long. I finally settled down and started getting some rest after I noticed there didn't seem to be any spiders living in this cave.

At the one month mark my dad and husband were going to go out and see what was going on, trying to get our extra rations if possible. It had been estimated that the greatest threat should be over. We didn't really have much of a choice. We weren't prepared to last much longer than this. The eight mile journey would probably take an entire day, if not longer, because of the terrain. No one was really sure. We packed them rations for two days, and hoped and prayed that they would be back quickly.

We closed the door tightly behind them, and they covered the entrance again, trying to take extra precautions.

Two days went by, and none of us got very good sleep that second night, expecting them to show up any time. The next morning we began to grow uncomfortable. The supplies were just about out, and the kids were

complaining about being hungry, but none of us really knew what to do. We went to bed hungry, hoping for the best, fearing the worst.

The fourth day was pretty chilly. It was now into mid-October, and there were just as many cool days as warm days. Luckily the cave stayed fairly warm, especially when we all huddled together at night. I had barely had any water the day before, and felt a lot of contractions with any movement.

My grandpa looked concerned, and came over and checked a few things. He was a nurse in the army during WWII so he had a bit of experience with these things.

“You’re getting dehydrated.” He said, as he stood up.

“Sherry, I’ll be back tonight.”

He announced as he collected a few gallon containers and stepped out the front of our temporary home.

Joey and I just looked at each other. Now we were down three. I shrugged my shoulders. I guess somebody should get us something, or things weren’t going to turn out very good.

I wondered about collecting rain. I didn’t know how we could do it without attracting attention, but then I settled on the thought that there must be water nearby. There were always little streams running into the ocean, we just needed to find one.

As he promised, Grandpa was back by dusk. He had a collection of roots and herbs in his hands, some sort of strange-looking melon, but no water. We ate up everything he had, even the boys ate the strange roots. It pained my heart to see them lately. They seemed so timid and shy, not the outgoing, crazy kids they had been just a month before.

They played quietly now, without even being asked. Gaiden didn’t talk as much as he did before, and I hoped he wasn’t somehow becoming traumatized from all this. I made a point to begin having him come over and sit with me each day. I drew letters in the dirt and told them stories.

Staying in the cave all day had taken its toll on each of us. We all began to hunch over, since the roof was just above our heads. Everybody looked wan and pale from the lack of exercise and sun resulting from just one month of living like this.

My sister barely said anything. She was sixteen and small. Barely five feet tall she, was tiny with thick, dark hair. It was short and looked like a mess all the time, without flat irons and hairspray she looked like a

cavewoman. She had a couple or orange-yellow pieces in her hair that just added to the affect. She was very pretty, with big, dark eyes and long lashes. She may have been the most upset about the whole thing. She left her boyfriend, and I saw her crying a few times. I knew she was worried about him. She didn't know if he was alive or dead at this point. She left her high school, and her friends. Here she was with so much uncertainty before her. She probably had the most to lose in this.

She helped with the chores, but when nothing was required of her she sat by herself near the mouth of the cave, quietly thinking. I wished there was something we could do for her but I had no idea what. And sadly, I didn't really have enough time to think about it.

The next morning, Grandpa decided to go out again, to try again to find some fresh water. He took a couple containers and left. I wished I could go with him. I hated just laying around, but I knew it was best for the baby.

About midday we heard something at the entrance. Joey tiptoed to the entrance, and we all stayed as quiet as possible. We didn't even know what to do if there was an intruder. I thought about getting the gun, but before I had a chance to act on it Joey called back that it was Ian and Dad. We all breathed a sigh of relief. We had been concerned something happened to them, but our need for food and water had drained us of even the energy we needed to worry.

They had gotten turned around and when they finally found the supplies it was more work to carry them back than they had expected. They had also noticed enemy airplanes flying overhead, which required them to hide. They had figured out on the way there that the planes only flew over once a day, just before noon time. They made sure they were completely hidden on the way back, and felt that they had in no way revealed our location.

Ian pulled me aside to speak with me privately. He asked how I was doing, noticing that I seemed pale and wan. With very fair skin and dark hair I always seemed pale, but when I was ill it was even worse. I could see the concern in his eyes as he cupped my face in his hands. He softly kissed me and then proceeded to tell me what he had discovered.

On their trip Ian had detoured to a nearby city to see if he could see anything. He had discovered that there was a virus. He said it looked like something out of a horror movie. Those affected were quarantined and

buildings had images in red spray paint warning others from coming in. The place was completely abandoned except for those who were infected. And the bodies of those that had succumbed. He said they were piled so high in some areas it was unreal. Some were piled in trenches, others just one on top of the other off the side of the road. He had no idea where the others had fled.

If there were others.

As they unloaded what they had returned with, the wood, matches, water, and canned food look painfully sparse. I looked at my husband, realizing he knew we needed to make some big changes if we were going to get through this.

Later that evening, Grandpa made his way back. He had found a very small stream, and didn't have time to follow it. He seemed surprised to see Ian and my dad, alive and well, but he told them about the discovery and spoke with them about other plans.

The days turned into weeks, and we had a pretty good thing going. A stream with fresh water was pretty close, and Ian was sure that if he followed it there would be a bigger tributary where we might find fish. I was still on bed rest. It was thirty weeks into my pregnancy, but I didn't seem nearly as big as I should be. I chalked it up to the fact that we hadn't been eating very good since the strike.

The boys were still kept inside; we didn't want to risk any kind of contamination. They had grown used to playing in the caves, and had begun exploring their depths. That was another area that gave me anxiety. We had not fully explored the tunnels, and the boys played in them every day. I made them call out to me every few minutes so I knew they were safe.

Another issue that had come up was the smell that was starting to fill this place. With the animals, all these unwashed bodies, and our homemade outhouse, I knew we were going to have to do something about it soon.

At the two month mark the men had a conference and decided to open the cave. We could make short trips outside, and since they had marked the flyovers, we would be sure to be hidden out of sight when they came. It was mid-November, I was thirty-two weeks pregnant, and once again, our supplies were running ridiculously low.

CHAPTER TWO

One bit of good news among all of this was that the rabbit gave birth to a litter. Supposedly she could breed again in six weeks. We decided as soon as we could tell their sex we would move out another male and female for breeding.

My Grandpa, a short Italian whose parents had immigrated, started showing Mom which herbs and roots were good for food. I was surprised to learn about the things growing all around us that were edible. He had found blackberry bushes that had no berries right now, but there were many other things, including mushrooms on the forest floor and in another area there were lots of dandelions, whose leaves and flowers actually tasted good.

When we took the boys out, we showed them also. Their excitement was palpable when we let them out of the cave. After the initial shock of what had happened, they seemed to be handling it all pretty well; I should have expected it. They seemed to feel like we were on some grand adventure.

Grandpa had also found a section of earth where the sun shone for more than six hours a day, so he started planting some seeds for garlic, peas, beans, and onions. He planted a mere two or three seeds a day, in a random pattern, so as not to attract the attention of anybody from above.

The chickens were not laying as frequently as before, probably because of the waning winter light. We needed to make another area to put the chickens that we fertilized, once we got around to doing that, so we could have some chicks. So far we were eating up all the eggs right away, and they were our only source of protein, except for a few cans of beans we had, but nonetheless, we needed to think about the future.

I watched my husband stay busy around the cave. He was continuously working on something. He stacked wood for fires, dug new bathroom holes, moved things around and finally decided to start building some traps. I would see him watching me, those blue eyes looking at me with love and concern. He was about 5'10", and had brown hair he kept short. He played soccer all through high school and was in pretty good shape when we got married. He had put on a few pounds over the last couple of years, but two months out here and he had lost it all already. His nose was crooked

because it had been broken two times, and he was always making jokes about something.

He saw me smiling at him and I motioned for him to come and sit down with me. I wanted a kiss, and I wanted to talk over a few things we needed to take care of, and soon. I began running down a list I had in my head: a birthing plan, an alternate source of fire/heat, some more protein, and an alternative bathroom area. Speaking of baths, we all needed one.

We hashed out how things would go when I went into labor. As for the second item on the list, I was concerned about fire because if anything ever happened to our matches, or we ran out, we would be screwed. He said he would figure something out. We still hadn't found a fishing spot, so Ian suggested we set some traps around for rabbits or squirrels while reassuring me they would soon find a fishing spot.

Nobody had seen a razor in the last two months. It hadn't really seemed like a priority to bring one along. Being Italian, my mom, sister, and I looked like we hadn't seen a razor in years. My sister's mustache was growing in strong; back home she waxed every other week.

My brother had a full freakin' beard, all black and shaggy; he looked like a terrorist. My grandpa looked like a Semitic priest of some kind, and my husband, being Irish, had a patchy, red beard that looked absolutely ridiculous.

Ian started trying to find ways to make fire. He got a string and a stick and did some rubbing thing a few different ways, but it didn't seem to be working. Another thing he did was hit different types of rocks together. Still no results. The third thing he tried was a piece of glass and a pile of dry grass. It started smoking a few times but he couldn't get it to catch. Frustrated, he set it aside and worked on something else.

Instead of digging another tunnel for the chickens, we decided to have Joey make a cage outside to start keeping the chickens that laid. My brother was stocky; about 5' 10" and 185 lbs. He had dark brown hair and piercing, grey-blue eyes. He had a long-time girlfriend that he found out was cheating on him just about six weeks before the strike had happened. She had met someone on the Internet and she had moved to Texas to be with him. I think Joey was still reeling from it all. I watched him, quietly collecting young branches that were still soft and weaving them together.

I helped as often as I could. There were only five chickens altogether, and three chickens in a cage shouldn't attract any overhead attention. If

somebody stumbled upon our camp, that would be a different story.

Another week passed. The stream still hadn't yielded any fish, and we had a few more weeks before the rabbits would be big enough to eat. Ian and Joey decided to take the fishing poles, along with a few supplies and scout the streams until they could find some fish. Even if they were gone overnight, it would be better than staying close to the cave and starving.

As soon as they set off, I decided that we were going to wash our bodies. I gathered a few things and left a couple hours later, during the warmest part of the day. The stream wasn't that far, and as soon as we got there I made the boys strip down and wash. It was cold, and they were complaining, but we all needed to take care of ourselves. If we didn't start washing on a regular basis who knows what kind of issues we would have. My grandpa had led us to the spot, so he took the boys away so I could also wash off. It felt nice to be clean.

While washing I examined my belly. I was still very small, even though I was almost thirty-five weeks, and I hadn't been feeling the baby move as much as I knew it should. I didn't know what I could do about it. I dressed quickly and tried to put it out of my mind.

On our way back I started contracting hard again. I hadn't thought about it but this was the most work I had done in a long time. I had to stop several times to wait until the contractions passed. I saw Seamus watching me, his little eyes wide open. He seemed like he barely spoke anymore, and I felt like this couldn't be good for him to see.

The contractions didn't stop when I got back. They just got worse. My grandpa decided to start a fire for extra heat.

After a few hours, as night was beginning to fall, I knew the baby was coming. My water broke, and I thought about the fact that even though I was premature, we were pretty much out of the danger zone. I just wished Ian would get back in time, even though I knew he probably wouldn't.

We sequestered my dad and the two boys in the back of the cave, and me, my grandpa, my mom, and sister were in the front, where the living area was. I couldn't believe this was happening. It was so surreal, so much like a strange dream that I would soon wake from.

Sometime, deep in the middle of the night, the little guy was born. The labor wasn't horrible, probably due to the fact that he was far smaller than he should be at this stage. He was tiny. So tiny, I started crying. Something wasn't right.

I tried to nurse but he seemed like he was having a hard time latching on. My grandpa opened a can of evaporated milk and started dribbling drops in his mouth and the baby swallowed some of that. Grandpa said he thought the baby was between 3 and 4 pounds. I didn't even feel like we could name him without Ian here. I laid back and tried to get some rest, trying to squelch the feeling of dread that I had.

We continued alternating between trying to get him to nurse and my mom feeding him the evaporated milk. I tried to express milk with my hand because I knew if I didn't produce we didn't have enough of that evaporated milk to keep him going.

Midway through the day, Ian and Joey returned with half a dozen small fish. Of course we were all elated to see them, and happy they had brought back food. Ian was in shock that the baby was here. He kept looking at him and I could see how concerned he was about the baby's small size.

Always the optimistic one, he put a smile on and started talking about names. We decided on Liam, and instantly my mom started calling him 'Little Liam'. We had a delicious fish dinner, and Joey told us where they found a spot that seemed to be promising. This was a double blessing, because the fish bones also provided us a flavorful broth for roots and canned food.

It was now mid-December. The nights were beginning to get pretty cold along the California coast, and Christmas was fast approaching. I marked the occasion in my mind, but I didn't know if we should even bring it up. If the boys were expecting something grand it would just be horribly disappointing, or we could try and make a small celebration with the things we had. I opted for the second choice. I began secretly planning with my mom and Lisa for a special meal, and what we could do for small gifts.

My mom, always able to make something out of nothing, came up with a few things we could do for gifts. She had often made small handcrafts for parties or get togethers, and had a knack for making something out of nothing. She was just over five feet tall and she had crazy dark brown hair that she frequently dyed dark red. Determined, I could see it in her green eyes that she wasn't going to let the circumstances get her down.

A week passed, and Little Liam didn't seem to be doing any better. He drank a little bit here and there, but he didn't put on any weight. We still couldn't get him to nurse, and I knew I wouldn't be able to keep a good

supply if he didn't start eating. I had continued squeezing out milk with my hand and we were feeding it to him with a cloth.

The whole thing wasn't working out very well. We had no way to preserve the milk, and whatever he didn't eat that day had to be thrown away. He looked so helpless. He reminded me of a little baby bird with no feathers, transparent skin, and eyes that are too big for its body.

On his eighth day of life, my brother, Joey, volunteered to head to the city the guys had found and see if he could find some help for the baby. I knew he was having a hard time watching Liam struggle, so we agreed it would be best if he went to find help. He packed a few supplies and left his other things in the back of the cave, covered with a tarp.

The next day Ian and my Dad let us know it was the chosen day to reunite, being December 21st, it was exactly three months since the Strike. If they didn't go they would miss the opportunity to see if anything had developed, and this would be their only chance to get some information on what was going on.

I assured Ian they should go ahead and go, Joey would be back within two days to let us know if he had been able to find someone to help with the baby. Ian and my dad should be back within four days, which would be on Christmas day. I decided to go ahead with our preparations, using the time while they were gone to finalize our secret plans.

My grandpa left that afternoon to see if he could find the fishing spot the guys had, and the girls stayed back to take care of the kids. My sister took the two older boys out a couple times a day to look for berries, roots and herbs that we could eat, and they also checked on grandpa's garden.

She came back to report that several things were growing well, and even though it would be a few months before they started yielding, it was a good start. Every little bit helped at this point.

Grandpa came back that night stating that he was unable to find the fishing hole, but he had found another spot and brought back a few small fish and some sort of mussels. I stared at the mussels. They looked like furry, slimy donuts. I didn't know if I could stomach that.

The next morning there were no eggs, so we just ate some cold beans and drank water. What I really wanted was some coffee. I warmed up some water and drank that, hoping to make myself feel better about it. We were down to our last tank of propane. We all took turns trying to feed the baby, but he wouldn't eat anything.

We continued holding him, rubbing his arms and legs, and trying to get little bits of milk into his mouth. He latched on for the first time, but he wouldn't suck or swallow. We started praying that Joey would return early, with some sort of a miracle.

The next morning the baby was almost comatose. He wouldn't open his eyes and barely responded to anything we tried to do for him. My sister took the boys out earlier than normal; I don't think she could stand to see him like this. Grandpa went to find some food, and my mom started going through stuff in the back of the cave, looking for something. I don't think she knew what, just something that might help.

"Izzy, come here." My mom called from the back of the cave. I quickly got up, sensing something in her voice. I carried Little Liam as I walked over to her.

She pulled back the tarp that covered Joey's things, and I saw why she was concerned. He had taken everything. I stared for a minute, wondering if I should pretend like he was coming back. I heard the soft sniffing of my mom crying. I knew how she felt, but there was no reason for him to stay and watch us suffer. He could survive easily, without having to worry about all of us and our problems.

"Mom, he couldn't handle it. You saw how he was watching Liam. It was probably best if he left. Maybe he can establish himself a bit, and..."

I didn't get to finish my thought because just then, I felt something. I looked down at the baby, trying to see what had changed. I moved him closer and realized he had stopped breathing. I moved him around and patted his back, but nothing changed. My mom moved to my side, seeing my concern. She took him from me and started rubbing his arms and legs. It didn't matter. Liam was gone.

Tears filled my eyes and I couldn't even say anything. Deep inside, I knew all along that it was going to happen, but that didn't make it any easier. I felt like my heart was squeezing out of my chest, looking at his helpless little body. We quietly wept together, not saying anything. I don't think I could have formed words at that moment if I wanted to. Finally, we decided to quickly bury him, before Lisa and the boys got back.

We picked a little spot under a huge redwood tree, and marked it with a mound of branches and leaves. It was so deceivingly peaceful out here, the quiet calm of the forest belying the turmoil welling up inside. I felt like

part of my heart was torn out as I laid his little body in the earth. It wasn't right.

As soon as they returned, Seamus began asking about the baby. He was so sweet and I didn't even know how I could tell him what had happened. Finally, I told him that the baby went to live in Heaven, because it was too hard for him to live here. He and Gaiden were very quiet the rest of the day. Gaiden was usually the talkative one, but I think he picked up on the general mood. I don't know if they understood, but after a little bit of time, they both seemed to handle it well.

I tried to talk to Lisa, but she wouldn't say anything. She cried most of the day and didn't eat anything. I was growing concerned about the general health of everybody involved. It was hard to keep up an appetite when things like this were going on, but we all needed to keep up our strength.

Grandpa returned in the evening with even less than the day before. He simply nodded when we told him about Liam, as though he had expected it. I was a bit frustrated that he didn't respond more than that.

I decided I should go out looking for food the next day. I needed a break and I could take the two boys. After all that had happened in the last few weeks I felt like they needed a distraction, too.

The next few days passed in a fog. Ian and my dad hadn't returned on time, Christmas passed and all our plans fell through. My mom and I had explained to Lisa and grandpa that Joey wasn't returning, and Lisa seemed to sink deeper into her depression. Even though Joey teased her when they were children, they had grown close over the last few years. She probably felt like he abandoned her. She might even wish he had taken her with him.

I caught a few fish, and the chickens laid a few eggs between them. Grandpa had continued his foraging and gardening, and we ate a few of the young garlics one night. In spite of all that happened I tried to be optimistic. Things were looking up a little bit.

After a full week Dad and Ian returned. Dad was so ill he could hardly walk, and it had taken them twice as long on the return. Ian was practically carrying him into the camp. We laid him down and got him warm. I made a soup out of some fish bones and we added herbs and roots to it. Dad was pale and coughing a lot. It was a horrible cough. Like nothing I had heard before, each time it sounded like he was choking.

Dad had always been thin, standing six feet tall he had a slender build, with salt and pepper, wavy hair. As long as I could remember he talked

about the fact that he was going bald, even though I still couldn't see a bald spot anywhere. He was cynical, and skeptic, and generally didn't like people. He didn't like Ian at first, but in the last few years it seemed they had grown very close.

Now he seemed strangely thin. He looked like a skeleton. His eyes were sunken in and his skin looked waxy, drawn tight against his skull. Ian didn't seem extremely well, either, he told us that Dad had started coughing the day they left and the nights sleeping on the cold ground just seemed to make it worse. Ian had started coming down with something about halfway back, and wasn't coughing, but seemed to be extremely wan and pale.

He almost didn't notice two people were absent from our group. I quickly pulled him aside and explained about Joey and Liam. He didn't respond, just continued staring with that hard look he had acquired over the last three months. He pulled me close and held me. I tried not to cry but I felt the tears coming. He stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. After a long time, he spoke. They hadn't found anybody at the meeting place.

Dad coughed so much we could hardly rest that night. I found some Eucalyptus and tried to cook some of the leaves to help his breathing, but it didn't make a bit of difference. His coughing and wheezing fits got so bad he couldn't even eat. Every breath sounded like it required extreme effort.

Every time he coughed the boys stared with wide eyes. They knew something was wrong. He never did notice Joey and Liam were gone. He didn't respond when we asked him things, and finally, two nights later he choked and coughed for almost two hours before he finally breathed his last. He had never even spoken a word to us since his return. My mom had spent those two days in fear. She alternated between crying and staring, and after his death I grew concerned for her. The next morning I showed Ian where our little plot was, and we put my dad into the ground.

My mom didn't speak during his burial. She stood there, quietly, not even crying. Lisa, on the other hand, was hysterical. She sobbed and wailed, talking unintelligibly. If somebody touched her or spoke to her she cowed away, renewing her crying and muttering. Oddly, I was more concerned for my mom. She barely answered when we spoke to her, and she spent the next few days doing little else besides staring.

After things had settled down a bit, Ian told us that he suspected the flyovers were drones. He thought they were probably just decoys to keep people in fear, so we decided to test it out. I wanted to go with him, but I

was worried to leave my mom and Lisa alone. I talked with Ian loudly about wanting to go, but needing to do laundry. My mom came out of her reverie a bit and offered to do the laundry. That made me feel a bit better.

We concocted a plan to put one of our vehicles out in the open and see if it got any notice. Early the next morning, before the sun was up, we drove the car about twenty miles away from our base camp. We left the lights off and drove slowly. He pulled off the road onto a shoulder that was covered with tall redwood trees. I turned to face him. We were still a few miles away from our goal area. We sat in silence for a moment before he turned to me. He cupped my face in his hands. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the comfort and security I felt in his touch.

He pulled my face towards his, kissing me softly, and I realized he had planned this little rendezvous. He pushed his chair back and pulled me on top of him. His kisses quickly intensified as he pulled my body against his, his hands under my shirt, racing up my naked back.

“It’s been a while.” He said, with a little smile and lifted my shirt over my head.

We continued up the coast a few more miles. After leaving the car on the side of the road, we walked about half a mile toward the coast, into the forest, and followed the road back. We were about halfway home when the flyover passed. Nothing. It was a drone. We excitedly began walking back to camp. About four hours later we heard a huge explosion. We turned back and scanned the sky, dark smoke swirling upward where we had left the car. My stomach clenched in fear and I instantly felt nauseous.

Ian’s face grew dark. He explained it was still sending images to some sort of a base camp that obviously wasn’t very far away. We hurried back to camp and told the others. Just as we were explaining it, we saw another plane on the horizon. It wasn’t the right time of the day for that, so we realized we had alerted them to a nearby presence. We quickly hid, and spent the next four days very cautiously. They knew we were here, and now they were looking for us.

CHAPTER THREE

Grandpa and Ian went out to forage only at night, and were having difficulty getting fish. Luckily, the rabbits were now big enough for us to start slaughtering. The first night of slaughtering, Ian vomited, but after that he got the hang of it.

The flyovers settle down a little, but it was obvious they were still looking for us. We started going out again during the day, but we made sure we were covered at all times. The rabbit had kindled again, and things were looking up a bit. Lisa had started doing 'school' with the boys, and it was great because it kept all of them busy.

Our little cave looked like it was right out of Swiss Family Robinson. Woven baskets hung in different places, with belongings, roots, and fruits. We had constructed a decent stove top out of pieces of metal and rocks, laid over a fire. It looked like an old kiln, and even with all that was going on, spirits were high.

Another couple of weeks passed, and we marked the time in mid-January. Four months. Things were going great. The garden looked good, and Grandpa still planted seeds every few days. He started some carrots, broccoli, spinach and lettuce. The spinach and lettuce had sprouted right away and he said as long as the weather was good, we should enjoy them soon.

A few days later, Ian came running back into the camp, breathless. He broke into a coughing spell as he told us there was a group of refugees several miles away, traveling down the freeway. They were trying to hide, but there was so many of them he was sure they would be spotted by the flyover. If they sent in a patrol we would be found for certain. He decided to go back out for Grandpa, and we started moving our stuff inside. We brought in the chicken coop and a few of our small things that were sitting in the sun. We tried to make our space as inconspicuous as possible.

Grandpa and Ian got back. Luckily Ian had thought to fill a few water containers. They covered the entrance to the cave. Ian expected it to take the vagabonds a couple of days to get far enough away that we could resume our normal routine, if they were not caught. We ate eggs, and rabbits, slaughtering them in the back of the cave. I wasn't sure if I would

ever get used to the sound. Their high pitched whining as he slit their throats was unnatural and very disturbing.

Ian didn't seem to be doing well. He was pale, and quickly thinning. I decided he should use this time that we were confined to the cave to regain some of his strength. It was hard to keep him down, though. He would rest a bit, and then start working on a way to make something better; digging new bathroom holes, exploring the caves a bit with the boys, clearing leaves and debris from the back of the cave.

We couldn't have a fire inside the cave during all this, it was way too risky. We had one canister of propane left, which we felt we should use for light, so we began to eat the canned supplies.

Two days later my Grandpa stopped in the middle of what he was doing. He held still a moment, and then snuck to the edge of the cave. I glanced around and caught my sister's eyes. They were huge, wide open, and filled with tears. I didn't know if she had heard something, or what. I looked back at my Grandpa. He raised a finger to his lips and we all held incredibly still. Ian was somewhere deep in the caves with Seamus and Gaiden, and I hoped they stayed back there a while longer.

I silently moved to the edge with him, to find out what was happening. I heard something but I couldn't distinguish what it was. After a moment, it was followed by a sound that could only be described as distant fireworks. I frowned, trying to determine what it could be when Ian came running with the boys from the back of the cave. He had his hand over Gaiden's mouth and both boys were crying.

Worried, I almost spoke before I remembered that we were supposed to keep quiet. Ian started mouthing stuff and pointing to his ears. I nodded. We had heard it. He made a gun with his hand. A chill ran over me. That was the first sound. It was so far away I hadn't recognized it. It must have been some sort of rapid-firing gun.

Just then Gaiden whimpered and Ian squeezed his mouth tighter and bent to his ear. More tears spilled out of his eyes and his little body was trembling. I looked at my sister and mom. My sister was silently sobbing, but my mom still just stared. I was beginning to wonder if she knew what was going on.

My grandpa was waving again from the cave door. He did some things with his hands and arms, and finally I realized that he could hear someone running. We all stayed deathly still. After a minute Ian motioned me over to

him. He wanted me to take over with Gaiden, and he made his way to the back of the cave.

I wondered where Ian was going as I quietly reassured Gaiden everything was ok. He had stopped crying and I convinced him to lay down. Ian came back with the gun. I silently prayed he wouldn't chamber it. That much noise could bring somebody to us, especially if they knew what to look for. And our luck, he would shoot my grandpa, not the intruder.

Time passed eternally slow. It seemed as though whoever it was had gone. Ian quietly whispered to me that the other noise we had heard was a bomb. I could hardly swallow as I felt my stomach turn into an icy knot. We could have all been killed. Just like that. If they had bombed a few miles closer.

For some reason I suddenly felt more serious than I had this entire time. I guess the finality of it was so much more real. All of our wandering around outside and acting like we were on some extended camping trip came rushing back. This was real. This was serious. We needed to kick it in gear or we were going to be in trouble.

The next few days were painfully slow. The fly overs were random and frequent. We had started going out only at night and keeping the cave closed. A couple of times my grandpa went out, but it was so dangerous he came right back. We still didn't feel comfortable having a fire, and the last of the propane had run out. We couldn't cook any eggs or rabbit meat without the fire, so all we were eating was canned beans and some canned vegetables.

Ian was growing worse. He was almost yellow and he had lost a considerable amount of weight. We all had, but there was something different about it. He had a strange cough, too. It wasn't there all the time, but when a spasm came upon him it took him several minutes to recover.

After three or four days had passed he came out of the back of the cave with something. I had no idea what it was, it looked like a large woven box. He explained it was a trap for fish. He said you could put it in water and when you pulled on it, it closed up, almost like a net. I smiled at him. He had also decided that he was going to go out tonight. He was going to catch fish and try to cook some rabbit meat over a fire deep in the forest. He was going to try and hide it, and hope it couldn't be seen from above.

I didn't want him to go. I actually started crying as soon as he ducked out of the cave. It was so dangerous right now, and I couldn't bear the

thought of something happening to him. I couldn't sleep at all that night. We had left the cover back a little bit to let some moonlight in. I tidied up a bit, and tried to find some things to do but I ran out of energy. Not feeling a bit tired, I waited by the door of the cave.

Somewhere in the early morning hours I heard something. It was a faint rustling that seemed to be getting closer. The clouds had covered the moon, blocking its bright light. I thought about waking Grandpa, but I didn't want to alarm him. It was probably just an animal. After a few more minutes, I heard it again. I thought for a moment that it could be Ian, but he had made it very clear that under no circumstances would he return tonight. I stayed perfectly still, hoping some wild beast hadn't caught our trail and would soon be intruding on our hideout.

Just then, the clouds moved and light spilled down on the cold night. I saw shaggy fur. I focused for a moment and realized that it was hair. My heart beat so fast and hard I thought for sure it was audible. A head turned and I could see it was a man. He was tall and large, with a big coat that seemed to be camouflage. Tears started filling my eyes and I silently prayed that he would continue. He seemed to be looking directly at our cave.

He stood still for a moment before continuing on. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I sat there, my back against the hard stone wall until the morning light broke on the horizon, and I fell into an exhausted and troubled sleep.

I awoke that morning to Ian returning. He had been successful, catching a few fish and cooking some rabbit for us. He looked terrible. I hoped it was only because he hadn't rested the night before. I ordered him to bed and fed the boys some food.

As the afternoon turned into the evening, Ian didn't get up. I figured he just needed some extra rest so I didn't worry about it.

The next morning he didn't get up, either. I went to his side and tried to wake him. He was feverish and barely could awaken to speak with me. I told myself he would be fine. That he just had a touch of the flu, but I knew in my heart it wasn't true. I couldn't believe this was happening. I took some deep breaths and tried to tell myself to calm down. I needed to get it together.

The next morning his skin was sallow and slick with sweat. His breathing was weak and his heart rate was erratic and rapid. Grandpa announced he was going to look for antibiotics. He quietly told me Ian

probably wouldn't make it, but if any of us wanted to survive he needed to go now. He packed a bag and left.

I retreated to the interior of the cave. I sat near Ian's side, wondering how we could possibly survive. I decided we were going to make some changes. It would be better if we kept a small fire and cooked some food than starve to death trying to stay unseen.

I was glad I had been watching the rabbit slaughtering. For the next week we alternated eating rabbits, and making stew from their bones. We kept a small fire in the cave, only at night, and for as little time as possible. We had started sleeping during the day, and going out at night for foraging.

On the five month mark, Ian passed away. It was February, just days after our anniversary. His death snapped me out of a slump. I realized I had barely been eating the last few days, only thinking about what was happening with Ian. I knew the responsibility was on me now. I needed to keep spirits high. The only thing that kept us girls motivated was the little boys. We wanted to quit, to give up, but we knew we needed to keep going.

It was apparent that I needed to figure out a way to provide some protein for us. I decided our best bet would be Ian's fish trap, so I commissioned my mom to weave a net so we could catch a large number of fish and keep them in a net in the river until we were ready to eat them.

The flybys literally ceased within the next few days. We still worked only at night, but we kept watch on how things were going during the day and didn't see any more signs of planes.

Our fish trap seemed to be working fairly effectively, and Lisa came back one day announcing that the beans had small pods on them. I couldn't wait to eat some fresh vegetables.

I hadn't told my mom or Lisa about the man I had seen that night, I didn't want to frighten them, but I thought about him all the time. Was he just passing through, or was he hiding out near us? I tried to pay attention when I was out, but I couldn't see any signs of someone else.

After another week the fish were gone and there were no more to be found. The rabbits were all gone and while there were more babies right now, it would be some weeks before we could begin slaughtering them. We could starve, kill one of the chickens, or find another source of protein. I decided that I should travel upstream and see if I could find somewhere else to fish.

I packed enough food and water for a day, and started out the next morning before the sun was up. I followed the river across the freeway and far inland. A couple of times I thought it might be completely gone, but it would widen again. There didn't seem to be any spots better than the one we had already.

Just after noontime I stumbled upon a huge pool of water, a little bit away from the stream I was following. I had seen the sun gleam off it and followed it for a few hundred yards until I found the source. I decided to take this opportunity to wash. I could check it out and see if there were any fish while washing three months of grime off my body.

I tucked my clothes under a bush, leaving my bra and panties on, and swam out a little ways. I had always had an unnatural fear of rivers and lakes, and it was kicking in now. I felt the moss tickle my feet and visions of barracudas swimming made me panic. I thrashed in the water, somehow growing more fearful of the imaginary predators lurking in the dark water.

My toes found a rock and I tried to push off it, but I slipped and went under. I hit my knee and began flailing. I tried to get my head above water but kept swallowing instead. I didn't think about anything but getting to shore. The fact that a plane could have spotted me, or I could have alerted anyone within three miles of my presence didn't enter my mind. I was drowning.

Just as I thought to myself that I was actually going to die I felt something. Something was grabbing my arm and I went berserk. I coughed and sputtered and kicked and flailed. It was dragging me underwater. Rocks started scratching my legs and I realized that I could stand up in the water. I continued flailing, punching and kicking with all my might.

Suddenly, I heard a voice, telling me to calm down. I froze. As soon as I could turn around I did, flailing and freeing myself from my captor's grip. I was shivering and trying to adjust my eyes. A man stood before me, who looked vaguely familiar. White teeth gleamed out of a bushy, dirty blond beard. He was smiling. I tried to scan the area around me, but since I was still partway in the water there wasn't really anything I could use as a weapon unless I grabbed a rock.

"You all right?" The stranger asked. I stared at the man in front of me, my eyes narrowed as I tried to determine if I should reply.

"What happened out there? Something get ya?" I still didn't answer. I just scowled. Why did he look familiar?

“Listen, I’m not trying to hurt you. I saw you wandering around out here, far away from your camp, and I was going to see if you needed some help.”

A chill ran down my spine. He knew where our camp was. And then it hit me. He was the man that had been near our cave that night. I started shivering more, my teeth clattering loudly against each other. I tried to stop them, but couldn’t. I needed to get my clothes on.

He smiled again.

“Don’t worry. I can help you out.” He reached his hand out to me and I shirked back, afraid of what he might do to me, out here all alone.

“Listen to me.” He said, a cold tone entering his voice.

“If I wanted to hurt you I would have already. I know where your camp is, I know you all are running out of food. I want to help you.”

I shook my head and kept my eyes on him as I moved toward my clothes.

“I don’t need your help.” I said, snatching my clothes out of their hiding place.

“You’re not going to find fish in this stream.” He said, and turned away from me.

I stood there, for a moment, before I realized I was still standing there in my underwear. I quickly dressed and thought about what he said. We were on the brink of starving. If we didn’t do something different we wouldn’t make it.

He seemed a bit older than me, a shaggy, dirty blond beard covering most of his features. His hair looked greasy, and he seemed very unkempt. It struck me that he must be alone. I probably wouldn’t have kept up my appearance if I had been completely alone. He had a big, tattered overcoat that he put back on over his wet clothes. Wet because he had helped me from drowning myself.

I could tell he knew his way around here, and he was probably right, he could help us. My only problem was what he wanted in exchange.

I took a deep breath and called out to him.

“Hey!”

He stopped.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked, for a moment thinking he could be some kind of spy.

He turned to face me.

“It’s a long story.” He was quiet for a moment. I didn’t know if he was going to tell me the long story or if that was all I was going to get.

“Was that your husband that died?”

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I hadn’t really talked to anyone about it since it happened. It seemed like so long ago, but I realized it was just a couple of weeks.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He said, softly. “If you don’t want my help, I understand. I see you have kids, and would hate to see you all starve to death. “

I stood there, still unable to focus.

“What’s your name?” He asked, as he took a step closer to me.

I backed a bit.

“Izzy... Isobel. How about you?”

“John.” He put his hand out to shake my hand. I frowned for a moment, then decided to acquiesce.

“How about this? You head back to your camp, and I will keep looking for a fishing spot. I saw your little garden; you can trade me the food for vegetables when they are ready.”

Tears filled my eyes. I didn’t want to owe him but we really needed this. I nodded, barely.

“But I want you to show me the spot, when you find it.” I demanded. He nodded, still watching me.

“Alright.”

I turned away, and then I thought of something. I didn’t think it was a good idea if my family knew that some guy was aware of the exact location of our camp. I suggested we meet by the garden, weekly. He agreed and we parted ways.

CHAPTER FOUR

I didn't know what to do. I decided to tell my mom and sister as soon as I returned, but I could tell they were both scared. I assured them he didn't know where we were, and they actually seemed very relieved he was going to help us out with food.

The first week there was nothing ready from the garden, so we gathered extra roots and berries. I arrived at the appointed place, and worked in the garden while I waited. I was nervous. Not only had I not been around another person in almost six months, but I was leery of him. I didn't know him at all. How did I know if his intentions were good?

I could not appear to my family that I was unsure of him, I had to put on a face, and act as though I had great confidence in his character.

A sound in the bushes startled me out of my thoughts. My heart started beating wildly and I crouched into the shadows. I had a knife hidden in my pants and I waited quietly.

"Hello, there."

John stepped out from behind a redwood, his left hand open in front of him and his right hand holding a string of fish in front of his body.

I showed him our small basket of roots, berries, and edible leaves and grasses, and explained that nothing was ready in the garden. He seemed impressed with our collection, and asked a few questions about some of the plants.

He gave me the fish, thanked me, and walked back into the woods. I was surprised. I expected him to stay and chat; to ask more questions and to be difficult to get rid of. Instead, he was quickly gone. I made my way back to our camp and showed them the fish. I could see my mom and Lisa were relieved nothing had happened, and I felt this could be a good arrangement.

It was just about the beginning of March. It was raining frequently, our garden was growing rapidly, and we added seeds as often as we could. We also collected seeds from the berries we found, and cuttings from a few herbs, and planted them, too.

The rabbits were big enough to slaughter, so we set aside another pair for breeding and had rabbits again for eating. The chickens had started laying again, and we decided since we had this arrangement with John, we

should start fertilizing eggs, also. We could do with a few more laying hens, and it would be nice to have a roasted chicken down the road.

The second meeting with John I was able to offer him a handful of peas and pea shoots, a few beets, some radishes, and some lettuces. I also included three eggs and a dead rabbit. He looked at it for a moment.

“I don’t need that much food. You can keep some of it.” He said as he handed me the fish.

Somehow I had expected him to say something like that. I explained that we would have good weeks and bad weeks, but if he consistently brought us fish he would keep us from starving the bad weeks. He slowly nodded, but I didn’t think I had convinced him.

He reached around his back and started to pull something out.

“I have something for you.”

I took a step back and moved my hand toward the knife I had in the wasteband of my pants. As soon as I saw what he had I blushed, feeling so foolish and hoping he hadn’t seen me.

He pulled out two small wooden swords. The hilt was tied on this some sort of string.

“For your boys.” He added, with a sheepish smile.

I smiled in return, feeling awkward and out of practice with social gestures, and almost started crying. It was very kind, and they would appreciate it very much. I had been so focused on surviving I hadn’t thought about finding fun things for them.

“They will love these. Thank you.” I said. I looked at the ground, feeling bad for being so skeptical of him. He was probably more starved for human interaction than we were. He asked me a few questions about edible roots and then thanked me for the food and ducked out of sight.

When I brought the swords back my mom just stared at them for a long moment before speaking.

“Maybe we should see if he wants to live with us.” My sister and I looked at her, then each other. I knew my mom was beyond stressed about not having someone to help with the chores, and there were many things that needed doing and fixing, but that was a bit premature.

Lisa spoke first. Well, she erupted.

“Mom, we don’t even know him!” She was worked up. I tried to think of something to say, but Lisa kept going.

“So we should show him where our camp is? What if he tries something? What if he kills us?”

Mom scowled at Lisa. “You don’t need to be so rude to me. You really think he doesn’t know where we are? He knows that Izzy has two boys. How do you think he knows that?”

Lisa looked at me for a long moment, “He knows, doesn’t he? Is he spying on us? Where did he come from?”

I took a deep breath.

“I don’t know, alright. I didn’t ask him all that stuff because it doesn’t matter. He knows where our camp is, so what good would it do to tell him he can’t bring us food? He probably just wants to be around people. Listen, why don’t we invite him to eat with us? We can ask him some questions, and maybe find out where his camp is. Unless you want me to try and find it myself.”

Lisa turned on her heel and stomped away. I knew she was probably scared, as she should be. My mom looked back at me for a moment.

“I think we should have him eat with us. I would like to meet him.”

I nodded. Fine.

That night, as I was lying in my sleeping bag, the wheels were still turning in my head. I decided it might be a good idea to find out what was going on with him. The next morning, I sat down with my mom and Lisa and we hashed out a plan.

At the next scheduled meeting, my mom would take John the food. She would tell him I was sick and couldn’t make it. I would be hidden in the direction he came from and follow from a distance and find out where his camp was.

The whole next week I was anxious. I was worried something would go wrong, or we would find out something about him we didn’t really want to know. The boys loved their swords, and we had decided that my mom would ask him to come for dinner when she took him the food. I was beginning to worry about my Grandpa. He still hadn’t returned and I honestly wasn’t expecting it to take him this long.

The morning that the meeting with John was scheduled I got up extra early. I dressed and went out to hide in the woods. My adrenaline was pumping and I kept telling myself to calm down. Our camp was to the south east of the garden, and John went northeast when he left. I hid just a few yards away. It wasn’t the easiest thing in the forest. It had seemed dense,

but really there was a lot of visibility around me. This was going to be more difficult than I thought.

After about an hour, I saw John in the distance. He was quick and quiet, and made his way to the meeting place. I heard my mom's voice, then his, and they seemed to be talking for longer than usual. I heard my mom laughing. It was weird. It had been a while since she had laughed. I hoped she wasn't hitting on him, because that would be embarrassing.

It seemed like forever but finally he started making his way in my direction again. I waited quietly. I decided I needed to stay very far behind him if I wasn't going to be seen, and when he was just out of view I moved.

After just a few moments, John turned sharply to the right. He was heading straight for our camp, but he would end up a few hundred yards above it if he continued this way. He circled back around and ended up very near our camp. Here I saw that he had a perch of some sort in a nearby tree. I waited and watched, and noticed that he was able to see everything that was going on at our camp.

I realized he could have noticed my absence, but I was supposedly sick, so it would be natural for me to be out of view. I felt unsettled, knowing that he watched our camp. He pulled out binoculars and some sort of food and settled in.

He seemed like he was going to stay a while, so I decided I may as well get comfortable. As quietly as I could I tucked myself behind some bushes. I couldn't see him when I leaned back, but I knew as soon as he moved I would be able to hear him.

CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up and realized that dusk was settling. The entire afternoon had passed and I quickly looked around, wondering where John was. I searched the horizon and noticed some branches moving, so I hopped up and continued my pursuit. I briefly wondered if he watched us every day or only sometimes.

He continued into the forest until well past dark. I had to get closer to him to keep him in my sights. I tried to still my breathing so he wouldn't hear me. The moon began to rise and soon I saw light from a fire.

I stopped, dead in my tracks. There shouldn't be a fire if he was out here alone. I remained still, trying to decide what I should do. I watched the fire and thought about my options. I didn't think I could get back our camp in the dark. Hell, I didn't even know what I was going to do when I got here. I shook my head. I was in deep.

Glancing around, I decided I should take my chances heading back. I backed slowly away and suddenly there were arms wrapped around me. A large hand covered my mouth and stifled a scream.

"Don't move and keep your mouth shut."

I flailed, knowing that I could be dead in a matter of moments if I didn't make some noise. I tried to elbow his gut and bite his hand.

He pulled me close to him, engulfing me with his arms. I could hardly move, but still tried to squirm as much as I could. I heard a whisper in my ear.

"Stop that, it's me, John."

I continued thrashing and trying to scream. I didn't trust him.

Then there were voices, coming from by the fire. People talking excitedly and I saw shadows dancing on the forest floor. John started dragging me away and without warning threw me to the ground behind some bushes. He pushed me over by a fallen redwood and used his weight to pin me down.

He kept a hand over my mouth and got his face about three inches away from mine.

"These people aren't friendly." He whispered. "You need to keep it down or you are going to get both of us killed."

I swallowed. I didn't know if I should believe him but I wasn't dead yet so I decided to go along with it. After a moment, a group passed. They were filthy; their ragged clothes looked like they didn't even bother washing them.

Three passed that I counted, each one carrying a gun. After what must have been an hour of lying underneath John I realized my arm was asleep. I started wiggling and he moved away. He sat up, his back turned away from me.

"Why did you lie to me?" He finally asked.

"You're the one that lied! You were spying on us." I challenged.

He motioned me to be quiet and a moment later we saw one of the campers return.

"The rest should be back in a minute," he said, just above a whisper, "and then we can get the hell out of here."

We sat in the silence for a moment and my stomach growled. I realized I hadn't eaten anything at all today. I had been too nervous earlier, and I had completely forgotten to pack food. I pulled out my water bottle and took a swig. At least I had remembered that.

I turned back to John and he was holding out a piece of some dried meat. I took it and gnawed on it for a while, hoping we could go soon. I felt awkward and I just wanted to leave.

The other two campers returned, and I could hear them arguing about something, but couldn't make out the subject matter.

John motioned that we should go, so I quietly got up and followed him, hoping the sound of their arguing covered any noise we made.

As soon as we were clear of the camp I started off on my own. I was mad. John wasn't being truthful about things and had failed to mention that there was another camp nearby. We could have been helping each other out this whole time. Also, he seemed to be in the business of spying on people and that didn't sit well with me.

I walked a few steps away from him and he turned to follow me.

"Hey." He called, just above a whisper. I ignored him and kept walking.

He tried again, and then jogged up to where I was. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me back.

"What do you think you're doing?" He growled at me.

“Going home.” I said and I wrenched my hand out of his grasp. I turned and marched away.

After a few yards I turned back to see him standing there, in the dark, watching me. I was so angry. I’m supposed to be protecting our family and I just trusted this guy without even thinking twice.

I circled back the direction I thought we came and headed toward the ocean. I had spent most of the trek uphill so I figured if I was going down I was going the right way. In the dark I could hardly tell where I was going. I began to get nervous as the moon rose high in the sky. It illuminated the ground around me, but nothing looked familiar.

The chill wind was coming down the cliff and I realized I hadn’t dressed very warmly. The excitement of everything that had been happening had kept me from noticing. As I wandered around I tried to sort out my thoughts. I felt a little foolish now, and wondered if I had made a mistake. I could be heading miles in the wrong direction by the time daylight hit.

I didn’t know what to think about John. I decided that we should just sever ties. I didn’t really know anything about him and I would rather try to survive on our own than risk him harming our family. The rabbits were big enough to slaughter and spring was right around the corner. We could make it.

After what seemed like hours I sat down. I had no idea how much time had passed, and I had no idea where I was. I put my head in my hands and tried not to cry. I didn’t know what to do. The weight of the world was on my shoulders and I felt like I was miserably failing. My mom was on the point of insanity. I knew if one more thing went wrong it would push her over the edge.

My sister seemed like she was adjusting, but at some point she was going to get tired of being out here in the middle of nowhere. She might leave, like Joey, or end up snapping. My eyes burned as tears began filling them. I couldn’t even think about the boys and their future without crying. What was in store for us? I wanted to rely on John’s help but who was to say he would be around in a week, much less however long this attack would last.

Just then I heard something. I jumped and whirled around, retrieving my knife. I crouched down and tried to hide in the bushes nearby. I hadn’t even thought about wild animals. Bears should be leaving their caves soon,

and bobcats and coyotes were all around here. I tried to stay as still as I could, not even knowing what I would do if there was a wild animal.

After another moment I heard the rustling again.

“Izzy?”

It was John. I stayed in my spot, not knowing how to react. It was frustrating that he followed me, but at the same time I was so relieved he was here that tears started filling my eyes again. I realized as I began weeping that the dam was breaking. The stress of everything that had happened was finally overflowing the walls I had made and now-right here, right now in front of this guy I didn’t know-I was having a meltdown.

He stayed where he was, and I bent over, my face in my hands, and tried to get a hold of myself. All my feelings of hopelessness and fear were rising to the surface. I dropped my knife and started wiping my face on my shirt.

I felt him pull me to him and he hugged me. He sat there, silently squeezing me for a long time. Finally, I stopped crying. I pulled away and wiped my face on my shirt again.

“I’m sorry I was spying on you.” He said quietly.

“I told myself I was protecting you, but I just wanted to see people. I like watching your kids, and your family. I know it sounds weird. I just haven’t seen a family in a while...”

He trailed off quietly. There was silence for a few minutes. Finally, he started again.

“You are doing a great job taking care of everybody. I don’t know many women who could do what you have been doing.”

Tears filled my eyes again and I dropped my head. I took a deep breath and tried to get it together. I started with some things that had been floating around in my mind.

“Where did you come from? How long have you been watching us? Who are those people? Why do you think they are unfriendly?”

I had a few more questions but I stopped, trying to sort out my thoughts. I heard him chuckle and I wondered if I had said something funny. He was still sitting next to me, on the forest floor, and I was overly conscious of his nearness to me.

“I saw a man leave your camp a few weeks back. Looked younger than you, with dark hair.”

“My brother.”

John slowly nodded.

“That was when I found your camp. I saw you bury something small-a pet?”

I started crying again. I could hardly speak, but managed to choke out that it was a baby. John sat up and grabbed both my arms, turning me to face him.

“You had a baby out here?” He seemed angry. I nodded, still crying.

“My brother said he was going for help. The baby was too small and he came early. We didn’t know what to do. My husband left to go to a meeting place and nobody was there but the baby was gone by the time he came back anyway.”

John scowled in the darkness, the light from the moon casting shadows on his bearded face, making him look like a wild man. He stared straight ahead, frowning, and pulled me to him again. I rested my head on his chest and enjoyed the comfort of his arms.

I suddenly realized how exhausted I felt. The night’s events, lack of food, and the emotional roller-coaster had left me feeling void of any strength. I took a deep breath and relaxed, feeling stress pour out of me.

I blinked against the sun’s bright rays, shining in my face and temporarily blinding me. I sat up and looked around, trying to remember where I was. My mouth was dry and felt like I had been sucking on cotton. My head was throbbing and this damn sunlight wasn’t helping. I stood and stretched, still trying to get my bearings. I felt really disoriented.

“Good Morning!” I whirled around and tripped on some branches, knocking the wind out of me.

John began helping me up and last night’s events flooded my mind.

“Where are we?” I suddenly realized my family was probably very worried right now.

“I’m not really sure. We need to get to high ground and find the ocean.” He offered me some nuts and berries he had found, and told me there was a stream nearby. After washing up I felt much better, and we started trying to figure out our way back.

I was a bit embarrassed that I had spent the night with a man I barely knew, after sobbing on his shoulder. I found myself avoiding his gaze, and I tried to pretend like last night never happened.

As we walked he divulged some information about himself. He was ex-military, he had been married, had a son, and when he returned from

Afghanistan found that his wife wanted to leave. She had left the boy with him for about a year, and then returned, demanding that he relinquish custody.

Shortly after that he was camping by himself when the strike happened. He hid for a couple weeks then went up into a few towns and saw the devastation that had been caused by the virus.

I asked him how it was that he hadn't been contaminated. He shrugged his shoulders and told me there were several different times during his tour that they were given extra vaccinations as precautions, and he thought they might have known something about this particular strain.

That gave me something to think about. I stopped listening to him for a moment as I realized how many deaths could have been prevented if they had issued a precautionary vaccination here. We get vaccinations for everything else, hell, if they had just slipped it in with the flu shot none of this would have happened.

I could hardly think straight. This information left me reeling. I wasn't a big fan of the increasing number of vaccinations over the years, and I even thought our immune systems were weakening because of them. To hear that something could have been done about a truly devastating virus stunned me.

"Izzy? What's wrong?"

I mumbled a reply but John persisted. I finally told him what was going through my mind and he quietly confirmed that he had thought the same thing.

In need of a subject change, I asked him about the people near our camp. He said they showed up shortly after us. They never went toward the ocean, always toward the cities, and looted and robbed where they went.

They stole food and supplies, and threatened people with guns. They could quite possibly be contaminated from their interaction with the populated areas.

This was nothing like what I expected. Instead of helping each other in need we were turning on each other like rabid dogs. I couldn't believe those people would live like that.

We continued walking until just about noontime, when we came upon our camp. I had hiked way too far south, completely circumventing our campsite.

The boys ran out to see me and were very interested in the stranger I had brought. My mom and sister were so relieved it was tangible. I explained briefly that I had been lost and John helped me find my way back. He greeted everyone and then said goodbye, reminding us that he would be back for that dinner we promised the day after tomorrow.

As soon as he walked away my mom turned to me.

“Did you have sex with him?”

I looked at her for a moment without answering. I thought about telling her it was none of her business.

“No.” Thoughts raced through my mind. This was not where I wanted this to go.

“He’s way too old for me, Mom.”

She laughed and it grated on my nerves.

“How old do you think he is?” She got this coy little smile. A smile she always has when she’s talking about sex and it seriously grosses me out.

I got up and walked away.

“I’m going to check on the garden.”

I took the boys with me to provide a distraction. I was mad that my mom would assume I would hop into bed with some guy I didn’t know just weeks after my husband had died. I tried to shake it off. I wondered if we should just cancel our dinner with him.

When I got back to the cave I forgot about John and my mom. My grandpa was back.

He told us an outpost had been set up. It was only ten miles away, and we could trade meat, vegetables, and fish for other supplies like antibiotics, soap, and matches. He said we needed to be careful because small groups of thieves had formed and they were attacking people on the main roads.

It was also rumored that the Koreans had exhausted their resources, and we were readying ourselves for a counter-attack. As this information soaked in, I wondered how long it would be before things would get back to normal.

He opened up his backpack and pulled out a small leather case with four tiny syringes. The vaccination. I stared at it for a while, unable to comprehend that this little thing could have saved so much death and destruction. I noticed a strange symbol on the leather case and something about the case struck me as. After a few moments I realized that the case was caked with dry blood.

“Did you already use yours?” I inquired, realizing we needed five. He shook his head no.

“I’m not staying.” Was all he said, and he kissed my mom and ducked out of the cave.

We all stared as he disappeared. I tried to work through his rationale. Maybe he thought we would do better without him. I couldn’t help but feel that yet another man in my life was abandoning me. I tried to push that out of my mind. I needed to think about the task at hand. There was no way we could go with him, so we just needed to move on.

I watched my mom while I quickly administered the vaccine. She seemed to be taking it pretty well, but it could be because she had found new hope in John. I wondered if she was attracted to him. He could be good looking. I just couldn’t tell with that beard. After engaging her in a conversation about the vaccine, we examined the box grandpa had brought and decided we should bury it. Who knows what story was behind that.

We took inventory of our stock and supplies, and with the newfound information about the nearby outpost, decided we would try and get some new clothes as soon as possible. Our clothes were worn and ragged, and Seamus looked like a castaway with the combination of the growth spurt he had over the winter and his short pants.

My mom and I planned to wait until the next litter of rabbits was born and then we would slaughter the other six rabbits, all at once, and take them for trade. Perhaps we could use any fish John gave us that week, too.

The next day and a half passed quietly. It was odd, since it seemed like something huge had happened every other day for the last six months. We were settling into our life here. It wasn’t ideal, but we were surviving and that was what was important.

As evening was drawing on we prepared for our dinner with John. We had washed all our clothes that day and tried to spruce things up a bit.

I heard a sharp intake of breath and looked up. A man had walked in our camp. Nobody moved for almost a minute. We all stared, wordlessly. Just as I had decided to dive for the gun I realized it was John. He had shaved his beard and looked like a different person. He had a bouquet of wildflowers, and presented them to my mom with a kiss on her cheek.

The boys ran up to him and started jumping around, clawing at him like he was some kind of a jungle gym. He looked across at me and held my

gaze for a moment before turning his attention to the crazy monkeys attacking him. I felt a tightening in my stomach and turned away.

I spun to help my mom and saw my sister staring at me with a smirk.

“Too old, huh?”

I blushed and ducked my head.

“He looks younger without the beard.” I quietly replied, trying to hide my smile.

“Yeah... younger and hotter.”

I ignored the comment and started helping my mom finish up dinner. I could tell his presence relaxed her, and for the first time in months I felt peaceful. The boys were laughing and playing, and the winter finally seemed over. I knew we were going to be alright.

But I still wanted answers.

Excerpt from *The Breaking*

Book II in The End of the Golden Age Trilogy

“Did you see him?” I heard a man ask, his ruff voice rumbled barely above a whisper. My eyes snapped open but I found only blackness. They were covered. I bolted, trying to free my eyes only to find my hands were tied behind me.

I heard scrambling and the sound of voices. My antics had alerted the others to my return to the present. I was on my side, my face smashed into the earth. I started choking as dirt filled my nose and mouth. My arms were sore and tired, and as I struggled to turn over I whimpered as a fresh wave of pain crept down my wrists. They were raw and felt on fire from being bound.

Suddenly, the voices grew quiet. I stayed still, trying to hear what was going on. There was nothing except heavy footsteps, making their way to me until a hand grabbed my hair and snapped my head back.

“Where is he?” That gruff voice from the river breathed into my ear. I didn’t even know what to say. Who?

The hand tightened its grip, and I cried out, certain my scalp was bleeding. “Who? Who are you talking about?” I said as tears streamed down my face.

“Sergeant Martin. We know he has been hiding out over here.” He jerked my head around again, as if emphasizing his point.

“I don’t know him! I don’t know who you are talking about. Please let me go.” I bit my lip to try to stop crying.

“I don’t believe you, girly.” He said, leaning in close again. He sounded like he was smiling. “Who made those fancy fish traps? You seem like his type, some girl living out here alone, needing a big strong man to help you.” His mouth was inches from my face, his foul breath hot against my skin.

“My husband made them.” I whimpered. I had always envisioned myself taking control of a situation like this, not crying at the hands of a bully.

“And where is he now?” He asked. His voice said he was surprised that I had a husband.

“He’s dead. He died.” I began crying now. As the words came out of my mouth I knew they were a mistake. I shouldn’t have told him that. His hand roaming up the curve of my thigh confirmed that.

“So there’s nobody to hear you? Nobody to call for help?” Even with the blindfold on I was certain that now he was smiling. His hand reached my waist and he placed his hand flat on my belly. I jerked away. His touch sent chills down my body.

I heard a rustling noise and another voice snickering and I wondered how many of them were here. How long would they keep me? Rapid fire thoughts went through my mind. My family could be in danger. They couldn’t survive without me.

My thoughts were interrupted by a new set of hands, exploring. I clenched my teeth and tried to think about something else. I had read a story a while ago of a woman who had survived a rape attack. She said that she just let them do what they wanted, but that was easier said than done.

Another rustling and a breeze hit my face. I could sense some movement. Another voice joined in. I felt dizzy, like I was going to pass out. I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I wouldn’t let this happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.L. Montclair was born in southern California and grew up living all across the Golden State. Her family has a culturally mixed history, one side growing up in the South and the other immigrating from Spain, giving her a rich view of the simple things in life.

Montclair now resides in Northern California with her family. She loves gardening, cooking from scratch, eating sustainably, and playing video games with her three boys.

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ISBN-10: 1492903248
ISBN-13: 978-1492903246