

RADICAL



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CHAPTER 1

They can die in their beds for all I care. All of them.

Especially Mark.

Mom's always been hopeless, but now Dad's checked out, too. He spends more time thinking about baseball than what we need to be doing to prepare—like knowing game stats of rich guys who wouldn't spit on us if we were on fire is going to matter at all in a grid-down scenario.

Then they give me crap for trying to prepare on my own.

Well, fine. Screw them.

My boot catches on a root, and I almost go down, grabbing the tree to save myself from a header into the trunk. My face scrapes down the bark until I get some purchase and stop the slide. The weight of the pack shifts to the side, pinning me against the bark with the rifle in its sling between me and the tree. I focus on the arm that's keeping me upright and turn

just enough to brace my body against the tree until I can get my footing.

Once I can peel myself off the tree, I assess the damage. Stings, scrapes, aches, but nothing serious.

Before moving on, I adjust the shoulder straps on my assault pack and tighten the waist belt to make sure it won't shift like that again.

If I knocked myself out, I'd never hear the end of it. Instead of just being restricted to Uncle Skip's land, I'd probably be housebound, too. Maybe roombound. That would make them happy: me "safely" locked inside. Like keeping me from training will make me safe.

At least before he gave up, I had Mark. He rolled his eyes at all my plans and would never train seriously, but I knew that if we needed to bug out, he'd be there, right beside me, helping me get them out of here. With both of us, we might have a chance. Dad would rally. Uncle Skip would be another armed man, if we could get him to leave. Mom would need help, but with all of us, she'd be okay. But without Mark, it would be just me. They never listen to me.

I could survive by myself if I had to. Hook up with a good Mutual Assistance Group. Or form my own MAG. But that's only if I would go and not look back.

What kind of person leaves their family behind? What kind of person even thinks about leaving their family behind?

Thinking it is giving up.

I won't give up.

We should *all* be preparing. But until I can make them see what's coming, I will keep preparing on my own. And then we'll be that much further along.

Because it's only a matter of time until we will have no choice but to fight.

My phone vibrates, and I drop to my knees behind brush as if evading a scout. I work deeper into the brush and then pull the rifle to ready while I go prone. A perfect transition. Sweep the area. Acquire my target: a knothole on the tree. Sight and hold, as if waiting to engage. Dry fire, work the bolt to load the next imaginary round, and scan the area for other hostiles. I'm pretty sure I would have hit the knothole. With dry firing, it's hard to be sure, but it felt right.

When the phone buzzes again, I take it for the all clear and sprint for the pond, ignoring stealth. Sprinting all out like I'm being pursued.

They say that the difference between getting away from danger and not is the ability to sprint for three minutes. If I was ambushed—or even now, if someone tried to jump me

on the street—the energy exertion to break away from the initial threat would be like sprinting all out for two to three minutes. I might not be able to outfight a grown man, or a trained soldier, or a bunch of hostiles, but I will be able to outrun them, outthink them, and hide, especially in wooded terrain. I could last a long time in dense woods.

At the pond I sweep the area, as if the dirt berm we use for shooting could be shielding hostiles. I sight on a fragment of clay disk still stuck in the dirt, steady, sight, and pull the trigger. I know I would have hit it.

It would be better if I could be sure, but Mom would go ballistic if she heard live rounds. Dad isn't crazy about me shooting alone, either, but he'd be most pissed at the "wasted" ammo, especially with Mom's ban on unnecessary spending. Like anything is more necessary than ammo. We don't have near enough on hand. I can only squirrel away so much without Dad noticing. The message boards and forums say you should have at least a thousand rounds for each armed member of a unit. If our family is a unit, we are nowhere close. We couldn't each carry a thousand rounds, but what we have is not nearly enough if we have to defend ourselves here or fight our way out.

If I were already eighteen, then I could stock up whenever there's a deal on ammo, but we don't have two years and

I can't get Dad to see reason. The government is restricting guns and ammunition already, cataloging us with permits and paperwork. Supply is already disrupted, and if the online warnings are right, supply could be cut off at any time.

With every incident — protest or shooting or whatever — the pressure builds. I watch the news and the sites. I stay on high alert, everything packed and ready to go. We are one rancher standoff or police shooting or massive protest away from all-out chaos, followed by a military state.

In the forums and message boards, people are sharing leads, talking about what they're hearing. The guys in Texas are freaked. Their governor is mobilizing the National Guard, in case those army training exercises end up being cover for something more.

Some people think it's the multinational corporations turning us on each other and distracting us with foreign problems and culture wars so we don't have time to watch them take over everything. Some think it's the government stirring up all this unrest so they have an excuse to declare martial law. I think it's all related. Dad loses his job because some rich guys decide to send the jobs somewhere else, and then we lose the house because the banks get paid either way. The rich guys and their corporations own the government. They won't be happy until they own everything else, too.

Whatever sparks the chaos, the result will be the same. It will be us against everyone. We'll need to be ready.

Government forces. Militarized police. Foreign hostiles. So-called patriots. Fellow survivors of whatever plague or catastrophe hits first, maybe gone feral or just competing for scarce resources until society rebuilds. We could trap and fish and forage. We've done it before. But getting somewhere safe and defending ourselves will take more than that.

Why can't Mark at least see it? I get that Mom isn't clued in to this kind of stuff and that Uncle Skip and Dad think it's all paranoid "wackos" with "conspiracy theories." But Mark reads the same sites I do, or he used to. He used to be right there with me and Dad on survival skills weekends and deep-woods camping trips. It's like when we lost the house, they all gave up. Even Mark.

Every time I try to make them see the urgency, I get in trouble.

They're probably sitting at the kitchen table right now, Dad reading the box scores, Mom wishing he'd focus on the want ads. If they're thinking about me at all, they're pissed that I'm out here training instead of obsessed with useless crap the way my cousin Hannah is.

I like it out here by the pond. A breeze and a stump to sit on and no one bugging me.

I dig into my pack for a protein bar.

Everything I'd take if we were making a break for it on foot is in this pack—my bug-out bag.

Most guys think the bigger the better. Like a four-wheel-drive vehicle stocked to the rims is the bare minimum. They think dragging as much as they can physically carry is better than maximizing efficiency.

Even Mark. He doesn't know what we would really need, or how it would feel to pack it, carry it, go for days on what was in that pack strapped to his back.

I do.

I've been training with my pack for months. And before that, I used my regular backpack, weighted down with whatever I could get my hands on.

I raided what I could from our camping supplies—compass, D rings, paracord, fishing line and hooks, a first-aid kit, the firesteel and scraper, and the aluminum tent stakes and military surplus poncho, which I can strap to the outside of the pack and use to build shelter pretty much anywhere.

But I can only add new things one item at a time, quietly, so as not to draw Mom's attention. I need a better water-purification system and a space blanket. A portable chain to cut wood (much smaller and safer to carry than a hatchet or chainsaw). A better knife sharpener, because if

ammo gets scarce, or it's too dangerous to go where the ammo is, the fixed blade strapped to my thigh might be my best weapon.

I have a visual in my head, the pack with empty spaces where items still to be acquired should be. The written lists freaked Mom out, and the mental image plays double duty—shopping list and preparation exercise—as I visualize the contents of my pack before I fall asleep and when I wake up, so I can organize it and find what I need without thinking in a crisis.

Until my pack is complete, a couple of water bottles and boxes of bolts keep the weight and bulk right for training and acclimation. Bolts and washers in the pockets of my vest stand in for ammo. A large wrench strapped to my belt simulates the weight of my Glock, because even on our land, I don't carry a handgun. That is Dad's line in the sand.

My phone buzzes. Text from Mark. *Leaving in 40.*

Mark's coming to the range? All right, then. He hasn't wanted to shoot with me in months, not since we set off the pipe bomb and Mom went ballistic. He's shot plenty of hostile beer cans with his idiot friends, but that's not going to help him improve his accuracy or his readiness on the move.

I take a different trail back, closer to the road that runs along the far perimeter of our land, until I get to the old barn.

This hasn't been a working farm in decades. Dad and Uncle Skip grew up down the road. When Uncle Skip bought this place, he converted the barn into a workshop, with built-in workbenches and shelves for his woodworking tools, and a storage area for all our collective junk that doesn't fit in the house. In the back of the storage area, under some boxes and a tarp, half behind a standing mirror, is an old trunk, with a combination lock added by me. I spin the dial, pull it open, and push my pack inside. I'll bring my pack in later, when everyone's asleep. Or tomorrow. If I bring it in now, and Mom's itching for a skirmish, she might just try to take it away. Dad might actually change the combo for the gun locker instead of looking the other way.

I survey the house from the barn, make sure no one is looking out the kitchen window or door, and then move low and fast to Dad's truck. I stow the rifle in its soft case, which I put in the back of Dad's truck earlier so he'd have no reason to look for the rifle in the locker.

"Where have you been?" Mom says before I'm even through the screen door.

"What? I went for a run. I'm not even allowed to run on our own property anymore?"

Mom slaps the counter with the hand holding a dish towel, giving me that look, the one that says I'm trying her

patience, that I'm not too old to be put in time-out, dragged there by a good grip on my ear like when I was six.

I stand my ground, staring back at her. We've been having this fight for weeks. They can refuse to do anything to prepare themselves, but they can't stop me from training.

"I don't like waking up to find you gone. Sneaking out while it's still dark, running around the woods doing Lord knows what."

"I had to get a run in before we left." She stands there, staring. She isn't backing off. "Fine," I say. "From now on, I'll wake you up on my way out, however early that is."

Dad pauses midbite to give her a look that says he's not in favor of early wake-up calls.

Mark says something unintelligible around half-chewed eggs and toast, double-fisting the fork and toast like a toddler.

"Swallow," Dad says. "And you." He looks at me. "No more sneaking out. If," he continues, putting up his hand to stop my response, "If you plan an early run, you make sure we know the night before."

"Fine," I say.

Mom stares at him for a long pissed-off beat and then turns back to the dishes, pan clanking off the edge of the sink.

Mark forces the food down. "We're gonna be late."

“For what?”

“We’re dropping Mark off on the way,” Dad says. “His truck died. Again.”

Mom slams the pan against the edge of the sink louder.

“Dropping him where?” I ask.

Mark mumbles a response, food getting in the way.

“Where?”

“Clearview Sportsmen’s Club,” Dad answers, like he can’t believe it any more than I can.

“A *sportsmen’s* club? Are you kidding me?” I can’t get either of them to train, but Mark’s going to a snooty gun club full of wannabes and rich losers? “Since when are you the joining type?”

“Daniel Trace invited me to check it out.”

“This is a joke, right? With what money? You can’t even afford to keep your truck running.”

“He’s going as a guest,” Mom says from the sink. “A free guest, right?”

“Yes. As a guest. For free,” Mark says.

The way Dad won’t really look at Mom makes me doubt it’s really free. Mom’s back is tense and angry. Dad’s looking guilty. Of course Dad’s giving Mark money. Never mind that neither of them is earning anything steady these days, or that

Dad said I had to pay the range fees today out of my money. If Mark wants something, then by all means.

“Why does he get anything he wants and he doesn’t even have to—?”

“I don’t get anything—”

“Enough!” Dad yells. He can’t stand talking about our current financial condition.

By the time I’ve cleaned up and changed, Dad and Mark are waiting outside, ready to go.

Mom grimaces at my clothes—my too-long-and-baggy-by-her-standards cargo shorts, my layered shirts. Even the bandanna over my hair.

“Mom, we’re going to the range. No one you know will see me.”

She grunts and turns back to the sink. I am dismissed. I grab an apple on the way out the door.

It’s already getting hot, and three of us crammed into Dad’s truck makes for a sticky, sweaty ride.

“The rifle will be back in the locker as soon as we get home,” Dad says. “And it will stay there unless we are going to the range.”

Crap. “I was just dry firing.”

“I don’t care.” Mark’s pretending he can’t hear us. “You know better.”

“What good is practicing tactical movement without at least being able to sight and dry fire?” Dad gives me a look. “Only on our land, I promise.”

“Skip’s land,” Dad corrects. “It’s Skip’s land. We are his guests.”

“But I need to—”

“Not when you’re home alone, or like this morning, when no one knows where you are. End of discussion.”

Mark’s still quiet. Usually he’d be giving me crap or sucking up to Dad. But today there’s nothing.

He showered. He shaved what little facial hair he has. Clean clothes. New boots. Well, newer than his old ones. He doesn’t look dressed for a snooty club, but he definitely put some effort into this.

The snotty, sulking Mark we’ve had to deal with since moving out to Uncle Skip’s place is gone. Maybe he’s finally waking up again.

Daniel Trace and his dad used to camp and do survival skills weekends with us. Mr. Trace is the one who taught me to set snares. I can’t believe they’ve gone club. Clubs are for wannabes and poseurs, and they always cost money.

“It’s really free?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Mark says. “For now.”

“Why just for now?”

“Because right now I’m a guest, checking it out. They’re just getting started.”

“And later?” I ask. He looks at me. “When it stops being free?”

“I’ll work it out.”

“How exactly are you—?”

“Leave your brother alone,” Dad says. “It’s his business. Not yours.”

Of course. Because he’s a boy. No, a man now. I’m still just a girl. And not even good enough at being that.

CHAPTER 2

“There, on the right,” Mark says. “There.”

Dad slows to a crawl and then turns onto an unmarked road.

“Are you sure?” Dad asks. There’s no official sign marking the entrance. Just NO TRESPASSING signs on trees here and there.

“Yes.” Mark seems amused by Dad’s skepticism, like he’s in on some secret joke we don’t know.

After we pull off the main road, we drive for at least a mile on a country road before turning onto an even smaller one. I’m not sure two trucks could pass in some places. More NO TRESPASSING, PRIVATE PROPERTY, and NO HUNTING signs as we go deeper into woods. Then DANGER: SHOOTING RANGE signs start to appear. Then the road widens and the trees recede, and there is a metal cattle gate, with a fence extending from the road into the woods. But it’s not “gated”

like where Aunt Lorraine and Uncle Nathan aspire to live, with the manicured lawns and friendly attendant in the booth to wave you through. There's no booth. Just a card reader and a keypad. A building on the other side of the fence could accommodate guards, in a shit-hitting-the-fan scenario.

Dad slows as we approach the gate.

"Go through. It's open," Mark says, but Dad's look is asking again, *Are you sure?* "It's okay, Dad. We're allowed."

Dad pulls through slowly, as if waiting to be ambushed.

After another half mile or so, an open space emerges. A large gravel parking lot. A few benches and a picnic table next to it. Beyond that, some grass and then a gravel road. A large post-frame building with wide doors for equipment. A smaller building that looks like it could be offices. Poles in the ground for something else next to it.

There isn't even a sign like these snooty clubs usually have.

Dad pulls in next to some other trucks. Maybe twenty cars and trucks parked around the gravel lot. Plates mostly from Michigan, like ours.

Dad's looking around, dipping his head to see past the cars and trucks. He's starting to look more and more skeptical about leaving Mark here.

"Daniel," Mark calls out the window before he even has

the door open. “Daniel,” he yells again, louder, adding a wave as he jumps out of the truck. Daniel and the two guys he’s walking with turn around. They don’t wave. The two other guys start walking again, but Daniel holds up at the edge of the lot.

“Hey,” Dad calls to Mark. He motions Mark over to his side of the truck, and when Mark doesn’t move says, “Come here.”

Mark rolls his eyes and lurches around the truck and over to Dad’s window.

“Thanks, Dad,” Mark says, to forestall any lectures. “I’m pretty sure Daniel or one of the others can give me a ride home. So . . .”

Dad looks hard at Mark, then across at the buildings again, around the lot, squints at the trees behind the buildings, then back at Mark.

“Dad,” Mark whines.

“Where are the ranges?” Dad asks.

Mark points back toward the buildings.

All I see are trees.

Where *are* the ranges? Screw the ranges—where are the sportsmen? Where are the poseur wannabes in their expensive shirts and stuff? Where’s the clubhouse? We may not have seen a lot of sportsmen’s clubs, but this doesn’t look like *any* kind of club, let alone a snooty gun club.

If there are ranges here, they are well hidden.

A guy walks by the truck in full tactical gear.

Dad turns off the truck and opens his door.

“Come on,” Mark gripes, but Dad gets all the way out of the truck. Then he puts his keys in his pocket.

“I just want to check things out,” Dad says.

Mark looks over his shoulder. Daniel is standing with some guys on the path near the buildings. “Look, there’s Daniel’s dad. Okay? You know Mr. Trace wouldn’t be involved in anything weird.”

Daniel’s dad is standing next to a man wearing a polo shirt and khakis. He’s the first country club–lawyer type we’ve seen here. *He* looks like he could be in a sportsmen’s club.

“Dad,” I say, “I want to get to the range before it gets crowded.”

“You’re embarrassing me,” Mark says, trying to block Dad’s path.

Dad stares until Mark steps back. “I want to say hello to Mr. Trace. That’s all.”

Mark groans, but he follows Dad across the lot toward the men.

When they get there, Mark does introductions. Daniel walks over, and his dad puts his hand on Daniel’s shoulder

while Daniel shakes Dad's hand. Like they're saying, *This is the boy that sprang from my loins. I see your son is a boy as well. We have sons, and they are grand.* Don't mind the girl waiting in the truck—who can shoot better than either of them.

Another man walks up. Handshaking all around. Mr. Country Club does that thing where he reaches out with his nonshaking hand and draws Dad closer.

Mark is grinning and nodding so hard he looks like a bobble-head doll. Then he bumps fists with Daniel and they head over to where the other guys are waiting, and the whole group starts down the path toward the trees. And still Dad is talking to the two men.

At this rate we'll never get to the range before the wait is three deep. I reach over and lay on the horn. Dad turns and waves me off, then goes back to the talking and smiling. Daniel's dad crosses his arms. Country Club guy touches his chin like he's got a great idea. More talking and now gesturing. Dad looks back toward me, and then Mr. Country Club is motioning toward the truck and over. Dad is nodding. And then all of them turn their backs on the lot and more gesturing and nodding, now toward the buildings.

Ten more minutes and they're still talking.

A car pulls up next to the truck. The driver takes off her

sunglasses and tilts the rearview mirror so she can see herself. She likes what she sees. She takes her time gathering her long dark-red hair behind her head, and then puts it up in a ponytail. She smooths the hair on the side of her head until it's just right, and then adjusts her ponytail and studies herself in the rearview mirror. She wipes at the side of her lip, like her lip gloss got smudged. She gets out of her car and pulls a vest on over her tight black T-shirt. Then pulls her range bag out of the trunk. Her vest is nice but far from new. Same with her bag.

She looks at me as she fastens her vest. I turn my face, pretend I was just looking around. But when I glance back, it's clear she knew I was watching her the whole time. Stupid. I should have just held her stare, like I don't care at all what she thinks.

She walks by slowly, her hips swaying in camo shorts, and then follows the same path Mark took. There are girls in this sportsmen's club? Well, *a* girl, at least. A girl who feels like she needs to primp before she goes to shoot. Maybe she doesn't even shoot, just strikes a pose and squeals at how good the guys are. I've seen girls like that at the range. These clubs never take girls seriously. Maybe they hold a basics class for wives and daughters, or even a pink-themed ladies' session,

but never more than a condescending nod toward their skills, never as equals.

Dad and the men are still nodding and pointing. And now moving toward one of the buildings. Did he completely forget about me? Screw that.

The gravel crunches under my shoes until I step over the wood divider and onto the grass.

I can't really make out what they are saying until I get close, and then I can hear Mr. Country Club talking. "Eventually, yes. But for now, the course, and some kind of accommodations out by the camping area." He waves toward the far right, where I can just make out a camper behind the trees.

"Sure, sure," Dad says. "What are you thinking in terms of timing, budget?"

"Why don't we go into the office and look at the plans. I—"

"Hello, Bex," Daniel's dad says when he notices me.

"Hello, Mr. Trace." The others turn around.

"Why, hello," says Mr. Country Club.

"Oh, right," Dad says. "The range." He looks at his watch. "Uh, this is my daughter, Bex. Bex, this is Mr. Riggs and Mr. Severnsen."

"Hello," I say, reaching out to shake their hands.

“Nice to meet you, Bex,” Mr. Riggs says. His hand is soft and smooth. He doesn’t work with his hands.

“I promised her we would go to the range. Uh”—Dad looks at his watch again—“maybe I could come back after. Drop Bex home and . . .”

“Why doesn’t Bex just join the others at the range here?” Mr. Trace asks. He looks at Dad and then at Mr. Riggs.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Mr. Riggs says. “We can consider Mark’s guest pass a family pass. You can all see the facilities.”

“No, we couldn’t,” Dad says.

“Why not?” Mr. Riggs asks. “Bex can check out the ranges. Meet some of the other young people. I can show you both around on the way out to the range, and then we can go into the office and look at the plans.”

I try to give Dad the head shake no, but he’s not looking at me.

“We have range rifles,” Mr. Severnsen says to me, and then he turns to Dad. “There’s adult supervision. If you’re comfortable with her shooting without you there, she can use a range rifle.”

“She has a rifle,” Dad says.

“Yeah, but . . .” Dad’s look shuts me up. This isn’t what I wanted. I wanted Dad, to myself, at the range. I want to shoot

my rifle *and* my Glock. Here I'll be restricted to a rifle unless Dad stays to supervise me.

"Great," Mr. Trace says, with a big grin. Mr. Riggs nods with a smile of his own.

Dad hands me the keys. "Get your stuff out of the truck."

As we walk away from the buildings and toward the trees, we move into shadows, and the sudden chill makes me shiver.

Riggs points out places, some with stakes already in the ground, where they plan to build this and that. A "proper" education center. Places for people to sleep and eat and clean up. Eventually. He chatters to Dad about other families, and about membership and how they're still figuring things out. He points to where the indoor training facilities will go—again, eventually. And waves toward the left, where other things will go. But right now there's not much beyond the buildings near the lot.

I glance at Dad. He's nodding, smiling, but I have a feeling his mind is on whatever "plans" they were discussing and whatever work that may mean for him. If there are no lines for him to supervise or tool-and-die work he deems worthy of him, maybe he can at least make some money here until something better comes along.

We pass the beginnings of a couple of trails, different

colors marking the start of each trail, and then an area that's been cleared for construction, with pegs in the ground and string. Riggs points out a squat, square metal building, which he says they're using to store their guns and stuff. But he also details his plans for a proper "armory" and then for more. I bet they're handing out free passes like Halloween candy. You need paying members to fund all this.

From the highway, if you didn't know they were here, you'd never guess. The sportsmen club label makes sense for ranges and trails, but they're talking about a lot more than that. Almost like a compound, but of course he doesn't call it that.

Riggs seems a lot younger than he must be, strolling along with his hands in his pockets. But he moves smoothly, fluidly, like he could break into a sprint or execute a roll at any time, drop to prone and pop back up again just like that.

His clothes are expensive. Expensive watch, too. Like he's dressed to work in a fancy office somewhere.

"We're hoping to have an indoor range in place by year three," Riggs says, looking from me to Dad and back again, "and after that maybe a pop-up range. But for now we have two ranges and some cleared training grounds. Once we get an organized training schedule set up, we'll reevaluate our needs. Maybe in addition to the tactical courses, we'll need to add some pistol bays."

So they want Dad to help them build tactical courses, and maybe more. But is this help or work? Unless that's how they get people like us in—let us work off our fees. Mom will never go for that. Mark and Dad need to be doing actual, money-paying work or we'll be broke and living with Uncle Skip forever.

The path widens and blends into the area behind the first range. "This is our pistol range," Riggs says. "Target boards at twenty-five yards on the right"—he motions to the firing points to the right of us—"and at fifty yards on the left, so you can also sight in rifles."

Maybe twenty firing points with wooden tables behind them. Stools for those who want to sit and space between the tables for kneeling or going prone. The range is cold while two men are packing up their gear and another is getting ready to shoot. The others are talking or checking their targets while they wait to continue.

"You know," Dad says, looking at the guys waiting to continue with their shooting, "if you added a concrete wall in the middle, one group could stay hot while the other side is cold."

Riggs smiles like Dad is a genius. "It's been requested, along with overhead cover, but we haven't gotten to either yet."

It's Dad's turn to smile, and now I'm sure that at least *he*

thinks he's getting paid for whatever "help" he offers them with all these plans.

"What do you think?" Riggs asks, and it takes me a beat to realize he's talking to me.

"Nice," I say, but it's better than nice. I could spend all day here.

"You'll have to be tested before you can shoot outside of group training sessions or scheduled one-on-one times with an instructor's supervision," he says to me, leaning around Dad. "We're going to put together a posted schedule showing when teens are allowed individual practice. Always supervised, mind you. Sixteen?" he asks, but before I can answer, he says, "We have some other active young shooters. Their parents drop off their firearms and ammunition, or we'll supply what you need to shoot here."

For a fee, I'm sure. Fees. Ammunition. Money. But to be able to shoot whenever, with actual targets, in this range, would rock. And that's at least three times he's said *training*. Could they be doing more than shooting?

We move on back into shade and trees. Riggs is still talking.

When the path widens again, we come around a bend and there they are. About fifteen kids are standing around, with two adults talking near the firing points. They've already

set up metal freestanding targets and wooden target frames in front of three or four of the shooting tables on one side of the range. Off to the left are additional targets, barrels, and obstacles, ready to be used. The obligatory dirt berm forms a wide U around the whole area and seems high enough that no rounds should leave the range.

On closer look, some of the kids could be adults, too. At least nineteen, like Mark, or maybe even twenty.

We follow Riggs down front to where the two men in charge are talking.

“Randy, Carl, hope we’re not interrupting,” Riggs says, even though it’s obvious they haven’t started yet.

Some laughter filters through like a breeze through the trees.

“This is Bex Mullin, Mark’s sister,” Riggs says, turning slightly and looking for Mark in the group. Mark scowls at me. “And their father, David. Bex is going to join you all for today. And may attend some of the open sessions. As our guest,” he adds, maybe for Dad’s benefit, maybe for Randy’s and Carl’s, some sort of communication about how much I belong. Like I’m not entirely trustworthy, or maybe making sure they know I’m just a guest.

“Welcome, Bex,” Randy says, not very convincingly.

Carl just smiles and dips his chin.

“Are you all set to start?” Riggs asks, looking around for someone.

“Yes,” Randy says, “but we can hold off a few minutes.”

“Great.” Riggs turns, and somehow I’m turned with him. “Ladies,” he calls out. Some girls who are hanging near the far end of the range look at each other. The redhead from the parking lot is in the middle of the group. Riggs waves and they start toward us, reluctantly, as if only because they have been ordered to do so.

“Ladies,” Riggs says again, waving them close, his hand between my shoulder blades so I can’t bolt, “I want you all to meet Bex Mullin. Bex, these are some of our core girls. Karen Severnsen.” A tall girl with a dark-blond mullet clenches my hand in a hard shake.

“Hi, Bex,” Karen says. Her arms are defined, strong, and her hand crushes mine, but her smile is real.

“Trinny and Rhonda,” he says. A girl with pigtails and a short, soft girl both say hi.

“And Delia.” A girl with dark skin and braids smiles and says hey. It’s good to see her here; it means they’re not into all that racial-purity crap.

“Stacy,” says a girl with a long brown ponytail, offering her own name when Riggs doesn’t immediately come up with

it. Then he acts like he knew it all along. I can't tell if her sour look is for me or Riggs.

The redhead is the only one left, and she hasn't moved.

"Cammie," Riggs says, like it's her rank more than her name.

She walks forward and extends her hand.

The queen. Or maybe lieutenant. Maybe lieutenant of the Apron Brigade—that's what some of the guys on the forums say, as if women would only need to use the guns in their apron pockets if their men fell. Is that what this is? Because if Riggs felt the need to introduce me to "the ladies," his "core girls," then he sees us as different from all the guys he's not bothering to introduce.

"Welcome," Cammie says, but her look is a challenge. Her nails are short but still sharp. One pinches into my wrist as we shake hands, like she's daring me to squirm or pull away.

"Hi," I say. My voice sounds funny.

Cammie doesn't let go of my hand.

"I'll leave you all to get acquainted before the training starts." Riggs walks, brisk and formal, back the way we came, all that easy looseness gone. "Come on, David," he says, gathering my father without breaking stride. "The girls will take care of her."

Sure they will. I refuse to rub at the stinging indentation on my wrist. The girls are already moving back to the end of the range where they left their stuff, all of them together, separate from the guys.

“Okay, everyone,” Randy says. I turn to watch and find myself near Mark, who is glaring again.

“Wasn’t my idea,” I whisper.

He just mumbles, “Whatever.” But it’s clear he’s blaming me.

“Basic weapon handling,” Randy says, staring at a few still talking in back, “takes a lot more than hold, point, and shoot. I know most of you have been shooting for years, but since we don’t know you all personally, we’re going to start slow, checking the basics. Today, in small groups, you’ll take turns shooting. That way we can monitor everyone, make sure everyone is handling their firearm safely, and focus on perfecting the building blocks, so that once we are working with higher-caliber weapons, moving from the ranges to tactical maneuvers, we can be sure a sound foundation is in place.”

“And we *will* be moving toward tactical maneuvers,” Carl says, maybe seeing that Randy has lost some of the older guys. “Holding positions. Attack and retreat. Flanking. Defensive positioning. Maybe even some squad work, if all goes well,” he says, glancing at Randy.

Squad work. Tactical maneuvers. Holy crap. Thank God Dad left already — this stuff would freak him out.

“Right,” Randy says, “but we’re going to start with range rules and safe-handling tips before we move on to monitored shooting.”

A lot of groans, and then someone says, “Come on,” but I’m impressed. This isn’t just about safety, but actual proficiency.

“Let’s break into three groups,” Randy says. He motions to indicate some of the older guys in back. “You guys are with me,” he says. “The rest of you split into two groups. One with Carl at firing point five and the other with Karen at firing point eight.”

Four or five older guys filter through the group from the back and follow Randy, all looking a little resentful to be here. “I know, I know,” Randy says, waving off their grumbling. “We’ll do a quick run-through and then get you guys shooting.” He leads them toward firing point two.

I’m right near Carl, so I join his group. He has his handgun holstered, but he places a rifle on the table, muzzle toward the targets. Then he just sort of looks at me.

“Bex,” Mark says.

“What?”

Mark, Daniel, some mouth-breathing skinhead-wannabe

loser, and the other three guys in my group are all glaring at me. And then I look over at the other group, which is clustered tight around Karen. Karen's with the girls. The guys are here with Carl.

Mark jerks his head toward Karen's group.

Apron Brigade for sure. Well, screw that. I turn so I'm facing Carl and wait.

Carl stares for a few beats and then says, "Okay," and he turns to place his handgun on the bench.

He runs through the basic safety fast. Everyone here is experienced, but he still goes over the first-day-at-the-range basics, like how to always point the gun toward the targets or down, never leave a loaded gun on the table, finger off the trigger until you are actually in position, all guns unloaded until ready to shoot, et cetera.

"What about open carry?" one of the guys asks. "I mean, we can carry out there, but we can't carry here?"

Carl takes a deep breath and looks over at Randy, but Randy is in the middle of explaining something to his group. "If you're eighteen or older, and the firearm you're carrying was legally purchased and is registered in your name, it's fine to carry it on the land. But we're encouraging everyone to exhibit some basic courtesy by the ranges. That means

keeping handguns holstered and unloaded, and keeping long guns unloaded and open unless you are actively shooting.”

“Bullshit, man,” the guy standing next to Mark says. “If I can carry out there, chambered and ready, I’m not disarming myself here.”

“Well, you can take that up with Mr. Severnsen, who’s in charge of the ranges, or Mr. Riggs.”

“Talk to Riggs about carrying?” one of the others says. “Yeah, right.”

“Anyway,” Carl says, directing us back to the range rules.

Then he makes each of us step forward and run through safety checks using his rifle and pistol. After each guy goes, Carl pulls him aside to make corrections or offer advice without tipping off the rest of us who have yet to be tested. The guy before me is a little too casual about it, and, from the looks of it, he gets more of a chewing-out than simple corrections.

“Bex,” Carl says. I step forward. The doofus left the handgun pointing sideways on the bench with the magazine in *and* the action closed. Pretty much a what-not-to-do if you’re trying to show you know how to safely handle it. I pick up the pistol, point it downrange, remove the magazine, and put it on the table. I pull the slide back and hold it open, look in the chamber, and then hold it so Carl can also see that the

chamber is empty. He nods his approval, so I let the slide slam forward on the empty chamber. I pick up the magazine, show him it's empty, and slap it back in. I check that the safety is disengaged, sight on a target, and dry fire. I lock the slide back, remove the mag and put it down, and then set the pistol on the table with the muzzle pointed downrange and the action open. Carl smiles. I run through the checks on the rifle, then shoulder it, sight, and dry fire toward the target. Then recheck and lay it down.

“Good.” Carl doesn’t correct anything, and seems surprised not to have to. “Under eighteen? The rule for all the under-eighteens is that you can participate in dry-fire drills and live long gun drills with your parent’s consent. But you do not touch a loaded handgun without a parent present. Understood?”

“Yeah.” I was hoping they’d be more lax on that. If Dad consents, what do they care?

“I know,” he says, “but it’s the law. And we will be following all laws and regulations.” Carl looks over toward Randy and then leans closer. “At least for now,” he adds. “Once we get more organized, get to know everyone a little better, we’ll be talking about squad work and how to best accommodate the training schedules.”

Meaning maybe they’re just being sticklers until they

know if there's a plant around who will run to the closest law enforcement to report any infractions or violations.

I glance around the group as I step back. I don't know any of these guys, but I can't imagine any of them are federal agents or informants.

"We going to shoot anytime today?" Karen asks from her table.

"Yeah," Carl says, but he turns and waits for Randy to finish.

"You ready?" Randy finally asks. "First shooters up. The rest of you, fall back to give the shooters some space. Eyes and ears, everyone."

I get my eye protection and earmuffs from my range bag and put on my vest.

Mark, Daniel, and the other guys in our group all step to the right so they can see the skinhead-wannabe loser getting ready to shoot. I hang to the left so I don't have to deal with them. Mark, mostly.

Even before he can fire the first shot, Carl is stepping in to give the wannabe some direction.

The short girl is up first over at table eight. Karen is working with her. She's using a range gun and is still pretty timid. She's probably a beginner. Cammie is watching, one step back, like she's the one in charge.

All three are readying to shoot, so I put my muffs over my ears.

Trinny, the girl with the pigtails, has on a unicorn shirt. It sparkles. So does the stretchy band to keep her hair out of her face. Her earmuffs are pink and covered in star stickers that I bet glow in the dark. I hope she has a different pair for maneuvers.

If we're still here by the time they're doing maneuvers. When Dad figures out that they're in to more than shooting ranges, he'll probably bail. Or our guest passes will expire, and they'll want money, which we don't have, not for this.

One of the older guys starts shooting. He's using a Sig Sauer with night sights. From the way the older guys looked to him, I figured he was the alpha of that group. Maybe of the whole group. Seeing him shoot, and his choice of weapon, gives me hope. He's serious but not a show-off, no tactical gear or drama. He has a solid firearm, and he handles it well.

The rest of the older guys are still grumbling or talking. Not even bothering to look at the guys in my group, let alone the girls. As far as they're concerned, they're already their own group. Men, not boys.

In my group, Wannabe is getting frustrated. Probably because he was strutting around before, but he's shooting like

a beginner. He even clips the empty target holder in front of firing point four.

Delia's up in Karen's group. She's using a range rifle, too, but she's pretty good.

Mark and the two guys who were going on about open carrying are joking around, mostly about Wannabe. But I think some of it's about me, or maybe the other girls. Maybe Delia. Something jerky.

Daniel is standing apart from them, acting like he's watching Wannabe but really watching the older guys. He wants to be over there, not with Mark and these clowns. He probably should be, and if Mark and the others weren't here, he probably would be. Wonder if he's realized that recruiting these guys seems to have worked against him.

After Delia, Trinny shoots. Her rifle has a pink tiger-print grip. It would be pathetic if it wasn't so clear she didn't care what people think. Or if she didn't handle it so well.

Daniel does fine. When he's done, he looks over to see if any of the men noticed. They didn't.

Mark does well enough, and after him, the less mouthy of the open-carry guys does okay, too. Better than the sulking Wannabe. Then Mr. Open-Carry-You're-Not-Disarming-Me goes. For all his talk, he's only about at Mark's level. Nothing special.

I wait for my turn, watching Mr. Open Carry reload.

When he's done shooting, I step up. Cammie is getting ready to shoot at her table, but I force myself to focus front. I unpack my rifle and ammunition. I run through my checks, load up, and then pull a stool over to get in position.

After Carl signals me, I let everything else fade away. It's just me and the rifle. I ignore the steel targets placed at handgun distance and focus on the paper targets on the fifty-yard target boards. After the first five shots, I put the rifle down with the bolt open and pick up my binoculars to check my shots. I have a good group, maybe an inch and a half to two inches, about two inches below the bull's-eye. I don't want to adjust my sights, so I'll just aim higher for the next five shots. Carl taps my shoulder and holds out his hand for the binoculars, so I hand them over. He checks my target and hands them back with a smile and a thumbs-up. I half hear him and half read his lips as he says, "Good shooting."

I load the next magazine and shoot again, holding a little higher this time. When I check again, the group is about the same, but now centered nicely in the ten ring. While Carl checks my shots, I lean back to see where the others are at. Cammie and the guy in Randy's group are both ready to go with their other guns. Rather than reload, I clear the rifle and

hold. I'm a guest, and figure it's better to leave Carl impressed by my corrections.

Cammie is still shooting. Looks like a Glock, newer than mine. Her form is perfect. She takes out the metal targets in order, slow but deliberate and in rhythm, and then focuses on the humanoid target. Nice clusters. In the target zones of head and chest.

She's good. And she knows it, by the way she ejects the magazine and checks clear.

Once the range is called cold, Karen runs down and gets Cammie's target. She studies the clusters and then hands it to Cammie. Karen high-fives her and then slaps her butt. Cammie smiles, then sees me watching and stops.

Carl hands me my target. I get another, more pronounced, "Good shooting." When I look up, Cammie and Karen are inspecting my target. Karen nods her respect. Cammie checks out my rifle on the table.

"Hey, Carl," Karen says. "Do you need to spot my turn?"

Carl gives her a *don't be stupid* look and shakes his head.

Karen grabs her own range bag while Cammie resets her targets.

Ready and focused, Karen looks fierce. Hard-edged and serious and not to be messed with. She lifts her pistol and

focuses downrange. Cammie moved the targets back some, and Karen still efficiently knocks over all of the metal free-standing targets, and then readies for the paper target. She glances over her right shoulder at Cammie, and the right side of her mouth turns up. I move over to get a better look, just as Karen nods and Cammie starts calling the shots. Heart. Right temple. Neck. Nipple. Kidney. Pinpoint shots, including one last one down low, near the edge of the target, and it's not hard to guess where she was aiming.

"Excellent," Carl says, bumping fists with Karen when she's done and clear.

Maybe not *just* an Apron Brigade.

Laughter and a squeal off to my right. One of the older guys is lifting Stacy off the ground.

"Cut it out, Trip," someone says, but Stacy's only playing at being upset.

Karen and Cammie roll their eyes. Not impressed.

But I am. Not with Stacy or that crap. But with the ranges. The trainers. Tactical training. Finally, other people who get it. *This* is exactly what we need.

Radical

E. M. Kokie

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