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**CHRIS
STEWART**

**EVIL IN THE
DARKNESS**

**WRATH & RIGHTEOUSNESS
EPISODE EIGHT**

EVIL IN THE DARKNESS

WRATH & RIGHTEOUSNESS

[Episode Eight]

CHRIS STEWART



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NEW YORK

DALLAS

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Mercury Radio Arts, Inc.
1133 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10036
www.glennbeck.com
www.mercurvink.com

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Cover design by Richard Yoo

ISBN: 978-0-9854619-8-0 (ePub)



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“The totalitarian phenomenon is not to be understood without making allowance for the thesis that some important part of every society consists of people who actively want tyranny: either to exercise themselves or—much more mysteriously—to submit to it. Democracy will therefore always remain at risk.”

—Jean-Francois Revel

Last Exit to Utopia—The Survival of Socialism in a Post-Soviet Era

Fourteen Miles East of Little Rock, Arkansas

Lieutenant Bono pulled his camouflage jacket around him and rolled over in his sleep. He was crammed in the backseat of a black Cadillac, the largest car abandoned on the freeway that he could find, but his feet were still jammed against the rear door and his legs were cramped from being bent. He had taken off his boots and placed them on the floor beside him; other than that he was fully dressed. He'd rolled up an extra pair of pants to make a rough pillow and spread his military jacket over him for a blanket, though it only covered him to his waist. His gear and backpack were beside him on the floor, everything organized and tidy, just as it should be. Attention to detail. Keep things tight. Keep things clean and oiled and always ready for a fight.

The military issue 9-mm Beretta Special Forces handgun was under the front seat, within easy reach. The tiny, pearl-handled .22 caliber pistol he'd picked up in Baltimore was, as always, strapped around his calf.

Bono shivered in his sleep. It was really cold outside. Frost had formed on the front window, creating a maze of crystals that, in half an hour, when the sun came up, would reflect in tiny prisms of light. His breath formed a light mist in front of his face. The lieutenant rolled over, pulled the jacket to his chin, shivered, and slowly opened his eyes. He lay there for a moment trying to figure out where he was, the semidarkness of predawn illuminating the car in gray light. Within a few seconds it came back to him and he was instantly awake.

He got up, pulled on his boots, climbed out of the car, and stretched. A small ditch ran under the freeway and he climbed down to it, washing his face and shaving as quickly as he could. He hadn't shaved in days and it felt good to get the itchy stubble off his neck. Working his way upstream, he traced the water in the growing light until he found a pool where the small stream was calm and clear. He studied the water, looking for signs of vermin or other water life. He sifted it with his fingers, smelled it, let it drip against the light, tasted it, then sat back on his haunches and thought. He had iodine pills in his backpack, but only a few weeks' worth, and who knew what lay ahead? The new water hole he found might be little better than a sewer, while this seemed fairly clear. Take his chances? Wait for better? He thought for a moment, then leaned over and drank deeply, filling his stomach as much as he could, then his canteen, then the plastic water bottles the Air Force sergeant had given him on the flight into Little Rock. Scrambling up the embankment, he walked back to the freeway and climbed up onto the roof of the car.

The sun was up now, its yellow rays slanting across the horizon, and he took a few minutes to look around. Interstate 40, the major artery between Little Rock and Memphis, ran east and west. Lines of dead cars cluttered the freeway as far as he could see. To the west, toward Little Rock, he could see multiple lines of smoke lifting into the calm sky. Thousands of people, all of them refugees, had moved into the country now, setting up makeshift camps of various shapes and sizes. The nearest campfire was two, maybe three hundred yards behind him. Looking east, he saw no fires. The road between the major cities appeared to be mostly deserted. Still, he didn't plan on walking along the freeway. Too many people there. He pulled out his map and studied it in the growing light. The old State Road 70 paralleled the freeway a couple of miles to the south. Using his fingers, he measured the distance to the small ranch where his wife was staying with her parents. Twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five miles. He thought it over. He wouldn't run, but his walking pace was as quick as a slow man could jog, which meant he could cover maybe thirty miles a day if he kept it up. Two and a half

maybe three days to get there.

~~Just enough time to kiss his wife, hug his daughter, and turn around and head back to his military unit again.~~

He thought about his last conversation with his unit commander back in Washington, D.C., and the very specific instructions he'd been given. *"You have two weeks. Understand me, Lieutenant. Fourteen days. Not an hour more. I can't believe I'm doing this anyway, letting you guys even try to go home. But I want you back here, understand. I want you checking in in two weeks. We're in the middle of a war here. I don't think I need to remind you. Now go on, get out of here."*

Bono counted the days. One night in the military aircraft flying down to Little Rock. Two days walking south and east. Three days since he'd left Washington, D.C. A total of six days to get to his family, had to plan on six days getting back, which left him two days to spend with his wife and daughter.

Part of him swore in frustration at so little time; part of him smiled at the thought of two days with his family. Two days of heaven and bliss. Truth was, he would walk a year across the Gobi Desert to spend two days with them. He'd crawl across broken glass and nails to spend an hour with his wife.

Jumping down from the roof of the car, he opened the backdoor, took out his backpack, pulled out an incredibly dense military meal bar—two thousand calories of what tasted like sweetened rust and nails, as far as he could tell—hoisted his backpack, checked the weapon in the holster at the small of his back, turned southeast, and started walking with a long, determined gait.

The sun rose and it got warmer. Half an hour later, he started to sweat. His stomach growled. He felt a little dizzy. Sweat began to drip down his ribs.

Twenty minutes later, just as he climbed the embankment of State Road 70, he leaned over and started heaving in gushes.

An hour later, he knew he was in trouble. Whatever was in the water, he felt like it was killing him.

Two gut-wrenching hours later, he wished it would.

Raven Rock (Site R), Underground Military Complex, Southern Pennsylvania

It was a small group, two women and five men, not including the new president of the United States. With the exception of the lean, thick-haired man who found himself in the amazingly unfamiliar position of sitting in the president's chair, the members of the group knew each other intimately, having worked together from behind locked doors, aboard private jets, and inside luxurious villas for many years. Along the wall before them, a secure conference system brought in video feeds from Paris, London, and Berlin. Altogether, thirteen people were on the line. And though he sat at the head of the conference table, President Albert J. Fuentes didn't control the meeting, set the agenda, or have very much to say.

He was a weak man, a coyote of a leader, doomed to follow the pack, with no more intelligence or talent than the average man out on the street. The only things he had in great abundance were good looks, an empty character, and hot, burning, soul-selling, back-stabbing ambition. He also had came presence, having started out as a television newsman, reading other people's words from a teleprompter as if they were his own.

It was a deadly but useful combination, and the reason why he just might be the perfect choice.

The old man sat on the same style of black leather chair as they all did, but he hunched lower, or slumped and shriveled, almost pygmy-like against the enormous conference table. The others watched him carefully, listening to his every word. He gestured toward Fuentes. "This is him?" he asked.

The others only nodded.

The old man raised an eyebrow. "He's the best you got?" He smiled weakly as he said it. Fuentes thought that he was kidding. The others knew he was not. "I don't know. I really don't," the old man went on. "I feel like I'm on the iceberg watching the *Titanic* bearing down. It's a full moon. We'll see the bodies. This is going to be a mess."

The newly appointed vice president, the man who'd chosen Fuentes, sat forward in his chair. He was intense, moody, brilliant, and one of the wealthiest men in the United States. He had already mastered money; now he mastered power. "It's going to work," was all he said. There was significant meaning if unknown, meaning in his words.

Sensing the mood of the people in the room, Fuentes shifted angrily. He did not know the old man, had never seen him before in his life (and he knew everyone who was anyone, or so he thought) and his indignation rose. "I remind you, *sir*, that you are speaking to the president of the United States."

The old man didn't respond as he stared at Fuentes.

"He'll do what we tell him to," the new vice president went on, speaking as if Fuentes weren't there. "And remember, he was the next in line of succession. We had to follow protocol. We couldn't push too far. I mean, we've already had to kill one of them and put another into a coma. We thought best not to have to kill him, too."

"You're going to have to kill him eventually. Might as well do it now," said the old man.

Fuentes' face grew white, his lips tight. Was it him they were talking about? He couldn't even tell. Surely not. He must have missed it. No one looked at him.

The vice president brought his elbows atop his armrest and put his fingers to his lips, building a small tent before his face. He glanced patiently at Fuentes. "I trust him," was all he said.

The old man pulled on his feeble chin. It was covered with white hairs, scattered and wispy, some

of them far too long, as if it was hard to shave between the deep creases on his face. And he exuded a odor. It wasn't strong and it wasn't necessarily unpleasant, but there was something odd, almost unworldly. Fuentes sniffed the air, trying to identify it. It was old stale air released from a sealed room within an ancient temple; an old book that hadn't been opened for many years; an old house; a rotting tree; it was, what? He couldn't tell and maybe it was that simple. The old man just smelled old.

The old man cocked his head to the right, then leaned toward Fuentes. "Do you love your country?" he asked.

Fuentes hesitated. What was the answer he was looking for? "There are things I love about it," he finally said.

"Do you think it can be rebuilt?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you think it *should* be rebuilt?"

The president of the United States looked down. This was where they had him. He answered carefully. "We have made mistakes. Plenty of them. There are many things we shouldn't have done. We've hurt the world, there is no question. Most of the world hates us now, and who are we to blame them, when we even hate ourselves? We've oppressed, robbed and plundered. Pumped our filth into the air. We've started wars to keep the oil coming, spilling blood to prime the pump—"

The old man raised a hand to stop him. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before. Some of what you said is truthful, but most of it is crap. You've got to learn to see the difference."

Fuentes hesitated. "We've grown weak," he concluded. "We could be stronger, so much stronger *if* we take the proper steps."

The old man pulled out a pack of cigarettes, tapped the box, extracted a filter, and held the cigarette between his dry lips. "Do you realize that you can't lie to me?" he said.

Fuentes kept his eyes down. *Such an unusual thing to say.*

"You can't lie to me," the old man said again. "You can't deceive me. I can see into your soul. I sense your deepest thoughts by the flicker in your eye. I know your heart by the way you look at me. I know everything about you. More than you even know yourself. You forget. I never do." The old man stopped, lit the cigarette, and sat back against his chair.

Fuentes started to fidget, brushing his hands across his face.

"You're forty-seven," the man continued. "You used to be a Republican but switched parties when your old boss told you there were better opportunities in the new administration for a man such as yourself."

Fuentes looked up at the old man, his courage building. That was no secret. Anyone who knew him would know about that.

The man drew a breath of smoke, then broke into an evil smile. "You tell your friends and family even your wife, that you've got a lot of money, but the truth is, you've got nothing. Not a dime, as far as I can tell, and you've been broke for years. If it weren't for credit cards, and a handful of overly generous friends, I think you'd be living on the street."

Fuentes frowned and started to answer but the old man cut him off. "That's OK, I can live with beggars. It's some of these other things I find more interesting." He pulled himself forward by the edge of the table. "When you were ten, you and one of your old buddies, what was his name, Dave Butter, yeah, I'm sure that's it, the two of you found a litter of kittens in the old barn behind your grandma's house. Do you remember that, Albert?"

The president sat lower in his seat, his face growing pale now and sick.

"You put them in a small bag"

Fuentes shifted on his chair. A cold chill seeped into the room. "Stop it," he muttered quietly.

"You dropped them in the creek. Five little kittens. There was no reason. I've got to tell you,

think that's a bit sick. Then, remember back in high school, that sweet young thing you took to the prom—what was her name? Kristen, yes, I think that's it. A real cute little girl. So much younger than you were”

Fuentes wanted to scream, but he was silent, overcome with gut-wrenching surprise and fear. *Who was this man? How did he know these things? Where did he get his information?*

The old man stared at him. His lips were smiling but his eyes were blank and dark. “Funny, isn't it, *Mr. President*,” the name was sweet syrup on his lips, “a man of your background and education; young television reporter, then Harvard, then state attorney general, U.S. assistant attorney general, and now president of the United States. Yet you have so many peculiar habits. So many late nights at the computer. What are you staring at all that time? Why does your wife sleep in the basement? What is she afraid of, President Fuentes?”

The old man stopped and drew another smoke. Fuentes kept his eyes down. His hands trembled on the table, and his breath was short and tight.

“Look at me,” the old man said to him. “Look at me right now.”

Fuentes reluctantly raised his eyes.

The old man leaned toward him. “You're not who I would have chosen, but some things are beyond even my control. When you're a member of the Donner party and someone throws you a bone, you've got to take it and chew on it, sucking out whatever marrow you can get, know what I mean. And that's where we are now. Someone threw you to us. Now we're going to chew.

“But I want you to remember: I know you. I have known you well for years. Yes, we're going to use you, but there are many things we have to teach you first, many things you need to know. Who are these others. Who these others are. What we intend to do. It will come slowly, but we will teach you, and this is your first lesson: You can't lie to me. You can't deceive me. So please, don't even try. All it will do is hurt you. And we don't want to hurt you, friend.”

Fuentes took a breath and held it, then looked up at the old man. “I understand,” he muttered, though he understood not a thing at all.

“All right, then. We understand each other. Now, let me ask again. We have a chance to rebuild this nation, but in another way, after a different model, a model we'll control. Are you willing to support us? It all comes down to that.”

Fuentes pressed his lips together and adjusted his perfect hair. Leaning forward, he lowered his voice to a dry whisper. “If you say you truly know me, then you already know I will.”

The old man smashed his cigarette. “Let's get to work,” he said.

* * * * *

They talked for hours, outlining a final agenda, naming key players and responsibilities, and setting up a time line to put the plan in place. The last thing they had to decide was when the new president would address the people of the United States.

“It will take FEMA several days to distribute the equipment throughout the country,” the vice president announced. “It's a huge problem, getting working television receivers and satellite systems out to all the cities and towns. We don't want people to congregate any more than they have to—large crowds are unpredictable and so much harder to control. We want a television in every small town. We're talking a couple hundred thousand systems. It will take a little time.”

“Four days,” the old man prodded.

They agreed that that would work.

Their business complete, the meeting started to break up.

“There is still one problem,” the new vice president said as the group started collecting the things. They hesitated awkwardly, throwing a glance or two in Fuentes’ direction.

“This is private,” the vice president said to his new president.

The president was excused. He left without comment and the group sat down at the conference table once again.

“We think the SecDef is alive,” the vice president announced. “Not only alive, but suspicious. And we can’t find him anywhere.”

The old man’s eyes flashed in anger. “You will take care of him, I am sure.”

The vice president nodded. “He’s an old friend. I think I can round him up.”

“And what about King Abdullah?” one of the women wanted to know. His absence from the conference call had not gone unnoticed among the group.

The old man sat back and thought a moment about his good friend, the Saudi king. The group sat in awkward silence. They all knew what he would do.

“You’re going to kill him?” the vice president asked.

The old man stood up from the table. “I don’t think I’ll have to. He’s stupid. He’s too aggressive and always there’s his foolish, blinding pride. I don’t think I’ll have to do it. We’ll simply let him kill himself.”

THREE

Twenty-One Miles East of Little Rock, Arkansas

What started as a cool morning, with temperatures just below the freezing mark, quickly heated up to a humid 73 degrees Fahrenheit. The sky was clear, the air still, almost like it was waiting for something new to come. The sun rose higher in the pale sky, beating straight down on Bono's face.

Just before losing consciousness, the young lieutenant had made an important decision. Knowing he was slipping away, he'd crawled off the road, not wanting to be found by other travelers when he wasn't in a position to defend himself. Dragging his body painfully between the strands of a barbed wire fence, he'd dropped into a thicket and immediately passed out.

The day wore on and the sun beat down, burning the left side of his face, his right side mashed into the thistles and dirt. He sweat, he threw up across his chest, he mumbled and called out, but he never regained consciousness. By afternoon, a violent seizure racked him and he almost choked on his tongue. Sporadic spasms came and went, convulsing him into a painful ball.

Along the road, several people moved east and west. None of them saw him, though a couple of people thought they heard someone calling as they passed.

Afternoon came and a band of clouds started building in the west. Rain was coming. The sun dropped toward the western horizon and the temperature fell.

As twilight approached, Bono opened his eyes and shivered. Focusing his entire will and using every ounce of energy that he had left, he opened his backpack, his hands shaking violently, his arms barely able to even move, and pulled out his field jacket. Fighting against the crippling pain inside his stomach and chest, he struggled to spread the jacket over his shoulders—it felt like it was made of lead—then dropped his head onto the dirt.

He was so thirsty. Brutally thirsty. His stomach muscles were tied in knots, painful spasms racking him. He heaved at the dryness, but there was nothing left inside him to throw up. He tried to swallow. His tongue and throat were so swollen it was like trying to swallow sand.

“No, no, no,” he almost wept, physical and emotional misery racking him. *“Please, whatever is, I cannot die here. Please, help me to get home first. If it's Your plan, then I accept it, but please don't let me die out here by myself. Caelyn will never know what happened to me. Please don't make Ellie spend the rest of her life wondering what happened to her father. Please, I do not ask this for myself, I only ask it for my family.”*

FOUR

East Side, Chicago, Illinois

The sound of thudding footsteps rolled down the narrow hallway of the high-rise apartment building. Sam, lying atop a sleeping bag just a few feet from the apartment door, was immediately awake. He sat up and listened carefully to the sound of the passing footsteps, taking measure of them, his nerves on edge, his breathing light. Four people, maybe a few more. Adults. Most of them heavy treaders, probably men. None of them were speaking. They knew where they were going and what they needed to do. The sound faded, the stairwell door slammed, and they were gone. Sam checked his watch: 3:45 a.m. He stretched, swallowed against the dryness of his mouth, and lay back down. The moment knowing he'd never get to sleep again, he stood.

Luke and Ammon were asleep inside their bags. Luke's breathing was heavy. It almost sounded sedated. Ammon was curled up, his sleeping bag pushed down around his waist. Sam's military boots and jacket were lying on the floor beside him. Moving quietly, he pulled on the leather boots, ran the laces behind the quick-lace eyelets, stood, and pulled on his jacket. Turning for the door, he sensed Azadeh's outline in the darkness and stopped.

"Hey, Azadeh," he whispered, not wanting to wake up his brothers.

She barely nodded to him, afraid to speak.

He moved toward the door. She followed closely. "Where are you going?" she whispered once she got very close.

"Thought I'd go up on the roof and take a look around."

She moved a little closer to him. "Can I come with you?"

Sam hesitated. "I don't know. It might be better if you stayed here."

She dropped her eyes. The whites, large as they were, were barely visible in the dark. "I've been inside this apartment for a very long time. Days. It seems much longer. If I could please just come with you, it would . . ." she hesitated, searching for the right word, "it would mean good things to me."

Sam smiled, wondering what word she had been searching for. "It's going to be cold up there."

She was already holding her coat and she stepped toward the door. He helped her put her coat on and then pulled the door back. The hallway was empty and he led the way toward the stairs.

* * * * *

The moon, a quarter full, waning and burning orange, was already low on the western horizon when they came out on the roof. With no city lights to drown them out, a million stars filled the night sky. A light wind was blowing from the south, and Sam sniffed the air. "A cold front is going to move through sometime in the next day or so," he said.

Azadeh nodded, pretending to understand though she had no idea what he meant. Sam watched her, knowing she was faking it, and explained. "A south wind at this time of year and up here in the north," he pointed to his left, "usually means a low pressure system is moving through. The wind circles around low pressure in a counterclockwise direction." His voice trailed off. He had lost his train of thought again. "It's going to turn cold in the next day or two," he said more simply.

Azadeh nodded. That she could understand. She shivered anyway. "It seems cold right now," she said.

Sam reached out and pulled her collar up around her ears. "Is Chicago colder than Iran?"

~~Her hair was loose and it blew behind her, falling in shadows down her back. Her face was~~ almond colored in the moonlight and her eyes were large and bright. Sam felt his stomach tighten. he looked at her as he tried hard not to stare. "I grew up in the mountains," she said. "My village was in the Agha Jari Deh Valley. Remember? You have been there."

Sam remembered very well.

"I am used to the cold." Still, she shivered. Sam knew that she was scared.

"It's going to be OK," he told her.

She looked at him and nodded. "I think it will." She brushed a strand of hair away. "I saw what you did on that first night, back in the car. I saw what happened to your brother. I saw what you did for Kelly Beth. I don't understand it. It makes me feel . . . awkward. Is that the right word? I don't think that it is. It makes me feel funny. There is a strangeness in my chest. It keeps me warm. It makes it so I can't sleep. I wonder what it means."

Sam hunched his shoulders, struggling for his own words. He was not good at this and it scared him that he might say the wrong thing and screw it up. "It's going to take a while to understand it. But it has to do with God. With Allah. He is real. Do you believe that?"

"I know that He is real."

"Do you believe that He can hear us? Do you believe that He can answer our prayers?"

She looked away. "I have prayed my whole life."

Sam waited, noticing she had left his actual question unanswered. But her face was softer now and not so full of fear.

"God does answer us," he told her. "God always hears and answers our prayers."

"Are you a messenger from Allah?" Her voice was full of doubt and wonder.

"No, no, no." He started laughing. "I'm no messenger from Allah. I'm just a man, just a kid really, at least that's how I feel. I'm just like you are, Azadeh, trying to figure this whole thing out."

"But the prayer you said. You promised your brother he would live."

Sam bit his lip and looked away. He had no idea what to say. This wasn't something he was comfortable with. He was a doer, not a talker, and someone else, anyone else, was far better at explaining this kind of thing. "It will take a little time, Azadeh, before you can understand," he finally said. "But that's OK. You've got all the time in the world."

He watched her, waited, and, when she didn't answer, he turned and walked toward the corner of the building, looking around. She followed, keeping a few steps behind. The city had fallen silent below them. The sky was alive and bright, the ground nothing but an empty black hole. Looking west, Sam could barely make out the outline of downtown, the skyscrapers reaching high enough to blot out some of the stars, leaving square shadows against the bowl of light. Looking north, Lake Michigan was another black hole. No lights but the setting moon and stars. No noise now. Perfectly quiet. He took a breath and held it. It was almost beautiful. So peaceful. So serene.

Azadeh moved beside him and touched his shoulder, pointing east. "Look at that!" she whispered in surprise.

Sam turned and looked. Lights! Man-made lights along the shoreline! They were clustered in a row that seemed to stretch two hundred feet or more. A long way away, maybe four or five miles. Lights. That meant electricity. Which meant, what? He didn't know. Civilization? Maybe. At least it was a start.

He stared, his mouth open, then grabbed Azadeh by the hand and said, "Let's go."

East Side, Chicago, Illinois

It was getting lighter now, sunrise less than an hour away. They were heading east. The streets weren't empty, but they were relatively quiet: a few clusters of people here and there, a few fires—an old warehouse had burned down, but it was only smoldering—and a row of barricades, which Sam helped Azadeh climb over. They walked another forty minutes. A couple of miles away from the shoreline, the streets became noticeably more crowded. Word had spread. *Lights along the shoreline*. Getting closer, Sam could smell the lake: seaweed, wet sand, humid air. Azadeh stayed close to him, her hair tucked underneath the hood of her overcoat, the buttons tight around her waist. Moving toward a large intersection, they turned right and immediately stopped.

Two blocks ahead of them, an enormous crowd had gathered. Noise. Sometimes screams. Fights were breaking out. Smoke—it looked like tear gas. Behind them, they heard the pounding of footsteps as a group of people ran toward the massive crowd. Sam immediately pulled Azadeh to the side, pressing her against the wall of the nearest building, letting the roaring crowd go running by. A dilapidated antique shop was on his right. He approached it, broke the window on the door with his elbow, reached in and turned the lock, pushed the door back, and pulled her inside. The room was dark, though there was a hint of light now, the eastern sky turning light pink and orange. The shop was musty and mostly filled with junk. “Stay here!” Sam commanded. “Lock the door behind you, then go into the back room. There has to be a rear entrance to the building. Find it, then stay here. If anyone comes through the front door, and I mean *anyone*, you run out the back. You understand me, Azadeh? Go out the back. There has to be an alley back there. Find a place to hide and wait for me.”

“Don't leave me here,” she whimpered. “Please don't leave me here alone!”

“Azadeh, you'll be OK. No one's going to come in here. If they do, do what I tell you and go running quietly out the back. But it's important, Azadeh, that you not talk to anyone. They will know where you're from. Normally, that's not a problem. Might not be a problem now, but we can't take the chance. These are not normal times. There is no normal anymore.” He stopped and looked toward the broken window. Another crowd of people ran noisily down the street. He turned back to face her. “Are you OK?” he asked.

“I'm OK. I stay here. If anyone comes, I go out the backdoor and wait for you.”

“That's right, babe.” He stopped and looked around, suddenly embarrassed. He knew that he was blushing. His dad had called his mother *babe*, but Sam had never called a woman that.

He held her shoulders. Then he turned and walked out the door. She followed him to the doorway and looked out, but he was quickly swallowed up in the shuffle and panic of the growing crowd. She stood at the door a moment longer, looking out through the broken glass. She then turned away, slipped behind the shop's counter, leaned against the wall, and slid down to the floor.

Twenty-One Miles East of Little Rock, Arkansas

The rancher found Bono lying in a ditch, surrounded by his own vomit and coated in sweat. He watched him from the saddle of his horse without moving toward him, suspicious, even angry, finding the stranger who had passed out on his property. *Probably a drunk*, the rancher thought. *Maybe someone running from the law. Maybe worse. Maybe he was one of those men who'd joined up with the tribes that were forming in these parts, some of them violent, most of them crazy, all of them growing desperate.* He held his horse back and watched the stranger closely, noting the sickly face and shaggy hair. Seeing the military clothes didn't help to ease his suspicions, for he doubted they were real; lots of losers hung out in secondhand fatigues they'd picked up at the army surplus store. He'd known more than one liar who claimed he was in the army when the closest the liar had ever come was walking by the recruiting station on his way to the Red Cross to give a pint of blood for thirty bucks.

A little pressure against the mare's ribs was all it took to move her forward. She stepped over the narrow ditch and stopped again as he leaned forward, crossing his arms atop the saddle horn. He noticed the three-day assault backpack, coyote-tan and clean, then the insulated pouch of water. He studied the equipment hanging with carabiners from both sides of the backpack, all well maintained and clean.

Quickly dismounting, he dropped the reins—the young mare was as trustworthy as his dog and wouldn't go anywhere. He patted her neck without thinking as he passed and moved quickly toward the stranger.

The young man was almost lifeless, his breathing shallow and slow. The rancher leaned toward him, then pulled back from the smell. Turning his face, he took a deep breath, then pressed two fingers against the young man's neck, feeling his pounding pulse. Lifting the soldier's head, he started talking to him. "Hey there, buddy. Can you hear me?" He gently patted his cheeks. "Are you in pain? Can you hear me?"

The dark-haired soldier didn't move. The rancher quickly wiped his right hand across his jeans, cleaned his fingers, cradled the soldier's head, and opened his right eye. The pupil quickly dilated but he stared past him, still not seeing. He could feel the soldier's cold and clammy skin under his careful hand and he gently laid Bono's head down.

He whistled to his horse. The mare, dark with white socks, lifted her head and stared at him but didn't move until he whistled a second time. The rancher held his breath against the smell of human waste and vomit, and strained against the soldier's weight. Sensing his burden, the horse almost knelt, making it easier for him to lift the soldier across the back of the leather saddle. Working quickly, the rancher gathered up the backpack and small sleeping bag and tied them to the saddle with leather straps. He pulled the reins over the black mare's neck and she lowered her head, allowing them to fall across it. The rancher held on, then started jogging. He wasn't young anymore, and he was a little overweight as well; it was only a couple of minutes before he was panting like a dog. The horse easily kept up with his pace, moving gently to keep her load from bouncing on her back.

Looking back, the rancher watched her smooth gait and reached back to pat her neck again. A good animal. Smart. Sensitive. One of the best horses he'd ever owned.

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