

LIGHT OF
DAWN

VANNETTA
CHAPMAN



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For Dad

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my dad, who passed from this life to the next twenty years ago. My father loved to debate, to toss ideas back and forth, to challenge me to think outside my box. During my teenage years, we would stay up late into the night discussing “wars and rumors of wars,” how to survive in this world, and how *surviving* wasn’t enough—unless you had a clear conscience, unless you had helped your neighbor, unless you’d followed that Golden Rule. I love him and miss him and am so grateful to have had him in my life.

Many thanks to the awesome staff of Harvest House for your guidance as we jumped into the dystopian genre together. The fine folks in sales, editorial, and marketing all helped to make this project possible. Kim Moore, you are the best! Thank you to Reagen Reed for providing editorial input, and my agent, Steve Laube, for guiding me through the continually changing publishing world.

My pre-readers, Kristy and Janet, deserve rubies and gold, but this thanks will have to do instead. My family continues to encourage me through every deadline. A special thank you to Dorsey Sparks for inspiring my main character.

Many readers have written to me since the release of Book 1, *Deep Shadows*. You’ve taken my scenario to heart, spent time in prayer, some have put together go-bags, and others are purchasing generators...not necessarily because of what I’ve written, but rather because the times seem to point to an impending upheaval, a fundamental change in the way we live. I want to remind you to keep the faith. In the end, our faith and God’s provision are what will see us through any trouble this world throws at us. I continue to pray the events described in this series never happen, but as Max has said, “We hope for the best, but plan for the worst.”

And finally...“always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20).

*In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time
to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people.*

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH
CHAPTER II, VERSE II



*Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow.*

T.S. ELIOT
THE WASTE LAND

ONE

High Fields Ranch
March 14

Shelby's head jerked up at the sound of the emergency bell. She dropped the bucket full of slop and ran full speed toward the house, the March wind whipping at her clothes. Carter reached the porch steps at the same time she did. Roy had hurried over from the main barn, and Georgia stood wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

Max stood next to the bell, an old rusted thing they'd found in the barn and fastened to the front porch as a kind of emergency warning system. There were many things they'd learned this first winter on the ranch with no electricity, no power, and no one to depend on but each other. One of the most important was the need for the bell.

Max grinned and held up both hands, palms out. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Shelby wanted to scold him, but instead she leaned over, hands on her knees, and tried to pull in deep breaths. She focused on convincing her heart that it was okay to slow into a regular rhythm.

"So what's up?" Carter asked.

"Got a call on the radio from the roadblock crew. Patrick's on his way."

"Patrick? Seriously?" A grin broke across Carter's face.

Roy reached over and circled an arm around Carter's neck, pulling him into a bear hug.

Georgia breathed a sigh of relief and sank onto the porch rocker.

“You’re sure?” Shelby raised her gaze to Max. “You’re sure it’s him? Because he’s not due for another—”

“Three months. Yeah, I know.”

“But you’re certain it is him?”

“Know anyone else who is still driving a red ’65 Mustang?”

An ache deep in Shelby’s heart eased at those words. Patrick. Alive. Here. It was something she’d prayed for every night since that day in July when he’d sacrificed himself for Carter.

Max walked down the steps and pulled her into his arms. “He’s okay. I told you he would be. He’s fine.”

She pulled away out of habit. Instead of being offended, Max grinned at her.

And then they heard him—the rumble of the V8 engine reaching them well before they could see the red hot rod. That it still worked was a wonder. But then many things they’d expected to work didn’t, and a few things they didn’t expect to still be functional were. The classic Mustang was one.

It made the curve in the caliche road and headed up the hill to the ranch house. Carter let out a whoop when sunlight glinted off the bright red finish. He took off at a lope and reached the car before it made the parking area. Patrick stopped the car in the middle of the road, stepped out, grabbed Carter, and pulled him into a hug.

Shelby’s legs began to tremble. She plopped down on the top porch step.

“Easy, Sparks.” Max moved so that he was standing in front of her. “This is a good thing.”

It was. Certainly it was, but they’d had so much death and tragedy that a part of her wondered.

Why was their dearest friend here three months early?

What had happened in Austin?

Was there more trouble in Abney?

And then the passenger door opened, Bianca stepped out, and Shelby was running, her feet flying over the distance between them.

TWO

Twenty minutes later they were all seated around Georgia's kitchen table. Shelby rubbed her fingertips across the worn oak.

Sunshine streamed through the window over the sink, landing on a jar of honey that they had harvested from the bee boxes they'd traded for last summer. Georgia had reheated their morning coffee on the gas stove top. It was made from acorns that they had gathered, soaked, and then roasted. It wasn't Folgers, didn't have a drop of caffeine in it, but somehow she'd become accustomed to it.

"Tell us everything," Carter said. "How's Abney? And...and the capital? We don't get any news out here."

Shelby tried to look at her son objectively, but of course that was impossible. He'd grown an inch since they'd come to High Fields. Georgia had measured him the week before at five feet eleven inches. He'd also dropped twenty pounds, weight he couldn't afford to lose. His black hair curled at the base of his neck, and his dark brown eyes remained glued on Patrick and Bianca. Her son was no longer a child. He'd become a man since they'd moved to High Fields. He'd earned a seat at the table.

"When was the last time you visited Abney?" Patrick asked.

"Late fall," Max said. "November, maybe."

Max was tall and wiry, black hair streaked with gray, and deep-set hazel eyes. He'd celebrated his forty-sixth birthday the month before. Shelby had known him nearly all her life. In truth, she knew him better than any other person in this room, including her son. In many ways Max was more

of a father to Carter than his own biological dad had been, but then Alex had died of a drug overdose when Carter was only three years old.

"We've been meaning to get back," Roy admitted. "Something always comes up, though, and we figured they wouldn't have what we needed anyway."

Max's parents had fared the changes since the flare better than anyone else Shelby knew. Roy's daily work had changed very little. He'd been a rancher before and was a rancher and farmer still. Though these days he was doing both of those jobs more like his grandfather had done. Georgia had taken the changes in stride, working diligently to provide them with balanced meals and adequate clothing. Shelby hadn't realized how much she missed her own parents until she moved to High Fields. Georgia and Roy were in their late sixties, hardworking, and pillars of strength both emotionally and spiritually. Her thoughts skipped back to last July, to those dark days when she'd wondered if Carter would survive his accident. She pushed those memories away, determined to focus on the situation at hand. She knew they were getting down to business when Bianca and Patrick exchanged glances, and Patrick cleared his throat.

"Abney doesn't have what you need," Patrick said. "Other than the springs, which provide an unlimited supply of water, they have very little."

"Is your mom okay?" Shelby asked Bianca.

"*Mamá* died. Six weeks ago."

Shelby popped out of her chair, skirted around the table, and pulled Bianca into a hug. "We didn't know."

"How could you?"

"I'm so, so sorry. She was a very special person."

"She was." Bianca brushed at her eyes and pulled in a deep breath.

No one spoke for a moment. Shelby stood there, holding her friend, grateful that they were together. When Bianca stepped back, Shelby fetched a glass of water for her and returned to her seat.

"The doctor thinks it was a heart attack. At least I was there beside her at the end."

"What about your sister?"

"Went back to Mason the week after *Mamá* died."

"I'd guess the population is half what it was before the flare," Patrick continued. "The winter has been hard."

They all digested the news in silence, Carter glancing at Shelby. She didn't know what to say to him. He had to be thinking about the friends they'd left behind, but there was no way to know how everyone was doing. The days of being able to text someone and check on them were over, maybe forever.

"What about Austin?" Roy asked. "That was a fine thing you did, by the way. Offering to stay at the university so they'd give Shelby the insulin for Carter."

"A fair trade," Patrick said, placing his hand on top of Carter's head. Patrick was a big guy, former linebacker, retired military, large hands. He gave Carter's head a playful shake and said, "But you still owe me a chess game."

"Anytime," Carter murmured, a smile breaking through his worried expression.

Patrick again clasped his coffee mug. "The university fell three weeks ago."

"Steiner?" Max jerked his head up.

"No. Actually, the final attack came from the kids caught in the middle, the ones camping in the stadium. They hooked up with some of the street gangs. Our side managed to escape while they were attacking Steiner's side of the campus. We tried to help at first, but we were outgunned."

"And they would have broken through your side?"

"Maybe. Our barricades were good, but at that point we were out of supplies. There was no real reason to stay, especially if it meant that we might be surrounded by hostiles."

"So you fled the UT grounds? Where did you go? To the state government compound?" Shelby still sometimes had nightmares about the school, the perimeter fence surrounding the capitol buildings, and the great masses of people camped on the outside.

"We did, but three days later their forces attacked the governor's troops. We held them off at first, but in the end Governor Reed had no option but to retreat."

"Retreat?" Shelby shook her head in disbelief. "Retreat to where?"

“Corpus,” Bianca said. “Apparently, the governor had a fallback position there, and Corpus Christi fared better than other cities throughout the state.”

Max sat back, folding his arms across his chest and scowling at his best friend. “You’re telling me that Austin is a loss.”

“It is.”

“A bunch of students and thugs overpowered the state government?”

“I wouldn’t say they overpowered us, but you know Governor Reed. You met her. She wasn’t willing to fire into the crowds and kill hundreds or even thousands of citizens. When a show of force didn’t stop them, and the water cannons didn’t slow them down...”

“Using gray water.” Shelby shivered at the memory.

“They sure weren’t going to use fresh water.” Patrick shrugged. “Reed had two options—shoot to kill or retreat. She chose to retreat.”

“Wow.” Carter drummed his thumbs against the table. “It’s hard to imagine that things are that bad.”

“They are. Much worse than last July.”

“How is that possible?” Shelby asked. “How did things deteriorate to where we are now?”

Instead of answering her, Patrick glanced around the table and said, “That’s why I’m here. I agreed to do something for Governor Reed, and I’m going to need your help.”

THREE

Max resisted the urge to grab a piece of paper and list the pros and cons to what Patrick described next. He wanted to see it written down and analyze it, hammer it into a form that might make the scenario more palatable.

“I’m in,” Carter said.

Shelby and Bianca started talking at once, and Max caught his parents looking at each other with wide eyes. The fact that this surprised his father, that he hadn’t expected things to be as drastic as they were, said a lot. His father was a realist, a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy. The flares hadn’t slowed him down, but hearing that no one could even locate the federal government seemed to have momentarily stunned him.

“Okay, wait,” Max said. “Everybody hold on.”

Patrick grinned, and Max knew why. He’d slipped into his lawyer mode.

“To summarize, Abney is holding on by a thread. Austin is gone—”

“For all practical purposes,” Patrick clarified. “A few buildings are still relatively unscathed. Some folks are staying, but there’s not much to keep them there.”

“And the state government is now in Corpus Christi.”

“Correct.” Patrick snagged a few of the shelled pecans from the dish that Georgia kept on the table and popped them into his mouth.

“Governor Reed hasn’t heard from the federal government.”

“Not a word.”

“And she’s sending you to Kansas to look for them.”

Patrick folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. “We don’t know where the feds are. We can guess where they aren’t.”

“They wouldn’t be on the East Coast, not if what you’re describing in urban areas is widespread.” It was the first thing Georgia had said since Patrick began to describe what had happened and why he was here.

“Then they also wouldn’t be on the West Coast. That’s for sure.” Roy scrubbed a hand across his face, stood, and walked into the living room. He returned with a national map, which he unfolded and spread across the middle of the table. With his index finger he traced a line south to north, beginning at the Mexican border. “San Diego? Los Angeles? Even San Francisco? No way.”

“Portland and Seattle are a possibility,” Patrick admitted. “Reed is sending scouts there as well, but she strongly suspects that whoever is in control, whoever is left, would rather set up in the middle of the country.”

“But why Kansas?” Shelby asked.

“Have you ever been to the Flint Hills?” Patrick asked. “I was stationed in Fort Riley for a time. We drove out there once. Miles and miles of nothing. Fertile in spite of its limited topsoil. There’s water but no development. If the government’s looking for a place to start over, it’s as good as any.”

“Wait.” Max placed both hands flat on the table. “That could be said of certain areas in almost every state.”

“True, and she’s sending out scouts to every state.”

“Like before,” Shelby murmured. “Like she did when she sent Dr. Bhatti—”

“Gabe,” Patrick corrected her. “Gabe Thompson.”

“Right. I know that, but I still think of him as...you know. Dr. Bhatti.”

“Hard to believe that guy was a government operative,” Carter said. “Or whatever he was.”

“You’re right, Shelby. It is like before. Reed is a practical woman. She understands we need help, and she’s not afraid to ask for it. Plus, it’s been almost a year since the flare. We need to know what is or isn’t out there.”

“Whether the cavalry is coming,” Max said.

“Yeah. Pretty much.” Patrick hesitated, and then he added, “There’s something else. The gasoline we have is degrading...”

“That’s why we’re having trouble with the Dodge.” Carter rubbed his

hand across the top of his head, causing his hair to stick up. It was comical, but the look on his face was dead serious. “We keep topping it off, but the engine still knocks something terrible.”

“Smart move,” Patrick said. “Topping it off leaves less room for condensation to develop.”

“Condensation waters it down.” Carter sat back, crossed his arms, and looked from Max to Patrick. “We figured that out, and it worked for the first few months. Now it’s back to knocking.”

“The only other thing you can do to increase the lifespan of gasoline is add a stabilizer.”

“Which we don’t have.”

“No one does, except maybe the survivalists. It was scooped off the shelves pretty fast when the flare hit. Diesel lasts longer, and the reserves we had were already treated for long-term storage—with both stabilizer and algicide.”

“But we’re still talking about a finite amount,” Roy said.

“Exactly. The clock is ticking. If we’re going to send out a search party for the feds, now is the time to do it.”

“What does she hope to gain?” Georgia asked. She leaned forward and tapped the map. “Say you find the government. What then? What does she hope you’ll be able to achieve?”

“Three things.” Patrick ticked them off on his fingers. “There are federal storage facilities around the state that include food, medicine, and fuel. We need the exact locations and the codes to get in.”

“You think they’re still there?”

“It’s a possibility.” Patrick held up his second finger. “There are some federal units still within the Texas borders. Holdouts that either were left behind, forgotten, or simply didn’t disband when the rest did. Reed needs authority over those troops, and it needs to come from the president.”

“That would help with her manpower problem.” Roy crossed his arms and nodded for Patrick to continue.

“Third, and perhaps the most important, Reed needs information. She needs to know how long it will be before the feds assert their presence, before they return to the state level. What is their long-range plan? And by long-range, I mean three to five years.”

Shelby was shaking her head before he finished speaking. “I understand

why you're steering clear of the large metropolitan areas, but there's a Presidential Emergency Operations Center right under the East Wing of the White House. What makes her think that they aren't holed up there?"

"For nine months? Doesn't seem likely. Maybe at first, but at some point they would have needed to move."

"There's supposedly more than a hundred underground bases—secret ones." When everyone turned to stare at him, Carter shrugged.

"How do you know that?" Shelby asked.

"Google? Comedy news? The Internet? Surely you all still remember those things."

"He's right," Bianca said. "Some of my colleagues pursued that story once. They tried to make a documentary photographing the underground bases, or at least the communities where they were rumored to be. They didn't get far, though. The places they tried? All off limits."

Bianca had been a freelance photographer and graphic designer before the flare. She'd been good too. But like many other professions, hers had gone the way of the modern world.

"All right," Max conceded. "I'll agree it's possible that the seat of the federal government has moved, and I understand Reed's need to locate it. But why you? No offense, but—"

"I know what you're saying. *Why me?* is a good question, especially since I'm asking for your help." Patrick shook his head. "You can't conceive how much pressure she's under unless you've been with her. Half of the Texas National Guard has gone home. Of those remaining, she lost a few more to injuries in the battle of Austin. The truth is that she doesn't have many trained soldiers left, and the ones she has she needs there in Corpus."

"You're trained," Shelby pointed out.

"But I'm not active military. She actually foresaw that this might happen, and she had a plan laid out already. The idea was to send one military person and one nonmilitary person to each state, looking for the federal government. Get there, look around, request help if we find them, and if not—get back."

"Wait." Shelby cocked her head to the side, trying to make sense of what he was saying. "So...who are you paired with?"

"Gabe." He didn't give Shelby a chance to argue with him. "We're to

meet up with him tomorrow morning. He had to, uh, pick up some supplies first.”

Max could actually feel the anxiety rolling off Shelby now. He knew what was coming. Everyone at the table knew what was coming. Shelby’s issues with Gabe Thompson were legendary, though Max had thought most of that had abated when the guy helped to procure a supply of insulin for Carter. Unfortunately, Danny Vail, their former city manager, had stolen their supplies and forced them out of the government compound at gunpoint.

Patrick was the one to face Shelby’s attitude head-on. “I know you don’t like the guy.”

“I like him.”

“Or trust him.”

“I trust him—sort of. But he did mislead us. We thought he was a doctor—an ear, nose, and throat specialist—who just happened to stumble into Abney.”

“When, in fact, Reed sent him as part of Operation Nightshade.”

“It’s a good thing we had him,” Bianca said. “He saved a lot of lives. I understand Shelby’s hesitancy, but I believe that Gabe Thompson is a decent man, and of course I want to help Patrick. That’s why I’m going.”

“I’m in,” Carter said, repeating his earlier sentiment.

“Me too,” Shelby said quietly.

Max didn’t answer. Instead, he turned to his parents, a dozen questions on his lips.

“Go, son. The crops are planted. We can handle things here.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’re sure,” Georgia said. “Patrick needs you. Our state needs you. How could you not go?”

“All right. I’m in.”

“There’s one more thing,” Patrick said. “One more reason that we came here early. There’s something we—Bianca and I—need to do.”