

Premonitions

Book 1: The Farm

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by

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Prologue

I am normally a very practical person. I've spent the last thirty-some-odd years as a registered nurse, and my friends tell me I am rock steady. My nursing career started in the Army, and included several tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. I've also worked in civilian hospitals, mostly on medical-surgical floors, but I did some time as a surgical nurse, too. I was married to a fellow Army nurse, and he used to tease me and say that nothing would shake me, even when our twin boys were young. Boys can be trouble, and twin boys are way more than double trouble! But no matter how deviously they tried to scare Mama (like the time they hid a live king snake in my underwear drawer), Mama stayed cool, calm and collected. Okay, I wanted to screech like a little girl when I saw the snake – but I didn't. I admit I can have a temper at times (especially when I watch the news on television), but it is usually pretty hard to make me all weepy and emotional.

I was raised as the only child of a very loving couple. My father, Scott Langston, was a history professor, and my mother, Annagret, was a nurse. I wanted to be just like both of them when I grew up. Instead of listening to fairy tales, I would listen to my dad telling me stories from history. By the time I was ten, I think I knew more about the Spartans, the Revolutionary War, and the siege of Leningrad than most adults. Just because I liked learning things did not mean we didn't have fun, though. My mom had a thing for horses, and we spent many lazy weekends at my grandparents' farm in Riverdale, riding horses, playing horseshoes, and target shooting in the back pasture. It was quite an idyllic childhood.

That childhood ended one cold January night. My parents went to an affair at my dad's school, and I was staying on the farm with Grandma and Grandpa. It was a really cold and icy night, and most of the evening was spent in front of the fireplace drinking hot cocoa. The state troopers came knocking on the door about two o'clock on Sunday morning to let my grandparents know that my parents were killed instantly when an oncoming vehicle skidded on the ice and hit them head on. I barely remember the weeks that followed. My grandparents, Henry and Amelia Langston, became my anchors. As I flailed and struggled with all of the changes in my life, they calmly took me in and settled me down. The farm became my home and my place of refuge.

I stayed at the farm until I finished high school. I left to go to college to get my nursing degree. While in college, I joined the ROTC, and after graduation was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the US Army. Nursing in the Army was an incredible adventure, especially for a farm girl like me. My first assignment was at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. I worked on the orthopedic unit and spent my free time visiting those places in Europe my dad taught me about so long ago. I spent two years in Landstuhl and then came stateside for a few years. At that time I met my husband, Captain John Patrick Armstrong, RN. We had a number of wonderful years together that included the birth of twin sons. We traded assignments based on the boys. When he was overseas, I was stateside with the boys. When I went overseas, he stayed back. When we were really lucky, we were both stationed in the same place at the same time! It really worked well until the day the Chaplain and two officers in dress blues showed up at my front door. For the second time in my life my world collapsed. John was the head nurse of a forward combat hospital in Afghanistan. He was almost ready to retire from the military – actually only twelve days before he was supposed to be coming stateside to begin processing out of the Army – when he was mortally wounded after insurgents bombed his hospital. There was relief in knowing he died right away and did not suffer, but his death left a huge hole in my heart and my life. Meeting his casket at Dover Air Base was certainly not the homecoming I was expecting.

After John's funeral, my grandparents again became my anchor. When John died, I was a Major and the director of the medical-surgical unit at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. I was surrounded by memories of John. After six months on an emotional roller coaster, I decided I had to get away from everything military if I was ever going to get my life back together. The constant reminders that he was never coming home were tearing me apart, so I decided to retire from the Army and move to my grandparents' farm with the boys. They invited (or more like begged) us to come live with them. It was one of the best decisions I could have made. My grandparents were very loving and supportive of the three of us as we struggled with the changes in our lives. The farm was again my refuge, and my grandparents were amazing in the way they surrounded the boys and me with love.

Living on the farm as the mother of two kids was different than living there as a child. Although I worked at the local hospital, I threw myself into the activities on the farm,

especially the garden. Working in the garden was somehow very therapeutic for me and made me begin to appreciate how much work was really involved in getting food to the table. My grandmother taught me to can, and we put up incredible amounts of food each fall. Grandma also taught me to sew using her old treadle machine. I wanted to buy her a new sewing machine, but she said she did not want one – the treadle machine was good enough for her mother, it was good enough for her, and she hoped it would be good enough for me!

My grandfather was a hunter, and knowing my love for firearms, he took the boys and me hunting with him whenever I could get time off from work. We learned not only to hunt, but also how to dress the meat and how to make the world's best jerky. Grandpa also loved firearms, and had a good collection of them. He loved to take Chris and Jon shooting and had a range set up on one of the fields. By the time my boys were sixteen they could hit the bulls eye with almost any one of Grandpa's guns and could disassemble and clean all of them, too! Of course, I had my own collection of firearms, and Grandpa and I would spend many happy hours arguing over the relative merits of our assorted weaponry.

He also was very interested in current events. A staunch Conservative, Grandpa was very worried at the state of this country. We watched the news and dissected everything the commentators would say. Grandpa was not a fan of the administration, and we shared concerns about the emphasis being placed on political correctness and moral disintegration. Things that we considered important American values – truth, honesty, fidelity, marriage, faith, religion – all of these seemed to be targets of the administration. It was almost as though they were trying to tear America apart and turn it into the opposite of what the Founders intended it to be. We both really focused on what was being done to the economy. Our debt was unimaginably high, with no efforts to pay it down. The government kept growing larger and larger, spending money like there was no tomorrow. Grandpa and I believed that it was just a matter of time before the out-of-control spending led to an economic disaster. He had great insights into the world situation, and many an evening was spent discussing how events around the globe could affect us here on the farm. Grandpa and I spent a lot of time discussing potential outcomes of the poor management of the economy over the last twenty years. He taught me so much – and helped me to understand not only why the government felt an economic stimulus plan was needed, but also why it could not work. He opened my eyes to a number of things that I had

not ever considered. For example, I learned from him about fiat money – that is, money that is just printed paper with nothing to back it. I was surprised to know that our money is no longer completely backed by gold. I learned more about the Federal Reserve, also known as the Fed. I knew it was the central bank for the United States, but I always thought it was a part of the government. Grandpa helped me to understand that although the President appoints the board members, the Fed can make financial decisions for the country without approval of the President or Congress. The Fed oversees all of the banks in the country, and it is the board members and bank presidents that set things like interest rates and manage inflation. Grandpa thought (and I agreed) that the Fed had way too much power over our economy.

Grandpa's long-held concerns about the economy led him to becoming a prepper. I understood the basic philosophy of prepping, but it took me a while to understand that being a prepper meant far more than having lots of guns and food storage. Grandpa showed me that we needed to think about things such as water, safety, and surviving without electricity if necessary. Above all, he taught me that it did not matter what you had, if you did not have the skills to use it, you had nothing. Too many people buy nifty things like water filters or magnesium fire starters, but then never use them. I don't think the middle of an end-of-the-world situation is the time to start learning how to use those prepper tools! We practiced with everything we had, from fire starters to generators to cast iron cookware and my Big Berkey water filter.

Grandpa and I were both extremely concerned about the security of the United States and the world. In addition to watching the news on television, we would both scour the internet trying to find additional information to help us have a better grip on what was really going on. We learned quickly that the mainstream media only tells you what the powers that be want you to know, and you need to work hard to find anything closer to the truth. There was so much spin on the news these days – both liberal and conservative – that truth became very elusive. Grandpa had his bets on a total collapse of the economy. I was leaning more towards something knocking out the grid – an electromagnetic pulse or a hostile country hacking into our electrical grid and collapsing it. Grandpa would use the rupture of the housing bubble in 2009 as an example of what was coming, except on a bigger scale. He'd point out countries like Greece that were so in debt they would never be able to pay back their loans.

Then he'd point out our huge national debt and the fact we were printing billions of dollars with nothing to back it. As if that wasn't bad enough, he would cite our rising unemployment and cities across the country that were threatening to declare bankruptcy. When Puerto Rico began to make noise about declaring bankruptcy, I realized that Grandpa was probably right and began watching the economy even closer. It didn't mean I wasn't still worried about the grid, though, because I knew grid failure was a probable side effect of an economic collapse.

Unfortunately, our conversations about the *what ifs* of the economy and everything else came to an end with my grandparents' passing. It's been about three years since they both died. They are buried in the family cemetery on a hill out near the far pasture under an old oak tree that was one of their favorite places on the farm. It is hard to believe they are gone. I miss them so much. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of them and miss them both dearly. One really important thing that I did learn from them, though, was that life *does* go on, and I vowed that I would continue my grandparent's legacy of preparedness for my sons and my future grandkids.

Chapter 1

Today was turning into one of those days. I absolutely hate being late for anything. Maybe it was just my military background, or maybe it was my grandparent's belief that being on time was a sign of respect for others. No matter where it came from, being late to me was just as bad as being dishonest. And here I was, sitting in traffic at least a half an hour away from where I was supposed to be right now. Just one more rotten thing to cap off a totally rotten day.

I was really getting myself worked up over being late to meet my friends for our monthly dinner and over the lousy day I'd had. My rapidly deteriorating mood was interrupted when my cell phone rang. I looked at the screen and saw it was my best friend, Marcie Evans.

"Hi, Marce, what's up?"

"Where are you? We're all waiting for you, and we're starved!" Marcie exclaimed.

"I'm stuck in the demolition traffic near the old high school. Go ahead and order without me" I told her. "Just be sure to order me something with sausage on it. It's going to take me at least fifteen minutes to get past this mess and another ten or fifteen to get to the restaurant. I'll warn you now that I'm getting cranky!"

"You, cranky? Oh, my gosh, I just can't imagine that" quipped Marcie. "Drive safely, and we'll see you when you get here."

I thought to myself that this delay was just the perfect end to a crappy day. I had been looking forward to this get-together for a couple of weeks. It is hard to get all seven of us together with our varied schedules and assorted family responsibilities, and when we finally did manage to get it arranged, my lousy day at work made me leave late. Getting stuck on the road while trucks are hauling off debris from where they are razing the old high school in town was close to setting off my last frayed nerve.

My morning started off fine, until my boss told me that the hospital budget was being cut again for the fifth time this year. I currently work as one of the nursing educators for Riverdale General Hospital. My job is quite wonderful most of the time, although I do have issues with the Director of Nursing, who is more focused on finances than she is on quality

nursing care and patient safety. She does not seem to be all that interested in promoting whatever it takes to provide the best possible care to our patients and is more interested in dressing in her fancy suits and high heels and having her numbers look good for the administrator and the Board of Directors. I understand that with all of the changes to health care and shrinking reimbursement, hospitals are hard pressed to provide good care to patients and remain financially viable. This means things the hospital administrators see as non-essential are dropped to keep room in the budget for patient care services. I can agree with that to a degree, but I just think there are better places to cut than anything that has to do with providing good, safe care. The budget cut this time means the education department's part time clerical person was being laid off, and the other educators and I would have to take on all of the filing, record keeping, and other clerical tasks for the department, as well as our usual educator tasks. To make it worse, nursing staff was also being cut, which meant a few of our nurse assistants were being laid off. At least in this round, none of the licensed nurses are being cut, but I'm sure that will be coming soon. With the economy the way it is, the hospital wants to be as lean as possible, but I feel really bad for the people who were being laid off because there just are not that many jobs to be found. Unemployment was already pretty high in Riverdale, and increasing numbers of layoffs would only make it worse.

As if layoffs were not enough to depress my mood, some free materials I ordered for a class I am supposed to teach next month were supposed to be here today, but didn't show up. When I called the company, they told me the free materials were no longer available. The person on the phone tried to sell me similar materials, but my budget just didn't have the two hundred dollars they wanted. For that matter, I didn't have any money at all in my budget, and that's why I was so excited at the thought of free materials to begin with! Then I got a call from the contractor working on my farm letting me know there were some minor problems, and we needed to meet tomorrow morning. I spent most of the afternoon working with a nurse who simply could not grasp (or more likely did not want to grasp!) the concept of how to use isolation gear. I also had a few "emergent" requests from a couple of department directors to do mass education for all staff to solve problems caused by one or two non-compliant staff members. Since when does it make sense to re-educate everyone when one or two people who knew better chose not to do what they were supposed to do? And, in these troubling financial

times, if we don't have the money to keep all of our staff, how are we going to find extra to pay for staff to have unnecessary education? It makes me wonder if directors even think about that. It would solve so many problems to just hold the two or three staff members accountable for their choices!

Finally, I was all set to leave for the day when one of the physicians showed up at my door venting about issues with the nurses and telling me all of the things that I needed to "educate" them about. Dr. Nolan is a competent doctor, but he is older and very set in his ways. In his mind, healthcare went down the tubes when nurses stopped wearing caps and white dresses and fetching coffee for the doctors. Although he is great to his patients, he is pretty hard on nurses, and lately he seems to have a litany of issues he needs to "discuss" every day. That wouldn't be bad, except for some reason he only wants to talk to me about his issues, and he usually shows up about the time I am trying to leave for the day. I've tried to divert him to talk to the Director of Nursing, but he refuses to talk to her and says she is too unprofessional for him. Most days, I am happy to chat with Dr. Nolan and listen to his concerns about these "young girls" (yes, he is referring to middle aged nurses!) because even though he can be really crotchety and cranky, he is a teddy bear at heart, and I usually do enjoy talking to him. Today, though, he was more whiny than crotchety, and I was in a hurry.

Somewhere during the day, I developed a splitting headache, and now, sitting in traffic, I am ready to just go home and go to bed. I won't, though, because in spite of the crappy day, we all have been looking forward to getting together tonight. Spending a little time with "the girls" always seems to perk me up.

There are seven of us in the group we generously call "the girls." We all work at Riverdale General, and all of us are registered nurses. At 52, I am the oldest and live farthest from the hospital. My farm is about thirty-five miles outside of town, complete with dogs, cats, chickens, goats, three dairy cows, and four horses. I have a good-sized vegetable garden but I don't grow any major crops.

Marcie is 49, and works as a floor nurse on the medical unit. She was my preceptor when I first came to Riverdale, and we quickly became best friends. Her husband Frank is a retired Marine and works as a deputy sheriff for the county. They live in a little cookie-cutter

house about a block from the sheriff's office. Marcie has one daughter, Grace, and a sweet little granddaughter named Mandy who both live with Marcie and Frank.

Lisa Manzini is 34 and is the joker in our group. She is a circulating nurse in the operating room and is known for playing tricks on surgeons and staff alike. She has an infectious laugh that can be heard from great distances and keeps the rest of us laughing along with her. Lisa can make even the silliest joke funny, and she seems to always be happy. Her husband, Chuck, is the complete opposite – quiet, shy, and serious; he works in a gun store downtown and spends a lot of his off time studying various manuals and text books. He is planning to obtain his federal firearms license so he can one day open his own gun store. They have two sons, Jeremiah, 16, and Nathaniel, 14. Both boys are much more like their dad in temperament than their mother.

Maureen Flinn just turned 50 and works as a supervisor on the labor and delivery unit. She is a quiet, gentle person unless someone tries to take advantage of her staff, and then she turns into a pit bull. Even the doctors know they need to be good to Maureen's nurses or else. She is married to Clark, who is a busy veterinarian, and has three daughters (Sarah, Phoebe, and Zoe) who all work with their father in his veterinary practice. Clark and Maureen are a cute couple. She is tall – statuesque is probably a better word – and looks like a Valkyrie with blonde hair and ice-blue eyes. Clark, on the other hand, is a bit shorter than Maureen and takes after his Japanese mother with dark hair and almond eyes.

Samantha Rivers is the girlie-girl of our group, and works in the Intensive Care Unit. Although her driver's license says she is 42, she does not look a day over 29. Of course, she works hard to look that way, with her perfect make-up, carefully dyed blonde hair, and trim figure. She lives in an upscale condo near the hospital in an area nicknamed "Doctors' Row", and hob-nobs a lot with the doctors in her neighborhood. Don't ever make the mistake of calling her Sam, as she will let you know in no uncertain terms her name is Samantha! Samantha has been divorced twice, and is looking for the perfect husband – preferably one with MD after his name.

Janet Livingstone is about the same age as Samantha, but is Samantha's complete opposite. Where Samantha is petite and slender, Janet is tall and on the pudgy side with short gray-streaked brown hair. Janet is far happier in an old pair of jeans than all dressed up. She

remarked often that she would stay a floor nurse on the medical surgical unit forever if it meant she could come to work all the time in scrubs and didn't need to go through all of the prissy beauty routines that Samantha did every day. She is usually very soft-spoken, rather shy, and quiet. Her husband, Marty, is a carpenter, and they have two young boys, Samuel and Michael, who are anything but shy and quiet.

The newest member of our group is Patty Schmidt. Patty is a year younger than me, and, like me, is a very practical, logical person. She and her husband Bill moved to Riverdale a year ago when Bill got a new job on the Riverdale police force. While Marcie is my go-to person for having fun, keeping secrets, and talking about problems at home and work, Patty is my go-to person for having a serious conversation about current events or politics. I really enjoy Patty's perspective, her well-thought-out discussions, and her ability to have a discussion without having an argument. I often look for her at lunch time at work, just so we can eat together and have a good conversation. She works on Med Surg with Janet and Marcie, but hopes to eventually teach nursing in the local community college when she finishes her online Master's program. She has one son who is a career Army officer. He is the light of her life, and she often entertains us by sharing some of his adventures.

Finally traffic cleared enough that I could pick up a little speed. I pulled into the pizza parlor parking lot and was surprised to be able to find a parking space fairly close to the front. The pizza parlor was crowded and noisy, and every table was full when I finally walked through the front door. I found the girls at a table in the back corner, laughing and cutting up as always. Watching my friends as I waded through the crowd, I had to smile. Naturally, Lisa was the loudest at the table, and even across the restaurant, I could hear her loud, characteristic laugh. They must have ordered right after I talked to Marcie, because as I walked up to the table, the waitress was delivering several steaming hot pizzas. I pulled up a chair and sat down, grabbing a slice of my favorite sausage and extra cheese as I sat.

"Hi, guys! I'm sorry I'm late. Today was the day from Hades, with tons of rotten things going on. And, to top off my day, I was all set to leave, but I got stuck meeting with Dr. Nolan, who – as usual – had complaints about the nurses... again."

“That’s what happens when you decide to leave the trenches and go management on us,” laughed Marcie. “If you were still a floor nurse like some of us, you could have just sent him on to someone else and left at the end of your shift!”

Laughing, I told her that being an educator was hardly management, although a lot of managerial functions did get delegated to us. I looked around the table at my friends. I have worked with most of these ladies for last twelve years at the hospital, and realized how happy I am to have their friendship. I thought back to my arrival in Riverdale twelve years ago. I was such a mess then, and it is a wonder that any of them even were willing to talk to me, let alone over time become dear friends. I know I drove Marcie nuts as she was showing me the ropes. I was used to the order and structure of the military – and to being in charge – and as a result, I had a hard time learning how civilians did things. Once I finally relaxed, though, Marcie became my best friend. Well, at the time, my only friend! She went out of her way, though, to introduce me to others, and our little group was born.

“Denise, are you still with us?” Maureen asked. “You were a million miles away just now! Were you daydreaming about the wonderful Dr. Nolan or something?” Everyone at the table laughed. Dr. Nolan, in addition to being *very* married, was also at least seventy years old, bald, short, and hardly the stuff of daydreams.

I chuckled, and replied, “No, Dr. Nolan is about the last person I’d be daydreaming about after our conversation this evening! He just does not understand that the role of nurses has changed since he was a young doctor and the nurses would worship at his feet! But, it’s Friday night, and I am on vacation for the next three weeks, so why are we talking about Dr. Nolan?”

“I am really happy you are finally taking some time off,” said Lisa. “You are starting to get a little cranky, and some rest will do you good!”

I started to laugh. “I’m not sure how much rest I’ll get, since there are so many things that need doing on the farm! Of course, if any of you want to give up your days off and come over to help, I’m sure I can keep you busy!”

The group around the table started laughing and soon the topic of conversation moved to other things. Patty passed around a cell phone picture of her son. “He was just promoted to Captain. I think he looks good in his dress uniform!”

“Where is he stationed right now, Patty?” asked Maureen.

“He just finished some training with his team, and they are supposed to be headed to Germany. He said they would only be there a few weeks, and then they would be off on a mission somewhere. He is hoping to come home on leave sometime after the first of the year.” As the phone was passed to me, I looked at the picture. Captain Mark Schmidt was a very handsome young man, attired in his dress uniform. I noted the tan beret and the Ranger tab on his uniform – that certainly explained a lot about his many unusual deployments. I smiled at Patty and passed the phone back to her.

“So what is everyone doing this weekend?” asked Patty.

“Samantha and I are going shooting on Saturday,” said Lisa. “Anyone want to come with us?” We all looked at Lisa in surprise.

“Yes, Lisa is going to let me finally try out her new AK-99 gun with the folding stocking thingie, and I am just so excited!” Samantha said in a make-believe bored voice, rolling her eyes. Everyone around the table laughed, because they all knew Samantha hated shooting and would rather do just about anything than go to the range. “Actually,” Samantha said, “I am going to town for a spa day – massage, manicure, pedicure, and all. I’ll be so relaxed when I get back to work Monday you all might have to retrain me!”

The rest of the girls rolled their eyes, and Janet (who was usually the quiet one) blurted out, “Samantha, you have to be retrained EVERY Monday!” As the laughter around the table increased, Samantha reached over and swatted Janet on the arm. “Just for that, I am going to volunteer you to go over to Denise’s farm and muck out the barn or something!”

“Is that something you need help with Denise? I’m happy to come over and help if you need it,” answered Janet. I told her that as much as I would enjoy the company and that she was always welcome to come visit, I wouldn’t ask anyone to clean up after my goats and chickens. I really loved Janet’s quiet sincerity and desire to help others, but I was not about to take advantage of that willingness!

“Let me know if you need help, Denise. I don’t know anything about farms, but I always wanted to learn more about taking care of animals, especially chickens! I just think chickens are cute!” I told Janet to feel free to come over any time and I would happily

introduce her to my chicken harem. Janet clapped her hands like a little girl, showing her excitement. I hope she still feels that way when she gets to smell inside the chicken coop!

“Well”, Lisa said, “I really am planning to go to the range tomorrow with Chuck. Patty, do you and Bill want to come?”

“No, we’re going to go car shopping”, answered Patty Schmidt, “Although if Bill insists on getting a king cab pickup instead of a four door car like I want, there may be some shooting at the car lot!”

“How about you, Denise?”

“I’ll be working on the house construction this weekend- I’m meeting with the contractor tomorrow to go over some problems he found and some changes the boys would like made,” I answered.

“Denise, your sons are lucky to have you adding onto your house to give them both homes” said Marcie.

I explained it was part of my grandparents’ wishes that the boys had homes on the farm, even if they chose not to live there full time. Grandma and Grandpa put aside money to build two houses, but the boys decided that instead of two separate houses, they each wanted a wing added onto my house. That way, they would have private living space, but it would still be all connected as one really big house. I think part of their reason for wanting to be connected was we are still a close and happy family, even though the boys are both grown and married. I think the idea of a live-in baby sitter for future kids also might have played a role! Whatever their reasons, I am happy that we are finally getting it done! I asked Marcie if she and Frank wanted to come over tomorrow to see what we’ve done thus far. I told her the boys are both supposed to be coming over at some point tomorrow, so I knew I’d be home all day. I invited them to stay for dinner. After all, I’m not sure how long the kids will be there, so the company would be nice.

“I’ll see what Frank has planned. It would be nice to get out of town for a few hours and see what you’ve been up to!”

“Good! I am excited for you to see how much progress we’ve made thus far. Janet, if you and Marty and the boys want to come over, too, I am happy to introduce you to my chickens!”

“Oh, that would be a lot of fun!” Janet answered. “Let me talk to Marty, and I’ll call you in the morning.”

After we spent time catching up on everyone’s lives for the last few weeks since our last get-together, I looked at my watch and realized it was getting late. I have a 50-minute drive to get to the farm on winding back roads, and since it was starting to rain, I said my goodbyes and left.

The drive home was uneventful in spite of the light rain coming down, and my mind began drifting to the boys and the new construction. I call them boys, but both are grown men. Christopher, my older son by fourteen minutes, is the manager for Ernie’s Sports and Outdoor World store in Riverdale. After doing two years in college for a business degree, he decided college was not for him. He had been working at Ernie’s since he was in high school, and moving into management at Ernie’s was a natural move for him to make. Chris is my serious child, very conservative, and always talking about planning for the future. Last year he got married, and he and his wife Stacy are expecting their first child in late November. Great daughters-in-law are hard to find, and Stacy is wonderful! She is a stay-at-home wife who loves to cook, clean, sew, and do all sorts of housewifely things. They currently live in a small apartment in Riverdale and can’t wait to be able to move into their own home permanently. Jonathan, my other son, is as different from his twin in personality as he is in looks. While Chris is average height and blond with green eyes, Jon is tall and has his father’s dark hair and eyes. He chose not to go to college, but instead was following his dream of being a musician. No matter how much I tried to convince him to go to college and study music, he was adamant. He took music lessons through high school for piano, drums, and guitar, and for a short while played with a band. Although he is a very talented showman, his real passion is writing music. At present, he is a salesman for Music City, a music store in Riverdale. It works for him, as he is able to demonstrate the instruments he sells, and it gives him lots of time to work on his music writing. He married Gabriella DeVeaux two years ago. Gabby works at Pierre’s Patisserie, one of the most popular bakery-coffee shops in town. Gabby’s father was a French diplomat to the United States and met her mother in New York City. Gabby was raised speaking English and French and as a child spent her summers in Paris with her grandparents. After she finished high school, she spent a year in Paris at the Cordon Bleu Culinary Institute,

learning to be a pastry chef. She settled in Riverdale when Pierre, an old friend of her father's, recruited her for his Patisserie. She and Jon live in an apartment a few miles from the bakery. She was really shy when I first met her, but over time she has opened up and is a wonderful daughter-in-law. She and Jon plan for now to stay in the apartment and come to the house on the farm on weekends. I know that is convenient for them, but who would want to live in an apartment in the city when they have a beautiful place in the country! Is it obvious I really want my sons to live close by? I try hard not to interfere in their lives or to be the nightmare mother-in-law, but the truth is that both of my boys are interesting, intelligent people with whom I really enjoy spending time – and Stacy and Gabby are both everything a mother could ever desire for her sons. They are both a lot of fun to be around, too. I am very blessed to have such a good relationship with both of my kids and their wives.

I am also very blessed to have the farm. It was originally quite a bit larger, but my grandparents sold off parcels here and there over the years. Still, with 737 acres, I have plenty of space. Much of the land is heavily wooded, with numerous open rolling fields and a large stocked pond. The main driveway is almost three-quarters of a mile of winding dirt road. My house is the original homestead and is located towards the front of the property on a small hill, with a large barn out behind the six-bedroom home. Grandma and Grandpa did not have any animals except a pair of cats when we moved back, but a few years ago I got some chickens and two goats. Four rescue horses and three dairy cows soon followed. Don't ask me why, but I just felt a compelling need to have some animals running around. I guess that's why I also have three dogs. All three were rescue dogs. When we first moved back to the farm, I got two male puppies for the boys, which they named Frick and Frack. A few days after I got them, I got a call from the shelter that another one of their litter was available and would have to be put down if not adopted soon. I couldn't let that happen, so Emmaline joined her brothers. My two elderly cats, Rhett and Scarlet, originally belonged to my grandparents. Not only are they spoiled rotten, but they believe the household revolves around them. I get a kick out of how all three dogs act like they are scared of the cats, even though both cats are really very gentle. Of course, the cats know they are royalty, and act it!

In addition to the barn, the farm also has a number of outbuildings for storing tractors, garden tools, and other stuff. My grandfather was pretty handy and built a very nice workshop

out near the barn. While I enjoy tackling the occasional carpentry project, I usually don't have a lot of time for that. I'm sure there are tools out there that I don't even know I have, since I don't get to spend much time in the workshop. I have gone through a few of the outbuildings, but there are still a few buildings that I have no idea what they hold, and a couple that I know are full of junk.

My grandparents had a large well dug many years ago, with both an electric pump and a hand pump for use during the frequent power outages that occur in such a rural area. There are also two windmill-powered wells for the animals, one near the barn, and one out in one of the pastures.

Up until they died three years ago, Grandpa grew wheat, corn, and hay in the big fields out behind the barn, and Grandma kept a huge vegetable and herb garden. I don't have time to be a farmer right now, although I hope that eventually I will retire and learn how. At least then I won't have to pay someone for hay and grains to feed the animals!

Chris and Jon were young teenagers when we moved to Riverdale, and after living on a military base they loved the freedom and space afforded by the farm. They said they wanted to live on the farm when they were older, and their great-grandparents promised they could each have a house there if they wanted. Tragically, before that could happen, Grandma died suddenly one spring afternoon of a massive stroke. Grandpa followed her several months later – I think of a broken heart. I was astounded to find out that not only did they leave everything to me, but they also left enough money in trust to build a house for each of the boys! In addition, they never spent any of the money left to them when my parents died. It took me almost two years to get my act together and have plans drawn up for the extensions (the boys call them the East and West Wings), with lots of input from Chris, Stacy, Gabby, and Jon. We finally were able to break ground in August. Now that it is early October, the buildings are framed and weatherproofed, and we are almost done finishing the internal structures.

I am really pleased with the way the construction is turning out. My house is a large farmhouse with a wrap-around porch and a metal roof. I have six bedrooms in my section, with four bathrooms, an office off the living room, and a small room next to the kitchen I call my upstairs pantry. The new wings are on each side of the house, but pushed back somewhat. The porch carries around the wings to the back. There is an attached garage on the back of each

wing. My garage is not attached, but is not very far from my back porch, which now sits in between the two wings. Each wing is self-contained with its own kitchen, living room, four bedrooms, and three baths. We had to do major renovations to the septic system to accommodate six more bathrooms, but it was worth it. The wings attach to the main house through breezeways towards the back of the house.

Each wing has a full basement. The main house also has a full basement, and the basements from each wing open into my basement, which gives us a lot of shared space down there. The basement in the main house has a large storage room and a decent-sized root cellar. My storage room is a prepper's dream, with wall-to-wall built-in storage shelves, several movable storage racks, and even a small desk area which gives me a place to track my storage. A generous root cellar opens off the storage area and provides additional cool storage to keep my root vegetables.

The storage room takes up about a third of the basement area and is walled off with a locking door. The rest of the basement was set up as an additional family area, with a full bathroom, a fireplace, and even a small kitchenette area. When the boys were younger, they would have friends visit down there. The boys knew not to let anyone into the storage area, because Mom's prepping habit was a family secret. I did not advertise prepping for fear people would think I was one of those crazy Doomsday survivalists or something. Even my friends did not know I was a prepper, just that I liked being prepared for emergencies. I can just hear the tin foil hat jokes now if they knew! Of course, Chris, Stacy, Jon, and Gabby knew and they understand why I prep. Chris and Stacy were looking forward to moving in so they could have room for their own prepping, but Jon and Gabby thought I was just being a bit eccentric. We frequently have conversations about the world situation, and Jon, who is ever the optimist, always insists the world is not as bad as Chris and I think it is.

The rain was starting to let up as I pulled my Jeep into the garage. After going through my usual ritual of letting the dogs out and checking on the animals, I settled down on the sofa with a cup of tea to watch the news. I'm not sure why I bother to watch these days, because all I wind up doing is yelling at the television. Kim Jong Un has his finger poised over the nuclear button on his desk; Iran is threatening Israel and the US; Russia is still making moves on the Balkan states; we are still involved in a never-ending war in the Middle East; China is building

islands in international waters; the economy is in the toilet; unemployment is rampant; crime is out of control; the country is becoming polarized over things like race, sexuality, and immigration; and incidents of terrorism all over are increasing in both frequency and lethality. But are the TV stations covering any of that? No, of course not. They are spending time talking about football players who can't stand to respect the National Anthem, the President's latest tweet, people tearing down monuments to long-dead soldiers from the Civil War, and what movie star is going to win some stupid award. In the mind of the average American, it seems the outcome of the Super Bowl is far more important than anything going on in the world. The more I listen to the news, or rather, what the news is NOT covering, the happier I am that my grandfather taught me about prepping. Even though right now it is just me on the farm, I am hopeful that if anything really happened the kids and at least a couple of my friends would be here.

I do have hopes that I can get at least a couple of my friends to catch the prepping bug. I've talked about preparedness and current events at length with Marcie and Patty, and a little bit with Janet. All three seem interested, but I am moving slowly because I don't want to scare them. Maybe while I am vacation, I can get them over and we can do some canning or something.

Chapter 2

The first few days of my vacation were blissfully peaceful. The concerns my contractor had about the construction were minor things that were easily taken care of. On Saturday the kids came over, and all four were thrilled with the progress being made. They were a little worried about not having enough furniture to fill up four bedrooms, but I told them I would help them with that when the time was right. Marcie, Frank, Janet, Marty, and the boys all came over and stayed for dinner. After dinner, the nine of us adults sat around playing Trivial Pursuit. It was a fun and relaxing evening, and we made plans to get together again soon. Sunday was stormy, and I skipped church and slept late. I spent the afternoon straightening up my supply room so that I could do some shopping the following week. It was really nice to be able to relax and not think about all of the stressful things going on at the hospital!

I decided that my first full week of vacation would be spent getting ready for winter. Although it was only the second week of October, I did not want to wait until it was freezing cold and snowing to take care of my annual chores. With Stacy's help, we spent a whole day getting about half of the pumpkins in the garden canned, and we cut the rest of the herbs down and hung them to dry in the barn. I had both of the propane tanks filled, as well as the big diesel tank out near the barn. I cleaned the house from top to bottom, and even had time to take Ranger, my favorite horse, out for a ride one evening. I had time to do some leisurely reading, and got a number of things on my list completed. It was a wonderful feeling to have my days filled with activities I loved and to go to bed tired but happy each night.

Friday of that first week off was an especially enjoyable day. Stacy, Gabby, and I spent the morning shopping for baby things. We were able to find a beautiful antique crib with a matching changing table. Yes, I am a first time grandma, and I don't want my soon-to-be grandson or granddaughter to want for anything! Fortunately, I am in a financial position that I can afford to get a few nice things for the baby. We also found a big old rocking chair, big enough for a bunch of comfy overstuffed pillows. That would be perfect for sitting rocking my grandchild – although I needed to remember that it was for their home, not mine. Stacy, novice prepper that she is, bought a lot of extra baby wipes, and both cloth and disposable diapers. We

also bought all kinds of little jumpsuits, baby tee shirts, little socks, booties, and a winter bunting set. After a ton of baby shopping, the three of us went out to lunch in Riverdale. I don't usually get a lot of time to spend with my daughters-in-law, and I really enjoyed the day. As we were finishing lunch, it started raining pretty hard, so we decided to cut our day short a bit. I dropped both girls off and headed home. Supper was a bowl of soup and some home-made bread. I spent an hour watching television and yelling at the news, and then went to bed early. The rain's steady patter on the roof lulled me to sleep.

I had only been asleep a few hours, though, when something woke me up. I'm not sure what was going on, but I felt really uneasy with a strong sense that *something* – I don't know what – was about to happen. I got up, grabbed the handgun from my night table, and slowly walked down the hallway towards the living room. Everything was quiet, and I didn't see anything out of place. The dogs quietly followed me down the hallway, but were not acting as though they sensed any problems. I checked all the doors and windows, and everything was still locked up tight. I peeked between the drapes into the yard but nothing seemed to be out of place there, either. The rain had finally stopped, and there was enough moonlight to make out the yard and outbuildings. Everything looked fine, but I still had this sense of... I'm not sure what. Foreboding, maybe? The quiet before the storm? I couldn't put a name to it, but it was such a strong feeling I felt it viscerally. My gut was clenched, and I felt almost like something was trying to warn me – about what, I can't say. I noticed my hands were shaking, and I had broken out in a cold sweat. What would cause this, I wondered? Something I ate? Was it from yelling at cable news before bed, maybe? I finally went back to bed, and all three dogs decided to flop down on the floor next to me. Although I tossed and turned for a while, I eventually was able to go back to sleep.

I woke a few hours later to a Saturday morning full of bright sunshine pouring in the bedroom window. In the back of my mind, I still had a lingering sense of something being not

quite right, but I decided I had too much to do today to sit around worrying about cable news hysteria-induced fantasies. Two hours later, I was done with my shower, fed the goats, horses, cows, chickens, dogs, and Rhett and Scarlett, gathered the morning's eggs, milked the cows, and fixed myself a cup of tea as I tried to organize my day. Grabbing a pad and pencil from my desk in the little office off the living room, I took my tea and went outside to sit on the front porch swing in the warm autumn sunshine. There were so many things I still needed to get done over the next two weeks, and I was afraid if I didn't write things down, I'd forget something. I started making two lists. One was the list of things I absolutely had to get done, and the other list had things I wanted to get done if possible. I needed to meet with the contractor at 10, go to the grocery store, and stop by the cleaners to drop off my winter coats for cleaning before the cold weather hit. I still had about 200 pounds of pumpkin in the garden that I needed to either freeze or can. The big box store in town had solar panels on sale this weekend, and I wanted to go pick up a few to set up on the well – the less I needed to hand pump the well this winter in the event of a power failure, the happier I would be! I also needed to go by the feed store and place my winter feed order. The fence around the garden was in poor repair, and I needed to get more fencing to fix it. I made a note to call the firewood guy to deliver a load. I also needed to check on the tractors – if we had a good snow, I'd need those tractors to plow the driveway out to the road, and I wanted to be sure the plow attachment was handy and ready to put on.

The grass needed to be cut, especially under the pecan trees that were getting ready to drop their nuts. I guess I ought to put harvesting the pecans on my list, too, although it will be a couple of weeks before I'll be able to do that. A few weeks ago, I ordered a side of beef that was supposed to be ready this week. The meat will all have to be put up in the freezers...if there is room. So...defrost and clean the freezers went onto the *have to do* list. After about thirty minutes of writing, I realized my lists were impossibly long. I guess that means I'll just have to be impossibly busy for the next two weeks!

The sound of the dogs barking distracted me from my list for a minute as I watched the dogs running towards the driveway. Suddenly, I felt a chill come over me and I felt the same strange feeling as last night. What is it? Is something going on? It's almost like I was having

a premonition, except a premonition would give me a clue as to why I was feeling this way, or at least that's what I thought.

I heard a car starting up the long twisted driveway, and I put down my lists and walked out onto the front yard. After a minute or two, I saw Tom VanZant's old Ford F150 pick-up truck driving up to the construction area. Tom is my contractor, and I walked over to his truck to greet him. Surprisingly, he was followed by Jose Contreras and Timothy McCleary, his two carpenters.

"Hi, Tom! What's up, and what's with having the guys here on a weekend?" I called to him.

"Howdy! I hope you don't mind, but they were available and I have a strong gut feeling I need to get this work finished sooner rather than later." Tom turned to the two carpenters and gave them some brief instructions. They grabbed their tools from the back of the truck and headed over to the East Wing.

Tom walked with me to my porch with a big folder of papers under his arm.

"I know you are going to think I'm nuts, but last night I couldn't sleep because I was worried about getting this work done. Maybe I've been watching the news too much, but I just have this worry in the back of my head that getting the construction finished quickly is going to be very important soon."

I was pretty surprised to hear this from Tom, because in the many years I've known him, he has always been really level-headed and not prone to doing things without thinking them through really well. I related to him my sense of foreboding from last night, and we both decided we must be having some kind of reaction to all of the world events that were not covered well in the news. Tom was a news junky like me, and he shared my frustration at the slanted, skewed "news" reports we are fed every night on television. Cable news is no longer news, but is now entertainment – as if there is anything even remotely entertaining about people constantly yelling at each other. Even the local news was not reporting stories that were significant, but rather focused on silly superficial stories. Entertainment, indeed. I am not entertained, just really frustrated at feeling as though I am being fed disinformation to distract me from knowing what is really going on. Tom and I have talked many times about the "news" just being a distraction, and we've also talked a lot about what real stories are being kept from

us. Although we've never discussed it, I get the feeling that Tom might be into prepping, too. He just seems to have a good sense of situational awareness, and he's made comments at times about things like reloading ammunition and shopping in bulk that make me think preparedness is on his mind.

Tom cleared his throat, and pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. "I want to make a few changes to the interior of both wings. Let me explain what I'd like to do and why, and then we can talk about if you like the ideas and how we can implement them. First of all, I am really concerned about power. I know we've got underground power expanded to both wings, but I think we ought to add a full solar set-up to the house. I'd like to build a room in the basement for a full battery bank to go with the solar. If you don't want to do solar, then I'd like to add a few small wind turbines to the hill out back."

"Tom," I asked, "is there a reason you are worried about back-up power, other than the frequent outages we have?"

"Yeah, I am really worried that if the economy tanks again, our utilities may fail. I also don't trust Little Rocket Man to not set off an electromagnetic pulse and fry the grid. We hear all the time about people hacking into big companies – what's to stop someone from hacking into our electric grid system and destroying it? With solar, though, properly shielded, you could still have power even after any kind of grid-down situation."

"Well, there is plenty of money in the construction budget to cover the solar, so I say let's go for it. I'm not sure about the wind turbines, though – aren't they huge towers?" Tom laughed.

"No, you are thinking about the giant wind turbines that are part of wind farms. I am talking about small turbines, usually about ten to twelve feet tall. They usually sit on the roof of buildings, but they will also work well on a hilltop or ridge."

I thought about it for a minute or two. "Let's hold off on the turbines for now. I think the solar will be enough, although it would be good to get some spares for the solar. As a matter of fact, maybe we ought to think about solar for the barn, workshop, and well, too." Tom nodded and agreed that expanding the solar and having spares on hand would be a good idea.

“The next thing I want to talk to you about is adding a wood stove to the area between each kitchen and living room. There is that little alcove that was going to just have a bookcase, but I think a wood stove would be good to help heat each wing if the house lost power, and also to gives the kids another place to cook.” I gave my approval to that, too. I love cooking on the wood stove my grandma had installed in my kitchen, and I thought Gabby and Stacy would both learn to love it, too.

“I met with Jon and Gabby yesterday, and they gave me some additional things for the kitchen. Gabby bought a used commercial stainless refrigerator she would like to add. She also would like propane double-wall ovens. Jon tells me Gabby would like to be able to have her own cake decorating business from home some day instead of working in someone else’s bakery. I think it would be a good idea to change both wings to all propane appliances instead of electric. You already have a couple of propane tanks for the house. I would recommend adding at least two more large tanks to go with to the two you already have.”

Well, if I needed confirmation about Tom’s attitude towards preparedness and prepping, there it was. I agreed completely with his suggestions and told Tom those changes are all fine with me. I also decided that since I already have a propane stove and oven, that maybe a propane refrigerator would be a good idea, too. I asked Tom if he could arrange that, and he told me he would be happy to get me a propane refrigerator when he got the other appliances. I really appreciated his thoughts about power and heat. I guess we’ve been too busy thinking about the *now* and haven’t been paying attention to the *what ifs*. Tom is keeping us on target.

We spent a while longer going over the details of his recommendations. Suddenly, Tom looked at his watch and said “Gotta run, I have another client to go see today. I’ll swing back by this afternoon to see how Tim and Jose are doing.”

“Sounds good” I answered. “I’m headed to town to run some errands, but I’ll be back later on.”

After Tom left, I sat on the porch finishing my tea and thinking about what he said. Was it just a coincidence that we were both feeling uneasy? A shared psychic event? I don’t believe in coincidences, and I don’t put a lot of stock in extrasensory perception or any of that psychic mumbo jumbo. I would think if the folks on the psychic hotline were really psychic, they would call you to give you solutions, rather than you calling them to tell them problems! It

must be that Tom and I are both really in tune with what we think is going on in the world – either that, or our tin foil hats are getting too tight! Still, it is kind of odd that we both had those feelings at the same time. I sat there thinking for a few minutes, and then, snapping out of it, picked up my teacup and went into the house.

I grabbed the winter coats for the cleaners and headed into town. After I dropped the coats off, I swung by the feed store and put in my winter order for animal feed. Instead of my usual order for 400 pounds of chicken feed, I decided at the last minute to double it to get 800 pounds. I also ordered twelve tons of hay for the goats, cows, and horses to be delivered the same time as the feed. I knew I had some grain for the cows, but decided to order a bunch more of that, too. While I was at it, I also decided to increase my stock of supplements for the horses, goats, and cows. I set up delivery for two weeks from now.

As I handed over my credit card to pay for my order, the clerk asked me if I was doubling my herd or something, and I laughed. I told her I plan to get a few more goats, and I don't want hungry chickens, I guess. She smiled, and reminded me the delivery driver would call before he came out to the farm.

As I left the feed store, I wondered what came over me in there, to order so much more than usual. Again, I felt that unsettling feeling, and was surprised when I thought to myself, *will it be enough?*

Next stop was the grocery store. I don't go often, as I prefer to buy my groceries in bulk, but with the garden winding down for the year, I wanted to pick up some fresh salad makings. I was pretty surprised to see that even though it was Saturday, the shelves were not as full as they usually were. I decided that while I was there, I'd pick up a few extra things. I'd get a few extra jars of salad dressing, some extra spices... and a half hour later I finished paying for a full cart. Prices had gone up since the last time I was in the store, too. I'm fortunate that I don't need to watch every penny, but how about those folks who are on a fixed or low income – how are they coping with these price hikes?

I decided to forego the big box store since Tom was taking care of solar and just head for home. As I pulled up to the house, I saw that both Chris and Jon were there with Stacy and Gabby.

I told them what Tom planned to do with solar and the wood stoves, and they were all excited and approving. Gabby looked a bit concerned. "I've never used a wood stove for heat or cooking, but I guess I will learn if I need to!" I tried to reassure her, telling her it was not difficult, and I'd be happy to teach her if the need ever arose.

Gabby added, "Tom is making the changes in the kitchen to accommodate the big refrigerator I bought, and he is also extending the counter a little longer so I'll have plenty of room for my baking!" I was happy to see Gabby all excited. She always seemed to be a bit shy around me, and to see her excited was a treat.

"You ought to see the size of the cabinets he is adding to store her baking pans and supplies," Jon added. "I think she has more baking tools than the bakery does! When she's ready to open her baking business, she'll be all set!"

Gabby giggled and poked Jon. "I'm sure there are lots more things I'll need then!" Jon rolled his eyes and laughed. Chris jumped in. "I'm glad that you married a woman that enjoys baking. She can keep us all in fresh breads and cakes, right?"

I could see that the boys were getting ready to start teasing each other, which usually led to them rolling around on the floor wrestling. I loved the camaraderie between the two of them. That was one of the great things about having two sons the same age who really enjoyed each others' company!

"Why don't we all go inside and settle down a little?" I suggested. "Tom will be back soon, and we need to get a shopping list together of stuff he will need to add for the house." I no sooner finished saying that, when Tom pulled up in the driveway.

The kids and Tom were going over the details needed to finish both wings, and I went to the kitchen to start dinner. There is something very satisfying to me about cooking with food I grew and canned myself. Potatoes and onions from the root cellar, carrots canned from my garden, and beef from the side I bought last winter all came together in my grandmother's cast iron Dutch oven.

"Tom, you're staying for dinner, I hope?" I called into the living room. Tom looked surprised, but agreed to stay. Just then, Marcie and Frank drove up to the house. Frank settled down in the living room to talk to Tom and the boys, while the girls, Marcie, and I headed into the kitchen. Stacy and Gabby started getting items to set the table, while I started making a big

batch of buttermilk biscuits to go with the stew. Marcie caught me up on all the work gossip I'd missed over the past week while I made the biscuits.

"Our wonderful Director was at it again, telling nurses they could take a bigger assignment if they didn't waste so much time. I wonder if she ever really practiced nursing? She doesn't act it, that's for sure. I mean, I want her to be fiscally responsible, but I also expect she show some compassion to her staff and stick up for them once in a while. She sure did have a bunch of the nurses worked up the other day, it's a wonder they didn't quit. Of course with the economy the way it is, there are probably still nurses out there looking for work, so a few of her nurses quitting wouldn't matter to her a bit. Did you hear that the hospital laid off half of the maintenance and gardening staff yesterday? They also let go three receptionists from the business office and two coders. Looks like they are really having to pull their belts tight! I wonder how long it will be before nurses start getting pink slips?"

I was shocked. I had no idea that things were getting so tight at work. I asked Marcie if she felt that our jobs were secure, and she replied that the director of nursing told everyone the licensed staff was all safe – for the minute. I just shook my head.

Soon, dinner was ready, and we all gathered around my grandparents' antique dining room table. We held hands around the table while Chris said grace before the meal. The meal wasn't fancy, but it was hearty and everyone seemed to enjoy it. Conversation around the table was light while we ate, focusing mostly on the construction and how close it is to being finished. I felt very content with my friends and family near.

After dinner, we took coffee and tea to the living room. I started telling Tom about the layoffs at the hospital, and that started a big discussion regarding the state of the economy right now. I was surprised when Frank added that there have been some administrative cut-backs at the sheriff's office this week as well. Luckily, both boys seemed to feel pretty secure in their work environments. Jon noted that guitar sales were down overall, but they still had a couple of contracts for custom guitars for a buyer in Nashville. Chris said that parts of the business seemed to be improving a bit, especially in the hunting and camping lines of his store. I wondered if that is because people are getting ready for a bug-out situation, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want to get into an open discussion of prepping at that time. Both boys named a few stores near their work places that had closed recently. Marcie mentioned that gas

went up again, and passed on that she heard there were a couple of layoffs at her granddaughter's day care. She also mentioned that they were canceling meal service at the day care and Mandy would have to start bringing her lunch every day. Gabby added that she had to run to the grocery store yesterday for work, and she noticed the shelves were almost bare. Chris joked that people were getting ready for the Zombie Apocalypse, and we all laughed. I did tell everyone that the farm would be a good place to go to hide from the Zombies, and they were all welcome! I saw the surprised look on Tom's face, and told him of course he was welcome too.

"Thank you," he said, surprisingly serious. "I worry about my house, and how I would manage if something happened. The yard is big, but I don't have the wells like you and I have way too many neighbors."

"Well, there are no neighbors here for at least a mile down one end of the road, and three or four miles the other way. I think this would be a really good place to be if something happened," I answered.

Jon started laughing. "Yeah, because Chris and I built all those Zombie traps when we were kids, right?" I just shook my head. Jon is such a nut!

After everyone left, though, I started thinking about the layoffs at the hospital and other indicators that the economy was not as good in town as we would like. That feeling of foreboding hit me again. I think it is going to give me an ulcer.