



**Chocolate  
chip  
COOKIES**

BY Culex Pipiens

# Chocolate Chip Cookies

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Chocolate Chip Cookies is a work of fiction.  
Any resemblance to real people or events is purely  
coincidental. Names, characters, places and incidents  
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## Chapter 1

The sweet pulp from around the simple bean had finally dried enough to allow the seed to fall to the dark earth. With the rains, the seed sunk into the earth and sprung to life. Roots found their way deeper and deeper, branching out and seeking the nutrients long ago buried and sequestered into the soil by countless mycelium.

As the rains fell the seed continued to carry on the circle of life pushing its stem and leaves ever higher above the soil. Eventually the seed was gone and a tree stood in its place. A small sapling, a seedling, a fragile entity, but a tree none the less. Over the next half decade the stem enlarged and grew a protective layer of bark. The trunk branched and branched again growing the above ground support structure while the roots almost mirrored the actions below ground in their incessant quest for water and nutrients.

By the age of five, the tree started to produce pods, each filled with more seeds. The tree continued to grow, larger and larger before achieving a mature height a bit over twenty feet. By now the tree was producing thousands of flowers a year, but still a limited number of pods, usually less than two dozen. Well protected in each pod was the future of the tree. Seeds, also called beans, numbered between three and six hundred, nearly ten thousand seeds in total each year. Generation after generation the tree and its offspring waged their battle against all the other vegetation competing for the same water, nutrients and sunlight.

## Chapter 2

Rafael Sanchez woke up with the sunrise and the call of the resident roosters. His wife and kids were still asleep in their hacienda and he quietly dressed donning his well worn straw hat. As the day wore on the sun would

become nearly unbearable and his hat was, he felt, a vital part of his equipment. He trudged out to the fields, giving barely perceptible head nods to the other workers as their only form of greeting or acknowledgement. It wasn't rudeness, just a familiarity of seeing the same people day after day for years upon years. There was only so much to be said and they'd all said it many times over.

He didn't mind the work. They were paid reasonably well, enough to provide for his family and even get them the occasional treat. Besides, he worked outside, enjoyed a siesta each afternoon and wasn't working with anything poisons or dangerous. Yes, Rafael had a good life, he felt, as he approached the makeshift outdoor cooking area.

Some men were already eating when Rafael got in line. Soon, it was his turn and he gave his few pesos for a dish of eggs and sausage that he hungrily devoured. The dishes went back to the cook and the men moved off into the trees to continue with the harvest.

It wasn't long before the pile of Forastero cocoa pods had grown quite large and the men grabbed their sticks and sat down for the next part. Each pod was opened with the stick and the beans gathered and put in boxes which were then stacked and covered. Going to some previous packed boxes from almost a week ago, Rafael checked on the fermenting process and deemed that it was time. Each man lifted a box and carried it over to another area where large well used work tables were erected. The beans were dumped out and spread all over the tables.

Sunlight streaming down worked its magic and over the next several days the fermented beans slowly dried and changed to a rich dark brown color. Moving over to other tables, Rafael and the men took the fermented and dried beans off the table and filled sack after sack weighing and labeling them for market.

Other than once a year when he would spend a few more pesos on chocolate eggs for his children at Easter time, Rafael never saw or got to enjoy the end product of his labor.

The bag of dried Cocoa beans was loaded on a truck and shipped to the coast where more men and machines transferred the bags to a warehouse and then eventually a shipping container. The fully loaded container was hoisted high above the bustling freight terminal and put aboard a ship along with hundreds of other containers. Soon, it was buried in the middle with containers all around.

An uneventful journey at sea saw the arrival of the ship, and cargo at the Long Beach port. The container eventually was uncovered once more and transferred to a trailer. Another long journey, this time on the road, brought the container to a large metal sided building. Dozens upon dozens of other trailers were slotted into each loading dock while hundreds of people, some driving forklifts, scurried around, in and out of each trailer. After a brief wait, the container was completely emptied and the boxes and crates dispersed throughout the warehouse.

Only a day had passed before the crate containing the sacks of cocoa beans was again on the move. It was loaded to another truck and driven, again for a long time. Late in the afternoon on the following day the truck arrived at another large building and backed to the loading dock where the crate was removed, opened and the sacks counted. After some paper traded hands more people came by and lifted the sacks carrying them to a large opening. Each sack was cut open and the beans dumped in the opening.

As the hopper slowly emptied, the beans, now on a conveyor belt, went past other workers who picked out bits and pieces of leaves, twigs and other debris. They moved onto large racks and went into an oven where they were roasted. Upon exit, they again went past more workers who sorted them into various

barrels. When full, a barrel was taken away and immediately replaced with an empty. The full ones were dumped in yet another hopper, fed onto yet another conveyor belt and into another machine that cracked and removed the shells exposing the nib. The nibs were separated out and headed down a different path from the shells, ending up in another machine that would grind and liquefy them. The pure chocolate, known as chocolate liquor, drained off into more drums.

One again, as each drum filled it was swapped with an empty and the full one moved on to another process that extracted the cocoa solids in one vat and the cocoa butter in another. Each was packaged up into more drums and moved into a warehouse. A bit less than forty eight hours later the drums were loaded onto a truck and on the move.

The drive time was only a few hours passed before the drums were once more being removed from the truck. Maneuvered into position, drum after drum of chocolate was dumped into the vast mixing container along with sugar, vanilla and milk powder. A measured quantity of the cocoa butter was added back in. The motors activated and the contents were thoroughly mixed before moving into another container filled with metal beads. Frictional heat kept the chocolate mixture liquefied while the beads, acting as grinders, reduced the gritty texture of the chocolate into particles so small that the mouth feel would be smooth and almost creamy.

A final heating, or tempering, of the chocolate helps to control the size of the cocoa butter crystals resulting in a uniform and consistent product which is extracted into various bars and shapes. The runoff and broken bars end up in another bin where they get broken down into chunks and packaged up in large bulk boxes.

These boxes were on a truck the very next day and driven for almost six hours. Unloaded into yet another warehouse, the box of chocolate chunks sat and

rested for almost a week. Finally the box was opened and the chunks were poured into a mixing vat with flour, sugar, and liquid along with a variety of flavorings and preservatives. A dispenser squeezed out dollops of the well mixed batter onto a conveyor belt that traveled through an oven quickly baking the chocolate chip cookies.

Exiting the oven the cookies wound around for a few minutes to cool before the conveyor belt brought them to an automated packaging system. Two cookies were stacked, inserted into a pre-stamped and labeled plastic wrapper and sealed. Every twelve packs of cookies were gathered and dropped into die cut labeled boxes and automatically sealed closed. The boxes slid down the rollers using nothing but gravity where workers put the packs into larger case boxes, sealed the boxes and sent them down another set of rollers towards the warehouse.

By now, the Just In Time (JIT) inventory practices should be obvious to any observer. As JIT predicts, the cases did not sit in the warehouse long, just a few days for most of the boxes before being loaded on a truck and sent out for distribution. Some of the cases went direct to larger stores, while some went to smaller distribution centers where they were broken down back to the twelve pack boxes, bundled with other items and sent on to smaller stores like gas stations and convenience marts.

Delivery drivers drop them off, store clerks take the twelve pack and break it down to the individual packages, each containing two cookies, price the package and place it with all of the other snacks and drinks on the display racks. JIT calculations say that the cookies should all be sold within a week. This particular location gets deliveries twice a week, usually snack foods in one and beverages in the other although corporate, aware of marketing campaigns and also watching the daily sales numbers by location, can increase the number of deliveries, include more with each delivery and even dispatch special deliveries if deemed necessary.

An example might be a large shipment of sidewalk salt for their northern locations a few days before a major blizzard hits.

### Chapter 3

Deepa arrived at work relieving the night shift worker. He stepped behind the counter, affixed his name tag and changed the radio to his preferred station. This part of town wasn't that bad but it wasn't what you would consider a safe area either. His wife insisted he work a day shift and hire someone else to work the more dangerous hours.

Quickly his regulars started coming in. Most grabbed a coffee or a juice bottle on their way into the office. Some went for the donuts, others would grab a pre-made deli sandwich and a bag of chips for lunch. Once in awhile someone would even still buy the local paper, usually the older folk. He knew many by name and greeted them. His keen memory allowed him to remember details of past conversations and he frequently made small talk while ringing up his regulars.

“How did Johnny place at the track meet over the weekend?”

“Did you buy the car? You did? Ah, I see it. Yes, yes. Nice looking lines and I like the color. Is it fast?”

“How did your Friday date go? Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Doug, your usual pack of filters?”

In the middle of ringing up Mrs. Chanwick's purchase the power went out. Mrs. Chanwick, long since retired and windowed, came by promptly at 10 AM every morning, rain or shine, for a bottle of prune juice, one jelly donut and



whatever tabloid papers were new. Deepa went so far as to have a jelly donut put aside for her each morning just to make sure one would be left when she got there. He'd see her walking up the street and slip the donut into the box where she would find it and exclaim, "I always seem to get the last one. I must be lucky." It was a ritual with them.

Losing power wasn't. The register was on an uninterruptable power supply and should not have gone off. While wondering what was wrong and how much this would cost he heard multiple crashes outside. People seemed to have completely forgotten how to drive as vehicles appeared to be coasting into each other from all directions. Little to no attempt was made by the drivers to avoid the accidents.

Finally he looked back to Mrs. Chanwick and her purchases, realized he might not be able to ring them up and handed her the juice bottle and donut and said, "It's on the house today Mrs. Chanwick. You have a good day."

She thanked him and shuffled out of the store and back up the street. Passing her was a tough looking guy with a backpack slung over one arm. He walked, in fact almost trotted, making a beeline for the store.

"Oh, I am sorry sir but we are not able to be selling you anything with the power down."

The guy showed no acknowledgement of Deepa and instead picked up a shopping basket and headed down the aisle toward the refrigerated beverages. Deepa noticed his calm yet focused demeanor and he moved with purpose, little to no wasted actions. He had on jeans and a light coat, perhaps best described as a dirty tan color. Black, weathered, boots were on his feet.

"Sir, Sir!"

Oh, to hell with it, thought Deepa. If the guy wants to waste his time, that's his problem. He stared back out the window at people standing in the street and yelling at each other, both saying it wasn't their fault. Strange, the police were only three blocks away and the fire and paramedics were the same distance away in the other direction. He had expected to hear sirens by now.

Deepa was roused from his thoughts when the basket was slammed down on the counter. Glancing over he saw it was full of water bottles, energy bars, lighters, a couple of pocket knives, some shoelaces, pain pills, half a dozen ramen noodle packs and a handful of beef jerky sticks. Roughly a hundred dollars or so of merchandise by his quick mental calculations. Oh well, there goes the sale of the day, he thought.

“Sir, as I said when you came in, we can not sell you anything. I am wanting to but there is no way for me to charge your credit card until the power comes back on.”

The man pulled out two \$100 bills, placed them on the counter and said, “This is about double what the basket is worth. We got a deal?”

He glanced to the money, to the man, to the basket and back to the money.

“Yes sir. Thank you and come again.”

The guy dropped his backpack, canvas in an olive green color, to the counter and proceeded to carefully empty the basket's contents into the pack, arranging each item as he added it, before putting it back on his shoulders. He shifted a few times to settle the weight and Deepa thought he saw the handle of a gun briefly stick out from under his light jacket. He slowly moved his other hand under the

counter and felt for the panic button. One press would notify the police and have them here in less than two minutes.

The man, however, made no overt moves and once he was satisfied with how the pack was riding he headed for the door. Half through it he stopped and turned back.

Oh no here it comes, thought Deepa getting ready for the “now open the register and give me your money” line he usually heard. Sweat started to bead on his forehead. It could have been the lack of air conditioning since the power went off or maybe it was the situation. His finger tensed on the panic button as the man spoke.

“If I were you I’d lock the door and go home. It’s going to get ugly really fast.”

He then turned and walked away back in the direction he had come.

## Chapter 4

At first Deepa tried to stay busy. He took the newest shipments and stocked the shelves. Band aids, magazines, sports drinks, another twelve pack of chocolate chip cookie packages and countless other convenience store items all were inventoried and checked against the printed shipment list and placed on the shelves. With all the work he could do without power finally completed he returned to his register.

Deepa sat in the store, behind the counter, for a few more hours. It was the strangest day he could ever remember. Since the power went off not a single car had gone past. In fact all the cars were still stopped in the road right where most of

them had crashed. The accidents were mostly minor so he couldn't understand why the drivers just abandoned them and walked away.

He tried to call his wife but his cell phone was dead. Perfect time he thought. His wife always nagged him about plugging in the phone when he got home to keep the battery charged but he frequently forgot. She'd give him hell for this one.

A number of people came in to buy stuff, most trying to use their credit and debit cards. A few became quite vocal and hostile when he had to demand cash only due to the power being out. Finally even that slow stream of customers dwindled away to nothing.

The afternoon wore on and the streets seemed to be emptying, almost becoming deserted. Deepa was starting to wonder just what could have caused a bustling part of the city to become deserted in a matter of hours. While staring off in the distance and pondering he became aware of movement, of people, advancing down the block.

As they got closer he realized these weren't customers but looters as he observed them smash the windows on multiple cars and reach in to take things. A few, with what appeared to be tire irons, were busting store windows. Once breached, dozens would rush in and take things. Clothes, electronics, food, didn't matter. They all found something to take.

Deepa hurried around the counter and locked the door. He scurried back and ducked down behind the counter seeking the panic button. As his finger found it he began to repeatedly press it.

Crash!

The sound of the glass door, on his store, shattering, reached his ears. He could hear people pouring in and merchandise being grabbed when all of a sudden his leg was in extreme pain. He screamed and tried to roll over only to find a heavy weight pressing down on him.

After jumping the counter, landing on Deepa's leg and the falling on him, the looter rolled off of him, stood up and said, "Hey, Julio, looky here! Got one of dem foreigners back here."

"Who cares, just take the money."

The guy started pushing buttons on the register but nothing happened.

"Hey, old man, open the register."

"I am sorry but I can not."

"I ain't gonna tel l you again. Open the damn register!"

"Until the power comes back on I can not. It is not possible."

The guy took one swipe with his tire iron at Deepa smashing him in the side of the head before turning his anger to the register instead. He beat on it a half dozen times before the dented and mangled unit gave up the hold on the drawer popping it open.

Stuffing the money in his pockets he looked down at Deepa's bleeding head and unconscious body, "See old man, you don't need no power to open it," he said as he delivered two viscous kicks to his side breaking at least a couple of ribs. He jumped back over the counter, reached out and grabbed the last pack of chocolate chip cookies sitting on the shelf and stuffed it in his jacket pocket.

With that the store had been nearly cleaned out and people started pouring out the door heading for the next establishment on the block.

## Chapter 5

Eric Durning was not happy. He was miles from home and had lost his wheels. Abandoned might be a better description he thought. The undercover police cruiser had just died and it took all of his training to fight the dead vehicle safely to the side of the street cursing the motor pool maintenance department all the way. It wasn't until he had stopped that he realized he wasn't the only one having car troubles.

All around him cars were drifting to a stop, some safely, others only when they hit another vehicle, building or worse. Looking up he saw the stop lights were all out. Eric reached in, tried his radio.

“Unit 17, radio check, over.”

“Unit 17, radio check, over.”

Nothing. He turned the dial and got nothing, not even static. The radio had no power. He pulled out his cell phone and found that it did turn on but he had no service. Zero bars. In a city with cell sites every few blocks it seemed he simply had no signal.

A loud noise drew his attention upwards. The crash followed by the debris raining down had Eric diving for the safety of his vehicle. He flew past the open door smashing his shoulder against the equipment in the center console just as a

tail section of a small airplane hit the ground where he had been previously standing.

He scrambled across and opened the passenger side door crawling out and away from the car. Looking up once more he could see the remains of a small twin engine plane, missing the tail, half buried in the side of a building about four stories up. People were either gathering to see what was happening or running and screaming in the other direction. Most of the screamers were citing terrorists and terror attacks, some quoting religious verses.

Eric did not have the resources on his own to sort out the traffic mess, control the crowd, start a rescue attempt for the airplane occupants and attend to the injured who'd been hit by the drifting cars just literally a minute ago. Something else was vying for attention in the back of his head but he couldn't quite focus on it enough to remember what it was.

Knowing he had to at least do something, he let his training take over as he opened the trunk, got out a megaphone and trauma kit, and closed it back up. He turned the megaphone on and yelled for the crowd to backup and disperse.

Nothing.

He fiddled with the switch and volume control.

He could see the power LED light up but it seemed like the battery was nearly completely drained. He put it up to his ear, tapped on the microphone and could just barely hear anything. Tossing it to the ground he moved forward yelling to people to either get out of the way and disperse or to help. Most turned and left, a few stepped forward.

“You, you and you,” he said emphasizing by pointing at them, “Get up there and see if anyone in the plane is still alive.”

“You and you, go check anyone down on the ground on that side of the street, see if they are conscious or not. Find out if they’re hurt and where. Write it down and tape the notes to their chest, then move on.”

“I don’t have any paper,” a woman said.

Eric was already pulling a note pad, marker and a roll of tape from his bag. “Here, use this.”

On his side, he moved from person to person checking on their condition. A couple would not live more than a few additional minutes without paramedic attention. He had only basic first aid training so he helped those he could and was able to follow up on the other side of the street providing additional assistance based on the written notes.

Once the people who could be helped were and those who were going to die had done so, he sat back down in his car for a minute to start on the paperwork. He pulled the department and the FEMA incident notebooks from his emergency trauma bag and started scanning the procedures for this situation. The short section describing disasters and the likely injuries he would have to deal with caught his eye.

EMP.

Electro Magnetic Pulse.

An event caused by a coronal mass ejection from the sun or by a nuclear explosion high up at just the right altitude. Either cause would result in near one



hundred percent destruction of electronics and anything that relied on them, like cars for example. Casualties would be substantial in the immediate aftermath as operators would lose control of their vehicles but worse, lack of vehicles meant lack of transport of goods. Within 24-72 hours, or even less in some areas, the first signs of looting and rioting. By 72 hours wide spread panic would be in effect and if the EMP was nationwide or worldwide, within 30 days mass die off due to starvation would be well under way.

Now he remembered... his brain was trying to tell him he had read about this. Of course if there had been a close by nuclear explosion Eric was quite certain he would have noticed. He tried to scan the sky but the buildings blocked much of his view.

The airplane people returned and told him that they made it up to the fourth floor, found the offices that the plane was embedded within but it was not safe to enter the plane itself as they could hear it moaning and groaning and once saw it shift position slightly. They were worried it would fall out of the hole and down to the pavement.

“We called out and banged on the side of the plane but no one ever answered and we could see a lot of blood on the front window.”

“Ok, you did good. Thank you for checking. Now go home and take care of your families.”

The people left and Eric realized that was good advice. Take care of your family. He thought about his wife and young son at home for the first time since this all happened.

“No point in sitting here crying about it, I got a long walk ahead of me,” he said out loud but to no one in particular.

Eric once more opened the trunk and this time retrieved the tactical shotgun, AR rifle and his other emergency bag. He condensed what was left of his limited medical supplies and stored them in the second bag along with his water bottle and ammunition for the weapons and some miscellaneous gear including his vest. Slinging the AR over one shoulder, the bag over the other and carrying the shotgun, he started walking.

Block after block he went. At first he tried to tell those around him he wasn't a threat, but one look at him and the weapons and most people ran. His plain clothes, quite worn and scruffy looking in fact, did not help his statements that he was a cop and wasn't going to hurt them.

His goal was the district station where he could lose the hardware, find out the situation and hopefully get a set of working wheels. The motor pool could send a wrecker to pick up the car later, assuming they could get one running.

As the day wore on he was losing focus on his surroundings and simply trudging along. Step by step. Sun beating down. Sweat dripping. Sore feet, shoulders and neck.

The sound of breaking glass snapped him back to the here and now as Eric's head swung up to see what the cause was. A large group of troublemakers were headed his way smashing out store window after store window as they came. Others following along brought out arm loads of stuff and ran the other way. He slipped the AR off his shoulder, replacing shotgun with it.

Cursing the state mandated ten round limited magazines, he reached into his bag and extracted three illegal full load thirty round magazines that he privately acquired and normally kept hidden. Most of the cops did this and the commander looked the other way as long as they didn't get caught by the public with them. She

wasn't about to put her officers in harm's way without adequate firepower to defend themselves. The case was a prime example. Easily twenty perps were headed towards him.

"Yeah, why would I ever need more than ten rounds," he mumbled as he slammed home the full size thirty round magazine and took cover behind a vehicle.

By now the people had seen him and were spreading out across the street trying to stretch his field of fire and possibly even flank him.

Eric wanted no part of that BS. He raised the rifle, pointed it just over the head of the likely leader and fired a single shot before yelling out, "That was a warning. Drop any weapons, turn around and disperse. I will not warn you again."

"Hey, Julio, that pig shot at you. You gonna take that crap?"

"Fuck no. Get him!" he said gesturing with a Glock that had suddenly appeared in his hand.

"A half ounce to whoever takes out the trash."

At the offer of a drug reward, many more weapons appeared they started advancing, one guy even running right towards Eric.

Bang! Bang!

Eric let his training take over. Acquire. Sight. Squeeze. Verify. Move on.

One by one he would determine his next target, align his sights, squeeze the trigger twice, watch the gang banger go down and repeat. Not to say this was a slow process, rather each individual got perhaps a second or two at most before he

was already moving on to the next target. Each also got a double tap just to make sure they would stay down.

As the eighth guy went down the group mentality had a quick shift and the reward just wasn't worth it for most as they turned and fled, all except for Julio and the loudmouth originally egging him on.

Eric saw him running to the side in an obvious attempt to flank him, yet if he turned from Julio to engage he'd present the loudmouth with an opportunity instead. He knew his magazine was just under half filled which should be enough. He turned and ran towards an alley entrance while blindly firing towards Julio. Return shots pinged off the pavement and chipped the bricks right next to his head as he dove in the alley.

Assuming they'd follow him in and expect him to be hiding, Eric instead assumed a single knee position right in the middle of the alley and lined up on the entrance. He could hear footsteps approaching and then silence.

"He went in dere."

"Yeah no shit, go get him."

"Me? You're the big dog. You do it."

"What, you scared?"

"No, I thought you'd want to keep up your rep... ya know, get that pig back for killin yo guys."

"Ok, we both go at da same time."

“1...”

“2...”

Eric really couldn't believe the level of incompetence these two had, especially counting out loud, however he wasn't going to let that stop him from putting the animals down.”

“3!”

They both turned the corner, one trying to stumble around the other one to look down the alley. Eric simply had to pull the trigger and swing the gun to track the second one in order to take them both out. A single shot from the loudmouth is all they got off. It was enough. Eric was hit.

He dropped, rolled behind a dumpster and changed to a fresh magazine before peering out again. Both were down, one moving around a bit. He took his time to line up a head shot on each firing a single round and nodding with satisfaction as a red mist appeared in the air over each one's head as they lay still.

Looking down at his bicep, he could see the blossoming red stain coming through his clothes. Working quickly, Eric stripped off his top layers and dug around in his medical bag for bandages. A quick examination showed the bullet passed through and other than bleeding did not appear to have left any permanent damage. For now he one handed clumsily wrapped the wound with multiple gauze pads and bandages applying as much pressure as he could.

He felt a bit light headed and knew, from the amount of blood around him that he needed real medical attention as soon as possible. In the mean time he leaned back on the dumpster and ate an energy bar and drank a bottle of water. As

Eric relaxed, the adrenaline rush faded away and he felt even more exhausted plus his damaged muscle was starting to really hurt.

Giving himself a few more minutes he reloaded his magazines before using the rifle to push himself up from the ground. He put his shirt and jacket back on, rearranged his bag and headed toward the street. Approaching, stealthily, along the wall he stayed low and slowly worked his way around the corner making sure the street was clear. The only people he saw were on the ground and would not be causing any more trouble ever again.

Taking the time to check over the bodies he confiscated the weapons, mostly cheap junk and checked the bodies for anything else of use. Most were loaded with cash, obviously recently stolen, and not much else. He found a few IDs but suspected they were probably false. On the loud mouth instigator he found a pack of cookies, still sealed. Strange, he thought, as he tossed the package into his bag along with the confiscated guns and their IDs.

Lifting the now heavier bag with his good shoulder, he headed down the street, altering his course a bit to take him past the hospital, only a few blocks out of his way.

Eric stopped nearly every block or so to rest a bit and let the world stop spinning. As he got his composure back he'd push on as far as he could until the wavy spinning buildings threatened to knock him down again. His bandage and sleeve were soaked with blood and he could feel his life slowly slipping away.

“Just a few more blocks...”

“Just a few more blocks...”

“Just a few more blocks...,” he kept repeating the mantra to himself and kept pushing until he was able to look up and see the signs for the emergency room.

A few people were about and most, seeing a bloody guy, heavily armed, quickly ran the other way. Eric never noticed.

Twenty feet outside of the emergency doors a half dozen uniformed men came running out of the building, weapons drawn.

“DROP THE WEAPON! DROP THE WEAPON!”

“GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!”

With the rifle still over his shoulder, Eric, held up two fingers, pulled his light jacket wide open and very slowly reached into the pocket, obviously using just two fingers to very slowly pull out a small object. He dropped to his knees and fell, face first to the ground, his arm outstretched in front of him as his badge rolled from his hand, landing a foot away, face up.

## Chapter 6

“He’s one of us! Get a gurney! Call the doctor!”

The officers quickly holstered their side arms while rushing forwards to gather up Eric and lift him to the gurney coming toward them. They fairly roughly dropped him on it and rushed off with him. One of the other men grabbed his bag, rifle and shotgun and followed behind.

Inside the hospital it was dark. Even for being day time outside, the halls were dark. Backup power failed when everything else went out. Using the few working flashlights they had, the emergency staff took over and wheeled Eric into a normal patient room. The emergency rooms and trauma rooms, while much better prepared, had no working equipment and no lights. At least patient rooms had windows and some had been quickly turned into makeshift exam rooms.

“1, 2, 3. Lift!”

Eric was transferred from the gurney to a bed.

“There is a lot of blood here on the left side.”

“Right side looks good.”

“Cut the shirt.”

Quickly his jacket and shirt were cut and stripped off.

“Pulse is faint, heartbeat weak and irregular, breathing is shallow.”

“Got a heavily blood soaked bandage on the bicep.”

“Remove it, let’s see what we’re dealing with. Get me a temp, BP and blood type. Infuse a bag of plasma and then follow with blood. With the power out it isn’t going to last, we might as well use it while we still can.”

“It’s a hole clean through the arm. Looks like a bullet wound. Hit an artery pretty good, this guy should be dead already.”



“Get that blood going, stat! I don’t want to lose anyone else today. Clamp the artery and get it stitched up.”

Just thirty minutes later the well trained staff had cleaned the wound removing bits of cloth that had been dragged into the wound channel by the passing bullet. Small bits that could have lead to a deadly infection. Once the debris was removed, the wound irrigated and stitched up and many pints of blood infused into his system Eric’s color moved out of ghastly white and back into healthy looking shades. He was moved to an interior room as windows with daylight were too important to be used for those just recovering or sleeping.

That evening he finally woke, disoriented and confused. As he lay there quelling the panic, the antibacterial scent coupled with the feel of metal rails on either side of him screamed medical facility. Had he actually made it to the hospital? He wondered. The last thing he remembered was seeing the signs indicating the hospital ahead and that was it.

He tried to rise up and found his arm tied to the railing. Reaching over with the other one he could feel a bandage on his upper arm and a tube feeding into the lower arm. At his wrist he found a pair of hand cuffs connecting him to the railing. Cuffs? Why would I be cuffed, he thought.

“He... cough... cough....”

“Hey! Hello?! Anyone out there?”

After a pause, “Hello? Anyone?”

The door opened and he could see dim grey light filtering through the doorway as someone walked in with a flashlight.

“Keep it down. Other patients are trying to rest.”

Looking around with the dim light the flashlight provided he noticed many other gurneys in the room, each with a body on it.

“Why I am chained to this?”

“Just be quiet for a minute and hang on,” the female voice replied in a harsh whisper.

The light was laid down on the gurney next to him while the woman wheeled him towards the door slowing as she approached. Just before touching she came to a nearly complete stop and then very slowly advanced just barely making a noise as the edge of the gurney scraped against the door pushing it open as she went. Out in the hallway it was dim but compared to the room he was in, much brighter. She wheeled him past a half dozen doors and then parked him against the wall.

Retrieving her flashlight she told him, “Just you wait here a minute and I’ll get someone who can help you,” as she disappeared through a double set of doors.

Five minutes passed in silence before the doors opened and a fairly bright light was shined in his face.

“What’s your name?”

“Eric”

“Eric what?”

“Eric Durning. Who’s asking?”

“Never mind. I’ll ask the questions here.”

“No, I’ll ask the questions. First off, why do you have me cuffed to this?” he said rattling the railing. “I’m a damn cop.”

“Funny you don’t look like a cop, you came in with a bag full of gang banger guns, you ain’t got no uniform or ID and that name you gave me was on the badge.”

“Which means it’s me.”

“Or that you somehow learned to read.”

“I’m undercover and since when are Colt ARs and Mossberg 590s gang banger guns?”

“Yeah, sure you are, looks to me like you got in a scuffle with a cop, he shot you in the arm before you took him out and stole his stuff.”

“Screw you. Get on the radio, call Captain McDermott and tell her I’m here. She’ll set you straight.”

“Nice try asshole. No radios are working. If you were a cop you’d have known that.”

Eric laid back on the gurney trying to think of something to say to prove he was a cop when the doors opened and another officer entered.

“How’s he doing?”

“Who, this scum bag cop killer?” he said giving the gurney a kick.

The other guy came a bit closer and looked down at him, “What do you mean cop killer?”

“He killed a cop and took his guns and badge.”

“When? He is a cop.”

“Really? No shit?”

“Really. That’s Eric Durning, 5<sup>th</sup> district, same as me. He was deep undercover working on infiltrating the drug cartels.”

Eric opened his eyes and looked up at what appeared to be a kid still wet behind the ears.

“Eric, it’s me, Ramiro. We met once about 6 months ago when I mistakenly busted you. The captain had my ass for that.”

“Yeah, I remember. That was actually the best thing you could have done for me. When they saw me get busted they figured I was OK. I even did a few days in the jail to help extend my cover. Now, can you get me out of these?” he said, once again rattling the cuffs.

The other cop, quite sheepishly, pulled out his keys and undid the cuffs.

“Hey, no hard feelings? I didn’t know... we didn’t know you and just assumed... well...”

“Yeah, well next time put some of that academy training to good use and think first,” he said swinging his legs over the side and unsteadily getting to his feet.

“Ramiro, where’s my stuff?”

“This way Sergeant Durning.”

Following along, “Eric is fine.”

“Yes sir.”

“By the way, thanks for getting me out of there.”

“Yes sir Eric sir.”

“Any chance my clothes are still around?” he asked noticing he just had his pants and work boots on.

“I’ve got some spare uniforms in my squad if you need one.”

“Thanks, I was thinking of something a little less conspicuous. It’s pretty bad out there.”

“I’ll say. You came in with a gunshot wound and passed out by the doors seemingly covered in blood.”

“So that’s what happened? I can’t remember anything beyond seeing the emergency room entrance off in the distance and walking towards it.”

“Yeah, you were armed like Rambo coming towards the door. We ran out and almost shot you, at least until you pulled out your badge and collapsed.”

“I showed by badge and that dick still didn’t think I was a cop?”

“Most of us believed you but him and a few others got it in their head you had killed a cop and took his stuff. I never got a good look at your face until back there so I didn’t know it was you. Sorry sergeant. We got at least half a dozen different precincts here.”

They walked in silence for down a few additional hospital hallways, all looking the same in the dark; their boots echoing slightly off the tiled floors. The light was almost gone, just a faint flickering glow coming through the small windows in some of the doors they passed. Finally Ramiro led him into what looked like a lounge with almost a dozen other officers in there.

“Guys, Sergeant Eric Durning, 5<sup>th</sup> District, undercover narcotics.”

“Damn man, you looked like crap when you got here,” said one cop.

“Yeah, and you still don’t look any better!” replied another garnering some laughs.

“What happened to you?”

“Probably the same as the rest of you, an EMP took everything out, at least I think that’s what it was. Treated everyone on scene, then packed up my car and started heading for the station. Bunch of looters coming the other way were causing trouble. After the first eight went down most of the rest took off. Two more hung around trying to flank me. I ditched them in an alley and once I was in position waited. Sure enough they came in after me. Got them both, one getting off a lucky

shot. I bandaged it but it just kept bleeding. Figured I'd better head for here. How about you all?"

"Shit man, most of us were already here, or at least within a few blocks. We just gravitated here and have been waiting to find out what was going on. You took out ten bangers all on your own?"

"Well, I did have some help."

"Hah... I knew it. How many did you have?"

"Just one. His name was Sam."

"Was? Sorry man."

"No, he's been dead for years now."

"Huh?"

"Sam. As in Samuel. Samuel Colt," he said with a big grin.

"No, for real?"

"Yep. Can I assume you won't arrest me if I tell you I had some thirty rounders in my personal stash?" he said with a wink and another grin. "It's the only thing that prevented me from being overrun."

Nearly all the cops were carrying what would now be considered illegal 'high capacity' magazines and to the man, none would ever rat on a fellow officer for doing so. They each nodded in agreement at his words.

“Speaking of, has anyone seen my gear? I want to get back on the road. It’s still a long way home for me and I’m worried about the wife and kid.”

“Yeah, over there,” Ramiro said, gesturing to the corner past a couch.

Eric walked over and found his bag.

“How about my guns?”

“We got those locked in a squad outside. I’ll open it up for you when you’re ready to go.”

“Not that it hasn’t been fun guys, but I’m ready now.”

“No you’re not... at least not until the doc clears you. Said you lost a lot of blood and was surprised you were even still alive.”

“Aw shit. Well, let’s get this over with then. Where is he?”

“She. Doctor Burns. Come on, I’ll take you over to the ER, she’s probably still there.”

Eric lifted his bag and followed Ramiro, giving a raised hand and a head nod to the other officers as he left. Once more they went down a few more institutional hallways as Ramiro tried making small talk. Eric’s head was pounding and he just wanted to get back out on the road. If society broke down this far in a matter of a few hours, what would happen in another day or two?

They approached a T intersection and a tall red haired woman was rushing past on the crossing hallway.



“Doctor Burns, do you have a minute?”

“No. What?”

“Eric here wants to get checked out so he...”

“Not now, we got three more code ones just arrived. Get on the list at reception, find a seat and I’ll get to you when I can,” the last half said over her shoulder as she continued running down the hall.

“Well, I guess you’re here for the duration. Sign in, find a seat and get comfortable.”

“Aw hell, I ought to just walk out. It’s not like they can stop me, or even care at this point.”

“Probably true but you don’t want that arm getting infected. What good are you going to be to the family when you’re stuck in bed dying of an infection?”

“Yeah yeah,” he said dropping heavily into the generic vinyl covered chairs in the waiting room.

Looking around he saw the room was surprisingly empty, just a few scattered people, most with bloodied bandages wrapped around various limbs, all supporting a thousand yard stare. Each had been through their own personal hell today and Eric had no delusions; it was only going to get worse.

A few hours later a very exhausted Dr. Burns came out, holding a flashlight and an envelope and called, “Eric. Eric Durning”.

He dragged himself up in the darkness and approached.

“Let’s get you checked out. I’m surprised you’re vertical let alone still alive.”

“It wasn’t that bad doc, just a straight through wound.”

“It caught an artery. You nearly bled to death. What the hell were you doing out there?”

“Trying to survive. It’s a jungle.”

“Really? It can’t be that bad.”

“Heh... you have no idea.”

“It’s just a power outage. Once the electric company gets it fixed and we get our power back we should be fine.”

“Power outage? Where have you been? You haven’t been told?”

“Here. Told what?”

“Doesn’t the hospital have backup generators?”

“I think so.”

“So why aren’t they running?”

“Uh...”

“Doesn’t your medical equipment and monitors and such have battery backup built into them?”

“I believe so.”

“So why aren’t they running?”

“I don’t have time for this. What’s your point officer Durning?”

“This isn’t a power outage. Well, actually it is but not like you think. This is the result of an EMP. All electrical equipment has been knocked out. This is regional if not national or even global. Anything that connects to the grid, dead. Anything with a circuit board, dead. Most cars have computers. They’re now rusting piles of metal.”

“No, you’re wrong. The paramedics keep bring in people. The ambulances are working.”

“You sure about that?”

Doctor Burns stuck her head out the door of the darkened room they were in and looked up and down the hall before calling out, “You, there! Yeah, you. Can you come here for a minute?”

Eric could hear footsteps and then pieces of a conversation happening outside the door.

“... your ambulances are not running but that’s...”

“He’s right nothing is.....”

“...no, that means...”

She voice trailed off and Eric thought he heard sobbing sounds.

A few minutes later the doctor, wiping her sleeve across her face came back into the room, sat down in a chair and pretty much shut down.

“Doc?”

“Doctor? Hello? Anyone home?”

Seeing the signs of shock, at least mental if not physical coupled with her exhaustion of trying to perform her job under adverse conditions, Eric pulled her up, led her to the exam table and had her lay down. She complied going through the motions with no recognition that she even was. He pulled out the extension to get her lower legs and feet up on the table too and then covered her with a half dozen disposable gowns before going to look for a new doctor or nurse to check on her.

An hour and a half later Eric had gotten another doctor to sign off on his release, finally found a shirt to put on, obtained, and got filled an antibiotic prescription and managed to get a handful of bandages for when he needed to change the one on his arm. By now he knew his way around this hospital good enough to find the lounge. Only a couple of cops were in there, including Ramiro.

“Where’d everyone else go?”

“Some tried to get home, others are patrolling around the hospital trying to at least keep this area a relatively safe zone.”

“How about you?”

“We’re just on break for now, we go out on the next patrol. Otherwise, I got nothing. No family to go to so I’m just going to hang around here until I find out different from Captain McDermott.”

“Well, good luck. I’m released so if you can pop your trunk I’ll grab the rest of my gear and hit the road.”

Ramiro followed him to the door and then led him to his cruiser, opened the trunk and gave him the two assigned guns back and pointed to the gang banger guns, “you might as well take these too if you want.”

Eric opened his bag and dropped them in before Ramiro spoke again.

“Good luck out there man. I hope I see you again.”

“Yeah, same. It’s going to be hell for awhile, you stay safe.”

## Chapter 7

Eric got his bag situated on his good shoulder with only the shotgun over the shoulder on his bad left arm. The AR was held down but ready as he strode off into the dark. Looking up he marveled at the sheer number of stars in the sky. With no light pollution from the ground he could finally see what most city people never got a chance to see, millions of stars. The half moon provided just enough light to see by, at least once his eyes became fully accustomed to the darkness.

His route took him towards home with a slight deviation past the police station. Gun shots and screams were frequently heard yet very few people were seen out. A couple of times he was approached however raising up the AR was

sufficient to dissuade anyone from trying anything foolish. Most simply turned and ran.

By two AM he reached the station and found it deserted. Not just locked up with no one home, but actually wide open, everything gone and no one home. Things were not overturned or really in any disarray, just gone. The radios, all the weapons and ammunition, and anything else that could be used for survival or defense was simply gone. He walked around the station with his flashlight calling out and getting nothing but silence in response.

The holding cells were all unlocked and empty. Evidence room, empty. Administration, empty. Room after room. He finally checked out the conference room where they held roll call and got their daily assignments. His undercover work precluded him from attending these. Most days it was a simple email to the captain letting her know the general idea of what he'd be involved with that day and summarizing the previous day.

Thinking back Eric still remembered when he was a rookie, still believing he was going to protect and serve and not just become a garbage man, collecting the dregs of society. He still remembered roll call and eagerly awaiting his assignments for the day.

Shaking his head to clear away the history and bring his focus back on the present, he gave the room a once over and stopped when his light was on the white board.

Scrawled in a hastily written script, "999 - Take care of your own – McD."

Well, in his mind that settled it. The captain saw the situation for what it was and had issued a code 999. He never had expected to experience one in his life. Code 999, abandon station, every officer for themselves.

With little hope for the future and even more concern for his wife and child he turned, and walked out of the station, continuing on down the road.

The morning sky was just starting to light up going from inky black to a dark grey on the horizon. Twenty minutes later, the entire sky had brightened to a light grey bordering on orange at the horizon as Eric turned down the alley that led behind his home. Down the way he heard a dog barking, but not aggressively; more like a 'good morning world' kind of bark. He briefly wondered how long before pets were let loose and then how long until they formed packs and went feral.

Reaching the back gate, he lifted the latch, pushed the cedar gate open and entered, closing and latching it behind him. Walking along the six foot privacy fence he made it half way to the house before the back door opened and a shotgun barrel was stuck out pointing right at him.

"That's far enough buddy. Take one more step and I'll blow your balls off."

"Becky? It's me. Eric."

"Eric?"

The gun moved forward and a head peaked out, just a fraction of an inch.

"Yes it's me. Sorry I missed dinner."

This was an inside joke as his undercover work frequently had him out evenings and they rarely had dinner together, even so he still always apologized for missing it.

“Oh Eric!” she exclaimed finally lowering the weapon and rushing down the stairs to him.

“How are you? Are you OK? How about David?”

“We’re fine. What about you? Why are you wearing scrubs instead of your shirt. Oh my god, is that a bandage? Were you injured? Do we need to go to the doctor? Why is the power out?”

Finally out of both breath and questions she collapsed against him, sobbed and let the tears out.

After attempting to take a shower with noticeably lower water pressure than normal Eric sacked out on the bed and went comatose to the world for a good five hours, waking up again just after noon.

David was playing quietly on the floor and Becky was laying on the bed next to him, just watching Eric as he slowly woke up.

“Morning sunshine. Or I guess I should say afternoon.”

“Oh crap! How late is it?” he asked jumping out of bed.

“I think a little past noon. The mechanical grandfather clock still works even though nothing else does. What happened? EMP?”

He nodded, “Yep. Near as I can figure.”



Grabbing his bag he put it on the bed and began to empty it. His left over medical supplies, flares, tactical bullet resistant vest, extra magazines, extra ammo, a few water bottles, the gang banger guns and the pack of cookies.

“Hey, Davey.”

“Yes daddy?”

“I brought you a present,” he said tossing the cookie package to him.

He caught it and was about to tear into it when Becky spoke up, “What do you say?”

“Thank you.”

“Good boy. You can have those after dinner. Until then they are to remain unopened on the counter. OK?”

“Yes mommy.”

Six year old David ran down to the kitchen and put them on the counter anticipating eating them after dinner.

“Becky, do you think your parents would mind if we paid them a visit?”

“They love to see Davey and he enjoys helping with the goats and chickens on their farm but how are we going to get there?”

“I’m willing to bet my little hobby is about to pay dividends big time.”

“You mean that piece of crap in the garage you keep promising to fix up and get rid of?”

“Yep. It’s a ’67, which means no electronics. As long as we can get it started it should run just fine.”

Becky thought about the Saturday afternoon, three years ago, when Eric and a buddy showed up in his pickup towing a trailer with the biggest bucket of rust she had ever seen on it. Eric had gone on and on about the great deal he had gotten. Only \$200. Hell she was so pissed she would have paid someone \$200 just to take it away. He buried it in the garage and every so often Dwayne would come by and they’d go play with it his toy, his Camaro. More often than not it involved lots of beer and cursing but very little else.

“Do you really think it’ll work?”

“Let me go check.”

He strapped on his duty sidearm, an XD, and went out to the garage. Inside he flipped on the light. Nothing.

Damn, it’s going to take a while to stop doing that he realized. Pulling the curtain back from the window enough afternoon light from the service door and window openings were pouring in so he could see. He worked his way over to the car and pulled the tarp off. It was still covered in rust with the hood removed and propped up on the wall. At least Dwayne helped me get the engine cleaned up Eric thought. He went ahead and opened the door slipping into the well worn and ripped vinyl bucket seat. He gently, almost reverently, slipped the key into the ignition and slowly turned it.

Rrrr..... rrr.... Rrrr... RRRRRoar!

It came to life settling into a steady throaty purr. He let it idle for thirty seconds before turning it off.

Sitting back in his seat he had the largest smile on his face. He had a running car and no one else around apparently did.

Shit. He had a running car and no one else did. The smile quickly faded. How many of the neighbors had heard? This isn't good. They'll be wanting rides or wanting to borrow it. They needed to get moving and quick.

He pulled the curtain closed, locked the garage up and went back to the house. Just as he was closing the door he heard Jack from two doors down calling to him.

“Becky! Quick!”

Rushing into the kitchen where he was at, “What!? What is it?”

“Good news. The car works. Bad news. The car works.”

“Why is that bad?”

“People heard. We're going to be hounded, heck maybe even targets now.”

“Why?”

“Think about it. We're the only ones with a working car...” he let it trail off as she put it together.

“Oh damn.”

“Yep. We need to be ready to go in fifteen minutes. You pack clothes for us and David. I’ll get the weapons, ammo, food, water and toiletries stacked up at the back door. Remember we don’t have much room, but we may not ever be coming back either.”

“What do you mean not coming back?”

“If things get ugly the city is going to turn into a war zone at best and possibly burn to the ground. Now go!”

True to his promise, Within fifteen minutes Eric had everything stacked up and ready to go. All the bottled water, all the food in the house, his gun locker contents along with a toolbox and all the bathroom contents stuffed into garbage bags were ready and waiting to be taken to the car.

Just as he was going to look for Becky, David came into the kitchen dragging a duffle bag behind him.

“What do you have in there, Davey?”

“My clothes.”

“Is that all?”

“No. Mommy said I could fill the rest with toys. I got by teddy and my Legos and my GI Joes too. That’s OK, right?”

“Yes son. That is fine.”

Becky appeared lugging two more large duffle bags and two roll behind suitcases.

“Here are most of our day to day clothes. I still have to go back for all my cocktail dresses.”

Eric was about to chew her out when he saw her grin and knew her joke for what it was.

“Alright. I’ll start taking everything out, you go ahead and give the house a once over. We can probably fit a few more bags, but that’s about it.”

Eric began taking loads out to the garage. Most weapons and ammo got buried in the bottom of the trunk although he kept the AR and Becky’s 20 Gauge separate, placing them on the roof for now, along with extra ammo for both. On top of the other guns went clothes, food, water and his toolbox. In the back seat, leaving just enough room for David he added the toiletries and more clothes. Seeing some room left in the trunk he began tossing in a variety of hand tools he had in the garage for working on the car. Good quality wrenches and socket sets, more screw drivers, feeler gauges and handfuls of other stuff he didn’t stop to check, just kept cramming every open space with anything he thought might be useful.

He left the garage heading back to the house to see if they were ready when the back gate latch rattled. Drawing his XD as he turned, he took a weaver stance as the gate opened. It was Jack.

“Hey man!” he exclaimed throwing his hands up in the air. “Don’t shoot. I was just coming over to see what was going on.”

“Nothing is going on Jack. Go home,” he said lowering and holstering the weapon.

“Don’t say nothing man. I heard you start up that car you have in there. How come your car is running when no one else’s is?”

“Go home Jack. It’s none of your business.”

“Well, if your car works then you should be sharing it with the rest of us. We all got to get to the store and go find our families. You can just give us a ride, or better yet, just let me borrow it and I’ll drive the others.”

“Last time, go home Jack,” he said turning away.

“Look man, just give me the fucking keys and no one gets hurt.”

Eric slowly turned back, Jack had a revolver out and, in a very shaky hand, was pointing it at Eric’s head.

“Now Jack, let’s not doing anything stupid here,” he said slowly moving his hand towards his gun.

“Stop reaching for your gun and give me the keys. I asked nice but you had to be an ass and tell me to go away. **GIVE ME THE KEYS!**” he shrieked, spittle flying from his mouth.

**BOOM!**

Jack went backwards as his chest blossomed into a crimson mess.

Training kicking in, Eric moved to the side out of the path of the barrel, stepped forward and snatched the revolver from his hands. Quickly checking it he was disappointed to find it empty. Jack didn't even have any ammunition in it.

Turning to the house, Becky was standing there, holding his twelve gauge he kept hidden on top of the cabinet by the door, smoke still emanating from the barrel.

“Is he...?”

“If not, he soon will be.”

“I had to. He was going to shoot you. Right?”

Thinking to his academy training... ‘if a gun is pointed at you, assume it is loaded and take appropriate action’.

“Yes dear, he was threatening me.”

Not technically a lie but he wasn't about to tell her she had just shot an essentially unarmed man. He could hear David crying inside as Becky turned to check on him.

Wiping his prints off the revolver, he put it back in Jack's hand. He doubted this event would ever be a legal issue, let alone see a court room but wasn't about to take chances.

Inside he found Becky had calmed David down and had their last few things by the door.

“Take those out, I'll bring David,” he said.

She took the last few bags to the car while Eric scooped up David, his shotgun and closed and locked the door.

“David, look, over there, see that bird.”

“No, where?”

“Over there in the sky. It’s flying behind that tree.”

“Oops, I guess you missed it. Maybe we’ll see it again later.”

His distraction worked and David was staring off into the sky instead of down at Jack’s body as Eric walked past it. Once in the garage he got the remaining bags packed away.

Eric put the car in neutral, opened the main door and pushed it out into the alley. He closed and locked the service door and the big door before getting in and starting it once again.

RRrrooaar.

With a quick shift they were off.

Ten minutes into the ride David started wailing and crying in the back seat.

“What’s wrong dear? Are you OK?”

“We have to go back!” he wailed.

Eric stepped on the brakes, “Why? What’s wrong?”



“I forgot my cookies on the counter!”

Smiling, Eric let off the brake, stepped on the gas and said, “Don’t worry, grandma will make you fresh cookies.”

## Chapter 8

Beatrice was worried. For three blocks now there had been no cover. Nothing. Just block after block of blackened ruins. Homes burned to the ground. Nowhere to hide. She hated being out in the open.

Nearly a month ago the lights went off and have not come back on since. Most vehicles stopped working. She had no idea what had happened. One minute she’s entering payroll numbers into her spreadsheet, next thing she knows, everything is dead. A couple of guys jumped up, looked out the windows for a few moments as the street below and then briefly to the sky, ran back to their cubicles, banged a few drawers around and then took off, without a word to anyone, almost running for the stairs while strapping on large backpacks.

Those two guys always were kind of strange. She’d overheard them talking about guns and knives. Katy something or others... that sounded like they filtered water. Why not just buy bottled water? Every convenience store had it. They’d be discussing the latest disaster in the news and they really seemed to like insects. They kept talking about bugs or bugging things. Maybe they weren’t so crazy after all she now thought.

A sound made her pause and look around, quickly focusing back on the present.

There it was again. She turned slightly looking for the source. A beagle came stumbling out of the blackened debris of a house and eyed her up. When she didn't move it started to growl.

The poor thing was all skin and bones and she wanted to help but it also, for whatever reason, was still protecting and defending its former home and she couldn't risk a bite and possible infection.

She backed away a few hundred feet until it finally stopped growling and partially returned back into the charred hole from which it had come. Turning she wandered over to what would be the next block and continued on her way. Any direction was just as good as any other. It was a competition for dwindling resources and she didn't want to lose.

As she walked her mind drifted back.

Everyone else in the office just hung around chatting and waiting for something to happen. Mid afternoon Jake, the branch manager, came out and said he was dismissing everyone for the rest of the day but they needed to be back first thing in the morning as he was trying to make arrangements with IT to bring in portable generators if necessary.

The next surprise came when everyone went out to the lot and found their cars would not start. Beatrice, for once, was happy she only lived a half mile away and walked each day. She made it home, or at least to her building, and punched in her PIN code to unlock the door. Nothing. No buzz. No error tone. She tried again and again.

So close and yet no way to get home she sat on the ground in front of the door and waited. Luckily it was a short wait until someone else was leaving the building and they thankfully knew each other in passing so the woman let her in.

Of course the elevator was out so she climbed the stairs to her fifth floor apartment.

The next morning, with the power still out, Beatrice walked back to work as told and found no one else there. She waited two hours before giving up, leaving a note stuck in the door and walked back home. Once more she had to wait for someone to leave before she could get back into her building.

This routine continued for three days until she was nearly out of food. Leaving the building she found the door was unlocked now so she'd be able to get back in. Good, she thought. At the end of the block she tried the door on the local sandwich shop. Locked and dark inside. Wandering across the street the convenience store was open and had a sign in the window, 'cash only'.

A quick check of her purse turned up four dollars and change.

"Hello. In case you missed the sign it's cash only."

"Can I write you a check? I'm good for it."

"Nope."

"No? How about my gold VISA?"

"Cash only. What part don't you understand? "

"But I only have four dollars."

“Not my problem. Either buy something or get out.”

“How rude! I’m reporting you to the BBB.”

“You know, just get out,” he said coming around the counter with a bat in his hand.

She turned and rushed out of the store wondering what the world was coming to. Just a few days without power and people were already very rude. Of course that didn’t explain why vehicles weren’t working but she hadn’t really clued in on that yet.

Within the next forty eight hours what little of society that was still left around her completely collapsed. From her window she saw multiple people jumped, beaten and left for dead. Some managed to drag themselves away, others did indeed die where they lay. At night she heard the screams, the violence and soon even during the day these sounds were there. Police presence was nonexistent, then again no phones worked so you could not have called even if they were still around.

On the verge of starving, Beatrice finally decided she had to go get food by whatever means necessary. She dressed in comfortable clothes for hiking put on her sneakers and after mulling it over, finally decided to take a kitchen knife with her for protection.

In a mere twenty four hours she had looted three stores including the convenience store where she found the clerk with the bat was laying out front on the ground, beaten to death and maybe even shot. She had stuck one person in the arm when he made his intentions quite clear and tried to grab her. Finally she stabbed another person in the back when they had grabbed her bag of food and

tried to run. She scooped up the bag, yanked her knife out and took off not stopping to see if they were even still alive.

It was rapidly becoming survival of the fittest and Beatrice was learning as she went. By the end of the second week she had looted protective clothing, mostly leathers, good boots, a decent backpack and now had an assortment of knives, multi tools, a crowbar, a bat with nails pounded into it, and a gun that she was still trying to figure out.

Three weeks after the EMP she had killed a number of people in self defense, knew what to do with the gun, had a few additional guns and a pack full of food and water.

From now on she would live off the land scavenging what she needed to survive which brought her to the blackened and burnt neighborhood. In the distance ahead she saw her goal. Almost an entire block of houses not touched by the fires.

If she was lucky, these had been abandoned and not yet looted. If she was unlucky, they were still occupied and had been defended against the fires, which meant they'd be able to defend against her.

Taking her time she picked her way amongst the burned down houses. At a still relatively safe distance she got out her binoculars and scanned for signs of life. No smoke from fires, no people moving around. No sounds of human life. The doors and windows appeared intact.

She advanced another half block and repeated. Finally, she worked her way around the intact block of houses, still at a distance observing and examining.

“Well girl, it’s getting dark and you don’t want to be out on your own. Time to make your move,” she said out loud, but softly, to herself.

Walking forward with no weapons in her hands she approached the first house, a ranch style, tan and brown with bricks on the front. The flower beds must have looked nice but after a month of neglect they were in sad shape. A lot of water and a good afternoon pulling weeds would return them to their glory. She gently knocked on the wood door. After a minute she knocked once more a bit more forcefully. Working her way around the home she, cautiously at first, pressed her hand and face up against the glass and tried to peer into each window.

Not seeing anyone she spent more time looking through the windows trying to spot any supplies. The kitchen had cabinets, all closed, and she could not see anything on the counters.

One last look around and out came the crowbar. She jammed in by the door attempting to pry it open. After a few failed attempts she switched to plan B and smashed out the glass. Beatrice grabbed the handle to turn while reaching in to undo the lock. The knob turned before she even touched the lock.

“Huh. Guess I should have tried the knob first,” she said, once more out loud to no one but herself.

Methodically she searched the cabinets finding very little food. It appeared whoever had lived here must have taken everything with when they left. Room by room she checked the rest. The house was pretty empty in terms of useful goods. She did find lots of junk. The usual figurines and paintings, doll collections and plate collections, even train layouts. All sorts of hobby and collectable stuff that simply had no use any longer filled house after house that she had been through these past few weeks.

She opened her pack, added the few cans she had found, saving one for her dinner and left a partially filled box of cereal on the counter for breakfast.

“Well, Chef Boy, looks like you and me for dinner again,” she said to the can before opening it and eating it cold. She washed it down with a bottle of water.

By now evening had fallen and before it became totally dark she selected a comfortable bed for the night. Ensuring the window was tightly closed and locked, she pulled the drapes.

Out in the hallway leading to the bedroom she dropped a small handful of change into the empty pasta can, bent the lid back into place and balanced it on a laundry hamper. She ran a string from the can across the hall and tied it to the door knob of another bedroom. Hopefully anyone sneaking up on her in the dark would hit the string, knocking the can over and making a lot of noise as it fell, giving her time to either defend or flee.

As the sun rose the following morning she pulled the gun out from under the pillow and cautiously checked the hallway. The string and can were still in place.

Taking advantage of a toilet, even one that doesn't flush anymore, was now a luxury for her so she took her time and then added the remaining toilet paper and the spare roll to her pack when she was done.

A quick breakfast of the cereal and she was ready to get moving. While eating she had been watching out the windows for signs of habitation. Again no chimney smoke, no grill or cooking fire smoke. No sounds. It's as if this block of people had just disappeared.

House by house she went adding a little here, a little there to her meager supplies. The last house, a two story, brick bungalow style appeared to have been

hastily stripped. Clothes were strewn all over, but only impractical clothes. Toiletries had been all taken. The food and bottled beverages were all completely gone with one exception. A single pack of cookies was sitting on the counter. She added it to her pack and left via the back door.

In the yard she found a fairly badly decomposed body and noticed a revolver still held in the hand. Holding her sleeve over her nose she reached down, pulled the gun free and stepped away into fresher air. A quick check showed it was empty but otherwise appeared none the worse for wear. Not knowing when she would find ammunition, nor in what size, she wiped it down and added it to her pack. Worst case it could still look threatening.

Beatrice wandered for another few weeks eventually reaching the outskirts of the urban area. She had become quite adept at living off the land, although the land, to her, was still the trappings and habitations of society. She had walked past countless gardens and even 'weeds' that were all sources of food if she had only known.

She turned and headed away from the wilderness and back into the urban sprawl walking a different route from the one she had just come from. An hour later she saw a lone figure approaching and stopped to check it out with her binoculars, now upgraded thanks to a house with a yard full of bird feeders.

Whoever had lived there was now dead, not by her hand, she just saw the aftermath. They had thoroughly cleaned the place out of food and drink but left the binoculars right on the shelf next to the large picture window on her yard. From the number of bird ID books the former owner must have been into bird watching. One look through the Swarovski EL's and she quickly swapped with the, now obviously, cheap pair she had been using.



Once more she put the high quality optics to use and saw a well armed individual looking right back at her with their binoculars. They had on a cap and a long trench coat with gear strapped all over so she couldn't tell if it was a man or woman. Whoever it was had obviously seen her so running would only get her tired. She put the glasses away and fumbled with her pack for a minute as a cover while she drew her gun and kept it in her hand, pointing down, and somewhat hidden behind her leg.

She hated every part of it but would still willing put a bullet or three into them if it meant protecting her life. Last week she had shot two guys who thought she'd be a quick and easy lay. One would never be able to father children any longer, the other would never be getting up again.

Standing up, she slipped the pack on her back once more and began walking towards the person noting they had also started forward too. At one hundred feet both stopped once more.

The silence grew as they sized each other up. Finally the other one spoke.

“You going to shoot me with that?” he said gesturing.

The voice told her it was a guy.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Your intentions.”

“I'm just a stranger passing through miss.”

“I’ve heard that line before.”

“Well, suit yourself. I’m going to start walking. You can either move out of the way, shoot me or ask me to stop and talk. Your choice,” he said and then started walking, once more, at a steady pace straight towards her.

She stepped off to the side well out of his path and he continued on the same path never deviating. As he passed her and continued on she somehow just felt he was not a threat.

Relying on her intuition she called out, “Wait.”

He paused.

“What’s your name?”

“Liam.”

“What did you do? You know, before.”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Accounts payable.”

“Really? I did payroll.”

He laughed, “Yeah, those career choices really helped us.”

She giggled a bit too at the thought before responding, “Want to share a lunch?”

“What do you have?”

“I’ll throw in a pack of sardines, half a box of crackers and some powdered lemonade.”

“I’ll add a jar of salsa and a bag of corn chips.”

“Sounds like a downright feast to me,” she said with a smile as she holstered her weapon.

“Call me Beatrice.”

They sat not quite side by side on the curb with the food laid out between them. She added a couple spoonfuls of lemonade mix to his water bottle and then added a few to her own. They both shook the bottles and began to drink and eat.

They each passed a pleasant few hours enjoying the platonic company of another human.

Finally Liam said he should get going he was trying to get to the hills way off in the distance before nightfall but asked if she had anything she was willing to trade. He had a nearly full box of 9mm rounds that he couldn’t use and a handful of gold coins he’d found that he offered.

Coins weren’t edible so she turned him down on those. Digging in her pack she pulled out the various firearms she had and found one that would accept the 9mm size round. “What are you looking for in return?”

“That gun right there”, he said pointing to the revolver she had recently acquired.

“This one? I got no bullets for it.”

“Don’t matter. I’ve always wanted one, ever since I saw that movie with what’s his name in there.”

“Oh that’s helpful,” she joked.

She looked down for a minute and realized it was useless to her but the bullets he was offering could be a life saver.

“Deal.”

She handed it over and he handed the box of ammo to her, both pleased with the swap. As he put it in his bag she glanced over and had to ask.

“Is that a Snickers?”

“Yep.”

“Any chance you’d be willing to trade for it?”

“It’s pretty well melted in there.”

“Don’t matter,” she said digging furiously through her back. Finally she extracted the pack of cookies.

“Here, I’ll trade you for some cookies,” she said with a pleading look on her dirty, grungy face.

“OK, OK. You win!” he said tossing it to her.

She handed over the cookies to Liam who winked and said, “I don’t even like Snickers. I probably would have just given it to you if you’d have asked.”

Beatrice stuck her tongue out in jest as she finished putting everything away, standing up and shouldering her pack. With the Snickers bar already in her hand she finished with “Nice meeting you Liam. Stay safe.”

“You too Beatrice,” he replied as she walked off already eating the candy.

## Chapter 9

Liam continued past the last signs of habitation and into the wilderness. He couldn’t understand why Beatrice would want to stay but it wasn’t his place to tell her. In this new world everyone had to learn to survive or die.

He thought of heading back and calling out to her, seeing if she wanted to go with him. Balancing the pros and cons, finally his indecision settled the issue as she disappeared from sight, even when he used his binoculars. Turning back to the road he continued towards the forest.

Mile after mile, traveling on the road allowed him to make good time. Every so often he’d stop and look both ways but didn’t see anyone. The trees encroached on both sides creating a nice dappled canopy in the late afternoon sun.

Evening approached and Liam realized he would not make it to the hill country. In a previous life he used to take weekend camping trips in the national park and knew the hills and surrounding lakes like the back of his hand. Once there

he could hole up for months living mostly off the land. In the meantime he needed to find a spot for the night.

Not far up ahead, on the left side of the simple two lane forest road he saw what appeared to be a clearing in the trees. Large enough for perhaps a half dozen cars to pull in, he felt it would be sheltered enough from the road that he could risk a fire to cook his dinner.

He dropped his pack, took his 22 rifle and scouted the perimeter but saw nothing to raise concern. A quick shot, however, did drop a fat rabbit.

Grabbing some simple twigs and branches off the ground he dumped everything off by his pack.

Liam began by clearing debris from a sizeable circle before stacking the twigs in the middle. He opened his pack and took out a small jar of Vaseline. Smearing a dollop all over a stick he then lit it with his lighter and shoved the stick in with the twigs. Soon all were blazing as he added larger and larger sticks until a decent fire was going.

Using his knife he cut the head off the rabbit and then skinned it. Moving off a ways, he grabbed the legs and swung the carcass allowing all the innards to pretty much fly out into the woods. He took it back over by the fire, finished cleaning and preparing it and speared it on a stick which he then propped over the fire.

From his pack he removed a small pot, really not much larger than a drinking cup, added rice, beans, seasonings and water and set that near the fire to cook. Before putting the seasoning away he sprinkled some on the rabbit.

The first hot meal in awhile, Liam ate it all savoring every bite before sitting back and enjoying the warmth of the fire. His eyelids drooped and he slipped off to sleep.

**BANG!**

Liam heard the loud noise but waking up felt like he was chained under water trying to claw his way to the surface. He could look out, but it was like starting down a tunnel. His arms and legs felt like they were wrapped in lead tape; constrained and difficult to move. He struggled to wake up, to find the source of the sound. I must be dreaming he thought as he drifted back off to sleep never to awaken again.

“What a dumbass. Nice bright fire advertising his presence.”

“You’re the dumbass. You wasted a bullet on him,” he said gesturing with his knife. “I could have just slit his throat. He was snoring so loud he would have never heard me coming.”

“Both of you shut up. Mike, check the woods, make sure he doesn’t have a buddy off taking a piss or something. Dirk, go watch the road, watch so we don’t get surprised ourselves.”

He grabbed the pack and shook the contents out on the ground, items scattering everywhere. He then stripped Liam of his clothes dumping them and everything in his pockets in the pile. Starting with the empty pack, he tossed in all the cans of food and anything useful he found including weapons, camping equipment and supplies. The clothes wouldn’t fit any of them so he tossed them to the side; coincidentally they landed atop the pack of cookies still laying on the ground. Finally he picked up the small quantity of gold coins and surreptitiously slipped them in his pocket.

“I got rid of all the useless crap from his pack, let’s keep moving. I want to get some distance from here in case someone else heard the shot.”

## Chapter 10

Judy, Russel and their two kids, Jacob and Erin were, like nearly everyone else, quite surprised when everything stopped working. At first they simply holed up in their house and survived off what they had. They both worked in the food industry, one as a professional chef and one managing a food distribution warehouse. With this background they, of course, enjoyed food and had a well stocked professional grade kitchen and pantry in their home. Cooking over a fire in your back yard, as opposed to the Viking range and oven, took a bit of adjusting to, but they quickly adapted.

The four of them were able to go nearly seven weeks on their food before it started to run low. At first Russel thought he’d simply bike down to the local store and buy more. He discovered, quite quickly, that outside of the house all was not bliss. One store was burnt to the ground and another was looted down to bare shelves. Very few people were around and those that were didn’t look friendly. On his way back home two guys called to him and demanded that he give them his bike.

Russel started pedaling for all he was worth in an effort to avoid them. The real panic set in when the first shots were fired.

“Russ, are you OK? You’re drenched with sweat and look white as a ghost!” exclaimed Judy when he arrived home.

“L.. ii.. I’m f-f-fine.”



“No your not!”

He managed to nod his head towards the kids and then shake it back and forth signaling not now.

Judy was quite concerned but accepted that their seven and nine year olds didn't need to be part of every conversation.

“Erin, Jacob, go play in your rooms before dinner.”

“But we already played with all our stuff. We're bored.”

“Go!” punctuated with a pointed arm in the direction of their rooms.

“Aww...” came the dual reply as they stomped off.

“Tell me what happened.”

“It's not real good. One store was all burned up and the other was completely empty. It wasn't even open.”

“Oh dear.”

“That's not even the bad part. Two guys tried to, I guess you'd call it, bike-jack me on the way home. They demanded I stop and give them my bike. When I didn't they started shooting at me. With guns!”

“But they missed you. Right?”

“I don't think I'd be standing here if they hit me.”

“No I guess not,” she said grabbing him and holding tight.

Finally Russ broke the hug and asked, “What are we going to do? We don’t have that much food left.”

“Can’t the police help? Or the mayor?”

“How do we contact them? You’d think they would have gone around already telling people what to do and where to go for help. I’m not sure help is out there.”

“Maybe your sister can help us? She’s got that farm and is always talking about her chickens and eggs and vegetables. If we worked on the farm for her she could help us out. You can cook and I don’t mind gardening.”

“I guess we don’t have much choice, but how are we going to get there?”

“Walking or biking.”

“It’s almost four hundred miles!”

“Then we better get moving!” she joked.

“Seriously... We can’t walk or bike that far.”

“Not in one day. It’ll probably take a week or two.”

“What about food?”

“I’ve still got the tow behind trailer from when Erin and Jacob were little. We could fill that up with our remaining food and drinks and some blankets for sleeping at night. It’ll be just like camping.”

“I don’t know. It sounds too risky to me.”

“How about we table it for now. Tomorrow we can discuss again and see if either of us have any better ideas?”

“OK.”

Erin and Jacob snuck back down the hallway to Jacob’s room.

“Does that mean we’re going to aunt Tina’s?”

“Sounds like it and we’re going to camp and ride our bikes all the way there!”

The two of them could barely contain their excitement.

Over the next few days Russel and Judy finally agreed they had to go. The last of the food and water were loaded in to the trailer along with some blankets and a few changes of clothes for each. They got out their bikes, put on their helmets and gloves, with the kids also putting on knee and elbow guards and connected up the trailer to Russ’ bike.

Judy locked up the house and they all got on and started riding.

Russ had been out once and was still surprised, while Judy and the kids were shocked at the destruction and death around them. Bodies were simply left lying in

the street. Houses and whole blocks had been burnt down. Columns of smoke trailed up into the sky literally everywhere you looked.

Surprisingly, to all of them, the sound of gun fire quickly became an accepted background noise.

They rode hard and fast to escape the urban area and get to the more open country. In the case of making sure the kids could keep up, hard and fast meant they went barely twenty miles in five hours. Russ knew they would have to do better but that he couldn't push the family too much.

Judy was actually enjoying the ride down the shaded road, the dappled sunlight playing through the leaves, and wanted to keep going however the whining of the kids meant they would all have to stop to rest, again.

“Up there it looks like an area we can pull off and take a rest. Just a little further.”

“I'm sssooooo tired.”

“My feet hurt, my butt too.”

“I know, we're all a little sore but just think of the great exercise we're getting,” added Russ.

“I don't care. I just want to go home,” Erin replied with a pout.

They reached the small clearing in the trees and pulled off the road dropping their bicycles to the ground and pretty much dropping themselves right next to them.

Judy got out a loaf of bread, one of the last ones they had been able to bake just a few days prior, a jar of peanut butter and one of jelly and started making sandwiches for them.

Russ looked over his rear tire. It seemed to be down a bit on air and he had no idea how to fill it. Normally he'd just drive it over to the gas station but that wasn't an option anymore. He stood there drinking from his water bottle and scratching his head trying to think of a way to get air in there.

The kids got their second wind and went off to explore in the tall weeds and grasses. Soon they stumbled upon the pile of clothes and after poking at them with a stick, discovered a pack of cookies, still sealed just laying on the ground underneath them.

“Mom! Look what we found!” they exclaimed running up to her with them.

“Where do you find these?”

“Just laying on the ground over there. They're still closed up. Can we have them?”

“Maybe later. I'll put them with our other food for now.”

“Aww....,” they both replied.

Russ wandered over to where they had pointed, saw the clothes and then noticed a strange smell. A few more steps and he found the source. A badly decomposed and apparently well chewed up body was mostly obscured by the weeds. The local critters must have been feeding on it. He turned and threw up the small amount of water he had just drunk.

He wiped his mouth off on his sleeve and went back to join Judy and the kids.

“Erin, Jacob.”

Hearing the gravitas in his voice, they both turned and looked at him.

“I do not want you wandering away. Stay by us at all times. Understand?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m serious!” he nearly yelled. “I don’t want you wandering away. OK?”

Everyone was surprised as his outburst and the kids dropped their heads as if they had done something wrong and replied, “OK.”

Judy gave him a quizzical look but he just shook his head and mouthed ‘later’. Thankfully she let the matter drop.

The three of them ate the sandwiches, Russ said he wasn’t hungry and sat by the road while they finished. Once done everyone mounted up and started pedaling again.

A few more hours and nearly seven more miles down the road they saw an approaching truck in the distance. Literally this was the first working vehicle either had seen in about two months. It closed the distance and started slowing, coming to a halt right in front of them.

Russ could hear a second set of brakes and leaned over to see a second relatively smaller truck behind the large tractor trailer rig.

Four large men got out of the sleeper cab of the old tractor and a handful more exited the rear truck and began walking towards them.

“Hi folks. How’re doing?”

“OK. How’d you guys get a working tuck?”

“This old thing?” he said slapping a hand on the fender. “It’s got no electronics. All we had to do was change the battery and it started right up,” he said with a grin.

“Nice,” said Russ nodding.

“Can we give you a lift?”

“That would be great but we’re going that way,” Judy said pointing back the way the trucks had just come from.

“We’re going to see our Auntie on her farm. She’s got chickens and veggies and all sorts of good stuff.”

They didn’t notice the eight guys had been slowly moving out and around until the family was now completely surrounded.

“Really? Now that’s interesting. Grab them.”

At the last two words Russ actually looked around and saw them advancing on him. He tried to push one out of the way and received a round house punch to the side of his head for his efforts. Russ crumpled to the ground where two of the guys repeatedly kicked and stomped on him.

Judy and the kids all began screaming and would have rushed to Russ however each were being restrained by two of the men. Judy tried kicking out and struggling free and became the recipient of a viscous back hand nearly knocking her out.

“Hey, careful! Don’t damage the goods or we’ll get less for them. Dump them in the trailer.”

One guy grabbed Russ by the legs and dragged him to the rear of the truck. Judy, still queasy on her legs after the hit was tossed over a shoulder like a sack of laundry. The kids were pushed forward and told to behave or they’d get be in real trouble just like their mommy and daddy.

Neither had the sense to run and instead were led, like docile sheep, to the back of the truck. From seemingly no where a bunch of big guns appeared. Jacob had never seen guns up close like this before. His eyes were wide open.

When the truck was covered the driver banged on the door and said, “Get back or you’ll be shot.”

The door was opened and huddled as far from the door as possible were at least a couple dozen people, mostly women and children. Jacob and Erin were literally picked up and thrown into the truck, Russ got the old one two three heave and landed heavily, his head smashing against the side of the truck as his body flew in. Judy was pushed toward the back and told to climb in.

As she did two guys gave her a hand, groping her quite thoroughly in the process. She shuddered as they did. The door was closed and she was torn between checking on the kids or on Russ first.



After some more noises including the sound of the big door on the other truck opening and closing, both trucks started up and began to roll along.

The roof was translucent allowing for some light to filter in. Once the door was closed, the people in the truck came forward and tried to help.

“I’m a doctor, let me look,” said a man.

Russ had a walnut sized, and growing, lump on the side of his head. The doctor began feeling the limbs and moved on to Russ’ torso. Pushing, even gently, on the ribs elicited moans from the unconscious body.

“This isn’t good. I think his zygomatic bone is broken and a few ribs are at least fractured if not fully broken. The lung and or abdominal cavity may be compromised. He really needs professional treatment.”

“You said you’re a doctor, can’t you treat him?”

“In an office with my equipment and supplies, sure. Here? There is nothing I can do for him.”

“Will he die?”

“Depends on the ribs. If they’ve broken and punctured any organs or he’s bleeding internally, then there is a good chance he might not make it, otherwise he’ll probably heal on his own although he may never see out of that eye again. When the swelling goes down we’ll have an idea if the eye was damaged or not.”

Clutching Jacob and Erin protectively, each one with an arm wrapped around them, Judy asked, “What’s going to happen to us? Are they taking us to people who can help?”

Another man laughed.

“What?”

“Are you for real lady?”

“What do you mean?”

A woman put her arm on his and pointed toward the other end of the trailer. He just shook his head, turned and walked away.

She then turned to Judy and spoke, “We’re slaves now.”

“Slaves! No! That can’t be. This is America.”

“Not any more. It’s survival of those with the most strength or the biggest guns or the working vehicles. In this case they got all three.”

“What are they going to do with us? Make us pick cotton?”

“You know, that was pretty racist.”

“Was it? I’m sorry. I remember history books talking about slaves picking cotton on plantations. Isn’t that what you meant?”

“I’m afraid not. A few might end up doing menial labor, but most of us will be a different kind of slave. They’ll make us do whatever they want.”

The expression on Judy’s face clearly stated she still didn’t get it.

“Sex slaves. We’ll either be used, sold or traded.”

“Bb..bbb..bb..bbuutttt... ttth...ee...yyy ccc.cc.cc.cccaann’tt...,” Judy said looking around and really seeing, for the first time, the torn and tattered clothes, the vacant stares, the bruises and the sad nods of all the people around her.

“Oh yes they can and they already have. There used to be more of us but a few days back they traded a number of us, including a couple of teens, they’d used up for gas to fill the tanks on both trucks.”

Judy clutched her children to her even tighter and began to cry.

The miles rolled along as the trucks continued their journey, rarely slowing down or stopping. Food and water was not provided to the captives, nor were bathroom breaks. Sometime during the night Russel passed away quietly having never regained consciousness. No one in the truck even noticed, not even Judy who had still not released her hold on the children.

Sometime the next day, only apparent by the dim light filtering in from above once again, the truck slowed to a stop. Indistinct voices could be heard outside the truck.

Judy whispered, “Maybe it’s someone who can help us?”

“Doubtful, probably just the next poor soul to become entwined in their web, or perhaps another buyer.”

A spark ignited within Judy fanning to a full blown inferno in a few mere moments. She released her kids and stood up, “Hell if I’m not going to do my part to stop these animals!”

She immediately started pounding on the side of the truck, screaming out, “HELP! HELP US! WE’RE BEING HELD AGAINST OUR WILL!”

Continuing to pound she repeated the message once more before gun shots began ringing out.

A variety of different and distinct weapons were heard and someone knowledgeable would have recognized the sound of automatic gun fire. While everyone else in the truck was still sitting or even now laying on the floor, Judy was still standing when a line of holes appeared in the side of the truck almost five feet high, beams of sunlight shining through each.

Judy froze for an instant and then in slow motion, teetered forward, face first, against the side of the truck where she started slowly sliding down to the floor leaving a bright crimson smear on the wall of the truck.

The doctor rushed forward and tried to intervene but the two large gaping holes in her chest left little doubt she was already dead.

A few more sporadic shots were heard and then silence.

Minutes passed. People looked to each other, Judy’s children sat riveted in place, deep in shock, just staring at their mother’s body.

A noise at the back of the truck brought everyone’s heads up to see what their captors were going to do to them now. The doors were unlocked and swung open, bright sunlight poured in effectively blinding them as the men climbed up into the trailer and with weapons drawn, advanced.

“Clear Sergeant! No hostiles, multiple captives, estimate two dozen, at least one critical, mostly women and children.”

“Medics!”

The doctor stood up, “I’m a doctor. It’s already too late for her, the damage was too severe.”

Two men in digital camouflage BDUs climbed into the trailer and rushed towards Judy as the doctor was speaking. The first one took a quick look and called out, “He’s right. DOA.”

“Everyone, listen up. I’m Sergeant Martinez, US Army. The men have all been killed and will not harm you anymore. If I can get you to exit the back of the trailer, our medics will check you over and we’ll transport you to one of our FEMA camps. They are providing food, shelter, further medical treatment and consoling if needed. We will work with you to help get you and this country back on its feet.”

The people cautiously at first approached the rear of the truck suspecting some trick but found the military really was there to help.

“Sergeant, back here!”

Martinez headed to the back of the second, slightly smaller, truck where the door had just been rolled up and let loose a whistle.

“That’s a lot of supplies. Take Jones and get it moved to the camp and distributed, the people there can really use it.”

Privates DeForest and Jones got in the truck and drove off for the FEMA camp twenty miles further down the road.

“Damn, can you believe they were trying to sell people as slaves?”

“Trying? From some of the talk going on, they already had done so. The medics were discussing the people and I overheard them say many had been beaten and nearly all showed signs of sexual abuse too.”

“It’s going to be a long time before those people are normal again.”

“It’s going to be a long time before anything is normal again,” he said, settling back in the seat and lighting a cigarette. The rest of the trip was in silence, each lost in their thoughts.

Forty five minutes later the truck slowed as it came upon the military roadblock outside the FEMA camp. Seeing a non military vehicle approach the soldiers drew down on the truck waiting for orders to fire.

Two soldiers approached, weapons raised.

“Don’t shoot man! Don’t shoot! We’re on your side!”

“Driver, open the door from the outside and step away from the vehicle.”

DeForest did so, stepping down.

“Guys, I’m on your side. We ambushed a bunch of slavers and Sergeant Martinez sent us back with the confiscated supplies.”

“Corporal, get on the radio, find this Martinez and verify his story.”

The soldier disappeared into a canvas tent for a few minutes before returning.

“Checks out. HQ says to send them over to depot three.”

“You heard the corporal. Know where depot three is?”

“Nope.”

“Straight until you reach the gate. We’ll radio ahead and they’ll let you through. Take the first left after going through the gate and then just follow the signs.”

Saluting, he turned and climbed back into the truck.

“Whew... I thought we were going to have a friendly fire incident there.”

“Tell me about it. I nearly pissed myself. Let’s get going.”

They started the truck, put it in gear and drove on, soon coming to the gate, seemingly just another road block, which was already opening. The guard waved them right through. Following the signs they came up on depot three which turned out to be a Walmart, or at least in a former life it was. Currently the large parking lot was setup with row after row of tents where the civilians were assigned. It was surrounded by a chain link fence and patrolling guards were providing security for the civilians.

Following the waving guards they were passed around to the back by the loading docks.

A short little mousey looking civilian came up to the truck.

“Jack Swinson. I’m the manager of depot three. Heard you got us some stuff?”

“Yeah. The guys we took it from don’t need it anymore.”

The truck was moved into place at the dock and turned off, the two guys sat just sat there.

“Well, come on, help unload. The quicker it’s empty the quicker you can get out of here.”

Shrugging to each other they hopped out and went around back to help.

“Any box size quantities or larger go over there on those pallets, smaller quantities, like individual cans and such go in this bin. Anything else, dump in a pile over there and you can check it when we’re done.”

When some additional help arrived in the form of three more civilians, it only took an hour and twenty minutes to get the goods removed from the truck. A lot of the boxes did indeed contain food with case after case of canned and boxed goods stacked on the pallets and whisked off into the depths of the store. The pile on the side included a half dozen bicycles, a bike trailer, some backpacks and a few loose pieces of clothing, apparently stuff taken from the captives.

DeForest went through the back packs finding mostly camping style food, which he added to the bin, along with a surprising amount of useless equipment including four laptops and no less than seven smart phones, all dead of course.



Jones opened the bike trailer and added most of the food to the pile. One pack of chocolate chip cookies he slipped into a pocket when no one was looking.

Oh Four Hundred came around too early for Jones. He was not a morning person. The Army didn't care. The usual, shit, shower and shave taken care of, he headed for the mess tent for breakfast and then gathered with the rest of his unit find out what today was going to bring.

“Jones, DeForest!”

“Sergeant!” they replied in unison.

“Since you did so well yesterday as truck drivers, I got another little road trip for you boys,” the sergeant said while the rest of the unit snickered.

“See that rig over there?”

“The deuce and a half?”

“Yep. FEMA and DHS have been confiscating fire arms in an effort to contain the violence out there. That truck has a bunch of crates full and you get to drive them to the regional facility. The inventory has already been sent ahead so don't think of stopping and cherry picking any choices ones for yourself. If any end up missing it's coming out of your ass. Got it?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Dismissed.”

The two walked over to the truck, signed it out of the motor pool and got directions. If they hurried they might be back in time for dinner.

Three hours of monotonous driving later they rounded a bend and locked up all the tires in an attempt to stop. Laying across the road was a large tree, a good three feet in diameter blocking their passage.

“Aw shit man, what the hell, that bitch is gonna make us late for dinner now.”

A female’s voice was heard just outside DeForest’s window, “No, but this bitch will.”

He turned to see a woman in camouflage with long black hair streaming out from under a beret. Even more noticeable than her was the twelve gauge shotgun she held pointed at his face.

Before he could even think of reacting a dozen more individuals, all in camo, appeared seemingly from nowhere, surrounding the front of the truck, one even dropping down onto the hood, all pointing a variety of weapons at the two soldiers.

Knowing they were out gunned, the two of them simply put up their hands and hoped for the best.

“Get Out.”

They did so and were immediately cuffed with zip ties, arms behind their backs tight enough to prevent escape but not so much so as to cut off the blood flow. Their side arms were confiscated and their ARs taken from the cab. The

woman put the barrel of the gun into the back of Jones, gave a push and said, “Start walking.”

As they were led off into the trees a door slammed and the engine of their truck started up. Soon the sound of the truck driving away was gone, only their heavy boot steps on the ground broke the silence of the forest.

Two guys appeared out of nowhere, appearing to actually step out of the tree trunk itself. DeForest was impressed at the camo suits they had on, the blending with the tree bark was nearly perfect. The two of them took point with the captive soldiers following along. Most of the remaining people, including the raven haired woman, followed along behind.

Jones tried looking around to both estimate the numbers of their captors and to try and orient himself in case the chance at escape presented itself. Next thing he knew his legs were tangled together and he was face first in the dirt.

Once more the woman’s voice spoke out, “Eyes down and forward or I’ll blind fold you. Now get up and march.”

With difficulty, arms still constrained behind his back, Private Jones got to his feet and trudged onwards. By his estimate they walked for a good solid two hours before a halt was called.

Both soldiers were directed to sit on the ground in front of the root ball of a fallen tree, a virtual wall of roots, dirt and the occasional rock.

“Faces forward, stare at the roots. Don’t move.”

“I gotta piss.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

“Hey, this is cruel and unusual punishment. I got Geneva Conventions rights you...”

DeForest was not able to complete his sentence, or more accurately, chose not to complete it as the sound of a blade being drawn was heard a fraction of a second before it was pressed up against his throat. Looking down his nose at the gloved hand holding a grip on his right side and the majority of the eighteen inch machete sticking out to the left, he wisely shut up.

“We move in five minutes.”

A few minutes later, another camo clad person came over, up close they saw it was another woman, this one with short light brown hair barely visible sticking out from under her boonie hat.

“Just keep facing forward and keep your mouths shut. Are you thirsty?”

They both nodded.

Holding up a water bottle to one of them, “Here drink,” she said tilting it.

Jones drank all of the half liter bottle and a fresh one was held for DeForest who also swallowed it all.

“Sorry I can’t do more for you but if she catches me, well, we’ll all be in deep do-do.”

“Why is she doing this to us?” came the whispered reply.

“It’s because of the truck, or specifically what the truck was carrying.”

“The guns?”

“You know?”

“Yeah, our Sergeant told us to take the truck loaded with guns to the regional processing center.”

“Where’d they come from?”

DeForest answered this question, “No idea. He said DHS and FEMA were confiscating them to quell the violence. We just got assigned this morning as truck drivers.”

“Let’s move out!” the call came.

“Shhhh. Don’t tell her I gave you water. Ok?”

They both nodded as they struggled to their feet.

Everyone formed up, pretty much in the same order as before and continued through the woods. With their eyes and heads looking only down and forward they didn’t see the two women drop back out of earshot.

“They don’t know.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I asked pointedly. They’re parroting what they were told. Just a couple of drivers is my best guess. Still going to off them?”

“I don’t know....”

Her voice trailed off as she stared into the distance lost in thought.

They walked the rest of the day and into early evening before a halt was once more called for. This time, with six armed guards watching their ties were cut and they were a tossed a roll of toilet paper and told they got three minutes to do their business.

“Right here?”

“You’re army. Should be used to crapping in front of each other. Two minutes, forty five seconds.”

Both soldiers promptly dropped their pants and took care of their bodily needs. When they were done then were instructed to sit with their backs against a medium sized maple tree, each on an opposite side. They were once more cuffed with zip ties, this time to each other.

The rest of the group setup camp, ate dinner and settled in for the night. Well after dark the light haired woman once more snuck up on them. Each in turn, she put her hand over their mouth and gave them a poke in the side to wake them up.

“Shh... I snuck some more water and a bit of food for you.”

Once again holding the bottle for them, she allowed each to drink a few drinks and then proceeded to tear off chunks of bread and put it in their mouths. The whole time she was constantly looking over her shoulder and appeared, by her movements, to be quite nervous. Once she even let out the slightest, barely audible, squeal before dropping to the ground and freezing. Mere moments later a patrolling

guard walked within five feet of her prone motionless form, his eyes on the two soldiers he didn't notice her.

Jones finally whispered, "He's gone."

The woman slowly got up looking all around before responding, also in a low whisper.

"Whew. That was close. If they knew I was helping you both I'd probably be shot."

"Why? What did we do?"

"You said it earlier. Confiscating the guns."

"We didn't do that. It's DHS or FEMA. Our sergeant said they're taking the guns from people causing trouble in an effort to stop the violence that's happening."

"No, they're taking the guns from everyone, doesn't matter if you're a bad guy or a good guy just protecting your family or even simply hunting for food. They're shooting anyone who doesn't immediately comply and then confiscating all of their food and supplies. Without any means of defense, or even food to eat, people are being forced into the camps in search of sustenance and protection. Roaming bands of looters and worse are out there preying on those who don't go."

"Yeah, we know. Yesterday we shot up a bunch of slavers. They had over two dozen people, mostly women and children in a truck along with another truck full of stolen food. We rescued them all and took them to a camp for safety."

“Did you talk to the people? Did you ask how they ended up getting captured?”

“No.”

“You should have. You would have found out that DHS came in and flat out took their weapons, their only means of defense; left them with no way to fight off the bad guys when they came.”

“But the camps are trying to help. The military can protect the people and they get food and shelter.”

“If given a choice, would you rather stay in your own home with your family and your food and supplies you’ve stored away or go live communal style, a dozen to a tent, with a bunch of strangers and then be forced to work fourteen to sixteen hour days as payment for the generosity of a tent and the gruel that FEMA provided? After taking your stuff away from you? Until these people were stripped of their ability to take care of themselves they were doing just fine and in fact much better. Now you have partial families and even orphans, not because of the disaster but because the government killed mommy, daddy or both.”

“They wouldn’t do that. It’s unconstitutional.”

“Wrong. The National Defense Resources Preparedness Executive Order issued by the president some years back completely authorized them to basically take anything they want with no recourse to you. Regardless of the fact the law was issued in violation of Article one, Section one of the Constitution and the actions are in violation of the fourth amendment. ”

“I never knew, but how does that make us bad guys?”



“You represent the government. Everyone here has had a run in with them in the last few months, most have lost some or all of their family. Their spouses were summarily executed for simply trying to protect their family, in some cases for nothing more than refusing to give up their food. Food for their kids. Some kids were actually taken away from their parents who didn’t want to cooperate as they were getting by just fine on their own. Is it any wonder they don’t like you?”

“So why are you being nice to us? Why give us food and water?”

She paused before continuing in her whisper, “I don’t think everyone is bad, rather just a few bad individuals and a lot of people just doing their jobs not remotely aware of the big picture. Instead, like you, they only know and believe what their superiors have told them. Unlike the others, I don’t hold unknowing ignorance against you.”

A sound caught her attention.

“The patrol is coming back. I have to go,” she said quietly slipping off between the trees.

A fifteen minute walk found her along a small stream in the woods with a short waterfall, really barely more than a section of rapids.

“Did they say anything more?”

“They really are clueless. Whatever they’ve been told is all they believe. I laid it out for them and I don’t believe they were feigning shock and disappointment at what they heard.”

“But did they believe it? Or is their paradigm still centered around the lies of the system?”

“At the least I don’t think they’ll be blind to their surroundings any longer, perhaps they’ll question more. Whether they’ll realize the truth of the situation and what the government is doing to the people? The atrocities they’re committing? The abuses? The trampling of peoples rights? I can’t say, Gina, I just can’t say.”

“It’s OK, Margaret, I can’t ask for anything more than honesty,” she said, holding Gina as she collapsed into her arms sobbing.

“I know, the wounds of losing Nathan so suddenly,” and violently she thought but didn’t say, “and having to hold back from taking it out on them, it can’t be easy.”

Through her tears and sobs she replied, “I want to make them pay. I’d take your machete and cut them into thousands of pieces if it would only make things better. If it would only bring Nathan back.”

Gina knew what she was going through having lost her own husband barely two months ago. She watched in horror as the DHS jack booted thugs shot him point blank for not surrendering his shotgun and then took her, their kids and all their food and dumped them in a FEMA camp. She was dragged away from the kids, kicking and screaming until they finally drugged her. By the time it wore off and she came to, her kids had already been taken away to a different camp. Thankfully, if there was anything to be thankful for, it was still early on after the EMP and they didn’t have their security buttoned up yet.

At dinner she palmed a steak knife, not that they needed steak knives for the food they were being served, and got away with no one noticing it missing from her tray. Well after everyone was asleep, sometime around two AM, she slit the tent next to her cot, rolled out into the inky dark and slipped away. On the outskirts of the camp she ran into, literally, a DHS guard.

Not stopping to consider her actions she plunged the knife into his chest. The expression on his face, had she been able to see it in the darkness, would have been considered almost comical had it not been for his life blood pouring down his chest. He toppled over, dead, never having uttered a sound.

Gina ran, stopped, turned and went back to the body. Feeling around she found the sidearm in 40 caliber and two extra magazines filled with hollow point cartridges. Turning once more she ran off into the darkness.

Over the next month she encountered others, like her, who were fleeing the camps, most having seen loved ones taken or outright killed. They banded together and their numbers swelled into a squad, then a platoon, and finally a company. At their rate of growth they'd reach the size of a battalion, or at least five hundred strong, in another month.

For operational security, the rarely all came together, preferring to operate in five to ten person squads, or for larger operations three to four squads would join together. This particular mission had two squads cooperating, although they were down a few members due to the need to move the truck into hiding for a few days.

One day soon they hoped to start liberating the camps and find their missing family members. Until then they were strengthening their numbers and looking for weaknesses they could exploit.

A few people in DHS were sympathetic and felt the orders coming down were wrong. These people, as much as they hated the camps, felt they could do more good observing the abuses from the inside and getting information to those who could help.

As Gina was thinking all of this, Margaret finally regained her composure and stepped back a few paces.

“So what now?”

“Patience, Margaret. This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

The following morning they were each abruptly woken up by a swift kick to the thigh from Gina.

“Get your asses up. Now!”

They struggled to work together to stand, arms stretched out behind them and still bound together, the tree still between them.

“Cut the cuffs.”

While six guards trained weapons on them, another camo clad figure came forward, flicked open a Balisong and quickly sliced through the plastic. A few flicks of their wrist returned the blade safely between the handles and the knife disappeared as quick as it had appeared.

“Up against those two trees,” she said gesturing with her shotgun.

Still drowsy, they turned to move, not fast enough, and got shoved along by the guards.

Standing off about five yards, she slipped the sling of the shotgun over her shoulder and pulled out a 40 caliber pistol, racked the slide and pointed it at the head of DeForest.

“Any last words?”

“No, you can’t... I didn’t do... it wasn’t my fault... orders... we were just following....,” his babbling continued, mostly incoherent words as he pleaded for his life.

“Enough!” she yelled, adjusting her grip slightly and adjusting her aim as she looked through the sites.

Just then Margaret ran in front of him putting herself in the path of the bullet.

“Don’t shoot him.”

“Move!”

“No, he didn’t do anything, in fact he, actually both of them, rescued some slaves just a few days ago.”

“He’s government. He must pay.”

“But he didn’t know.”

“Ignorance is not an excuse.”

“If you shot him then we’re no better than they are.”

“Come here.”

Margaret walked toward Gina, keeping herself between Gina and Private DeForest.

Gina put her arm around her shoulder, turned and walked off a few paces. They began to argue in harsh whispers, just barely loud enough for the privates to catch bits and pieces.

“.... They may have overheard..... plans to rescue.... depot two.... attack in four days..... they couldn't have heard....”

Finally Margaret pushed Gina away and shouted, “If you're going to shoot them, then you might as well shoot me too.”

Getting down on her knees and looking up at Gina, “Go ahead, do it! Come one. You want blood. Show us all how you're no better than them,” she said waving her arm towards the soldiers. “Shoot me.”

Gina raised the weapon, pointed it at her head for what seemed to be an eternity before finally wavering a bit, lowering it a little, wavering some more and then finally dropping it to her side. Margaret reached forward, pulled the gun from her hand and gestured, “Remove her. She is unfit to lead us.”

As Gina was led off, head down, arms pinned to her sides, Margaret went up to the two privates, noting DeForest's wet crotch. He must have lost control when he was pleading she realized.

Speaking to Private Jones, “What should I do with you two?”

“You could let us go.”

“Ha! Why would I do that?”

“If what you said was true, I know I’m certainly not going back to the camps.”

“Sure. You’ll say anything to save your skin.”

“No, really. If they’re doing what you said I want no part of this.”

“Swear.”

“Huh?”

“Swear an oath you won’t participate in harming Americans.”

“I do solemnly swear to not harm Americans.”

“How about you?” she said during to DeForest.

He repeated the oath.

Search them, they get nothing other than a single water bottle each. Blind fold them, take them elsewhere and then point them towards the nearest road.

The guards patted them down finding just a package of cookies in the pocket of Jones’ Jacket.

“Just this,” he said.

“Toss it here.”

He flipped it through the air to Margaret who caught it, looked at both sides, turning it over in her hand, before pocketing it in her light jacket.

Blind folds were placed on their heads, each was given a water bottle to hold and they were led off into the woods.

Ten minutes later Gina returned.

“Are they gone?”

“Yep,” replied Margaret handing the gun back to Gina, “you know, you almost had me convinced you were going to shoot me too.”

She smiled, “Done right good cop bad cop works almost every time. You played your part perfectly.”

“What do you think they’ll do?”

“We gave them enough false info on depot two, now we watch to see if they go back and say anything or if they really do abandon the corrupt regime.”

Off in the woods, the two of them were counting out loud. Four hundred ninety eight, four hundred ninety nine, five hundred. They removed their blindfolds in unison and blinked at the brightness of the light. Looking down they saw sticks arranged in the shape of an arrow pointing which way they should walk.

“Let’s go, we got to get back and tell the Sergeant.”

“Tell him what?”

“Tell him about the nut jobs in the woods that stole the truck and held us captive and that depot three is about to get hit.”



“First off, she said depot two and second, I’m saying no such thing. We got held up and they left us by the side of the road. That’s it.”

“What, some chick comes on to you and suddenly you got a hard on for the rebels?”

“No, think about it. What if her story is correct? What if they are rounding people up?”

“So, not my fucking problem.”

“True, but it is a problem for Mary and Jimmy. What if DHS is right now raiding your house and dragging them off to a camp?”

“Shit. Damn, I never thought of that.... What do you think we should do?”

“I still think we go back to the camp but keep our eyes and ears open. If it’s really going down like she said, then we either tell the other guys and try to fight it from the inside or just go AWOL and get our asses out of there, on the other hand if her story is bullshit then we spill the beans on depot two and they can beef up the guards and ambush them.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Now what are we going to say about the truck? We better have our stories straight.....”

The voices trailed off as they continued walking. Meanwhile, two shadows dressed in bark colored clothes detached themselves from a tree and headed back toward camp.

“John.”

“Yeah?”

“Here, add these to our supplies,” she said reaching into her pocket, extracting the package of cookies and handing them to him.

He went off to a camouflage colored tarp covered pile of boxes and containers, lifted the corner of a box and slipped in the cookies.

## Chapter 12

The rumble of the truck was heard from quite a distance away. Each man in the room briefly looked at each other before they all sprung up as one. Grabbing a variety of 12 gauge shotguns, 30-06 rifles and even a couple of 22s, some positioned themselves by windows, others ran out the back, fanning out and taking cover behind trees.

Louder and louder, the growling of the big diesel engine soon drowned out all other sound. Coming around the last bend in the dirt road, the deuce and a half began to slow as it approached the weather beaten old structure.

The mechanicals squeaked in protest as the truck came to a stop, idled for just a moment and then went silent. Hinges badly in need of grease protested as the door was opened.

“Mac, you want to tell your cousins not to shoot me?”

“That you Gina?”

“You know anyone else with a deuce?”

“Hell, I didn’t even know you had one,” said a bear of a man coming out from behind a tree, lowering his rifle and breaking into a great big smile. His grey hair and beard showed his age even if his physical stature and movements didn’t reflect it yet.

While not her true grandfather, Mac had always treated Gina as if she was his granddaughter.

“It’s alright guys, you can come out.”

As a variety of guys came out from behind trees and out of the old building, the passenger got out of the truck and a couple more people jumped down from the back.

“How’s the store doing? How are you doing?”

“Not bad. Not bad. Most people out this way are pretty used to no power so when the lights went off we barely noticed. Of course all of them fools that bought the newer trucks are now kicking themselves, but the rest of us are getting around just fine. Old man Johnson setup the still again and is turning out a pretty good fuel. Works in the trucks too,” he said with a wink.

She gave him a friendly swat on the arm.

“So, not that I mind seeing you, but what’s the purpose of your visit? I doubt you drove that thing here just to say hi.”

“We got stuff. Stuff you don’t want to get caught with.”

“How much?”

Gesturing back to the truck with her thumb, “A lot. It’s pretty full.”

Crate after crate of weapons and ammunition was unloaded from the truck and stacked up on the dirt road. Next to the dozen large wooden crates a handful of boxes were piled up.

Mac let out a whistle at the volume of, now illegal, firearms knowing these would go a long way to helping all the people in the area, his cousins. Pretty much everyone living in this part of the state considered everyone else to be their cousin. In a few cases it was even true, then again a distinct lack of medical care and birth certificates left enough doubt as to the lineage of a lot of the residents. Regardless, they all looked out for each other and weren’t going to stand for any government intrusions into their lives.

Many people from the surrounding urban areas that had already been victimized by DHS had moved out here and were welcomed by the locals. They were itching to get in some payback.

The crates of guns disappeared behind the run down building, pretty much still a country general store, while the boxes of goods were brought inside where the locals helped to unpack them sorting and placing the goods on the counter and on the shelves.

A fast moving body slammed into the door, banging it against the wall as they dashed into the store. All heads turned at the commotion as Tommy blurted, “People coming up the road with guns.”

Todd, Angela and Sabrina knew things were getting bad. The lights had been out over a month and the car refused to start. Food was running low and the subdivision was coming apart at the seams. One guy was helping people out by supplying water from his well for an hour each afternoon when he had his generator on, and some others were trying to get the empty lots tilled and turned into gardens.

A few people did have running vehicles and were taking people to the local stores, although the stores were demanding cash only. Having the chance to shop, they were able to hold on a little longer but when the subdivision started expecting the residents to act as armed guards at the entrance road, Todd and Angie felt they had to leave and try to find somewhere safer with more resources.

Todd and Angela had met in the military, in the sand box, and both knew how to take care of themselves in a war zone, but after leaving had hoped to never have to live like that again, especially with a six year old daughter dependent now on them.

They packed up their meager supplies and a few mementos, mostly family pictures, assorted equipment they both felt would be useful and walked away from the house.

As a child, both Todd and Angela had spent some time in the country and knew a bit about farming and ranching and were hoping to exchange their labor for food and shelter. Todd had a hunting rifle and a handgun, plus a couple of boxes of ammunition, which he hoped to not use although with the lack of food remaining he figured he'd have to hunt or fish for at least some food.

They said their goodbyes and left the subdivision passing the guards on the way out to the main road. Turning left they began the trek, aiming for a rural part of the

state where they knew of a number of farms that catered to visitors and did almost all of the work by hand. They had taken rare day trips to a few of these farms in the past, usually to pick apples and buy fresh eggs.

The first few days they walked along the road and averaged about seven miles a day. Angie quickly estimated, with a safety factor, forty five days to reach the area their destination. This all changed on day three.

A vehicle was heard approaching. At first the sound didn't register as out of place, but soon they realized they shouldn't be hearing anything. It sounded like a truck with a bad muffler and soon, in the distance, Todd spotted it.

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I don't want to run, they've probably already seen me, but you take Sabrina and get off into those bushes over there. Quick now!"

Todd turned for a moment, removed his pistol from his jacket pocket, cycled a round into the chamber and slipped it back in his pocket, keeping his hand on the grip. He turned back towards the truck and saw it had closed the distance considerably.

Just when he thought it would simply pass by the brakes were applied quite hard resulting in the vehicle coming to a sliding halt amidst a cloud of dust. Not having much of a choice, Todd looked to the passengers and nodded.

"Don't you be nodding at us pretty boy or we'll fuck you up."

He mumbled, "Sorry," as he turned hoping to just walk away.

"Hey, it's rude to walk away from someone when they're talking to you."

Todd heard one of the doors creak open and then slam. He kept walking hoping to lead them away from his wife and daughter, both hands still in his pockets.

One of the guys came almost running, intentionally moving into his path.

“What, you deaf? I’m talking to you,” he said, pointing a finger at Todd’s chest, stopping just short of poking him with it. He could hear more footsteps coming up behind him.

“Look, guys, I don’t want any trouble.”

“Yeah, well give us your pack and if you got anything good in there maybe we’ll call it even.”

Todd knew almost all their food was in it. To give up his pack would very well be a death by starvation sentence for his family.

“I got nothing in there, just some old clothes.”

“Well, we’ll just check for ourselves,” he heard as he felt someone pawing at the pack behind him.

Todd dropped, rolled to put some distance between him and the men and came up with his pistol pointing at the first guy who had cut in front of him.

“Aww... pretty boy’s got a piece, wonder if he even knows which the bullets come out of.”

“Drop the gun or I’m going to blow your damn head off, pretty boy.”

Todd turned to see the other two pointing guns at him. One with what appeared to be a shotgun, the other an old revolver. He kept his pointing at the leader, who had his hands held out from his sides and raised slightly, knowing that if he wavered then there would be nothing stopping the other two from opening fire.

“I said drop the fucking gun. Last chance.”

BANG!

He heard the sound as he saw the head of the guy with the shotgun erupt into a spray of blood, brain and bone. Todd was already moving, dropping and swinging his aim toward the guy with the revolver. A quick double tap and he was down and out of the fight. Only one left, he thought as he swung back to acquire the target.

The leader was pulling his arm out from around his back, a shiny giant sized handgun was swinging around towards him as he heard the command, ‘Drop’.

Without even thinking he was down on the ground as a .308 round came screaming through the same space his head had just previously occupied and continued on into the center of the chest of the leader who was knocked backwards, only awkwardly maintaining his feet.

Even on the ground Todd was moving, rolling to his side and acquiring the target. Two more quick taps and he was certain the guy would not be harassing anyone else ever again.

He checked each body, and verified all were dead.



“Clear!”

“You stay here for a minute, Sabrina, I’m going to check on daddy.”

With tears running down her cheeks, “Mommy, my ears hurt.”

“I know dear, but you need to wait here. OK?”

Still sniffing and whimpering, “OK.”

Angie rose up, the Ruger All American in .308 still held against her shoulder, barrel raised and advanced toward the road verifying for herself that indeed no one else was around.

Todd was already going over the bodies, looking for anything useful but finding very little other than the guns, two which actually were not even loaded. Apparently only the lead trouble maker had any ammunition. He found a good condition Desert Eagle, a full magazine and a few loose rounds in his pocket.

Holding it up, Todd said, “Stolen I’d bet. Check the truck, these guys got nothing else useful.”

Angie glanced in the bed and saw what could have been blood stains; they were so darkened and weathered she wasn’t sure, but saw nothing else of use. Looking in the cab yielded a couple of partially filled water bottles. One look back at the guys and she decided she’d dehydrate before putting her lips on something their mouths had touched. A glance at the gas gauge showed the truck was running on fumes.

“Nothing here.”

“How’s the truck look?”

“Nearly empty. Probably not worth the effort to even bother with it.”

“Ok, let’s get out of here then.”

They went over to Sabrina and began walking once more, this time sticking to ditches alongside the road or even going completely off road instead.

After walking for some time in silence, Sabrina, in a small meek voice, “Mommy, did you hurt those men?”

“Yes I did.”

“Why?”

“They were trying to hurt daddy.”

“But why were they trying to hurt daddy? He didn’t do anything to them.”

Trying to come up with a response her six year old brain would accept, Todd squatted down in front of her.

“Some people are just bad people. Sometimes they want to hurt other people just because they can. If Mommy didn’t stop them they would have hurt me and then her and even you. Can you remember something for me?”

“Uh huh,” she replied with a nod.

“Whenever your mother or I tell you to hide or run, you have to do so immediately. No questioning us, no whining. If you don’t do exactly what we say then bad people might try to hurt you too.”

“I don’t want to get hurt.”

They both hugged her as they said, “We don’t want you to get hurt either.”

She accepted their words and didn’t ask anything more as they continued walking.

Day after day they walked, usually in the early hours from just before sunrise until around lunch time. In general the less savory people seemed more active in the afternoon and evenings. They made every effort to avoid others but sometimes it simply wasn’t possible, although after the encounter on the road, everyone else they met was at least polite if not somewhat reserved, even to the point of pretty much ignoring them.

Todd and Angie still did not let down their guard making sure anyone else they encountered saw their weapons, now prominently displayed, then again just as often those they saw were equally armed. The further out they got the less they saw of people which suited them just fine.

By early afternoon Sabrina would be exhausted and they would find a place to setup camp. In this case, camp usually consisted of a tarp strung between two trees or against some logs setup as a lean to. Sabrina would take a nap while Angie scavenged for nearby edibles. Todd would attempt to fish, snare or trap dinner, or if buildings were visible he scout them and, when he deemed it safe, would attempt a scavenging run. In late afternoon they’d prepare whatever they had gathered or found, or raid their nearly exhausted supply of food to make a simple dinner over a small, almost smokeless fire. Well before twilight they would ensure the flames

were put out before Todd and Sabrina would go to sleep. After some time, Angie would wake him and get in her sleep. Todd would let them sleep until the sky started to lighten at which point he'd wake them, they'd break down camp and have a quick breakfast from their almost empty bag of oatmeal, hitting the road before sun had risen.

They would walk for around eight hours before starting the whole process over once again. Every few days they heard a vehicle and would scramble from the ditch well into the surrounding vegetation. With their cover and not being initially visible from the road they were able to escape detection while the rare vehicle simply drove past unaware of them.

Sadly this approach failed one day.

“Car!”

“Quick! Into the trees and get down. You know the routine.”

They got a good fifty yard into the woods and took shelter behind two large poplars.

The sound of the car got closer and closer but instead of fading, they all heard the sound of it slowing instead. Todd could just barely make it out through the trees as it stopped and was turned off. Two doors were heard closing and then voices.

“I don't see anyone.”

“I'm telling you, I saw someone dart into the woods.”

“Where?”

“Right about here, they have to be out there somewhere.”

“Well, what do you want to do? Go in after them?”

“Naw, I’m thinking we call Cooter and have him bring one of his hounds. He’s only ten minutes away. They’ll find ‘em.”

They went back from the edge of the forest to their very early 1970’s Chevy and drove off in a hurry.

“Todd, what are we going to do?”

“Heading back along the road is bound to get us caught. Wait here.”

Todd ran back to the road, then continued down it for about a hundred yards before crossing over and plunging into the forest briefly, circling around a few times and retracing his steps back across and along the road and finally back to Angie.

“I left a few other trails. Hopefully they’ll pick up the trail, and think we came out and crossed over. It should buy us some time. Let’s get moving.”

He led them deeper into the woods on a somewhat zig zag pattern with an occasional side route only to circle back around on their trail using a figure eight pattern.

About twenty minutes after plunging into the woods they heard the baying of a dog.

“Daddy, I’m scared.”

“We all are honey. Hold tight to mommy’s hand. It’s just a little further.”

Every so often they heard the dog but never any closer, then again they didn’t appear to be leaving it behind either. Taking a more direct route they continued on until, almost literally, stumbling into a small river. Todd estimated it was perhaps twenty feet across as he looked both up and down stream before seeing what he wanted.

“Head that way. I’ll catch up.”

He took off in the opposite direction along the river bank, again running about a hundred yards before retracing his steps. He caught up with them and pointed to a slender trunk, no more than six inches wide that had fallen across the river and was resting, suspended, about eight feet over the water. The broken top was sitting on the edge of the bank right at their feet, the trunk apparently also snapped off and was laying on the far side.

“Cross here.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t walk on that.”

“Don’t walk. Sit, shimmy, tie your belt to it and hang from below, I don’t care, just get across and do it now.”

He continued on down the river another fifty yards before doubling back. By the time he got there they were both straddling the trunk and inching their way across, over half way already. A sudden baying of a dog, sounding closer than before was all the urging they needed to get going.

Once across, Todd climbed out, hung from the bottom and swung his legs over the log, pulling himself arm over arm across. At the far side he was exhausted but knew their lives depended on his next actions. Getting a good grip he began to pull on the tree until ever so slowly the top slid off the river bank, rolled down the embankment and into the water, but slowly enough that there was barely a splash heard. He adjusted his grip and began pushing until he had swung the floating top of the tree all the way across to his side, using where the trunk still rested on the riverbank as a pivot point. Jamming a stick down through the branches and into the mud he temporarily anchored the top of the tree to the shore.

Turning to Angie, "Let them figure out where we went now," he said with a smile.

Just then the baying sound was heard again and now quite close.

"Quick, he hissed, into the woods."

They went deeper into the trees on the far side of the river.

Sniffing along the shore, the hound dog went running down the stream only to pull up when the trail ended.

"Son of a bitch doubled back again," said Cooter pushing the dog in the other direction.

"Go get 'em boy!"

The hound took off running right past their crossing again coming up short when the trail ended.

"What's with the damn mutt?"

“Trail went dead again.”

Then they must have swam across.

“Nope. They’d leave a lot of odor if they went in the water. Zeke would have picked it up. Only way they could fool him is flying across the river. Unless you got me chasing fairies, looks like whoever it was done gave us the slip. Probably ran down here, left the trail and the doubled back and we missed the side branch further back.”

“Well, let’s stop wasting time here then.”

“C’mon Zeke,” said Cooter guiding the dog back towards the road encouraging him to find the side trail.

Todd, Angela and Sabrina waited until they could no longer hear the men or dog, rose from behind the fallen tree and headed further away from the river.

Sabrina was really starting to drag and Todd knew they’d either have to carry her or stop soon. Mulling over his options, Todd saw the trees were thinning and unexpectedly they ended up on a dirt road. It meandered through the trees, leading more or less north and south. Todd turned toward the north and led his wife and daughter on. He had the confiscated Desert Eagle prominently tucked into his belt while Angie still had the Ruger bolt action hunting rifle over her shoulder within easy reach. They rounded a bend and saw the trees thinned out substantially revealing an old weather beaten wooden building and a large military truck parked in front of it.

“Thank God, the military has finally mobilized,” said Angie.



A man, no, a teenager, maybe, thought Todd, hopped out of the truck. He was wearing boots but had on overalls and was carrying a rifle that in no way looked like military issue. He ran towards the building waving and shouting as he banged into the door trying to get in. Todd couldn't make out the words but also knew they had been clearly seen.

If he'd been alone or perhaps just him and Angie they could have run but Sabrina was in no shape for another lengthy flight to safety. They'd have to either talk or fight their way out.

As he walked, he made sure both of his side arms were ready to go and positioned himself between his family and the building. The closer they got they could see the peeling paint, worn and in some cases, missing wood and the general run down condition of the structure. Painted over the door were a few letters, enough to make out that it once said 'General Store'.

A number of men came out of the door, all armed, and Todd saw movement towards the back of the building, probably reinforcements moving to flank them. Any firepower advantage they might have had was quickly eliminated by the numbers and positions of the men.

They simply kept walking, not making any sudden movements until at about twenty feet a large man with gray hair and beard stepped forward."

"Folks," he said with a nod of his head.

"Sir," returned Todd as they stopped.

"Pardon my question, but you seem to be lost."

"No sir. Just passing through."

They were at a stand off, neither speaking, both sizing each other up, until Sabrina whined, “Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom.”

All eyes turned to her, and then quickly to the front of the building as the wooden screened door slammed open.

Gina was walking out, “Mac, these folks aren’t causing any trouble, stop hassling them!”

Approaching Angie, she said, “Come on honey, we’ve got a bathroom you can use.”

Angie looked to Todd and then took Sabrina’s hand and followed the woman.

The tension defused, most of the menu seemed to just mill about or wander away. The large gray bearded man stepped towards Todd, “I’m Mac, as you probably guessed. Sorry, we can’t be too careful. You know, the military and all.”

“Todd. And I guess I don’t know. What about the military?”

“They’re rounding people up and putting them in camps. Isn’t that what you’re doing out here? Getting away from them?”

“Actually we were trying to get to the farm land up north of here, we’ve got a few friends there that might take us in but some guys saw us on the road back through the woods and over the river. That way I think,” he said pointing.

“They went and got some guy and his dog to hunt us down. We’ve been running ever since.”

“Cooter?”

“Yeah, I think I heard one of them use that name.”

“Aw hell, he’s harmless. If he’d caught you he wouldn’t have know what to do with you. They’re chasing anyone one they see, mostly just to make sure the area stays safe. Early on we had some city folk, gangs we think, who thought they’d come out here and tell us what to do or just take what they wanted. They moved on right quick once we explained things to them,” he said with a grin and a few pats of his shotgun.

“Come on inside and sit a spell. Your young’n looked exhausted.”

Still suspicious but not looking to offend and ratchet up the situation again he followed Mac into the building. Just as they entered, the dark haired woman was leading Angie and Sabrina to the store area from the back room.

She reached out her hand to Todd, “Gina.”

He shook it, “Todd.”

Looking back to Mac he asked, “So what’s with the military round up you mentioned? We’re both ex-army and I can’t believe that’s happening.”

“Ask her,” he said point to Gina. “She’s the one who’s dealt with it.”

All eyes turned to her, “It’s really DHS that’s leading this, FEMA running the camps and the Army being used as the grunts. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“They’re confiscating guns, food and supplies. You resist and they shoot you or someone in your family or just take your kids away. We ran into a couple of privates a few days ago and explained what was happening. Both of them claimed they had no idea, just following orders, you know the drill.”

“What did you do with them?”

“After telling them what was going on we made them swear not to harm Americans anymore and then let them go... of course we, ahem, borrowed their truck and the confiscated guns in it,” she finished with a mischievous grin.

“You don’t expect them to honor that?”

“No, but I do expect them to now pay attention and think for themselves for once. Perhaps they’ll really see what is happening and decide to stick to their oath to the constitution instead of being a Homeland lackey.”

“You’ll excuse me if I find all of that a bit hard to believe,” said Angie.

“Only if you’ll excuse me for having witnessed them shoot my husband at point blank range, take me and my kids to a camp and then when I kept putting up a fight, knock me out with drugs. While I was out they took my kids elsewhere. I managed to escape and have been working on locating them and all the other kidnapped people so we can go in and free them.”

Angie and Todd both had horrified looks on their faces as she replied, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize,” and then clutched Sabrina to her.

They continued to discuss the situation for a few more minutes until Mac, who had disappeared, reappeared from the back of the store.

“You folks hungry?”

“Thanks, but we’re good.”

“I ain’t asking. Come on back, I’ve got a pot of Cajun stew and it looks like you all could use a warm meal.”

Todd once more tried to politely refuse, “We appreciate but we don’t have any way to repay you...”

“Did I ask for money?”

Gina leaned over towards Angie and with a grin said, “You really should stop him before he gets Mac mad.”

Todd looked to Gina, Angie and down to Sabrina and thought back to the last real meal they had eaten. Finally he looked back to Mac, “I guess it would be OK to stay a bit longer and have a bite to eat.”

Mac’s face broke into a big grin as he led them back to a sizeable dining room and began serving up large bowls. The other men and a few women appeared, mostly from outside, and got bowls of stew too, many of them wandering back out with it.

Todd was almost done with his bowl when they heard a vehicle pull up and a couple of doors slam. Indistinct greetings were heard outside followed by the baying of a hound. Todd jumped to his feet reaching for his gun.

Angie looked worried and Sabrina started to cry although she did so quietly. Mac motioned to Todd to sit back down, walked over to a window, leaned his head out and yelled, "Cooter, get your ass up here."

Footsteps were heard on the wooden steps, and then the back door opened and a disheveled man in dirty t-shirt and ripped jeans appears in the doorway, a hound dog pushed past his legs and followed his nose right towards the pot of stew.

Mac stood up towering over him, "I heard you was after someone in the woods."

"Yep. Damn near caught that sum a bitch. Bunch of damn gang banger city folk dun think dey can come take our stuff."

Mac stepped to the side so Cooter could see past him at the visitors. Waving his hand he said, "You mean these son of a bitch gang bangers and their daughter?"

Cooter looked at each of them, including the tears running down Sabrina's face. "Well, I, um, was dark, um...."

"Yeah I thought so. Now apologize to these nice people for terrorizing them."

He pulled his cap off his head showing scraggly unwashed hair, "Ma'am, Sir, I dun be sorry for scarren you. I wasn't meaning no harm, just tryin to potect us and ar stuff."

Before either could respond, the dog walked up to Sabrina, gave her a sniff and then started giving her big wet sloppy dog kisses, eliciting a laugh from everyone present.

People came in and out as they all talked about what had happened and the current state of the country, as they knew it. Eventually the stew was finished and the conversations winded down. As nice as it was to get a hot meal and have a short time of relative safety, he did want to get back on the road and took the opportunity to thank Mac and Gina and make to leave.

Leaning out the window once more, Mac called for Cooter. When he came in the door, Mac said, “These good folk need to be getting on their way. To make up for what you did, I want you to drive them to the county line. That’ll knock almost thirty miles off their walk.”

“Yesum sir,” he said.

“Now you three, come with me.”

He led them to the store and rummaged through the boxes that Gina had delivered earlier that day pulling out some water bottles. He then proceeded to fill a grocery bag with dried food and handed it to Angie.

“Here. I know if I give it to him I’ll just get another argument.”

With some effort he squatted down trying to get down to Sabrina’s level.

“This is for you missy,” he said holding up the package of cookies.

Her eyes lit up as she looked to her mommy. Angie nodded and Sabrina reached out for them with Zeke shoving his nose in looking to see if it was

something he could eat. Sabrina tried to keep it away from him but the hound dog was persistent. Finally Angie reached down and grabbed the packet and added it to the grocery bag.

“I’ll hold these until later for you.”

Sabrina gave the dog a big hug while everyone else exchanged hearty handshakes, Angie and Gina also sharing a hug.

“Mac, Gina, I don’t know how to repay you for this generosity.”

“We don’t need payment, instead, just spread the word about what is happening out there and keep your family safe.”

He nodded, “That I will. You have my word.”

They walked out the front door, got in the car with Cooter and drove off.

Knowing the dirt roads like the back of his hand, Cooter rarely used the brake, preferring instead to slide around the turns on the dirt roads. The dog stayed curled up on the floor boards while the rest held onto anything they could. Not more than forty five minutes later he slid to a halt where the dirt road turned into pavement.

“Here ya go. Sorry agin for scarren youse all back in da woods. Say, how did you give ol’ Zeke da slip?”

“Crawled across the river on a tree and then pulled the tree across to the far side.”

He started laughing and slapping his leg.



“Well damn, if dat dun’t just beat it all.”

They thanked him for the ride and Sabrina gave Zeke a big hug. They adjusted their now full of food packs and started walking as Cooter spun around and rooster tailed the dirt as he headed back down the road to the store.

## Chapter 14

Todd and his family walked for nearly another week covering longer distances each day, now that they were getting better nourishment at their meals and had more energy. They still stopped early but each day that time crept further and further out in the day.

On Saturday afternoon, not that they realized it was Saturday, just before stopping for the day, all three heard gun fire start up, not that far away. Todd immediately got them off the side of the road and into some brush, concealing them all from the road. They assumed it would be over soon, however the shots kept coming and coming. Not constant, but frequent enough that they both new, from their time in the gulf, that someone was pinned down and both sides were taking pot shots at each other.

“Probably some locals, we should just head the other way.”

“What if it’s someone who needs our help?”

“Angie, you know it’s a different world now.”

“You’re right. It is. People like Mac and Gina that we normally would have avoided at all costs turn out give us food and a ride asking for nothing in return. The least we can do to repay the help is try and help someone else. If it doesn’t look like something we should be involved in, we’ll leave. OK?”

They looked at each other, Todd making motions as if he wanted to argue but couldn’t come up with one. When they heard the scream of a child the decision was made for them.

“Sabrina, I need you to stay here in the bushes by yourself. It might be scary but you have to stay here, be very quiet and do not come out until daddy or I come and get you. Can you do that for us? Can you show us what a big brave girl you are now?”

Eyes wide as saucers, she slowly nodded affirmatively.

Angie, the better shot on the rifle stuck with it and Todd still had both handguns. They grabbed all the spare ammo they had, stuffed it in their pockets and took off toward the sound of the gun fire. Winding through the trees, shrubs and grasses they worked their way quickly but quietly forwards. At a small rise they belly crawled to the top and peered over the top.

Down below a ways they saw a road and a guy with an AR behind a couple of long abandoned vehicles. Laying on the ground next to him was a small boy with a bright red stain on his shirt and a woman, shotgun propped against the car, trying desperately to do something for him. Down the road, perhaps three hundred yards were additional abandoned cars and at least four different muzzle flashes firing toward the family. They were obviously pinned down and trying to defend themselves.

Todd motioned her back a bit and she crept down the hill out of sight.

“I’m going to parallel the road and come out behind them. From this perspective it looks like you should be able to get a better angle than the guy down there. Give me a two hundred count and then start shooting, work from right to left and I’ll be coming at them from the left.”

“What if the guy or woman gets hit?”

“Then just start shooting and we’ll improvise.”

“I love you,” he said, moving down the hill and rapidly into the bush.

“One ninety eight... One ninety nine... two hundred.”

Angie slowly exhaled, held her breathing and gently squeezed the trigger, almost surprised as the round went off. The .308 bullet flew down the barrel, developing a spin as it did. Exiting the barrel it flew nearly three hundred yards before impacting the roof of a car, deflecting slightly, as it punched right through, shattered the window, again deflecting slightly, before entered the relatively soft target of the human face. It continued traveling through the brain, impacting with the back of the skull where the velocity and force spilt away a four inch section of bone and carried it right through the scalp and into the ground fifteen feet away.

The guy never even knew what hit him, dead before the impact or pain could register. His associates turned to look as Todd rounded a large tree, both guns pointed out in front of him. He lead with his handgun, putting two rounds into each body he saw, before raising the Desert Eagle and administering a single head shot to each of the three bodies writhing on the ground.

Eric heard the sound of a gunshot, not in front of him but from behind him on the grassy knoll alongside the road. His spirit sank realizing the thugs had

flanked him, were going to kill him and his wife and child would be at their mercy. He turned, just waiting for the pain as the bullet ripped into him, yet he felt nothing. Looking up he saw the barrel sticking out, but it was pointed down the road, not towards him. Rapid shots were going off down the road, followed by three single loud shots.

He was quite confused now at the turn of events and the silence was almost deafening after all the gunfire. Eric was torn between checking on his family, seeing if the gang down the road was still a threat and keeping an eye on the shooter on the hill. Before he could decide on any a woman's voice called out.

“Don't shoot. We're here to help. I'm going to stand up now.”

He kept his AR raised but held the shot as a woman did indeed rise up from the hill and shoulder her rifle.

“I'm coming down now and my husband is approaching from down the road. He finished off the rest of them. I'd appreciate it if you didn't shoot him either.”

Eric whipped around and sure enough, a man was walking down the road toward him holstering a pair of side arms as he walked.

Deciding that if they meant him harm they would have already shot him, Eric turned to his son hoping to be able to do something to save his life. He began by cutting off the shirt, exposing the wound. His wife was nearly frantic which was affecting him until he saw the actual wound.

The bullet had traced a line along his ribs but had not penetrated the abdominal cavity. It looked nasty and bled profusely, but with simple bandaging it should not be life threatening.

He heard the other two people talking but it sounded like they were talking with each other so he concentrated on cleaning the wound, applying antibiotic ointment and then wrapping the bandages from his nearly depleted first aid supplies over the wound. He then comforted both his wife and son. When he finally looked around all he saw was the woman, the man was gone.

Eric gave her a quizzically look at which she responded, “We left our daughter nearby. He went to get her.”

He nodded and spoke, “Thanks for saving us, although when your rifle went off behind me I thought for sure they had flanked us and we were all dead.”

“Sorry about that. We didn’t want to try to signal you, have them see and risk losing the element of surprise against them.”

“Sound tactics. What brings you out this way, if I can ask?”

“Heading for refuge. We’ve got some friends out here that we hope will give us food and a place to stay in return for labor.”

“They’d better have a truckload of food stored away, or better yet, a farm. I don’t see society and commerce, at least as we knew it, isn’t coming back anytime soon.”

“Agreed.”

“Mommy!” a girl’s voice called out as Sabrina rushed forward to give Angie a hug, Todd trailing behind her.

Eric looked at Todd and once more offered his thanks.

“No problem. Just trying to help. I’m Todd by the way.”

“Eric. My wife Becky and our son David,” he added with a wave of his arm.

“I’m Angie and this is Sabrina.”

“Where are you headed, Eric?”

“Well, Becky’s parents have farm and, like you, we’re expecting they’ll take us in. They always said to come to them if things ever got bad. I thought they meant job loss or something, now I’m not so sure. How long have you been out here? Since the beginning?”

“No, we stayed home at first, but when the subdivision started turning into an armed camp we thought they were being a bit alarmist and left. After being on the road awhile I have questioned that decision, but we’re committed now. There is no heading back. How about you?”

“We left the very next day and drove the first hundred or so miles.”

“Drove? What, you had a car that worked?”

“Actually, yes. A ’67 Camaro. Project car. Becky hated that I hauled it home without checking with her first. Unfortunately the restoration wasn’t as far along as I wanted and the engine finally gave out. We limped it into an abandoned barn in a heavily overgrown field and left it there. I had all sorts of tools and other useful stuff locked in there, but I doubt I’ll ever see any of it again. We hit the road and have been hiking it ever since.”

Angie asked, “You all hungry? We got enough we could share a dinner with you.”

Eric looked to Becky and then back at Angie and replied, "Only if we can contribute some of our supplies too."

"Fair enough."

"We probably should get off the road, I don't want another fight if we can avoid it."

The women and children moved over the grassy hill to the far side, hidden from view of the road, while the two guys walked down the road to search the bodies for anything useful and gather up the weapons.

"So what did you do, you know, before?"

"Cop. Undercover narcotics. You?"

"Construction, before that I was army as was Angie. That's where we met."

Eric smiled, "That explains a lot. I was wondering how she learned to shoot like that, and from the appearance of these bodies you came in fast and hard as you unloaded on them."

He shrugged.

"Trust me when I say I wouldn't mind either of you covering my back. You know how to handle yourselves."

"Thanks."

"You mentioned trying to find a farm. Did you ever work on one?"

“Yeah. Angie and I both grew up in the country. My uncle had a ranch and I spent the summers there helping out with the herds. Angie’s parents had a small hobby farm. They mostly grew stuff for the greenhouse and landscape trade. I think I remember her saying they sold off the farm when she was fourteen and moved to the city.”

“You know, I can’t make any promises, but with your background in military, familiarity with weapons and defense and knowing your way around a farm, I’d say you’d have a better than average chance at Janesway.”

“Janesway? You mean Janesway Farm?”

“Yeah, you heard of them? Becky’s parents own it.”

“You’re kidding! That’s where we were headed. We’d make trips out there at least a few times a year to buy a half a beef and a whole hog along with the apple and berry picking they offered. They were too far to go on a regular basis but when we did make it there we’d always get a few bags of veggies and their fresh eggs too. It’s a great place!”

“I think it just might work out good for all of us,” Eric said with a big smile. “We should get back and tell the ladies.”

“Sounds good. Grab the guns I got stacked up over there. Most looked in pretty good shape. We can give them a good cleaning and then decide what to keep. I got the rest of their useful stuff in this pack.”

Meanwhile, Angie and Becky worked on putting together a dinner from their supplies. While digging in the pack, Angie saw the pack of cookies Mac had given



them. It had fallen all the way to the bottom. She pulled it out, handed it to Sabrina and suggested she go share with David.

Taking it she shyly walked over to him.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Does that hurt?” she asked pointing at the bandage on his ribs.

“Yeah, a little.”

“I’m Sabrina.”

“I’m Dave.”

“Want a cookie?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

She opened the pack of cookies, gave him one and took the other one for herself and then sat down next to him to eat it.



Culex Pipiens (pen name) is an amateur fiction writer focusing on PAW (Post Apocalyptic World) themed stories. Culex's work can be found on [www.culexpipiens.com](http://www.culexpipiens.com) where many of the stories are available as free downloads. A number of Culex's stories are also available in the Kindle format on Amazon.com (search Kindle books for 'Culex Pipiens'). In addition, select stories are only available in Kindle format. If you like the stories and want to support Culex's work, consider buying one or more in the Kindle format which is readable on Kindle devices along with the free Kindle app for PC, Mac and many different tablets.

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