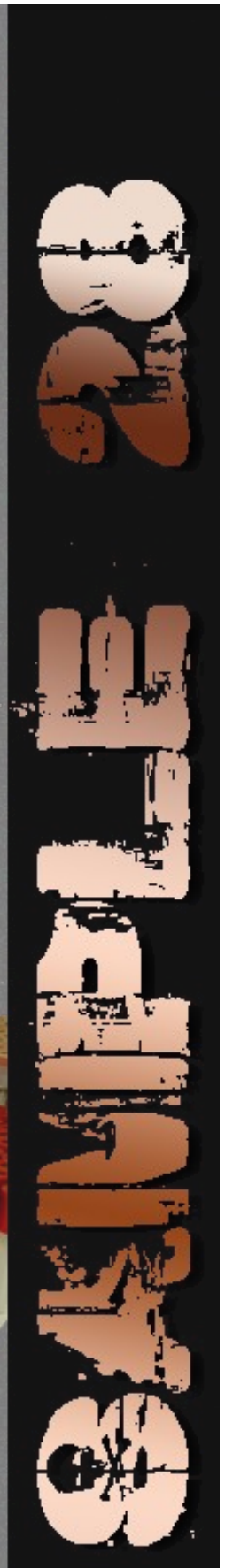


...a simple accident
leads to a fight for
survival in a world
of zombies...



by Culex Pipiens



Sample 28

Copyright © 2012 by Culex Papiens. All rights reserved.



The Big Box is a work of fiction.
Any resemblance to real people or events is purely
coincidental. Names, characters, places and incidents
portrayed in this story are imagined or used fictitiously.

Chapter 1

"Welcome Directors Johnson and Fitzpatrick. The meeting will be starting shortly. Can I bring you a coffee or tea?"

"Coffee, black."

"None for me, thank you."

"Very good. I will bring it right away. Please be seated as Chairman Soo-Long is about to begin."

As the two executives entered the richly appointed conference room Daniel commented to Brian, "Any idea what this is about? I had to take a red-eye in from NY and got almost no sleep. I'm not in the mood for another one of Lee's emergency meetings only to find out it's some BS that the lawyers should have easily handled."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Hell, it's my wife's birthday today and we had reservations at Trotters. You should have heard the fight we had last night when I tried to explain being summoned here with no notice. Hey, you might know... any decent jewelers here? If I don't bring home at least a 10K diamond necklace to make up for this I'll probably never get my balls back."

"Can't say I do. Just ask Shonda when she brings the coffee. I've found over the years that she can find and do just about anything. I'm sure with what she knows and has heard, that the company's scared she'll get poached by Merck or Abbot and take the secrets with her."

Taking their seats at the forty foot long, 3 inch thick mahogany table Daniel couldn't help but admire the flawless nearly mirrored finish on the table. Of course the \$7,500 each leather chairs were nothing to complain about either. All 26 of them. The room was tastefully designed with soothing natural colors all to put the participants in a pleasant and subdued mood. Hidden within was an amazing AV system. Hell, the corporate promo pieces they've shown us looked and sounded better than a Cameron feature in the best theatre. I wonder what a real movie would be like in here? Lee, er, Dr. Soo-Long, better

not let him hear me call him Lee, had just entered the room and was approaching the head of the table. As usual there was no greeting, no welcoming, just right into business.

"Gentlemen, Pharmalogicaltek is poised to revolutionize the pharmaceutical market and you are here to make that possible. Once I have laid out the secret research we have been doing you will vote to provide proper funding so we can finalize our testing, meet the regulations the government saddles on us and get to market long before our competitors can even figure out what we've accomplished."

Shonda entered the room with the coffee for Daniel and set it in front of him during Dr. Soo-Long's opening remark.

"Shonda, distribute the confidential briefings now.", demanded Dr. Soo-Long. As she started to place a sealed folder in front of each board member the lights dimmed and the presentation system sprang instantly to life. Dr Soo-Long continued.

"Alzheimer's is devastating. Families watch their elders waste away. What would you say if I told you we could completely halt this disease? How many billions, no, tens of billions per year is this worth? What if I told you that not only can we now eliminate this disease but we can also boost the IQ by 10-15 points of literally anyone? And with slight tweaks to the formula and dosing we can also dramatically alter the brain patterns themselves."

Images of the brain, pills and elderly patients have been displaying on the screen in the background however the last image was that of John Wayne Gacy and it stayed up on the screen instead of fading off as the others did.

"Imagine, if you will, the worst of the worst completely transformed into docile and safe upstanding citizens."

More images start appearing. Manson, Bundy, Dahmer, Berkowitz and more that Daniel didn't recognize.

"What would governments pay for this treatment? They pay hundreds of dollars per day to incarcerate viscous criminals and will do so for the rest of their lives. We can offer them a simple solution, for, oh,

let's say half that amount, and they can empty out most of the prisons. Now before you assume that the public backlash would prevent this, consider our economy. Most states are running multi billion dollar deficits. We can offer them a way to cut their penal expenses in half, saving tax dollars and in the process ensure that the people released are now safe to be in society. The alternative? Early releases to save money and what amounts to wild animals back in the population."

Daniel looked at Brian and saw the look on his face mirrored what he was thinking. The risk to the company is enormous. If even one person on treatment commits a violent crime, and we supplied a supposed safe medication, the company will be held liable. Add in a few more cases and it could financially ruin us. There is no way the board is going to approve this. What a complete waste of our time.

"I see from the looks on your faces that you're somewhat skeptical. Perhaps giving you a few minutes to read our briefing will help change your minds. Please open them now."

Each of the board members took the sealed envelope in front of them. Strangely Daniel thought that Brian's envelope was a bit thicker than his. As he opened it and pulled the first few documents out of the envelope Daniel went white as a ghost. A brief glance up showed similar reactions around the table. He was looking at pictures of himself in bed with Natalie. Natalie was not his wife. Pulling out more pages he found records of the multiple DUI's his son had that the company lawyers made go away. It was obvious that everyone at the table had something they did not want revealed and the company somehow found out about all of them and kept records.

Lee, that bastard, continued, "Now that you have had a chance to read our confidential briefing I believe you all have a better understanding of what is at stake and why we need to move forward with our research on an accelerated time frame." As Dr. Soo-Long paused he looked around the room being sure to make direct eye contact with each and every board member and said, "All I need, all the company needs, is the vote of each and every one of you to direct funding into this endeavor. I trust you will each do right thing. Oh, and obviously company confidentiality code of conduct applies to this meeting and to your briefings. You are personally responsible to

ensure that they are either protected or destroyed in accordance with company policy. I trust each of you to handle this as you see fit."

As Dr. Soo-Long stepped away from the table toward the exit he directed Shonda to poll the board and get their votes.

Chapter 2

A few hours later in the limo ride to the airport Daniel and Brian were sitting there in an uncomfortable silence. Finally Daniel couldn't take it anymore and spoke up. "What did we do?"

Brian's eyes flickered down towards the envelope Daniel held and said "Did we have a choice? I assume your briefing, while similar to mine also didn't match mine."

"Yeah. Lee, that bastard. How did they get this? This is an invasion of our privacy! We should sue him."

"You first, just remember the contents of that envelope become public if you do. He's got us all wrapped around his finger, there is nothing we can do about it and he knows it. I wouldn't put it past him to threaten to release these envelopes if any of us tried to resign."

Dr Soo-Long sat in his office with a smile on his face. The board unanimously approved the funding for his latest project. When this bears fruit and the stock hits astronomical levels perhaps he'll give the board another "briefing" on why his 8 figure bonus should be changed to a 9 figure bonus. These Americans and their infidelities and refusal to accept responsibility for their actions are so easy to manipulate. It was so easy to get them to do what he wanted. Then again with his superior intellect, he boasted to himself, he didn't even think getting the government to buy in would be hard to do.

Sandra Appleton went into the conference room and started to setup her laptop and projector. This conference room in the R&D lab did not

have a mahogany table. The chairs were generic conference room chairs and did not cost \$7,500 each. In fact the table and chairs combined weren't even close to \$7,500 in total. While booting up the laptop some of the other researches came in, some grabbing a cup of coffee, others taking a bottle of water from the fridge. There was friendly chatter along with some work topics being bantered back and forth. Sandra sighed trying to think how she was going to relay the latest directive from the bosses. Besides the enormity and almost impossibility of the task they were also given just 90 days to have something ready to go to trials. Don't they understand you just can do it that fast? Maybe in 3-5 years but 90 days? Oh and she was told that if they couldn't produce new researches would be found that could.

"Mom, I don't want to go to piano lessons today. My friends texted me that they're going to the mall to see that new scary movie and I want to go too."

"No Ashley, we're paying good money for these lessons and you're going. In fact Linda said the last few weeks you have not been showing any signs of improvement. Are you sure you have been practicing when you get home from school each day?"

"YES."

"A full hour?"

"Uh, yeah.. Whatever.."

"Well, I'll tell you whatever, you don't have to practice an hour after school anymore."

"Really? Great!"

"Really. Instead you'll put in 90 minutes after dinner where we can all listen to your playing."

"Mom! THAT IS NOT FAIR."

"Well no one ever said life is fair."

Ashley stamped off to her room and slammed the door.

Laura was frustrated with Ashley but had to remind herself that as a 14 year old it was, hopefully, just part of the growing process and eventually she'd out grow it. Ron and Jason would be home soon from soccer practice and it was her turn to come up with dinner. What did she have a taste for that could be delivered?

"Hey, what's that?", said Jim pointing at a revolver with a strange looking barrel.

"This? It's a Medusa from Phillips & Rodgers."

"A what?"

"A double action revolver that can chamber, fire and extract a whole range of cartridges in the .38, 357 and 9mm sizes. An ideal survivalist gun since it'll fire a lot of what you can scavenge."

Jim quickly looked around, noticing no one else in the area and hissed back at Mike, "Would you keep that survivalist stuff to your self? I'm a prepper and the last thing I want is others finding out and showing up on my door step in an emergency."

"Jim, you've known me for a long time and know that I would not betray the knowledge we have about each other and our preps."

"Yeah, well just try not to mention it when we're in public settings. OK? So, how much for it?"

Boy that smells good. Must be spaghetti and meatballs night. I'll have to hit their dumpster later for the left overs. Roger pushed his cart along looking for aluminum cans and smelling the cooking from Alfredo & Sons. A BMW sped past and a snotty teenager's voice yelled out the passenger window, "Get a job you bum."

Roger remember when he had a job, and drove a BMW himself. It's surprising what a couple of years of bad luck can do to a man. Economic recession put him out of work and his previous well paying

job history kept him from finding another. Everyone figured he'd just up and quit as soon as he could find something better so they didn't bother making him an offer. His 401K barely lasted 6 months with the house and car payments. He was able to stall another 3 months and then the late notices started coming a few more months later and the foreclosure notice came.

Not wanting to go through the humiliation of being thrown out on the lawn with all of his possessions he used eBay and Craigslist to sell all he could. Pocketed nearly \$4,800. Sounds like a lot but he had originally paid nearly \$50,000 by his recollection for the stuff. He took his laptop, money and a few small possessions and walked away from everything else.

Funny how his timing was... while only about a half of a block away a flatbed carrier came zooming past, quickly backed into his driveway (or I guess former driveway now) and repo-ed the BMW in under 2 minutes. He was sure the bank would be stopping by in the next few days with the sheriff for the house. At least he wouldn't have to see the stares of his former neighbors when this happened.

"Are you almost packed yet?"

"Not quite. I've got the tent, sleeping bags, stove and Mountain House meals packed up. I still need to put in the misc equipment, our first aid kit and my camera. How about you?"

"Just about done. I'm really looking forward to a long weekend by the lake. It's been almost 6 months since we last went camping."

"Speaking of lake, did you pack the fishing gear in the Jeep?"

"I almost forgot! Thanks.", said Karen.

While putting the fishing equipment in the back of their older Cherokee Karen wondered if Andy would ever propose. They'd been serious for a few years now and while not a prude, Karen was still old fashioned and wouldn't go all the way until Andy at least "Put a ring on it". Andy was also a gentleman and never pushed and demanded more than Karen was comfortable with. Perhaps that's why they got

along so well together as each consider the other's feelings as much or more than their own, and not just in the bedroom but in all facets of their lives.

They had both grown up as army brats and during their childhood their parents ended up stationed at the same bases a number of times. Getting together after years apart was just natural for them and since kids didn't have the same responsibilities, or baggage, as adults it was easy for them. In their mid teens a change in deployment separated them again. Later Karen put in 4 years in the national guard while Andy went in for Army and was a natural sniper and put in some time with the Rangers. A few years after they both got out chance had them living in the same town and intervened further when they stumbled into each other's arms, literally, at a local bar. He was turning from his friends to place an order at the bar when another patron inadvertently bumped Karen, also there with a few friends, right into Andy's arms. After a quick separation and apology they finally recognized each other and spent a long time catching up. Andy asked her out that friday for their first official date.

Chapter 3

"... so as you can see this timeline..."

"... is total bull, Sandy.", finished Mark.

"Yes, I know that and you know that. Everyone here knows this is nearly impossible to accomplish but if we don't try we're already out of a job. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and actually come up with a cure to Alzheimer's."

"And by luck this same drug will amazingly pacify axe murders? I just want to know who will be bringing the pigs?"

"Pigs? What pigs?"

"They ones that are going to hatch from those snow balls in hell and

go flying across the sky. 'Cause that's more likely to happen than this 'task' that has been given to us."

"Yes, I KNOW." an exasperated Sandra said. "What do you want me to do? I'm just the messenger. Now if there are no other questions on the impossible timeline let's move on to the project details."

"We've been asked to come up with a drug that will basically mess with the brain tempering the parts that are base urges, you know violence, sex drive or lust, etc, while enhancing the intelligence, memory and reasoning portions. In the process we also have to reinforce long and short term memory to drive off the various old age diseases. We're actually kind of lucky in that we only have to mess with part of the brain.", Sandra said with a weak smile.

The smile fell on emotionless faces so she quickly continued, "Taking a tour of the brain, the Frontal Lobe, right behind the forehead..."

"Yeah, we know our anatomy."

"Well, not everyone here is a brain specialist, Mark, so let's go over it just in case. Maybe it will trigger an idea that might help us. So, the Frontal Lobe involves knowing about our environment, judgements in our daily activities and our responses in terms of word choice, language and emotions. If this part is damaged we have difficulty or even an inability to plan a complex sequence. Such as making an egg sandwich on toast. You'd have to get out the egg, butter and toast, find the toaster, toast the bread, find a pan and the stove. Heat the stove, heat the pan, melt the butter, crack the egg into the pan, either leave it alone or scramble it, cook until it is done. Take the toast out of the toaster, put it on a plate, put the egg on the toast and put the other slice on top. Don't forget turning the stove off, putting the butter away and the pan in the sink to wash. Damage can also affect our interactions, persistence of a thought and cause changes to mood and personality. Social behavior can also be affected. Since alzheimer patients have difficulty with thought persistence and older people will forget simple things like turning the stove off when done cooking this is one part of the brain we will want to focus on. Altering mood and social behavior may also help with the criminal rehab aspect especially in tempering bad behavior urges."

"Next is the Parietal Lobe located near the top of the head and going towards the back. Visual and touch perception happen here along with voluntary movements and object manipulation. When injured you will see difficulty dealing with multiple objects at once along with reading, writing, drawing and math issues. Eye hand coordination also is affected. I don't see this having any relevance to Alzheimer's but possibly a way to boost IQ. Moving on we have the Occipital Lobes at the back of the head. This is primarily associated with vision itself and visual activities like colors, recognizing words, writing and such. Probably nothing useful here. Any questions or comments so far?"

"No, OK, on the side of the head above your ears are the Temporal Lobes. These are related to hearing and memory. Injuries here cause short and long term memory problems, difficulty with language, decreased sexual behavior and an increase in aggressive behavior. This is both good and bad as we can drop the sex drive of criminals but it may cause them to become more aggressive. All while also messing with their memory. If we enhance the memory to help with Alzheimer's, we run the risk of aggression and sexual irregularities."

"How about multiple drugs that would target each group instead of one super drug?", asked Mark.

"Let's put that down in our question column. It would potentially make this easier if we can attack it on different fronts. Moving on to the Brain Stem, or the connection from deep in the brain to the spinal column. This is mostly autonomous and regulates functions like heart beating, breathing, sleep and balance. Injuries here affect sleep, cause vertigo and can affect actions like swallowing to name an obvious one. Finally we get to the Cerebellum. This is at the base of the skull and handles voluntary movement, equilibrium and to a degree the reflexive response. When injured you lose the fine movement coordination, have difficulty grabbing objects and get tremors and vertigo. Like the Brain stem I don't see much application here to our task."

"So, The Frontal Lobe, Parietal Lobe and Temporal Lobes look to be the three main areas that we have to concentrate on. Let's spend the rest of the day brainstorming, no pun intended, how we might achieve

these goals."

Thom asked, "Since it normally takes a minimum of three years of lab rat research just to develop something to submit to then maybe get approval for very limited human trials how do we get to the human trial stage in 90 days?"

"We have priority access to the company Cray system which will simulate mouse, rat, canine and rhesus testing and do so at a greatly accelerated rate. In an hour you can simulate a year of treatment and all the interactions. OK, let's get started."

"... pill or injection..."

"... how about nasal spray to help speed past the blood/brain barrier?...."

"... how young should be allowed to take it... "

"... could we utilize a genetically modified virus as a delivery vector..."

"... we better get a big bonus if we pull this off..."

"... what level containment system should we use..."

"... anyone gonna order us lunch?"

The conversation drifted in and out of various methods, options, procedures, protocols, and just a general how might this work and continued not only through the day but well into the evening. Finally with a number of different hypotheses to test out the researchers broke for the evening all with a plan to start on the next morning.

Chapter 4

BANG BANG BANG

"Sweet. This Medusa is all you promised it would be. Now I just need a few more for spares and parts. See if you can find me at least 2 more.", directed Jim.

"Sure thing.", said Mike.

As they put their firearms away and checked out with the range officer they went to the lockers to get their jackets. It was convenient that this range was actually fairly close by, only a 30 minute drive, and offered memberships which entitled you to open shooting anytime you wanted and included a locker for keeping your fire arms at the range or at least a place to put your personal stuff. It also entitled you to 10% off on ammo purchases. While the range also sold firearms, and they knew that Mike did too, everyone was friendly and didn't really consider each other to be competitors. Mike would recommend his customers to the range and they didn't try to steal the customers away from Mike. They probably wouldn't have been able to anyway since Mike worked mainly with high end, high quality firearms and the occasional oddball like the Medusa while the range shop mostly stuck with the less expensive common items. One thing the range didn't know was that most of Mike's customers were actually acquired by word of mouth and most were also in the prepper community to varying degrees. Mike would go so far as to direct obvious non preppers to the range shop as they really could serve those customers better.

"Interested in grabbing a lunch with me? I also want to swing by Costco and pick up some more Thrive buckets after lunch. You're welcome to come with."

"I'll do lunch but then I got to get back to the shop. I've got another, er, um, like minded individual coming by for some suggestions. In fact you might want to stop by and talk with him."

"What about?"

Looking around to make sure no one would over hear, Mike said, "shelter building vs buying and the necessary accoutrements."

"Interesting. Henry's Hot Dogs OK for lunch?", seeing Mike nod, Jim

continued, "So what does this person have to say about...."

Karen called out, "Got another one", and started to reel it in. That made her third trout of the day. Combined with Andy's single catch they decided the 4 would make for a good dinner. Putting away their fly rods when they got back to their Traveler 5 tent, Andy took the fish off to the side to clean them and bury the guts while Karen started the fire in their fire pit. It looked like it might rain that night so while the fish were cooking they made sure everything was cleaned up and sheltered either in their tent or back in the Jeep.

After finishing up the fish and cleaning up their camp site they sat by the fire watching the lightning in the clouds way off in the distance. It would be at least an hour or two before the storms got close enough for them to consider seeking shelter.

"Andy", started Karen, "We've known each other, off and on, since childhood. The last few years have been really great. But..."

"What, Karen? What's wrong?"

"Nothing... it's... it... I just need to know that we're not just going to be complacent and content in our relationship. I need to know if it can grow to be anything more."

"Don't..."

"Don't what? Aren't you interested in..."

"STOP. Just be quiet for a minute.", snapped Andy.

Karen, not expecting this reaction, looked like she had just been slapped and stomped off into the brush. She quietly shed a few tears and decided that the relationship was over. Andy just isn't turning out to be what she had hoped he was. She thought she knew him but after his reaction, this was it. She'd go back and demand that they drive back home.

Drying her eyes and heading back to the fire she found Andy on one

knee.

"Karen, I'm sorry I didn't mean to snap. It's just that you caught me by surprise and I was the one hoping to initiate this conversation." Bringing his hand around from behind his back he held up a gorgeous yet still tastefully sized diamond set in a simple gold band. "Karen, will you do the honor of marrying me?"

Her previous thoughts of Andy and the situation completely forgotten but with fresh tears flowing, this time of joy, she exclaimed, "Yes, most definitely Yes!".

Switching off the Leno show, Laura turned to Ron, "Hun, what are we going to do with the kids? Ashley just won't listen to anything I tell her and Jason's grades have been slipping. I tried taking away their electronics but we want them to have their cell phones for emergencies. And since they can surf the web and text on them, not to mention playing games, taking the Xbox and laptops away really hasn't had any impact on them. What else can we do to make them understand that we're the parents and they need to listen?"

Looking up from his Wired magazine, Ron thought for a moment and then replied, "Maybe this is just a phase. You know how kids these days are. I don't want to push them away and if you punish them too severely they'll report it to their schools or the police and we don't want to go through that hassle."

"Yeah, but we're the parents. Linda says that Ashley's playing is actually sliding backwards and that the last few weeks she never even showed up for her lesson."

"Didn't you take her?"

"Well, yes, but I just dropped her and headed off to Starbucks for a coffee. I never watched to see if she actually went in."

"If she really doesn't want to play we shouldn't push her. She'll just end up resenting us. It's better if they think of us as a friend instead of demanding parents. Isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's what the magazines say."

".... hey..... you..... Hey!"

"Wwhh? Huh?", Roger woke up and rolled over to a blinding light in his eyes.

"You can't sleep here. The park is closed. Go find somewhere else you bum."

Roger eyes darted around and finally noticed the cuffs, handgun and radio on the belt and the second officer standing a few steps further back with a hand on the butt of his taser. At least I hope it's just his taser and not his Glock.

Wiping the sleep from his eyes Roger got to his feet, picked up the pack he was using as a pillow and started to shuffle off mumbling an apology.

I wonder who those cops were he thought. They must be new as he didn't recognize them and the regulars on the force usually cut him some slack. He had taken a citizens course at the police department a few years back where he found out all about what they actually do on a day to day basis (mostly paperwork) and he remembered that's where he knew they carried Glocks. The first time the police caught him sleeping on the bench in the park the guys that taught the class remembered him and asked how he ended up sleeping on the bench. After telling his story they basically gave him a nudge nudge wink wink pass to stay there as long as he wasn't a problem and cleared out before the early morning joggers saw him and complained. Being a naturally early riser he was fine with this arrangement.

Trudging off he went to find somewhere else grab a few more hours of sleep before morning.

Chapter 5

Agent Jameson took out his S&W M&P40 and made sure it was loaded and ready. He'd already done that 3 previous times in the past 10 minutes but he was a firm believer in having his equipment in top condition and always knowing what state his equipment was in. Was it ready for instant use? Would he need to click off the safety before using it?

He sat with the other FBI agents in the unmarked black Suburban with blacked out windows. One SUV like this going down the street would draw absolutely zero attention. However 5 in a row was unusual.

The people out that morning noticed them but without any markings they had no idea who was in there or what was happening. A few watchers of that old show, 24, thought FBI or at least some government agency but most people assumed it was a celebrity with their posse or some other harmless group.

Pulling into the parking lot and driving straight to the front door of Pharmalogicaltek 3 of the SUVs disgorged 15 agents who immediately started into the lobby.

The other 2 units had gone around to the "back" door. Really more of a small shipping/receiving area where a few trucks could unload deliveries. Being the HQ and R&D facility there was not a lot of shipments. That was all done at separate manufacturing facilities.

As the agents burst into the lobby, they pointed their weapons at the security and reception staff stating they had a warrant and that they were to step away from the desks with their hands held nice and high.

Daniel's information on the blackmail attempt and his continued cooperation had helped the agency develop a substantial case against Dr. Soo-Long, the Chairman of Pharmalogicaltek. When approached with the case and current evidence most of the remaining board members agreed to also turn into government witnesses and the FBI had their case. Now they also had their warrants and just needed their

suspect.

Leaving 2 agents to secure the lobby and 2 more to secure the elevators the remaining 11 headed up the stairs to the top floor. Thankfully the building only had 6 stories. Upon arriving at the top they cracked the door and snaked a mini camera through. Checking the hallway showed no activity and the Chairman's personal assistant, Shonda, seated at her station outside the Chairman's office.

Calling her work area a station might imply generic office cubicle furniture however this implication would be wrong. While she didn't actually have an office, her desk and suite of furniture was all top grade, in impeccable condition and is better than most CEO's have. Chairman Soo-Long wanted visitors to his office to know that his assistant was better off than they were. Anything he could do to put visitors off their game would give him an edge in a meeting.

One last check and the senior agent gave the final go ahead. The opened the door and swarmed into the hallway. Within seconds they had Shonda in custody and were preparing to get Chairman Soo-Long. It was then they noticed a smirk on Shonda's face. Agent Jameson called attention to this and they shortly discovered the foot pedal under the desk. The cable on the pedal simply led off into the floor and not over to the computer like all the other cables did.

"Damn, the bitch notified him of us. Go, Go, Go!"

Literally smashing in the door to the office they tossed in a flash-bang grenade just in case the primary suspect had armed himself. Immediately upon detonation they entered the room using well practiced room quartering and clearing techniques. The chairman, not surprisingly, was no where to be found.

"Air Support, come in!", barked the senior officer into his mic.

"This is your eye in the sky, over."

"Suspect has escaped, repeat, suspect is NOT in custody. Continue observation and watch for anyone fleeing."

"Roger. FLIR on, active monitoring in progress. Even if he's hiding in the shrubs we'll spot him."

The agent holding Shonda, upon hearing of the escape, said to her, "The judge will give you an extra 15 years for obstructing a federal investigation." At which Shonda lost the smirk and most of her color too. "I guess you didn't think through your loyalties. Let's go.". The agent and his partner started for the stairs radioing the agents in the lobby to expect them.

The nine agents left started to go over the office when one of them noticed something not right about a section of the wood paneled wall. Pushing his gloved hand against it opened right up to a stairway. "I'll be damned. He must have gone out through here and it didn't quite close and latch as he went through it.", said the agent.

Sam Catino, the Agent in charge pointed at two other agents, "Ben, Ramirez, secure this office, the rest of you let's go. He can't be that far ahead, we may still be able to catch him. If not we'll lock down the entire facility and tear it apart until we find him. The boys in the chopper saw him enter the building 30 minutes ago. He's got to be here somewhere."

Heading down the stairs they went a lot more than 6 stories down. Probably closer to 10 or 11.

"What the hell, we have to be well below ground level yet the prints on file only showed a basement level underground and nothing more.", stated Sam as the agents reached the bottom and another door. A quick test showed it unlocked. Again a camera was snaked through to check out the other side first. Seeing another empty hallway they opened the door and continued on.

The hallway ran for about 10 meters and then turned. A quick camera check and they proceeded around the corner. Along this 30 meter hallway they found many doors, all unlocked, and checking each room found mostly lab equipment, some apparently recently used and other equipment under protective plastic with a light layer of dust. Obviously older unused equipment. The last door they came to was different than the others. Instead of a plain door, this one had a key

code and biometric lock. The frame was quite substantial compared to the other ones.

Above the door was a red glowing light. A quick test showed the door was indeed locked.

Pounding on it they demanded that the door be opened. Voice, greatly muffled, basically refused. "Break it down", stated Sam.

A couple of agents at the back rushed forward with a portable ram and took their positions. "1... 2... 3....", they counted as they started swinging the ram. After the third swing they gave an extra hard swing into the door right over the handle. Surprising them all the door held. "Again", commanded Sam.

Just as they started the count the muffled voices raised in an almost panicked state pleading with them to stop. The agents could only hear muffled words here and there. "Stop.... danger.... you'll be sorry..... virus..... ", however by now the agents had finished the count and warm up and went ahead with the full swing. CRASH! as the door this time did shatter inwards.

Again a flash/bang proceeded the agents into the room as the seven of them swarmed into the room. "DOWN ON THE FLOOR! GET DOWN!"

In all of the noise and confusion no one noticed a tray of sealed test tubes get bumped right to the edge of the counter. It teetered for a moment and then stopped.

The agents by now had subdued the half dozen individuals in the room and first realized they all had on tyvek type suits with masks. Each was now laying face down with their hands bound behind them by temporary plastic cuffs.

"Uh, Catino, Sir, if they're dressed like this should we be in here?"

"Get them on their feet and out into the hallway. Is Dr. Soo-Long among them?"

Being bound the lab workers needed assistance in getting to their

feet. The agents more or less jerked each one up. While Mark was being pulled to his feet he almost lost his balance. The agent, Fox Mullens, yes his name really is Fox as his parents were fans of X-Files when Fox was born and named, thinking Mark was trying to attack him stepped back drawing his weapon again. In the process he ever so slightly bumped the counter and the minute vibration was enough for the teetering test tube tray to tumble off. Upon hitting the ground they, of course, shattered.

The look on Mark's face was one of pure horror. He started screaming "Containment Breach! Containment Breach! We must initiate sanitation procedure Alpha-39." Of course, with the mask on this was still muffled and only partially coherent to the agents.

"Yeah, file a complaint with the judge.", said agent Fox assuming the suspect was just complaining about some broken glass.

By now all the other prisoners had started to freak out and breaking away from the agents all tried, clumsily in their containment suits, to head for another door in the room.

"Stop them!", yelled Sam as the agents were already scrambling to grab the prisoners once more.

Only those entering the room needed access codes, or a battering ram, those on the inside could leave the room simply by turning the knob. Sam directed 3 more agents, including Fox, to continue on through that door while the remaining 4 would take the prisoners back the way they came. More or less dragging and herding them they finally got them out to the hallway. Once more Mark tried to make a break for it but this time the agent nearest to him made a quick grab to stop him. In doing so he managed to pull off his head gear and mask.

Looking like even more of raving lunatic now, and clearly heard by the agents Mark started incoherently screaming about death and dying and brains and blood.

"Get those masks and suits off, search them and then get them out of here."

Fox and the other two agents went through the door into a glass hallway with numerous vents in the ceiling, grates in the floor and nozzles of all types hanging from coiled hoses. "I don't like this.", stated Fox.

"Yeah, what the heck were they doing down here? I better not get a STD or something from those tubes you broke."

"Hey, wasn't my fault the guy was lurching around. I just hope I didn't step in it. Some of that crap looked like blood too."

Continuing through another door into a normal looking hallway the only thing they found was another stairway up.

Spending the entire morning searching every room of every floor they finally decided that some how the Dr. had escaped from them. Sam issued orders for his image to be supplied to all area airports and train stations and called in the evidence teams. The agents gathered together in the lobby for a debriefing. At one point Fox noticed his shoe was untied. He reached down to tie it and thought it strange that one of the laces felt moist.

As the field debriefing was wrapping up another agent was walking around with a box of sandwiches and everyone eagerly grabbed one and proceeded to eat.

Chapter 6

Roger knew of a construction site for some new town homes and thought that with the recession perhaps construction would have stopped and he could find a place to hole up. Sure enough the heavy machinery all had a noticeable layer of dust on them, outside of the normal grunge and grime, and there were no footprints anywhere to be found. Since it had rained a few days ago it means no one was here for at least that long, he thought. Finding a complex that, while not completed, was mostly sealed up Roger hit pay dirt. This one actually had power and someone left an extension cord running from the

temporary breaker panel into the building. Roger would be able to charge up the one possession he had of any value, his net book.

Making himself comfortable on the floor he took out a partially filled water bottle and the styrofoam container of leftovers he scrounged from the trash and started to eat while his notebook started up. He really couldn't believe his luck... one of the houses in the nearby subdivision had an unsecured WIFI connection that he was picking up. The signal was weak and the speed not that great but it was at least a signal. After eating he could try moving around and see if he could get a better signal from the second floor.

"Ma, I'm going out.", said Jason.

"Where?"

"A party."

"On a school night? No."

"You Can't Stop Me.", yelled Jason as he slammed the door and took off into the night.

"Oh this one is nice!", exclaimed Karen to the other women at the table.

A chorus of Ooohs and Aaahs followed.

It was ladies night out and with Karen's engagement her friends, essentially the same that would be in her bridal party, were all pouring over the wedding magazines ogling the gowns, dresses, cakes and all things wedding.

Click. OK, that's another possibility thought Jim. He was going through various off road and 4x4 and similar web sites looking for newer BOV, Bug Out Vehicle, ideas. He knew it would have to be a pickup, 4x4, and a crew cab. His existing one, as nice as it was, had no protection

from EMP. The big decision was going with an older until from the 60's or 70's that would hopefully be EMP proof but lack some of the more current amenities or spend a bunch on his existing truck to shield everything to make it EMP proof or just have spare computer parts locked in a small faraday cage in the truck. He found another one with a whole write up of everything the enthusiast had done to it and sent the link to Mike for his comments.

Chapter 7

Agent Fox got home late after completing what felt like reams of paperwork. His wife was already sleeping so he cleaned up in the downstairs bathroom before going up to bed.

Diane woke in the middle of the night and noticed Fox had come home. She also saw he was shivering. Putting her hand on his forehead it was sweaty. He must have come down with something. Poor thing.

By morning Fox had not gotten better and in fact was even worse. Diane took his temperature and when she saw 105 she knew it couldn't be good. Calling work to tell them she'd be late or not in at all she got Fox out to the car and drove to the emergency room.

They checked him in and started with his temperature.. 106... Quickly he was rushed "to the back" and put in an ice bath. For 3 days he was in and out of consciousness. His symptoms, besides the high fever were very flu like. Coughing, sneezing, achey. Tests for all the common and even unknown came up negative. No WNV. No H1N1. No H5N1. Ditto on CMV, human Parvo, Lymes and a whole host of other possibilities.

On the morning of the fourth day the nurse went in to check on him. Entering the room she noticed an obvious bulge in the sheets. Thinking back to her ex she figured it was "morning wood" to use that euphemism. Being a professional she ignored it and proceeded to check the monitors. Everything was in order and it looked like Mr

Mullens was coming out of whatever he had been fighting as his temperature was down to 101. She checked a few other vitals and everything else looked good. Just as she was finishing his eyes flashed open. She caught the movement in her peripheral vision and turned to look. His facial expression was a mix between the most disgusting leer she had ever seen and pure lust.

Thinking it best to get the doctor she tried to turn away but Fox grabbed her arm. As he jumped out of bed and started ripping at her clothes she screamed for help.

"I'm sorry miss, I know this is difficult but I need to know what happened."

"I.... i... i... I don't really know. I was checking his vitals one moment, he'd been out of it ever since admitting, and then next thing I know he's trying to tear my clothes off. He had an erection this morning when I went in the room, I saw the bulge under the blanket, but I assumed it was just ... you know... guys get that in the morning sometimes before they wake up."

"OK, so he attacked you. Then what?"

"Well, officer Berg, he was ripping my shirt and I think he had his hand in my pants when I started screaming and hitting him. It all happened so fast. One moment he was laying there the next thing I know I thought I was about to be raped....", as the nurse broke down into sobs.

"Again, I am sorry. I just want to get your statement and then one of our counselor is outside to talk with you.", said officer Jenny Berg.

"Sniff.... blow..... Yes. well as I said I started screaming. Thankfully it seems that everyone came running. They wrestled him off me and back to the bed where we strapped him down. He's been there ever since."

"Ok, thank you. I'm going to step out now and send our counselor in if

that's OK."

"Yes, please. Thank you."

Jenny stepped into the hallway and waved the counselor in. Her partner, Joe Madsen came over and they compared notes.

"So they say this guy just came in..."

"No his wife brought him in."

"Oh, where is she?"

"Two rooms over. She came down with the same bad flu he did the following day."

"I guess we won't be talking to her for awhile then."

"So he was admitted with a bad flu. Then, 4 days later, wakes up and tries to rape a nurse."

"What's his job? "

"FBI right out of college. Been with the agency 5 years now."

"Something doesn't add up. Have you tried talking to him?"

"Yeah, but he talks like Tarzan from those old moves. Stuff like 'Me want food' and 'Hot, too hot'. Although when another nurse came in he got a very crude look on his face. "

"That pretty much matches the statements I got. The poor nurse said he just went from out cold to attacking her with no warning."

"Once he's stabilized they can transport him to the jail hospital at county and he'll be their problem then."

"I'd still like to talk to the wife. I'll let them know to keep an eye on her and call me when she wakes up."

Beep boo Beep. Beep boo Beep. "Officer Berg here.", "She has.", "I see. OK, I'll be right over."

"Who was that?"

"The hospital. The wife..., uh, Diane, woke up."

"Good you can interview her."

"No, yeah. They said she's very incoherent too, but more concerning they say that those who have been treating her have fallen ill with the same symptoms. They're now quarantining the entire floor and want me, well actually us, to go straight there with no contact with anyone else in case we too are infected."

"You gotta be shittin me. How long? My kids playing in tonight's game."

"They didn't say."

"Well before we go anywhere I gotta take a leak."

Joe proceeded to the bathroom coughing into his hand briefly before grasping the door handle, and then zipping up and leaving without washing his hands. Back at the table officers Joe and Jenny finished their Panera sandwiches and headed out for the hospital.

Jake Goldstein also finished his sandwich and headed to the bathroom. He had to hurry as his London flight was 3 hours away and he still had to fight traffic getting to the airport.

Chapter 8

Leaning back in his leather executive chair the head of the CDC rubbed his face, sighed and said to the hastily assembled group in front of him. "What do we know about this?"

"Well, it appears to have started in LA, at least that's the earliest case. So far there are confirmed reports in New York, Seattle, Chicago, Maimi, Dallas and Denver. Also London, Beijing, Frankfort, Paris, Rome and Moscow. Unconfirmed in at least another 50 cities and 30 countries. It starts the same way. Flu symptoms with high fever, pretty much out of it for 1-3 days and then an apparent recovery however the affected are reported to be communicating like neanderthals, highly sexually aggressive and also food aggressive. The good thing is that they can't figure out something as simple as a belt. If they are chained up only one was reported able to undo the buckle the rest appear confused by it."

"Do we have a patient zero?"

Another staff member took a step forward, "Yes, well we have two. Either Fox or Diane."

"The Mullens?"

"Yes."

"So what's their background?"

"Diane's a grade school teacher. So far no outbreaks in anyone at her school. Fox is more difficult. We have finally found out he is FBI and which office he is with however no one at that office is returning our calls. All we get are recordings. I've called the local police to pay them a visit."

Officer Matt Bartowski turned off his patrol car and radioed in, "Unit 3, at FBI branch on Seward St. I'll be away from my vehicle while I investigate."

Matt got out and headed for the door. It was a 4 story building and the FBI had all of the upper 2 floors. The remaining floors were mostly small businesses. Accountants, lawyers being the majority with a Deli and a FedEx counter taking up the front of the ground floor. He got a few stares from people in the Deli but nothing that officers in uniform

didn't routinely get. He got on the elevator and punched the 3rd floor button. As the doors opened he exited the car and noticed no one at the desk in the lobby. He cased the space while waiting. By his count at least 4 cameras were there with at least 2 having him on film, or digital or whatever they call it now, at all times.

He waited around for about 5 minutes and then decided to go knock on the door leading to the rest of the offices and see if he could get someone's attention. His hand was raised and he was about to knock when he heard a moan from behind the door. It didn't sound like a moan of pain either. Well, I've got a job to do, thought Matt as he raised his hand again and knocked. Nothing. He knocked louder and said "Police". Another moan, even louder this time but no other response.

Matt radioed back to the office. "Sergeant, I've got a problem...."

He described the situation and asked if he had permission to break down a door to the FBI office. In the interest of human safety he was given the go ahead and he was advised that 3 additional units were en route to his location.

Matt pulled his sidearm out, reared back and kicked the door in.

An overwhelming stench immediately wafted over him. Upon entering the first thing he saw was some people wearing nuclear suits or were those hazmat suits? Whatever. They were on the ground with their hands bound behind them, obviously dead while two individuals beat on them. Two other piles of gore led Matt to believe that those used to be more bound individuals. Turning his head he saw what could best be described as an orgy with at least 20 people in it. Hearing the moan again he turned his head the other way and sitting right behind the door was yet another person with a pile of food wrappers around him and what appeared to be part of human arm in his hands. He raised it up and took a bite out of it and then moaned again as he started chewing. It was the moan you'd make when eating something very delicious. Yet this was a... a.

"BBllllleeecccchhhhhh!!!!" as Matt puked his guts all over. This finally did get noticed by the "people" in the office. The two that were

beating the dead bodies turned towards Matt and started gesturing. Matt didn't wait around. He ran back to the elevators. Thankfully the car was still sitting on 3 so when he hit the call button the doors opened immediately. He dashed in as they, whatever they were, came through the remains of the kicked in door. Matt punched the door close and lobby buttons until he thought his finger would fall off. The two came towards him and the doors still hadn't closed yet. Matt realizing his gun was still in his other hand pointed it and staid "Stop! Get down!"

Both things continued towards Matt. He shot one in the torso. It flinched and then came towards him again. He adjusted his aim for the head and that put one of them down. Just as the second one got to the elevator the doors tried to close. His arm was blocking them and they opened again. Upon doing so he seemed bewildered and lost. Then he noticed Matt and got his focus back. Matt also shot this one in the head and it too dropped, thankfully backwards allowing the door to close. Matt collapsed in the back of the elevator as it started to drop and wiped his arm across his brow. It came away bloody. He started to panic when he realized it was just blood splashed from the second... thing.

Chapter 9

"I've got to brief the President. Do we have anything else?"

"Well, as you know we traced this back to FBI Agent Fox and the raid he participated in at Pharmalogicaltek. Unfortunately everyone in that lab along with all the agents were involved in that incident at the FBI branch office. Seems that most of the police force is now infected too and the rest refuse to report to work."

"Continue."

"We pulled the hard drives and have analyzed the work that was done at Pharmalogicaltek .The analysts say the encryption was difficult to break but in the end they did get access. Seems they were trying to

make a triple action drug that would enhance IQ, reduce aggression in undesirables and stop Alzheimer's. They figured that since all 3 were affected by the same parts of the brain that something that could stimulate those parts of the brain in just the right way could tackle all three issues at once. From the broken vials on the floor we think that someone knocked over the test candidates, of which at least one was highly contagious. Basically any bodily fluid, sneeze, cough, blood, semen, spit, even sweat is enough to transmit if you get it on you. We don't know the life-cycle outside of the body yet."

"Is that all?"

"No. From the reports, symptoms and what we pulled off their systems we think the broken vials contained sample #28. This was an attempt to actually do the opposite. They figured if they could diminish memorization and enhance aggressive and compulsive behaviors that they could then know they were effecting the correct part of the brain, then just figure out the 'opposite' drug to introduce to 'fix' these problems. I believe they were quite successful in finding the right spot, unfortunately the undesired traits have now been amplified, although perhaps enhanced is the right word, and it's spreading."

"How can we tell who is infected?"

"Anyone exhibiting flu like symptoms is suspected although a high fever, 105+ is a pretty definite sign. Obviously once they've 'recovered' the actions are a more telling sign. Infection is near 99% to those exposed and in excess of 95% of those exposed become zombies."

"What did you say?"

"You mean the symptoms or the infection rate?"

"No, the term, Zombie."

"Oh, that's what we've taken to calling the infected."

"These are people. This isn't some science fiction movie, it's real life. Show some respect."

"Sorry. I'll let the rest know to cease using our nickname. How about just calling them 'infected'?"

"For now, that's fine, get with PR and have them provide a media friendly name for this."

"OK. Finally, the zom..., uh, infected, regardless of staying that way or recovering seem to maintain a 101 degree temperate instead of the normal 98.6. These people are just like you and me. There is no adrenaline fueled super strength or heightened senses. It just seems like they got really dumb and are driven more by base urges. We've seen primarily food, violence and sex although some have exhibited signs of extreme hoarding, OCD to the nth degree and other rare driving urges."

"OCD? Like what?"

"Well, one subject has been washing his hands non stop to the point of getting them to a bloody mangled mess with the flesh washed right from the bones from their constant rubbing, We've also seen some more advanced behavior in the OCDs. They can string together long processes, perhaps because those are so ingrained from doing it so often or perhaps it's just a part of the OCD they had before becoming infected."

"So they don't feel any pain?"

"No, that's the strange part. They do feel pain but the urges seem to over ride it. For example some of the violent ones if struck back will flinch and retreat a bit but then seem to overcome the unpleasantness of the pain and try attacking again. If you strike them again there is less of a reaction almost as if they are acquiring a tolerance to it. The reports from that officer involved in the FBI building incident, at least before he showed signs, was that a gun shot to the torso slowed them down but then they recovered and continued. He had not hit the heart, at least he didn't remember hitting it. He said his follow up shots were to the head and that dropped them just like any normal human."

"We can't just go around shooting US citizens because they have cold symptoms. Is there any progress on the vaccine?"

"We've started and the data from the hard drives will be an immense help however there are already signs that the infection has started to mutate. We might be chasing a never ending target. They used the standard GMO vaccine practices so we can use the same method when we finally do have something. Interestingly enough the few that have been infected but showed no symptoms have a 101 temperature but don't seem to be carriers. Also the few that have been infected gone through all the flu symptoms but seem to have fully recovered without any abnormal behaviors also have a 101 temperature. It seems regardless of outcome, once you were infected you can't be reinfected. We're not sure if it's an immune reaction or something else preventing reinfection."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's as close to an executive summary as I can give you. I'm sure you already know that if this isn't contained it will be life altering for the human race or at least what is left of it when this is done."

"My video conference with the president starts shortly and I need to prepare. Thank you, that will be all for now."

"My fellow Americans"

Has any presidential address in the memory of those alive ever started this way and not end up being followed by hype, misdirection and outright lies?

"We face a new epidemic, perhaps even a pandemic, and now is the time for all of us to pull together and support each other. Doctors are telling me that, while serious, this is not life threatening. The advice is to get your flu shot as soon as possible and then simply stay home for a few days, maybe a week, and let this flu pass."

"Now is not the time to be fearful but to instead help your fellow man. For example, share what you have with your neighbors so they don't

have to go to out for a few days and this virus will die out on its own."

The president rambled on about pulling together and how we'd all beat this. He finally wrapped up.

"I am turning this briefing over to the head of FEMA who will provide additional details. Thank you and good night."

"Jim?, yeah this is Mike. Did you see that presidential address earlier?", "Yeah me too. I was following a number of survivalist sites and some of the prepper forums. The buzz out there is that this is complete government lock down on the real story. The reports are saying that if you get this you turn into a zombie.", "Most definitely I wouldn't want to live like that... but get this. One of my contacts in DC said that right after the address he got on his helicopter with the entire family and took off for the airport. Almost immediately 2 more choppers zoomed in and it looked like all the senior staff got on those and they headed for the airport too.", "Yeah, there is nothing publicly listed. If I didn't know better I'd s... wait... hang on a sec..."

"OK, yeah, I've got my ham going in the background. They're definitely bugging out. Air Force One just took off and headed west. Reports from the capital are saying that a lot of limos are leaving the area too. All headed west on 66. Probably to the Greenbriar.", "Yeah that's what I was thinking too. Should we activate the PEN?", "Yeah, me too. OK. Good luck."

Mike hung up the phone and started sending emails to a half dozen preppers on his Prepper Emergency Network list. Shortly afterwards Jim got the message and in turned forwarded it to the half dozen on his list. Within a few minutes similar notices started coming in to both Mike and Jim's inbox from others. Mike was quite happy that the prepper community decided to create this mesh style network where any member could initiate a emergency notice as long as they had credible solid evidence. The tin foil conspiratorists and trouble makers were weeded out early on. Some of the other PEN announcements coming in provided more first hand accounts of the illness from all across the world. The PEN was country agnostic. Much of the information, including some from a few CDC insiders pretty much

allowed the prepper and survivalist communities to piece together just about the whole story.

Many bug out notices went out. MAGs quickly informed their members and started to prepare for how they would survive in what was quickly going to become a new world.

"Welcome aboard Air Force One Mr. President.", with a salute and then a nod of his head to the first lady, "Please take your seats we'll be departing in just a few moments for Cheyenne. They are already on lock down with all environmental and filter systems fully online and are expecting our arrival shortly. As we were landing I also received word that the vice president is already secured in the Greenbrier and congress is on the way.". The marine turned back to the door to close it hoping the pilot would turn on the air conditioning as he felt quite warm.

Chapter 10

Roger was holed up in the unfinished town home and had no plans to leave anytime soon. While his WIFI was still up he saw an increasing number of reports of some new flu going around. Then just last week outside the local convenience store some guy was going around pretty much trying to hump anyone in the area. A number of guys hit him pretty hard, some drawing blood, but it didn't seem to do much more than momentarily give him pause. That same night Roger did some more surfing and found out that this flu thing was actually much worse than authorities were letting on and highly contagious. In fact each of the guys that punched the weirdo are probably now infected themselves. The next morning Roger went out and spent every last penny he had on him for food and water and hastily retreated back to his make shift home.

It sounded like the flu thing was getting even worse, at least it did three days ago when his WIFI stopped working. Doesn't really matter as 3 hours later the surrounding homes went dark and if not for the

battery on his net book his laptop would have gone off too. Wanting to conserve his battery and figuring a glowing screen in a dark neighborhood is not a good idea he quickly shut it down.

In the last few days Roger kept a lookout from the second floor window openings and saw a few fights that didn't end when one of them went down, but more disturbing were the sounds he heard... no, Roger didn't think he'd get those sounds and occasional pleas for help out of his head for a long time, if ever. On the lighter sided, one guy was also mowing his lawn... at least he kept walking back and forth with his mower although it wasn't running. After nearly 2 days straight he had trampled the grass down to worn mud paths yet he kept trying to mow.

Taking stock of his supplies Roger figured he could hole up for at least another month, maybe two, and hopefully avoiding catching the virus. What he didn't know was that he was already safe. He was the one percent that didn't get infected. Had he taken his temperature he would have seen the 101 reading but even then he wouldn't have realized the significance of it.

"KCF9MKE calling KKL9OOHJ."

"KKL9OOHJ here. Go ahead."

"Jim, it's..... me.... mike..... "

"Mike, you sound horrible, are you OK?"

".....(slow intake of breath)..... no..... it got me."

"Who got you? Have you been shot? Where are you?"

".....no..... it's the flu..... thing..... I'm..... I'.... about topass out..... Don't th....."

"Mike, you still there?"

"....th think I'm.... I'n..... I can..... make.... it....."

"No, Mike I can come treat you..."

"NO.....(heavy breathing)..... tooo dangerous..... if you....
.don't..... hear from me..... within.....2weeks..... take
my....."

"Mike?"

"..... stuff..... you know..... where..... I.....
have..... it..... the code..... is....."

"Mike? You there? Come on buddy stay with me!"

Nothing. After 5 minutes of silence Jim was about to turn off the system when he heard another faint transmission.

"Yeah, he said KCF9MKE.... I found it in my database, yep. I got the guys address. Let's go get his stuff. "

"What about the code?"

"Don't need it. I got my universal key... my Mossberg... right here. Hahaha"

"Did you get the other one? Yeah, KKL900JH.... but I can't find it in the database."

"Doesn't matter we'll get that Mike guy to tell us. I'll meet you in an hour at the usual place. Bring the address."

Jim realized it was a couple of looters looking to capitalize on the fact that they stuck to the FCC rules and used their real call signs. Thankfully they transposed a few letters in mine, Jim thought, but he also realized it would be just a matter of time until they tried looking up variations and found his real data. He wasn't worried, however, as he had a PO box listed. Mike, on the other hand had his house listed but he also kept almost nothing there. Just about all his supplies were stored in other locations including that storage place. It was probably the combo lock code that Mike was trying to give me before.... Well,

knowing Mike I'm sure he's got a few surprises in store for the looters... surprises that will still work even if he doesn't anymore.

"Karen, I'm really worried. I saw some people that looked like they were infected and it's just a matter of time until one of us is in the wrong place and gets infected ourselves. Now that we're engaged I can't, won't, lose you. After the president's address last night both of our offices said we need to take a mandatory unpaid week off and we can use vacation to take an optional second week. Let's take the camping gear and head off to the woods away from everyone for a week or two and let this run its course. What do you think?"

"Agreed. If you want to start loading our stuff I'll gather up our freeze dried foods. We should probably take as much as we can just in case we need it."

"OK. :kiss: I love you."

"I love you too."

Laura knocked on Ashley's door. No answer.

Knocking again, "Ashley, open this door or I'm coming in."

Nothing.

Laura opened the door and found an empty room. A cold empty room. The window was open a few inches.

"Ron, she's gone out again.", called Laura.

Ron came up the stairs and found Laura in Ashley's room. "Doesn't she know she shouldn't be out there? The president said to stay home. Should I go after her?"

"Go where? If we knew where she was, perhaps, but she could have gone almost anywhere."

"She'll be back. She's probably just out partying with her friends. You know how stressful this is on her and Jason. With the school closing they have nothing to do. They can't even text with each other as the cell phones aren't working and with the power going on and off Jason's Xbox 360 got fried. If any of the stores were open I'd go out and get him another one. Poor kid."

"You're right. I'm going to go down stairs and read. At least I got a Cosmo that I haven't flipped through yet."

A few hours later a loud and frantic pounding and yelling woke Laura and Ron. They had fallen asleep on the couch. Laura recognized the yelling as Ashley's voice and that it was coming from the front door. They ran to it and opened the door as Ashley stumbled into them.

"Help! These guys have been chasing me!", Ashley yelled.

Looking out the door Ron could see three guys in their late teens, or maybe early 20's. Well, that doesn't matter they're trying to hurt my baby. He went to shut the door but one of them got an arm through and they all started pushing. Ron wasn't going to be able to hold it.

Ashley and Laura backed up and started screaming.

Ron slipped and the door crashed open.

Flying over the couch came Jason with a Louisville slugger. He proceeded to give each one a good shot. The one that got a head shot was down. The other two, despite having broken ribs from the shot, started to straighten up and advance on Ashley again.

By now Ron had recovered and started grappling with one of the other sweaty guys while Jason lined up for a head shot on the last one.

Another swing, crack, another one down.

Ron managed to push the third one back towards the door where a final head shot from Jason put him down.

It took awhile until they all settled down enough to call the police.

No answer.

"Jason, help me drag these bodies out of here. Maybe when they wake up they'll think better than trying this again.", said Ron as he got up from the ground and started grabbing one of the attackers.

It took some pulling and dragging but the finally got all three out on the lawn. Given the blood that one of them trailed from his head they didn't think he was alive.

Laura accused Jason, "You killed that guy! How could you do such a thing?!?!?"

"Mom, he was trying to hurt Ashley."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to kill him."

"What I was supposed to let him just come in instead?", shouted Jason.

"Some thanks. God, I hate this place, I hate you!", yelled Jason at his mom as he stomped upstairs followed shortly by the sound of his bedroom door slamming.

Acting as if nothing had happened Ron said, "I'm going to wash up and head to bed. Good night."

Laura and Ashley just held each other for awhile and finally Ashley said, "I'm sorry Mom, I shouldn't have gone out."

"That's OK. You should go to bed and get some rest."

On the way to her room Ashley softly knocked on Jason's door.

"WHAT?"

She cracked the door and poked her head in. "Jace... I just wanted to say... well, you know... thanks. "

He looked up, "Yeah, um, sure. Ok."

She closed the door and went off to bed.

The next morning Jason and Ron were both sick. By the end of the day, Ashley and Laura were sick too.

Chapter 11

BLAM! Cha chunk. BLAM! Cha chunk. Click.

"Crap."

Bang! - - - Bang! - - - Bang Bang! Footsteps. Bang!

Three less zombies, thought Autumn Dawn. A city girl, savvy to the streets, but also having spent many summers on her grandparent's farm, she knew how to take care of herself in both an urban and a wilderness setting. Her grandpa had taught her to use, but unlike the city gang bangers, still respect, firearms. Strictly speaking she should not have the 870 nor the Glock on her as it was illegal to open carry and you can't really conceal an 870 for that matter, however since the zombies came out a few weeks ago all the old rules seem to no longer apply. Only those who can take care of themselves or perhaps band together in groups will survive. Autumn was not ready for, or had not found, a group yet. Well, there was that one family, well actually just a couple of kids now I guess with their parents dead you can't call them a family anymore, but they weren't what you'd call competent. They'd simply be a drain on any group.

Autumn saw a nearby alley and ducked down it. Taking cover behind a dumpster and other garbage she proceeded to reload her shotgun and top off and reinsert the magazine into her Glock. With her defense needs met she took a few more minutes to down a Cliff bar and rehydrate a bit from one of her water bottles. She noticed that her supply was getting low. She'd either have to find a working tap or scavenge up some more bottles.

Ashley woke up to a horrible smell. It didn't take her long to realize the smell was her, and her sheets. She opened her door and yelled out, "Mom, I'm feeling better and my bed needs changing." With that taken care of she went to the bathroom to clean up. Flicking the light switch she noticed no light. Power must be out.

"Aaaaaaiiiieeee!", she exclaimed as she discovered that without power there is no hot water. Better make this quick. She quickly started to clean off and had a head full of shampoo when the water started trickling down to almost nothing. For the next 10 minutes she stood under the tiniest of trickles finally getting the rest of the shampoo out. Next up was conditioner. At this point the water just quit coming out altogether. "Damn."

She got out, put on her robe and yelled out the door, "Dad, the water isn't running."

No answer.

"DAD!"

Nothing

"MOM!"

Nothing

Finally she got fed up with yelling and went to look for them. The cars were in the driveway, of course the garage was too filled with "stuff" for the cars to actually fit in there. While looking in the kitchen she noticed the case of bottled water. Deciding she was smart enough to solve her own problem she lugged the entire case up to the bathroom and proceeded to finish cleaning up emptying all of the bottles in the process.

Finally feeling clean she got dressed. What the heck... my bed still stinks. Heading out of her room she started yelling again. "MOM! MY BED NEEDS CHANGING NOW!"

Still getting no response she went out to the yard thinking maybe they were outside. No one. Back inside she went room by room looking for them. All she had left was Jason's room and her parents room. She checked their room and found both of them. The smell was even worse than her room.

"Eeewww. You guys stink. I'm hungry. Mom, are you going to get up and make me breakfast?"

"MOM!"

"Don't bother. They're not getting up."

Ashley jumped, whirled around and saw Jason standing in the doorway.

"Don't scare me like that you jerk! Why aren't they getting up?"

"They're dead."

"What? OMG! No. Really? NO. OMG! OMG! OMG!"

She continued to freak out while Jason just stood there. Finally she went over to the bed and looked closely at them. She then noticed the blood soaked sheets under them and saw the bloody bat on the floor. Running to Jason she started screaming at him. "WHAT HAPPENED? DID YOU DO THAT? DID YOU KILL THEM?? YOU MONSTER!?!?". Ashley proceeded to slap him. He just stood there. She slapped him again. And again. And again. And... Jason grabbed her arm.

"Stop that or I'll have to do the same to you."

"What do you mean? "

"If you're a zombie I'm going to have to kill you too just like....", a single tear rolled down his face.

"Zombie? Mom? Dad? How? What?"

"Those guys from last week..."

"You mean yesterday?"

"No, last week. I've been up for 3 days now and I don't know how long I was out of it before then. Anyway those guys, whatever they had, they weren't human. Well, they were human but they weren't normal or I don't know. They just were acting like an animal or something. When dad and I dragged them out we must have got what they had and somehow you and mom did too. When I woke up I found all three of you really sick. I got each of you to drink a little but that's it. That evening dad came out of it but he had that same almost vacant stare in his eyes. He turned to mom and started beating her in her sleep. I tried to stop him but he just attacked me. I managed to get out of the room and he went right back to beating her. That's when I whacked him in the head with the bat and he fell back on the bed."

"Did mom get strange too?"

"I don't know. She never woke up. I checked her after I stopped dad and she was pretty beat up but still alive. Later I checked and she had really bad bruises all over her sides. I think he broke a bunch of ribs. Sometime that night I think she just died as she was cold the next morning when I checked."

Ashley had tears pouring down her face. "Sniff.. wh... what are we going to do? I just turned 15 and you're 17. We've never been alone before."

"I don't know. We've still got some food and water in the kitchen so that should last us a while."

"Do you mean that case of water bottles?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I used those to clean up earlier when the water in the shower stopped."

"How many?"

"Uh, all of them."

"All! Now what are we supposed to drink?"

"There's milk and juice and stuff in the fridge."

"You're welcome to it the power has not been on since I've been awake."

Crash. Tinkle. Tinkle.

The both jumped as they heard glass break downstairs.

"Jace... what was that?"

"Sounds like someone breaking in. I bet it's another zombie.", Jason grabbed his bat and headed down stairs. He could hear someone moving around in the kitchen, opening cabinets and such. He backed up to the doorway and pressed against the wall. Bat held ready he was gonna pop the zombie when it came through the doorway.

Except it sounded like the zombie was eating a box of cereal. He had to get it to come this way. Not knowing what else to do he took his shoe off and threw it across the room. That got the zombie's attention.

Closer.

Closer.

Swing!

....and a miss.

The zombie ducked under the bat, did a roll and came up with a big gun pointing towards his head.

He dropped the bat, put his hands up and yelled, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Give me one reason not to.", the girl said.

Jason thought she was maybe early 20's and very pretty. "Um, I'm not a Zombie?"

"Prove it."

"Ok. um, how?"

"What's 10 times 7?"

"Huh?"

The big gun was carefully aimed right at his face.

"Last chance, 10 times 7?"

"Seventy!"

"Go pour me a bowl of cereal with milk, 2 teaspoons of sugar and place it on the microwave."

"The milk is spoiled"

"Just do it!"

"OK. OK! Just don't shoot me."

"Well that depends on how good you do with the cereal."

Jason took the box of cereal and went to the cabinet and got a bowl. He poured in the cereal. Got a spoon from the drawer and the sugar from another cabinet and added 3 teaspoons. He then went to the fridge. Took a big breath and held it. He got the milk out, poured it into the bowl and put it back in the fridge. He then carried the bowl and placed it on the microwave and backed away.

"Ya know I wouldn't eat that if I were you."

"I wasn't planning on it she said lowering the gun."

"You're not going to shoot me?"

"I won't shoot you for being a zombie but if you try anything else I still might."

Jason slumped down to the floor where the girl noticed his pants were wet where they shouldn't be.

The girl took the bowl and dumped it down the drain, grabbed the box and started eating cereal out of it. "Why don't you go put on some clean pants. Sitting in your own urine can't be pleasant."

A few minutes later he came back in the kitchen wearing clean clothes with Ashley in tow.

The girl immediately brought the shotgun up.

"No, it's alright. I've been with her all morning. She's not a zombie."

The girl looked at Ashley. "Do you have a thermometer?"

"A what?"

"It's a simple question. Do you understand what a thermometer is?"

"Duh! What do you think I am stoopid?"

"That's yet to be determined. Since you know what one is do you have one?"

"How the hell should I know."

Jason turned to her, I think mom kept one in the bathroom cabinet.

"Go get it.", the girl gestured with the gun towards the kitchen doorway.

"Sheesh. Whatever.", as Ashley stomped off to find a frickn thermometer.

A bunch of rummaging was heard and she finally stomped back down with one.

"Here!"

"No, kid, it's not for me. Take his temperature."

Jason not wanting the gun pointing at them any longer grabbed it and stuck it in his mouth.

After a minute or so the girl said, "Long enough. What does it say?"

They finally figured out how to read it. "Um, almost 101."

"Just as I thought. Now you, shake it for a minute and then take your temperature too."

"Eww, No Way. He just had it in his mouth. I totally do not want his germs."

She pointed the gun right at Ashley's head. "Do it."

Ashley shook it and then spent the next minute wiping it off on a bunch of paper towels. Finally she put it in her mouth and stared daggers at the girl.

About a minute later, "OK, now you read it."

"101. So?"

"Does that mean anything?", asked Jason.

As she lowered the gun, the girl said, "Yes. It means you've both been infected but you're one of the lucky few who has gone through it and survived intact."

"You mean there are others?"

"A few here and there. Some were exposed but never got sick. A very

small number I think. I've only found one so far. A few more, like you, have been exposed, got sick but didn't turn into a zombie. The rest, well, you don't want to have to deal with them."

"Oh we have. Well at least Jason has. He killed some yesterday. No, wait, that was last week. He killed our mom and dad too. Well, actually our dad killed mom and then Jason killed him."

"Will you SHUT UP?!?!", yelled Jason.

At Ashley's outburst Jason actually got a sympathetic look from the girl.

"That must have been hard to do. What's your names?"

"Jason."

"Ashley."

"I'm Autumn."

"Well I was planning on scavenging here but since you're still alive and normal..."

"How'd you decide we were normal?"

"Well, you're not attacking anyone. You're not humping everything that moves.", which brought a bright red blush to Jason and Ashley, " And you're not eating the rotten food in the fridge. Finally you both proved you can handle a complex task like finding and bringing a thermometer or "

"... pouring a bowl of cereal.", finished Jason.

"Right. Smart kid. Although you put in 3 sugars when I only asked for 2. I cut you a bit of slack figuring you were nervous. Most zombies can't handle simple things. Even door knobs seem to confuse them. A few have been able to hold onto some semblance of language so just talking with one might not be enough to determine if they keep to short answers. After your answer to my math question I was already

fairly certain you were alright as they just can't seem to grasp math anymore."

"Well, like I said I'll move on and leave the houses on this block for you."

"For us? For what?", asked Ashley.

"Food? Water? Hlllllooooo. How do you expect to survive now?"

"I just woke up this morning. We... I... I don't know. Can you take us with you, Autumn?"

"You? Hah. Sorry but I'm not a babysitter."

"But what are we gonna do?"

"Sorry, kids, but that isn't my problem. I'm sure you'll figure something out."

"But, that's not fair! Our parents are dead, you have to take care of us!", demanded Ashley.

With that Autumn turned and went out the back door. As she closed it she called out, "Sorry for breaking the glass. I didn't know you were here."

Chapter 12

Fairly safe in his unfinished town home complex, Roger was keeping out of trouble. No lights, not that he had electricity, but not even a fire or flashlight was used for fear the zombies would see it. He continued to eat and drink from his small stash bought with the last of his money. The way things looked he didn't think money would matter anymore.

Unfortunately it was getting cold at night and Roger didn't have

sufficient clothes to keep warm. He could try to scavenging some materials from the other unfinished construction around him and make his space more weather tight, and maybe more secure too but with no tools, power or hand, and the noise it would make anyway meant this wasn't a likely option. Maybe it would be better to risk a little trip over to the finished and, formerly, populated houses. He hadn't seen or heard anyone for at least a few days now. Even the lawn mowing guy had disappeared.

His mind finally made up Roger decided on a night raid. He had no evidence to support a night excursion being any safer than a day trip but he figured if it was dark perhaps it would stop the zombies from seeing him. Roger made another good decision without even realizing it. With no power, and thus no communications, the CDC had no way to share their findings. No way to tell the population that the infected were still just normal people although with a much higher threshold for pain due to their base urges overriding the normal pain response. They could still be stopped, or to be blunt, killed just as easily as any other person. They couldn't smell any better than before and were just as blind in the dark as prior to infection.

Heading out he took a scrap length of 2x4 cut off with him. It might not be an ideal weapon but it was better than nothing. He headed for the mowing man's house as he had not been seen in days which meant he was probably gone. Slowly he approached the house but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Roger finally got close enough to start peeking in the windows but with no power and it being nearly completely dark he could really see nothing. Going around the house he noticed the lawnmower, still stuck in a rut. The ground around it looked torn up with scrape marks leading toward the house. The hair on the back of Rogers' neck was standing at attention but so was all his arm hair due to goosebumps from the cold weather. Well, either I get in there and see what I can use or I freeze, thought Roger.

Trying the handle he found it unlocked and opened the door ready to run away. Nothing happened so he risked venturing in a bit more. Still nothing. Feeling that it was probably safe since nothing attacked him and he heard no noises Roger started stumbling his way around the house. Besides being an unfamiliar house, the inky darkness inside had him all but blind. Banging his shins and thighs on various pieces

of furniture he found what he believed was the kitchen. Not that he could see but the smell of something spoiled along with the change in floor texture from carpet to tile told him he was probably there. Feeling around he located the counter and the under counter drawers. Hoping that these people, like most, had a junk drawer he also hoped a flashlight would be in it too. Luck was still with him when he opened the third drawer and felt junk. The first two were pretty easy, silverware and boxes of foil and plastic wrap. The third one, though, had a wide variety of objects in it. His hand hit a heavier cylindrical one and grasping it in one while feeling around with the other he settled on flashlight. A quick flick of the switch and the end barely lit up going out within a second. Just enough to confirm he was indeed in the kitchen but not enough to see anything else.

Great. Like most people they had a junk drawer with a flashlight and like most people they never checked the batteries. Feeling around in the drawer some more he did find what felt like loose batteries. Trying to change batteries in the dark with a flashlight you've never used before is more of a challenge than you think. First he forgot to feel the batteries in there before dumping them out so he didn't know how many or what orientation. Next he dumped them in the drawer mixing them up with the, hopefully, good ones. Finally he kept putting one in upside down so it took a half dozen tries before he finally got enough working ones in there and in the right orientation for it to turn on and continue to provide light.

Shining it around the room he found what was left, he surmised, of the mowing man. Just parts of limbs and a lot of blood. Immediately falling to his knees Roger proceeded to puke hit guts up. The spoiled smell, which he now realized was human flesh, the smell of the puke and the fact he was puking on the remains of a torn apart dead guy caused further retching. When nothing else would come up and he finally settled down enough he realized he was hearing a soft rhythmic sound punctuated by occasional slightly louder sounds. Slowly shining his light around the room he found the source. A zombie sitting in the corner on the floor slowly chewing. He then raised up his arm, holding the arm of mowing man and took another bite and went back to chewing.

Roger didn't think anything else was left but he vomited yet again

while also scrambling to get to his feet and find where he had left his 2x4. All that accomplished was slipping and falling in the various fluids already on the floor and him losing what little of his lunch remained all over himself. He also dropped the flashlight and it went under the table casting exaggerated shadows all around as it spun and rolled there.

He finally managed to scramble his way out of the kitchen back to the carpeted dining room where the carpet fibers started absorbing the wet slime off his shoes and giving him a better footing. Realizing that the zombie wasn't chasing him, his panic lessened just a bit. Looking back into the kitchen he just made out the 2x4 leaning against the counter right where he had been standing when this all started. Slowly he inched back into the kitchen and grabbed the 2x4. He used it to slide the flashlight out from under the table and then picked that up also. Backing out while keeping an eye on the zombie happily munching away he finally was able to get a look at the house. It was tastefully decorated although financial restraint was used. Quality furniture but not expensive or trendy. He found the coat closet near the front door and discovered many things that would serve him well. Coats, hats, boots, scarves, gloves and mittens. About this time he realized the clothes he were wearing were now pretty disgusting. Maybe the bedrooms would have something useful.

Making another check on the zombie, still happily munching away on mowing man's arm, Roger started up the stairs. The first bedroom looked to be a guest room as it was made up but had no clothes in it. Just spare blankets and such in the closet. Passing a bathroom Roger got an idea. Back to the bedroom he went and grabbed four pillow cases. He took them to the bathroom and started filling them with toilet paper, creams, ointments and anything else that he thought would be useful in the future. With one almost half filled he left it on the floor in the hall and continued down to the next bedroom. Opening the door he saw a severely dehydrated, gaunt woman who looked like she was about to pass out standing there. He was about to rush in asking if she needed help when she turned to the bed, ripped the sheets off and started putting them back on again. He watched her completely remake the bed. She then bent over, looking closely at the comforter where a small stain was visible in the light. Shaking her head she mumble something about "Must change bed". Proceeded to

rip all the sheets off and start making it again.

By now Roger had pieced together that whatever made that guy mow his lawn continuously, at least until he got eaten, must also be affecting this woman. She seemed to be a clean freak or something but just kept using the same sheets over and over. Being curious now Roger slipped back to the first bedroom, took one of the spare comforters out and brought it to the master bedroom and switched it with the stained one on the floor. Watching the woman continue to make the bed she finally got to the comforter, took the new one without seeming to notice it was different from the one she had been using. She placed it on the bed, smoothed everything out perfectly and then bent over to look at it. Seeing no stain on it seemed to satisfy her. She straightened up, seemed to almost smile and then stripped the bed again starting to remake it.

Shaking his head he headed to the closet and started going through the clothes. They're a few sizes larger than what he would normally wear but they were vomit free. A big selling point. Figuring it didn't matter with the woman there he stripped and started picking out stuff to wear. Right about the time he had one leg in and one leg out on a new pair of jeans he heard a grunt. Stumbling around Roger saw the zombie from the kitchen now on top of the woman on the bed. He was mostly trying to bite her. She struggled a bit but in her state with no food or water for who knows how long, the downstairs zombie quickly overwhelmed the upstairs zombie. Roger couldn't tell if she was dead or just unconscious. Didn't matter, the hungry zombie took a large bite out of her arm. Smacked his lips, started chewing and walked off dragging the meal, er, body, um, whatever... with him.

He hadn't even heard the zombie approach. Had the woman not been there Roger could have been the next victim. He decided he was pushing his luck just a bit too much. Quickly dressing, he grabbed a few spare pants and shirts and stuffed them in one of the still empty pillow cases. Trying to juggle the flashlight, pillow case and 2x4 he headed back down to the closet and filled another case with winter gear and put some on himself. A quick retreat back to his hideout saw Roger settling in for the evening to inventory his loot. He had forgotten his light rules and the glow was visible from quite a distance if you looked. Unknown to Roger, someone did.

Chapter 13

After the initial frenzy had died down Jim decided it was time to do a little reconnaissance. Having kept a low profile prevent him from having any issues up to now. The black out shades allowed for some use of lights at night without being a shining beacon to everyone, everything?, around and his solar system was making more than enough power to cover the minor use his LED lights, laptop, 12v refrigerator/freezer and ham system needed.

Reports from the regional area and from international sources all pointed to this being a pandemic event with the majority of the survivors being those who haven't been infected yet although a few have been and had anywhere from no to full blown symptoms but for whatever reason didn't turn into a zombie. Jim's temperature was still a normal 98.6 which means he hasn't been exposed yet. He'd have to take extra steps to protect himself.

Suiting up in a full tyvek suit and P100 head gear he gathered up his ever present bag with a variety of survival tools including 72 hours of food and water, portable water filter, change of clothes, multi tool, extra hand guns and ammo and motion sensors that set off lights and/or noise alarms when triggered. He carried it into the garage and tossed it in the back seat of his 93 Chevy crew cab. As with many of his items, he had customized it to fulfill the needs he had for it. The engine was replaced with a diesel and the suspension was lifted and modified to allow for city drive, fording 3 feet of water or bouncing over the "outback". Jim didn't know when or how he'd need this capability but he sure as hell wasn't going to get stuck wishing he had something when it was in his power to just add it.

He did a quick once over checking on the extra gas cans in back, verifying both the main and secondary tank were topped off and the roof rack with 2 spares and a variety of tools including digging and breaching tools. Never know when I might need to cut a lock or force a

door, thought Jim. Both front and back winch looked in good order and he had his trailer hitch ready to accept a variety of balls and even a pintle insert all stored in the bed tool box, which also included tow chains and a variety of vehicle tools for chaining tires, field repairs and a jack, just in case. The inside was modified at least as much as the outside. A row of switches in the dash allowed him to work the loud speaker and the nearly dozen forward and rear facing lights. He could also toggle the brake lights off, if needed, for a stealthy nighttime escape. Radio units included ham and CB along with an emergency channel scanning unit too. In a nod to James Bond he also rigged up a half dozen remotely released smoke canisters along with a few other surprises.

Finally, for defense, and offense should it be necessary, he had brought along his 870 which he slid into a custom designed holster alongside the seat. He propped his AR against the passenger seat within each reach. Finally a couple of .40 Smith & Wesson semi autos were sitting in their dash mounts on either side of the steering wheel.

Due to having to remove the firearms from the vehicle, for day to day use, he rarely drove his truck but the situation now meant he could leave them in place and shouldn't get hassled over them. Heck he'd probably have to use them before the day was over. Jim started the truck and pulled it out of the garage letting it idle for a few minutes to warm up. Making sure the garage and house were closed up he drove off deciding to pay Mike a visit first.

Mike lived about 30 minutes away although the drive took a few hours this time. Abandoned vehicles and accidents were the largest problem. It took a lot of back tracking and in one case using the winch to drag another vehicle out of the way. There were sightings of zombies although none were close enough to pose a threat. At this point the living were more of a concern to Jim. He did see a number of non zombies with most of them trying to get out of sight as fast as possible. One group of about a dozen started advancing on him when he got stuck by yet another blocked street. As he started to back away a few pulled out guns and started shooting. Only one shot even came close and he later found the hole in the passenger rear fender. In hind sight he realized that this blocked road was different from the others if he'd only stopped to look first. The cars were obviously driven into

position and not just abandoned or smashed up like the others.

Approaching each new blockage Jim now stopped way back and used his binoculars to scan the surrounding area first.

Another incident had him even more on edge. A woman in tattered clothes came running out from a house waving her arms and yelling. It was obviously she could speak and didn't appear to be a zombie. Jim stopped and rolled the window down a few inches while gripping one of his .40's and chambering a round out of sight from the woman. She started pleading with him to help that she was hungry and had kids in ide and needed some food. While Jim thought about tossing her a couple of his MREs he noticed a motion in his peripheral vision. A guy had run out in front of the truck and was pointing a revolver right at Jim through the windshield.

"Get out of the truck now!", shouted the woman who also had produced a revolver and was pointing it as him.

"It's not worth dyeing over. Just get out or we'll shoot you and take it.", yelled the guy.

Realizing he had been setup, Jim simply stepped on the gas. The guy was too close to the truck to get away and got knocked down and run over, although with the high clearance getting knocked down is the only injury the truck caused to him. The woman fired and it would have been a deadly shot to Jim, at least if the truck had normal glass it would have been. For the first time since spending nearly \$4,000 on bullet resistant glass did Jim finally feel it was money well spent.

As he drove off the woman when to check on the guy who was slowly getting to his feet.

Another mile down Jim pulled into a convenience store. He was finally getting near to Mike's place. Checking the surrounding area he saw no one. Grabbing his BOB he went up to the store and looked in the windows. No one visible. No movement. He grabbed his pry-bar he was about to bust out the glass when he realized the door was probably not locked. Sure enough it opened right up. He went in and filled his bag with additional water and some snacks. Over near the

magazines he found the real reason for stopping. A local map. Grabbing a couple of them, a few small notebooks and a few markers off another shelf he left and got back in his truck. Checking the area once more he settled down to a lunch of cool water, beef jerky and Skittles.

While eating he unfolded one of the maps and started tracing the route he had driven marking each thing he could remember. The hijack couple. The gang. A few of the worse roadblocks. He finished up marking down his current location. He then proceeded to document the marks in his notebook including an approximate inventory of the store. If help didn't come and society didn't recover anytime soon he'd need to know where supplies were and what areas to avoid, no time like the present for documenting what he already found.

Engrossed in his notes he was startled by a loud bang against the truck. Shoving the map out of the way there was a zombie plastered against the front fender. It noticed the movement when Jim dropped the map and advanced towards the door. Not wasting any time Jim started up the truck and was about to pull away when he realized the zombie looked familiar. It was Mike.

Mike started pounding on the door trying to get in but didn't seem to know how to try the handle. A few fingers were missing on one hand and it didn't seem to bother him at all. The unkept, unwashed and pathetic condition left no doubt in Jim's mind that Mike wasn't human anymore. He drove down about a block and then circled around once. Opening the window all the way he took his AR, sighted carefully in the scope and put a single round right in the head of the zombie dropping him instantly.

"Rest in peace now Mike.", said Jim as tears rolled down his face.

Never in a million years would he have thought that the best option was to kill his friend. Deciding he deserved more than to just lay there to be picked over, Jim drove back and checked the area once more. Clear. He poured some gas over the body and lit it. A cremation was the best he could do at the moment.

The adrenalin rush over and a chance to think about what he'd done,

just in the past few hours, was enough to have Jim bent over vomiting. Luckily he removed his mask just in time. He continued to heave for awhile and when nothing more would come out he went back to the truck for a bottle of water to clean himself up. What he didn't notice was some of Mike's saliva on the door handle that he used to open the door.

Chapter 14

"Pant... Pant.... Is it.... Pant.... Still following..... Us.... ?"

"No... Pant..... I think.... Pant.... Pant.... We lost..... them."

"What the heck was that? It didn't seem human."

"No idea. The way it just dove into our tent and started attacking the food... I've never seen anything like it."

"But why did it come after us?"

"You were there. It didn't any questions. You saw me hit it with chunks of firewood. They didn't seem to phase it."

"At least it had a bad limp. I don't think it was able to keep up."

"That's good but now what are we going to do?", queried Andy.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're a mile or more from camp, or at least what's left of it. With literally the clothes on our back. All of our gear, our car, everything is back there and it's going to be getting dark in about an hour."

"Oh yeah."

"We can't hike out, not at night. Even during the day it'll be at least 2

full days and we have no food. No water. No supplies."

"Don't remind me, I'll thirsty from all that running."

"So?"

"I dunno. Maybe we can circle back and grab our stuff and get in the jeep."

"Maybe.. but not back the way we came. We'll have to cut over the mid cliff trail and come back along the far side of the lake. That's another 2 1/2 miles at least. I doubt we'll make it before dark unless we pretty much jog most of it."

"What are you waiting for slow poke?", said Karen as she was already jogging down the trail.

They made it back to the campgrounds just as it was becoming difficult to even see the trail in front of your face.

"OK, here's the plan... grab everything you can and stuff it in the back.", said Andy while lifting a 4' long still solid log, "I'm going to do a little scouting while you're packing. " He was wishing he was back in the Army with his M16 but a log would have to do.

"Please, honey, be careful."

"You too. Just shout if you hear anything and then lock yourself in the car."

"Not without you!"

"Just do it. I'll be fine."

Andy and Karen worked their way through the deserted campgrounds until they reached their site. It was destroyed. The tent was ripped to shreds, everything tossed around with any food being completely consumed. Karen started by putting their packs, still intact, into the Jeep and then gathered up as much loose equipment as possible. Andy meanwhile started patrolling between here and the trail they

were originally chased down. Shortly after he heard scream.

"Aiiiiieee! It was following us all along... It's coming from the lake trail!", screamed Karen while scrambling backwards on all fours. She tried to get her footing but was too panicked to do more than keep scrambling along. Just before it reached her Andy came flying over her with the log in full swing.

CRACK

He connected squarely in the ribs obviously breaking some and stunning the zombie.

Karen took the chance to finally get to her feet.

"Get in the Jeep!", yelled Andy

"Not wit.."

"JUST DO IT!"

The zombie was advancing again and Andy took another swing, this time for the head. The sickening sound of cracking bone coupled with the splattering blood almost had Andy heaving. Suddenly the area was bathed in light. Karen had made it to the Jeep and turned on the headlights.

Andy saw the zombie on the ground, head split open with exposed brain matter. It wouldn't be getting up again.

The log just fell out of his hands as he stumbled back to the Jeep. His hands were trembling so much he couldn't grasp the handle to open the door. Karen finally opened it from the inside and he climbed in. Closing and locking the door he just sat there and shook for awhile. His Army training was just that. Training. He had never actually killed anyone, let alone doing so by beating them to death. Eventually he calmed down enough to realize Karen was talking to him.

".....to me. Andy! Talk to me! Are you OK? Andy?"

"Wwwhhha? uh, yeah. I think I'm OK. Karen, I think I killed it."

"I know... but it was us or it. You had no choice."

"You think the police will believe that? It was unarmed."

"We'll worry about that later. Let's get you cleaned up and get out of here. You've got blood splattered all over you."

Twenty minutes later on the drive home it occurred to Andy that they had both been exposed to the blood. They both probably had become infected with whatever the virus was. He said nothing to Karen hoping that perhaps he was wrong.

Hours later the Jeep coasted to a stop, out of gas, near an small industrial park. No one got out and there was no movement in the Jeep.

Chapter 15

Autumn was still crouched behind the dumpster when she heard shuffling in the alley. Sounded like more zombies. Bringing the now fully loaded shotgun to bear she rolled out to get a clear line of fire with her finger already depressing the trigger. Quickly pointing the gun to the sky she yelled, "What the hell do you think you're doing? I almost shot you!"

"We didn't know what to do. We followed you."

"What do you mean followed? I left your house 2 days ago."

Jason spoke up, "Ashley was scared and thought you'd protect us. I tried to talk her out of it but when she just took off I had to follow to protect her."

"Well that was chivalrous of you."

"You don't have to make fun of me."

"I wasn't. Chivalrous means... oh just forget it. I work alone. I don't need princess Ashley and her squire tagging along. Go home."

"No", said Ashley.

"Excuse me?"

"No, and you can't make me. You're an adult you have to take care of me."

Before Autumn could respond they all heard a sound and turned just in time to see 3 more zombies coming at them. Ashley screamed, Autumn fired. One dropped. Backing up she shot the second one. Dropping and pivoting she tried to get the third one but it had closed the distance and slapped the shotgun away knocking Autumn down. As she grasped for her sidearm the zombie reached for her.

WHACK!

In place of the zombie stood Jason with his bat. The zombie and what was left of it's head laying off to the side. Jason was looking down on Autumn and her Glock pointed at him.

"Ya know, I wish you'd stop pointing guns at me already."

"I told you I don't need any help."

"Yeah, it looked like it."

"I had him. You're lucky I didn't pull the trigger the bullet might have passed through and gotten you too."

"Yeah, Ok. Whatever."

Jason reached out a hand to help Autumn up. Reluctantly she took it.

"Thanks but I told you I work alone. I'm not a babysitter."

"We can watch your back while you rest."

"I've done fine so far."

Ashley was still whimpering in a heap in the middle of the alley. Jason gestured for Autumn to walk a bit further down out of her ear shot.

"Look, Autumn, Ashley's scared."

"Ashley?"

"Damn it. OK, I'm scared too. We're thirsty. We're hungry. We don't know know what to do. We don't know how to survive. Just take us with you. At least for a little while. We'll do all the crap jobs. Just show us how to survive..... Pllleeease?"

With an exasperated breath Autumn said, "I work alone. I'm not looking for partners or family or any of that. If I take you with me it's only long enough to show you the ropes and then we go our separate ways. Agreed?"

"You'll do it?"

"Do I have a choice? You'll probably just end up following me and you make too much noise You'll end up attracting more of them."

"Thank you."

"You can thank me by getting her up and moving. We can't stay here and I'm not going to take care of her or you for that matter. I'll show you but it's up to you to do what you need to. No handouts from me. We've already made enough noise, we need to get moving. Now."

Jason got Ashley up and moving but you could tell she was just going through the motions.

Over the next week Autumn took them to various stores to go shopping. The big difference is that no alarms went off. No police showed up. She showed them how to watch a building first. Observe for signs of occupation, either human or zombie. Get in with as little

noise as possible. They started with a little corner grocery store for food and water they went to a clothing store. Ashley proceeded to grab everything she wanted in the latest fashions. When they all met back at the entrance Autumn inspected their "purchases."

Jason had gotten a good pair of boots, a few pairs of jeans, long sleeve casual shirts along with plenty of wool socks and underwear, both normal and long thermal style. He finished up with a Carhart jacket and good gloves, hat and scarf. He also made a quick trip through their outdoor section. It was just a few token items for those making fashionable day hikes but he still got a decent sized backpack to hold a few changes of clothes plus plenty of room left for food and water. Tied to the bottom was a blanket from the home good section.

Ashley's cart was packed full of designer clothes, fashionable skirts, decorative belts and even a handful of jewelry.

"Put that back."

"Why?"

"We're going to be moving around a lot, most of the time outside. A, you'll freeze to death in those clothes. B, you won't be able to carry them or keep up with us if you tried. C, we're not looters."

"Yeah right. I see what he has and what you took. You can't tell me we're not looting."

For about the tenth time in the past 24 hours Autumn let out a frustrated breath. "Yes, we are taking this however we are taking only what we need to survive. Looting, at least to me, is taking more than you need. Taking stuff just because you want it, not because you need it. You don't need anything in this cart."

Ashley reached in and dumped it all out on the floor and turned to go back.

"Wait."

"What?"

"This isn't your room. Pick these up and put them back where you found them."

"No."

"Jason, our agreement is now over. Good luck."

"No, wait! Please. I'll go talk to her."

Autumn stormed off to keep watch at the doors while Jason talked with Ashley.

"Ashley, just do what she says."

"Why? She isn't our parent.", was the cocky response.

"Your right. She isn't. She has no reason to help us. No attachment. You know we can't survive out here on our own. Just put that stuff back and go get some reasonable clothes. You know outdoor camping kinda stuff."

"Fine.", came the snippy reply as Ashley went back, picked everything up and stormed back into the depths of the store. Once out of site she just ditched the fashion wear behind a rack and went off to look for 'reasonable' stuff like that bossy snit wanted her to do. Her second attempt was met with limited approval. Autumn told her that she still went for fashionable clothes as opposed to work clothes but at least they were more suited to what we'd be doing. Now what did she mean by that?

Throughout the week they holed up in various houses or apartments each evening. Most of the time they managed to avoid the zombies but did have to dispatch another handful. After that last encounter Autumn took them to the local sporting good store. It took a while to find weapons that they could both handle and even longer to teach them enough safety that she was willing to actually give them some limited ammo. Ashley was too young and small to handle any of the handguns. Finally in desperation Autumn gave her a .410 shotgun, youth model, and she was able to handle it. Worst case she would

have tried a 22LR, maybe a Marlin or Ruger but was worried about the stopping power. At least with the .410 she had a bit more stopping power and most head shots would suffice. The only sidearm she could handle was a M&P22. Jason ended up with a pair of .40 caliber Glock 22's similar to Autumn's. Strapped to his leg was a sizable machete and they found a nice sling that would fit his bat on his back.

They actually grabbed quite a bit more, both in terms of weapons, ammo and equipment and were trying to figure out how to move it all. Jason offered the family Escalade back home. He could go get it and bring it back load it up. Autumn vetoed that idea in favor of something a little closer. Specifically the GMC dealer across the street. An hour later they located the keys and were starting up their new Yukon Denali XL. They backed it right up to the doors and loaded all their stuff in it. As large as it was they ended up with a lot of empty space and went back in for more items and supplies they would need to survive. As they were bringing the next cart loads to the front they saw some people poking around. It looked like 3 guys and 1 girl. They were actually talking and trying the door handles on the truck so they probably weren't zombies.

Ashley rushed forward yelling "Hey, over here! Can we...."

Pow, Bang, Rat-a-tat-tat!

The group opened fire on her dropping her almost instantly.

Jason yelled and started to charge. Autumn tackled him and they rolled behind a display.

"Let me go! She's hurt!"

"Yeah, and what good will you be to her when they shoot you too. We have to take them out or at least chase them off first."

Autumn lined up and started sending a few rounds of buckshot their way.

Jason, and his youthful inexperience, managed to send a lot of lead in their direction but hit nothing and quickly depleted his mags. With

much better control Autumn was able to put one attacker down and injure another one. The remaining two decided they had enough and took off leaving their buddy behind. Autumn cautiously approached them kicking their weapons away as she got close. It was obvious one would not be getting up again while the second one was moaning in pain and would likely not walk again, at least not without a pronounced limp. Once she was certain he posed no threat she finally turned to Ashley.

Pushing Jason out of the way, Autumn gave Ashley a quick examination and other than a crease along the temple found no other damage. Jason was still freaking out over the blood while Autumn applied a glorified band aid to the wound. Finally getting Jason's attention she explained to him it was just a graze. The bullet did not enter. Really just a glorified scratch. That and a real bad headache when she woke up. If she was lucky it wouldn't even leave a mark once it healed. Ashley, meanwhile, had started to come around and upon seeing this Jason became less agitated.

"OK kids, shopping trip is over. We have the room but I'm not going to risk going back for another load. Jason, get Ashley in the truck and then help me with these last carts of gear. We're not hanging around."

While Jason got Ashley in the Yukon, Autumn left a bottle of water and a bag of chips next to the guy with the destroyed knee. "Here, this should keep you alive for a day or two until your buddies come back."

"What about the zombies? You can't leave me defenseless."

"You attacked us, unprovoked and now you want me to give you a gun? Ha!"

"It wasn't my idea. Raul made us. We just wanted to get away but he thought we could take your stuff. Really. You gotta believe me."

Autumn considered for a minute and then tossed his gun back to him.

"But it's empty!"

"Yep. I'm leaving a few rounds over here. You want it, then come and

get it."

"How?! You busted my knee!"

"Crawl. And if you complain any more I might just change my mind."

With that Autumn and Jason finished loading the last of the gear, got in and drove off as the thug started to drag himself across the sidewalk to get to the few cartridges.

Chapter 16

The next few days were relatively quiet. Even the zombie sittings were down and having a sizable SUV made short work of any that got in their way. It wasn't long before the grill was quite gory.

A trip to the local hardware store provided some manual pumps and hoses allowing them to siphon gas from other vehicles and stations as they needed it. As a habit they made sure to top off the tank each day when they were done scavenging.

While exploring they found an interesting building. Well built, with a sizable interior garage, no windows and heavy, apparently solid steel doors. Further investigation revealed that the most of the doors were unlocked and the building appeared to be zombie free. They pulled in and lowered the roll up steel garage door. Working their way room by room they verified that it was clean. In the offices they figured out that this was the main headquarters for a small security firm. The keys they found were for a couple of missing vehicles and also for the doors. Going around they secured the building and took inventory of what they had.

It wouldn't be that difficult to clear out some offices and each have their own room, plus a lot of extra room for storing of supplies. The break room kitchen had a sink, refrigerator and microwave and the indoor vehicle area would be ideal for keeping their ride secure and providing a safe place for unloading and gearing up for further

scavenging forays. The only problem was a lack of power. No windows and no power meant you had to do everything with flashlights. No power meant no working microwave. No refrigeration. They discussed finding a generator but Autumn nixed that idea as too noisy. Even if the zombies ignored it the other 2 legged predators could be an issue.

With no better plan at hand they decided to at least unload and use it as a supply station since they could now secure the building. They'd make battery powered lights a priority for future plans. For the first time they felt secure enough to not post a guard or watch at night. Each picked an office and went to get settled for the night.

Autumn lay there for a long time thinking. I didn't want these brats with me. I do better on my own. They're so clueless. So why am I still with them? They know enough to take care of themselves. Why do I still worry about them? Why are we planning on playing 'house' and setting this place up for habitation? With no answers she finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning they opened the garage door a few inches to let some light in and unloaded the SUV stacking everything in an organized fashion. Ashley just wanted to dump everything in a pile and go back to her room but at Autumn's insistence they grouped their haul from the last few days. Food in one pile, cold weather gear in another. Camping equipment. Armory. And on and on. Once it was all stacked up the piles did look pitifully small but it was better than nothing.

Later that day they mounted up for another foraging run. Finding a good supply of food, water and some hygiene supplies they were almost out of took them most of the afternoon to locate. By the time they finished it was nearly dark. Heading back to their fortress, as they started calling it, they passed a series of new town homes being constructed. One of them had a light going on the second floor. They paused a moment to observe when the light suddenly went out. Concerned that it was another gang they took off for the fortress.

Roger was reading one of his books by flashlight when he thought he heard a sound. Turning off the light he peaked up over the unfinished window opening just in time to see a SUV drive off pretty quick. By

now he knew the zombies couldn't handle anything nearly as advanced as driving so they had to be normal people. But were they friendly or foes? He had observed, or rather heard, at least one shoot out a few days ago. Shortly after 2 people went running by only to return with reinforcements a little while later. He heard no more shooting but did see them carrying a guy with a bloody knee past and they all had a lot of guns with them that he didn't remember seeing earlier.

Since Roger was getting low on food and water he decided that maybe it was time to do a bit of exploring and scavenging too. He'd need more than a 2x4 for protection however. The next morning he packed up his few meager possessions and headed out. Avoiding the last house with the munching zombie he went in the opposite direction. Every so often he randomly tried a house. A few times he got lucky, found an open house that was also empty and picked up a few more days worth of food and water. Unfortunately nothing better than a beginners bow and arrow kit, at least that what the unopened box said, and a few golf clubs were the best defensive items he could find.

Consciously or not he drifted in the same direction he had last seen the SUV heading. Over the next few days he drifted from place to place picking up some more supplies. Late one afternoon he heard a vehicle approach. Not seeing anywhere he could easily duck into, Roger dropped to the ground and did his best imitation of a corpse.

As the Yukon drove up Autumn slowed to a stop about 50 feet away.

"I don't like this."

"What?"

"That body."

"We've been seeing dead bodies all over. They just started to bother you now?", asked Jason.

"No, yes... they have all bothered me but it's something about this one in particular."

"It wasn't there earlier.", chimed in Ashley.

"You're right. When we came this way earlier there was no body in the street. But it's more than that. Something is wrong with it."

"Well, there's a pack laying there and the coat looks pretty nice."

"That's it! The zombies haven't been smart enough to put on coats. They've been walking around in whatever they had on when they got infected. This one looks like maybe a non infected person. Probably just was starving and dropped here or maybe those couple of punks we chased off last week got him."

"Let's check him out. Maybe there is something in the pack we can use."

"I dunno..."

"We got guns and I don't see anyone else."

"Yeah, we do and unlike last time you need to learn to pick your shots instead of spraying a whole lot and missing on all of them!"

"Sorry. That was pretty dumb of me."

"Yeah. OK, Ashley, you stay here and guard the truck, Jason you got the right side of the street, I'll take the left. We get out and wait. Scan left and right and up and down. Take your time. Once it looks clear use your binoculars to check out the roof tops, windows, etc. I don't want any surprises. When your certain call clear and then we'll advance on the body. Still scanning our assigned sides. Ashley, once we advance you'll step out and cover the street to make sure no one sneaks up on us from behind."

"Why do I always gotta stay in the truck. I want to go see what's up there."

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Exactly for what you're doing now. You get to do more when you learn to grow up and stop complaining about everything."

"Hmmprrhfff.", as Ashley sat back in the seat and pouted.

"Jason, let's go."

They both got out of the truck and spent a good 3-4 minutes just observing and finally each called clear.

Roger knew he was in trouble. The truck had stopped, idled for awhile and then they had turned it off and at least 2 people got out as he heard 2 doors slam. He wasn't sure if he should run or continue playing dead. Time seemed to drag on and on. Suddenly he was startled by 2 voices yelling 'clear'.

"Jason, did you see that?"

"No, where?"

"The body. I swear when we called clear it twitched. I don't like this. Spread out and we're going to make sure that it's dead before we check the pack."

On hearing this Roger nearly wet himself. Make sure it's dead. It. Me. Dead. He couldn't take it anymore and scrambled to his feet and ran down the street yelling "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!".

"Stop!"

He kept going.

BLAM!

"Stop! or the next one won't be over your head."

Roger slid to a halt and slowly turned around. A woman was holding a big black gun and pointing it right at him. Off to the side a kid, no, a teenager, had another nasty looking gun in his hand also pointed at

him.

The kid, er, teen called out "What's 7 times 10?"

"Huh?"

"It really is a simple question. What is 7 times 10?"

"Uh seventy?"

The woman called out "Now jump on one leg while you pat your stomach."

"What? You want me to...."

"Just do it, now.", punctuated with a gesture from the 870.

Mumbling to himself, "these people are frickn nuts", Roger started jumping and patting his stomach.

Jason eased over to Autumn and quietly said, "He's jumping on both legs, not just one. What do you think?"

"Probably just nerves, Mr. 'I wet myself'."

"Alright you can stop now. I don't think you're a zombie."

"Hell, I could have told you that. All you had to do was ask instead of sneaking up on me and trying to shoot me."

"You can't be too careful. What's your name?"

"Roger. Yours?"

"Autumn, that's Jason.", she said gesturing.

"What's your story?", asked Jason.

"Short version, homeless, living off the street, suddenly zombies appear, I was then hiding out in a construction project for the last

month or so."

"Did you have a light on a few days back and then turn it off when you heard a car?"

"I did if you were the car that drove off when I turned the light off."

"Yeah, that was us. Like you said, can't be too careful. We got jumped by 4 less than savory people a week ago. Put one down and made sure another one probably won't walk again but the other two ran off."

"For awhile, then they came back with at least a half dozen buddies. I saw them go by from my perch. Short time later they can back carrying a guy with a bloody leg and they had a lot of guns."

"Sounds like the same group. Damn. I knew we should have gone back and got the rest.", said Autumn to Jason.

"How about you? Brother and sister? You look too young to be her boyfriend."

"Us? No. Long story. Let's just say I'm currently babysitting these two."

"Two?"

"Oh, his sister, Ashley, is the SUV.", said Autumn while waving Ashley to come up by them.

"Ashley, this is Roger."

"Hi Ashley"

"Yeah, whatever."

Autumn rolled her eyes and addressed Roger, "We got a fairly secure place, it ain't much, but you're welcome to join us."

"You're just going to invite him to our place?", exclaimed Ashley.

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, you don't know anything about him."

"I know he's managed to survive this long on his own, he isn't a zombie it would be nice to have an adult conversation again."

"What if he's a sexual predator?"

"Roger, are you?"

"No"

"Satisfied Ashley?"

"But... bu.... uhh... He smells."

"Now that's funny. Have you smelled yourself lately?"

"Thanks for the offer but I don't want to intrude."

"You wouldn't be. We can use an extra body during our scavenging runs and unless I miss my guess, you've gotten pretty good at it too or you wouldn't still be around."

"Well, how about I come check out your place and then decide?"

"Fine with me. Everybody back in the truck."

A short drive later and they were back at the fortress. Jason, after a quick scan hopped out, unlocked and opened the garage door. Keeping his sidearm ready he stood watch until they were safely in. One final check and he too came in, closed up and locked the door. Before the SUV was even in park Ashley had already hopped out and headed off for her room leaving Jason and Autumn to unload the days haul. Roger stepped in and gave them a hand. Once finished Jason excused himself and headed off too leaving Autumn and Roger alone for the first time.

"I don't think she likes me."

"Who? Ashley? Yeah, she's a stuck up princess. It's going to get her in trouble. Real trouble, one of these days."

"Jason seems to have a good head on his shoulders though."

"Yeah, he grew up fast. I think it started when he had to kill his parents. They had become zombies or at least one of them did I think he said. Either way the innocence was quickly taken from him. If he keeps his focus and moral compass in line he'll turn into a fine catch in a few years... not that there will be many left to catch him."

"It definitely is a new world. What are you doing for light in here? I mean besides the flashlights?"

"Nothing."

"No electricity?"

"Um, No. There's a zombie war going on, power has been off for weeks now... or did you forget?"

"There's more than one way to get electricity. Having the city provide it is the most convenient but not your only choice. Before losing everything I was a sales manager at Brite Lite Power. "

"Never heard of them. "

"Largest alternative power dealer in the area. We sold solar, wind and micro hydro systems and had our own installation staff. I actually started there years ago and switched to sales and then took over managing our sales force."

"That's nice but I don't see how sales management is going to help us."

"Our warehouse is also in the area."

"Wait, so you're saying there's a building full of alternative power equipment in the area?"

"Yes, at least when I last worked there they had a lot."

"And you know how to assemble them?"

"Yep."

"What the hell are we standing around talking for... "

"Well it is getting late. Perhaps you give me a tour of the building and we draw up some plans and get a list first. It'll help us avoid wasting time getting too much or not enough of something."

"Sounds good. well, here's the garage...."

The next day, list in hand, they followed Rogers' directions and pulled up to a nondescript warehouse building. Jason and Autumn did the usual scan of the area with no threats found. She remained vigilant while Jason got out a sizable crowbar and started on the door. Ashley just kind of moped around. After just a few minutes Jason had it open and then all went in. Roger turned on his flashlight and shined it around.

"I guess the down turn hit them harder than I thought. There's a lot less here than I remember."

"So they don't have what we need?", said Autumn.

"Oh, there's still more than enough here. Just nothing like what they had in stock back when I still worked for them."

Roger directed them to the various areas to find what they needed. They started with a few dozen 240 watt panels. Next up a few charge controllers and inverters. Locating a pallet jack they used that to move a dozen batteries to the loading door. Finally a whole pile of cable was added.

"Is this enough?", asked Jason.

"Yep. It will easily provide what we need for the fortress."

"How about in case something breaks or gets damaged? Shouldn't we take some extras?"

A few looks at each other before Roger chimed in, "Yeah, I guess. That makes sense. There's enough here to take the same amount again just in case. The garage back at the fortress has more than enough room for everything."

"Jace, you dork. Now we have to do more work."

"Ashley, just shut up and get to work. You want light in your room, don't you?", responded Jason.

After doubling the pile waiting at the door Roger added, "Not to be a spoil sport, but there really isn't much left. Just a few parts here and there. Why don't we just take the rest? Also I want to check out the installation truck out back. It should have a full tool box in it. If so we can rig up a basic system to charge the cordless tools and then use those to do the full installation."

"Uh guys...", queried Jason, "ain't no way this all gonna fit in the truck. Not even the original pile would have fit."

"Um"

"Uh"

"Er"

"Ideas?"

"There was a rental place a few blocks back with Uhauls. Maybe we can find the keys to one of them.", offered Jason.

"Anyone else?", asked Autumn, "OK, your idea, you go get one. Take Ashley as no one goes alone."

"Do I hafta?", Ashley whined.

"Yes", came the response from more than one person.

They headed down the block, crossed the street and started down the next block towards the Uhaul sign at the end. Just past a florist shop a loud crash had them both ducking for cover while turning to see what happened. A zombie was laying in in the pile of glass from the broken window and starting to get back to its feet. Jason jumped in bat in one hand, machete in the other. A quick whack with the bat further stunned it long enough for him to bring the machete to bear neatly severing the head from the body. He stopped long enough to while his blade clean on the clothes, re-sheath it and do a quick scan for other threats before turning back towards the Uhaul.

"Ewww. That's sick."

"What's sick?"

"You just cut that guy's head off."

"Yeah, we end up putting down zombies almost every day. What else am I supposed to do? It's a lot quieter than a gun plus I save the ammo in case we really need it."

"But you're killing people. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course it does. You don't think I know what I'm doing? You think I don't remember these were people! You THINK I'M A MONSTER?", yelled Jason getting more and more agitated.

"I'm sorry Jace, I just didn't...."

Jason had collapsed on the ground and just sat there sobbing. Ashley had no idea what to do and just stood there waiting.

Finally Jason pulled himself together. "I'm sorry for yelling. I tears me up each time I have to do this but I just keep thinking of what Dad did to Mom when he turned into a zombie. I think of all the other helpless people who've suffered at their hands. If I don't do what I can to stop them... I It's.... "

"It's OK Jason. It'll get better."

"Yeah. I hope so. Let's go find a truck."

They continued down to the lot only to find the building windows smashed out and all the trucks gone. Someone else, or more likely a number of people, had beat them to the trucks.

"Now what?", questioned Ashley.

Jason looked around a bit and said, I got another idea. Let's get back.

They arrived back at the solar warehouse without incident and found Autumn and Roger out back, Autumn standing watch while Roger was pulling tool boxes out of a van.

"Where's the Uhaul?"

"Someone else must have had the same idea, they're all gone."

"Well, I guess we spend the next few days shuttling a bunch of loads back and forth then."

"No. I just came back to get the truck."

"For what?"

"I said the trucks were all gone. Not the trailers. They have a bunch of trailers. We just need to hook up one of the larger ones and we can take everything in maybe one trip, worst case 2 instead of a few dozen trips."

"Smart thinking.", said Autumn as she tossed the keys to Jason.

"You trust me to drive it?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"No, Yes. Wait. What I mean..."

"I know what you mean. Just go get the trailer.", said Autumn with a smile. As they drove off she realized she couldn't remember the last time she had smiled. Shaking her head she pulled herself back to the present and went back to scanning for threats. About a half hour later they returned with a large trailer in tow.

"Did you have any problems?"

"Took a few minutes to find the round thingie for the trailer spot on the back."

"You mean the ball for the trailer hitch?"

"Yeah, that. Then it was a challenge getting the truck backed up to just the right spot to be able to connect them up, but after a bunch of tries I finally got it right. After that it was pretty simple to figure out."

"Good. Well Roger found all the tools he needs. Back up over to the loading dock. I'll guide you in. Ashley, you're on guard duty while we load up."

"Whatever. As long as I don't have to carry that junk again."

A few hours later everything was loaded and secured on the trailer. They were finishing up putting the last of the tools in the back of the SUV when Jason started yelling. A group of individuals was coming down the block towards them. They were still about a hundred yards off and just walking but when realized that they had been spotted they started running towards the group.

"Quick, everyone get in! We're done loading.", yelled Roger.

They all got in and locked the doors as the group reached them. They numbered 7 individuals and one of them kept pointing at them while talking to another one while the rest fanned out around them.

Without waiting to see what would happen, Jason who had hopped in the drivers seat gunned the engine and floored at them. Bodies went flying as they dove out of the way to avoid getting hit. They hadn't gone far when the sound of bullets impacting with the truck were

heard. Driving at a reckless speed and taking turns much faster than he should have, Jason managed to keep the truck from rolling and got them well away before he slowed down to a safer speed.

"Anyone hit? or hurt in any way?"

A chorus of No's responded.

"Ashley, you were on watch. Why didn't you see them?", asked Jason in a very angry tone.

"I was cold I went over by the building where the wind wasn't blowing and the sun was shining to try to get warm."

"But you were on watch. You can't just ignore your duties. Someone could have been seriously hurt or killed. If you had been watching you could have given us a lot more warning!"

"Shut Up! You're not the boss of me. You can't tell me what to do."

"You're right. I'm not. But that attitude and your lack of pulling your fair share of the work is going to get someone hurt or worse and then you'll have to live with that. You need to decided if that's something you want."

Ashley didn't reply.

Chapter 17

Jim woke up feeling exhausted. Hungry too. He got up made a bowl of oatmeal from his LTS stock. Sprinkled on a few raisins and sat down at his laptop. While the internet was long since down and power was out he still had a lot of saved documents for reading, referencing and learning from plus he also had enough solar power, along with his backup generator if necessary, to power it. He noticed that the time was much later than he thought it should be. Yesterday had been a rough day with having to kill one of his best friends and he had

dropped into bed exhausted when he got back, but if the time was correct he had slept nearly 15 hours. He went and found his watch to compare times and it was correct. He had slept 15 hours. As he went to set the watch down the date caught his eye. He hadn't slept 15 hours, he had slept for 4 days and 15 hours! No wonder he was famished.

The sudden realization finally hit him. He had somehow got infected and survived. At least he thought he was a survivor. Or was he dreaming? Or worse, was he a zombie but not realizing it? If he was dreaming he'd eventually wake up, but if he was a zombie could he have made the oatmeal? or started up the laptop? No, I guess I couldn't have. If I was a zombie I couldn't handle difficult tasks and I would have eaten the oatmeal straight instead of preparing it first. Oh yeah... temperature.... let's see... I have a PDF on that here somewhere.

Scanning his most recent files and reports he had grabbed from various internet sources before it went offline he found a source that made reference to infected individuals having a higher temperature. He put his hand to his head. It did feel a bit warm. Rummaging around in his medical kit he found the thermometer and took his temperature. Sure enough. 101. He was a survivor. Good thing. Just his one trip in his protective suit had been annoying enough. He couldn't see himself putting it on each and every time he went out.

He spent a few days recuperating and getting his strength back, making sure, at least in his mind, that he really was OK before going out again. This time he kept to just the local neighborhood and made sure to keep updating his map with anything he found of significance. One event, really was significant. At least in terms of keeping Jim safer. He had gone into one of the larger grocery stores looking to replenish some of his stocks. It obviously was a scene of destruction. Most windows were broken, both inwards and outwards, a number of bodies were scattered around and at least one vehicle had been driven into the entrance at some point although the vehicle was long gone.

Keeping his 870 in hand and his AR slung over his back Jim cautiously entered the store. Grabbing a cart he slowly went up and down the

aisles. Not much remained, at least of the food, except for canned items. There seemed to be more of that left. Maybe only the survivors were taking that as zombies probably couldn't open the cans. Jim took advantage of this windfall and started gathering all he could find. Focused on grabbing cans and tossing them in the cart he was quite surprised by the shuffling sound of a zombie coming down the aisle just 10 feet away from him.

"Dumb, stupid, amateur mistake.", he mumbled to himself realizing he had left his 870 on the shelf and it was now about 10 feet behind the zombie. To buy some time he took the can in his hand and flung it at the zombie just as much a distraction as to free up his hands to swing his AR around and use it. The can, tuna fish, missed the zombie but did hit the shelf next to it splitting open and spraying tuna around. The zombie froze. Turned and started lapping up the tuna almost like a dog.

Hmm, thought Jim as a light bulb went off in his head. With his AR ready he sprinted the other way down the aisle and did a quick scan of the signs. Three aisles down he dashed down and grabbed a dozen pop top cans stuffing them in his pockets. Another quick sprint back just in time to see the zombie licking the last of the tuna and turning its focus back to Jim. "Well, let's see if this works...", said Jim to no one in particular. He grabbed a can out of his pocket, popped the lid and flung the can over the zombie's head. Almost immediately upon impact the zombie turned, rushed over and started lapping up the food. Cat food. Fancy Feast Chicken flavored something or other. Amazing, he thought, the smell must be enough to distract them. Waiting until the zombie was almost done with the can, Jim finally lined his sights up on its head and pulled the trigger. One shot, one kill, no sense in wasting ammo.

He finished gathering up the canned food, went back to the pet aisle and grabbed as much as he could fit in the cart. These would make ideal, um, distraction grenades. Yeah. That's what I'll call them. Pushing the cart outside he loaded up his truck, grabbed a handful of "grenades" and tossed them on the seat next to him.

For the next 2 hours Jim drove around actively looking for zombies. As he found them he'd toss the grenades and see if they went after

them. About half the time they did while the rest of the time it didn't seem to work. He'd have to think on this. Heading back home he unloaded and locked down the house. The rest of the evening was spent with his various radios. A surprising number of people were still out there and on the ham bands and while they wouldn't give exact locations, or call signs anymore, just comments about their general areas were helpful. Everyone discussed what they had figured out or found out, with much emphasis put on first hand information. "I heard from a guy who knew..." type of comments were quickly discarded. If you didn't do it yourself or personally witness it then it wasn't reliable. The survival conversations weren't theoretical or fictional scenarios anymore. It was life or death. When Jim finally signed off he had a much better understanding of what made them tick and had found warm reception to his pet food can grenade technique.

Another couple of days passed and Jim finally decided it was time to go check out Mike's stash. He made sure he had his universal key, a good pair of bolt cutters, loaded up with his usual 72 hours of supplies and made the half hour drive to the storage facility. The place was quite trashed. It looked like a lot of people had panicked and grabbed their stuff in a real hurry to get out of the area. A number of doors had also obviously been busted into. He went down the aisles with some trepidation that all of Mike's stuff might have been stolen.

Fortunately as he got closer to the garage sized room Mike had rented Jim saw no signs of tampering. A quick snip of the lock and he had the door open. A whistle escaped Jim's lips as he saw the full stash. He had been out here with Mike with a few loads early on to help him carry and arrange it but hadn't been back since. Mike had since added 10 more years of Long Term Storage food. The LTS food was mostly in 5 gallon buckets although there was also a pallet full of boxes, each with 14 MRE's. One whole wall was a virtual arsenal. Easily 2 dozen weapons were hanging from pegboard that had been put up with 4 pallets underneath them, each with a different caliber of ammo. The back of the room had a canoe, pair of kayaks and enough camping gear for an entire troop of scouts. In the middle of the room was a big pile of all sorts of stuff and a half dozen barrels, 3 labeled 'Gas, with PRI' and 3 labeled 'Diesel, with PRI'.

Jim didn't just want to leave the stuff here but also had no way to

transport any more than a tiny fraction of equipment at a time. Figuring it was as safe here as anywhere he closed the door with a clatter and re-locked it with his own lock from the truck. He was about to get in the truck when he heard a faint call for help. Figuring zombies wouldn't be playing tricks on him, heck they could barely grunt let alone carry on a conversation, he cautiously started to explore and see the source of the calls.

Walking down a couple of units to the end of the aisle, and the security fence he heard the calls a little louder. Making sure his 870 was ready he led with it and turned the corner. There, nearly parked against the fence was a Jeep with 2 people in it. The woman in the passenger seat was weakly calling for help. Jim scanned around and decided that she wasn't a zombie and the area seemed secure. Once satisfied he walked forward enough to be in her line of site and called to her.

She looked and started calling more desperately. He finally gestured for her to be quiet and said he'd have to go around the fence and that she should just sit quietly until he could get back around. He walked back to his truck and drove it around to her. Bringing some water, a can of cat food and some candy bars he went over to her door and cautiously opened it keeping the door between her and him. She thanked him for stopping and said that she just woke up here but she couldn't get her fiancée to wake up but that he did have a pulse and was breathing. She had no idea how long she'd been there. Jim popped open a can of cat food and handed it to her. She looked at the label.

"Cat food? Is this some kind of joke?"

"I take it you don't want to eat that?"

"Uggh, I'm starving but not that hungry. This is really mean of you to do."

"Sorry but I had to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"That you weren't a zombie. Many of them would have started devouring the cat food immediately upon smelling it. At least the eaters would have.", he said while handing her the water and candy bars. "The beaters don't seem to care about the food, neither do the pervs although they're mostly dead now. OCDs, well, they could get their own book."

"Huh? You're not making sense to me."

"I'll explain later. Let me check him out.", said Jim going around and opening the drivers door. The guy appeared to just be in a deep sleep. Almost like a coma, or perhaps a metamorphosis sleep. The only question is what would emerge when he woke up. "Can you drive?"

"I don't think so. I've tried starting it and while it tries to turn over it won't keep running."

Jim checked the gauges and saw the tank on empty. "You're out of gas. Didn't you know? "

"No, I must have fallen asleep before Andy pulled over here."

"How long have you been here?"

"I... uh... I don't know. Let's see it was tuesday when that thing attacked us, we drove well into the night until I fell asleep. It looks like mid morning so I've probably been out of it for about a half day now."

"It's Friday, not Wednesday, so you've been sleeping 2 1/2 days. About average for the infected."

"Infected? Wait, Friday? How...? Do you... ? Um..."

"I know it's a lot to take in. I can explain it all but it takes time. First I want you to take your temperature." Jim pulled a disposable thermometer out of his bag and gave it to her.

"Why?"

"Just take it. Humor me."

"Uh, OK.", she said. Checking it she read off, "101 degrees. I guess I got a mild fever. Must be why I feel under the weather."

"No, you were infected with the zombie germ but survived and didn't turn into one. He's probably infected too."

"I was OK so he will be to. Right?"

"No way to know. Can you help me with him?"

"What are you doing?"

"Tying him up."

"No! Stop! You'll hurt him."

"If he wakes up and is a zombie I'm going to do a lot more than hurt him."

"No, you can't! I love him."

"You love who he was. Until he wakes up you don't know if will be him or something else entirely. Trust me, the last thing you want is a beater to deal with."

"A what? You know, never mind, you can tell me later. Just don't hurt him. OK?"

"I promise until he wakes up I'll be nice. But after he wakes all bets are off. Now help me get him out of here and into my truck."

They moved him into Jim's truck and then proceeded to tie his arms and legs together. They also put a seatbelt on him. Karen wanted their supplies so she opened up her Jeep and dug through the equipment with Jim.

"You know, most of this stuff is crap. It's torn, broken or just plain not going to be helpful anymore.", Jim commented.

"It was high quality expensive equipment until that zombie just tore through our camp. I think the packs we had are the only things that weren't broken but we were in such a hurry to get out of there we just tossed stuff in the back and took off. Andy killed it even though it was unarmed. You won't tell the police, will you?, Karen asked with a scared look on her face.

Jim just started laughing. Finally he composed himself and explained, "Tell the police? Heck they're probably all zombies too. There is no police. No government. Nothing."

"But the president will send in the army or something. Won't he?"

"President? Military? Within a few days of the outbreak the president made a speech and then disappeared. Hasn't been heard from since. And the troops either went home to protect their families or turned into zombies, or probably both. I would image the Navy out on ships with no contact might still be somewhat intact but that might be about it."

"Can't Europe or Japan come help us?"

"Help us? They can't help themselves. They're all infected too. Weren't you around when this started? "

"Just at the very beginning. We packed up and headed off to the woods and have been camping there ever since. Until that zombie showed up we thought we were safe, although out of touch with the world too. Once we got attacked we just ran out of there and then decided to head for home and see if everything had returned to normal."

"Not hardly."

They finished moving the packs to Jim's truck but pretty much abandoned the rest of the equipment.

"What do you have for defense?"

"Defense?"

"Weapons? Guns? a big stick? anything?"

"Uh, no. "

"Do you know how to handle a gun?"

"Well, I put in my four years with the Guard and Andy was an Army Ranger."

"I'll take that as a yes. Got a preference?"

"Not really. "

Jim started the truck, drove back into the storage center and this time right up to Mike's unit. He parked far enough back that Karen wouldn't be able to see in.

"Stay in the truck, I'll be right back."

A few minutes later Jim came out with 2 big guns. He waved her out and handed one to her. "This is for you and the other for him if he wakes up and is normal."

"I can't take this. I have no money to pay you for it."

"Money's worthless now. Besides I'm giving it to you, not selling it."

"Well, OK, but it's just a loan. Agreed?"

Over the next half hour Karen checked over the AR and shot a few magazines at the big orange door of another storage unit. Like riding a bicycle, she quickly was placing more than adequate groupings.

"That's enough for today. The ammo we have is all we'll probably ever have. Keep the AR with you. Always. You go to bed and it should be right next to you. Go to the bathroom and it should be next to you. You eat and it should be next to you. The last thing you want is to be surprised by a zombie."

"Thanks."

"Your welcome. Here, take these."

"More cat food? Is this some kind of fetish with you?"

"Hardly. The eaters are attracted to it. You treat these almost like a hand grenade. Pull the top and toss at a zombie. If it's an eater you just bought yourself 30-60 second before it finishes and comes after you."

"An eater?"

"Pay close attention. There are four main kinds of zombies. What happens is this infection seems to make you stupid but also enhances your base urges. So, people that liked to eat. I mean they really liked food. They became what we call 'eaters'. Those that go around eating. The problem is we seem to be prey to them. They have no problem tracking you down and eating you. More often than not while you're still alive too."

"Ewww."

"Yeah.. Eww. Next are the 'beaters'. These are formerly people who had violent tendencies. Gang bangers, ex cons, domestic abusers, etc. They seem to enjoy beating anything they can their hands on. They'll literally kick and hit you until your dead, and then keep going until there is nothing left to identify you with. Very nasty and highly aggressive. Unfortunately the cat food doesn't work on these."

"But it does on the eaters?"

"Yes. Third are the 'pervs'. Sexual deviants, predators, rapists, etc. Those with very strong basic urges toward sex. I don't have to tell you why you want to stay away from them. The good news, if you can call it that, is that most have literally killed themselves over sex. They were so narrowly focused that they died of dehydration or starvation within the first few days and weeks. Unfortunately newly infected might still fall into this category."

Jim continued, "And last we have the OCDs."

"As in Obsessive Compulsive?"

"Exactly. Their compulsion was so ingrained in their base responses that they just kept repeating their compulsion over and over and over. Like the pervs most of these have died too. Even new cases of these are rarely dangerous. As long as you don't interfere with their task they pretty much ignore you."

"Why haven't the beaters died then if they're focused on beatings instead of eating?"

"The latest observations are pointing to them switching to eating mode until satiated and then going back to beating."

"Latest observations? Sounds like a news report. I thought all power was out."

"It is. I have alternative power capability and a decent variety of radios. I've been able to communicate with many others, like me, around the world. We all shared out first hand experiences and observations and have a pretty good handle on what we're facing."

"Others like you? So, you're a survivalist?"

"I guess it doesn't matter what term you want to use now. We used to prefer prepper as it didn't have the negative connotations that the media associated with survivalists, but, yeah, I guess that would be the most accurate term now."

"Let me thank you, again.... you know, I never got your name. I'm Karen."

"And I'm Jim. Now lets get you back to my place and we can keep an eye on Andy."

Karen, Andy and Jim settled into a routine. At least once Andy woke up and proved he wasn't a zombie. When he first started coming to, there

were some tense moments. The last thing you want to do is wake up to to a big black scary gun pointing at you. Eventually he stopped yelling which is a good thing. While yelling and trashing around trying to get out of his restraints he appeared very much as the beaters acted. Karen stepped in front of Jim and his shotgun and finally got Andy to focus on her. Once he did he settled down and Jim decided he was safe and didn't have to be killed.

Their routine involved an hour or so exercise while listening to the various radios for more reports. Over the course of a month they all improved their physical conditioning. Following the workout was personal hygiene time, breakfast and then the days duties. Be it a scavenging run or work around Jim's place or whatever else needed doing. They'd wrap up the day with dinner, a bit more radio and then bed. Every so often they'd make a new observation and report it. Over a number of weeks a disturbing trend appeared to be happening pretty much world wide.

The eaters and beaters were teaming up into packs. No one knew why but the eaters didn't try to eat each other, nor did they try to eat the beaters. The beaters, for the most part, left the eaters alone too. They'd chase their prey, beat them to death. At this point the eaters would pull off arms or legs to eat while the beaters keep pounding on what was left of the corpse, perhaps grabbing a few mouthfuls themselves.

Singly the zombies could be dealt with but with their new found pack techniques it made an already dangerous world even worse.

Chapter 18

Over a couple of weeks Roger wired together a few panels, placed them on the roof and ran them to a charger and finally connected a few batteries. He waited for two full days of sun before connecting the inverter and then the chargers for the cordless tools. Once those

batteries were charged he could start using the tools and progress went much quicker. While waiting for the various batteries to charge they took the SUV and trailer made a few trips concentrating on various hardware stores. At each stop they cleaned out all the fasteners, roofing caulk, angle aluminum and more hand tools. Surprisingly all the hardware stores were pretty much untouched. Even the food, mostly candy bars in the check out aisles, was untouched but even more importantly these places all had a display of cases of bottled water. They took it all.

It took Roger another week with Jason's help to lug the panels to the roof and get them mounted. They fashioned a battery and electronics box on the roof paying special attention to make it weather proof. Once it was in place the permanent charge controller and inverter, along with the batteries, were installed. Everything was carefully tested and then allowed to charge the rest of the batteries.

Back inside they stacked all the backup and surplus solar equipment neatly on one side of the garage. With all their scavenging the garage was getting filled up rather quickly. Finally, Roger installed some monitoring equipment inside the building so they could check on the system without needing to go up on the roof every time.

The big day had arrived. Roger had disconnected the buildings electrical system from the former city power source and connected it to the solar system. Lights came on and everyone cheered. Now that they could easily see in the building they spent the rest of the day and the entire next day rechecking the entire building. They realized they had more space than they had thought but would need to move much of their supplies to unused offices. Taking advantage of having to handle everything, yet again, Roger setup his net book, charged it up and then used a spreadsheet to inventory everything in the process. They designated one room for solar, one for food and one for everything else. Besides the 4 offices they were using as bedrooms there were still 3 more plus a conference room available. It was decided to keep the conference room as a common room but the other three would go towards supplies or possibly be used for additional people if they agreed to allow more to join.

The last big hurdle was water. After much debate they finally decided

that collecting, filtering and using rain water would be their best bet. The roof already did collect it and divert it all down to the sewers. If they could change the downspouts to fill a cistern instead and then pipe that into the building they would be set. Piping was easy but where could you find a big tank in the city? Jason finally offered the winning solution. Take a tanker truck from a landscaping company. They were always doing work back home in the subdivision that Jason and Ashley had lived in and after planting would return weekly for the next month to water the transplants. Jason remembered the name but not the location of the company. While the three of them cursed the Internet no longer being in existence, Autumn left the room. She returned a few minutes later and slammed a big yellow book on the table.

"Here. Try this.", she said, and then mumbled something about kids these days not being able to find their own rears without an iPhone and a couple of apps on it to tell them how.

Shrubs and Shoots was on the outskirts of the suburbs. Close enough to service their customers but far enough away to afford some land for their nursery and greenhouses. They piled in the Yukon and headed out first thing the next morning. About an hour later they were scouring the grounds looking for the vehicle shed. Jason and Ashley found it and called Autumn and Roger over. It did not take long to find the keys and to verify that the tank was labeled for water only. Chemicals prohibited. They did find other trucks clearly labeled as chemical, fertilizer and weed killer usage only so they were pretty certain that the tank would be safe. As a precaution they'd fill and empty it once just to give it an extra rinse before use.

Autumn pointed out how well many plants were still growing in the greenhouses, even after all this time with no water and with the colder temperatures outdoors. If they could no longer find sufficient food it might be worth considering a move out here to start up a farmer's life. Roger and Jason were thoughtful while Ashley offered her usual sarcastic sound and walked away. Just a few minutes later they all heard her scream and ran to find her.

Ashley was up against the side of a building surrounded by zombies. At least a half dozen with more coming around the far side of the

building. Then went in attack mode with Jason using his preferred method of bat and machete. They each kept yelling to Ashley to take her sidearm and start shooting but she just crouched down and kept screaming. Jason was the first to reach her quickly dispatching two and then fending off 4 of them while Autumn and Roger kept a steady stream of lead headed towards the new ones joining the fray.

Swing, chop, dodge. Jason kept up the unrelenting attacks but these zombies seemed to be more skilled than the rest he faced. They dodged his shots, something he had not experienced before. When they did take a shot from the bat, they would use the impact to provide them momentum to tumble out of the way avoiding his machete. He was unable to land a head shot and their constant probing of his defense of Ashley was quickly exhausting his strength.

Chop, dodge, dodge, chop, swing, dodge, dodge, dodge. Jason was doing more and more dodging trying to stay one step ahead of them. But three of them kept attacking. The fourth one had dropped back and was looking around as if searching.

To Jason's dismay he noticed the fourth one found what it was looking for. A wooden pole, no, actually a wooden handle with a rusty hoe blade on the end of it. He pressed his attacks on the other three and managed to knock one out although he was still too busy with the other ones to deliver a kill shot. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the fourth one finally figure out which end of the hoe to hold and make a few tentative swings with it. A smile, if you could call it that, seemed to appear on its face.

Jason knew he was in trouble. He started yelling, "Ashley, get out your gun! Shoot them in the head. I can't keep this up forever."

She just cowered against the wall crying.

The inexperience of the fourth zombie worked to Jason's advantage when it finally joined the fray and in its exuberance swung and caught one of his zombie friends in the side when Jason ducked. Before he could pull it free, Jason popped back up and took off the head of the injured zombie. As the body collapsed the fourth one managed to hang on to his hoe and pull it free.

Roger and Autumn were taking their time to place their shots, specifically going for head shots as their ammo was running low. The pile of zombies must have numbered at least 30 already but thankfully the new ones appearing seemed to be slowing down. Last mag called out Roger. Autumn still had 3 left and tossed one of them towards Roger.

"Here! Place your shots. It's all we got left.", said Autumn while thinking that he had gotten pretty good with the AR. They had a half dozen that were liberated earlier from the sports store and once she was certain Roger was what he appeared she had given him one and they both practiced a little. She would have liked more time with it but not knowing when or where more ammo would come from most had to be saved for obvious reasons. In fact that pile of obvious reasons was getting even bigger but only a few were left standing and no more appeared to be coming anymore.

Jason faced off against the unarmed zombie and Mr. Hoe as he started thinking of him. He finally had his opening and took out the unarmed one with both a rib crushing bat shot and a spinning move resulting in another clean decapitation. The victory was short lived as the move brought him within reach of Mr. Hoe. The zombie swung his implement catching Jason in the side with the pole, but not the rusty blade, making an audible crack. Jason didn't know if the crack was the handle splintering in half or his ribs or both but it stung like a thousand angry bees had just taken up residence under his jacket. The shock caused him to drop the machete.

Mr. Hoe pressed the advantage swinging and clawing with his arms at Jason. He backed pedaled while still trying to catch his breath and tried to put up a weak defense. It proved too much of an exertion and his bat swing, while connecting with Mr. Hoe, was not effective. He tripped on one of the other bodies landing hard on his back and setting another thousand angry bees free in his jacket. The remaining zombie pounced on him in an instant punching, clawing and biting. Jason fought back and with a surge of adrenalin was able to yell a guttural growl and keep the zombie at bay but it was just too strong for this to last much longer. The zombie was now trying to bite his neck and tear out the jugular. Jason resisted and twisted just enough for the zombie

to get a mouthful of coat and shoulder instead of neck. The bite was viscous and deep and penetrating through the coat deep into his flesh. Jason screamed in pain and then started to pass out. His last thought was that of sadness.

Sadness for all the senseless violence. Sad that as he died he'd be going to face his dead parents. He couldn't save his mom and killed his dad. He couldn't protect Ashley. What would they think of him? What could he say? The sweet darkness overcame him.

Autumn and Roger both hit the last one with simultaneous shots. As they checked the rifles and rounds they had left, they heard Jason's scream and saw the zombie on top of him. With the thrashing around neither could risk a shot and neither was close enough to do anything. They watched as the zombie tore out a chunk of his shoulder.

Jason felt like he was drowning. He couldn't breathe. This was not what he thought death would feel like. No harps, no white puffy clouds. Then again no fire or brimstone either. His eyes flashed open as a cloth was pulled from his face. He tried to sit up but the angry bees immediately returned. He heard yelling, "He's awake!"

"Wwwhhheere... am... Whhat hhapppeenneddd?"

"Jace lay back and rest. Your safe."

Jason didn't hear as he had already passed out again.

Over the next week he was in and out of delirious states. He was running a high fever and they weren't sure he was going to make it. At the end of the week, however, he woke up for the first time with his temperature back to a normal 101. Ashley was sleeping in a chair next to his bed.

Jason tried to sit up again and discovered that there were still angry bees but maybe only a hundred were left. He laid back with a moan which woke Ashley.

"Jason, you're awake. Don't say anything, just let me take your

temperature."

Upon seeing a normal 101 degree reading Ashley was visible happier.

"I'm thirsty. Can you....", he hoarsely croaked.

"Water?", she interrupted.

Jason nodded. She reached over to a table and poured a glass and put in a straw. She brought it over to him and gently held his head up and told him to take just sips at first.

For the next 2 days Jason drifted in and out of sleep but with the fever gone it was restful and recuperative for him. On the third day he was able to sit up a bit in bed. His shoulder still ached and his side hurt if he twisted but as long as he didn't move much he was OK. He asked Ashley what had happened but she just told him to rest.

One afternoon he woke and found Roger sitting there instead of Ashley. He asked Roger what happened.

"Jason, it was one hell of a battle, although I don't have to tell you... heh?", he said with a big grin.

Jason smiled and tried to laugh a little but the pain quickly brought a stop to that. Once he regained his composure he asked Roger to continue.

"What do you remember?"

"I remember taking some of them out to get to Ashley and protect her and then getting surrounded by four of them. I was slowly making progress until one of them seemed to learn. He picked up a hoe and started attacking me with it. He caught me in the side with it while I was finishing with one of the other ones."

"Ah, that explains the ribs. We never did figure out how that happened. Continue."

"Well I went down somehow and that thing jumped on me. I was trying

to fight him off and kept calling for Ashley to shoot it. He finally latched on to my shoulder and the pain was... well, I thought I was done for. I figured that was the end as everything went dark."

"And that's it?"

"Yep. That's it. So how did I end up here? In fact, where is here?"

"We're back at the fortress. We weren't sure you were going to make it."

"But how am I alive? Why didn't the zombie kill me?"

"Well, Autumn and I shot close to 40 of them but since we were at a safe distance the whole time there really wasn't much to it. You, however, were the hero taking on a half dozen of them in hand to hand combat. Oh, and when you're feeling better expect to take some hell from Autumn for doing that.", said Roger with a wink.

Jason smiled and said, "But you still didn't say what happened to the zombie that had me."

"Short version, Ashley killed it."

"Ashley? Really? So she finally got her gun out and shot it?"

"No. When that thing tore out your shoulder Autumn and I both lined up on it but with all of the movement couldn't risk missing it and hitting you."

"So you ran up and beat it off of me?"

"No. Before either of us could react Ashley suddenly jumped up, grabbed the machete you had dropped and chopped an arm off. The thing jumped up yelling and she hacked another one off. She just kept hacking and hacking until nothing recognizably human was left. We watched literally in stunned shock."

"So she saved me?"

"Yes, but that was just the beginning. We finally snapped out of it and ran over to you. You had bled pretty well from the shoulder wound and we tried our best to bandage it. Ashley, meanwhile just collapsed next to you sobbing something about...."

"... About being too scared. Too scared to admit I needed help. Too scared of what happened to mom and dad. Too scared to grow up.", said Ashley from the doorway.

"But you weren't too scared to do what needed to be done when I was hurt."

"Jace, when I thought I was about to lose you too something in me just snapped. The fear just melted away. I wanted that thing away from you. I wanted it dead. I've never felt like that before about anyone. Anything. That feeling scared me but also gave me strength."

Autumn walked into the room and continued, "After we tried to bandage you up we brought you back here and made one of the offices into a make shift hospital room. For 2 days you just kept getting worse and worse. Ashley finally demanded that I drive her to the library or she'd walk it herself. She wouldn't tell me why, just insisted I take her. I kept watch while she was in there about 10 minutes and then she insisted we go to the drug store on the corner where she was also in there about 10 minutes. In both cases she came out with a large bag of stuff but refused to say anything. When we got back she has been in here nearly 24x7 taking care of you."

Roger added, "It was only recently that we found out she had taken medical books from the library and while at the drug store she took all the medical supplies and broke into the pharmacy grabbing anything that even sounded like an antibiotic. She spent every moment here reading about treatment, infection and dosages and then started to properly clean and bandage your wound along with giving you shots of antibiotics. Until your fever broke she wouldn't allow anyone in here."

Jason looked at Ashley and asked, "Is that true? Did you really take care of me?"

Shyly, she replied, "Yes. After mom and dad I couldn't stand the thought of losing you too.", then gaining momentum she continued, "I was so scared out there but then something in me just died. Or maybe something flared to life. I don't know. You were just laying here with your life slowly ebbing away. I couldn't just stand by anymore. I just knew I had to do something. I've really been a jerk lately. To all of you, I've been a jerk. I'm sorry."

Roger and Autumn just stood there with their mouths hanging open.

Jason responded, "I knew something was wrong with you, I too am sorry I didn't ask or try to help."

Over the next few weeks Jason healed up and stayed at the fortress while the others continued their scavenging operations. At Ashley's insistence they went to the hospital and found a number of portable devices including an ultrasound along with vastly superior medical equipment and even some minor surgery gear. Ashley spent all of her free time reading and reading every medical text she could get her hands on. Eventually she even learned to use the ultrasound unit and checked Jason's ribs. It wasn't as good as an xray but worked well enough to see that 3 ribs had indeed been fractured. She even went so far as to prepare a substantial field trauma kit/first aid bag that would go with the group every time they left the fortress. It seems Ashley had finally found her purpose and was quickly growing up.

Chapter 19

Jim, Andy and Karen had amassed a substantial quantity of supplies at Jim's place. Nearly every day they continued their operations which more often than not included simple reconnaissance and labeling of their various maps and notebooks for future reference. They had documented enough food and water resources to last at least 5 years and this was in addition to Jim's LTS supplies.

As they were securing fuel supplies and treating it for long term

storage Jim suggested they go retrieve their Jeep as a secondary vehicle. Andy and Karen readily agreed and plans were made. It might not seem normal to put together a plan and gather resources simply to go get a vehicle but you had to be prepared to live out there for possibly days if something bad happened. There were no emergency services. No police. No fire department. No triple A. No one to come help. And most beings you encountered wanted to do you harm. Didn't matter if they were zombies or survivors. Of course they did run into the occasional individual or small group that was friendly, at least to a degree. As long as both sides were armed and kept a safe distance they could carry on a conversation, of course specifics as to resources and locations were rarely discussed.

Minor trades sometimes occurred and on real hard luck cases, usually groups with young kids, Jim would either give them a bit of food or, as he preferred to do, point them to a nearby food resource and stand guard while they gathered what they needed. Jim felt that teaching them to fish, or in this case, safely scavenge, would help them survive much more than a simple handout.

Dispatching zombies was still nearly a daily activity and since they were, more often than not, operating in groups now it made it that much harder. Some had even learned tool usage and were carrying around mostly striking implements. Being armed with with their rifles allowed the three of them to maintain a safe distance in each fight.

In a matter of days they had developed an efficient fighting triangle. They would stand with their backs to each other each covering a 120 degree field. This saved them from another group of zombies coming up from behind on more than one occasion. On the rare occasion where there were so many zombies that they even changing a magazine could be life threatening, the person nearly empty would call out and the one who had fired the least would swap with them. Each would take a simple step around each other allowing a fresh shooter to hit the targets and giving the other one a moment to swap magazines and catch their breath. As they got more proficient and comfortable with each other it was almost like watching a ballet dance when they were fighting.

Jim discussed the volume of supplies they were getting and the lack of

storage options and they all agreed some additional shelving would help. Time for another trip to the home center. They parked near the front doors, forced them open and headed for shelving. On the way they heard noises inside the store and realized they weren't alone. Immediately assuming their fighting triangle, they started to clear the store. Up and down each aisle they quietly went. Approaching the electrical and electronics department they found their targets. Four of them, but they were taking boxes off the shelf, appeared to be discussing them and then putting them back and taking another. The fact that they were apparently talking in hushed voices and using a flashlight strongly implied they weren't zombies. Friendlies? Yet to be determined but probably not zombies.

Jim, taking no chances popped the top on a can of cat food and slid it over to them.

They heard the pop and got defensive but couldn't tell from where the sound came. As the can slid towards them they back tracked with their flashlights and brought their own weapons to bear.

"GUN!", called Jim diving behind the display with Karen and Andy following suit.

The other group likewise took cover and a female voice called out, "What's 10 times 7?"

"Who wants to know?"

"It's a simple question, unless you're a zombie."

"We're not zombies. Have you ever carried on a conversation with one?"

"No, but there are others who are no better than zombies, we find they're not so good at math either."

"We're just here for some shelving. If you have no hostile intent then put your guns down and back away and we'll be on our way."

"Yeah, so you can shoot us first and take our supplies, not likely."

Besides you still haven't answered my question."

"OK, I'll play. seventy. My turn. 'To be or not to be."

"Shakespeare. What's the area of a triangle?"

"Length times height divided by two. How long are we going to keep this up?"

"How about we all step out nice and slow weapons lowered?"

"On the count of three?"

"One - two - three."

All three of them rose to their feet, weapons ready but lowered and cautiously stepped out. The two people on the other side did the same.

"There were four of you, I only see three."

"Well, you're holding back with someone too. Care to try this again?"

Both sides gestured to their hidden backup who also stepped out. They stood there awkwardly for a moment sizing each other up. Finally Jim suggested they head to the front of the store by the windows so they could have a conversation without shining flashlights at each other. Everyone cautiously headed up there keeping an eye on each other and gathered around to have a chat.

They each discovered that they were dealing with honorable people and Jim, Karen and Andy soon learned Autumn, Roger, Ashley and Jason's names while sharing their own. They talked zombies, strategy and loosely talked supplies and resources with neither side giving away any secrets. Both admitted to having a secure location but neither discussed where.

Suddenly, without warning Jason rose to his feet and pulled out his bat and machete. Within moments everyone was pointing weapons at each other. Jason gestured towards the windows and said, "We should

probably take care of them before we shoot each other." They all looked to see a group of zombies, perhaps 15-20 strong advancing on the doors that were still propped open.

Andy ran for the door, pushed them closed and quickly pushed a row of carts behind them. When the zombies reached the doors they tried, unsuccessfully to push them open. One of them who had stood back throughout the futile attempts to get in through the doors bellowed an animal sound. The others stopped and looked to him. He cautiously advanced on the outdoor displays and looked from them to the window and back. Over and over. Finally he grabbed a brick and tentatively threw it at the window. It cracked but did not break. He grabbed another and threw harder. The window was now severely spider webbed.

A few others caught on and quickly a decorative retaining wall display setup to show off landscaping brick options was reduced to nothing with several windows now broken. When they ran out of bricks the zombies turned their attention to the windows again and approached. One tried to climb in, slipped and fatally impaled itself on the broken glass. The others used his body as a ramp to get in.

The seven survivors had not been idle. As they realized the zombies were learning they took up a defensive position behind a display and waited. Once they started coming in, all through the same opening, it was relatively easy to shoot each one in order. At least until 2 more took a flying leap through another broken window.

Jason jumped up and called, "I've got them." He started his twirling display with swinging bat and flashing machete. Swing, dodge, swing, whack, chop. More came in though the second opening but he was keeping up with the flow.

Roger, Ashley, Autumn, Karen, Andy and Jim quickly finished off the rest and advanced toward the opening to see if any remained outside. None were to be seen.

"Did you see how they learned to use the bricks? That's new. I'll have to report it.", said Jim.

"Report it? To who?", asked Roger.

"The ham network. There are a bunch of us who communicate each day at 6am, 2pm and 10pm. We try to attend at least one broadcast and anything stated at one is repeated 5 more times so even if we miss a day we can still catch the 'news'. Anytime new zombie activities or behavior is observed we report it. My claim to fame, at least until now, is the cat food. Although this new twist is not good."

"Cat food? Is that the thing you threw at us?"

"Yeah. Many of them will smell it and go after the food source. We use them as distraction grenades and also as a test to see if someone is a zombie. It works almost every time with the eaters."

"Neat trick. But what is an eater?"

Jim went through the four classifications of eaters, beaters, pervs and OCDs. The four of them nodded their heads in agreement with the unofficial classifications as they had witnessed these very behaviors too.

Jason had meanwhile worked his way outside and called to them, "Is there one in there wearing a black leather jacket?"

Searching the bodies, "Uh, no. Why?"

"That was the apparent leader who stopped them from going through the door and started with the bricks and window routine. I can't find the body out here."

"Well it's not in here.", said Ashley.

They all went over to check the parking lot and stepping over the bodies Karen lost her balance and sliced her arm on the broken glass. Ashley immediately jumped into action pulling off her jacket and examining the profusely bleeding wound. Quickly digging out some bandages she pressed them to the wound and elevated it. She kept this up while the rest of them continued looking for leather jacket zombie.

"This is not good. Self preservation. It's the first time I've witnessed it. This is as vital as the brick story. I must make notes so I don't forget any details." Jim scribbled in notebook and put it back in his pocket. He went over to check on Karen.

"Perhaps there is a fifth kind. The brainiac.", said Andy, which prompted some Pinky and the Brain jokes and of course the zombie imitations with the chant of brains, brains. The humor helped relieve the stress of the battle.

Ashley was carefully removing the bandages and examining the wound. "Nothing major was hit and the bleeding seems to have stopped. I can try to stitch it up for you but I can't do anything for the pain. It will help you from tearing it open again."

"Do what you have to."

Ashley got out some sterile thread and a needle and proceed to crudely but effectively stitch it closed. She re-banded it and then fished out a pack of antibiotics. Looking them over carefully she finally handed it to Karen and said to take three per day, morning, noon and night until they were all used up. It should help prevent any infection.

Jim watched this and then asked, "You look young. I would have never thought you were in medical school."

"I'm only 15. I was still in high school when this happened."

"How'd you learn to do that?"

"Books. My brother got hurt and I wanted to make sure if something ever happened again I would be able to help. I've been reading everything I can get my hands on. To be honest, this was my first real field stitching. Until now I'd only practiced with thread on stuffed animals and once on Jason's shoulder."

"Well, you could have fooled me. Keep up your learning, you're obviously doing well.", said Jim while Ashley both blushed and beamed with the unaccustomed praise.

With the excitement over everyone felt it best they get back to what they were doing and then take off for their respective homes. Before doing so Jim went out to the truck and brought back a radio and handed it to Roger. "Here. It can run off AA batteries so make sure you grab plenty of spares. Here's how you operate it." Jim proceeded to demonstrate how to change channels and how to transmit when you wanted to talk. He advised just spending a few days listening before joining in and to not reveal anything that could allow someone to figure how who or where they were. Roger suggested that he'd use a coded handle but Jim advised against it as too awkward. Jim mentioned that he just went by Jim and Karen and Andy just used their first names too. The rest agreed that they'd also just use their first names.

Chapter 20

As the colder months were nearing an end, Roger fired up the radio for his daily check in. The moment he tuned to the correct channel he heard a frantic sounding Karen calling for him.

"Karen, it's Roger, I'm here. What's the matter?"

"Roger, it's Jim. He got hurt. Hurt real bad and we don't have the knowledge or resources. Can you guys come help?"

"Sure, but we don't know where you're at and you shouldn't broadcast it."

"Um, uh.... Oh!.. Remember where we saw leather jacket guy when we first met?", asked Karen.

"Yep."

"How quick can you be there?"

"We're on the way. Out.", finished Roger. "Hey, guys, we got a big

problem...."

Within minutes everyone was in the Yukon heading for the home center. They parked a distance away where they could safely observe the lot. Shortly afterwards a Jeep came tearing into the lot and screeched to a halt right in the middle. After they saw, in their binoculars, and scopes, that it was Karen and were sure that no one else was waiting to ambush them they put the SUV in gear and drove on in.

As soon as Karen saw the SUV and who was in it she quickly drove towards them, abruptly stopping next to them and yelled out the window, "Follow me! He's getting worse!"

They just barely made out the last words as the tires were already squealing as she took off out of there. She drove a direct route back to Jim's place with the rest following along. She led them to a part of town where everyone had larger than average lots but still had modest homes. No McMansions. No cookie cutter houses either. Each appeared to be custom built, but again modest and tasteful. They noticed that the house had roll down metal shutters on all the windows although currently they were rolled up and a number of rock walls used for decorative landscaping but arranged in such a way that a vehicle couldn't simply drive directly up to the house. As they pulled to a stop next to the brick home Karen had already jumped out and was urging them to hurry.

Entering via the back door they followed her to a main floor bedroom where Jim was on the bed. He was white as a ghost and his shirt, along with the bedding and a number of towels were soaked in blood.

Ashley's eyes nearly bulged out of her head and she backed away. "I can't handle this."

Jason stood behind her and stopped her turning her around. "Yes you can. If you do nothing Jim dies. He still might die but if you do nothing then you'll never know if you could have saved him."

She stared at him for a moment, swallowed hard and turned back to Jim. Dropping her medical bag on the bed she rummaged around and

pulled out a pair of gloves. While putting them on she asked what happened.

Andy offered, "We were on a normal, heh... who would have thought we'd ever be calling this normal, supply run. Jim was watching while we carried some supplies out. When we were inside we heard a number of shots, dropped our boxes and ran out to find Jim down and bleeding and a couple of gang bangers also down. As we came out a third one saw us and took off. We snapped off a couple of rounds but he was already going around the corner. We loaded Jim up, drove back here and got him to the bed. Karen called on the radio for help and you know the rest."

Ashley had the gloves on and had already started cutting off Jim's shirt and pants. There were two obvious wounds. One high and right near the collar bone, the other low and left, right around the pelvis. Getting the others to help her, she tried to turn Jim onto his side. She could see the upper bullet hole had a corresponding wound on the back but not so with the lower one.

"The upper one looks good. The bullet passed through and missed the bones. I'm just going to clean, de-bridge and bandage both wounds and hope that he can heal on his own from them. "

"What about the lower one?", asked Autumn.

"Looks like the bullet went in but didn't come out. That isn't good."

"Can you take it out?", Andy asked.

"Um, maybe if I had an operating room and 8 more years of training!"

"Can't you at least try?"

"I'll see what I can do. Some stuff I read mentioned that as long as it doesn't get infected he can live with it in him. I just don't know."

Ashley spent nearly an hour cleaning and bandaging the shoulder wound. She worked slowly and carefully and many times stopped and referred to a few books she had with her. Her go to guide, Ditch

Medicine, detailed the process of not closing the wound so it could drain, which she followed. Finally satisfied at the job she did she moved onto the hip. Pulling apart the sides of the rather small wound caused it to start bleeding again but also showed a flash of metal. Quickly blotting up the blood she saw the bullet had lodged in the pelvic bone literally just below the skin. Grabbing a pair of forceps she was able to latch on and pull it out. It made a small thunk on the floor as she dropped it. Using similar techniques she cleaned and bandaged this wound too. Having already performed the steps once she was quicker and more sure of herself and had this one done in only about a half hour.

Physically exhausted from the stress at doing something that could kill a person if done wrong she collapsed back on the floor and just sat there for a number of minutes. Autumn finally went up to her and helped her up, "Come on, let's go sit out there.", and took her to a chair in the living room.

Karen and Andy covered Jim up with a blanket and went to join the others.

"Thank you. Regardless of what happens I know you tried your best.", Karen said to Ashley.

Sounding like a scared little girl, Ashley said, "I sure hope he makes it." Within minutes Ashley was asleep in the chair.

Andy got Rogers' attention and motioned him towards the kitchen. "Hey, I'm not so good at that touchy feely stuff but I can cook. Care to give me a hand whipping up something for dinner?"

"Sure. I'm not so bad in the kitchen myself."

They whipped up some pasta with a quick home made sauce using cans of diced tomatoes and some of Jim's LTS noodles.

Back in the living room Karen noticed it was starting to get dark out. She asked Jason to help her lower the shutters after showing him how. They went around and closed up all the shutters. Once closed Karen flipped on a few lights and tossed another log in the wood burning

stove.

"Looks like you've got a nice setup here.", stated Autumn.

Karen offered, "I can give you the quick tour. It's Jim's place but we've been staying with him for months now. We keep offering to find our own place but he insists it's fine with him if we stay and this way we can split up the work. We did go past our house, or what was left of it. That part of town had just simple ceased to exist when it burned town."

Leaving Ashley asleep in the chair, Jason and Autumn followed Karen around as she pointed out the self sufficient features of the home and its defenses against attack. She left out the basement shelter and storage as it wasn't her place to reveal Jim's preps. Although she thought to herself, if Jim passed I guess they would be our preps now. She shuddered at the thought since Jim seemed to know what to do and had been very generous with his help.

The guys called everyone for dinner, waking Ashley in the process. After a simple but pleasant meal Karen offered a spare bedroom and the couch if they wanted to spend the night and then went into the kitchen with Andy to clean up while the rest discussed it. Ashley didn't want to leave Jim in case any complications resulted and Jason didn't want to leave her here alone, no matter how nice Karen and Andy were. It was decided that Autumn and Roger would head back and keep an eye on the fortress while Jason and Ashley stayed. They'd come back tomorrow around lunch time.

"Ok, you guys drive safe.", called Andy to them as they were leaving.

"Thanks. Jason, if you or Ashley need anything call us. We'll monitor at each designated time."

"We'll be fine. Just don't do anything I wouldn't!", joked Jason.

On the drive home Roger asked Autumn what Jason had meant by that.

"Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Ashley keeps nudging me to, ahem, how can I put this delicately.... take our friendship to another level. I just figured they were trying to play matchmaker with us."

"oh. Oh!.", said Roger as the full meaning finally hit him.

"Given the way things have been going with just trying to survive I hadn't really thought about it until I realized what she kept hinting to me.", said Autumn blushing a bit.

"Autumn, I like you. Really, I do but I wasn't thinking of a relationship. Like you said, just surviving is enough. Maybe in the future it would good to start repopulating to world."

"Oh, how romantic. Me Adam, you Eve. We make lots of babies."

"No, that's not how I , what I ... oh forget it."

"I understand what you're trying to say... I'm just having some fun with you.", said Autumn with big smile.

Roger realized she really was joking with him and had a laugh too.

She continued, "Now is not the time to be bringing kids into the world or complicating things. Perhaps in a while if"

"When", corrected Roger.

Always the optimist, thought Autumn, "OK, when things get better and it isn't a day to day existence."

"Besides", added Roger, "Jim seems to be doing pretty well for himself. He'd make a nice catch for you."

"Huh? The guy's laying in his own pool of blood and must be twice my age!"

"Yeah, but if he doesn't make it look at what you'd get to inherit!", said Roger with a grin.

"Don't even joke. He is a good man. There aren't a lot of good people left and every last one of them will be needed to put society back together again."

They drove the rest of the way back to the Fortress in silence. Lost in their thoughts neither one noticed the car with the headlights off following at a discrete distance.

Chapter 21

The next morning Jim woke feeling like a train had run over him. He tried to sit up but the pain in his shoulder and hip made him gasp in pain and fall back on the pillow. He remembered the three punks dashing out from around the corner firing as they came out. The first shots went wild and he was able to hit one of them quickly. Before he could line up again, the second one, with a nice looking stainless steel Ruger 10/22, if he remembered correctly, hit him in the hip. He lined up and took that one out too. Turning for the third one he felt a hard impact in his shoulder knocking him backwards and down to the ground. He tried to bring his gun up for another shot but passed out before he could. His last thought was that he hoped Karen and Andy would be able to live a good long life here with the preps he had saved up.

Here.

Wait, I am here.

Back in my house. And I'm bandaged up pretty good too. I didn't think Karen or Andy knew how to.

The gasp had been loud enough to wake Ashley sleeping outside in a chair. She got up and came in to check on Jim.

"Ah, girl. I guessed it might have been you. Looks like you've done a pretty good job."

"Uh, thanks. I just cleaned the wounds and bandaged them up. Had to pull a bullet out of the one on your hip. I was going to sew up the shoulder but my book said to leave them open to drain. You'd probably get a scar but have a better chance at healing. I hope that was OK.", said Ashley rushing faster and faster though the words.

"It's fine. I'm alive aren't I?"

Ashley had to admit that he did have color in his skin again and seemed no worse for wear. Although it would be awhile before he was up and about and even longer until he was back to 100%.

At the mid day radio check Ashley mentioned that Jim appeared to be on the road to recovery and they could come get them whenever.

When Roger and Autumn arrived Jim thanked them for bringing Ashley and then called Karen over and instructed her, "Please take them downstairs and show them everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes. After what they've done for me I want them to know what we can do for them if they ever need it."

Karen unlocked the basement door and led them down. Stacked around the walls were nearly 5 years of LTS food along with nearly everything else you'd need from toilet paper to board games.

"Wow!", exclaimed all of them.

"Oh, no. This is just the storage. Over here...", Karen led them to a massive steel door. Unlocking it she opened the door to a landing and then a stairway leading down a dozen steps. Following her down the found a 1200 square foot shelter complete with a small armory and another 2 more years of food plus accommodations for at least a half dozen people.

Everyone was speechless.

Finally Karen just explained. Her and Andy had been just as shocked but Jim told how he had built this when the house was built but listed it as a small scale mushroom farm. He had all of these brochures about "grow your own mushrooms" and "turning mushrooms into money" that he showed the builder and they all thought he was nuts but his checks were good so they built it. Only once the house was done and the contractors gone did he then do the shelter build out and stocking himself. So, only the seven of us know about this.

Jason was the first to speak, "It won't leave our lips unless Jim tells us to share it with someone.", the rest nodded in agreement.

Karen said, "I'm sure Jim already knows that or he wouldn't have had me show you. Just remember if something else ever happens just come here. We're all family now.", followed by a big smile.

Eventually they all went back up stairs. They wanted to thank Jim but he had fallen asleep again. Ashley gave Karen a bottle of antibiotics and instructed her how and when Jim should take them. Finally Roger and Autumn drew up a map of how to get to the fortress and they agreed that in 2 weeks Jim should be healthy enough to make the trip and that they should come over.

"I'm telling you they turned down this alley and then disappeared. They gots to be here somewhere."

"Dude, you been hitten the pipe too hard. Ain't nobody here."

"Yeah, that was good smack. But I ain't shitten you. I weren't high when we followed dem."

"So where did they go then?"

"Like I tells you, we were back a few blocks so they wouldn't spot us and they turned here. When we got here and turned they be gone. Poof!"

"Yeah, you're a poof."

"sshhhhh!, I hear sumthin."

"Yeah, it's a car... quick, back here."

The two of them crouched behind a dumpster and watched a Yukon pull into the alley, go about half way down and stop at a garage door. A couple of kids, not much younger than the two of them, got out and scanned around for a few minutes. Finally they both called out clear and one of them produced a set of keys and opened the garage door. The SUV pulled in and they followed it in and closed the door.

"See, told ya. "

"Shud up. We gotta get back and tell Raul bout dis. They must have nice stuff in there since they keep it all locked up nice."

Jim's wounds were healing nicely and after a week he was already up and about, just performing light tasks. By the end of two weeks he was feeling pretty good with his hip nearly completely healed and his shoulder well on the way. Neither wound had shown signs of infection so Ashley must have cleaned them well or the antibiotics helped or maybe a bit of both. They loaded up Jim's truck with their GHBs and some extra supplies just in case. Grabbing their weapons they loaded up and programmed the GPS for the address of the Fortress. Once they got in the area Jim had Andy take a more circuitous route checking out the neighborhood. It seemed pretty modest with a mix of business, light manufacturing and residential. Once they were certain the area was clean they pulled down the alley and up to the door. Karen hopped out and knocked on the door. A moment later she heard a small motor and realized an outdoor camera a bit over 4 feet above her was pivoting down to get a shot of her and the truck.

Hoping they had the right place she smiled and waved. Almost instantly the garage door opened and Jason came out.

Andy turned the truck off seeing that they were at the right place. Jason walked over to the driver side and said, "Start it back up and

pull it in. We have plenty of room here for another vehicle. It'll be locked up safe while you're here."

Jim nodded and Andy pulled it in with Karen following on foot. Once in Jason closed and locked the door.

They got out and joined Karen with all of them looking around.

Autumn came out and called a welcome inviting them to come relax for a bit. Ashley checked over Jim's wounds and was again beaming at his praise for a job well done. Finally with everyone settled and some drinks passed around Roger invited them for the tour. He showed them their garage, supply rooms, meeting room, offices/bedrooms and described the solar setup he had on the roof. They were quite impressed that he knew all about alternative power systems but declined climbing the access ladder to the roof to see it. He finished up with his special room, actually what used to be the reception desk. He had converted it into a security center that was connected in to a half dozen cameras he had put up around the fortress. Roger mentioned that when they first met at the home center they had been there looking for the cameras and wiring.

Jason and Ashley had prepared simple tuna salad sandwiches for lunch with chips and pickles. They all ate and then sat around visiting. As the afternoon wore on Jim suggested they should be heading back soon but Autumn put out another suggestion. They had the spare rooms and if the three of them wanted they could easily spend the evening. Since everyone was getting along pretty good they agreed. Dinner consisted of Ramen noodles with rehydrated vegetables and some canned chicken.

Thinking that perhaps they would be invited to spend the evening Jim had brought with a Trivial Pursuit game. They all readily agreed it would be fun and sat down to play. Autumn won but just barely. Finally around 10pm, a late evening now adays, they all headed off to their bedrooms and turned in.

About 3am a loud crash awakened them all. Throwing clothes on they stumbled out of their rooms and made their way to the garage where the weapons were kept. Another loud crash. As Jason brought up the

lights they grabbed their rifles and saw the source of the sound. Two large dents in the garage door. Someone was trying to get in.

Roger and Jim dashed off to the security center to see what was on the cameras. Zooming out and panning around they saw a half dozen vehicles and nearly 20 people, all quite well armed. One of them noticed the camera moving and pointed it out to a guy who appeared to be the leader. He gestured and hail of bullets sailed at the camera. The screen quickly showed just static.

Pulling up a chair, Roger punched up another camera higher up and on the other side of the door. They had not spotted it yet. He cycled through the rest showing that the entire group was massed at the garage door with no one in front of the building.

They sent Ashley to keep watch at the front door in case someone tried to get in that way and the rest gathered in the garage. Jim suggested that a few snipers on the roof could help reduce the numbers out there. Autumn agreed and they sent Andy and Karen up there with their ARs. Jason whacked the door with his bat and yelled that they we're armed and will defend ourselves. A number of shots rang out bouncing off the fortress's steel garage door.

The gang resumed whacking at the door while Andy and Karen got in position on opposite corners of the building. Jim soon joined them, took his position and then Jim looked at them and nodded.

Taking aimed shots they quickly dropped 4 before the rest figured out what was happening. Diving behind cars and dumpsters the gang bangers took cover making kill shots much more difficult. Karen and Andy could still hit a foot or elbow sticking out but no longer had any clean lines to a head or center mass shot.

A few gang members finally figured out where they were and started shooting back forcing both of them to duck and take cover further back on the roof.

Inside Autumn and Roger were positioning the vehicles to act as a defensive barrier while Jason looked for something more suitable to fight with. A machete and bat worked well on the zombies but they

didn't shoot back. He finally settled on a Remington 870 from their small armory and proceeded to load it and put a bunch of rounds in shoulder bag.

With Karen and Andy no longer keeping them suppressed the gang got started on the door again. Bang! Another hit on the door causing it to buckle a bit more. Bang! Bang! Bang!

More and more hits were coming in the same spot further weakening the door. A small gap between the door and the building started to open. Jason rushed up and stuck the muzzle of the shot gun in the opening and fired a cartridge.

They could all hear the screams on the other side of the door. Another one down. Unfortunately 2 could play at this game and a muzzle came through the opening spraying bullets inside. Everyone ducked and even with a few ricochets no one in the garage was hurt.

Karen and Andy kept popping up, occasionally getting a shot off but having to duck back quickly to avoid getting hit. Karen worked her way to a new position. She was able to look over without them realizing she had moved. Getting ready to fire another shot, by the light of the moon, she noticed movement further down. Waiting to see what would happen she realized their fortune was taking a turn for the worse. Another 4 cars were pulling up with another 15 guys joining the fight. She ducked back and called to Jim. He dashed back inside to update the others.

Autumn heard him but looking around didn't see Jim. Finally she spotted him rummaging around in his truck. He looked to be playing with his radio and mumbling or something but instead of the radio he came out with an interesting weapon. Seeing her puzzled look he explained it was an M16 with a grenade launcher. He had a few illegal for citizens grenades but didn't think anyone was going to report him to the BATFE he said with a smile.

"I'm going back up on the roof. I'll see if I can take out a few groups with these."

"How's your shoulder?"

"At this point does it matter?"

"Please be safe."

Jim, again, painfully made his way up the access ladder to the roof. Once he clambered onto the roof he strapped on a pair of night vision goggles he had also retrieved from the truck. Making his way to the edge he took a few quick peeks over. Most of the gang seemed more interested in the arrival of their buddies than in their assault. Taking advantage of their distraction he aimed for a group and fired. Whoosh! The grenade sailed right in the middle of them and clattered around on the ground. They looked down and wondered what it was just as it went off mostly atomizing 5 of them into a pink mist and a pile of gore.

That certainly got the attention of the rest and they took cover again spraying at the roof.

Jim moved down towards Karen and looked again. He could make out a radio antenna sticking out but couldn't get a shot on the guy with it.

For the next 30 minutes it was more or less a stalemate. Neither side was able to make a kill although Andy got winged in the arm and inside Roger had a grazing line on his thigh where another ricochet shot just barely caught him. It burned like hell but seeing it was not serious he couldn't stop to worry about it. Autumn kept a constant check on Ashley, the cameras, the roof and the garage, more to keep her busy and her mind off what was on the other side of the door. At least the group on the roof was keeping the gang away from the door.

Those on the roof heard a loud horn, an air horn, about a block or two away. The gang members heard it too and let out a cheer.

"Uh oh, this can't be good.", said Jim to no one in particular.

Peeking over he saw a semi tractor pull into the alley and stop a distance back. He started blaring the horn..

EEHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

EHHHH EHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

The gang started chanting, "Ra - ul! Ra - ul! Ra - ul!"

Jim told Karen to run to the ladder and call down to those below to stay back from the door. Meanwhile he dug around in his jack pocket until he found what he was looking for. Pointing it to the sky he pulled the trigger. A glowing red ball of fire shot out and straight up. It finally reached the peak of travel and started back downwards fizzling out as it went.

EEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Karen yelled to those below.

Jim loaded another of his precious few grenades and got ready.

The truck shifted into gear and started accelerating. Faster it came. As it neared the fortress the driver turned the wheel swinging the truck towards the garage door.

Aiming carefully Jim fired. The grenade bounced off the front of the truck.

EEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Hit the ground.

EEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

And exploded.

EEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

CRRUUUNCH!!

The sound of crunching and tearing metal combined with a resounding feeling thud.

Jim risked another quick look and saw the explosion caused the truck to veer slightly and it only hit part of the door. Most of the truck had smashed into the building.

Inside the sound of the impact caused them all to hit the floor praying or swearing. When the noise died away they looked up to see the door nearly buckled in but still holding. The opening was almost wide enough for someone to get through and they could see arms and a weapon coming through the opening. Everyone opened up on the hole causing screams and the gun to drop when the arms retreated back through the hole.

Jim heard the grinding of gears and realized the driver wasn't out of the fight. Moving to another spot he figured he'd have a second or two before they spotted him and he'd be able to get off a few shots on the drive.

As he peeked over he saw the last grenade had set some trash on fire and the entire alley was bathed in an eerie orange flickering glow.

As the truck backed up Jim got ready.

EEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

He popped up and with his illegal M16 set on full auto emptied the magazine at the front of the truck. In return he took a round in the bicep and dropped back.

EEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

The truck engine roared as it started moving forward.

BOOOOM!

A few second later the truck coasted to gentle halt against the side of the building but not the door.

Bang! Bang! Rat a tat tat!

Explosions and gun fire were erupting all over the alley.

Jim smiled, laid back and passed out.

Chapter 22

Within minutes the sounds in the alley ceased. Finally Karen and Andy peeked over the edge and saw a few vehicles on fire, a few more just piles of now scrap metal and bodies strewn all over. Not a single one moved. They turned their attention to Jim they found him in a growing puddle of blood.

As carefully as they could they dragged his body to the ladder and called down for a rope or something to use to lower him down. Jason quickly located one and brought it up. Together they tied it to him and started lowering him over the edge. Roger had climbed up the roof hatch ladder and was stabilizing his body preventing it from spinning or further bumping on the way down. Autumn ran to get Ashley and once they moved Jim to the make shift hospital room that Jason had once occupied she started immediately working on Jim.

"Hello to the building. We are friendly. Do not shoot."

Andy scrambled back up the ladder and looked over. A new group of guys with guns was standing in the alley. One had stepped forward and again addressed the door.

"Hello. We're looking for Jim. Do you have a Jim there?"

Andy scampered back to the hatch and called down what he saw.

Jason went towards the garage door stepping to the side and out of site of anyone looking in the hole and called out, "Who wants to know?"

"We're friends of Jim. We part of a loose group known as PSG. Is he in there?"

Karen spoke up, "I heard him mention PSG but he never told us anymore other than the initials and that he was going to make a private call to them every once in a while."

Jason called out, "He's here but he is hurt."

"We have a medic with us. If you open up I can send 'em in."

"How can we trust you?"

"You can't. Then again I can't trust you not to shoot our medic or try to hold 'em for ransom either."

Autumn said, "He has a point. Perhaps we give them a chance."

"OK, just one person, unarmed. You'll have to send him around to the front entrance as this door probably won't work anymore."

"We assumed that too. The medic is already waiting at the door. I'll radio the guards to expect you but not to follow in. Don't try anything or you'll be sorry."

Roger and Andy took firing positions near the door and nodded to Autumn who unlocked and opened it. A woman was standing there holding a bag with a large red cross on it.

"By the surprised looks I'm guessing you weren't expecting a woman?"

Roger spoke up, "Um to be honest, no. "

"Will this be a problem?"

Quickly Autumn jumped in, "No, not at all. Please follow me."

As she led the medic into the fortress Roger locked the door back up. Once in the makeshift hospital room the medic had her turn with a surprised look when she saw Ashley working on Jim's wound.

Ashley noticed her, and the bag and said, "It's a through wound. Nicked a vein but I was able to stop the bleeding and tie it off. I was

about to clean and de-bridge it but I'll let you take over."

"No, you're doing fine. If you don't mind I'll watch but so far you're following all the right steps. You look younger than I thought, what med school were you attending when everything happened?"

"Uh, I was in high school. It's just pretty much this year that I started collecting and reading medical texts and practicing however I could."

"You have a natural talent for medical work. With proper training you could really be good. What's your name?"

"Ashley.", she said blushing a bit but never losing her focus on Jim's wound.

"I'm Dr. Lin, Dr Sue Lin, but everyone calls me Doc or just Sue."

Roger, Andy, Karen and Autumn met up back in the garage and found Jason sitting near the separation between the door and the wall chatting with the people outside. Jason found out that PSG stood for Prepper Support Group. A loose organization of prepper and survivalists in the area that had all agreed to come to each other's aid in times of great need. Jim had put out a call about an hour ago with the address of the fortress. All who could make it arrived and stayed out of site until the signal, a single flare, was given. At that point their snipers took out the key people using 50 caliber BMGs and then everyone else swarmed in opening up with whatever they preferred. That gang never stood a chance.

After hearing Jason's short version of their story the group in the garage felt bad about distrusting the very people who saved them. Roger got the cordless drill out and he and Andy started to disassemble the garage door tracks. It obviously would need to be replaced and was useless as is. Within an hour they had it down and the saviors and fortress residents were mingling and discussing all that had happened to everyone.

A group was able to whip up a modest feast, if you can call dried foods and MREs a feast, for an early breakfast. Within hours Jim came to and with a heavily bandaged arm finally walked down to mingle with the

rest.

With the fortress compromised talk of what would happen to the residents lasted nearly all day. They finally decided to relocate to the garden center/farm where Jason had first been hurt. Over the next week various PSG members helped them move everything to farm and to reinforce the buildings against attack. Roger dismantled, moved and setup the solar equipment out there.

Throughout the spring, and summer various PSG members came to work the farm in return for a share of the harvest while Roger went around and helped setup alternative power systems for many of them. By fall a number of additional individuals had relocated to the farm.

The following spring saw a large area, nearly a half mile on each side, fenced in with most of it devoted to farming and livestock. A small town was developing on the rest of the property and shortly expanded outside the fence. Over time additional areas were fenced in and most of the PSG members ended up moving to the farm. Others, good people, found the farm and joined up.

Bad people also found them but were quickly dealt with. Word got around and rarely did any further human attacks occur. The zombie attacks dropped off after the first few years since most were now dead. Year four at the farm found a large scale zombie attack led by one in a black leather jacket. The group was able to stop the attack with minimal injuries. Again that smart zombie was not found among the dead. Years later a group of kids found a pile of bones and remnants of a leather jacket in the woods a few miles from the farm but it was never proven if this was the smart zombie or not.

Ashley matured into a great doctor under the tutelage of Dr Lin. The two of them ran a clinic serving everyone and training those who also showed strong aptitude to medical care.

Jason joined up with the security group. They provided routine patrols of the farm and led any defense against attackers. He was instrumental in the defense of the last mass zombie attack. A year after the attack Jason took over as the head of security.

Roger and Autumn remained good friends but never anymore. Autumn eventually found someone and married with a boy and a girl to follow. Roger headed up the technology group which involved mostly salvaging and implementing existing equipment and maintenance and repairs to this equipment in the later years.

Karen and Andy married and also had 2 children which they raised to be very self reliant and well in tune with the land.

Jim eventually paired up with one of the later people who found the farm and chose to stay.

The ham network was continued and they were communicating with many around the country and the world and found that a lot of similar groups were forming. Over time trade routes developed and surplus items from one area were traded elsewhere for their surplus. Within a few decades civilization had reached a new normal. It would never again be like it was prior to the collapse. Many who remembered the past had mixed feelings about this but the new generation, not knowing anything else, was quite content. Hard work was normal, but as long as you did it offered rewards too.

Occasional zombie sightings continued for almost 10 years but by then everyone was either a survivor or immune. The last of the zombies either died out or were put down finally ending the horror caused by sample # 28.



Culex Papiens (pen name) is an amateur fiction writer focusing on PAW (Post Apocalyptic World) themed stories. Culex's work can be found on www.culexpapiens.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 Papiens'). 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.

Culex Papiens can be reached through the web site, via facebook (Culex Papiens) and at Twitter (CulexPapiensPAW) and is regularly found on a handful of forums under the screen name of CulexPapiens.