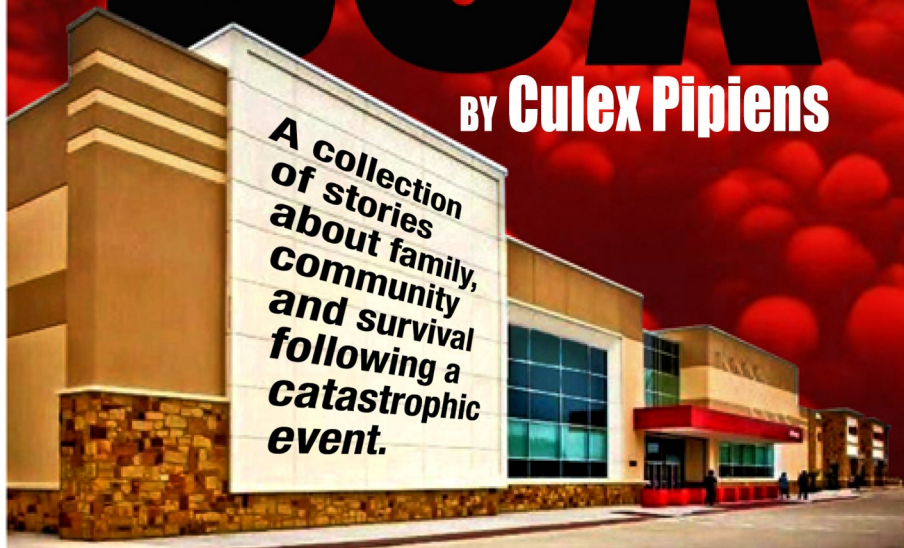


# THE **BIG BOX**

BY **Culex Pipiens**

*A collection  
of stories  
about family,  
community  
and survival  
following a  
catastrophic  
event.*



# The Big Box

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.

### *Author's Note*

The Big Box started out as a single short story but over time additional stories centering around the same apocalyptic event were added. The blossoming idea was to include differing points of view, differing circumstances and differing outcomes for each of the stories and subplots. The main characters appear in most of these follow on stories and some occur concurrently while others follow in time line sequence.

*Story 1 – The Big Box (and the little box in the big box)*

Mary and Joe were heading back home from Chicago where they had gone downtown to see the latest exhibit at the Field Museum of Natural History. Even though it was a weekend the expressways, like normal, were very heavy. They decided to take surface roads and drive through some of the old neighborhoods that they grew up in. It was a pleasant trip down memory lane. Even though it was staying lighter a bit later each day, as normally happens in the spring, they still noticed evening approaching, stopped their meandering route and headed straight west to get home. It would take at least another half hour of urban/suburban driving to get to their town as they were only about 18 miles outside of the city so far.

“Hey honey, that's a strange sunset.”, stated Mary.

Joe looked up from traffic noticing the glowing orange sun at the horizon but realized he could actually see it moving and it was moving up, not down. “Um, I don't think...”, started Joe.

Before he could finish a much brighter light lit the sky up behind them. Joe instinctively turned out of traffic into a parking lot, slamming on the brakes and pulling Mary down with him. She was quite upset and started to give him an earful struggling to rise but Joe kept her down waiting for what he dreaded was next. Sure enough the car rocked a bit like a strong wind had hit it. Moments later the wind seemed to hit it again from the other direction.

He finally released her and they both got out of the car, along with hundreds of other motorists, all looking east at the pillar of fire rising up from what was once Chicago.

Joe spoke first, “This is not good. I suspected that glow to the west might have been a nuke, but this confirms it. We have to get home now as the panic will be starting any moment.”

Both jumped in the car but before they he could get the key in the ignition another glow lit the sky to the west of them. Joe again pulled Mary down and as the huddled down he said, “I bet that was Fermi lab. So they got either DeKalb, Rockford or the Byron nuclear power plant with the first one, Chicago and then Fermi. This can't be a

simple terrorist act... it has to be part of a larger attack. With at least 3 that we know of I'd have to guess China or Russia as the other players couldn't pull off this many. Smart money says this is happening around the country, and probably shortly around the world.”

Once the blast wave had passed them and receded Mary asked Joe what now?

Looking around Joe noticed pandemonium on the road and ruled out trying to drive anywhere. He thought perhaps a culvert or something but this was the flat Chicago suburbs. Other than 12” drain pipes under roads there just wasn't anything big enough to use as a shelter and they couldn't fit in a foot wide pipe, let alone speed weeks or months in there. Turning around he saw that they were in a big box home improvement store parking lot.

“Mary, switch with me. You drive. Drop me at the front door and then drive around back to the loading docks. Look for a garage door at street level. There should be at least one or more. I'll meet you there in a few minutes. Keep the doors locked and try to avoid the panicked people. Wait... head for the garden center and drop me there instead as there are a lot less people streaming out over there and then head around back.”

She did and Joe jumped out locking the car door as he closed it. He dashed in to the outdoor garden center and then started through the doors that leads into the building proper. Just as he came through the doors a guy in an official looking uniform instructed him that he has to leave now as the store is being evacuated. Joe ignored him and turned right heading down the aisle with the garden tools.

“Sir, you must leave now. I am store security and if you don't leave I will detain you and call the police!”

Joe took a few more steps and found what he was looking for. Reached out, picked up a large axe and turned toward the security guard who immediately said, “Hey, I ain't paid enough for this crap. Screw you buddy I'm telling the police that you're armed and dangerous and should shoot you on site.”

“Yeah, you do that,” said Joe as he turned and walked further into the store. Thankfully the power was still working and the store was still lit up.

No sooner did he have that thought when the lights went out and the emergency lights kicked in. He picked his way past the abandoned carts finally reaching the lumber department and the big overhead doors. It took a moment to figure out the manual release but once he did he started pulling the chain and opening the door. Mary was waiting there and he waved her in dropping the door behind her.

“Are we going to be safe in here?”, called out Mary?

“Nope. But it will buy us a bit of time I hope.”

“Time for what? If we're going to die I'd rather it be quick instead of long and drawn out.”

“Since we weren't at or near ground zero it's going to be slow and painful unless we can get protection from the approaching fallout.”

“We're inside, won't that protect us?”

“No, we need something like inches of lead or feet of earth to protect us. That's why shelters are build underground. The earth provides the shielding from the radiation.”

“Then what are we doing in here? Shouldn't we be looking for a basement somewhere?”

“Yeah that might be our fall back plan but right now I think we can build a safe room here in the time we have. I'm guessing at least 30 minutes and maybe up to an hour if we're lucky before the radioactive fallout arrives. Now let's stop talking about it and get to work as if our lives depend on it... well, because they do. Follow me to the front corner of the store and I'll explain what I have in mind.”

They dashed up to a corner which had some shelving with misc construction and roofing hardware next to a tall display with ladders. Joe pulled a few ladders away from the wall and tossed them down an aisle. Reaching through and banging the wall he said, “Good, this is brick. Now what we need to do is build a cinder block wall about 3 feet in and then fill in between with sand or dirt and then build up a double wall on the other

two sides so we have a box and fill in that double wall too. Finally we'll have to get a support column or two, lay some plywood on it and make a big pile of dirt over the top. You get started by pulling everything off these shelves and throw it in a pile over there out of our way. I'm going to get some dirt from gardening.”

Joe headed off back to the garden department, found the forklift and said a quick thanks that it was spring and there were at least a hundred pallets with bags of dirt on them. Most were stacked about 4 feet by 4 feet by 4 feet. He quickly picked one up with the forklift and after propping the no longer functioning doors open, drove back in the store to the corner. Mary had finished removing the contents of the shelves so he said that he'd drop the pallet and be back with a load of blocks and they could start making the wall and then begin opening the bags and dumping the dirt between them.

“Uh, Joe?”

“What?”

“Do we need to make a wall?”

“Well how else will the dirt stay in place?”

“It's staying in place on that pallet pretty well by itself.”

“Duh! Great idea... we can just stack pallets. That will save a ton of time. Then we just need to build the support system inside.”

“Can't we just using the shelving units as a support system? They're designed to hold thousands of pounds as is.”

“OK, you get 2 gold stars now.”

Joe used the forklift to drag out the heavy shelving units and placed the first pallet in the corner. Driving as fast as he could he was able to place 5 pallets across and 2 high on one wall and 6 more across, with 2 up on the other wall. He used the forklift to push the shelves in place and then added 3 pallets to each shelf which filled them quite nicely.

Just as he was about to go get more, Mary asked what she should be doing as she

is really just standing around and watching now. Joe replied, “Grab a cart or as many as you need. Find every possible item of food or beverage in the building. Chips, candy, anything that we can eat. Take a pry bar and break into the employee areas if necessary and look in the refrigerators and vending machines too. Take any water bottles or soda you find. Also, grab buckets and as long as the sinks are working start filling the buckets with water.”

Continuing with the pallets Joe enclosed the space leaving out just a single pallet for the entrance. From there he took the long wall with 6, including the corner pallets, and starts to build out a double high pallet wall 4 deep making a long entrance hallway leading to a 90 degree turn to get into the shelter.

Mary arrives back and says that's it. The water has stopped running. She did find lots of food in the refrigerators and put it in coolers so it should keep for at least a few days. Lots of candy bars and chips, plus all the bottled water and soda she could find from the displays and the checkout lines.

“Thanks Mary. Now, get another cart and grab a few more buckets and all the TP and paper towels you can find.”

“You mean we're going to have to use...”

“Yes. Now go! Remember to get buckets with lids! We don't have much time left.”

Joe went back out to the garden area and picked up a pallet of sand bags. These would be used to cover the waste in the toilet buckets. No sooner did he pick up the first pallet when the Nuke Alert (NA) keychain detector he always carried made its first chirp. Gotta hurry thought Joe, we're so close.

He raced in and dropped the first pallet. Back outside and it started chirping again. He picked up a second pallet and went back in with it. Making one more trip outside he grabbed a third pallet and the chirping got a little faster. He noticed what looked like the first few flakes of snow falling. Racing inside he pulled out the door stoppers and manually pushed them closed. Moving the NA keychain all around his body it beeped a few times. It seemed he got a bit of fallout on him. Well, no time like the present. Joe stripped down tossing his clothes back outside. Naked, he hopped on the forklift... wow,



that seat is cold, and raced back.

Dropping the third pallet just outside the shelter he left the fork lift and then started unloading the carts into the shelter. They had about an 8 x 12 space under the shelves to work with and it was only 4 feet high. As he knelt on the floor he felt the cold seep up from the concrete into his bare knees. Thinking for a moment he moved the few items back outside of the shelter and headed down the insulation aisle. Returning with a half dozen sheets of 2" thick pink insulation foam he realized that they wouldn't make the bend into the room.

Joe ran to the tool section, grabbed a few utility knives and headed back. Quickly scoring each sheet he snapped them in half, then scored the halves and snapped them again resulting in a pile of 2' x 4' pieces of pink insulating foam. Those easily fit down the hallway and through the entrance. He lined the floor with them and immediately felt warmer.

Mary returned with the toiletries including some cleaning solutions and boxes of rags too. She also had another cart half full of flashlights and packs of batteries. Joe commented, "Good idea the batteries in the emergency lights are starting to run out." It was then he noticed the shocked look on Mary's face and realized he was still naked.

Just then the NA beeped. "Quick, start moving everything into the shelter. Stack the extra foam up against the inside walls or if we don't need it just leave it out here. But get the rest of our supplies in there. I'm going to grab our emergency bag and my spare clothes from the car.", yelled Joe as he ran off.

He got back, dressed this time, and helped Mary finish moving the supplies into the shelter and crawled in and just collapsed from the exertion. As they both laid there panting his NA chirped again.

"Joe! You said this would protect us... why is that thing beeping in here!?!"

Joe grabbed a flashlight and turned it on. It lit up and he was happy that, in this case, batteries were included. Shining it around he saw that between the lower pile of dirt bags and the upper pile the pallet created a mini tunnel right to the outside wall.

"Mary, we have to fill these gaps. I'll bring in sand bags from the pile outside, you

stuff them in there as far back and tight as you can.”. Ten more minutes of hard labor and a lot of scrapes and splinters later the pallet gaps were all sealed and the NA was silent.

As they both rested again they realized just how crowded and cramped it was in there.

“I'm going to make one more trip.”

“No, Joe, it's too dangerous”.

“Mary, so far we've only been exposed as the very lowest level and we could reasonably safely maintain this exposure for an hour or two each day with probably no real long term affects.”

“Probably?”

“Well, there is always a bit of risk. If the level rises I'll immediately come back. This should only take a few minute anyway.”

“Please be careful.”

Joe grabbed one of the empty carts and ran off to the employee area. A few well placed hits and the first aid cabinet nearly fell off the wall. He pulled it loose and tossed that in the cart. Heading back into the store he went down the storage aisle and grabbed a few plastic shelving kits. His NA still chirping slowly he headed down one of the other aisles and noticed rolls of bubble wrap and moving accessories. He grabbed some of each and protection moving blankets too. Passing near the front of the store he saw the DIY book displays. Grabbing a wide variety and many magazines they too went in the cart. Finally he passed the tool aisle on the way back to the shelter. The NA increased its chirping.

Running into the tool department he grabbed two different assorted tool kits, added them to the top of the pile and raced back to the shelter. He tossed everything down the hallway as Mary pulled it into the nearly over flowing shelter.

Using the first aid kit he cleaned up their scrapes and scratches and they pulled out

each other's splinters and put on ointment to protect against infection. "Why didn't we just use our bandages in our car kit?", asked Mary.

"We could have but since there was more here, why use up ours, especially since we may very well need them later."

With the adrenaline rush rapidly fading away they both grabbed a moving blanket pulled it over them and went to sleep.

Over the next week they built the shelving and cleaned up their supplies. The packing boxes and bubble wrap was turned into sleeping pads and pillows. Books were going to provide them hours of reading entertainment. Granted they wouldn't be dry walling any time soon, if ever again, but it was still knowledge and kept the mind occupied.

After a thorough inventory, it showed they had about a 2 month supply of water and food for the two of them. Mary questioned how long they would be in there. Joe replied, "It all depends on the radiation level out there. If it's too high then when we run out of food and come out of the shelter we would be at risk of radiation poisoning. If it starts out low enough, then when we come out it should have decayed to a safe level. I hope."

"Decayed? What would be a safe level? How would you know?"

"Well, using information I found on the Internet, and I hope it is accurate, there is a 7-10 rule. Basically for each factor of 7 in time the affect drops by 10. So, if the highest reading measures 100, then"

"100 what?"

"Rems or rads or whatever term they use. I forget, but for now that isn't relevant. Just assume the measurement is 100. Then after 7 hours the measurement should be 10. After 7 times 7 or 49 hours the measurement would be 1, then after another factor of 7 (7 x 7 x 7) or 343 hours, about 2 weeks, it would be 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of that initial measurement. Ideally we want an exposure no higher than 1/100<sup>th</sup> with 1/1000<sup>th</sup> being much safer for the long term."

“So, worst case we only have about a week to go?”

“Well, yes and no. If the peak measurement was 100, then yes, we can safely leave here for short periods after another week. But if that peak measurement was 1000 instead, then factor in another 7 and we're stuck for 14 weeks or about 3 and a half months.”

“But we only have enough for 2 months!”

“Yep. That's why we're going to stay in as long as possible. If it is a lower value when we come out we'll be safe and have just stayed longer than necessary. We'll just have to hope and pray that it was. With luck the winds might have blown the worst of it north or south of us too.”

Later that day Mary started yelling almost incoherently. After Joe got her to settle down enough to understand what she was screaming he understood why she was so upset. She had just realized that their daughter and granddaughter were out there somewhere and until now she had completely forgotten about them. Joe remembered that they were way up north staying at their Minnesota cabin which was nowhere near any targets. It also had a fully stocked shelter in the basement and they knew how to get into it. They'd be OK. This seemed to settle Mary down. Even more so when Joe promised that once they got out they'd try to get to them.

Six weeks into their makeshift shelter stay, Joe crawled down the hallway and held out his NA keychain. It started chirping but never got beyond the lower levels. Crawling back in he told Mary the good news that it looked to be a less severe dose of fallout, at least in this area. They inventoried their food and water and decided it should make it to about 73 days total. They both agreed to leave on day 70 and try to make it home so about a month left to go.

Day 70, what, coincidentally was the first day of summer, saw them crawl out and head over to the windows to look outside for the first time in over 2 months. The NA was silent. Staring into the parking lot was like viewing a paused apocalypse movie. A few bodies in advanced stages of decomposition. Cars every which way. A column of smoke rising off in the distance. And silence. Utter silence.

It had rained a number of times so instead of a layer of fallout dust covering

everything they found the outside to be almost clean with the ash mostly washed away. Given just the visible crashes and abandoned vehicles they did not think their car would get them home. Scrounging up the keys to one of the big box store's rental pickup trucks they tried to start it. Barely grinding it finally caught just enough to fire up. They revved it a few times and then let it idle for awhile to charge up the battery.

There wasn't much left in the makeshift shelter. They took just their emergency bag, some garden tools they might use later and the blankets. While they were at it, Mary grabbed all the seeds thinking a large garden could very well be in their future. In the indoor section of the garden department they also grabbed some gas cans and a few siphons. They topped off the truck and filled the cans from the cars in the lot and put their few items in the back of the truck. Getting in they headed for home driving mostly on lawns, over curbs, through bushes and fences and anywhere else they had to in order to get around the cars and wrecks on the roads. They never saw another person.

A few miles from home the NA let out a beep and Joe stopped.

“Uh oh.. now what?”, questioned Mary.

“Well, it's probably starting to pick up the closer hit to the west of us. It is barely registering but I expect it to go up as we get closer to home.”

“Can we risk going home then?”

“Hard to say. I think if it doesn't get much higher it might be worth it to get our supplies before we head north. As you know it's only a little further yet. But we have to agree, what we can grab in, oh, let's say 15 minutes is all we take. That should minimize our exposure. Don't forget we're getting a little on the way in and back out too.”

The NA chirped again.

“Ok, if it doesn't get any higher. 15 it is.”

Joe drove on and they arrived home. The beeps were more frequent but still somewhat far apart and at the lowest level. The front door was kicked in. Joe led the way, with a hatchet in hand. He would have liked something a bit more forceful, like his 1911, but state laws prohibited carrying either open or concealed so he was not legally

able to have his with him. Joe smiled at the thought that those laws no longer applied.

By the undisturbed dust on the floor, it didn't take long to figure out the break in had occurred long ago. Mary grabbed a few items from the house itself, a few memento pictures, clothes and necessities while Joe went to the basement. There was some minor flooding but no more than an inch or so and mostly pooled in the center of the space. Going to a cabinet that had been gone through by whoever broke in, Joe pushed it to one side revealing a door behind it. Opening the door made him smile again as he saw their supply room still intact and untouched.

Over the next 10 minutes Joe hauled up case after case of LTS (Long Term Storage) food, all weather camping gear, his 1911, Ruger 10/22, Remington 700 in .308 and a basic Mossberg 590 12ga shotgun along with 2 ammo cans for each. Nothing like the 10,000 rounds he always saw referenced online, but more than enough, he felt, to reach their cabin up north where he had more. With everything they wanted packed away they headed back east until the NA stopped beeping and then turned north knowing what should be a single day drive would probably take a week or two now.

## *Story 2 – Call Me Sam*

Hi. You can call me Sam. That isn't my real name, but one of my ancestors went by that name and I like it so I go by that name too.

Perhaps I should give you a bit of background about me. I was born in 1943. While still basically a baby I was sent off to war. A nice man name Gene was responsible for me and I did everything in my power to please and protect him. Each night he would gently wipe me down and clean me up and make sure I was OK. To say we were close is an understatement. We were rarely apart. He even slept with me.

Don't misunderstand, times were different back then. It was normal for guys to sleep with me and others like me. All the solders slept with their guns. Oh, didn't I mention that I am a gun? An M1911 model to be specific, manufactured by Colt.

Well, after World War II ended and Gene was discharged and being sent home I was supposed to be returned to the supply room but Gene was fond of me and snuck me out. On the way home in those big boats I found a bunch of my brothers and sisters had also been snuck out. Unfortunately I haven't seen any of them since the boat. When we got back to shore we all went our separate ways.

For the next 25 years I spent most of the time napping in a cigar box. Occasionally Gene would take me out. Sometimes just to look at me and sometimes to hold me while he sat and cried. I think after what he went through in the war I was a comfort somehow to him. He did scare me once when he put some ammo in me and held me up to his head but then he heard the kids calling and he quickly put me back in the box and up on the shelf in the closet.

Almost another 8 years passed and he had not taken me out at all until that one day in the middle of summer.

“Yes, Bobby, I was in the war. Do you want to see my uniform?”

“Sure Grandpa.”

Gene reverently took out a garment bag and removed his uniform with the medals still attached. He sat on the bed with his 7 year old grandson, Bobby, and answered all of

his questions. Noticing the empty holster Bobby asked what it was for.

Going to the closet again, Gene reached up on the high shelf and brought down the cigar box. He took out the 1911, made sure it was not loaded and held it up for Bobby to see. His eyes were wide as saucers.

“Is that a real gun?”

“Yes, Bobby. It is.”

“Can I hold it?”

“OK, but first I have to explain gun safety to you. You are never ever allowed to touch it without my permission first. You can be seriously hurt or even die if you are careless with it. Do you understand?”

Gulp, “Yes.”

“See this opening down here?” he gestured, “That’s where the magazine goes.”

“That holds the bullets, right?”

“Well, we call them rounds or cartridges. The bullet is only a part of a cartridge. But in principle you are correct. The first thing we check is to make sure that the magazine is not in the gun. Then you pull back up here and look in this opening. What do you see?”

“Uh, nothing?”

“That’s right. If there was a round in the chamber, what you see through this opening, you would be able to see the round and know that the gun is armed. If it was armed it means that you could hurt or kill someone if you pointed it at them and pulled the trigger. You do know what it means to kill someone don’t you?”

“Yes Grandpa. It means that they are dead and like fluffy my rabbit, they are never going to come back.”



“That’s right Bobby. This is why we are always respectful around firearms, whether they are handguns like this one or big long ones called rifles. You should always treat them as if they are loaded. Always point them in a safe direction, never at someone. Do you think you can remember all of that?”

“I think so.”

“OK, then I’m going to hand it to you. First, point it in a safe direction and then I want you to check it to make sure it is not loaded. Never assume that it is, always check it yourself.”

Gene gave the gun to Bobby who pointed it towards a wall and looked in the bottom of the grip and then with a lot of difficulty finally pulled back the slide and looked in the chamber. Satisfied it was empty he said, “It’s empty Grandpa.”, and proceeded to look it over carefully.

“BOBBY! YOU DROP THAT RIGHT NOW!”, shouted Cheryl, his mother who had just come into the room.

“It’s OK, Cheryl, it’s not loaded and I’m teaching him safe handling practices.”

“Oh no you aren’t Gene. How dare you give a gun to my son!”, she yelled, grabbing Bobby’s arm and dragging him out of the room while she continued, “They kill people and are evil. Don’t you ever let me see you do that or I’ll refuse to bring Bobby here ever again!”

Gene shook his head. His daughter in-law just didn’t get it. She believed that more and more legislation was the answer thinking somehow that more laws would stop those who don’t obey laws in the first place.

After that experience I was put back in the box and stayed there for a long time again.

“I’m sorry honey, I know your grandpa meant a lot to you.”

“Yes, Jeanne, he did.”

“Are you sure you want to do this so soon after the funeral? Your dad said they aren’t putting the house on the market for a number of months yet.”

“No, I want to do this now. I know he said I could take anything I wanted, but there are only a few mementos that I’m interested in.”, Bobby, no, Robert now, went to his grandparents bedroom and took a couple of quilts his grandmother, who passed away a few years earlier, had made and then went to the closet and found the garment bag and cigar box. He did not want his mom desecrating his grandfather’s memory and diminishing the importance of what he did back in World War II. If he didn’t take these items now he is sure when she found them she’d convince his dad to destroy them or at least turn them in to the police or something.

Robert sat on the bed and cried one last time as he remembered his grandparents and regretted everything he still wanted to ask them and say to them but never did. Finally composing himself he wrapped the cigar box in the blankets and picked them up along with the garment bag and left with his new wife, Jeanne.

At first I was worried since all my life I only knew Gene. But Bobby, er, Robert, turned out to be a good person too. He even took me a number of times to this place called a range. Where we’d put holes in paper. I didn’t see the point but Robert and the other people there kept talking about practice and stances and stuff. I guess if it helped us to work better together than it was a good thing. I was just happy to see others like me. I never did see any of my brothers or sisters but I did meet a few new friends. One went by the name of Wesson and the other by Smith. They both claimed to work a lot with military and police. I was polite with them but couldn’t imagine the military ever giving up my power for the smaller 9mm capability of those two.

I was still kept in the cigar box and still in a closet on a high shelf plus I had something called a trigger lock put on me. It felt like a leash but it was supposed to make me safer for others so I guess it was OK. The key to it was in the box with me so I’m not sure just how safe this really made me. I thought Robert was a good guy but one

day when we went for a ride, I assumed to a range, it turned out we ended up at something called a pawn shop.

Robert was explaining how he had lost his job and they were having problems making ends meet and he'd just needed cash. Some other guy was making comments about, yeah, I can use this, no, I can't sell these and then the lid was opened and this new guy, I never did find out his name, was holding me. He caressed and fondled me and I have to admit I did not enjoy it. He really didn't seem to know how to properly hold me. He never even checked to see if I was loaded or not. There was some more conversations and then this guy gave Robert some green paper and Robert walked away leaving me there.

I was stuck in a glass box with some other's like me. There were a group that all went by the name Gaston and in order to tell them apart they said I should call them Gaston 17, Gaston 19 and Gaston 26. Didn't make sense to me but whatever. There was also one who went by the name of Ruger and another who wanted to be called Remy.

Remy was interesting in that he had this big round glass tube stuck on top of him but he didn't seem to mind. He said it helped him to hit targets that were far away.

One night while we were sleeping there was a loud crash. Three people in dark clothes with hoods on came rushing in through a broken glass door and were stuffing things in bags. One came over by me and smashed the glass box with a big metal stick. He grabbed me and the Gaston brothers and stuffed us in his bag. Moments later a wailing sound was heard, one of them yelled something and they all ran off into the night.

It turns out that the new person I was with was called T-Bone and he hung around with some very unsavory people. One day we went to a house and he cut the screen around a window and pushed it aside and crawled in through the window. Something seemed wrong to me. After creeping around in the dark and looking in drawers and stuff he went upstairs and was looking in another drawer when the light came on and a voice yelled, "What do you punks think you're doing? GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

T-Bone turned and pointed me at an old guy. He was almost as old as Gene was when I last saw him.

“Shut up gramps!”

An old woman, probably his wife, woke up and started yelling.

T-Bone walked over to her and slapped her yelling for her to shut up. He then put a pillow over her head, stuck me against the pillow pointing at her head and yelled, “Where’s the money? I know you got money.”

“We don’t, we live on social security. We’re barely making it. Please, take the jewelry and anything else you want, just don’t hurt us.”, the old guy pleaded.

“You’re lying! Tell me where the money is or granny gets it.”, T-Bone pointed me at the wall and pulled the trigger. I roared and a hole appeared in the wall. I was stuck back in the pillow against the woman’s head.

“Really we have nothing. Please don’t hurt her. Shoot me if you must but don’t hurt her.”

“To late pops...”

I could feel T-Bone pulling the trigger and knew this was wrong. During the war when I was protecting Gene I shot bullets at many people but they were trying to hurt him or his friends. Here this woman wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. It took all my will to keep the hammer from striking the cartridge hard enough to set it off.

“What the hell?”, questioned T-Bone.

He pulled the gun up and racked my slide. I spit out the still live round and only partially fed another one. He put me down in the pillow and pulled my trigger again. Nothing. He held it up again, pulled the slide back and I grabbed that casing causing it to get stuck on the way out.

T-Bone looked at me, swore at me and flung me against a wall. He pulled out one of the Gaston brothers from behind his back and was moving towards the pillow with it when a wailing noise was heard again.

One of the other thugs said something and T-Bone looked undecided. Finally he

turned, pushed the old guy down hard and ran out of the room. The old guy gasped in pain but did manage to drag himself over to the bed with the woman. She was fumbling to get the pillow off her face. They just held each other for a few moments until a new voice yelling “POLICE” showed up.

For hours and hours a bunch of people were all over the room and I was put in a plastic bag and put away. Before they carried me out I saw the old guy on a table with wheels and a couple of people who were looking him over saying something about a broken hip. Days later I was taken out and someone who knew how to handle me very clinically put dust and powder on me and then pulled it off with tape. He put me in a special box and shot me a number of times. Since he wasn't trying to do bad things with me I didn't resist and all of my shots worked fine.

“Sergeant, it worked fine. No jams. I know the report says it misfired and jammed multiple times but I can find nothing wrong with it. It appears to be in very good condition. Records do not exist for it. If I had to guess I'd say it was a WW2 era model that someone smuggled back with them. I've got everything off of it I'm going to get. The ballistics match the round in the wall and the cartridge on the floor. I'll put them all in evidence.”

A few years later I and some of the other new friends with me in “evidence”, whatever that was, heard voices, something about closed cases and disposal of evidence. We were collected and taken to a place called Cabelas. There I was handed to someone else in exchange for more of that green paper. I'm going to have to find out what that is one of these days. After being taken apart, cleaned up and oiled and reassembled, it felt good to be clean again, I was put in another glass box and left there. Occasionally someone would touch me but I was always put back. Late one evening I noticed a bright light way across the store and people started yelling and running around. A few of my friends were hastily grabbed by the people and I haven't seen them since. In fact since that night it has been very quiet. Normally people would look at me every day but I think it has been at least a few months now since I have seen any one.

Joe turned the truck on Route 53 and headed north. They had not gone more than a mile when they both heard a bang! followed moments later by 2 more bang! bang! and Joe immediately pulled the truck over. He wasn't sure but he thought they sounded like they came from the direction they were headed.

Mary inquired, "Joe, what was that? Gunshots?"

"Yep, I think so. Hang on a minute.", said Joe as he got out and rummaged around in the back of the truck. Getting back in he handed the shotgun to Mary and had his 1911 pistol tucked into his waistband. He set a couple of boxes of shells on the seat and tossed a few spare magazines in the center console.

"Mary, remember how to operate the shotgun?"

"It's been awhile but I think I do.", said Mary as she opened a box of shells and proceeded to load it.

Joe started the truck up and continued driving. Less than a quarter mile down the road passed a sheriff's car driving the other way. They both realized this was the first moving vehicle, heck the first person, either had seen since the explosions, Joe also noticed it turn a rapid u-turn behind him and flip on the lights apparently coming after him.

"Joe, what did you do? You weren't speeding or something?"

"With all of these abandon vehicles blocking the road? More likely he'd be pulling me over for driving on the other side or even off the road.", said Joe as he continued driving.

The sheriff's car flipped the siren a couple of quick times.

"Joe, why aren't you pulling over?"

"This is the first person we have seen. Given what has happened, how do you know he really is a sheriff? Could be he just acquired the car like we did with this truck."

The siren was triggered a few more times.

“Joe, we're both armed, I don't think he'd try anything besides if he is legit maybe he knows what all has happened.”

“Maybe you're right. OK, keep the 590 ready but not threatening. If he comes towards us with his hand anywhere near his gun I'm going to floor it.”

Jim pulled to a stop as did the sheriff's car. Almost immediately the occupant got out and he was wearing a full uniform that appeared to fit properly. Looking in the mirror Joe could see he was wearing a sidearm but his hands made no move towards it as he approached the truck.

“Howdy folks.”, he greeted them with. Noticing the 1911 in Joe's belt and Mary holding the shotgun like she was ready to use it he took a step back and continued, “Would you mind handing me your weapons?”

“Sorry, no.”

“No? Can I ask why?”

“My wife and I are not looking for any trouble but being as you are the first person we've seen in nearly 3 months I'm not taking any chances. Maybe you are legitimate, maybe you just found the car, or worse.”

“I can assure you, sir, that I am a sworn officer. Since times are now different, as long as your not threatening with them I can accept you hanging onto them for now.”

“Fair enough. Can tell us what happened?”

“If you've made it this far then you know about what I do.”

“All we know is what we saw. Three nuclear explosions. We sheltered until we ran out of food and came out just this morning.”

“As I'm sure you have guessed, that isn't all. Looks like the whole country was hit.

Right before the radios went dead we heard the announcement of incoming missiles and then I saw a glow off to the west.”

“Yea, that's the first one we saw. Any idea who started it? How'd you survive?”

“Whoa, one at a time. No, they never said during the emergency announcements. To answer your second question, I wasn't far from home and had a shelter in the basement. I quickly drove home and got the car in the garage just as Chicago got hit. I spent the next few months in the shelter and when the radiation level had dropped to a relatively safe level I started make a few excursions and have been looking for survivors for the past 2 weeks now. How about you?”

Joe related the short version including how they acquired the truck and that they were now headed up north to try to reach their daughter and grandkids. He followed with the obvious question, “Since you had a shelter, can I assume you too are a prepper?”

“Yes. I guess the shelter statement made that kind of obvious.”

“Just a little.”, said Joe as he smiled and noticed Mary still tightly holding the gun. “Mary, I think the officer, um, “

“Jason”

“Officer Jason is OK and you can put the gun down.”

Mary lowered the gun leaving it resting against the seat next to her.

Joe asked, “So, can I assume that the former Illinois laws about carrying weapons don't apply anymore?”

“As long as you aren't doing anything illegal, I'm fine with it.”

“Illegal?”

“Looting, murdering, etc. Just act with some common sense and respect for anyone else still around.”



“We did hear a few gun shots a few minutes before we saw you.”, offered Mary.

“Yes, I witnessed a guy trying to break into a house. If he was just scavenging I would have not interfered however in this case the owner was still home. A little old lady opened the door pointing a 357 revolver at him. He raised the cro-bar he was using to hit her and before I could get out of the car and draw, she put him down. I came up and he was still alive but since there are no medical services and no jail anymore I put him out of his misery.”

“How was the old lady?”, she asked.

“She was fine. Swore like a sailor and said the punk deserved what he got.”, said Jason with a chuckle. “I hate to have to say it but for right now I've also become judge and jury too. There aren't many of us left and I am damned if am going to let lawlessness take over.”

“So, what are the 'rules' for scavenging then?”

“There really aren't any, just don't take anything that obviously belongs to someone else. If it's abandoned then it's fair game. Of course this isn't an official stance, just how I am handling this area. If you're moving on you'll have to check local jurisdiction.”

“OK, Thanks.”

“You seem like some good folks. Be careful out there. Good people survived but some bad ones did too.”

“You too. Take care of yourself.”, said Joe as Jason headed back to his car.

Joe and Mary drove away and Jason turned his car around and headed the other way. Continuing north on Route 53 they passed some convenience stores and after checking the first few they came to the realization that they probably all were looted or scavenged already. Ending up near the Woodfield mall Joe was adamant about staying way from the mall but did suggest they try a couple of restaurants in the area.

Mary questioned why and Joe explained, “While the grocery stores were empty, many restaurants also have canned ingredients and those might still be good. The upper scale ones also cater to clientèle that want that expensive bottle water. Unless someone else thought of scavenging there, the resources are just waiting for us.”

She agreed and he pulled the truck into a higher end steak joint. Heading around back they parked and locked the truck up taking the 1911 and 590 with them. Since the explosions happened in the early evening Joe thought that the patrons and staff may have simply fled and not locked the doors. Going around to the front they found this to be true and quickly slipped inside. Joe asked Mary to hang around the reception counter and call out if she saw anyone coming and that he would go check the rest of the place out.

The smell was quite overpowering with all the abandoned dinners and the spoiled food in the refrigerators and freezers. Joe worked his way further in gagging the entire time. Finding the store room he found shelf after shelf of canned goods. They were mostly #10 sized cans but this was not the time to refuse an opportunity to supplement their LTS foods. Behind the bar he found cases of Evian and Perrier. Checking with Mary she said that not a soul was to be seen.

They both went and gathered up all the food and supplies including paper goods from the bathrooms and stacked it by the back door. When they were done Jim propped the door open and they loaded up the truck. As they finished they headed west on Golf Rd and repeated the same procedure at three more restaurants. Passing a pharmacy they picked up a small amount of additional food, water and a lot more medical supplies to supplement what they already had. Joe crawled over the counter and grabbed everything that even sounded like an antibiotic.

Mary commented on how the truck was almost two thirds full now and that they easily added quite a number of additional months of supplies to what they already had in food and supplies. Joe agreed and they turned on to route 72 heading northwest. Questioning his route choice, Joe told Mary that he wanted to try one more stop before seeing if I-90 was passable enough to continue their journey to their vacation home up north and hopefully the rest of their family.

“Where are we going now?”, asked Mary.

“I want to see if Cabelas is still standing or if it’s been scavenged.”

“Something tells me we shouldn’t. I have a bad feeling.”

“We’ll be careful. I promise. The amount of stuff they have there is worth taking a look. First sign of trouble and we’re out of there. OK?”

“OK. Just be careful.”

Joe drove the truck down the side road and turned into the entrance. He stopped and they observed for awhile. Not seeing anyone he drove right up to the front doors. There were still dozens of vehicles in the parking lot but they looked like they’d been there since the nukes hit. Again they just sat in the truck for about 5 minutes waiting and watching. No movement and no sounds are all that greeted them. Finally he and Mary got out taking their guns with them.

With no power the doors did not work but a simple push was enough to open them as they were unlocked. As they entered the store they again just stood there listening. No sign of anyone and no sounds. Joe grabbed a cart and had Mary do the same.

“Why don’t you start over here. Fill a cart with food and first aid supplies. If you still have room add anything else you can think of. When you’re done, park it by the door and start grabbing all season camping gear and cooking equipment that doesn’t need electricity. I’m going to hit the fishing and gun departments and then we can meet in the clothes and boots area and pick up a bunch more in our sizes. After all they ain’t making any more!”

They split up and Joe managed to nearly fill a cart with fishing gear. He’d have to pack it into tackle boxes to consolidate but that would be later. Heading to the gun department he selected nearly a dozen various rifles and shot guns. Satisfied he started looking at the handguns. Since he was already shooting a 1911 he figured more of the same would be good for parts and for sharing ammo. He grabbed about 8 of them including Sam and tossed in some ammo. Heading to the front of the store he grabbed a new cart and proceeded to fill that with more ammo in the various calibers that he needed.

Meeting up, each with a fresh cart, in the clothing area they got multiple pairs of

boots in their sizes and then filled each cart to overflowing with pants, shirts, socks, long underwear and anything else that thought they could use. On the way back to the front they tossed on some camouflage jackets too.

Wheeling the carts outside they started reviewing what they had gathered, it would be a one time grab since they weren't planning on coming back this way. In the process of putting the guns in the back of the truck Joe stopped when he picked up Sam. For some reason he felt a sense of history and something intangible... almost describable as an intelligence... when he held Sam. Right then and there he loaded up Sam and handed it to Mary while asking if she could put it in the cab. She tossed it on the passenger seat while Joe put the rest of the guns truck bed.

The rest of the ammo, food, cooking and camping equipment and clothes got layered on. By now the bed was heaping and it was obvious that some type of tarp would need to be fastened over it. Joe said he'd head back in and find something while Mary finished putting the last few items in the truck.

Minutes later a vehicle came racing up. Mary still wasn't used to the sound of a vehicle being a sign of alarm and didn't pay it any attention until the doors started slamming and she heard, "Hey Chicky, whats you doin there?"

She started to back away from the bed moving towards the cab.

The 3 guys spread out, one heading around the far side of the truck, the other two still approaching her. "Thanks for packin up the truck for us. Now hows about we have a little fun before we hit the road...", said one of them while grabbing his crotch.

"I'm armed. Stop where you are or I will shoot you."

"Hey baby, I don't see no gun so you're not going to hurt anyone. But I can't say we're going to be gentle with you."

The third guy had made it to the front of the truck and the other two still were advancing. Mary decided that was enough and remembered her self defense pistol training. Reaching in the open door she grabbed Sam off the passenger seat. The guy at the front of the truck saw her lifting up Sam and yelled, "T-Bone, she got a gun"

The two guys both reached around behind their back. Before either could pull their weapons around to the front she put a round in each of them. Turning around she saw the front guy lifting a gun to point at her. She dropped behind the door and kept going all the way prone to the ground. Looking under the truck she pointed Sam at the visible shin and fired. The third guy went down screaming.

Joe came running out of the store just then, his 1911 in hand yelling for Mary. He happened to go around the front of the truck first and stumbled across the guy down with a shattered shin bone. "She Shot Me!" he yelled.

Joe pointed his 1911 at the guys head and pulled the trigger, all without breaking stride, "Yeah, so did I."

He almost lost it seeing Mary on the ground but just as he spotted her she started rolling out from her position so she could clear the door and stand up again.

"Are you OK!"

Shaking she collapsed against Joe. In between sobs she got out that she was unharmed but was so scared.

Finally Joe got her to sit in the passenger seat and he took Sam from her hand, which until now she had held it in a death grip. Moving over to the other two thugs one was obviously dead, shot through the heart but the last was still alive but unconscious. Joe kicked away their guns and then slapped the guy until he came to.

"What's your name?"

"T-Bone, man, where is she? Shoot her for me and I'll give you half of what's in the truck."

"Hey, Mary, this piece of crap says if I shoot you he'll give me half of what's in the truck. Do you want to make me a better offer?"

Mary came out of the truck, walked up to Joe and took Sam from him, gave Joe a big kiss and then looked T-Bone right in the eyes as she ended his life. Sam, recognizing T-Bone was only too happy to oblige and made sure not to mis-fire or jam. Afterwards

Mary handed Sam back to Joe, walked off a ways and threw up.

Getting out a water bottle for her he walked over, set it down next to her and went back to the truck to give her some time. It was a new and very dangerous world that they'd both have to learn to live in and this would be 'on the job' learning. Sitting in the truck he idly turned Sam over in his hands and examined it closely. Noticing something on the bottom of the barrel he saw it had a small engraving that said 'Gene Adams'. Joe was floored. His father was named Gene Adams.

Could this be the gun his brother, Michael had once told him about? Gene, their father, was showing Bobby, Michael son and Joe's nephew, the gun one day when Michael's wife Cheryl caught them. Michael had told me all about how she was against guns and chewed out Gene and almost forbade Bobby from ever going there again. It would be an amazing coincidence if this was the same gun. If I ever see Bobby again I'll have to ask him if he recognizes it.

Joe remembered back to trying to get Michael to get some preps together but Cheryl was so dead set against it and absolutely forbade any weapons in their house. It was unlikely they had survived the radiation let alone avoiding starvation and thugs like the three laying here. His musings were interrupted when Mary came back.

"All better?"

"No, but I am a bit better. I know these guys were bad but I still can't get over the fact that I ended their lives. Me. I did it. Who ever gave me the right to make that decision?"

"Mary", said Joe taking her firmly by the shoulders and looking her in the eyes, "they gave you the right. When they threatened you they forfeited their lives. They could have taken a different approach. They could have asked for help. Once they crossed the line from fellow human to predator you had no choice but to defend yourself."

"I hope your right."

"We need a few things. One to get moving, second, to take away an important lesson from this. People will try to kill us or worse for what we have. We must never go unarmed again. Not even to leave a weapon in the cab while we're back here by the bed.

If it is not within arm's reach we might as well not even have it. Finally we do not split up. Ever. I should have never left you alone out here. I don't care if it means one of us stands over the other while we do our business in a hole in the ground, we must always cover each other's backs."

"I love you, Joe. Now let's go find the kids."

They got in the truck, drove through the lot siphoning off as much gas as they could hold from the other abandoned vehicles and headed for interstate 90 to hopefully take them closer to family.

### *Story 3 – Time for Church*

Rumble...

“What was that?”, asked Cheryl. “If those contractors next door dropped something in our yard we’re going to file a lawsuit. They’re disgusting always spitting and showing their cracks. I’ve called the police again and again but they refuse to come out anymore. That reminds me I need to file a complaint with the city over their lack of response. I pay their salary and they work to serve me. It says so right on the side of their cars, ‘To serve’.”, continued Cheryl making air quotes on the last part.

“It’s about time those donut eating....”

Cheryl was interrupted by a loud ‘RRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRRRR’ sound.

“Hey, is that the tornado siren?”, queried Cheryl while looking out the north window of their Lake Forest, IL home. “I don’t see any clouds. How can there be a tornado. It better not be the city testing it and scaring us like this. I’ll have a talk with the mayor next time I see him at the clubhouse. Turn on the TV see what they have to say.”

“Yes dear.”

“... we interrupt this broadcast for a zzzztttt”

“Now what? Why did the lights go off? Is everyone off?”, asked Cheryl again peering out the window. “Go ask the Henderson’s if they have power.”

“On my way dear.”

Michael opened the door and went outside. Turning south at the sidewalk to go to the Henderson’s, who lived on the other side of the construction project next door, Michael noticed others out on the block all just standing there staring south. A few were pointing. He finally raised his eyes above the trees and saw the expanding mushroom cloud. Turning quickly he ran back inside and slammed the door.

“Cheryl, we’re in big trouble.”



“What? Is there a tornado? Or was it those dumb hicks doing the work next door. I swear if they damaged my petunias I’ll sue them for everything they got. I bet...”

“SHUT UP!”

“What? How dare you tell me to shut up?! You can’t talk to me th...”

Completely out of character, Michael grabbed Cheryl by her shirt sleeve and dragged her over to a south facing window. She was so upset she was, finally, speechless, simply sputtering and trying to pull loose while wind milling her arms around. Michael finally had to physically turn her head to look out the window at the expanding mushroom cloud.

“What do you think you’re doing? You probably bruised my arm and hurt my neck all to show me a cloud?!”

“That’s a mushroom cloud. They nuked Chicago.”

“No, you’re wrong. It can’t be. Now apologize or I’m calling the police to have you arrested for spousal abuse.”

Michael grabbed Cheryl again and dragged her outside to the street making her acknowledge what she was looking at and to see the shocked and horrified expressions on the faces of everyone else around. It finally dawned on her that maybe it was a nuclear cloud. But that didn’t matter. Chicago was too far away and Michael rumped her blouse sleeve.

“We have to find some shelter or we’ll get killed by the radiation.”, he said.

“It is too far away. We won’t get hurt.” She turned to go back inside just as a squealing sound was heard. It was the Henderson’s rapidly accelerating out of their driveway and turning on to the street. Michael flagged them down before they could drive past.

Quickly stopping Jack called out, “You need to get to shelter fast!”

“I know I tried to tell Cheryl but she doesn’t believe me.”

“Cheryl!”, yelled Jack. She turned and came over to the car.

“Both of you have to get to shelter fast! The fallout will be here shortly and the radiation from it will kill you.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

Marianne, Jack’s wife, leaned over and said, “Yes it will. Remember Jack’s a scientist. He knows all about this stuff. We’re heading to Saint Anthony’s as there is an old shelter in the basement of the school and a smaller one under the church. They’ll have to let us in especially since we’re bringing some food with,” gesturing to a bunch of shopping bags filling the seat behind them.

“Michael, why didn’t you say we had to get to a shelter. You’re so stupid, not smart at all like Jack.”, said Cheryl, “Thanks Jack. We’ll see both of you there later as I have to go pack my stuff first.”

As they drove off she said to Michael, “Go get some food bagged up so we can make a donation too and get them to let us in. I’m going to go pack my clothes.”

Michael put cans and cereal and oatmeal and such into a bunch of bags nearly filling the table. He hoped his son Robert was OK and Denver, where he was living now, wasn’t hit. Finishing up he grabbed a duffle bag, tossed in a couple changes of clothes, a few books and on a whim went out to the garage and took his multi tool off the shelf and dropped it in the bag too. Setting it by the front door he started moving the groceries over to the door when Cheryl came down lugging 2 large suitcases.

“Go get the rest of my bags from upstairs. There are 5 more.” Looking in the grocery bags she started yelling, “I’m not giving them all of this besides you know I like this cereal! They can have the leftovers from the fridge! I can’t trust you to do anything right!”

Storming off she took the bags back to the kitchen, dumped everything all over the table and proceeded to fill a single bag with a partially filled half gallon container of milk, some opened containers of yogurt and cottage cheese and half dozen Styrofoam

containers with left over dinners from the last few evenings. With a satisfied nod she took the single bag to the door and dropped it there by her luggage just as Michael finished bringing down the last of the luggage.

“Well, bring the car around and load it up. I’m not carrying all of this!”

Michael did as he was told and they drove off heading for the church.

As they got close they encountered a complete mad house. Cars just left everywhere and people pushing and shoving all trying to get in. Cheryl used Michael as a shield to help push them to the front where she then jumped around him and screamed, along with everyone else, to be let in. The priest of the parish stated they were only taking families with children. She said they had a child with them, still in the car and if they’d let her in Michael would go get the child and the food they brought with them. At the mention of a child and food the priest instructed those with him to let her pass and told Michael to go get the child and the food. He tried to explain the lie to the priest but everyone shouting around him drowned him out.

Michael trudged back towards the car and got the first piece of her luggage and the bag of food and started towards the church. A sharp blow from behind as the bags were being ripped from his hands was the last thing he remembered.

Sometime later Michael groggily rolled over wondering why the bed was so hard and wet. As consciousness returned he felt not a mattress but grass instead. A few minutes of collecting his wits and feeling the lump on the back of his head and he was able to finally rise and stagger his way to the church. Darkness had fallen and no one was around. He found the doors unlocked and went inside. Checking each door he was finally able to locate the stairs to the basement. Once there the trail of debris led him to the shelter door. He pounded on it and called for Cheryl.

A muffled voice told him the shelter was full and he was probably full of radiation anyway. They couldn’t let him in, not without putting everyone at risk. He asked for his wife. Minutes passed and finally, heavily muffled, he could hear her voice.

“What do you want?”

“Can’t you get them to let me in?”

“What and kill us all? No. I won’t ask them to do that.”

“But I’m your husband.”

“Not any more. I was going to file for divorce next week. You’re not good enough to be my husband. Go away Michael.”

Further calls went unanswered. After thinking for a moment an indescribable feeling passed through Michael. He wasn’t sure if it was anger or relief or freedom or hurt or what. Perhaps a combination of all. Cheryl, over the years, had become very controlling and it was easier to just go along than to deal with the tempest she could turn into. Between her yelling and throwing things at him and the constant accusations... maybe this was for the best. He might only live a few more hours but it would be on his own terms for the first time in a long while.

Michael got in the car and went back home. He didn’t know if he had been exposed or not. Heck he didn’t even know how long had passed since the explosion. It was too dark to see the mushroom cloud anymore although there was a faint orange glow in the southern sky, probably from all the buildings burning he guessed. Going in the house he had a sudden desire to fight for life again. Quickly repacking all the groceries from the table he took those out to the car. Tossing her designer luggage on the lawn freed up a lot of space. At least his Camry was still working and had some storage. Her BMW convertible had almost no luggage capability. Back inside he added a few more clothes and toiletries.

Thinking clearly for the first time in a while he remembered the cases of bottled water. He added those to the car. Finally he went through their home office. Looking in the safe he took out his small collection of coins. Mostly old quarters and dimes from the 30s through the 50’s and a couple of small gold coins he had inherited from Gene, his father. He couldn’t say why he did, but he went through the drawers of the desk the Cheryl used. Sure enough in the second drawer he found a large envelope from an expensive law firm downtown and inside were divorce papers. Reading through he saw she was going to demand the house, all savings, both cars and 50% of his salary as alimony. He would have been left with nothing if this had gone through.

He wrote, ‘The house is all yours now, you bitch. Enjoy it.’ Feeling more hurt than

anything he went out to the garage and popped the hood on the BMW. He proceeded to cut every wire and hose he could see, slashed the tires and the soft convertible roof and scratched the sides all up. Somehow feeling better he returned to the house and loaded the last of what he wanted into the Camry and headed north, away from the explosion in Chicago.

For the first few weeks he just wandered aimlessly around the Illinois/Wisconsin border although many days were spent sheltering in his car as he felt too weak to safely drive. Vomiting was a regular occurrence at first but had since subsided. For a brief period he had a fever too and even mild exertion left him exhausted. Eventually there was a bit of hair loss and some minor bleeding from his gums. He focused just on getting food and water and eventually gas for the car. Being an upstanding and honest citizen he at first tried to locate the owners or look for an open store but quickly realized there was practically no one around. The few people that were usually meant him harm.

While his money lasted he would take what he needed from a store and leave money on the counter for it. Once his paper money was used up he switched to using the older quarters and dimes. Since they were old and probably collector items he figured that they were worth twice face value so Michael would leave \$3 in 1950 quarters to cover \$6 worth of merchandise. Had he realized the value of the silver in them one quarter, not 12, would have covered the merchandise and he should have received change!

Once those were gone he was down to just his gold coins. For sentimental reasons he couldn't part with them and finally committed his first crime. Misdemeanor theft of a gas can and a siphon hose.

More than once he was chased away by people with bats and pipes and at least once he had someone shoot at him. Carrying his multi tool with the knife blade out was no match against a 4 foot steel pipe and he remembered some old saying about using a knife in a gun battle or something like that. Cheryl had been 100% against guns so he never brought them up even though he was fascinated by them and always wanted to own one. Maybe now would be a good time to get one. But where?

The first few weeks after the event had passed found Michael finally feeling a little better. It took awhile but he eventually remembered his brother had a cabin up north. Perhaps he could make his way there and if it was vacant stay there.

Wandering around south eastern Wisconsin he was still scavenging food and water from where he could find it. At a small town convenience store he was poking around behind the counter when he found a local phone book. He pulled it out and looked up gun shops. There were three listed. After fruitlessly looking for a pen he finally just took the whole book with him along with a regional and a state map. The first store had a heavy metal mesh gate across the front and he couldn't see any way in so he continued on. The second, listed as a gunsmith, wasn't a store at all but a rural residential address he discovered.

At first he tentatively knocked on the door. No answer found him peering in the window. He couldn't see anyone. Michael finally went all around the house looking in every window. No one was to be found. Taking a decorative landscape brick he broke a window, reached in and unlocked the door. He entered and found a well stocked kitchen and planned to take what he could on the way out. Continuing through the house he found no guns. Perhaps the address was wrong. He checked the phone book and it matched. He went down to the basement and saw many wooden shelves and some deep wood cabinets with double doors. Looking in the cabinets they had mostly clothes or other useless household stuff. He noticed a cinder block sectioned off area with a heavy looking steel door that was locked. Perhaps the guns were in there but he had no way in.

With no idea he finally decided to move on to the next gun shop. Trudging up the stairs he got to the top just in time to see a big black gun pointed in his face.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“Uh, looking for a gun. Please don't shoot me,” squealed Michael dropping to his knees and cowering.

“Did you break my window?”

“Yes, but I can pay you for it.”

“With what? Money is only useful now to wipe your ass.”

“Uh, um...”

“Give me one reason not to blow your head off right here, dirtbag!”

Remembering the coins, “I got gold coins. Would those be any good?”

The gun wavered a bit, “Let’s see them.”

He quickly reached into his jacket pocket only to have the gun thrust back in his face, “Nice and slow, no sudden moves.”

“Sorry!” he slowly pulled his hand out and opened it to reveal 2 one ounce gold eagles. “Is this enough to cover the damage?”

An older woman’s voice called out, “George, let him up. You scared him so bad he peed himself. With his missing patches of hair it looks like he got some of that radiation sickness.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I think I did but I’ve been getting better each day for at least a week now.”

“Martha, you’re too trusting. How do you know he ain’t going to jump us first chance he gets?”

“I wouldn’t do that sir, honest. I just wanted to find a gun to protect myself when looking for food. I found your address in the phone book and knocked and knocked but when no one answered I figured you had left and the house was abandoned.”

“Does it look abandoned?”

“No. Here. Just take these and I’ll go away.”

“Where’d you get them from? You steal them?”

“No, I inherited them from my father who passed away last year. It’s all I have left of him.”

“George...”

The gun was pulled back, “Get up, and come in the kitchen. We’ll talk, but don’t try anything funny or I will shoot you.”

“First take off your pants. I’ll wash them for you,” said Martha.

Michael, feeling compliance was more important than modesty at this point, started to disrobe and by the time he had the pants off Martha had returned and handed a towel to George who tossed it to him. He took off his underwear and wrapped the towel around his waist and then wrapped the wet part of the clothes with the dry parts and handed the dry part to Martha who disappeared around the corner with them.

Going into the kitchen George kicked out a chair and motioned Michael towards it. He took a seat across the table and Michael noted that he kept the big black gun in his hand but didn’t have it pointed at him anymore.

“So, you say you found me via the phonebook?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hmm, I guess that’s good to know. If you did I’m sure others will. Perhaps we should leave as we discussed.”

“Deary, would you like something to eat? You look like skin and bones,” asked Martha.

“That would be great but I can’t pay you for it so no thanks.”

“I didn’t ask if you wanted to buy food. Let me make you a sandwich.” Martha disappeared behind him and he heard the refrigerator open and close a few times.

“How do you have power?”

“Propane.”

“Huh? Don’t you use that for grilling?”

“They sell refrigerators that run on propane. I guess you city folk don’t know



that.”

“George...” said Martha.

“You already know our names, what’s yours?”

“Michael.”

George looked towards Martha. She held up Michael's wallet she had taken from his pants and said “He’s telling the truth.” as she tossed the wallet on the table in front of Michael.

Michael realized the 'Deary' and friendly nature of the woman, while honest, also hid a sharpen intelligence which she just used to secretly check out his answers.

“Well Michael, let’s see those coins.”

He took them back out of his jacket pocket and put them on the table. George picked them up and looked them over. Martha placed a plate with a turkey sandwich on it in front of Michael and a cup of iced tea. George finished looking over the coins and said, “yep. These should just about cover the window.”

“Now George.”

“What dear?”

“You know darn well those are worth about \$1800 each.”

Michael choked on the food.

“Give them back. They’re all he has left from his father. My gut tells me he’s a good person and did not mean any harm to us.”

George reluctantly pushed them back across the table to Michael who picked one up and looked at it in a new found light.

“We still got a broken window.”

“George, you’ve talked about us moving out to be with the grandkids so we could keep an eye on them. We can just put a board over the window as we’ll probably never make it back to this house in our lives anyway.”

Michael finally noticed that the couple was getting up there in years. Martha disappeared into another room for awhile and George asked about his father and his life story.

It took nearly an hour but felt like a cathartic release for Michael. He told of his father, Gene, and his service in the war. He told of his wife Cheryl and his son Bobby. He told of the decline of his marriage and how Cheryl ditched him at the shelter. He described the divorce papers he found. Finally he went through the last weeks and what he had endured trying to survive, where he was trying to go and how he ended up here just looking for a gun to keep him safe.

As George realized that Michael was truthful in more than just his name and not out to hurt anyone he finally took pity on him. Martha had returned with his dry clothes which he gratefully put on. He then asked Michael to stay seated for a bit longer and went into the other room with Martha.

Michael could hear them talking but couldn’t make out the words. Finally they both returned and sat at the table with Michael.

George spoke first. “Here’s what we want to offer you. As restitution for the broken window we want you to help us pack up the possessions we want to keep and help us move them, and us, to our grand kids place. In returned I’ll consider your debt paid and I’ll provide you with a gun and some ammo. Deal?”

“Where is your grand kids place?”

“It’s in Duluth.”

“But, that, why,”

“Spit it out son.”

“That’s almost all the way to where I’m going too.”

“Yes, we know.”, said Martha smiling.

“But why would you do this for me? After what I did to your house?”

“It’s just an object. Your intentions were good although misguided, and to be honest we’re getting up there and could use the help. I think this works to both of our benefits since it’ll be safer to travel in numbers and we’re both headed the same way. While you’re no teenager anymore, I’d wager we still got at least 20 years on you. You don’t mind some physical labor, do you?”

“Well I don’t know what to say.”

“We’d hope you’d say yes.”

“Of course. I’d be happy to help you. And thank you for not just shooting me.”

“Well, you can thank Martha. She always has been a voice of reason for me,” added George.

In the next few weeks Martha packed up what they wanted while Michael got a crash course in firearms from George. While he could shoot anything he did the best with a 22lr. Not great stopping power, yet, ignoring police and military, reports said the 22 has accounted for more deaths each year than any other caliber. Michael was able to achieve a higher level of accuracy with it than with any other caliber. Being a home based gunsmith he didn’t have the inventories of a storefront so the choices were limited. George gave Michael a Ruger SR22 pistol along with what was commonly know as a 'brick' of ammo, basically a box with 500, or more, cartridges in it.

Once Martha had everything packed in boxes that she wanted to take George went to a barn out back and started up a F350 Crew Cab Dually with a 4 horse trailer. Michael moved most of the boxes into the trailer while George and Martha handled the lighter stuff and the special items they wanted in the truck.

The next morning was spent boarding up the house. All the windows and doors had boards nailed across them, of course leaving one door open for now. Meanwhile

George went around and turned off the water and propane valves. Just before leaving George had Michael accompany him to the basement.

He had already seen in the cinder block room and it was outfitted for gunsmith work but other than a bunch of tools and parts, there was only a small handful of weapons, all of which George had him try out earlier.

Together they pushed and shoved a deep double door cabinet away from the wall.

Michael was a bit disappointed as he had expected to see a secret passage or hidden safe room or something. Rather George gestured that they had to keep pushing and turning the cabinet. As they did the back came into view and it was a solid piece of cheap plywood. George handed a pry bar to Michael and said "Give me hand."

They worked around the edges prying out the nails until the board came free. Once it was moved away Michael discovered a 6" deep compartment. He went around to the front and looked in to the back, then around the back again. Finally he held up a stick on the inside and pressed it to the back. He then held it on the outside and realized the inside dimensions were indeed about 7 inches less than the outside dimensions but with all the boxes of holiday decorations piled in there it was not apparent to the casual observer.

With the false back removed the secret compartment yielded a small stash of weapons and a few boxes of less than legal items. There was a Barrett 82A1 although no ammo to go with it and a pair of Savage 338 Lapua 110's with a thousand rounds. All three rifles had Leupold scopes. Sitting on top of the ammo boxes were a pair of 1911's with highly detailed engravings. Of course Michael didn't really know what he was looking at, just that these looked to be really nice and must be expensive to warrant the trouble of hiding them like this.

George produced some cases for the rifles and said, "Give me a hand putting these in the cases and hauling the ammo cans out to the truck."

Martha used the last of the perishables from the refrigerator to make lunch. With the propane already turned off it would start warming quickly. The trucks loaded and lunch finished they disposed of the last perishable items, closed and locked the door and finally boarded that one up too. George dug around in the flower bed next to the door

and produced a 2 foot PVC tube painted black. He unscrewed the end and had Michael drop in the hammer and pry bar. He added the keys, screwed the lid back on and buried it in the dirt scattering some wood chips over the top.

“Just in case we decide to come back. If not then I guess someone else can one day make use of it.”, George said winking at Michael.

They got in the truck and drove out with Michael following behind in his Camry. George headed west and picked up route 12 for awhile. Not wanting to get too close to Madison in case it had been hit they switched to 67 and continued north until they picked up 33 and took that west planning to pick 39 in Portage. As evening was approaching they felt it was time to find somewhere to hole up for the night.

Portage turned out to still have a fairly high number of residents. Being a more rural town many had survived and all access roads into the city had armed checkpoints and barricades. After George stopped and talked with them for a few minutes the barricade, some old cars, was moved and George drove in. One of the 6 guys with big long guns waved at Michael to stop. He did so and rolled down his window.

“Your father said you’re helping them move and that you’d be staying just the night. I already gave him the rules so just follow him to the motel and he’ll fill you in.” said the guy who then stepped back and waved Michael on. As soon as he was clear the barricade was put back in place.

They drove into town and then took a left heading north. At the far end they got to a Motel 6 and George pulled in. Michael followed parking next to him. Everyone got out to stretch and Michael looked at George a bit strangely.

George asked if something was wrong.

“My father?”

“Sorry, I figured it would be the easiest way to explain our situation. I hope you don’t mind. No disrespect to Gene intended.”

Realizing that it had been weeks since he told George about Gene and he still remembered his name he quickly responded with “No, none taken, I was just a bit

surprised. That's all."

"Good. Now let's see about a room."

"What about the rules? A guy with a rifle told me you'd fill me in."

"Nothing really. Just be law abiding, like before, and you should be fine. Also most goods and services are being conducted on a precious metal or barter basis now."

Walking in to the front desk no one was around but they did see an old bell on the counter.

"Ding. Ding."

"Be right out."

Moments later a cheery looking woman warmly greeted them. "Hi. Welcome. Just so you know, we have no power, no continental breakfast and we only run the water pump generator for 30 minutes in the morning and evening. We'll supply a bucket but you're responsible for filling it and bringing it to your room. If you're still OK with this I can set you up with a first or second floor room. Your choice."

"That will be fine. Do you have something with a couple of queens?"

"I do have a first floor suite, It has a common room and two bedrooms. Each bedroom has a queen. Will that do?"

"How much?"

"A tenth ounce gold coin, 25 pre 65 quarters, the equivalent value in ammo in common calibers only or food for one for a week, and not just a bucket of wheat. I mean real food."

"We can pay with food. Please get our room ready and we'll get it from our vehicles."

"Thanks. I actually prefer that as you can't eat the coins and oatmeal every night

grows old after awhile.”

The three of them returned to the vehicles, made sure anything of value was locked in the back of the truck cab or in the trunk of the car and gathered up the food to bring in. Each also carried a small bag with clothes, personal items and a handgun... just in case.

Michael set the box on the counter and the clerk opened it and pulled out just over 2 dozen quart canning jars. Some were vegetables, some had stew meat, a few contained fruits and two had dried barley in them. Her eyes got wide at the variety and quantity.

“As much as I’d like to just take this, there are at least 3 weeks of food here. If you’re only staying one night then you only a third of it is required.”

“Can you cook?”

“Yeah, why?”

“How about half and you include a cooked dinner for us?”

“Deal.”

“OK, pick out the half you want.”

For everything in which there were at least 2 she took one and in the case of the stew meat and barley she took an extra of each to make an even dozen jars for her pile. She put the room key on the counter and directed them to go down the hall to get to the room. “If you need anything else, you’ll have to come back down here as the phones don’t work. I’m Sally and either I or my boy will be nearby, just ring the bell.” Looking at her watch she added, “Would dinner at 8pm be too late for you?”

“No, that would be fine.”

“OK, just come back down and we’ll have dinner in the lounge over there since we don’t have a restaurant here.”

“Thanks. See you in a few hours then.”

“Don’t forget the water pump only is available from 7-7:30 and some buckets are inside your bathroom. Just head out that door there and you’ll find a hose you can fill them at.”

They went to their room and rested until 7 when Michael took the buckets down, filled them and brought them back up. They each were able to freshen up a bit and actually use the water to flush the toilets with enough time to get back down and get another refill before the pumps were turned off. Promptly at 8 they went down for dinner.

They took seats in the lounge and shortly afterwards a boy, maybe 13, came out and placed bowls and spoons on the coffee table. He returned in a few minutes with a pitcher of lemonade and some glasses. As he started filling each, Sally came out with a basket of steaming biscuits and introduced her son, Jacob, and Michael, Martha and George made their introductions. Sally left and shortly returned with a pot of stew just as a guy with a rifle came in the door. George recognized him as one of the guys from the road block. Sally turned, gave him a kiss and motioned for him to join the group.

Quick introductions were made and they found out that he was Sally’s husband, Rick. Martha praised the stew and was followed with murmurs of approval all around. They made small talk through dinner but once the food was finished and the dishes cleared away George pointedly asked Rick how things were going out in the world.

He shared the problems they’ve had with some gangs but nothing the barricades and townsfolk couldn’t handle. Usually it was just someone looking for a free ride or a handout. They had heard rumors about which countries were involved but no one had any factual data. He also mentioned had George not volunteered at the blockade that they could pay in food they would have been turned away. Rick also stated that it wasn’t wise to be out without being armed. At this, George moved his sweater a bit and Rick saw the 1911 tucked in his belt and nodded in approval.

Michael, noticing this realized his SR22 was safely tucked away in his duffel bag in his room. Had he been alone he would have whacked himself in the forehead for being so stupid. This was a new world. A new society. He’d have to adapt quickly.

Not more than 5 minutes later in the conversation Martha let out a loud gasp,



clutched her side and fell off the chair.

She came to on an examination table with a number of flashlights shining in her face. Being blinded by the lights she could hear George and some other voices talking but not see the speakers.

“It is her appendix. We will have to remove it or she will die.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow after we can gather the people and necessary equipment. But this is not a minor operation. It will require our generator and fuel to power our equipment. Much of our limited medical supplies will be used and care while she recuperates will be necessary. Not to be callous about this but unless you can offer something I’d rather save the supplies for people who have lived here all their lives, not someone passing through.”

“I understand. Can we step out to my truck?”

“Sure, Jane will keep an eye on her.”

Out in the parking lot George opened the rear doors on the cab and had Michael pulled out a large case as George indicated. He gave him a questioning look and mouthed “Are you sure?” and George nodded yes.

They placed the case on the back of the truck and opened it. The doctor looked in and was not impressed. “It’s a gun. So?”

“Is there someone here who knows about these?”, asked George.

“Uh, yeah... hang on. Hey Rick, come here.”

Rick who had led them from the motel to the town’s medical center had not left yet and sauntered over. “Yeah?”

“They are offering this for payment. You know I don’t care about them but he seems to think it’s worth something.”

Rick went over to the back of the truck and looked in the case. His eyes got quite large.

“I’ll say. The gun is worth probably 10K on its own and at least another 5-10K for the scope. I’d say 8-10 ounces of gold equivalent.”

At this the doctor took some time to reconsider.

“Could you guys use this at the barricades? If so I think that would probably be a fair trade for the surgery and supplies.”

“Sure. Heck we could position Johnny on the water tower with this and he could cover all the barricades at the same time.”

“Ok Sir, we have a deal then. We’ll take care of your wife’s surgery and inpatient care until she is back on her feet. Figure 2, maybe 3 weeks. You can make arrangements at the motel.”

Not feeling George should have to part with that much food, Michael stepped up and used his gold coins to get them a room until Martha recovered. George was against it but Michael said after what they did for him it was the least he could offer besides he felt his departed dad would approve. A few days into their stay it was revealed that awhile back the town had lost a few citizens to the gangs including their gun store owner and gunsmith. When George revealed his skills and volunteered to service all their weapons and train someone else in gun smithing to take over when they left Rick readily agreed and even had Sally give back the gold coins to Michael as the work was more than a fair trade he felt.

Michael, having been an advertising executive in his previous life, was only able to contribute manual labor but did so readily and assisted a number of Portage residents with a variety of projects. He even did a few rotations with Rick, and the other guys, at the checkpoints and got to know a few locals. They all agreed he was definitely a sheeple, aka a clueless member of society with no survival skills, when the missiles hit but had since shown a lot of promise and just might eventually make it on his own. George supplied him with another Ruger, a 10/22, for him to use when manning the barricades. After his security rotation was done George told him to keep it.

Martha came through the operation just fine and took about 3 weeks to recover enough to be up and about. George still had about another week of training before he felt the new gunsmith would be ready to take over so everyone agreed it was in the town's best interest to put them up for one more week in return for George's services and Michael's labor. All too soon the time was coming for them to get back on the road.

## *Story 4 – They Got Schooled*

Roy hauled out the 8<sup>th</sup>, or was it the 9<sup>th</sup> bag now, to their SUV. It would be nice to get a few days away without the kids. Hopefully his wife had finished packing for the kids and their stay at Grandmas.

With two young toddlers you simply couldn't go anywhere fast. Eventually they got the kids belted into their car seats and the dog assumed his place on the floor between them. Making sure everything was turned off as they wouldn't be back for 3 days, they got in the front, Roy turned the ignition, put it in drive and pulled out of the garage. He took a few side streets until he was able to get to the 94 entrance ramp. Heading just a mile or so south allowed him to pickup 90 west and head out of Chicago towards Rockford.

His parents lived on the west side of Rockford and they'd have just enough time to drop the kids and get back on the highway to reach the Wisconsin Dells by 10pm. Any later and the hotel wouldn't guarantee their room. The Dells were actually pretty kid friendly but the two of them just needed a bit of adult time alone and his parents were more than happy to get some time with the grandkids.

An hour and half later, after going through some nasty, yet normal for Chicago, traffic, they were passing the Chrysler plant outside of Belvidere when the older child pointed and asked, "Mommy, why is that cloud moving so fast?"

It took her a minute figure out what the kids were fascinated by and finally spotted the cloud. It looked like a really wide airplane contrail but was moving too fast to be an airplane. As she was trying to call it to Roy's attention it quickly descended seemingly right in front of them, although it reality it was at least 3 miles away.

Almost instantly the thermal pulse blinded them along with all the other motorists and resulted in at least first degree burns on all exposed skin. A highway full of vehicles doing in excess of 70 miles an hour, all with blind drivers is not a safe situation. Had the shock wave, arriving a bit over 10 seconds later, from the blast not thrown the vehicles all over the blind drivers would have ended up crashing into each other anyway.

The SUV tumbled over and over with the bags and luggage flying all throughout the vehicle. It finally came to a stop upright in a normal, although bashed up, position.

None of the people in the SUV were dead, but all were severely injured and had received a lethal dose of radiation.

Roy woke to a wet feeling. He discovered it was their dog licking his face, at least he thought it was as being blind made identification difficult. He could feel his wife in the seat next to him and called to his wife and kids but got no answer. With great difficulty he forced the door open and gingerly stepped out to the pavement. He was sure his arm was broken and probably some ribs too as it hurt to breathe.

He took a few tentative steps and then tried calling for help. No one answered but he did hear a few moans of pain off in the distance. He turned around and called again. Still no answer. He turned to go back to the SUV but after 10 steps realized he should have long since made it back. He turned again and walked a few more steps until he reached the hood of the SUV. Feeling along he realized it wasn't the SUV but a car. He was hopelessly lost and helpless. Roy dropped to the pavement and cried, sobs of frustration racking his body.

Minutes later he felt movement and reached out to find a furry companion had joined him. "Good Boy" he said giving him a rub. "Lead me back.. Go on... Good boy. You can do it," he said, painfully rising to his feet. The dog lead him on and on. Finally, under his shoes, he felt gravel and then grass instead of pavement.

"No, Bad! You lead me the wrong way. Get me back."

The dog just barked and jumped around Roy.

After yelling at the dog to no avail Roy blindly kicked out in frustration and unluckily caught the dog in the abdomen.

The dog yelped and backed away.

"Dumb mutt," mumbled Roy turned and worked his way back to the pavement. By morning he would be dead. By the following evening the rest of his family would also succumb to the elements, their injuries or the radiation or probably some of each.

The dog, being low in the vehicle was somehow shielded by the metal sides or the engine block or just dumb luck. It didn't see the initial blast and had not been blinded.

After deciding it didn't want to go near Roy again it started walking east away from the fires caused by the explosion. Hours and miles later it crawled into a large drain pipe and rested. Lapping water in the pipe to quench its thirst the dog stayed in the pipe more or less for a couple of weeks recovering from the kick and the radiation it did receive. Deep in the pipe he was protected from the majority of the fallout. When he did come out, half staving, he started to accumulate additional radiation but at a much slower rate than earlier. Months passed as he reverted to his wild feral heritage and started living off the land. Small animals became meals. The human remains were too far gone to eat but he did recognize bags of chips and other food sources that the wrecked and overturned vehicles still contained or had spilled all over the road. He could smell food in some vehicles but there was no way in so he moved on.

A noise caused the dog to look up. He hadn't heard this noise in quite awhile. His meandering journey east had taken him nearly to route 47 and now one of those moving metal boxes was approaching. Standing over the nearly empty bag of cat food he had liberated from a shopping bag in yet another overturned vehicle, the dog was not going to give up his meal to anyone.

The metal box came to a halt about 50 feet away and got quiet. The flaps on the sides moved and out of the one on the right a human came out. The dog had not seen a living human in months, not since that man kicked him. He could see a man human on the other side holding a stick that he was pointing this way but the woman human had squatted down and was making sounds. He recognized some of the sounds.

“Hey there.... ????? a good boy.... Come here ?????”

“? ???? ???? ?? ????? ???? ? ?????? dog. ??? ????? ? ??? ???? ????  
food ??? ??? ??? ?? come? ?”

“???? ?? ???????? ? dog bite ????? ?? ???? ?? ????? ????”

The dog only understood a few words and the voices were different but didn't seem to be threatening to him. After a few minutes the human woman went to the back of the metal box, made some noises and then came back. She had a can and did something to it and then dumped the contents on the pavement and backed up a few steps. Raising its nose to sniff the dog liked what he smelled and slowly approached, the whole time the human man kept pointing his stick at the dog.

Very tentatively the dog approached the pile and gave it a lick. Fresh meat. He licked a little more and finally tore into it gulping down the corned beef hash. As he finished the woman opened another can and dumped it down right next to her. The dog was still skittish but finally came close enough to start lapping up the tuna. As he did the woman very slowly stretched out her hand and stroked the dog once on his neck.

Immediately the dog dashed back about 20 feet before stopping, turning and growling.

“That’s it, I’m going to shoot it.”

“No! Give him a chance. He’s been all alone since the missiles I bet. If he wanted to attack he would have done so already. He's just scared.”

Hunger overcoming fear the dog slowly approached again and started to eat. This time when the woman stroked his neck he flinched but didn’t run off. She continued to softly talk to him and stroke his neck.

“Looks like he was a fine American Staffordshire Terrier .”

“You sure? I’d say pit bull.”

“Yea, I think so. They do look similar and are fairly closely related but you can see differences in the head and over time you'd notice it a bit in the temperament. He must really be hungry. He’s just skin and bones although these small lumps could be start of a bunch of tumors. Poor thing.”

“You should give him some water too.”

“OK, can you get me another can of hash, a bowl and a bottle of water?”

Joe rummaged around in the back and brought it over to Mary. As he approached the dog backed away a bit but once Joe stepped away the dog came right back to Mary. She popped the third can and dumped it out while filling the bowl with water. As the dog ate and then drank she continued to pet him.

Finally the dog finished every scrap of food and every drop of water. He walked around Mary and nuzzled her for more. She gave him some more petting and he responded by licking her hand. She noticed the tags dangling from his collar and looked at them. The first was a rabies tag. The second said Max.

“Joe, I think his name is Max. Try calling him.”

Joe stood off a bit and called. “Here Max. Here Boy.”

At hearing his name, the dog turned and half approached Joe. He was thinking that this was a man and the last man had kicked him. But this man knew his name and the woman with the man gave him food and water. The dog was undecided and finally turned back to Mary.

“Sorry, Joe. Guess he likes me better,” said Mary with a mischievous grin.

“Well, we really should be going. Say your goodbyes to him so we can get moving.”

“What do you mean? We’re not just going to leave him here.”

“Uh, we aren’t?”

“No.”

Mary’s tone told Joe this wasn’t a discussion point so he went and got in the drivers seat in the truck to wait. Once she cleaned the bowl and stashed it, along with the can opener, in the back she too got in the truck and left the door open.

“Come on Max. Come on. Good boy. Go for ride?”

Max stood outside the door for a moment appearing to be deciding something. But once he made his decision he hopped right in and curled up on the floor by Mary’s feet.

She closed the door and told Jim that now he could drive.

They continued west on 90 crossing over 20 and then just as they crossed 23 the



Nuke Alert let off a chirp.

“I knew they had hit Rockford. Or the nuclear plant in Byron. Heck, drop a big enough nuke half way between the two of them and it would probably take out both. Either way we need to find a different route,” Roy said.

Doubling back he got to 20, and used the entrance ramp as an exit ramp to get on to 20. It lead to the north but shortly swung around to the west again. Just as they entered Marengo the NA went off again. He took the first major street, 23, as it lead off to the north.

Continuing on in an almost due north heading they merged into 14 and came to Harvard. The streets appeared deserted but as they passed 173 a few shots rang out and they heard a ping as one hit the truck.

“Duck!” Yelled Joe as he floored it.

No further shots hit the truck and they never saw the shooters as they raced north on 14. Mile after mile passed without incident. They passed into Wisconsin and eventually the road angled to the west and they could see Janesville in the distance. Stopping at the next few abandoned vehicles Joe siphoned off enough gas to top off their tank. He got back in, made sure his new 1911 was ready and Mary checked over the shotgun.

Joe drove on and 14 bypassed most of the city offering them an entrance back onto 90 without encountering anyone. He took it and barely merged from the entrance ramp onto the expressway when his NA started to go off again. He quickly came to a stop, went in back and dug out his packet of maps. Bringing it around he found the Wisconsin one and spread it out on the hood. Tracing various routes he felt the best bet would probably be 26 to 33 and then take that west to 90 again bypassing Madison which looks like it too was hit.

Folding up the maps and getting back in the truck he turned around and took the entrance ramp he had just passed, again using it as an exit and got on 26. Miles later he almost missed the turn for 33 but noticed it at the last moment. Coming to a safe stop he backed up and turned left on 33. It eventually lead them into Beaver Dam, another small Midwestern town. They saw a few people out and about however they quickly averted

their faces and disappeared back indoors as the truck passed. Right in the center of town 33 took a right turn so they turned heading north again. Not more than a handful of blocks down they passed a school and were horrified to see bodies hanging from the trees out front, most of them naked, bloated and horribly mutilated.

Max had hopped up on the seat and was uttering a deep throated growl.

Mary turned to Joe and said, "I don't like this. I think we should get out of here."

No sooner were those words spoken when a bunch of guys looking like a cross between bikers and gang bangers started pouring out of the school. Joe floored it racking down the residential streets with a half dozen guys on bikes soon in pursuit. Max had his head out the window barking furiously in the direction they had just come from.

Mile after mile Joe raced the truck with some of the bikers slowly closing the distance. A couple had the foreign crotch rocket style bikes and had out distanced their buddies nearly catching the truck. Flying into Fox Lake Joe again nearly missed the sharp left turn in the middle of town. Turning hard he was pretty sure only two wheels were in contact during at least part of the turn. Mary wrapped her arms around Max to prevent him from being thrown from the window.

Racing west on 33, Mary got Max settled on the seat as Joe suggested she fire a couple shells at the bikes to get them to back off. She leaned out the window and fired off three rounds of 00. While none appeared to hit, the bikers got the idea and dropped back about a 1/2 mile and hung there with their brethren still following. Mary replaced her rounds.

The chase continued for nearly 30 more miles with neither side gaining any advantage. As 33 curved to the south and crossed a small river, really nothing more than a creek, Joe slammed on the brakes screeching to a halt a dozen yards short of a couple of cars blocking the road. Six guys stepped out, three from each side of the road, and pointed their rifles at them. Joe yelled out the window that they could shoot him if they wanted but a half dozen pissed off bikers were about to round the bend.

No sooner had he said this when the sound of engines approaching were heard.

The six quickly got behind their barricade and pointed the guns down the road.

Mary hopped out pointing her shotgun back down the road and Joe quickly procured one of his rifles from behind the seats and used the truck for cover.

The crotch rockets were in the lead and seeing the trap tried to stop but both ended up dumping the bikes and sliding down the road. The other bikers had a little more distance to stop and did so bringing up handguns and immediately opening fire.

Seven rifles and a shotgun put the 4 down in a matter of seconds. Turning to the other two, one had gotten his bike up and was racing off while the second one threw up his hands. A boom echoed from further up the road and the one racing away exploded in a fireball.

Rick nudged Michael and said, “See, told you Johnny knew what he was doing. Gas tank vs Barrett... I think we know who wins.”, he said chuckling. They climbed over the barrier with the other 4 guards and approached the couple with the barking dog.

Rick took the lead and began with, “OK, names and what do you want?”

“I’m Joe and that’s Mary and the bark...”

“JOE?!”

Joe craned his head around and caught sight of Michael pushing his way to the front.

“Michael!”

Then grabbed each other in double bear hug.

“I never thought I’d see you again!”

“Me neither. Heck I thought you’d probably been vaporized by the nuke. How the heck did you get way out here?”

“I supposed I could ask you the same!”

Rick waved the other 4 guards and their prisoner back as obviously Michael knew

this couple and after all the help he and George had provided he felt the couple was probably OK.

Finally Michael and Joe separated and he explained to Rick this was his brother and sister in-law. Introductions were made all around and then they finally came to the discussion on the prisoner. Joe and Mary shared what they saw outside of that school and the entire chase getting to here.

Rick said he'd like to discuss this at a town meeting this evening and asked Joe and Mary to speak again there. They readily agreed. He dismissed Michael and told him to take them to the hotel so they could freshen up and to tell Sally he said to put them up for the night. Once they were a few blocks away a single shot rang out. Prisoner? What prisoner?

Michael and Joe talked for a number of hours about everything that had happened, what they had both gone through and even about the 1911 (Sam). Michael strongly felt it was Gene's, their departed father's, but only Bobby, er, Robert, could say for sure. Mary wandered off and ended up helping Sally as she didn't want to just take handout of a free night. Together they cleaned up the few rooms that needed it and worked on weeding a sizable kitchen garden that had been started out back.

Early evening George returned with Martha and the conversations started all over again once introductions were made. George marveled at the coincidences that had brought them all together. Just a few more days and they would have left already. A different day or time and Michael would not have been on guard rotation and the guards would have turned them away. Not to mention the divergent paths that eventually led them both to this same place.

As darkness fell Sally shooed them all out to the town meeting. A good number of people had gathered and Joe and Mary told of what they had seen. The previous attacks at the barricades had also been biker gangs so they all felt it was probably the same group. After hearing of the mutilations done to the bodies and the unspoken thought that these people had suffered these atrocities while still alive it was decided that something had to be done.

George, Michael and Joe all agreed to join the men along with a number of the Portage women including Sally and Mary too. They realized what their fate could be if

this gang ever stormed in with sufficient numbers and all felt a duty to the people of Beaver Dam, not out of anything other than to help a fellow human in trouble.

Two days were spent planning who would go and who would remain to protect the town. Martha would remain behind along with many of the older woman to watch the kids and the men drew straws to see who would stay behind. Once the posse was ready they mounted up in a bunch of pickups. As the locals knew the roads they took the lead and ended up on an early cut off at 73 and then some county roads coming in right near dark on the far southern side of town.

A small group went up to the first house and quietly knocked on the door. An exhausted and unkempt looking woman answered the door. They asked her about the bikers. She made a fearful face, looked around and quickly ushered them in. About 30 minutes later the same group left the house and retraced their steps back to the trucks.

They related the situation. The gang was holding the young kids prisoner in the school in order to keep the rest of the town in compliance. They had to bring food and water to the bikers, as much as they wanted, and two women could check on and feed the kids once each day. As long as they didn't make trouble the gang left the town alone but anyone passing through was chased, usually caught and the gang used them as they wanted. Anything from live target practice with various weapons to completely unspeakable acts.

The town folk would not do anything to help while the kids were in danger and in fact would probably turn them in just to earn favor with the bikers and keep their kids safe. She also put the numbers of the gang at around 75.

Almost an hour of discussions occurred before the same small group again approached the house and were quietly and quickly ushered in again.

The group started with, "You said the townsfolk would probably turn us in. Why didn't you?"

"I don't really know. I would be lying to say I wasn't tempted, they have my daughter and son over there, but to be honest I'm sick of bowing down to them. "

"Are there others who share the same viewpoint that we can trust?"

“I think if the kids were safe the entire town would rise up against them, but you’d have to guarantee that safety first.”

“We can help, but we need a few townspeople who know this city like the back of their hand, someone who knows the habits of the gang and either blueprints to the school or someone who knows the school really good. Do you think you can get this together and trust these few people to not turn us over?”

“Give me 2 days. Come back here just after dark. If everything is OK I’ll leave a scarf tied to the light on the porch. No scarf means I don’t trust the group or some other trouble.”

“OK. We’ll be back. This gang has killed some of our people too and they have to go.”

Sneaking back under the cover of darkness they got the trucks turned around and drove a good ways before turning the lights on and finishing the trip back to Portage. The residents were surprised to see them back so soon but once the situation was revealed they knew the plans had to change.

The next few days were spent preparing for their task. George cracked open his stash and produced a few suppressors. With these they would have a chance at taking out some of the guards without alerting the rest of the gang. A number of plans were made, discarded and made again all subject to change once they filled in the blanks from the locals. Supplies and props were gathered together and later that afternoon the same group headed out again.

One truck went on ahead and when they were certain it wasn’t an ambush the rest drove up and as darkness fell the small group went over to the house again. A scarf was tied to the porch light so they quietly knocked and were quickly ushered in.

Besides the woman there was an older guy, a town police officer and two other women. Basic introductions were made and they found out the old guy had been the school janitor for the last 20 years. The cop knew the town and wanted the gang gone or dead but with the kids being held was powerless to act and he was also greatly outnumbered. The two women were regulars going over there to feed the kids and give

the gang their protection tributes. They discussed if the gang would notice someone different feeding the kids. How to gain access to the rooms with the kids, sleeping habits, etc, the layout of the school, the layout of the town and more. Hours later they had a plan set for the next day.

That morning the cop quietly drove around town discretely telling key trusted individuals to be ready later today.

Sally and one of the women gathered up the food and went to the school. She was so scared the trembling nearly gave her away. They almost made it to the kids when one of the guards stopped her.

“Hey, you’re not the regular one...”

The woman spoke up first, “No, Jeanne is sick with the runs today.”

“Hey baby, I don’t want to hear about your problems, just hurry it up unless you’re changing your mind about spending some quality time with me.” he said leering at them.

They quickly moved on to the classrooms. All the kids were in three rooms, all off the same hallway with a couple of guards down the hall and one in each room. They entered the first room and started passing out the food. The guard looked in their basket of food and pulled out some for himself and then motioned to them to proceed. When he turned away Sally lifted the loaf of bread, jammed her hand inside of it and pulled out a 9mm Beretta with a suppressor. Two shots center mass dropped the thug. Anticipating this the local woman rushed forward jamming a cloth in his mouth and somewhat guiding him to the ground so he wouldn’t crash into anything, thus making noise, on the way down. Duct tape was quickly produced from inside a box of cereal and the thug had the gag taped over his mouth and his arms and legs bound. They weren’t sure if he was dead and weren’t planning on traumatizing the kids any more by performing a blatant execution in front of them. With the bindings and bullet holes they were fairly certain he’d bleed out and be dead soon anyway.

To their credit, none of the kids yelled out or cried. They had been through a lot already but at least none appeared to have been physically harmed. Quietly the two women told them to stay here until they took care of the guards in the other two rooms.

Stashing the gun and tape they repeated the same trick two more times. With the room guards taken care of they had only the two hall guards to deal with. Sally handed the gun to the other woman and walked out in the hall and up to the two guards. She looked at the one who had spoken to them earlier and said she changed her mind and was looking for a bit of fun but they'd have to hurry or the guys out front would wonder what was taking them so long. The one guy who started following her nearly jumped out of his leather when she said, no, both of you, with a seductive smile on her face and started to back into an empty classroom door across the hall from the kids. The followed her while watching as she started to unbutton her blouse. Neither heard the other woman approach from behind. A red mist sprayed into the room and as the first one fell the second was still trying to figure out what the mist was when the suppressed gun was used on the back of his head too.

Sally quickly re-buttoned the two she had undone and congratulated the woman on a good job. It didn't take long to realize the woman was going into shock over what she had just done. Sally grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her a few times until she could get her eyes on her and get her to focus. Looking her right in the eyes she said, "It was them or you and your kids. You did what had to be done. Now we have to take care of the rest of the kids."

That seemed to help a bit although Sally knew she would have to lead now. Grabbing the woman by the hand she led her across the hall to the kids. Very quietly all the kids gathered in the hall and using the notes the janitor had prepared for her she led them further down the hall to a maintenance closet. Inside she took a key he had provided and opened another door at the back of the closet. They ushered the kids through the door and down the stairs. A couple of flashlights were produced and the line of kids kept funneling into the closet and down to the boiler room. Once the last was in they turned off the closet light, went through the doorway and locked the door from the inside. Sally reached in her jacket pocket and produced a small radio. She clicked it 3 times and got back 2 clicks in return. The plan was in motion.

Three minutes later the same big box store rental pickup truck drove up with Joe and another guy in back and screeched to a halt in front of the school.

"Hey, dirtbags!", Joe yelled.

As they came pouring out of the building Joe and the other guy pushed a crotch



rocket off the back of the truck. They turned, grabbed one of the dead bikers and pushed him off the truck onto the bike. Joe then grabbed his 1911 and put a couple of rounds into the body. That was the signal for the driver to race off. Every biker either took a shot at the truck or scrambled for their bikes. Wisely Joe and the other guy had already ducked down in the bed. The truck raced off with the bikers in pursuit. This time the truck turned off 33 and headed for Industrial drive. Racing down the street they turned a hard left into a small apartment complex and drove down the parking lot between the two buildings. At the end the truck stopped and turned with everyone scrambling out to take cover behind it as the bikers turned into the lot.

They all came to halt bunched up in the center of the parking lot. Joe stood up and yelled out “You need to leave now and never come back”

Laughter all around.

“Last chance!”

A couple of them racked their shotguns and were lowering them into position.

Every door on the second floor of the apartment complex burst open with dozens of armed citizens rushing out. All pointing their guns down in the parking lot they opened fire. The bikers never stood a chance. Boxed in it was easier than shooting fish in a barrel. They only managed a few return shots injuring, but not critically, a few townspeople.

Once they were certain the bikers were dead the injured people were rushed to the Beaver Dam medical center while the cop got on his radio. His deputy was watching the school and said there were maybe a half dozen left. Everyone at the complex loaded up into a bunch of pickups and drove back to the school. As one they piled out presented an armed group nearly 50 strong.

The handful of bikers left called out, “You don’t want to do this. We will kill your kids.”

“Go ahead,” challenged one of the women in the group.

The biker leaned over and said something to his pal who then walked off into the

school while making a show of checking the magazine in the handgun he was holding. The townspeople started slowing advancing.

“Stop now or we will kill them.”

They kept walking.

Getting nervous one of the 5 five yelled out, “If you don’t stop we’re going to hurt them real bad before we kill them.”

They kept walking.

The sixth guy came running out yelling, “They’re gone! The kids are all gone and guards are dead!”

At this the townspeople who were now within 20 feet charged. Not a single shot was fired. When it was over the badly beaten and mutilated corpses of the last 6 bikers were dragged out of town and hung from trees at each road leading into town. A pile of broken bikes were left beneath the bodies and a simple sign hung around their necks. “Stay Out”

Once the armed people checked the entire school and made sure it was safe the janitor went to the maintenance closet and knocked 3 times, waited, 2 times, waited and then 1 more time on the door. The lock was undone from the inside and the kids streamed out into the arms of their waiting parents.

A small feast was held that evening to honor the people of Portage that had helped liberate their children and free their town. Joe stood up and made a small speech about being an outsider and moving along but if he ever came back this way he’d strongly consider both towns to be his adopted home. Cheers all around. Many other short speeches were made along with proclamations of ‘Never again’ and guarantees of support from one town to the other.

Not to say that it was all good. Many tears were shed and the kids would have emotional issues for a long time but at least the healing process could now begin. Joe, Michael and the rest of the people from Portage finally had to say their goodbyes and left for home.

The next day George and Martha packed up to leave. Michael discussed his situation and agreement with Joe and Mary and they both looked at him kind of funny. When questioned they told Michael, that of course they'd be joining the caravan and once George and Martha were settled Michael would be more than welcome up at their place. Michael was relieved.

Meanwhile, Joe and Mary traded a portion of the restaurant food they had found for bags and cans of dog food for Max who had become quite attached to Mary and at least tolerated Joe.

*Story 5 – Turkey Worms*

“Hey Cletus, I’m hungry.”

“Well then make some dinner woman.”

“Don’t you woman me! There ain’t be no food left. Since them bright lights none of them stores opened up no more.”

“What am I supposed to do bout that?”

“Get off your lazy behind and go find us some food. Go shoot up a deer or somethin if you has to.”

“Nag nag nag. That’s all you do Nadine,” said Cletus as he stomped out of the run down single wide trailer and got in his 69 Jeep Gladiator. It sat on 36” tires and could go pretty much anywhere despite the beat up and run down appearance. The important parts under the hood along with the drive train were sound.

He fired it up and drove over to Bubba’s place.

“Hey Bubba, you here?”

“Yeah, round back.”

Bubba’s place could charitably be described as a shack at best. Two rooms with no electricity and a wood stove rounded out the interior. Manual well pump and a outhouse for the rest of your needs.

They didn’t live in the middle of nowhere, but they certainly weren’t far from it. Babcock was the closest town, if you can call 3 blocks by 3 blocks a town. Living pretty much in the woods, they both did odd jobs in the area on a cash arrangement, but other than food, gas and ammo they rarely had any expenses so the under the table transactions suited them just fine. Bubba, not his real name but it’s all anyone can ever remember calling him, lived on his own although on occasion he’d shack up with someone, figuratively and literally, from the bar, usually after much consumption of alcohol by both parties. These arrangements rarely lasted once both parties were sober.

Cletus and Nadine got married in a shotgun arrangement while both were still in high school. Unfortunately she had a miscarriage and developed complications resulting in an inability to ever have kids. Lack of a high school diploma, and no real ambition, prevented either of them from ever getting a decent job. When money got bad Nadine would take a job waitressing at the local bar or dispatching for the area trucking company but would rarely last more than a few months.

Walking around the shack Cletus found Bubba out back cleaning his 30-06. He pulled up a stump and just sat there watching.

Finally Bubba finished up, reloaded the weapon and set it to the side. They sat on their respective stumps for another 30 minutes before any more words were spoken.

“Want a beer?”

“Yep.”

Bubba disappeared into the shack and came out with a couple of tepid Pabst Blue Ribbons.

Another half hour passed as they drank them down in silence.

Finally Cletus spoke up, “Nadine’s complaining bout no food in the house. Wanna get a deer?”

“Yep.” Bubba picked up his loaded 30-06 and walked off to the truck with Cletus following. As they got in Cletus pulled a basic .308 rifle from behind the seat and they drove off down the dirt trails.

About an hour later they saw a deer off in the distance. Both leaned out the window and took a 300 yard shot, iron sights only, and managed to wound it in the hindquarters. Whooping and hollering they gave chase in the Jeep. The poor deer ran for miles and miles, deep into the Necedah Wildlife Refuge until it pretty much dropped of exhaustion. The two of them got out and finished it off, dragged it a short distance back to the truck and heaved it in back.

Not being that far from the highway Cletus said he knew a guy down in Madison that owed him some money and he wanted to collect. Bubba figured it would be a chance to get some cold beer so he was in. They headed south on 94 wondering where all the cars were. They knew that something bad had happened after the bright lights some months ago but other than the delivery trucks no longer coming through they had no idea that communications, power and everything else in a modern society simply wasn't there anymore since they didn't live with it anyway. They rarely left the woods and people rarely came into the woods. The lack of moving vehicles, coupled with all the abandoned ones made them feel a bit uneasy at first. After a few miles, Cletus hit the brakes hard.

“What'd you do dat for?” said Bubba.

“These cars just be left here... I guess no one wants them which means we can take what we want.”

“You sure?”

“I don't see no cops. You?”

“Nope,” said Bubba with a big grin forming on his face. They got out, went up to the first car and looked inside. This continued with them stopping at each abandoned car. It looked like most just ran out of gas and for those that were locked a shot to the window, sometimes followed by a couple of strikes with the rifle butt were usually sufficient to get in. Most of the cars had junk in them, but the trucks had tools and sometimes even a gun.

Hours later they had thousands and thousands of dollars of stuff piled up in the back of the Jeep, along with the deer carcass, and grins on their faces like a couple of kids at Christmas. Finally out of room they headed back to Bubba's place and dumped everything there. Cletus didn't want to head home as Nadine would just be complaining about him not bringing home any food. Bubba offered him the guest bedroom, a beat up old couch, if he wanted to stay the night.

They butchered the deer, again figuratively and literally, wasting as much meat as they actually saved and put a number of holes in the skin making it pretty much useless. They roasted the meat over a fire before eating and downed it with some beers. Stuffed

and mildly inebriated they both passed out by the fire. Coyotes liberated much of what was left of the meat while flies contaminated the rest as the two of them slept.

Next morning they woke up, discovered what had happened and swore up a storm while firing randomly off into the woods at imagined coyotes hiding there laughing at them. Once both guns were empty they reloaded and got back in the jeep heading for the highway.

They continued the raiding of the vehicles working their way towards Madison for the rest of the week and never saw another living person. A few cars did have dead bodies in them and they made the mistake of breaking into one with bodies only once.

As they neared Madison Bubba commented on the destruction of the buildings. They had no glass in the windows and any over a few stories were toppled over. Not far off they could easily see a big crater. Cletus joked about going to war with the Minnesota National Guard and it looked like Madison lost.

Over their days of scavenging they found enough food to last them and Cletus brought some home for Nadine but eventually even this source was running low. Time to go shoot something else for dinner. They headed towards Bubba's place and this time got a wild turkey. The .308 did substantial damage to the bird but they salvaged enough meat for the two of them for dinner. A few hours later both were throwing up and not feeling well.

Each day they felt worse and worse and when Cletus rubbed his head, large clumps of hair came right out. They tried one last trip to Madison thinking they'd get some drugs from a drug store to fix them up. Bubba blamed it on flesh eating bacteria from the dead people in the one car they opened up while Cletus said he thought it must have been invisible worms in the turkey meat they ate.

The one pharmacy they did find still intact had already been raided of the prescriptions. The OTC medications were still on the shelves and to them these counted as drugs. They took a number of bottles and popped a few pills from each, grabbed some bags of chips and headed back on 94 towards home.

Heading north on 94 the small caravan of two pickups, a horse trailer and a Camry slowly wound their way past the stopped cars and trucks. Each truck was opened and inspected for usable goods. Most were empty or had unusable goods. They did find a food delivery truck but before they even opened it the smell told them not to bother.

Just past the turn off where 90 heads west and 94 continues in a north west direction they stopped to check out yet another truck. A local UPS delivery truck. Breaking in was easy, the hard part was opening each and every package looking for anything useful. One case of assorted wines from some internet wine vendor was the only usable thing they found. It got added to the load on the horse trailer.

Just up ahead they found another horse trailer, empty, hitched to a pickup.

“You know Joe, we could gather more goods if your truck accepts a trailer,” said George.

“Let’s see.”

The group went around and determined they just needed the ball and the trailer should connect right up. They worked at getting the horse trailer off and the ball removed and remounted and then pulled the truck close so they could hook up the trailer.

Max, meanwhile wandered up the road a ways. Outside of a Jeep he started barking until the group came to see.

Looking into the older Jeep Gladiator, which was lifted and sitting on big tires they saw a couple of bodies however, unlike other vehicles, these looked to be fresh. Joe opened the driver’s door and the body fell out as he did so. Going around to the other side he opened the passenger door and noticed the missing hair, a sure sign of radiation sickness. Mary checked for a pulse found none on either body. They were still a bit warm and the group surmised that they recently passed away.

Michael checked for ID but found none. Just some cash in one of their pockets. He returned it and looked in the truck. A number of open bottles of pills and a couple of rifles in back were all he found. Martha thought perhaps they took the drugs and overdosed in an attempt to cure whatever they thought they had.



George popped the hood and took a look under there. A low whistle got the attention of the other guys. They saw the guts didn't match the outside. Joe suggested that perhaps Michael might want to trade as the Camry and all the modern electronics in it might not be practical anymore. Plus he could carry a lot more in a pickup than in his car.

Making an attempt to wipe down the inside first, they then spent 30 minutes transferring everything from the Camry to the Jeep. He then pulled the Camry over to the side of the road, hid the keys under the floor mat and got in his truck. The 3 truck, 2 trailer convoy pulled out with Joe in the lead. Driving slowly at first Joe got a feel for the handling with the trailer on back. He picked up speed until they were moving along as fast as they safely could while still stopping to check out the abandoned vehicles.

By late afternoon they were approaching the turn off onto 53 which lead into Eau Claire. Joe's Nuke Alert was still quiet so they were confident that it hadn't been hit. The first exit was Golf road. They saw the exit ramp was blocked and just ahead the road was blocked with a couple of guys standing in front of some cars. Coming to a stop Joe got out and walked back to the other two vehicles suggesting that they hang back and he'd go up there to see what the situation was. He didn't want to blindly lead them all into an ambush.

Walking up the road he got within about 100 feet when the two guys called out, "Far enough. What's your business here?"

"We were thinking of finding a place for the night."

"Sorry. Not enough resources to take in outsiders. We're barely taking care of our own."

"I can see. Only two guys on a roadblock won't be very effective against a large group."

One of the guys let go with a loud whistle and a dozen people with scoped rifles popped up from the bridge behind them. "Now why would you think we were dumb enough to only have two here?"

“Look, we don't want any trouble, but trouble found us a while back. A gang at least 50 strong had taken over a town and we helped liberate them. At first glance your security seemed a bit lax but obviously you have it well in hand. We'll just be on our way. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“Beaver Dam?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Word travels fast on the ham radios. Normally we turn strangers away, with force when necessary. We can't put you up for the night, however given your reputation we can offer safe passage through town if you want.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“OK, stick together, stay on the 53 highway bypass and don't stop until you reach the roadblock on the other end of town. I'll radio ahead to let them know you're coming.”

“Thank you,” said Joe going back to the group to give them the news.

They drove up to the road block and one of the guys moved a vehicle so they could get through. After passing through they came to a stop and Joe got out again.

“I said No Stopping!” The dozen on the bridge trained their weapons on Joe.

“Sorry. I hope you don't mind. We've been salvaging from abandoned vehicles on the way here and thought you might be able to use some of what we got.”

“Let's see it.”

Joe continued walking to the Jeep and pulled a few sizable boxes off the back. Placing them on the ground he backed away. One of the guys opened one up and found it filled with Hostess snack cakes.

“What are we supposed to do with these?”

“If you don't want them, share them with your kids. I imagine by now deserts and treats are pretty hard to come by.”

Looking in the second box he found it filled with cans of food. The third box was filled with boots and shoes, all new, in a variety of sizes. He looked up at Joe.

“I know it isn't much but a lot of the vehicles have already been picked over or had nothing good to begin with.”

“How much you want for all this?”

“Want?”

“Money? Gold? Trade?”

“Nothing. Consider it a thank you and a goodwill gesture for letting us pass safely through.”

“Mister, ain't no body giving stuff away for free anymore. What's wrong with it or with you?”

“Honestly, nothing. I just don't want to see society fall back to the stone ages. I'm not going to blindly trust someone but a bit of helping your fellow man and a bit of pay it forward I hope will go a long way to restoring an orderly and civil society. You share and distribute as you see fit.”

After pondering for a few moments the guy gave Joe a respectful nod. Joe nodded back, turned and went back to the truck. The convoy moved on and was let through the roadblock at the other end of the city with no hassles.

They passed by Bloomer and seeing a few fires burning in the town wisely stayed on the highway continuing north making slow but steady progress going around vehicles and inspecting those with potential. As evening approached they decided to turn off in a heavily forested area. Lack of an exit ramp wasn't a problem. They just slowly drove off the road, through a fence and down a grass/dirt track off into the woods. At a clearing about a half mile in they turned the vehicles and trailers into a circle and for the first time since scavenging at Cabelas Joe found a use for the camping gear Mary had

gathered.

They guys setup a pair of 2 person tents while the girls prepared a simple dinner. Max sniffed around the woods. As darkness fell they started to work out the sleeping arrangements. Michael offered to sleep in the truck so each couple could have their own tent. The small fire burned down to just coals and everyone turned in with Max joining Joe and Mary in their tent.

Michael bolted up from the bench seat, his blanket falling to the floorboard. He had the window open a few inches and was straining to hear what it was that had awoken him but the pounding of his heart made it difficult. He sat there for an eternity but heard nothing out of the ordinary. Just as he settled back down and was drifting off he heard the snap of a branch and bolted up again.

He slowly eased over to the door and quietly pulled the handle to open it. As he did the interior light went on and he silently cursed to himself as he heard a rustling of in the bushes. Slipping out, he gently pushed the door closed and dropped to a squatting position. Waiting a few minutes for his eyes to recover from the sudden light he kept down and listened. The half moon shed just enough light to see the closest trees but nothing more.

Finally, Michael, in a half crouch, crept forward to the trees around the clearing. "Damn! Stupid mistake," he said to himself remembering the 10/22 still in the truck. Should he go back for it or rely on the SR22 pistol still on him? He finally decided the risk of the light going on again wasn't worth it.

Getting his SR22 out, he worked the action loading a round into the chamber. Ever so slowly he crept through the trees looking for the intruder. Nearly an hour later he came to the conclusion that he was hopelessly lost in the forest. Michael considered calling out for Joe and the others but didn't even know if he was still in earshot.

He sat down with his back to a tree to wait for daylight but didn't wait for long. Not more than 15 minutes later he heard hushed voices.

"He went this way. I'm sure of it."

"You sure? The tracks disappeared a ways back."

“I'm sure of it. He breathes like an asthmatic hippopotamus.”

Michael quietly got to his feet and tried to control his breathing and his rising fear. Should he take the first shot? Or run? Or hide? Looking around in the darkness he couldn't see the pursuers. He couldn't see anywhere to hide. He had nowhere to go and didn't know how close they were.

Deciding that standing still where they could stumble across him was the worst of his options and he started to move one cautious step at a time. Carefully feeling to avoid stepping on a branch or a dry leaf he kept moving from tree to tree. The voices were still there but sounded like they were getting further away.

One more step. One more tree. He kept advancing as quiet as he could. Considering the cool evening he was covered in sweat. One more step, his ankle twisted and he went sliding down a short embankment to a dry creek bed.

“Over there, I heard something!”

Michael jumped to his feet and ignoring the pain in his sprained ankle ran as fast as he could given the conditions. He knew he wasn't very quiet but also knew it was his life at stake. On and on he went hearing the sounds of his pursuers following along. Pushing through a bunch of undergrowth he came to a clearing in the trees and then realized he was back at the highway.

Without the cover of the forest he would be easily seen in the moonlight. The predators were closing in on the prey. His mind raced trying to find a way out. He finally remembered the gun and realized he still had it in his hand. Running about 50 yards down the highway shoulder he ducked back to the tree line and crouched down. When they came out he decided he would shoot first.

Crouching back further down among the brush he went to a knee and almost yelled out in pain. Jerking back he felt around and found the tennis ball sized pointed rock he had knelt on. Just then the pursuers burst free from the trees and were visible in the moonlight about 70 yards away.

He raised his 22 but as a result of his running and the adrenaline in his system he

couldn't hold it steady enough to line up a shot at that distance. The two of them looked to be conferring and then split up, one heading away, the other towards him.

Finally thinking clearly, Michael had an inspiration. He felt around on the ground until he found the rock. Still somewhat in the shadow of the shrubbery he wound up and threw the rock as hard as he could across the road. It landed with a thunk and a rattling of the bushes.

“He's on the other side! I heard him,” said the closer of the two men as he turned, ran through a gap in the fence and across the empty highway. The other came running and caught up with him at the fence on the other side. They quickly climbed over it and plunged off into the woods on the far side of the road.

Michael realized the gap in the fence on his side was where they had driven through and was able to barely make out the ruts of the overgrown dirt track they had driven in on. Turning and staying low he started to follow it. He took his time as he didn't want to get lost again. Nearly an hour later he saw the vehicles at the same time he heard a click of safety followed by “That's far enough.”

“George?”

“Michael? Why did you sneak off? I woke up and had to go water some bushes. On the way back I did a check on everyone and found you missing but your rifle still in the truck.”

“Yeah, stupid mistake. I heard a noise and went to investigate...”

After hearing his story, George went and woke the others. They had a brief discussion and agreed a watch should have been posted. They were all surprised that Max hadn't heard the intruders and barked. Michael was exhausted from his adventure and George had already been up over an hour looking for him so Joe offered to take the watch for the few hours left until light. Mary volunteered too since she said it would be hard for her to get back to sleep.

They hunkered down a short distance into the woods where they could see the vehicles and the road leading in and kept the rifles read but the remainder of the night passed quietly. Over breakfast Michael retold his story once more and they all agreed to

implementing a watch and stepping up their security from now on.

Completing their morning routines, they all loaded the gear back into the trucks and started down the path back to the highway. Once back on the highway they continued north. A bit south of the group, two guys detached themselves from the trees and walked over to their truck.

“I count 5 of them and the one of the passengers had a rifle, the other had a shotgun. I think we can assume the drivers were armed too. Do you want to go after them?”

“They’re headed into a hot zone. I don’t want to lose whatever stuff they have but I’ve already picked up enough exposure. Once they see the crater they’ll turn around and we can get them on their way back.”

“What do you think? Four hours?”

“Depends on if they drive straight through or scavenge along the way. Could be a few days if they’re taking their time or I agree, about 4 hours, if they drive in and come right back. Either way, let’s setup here for them.”

The caravan made it just past Rice Lake and had almost reached Spooner when Joe started blowing his horn and pulled over. The others followed, stopped and walked over to see what he needed.

“Guys, my Nuke Alert just started chirping.” He looked at George and continued, “George, Martha, you said you got family in Duluth. There is a good chance it isn’t around anymore.”

“I know what you’re saying, Joe, but I have to disagree. You said it just started going off, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the range on it?”

“There isn’t really a range, it’s just picking up radiation. The closer you get the more it picks up.”

“But we know from Madison that it started about 10 miles away. Right?”

“Yes.”

“So I’d assume we’re about 10 miles away. It can’t be south as we came from that way so either it’s north, east or west of here.”

“Agreed.”

“Even if it was a really big one, let’s say it couldn’t be more than 20 miles to ground zero.”

“OK.”

“Well, the last sign we passed said Superior was about 60 miles away and we have been driving for maybe 15 minutes since I saw it. So we’re at least 50 miles or more away from Duluth.”

“Yes, but what is your point?”

Well, if we’re 50 miles from Duluth and the impact is 20 miles from us, that puts it 30 miles or so, at least, from Duluth.”

“You make a compelling argument. Next, thoughts on where to go now? Anyone?”

Martha finally spoke up, “Can’t we just go around?”

“Maybe we should head back to Eau Claire and see if the locals there know. It would be better than driving blindly,” added Michael.

Mary said, “I’m with Joe, whichever way he wants to go.”



Joe looked at each in turn and then said, “How about I take the truck and continue north. If it gets worse I’ll turn back and then try a different direction until I can find a clean path around?”

“On your own? No way. You said we don’t split up,” said Mary.

Everyone else agreed it was either all go or none go.

Since they already stopped they had an early lunch and took care of personal business. Thirty minutes later they were starting up the vehicles and Joe took the lead heading north. Almost immediately it started beeping again and soon increased the speed. He took the first u-turn and took them back south until it became quiet again.

Joe pulled to a stop and got out the state map and studied it for a few minutes before getting out and telling the others he was going to take 70 west as the ramps were just ahead. It would mean going through Spooner so everyone needed to stay alert and be ready for trouble. If the impact was north as then suspected then the NA should stay quiet.

They drove off the highway onto 70, probably a county road Joe assumed, and headed west. A few minutes later they were entering Spooner. It wasn’t a large town but not tiny either. People were out and about and not attempting to hide from them. They did see an obvious police presence along 70 but no attempt was made to stop or harass them. Passing through the west side of the town Joe came to a stop next to one of the police cars and called out, “Excuse me, officer?”

The officer walked over a few steps. Looked into the cab noting the shotgun resting against the seat and the 1911 tucked into Joe’s belt. Max lifted his head and looked but put it back down again showing no interest. “We aren’t taking in outsiders and have nothing for sale. Something else I can help you with?”

“We’re just passing through if that’s alright. We’re headed for Duluth but back on 53 my Nuke Alert started to pick up radiation so we turned back. Any idea where the impact was?”

“Yep. Near as we can figure it hit somewhere around Solon Springs.”

“Solon Springs? What’s there?”

“Nothing.”

“Stray missile? Maybe missed its target?”

“That’s what we figured.”

“Superior or Duluth get hit?”

“Not that we know of. Never saw a flash from that direction. Maybe it was meant for there and fell short.”

“I guess we should be OK then if we pick up 35 and approach from the south.”

“Should be fine for getting there. I doubt you’ll get out though, at least not alive.”

“Why is that?”

“Gangs from the twin cities, at least those that survived, headed north and descended on both Duluth and Superior like a swarm of locusts.”

“George has family. There. His daughter and grandkids.”

“If I were you I’d pray they were shot and killed in the initial attack. It could be real bad for them if they are still alive... at least that’s what rumors have been saying. Don’t rightly know myself.”

Mary had turned white in the seat next to Joe. He said to her, “We need to keep this to ourselves. Don’t say anything to Martha. I’ll talk to George privately. Ok?”

Mary nodded her head.

“Anything we can help you with? We’ve picked up a few items along the way. Strictly from abandoned sources.”

“No. Like I said we have nothing for outsiders but we are, just barely, holding our

own. Thankfully, if there is anything to be thankful for, it happened in early spring so we have a full growing season to try to grow enough to last the next winter. Make sure you keep your scavenging to abandoned resources, if you get caught looting or stealing, that is taking from someone else, we will shoot on sight. You folks take care now.”

“Thanks officer. You too.”

Joe put the truck back in gear and continued west on 70. The next town they passed through was Siren and it was deserted. No one around. Not a sound. They stopped in the middle of town and discussed what to do.

First they siphoned some gas from the vehicles and topped off their tanks. They then drove around town and found the high school parking lot filled with cars along with all the surrounding lawns. By the height of the grass they could tell the cars had been there quite awhile.

They could all feel it. Something wasn't right. Against their better judgment they decided to investigate further. The school was not locked. Not long after entering Michael took the lead and said to follow him. Max tagged along but was slow in keeping up and soon lagged behind. An obvious trail of dirty footprints and cast off possessions led them to the auditorium and to an unmarked door in the corner. It too was unlocked.

Opening the door the group saw a set of stairs leading down into the dark. George and Martha went back to the truck and returned with a couple of flashlights. They were turned on and the group followed the stairs down until they came to a storage room with a vault type door like you'd find on a bank. A quick check showed no apparent lock, at least on this side. Joe stepped forward and turned the wheel. It freely spun. When the bolts retracted he swung the door open.

It took but moments until all five of them were retching. The overwhelming stench of death and decay hit them like a wall. As soon as someone could stop vomiting long enough they rushed back up the stairs and gulped in the clean air. Eventually they all made it back to the auditorium. When they had recovered a bit Joe motioned to his brother.

Joe went out to the truck and he had Michael go with him as they had all agreed to Joe's rules of no one goes alone. He returned with a couple of masks from the pharmacy

he had scavenged at... heck that was less than a few weeks ago but seemed like a lifetime now to Joe. He and Michael donned the masks and went back down.

The masks barely made any difference but at least kept them from inhaling the dust and who knows what else they were stirring up. Just opening the door had allowed a bit of fresh air to cycle in and they were able to investigate inside the vault although they were gagging quite a bit. They found unopened food packages and many bottles of water. It wasn't until Michael pointed out the lack of air vents that they guessed what had probably happened.

Going back up stairs they had everyone go outside where it was much easier to breathe. Michael said, "It looks like when the nukes hit everyone took shelter here. They had brought a bunch of food and water and much of it is still down there. When they sealed themselves in, there was no air filtering system. They all asphyxiated and died when they stayed too long and the carbon dioxide levels got too high. The water in the bottles is probably OK as is the packaged food but I don't think I could consume any as the stench of what happened is clinging to the outside of the packages. I know we shouldn't pass up anything useful but...."

Joe concurred with Michael's analysis and they all agreed to take a pass on this resource. On the other hand, since the town was now vacant and unclaimed they had no qualms about scavenging.

Hitting the drug store, the animal hospital, a chainsaw dealer, three restaurants, one food store and nearly one hundred houses and other buildings they greatly increased their supplies, tools and equipment. There was so much they had the opportunity to be selective in what they kept. It took almost a week and they stayed at one of the two lodges in town each night. The trailers had been packed full and a third trailer was located and connected up to the Jeep and they proceed to fill much of it also.

When they were finished they got one last night of rest and left early the next morning. An uneventful drive west on 70 got them to the state line and just after crossing into Minnesota they found a visitor center. Joe and Mary went in and grabbed multiple copies of every type of map they had distributing one copy to each vehicle.

Continuing west they finally reached the highway, 35. Unfortunately there was no entrance or exit but looking south they could make one out not far off. Back tracking

they realized about a mile back they had missed the fact that 70 took a turn to the south and then swung back around to the west to meet up with 35. Now back on track they headed north on 35.

Around noon, George who was leading at this time, pulled over by a bridge that crossed over a river in the middle of a large natural area. According to the map they were probably in the Banning State Park. They left the vehicles and walked down to the river to sit and eat. George commented about always wanting to go fishing when he retired.

Joe asked George to go for a walk back to the truck with him. Once there he dug around in the bed and pulled out a bunch of the fishing gear he had liberated from Cabelas early on in this journey. They hauled it all back to the group and they sat around for a bit unpacking the gear and storing it in the tackle boxes. There were enough poles to go around so they stayed there fishing until almost dark.

Once everything was packed up and put away they pulled the vehicles into a circle, had dinner and got the tents out. Storm clouds rolled in and whoever was on guard duty got a complete drenching. By morning everyone needed dry clothes but at least the clouds were breaking up and clearing out. That morning Joe revealed to George what the cop had told him about the gangs and Duluth. George was a bit upset that he wasn't told sooner but agreed rushing in wasn't going to help anyone. They left Martha out of the loop for now to avoid worrying her any more.

Coming in from the south they made their own exit ramp and drove through another fence to get on the Skyline Parkway. George pointed it out on the map and explained that in Duluth, it wound around the upper parts of the modest mountains that extended up the entire north shore of lake Superior. He felt they could stay hidden up there but use the scopes and binoculars they had to check out the city.

As they got situated with the vehicles out of sight they climbed into the bushes and trees and started scanning the city. It was both encouraging and discouraging. In the downtown or city central area the gang infestation was obvious and numbered well into the hundreds. The further you looked outside of the city proper to all the homes you saw little to no signs of gang activity, but also little to no signs of residents either.

George's family was on the north side so they continued on the skyline heading as

far to the north as they could. Working their way to county highway 91 they headed north to Arrowhead, cut east to Snively and took that to Glenwood hoping to slip in without being observed by the gangs. Just as they passed a golf course a large truck pulled out blocking the road and they all slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting it. Hearing a large engine roar they looked back to see a second truck pull out behind them effectively boxing them in. Heavy woods to the north and a golf course to the east completed the box. Joe briefly thought of driving onto the course but 2 dozen armed individuals appearing from seemingly nowhere all pointing their rifles at the caravan quickly changed his mind. He rolled down his window, put both hands on the steering wheel and sat and waited.

The armed people worked their way from the back towards the front pretty much dragging each group out of the vehicle and over to the side of the road. They were made to kneel with their hands on their head and their legs crossed. Max didn't like this at all continually barking and growling at the armed men. Mary was told to muzzle him or they'd shoot him. Not having a muzzle she tied a rope around his neck as a leash and held him on a very short lead. Once the 5 of them were situated to the side of the road with Mary still struggling to hold Max back, the first truck moved out of the way and people got into the caravan trucks and drove off.

George tried to reassure Martha getting a muzzle pointed right in his face and told to be silent for his efforts. The rest took the hint and were quiet except for Mary who kept holding Max back and telling him it was OK.

Finally after about a half hour someone new came on the scene but stayed quite a ways down the road. Two guys grabbed Joe by the arms more or less dragging him down the road where he was forced to kneel again. The new guy walked up to Joe, pulled a large knife out and held it to his throat.

"Name?"

"Joe."

"Why are you here?"

"My brother, myself and my wife are headed north to our cabin with some friends who have family here in Duluth that they came to check on."

“Take him back.”

Joe was dragged back down the road to the group and Michael was brought over with similar questions being repeated. Mary was next and it was decided that Joe was to hold the leash. As soon as Mary was dragged off Max went crazy snapping at everyone including Joe who in surprise dropped the leash. He charged for Mary and her captors. A couple shots were fired at him, both missing when she broke free from the captors and intercepted Max wrapping her arms around him and preventing him from attacking anyone else while also protecting him from the gunmen.

One gunman walked over, pulled a revolver out from behind his back and pointed it at Max. Mary moved between the gun and the dog and yelled at him, “You will have to shoot me first! He has done nothing to you, none of us have done anything to you! We’re here to see our family and you have threatened us, harmed us, stolen everything we have and now tried to kill Max who is one of us. I swear on everything I believe in, if you harm him I will kill you!”

For the next two minutes Mary and the gunman man had a staring contest. A force of wills. At the end he turned and walked away to join the apparent leader. Down the road he gathered together with a few others and had a discussion which resulted in one of the people walking east down the road.

Maybe 10 minutes had passed with no change. Mary still held Max, the rest were still kneeling on the concrete and the gunmen were still standing there. Martha finally just collapsed either from the stress, fear, the physical exertion at her age or her weakened condition from her recent operation that she was still recovering from. George made a motion towards her then stopped and looked up. One of the gunmen waved his barrel towards her and George took that as permission and went to cradle her. Shortly after a van pulled up and a woman with 2 kids got out, the kids saw George, yelled out “Grandpa” and ran over to him followed by their mother.

As she saw her mom, Martha, and her condition and how Joe and Michael were still kneeling she stormed down the road to the unnamed gunman who had performed the interrogation and lit into him. All the other people with the guns lowered them and shuffled off the scene and back into the woods as unobtrusively as they could. When finished she took charge of the 5 of them and Max, who was quite friendly to her, and

got them all into the van.

Closing the door she burst into tears sobbing and apologizing to her Mom and Dad. It took awhile but they all finally got her to settle down and asked about the welcome. She finally explained, “When the gang showed up in Duluth we evacuated as many people as we could north. This part of the city is only accessible by three roads. Cut off those three routes and you effectively cut off the entire north shore. If you're a long time local that knows the back roads you can still get around and head north but it's unlikely the gang will figure those out anytime soon. We keep all three routes heavily guarded and have a few watching the fire roads too, just in case. They've tried a few times to get through and we shot a number of them. We're pretty much at a stalemate right now.”

After a pause she finally continued on, “The guys mean well, if they fail and the gangs get through, not only will they take all our food, but we, well... I think you know how we'll be treated. I'm just so sorry they treated you that way and hurt you. They're over zealous in their protection of us.”

Michael spoke up, “We weren't really hurt. Just had the crap scared out of us and all of our stuff and vehicles taken away. Any chance at getting it back?”

“They took what?!?” She opened the door, hopped out and slammed it behind her. The unnamed leader had started to walk away and she fast walked after him shouting the whole time. Again she lit into him and he finally nodded his head. Apparently satisfied she turned and came back to the van. “They will be returned fully intact.”

Turning the key she started the van, put it in gear and drove north and east on the residential streets for a few minutes until she got to an average looking house. George leaned over to the others and said it was her house.

She parked in the driveway and they all got out and headed for the house. Before they could reach the door they heard engines and saw all three trucks and trailers coming down the block. The woman opened the door and they all went in. She gestured to them to take seats in the living room and disappeared into the kitchen. The grandkids hung around with their grandparents, George and Martha, while the other three sat on a couch.

A few minutes later she returned with a tray of cookies and the unnamed guy,



recognized by Joe and Michael, with the rifle following her. He was carrying their keys, a tray of glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. "You can put that over there Eric," she said gesturing to the table. He set it all down and stood there. Max was growling and Mary restrained him and tried to calm him down. Waiting a moment the woman then looked at Eric and said, "You had something you wanted to tell these folks?"

"Yes ma'am."

"George, Martha, um..."

"Joe."

"Mary."

"Michael," they each volunteered.

"Yes. Folks, I wanted to apologize for our treatment of you. We're scared of outsiders right now and didn't know you were who you were claiming to be. Had we known, well we would have never.... Well, you know. I just want to say I'm sorry."

Joe spoke up, "I'd be lying if I said it was alright but I think I speak for all of us when I say that we do understand. Next time, take a look," he said gesturing towards Martha and George, "at the people. Do they really look like gang members?"

"No sir."

"Apology accepted."

"Thank you sir."

"Please, call me Joe."

"Yes sir, er Joe."

George spoke up, "Eric, can you give us a minute?"

"Yes," he said and left the room heading towards the back of the house.

Gesturing at each in turn, “Joe, Mary, Michael, this is Cynthia, our daughter...”

“Call me Cyndi.”

“... and Zachary, and Wendy our grandkids.”

They all officially greeted each other and Cyndi served up the lemonade and cookies to everyone.

Joe looked at George and asked, “Why did you want Eric to step away?”

“Joe, I've got two favors to ask of you.”

“George, I haven't known you that long but you did take in and take care of my brother so anything I can do for you I will.”

“No, I have to ask you first as these are not trivial requests.”

“Go ahead.”

“First, you got a lot of spare firearms and ammo from Cabelas, right?”

“Yes, you know that.”

“I'm going to give them as much of my spare stuff as I can as they can use it to defend against the gang. Would you be willing to donate also?”

“Absolutely. If they keep them contained or even defeat them then my family up the shore is safe too.”

“Thank you. Second, I'd like you to take Cynthia and the kids with you.”

“Dad! You can't ask that of Joe!” exclaimed Cyndi.

“Cyndi, I don't want you here. He has a place further north where you'll be safer. Think of the children.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“We'll stay here as we don't want to put Joe out anymore than I've already asked of him.”

Joe finally spoke up, “George, what your asking is not...”

George reacted as if he had been slapped but quickly recovered and started, “I'm sorry, I should not have asked that of...”

Joe interrupted him, “No, hear me out. George, what your asking is not... necessary. My answer is that you are all welcome at my place. All five of you. I have the room and as I said you took in Michael when he needed it. This is the least I can do to try to pay you and Martha back.”

“We never asked for payment, Michael earned his way.”

“I know, but you could have turned him away in his time of need. You didn't. Now you and your family are in a time of need and I believe, I feel, it is the right thing to do and it is in our power to do so.”

George looked at Joe, then at Mary who smiled and nodded.

“Thank you,” he said sounding very relieved.

Michael spoke up, “I got room in my truck for Zach and Wendy if you and your husband want to fill your vehicle with supplies.”

Cyndi got a brief look of pain and a frown on her face but quickly hid them away and responded, “I'm not married.”

“Oh, I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. He didn't treat me well.”

At that statement George and Martha both exhibited a displeased look but also

quickly covered it up too.

To cover the awkward moment, George changed the subject, “Cynthia, can you go get Eric?”

“Yes dad.”

Joe inquired, “She said to call her Cyndi but I noticed you call her Cynthia. Any reason why?”

“It's what we've always called her. Old habits are hard to break,” he said smiling.

They sat in silence for a few minutes eating the cookies and drinking more lemonade while the kids played with Max. Shortly she returned with Eric. Max stopped playing and eyed Eric but didn't growl this time.

“Eric, please come with us,” said George getting up and heading for the door.

Eric followed and Joe brought up the rear. They went out to the truck and George pulled out a couple of cases, opened one and pulled out a Savage 110 rifle in .338 turning towards Eric with it who suddenly had a worried look on his face.

“I'm not going to shoot you boy! Here, take it,” he said holding it towards him.

Seeing the rifle and the scope on it Eric knew the value and capabilities of it. Something like this would allow the guards to consider an offensive role against the gang. George gestured towards the other case and said there's another one in there plus a thousand or so rounds in these here cases. You need to get some of your friends up here to carry them. I'm too old to be doing that anymore.”

Joe, meanwhile had dug out a handful of rifles, both ARs and bolt actions plus a few shotguns and many thousand rounds for them along with a box of magazines for the ARs. When George finished speaking he called to Eric and said, “Here these are for you also.”

“But, I don't know what to say... after what we did to you folks, you're just going to give us these?”

“Look Eric, your methods were heavy handed but your heart was in the right place. You kept the gang away from my daughter and grandkids. If these will help you keep them out or even eliminate them, then take them with my gratitude.”

Joe added, “I've also got family up north and your actions here have hopefully kept them safe too.”

“Thank you. After what we did to you all I don't feel we deserve this but we will make you proud. I swear on my life we will not let them through.”

“I know you will boy. I know you will. Just so you know we're continuing on north and taking Cynthia and the kids with us.”

“I understand sir,” said Eric with a somewhat hurt look on his face.

“Call for a couple of guys and a pickup for all this. You can unload the ammo while we're waiting.”

After a call on a hand held radio, Joe and George indicated the cases to Eric and he started stacking them and the rifles on the lawn. Just as he finished a pickup pulled up and a couple of guys got out Eric briefly had a word with them and they all loaded the firearms and ammo into the pickup. When finished Eric got into another truck a bit down the block and they drove off.

Joe said to George as they walked back to the house, “Eric seemed very uncomfortable with you, more so than the rest of us. Did you pick up on that?”

George stopped, turned to Joe and said, “This is between us and only us. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Eric used to be married to Cynthia. He got to drinking and let's just say he treated her pretty bad when he was drunk. He spent a year behind bars and she filed for divorced while he was in there. The last three years he went cold turkey and got his life back together. He still has an interest in Cynthia and has never laid a hand on her since

but after their past she refuses to get involved with him again. The grandkids were too young to remember before he went to jail and the divorce was finalized before he got out so they really don't remember him.”

“I can see the difficulty with the situation.”

“Yes. It is difficult but I wasn't lying when I told him his heart was in the right place and he does have my gratitude for keeping them, and the rest of this part of town, safe. Also, thank you for taking us with you.”

“No need to thank me. Let's head in and see if we can get everyone packed up and get back on the road.”

It took a bit more convincing but finally Cyndi relented and agreed to head north with the rest. They did not get on the road that day, in fact it took a few more before they finally had their stuff packed and the van loaded and ready to go. She was good about taking essentials. Food, gardening equipment, good quality work clothes and just a few mementos. She packed similar for the kids but allow each to bring a small box of toys too.

Joe and Michael spent part of the time exploring the three blockades including the other two at Superior and on 61. They had a set of trucks at those and a further arrangement of cars on 61 situated in such a way as to force anyone passing through to have to slow almost to a stop and weave between them. Of course a few dozen gunmen were situated at both roads too. Michael pointed out the railroad line and lake walk bike trail was not guarded. Realizing their mistake and luck that no attacks came that way they unbolted a rail to derail any train engine from coming up that way and stationed gunmen along both of those routes too.

Once everyone was ready the caravan of four vehicles headed out to 61 and continued north towards Joe and Mary's cabin.

## *Story 6 – The Hunters*

Eric watched, from a distance, as the caravan pulled out. Could he really fault them? George, his father in-law was taking Cyndi away from him. Then again his past drinking and what he did to her back then drove her away and the courts finished it by taking his kids away from him too.

Now he was watching them leave, probably for good with some guy, Joe, and his wife Mary and Michael, Mary's or was it Joe's brother? The last three years he had gotten his life back together after detoxing and spending a year in jail. He always held out hope that Cyndi would reconsider. That she would take him back, or at least let him be involved in his kids lives again. But this was apparently not to be. The nuclear explosions were the final nail in the coffin.

What was a normal city with normal citizens at one time was now an armed camp with multiple blockades, around the clock defense forces and regular skirmishes with the gang that took over downtown Duluth, and if reports are correct, parts of Superior too. Eric was the unofficial leader. Even with his past the other men had looked to him for leadership and he had kept the northern part of Duluth isolated and the citizens protected from the gangs.

His ex wife and his kids were a large motivating factor in keeping this part of town safe. Now, with them gone, he had lost a large part of his will to live and his motivation. Now he just wanted revenge. His old habit of resorting to violence was barely suppressed under his calm exterior.

Roger, Steve and Jim pulled up in Dodge Ram crew cab, got out and slipped their rifles over their shoulders. Closing the doors they walked over to where Eric was waiting. They stopped a half dozen feet away and nodded to Eric who returned the nod and went back to scanning the city through his binoculars. The three of them quietly waited.

After a fairly lengthy time had passed he finally lowered the binoculars and turned giving each a soul searching look before breaking eye contact and moving to the next. After the last he seemed to finally settle on his decision and said, "It's time to go hunting."

They all nodded again to Eric, turned and went back to the truck, got in and drove off.

Nearly a week later, over a ten minute period, three trucks pulled up and parked on the street across from a small house. The condition was not great but you wouldn't call the house run down either. Just in need of some routine maintenance and a bit of landscape care. None of the drivers noticed this as they walked up to the house carrying a rifle and a sizable backpack.

When they all were seated in the living room, Eric came out of the kitchen with cooler filled with cold water and sodas. Very few knew the history of these four. Those who did knew they all spent time in detox to clean the alcohol from their systems. They also knew that ever since getting clean the four of them had never touched a drop again. They each felt falling off the wagon would lead to a self destructive death or, at the very least, a long time in jail where death might be the preferred option.

The four of them met in jail serving overlapping sentences with a period of almost a year where they were all in at the same time. A couple had extensive outdoor and hunting experience and a couple had prior military experience. During their time incarcerated they had discussed forming a militia as they felt the country was going in the wrong direction and one day they felt it would all collapse. In their minds, the militia group is all that would stand between anarchy and survival.

Little did they know it would be an apparent nuclear war and not a societal, economic or governmental collapse that saw them take up arms. For whatever reason the locals looked to them as a novelty at first but quickly were falling all over themselves to support the group and even join up with them in defense when the gangs showed up. Near as anyone could figure these were the surviving gang members from the Twin Cities that survived the blasts there and fled north to Duluth and Superior to establish new territories, loot food and worse.

The group of four organized the exodus of as many people that wanted to flee as possible, moving them north and then cutting the northern part of the city off from the rest gave them time to settle or continue on up the north shore. Only three roads led north and three armed roadblocks were enough to keep the gang from advancing. Dumb luck helped as the gang numbered in the hundreds and the road blocks usually had no more than twenty individuals manning any particular one at any given time. Since



supplies had not run out yet the gang had not made any concentrated attempt to move north yet, but if they came in force it was doubtful a roadblock would stand.

Over the weeks and months the four had played out many scenarios and all felt that a small group would stand a better chance of slipping into the gang controlled areas and taking out the vast majority of them using urban, suburban and even wilderness guerrilla tactics. An outsider studying the city of Duluth would find a modern downtown, a suburb and north woods wilderness all within a few miles of each other. The locals lived there for that very reason and the four men would be exploiting their local knowledge of the city and the terrain.

Drinking can after can of soft drinks, they reviewed the backpacks and what gear each felt would be necessary. They would only be a few miles from safe territory but did not know if they could make it back so each would carry as much as possible expecting to live out of their pack for at least a week at a time.

Weapons check was fairly easy. Two of them would be using the recently acquired Savage 110BAs in .338 with Leupold Mark 4 Scopes with the other two spotting. When not sniping, they'd use ARs equipped with EOTechs for close in work. Room clearing would be accomplished with Mossberg 590A1 shotguns. As a last ditch backup they'd use handguns, each using their preferred model and caliber. Each shotgun would be loaded with alternating 00 buckshot and slugs.

Each carried a full trauma kit and would be self administering medical care unless incapacitated or wounded too severely to do so. Various multi tools and knives, para cord and hand radios with headphones along with water and MREs completed their bags.

The plan was simple, at least in theory. Stay in the hills and snipe the gang members for as long as possible moving after every few shots. Once the gang decided to stay under cover they'd move into the suburbs and city itself and when no more were to be found start going building to building. Of course plans rarely survived intact once put in motion but they felt this was better than nothing and a lack of on the ground intelligence hampered more detailed plans.

Everyone of them had made peace and realized any or all of them may not live through this but they had to try. Eric had already established others to take charge of

security in his absence and told them he'd just be doing some scouting in the hills. No one in the safe zone knew of the plan and they wanted it kept that way.

Donning the newer universal digital camo BDUs and performing a final weapons check they headed briefly north and picked up the Superior Hiking Trail. Walking the trail they worked their way to Arrowhead Rd. Crossing over they melted into the woods slowing inching south until the first few buildings of the University of Minnesota at Duluth were visible through the trees.

Over the next 24 hours they simply hunkered down and observed. It didn't take long to recognize the gang members. Their style of dress and the fact they were the only ones out and about walking openly made the next actions fairly easy.

Right at high noon 2 shots rang out so closely together witnesses thought there had been a single shot, but two gang bangers were laying on the ground in growing pools of blood which disputed the single shot belief. A couple of the smart ones took cover, the rest just pulled out their guns, holding them sideways and looking all over for the shooters.

Exactly 15 minutes later 2 more shots rang out, again overlapping in their reports. By now the guard had been relaxed and some of the bad guys had come out to look at the crimson pools soaking into the pavement. Two of the gawkers were now contributing their own pools.

As the second hand ticked to 12:30 two more shots rang out. With six people down the remainder finally took to the buildings and refused to come out again.

The group slowly worked their way to the east and then south through a very narrow tree line moving towards the Bulldogs football field and track. They hid in the last small groups of trees until darkness fell and then slipped across the small parking lot and into the stadium building. Once they found an open door they switched to their 590's as their primary weapons and entered the building. Working their way slowly and quietly they worked deeper and higher in the building. Finally they made it to the roof access hatch and slipped onto the roof.

Preparing their positions in the darkness first, the spotters then slept while the snipers kept watch switching off about half way through the night. As the sky was just

barely starting to light up the spotters waked the snipers and they all ate a quick MRE breakfast before the spotters took up their prepared positions. It wasn't until well after the sun came up that the first few gang bangers showed themselves. A few tentatively came out and when no one was shot a few more came out.

One of them approached the bodies still laying there and took the gold and guns from each of them before getting in a low rider and driving off. About an hour later the same low rider returned followed by a white Hummer H2 with gold spinner rims which matched all the shiny gold trim pieces.

Three men and one woman got out of the H2 and walked over to the bodies. At their appearance quite a number of additional gang bangers came out of the buildings and approached the scene. Their reaction was one of deference and respect to the H2 driver.

“...ccchtt. Echo 1, I've got a clear shot on bling boy.”

“...ccchtt. Roger Echo2. Take him out and empty your magazine into the rest of them as long as targets present themselves. Echo 3 and 4, initial shots to the other male passengers of the H2, then free fire on anyone still standing.”

“...ccchtt. Echo 3, acknowledged. Waiting for your mark.”

“..ccchtt. 3...2....1.... Mark.”

BANG BANG..... BANG BANG..... BANG..... BANG..... BANG  
BANG....BANG.....BANG

The female from the H2 was standing in place screaming with the former occupants of the vehicle laying on the ground around her, all dead along with seven other gang bangers. The remainder were scattering in all directions including one bright one who hopped in the hummer and was trying to drive off.

“...ccchtt. Ehco 2, stop the H2.”

Of course when both 5 round magazines were empty the snipers had immediately changed them out for fresh magazines and with the command from Eric one of the

snipers fired a round into the drivers window. The H2 stopped accelerating and started drifting to the right eventually slowing a bit before a tree brought it to an abrupt stop.

The woman was still screaming and the radio came to life, "...cccht. Echo 4, shut her up."

"...ccchtt. Echo 1, negative, she is not a combatant."

"...ccchtt. Echo 4, I repeat take her out. Any gang member is a valid target."

"...ccchtt. Echo 1, but she's a..."

BANG

"...ccchtt, Echo 2, target eliminated."

No further targets presented themselves and finally Eric had them fall back, when darkness fell, to the tree line where they then worked their way back to the hiking trail and back to the intersection with other trails by Hartley Pond. As expected the area was deserted and they setup a camp and ate their MREs in silence.

When they were finished Eric finally spoke up. "Can someone tell me what the hell happened back there this morning?"

"You mean your order to shoot a woman?"

"No, my order to shoot a gang banger."

"I didn't see her with any gun. In my book she is not a combatant. Besides she was screaming her head off, not trying to flee or fight back."

"Doesn't matter. Anyone with them is guilty by association and deserves to die."

"Speaking of dying, who the hell died and made you judge, jury and executioner?"

"Hey I'm just trying to keep our families safe."

“What family? Yours left.”

Eric launched himself at Steve and it took Roger and Jim to separate the two of them. Finally Jim pulled his XD and fired a single shot in the air which served to bring everyone to a halt.

Jim started, “Now that I have everyone's attention we're going to sit down and civilly establish our rules of engagement and we're all going to agree to abide by them. Failure to do so means we're done and we abandon this little escapade right here and now.”

Steve jumped in, “Escapade? You call murder escapade?”

“ENOUGH!” shouted Roger. “I took the shot. It was my decision to follow Eric's order and I have to live with the fact I shot an apparently unarmed non combatant woman. I am not proud of it but I agree with Eric. They invaded our town. They've killed our people and I shudder to think what has and probably still is happening to those they took instead of killing. While she might not have been able to stop what they were doing she could have left. Walked away at any time. Permitting something to continue and not leaving or taking a stand against it is, at the very least, implicit permission for said activities to continue.”

With this they all finally calmed down a bit and Jim said, “Everyone take a walk and prepare your thoughts. Meet back here in 15 minute and we'll decide if we continue, how we continue or if we are done.” Without waiting for an answer he turned and walked off.

Slowly the others also turned and went down separate trails. Exactly 15 minutes later four shadows appeared from out of the darkness and converged on the campsite. The discussion lasted for hours until they finally came to an agreement on how to handle future situations involving the gang and armed vs unarmed individuals. There would be no more unarmed shootings unless all four agreed that the target was high value and an apparently highly placed individual in the gang hierarchy.

Of course determining if someone was armed was not cut and dry either. Brandishing a firearm was obvious, but what if it was a bat? Or just a stick? What if the

gun was tucked into a waistband? How about an unarmed individual standing next to an armed individual and the unarmed person was restraining or otherwise harming, without a weapon, one of the locals? The four of them dove quite deep into the practical and theoretical sides of their possible actions until they reached a consensus they all felt their conscience could accept.

The group finally went to sleep with a rotating guard for what was left of the night and rested most of the following day. Mid afternoon they broke camp and headed, through the woods, about a mile west before swinging south. Still working their way through the woods they went past the eastern side of the College of St. Scholastica. A few hours of observation resulted in just a few gang bangers showing themselves. Eric finally gave the order and since they were all armed the snipers dropped every one of them. Heading east past the campus they crossed Kenwood and worked their way through Chester Park.

A small finger of the park extended about a third of a mile south with the trails crossing under 9<sup>th</sup> street. Where the park ended there was only about a quarter mile until the start of the heart of downtown which itself extended on for another mile and a half or so. At the far end of the city was the Radison hotel, one of the tallest buildings and an ideal place to setup the snipers again but crossing a city full of gang bangers eliminated this as an option.

Instead they waited for darkness and then made short forays out of the woods to the surrounding houses checking for people. For the most part they were deserted although one did show recent signs of habitation but their attempts to locate or communicate with anyone inside were fruitless.

For lack of a better option they headed down 4<sup>th</sup> towards the city with the ARs at ready. Clearly they weren't just walking openly down the middle of the street but instead staying to the shadows and advancing slowly. A few hours later they reached the hospital, Saint Mary's, and for the first time saw what appeared to be civilians moving around inside. A small armed group of gang members was hanging out in front of the building.

Taking them out would be easy but they weren't ready to make their presence known this deep in the city yet. The four of them quietly worked their way south east almost four blocks until they found a building they could scale. Once on the roof they

were able to follow the walkways across the streets and rooftop by rooftop work their way back to the hospital. Popping open the roof hatch they slipped inside and transferred to their shotguns for the possible close in fighting.

They descended a few flights of stairs before they heard voices outside one of the stairwell doors. Turning the handle ever so slowly Steve cracked the door and peeked through. In the darkness he could see what appeared to be someone in a lab coat, perhaps a doctor, and two nurses. As the conversation ended, the doctor and nurse walked off while the remaining nurse was alone in the darkness still reviewing a clipboard with her flashlight. Steve continued to open the door as her back was to it.

He advanced through the doorway, came up behind her and wrapped one arm around her at the same time he put his hand over her mouth quickly dragging her back into the stairwell. After the momentary surprise she tried yelling and struggling but his grip was firm and her cries muffled. As the door closed the others turned on their lights and asked her to please be quiet as they weren't gang members, had no plans to harm her but were instead here to help.

Her frightened eyes darted from one to another picking up on the BDUs and the firearms they all held. Steve said that he was going to release her and step back away from the door. She was free to go if she wanted but they were hoping she would at least hear them out. Letting go he took a few steps backwards.

She too backed to the door putting her hands behind her and grasping the handle but not yet opening the door.

Eric took a step forward and she made a motion to flee. He abruptly stopped and apologized for frightening her. "We're sorry. We didn't know if any gang bangers were out there and wanted to get you alone where we could talk without them noticing."

"You could have just asked!"

"We didn't want to tip them off."

"Who?"

"The gangs! Where have you been?"

“Since the gang showed up we haven’t left the building. We worked out an arrangement. Only the injured come in here and we treat them no questions asked and they leave us alone.”

“Sounds like a jail to me.”

“Yeah, pretty much but a safe one as only their injured ones come inside.”

“So far.”

She had no response.

“We’ve got a safe zone in the north east part of the city. We cut off the only routes in have so far held off their attempts to come that way,” offered Jim.

Roger added, “We’ve been out hunting the gang.”

“You’re the ones?”

“Yeah. You’ve heard of us?”

“Not specifically, just overheard some of the bangers talking about it in the exam rooms earlier today. Sounds like you shot up the university pretty good.”

“Seventeen by my count.”

“Eighteen,” said Eric.

“Well, I normally save lives, not take them but I can’t say I’ll grieve over your actions. You do know there are at least a couple hundred more here and probably the same number across the bridge in Superior...”

“Yes we heard similar rumors.”

“... and you’re aware you took out the second in command...”



“Good.”

“... who is the leaders brother...”

“Even better.”

“... who then vowed revenge on those of us left in retaliation. We have until midnight tomorrow, or I guess that would be later today now, to find and turn you in. “

“Or what?”

“They round up every one left they can find and torture us one by one in front of the rest.”

“Oh crap.”

“Yeah... I’m not relishing being a part of their activities so you got until tonight to figure something out. Either you take them out or I guarantee people have seen you and will report your whereabouts. Nothing personal, we hate them as much as you do but we have to think of ourselves and the safety of our families.”

Thinking quickly, Eric asked, “Do they know how many of us there are?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Would they buy into a loan ‘hero’?”

“Maybe.”

“OK, then wait until mid afternoon, say 2pm and then somehow get word to the gang that I am hunting them, and specifically the leader. Make sure they know I took out his brother and he’s next. If he wants to beg for his life he can meet me at the Bayfront park at sunset. Make sure you tell it just like that. OK?”

“Hey, it’s your life. As long as they leave us alone I’ll tell them anything you want.”

“Eric, no. You can’t do this. He’ll show up with all his bangers.”

“Actually I’m counting on that. Come on guys, let’s get out of here. We have a lot of work to do. Miss, I’m sorry for how we approached you...”

“Abducted me.”

“... I guess. Again, I’m sorry but I promise you I will not allow innocents to come to harm due to my actions. Remember the message and wait until at least 2pm to pass it along.”

“Good luck.” Looking Eric up and down she added, “Under other circumstances I might have even asked you out for drink,” she said holding up a hand with no ring on it.

She went back through the door into the hospital leaving the four of them alone in the stairwell.

“What do you think we can do against two hundred?”

“Us? A lot. With some reinforcements we can put them down once and for all. Let’s go.”

They headed back to the roof and used the walkways to go from building to building again. A few blocks over Eric saw a way back down to the street and called a halt. Moving to the center of the roof where voices wouldn’t carry to anyone below he gathered the others around and laid out his plan. Once he overcame their disbelief they realized it just might work but there was a lot of work to do.

Moving down to the street they split up with Eric heading off northeast along the tracks and the others heading for the park.

About 2:30 that afternoon Tiffany looked in the mirror at her disheveled hair and slightly smeared makeup. She applied a bit of mascara and then a few drops of saline solution over it causing what looked to be tear tracks down her face. Clutching the envelope she went down the lobby and outside towards the gang members. They immediately started with the rude comments but she just gritted her teeth and continued approaching them.

“G..g... gguys, some military looking dude grabbed me a while ago and wouldn’t let me go until I promised to give you this note. He even roughed me up laughing at how easy it was for him to freely move about this town and how all the spoils would soon be his when he took charge.”

Tiffany pinched the underside of her arm where they couldn’t see, hard enough to draw blood, but it got the desired effect of nearly instant tears running down her already streaked mascara. She held out a trembling hand, this she wasn’t faking, and handed the envelope to one of them. The guy grabbed it, tore it open and said, “Oh crap, The Man isn’t going to like this. Come on we got to get this to him.”

“What about watching this place? He told us not to leave... and I ain’t gonna cross him.”

“Trust me, he’ll forget all about this place when he sees this note.”

When the small group walked into the Radison and started up the stairs to the penthouse suites they were already sweating. By the time they reached the suite they were downright soaked and smelled not only of sweat but of fear too. The one with the note raised his arm to knock on the door but it opened before his knuckles touched it.

“What?”

It was a question but spoken as a demand.

“Uh... we... um...”

A Glock appeared from seemingly nowhere to suddenly being pressed up against his temple.

“Last chance.”

He thrust out his hand with the envelope. “Here.” As the guy with the gun reached for it the banger dropped to his knees cowering.

Another voice, from further in the suite spoke, “What does it say?”

The guy with the gun holstered it, took the already opened envelope and read the note out loud.

Minutes of silence passed before the voice in the room, in a low and cold steel dangerous tone finally spoke again. "Gather the troops. We leave in one hour."

"You heard The Man. Go now. Tell the others and spread the word. Anyone not here in one hour better already be dead," as he waved his arm dismissively.

Right at 5pm, a bit over an hour later the entire gang was gathered in the street outside the hotel. Without warning muffled gunfire erupted and then a fifth floor window shattered out raining glass down to the street. All eyes turned upwards as The Man stepped to the window opening.

"Our fellow brothers were murdered yesterday and today. The animal responsible for this freely admits it and said the rest of you will be his subjects."

A chorus of boos and swearing rose up. As the sounds finally died down he continued.

"He claims only he is smart enough to lead the jokers with the cap guns," followed with a sweeping arm encompassing everyone down below, "and he can freely move about the city."

Even louder noise.

"He thinks the spoils of this city should be his, not yours."

This last statement pushed them over the edge. The blood lust was now readily apparent in everyone down below. They had been living relatively easily off the city and weren't about to just let someone stroll in and take that away.

The roaring and cursing was still going on when The Man stepped out of the doors and into the street. Chants followed him. "The Man. The Man. The Man."

He move among all of them getting their pledges to end the life of this intruder

and whipping them all into a frenzy. Evening was starting to fall when he led his troops on the short three block walk down 5<sup>th</sup> avenue to the Bayfront Festival Park. The Man was not stupid. He suspected a trap and sent out his lieutenants to check the surrounding area and eliminate anyone waiting to surprise them. As he approached the actual park itself he made sure he was in the middle of the group surrounded by many bodies.

No one was visible as the group moved to the large grassy field. Right in the middle was a single small curtained table with a rock on top of it. They all gathered around the table and saw another envelope under the rock. One of the few who could read took the envelope, opened it and read out loud the contents.

### 'At Dusk You All Die'

The sun was dropping low in the sky and all the gang bangers were on edge. While they were worried they weren't paying attention. No one noticed that one of the members walked off into one of the small group of trees to take a leak and never came back.

Joey opened his zipper and started to relieve his bladder. As he finished the brush on the ground came to life, rose up and slashed his throat with one smooth motion. Another brush had risen up behind him to catch his body and lower it quietly to the ground into an expanding puddle with the last of his life blood contributing to that puddle.

As the sun dropped below the sawtooth mountain range and the last rays disappeared a single figure, dressed in baggy jeans, wife beater shirt and an over shirt on top of that wandered out of the trees and melted into the crowd. He slowly worked his way towards the leader.

Coming up behind him he put one hand on his arm at the same time a barrel of a hand gun was thrust into his back. He leaned in and spoke just loud enough for The Man to hear him, "We're going to walk towards the table and when we get there you're going to tell the gang that you are stepping down as leader and I am the new leader. Make any other move and you're dead." A sharp push of the barrel got him moving. The figure stayed close close enough so the gun could not be seen and kept his hand on his arm.

The Man quietly spoke, "I could have worked with you. We could have shared the

city. Instead, you must now die.”

No reply, just the increased pressure of the gun as they took the last few steps to the table.

“Tell them.”

“No.”

The figure called out loudly, “The time of your leader is past. He is dead.”

As everyone turned to look he raised the gun and fired a single round into the head of the leader. In one smooth motion he pushed the body away and dove through the curtain around the bottom of the table.

With the sound of the single shot a dozen bushes rose up from the surrounding groups of trees and started firing on the gang members.

The confusion was widespread. Some shot at the curtain around the table to kill the person under there. Others tried to run away but were trapped in an open field between the water and the shooting bushes. A couple tried to swim away and a few made it past the tree line only to be dropped by a sniper shot fired from the roof of the Great Lakes Aquarium building a short distance (for a sniper) away.

Some semblance of order was finally restored when the remaining gang members tried firing back however Glocks held sideways and a few AKs just held up and fired in a general direction were quite ineffective against ARs and bolt action hunting rifles in hands that knew how to make each and every shot count. In the ensuing time their numbers had already been cut by nearly 70%. The snipers turned on the rest of them in the open fields while the bushes continued firing. With no cover available to them it was over in just a few minutes. Every gang banger in the park was dead including “The Man.”

One of the bushes advanced out into the park. No more shots were heard and other than a few groans, it was eerily silent. He gestured to the remaining bushes who came out of the tree cover and into the fields. “Check the bodies. Anyone alive gets a bullet to the head. No exceptions.”

The bush walked over to the table seeing the bullet ridden curtain surrounding it. He grasped the edge of the table, lifted and tossed it to the side. Looking down into a 6 foot deep hole he called, Eric, you alive down there?

No answer and the body didn't move. Jim jumped down the hole as a few shots were heard in the background. He found Eric with a abdomen shot and just barely alive.

“J...j...Jim... Is everyone..... alright? No injuries?”

“Just, you! Let's get you out of here and to the hospital.”

“...ccchtt. Echo 3 to Echo 2 and 4, anyone get away?”

“...ccchtt. Echo 2, negative. A few runners and swimmers. The runners are down and the swimmers are feeding the fish.”

“...ccchtt. Affirmative. Come on down. Eric's shot and we need to get him to the hospital.”

A few minutes later Steve and Roger, 338's in hand joined the group. In the mean time all the gang members were verified dead and the townspeople were in the process of removing all the bush parts they had affixed to themselves as camouflage.

As soon as Eric had been discovered shot a runner was sent to the hospital. The guys performed field procedures to try to stop the blood and bandage him up until an ambulance arrived. They quickly got Eric on a gurney, loaded it up and drove off.

One of the guys came over and called to Jim, “You know, when he came running back to our roadblock I nearly shot him, then when he laid out the plan to get them all in one place and said just a dozen of us could take them all out I thought he was nuts, but I have to hand it to him, the plan worked.”

“Yeah, Mike, unfortunately not good enough. I told him diving down a hole to avoid getting shot was a dumb idea, heck just walking in amongst them as he did wasn't bright either but he insisted the head had to be cut off first and then the rest would fall. I guess he was right.”

The three of them left the clean up at the park to the dozen townspeople, former roadblock guards, and headed off on foot to the hospital.

They were met in the lobby by Tiffany. She had smeared mascara from tears going down her cheeks and it wasn't faked this time. A shake of her head was all the three of them needed to know. Eric had sacrificed himself to save the town.

Cyndi felt a sudden cold hand grasping at her heart but it only lasted a moment and then passed on to a feeling of release transforming into a feeling of immense happiness, but not for her. Somehow she knew that Eric had died. Tears rolled down her face. Michael was nearby, noticed this and asked what was wrong. She just turned to him and buried her head in his chest and cried. He held her not knowing why she was crying but just letting her.

It took nearly a week to thoroughly cleanse the city as some gang members had not received the call to gather or were too drunk or high to bother to show up, but the missing members numbered barely 20 in total and were scattered around the city in groups of no more than two or three. No match for the armed citizens reclaiming their city block by block, house by house and even room by room. Not everyone had escaped or had an arrangement like the hospital did. Those doing the cleaning found the dead bodies, and worse the survivors of the gangs occupation. They were taken to the hospital for physical and mental care and for a few even that would not be enough.

Before the cleansing took place they moved the barricades to the 535 and highway 2 bridges and set up two more on the 35 and 23 routes coming in from the south. Once Duluth was deemed clean they found a few ham operators, with generators, who made contact with their counterparts over in Superior. The reports of gang activity there were greatly exaggerated.

Only about 50 bangers were there and all were holed up in a 6 block area in the downtown section. The three guys from Duluth took the ARs and Savage sniper rifles and worked with some armed locals to root out and put down the faction of the gang in



Superior. A few locals were shot but none of the wounds were life threatening. Superior residents formed road blocks on the likely routes into the city too but no gangs ever tried to take over either city again.

## *Story 7 – Friendly Neighbors*

The small caravan of vehicles pulled out heading north on 61. For old time sake Joe took the scenic route instead of the highway route. In actuality the two roads paralleled each other, in most cases literally a quarter mile apart or less. The difference being that back in normal times the highway was much faster while the scenic route had great views of Lake Superior, now you could pretty much drive whatever speed you wanted wherever you wanted.

Joe knew this stage of their journey was right around two hours, at least back before the nuclear explosions. Now he didn't know. Would the roads be clear? Would they be blocked? Did the locals set up roadblocks? Did this part of the state get hit? He'd have to deal with each situation as they came to it.

As they approached Two Harbors the apprehension in the air was almost tangible yet other than some suspicious stares no one accosted them as they passed through town. There weren't many vehicles out but many people were on foot and most appeared armed in one way or another. All four drivers noticed the police car pull out at a discrete distance and follow them for a few miles before turning back. Apparently the law was still active here and was satisfied that they were just passing through.

The drive was going smoothly and they even stopped at one of the few roadside sandwich shops that appeared to actually be open for business. Joe and Mary went in first and were given the very limited menu and told that paper money was not being accepted. Either silver coins, ammunition or some type of food would be accepted.

"Food?" they questioned. "Why would we trade food, if we had some, for food?"

"Well, it's a 2 for one trade. Bring us something we can use and we'll give you back half prepared and cooked. Or trade us something you have surplus of in return for something we have surplus of."

"So you're saying if I shoot a grouse or catch a trout and give it to you I'd get back half all cleaned and prepared?"

"Exactly," said the girl behind the counter.

“Interesting arrangement. We’re going to check out what we might have in our truck to trade. We’ll be right back.”

“No funny business,” said a male voice as the owner, and his shotgun made himself visible from the back room.

“Never crossed our minds,” Mary quickly supplied.

They went outside and discussed with the others and decided to trade a few of the #10 cans of staples they had liberated a while back in return for a bit of relaxation while someone else made a meal for them for once.

Joe and Mary carried in four #10 cans, dropped them on the counter and asked, if this would be adequate for eight bowls of deer stew with bread.

“Two more cans.”

“How about a 5 lb bag of flour instead?”

“Deal.”

Joe went out to get the flour while Mary chatted with the girl. She was just a teenager but had grown up very quickly these last 3 months or so.

The man, her father, brought out 8 steaming bowls with a generous helping of stew in each and a couple of fresh baked loaves of bread.

“Sorry, no butter. It went bad when the power went out.”

“This is fine. Thank you.”

“Gertrude, get some glasses and a couple pitchers of water for these folks.” He turned and looked at Joe and quickly added, “It’s from our well and is filtered.”

Joe gave him a nod and started carrying the bowls out to the others. They all gathered around the outdoor tables and relaxed while enjoying the food. Mary tore off a large piece of bread, dipped it in the stew and tossed it to Max who eagerly ate it up.

Max got to lick out the remnants left in each bowl as they finished. After eating, Zach and Wendy played catch with a ball they had brought with and after awhile Gertrude came out and joined them being a kid again for at least a few minutes.

That ended when a couple rode up on horses and she excused herself to go back in and work on their order. After they rode off the father came out and introduced himself as Paul and they chatted about how everyone was getting along. He also, not so subtly, questioned what they were doing up this way.

While he didn't feel he owed anyone an explanation, Joe did share that he and Mary owned a home out by Caribou lake for nearly a decade now and that they used it a few months each year as a vacation home but were now planning on making it their permanent home since their old one was no longer habitable and wouldn't be for a long while.

As the conversation lulled George suggested they should be moving along and everyone said their farewells to Paul and Gertrude and they drove off.

Mary queried Joe, "I didn't see Paul's wife. I wondered if she made it but I didn't want to be rude and ask."

"That was probably smart. If she didn't the emotional wounds could still be fresh."

"I can't wait to see Lauren and Cari."

"I know." He didn't add that he hoped they were OK. Neither wanted to face the reality that even in a well stocked cabin with a bunker they still may not have made it. Losing your child and your grandchild would be just too much for them. They both kept their concerns quietly to themselves.

The drive from here was less than an hour and went uneventful. Again there was a noticeable lack of traffic. They did pass a few vehicles heading the other way, just not many. More obvious were the ATVs, dirt bikes, pedal bikes and horseback riders and the presence of a rifle, shotgun or pistol tucked in the waistband of nearly everyone. Perhaps it was the weapons or maybe just the feeling of needing to pull together but everyone they passed gave them a once over look usually accompanied by a friendly nod

or occasional wave. It seemed that the population had discovered manners again.

They passed through Lutsen. Really nothing more than a tiny strip mall with a gas station and a coffee shop and realty office in the building next door. The general store/gas station looked like it might be open as did the liquor store but everything else appeared closed. They continued on another half mile or so to Caribou Trail, and took a left onto it.

Not more than 30 seconds later they spotted a car racing towards them and recognized it as their daughters Baja. A modest 4 door car with a small pickup type bed and four wheel drive. As she approached they honked the horn and waved. At the very last moment she finally recognized them, screeched to a halt and came running out screaming for help while pointing back up the road.

A couple of pickup trucks were rapidly approaching and they could all see rifles pointing out the windows. Quickly grabbing their weapons everyone took cover behind the trucks and trailers as the other two trucks came to a stop about 100 feet away. Max, still in the truck, was growling at the approaching trucks.

One of the men got out and said, "You're not welcome here."

"Come again?"

"No outsiders. Those two didn't listen to the warning."

"Earl?"

At this statement the speaker seemed a bit surprised that someone knew his name.

"Earl, it's Joe and Mary. We were headed up to our cabin to meet up with our daughter here and I find an armed mob chasing her down the road. Would you like to explain yourselves?"

"Sorry Joe. Like I said, only year round folk now. We told all the other outsiders they needed to leave and they packed up and took off. Only she," as he gestured towards Lauren, "didn't. We finally had to convince her we were serious. No hard feelings but we have to look out for our own and don't have enough to be taking in charity cases."

At this Lauren shouted back, “Charity? CHARITY? What did I ask of you? Huh? NOTHING. That’s what. Yet my dad helped you build your shed some years back and last summer he spent an entire week roofing your house with you. Wasn’t that charity? Especially since he asked for nothing in return. He was just being neighborly!”

Joe turned to Mary, “Take her in back, please. This isn’t helping.”

“Dad!”

“Please, go with your mother.”

He turned back to the gunmen. “Earl, we’re going up to my place to get the rest of our stuff and then we’ll leave.”

“Sorry Joe, can’t let you do that. You might hole up in there and then we’d have to threaten you too in order to get you out.” At this Earl realized he’d just admitted to Joe that they were threatening his daughter and granddaughter and even at the distance he could see Joe drawing a bead and his finger twitching on the trigger.

Joe finally got his emotions under control when he realized a shoot out, even with nearly even numbers on both sides, wasn’t something he thought they could safely get through. After all, these weren’t sloppy gang bangers, but people who grew up with guns and knew how to aim and hit what they aimed for. He raised his barrel up a bit so it wasn’t pointing at Earl anymore.

“Joe, just turn around and go somewhere else. I don’t want to see anyone get hurt.”

Earl signaled and they got back in their trucks and headed back up the road towards Caribou lake.

Once they were out of sight Joe turned and found Mary and Lauren getting Cari out of the car. Joe was even more relieved that he hadn’t starting a shooting match since the car with Cari in it would have been right in the middle of all the gun fire. Emotional hugs all the way around followed by introductions. Cari readily took to Wendy and Zach as they were all similar in age and Max licked both her and Lauren until they had to

practically drag him off.

Lauren looked questioningly at Michael, her uncle, when he introduced Cyndi, before finally just blurting out, “That isn’t Aunt Cheryl,” and gesturing towards Cyndi.

Realizing her miss-interpretation he said that they weren’t together in that sense of the word, just traveling together. The long story would have to wait for later.

“Speaking of later, what are we going to do about them?” Lauren said gesturing with her thumb in the direction the trucks had gone.

“Right now, nothing. We need somewhere to setup camp and discuss our options.”

“How about the camp ground as Cascade River park?”

“That’ll work. Ok, let’s get these turned around. It’s only about 10 minutes away.”

They pulled in and unsurprisingly, no ranger was on duty so they just took the first area that appealed to them. All 5 vehicles were pulled into a large circle. The kids were told to stay inside the circle. Michael and Joe scouted around a bit checking out the surrounding area and looking if they had any neighbors. The rest worked on setting up the camping gear and getting dinner started.

When the two men returned they reported all clear. No one else appeared to be here. There were some other vehicles however the amount of dust and debris on them implied they hadn’t been touched in months. The owners were either dead or abandoned their cars and disappeared into the wilderness.

Once they all sat down to dinner the stories started flowing. Everyone shared their tales in getting to the road they met on and then Lauren related hers.

“As you know, Cari and I came up here for a short get away. We were only planning on staying at most a week. I had to get back to work and the school was already frowning on having her out for a week, any more and they probably would have called child services or something.”

“Anyway, we were only here a few days when the power went out. Those with the emergency radios reported to the rest of us about the missile strike alerts before those radios too went dead. Everyone was worried about fall out and getting irradiated. I remembered what you had told us about the bunker in the basement. We went down there and it took a while but I finally remembered how to find it and then open it up.”

“The instruction manual you had sitting right there on the desk was a life saver. It spelled out exactly what to do and we followed it just as listed. At first I wanted to get the neighbors to join us but then I read the part about trusting no one as things could get bad really quick, we didn’t tell anyone.”

“So, we stayed in there for 60 days as the manual said and then checked the meters and the reading was zero so I’m not sure if we ever got anything or not. When we came out the house was dusty and the gardens were getting a bit overgrown so we spent a week or so fixing them up, cleaning the house and keeping to ourselves.”

“Everything seemed to be going fine and I kept telling Cari that you’d come and get us. I don’t know how but I felt that you were still alive and the best thing to do was stay put and wait.”

“It was only about a week ago that the problems started. Cari came running in saying that a bad man with a gun was yelling at her. I strapped on the XD you got me and went outside to find Earl there with a shotgun. He told us that we didn’t belong here and needed to leave. I told him we we’re your family and we aren’t going anywhere and that he’s trespassing. He started to move the shotgun so I put my hand on the grip of the XD. I guess that made him think twice. He said we got 4 days to be gone or else.”

“We started sleeping in the bunker at night again and I wouldn’t let Cari out of my sight. Four days came and went but nothing happened. Then on day 6 he showed up again this time with three others all armed. They kept calling to me to get out or they’d burn the place down with me in it. One of them kept spouting something about us taking all the fish out of the lake and the locals were going to starve come winter. Funny as we hadn’t even tried fishing after what happened. This time I had a rifle too and I pointed it out the window at them and told them once more they were trespassing. Next time I would shoot first instead of warning them.”

“They shoved off with a lot of swearing and told me this was my last chance. In



24 hours they'd be back and weren't going to take 'no' for an answer. I didn't know what to do so the next morning I hid the bunker entrance again, packed our stuff in the car and just as we started to drive off the two pickups came tearing up the road. I floored it and they gave chase. I don't know if they were trying to catch me or just really scare us off."

Mary was crying and Joe asked, "So Earl was there each time?"

"Yes. The first time he just seemed reluctantly cranky, almost like he didn't want to say anything, but the second time it almost seemed as if the others were egging him on and he didn't hold back."

"You're sure none of them know about the bunker?"

"I told no one."

"What's still in it?"

"Almost everything. We didn't touch the supplies until we exhausted what we had brought with us to eat. Out of the 100 boxes of food, I think we only made it through 2 or 3 of them. The solar panels did what they should and the well kept pumping water so we never even touched the bottled water. All the guns are still locked in the safe and while we did play some games and read some books those aren't something you'd use up. That was a smart idea putting in those educational CDs and DVDs. I kept up Cari's lessons on the laptop. Instead of teaching to a generic test I let her study at her own pace and to go in depth in topics she found interesting. It made learning fun for her again."

Joe looked around the circle of family and friends before speaking. "The bunker is safe and unless you know how to find it I don't expect any of them would be able to locate it. This means that we can either leave it as a cache or risk going in and cleaning it out. After what Earl did to these two," said Joe as he put his arms around Lauren and Cari and gave them a hug, "I'm inclined to clean the place out of every usable item rather than risk them getting their hands on it. Of course this would mean all our supplies and gear are with us and an accident or organized gang could potentially take it all way too."

The group members were each pondering the options when Michael spoke up. "I'm with Joe. Whatever you decide, I'm in."

“Thanks Michael, but I’m not asking anyone to risk themselves over some supplies.”

“Doesn’t matter, bro. I’m going along and you can’t stop me,” Michael said in a pouty voice and then stuck out his tongue. This got a laugh from everyone and lightened the mood a bit. Some were for getting the stuff, others thought leaving it might be better but also posed a risk in case it was discovered. Finally they settled on Joe, Mary and Michael going to get the stuff while the rest stayed back at the camp site.

The next day everyone just took it easy and pretty much rested up. Most everyone took advantage of the trails in the area to do a bit of hiking, either singly or as couples as much to clear their heads as to have a bit of private time away from the group. It did violate their rule of 'no one goes alone' but for their mental health they felt it was a necessary risk. Michael and Joe were able to get one of the abandoned trucks running and were pleasantly surprised to find a nearly full tank of gas.

On the following day, after breakfast the group unloaded one of the trailers and trucks combining and repacking the contents into the new truck and the other trailers. Joe felt there would now be sufficient room to take everything in one trip. He, Michael and Mary turned in early to get some sleep before their outing that night.

All three left just after dark and drove back to Caribou Trail. Just before turning onto it they turned off the lights and waited about 15 minutes for their eyes to adjust. Creeping slowly up the road so the sound of the engine would be minimized as much as possible they finally got to the lake, a few miles down, and turned onto their dirt/gravel road. Pretty much moving forward on idle all the way to the house Joe shifted into neutral and let the vehicle coast to a stop so he wouldn’t have to hit the brakes. If anyone was watching the brake lights would be visible for quite a distance in the darkness. He shifted into park and they got out quietly closing the doors.

They approached the house and found it intact. Joe used his key to open the door and let them in. Mary went from room to room gathering useful stuff, like blankets, some spare clothes including winter gear that they kept here and toiletries from the bathrooms. She also added a few mementos but these were small. There was very little in the kitchen but she still took any food she found along with all the metal cookware and utensils. The glass plates and bowls she left as they would be too difficult to safely

transport.

Joe led Michael down to the basement. Anyone paying attention would have noticed it only took up about half the space of the house, but rarely was anyone brought down here. Joe went to the cabinet on the wall, released a catch and swung it out from the wall revealing a door that looked like it belonged on a walk in safe. He spun in the combination and opened the door. Inside they turned on the light and started hauling box after box of food upstairs. He moved on to the water and finally the gun safe. A couple of AR15's, a couple of Remington 700s and a couple of shotguns along with 5 different variations of Ruger 10/22s were removed and added to the pile upstairs. A couple of XDs and a few 1911's along with a number of cases of ammo were also hauled up.

The last thing Joe did was to disconnect the batteries and remove the inverter and charger from the wall and take those upstairs too. Michael wasn't happy about carrying the batteries but kept his grumbling mostly quiet.

Once the whole pile was ready they started to haul it out to the trailer. On the third load Joe heard a threatening voice outside. Pulling out his 1911 he peeked out the window. Earl was standing there pointing a rifle at Mary. Joe signaled Michael to head out the back and circle around. After giving him a 10 count Joe walked out the front door pointing his weapon at Earl.

"You will point the rifle away from my wife, Earl," he said in a cold menacing tone.

"No, if I do you'll shoot me. I told you not to come back. I see you did have a secret stash. You should have shared it with us."

"Shared or given?"

"Doesn't matter. If you want to see Mary live you'll empty those boxes out of the truck and drive away. Once I know you're gone I'll let her go."

"Don't think so."

"You won't shoot as you know I'll be able to pull the trigger before I die."

“No you won’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because you won’t have the gun anymore.”

Just then Michael who had come up quietly behind him grabbed the barrel and yanked it hard to get it away from Mary. Hard enough that he actually ripped it right from Earl’s hands.

Joe walked up to Earl and back handed him with the gun easily drawing blood and knocking him to the ground, stunned, before checking on Mary.

She was a bit shaken up but unharmed.

“Michael, keep an eye on him. I’ll be right back.

Joe returned a few minutes later dragging a kitchen chair out of the house and set it on the ground right in front of Earl.

“Get him in the chair.”

Michael dragged him up and plopped him into it. Joe produced a roll of duct tape and proceeded to tape Earl’s arms to the back of the chair and both ankles to the legs of the chair. By now Earl had recovered from the hit and started struggling. He tried yelling but Joe was just as fast with the tape and silenced him with another piece.

“Let’s get the rest loaded up.”

They finished loading the truck and trailer in the darkness. When they were done Joe walked over to the solar array conveniently located at ground level on a tracking mount and proceeded to disconnect all the panels and stack them also in the trailer. All that was left was literally the shell of the house, some major appliances and the furniture. Joe walked over to Mary and had a quiet word with her. If there had been some more light a bystander would have seen tears running down her cheeks but also her nod and mouth, “do it”.

Joe went to the truck and took one of the gas cans. He walked up to Earl and stood in front of him holding the gas can and reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter. Even with the duct tape on you could hear Earl trying to scream and tear himself out of the chair thinking that Joe was about to douse him in gas. Joe turned and walked into the house. A few minutes later he emerged and put the empty gas can back in the truck.

Going back up to Earl he said, "Since I've been a good neighbor and helped you out around your place and you've been such a friendly neighbor looking after my daughter and granddaughter in their time of need, I thought I'd give you my house as a sign of appreciation." With that he used the lighter to light a stick which he threw at the front door. In less than 30 seconds the entire house was full of flames.

He leaned over and whispered into Earl's ear. "If I ever see you again I'll leave you inside the next house I set on fire."

He straightened up and called out, "Let's go."

They turned the truck around and headed back towards the main road. Locals were coming out of their cabins to see what the orange glow meant. Mary called out to Joe to stop the truck. He did so and she rolled down her window and waved over a woman. Mary leaned out, said a few words and the woman ran off screaming towards the house. "Ok, you can drive on now."

Once back on the main road Michael finally asked, "OK, who was that and what did you say to her?"

"You didn't recognize her?"

"Not in the dark"

"That was Shirely, Earl's wife. I mentioned that he had repeatedly threatened Lauren and Cari and along with some of the other guys were threatening us with harm if we didn't leave. I also mentioned that he's got a front row view of the fire," she finished with a mischievous grin.

"You don't think she'll be mad?"

“Mad? I hope so. I’m quite certain the women in the area had no idea what Earl and the others have been doing. My guess is once she sees he is safe she’ll rip into him. He’ll almost wish he had been in the house instead of facing her wrath.”

“Joe?” asked Michael.

“Yeah?”

“Remind me to never get Mary or you mad at me!”

All three had a good laugh on the way back to the camp ground.

They pulled in shortly before dawn and found no one there. Suspecting something bad had happened they drew their weapons and exited the truck. All the vehicles were still there as were the supplies. Even the camp looked normal. No signs of a struggle. Nothing broken.

Each of them was at a complete loss until they heard the rapid approach of someone. Three barrels and three flashlights ended up pointed at Martha. Once they realized it was her they quickly lowered their weapons. Mary was the first to ask, “Where is everyone?”

“Out looking for Cari. Lauren woke up and found her gone about two hours ago. We’ve been scouring the woods ever since. I’ve been staying in this area in the hope that she would return.”

Exhaustion and sleep forgotten, they each grabbed spare batteries for their flashlight and took a FRS radio from their electronics stash and an emergency bag with some water, food and medical supplies.

“Anywhere in particular?”

“Sorry, no. We just scattered looking for her.”

Joe called on the radio, “We’re back at camp. Where’s everyone at?”

The reports had them scattered all over with Wendy and Zach reporting that they

got separated from Cyndi, their mom, and weren't sure where they were at anymore.

“OK, you all heard that. Anyone that can hear the waterfall, head for it and then make your way along the river downstream until you get to the road. Stay just inside the tree line when you get there. That will be our rally point. If you can't hear the river then I want you to stay put for now.”

Everyone reported back in that they could hear it except for Cyndi since the kids had the radio.

“Martha, I want you to stay here with the camp. Dawn can't be more than an hour away and the sky should be lightening shortly. Once it does we'll be able to get everyone together again. Michael, stay with her. Mary, let's go. We need to meet them at the rally point. You can just make out the sounds of the waterfall over this way.”

Less than 10 minutes later they had reached the river and worked their way downstream. As they passed a bench along the trail they found Cari curled up asleep on it.

“We found Cari. Repeat, we're with Cari and are on our way to the rally point.”

It took nearly a half hour for everyone who was coming to get there. When she arrived Lauren grabbed her up and held her while she cried and cried. “Don't cry, I'm OK mommy. I had to go to the bathroom and didn't know which way was back to camp so I walked until I found a bench and went to sleep on it. Grandpa and Grandma found me.”

By now the eastern sky was quite light and only Cyndi was missing. They were able to make out the trail without flashlights and Joe led them upstream until he found one of the park's 'you are here' signs and quickly pointed them down the trail that would take them back to camp.

With all but one back in camp Joe set out with Michael to find Cyndi. They walked for five minutes, stopped and called three times. After no response the two of them continued again for five minutes. This repetition went all morning and into the early afternoon. By now they had covered nearly all the trails in the park. Either she had wandered outside of the park or was hurt and couldn't answer.

Michael wanted to take the lake front trail and loop around back to camp but Joe didn't think she'd have crossed the road. Since it was light out and the trails were well marked Joe agreed to split up and headed back to camp while Michael took the other trail.

He walked for perhaps thirty minutes when he came across a bench on a small bluff, maybe twenty feet up from the rocks and waves of Lake Superior. Michael sat down to rest for a minute and dug around in his pack for a bottle of water.

“help”

Michael turned his head and listened again.

“hheellppp”

Yes, he thought, someone was calling for help in what sounded like a hoarse whisper. Standing up he walked to the edge and looked around. Down among the rocks he saw Cyndi. Grabbing his pack he scrambled down to her.

“Cyndi are you OK?”

“Where are Zach and Wendy?”

“They're fine. Everyone but you is back at camp.”

“Cari too?”

“Yes. You're shivering. Where are you hurt?”

“I got separated from the kids and ran around frantically looking for them. When I got to the road I thought perhaps they might have come down to the water so I followed just in case. I must have slipped on the rocks up there. Next thing I knew I was down here getting hit by waves and unable to stand.”

Michael looked her over and sure enough her leg did not look good. The angle was wrong and it was probably broken. She had hypothermia setting in from getting



constantly doused with the cold water and he wasn't sure but thought she might be going into shock.

“Joe, I found her but she is hurt pretty bad. Get in the truck and get down to the road. I'm going to try and get her up to it but I don't know how far we are from the park entrance.”

“Michael, I'm on the way. I'll blow my horn when I get to the road. You tell me which way and I'll work my way towards you.”

“OK, Out.” He turned to Cyndi, “I'm sorry Cyndi, but this is probably going to hurt.”

“Do what you must. I'm a big girl.”

He lifted her up and draped her over his shoulders in a fireman carry position. She screamed in pain. Michael looked around and started walking along the shore looking for a way up.

A horn blew.

“Joe, I heard that but way off. Do it again.”

Honk

“Ok, It sounds like your south of me. Head north a bit and honk again.”

A few moments later.

“HONK”

“Good, you're a lot closer. Stop and wait as I'm trying to figure out how to get up from the rocks back to the trail.”

Michael went another hundred feet until he saw a slope that he thought he could make it up. Every step must have been torture for Cyndi as more often than not she was moaning in pain.

“Only a little further my dear, I’m going to try to scramble up the slope here. It might be a little bouncy. Just hang on.”

He threw caution to the wind and just went for it figuring a quick dash with a few bounces would be overall less painful for her than a prolonged slower approach. He made it up and she screamed a few more times from the pain.

Michael stopped for a moment and heard an idling engine. He looked up and since the road also paralleled the lake he knew it couldn’t be far away. Plunging through the shrubs and forest he came out on the road just 50 feet from the truck.

“Joe!”

Joe got out and ran over to help. They got her to the truck and gently placed her in the back. Michael ran around to the other side, got in and cradled her head.

“It’s OK honey, Joe’s here now and you’re in the truck.”

She was still shivering from the exposure and Joe handed Michael a blanket to put over her as he floored it down the road.

“Hey, that was the turn off for the camp....”

“We’re not going there. It seems the north shore has survived pretty well. I’m counting on Grand Marias to still be around. It’s only about 10 miles down and they have a medical center. It’s her best bet if it's still open.”

Sure enough as they approached the town more signs of people were apparent. As was a police road block. Joe screeched to a halt as the officer and a few other armed men pointed weapons their way.

“We have an emergency here! Is your medical center still around?”

The officer gestured to the other two who kept their guns pointed at the truck while he approached and took a look.

“OK, I’m going to send Jed with you...”

“I know where it’s at,” said Joe as he started to edge forward.

The officer slammed his palm on the hood causing Joe to stop. “I said, I’m going to send Jed with you. You try anything funny and he will shoot first. It’s up to you to negotiate payment for the services.”

“Thank you,” said a chastised Joe as he waited for the officer to talk to Jed and Jed to walk over and get in. Jed held a 1911 low but ready.

Once he was waved ahead Joe stepped on it and drove straight to the medical center. He ran in and a couple of nurses followed him out with a gurney. They managed to get Cyndi out and on the gurney with only a few more screams. Michael accompanied her in while Joe offered to Jed to take him back to the road block.

“Not necessary. I’ve been ‘assigned’ to you while you’re here in town.”

“Suit yourself. We’re no threat.”

“I’m here to make sure of that.”

Joe went into the center, Jed in tow, and heard the nurse telling Michael that he had to wait outside while they tended to his wife.

He raised his hand to correct them but they had already disappeared behind the doors.

They all sat in the waiting room for nearly an hour making small talk. Mostly giving some general, but truthful, answers to questions Jed asked although Joe also inquired a bit about the situation in the area and got equally general answers back. Finally a nurse finally came out to talk to them. “Sir, your wife...”

“She’s not my wife, just a friend.”

“Oh. Um, well do you know where her husband is?”

“She’s divorced.”

“Hmmm... that could be a problem. We have very limited resources here and...”

“Don’t worry about that. I have supplies and we’ll compensate you however you feel is appropriate. Just treat her,” said Joe.

“Well, we could use medication and bandages for a start.”

“How about a case of assorted bandages, 20 packs of antibiotics and fifty #10 assorted cans of food for you and the staff in return for treatment and any necessary follow up visits?”

“Mister, you have a deal. But you won’t be offended if I’m a bit skeptical?”

“I’ll be back in a few hours with it. Michael, stay here with her.” He turned to walk away and looked back, “Well, Jed, you coming or staying?”

Jed was at a loss since they were splitting up and he couldn’t stay with both. He finally followed Joe. The two of them got in the truck and drove back to the road block.

“Officer....”

“Hartman”

“Officer Hartman, I’ve got a small group with me. Six vehicles, 10 people in total. We are wholly self sufficient and won’t need any supplies from the town. In fact we might even be able to setup a bit of trading if that’s allowed. I’d like to bring them back with me and we can setup in the campground area over there,” he said gesturing to the public camping area right by the lake.

“Fine with me, just don’t cause any trouble or we will not hesitate to evict you either under your own power or in a pine box.”

Joe nodded in agreement and drove off back to the Cascade River Park campground. He filled in everyone on what had happened and they quickly broke down camp. The kids called for Max and he came bounding back from off in the woods.

Without Michael and Cyndi they were one driver short for their vehicles.

“I guess we’ll be doing a bit of shuttling then,” said Joe.

Lauren’s car had very little in it compared to the rest so they left it and took the other vehicles back to Grand Marias . At the road block the Officer Hartman gave a cursory look in each vehicle and trailer and then came back to Joe and said that he did look well supplied and waved them all through to the camp ground. Joe then drove back with Lauren to get her car. Once they were all situated back in the camp ground he transferred the agreed upon payment to Lauren’s car and him and Lauren drove up to the road block. Joe leaned out and called, “Hey, Jed, coming?”

He gave them the finger and waved them off. Apparently the answers they gave and their supplies had satisfied the police that they weren’t a threat. They drove down to the medical center while Joe explained to his daughter why he was chuckling out loud.

At the center he unloaded the food and stacked it inside the door and then brought the medical supplies to the counter and waited for the nurse. When she was available he opened the boxes and verified that the bandages and drugs met with her approval. She was quite happy to get them and even more so after Joe pointed out the pile of food. A few minutes later a couple of other employees showed up with a few carts and started hauling the food to the back of the building.

A couple more hours passed with Joe and Lauren having joined Michael in the waiting room. They filled him in on the move and then since they'd been awake since before dark the previous evening they all started to drift off. Finally the nurse came out once more and said they could come back now. Following her they were led to a small room where Cyndi was resting. Her left leg was wrapped in a cast.

The nurse spoke, “She had a dislocation and a nasty fracture but, by comparison, that was easily treated. Her hypothermia was what really worried us. Had you not gotten her here when you did she probably wouldn’t have made it.”

“Thank you,” said Michael.

She should be awake in a few hours and we really don’t have facilities to take care of her at night. Normally we’d transport her to Duluth for extended care but with the

gang problem there...”

“We know about that. Thankfully we made it through safely by taking some back roads. We also left some weapons and ammo for the locals to use in defending themselves from the gang,” interrupted Joe.

“... good. I hope they wipe them out. I know about the Hippocratic oath and doing no harm but my sister Tiffany works at the hospital there and I haven’t heard from her in weeks and weeks now. I pray every day that she is safe. Anyway, back to Cyndi, it would be best if you could look after her and just bring her back every few days for a quick checkup. We’ve got her warmed and stabilized and other than a short course of pain meds for the leg there shouldn’t be anything special. Just help her out as she won’t be very mobile for awhile.”

Michael spoke up, “Sure. Not a problem. We’re at Cascade park, no wait, we moved to the campgrounds here?” he finished as a question looking to Joe who nodded affirmative. “Yes, we’re at the campground here.”

“OK. When she wakes I’ll bring her out in a wheel chair and we have some crutches you can borrow. Since you did come back for her with the food and supplies as promised I trust that you’re good folk who will return the crutches when you’re done with them.”

Again they thanked her and went back to the waiting area. It was almost 3 hours later, another nap, and nearly dark outside, when they finally brought her out. Michael and Lauren helped her into the truck when Joe pulled it up by the door. They put the crutches in back and drove to the campgrounds.

Cyndi was exhausted but needed to use the bathroom before going to sleep. Lauren helped her and then got her into bed.

“You’re really lucky.”

“Lucky? Yeah. Funny.”

“No, I mean it. They weren’t going to search by the lake but Uncle Mike insisted. He carried you out all on his own when he found you and waited in the hospital for you

the whole time you were there. The nurse said if he hadn't gotten you there when he did you would have died from the exposure. Well, try to get some rest."

Lauren left the tent and Cyndi laid there for the longest time thinking of Michael and the fact he used terms of endearment including calling her 'dear' and 'honey' while rescuing her. In a bar or other pickup situation she would have blown him off for speaking like that but he seemed to really care about her comfort and getting her to safety. Was there more to Michael than just a traveling companion? Or were the pain meds causing her to not think clearly? As her mind whirled around and around she finally fell asleep.

The rest gathered by their campfire and discussed the situation. Until she was up to traveling they would be staying put, but then what? Over time the general consensus was to head back south to find a place with milder winters and good land for farming and ranching as scavenged food would eventually run out. They would also need a cluster of buildings to live in and hopefully attract some other good people and some place they could defend. Ideally they'd be able to find this near a town where people already survived but given what they had encountered on the road so far there was either not enough food so the locals didn't want them or wanted to kill them and take their food. This part of Minnesota seemed to be holding their own but what would happen in a few months when fall set in and the gardens were gone?

The final topic before turning in included the complete disarray of the previous 24 hours. Running off in the woods with no plan, not giving everyone their own radio and not staying with a buddy were the top three violations. They all agreed to come up with a set of procedures to follow if or when another emergency presents itself to hopefully avoid getting anyone else hurt.

Over the next week or so they inventoried their supplies more carefully including the newest acquisitions from the bunker. They felt they could make it maybe a year but would then be completely tapped out.

The first checkup visit to the hospital had Lauren and Michael taking Cyndi but the second time just Michael took her in the afternoon. They had to wait a bit before she could get checked over but got a very upbeat reply from the nurse. If Cyndi continued to be careful they could probably be on their way soon and the nurse said for the next visit she'd have instructions on how they could remove the cast themselves.

It was just after dusk when they left the facility. Michael opened the door for Cyndi and was helping her to get in the car when she gasped. Michael was worried something had happened but Cyndi just turned, with tears streaming down her face and held onto him. He figured if she was physically hurt she would have said something, so like most men do when women cry, he just stood there dumbfounded and held her.

When she finally raised her head up and wiped the tears away she had a peaceful look on her face.

“Um, I don’t mean to pry, but are you OK?”

“Yes. Eric is dead,” she said as a matter of fact even though he was well over one hundred miles away when they last saw him.

“Your ex husband?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. But it’s OK. He is finally at peace with himself. His was a tormented soul. Even lately with putting his life back together he still wasn’t quite right. If you knew him you could still see that. I never did find out if something during his time in the military caused this or if he..... well, let’s just leave it at he’s in a better place now.”

Michael didn’t know what to say so he helped her into the truck, put the crutches in back and got in. As he started to drive away Cyndi reached out and held his hand for the short drive back to the campground.



## *Story 8 – Run Kris, Run*

Kris was part of a large multi generational family living on a modest farm just south west of Rathburn lake in Iowa. The family practiced organic farming methods and had thriving fields with a variety of vegetables growing on a portion while the majority of the land was used in a rotational grass fed diet for a herd of cows. Near the barn on a half acre were some pigs and chickens. Outside of a few staples, the family was mostly self sufficient. They all lived in the old farm house. Originally built in the 1800s, it had been added on to many times over the years. In the current configuration there were 8 bedrooms, 5 bathrooms and a large kitchen, dining room and family room. Downstairs was a full basement with a section of it walled off and turned into a root cellar.

At 15, Kris' days were spent at school however before school and on weekends farm chores were a part of life. After the cows were milked and the chickens fed, Kris went inside, put on clean clothes for school and grabbed a backpack with a few books and a laptop. The bus could be heard coming down the road so Kris hurried out and ran down the long gravel driveway to meet the bus. Upon boarding Kris went towards the back and sat with Milton, Paul and Josh. This small group had known each other since early grade school and for years now used their online identities of C0derXtr3me (Milton), PlazmaWave (Paul), T1tan (Josh) and BITterWon (Kris).

When they discovered computers the group was amused but with the Internet and the abilities to explore or hack other systems they really came into their own. None of them were destructive. They didn't write viruses or destroy data. However they did routinely commit felony level crimes by stealing data however it was curiosity that drove them, not sabotage, espionage or blackmail. Trying to sell or profit from the files they acquired had never even crossed their minds. The challenge of getting in was the real 'game'. Looking at the content of the files was usually, but not always, anticlimactic for them.

“Hey, you got to take a look at what I found last night. I can't even read it. I think it's Chinese or Russian or something,” said Kris.

“Send it over,” said Paul as the four of them pulled out their laptops and powered up while the generic yellow school bus bounced along the dusty county roads.

Within a few minutes all of them were logged in and pouring over the data.

“Looks like a lot of whatever it is. The numbers here reflect millions but I don’t know what the millions are in reference to. Maybe dollars?”

“No, you moron, China uses the Yuan.”

“That’s what I meant loser.”

“Ain’t what your mom said last night, “ said Paul who moments later found, to his chagrin, his system rebooting as Milton issued a remote command to it in retaliation. “Yeah, real funny. Bite me.”

Once Paul got logged back in he joined the rest of them in pouring over the files but none of them were able to decipher them.

“How did you get these?” Milton asked Kris.

“Pretty simply. I setup a DDOS attack from some machines overseas I had hacked into, maybe in the Ukraine or Siberia I think, and when it overloaded the server I stopped the attack and then switched to the back door utility I wrote. It kept hammering on the server and as soon as it came back online I was able to inject my root kit and get access before the virus and security software kicked in.”

“Sweeeeeeett,” came a chorus from the three others.

A low ranking aide walked down the corridor and briefly stopped outside the ornate door. Taking a deep breath he pushed it open and entered the sparsely decorated office. He stepped in front of the desk and saluted.

“Have a seat.”

“Yes sir,” he said as he sat down and prepared his notes while waiting for the general.

Finally looking up, the general queried, “Your report?”

“General Cho, we detected another intrusion yesterday. It looks like the Americans in conjunction with the Russians.”

“What did they access?”

“Mostly harmless files detailing inventories and supplies for our army.”

“Mostly harmless? What else did they get?” demanded the General.

The aide broke out in a sweat, swallowed hard and tried to continue. “We’re not entirely sure if they even accessed the files.”

“I will only ask once more. What else did they get?”

The aide felt as if all the lights in the office were pointing at him as the sweat was running down his face, a fact not lost on the general. He stammered at first and then finally in a rush got out what he was trying to say.

At first the General rose up with a furious look on his face but then he paused, his face went blank and he slowly sat back down. Stone faced he just sat there while his aide squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

“Sir? General?” after pausing between and still receiving no response the aide rose to his feet and said, “If that is all I will leave you with your thoughts,” nodded, and walked out.

General Cho never saw or even heard the aide leave. His mind was reeling at the news. Project Dragon Fang and Project Sleeping Serpent had both been compromised.

Project Sleeping Serpent was a full set of plans for strategic nuclear strikes in either US or Russia with the goal of blaming them on the other country. With luck the recipient of the nuclear strikes would eventually attack the other country and hopefully they would then further retaliate and in a matter of hours both countries would cease to exist.

Project Dragon Fang was even worse. It detailed plans for taking over all of Asia and then moving on to Europe. With US and Russia out of the way it wouldn't be difficult, the planners felt, to thrust China to the forefront and make them the sole and rightful world power.

What neither the general nor the aide knew was that plans for Project Emperors Destiny was also taken. This was the most ambitious plan and setup as an alternate to Fang and Serpent. It involved teaming up with the Russians to invade the US in an equitable split of resources. However once the Russians were well entrenched the Chinese would use nuclear weapons against the US cities now occupied by the Russians and then turn to the Russian homeland and send in millions of reserve troops to take over that Russia too. In one fell swoop China would eliminate both super powers, gain most of their resources and secure its place in the world and economy of the future.

The general knew these were all just theoretical plans, really nothing more than barely fleshed out ideas, nothing ever even discussed outside of a small think tank type group. However in the wrong hands they could be misconstrued resulting in, at best, an international incident, and possibly much worse.

The NSA had, of course, been intercepting all international Internet traffic and directing a copy of it to set of shadow servers hidden in a massive underground facility at an undisclosed location. Acres and acres of cabinets each filled with dozens of servers churned through this data in near real time. The very few techs who handled these systems spent near all of their time rebuilding and replacing failed drives and servers. With nearly 100,000 servers and 800 SAN storage systems, it was a slow day when only a few dozen items failed necessitating replacement.

Another group was responsible for maintaining the massive distributed database. A third group was responsible for archiving everything. Besides the online archives there were tapes stored away. Each year they gathered enough data and filled enough tapes that, if laid end to end, they would reach nearly half way to the moon. A final group was responsible for the actual search algorithms and presenting the data.

The first pass was simply to look for key words. By now the list had grown to thousands of entries including most members of government, regardless of the country,

special words like 'nuclear' and phrases like 'kill the president'. Of course these phrases were monitored in all known languages. Encryption was rarely a problem. Most systems had governmental back doors. If the encryption companies didn't want to get buried in legislation and regulations they played ball and put in the secret back doors. For the few overseas companies that were out of the US influence there were entire server farms dedicated to breaking the encryption via whatever method, up to and including brute force, was necessary. Rarely did anything encrypted last more than 10 minutes before succumbing to one method or another. It is like the old saying about a thousand monkeys and a thousand typewriters. With enough computers it becomes theoretically possible to try every combination in a relatively short period of time. Theory quickly became implemented protocol.

Projects Sleeping Serpent, Dragon Fang and Emperors Destiny all made it to the special list and quickly got bumped up the pay grades until, only minutes after intercepting, senior analysts who could fluently read Chinese were pouring over the documents. The following morning the President was briefed and agents were dispatched from Des Moines to find out what they could about the terrorists who had received these files and what they were plotting with the Chinese and Russians on these projects.

In Washington a very small group met behind closed doors and thanks to a few overzealous analysts, what were once secret 'what if' plans, were now outright imminent invasion plans involving nuclear strikes against the US. Quickly Russian and Chinese diplomats were called in and threatened. Over the next 48 hours tensions escalated and things really got out of hand. Cooler heads tried to prevail however when the US sent most submarines on a direct course for the Chinese and Russian coasts and followed up with stealth bombers and fighters flying into their airspace in a show of force, a low ranking Chinese missile controller, under orders to stand down, hit the wrong button and sent a heat seeking missile streaking for the military planes.

The superior US technology allowed them to easily evade however a nearby 747 out of LA en route to Beijing, oblivious, as most of the population was, to the events did not evade the missile. Most people never even knew what had happened. One moment they were alive, the next they were vaporized as part of a massive explosion. The pilots lived long enough to just start the thought process of why they could suddenly see a bright orange glow behind them before they too ceased to exist.

Upon receiving the news of the civilian plane being shot down, the air force was given permission to return fire. It only took one more day, barely 24 hours, before continuous escalations and retaliations resulted in the first of many nuclear missiles being launched by the super powers, and shortly thereafter by anyone else with one.

Kris was in the barn getting feed for the chickens when vehicles were heard approaching. Peering out between the slats a large number of black SUVs pulled up and well over two dozen men in dark suits emerged. Kris was about to leave the barn and head to the house when an agent pulled out a gun with the rest following his lead as they headed for the house. Within minutes the entire family was gathered outside and held at gun point.

No more than 10 minutes passed when the last of the agents came out and set down a pile of computer equipment on the ground including Kris' laptop.

“Check the barn and other buildings,” barked one of the men.

On hearing this, Kris headed up to the loft and burrowed into the hay pile.

The agents did a cursory check but were quite certain they had everyone so no one bothered to dig around in the hay. When it was obvious they were no longer in the barn Kris quietly crawled out from the hay and found another hole to peer through. The computer equipment was loaded into one SUV and all the family members were split up with each one taken to different SUV. Grandma's arthritis was acting up and she was not walking fast enough for the agents. They pushed her and she stumbled and fell. Kris gasped and nearly ran out to stop them but didn't know what one person could do. A couple of agents grabbed grandma and pretty much dragged her to the SUV unceremoniously pushing her into the rear seat before getting in themselves. As the vehicles pulled out Kris sat in the hay loft and cried not understanding what had happened or why.

As the Department of Homeland Security caravan of black SUVs exited from the 235 into Des Moines they all had a fraction of a second to wonder why it was suddenly

as bright as a sun in downtown Des Moines. Kris, unknowingly, was now an orphan.

The medical center told Cyndi that her leg was healing quite nicely and would not need any further attention. Simply go easy on it for a few more weeks and then the cast could be removed. The group discussed waiting around and having the nurses remove it or hitting the road and removing it themselves. At night temperatures were getting down to nearly freezing and even the day time warm up was not anywhere near what it had historically been. Even one was quietly thinking nuclear winter and each felt a calling to migrate south as soon as they could.

After speaking their minds the consensus was to deal with the cast themselves and get going as soon as possible. They spent the next few days trading with the local town folk before packing up their camp and heading out with a wave to the police at the roadblock and calling to Jed to see if he was coming with. Jed, as usual, gave them the finger in response and by now everyone got a chuckle out of that.

It was slow going as they were trying to find a way around the gang infested Duluth area since none knew that the problem had been solved weeks ago. In addition they frequently stopped at abandoned vehicles, stores, businesses and even sometimes homes and scavenged what they could. Six vehicles used a lot of gas but also hauled a lot of supplies. It was a double edged sword.

They headed west to Ely and worked their way south eventually passing near Saint Cloud. Concern for other possibly gang infested areas and simply the desire to avoid any large hostile, group of people saw them sticking mostly to back roads. They did encounter others, just occasionally and usually only from a distance. Everyone was armed and most people were either on foot or horseback although a few vehicles were still out and about. The fact they had a handful of running vehicles, obviously with gas, made them a target and more than once they heard shots ring out but no one was hit and they drove on without slowing or stopping.

Eventually they worked their way to 90 and headed east and then south on 35. Each night they put forth ideas on an ideal place to live. Based on their maps, atlases and other resources, they settled on a Midwestern state, near water but away from major rivers. It also had to be as far away as they could from major cities. The group was

concerned about gangs but also about radiation as most large cities appeared to have been hit.

Nearing Des Moines Joe's Nuke Alert key chain fob started to chirp. They drove on for almost a mile before the sound registered in his brain as it had been so long since he last heard it. Pulling over he got out and they all had a quick discussion. Everyone mounted back up and they headed back north and then east, nearly to Waterloo IA before working their way mostly south and a bit west again.

Passing through many small communities they found anything from fairly normal to scorched earth and complete destruction with no living to be found. Sometimes they traded with the functioning communities, occasional scavenging from the abandon ones, although by now much of the good stuff had already been taken.

Heading down yet another country road, with Michael in the lead, the entire group had to slam on their brakes to avoid hitting each other when he stopped short. Looking up they saw Michael getting out of the truck and then turn back to grab his gun. Instantly everyone else grabbed their rifles and took up defensive postures while scanning the surrounding countryside.

It did not take long to spot the running figure with others in pursuit. The lead person had tattered clothes, barely even rags and was quite filthy as was apparent even at a distance. For the first time the figure seemed to notice the trucks and hesitated briefly allowing the pursuers to catch up. They tackled the figure and most stayed down with the figure while one of the pursuers begin to undo his pants.

The group had seen enough and some charged in shooting in the air as they went. With his pants half down the lead figure tried to turn and ended up on the ground instead. The others jumped up, two holding pieces of pipe and one with a knife. The final figure stayed on the ground holding a knife to the throat of the prey dressed in rags.

At about 20 yards it became a standoff. The pursuers, now readily visible as teen aged boys looked like they wanted to run but the one on the ground with the knife told them to stay put and yelled to Joe and the others to back off or he'd slit her throat.

The leader holding the victim had her head between him and Michael and he



didn't see Michael raise his 10/22 into firing position. The girl did. Michael nodded. She gave her head just the slightest nod in return.

Joe called out, "Let her go and we'll let you live."

"She's ours. This is none of your business."

They continued the banter for a few more minutes while Michael and the girl were learning, on the fly, how to silently communicate. Slowly Michael moved a hand away from the gun and held it near his throat and then raised it up just a bit and made a motion to bite it. The girl got the idea.

Finally the chance came when he pulled the knife away a bit to gesture toward Joe. She leaned forward and sank her teeth into his hand.

He screamed in pain and slugged her with his free hand. In the process it knocked her clear and Michael took the shot and immediately followed it with 4 more.

All five rounds leapt from the barrel and sped towards the attacker. The diminutive caliber bullet ripped into his chest and was still ricocheting off the inside of his ribs when the second round impacted. The third caught him in the arm and the sudden pain caused his hand to spasm dropping the knife. Fourth round just grazed his shoulder while the fifth round hit the carotid artery in the neck. It was a race between his shredded lungs filling with blood and his destroyed artery pumping blood from his body onto the field. In the end it was the girl that grabbed the fallen knife and plunged it into his heart that killed him but by that point he was already helpless on the ground and would have died in moments anyway.

She yanked the knife free and turned towards the other teens who immediately dropped their weapons and ran off through the field. One of them was still trying to put his pants back on while running and finally gave up, yanked them off and continued off in the distance running half naked.

Joe started towards the girl who turned toward him with the knife. Mary put her arm on his and said that the men should go back to the trucks and help Cyndi and Martha keep an eye on the kids. Her and Lauren would take care of the girl.

As the men walked away, Mary turned to the girl. "We're not going to hurt you."

"No, you aren't. No one is ever going to hurt me again," she said rubbing the side of her head where a large lump was forming and her eye was closing up. She still held the other hand up with the knife.

"Where are your parents?"

"Probably dead."

"Any other family?"

"Since the bombs came. I ain't seen any of them anymore."

"You've been by yourself this whole time?"

She did not answer.

"Look we just want to help. We have some food and water we can give you and then leave if you'd prefer."

The girl looked to them, to the vehicles and then in the direction the teens had run off in. Ever so slowly the knife lowered. Mary leaned towards Lauren and said something. Lauren nodded, turned and went back to the vehicles. Mary and the girl watched as Lauren disappeared into one of the trailers for a few minutes and then came back out with an armful of stuff.

Lauren dropped the pile on the ground and then knelt down by it. The first thing she did was lift up a 10/22 rifle which caused the girl to quickly raise the knife back up.

"No, child, this isn't for me, it's for you." She set the gun down and a small box of 100 rounds next to it. "Do you know how to use it?"

The girl nodded yes.

"Good. It's much better than the knife, but I'd suggest you keep that too." She then proceeded to layout a couple of water bottles, some pop tarts and other ready to eat

food and a few changes of clothes. “I wasn’t sure on your size, hopefully one of these will fit. Those rags are about to disintegrate off of you. Here’s another bottle of water and a wash cloth too.”

After arranging everything on the ground Lauren stood up, backed up a step towards Mary and Mary spoke up, “We’re going to go back by the trucks. This is for you regardless of your decision but we hope you’d consider coming with us. We’re looking for some land that we can move into and start raising livestock and crops and carving out a safe little haven for us and other good people. When you’ve made up your mind you can come join us or just walk away. We’ll wait as long as it takes you to decide.”

With that they turned and headed back to the truck.

Kris didn’t know what to do. She had been through so much these last few months. First the government taking away her entire family, then the bombs. For the first few months everything was quiet and she just took care of the animals and did the chores. She picked food as necessary but being just herself eating it, much of it went bad in the fields. She started reading her grandma’s books and found a wealth of information on preserving food and other methods to ensure adequate supplies of food to last her through the winter.

She had developed a routine and was surviving, although she was a bit lonely, when the boys showed up. Milton, Paul, Josh and a couple of others she didn’t know. They were hungry and she shared the food and produce from the fields with them. For weeks everything was fine until one of the other boys, Dan was it? Yeah. Dan. She woke up to find Dan half naked in her bedroom and pulling the sheets off of her. He put his hand over her mouth and said not to wake the others and they could have some fun. She pushed him away and screamed causing the others to come running in.

Catching him standing there like there didn’t go over so well. Over the next few days the tension in the air was so thick you could almost literally feel it engulfing you. Finally, just this morning, Dan came into the kitchen where she was at and said that since she was the only woman around that she owed it to them in return for their protection. Owed them what she asked and they were very graphic in their answers. Even her friends from way back in grade school seemed to have turned to Dan’s side and made it abundantly clear that either she play along or they’d get what they wanted the hard way. As Dan advanced on her she pushed him and turned to run. Their hands

grasped at her but she tore away leaving her shirt in tatters as she burst out the back door and ran for her morality if not her very life.

They took off in pursuit. Kris ran over the fields and through the hedgerows at the border further tearing her clothes and scratching her arms and legs on the way through. A few times she fell in the dirt but immediately got to her feet and continued running. She crossed the fields of the farm next door and went through the small woods bordering it. Out of breath she stopped behind a tree to catch her breath hoping she had left them behind. She turned to look one way and as she turned back Milton was right in front of her reaching for her. A swift kick to the groin temporarily dropped him and she took off again with the rest not more than twenty feet behind her. Running through the next field, and almost two miles from the farm house now, she felt her lungs about to burst. The pain in her side was crippling and her stamina, driven by fear and adrenaline was nearly exhausted. She knew they were going to catch her and then....

She closed down that part of her mind and just kept running. It was then she thought she heard an out of place sound. She looked up and, without realizing, slowed a bit allowing the pursuers to catch up. They tackled her and each grabbed a limb holding her on the ground while Paul, the only one still standing, displayed an evil leer and started to undo his pants saying, "Lucky me, I get to go first." She clamped her eyes shut and her mind started to shut down as a defensive mechanism to protect her from what was about happen when a gunshot rang out. Then suddenly Dan had the knife to her throat. When she finally spotted him she realized that guy with the gun seemed to be literally in her mind. Just a look from him and she knew what he was thinking about taking out Dan. She just needed to know how she could get out of the way when he pantomimed the bite. As soon as the opening was there, Kris took it. It earned her a shiner for sure but plunging the knife into his chest made up for it. She thought she should have felt bad or remorse about killing him but as he appeared to be the instigator of the others she felt nothing. Not happy, not sad, simply nothing at his death. The same feeling she felt when she tossed bags of trash out of her dad's truck at the dump. Simply taking out the garbage.

The harrowing last few days played over and over in her mind as she ate the food and drank the water. The tears streamed down her face leaving muddy trails as she realized what had almost happened and how she missed her family. With a big family there was always someone around to watch out for you. Someone always had your back and bad people couldn't come and hurt you. Sure she got in a few fights with her

siblings and cousins but in the end they always made up and shared some ice cream.

At 15 Kris, or Krissy as her parents had called her, was stuck between being a kid and being a woman. She wasn't truly ready for independence but the last time she invited some people into her house... how could she trust these people? Maybe she should just take the gun, turn and walk away.

Hour after hour went by as she finished the food, washed up a bit and put on the new clothes. She kept an eye on them and saw an older couple. Kind of like her grandparents. She also saw two middle aged couples and one younger woman, the one that brought her the stuff. She reminded her of her older sister. They were interacting with each other in a friendly fashion. Like a family would. None made any attempt to approach her again. In fact they were watching over and playing with three smaller kids. Close in age to her cousins. At one point a dog broke off from the group, came over by her sniffed around a bit. He looked off in the direction the teens had left in and growled. Seemingly satisfied he turned back, sniffed some more and then approached, licked her hand and ran back to play with the little kids.

Kris had a farm. These people helped, no, saved her. Perhaps she could invite them to the farm. Not only did they save her, they gave her food, clothes and even a gun and ammo. If they meant her harm they wouldn't have armed her. Would they? She looked down at the gun. It was a basic Ruger 10/22. Plain wood stock. Just like the varmint gun her grandfather had. He'd first taught her how to use it when she was 10 and almost every weekend she had practiced with it shooting cans off the fence in back. She could knock down 9 out of 10 cans at 50 yards using just the iron sites nearly every time. Kris picked up the gun and loaded the magazine. She held it up, pointed it in a safe direction and fired off a few rounds using her one good eye.

The people briefly stopped their conversations but as she continued to shoot off at fence post in the distance they resumed their talking and the kids kept playing.

As the afternoon wore on Kris finally decided she needed the company of others. The protection of a group and maybe the kind of people that could one day be called family. Maybe that's why she let the guys stay with her. She thought they could make up for her missing family.

She finally decided to give them a chance. She gathered up the gun, all the empty

casings and the old clothes and packaging from the food and water and walked towards her new family.

## Epilogue

Krissy was introduced to George and Martha, Mary and Joe, Michael, Cyndi and her kids Zach and Wendy, Lauren and Cari and finally Max. She told them about her farm and invited them to come live there. It was nearly a perfect arrangement for all involved. As they drove up to the farm house the teen boys, which had returned there, took off running as fast as they could.

The supplies were rationed and with the crops they harvested they were able to make it through the first winter, which did arrive early and still have some reserves left. That spring, which came late, saw them planting as much as they could along with continuing to manage the livestock.

Joe got the solar system rigged up and Michael routinely went on scavenging runs providing them with more off grid capabilities and labor saving appliances, and parts for when they break, not to mention more food, seeds and even some unclaimed livestock to add to their collection.

Krissy was instrumental in showing the city folk what needed to be done on the farm and to their credit they all jumped in with both feet knowing that their survival depended on their actions.

A few years later the teenagers, still alive, armed with shotguns and quite drunk returned and caught Krissy, Joe and Michael outside and unarmed. They threatened them and tried to grab Krissy however a few well placed shots made by Lauren and Mary from the second story windows put a quick end to them.

Michael went slow and got to know Cyndi and the kids before, after a few years, finally asking her to marry him. She of course agreed and without any one official to perform the ceremony they simply wrote their own vows and pledged the love and devotion to each other in front of their family and friends and from that point on

considered themselves married.

George and Martha became known as Grandpa and Grandma to all the kids, Krissy included. Even though she always addressed everyone else by name she considered them all to be family.

About a year after moving to the farm, Max passed away from the many tumors he had. He was buried under an apple tree behind the farm house.

By the second year the temperatures had more or less reverted back to the normal cycles and growing seasons were again pretty reliable.

During the next decade they were mostly on their own at the farm although through Michael's scavenging they found some surrounding communities that they eventually formed trade relationships with.

The government never really came back. Attempts were made to re-establish it however no one was willing to pay taxes and if you didn't work you didn't eat so entitlement programs were no longer needed. With the massive worldwide population reduction military wasn't needed so there were no reasons for a national government anymore. Family and friends took care of each other once again and all felt this is how it should be.

Cover Credits:

Big Box store image: JCPenney\_Standalone by Azt3r1x

Nevada testing image: “Photo courtesy of National Nuclear Security Administration / Nevada Site Office”





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](http://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.