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## The Battery

Lying on a small hill watching the subdivision. Subdivision was walled, located on the end of a cul-de-sac and appeared to be well organized. Entrance to the subdivision was blocked and guarded 24 x 7. Front and back yards converted into what looked like gardens when in season. They used buckets lowered into their water wells for their water source. During my on and off observations during the last few weeks I counted 37 adults and about a dozen kids. They all appeared to be well nourished, the adults armed and they rarely leave the safety of their cul-de-sac. Dogs had either been eaten or...didn't matter, they didn't have any. No dogs allowed me my preferred option of a dark night approach.

Harder to tell what their security arrangements were at night. Night scope batteries are just about gone. Two sunny days on the solar charger gives me less than 5 minutes of run time before the batteries are exhausted. I've lost count on how many times the night scope saved my butt; I'd hate to lose the option.

Alkaline batteries have all turned to dust, NiCads could work but the last ones I found were over a year ago. Scavenging another abandoned house I found an iPhone. Worthless when cell coverage and the power grid died. I kept mine awhile until I needed to lighten the pack load, two or has it been closer to three years ago? Why didn't I think of this sooner? Charge the iPhone then use the iPhone's USB charging cable to power the night scope? I could kick myself.

And now you know why I'm laying here in the cold rain watching the subdivision. Are they friendly? If they still have any smart phones would they be too curious as why I would be willing to trade for them? Or would they go the practical and safe route by shooting the stranger (me) on sight?

Never a good idea to always observe from the same location, good way to get yourself ambushed. Today I'm lying in a drainage ditch and had wiggled my way in just after nightfall as close to the entrance guard as I dared. If this rain keeps up I'll be swimming and regretting my great idea. I'm planning the weather will help the guard to be inattentive so I can place a note in the middle of the roadway. Note is in a salvaged bright colored plastic bottle, easy to spot.

Other than the ditch filling up with rain water I've got a great spot. The full moon is providing the light so I can see the guard's nodding head. I'm soaked and have started shivering. I'm crouched, ready to run across the road, drop the bottled note and continue to the other side of the road before the guard can react. I planned on moving fast so I've hidden my pack and rifle back the trail a ways. On three... one...two...I smell cigarette smoke...wind is behind me, towards the guard. I drop back into the ditch mud.

"THIS IS TOM! WE'RE HERE TO COLLECT! WE'RE COMING IN!"

Not ten feet from me is a black clad figure and a leashed dog. I hate dogs. Dog looks my way as the Subdivision Guard takes off running into the cul-de-sac. I hear a slight noise off to my left. Peripheral vision I see another black clad person. Great. On my right is the guy with the dog, on my left another guy and me dap smack in the middle. Dog is still looking at me and starts to growl. "SHUT UP STUPID! That's Dick you stupid mutt. DICK AND HARRY! COME ON IN."

Dick? jumped the ditch just in front of me and Harry? came in from the other side of the road. If Dogman is the point and Dick and Harry the left and right flank then the main group should be coming up from the rear...I was right. There was five more black clad men (and women?) in the main group, one of them was smoking and appeared to be the Leader.

When I thought it was safe to do so I pulled my face out of the mud and looked again. No subdivision guard, no Black Clads and more important no dog. Might as well as stretch my luck further. I ran to the guard's post for a look inside the subdivision. The Black Clads was entering one of the houses.

I've pushed my luck far enough. I worked my way back along the ditch to pick up my pack and rifle and head to one of my temporarily locations to warm up, dry out and ponder a bit. Before daybreak I'm back on the hill looking down into the subdivision. I've only have an hour wait before things became a bit interesting.

Black Clads exit a house to meet with what looked like the subdivision leaders. With the cold front moving through the wind has shifted and part of the conversation drifts to me. Every full moon the Black Clads arrives at the subdivision for their payment for "protection". Evidently the subdivision is unable or unwillingly to make full payment. Two of the Black Clads enter one of the houses and drag out a female with black hair, late twenties I would guess. I can't hear if she is to be taken as a hostage or for the balance of the protection payment. One of the subdivision men object too strongly and is shot by the Black Clad Leader. Woman's hands are tied behind her back and a dog collar with leash placed on her neck. Black Clad Leader pulling the leash leads her towards the subdivision exit while the rest of his men pickup up the bags of food that evidently is the protection payment.

What I don't understand is the armed subdivision citizens outnumber the Black Clads almost five to one why are they allowing the Black Clads to kill, kidnap and rob them? What I do understand is why I broke one of my rules by sticking my nose into someone else's business. My daughter would have been ...is the same age as the collared black haired female. Daughter and her husband were out of the country when...well I hope someone had the same opportunity to watch over my daughter. I decide to follow the Black Clads.

I'm puzzled why the Black Clads don't have a rear guard, over confidence? I'm able to follow easily for several hours. I've been this far north once before, there is a bend in the trail coming up. My decision to stop following and cut cross country to get ahead of them saved my life. I had found a nice ambush site when the Black Clads came into view. Since I'm traveling light my rifle was a 22. I'm hoping to get four of them, if the woman has the sense to drop to the ground when the firing starts and if the others run off the woman might be rescued. I count only five plus the woman. Where's the point man and flankers, they should have appeared before the main group? Have I been over confident and allowed them to get behind me? Without knowing where they are I have to forget about my ambush attempt. I let the five Black Clads past my position and wait. My wind up watch tells me twenty-two minutes has passed before the missing three Black Clads come double time down the trail. I now understand. Point and Flankers had dropped behind at the trail bend. Perfect place to ambush anyone following the Black Clads. My luck is still holding. Unfortunately the woman's luck isn't because when I finally catch up to them they are already headed upstream in boat, on a river I didn't know existed. Wonder where they found good gas for their boat motor?

I've been busy between the full moons. Took me seven days to get back to my base camp. Another few days to get caught up the camp chores. A long hike to one of my caches to retrieve the 308 and night scope (never ever store all of you supplies in one location, never). The iPhone I had found is toast, on solar charger while I was gone and still the battery is dead. Rats. The scope was a key element in my plan; I'll just have to make do without. Eight days for an indirect route back to the river the Black Clads used. Two days of walking through briars and sucking mud following the river downstream until I find their boat. Boat is on the opposite side of the river tied to a rather substantial pier. Sign at the end of the pier reads, "IGS CNG Services". While I'm thinking about options on how I am going to get across that river the rain turns to snow.

A bridge would be a quick and easy way to cross the river, a bridge is also an excellent place for an ambush too (I've learned this the hard way). River current too strong and too cold to swim across, I went looking for a small boat. Found a canoe at a beach cottage. One of those cheap plastic covered ones like you would've bought at Bass Pro, now there's a name out of the past. Stored beside the cottage with the oars under the canoe. Unfortunately looks like someone

purposely put several holes in the canoe (Black Clads?). Warmed pine pitch with finely crushed charcoal (from my camp fire), dry grass and a pinch of mouse turds added for a glue. Glue holds the plastic garbage bags I found under the cottage sink over the canoe holes and it's watertight too. I wouldn't want to take a long trip in my repaired canoe but it should hold for what I have in mind.

Current was strong (or my paddling was weak) and I ended up downstream further then I had figured but still above the pier. But I made it and dry too. If it wasn't for the strong current the river would be freezing over. The thought that a person wouldn't last five minutes in the icy cold river gives me an idea.

From my observation point I could see the Black Clads base was a compressed natural gas bulk plant surround by an eight foot chain leak fence topped with razor wire...and a dog kennel. Have I mentioned I hate dogs? Bet they are using CNG to power their boats, cooking and heat! Slick!

Every few days the Black Clads would take their boat with a dinghy tied behind and head in a different direction on the river. They come back usually within twenty-four hours with the dinky loaded with what I assumed are their protection payments. I reason there are other survivors the Black Clads are collecting "protection" from. When they go out on these collections, three Black Clads are left behind, one always close to a small out building with a barred opening in the door. I can't get any closer because of the dogs. I'm now wishing I had carried the extra weight and brought the spotting scope with me.

Their routine I can use against them.

I was getting discouraged searching the cottages on the "IGS CNG Services" side of the river. In a garage I finally found what I was searching for, two full boxes of D-Con protected by Tupperware. Snares caught the rabbits I needed. Finely cut up the rabbit meat, cooked lightly to generate some grease. Mixed generous portions of D-Con in with the meat and the grease held the meatballs together. Meatballs I stored back in the Tupperware. I'm ready.

Moon looks like in another two or three days it will be full. Wind is in the right direction. The snow has melted so I'll leave no tracks. I start working my way in. One of the dogs starts barking and of course they all have to start barking just as I lob my meatballs into their kennel. I heard a Black Clad guard yell as I work my way backwards. The dogs have stopped barking and hopefully are chowing down my meatballs. Ever since that pack caught me out in the open I've hated dogs!

It is the next morning and the dogs bark no more. Black Clad Leader is standing over one of the dog's carcass and he isn't happy. From my vantage point I can see him waving his arms and

yelling. All but one (now I know who the second in command is) starts checking the perimeter fence for cut entries. BCs report back from the fence detail with negative results. Leader still isn't happy. One BC gets a dressing down (gate guard?). When another heads towards the small out building my curiosity is peaked.

I haven't been able to see why they guard that small out building. Twice a day I would see a BC unlock the door enter to carry something in and then leave. Is this where they are keeping the woman? Or have they already killed her? I can't tell and I haven't seen her since I've been watching. All of their "protection" supplies are always carried into the main building.

Sun will be up in a bit. Tonight is the full moon. BC guard at the pier gate has his back to the pier as I work my way over to their boat. Guard is still looking away as I lower myself in to the boat. I'd say about a ten person boat with twin outboard motors. My guess they are using LP for fuel is confirmed when I see the six 60 pound LP tanks tied to the gunwales. On the tank in the back partially hidden by the other tanks I use clear fishing line to tightly tie a hand grenade (found on a National Guard corpse a year ago) against the LP tank. Using about fifty feet of the fishing line I tie one end of it to the hand grenade pin. The other end of the line is tied to the pier. I tie some small stones to the line to sink it under the boat so the props will miss it. Checked the valves to the tanks and they are off, good! Point of my knife made some nice pinpricks to the fuel line. If they turn on the tank valves and don't smell LP, if the fishing line doesn't break before pulling the hand grenade pin out, if the hand grenade is still good, if the explosion is sufficient to rupture the tank, if the resulting explosion sinks the boat and if they are far enough away from shore the BCs should all drown in the icy river current. What could go wrong?

If their pattern holds this is the day when they head back to the cul-de-sac. I'm already in position as close to the boat dock I can be and still be reasonably hidden. I have to be close so I can get the gate guard before he has a chance to relock it. Then sprint up the pier stairs, through the gate and around the corner of the main building to take out guard Number 2. This can be done all out of sight of guard Number 3 at the out building if I hurry. Then I can wait briefly in ambush as Number 3 comes to investigate my gunshots and (hopefully) the boat explosion. If Number 3 doesn't come then I have to go look for him. Leaving him alive and behind me is a good way for me to commit suicide.

I hear voices. It's Tom, Dick and Harry heading to the boat. I stifle a chuckle at the realization of their names, "Tom, Dick and Harry". Wonder if those are actually their names or just code names? Gate Guard unlocks the padlock and removes the chain to let Tom, Dick and Harry (another stifled chuckle from me) through. Good, the Gate Guard has followed Tom, Dick and Harry out to the boat leaving the gate open. If I had known...I could have slipped in and surprised the Gate Guard from inside, trimmed some time off my attack! I heard the outboards

rumble to life. I'm not too far out of position to sneak in the gate...if I don't get caught by the other five BC coming out. Is this too good of an opportunity to let go to waste or a deviation from the plan that could turn into a disaster? If the Boat Crew discovers my attempt to sink them and returns then I caught inside and out numbered. All of these thoughts rush through my mind seconds before the rest of the boat crew walks through the gate. That answers my thoughts.

The Boat Crew unties the boat and backs out into the current. Gate Guard is walking back to his post with my rifle sights on him. I hear the outboard motors roar as someone pulls on full throttle. The Guard is closing the gate...it's now or never... I hear an explosion. The hand grenade was good I thought just as a metal fragment embeds itself into a tree beside my head. I pulled the trigger and the guard's head is replaced by a red spray. Eight BCs down with their boat, the gate guard down, two to go I was thinking as I ran up the steps through the gate and made a sharp left turn. I'm now at the front corner of the main building working my way slowly but quickly under the windows. The main building door opens and Guard number 2 to steps out and looks toward the pier. I'm at his right side and I'm ten feet away when he catches me in his peripheral vision. Two 308s to his chest. I've got one Guard to go.

I work my way into a bunch of large LP tanks. I'm about 2/3rds of the way to the out building. Laying prone I can see under one of the tanks and as soon as Number 3 walks into view...five minutes pass and no Number 3. In the canoe the current carried me a mile downstream. Without a boat the current would carry the Boat Crew two or three miles downstream assuming the worst case that they survived? I'll figure two miles and with wet clothes it will take them an hour to get back here if they don't freeze to death first. Factor in a safety margin I've got twenty-five more minutes before I got to bug out. Safer to let Number 3 come to me... where is he?!

I'm down to twelve minutes before my self-imposed deadline so I work the long way to the out building, he could be waiting for me to appear. I'm now behind the out building, no sign or sound from Number 3. The 308 is my right hand and my knife in my left as I round the building to the front. This time I can't suppress my chuckle. Number 3 has what looks like a homemade braded rope around his neck and tied to the door window bars. From the color of Number's face I's say he has been dead the entire time I spent waiting to ambush him. At the sound of my chuckle the hand reaching from the door window and trying to reach the keys on Number 3's belt disappeared back into the building.

"Who's out there." whispered a woman's voice.

"Your Knight in shining white armor." I answered. "Give me a minute and I'll get the door unlocked."

“I don’t recognize your voice. Who are you?”

“I told you. Your Knight in shining armor.” I replied as I remove the keys from Number 3’s belt, unlocked the door and swing it open. A naked red haired flurry almost knocked me over as it tried to scratch my eyes out. If it wasn’t for my goggles the red flurry would have succeeded. I pushed Red back into the building at the same time as another naked flurry (only this one was black haired) was trying to exit. Both flurries land back in the building on top of each other in a heap on the floor.

Red screamed hysterically as she crawled back into a corner. Black stayed where she was clutching a broken chair leg. Given a half of a chance her look told me she’d brain me with that leg.

“Ladies. I told you the truth. I’m here to rescue you. If you...where are you clothes?”

“They took them.” Black answered. “They thought we wouldn’t try to escape if we were...and it made it easier for them to rape her...they said I was next if my friends didn’t pay in full this month.”

I looked at Black. “Take the uniform off of Number Three and dress one of you with it and I’ll find something for the other.”

“Who’s Number Three?”

“The one you got hanging by his neck on your door.”

“OK. She’s insane. We need to leave her.” Black pointed to Red.

“I’m sorry but I wasn’t raised to leave a lady in distress behind. I’ll meet both of you by the back fence...that way” I pointed. “In five minutes”, I said as I looked at my watch. It was five minutes pass my safe bug out time.

I ran back to the main building leaving the women alone and their door open. If they are still there when I get back I’ll help them across the river. If they are not then I’ve done what I could and my conscious is clear.

When I entered the main building I was like a kid in a toy store. Food, clothing, rifles, pistols, ammunition, MRE’s, backpacks, sleeping bags still all in the packaging and BATTERIES! I grabbed a handful of AA batteries and filled my pants leg pocket with them. Two backpacks I filled with MREs, ammo and I also most forgot, clothing for Red or Black. I see a notebook on a desk, a quick look, it’s a log or diary, I put it in my tactical vest map pouch. I scanned through the windows before leaving the building, just in case, looked clear so I run to the back fence lugging my new found riches along. Red and Black both were waiting for me. Black was wearing

Number 3's uniform including his side arm and Red was wrapped in a blanket with her hands tied with the same makeshift rope that had hung Number 3.

"Here. Get Red dressed while I cut the fence." I had thrown a large pair of bolt cutters over the fence the night before. The cutters had landed in some briars where I thought they could remain hidden but easy for me to locate. Red just stood there with a blank look as Black got her dressed and retied her hands.

I cut the fence just enough so we could squeeze through. Then I took some scrap wire I had hidden on the outside of the fence to stitch the fence together again. I've got plans for this CGN plant and don't want to run the risk of having to clear it later of wild dogs.

"See that large tree over there?"

Red nods. Black says, "Yes".

"You go first Red. Then you Black." I whispered. "No talking. We're not out of the woods yet."

It was half a mile to the tree and we covered the distance at a good clip. I thought Red would slow us up that's why I put her in the lead, to set the pace. I was wrong. It was me falling behind. In my defense I was the one carrying two loaded backpacks, the 308 and at least twenty-five more years than the women. They were waiting for me at the tree.

"OK ladies we can rest a bit. Here..." I had hidden some water and food up in the crook of the tree. "...is water and food. Take your time eating, no need to gobble it down. The worst is over. We only have a quarter mile to go. Just stay low so we can't be spotted. Black you know how to use that sidearm?"

"Maria. My name is Maria and yes I know how to use it. Nine millimeter with two full magazines and one in the chamber and I'm not giving it to you." The look in her eyes told me she'd die first.

"Maria my name is Scotch. And Red you are...?"

"She doesn't talk. At least the month we've been together I haven't heard her. The ...what do you call them?"

"Black Clads or BC for short. Because of their uniforms. You're Black because of the color of your hair and she's ..."

"...yah I caught that. Every day I was in captivity I place a pebble on top of the door frame. For the first twenty-two days they'd come and get Red...sorry I don't know your name..." Maria said looking at Red. "...they came and got her two or three times a day. When they would bring



her back she'd have fluid running down her legs. I'm sure they were raping her. Anyways that's what they told me would happen to me if my friends gave them any trouble again. I wasn't too sure they would wait that long...I think she mentality just went off someplace to end up crazy. Can't really say I blame her, that's why NO ONE is taking this gun from me!"

I think it's time for me to change the subject. "Nine mil? Can you carry this backpack? There is nine mil ammo in there along with food, water, clothing and miscellaneous for two days. Other than the ammo you shouldn't need any of it unless we separate. Time to go...that way" I point towards the river.

Red gets up and starts walking in the direction I had pointed. She's traumatized not crazy I'm thinking as Black I mean Maria follows with me bringing up the rear again.

"Maria? Where is the larger group of BC camped at? The ones back there are just a satellite camp, correct?"

"No. That is all there is. The three in camp and the five that left this morning. "

"I don't think we will have to worry too much about the five. Their boat sank in the river on the way to your subdivision. I would be surprised if any of them made it to shore before they froze. Still we need to be careful just in case."

"Was that the explosion I heard then the shots?"

"Yes. Explosion was the LP tanks on their boat blowing and the shots was for the BC guards."

"The explosion is when the one you call Number Three backed up against the door within reach of my rope. He out weight me and starting pulling loose but Red came and helped. The only sane thing I've seen her do. I knew I had to get the keys but I couldn't reach them. That's when I heard you and thought another guard had come when he saw what I had done..."

Time to turn the subject around again. "Maria what I don't understand is why your friends just didn't eliminate the BCs? You out numbered them. "

"At the time we thought they were friendlies. It was last spring when they appeared. They said they were one of six patrols sent out by a group of over two hundred survivors to secure their perimeter. Their main camp was five days south of us and if we could provide the patrol a safe place to spend the night once or twice a month, perhaps a meal too if we had any to spare. In return they would offer us protection."

"Our Leader was in bed dying from Pneumonia. He told us to kill them! Our Second in Charge disagreed and let them in. Each time they came back they demanded more and more. We thought we were outnumbered...you know the rest. "

Good. Maria didn't catch my slip up. She didn't ask how I knew her and her group outnumbered the BCs.

"Here's how we're crossing the river." I said as I removed the brush covering my canoe and my day pack. Maria looked at the patches on the canoe, then at the river then at Red and finally back to me. From the look on her face I'd say she was judging who the crazy one was Red or me and I had won. "It got me over here and if we're careful it will get us back across. Red in front, then Maria with our packs between us...ready?" I shove off.

From my first crossing experience and with a bigger load I figured with my paddling the current would land us across from the BC pier. Then a day and a half hiking before we'd be back with Maria's friends. They'd be grateful for her return, I get a iPhone or two to power my night scope, wait don't need the iPhones I got rechargeable AAs in my pants pocket! The clouds parted and a beam of sunlight landed on Red. Red turned her head to look back at us. With the sun glistening her hair and face she looked like an angel. Red mouthed the words "Thank you" as she purposely put her foot thru one of the garbage bag canoe patches.

"JUMP!" I yelled as the canoe instantly filled with water. I threw my 308 towards the river bank some ten feet away. Got my day pack almost off my back before going under. Finished ditching the day pack under water but something had caught my leg holding me under. With a jerk my leg is free but I feel a sharp pain. My head pops above the water and I suck air. I grasp the black hair I see floating pass. Fortunately the canoe sank on the inside of a river bend where the current isn't as strong and river isn't as deep. A couple of kicks towards shore pulling the black hair behind me before I can stand. I'm shivering uncontrollably. The black hair belongs to Maria. I pull her upright and she starts gasping for air. I take that to mean she's still alive. 308 sticking in the river bank like a tomato stake, barrel down. I anchor my left hand with the 308 and with my right push Maria's butt up and onto the river bank. Once I'm on the bank too I look back for Red. With her hands tied she doesn't stand a chance and even if I do see her I don't have the strength to go back in after her. I can't find Red.

"Quick Maria! Over to that grass and take off your clothes! If we don't get out of these wet things we'll freeze to death". I didn't have to tell her twice. "Wring all the water you can out of your clothes and hair and then dry off the best you can using the grass. Then redress. I know a place about a mile from here where it will be safe to light a fire."

"You got a nasty cut on your leg."

"Yea I'll have to deal with it later. We need to get warmed up first." Look like the pants pocket full of batteries got hung up on the something underwater. When I jerked to get free the pocket tore, spilling the batteries and leaving me with a deep cut in my calf.

We're getting our pants back on when, "So you're the one that has caused me all of these problems?" We both turned towards the voice. It was the BC Leader with my 308 pointing straight at me. BANG BANG BANG. Strange, I always thought there would be pain when a person was shot. Especially at close range with a large caliber rifle. I don't feel a thing. It's like a dream where everything is in slow motion as I turn to look at Maria. I hope she can get away. I'm puzzled because she has a pistol in her left hand so I turn to look back at the BC Leader for an explanation just in time to see him fall backwards. Maria walks up the BC Leader and puts a fourth round into his head. "Been wanting to do that for a long time!" She said. My ears are still ringing as my head clears. I hadn't been shot!.

Our adrenalin from the BC Leader encounter along with our brisk mile hike is the only things that kept us from freezing to death. We both started shaking again just as we made it to the cave. I went in first to make sure it was unoccupied by four and two legged predators before waving Maria in. Cave was peanut shaped with a small exit/entrance at both ends. In the narrow center part of the cave was a twist with another opening that lead into a small side room. This side room had cracks in one side of the ceiling that smoke would escape through undetected. I had already stored fire wood. Also in the side room is where I had hid my long range pack which included a fully functional "use in an emergency only" BIC lighter. It didn't take long to have a hot fire going.

"Marie I didn't know how to handle this." I should have listened to her when she told me Red was nuts. So asking for her opinion now was my way of saying sorry for almost getting us killed. "I've got a dry shirt and dry pants in my pack. You want to wear them while your clothes dry or...?"

"Give me the shirt and you can have the pants. Sound fair?"

"Works for me. I'll just step outside in the main cave while you undress..."

"Too late. You've already seen all of me. How about we just turn our backs? I'd feel bad with you standing out there freezing off your..."

"Back to back then" I quickly replied.

We stood there with the fire between our backs until our bodies dried and we were finally warm again. We dressed and left our wet clothes steaming by the fire. One of my boot shoelaces started smoking so I back our boots further from the fire before putting more wood on.

“This was my base when I was scouting the BC’s camp. The bed could use fresh pine boughs. I get some when my clothes are dry. Sorry I don’t have a comb for you.” Maria had been running her fingers through her hair as it dried.

“That’s OK. I let it grow starting in the fall for the winter months and will shave it again come spring. That’s easier and less smelly than using stale gasoline to kill the head lice. I’m surprised I have any left the way you tried to jerk my hair out. I’m joking. I’m glad you pulled me out of that river!”

“I’m glad too. You’re good company and pleasant on the eyes.” She blushed. “You could use a garlic and lime juice paste. Work it through your hair and leave it for a half hour, suffocates the little buggers and doesn’t smell as bad as gas or Turpentine. Doesn’t have the fire hazard either“

“We grow garlic and lemons, I’ll try that. Thanks for the tip.”

I started tearing down my 308 as we talked. Maria reached over and took the upper from me. She popped the butt off, pulled the buffer tube spring and had the bolt carrier group out almost before I could blink. Then she found a stick to started working the river bank mud out of the barrel. She knew her way around firearms, I had noticed both of her feet were bloodied, she didn’t whimper when the going got tough and didn’t hesitate to take a life to save hers or others (mine). She would be a catch I thought as I set my Otis cleaning kit on the bed between us. Wonder how long Widows mourn...”Sorry about you husband. I was too far away and didn’t have the right rifle with me to stop them.”

“Husband? I lost him years ago. Caught him cheating with a Bar Maid. Before all this happened. Who are you talking about?”

“Back at your subdivision. When the BC’s dragged you out and shot your husband...well I assumed it was.”

“No no that’s wasn’t a man. Probably looked like a man from a distance, she is...was a good friend. We’ve been together ever since the world went bust...I...I...I...” She started softly sobbing and couldn’t finish. I put the 308 lower down to draw her to my chest and held her quietly.

When she was all cried out, “I’m sorry. You must think I’m a blubbering female.”

“No you’re perfectly fine. It’s better to get it all out as soon as you can. I made the mistake of bottling it all up inside. No it’s better your way. Our clothes are dry. I’ll get dressed first then I want to go out and look around.” I said as I reassemble the 308. “I’ll be back in ten minutes with fresh boughs for your bed. There is a pot, boiled water and some MREs in my pack. If you

wouldn't mind warming a meal for us while I'm gone?" Giving Maria a questioning look. She nodded yes.

I checked the other cave entrance for signs of entry. The pebbles I had placed were not distributed. We should be safe.

I cut fresh pine boughs a half mile from the cave, dragging them back to the cave entrance, stopping periodically to sweep away my tracks. I manage a quick perimeter sweep before calling it quits because of the throbbing pain from my leg calf. And I should have waited until my coat was completely dry before leaving the warmth of the fire, I got chilled again.

"OK if I come in Maria?"

"Yea I'm dressed. Good timing supper is ready."

I hang my coat by the fire to complete drying it out. Then I bring the pine boughs in to cover the bed. Then back out in the main cave to sweep away our tracks. From the main cave you can't see the campfire. While I was outside I could smell a trace of our wood smoke but with the wind it would be hard to follow back to us. I'm bushed, leg is hurting, I have done what I could. I really need a hot meal and rest.

"Thank you I needed that. I haven't had a hot meal since I've been on the other side of the river."

"You're welcome. Now drop your pants so I can take care of that leg wound."

"First I need to get rid of the MRE food wrappers. Never a good idea to eat where you sleep. Draws two and four legged animals and insects too. Course with the cold weather we can rule out insects. I'll just bury them away from the camp..."

"No you stay where you are. I'll bury the trash. You're still shivering and looking like you might have a fever too. Before I could open my mouth to object, "You didn't listen to my advice about Red and we know how that turned out." Maria said with a smile. "Are you going to ignore good advice again?"

"No ma'am".

I must have dozed off. I remember seeing her leave the cave, the next thing I know she's trying to get my pants off. I shook my head to get the daze off as I stood up to take off my pants. "Small pouch, bottom left on my back is my First Aid supplies. Bandages and a new tube of Neosporin only a year past its expiration date."

“Found them. You just lay back down while I boil some more water. Wood splinters from a submerged tree branch? Wound looks angry, infection from the river water more likely. It’s not too deep. These butterfly bandages will work...” Maria looks up at my face to see me sleeping.

Our Daughter had married Army. Couldn’t ask for a better son-in-law. They were leaving for his overseas post at the end of the week so we had driven to meet them, to have a last meal together and say our goodbyes. We returned home late and tired. Winter and I could hear the cold wind blow in my sleep. Bed is warm, I’ll just go to work late I thought as I put my arm over my sleeping wife and cuddled closer. Life doesn’t get any better than this I thought as I start smelling smoke and body odor...after the Daughter had moved out the wife had gone back to sleeping without a nightgown. What she’s wearing now is the roughest, coarsest material...I open my eyes. I’m in a cave. The smoke I smelled is from a fire not ten feet from me. The body odor is from me and the black haired, fully dressed woman that I have my arm around. The realization that I had been dreaming fully woke me.

“Maria?” I whispered. “Are you awake?”

“Yes. I’ve been awake listening to the wind. I knew you needed your sleep but the fire had died down and I was getting cold. I didn’t want to risk waking you to put more wood on the fire...thank you for warming me up.”

“We better get going. Let me look at those feet of yours first. “

“No need. I took care of them after fixing your leg. Just blisters. The Guard’s boots were too large for me and I should have taken the time to wrap my feet using part of Red’s blanket. I didn’t know how long you would be and I didn’t want you to find me at not ready to go. If I had known Red had planned for us to go on a group swim I would have taken care of them at the tree. I killed her didn’t I, by having her hands tied?”

“No. The BC killed her, or when the world ended as she knew it.” Time to change the subject again I thought. “Sounds like a storm brewing. Best time to travel unseen. How about a hot meal before we leave?” I looked at my watch to check the time. Second hand wasn’t moving. I wound the watch and the second starts moving. I don’t know what time it is but I do know now the river water hadn’t ruined my watch. Have to wait for a sunny day to guess on when it’s noon to reset my watch. My leg wound didn’t look as angry red as it did yesterday. Maria said her feet were better too and she used some of my Neosporin without asking me, “OK?” “No problem” I told her.

Temperature had dropped during the night freezing the ground. Wind was at our backs. We walked in silence, the wind making conversation difficult plus it would carry our voices in the

direction we were headed. In this weather the outhouse behind a burned out farmhouse was a welcomed relief in more than one way. My Long Range Pack had enough food for a week for one. By limiting us to two meals a day we will make it to Maria's subdivision before we run out. We made very good time. It would be dark in another hour, my leg was throbbing a bit and Maria had a slight limp for the last couple of miles. Blanket thrown over a farm fence blocked the wind to allow the alcohol burner to stay lit and heat water for our supper.

Behind us, carrying on the wind we hear dogs howling. Impossible to tell if they were close or far. With man's interference removed, Mother Natural had almost eliminated the wild dog packs from a year ago. Almost. Have some dogs picked up our scent?

Time to start looking for place to spend the night. Off to our left about five hundred feet and slightly behind us looks like a possibility. Large tree had been uprooted recently. Earth filled root system would provide shelter from the wind. Trim the small branches and use them to close in the gaps, we could spend the night under the trunk quite comfortably. We pack up from our meal and continue to head down wind until we find a good place to back our trail by following our steps back to the fence where we had eaten. The fence is what I believe they would call a cattle fence. Wire rectangular squares about six inches in size. Keeping our feet in the squares we "walked" on the fence for a hundred feet before getting off. Then we walked into the wind back to the fallen tree where we would spend the night. If dogs were trailing us hopefully this would throw them off.

We worked in silence. Maria collected bedding to insulate us from the ground while I filled in the gaps on the downward wind side of the roots. Rock paper scissors and I lost; I got the first four hour watch. I sat with my back up against the roots, Maria with her back against my chest and the blanket covering both of us. The 308 on the right leaning against the roots and Maria's 9 mil in my right hand.

"Good night."

"Good night. You better wake me in four hours."

"Yes ma'am." Maria's breathing told me she had fallen to sleep before I had answered.

According to my compass we were on a heading about 25 degrees off course to the subdivision. I had done this on purpose. Two years ago a Marine "ambushed" me. I was making a beeline straight to where I heard there was an active FEMA camp. The Marine had followed me, saw the direction I was heading, walk at night when I had slept to get ahead of me and then waited for me to fall into his ambush. He scared the living daylights out of me popping out like he did. "GET ON YOUR KNEES NOW!" He had barked. "KEEP YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD AND CROSS YOUR ANKLES." Before I knew it he had planted his foot between my feet and place a

knee into my back while grapping my wrist. In a blink he had both my hands tied behind my back. "State your name and purpose Civilian", the Marine ordered.

"Scotch Williams. My wife was killed soon after in the rioting. I'm working my way to Washington D.C. hoping my daughter and son-in-law made in back to the States. I thought the FEMA camp would call or radio or whatever to DC and..."

The Marine had emptied my back pack on the ground in front of me. I didn't think he heard or paid any attention to a word I was saying.

"... help me find my daughter. Or at the very least a safe place to rest up before for I continue to DC."

The Marine had been shaking his head the entire time he was searching my belongings. "Back to the States from where?"

"Germany. Son-in-law is Army ..."

"Army! I'm sorry. They were pulling personnel back for about six months after, before the military command structure collapse. It's possible they made it back. Even though he's Army I hope they made it. Where did you get this backpack?"

"Walmart. After the rioting..."

"Walking around the country side with that bright orange target on your back I'm surprise you're still alive. Well made, but made for mountain climbing, orange to be easily spotted for rescue. You should have found some browns and greens to paint that thing. Shame to have Army and your daughter make it back to the States only to find their stupid dad dead."

I was getting mad. I had survived almost a year. "Now look here..."

"You are in no position to talk dumb Civilian. You're the one trussed up like a chicken. No firearms and you call this a knife?" He was holding up the pocket knife he had taken from my pants pocket. Before I could answer the Marine had unsheathed his knife and had the point press into my neck. I knew he drawn blood because I could feel the warmth running down my neck. "Now this is what I call a knife!"

I decided my silence would be the better part of my valor.

The Marine sheathed his knife. "No spare socks or foot powder. Twice a day change into dry and clean socks. Stay away from the FEMA camp. They are letting people in, taking whatever they have and letting no one leave alive. You got that?"



I nod my head.

“And never take a straight route to your designation. That is how I knew how to get ahead of you. You’re one dumb Civilian aren’t you?”

I nod my head again.

“Good. Glad to see we are coming to an understanding. I’ll just take this stuff to teach you a lesson.” The Marine started backing all of my belongings back into my backpack. “If you don’t become someone’s barbeque and manage to find you son-in-law tell him “OO-RAH” from me. Bye.”

The Marine had walked back in the direction I had come from, out of my light of sight. I waited as long as I could before trying to uncross my ankles. I couldn’t. When did he tie them too? My arms had gone numb, my shoulders had been hurting. How in the Sam Hill am I going to get out of this I wondered? I tried to move my arms to readjust them and get some feeling back, they weren’t tied! The Marine’s knife had been so sharp that I hadn’t felt him cutting the rope. Boy do I feel like a “Dumb Civilian” is the term that popped into my head. I laid on my chest until the feeling came back into my arms. I rolled over and sat up to untie my ankles. Looking back to see if I could spot the Marine, I didn’t but I did see a little orange in a bush. It was my back pack. Laying on top was a pistol, a compass and a small pair of binoculars. I turned away from the FEMA camp. Found some paint like the Marine suggested and painted my back pack. In the basement of an abandoned farm house (if you don’t count the skeletons it was abandoned) I found some books on basic military tactics, survival and eatable plants. Three weeks later I was on a hilltop overlooking the FEMA camp. What I saw confirmed what the Marine had told me.

Wind had died down. Cloud cover was just about gone, moon was shining. Several inches of snow had fallen. Snow will make it easy to see if anything or anyone was following us. It would also make it easy to track us. Just over four hours on watch when I nudge Maria awake. We both got up to stretch before settling back into the same positions. I give Maria her pistol back along with my wristwatch. Wasn’t too long before I was out of it.

“Scotch?”

“Yes?”

“It’s been five hours. Sun has been up for half an hour.” I give Maria a questioning look. “You promised me to wake me in four hours, I didn’t promise you!” She said with a smile.

She’s right...again. “Anything happen last night?”

“Heard those dogs again. Sound close but not too close. Here’s you watch back. I wound it last night and guessed the sun came up at eightish, so that’s the time I set on it. Wasn’t sure if you would want to leave tracks in the snow so I thought I’d let you sleep. Let me check your leg before we eat?”

As we ate the snow starting melting. Checked Maria’s feet blisters and gave her the dry pair of socks to wear. Time to leave; melting snow was dripping into our camp. I did a hundred foot perimeter walk around our camp. No tracks but mine. We adjusted our route closer to the subdivision. After two hours Maria started recognizing the country side. She said another three hours we will be there. Snow was almost all gone so we changed to a direct route. Another hour we stopped to eat.

“Scotch why don’t you have a sidearm?”

“Well I keep on losing them but I’d say the main reason is because of my eyesight. Things up close are a bit blurry. Once I almost killed a friend. He surprised me and since I could not see his face clearly I almost shot him. Fortunately he spoke up quickly and I recognized his voice. Distances are clear for me and I prefer a rifle anyway.”

“So back when you rescued us at IGS and later at the river you couldn’t really see me? I mean without my clothes? Naked?”

“Maria you do have certain very prominent features and I’m not blind.” Maria blushed crimson red and I was thinking my answer shouldn’t have been so truthful.” Time to change the subject again. “Why bring that up now?” Maria blushed again. “I mean about handguns.”

“Don’t move but behind you about fifty feet are four dogs watching us. They seem more cautious then dangerous. But a handgun would be better protection then your rifle right now if they decided to attack. I would like to try something but that would mean you’d have to cover me with my gun just in case. Can you see well enough to tell the difference between a dog and me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Here.” Maria hands me her nine. “One is in the chamber.” Maria talks a step towards the dogs before kneeling on one knee. “Here doggies. Are you hungry?” Maria has some of the mystery meat left over from our meal in her hand. “Come on. It’s alright. Come and get it.” I’ve slowly turned to get a better shot. Four German Shepard dogs, three half grown pups and the mother?

“Come on. I betcha hungry. Come on.” One of the pups starts towards Maria, stops dead in its tracks when nipped at by the mother. My first kill will be the mother, pups should scatter when

their mom is down. The mother takes a step then two with her neck stretched out sniffing. The pups have had enough. They take off running at Maria. The pups aren't growling, just bounding like playful puppies do. The mother has surrendered, she's walking slowly towards Maria with her head down in submission. The dogs are harmless and soon have Maria playing with them. I open our last MREs to get the meat out of them.

"Here pouch" I call as I toss the meat to the dogs.

Two hours later we are concealed watching the subdivision, all six of us. The dogs insisted in coming with us. I was surprised how quiet they were.

"Looks normal." I hand my monocular to Maria. "Look normal to you?"

"Yes. It's safe. See the yellow two story house on the left?" Maria said as she hands back the monocular to me. "Middle second story window. See the flower pot? It is placed there every morning and removed at night. If it isn't there then there is danger. Let me go first. They shoot strangers now on first sight." The pups got up to follow her. Pooch got up to go with her pups, looked at me as to say, "Come?" I shook my head no and she lay back down beside me. Did I ever tell you I kind of like dogs?

Maria worked her way down to the road and stayed out of sight before calling. "Hello! Toby is that you? It's Maria. I've escaped."

I saw the guard jump. Then run out to open the gate to let Maria in, thought about it, then shut the gate and run back to his post. Looks like the guard is on some type of communication device. I see more movement in the subdivision. Five, no six, make that seven armed men are approaching the gate.

"Maria. Is that you?"

"Yes Tobias. It's me. I have a friend with me and four dogs." Maria has told me "Tobias" is code meaning she is acting under her own free will. "OK Tobias for me to step out in the road?"

"Yes. Come slowly and keep your hands where we can see them."

Maria steps out into what was a paved road. "I've got three of the dogs with me Tobias."

I watch from my advantage point with the 308 sights on their Leader. At the first sign of treachery...pooch utters a low growl. I look in the direction pooch is looking. "I see him." I whisper. Someone in full camo and on the opposite side of the road is slowly working into position behind Maria. Another BC had survived and followed us here? I don't see how that's possible. The pups with Maria stop and in unison turn their heads toward the still hidden camo figure. "What's going on Tobias?!" Maria yells.

I put the mono on the camo person. I recognize that face! It's the Marine that "ambushed" me those years back. Pups are crouched ready to attack. Subdivision guards have raised their rifles. Maria is caught in the middle. If something isn't done quickly to defused the situation..."HEY MARINE." I yell. "You just got ambushed by a dumb civilian!"

The Marine is laughing as he slowly stands to reveal himself. The pups look at Maria not sure on what they should do. She bends down and calms them.

"So you haven't been anyone's barbeque yet?" The Marine is scanning with his eyes trying to determine where my voice came from. He settles on a high position a hundred feet to my left. "It's OK Tobias he's and old friend." I call out.

I don't move. Still appears to me a friendly situation but until Maria gives me the word I'm staying put. Maria is talking to "Tobias"? Heads are nodding. Marine is standing behind Maria like he is bored. I've seen that look before; in a flash the Marine can react. Maria turns her back to me to wave. That's the signal for me and pooch to come on in. The Marine has a puzzled look on his face as he looks in the direction Maria had waved. When he looks back in the direction he had thought my voice had come from he found me standing on the roadway no thirty feet away.

"HA! HA! HA! Guess you're no dumb civilian after all!"



One week ago the Residents woke to find the Marine calmly sitting in the middle of their subdivision cooking his breakfast. A quick check of the guards showed none were injured nor had they seen the Marine enter either. The Marine ignored their panic and calmly ate his meal. When he was done he cleaned his kit, tapped his alcohol burner to see if it had cooled before repacking it. Then he slowly stood up, stretched before asking "Who's in charge here?"

Brandon (Tobias) said, "I am".

They worked out a deal. In exchange for some needed military training for the residents the Marine could use their subdivision as a base for his quest. He had heard of a group extorting survivors and he wanted to see if he could confirm and then deal with the situation as need be. He was coming back in from an all-night recon when he heard Maria calling.

We told him about the Black Clads and their former base across the river at the IGS bulk plant. That's when I remember the notebook I had taken. The notebook was still in my vest map

pocket. A little worse for wear but still legible. A map of the different survivor camps the BCs were collecting “protection” supplies from. Their Leaders names, what supplies were taken and when. The Marine’s suggestion that he be authorized to contact the other survivors, arrange for a group meeting with them at the IGS location to iron out a mutual aid agreement and return the stolen goods was approved.

Maria asked if I would stay. Temping. It had taken me almost three years to arrive here from Arizona. Spring was coming and with a little luck another seven or eight months I can be in D.C. The Marine said returning troops would have flown into Reagan or Dulles airports. I need to know what happen to my daughter. The pups decided to stay with Maria, Pooch voted to come with me. I’m rested, the leg has healed and it’s time for me to leave. I’ve traded some 22 rounds for the battery for my night scope like new and still in the original box, USB rechargeable too. I sure took the long way around acquiring the battery didn’t I?

The tearful good byes have been said. It’s time to leave. Pooch and I start walking east into the rising sun.

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## Chapter 2

We really were lucky in West Virginia.

We took the safer routes by going cross country as much as possible, takes longer but we avoid the blockades and ambushes. It was two days ago when we had to cross an Interstate and saw a sign lying in the roadway “Welcome to West Virginia”. The closer we got to Washington D.C. the more destruction there was so I was really surprised when we spied an intact building. When I say the building was intact I’m meaning it still had four walls and a roof. Most of the glass windows were broken and the main door was hanging on one hinge. A Mom & Pop type store beside a single lane gravel road.

Before I found my traveling partner my normal routine would be stay concealed and watch a building several hours before approaching. Being caught unaware by hostiles is not recommended way to extend one’s life span. If a building secured with boarded windows and closed doors then I felt it was safer to assume that the building had an “owner” and I would stay away. If a building was obviously abandoned then salvage rights belonged to the Finder (me). And as the years progress the odds of finding anything worth salvaging was getting slimmer and slimmer. “Pooch go.” I said as I pointed at the store. Pooch disappeared into the

woods only to reappear a few minutes later at the back of the store. I watched as Pooch cautiously circled the store before entering. When I saw Pooch come back and sit in the doorway I knew it was safe. I then did a perimeter search about five hundred feet out for any signs that anyone had been this way recently. Negative.

I don't normally spend a night inside a building. Too easy to be surrounded and trapped. But the last four days with nothing but rain and now a thunderstorm left me soaked. My fever had come back and I really needed a place to dry out and get my strength back. Concrete floor by the windows was wet and the roof had a few leaks but towards the back just outside of the living quarters was a dry, mold and draft free spot. I discreetly rearranged some of shelving to hide the fire from the outside. The smoke went up through the suspended ceiling where the tiles had fallen out. There was plenty of wood furniture and shelving to break up for firewood. Sure beat traipsing around outside looking for dry firewood. Best camping luxury I've had since leaving that subdivision.

The loud thunder and close lighting never caused Pooch to flinch; she appeared to be out cold but I knew she'd instantly alert me to danger. I strung some light rope (military called it Paracord?) for a clothes line. I couldn't figure out what clothes were the dryer, then ones I was wearing or the ones in my backpack. So I hung all of them up to dry. I really need to find a better backpack, mine has seen its better days months ago. Sleeping bag was still in good condition so I was sitting on it in my Birthday suit by the fire as I dried and oiled the 308. Unloaded my last three magazines, used a window curtain to dry the ammo before reloading the mags. It was dark outside. I couldn't tell if it was from the thunderstorm or the end of the day. My wrist watch had stopped so I tapped it a couple of times and the second hand took off. "Hope it's just damp" I thought as I hang it on the cloths line too. I'm too tired to eat, I'm turning in. "Good night Pooch." Pooch turns one ear in my direction as to say, "Good night to you too".

Sleeping bag had kept me warm so I had let the fire die out during the night. Pooch was gone. Backpack and clothing had dried. I repack my pack and got dressed. Storm was over and from the height of the sun I'd guess midmorning. Fever was gone and the stomach started growling. As on cue Pooch brought in a coon. Amazing how Mother Nature recovered without man's inference and after the "We'll just go into the woods to hunt and survive" mentality hordes had died off. I took the coon through the living area, unlocked the still functioning back door and out a ways to butcher it. Wondered if the hide could be made into anything? Too small and I didn't know anything about how to tan the hide anyway. I buried the remains.

Fire restarted to cook the meat. We both ate and what was left I wrapped in a cloth for later. Nothing left in the store or living area we could use. Did notice the living quarter's floor sounded different then the store's concrete store floor so I started looking for...found it! A trap

door with the remains of a rug nailed to it. Lift the door and the edges of the rug folded and then would flop back into position when the door was closed again. Perfect place for a person to hide supplies! Basement had already been picked clean. All that was left was dampness and empty cardboard boxes.

Woods is still wet and will be muddy. Pooch made a motion to stay and leave tomorrow at first light. I seconded and with no votes in opposition, we stayed. Used some of our drinking water to get the hand pump out back primed. Should be safe to drink but I boiled it anyway and filled up the canteens. I had a small bar of soap left so now would be a good time to take a bath. We couldn't decide which one of us smelled the worst so we decided to save the soap. Boots were still damp so I took them off along with the socks to dry more. Laid down on sleeping bag using my pack for a pillow and plan for what I've been avoiding.

The Marine said if my daughter and son-in-law were flown back to the States they would have landed at Reagan or Dulles airports. I don't know where those airports are in relationship with DC. If they did land I don't know how to find that out. I assume DC is worst then the other cities I have detoured around. They could have not survived by staying at the airports or in DC. They would have left. But where to? A military base? If so which one? These are question I didn't want to face when I started this "rescue" trek from Arizona. She's my daughter and I couldn't cope with me not being there for her. Perhaps I should have listened to Maria and stayed with her group?

During these thoughts I had been staring at the ceiling. My eyes focused when I realize I've been staring at a green box. Where I had been staring a ceiling tile was missing and up beyond the darkness I could just make out the end of the box. Looked like the end of a military ammo can! Didn't take me long to stack a makeshift furniture ladder to reach it. Turned out to be two fifty caliber metal ammo cans wired to the roof's rafters. I cut the wire and brought both cans down. Went back up my ladder to have another look, nope just the two cans.

Both cans had some weight to them, definitely something inside of them. Layers of dust on the lids told they hadn't been disturbed for a long time. Pooch came over to sit beside me to give the look, "If any dog biscuits in there I've got first dibs."

"OK Pooch but if there are tickets to Disneyland they are mine."

First can had loaded magazine for AR-15 and M110 rifles. The empty space left in the can was filled with a mixture of 5.56 and 7.62x51 ammo. 7.62 ammo I could use because it basically the same as .308, unfortunately the magazine would not work in my M1A. The magazines and 5.56 ammo I'll use for trade items. It was the contents of the other ammo box that was disappointing. It was filled with silver and gold coins.

The few times I risked trading the prevalent trading items was food, ammo or medicine, in that order. Can't eat silver or gold is my thinking. Pooch was bored, no biscuits, got up for a perimeter look see. I start picking out and stacking the coins, if these were mine five years ago I'm curious how much they would have added to my nest egg. It was when I got to the bottom of the can my eyes lit up when I spied the topographical maps!

Place like truck stops or gas stations that normally had paper road maps were vandalized soon after. Today the only place a map could be found is the rare farm house that was still intact. And many times it was just for that State and brittle with age, last one I found was back in Kansas. Since leaving Kansas I was traveling by lining up with the rising sun to head east. Figured when I hit the Atlantic Ocean I'd have to flip a coin to determine if I go North or South to find DC. Sealed in the ammo can the maps were in a like new condition. West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and WASHINGTON DC!

Reagan National is almost in the center of DC. I doubt if I can get through the city alive. But Dulles is northwest more of a rural area...possible...very possible. I realize I'm smiling from ear to ear. "OK Pooch this is the plan. See we'll take this route. Find Nine and parallel it south to North Fork Catoctin Creek. Jump across here to South Fork Catoctin Creek. Then take this creek towards Kalnasy Pond, follow the west tributary, find a safe place to cross Seven, avoid Westpark Golf Club, follow Tan Branch Creek to the lake. Work our way between Brambleton and the John Moby Highway and ...see right here the high wooded ground? From there we can look down into the airport. We're home free to Dulles Pooch!

I sewed a few of the silver and gold coins into my coat lining, a few more in my backpack and the rest went back into their ammo can. The ammo can I hid back where I had found it. Be dark in a few hours so I washed off and reheated the left over coon with chopped wild onions for supper. Been saving a can of fruit cocktail for a special occasion and the special occasion is now! Split the meat with Pooch and offered her some fruit cocktail . One sniff of disdain told me, "No thank you."

"What do you think?" We had waited until it was dark before exiting from the back. "Good? OK I'm going to be right over there. You watch." I walked away from the store back into the tree line, did a J hook before digging a cat hole. I walked back to the store. Here's the dangerous part. Using the steel ladder bolted to the back wall I climbed up and on the roof. Not a good place to be trapped. Turned on my night scope to do a 360 degree sweep. The "new" battery was working perfectly. A few distance hot spots, small animals, no humans. I climbed back down. "Come on Pooch, bed time."

Two hundred and twenty miles I scaled on the map. We've been walking for five hours, break for one and another five hours before stopping for the day. Twenty to thirty miles a day.



Probably closer to twenty. Ten days the earliest we will be there. I'm coming Nichole I thought as I drifted off the sleep.

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"Bravo one ninner...Bravo one ninner...Alpha Charlie Romeo eight eight... Alpha Charlie Romeo eight eight."

"Bravo one ninner standby for authentication."

"Ten four Alpha Charlie Romeo."

"Bravo one ninner. Whiskey seven. I repeat Whiskey seven."

"Alpha Charlie Romeo. The Cat is Green. The Cat is Green."

"Confirmed Bravo one ninner. Report."

"All is well. I repeat that all is well."

"Copy that Bravo one ninner. Out."

The Lieutenant had been watching over the Sargent's shoulder and now asked. "That's the Colonel's call sign isn't it?"

"Bravo One Nine, Yes ma'am that was the Colonel that called."

"Good. We haven't heard from him in for a while. Good to know he's still with us. Send his recorded call over to be decode, top priority Sargent."

"Yes ma'am." Sargent typed the appropriate command into his console and pressed "Send". Then he wheeled his chair to the Decryption console. Checked the flip chart on the proper decode sequence and applied it to the Colonel's recorded call that he had just sent to this console. "I'll have it for you in five minutes Lieutenant." The Lieutenant returned the Sargent's look with a nod.

It was a coded text message embedded in the Colonel's voice radio transmission. During the Colonel's voice transmission he had pressed a button to embed a pretyped coded text message.

"Here it is Lieutenant."

*“Need last known location of the daughter and son-in-law for a Scotch Williams, Arizona. SIL is Army. Last known post was Germany.”*

Our link to NSA still online Sargent?

“Yes Ma’am”

“High orbit satellite C3 is still operational too. Run the Colonel’s search request and upload the results to C3. The Colonel can download it from there at his convenience.”

“Yes ma’am.”

There were twelve Soldiers assigned along with one civilian maintenance person per weekly shift. They were assigned to a Top Secret communication bunker, a decommissioned nuclear missile silo. Every Monday a “Johnson Global Maintenance” van would enter the compound and back up to an overhead service door. The Driver would get out of the van to open the service door, sometimes he’d back the van into the building and sometimes he wouldn’t. From the back of the van the next shift would exit to ride the elevator down to relieve the on duty crew. Any resupply would be sent down too. Four to six hours later the van would leave. The following Monday only five arrived to relieve the first shift, no van arrived for the third shift or any since. Of the eighteen one by one they abandoned their posts. Either to search for loved ones, family or the confines of being buried five hundred feet under rock was too much for them. For the past four months the command was down to the Lieutenant, the Sargent and the civilian maintenance man Bruce.

The Bunker was designed to provide the needs for a maximum of twenty people for ten years. Primary source of power was a surface solar array “disguise” as a public utility, with tri-powered generators as backups. Some of the solar panels were now damaged and off line but really of no consequence. With only the three of them the Lieutenant had projected supplies would run out in sixty-five years, really not a problem either. Water was unlimited. Bunker was tapped into an underground stream; filtration and purification process was really not needed but was included to satisfy a Senator’s desire to direct the money into her district and indirectly into her pocket. In reality, for the three of them, the bunker’s dehumidifiers provided enough distilled water they really didn’t the stream’s water other than the automated convenience it provided. The Bunker was built during the peak of the political correctness madness, so everything was design as unisex. And everything had backups to the backups which had backups with spare parts. Like the current air scrubber. With only the three of them Bruce had shut all of them down except for one which left seven in reserve. The bunker had surveillance cameras everywhere. From the Security console an Operator could view the entire complex.

They could easily live out their lives down here with all of the comforts of home without any of the disadvantages. Well as far as the Sargent was concerned there was one disadvantage but he took care of that.

The Sargent had caught Bruce multiple times looking “that way” at the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant was a political correct appointee but surprisingly dedicated to her job. She wasn’t really dumb just completely out of her element. Brunette, five foot three and one hundred and twenty-five pounds according to her personal records. Definitely nowhere near being flat chested, but not obscenely endowed either.

The Sargent had noticed what appeared to be a minor inventory discrepancy involving clothing. Every item was RF chipped and the chip was automatically scanned when removed from storage and recorded. Normally Bruce would be sent to confirm...a quick chair roll over the Security console to check the cameras...Bruce was up three levels cleaning what looked like a filter maybe that’s why the bunker has been so warm lately. New clothing storage was one level up so Sargent decided to run up quick do a count himself. Inventory data based should have listed olive green brassieres in almost every conceivable cups and sizes. What the Sargent found on the shelves were only “A” cups. That can’t be right...a complete inventory had been completed the day after lockdown. Why would anyone want to steal bras? Lieutenant going bonkers? Lieutenant was off duty and...in her new quarters. Sargent decided to go up the next two levels to warn Bruce.

Bruce had just finished reassembling an air scrubber when he was startled by the Sargent.

“Sarge! You scared the heebie-jeebies. Don’t think I’ve ever seen you up here before. What’s up?”

“We may have a problem with the Lieutenant. I just came from the clothing stockroom and all the bras are missing except...what?” Bruce had a strange look on his face.

“It’s not the Lieutenant. I took them. Actually I threw them into the trash incinerator” Bruce said while pointing over to the large incinerator. “A whole cow could easily fit into that thing.”

“YOU DID WHAT?”

“It’s boring down here so I have a lot of time to daydream. The Lieutenant is what a C or D cup? Hard to tell with that uniform. And when it was my rotation to do laundry I soaked her good bras in a mild chlorine solution. Overheard her talking to herself wondering why they were falling apart. Guess what size the only replacements were? I was hoping she’d go braless...”

The Sergeant was flabbergasted as he stood there with his jaw hanging.

“...when she didn’t I recalibrated the environmental control sensors, easy to do at this maintenance console... I just change these parameters a little each day and the place warms up a little more. All the readings in the control room look normal too. Notice she’s been leaving the top three buttons on her uniform unbuttoned lately? If you time it right coming down a stairway as she’s coming up...” Bruce lets out a sigh.

The Sergeant continued to stare at Bruce.

“...and you know those flip charts they have everywhere? I found how we could override the camera lockouts so we could see her in the shower too...see at my console here we just go to this menu and this sub menu...”

The Sergeant snapped. With the wrench he discovers by his hand he hit Bruce at the base of his skull. Before Bruce’s body could fall to the concrete floor, Sargent had caught it, ripped off Bruce’s ID card and flipped the body into the incinerator, closed the incinerator door and pressed the “IGNITE” button. The Sargent was wondering if he had actually killed Bruce or just knocked him unconscious. It really doesn’t matter he thought when he heard the “Poof” of the gas jets ignite. The Lieutenant was his and his plans didn’t include sharing! As he left the room he reached over to the console and bumps the temperature up a half degree.



“Sergeant have you seen Bruce lately?”

“No ma’am.”

“I don’t see him on any of the cameras. Page him.”

“Yes ma’am.” Sergeant rolls over to the Com console and carefully selects “Bunker Only”. “All” would blast their existence to any listeners on the surface. “Bruce. Call us at Command. Bruce. Call us at Command.”

When Bruce didn’t respond the Lieutenant looked gravely at the Sergeant. “He might be hurt and unable to respond. The last I saw him was just before I went off duty. He said he was headed up to Environmental for some maintenance. Check the cameras history and see if we can back track him.”

“Ahh ma’am. The cameras archive files have been erased and the backups too.” The Sergeant lied. “Just like someone doesn’t want us to...they missed the door lock history”, pointing with his finger at the computer screen. “That his code. See?”

Lieutenant nods in agreement. "He rode the evaluator all the way to the top and unlocked the main door of the Bunker." She said. "I never thought for an instant he would ever desert us. He or anyone else cannot get in using his ID card, correct?"

"That is correct ma'am."

"Well I guess that's that. I really didn't expect that from Bruce. Kind of ridiculous us dressed in full uniform considering the Colonel was the first outside contact we've had in four months? I don't know about you but it's been getting hotter in here so we can drop the protocol a little around here." The Lieutenant walks over to the Environmental console to bring up the control room's temperature. "Normal. Hmmm can't be right. We'll change the uniform of the day to T-shirts and shorts until we can figure out what's wrong with the cooling units. See any problems with that Sergeant?"

"No ma'am"

"I'm headed to the showers to cool off before I change. I'll be back in an hour to relieve you Sergeant."

"Yes ma'am". An hour is plenty of time to figure out how to erase the video files. After the Sargent had incinerated Bruce, the Sargent had used Bruce's ID to take the elevator up to the main level and then had thrown Bruce's ID outside. That's why the door lock records showed Bruce leaving the Bunker. An hour...plenty of time...and the Sargent's persistent question "pink or brown" would hopefully soon be answered.



"What do I do now?" The Lieutenant wondered as she walked to the Commander's quarters. She wasn't the original Commander just the highest ranking Officer that hadn't left. When it was clear that no relief was coming she had moved into the Commander's quarters...well...after they had cleaned up the mess from the Commander's suicide. She was surprised that the Commander's quarters had surveillance cameras too. From the Commander's console she could mirror every console in the Command Room. She locked the entrance door before turning on the console. Something just wasn't right. Why would Bruce erase the surveillance files and not the door access files too? If he was leaving why would he care? Something just wasn't right. While the console was booting she decided to shower before checking the video logs. Ahhh the cool water felt good.

In college she majored in Psychology and that was why she was assigned to this posting. With a dozen personnel locked in confined quarters for a week her assignment was to observe their

interactions, potential problems and report to the Commander. To conceal her role the duty roster listed her as "Support Staff". She knew that most underestimated her and thought it was her political appointment and figure that got her this far. She used their misunderstanding to her advantage. Raised in an orphanage and a loner during school she had no family, no close friends. Joined the Army to pay of the college debts, she discovered she love the Army and decided to make it a career. She was first repulsed by the offered short cuts to promotion but realized why not? Since she was qualified why go the hard way when the end results would be the same?

She reasoned the primary reason Bruce and the Sargent had stayed at their post was because of her. Surprised that neither one of them hadn't made a pass at her during the long time coop up together. "Did that camera LED just blink?" She asked herself. Bruce was the typical young male seeped in testosterone. Bruce finding a way of watching her undressed would be his style. That's why she had place tape over the cameras' lenses when she had moved into these quarters. But Bruce had left. The Sargent? No that wasn't his style. The Sargent was a "Yes ma'am. No ma'am" strictly professional relationship type. Hate to be on his bad side if he ever snapped. The likely explanation was another solar array went off line which caused a momentary power drop which in turn caused the LED to blink.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around her wet hair as she walked over and sat down in front of the console to enter her password. "Yes the Sargent was correct. All of the archive surveillance files had been erased. Doesn't make sense and I've got to stop talking to myself." If she had known to scroll to the right she would have seen the erasure had happened less than five minutes earlier.

"Hot in here... it's a shame to get dressed but I did inform the Sargent I'd be back in an hour. We've got to maintain some sense of military protocol and there could be others like the Colonel relying on us too. But no more amusement on my part watching the men staring when I'm trying to readjust those too small bras, I'm sure that was Bruce's doing. Let's see how long the Sargent's professionalism lasts when he sees me in this T-shirt braless..."



It was three weeks before we made it to the hilltop above Dulles. A lot more enclaves and crazies to avoid then what I had thought. Several times I thought we were in the clear only to have Pooch stop us with a low growl. We'd take cover until the unknown threat had passed.

Once we saw three women in their thirties, well I'd guess thirties. Guessing ages is getting harder and harder for me as time passes. Most people are leaner today than normal and not as

clean either. Normal? I mean what was normal four years ago. The three women had five children with them, the oldest about ten? We could see the children's ribs. All of them including the adults looked like they could use a good meal. We have extra food and I should warn them about how it's not safe traveling on the roads like they are. As I shifted my weight to stand Pooch growled so I froze. Moving my eyes only I scanned on both sides of the road and then front and back, nothing. "Pooch you're losing it" I thought. Pooch must have read my thought because she responded with another low growl. There is absolutely nothing out there...movement...in front of the women on the opposite of the road from us. An ambush and the women are walking right into it! I count at least five could be Slavers or worse! Just within my comfortable range with the 308. Their first move towards the women... the 308 sights are lined up on the one I have the clearest shot at...just a little more...I slowly start to squeeze the trigger...they let the women pass them...I understand now! The women and children are being used as bait. Willing or unwilling I don't know. Any unnecessary rifle shots will bring all the Loonies out of the woodwork, I can't risk that. We wait until after dark to retreat. After that encounter we travel by night only and hide during the day. The new battery for the night scope really comes in real handy for the night time travel.

When the sun started to rise to the north east of our hilltop I was ready with the Monocular in hand. When there was enough daylight for me to see down into the airport my heart sank. The runways and ramps were almost empty. If there had been a mass exodus from the overseas bases wouldn't every available spot have a plane parked on it? Even if they had the fuel to make multiple trips wouldn't the military had left their planes here on the last trip back? And wouldn't the Military stay and secure the airport...I don't see anyone down there...I look at Pooch with tears streaming down my face. "She's gone. Nichole is gone..."

I knew the odds were slim; I just didn't want to admit I had lost my daughter too. Now that reality was staring me at through the Monocular it was impossible to deny the truth any longer. Perhaps Reagan airport? No I'm lying to myself again. Mark has her safe someone in Germany is my last hope. Where do I go from here I thought as Pooch licked the tears on my cheeks.



The Colonel had finally lost his pursuers. They had been following him for a good week. The Pursuers must still have functional radio communications to enable them to set up that neat ambush! The Colonel had almost walked into it. Two of the Pursers will not be trying that again. Unfortunately the Colonel's satellite phone was destroyed during the exchange. It was vital that he retrieve a replacement. Looking over his maps the closest resupply cache was at a

small maintenance building. He had been working his way in that direction to resupply anyway and was relieved a replacement satellite phone should be there too.

Cut the fence or walk in through the open gate a half mile away? Cutting the fence would leave a telltale sign that someone had been there. Go through the gate was a half mile walk in the open in both directions. Cut the fence was the Colonel's choice. The windowless storage shed he was after was set off into a corner of the property not too far from the fence. Shed's security was provided by secrecy. Just after four AM he cut the fence and entered the unlocked shed. Once inside the Colonel locked the door. Metal shelves lined the walls, filled with useless junk. As the Colonel recalled always the north wall, fourth shelving unit from the left, fourth shelf from the top and remove the two bolts. Looks can be deceiving; bolts looked they had been rusted on forever but easily removed by hand. When the shelves were unbolted the Colonel pulled the shelving unit out towards him. Behind the shelves was a narrow stair case leading down. At the bottom of the stairway was a secured steel door. Pressure switch at the bottom of the stairs caused the shelves to roll back in to place. Once the shelves were back in place the Colonel was greeted by a ceiling light coming on and a computer generated voice, "You have thirty seconds to confirm retina scan, voice identification and finger print...30...29...28..." When the Colonel was briefed about these procedures he had asked, "What happens pass the thirty seconds?" His Briefers just smiled and moved on to the next topic. Simultaneously the Colonel held his left eye in front of the viewer while placing his fourth finger of his left hand on the fingerprint reader and recited, Colonel Dan E Sanders 414383741." The door clicked. "...12...11...10...9" The Colonel pushed the door open and the computer voice count down stopped.

The cache was designed for a "Stop and go" resupply of military Officers on special assignments. Small weapons, ammunition, first aid, food, water, communication equipment, clothes (military and civilian) anything and everything that a field operative could need. Power source for the building wasn't revealed during the briefing, just all the power needed for a very long time they were told. No shower or cot but an electric incinerating toilet in the corner with real toilet paper. Colonel topped of his ammo, MREs, found the satellite phone he needed and place it in a charger along with a spare battery. He had figured a half hour to enter the cache, retrieve what he needed, report to his Superiors and exit the building. That would get him out of the building an hour before daylight.

Colonel turned on the computer terminal and logged in. He was almost a full week past his scheduled check in. The environmentally control cache was nice compared to the heat and humidity outside.

"C3 0001 One new message."



“His Commanding Officer chewing him out for reporting tardy” thought the Colonel. He was wrong.

*“Nichole A. Mahaffa. Maiden name Williams. Married to Army Pilot Mark S. Mahaffa. Last confirmed location, USAG Schweinfurt, Germany. Both subjects resided on base. Military resources did not permit evacuation to Stateside. Satellite imagery shows base destroyed. Presumed both subjects are KIA.”*

Wasn't the news he was hoping for. Colonel type his reported and then pressed send. Time to get reacquaint with that toilet paper, it sure will be a pleasure.

“beep. Message not sent. Designation unreachable”

“What? Did I forget to press send and it timed out? Copy the original, select designation and there. Now back to trying the toilet paper...”

“beep. Message not sent. Designation unreachable”

Primary satellite must be down. Colonel selected “M”ain Menu and then “D”iagnostics.

“Antenna within operational parameters. Transmitter operational. No signal received. Would you want to select an alternated designation? “A”ll designations or “L”ist designations.”

The message header indicated the message the Colonel had received was from C3 so the Colonel selected “L” scrolled down to select C3. Retyped his report and pressed “S”end.

“Encryption in progress.....encryption will be completed in five minutes”

Real toilet paper. Amazing how the little things in life can lift ones spirits...

“beep. Message not sent. Designation unreachable”

“What the...” It took too long for to try every listed destination and run diagnostics on every one of them. All designations were unreachable, that meant nonoperational. It was now daylight outside. No way it would be safe to leave in broad daylight, he'll just spend the day here while mulling over his options and if he had anyone left to report to...was his assignment now moot?



“Well Pooch. When we're done eating we'll head out. It will be good and dark soon. About five days till a full moon? Overcast tonight, that's good. Pooch if Maria was here I'd have you

go with her while I checked out Reagan. “ Pooch lays her head on my leg so I would scratch behind her ears. “You’re the only one I have left.” My cheeks are getting damp again.

The small solar cell I carry has top of the battery’s charge. Reconnected the battery to the night scope and make a three sixty sweep. Hmm. Five hot spots in a semi-circle just outside the airport’s chain link fence by that little building. Another two behind the five. Looks to me as an ambush but for who or what? “Pooch. Let’s crawl in a little closer for a look see.”

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During the day’s wait the Colonel tried all of the communication relays again with no luck. It’s obvious that his Superiors no longer have the ability to communicate. His mission is over. He reloaded his backpack for his new self-appointed mission. Opened the steel door and made sure it locked behind him. As he started up the stairs the overhead shelf slid noiselessly open and the stairway light went off. The Colonel pushed the shelving unit back closed and retighten the two bolts that locked it in place. Then he cracked the entrance door to confirm it was night. Watches these days weren’t the most reliable...yep it’s dark. Colonel sprinted over to where he had cut the fence, pushed his backpack through before going through himself. In the building he had found the wire he would need to stitch the wire link fence back together. He heard a “Crack” just before he felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder. The Colonel dropped behind his back as he tried to draw his pistol with his left hand.

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“Well that settles that Pooch. The Seven ambushing the One and taking the first shot too. That makes the Seven the Bad Guys in my book.” The Two behind the Five I had figured as the Leaders. My first two shots dropped them. The remaining Five hadn’t figured out where my shots had come from until I had dropped two more of them. It was obvious they didn’t have night scopes by the way they fired randomly at the hilltop where I had spent the day. I wasn’t there. After another of my shots the remaining two took off running in opposite directions. Four shots later and their bodies were lying cooling like their comrades. We waited I’d guess and hour before we crawled to our right so we had a clear view of the One they had ambushed.

The Ambushed body was still giving off heat so he or she was still alive but I didn’t see any movement. Good way for me to get shot is to walk up to say, “Hi”. “Well Pooch,” I whispered “What do we do now?” Pooch looked at me then stood up and quietly walked towards the Ambushed One and then gave me a happy yap.

“Is that you, you dumb civilian?”

“Yea...thought I left you far behind me Marine? You want to chit chat here in the dark until the Loonies arrive or get out of here?”

“Get out of here...but I’ll need some help getting up...”

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We didn’t get as far from the airport as I would have preferred. The Marine had lost a lot of blood. Back entrance hole with a front exit hole too. He pulled some QuickStop from his pack, told me how to use it to stop the bleeding before I applied the pressure bandages. He was able to stand and I helped him get his pack on, he insisted in not leaving it behind. Tough Marine! We slowly made about five miles out and into the suburbs before the Marine collapsed.

“Pooch. Find.” I said as I pointed at the houses ahead of us. Pooch took off. I took my night scope and turned it on to sweep the houses. No heat from the chimneys, no other obvious signs of anyone. I watched Pooch circle the closest house then stand there looking at me to say, “This one good.” I waved Pooch to come back, “Stay. Watch the Marine.” Pooch lay down across the Marine’s legs. I took both of our packs to the house Pooch approved. Forced a window and laid our packs inside before crawling in. Walked through the house to the attached garage. Garage had two cars still parked inside. Unlocked the back door and waved at Pooch. Pooch came running and went inside to watch our packs. The Marine was half conscious and did what he could to help me get him inside the house.

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“How long have I been out?”

“Eight days by my count.” I replied. “Found some Penicillin in your pack. If it wasn’t for that I figure you’d be talking to your Maker. Noticed the expiration date on the Penicillin was still good. You mind if I ask you where you found it.”

“You stitched me up?”

“Yea. I waited until your insides were healing well. Didn’t want to trap the infection and pus inside you. Just finished, maybe that’s what woke you up? Hungry? I got some fresh Beef cubes from a ten year old MRE that I can make a broth that will kill you if it doesn’t cure you!”

“I’m starved. You fix it and I’ll eat it.”

“Deal.” Using a bottle of “Heet” I had found out in house’s garage I filled my alcohol stove. Lit it and added the pot of water. Once the water started boiled I dropped in the beef. “Well the package says its beef and it even sort of looks like beef too if you squint your eyes. I noticed you didn’t answer my question about the Penicillin. Was that intentionally?”

“Yes. My name is Colonel Justin Sanders of the United States Marine Corps. Yes you heard right Colonel Sanders and no I don’t fry chicken but I do make a mean roasted rat if you are interested in trying.”

“The rat I might have to try some day but not today. Do I call you Colonel, Marine or what?”

“Call me Justin. Before you saved me from that ambush I lost all contact with my Superiors. I don’t think the military exists any longer, at least at a National level. I have or had access to some supplies, that’s where I got the Penicillin. I was planning on heading back to that subdivision where I met you, Maria and that dog of yours.”

“Can Pooch go with you? I want to checkout Reagan International before I leave DC.”

“That’s suicide. You know if you gnaw on those beef cubes long enough you can almost swallow them too.”

“I’ve got to know. My Daughter and son-in-law may be there. That’s why I was a Dulles when you got yourself shot.”

“Is your Daughter’s name Nichole and your Son-in-law’s Mark and he was posted at Schweinfurt, Germany?”

“YES! How did you...”

“For a dumb civilian I rather took a liking to you. So I managed to request their location and surprisingly received a reply before my communications failed. They were safely evacuated from Germany to New Zealand. On way back to Maria’s subdivision I was hoping I’d run across you again to tell you the good news.”

“They are alive...you’re not lying to me are you? To keep me from going to Reagan”

“I swear on a stack of Bibles and on my Mother’s grave so help me God that you no longer need to worry about your Daughter’s and Son-in-law’s wellbeing.”



When Justin could travel we headed southwest to avoid the coming winter's snow. Hindsight perhaps we should have headed more south once we were around D.C. because an early snow trapped us in the Appalachians for the winter. On the other hand it would also give Justin more time to heal, he's been pushing himself too hard I'm afraid.

Hunter's cabin? Chinking between the logs was still pretty good, a few open spaces we fixed with a mixture of moss mixed in with mud. Took most of our water to get the "kitchen" hand pump primed. Justin pumped until the water ran clear, said it was good therapy for his shoulder. Water went down the sink drain and out to? With the snow cover we couldn't didn't find a cistern, perhaps it drains into a ditch somewhere? As a bonus the outhouse was functional too. Cabin's Owner had left a wood pile, it wouldn't last us through the entire winter so we decided to save it for cooking and for when it got really cold. Cabin was small so it didn't take us long looking for any hiding places with supplies. There wasn't any. Snow cover made it easy to see if anyone else was in the area but also made it impossible to conceal our presence too. We alternated checking the snares. Homemade checkers help pass the time. Then our competition on who could carve the best looking Chess pieces, I did the black and Justin the white. Pooch acted as the Judge. The food supplies we had carried in were gone, snares weren't providing enough. We were at the point of risking walking out on our homemade snowshoes when Pooch brought back a fawn. If there are fawns then spring must be close. The following week enough snow melted that we could head out.

Once we made it out of the Appalachians we made real good time. I remembered back when I travel by myself and how little distance I could cover. Providing security, gathering food, trying to sleep was really hard when I was alone. When Pooch came it made life a whole lot easier and now with Justin joining us ...we made it back to Maria's subdivision in record time.

Justin's prior meetings with the area's Leaders had really paid off. When we returned instead of several small enclaves trying to survive and defend themselves we found a vibrated growing community called "New Hope". Another surprise is when Maria introduced me to her seven month old son Aaron Scotch Williams!

"But we never...I'm old enough to be your father maybe even grandfather...!"

"Hush Scotch...I know...something I never told you. The ones you called the Black Clads? I fought and scratched back as hard as I could but...but...but...isn't Aaron the cutest little boy you ever saw? So I named him after the one who was responsible for him...his safety I mean, bring us back here safely. Scotch there is someone else I want you to meet. She's like a mother to me helped with Aaron's birth and showing me how to take care of him...Mia! Mia can you come here? This is Scotch the man I told you about."

Justin became New Hope's head of security. Once in a while he'd say he would be going out by himself to do a little recon and return with the amazing finds, MREs, medicine, radios, weapons and ammo. Just lucky finds he would say. I believe there was more than what he was telling and I now wish I could have seen inside of that storage shed at Dulles airport.

I became New Hope's Jack of all Trades and Master of none. We got a prototype water powered generator working with enough reliable power for the Communities Short Wave radio. Working on a larger model and I wouldn't be surprised if Justin "happens" to find the key components we will need. Mia and I were married that fall. Sometimes Mia would catch me looking towards where I thought New Zealand would be, "She's alright Honey. Your Nichole is all right."

Pooch has been busy too. She's got four pups to raise. Dogs have become valuable part of New Hope's security and if her pups are half as smart as their mother, worth their weight in trade.

"Scotch. Know anything about antennas?" Bryan our main radioman.

"Enough to know the higher the better. I think I've got an ARRL book they found in that Library. Important?"

"Well I'm not sure. I had a contact on twenty meters. They keep fading in and out. Here read this. I wrote down what I could make out. Doesn't make sense to me."

*"? Nickle will ? bra ? help? ? ? ad ? I have lost contact. "*

"Doesn't make sense to me either. There's that cell tower an hour south of us. Perfect for your Yagi but the Committee said it was too far away to provide protection. I'll see if I can't get a taller pole for now. Be awhile. My "To Do" list has a few higher priority items on it."

"That's OK Scotch. I know you bruised some feelings prioritizing power for me. It's just the first transmission I've heard in English and I'm curious otherwise I wouldn't have bothered you.

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USAG Schweinfurt Germany

"Honey wake up. The General is leaving and so are we!"

"I thought you had orders to stay" Mark's half-awake wife Nichole mumbled.

"I did...I mean I do. But the General claims he has been ordered back to Washington but a friend in communications said no such order came down. Once word gets out that the General is bugging out it's going to be nothing but chaos. We need to get while the getting is good! Coffee is on and we need to be on the flight line in one hour."

"We?"

"Yes you're going as one of my Gunners, Alec's wife will be the other Gunner. Here's your coffee. Put these flight coveralls on while I explain."

"I've got to pee first" Nichole said as she gratefully took the coffee and headed to the bathroom with Mark following.

"I and three other UH-60As are to escort the General's plane to Rhien-Main. He has a KC-130J outfitted with an internal tanks waiting for him there. From Rhien-Main the 130J is flying to Moron Air Base in Spain to top off its tanks before the cross Atlantic trip to DC. Chief of Staff told me to pick the other three crews...all are our like-minded friends. At Rhein-Main were boarding the 130J instead of the General..."

"There I feel better. So we're flying back to the States? Do we have time for me to get rid of the morning breath?"

"No to both questions. Get the flight suit on and I'll explain the rest when we are in the air."

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"Preflight is completed Mark"

"OK Alec. Have any problems getting here?"

"Nope. One Guard questioned the wife's appearance. Guard waved her though when I mentioned how the General would be EXTREMELY disappointed to miss his departure time. You know we'll get court-martialed for this, right?"

"I don't think there will be anyone left that will care."

"The other Pilots know the plan?"

"Not the details. I had just enough time to get them to the flight line and give them the alternate frequency code. Looks like the General and his Staff is boarding so let's spin her up."

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“This is Flight Leader. All Pilots switch to the alternate frequency and insure your crews are intercommed in...we will flank the 130J when we land at Rhein-Main. All personnel will remain boarded in their aircraft. Frank will convince the General and Staff that they would be more comfortable and safer waiting in the terminal until the 130J’s preflight is completed. When the General is out of site of the flight line all Blackhawk crews will abandon their craft and board the 130J. Frank will fail to notify the General and take off for Moron Air Base. Any questions?”

“Yah. What happens when the General realizes were leaving without him? All he has to do is radio Moron and we’re dead.”

“That you Tyler?”

“Yep”

“Good point. One of Frank’s flight crew will serve the General and his cohort’s drugged drinks just before we land. Before the 130J takes off they will be sleeping in the Terminal and shouldn’t wake up until we’re half way across the Atlantic. If anything goes wrong at Rhein-Main or Moron at least we’re a little closer to home and will have more options available to us.”

“Crew of the 130J on our side?”

“Yes they are. Piece of cake here on out! “

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“Mark? Can you come on up to the flight deck?” Mack was the Pilot for the 130J and called Mark though the plane’s intercom system. Moron was a half hour behind them. The spur of the moment pieced together escape plan had been going too well that Mark had been waiting for the other foot to come down.

Mark looked at Nichole and shrugged. “On my way”

“Mark we have two problems.

One. This aircraft has a range of just under 3,000 miles. With the internal tank we can stretch that to 4,000 miles. And the slight tail wind is helping.



Two. Sam's been monitoring the frequencies. Sounds like we waited a half day too long. East coast is in shambles. Texas is one of the remaining free states so Sam managed to contact their State Air National Guard. They have orders to shoot down any and all craft.

"Then what is left?"

"Macapa, Brazil. Their airport is just within our range and the runway is long enough for us to land. Not long enough for us to take off if we could manage to get refueled."

"Looks like we're going to have a long hike. "

"That's better than a long swim across the Atlantic! I'll tell the rest."



"Anything?"

"No nothing."

"Are you sure it's working?"

"Yes I'm sure. I heard someone trying to reply."

"And when we point the antenna towards Europe?"

"Nothing. Whole continent appears to be dead. Good we left when we did."

"Try one more time Honey?"

"OK. This Nichole Williams in Brazil. Want help trying to reach a Scotch Williams in Tombstone Arizona. He is my Dad. I have lost contact with him...repeating... This Nichole Williams in Brazil... "

**The End**