

The Earth gets A Sunburn

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Chapter 1

I woke with a start. I could smell smoke and someone in the hallway was yelling waking everyone up in the motel. I leaped off the bed and got dressed as fast as I could. I tried the light but the power had apparently already gone out from the fire because the light would not work so I used my little flashlight. Once dressed I grabbed my open suitcase and sensing that I still had time I went into the bathroom and grabbed my toiletries bag and added that to the suitcase before closing it and headed for the door. On the way, I grabbed my jacket and was then making my way down the dark hallway.

Only then did I realize that the emergency lights were not on in the hallway so there was no light at all. I was on the first floor and remembered the way out so keeping low where the air was better I made my way to the closest exit door.

Outside there was light but it was a strange light indeed. There were no street lights or any man-made lights of any kind. There were fires burning all around in every direction that provided a small amount of light. But the sky is what everyone outside was looking at, not the fires.

The sky was full of undulating lights in mostly green streaks with red and blue in some areas of the sky. It was quite bright even with all the smoke in the air. I was still half asleep from being woke up in the middle of the night so it took me a couple of minutes of staring at those lights in the sky to realize what it meant.

I think it meant that the population of the United States was about to drop from well over three hundred

million people to just a fraction of that number. And a very small fraction at that.

Because I realized those strange lights in the sky were the Northern Lights or more accurately called the Aurora Borealis. I had seen them many times growing up in North Dakota but tonight I was in southern Colorado where these lights were seldom if ever seen. Unless the Earth just experienced a major magnetic storm caused by a very strong Coronal Mass Ejection from the Sun that made a direct hit on our planet that is.

I looked away from the sky and instead looked around me. The Inn where I was staying here in Pueblo, Colorado was now fully engulfed in fire. The motel next door was also completely on fire. Looking in the distance towards the main city I could just see lights from even more fires.

I was in the open parking lot of the Inn and I walked over to my pickup pulling my wheeled suitcase behind me. I had my keys and I hit the unlock button on the remote. I saw no response from my truck so I unlocked the door using the key. When I opened the door I could smell the sickening smell of burnt plastic inside the truck. Fearing what would happen I put the key in the ignition and tried to start the truck. As I now expected nothing happened. I had already noticed that the interior lights had not come on when I opened the door. The truck was dead.

I then looked out to the nearby interstate highway and saw nothing. No car headlights and no taillights. No moving vehicles of any kind. I could just barely make out several stopped vehicles on the big highway using the light from the spectacular Northern Lights display that covered the whole sky.

I had my cell phone in my pocket and I brought it out. When I touched the screen it lit up but showed that it had no signal. The phone itself did seem to work but obviously, the cell towers did not. This made sense. The

tiny bit of wiring inside the cell phone did not suffer any damage from what must have been a massive CME strike.

But the long wires of the electric grid soaked up the enormous power that came through the Earth's damaged magnetic field and overloaded everything connected. This is what started every building on fire. All the wiring got very hot, hot enough to start the fires. The wiring in my truck also was long enough to collect some of the sun's power and apparently it was enough to burn the wiring in the pickup rendering it useless. Totally useless just like all those stopped vehicles I could see sitting still on the interstate highway in front of me.

I took a minute to try and think of the consequences of this obviously massive CME strike. If the released power was enough to burn the wiring in every building starting all those buildings on fire it would mean many houses would also burn down so those people would have no place to live. Every warehouse would likely burn which would mean that manufactured products and all food products would burn up that were stored in those warehouses. So the food and other supplies stored in homes, in warehouses, and in retail stores would now be burning up and those supplies would be gone by morning.

There would be no electric power anywhere to run water pumps so no one would have drinking water. All the countless bottles of water that people bought and drank every day would now be all burned up in houses, stores, and warehouses. No drinking water for anyone. Add to that fact that all the food in houses and warehouses would have also likely burned up and it would mean no food for anyone.

Likely even those off-grid homes would have enough wiring to make them burn down and if not the solar panels, charge controllers, and inverters would very likely be fried and worthless. Looks like we will be turning back the clock to live in the eighteen hundreds or even earlier for

everyone. In the eighteen hundreds, there were steam trains, steamships, and wagon trains to move food and other goods along with people from place to place but we would not have that now.

Almost everyone that lived through tonight's fires would soon die of thirst and starvation. Many would die from the violence that would grow exponentially starting very shortly when people figured out that there was no way to call the police and no way for the police to drive anywhere with no vehicles running. The Sun had just ended the rule-of-law in every area of the planet that was affected by this solar phenomenon.

I looked at the self-winding watch on my wrist and saw that it was four twenty in the morning. In another hour or so it would start getting light. Even with my light jacket on it was a little cool standing outside. Early morning was usually the coldest part of every day. I got inside pickup and closed the door after putting my suitcase in the back seat. It would be slightly warmer inside than standing outside where there was a very light wind.

I had some thinking to do while I waited for the sun to rise for the day. I was many miles from my home. I was coming home after visiting my sister and her husband who lived in Ohio. I was still five or six hundred miles from my home in the White Mountains of Arizona. It would be a long walk if I decided to go home.

Like every house, my house was very likely now on fire and would be mostly totally burnt to the ground before the day even started. So what was there to go home to anyway? I did have two sheds and a free-standing garage. It is slightly possible the all-metal garage might not have burned down even though it was wired inside. The two sheds were mostly not wired and those should for sure be still intact unless a grass fire was started and burned down all my buildings.

One of the sheds was just for storage and was not electrified at all but the other shed I had been slowly in the process of changing into a tiny house to use as a guest house for any visitors I might get (like my sister and her husband). I had run electric but only to one outlet inside so far so it might be still standing and be livable inside. The only wiring was about a foot or eighteen inches of wiring from the floor to that one outlet. Hopefully not enough to start a fire.

I had nowhere else to go so I think I will head towards home and if something looks better along the way then I can always end my journey early. I live alone as a bachelor so no one is waiting for me at home anyway.

Okay if I am going to try and make it the many hundreds of miles home then how will I accomplish that feat with no vehicles running anymore? Well, I don't know if all vehicles are not running. Very old vehicles might or might not run along with small vehicles like old motorcycles or even mini bikes which have very little wiring. Obviously, I can walk and at, say, twenty miles per day I could, in theory, be home in about a month of steady walking. Unfortunately the land between where I am now and my home is pretty much all very dry and desolate. The desolate part might be in my favor but the dry part would be bad.

This will require careful planning if I expect to make it there. Or even just stay alive anywhere.

Chapter 2

I have a small get-home bag that is always in my truck and I have my suitcase full of mostly clothes. I do have comfortable hiking shoes on my feet. My suitcase is one with two little wheels that I could easily pull behind me until those two tiny wheels fall off. I figure those wheels will last one or two days of steady walking. Maybe in that time period I can find something better.

I have two guns with me and neither would be my first choices for the trek ahead of me. I have a twenty-two rifle that is a take-down model that makes it very compact when broken down. It is a gun that I bought slightly used just to always carry in the pickup. I also have a full bulk pack of about five hundred rounds of ammunition for the rifle.

I also have a carry pistol. It had been my father's and I sometimes carry it just for nostalgia's sake though it does function fine and is fairly accurate. It is an old model nineteen oh eight Colt pistol in three eighty caliber. I think I have a box of ammunition in the truck console to fit the gun. The box might not be full. I do have an old shoulder holster with for the pistol. So while I am armed neither of the guns are particularly well suited for the task ahead of me.

I have a few mixed supplies in my get-home bag with the only real valuable item being a small water filter to purify water for drinking. That one item will likely be a true lifesaver in this situation. I also have maybe three or four full bottles water with in the truck. The get-home bag is only a fanny pack.

The date is August eighteenth I think. Still summer but very close to fall. With more thinking, I have decided to

just start walking south on the interstate highway. In the console I take out the flashlight that I always keep there. I check and it still works fine so I look through the console for any other items I might want to take with me. Then I do the same with the glove compartment.

I then check under the seats and search through the back seat area. I have gathered many odds and ends that I will take with me and I put them either in the get-home bag or the suitcase. Then I exit the pickup cab, walk around to the back and open the tailgate so I can access the hidden trunk in my Honda pickup.

There is a rather comprehensive toolbox and mixed other supplies in the trunk. I sort through and decide I can only take a few of the many items that might all come in handy. I have very little space available to take things and I really need to keep the weight to a minimum. By the time I am done sorting and have everything I want packed and ready the sun is almost up. Seeing no need to lock the truck or to even take the keys, I toss the keys on the floorboards and walk away to likely never see my truck again.

I have jammed the disassembled twenty-two rifle into my suitcase and I have the fanny pack and the shoulder holster on with the loaded pistol in place. I am wearing my light jacket but I know that won't last long as the day starts to heat up as I continue walking.

It is only a matter of several minutes before I get up on the interstate highway and start my mostly southern trek. There are a somewhat surprising number of people on the highway among all the stalled vehicles. Some try to ask me questions as I walk past them but I just shake my head and keep walking. I see no reason to waste my time talking to anyone. After about two miles I take off my jacket and using the sleeves I tie it to the handles of my very now very full suitcase.

At a little over three miles and away from any close people I stop and drink a half bottle of water. I do not want anyone to know I have water because I sure don't have any to share. I pass countless cars and trucks on this major highway. Surprisingly many people are just standing around their stalled vehicles. I'm not sure what exactly they are waiting for but I don't bother to ask them. I want no interaction with anyone. If they are waiting for help, they are in for a sad surprise. There will be no help for anyone anymore.

I have been keeping an eye and an ear out for any aircraft but as I expected there have been none so far. Also, I have not seen a single moving vehicle of any kind. Almost every kind of vehicle has a substantial wiring harness and once those wires get burnt that vehicle is going nowhere. Even motorcycles have some wiring and I have seen several newer big bikes stalled in just the short distance I have traveled so far today.

It doesn't matter if the vehicle is a twenty eighteen model or a nineteen sixty model, they all have plenty of wiring to burn up and then they are dead. Though granted the newer vehicles have much more wiring than the old ones.

This is wide open country and you can often see for many miles in every direction. Now that I am farther from the large town I started from there are fewer stalled vehicles on the road and fewer people on the highway. When I see a semi-truck in the southbound lane I am walking in that is mostly all by itself I stop when I approach the tractor cab.

I climb up and knock on the truck's door. Getting no response I knock much harder. When I still get no response I walk back to the back of the trailer. The back trailer door is latched but not even locked. I open it up to see what's inside. The trailer is mostly empty but not quite and it has what hoped for inside. Leaving my suitcase on

the ground I climb inside and detach the two-wheeled cart that is held to one wall by two bungee straps and pushing it to the back I lower it to the ground.

I use the two rubber bungee straps to attach both my suitcase and my small pack to the cart. I close the trailer door and continue on my way now pulling the cart behind me. The cart is much heavier duty than I need but it will last all the way to my house and can carry more stuff if I find things I can use along the way.

Around noon I stop for a short rest and have my lunch. I have a granola bar from my pack and drink more water. At this point, there are hardly any people on the highway anymore. Their few vehicles are here but the people have walked away. I have seen several places near the highway that have burned homes. Sometimes some other buildings are still standing and sometimes there are just smoking piles of rubble. Most of the places are still smoking with a few still showing open flames.

With no people in sight, I start stopping at each stalled vehicle to search it for any supplies. One of the few tools that I have brought with is a pry bar and I use that on every car trunk to open them. The third trunk yielded a new case of water bottles. Temporarily I put the case of bottles under my suitcase on the cart. Inside a couple of the cars I have found some snack food. So far a partially melted candy bar which I promptly ate, a small bag of chips that is now empty, and a package of jerky that might end up being my supper.

In the trunk of one car, I found a clean looking blanket that I took with me. In a pickup I found a small well-used tarp that is now wrapped around the case full of water bottles to hide them if I run into any more people. I still have none to share.

It is slow searching the vehicles but I take something that I find valuable from just about every one of them so far. It might be just a cigarette lighter that I find in the glove

compartment or a pair of gloves that fit me but I do usually find something. I am now walking past a sign that says Colorado City exit two miles. It is getting late and I decide not to try and walk past that city today.

I have found a few more things to eat during my searching and I sit on top of a car to look around while I eat a candy bar and then some jerky which I wash down with a bottle of sports drink.

From my little higher vantage point I can see ahead quite a ways. I see no people though there is the possibility that some could be inside one of the many vehicles ahead of me.

As the sun sets I just recline the seat in the closest car and it will be my bed for the night.

Chapter 3

I have more snack food for breakfast washed it down with plain water and then hit the pavement again for another day of walking. Near this town that I am approaching, I quit doing any searching of vehicles just so I get past the town faster. The highway completely bypasses the town but I'm sure there are plenty of people around here that I don't want to meet.

About two hours later with the town safely behind me, I resume occasional vehicle searches. In the trunk of one car I find a much larger wheeled suitcase and switch it out for mine. It still fits well on the heavy-duty cart and now I have much more room for additional items. When I come to another semi I open the trailer and discover it is a grocery hauler. The trailer is maybe a third full and I work through the load taking items that can be eaten with no cooking required. I try to steer clear of any snack type food and stick with regular wholesome foods. I take as much as I can haul and only leave after I have also eaten as much as I can hold. With a full belly and full cart I move on down the highway. Near the bottom of the cart is now a cardboard box full of real food items.

Now I only look in vehicle windows as I walk by just in case I see something I might need but otherwise, I do no searching. I have a full load anyway and will try to make more miles today. Around noon I pass another town but again the interstate highway completely bypasses it. As I walk past I can see what must have been a residential area but now it is just a burned area with almost nothing standing other than an occasional chimney.

As soon as I pass the town the area is again flat, desolate, vacant, and boring. But I have a mission and I just keep walking. Luckily I am only thirty-two and though

all my work is done online from my home I have always spent time every day on exercise which is paying off now with many miles already done on my trek home.

Though this is a very desolate area where very few people live the highway is a major north-south route and does carry a fair amount of traffic. Almost all of the traffic is through traffic that is traveling through this area to other states. Mostly vacationers and trucking use this highway. I have passed a couple of RV's today but I have not stopped at any. One I walked past I think was occupied because I was sure I heard movement inside but that just made me walk a little faster to get past.

I'm not sure where all the people from all these vehicles have gone. Into the closest towns, I would guess for almost all of them with some maybe checking some of the still-standing buildings that can occasionally be seen on one side of the highway or the other.

I walked until close to sunset today and well over twenty miles even with pulling my cart. When I came to a semi with a sleeper cab I managed to get the locked door open and will sleep in comfort tonight. I'm still not sure if heading for my place is my best idea but I will be going that direction until I decide on a different destination. Honestly, I just do not see any way I will survive in this ugly new world. I have no real supplies and not even a winter jacket with winter approaching.

I wake up well-rested and eat some of my no-cook food. Then I start walking again. Walking and thinking. I have to try and come up with a plan where I survive after this event. It just seems overwhelming because of the drastic change that has taken place. I try to think of a plan but I get nowhere. I only see death in my future and I fully expect it to happen soon.

Okay, then I need to look at smaller parts instead of the whole. I need food, water, and shelter. There was a lot of food in the grocery truck I had found and the truck would

have provided shelter. There was no surface water close to the truck and few drinks inside there. Plus the food would run out and there would have been little access to additional food in that immediate area. So I think I made the correct decision to take as much as I could carry from the truck and move on from there.

For a steady source of food, I would need a farm or something similar. Except most farm buildings would now be all burned down because the event over-heated all the wiring starting everything on fire. Unless it was an Amish farm. And where would I find an Amish farm? And they would certainly not be excepting guests.

Okay, maybe I should look at this as if I was in the year eighteen fifty and I was going to homestead a place. I had no horse and very little in the way of supplies. And I was in a poor spot of the United States to start a homestead. So traveling was the right thing to do for now. But what direction should I travel? It is August now and warm but that would be changing to winter all too soon. I would need warm clothes that I did not have right now other than the one light jacket. Also, no matter where I was I would need a large supply of food to carry me over the winter. You cannot grow food in the winter any place close to where I now found myself. And it would be cold unless I could travel much farther south. And south was all arid country with very little of the water which I would need every single day.

I'm sure most anyplace I go I would be able to find some kind of shelter. There were many sheds, cars, and trucks that were not burned. They might be rather poor shelters in some respects but they would be shelter and were already built. So I will assume shelter will not be my major problem. Which is good because I still have the main problems of both food and water and they are very real problems that will be difficult to overcome. Even water in the wintertime is a problem because surface water will

be frozen solid and basically inaccessible. And food will be the huge issue. I need way more food than I can transport. So not only must I somehow find a whole lot of food but it must also be very close to a permanent source of freshwater and there must be adequate shelter very close too. Where to find all that stuff?

And I have a major decision coming up. The road I am traveling on goes north and south, I am currently traveling south. Up ahead is a major crossroads where I have to decide whether to go east or west or continue south. All directions have good and bad points. East would eventually lead me to Kansas and there are many farms there. And there would be huge grain bins full of edible grain so there would at least be that one food source.

Unfortunately, without a grinder or mill the grain would be more difficult for me to use. I could spout and eat it but that would be problematic in the winter in any makeshift shelter. And east would have a higher population density of hungry desperate humans that I would have to deal with somehow. No being around more people now would be a very poor choice. Everyone still alive would be desperate for exactly the same things that I needed to survive. And many of those desperate people could be better armed than me.

West goes right into the mountains. And they are high mountains too. Only in relatively modern times have the mountain areas become populated because life there is difficult without all the modern conveniences. Winter will be earlier in the mountains and winter will be tougher in the mountains. And I am woefully unprepared for winter. On the plus side, there would be a fair amount of large game animals that I could harvest in the mountains. So the mountains would have the plus side of more wild game animals and fewer people. On the downside, there are fewer people because life is harder in the mountains. So

why would I travel to someplace where life was hard even in the best of times?

South is into more arid land so water would be more of a problem. It might not be quite so bad this time of year because it is still during the monsoon season so rain should be fairly regular and water holes should all contain water. Because the area is arid, there is little farming unless it is irrigated which now would not be happening. As I go south the winter weather should be warmer and because it is arid snow should not impede my travel. Also lower human population densities could mean less interaction with possible hostile people and less competition for any still available food sources. Also it is the general direction of my home which was my original destination.

Many people think the southwestern states are warm in the winter and that is certainly true for some spots of those states. But for the most part the southwestern states get cold in the winter, maybe not way down below zero but below freezing is certainly common. Cold enough in the winter so you need a good shelter and some heat along with a steady supply of food.

For good or bad I guess I will continue going south though I will have options off and on to go east or west along that route. It happens to be a route I am at least somewhat familiar with too. I do have several pages of a road atlas that I ripped out of the atlas I carried in my pickup. I know it will take me a month at least on foot to get to my place if I decide that is my destination. Just to think a couple days ago I could have made that trip in just one day. Actually on the day of the event I had planned on driving to my house that day and now it will take me at least a month and to be honest, I doubt if I can even make it there alive.

I don't want to be a pessimist but it is folly to not be realistic. For everyone in the nation, they will need food

and shelter along with a steady supply of clean drinking water for the coming winter. Almost no one will have all of those things. To say thousands will die does not even come close. Way more than two hundred million will die in this nation alone. And if this event is world-wide then billions will die in the coming months.

To think I will be one of the very few that live through winter is just not very realistic.

Chapter 4

I have plenty of time to think about and analyze my situation. When you are walking down a lonely highway the one thing you have plenty of is time to think. The land here is, well, sparse is a polite word for it. You can see long distances in just about every direction. You do not see homes or any other buildings for the most part. There is some grass and low plants but usually you can see plenty of bare dirt between the growing plants. There are some occasional brush and small trees mixed in here and there. In the distance you can often see hills that appear green with what looks like trees but are likely just very short small evergreen trees. What many people commonly call scrub trees.

There are no farms and for the most part no ranches. That stuff requires a bunch of water and water around here is a very precious rare commodity. Much of this land only gets maybe ten inches of rain per year. Not enough for most things to grow. That is why there is usually empty space between plants so they can gather all the moisture from their surrounding area without any competition for that valuable resource.

There are very few permanent surface water sources. There are a lot of dry creek beds that contain water only for very short times during the year and then only if there happens to be a hard rain. Sometimes they are dry for more than a year.

The harsh environment here is why there are very few people in the area. No one homesteaded here because it was impossible. People could live here now because they could drill deep wells for water and buy all their food from grocery stores. Now there is no way to get water from those deep wells and there are no grocery

stores anymore. So people here have only one option and that is to die.

While my situation is grim, I will not give up. I will fight to survive. I am young, healthy and strong and if someone can survive this event then I will try to make sure that I am that person. So I will plod along this highway and think and plan what I can do to make sure that I have a future. Logically the main viable resources in this area are all contained in the vehicles that are stopped along this major highway. So I will continue to harvest those available resources as needed as I continue my journey to whatever final destination.

Saw my first dead bodies today. I looked in a car like I do with almost every car and saw an elderly man and woman who both appeared dead. I could only guess that when their car stopped they realized they would not be physically able to walk to any town from this location so they stayed and waited for help to arrive. Obviously, no help ever showed up here. It was a scene that was playing out across the nation I would guess. In any disaster it is always the very young and the very old that are usually the first casualties.

It was on the fifth day after the event that I had something different happen. I was in the back of a small box truck that had a fair amount of groceries inside. I was sorting through the boxes and wasn't keeping track of things outside the truck. I had no reason to suspect any trouble because in all the days of travel so far I had no trouble at all. I was working industrially when I thought I heard voices. This was something new because I had not even seen anyone for a couple of days though I was now just south of the city of Trinidad. I looked up and coming from the north was a small group of people. There looked to be two women and four men.

For no reason what-so-ever I was suddenly concerned for my safety. I reached up transferred the

pistol into my waistband in the small of my back and released the safety. Then I walked to the back of the truck to meet the newcomers. When they got close enough I spoke.

“I am almost done here and then I will be out of your hair and move on.”

I pushed the box of mixed supplies I had ready closer to the end of the truck as I finished speaking. One of the men had a pistol I noticed and without speaking a word he grabbed it and started to draw. He was behind all the others. I reacted without any conscious thought at all. It was almost like someone else was in charge of my body or like I was watching my actions from a distance.

I reached back and drew my pistol and started to lift it in front of me. The other guy was doing the same. When my pistol was up and the front of the pistol was superimposed over the man's chest I started to fire. I saw no sights just the front of my pistol. The man was very close now because as he was drawing his gun he had stepped ahead of the others and closer to the back of the truck. He shouldn't have wasted that time moving because I fired first.

With the first bullet impact, the man stopped all movements like he was stunned. The next two shots went into his torso and he started to fall. I stopped firing but kept the gun pointed towards the falling man and vaguely in the direction of the rest of the small group. Hearing the impact of the man's body on the pavement seemed to stop every movement from everyone present. We all just stared at each other for a couple moments.

“Get back all of you. Turn around and walk back the way you came. Do it right this minute. When you get back at least a hundred yards you can stop and I will leave. If you do not move away right now I will shoot every one of you. Now get moving!”

Two of the remaining men turned and started walking away immediately. Then the other man and one of the women turned and started walking away quickly. That left a lone woman who just stared at me.

“Leave with the others!”

“No. I don’t think I will.”

“Are you nuts! I just shot that one guy and I will shoot you too! Now take off!”

“You won’t shoot me because I am no threat to you.”

“That one guy in your crowd was certainly a threat and I have reason to believe all of you wish to kill me. I will shoot you if you do not walk away. You know there are no laws anymore and you just saw me shoot a man in cold blood. There is plenty of food in this truck and I am only taking this small box with me. Now for the last time walk away!”

“I am going to go with you.”

“You are nuts! I am a killer! You saw that just a minute ago.”

“That man was bad. But I don’t think you are so I am going with you. Go ahead and shoot me. It would very likely be the best thing that could happen to me.”

I just stared at the woman. It likely was a fact that if I did shoot her it would be the best thing for her. What a bizarre situation. I said nothing for several moments. Then I glanced at the group of others who were still walking away even though they were well over fifty yards back at this point. Looking back at the woman I saw she had never even moved. Now she did.

The woman fearlessly stepped forward and picked up the box I had slid near the back of the truck. She carried over to my cart and set it down. Then she turned and walked back to the truck and commenced climbing into the back.

“You are totally crazy!” I said as I got down and walked over to my cart.

“Give me a few minutes to find what I want to take with me, please.”

Without waiting for any answer she started going through the boxes in the truck. I split my time between rearranging the load on my cart, watching the still retreating group and watching the crazy woman in the truck.

I didn't know what to think about this crazy situation.

Chapter 5

Once I got the load on the cart to my liking I went over to the dead guy. I went through his pockets and took everything I wanted. Then with some effort I got his belt off so I could get the holster for his pistol. I also unlatched and pulled off the fanny pack he was wearing. The holster I put on my belt and after inspecting the pistol I put that in the holster.

The pistol was a Glock 17. I had never owned one but I had shot a couple that friends of mine had. I was familiar enough with the gun to be comfortable using it if I ever needed too. I crammed what I had collected from the dead guy into his fanny pack which I just attached to the top of my cart. I would go through that small pack later.

I looked up when I heard a louder noise by the truck. The crazy woman had dropped the two-wheeled cart like mine from the back of the truck. She then climbed down and taking the boxes she had stacked at the edge of the truck she stacked them on her cart and strapped them down before looking at me.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

She even smiled when she said that! She was crazy! I said nothing and taking one last look at the group that had finally stopped and was looking in my direction, I grabbed my cart and started walking south again.

After maybe two miles I stopped at a car along the highway. I could hear the young woman’s labored breathing. I had been looking back occasionally but the group had never advanced past the grocery truck. I expected them to likely stay there at least all the rest of the day and sleep there tonight. It was food and that was obviously hard to find.

When I stopped the young woman stopped and just sat down on the pavement. With nothing better to do, I pried the trunk open on the car to look inside. There were a couple suitcases and some other stuff. The first suitcase contained woman's clothes so I lifted it from the trunk and set it next to the crazy woman. Then I turned back and continued my search inside the car's trunk.

I went completely through the suitcase with the men's clothes. The sizes were about right for me. I picked out several things to take with me. There was some bottled water in the trunk and some snacks inside the car itself. I handed a bottle of water to the crazy woman and let her pick a couple of snacks to eat with the water. I sat down in the car with the door open and drank and ate some. I actually ate everything that remained of the food I had just found.

I wondered why I was feeling nothing after shooting that man. I had often wondered what it would be like to shoot someone. I felt nothing. Well, at least I felt no different. Maybe it takes a while to get through to a person. On the television it often shows people throwing up or going bonkers or something after they kill someone. But I feel nothing different.

I had noticed the woman sorting through the suitcase I gave her and take some things that she added to one of the boxes on her cart. Done with my noon break I packed away the items I wanted into my cart then I turned to the crazy woman.

I just stared at her some then I spoke.

"You don't look bad. I'll probably rape you later when I stop for the night."

"Go ahead. That will be my fate anyway unless I die first."

"Why do you want to travel with me?"

"Because you are a good man and look to have a plan. I have zero chance of survival on my own and

currently, my only chance at all is with you. And I know you will not rape me.”

“You know nothing about me except for the fact that I am a cold-blooded killer.”

“You killed to protect yourself just like anyone would do if they had the ability. I can see you are a good man and you care about me. That is why you stopped at this car, isn’t it? Because of me.”

“I stopped to look for added supplies and to take a lunch break.”

“I don’t believe that and you know that is not why you stopped. I’m rested enough now so we can go whenever you want. I will likely get more tired as the day wears on though.”

I saw no point in any more talking so I grabbed the handle of my cart and started walking again. After that I started looking in any vehicle we came too. At each stop it allowed the woman to rest some and once in a while, I did find something I wanted to take. When I found a hat I handed it to the woman. After that she usually went through the vehicles with me when she realized there were things she could use in them. There were not very many stopped vehicles along this part of the highway. It was just too far from anything in this area.

As the sun started to drop I stopped at a semi-truck that had a sleeper cab.

“You can sleep in the sleeper. I’ll sleep in the back with the carts.”

“We both need a good night’s sleep. The sleeper looks plenty big enough for two people. I promise not to attack you or try to rape you.”

She had a small smile as she said that. We both looked inside the cab after I got the door open. There was plenty of room for two people and the mattress sure looked inviting. I did open the back of the trailer too. I lifted both our carts into the back and we both climbed inside the

trailer to look around. It was about half full of stuff but after a half-hearted search, we decided there was nothing for us in there. We sat on the edge of trailer and ate our meager supper together. We had done almost no talking all day. Now that changed.

“My name is Bill.”

“Hi, my name is Mia. Thank you for everything today.”

“Um, I don’t really have a plan as to what to do other than I thought the winter would be warmer if I went farther south.”

“Well, that is kind of a plan. Better than what I had before we met. The man you shot had more or less kidnapped all of us. I guess the other men were somewhat friends of his but they did not like it too much when he “acquired” me and the other woman and he forced us to come with them. The others did not object too much though.”

“So did you live in Trinidad?”

“No, I was on a tour bus and it had stopped for the night in Trinidad and we were all in a motel there. After the motel burned we all were staying in the bus. Things started to go downhill so I decided I may as well leave. I had my suitcase with me but when I was kidnapped the man said I would not need it and forced me to leave it behind.”

“I was traveling and was in Pueblo when it happened. I have been walking south ever since. I am more or less heading home to Arizona even though I know my house will be burned to the ground.”

“I think one destination is about as good as any other. Who would have thought something like this could ever happen. I still can hardly believe our world is gone and not coming back. When I started walking away from the town I realized I was a dead woman walking. I was not at all surprised when I was kidnapped. I knew it was inevitable.”

"I noticed you seemed very calm after I shot that man. It was like you did not care about anything. I was shocked when you would not walk away with the others. I thought you were off your rocker."

"Maybe I was crazy. Being with you today has given me a glimmer of hope."

"How did you know I would not rape and kill you?"

"I just looked in your eyes. And if that had been your plan you would have shot those other men."

"So now you trust me?"

"I don't think trust is the correct word. I don't think you will hurt me and that is a big thing."

"Well let's hit the sack and see how this will work out."

She actually laughed.

Chapter 6

We both seemed to sleep well and neither of us raped the other. We got up and started day six since the event.

In less than a mile we entered New Mexico. Not that it meant much because it was just a sign on a seemingly endless highway. Soon we would pass the town of Raton but towns or cities meant little anymore. Those towns were all or mostly burned completely down. There are only downsides to any town or city now and that is an increase in the number of refugees like us. Just more competition for the very limited resources and also the real threat of more violence. I did realize that having Mia with me would just add to the chance for more violence.

We did get something useful from a truck not too long after we started walking today. The truck had a large amount of used heavy-duty tote boxes. We both switched over from our cardboard boxes to the heavy plastic totes. The totes would hold our stuff more securely and hopefully keep the contents dry if we got rain. The only downside was a slight increase in weight. I no longer carried a suitcase. The totes just made more sense.

We now had a little more room for stuff on our carts. At one stop at a car, I finally went through the fanny pack and left everything I did not want on the seat of the car for someone else to find. Nothing man-made could be thrown away anymore; it all had to be preserved to be used later by you or someone else. It would be many, many years before there would be any chance of manufacturing starting up again. I would guess it might be decades. By the end of this winter most people would be dead. The few left would be very busy just trying to stay alive.

Just before we got to the Raton exit we came to a motor home. It was empty and we went inside. The one thing I wanted was a couple of cooking pots so I could cook or boil water. The RV was fully stocked in the kitchen area with pots and pans and we took three with us. Two pans with lids and a frying pan. When I saw Mia take all the spices I realized that was an excellent idea. She also took the heaviest blanket so she had one warm one (she had taken the thin one from the sleeper this morning).

We did not stop at any vehicles after that until we were well past the town of Raton. We had only seen a couple of people and they were on the northbound lane of this big highway.

We walked and walked and to help pass the time we talked. We were on a major north-south interstate highway. We both realized that the big highways were now the only places to find food or other supplies. The cities, towns, and houses were all burned down so there would be no supplies left in those places for the most part anyway. The only supplies were in delivery trucks and those trucks could mostly be found on large highways.

Trains would also be full of supplies in the boxcars but a large highway was the best place to look for supplies now. Once we realized that simple fact we knew we would be staying on interstate highways until we thought of or found something better. Where we went on those highways mattered very little.

I now have no idea just how many days I have been walking. Every day is almost identical to the one before and the one after. I had to shoot another man yesterday. He wanted Mia and I said no even though I never asked her. The man thought it was not fair that I had the woman and would not share. He decided to get aggressive and wound up dead. He had a very small pistol which I gave to Mia. She shot it one time to see if it worked. It did and she has five cartridges left now.

We carefully planned our passage past the city of Santa Fe. We stopped early one day and walked farther the next day to get well past what remained of that larger city. We did see other people but had no trouble real trouble. We had many people beg for food or water but we both knew we had none to share. Everyone that begged from us we told to search every vehicle for supplies. A couple of times people got aggressive but when I drew my larger pistol they backed off.

Just after Santa Fe I assembled my twenty-two rifle and showed Mia how to shoot it. I allowed her to shoot it one time and now she has the rifle on her cart fastened so she has quick and easy access to the rifle. Now we each have two guns, I have two pistols and Mia has the small rifle and small pistol. The sight of the rifle is enough to intimidate most people. Now when we come upon a group of people Mia keeps the rifle in one hand as she pulls her cart with the other.

Every day the people we meet are more desperate and so more aggressive. Well, some we see are now way too weak to be aggressive. We have also seen many bodies. A lot of dead bodies. We don't know or care why they died. We both know that death waits for both of us too. It could happen any day or night and we both accept that simple fact. We never really talk about anything in the future farther than a day or two. Neither of us thinks we have a future but we are both too stubborn to stop trying to survive.

Mia shot her first man near Albuquerque. We actually had a little shootout with three guys. Neither Mia nor I got hurt. The three guys got dead. They made a huge mistake by shooting when we were at least fifty yards away and all they had were pistols. Mia shot all three with the rifle then after a wait, I carefully walked up and dispatched each of them with my pistol.

Now Mia has a nice full-sized pistol, her little hide-out pistol, and the small rifle. I now have three pistols. The remaining pistol from the dead guys I broke down and scattered the pieces so it would never again be used against us. Two of the three men had small daypacks which we now wear. Our packs contain a little food and water along with a little ammunition and a couple of other small items so they are very lightweight yet contain some essentials. My now well-worn fanny pack is on my cart. I might want it later.

We are now armed well enough for close work. It would be nice to have a full-sized rifle but we have what we have and that will have to do us. I think we are now roughly two hundred miles from my place. In theory, we could be there in ten days or so if we choose to go there. We have at least ten days to think it over and talk about it. There is plenty of time when you are just walking every day all day long.

Several days later we opened another truck that was going to the Tractor Supply Company. The truck was just about full and we spent most of one day going through that truck. We even stayed overnight there. We each assembled a new cart. It was called a Gorilla Cart and was a large four-wheeled cart. Made to be pulled by hand or behind a compact tractor or quad. It even had a dump bed, though we had no use for that aspect. These new carts would hold a very large amount of supplies in each cart and as long as we stayed on the hard pavement they pulled easy enough for our road-hardened bodies.

Besides the carts that truck gave us many other supplies. When we finally left the truck behind we each had heavy loads. And then it was more walking and breaking into cars and other vehicles. We often switched out things we were hauling for items that we thought were better for us.

By the time it came to the exit towards my home the carts were very heavy. The heavy carts cut down the distance we could travel each day but we wanted all those supplies. Five days after leaving the interstate highway we made it to my place.

Chapter 7

My place sure looked different. The house was completely gone. The two sheds were intact and the all-metal garage looked not too bad on the outside but spots inside where there was wiring were badly scorched and one corner where the electric entered had burned some. Overall it was way better than I expected.

We stayed in the one partially remodeled shed for three days then we left again. We left most of our gear and supplies at our place but did take the carts. I had packed all the wheel bearings with grease and used a hand pump to put more air in the tires to make them pull easier. We went back to the interstate highway to the trucks we had already found and kept track of for this reason. We mostly wanted food and that is what we filled the carts with mostly. When the carts were full we returned home.

Mia and I were not just traveling partners anymore. We were now man and wife, at least in our eyes. There had been no ceremony or papers filled out and no marriage license purchased.

The weather was already cooling. We talked it over and made one more trip back to the interstate highway for added supplies. We tried to move as fast as possible on this trip. Again our carts were very heavy on our return trip but we had a lot more food and other supplies.

I had some building supplies her and used some to finish off the inside of my guest house. Some additional materials were used to make a simple but mostly wind-proof outhouse over my septic tank. Where I lived did have winter but not like in the northern states.

We made hikes to the scattered other places within several miles of our home to see if we could gather any additional supplies. Houses were always burned but some

outbuildings had survived. We brought home many useful items. We even disassembled and reassembled two small all-metal sheds. The smaller one I made into a smokehouse.

In my garage, I had a cheap black powder rifle and the supplies to shoot it. I used that to harvest a cow and we smoked all the meat to turn it into jerky. The jerky was stored in an eclectic assortment of salvaged containers. Some was in zip lock bags, of which we had huge supply from the highway scavenging.

We had salvaged a small propane heater and I was able to find enough piping to hook it up inside our shed home. We only used it in the mornings and evenings but it was nice to have for heat. Gradually I thought of more things I could adapt and convert to make our home nicer and better for us. More trips were made to distant places for added supplies.

We just might survive here. We now had hope and we had each other.

The End

