

# **After the End**

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# Chapter 1

Looking back I am still surprised at just how fast everything fell apart. Everything was smooth sailing and the future was looking bright then, whamo, and there was chaos in the streets. Now my world is a totally different place. I remember when I used to escape the hectic city whenever I could and run to the country to enjoy some peace, quiet, and solitude. Now I live in the country out of necessity.

It is so easy to spend time just remembering how easy life was back then. Get up in the morning, take a long hot shower, and drive to work where nobody really worked hard. We had thousands of machines that did all the hard work. At lunchtime, most people would just drive to a nearby fast-food restaurant where they could order almost anything they wanted and it would be served hot to them in just a matter of minutes.

For a drink, you had your choice of many hot or cold beverages. Then back to work until quitting time. After work maybe you would stop at a bar with some of your friends. Or maybe just drive on home and cook something in the microwave then eat it in front of the television. You could watch the news from around the world and get local and national weather reports. Sometimes you might even fall asleep in front of the TV while sitting on your comfortable couch in your temperature-controlled house or apartment.

Life was so easy then but almost everyone complained every single day about how tough they had it. They would complain about the stupidest things while not realizing what an easy and wonderful life they were living back then.

Well, those days are long gone now. Now it's hard for most people to remember the old days of the easy life. They don't remember because they are dead.

Even though I lived through it, I'm still not entirely sure exactly what all happened that led to this situation that we have now. It seemed like the economy just collapsed overnight. Or maybe not really the economy collapsed but the great American dollar collapsed instead which ruined everything. Yeah, that is maybe what happened; it was all about the dollar.

On the news, I heard one guy talk briefly about it. That is back when we had television that we could watch. He said all fiat currencies collapse at some point and that it is just historical fact. I'm sure that guy is dead now just like most people.

But the dollar did collapse. I guess that is what you would call it anyway. Things were fine and then they were not. I was never a newshound or even watched the news hardly at all, same as most people back then. But even a blind man could see what happened. Prices went way up. And I mean really way up but the reason for that rise I guess was that the value of the dollar dropped. I admit this is just some guesswork on my part.

That loaf of bread still had the same value as before but when all you had to buy that loaf of bread with was American dollars that were worth less and less, it took a whole lot more of those dollars to buy that bread. It kept getting worse and worse until basically, you couldn't carry enough of those dollars to even buy that bread. Of course, no one had very many dollars at that point.

I think the government tried to step in to try and fix the problem. But the government failed that miserably and things just got worse and worse no matter what they tried to do. Rumors said it was not just here in the United States either because the whole world seemed to be in total chaos if you can believe the news.

You see that is another thing. The news outlets were telling outright lies. But maybe that was not their fault. Maybe they did that to try and ease the pain of what was happening. Or maybe our government just plain told them what they could say and what they couldn't say. I guess it makes little difference now anyway. Once things got bad most people changed their habits and started watching the news closely but it was a case of too little and too late. We should have watched the news all along and maybe we all could have prepared for what happened. Or not, I just don't know.

Everyone was working but they could not buy hardly anything with the money they earned. And it got worse until there was really no reason to even go to work. So people stopped working. Some had no choice. Thousands of businesses closed down. And gas got so expensive many people could not buy the fuel to drive to work.

Then all levels of government services started shutting down. Some just because the workers failed to show up to work. More and more services shut down and that just made things worse for everyone. And of course, there was violence.

Riots engulfed all the larger cities. The National Guard was called out to quell the riots but even they could not stop them. Then live ammunition was used to kill the rioters. That is when the news stopped I think if I remember right. Or at least when they stopped telling the real news maybe.

Then the power went off and that was the end. I had never thought about it but basically, a first-rate nation like the United States cannot survive without electricity. And it didn't survive. Everyone died.

Well, obviously not everyone. I'm still alive and so are some other people. I am only alive just because of a man I met just after the power went off. He's dead now but he talked to me before he died. There were still a few

vehicles on the road back then and while walking he had been hit by one of those vehicles. The truck had a grill guard and it had driven well off the side of the road to hit him on purpose. Just for the pure evil of the action, I guess it must have been.

Even then there was no calling nine-one-one for help. Everyone was on their own and he was dying. I was stupid back then and I went over to see if I could help him. When I tried to help the first thing he said surprised me.

“Help me? How have you stayed alive this long? You should take advantage of my “disability” and kill me then take my stuff.”

What he said shocked me back then. I said nothing and just stared at him. The man was bloody and having some trouble talking, having to stop and cough up blood between every couple of words. He started talking again when he saw just how stupid I was back then.

“You are a stupid one. I am going to die and I’ll do one last good deed in this world. It can’t hurt me now and maybe God will take this last act into consideration if I help you.

Almost every person in this country is going to die. Most will die horrible deaths. To survive you have to change. Today!

Trust no one and avoid everyone. Depend on yourself and keep in the shadows. From now on your every thought should be only concerned with just your very survival. You will need four things to survive. You need food, clean water, shelter, and security. The order of importance of those four things will be constantly changing all the time but those are what you need and they should be the sole things that concern you. Nothing else.

Take my backpack and the contents will help you survive. Take everything I have. Empty my pockets and take every single thing you find whether you think you

should or not. Some of the things you might not recognize but trust me you need everything I have on me.”

Then he drew a pistol from somewhere and pointed it at me.

“I could easily shoot and kill you right now. Never trust anyone. You should have just hung back and waited for me to die then came up and taken my stuff. Remember that fact. Good luck. You will certainly need it.”

Then he turned the gun quickly and shot himself in the head. Blood and gore splattered everywhere. But I had seen dead people before by that time and the shock was not as much as it would have been in the old days.

I was torn as to what to do then. But he had told me to take his stuff and the fact was, I was really hungry and thirsty and I hoped he had something I could use in his pack.

So I did just like he said I should do before he died. I stripped the dead body of everything. When I walked away the only thing left on the gory body were his clothes. I had even taken his leather belt. And that man saved my life. Eventually, I figured out what everything he had was for and how to use those items. And those items have saved my life many times over.

## Chapter 2

I've killed some people. I don't keep track and it would be hard to know how many for sure anyway. All you have to do is wound someone and almost for sure they will die from the infection that is almost sure to set in and kill them slowly. And I have many regrets, but not about the killings. Those needed to be done. No, I have some regrets about not killing.

I could have killed others that I did not and I should have done so when I had the chance. Because some of those are still alive they have likely since killed many "good" people. The line between good and bad is blurred now. I have killed but I still consider myself in the "good" column, but just barely. I have become a different person. A very hard man. Really a very heartless man. And that fact as allowed me to survive.

If you kill someone that is intent on killing or harming an innocent, does that make you "bad?" With no laws of any kind and no one in authority, there are only the laws each person decides to live by. I have killed for many reasons but mainly just to save myself. I am a survivor. And if I have to kill to survive then so be it.

I do not kill people just to take their stuff. I do not kill for fun or entertainment. I do not rape. I steal if it can be called stealing anymore. I do not rob people and I do not steal when I know there is an "owner" nearby. Ownership is different now. Who owns the items in an abandoned car, house, or business?

I mostly avoid any contact with people and try to stay well away from them. Everyone is armed. Everyone left alive anyway. There were hundreds of millions of guns in America when everything fell apart. And there must



have been many billions of rounds of ammunition. People soon found out that if they wanted to survive they better have a gun and learn quick how to use it.

That is one reason I try to avoid everyone. Because with everyone armed and life so tenacious it is best to avoid any encounters. Many shoot first and ask questions later. And I can understand that philosophy. Not everyone does that, thank goodness. I try hard but I have been surprised a few times. It's just blind luck that I am still alive. I think survival is about twenty percent skill and supplies and about eighty percent luck.

The times I was surprised the other party allowed me to live. Most people would not. So I am alive today because of luck. Luck because those people were like me and did not shoot first and ask questions later.

And I have regrets and lately those regrets are starting to wear on me. One instance from my past is really haunting me now. I want to drop that memory from my mind but I cannot. The memory is in my head and it festers there. All I can do is push it as far back in my head as I can. Sometimes that process works. Most of the time it does not.

There was once I heard a woman screaming. I moved closer carefully until I was close enough to see what was happening. Three men had a woman. I had a rifle and they did not know I was there. I could have killed one for sure and had a fair chance of killing two. The third might have run away or he might have attacked me. If he would have attacked me I still had a fair chance of killing him. But I had done nothing. It was fairly early in the new world and most people were still busy dying. I figured there was a fair chance that if I did somehow save the woman she would have very likely died very soon anyway. So I had backed up and faded away from the area.

I wander. Those people still alive mostly have found places where they can eke out a living by staying in one

place. But not me because something keeps pushing me onward. Some travel around in groups and stay alive by raiding those that have found a home. Any traveler is fair game for either of those two groups.

The squatters know that anyone traveling just about has to be living off those who have now found a home. But not me. I avoid any habitation that I encounter. I travel past without them ever knowing I was there. At best they might find a track I left by accident. I am always careful not to leave tracks or any sign of my passage when possible. Doing so can get you killed. Someone cutting your trail can follow and sneak up on you. Snipe you from a distance then calmly walk up and take whatever you had in your possession. So you learn to leave as little sign as possible or you die.

You build smokeless fires and you scatter the remains of that fire before you leave the spot. You never build a fire where you will camp for the night unless it is an emergency situation. You do your cooking or boil your water to make it safe to drink then move on some distance before bedding down for the night. Your fire might be fairly smokeless but it can still be smelled for quite a distance; same with the smell of cooking food. You never have a fire after dark; it can be seen for long distances. Anything that can draw attention to you can mean your death. Or at least a fight where if you win you take whatever your attacker had with them. And if you lose they take your stuff instead. Of course, when you're dead it matters not to you anymore what happens to your stuff.

The world is a dangerous place. You have to be on guard at all times. This wears everyone down but eventually, you are either dead or you get used to it and it no longer is the burden that it was in the beginning. Your security has to become second nature to you. It has to be like breathing where you do not have to think about it at all, it just happens.

In many ways, it is not so bad now. That is because most people are dead so there are way fewer people to encounter. Encounters are bad for the most part in several ways. Obviously, the big thing is violence. Chances are good in any encounter the other party will try their best to kill you. If by some chance the other party does not start shooting the moment that you come in sight there is still the real possibility that they might have some communicable disease to spread to you.

This does not have to be something exotic but instead just the flu or even the common cold. There are no doctors or hospitals anymore and even over the counter medications are hard to find and they are losing their potency due to age and poor storage conditions. So you avoid any and all contact with other survivors if possible.

Like I said the world is a different place; an ugly place. And it is the place where I travel on my never-ending path.

I have mingled with other people on a few occasions. Twice I stayed and worked alongside farmers when they needed another hand. I was paid in food for that help. When the work was done I moved on again. Once I stayed the winter with a small group. That time I helped with a big harvest and I helped defend the place. In the spring I resumed my never-ending journey.

I do sometimes trade with other people. I always need food. I try to carry lightweight, small trade goods. Cigarette lighters, matches, and over the counter medications are always popular. Shoelaces, needles and thread, good knives, and even pencils can be easily carried and used for trade. Ammunition is a good trade item but too heavy to carry any distance.

I have learned many things since this began. Good things and bad things. One of the things that has been a big help is learning to forage from what nature provides. Many had foraged for food for centuries. But then man

learned that it was easier, safer, and way more productive to grow their own food.

If you plan to forage you must also plan to be constantly moving. There are not enough natural plants (or animals) in one place to sustain a person for any real length of time. So you travel and forage as you go along and you do sometimes stop when you find a good spot but you only stop for a while then you move again.

Foraging includes plants that man has planted in the past. Many plants reseed themselves and grow year after year in the same area. All manner of fruit trees still produce without any people around to tend to them. When in season and found they are always appreciated.

Many plants have medicinal qualities and now people are going back to using those plants. Just because that is their only choice.

## Chapter 3

I am heading south but I should have done so much earlier in the year because it is already quite cold. The cold seemed to come early with hardly any fall type weather this year. I have no idea what month it is so maybe it is a normal year and I just waited too long to head south.

Luckily there is no real snow yet except for a few spots of it where the sun cannot reach. But it is cold. Last night I stayed in a barn. There was a house there too but I chose the barn. There was plenty of hay inside for a comfortable bed and it had three exits if someone else showed up.

It was a big barn and I cooked a morning meal inside before leaving. After eating I left the barn and turned south again. I have only traveled maybe four miles when I saw the man. He was next to a river doing something. I don't care what he is doing and I have turned off my course to circle around him. With luck, he will never see me. I am now extra careful because the man might have a partner. I am now moving much slower and looking everywhere.

When I come to a spot where the man should be visible to me I stop. I cannot see him! I drop down some and crawl forward. I am mostly just listening now because I can see almost nothing this close to the ground. After moving fifty feet or so I slowly rise up to look around. I am very close to the river now where there is more foliage to hide me. Unfortunately, it can hide others too.

I hear a big splash and move a little closer to the river to look towards where I heard the noise. The man must have slipped on the icy bank of the river because I can plainly see him thrashing around in the freezing water. He will likely die because the river is fairly swift and just

above freezing temperature. I see him floating towards me and I decide to help a meager amount. I do not fear the man because I see he is already moving much slower from freezing.

The current is carrying him closer to me and I see a long tree limb close by. I grab it and extend the branch out as far as I can reach. I let the end of the branch drop down in front of the man. I'm sure he can now feel the branch but he does not grab it. I move the branch hard against the man and he does finally grab on. Instantly I pull the branch and clinging man into the shore. When close enough I reach down and grab the man's arm and pull him up onto dry land. He is not very heavy and might just be a teenager.

He is now out of the water but he can do nothing for himself at this point. The cold water has sapped all of his strength. I grab his coat and drag him back upstream where I hope he has a camp with some supplies. I find the spot where I first saw him and soon see a backpack nearby. He does have a fire laid out but not started yet. Maybe he was trying to catch some fish for a meal is my guess.

When I open the pack I see it is almost empty but does have a piece of canvas tarp and a blanket. I turn back to the man to strip off the wet clothes to give him a chance at life. I am surprised to see he is clean-shaven, something rather rare nowadays. He must just be a teenager I think as I am trying to get all the wet clothes off him as fast as possible.

I am maybe a little rough because I am trying to be fast and the wet old clothes are fighting me. Then I am shocked! He is not a man! Well, no matter I continue to try and save the woman's life. Once the clothes or most of them are off I get her wrapped in the blanket and then the tarp. I then immediately get the fire going quickly. Once the fire is burning well enough I leave to gather more wood.

I will need a big fire to warm the woman and try to dry her clothes.

Three trips into the surrounding area and I have plenty of dry or mostly dry wood on hand. I had put the first load on the fire and now it is much larger. I move the woman as close as I dare to get her warm. Looking around I find what I need to get her clothes spread out and hanging separately close to the fire. Close enough to dry quickly but hopefully far enough away so they do not catch fire.

The woman is very light and I easily lift and turn her so the other side gets some of the heat. As time passes I turn her off and on and also move and rearrange her clothes to get them dry without scorching them. It is maybe a couple of hours before I see the woman stir. Her eyes slowly open and shortly they open very wide. She struggles a bit being wrapped up in the blanket and tarp.

“Take it easy. I will not hurt you. Your clothes are almost dry except for your jacket. I recommend just laying still and staying warm.”

She says nothing but I see her eyes moving everywhere. Then she again faces me.

“You took off my clothes!”

“It was either that or you would be dead now. I thought you were a man or at least a teenage boy until I got most of your clothes off. I’m sorry but there was no other way to save your life.”

“What else did you do?”

“Lady, I just saved your life. I’m sorry if that fact causes you concern. But don’t worry now that you are awake and alive I will be on my way.”

I got up and put a little more wood on the fire and then started to grab my things.

“Would you have any food you could share?”

I slowly turned back towards the woman. I stared at her for a moment and neither of us spoke. Then I turned back to my pack and removed the little takedown rifle

strapped to it. Taking up that little rifle I laid down my other one. I then stepped away from my stuff and turned back towards the woman.

“I will get us some food. Leave my stuff alone. Don’t make me regret saving your life.”

I turned and left her alone. I walked fast for maybe a half-mile or so then started hunting. As I expected there was a fair amount of sign along near the river. It wasn’t long and I saw some squirrels. After I shot the first one I looped back towards where I left the woman. I shot three more squirrels in just a short time and then walked quickly back to camp.

Once back I saw the woman was now sitting up and her clothes were on her except for her jacket and boots. She was sitting close to the now smaller fire with the tarp and blanket wrapped around her. I looked at my stuff and it did not look disturbed. I laid the twenty-two rifle down and walked off some to clean the squirrels. I took them down to the river and rinsed them off in the freezing cold water before returning to camp. On the way, I cut four branches suitable for roasting the squirrels.

Opening my pack I found my spices and doctored up the meat a little. Very little because spices of any kind are rare items now. Next, I skewered the squirrels on the sticks and placed them near the fire. The fire was mostly down to coals at this point but still put off a good amount of heat. The meal cooking, I turned to the woman.

“What is your story? I saw you have almost no supplies at all when I got the blanket and tarp from your pack. How did you expect to live over winter?”

“My family group was attacked about a month ago. They killed everyone and then took anything they wanted from our camp. Then for no reason, they burned the rest down to ashes. I was out fishing at the time they came and I saw them when I came back. I stayed hidden in the woods until they left but I could not fight the fires they had



started. So I started moving south. I have little hope for survival.”

I said nothing more while I tended the roasting squirrels. She had a tale of woe but so did everyone. It put me in a bad place. I carried enough for me and not two people. And many a time I have gone hungry. And now winter is coming. If I leave her here she will die. Why did I save her life just so she could die slower? If I take her with me there is a very real chance we will both die. Like many problems now there are no good solutions.

“You can come with me if you choose to do so. We might survive the winter though I would say that the odds are rather poor.”

When the meat was done cooking we each ate two of the squirrels. It was maybe around one in the afternoon I guessed when we finished. We gathered what items we had and left camp to make a few miles before dark. Before leaving the woman gathered the fishing lines she had been placing when she fell into the river. There were two fish which she cleaned and we brought with us when we left.

## Chapter 4

We traveled in silence for only maybe a mile or two before she spoke.

“My name is Marcy.”

“I’m Barry. Please only talk if it is required and then in a very low voice. Voices carry and we do not want any company.”

She was thankfully quiet after that. The river went mostly south so we followed that for our route. We did not walk close to the river but instead stayed a good hundred yards or better away. It was easier walking and less chance of a human encounter. When I saw buildings ahead I approached very cautiously. She needed more supplies and though every building of any kind had been searched by many different people by this time there was still the possibility of finding her more clothes or other items she or I could use.

Only when I was sure as possible that the buildings were vacant did we approach them and go inside. We tried the house first.

“Search for clothes, shoes, bedding, or anything else you could use.”

She nodded and we split up. I went to the kitchen area. Obviously, there would be no food of any kind but there might be some cooking items. She needed one or two pots for cooking and boiling water to drink. And something to carry water in besides the one old water bottle I saw inside her pack.

I found a one-quart stainless steel pot and there was even a lid. This was an amazing find. I took a butter knife, a fork, and a spoon from the utensil drawer. There were no sharp knives that I found. I found one plastic container that looked reasonably clean and set that on the table next to

the other take items. There was a dirty hand towel that was in fair shape and we would take that too. I could find little else that I thought was worth packing with us in the kitchen area.

I moved quickly through the other rooms. Not surprisingly there was nothing else I thought worth taking. Marcy said she found a couple of pieces of clothing that she took with her. I did a quick look through the other buildings. I found nothing but Marcy found an almost full box of old twenty-two ammunition on a shelf in a shed. It had been hidden with other worthless items in front of it. I wasn't sure if the ammo was still any good but I put it in my pack.

We left there and now just continued on the dirt road the buildings were located on because we could see others ahead of us. The next place yielded nothing we thought worth taking with us. We did decide to stay the night in the barn. There was an old worn-out tarp that while not worth taking it would make sleeping better for Marcy overnight.

We made a quick fire inside the old barn and cooked the fish we had brought with us. While Marcy cooked the fish I took a pail from the barn down to the nearby river. I washed out the pail and then filled it and brought it back to the barn. We used some of the water to wash out the pot I had found for Marcy. Then we used that to boil some of the remaining water to use for drinking. What river water remained Marcy used to wash what clothing she had found along with the washcloth I had found. There were plenty of spots to hang those items up to dry overnight inside the big barn.

When it came time to turn in Marcy removed her jacket that was still not quite dry and hung that up. Using the old crappy tarp as a ground cloth over some dry hay she laid down and covered herself with the blanket, her tarp, and then the remaining worn out tarp. I thought she should be warm enough overnight with that setup. I did ask

if she wanted me to cover her with additional hay that she declined. Sleeping on top of the hay would provide insulation from below anyway.

We both woke up alive and refreshed in the morning. We used some of my stored food for a meager breakfast before leaving the relative comfort of the old barn. And we again headed south keeping within sight of the river or at least the trees found along the river. I used one of the cartridges from the box Marcy found just to try them and bagged a rabbit sometime after we left the barn. We shared that for lunch. In the afternoon we went through two more places. I usually never searched places because I had a pretty good setup that I carried with me. I considered the searching a waste of my time. Now things were different because Marcy needed many more things to make camping out and life, in general, better for her. So we searched and at each place, we usually found one or two useful items: either for her or me. The searching meant slow travel.

It was cold but above freezing temps at least during the daylight hours. At night I would guess that it likely dropped into the low twenties maybe. It was cold enough at night to skim ice over any standing water and freezing solid small amounts of water. We traveled every day always going south. On the second day, we left the river we had been loosely following because it made a turn to the east.

On the fifth day we were together we came across a very small settlement. We approached slowly but out in the open. Marcy now carried my light twenty-two rifle but this was mostly just so we looked more intimidating as a well-armed pair of travelers. At this settlement, we were invited in to do some trading. We ended up trading for a few things here. Mostly food but Marcy got a few added items for herself. I gave her the trade goods to get what she

wanted. A few items we traded were things we had found in the searching we did since we got together.

When we left the settlement we made fast time with no searching for two days before we again started doing occasional searches of buildings we came across. We were able to find a good patch of oak trees and spent the day there harvesting and processing the acorns. By the time we left that grove of oaks our packs were heavier due to all the acorns we now carried. They were good traveling food and we each kept some handy to snack on throughout the day. The fat in the acorns was a much-needed nutrient in our diets, especially now in this cold weather.

We always continued south but we made little real headway in that direction. The days were short and time was spent every day looking for food of any kind. When at one house we found a very large home-made smoker so we stayed there for several days. I was able to shoot two smaller deer and we turned all that meat into jerky except for the small amount we ate fresh. There were also more oak trees near enough so we harvested and processed more acorns there at the same time.

There was a creek close by for water and we both washed all of our clothing. We even heated water and each of us took a bath in the house bathtub. It was sure nice having a clean body and clean clothes to wear. We had found a few small amounts of various soaps in all our searching and used that sparingly for our washing needs. When we left that place we were clean, well-fed, and had a pretty good supply of food with us. With no time wasted looking for food we made better time the next week or so before we had any trouble.

We had gone up to a place with the thought of searching it which was something we did only seldom now. Like always I approached very cautiously and saw no movement or noises from the place. The door was not locked and we went inside.

I immediately saw signs of someone now living here or very recently someone living inside the house.

“This is someone’s house. We leave right now.”

Marcy just looked at me but I wasted no time and exited the house. When she followed me out I whispered for her to look for trouble. With my head on a swivel, we walked briskly away from the house. Though I saw no one I was not all that surprised to hear the shot. I dropped to ground instantly but obviously not so fast that the bullet missed me. I felt the tug on my arm and also felt the burn. I could still move my fingers and we now started crawling away to better cover a short distance away.

I heard two more shots but none hit me and I heard no noise from Marcy. Once I got to cover I saw Marcy crawl next to me.

“Were you hit?”

“No.”

“Did you see where the shots came from?”

“No, I was too busy trying to get away.”

We were not in a bad spot now. We were behind an old fallen tree. It was big enough to supply excellent cover. There was a woods right behind us that would maybe allow us to exit without exposing us to very much firing. Not perfect but good enough so we might get out alive. I peeked out from near the ground on the end of the tree we were hiding behind. I could see for a ways but at first, I could not spot anyone. I kept watching and eventually saw the man making his way slowly in our direction. I think I could kill him but we were the interlopers here. I crawled near the other end of the fallen tree and yelled.

“We will leave in peace. Just let us go.”

I then crawled back to the other end of the tree again. When a bullet hit the tree I again peeked around my end. Through the now dead weeds, I could again see the man slowly approaching. I had no real choice. My rifle was ready and I tracked the man with the sights. When he

stopped for a moment I squeezed the trigger. The man fell to the ground.

I looked all around. I could barely see a small patch of the fallen man's clothing. I just laid there and watched for some length of time. I never saw the man move or saw any movement any place else. Still, I waited even more. But nothing moved anywhere. Finally, I stood up but never stopped looking around. Now I used my small binoculars to first look hard at the fallen man then all around the area. Nothing moved anywhere. I motioned for Marcy to get up and I went towards the fallen man.

I approached him from the side his feet were pointing. My rifle was ready and my finger was on the trigger. I could see no movement of his chest but he could be breathing very shallowly. When I got close enough I brought one boot down hard on his ankle. He never flinched. One more step and I kicked him hard and again there was no response. He was very dead.

## Chapter 5

“Can you search him?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll keep watch. Take the pack. We can look through it later.”

I had seen the small daypack on the man. I heard Marcy working but I never looked down. The shooting would have been heard for a long way. I kept a good watch in all directions.

“I have everything.”

“We might as well go back to the house.”

So that is what we did – but very carefully. Back at the house, I walked all the way around it stopping often to listen for any noise from inside. When I completed the circuit we went inside.

“Stay here.”

I softly whispered in Marcy’s ear. I had the safety off and I was primed as I made my way through the small house. It was pretty messy so I had to watch where I placed my feet. The doors to all rooms were standing open which was helpful. In the last bedroom I came to I saw someone on the bed. They were covered with a blanket but the head looked like a woman. I watched closely and saw a slight movement of the blanket so I was sure they were alive. It smelled pretty bad in the room and actually, the whole house stunk pretty bad.

I approached the bed and prodded the body with the barrel of my rifle. No change. I prodded again harder. That brought a moan. Very carefully I lifted the end of the blanket closest to me. I instantly wished I never would have. The smell was awful and what I saw I could never unsee.



I backed away before I turned and returned to where Marcy was waiting.

“There is someone alive back there. They are barely alive. They are not a threat to us but I am going to kill that person just to put them out of their misery.”

“Maybe I can help them. Is it a man?”

“It is what is left of a woman. She is way beyond any help we could offer. The only thing I can do is to end her misery.”

“Let me try and help her first.”

“Please don’t go back there. What I saw will haunt me for the rest of my days. I won’t stop you but I urge you not to look and see what I saw.”

Marcy just hung her head and nodded. I walked back and made one shot that echoed through the house before returning to Marcy.

“The man shot me in the arm. I might need your help. We can check the wound now and then leave as soon as we can.”

“You should have said you were shot!”

Together we removed my jacket and my shirt. The wound luckily was very minor. The bullet skimmed my upper left arm just breaking the skin. There was some blood but it had already stopped bleeding. Using some of our drinking water Marcy cleaned the wound well enough. When she was done it started bleeding again but very little and soon stopped. I did have a first aid kit that I had put together. It wasn’t much. Some bandaids that would no longer stick and a few other items. One was a larger patch still sealed in its original package. We used that now and held it in place with a partial roll of gauze. A booby pin held the end from unraveling. I got dressed again.

“We can take a quick look for anything useful but we will not waste much time here. I don’t really want to take anything but it would be a shame for stuff to go to waste.”

So we made a fast search and did take some things with us including a somewhat clean extra blanket for Marcy. We also went through the daypack from the dead guy. The rifle was a good one and we found enough ammunition to make the rifle still useful. I broke down my twenty-two rifle so I could attach it to my pack. Marcy would now carry the new rifle. We left the smelly house behind and I only wished I could leave the memory of what I had seen and done back there behind just as easily.

I pushed hard the rest of the day to get us as far away from that house as possible. Marcy never complained. That night we slept out under the stars. At least I assumed Marcy slept anyway.

We had traveled many days since we got together but I'm sure it was only one hundred and fifty miles at the most. It will be spring long before we get to any place warm. Instead of traveling in winter we should look for a likely place to hold up for the rest of the winter. I'm not exactly sure what a good place would be but we can keep our eyes open for someplace that might work out for us. In the meantime, we will continue south.

We don't have much choice anyway because though we are okay for now I'm quite sure we will get dumped on with snow sometime soon and travel will be much, much more difficult. Now when we see a place that might hold promise for a place to hunker down over winter we check it out.

We need a place with a wood stove and some wood available in the area. Also someplace with a running river or creek that is still open and not frozen completely over and within a reasonable walking distance from the house. And signs of deer so we can add to our meat supply over the rest of the winter. It is a lot to ask for but we will keep looking.

When we came to a river we started to follow it. It flowed more or less south and it would be a source of water

if we found a place to stay. Also, critters are always more concentrated near water sources. We checked several houses but finding one with a wood stove is proving difficult for us. It was another three days of travel before a house looked promising.

It was an older farmstead with a house, a barn, and several outbuildings. There was a wood stove and just a little firewood. But one shed had a lot of old used lumber that could be used for firewood. As a big bonus, the big propane tank still had fifteen percent fuel left in it so we could use the kitchen range over winter for at least cooking and cooking inside on the range would also provide some heat in the house.

We both looked the house over very well and both of us decided we were okay with the old house. The house had obviously been searched for everything useful, likely many times but even though we found nothing for us the house itself would work. So with some work, we did some clean up in the house. Well honestly Marcy did the cleanup and I sawed or broke up the old lumber for additional firewood. I stacked all the wood in one corner room inside the house.

As a big bonus when I found and checked the attic there were many cardboard boxes up there full of different things. The big find was a big box of old quilts. I hung all the quilts on the old clothesline outside and beat them with a smooth stick to clean them and help air them out. I also found several pails that held water and so we always kept plenty of water on hand in the house.

After a few days, I went out, found, and shot a deer. We used the old gas oven to make the meat into jerky. We had done some rearranging in the house. The wood I had put in one of the bedrooms after removing the bed. There were no single mattresses so we dragged a queen-size mattress into the living room where the wood stove was located. We then slept together on the one mattress but as

brother and sister. We used a quilt to close off the hallway from the living room to help keep the heat in just that room. We used the wood very sparingly. We usually always kept our jackets on all the time except when we were sleeping. We tried to only use the wood stove when the sun was down so no one could see the smoke from the chimney.

Before we got a major snowstorm we were able to harvest some local nuts. Neither of knew for sure what nuts they were. Maybe butternuts or hickory nuts or something. Not that it mattered because they were edible and available. We had a very poor diet. Mostly nuts and meat. We did have some other food we had traded for but used it very sparingly because once it was gone it would be gone for good.

The place even had an old outhouse. It was pretty drafty but using whatever I could find on the place I sealed it up pretty good. There were plenty of paper goods to use in there. In the attic, we found some rolls of Christmas paper. Not as nice as regular toilet paper used to be but very festive!

Then we got several snow storms one right after the other. There was a lot of snow. We now used the melted snow for our water supply. It was handy because we did not even need to boil it. We kept pails of snow near the wood stove all the time. With all the snow we felt secure here and used the woodstove all day and night. We did keep the fire very low to conserve our wood supply but the heat sure felt nice.

Marcy had a deck of cards she had found someplace and had put in her pack as a trade item but now we used those cards almost daily to pass the time.

## Chapter 6

The winter finally passed and we were again free to travel. As the time of spring approached I shot another deer which we turned into jerky for traveling food. For no real reason, we left as soon as it was suitable for travel. There was obviously no rush and it is even possible we could have made a life for ourselves at the house we stayed in over winter. Marcy was in no hurry to leave but something is always pushing me to travel. So we went back on the road and she never complained.

While I knew some edible wild plants, Marcy had much more knowledge about wild plants than I did. She knew many medicinal plants including what parts of the plants to use, how to administer, and what those plants were good for treating. With all the green plants growing now she pointed out countless plants almost every day and told me how they could be used or eaten. Every day she gathered wild plants to include in our meals. She told me if we ever would stop for a few days in one location she could dry many plants for medicinal use or to use to add flavor to items we cooked. She did dry some plants by just hanging them from her pack (and sometimes on my pack too) so they would dry as we walked.

The fresh greens she picked were a great change from our almost total meat diet. We did often use her fishing gear to add fish to our diet now too. With her extensive knowledge of plants we were now eating better

and it would have been logical to stop, gather, and dry many plants to take with us. Or stay in one place and make it our home. While that would be logical, I was always pushed to keep moving for no reason that I could communicate to Marcy. She would never complain though she would sometimes shake her head or let out a sigh. Sometimes I wondered why she stayed with me though I admit that I am happy she is here.

Then we came to a house that we decided to search. It was near a river but not so close that flooding would ever be a concern. It did have a barn, a free-standing garage, and two sheds. We looked inside the house and while there were many useful things there we found only a couple of small things we could take with us. This was a common problem. We would often find things that would be very useful but those things were often either too big or too heavy for us to take with us. One thing we found here was a full fifty-pound bag of rock salt. We would take some of the salt because it was like gold used to be in the old world. But most of the salt would have to be left because it was too heavy.

This place we discovered and a well with a hand pump on it that actually worked! We both decided to take advantage of that and stay a day or two so we could wash our bodies and our clothes. Marcy discovered that the big propane tank was almost sixty percent full. We used the gas kitchen range to heat water for washing.

At the end of the second day, we were sitting on the front porch just watching the sun start to go down. Marcy turned to me.

“We could live here and life could be good.”

“Yes, we could. This place has many benefits.”

“I’m staying here.”

I turned to look at her. She was watching the sunset. It almost seemed like she was not looking at me on purpose.

“You could get by staying here.”

I mostly said that so she would look at me. She did not turn towards me. She also stayed silent.

“I’ll probably leave in the morning.”

What is the deal? No matter what I say she will not look at me. I know she is not mad at me because she is never mad. Now thinking about it, I am never mad at her either. So why is she silent and not looking at me? I decided to say something else.

“I guess we could stay here together.”

She turned her head at that and looked at me.

“Things would have to be different between us if we stayed.”

What is she talking about? How does she mean different? Why would things need to change? It makes no sense to me. We get along just fine. I just sat there and tried to figure her out. Though we always spoke freely with each other, many times we would be together and just say nothing because nothing needed to be said. She obviously wanted me to say something but I don’t know what.

I did get a response when I said we could stay here together. But I don’t know what I could add to that. Obviously, we could stay here together. The place had many benefits and the area here was full of game and there were many nut trees we had noticed along the river here. And there were fruit trees here though I don’t know what kind they are but in the late summer, we would see what fruit they produced. We could get fish in the nearby river too.

So it was a very nice place. And we get along great together so living here together would be comfortable for both of us I think. So what does she want me to say? I decided to just wait her out because I did not know what else to do. I admit it was bothering more than it should be. Finally, she spoke.

“You are really dumb sometimes, you know.”

It was not a question and was not spoken with any malice. She was just making an observation. I looked at her and she had a little tiny smile on her face. She was quite pretty I realized. Then she spoke again.

“You would need to get a haircut and shave first.”

We always took any razors we found because they were small and light and were good trade items. I know we had several right now in our packs. I should cut my hair before summer to make it cooler anyway. And I suppose I could shave. But why did she say that?

“Why do I need to do that stuff?”

“Because my husband is not going to look like a hillbilly.”

I stared at her and what she said at first seemed to make no sense. Then it hit me and I realized she was correct when she said I was really dumb sometimes. I think I was smiling now and when I looked at her she had a bigger smile.

“I guess I could get a haircut and I could take up shaving if I was no longer traveling.”

She had a bigger smile now if that was even possible and I feel my smile stretching my face.

“Okay then.”

I think we are both going to really like living here. I can tell. I’m not always dumb.

**The End**



