

TALES OF THE RANCH ***– LONELY BEAR***

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PROLOGUE: TALES OF THE RANCH – LONELY BEAR

Sergeant Jamie Collins sat nervously while Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dayfield worked on some report or other. It wasn't an entirely unfamiliar situation he was in, waiting on his commander to speak about something. However, Staff Sergeant Katie Shepherd sat to his right, waiting as well. And Jamie had no idea, well, he had an idea why he was there and it really was his fault. He should have known better and gotten more immersed in the unit before doing something like he had. It appeared Colonel Dayfield had finished up as he set the report off to the side.

"Okay, now that's out of the way" he said and set it in a pile of reports to send off. "You two getting caught up on your rest?"

"Yes sir," they both answered separately.

"Do you know why you're here?" asked Thomas.

"Sir, I can explain," said Jamie.

"Okay," said Thomas with a half a smile and leaned back in the chair. He detected neither one knew exactly why they were here, but figured he'd see what they thought.

"It's a perfectly good explanation," said Jamie.

"I bet it is," said Thomas. "And I might agree if I knew the specifics."

"Well..." said Jamie and took in a deep breath.

CHAPTER 1

Date/Time: 6 May/1422

Location: Combined Forces Command, RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

The buzzer sounded and Sergeant Jamie “Outcast” Collins immediately brought his M4A4 carbine up and started engaging targets. There were five stationary targets in his immediate view as well as two targets that kept popping up and three move moving in the background. And he only had thirty rounds in his carbine to deal with the threats. The first two stationary targets were quickly engaged as the first moving came into view and was engaged just as quickly. He changed his focus slightly and engaged one of the pop up targets and immediately switched to the next moving target. He continued to engage the targets until the bolt on his M-4 locked back. However, he wasn’t done with the exercise as he immediately transitioned to the Smith and Wesson M&P pistol, designated the M26A1, and engaged each target with two more rounds, having to reload his pistol while engaging. He eventually had engaged all the targets with two rounds apiece finishing the course of fire.

“Time, 46.46 seconds,” said Staff Sergeant Katie “Bear” Shepherd as she checked the timer box. “Not bad, but not the top time today.”

“Which is?” asked Jamie.

“Mine,” said Katie with a grin. “42.88 seconds and perfect score of 500.”

“Let’s see how I scored,” said Jamie as the other members finished their strings of fire. The line was announced clear and they walked downrange and checked the targets and found his aim was dead on.

“Close on this one,” she stated and pointed at the one round that was close to the 10 scoring area, but appeared to be just over.

“It’s touching the line,” he remarked.

“It’s close,” said Katie as she checked it again. “I can give it to you, but that means you’ll cheat the system. Now wouldn’t you rather get better instead of cheating?”

“Well, when you put it like that,” he laughed.

“Just this once,” she said and annotated his score sheet with the score of 500. Jamie placed the tape over the bullet holes in the targets and saw the score could have gone either way.

“Next time I won’t put you in a position to have to cheat,” he grinned as she helped him finish taping the last target.

“Next time just hit the center of the 10s and you’ll be okay,” she smirked and was joined by her team leader Captain Bill “Chaos” Meyers.

“Don’t tell everyone the newbie outshot his team leader!” he announced for everyone on the line and even those waiting to hear.

“What?!” exclaimed Captain Rick “Badaa” Jones as he came over and looked at the sheet. “No way!”

“Perfect 500 and a better time,” remarked Katie as she looked at the other score sheet. “New guy showing up his team leader.”

“Rick, you let the new guy beat you?” asked Lieutenant Colonel Thomas “Warbucks” Dayfield as he checked the sheet. Recently promoted after a mission where they liberated a prison camp in the Slovakian Republic, the 14th Special Operations Battalion, Operations Group Alpha was currently doing their required refit and replacement training in England. They had been pulled after the mission and given two weeks of R and R in the rear after nearly six months straight of combat operations. The back to back R and R and annual training wasn’t usual, but extenuating circumstances were taken into account before sending them on their way.

“I want a rescore,” said Rick.

“I gave you the line shots,” said Meyers. “And you still are slow and only got a 476.”

“This is horseshit!” exclaimed Rick.

“Didn’t you say dinner was on the person with the worst time and score?” asked Jamie as the other two sheets were brought over. And it appeared Staff Sergeants Heather “Trouble” Davis and Rob “Rocky” Davis, a brother and sister team, had better scores as well.

“Horseshit!” exclaimed Rick again, but would honor the bet as he knew he had been beat.

“Looks like Bear has the time and score to beat Warbucks,” said Meyers. “You think you can take the crown today?”

“Easy,” said Thomas as he got ready on the line. Major Darren “Snoopy” Thompson was ready behind him as the weapons were loaded and the targets made ready. The buzzer sounded and Thomas immediately engaged the targets before transitioning over to his pistol and completing the course of fire.

“Time, 43.06,” said Darren.

“No way!” exclaimed Thomas as the remainder of his group finished.

“Youth and all that, Colonel,” grinned Katie.

“Line is clear!” announced Sergeant Martin “Solo” Watkins from the opposing end after everyone on the line checked in.

The group traveled down to the targets and scored them, finding Thomas missed the perfect mark by two with a final score of 498. And of course, gained razzing from several of the members.

“If you had your M465, you know your time would be off,” remarked Thomas after hearing it from Katie. “That’s at least another five seconds.”

“I’ll be more than happy to go head to head with you if you want,” she said with a grin. “And I’ll still win even with a heavier rifle. You can even game it and use your Mk18 if you want.”

“It is so on the next chance we get,” laughed Thomas as he knew Shepherd was deadly with about any firearm she picked up.

“Want to go team scores for dinner?” asked Darren as he prepared his weapons.

“I haven’t seen the rest of them,” said Thomas.

“Scared?” asked Darren.

“It’s on,” grinned Thomas as he prepared the timer. And hit the buzzer which started the exercise and Darren immediately started popping rounds. It wasn’t long before his M-4 ran dry and he immediately transitioned over to the issue Sig P-226 and continued to engage. When the last round was fired, Thomas hit the end button on the timer.

“Time, 43.34,” said Thomas.

“Bull...shit,” laughed Darren.

“Actually, he’s giving you the benefit of the doubt,” said Rick. “I’ve got 43.66.”

“Let’s see how you scored,” said Thomas after the line was declared clear. They headed downrange and Thomas automatically keyed in on the targets with an “Uh oh.”

“Dammit!” exclaimed Darren. They totaled the score up for 497. One errant pistol shot in the 8 scoring area and one rifle in the 9 caused him to drop from a perfect score. “How’d everyone else do?”

“Frank got his usual 500, but with a 45.09 time, Jeremy got a 480 with a 47.47 time and Marty got an...ewww...432 with a 50.52 time,” said Rick as he looked the score sheets over.

“Pistol jammed and threw me completely off rhythm,” said Staff Sergeant Martin “Solo” Watkins. “I was throwing them like crazy afterwards.”

“So out team won?” asked Thomas who knew the answer in advance.

“Amber was 466 with a 49.16, Greg came in at 49.88 with a 470 and Brian got a 496 with 45.93,” said Rick. “We’ll add them up, but yeah, Tom’s team cleaned up today.”

“Dinner,” said Thomas as he and Darren competed regularly as individuals and recently added their teams for an additional challenge.

“Still not the best team today...” said Rick as he looked over the total scores. “It appears that someone beat the top dogs today.”

“Who?” exclaimed Thomas.

“Bill and his team had an average score of 486 with an average time of 46.74,” said Rick.

“I demand a recount!” remarked Thomas.

“So, dinner for us?” asked Staff Sergeant Adam “Crash” Neal with a grin.

“Not a chance,” said Thomas. “Your team leader was afraid to make the bet.”

“Next time,” said Meyers.

“That’s everyone,” said the range master who was utterly bored. Called on from time to time to assist with marksmanship training, the current unit needed little of his expertise and policed themselves on the range far better than he could. Other than operating the safety tower, he had little to do but read the local newspaper and occasionally glance to make sure nobody was violating the rules of the range.

“Good deal,” said Thomas as he passed over the score sheets. “We’re finished folks. Go ahead and police the brass, pull the targets and get the trash cleaned up.”

“Please make sure the items that can be recycled are put in the proper bins,” announced the range master. “But not to worry about sorting the brass; I’ve got lags that do that.”

“Lags?” asked Thomas.

“Local prisoners,” said the range master. “Only those with misdemeanors and whatnot. Part of their public service sentence is helping sort things for recycling and reloading.”

“Got it,” said Thomas as he grabbed one of the buckets and started collecting the brass.

“So any suggestions?” asked Jamie to Katie as they started clearing the range of the brass and garbage. It seemed unusual since as a unit they shot more than most battalions in proficiency fire, but the qualification course was a “check box” they had to have in order to complete the refit and replacement training. And even slightly more unusual since the weapons they were firing were not what they typically carried on missions. They had already done the proficiency

fire on their duty weapons the day prior and Jamie had scored perfect on his M203 grenade launcher.

“Yeah, shoot straighter next time,” she remarked.

“Really?” he asked.

“You were leading a bit too much with your pistol,” she said. “Back it off just a tad.”

“Okay,” he said with a smile but found she had already turned her back. “Thanks.”

She turned and gave him a polite smile as she continued to police up the brass and dump it into the nearby receptacles. Jamie was curious about the teammate who appeared to outperform almost everyone in the unit despite her small stature. She wasn’t just competitive, but took perfection in her job to a whole new level and might be described as anal retentive to some. But she was outstanding in the job she performed and was the model troop for the Cider unit.

But Jamie also saw she was attractive despite being all gung-ho over the military side of the house and genuinely wanted to get to know her better. Maybe even on a personal level. Most of the other females that were in the unit had companions or boyfriends of some sort, but she apparently shied away from the personal side of the job and focused in entirely on being professional and the top member of the unit. He had briefly seen her during the R and R time while visiting one of the local attractions in Germany, but had been unable to catch her during her visit before she disappeared in the crowd.

And today seemed no better at starting a conversation as a minimum as she was entirely in the zone during the qualification save the times she was pointing out how badly the leadership was shooting. It was hard to start a conversation when she was so focused.

“Okay kids, head for the cleaning area,” announced Thomas as he inspected the line and found it passed the basic inspection. The group gathered their weapons and headed over to the cleaning shed where they pulled out cleaning kits and immediately set to scrubbing down their weapons. For those that didn’t typically carry the M-4 carbines, they would place them back in storage after cleaning and oiling them. Or reattaching the items needed like the M203s. The group seemed in high spirits especially since they had all passed the course with flying colors even for those with low scores. And since it was Friday, they all were looking forward to the weekend and the time off it afforded.

“Doing anything this weekend?” asked Rob Davis.

“Nothing really planned,” said Jamie as he pulled a patch through his barrel. “You?”

“The girlfriend and I are going to Stonehenge,” said Rob. “I think a bunch of folks are heading to some castle or other.”

“I’ll probably just get caught up on sleep,” said Jamie. “I just came from S and T, remember?”

“Yeah, it’s a bitch,” said Rob. “Although ours wasn’t half as bad as it is now.”

“Lucky,” said Jamie. “They will flat wear you out these days. I might end up wandering the town a little bit. Just see Oxford and what the deal is.”

“All right guys and gals, listen up,” said Command Chief Master Sergeant Greg “Grumpy” Henry. “This is your official weekend safety briefing. We all have a mandatory check in between 1300 and 1500 on Sunday, in uniform, sober and on time. Major...pardon me, Colonel Dayfield and I will be waiting and the quicker we get signed in, the better. Otherwise, no fighting unless you call us first, no getting caught by the cops and if you are, we aren’t coming to bail you out until Monday at 0700. So you’d best hope your buds can break you out. Otherwise, remember the rules of the road here-”

“There are rules?” asked Captain Dave “Rowdy” Lawson.

“Yeah, drive on the left side and don’t hit solid or moving objects,” said Greg. “Do be mindful and considerate of our British guests and don’t cause problems. No curfew for the moment, Threat Condition is still Bravo, those that choose to carry a personal defense weapon will do so concealed and only be used as a last resort. Colonel, am I missing anything?” asked Greg.

“Nope, next week is mainly classroom stuff as well as some technical classes. We’re getting some new equipment and gadgets and the tech support guys and company reps will be here so make sure you pick their brain. Otherwise, as always, stay safe out there and don’t cause problems,” said Thomas. “Team leads, go ahead and check your folks and get a generic idea of where they are heading this weekend.”

“Well troopers?” asked Rick.

“Stonehenge,” said Rob.

“Catching up on sleep and heading into town tomorrow afternoon,” said Jamie.

“Sounds very...boring,” laughed Rick as he turned to Heather.

“Heading to Birmingham tomorrow morning with Giggles, Sister, Monster, Chevy and Casper for shopping,” said Heather. “Speaking of, Katie, you’re more than welcome to come with us.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m just going to hang out here and get caught up on sleep and head into town tomorrow,” said Katie from an adjacent table. “Thanks though.”

“You sure? We’re going to have a blast and spend our hard earned combat pay,” said Heather.

“Maybe,” said Katie after she thought about it. “I’ll let you know tonight, okay?”

“Okies,” said Heather.

“Okay, a bunch of us are heading to Broughton Castle in the morning and should be back by tomorrow evening,” said Rick. “Just remember to sign in on Sunday. Otherwise, be careful, don’t cause trouble and mind your manners.”

The remainder of the groups were letting their leadership know what their plans were and were preparing to scatter to the winds once the all clear was given. Rick headed over to Thomas to let him know everything was ready.

“And who are you giving your report to?” asked Rick.

“I give mine to Amber,” laughed Thomas.

“You’re welcome to come to the castle with us tomorrow,” said Rick.

“What time are you leaving?” asked Thomas.

“Around 8:30 or so,” said Rick.

“Okay, I don’t think I’ll be out too late tonight,” said Thomas.

“Oh yeah, you’ve got a date,” laughed Rick.

“It’s not a date,” said Thomas with a shake of his head. “And I’ve got a chaperone.”

“I’m sure you do,” laughed Darren.

“He won’t get into trouble,” said Amber.

“You’re the chaperone?” laughed Captain Michael “Token” Parsons. “That’s like the wolf guarding the sheep.”

“I made a promise to Mrs. Dayfield to keep Mr. Dayfield out of trouble while we were gone. And that means protecting him from hot pilots that make gaga eyes at him when she came down to see him this week,” grinned Amber.

“She wasn’t making gaga eyes at me,” objected Thomas.

“Yeah, she was,” giggled Staff Sergeant Nancy “Giggles” Dugger from behind him.

“I didn’t notice,” said Thomas.

“Are you that dense?” asked Captain Shannon “Volley” Parsons.

“She’s married!” protested Thomas.

“That doesn’t stop some,” said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ashley “Sunshine” Scott. “And she was making gaga eyes at you and giggling at every word you said like some teenage girl.”

“No way,” said Thomas shaking his head. “It was not that bad!”

“I would have gotten the Trouble brief had I done anything even remotely close to what she did,” said Heather with a grin.

“You just might anyway,” laughed Thomas. “But there was no flirting going on!”

“Perhaps not from you. But it was plainly obvious she was struck with the handsome figure Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dayfield presented,” said First Lieutenant Carmen “Chevy” Ford very theatrically as if telling a love story. Originally from Georgia, her southern drawl was reminiscent of Vivien Leigh from *Gone with the Wind*. “And to garner his attention, she batted her eyes and primped her hair and positively swooned over her dashing hero.”

“You guys are just wrong!” laughed Thomas as the rest of the group was in stitches. “The girls are ganging up on me and being mean!”

“You picked them,” said Darren between gulps of air.

“Not really,” laughed Thomas.

“Don’t worry, if I have to play my possessive act and start running my hand up his leg, I’ll keep him out of trouble,” remarked Amber.

“I know it won’t go that far,” said Thomas.

“I might do it just to keep you on your toes,” grinned Amber. “And to prevent any naughty thoughts from entering Shelly Wilson’s pretty little head if she thinks you’re already taken.”

“Yeah, I’ll head with you tomorrow,” said Thomas. “Provided I live through tonight.”

“Is she bringing a chaperone?” asked Darren.

“She’s bringing her entire crew,” said Thomas. “Which is why I’m asking for lusty bachelors to tag along as well. Who knows what romantic interludes might happen?”

“Which are?” asked Darren.

“Your son for one,” laughed Thomas. “As well as Mongo, Leroy and Elvis. They get the other table with the crew and I get the private candlelit dinner with Major Wilson.”

“Absolutely not!” protested Amber. “How else am I supposed to hang all over you?”

“You’re horrible!” exclaimed Thomas with a laugh. “It’s a friendly dinner.”

“For some maybe,” chuckled Darren as he turned to his son, Sergeant Johnny “Junior” Thompson. “Did you fail to mention this to me?”

“I’m a grown man Dad,” said Johnny. “As you’ve told me before. And besides, you know I can’t refuse an order from my leadership.”

“Thomas ordered you to go?” asked Darren.

“No, sometimes business and pleasure mix,” he grinned.

“I’m going to have to have a talk with that boy behind the shed,” Darren muttered.

“At least you can meet your future daughter in law,” remarked Rick and added with a grin. “Unlike future son in laws.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Darren in a tone as his daughter had recently become seriously involved in a relationship. And it grated on Darren not to be able to meet nor threaten the boy in question.

“All right everyone,” said Thomas as it appeared most of the members had finished cleaning their weapons. “Make sure you lock up your weapons and the sensitive items. Otherwise, you all are dismissed for the weekend.”

The group finished up their tasks of cleaning and reassembled the weapons. They would clean them again as usual, but not until the next week when they would let the oil take effect and soak through some of the carbon making the task easier. They departed in pairs and threes as they chatted away about the plans for the weekend and the little things in life.

“How much longer are you going to be on crutches?” asked Jamie as he caught up with Specialist Reggie “Burnout” Nicholson.

“Another week or two I think,” said Reggie. “Which is way too long.”

“I broke my foot when I was in high school and was on crutches for two months,” said Jamie. “So I feel your pain.”

“The doc said probably another three weeks and then into rehab. I’m cheating a bit though by working it in advance,” said Reggie.

“Sometimes you just need to let it heal,” said Jamie.

“Man, my second mission out and this happened,” said Reggie as he stopped to shift the carbine attached to his patrol pack from hitting the crutches as he walked.

“You want me to carry that?” asked Jamie.

“Nah, I got it,” said Reggie. “Thanks anyway.”

“Are you going to take part in the field exercises?” asked Jamie.

“If I can,” said Reggie. “And probably even if I can’t.”

“Let it heal man,” said Jamie. “You aren’t proving anything if you go out and get hurt again and it sets your rehab time back that much more.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Reggie. “I busted my ass to get into Cider and then get hurt. Just sucks.”

“Well, at least you’re still with the team,” said Jamie.

“Yeah, it’s nice having a doctor and staff around,” said Reggie. “Colonel Dayfield was smart to get one when he could.”

“And he’s a good doc as well,” said Jamie. “Even I learned a few things in his class this week.”

“He’s saved a lot of lives,” said Reggie. “Along with Sergeant Major Carlson.”

“Yeah, I’ve got some big shoes to fill,” said Jamie.

“You’ve done okay from what I heard,” said Reggie.

“Still, not easy hearing about the man, the myth and the legend of Scott Carlson. But nobody has said anything about me in particular, so it’s more of a challenge to live up to expectations rather than be annoyed by it,” said Jamie.

“Good way of looking at it,” said Reggie.

“He was here from the start,” said Jamie. “Well, from before the start as well. So it’s natural the teams look at him differently.”

“Yeah, and you being outcast doesn’t help,” laughed Reggie.

“Yeah, I’ll never live that down,” chuckled Jamie. “Why Burnout?”

“When I was going through S and T, one of the instructors said I had a face that looked like a burned out rock and roll star since I look drugged out when I get tired. I kindly reminded him that I was black and not many rock and roll stars were. And of course, the rest of the instructors picked up on it and the name stuck,” he explained.

“There’s always Jimi Hendrix,” said Jamie.

“Yeah, I need to grow a fro and go with that,” laughed Reggie as they arrived at the temporary dorms that housed the various units as they came in to refit and receive replacements. Luckily

there weren't many units on the base at that particular time and the occupants were single to a room. So they had a lot more privacy save sharing a bathroom which Jamie was sharing with Johnny Thompson. He stowed his weapons in the small locker and shed his uniform top before plopping down in the seat and flipping on the radio. As he started taking off his boots, he heard a knock at his bathroom door.

"Yeah," he said as he flipped off the first boot. Johnny came in through the bathroom.

"Hey man, can I borrow that blue shirt of yours?" he asked.

"The button up?" asked Jamie.

"Yeah," said Johnny.

"Go for it," said Jamie and nodded towards the wall locker. "It should be hanging up."

"Cool," said Johnny as he dug into the wall locker and found the shirt on a hanger. "You want to come with us tonight?"

"Nah," said Jamie as he removed his other boot. "I think I'll hang around here and sip a beer out by the fireplace."

"Kinda lame on a Friday night," remarked Johnny.

"From what I understand, there's four dudes and four gals," said Jamie. "Adding number five kinda makes that awkward."

"Other fish in the sea," said Johnny.

"Which the fireplace tends to get some from time to time," said Jamie. "I noticed last Friday when we got here it's kind of the communal spot for the base at night."

"Well, there is that," agreed Johnny. "And someone has to keep those Texan girls company."

"Texas girls?" asked Jamie.

"Yeah, an artillery unit from Texas is on base right now," said Johnny. "And they have a few attractive females in their midst."

"So who else is going to take care of them while you're out with the aircrew?" grinned Jamie.

"Apparently not those pogues from that support battalion," laughed Johnny. "Mind if I grab a shower first?"

"Go for it," said Jamie. "I'm heading out for a run."

“Alright, see you later,” said Johnny and noticed something on the way out. He snatched the bottle of cologne sitting on a shelf on the way out. Jamie chuckled as it was usual for military members and friends to share...and steal items with and from each other. As the old saying went, civilian friends want the item back you borrowed. Military friends have been stealing from each other for so long that nobody knows who really owns what anymore. And Jamie figured it would get passed around and eventually end up back in his possession before it was empty. It was something that had been going on forever in the military.

After changing into his PT gear, he headed out onto the large outdoor track and stretched out before starting in on a five mile run. He set a pretty quick pace and headed around the two and a half mile course. There were others out on the track and he noticed Katie Shepherd ahead of him. Seeing there was potentially an opportunity to catch up and maybe even get noticed, he increased his speed slightly hoping to overtake her. However, a half mile into his catch up period, he noticed the distance wasn't decreasing any and she was keeping the same pace he was. He was getting slightly winded and figured it might be best to back off a tad since falling short of his planned distance meant he would have to try harder the next day. So as he slowed down, he tried to think of other ways of trying to meet her outside of work and maybe even get to know her. And maybe still on a personal level as opposed to the work she was dedicated to.

CHAPTER 2

Date/Time: 7 May/1254

Location: Oxford, England

“I’ll have the shepherd’s pie please,” said Jamie as he sat at the small outdoor café for lunch after wandering through Oxford. It was a pleasant afternoon out and he was able to wear short sleeves without any problems that day.

“We’re out of lamb at the moment sir,” said the waitress. “Rationing and all. Might I suggest the cottage pie instead?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Jamie as he handed back the menu.

“Would you like the side salad?” asked the waitress.

“Sure, that sounds nice,” said Jamie with a smile.

“Drink sir?” asked the waitress.

“A Fanta please,” said Jamie. “Thank you.”

“Be right out sir,” said the waitress as she skipped off inside to deliver the order. It was fairly strange to Jamie that less than four hours away, people were dying on the battlefield and here he was in an outdoor café with others like nothing in the world was going on. However, the fact that certain items were not available meant the British people, not unlike Americans were sometimes doing without. A far cry from when he was growing up and remembered seeing the wars on TV while having a refrigerator and pantry filled with food. The waitress returned and set his drink down with a smile and stated the meal would be served in short order.

Jamie looked around as he had this feeling that he was being watched. He had the feeling all morning, but never could put his finger on what it was exactly. He shook it off as being in a foreign country and still being a bit uneasy after coming away from his first combat missions. Many soldiers have felt the effects after coming home of still being a bit edgy after their initial exposure to combat and Jamie knew it was something that would happen. He had been in a shooting situation before, but nothing like the longer exposure he had been witness to just recently. And getting tossed into the mix without proper immersion training didn’t help matters. So he put the thoughts out of his mind for the moment as the waitress came back with his order of cottage pie and the small side salad that was heavy on cabbage and carrots. However, everything was tasty and he started in on his meal and the waitress came back to check on him.

“Everything alright sir?” she asked politely.

“Absolutely delicious,” he stated. “Everything tastes fresh even.”

“We grow the vegetables ourselves sir,” said the waitress with a smile. “My family has a greenhouse that helps support us.”

“And the cow?” he grinned and took another bite.

“Our neighbors have the cows,” she laughed. “Do you need anything else at the moment?”

“Not unless you can ship this to the front every once in a while,” he laughed.

“My brothers said the same thing,” said the waitress.

“Are they serving?” asked Jamie.

“One is in Slovakia with the Army right now and the other is in the RAF in Poland,” she said with some pride. “And next year when I turn eighteen, I plan on joining one or the other.”

“Tell them thanks for their service,” said Jamie.

“I should be thanking you,” said the waitress. “Your countries helped liberate us.”

“It was our pleasure,” said Jamie.

“If you need anything, just yell,” she smiled and headed back towards the inside. Jamie finished up the meal as the waitress returned with a coffee and the check. He didn’t have enough local currency to pay, but was able to pay it off in NAU Credits at a favorable exchange rate. The British Pound was still getting back on its feet, financially speaking, and the exchange rate was still heavily biased in favor of the North American countries. But he left a generous tip in British currency for the waitress as he departed the location. And again got the feeling like he was being followed and watched. He ducked into a nearby shop to see if anyone else was around and peeked out the window as soon as he was inside.

“Hello,” said the shopkeeper. “Can I help you?”

“Just looking around, thanks,” said Jamie.

“Something for the Misses perhaps?” asked the shopkeeper.

“Sorry?” asked Jamie as he turned around and found himself in a women’s fashion store.

“Something for the wife or girlfriend?” asked the shopkeeper.

“Ahh...my mother,” said Jamie.

“Well, if you need any help, let me know,” said the shopkeeper. Jamie browsed the wares, completely unaware of what size anything was or what he could get for his mother, but kept his

eye on the exterior the entire time as well just in case. Nobody came along and Jamie eventually found something for wasting the time anyway. He was unsure if his mother would ever wear the scarf he bought, but it actually was fairly nice and would serve her well in the cold Nebraska winters. Again, he paid in NAU Credits, but at a worse exchange rate than before.

“Mind if I ask a favor?” asked Jamie.

“Sure lad,” said the shopkeeper as he made change in British currency.

“Do you have a backdoor I can use?” he asked.

“Got trouble following you?” asked the shopkeeper. “I can call the police.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” said Jamie. “Just a feeling I’ve been getting.”

“You can use the back door lad,” said the shopkeeper. “It leads to the alley and back onto the main street in about a block or so.”

“It’s appreciated,” said Jamie as he was led back through the storage area and out the back door. Once he was in the alley, he didn’t see anyone else and headed back the way he came and entered the street once again. There wasn’t much more he was planning on doing in the town and headed back towards the bus stop for the military personnel to head back to base. He arrived at the bus stop and found he was in luck that the shuttle would arrive in about ten minutes. There were about a dozen people waiting around for the shuttle but Jamie didn’t recognize any of them. Eventually the bus arrived and the waiting crowd boarded after the others got off. The half hour drive was uneventful and Jamie decided to catch up a bit on his sleep. Heading back to the dorms, he didn’t get the feeling he was being watched anymore and chalked it up as being in an unfamiliar environment.

Date/Time: 8 May/1422

Location: Combined Forces Command, RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

Jamie had finally been able to get his timing perfect when he headed out for a run earlier that day. He had seen Katie Shepherd starting her run and managed to only miss her by about a minute or so. And he figured it would be far easier to catch her this time as opposed to the two attempts over the past two days to get into position. However, he found that yet again, she was setting a serious pace for someone so short. And yet again, she beat him to the finish line and started walking off the run she had completed. He set his pace back just a little as he approached the finish line, puffing pretty good after trying to catch her. He collected his water bottle and towel before heading over to where she was stretching out over in the grass and joined her to stretch himself after the hard run.

“You are fast,” he said with a nod as he started to stretch.

“For a short girl, right?” she asked.

“No, I mean you are fast for anyone,” said Jamie.

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry, I’m just used to the short jokes.”

“I didn’t notice you were short,” he said with a grin.

She looked at him with a smirk before shaking her head slightly and continuing to stretch. Jamie happened to notice she was built like a brick outhouse and admired the shapely legs she was stretching out. “It’s Bear, right? We’ve never really been introduced.”

“Yeah, they call me Bear,” said Katie. “But out here, it’s Katie.”

“Jamie Collins,” he said and reached across to shake her hand. She took it politely and changed her stance to stretch out her left leg.

“You’re Outcast, right?” asked Katie.

“Yeah,” said Jamie.

“Why Outcast?” she asked.

“I don’t play by the rules,” said Jamie. “And I wasn’t a team player before I got here.”

“And now?” asked Katie.

“I learned the hard way,” he chuckled finally glad to break into a conversation. “Why Bear?”

“When I went through basic training, my drill instructor said I needed to be meaner. So he made me growl like a bear any time I said anything. If I answered a question, it had to be proceeded with a growl. If I had to go to the latrine, it had to be proceeded by a growl. So my platoon started calling me Bear along with the instructors and it’s followed me ever since,” said Katie.

“You still growl?” he asked with a grin.

“Sometimes,” she chuckled. “Like when I hear someone trying to outrun me on the track.”

“I didn’t think I was that obvious,” he laughed.

“You have heavy footsteps,” she laughed. “I heard you from a quarter mile away.”

“I’ll get a head start next time,” he laughed.

“I’ll still beat you,” she grinned.

“Hey guys,” said Staff Sergeant Reuben “Chewie” Bruno as he walked up. “Don’t forget we have to check in. And it ends in less than a half an hour.”

“Shit! I forgot!” exclaimed Katie. “I’ll be there.”

“Hurry up,” said Bruno as he continued to the check in facility.

“Can I ask a favor?” asked Katie after he departed.

“Yeah, sure,” said Jamie.

“My barracks is fifteen minutes from here and I’ll never get changed and make it back in time. Do you mind if I changed in your room?” she asked.

“Yeah, no problem,” said Jamie. “But changed into what?”

“I always keep a spare uniform in my pack,” said Katie. “Along with boots.”

“I see,” said Jamie as he rose to leave. He helped her off the ground and she collected her pack where she had stowed it under a nearby bush. “How come you carry a spare uniform?”

“I got caught wearing shorts and a t-shirt during an air raid prior to Phoenix and ended up spending the better part of four hours in a shelter in fifty degree weather. Since then I learned to take extra clothing with me,” she replied.

“I can completely understand,” said Jamie. “I mean, there’s not an ounce of fat on your body to keep you warm.”

“Thanks,” she replied. “I think.”

“It was a compliment,” he said as they traveled the short distance to the temporary dorm facilities where they were staying during the month long refresher training.

“Are you flirting with me?” she asked very directly.

“I...umm...maybe,” he stammered. “I’m sorry if you were offended.”

“No, it’s just...” she started to say. “I don’t get flirted with much.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “Just unusual.”

Jamie didn’t say anything as whatever he could have said might have been construed as wrong. They entered the room and he grabbed his set of fatigues to don and headed for the bathroom, leaving her more space to change in the main living area. It didn’t take long for Jamie to pull on

the pants and t-shirt, but courtesy took over and he asked if it was okay to step out. She replied it was okay and he came out to retrieve his boots and uniform top. However, he wasn't expecting to see her in her underwear pulling out the pair of pants from her bag. And his suspicions were confirmed that there wasn't an ounce of fat on her frame. He blushed up and attempted to get back in the bathroom.

"Jamie, it's okay," she said and pulled on a t-shirt without getting into a rush.

"I didn't mean to, umm, sorry, uhh," he stammered and avoided looking at her.

"It only matters if we both think it matters," she said. "Listen, you can't be in the job we have and be modest. It's only underwear and I was decent otherwise."

"I just..." he stammered.

"Have you seen a girl in her underwear before?" she asked as she pulled on her pants.

"Well, yeah," he said.

"So now you've seen two girls in their underwear," she replied as she slipped on the pants.

"The last one didn't look as nice as you," he said.

"Now see, that was flirting," she said and looked at him from the tops of her eyes.

"I..umm," he stammered.

"Put your boots on Sergeant," she said and nodded at his footwear.

"Yes, ma'am," he said and immediately set to getting the boots on and tied. And without looking at her the entire time along with the blush covering his entire face. She smiled briefly at the scene and laughed slightly at his behavior. She pulled her own boots on before grabbing the holstered Sig P228 pistol and magazine pouches from the small waist pack she had been wearing while running and clipping them on her belt.

"You always carry a pistol as well?" he asked after finally getting over the embarrassment.

"Yeah, why don't you?" she asked.

"I didn't know we were supposed to," he said.

"It's a good habit to get into," she replied. "C'mon, we need to get going."

"Yes ma'am," he replied and grabbed his own pistol. "I wondered why they issued me a concealed holster when I got to the unit."

“Stop with the ma’am stuff please,” she said as he locked the door behind them. “I told you to call me Katie.”

“Sorry...Katie,” he said.

“You boys are always hilarious the first time one of us pulls off a t-shirt,” she laughed as they headed to the building to sign in. “It’s like you never saw a girl in her underwear.”

“I just wasn’t expecting to come out of the bathroom and find you in your skivvies,” he chuckled. “I’m still the new guy, remember?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find Heather stripping down eventually,” said Katie. “It gets even more entertaining when we have to share showers.”

“I suppose it’s better to learn now rather than when it really matters,” he replied as they came to the building. Courtesy took over and he opened the door for her and they entered the building to find several tables for the different units that happened to be at the base at the time. They eventually tracked down their unit and found Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dayfield along with Command Chief Master Sergeant Greg Henry sitting at a small table.

“Bear!” exclaimed Thomas. “Thought you were going to be a no show.”

“Sorry sir,” she said as she located her name and signed next to it. “I was out running and lost track of time.”

“Well, you aren’t the last at least,” said Thomas and nodded at Jamie.

“I was running as well sir,” said Jamie.

“You two running together huh?” asked Greg although not meaning anything by it.

“No! We just happened to be on the track at the same time!” exclaimed Jamie.

“I didn’t mean you two were holding hands and skipping along,” said Greg.

“I...sorry Chief,” said Jamie as he signed in as well.

“Okay, training in the pool tomorrow,” said Thomas. “Bring a towel and a set of uniforms and boots you won’t need for a while and a complete change of clothing. We get to go swimming.”

“What time sir?” asked Katie.

“Your team is scheduled for...” said Thomas as he looked at the sheet. “0945. And Mister Collins you are at 1015 with your team. But everyone shows at 0800 as we will probably run ahead of schedule.”

“Specifically what training in the pool sir?” asked Jamie.

“Oh, it’s that fun water survival training,” laughed Greg. “You get dumped into the water, get to shed all your gear and come out alive.”

“I hate that,” remarked Katie with a frown.

“Because you sink,” laughed Thomas. “I think the group is heading into town tonight for dinner and drinks. I’m not sure who the focal point is, but it’s at the Ye Olde Hare.”

“Sounds great,” said Katie.

“Jamie, you’re more than welcome as well,” said Thomas.

“I’ll be there with bells on Colonel,” said Jamie.

“Okay, enjoy the rest of your day,” said Thomas as he noticed there was one final blank spot. “How long have we been sitting here?”

“Close to two hours,” said Greg.

“And in that time you never thought to sign your own name?” laughed Thomas.

“I was busy,” laughed Greg and signed the final spot. “Bear seemed in good spirits, but Collins appeared to be nervous about something.”

“I didn’t notice,” said Thomas.

“Strange they came in together,” said Greg.

“I didn’t put much thought into it,” said Thomas.

“I guess my dirty old mind is playing tricks,” laughed Greg.

As they departed, Jamie noticed Katie was still at his side as he headed towards the dorms. “Can’t get enough of me?”

“My pack is in your room,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

“You are a silly one,” she chuckled.

“I forgot,” he said.

“You want a hint of advice?” she asked.

“About?” asked Jamie.

“Stop being so nervous around the women,” she said. “We’re no different than you guys except the fact you have a few extra parts.”

“I…” he started to say. “It’s different with you folks.”

“I’m not sure how,” she replied. “You’ve worked around women before right?”

“Well, yeah,” said Jamie. “Just not in combat situations.”

“We can do our part,” said Katie.

“I realize that,” said Jamie. “I saw as much on our last mission.”

“So just treat us like one of the guys and everything will be okay,” she replied.

“I guess,” he said and opened the door to his room. She collected her items and stuffed them inside the pack to take out when she got to her room.

“You going tonight?” she asked before departing.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” he said.

“It was nice talking to you,” she replied. “Maybe we can continue tonight.”

“Now who’s flirting?” he grinned.

“That wasn’t flirting,” she objected. “That was a team member curious about one of her new teammates she doesn’t know much about.”

“Oh,” he said.

“So maybe we’ll talk tonight,” she said and departed.

CHAPTER 3

Date/Time: 8 May/2012

Location: Carterton, England

“You look familiar,” said Heather as she saw who her brother’s date was that evening. The unit had arrived at different times in the restaurant in the local town and had a meal together before the training started again the next day. It was odd that they spent so much time with each other at work that they stuck together even during their time off. But through thick and thin, they did about everything together. From time to time outsiders were welcomed into the fold as was seen by the unknown female that had accompanied Rob Davis that evening. Rob was a bit of a ladies man and tended to attract all sorts of women, but his current date was different as Heather noticed. She was attractive, but more in a girl next door way.

“I was the flight engineer on the Chinook that took you guys in on that rescue mission last month,” said the female and stuck out her hand. “I’m Erin Hawke.”

“Oh! That’s where I know you! Heather Davis,” she said politely and shook her hand. “I thought your unit was based in Germany. How did you end up here?”

“We have our refit and refresher training as well,” said Erin. “And I found out Rob was going to be around so we met and he bought me dinner for saving his life.”

“Once you get to know him, you’ll regret that,” laughed Heather.

“You’re his sister, right?” asked Erin.

“Yeah, that’s my big brother,” laughed Heather. The two carried on a conversation for several minutes getting to know each other a little bit.

“Rob seems like a nice guy,” said Erin.

“He can be a pain,” said Heather with a laugh. “But he is my brother so I love him. And normally he’s tolerable.”

“Sibling rivalry?” laughed Erin.

“Not in the least,” laughed Heather. “I’m smarter and stronger than he is. Isn’t that right?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure,” said Rob as he was drawn into the conversation.

“He’s a hoot,” laughed Erin. “I’ll be back here in a minute.”

She departed for the rest room area and Heather scooted her chair over closer to her brother. "So, what happened to Melanie?"

"Who?" asked Rob.

"Your other girlfriend?" asked Heather.

"Ah, you know how it is," said Rob with shrugged shoulders. "Had to part ways."

"This one is different," said Heather.

"How so?" asked Rob.

"She's pretty, but not the flashy types you tend to go after," said Heather.

"Well, maybe I'm turning over a new leaf," said Rob.

"That'll happen," said Heather with a roll of her eyes.

"What?" asked Rob.

"Normally you go after the ones that are model perfect without a brain in their heads. This one seems to be able to string a coherent sentence together. Not your normal motive," said Heather.

"I like her, okay?" said Rob. "She's different than most of the girls I've been with."

"So what do you like about her?" asked Heather.

"She doesn't put up with my crap for one," he laughed. "She's smart, can carry on a good conversation...just an overall nice woman."

"Not a girl?" asked Heather.

"No, for certain she's a woman," chuckled Rob. "And a lady too."

"Then I'd latch on to her and never let go," laughed Heather. "Hey, I think it's nice you found a decent one for a change."

"They are always decent," said Rob.

"And normally dumber than a box of rocks," said Heather with another roll of her eyes.

"Okay, so I got a smart one," said Rob.

"Do me a favor? Don't screw this one up," said Heather.

“Would I ever do that?” he asked with a laugh and pulled his glass in front of her. “To not screwing it up with the smart ones.”

“To my dumb brother that will screw it up,” laughed Heather as she clinked her glass against his. Erin returned and Heather made room for her to sit back down. She did notice that Rob wasn’t his usual self and was a bit more reserved with the new lady friend of his. Which she found highly unusual, but was happy he was finally growing up a bit.

“You leaving slacker?” asked Rob as Jamie got up from the table and started heading towards the patio door.

“Nah, just getting a breath of fresh air,” said Jamie as he collected his beer from the table. “This is such a backwards place. Driving on the wrong side of the road, no sunshine and warm beer.”

“Ah, to be in England laddie!” exclaimed Rob with a horrid British accent. “Don’t stay away too long. Badaa is going to have a dance off with Warbucks soon. I hear he’s putting on his world famous robot dance act.”

“It’s not world famous,” said Rick from the other side of the table. “It’s universally famous. The aliens came down to learn it from me!”

“I’d bet,” laughed Jamie as he departed onto the patio area. The restaurant that converted into a pub after hours was small and cramped like a lot of European places were and Jamie was glad for a little space for the moment. He wasn’t antisocial by any means, but being inside the pub with over a hundred people wasn’t as easy as it sounded and sometimes you just need a break from people. However, his solitude was interrupted before long.

“You don’t have to be an outcast at social functions either,” said Katie as she walked out of the pub. Jamie had seen her that evening, but hadn’t been able to talk to her as he intended.

“Just crowded in there,” said Jamie. “And I’m not an outcast if you’re here.”

“Well, true,” said Katie with a laugh as one of the wait staff appeared.

“I’ll have another pilsner,” said Jamie. “And whatever the lady wants.”

“I think I’ll have one of those as well,” said Katie. “Aren’t you going to invite me to sit down?”

“I didn’t think you needed an invitation,” said Jamie as he swept a chair out of a table. “If the madam will have a seat please.”

“Silly,” she laughed and sat down.

“I haven’t seen you drinking tonight,” he stated.

“I haven’t been,” she replied. “Or more specifically I was waiting for someone to buy one for me and invite me to have a seat for a chat.”

“That almost sounds like you’re flirting,” he remarked.

“Maybe,” she said with a slight grin.

“Guess I’m the lucky guy,” he chuckled.

“Maybe,” she grinned fully this time. The two continued their talk from before and got to know each other a lot more than they already did. Jamie was careful not to flirt any more than he already had since he didn’t want to mess up with a teammate and alienate her. But the looks between the two said volumes about the attraction they both had. Before long, a half hour had passed and they were still talking. Katie found it was slightly relaxing not having to talk about work all the time and enjoyed the conversation immensely.

“C’mon guys! Dance competition time!” said Amber as she popped out onto the patio area.

“Who’s the judges?” asked Katie.

“I dunno, some British girls,” said Amber. “C’mon, get involved.”

“I don’t dance,” said Jamie.

“You will learn mister,” said Amber. “Now move it!”

“I don’t have a choice?” asked Jamie with a laugh.

“You do. No dancing, no beer,” said Amber as she snatched his glass off the table.

“I can always order another one,” said Jamie.

“That’s against the rules,” said Amber.

“What rules?” asked Jamie.

“Mine!” exclaimed Amber. “Move it!”

Jamie had a laugh and departed for the inside where the “dance off” was already in progress. He hadn’t danced in years, but figured now was as good a time as any. And saw that he could do no worse than anyone else already on the floor when he reentered the pub. And attempted to dance himself as the music turned to an old techno song as the group flailed about. Staff Sergeant Greg “Leroy” Jenkins even gave a bit of breakdancing a try. However, the British ladies in the pub started plucking the men off the floor as they didn’t meet their “standards” until only three were left: Jamie, Jenkins and Darren Thompson. Darren was quickly removed for being “too old” and the winner was declared between the remaining two as Jamie.

“Nice job love,” said the British woman who picked the winner. She appeared to be about his age and he noticed there was no wedding ring. And obviously had picked him for other reasons than his lack of dancing skills as was evident in her eyes.

“What do I get for winning?” he asked.

“You get to buy me a drink,” she replied, although her eyes told him there obviously was more to come on his reward.

“Okay,” he laughed and saw Katie across the room talking with other members of the team. But being polite, he didn’t ignore the British woman and collected her drink of choice and had a seat at her table. They passed the next few minutes in small talk and the obvious signs she favored Jamie quite heavily. But apparently he wasn’t being very discrete about something.

“Who’s the girl?” asked the British woman.

“What girl?” asked Jamie.

“The one you keep looking around the pub for love,” said the woman. “The short one.”

“Just a teammate,” said Jamie who didn’t realize his search was that obvious.

“Your girlfriend?” asked the woman.

“No, nothing like that,” said Jamie.

“Thanks for the drink,” said the woman and planted a kiss on his lips. “Go find her.”

“No, I’m okay,” said Jamie.

“You keep wrenching your neck around looking for her,” said the woman. “So do yourself a favor and go track her down. She’s watching you too.”

“I am really sorry,” said Jamie.

“Not the first time a Yank has broken my heart,” laughed the woman. “But the night is young.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Jamie as he departed the table and the woman let out a sigh. However, she already had her sights set on another American in the pub and started making her way across the room. By that time, Jamie had caught up to Katie who was laughing at a joke told by Specialist Chris “Dutch” Chang.

“Hey,” said Jamie.

“What happened to your girl?” asked Katie.

“I prefer talking to you,” said Jamie.

“And the kiss she gave you?” asked Katie pointedly.

“I was completely unprepared for that,” he said. “She snuck it in on me.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the sneaky one?” she laughed.

“I suppose,” he said with a grin. “I did manage to move her along so I could get back to you.”

“Flirting again?” she asked with a grin.

“Yeah, actually I am,” he said with a bit of courage.

“Wow,” she said. “The bold approach.”

“Sorry,” he said and turned to leave. However, she caught him and spun him around. He was surprised at her strength after being tugged back into her view.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t appreciated,” she said.

“A little aggressive aren’t we?” he laughed.

“Oh, you wish,” she said with a sly grin.

“Maybe I just like talking to you a lot more than I do to her,” he said with a smile. She blushed up slightly at the overt flirting, but before anything else could happen, they had yet another visitor that interrupted things before they could develop.

“I think the contest was rigged!” said Darren loudly. “And I know I’m a better dancer!”

“Can’t prove it old man!” shot back Jamie with a laugh.

“I’ll prove it to you!” said Darren as he got on the tabletop and started dancing yet again, knocking over some drinks of a few of the locals in the process.

“Ay!” they shouted as Darren finished his impromptu dance and hopped off the table.

“Sorry guys,” said Darren. “I’ll grab you another round.”

“You bloody Yanks some in here all sodding pissed and making bloody fools of yourselves!” exclaimed one of the men.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” said Darren. “I’ll get you a fresh round.”

“Fresh isn’t going to cut it mate,” said the man who was obviously looking for a fight.

“Hey, c’mon guys, we don’t want trouble,” said Thomas who interjected on behalf of Darren and attempted to step in between the two.

“Piss off,” said another of the group and pushed Thomas back. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Now that’s not very nice,” said Thomas as he turned to take issue with the newest offender.

“I don’t want any trouble from any of you!” exclaimed the pub keeper who had been watching and decided it was time to act. “Out! All of you!”

“He started it Ruby!” protested the man.

“Out I said!” yelled the pub keeper in a voice that didn’t brook an argument. “You two as well!”

“Yes ma’am,” said Thomas as he collected Darren who was not backing off an inch. However, their plans of an exit were thwarted as a punch was thrown by one of the men. However, Thomas saw it coming out of the corner of his eye and managed to duck and prepare for a counter. But he had found his partner in crime already had taken the matter into consideration as Amber delivered a front snap kick to the attacker, knocking him and a table over. And of course complete bedlam ensued as the locals jumped in and teammates jumped to cover each other. However, the fight wasn’t fair as the teams were very well versed in unarmed combat and managed to counter the hasty assaults from their attackers.

“MPs!” shouted someone from the front of the pub as British Police and Coalition Town Patrol members were seen entering the front doors and assessing the situation before attempting to break up some of the individual fights going on.

“E and E!” yelled another member of the unit as they quickly made use of every available exit including windows and through the kitchen to escape. The police gave a halfhearted chase on some of the members, but knew it was foolish to try since most of them escaped and the fight didn’t last long. And the unlucky ones that were caught were not part of the 14th.

Jamie was heading down the street away from the pub and back towards the base when he heard the distinctive sound of a British siren coming down the roadway. He looked for a place to hide, but was unable to find a good spot as the headlights and emergency flashers were seen. He was suddenly grabbed and yanked to the ground and hauled under a bench. Before he knew what was happening, he reacted by grabbing his attacker, but before striking he saw it was Katie.

“Shhhh,” she said and climbed on top and straddled him to make room. The three vehicles passed by and she peeked out to see if there were any more. “I see you’re carrying your sidearm...at least I hope that’s your sidearm.”

“I...” he started to say and his voice trailed off.

“Just admit you don’t have a witty retort,” she whispered with a grin.

“Someone told me it was a good habit,” he said. “And it feels like you are as well.”

“Never leave home without it,” she said and peeked out again. Another police vehicle was heading their way as he got slightly more comfortable and removed his arm from under her leg. Not knowing exactly how she would react, he loosely grabbed her around her waist so his hands wouldn’t be hanging out of the bench.

“I’m not going to hurt you for holding me like that,” she remarked.

“I wasn’t sure,” he said with a chuckle.

“It’s actually feels kind of nice,” she said.

“That almost sounded like flirting,” he remarked.

“No, just my way of telling you I won’t cause you bodily harm for grabbing me around the waist,” she replied. “But if you grab my ass, all bets are off.”

“Well, if I would have known you weren’t going to break my fingers if I made physical contact, I might have done it before now,” he said.

“It almost sounds like you are flirting that time,” she replied.

“It was kind of overt,” he chuckled.

“You think?” she replied with a chuckle of her own. “Looks clear.”

“We heading home?” asked Jamie as they exited their makeshift concealment.

“Unless you want to go back,” she replied and brushed the dirt off her pants.

“I think it’s time to retire for the evening,” he said.

“And lucky for you, you’ve got an escort to see you home,” she grinned and winked.

“I feel very safe having a bear escort me home,” he laughed. They continued back to the base talking pretty much the whole way. And when they got within sight of the gate for the base, they saw additional police out front checking those who were coming in. Along with one of the original attackers from the pub that evening.

“Change of plans,” she said and diverted onto a side street.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

"I'm not sure you want to explain to the police about this evening, so we're taking the back way into base," she replied and turned back towards the base. They eventually came up to the fence and followed it down to an old pedestrian gate away from the main gate area. "How are your climbing skills?"

"Decent enough I suppose," he said as he looked at the gate.

"Use the building," she suggested and started using the old stone building as a means to get over the fence. She scampered up fairly quickly and was on the roof in no time. He followed her path for the most part, but found she had the advantage of smaller feet and was able to balance on the smaller outcroppings better. However, he did manage to haul himself to the top.

"Walk the edges," she said and walked around to the interior of the base and dropped the eight feet onto the ground. He did the same, but caught his left hand on the edge of the gutter as he came off, slicing it open.

"Owww," he said through gritted teeth.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Sliced my hand," he said. "I'll be okay."

"Let me see," said Katie.

"I'm okay," he said as he clutched his hand.

"Here," she said as she tore a piece of her undershirt and handed it over. He took it and she was able to get a look from the light of a nearby streetlight.

"You didn't need to tear your clothing!" he objected.

"I thought the style was bare midriffs," she chuckled as she tore another strip to hold the original piece in place until they were under better light and more advanced treatment could be applied.

"You're going to need stitches."

"I can handle that," said Jamie.

"Listen, you aren't the only medic around here. You can come back to my room and let me patch you up," she stated.

"I'll be okay," said Jamie. "I can stich as well."

"The subject wasn't up for debate," said Katie. "You will let me patch you up."

"Yes ma'am," he said with half a smile.

“God you are stubborn,” she remarked.

“Yeah, I am,” he confirmed as they arrived at the dormitory where she was being housed and snuck past the Charge of Quarters (CQ) from another unit that was supposed to be signing in visitors for the temporary residents. However, since official visiting hours were over they needed to avoid the person yet again. It was a trivial task and before long they were on the third floor. After entering her room, he was instructed to go clean the wound as she grabbed her medical kit.

The wound wasn’t as bad as it appeared in the light, but he would need about eight stitches to close it up. The water stung and started loosening up the clotted blood and he retrieved a bandage she had set out for him to help before she applied the stitches. After returning to the main living area, he was instructed to sit in a chair where a lamp and the necessary items were already waiting.

“Before you sit down, have you ever had a reaction to tetanus?” she asked.

“No, I’m-” he managed to say before he received a jab into his backside and the booster shot was injected. “Gahhhh!”

“I find it helps if the person doesn’t know it’s coming,” she said and retrieved the empty needle and syringe and set them on the table. “Drop your pants and I’ll apply a boo-boo sticker.”

“Where did you get tetanus vaccine?” he asked as he rubbed the area.

“Signed it out from the hospital the other day since a couple of guys were due for a booster,” she replied. “Come on over and I’ll make sure the hole isn’t bleeding.”

“Let me walk that off real quick,” he said crossly. “And it’s not going to be fun tomorrow.”

“It’s just a shot you big baby,” she said.

“I hate shots,” he said.

“Well, something else I learned about you tonight,” she said. “Are you going to pass out now?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” he said and came over to the seat. Before sitting, he pulled his pants and underwear down just enough for her to attach a gauze patch and a piece of tape.

“It is a nice looking target,” she commented as she readied a local anesthetic and antiseptic for the wound.

“Are you flirting with me?” he asked.

“Do I really need the local on here?” she asked and pulled back the swab with the solution.

“You don’t play fair,” he chuckled as she applied the anesthetic and got the stitches ready while it was taking effect. She poked and prodded gently to garner his reaction and upon finding the anesthetic had taken effect, she started applying the stitches and kept them close. “You’re pretty good at that.”

“Once upon a time I had a part time job in an alterations shop,” said Katie. “I learned how to sew a long time ago and it’s kind of second nature. You’re lucky this is on the bottom of your hand where it should heal okay.”

“You do curtains as well? My room could use some color,” he quipped.

“I can sew your mouth shut,” she remarked as she applied another one.

“You going to get me to sit still for that long?” he chuckled.

“I’m sure I have something in my bag of tricks that will keep you in one place,” she said.

“I think I’ll concede defeat now,” he laughed.

“About time,” she said with a scoff. “Finished. Go ahead and wash up please.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said and went back to the shared bathroom and washed the remains of the blood off and cleaned his hand as best as he could. After finishing up, he came back into the living area where she applied a bandage and taped it into place.

“Obviously you’ll have issues tomorrow with being in the water,” she said as she looked over the job. “But just reapply some antibiotic and a fresh bandage and you should be okay. As for the tetanus booster, you should be able to walk that one off.”

“I don’t get a visit from the doctor to help?” he grinned.

“Are you flirting again?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said as they were right in front of each other.

“Look, I-” she started to say but cut herself off as he started moving his head towards her.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“I...” he started to say and was embarrassed at the impromptu attempt at getting a kiss. “I was caught up in the moment and thought well, maybe we...I’m really sorry.”

“Listen mister, I don’t know who you think you are, but you do not get aggressive with me in my room! Understand me?” she growled and poked him in the chest. He backed up involuntarily further into the room.

"I'm really sorry!" he exclaimed and blushed up and started looking to exit. However, she blocked his path out of the room.

"In here I get to be the one that's aggressive," she stated and shoved him over on the bed and followed up the attack by crawling on top of him eventually coming face to face. He initially was taken back, but eventually their mouths located each other. And even as aggressive as she was, he was just as forward with her as he flipped her over onto her back and pinned her in place as they continued their embrace and their hands roamed the other's body. But she appeared to go with it and eventually flipped him back over and got the upper hand once again.

"Are you flirting with me?" he asked after a round of passionate kissing.

"Just shut up," she said and the two were lost in their passions.

"So do I have permission to speak once again?" said Jamie as he gently ran his hand up her arm and kissed on her shoulder. She reciprocated by snuggling in a bit closer to him

"I suppose a few words wouldn't hurt," said Katie. "Seeing that you avoided me for long enough that I had to make a move."

"I avoided you?" he asked.

"You think I would turn down a shopping trip with the girls?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Jamie.

"I overheard your plans," said Katie. "And I thought I announced my intentions to stay on base or in town loud enough for you to hear. It was almost verbatim what you said."

"I didn't notice," said Jamie.

"And even made myself painfully obvious while you were in town eating lunch yesterday," she said. "I would have figured you'd noticed."

"Really?" he asked. "You mean you were hoping to meet me?"

"I was sitting two tables over and to your seven o'clock," said Katie. "Had you actually been looking around like you were supposed to, you might have noticed. And had you come over, I'm sure I would have invited you to sit down. I was curious about you."

"I had this feeling yesterday I was being followed and watched," said Jamie.

“Well, that’s because you were,” she chuckled and rolled over to face him gathering a kiss in the process. “Until you dipped into that women’s store and I lost you. But something tells me it wasn’t exactly the place you were looking for to escape.”

“No, not really,” he chuckled. “How did you know I was downtown?”

“Not hard to follow you around,” she replied. “We kind of get training in that.”

“You mean you were on the same bus and everything when I left here?” he asked.

“It was a bit crowded, so you get a pass on that, but yes,” she chuckled.

“I’m slow sometimes,” he chuckled.

“That’s an understatement,” she chuckled and scratched at his chest. “So yes, it was about time you actually came to talk to me today. I did happen to notice you took more than a passing interest in me.”

“I tried at the range on Friday,” said Jamie.

“That was work,” said Katie. “Not to be confused with away from work.”

“I’m still learning,” said Jamie. “You were kind of a smartass and standoffish.”

“I wanted to see how you would react,” she replied. “And you do lead the targets too much with your pistol.”

“Is that work or pleasure?” he chuckled.

“A bit of both I might say,” she chuckled in return. “And still behind me on times.”

“Are you always this competitive?” he laughed.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she laughed. “I have been since I joined.”

“Was I too slow tonight?” he asked while running his fingers up her arm.

“I’d say tonight you were right on time,” she sighed with a smile. He moved his hand and ran it down her bare side which garnered a reaction from her.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

“No, I’m...” she started. “Never mind.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he said.

“No it doesn’t hurt,” she said. “Certainly not that.”

“You’re ticklish,” he chuckled.

“That’s putting it mildly,” she laughed.

“I found your kryptonite,” he laughed.

“Remember that comment about broken fingers?” she chuckled.

“You wouldn’t,” he said with a kiss on her forehead.

“Want to put that theory to the test?” she asked with an evil smile.

“Do that mean I would get patched up by you again and have you assault me as a way of showing affection?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Were you complaining?” she asked.

“Not in the least,” he replied and added a kiss. “Why did you say you never get flirted with?”

“I’m pretty dedicated to my job,” she replied. “Honestly, I never explored the opportunities out there and most of the unit thinks I’m a lesbian anyway. So instead of trying to flirt, I’m more like a little sister than anything.”

“Never flirted with anyone else?” he asked. “Outside of the unit at least?”

“Never found the time,” she replied. “I joined the military at a young age and dedicated myself to being the best soldier I could. I didn’t have time for things like that.”

“Never got lonely?” asked Jamie.

“I am too focused on my job to think of things like that,” said Katie. “And I’ve got friends so I’m never really lonely.”

“What were you like before the Fall? I know you’re from Kansas, but there has to be a story of why you’re so determined and headstrong,” asked Jamie.

“It’s a long story,” said Katie as she rolled back over. He took her from behind and wrapped his arm around her waist.

“We’ve got until eight o’clock tomorrow,” said Jamie.

“You really want to know?” asked Katie.

“Sure,” said Jamie. “It’s get to know my Bear night.”

“I’m not specifically your Bear,” she temporized.

“Right now you are,” he said and kissed at the back of her neck. She groaned and pushed back gently letting him know his efforts were appreciated. “And I noticed you growl during other times as well.”

“I do not!” she protested with a giggle.

“Oh yes you do,” said Jamie with a chuckle and ran his hand down her arm.

“Maybe just a little,” she chuckled in return and squeezed his hand.

“So about you?” he asked.

“I’m from Kansas City, Overland Park specifically. Well, originally I’m from Delaware, but spent the years before the fall in suburban Kansas City,” said Katie as she turned over and laid her head down on his shoulder. She brushed her hair away from his and her face before continuing. “And I’m nothing like I was before the Fall...”

CHAPTER 4

Time Since Attacks: 32 minutes

Date/Time: 20 April/1337 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Attention please,” said the Principal’s voice over the PA system in the high school where students were anxiously awaiting any information on what they had been hearing rumors about for the past half hour. “Attention please, this is Mister Walker and I have information over what we have been hearing on the news.”

“About a half hour ago, six U.S. cities were attacked by nuclear weapons. Right now we don’t know the extent of the damage and we don’t know who is responsible, but we do know they happened in LA, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Houston and New Orleans. We don’t know if the attacks will continue or not, but for the moment it seems they have stopped. The school board has authorized all schools district wide to release early until we know more about who is behind the attacks and whether more are coming. Until we can safely release you to your parents or legal guardians, the teachers will be handing out emergency action pamphlets to go over with each of you in case of another strike. And all students are locked down to their classrooms with the exception of bathroom breaks. But we believe the attacks are over for the moment.”

“We are currently attempting to contact your parents and legal guardians to come pick you up, but those with cell phones can contact them directly. Please ask your parents to report to the gymnasium where they can pick you up. Until such time, please remain in your classrooms and please remain calm. I know many of us are scared right now, but we cannot help the situation by panicking. I have tied the school TV system into the national news where we can get information as it comes in. Again, please remain calm and you will be released shortly.”

The principal turned off the PA system with a great sigh before heading out into the main administrative area of the office area. There were already fifty parents waiting to sign their children out and demanding resolution right then and there. He finally managed to gain the attention of the group by standing on top of the counter and slamming a book against the wall.

“People, please! Ladies and gentlemen, please!” he shouted as the crowd finally died down. “I’m Pat Walker, the Principal here and we will get your children to you as quickly as possible! Right now I understand many of you are scared and worried, but we are getting you served as fast as we can. The teachers and aides are being notified to release your children as we get your information. So I urge you to please have a little patience with us and let’s work through this together. Now what we are going to do is move all of you down to the gymnasium where we can better handle a large crowd. So if you would please head out the main door and take a right down the hallway where additional guides will show you to the gym,” he said. The crowd still seemed a little agitated, but was calmer than before as they started shuffling towards the door of the office. It took several minutes for the crowd to disperse and all that remained were the secretaries answering the unending phone lines.

“Where did you get that pamphlet?” asked Walker to his assistant that was busy running copies.

“Off some website,” said the assistant principal. “Dated before we both were born, but it’s the best we could get on such short notice.”

“I remember doing the nuclear drills as a kid,” he remarked. “I never thought I would have to go through them again.”

“I’m scared Pat,” she said as she hit the buttons on the copy machine again. He noticed her hands were trembling as she messed up the numbers on the machine.

“Hey, take a quick break,” he said and took the papers from her hand.

“What if we’re next?” she said in a low voice.

“That kind of thing is what we need to avoid right now,” he said calmly. “We don’t need to panic in this situation and we need to remain calm for the children. Go ahead and take a quick break and catch your breath.”

She nodded slightly and walked out towards the teacher’s lounge. He headed over to the head secretary that was busy juggling phone calls from concerned parents.

“We’ve had about a hundred parents already come in. And about three hundred more that have already called in and are on their way,” she said as she punched the button that started flashing once again and answered with the school name. “Yes, you can come pick your child up...please come to the gymnasium...yes, they will be released to you without any problems...yes, thank you...yes, you too...bye-bye.”

“It’s insane right now,” said the secretary. The principal turned and found his other assistant.

“Make sure the teachers are ready for the mass of parents in the gym,” he said. “Get tables and chairs set up and lists of all the students. We’ll need to account for all of them before we can turn everyone out for the day.”

“What about tomorrow?” asked the assistant.

“Let them know to watch the news or listen to the radio. Right now the school board isn’t sure if school will be in tomorrow, but I’m betting it won’t be. But for the moment, just tell them to watch the local news,” said the Principal.

“Okay,” said the assistant as he scurried out of the office and headed towards the gym. The Principal looked around the office which was complete pandemonium at the moment, but saw everyone was doing what they were supposed to be doing. Taking in a deep breath himself, he muttered “Now who’s supposed to keep me calm?”

“This is crazy!” exclaimed Susan Mendez in one of the many classrooms in the school. In one minute they were bored out of their minds discussing Shakespeare and the next minute they started hearing about the attacks.

“I know, right?” said Katie Shepherd from her side. Sixteen years old and a Junior in the school, she had no idea what was going on or whether or not she needed to be scared. She remembered the September 11th attacks clearly, but this time it was far worse and she was old enough to understand the danger that nuclear attacks posed.

“Your mom coming to get you?” asked Susan.

“I hope so,” said Katie.

“Don’t you have a cell phone?” asked Susan.

“No,” said Katie.

“Here, you can use mine,” said Susan as the news went back to shots from Philadelphia. Emergency responders were already attempting to converge on the city, but were bogged down attempting to fight the fires at the outer edge of the blast zone for the moment. Katie took the phone and dialed her mother’s work number. It rang several times before the secretary picked up on the other end.

“Independence Insurance,” said the secretary.

“Hi, this is Katie Shepherd. I’m looking for my mom, Theresa Shepherd,” said Katie.

“Katie! Your mom is out and about right now. Are you okay?” asked the secretary.

“Yes, we’re being let out of school early and I’m wondering if she’s coming to pick me up,” said Katie. “Does she have her cell phone?”

“I think she does,” said the secretary. “You want me to call her?”

“No, I can, thanks though,” said Katie.

“You be careful sweetie,” said the secretary. “And if you can’t reach her, call me back and I’ll see what I can do from my end.”

“Okay, thanks Kim,” said Katie. “Bye.”

Katie hit the end button and dialed her mother's cell number. The lines were fairly busy right then and she had to dial it three times before getting through. It rang several times before her mother was able to answer. "Theresa Shepherd."

"Mom!" exclaimed Katie.

"Katie! Are you okay?" asked her mother who was on speakerphone.

"Yes Mom, I'm calling to see if you can come pick me up," said Katie.

"I'm already on my way baby," said Theresa as she heard a horn honk in the background. "But it's already gridlock out here and it may take a while."

"Okay Mom. Go to the gym when you get here," said Katie.

"Okay, I don't know when I'll be there, but I'll be there as soon as possible," said Theresa.

"Okay Mom, be careful," said Katie.

"Love you Katie," said her mother. "See you soon."

"Love you too Mom, bye," said Katie as she hit the end button again and handed the phone over to her friend.

"Did you get through?" asked Susan as she glanced away momentarily from the TV to receive the phone. And her attention was right back on the screen as soon as she felt contact from the phone. She slid it into her small book bag and watched the TV intently.

"Yeah, my mom's on her way," said Katie as she watched as well. The TV talking heads looked frazzled as nothing of this magnitude had ever happened before in their country. "What about your parents?"

"Dad's coming in as quickly as he can," said Susan. "He was on a job in Lawrence, but left to come get me."

"Mom said it was gridlock out there," said Katie.

"If I know my Dad, he'll be running over cars to get here," laughed Susan. Behind them, a commotion was heard and desks and chairs scooting across the floor garnered the attention of everyone in the classroom. Two boys were seen fighting in the rear with several more attempting to split the two apart.

"This is all your fault!" exclaimed one of the boys and he strained at the grasp of two others trying to break free. "You and your terrorist buddies from Iraq probably did this!"

"I'm from India you idiot!" exclaimed the second boy as he struggled to break free as well.

“Same difference!” exclaimed the first boy as he continued to struggle.

“Hey! Hey! Knock it off!” exclaimed the teacher as she rushed into the rear of the class. “I said to knock it off!”

“It’s his Muslim friends that did this!” exclaimed the first boy. And the second attempted to break free yet again to defend the honor of his nationality.

“I’m a Christian you asshole!” yelled the second boy.

“Knock it off!” yelled the teacher as she slammed a book down on the table. “Take Pavak out into the hallway and let him cool off!”

The boys that were restraining the Indian boy released their grasp ever so slightly and he started heading towards the door. But the sneer from the first boy set him off again and he lunged and managed to get a good punch in before being restrained yet again. Eventually the other boys managed to get him outside and the door closed behind him.

“You will shut your mouth!” growled the teacher. “We don’t know who did this and you provoking another student won’t help! So shut up right now!”

“Not my fault his terrorist buddies did this,” said the first as he felt at his jaw where the blow had landed and worked it back and forth.

The teacher crossed plenty of boundaries right then when she grabbed his arm and swung him around to face her. She was also on edge since her family was originally from Houston and they still had plenty of friends and extended family that lived there. “You will shut your mouth mister! I won’t tolerate you saying another word in the matter, you hear me?” she snarled and pointed her finger in his face.

“You understand my parents can sue for you touching me,” he said with a sneer.

“You go right ahead and tell them to,” she said through gritted teeth. “Because I won’t let you provoke another student over your ignorance. So you better shut up.”

The look she had on her face was one that wasn’t to be trifled with and the boy averted his gaze to the floor. The teacher knew she would probably be in a good amount of trouble for what she just did, but emotions were controlling her at the moment and she hoped the school administration would be understanding. She released him and went back to the front of the class before turning it over to an aide and walking out into the hallway to cool off herself.

“Crazy!” exclaimed Susan.

“I know,” said Katie and suddenly started getting a little more afraid at the situation as it stood. And what didn’t help matters was when the teacher’s aide started going through the nuclear

attack drills and protective actions. For some reason, she didn't feel like hiding under a desk with her hind end sticking up in the air would do much good in that situation. But since it was the only information, she went along with it for the moment.

The aide didn't seem to be getting much into the instruction either as she flipped the TV back on with the news still playing. The scenes were currently of New York where a helicopter was braving the destruction and flying in far closer to the city than probably should have been allowed. Katie wondered about the radiation and if they should be that close, but was mesmerized by the destruction she was seeing on the TV. It appeared to be coming in from the Atlantic side of New York City and zoomed in on some of the locations that were on fire or completely flattened. It got close enough to see the Statue of Liberty had disappeared from view and all that was left was the partial base of where the proud monument once stood. The sights sent chills down her spine as one of the faculty came in and started calling names for some of the students to leave. She hoped her mother would get there quickly before more panic set in.

"So what are you doing Friday?" asked another student to Susan.

"I don't know, why?" asked Susan.

"I'm throwing a party," said the other girl as if nothing was going on in the world. "My parents will be out of town and I'm setting things up. Katie, it's cool if you come too."

"Maybe," smiled Katie. "Dunno right now."

"It's cool," said the other girl as she turned to talk over the idea with others. "You know where I live, right?"

"Yeah," said Katie.

"Come along and bring your boyfriend if you want," said the other girl as she turned to pick others from the class she wanted to invite, and ignored others she didn't want.

"You're seriously Miss Popular," said Susan with a laugh.

"Huh?" asked Katie.

"Like, everyone likes you," said Susan. "Nerds, jocks, cheerleaders, dorks. Everyone thinks you're cool. So you've got Miss Popular sewed up."

"I just go with the flow," said Katie.

"That's what's cool about you," said Susan. "You're really easy going. I bet you've never been in, like a fight or anything."

"No, I haven't been," said Katie. "I'm just me I suppose."

“Who’s your boyfriend again?” asked Susan.

“Jacob Carter,” said Katie.

“He’s cute,” exclaimed Susan with a grin.

“Yeah he is,” grinned Katie.

“So is it like serious?” asked Susan. “As in, like that kinda serious?”

“Yeah, it’s that kinda serious,” grinned Katie knowing Susan was wondering if they had slept together. “Like got that way last month.”

“Totally cool,” said Susan.

Katie saw one of the runners come into the class and call several names before she could reply. Three names were called before “Katherine Shepherd” was called and she darted out of her seat while collecting her pack. Susan’s name was also called and she joined Katie and continued the conversation all the way to the gym. Once inside, Katie saw her mother and darted across the gym floor and was practically squeezed to death with the hug she received.

“Oh my God, I’m so glad you’re safe!” said her mother and she didn’t loosen her embrace.

“I’m okay Mom,” said Katie as she was squeezed harder than normal. “Can’t breathe Mom.”

“Are you okay?” asked Theresa as she finally relented slightly on the embrace.

“I’m a little scared,” admitted Katie.

“We’re all a little scared baby,” said Theresa as she turned to the school faculty.

“I’ve got Katie marked off,” one of the teachers said before Ms. Shepherd could ask.

“Thank you,” said Theresa as they departed. On their way out, they saw the line of anxious parents, some of which were fairly irate at waiting.

“You people need to speed up!” exclaimed one anxious father. “It’s criminal keeping our kids locked up like this.”

“Sir, we thought it would be best if they were locked down to the classrooms until you could get them. It’s better than letting them scatter to the four winds,” said the Principal.

“I don’t care!” he exclaimed. “I want my kids now!”

Several more of the crowd agreed with him as the murmurs started growing louder that the school wasn't moving as quickly as they could have and obviously should have been. Katie felt her hand being taken by her mother as they sped up to get out of the gym.

"It's about to get ugly in there," said her mother as they approached the double doors leading to the outside.

"People are scared Mom," said Katie.

"I know," said Theresa. "But it won't do any good to go off on Mister Walker like that."

"Are we heading home?" asked Katie.

"First thing is to get to the grocery store," said Theresa. "I know they will probably be crammed, but we'll need food."

"I saw some of the places on the TV getting wiped out," said Katie.

"We'll just have to hope," said Theresa with a smile as they reached their car. Her mother popped the locks with a remote and the two climbed inside. Katie tossed her small backpack into the back seat and found several bags already in the back when she did.

"Looks like you've already been shopping," said Katie.

"I figured it would come down to people panicking, so I headed to the grocery store as soon as I started hearing about it," said her mother.

"And we're going back?" asked Katie.

"Better to have and not need than need and not have," said Theresa as she started the car and departed the parking lot. Traffic was far heavier in the streets for the particular time of day and they were in stop and go conditions at several points.

"There's a grocery store," said Katie and pointed as they passed by. "And it looks like the parking lot is nearly empty!"

"It's already wiped out," said Theresa. "I saw it on the way in and it was swamped."

"Oh," said Katie. "So which one are we heading to?"

"The normal one close to home," said Theresa. "Being a little further out there means it might not have been slammed quite as bad."

"That makes sense," said Katie as they pulled up to a red light. Her mother fished around in her small purse before pulling a notepad out and tearing several sheets of paper.

“When we get there, grab another cart and I want you to get those items. Ten apiece if you can. If something isn’t there, just move on to the next item,” she said.

Katie looked over the sheet and saw mainly dry and canned goods on the list. “Not much variety here Mom.”

“People will panic,” said Theresa. “And I suspect the stores will be picked clean for the near future so it’s better to have stuff that won’t go bad easily.”

“You’re smart for an old broad,” laughed Katie and received a pop on her leg and a smile from her mother. It was just the two of them and unlike many mother-daughter relationships, they got along very well. Katie’s mother and father had divorced when she was eight although he hadn’t been around for over a year before it was official. They were originally from Delaware, but had moved to Kansas City six years prior when her mother was seriously involved with another man. Her family had frowned on the affair, but Theresa Shepherd was a stubborn individual who didn’t like to admit defeat and had stayed after the falling out she had with her family and the relationship had ended. She rarely dated after that point and concentrated on raising her daughter in the best possible environment she could. And they managed to get by before Theresa Shepherd eventually moved into a better position at her job and had an easier time raising her daughter. She didn’t communicate much with her family as they still thought she should pack it in and come back to Delaware and hadn’t visited them in almost four years. So Katie and her mother knew all they had for the moment was each other and a special bond had been formed between the two a long time before.

They arrived at the local grocery store which was packed to the gills as well as her mother sighed as she swept the parking lot numerous times before finding a spot. Once they parked, her mother grabbed one of the blankets she kept in the trunk for emergency purposes and covered the groceries in the back seat after setting them in the floorboards.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Katie.

“Because I’d rather not have someone be tempted to break out the window and do a little free shopping of their own,” explained Theresa.

“You think someone would do that?” asked Katie.

“People panic and do stupid things when they are scared,” said Theresa as she finished up. “Go grab that cart over there.”

Katie darted across the parking lot to grab the cart someone had left, but not before getting a long horn blow by an angry driver that was attempting to leave. It gave her mother a brief heart attack as she did so, but Katie managed to get back unscathed.

“Katie Shepherd!” exclaimed Theresa. “You could have been killed!”

“I’m okay Mom,” said Katie.

“You’ve seriously got to watch out for drivers right now,” warned her mother. “Everyone is acting the fool and probably wouldn’t even stop if they ran over you.”

“Sorry,” said Katie as they headed towards the door as more people were seen coming out. Katie’s mother grabbed a shopping cart from near the entrance as she had to wait on a couple of people coming out. Several had multiple shopping carts filled to the brim with the most completely random objects one could imagine. Once inside, they found it was even worse on the inside as the aisles were completely filled.

“Okay, go head and grab your list. When you get everything, head over to...checkout lane number 6. I’ll meet you there. And you don’t leave, got it?” said Theresa.

“Yes Mom,” said Katie as she was slightly overwhelmed at the amount of people and furthermore, their interactions with each other. They didn’t seem concerned with running over each other with shopping carts or shoving people out of the way to get to whatever it was they wanted. Katie hesitated before wading into the crowd and heading towards the canned goods and was slightly beat up by the time she arrived in the proper aisles. Most of the shelves were already bare, but Katie managed to get a few of the items specified on the list and tossed them into the cart and moved on. But something strange was heading her way as she saw a mob heading down the aisle that was following a man with a hand truck hauling a wooden pallet of canned goods. Katie started moving that way as well as she saw the pallet contained tuna, something her mother had put on the list.

Katie figured it might be better if she left the cart behind and pulled it off to the side before heading off the pallet. Apparently the stocker figured right in front of her was as good a place as any and dropped the pallet and attempted to remove the hand truck. And didn’t even bother trying to remove the plastic wrap on the outside as the crowd descended on the pallet and tore everything to shreds while grabbing whatever they could. Being of small stature, Katie got slammed pretty good by the wave of people practically climbing over each other to get at the goods. But she managed to be able to grab a full case of the tuna before trying to escape the mob that seemed uncontrollable. Several cans were snatched away as she waded back through the crowd, but she managed to get to the edge with almost half of it left. And returning to her buggy, found someone had already taken the opportunity to clean it out with nothing more than the old sales flyers in the bottom.

Katie looked around for the would be thieves and saw it could be anyone and everyone. With a sigh, she dropped the remainder of the case inside and figured it was better to go back with half a case rather than empty handed. She headed back up the aisle and managed to get several items she had found before and dropped them into the cart. And figured enough was enough as she went to track down her mother in the store. She waded through the ends of the aisles until she caught sight of her mother down one of the dry goods aisles and yelled to get her attention. And being a mother, immediately recognized her child’s voice even in the environment they were currently in. She turned around and headed back and made contact with Katie.

“You’re done already?” asked Theresa.

“No, but I think it might be easier if we are together,” said Katie. “The people in here are crazy and it might be better if I’m with you to be able to dart in and grab what I can as they bring the things out.”

“It will take less time if we are separated,” said her mother sensibly.

“I already tried that and the cart got wiped out,” said Katie as she started transferring the canned goods over to her mother’s cart. “You seriously can’t turn your back on it for a second.”

“Okay,” said her mother. “What were you able to get?”

“Nothing even close to what you wanted,” said Katie as she looked over the list.

“Let’s head back that way,” said Theresa as she saw Katie didn’t even manage to get a quarter of what she had requested. But it was to be expected as the bedlam inside the store was growing with each minute. They managed to get into position on several more pallets that were brought from the storage area and the plan to use Katie to dart in, grab the items and dart back out appeared to work a little better. Katie dumped the armful of spaghetti into the cart as they continued on. And they saw the shoppers were still growing in numbers and were getting far more physical in their attempts to get what they wanted. Heading over to the soda aisle, they found the bottled water was completely gone, but managed to snag twenty assorted two liter sodas before moving towards the checkout lanes. There wasn’t much left on the shelves, but they found enough variety to get a few of each.

“What’s Royal Crown?” asked Katie.

“It’s like Coke, but sweeter,” said Theresa.

“I don’t like Coke Mom,” said Katie.

“There’s a method to my madness,” said Theresa as they entered the checkout line and slowly crept forward. They were nearing the front when a fight was seen breaking out behind them as someone finally had enough of hands prying in their cart and decided to take matters to a more physical level. And instead of attempting to break up the two currently rolling around on the floor, the bystanders were more interested in grabbing whatever the two had in their carts and putting it into theirs before moving on. Eventually two store employees managed to get the two separated, but not before both the carts were empty.

“This is crazy Mom,” said Katie as they were next in line to check out.

“It will be worse tomorrow,” said her mother as Katie started putting the items on the conveyer belt and attempting to keep them separate. However, the person to their front kept eyeballing the items as Katie put them on the belt before a stern “ahem” from her mother was heard. The person to their front noticed the look in her mother’s eyes as well as the expression on her face

before turning back around and getting ready to pay. Katie recognized the look very well as her mother typically used it on her when she was extremely upset over something.

“So why will it be worse tomorrow?” asked Katie.

“Because the shock will have worn off by then and they will find they don’t have what they think they need,” said Theresa. “And they’ll swarm the stores even more than they did today.”

“Why are people panicking?” asked Katie as the clerk started scanning the items and sliding them down the end of the lane for the bagger. Both looked extremely frazzled and had no idea how to deal with the mob of people that were buying anything and everything.

“Because our country has never been attacked like this before,” said her mother. “And people fear the unknown and think it’s better to stock up.”

“Like us?” asked Katie with a grin. They eventually finished checking out and paid using her mother’s credit card. Katie grabbed the plastic bags and started putting them back into the cart while the receipt printed up. They headed out of the store as even more people were coming in and quickly loaded the groceries into the trunk area. Katie was sent to drop the cart off, but it was taken away by a couple with a semi-polite thank you as they darted into the store themselves. Getting back into traffic wasn’t easy as the drivers were all in a hurry to get home or to the stores that were quickly being wiped out.

“Why’d you put the groceries in the trunk?” asked Katie.

“Again, prying eyes,” said Theresa. “People aren’t desperate right now, but that will change quickly. And people won’t think for a second to rip us both out of the vehicle and take what we have no matter if they need it or not.”

Katie turned to make sure the vehicle was locked and found the auto locking mechanism had worked as it should. “You were smart to go when this all kicked off.”

“There were still way more shoppers out at that time than usual,” said Theresa.

“So you were smart and beat the crowds?” laughed Katie.

“Exactly,” laughed Theresa as they passed a gas station. Katie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head as she saw the price listed as “\$10” per gallon. And what was even more astounding was the fact that the line for the pumps almost spilled over into the road.

“Ten dollars a gallon?!” exclaimed Katie.

“Price gouging is already in full effect,” said her mother with disgust.

“That’s crazy!” exclaimed Katie. “And people are buying it!”

“People think they need it,” said Theresa as they turned towards the residential area where their home was.

“Umm, we don’t need gas do we?” asked Katie.

“No, I filled up this morning after I dropped you off at school,” said Theresa. And luckily enough, they had a relatively fuel efficient Toyota that sipped at the gas even in the stop and go conditions. Eventually they turned onto the street where they lived and pulled into the driveway outside the smaller two story house. Katie was tasked to unload the vehicle as her mother started organizing things inside the house. She was pretty winded when she finally grabbed the last of the bags as most were canned goods and started helping her mother organize them in the pantry and cabinets. The TV was on in the other room and the news was constant from the networks on the level of devastation from the targeted cities. Before long, they heard the President starting to talk and they both headed into the living room to hear what he was saying. They caught up as he was in mid-sentence, but found they hadn’t missed much.

“...the victims of an unprovoked nuclear attack on our own soil. Since these attacks, I have been in contact with our senior military commanders, the Russian President and the Chinese Premier. All have assured me this was not, and I repeat NOT an attack by China, North Korea or Russia. None of our intelligence forces or our satellite surveillance detected any missiles launched at the United States from those countries. These three nations, as well as NATO, Japan and our steadfast allies from around the world have promised assistance in bringing those responsible to justice. And I promise you, justice and vengeance will be brought to those responsible who would dare attack our nation in such a cowardly fashion. Citizens of this great nation, I ask for you at this time to reserve judgment until our investigation is complete. I also ask you provide restraint on your feelings and do not take aggression or retribution out on any group or person just because of their race, nationality or religion. When the time is right, we will avenge our loved ones lost in those great cities. I also ask that you pray, pray for the lost and their families, and pray for the valiant rescue workers in those American cities which were attacked. I ask all Americans come together in this time of need, to help each other weather this crisis. The very foundation of our liberty has been attacked, but those responsible will find our foundations built upon the rock as the Bible tells us. Your government is doing everything in its power to help those in the affected cities. Please do not attempt to enter those cities or the surrounding areas. If you desire to help, please report to the nearest Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters or to the nearest Red Cross organization. We will be sending you additional information as we receive it. May God bless all of you and keep you safe, and may God bless America.”

The screen went away back to the talking heads of the network the TV was tuned into. They returned to the kitchen in silence as her mother continued to organize the groceries.

“Mom, I’m scared,” said Katie after the silence was too much.

“Oh, baby,” said Theresa as she crossed the kitchen and took her daughter into a hug. “Everything will be okay. We’ve got each other and you know I won’t let anything happen to you. I’m a little afraid as well, but we’ve got each other to depend on.”

“It’s just...what if we’re next?” asked Katie.

“I think we are okay for the moment,” said Theresa as she embraced her daughter again. “And we’ll make it through this no matter what.”

CHAPTER 5

Time Since Attacks: 11 hours

Date/Time: 21 April/0004 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“...and as you can see, fires behind me are still out of control despite the best efforts of emergency responders. Many are letting the fires burn and concentrating on getting the downwind areas evacuated instead. Relief camps are being set up in the Santa Barbara and San Diego areas and FEMA has ordered a mandatory evacuation of the San Bernardino and Palm Springs areas until the fallout pattern can be determined for certain,” said the on scene reporter from an outlying district of Los Angeles. It was very odd seeing him dressed in the chemical protective suit of the military as well as wearing a gas mask, but the network had provided the protective gear for its employees as they continued the twenty-four hour reporting. The muffled voice wasn’t always easy to understand, but the fires raging out of control behind him were a grim reminder of the devastation that was once one of the largest cities in the United States.

“Do you know if rescuers have been able to reach ground zero?” asked the anchor.

“We aren’t sure right now. The local FEMA representative, National Guard commander and Los Angeles Emergency Manager are scheduled to provide a briefing in about an hour or so,” said the reporter.

“How did the Emergency Manager escape the destruction?” asked the anchor.

“Apparently he was away at a conference in Las Vegas at the time and made his way back as soon as the attacks were completed,” said the reporter as military individuals in protective gear were seen approaching.

“Folks, we’re going to need you to evacuate the area,” said the man holding an M-16 rifle as he grabbed the reporter. He probably had no idea his image was being broadcast out worldwide at the moment. “It’s been declared as unsafe and off limits to everyone except emergency personnel and relief workers.”

“We’ve got a press pass,” said the reporter as the camera rolled on.

“Well, that’s just fine and dandy, but the winds have shifted and radioactive fallout is starting to hit this area pretty hard,” said the soldier. “Now if you would kindly move your ass out of here I’d appreciate it.”

“Which way?” asked the reporter without any further argument.

“Head to the southeast,” said the soldier. “There’s a radiation check station set up about ten blocks from here and you all will need to be looked over.”

“We’ll get back with you later Bill,” said the reporter as he sliced his hand across his throat to kill the feed and the screen cut back to the anchor desk at the alternate studio in Washington D.C. since it’s normal broadcast studio in New York City was presumed destroyed.

“That was Sam Givens live from Los Angeles where he continues to report on the dire situation and rescue efforts in that city. We’ll break away now to the press conference given earlier by the White House,” said the anchor as the screen cut away to a frazzled looking man behind a podium getting beat up for answers he didn’t have at the moment. The FEMA Director was seen at the podium along with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the Secretary of Homeland Security in the background.

“Do we know what kind of bombs they were?” asked one of the reporters in the press pool.

“They were multistage nuclear weapons above 200 kiloton strength. Exactly how strong we are not sure yet,” said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as he stepped forward.

“The President stated earlier he was certain it wasn’t the Russians or Chinese,” said another reporter after shouting over her counterparts. “How do we know for certain?”

“The President was in contact with the Russians as well as the Chinese shortly after the attacks happened. We know for certain the detonations were not preceded by any inbound ballistic threats nor any sub launched missiles,” said the Chairman. “And this data has been confirmed by NORAD and will be released maybe tomorrow.”

“What about terrorist groups?” asked another reporter.

“We are not discounting any possibility at this moment,” said the Secretary of Homeland Security. “You have to remember, we are less than twelve hours into this and data is still being analyzed. We just don’t have information to give right now”

“Several terrorist groups have already claimed responsibility,” said another reporter. “Are the claims credible?”

“We are investigating those claims,” said the Secretary.

“Do we know any more about the bombs themselves?” asked another reporter.

“We’re still analyzing the data, but we are certain they were multistage nuclear devices above two hundred kilotons,” said the Chairman.

“Hydrogen bombs?” asked another reporter.

“That’s a generic term,” said the Chairman. “Multistage nuclear device is more correct.”

“Which are or are not hydrogen bombs?” asked the same reporter.

“They could be classified as same, yes,” said the Chairman.

“Do we know how they were delivered?” asked another reporter.

“We are investigating that,” said the Secretary. “Again, we’ve got a mountain of data to go through and we just don’t have the information right now.”

“Several members of Congress were quoted earlier as saying FEMA was not as rapid in the response as they could have been. They are claiming it’s another Hurricane Katrina type of response. Any response to those allegations?” asked another reporter.

“Are you kidding me?” demanded the FEMA Director and started losing his cool. “We were just hit on a scale that has never been seen before in this nation and we are less than twelve hours into it. And furthermore, most of the main FEMA offices were in the cities that were attacked and presumed to be destroyed! So the major relief efforts were stalled by having to move responders from nearby cities all while attempting to ascertain the extent of the damage. So to answer the allegations, I would tell said members of Congress if they feel we are moving too slow they are more than welcome to come to the disaster areas and show us how to do it faster!”

The Chairman put his hand on the arm of the Director and gently pulled him away from the podium to take the question on himself. “What the Director means is we are moving as fast as possible under the conditions. Being that the exact extent of the fallout and radiation hazards were not known as they got on the ground, the responders had to do checks frequently to discover the hot zones. And that’s an ongoing process as new danger areas are being identified as we move closer. It’s going as quickly as possible as we have to identify safe areas to evacuate the residents that were not killed in the attacks before moving further in.”

“How is the military involved?” asked another reporter.

“The military has deployed specialized units into the disaster areas and is currently assisting the federal agencies with detection, decontamination and logistical support,” said the Chairman.

“Has martial law been declared in the disaster areas?” asked another reporter.

“No,” said the Chairman. “The President has ordered the military to assist in any way necessary with civilian relief efforts. No military personnel are being used in a law enforcement capacity at this time.”

“Do we know the exact count of the dead?” asked another reporter.

“We don’t know yet,” said the Secretary. “And I don’t want to give bad information.”

“Could we use the number of millions?” asked a reporter.

“We are not sure,” repeated the Secretary. “We can’t put a number on it yet.”

The screen cut back to the alternate studio as the anchor continued to talk over the attacks and showed responses from around the world. Theresa Shepherd found it completely unsettling that people were dancing in the streets in some cities in the Middle East and wondered how anyone could be glad that millions were probably dead from the attacks. Despite what the government was telling the people, the chances of survival in the cities was slim to none. And since they were heavily populated as it was, the chances of the numbers of dead being in the millions grew with each passing moment. The screen cut away to satellite photos taken earlier that day of the cities that had been attacked. It was nearly impossible to tell the extent of the damage as thick smoke covered most of the cities, but when combined with the ground level, the destruction was far worse than Hollywood could ever have depicted. As if Hollywood was around right then to depict such events as it was very near one of the blast zones.

She looked over at Katie who was asleep curled up on the end of the couch. She had been watching the news intently until the goings on of the day had finally worn her down. She went over and covered her daughter with a blanket and pulled the hair away from her face. She touched her face slightly as Katie stirred gently in her sleep. Heading into the kitchen, she saw the food they had bought earlier that day would be able to keep them up for a while, but wasn't positive for how long. She had a feeling in the back of her mind that the situation wasn't over by a long shot and there were far more bad things to come in the near future. She turned off the TV before heading upstairs into her bedroom and turned on the small TV there where she continued to absorb the news of the attacks like millions of Americans were doing at that time. It had already been announced earlier that the Kansas City Metro and the surrounding area schools were not going to be in session the next day and her office manager had already called and said the office would be closed as well so she wasn't worried about staying up as late as she was.

The phone rang and she quickly darted to pick it up, hoping it wouldn't wake Katie. She managed to get it by the second ring and found it was her parents.

"Hi Mother...yes, we're okay for the moment...no, you didn't wake me...I'm probably doing the same thing you are right now, watching the news...yes I tried calling you earlier but the phone lines were tied up and I kept getting a busy signal...yes, Katie is okay as well...how are you and Dad...no, I think we're going to be okay for the moment...she's taking it decently well, but like most of us, I don't think it's really hit her just yet...or me for that matter...no, I don't think now is the best time for us to be packing up and coming halfway across the country...no I understand you are worried, but it's just not...no Mother, until we know more, I think it's best we stay here...I understand you and Dad are worried, but I don't think it's wise to do that until we know more...and the fact you are far too close to Philadelphia and Washington for my liking...Kansas City has some rough parts, but we're well away from them...I figure it's far safer than where you are..."

"No, he hasn't called...I honestly don't know where he is now...last I heard he was somewhere in Pennsylvania working some menial job...maybe four or five months ago...I don't expect him to call, but I do expect him to call...I don't know," said Theresa with a sigh. "You and I both know he has problems...yeah, I know, but he has to make a decision about it and I can't live

with that problem...I don't know, maybe...we need to move on...no, I'm not having this talk of coming out there...Mother, please..."

"No Mother, I just don't...will you stop for a minute. Yes, we are safe here, but we won't be as safe if we go traipsing across the country when gas prices are already shooting through the roof. And yes, I have a career out here and Katie still has school...no, it's not that...no, I do love the both of you, but now is not a good time to drive...well, that would be okay but since all the airliners are grounded...no, not even for a couple of weeks...maybe once her school is out on summer break...I don't know, but I don't get the feeling this is over...I don't know, just a bad feeling...I think we are far safer here than where you are...well, why don't you and Dad come out here instead...now see what happens when the shoe is on the other foot...listen Mother, I'm not going to fight with you about this tonight. This is our life out here, I'm a grown woman and I make the decisions for my daughter and me. So please stop trying to lay this guilt trip on me about this whole thing...no, it's just not safe right now and I don't have the money to spend ten bucks a gallon on gas to get across the country...this discussion is over as far as I'm concerned. I'm glad you and Dad are safe and I'm thrilled to hear from you, but I'm not going to get into a heated discussion tonight over an argument that's been going on for six years...no, I'm not being hard headed...yes, I do get it from my father as well as my mother...can you put him on at least...yes, I love you too...no, Katie is finally asleep and I'd rather not wake her...she's had a long day...bye Mother, I love you."

She continued the talk for several more minutes with her father and continued the argument about not leaving their home in Overland Park to come across the country to be with their family. Luckily enough, her father relented slightly as he knew the stubborn streak in his daughter came from both sides of the family and getting her to change her mind after she was adamant about a certain decision was like trying to change the tides. She talked over several little things before declining the invitation one last time and ending the call with the promise of keeping in touch more frequently than in the past. She hung the phone up before starting to get back to what she was doing in the beginning, but Katie stopped her.

"How are Grandma and Grandpa?" she asked.

"I didn't mean to wake you sweetie," said Theresa apologetically.

"You're kind of loud," said Katie with a tired smile.

"I'm sorry," said Theresa. "They are fine and worried about us. They want us to come out there until all this has passed."

"Is it a bad idea?" asked Katie.

"Sort of," said Theresa as they sat down on the bed. "First you have school to finish before summer break and I have my job. Sure I have some vacation, but you saw how gas prices shot up right after it happened. We just don't have the money to go to Delaware right now."

"You think it's safe here?" asked Katie.

“I think so for the moment,” said Theresa.

“For the moment?” asked Katie.

“I think we are safer here than in Delaware,” said Theresa. “They are between Philadelphia and Washington. Philly was hit and Washington is just a big target waiting to be hit. I think where we are right now is the safest place for the moment.”

“I hope so,” said Katie.

“I know so,” said her mother with a smile. “Now, you should head back to bed. We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Doing what?” asked Katie.

“I’ll explain in the morning,” said Theresa as she kissed Katie on the forehead. “Go get some sleep.”

“Can I sleep on the couch?” asked Katie.

“Sure,” replied Theresa with a smile.

“You know what I think? I think we’re going to be just fine,” said Katie as she took her mother’s hand in her and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Shouldn’t I be trying to calm you down?” she laughed and squeezed back.

“You worry a lot Mom,” said Katie. “And you shouldn’t. I think that everything will work out in the end and we’ll be just fine.”

“You are a beautiful young woman Katherine Shepherd. You always look to the positive things in life and you are a blessing for everyone around you,” said her mother with a smile.

“You worry enough for the both of us,” said Katie with a grin. “Someone has to be positive.”

“I’m positive I am blessed to have a beautiful daughter like you,” smiled Theresa.

“Aww, Mom,” laughed Katie as she hugged her mother.

“Now go get some sleep sweetie,” said Theresa.

“Night,” said Katie as she departed the bedroom and headed back downstairs. After she departed, her mother started taking down some boxes from the top of the shelf in the closet and finally found what she was looking for at the back and on the bottom of the random boxes. It was something she hadn’t opened in years, but for some reason felt compelled to check it at the

moment. She didn't know why, but got the feeling it might be needed in the near future. The wooden case was just as she remembered and she popped it open, seeing the object inside just as she had placed it in almost ten years before. A gift from her former job, she had never used it and had put it up not long after receiving it. She closed the box and put it back in the cardboard box before putting it back into the closet near the front. There was still one critical item she needed and hopefully she could pick it up the next day provided the stores weren't wiped out as she suspected they would be. But one of the neighbors might be able to help as well.

She headed back downstairs and saw Katie was sound asleep on the couch. She smiled briefly at the serene scene in front of her and got into the lounge chair and curled up herself, feeling quite exhausted at the turn of events that started off as a normal day.

Katie awoke to the sun coming through the windows in the living room and a start of a new day. It was a strange feeling as she knew the world had changed in the blink of an eye the previous day and anxiety and confusion of the future was clouding her mind at the moment. She stretched out and saw her mother curled up in the recliner under the snuggle blanket she always used. Since school wasn't in that day and her mother wouldn't be going into work, she figured a nice cooked breakfast would be in order. Tiptoeing to the kitchen, she started getting a breakfast of blueberry pancakes and sausage ready, hoping it would be done by the time her mother woke up. And to top it off, she got her mother's coffee machine ready and started the brew as well. But Katie didn't realize the smell of coffee can wake someone out of a sleep and her mother came into the kitchen as the machine was still gurgling, yawning at the early morning.

"What time is it?" asked her mother.

"Around 6:30," said Katie.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked and checked on the pot.

"I thought I might fix breakfast for us," said Katie as she continued to mix the batter for the pancakes. "Since we're going to have a big day and all."

"How thoughtful of you," said Theresa as she collected a coffee cup from the cupboard and grabbed the creamer and sugar from the cabinet.

"So..." said Katie.

"So..." repeated her mother.

"What's the plan for today?" asked Katie.

“Well, panic obviously hit yesterday and it will probably be just as bad today as well. But I thought maybe the two of us could just have a relaxing day with each other,” said Theresa.

“You said it was going to be busy,” said Katie.

“Sometimes in life you just need to slow down a tad and enjoy the things around you,” said Theresa. “And I’d very much like to enjoy the company of my daughter for a day.”

“Which really isn’t busy,” said Katie.

“Maybe not,” said Theresa. “But at the same time, you don’t realize how fast time passes when you are doing something you enjoy.”

“Guess so,” said Katie. “So a girls day out?”

“A girls day in is more like it. Unless you want to go grocery shopping,” said Theresa with a smile and sipped at the coffee.

“I love you Mom, but you’re insane if you think I’m braving that horde again,” laughed Katie.

Katie started fixing the pancakes on the griddle and put in some sausage to cook in a separate pan. Her mother flipped on the TV only to find more of the same they saw last night: government officials telling people to keep calm, more scenes of the disaster areas, so called experts in the field attempting to explain things that had often researched, but never seen with their own eyes. It was not long before her mother flipped the channel to a cable channel with a rerun of an older show.

“It’s a bit early for Andy Griffith isn’t it?” laughed Katie.

“I can only take so much of the news,” said Theresa as she got the syrup out of the fridge to warm it up. “And it’s really depressing right now.”

“I know,” said Katie. “You think we could call back Grandma and Grandpa today?”

“I think that can be arranged for certain,” said Theresa.

“And before you mention it, no I won’t let them try to get me to convince you to come to Delaware,” chuckled Katie.

“Apparently you overheard more of the conversation than I intended,” said her mother.

“You were kinda loud,” chuckled Katie as she set out two plates.

“I didn’t mean to be, but your grandmother thinks if she repeats herself enough times that eventually I’ll give in,” said Theresa.

“So I get my stubborn streak from you?” asked Katie.

“Katie, you’re a lot of things in this life, but stubborn isn’t one of them. You have a mellow personality and tend to go with the flow,” said Theresa.

“That can be a problem can’t it?” asked Katie.

“Sometimes,” said her mother. “But generally the way you follow is the right path so I can’t really complain. You let your heart guide you and it tends to be true.”

“I’ve got a lot of love to give,” said Katie. “Speaking of, I need to call Jacob today.”

“How is he handling this?” asked Theresa who knew Katie was somewhat serious about him. But being sixteen, the chances of it being that serious were slim to none as love flitted into a heart as quickly as it flitted out at that age.

“Dunno,” said Katie. “He left school yesterday before I got the chance to talk to him.”

“I’ll make time in our social schedule today,” smiled Theresa.

“I’m sure it will be packed,” laughed Katie as she served out breakfast to the two. They continued chatting over breakfast and Katie ended up “volunteering” for cleanup duties while her mother refilled her coffee mug and checked her email and several news sites. Before long, her mother placed the call to her parents and gave Katie the opportunity to speak to her grandparents. And as predicted, Katie had to be the go between of attempting to convince her “stubborn as a mule” mother to come to Delaware. But they also knew it wasn’t fair to use their grandchild like that so the conversation turned to other topics as they caught up. Katie’s mother had planned on bringing her out that summer as it was, but with the recent strikes, she wasn’t sure exactly when or even if they could make the trip. Eventually Katie passed the phone back to her mother and the conversation resumed from the night before. But as both sides were weary, neither pressed the issue as much as they could have. Eventually goodbyes were said and her mother returned to find her finishing the dishes.

“It’s going to be a pleasant day,” observed Theresa. “Want to work on your tan?”

“Prom is coming up,” thought Katie. “Dunno if my old bikini will fit though.”

“You and I are about the same size now,” said Theresa. “You can borrow mine.”

“That’s like old people clothing!” objected Katie.

“I’m not that old missy,” said Theresa with a smirk.

“You’re almost forty Mom,” said Katie. “That’s almost like being dead.”

“You know, parents are still allowed to beat their kids,” her mother remarked.

“I thought you said I was sweet and stuff,” said Katie with a pitiful look.

“You are the best daughter anyone could ever dream of having,” said Theresa with a smile.

“And someday when you have a daughter, I hope she calls you old as well.”

“Can I call Jacob?” asked Katie as she wiped her hands on the dishtowel.

“Sure,” said Theresa as she finished her coffee and poured the last cup. Katie bounced out of the kitchen with the cordless phone and dialed the number to his home. She headed to her room for some privacy and plopped down on her bed as the phone rang at his house. There wasn’t an answer, so she hung up and called his cell phone instead. After a couple of rings, he picked up.

“Hello?” asked Jacob Carter, a senior at the same school Katie attended.

“Hey,” said Katie. “How are you?”

“Fine, how are you?” asked Jacob in a standoffish voice.

“Good,” said Katie in a cheerful voice. “I missed you yesterday with all the craziness going on. You at home?”

“No,” said Jacob.

“Out and about?” asked Katie.

“Kind of,” said Jacob.

“Is now not a good time?” asked Katie.

“I’m not sure there will be a good time,” said Jacob.

“What do you mean?” asked Katie as she propped herself up on her elbows.

“Well, my family upped and headed to Arkansas not long after the attacks yesterday,” said Jacob. “And we’ll be here for a while.”

“Oh,” said Katie. “That was some craziness wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Jacob.

“Is something going on?” asked Katie as he didn’t seem as talkative as usual.

“Look...” he started. “I don’t think we’ll be back for a long time. And you’re a really cool girl and all, but I just don’t think this is going to work.”

“What do you mean?” asked Katie as a horrible feeling hit her.

“I just don’t think this relationship is going anywhere,” said Jacob.

“You mean...” asked Katie as her voice trailed off.

“Yeah, we should break up,” he said confirming her dread.

“But Jacob,” said Katie in a wavering voice. “You said you loved me.”

“Guess I was wrong,” said Jacob. “Look, I don’t want to make this hard, okay?”

“But I love you Jacob,” said Katie as her voice broke.

“I just can’t okay? It’s just not going anywhere,” said Jacob. “I like you, but only as a friend. And I just don’t see you like a girlfriend anymore.”

“But we...you know,” said Katie.

“I know,” said Jacob. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think you are,” said Katie as a tear rolled down her face.

“Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,” said Jacob. “I hope everything works out for you.”

“Jacob-” she started to say but was cut off.

“Bye Katie,” he said and ended the call. She sat with the phone and called his name several times before finally realizing she was talking to herself. She dropped the phone onto the bed as tears streamed down her face. She rolled over and dug her head into her pillow and cried, hoping he would come to his senses and call her back.

And she rolled back over and stared at the phone waiting for it to ring as her emotions were on yet another roller coaster as they typically were at sixteen years old.

CHAPTER 6

Time Since Attacks: 2 Days

Date/Time: 21 April/1023 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Katie?” called her mother from the bottom of the steps. It didn’t garner an answer, so she headed up the stairs and called at the bend. “Katie?”

Still lacking a response, Theresa came to the door and knocked softly and called once again “Katie?” as her daughter might have been asleep since the previous day’s events had worn them all down. But the mother in her worried slightly and she opened the door quietly and peeked inside her room. She saw Katie sitting on the bed facing away from the door and quietly moved across the room.

“Is everything okay?” asked Theresa as Katie briefly turned away as she heard the movement.

“Yes, I’m okay,” said Katie as she sniffed a little and wouldn’t look her mother in the face.

“It’s doesn’t seem like everything’s okay,” said Theresa.

“I’m okay Mom,” said Katie. “I just want to be left alone.”

“You know I can’t do that,” said Theresa.

“Everything is okay,” said Katie and finally turned to look at her mother. Her red eyes were clearly indicative of her recent crying and her face was as long as a mile.

“Katie? What happened?” asked Theresa.

“Nothing,” said Katie as she looked at the floor.

“Did you get to talk to Jacob?” asked Theresa.

Katie nodded briefly and looked at the floor, tears welling up in her eyes once again. She sniffed back the tears once again, or attempted do and failing in the process. “He broke up with me.”

“Oh Katie, I’m sorry,” said Theresa as she pulled her daughter into a hug and let her break down into tears once again. Sometimes there didn’t need to be anything said and her mother decided it was best to just let her get it out of her system. Being sixteen at one point in her life, she fully understood what it felt like to get your heart stomped on at that age. What had started off as such a good day had taken a radical turn for the worse. Eventually Katie pulled back and wiped at her eyes while sniffing back the remainder of her tears.

“I don’t know what happened,” said Katie before her mother even asked.

“What did he say?” asked Theresa.

“Just that he didn’t like me anymore,” said Katie as she wiped her face once again. “And said we were done since he didn’t see our relationship going anywhere.”

“Did he say why?” asked Theresa.

“No!” exclaimed Katie. “Just that he wanted to be friends instead!”

“Do you?” asked Theresa.

“No! I hate him!” exclaimed Katie. “He told me he loved me!”

“Katie, it’s not right to hate,” said her mother patiently. “And immature boys will say anything they think a girl wants to hear.”

“He hurt me Mom!” exclaimed Katie.

“I know honey,” said Theresa. “But in time the hurt will pass.”

“Just feels like he stomped all over my heart,” said Katie as another tear escaped.

“I know how that can feel,” said her mother patiently again, but wanted to wring the boy’s neck that hurt her daughter. “Look, I know this might not be what you want to hear, but someday you’ll meet someone very special. Someone that will be able to see what a kind heart you have and love you for who you are. A good man and not a little boy.”

“I doubt it,” said Katie. “Boys only want to get in your pants.”

“Maybe so,” said Theresa who suspected they were active. “But a man, a mature and good man, will look past that nonsense and see what a wonderful woman you truly are.”

“You think so?” asked Katie.

“I know so,” smiled Theresa. “And you are a wonderful young woman already. You’ll find a good man one of these days that you can share love with.”

“Is it wrong to want to smack him in the face?” asked Katie.

“No, that’s a fairly normal reaction,” chuckled her mother. “But I wouldn’t suggest it.”

“Might make me feel better,” said Katie with a brief laugh.

“You know what else would work?” asked Theresa.

“What?” asked Katie.

“Find a better boyfriend and make him jealous,” said her mother with a grin.

“Kenny Penn thinks I’m cute,” said Katie.

“The football player?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah,” said Katie with a slight grin.

“He is a cutie as well,” said Theresa. “Does he have a date for the prom?”

“I dunno,” said Katie.

“It’s the 21st century,” said Theresa. “It’s okay for girls to ask boys to the prom.”

“You think I should?” asked Katie.

“I know you should,” said Theresa. “And when you two get to the prom, and a cute couple you will be, Jacob won’t even know what to do with himself.”

“I don’t know if Jacob will be at the prom,” said Katie.

“Why is that?” asked Theresa.

“He said he and his family left town yesterday because of the strikes. They went to Arkansas and he said he didn’t know when they would be back,” said Katie.

“See? Now you are single again and can ask Kenny to the prom,” said Theresa.

“Maybe,” said Katie.

“Feeling any better?” asked Theresa.

“No, not really,” said Katie with a slight smile.

“Hungry then?” asked Theresa with a laugh.

“I could eat, yes,” said Katie.

“Okay, your choice for lunch,” said Theresa. “You get cleaned up and we’ll head out for lunch. Sound good?”

“Any place I want?” asked Katie.

“Sure,” said her mother.

“Road trip to Wichita to Braums?” asked Katie with a slight grin.

“Okay, how about your choice *locally* for lunch?” laughed Theresa.

“I suppose I can think of something,” said Katie as her spirits were a little better than before. Her mother had a way of being able to help her see through the moments of sheer disaster that often struck her young life and made her feel better. And unlike a lot of teenage girls, she never resented her mother and considered her a friend as well as family. The two stood up as Katie headed towards the second bathroom and her mother into her own private bath. Eventually they both were cleaned and made up and ready to go. As they departed the house, the radio station was still blasting the news and her mother turned it down slightly as they headed out onto the roadways. Neighbors were seen out and about as well, mowing lawns and doing yard work, bringing groceries in from vehicles and generally enjoying the nice spring weather that Kansas was currently under.

After arriving at the restaurant that Katie picked out, her mother saw she was in slightly better spirits than she had been that morning. And apparently a bacon cheeseburger, fries and a milkshake was good medicine for bringing someone back to normal levels. And even Theresa cheated a bit that day since it was a girl’s day out, but had to remind herself to take it easy that evening since it wasn’t quite as easy to burn calories at close to forty as it was at sixteen. But all in all, they enjoyed a good lunch and Theresa saw her daughter was bouncing back into form a little bit. But she knew that at that age, the rebound would still take a little while as relationships ending seemed to be the end of the world. But Katie was also young enough to have it pass quicker than Theresa had after her divorce.

Eventually they finished up and started heading back home, seeing the packed parking lots at the local grocery stores and the endless lines of people going in and out. Katie saw her mother was entirely correct when they made the mad dash the day before and was happy they didn’t have to brave the crowds that day instead. However, as they turned towards the house, Katie asked to stop in at her part time job and speak with the owner.

“I think that can be arranged,” said Theresa as she made another turn and headed towards the alterations and dry cleaning shop where Katie had started working part time for spending cash and saving up for paying for half a car earlier that year. Once they arrived, they saw the owner and hardest worker in the shop, Camille Simmons behind the counter working as usual. An elderly Filipino lady, she was still spry for a woman in her 60s and kept the shop running as smooth as the silk she currently had in her hands.

“Katie! Theresa!” she exclaimed with just a hint of an accent as they came in. A widow, her husband had married her while he was stationed in the Philippines and they had retired out of the nearby Whiteman Air Force Base over twenty years before. The shop also served as their home as the second floor was an apartment that Mrs. Simmons currently lived in.

“Mrs. Simmons,” said Katie as she collected a hug. “I just came by to see when you want me to work again and to check on you.”

“You’re welcome here at any time dear,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Tomorrow?” asked Katie.

An “ahem” was heard from behind her as her mother gave her the look only mothers could when their children had crossed the line.

“I would say yes, but I believe your mother has other plans,” laughed Mrs. Simmons.

“Like school?” asked Theresa.

“After school maybe?” asked Katie.

“Maybe, but I kind of have other plans for us,” said Theresa.

“That’s a translation for she wants to use me for slave labor Mrs. Simmons,” giggled Katie.

“Your daughter is a jewel,” laughed Mrs. Simmons.

“She’s a mess is what she is,” laughed her mother. “Are you doing okay?”

“Oh perfectly fine except for the lunatics out and about right now,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“We encountered some yesterday,” said Theresa.

“The entire bunch of them are crazy,” said Mrs. Simmons. “Hopefully it dies off in the next day or two. But it might be wishful thinking on my part.”

“We avoided the grocery stores today and saw the lines. I don’t know if it’s worse than yesterday, but I’m not going to find out,” said Theresa.

“A good idea,” said Mrs. Simmons. The three caught up in some small talk before Theresa looked at her watch and customers started rolling in once again. They said their goodbyes and Katie and her mother departed to head back home. The drive wasn’t that far and they didn’t encounter significant traffic like they had in town. Once arriving at home, Katie plopped herself back down on the couch and flipped on the TV while her mother checked the computer once again. Of course the news continued to cover the six disaster areas with occasional blurbs from government officials stating what they knew which generally turned into what they didn’t know. Katie also watched the ticker across the bottom of the TV screen and saw some local info as well.

“Mom? Apparently school is out tomorrow as well,” she said.

“Really?” asked Theresa.

“It was on the bottom ticker,” said Katie.

“Okay,” said Theresa as she grabbed the phone and dialed the school to find out when they might be back in. She managed to get through on the second try and spoke for a couple of minutes with one of the faculty before saying goodbye and returning to the living room.

“Didn’t trust me?” asked Katie.

“No, I trusted you,” said Theresa. “But I wanted to find out exactly when you were going back so I can make plans too.”

“Oh,” said Katie.

“Tomorrow they are going to use one of the snow days they didn’t need this year and you’ll probably be back on Monday,” said Theresa.

“Okay, so I can throw a wild party tomorrow while you’re at work?” asked Katie with a grin.

“No,” said her mother with a look. “Tomorrow means I take a day of vacation as well.”

“Aww,” said Katie who was rapidly rebounding already.

“I’ve got to get the rest of the flowers put out tomorrow which would be a wonderful time for me to make use of my daughter’s strong back in moving stuff,” said Theresa.

“But I’m little and stuff,” said Katie.

“Got to make sure you’re in shape for prom,” said Theresa. “And tanned.”

“Guess so,” said Katie.

“Anything new on the attacks?” asked Theresa.

“They think it’s terrorists,” said Katie. “And they were on planes.”

“Really?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, that’s what they just said,” said Katie. “And a couple of groups from around the world have claimed responsibility.”

“Where did they get nuclear bombs from?” asked Theresa, more to herself than anyone.

“Dunno,” said Katie. “Weird huh?”

“Frightening,” said Theresa.

“Still a little scared?” asked Katie.

“No, I think we’ll be fine here,” said her mother, but worried inside. If terrorists could create six bombs, they surely could create more. And be able to deliver them anywhere in the world.

“But nothing else really,” said Katie as the scene turned to Houston where the helicopters were being herded out of the hot zones by military gunships. “The Air Force shot down a couple of planes this morning though.”

“What?” asked Theresa with some surprise.

“Like small ones that were heading towards cities,” said Katie. “They shot them down when they didn’t answer their radios.”

“More terrorists?” asked Theresa.

“They don’t think so,” said Katie. “Just some private planes that weren’t following orders.”

“Sad that it happened,” said Theresa. “You still want to get some sun?”

“Sure,” said Katie. “As long as I don’t have to wear your old woman bathing suit.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” said her mother.

“It still hurts,” said Katie.

“Time sweetie,” said her mother. “Just takes time.”

Time Since Attacks: 36 days

Date/Time: 26 May/1533 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Katie? I’m home,” said her mother as she came in and set down the plastic grocery bags in the kitchen. It had been over a month since the initial attacks and slightly less since the US nuclear response striking at targets in Iran. And the retaliation by the Islamic world in cutting off the oil supply to the world as well. It hadn’t hit that hard yet in the United States, but the price of a gallon of gas had already gone over \$7 in anticipation of the supplies drying up.

Katie came downstairs dressed casually for the moment since she had the high school prom that evening. The school had already accelerated their schedule and graduated two days prior, but attempted to keep some form of normalcy in the aftermath of the largest terrorist incident the world had ever seen.

“You look beautiful!” exclaimed her mother.

“Got my hair done and everything,” said Katie with a smile.

“I don’t think Kenny is going to know what hit him,” smiled Theresa.

“You think?” asked Katie who had asked the boy to the prom and been told immediately yes. They had even gone on two dates before it got too expensive for either of them to drive.

“I bet his mouth will hit the floor,” said Theresa with a grin.

“Did you go to the store?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said Theresa with a sigh. “And still somewhat wiped out.”

“We’ve still got some stuff,” said Katie.

“We do, but it’s not going to last much longer,” said Theresa.

“There’s the Red Cross and FEMA stations,” suggested Katie.

“Maybe,” said Theresa. “But only as a last resort. I’ve tried to teach you self-reliance and not having to depend on others to get by. But if push comes to shove, we will.”

Katie knew there was more to it than that. Since the strikes and the rising price of gasoline, her mother’s work schedule had been cut to four days a week and she knew the business was contemplating cutting to three days. Since not as many people were driving, there were fewer claims at the moment and it hurt the overall business. And typically the first place they looked for cost savings was the employee salaries.

“Is Kenny taking you out to dinner first?” asked Theresa as she put the few cans she was able to buy on the shelves in the pantry.

“Supposed to,” said Katie. “He’ll be here at 5:30.”

“When are you going to get dressed?” asked Theresa.

“Figure in an hour or so,” said Katie as she helped her mother.

“I’m glad the school didn’t cancel the prom,” said Theresa as she grabbed the next bag. Even through the crazy times the world was having, the school felt it was best to continue the tradition although Theresa feared it might be one of the last they would have for a long time. Random violence was starting to be far less than random as desperate people started robbing and stealing what they thought they needed to survive. Home invasions were more frequent and it worried her to no end seeing they were in a decent neighborhood. But luckily the violence had passed

them by and was generally in the bad parts of town. But, as the local news had reported, was spilling over as resources in those areas dried up.

They were fairly lucky for the moment as the bills were still being paid on time although Theresa had to dip into the savings and Katie's college funds for the moment. She was hoping for an academic scholarship for Katie to continue her education to help offset the balance, but as with all things, college was one of the last things on her mind at the moment.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Katie.

"Oh, nothing," said her mother.

"I can tell when something's on your mind," said Katie.

"Just wondering what your curfew is going to be tonight," said her mother.

"You expect me to believe that?" asked Katie. "I can tell when you're lying."

"Didn't convince you?" asked her mother with a laugh.

"No," laughed Katie. "Everything's going to be okay Mom."

"I do hope so baby," said her mother with a smile and a sad look.

"What?" asked Katie.

"My baby is growing up," she said with a smile.

"Oh Mom, don't get all mushy," said Katie. "I've got another one of these next year."

"Someday when you're a parent, you'll understand," said her mother.

"I guess so," said Katie. "It's just prom."

"Just another step before you leave the nest," said her mother. "And I get to throw a wild party when you leave."

"I'm not invited?" asked Katie.

"A party for the fact you're gone," laughed her mother.

"Not fair!" exclaimed Katie as she saw the mailman delivering the mail.

"I'll go grab it, I don't want the humidity messing with your hair," said her mother as she collected the mail that came in. Even with the country teetering on the brink, companies still found the time to send pre-approved credit card applications and discounted life insurance

policies. However, she found the letter she was hoping for from the school. As she came back inside, she dumped the remainder of the mail to go through later and opened letter with Katie's final grades for the semester. Katie was busy through the house doing something and responded when her mother called her name.

"Am I in trouble?" asked Katie as she saw her mother reading over her grades.

"Maybe," said her mother. "Depends."

"On?" asked Katie.

"Can you explain this?" asked her mother as she handed over the letter.

Katie read over the grades quickly before finding the final average. "I maintained a 3.6!"

"I'm proud of you!" said her mother as she gave her a hug.

"And you have to buy me a car!" exclaimed Katie. "The deal was if I maintained at least a 3.5 and got a job, you'd help split the difference on a car."

"That certainly was the deal," said her mother. "And as soon as things calm down, I'll make good on that promise."

"Awesome!" exclaimed Katie. "I've already got a list ready to go!"

"I'll bet you do," laughed her mother.

"Is a Corvette too much to ask for up front?" grinned Katie.

"I think we'll definitely need to look over your list before we shop," laughed her mother.

They passed the remainder of the afternoon talking and before long Katie started getting dressed for the prom that evening. Her mother helped her with her makeup as the clock clicked closer to when her date would arrive.

"Blot your lipstick," said her mother.

"Too much?" asked Katie.

"Just a bit," said her mother as she passed over a tissue. "Just enough to bring out your highlights. Too much and you look trashy."

Katie blotted the lipstick and looked herself over in the mirror. "I need something to bring out my eyes."

“That’s next,” said her mother as she got the appropriate makeup items out and started helping. “But you don’t need a lot to bring them out. You have your father’s eyes.”

“I don’t remember them that much,” said Katie as her mother started carefully applying the makeup. “Just that they were blue.”

“Oh, he had nice eyes. Certainly one of the attributes you got from him,” said her mother.

“You think Kenny will be impressed?” asked Katie.

“I think my daughter makes aquamarine look absolutely fantastic,” said her mother. “That dress was practically made for you.”

“I think you’re biased,” said Katie.

“I think my daughter is wrong,” said her mother. “You still have some filling out to do over the next few years, but I think you will be a very beautiful woman. Not that you aren’t already.”

“You say nice things,” said Katie.

“Why else did Kenny trip over himself to say yes to your invitation?” asked her mother.

“Because he’s a boy?” asked Katie with a grin.

“And might be that my daughter is a lovely young woman,” said her mother. “Sit still.”

“Sorry,” said Katie as she adjusted in the seat and her mother fixed the errant application. They spent the next few minutes finishing up and touching up a few things before her mother announced it to be complete and had Katie look in the mirror.

“Wow, I kind of clean up okay,” said Katie.

“I think so,” said her mother with a smile. They still had a half hour before Kenny was due to arrive and Theresa made sure the camera was charged. However, he was a bit early which didn’t bother Theresa in the least since her daughter pacing around was driving her up the wall. Katie bounded to the door when he rang the doorbell.

“Hi!” she exclaimed.

“Hi Katie,” he said. “Wow!”

“Do I look nice?” asked Katie.

“Very,” he said as he saw her mother coming with the camera. “Hi Mrs. Shepherd.”

“Good evening Kenny,” said her mother. “You are especially handsome this evening.”

“Thank you ma’am,” he said as he pulled out the corsage for Katie and slipped it on her wrist. They took the next few minutes to pose for the camera as her mother took about thirty pictures before finally allowing the two to depart.

“Kenny, I’d like Katie home by 1 please,” said her mother.

“That’s no problem Mrs. Shepherd,” said Kenny. “It will be well before that as my parents set my curfew at 12:30 since we have church tomorrow.”

“Okay, that sounds good,” said Theresa. “You two have a wonderful time.”

“Bye Mom,” said Katie as she was escorted to the truck he was driving and helped inside. They departed the residence to go back to his parent’s house where the process of gushing over the couple and photo taking ensued yet again.

Theresa went back inside and sat down on the couch, looking through the pictures she had taken of the two. A sudden feeling of loneliness came over her as she realized her daughter was growing up and would be leaving home soon to start her own life. And like billions of parents before her, was sad at the thought of the baby bird finally taking her first steps out of the nest even though that was a part of life they all had to deal with.

“I had an awesome time tonight,” said Katie as they stood outside her home with barely enough time for him to dash home.

“I did too,” said Kenny with a smile.

“So...” said Katie.

“I probably need to get going,” he said.

“No good night kiss?” asked Katie and being pretty forward.

“I wasn’t sure,” said Kenny.

“I’m sure,” said Katie.

“So I can kiss you?” he asked.

“I was hoping you might,” smiled Katie.

They met in the middle and kissed briefly. Just long enough to get the point across that they liked each other a little more than as friends and had a good time that evening. Eventually they separated and he backed away slowly.

“I really need to go,” he said sadly.

“I understand,” she replied. “Good night.”

“Night Katie,” he said as he opened the door on the truck and hopped in. As he was leaving, he waved out the window and she blew him a kiss. After unlocking and opening the door quietly, she saw her mother asleep in the chair in the living room. She attempted to tiptoe across the floor after removing her shoes, but found the appearances were deceiving.

“Did you have fun tonight?” asked her mother.

“I thought you were asleep,” said Katie.

“No, not really,” said her mother.

“We had an awesome time,” said Katie. “Kenny is a really cool guy.”

“Aren’t you glad I told you to ask him?” asked her mother.

“You waited up to tell me you told me so?” asked Katie with a grin.

“No, I wanted to make sure you got home okay,” said her mother with a smile.

“The answer is yes, I’m glad you told me so,” said Katie.

“I’m happy you had a wonderful time,” said her mother. “Need some help getting out of that thing?”

“Please,” said Katie as she headed upstairs to her bedroom. “Kenny is a sweetheart.”

“He seems like a nice boy,” said her mother as she located the zipper and started undoing it.

“Very gentleman like. Apparently he’s one of those men you talk about,” giggled Katie.

“You appear to be a little interested in him,” laughed her mother.

“He’s cute,” said Katie. “And can actually carry on a conversation.”

“That’s always a plus,” said her mother as she handed over an oversized t-shirt for Katie.

“And invited me out again next Friday,” said Katie. “As well as inviting us to his church.”

“I think that can be arranged,” said her mother. “Where do they go?”

“I didn’t even ask,” admitted Katie. “I can call tomorrow and find out.”

“You’re pretty hyped up right now, are you going to be able to sleep?” laughed her mother.

“I think so,” laughed Katie as she headed to the bathroom to remove the makeup. After returning, she found her mother looking through the photo albums of when she was growing up. “Aww, Mom, you’re going to get mushy again aren’t you?”

“No,” she chuckled. “My baby is growing up though.”

“I’m never going to outgrow being a baby am I?” asked Katie with a grin.

“Nope,” said her mother. “Even when you’re sixty-five, I’ll still call you my baby.”

“I have to learn to deal with it don’t I?” asked Katie.

“You just have to accept it ladybug,” said her mother as she pulled back the bedspread. Katie hopped into the bed with a smile on her face, revisiting the evening and the wonderful time she had. And how she found Kenny way more interesting than Jacob ever was. She said good night to her mother as she slipped out and headed back downstairs to turn off all the lights before heading to bed herself.

CHAPTER 7

Time Since Attacks: 40 days

Date/Time: 30 May/1149 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Not much business Mrs. Simmons,” said Katie as she sat behind the counter in the alterations shop. Only three individuals had been in all morning and all three were part of the Air National Guard recalled to active service that needed repairs and patches sewn onto their uniforms.

“I’m afraid we aren’t going to see much business anymore,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“We had those military guys,” said Katie.

“I’ve had a few come in, but eventually they will run out as well,” said Mrs. Simmons. “There’s only a few times a uniform can be mended before it is useless.”

“I think things are going to get better,” said Katie.

“Not before they become far worse child,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“You think so?” asked Katie.

“Probably,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“If everyone would just work together to get through this we would be okay,” said Katie. “I don’t know why people have to be stupid about it.”

“Because people get scared and think they have to do bad things to survive,” said Mrs. Simmons. “And some even do bad things because they know they can get away with it.”

“But if people could just see that things would be better if they worked together,” said Katie.

Mrs. Simmons smiled at Katie knowing she had the heart of a child still and didn’t understand that the world was filled with bad people that didn’t care about helping others. She was in a word still innocent to the horrors that were happening even in front of her eyes and still had hope for a bright future. Mrs. Simmons took a little comfort from the fact that she had become jaded in her life and remembered with nostalgia the times she believed the world was perfect.

“I’m going to have to send you home early if that’s okay,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Did I do something wrong?” asked Katie.

“No, there’s only so many times you can sweep the floor and sit on a chair waiting for a customer to pop in. And as much as I enjoy your company, I can’t afford to keep paying you for sitting down,” she laughed.

“But I do a very good job warming a seat,” grinned Katie. “You want me to come in tomorrow when you open?”

“Not tomorrow,” said Mrs. Simmons. “I’m only going to start opening four days a week.”

“Oh,” said Katie. “That sucks.”

“I just can’t justify keeping the doors open. But of course since I live upstairs I can always open up if I need to,” she explained.

“So on Friday then?” asked Katie.

“I’ll call you and let you know,” said Mrs. Simmons who opened the cash register. “I figure it might be better to pay you in cash instead of a check.”

“Cash is okay, the bank takes it too,” said Katie as she collected the two twenty dollar bills. “I only worked for four hours today. That’s only thirty dollars.”

“Call the rest a tip for keeping an old woman company,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“I can’t Mrs. Simmons,” said Katie.

“You will,” she said in a voice that didn’t provide a way to argue. “Now you head on home.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Katie. “Bye.”

“Bye-bye,” said Mrs. Simmons as Katie departed the shop. Being that her mother was at work, Katie walked the distance home, a little over two miles, along the roads and into her neighborhood. She saw very few people out and about and very little traffic as well. It was almost like late evening in the middle of the day as people stayed inside mostly and didn’t come out unless they needed to. Lawns were already starting to overgrow as people saved the gasoline they normally used in lawnmowers and weedeaters for their vehicles. Arriving home, she locked the door behind her and went to the kitchen and grabbed a glass of ice water. Heading into the living room, she flipped on the TV and found yet another world crisis erupting.

“...forces are on the move after a massive artillery barrage against the Republic of Korea troops on the Demilitarized Zone. South Korean President Kang released a statement denouncing the actions and demanding assistance from the United Nations as guaranteed from the initial invasion in 1950.”

“The United States President along with senior members of Congress have also denounced the actions of North Korea and called for an immediate end to the hostilities. When asked if the

United States would be providing troops to assist the South Koreans, White House Press Secretary Blain stated ‘the President is considering all options.’ US troops were removed from Korea and Japan in the initial weeks after the April 20th terrorist attacks and less than two thousand remain in those two countries.”

“We’re going to try to link up with our Wolf News affiliates in South Korea right after we return from a commercial break.”

Katie tuned out the commercials as she wondered why the world had suddenly turned crazy. From the terrorist attacks in her own nation to the Islamic World stopping the supply of oil to the regular naval battles in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, someone had tossed a match in a bucket of gas just to watch it burn. The report came back on and she saw the battles raging near the front in South Korea as explosions were seen on the TV screen and tanks fired at distant targets even in the darkness of night. Fighter jets were heard roaring overhead and dropped their payloads all on live television. And it awed her slightly seeing the power that men controlled. They broke away from the scene to their reporter in Seoul where she gave an update on the South Korean response to the invasion.

The phone rang and it was her grandparents calling again, worried this time since the fighting had begun in Korea yet again. She informed them her mother wasn’t home and had a long conversation with the two of them as well as one of her uncles she hadn’t spoken with in years. They all three asked when, not if, she and her mother were coming back to Delaware to be with the rest of the family and Katie obviously didn’t have an answer to give. But she did promise to ask her mother about it and promised to have her call them when she got home from work. She ended the call and watched the news for several more minutes before finally agreeing with her mother that too much news was bad for the brain. Shutting off the TV, she went to the computer, but didn’t feel like browsing the web for the moment. In a word, she was bored.

However, she decided a little surprise for her mother might be in order and she changed into some work clothing and headed into the backyard and started pulling weeds from the flower gardens her mother had been negligent in recently. Katie knew she worried a lot more than she let on and Katie attempted to be as upbeat as possible to help be a positive light in her life. She lost track of time and was startled when her mother came into the backyard.

“Did someone pay you to do that?” asked her mother.

“Mom!” yelled Katie. “You scared me!”

“I’m sorry sweetie, I didn’t mean to,” said Theresa who looked a little worn.

“Everything okay?” asked Katie.

“Yeah, sort of,” said Theresa. “The flower beds look nice.”

“Thanks,” said Katie. “I’ve slaved over them like all day.”

“Uh huh,” said Theresa with a brief smile.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” asked Katie.

“Got my hours cut again today,” said Theresa.

“That sucks,” said Katie.

“The company just has to protect the bottom line,” said her mother. “And they actually let a couple of employees go so I should be thankful. But we will have to make some hard choices.”

“Such as?” asked Katie.

“Let’s take a break and head inside,” said Theresa. “Not that I don’t want the neighbors hearing our conversation or anything.”

“Okies,” said Katie as she wiped off her hands and they headed inside. She grabbed another ice water and one for her mother as they sat down at the kitchen table.

“So we’re going to have to look at cutting costs big time for the moment,” said Theresa. “Like drastic cuts, you understand?”

“Like what Mom?” asked Katie.

“Like cutting back on the power around here for one. During the day we can run the air conditioner sure, but after dark when it starts cooling off, we probably need to look at shutting it off and opening the windows. It’ll be a little warm, but it will save us a bunch right there. Or not running it when we aren’t at home. Every little bit helps. And not running the TV when we aren’t in the room, turning off lights, unplugging electronics that aren’t in use, things like that,” said Theresa. “Just whatever we can to cut power consumption.”

“Sounds easy enough,” said Katie.

“And unfortunately, we’ll have to start buying food whenever we can,” said Theresa. “I know the rationing will start soon like it has for the gasoline so we need to stock up like crazy.”

“I was thinking about that earlier. How hard would it be to plant a garden?” asked Katie.

“Not really much different than flowers,” said Theresa. “It’s a bit late though.”

“But not too late, right?” asked Katie.

“Not, not really,” said Theresa. “We can raise some stuff, but the backyard isn’t really set up for that. But it doesn’t mean we can’t try.”

“Easy enough,” said Katie.

“And the assistance centers,” said her mother with a sigh. “We’ll need to start thinking about taking some of the items they are handing out. I’m not sure how it works, but we’ll find out.”

“It doesn’t bother me at all,” said Katie.

“I just don’t like having to depend on others,” said Theresa. “And gas usage. You’ve been good about walking to and from work, so that will have to continue. Sorry sweetie, but your car will have to be put on hold for a while.”

“I kinda knew that already,” said Katie that didn’t seem disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” said Theresa.

“Mom, it’s not a big deal. I completely understand the situation,” said Katie.

“I promise you once I get my feet back under me we’ll get you one,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie and added with a grin “A Corvette, right?”

“We’ll see,” chuckled Theresa.

“What else?” asked Katie.

“I’m going to try to offload some old stuff at the pawn shop. So if you have things you don’t need any more or don’t want, we’ll get rid of them,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie. “Like what?”

“That’ll be up to you,” said Theresa.

“Easy enough,” said Katie. “Aren’t you glad I insisted that we rent my prom dress?”

“Absolutely,” laughed Theresa who was very proud of her daughter right then.

“One more thing,” said Katie. “And I know you’re going to say no, but you can’t say no, okay?”

“If I knew what I was saying no too I might agree with?” asked Theresa.

“I’m going to lump my savings account into yours,” said Katie.

“Katie no! That’s your money that you worked for,” said Theresa.

“And it’s something we both need right now,” said Katie. “Call it a loan and I know you’ll pay me back eventually, but we need it to get by.”

“I can’t Katie,” said Theresa.

“I don’t think you have a choice in the matter,” said Katie. “I’ll go to the bank myself and pull it out in cash if I have to.”

“Which might not be a bad idea as it is,” said Theresa. “But that’s only going to work for so long until the cash is worthless.”

“I don’t understand,” said Katie.

“It would take a little while to explain, but basically paper money is just the idea that someone is backing it like the Federal Government. But when the Government can’t back it anymore, like I fear is coming soon, that money will be worthless,” explained Theresa.

“So we use the cash now,” said Katie. “And get what we need.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” said Theresa. “In fact, we’ll head there tomorrow and do that.”

“And look for garden seeds and stuff,” said Katie. “Mrs. Simmons is going to be closing more often and cutting back my hours too, so I can help keep it up.”

“That’s an outstanding idea,” said Theresa. “So tomorrow, we’ll take care of some business.”

“Absolutely,” said Katie. “How was the rest of your day?”

“Boring,” said her mother. “Not that many claims coming in right now except for theft, which is seriously on the rise. And it’s not easy prying the reports out of the police right now as they are swamped. So the claims are getting backed up.”

“We’re still safe here, right?” asked Katie.

“Yes, we’ve been keeping track of the areas that are getting hit,” said Theresa. “And the area here has been pretty calm for the most part. But just in case, we won’t leave anything of value out, okay?”

“Absolutely,” said Katie.

“What else happened while I was at work?” asked Theresa.

“Well, South Korea was invaded by North Korea,” said Katie.

“What?!” exclaimed Theresa.

“It was on the news when I got home,” said Katie. “I eventually had enough bad news and went outside to play in the flowers.”

“Probably a good choice,” said Theresa with a chuckle.

“And Grandma and Grandpa called,” said Katie. “I told them you would call back and I got to talk to Uncle Rick for a while.”

“He was there?” asked Theresa.

“Apparently he and his family moved back with them,” said Katie. “And before you ask, yes, they did ask me to talk to you about coming there.”

“I don’t like you being used as a pawn in that,” said Theresa.

“They didn’t push the issue,” said Katie. “And I’m guessing it’s not going to happen anyway.”

“With the price of gas and lack of supplies, no,” said Theresa.

“You know you’re going to get an earful from Grandma about it,” said Katie. “She’ll remind you she told you so about a dozen times.”

“At least,” laughed Theresa as the phone rang. She was closest to the cordless jack and answered it on the second ring. “Hello.”

“Yes, this is Theresa Shepherd...yes...oh, hello, it’s nice to talk to you...yes, Katie is my daughter...sure, hang on,” said Theresa and held up her finger with a nod at Katie and headed outside onto the back patio.

“Okay, I’m away from her...oh my God...oh no...I am so sorry Mrs. Penn, I didn’t know...what happened...oh dear Lord, I am so sorry...yes, I think she and Kenny were somewhat serious about each other...is there going to be a memorial service...yes, we can attend if you would like...I really just don’t have the words...yes, I’ll let her know...I appreciate the call...just let us know when it will be...okay, thank you...bye.”

Theresa returned inside where Katie was still sitting at the table and saw the look on her mother’s face. She knew the look very well as it typically meant bad news. “What?”

Theresa replaced the phone on the stand and sighed deeply. She took a seat at the table and looked her daughter in the eyes, searching for the right words to say. But there was really no easy way to tell her daughter and no easy way through the situation.

“Your boyfriend Kenny...” said her mother.

“Kinda boyfriend Mom,” said Katie. “Go on.”

“He was...he was murdered today,” said Theresa as she didn’t know how else to put it.

“What?” asked Katie after a moment’s pause.

“He was killed in a carjacking gone wrong,” said Theresa. “That was his mother.”

“Why?” asked Katie in a wavering voice as tears already started to stream down her face.

“I don’t know Katie,” said Theresa as she took her hands. “He was at a traffic light and someone tried to steal his truck and shot him.”

“But why?!” demanded Katie through the tears. “He was a nice guy!”

“I can’t really explain it sweetie,” said her mother as she shed a tear of her own. First off at the shock and emotions her daughter was going through and the fact that people were doing senseless things to each other right then. “I’m so sorry.”

“It can’t be!” said Katie. “We just started dating!”

“I’m so sorry Katie,” said Theresa as she took her daughter into a hug and let her cry on her shoulder yet again.

“It can’t be!” wailed Katie.

“I’m so sorry,” said Theresa who cried tears of her own.

“Do they know who did it?” asked Katie after several minutes.

“His mother didn’t say,” said Theresa.

“I hope they die,” said Katie through gritted teeth.

“Katie...” said Theresa, but knew right then wasn’t the time to discuss it with her daughter.

“Why are people doing this to each other?” she demanded through more sobs.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Theresa. “I really wish I did.”

“I barely knew him,” said Katie as more tears rolled down her face.

“But his family knew how much you meant to him already,” said Theresa. “And that’s why they called to let us know. You made a difference in his life.”

Katie continued to cry and sob as her mother held her and let her shed the emotions of the event. Unlike before, this would take far longer to get over as having someone ripped out of your life like this was never easy to deal with. Katie sat staring at the table and continuing to sniff back the tears as she slowly let the emotions unfold in her mind and anger replaced shock.

“The memorial will be in a few days,” said Theresa when the time was right. “Do you want to go?”

“Yes,” said Katie mindlessly as she was still attempting to comprehend why people did such evil things to each other and why it seemed to happen to the good people.

“Do you need some time alone?” asked her mother.

“Please,” said Katie.

“Okay,” said Theresa. “Why don’t you head upstairs? We can talk later if you like.”

“Okay,” said Katie as she numbly hopped off the chair and went upstairs, the thoughts still crashing through her head, but always coming back to “why” as the ultimate question.

CHAPTER 8

Time Since Attacks: 45 days

Date/Time: 5 June/1022 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

The memorial service was complete and the small group started breaking away from the graveside as Theresa Shepherd took her daughter into a hug and guided her away. But before they left, Katie decided it was time to speak to Kenny's parents. Her mother stood politely away as the family stood and stared at the grave wishing it was all a nightmare they would wake up from and everything would be like it was before.

"Mrs. And Mr. Penn?" asked Katie in a soft voice.

"Katie," said Mrs. Penn. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

"I'm really sorry this happened to you," said Katie as she sniffed back a tear. "Kenny was a really nice guy and had a good heart."

"He thought very highly of you," said Mr. Penn. "He said you were one of the nicest girls he'd ever known."

"Thank you," said Katie who was unsure of what else to say.

"Katie, you shouldn't let this weigh so heavily on your soul. You managed to bring a ray of sunshine into our boy's life even if it was for a brief time. You made him happy which was more than anyone could ever ask for. And for that we thank you," said Mrs. Penn.

"Mrs. Penn..." started Katie and couldn't find the words.

"He's with God now," said Mr. Penn. "Take comfort that he's in a better place."

"Yes sir," said Katie as she sniffed back another tear. "I just..."

"We understand," said Mrs. Penn as she hugged Katie, both emotional wrecks at that moment. Katie looked at the fresh grave for several minutes before turning away with her mother and heading back to their vehicle. Her mother kept her arm around her shoulders the entire way until they reached the car and Katie grasped her hand and squeezed. They hugged before getting into the car and heading straight home as they didn't want to waste a drop of gas that was in short supply. The drive was quiet as the radio played in the background.

"...South Korean forces have been able to stop all advances since the invasion and have begun to counterattack in most areas with the assistance of airstrikes by the United States. North Korean forces reached within five miles of Seoul before being stopped."

“In domestic news today, the President announced he was considering implementing limited martial law in selected regions of the nation due to the overwhelming amount of violence gripping many major metropolitan areas. Milwaukee, Tampa and Denver joined an ever growing list of US cities being placed under martial law and the White House said this could extend to a regional basis. When asked if the White House was considering nationwide implementation of martial law, the Press Secretary stated all options were being considered.”

“Gas shortages are increasing in all parts of the nation and the President has authorized the full release of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. However, this is likely not to help consumers at the pump as the reserves will be immediately put into use by national critical infrastructure and emergency services. And adding to the already growing list of concerns, several pipelines and small refineries were damaged in terrorist acts last night with little known eco-terror groups claiming responsibility. FBI and Homeland Security representatives stated the widespread nature of the attacks was not random and ‘major coordination’ was happening behind the scenes to attack the petroleum industries.”

“Mom, do you think we’ll recover from all this?” asked Katie, starting to have doubts.

“I don’t know sweetie,” said Theresa as she pulled off the four lane road and into the residential area. “But what I do know is you typically are full of hope and that helps bring others spirits up. And I’d like to see that side of my daughter yet again.”

“It’s hard Mom,” said Katie as another tear escaped her eye.

“I know sweetie,” said Theresa who was having a difficult time of her own. The death of Kenny hit her just as hard as it had Katie and showed that nobody was escaping the violence enveloping the nation. And started to worry her that they hadn’t gotten out beforehand although from the news reports, Delaware wasn’t in much better shape with the spillover of crime from Washington and Baltimore reaching into the First State. As well as the FEMA camps that had been set up for the victims from Philadelphia. So for the moment, they would have to wait and see what would happen next as well as hoping for the opportunity to escape the metropolitan area if they could. Pulling into the house, Katie got out and manually opened the garage door and her mother pulled the vehicle inside. Gas theft was becoming far more frequent and even the locked gas caps did little to deter the criminals as they would bypass it and puncture the tank to drain the liquid inside. They went inside and shed the formal clothing before putting on more comfortable clothing that would keep up with the limited air conditioning in the house. They had set the temperature far higher than they normally did at 78 degrees which kept the house reasonably cooler than the exterior, but still not entirely comfortable.

Katie plopped herself down on the bed and stared at the far wall, still trying to sort through everything that was happening in her life right then. It wasn’t easy to deal with what she was having happen to her in such a short period and even events out of her control were affecting the things she cared most about. However, she still had her mother that was the solid rock in her life and headed towards her bedroom where she saw her sitting at the small desk and writing in her diary as she often did.

“Mom?” asked Katie.

“Hey, come in,” said Theresa as she put down the pen and closed the diary.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been myself lately,” said Katie.

“Honey, none of us have been ourselves lately,” said Theresa. “You’ve had a lot thrown at you over the past month.”

“I know, but I shouldn’t let it affect me like this,” said Katie.

“Katie, that’s called being human. I’d be more worried if this didn’t affect you,” said Theresa.

“Yeah, but I don’t want you worrying over me,” said Katie.

“I worry anyway,” said Theresa with a smile. “It’s called being a parent.”

“I know, but you shouldn’t have to worry about what’s happening to me,” said Katie.

“Again, what happens to you, happens to me as well,” said Theresa. “I mean, you don’t fully understand that what happens to a child also happens to a parent.”

“I know, I just don’t want to add to everything,” said Katie.

“I love you Katie,” said her mother with a warm smile.

“I love you too Mom,” said Katie. “I’ll try to perk up a bit.”

“Honey, you take all the time in the world to sort through your mind. Like I said, you’ve had a lot thrown at you and you’ve handled it very well so far. And I also told you before that time is a great healer,” said Theresa.

“It’s just that everything is so crazy!” exclaimed Katie. “I mean, I know things happen in life, but it just seems like everything is happening at once.”

“We’ve got each other right now and that’s all we’ll need,” said Theresa.

“I wouldn’t want anyone else,” said Katie with a smile.

“The feeling is mutual,” said Theresa. “Feel like getting a bite to eat?”

“Sure,” said Katie. They headed to the kitchen where a simple sandwich sufficed for the moment although Katie was starting to have a dislike for Spam. She actually preferred the Treet brand instead although it was about as hard to come by as the Spam. As they finished eating, the lights flickered in the house for a moment before going out entirely.

“You did pay the bill, right?” asked Katie.

“Yes, I paid the bill,” said Theresa as she went towards the front door. Other neighbors were seen outside looking around and trying to figure it out themselves. She went back inside and called the power company where she was told yes, we are aware, there was some damage to the main substation in your area and we’re fixing it as quickly as possible. Seeing that nothing would get accomplished by berating the person on the phone, she thanked them and saw Katie was already opening the windows in the downstairs. There was a decent breeze that day so there would at least be an exchange of air in the house and wouldn’t be as stuffy.

“Kinda glad you started upping the temperature,” said Katie. “It’s not as bad as if we had it set at 70 like normal.”

“Still going to get warm though,” said Theresa. “And don’t open the fridge or freezer until the power comes back on.”

“Right,” said Katie as she opened the windows in the kitchen and pulled up the blinds. Some papers on the table flew off and they both chased them across the room before finally getting them collected and back under the phone book so they wouldn’t move again.

“Well, there’s my exercise for the day,” said Katie.

“So you aren’t up to taking a walk with me?” asked Theresa.

“You want to?” asked Katie.

“I’d just like to get out of the house for a bit,” said Theresa. “If that’s okay.”

“Sure,” said Katie. “Let me grab some shoes.”

“Just around the neighborhood so tennis shoes will be okay,” said her mother as she headed upstairs to collect her own. She had an ulterior motive for taking the walk, but decided not to let Katie know right then since it would worry her if she knew the truth. Katie bounded downstairs in front of her and they headed out of the house towards the outer edge of the housing development, chatting the whole way. They passed by one of their neighbors, Paul and Trish Brady, a couple in their late 40s that lived a couple of blocks over.

“Good afternoon you two,” said Paul Brady.

“Paul, Trish, nice to see you,” said Theresa. “Your power out too?”

“Yeah,” said Trish. “Paul was out and about and saw the substation go up. It’s going to be out for a while.”

“Went up?” asked Katie.

“Lines overloaded or something,” said Paul. “Looked like the 4th of July came early.”

Theresa sighed as she knew it would be hours if not longer before the power could be restored. “Glad we’re not having the normal June weather.”

“It has been a little better this year,” said Trish. “And you’ve got all those nice windows in your place that should let the breeze in.”

“Still not going to be nice for a while,” said Theresa.

“How is everything else going?” asked Paul.

“About as well as could be expected,” said Theresa and avoided talking about their problems.

“You okay on food and whatnot?” asked Trish.

“For the moment,” said Theresa. “I think we’re going to end up having a feast tonight though.”

“Got stuff in your freezer?” asked Paul.

“Yeah,” said Theresa. “And I remember back a few winters ago when that ice storm knocked out the substation and we were without power for almost two days. So I’m imagining it won’t be much better this time.”

“Probably not,” said Trish. “But if you need anything, give us a yell.”

“Actually, I might end up doing that,” said Theresa. “I’ll get back with you though.”

“Okay, if you need something let us know,” said Paul. “Later.”

“Bye,” said Theresa and Katie as they continued their walk. They were about a mile and a half from their house as the crow flew and saw a small creek in the outermost edge of the subdivision. They headed towards it and saw the water was still running fine through it.

“I never knew there was a creek down here,” said Katie.

“That’s because you never jog,” chuckled her mother.

“I do keep in shape though,” said Katie.

“For the most part,” said Theresa. “Your walks to and from the alterations shop help.”

“You think I should run more?” asked Katie.

“It certainly won’t hurt,” said Theresa. “Trust me, age will catch you eventually.”

“I’m going to be sixteen forever,” laughed Katie as they turned and started heading back towards the house. Her mother pointed out several vacant lots along the way and explained the contractor had gone out of business before the land could be cleared and the homes built. It was overgrown and still had a lot of trees on it, but could still be walked through just in case.

They arrived back home and found the power certainly wasn’t coming back on anytime soon. Theresa got the two steaks they had left in the freezer as well as the frozen shrimp for that evening and set them on the countertop to thaw out. The grill outside would have to suffice for the cooking that evening and she grabbed some carrots, onions, celery and potatoes and started peeling them to toss into some aluminum to cook over the charcoal.

“Whatcha making?” asked Katie.

“It’s called a hobo pack,” said Theresa. “You wrap everything up in aluminum and set it in the coals to cook. Grab the butter from the fridge please.”

“Anything else?” asked Katie.

“Grab the season all and garlic,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie as she stood on her tiptoes and grabbed the two spices from the rack and set them on the counter along with the margarine. She noticed her mother making two of the packs and helped by grabbing another cutting board and slicing the celery.

“Do we still have charcoal?” asked Katie.

“We should have nearly a full bag in the garage,” said Theresa.

“I’ll go check,” said Katie as she bounced out of the house and returned moments later. “Half full, but should be enough.”

“We’ll be okay,” said Theresa.

“I noticed something strange today,” said Katie.

“What was that?” asked Theresa.

“When we first went outside when the power went off, I didn’t see as many people as I thought I would. Normally everyone comes out of their houses,” said Katie.

“I wasn’t paying that close of attention,” said Theresa.

“And there’s definitely not as many cars around,” said Katie.

“Now that I did notice,” said Theresa. “Maybe they went other places.”

“Maybe,” said Katie. “Where though?”

“Maybe to family that lives elsewhere,” said Theresa.

“Do you regret us not going back to Delaware?” asked Katie.

“No,” said Theresa. “I honestly don’t think anyone could have seen what is happening right now. And your grandmother freaks out if we get as much as a thunderstorm out here so it was pretty easy to take her warnings with a grain of salt.”

“But we’ll be okay, right?” asked Katie.

“Absolutely,” said Theresa. “Do you want to make sure the grill is cleaned off?”

“Sure,” said Katie as she headed to the backyard where the smaller charcoal grill sat and got the scraper out. The build up wasn’t too bad and she removed the ashes in the bottom as well and transferred them to the garbage can on the side of the house. Yet another unintended consequence of the aftermath of the strikes was the city only removing garbage every two weeks to save on fuel costs. And they were getting close to the end of the two weeks as evident by the smell coming from the can. Katie held her nose to the side as she dropped the plastic shopping bag into the can and headed back to finish up the cleaning. She eventually bopped back into the kitchen and washed her hands off as her mother was finishing up everything.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” asked Katie.

“You ever question your mother’s cooking skills?” asked Theresa.

“No, just pick up tidbits here and there,” said Katie. “I sure could go for one of your clam bakes about right now.”

“Kind of an expensive and all day affair,” chuckled Theresa.

“Yeah, but worth it in the end,” said Katie.

“When this is all over, I’ll throw a party and put one on,” said Theresa.

“Cool!” said Katie. Her mother set the items off to the side and the margarine back into the fridge while the remainder of the items thawed out enough to put on the grill. While they were waiting, Katie found enough batteries to run the small radio in the kitchen and flipped it on to the local pop channel which tended to drive her mother up the wall.

“Eventually I hope you’ll start to love country more,” said Theresa.

“Mom, there’s nothing wrong with this,” said Katie.

“Other than the fact it sounds like the same people strangling different cats?” asked Theresa with a grin. “It has no soul.”

“It has plenty of soul Mom,” said Katie and rolled her eyes. “You’re just too old.”

“I think that was a saying well before your time young lady,” said Theresa.

“Still applies today,” said Katie with a grin.

“If you say so,” said her mother as she cleaned the dishes already in the sink.

“I can get that,” said Katie.

“I’ve already started,” said Theresa. “But if you want to help, why don’t you sweep the patio or get some candles out for later?”

“I can do that,” said Katie as she headed off. Theresa was still concerned about her mental well-being as she had been through a lot in the past month and a half. And she was surprisingly chipper today as opposed to where she probably should have been. Theresa saw her outside sweeping the area around the patio and decided it was as good a time as any to ask.

“Hey ladybug,” said Theresa, calling her by the nickname she had collected at a very young age.

“Hmmm?” asked Katie as she concentrated on sweeping.

“Is everything okay?” asked Theresa.

“What do you mean?” asked Katie.

“I just would have thought you would have been a little more reserved today,” said Theresa.

Katie sighed and set the broom against the wall before taking a seat across from her mother. She shifted in the plastic seat and sighed again before shaking her head slightly and holding up her hands with the palms up.

“I know I should be a complete train wreck right now and part of me is. But another part of me just...I don’t know, doesn’t care? It’s a weird feeling and honestly is a little scary, but it’s almost like nothing is causing an emotional response right now,” said Katie. “Part of me wants to bawl my eyes out and the other, more overwhelming part just pushes me forward.”

“Talking about it doesn’t hurt,” said Theresa.

“I know,” said Katie with another sigh. “But I really don’t know what to say. And I think that’s the scary part is I don’t know what’s going on inside my head and I can’t deal with it if I don’t know. So I’ve tried to remain as normal as possible.”

“It’s called being human Katie,” said Theresa. “And let’s face it, you’ve had more dumped on you than most girls your age in the past six weeks.”

“I know,” said Katie. “But I don’t want to get to the point of not caring Mom.”

“I think you still care,” said Theresa. “It’s there underneath just waiting for the right time to come out. Give it time.”

“I mean, I do still care about you,” said Katie.

“Well, that’s nice to hear,” chuckled her mother. “I understand what you are going through a little bit. Like when your father and I got divorced everything that happened in my life was an instant crisis. But eventually I got numb to almost everything that was going on. I moved on since I had you to focus on and eventually got back on track.”

“So you’re saying I should get pregnant and have a kid?” said Katie with a half a grin.

“Katie,” said her mother and added a look that was unmistakable.

“I’m kidding Mom,” said Katie with half a smile.

“In seriousness, you’re just drained right now. Again, you’ve been up and down on your emotions and it’s finally catching up. You just need a break to recharge,” said Theresa.

“I’m not really a battery pack,” said Katie with half a grin.

“No, you’re my beautiful daughter that cares about everyone and everything. And you truly have a gift to give the entire world of your loving and caring spirit. And you are going to change the world one of these days,” said Theresa warmly.

“You say the nicest things,” said Katie, cheering up a tad.

“I only say it if it’s true,” said her mother with a smile.

“I love you Mom,” said Katie. “I think you’re the only thing that’s held me together.”

“I could say the same about you,” said Theresa.

“That you love me or you would have given up?” grinned Katie.

“A little of both,” laughed Theresa.

“Good to know,” giggled Katie.

“And just for the record, I love you too,” said Theresa.

“Thanks Mom,” said Katie as she squeezed her mother’s hand. And for the moment, they both forgot about the world and drew strength from each other even while the insanity gripped everyone else around them.

“You ready to eat?” asked Theresa after several moments.

“Starved!” exclaimed Katie.

“Grab the stuff from inside and make the table out here. We’ll do this one up right tonight,” said Theresa as she started dumping charcoal into the grill. Katie headed inside and brought everything they had prepared earlier. As she exited, she could smell additional barbeques around the neighborhood as other neighbors had the same idea and were cooking outside that evening. The two commenced to cooking and Katie found the idea of cooking the vegetables in the aluminum foil was an outstanding idea and even enjoyed the taste. The two had a pleasant evening as the night started falling and the stars started coming out. The entire city was dark for the moment and the stars were shining brighter than Katie had ever seen them before. A city girl by heart, she had never been away from the light pollution given off by the cities. She and her mother enjoyed a quiet evening outside watching the stars and enjoying each other’s company.

Katie still had confusion in her mind about her feelings and the emptiness she felt. It was confusing since she knew she should have felt far worse and even with the chat she had with her mother, she still wasn’t entirely certain what was going on. But she would take everything one day at a time as a lot of people in the world were doing.

CHAPTER 9

Time Since Attacks: 61 days

Date/Time: 21 June/0739 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“So what’s this mean Mom?” asked Katie as the news report finished on the radio announcing the implementation of martial law in the Kansas City metro area and surrounding communities.

“I’m not entirely sure except the curfew hours,” said Theresa.

“Are we like confined to the house or something?” asked Katie.

“No, they didn’t say that,” said Theresa. “So I’ll tell you what; let’s make some common sense measures of our own. Always carry your ID wherever you go, don’t be out after dark, if you get stopped by the police or military, be polite and courteous and do as they instruct. Simple, right?”

“Sounds easy enough,” said Katie. “I just don’t want to get into trouble.”

“I don’t think you will,” said Theresa as the power flickered yet again. They had been having some brownouts and complete power losses over the previous few days and Theresa suspected it might not be long before they lost everything entirely. “But for the moment, you still up for our shopping trip today?”

“Absolutely!” exclaimed Katie.

“Remember, it’s not your typical shopping trip,” said Theresa.

“I know, but as soon as we get back to normal, I think we’re both due for a long day of shopping and a girl’s day out,” grinned Katie.

“Deal,” laughed Theresa who knew the waste of gasoline going to the area’s largest flea market would probably be worth it in the long run. Other than the cash they had been able to get out of the bank, they both carried some of the jewelry and other valuable trinkets for barter material. Theresa wasn’t sure what to expect, but knew it was better to go a little overboard on what they could trade or use for purchase. Plus Theresa had one special item in particular she was looking for and expected the price to be fairly high as she had already shopped around and found the supplies were virtually gone. They quickly showered and changed into comfortable clothing before departing to the flea market.

“You’ve got your list, right?” asked Theresa as she navigated the streets and kept an eye on everything as well as everyone. Not that she didn’t trust people, but she surely didn’t trust them right then and there. She did her best to avoid areas with traffic lights and even in the few they encountered, she made sure there was a clear path to her front in case they needed to escape.

“Yep,” said Katie as she looked it over and saw the items she was to look for. And she noticed her mother underlined the note of “check the expiration date” three times as well as adding an exclamation point. “Should I check the dates on the cans?”

“Yes,” chuckled her mother. “I’ll want you to stick with me for a little bit then I’ll send you out to roam. Okay?”

“I’ll be okay if you want to split up,” said Katie.

“No offense Katie, but the people we will be dealing with can, and some likely will try to take advantage of you. So I want you to see how to bargain first before I send you out,” said Theresa.

“I don’t think it will be that bad,” said Katie.

“People know how desperate others are getting,” said Theresa. “Trust me, there are plenty of predators out there that can and will take your age and kindness into account.”

“Really?” asked Katie.

“Absolutely,” said Theresa. “So I want you to watch how I bargain before you start.”

“Okay,” said Katie who didn’t think it would be as bad as her mother thought. They pulled into the parking area and made sure the car was in a somewhat visible area. Nothing was inside that could be seen and she made sure the gas cap was locked although there wasn’t much fuel left in the tank as it was. She and Katie donned their smaller packs and waded into the crowd that was a little larger than normal and certainly not what one might expect to see at a flea market. Suits and ties along with dress clothing certainly wasn’t the norm as people were taking off from work and collecting items they should have had long before.

They browsed the first couple of rows of the tables set up and saw all different kinds of items they might need. However, Theresa wanted to see the entire area and not stop at the first booth since chances were better deals would be had if they went deeper. They found one booth worth checking out that stated in a handwritten sign “food for barter” and Theresa swung that way to check it out. The scruffy looking man behind the table had an assortment of canned and dry goods sitting out. Theresa checked the expiration dates and found many of them were close to expiring, but some were still within an acceptable date range.

“How much?” asked Theresa.

“Five dollars cash on the small cans, eight bucks on the larger cans, fifteen on the family sized portions,” said the man.

“And your barter?” asked Theresa.

“Well, depends on what you have to trade. I’ll take pre-64 silver, dimes on two of the smaller cans and quarters on two of the large ones. Measurable weights of gold, silver and platinum could get you some stuff. I’m also looking for ammo, propane bottles, filled or over half that is, medicines and gasoline,” said the man.

“Maybe,” said Theresa. “We might be back.”

“There are other bargains as well,” said the man.

“Such as?” asked Theresa.

“Well, simple stuff really,” said the man as he looked her up and down. “Maybe fifteen, twenty minutes of your time or so. Not too much to ask for some food and the terms would be generous in your case. Even more so for both of you.”

“Katie, go ahead and check the next table,” said Theresa as she knew exactly what the man was implying. Katie wandered to the next booth and Theresa asked for clarification.

“Not out in the open like,” said the man as he looked her up and down again. “I’ve got a partner that can keep an eye on things and a camper truck not far from here.”

“You are a sick and twisted pervert,” remarked Theresa as she began to leave. “And that’s definitely not happening.”

“You might be surprised what folks do when they get hungry,” said the man with a leer. “So come back and see me when your stomach starts growling.”

“You can go to hell,” said Theresa with a forced smile, but eyes as cold as ice.

“Have a nice day ma’am,” said the man as he moved on to the next customer. Theresa caught up with her daughter at the next booth.

“You said some bad words didn’t you?” asked Katie.

“Not really bad ones,” said Theresa. “Did you understand what he was saying?”

“I’m not a little girl Mom,” said Katie.

“I’m sorry you were there when he said that,” said Theresa.

“I just would have walked away,” said Katie. “And I wouldn’t do that anyway.”

“Good,” said her mother as she continued to look around. The cheapest they found cans of food was three dollars per small soup sized cans or the silver people talked about.

“Mom, what’s pre-64 silver?” asked Katie.

“I think that’s normal quarters and dimes and 1964 was when they stopped putting all the silver into it,” said Theresa.

“Like full on silver?” asked Katie.

“I think so,” said Theresa.

“You know we’ve got that old piggy bank at the house, right?” asked Katie.

“The one in the attic?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, grandma and grandpa used to talk about putting coins in there,” said Katie.

“We might check it when we get home,” said Theresa. “Let’s check this booth out and I’ll send you to look on your own, okay?”

“Okay,” said Katie as they headed to yet another table where her mother was able to gather four cans of soup at a better price than they had seen through haggling a bit. And the process was repeated at another table for a pre-packed first aid kit although again at a way inflated price.

“Mom?” asked Katie. Theresa looked at her daughter and notice she nodded towards the crowd. The same man from earlier was seen leading a decently dressed and attractive woman away and towards the parking lot, obviously to enact his “bargain.”

“That’s just sad,” said Theresa.

“I guess some people are just desperate,” said Katie.

“Okay, see how I haggle and bargain?” asked Theresa as she changed the subject.

“Yep, I can do that,” said Katie. “And if all else fails, I’ll pull my pitiful act.”

“Not sure pity is in great supply these days,” laughed Theresa.

“But I do it so well,” said Katie.

“Give it a try,” laughed her mother. “I’ve also seen what people are trading for so another trip might be in order tomorrow.”

“Like for stuff?” asked Katie.

“Yes, but we’ll see how far the money goes today. And nothing under three dollars a can, okay?” asked Theresa.

“Same cans going for seventy-five cents before all this,” said Katie.

“It is what it is,” said her mother. “We’ll meet up in say an hour back at the car.”

“Okay,” said Katie.

“And if you get into trouble, scream your head off and run,” said Theresa. “There’s way too many unsavory characters here for my tastes.”

“I’ll be okay Mom,” said Katie.

“Okay, see you in an hour,” said Theresa as the two split up. Katie went to several booths and was able to procure about a half dozen cans of food for slightly more than her mother asked for although still at a respectable price. As well as two large packs of baby wipes although she wasn’t entirely positive why her mother put those on the list. She was looking over another table where some first aid supplies were handy and saw bandages on her list and heard a commotion to her rear. Two men were fighting over something until the local security that had been hired by the market owners came over to settle the dispute. And didn’t seem to have a problem using the police batons to subdue the two before dragging their unconscious bodies and dropping them off in the parking lot. Two rows over, Theresa saw the same thing and went back to haggling.

“The price is set,” said the woman she was dealing with. “Either you pay or not.”

“Two bucks per?” asked Theresa.

“People are paying it without question and coming back for more,” said the woman.

“Sorry,” said Theresa. “Thanks anyway.”

She headed into the adjacent booths attempting to find anything useful, but again noted that for trades, it might have been better to have brought items of their own. However, some batteries caught her eye and she managed to pick up two packs without much haggling and dropped them in her pack. And looked over a bottle of lamp oil on the adjacent table. However, the seal had already been broken as she examined it closer. Opening the top, she didn’t notice the strong odor and could even see a faint line about halfway up the bottle where the oil was separating from the water.

“Topped it off?” she asked as she set it back down.

“Other folks won’t hesitate to grab it and run,” said the vendor as he shook the bottle to mix it up. Theresa also remembered putting lamp oil on Katie’s list and headed back into the crowd to track her daughter down. She caught up with her just as she was playing a very good pitiful act with one of the vendors and got them to drop the price slightly as Katie mentioned her “three brothers and sisters and sick father” at the house waiting on food. Theresa had to bite her lip slightly and try not to laugh as the vendor sighed before giving her the bag of rice at a slightly reduced price. Katie turned and headed away before being stopped by her mother.

“You’re horrible, you know that?” laughed Theresa.

“And you said pity wasn’t going to work,” giggled Katie.

“You did it very well, but I’d imagine that’s not going to work all the time,” said Theresa. “How much have you gotten?”

“About a dozen cans of stuff, the bag of rice, two boxes of matches and two packs of baby wipes,” said Katie as she rummaged through her pack.

“And how much have you paid?” asked her mother.

“Not as much as you’d think. The sympathy is way high here today,” said Katie with a grin.

“Okay, cross off lamp oil on your list,” said Theresa.

“How come?” asked Katie.

“Folks are watering it down,” said Theresa. “We don’t need it that bad and we only have that one decorative lantern anyway.”

“Don’t we have a bottle in the garage anyway?” asked Katie.

“Two is better than one,” said Theresa.

“True,” said Katie. “Want to wander the rest of the way together?”

“I might intrude on your pity party,” grinned Theresa.

“I’m not sure we’re going to get better prices than what we’ve found so far,” said Katie.

“I was thinking the same thing. I can bargain all day long, but when people are lined up behind me to buy it without question, it’s a waste of time,” said Theresa.

“So we spend what we have,” said Katie. “Come back tomorrow with trading goods.”

“Seems reasonable enough,” said Theresa as they headed back towards the tables where she knew the canned food was well within the date. And a minor bit of haggling got the price dropped slightly by fifty cents a can since they were reasonable with the offer. Dumping the cans into their packs, they grabbed one more pack of baby wipes, another two of batteries and some cooking oil that looked to be okay. Finding they weren’t going to be able to pick anything else up, they headed back towards the parking lot where they encountered the woman from before that had departed with the man. Normally a reserved person, Theresa couldn’t help herself as they came towards each other.

“How could you do that to yourself?” she asked with frown.

“Do you think you could watch your kid starve?” said the woman as she pulled her hair back up and headed into the market once again without saying another word.

Theresa was rarely stunned in her life, but this was one of the few moments that caught her speechless. And she realized that for all her dignity, there was probably nothing she wouldn’t do to keep Katie from starving. Perspective was a wonderful tool for removing the rose colored glasses she had on about the state of the world. Theresa made sure the items were locked away in the trunk as they got in the car and headed home in silence. As they started turning into the neighborhood area, Katie finally had to break the silence.

“That woman got you to thinking huh?” asked Katie.

“Only about how much my daughter means to me,” said Theresa somewhat evasively.

“Mom, I wouldn’t ever want you to do something like that over me,” said Katie.

“I don’t think I could,” she lied. Katie didn’t either catch it or didn’t react so the matter was dropped as they headed inside. Theresa started organizing the cans on the somewhat bare pantry and was concerned that what they had might keep them going for another week to ten days at most. Katie headed upstairs and returned in short order with an old porcelain piggy bank that had been handed down through the family. It was probably fifty years old at a minimum and slightly heavy from the change within.

“You going to separate it out?” asked Theresa.

“I might need some help,” said Katie as she popped the plug on the bottom and change came spilling out. She managed to get it back into a pile and turned over the bank to keep the remainder inside for the moment. Theresa grabbed two plastic containers to separate out what they found.

“1964, right?” asked Katie as the lights flickered slightly.

“Yes,” said her mother. “At least that’s what I think. Hang on.”

Checking the phone, she was able to get a dial tone and called up her neighbors the Bradys. After ringing several times, she got Paul on the phone. “Hi Paul, it’s Theresa Shepherd...good, just got back from the flea market...bunch of lowlifes and buzzards...quick question though that you might know the answer to. When did the government stop putting all silver in the coins...okay, we thought it was 1964...only dimes, quarters and half dollars, okay...maybe, we’re not sure yet...yeah the flea market seemed interested in that kind of thing. But if you go, I’d take barter material instead of cash...okay, easy enough...thanks, you too...bye.”

“Okay, Paul says 1964 and earlier will be okay, but only dimes, quarters and half dollars,” said Theresa as she pulled a small pile away.

“I’ll have to pull the nickels then,” said Katie as she dumped one of the containers.

“Did you already find some?” asked Theresa.

“Close to ten, well, four now,” said Katie as she separated out the nickels.

“It’s a start I suppose,” said Theresa as she pulled the pennies and dropped them into the other container. Eventually they had everything sorted out and found they had twenty-seven of the coins, eight quarters and nineteen dimes.

“Better than nothing I suppose,” said Katie. “How did Mr. Brady know about that?”

“He told me once about it,” said Theresa.

“Interesting piece of conversation,” said Katie.

“I thought about coin collecting at one point,” said Theresa. “Until I figured out it was far more expensive than I knew of in the beginning.”

“Bet you’re rethinking that aren’t you?” grinned Katie.

“I guess I could have sold you to the circus to pay for it,” said her mother.

“You wouldn’t do that,” said Katie.

“Sometimes,” said Theresa with a laugh. “I think we’ll try one of the smaller markets tomorrow. Might have people willing to do a better deal.”

“Gas?” asked Katie.

“We still have the gas for the lawnmower,” said Theresa.

“Not as much as you’d think,” said Katie.

“We’ll get by somehow,” said Theresa.

“We always do,” said Katie. “Can I check on my plants?”

“Sure,” said Theresa as Katie went outside to check on the seeds they had planted not long before. It took up some space on what normally would be her flower garden, but otherwise wasn’t a bad situation if they were able to grow some food of their own. And Katie dutifully kept it up so far and watered the plants almost every day.

“Mom!” exclaimed Katie. Theresa heard her exclamation and bounded out of the chair and rushed outside, thinking something was wrong. She saw Katie standing over the beds and rushed to her side.

“What?” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, lookit!” exclaimed Katie and pointed at the small rows of items they had planted. Small sprouts were seen coming out of the ground in some of the areas and allayed Theresa’s fear they had planted them too late.

“Which are those?” asked Theresa.

“Umm, corn and radishes,” said Katie. “And these are the green onions and broccoli.”

“Wonderful!” said Theresa. “What about the rest?”

“Nothing yet,” said Katie. “Give it time Mom.”

“I think your devotion is helping,” said Theresa.

“Well, at least we won’t starve,” said Katie.

“Still going to take a while to produce,” said Theresa.

“True, but we’ve got a good start. Do you think we should plant the rest?” asked Katie.

“Give up the rest of the flowers?” asked her mother.

“Either make the backyard look pretty and starve or pull the flowers now and be able to eat,” said Katie sensibly.

“Interesting way of putting it,” said Theresa. “The flowers aren’t going to amount of much anyway, but let’s keep a row or two and the rosebush just to keep your mother happy.”

“I think that’s doable,” said Katie. “Can I start now?”

“Let’s get changed first,” said Theresa. “Get out of the decent clothes.”

“Cool!” said Katie as she bounded inside. Her mother followed her inside, happy to see a bit of life around Katie since she seemed to be constantly surrounded by death as of late. They both changed and ended up pulling more of the flowers, Theresa giving a sigh at the money she spent on the flowers in the spring now lying in the sun already starting to wilt. And came to the deduction her daughter was being far more pragmatic about the situation as she would rather eat than have her backyard look pretty.

“We need another mound for the cucumbers,” said Katie.

“We don’t have any more dirt,” said Theresa.

“Dig a hole?” asked Katie. “Or how about the front walk?”

“It’s covered in cedar chippings and won’t be good,” said Theresa.

“So...dig a hole?” asked Katie.

“Over by the fence,” said Theresa after thinking about it for a minute. Katie grabbed the small shovel they used for turning the dirt in the flower beds and immediately started attacking the longer grass to get at the dirt. Normally reserved about outside work like a lot of teenagers, she was determined to help see her family fed come what may.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Theresa. “I’m going to grab the weedeater and start back here. I don’t want to waste gas on the lawnmower, but we need this jungle cut back.”

“Want me to help?” asked Katie as she pulled another shovelful of dirt and dumped it into a bucket. She wiped at her brow as the sweat from the hot Kansas summers was taking its toll.

“Nope, I want you to go grab some water and rest for a minute,” said Theresa.

“But Mom, I’m okay,” said Katie.

“It wasn’t a debate,” said Theresa. “Go inside and cool off.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Katie. “You want some water?”

“Please,” said Theresa and deciding on the best option to remove the high grass in the yard. She headed to the garage and determined there was enough gas left in the mower for a couple of quick passes and paths and would use the weedeater on the rest. She adjusted the wheels as low as they would go as Katie caught up to her in the garage.

“I thought you said we weren’t going to use it,” said Katie as she handed over a glass of water.

“There’s enough gas left in the tank to make a couple of paths and it’s not enough to try to siphon out. Unless you want to cut it by hand?” asked Theresa.

“I like the lawnmower idea,” said Katie with a scrunched nose.

“Figured as much,” said Theresa as she sipped at the water. “But if you want to help, you can restring the weedeater.”

“Fair enough trade,” said Katie as she commenced to removing the head and replacing the string inside. It was an electric model and Theresa wasn’t sure how much longer they might have the use of it so she made sure they cut down what they could as soon as they could. Theresa headed to the backyard and quickly mowed the paths from the door to the small garden as well as and areas immediately around. And a single path over to Katie’s hole which Theresa figured might have other uses besides being a hole. Katie plugged in the weedeater and immediately set to

making large swaths through the growing grass until she was informed to put them down as close to the ground as possible. However, as Katie continued, her efforts were cut short as another power outage caused the weedeater to die.

“Well, this sucks,” said Katie.

“I think you did okay for the moment,” said Theresa. “Good enough for what we need.”

“Okay, can I finish my cucumber mound?” asked Katie.

“Go for it,” said her mother as she contemplated finishing the yard with the mower. But being that gasoline was in short supply as well as being highly expensive, she tugged the mower back to the garage and stowed it back in its corner before returning to help Katie. They were working on forming the mound when sounds like fireworks were heard somewhat close by.

“Someone shooting fireworks?” asked Katie as she looked up.

“No,” said her mother with a little concern. “Let’s go inside.”

“What is it Mom?” asked Katie.

“That’s gunfire,” said Theresa. “Come on, we’ve done enough for now.”

“Are you sure?” asked Katie.

“Positive,” said Theresa. “Let’s go.”

“How do you know it’s gunfire?” asked Katie as she brushed off her knees and hands before heading to the door with her mother.

“I’ve heard it enough on TV,” said Theresa. “We’ll stay inside until it goes away.”

“Okay,” said Katie. “Actually, it’s close enough time for supper.”

“A natural gas range would have been very helpful about right now,” said Theresa looking at her electric range with slight disdain.

“The power might come back on soon enough,” said Katie. “Let’s shower first and then see if it’s back on.”

“I think that will work,” said Theresa who worried over the sounds she had heard as well as the close proximity to their home. Again, she knew she needed to pay a social visit to the Brady family and request assistance and continued to put it off. But she knew it was at the forefront of the thinking with this latest turn of events.

CHAPTER 10

Time Since Attacks: 61 days

Date/Time: 21 June/1809 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Still no power,” said Katie as they contemplated what to eat that evening.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Theresa. “Go around the house and start grabbing the limbs and stuff that’s fallen from the trees.”

“Like those dead branches and stuff?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said Theresa. “And head down a couple of houses and collect what you can near the sidewalk as well.”

“You building a fire Mom?” asked Katie.

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do,” said Theresa.

“You know how to build fires?” asked Katie.

“It’s not hard,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie as she slipped on her flip flops and headed out the front door. Theresa went into the backyard and started preparing the hole Katie has dug out earlier to accept the bricks and the grill top from the charcoal grill and set everything up when Katie came back with an armful of smaller branches.

“Okay, nice start, but try to find some bigger stuff,” said Theresa.

“Like how big?” asked Katie.

“About the size of your thumb and larger,” said Theresa.

“There’s not a lot of that around,” said Katie.

“Hang on and I’ll come with you,” said Theresa. They departed the house and headed up the block as her mother collected some larger pieces and sent Katie into a couple of the trees to find the larger branches that hadn’t come out yet. She warned Katie not to grab the green ones and they eventually had what Theresa considered enough to do the job. On their way back, Theresa grabbed a couple of handfuls of dead branches from a neighbor’s cedar tree and they headed to the backyard. She immediately set to breaking up the items and sent Katie inside to grab one of the sales flyers that somehow still managed to appear in the mail.

“Okay, grab my small frying pan and the two quart sauce pan. Put the water in about halfway or so,” said Theresa as she wadded up the paper and started adding the tinder and kindling on the top. And started breaking the larger pieces, but found she needed the loppers to effective break some of it.

“How did you know how to do this?” asked Katie.

“I wasn’t always an insurance agent and had hobbies,” said Theresa.

“I suppose so,” said Katie as she returned to the kitchen and returned inside while her mother collected the loppers from the small shed in the backyard. She had cut the wood to the appropriate size when Katie returned.

“Here you go,” said Katie.

“Okay, I want you to keep an eye on this and if it starts spreading outside the bricks, squirt it with the water hose,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie as she watched as her mother put the pot of water over the top of one of the piles and lit it with the lighter they used for the grill. She hurried inside and returned a couple of moments later with a can of the chicken they had traded for as well as one of the remaining boil in a bag packs of rice. She added more fuel to the fire and watched as bubbles were already starting to form on the bottom of the pan. Eventually, it was warm enough to drop the pack of rice into and she turned her attention to the small frying pan and the fire for it. She adjusted the pieces of wood slightly and added one more in a small gap and set the frying pan on top before opening the can of chicken. She dumped the entire can in, water and all and listened as the sizzle came from the water as it hit the hot pan.

“Don’t you normally drain the water?” asked Katie as she saw her mother scraping every last bit of chicken out of the can and tossing it in the pan.

“Normally,” said her mother. “But we don’t need to waste anything and it will mix okay with the rice once it’s done. Grab some garlic salt please.”

“Okay,” said Katie as she bounded back inside and returned with the shaker. Her mother liberally doused the chicken knowing it would be pretty bland otherwise and continued to move it around with the small spatula she brought along. Eventually the water was boiling in the rice pan and the chicken was heating up nicely. Katie retrieved paper bowls and spoons since she felt it probably would end up being far soupier than the imagined. And she wasn’t wrong as her mother pulled the rice out and portioned it into the two bowls and added the chicken on top. But for some reason her portion was a little larger than her mother’s so as soon as her mother turned her back, she quickly spooned back in some to her bowl. They had a seat and poured out a lukewarm cup of the RC Cola apiece as the temperature started dropping slightly.

“Katie, is there any reason why my bowl suddenly got more food in it?” asked Theresa.

“Yep,” said Katie.

“And?” asked her mother.

“I won’t have you go hungry because you gave me more food,” said Katie.

“Maybe I’m not that hungry,” said Theresa.

“Want to practice than and try again?” asked Katie with half a smile.

“Katie…” said her mother with a look.

“Mom, I love you and it is appreciated. But we both have to stay healthy and that won’t happen if you get sick because you’re not eating,” said Katie.

“I just want to make sure you don’t go hungry,” said Theresa.

“And I could say the same thing about you,” said Katie.

“Thank you,” said Theresa with a smile. “But why don’t we add some crackers to this to make it a bit more filling?”

“Okay, I’ll grab them,” said Katie as she stood up and headed towards the kitchen. However, she stopped after about three steps and grabbed her bowl with a knowing smile and went inside and returned with a sleeve of the crackers.

“So why’d you take your bowl?” asked her mother.

“Because I don’t trust you?” grinned Katie.

“Would I do something like that?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, you would,” grinned Katie as she opened the pack of cracker and set them in the middle.

“Would you teach me how to build a fire?”

“Sure, it’s not hard at all,” said Theresa.

“You think we’ll have to do this again?” asked Katie.

“I…don’t know Katie,” said Theresa with a sigh. “I have hopes we’ve hit rock bottom, but it seems like we keep digging a hole even deeper.”

“It can’t go anywhere but up,” said Katie.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Theresa.

“So what else could happen?” asked Katie.

“I don’t know,” said Theresa. “But nothing really to worry about.”

“You don’t sound convincing,” said Katie.

“Everything will be okay,” said Theresa. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do tomorrow though. Tomorrow we’ll go check out these food distribution centers.”

“I thought we were going back to the flea market,” said Katie.

“Let’s do that the day after,” said Theresa. “I would rather check out the other first.”

“Okay,” said Katie.

“And it’s generally within walking distance,” said Theresa.

“How far?” asked Katie.

“Maybe three, three and a half miles,” said Theresa.

“That’s like across the state practically!” objected Katie.

“Well, if you don’t think you can make it I’ll go alone,” said Theresa knowing her daughter would accept the challenge.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t make it,” said Katie.

“I wouldn’t want you to get worn out,” said Theresa. “I can go alone.”

“Hey, if you can make it, I can make it,” said Katie.

“I thought so,” laughed Theresa.

“What do you want to do about the fires?” asked Katie.

“Let it burn, it’ll be okay,” said Theresa.

“It won’t spread?” asked Katie.

“I wouldn’t think so,” said Theresa. “It’s deep enough in the hole and there’s nothing surrounding it so the coals will go down eventually.”

“So it won’t burn down the house?” asked Katie.

“I think we’ll be okay,” laughed Theresa.

“I hope the power is back on by tomorrow,” said Katie. “Warm shower at least.”

“That certainly is a plus,” said Theresa. “Are you finished with your bowl?”

“Yep,” said Katie. Theresa took it over to the makeshift fireplace and tossed the two on top of the coals where they smoldered for several seconds before flames enveloped them.

“Well, that’s one way of doing the dishes,” remarked Katie.

“We should start burning what we can instead of trashing it. It’ll make the garbage smell a lot less,” said Theresa.

“Caught that smell in the bedrooms at night too?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said Theresa. “Getting a little ripe.”

“Trash comes day after tomorrow,” said Katie.

“And we’ll wash the can out right after,” said Theresa. “But no matter what, whatever we cook from now on, we consume everything.”

“Absolutely,” said Katie. “I gotta grow up big and strong!”

“Katie, I love you to death baby, but I don’t think you’ll ever be that tall. You take after your father in that regard,” said Theresa.

“Well, hopefully as tall as you at least,” said Katie.

“Who knows? You might hit five seven eventually,” said Theresa.

“Five two sucks,” said Katie. “Makes me look like I’m still about twelve.”

“It doesn’t matter how tall you are,” said Theresa. “But the fact my daughter has a huge heart is all that matters.”

“Guess so,” said Katie as they returned inside and set the spoons and glasses in the sink to be washed the next day. They flipped on the radio and heard the nightly news after a couple of songs and saw the situation in the country as well as the world wasn’t getting much better. But they both still had hope and still had each other to cling on for support.

Time Since Attacks: 62 days

Date/Time: 22 June/1039 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“This is the place?” asked Katie.

“I guess so,” said Theresa as they saw a long line waiting at several trucks unloading supplies. People were taking small boxes and military style rations away along with liter and a half plastic bottles. Theresa saw what appeared to be someone in a military uniform that looked official and started making their way over to him. He seemed a little frazzled, but was polite as he pointed the two towards a tent area to get signed up. There was another line and they patiently waited for the next FEMA aid worker that called them over. The person looked tired as could be and motioned them towards a seat.

“Name?” she asked while looking at a laptop computer.

“Theresa Shepherd,” said Theresa and watched the lady enter her name into the computer.

“Just signing up?” asked the FEMA worker.

“Yes,” said Theresa.

“And you are?” asked the FEMA worker as she looked over the top of her glasses at Katie.

“My daughter, Katherine Shepherd,” said Theresa as the woman typed her name in.

“Address?” asked the woman.

“2865 89th Street,” said Theresa and handed over her driver’s license for the rest of the info.

“Social?” asked the woman. “For the both of you.”

Theresa told the woman hers and had Katie give hers as well. The woman put them both into the system and eventually printed out two copies of a form and set it in front of them.

“Okay, here’s how it works,” said the woman. “You can get two days per person, per trip in rations and two bottles of water if they are in stock. Being that you’re family, one person can sign for both, but only for one day’s worth of rations for the absent member. You go to that big line over there and wait your turn. There’s a notice at the bottom that you’re receiving US Government aid that is not to be sold, traded or transferred without the written permission of FEMA, so on and so forth.”

“Best times of the day to come are first thing in the morning or right after a supply run which tends to be in the late afternoon. Bring a government issued photo ID and these cards,” said the woman who handed over another printed piece of paper. “And they will be annotated. The cards are good for two months and you’ll need to return here for a replacement. If you lose your ration cards, you will need to reapply through the process and an investigation will be conducted as to the circumstances. Any questions?”

“No, thank you for your time,” said Theresa as the woman turned back to the computer without another word and finished the report before identifying the next person to come sign up.

“Want to see what they have?” asked Katie.

“We’re here already, might as well,” said Theresa as they headed over to the line and started moving forward into a more distinctive line. But they didn’t know how long it would be and the sun was already beating down on them pretty good. An elderly lady nearby offered them a bottle of water and they thanked her before sharing it back and forth and moving forward slowly. It took close to two hours before they were able to reach the front and were served by a woman wearing Navy dungarees and were provided two bottles of water by a man wearing civilian clothes. They were shown the proper place to exit and headed that way, carrying two military rations apiece as well as a box that was labeled “Air Force Services Food Service.”

“Now I know why people brought backpacks,” said Theresa as she shifted the load in her arms.

“We’ll know better next time,” said Katie as she spied an object away from them. “Hang on, I’ll be right back.”

“Katie!” exclaimed her mother as she darted away and retrieved the shopping bag that was hung up in the orange safety fence. She saw Katie drop the two rations inside which made carrying a lot easier. Her mother eventually met her halfway and was able to drop the two rations inside as well. They started heading home still juggling the items slightly until Katie had an idea.

“We’re close to Mrs. Simmons shop. Do you think she’ll have a bag?” asked Katie.

“She probably does,” said Theresa.

“It’s only like a quarter mile out of our way,” said Katie.

“Let’s go,” said Theresa as they diverted their path and headed for the shop. They eventually came to the building but found she was closed. However, using the exterior staircase, they knocked on her apartment door upstairs and were met after they saw her peek out the window.

“Katie! Theresa!” she exclaimed. “Come in!”

“Hi Mrs. Simmons!” exclaimed Katie as they came inside and started looking for a place to set down the items.

“Were you two at the food distribution center?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“Yeah, figured it would be best to stock up what we could while we could,” said Theresa.

“You should be careful around that place,” said Mrs. Simmons. “All sorts of rough looking characters going and coming from there.”

“It was our first trip and we’ll know better to go early next time,” said Theresa.

“Let me get you two some water, you look dried out,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Thank you,” said Katie as they were shown seating. It was noticeably cooler in the apartment than it should have been and they noticed a lamp on in the adjacent room. Mrs. Simmons returned with a pitcher of water as well as two cups of ice.

“And where did you find this solid gold?” asked Theresa. “Your power hasn’t been going out?”

“It has in this area,” grinned Mrs. Simmons. “But my husband some years ago put this place on solar, or as much as we could. It doesn’t run the shop downstairs, but mostly runs the stuff in the apartment. Of course, I don’t advertise I have power.”

“Can I move in?” asked Katie with a grin.

“Katy!” exclaimed her mother.

“I’m joking Mom,” said Katie with a grin.

“I’d adopt your daughter in a heartbeat,” said Mrs. Simmons. “She’s a sweetheart.”

“She’s a mess,” said Theresa with a smile.

“Are you doing okay for food?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“Yeah, we’ve got about a week or two stocked up,” said Theresa.

“Not a lot,” observed Mrs. Simmons. “And I don’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s okay,” said Theresa.

“Have you two eaten?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“Not since this morning,” said Theresa. “We actually just stopped by to see if we could snag a plastic shopping bag or something to carry this stuff in.”

“I’ve got those things running out my ears,” said Mrs. Simmons. “But I think something else might be in order.”

Mrs. Simmons disappeared into one of the back rooms for several minutes before returning with a large brown pack.

“I think this would work okay for Katie although being a bit large,” said Mrs. Simmons as she handed it over. “So please take it.”

“Mrs. Simmons!” objected Katie. “I can’t!”

“You need some sort of pack,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“I have my book bag at home,” said Katie.

“You need something a little larger than that bright pink and gray pack I’ve seen you come in with,” said Mrs. Simmons as she pushed the Eberlestock pack towards Katie. “It might be a bit large for your frame though.”

“I can’t Mrs. Simmons!” objected Katie once again.

“I’ll take it to your house and leave it on the doorstep,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“My pack is okay,” said Katie.

“Your pack would barely hold what you’re carrying,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“I can’t ma’am,” said Katie. “What if you need it?”

“It was my husbands before he died and I don’t use it,” said Mrs. Simmons. “Please take it.”

Katie saw she couldn’t argue with the woman and looked at her mother. She nodded briefly and Katie sized it up quickly. She almost needed all the available webbing to size up the straps and belt. But it fit, although being somewhat large. However, it wasn’t as used as she let on as everything looked to be brand new.

“You sure you don’t need this?” asked Katie. “It might make good trade material.”

“I am certain I won’t need it,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Thank you very much,” said Katie and was repeated by her mother.

“Oh! Where are my manners, I’ll be right back!” exclaimed Mrs. Simmons as she disappeared.

“That’s a really nice pack,” remarked Theresa as she looked it over.

“I think it will hold everything we have today,” said Katie as Mrs. Simmons returned carrying two Styrofoam plates with food on them and a bottle of sun tea.

“Mrs. Simmons, we’re okay,” said Theresa.

“You’d turn down my food and hospitality?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“Well, when you put it that way,” laughed Theresa as she took one of the plates and saw stewed tomatoes and what appeared to be a beef stroganoff of some type. “What’s this?”

“Leftovers from lunch,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Mrs. Simmons, we can’t take your food!” protested Theresa.

“I’ve got plenty of food stored up,” said Mrs. Simmons. “In the Philippines we always stocked up a little extra when we could and had plenty on hand. So I’m doing just fine.”

“Thank you,” said Theresa as she dug in with the provided spoon. “It’s good.”

“Camping food of all things,” said Mrs. Simmons. “Pretty tasty even.”

“Right now I could eat a horse,” said Katie as she dug in.

“Did you two walk here?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“Yes, I didn’t want to waste the gas,” said Theresa.

“Better be careful out there,” said Mrs. Simmons. “The streets are getting a bit dangerous.”

“It’s still okay for the moment,” said Theresa.

“That can change by the minute,” said Mrs. Simmons as she poured a glass of tea for the two of them. “Just need to be mindful of who’s around.”

“We certainly are,” said Theresa. The three continued chatting while Theresa and Katie finished the late lunch and started loading up Katie’s new pack to get back to the house.

“I’m glad I brought my Sherpa along,” said Theresa with a grin as Katie shouldered up the pack.

“Teenagers are good for that,” laughed Mrs. Simmons.

“What’s a Sherpa?” asked Katie.

“A human pack mule,” said Theresa.

“I’m not a mule!” objected Katie.

“No, you aren’t stubborn at all,” said Theresa. “You just go with the flow.”

“Yep,” said Katie.

“Too heavy?” asked Theresa.

“No, I think it’ll be okay,” said Katie as she pulled at the straps. Mrs. Simmons showed her how to adjust the load lifters and Katie found wearing the pack was fairly comfortable.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” said Theresa. “Are you sure you want to part with it?”

“I wouldn’t have given it to her otherwise,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“Thank you very much,” said Katie.

“You two be careful, okay?” stated Mrs. Simmons.

“We will, bye,” said Katie and was followed by her mother out the door. The walk home wasn’t eventful although several shady looking characters were seen in vehicles driving around while they made the journey home. While they obviously didn’t know everyone that lived in the area, the neighborhood tended to keep the riffraff out for the most part and the individuals in the vehicles didn’t appear to be the more middle class family types that lived in the area. Eventually they arrived home without incident and broke down the boxes that hadn’t been out into the pack.

“Interesting assortment of items here,” said Theresa as she pulled the canned goods and other items out. It was enough to get a person by for a day or so and would help supplement what they had gotten from bartering and buying.

“Not a fan of that brand of breakfast bar,” said Katie as she looked over the package.

“You get hungry enough and I think you would suffer through it,” said Theresa.

“Well, when you say it like that!” exclaimed Katie. “Is mine the same?”

“For the most part,” said Theresa as she opened the second box. “Instead of soup, you got canned spaghetti though.”

“I think I’ll manage to suffer through that,” said Katie.

“I thought you liked that?” asked Theresa.

“I do,” said Katie as she peeked over at what else her mother was dragging out of the boxes. “And chips!”

“Thought that would catch your attention,” chuckled Theresa.

All in all it was a somewhat profitable day for the two that day with the addition of the food as well as the new pack for Katie. The power was finally back on and the two were able to catch up with the brief housework and Katie finished getting the remainder of the yard cut with the electric weedeater before the evening. And she and her mother made a quick trip around the neighborhood looking for more downed limbs since they both felt like the possibility of having to use the fire pit again was a real possibility.

CHAPTER 11

Time Since Attacks: 73 days

Date/Time: 2 July/1444 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“There are really weird times,” remarked Katie as they finished listening to the Presidential address on the radio and her mother shut it off to conserve the precious batteries.

“You’re living through history being made right now,” said Theresa. “It’s the first time in American history that a President has not been voted into office.”

“What about George Washington?” asked Katie.

“Well, there’s that,” said her mother. “When did they say he was going to resign?”

“Tomorrow at noon,” said Katie. “What’s the deal with the new President?”

“I don’t really know much about her,” said Theresa. “You know I don’t keep up with politics that much.”

“Just weird that those terrorists had more bombs,” said Katie and referring to the additional terror attacks around the world by the affiliates of Al Qaeda with nuclear and chemical weapons. And the American, Russian, NATO, Israeli and Chinese responses. In total forty cities around the world had been targeted by the terrorists or the retaliatory strikes before both sides pulled back and licked their wounds. The new nation, the Islamic Union promised to continue fighting to defend themselves as long as it took, but were diverting their attention inward at their own relief as they had taken a far worse beating in the retaliation than had been received by the targeted countries. Nuclear weapons designs had advanced to the point where they were accurate, dependable and highly lethal at the job they were designed to do. And the devastation within the Middle East and North Africa was clearly apparent the Islamic Union faced a far more capable opponent than they currently had available. And even with the decline of most nations around the world, their nuclear stockpiles were still available for use and it appeared they didn’t lack the conviction to use them in response.

“You think it’s over?” asked Katie. “The war I mean.”

“It really isn’t much of a war so to speak,” said Theresa.

“I mean like the nukes,” said Katie.

“I think between us and the Russians they got their butts kicked and it’s giving them a moment to think about pushing further,” said Theresa. “I don’t think they will be so ready to hit us again since they know we can pretty much wipe their country off the map.”

“I hope it’s over,” said Katie. The power had finally gone out to their home and they were reduced to listening in to the radio every couple of hours to find out what was happening in the world and on a local basis. They made trips every other day to the food distribution center and were pretty much down to what they had stored. The gas had finally run out of the vehicle to getting to a flea market was no longer an option. Luckily enough the last two trips they had made had been more profitable since the barter goods they brought along brought a better deal than the cash which most people didn’t accept anymore. Theresa held onto the silver just in case it was needed in the future, but several other items had been traded off for food and other items. Theresa had once dealt in decorative candles when she was getting her start in Kansas City so they had a reasonably large supply at the house still available and found they commanded a decent price at the local markets.

Katie went over to the sink to fill a glass of water to chase down the crackers they had eaten during the late lunch. They weren’t going to the distribution point that day and were generally attempting to work around the house although the Kansas heat was getting almost intolerable. However, when Katie flipped the lever up, nothing came out of the faucet.

“Mom?” she asked and flipped it several more times. Theresa went through the house and tried the downstairs bathroom as well and found it wasn’t working either. With a sigh she returned to the kitchen where Katie was still fiddling with the faucet and checking underneath the sink although she really didn’t know what to look for.

“Water finally went out,” said Theresa.

“Like the power?” asked Katie.

“I figured it was going to happen sooner or later,” said Theresa with a sigh.

“So what’s this mean?” asked Katie.

“Other than the bottles we sometimes get from the distribution point, we will need to start getting our own,” said Theresa.

“Not raining much lately Mom,” said Katie.

“No it isn’t,” said Theresa. “We’ll have to go to the creek.”

“That place you showed me?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said Theresa. “We can get it and boil it and go from there.”

“Isn’t it bad for you?” asked Katie. “Like water from the creeks?”

“As long as we boil it first, we should be okay,” said Theresa.

“But we have the bottles you had me wash out and fill,” said Katie referring to the two liter bottles of soda that had been consumed and later refilled with water from the tap.

“Which won’t last forever,” said Theresa. “We’ll have to go to the creek and bring it back here which means we’ll need more firewood as well.”

“You shoulda traded for that chainsaw,” chuckled Katie.

“Yeah, you and I both would cut our legs off trying to use it,” laughed Theresa.

“Seriously though, where can we find more?” asked Katie.

“The small patch of woods along the way to the creek and in those vacant lots. Plus around the neighborhood there is downed stuff,” said Theresa.

“I’ve pretty much cleared this street out,” said Katie.

“It happens to join other streets,” said Theresa. “I’ll help out.”

“Want to go now?” asked Katie.

“Can’t think of a better time,” said Theresa. “Just try to get the bigger stuff. I’ve gotten enough of the small stuff to get fires going. At least for the moment.”

“You want me to head down to the woods?” asked Katie.

“No, just hit the streets,” said Theresa. “I’ll go that way.”

“Okay, be careful Mom,” said Katie as she collected the four reusable cloth shopping bags they had recently been using in the firewood collection and headed out the door and up to the adjacent street. It felt a little odd like she was being watched and she suspected she might just be as there were still occupants within the neighborhood. However, she only entered the yards of the houses that appeared to be completely abandoned to collect the downed limbs. She saw several trees with dead limbs still on them and decided to come back when she wasn’t wearing a pair of sandals to climb up and break them off.

Several streets over, Theresa stopped at a house along the way and politely knocked on the door. She stood back far enough to where they could identify her either from the peephole or the side windows. Eventually the door popped open and Trish Brady was seen. “Hey Theresa.”

“Hi Trish,” said Theresa. “Got a minute?”

“Yeah, come on in,” said Trish as she opened the door slightly wider. Theresa entered the home and moved out of the foyer area into the living room. “How can we help you?”

“I was wondering if I could do a little trading with you and Paul,” said Theresa as she outlined the specific requirements of what she desired.

“Yeah, I’ve got some,” said Paul who had appeared out of another room. “How much?”

“A box or however much you can spare,” said Theresa.

“That’s it?” asked Paul.

“That’s kind of a lot these days,” said Theresa.

“Best not look in my basement,” he chuckled. “It’s somewhat buried so I’ll have to dig it out.”

“And in trade?” asked Theresa.

“From the goodness of our hearts,” said Paul. “But it is a little unusual you making this request.”

“Only piece of the puzzle I’m missing,” said Theresa and went on to explain the details.

“We’ve known you for several years and never knew that,” said Trish.

“It’s not something I talk about much,” said Theresa. “Not a good story of why I got out.”

“Hey, for you and your daughter it’s no problem,” said Paul. “Give me a few hours and I’ll grab a couple of boxes.”

“I think one would be okay,” said Theresa.

“Two would be better,” said Paul. “Trust me.”

“Fair enough,” said Theresa as she pulled the small pouch of pre-64 silver out of her pocket and grabbed two of the quarters. “But at least let me give you something.”

“That’s way too much,” said Paul. “Quarter for both or two dimes.”

“That’s not fair,” said Theresa.

“Spot price of silver was skyrocketing last time I got a financial report,” said Trish. “It’s more than fair for the trade.”

“I honestly didn’t know,” said Theresa.

“I wouldn’t expect most folks to,” said Paul as he took the quarter. “I’ll drop by tomorrow.”

“I can’t thank the two of you enough,” said Theresa.

“It’s not like you’re mooching,” said Trish.

“And I hope I never have to,” said Theresa. “I’ve got to get going, but again thanks.”

“Be careful,” said Paul as he opened the door and let her out. Theresa walked onto the small front porch and heard the door lock behind her as she headed out and started collecting some of the downed limbs herself and loading them into the smaller backpack Katie had been using for school. Theresa knew she would end up having to get a new one when, or more specifically if, school would go back in session. But she feared that wouldn’t be for a long time. Eventually she found enough to fill the smaller pack and headed home where she saw Katie grabbing the loppers and heading back out.

“Where you going?” asked Theresa.

“There’s some branches that are dead, but still on the trees,” said Katie.

“Where?” asked Theresa as she dumped the pack.

“Couple of blocks over,” said Katie.

“In people’s yards?” asked Theresa.

“Yes,” said Katie. “I don’t think they’re there though.”

“Katie, it’s still other people’s property,” said Theresa.

“Yeah, but we need it,” said Katie.

“We can get plenty from places we know for certain don’t belong to others,” said Theresa.

“Just easier to get at,” said Katie.

“That may be, but let’s save it for times where we don’t want to walk as far,” said Theresa.

“Good point,” said Katie. “Do we need more?”

“Probably,” said Theresa taking stock of what they had. “I’ll tell you what, let’s head down to the woods instead.”

“Easy enough,” said Katie as she dumped the bags. Her mother went inside the house and returned several minutes later with a larger pack meant for backpacking. “Where did you get that from?”

“I’ve had it for years,” said Theresa. “It was buried under some stuff in the attic.”

“You can double the load with that,” said Katie.

“Yep, you get the shopping bags and the small pack and I’ll take this one,” said Theresa as they started towards the garage. “But one more thing we’ll need.”

Theresa opened the door and started looking through some random boxes before coming out with a fifteen inch carpenter’s saw. She dropped it into the large pack she was wearing and closed the garage door before heading out.

“Where’d you get that?” asked Katie.

“It was your father’s,” said Theresa. “I just never needed it until now.”

“Might be easier on my knees,” said Katie who had bruises from the first few times she had broken the branches and found they were a bit tougher than expected. And learned the hard that that slamming them against your knees didn’t help break them any easier. They headed down to the small area near the creek and found plenty of downed branches and commenced to breaking them and cutting them into manageable pieces. Theresa knew the more detailed cutting would happen at the house and just made the pieces large enough to fit in the packs without falling out for the moment. They headed into the area and saw the poison ivy was already growing pretty good.

“Don’t rub up against the plants,” said Theresa.

“Next time we wear pants,” said Katie who hated the stuff.

“Lesson learned,” said Theresa as she found a smaller branch and started breaking it up into manageable pieces and ended up having to cut it eventually. The saw wasn’t designed for that kind of cutting, but worked well enough for the purpose.

“While we’re down this far, let’s go ahead and fill these bottles at the creek,” said Theresa as she pulled out the two bottles she had brought along.

“I didn’t know you brought those,” said Katie.

“Figured while we were this far out it wouldn’t hurt,” said Theresa.

“I’ve still got some space in my pack,” said Katie.

“And I have enough in mine for one,” said Theresa. “Kind of like I planned it that way.”

“Can we leave the packs here and pick them up on the way back?” asked Katie.

“Let’s cover them a little, but yes,” said Theresa. “Another lesson learned.”

“Get the water first?” grinned Katie.

“We both learned a few things this trip,” said Theresa as they shed the packs and managed to partially cover them with leaves before heading the half mile to the stream. There didn’t seem to be anyone else around as they filled the two from the rolling area and capped them back off.

“So how’s that work?” asked Katie.

“You boil it,” said Theresa. “It’ll kill off the nasty bugs and stuff.”

“What about the floating stuff?” asked Katie.

“That...we’ll have to think about that,” said Theresa. “I might have an idea though.”

“What is it?” asked Katie.

“I was thinking my coffee maker,” said Theresa. “It doesn’t work without electricity, but we can pour the water into the top where the filters are and it should remove the large chunks of stuff. After that we can boil it and it should be okay.”

“You’ll give up your coffee maker for that?” laughed Katie.

“Well, either that or dehydration,” laughed Theresa.

“Yeah, you make a good point,” said Katie. “But being that I don’t drink coffee, not a big deal.”

“Probably a good thing,” said Theresa with hidden grin. “It’d stunt your growth.”

“That’s not funny,” said Katie with a frown.

“It’s a little funny,” said her mother with a laugh.

“You’re my mother, what’s that say about you?” asked Katie.

“I’d say it says you take after the Anderson side of the family far more than the Shepherd side,” said her mother. “Your Grandmother Anderson was only about five two.”

“Still not funny,” said Katie.

“Yes it is,” said Theresa with a grin.

“I’ll meet you halfway with mildly amusing,” said Katie.

“You’ve still got some growing to do,” said Theresa. “You might be my height eventually.”

“Hope so,” said Katie. “I’m never going to dunk a basketball otherwise.”

Theresa laughed at her daughter as they came back and found the packs undisturbed. After slinging them up and collecting the bags they walked the distance home where the wood was placed in the backyard and the water to the kitchen. Theresa set Katie to sawing up the larger pieces of wood while she tried her theory of the filtration through the coffee machine. After flipping open the lid, she put a new filter in and poured some of the bottle in. The water went through the filter like it should and started dripping into the pot below having removed the larger particles as well as much of the smaller ones.

“Looks like it works,” said Katie as she rummaged on the countertop and found the cotton work gloves she was looking for.

“Appears to work fine,” said Theresa. “One thing I forgot, but we’ll need to keep yet another supply for the bathroom. The tank won’t be able to refill so we’ll have to pour water in when we use it and flush.”

“That sounds awesome,” said Katie with a frown.

“Either that or dig a hole outside,” said Theresa.

“Filling the tank it is,” said Katie as she returned to the outside and continued sawing the branches into the size her mother instructed her earlier. It wasn’t easy work, but eventually she figured out if she sawed it halfway, she could break the remainder by smacking it against the ground a couple of times.

“Be careful doing that,” said Theresa.

“I’m fine Mom,” said Katie as she continued until she figured out what her mother meant when a piece flew up past her head after smacking. Katie managed to dodge the errant piece of wood and didn’t get hit, but saw the wisdom in her mother’s remarks.

“Don’t say it,” said Katie.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Theresa as she headed back in to continue the filtering of the water. It went fairly well and she saw the water was clear enough for most purposes. She managed to get close to a pot and decided to give it a try outside. She came out and drug Katie away from the sawing for the moment and showed her the basic fire lay to get a small fire started. She was using paper, but explained there were several natural materials she could use as tinder to get the fire going. She grabbed a kitchen match, one of the packs Katie had been able to trade for during one of the trips to the flea market, and struck it against the box and lit the paper at several points. Katie watched as the paper caught fire and lit the cedar twigs and eventually caught everything else while her mother continued to feed larger pieces in.

“Seems simple enough,” said Katie.

“Good, you’re doing it for the other one,” said Theresa.

“I am?” asked Katie.

“Yep, only way you learn,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie as she started looking for the materials to build it with. She was shown a few of the items by her mother as she laid everything out in the second fire pit. But she didn’t strike the match just yet as they didn’t have enough water to boil or another empty container to put it in when they finished it up. However, Theresa saw it should work okay as they went back to finishing the other fire and placing a pot over the top to start the boiling. She showed Katie how to add some larger pieces of hardwood to the pile to get more coals going which in turn would add more heat to the pot.

“How long does it need to boil?” asked Katie.

“Five minutes or so,” said Theresa. “We have one empty bottle right now and you need some water yourself. What we’ll need to do is mark bottles by clean and dirty so we don’t put bad water into a clean bottle. So go ahead and grab a marker and mark them as C or D.”

“Got it,” said Katie as she headed inside and grabbed the empty bottle they had used at the creek and marked it while finding the empty milk jug as well to pour the boiled water into. Heading back outside, she grabbed the large funnel along the way where the water was starting to get some steam coming off it.

“Seems to go pretty quick,” said Katie.

“Needs to be a rolling boil so we’ve got a way to go,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie as they continued chatting and waited for the water to come to a rolling boil. Theresa figured the smaller amounts might be easier to do as opposed to entire bottles at a time. Eventually the water reached a boil and Theresa kept an eye on it as they contemplated what to have for supper that evening.

“We have stew, spaghetti or...stew or spaghetti,” said Theresa.

“No filet mignon?” asked Katie with a grin.

“Side of Doritos,” said Theresa.

“Sold me,” laughed Katie as she watched her mother take off the water and let it cool before pouring it into the gallon jug. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“We’ll need to head to the distribution center first thing in the morning,” said Theresa. “We’ll check the water first thing in the morning, but I have this feeling it won’t be back on.”

“We can hope,” said Katie.

“As always,” said her mother with a smile.

“It’s still a bit unusual not having to go in to work isn’t it?” asked Katie. Theresa had been getting her hours cut back more and more until the office manager finally had to tell the remaining employees he would call them when they were needed again. So the entire office had been cut and Theresa didn’t think it was promising they would be back any time soon.

“Yeah,” said Theresa quietly and wondered how they would manage to get by. There was still money locked away in savings, but with no banks being open or open for limited hours with no cash on hand, they were in an interesting position to continue “life” as they knew it. But Theresa was hopefully giving Katie some basic instructions on how to get by even if she didn’t know all the answers herself.

Katie saw the problem of not working weighed heavily on her mother’s mind and decided not to bring up the issue again. They continued talking about other things as the cans were set in a pan of water to heat up and paper bowls were brought out again since water would be in short supply to wash with. Theresa wondered how they would find more for the bathrooms and saw the guttering on the house. She had several buckets around the house that were generally unused that could catch the rainfall to be used in the toilet. It was something they could take care of the next day since the evening didn’t appear to be bringing any rain.

But for the moment, Theresa still worried about her child growing up in the aftermath of the fall of the American nation. And as they ate in silence, she wondered how further down the hole they could go before everything broke loose and complete anarchy broke out.

CHAPTER 12

Time Since Attacks: 74 days

Date/Time: 3 July/0908 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Mom? You ready?” asked Katie as she slipped on her pair of sneakers and grabbed her pack.

“Yeah,” said Theresa. “Give me a minute.”

“Everything okay?” asked Katie.

“I’m putting out some buckets around the gutter so we can catch the rain,” said Theresa.

“What for?” asked Katie.

“For the toilet,” said Theresa.

“Good idea,” said Katie as her mother joined her and they headed out the door. Locking it behind them, they started the trek to the FEMA distribution point to gather more rations. They saw a couple of people during their walk, but instead of the normal friendly nods, only momentary glances passed between the people and generally nothing was said. They arrived at the point and saw there was already a decent sized crowd and got in line waiting and looking around at the others that were waiting as well. It was unusual as the crowd was a complete variety of people ranging from a man and a woman wearing a suit and a presentable dress to what appeared to be homeless people waiting patiently in line. Eventually they moved to the front and were served and had their cards marked before being ushered towards the exits. One thing Katie noticed that day was there appeared to be more military at the point and more of them seemed to be armed.

“Did you notice the soldiers?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said her mother.

“You think something is going on?” asked Katie.

“I don’t know,” said Theresa. “Maybe they just feel like additional security will keep people from causing trouble.”

“You think there could be trouble?” asked Katie.

“I wouldn’t think so,” said Theresa as they stopped near the exit to load up the pack. Katie saw a nearby soldier and had to ask.

“Excuse me?” she asked politely.

“Yes ma’am?” asked the soldier.

“Why are there so many more of you guys today?” asked Katie.

“FEMA is being redeployed back east and we are taking over the area,” said the soldier.

“Oh,” said Katie. “Just wondering since a lot of you are armed.”

“We had a gang try to break in last night and steal the supplies,” he stated. “We’re just making sure everything is safe for you folks.”

“Okay,” said Katie. “Thanks.”

The soldier politely nodded and went back to watching the crowd. Katie returned as her mother finished packing away the items and folding the boxes and putting them into the pack.

“Is it my turn to carry it?” asked Katie.

“No, I think I’ll be okay for today,” said Theresa as she shouldered it up and adjusted it slightly before attaching the belt. “It is a nice pack.”

“Mrs. Simmons is awesome like that,” said Katie.

“I would say she loaned it to you, but as stubborn as she is, she won’t accept it back,” said Theresa as she had to let out the belt slightly since Katie was thinner than she was. An expanding waist was always a product of age, but Theresa had kept herself in decent enough shape before the attacks and tended to get out and about on her feet with the job she had. They headed out towards their home as Katie snagged branches along the way and put them in the small pack she was carrying. They found more than a few decent pieces along the way and Katie managed to break them apart and get them into the pack.

“It seems like you are making an effort to start a woodpile,” said Theresa.

“Well, it seems to burn pretty quickly,” said Katie. “But I am wondering something.”

“What’s that?” asked Theresa.

“What happens when winter comes around?” asked Katie.

“We have the fireplace,” said Theresa.

“It’s gas Mom,” said Katie.

“Which it was a wood burning fireplace originally,” said Theresa. “We can remove the gas logs and use it to burn wood.”

“Oh,” said Katie. “I didn’t know that.”

“But hopefully everything’s calmed by winter,” said Theresa.

“I think it will be,” said Katie as they arrived at home. Katie headed into the backyard where she continued to finish sawing the wood as Theresa sorted out what they had gotten from the distribution center. A knock on the door was heard and Theresa peeked out and saw Paul Brady standing outside.

“Hey Paul, come on in,” said Theresa.

“Hi Theresa,” he said as he walked inside.

“Can I get you a water?” asked Theresa.

“No, thanks though,” he replied and stood near the foyer area. “I just came by to drop off what we agreed on.”

“Oh! Thanks!” exclaimed Theresa as she took the items and immediately turned. “Let me go ahead and run them upstairs.”

“Okay, I hope you understand if I wait down here,” he laughed.

“I understand,” said Theresa as she headed up the stairs and returned in short order.

“I get the impression Katie doesn’t know about this?” he asked. “Hopefully that’s not too forward of me for asking.”

“No, she doesn’t,” said Theresa. “It’s something that’s never come up.”

Paul didn’t say anything as that was not his concern since it wasn’t his family. But he knew why Theresa had asked and let the matter drop. “Everything going okay otherwise?”

“For the most part,” said Theresa. “We just got back from the food distribution center.”

“I’m trying to avoid that place,” said Paul.

“We needed to stock up a little more,” said Theresa.

“Luckily Trish and I are okay in that department,” said Paul.

“I thought we were as well,” said Theresa. “But we weren’t as prepared as we thought.”

“You and the majority of this country,” said Paul. “Look, if you two need any help, let us know, okay? We can afford a little charity.”

“I prefer not to have to use it,” said Theresa.

“The offer is there,” said Paul.

“I’m worried about long term and I’m weighing options right now,” said Theresa.

“Such as?” asked Paul. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Maybe applying for refugee status and heading for a FEMA camp,” said Theresa. “There’s one down in Wichita that doesn’t seem bad from the news reports.”

“I think you two should avoid that place,” said Paul. “None of them are safe.”

“I might not have any choice,” said Theresa with a sigh. “Food will run short, this place will become bad before long and I’ve got my daughter to protect.”

“And neither of you will be safe there either,” said Paul. “The security at those locations isn’t all that great despite what the news is saying. And a lot of the refugees are not the good sorts either and I have this feeling the Federal guys will end up pulling out of this State before long.”

“How come?” asked Theresa.

“Power base,” said Paul. “Our new President, which was the nicest coup d’état I’ve ever seen in my opinion, will want to consolidate her power base closer to home.”

“Isn’t she from California?” asked Theresa.

“She is, but the power brokers are in Washington,” said Paul. “So I’d be willing to bet the troops and aid workers will be pulled back east of the Mississippi before long.”

“You honestly think they would let us fend for ourselves?” asked Theresa.

“It’s the government, what do you think?” asked Paul.

“I am hopeless when it comes to politics so I don’t know,” said Theresa.

“You don’t vote?” asked Paul.

“I tend to keep up about right before elections,” said Theresa. “I’ve got bigger concerns like raising a daughter.”

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to have an election for a while so it’s a moot point anyway,” said Paul. “But no matter what, I’d avoid the FEMA camps.”

“Suggestions otherwise?” asked Theresa.

“Oklahoma, Texas, maybe the Southeast,” said Paul. “I know it’s a good distance, but I have this feeling they will end up being far safer in the long run.”

“I’ll take it into consideration,” said Theresa.

“How are you going to get there?” asked Paul.

“Walk if we have to,” said Theresa and Paul immediately saw she hadn’t thought it out that far.

“What about you two?”

“We’ve got a place we’re probably heading out to soon,” said Paul and didn’t elaborate.

“Specifics?” asked Theresa.

“Sorry,” said Paul. “It’s a private family area.”

“I understand,” said Theresa.

“Well, if you two need anything, don’t hesitate to come over,” said Paul.

“Again, this is seriously appreciated,” said Theresa.

“Not a problem,” said Paul. “And you did pay for it.”

“Should I hold onto the rest of the silver?” asked Theresa.

“I’d wait for the opportune time and a far better deal to give it away,” said Paul. “I heard the flea markets were not exactly very good with the exchange ratio. It’s worth a lot more than what they let on.”

“Okay,” said Theresa. “We’re still learning here.”

“As are we all,” said Paul. “Take care now.”

“Bye,” said Theresa as she opened the door and locked it behind him when he left. She headed to the backyard where Katie was almost done with the small woodpile. “You okay?”

“Hot and sweaty,” said Katie. “And my arms are tired.”

“You could have stopped,” suggested Theresa.

“I was almost done,” said Katie.

“And you’ve done a great job,” said Theresa. “I’ll pile it up over here on the deck.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense out by the fireplace?” asked Katie.

“And if it rains?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, there is that,” said Katie. “What are we doing for supper tonight?”

“I have no idea,” said Theresa.

“Can we do something other than soup or tomato pasta?” asked Katie.

“Did you have something in mind?” asked Theresa.

“We have the canned shrimp and a jar of alfredo sauce,” said Katie.

“And no fettuccini noodles,” said Theresa.

“We have spaghetti,” said Katie. “Hey, it works in a pinch and we wouldn’t be using canned shrimp either, but it’s not exactly like we are fine dining right now.”

“You have a valid point,” said Theresa. “So who’s cleaning?”

“I thought maybe I could do the cooking,” said Katie. “Being my idea and all.”

“Which leaves the cleaning to…” asked her mother.

“The one that isn’t cooking,” grinned Katie.

“I think we can splurge this evening,” said Theresa.

“Cool!” said Katie. “As in like soon, right?”

“Yes, go get washed up and get the stuff ready,” said Theresa. “I’ll build the fires.”

“Already done,” said Katie and pointed at the pit.

“You’ve been a busy little bee,” said Theresa.

“I figured you wouldn’t mind getting served tonight,” said Katie.

“I do appreciate it,” said Theresa.

“Be right back,” said Katie as she dashed off and started cleaning up. Theresa took the time to move the wood pile back to the covered deck area and found a piece of plastic sheeting to cover it over in case of rain. Katie eventually returned with all the items as the two started preparing

everything until Theresa was shooed away from the area by Katie. Her fire builds worked the first time like they should have and she got busy preparing everything. Theresa resigned herself to setting the table and put out the normal dinnerware since the paper plates they had been eating off of lately was getting a bit old as well. Eventually Katie mixed everything up and served the meal and had a seat.

“Not bad for canned shrimp,” said Theresa after taking a few bites.

“Best we can do and all,” said Katie.

“When we were in Delaware, there was a nice market that had the best fresh seafood you could imagine. We used to get shrimp the size of your thumb that grilled up great,” said Theresa.

“Are there any fish in the creek?” asked Katie.

“I don’t know,” said Theresa. “I wouldn’t think so though.”

“How come?” asked Katie.

“Too small,” said Theresa. “If there are, they are probably little.”

“Too bad,” said Katie.

“As if either of us know how to fish,” said Theresa.

“Can’t be that hard, right?” asked Katie.

“Not as easy as it looks,” said Theresa. “Your father used to from time to time, but never really caught much.”

“I wonder how he’s doing,” said Katie.

“He called about a week after the strike,” said her mother.

“He did?!” exclaimed Katie. “You didn’t tell me?!”

“He called to make sure you were okay,” said Theresa. “And made me promise not to tell you he called. He didn’t want you worrying over him.”

“Where is he at?” asked Katie.

“He said he was in New Hampshire when he called,” said her mother. “But the number came up out of South Carolina, so I have no idea.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Katie.

“Katie, you have to understand some things. I’ve held them back until you could understand and now is as good a time as any,” said Theresa as she set the empty plate off to the side.

“Your father loved you very much, and still loves you very much to this day. But he had some problems...still has some problems really. He was an alcoholic for one. And he had other problems as well when he would get drunk. When he was sober, he was probably one of the nicest men I’d ever met on the planet, but he let the alcohol control him any time it passed his lips. I tried as best as I could to get him into treatment and help, but it just never worked and he went right back to where he was before.”

“Eventually it cost him his job, but we were able to get by on my income. But as things often do, his drinking cost me my job as well and I had to move on. So I started a new career in insurance and we just drifted apart. Eventually it came down to some abuse and the first time was the last time with me. So I moved out with you and the judge gave me full custody in the divorce. He never challenged it, never came back asking for time...just never changed. I always wanted him to show up sober and showing he was the man I fell in love with, but he has to figure out his own life before he could be a part of ours.”

“I still love him, I really do. And I think he still loves me. I know he loves you for certain even though he’s not been a part of your life in a long time. But I think deep down he knows he can’t be a part of our lives until he can change. And that’s why he’s never made any attempt at reconciliation with me since we divorced,” said Theresa.

“He never called before recently?” asked Katie who was taking a lot in right then.

“He used to call from time to time,” said Theresa. “Normally drunk as a skunk and confused, but no, never called sober and never showed up.”

“Does he know where we’re at?” asked Katie.

“Yes he does,” said Theresa. “He’s known since we moved out here. He wanted the address and phone number so he could send you birthday cards and presents, but he just never did.”

“But he loves me?” asked Katie.

“Yes, in his own way,” said Theresa. “Katie, you’re too young to understand what being a parent and the unconditional love that comes with it entails. Someday you’ll get married and have children and you’ll understand, but being a parent means you love someone without hesitation and accept the bad with the good. And that love is eternal, no matter what. So yes, your father loves you because you’re his daughter. And really, you’re a lot like he is personality wise. He has a kind heart and a good soul, but just one flaw that has to be fixed.”

“What’s my flaw?” asked Katie.

“I wasn’t meaning you had a flaw,” chuckled her mother. “Let’s get the table cleared and some water in the dishes so we can soak them.”

“Okay,” said Katie and started gathering the items. “So do I have a flaw?”

“If I was to say my daughter has a flaw, which I think is a really minor one, is that she is too nice,” said Theresa. “We have to toughen you up kiddo.”

“I don’t think I’m too nice,” said Katie.

“You’re a complete and utter sweetheart,” said Theresa. “You let your heart guide you on your path of life and take everything as it is, but from time to time you have to stand up and fight for what you believe in.”

“But you always tell me fighting isn’t the answer,” said Katie.

“Not that kind of fighting, but it has to be done as well from time to time,” said Theresa.

“Like now?” asked Katie.

“There are a lot of bad people out there right now and yes, someone has to fight them. But I wasn’t meaning you specifically,” said her mother.

“I figure we could get through this if everyone would just work together,” said Katie.

“Maybe,” said Theresa. “But some people would rather take in this life.”

“That’s sad,” said Katie.

“Happens all the time,” said Theresa. “But otherwise, you have a lot of love to give to this world and will change the world more than you know one day.”

“I’ve gotten a little better recently,” said Katie.

“You’ve had a rough time lately,” said Theresa. “But yes, you are starting to get back to the daughter I love.”

“You didn’t love me before?” asked Katie with a grin.

“From time to time you’re tolerable,” laughed her mother.

“Is that the reason you never got remarried?” asked Katie. “Because of Dad?”

“A little bit maybe,” said Theresa. “It’s hard to move on knowing there was something incomplete in your life.”

“And Patrick?” asked Katie referring to the man her mother had come to Kansas for.

“Just a fling more than anything,” said Theresa. “There was something there sort of. But I knew it was never going to go past where we were at. After eight months, it just wasn’t taking hold.”

“Never heard from him either?” asked Katie.

“Not since the day we stopped seeing each other,” said Theresa. “There were other complications there as well.”

“Like?” asked Katie.

“He was...standoffish with you,” said Theresa. “He had a hard time accepting the fact I had a child already. It’s not easy for a man to accept that kind of thing.”

“Really?” asked Katie.

“He never said as much, but I could see the signs,” said Theresa.

“So why didn’t we move back after you broke up?” asked Katie.

“There were other complications,” said Theresa.

“Grandma?” asked Katie.

“I...” said Theresa and decided Katie was of the age to understand everything. “Yes. I love your grandmother dearly, but she needs to learn when not to say ‘I told you so’ until the time is right. And in the immediate aftermath of a relationship isn’t the right time.”

“So we didn’t go back because of her?” asked Katie.

“Partially,” said Theresa. “There was a lot of baggage I left behind in Delaware. Kansas has offered me a new chance and a clean slate.”

“Grandma can be persistent,” said Katie.

“To a fault,” said Theresa. “So no, we didn’t move back because I honestly couldn’t deal with being reminded of a failure every time we talked, which is exactly what would have happened. And did happen every time we talked but I had the option of hanging up the phone.”

“We’re just a couple of failures aren’t we?” laughed Katie.

“No,” smiled Theresa. “I have you ladybug. Certainly the most successful thing I’ve ever done in this life.”

“Aww,” grinned Katie.

“And I got the promotion at work so everything worked out eventually,” said Theresa.

“Thanks for talking with me like an adult,” said Katie. “I always had questions, but I probably wouldn’t have been able to rationalize them like I can now.”

“You’re growing up quickly,” said Theresa. “Kind of had to in recent memory.”

“If I only could grow a bit taller,” grinned Katie.

“I hope you get to six feet,” laughed her mother.

“We’re going to need some water tomorrow,” said Katie as she checked the stores.

“I noticed that,” said Theresa. “We’ll make a trip first thing in the morning.”

“Both of us?” asked Katie.

“Unless you want to carry it all by yourself,” said Theresa.

“I think both of us would be wise,” said Katie.

“I kinda thought you’d see it my way,” laughed Theresa. “So what we need to do is start marking bottles as to which ones go in the creek and which ones are the clean water type.”

“How many do we need?” asked Katie.

“Use the gallon jugs for the clean water,” suggested Theresa. “And the bottles that can be capped for going to the creek.”

“We have a lot more of the two liter bottles,” said Katie.

“We’ll try to divide them up as best as we can,” said Theresa.

“That’s why you bought all those sodas the day of the strike isn’t it?” asked Katie. “Like you knew this was coming.”

“Kind of,” said Theresa. “We really needed to stock the tornado shelter with some stuff and I just kept putting it off. So I figured then was as good a time as any.”

“Smart,” said Katie.

“I try sometimes,” said Theresa as they counted the bottles they had remaining. “Looks like we have twenty-three two liter bottles, five one gallon jugs and a bunch of the smaller bottles from FEMA.”

“So we use the gallons here at the house, that’s about ten two liter bottles to fill, leaves us another thirteen two liters so half would be six rounded down, but the FEMA bottles can offset that and we could keep another, say ten and use the FEMA bottles at the creek,” said Katie.

“Did you do that math in your head?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah,” said Katie.

“Not bad,” said Theresa.

“I try sometimes,” grinned Katie.

“Okay, we’ll head out in the morning,” said Theresa. “And we need to start thinking of how to clean some of the clothing.”

“Don’t you have like a washboard or something?” asked Katie.

“I’m afraid not,” said Theresa. “We’ll have to hand wash in the sink and hope for the best.”

“Not fun,” said Katie.

“Kind of what we have to do for the moment,” said Theresa as she wondered what other long term problems they had missed.

CHAPTER 13

Time Since Attacks: 77 days

Date/Time: 6 July/0719 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Mom? Are you okay?” asked Katie as she saw her mother holding her stomach again.

“Something’s not agreeing with me,” said Theresa as she bolted for the bathroom again. Katie could hear her retching inside and she came out as pale as a ghost.

“What’s going on?” asked Katie.

“I think I didn’t boil one of the pots of water long enough,” said Theresa as she coughed and wiped at her mouth.

“What can I do?” asked Katie.

“First thing we’ll do is get all the water we brought from the creek and boil it again,” said Theresa. “And check the food for contaminated items.”

“First thing you are going to do is go lie down,” said Katie.

“I’ll be okay,” said Theresa.

“Mom, that wasn’t an option,” said Katie. “I can boil water just as easily as you can.”

“I know that, but I can still help,” said Theresa.

“Mom, please go sit down,” said Katie.

“I’ll be okay,” said Theresa.

“No, you won’t be,” said Katie. “Look, I need to go to the distribution site and pick up our rations. When I get back I’ll boil the water again. There are still a bunch of bottles that are the tap water so use those until I get back.”

“Honey, I can start on it while you’re gone,” said Theresa.

“Mom,” said Katie. “Please do what I asked this once.”

“I’ll be okay,” said Theresa.

“Then I will have to stay here and make sure you don’t do anything,” said Katie.

“No, you need to go,” said Theresa.

“No, because as stubborn as you are, you’ll try something while I’m gone,” said Katie.

“Katie, I’m okay,” said Theresa as a pale look came over her face once again and she bolted for the bathroom. Only this time it came out the other end.

“Mom, please,” pleaded Katie.

“Okay,” said Theresa. “Can you grab me a bottle of good water before you leave?”

“Yes, as long as you promise to stay put,” said Katie.

“I promise,” said Theresa as she poured herself into the recliner. Katie saw she wasn’t going anywhere for the moment and headed into the kitchen and found one of the remaining bottles of tap water and brought it along with a cup. Katie poured a cup and handed it to her mother.

“I’ll be okay for the moment,” said Theresa.

“Please don’t do anything while I’m gone,” said Katie.

“I can’t ask you to do everything,” said Theresa.

“Please,” asked Katie again. “Do it for me.”

“Okay, I won’t,” said Theresa. “I promise.”

Katie grabbed her pack and shouldered it up before grabbing another bottle she knew wasn’t contaminated and dropping it inside. She took a couple of the energy bars as well and set two at the end table next to the recliner. “See if you can get something in you while I’m gone.”

“I’ll try, I promise,” said Theresa. “Be careful.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Katie. “I’m going to swing by and check on Mrs. Simmons as well if that’s okay. Shouldn’t take more than a half hour extra.”

“Okay, again, be careful,” said Theresa.

“You promised me, remember that,” said Katie as she headed towards the door.

“I’ll either be here or in the hobby room on the futon,” said Theresa.

“Love you Mom,” said Katie as she opened the door.

“Love you too baby,” said Theresa.

Katie headed out along the main roads and first stopped by the alterations shop. She peeked into the shop windows and didn't see anyone inside so she went to the back where steps led to the upstairs apartment. She knocked on the door and made sure she was in view of the window as Mrs. Simmons probably had a nasty looking shotgun right behind the door. The door was opened slightly and Katie saw the privacy chain was still latched.

"Katie!" she remarked. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to come by and check on you Mrs. Simmons," said Katie.

"Please, come in," said the woman as she undid the latch and opened the door. Katie went inside and saw the place was absolutely spotless even in the wake of the attacks. And Mrs. Simmons set down the shotgun next to her chair. "What are you doing out running around?"

"I was heading to the food distribution point," said Katie. "And I thought I might stop by and see if you were doing okay."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said. "Can I get you some water?"

"Thank you," said Katie as Mrs. Simmons filled a plastic tumbler and handed it over.

"You're going over there by yourself?" asked Mrs. Simmons as she took a seat.

"Mom's a bit sick right now," said Katie as she sipped at the water.

"What happened?" asked Mrs. Simmons.

"Bad water we think," said Katie. "We probably didn't boil it long enough."

"Where are you getting it from?" asked Mrs. Simmons.

"From a creek near the house," said Katie.

"You're boiling it?" asked Mrs. Simmons. "Do you have any bleach?"

"Some I think," said Katie.

"Try two drops of bleach per liter," suggested Mrs. Simmons. "It will help kill the nasty stuff along with boiling it."

"Like with an eyedropper?" asked Katie.

"Exactly," said Mrs. Simmons. "Do both and it will probably be safe."

"Okay," said Katie.

“I worry about you going to that awful FEMA center though,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“I’m normally home by dark,” said Katie.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Mrs. Simmons. “It’s getting to be just as dangerous during the daytime as people get more desperate.”

“I worry about you too,” said Katie.

“Oh Katie,” laughed Mrs. Simmons. “I’m just fine here.”

“But you’re here all alone!” said Katie.

“Trust me, I can keep a low profile,” said Mrs. Simmons. “I’ve got plenty of food and water saved up and plenty of bullets for anyone who wants it.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” said Katie.

“I appreciate the concern,” smiled Mrs. Simmons. “How are you and your mother holding up?”

“Other than Mom getting sick, we’re okay,” said Katie.

“Does your mother have some medicine?” asked Mrs. Simmons.

“I don’t know,” said Katie.

“Hmmm,” said Mrs. Simmons. “Hold on a moment.”

She disappeared through the apartment and came back after a couple of minutes carrying what appeared to be a small toolbox. Opening it up, Katie saw a dozen bottles of pills and packs of medicine. Digging through the packs she found a partial bottle of Amoxicillin and handed it over.

“Without knowing what exactly is wrong with her, this can’t hurt,” said Mrs. Simmons. “At the very least it will help boost her immune system.”

“Mrs. Simmons! I can’t!” objected Katie.

“I’ve got more to replace it,” said Mrs. Simmons. “Take it.”

“I can’t,” said Katie.

“I’ll take it over to your house myself if I have to,” said Mrs. Simmons.

Katie worried about the elderly lady being out on the streets and took the bottle before dropping it into her pack and zipping the compartment. "Thank you."

"Just one a day can't hurt," said Mrs. Simmons. "I know it's prescription and all, but who cares at this point in time."

"I'll have her start it when I get back," said Katie.

"Do you and your mother have any other place to go? I know you're from Delaware and that's a good ways away, but anyplace closer?"

"No, not really," said Katie.

"You should think about leaving soon," said Mrs. Simmons.

"Why?" asked Katie.

"The city is about ready to blow up," said Mrs. Simmons. "People are about to start taking matters into their own hands and doing what they can to survive. And you and your mother should be long gone by then."

"But what about you?" asked Katie.

"I'll be fine," said Mrs. Simmons. "I'll be leaving soon enough."

"How?" asked Katie.

"My son is coming to pick me up," said Mrs. Simmons.

"Oh," said Katie.

"So the less stuff I have to take, the better off I am," said Mrs. Simmons. "So a bottle of medicine gone is one less thing I need to worry about."

"I really have to thank you," said Katie.

"You just take care of yourself young lady," said Mrs. Simmons. "You are a wonderful young girl that always looks at the bright side of things."

"Thank you Mrs. Simmons," said Katie.

"Now you get going to the distribution center," said Mrs. Simmons. "And don't you dare get caught out after dark."

"No ma'am," said Katie. "Thank you for the medicine."

“You take care,” said Mrs. Simmons.

“When are you leaving?” asked Katie.

“Whenever my son gets here,” said Mrs. Simmons, being intentionally vague. While Katie wasn’t a threat, there was still the chance she could say something inadvertently. And the departed Mr. Simmons had always reminded her that the less people knew, the more secure they would be. And that preparedness pays off as he had also informed her, just as she was seeing at that point.

“Bye Mrs. Simmons,” said Katie and collected a hug. “When this is all over and things get back to normal, will you come back?”

“Maybe,” said Mrs. Simmons. “I don’t think it will be normal for a long time.”

“I hope it will sooner than you think,” said Katie.

Mrs. Simmons smiled at her as she walked her to the door. She checked the outside before opening the door and letting Katie out. After she departed, Mrs. Simmons went back through the apartment to continue packing the long term food items and other valuable resources for the move to Oklahoma. Her son would be there that night with two close friends and they would end up packing more of the night for the drive out the next day.

Katie ended up seeing the line was longer than in recent days at the distribution point and she knew that getting an early start wasn’t working as well as it had in the beginning. However, she shuffled forward as others were doing and munched on the energy bar as she got closer to the head of the line. A couple of people gave her more than a cursory glance and she felt slightly uncomfortable, but knew she was relatively safe in the crowd of people as well as having the military around. A couple of Overland Park Police were also seen, but the overwhelming majority of the armed people at the site were military. Eventually she was sent to the next worker and handed over the two ration cards.

“Where’s Theresa Shepherd?” asked the Navy Petty Officer.

“She’s at home sick,” said Katie.

“We can only give you one day of her rations,” she explained.

“I understand ma’am,” said Katie.

“Okay, if you want, you can file a supplemental request over in the admin tent,” said the Petty Officer. “They can authorize you an additional day.”

“Would I have to go back through the line?” asked Katie.

“Probably,” said the Petty Officer.

“Thanks,” said Katie as she noticed the Petty Officer drop an additional bottle of water into her pack. While it wasn’t much, it was the least she could do and they had received a new shipment of water that morning so an extra bottle wasn’t going to hurt that much. Katie zipped everything up and headed through the exit still feeling like she was being watched for some reason. On her way home, she decided to divert off the main roads and follow the back alleys to her home. While they weren’t in the open, she felt they provided a little better safety than walking alone on a roadway where help probably wouldn’t be coming. It added another half mile to her trip, but decided the additional safety was probably worth it. Arriving at home, she unlocked the door and found her mother had actually lived up to her end of the bargain and hadn’t moved.

“Hey baby,” said Theresa.

“Hi,” said Katie as she crossed the room. “Feeling any better?”

“Not really,” said Theresa.

“I got you something from Mrs. Simmons,” said Katie as she pulled the bottle of antibiotic out.

“What’s this?” asked Theresa.

“Antibiotic,” said Katie. “She said it couldn’t hurt.”

“Maybe not,” said Theresa. “I’m not allergic so that helps.”

“I want you feeling better,” said Katie.

“Hindsight and all, I forgot to buy a bottle of stomach relief,” said Theresa.

“We don’t have any?” asked Katie.

“No, used the last of it a couple of weeks before the attacks,” said Theresa. “It wouldn’t cure me, but at least give me a bit of relief.”

“Want me to check around?” asked Katie.

“We’ll see if this helps and tomorrow how I feel,” said Theresa.

“Okay, I’m going to boil the water again,” said Katie. “Also, where’s the eyedropper?”

“Why?” asked Theresa.

“Mrs. Simmons said to add some bleach to the water to help kill the stuff,” said Katie.

“We have plenty of bleach,” said Theresa. “In the laundry room.”

“And the eyedropper?” asked Katie.

“Kitchen I think,” said Theresa. “Check the catchall drawer.”

Katie rummaged through the drawer until she found the eyedropper than her mother had kept around for some reason or other. And headed into the small laundry room and found a bottle of regular bleach to help out. She wasn’t sure if she should add the bleach in before or after boiling the water, but decided to err on the side of caution and drop it in before since the thought of drinking bleach wasn’t appetizing. She started grabbing all the bottles of water they had collected from the creek and heading outside. Once she was there, she started looking over the random pots they had been using and how to accomplish the task. While she was building a fire lay, her mother surprised her from behind.

“We’ll need to sanitize the bottles as well,” said Theresa.

“What are you doing up and about?” asked Katie pointedly.

“Some fresh air won’t hurt,” said Theresa. “What we can do is use another pot to soak the lids and dunk the tops in a solution.”

“What?” asked Katie.

“The bottles need to be cleaned out,” said Theresa as she groaned and sat in one of the outside seats. “So mix one part bleach to about twenty of water and clean out the caps and tops of the bottles. And use the solution to wash out the bottles and rinse thoroughly.”

“Oh, I understand,” said Katie. “Why do we have four gallons of bleach anyway?”

“I got it on sale,” said Theresa. “Buy one get one free never hurts.”

“Especially not now,” said Katie.

“I’ll make a bargain shopper out of you yet,” chuckled Theresa.

“Should we do all the bottles?” asked Katie.

“No, just the ones from the creek,” said Theresa. “Once we get done with the tap water bottles, we can do them, but for the moment, that’s our only known source of good water.”

“Good point,” said Katie as she removed the ones she knew for certain weren’t tainted and set them off to the side. They only had three gallons left so she needed to make sure everything was purified before they ran out. Dropping the bleach into the remaining water supplies, she shook the bottles and let them sit for several minutes while concentrating on building the remaining fire and getting the pots ready.

“Make sure you disinfect the funnel as well,” said Theresa.

“Yeah, forgot about that,” said Katie as she grabbed the funnel. “How about I soak it instead?”

“I think that would work great,” said Theresa. “My suggestion? We’ve got several empty bottles. Disinfect some and let them air dry out in the sun. Once they are dry, put the water back in and go from there. It will take longer, but sunlight can help as well.”

“Okay, I’ll still have to get at least a couple of liters for a rinse,” said Katie.

“Sounds like you’re on the right track,” said Theresa as she watched her daughter going about the duties she should have been helping perform. She decided to help and started getting out of the chair to grab one of the bottles.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Katie.

“Helping,” said Theresa.

“If I was sick and tried to help, would you let me?” asked Katie.

“That’s different,” said Theresa.

“You sure about that?” asked Katie. “Because I’m pretty certain you would make me stay in the bed until I felt better.”

“How long did it take you to come up with that?” asked Theresa with a chuckle as she sat back down as she knew the argument wasn’t going to hold.

“Pretty much all morning at the distribution center,” said Katie.

“It worked,” said Theresa with a grunt as her stomach flared up again.

Katie got one of the fires started and poured one of the two liter bottles in to boil. It took a lot longer since there was more water inside and she continued feeding the fire until the water was at a rolling boil. After five minutes, she set it off to the side to cool and started on another pot of water. She took her time in washing the bottles and caps before rinsing and setting them on a table to dry. However, the wind wasn’t helping and knocked the bottles over before long. Katie managed to keep them in place by bracing them with some old boxes that were waiting to be burned. But before putting them down, she shook them as much as possible to get as much of the water out before drying.

“You hungry?” asked Katie.

“Not at the moment,” said Theresa. “I need to let my stomach settle.”

“Water?” asked Katie.

“I’ve been able to keep it down for the moment,” said Theresa.

“Mom, you really need to eat,” said Katie.

“I know sweetie, maybe in a bit,” said Theresa.

Katie continued working with the water and boiling as much as she could and waiting for the bottles to dry. She would keep the water within the pots until they could be transferred, but worried they wouldn’t have enough especially with her mother in as bad a shape as she was. She already made plans to start making daily visits to the creek if she needed to in order to keep her mother hydrated. And would do whatever was necessary to keep her alive as her mother was all she had left in the world.

CHAPTER 14

Time Since Attacks: 79 days

Date/Time: 8 July/1932 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

Katie waited patiently in line at the food distribution point where at this point, there was nothing but the military handing out packets to those in need. Since the breakdown of the transportation and electric grid, the government was forced more and more to give emergency aid to the general population and the larger crowds at the FEMA site showed it. But the problem came about that the supplies were running dangerously low and facing an angry horde waiting on food and water was not something they wanted to face. She hoped she would be served before they ran out. And furthermore, before it got dark when the streets got dangerous and roaming gangs battled each other and preyed on the weak. Luckily it had missed her neighborhood for the most part, but she still had a good distance to travel home. There were just three people ahead of her as she saw a stocky man in a military uniform arguing with a woman in front of her.

“Look, I can’t give you extra,” said the man. “It won’t be fair to those behind you.”

“I’ve got kids that need feeding!” protested the woman.

“If you brought their ration cards or identification, I could do it,” said the man sensibly.

“Hey! Move along! Shut your yap and get out of the way!” yelled another member behind Katie. Grumbles from the crowd were rising as the woman had already wasted more than enough time arguing with the soldier that didn’t have any more to give. The woman persisted before being forcibly removed by two additional soldiers wearing their full gear. The crowd didn’t protest since they now had the ability to move forward and Katie was now only two people away of being able to hopefully get two days’ worth of rations for her and her mother. The next two people got their quickly and moved ahead. The soldier serving her looked tired and worn down. He took her cards and looked over the information before checking a list.

“Where’s your mother?” asked the man.

“She’s at home,” said Katie. “Sick.”

“What’s wrong with her?” asked the man.

“She got some bad water we think,” said Katie.

“You are requesting two days for you and her?” asked the man.

“Yes,” said Katie.

“I can’t give more than a single day for those not in attendance,” said the man.

“I’m not sure she will be able to make it tomorrow either,” said Katie.

“It’s the rules,” said the man. “Sorry.”

“So I have to come back tomorrow?” asked Katie.

“Yeah,” said the man as he handed over the two days for Katie and one day for her mother. “It’d be better if she came herself.”

“I’m not sure she’ll be well enough,” said Katie. “Her stomach is cramping up pretty bad.”

The man sighed and looked at Katie. He had dealt enough lately with excuses and people trying to game the system, but this girl didn’t appear to be trying to do either. And unlike most in the past few hours, had not been demanding. With another sigh, he turned to the soldier next to him. “Cover for me for a minute.”

He nodded with his head behind the area where the supplies were being handed out. There weren’t a lot of crates left and Katie looked at the crowd, the remaining food and water and saw the remaining supplies wouldn’t be able to cover everyone. And as agitated at the crowd appeared to be, the chances of a riot not happening were slim to none. They arrived at an area being guarded by another soldier and were admitted after the man told the soldier she was with him. He went to a nearby box and started looking through the contents. He eventually found what he was looking for and handed over a bottle of pink bismuth.

“It’s all I can give,” said the man. “Look, make sure you boil and filter the water you drink. Use whatever you can to burn and bring it to a boil for at least five to ten minutes. If your mother keeps going downhill, bring her to one of the field hospitals.”

Katie took the bottle and stowed it inside of her small pack. She also put the military rations inside and zipped up the main pocket before turning to the man. “Thank you soldier.”

“Actually, I’m in the Air Force, a Sergeant to be exact,” he smiled.

“Thank you Sergeant Henry,” said Katie as she shook his hand after reading his name tape.

“Get home before it gets dark,” he replied and started making his way back to the line. She departed the area and started heading towards her home four miles away in the growing evening. She knew she wouldn’t make it before the darkness set in, but she knew some back pathways that would keep her slightly safer than walking the main streets. It was slightly eerie seeing the streets so dark and lifeless in her neighborhood and she missed the normal evenings where people would be out walking or finishing bar-be-ques. Since the attacks, everything was surreal in the world and she wondered what future they would have. She had listened to the President speaking of tolerance and putting down the lawless actions, but she had yet to see anything of the sort in Kansas even with the military presence in the town.

She speeded up as the darkness fell even more and turned on her last mile before hearing gunfire somewhere behind her. It wasn't aimed at her in particular, but she knew the darkness was bringing out the nighttime predators and she needed to be in the relative safety of her home. Jogging slightly, she was out of breath before coming to the alley behind her home and opening the fence to go through the backyard. She opened the back sliding door and went into the house to the innermost room where her mother was waiting. Three candles lit the room, not entirely, but enough to see most everything. It also was the innermost room of the house and the windows were blacked out since light attracted looters.

"Hey ladybug," said her mother weakly.

"Hey," said Katie as she went over to her mother and felt her head. "How are you feeling?"

"Still horrible," said Theresa with a smile. "But better knowing you're home."

"I'm a big girl Mom, I can take care of myself," smiled Katie.

"You're sixteen years old," said Theresa. "Not a big girl by any means."

"Guess what I got?" asked Katie as she dug into her pack and pulled out the bottle of medicine.

"Where did you get this?" asked Theresa as she took the bottle.

"A nice soldier gave it to me," said Katie.

"Out of the kindness of his heart?" asked her mother.

"Yes Mom," said Katie. "Not everyone is evil in this world."

"Honey, a man doesn't do something like that with something so precious without something else on his mind," said Theresa.

"There are still a few good people out there," said Katie.

"You're a very beautiful young woman," said her mother. "Still filled with hope and encouragement for what I feel will be a dark future."

"Things will get better Mom," said Katie with a smile as she broke the plastic seal on the bottle.

"I dearly hope so sweetie," said Theresa as she took the small cup and drank down the chalky liquid. Katie refilled it with water two more times to help wash out the remaining medicine and to help rehydrate her mother as well. She poured an additional cup of water and insisted her mother drink it to help with her current condition.

"I'm going to have to go to the creek in the morning," said Katie. "I'm trying to keep the water as topped off as possible for the days we can't go."

"I'll be over this soon enough and be able to help you," said Theresa.

"You just need to rest until that happens," said Katie as she brushed her mother's hair away from her eyes. "And you will get better."

"You're getting to be a little more stubborn," chuckled Theresa.

"A trait I got from you," laughed Katie. "Hungry?"

"A little, yes," said Theresa. "Something simple would be best."

"I was only able to get you one day of food," said Katie.

"And you got two?" asked Theresa.

"No, actually I got you two and myself one," said Katie.

"Absolutely not," said Theresa. "You will eat young lady."

"Mom, if you don't eat you'll get sicker," said Katie.

"So? You're my daughter and I won't see you go unfed," said Theresa.

"I won't do it," said Katie.

"Oh yes you will," said Theresa sternly. "You won't get sick like me."

"Mom, you could die," said Katie and a tear dropped out of her eye.

"No, I won't," said Theresa. "But you won't stay healthy if you don't eat."

"I'd rather you eat and get better," said Katie as she opened the ration up. It was a hodgepodge of items, but it was food at least. "How about some oatmeal?"

"For supper?" laughed her mother weakly.

Katie looked in the package with a smile and found a can of beef stew. "Beef stew?"

"That sounds okay," said her mother. Being that it was after dark, Katie decided against trying to heat the can up since the fire would attract attention and they didn't want attention. Lately several rougher looking individuals had been seen nearby and even a few cars that carried people that didn't appear to be neighbors. Katie opened the can and found the plastic spoon inside and

helped her mother with the first few bites. However, she was able to feed herself after making sure everything would stay down and took the can and spoon from her daughter.

“I was thinking,” said Katie. “Maybe if I traded off more of our jewelry and some other stuff for food, we might be able to get enough to go to Oklahoma.”

“Why would we go there?” asked Theresa.

“It’s safer,” said Katie. “Or so I heard.”

“And how will we get there?” asked Theresa.

“Walk maybe?” asked Katie. “Anything is better than hanging around here. Maybe one of the small towns west of here might be safer.”

“Honey, you don’t even know if there’s a safe place there,” said Theresa reasonably. “And who knows what dangers we would face going.”

“I thought about that too,” said Katie. “And maybe someone would be willing to trade us a gun for something.”

“Absolutely not!” protested Theresa. “First, you don’t know anything about guns. Second, the President outlawed guns just a couple of days ago.”

“I know,” said Katie. “I was just worried about protecting you.”

“Honey, we’ll be okay,” said her mother. “And having a gun would only add to the problems we are seeing now.”

“I know, but I just don’t think it’s safe in the cities any longer,” said Katie.

“Let me think about it,” said Theresa.

“I want you safe as well,” said Katie.

“And I want my only child safe,” said her mother as she stole one of the crackers Katie was eating. “So yes, I’ll give it some thought.”

“I love you Mom,” said Katie.

“I love you too Katie,” she replied with a smile.

The next morning after the sun came up, Katie grabbed the large pack and empty bottles for a trip to the nearby creek. She arrived at the spot she and her mother had been using and noticed others up and down the creek bed doing the same thing as she started filling them. Katie had learned a valuable lesson that even items that typically were deemed useless in normal times became invaluable in times of crisis like the two liter bottles she was currently filling. She also reminded herself that she needed additional wood for her fire since they had been boiling a lot more lately. She finished filling the ten bottles and put the last one in the main pouch before zipping up the pack. It was reasonably heavy at close to fifty pounds, but she had carried it often enough lately that the weight was a lot more bearable now than it was in the beginning.

As she traveled the route back home, she spied a few dead branches that were falling from the trees and made a note to come back and gather them once she dropped off her load of water. However, she grabbed a couple while on her way since she was closer to home. Once she arrived, she found her mother up and about.

“Hey! Feeling better?” asked Katie as she shed her pack.

“Feeling much better today,” said Theresa, although still too weak for Katie’s tastes.

“I might have to go track down that soldier, get him to marry me,” said Katie with a grin. “Who knows what I could get if I slept with him.

“Katherine Lynn Shepherd!” exclaimed her mother.

“I’m joking Mom,” said Katie who thought it was pretty funny beforehand.

“You don’t joke about things like that!” said Theresa in admonishment.

“I’m sorry,” said Katie.

“There’s plenty enough of that going on right now; women sleeping with random men for a can of peas. But I certainly don’t want you to be a part of it,” said Theresa.

“I wouldn’t,” said Katie meekly.

“I’d hope I raised you better than that,” said Theresa.

“It was a joke Mom,” said Katie. “A bad one at that.”

“You have a good heart and someday you’ll find someone to love,” said Theresa.

“I thought I was in love with Jacob,” said Katie.

“Honey, you’re a teenager,” said Theresa. “True love doesn’t happen at your age very often.”

“I know,” said Katie. “Just felt like someone stomped on my heart you know.”

“A puppy crush is like that,” said Theresa.

“Well, whoever it is I fall in true love with, I hope it’s someone with a good supply of food,” grinned Katie.

“That’s always a plus,” laughed Theresa and didn’t want to admonish her daughter any more than was necessary. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Yes?” asked Katie.

“I know you’re heading back to the food ration point today, but I need you to make another trip to the creek and fill another four bottles,” said her mother.

“Okay,” said Katie questionably.

“We have four spares from FEMA and if we are thinking of leaving, we’re going to need more water,” said Theresa.

“You’re considering it?” asked Katie.

“I am,” said Theresa. “My daughter doesn’t feel safe so we’ll go someplace safe until all this nonsense has passed us by.”

“Thank you!” exclaimed Katie as she bounced up and took her mother in a hug.

“So go ahead and dump four bottles into the pots and head back. I can start boiling it,” said Theresa. “And before you remind me, yes, I know let it boil for ten minutes this time and add the bleach.”

“You going to be okay?” asked Katie.

“I think so,” said Theresa. “You need to get going.”

“I’ll bring more firewood as well,” said Katie as she emptied four of the bottles and departed. Heading back to the creek, she again saw others filling random containers and going about their business. One thing that had happened during the Fall was the fact nobody really talked much in the cities. It was like most people were on edge and waiting for you to attack them. Katie took solitude in the fact she would be able to outrun most threats, but really had no other means of defending herself other than hiding. But she and her mother had taken good precautions to be able to make their house look unoccupied and uninviting for the roaming gangs. There weren’t many families still on her block and their neighborhood was generally deserted.

Or appeared that way for the most part. Katie wasn’t entirely sure which ones had occupants and which ones didn’t since some showed signs of life. But again, suburban America in most major cities had become reclusive and what once would have been friendly greetings and nods from the

neighbors were now shadowed eyes peering from the darkness of the interior of homes. It was slightly creepy knowing there were probably eyes probing her at that moment and she hoped she didn't present any kind of threat.

Katie quickly finished up filling the bottles and headed home, grabbing random pieces of deadfall along the way and putting it in the pack. Since it was far lighter, she was able to gather a decent amount of firewood, at least enough to last them another week of boiling water and heating food. She was happy the neighborhoods had a habit of growing trees for decades and the trees had dead branches that would drop from time to time. Another thing she had learned since the strikes it was better to have more than you thought you needed rather than not enough. She and her mother had enough food to last for the first couple of weeks, but when the power went out and supplies started drying up, the food disappeared quickly and they put themselves on forced rations. They had a little saved up, but the majority was gone and they had been not unlike many other Americans in the fact they had not prepared properly for any kind of crisis.

"Mom?" she asked as she unlocked and entered the front door.

"Out back," she heard her mother call. She headed through the house and entered the backyard where her mother was finishing boiling the water she had collected earlier. The pots were set off to the side since they were still cooling before being put into the bottles. "Did everything go okay?"

"Sure did," said Katie as she dropped the pack. The wood was set aside and the bottles were handed over. "Are you still feeling okay?"

"For the moment," said Theresa. "Are you still planning on going to the distribution point?"

"Yes, and I need to get going," said Katie.

"Okay honey, you be safe, you hear?" asked Theresa.

"I will Mom, I promise," said Katie.

"And if anything happens, you run," reminded her mother.

"I will," said Katie.

"Bye baby, love you," said Theresa.

"Bye Mom, love you too," said Katie and grabbed her small pack and one of the bottles of water for the trip. She knew she could get at least two days more for herself and one more for her mother and tried to figure out a way of getting additional food for a trip. She wasn't sure how long or how far they would have to travel before they found safety, but again, she knew more was better and knew they would require as much food as possible. However, as she approached the site she didn't see the normal lines and crowd waiting for supplies. And saw armed guards standing at the entrance of the normal supply area.

“Ma’am, stay where you are,” said one of the soldier as he pointed a rifle at her from behind a box. His partner moved behind a light post and watched past her for more unseen threats.

“What’s going on here?” asked Katie.

“We’re closed for the day,” said the soldier. “I need you to move on.”

“What happened?” asked Katie.

“Ma’am, you need to go, now!” ordered the soldier.

“But my mother is sick and needs food!” exclaimed Katie.

“You need to leave the area before you are arrested. Now go!” ordered the soldier.

“My mother needs food!” said Katie as her voice wavered.

“You’ve got five seconds to move,” said the soldier as he aimed in below her feet. “One.”

“I can’t go home empty handed!” exclaimed Katie.

“Two,” said the soldier in an even voice.

“I can’t leave,” said Katie as a tear dropped down her face.

“Three,” said the soldier and saw she was adamant about not moving. “Four...”

“Stand down Specialist!” announced a voice from behind them. Katie saw another three individuals moving towards the gate area. “Stand down, everything is okay.”

“Roger that,” said the soldier as he stood up and moved back slightly, although keeping his eyes on Katie the whole time.

“Mister Winston?” asked Katie as she noticed the man giving the orders was her history teacher from school.

“Katie?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Trying to get rations for Mom,” said Katie. “She’s sick and can’t make it. What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were in the Army.”

“I wasn’t until recently. I was a long time ago and got reactivated by Presidential order,” he explained. “And got put in charge out here.”

“I didn’t know,” said Katie. “Are you closed today?”

“We had a riot earlier when we ran short and had to close up for the day,” said Captain Winston. “We’ll be open tomorrow though.”

“Mom’s sick,” said Katie. “We can only get her a day at a time.”

Winston looked at her and sighed. He knew Katie from the school and knew she wasn’t the type to be lying over anything. And furthermore, had always been a good student and a pleasant young lady overall. He went to the gate and removed the simple chain securing it before nodding his head inside. “We’ll do an emergency ration for you.”

“Thank you,” said Katie.

“Come on over to the administration tent,” said Winston as he led her into the deserted compound. Katie could see empty tear gas containers as well as spent shell casings while they walked in. She had no idea what happened earlier, but it was obvious the military forces had prevailed during the riot. Upon entering the tent, Katie saw there weren’t many people inside as they headed over to a desk. Katie slipped off the pack and it was immediately grabbed by Winston and opened up. Katie didn’t know what was going on before he started ripping open a case of military rations and dropping them inside.

“Mister Winston!” she exclaimed.

“I’m not done yet,” he replied and opened a second case and dumped about half in the pack. And added four bottles of water as well as a box of instant sports beverage packs before turning to a nearby soldier. “Do we have a medic on tonight?”

“Two sir,” said another member inside the tent.

“Grab one and tell them to get their bag of goodies. I also want two more for a security escort and a tactical vehicle ready to go,” said Winston.

“Aye-aye,” said the Navy sailor and headed off in search of a medic.

“Now listen to me,” said Winston as he faced Katie. “You and your mother need to get out of here. I don’t care how, but you two need to get out of the city. Head south towards the smaller towns and stay away from Wichita and Topeka for the moment. Anywhere else in rural Kansas, Oklahoma or Texas should be okay, just not the metro areas.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Katie.

“It’s about to get really dangerous out here,” he explained. “FEMA has already been ordered back east and we are supposed to be moving soon. And as soon as we leave, all hell will break loose in this town. So you two need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“When?” asked Katie.

“I don’t know exactly, but probably within a week,” he said. “I understand your mother might not be well enough to travel right now, so I’m sending a medic to check her out. As soon as she’s able to travel, you two need to leave.”

“We talked about it kind of,” said Katie.

“Make that ‘kind of’ like as soon as possible,” said Winston. “Tell your mother to trust me on this, just get out as soon as you can.”

“I’ll tell her,” said Katie. She saw Winston strapping something to the webbing on the outside of the pack. She knew there were pouches that had come with it, but had never put them on. “What’s that?”

“It’s a first aid kit,” he explained. “You might need it.”

“You’ve already given up a lot,” said Katie.

“You’re a good kid and your mom is top notch as well,” said Winston as he saw the medic and two more soldiers coming up. “You will escort this civilian to her home and check on her mother. She thinks she got into some bad water so see if we can help. Leave sufficient meds in case they need them and let me know what so I can account for it later.”

“Yes sir,” said the medic dressed in a flight suit. The four departed the tent after Katie collected her pack and headed outside where a military HMMWV sat waiting for them. They boarded the vehicle and departed the area with one of the soldiers in the turret watching the area with his rifle.

“What’s wrong with your mother?” asked the medic.

“Bad water we think,” said Katie and explained her conditions.

“Not a lot I can do for that except let it run its course,” said the medic.

“Are you going to check at least?” asked Katie.

“Sure,” he said. “Captain Winston wouldn’t have asked for just anyone.”

“He’s a nice guy,” said Katie.

“He’s hell on wheels,” said the medic. “Kept us from getting overrun today.”

“What happened?” asked Katie.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” said the medic.

Katie gave directions to her home and they arrived as it was getting dark. The two security stood outside in a silent vigil while the medic and Katie entered the house.

“Katie? Who’s this?” asked Theresa as Katie announced herself.

“He’s a medic Mom,” said Katie. “You remember Mister Winston from school. My history teacher? He sent him to help you.”

“What’s he doing there?” asked Theresa.

“Captain Winston is our commander now ma’am,” explained the medic. “He was recalled to active duty by Executive Order.”

“Okay,” said Theresa still a bit confused.

“Have a seat please, I’ll need to get you checked out,” said the medic. After several pokes, prods and taking her temperature and blood pressure the medic announced his findings. “Okay, basically it’s what you think it is. Bad water and could be any one of protozoal infections. Not a whole lot I can do except give you some antibiotics to help boost your system, but unless you want to go to a hospital, it’s nothing that fluids, food and most importantly time can’t solve. You appear to be past the worst stages so now it’s just time.”

“I’ve been feeling a bit better,” said Theresa.

“Just going to take time,” said the medic. “Drink plenty of water, eat as often as you can and mix some of these Gatorade pouches twice daily to keep your electrolytes up. Otherwise, here’s a pack of antibiotic, take once a day and continue until the packs gone.”

“I really appreciate it,” said Theresa.

“You two take care now,” said the medic as he retrieved his carbine and departed the house. Katie locked the door behind them and headed back to her mother.

“What was that all about?” asked Theresa.

“I went to the FEMA site and it was almost deserted. The soldiers told me to leave, but I knew I couldn’t before getting you your ration,” said Katie.

“We talked about you doing what you were told,” said Theresa.

“But it was for you Mom,” said Katie. “And Mister Winston was there. Speaking of.”

Katie opened her pack and Theresa saw the rations he had dropped in spill out. And the first aid kit attached to the outside. And the additional water bottles that he had put inside.

“Katie!” exclaimed Theresa.

“He also told us to get out of town, like soon,” said Katie. “He said FEMA has already left and the military might not be far behind them. He said as soon as you’re better we need to get going either to a small town in Kansas, Oklahoma or Texas.”

“How does he know this?” asked Theresa.

“He’s in the Army now,” said Katie. “He was before, but said they pulled him back in.”

“And he knows this for a fact?” asked Theresa.

“I’d say he has better information than we do,” said Katie. “Look Mom, you’ve thought about leaving so we need to have a serious talk about it. I’m scared right now especially since I’ve seen some people around here that probably don’t belong. I think it’s time we left.”

“Katie I understand you might be scared, but right now I don’t know how far I’ll get,” said Theresa. “Or where we would go for that matter.”

“Then we need to think pretty hard about it,” said Katie as she lit a candle as the darkness was growing. “I’m not trying to be a pain, but you and I both know we can’t hole up here.”

“I know Katie,” said Theresa. “We’ll talk to Mr. and Mrs. Brady tomorrow.”

“You think they’ll know where to go?” asked Katie.

“I have this feeling they know exactly where to go,” said Theresa. “If they haven’t left already.”

CHAPTER 15

Time Since Attacks: 81 days

Date/Time: 10 July/1120 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“So south is the best way to go?” asked Theresa.

“South or southeast,” said Paul Brady as he pointed at the map. “Certainly avoiding Wichita and Topeka so west is out. And Columbia in Missouri so east is out. You could go north, but that means you’d have to cross the entire city practically. South Missouri might net you a couple of towns that might take you in. The farming areas south of here might be okay as well.”

“South it is then,” said Theresa as she pointed at the road atlas. “All these little towns out here might be better anyway since we’re from Kansas.”

“Well, you’re technically Yankees,” laughed Trish Brady.

“They don’t have to know that until well after the fact,” laughed Theresa. “You think you’re up to a couple of hundred mile walk kiddo?”

“Sure,” said Katie who didn’t comprehend the distance involved necessarily. “It gets us to safety, right? So it’s not a big deal.”

“Decent water supplies along the way, but I’d make sure I packed out as much as possible if I were you. Same thing with food and winter clothing,” said Trish.

“Winter clothing?” asked Katie.

“I doubt you’ll be back before the cold hits,” said Paul.

“I hope you’re wrong,” said Katie.

“Better to plan it out and have and not need,” said Trish. “Otherwise, the routes Paul showed you should be fine.”

“Stay off the main roads, like the State Highways and Interstates,” said Paul. “Stick to the country roads and whatnot since there is less of a chance of a gang seeing you.”

“You think they’re out there yet?” asked Theresa.

“I wouldn’t bet against it,” said Paul. “Although it’s too early to think they would be targeting the secondary roads.”

“Well, I’d say that settles it,” said Theresa. I can’t say how much I appreciate the advice.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Paul. “You have a timeline of when?”

“Not sure yet,” said Theresa. “At least three more days or so to get over this bug enough.”

“If you need anything in the meantime, give us a yell,” said Trish as she showed the Katie and Theresa to the door.

“The same can be said for you,” said Theresa.

“Not a big deal with us, we’re set,” said Trish. “But we were worried about you two.”

“Oh, we’ll be fine,” said Theresa with a smile. “Again, thank you.”

“Theresa, I’ve got to ask if maybe you were thinking of something for Katie...catch my drift?” asked Paul as Theresa was about to exit.

“Maybe...give me a day or two to think it over,” said Theresa.

“Open offer as long as you’re in town,” said Paul.

“I really appreciate it,” said Theresa. “You all take care.”

“So we’re leaving?” asked Katie as they walked home.

“We’ve got a lot of things we need to do first, but yes,” said Theresa.

“Where to?” asked Katie.

“I’m not sure yet,” said Theresa. “We’ll try to find someplace that can take us in and we might have to check several towns along the way. I’m not sure how much an insurance saleswoman and a junior grade seamstress will be able to help, but you never know.”

“I shoulda started learning that survival stuff when I was real young,” said Katie. “You know, like those kooks that hole themselves up in the mountains?”

“They really aren’t the kooks now are they?” laughed Theresa.

“Apparently not,” laughed Katie. “You know, it’s weird. Three months ago we were laughing at people like that. Now I guess they are having the last laugh.”

“Nobody could have seen what was going to happen,” said Theresa.

“Maybe,” said Katie. “But they probably are eating better.”

“This is true,” laughed Theresa. “Okay, so if we are leaving, we’ll need to do some things first. I’ll obviously need a couple more days to rest.”

“And eat,” said Katie. “Period.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Theresa with a laugh. “I have been eating.”

“Not enough for my liking,” said Katie.

“You are the most precious daughter anyone could ever have,” said Theresa. “And I know you’ve been giving me part of your rations.”

“Well, I love you and want you to get better Mom,” said Katie.

“And I love you too. Now since we will be walking, we will have to travel light. Food, water, clothing and maybe a personal item or two. Nothing really heavy though,” said Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie.

“You can use your new pack and we’ll figure out a way of strapping on your smaller one if we can. And I’ll take the big pack,” said Theresa.

“But Mom, I’m already used to heavy weights in the big pack,” said Katie.

“We’ll talk that over when the time comes,” said Theresa. “But other than that, tomorrow morning, I’ll need you to start sorting out what you want to take.”

“I’ll need to go back to the distribution point,” said Katie.

“I think I’ll be well enough to head over on my own tomorrow,” said Theresa. “So this will be the last day you’ll have to go on your own.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” said Katie.

“I’m glad you almost got shot getting me help,” laughed Theresa. “So back on the packing list. You’ll need a couple of pairs of jeans, your winter jacket and rain jacket, a couple of sweaters or sweatshirts, summer clothing and those boots you got for hiking a while back.”

“The clunky ones?” asked Katie with a scrunched up nose.

“Yes, they are more durable than shoes,” said Theresa.

“But it’s like walking in concrete blocks!” objected Katie. “And I don’t think they fit anymore.”

“Try them on tomorrow,” said Theresa. “But pack a pair of tennis shoes as well.”

“I hope the pack will be big enough,” said Katie.

“So socks, underwear, t-shirts, things like that,” said Theresa. “Again, nothing heavy.”

“We should find a mule or something,” grinned Katie.

“I have a mule,” said Theresa. “It’s called a daughter.”

“Not fair!” laughed Katie. “Will we need to refill the water?”

“Probably daily until we leave,” said Theresa. “And we should find a way of sterilizing the other bottles we’ve been using and take a few with us.”

“Okay,” said Katie.

“Now we’re not going to know when we can leave for certain, but we need to be ready to go at a moment’s notice, okay?” asked Theresa.

“Okay,” said Katie. “But in the next few days, right?”

“Yep, but ready to haul out in case of trouble,” answered Theresa as she knew the question was on Katie’s mind.

“Oh,” said Katie. “You think it will come to that?”

“I don’t know,” said Theresa.

“I think we’ll be okay,” said Katie.

“I think so as well,” said Theresa. “Now, if there’s nothing else, go ahead and grab a bite to eat and head to the FEMA site. And get in bed early tonight since we’ve got some tough days ahead of us in the future.”

“Cold food for lunch?” asked Katie.

“I think we can heat something up,” said Theresa as they arrived at the house. “But let’s not eat those military rations yet. We’ll do the canned stuff.”

“How come?” asked Katie.

“Weight,” said Theresa. “It’ll be a lot heavier carrying cans around.”

“Good point,” said Katie as she helped prepare a fire lay and got a nice blaze going as her mother popped the top on two cans and set them in the water to warm.

“It’s criminal what this fireplace is doing to my good cookware,” sighed Theresa.

“Maybe you should have gotten into camping,” said Katie.

“I was, kind of, a long time ago. Your father and I enjoyed hiking and camping before you were born and a little bit afterwards. I just kind of lost interest after he left,” said Theresa.

“Really?” asked Katie.

“Oh yes,” said Theresa as she fed another small piece of wood into the fire. “We went up until you were about three or so, but you probably don’t remember. And after that, the marriage just started going downhill and we never went anymore.”

“And no camping gear left?” asked Katie.

“Your father took it when we divorced,” said Theresa.

“Hindsight and all,” said Katie.

“There’s a lot of things in hindsight I’d probably do,” said Theresa.

“Move into the mountains and become a survivalist?” grinned Katie as she stirred the cans.

“Yep,” laughed her mother. “But honestly, we could have been better prepared for this.”

“Hindsight Mom,” said Katie. Theresa didn’t let her know how concerned she was about the journey they were about to undertake. Katie was old enough to realize the dangers they faced, but still had a bright outlook on the situation as it stood. But Theresa knew the chances of find a decent place to stay until everything settled down wasn’t going to be easy in the least. However, she knew they probably were going to be less safe living in the aftermath of the collapse of the city once the military moved out. Roaming gangs were coming closer to the neighborhood as Katie suspected and the gunfire crept a little closer each and every passing day. So the safest bet was to leave. But while safe, it also presented the most problems in trying to find a place to stay and getting there was not going to be easy.

“Thinking?” asked Katie.

“Yep,” said Theresa as Katie removed the cans and brought them to the table.

“Worried?” asked Katie.

“Don’t I always?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, you do,” said Katie. “I think everything will work out just fine in the end.”

“I hope so sweetie,” said Theresa.

“So I was wondering why Mister Winston gave me all that stuff,” said Katie.

“Because you’re a good kid?” asked Theresa.

“I guess so,” said Katie.

“And other reasons,” said Theresa.

“Such as?” asked Katie.

“He had a thing for your mother a while back,” said Theresa.

“Oh?” grinned Katie. “And?”

“It just never worked out I suppose,” said Theresa.

“How come?” asked Katie.

“He was going through a divorce at the time,” said Theresa. “He had my number and I asked him to call once the divorce was final, but he never did.”

“Well, that sucks,” said Katie.

“In his defense it was only a couple of months before the attacks, so I’m not even sure his divorce went through or not,” said Theresa.

“I could find out when I’m there today,” said Katie.

“I think it can wait until tomorrow when I go,” said Theresa. “What’s another day?”

“He is okay looking for an older guy I guess,” said Katie.

“You realize he’s only two years older than me, right?” asked Theresa.

“Yeah, okay looking for an older guy,” said Katie.

Theresa sighed and muttered an “uh huh” under her breath until she could see the mirth in Katie’s eyes. Eventually she couldn’t hold it in any longer and giggled at her mother.

“You’re not too old,” said Katie.

“Wherever we end up, I hope it’s a place we can beat our kids,” said Theresa.

“You wouldn’t beat me up?” asked Katie with an innocent smile. “Poor little me?”

“Don’t tempt me,” said Theresa, glad her daughter was back in slightly better spirits with the news they would be moving on soon. “But you need to head down to the distribution point.”

“Yeah, it’s about that time,” said Katie. She headed inside and made sure she had both the ration cards before grabbing her pack and a bottle of water. “Yes, I’ll be careful.”

“You know I’ll still say it,” said Theresa.

“I know,” said Katie.

“Be careful,” said her mother.

“Love you Mom,” said Katie as she bounded out the door and headed towards the distribution point. Moving along the streets she saw a few people here and there as she walked on the sidewalks past the houses that were still occupied. She was friendly and politely nodded and smiled and received halfhearted gestures in return. Once she arrived at the distribution point, she noticed the lines were slightly longer than the day before and got into one that appeared to be moving a little faster than others. And waited, and waited, and waited...

It was late afternoon when she saw genuine progress since the supply trucks had made another drop off. Pulling out her card, she noticed the soldier from the day before hadn’t marked the appropriate block meaning she could get two more days’ worth of rations for herself. It was slightly cheating the system, but in survival mode, there was no such thing as cheating. Looking behind her, word had apparently spread about the new shipment and the lines were longer than when she started. And there was a feeling she couldn’t shake about the crowd that day. There was certainly something in the air that afternoon that heightened her senses in knowing something ill was afoot and it was best she received her rations before something happened. It was close to eight o’clock when she finally arrived at the head of the line and made contact with the soldier handing out the rations. It wasn’t the same one and this one made sure both the cards were marked as receiving the rations.

“You’re lucky,” said the soldier as she filled her pack.

“Why?” asked Katie.

“Because we’re about to close,” said the soldier.

Katie looked behind her and saw the large crowd and knew that she needed to leave right then. Because once the crowd finished tearing apart the supply station, they would turn on those that already received their food. She attempted to make her way through the crowd near the tables as word was probably spreading they were almost out, but it wasn’t easy moving through a few hundred people towards open spaces. She heard someone on a loudspeaker announcing they had run out that day and for people to come back the next day. We’re very sorry, but supplies are limited said the voice. And the entire crowd was silent for a moment before a leader emerged.

“Bullshit!” said a random member. “You’ve got food! Now hand it over!”

“We’re sorry, but we have to keep minimums on hand,” said the loudspeaker.

“Screw that!” said the man and turned to the crowd. “These bastards have food and my family is hungry! I’m not going home and telling them I don’t have anything to show!”

The crowd started cheering on their agreement as Katie attempted to move away from them. But the momentum of the crowd pushed her backwards. Instead of trying to stem the tides and get trampled in the process, she turned around and moved in the same direction, attempting to find a way out if possible. The leading edges of the crowd were already pushing against the now empty tables as the soldiers attempted to load trucks quickly and more stood guard. Several less than lethal rounds were fired as well as concussion grenades. But it only affected the first few ranks of people in the mob and those behind them pushed forward towards the supplies. More rounds were fired and a machine gun spat out a warning shot to the group, but still they pushed forward. Trucks attempted to escape, but a group from the mob cut off their escape routes and started yanking the drivers out as the security forces fired more rounds, this time live bullets. Many of the mob were hit, but the remaining started charging towards the offending soldiers and attacked them as well. Pure bedlam had replaced the neat and orderly rows of people waiting for their rations. And nothing was going to stop them from getting what they believed they were owed. The military forces finally saw the futility of their actions and attempted to orderly retreat from the site and get away from the mob. They saw it was far better to run and survive for another day than be yet another statistic.

Seeing they had achieved victory, the leading edge of the mob tore into the remaining supplies and started grabbing whatever they could. However, just as the mob had turned on the military, they now turned on each other as fights broke out over boxes containing unknown items, cans of food that would sustain them for a single meal and water bottles that quickly broke and spilled their contents before anyone could drink them. More gunshots were heard as the crowd started engaging the threats to their goods and exchanges of gunfire were heard as others reciprocated in kind. By this time, Katie had managed to make it to the edge of the crowd and saw open space. Ducking under a grab by a mob member, she darted into the opening where others were fighting each other and ran at full speed towards the nearby streets and relative safety the shadows would offer. Darkness was falling quickly as the mob finished tearing the supply point apart and departed, seeking their goods elsewhere. She knew it was dangerous to be out and the safety of her home was the only thought on her mind as she ran down the streets in a full on dash.

She made good time despite the pack on her back and saw the back alleyways she tended to use to avoid people. More gunfire was heard from the area she had left and the glow of the fires started in the aftermath of the riot were seen lighting up the horizon. She was approaching the alleyways when trouble finally caught up to her. She was at a fast walk when two men moved out of the shadows and intercepted her. The first grabbed her around the waist and pulled her from behind.

“Well, lookie what we got here!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing out this time of night?”

“Let me go!” screamed Katie and cried for anyone else. “Help! Help!”

“Ain’t nobody out here princess,” said the man as he drug her towards an empty building that had been looted sometime in the past few weeks. The glass from the windows had been smashed in and crunched under his shoes as he drug her kicking and screaming inside followed by the other man. Three others came out from watching and entered behind them. After getting to the interior, she was pushed into the far wall and had the breath knocked out of her.

“What you got in the pack princess?” asked the man. Katie attempted to move past him and leave the building, but was tossed back against the wall yet again this time followed up by a punch to her stomach. She fell to the floor coughing as the pack was ripped away from her shoulders and tossed to another man. He dug inside finding the rations as well as her identification.

“So Miss Katherine Shepherd of 2865 89th Street,” said the man with utterly evil eyes. “You got anything else at your home worth talking about?”

Katie attempted to catch her breath after the punch, still coughing and attempting to keep the oxygen in her lungs. But managed to make a plea. “Please don’t. Just take the food.”

“Oh, we’re gonna take the food,” said the man. “And see what else you might have at home.”

“No, please,” begged Katie as she attempted to rise from the floor.

“Shut up!” exclaimed her first attacker and backhanded her across the face to keep her down.

“We’ll grab the wheels,” said the first man, the obvious leader of the group.

“How long?” asked the first man.

“An hour or two,” said the leader. “Plenty of time for you to take care of business.”

“You want me to save a bit for you?” asked the first.

“Plenty more where she came from,” said the leader as he tossed the Kansas Driver’s License back into the pack and everything onto the floor. “Take care of your business and bring the pack when we get back.”

The other three left the building as the first man moved in on Katie once again. She was recovering yet again from the slap as he grabbed her hands and drug her away from the wall. She pleaded with him not to do what she knew was about to happen, but her cries fell on deaf ears. She was dropped yet again after being pulled across the floor and the man got on top of her. She attempted to defend herself once again and received another backhand for her troubles. He started ripping at the outer button up shirt she wore and she halfheartedly tried to push his hands away, still dazed from the blows. She screamed at the top of her lungs yet again, but nobody was coming to rescue her. The man covered her mouth and shoved her head to the side as he used his other hand to undo his belt. After doing so, a pistol dropped out of his waistband

and clacked against the tile floor of the shop. He pushed it off to the side and continued attempting to remove her clothing forcefully.

Katie had become a little more coherent at this point and spied a decorative metal bracket just within reach that was typically used to support shelving. She could feel her attacker attempt to undo her shorts as she managed to get her fingers around the cast iron bracket and swung it with all her might against the side of his head. It hit with a thud and she felt him stop almost everything. But she saw he was still awake and swung the bracket yet again with a scream and smashed it into the side of his head. He fell off the top of her, entirely dazed and disoriented and onto the floor. Katie immediately looked towards the door to escape, but had caught the attention of the second man. She was too far away to strike at him and out of sheer instinct threw the bracket at him at full force. He was unable to dodge the object as it smashed into his chest.

“Bitch!” he exclaimed and attempted to pull his own pistol out of his waistband. But it was caught in his clothing as he attempted to remove it and her survival instincts kicked in. She spied the pistol that had fallen away from the first attacker and grabbed it from the floor. She had never fired a gun in her life, but pointed it at the man and pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened. She momentarily panicked as something obviously wasn’t working like it was supposed to and a thought came into her head as clear as day. She didn’t know where it came from, but a way through the situation presented itself to her. *They always pull back the hammer in the movies*, she thought and reached up with her opposing thumb and felt the hammer click twice. By this time the other man was moving towards her, still struggling with his pistol as he closed the distance between them.

The 1911 style pistol bucked in her hand and she almost lost control of it. Having never fired a handgun before, she was not ready for the recoil, but brought the pistol back down and increased her grip while yanking the trigger once again. And brought it back for a third shot. For the first time firing a handgun, her bullets were all on target, hitting the attacker in the chest twice as well as in his liver. Time seemed to stand still as he dropped his pistol onto the floor and fell to his knees before falling completely onto the floor. Movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention as her initial attacker had started to come about and was getting off the floor to come after her yet again. Pure instinct took over as she swung around and pulled the trigger yet again. For not aiming, her shot was perfect as she saw a hole appear in his forehead and blood, brain tissue and bone fly out from behind him in a spray and he dropped to the floor dead on the spot.

Katie stood there for what seemed like an eternity panting as if she had just completed a marathon in record time. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and the pistol felt like a hot coal in her hands. But she was brought back to reality as she remembered the remainder of the gang knew where she lived and her mother was at home helpless. She grabbed her pack and dumped the two guns inside before heading back out on the street at a full run towards her house, pulling the pack on as she went and not taking any of the back streets as normal. She was only about a mile and a half away and finished completely out of breath at her front door where she took out her key and unlocked the two locks before scampering inside and locking them behind her.

“Mom!” she exclaimed and started heading towards the interior of the house.

“Katie! I was worried sick about you!” exclaimed Theresa as she sat up on the futon and her daughter entered the room. There was just enough light to see the bruises starting to form and the trickle of blood coming from the two cuts on her face. “Katie! What happened to you?”

“Mom, we’ve got to go! Right now!” exclaimed Katie as she started looking for the other large pack and the water bottles.

“Katie Shepherd! What happened to you?” demanded Theresa again.

“Mom, they know where we are! We’ve got to go!” pleaded Katie. Her mother came across the room and grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her face to face.

“What is going on? Who knows we’re here?” asked Theresa. “What happened?”

“There was a riot at the distribution point and I was on my way home. And I got attacked by these two guys who took me inside a shop to...” said Katie as tears started coming into her eyes as she realized exactly what she had narrowly avoided. “I think I killed them Mom.”

“What? Who were they?” asked Theresa.

“I don’t know,” said Katie as the tears came on full force now and she broke down entirely. Her mother took her in a hug and wrapped her up, crying tears of her own at knowing her daughter had just been involved in something traumatic and life altering. She pulled her daughter in tight and whispered in her ear “it’ll be okay” repeatedly. Eventually Katie remembered they were still under threat and pulled back. “Mom, the rest know where we live.”

“What? How?” asked Theresa.

“They saw our address on my license,” said Katie. “We’ve got to leave.”

“Katie, who saw it?” asked Theresa.

“The other three in the gang,” said Katie.

“You said there were two,” said Theresa.

“I shot two Mom,” said Katie as another tear came rolling down her cheek.

“Shot them?” exclaimed Theresa.

“I got one of their guns,” said Katie as she unzipped the bag and pulled out the two pistols. They were immediately snatched away by her mother. Katie saw her clear the both of them with what appeared to be practiced movements although to her knowledge she had never picked up a gun before in her life.

“Katie, who are the others?” asked Theresa as she set the EAA Witness and 1911 off to the side and turned back to her daughter.

“I don’t know, but we need to leave!” said Katie. “Right now!”

“Are you sure they are coming here?” asked Theresa.

“Mom! Please! We need to leave the house right now!” pleaded Katie. “Even for a little while to make sure it’s safe!”

“Okay,” said her Theresa. “Let’s get the food and water packed up.”

Katie started a mad grab for anything and everything valuable and started tossing it into the large pack. She eventually filled it and took it to the back sliding door and went back to help gather the remainder of the items her mother was putting into her pack. Before they were finished, a slam on the front door was heard.

“We know you’re in there little bitch!” screamed the man she identified as the leader before. “You think you can kill my friends and get away with it?”

More slamming was heard on the front door as the two stood motionless in the room. The door facing was heard splintering and it propelled her mother into action. She quickly removed a Sig P228 pistol from underneath the futon mattress and loaded up a magazine and grabbed the Witness and quickly loaded it. Theresa handed it to Katie who stood there with an open mouth and pointed at the safety. “Katie, this is the safety, you flip it down and pull the trigger, okay?”

“Mom...” said Katie in a shocked tone.

“Katie, go,” she said and handed the pack before pushing her towards the back door. She saw Katie slip on the straps to the pack and held the pistol out.

“No Mom! We go together!” said Katie who didn’t want to take the pistol.

“Katie, go now!” exclaimed her mother as she slipped the Witness into her hands. “Go before they get to the back door! Grab both packs and run!”

“No!” said Katie.

“Katie! You need to go! I’ll hold them off!” yelled Theresa.

“No! I’ll help!” yelled Katie.

“I love you with all my heart,” said Theresa calmly as a tear fell down her face. “From the moment you were born, I’ve loved you more than anything in this world. Go, please.”

“I can’t leave you,” cried Katie.

“I’ll catch up, I promise,” said Theresa as the door splintered once again. A window was heard breaking on the front of the house. She pushed Katie again yelling “Go!”

Katie stumbled through the dark house and got to the sliding door. She hesitated momentarily before yanking it open and grabbing the other pack and darting into the backyard. She had just opened the fence to the back alleyway when gunfire was heard from the inside of the house. Several different sounding shots were exchanged before it was quiet once again. Katie didn’t know what to do at that moment besides go into a neighbor’s backyard and hide. She found their utility shed unlocked and went inside, closing the door behind her and moving to a far corner as tears continued to stream down her face. She could see the back privacy fence of her house in the moonlight and waited for her mother to appear.

And tears streamed down her face as she continued to wait and her hopes of seeing her mother evaporated with each passing moment. Katie waited as long as she possibly could for her mother to appear. Minutes seemed like hours and after waiting for what seemed like an eternity, she finally reappeared from the shed minus the pack. She carried the pistol given to her by her mother and crept back to the house. It was deathly silent and she wondered if was a mistake and the attackers were still inside waiting for her. But she also knew her mother was inside and might need her help. Opening the sliding door as quietly as possible, she found the flashlight they had used sparingly beside the back door and flipped it on. There was nothing immediately seen in the kitchen and dining room area so she moved forward into the house with the pistol held in front of her. She saw a body lying in the hallway in the dim light and the sudden appearance startled her. Pointing the pistol in the general direction, she moved closer to the body and noticed he was dead. Two other bodies were seen in the foyer area where the smashed front door hung by a single hinge. Katie carefully started peeking around the corner and saw the final body lying halfway in the doorway. And just beyond, saw her mother leaned against a chair with a pistol next to her.

“Mom!” yelled Katie as she rushed in the room. She dropped the pistol she was holding and went to her mother’s side. Her eyes were open, but there was no reaction. “Mom?”

Katie gently shook her mother and noticed the gunshot wounds on her body. “Mom?” she asked as her voice cracked with tears starting to form in her eyes. She gently shook her mother again and her head rolled over to the side, completely void of life. Katie began to cry and scream as she pulled her mother’s head towards her and held it tight. Her mother had selflessly given her life for her daughter to live, a feat which Katie didn’t comprehend at that moment in time. All she knew was sorrow and rage as she continued screaming and crying as hard as she ever remembered doing in her life. And she sat there holding her mother and crying for the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER 16

Time Since Attacks: 82 days

Date/Time: 11 July/0627 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

The sunlight peeking around the shades and curtains prompted Katie into finally moving. She had spent the entire night in the same spot and was numb, both in emotions as well as her body being stiff. The light started showing the details of the minor battle that had been waged inside the house the previous night and the dead bodies littering the floor. But Katie ignored them as she walked outside and looked around. The dawn was calm although the smell of smoke from nearby fires set during the riot was still in the air as well as a few wisps seen floating from the area she had departed the previous evening. But none of it mattered to Katie at that moment and the feeling of loneliness suddenly came over her. As well as fear of the unknown. She didn't feel safe at that moment in time and went back inside her house where she saw her mother lying on the floor. Tears streamed down her face once again as she stepped over the dead bodies and back into the room and sat with her mother yet again. She was drained at that moment and wondered if she should press on. A pen and piece of paper caught her eye and she saw her mother's handwriting on a note partially covered in blood. But the message was clear.

Love you, get to safety

Katie started crying yet again as her mother's last thoughts were of her and getting to safety. And the emotions of what had transpired over the previous twelve hours came back full force as she laid her head on her mother's shoulder and cried once again with deep sobs. Eventually she knew she needed to escape, but not before she buried her mother as a minimum. They didn't have a full sized shovel, but Katie remembered seeing one in the shed in the neighbor's yard the previous evening. She knew they weren't around and hadn't been for some time and figured it would be okay to borrow it. She entered the shed and found the tools inside stored neatly on the walls and removed the D handled spade and returned to the back yard. She found a spot by the flower gardens her mother liked to put out during the spring and started digging. It wasn't easy work and the Kansas summer heat was taking its toll, but she continued. Her hands started forming blisters, but still she dug into the ground, an occasional tear escaping her eye as she continued digging the grave. Eventually she thought it might be deep enough and went to the house to gather her mother. She found her favorite snuggle blanket, the one that she would often wrap up in on the couch while reading a book or watching TV. Lying it out beside her mother, she gently rolled her onto it and drug her through the house and into the back yard. It wasn't easy work getting her into the grave, but Katie was a woman on a mission and nothing would stop her. She eventually got the body into the grave and sat down beside her hoping it was all a bad dream and her mother would awake and pull the blanket back.

Katie took one last look at her mother before taking the spade and starting to fill the dirt back in, with each shovelful her pain growing even more. And guilt that she had left her mother to die when she should have been more insistent on her coming. She was too young to comprehend a

mother's love for their children and often times their decisions to give up life in order for their children to live. Eventually, she would learn this lesson, but for the moment, she felt guilty and the reason her mother had died. When she finally put the remainder of the dirt on top, she also remembered seeing a hammer and boxes of nails in the shed. Once she returned the shovel, she grabbed the items and returned, using two boards from the privacy fence to form a cross. While not especially religious, they did attend services from time to time and hammered the cross in at the head of the grave. And marked her name and date of birth and death on the board in a permanent marker. She said a small prayer, trying to remember the right words they often used in church, but in the end simply asked God to take her mother to Heaven.

When she opened her eyes, sheer and utter exhaustion swept over her body and mind. She had been on the go for over thirty-six hours straight and the emotional roller coaster had finally taken its toll on her. And she was parched, not having drank any water since before the encounter the previous evening. She found one of the two liter bottles and drank down nearly three-quarters of it as she stood looking at the grave through eyes that filled with tears yet again. She slumped over on the ground, the fatigue finally taking its toll and passed out at her mother's side.

Katie awoke to birds chirping in the nearby trees as the soft gray of the dawn was falling on the area. She was disoriented after she awoke and remembered the previous day as the outline of the grave was seen to her side. She was still an emotional wreck after everything that had happened over the past two days and in reality, everything over the past three months. She went back inside the house and remembered the other bodies inside as she entered the kitchen area. Hunger pangs shot through her stomach as she realized she hadn't eaten at all yesterday. She mindlessly found the remains of one of the rations and grabbed the first thing edible that didn't require preparation in the package. The ravioli wasn't exactly appetizing, but since it was food and settled her stomach for the moment she devoured the entire can before searching for more water. After drinking down almost the entire one liter bottle, she saw the sun was providing enough light to gather everything for her journey to...she had no idea where she was going. Oklahoma was her ideal spot, but she knew she would have to cross major parts of the State in order to get there. The smaller towns in Kansas offered an easier path and she made the snap decision to make her way towards a place where she could hopefully find shelter and a place to stay until the troubles were over as they had planned on doing.

She remembered the large pack containing much of the food and water was still in the neighbor's shed. Katie went through the two fences and went back inside the shed for her pack. When she entered, she saw the pack, but other items that might prove useful as well. Her mother's voice warned her from inside her mind that stealing wasn't right, but Katie thought she might understand just this once. The pack of strike anywhere matches was dropped into the pack as she reached for a small folding pruning saw. But her mother's admonishment came back full force in her head and she replaced the saw on the table and headed towards the house. Since it was only going to be her at this point, she decided to consolidate everything into the pack given to her by Mrs. Simmons. She saw her mother had already stripped the military MREs and removed

all the cardboard packaging they came in and had the items somewhat sorted out. And she remembered the small pouches that had come with the pack and decided to go ahead and put them on for the additional space.

She was unfamiliar with how to attach them, but eventually figured out they would lace into the webbing on the pack. There were several large ones that she attached to the sides and some smaller ones she put on the back panel before finding everything was done. She started going through the food items again and found the smaller meal packs from the MREs fit into the pouches better than being loose inside the main pack. Eventually she got most of them stored away and started adding in the other items that were easy to eat and eventually got to the canned goods. She only took the items she knew were going to be better in the long term like the canned tuna and the pasta and left the vegetables in the pantry. And finished everything off with four of the two liter bottles and two of the one liter bottles of water they had purified. She found a small bottle and added bleach before dropping it in as well. Heading through the house, she noticed the pistol her mother had used was still sitting on the floor as well as the guns from the gang that had broken in. She stepped over the dead bodies and grabbed the pistol from the floor looking it over and trying to remember how her mother had worked it. She pulled the slide back and saw one of the bullets fall out and only the floor, but another one replaced it in the chamber. She looked over the pistol and found a lever and a button, pushing both before the magazine dropped out onto the floor and startled her.

She retrieved the magazine and put it in her pocket before pulling the slide back again and removing the round from the chamber. She pocketed both the rounds before racking the slide once again and tucking the pistol into her waistband and heading upstairs. She faintly remembered what her mother had told her to pack and started grabbing the various items from the dresser and closet and tossing them on the bed. She was emotionless as she looked over the clothing and grabbed several spare sets of underwear and socks before pulling the hiking boots out of the back of the closet. Trying them on, it was as she suspected that her feet had grown out of them and they would be more of a hindrance rather than a help. But she remembered her mother had a set as well and they might work. Heading into her mother's bedroom, she spied the boots in the rear of the closet like hers were and pulled them out. They were a bit loose, but Katie dug into her mother's sock drawer and found a couple of older sets of wool hiking socks that helped take up the extra room. Deciding that even in summertime pants were a better option, she went back into her room and quickly changed into a pair of khaki cargo pants and slipped on the boots. She found they weren't as uncomfortable as she thought and went back to her mother's room to collect the other pairs of socks she had seen in the drawer.

However, before she got too deep into what she would take, she headed back downstairs and grabbed the pack as well as one of the smaller pots they had used to boil the water. She knew she would need the pot when she ran short of water and stowed it inside the pack before going back upstairs and packing away the clothing she had set out. The pack was full, but not overflowing, however, was pretty heavy and she removed one of the two liter bottles which made it slightly more comfortable. There was little else she would take from the room and headed back into the hallway towards her mother's bedroom where she momentarily paused before going inside.

Katie was still uncomfortable with going through her mother's things but started looking through the boxes in the top of the shelves in the closet for her birth certificate. While she had a driver's license, she felt she needed another form of documentation in case anything ever got back to normal. She pulled the first box off the shelf and started looking through the top, finding old bills and other items that wasn't what she was looking for. The second box was opened and Katie found a leather holster still in the package presumably for the pistol her mother had surprised her with the night of the attack as well as a double magazine pouch in the same leather pattern. Setting them off to the side, she located a wooden presentation case and pulled it from the box. Opening it up, she noticed a message on the inside stating "To Theresa Anderson from the Dover Police, 500 for 500." Katie knew her mother had reverted back to her maiden name after the divorce from her father, but probably was still named Anderson when she was presented the pistol...for what thought Katie. She saw an insert in the felt lining which was presumably for the pistol she still had tucked away in her pants as well as two more magazines and the instruction manual. Not knowing what was needed and what wasn't, she removed everything from the box and dropped it inside the pack along with the pistol.

Why was Mom always so against guns? thought Katie as she continued digging into the box. She never even hinted at knowing how to use a gun or even owning one for that matter. But here she has a pistol, holster and everything sitting right here.

A picture frame was on top which enclosed a certificate which piqued her curiosity. Turning the first one right side up, she saw it was her mother's diploma from the University of Delaware for a Bachelor's in Criminal Justice. She set it off to the side and her eyes opened slightly at seeing the next certificate in the box as she read the title across the top.

Mom was a cop? thought Katie as she looked over the items in the box and saw the diploma for graduating the police academy in Delaware. Really?

She started pulling the remaining items in the box and saw her mother had been a member of the pistol team for the Dover Police Department at one point and had won several competitions on the local and State level. A couple of articles went over her achievements in the department until she found one last article that had been clipped from the newspaper. It was a local story and was obviously in the back page somewhere, but it stuck Katie like a hammer as she read through.

Local Officer Dismissed – Patrol Officer Theresa Anderson was released from the Dover Police Department Tuesday after a review board found “credible evidence” of wrongdoing as part of an ongoing investigation into a DUI hit and run case. Officer Anderson, a member of the force for almost four years, was found to have covered up evidence of wrongdoing on the part of her husband, Rodney Anderson, after he was witnessed striking several vehicles while allegedly operating a vehicle impaired. The Professional Review Board found her actions were not in line with departmental policies and “contradictory to good judgment and discipline.” Officer Anderson would not comment on the dismissal or the ongoing case against her husband. Rodney Anderson will be appearing in court on August 15th for his trial in the hit and run accidents.

Katie now understood more about why the marriage between her mother and father had failed. It was one thing to love someone, it was another to make a choice in giving up their profession out

of love and trying to cover up a crime they committed. And from the date on the article, she saw it had happened when she was about three years old, but she obviously was too young to remember. She knew her mother had more love to give in the world than she ever knew and even to a fault as she had witnessed herself.

Placing the items back in the box, she set them back in the closet and took the holster and magazine pouch and dropped it into her pack. She had no idea how to use the pistol her mother had apparently had for many years, but figured her neighbor, Mister Brady, would know. She pulled a third box and found a small lockbox inside where undoubtedly her mother kept important papers. Katie knew where the key was located and fished it out of the nightstand drawer before opening it and finding her birth certificate near the top. She dug through the remainder of the documents and collected her Social Security Card and didn't find anything else of significance except the insurance policy paperwork on the house, her mother's insurance policy and her own. Some letter sized envelopes were found and Katie slipped the paperwork inside and pulled the tab back over to close it up. She set the box back into the top of the closet and found the reminder of the two boxes of ammunition in the top of the closet hidden behind another box. She opened it up finding thirteen gone and assumed they were what was already loaded in the pistol.

Katie dropped the boxes into the pack and saw she was about done with what she could pack inside. However, one more item out of the corner of her eye caught her attention and she picked up her mother's diary off the small desk. She flipped it open to a random page and found it wasn't her mother's diary, but rather a book filled with events from her own life her mother had recorded since she was born. Katie took a moment to read some of the passages and the tears started welling up once again as she never realized how much she meant to her mother until that point in time. While they had always had a special relationship, Katie realized she was the world to her mother and she would have done anything, to include dying, to protect her child. Katie closed the book and went downstairs quickly and returned with the note her mother had written in the final moments of her life. She put it on the inside cover and put the book deep in the pack.

Taking a few moments to compose herself, Katie still wanted to go through the garage in case there was anything she hadn't thought of at that point. Upon entering she noticed the machete that her mother had around for some reason hanging from a nail on the wall. She never knew why her mother had it and had never used it as far as she knew, but figured it would make a decent last ditch weapon or a useful tool for cutting up branches. Remembering she had left the saw in the backyard, she headed out and set it on top of the pack while trying to figure out a way of stowing it inside. However, as soon as she had gotten the pack, she remembered a pouch that came out of the bottom and the top and slid the two tools inside. It appeared to be a case for a gun of some kind, but worked pretty well for the purpose she was using it for.

She also remembered she really didn't have a decent bedspread of any kind and decided to take an older fleece throw and add it on the bottom. All in all the pack was pretty heavy, but she knew everything in there was essential to her continued survival and escape from the city. It was getting late in the day and she didn't want to spend the night in the house knowing there were dead bodies inside, but she did remember there were firearms scattered inside. She went to the foyer and hallway area, stepping over the bodies that were already starting to bloat and stink and

collected the various arms, four pistols, a shotgun and a longer gun she had no idea of what, but noticed the words “Hi Point” on the side. Katie stowed the guns inside a garbage bag and hid them under the grass clippings in the backyard until she could come back. However, she kept one of the weapons out, the 1911, which she would use as trade material for the Bradys.

It was midafternoon and she wanted to get over to the Brady’s house and hopefully get some instruction in the pistol before she set out that evening. She decided traveling by night might be a better option rather than being out for everyone to see during the day. Shouldering up the pack, she headed through the house and held her nose as she passed by the dead bodies in the hallway area. She went to the backyard and stood by her mother’s grave one last time, again wishing that she could turn back time and convince her mother to come with her. She spent far longer than planned at the graveside before heading to the front of the house by the gate on the side.

Katie looked back at her home one last time before and remembering the times she had shared with her mother in that dwelling that had become a home. A tear escaped down her cheek once again and she closed her eyes and looked upwards before taking in a deep sigh. Looking one last time, she turned and headed down the block and several streets over and arriving at the Brady’s home. There didn’t appear to be anyone home, but like most homes, appearances could be deceiving. She headed to the front door and knocked before waiting patiently. She heard movement behind the door and waited for them to identify her.

“Katie!” exclaimed Mrs. Brady as she opened the door slightly and peeked out.

“Mrs. Brady,” said Katie quietly.

“Please, come in,” said Mrs. Brady and saw the look on Katie’s face as well as the cuts and bruises. “What happened to you?”

“We were attacked the other night,” said Katie without emotion. “Mom is dead.”

“What?!” exclaimed Mrs. Brady. Katie saw Mr. Brady setting down a military style rifle nearby as he came forward into the house.

“A gang attacked the house,” said Katie. “They tracked us down after two tried to rape me. Mom sent me to safety away from the house and killed the others before being murdered herself.”

“Oh my God Katie, I’m so sorry,” said Mrs. Brady.

“Mom’s in a better place now,” said Katie as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Oh, you poor girl,” said Mrs. Brady as she took Katie into a hug. Katie hugged back without emotion and eventually pulled back a little bit. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m leaving,” said Katie simply.

“Where are you going?” asked Mrs. Brady.

“Away from here,” said Katie.

“Where to exactly?” asked Mrs. Brady. “I know your family is in Delaware, but that’s halfway across the country.”

“I’m going south,” said Katie. “To Oklahoma.”

“By yourself?” asked Mr. Brady as he entered the conversation.

“Yes,” said Katie simply.

“Katie...” he started to say, but didn’t know exactly what to say about the current situation. “It’s a long way and filled with danger.”

“I need your help,” said Katie as she slipped off the pack.

“What can we do?” asked Mr. Brady.

“Teach me about this,” said Katie as she pulled her mother’s Sig out of her pack and handed it over. Mr. Brady took the pistol and automatically cleared it and checked the chamber.

“Katie, learning to use a handgun takes a long time,” said Mr. Brady.

“Mr. Brady,” said Katie. “My mother is dead and I’m going south. I want to take my mother’s pistol with me as some kind of protection and I need to know how to use it at least.”

Mr. Brady sighed and looked at the grim determination on her face. He knew he could stop her about as easily as the rising sun. “If and only if you delay for a day for me to teach you.”

Katie slowly nodded her head in response as she was guided over to sit down on the couch. Mrs. Brady brought in a bowl of soup and set it down for her along with some homemade crackers and a glass of water. Katie quietly thanked her and started eating slowly as the two went into the kitchen to discuss her plans. Katie could overhear them a little bit and they both seemed in agreement that the best course of action was to try to talk her out of it. But Katie was determined to leave and decided to seek help elsewhere if they persisted. They returned from the kitchen and explained their situation.

“Katie, we just don’t think it’s a good idea for a young girl like you to go out there all alone,” said Mrs. Brady. “There are all sorts of evil people out there that won’t hesitate to do horrible things to you. You’re more than welcome to stay here.”

“There are all sorts of evil people here. Including people that killed my mother and tried to rape me,” said Katie in a voice void of emotion. “I have to go.”

“Katie, you’re probably very upset right now at what happened. You probably need a clear head to think through everything,” said Mr. Brady.

Katie paused for a moment before confirming the decision. “No, I need to go. I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of your hospitality, so this should cover the meal.” She reached into the pack and handed over the 1911 pistol to Mr. Brady. Again he cleared it, finding it empty already as Katie handed over the single magazine that came with the pistol.

“Katie, are you sure?” asked Mr. Brady.

“It’s what Mom wanted me to do,” said Katie. “Her last wish was for me to get to safety.”

The pair looked at each other and saw nothing they could do short of tying Katie down was going to stop her. Mr. Brady sighed and sat down as Katie finished up eating.

“We can take you wherever you want to go maybe,” said Mr. Brady.

“No, I need to take this journey alone,” said Katie. Mr. Brady looked once again at her face and saw the determination as well as the inner demons she probably needed to deal with. And sometimes those demons were better dealt with alone with time to think.

“Well, it’s a Springfield, so it’ll cover the rest of the meals today and a lesson in how to operate your pistol,” sighed Mr. Brady. “As well as some ammo.”

“Paul...” said his wife as she gave him a look.

“This girl is leaving with or without our permission. The least I can do is make sure she knows how to operate that thing safely,” said Mr. Brady. He received a stern look in response, but also gave back a stern look as well. Mrs. Brady sighed and departed the living room to collect her thoughts and hopefully talk some sense into the both of them.

“Okay, you have a German marked Sig P228 in 9mm. But first, here’s the basic gun safety and you will repeat after me:”

“Treat all firearms as if they are loaded,” he said.

“Treat all firearms as if they are loaded,” she repeated.

“Never point the muzzle at anything you’re not willing to shoot,” he stated and she repeated it.

“Always be sure of your target and what’s behind it,” he said and she again repeated it.

“Keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to shoot,” he said and she repeated it yet again. “Okay, now repeat them all back to me.”

“Threat them as if they are loaded, never point them at anything you don’t want to shoot...keep the finger off the trigger until you are ready to shoot and...make sure of what’s behind your target,” she concluded after having to think over it for a moment.

“Again,” he stated and she repeated them once again, this time with more confidence. But he was an unrelenting teacher. “Again.”

Katie got them down pretty pat before he started going through the nomenclature of the pistol and what the particular parts were. She listened intently and asked a couple of questions along the way. She knew little about guns, but was a quick study since they had already been used twice to save her life. As he went through, he would backtrack from where he was at and ask about a certain part or have her repeat the firearms safety rules once again. She eventually asked why he was making her repeat the items.

“Because this object is capable of great power. It’s capable of both ending life and protecting life. But it’s not the gun itself that has the power. Only the one behind the trigger has the power to decide whether its purpose is for good or evil,” he explained.

“But why make me repeat it?” she asked.

“Because neither your mother nor I will be around to remind you of the dangers associated with it once you are gone. When you leave, you will be on your own and need to remember yourself,” he said. “So you have until tomorrow to learn these things.”

“I understand,” she said and he continued in the lesson. Eventually he got to the point where more advanced mechanical instruction was needed and he unloaded the magazine before departing the room. He left the pistol sitting on the table to see what she would do, but she had not touched it before he returned with some snap caps for the pistol. He showed her how to load and unload the pistol as well as how to use the decocker mechanism and safely lower the hammer. He had her practice several times and saw she was a quick study and always pointed the weapon in a safe direction.

Mr. Brady showed her how to properly disassemble the pistol after clearing it out. She had never taken anything mechanical apart and saw it was deceptively simple to do. She expected small parts to come flying out and wasn’t quite expecting to only see five parts when it was all said and done. “That’s it?”

“That’s all you need to do,” said Mr. Brady.

“Looks too easy,” said Katie.

“It’s a design that was created for soldiers in the field. So there was no reason to make it that complicated,” said Mr. Brady.

“What about all those other small parts that didn’t come out?” asked Katie.

“You don’t need to worry about them unless one breaks. And on this particular brand, they rarely do fail,” said Mr. Brady as he started showing her how to reassemble the pistol. After completing it, he walked her through it and had her repeat the process several times as she gained confidence each time. By the fifth time he saw she was proficient and moved on to loading and unloading by putting two snap caps in one of the empty magazines and showing her the proper technique for chambering a round.

“Just make sure you don’t ride the slide forward,” he reminded her.

“How come?” asked Katie.

“Because the extractor might not grip the round. You want a positive forward motion to make sure the pistol gets the round into the chamber,” he said.

“Okay,” said Katie as she watched as he demonstrated using the slide release as well as racking the slide to chamber a round. He had her practice it again several times before moving into malfunctions and going over the tap, rack and fire method. It was the first time she had pulled the trigger on this particular gun and asked about the double action trigger.

“It’s called double action since it uses a long pull in the beginning to cock a release the hammer. Once it fires, the slide cocks the hammer for the next shot,” he explained.

“So I should keep the hammer back always?” she asked.

“No, it’s not as safe unless you are about to use it. Keep the hammer down,” he explained.

“By using this thing, right?” she asked and pointed at the decocking lever.

“Exactly,” he said. “Once you chamber a round, the hammer will be back so you’ll need to use it anyway before holstering it and carrying it.”

“Okay,” she said as he continued with some fundamentals of firing and showed her how to align the sights. They were the three dot type and instruction was simple. He had her work the actions several times and went back in his lessons to see how much knowledge she had retained and found her she had remembered almost everything he had taught her. He had her dry fire both the double and single actions modes and helped get her hands adjusted on the grip to where she had better control. She picked it up quickly, but asked about the recoil.

“It’s not that bad really,” said Mr. Brady. “It’s a smaller pistol so it’s more pronounced, but the 9mm is a fairly easy cartridge to deal with.”

“Is it like the one I gave you?” she asked.

“The .45? No, nothing like that,” he answered. “Did you use that .45?”

“Yeah,” she said softly and didn’t elaborate further. He decided she had a good reason for not wanting to explain further and didn’t press the matter.

“Okay, you keep practicing and I’ll be right back,” he said and disappeared into the house. She continued working the trigger and found her finger was getting a bit tired since she wasn’t used to using it in the manner she was. Eventually Mr. Brady came back with two cases and motioned with his head towards the back of the house. They entered the backyard and he set the cases down and pulled a Sig P226 out of the first.

“Okay, this is a larger model of what you’ve got there,” he explained. “Same trigger, just going to be a bit heavier.”

He opened the second case and pulled out what looked like a long can of some sort. He threaded the suppressor onto the threaded barrel of the P226 and loaded some subsonic ammunition into the magazine. While the sound wouldn’t be completely quiet and might draw attention, she needed the opportunity to actually see how the pistol would perform. He handed over a pair of shooting glasses as well as ear protection as it was a habit he had formed long before and good habits were hard to break.

“Okay, you won’t really be able to use the sights on this one, but as a minimum, you can get a feel for what the recoil is like,” he said and handed the pistol and magazine to her. He had a woodpile they were shooting into and had her load and ready the pistol. He corrected her stance slightly, moving the position of her feet and leaning into the pistol. The weight wasn’t helping, but she managed to shoot the first shot and hit generally where she was aiming the pistol at.

“Okay, drop the hammer,” he instructed her as the sound of the shot didn’t travel that far. “Do it again in double action.”

She repeated the double action firing four more times before shooting in single action and finishing off the magazine. She was surprised at the lack of significant sound as the first time she had shot had nearly deafened her in an enclosed space. But she was getting more comfortable firing and the recoil didn’t bother her that much. He gave her another magazine and she fired it yet again at the woodpile, hitting again where she was generally aiming at.

“More comfortable?” he asked as she handed the pistol back over.

“Yes sir,” she said. “Is mine going to be different?”

“A little more recoil, but nothing unmanageable,” he said as he took the suppressor off and places the items back in their proper cases. “Less weight on the pistol, more recoil that is sent into your body.”

“Thank you for everything,” said Katie.

“Okay, last lesson and we take a break,” he said and had her sit down. “A pistol is a self-defense tool and nothing more. But the big thing is, once you pull it, you need to be ready to use it. That

crap you see in the movies about waving a gun around and people breaking down and crying ain't real at all."

"So if you have to use that weapon, use it as a last resort and when you do pull it from the holster, you pull the trigger. Don't hesitate at all and shoot right into the center of their body twice. If you hesitate, you might have it taken away from you," said Mr. Brady. "So when you shoot, you shoot to kill. Out in the real world there isn't such a thing as aiming for a leg or shoulder or that nonsense. You shoot someone until they aren't a threat anymore, understand?"

"Yes sir," said Katie with a nod.

"And it's the last resort," said Mr. Brady. "If you can't talk them out of whatever they are trying to do or run away, you use your weapon. But only as a last case situation."

"Yes sir," said Katie with a nod.

"And it's short range, like within thirty yards or so. It's capable of much further, but for what you will need it for, thirty yards is acceptable," he stated.

"What if I get shot at from longer out?" asked Katie.

"Run," said Mr. Brady. "As fast and possible and in the opposite direction."

"Yes sir," said Katie.

"Okay, we'll break yours down and oil it up," he said and motioned towards the house. They went in and he pulled a bottle of gun oil from his kit and showed her where to oil the rails and had her cycle the actions to work it in. "Now if you need to oil it out there, just find a car or something and pull the dipstick for the oil. You know what that is, right?"

"I think so," said Katie.

"It's normally yellow and has a long thin piece of metal attached," he said. "Come on out to the garage and I'll show you."

They headed into the garage and he showed her how to open the hood as well as where the oil dipstick normally was. "Just dip it in and put it on the rail, do it again for the other side."

"And that will work?" asked Katie.

"Works well enough," he said.

"Okay," said Katie as they headed back into the house.

"While Mrs. Brady is getting supper ready, let's see what all you've got in your pack," he requested as they entered the living room. Katie put her pistol back in the leather holster and

started unloading the pack. He saw she didn't have much, but was well stocked with water for the moment, but was lacking somewhat in food.

"Hmm," he said when she finished pulling everything out and describing some of the pieces she had brought from the house. He disappeared for several minutes before returning with a box full of items. "Okay, here's a military poncho that you can use for a tent or for rain. Here's a pack of water purification tablets that have the instructions put on them. Some parachute cord. Some Zip-lock bags for keeping stuff dry. Some fire tender. A folding camp saw. Here's a lightweight pot to replace that heavy steel one you have. A hydration bladder. A compass. A camouflage jacket in case you need it. Here's a folding knife with a pocket clip, put that in your front pocket. And a Leatherman that's got different tools on it for you. And..."

Mrs. Brady came in with a shopping bag that had additional food inside. None of it was canned, but mainly lightweight freeze dried food.

"I can't take this!" exclaimed Katie.

"Honey, we wouldn't give it to you if we didn't have more," said Mrs. Brady. "Please take it."

"I don't want you two going without!" exclaimed Katie.

"Trust me, we'll be fine," said Mr. Brady. "Eat the canned stuff first and follow the directions on the freeze dried stuff."

"How come?" asked Katie.

"Weight," said Mr. Brady. "Less weight to haul around."

"You are survivalists, aren't you?" asked Katie.

"More or less," said Mr. Brady. "We've just been preparing for emergencies for a long time."

"Why aren't you up in the mountains or out on a farm somewhere?" asked Katie.

"We're getting there," said Mr. Brady. "It's all a matter of time. We've been waiting on a signal from our group that it's safe to proceed."

"It's getting more unsafe," said Katie.

"We're leaving soon, trust me," said Mr. Brady. "If you could wait another week or two, we could take you with us."

Katie thought about the proposition, but declined after a moment of thinking it over. "No, I have to go out alone. Come what may, I need some time to myself."

"The offer is open if you change your mind," said Mrs. Brady.

“And one last thing, let’s see all your magazines,” said Mr. Brady. Katie handed over the three magazines she had and received four in return. She saw they were slightly different, but appeared to be the same shape and size. “Those are fifteen round magazines that are just as good as the ones you had. Before you object, I’ve got more than I know what to do with. They are already loaded with some good hollowpoint ammunition and here’s a spare box in case you need it. And no, you aren’t allowed to object.”

“Mr. Brady, I just can’t!” exclaimed Katie as she held out her hands.

“I have more magazines than I know what to do with,” repeated Mr. Brady. “Trust me, you might end up needing these in the long run.”

Katie took the magazines and the box of ammo, seeing the brand name of “Speer” on the box. She put the box with the remainder of her gear to repack and set the magazines off to the side. “Before I leave, I’ll need to bring you back by the house. I’ve got some other things for you.”

“Such as?” asked Mr. Brady.

“The rest of the guns from when the gang attacked,” said Katie.

“Why did you leave them there?” asked Mr. Brady.

“I was going to pick them up on the way out,” said Katie. “But it’s a lot of additional weight.”

“Why were you going to take them?” asked Mr. Brady.

“Trading material,” said Katie. “I may only be sixteen, but I’ve learned the value of trade goods and a gun makes a good trading item.”

“Not smart though,” said Mr. Brady. “A gun you trade today can be used against you tomorrow. You should only trade them to people you know and trust.”

“And I am trading them to you for what you’ve given me,” said Katie.

“Well, I guess that works,” said Mr. Brady with a smile. “Let’s get your pack done up.”

He showed her the best way of packing up her pack where the weight was balanced out correctly. And how to put items where she could get at them easier like the food and water rather than having to unpack many of the items. Eventually they got everything repacked and the pack adjusted just so. However, she noticed she wouldn’t be able to wear the leather holster on her belt if she had the pack belt on. But Mr. Brady came to the rescue once again and handed over a Blackhawk Serpa holster that had the correct MOLLE attachments to fit on the belt.

“Why do you have all this stuff?” asked Katie as he showed her how to attach it as well as the military ALICE double mag pouch.

“I own a P229,” said Mr. Brady. “That’s the newer model of yours.”

“Newer is better?” asked Katie.

“Not necessarily,” said Mr. Brady. “The German marked Sigs are great pistols.”

“Okay,” said Katie as they finished attaching everything and she found the holster would be right where she needed it. He showed her how to activate the button on the side and reminded her not to put her finger in the trigger guard before she was ready to shoot. Mrs. Brady came back into the living room and informed them to get washed up for supper as it was almost ready. Eventually they settled in around the table and prayed before eating. Katie ate mindlessly as the other two watched her for signs of...anything really. Something they could use to convince her that the journey she wanted to undertake was not in her best interests.

But Katie was bound and determined to make the journey. Come what may, Katie decided to leave her fate in the hands of the spirit of her mother since she was sure she was watching over her and go south and seek safety.

CHAPTER 17

Time Since Attacks: 84 days

Date/Time: 13 July/0746 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

“Katie, I’m going to at least get you to the edge of the city,” said Mr. Brady over breakfast. It was the first time in recent memory Katie had eggs and even though they were the dehydrated type, they tasted better than anything she remembered in recent memory.

“You don’t have to,” said Katie who had spent a restless night on the spare bed in their house. And lucky enough, they still had water pressure since the well that used to supply the house had been uncapped and put back into service by the couple not long after moving in so Katie had been able to take her first shower in recent memory and clean up for a change. Being solar powered, it had enough pressure to give her a little relief and take account of her injuries.

“That’s not debatable,” said Mrs. Brady. “Paul will take you at least as far south as Spring Hill.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Katie as she finished eating. “May I make a request?”

“Anything,” said Mrs. Brady who hoped she had changed her mind about staying.

“Can I take one more shower please?” asked Katie.

“Absolutely,” said Mrs. Brady. “I’ll get you a fresh towel and washcloth.”

“Thank you,” said Katie as she departed.

“We really wish you would stay,” said Mr. Brady. “Under the circumstances, our group would be willing to take you in. Since we know the kind of person you are, we can vouch for you.”

“I...can’t,” said Katie. “I hope you understand I have to go my own way.”

“That way may lead to death,” said Mr. Brady.

“I think Mom is watching over me right now and she won’t let any harm come to me. I just get this feeling she will guide me in the right direction,” said Katie.

“Your mother loved you more than you’ll ever know,” said Mr. Brady.

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea,” said Katie who was attempting to be brave right then. But like before, the emotions had completely drained out of her. Everything in life she had loved or been emotionally attached to had been lost in the past three months. From Jacob to Kenny to finding out her father had almost destroyed the family to her mother being violently ripped out of

her life, she was void of any emotion and swore right then she would never be able to care again in her life. And now she was leaving her home where she had spent over half her life, chased away by the lawless gangs that were starting to take over the city. And in that brief moment in time, she swore she would one day have revenge on those that preyed on the weak. She knew there was a long road ahead of her, but she would need to find someone to teach her how to fight and she would dedicate her life to protecting those that couldn't protect themselves.

"A wise man once said before setting out on revenge, dig two graves," said Mr. Brady.

"Reading my mind?" asked Katie.

"I just know how I might feel in the same circumstances," said Mr. Brady.

"It's not about revenge," said Katie. "Mom exacted the revenge the night it happened."

"Katie, I can't tell you how you should feel or even the right words to say, but you need to be careful about the path you could slip into. There's a fine line between justice and revenge and it only takes one misstep to cross over onto a path that leads to your destruction," said Mr. Brady who knew exactly the thoughts crossing her mind right then.

"I used to be hopeful about how people might come to their senses and work together to get through this, but after the night before last, I know the only thing that will stop them is to be stronger than they are," said Katie. "I'll need to find some time to get my head clear and then I'm going to seek out someone who can train me to fight."

"Be careful," he replied after thinking over her comments for a moment. "The pathway you are seeking can easily be perverted into the wrong cause."

"One thing I've learned so far in my life is the difference in good and evil. Mom and I weren't especially religious, but I do know what people are doing to each other isn't good. And if I just stand by and let it happen, I'm no better than they are," said Katie.

"Just be careful," said Mr. Brady.

"I will," said Katie as Mrs. Brady returned with a towel and washcloth.

"The water should be warm at least," said Mrs. Brady as she handed over the towel.

"Thank you," said Katie as she went upstairs and into the bathroom where she quickly undressed to take a shower. She rightly figured it was going to be the last time for a while she would be able to do such a thing.

"Did you talk her out of it?" asked Trish once she was out of earshot.

"No," said Paul. "No matter what we say or do or offers we make, that girl is bound and determined to go her own way. And even if we tried to keep her here, which we wouldn't do,

she would escape at the first chance she got and leave. We just have to hope she finds whatever it is she's looking for and finds a balance in her life."

"I wasn't implying we should hold her against her will," said Trish.

"I know you weren't," said Paul. "That was an option I dismissed early on."

"You think she'll be okay?" asked Trish.

"I don't know," said Paul. "I think she is searching for something but she's not quite sure of what yet. But it's up to her to find it."

"Without guidance?" asked Trish.

"She has a good head on her shoulders," said Paul. "For the most part that is. And is a good kid with a big heart. I trust Theresa instilled some good morals in her early on."

"We owe it to her to take care of her child," said Trish.

"No we don't," said Paul. "I liked Theresa and she was a friend, but we never owed her anything. But no matter what, we cannot make the decisions for Katie."

"She's still just a girl," said Trish. "Barely capable of making rational decisions."

"She's grown up more in the past two days, probably the past three months, than most her age. We just have to trust she'll find the right path," said Paul.

"And if she dies?" asked Trish.

"Trish, I can't give you a good answer," said Paul. "Again, Theresa was a friend and we've offered everything we can short of tying her up. It's her decision to make."

"Not really," said Trish.

"Okay, I'll grab the rope," said Paul.

"Not like that!" exclaimed Trish. "There has to be something we can do!"

"Apply for refugee status and turn her over to the government?" asked Paul. "Because that's about the only option we have."

"That certainly won't help!" objected Trish.

"Then your suggestion would be?" asked Paul.

"We could take her to the retreat and let her see how good she could have it," said Trish.

“We have to get her to stay here first,” said Paul. “And convince her to come.”

“We just won’t tell her until we get her there,” said Trish.

“And how are we going to lure her into the truck? Free candy sign?” asked Paul.

“You really are pushing it Paul,” warned his wife.

“I agree with you that she would be safer with us than on her own, but like it or not, we cannot make that decision for her,” stated Paul.

“We haven’t tried that hard to convince her!” objected Trish.

“So what haven’t we used yet?” asked Paul. “You give me the idea of what we should do and we’ll present it to her. Otherwise, we wake up one morning and find her bed empty and she went out on her own if we try to force her to stay.”

“We try to talk some sense into her!” objected Trish.

“You are more than welcome to try,” said Paul. “I’ve done as much as I can.”

“We need to do this together,” said Trish.

“You aren’t understanding that girl is going her own way no matter what we happen to have for her. I can’t say anything more to her than I’ve already said so I don’t know what else to say. We could offer her a tropical paradise right now and she wouldn’t budge,” said Paul.

“We have to convince her,” said Trish.

“Again, you’re more than welcome,” said Paul and interrupted his wife before she could object. “I’ve done everything I can short of telling her exactly where we’re going to convince her.”

“Maybe that’s what we need to do,” said Trish.

“Have at it,” said Paul. “No locations though.”

“Yes Paul,” said Trish. “I understand the security factor.”

“Like I said, you’re more than welcome,” said Paul.

“Maybe we could take her down and show her,” said Trish. “And let her decide then.”

“We don’t have the gas for a round trip,” said Paul.

“So if she still wants to go after seeing it, she can go,” said Trish.

“Have to convince her to go in the first place,” said Paul. “And we’re still waiting on the signal the roads are clear. We shouldn’t be here right now anyway.”

“I know we should have bugged out after the first week, but we didn’t know it would be this bad,” said Trish and slightly relented. “Yes, you were right.”

“It doesn’t matter at this point,” said Paul. “We just need to get ourselves to safety. I like Katie and she needs a second chance, but she’s also old enough to make the decision for herself.”

“We can guide her in the decision,” said Trish.

“The only person that would have had any sway in that sort of thing died two days ago,” he said.

Trish got quiet at that announcement and saw she wouldn’t be getting any help from her husband in the matter. So she decided to give it one last shot in attempting to get Katie to stay and come to the retreat even if there was a slim chance she wouldn’t be accepted. She heard the shower stop upstairs and headed up and waited for Katie to appear. She eventually came out of the bathroom wrapped in the towel and headed towards the bedroom. Trish gave her another couple of minutes to get dressed before knocking on the door.

“Yes?” asked Katie from the inside.

“Katie? It’s Trish,” said Mrs. Brady. “Can I come inside?”

“Juts a second,” said Katie as she pulled on a t-shirt. “Okay.”

“Got a second to talk?” asked Trish as she peeked inside the door.

“Mind if I finish dressing?” asked Katie.

“Sure,” said Trish as she sat down on the bed opposite of the chair Katie was in. “Katie, I’m going to be straight up and honest with you. I want you to stay.”

“I understand and appreciate that, but I can’t,” said Katie as she slipped on a pair of the socks.

“You could be killed, injured, taken into slavery and used for sex by some gang of sick perverts. Who knows what you can encounter out there,” said Trish.

“I understand,” said Katie. “But I have to do this, okay?”

“You don’t have to do anything but finish growing up and surviving. I think your mother would want that more than anything,” said Trish.

“So why stay here? It’s just as unsafe as my own house,” said Katie.

“Because, we aren’t staying here. We’re going to a prepared retreat in Missouri as soon as we get word the roads are safe. You could come there and at least survive,” said Trish.

“I need to make this journey,” said Katie. “Alone.”

“Katie, I’m not your mother, but I don’t think you’re being smart right now,” said Trish.

“So if I go there, what then? What happens if more gangs attack the retreat? Can you defend it? This is the only thing that feels right to me right now,” said Katie.

“I don’t know if it feels right or not, but at least you’d be safe,” said Trish. “Have a life at least.”

“I’ve got a life,” said Katie as she finished lacing up the boots. “And right now it’s taking me south of here.”

“I can’t let you go,” said Trish with some conviction.

“You’re going to stop me?” asked Katie.

“I’d rather not,” said Trish.

“So you’re going to keep me locked up here against my will? Take me to a place where I don’t want to be? Is that what this is coming to?” asked Katie.

Trish paused and looked at the floor before responding. “No, that’s not what I want.”

“Then please let me go,” said Katie. “Come what may, I’m not your responsibility.”

“Your family is on the other side of the country, someone should look out for you,” said Trish.

“If Mom hadn’t been murdered, would you still have invited us?” asked Katie and looked right into her eyes. Trish felt like Katie was looking right past the lenses and deep into her soul and she knew she couldn’t lie right then.

“No, probably not,” said Trish.

“So what changed? My mother being murdered makes you feel pity and sympathy for me and you feel like you have to take me in?” asked Katie.

“Katie, I know you don’t mean those things you just said,” said Trish.

“I don’t want anyone to feel pity for me,” said Katie. “Look, I understand you feel like you need to help and I appreciate it, I really do. But this is what feels right to me when nothing else does.”

“You could wind up dead out there,” said Trish.

“Maybe,” said Katie. “But that’s my choice.”

“It’s suicide,” said Trish.

“I think Mom will watch over me,” said Katie. “I was her entire world, more than you’ll ever know, and I think she won’t stop watching over me even in death. So this is what I know I need to do. For me.”

“I’m not going to talk you out of it am I?” asked Trish.

“No,” said Katie simply. Trish nodded slightly with a sigh and leaned over and took Katie in a hug.

“You be careful out there, you hear me? You see trouble and you run, period. Don’t let yourself get captured by a gang and you shoot to kill,” said Trish.

“I’ll look you both up when this is all over,” said Katie.

“We’ll be in Missouri near Camdenton off County Road V at a place called Tiger Ranch,” said Trish. “In case you change your mind as well.”

“Thank you,” said Katie.

“Go with God child,” said Trish as she turned away and headed off, fearing she would never see Katie again. Katie collected up the remainder of her items and headed downstairs where Paul was already waiting.

“I’ve got the truck ready and your pack is stowed,” he said. “And I’ve got you a hat.”

“Do I need a hat?” asked Katie.

“Everyone needs a hat,” said Paul as he handed over an olive drab military style boonie cap.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this,” said Katie.

“You can stay,” said Paul. “Just putting it out there.”

“Thanks,” said Katie as she headed towards the door. He collected a rifle and web gear and followed her outside where they got in his truck.

“I’m going to swing by your house so you can grab the rest of the guns,” he said.

“If it’s okay, I’ll tell you where they’re at,” said Katie.

“I understand,” said Paul as he put the truck in gear and backed out of the garage. They turned and headed the four blocks to Katie’s home where it appeared nobody had been around.

“They’re in the back of the yard next to the fence under some grass clippings. About halfway up the fence,” said Katie.

“Will you be okay here for a minute?” asked Paul.

“Yes, I just can’t go back there yet,” said Katie.

“I understand,” said Paul as he put the pistol that had been on the seat beside him in his holster and headed around the house. He saw the grave that had been dug by Katie as he rounded the house and the cross she had built. He made a promise to keep it up as best as possible before they left and headed across the yard. The bag was only partially hidden and he grabbed it and headed back to the vehicle, no comfortable being out in the open like this. Once at the truck, he took inventory of the weapons inside quickly and stashed them in his cargo box before jumping back in the cab.

“I’ll keep up with your mother’s grave until we leave,” said Paul as he put the truck back into gear and headed out of the neighborhood. Several seedy sorts were seen out and about and gave the truck long looks as they departed the neighborhood. “You ever shoot a rifle?”

“No,” said Katie.

“Just in case we need it, my AR is in the back. I’ll show you how to flip off the safety if you need to shoot,” said Paul.

“What are the chances of that?” asked Katie.

“Never hurts to be prepared,” said Paul.

“I know,” said Katie with a sigh. But the drive south was uneventful as they headed towards the small community of Spring Hill, just outside the metro area. Once they arrived, Paul took the truck to the southern edge of town and onto one of the county roads.

“Last chance,” he said as he pulled the truck to a stop.

“I have to do this,” said Katie.

“Go southwest from here and then south. I’d suggest paralleling the State Highway and checking out the towns and farms as you come across them. Observe first, then make contact because people out there right now are just as apt to shoot first as they are to take you in. Find out what the deal is before making an approach. Here’s a map that you can use to get your general bearings from,” he said as he handed over a folding map of the State of Kansas.

“And most importantly, be extremely wary of strangers. If you find cars blocking the road, that’s an ambush site and you need to avoid it at all costs, swing wide away from them, preferably at night, and go around. Stay hydrated and make sure you boil the water and add your

bleach. And keep up with your food as much as possible. I know it's not right to steal, but if you come across fields that have been planted and have crops, take just what you need and move on since it will stretch your food supply. I know Oklahoma is your ultimate goal, but if you find something suitable in between, I'd suggest taking it," said Paul.

"Thank you both for what you've done for me," said Katie as she got out of the truck and shouldered up the pack. She loaded the pistol and dropped the hammer before sliding it into the holster at her waist.

"Good bye Katie," said Paul. "And you take care."

"Take care as well," said Katie as she shook his outstretched hand through the window. She started off across the large field heading southwest as he mentioned and never looked back at the life she was leaving behind. It certainly would give her plenty of time to think and reflect on how her life had been transformed over the past three months and give her time to recharge her emotional batteries as her mother put it.

Paul waited until she was out of sight before turning the truck around and heading back to his home where he and Trish would continue packing away for their journey. As he departed, he checked the mirrors one last time to see if she had turned around to take them up, but eventually lost sight of the area he had been in. Sighing deeply, he hoped her path would eventually lead her to what she was seeking and prayed for her safety.

Time Since Attacks: 84 days

Date/Time: 13 July/2004 Local

Location: Overland Park, Kansas

"That doesn't look good Captain," said the NCO as he looked at the door hanging on the hinges at the front of the house.

"No lights inside," said Captain Winston. "Back me up."

"What about the vehicles," asked the NCO.

"They'll be okay for a few minutes," said Winston. "I need you to back me up."

The NCO pulled his M-4 in tight against his shoulder and followed the Captain to the doorway. They entered tactically and immediately came upon the bodies lying in the foyer area of the house. Kicking each as they passed by to garner a reaction, they noticed the smell as well as the stiffness of the rigor mortis that has set in. They swept the entire downstairs before flipping on their flashlights and moving upstairs, still not finding anything.

"House is clear sir," said the NCO.

“I know,” said Winston as he peeked out the window and saw the grave in the backyard of the Shepherd’s home. They headed back down and out the rear of the house where they found the still fresh dirt and the cross bearing Theresa Shepherd’s name.

“I’m sorry sir,” said the NCO.

“Has to be Katie,” observed Winston.

“What do you mean?” asked the NCO.

“Her daughter,” said Winston as he went back inside and found the empty packaging from the MREs as well as the remainder of the food gone. And the pack she had been seen with was missing as well. Heading back upstairs, he found her closet had clothing missing as evident by the hangers on the floor and the drawers she had failed to close. “She’s gone.”

“To where?” asked the NCO.

“I don’t know,” said Winston. “Her family is on the East Coast so I’m not sure where she would go or who she might run to.”

“We could check the refugee station,” suggested the NCO.

“We can’t go back there at this point,” said Winston. “We’ve got our movement orders and will need to head out.”

“You don’t want to check the neighborhood?” asked the NCO.

“No time,” said Winston. “We both need to be underway before dark.”

“Sorry about this sir,” said the NCO.

“I warned them to get out,” said Winston. “All I can hope is Katie made it out alive.”

“You don’t know where she would go?” asked the NCO.

“No,” said Winston as they headed back around the house and avoided the stench of the interior. “I really wish I did so I might be able to pick her up.”

“You still heading for Nebraska?” asked the NCO.

“Yeah,” said Winston. “We can probably make a quick run into the supply yards one more time and top everything off. I can use the extra supplies.”

“I’ll help,” said the NCO.

“No, you need to get going,” said Winston. “You’ve got a longer trip than I do.”

“I could use an extra gas can or two,” said the NCO.

“Okay, but we’ll need to make it quick,” said Winston as they headed for their vehicles. The drive back to the distribution center was uneventful and the vehicles were waved inside after the occupants were identified. They moved towards the supply area where others were already taking boxes and crates of food, water and other items and loading them into whatever vehicles were available. After the last riot, Winston had determined it was no longer safe for the men and women under his command and quietly sent them on their way to their families and loved ones. Additionally, the unit under his command had been tasked with the door to door searches as ordered by the President and he knew he would take serious casualties. So he felt like they were mission complete and decided to get them out under the cover of darkness.

The NCO grabbed two more gas cans and managed to shove them in the back with the remainder of the supplies he was hauling. He had quite a load already inside, but knew the trip would require more than one refueling along the way and extra gas wasn’t going to hurt anything. He closed the rear hatch and had to bump it to get it closed, but finally got it latched all the way. He headed across the yard to help Winston load a few more cases in the seating that would have been taken up by Theresa and Katie.

“I’ll need to get going sir,” said the NCO. “Again, I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“At least one of them is alive,” said Winston. “That counts for something.”

“If Nebraska is a bust, you could try Colorado. I can’t say for certain the place I’m going will take you in, but at the very least you could try,” said Staff Sergeant Greg Henry.

“We’ll see,” said Winston. “Best of luck Greg.”

“And to you too sir,” said Greg as he saluted and shook the man’s hand. He jumped back into the driver’s seat of the Chevy Tahoe and pulled out of the distribution point. He already had a story made up to keep the remainder of the unit safe and a set of movement order assigning him to Phoenix. Heading along the darkened roadways, he made his way up to I-70 and towards the retreat where his longtime friend Thomas Dayfield had once promised him a place to live through the chaos sweeping the nation and the world.

CHAPTER 18

Time Since Attacks: 100 days

Date/Time: 30 July/1831 Local

Location: Southeast Kansas

Katie peeked over the top of the small rise at what appeared to be a roadblock on the county road she was currently paralleling south towards her ultimate destination. She was far enough away she hoped to be able to observe to see if the occupants were friendly or whether they were like others she had seen so far. She had dropped the pack and was using the camouflage jacket to cover her top as she peeked through the long grass from about three hundred yards away at the dozen people she saw carrying weapons and waiting by the road. She could easily avoid it for the most part, but the problem she saw was the fact that the group at the roadblock would head into the fields from time to time and collect the random vegetables growing in the small plots. And she wanted to keep the roadway in sight if at all possible as well as snatch a few of the vegetables herself if at all possible.

The ambush was set up near a house that had burned somewhat recently, but still had a barn area where apparently the ambushers stayed. And the original occupants had laid out several personal gardens that were already bearing decent crops. And lucky enough for her, the ambush was at the end of the driveway about a hundred and fifty yards from the former house. She hadn't seen any movement at the barn area since arriving and was waiting for either dark or for the ambush to leave.

Katie was slightly in luck though as a truck was approaching down the roadway from the north. It appeared to be loaded down pretty well and looked to have at least two families riding inside and the back. But they also saw the roadblock from a distance and attempted to slow the vehicle without throwing the occupants out. However, they also garnered the attention of the group at the roadblock and she saw at least half the members running towards the vehicles carrying their weapons as they scrambled. Two vehicles, a high performance convertible and a truck squealed their tires in pursuit of the vehicle that had appeared and was attempting to turn around on the narrow road without spilling the occupants or anything they had in the bed. However, the other two vehicles were faster and made the ground up quickly and overtook the escaping vehicle just as it was departing. Katie could hear the gunfire as the ambushers started firing and some selected return fire from the victims.

However, the attackers had well thought out moves and were able to divert the attention of the victims by presenting a large target in the truck while the Mustang swept around the side of the vehicle and engaged the driver. As soon as the driver was hit, the vehicle swerved erratically before rolling off the road and getting caught in the ditch where the occupants and the supplies inside spilled out as the truck rolled over. The attackers pulled up and wasted no time in dispatching the victims as they walked off the roadway and shot anything that was still moving. Katie watched in horror as the attackers casually aimed and executed the wounded before starting to collect the supplies from the vehicle.

But even as horrified as she was, she saw the numbers at the roadblock were diminished and the remaining individuals at the point weren't paying attention to anything but the rest of their group picking up the supplies and whatever else they could get from the ambush. She quickly darted into the nearby gardens and grabbed several cucumbers, carrots, tomatoes and a head of cauliflower as she tossed them into a plastic shopping bag while trying to keep an eye on the roadblock. She was spending far too much time far too close to the attackers and knew she needed to clear soon. She filled as much as possible before darting back into the rows of corn nearby. After getting somewhat concealed, she checked behind her and didn't see anyone pursuing her for the moment. She attempted to stay as low as possible and headed back towards the area she had left her pack.

But she was slightly disoriented and tried to pick her way back through the rows of corn along the path she thought she had taken. But still couldn't find her way to where she thought she was supposed to be. Figuring she couldn't do much more, she decided to pop her head up quickly to get her bearings. And as soon as she did, she knew it was a mistake as the whizzing of a gunshot nearby caught her attention. But she did manage to figure out where she was at and where she needed to go and quickly ran towards the low rise. More gunfire followed her from the vehicles as she dove over the top of the rise and rolled downwards towards her pack. She quickly dropped the bag inside and zipped the main compartment before dragging it low towards the long grass to her rear. The gunfire was more sporadic now as she reached the relative safety of the concealment it offered. But she knew she wasn't out of danger as the ambushers certainly would have pinpointed her location and were probably heading her way. She pulled on the pack quickly and darted away from the area and towards a low ridge she had seen earlier while scoping out the gardens. Peeking up above the grass and weeds, she gained a few more shots in her direction before running full bore toward the ridge.

The pack was slowing her down, but she had become accustomed to the weight and since she had been eating food, it weighed less than it had in the beginning. And the fact she had eaten all the canned goods first meant the weight was reduced even more. However, it still slowed her down considerably as she continued to pant as she ran towards what she considered safety. Two more bullets passed close by, enough to spur her on as fast as possible before she covered the two hundred yards to the rise and went over the crest. Once on the other side, she knew she should continue walking as a minimum to put as much ground between her and the ambush as possible, but paused momentarily to catch her breath and take a few sips out of the hydration bladder on her back.

But as she panted, a noise to her rear caught her attention as she heard yelling on the other side of the ridge. She didn't know she had been pursued and had no desire to find out if they had pinpointed her location. She continued moving towards the ridge, but along the way was looking for a better place to hide. She found a small depression in the ground and could see the overhang that provided a place to hide. She pulled the pistol from her holster before dropping the pack and shoving it inside and followed it by crawling inside and pulling some of the grass to conceal her position. And took the time to catch her breath even more and drank down more of the water as she watched the area intently to her front.

“Over here!” she heard a voice yell outside the area she was hiding in. Katie gripped the pistol even tighter and thumbed back the hammer as she heard footsteps near her position and a pair of legs in blue jeans walked outside her hiding spot about ten feet away. She held her breath and didn’t move an inch as they stopped and looked around before continuing past the position. But she knew she wasn’t out of danger just yet as there were obviously others looking for her as well and she stayed as still as possible.

“We know you’re out here! We aren’t going to hurt you! Come on out!” yelled the male voice. A gunshot from near the position made her jump and she heard the pair of ambushers run past her position. Luckily enough the shot wasn’t aimed at her position as she heard two more shots and a female voice from somewhere behind her.

“Got her!” yelled the voice as she heard the pair running across the field and coming to a stop.

“Just a stupid rabbit,” remarked the other voice, a male voice. “We know you’re out here! Just give up because you know we’ll find you!”

Katie again didn’t react and didn’t move at all. The pair continued walking around for several minutes and even passed by her hiding spot again before a third voice called out to them.

“Anything?” he asked.

“No,” said the female voice. “She’s out here though.”

“We’re too far away from camp,” said the third voice. “We should head back.”

“We should wait on the ridge,” said the female voice. “She’ll pop up eventually.”

“We’ve got some good stuff from the vehicle we just hit,” said the third voice. “One little girl with a pack isn’t worth the trouble.”

“I don’t like it when they get away,” said the female voice.

“You want to wait her out, be my guest,” said the second male voice.

“It’s going to be dark soon,” observed the other male voice.

“Leave me your flashlight then,” said the female voice.

“Not a chance,” said the third voice.

“Just leave me the stupid flashlight!” protested the female voice.

“We don’t have the batteries to waste,” said the first male voice.

“Give me the damn flashlight!” yelled the woman’s voice and a scuffle was heard. Katie heard the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the ground hard and what appeared to be a shotgun slide racking.

“You put your hands on me again and I’ll blow your head off,” said the second male voice through gritted teeth. “Understand?”

Katie could hear the woman attempting to get up and resume her attack before a strike was heard hitting her midsection and the air emptying out of her lungs. And a dull thump as Katie heard her being struck again. But no further movement from the woman was heard collapsing entirely on the ground.

“Grab her rifle and pistol,” ordered the second male voice.

“Want to carry her back?” asked the first male voice.

“She can lay out here and hurt for a while,” said the second. “When she wakes up, she can find her way back.”

“If she wakes up,” said the first.

“Well, that just means she learned her lesson,” said the second. “Let’s go.”

“Can’t just leave her out here,” said the first voice.

“We’ll just blame that girl that got away if anyone asks,” said the second voice. “Just grab her stuff and let’s go.”

Katie could hear the two grabbing the rifle and unbuckling the pistol belt she had on with the holstered pistol. The footsteps departed back towards the ambush site, yet still couldn’t bring herself to move after a half an hour of waiting. She knew it could be a ruse to draw her out and decided it was better to wait for darkness to fall where she could move easier. But one thing was for certain, she wanted to put as much distance between the ambush site and her as possible. Eventually it appeared dark enough outside her hiding spot to move out and she pulled the pack behind her as she crawled across the still hot ground towards the depression. Once she was out, she held the pistol out and looked around her position. She immediately saw the woman that had been chasing her lying face down on the ground with a large lump on the back of her head. With the pistol pointed at her, Katie inched forward and could see the shallow breathing in the waning daylight. She managed to roll over the woman and heard her moan softly, but could see she was still breathing.

Katie had a desire to help her because she was injured, but also remembered the fact the woman was pursuing her with the intent of killing her if she got the chance. And common sense overtook the desire to help and she gathered her pack before moving away from the area as rapidly as possible. The remainder of the daylight helped her move across the open field and she could see a decent sized grove of trees in the distance that would provide her shelter for the

night. Luckily enough, the almost full moon was helping guide her as it was already up as her eyes started adjusting to the growing darkness. She made decent time even though being slowed by the terrain and having to watch her steps as she continued across the large open area. The darkness would be a problem as she got closer to the trees as there might be danger hidden inside, but she decided it was also her best bet for finding more water.

Katie approached the area cautiously after finishing the short trip and stopped to listen for any dangers that might be waiting on her. And as soon as she stopped short, she heard the distinctive sounds of voices inside the trees. She couldn't make out what was being said, but it was more than one person and there was danger in just about everyone she met those days. She decided to depart the area and head away and find a place in the large open stretches that might conceal her for the night. But as soon as she started moving, a sound was heard to her right side.

"Don't move," ordered a voice with an odd metallic click.

"Please don't hurt me," said Katie. "I'm leaving."

"What are you doing here?" asked the voice.

"I was looking for a place to spend the night," said Katie.

"Who are you?" asked the voice.

"My name is Katie," she replied. "I'll move on."

"Not so fast," said the voice as she heard him moving closer and yanking the pistol out of the holster. "Why are you stopping here Katie?"

"I was looking for a place to hide while I slept," said Katie.

"Where's the rest of your group?" asked the voice.

"I'm alone," said Katie.

"You sure about that?" questioned the voice.

"Yes sir," said Katie.

"Well, bye," said the voice. "You can go now."

"Can I have my pistol back?" asked Katie.

"You're funny," laughed the voice.

"It's my only means of protection!" protested Katie.

“And you come back after my back is turned and kill every one of us,” said the voice.

“No,” said Katie. “I am just looking for safety.”

“Yeah, like that exists today,” said the voice. “You can go now.”

“Please sir,” said Katie.

“You can leave or get shot,” said the voice. “Two choices.”

“John!” exclaimed a second voice to her side. A female voice. “You stop that!”

“She’s free to go,” said the male voice.

“She’s just a young girl,” said the woman’s voice. “Now stop scaring her!”

“You need to go back to the camp,” said the male voice.

Katie turned slowly as the two were having a brief discussion and saw both their faces were half covered with some sort of device. She didn’t know exactly what it was, but saw the both of them were carrying rifles as well.

“I’ll leave, but I’d like my pistol back,” said Katie. “You can take it out in the field and set it down or walk me away or whatever, but you can’t leave me defenseless.”

“We surely can,” said the male voice.

“Fine, walk me out and give it back when I’m far enough away. If you see me turn around then shoot me. But please don’t leave me defenseless out here,” said Katie.

“We just don’t know who you are, that’s all,” said the female voice. “We can’t be too careful about strangers we meet these days.”

“You mean like the strangers a couple of miles up the road that are ambushing people going by?” asked Katie.

“There is a gang ambushing people up the road?” asked the male.

“About two miles north, yes,” said Katie.

“We didn’t know,” said the male voice. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You’re more than welcome to check it out in the daylight,” said Katie.

“No, they are best to be avoided,” said the male voice. “How do we know you aren’t a part of them and just waiting to go back and tell your friends?”

“Because I don’t kill innocent people,” said Katie with resolve. “Or steal their stuff.”

“What are you doing out here alone?” asked the female voice.

“Heading south to Oklahoma,” said Katie.

“Why are you alone?” asked the female voice. “Where are your parents or someone to watch over you?”

“I’m alone,” said Katie. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“You don’t have anyone?” asked the woman.

“Ma’am, I don’t feel comfortable talking about it,” said Katie. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m sorry,” said the woman. “It’s just that a young girl like you is easy prey for the predators out on these roads. It’s not safe.”

“I know better than most,” said Katie. “Look, I just want to find a place to sleep tonight. But I need my pistol back unless you want a young girl out here wandering around those predators without any protection.”

“Give it back to her,” said the woman.

“No,” said the man. “I’ll walk you away from here and give it back, but I’m not giving it to you right now. And that’s not up for debate.”

“I don’t trust you to do it so I’ll take her away,” said the woman. “Give it to me.”

“You aren’t going out there wandering around by yourself,” scoffed the man.

“Either give me the pistol or I’ll give her mine,” said the woman. “And don’t argue with me.”

“We’ll go together,” said the man. “Go that way.”

Katie led off the small party away from the grove and in a southerly direction. They were a hundred yards away when the man finally spoke again.

“How many people at the roadblock?” he asked.

“A dozen, maybe fifteen,” said Katie. “They are blocking the roads with old cars.”

“How are they stopping people?” asked the man.

“Chasing them in other vehicles,” said Katie and explained what she saw during the ambush.

“So fifteen total?” asked the man.

“That’s about what I counted,” said Katie. “They are at a burned out house.”

“Can they be bypassed?” asked the man.

“If you stay beyond that far ridge, probably,” said Katie. “There might be a woman lying out in one of the fields though.”

“Care to explain?” asked the man.

“Long story short, they saw me and gave chase,” said Katie. “She wanted to keep looking for me, but the leader decided not to. They had...a disagreement and he knocked her out.”

“How do we know you didn’t do it?” asked the man.

“John!” exclaimed the woman. “She told us about them, that’s good enough.”

“I don’t trust her,” said the man.

“I don’t trust anyone either,” said the woman. “But she’s barely old enough to be out here by herself. So ease up.”

The man heard the “or else” tone his wife gave him and decided it was better to cease the discussion at the moment. And Katie helped along as well.

“What are those things you’re wearing?” she asked.

“Night vision goggles,” said the woman.

“That’s neat,” said Katie. “I could use some.”

“We only have the two pairs,” said the man.

“I originally tried traveling by night, but I couldn’t navigate around in the dark,” said Katie. “Something like that would have made my trip easier.”

“Where are you going again?” asked the woman.

“Oklahoma,” said Katie.

“Any place in particular?” asked the woman.

“Wherever will take me in I suppose,” said Katie. “Where are you all heading?”

“North,” answered the woman who also didn’t say anything about Katie’s destination since she knew there were few places that were taking in the influx of refugees coming from the north and even some from the east. But she thought that with Katie’s age it might help find her a better spot than in one of the refugee camps. They were about five hundred yards away from the trees when they finally stopped.

“I’d like it if you went another mile or so,” said the man as they stopped.

“I’ll try,” said Katie as she received her cleared pistol and magazine. “Is there water nearby?”

“About three miles south of here is a small stream,” said the man. “It runs east to west so you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” said Katie as she holstered the empty pistol and put the magazine in her pocket. She would load it up after the pair had left since obviously the thought of her being armed was unnerving to the pair and whomever they had with them. She headed off in the southerly direction away as she felt the two watching her. She eventually heard them turn to leave and the wife giving her husband down the road over his conduct.

Katie went another few hundred yards before finding a place out of the way that was somewhat sheltered from the wind that was currently blowing in from the west as it typically did. Some clouds were on the horizon, but it didn’t feel like it was going to rain that evening. But she unpacked the poncho and laid it out on the ground just in case she needed to bundle up that night if it did. She checked her water quickly and found for certain she would need to refill the next day. With only two liters left, she would need to top everything off as well as finding a place to start a fire and sterilize it. And she removed the plastic bag she had stowed from earlier and found in her mad dash two of the tomatoes had broken inside the bag and covered the other vegetables. But no matter what, it was fresh and after a steady diet of processed food, she enjoyed the taste of the fresh tomatoes as she grabbed one of the broken ones and started eating it and licking the juice off her fingers. The remainder would need to be checked out prior to eating and she set the bag off to the side for the evening.

Katie was pretty tired after the two brief encounters from that day as she laid her head down on her pack. Thoughts of the day’s events went through her head as she tried to get comfortable on the hard ground. She wondered if she was right by stealing even though the group at the ambush site had probably not come across the gardens legally either. She couldn’t come to a good decision in her mind on whether or not stealing from bad people was okay or whether it was just...well, stealing. She wondered what her mother might say in that instance and decided she probably would have called her “Katherine” with that particular look on her face. So before falling asleep Katie made the determination to not steal any more even if it was from the bad people causing harm right then. And furthermore, it put her at greater risk trying to find food since most of the gardens were closer to the houses that were still occupied.

Katie awoke the next morning as the sun was starting to come up. Even though she didn't have an alarm clock or any kind, her body seemed to know when it was time to get up and start moving. However, she stretched out and laid on the ground for several more minutes, still a little sore from the mad dash she had done the day prior. Eventually she knew she needed to get up and move and pulled the poncho back away from her legs and sat up and stretched. Letting out a slight groan she checked her pack and the food bag and saw they were untouched by the local wildlife that probably wasn't too far away. And even though she saw plenty of rabbits and squirrels, she had no idea how to skin and prepare them even if she managed to catch one.

She grabbed a bottle of water from her pack and drank down a decent amount, still feeling a little dried out from the run the previous evening. Checking the plastic bag, she pulled a cucumber out and wondered if the family had sprayed it at all. Seeing that one couldn't be too careful, she poured a bit of water over the vegetable and washed it as best as she could. However, she also saw her hands were fairly dirty and applied a little more water to them and rinsed them as best as she could. She used the camouflaged top to dry them off and started peeling the cucumber and looking through the MRE parts in her bag, finally finding one of the main meal pouches worthy of sharing with the fresh produce. But she did wonder exactly what animal the supposed chicken patty came from since it didn't taste like any chicken she ever had before.

Ripping the top off, she took a bite of the chicken and started eating the cucumber from one end like a banana. It wasn't that large, but was enough to help fill her up along with the MRE meal. And most importantly would help stretch her food out a little bit more as she was running low as it was. She thought again about the decision she came to the night before and thought the decision might have been because she was tired. But the more she thought about it, the more her mother's voice was heard in her head telling her it wasn't right. But eventually she found a middle path that her mother would probably have agreed with in only taking things that were completely abandoned. *That wasn't necessarily stealing*, she rationalized in her head as she took another bite and a sip of water. And found her mother's voice agreeing with her after a sigh.

Finishing everything up, she suddenly had the call of nature. She had originally packed away a couple of rolls of toilet paper for fire starter, but after the first day had realized she probably couldn't use it for that as there were certain aspects of her journey she hadn't thought about when packing. So she saved the two rolls for the absolute necessary times and used the small packs of tissue found in the MREs for that purpose instead. But being that everything needed to be stretched, she even started using the small tissue packs from time to time as well.

After finding a decent spot away from her camp, she squatted down to relieve herself and looked around at the horizon. She could see fairly far into the distance and saw the group she had encountered the night before leaving the grove of trees and heading north. She counted almost twenty in their party as they skirted around the ridgeline out of sight and mind of the ambush on the roadway. Katie wondered where they were going and more importantly wondered if they would arrive there. They seemed to be pretty well set up from what she could tell in the distance with the majority of the group wearing large packs and even the children carrying something or other as they pushed north.

After she finished, she also noticed that she needed a bath, badly as it would seem. Walking and sweating had taken its toll on her hygiene and she really needed to find a place to wash up when she could. She collected everything into the pack and did her best to cover the garbage before departing. She checked the map and got a general idea of where she was at before pointing the compass south and heading off. While she had no idea how to use it in the beginning, she quickly learned the cardinal points after studying the device for a couple of minutes and at least would have a general idea of where she was heading. She traveled slightly southwest looking for the roadway again and after an hour came across the small stream the man had told her about the night before. It wasn't on her map, but most of the small creeks and streams she had used weren't on her map. She checked the area out before approaching and found the stream was deserted for the most part. It was slightly wider in the area she was in and she spied an old tree standing alone nearby that looked to have several dead branches just within reach.

Katie decided to gather her water from that area instead where she could refill at her leisure and boil at the same time. Taking out the pot as well as her two dirty water bottles, she set everything up before gathering the firewood and starting to make her fire lay. By this point in her journey, she had pretty much mastered fire building and found several natural materials that would aid in getting it started. Breaking off the tops of some dead weeds nearby, she got everything ready and filled one bottle before filtering off the mud and dirt into the second bottle. The coffee filters she used were less than ideal, but still got the majority of the nasty stuff out before being poured into the pot to boil. She struck a match and the tinder immediately caught and started burning through. She added in the pieces of kindling and puffed on it to keep it going. Before long she had a good blaze going in the small pit she had dug out with her boot and the pot already starting to bubble up on the bottom.

She removed all the empty bottles from her pack and transferred the remainder of the water in one of the bottles into her hydration bladder. She had found the item almost worth its weight in gold as she didn't have to stop and pull out a bottle of water any time she wanted to drink. After the bladder was topped off, she drank down the remainder of the two liter bottle and set it off to the side. After adding a few more pieces of wood to the fire, she had boiled the first pot long enough to add to the first bottle and set it off to the side to cool slightly before pouring it in. She had already warped one bottle by not waiting long enough and the near boiling water had deformed it badly. After waiting for five minutes she poured it inside the first bottle and prepared the next batch to boil. It was a time consuming process, but she also knew there was no such thing as too much water. *Too much safe water*, she reminded herself for the thousandth time as she pulled the small bottle of bleach out and added a couple of drops to the two liter bottle before swishing it around to mix it up.

It took nearly an hour and a half to completely fill the bottles she was carrying and she even filled the dirty bottle to later purify as it was far easier to find fire materials than it was water it appeared. As she reloaded the pack, she realized that last night was the first time since she had left Kansas City she had any human contact. It was strange that she had been out in the rural areas of Kansas for two weeks and only then had some human contact. And not very friendly contact at that, but she realized everyone was on edge these days and she had avoided human contact as well. Before leaving, she checked the water in the small stream and found it was acceptable for being able to wash off with for the moment. She looked around and couldn't see

anyone for the moment and went to the tree. The lower branches were just within reach and she climbed towards the top and looked around as best as she could. There didn't appear to be anyone, but in the distance she did see a town that would be within reach if she made good time that day.

Dropping back to the ground, she got some of the spare clothing out and decided it was past time to at least rinse off. Since she was alone, impropriety went out the window for a moment as she pulled off the t-shirt and her boots and socks. Rolling up the legs on her pants, she toed into the water and started wiping down as best as she could. The water wasn't deep enough to wash out her hair, but she used one of the bottles to wet it down. She took a chance and pulled off her pants and washed quickly before donning her spare set and rinsing out the t-shirt and pants. Grabbing her last clean t-shirt, she attached the wet clothing to her pack and shouldered it up before setting out for the town. She felt cleaner for the moment than she had and the breeze helped keep her head cool for the moment.

And she set off to check the next town just in case they were allowing refugees in.

CHAPTER 19

Time Since Attacks: 101 days

Date/Time: 1 August/1658 Local

Location: Near Fredonia, Kansas

Katie watched as the security checkpoint going into the town turned away yet another vehicle of refugees. She had no idea how they got past the roadblock at the farm since they came down the same road, but decided it was irrelevant as she had no hope of getting in anyway. With a sigh, she took one last look at the checkpoint that appeared to be manned by some form of police and headed directly south and towards the river she saw on the map. At a minimum she would be able to top off her water and continue on although her food was running a bit scarce. She wondered if she should try the town anyway and attempt to at least trade for some food to keep her going a little longer but decided with the way she saw the police treating the refugees it would be a wasted trip.

She was also faced with a dilemma of where to cross the river at. She was giving the town a reasonably wide berth when she saw a way through that was somewhat sparsely populated. She decided to give it a go but to wait until it was a little darker out. But she decided to get as close in as possible before it got dark so she could pick her way through. According to her map, there looked to be a bridge across the river on one of the street roads and she decided it was the best place for her to cross. While waiting for it to get darker, she grabbed one of the MRE meals from her pack and saw it was “Mexican Style Corn.” And decided it was better than going hungry as she used her knife to cut a small slit in the top and ate without the spoon. She ate and saw a few vehicles going this way and that, but certainly not as many as there normally were. And most appeared to be some form of security or police as the occupants were armed.

Katie decided it was dark enough to give it a try and headed towards the small neighborhood and would pick her way through heading towards the bridge. As she started getting closer, an eerie feeling swept over her as if she was being watched. But she managed to get past the first houses without incident and continued towards the bridge coming to a fenced in area. Not knowing who or why it was fenced, it was in her way of getting to the bridge and she found an area where she could slide underneath the fence and continue directly west. After going a hundred yards, she noticed the area was a golf course of some type and was in a pretty bad state as it was. But she continued through, feeling a bit safer since if it was a golf course, the chances of finding anyone living there was remote.

She arrived at the other side and found another place in the fence that she could wiggle her way under and outside was the road she was looking for. It was almost dark now and she paralleled the road and saw the bridge in the moonlight. There didn't appear to be anyone on the bridge at the moment as she got closer, but she stopped and checked it out anyway. A passing vehicle caught her attention and she hid down in the long grass and watched as the vehicle passed by loaded down with armed men. She didn't know if they were police or just concerned citizens, but she didn't want to find out as it was. They crossed over the bridge and out of sight as Katie

also noted nobody stopped them as they crossed. She figured the crossing was clear enough and headed out at an increased pace to be able to cross. She also planned on following the river away from the town and refilling her water away from the houses where she could conceal herself from observation as she had been doing since the day she set out.

Crossing the bridge was the easy part, but the fact there were houses on the other side and they appeared to be occupied was another matter entirely. And trailers of some sort on the other side of the road. She could hear voices coming from behind one and what appeared to be a campfire in the backyard as people were laughing and talking with each other. It was almost a normal scene had it not been for the fact they were over three months past the largest terrorist attacks in history and the world as they knew it had ended. But she pressed on over the bridge and crossed without being noticed.

But she faced a new set of problems as she wouldn't be able to follow the river that easily since the trailers butted up against the path she intended to take. And she didn't want to go west necessarily since it would take her well away from the direction she wanted to go. She looked at both directions and saw the east side was a little more open and decided it was better for her to go that way instead. She crept along as quietly as she possibly could and followed the river towards the area it went south again, but found she had been discovered.

"Freeze!" yelled a voice and the sound of a weapon being charged was unmistakable. She didn't know exactly what to do, but her gut instinct was to run as quickly as possible. A powerful light came on as she sprinted down the path of the river and into the trees. But vehicles were heard rumbling to life and more shouts were heard from the trailer area as the security force for the town was heard coming to life and giving chase. She wasn't sure how they might react to her being there, but again, with the rough handling of some of the refugees she had seen earlier, they probably wouldn't have treated her any differently. So she ran as fast as possible as the security pursued the shadows of where she was at and fanned out searching for her.

"We're finally going to catch that murdering thief!" exclaimed one of the men in the party as they set out across the open field looking for any signs she had been there.

They think I've been here before, she thought as she ran faster and tripped up from time to time on the uneven ground. And if that wasn't enough, the gunfire to her rear spurred her on even faster as she took longer strides trying to put some distance between the security and herself.

"Dammit people! Cease fire! Cease fire! I said stop shooting!" yelled one of the leaders. "We want them alive!"

"I thought I saw something!" exclaimed one of the men.

"They killed three people and have looted four houses! We want them alive to stand trial!" yelled the leader. "So no shooting unless there's a direct threat!"

Katie heard the conversation and decided the security would consider her a "threat" as they already appeared to be trigger happy. And appeared far more than ready to use lethal force no

matter what. She decided to change her direction slightly since she had been going in the same direction for a while and headed back towards the southwest. But the lights and vehicles behind her made her continue the quick pace she had set and she decided it might be best to hide and let them pass her by while they were searching.

But she also thought it might be wise to press on and put as much distance between the town and herself as possible. So she pressed forward, taking a sip of water as she did so and moving as quickly as possible. A large field opened up to her front and she didn't necessarily want to cross it since she would be out in the open, but she could see the pursuers to her rear were concentrating their search in the wooded areas near the river so she pressed forward into the field. The headlights of the vehicles were seen sweeping her from time to time, but apparently they never caught sight of her as they continued their search. She tripped over an object in the field of some sort and looked in the pale moonlight and saw an old piece of sheet metal mostly covered in grass covering up a narrow furrow in the ground of some sort. She had no idea what it was or why it was here, but she decided it might be the best thing since the pursuers were starting to sweep the fields nearby as well.

Katie took a chance right then and decided there was just enough room underneath for her to hide and hopefully allow the pursuers to pass by unnoticed and be able to escape. For once in her life, she was happy about her small stature as she got underneath the piece of metal, an old business sign of some sort, and shoved her pack in behind her. Turning around underneath wasn't easy, but she managed to do it in hopes it hadn't disturbed the grass on top too much and pushed the grass near the entrance back up to conceal her entry. She thought about grabbing the pistol attached to her pack, but knew it certainly would enrage the pursuers even more if she started taking shots at the group. So she decided if she was caught, she would face the group and attempt to convince them of her innocence and hopefully they would let her go on her own way.

Katie peered out into the field and saw the group of men coming closer as she pulled back slightly underneath the board for more concealment. Two men were bearing down on her position, and she hoped they would divert their path. However, it wasn't happening as they drew closer and shined bright flashlights back and forth looking for her. They didn't pay attention to the ground as much and passed within ten feet of her position before continuing on through the field on their search. She contemplated getting up right then and there and making a run for it behind them, but decided it was better for the activity to die down before moving again. She heard random footsteps moving past her on several occasions and even heard more gunfire in the distance, but it appeared her hiding spot was okay for the moment.

Without moving too much, she managed to locate a bottle of water in her pack and pulled it forward enough to drink. But in her cramped conditions, it wasn't easy and she ended up spilling a portion out on the ground as she attempted to drink in some of the water. She wrapped her lips around the spout of the two liter bottle and sucked the water out until she realized the bottle was compressing and was out of shape. She released her mouth only to hear the bottle pop back into position making a noise far too loud for her comfort level right then. She quickly capped it off, losing a little more water in the process and heard footsteps coming in from behind her as she set it off to the side.

The footsteps closed in and got slower as she laid motionless waiting for them to pass. But she was unlucky as they drew even closer, soft footsteps of a practiced hunter waiting for his prey to appear and make a mistake. But she was motionless even as he stepped on the edge of the piece of sheet metal and stood right on top of her lower back. He stomped on the metal for a moment almost causing her to cry out in pain, but a yelling from south of her position caused the footsteps to depart quickly as someone had yelled “over here!” from a position well away from where she was hiding.

Katie laid there motionless for what seemed like an eternity waiting for the person to return and uncover her position. But the activity moved away from the place she was hiding for the most part and she laid there in silence wondering what to do next. She knew the security was bound and determined to find her and make an example of whomever they thought she was and she felt that no amount of convincing would help her leave that town. And she decidedly marked it off her list as a place she could be able to stay for the most part. She knew she needed to move south as quickly as possible and away from the town, but wasn’t sure if it was clear yet.

After a half hour of waiting and being patient, she crept forward and peeked her head out of her burrow and into the field. She couldn’t see anything due to the long grass in the field and moved forward a bit more peeking over the top and saw two vehicles waiting north of her in the field with men inside shining spotlights over the field attempting to catch a glimpse of her. Most of the search was well south of her at this point and she wondered if they would return and conduct a more detailed search of the area and find her. So for the moment she was content to slide back into her hiding spot, reset the grass and wait for a better time to leave. She managed to drink in a few more gulps of water, making sure the bottle didn’t deform again and located one of the ration bars inside an outer pocket on her pack. It made far too much noise for her liking, but she needed something to eat and keep her going.

And as the night continued on, she heard random noises of the continuing search to include the field once again. And her fears of being discovered multiplied as several of the security passed by her location, but by and large they never found her. And she didn’t even attempt to sleep that night knowing full well the group had revenge set on their mind and a sleeping target made a still target in her mind. So she continued to listen and watch the small opening throughout the night.

As the dawn crept closer, the light outside turned to the dull gray as often seen right before the sun would come up. Katie again wondered if the security men had left the field and crept out of her hiding spot and looked around up the field. And the vehicles along with the men were still there watching the area, although not as intently as the night before. Several groups of the security were seen coming back from searching and heading back towards the town as she knew it wasn’t possible to leave yet again and certainly not in the daylight. One of the two trucks left, but one remained behind with four of the security still watching the field and Katie figured her best shot was to wait the entire day and head out when it was dark again and the security wasn’t as alert to the presence of an individual. Or she hoped something else would distract them so she

could slip away unnoticed. She wasn't sure how far outside of the town she was, but the further she was, the more comfortable she would be.

She pulled another meal pack from the pack and ripped it open, taking account of how little food she had left. But she knew if she was to move away, she would need energy and managed to eat the meal without the aid of a spoon yet again. And drank down more water as the sun peeked out over the horizon and started warming the ground. Taking another drink of the water, the metal surface of the old sign was already starting to warm up and she felt it would probably get unbearable before long. But she also knew with the vehicle sitting three hundred yards away escape wasn't likely and her plan to leave that next evening was probably her best shot at getting away unnoticed. So she stayed in her position, waiting and listening as a few vehicles swept by from time to time and the sunlight started heating up the metal surface and warming everything underneath. And she got lucky as the field was swept again and four of the individuals stopped close enough for her to hear their conversation.

"You think they're still out here?" asked one of the men.

"Probably not," said another. "But as we suspected, whoever it is came in from the south."

"I don't think they'll be stupid enough to try to cross that bridge again," said another.

"It's the only way across except for downstream," said the first. "And the other side is being covered and searched as well."

"We've got to be careful," said another. "Anyone who kills three people in cold blood needs to be shot down like a dog on sight."

"The Sheriff wants them taken alive," said one of the men.

"So he can string them up himself," laughed another.

"I don't know about our Sheriff, but I do know if I happen to get 'em in my crosshairs, there won't be much of a trial," remarked one.

"The Sheriff wants to make an example of them," said another.

"Dead bodies work just as well when you hang a sign on them," said the boastful one.

"He'll be pissed," said one of the men.

"So they were a 'threat' and I had to protect myself," said the man.

"Have to find them first," said another of the men.

"They came back five times," said the man. "Can't see why they wouldn't come back again."

“Want something to eat?” asked one of the men.

“Yeah, let’s head back,” said another as Katie caught a glimpse of two of the heads as they passed close to her hiding spot. She sighed briefly as they passed by and grabbed the water bottle yet again and took another drink. But the most important thing she had figured out the entire time was that she was in serious danger the longer she stayed near the town. But at the moment, she had no way of being able to escape and would more than likely have to wait for dark yet again to move away. So she tried to make herself as comfortable as possible while the sunlight continued to beat down on the metal above her.

Time Since Attacks: 102 days

Date/Time: 2 August/1843 Local

Location: Near Fredonia, Kansas

Katie was miserable. After staying in position that entire day and having the sun beat down on the metal above her, she was completely drained and exhausted. It was likely a record breaking temperature that day and being that her hiding spot had no air circulation meant she was soaked from the sweat and tired as she ever remembered being in her life. And she knew she still had at least three more hours until she could move. She had taken the opportunity at one point to check out her surroundings once again and had seen the vehicle waiting to her north hadn’t moved. And several patrols had passed through the field throughout the day although none had come close to her position.

Checking her watch for the millionth time it seemed like, she tried to get comfortable once again and take a brief nap. But as soon as she thought about it, she also remembered if she slept through the night somehow, she would end up having to stay in position for yet another day. So she shifted yet again and tried to get comfortable, but it was impossible in her current state as she was hot, sweaty and tired. Another problem was presented to her as she knew the water she desperately needed to refill would be completely out of her reach unless she traveled far down the river. And furthermore, wouldn’t be able to boil it effectively since the light from a fire would be sure to draw attention. She cursed herself knowing that she had used up the purification tablets given to her by Mr. Brady in the first week and how invaluable they would have been since she could have just dropped the tabs in and continued walking.

But even with the tablets, she had no way of knowing whether the river would be patrolled by the security and what her chances of being caught were. And with the patrols being in vehicles, she had no idea how far out they would travel away from the town. So she decided to make a mad dash immediately south once it got dark and stay away from the roads as best as possible. And most importantly, put the town in her rear view mirror as fast as possible.

Katie knew she needed some food to keep her going and checked the vegetables she had gathered from the garden a couple of days prior. Retrieving the bag wasn’t easy, but she managed to get it pulled from the pack and up to where she could get at the contents easier. However, as she put her hand inside, she found the items inside had wilted in the heat and

became a mushy mess inside the bag. She had no idea whether or not they were safe to eat and the thoughts of having stomach problems inside her small hiding spot was certainly not a risk she wanted to take. With some disgust, she set the bag off to the side and grabbed at several pouches before coming up with a freeze dried pouch. She knew it required boiling water to make, but decided she could just drop the warm water inside and let it soak instead. She decided to give it extra time to soak in and dropped what she thought was about two cups inside and zipped the pouch back up. However, she had an idea of putting it against the top of the hiding spot to give it a bit of extra heat and wedged it between the pack and the sheet metal before calling it good.

She managed to dig out the spoon from her pack as well as she waited on the meal pack to finish up. She hated not being in a good position to be able to see around the area, but knew there was no other alternative the previous evening than hunkering down and hoping for the best. Thoughts continued to roll through her head as she was lying there, thinking of her mother, how far things had gone downhill, what and where her life was heading and whether or not an end was in sight. But mostly, she wondered how her mother would have held up on the journey so far and what advice she would have given at that moment in time.

I would tell you to keep going, said her mother's voice in her head.

But there's no end in sight and everywhere I go I see bad things happening and people getting turned away, Katie protested in return.

You were the one that said not everyone in the world was bad, said her mother's voice. *So it's up to you to find those people and survive this.*

I don't know if I ever will, Katie thought.

I tend to think you're stronger than you give yourself credit for, said her mother in her head. *And I think you'll make it through this and find what you're looking for.*

It just seems to hopeless, thought Katie. *Maybe I should just turn myself in to this town.*

And get killed for it? I don't think that's a wise decision, said her mother.

I know, thought Katie with a mental sigh. *I just keep looking for the light at the end of the tunnel and finding more darkness.*

All tunnels have to end eventually, said her mother's voice.

Except the ones that dead end, thought Katie with a mental smirk.

You were always the bright, positive example in my life and I cannot figure out why you are so cynical all the sudden, said her mother's voice with sadness. *You're alive, you've survived this long and I know you can keep going if you put your mind to it. And who knows what you'll find down the road in the next town or farm.*

You're not going to let me give up are you, thought Katie with a slight grin.

I know you would never let me give up, said her mother. *Turnabout's fair play.*

I love you Mom and I miss you so much, thought Katie. *I really wish you were here.*

I'll never be that far from you as long as you keep my memory in your heart, said her mother's voice with kindness and a mental smile. *And you will make it through this.*

"Thank you," whispered Katie as she finished the mental conversation and brought resolve back into her mind. She knew what she needed to do and how she needed to do it. And now just needed to get it done as her mother used to say. She pulled the food pack to her front and ate quickly, ignoring the minor crunches she had from time to time where the water hadn't penetrated the freeze dried food. She took in a little more water, but wanted to be careful since rationing was needed until she could find another source. Luckily enough, she still had four full liters to go on and could stretch that until she found another source or went east to the river. After she finished, she put all the garbage she had accumulated inside the plastic shopping bag and set it behind her pack, making a little more noise than she wanted to. But overwhelmingly, she wanted to leave this area as quickly as possible and as soon as it got dark.

Katie peeked out across the field as best as she could in the darkness. The security vehicle was still sitting there, however, the occupants were not searching with the spotlights like they had done the evening prior. After stretching out as best as she could, a cold shiver went down her body as the breeze hit the wet clothing she had on. But she ignored it for the moment and shouldered her pack quickly before heading out due south and keeping a wary eye on all sides. She hadn't heard anyone searching near the river and couldn't see any signs of anyone in the darkness her eyes were getting accustomed to. But after seeing the couple before this town with the night vision goggles, she didn't trust anyone to have a light on while searching.

She quickly departed the field and crossed over an old barbed wire fence. She had become pretty adept at crossing them in recently memory as there had been several she had to move across. After shedding the pack, she dropped it on the opposite side, making a little noise in the process and quickly placed her hands on the wooden fence post before hopping over. Her actions didn't garner a response for the moment so she quickly donned the pack and continued south.

After traveling what she thought was about two miles, she decided to double back east towards the river and fill her water bottles. The map showed it went south for a ways after it had gone east and she hoped she had traveled far enough south to make it a shorter trip. But after she had gone about a quarter of a mile, one of the vehicles from the nearby town passed by on one of the farming roads as they scanned back and forth. She dropped to the ground and hid while they passed slowly and used spotlights in the fields. But she remained undetected as they continued down the road and disappeared over a low rise. Since they had passed her, she decided it might

be best to dash across and try to get to the river. After slowly approaching the road, she checked both ways before sprinting the distance and for another hundred yards into the field. She continued her approach towards the river until she came within view of a house with several vehicles outside.

She could see at least one police vehicle sitting with the others and figured it had to be from the nearby town. And if there were vehicles there, the chances were huge that they had at least a dozen people nearby looking around. So instead of continuing on, she doubled back and crossed the road again before continuing south. She decided it was best to go south and try to find one of the smaller creeks or streams that wasn't on the map and use it instead.

As Katie continued on the fatigue was catching up with her though and she knew she needed some rest. She had been awake for almost thirty-six hours and knew that rest would help more than anything. She hadn't seen any signs of human habitation for a while and decided it might be better to hide in plain sight as far away from the roadway as possible and catch some sleep. She knew she was at least a quarter mile away from the roadway, but she wasn't sure if there was anything to the west. But she decided to take a chance in the open and pulled the poncho from the pack and set up her camp. She wrapped it over the top to give herself a little concealment and was out like a light within moments of her head hitting her pack.

Time Since Attacks: 103 days

Date/Time: 3 August/0618 Local

Location: Southeast Kansas

Katie awoke to the sounds of some nearby birds chirping and peeked out from under the poncho. She couldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary as she sat up and looked around. She couldn't see anything nearby to include houses or people and got up and stretched. She took account of what little food she had left as she munched on a bite of the last energy bar and more importantly what little water she had left. She knew the four liters could be stretched a decent amount, but not as far as she wanted. Again, she was faced with a dilemma of heading towards the river or continuing south and finding additional sources along the way.

She made a snap decision in her mind that the safe bet was to continue south and avoid the river since she had already seen patrols on it the previous night. Pulling out the compass, she got her bearings and shouldered up her pack while continuing her journey.

CHAPTER 20

Time Since Attacks: 105 days

Date/Time: 4 August/1507 Local

Location: Southeast Kansas

Katie stumbled ahead aimlessly across a large open field in search of water. She had run out the day prior and had been unable to locate any more sources she could filter and boil since that point. The normal rains that came through Kansas during the summer hadn't been as frequent as she'd hoped and the wet weather streams and gullies didn't contain the water she so desperately needed. She had been able to keep her stock replenished until only recently and had taken the last drops out of the bottles the previous evening before waking up in search of more.

Along her journey she had seen several towns and farms that looked promising, but had heeded Paul Brady's advice and looked them over beforehand. And in every case he was right as refugees were typically shot at or herded away from the towns. And in the case of two of the farms, killed outright and whatever belongings they had were taken over by the residents in question. So she continued southward towards Oklahoma and the safety she believed she would find there. But the only thought on her mind at the moment was water. Just a gulp of water to quench the incurable thirst rolling through her body. And she commanded her feet to move forward each and every step of the way in search of anything that she could drink.

But her legs were cramping and she felt dizzy as she moved forward. She stumbled once, rolling onto the ground before getting back up slowly and continuing on. She came across a dirt path and crossed it like so many others before continuing forward with the single thought of water on her mind. She thought she saw a house in the distance, but felt her mind was playing tricks on her once again as they had been all morning. But she moved that way just in case in hopes of finding help. But eventually the weakness was too much for her to bear as she passed out and fell flat on her face in the middle of a field.

"She appears to be alone," said a man as he peered through a set of binoculars.

"I don't trust anyone," said a second one as he took the glasses and swept the horizon. "Who knows if there isn't a gang out there ready to attack."

"I'm kind of hoping it's too early for them to be using a ruse to draw us out," said the first.

"We can't go on hope alone you know," remarked the second.

"She doesn't look threatening," said the first.

“You want to go find out?” asked the second.

“I’d prefer to find a gang as far away from the house as possible,” said the first. “If they are out that far, you can support us from the house and we can take a few of them out.”

The second man relented for a moment as it was his house and his decision. “I’ll go.”

“It’s my idea,” said the first.

“And it’s my home,” said the second. “I’m not going to let a guest go do all my dirty work.”

“Take a few with you,” said the first.

“Give me Aaron, Adam, Kip, Shelly and Steve,” said the second. “And a med pack.”

The first man headed off to find the individuals that had been requested and returned in short order with a medical bag and two of the specified group. “The rest are on the way.”

“Okay, Aaron, Adam, when we go out, you head towards the trees. Kip and Shelly will check out the ditch over to the northeast. Steve will stick with me,” said the second man.

The remaining individuals showed up, armed to some extent or other and they headed towards the area where they had seen the girl fall down. After departing the house, they had spread out and the pairs went separate directions to do as was instructed. They found the girl lying face down on the ground about three hundred yards away from the house. The man pulled at the pack and rolled her over while being covered by his partner. She was completely limp and dangled from the straps as he held her in place. He loosened the straps and belt while the body slipped out and hit the ground with a minor thud.

“Looks to be dehydrated and probably heat exhaustion,” said the man after checking her vital signs. He noticed one of the pairs was returning from the trees that were in the distance.

“It’s clear,” said the one identified as Aaron.

“We’ll get her to the house,” said the man as he pulled the pack away and set it off to the side. He did happen to notice she had a pistol and removed it from the holster on the pack and tucked it into his waistband. There were no other weapons immediately visible save the machete sticking out of the top of the pack and someone else would be carrying that. He peered and saw his other pair had finished checking the ditch and shot him a thumbs up. He used the military “rally up” hand and arm signal and pointed at the house. The pair started making a beeline towards the house as the man slung his Springfield M1A over his back and picked her up. Her limp form wasn’t that heavy and he stood up to return to the house. “Grab her pack.”

The remaining four started heading back towards the house as well, uncomfortable with being out in the open as they were. While most of the violence had not gotten to their location yet,

they had already been hit once by a gang and defeated the threat before they were able to get to the house. Once they arrived, the front door was opened and the first man stood next to the door with a scoped hunting rifle waiting on them to enter. Once everyone was inside, he shut the door and resumed his perch of watching the front of the house.

“Grab an IV kit with two bags of saline. And grab an ice pack from the freezer,” said the man as he headed towards the spare bedroom where one of the members of his retreat were currently staying. He laid her down on the bed and started removing the boots she was wearing and the outer shirt she had on over the tank top. She was extremely flushed and needed fluids and cooling down more than anything at the current moment. She might not have survived much longer had they not gotten to her in time.

“So what’s the plan?” asked the first man as he had been relieved from his watch position.

“Find out who she is and where she was heading,” said the second. “She’s way too young to be out here wandering around by herself.”

“Taking in more strays?” chuckled the first.

“No, probably not,” said the second as he started trying to find a good vein for an IV. “The least we can do is hydrate her before dumping her back on the road.”

“We found her driver’s license in her pack,” said the first and handed it over.

“Anything else?” asked the second as the IV was brought in and he started prepping the kit.

“Little bit of food, bunch of empty water bottles, jewelry, some silver, a diary, some other odds and ends, but nothing significant,” said the first. “And nothing to indicate she is a part of a gang. Looks like just another unprepared person out wandering around.”

The second man was able to get the IV started in her left arm as another member started applying the ice packs they had brought around her head and under her armpits. “Grab the fan,” said the second man as he hooked up the IV and placed it on the tree intended for the purpose.

“We might have to run the generator to charge up the batteries tonight,” warned another member.

“Fine,” said the second man as he looked over the driver’s license and back to the girl in front of him. “Okay Katherine Shepherd, what were you doing out there?”

Time Since Attacks: 107 days

Date/Time: 6 August/1657 Local

Location: Southeast Kansas

Katie awoke to complete disorientation as she was in a bed and had a sheet covering her lower body. Opening her eyes and attempting to focus through the sunlight coming through a window, she first noticed the stainless steel IV stand as the light was shining off it. She brought the object into focus and noticed the IV line running down to her left arm where it terminated in the crook of her elbow. Still unsure of her surroundings, she noticed a Hispanic looking woman reading a book and turned her head to get a better look. Her movements caught the attention of the woman as she set down the book and came over to her.

“Finally awake I see,” said the woman with a smile. She called to someone else in the house before turning back to Katie. “It’s okay; you’re in a safe place.”

“Where am I?” asked Katie weakly as she tried to sit up.

“Just take it easy,” said the woman calmly. “Don’t try to move too much.”

Katie slumped back over on the bed, but was helped into a semi reclined position by the woman who put extra pillows behind her and helped her scoot into position. A man came into the room as they were finishing and went to the opposite side of the bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he put his hand against her forehead to feel her temperature. She was still weak, but appeared to be out of danger for the moment.

“Confused,” said Katie as she looked around the unfamiliar environment. She saw the man had a kind face, although it looked weathered. Like a man who spent the majority of his time outside under the sun working. He didn’t appear to be that old, but had a wiser look normally associated with age.

“You’re lucky to be alive,” said the man as he felt for her pulse. “You took in five bags of IV and were out cold for two days.”

“Where am I?” asked Katie again.

“You’re in my house,” said the man. “We’ll finish this bag of fluid and pull your plug. Are you hungry?”

“A little,” said Katie who was still trying to orient herself. “Am I still in Kansas?”

“Yep,” said the man. “Near Elk City. What’s your name?”

“Katie, Katie Shepherd,” she replied and shifted a bit and looked around. Her face must have shown the confusion and concern she was currently thinking.

“You’re safe here Katie,” said the man. “Where are you from?”

“Kansas City,” said Katie. “Originally from Delaware.”

“How’d you get so far out here in the country?” asked the man.

Katie looked at him, but didn’t answer. She still wasn’t sure what was going on or why they nursed her back to health. And at this point, she didn’t trust anyone she didn’t really know. “Where are my clothes?” she asked as she noticed she was wearing a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt that was far larger than her small frame would support.

“My wife and sister in law decided you needed a bath,” chuckled the man. “Your original clothes were washed and put with your pack. So how’d you get this far out?”

“I was forced to leave my home,” said Katie. “I was looking for a safe place to go to outside of Kansas City.”

“Are you alone?” asked the man.

Katie looked at him as the memories flooded back into her mind of the reasons she had to leave and who she had left behind. She nodded slightly in response and the man saw it might be a touchy subject so he avoided it for the moment. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich and homemade tortilla chips were brought in along with a large glass of water as well as a packet of instant lemonade. A TV tray was set up next to the bed and the items set down.

“Can you sit up?” asked the man. Katie attempted to wiggle her way up, but ended up needing help from the pair to be able to sit up in her weakened condition. Her legs dangled loosely from the side of the bed as she attempted to sit up straight. The food looked appealing as she slowly picked up half the sandwich and took a bite, helping chase down the sticky peanut butter with a drink of water. The food hit her stomach and immediately formed a cramp as it was the first time in three days she had anything to eat. A bottle of pink bismuth was brought out to help settle her stomach where she could tolerate more food as she needed to get her strength back up. Upon seeing the bottle, a tear formed in her eye and escaped down her cheek as she remembered the last time she had seen the medicine and who it had been provided to. The husband and wife traded a look as Katie let the medicine settle her stomach before taking a small bite out of one of the chips and slowly chewing it up. She managed to get down half the chips and sandwich before having to let it settle for the moment.

“Thank you,” she said and looked at the pair still staring at her intently.

“You’re welcome,” said the man. “You’re welcome to stay here until you get back healthy. After that, we’ll see about getting you to wherever you were going.”

“I honestly don’t know where I’m going,” said Katie.

“Well, we can cross that bridge when we get to it,” said the man. “Let’s just get you healthy first, okay?”

Katie nodded her head slightly once again, still unsure of how she got to this house in the first place. The last thing she remembered was walking along in a daze and having no idea where she

was going. She had only glimpses of wandering through a field before blacking out entirely. “I don’t have a way of paying you,” she said.

“We’ll figure something out,” said the woman with a smile. “You’re free to leave at any time if you want, but I’d take the opportunity to eat a bit and rest up. You’re far too skinny for my tastes and you need some better food than what we found you with.”

“I’ve always been slender,” said Katie quietly.

“Not this much I’d bet,” said the woman. “Feel like finishing your sandwich?”

“No, not yet,” said Katie. “Maybe in a little while.”

“We’ll cover it up to keep away the flies,” said the woman and called to one of the other members in the house. A younger girl came in and smiled at Katie as she took the plate back to the kitchen. “Whenever you are ready, let Susan know and she’ll grab it for you.”

“I really need to go to the bathroom,” said Katie as her bodily functions were starting to catch up. And the pressure on her bladder immediately came on full force.

“I figured your back teeth were floating by now,” chuckled the man as he checked the IV bag and saw it was empty enough to force the last into her system. He squeezed the bag and sent the remainder into her vein before stopping the flow, pulling the catheter out and taping a folded piece of gauze over the point. She attempted to stand on her own, but eventually saw she needed help as the two helped move her into position. She was led into the bathroom and the man and woman closed the door after she was inside. She immediately moved to the toilet and pulled down the shorts after untying them and sat down with a thud. But while the rest of her body may have been moving slowly, her bladder surely wasn’t as the pressure was finally being relieved. It didn’t appear to be stopping anytime soon and Katie let out a sigh of relief. After finishing up, she flushed the toilet, but immediately regretted it since the tank wouldn’t refill. However, she heard the water running into the tank as it normally did and wondered why they had pressure where they were at. After pulling the shorts back up and tying them off, she washed her hands in the sink where again the water was running and looking for a hand towel. After finding the towel and drying off, she opened the door and found the younger girl waiting on her.

“Momma and Daddy are waiting outside,” said the girl and handed a pair of flip flops to Katie. “They asked that you come outside when you were done.”

“Okay,” said Katie and took the footwear. “Thank you.”

She slipped on the flip flops and felt a little stronger than she did since she woke up. But she still moved slower than normal as the young girl led her to the back door and onto the covered concrete patio on the rear of the two story farm house. The man and woman were talking with another person she didn’t know and Katie could see an old farm hand cabin as well as ten camper trailers and another half dozen tents set up in a semicircle around the property. Gardens and fields growing some crops were seen and a handful of people were going about doing chores and

duties. Katie walked slowly over to the man and his wife as they finished talking and the person left on whatever task they had been assigned.

“I figured a little fresh air might help you out,” said the man.

“This is your house?” asked Katie.

“Yep, our little slice of heaven,” said the man. “We’ve got families and friends staying with us right now until things settle down.”

Katie peered around at the grounds and the people nearby. She again wasn’t sure how she had gotten there, but wasn’t complaining since the man and his wife seemed to be genuinely concerned about her health. Whether there were other motives she wasn’t sure, but for the moment, she would be thankful for what she was being given. She did happen to notice everyone was armed with at least a pistol and some carried military style rifles as well.

“We’ll return your pistol to you when you leave,” said the man as if he read her mind. “Not that we don’t trust you, but we don’t trust you just yet.”

“I understand,” said Katie. “I can stay here until I get healthy?”

“Do you have a place to go?” asked the man pointedly.

“Not really, no,” said Katie. “I was heading for Oklahoma.”

“What’s in Oklahoma?” asked the woman.

“I heard it was safe,” said Katie. “So I was trying to reach there.”

“Any family that can take you in?” asked the man.

“Not here,” said Katie. “In Delaware maybe.”

“Long way from here young lady,” said the woman.

“I’m not even sure if they are okay,” said Katie.

“Mother? Father?” asked the man.

“No,” said Katie quietly as her eyes got distant once again.

“Oklahoma isn’t really taking in refugees right now,” said the man.

“I didn’t know,” said Katie.

“We were talking while you were in the bathroom,” said the woman very pointedly. “I think you’ve had something happen to you very recently. I know you’ve obviously had a rough time from the remains of some cuts on your face and body. And you showed up all the way out here with barely any food or water. But the most telling fact is that you showed up all the way out here from Kansas City alone.”

“And we want to help,” said the man.

“Help?” asked Katie.

“Find you a place to live that’s safe,” said the man.

“I...don’t know,” said Katie. “I’m not sure where my life is taking me right now.”

“That makes you little different than most teenagers,” laughed the man. “So in the meantime, you can rest up and get back to health. Just a thought to consider.”

“Are there places taking in refugees?” asked Katie.

“Not many, but a few,” said the man. “I’d avoid the FEMA camps though.”

“Know any of them in Oklahoma?” asked Katie.

“I can’t say,” said the man. “News is a little slow these days and a lot of it is still government propaganda. And being that Oklahoma isn’t sitting well with the federal government or what’s left of it, the news is pretty biased.”

“I guess I could take my chances,” said Katie.

“Or there’s another option,” said the woman.

“What’s that?” asked Katie.

“You could stay here and help out,” said the man. “If you wanted.”

“You would be willing to take me in?” asked Katie.

“Maybe,” said the man. “I’m just going to ask point blank, do you have anywhere else?”

“No,” said Katie quietly.

“Can you work hard, shoot straight and contribute around here?” asked the man.

“I can work hard and contribute, but I’m not sure how,” said Katie. “And I really haven’t shot a gun that much.”

“You had one when we found you,” said the man.

“It was my mother’s gun,” said Katie without explaining further.

“Like how often is ‘that much’ to you?” asked the man as he noticed the past tense Katie put on her comment. He suspected her mother was dead before and Katie partially confirmed it.

“Like twice,” admitted Katie.

“You have any special talents that we don’t know about?” asked the women.

“I can sew a little,” said Katie. “I worked part time in an alterations shop before the strikes.”

“And we were just saying we needed a seamstress around here,” said the man with a chuckle.

“Really?” asked Katie.

“No,” he laughed heartily. “But it’s not a bad talent to have around.”

“I...had some problems before,” said Katie. “Just that you know.”

“Bad problems?” asked the woman.

“I...had something happen to me,” said Katie without explaining. “And to my mother.”

“We’ve all got problems,” said the man. “But yours seem a bit more pronounced. We won’t make you talk about them if you don’t want to, but we’ve got some folks nearby that maybe can help out. We know a good preacher that does dandy counseling.”

“Maybe,” said Katie.

“Are you a bad person?” asked the man pointedly.

“No,” said Katie. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, until you can get your feet back underneath you and you decide which direction you want your life to head, you are welcome to stay,” said the man.

“I don’t want to be a burden,” said Katie.

“Too late for that,” the man chuckled. “Open invitation for the moment. We just ask you work hard like the rest of us and conduct yourself in a proper manner.”

“You would just take me in?” asked Katie.

“Is there a reason we shouldn’t?” asked the man.

“No,” said Katie. “I just saw most of the farms and towns not taking refugees in.”

“We aren’t like a lot of them and we haven’t seen that many refugees out this far,” said the woman. “We’ve taken in a couple though that we thought could help. So you aren’t the first one we’ve offered to stay here.”

“Where would I stay?” asked Katie.

“Accommodations are a little short, but we can find a tent for you and something to sleep on. As you might have noticed we still have water pressure so it isn’t completely unbearable,” said the man. “Best we can offer.”

“I can’t complain,” said Katie after having spent nearly three weeks sleeping under the stars.

“So you accept our invitation?” asked the woman.

“I’d like to give it a try,” said Katie.

“Just behave yourself and you get three hots and a cot along with knowing we have armed security out twenty-four hours a day,” said the man.

“I’ll do my best,” said Katie.

“I never got the chance to introduce myself,” said the man. “I’m Bill Meyers and this is my wife Mariana. Welcome to my farm.”

CHAPTER 19

Date/Time: 9 May/0026

Location: Combined Forces Command, RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

“It took me a long time to get over my mother’s death. But Bill and his family helped me along. I met a nice minister that helped guide me through the tough times and eventually was able to deal with the loss and my loneliness,” said Katie as she finished up her tale.

“Wow,” said Jamie. “I didn’t realize you had been through so much.”

“I haven’t really been open with anyone since. Like not cared for them like I could have I suppose,” said Katie. “Attachment is kind of hard to do after you’ve had so many people you care about ripped away violently.”

“I can completely understand,” said Jamie.

“If you want to run now, I’ll understand,” she said. “My head’s a mess.”

“No, it just proves what a tough lady you are,” said Jamie as he pulled her in closer.

“I’ve had to be,” said Katie. “When I finally got healthy and my head straight, I focused my attention on becoming the best soldier I could. There were bandits and gangs still out there preying on the weak and I knew the only way I could stop them was being strong myself and helping those who couldn’t help themselves. So I focused every single moment on perfecting my skills as a soldier and putting an end to it.”

“You’ve done good so far,” said Jamie.

“I joined the Army not long after the NAU formed up. Bill had asked me to stay behind in the beginning when he left to help watch over his property, but eventually I had to go myself. And after I got through basic and advanced training, I went straight to Cider selection and made it through with flying colors. I joined the unit right before going to Iceland,” said Katie.

“Did you ever go back home?” asked Jamie.

“Yeah, I went back to where the house was a couple of years ago. Apparently a fire had wiped out the entire block at some point and it is nothing but an overgrown field now,” said Katie. “I was able to locate and remark my mother’s grave with a more permanent cross.”

“What about your grandparents and the rest of your family?” asked Jamie.

“They’re still in Delaware,” said Katie. “I tried to explain what happened but they blamed my mother for what happened and basically said if she had listened she would still be alive. I wasn’t

in the mood for a conversation of ‘I told her so’ since she gave her life to protect me and I don’t think anyone should say anything about that.”

“And really, her idea of what I should do with my life was resign my service commitment and come back to Delaware and ‘find a nice boy to settle down with’ along with popping out some great grandchildren. And couldn’t understand what I was doing was important and what I felt I need to do in this life. So we don’t talk if you get my meaning,” she concluded.

“And your dad?” asked Jamie.

“No,” sighed Katie. “It’s not easy tracking anyone down after the Fall and being in Europe and all. I really just don’t have a good place to start. Maybe when it’s all over I’ll give it a try, but I’m not holding my breath.”

“I’m really sorry,” said Jamie.

“Don’t be,” said Katie. “I’m just one of millions that lost someone during the Fall.”

“Maybe, but you happen to be the one I’m talking to right now,” said Jamie. Katie snuggled in a little closer to him and squeezed his shoulder letting him know she appreciated his words and letting her tell her story and release a few of the demons from her soul she carried around for so long. It felt nice to finally open up to someone other than the preacher in Kansas.

“Let’s change the subject though,” said Katie. “I’ve probably depressed the hell out of you.”

“No, not at all,” said Jamie as he adjusted slightly. “Like I said, it’s get to know my Bear night.”

“And I think I reminded you that I’m not your Bear,” she chuckled.

“I know how to put you in check,” he said and his fingers found their way down to her side and he softly ran them against her exposed side. She flinched and swatted at his chest before reminding him broken fingers took a while to heal.

“And you say you never get flirted with,” he chuckled.

“Not that I noticed,” she chuckled and scratched at his chest. “Until you at least.”

“Does Chief Henry know you two met before you got here?” asked Jamie.

“I don’t think so,” said Katie. “I never mentioned it either. I mean, I was a single face out of a thousand faces so I doubt he’d remember me.”

“You have a pretty face,” remarked Jamie. “I doubt anyone would forget it.”

She pulled her leg up his and snuggled in closer. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, you are pretty,” he said and kissed at her forehead. Which in turn was answered by her reaching up and kissing him on the mouth which generated a lot more passion as she slid on top of him. “You are a pushy broad.”

“Well, I didn’t realize I wore you out,” she giggled.

“I didn’t say that,” he said as he added more kisses down her neck.

“We’ve got a big day tomorrow,” she said with a groan. “You might want to save a bit of energy since we are swimming.”

“I’m more worried about you wearing yourself out,” he said and continued to kiss. “I hope your neighbors understand.”

“She’s some girl from a Texan artillery unit,” said Katie between kisses. “She’s already kept me up a couple of nights with her random dudes.”

“We can return the favor,” he said as his hands roamed over her body.

“I don’t want you to wear yourself out before tomorrow morning,” she groaned.

“Our job requires great dedication to the task at hand and service above and beyond the norm,” he said as he adjusted slightly underneath her. “And I’m prepared to do what is necessary.”

“I can feel that,” she said in a husky voice as the two were lost in their passions once again. But even as they let themselves go, she still felt a slight hesitation as this was as close as she had come to anyone in a long time. And confusion filled her mind as she had always attempted to prevent the emotions from entering her thoughts. But for the first time in a long time, she had let herself go and decided to let her heart lead for a change.

Jamie woke early as the sun was beginning to peek into the curtains in the room. Katie was still sound asleep and her alarm hadn’t gone off yet. Jamie checked his watch and found it was just a bit after six. He knew he needed to head back to his room and get showered and changed before the morning. He attempted to pull his arm out from underneath her without waking her and was successful. Picking through the random clothes on the floor, he finally got everything and went back over to the bed and kissed her on the cheek, accidentally waking her in the process.

“Hey,” she smiled. “Leaving?”

“I’ve got to get back and shower and change,” he said and brushed the hair away from her face.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“About ten after six,” he said. “I’ve got to run sweetie.”

“Too bad,” she said with a naughty smile.

“Maybe later,” he smiled and gave her a kiss. However, her aggressive streak took over as she pulled him down and the two passionately embraced for several moments.

“I gotta go baby,” he said after they released.

“Okay,” she said and gathered one last kiss. “See you in a bit.”

“Bye,” he said and departed the room.

“Everyone made it back okay?” asked Thomas as they gathered around the large pool.

“Nobody is reported missing,” said Darren.

“And I didn’t have the MPs waking me up last night to bail anyone out,” said Thomas. “Okay, everyone doing okay this morning?”

“Let’s do it!” remarked Chief Warrant Officer 3 Stephen “Papi” Garcia, recently promoted back to team leader after Major Mark Williams had taken a new job on the staff. He was also breaking in a new troop that had arrived to replace Technical Sergeant Heath Bates who had been wounded and would likely never return to the unit. And as with most new troops, had his problems of being eager to charge into the fire.

“Looks like I’m up first,” said Thomas as they started donning the equipment for the exercise and qualification. Body armor, helmets, vests, packs and simulated weapons were all donned as they got ready to hop in.

“I just realized it’s not going to be fair,” said Darren.

“What’s not?” asked Thomas.

“The stuff isn’t waterlogged yet,” said Darren. “That gives you an advantage.”

“Excuses,” grinned Thomas.

“Bet we still beat you,” said Darren.

“Okay, team dinner,” said Thomas. “We get a quicker time, you buy. You get the quicker time, I’ll buy. Deal?”

“Place of choice?” asked Darren.

“Absolutely,” said Thomas.

“Amber gets to wear an apron?” asked Staff Sergeant Jeremy “Irish” Baines with a grin.

“Sure,” laughed Thomas. “Good incentive for her to move quicker.”

“I don’t wear an apron for anyone,” she remarked.

Thomas got the nod from the instructors and observers in the water that they were ready. Amber had her back to the pool and was adjusting the pack as Thomas walked by and shoved her in the water. She landed with a yelp and immediately started sinking as he followed her in and immediately set to removing the gear and getting back to the surface. It wasn’t an easy exercise and required significant swimming ability to be able to kick back to the surface and take a breath before removing gear and sinking once again. But eventually they had removed the gear along with their uniform tops and boots and were treading water. And continued to tread water for another half a minute before the lead instructor declared them to have passed. The bottom of the five meter end of the pool was the point where they would “pass” or “fail” on the exercise as the object was to shed all the weight before hitting the bottom.

“Well, you won’t set any records, but you passed,” said Darren as he annotated the time on the sheet and Thomas removed himself from the pool.

“I’d hate to think I got sent home for failing this,” chuckled Thomas as he collected his towel and wiped his face. Additional personnel were already collecting the various packs, body armor, helmets, web gear and weapons from the bottom of the pool for another group to put on.

“I’m reasonably certain nobody will fail,” said Darren. “Especially since most of our missions are over land at this point.”

“I think this is just an easy way of getting a free wet t-shirt contest myself,” said Amber as she hauled herself up the ladder.

“Be happy you have something to show,” said 2nd Lieutenant Holly “Casper” Meredith as she grinned at Nancy Dugger.

“I’m perfectly content in that department thank you very much,” said Nancy. And they noticed Amber was sneaking up on Thomas trying to retaliate for his push earlier. However, he caught her out of the corner of his eye and managed to side step her push and countered by shoving her back in the water. She landed with yet another yelp and came floating back to the surface as the teams had a good laugh at her expense.

“Colonel, I know this seems trivial to you,” said the lead British instructor. “But can we please take it a bit more serious?”

“My apologies Petty Officer,” said Thomas. “Okay gang, no horseplay in the pool and no swimming at least thirty minutes after you’ve eaten. And no cannonballs.”

“Not fair!” exclaimed Amber as she was hauled out of the pool by Thomas and Darren. “You were supposed to let me shove you back in!”

“It was more fun to watch you get wet again,” laughed Thomas. “Who’s next?”

“Shannon and her team,” said Darren.

“I really love annual certifications,” remarked Thomas. “Be back in a few.”

The next team already jumped into the pool and were busy shedding the gear without touching the bottom. While it sounded fairly easy, attempting to remove over fifty pounds of gear, boots and other equipment wasn’t as easy as it appeared. Thomas reappeared after showering off and changing into dry clothing with the remainder of his team. “You’re up next.”

“Fun,” said Darren as he handed off the clipboard and watched as the team under the command of Chief Warrant Officer 2 Cliff “Doodle” Morris was going through the exercise. Three of the team had finished, but Specialist Trent “Flower” Rosenberg was having problems. But eventually he shed everything and was treading water. However, one of the instructors came to the poolside and waved over Thomas.

“Your last mate didn’t pass,” he said in a heavy British accent. “He kicked off the bottom.”

“He’ll go again,” said Thomas.

“We have to do refresher training first sir,” said the instructor.

“We’re booked for a while,” said Thomas. “Give him another go.”

“I’m not supposed to sir,” said the instructor as his team was busy tossing out the equipment to the next group.

“Call it a favor,” said Thomas.

“Okay, but if he doesn’t get it on the next pass, I have to report it up,” said the instructor.

“Flower, you’re going again,” said Thomas.

“Okay sir,” said Rosenberg without argument as he hopped out of the pool and collected his gear. Putting everything back on, he jumped back into the pool solo and started the exercise once again. The entire gathered group came to the poolside to cheer him on and he passed this

time without any trouble. He was hoisted out of the pool by the rest of his team and congratulated by the group.

“Okay, he passed,” said the instructor. “Next group!”

Darren and his team hopped in the water and completed the exercise in slightly better time than Thomas and his team had. And Darren made sure to point this fact out to Thomas as he exited and saw the official time.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Thomas. “Go shower up.”

“You’ve got dinner tonight,” reminded Frank as they departed. Bill Meyers’ team was up next and also completed the exercise somewhat with ease. But as always, Katie Shepherd had a bit of problems as she was naturally not that buoyant and sank towards the bottom. But she managed to keep from having to use it and eventually got to treading water. They were instructed to exit the pool and Katie saw Jamie smile at her and give her a thumbs up. She briefly smiled back at him and departed with her team to shower and change.

Eventually Thomas was rejoined by Darren as the two watched as Rick and his team took their turn. And something interesting came up yet again.

“How is that even possible?” asked Darren.

“How is what possible?” asked Thomas.

“You have a brother and a sister, same mom and dad and one you could use as a surfboard and the other as a boat anchor,” said Darren as Heather kept popping up to the surface with ease and Rob kept sinking towards the bottom.

“Nice to know we could sit on top of her and paddle our way out if we needed to,” chuckled Thomas. “So she’s useful for something.”

“I heard that,” said Heather as she pulled herself up the ladder out of the pool.

“We were discussing how drastically different you and your brother are,” said Darren. “You float like a cork and he sinks like a rock.”

“It’s always been that way too,” said Heather. “He’s the weird one of the family.”

“For you, that’s saying a lot,” laughed Thomas.

“Not cool!” objected Heather as she helped the rest of her team out and they left to change.

“How many more do we have?” asked Darren.

“We’re over halfway,” said Thomas.

“And this afternoon?” asked Darren.

“Sensitivity training and other various briefings we get to sleep through,” said Thomas.

“I don’t think we’re insensitive,” remarked Darren.

A scoff was heard from the side as Katie had returned from changing. “Really?”

“Okay, besides making fun of short people,” said Darren with a grin.

“You guys need to go through it twice,” she laughed and returned to the bench. Before long she was joined by Jamie after he returned from changing.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she said and looked away.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

“No, it’s not that,” she said. “I just...we’ll talk at lunch, okay?”

“Sounds fair,” he said, but was still worried he had done something wrong and upset her over something. She didn’t appear to be paying any attention to him and before long he was called over by Thomas.

“What happened to the hand?” asked Thomas as he saw the new dressing Jamie had applied.

“I cut it last night,” said Jamie simply.

“Paper cut?” asked Thomas with a look that he expected more on the answer.

“I...had an accident sir,” said Jamie.

“Doing?” asked Thomas.

“When we were coming back on base,” sighed Jamie and told his commander the whole truth. “We were avoiding the gate guards and used a pedestrian gate building to climb over. I sliced open my hand on the guttering when I came off the roof.”

“Oh, okay,” said Thomas plainly as he sipped at his ever present travel mug full of coffee.

“You aren’t mad sir?” asked Jamie.

“You think you were the only one hopping fences last night?” asked Thomas.

“I guess not,” said Jamie.

“You did what you had to do to avoid getting detained by the police and made it here to training on time and sober,” said Thomas. “That’s a good day in my book.”

“Roger that sir,” said Jamie.

“You did good in the water today,” said Thomas.

“I had to do it fairly recently when I came in theater,” said Jamie. “So I had practice already.”

“Ah, yeah,” said Thomas. “Well, you’re good for another year.”

“Yay,” deadpanned Jamie. “Anything else sir?”

“Nope, I was just curious,” said Thomas. Jamie looked back and saw Katie was talking with other members of the unit so he went back to his team.

“You look different today,” observed Heather.

“I do?” asked Jamie.

“Yeah, and besides the bandage before you bring it up,” said Heather.

“How did you know I was going to say that next?” laughed Jamie.

“You think you’re the only smartass in this outfit?” laughed Heather.

“Just got a good night’s sleep I suppose,” said Jamie.

“Okay,” said Heather who knew there was more, but didn’t know what exactly.

“What do you mean I look different?” asked Katie as the same question was posed from Captain Shannon Parsons. “I don’t feel different.”

“Normally you have this intense scowl on your face and grim look of determination. It’s missing today and I’d almost say you had a happy look for a change,” said Shannon. “We’ll call it a very content look instead.”

“I have no idea,” said Katie.

“Well, whatever happened last night, it was good medicine,” said Shannon.

“What do you mean what happened last night?” asked Katie.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” said Shannon. “You had your Bear look when I saw you yesterday and today you look a bit more relaxed.”

“Oh,” said Katie.

“Awfully defensive about it aren’t we?” asked Shannon with a grin.

“I didn’t think I was,” said Katie evasively.

“Something happened last night didn’t it?” asked Shannon with a grin. “You met someone?”

“No,” said Katie, but her face told a different story.

“You can’t lie worth a damn honey,” laughed Shannon. “But if you don’t want me prodding into your off duty time, I’ll leave it alone.”

“I get that from my mother,” said Katie with a brief smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“Just if you know what you’re looking for,” said Shannon. “I minored in psychology when I was in college and it’s more of a hobby to me now. And unfortunately for you guys, you are my test subjects and I tend to notice change in moods and whatnot.”

“I’ll try to be more reserved,” said Katie.

“Hey, I think it’s nice if you found someone to help ease the tension a little,” said Shannon.

“My tension was eased a lot,” grinned Katie.

“Oh,” said Shannon with a knowing grin. “Well, I think it’s nice.”

“Our secret, okay?” asked Katie.

“Oh laws yes,” laughed Shannon. “We know how to be discrete.”

“Thanks Volley,” said Katie.

“Keep it up and you might find you like it,” said Shannon.

“One thing about it is I’ve been able to not let my personal feelings come into the job. I try to focus one hundred percent on what I’m doing here and I don’t need the distractions of a man in my life screwing up my rhythm,” said Katie, but not really agreeing with her own logic.

“Yeah, I know how it is when you try to be hard and act like you don’t care about someone while doing this job,” said Shannon sarcastically.

“It’s different with you and Token,” said Katie.

“Not really,” said Shannon. “I just learned to balance the two very carefully. Look, Michael goes out and does dangerous things. As do I. We both fret over each other, but we’ve both learned to put it in a box in our mind while we’re at work. And when we’re not at work, we have that ability to open the box and let the emotions out. So you just have to find your box.”

“Gonna be a small box with me,” said Katie.

“That’s the nice things about boxes; they come in all shapes and sizes. And if you need a bigger box, you can always get one,” said Shannon.

“You have a simple way of putting things,” observed Katie.

“When you’re married to my husband, you have to be simple,” laughed Shannon.

“You know I’m sitting right here?” asked Michael from the other side of Katie.

“How long have you been sitting there?” asked Katie with her eyes opening a bit wider.

“Long enough,” said Michael. “We all love you to death, but you don’t always have to be Bear twenty-four seven. Be a human for a change sometimes.”

“Ganging up on me?” chuckled Katie.

“Nope,” said Michael. “Common sense for a change. Everyone needs a release every once in a while. We get ours during times like this. Warbucks gets his release from defying orders and going on unsanctioned missions. We all have something to keep us sane.”

“I thought we all had to be slightly insane to be in this outfit,” laughed Katie.

“Well, there is that too,” laughed Michael.

“Mike! Stay away from my talent!” remarked Bill Meyers.

“Straight up trade for Giggles,” said Michael.

“Hey!” objected Staff Sergeant Nancy Dugger.

“But only if you throw in a ladder with the trade,” said Michael.

“Sorry, can’t part with the Bear,” laughed Meyers. “Or my ladder for that matter.”

“Ya’ll just wait til I grow up,” said Katie. “I’ll be whipping every one of you.”

The group had a good laugh at the conversation as the remainder of the teams finished up the exercise and returned from changing. Once everyone was back in place, Thomas gathered them around addressed the group.

“Okay folks, I’ll need four pairs that aren’t team leaders to volunteer to take all the uniforms over to the laundry exchange and turn them in. Put it on the unit tab,” said Thomas.

Eight individuals were selected out of the group as hands went up. Thomas didn’t have trouble finding any volunteers for the task as the group tended to go above and beyond as it was.

“Okay, so from here, grab lunch and be formed back up at Kisling Hall at 1330. We’ve got an entire afternoon of briefings and I swear I’ll keel haul the first person I hear snoring this afternoon, understand?” asked Thomas.

“I think that only works if you’re on a boat,” laughed Holly Meredith.

“We’re on an island so it’s a pretty significant deal,” said Thomas.

“And who gets to keel haul you?” asked Dave Lawson.

“I’ve got Glamour to keep me out of trouble,” said Thomas with a grin.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen,” laughed a member of the group.

“Fine,” said Thomas. “I’ll allow Sister to do it. She knows a thing or two about the Navy or so I heard anyway.”

The crowd gave some catcalls and “ohhhhs” at the expense of Sergeant Jill “Sister” Dugger who had become involved with an AFNAS SEAL somewhat recently. She blushed up at the remarks and couldn’t find a decent retort at the moment.

“On a serious note, I’ll need the team leads together for lunch so try to get there a little early. We’ve got to go over the rest of the week’s training schedule and start getting prepped for next week. We’ve got an easy week this week so rest up while you can since we’re back in the field next week for exercises. And a three day E and E exercise against the British Home Guard as well as an SAS Squadron,” said Thomas.

“They ain’t got nothing on us!” exclaimed Sergeant Fred “Woody” Stone with pride.

“They are pretty decent at playing hide and go seek,” said Thomas. “And we’re playing in their backyard so I’d expect it to get a bit entertaining. Okay, any questions?”

Nobody answered and the group was dismissed. The group grabbed their wet clothing and tossed it into large bags for transport over to the laundry turn in. The remainder of the group

grabbed their packs and headed back to the living quarters to drop off the wet pair of boots and head to lunch. After Jamie arrived, he set the boots inside the bathtub portion of the shared bathroom upside down to drain out just as Johnny Thompson was coming inside to set his up as well.

“Hey man,” said Johnny.

“What’s going on?” asked Jamie.

“You know how it is,” said Johnny. “Heading to lunch?”

“Yeah, go ahead and get it out of the way,” said Jamie. “You?”

“Nap for me,” said Johnny. “Late night last night.”

“I understand,” said Jamie.

“Sorry if I woke you up,” said Johnny with a sly grin.

“I wasn’t here last night,” said Jamie and immediately regretted it.

“I can completely understand,” grinned Johnny. “See you in a bit.”

“Later,” said Jamie as he quickly dropped everything and headed for the mess hall. He had no idea what happened in the brief time between the morning where they had said goodbye and the time they met at the pool. He didn’t know what he had done to upset her, but the best chance of finding out was speaking with her as she suggested over lunch.

CHAPTER 22

Date/Time: 9 May/1134

Location: Combined Forces Command, RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

Jamie opened the door and headed into the cafeteria where he joined in the growing line. He was lucky since it was right at the beginning of service before the line grew longer than normal. As he headed in, he saw Katie was already ahead of him and had finished up signing for the meal before he got through the line. He was waiting on the main service line and decided he would give himself a minor treat that day since he had been doing well and moved over to the fast food line. After getting a double bacon cheeseburger, baked beans and fries, he decided a little bit of health might be in order and got a small premade side salad. Upon signing for his meal, he noticed Katie was still sitting alone and headed for her table.

“So am I still in trouble?” asked Jamie as he took a seat across from her in the dining hall.

“I didn’t know you were in trouble,” she said and added with a grin. “Again.”

“With you,” he said with a smirk.

“No, you aren’t in trouble with me,” said Katie. “Unless you didn’t change your bandage like you were supposed to.”

“No ma’am,” he replied and showed her the changed bandage.

“So why would you assume you were in trouble?” she asked.

“I just...” he started. “You were kind of standoffish at the pool.”

“I just wanted to separate work from play,” said Katie.

“Two people having a conversation isn’t okay?” he asked.

“I don’t...” she started to say and stopped.

“Go on,” he said.

“I’m a little confused right now, okay?” she stated.

“I’m sorry,” he said and started to leave.

“No, you don’t need to go,” she said and nodded at the chair. “It’s complicated.”

“Okay,” said Jamie with some confusion. And with that the conversation came to a dead halt as neither knew what to say at that point. However, the silence after two minutes was killing one and she brought up another point.

“You really should eat a little healthier,” said Katie as she nodded at the cheeseburger he was devouring at the present.

“I got a salad as well,” he protested.

“Yeah, that balances it out,” she chuckled.

“I’m allowed a cheat day every once in a while,” he said and picked at the fries.

“Something men can do a little easier,” said Katie. “If I ate that, it would go straight to my ass.”

“I think you’d be okay for a single meal,” he said.

“You don’t realize what that kind of stuff does to a girl’s figure,” she said.

“Yeah, I can see how fat you are to start with,” he said sarcastically.

She laughed and rolled her eyes, but did reach across the table and steal a French fry because she could cheat a little as well. “You don’t want to know?”

“Know what?” he asked.

“Why I’m complicated?” she asked.

“Aren’t all women?” he said in reply.

“I’m not like most women,” she said.

“This is true,” he agreed. “You’re different, but not in a bad way.”

“So that’s a good way?” she asked.

“I’d say so,” said Jamie. “So why is this complicated?”

“I’m not sure if us being together breaks rules or anything,” she said. “And my personal issues coming into this as well.”

“I…” he started. “Can I be completely honest?”

“I’d prefer it,” she said.

“You are hiding,” he said simply and hopefully wasn’t something he would regret. But he felt like he had to say what was on his mind and let the chips fall where they may.

“Hiding?” she asked.

“Hiding behind that wall you’ve thrown up that you think protects you. I’d be willing to bet you’ve been flirted with before and hit on and even asked out for a cup of coffee in more than a friendly manner. But you always said no because you are afraid of letting your emotions show. You want to be the good soldier that doesn’t want to start to care because you’re afraid of getting hurt again. So you throw up this cold hard barrier that you think will protect you. And you use the rules as an excuse not to get closer to someone.”

“Honestly, I can completely understand why you are hesitant, but you can’t go the rest of your life without caring a little. Whether or not you want to admit it, you will eventually get so hard and used to being able to deflect your emotions that you’ll be alone the rest of your life. Mainly because you will forget how to care,” he said, letting it all out. He didn’t know what her reaction would be and if he would be wearing the glass of tea she was currently sipping, but everything he thought was on the table.

She was a little mad that he assumed to know her mind after not knowing her that long. And her anger must have shown a little, but as she thought about it, he was right and she had been hiding from the fact she hadn’t allowed herself to care about anyone since her mother died. She knew she cared for her teammates, but not on a level that some did. And her face softened a little.

“You throw a lot at a girl on a first date,” she remarked.

“You’re not mad?” he asked.

“A little,” she said. “But you’re only saying what others are thinking.”

“So I’m not going to the briefings wearing that glass of tea?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Not yet,” she warned him although the mirth in her eyes told a different story.

“Look, I can understand why you might be hesitant to open up a little,” he said. “And maybe it’s not my place to tell you that. But you’ll find I’m a pretty open and honest dude.”

“No, it is your place to tell me that,” she replied. “As a teammate, you should be open and honest no matter if it hurts or not.”

“Just a teammate?” he asked.

“Well, that’s what you are,” she replied.

“I’d rather not hurt you,” he replied.

“Gonna take a lot more than that,” she said with a smirk.

“So last night?” he asked.

“I’m not sure how to feel about last night,” she said bluntly. “I enjoyed last night, sure. And could even go for a repeat performance. But I just don’t want my emotions interfering with my job. So I’m a little confused. Plus the angle that I’m not positive we can see each other.”

“Are there rules?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, Chief Henry and Amy are an item. We’ve got the Parsons that are married. Amber’s husband was a part of the unit until right before you got here. But most of that predates my time here so I’m not sure.”

“I can be sneaky,” he grinned.

“Not really,” she smiled. “You’re pretty blunt.”

“As are you,” he grinned. “Well, pushy at least.”

“Is it a turn off?” she asked.

“No, just a little more than a lot of guys can handle,” he replied.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be,” he said.

“Look, I enjoy our company and maybe in time...I mean, who knows what the future holds,” she said. “I just want to be careful and not get you into trouble.”

“Or get yourself in trouble by actually letting your emotions show just a little?” he asked.

“No, not really,” she said.

“Yes, really,” he said.

“Arguing with me again?” she asked with half a smile.

“I’d say no, you’re too stubborn to argue with,” he laughed.

“Are you calling me stubborn?” she laughed. “Either way, I just don’t want to put you in a position to where you get briefed again.”

“You’re a golden child around here so I’d be more concerned with getting you in trouble,” he grinned. “I’m the bad boy that gets good girls like you in trouble.”

“I think you have a few redeeming qualities,” she said with a smile.

“Such as?” he asked.

“You don’t argue with me...much,” she laughed.

“Probably because you’ve never had a guy stand up to you before,” he said.

“There is that,” she agreed. “Can you give me a little time to sort out the mess?”

“I suppose,” he sighed. “Not sure if I can contain myself if another British girl picks me because of my dancing skills though.”

“Self-control is a wonderful thing,” she said with a sly grin. “You proved that last night.”

“You are something else,” he laughed. “And you are welcome.”

She laughed at the comments and the conversation moved on to other items. They both were still a little curious about the other and a few more “get to know you” detail questions were asked as they finished eating and enjoyed each other’s company.

“Looks like someone tamed the Bear,” said Thomas with smile and a nod towards the table where Jamie and Katie were having lunch together. And from the appearances there was more to it than a happenstance meeting and sharing a table.

“What?” asked Rick as he glanced in that direction. “Bear and Outcast are eating. So?”

“Look a bit closer,” said Darren who had noticed the same thing. It was apparent there was a mutual attraction there as their body language was extremely telling.

“Oh great,” sighed Bill Meyers. “I’ll talk to her about it later.”

“And I’ll talk to mine,” sighed Rick.

“About what?” asked Thomas.

“About the rules,” said Rick.

“What rules?” asked Darren.

“The unwritten ones,” said Rick. “No messing with teammates.”

“Is there such a rule?” asked Thomas.

“Not written,” said Rick. “But yeah.”

“I don’t ever recall the matter coming up,” said Thomas.

“But it isn’t kosher,” said Bill.

“And why not?” asked Thomas. “They are on separate teams, both are single and around the same age. As long as they keep work with work and play with play, there isn’t a problem.”

“It’s like dating your sister,” said Rick. “Just not cool.”

“Look, we knew this might happen eventually,” said Thomas. “It’s what happens when you get guys and gals together. Most find their relationships with folks outside this unit, but you had to know it was going to happen.”

“Yeah, but...” said Rick and not finding an argument since he was being trumped.

“I can’t have married folks serving together in this unit and make restrictions on the single folks at the same time,” said Thomas answering what was on Rick’s mind. “Greg and Amy are positive proof that you can have a relationship and still work together.”

“Yeah, but that’s different!” said Rick. “They were together before we joined.”

“No, not really,” said Thomas. “It was there prior to, but didn’t develop until after we were in Texas.”

“Yeah, but you darn well know how much drama can come about if it doesn’t end well,” said Bill. “It causes disharmony.”

“So even if you two tell them not to see each other, you can’t hold their hands twenty-four hours a day. And you should know Outcast has a bit of a rebel streak in him and would ignore you anyway,” said Darren. “Better in public than sneaking around.”

“We could order it,” said Rick.

“And you know that’ll fly,” said Thomas sarcastically. “Look, I’ll talk to them, okay?”

“I guess,” sighed Rick.

“Smack them both in the back of the head, okay?” chuckled Bill.

“You guys act like you’ve never been attracted to a girl before,” said Darren.

“I guess we’ve just been so protective of the ladies on our teams it’s gotten to where we’re the mean daddies not wanting any boy to lay a finger on them,” sighed Rick.

“Well, they do make a cute couple,” remarked Shannon Parsons who had put two and two together when she saw the couple sitting by themselves.

“Oh great,” sighed Rick. “Now we get all mushy over this. ‘Oh, how cute’ you say...”

“Okay, enough,” said Thomas. “I’ll handle it.”

“So, are you finished?” asked Katie as their leadership discussed other matters.

“Yeah, why?” asked Jamie.

“Do you want some dessert?” she asked.

“You gave me grief over what I ate now ask me if I want dessert?” he laughed.

“Just wondering,” she said. “Don’t you have anything in your room?”

“I’ll be okay,” he said.

“You sure?” she asked. “We’ve got about an hour and a half before the classes start.”

“I was thinking of a quick nap,” he said.

“Oh,” she said dejectedly. “Okay.”

He didn’t think too much on what...and suddenly the realization of what she was implying smacked him right in the face. “I’m an idiot.”

“So you want dessert? I’m down,” she said.

“Let’s go,” he said and collected the two trays as they departed the cafeteria. And back to his room where he found dessert wasn’t the only thing on her mind. But it left him with a feeling of confusion when it was all said and done as he wasn’t sure which way she was leaning. He was fairly smitten with her and in a very short amount of time. But he couldn’t get a read on whether she was just using him or actually felt something for him and her armor was cracking a bit. So for the moment he would just go with the flow and take things as they came. But one thing was for certain, she was way different than other women he had been around before and had him far more than curious on a personal level.

“...and you can use the appropriate chain of command to report fraud, waste and abuse violations as you see fit. There are protections in place for whistle blowers so don’t feel like you would be put in a position to jeopardize your career by any means. Coalition Forces Regulation

200-42, Chapter 14 deals with the protections as well as the avenues you can take for reporting such fraud, waste and abuse. And Coalition Forces Memorandum 1412 deals specifically with reporting said violations across the different nations and services. The war effort requires each and every one of us to make sure the resources are used appropriately. Are there any questions for me today?" asked the current briefer as he finished up his forty-five minute briefing on yet another checkbox the unit had to have for annual certifications. And being that it followed the safety briefing was pure agony and more than a few people in the theater had their head bobbing by the time the briefings were done. However, there was always one in every crowd.

"I have a question," said a member as he rose. "Let's say I have an overage of a certain item and feel someone else can use it from another nation. Who do I turn it into?"

"You hold onto it and trade it off for something you do need," said Stephen Garcia. As he was hidden from view by Rick Jones, the briefer couldn't tell where it came from.

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed the briefer. "Who said that?"

Nobody acknowledged the question, yet at least three quarters of the theater mumbled their agreement with Stephen or nodded their heads.

"That's a really good question and I'm glad you asked. And please ignore the comments that were just made. That doesn't work in the real military," said the briefer as the remainder of the theater rolled their eyes or hung their heads in shame as the briefer went on for another seven minutes describing the process.

"You know, me and a couple of the boys could take that kid outside and give him the answers," said Senior Master Sergeant Brian "Tattoo" Holmes in a low voice to Thomas.

"If he asks another stupid question, don't grab the kid, do a snatch and grab on the instructor and hold him for ransom," said Thomas.

"You honestly think anyone would pay to get him back?" asked Brian.

"Tell them we'll put him on twenty-four hours a day on the Armed Forces Network talking about fraud, waste and abuse if they don't pay up," suggested Thomas.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Please," said the instructor as he looked at Thomas and Brian. "This is an invaluable subject that is critical to the war effort! I request you don't interrupt please!"

"Our bad!" said Thomas with a large cheesy grin. "Please proceed!"

Barely contained sniggers and snorts were heard throughout the ranks in the Cider section as well as the other units inside the theater. Eventually the briefer got finished with the answer and looked at his watch. "Okay, we'll take a quick fifteen minute break. Please be back in your seats at quarter after for your sensitivity briefing."

“Check this out,” said Darren as he stood and tried to get by Senior Master Sergeant Tim “Fluffy” Daniels. Darren waved his hand in front of his face several times with no reaction. He didn’t appear to be asleep since his eyes were wide open.

“Did he die from sheer boredom?” asked Greg Henry.

Darren snapped his fingers in front of his face which brought Tim back to the land of the living.

“What?” he asked. “Are we done with the safety briefing?”

“Oh that’s classic,” laughed Thomas. “You can sleep with your eyes open?”

“It’s a trick I learned a long time ago,” said Tim as he wiped his face.

“Dude, you’ve got to teach me that!” said Greg. “We can make millions off the book deal.”

“Oh no,” said Tim as he stood up. “That’s my little secret.”

“Am I going to have to keep an eye on you in the staff meetings from now on?” asked Thomas.

“You don’t really hold what the rest of the military calls ‘staff meetings.’ It’s more like a cross between a rugby match, a Metallica concert and a mass riot,” remarked Darren.

“We do need more music during our informal staff calls,” said Thomas. “Everyone gets their own intro song with smoke and lights. I want our command trailer completely pimped out with a fog machine, strobe lights and surround sound. Make it happen.”

“I’m not sure a fog machine is on an official request form,” said Darren.

“I bet I can find one,” said Tim.

“No way,” said Darren.

“What are you willing to wager?” asked Tim.

“Hmm, let’s say the bottle of Scotch I’m saving and a batch of Janet’s cookies,” said Darren.

“Which ones?” asked Tim.

“Your choice,” said Darren. “And what do I get if you don’t come through?”

“I’ll give you my Yankees hat and my music collection on MP3,” said Tim.

“Deal,” said Darren as he stuck his hand out.

“You’re so screwed,” laughed Tim as he took the offered hand.

Thomas had wandered to the back of the theater and was stretching out and attempting to keep himself awake through the briefings. He remembered he wanted to make contact with Jamie Collins and Katie Shepherd and was on his way to collect them when he was stopped by an old friend.

“Congratulations Lieutenant Colonel Dayfield,” said Colonel Powers from J-SOD.

“Colonel!” exclaimed Thomas as he received a punch from the front on his new rank. “Ooof!”

“That’s the least you deserve,” he laughed. “The headquarters said you would be here.”

“Yeah, about that,” laughed Thomas.

“How are you doing?” asked the Colonel.

“Oh, if I get another briefing like I just had I think I’m going to start murdering people,” said Thomas with a faux excitement.

The Colonel had a good laugh as they headed to the outside of the theater for a breath of fresh air. “What brings you all the way to England?” asked Thomas.

“We had a leadership conference Manchester with the Russian National Forces. Their civil war is about over and they are going to need some time to consolidate before joining us. But they are coming in on our side of things so it’ll be a huge help on the northern flank of the IU. So it was initial talks and getting on the same page of things,” said the Colonel.

“Kinda obvious they would have been next,” said Thomas.

“Apparently they weren’t happy with a bunch of places that end in ‘Stan joining the IU. And certainly weren’t comfortable with the so called assurances they wouldn’t be targeted. Especially after the IU was found raping and robbing equipment, weapons, aircraft, vehicles and munitions from their old stocks. Pretty much if it wasn’t nailed down, the IU was hauling it off,” said the Colonel.

“I thought the majority of it was being used in the Russian Civil War,” said Thomas.

“I think you underestimate the amount of crap the Russians piled up during the Cold War. I’d be willing to bet even the senior Russian leadership before the Fall didn’t have the first clue about the vast stockpiles they had saved up,” said the Colonel.

“Yeah, folks tend to get a little upset when you start stealing their toys,” remarked Thomas.

“Don’t ask me how I know.”

“But either way, I had to swing down and talk to you about something else,” said the Colonel.

“I’m all ears,” said Thomas. “And hopefully it removes me from the rest of these briefings.”

“Sorry, I can’t promise that,” laughed the Colonel.

“You’re dead to me sir,” laughed Thomas.

“Anyway, the Russians, well, quite a few of the special ops guys are requesting a briefing on how you took down that camp. The US was very interested as well as the Brits and the Texans. So I took the liberty of scheduling you in for a full on briefing on the operation,” said the Colonel. “You and whichever staff you feel could contribute.”

“Like a formal briefing with slides and pretty pictures?” asked Thomas.

“Being a Lieutenant Colonel means you have to do this from time to time,” said the Colonel.

“I’d bet Mark Williams is behind this,” said Thomas. “He knows how much I hate staff work.”

“No,” laughed the Colonel. “He’s getting settled in after the R and R though.”

“Well, good,” said Thomas. “What kind of briefing and where?”

“Probably in Manchester or maybe Berlin. And a standard briefing from the start of the mission, planning, intel coordination, logistics, the takedown itself, so on and so forth,” said the Colonel.

“Even though the mission was...questionable?” asked Thomas.

“You might want to omit the parts about how it came together,” said with Colonel with a chuckle. “But let’s face it; the mission was a textbook example of a combined operation that went off without a hitch. And since the coalition leadership was ecstatic that we not only liberated that camp, but managed to get two complete divisions of troops surrounded and to surrender, the questionable methods were shoved in a deep dark hole never to emerge.”

“I suppose I could whip something up,” said Thomas. “I’d like Major Thompson and Williams in on it as well. Probably Captain Parsons, the Mrs. Captain Parsons type since she did a lot of the legwork on the coordination. Captain Andy McNabb of the Australian Defense Force was who led us there originally. Chief Scott and Captain Meyers both had reports that positively identified the compound. Captain Brown from the Rangers had a critical role in our escape. Honestly there’s a lot of people that should be involved.”

“But only one commander that brought them all together,” said the Colonel. “You can have an assistant to help during the briefings, but that’s it. This is your briefing to give.”

“I don’t like the spotlight sir,” said Thomas.

“Maybe not, but the coalition staff is setting some new priorities,” said the Colonel. “With the way this one went down, they are starting to feel like the liberations of these camps should be at

the forefront of our taskings. They obviously won't always be in the positions like you had where we can evacuate them easily, but the logistics of that can be worked out. But the major point is the fact your unit and those Rangers took down that camp in less than fifteen minutes and freed five hundred people. Your force was outnumbered almost three to one and you didn't take any significant casualties. And if that isn't a lesson to be taught, I don't know what is."

"I understand," said Thomas.

"So start putting some thoughts down on paper. I'll send in one of the paper pushers to help with the briefing portion and show you how to turn on the computer and make everything pretty when you get done with your exercises next week," said the Colonel. "And of course, something on paper to take away from the briefing."

"Are you implying I'm not technologically inclined?" laughed Thomas.

"Of course not," laughed the Colonel. "I would never do that!"

"Seems easy enough," said Thomas.

"You might even like staff work before long," grinned the Colonel.

"Oh no," said Thomas. "That's your realm."

"Well, either way, I'll let you know when everything will go down. I'd plan on giving it at least three or four times with Birds and Stars in attendance each time," said the Colonel.

"You failed to mention that part," said Thomas.

"You'd be surprised at how many people are interested in hearing the details of that mission," said the Colonel. "And it didn't help that General Chambers was screaming your praises to the high heavens after it was said and done."

"That man..." said Thomas with a shake of his head.

"Would adopt you if he had the chance," chuckled the Colonel.

"I think I'm still skating on thin ice with him," said Thomas.

"You really don't know what went down between the mission and your promotion do you?" asked the Colonel.

"Honestly no," said Thomas. "A bit of scuttlebutt, but nothing confirmed."

"Well, it appears Colonel Woodson started a major gripe and had a few supporters. General Chambers went to bat for you in a huge way. Like threatening to resign his commission if

anything happened to you kind of huge way. And he wasn't alone as the Corps Commander jumped in on your side as well."

"Well, after the facts of what happened came out, it appears Colonel Woodson ended up being faced with two choices, resign or face a trial for what he did. It was a pure mess and when his attorney told him he'd rather be on the prosecution, he resigned and went home to momma. And it didn't help your case that the Governors of Colorado, Kansas, North Dakota and Minnesota called up the General of the Army Martin and asked what decoration he was putting you in for. For once, politics worked out in your favor," said the Colonel.

"I didn't realize it went that high," said Thomas.

"The highest levels now know exactly who Thomas Dayfield is," chuckled the Colonel.

"I'm not sure that's a good thing," laughed Thomas.

"You might be surprised at how far you can advance with a little backing from the right people. Doing your job exceptionally well is one thing. Having senior leadership and politicians back you for higher positions are helpful cards to have in one's deck," said the Colonel.

"You know I just want to do a job and get back home," said Thomas.

"And along the way the Army will use you in the capacity you are most suited to. And if that happens to be, say a full Colonel commanding a Brigade or even my job at the J-SOD, then that's where your capacity will lie," said the Colonel. "Something to remember."

"I don't care about promotions," said Thomas. "Not really at least. I do care about getting my people recognized and more pay for them as well which means accelerated promotions."

"You may not care about promotions, but you will find that being in a higher grade can get a lot more of what you want accomplished. While most of the people look past your rank and see the aptitude you have for the job, there are some that won't deal with you because you're a Major or a Lieutenant Colonel. So there are unseen benefits to being promoted," said the Colonel.

"I just got promoted, so that's a long way off," said Thomas.

"With the way this war is going, it might not be as far as you think," said Powers.

"I'll try to play nice and let the chips fall," said Thomas.

"That's all we're asking," said the Colonel.

"Okay, you going to shoot me an email about the briefing?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah, times and dates," said the Colonel. "Your assistant will be here Friday when you get out of the field. Have fun with those SAS boys by the way. They're damn good."

“So are we,” said Thomas. “I’ve got to get back. The next briefing has probably already started and you know how detrimental to the war effort it is to miss sensitivity training.”

“You need it more than anyone,” laughed the Colonel as he shook Thomas’ hand.

“People keep telling me that for some reason,” laughed Thomas. “We’ll see you soon.”

“Take care,” said the Colonel as the two saluted and Thomas returned inside. He was making his way back to his seat and trying not to cause too much disturbance as the briefing had already started. As he made his way through the aisle he was stopped by the briefer.

“Excuse me, you needed to be in your seat before the briefing started. I’m afraid you’ll have to reschedule,” said the Second Lieutenant.

“My apologies, I was held up,” said Thomas as he continued.

“Sorry, but you’re going to have to leave and come back next week,” said the Lieutenant.

“Okay,” said Thomas with a large grin as he continued towards his seat.

“I said you need to leave,” said the Lieutenant.

“I heard you,” said Thomas. “And I’m ignoring you.”

“What?!” exclaimed the Lieutenant who had no idea who he was dealing with.

“You might want to continue with your briefing Lieutenant,” suggested Darren and murmured agreements followed from those that could see the rank on Thomas’ uniform.

“I’m the instructor and in charge here,” said the Lieutenant. “You need to leave.”

“Son, just don’t,” said Thomas. “Else you’ll find yourself the recipient of a significantly life altering briefing about how insensitive I can be if you choose to continue on this path.”

The Lieutenant was dumbstruck and looked over at the Captain that he had accompanied to the briefing. He missed the subtle shaking of his head and persisted. “What is your name?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. Dayfield, Commander, 14th Special Operations Battalion, North American Union Forces. You want my service number as well?” asked Thomas with an edge in his voice and a look on his face that spoke volumes.

“Sir, you aren’t required to sit through these briefings. There are special provisions for commanders and Lieutenant Colonels and above,” said the Lieutenant as a dodge. However, it apparently wasn’t the right time to pull that card as Thomas rose out of his seat.

“My troops have to sit through this briefing so hence; my troops won’t go through anything I’m not willing to do myself. So I’m going to have a seat right here Lieutenant and I’m going to thoroughly enjoy your briefing because you are about to get articulate, entertaining, funny and, most importantly, very succinct. Because like everyone else in here, I don’t like having my time wasted and while this may be an important subject, you’ve got a whole theater full of combat troops that should be out training to kill our enemies instead of wasting time here. And I hope you get the distinct impression that I’m not in a mood to fool around any longer today,” said Thomas. “So if you’ll move along in your briefing, make us laugh and keep us entertained for the next little bit, I’m sure we’ll all be happier for it.”

Cheers and applause followed his announcement as the Lieutenant blushed up at the rebuke. He again looked to the Captain and was more visibly prompted by a waving of his hand to continue on with the briefing. He stuttered for a moment before getting back into where he was at.

“Yeah, some insensitive bastard needs this class,” whispered Amber in a chuckle.

“Hush,” chuckled Thomas in return. “Or you’ll get briefed as well.”

“You wouldn’t do that would you?” she asked with her pitiful look.

Thomas scoffed and shook his head as the briefer got into his topic. But added in a wink at the end since it was Amber. And since it was “suggested” to make the class entertaining, he went away from the prepared manuscript and actually had the class laughing at certain points with some witty comments and they generally paid attention throughout the half hour lecture. And he found it far easier to do his briefing in a more relaxed environment over what would normally be considered a boring topic. Once he concluded, there were no questions and he started to depart. Thomas rose and cut him off at the exit to the theater.

“I apologize for my behavior Colonel,” said the Lieutenant with a polite bow of his head.

“Not everyone that sits in these classes is who you think they may be,” said Thomas. “You did good and kept the topic entertaining. Try doing that from now on and you’ll have a far easier time. And you won’t draw the ire of angry Lieutenant Colonels in the class.”

“Roger that sir,” said the Lieutenant and noticed Thomas had his hand held out. He shook it and came back with something in his hand. He noticed it was the Commander’s Coin for the 14th Special Operations Battalion as Thomas nodded and returned to his seat.

“You realize what you have there?” asked the Captain.

“His commander’s coin?” asked the Lieutenant.

“Some commanders hand those things out like candy,” said the Captain. “This is the first time I’ve heard of anyone outside special ops or those that support it getting one of his. And few enough as it is.”

“So it’s a big deal?” asked the Lieutenant who had never received a coin.

“Huge,” said the Captain. “So keep up what you are doing. It works.”

The remainder of the briefers has seen what had happened prior to their instructional periods and found that it was far easier to go impromptu on their briefings and make them somewhat entertaining. Certain subjects weren’t as easy to do, but they managed to keep the attention of the gathered troops in the theater through the remainder of the afternoon. And eventually it was quitting time and the troops started gathering around their leadership.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I want the grumpy bastard to start all of our formal classroom instructions with a briefing to make it fun,” grinned Michael Parsons.

“You mean Greg?” asked Thomas with a grin.

“For not wanting your Lieutenant Colonel rank, you sure make it work when you want it to,” laughed Darren.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Thomas. “Okay folks, that’s it for today. Tomorrow we have the mandatory 5K fun run with the base populace and at 0800 we get the techs in from Future Cyber to go over our new communicators. Tomorrow afternoon, Stellar Applications is coming in with some new thermal and night vision goodies I think you’re going to like. So get ready for some tech time and not understanding half of what they say.”

“Fun run starts at the flagpole at 0530 and is a formation run. Furthermore, I’m going to say I’m not going to let any other unit on this base beat us out. So we will finish first, leading the way and setting the pace for others to follow, clear?” asked Thomas.

Acknowledgements, cheers and growls came from the group as they were dismissed.

“Outcast, Bear, hang tight,” said Thomas as the members departed. Thomas waited for a moment for the area to clear before addressing the two. “I’ll need to see you both tonight after supper. Say 1930 in my temporary office at the admin building. Okay?”

“Sure,” said Jamie with a questioning look.

“You aren’t in trouble,” said Thomas. “Just need to go over a few things with the two of you.”

“Roger that,” said Katie in a confused tone as well.

“It’s nothing serious,” said Thomas. “So stop worrying.”

“Yes sir,” they said.

“Okay, get out of the monkey suit and grab some food,” said Thomas. “See you in a bit.”

The three departed and Jamie and Katie wandered away from everyone else. “You think it’s serious?” asked Jamie.

“I wouldn’t think so,” said Katie.

“Normally when I go see the commander, I’m in trouble,” chuckled Jamie.

“I don’t think...” said Katie and stopped.

“What?” asked Jamie.

“I wouldn’t think Colonel Dayfield knows about what we did already,” said Katie.

“That can’t be it is it?” asked Jamie.

“No,” said Katie. “At least, I wouldn’t think so.”

“Now you have me a bit worried,” said Jamie. “I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“I’m the golden child, remember?” she laughed. “But you are a bad boy.”

Jamie chuckled in response as they departed the area, promising to meet up after supper to go in together to see Thomas. Jamie was slightly worried as he didn’t want her to get into any kind of trouble on his behalf, but could only come to the logical conclusion that was what it was about.

EPILOGUE

Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have. Margaret Mead

Jamie sat in the seat across from Thomas, still unsure of what he was seeing his commander for this particular time. But what worried him was the fact Katie was sitting next to him as Thomas mindlessly finished up a report and signed at the bottom. There was no way the unit could have found out already since it had only been less than twenty-four hours since their first encounter. But there was no other explanation for the two sitting in front of him waiting. He had often heard their ability to find out things was legendary, but this bordered on absurd.

“Okay, now that’s out of the way” he said and set it in a pile of reports to send off. “You two getting caught up on your rest and training?”

“Yes sir,” they both answered separately.

“Do you know why you’re here?” asked Thomas.

“Sir, I can explain,” blurted Jamie before Katie had the chance to respond.

“Okay,” said Thomas with a half a smile and leaned back in the chair. He detected neither one knew exactly why they were here, but figured he’d see what they thought.

“It’s a perfectly good explanation,” said Jamie.

“I bet it is,” said Thomas. “And I might agree if I knew the specifics.”

“Well...” said Jamie and took in a deep breath. “I know it’s probably against the rules or protocol to see someone from our unit. But I think Katie, I mean Staff Sergeant Shepherd, is really cool and I thought it would be nice to get to know her, you know? Like on a more personal level. So we’ve kind of been talking and seeing each other, but not for long. It’s all my fault really so I’ll take the blame. I mean, I know it’s probably inappropriate, but I’ve started to grow quite fond of her in the short time I’ve known her and really like her a lot-”

“And I like him a lot as well,” interrupted Katie. “On more than professional grounds.”

“Wait...you like me a lot?” asked Jamie.

“Umm, yeah,” said Katie as he looked at her.

“As in like like?” asked Jamie.

“As in yeah, like and care about you in the way a girl likes a guy a lot,” said Katie.

“Really?” asked Jamie.

“I thought it was kind of obvious,” said Katie.

“Well, you didn’t say anything,” said Jamie.

“I didn’t realize you had any doubts after we...” said Katie and her voice trailed off. She looked at Thomas with a bit of shock on her face out of the corner of her eyes and saw her commander was emotionless. However, Thomas did look between the two with pursed lips, but with a hint of humor in his eyes. “After we shared dessert.”

“Well, you didn’t say specifically,” said Jamie.

“I didn’t realize I had to,” said Katie. “I like you, okay? You’re a nice guy with a good personality and a cute grin. Not just your grin, but a good looking guy all together. And you’re built like a brick outhouse. And can carry on a decent conversation. I mean, why else did you think I wanted to hang out with you?”

“I just didn’t know you liked me on that level,” said Jamie. “You said you were confused.”

“Girls can think on multiple levels you know. We can like a guy and be confused at the same time,” she said. “I thought maybe you were hesitant since you thought I was too pushy.”

“You weren’t being too pushy...well, maybe a bit pushy, but nothing I can’t handle,” said Jamie. “And I thought I was being too forward.”

“But you never said anything either,” said Katie.

“Yes, I like you,” said Jamie. “Fair enough?”

“Well...sure,” said Katie.

“I’m not feeling it,” said Jamie.

“Of course I like you. I mean we did...” said Katie and waved her hand. “Share dessert three times. You think I do that with every guy I meet?”

“Well, no,” said Jamie.

“Was there ever a question?” she asked.

“I should have just asked,” asked Jamie. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I just thought you knew,” said Katie. “I do like you. I just didn’t know you liked me.”

“I didn’t realize I had to say it,” said Jamie. “I thought you already knew too.”

“Girls like hearing that kind of stuff,” said Katie. “You should have said something and I probably would have said the same thing.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was trying to pressure you or anything,” said Jamie.

“I would let you know up front real quick if you were out of line,” said Katie.

“I don’t know,” said Jamie. “You didn’t even say you liked me.”

“You should have said it first,” said Katie.

“Are you serious?” asked Thomas with an exasperated tone, finally breaking into the conversation. They both looked at him with surprised looks on their faces as they had almost forgotten he was in the room with them.

“Have we cleared this up?” asked Thomas. “Or do I have to pass a check yes or no note?”

“Sorry sir,” said Katie and Jamie at the same time and both sat up in their chairs, a little uncomfortable at the current situation.

“Yes, he likes you,” he said to Katie and turned to Jamie. “Yes, she likes you. Now can we move on?”

“Sorry sir,” they said almost together.

“This is some straight high school shit that I don’t have the time nor the great desire to deal with, okay?” asked Thomas.

“Sorry sir,” they answered together.

“Look, there aren’t any rules against two team members becoming romantically involved with each other. I always knew the chance was there for it to happen, but you two are actually the first to be involved outside of work. It’s not really a big deal as you are two consenting adults and what you do in your off time is your own business. Now having said that to say this, I will not have work and personal life collide. We don’t go peeking into bedroom windows around here for any of the members. But when you come on the job, personal feelings get left at the door. So no matter what, you two will be professional with each other when you come on duty,” said Thomas. “Understood?”

“Yes sir,” they said together.

“Now some might frown on your two being an item, but as long as you can keep work at work and play at play, there will be no problems. And you know I don’t like problems,” said Thomas. “And if I even get one hint, one iota of a suggestion you two are bringing personal life into work,

one of you will be out of this unit and heading for another Cider Battalion before the ink is dry on the orders. And I don't care which one it is, just the first I get my hands on. So there will be no wounded puppy looks or growls from either of you if this ends. Understand?"

"Yes sir," was the reply in unison.

"Also, if you two run into trouble with anyone causing an issue with your relationship, you come let me know. Either me personally or Snoopy. Nobody has the right to tell you who you can and cannot see but I wouldn't put it past some people. So as long as it's professional, nobody can say a thing. Am I being clear?" asked Thomas.

"Yes sir," the reply once again.

"And I hope I've foot stomped the professional aspect enough," said Thomas.

"Yes sir," they said together.

"Now get," said Thomas and jerked his head towards the door. The pair stood and saluted and received a salute in return before departing the office. But they were stopped just as they reached the doorway. "One more thing."

They both stopped before exiting the office. Thomas was already looking over the next report and didn't look up as he was speaking. "That's the lamest attempt I've ever heard at trying to hide the fact you two are getting it on. Try to be more creative next time."

Katie turned and looked at Jamie as they both tried to stifle a giggle and departed the office. Once they were outside, Katie cornered Jamie in the hallway.

"You didn't say you liked me," she remarked in trying to get the last word in.

"I thought it was plainly obvious," he said. "Yeah, you're a really nice lady that puts me in check. You've got a good personality and a good heart when you get past your hard exterior. You caught my eye almost the first time I saw you and there aren't a lot of women that have ever done that."

"Well, I didn't know," said Katie. "I mean, I might have liked to hear it from you."

"Seriously?" he asked. "Yeah, I do like you. Why do you think I happened to be on the track at the same time you were three days in a row?"

"You were stalking me?" she asked.

"No more than you stalking me downtown!" he protested.

"You didn't see me so that doesn't count," she replied and cut him off before he could reply. "Don't argue, you know it doesn't."

“I was just trying to get in position to start a conversation,” he remarked.

“Why didn’t you just knock on my door?” she inquired. “Ask me to dinner or something?”

“I thought that might be too forward of me,” he answered.

“Like you have a problem being forward,” she remarked.

“I tried starting conversations before,” said Jamie. “But you blew me off.”

“At work yes,” she said. “You should have been less subtle away from work.”

“I wasn’t sure if I should since you seemed like you didn’t care,” said Jamie. “And for the record you didn’t say you liked me either and could have come up to me.”

“I was waiting for you to make the first move,” she replied. “And I wasn’t sure how you would react if I was that forward.”

“Seriously?” asked Jamie.

“I’ve thought you were cute since you showed up,” said Katie. “Of course I kept it professional in the field, but let’s face it; you’re a good looking dude.”

“And you’re a good looking gal,” he replied.

“Not so much,” said Katie.

“I think it’s what’s here that matters,” said Jamie as he touched her chest and her heart area. “And you win over all sorts of women in that regard.”

“So I’m not pretty,” she said.

“No, you are,” said Jamie. “But I’m not the kind of guy that goes on looks alone. That British gal was pretty, but just wasn’t my type. I like a bit of substance.”

“Are you calling me fat?” she asked and half hid a grin.

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” he grinned. “Yes, you are a very pretty lady.”

“Thanks,” she said and moved in closer to him. And even though they were in a somewhat public place, they hugged which led to a kiss and ended up getting a little hot and heavy in the hallway. Since it was after hours, the chances of being discovered were minute. For him, it was the first time since he had been through training he got to be a little intimate with a woman. Furthermore, one that had challenged him in more ways than one. For her, she had been trying so hard at her job since joining the military she had forgotten there were other pleasures to be

had and it was okay to show some affection and care for someone as more than just a friend or coworker. It would still take a while to completely get over everything bad that had happened in her life, but Jamie was helping her on the road to recovery. However, they were interrupted by a stern “ahem” before getting too involved.

“There are private places for that,” said Chief Master Sergeant Frank Zimmer as he came around the corner with Senior Master Sergeant Tim Daniels carrying a machine of some sort. “And the schedule is clear this evening.”

“Sorry Chief,” they said in unison and released each other.

“You need some help with that?” asked Jamie as he saw the two carrying the object.

“Nah, we’re delivering it to Warbucks,” said Tim.

“What exactly is it?” asked Katie.

“It’s a fog machine,” said Tim with a grin.

“Do we want to know?” asked Jamie.

“Probably not,” laughed Frank as they walked past them and into the office where Thomas was finishing up.

“We should follow the advice of our leaders,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes. “And find a private place.”

“Remember, I’m the maverick here,” he grinned.

“I bet I can set you straight,” she commented.

“Are you flirting with me?” he asked with a grin.

“Come buy me a cup of coffee and find out,” she said and looked over her shoulder with a naughty smile as she walked away. Bear had finally opened her heart just a tiny bit and found she liked being able to care once again.

Afterthoughts on “Tales of the Ranch – Lonely Bear”

I got the idea of doing some shorter works with some background and character development of a few of the characters I’ve introduced since Normal was written and decided to go “back in time” for lack of a better term and focus in on one of them during the initial days and weeks after the attacks portrayed in “Normal.” It’s not as detailed as others with a lot less action, but at the same time, shows how ordinary people are affected by the events they are totally unprepared for as well and how they try to adapt as they are caught between a world that is normal and one in chaos. I tried to tie up some loose ends I left in “Tales of the Ranch - Seeing Jahannam” as more than one person has pointed out that I didn’t further explain a few of the things. So I hope I got some minor points neat and tidy.

The story focuses more on the everyday citizen and again, how they might react. I intentionally gave Theresa Shepherd a little more foresight than most citizens and a few more skills, but not enough to be the major preparedness type portrayed in a lot of stories. And Katie was simply a young girl swept up in events completely out of her control and how the emotions can, and will, take a toll on people eventually. But in short, it’s a story for entertainment as well as some minor lessons to be learned about preparedness in general.

As a reminder, this story series was written in advance of the 2008 elections, so the President at the time was not who won. So the Normal and Tales of the Ranch series can be considered an alternate timeline for most intents and purposes.

As always, credit and appreciation goes out to the staff of Timebomb2K and Survival Monkey for keeping the sites well maintained and operational for amateur writers like myself. And to the readers who put me behind the keyboard in the first place. I appreciate all the support you continue to give and hope I live up to your expectations.

Grand58742

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