

SURVIVALIST FICTION



The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana Chapters 1 - 21

by Desert Doc and AgrayMan

Chapter-1 Sniper

Mark Williams lay perfectly still, despite the ants finding their way up his camouflaged BDU pants. He sweated silently onto the cheek pad of his National Guard issue M-24 sniper rifle, as the insect repellent washed into his eyes, causing them to burn and tear. He breathed slowly, evenly, and quietly as he peered through the riflescope. The soldiers some 600 meters below were a mixed lot, some moving slowly, cautiously and alertly. These soldiers held their rifles with their muzzles up, at a forty-five degree angle, fingers outside the trigger guard, their eyes and heads constantly on the move. They moved forward a few paces then stopped, apparently trying to listen. Although Mark was too far away to hear much beyond the occasional sound of voices, it was apparent that some of the other soldiers were screwing off, making too much noise. Mark mentally shook his head and grinned. The soldiers continued up the draw, their forward point men having past his position several minutes ago, one almost stepping on Mark and his spotter, Dave, as the point man trudged tiredly along the ridge, holding his M-16A2 rifle by the carry handle on top, rather than in the ready position. As the man had passed, Mark had put his face down in the dirt, fighting every instinct to jump up and attack or run. But he trusted his training to let the Ghillie suit hide him. He could hear Dave quietly let out his held breath as the point man stumbled and muttered his way out of earshot. Other than that, there was no communication between his spotter and himself.

Their Ghillie suits consisted of frayed strips of burlap of earth-tone colors tied to netting that was in turn secured to the BDU top. This turned them, to even the closest observer, into piles of very non-human looking forest debris. Human eyes and brain looked for man-shapes, straight lines, stand-out colors and movement, and the Ghillie suit camouflaged a man by breaking up the outline and coloring him the same as the forest floor. Even the M-24 sniper rifle had strips of burlap tied around it in various places to break up the outline.

It was a beautiful summer day, and aside from the stinging in his eyes, the insects in his drawers, and the hot Missouri sun filtering through the trees, Mark

was glad he was here. It sure beat the hell out of working as the Produce Manager at Piggly-Wiggly. He had gotten out of the Marines six months earlier, disillusioned by the massive cutbacks in the military's budget. His unit didn't even have live ammunition for training, nor fuel for the vehicles. The final straw came when he talked to his buddy in an armored unit which actually was made to "walk through" a tank attack exercise in groups of five (an M-1 Abrams tank crew), calling out commands as if they were actually in the tank. It would have been funny if it had not been so sad. His enlistment was up soon thereafter, and he mustered out. He had been a squad leader in the Marines, but he had the opportunity to attend sniper school through his National Guard unit, and jumped at the chance. All in all, the Guard was a little better than the active military. The money came from the state rather than federal government, so there was at least some ammunition and fuel for training. There were still a few crusty Viet Nam era vets who had their sh*t together, and Mark bought a beer for them when the opportunity arose to listen to the stories. On the other hand he had to deal with fresh out of high school punks who didn't realize what they were training for. It was a big camp out with guns for them, and most of them took it as a wonderful opportunity to screw off and get paid for it.

Finally what he had been waiting for happened. A soldier in BDUs the same as the rest strode purposefully up the draw. A soldier with a radio walked beside him, then stopped suddenly. The soldier who had been striding along stopped and turned to the radioman, then said something to the soldiers in front of him. They stopped, turned, and then said something to the soldiers in front of them, who also stopped. The word was passed up the line and soon everyone was stopped. The soldiers who were alert crouched down, weapons pointing outward, in a pattern that was supposed to ensure that a 360 degree area around them was covered in overlapping arcs by everyone facing outward. The problem was some of the soldiers down there had neither the intelligence nor the patience it took. He almost heard the more squared-away members of the unit below trying to get the other sh*t heels to do what they were supposed to. The purposeful soldier, whom Mark had already pinpointed as the lieutenant or squad leader, was on the radio and was gesturing wildly to the sh*t heel soldiers at the same time. About half of them complied with his pantomime to face outward and pay attention to the forest, while the other half edged closer to one another to whisper apparent witticisms between them. These men ignored the stern looks from the older veterans and giggled between themselves. Mark resisted the momentary temptation to punish them with the M-24 for their foolishness, and instead shifted his position ever so slightly to center the lieutenant in the crosshairs. The

lieutenant was still talking on the radio, gesturing in an agitated fashion, and Mark decided now was as good a time as any. He tapped his left boot, which was in contact with Dave's and felt, rather than saw him tense ever so slightly. Mark closed his eyes and took three steady, deep breaths. He opened his eyes on the last breath, and only let half of it out. He gently and slowly squeezed the Remington's trigger until the round went off.

Working quickly, he manipulated the bolt with his right hand thumb, catching the brass cartridge casing between his ring and middle finger, while at the same time centering the scope's crosshairs on the radioman who was just by now hearing the sound of the first round being fired. Mark quickly but smoothly squeezed the trigger as the radioman looked dumbfounded by the noise. Mark worked the action, again catching the spent brass casing. He safed the M-24, and slowly inched his way backward over the crest of the ridge. He heard the distant beeping of the MILES gear, and even without optics, could pick out the lieutenant jumping up and down, and could only imagine what cursing was taking place. He flashed a grin at Dave as they both continued to inch backward, and Dave returned it in kind. Once over the crest of the hill, they got to their feet and began to dogtrot back to the Blue base. "Damn, I love playing Opfor!" he thought with an outward smile.

Back at work on Monday, Mark stretched his tired muscles as he lifted box after box of celery from the semi-trailer which in turn had carried it all of the way from California. Out of the Ghillie suit, Mark's six-foot height was apparent, along with a muscularly lean build. He had close-cropped reddish blonde hair and brown eyes. As he worked, he reflected on how his life had taken a few twists and turns in his twenty-six short years. His father had left his mom when he was quite young, and he had never really gotten to know him. Although this was hard on Mark, it was by no means a crushing, life-crippling event. Mark's mom had found another husband, a good man who loved Mark a great deal, and treated him as his own son. Mark had grown up in the country, enjoying hunting, fishing, and a little bit of trapping. These activities, combined with a chronic lack of money taught him self-reliance and humility. His stepfather, Jim, introduced Mark to hunting, and spent many hours in the woods, quietly explaining the way of the forest, combining woodsman's lore with American Indian teachings. Jim taught him not to kill unless it was necessary, to take only what he needed from nature, and above all, that there was a balance: The squirrel took of the tree, Mark took of the squirrel, and someday in the far future, a tree would take of him. It was the way of things, and has been since the beginning of time. Jim also taught him

marksmanship, which gave him a leg up on most of the other students in the Army's Sniper School, most of whom had been city kids, not even getting to hold a real rifle until they joined the service. Marksmanship was only a small part of the Sniper School, much of the rest being woodcraft, of which he also had plenty. He had joined the Marines shortly after dropping out of college. He had not really known what he wanted to achieve in college, and rather than continue throwing money into his slowly slipping grades, he decided to join the Marine Corps.

All Marines are riflemen first, but Mark joined the Infantry to really see the world. Besides, he enjoyed the dangerous aspect of the work. The thrill of the possibility of death made him feel excruciatingly alive. He had seen a little action in Somalia, not enough to consider himself a veteran, but enough to have actually pulled a trigger with the righteous intent of killing someone who was trying to kill him. Sometimes the memory of the black face, eyes half-lidded with the effects of the khat as the teen ambled up to his patrol, carelessly holding his AK-47 assault rifle by its wooden pistol grip would come to him. He could sometimes hear the distant memory-echoes of his own shouts and those of his patrol as the yelled at the teen to stop, and put the rifle down. The question of whether the kid was just too stoned to care, or didn't understand the pantomime of dropping his rifle was forgotten in the blink of an eye as the teen pulled the AK into a firing position at his hip. Mark had already shouldered his M-16A2 when they first noticed the kid and his rifle, and as the kid had approached, Mark had clicked off the safety to the single-shot position. As the kid had raised the rifle, Mark had pulled the trigger, simultaneously it seemed with two or three other members of his patrol. At the range of ten meters, it seemed that the world exploded in his ears as the kid stumbled and fell backwards, a seeming sudden wind plucking furiously at the front of his shirt. Mark shook his head to clear the past away, and set his mind back to unloading the semi trailer.

Max Jeager sat in the squad room, listening to the briefing and taking notes. Max was a serious cop, who cared a lot about doing his job and doing it right. In fact, just about the only thing that he loved more than his job was his family. The briefing was regarding the rapid increase in gang related activity they had seen in the past few months. At first everyone had assumed it was the "wannabees" that were tagging the local high school, and getting into petty fistfights. Things had escalated, he was learning. Last week there had been an honest-to-God shooting, and the investigators, in snapping up the usual suspects, were noticing the rising level of belligerence, disrespect and violence among these wannabees. As was inevitable, somebody started talking. The gangs from Minneapolis,

Detroit, and Chicago were making their presence felt by organizing the wannabees into sort of a Hitler Youth for the gangs. Making them "lieutenants" in the fledgling branches of the organization, and rewarding criminal behaviors such as assault and possession with intent to deliver with praise, drugs, prestige, and money had begun to show results for the gangs. Crimes such as simple battery were up, mostly from the Hitler Youth of one organization battling another. That's what the murder had been about. Not content with pool cues and knives, someone had brought a gun to a knife fight. Drug related crimes such as burglary, robbery and prostitution were up as well. Max thought briefly of the fifteen year old runaway he had turned over to Social Services last night. Christ, fifteen and turning tricks to pay for a methamphetamine habit. She'd also been associated with one of the gangs, though more as chattel -a whore- than a member. He had heard the gal from Social Services talking to this kid in the interview room about the initiation: All the gang members got a turn or two between her legs. Max shook his head absently in disgust. Another life effectively ruined. This kid, provided everything else went exactly right in her life, might have a chance of appearing normal on the surface, but she would, no matter the amount of psychotherapy, live the rest of her life as a deeply scarred person.

Though most of the community members were white, there had been a sizable and relatively well-integrated number of blacks as well. As the mostly black gang members from the cities had moved into the area, racial tensions began to rise. Television news from the cities showed an endless parade of black faces charged with murder, arson, beatings, robbery, carjacking, drug crimes and even check forgery. Although there were certainly white criminals, they never seemed to attract the notoriety that the blacks had. For that reason, the acceptance that the long time black residents had enjoyed was becoming more and more fragile. Local news rightly blamed gang members from the cities for the increase in problems with the youth, and everyone knew they were mostly black. While no one had yet attacked a long time black resident, there were folks on his "beat" that told him of increasing hostilities. It came down to be a big effin' mess. White kids trying to act black, blacks trying to sell drugs, and other blacks just trying to live in peace, and he couldn't see into the heart of anybody to see the right from the wrong. He suspected it wouldn't be long before the next shooting. If this followed the pattern seen in a number of other medium sized communities, these Hitler Youth would soon turn from high school kid to gang leader in a short while. Drug trade would be expanded, and the new crop would send out feelers into other communities, where the problem would begin all over again, but in the mean time there would be turf battles between the various gang affiliations, and

sometimes between factions in the same gang. The new, disturbing development was in the way these gangs were now organized, both on the drug-and-money side, as well as the security and enforcement side. It was sort of a wicked cross between Amway and the Mongol Horde. The gang experts had warned of this for years, and now they were finally beginning to see it firsthand: Gang members who were former military.

It used to be that a judge would give a lad his choice between jail or the military, and the military would straighten him out. It was now not the case. Max's brother told him that while he was in the Navy, there were some parts of the ship that no one went to, for fear of the gangs. He found that incredible, but his brother just shrugged and mumbled something about the "new Navy." But the gang members he was concerned about weren't ex-Navy, they were the ex-airborne, ex-infantry, and ex-Marines. They would have knowledge of weapons, not just the stupid bravado that a thug with a gun has, but for real and for true knowledge about sights, fire control, ambushes, immediate action drills, and the like. Their preferred weapons would not be common, ineffective 9mm pistols, but the short barreled assault rifles like the CAR-15, or the AK-74 "Krinkov," both of which had the range and velocity to stand off and safely penetrate Max's standard threat level IIA body armor from a distance. Hell, even the entry team's threat level IIIA could only stop one or two rounds, and that was only because of the ceramic trauma plates. These hombres would also have some discipline. They would not lose cool and run like their non-military compatriots, they would choose targets and engage. These gangstas were a new and dangerous breed. He hoped that they didn't take the next logical step and start training the Hitler Youth. It would make his job infinitely harder to have an army of trained, armed, sociopaths intent on criminal behavior. They have already become more sophisticated in their use of cellular phones and pagers, and having lookouts, etc. for their drug operations. He prayed history wouldn't repeat itself, and that trouble would pass his little county by.

After the briefing, Max arranged his squad car as he liked it. He replaced the Remington 870 shotgun in the overhead rack with the AR-15 carbine. The shotgun was a good close in weapon, but Max preferred the AR-15 for his work out in the county. The range was greater, and the magazine held far more than the old reliable shotgun. He placed his black nylon carry bag on the seat next to him, and checked his watch. He had patrol for two hours alone before Andy would join him. His department was pretty good about allowing ride alongs. Of course, it didn't hurt that Andy was a paramedic and worked closely with the

emergency response team as a "Special Deputy." That meant he wasn't a sworn officer, couldn't carry a gun in a law enforcement capacity, but was still covered by the county's liability insurance when he was the medic for the emergency response team. He hoped it would be a quiet night.

There was a lot of new and urgent information to discuss with Andy. One of his buddies from the service who had since become an officer in Army Intelligence had sent him a PGP encrypted message, mentioning some of the developments in the middle east that were not being reported on the broadcast media. George was a friend from high school, who went to college with the help of Uncle Sam, and received his degree in Arabian culture and Arabic language. George used to joke that he got his degree just in time to have it be obsolete. In the late '80s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were no longer the rubles to support renegade organizations like the PLO or Hezbollah or a myriad of others. The focus of conflict had shifted from the Middle East to Somalia, the Baltic, and Africa. Low intensity, mostly managed by diplomacy and air strikes, especially after the quagmire in Somalia. George's E-mail mentioned a dark purpose to the new Pan-Arab Coalition, that Hussein and Khaddafy had put aside their differences in the interpretation of the Koran, and had decided to do something about the last remaining superpower, the great Satan, the USA. With oil revenues and a totalitarian regime, both countries had amassed enough wealth to create a formidable enemy to the United States. Not in the sense of army vs. army, as the US military was indisputably the most capable and deadly in the world, but in the sense of state-sponsored terror. The collapse of the Soviet Union had been a blessing in disguise: Free of their Soviet "advisors" they began to think for themselves and formulate real, damaging options for destroying the United States. Additionally, the cash-starved former Soviet scientists were lured away from research facilities and weapons labs where they had not been paid in some cases for months with kept promises of new, state-of-the art European-equipped labs, luxurious apartments, high salaries and prestigious automobiles. Soviet military officers of the Strategic Rocket Corps were not immune. Several became willing guests of Libya, bringing with them some twenty "suitcase nukes." There had been an uproar in the world community regarding the "misplacement" of thirty-one of these devices, but the Libyans had paid well and promised much, and without a paper trail or evidence, the incident quickly faded from view. To be fair, Libya only had twenty, and no one seemed to know where the other eleven or so were. Iraq had suffered a few setbacks in their assigned aspect of the destruction of the Great Satan, the chemical weapons. Saddam had been convinced by some over-optimistic advisers that the US would not

object with anything more than UN resolutions if Iraq annexed Kuwait. This very nearly was the end of Iraq's chemical warfare program. UN air strikes by all manner of aircraft and Tomahawk cruise missiles nearly crippled the program, and only the fact that Saddam had multiple, redundant facilities kept the effort on schedule. George went on to mention the increasing alert status of the Iraqi and Libyan armies, the construction of multiple bunker-like facilities in the desert, and the interesting tidbit of ex-Soviet and European advisers increasing both countries combat troop's ability to fight. In the end of the E-mail, George gave his analysis: There would be a nuclear and/or chemical attack in the US. The Pan-Arab Coalition wasn't stupid: They knew they may possibly suffer nuclear retaliation for this act. Therefore, expect a massive, coordinated attack, with the intent of knocking out as much of the US command and control system as possible, and/or the maximum number of civilian casualties. With the civilian population out of their minds with fear, economic production would slow or cease, violence would erupt, and it would produce nearly the same effect, but be a damn sight cheaper for the Arabs, than nuking every major US city.

"Yeah," Max thought as he wheeled the cruiser out of the department parking lot and onto the county road, "we got a lot to talk about. It's raining **** and we don't have an umbrella."

"Hey, how's it going so far?" Andy asked, as he tossed his bag into the back seat of the patrol car, then plopped down into the passenger's seat.

"Nothing much going on tonight. A nice, slow Tuesday. All the good citizens are snug in their beds. We ought to have plenty of time to discuss our next moves." Max replied, as he watched Andy fasten his seatbelt, then put the squad in "drive," and rolled out of the EMS parking lot.

Andy unconsciously looked over at the radio console to make sure that the "transmit" light was off. He had not made the mistake himself, but had heard plenty of other medics and cops on the radio complaining about management, their sex lives, etc. Not only was this a huge source of embarrassment, there were also more serious repercussions if any of the folks out in "scannerland" heard the conversation between partners, and called or wrote in complaints.

"Well, I think we are fairly well set. We have pretty much every thing we need, just not enough of it. I have a couple month's food, and I think you have about that much. We could use some more, I guess. I'd like to have about a year's worth on hand. But that'll come when we can afford it, I guess. You've got the

propane heater, and I've got the kerosene, and about three weeks fuel for it. I'd like to double that, or put in a wood stove, or maybe both. Lights we have, in oil lamps, battery powered fluorescents, and propane lanterns. We've got about a month's worth of water, more if we're stingy...."

"Are you counting the water heater?" Max inquired.

"Oh, no I hadn't! Lessee, say thirty gallons, figure four gallons per day between Becky and me, that's about another weeks' worth! Good thinking. As long as we're on the subject, I think we should plan on using the water in the heater first." Andy said

"Why?"

"Well, it's not treated, unless you count the municipal treatment. It'll probably start to grow bugs sooner than the stuff we have in storage. Plus, if this 'disaster' is only short term, it's not going to be as much of a problem to refill it as it might for the storage barrels." Andy replied.

"Good thought." said Max, "I'm not looking forward to pumping four gallons per day of water out of those barrels. It doesn't seem like a big deal, but when we did a practice a couple weeks ago at home, I got real tired, real fast of pumping water. As long as we're on this subject, how are you set for ammunition?"

Andy looked sharply at Max. "Why? What do you know?"

"Nothing! I just want to make sure that you have enough. It isn't getting any cheaper, you know. Plus, well, there has been a lot of serious gang activity recently. If something big happens, that's gonna be a factor. Gangstas gotta eat too, you know. They show no hesitation for shooting people for money or just for fun. Imagine what's gonna happen when they're hungry." Max answered.

"Well, I think I have about twelve hundred rounds of .308 for the FN and the H&K, plus about five hundred for the .45, then a whole mess of .22. Probably three or four thousand rounds. That's the long-term storage stuff in the ammo cans. I have probably two to three hundred rounds of everyday practice stuff."

“Man,” Max said, “That’s pretty good. I know I should pick up some more of the .223 stuff for Lisa’s CAR-15 and for mine, but it never seems like I can get around to it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Andy asked in amazement. “ The department gives you .223 for you to practice with! Just grab a few extra boxes every time we go shooting. It won’t take you long to get a pretty good stash of ammo. Hell, you have the key to the range house on that ring if you are Senior Officer tonight: We could swing by at, say, 0330, load up a few hundred rounds and drop it off at your place at ‘lunch!’”

AGrayMan

Chapter-2 The Old Ways

Khalid Atwa looked at the Edmunds Scientific Catalog, staring at the pages and mentally calculated all of the factors involved. Lift capacity, altitude at rupture, cost, volume...Ten apiece should do it. He lifted the receiver of the phone, dialed the order desk, tapping the gold, pre-approved MasterCard that had come in the mail just that day. After he placed his order, Atwa stood, put his keys in his pocket, and left the small, unassuming rented apartment. The payphone was several blocks away, and the “cyber café” was several blocks further than that. The weather was still warm –as it was late August- and he had no need for even a light jacket. As he walked, he stared steadfastly ahead. Internally, he recoiled in disgust at the bloated, fish belly-white people who passed and jostled him on the sidewalks. He longed for his family and his homeland, but knew that, short of a miracle, he would never see them again.

After several minutes, he arrived at the phone. Retrieving a convenience store prepaid calling card from his pocket, he set to dialing. The voice on the other end was not familiar. It was different each time, and the connection was often poor.

Khalid spoke in English with a cheerfulness he did not feel: “This is Ahmed. Big Stan’s gift is nearly ready for the party. I just need the secret ingredient, and his surprise will be ready. You can tell my cousins that the decorations will do just fine, but they will need to buy ten each to make the party a success.”

The voice at the other end said, “ That’s wonderful news! Your father will be so happy with you. You should prepare yourself for guests.”

“When should I expect them?” Khalid asked. “Soon, I hope.”

The voice chuckled. “Soon enough. I go now to call your cousins.”

“Goodbye.” Replied Khalid, replacing the receiver.

He then resumed his walk to the “cyber café.” His spirits lifted slightly as he walked: Soon enough. Soon enough.

Eli Yoder leaned back against the railing of the hay wagon, stretching his aching back. Maybe the English had the right idea after all: He sure wouldn't mind sitting in an air-conditioned cab, sipping lemonade while the machines did all the work! A brief flicker of a smile crossed his lips as he thought of what the elders would say if they say him in a massive 8-wheeled green John Deere tractor. No need to worry about that, though. Besides it must be sacrilege to think thus. He removed his straw hat and wiped his brow. The plain, dark clothes intensified the heat, and the dry flecks of hay stalk clung tenaciously to his skin, causing a fierce itch. His son, Jacob, was 14 and already adept at working the team of horses. Eli watched as Jacob guided the horses and the hay rake they pulled to the end of the field and began to guide them back. Jacob worked as hard as Eli, but always seemed to have more energy at the end of the day. That was the difference between 14 and 38, he supposed. With a sigh, he turned back to the pitchfork and the pile of hay yet to be pitched onto the wagon. It would be dusk soon. Time to go take a bath, then on to the prayer meeting. He had to keep an eye on Jacob: He spent far too much time looking at young Rachel and not enough time listening to Bishop Hochstadter.

AGreyMan

Chapter-3 Warning

It was well past midnight before David finally shut down the computer, completed his nightly rounds to check the security of the house and then quietly crawled beneath the covers. Denise rolled to face him as the cold air whooshed under the warm covers.

“Honey you've really got to get to bed earlier.” She murmured half asleep.

“I know dear.” He affirmed. “Just needed to finish imputing the grades and then checked Jeff’s latest update.”

“Anything new?”

“Nothing really...but the Sergeant Major’s not happy with some of the message traffic he’s been catching bits and pieces of lately. Says we should be sure our tanks are topped off and we’re standing by locked and loaded.”

“Topped off.” She rose up on one elbow. “What’s he mean by that?”

“Well I suppose that means we should be sure our tanks ARE topped off.” David replied as he settled down for the night.

“I’ve known Sergeant Major for too many years not to listen when he says something, no matter how subtle.”

“You call that subtle? Locked and loaded is hardly subtle. You don’t actually think he’s serious do you?” Denise was now wide-awake.

“The one thing I can say for sure about the Sergeant Major is that he’s never **NOT** serious.”

Denise had met the Sergeant Major only one time before David hung up his anchor and traded navy blue for civilian “whatever”. A leathery faced, hard lined, sinewy coot with Marine Corps flowing through his veins, the Sergeant Major was an enigma of contradictions. None-the-less she had taken an immediate liking to him. Always polite and an absolute southern gentleman, there was an undercurrent of rage just below the surface. She knew they had served together in a grunt unit during the Gulf War, something her husband had never really talked about. But through all the years since the war, and the five years it took David to finish a college degree and land a teaching job after he had retired. David and Sergeant Major had kept a tight friendship going as well as a frequent stream of correspondence between them. The Sergeant Major, or Jeff as Denise liked to call him, was due to finally call it quits after almost thirty years of service. Now a crusty Sergeant Major, Dave first met him back when he was the Company Gunny. Dave was always just “Doc” to the Sergeant Major and together they were a pair, of what, Denise was never quite sure. But they certainly were a pair.

“Men?” She muttered under her breath as she rolled over to sleep. “Still playing games after all these years.”

Little did she know that the games were about to begin. David knew full and well the meaning behind the latest message. He laid awake going over a mental readiness list in his head.

“The Sergeant Major must be really concerned about something...but what?” David began to warm up beneath the covers and started to drift off to sleep.

“I wonder what has him worried?” Dave started to drift.

“That old Gunny doesn’t sweat the small stuff...I better get ready...for...?”

Meanwhile on the other side of the continent Sergeant Major Jeffery Lee Strothers, United States Marine Corps active duty, was just finishing up the last personal message of the evening. In thirty-nine days and a wake up he would be a member of the First Civ. Div. After twenty-eight years of honorable service, two marriages, two wars (not related) and several major conflicts he was finally hanging up his eagle globe and anchor. He hoped that his ol’buddy Doc would heed the message he had sent. Things were breaking loose even if no one else would believe him. He only hoped that every thing would hang tight until he was a free agent and able to choose his battlefield, rather than let some chickenshet democratic congressman chose it for him.

“Only thirty-nine more muther-friggin days!” The old battle weary Marine muttered to himself.

“Just hope the pencil necked jerks inside the beltway can keep it in their pants until then.”

The last light in his Staff NCO Bachelors Quarters blinked out and the cool Northern Virginia night engulfed the quiet. The Sergeant Major listened to the evening noise cataloging each one. He slid his hand beneath the pillow till he felt the cold blued steel of one of Colonel Colt’s best offspring, born back in 1911. Reassured he quickly drifted off to sleep.

“Only thirty-nine figgin days.”

Desert Doc

Chapter-4 Call to Mom

Receiver held to his ear, Mark wrote himself a note as he half-listened to his mother. “Yeah...OK, Ma. I’ll see what I can do, but I really don’t have a lot of say in it.”

His mother didn’t seem to understand the working world. Mark would love to visit on both Thanksgiving and Christmas, but the reality was he would be lucky if he got to visit her for either. It’s not that his boss was a hard case, but it was a business and businesses these days needed to be open all the time. In addition, it was at least a ten-hour drive from Missouri to Wisconsin. That meant it wasn’t just a quick trip. He needed a few days in a row off to even make it worth the effort.

“Well, maybe if you told him how much it would mean to me. Honestly, are you so vital they can’t do without you for a few days? I’m not getting any younger, you know. Tell him that.” His mom complained into the phone.

He sighed inwardly. “I’ll do that Ma. Let me see what I can figure out. If I have to choose, though, which would you rather have me home for? Thanksgiving or Christmas?”

“Oh honey, it’s so hard to choose...I guess Christmas. Your sister will be home then too.”

“OK Ma. Like I said, I’ll see what I can do. I gotta go, or I’ll be late.”

“All right son. I love you. Good-bye.

“Love you too. Bye, Ma.” Mark said, then hung up the telephone receiver.

On the note, he wrote “Get Christmas off,” then stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He turned to the task at hand, which was not, as he had told his mother, going to work. Actually, he had the day off. No, today was to be spent getting his tiny apartment in order. There always was the possibility that he could find a date and bring her home, and he’d like to have a relatively clean place to bring this as-yet-

unnamed date. Plus, the place was looking like a pigsty. He was already mostly finished with the domestic stuff. Dishes and laundry were done, and clean sheets were on the bed. He turned his attention to the closet. Half of it was taken up with Mark's Guard stuff, plus some miscellaneous camping equipment. He looked at the pile with distaste. That stupid sleeping bag was such a space-waster. A surplus extreme cold weather bag took up about the same space as a medium suitcase, and that was when rolled up! Well, the weather was going to get colder soon. "Even in Missouri, there can be ice storms." He thought. Mark set to rolling up the sleeping bag as tight as he could make it, then set to stuffing it into an empty, clean 5 gallon plastic bucket, then snapped the sealing lid in place. With much sweating and cursing, the task took about 30 minutes, all told. He set the bucketed sleeping bag next to the door, to take to his car on the next trip. In another bucket he placed other items selected from the closet. Snow boots, winter coat, and a change of clothes barely fit into the bucket, but again, after much work and re-arranging, he finally snapped the lid in place. Lastly, into a ratty old ALICE pack with a frame, he put other essentials, such as a canteen with cup and cover, a bottle of Polar Pure, a small toiletries kit, fire starting kit, Buck knife, and small kit with 2 Connibear 110 traps and some assorted snares. A few "Datrex" ration packs and a canteen-sized bottle of food tabs rounded out the pack, plus some other odds and ends. This "Emergency kit" usually sat in Mark's trunk, but he had used much of it on the last camping trip, and never got around to repacking the kit and putting it back in the car. With the cleaning frenzy, plus the prospect of a road trip on the horizon, Mark was glad he finally got around to putting it back in the beat-up AMC Eagle station wagon that he drove. The kit was his security blanket, and he was vaguely uneasy without it in the trunk. Frankly, though, the tool kit he carried in the car saw more use than his personal emergency kit. When the Eagle worked well, it was great, but 200,000 miles plus was asking a lot from an AMC. Still, it was old enough so he could do most of the repairs himself. It did have a "black box" albeit a primitive one, but he could still see the engine through the hoses, belts, and plastic covers, which was more than can be said about Dave's new Camero!

With the car loaded and the apartment cleaned it was nearly dark. Mark closed the curtains, went to the nightstand and withdrew his Glock 17. He had owned it for nearly ten years, and absolutely loved it. He had had the foresight to purchase two extra magazines when he had purchased the pistol, and thus had three high capacity pre-ban magazines for the pistol. Many people disregarded the 9mm, calling it a "Mouse gun" round, and a favorite of the gangs, but Mark

lived by the old saw that you ought to “Shoot what you’re good with,” and he was pretty good with the Glock 17.

He spread an oil-stained towel on the coffee table and quickly stripped the Glock to its subassemblies. Peering at them, he lightly wiped the parts down with a clean cloth. He then went to the sink, reached into the cabinet underneath, and withdrew a can of automobile brake cleaner. Taking a few deep breaths and holding the last one, he liberally sprayed the action of the Glock, until he was certain that he had removed almost all traces of oil from the slide and frame. He shook the parts vigorously over the sink, then tossed them into the dish rack before scooting to the living room and drawing a deep breath. “Damn!” he said. The brake cleaner worked great, but sure stunk up the place! Minutes later, after the brake cleaner had dissipated from the parts (but not the smell), he took the components back into the living room. Mark opened his “gun bag” withdrew a small tube of powdered graphite, and lightly directed the extremely fine black powder into the areas of the pistol where friction occurred. He knew he was probably being overcautious: This was Missouri after all, not Alaska! But still, it wouldn’t hurt anything to have the graphite lubricant in place. Mark started using graphite after listening to his uncle tell stories about the effect of cold on his sidearm in Korea, and after talking to a guy in the Corps who had spent a few miserable months at Ft. Wainwright. Finished, he reassembled the pistol, racked the slide a few times and wiped the outside down to remove any stray graphite. Picking up the loaded magazine, he looked at the bottom. A small “2” was painted there. Mark unloaded the magazine, placing the 12 rounds of Federal hollow-point in the magazine with the “3” on the floor plate. Before returning the pistol to the holster, he re-checked the chamber, dry-fired it, then placed the loaded magazine in the well.

Walking to the bedroom, he placed the Glock back in his nightstand, then went to the kitchen to prepare his evening meal.

Andy glanced guiltily at the straining UPS man as he staggered onto the porch for the fifth time.

“Damn it Andy, you’re going to have get a broomstick to put my hernia back in,” he wheezed as he dropped the large box as gently as possible.

“My wife and that damn e-Bay!” said Andy as he reached for the electronic clipboard and signed his name. “Well, I hope the rest of your deliveries are lighter.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” Groaned the man in brown as he swayed, took his clipboard back and started down the sidewalk. “See ya!”

“Bye!” Called Andy as he swept his eyes over the boxes.

He already knew what was in most of it: Freeze-dried meat. In preparation for hard times, Andy had tried TVP.

“Tastes just like beef!!” the advertisement had proclaimed. Tasted more like beef manure, Andy thought.

The only other alternatives were to keep canned beef, or freeze-dried. He loved beef, like any other Wisconsinite, and despite the canned venison in the pantry the freeze-dried beef was a welcome addition to the other storage food. In the basement prophylactically surrounded by mousetraps, were many 5-gallon pails lined with Mylar bags, full of storage food. His wife Becky had slowly come to realize the wisdom of such preparations. He cautioned her not to speak of them with anyone, and after he extracted her promise, she did not. She felt calming effect of Andy’s preparations during the Y2K scare several years before, although most of his preparations had been in place long before the media circus that surrounded the calendar rollover.

The preparations that Andy insisted on making had proved themselves on several occasions. Only last winter, the freezing rain dropped power lines, and their home was without outside power for three days. While most of the neighbors fled to relatives’ homes, Andy’s system to heat the house worked well. Although the LP tank that normally heated the home was full, the furnace would not work because there was no power. Andy’s solution was to have two large golf-cart batteries connected to an inverter, and the furnace connected to the inverter. A float charger kept the batteries topped off at all times. The batteries alone were sufficient to run the furnace for nearly two weeks, but just for practice during the outage, Andy had recharged them by running a cord in from the small diesel generator in the detached garage. He discovered that with the different muffler and the garage windows only partially open, the little generator was acceptably quiet. Another preparation that proved itself during that outage was

the well. The property already had a well in place before Andy and Becky bought the place, but the Department of Natural Resources had ruled that it was fit only for watering the lawn, despite a clean well test. It was suspected by many residents who had wells suffering a similar fate that the city somehow encouraged this, as it extended its municipal lines into the half-rural, half outskirts areas surrounding the town.

Andy had not dug up the well as many neighbors had done. Instead, he installed a 110V well pump, and ran the plumbing underground to the house. For drinking and cooking initially, they used water stored in plastic barrels in the basement. When that ran low, or they needed to take a shower (a hot shower, thanks to the LP water heater), Andy opened the valves that put the well water into the household plumbing. They had no concerns about the toilets backing up, as the city had not quite got around to extending the sewer out as far as their home, and thus, still had a perfectly functional septic tank and leech field.

“Well, to work!” said Andy as he hefted the boxes for the trip to the basement.

AGreyMan

Chapter-5 Higher Education

David McMillan stood fuming outside the Senior Educational Director’s office. Directors were not referred to by the antiquated and *Politically Incorrect* term of Principal. Such elitist terminology was no longer accepted in the secondary education system in the “Republik of Kalifornia”! David thought to himself.

David could hear the muffled conversation going on behind the Director’s door and could well imagine the PC bowing, curtsying, and genuflecting taking place at this very moment.

Suddenly the door opened and the Director, Ms. Janice “Torquemada” Torgelson, emerged leading an obviously distressed pair of aging yuppie parents.

“Yes Ms. Daniels, I fully agree with your concerns and we will take the appropriate actions necessary.” Torgelson said as she led the Daniels’ into the outer office, giving David a critical look as she passed him.

More genuflecting and hand wringing was conducted in the outer office before Director Torgelson stiffly marched back to her office and motioned David inside. David felt like he was back in the service standing before his CO's desk about to get royally @ss chewed for something. The Director moved around her large executive walnut desk, sat down and began shuffling papers and arranged her desk ignoring David standing right in front of her.

"Isn't this charming." David thought. "Shall we pull another page from the Executive Leaders Guide Book?" He continued. "Hmmm that would be under Chapter 3, Intimidation of Subordinates and other arrogant procedures." Ms. Director now looked up at David.

"You do know why you're in my office Mr. McMillan, do you not?" She began.

"Frankly, no."

"Come now, surely you recognized the Daniels, Rebecca's parents?"

"Oh yes, I've met them."

"Oh you've met them? I'd say you more than met them. They are quite upset and justifiably so, I should say."

David could see the expression on her face-harden, as well as hear the vinegar begin to enter her voice.

"They are very disturbed by your conduct in the classroom the other day and the propaganda you are attempting to espouse to your students!"

"Propaganda?" David could feel the hackles on the back of his neck raise. "Just how is teaching the Constitution and the Bill of Rights propaganda Ms. Torgelson?"

"It is not what you are teaching, IT is the WAY you are teaching that is upsetting the students and the parents of those students." Torgelson was starting to build up steam.

“It is the way you go on and on about individual rights and responsibilities. Bantering over and over again how it is each and every citizens right, no their duty to criticize their government. You are teaching anarchy in this very school!

“How is it anarchy when it is clearly stated in the Bill of Rights...” She cut him off.

“I don’t need one of YOUR lectures Mr. McMillan. You are constantly degrading the present administration, finding fault with all its policies. You rant on and on about the unconstitutionality of decisions being made at the highest levels in our government and how Americans are losing their rights and becoming subjugated by the very organizations that are meant to protect those rights. You, Mr. McMillan are teaching a warped and twisted view of our political system and are quite frankly scaring the kids in your class, and upsetting their parents at home!” Herr Director was just starting to warm up.

“Ms Torgelson” David began quietly. “I am teaching a class on U.S. Government, in order to do that I must discuss, in detail, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They ARE somewhat pivotal documents and quite necessary in order to explain how our system of government is supposed to work. That also includes comparisons to present day situations and the application of these documents in our modern world today. When what the founding fathers wrote down blatantly conflicts with the current administration’s actions, just how do you propose I justify that to my students?”

“You have twisted those documents to serve your own agenda and I will not have it in my classrooms!”

“I have done no such thing. I have merely taught the information as required from the states approved educational material list, *when it was correct*. I have only added supplemental material when it was necessary to clarify or correct gross oversights and/or outright errs in those approved materials.”

“Your own materials!” She was standing up now. “Right-wing propaganda is more like it.”

“I hardly consider the Federalist Papers, Poor Richards Almanac, and the correspondence of our first presidents right-wing propaganda, would you?” Dave was struggling to maintain a calm profile.

“That is ancient history and material no longer applicable to today’s problems!

“No longer applicable!” Now David was now starting to get steamed. “It is more applicable now, and has greater need than ever before in our nations history!”

“Oh is that so! Just like your little tirade the other day on the Second Amendment. That antiquated so called right! You openly compared the current program of restrictions on gun owners as “Neo-Nazi Jackbooted politics”...right in class! You then so far as to make a direct comparison between our current governor and Adolph Hitler!” Torgelson slammed her fist on a stack of paper. “And called the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms a group of SS Thugs!”

“If the shoe fits.”

“I have about had enough of your warped right wing politics.” She stammered out. “I should have known better than to hire a...a...a...”

“Vet.” Dave injected.

“That’s right!” The color was now rising in her face. “You’re nothing but a bunch of brainwashed killing machines! We should never allow your type out in public among civilized citizens!”

Dave just stared back in disbelief. He was seeing Torquemada in full colors for the first time.

“Let me remind you Mr. McMillan, that you are a ‘probationary’ teacher and as such your position can be terminated at my leisure.” She moved out from behind the desk. “From this point forward all lesson plans will be screened by me and will contain only material I personally approve of. There will be no deviation from accepted themes and outlines. Is that understood?”

David just stood there stoically.

“You Mr. McMillan” She shook her finger at him. “are officially warned, any deviation, any deviation at all, however slight will result in your immediate dismissal. Your propaganda will not be tolerated here, do you understand? NOT HERE!”

David looked down at this weasel of an administrator. "I will speak the truth Ms. Torgelson, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

And with that David spun on one heel in military fashion and walked squared shouldered out of her office.

"You get back here Mister!" She yelled after him. "I am not through with you yet! Do you hear me, GET BACK HERE!"

The secretaries and students in the outer office just stared in disbelief as David walked quickly past leaving the Director fuming and spitting curses in his wake.

"Well I guess school is out a little early today." David muttered to himself as he rounded the corner and headed towards his office. "So much for my teaching career."

Desert Doc

Chapter-6 Sergeant Major

Sergeant Major Strothers swing the last duffle bag into the back of his tan Suburban. His last checkout was finally completed. He had been thoroughly poked, probed and prodded by the Doc's and handed a clean bill of health, and last but not least received his final debriefs by the various "S"-shops on his way out the door. He knew that they where not sad to see him go. He was the last of the "Old Breed" and no longer politically correct in the modern Marine Corps. It was now about "Image" and not effectiveness. Not whether they got the job done, - but whether they looked good before the camera's doing it. As his last and final CO had phrased it during an Officers and Senior Staff Call a few months back.

"Impression is Everything, Sergeant Major, Impression is Everything."

To which the combat experienced ol' Salt had replied flatly.

"Impression is an illusion Sir."

"I would have to disagree with you there Sergeant Major. If your troops look good then they will perform equally as well, it's the impression that counts."

“Iraq had an impressive army on paper at the beginning of the war back in ‘90. It was rated as the third or fourth largest standing army in the world. Didn’t last squat when it came down to putting the metal where the mouth was. They rolled up like yesterdays newspaper.” Strothers sipped his drink. “The Somali’s on the other hand looked like punks, not impressive at all - but handed us our @ss and backed us out of that hole because we couldn’t take off the kid gloves.”

The Colonel just looked at his Sergeant Major in disgust.

“We need warriors, Colonel, not bookends. That is what wins wars, hard, cool headed, warriors.”

“Your days are long gone Sergeant Major. The days of Chesty Puller are over and will never come again. The world is a different place now, no more big wars, and no more pitched battles, no more heroes. We’re the policepersons of the world now and that requires finesse, something that you and your old breed totally lack.”

“Amen to that Sir, Amen to that.” Strothers muttered under his breath.

“Sergeant Major?”

“Oh nothing sir, just reminding myself of something. With your permission, Sir.” Strothers lifted his glass to the Colonel, thereby excusing himself and he quickly began looking for the bar. He need a fresh stiff drink, his was feeling watered down.

As he drove out beneath the main gate of Quantico and headed for highway 95, he felt a bit of remorse. We’d had a good Corps back when he’d joined. It was right at the end of the Viet Nam war. They had trained hard for real combat. The DI’s back then were some of the toughest Marines he had known. They were hard tempered steel, quenched by cold reality in the heat of battle. To a young blue-eyed seventeen year old kid from the back woods of South Carolina they WERE the God’s of war and “the Private” Strothers hung on every word they spoke. This was a time when Honor, Courage, and Integrity actually meant something. They lived and breathed it daily under the constant tutelage of Staff Sergeant Minde, survivor of the Walking Dead, and Staff Sergeant AuAu, the biggest Samoan (the only Samoan) young Private Strothers had ever seen.

Strothers smiled to himself as he headed south on 95 towards Richmond. He could see the faces of his many comrades through the 28 years of military service. He sighed, thinking of all the good times in the bars overseas as well as the bad times eating dirt and sleeping in fighting holes.

“Hell of a life so far.” He said to himself as he reached over and patted the broad head of his Rotty. “Well Ruger, it’s just you and me now.” He checked the map on the dashboard.

“Just hope Doc doesn’t mind a little company.”

The ol’ Sergeant Major, now retired, shifted his backside a little in an attempt to find a more comfortable position for the long drive ahead. He had a few stops on the way to check in on some old warhorses like himself - now, put out to pasture. But he knew that he had more than a few races left in him. He just hoped that he would be up for the task ahead. He hoped that they all would be up for the tasks ahead. Strothers shook his head at the thought of all those soft Americans that wouldn’t be ready.

“Sorry b@stards.” He whispered to himself. “D@mn sorry b@stards.”

Desert Doc

Chapter 7 Checkpoint

Sgt Maj. Strothers (now retired...as of 37 minutes ago) crept slowly along in his Suburban with the rest of the southbound traffic on 95 just north of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The travel checkpoints had become a routine pain in the behind for commuters. But as usual, people eventually got used to them and the loudest complaints had by now quieted down to mere background grumbling. The Home Security checkpoints started showing up shortly after the second terrorist attacks that followed a little over a year after the World Trade Center disaster. Established primarily on the main highways between major cities their initial purpose (as reported) had been to track and inspect the millions of big rigs that crisscrossed the nation to preclude their use in another terrorist strike. It didn’t take long before the checks were extended to all vehicles regardless of size. Before the smoke from the Third wave of attacks had begun to clear, the Checkpoints and National ID requirements were established facts and all travel was restricted without the proper paperwork. If it moved on the American

highways big brother knew about it. This was all in the name of National Security, and these restrictions were for the common good...of course. The fact that these restrictions not only came about so quickly but also were manned up and enforced with such efficiency was amazing. It was almost as if this entire scenario had been preplanned.

The bored Homeland Security guard quickly waved Strothers's big '72 Suburban, the "Blue Moose", through the checkpoint once he noticed the military decal sticker in his front window. The Moose rumbled away from the choked traffic flow and a few minutes later cruised on into Fredericksburg. He had to make one last stop at Carl's before leaving the area for good. Carl's Ice Cream shop, off of Princess Anne St., was one of the last independent mom and pop ice cream shops in existence. It didn't look like much as you drove up to it, but sure had some of the creamiest, sweetest ice cream ever, made right there on the spot. Ruger popped his head up as they rolled to a stop around the corner from the little white building. Carl's ice cream was one of Ruger's favorite haunts as well.

"Seems kind of silly I suppose." The ol' Sgt. Maj. said to the dog as they both headed over to stand in line. "But this may well be the last time we're out this way for a while, eh Ruger?" The big Rottie just squirmed in anticipation. "How about a little treat for the road? Hey fella!"

There was always a line around Carl's when they were open. Ruger sat obediently right beside his master and watched the scene, waiting as patiently as he could. After they each had finished their treat they climbed back up into the "Moose" and headed for the self-storage lot at the south end of town.

The Sgt. Maj. backed up to the trailer he had prepacked and stored there inside one of the larger rental storage garages. Its contents safely secured within the trailer and locked within the storage garage, which resulted in a form of double protection. He had picked up the old 15 foot ex-Ryder trailer several years back at an auction. It had been pretty rough to start with, not too different shape than the way he had found the "Moose", but after a little work, a beefed up frame, new suspension, a few replacement panels, fresh tires and a new coat of paint, the trailer looked almost brand new. The Moose on the other hand had required considerably more work and had taken several years of patient painstaking effort before the Sgt. Maj. was satisfied with the final product.

It began as a complete off the frame restoration for the '73 _ ton 4x4 Suburban. The 350 V8 had been totally rebuilt, blueprinted and balanced. The "Blue Moose" as she was finally dubbed had been rebuilt for absolute rugged reliability. *Expeditionary reliability* Strothers liked to think. From the Huge "Roo" bar on the front, through the beefed up bullet proof suspension, extra long range gas tanks to the heavy-duty roof rack on top. Even the tires on this behemoth were the toughest tread going and run flat designed. This blue monster could go just about anywhere or through anything. The trailer was like wise reinforced and heavy duty. Rather than a conventional towing ball connection, Strothers had installed a heavy-duty pintal hook connection taken from a 5-ton military truck and trailer to hold the Moose and her caboose together. Whether on or off the road the Sgt. Maj. could take this rig just about anywhere and had.

Strothers double-checked everything before he was finally satisfied. All fluids were topped off. Tire pressures within specs. The cooler was stocked and ready just behind the center console between the front bucket seats. Ruger was waiting in the copilot position to get underway. All gauges were steady and reading normal. Ready to go and with everything in place he flipped up the center console top and reached inside. His fingertips quickly located a small hidden button, and pressing firmly triggered the side panel that sprung open and revealed his cherished old Colt. With the familiarity bred from years of use he quickly dropped the magazine out, jacked the slide and checked the charge. She was locked and loaded. He slid the magazine back in firmly, set the safety and slid the .45 over into it's ready position beside the his bucket seat in a specially constructed holster. Drop your hand down into what looks like a map pocket and it is likely to come up packed and ready for action. The big dark blue beast rumbled out of the storage yard and out onto the highway. Next stop: Master Guns - Lin Ashley's "End of the Road Hollow" in Arkansas. Strothers had both a drop off and a pickup to take care of before he continued west.

Strothers made fairly good time down 95 through the Richmond checkpoints over to the 64 highway and out 81 into Knoxville and finally onto the 40. Just before Knoxville one of the more prudent Home Security guards started to get a little too nose.

"Must have just been promoted" Strothers thought to himself.

The upstart NCO started ordering him to get down out of his rig and to bring all his travel papers as he walked around the rig poking his nose everywhere. Ruger

must have made him nervous, and for good reason. The skinny twerp would hardly have been a much more than a quick chew toy for Ruger once he got going.

Strothers complied quietly with the order and started to lay out his travel permit, discharge papers, moving orders etc. The weasel looked through the papers like he knew what he was doing.

“Quite a rig you drive there Citizen.” The Corporal began. “Mind telling me what it’s for and where you are going?”

“Oh the Moose?” Strothers smiled his best – I could snap your weenie little neck smile. “Yeah it’s sort of a toy of mine. Built her between missions over the last dozen years or so. Figured when I retired that I’d do a little exploring, sort of see the country before I decide on where I’d finally settle down.”

The Corporal slid the Sgt Maj’s National ID/drivers license through the scanner. Then checked the information against the papers spread out before him.

“What’s in the trailer Citizen?”

“Personal and Household effects is all. You can check the packing manifest there.” Strothers pointed to the stapled multicolored forms. “All inspected and sealed at Quantico before I left this morning.”

The Corporal harrumphed as he scanned over the list of personal effects. Just then an older senior NCO walked back into the inspection shed coffee mug in hand to check on things, looked over the Sgt. Maj.’s shoulder and began reading the official military papers spread out on the counter.

“Tompkins, just what the hell are you doing? Are you trying to loose those new strips already? For crying out load, quit fussing with this Marine!”

Strothers turned to look at the Master Sergeant now beside him.

“Evening Top”. He remarked.

“Evening – er ah.” He leaned forward to get a close look at Strothers papers on the counter. “Hmmm, oh Sergeant Major. Yes Sergeant Major!”

“I’m just doing my job Top.” The Corporal whined.

“Hell Tompkins, can’t you see the date on those discharge papers! The Sergeant Major just retired and on his first day out you’re going to hassle him. Get a clue Son, and stamp the damn papers and let him get on his way!”

Tompkins now red faced began stamping Strothers paperwork.

“Sgt Maj I’ve got a fresh pot over here, care for a nip?” The Top motioned him aside and lowered his voice. “Sorry for the hassle, he’s a good kid just a little too energetic with his new stripe.” The Top said as he poured a Styrofoam cup full of steaming hot java.

“No sweat Top.” Strothers said as he accepted the cup. “We were all greenies once.” The pair chuckled.

“So where you headed now Sgt. Maj.?”

“Not really sure to tell you the truth Top. I’ve got a one year free travel permit, thought I’d visit a few old war horses like myself that have already been put out to pasture, drink a few beers, tell a few worn out war stories, and then...who knows. Perhaps I’ll find a nice place where someone can still fish and hunt without too much hassle.”

The Corporal was now standing beside them with Strothers papers in hand.

“Yeah, that sounds like the ticket there Sgt. Maj., Hmmm looking forward to that day too in a few years.”

Strothers took the papers from the Corporal, who was now more obliging and subdued. Raised his cup to the Top Sergeant and thanked him for the help.

As Strothers drove off into the night the pair of Homeland Security guards watched him from the guard shack.

“I was just doing my job Top...just like you told me to.”

“Son there are times to follow the rules and times to use common sense. Did you see list of medals on his Discharge papers, almost 30 years in the Marine Corps! Hell boy, he had a unlimited one year Free Travel Permit! When was the last time you saw one of those? They don’t just give those out to anyone anymore...Nope, not these days. That is someone you don’t need to mess with Tompkins. That there is a Real American Patriot, they don’t come any tougher.”

Truer words were never spoken, but if the Top Sergeant had known just what kind of Real American Patriot he had given coffee to and sent on his way, he probably would have wet his pants.

Desert Doc

Chapter 8 – At the Hollows

It was a little after midnight when Strothers finally rolled up to the outer gate of the “End of the Road Hollow” of Lyndon “Lin” Ashley deep in the sticks of Arkansas. They had served together at various duty stations through out their careers. Lin had retired five years earlier with 24 years under his belt and disappeared into the back woods of northern Arkansas. They had competed together on various Marine Corps shooting teams and when Strothers stepped down by retiring, the Marines had finally lost their Old Man of the High Power Circuit. Lin was one of the few shooters that could give the ol’ Sergeant Major a run for his money and often did. They had become fast friends after their first shooting match back as Sergeants and Jeff (as Strothers was called by his old pal) had stood up as best man at Lin’s marriage to tiny Maria.

“What an odd couple” he remembered thinking when he first met Maria.

She was probably the cutest Philippina he had ever seen, long dark hair, perfect olive skin, petite, almost doll like in everyway. While Lin was more easily described as a shaved gorilla that had been house broken and trained to behave in doors. Strothers chuckled to himself just thinking about it. When Lin wrapped his paws around any long rifle, which is what it usually looked like, it seemed as if the rounds didn’t dare strike anywhere else but in the black. Lin had a rare gift with weapons and there was no one that could truly tune a piece better than Lin, ex Master Gunnery Sergeant and Master Gunsmith to the Marine Corps, now retired. And as tiny and frail as Maria seemed there was no question that she ruled the roost in her house. Strothers’ never thought he would ever see any one,

let alone this tiny gal, bring Lin into line. That had been difficult enough for the Marine Corps to do, but there was no doubt that Lin's boss was a little 98 pound, dripping wet, fire ant from the Jungles of Mindanao.

"What a pair". Strothers muttered to himself. "What a pair."

Strothers dimmed his headlights and waited. He heard the crackle of someone keying the mike twice on his CB speaker. He keyed his mike twice back, paused, and then twice again. Suddenly the chain link gate opened and started to slide to one side. He still had a mile or more to drive up the winding rutted dirt road. It was dark and foreboding and he was glad he was a friend and not a foe. It would not be easy to storm this place judging by the thick underbrush and heavy forest. Suddenly the forest opened up into pasture and sky filled with stars. He never got tired of looking at the night sky when he was away from the lights of civilization. He could still remember lying out at night in Saudi Arabia desert before the ground war started and just gazing up into the full glory of the Milky Way. What a sight! The dirt road suddenly turned to gravel and the ruts smoothed out, as the Blue Moose got closer to the house. Strothers could see a big bear of a man wearing coveralls sitting out on the porch waiting for him as he drove up and parked.

"Let Ruger out Jeff. I've got the dogs in the house, give him a chance to stretch a bit." Lin came off the porch and in just a few large steps reached him and gave the smaller man a great bear hug. Not that Strothers was a small man, at five foot ten inches he was about average, however next to Lin's six four Paul Bunyan frame almost anyone appeared small. Ruger bounded out of the truck and sniffed the ground earnestly, chasing the strange new scents off into the darkness.

"Well Hoss I guess you're one of us now." He growled as he let Strothers down and handed him a cool one.

"Not if I have to wear those hillbilly trousers like you've got on." He welcomed the cold beer and let the first taste slide down his throat.

"Wheeew that was good." He said catching his breath. "Looks to me like you've gone native on us there cowboy." Strothers motioned to Lin's coveralls. They turned and headed off towards the porch.

“I’m just a good ol’ boy now, Jeff.” He chuckled. “And like you taught me in jungle training, doesn’t pay to stick out in a crowd. Just blend in with the vegetation, Hee, hee, hee.”

The two old warhorses seemed to shed the years away as they walked up the steps on the porch. They were two young cocky Marines out on liberty once again. Just looking for a good time for a little while before they had to go back on duty.

“Maria’s got Lumpia and Pansit waiting for you and there’s plenty of cold beer in the frig.”

Maria was waiting for them when they came into the house. “Wipe your feet Marines, I keep a clean house here.” She said with a hint of her Philippino accent. The pair looked at each other and roared with laughter, but they did wipe their feet. The next several hours were filled with old jokes, old stories and old times. It was getting close to three in the morning before they finally called it quits and Lin showed Jeff to his room.

“Best bunk this side of the Mississippi there buddy.” Lin pointed to the full sized feather bed covered with one of Maria’s country quilts.

“Whoa, you do run a hotel here Hoss. You’ve really gone soft of me haven’t you?”

“Well you just wait until you spread out on that there cloud. You’ll be sleeping like a baby in minutes. Of course there’s the cold, damp ground outside if that’s more to your taste.”

Strothers stretched his back in anticipation of a good nights sleep; it had been a long 18 hours of driving. “No thanks, been there and done that.”

“I thought so...you’re going soft already, and you not even a silly-villy-ian for twenty-four hours yet.” Lin chuckled. “It’s a sad, sad thing to see a Marine go soft so quickly after all those good years of training.”

Strothers slapped the ol’ gorilla on the shoulder. “Just following your lead there Master Guns, just following your lead.”

Lin had been right, when Jeff finally plopped down on that feather bed he felt like he was floating. He didn't even last minutes before he was sound asleep.

The following morning found the pair up at the crack of dawn. Strothers could smell the fresh java brewing as he descended the stairs. "Lin had built himself a nice little home back here in the hollow." He thought. The house was solid oak timber frame construction with river rock and brick infill. It was a basic saltbox design that was infinitely adaptable and Lin and Maria had done a beautiful job of building and furnishing their home. Lin already had a cup of hot steaming Joe waiting for him when he walked into the kitchen.

"So how long until I can sleep in like normal folks till noon?" Jeff asked.

"Well first off you have to be normal, and folks like us just don't fit that mold Bubba!" Lin handed Strothers his cup. "It's been five years for me and I still don't need an alarm clock." He took a sip. "Doesn't matter how late I stay up working...come oh five hundred hours and my eyes pop open like a damn robot. I'm awake and might as well get up."

Strothers just shook his head and sipped his coffee.

"But I do take some real nice nooners." Lin chuckled. Referring to the military habit of an afternoon nap after the noon work out. If you could work it right, you took off early for lunch, worked out hard for an hour, showered up and still had time to get in a forty-five minute to an hour nap before you had to be back on duty.

"So what presents did you bring me Sergeant Major?" Lin motioned to the trailer behind the Blue Moose parked out front.

Strothers turned to look out the window. "Everything you had on your list Bud."

"Everything?!" Lin seemed amazed and almost choked on his coffee.

"Yep...well almost everything. I didn't bring the dancing bears you asked for." Referring to the dancing strippers that used to entertain GI's back in the P.I. early in their careers. "I didn't figure Maria would go for that and I don't think you could out run her Butterfly knife there sport in your bubba utilities." They both chuckled.

“Oh no, mamma wouldn’t take kindly to that at all.”

“But aside from that I think I picked up everything you’ve been asking me to look into for you.”

“The CNC machine?” Lin asked unbelievably.

“Well that took some doing to find one worth the effort, but yes even the CNC.”

Now Lin had that look you see in a five year olds face first thing Christmas morning when they first lay eyes on all the toys under the tree.

“And everything else?”

“I think so. Had a hell of a time getting everything crammed into the trailer along with my stuff. You don’t mind me bringing some of my stuff along do you? But yes, I think it’s all there.”

Now they were walking out on to the porch. Strothers continued.

“The tools and tool metal weren’t too much of a problem, some of the electronic stuff took some doing. After all we didn’t want to leave a paper trail and I couldn’t purchase too much at one time. But you’ll find everything and then some. Thought I’d pad the list a little if I got some good deals. The parts kits on the other hand...well let’s just say I managed to pick up everything and then some but I was skating on pretty thin ice there with all the new restrictions.”

Lin just stared in disbelief when they started to unload the trailer into the storage room next to his shop. Forty minutes later they were inventorying the treasure now stacked on the concrete floor.

“The large crates are spent 50 cal brass. Those cans are the AP you wanted. I’m keeping a couple of cans for myself. Most of it is linked so you’ll have to deal with that.”

Strothers walked along checking off his list.

“Those two crates are the Browning 50 cal barrels you wanted. You should check out those suckers Lin, they are still packed in the cosmolene. Talk about cherry.”

They walked on. “Those boxes are all your tooling and the tool metal is back over there. These here are the FN part kits. They look pretty good, you’ve got some nice chrome lined barrels and three of them are heavy duty. Every things Metric as you requested,” He said as he kicked the wooden crates.

“The CNC is broken down and still in up there in the front of the trailer. The rest of these boxes are the little odds and ends that you and I’ve have talked about over the last year or so.”

Lin just stood there flabbergasted. “I still can’t believe you managed to pick all this up.”

“Well Merry Fricken Christmas cowboy! Santa has arrived!”

The two looked at each other and broke out laughing. Lin couldn’t believe his luck and Strothers was tickled pink at his friend’s reaction.

“Ok buddy, well I’ve got a few prezes of my own now that its show and tell time. Follow the master blaster.” Lin said as he led the way.

Lin’s shop was made up of four specialty shops in one. Much like a large box with internal dividers each area was a craftsman’s dream. They had unloaded the trailer on the auto shop side. Complete with a walk down pit and air tools, there was just about every tool and device one would need to rebuild a vehicle from the ground up. The double doors in the middle of the north wall brought them into the metal shop. Setup with a foundry, a blacksmiths forge, a complete welding shop and a metal mill and lathe, Lin could manufacture just about anything out of metal that you could need on a homestead, or an armory for that matter. Through the door on the east wall of the metal shop they entered into the gun shop. From simple trigger work to boring barrels Lin had both the tools and the knowledge to build it. It was here that Lin brought Strothers. Lin walked over to the main workbenches that sat in the middle of the room and stood beside something draped with a canvas cover.

“OK smart @ss, do you want to hazard a guess as to what’s under curtain number Uno?”

Strothers could tell that Lin was just waiting to show off his new baby, whatever it was. “Naw, not particularly...isn’t there somewhere we could go fishing right about now?” He smiled at his old buddy.

Lin’s hand was on the cover. “Now don’t start playing mean on me you ol’ fart. Come on and guess!”

“Lin you’ve had five years out here to come up with something, how the hell should I know what you’ve got under there. Come on...share nice now.”

Lin gave him a big frown but still lifted the cover. The fact that Strothers’s eyes got as big as dinner plates gave Lin all the satisfaction he needed.

“What in the hell is that?” Strothers said in amazement as he leaned forward and reached out his hand.

The shape and style looked very familiar but the sheer beauty of the machine work and finishing was beyond expectations. Strothers looked at Lin in amazement.

“That my scrawny little friend is a Lin Ashley version of the Barrett Simi-automatic 50 caliber BMG sniping rifle.”

“May I?” Strothers motioned to pick up the piece.

“Sure, go ahead.” Lin said with a big smile on his face.

Strothers hefted the big gun easily. “It’s a lot lighter than any Barrett I’ve handled before.” He said in amazement.

“Well, now you know what I’ve been doing with all that high-speed, low-drag metal I’ve been asking you about. Without the magazine she’s about the same weight as our old M60’s, but will a hell of a lot more punch, I can tell you.” Lin showed his buddy how to check for safe on this custom rifle.

“I’ve solved the accuracy problem with the recoiling barrel system, as well as tweaked a few other things myself. She’s as accurate as any 50 BMG ever made and I would probably put hard money on her that in the right hands, yours and mine, she couldn’t be beat in any competition.”

Strothers noticed the different sized magazines on the table. “I recognize the five and ten rounders there but that isn’t...”

“A twenty round magazine...hmmm sure looks like that to me. I’ve even played with a thirty round mag but it was just too heavy to feed properly. Twenty is the limit and it really works best with the Ten.”

Strothers couldn’t take his eyes off the Ashley/Barrett 50BMG. He set it down carefully. “It’s a beautiful work of art Lin...I’m impressed.”

“Well you should be it’s yours.”

“What?!”

“You know it’s not often that I get to see your jaw hit the ground, but this was worth it!” He slapped Strothers on the shoulder. “Not only that, it’s got a twin also with your name on it.”

“No way!”

“Well I figured that that nephew in-law of yours, that corpsman could probably use one if he was going to go out shooting with you. Besides I’m not hurting for big toys, don’t worry about me in that department.” He chuckled.

“Well I’ll be...”

“I know, I know, you’ll be grateful mush mush mush. Come on we’re not done yet. Now lets go and check out some serious toys.”

Lin walked over to one of the steel cabinets against the wall and reached up and triggered something. It opened up and swung out like a door reveling a dark staircase leading down.

“Let’s go check out my personal toy room, shall we?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 09 - Jihad Arrives

Khalid Atwa looked at his watch again. The sun was just now breaking through and chasing the last gray night vapors away. Allah would be pleased with this new attack upon the infidel. Now **they** would hear the cries of their starving children as he had in the refuge camps. Now **they** would feel the gut burning prangs of hunger. Their vast seas of golden grain would in just a few days become brown wilting and rotting cesspools of starvation. Now **they** would know fear! He chuckled to himself.

“Here is a new fad diet for you America!”

He waved his arm and watched as ten large helium balloons lifted silently into the dawn sky. Stationed a mile apart on this back road in Colorado these ten balloons along with over fifty more would blanket the great grain belt of the American Midwest with the deadliest combinations of plant diseases known to man. Khalid’s colleagues had spent the last three and a half years brewing and mutating plant viruses, fungi, and bacteria for just this moment.

While the Americans foolishly focused on the remnants of the Afghan Al-Qaida and chased Muslim guerillas through the Mindanao Jungles, he and many groups like his had quietly gone about their work. The Americans even funded many of the elements of this operation, they were so naive. They paid for their own downfall. It was as his uncle had said.

“These are a people with vast weakness. Money being the greatest of them all! They are unwilling to bow their heads to Allah, but only to money do they give their allegiance. It will be their downfall.”

Much of the vast billions of dollars given out in foreign aid by the U.S. every year was quickly channeled to the freedom fighters of Allah. Khalid’s own education and training was the results of grants from the Infidel’s own purses. He had trained at the best schools that American money could buy and when he completed his Masters degree in Viral Botany he was recalled to join the Jihad.

His was only one prong of this attack, like the crescent moon of the faithful the second prong was rolling through several American cities as Khalid climbed into the pickup truck and drove away. In a few hours he too would be airborne but instead of raining down death to the breadbasket of the Great Infidal, he would be headed home.

Hamid Fakiri bounced through the back streets of Chicago in his worn out Peterbilt truck. He was not unlike the hundreds of other truckers rushing around the city in the pre-dawn hours trying to make their deliveries before the rush of the Windy City's traffic choked the blacktop arteries of this midwestern metropolis.

The diesel beast he drove belched out its black smelly soot as he geared up and down navigating the vast web of roads over the last several hours. He was not lost or searching for some hidden location in this maze of canyons. He had been making his deadly delivery as he worked his way across the vast city and suburbs of this metropolis along the great lake.

He knew that there were other delivery trucks like his working this city as well as the other targeted cities. It would be several days before the evidence of this pre-dawn attack would surface. Days before the doctors in the clinics and hospitals began to realize that they faced something far more sinister than the common cold. But by then it would be too late.

Hamid did not know what pestilence he carried aboard his rig. He was not well educated and had actually been a truck driver for these last fourteen years before he had received the phone call.

He did not understand the politics involved, or why this was necessary. But they had promised to protect and safeguard his family. It was not that he particularly disliked the Americans. There were a few that he actually thought of as friends, but life had not been easy, especially since the World Trade Towers. His son had been beaten up several times, once so severely that he ended up in hospital for weeks. Had it not been for the financial assistance from his Mosque he could have never hoped to pay for the expensive hospital bills and rehabilitation for his son. So now he found himself suddenly on the forefront of the Jihad.

He looked down at the gauge they had mounted on the dashboard. He was almost empty. The sprayers had just about completed their job. Over five thousand gallons of deadly virus was drifting through the air as Hamid drove south out of town. It drifted quietly, silently in through windows, across the city and the suburbs coating everything. It did not discriminate, it did not care...

Eli Yoder and his son Jacob looked out over their fields. Something was wrong, something was very wrong. Corn that stood tall and proud just yesterday looked

off. The bright green of health was now dull and splotchy. Eli had seen bad years before, but there was something more with this. All his crops, corn, wheat, rye, alfalfa were beginning to show bad signs. Even the vegetable garden looked off, not really ill but not healthy either. He felt it in his bones, this was an evil omen of some kind.

He and Jacob quickly walked back to the house. He needed to speak with Mary. They needed to inventory the preserves and the root cellar. He had a feeling this would be a very lean year.

Dr. Nathan Anders shook his head as he covered the child up. Her parents weeping beside the bed.

“What the hell is going on here?” He thought to himself. This is the second child today and there are more coming in by the hour. He had called several colleagues and even the local CDC (Center for Disease Control) representative. There was an epidemic brewing up, a storm front moving in and he just knew that they were standing at the leading edge of it. Yet he was getting nothing from the damn bureaucrats!

He looked up to see Sheila, his lead nurse motioning him leave the room. Once he stepped out she bent his shoulder down so that she could speak quietly into his ear.

“Nat we’ve got another three going south like little Lisa in there, nothing is working and five more just showed up. I’ve got two nurses also showing signs of coming down with this....what do you want me to do?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 10 – An Ill Wind This Way Comes

The well-polished expensive Italian shoes echoed in the near empty corridor. The gait was swift and purposeful on the tile floor in the long hallway. The young well-groomed man moved quickly, not running; yet not walking either. This was not sort of news that a young upcoming and aspiring Young Turk wanted to present to his Director, but there was no choice and little time. This was serious!

He moved briskly through the outer doors, past the receptionist, down the short corridor to the security hatch. He placed his palm on the hand scanner that

checked his fingerprints and the chip implant in his right hand against the security records. He looked into the retinal scanner and spoke his name into the voice recognition sampler and heard the soft click and buzz, as the door unlocked.

He quickly moved past the armed inner security guard and turned right at the reception desk. The echo of his steps seemed like an echo of his heart pounding in his ears as he reached his destination. His feet stopped. He grasped the door lever and took a deep breath. Paused. And entered the outer office of the Homeland Security Director for the United States. Janice his secretary tried to stall him as he moved toward the Directors door.

“The Director is in a meeting ...” She tried to say.

But he was already opening and moving through the door. Several powerful looking men were sitting in front of the Director who sat behind his dark polished walnut desk. The Director looked at him with a slight scowl. He didn't like unannounced visitors, especially when he was deep in discussions with influential people. The Young Turk moved around the desk.

“Please excuse me gentlemen, but I have vitally important information that needs the Directors immediate attention. My apologies.” He said as he placed the black folder before the Director and then leaned down to whisper into his ear. “The data is confirmed Sir. The situation is critical.”

The messenger stepped back and stood by awaiting the Directors needs.

“Excuse me Senators, apparently there is something that needs my” He paused mid sentence. The look of shock slowly scrolled across his face. He looked away and then quickly back at the folder, flipping through the pages rapidly.

“Simpson, has the President been notified about this?”

“No Sir, you are the first to see this information outside of the surveillance officers that gathered the data.” The messenger answered.

“Is there a problem?” One of the gentlemen sitting to the right asked.

“Just a second Senator.” The Director swung his chair around to face the messenger.

“Are you absolutely certain of this information?”

“It’s gospel Sir, beyond question. I’ve verified the data three times myself.” He paused. “In addition Sir, I’ve already implemented a news quarantine on the situation pending your review. We have...ah...isolated at least four delivery devices and we are looking for others as we speak.”

“You’ve confirmed the cities?”

“Yes Sir, this is not, I repeat, not a random occurrence. We have absolute confirmation that the cities listed in this report have been targeted. CDC has verified the species involved and the virulence.”

“Oh my God.” The Director whispered.

“Director, would you like to inform us as to the nature of this shocking news?”

The Director slowly stood up and walked away from the desk towards the window.

“Simpson, would you please brief these gentleman as to the contents of that folder.”

“Sir?”

“It’s OK lad, I’m sure the Majority and Minority leaders of the Senate have the necessary clearance, and will be hearing about this soon enough.”

“Yes Sir.” Simpson picked up the black folder. “Senators, the United States is under biological attack and has been so for the past three days. The population centers of New York, Chicago, Memphis, Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, Denver, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are facing disease outbreaks of Pandemic proportions.” He paused. “In addition...”

“There’s MORE?” The shocked Senate Majority Leader asked.

“Yes Sir...in addition to the attack on the population centers there is strong evidence to suggest that the central agricultural production regions of the U.S. have been seeded with biological agents designed to destroy our food producing capabilities.”

“Suggesting...in what way suggesting?” Asked the Senate Minority Leader.

“Virulent plant plagues are suddenly sprouting up through out the region. We will have confirmation cultures within the next 48-72 hours that will verify our suspicions, but the empirical evidence thus far points to widespread multi-layered biological attack.”

The Director turned back and strode purposeful to his desk and picked up the phone.

“Janice, get me the President on the phone, this is a Code Red Omega-3 emergency. Then as soon as I’m on with him, activate all emergency systems, I want an executive officers meeting in my office in thirty minutes and inform the appropriate Homeland Security Area Commanders that I want the borders closed right now, start preparations and I will have Presidential confirmation within the next fifteen minutes.

Yes dear, I’m afraid so. Now get on with it and let me know when you have contacted the Area Commanders.”

A few seconds later. “Yes Mr. President...we have a situation.”

Dr. Anders sat slumped over with his head in his arms in the hospital staff lounge, more asleep than awake. The last forty some hours had become a macabre nightmare that surged on without let up. There seemed to be no end of the patients streaming into his facility, torrents of sick people that he could do nothing for, nothing except watch them die. And he was not alone. Every hospital in the city was overwhelmed with the sick and dying. This was a scene too surrealistic to imagine. A modern Dante’s Inferno.

His calls to the civil authorities went unanswered. Public Health was aware of the situation and was “working on it.” Working on it? What was there to work on? Even his own staff was falling victim to this new plague. Finally when the obvious became overwhelming Nathan ordered reverse sterility procedures for all his staff. They absolutely must, protect themselves from this unknown killer. But

before he had initiated this procedure over ten percent of his fellow physicians and nurses began to show the first signs of the infection.

It was now over forty-eight hours since the first victim had died on his watch. Forty-eight hours of frustration as he and his colleagues tried every drug at their disposal, every technique in their kit bags, every means possible to save just one patient and it was all for naught.

There was no rhyme or reason; no single factor save it was a bronchial/pneumonia infection that quickly choked the life out of its victims as the lungs filled rapidly with fluid. Nathan recognized the symptoms, reminiscent of the Spanish Influenza that descended upon mankind just after the turn of the last century. But this version was far more deadly and vicious in its nature. He had never felt more alone, more frustrated...and more useless in his entire life. He was bone tired and out of options.

“Dear God.” He thought. “What have we done to deserve this?”

The steady hum of the ventilation system droned on in the background. The sound of the hum was broken as one of the nurses opened the door and called to Nathan.

“Dr. Anders...Dr. Anders.” He looked up slowly. “It’s Sheila, Nat. She’s calling for you. I don’t think she has much time left.”

Dr. Nathan Anders slowly pulled himself erect. Every fiber of his body screamed for rest, but this was not the time. He had to go.

The corridors of the hospital were overflowing with patients in the various stages of the disease. Wet mucoid coughing echoed off the tile and plastered walls while the constant wheezing filled the background as they walked. There was the sweaty smell of death in the air that even the surgical masks could not keep out.

“So many patients, so many patients, and they just keep coming.” He muttered to himself.

The nurse led Nathan through the throngs of dead and dying patients. To a small room off the main corridor. Sheila Nordstrom, his head nurse, lay under an oxygen tent they had rigged up. The cyanotic tint of her lips and pallor skin hinted

at her limited time. Nathan took up her hand under the plastic drape. She smiled weakly.

Slowly she moved her lips, but no words came out. She started coughing, expelling mucoid clots of choking phlegm as she fought for breath. After five minutes she finally calmed down, sweat dripping off her forehead, eyes bloodshot and watery. Sheila signaled for some paper and a pen. Nathan handed her his useless prescription pad, holding it for her to write upon. She wrote just three words. But those three words spoke volumes and resonated down to his very bones.

The attending nurse looked over his shoulder and slowly made out the wretched scrawl on the medical prescription pad. Sheila had written: "ESCAPE NOW – GO!" Nathan was staring unbelieving at the pad.

Sheila slowly dropped the pen as her eyes glazed over. She was gone. Nathan just sat there. He sat there and cried. He had tried everything, everything, everything and had lost every battle in these last few days and now he had lost more than a medical colleague, he had lost a true friend. All his years of training and learning were totally useless in the face of this new threat. She was right, he knew it but couldn't bring himself to abandon the patients he was powerless to help.

He awoke several hours later. He didn't remember walking out of that tiny room with only the husk of a dear friend remaining. He didn't recall the walk back to his ready room and the nurse removing his shoes and covering him with a blanket. He didn't remember if he had dreamed or was dreaming now. Perhaps it was all a bad, very bad dream.

"Dr. Anders...Dr. Anders, you need to come out here Sir, something strange is going on outside the hospital." Mickey Davis one of the hospital's EMT's was shaking him awake.

"What...what's going on." Nathan said as he tried to wake up.

Mickey put something into his hand. "It's the last of the coffee Doc, tastes like cr@p but it's hot."

Nathan took a sip of the bitter liquid and started to cough. He screwed up his face at the taste.

“Told you it tasted like cr@p, Doc.” Mickey grabbed Nathan’s shoes and started to push his feet into them.

“What’s going on?”

“Well, Doc...it looks like the National Guard has been called out and we’re being surrounded by barbed wire.” Mickey answered, slipping the other shoe on.

“Come Doc, you’re the senior Doc on duty. Hell you’re about the only Doc on duty.”

“What? Where are the other doctors.”

“Sick, dead, or run off. Oh, and they’re not letting anyone in. We’re cut off now.”

“Cut off?”

“Yep, the Guardsmen outside are stringing up barbed wire all around the hospital and keeping everyone either in or out with guns.”

Nathan stood up. “Show me.”

The pair quickly walked through the ever-coughing throng of patients, but Nathan noticed that the intensity of the noise was much lower, and more and more patients were covered completely by sheets and blankets.

“Why aren’t these bodies being moved to the morgue?” Nathan asked.

“Morgue’s full, and there is hardly anyone here to move them. There are only a few of the staff still left.”

“Sh*t!”

Nathan and Mickey walked out the Emergency entrance of the hospital. The National Guardsmen had strung coiled concertina wire across the driveway and parked a 50 caliber Humvee in the center of the ambulance access way. Together Dr. Anders and his EMT walked up to the camouflaged soldier manning the outer perimeter of the wire.

“Just what the hell is going on here soldier!” Nathan demanded.

The soldier brought his weapon to port arms and turned to face them. “Back away from the wire Sir!” He ordered with a muffled voice through the gas mask he was wearing.

“Not until I speak to someone in charge!” Nathan answered angrily.

The soldier sitting on top of the Humvee suddenly swung the big 50-caliber gun around and pointed it at the Nathan and Mickey. At the same time the near Guardsman brought his weapon up and pointed it at the pair also.

“Step back from the wire Sir, or we will open fire.”

“My @ss! We’re unarmed you stupid sh*t!” Mickey answered him.

“Sir step back from the wire...this is your last warning!”

The pair slowly took one step back from the wire. “I want to speak to the officer in charge right now soldier.”

The near soldier turned to look at the third soldier in the Humvee who was talking on the radio. The radio talker gave him the thumbs up signal. The near Guardsman turned back to the Doctor and the EMT.

“He’s on his way, Sir. Now if you will step back further from the wire and wait a few minutes he will be here to answer your questions.”

The pair turned around and walked several paces back towards the hospital. “Mickey, just what the hell is going on here? When did this start?” Nathan asked in a hushed breath.

“This all just came down less than thirty minutes ago Doc. I heard the commotion outside and then came looking for you. It seems that most of the staff is either sick or has split. You’re the only healthy Doc I could find.” Mickey paused.

“Oh and forget calling out or getting any news. The phones are locked up, busy signals on both landline and cellular. There’s no news on cable TV or radio. Everything is blacked out...I don’t like it Doc. No sir-ree, I don’t like this at all!”

Ten minutes later Humvee arrived, the Guardsman that stepped out was saluted and talked quickly to the soldiers at the Humvee. Nathan walked forward to the wire. He noticed that all the Guardsman including the new arrival were wearing their gas masks. He didn't like the implication of this.

"Sir, that is far enough." The original guard yelled through the gas mask. Nathan stopped several feet shy of the wire. The newly arrived officer stepped forward to the other side of the wire.

"I'm Doctor Nathan Anders the senior physician in charge at the moment and I would like to know what is the meaning of this wire and these gunmen?"

"Doctor Anders, I'm Colonel McCray, Section Chief of this military control zone sir. You are under armed quarantine by order of the Homeland Security Director and Presidential Executive Orders." He answered, his voice muffled and metallic through the gas mask.

"Armed quarantine?" Nathan said in amazement. "What the hell is that Colonel?"

"Simply stated sir, nobody in and nobody out. All centers of infection are under martial law per Executive Orders as of 1300 hours today. Anyone violating those orders will be shot without hesitation Doctor Anders."

"You've got to be kidding."

"I wish I was Doctor, I wish I was.

Desert Doc

Chapter 11 – Escape

Mickey could tell by Doc Anders posture and animation that things were not going well with the National Guard officer. He could hear enough bits and pieces to figure out that they were locked in and the guardsmen were not going to let them out. The gears started turning on the problem before him. How to get out and how to get away.

Dr. Anders suddenly stopped talking and spun about and started walking briskly back to the hospital.

“Well Doc?” Mickey asked.

“We’re scr*wed Mickey, totally scr*wed. They’ve slapped down martial law everywhere. The entire city is under military control. We can’t leave and no one can come in.”

“So what now Doc, do we get out of here or sit around and wait to die?”

“Didn’t you hear me Mickey? We’re locked down, we can’t leave!”

“Oh I heard you loud and clear Doc. Now do you want to get out of here or do you want to sit here and wait to die?”

They both stopped just shy of the emergency room doors. “What the hell are you talking about, we can’t leave. The Colonel...” Nathan stammered, still p*ssed from the encounter.

“The Colonel don’t know squat, Doc.” Mickey leaned closer. “Look Doc, there’s nothing we can do for these people in here. Nothing we’ve tried so far has worked, and it’s likely that nothing is going to work. We’re not the only one’s in deep sh*t here. Just before all the communication gear went cold I was talking on the dispatch radio with a couple of other ambulance crews around town. This sh*t is happening everywhere. Do you understand...EVERYWHERE! There’s not a clinic or hospital in town that isn’t over run with people just like these in there!” He pointed towards the door. “This ain’t no accident or act of God, you can bet on that Doc, this ain’t no f*cking accident.”

“You don’t mean...” Nathan stopped and thought for a moment. He had at first suspected some sort of Legionnaires Disease type of outbreak, but soon he became just too busy to consider any other possibilities. “Sh*t!—Sh*t!—Sh*t!”

“Doc?”

The realization suddenly came over him. “It’s a Bio-weapon, that’s why nothing has worked...that’s why it’s spread so rapidly, and that’s why the National Guard

is standing outside our hospital!” He turned and looked back at the 50 cal Humvee. “And now we’re trapped in here with no way out!”

“No Doc, we’re not trapped.” Mickey said matter of factly. “I think I know a way out of here...if you’re with me that is.”

“But the patients, I can’t...”

“—Do a damn thing to help them Doc.” Mickey finished the sentence for him. “You know that as well as I do. We haven’t been able to do sh*t since this began and now we have to decide if **we’re going to survive!** Because we sure know that no one that stays here is going to walk out of here...if they ever let us!”

“But my oath...”

“Your oath says to do no harm, well whether you stay or go is not going to change the outcome for these people. They are dead! Dead regardless of anything you do. They are DEAD DOC!” Mickey grabbed him by both arms. “But we’re not! And just maybe if we clear out now, we’ll stay alive.”

Mickey pointed to the armed guardsmen in the distance. “They’re right Doc. They’ve contained a source of contamination, this hospital is a big source. All the really sick people are here...think about it! We’ve got to get out of here NOW or we’ll be the next ones on those gurneys in there. We’ve got to leave right now while we still can.”

Mickey still had a hold of Nathan arm. “Quick follow me.” He pulled him along.

They passed through the choked main corridors filled with the dead and dying, around to a back janitorial passageway. Nathan had never been in this part of the hospital. Mickey still had him by the arm until they passed through a door marked engineering and began to descend a metal stairwell. The air was dank and steamy as they went down the steps into the dimly lit room below.

“The boiler room?” Anders asked.

Mickey led him walking quickly through the basement room filled with steamy drippy pipes and oily machinery.

“We’re headed to the other side.” He answered as he disappeared around one of the immense old oil fired boilers. “This is a shortcut Doc...we’re almost there.” Mickey held the door for him and they stepped into another passageway.

“Where is this?”

“We’re down in the old sub-basement area. Nothing much here anymore, mostly junk rooms and stuff.”

Mickey walked up to a gated passageway that disappeared off into the darkness. The chain link gate was secured with a large dusty padlock. Mickey looked around.

“Hang on Doc.” Mickey said as he ran back the way they had just come. Nathan heard something breaking in the distance and a few seconds later the EMT returned with a fire axe.

“Stand back.” He said as he swung the axe down on the padlock. It took several attempts until he finally nailed the lock and broke it apart. “Not pretty but effective.”

Mickey led the pair into the darkness with his small paramedic maglite swinging from side to side in the long corridor. “We’re under the main street now. Just a little further and we’ll be under the old building across the way.”

They had arrived at the end of the corridor and stood before a poorly finished brick and mortar wall.

“Now what?” Nathan asked.

“Here hold this.” Mickey said, handing him the flashlight. “Give me some swinging room and we’ll see just how tough this wall is.”

The big EMT flipped the axe around and using its pick began swinging into the brick wall. His aimed improved with each stroke and he soon was chipping out large chunks of mortar between the bricks. After a good dozen or so whacks he wrenched out the first brick and then the second. There was an empty void behind the wall!

“Doc, take a look...what do you see?”

Nathan leaned into the wall and flashed the light through. “Looks like a storage room Mickey, mostly filing boxes and old chairs.”

“Great! Then we’re out of here. Step back and let me give is a few more whacks and I’ll have a hole big enough for us to get through.”

“But what is this?” Nathan asked.

“This was the way over to the old morgue and funeral home that used to stand on that corner across from the hospital. Probably built back in the twenties or thirties. When the new morgue was built downtown and more central to the other hospitals, this building we’re breaking into was sold and later remodeled into office space.” He paused. “Kind of creepy when you think about it.” He continued swinging the axe.

“Later during the height of the Cold War they turned the rooms off here and this tunnel into storage rooms and a bomb shelter. Still have some of the supplies stored down here I think.”

After another five minutes Mickey had enlarged the hole, pushed back the garbage on the other side of the wall and was out through the storeroom door. He called back to Nathan still on the corridor side of the wall.

“OK Doc, we’ve got a clear shot out of here. This leads to a boiler room and then up to the first floor. It’s clear all the way.” Mickey’s voice grew louder as he crawled back through the opening over of the storage junk he had pushed his way in through.

“Now we’ve got to get our gear and the others and get the hell out of here.”

“Others?” Nathan looked at him startled. “I thought we were the only one’s left?”

“Not quite Doc, there are a few of us still on watch that haven’t gotten sick, not many, but we can’t leave them behind if they want to split.”

The pair quickly retraced their steps back up onto the main floors of the hospital. Mickey led him to the dispatcher’s office. There he introduced Nathan to Isaac the other half of Mickey’s ambulance team. Isaac had been monitoring all the

radios and was more than frustrated buy the time they arrived. Mickey quickly explained the plan to his partner and then asked if he had been able to pick up any new information.

“Everything is being jammed man! All the local stuff is totally weirded out.” Both landline and cellular is nothing but busy signals. All two-way and even the cops freq’s are strangely quite. Man we’re in Chicago...the cop’s are always busy! TV and radio are just passing canned cr*p. It’s like there’s nothing going on...nobody sees anything!”

Isaac was more than animated as he flipped switches and twisted knobs on the consul.

“But hey Mic...check this out.” He began as he spun his chair around. “Just after all the local stuff went weird I checked out the Short Wave freqs, that is before they went quiet too. There’s something big going down dude. New York, Denver, Seattle, San Fran, New Orleans, and us...all the major cities were screaming about plague or something and then everything...and I mean everything everywhere just clammed up! Too weird dude!”

Nathan and Mickey looked at each other and then back at Isaac. Mickey was the first to speak.

“Isaac, get on the hospital wide intercom and have every able bodied staff member meet us...” He looked at Nathan.

“Cafeteria?”

“No Doc, that’s the overflow morgue...”

“The Doctors conference room outside the directors office.”

“Perfect!” He turned to Isaac.

“Got it Mic...I’m on the stick.” Soon the hospital was echoing the message.

Thirty minutes later only a handful of hospital staff had arrived. Nathan could not believe that this was all that was left of over a hundred medical and support personnel that manned this hospital at any one time of the day. He quickly

explained the situation and what he felt was the best course of action for them. Several were shocked that he advocated the abandonment of the hospital. While he agreed with them, he pointed out that he also felt that there was no other survival choice left open to them. That they had managed to avoid the infection thus far was surely a matter of luck and that could not hold out much longer.

One of the nurses argued that they all might be carriers of the disease that hadn't surfaced yet and by this action could be spreading the infection even further. She argued that surely government support would soon arrive and they would be safe. Mickey informed the group about Isaac's discoveries and that their situation was not an isolated event.

"We're on our own now, like it or not." Mickey added flatly.

It was getting dark outside as the individuals that had decided to follow Dr. Ander's advice gathered in the janitor's passageway. Mickey led the eight escapee's down into the bowels of the hospital to the passageway under the street. About halfway down the dark corridor he paused and opened a side door and led them in. Above the door was the old faded Civil Defense symbol. They quickly filled the small room as Mickey found the light switch. It reminded Nathan of high school shower room with wood benches and clothing hooks on the wall.

"These are the decontamination showers of the old Civil Defense shelter. I thought it might be best to leave as much of the infection here behind us." Mickey stepped into the shower area and tossed his gym bag and medical kit across to the other side of the shower room. There were two shower passages with the spouts on the central wall. He motioned the females of the group to use the other side. Everyone hesitated until Dr. Anders spoke up.

"Look we've made it this far, Mickey's right, lets decontaminate ourselves and get on with it." He said as he started to peel off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

Twenty minutes later the group assembled on the other side and dressed in a mix of civilian clothes and clean medical scrubs, Mickey handed out replacement surgical masks for the ones they left at the entrance to the shower. The somber group followed quietly as the EMT and Doctor lead them back out into the corridor and into the basement of the old morgue building.

The building was quiet as they climbed up the stairs of the old building. Mickey slowly opened the basement door and moved out into the hallway. There were no sounds of occupation. He could see through a distant window down the hallway that the evening was almost upon them. The group moved through the first floor almost serpentine fashioned. Most of the office lights were out, just one or two here and there. They found the main hallway and moved quietly towards the back of the building away from the side facing the hospital.

Mickey whispered to Nathan. "If we can get to the back of this building there's an alleyway there. Cross that and into one of the buildings behind here and we'll be over on the next street and only a half a block from the parking garage where my pickup is located."

"Damn...I totally forgot about my car." Nathan exclaimed.

"Forget it Doc. If you left it in the physicians lot at the hospital you'll never get past the weekend warriors to get to it."

"You're probably right, Damn." They had arrived at the janitor's door to the alley.

"Now what?"

"Now we'll see if there's anyone keeping an eye on this alley." Mickey said as he slowly pushed open the door.

The alley was dark and damp as they emerged into the gray dusk. Mickey crossed the alley and moved stealthfully against the back walls checking each door as he moved along. He smelled the garbage of the little Chinese restaurant that he often grabbed take out from on the way home. He listened at their back door but didn't hear the normal clatter of pots and pans and restaurant noise associated with such an establishment. For the first time he noticed that the entire town was deadly quiet. Wrapping the fire axe in his coat he used it like a battering ram to force the door open. The casement shattered with minimal noise and he motioned the others to follow.

The Chinese restaurant was empty and dark. They crept through the kitchen and headed towards the front of the restaurant. Mickey motioned them to stay put and he inched forward. From the corner of the storefront window he glanced up and down the street. It was empty, save a few scattered cars parked here and

there, nothing was moving. Mickey signaled for everyone to move quietly forward.

In a heavy whisper he called to his EMT partner. "Isaac, get up here and take care of the front door alarm."

Isaac move quietly forward grabbing a stool on the way and set to work on the magnetic sensors above the front door. Taking out his leatherman tool he flipped up the Phillips head screwdriver and began to unfasten the door sensor.

"Someone find me some rubber bands." He whispered as he finished the second screw.

Lisa the nurse from the OB/GYN clinic quickly rummaged around the cash register and found one in a drawer. With it Isaac banded the two sensors together and set them on the metal rail above the glass door. After which Mickey moved to the center of the double doors and pushed the fire axe blade between them and using it as a lever popped the one side open.

The noise seemed overly loud in the still night air. He dropped down and listened and watched. A full five minutes went by before he pushed open the door and crept out on to the sidewalk. From there Mickey quickly lead the group across the street one at a time. It was agonizing slow, but far safer than the entire group groping their way across to the other side. He had them spread out and with Isaac bringing up the rear they moved further away from the main streets and down back alleyways and finally over to the parking garage.

Two hours and many shattered nerves later Mickey followed by Isaac pulled up in the parking area behind Mickey's flat a the warehouse district not far from the lake. Twice they had been shot at by National Guardsman who where stationed at the numerous checkpoints scattered throughout the city. But one thing Nathan had to say about their two getaway drivers, they knew their city. He had heard of back street and alley driving, but he had never been a witness to it before and he hoped that he wouldn't have to go through that again too soon.

The weary group slowly climbed out the vehicles and followed Mickey into the walkup and into his loft apartment where they collapsed on the floor and across the furniture. The first part of their ordeal was over. Tomorrow they would plan the next part of their escape.

Desert Doc

Chapter 12 – Out of a Jamb

Mark glanced down at his gas gauge. Enough for about another hour at this speed and he figured he could make it to the next big truck stop. Things had been getting “curiouser and curiouser” to quote Lewis Carroll. There had been a lot of traffic on the interstate. He figured it had something to do with the reports of the disease cases in the cities. Most radio stations were obvious in their silence on the matter. Mark usually listened to unabridged books on tape in the car anyway, and didn’t give it much thought. Sounded a lot like the few cases of anthrax that had been found in ’02, from what little he did hear. People were driving, well, crazy. Speeds were faster than usual, as well as taking more chances. Tensions slowly rose as people began to, cut other drivers off, flash headlights to pass, and in a couple instances, pass on the shoulder. Crazy.

The miles clicked by, and Mark noticed more and more traffic in the opposite direction. If he thought things were bad on his side of the interstate, things were getting really thick on the other side. He tried to pay attention to his driving, as well as watch the other lanes. Sure enough, suddenly there was very little traffic from the opposite direction. The cause became obvious a few miles later: A semi tractor had crunched a Geo Metro into a two foot tall metal pancake, but the pancake caused the trailer wheels to skid, and the trailer then tried to swap ends with the front of the rig. The whole mess came to a stop pretty near completely astride the two interstate lanes.

The scene was chaos. It reminded Mark of the add that ran in one issue of “American Survival Guide.” It was a crude drawing of a stream of cars headed away from a city with a mushroom cloud looming over it. In the drawing, people were out of their cars with the hoods up, staring in befuddlement at the now-dead engines. The advertisement was for a replacement ignition system.

“It’s going to take a lot more than an ignition system to get that mess going again.” Thought Mark nervously.

Glancing back he could see that things were degenerating seriously. Cars tried to edge around the wreck. The four-wheel drives had no problem taking to the median initially to get around the wreck. The trouble was that people in Ford Tauruses and Chevy Cavaliers tried to do the same thing, and got stuck. The

four-by-fours went around them, too, until the Toyota Corollas tried to emulate them, and got stuck too, ad infinitum. Soon there was an impenetrable wall of cars blocking any means around the wreck. One brave soul in a Blazer had made it through, then backed up to pull a car out of the mud. Mark knew that such an action, while noble, was ultimately useless: The next vehicle behind the one being pulled out attempted to go through the hole made by the towed car, and became stuck. There were no police in sight.

Mark became more than worried. He got scared. Here he was, about as far from his home as his mom's place, and the roads were nuts. He rounded a corner, and his worst fears were realized: A sea of brake lights shown red in front of him. He eased to a stop in the right lane, with a little less than a car length of open space in front of him.

In normal traffic jams, there would be a good 6 inches of movement every few minutes or so. Not this one. Mark wondered if somebody from the other lane tried to cut across the median and drive on the shoulder, and maybe got whacked by somebody trying to pass on the shoulder.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, people up ahead were getting out of their cars and milling around. Mark decided this was a good time to get out his CB and FRS radios. He exited the car and walked to the rear. Carefully, as the occasional idiot roared by on the right shoulder, he opened the Eagle's rear hatch and reached in to grab the hand-held radios. As he reached in, he was struck by a thought. Pausing for an instant to mull it over, he quickly reached up to shut off the rear hatch dome light. As surreptitiously as possible, he then pulled the Glock 17 from its case and tucked it into his pants front, pulling his flannel shirt over it. He'd rearrange it into a holster later.

Straightening, he turned on the CB radio to channel 19. It was a mishmash of voices. Some swearing, some pleading, but most scared. There wasn't much information. Everybody was asking what was going on, and nobody had any answers. There was all sorts of opinions. Some people said that the cities were fine, that you f%\$king idiots were panicking for nothing. Others said that the cities were full of the dead, that they were all going to die unless they could get away. Some said that military jets were napalming certain areas of town. Some people said that Christ had returned. Some people said it wasn't Christ, it was the aliens. He turned off the CB and turned on the FRS radios. Mostly it was people convoying together, unaware of what was going on, and more speculation.

Mark clicked off the FRS radio, and cast about. Things were definitely beyond normal. He walked to the front of his car and climbed to the hood, then the roof of the car. He looked in the direction of travel: Nothing but stalled cars as far as the eye could see. Even the shoulders were beginning to get backed up. He spotted a two wheel drive small truck with an array of antennas on it, about 100 yards ahead. He recognized them as the same sorts of antennas his uncle, a ham MARS operator owned. Mark jumped down, and began walking toward the mini truck. He passed groups of people, most chatting amiably, but with a note of worry detectable in their voices. Mark smiled and waved occasionally at some of the small children who were staring wide-eyed from some cars.

He finally reached the mini truck, and looked in the window from several feet away. A grizzled elderly man with a big, bushy white beard was speaking into a microphone. Mark pasted a smile on his face, and waited for the old man to notice him. After several minutes, the head turned toward him, and the elderly man rolled down the window.

“Yes?” the man asked with a note of suspicion.

“ I couldn’t help noticing your Ham antennas, sir.” Mark began, “And I was wondering if you had any news.”

“About the traffic? Sorry son, I’m not monitoring the CB bands.” He said as he started to roll up the window.

“No sir. I mean in general.” The man paused in his rolling, and Mark spoke quickly.

“People are talking about the military. A plague. Now this traffic. I just want to know what you have heard.”

The man paused a moment. He looked at Mark, noting his haircut, his fit physique, and his consistent use of “Sir.” He took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. “Look son. This is all speculation. Nobody knows for sure what’s going on. But I have heard for a couple days from hams saying crops are dying. I have heard hams talking about rising numbers of really sick folks in the cities. Lots of reports from all over. And damn it,” the man said with a brief instant of

desperation “ I’m afraid if I don’t get out of this traffic soon, I am going to end up walking.”

Mark thought about what the man had said. He rapidly began to think about what was the worst that could happen if the reports were correct. He thought about the worst that could happen if he was wrong. He felt numb for a minute. He glanced at the sky. It was getting dark.

“Thanks, sir. Good luck to you. I hope we all get out of this soon” Mark said, turning and walking away back to the Eagle.

He began to shiver, but not from the cold. He broke into a jog. At the car, he again opened his trunk and reached into the pocket of the ALICE pack that rested there, and withdrew a Garmin GPS. He activated the GPS and got a fix on his position, then shut the machine off and reached into his car for the “Atlas and Gazetteer,” turning to the page that had his approximate position. He peered closely at the map’s markings denoting latitude and longitude, then took a pencil and marked the interstate with a small “x” to remind himself exactly where he was. His eyes then roved the area beside the interstate on the map. It showed a gravel country road about a quarter mile to the east. Mark lifted his eyes from the map and looked east. Beyond the somewhat steep swathe of land that bordered the interstate, there was the standard interstate fence, and most discouraging, a single line of 20’ pine trees, spaced about 4’ apart. Beyond that, a gentle ridge. The trees ran as far as the he could see in both directions parallel to the interstate.

Mark thought for a moment. He glanced at the row of cars becoming backed up on the shoulder.

“Well,” he thought, “If I’m gonna do this, I’d better get to it before I’m blocked in.”

He climbed in to the driver’s seat, and started the engine. Many heads turned his way. Most all car owners had shut the engines off to conserve fuel, and the Eagle turning over startled some. It was dark enough to make the headlights a good idea. He looked back over his right shoulder, and eased the Eagle onto the shoulder, then down the embankment, parking parallel with the interstate fence. He then shut the car back off and sat in the dark for a few moments. Many people had some form of camping gear out, and were “tailgating” in the largest parking lot Mark had ever seen. Mark sat quietly until he figured most people’s

curiosity about him had faded. He reached up to make sure the dome light was off, then exited the car. Once again, He opened the rear hatch and dug in the ALICE pack. He pulled out a small can, roughly the size of a tuna can. He then reached in the tool kit of a pair of 36" bolt cutters. "A little overkill, but they'll do the trick." Mark thought as he walked to the front of the car, and began to cut the strands of wire that constituted the interstate fence. Five minutes later, he pulled the entire 20 foot section between wooden posts away. Leaning the bolt cutters against the fence, he reached into his pocket and unscrewed the top on his "Short Kutt" brand pocket chain saw. Mark had found the little gem after becoming gravely disappointed with the so-called "wire saws" that lasted about 10 minutes in real life. He bent and began sawing at the base of the first pine tree, as low as he could get. Pausing only to shuck his flannel shirt and briefly look around to see if anyone noticed his activity, he was through the first tree in about 15 minutes. If anyone heard it fall, no one came to investigate. Most people had returned to their cars and were intermittently running the engines. The second tree took longer. He grunted, heaved, and finally got the two trees out of the way. He collected the bolt cutters and re-stowed them along with the pocket saw in the car. He paused long enough to let his breathing return to normal from his exertions, as well as taking several gulps from his water bottle. He then took a small Photon LED flashlight, and started walking due east. He hid the beam of light with a hand, holding it close to his body to hide it from the cars stalled on the interstate behind him. The ground was relatively firm. There was knee-high hay, brown in large patches, in the field. It again sloped down for a distance, but then took a dramatic turn uphill. Mark crested the hill, then began to walk down the other side. After a short walk, he found himself across the ditch from a gravel road. It took another 20 minutes to find the culvert spanning the ditch.

Mark walked back to the car. Doing his best to memorize the distances, especially at the end. He figured he'd be safe to turn on the headlights after he was on the far side of the crest of the hill. Mark cautiously approached the car, but it seemed no one had become curious and wandered down to check on him. He climbed into the driver's seat, fastened the seatbelt, rolled down the window, put the car in four-wheel drive and began to drive. As he started, he cursed himself as he remembered that the brake lights would tell everyone where he was if he stepped on the pedal. Instead, he reached for the handbrake. After some slow maneuvering, Mark felt himself crest the hill. Another 50 feet and he turned on his parking lights. His eyes had adjusted to the dark well enough that they were pretty much all he needed.

Mark breathed a sigh of relief as he crossed the culvert and turned north onto the gravel road.

“Well,” he thought, “I’m not sure what comes next, but at least I’m mobile again.”

AGreyMan

Chapter 013 – Crackdown!

The Undersecretary for Transportation was late for the meeting. Security was getting so tight and the delays so time consuming that any movement around the capital was all but impossible. As soon as the computer and communication geeks could get everything rigged up and hard secured they would be able to conduct these meetings remotely. Davis couldn’t wait until that happened, but until the kinks could be worked out and it actually happened, he would be forced to jump through the gauntlet of ever increasing security hoops now in place. He passed his hand through the Biochip scanner and was cleared by the armed Marine guard at the last checkpoint just outside the conference room.

“You’re cleared Mr. Undersecretary, the meetings already commenced Sir, but there’s plenty of seats left.” The Marine politely said as he opened the door for Davis.

The Director for Home Security was at the podium speaking as Davis slinked into the first empty seat in the back. “Chicago five point three, Los Angeles two point six, and Houston one point two. Cities with loses under one million are: San Francisco four hundred sixteen thousand, Atlanta three hundred sixty-eight thousand, Denver two hundred forty-nine thousand, Memphis two hundred...”

“ENOUGH! ENOUGH!” The President viciously called out as he suddenly stood up sweeping his arm towards the Director. “That is more than enough...” He paused, and stepped towards the podium. “What’s the bottom line?”

“Sir...?” The Director cleared his throat. “Sir, ah by our best estimates...we have...suffered...ah...er.”

“Spit it out man...spit it out!”

“Yes Sir er ah, Mr. President...we have...um...estimated losses of somewhere between sixteen and eighteen million Americans from this single biological attack over the last two weeks...Sir...and...um.”

The air suddenly rushed out of every lung in the room. Not even one's own heartbeat could be heard in the stillness that followed. Time seemed to have stopped as they sat there in total shock. The air was thick and electric and seemed to suddenly close in and suffocate everyone sitting in the room. Davis felt like he was going to lose his hastily eaten lunch. The mere thought of that many people suddenly dead in less than two weeks...was beyond comprehension.

Someone whispered under their breath. “Oh my God!”

There followed a louder. “Sweat Mother of Jesus.” And “F*cking B*stards” echoed from over near the corner.

The room started to spin as Davis suddenly burst from his seat and ran for the exit. He pushed through the double doors and spewed this lunch across the Pentagon's tiled floor before collapsing to his knees and dry heaving. His heart pounded in his ears and he could suddenly feel the strong hand of the Marine guard on his shoulder just before he passed out.

“Sir...Sir...are you all right? Sir...take a breath...SIR BREATH SLOWLY, SIR, SIR!”

The sound started to drift away into the encroaching mist. The last thing Davis remembered was the Marine's voice...“Get me a Corpsman down here quick, this guy's going out...”

Dr. Nathan Anders slowly drifted awake. The floor was hard beneath him but someone had covered him with a blanket and placed a small pillow beneath his head. An odd smell filled the air, oily, machine like. He slowly sat up against his complaining cramped muscles and joints. He remembered now; the hospital, all the death, their escape through the old tunnel under the street and that insane run through the back streets and alleyways of old Chicago. The Guardsmen shooting at them and they ended up finally at the EMT's place down near the warehouse district...Mickey...ah...Mickey Davis, yeah that's right.

Nathan looked around and could make out several other still sleeping lumps scattered across the carpeted floor. The loft was large and roomy, somehow fitting a bachelor's life style.

"Coffee's on the counter Doc." Mickey called to him from the other side of the room.

"Ah...Thanks." He answered as he grudgingly rolled over and stood up. Mickey was sitting at a large picnic table covered with a blanket and with a pile of mechanical looking parts strewn across it. He was polishing something with a cloth as Nathan staggered past, still half a sleep and started to pour himself a cup of coffee.

The steamy brown liquid smelled rich and earthy and Nathan welcomed the soothing aroma. He felt alive. Alive for the first time in as many days. He walked back over towards Mickey and suddenly realized that the tabletop was covered with gun parts. Mickey was in the middle of cleaning and assembling a large rifle. Several other weapons were leaning against the nearby wall; he recognized a couple as M-16's, two shotguns, and some military looking rifles. Several pistols, 45's he thought remembering them from a Bruce Willis movie, were setting on the corner of the table.

"Did someone start a war?"

"Well you don't kill a couple of million people and simply walk away without a fight."

"What?" Nathan asked shockingly as he sat down.

"Well apparently, from what I can gather from the BBC Short Wave and the Emergency Civil Defense broadcasts...the US was hit with a biological attack last week. We've been smack dab in the middle of it Doc, and somehow managed to survive. But several million of our fellow Chicagoans didn't make it." He paused as he snapped the weapon back together and rubbed it lightly with a silicon rag. "They hit a bunch of other cities as well. New York got really nailed, L. A. is toast, we got banged pretty bad here and a bunch of other cities got smacked hard; Memphis, Atlanta, New Orleans, San Fran, Portland, Seattle, and Denver plus one or two others but I don't remember which ones. Needless to say, Washington is not very happy right now and the sh*t has seriously hit the fan!"

“Did Washington get attacked as well?”

“Nope, strange that. You’d think that they’d have gone for the nation’s capital too. But so far they’ve walked away clean. Scared sh*tless though I’m sure.”

“So where does that put us Mic?”

“Well...for right now we’re sitting fat in the middle of one of the major ground zero’s. Total, and I mean TOTAL martial law has clamped down across the country. Oh and just be glad you’re not Arabic or Muslim right now. Remember what they did to the Japanese American’s during World War Two?”

“You mean internment camps?”

“Yeah that’s it. Well right now the army is out in force rounding up anyone that looks the least bit like an Arab and forget it if your name is Mohammad or anything that even sounds like it. That’s a sure ticket straight to the camps!”

“I can’t believe it, they’re using internment camps? But isn’t there some kind of protest or resistance?”

“Are you kidding? We’re talking MILLIONS of Americans dead Doc! They’re lucky that they aren’t being shot on sight. The country is pretty p*ssed off right now.” He locked open the bipod support legs and set the rifle on the table. “Besides which, ATF is having a field day kicking in doors and confiscating guns all over the place. It’s total martial law, no private ownership of arms, no travel, no hording, no nothing!”

“ATF?”

“The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the candy @sses of the federal bureaus, real wanna-bees. Only now they’ve really got a mission. They’ve closed all the gun shops across the country; any registered owner has twenty-four hours to turn in all firearms and reloading equipment when they arrive in your area. THEN they start going from house to house. If you’re found with any contraband they haul your @ss off to one of the camps.”

“But they can’t do that, there’s due process of...”

“HELLO DOC, did I fail to mention the ENTIRE COUNTRY is under MARTIAL LAW? They can do what ever they want. And right now they want vengeance and an entirely disarmed population.”

“So where does that put us...here.” Nathan pointed to the rifles and such against the wall. “How long until they come for these?”

“Well first they have to know about them. You don’t think I’d be stupid enough to register any of this?”

“But they will be coming, right?”

“Oh you can bet on it, but this isn’t a normal rent district you’d be expecting to find people living in, is it? “We’re gonna be OK for now, but I don’t think any where in Chicago is going to be a good place to stay for quite a while. And right now we’re still inside the ‘Red Zone’, too much bio contamination to start scr*wing around near us.”

“So now what?” Nathan asked and took another sip from the mug.

“Well Doc...Isaac and a couple of others are going to try to get back home. He’s out scouting a route right now. As for the rest of our little clan. Well you’re welcome to hang out here for a while, but I wouldn’t stick around too long. I’ve already heard shooting off in the distance. No telling what it’s from. Could be more Guardsmen, could be gangs, could be anything now. There’s not enough National Guard to totally lock down the city and the cops are still nowhere in sight, hell they could all be dead for all we know. Do the math...it’s not a good situation.”

“And you, looks like you’re preparing for a war. What’s with all this hardware?”

“Oh me. Well Doc...I’m one of those Survivalist-Patriot-Militia types that the media is always warning you about.”

“You?!”

“Yep, here I sit, redneck and all.”

“But...you don’t seem the type. Why you even work with a...ah...”

“A Blackman, you can say it Doc...yeah Isaac is black. Say I wonder if I should remind him sometime about that?”

“But I thought that...well I mean...er...ah.”

“Look Doc, don’t believe all the hype that gets spewed out by the media. They have their agenda and we have ours. Yeah there are some total jerks running around professing to be righteous militiamen and patriots etc., but don’t you believe ‘em for a second! Bunch of whinny @ss wannabee’s if you ask me. Isaac’s agenda and mine are one in the same. ‘You works hard you gets paid a fair wage.’ Nobody gets cut a husk ahead of anyone else. That’s why we get along so well. He jerks my chain when I get out of line and I jerk his. I don’t cut him any slack and he don’t cut me any.”

“Beside which he’s the best damn EMT I’ve ever worked with! Did you know that he was in the Gulf War? Got wounded dragging Marines out of hell-ova hot firefight. He was one tough Corpsman I heard. He never talks about it, but I got it on good authority from some of the other EMT’s.”

“So where are you headed Mickey?”

“Well I can’t get in touch with anyone right now. Phones are still down, emergency use only. But I’ve got a couple of hunting buddies that have some land up across the lake in Northern Michigan. Figure I’ll load as much of my gear as I can, and borrow a boat down in the basin and skedadle out across the pond and hole up there until things get back to normal. Which may not be for a long time.”

He got up and added the lethal looking rifle to the others leaning up against the wall. “You’re welcome to join us if you like Doc.” He paused. “Your family as well.”

“There’s just me Mickey. Well and my ex-wife, she’ll miss the alimony.” He chuckled.

“I won’t! We didn’t have any kids.” Nathan looked up from his cup. “There’s my brother, he’s out in L.A. and a sister down in Arizona, but we haven’t been very close for years and they’re too far away now I suppose.”

“Yeah, right now they might as well be on the moon. Nobody but federally authorized vehicles are allowed on the roads. There’s no way you could get to them now Doc and probably not for some time...so what do you think...are you up for some rugged living? A full on Doc would be welcomed.”

Nathan sat there for a bit ruminating over the idea. He took another sip of the coffee and could feel the warmth ease down his throat. He really didn’t have any other options. His work had been his life and that was pretty well shot now. He certainly didn’t relish the idea of walking back into another hospital for a while. He had seen enough death in the past several days to last a lifetime.

“Hmmm perhaps a little vacation is in order Mickey. But I’ll warn you, I’m pretty much a city boy and not much good in the woods.”

“That’s not a problem Doc. Hang with me for a while and I’ll be happy to teach you everything you’ll need to know.” He paused. “And perhaps you can teach me what I need to know to be a PA.”

“Physicians Assistant?”

“Yeah, I’ve been taking night classes to get my AA degree with the idea of going on and applying to one of the local PA programs.”

Just then the downstairs main access door’s buzzer sounded several times. Someone was pressing it frantically and Mickey ran across the room and cautiously looked out the window. He could see Isaac being supported by two people, one he recognized as Isaac’s sister.

“Sh*t !” Mickey slammed his hand on the door release, grabbed one of the rifles against the wall and raced down the stairwell. Dr. Anders followed close on his heels.

When they arrived at the bottom of the stairs they could both see the blood soaked clothing on Isaac and the pale gray color of his dark skin. He was going into shock.

“He’s been shot! He’s been shot! Oh it’s all my fault.” Salina blubbered.

Isaac raised his head. “Got ambushed Mic, they’re not far behind us. Sorry man...no where else to go!”

Nathan and Mic helped him to the ground and Nathan took over. He had been shot on the left side just below the breast.

“We’ve got a s*cking chest wound Mickey. Through and through. Damn I didn’t bring any equipment to deal with this!”

“I’ve got some stuff upstairs Doc. Here help me get him up.”

The Pair picked him up in a two man chair carry and carefully crabbed up the stairway to the loft. Everyone was up by the time they reached the top landing. Mickey motioned for one of the nurses to take his place and he quickly moved to prepare a operating table for Isaac. He bundled up the gun cleaning supplies and the weapons and moved them over to the corner. Then raced off to a back room and came out with a duffle bag that had a heavy-duty zipper down one side. After clearing off the counter he tossed the bag up on it and opened it up. By then they had positioned Isaac on the table.

“Here’s two bags of Ringer’s Doc, Heimlich valve, Dressings, Surgical Kit., I’ve got a big Kelly’s here for the chest tube.” Mickey was rifling through the contents tossing medical and surgical equipment at Nathan and the two nurses.

The action was fast and furious. For the next forty odd minutes Nathan was clamping, tying off, and sewing up bleeders as quickly as he could. This was meatball surgery, he didn’t even know if the equipment he was using was sterile or not. At this point it didn’t matter. If he didn’t stop the bleeding and control the shock it would all over well before any infection could set in. Then suddenly he was done. That was all he could do. The rest was up to Isaac. Nathan walked over to the easy chair and collapsed. Mickey came up and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Nice work Doc, very nice work.”

“Don’t know if it will do any good. I just plugged him up as well as I could. Thank God it was a clean shot through.”

They stood there quietly for a few minutes and watched the two nurses clean up the patient and then they helped them move him in to Mickey’s bedroom. Salina grabbed the doctor’s arm and cried softly, thanking him for saving her brother.

“He’s not out of danger yet dear, but he’s got a fighting chance.”

“Mickey...we’ve got company.”

“Sh*t ! I forgot about them...damn, damn, damn!” Mickey ran over to the window and peeked out. “Where are they?”

Sheila, the 17-year-old Candy Striper that had survived the nightmare in the hospital with them pointed off beyond the immediate buildings. “I saw some movement back there behind that short building.”

Mickey raised his bino’s and scanned the distance. “Nothing, nothing, oh oh...yep, I see ‘em, Salina were those street punks that ambushed you?”

“Yeah it was gang-bangers. They shot up the car and was acting all crazy like, blocked the street with wrecks and Isaac had to drive clear up on the curb and through a yard to get by them.”

“O.K...@ssholes...well now you’re on my turf and I don’t play nice!”

Mickey handed the binoculars to Sheila “Keep an eye on them for me.” He said as he walked across the room to a wall locker. He quickly started dressing out for combat. Over the camo’s he was wearing he pulled on a military looking flak vest. A vest had pockets that he started filling up with magazines, and gear. He walked back to the Doctor and handed him a small radio.

“This is so you’ll know what’s going on and you can let me know if you’re in trouble. Do you know anything at all about guns?”

Nathan shook his head. “Very little I’m afraid.”

“Well there’s no time like the present.” Mickey quickly gave the group a brief overly simplified course on the AR 15 and the 12-gauge pump shotgun before handing them out.

“Now remember you’re not to get involved UNLESS I call for help. Just sit here and pray these punks are as stupid as they look. At the most all you’ll have to do is make noise with them. BUT STAY HERE! After I leave this loft anything I run into out there is gonna get shot. SO DON’T BE STUPID...UNDERSTOOD!”

“Mickey are you sure that there’s not something more I can do.” Nathan pleaded. “Doc, you stay here and keep Isaac alive...he owes me ten bucks on a bet. And I intend to collect.”

Wallace Danfort stepped forward. He had been a custodian at the hospital. “Look here son, I may just be a janitor but I do know how to use one of these civilian M-16’s. I was in the Army back during Nam. Wasn’t in combat unless you count bar fights while stationed over in Germany. But you ain’t going out there alone...that is plan stupid!”

“Can you keep up?” Mickey asked.

“You just lead sonny and I’ll be there to cover your six...can I keep up, damn boy I ain’t that old!”

Mickey pulled out another vest and handed him one of the AR’s. “Grab the bandoleer’s and that gun case and we’re out of here.”

The pair, heavily loaded down with gear, moved out quietly from the warehouse. They circled back behind and moved as fast as they could away from the loft as possible. There was no sense to draw these punks to his retreat. Better to draw them off and catch them well out of the line of fire from Doc and the others.

“What he hell is in this case Mic? Fricken thing weighs a ton.” Wallace puffed.

“That’s the enforcer. We use that if everything else fails.”

“Well it’s damn heavy.”

“Yeah, well just be glad you’re not carrying the ammo for that thing.” They continued to maneuver for position and arrived ten minutes later where Mickey wanted to set up.

“Ok Wally, you set here and make real quiet. You’re my back up. This is my line of retreat and our redoubt. I’ll try to pick them off up ahead of here. But if not, this is where I’ll be coming...so don’t shoot the first thing you see, it will probably be me. OK?”

“Gotcha Mic.”

With that Mickey moved out. He quickly covered the ground between the redoubt and where he figured the gang-bangers would be by now. He checked his weapon, his AR-15A2. He would have rather carried the FN or the M1A but he was looking at multiple targets, close to medium range and needed the massive firepower that sheer numbers of rounds headed down range would provide. Not that the 62 grain .223 round is anything to laugh at. Inside two hundred meters the round is devastating against human flesh. Added to that he was carrying ten thirty round magazines in his chest pack, another six mags on his web gear and counting the one in the weapon, was packing over 500 rounds of close up and nasty. A couple of hand grenades would have been nice. But as his old Gunnery Sergeant had said. “Sh*t in one hand and wish in the other...see which one gets full first.”

“Damn! Wish that Gunny was here with me now!”

He could hear noise up ahead; some was idiot beating in a metal door. He lowered him self to the ground and looked quickly around the corner of the building.

“Yep. Those idiots are trying to break into the storage garages.” Whispered to himself.

He could see several gang-bangers outside and hear several more inside one of the units they had managed to break into. Boxes and household goods were being tossed out into the driveway between the row of storage units. While they were half in and half out of the storage garage he couldn't hope to ambush enough at one time to finish the job. He looked around for options. “HmMMM just maybe.”

Suddenly Mickey heard several voices coming around the corner behind him. He was momentarily hidden by several fifty-five gallon drums and a low stack of crates, but now he was caught between two different groups and his only escape was in the open between them. “Sh*t !”

Three bangers walked around the corner. All were armed. Mickey clicked the safety over to full auto and began tapping the trigger sending two round groups rapidly into the unsuspecting hard @sses at point blank range. The first two

bangers were caught completely by surprise and never had a chance, but their off balanced descent to the ground partially blocked and protected the third member and he did manage to return fire, ineffective, but far too close for comfort. Mickey tagged him several more times to make sure he wouldn't get off another round. Mickey was now exposed.

Spinning around he could hear shouts and gunfire coming from the invaded storage garage less than thirty yards away. Clicking back to Simi-auto and feeding in a fresh magazine into the AR he inched up to the edge of the building. He needed a distraction. The drum beside him was partially empty and not too heavy. Mickey pushed it over and kicked it to get it rolling. He waited until it was six or eight feet away before he quickly whipped his rifle around the corner.

Tap-tap, one down! Tap-tap, second down. The third and fourth bangers are running for cover of the storage unit firing back blindly. Tap-tap...Tap-tap...Tap-tap, another down. "Sh*t!" the fourth dove into the garage. Mickey let fly a rapid-fire barrage into the opening of the storage garage. When the AR locked open on empty he retreated quickly back, reloaded, picked up the earlier emptied mag and took off running.

Twenty yards...fifteen...ten...five...Crack-crack-crack. They were out of their hole and hot on his trail. CORNER! He switched to a left hand hold and poked out around the corner of the new building. There were seven more of them! They had just reached the position he had vacated and discovered their dead partners.

"Sh*t! Now they're p*ssed for sure!" He could see that most of the second group he tagged were still on the ground.

"How many of these b*astards were there to begin with." He tried to steady his breath. "Make a note to self...Self, must radically improve recon methods. Best to have an idea of how big a bucket of sh*t you're jumping into BEFORE LEAPING!"

He poked back around the corner, sighted in on the baddest looking banger and proceeded to empty the third magazine into the group. Two more dropped but the rest quickly ducked for cover and started to return fire. Mickey disappeared back around the corner, reloaded and took off again.

"I wonder how long before they wise up to this tactic." He thought to himself. Then he heard the squeal of tires in the distance and got his answer. He was at

least one hundred yards away from Wally through a maze of factory and warehouse buildings. One hundred yards too far he was sure. "Screw it!" He took off running at full tilt.

He had covered nearly half the distance when he heard the car slam on the brakes behind him and shots rang out. He dove behind a ramp, rolled and came up shooting. The carload of bangers was less than forty yards away and several of them had what looked like AK's and MAC Submachine guns. Sh*t was whizzing past fast and hitting all over the building walls behind him.

"Hits count"...tap-tap..."hits count"...tap-tap..."hits count"...tap-tap. He kept saying to himself as he took aim and let out a steady stream of fire. THAP! Suddenly his head got knocked back with the force of a baseball bat and his helmet almost pulled itself off! He laid there stunned for a couple of seconds before he realized that he had been hit.

"I got him! I got him!" He could hear coming from the bangers in the car. Mickey's head was pounding but he was alive. They couldn't see him from where he was, but he couldn't leave without exposing himself right in front of them. "This really s*cks!" He thought. He rolled over and tried to clear his head.

"Are you sure Man? Did you get him good?"

"Yeah man I totally capped him in the head! He's wasted man, totally wasted!" Mickey blinked his eyes but everything still seemed watery. "This is not cool." He muttered. He could hear car doors slam, they would be moving in now to check their kill. Mickey fumbled around and pulled out a fresh mag, ejected the near spent one and prepared for a last stand. His vision was starting to clear and it was now or never. He popped up suddenly and two bangers were less than a dozen feet away. He flipped to full auto, sprayed and prayed.

But something strange happened to the banger to his right. He suddenly jumped over thirty feet through the air sideways back towards the car. Mickey blinked, and blinked again. Something suddenly burned his left thigh and he came back to focus.

He locked the AR into position. "Hits count"...tap-tap..."hits count"...tap-tap..."hits count"...tap-tap. WHAM!...WHAM!... WHAM! The front of the car started to shatter, glass, metal and people began flying everywhere. The last banger gun went silent. Mickey stood there his weapon empty, his head

pounding, his ears ringing and his leg burning, but he stood there alive, dazed but alive.

Wally had come up to provide him cover and with him he had brought the Barrett 50 caliber BMG that he had been hauling around in the gun case. Somehow he had managed to quickly figure out how it worked and set it up at the end of the factory lane only a little over a hundred yards away. The firepower of that gun at that range quickly turned the tide of the firefight. Wally turned the car into Swiss cheese and every one it as well.

When they got back to the loft, Nathan quickly patched the leg wound, just muscle...”ouch Doc!” and Mickey admired the now ruined Kevlar helmet.

“Man that must of hurt!” Wally said. “I thought you were a goner for sure when I saw your head snap back.”

“Would have been if it hadn’t been for this helmet. My head is still pounding, but that is better than the alternative.”

“Thanks for disobeying my orders and coming up and saving my @ss.” Mickey said to him.

“Youth and enthusiasm...”Wally said pointing at Mickey. “Age and deceit.” His thumb now pointed at himself. “A tough combination to beat wouldn’t you say.”

“Yeah Wally, Yeah I’d say it was...do you suppose you could teach me some of that age and deceit sh*t...cause that youth and enthusiasm cr*p just about got me killed out there.”

“Sure we can work a deal Mic...say...do I get to keep the big gun?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 14 – A Taste of Things to Come

Max Jeager walked slowly to the patrol car head down, and deep in thought. Things were going bad, and going bad fast. The Chief had given them a pep talk, all about how this was a great and powerful country, that the top people in the nation were working on the problems of the disease, and the crop failure. There

were strategic reserves of fuel, and we were having a surplus of grain, for Christ's sake, besides all the government cheese!

"Don't worry about this." The Chief had said. "It'll be back to normal in a few weeks. Count on it."

Max was less than reassured. So far the grocery stores were still full of food to buy. He thought that would last a few days at the most, several hours at the least. The news was still talking only vaguely about the problems of the disease and crop damage. There were an inordinate number of "happy stories" on the network news. Stories about kids who won spelling bees or bicycling grandmas. But the guard had been called up to go into the cities, and their family members weren't stupid. They knew something was up. The state patrol was having their hands full with the interstate corridors. They were scheduled to close the interstates nationwide at 1800 tonight. Three hours from now. It was being kept pretty hush-hush, but even several counties away from the "I" the State Patrol was informing Max's department that they may be requesting personnel, and were willing to pay overtime costs to the department. The reasoning given was a "precaution" to prevent the spread of the disease.

Max figured that tonight was the night. When they closed the interstate, people would no longer be able to ignore what was going on. The happy talk from the news would suddenly be seen to be lies. The panic would begin, and panic –like fire- had a way of feeding on itself to grow and spread. People would rush out to get gas for their cars and groceries for their stomachs. A couple million lemmings all with the same idea. Tempers would flare, punches would be thrown, triggers would be pulled, windows would be broken, and the dark ages wouldn't be far behind.

"I should have called in sick." He thought with a sigh as he sat down into the driver's seat of the patrol car. Three of the others on his shift did. He wondered how long the department would function. If there were a sufficient level of anarchy and lawlessness, he knew that most officers would bag it, and go take care of the people that really mattered to them.

Like many officers, Max was growing a tiny seed of the "Us vs. Them" attitude that law enforcement personnel seemed to develop over time. There were three classes of people: The Good Guys. Cops. There was the general public. Stupid, idiotic, thought-free. The bad guys: Thugs, punks, perps, scrotes, etc. The public

was to be tolerated, but that was pretty close to all that could be done. Intellectually, Max knew this was wrong. But the simple fact of the matter was that the majority of smart, well-adjusted normal people rarely had the occasion to call a cop. They took care of problems before they were problems. Therefore, most of the public that cops were exposed to –while not actually criminals- were not exactly the cream of humanity’s crop. Max figured he and his fellow officer’s loyalty to this public would last only so long after the paychecks started coming in.

Max wheeled the cruiser into the gates at the city shops. The place was like a ghost town: Deserted except for a few mechanics working on a street sweeper, and one attaching a snowplow blade to the front of a bright orange dump truck. He spotted one of the mechanics that he sometimes shot the breeze with while filling the patrol car or having it serviced.

“Hey Tommy. Where is everybody?” Max asked

“Hiya Max.” Tommy replied, wiping his hands on a shop rag. “Some called in sick, some are up at the “I” getting ready to put up Jersey Barriers. There’s a coupla guys round here someplace. Then there’s me. Something weird’s going on. This just ain’t right.”

“Tell me about it. That’s why I’m here. I have a feeling it’s going to be a hell of a night. I came to see if you had any 5 gallon gas cans. It might be a while before I can refuel tonight, and I don’t want to be stuck out in BFE without gas.”

“Well...” Tommy started, “It seems you aren’t the only one with that idea. We had a bunch of them for refueling the mowers and the like, but a lot of ‘em seemed to grow legs lately and walk away. I think I can scare you up a couple. Gotta sign for ‘em, though.”

“No problem Tommy. I’ll sign for ‘em.”

“Plus the city says you aren’t supposed to carry them in the trunk.”

This was Tommy’s fun. He pretended to be a by-the-book city shops employee, but it was just that: Pretend. He’d bent the rules plenty of times if the reason to do so made sense, or if the person requesting the bending was “a decent guy.” Today Max had both on his side.

“Well Tommy, I won’t tell if you don’t. Plus if it’ll ease your conscience, you can just hand ‘em to me and go do something else. I’ll do the rest.” Max said with a grin.

“Aw hell. There aren’t any supervisors for miles anyway. Pull the car up to the pumps. I’ll meet you there.”

Max drove the squad around the huge shop building to the fuel pumps out back. On the night shift, the officers were supposed to pump their own fuel, and thus knew where the switches for the pumps were located and had keys to the gates. There were two pumps, one for diesel and one for gasoline. Most of the city’s larger equipment ran on diesel, but the squad cars, city pick-ups, lawn mowers, sidewalk plows and a myriad of other equipment ran on gasoline. Thus, the city bought thousands of gallons every month to feed the vehicles it owned. Max began to fill the cruiser, and soon Tommy rounded the corner of the shop carrying three red “jerry cans.”

Tommy set them down next to the pump, and said, “Say, are you OK here? I have to get some stuff done around here. We really are short handed.”

“No problem. Thanks for the help. Oh, where do I sign for these?” Max replied. Tommy tapped the side of his head with a finger, “You already signed right up here. Just bring ‘em back when you’re done with ‘em, will you?”

“Will do. Thanks again.” Said Max as he turned to fuel the gas cans.

The next few hours were the worst of Max’ life. It started with a call to a fight at a bar next to the grocery store. Max pulled up and there were two men rolling around in the parking lot. Like most fights, this one had degenerated from throwing punches to a kind of wrestling. Bystanders were watching, trying to separate the combatants, trying to stop those who were trying to separate the combatants, and the usual drunken cheerleaders. At three thirty in the afternoon, no less. Max got out of the car and walked over. Most of the bystanders had backed a little away, but many were now shouting at Max. He shoved a couple of people back, then grabbed one of the combatants by the shirt and yanked him a couple feet away from the other guy. Max’s backup wasn’t too far away, but there were only two other cars on duty, due to the sick calls. Dispatch was having no luck getting anybody to come in, either. One of the heroes made a drunken lunge for the other, which Max stopped with a boot on the shoulder, and a gruff “Sit

down.” This riled the drunken crowd who began shouting at Max even louder. Max chose the most non-compliant of the two and began to cuff him and hustle him to the back of his squad car. It was best to get done what needed to be done, and get the hell out of there. When he went for the other one, a drunken woman in a tube top staggered between Max and the other fighter.

“He din’t start it. You leave him alone.” She screeched

“Ma’am, step back.” Max said. He learned you can’t argue with drunks: Their logic knew no bounds.

“You keep yer f*kin’ hans of him. He din’t do nuthin’, you stupid cop!” She replied.

The crowd sensed a good show, and their volume level rose considerably. Max was uncomfortable, but not scared. He did wish backup would show the hell up, though.

“Ma’am,” Said Max, unsnapping the pouch on his belt and withdrawing the pepper spray, unconsciously giving it a shake, “I’m not gonna tell you again: Step back away from him. He’s going to jail, and unless you step back, you are too.”

“That shee-it don’ work on me. I’m a-moon.” She slurred.

Max let fly with a stream of pepper spray at her face. For all of three seconds, it seemed as though she was immune. Then she dropped to her knees.

“Aaagh” She screamed, dropped to her knees, then added “Auuogh!”

As mucus ran in long, stringy strands from her nose, her eyes were pinched tightly shut. Her face became as reddened as one of those baboons he had seen once on PBS.

The crowd grew even louder. To them, a great injustice was done to the Drunken Nation. How best to avenge this terrible tragedy?

Max was cuffing the second fighter, who had become quite compliant, and was walking him to the squad -past Xena the Warrior Princess, who was rolling around on the gravel parking lot- when the first beer bottle flew. The first missed, but a subsequent bottle hit Max squarely in the back of the head. White lights burst brightly before his eyes, and he stumbled briefly, bumping into the cuffed

drunk in front of him, bringing them both to the ground. Max reached to the radio hanging at his belt and hit the “panic button” that sent a tone to dispatch, letting them know he was in trouble. More beer bottles flew, another striking Max in the chest. Another hit the squad car, shattered, and a shard cut Max’ cheek. The crowd was coming closer, sensing a victory, when Max, from a kneeling position hosed the crowd with his pepper spray. His vision has not completely cleared, so the aim was not what it had been with Xena, but it was enough. He emptied the entire can in the crowd’s general direction. They backed off, and dispersed, most looking for water to try to wash off the pepper spray.

Max’ back up rolled up about then. Max stood and shoved the last fighter in the back of his squad.

“Jesus, Max” said Kass, the first back up to arrive. “You look like sh*t . You all right?”

“I think so.” Max reached up to feel the blood running from the cut on his cheek, and from the great and growing welt on the back of his head. “Listen, I think I’m gonna need some stitches. Will you take these guys to the station and start on ‘em? I’m gonna head to Mercy.”

“Sure, Max. What about her?” Kass said, gesturing to the moaning, swearing form with the tube top around her hips.

“Her too. Obstruction for now. Until my bell quits ringing and I can think of something better.” Max said, climbing into the squad.

Things were going to get a lot worse for Max in the next few hours.

AGrayMan

Chapter 015 - Grandma’s Cookies

She could hear the laughing on the other side of the door. She could still smell their fetid breath, the stench of their filthy bodies sweating all over her. She could barely see out of one eye and the other was swollen shut...THOSE B*STARDS! Thankfully she had passed out, earlier, but now she had to find a way out...any way out! Her one hand was still tied to the bedpost. Somehow, somehow she must get free.

The old green '53 Willys Overland Station Wagon cruised slowly but steadily down the dirt gravel road. It had been well over month before Betty had ventured out the first time, "just too much silly stuff going on." her Murray would have said. She wished Murray was with her now. All those years of preparation, all those plans they had worked on to be ready for just such a day and now, well...he had fought the cancer like the old soldier he was. Just like that day back on the Normandy beaches he would tell her about when the Scotch got to him a little too much, but this final battle he couldn't win. Still he had prepared her for this day. She just wished she wasn't alone..."Well", she thought patting the dark rump of the Rottie looking out the passenger window, "Maybe not quite all alone."

She could hear footsteps coming closer to the door, then the knob turned and the door suddenly opened and filled the room with loud music and the smell of stale beer, urine and cigarettes. She froze, as if she was still unconscious and prayed.

"Naw...the b*tch is still out! Geez Ben did you have to hit her that hard?" The door slammed shut and the footsteps moved away.

Through her one good eye Samantha looked about the shabby room. Early welfare trash. She was laying in the middle of a bed, naked, battered and bruised. Her right hand was free but she could hardly feel her fingers, her left was still tied to the poster of the bed by some sort of heavy cord. She tired to move and every inch of her body screamed at her in pain. But she had to move, it was the only way out of this nightmare. She knew that if she didn't get out there soon, there would be no later. It was move or die.

Betty finally reached the black top road and turned the Willys left on to it. Just another ten miles and she'd be in the small community of Monte Vista in the mountains north-northeast of San Diego. It wasn't much of a town as far as towns went; a bedroom community of perhaps twenty thousand give or take before the Bio attack. She had lost a good many of her friends in those first days. According to the short wave radio she monitored religiously things had been really bad in the major cities where millions were said to have perished. She still found it hard to believe, so many people so quickly. Betty believed that only her isolation out in the sticks where she and Murray had built their home had probably saved her. Even the little community of Monte Vista had not escaped the plague and had suffered the loss of almost a thousand of its citizens. Of the remaining survivors less than half still remained, most had gone off elsewhere to

wait out the storm or moved into better-policed suburbs. Things had been getting pretty rough since the out-break. Murray's old police scanner seemed to be getting busier and busier lately and level of violence was steadily increasing.

Samantha worked at the knot on her left wrist with her teeth; her right hand was still almost useless from the lack of circulation caused by the ropes still dangling from it. At last the final bit came loose and she was free from the bed, now she had to get out of the room and out of the house. She slowly eased off the bed and looked for something to cover herself with. The remains of her clothing was piled across the room in the corner, but she remembered that most of that had ripped and cut off.

"Prioritize, prioritize." She kept thinking. "Focus - focus on the problem. My god what a nightmare!"

She limped over to the window. It was partially open. All she had to do was slide it the rest of the way open and climb out through the torn screen, the ground was just feet below. It seemed like it took hours for her to move a rickety chair over below the window, slide the window quietly open and then finally she managed to push/fall through the screen to the ground five feet below. She landed with a muffled thud in a lump on the cold wet grass knocking the wind out of her, but she was outside that room. Pitifully, painfully she pushed herself to her knees and then leaning against the stucco side of the house its coarse grit like sand paper finish tearing at her already traumatized skin. Slowly she clawed her way up until she was standing, then step by agonizing step she limped forward, out the side gate, across the front of the neighbors yard and slowly down the street. Naked, bloody, and filthy she looked more dead than alive, a hideous creature of the walking dead loping down the side street and alley.

She hadn't managed to get very far away when the animals that had spent the last twelve hours raping and beating her discovered her absence. Off in the distance she could hear the hollering, cussing and shouting suddenly drowned out by engines starting up.

"Oh my God...Oh my God!" She felt the sudden surge of panic flood through her and she drew from that deep well of desperation in her very soul and started running, running, running anywhere but here.

Betty arrived at the edge of town. It appeared unseemly quiet and strangely vacant, especially for the middle of the week. Granted it was getting close to the

end of the day, in about an hour or two she figured it would start getting on towards dusk. She didn't want to be out after dark. Just a quick run into town for some fresh supplies and such, and then back to the ranch. She pulled up in the alleyway of the local Carniceria. She had been getting her meat and spices there over the last forty years from the Sanchez family. Manny always gave her more than a fair price and usually a little something extra was always thrown in, especially some nice juicy bones for Patton. Betty's husband Murray had built Manny's home, and three of his daughter's houses as well. Maria, Manny's wife had taught Betty the secret to making good tortillas and tamale's as well as many other traditional Mexican dishes. It was a small community and the roots ran deep. While the rest of the world seemed to have increasing problems between the different races and religions getting along, Monte Vista had somehow been spared that ordeal.

Samantha ran in sheer panic down the sidewalk towards the boulevard. There was no one about, no one to help her or hear her cries for help. The sound of the motorcycles and trucks were still way off in the distance, but it was only a matter of time she knew before she would be fighting for her life. Her feet were bloody from the blacktop and concrete tearing at them. She had fallen too many times to remember, her skin covered more with weeping and bleeding abrasions than the manicured tan that she usually sported. Her custom nails that she had preened every two weeks were broken or ripped off. God what a bloody mess she had become in less than twenty-four short hours. From a cultured well-dressed college coed studying journalism at one of the top western universities to a naked and bleeding panicked creature looking for any kind of shelter from the rabid animals stalking her now.

Betty arrived at the Carniceria and pulled around behind into the alley as was her habit. She parked near the back door to ease loading her purchases in the wagon and shut the Willys off.

"Patton you stay here and guard the wagon." She said as she climbed out of the Willys. She hesitated for a second, remembered what Murray always said then adjusted the fit of her shoulder holster under her Levi jacket. The Browning High power was locked and loaded and ready if she would need it. Not that Manny's was a difficult place to shop or anything, but as Murray had always reminded her:

“When in doubt, be ready.” With that done she grabbed her shopping list and entered the rear door. She loved Manny's shop, so full of the aroma of herbs and spices.

“Seniora Betty, how nice of you to visit my shop today.” Manny greeted her as she came in through the back door.

“Hi Manny, how's Maria doing?” She asked.

Maria was getting over the Influenza plague when a secondary infection of pneumonia jumped in and that nearly did her in. Betty had been bringing her fresh herbal treatments from her garden as well as strong antibiotics from her cache. It had been touch and go, but over the last week or so Maria seemed to slow getting better day-by-day.

“Oh, she is getting much better I think. The new medicine seems to be helping. We are so grateful for your help.” Manny walked over and gave her a hug. Then stepped back and looked had her strangely.

“Oh don't worry Manny, it's just insurance in case things got a little strange coming into town today.” She said opening up the left side of her jean jacket to show him the holstered auto.

“Si, I understand Seniora, since the plague things are not going so good these days.”

“Are you having any problems Manuel?” She asked concerned.

“Oh, no, not me. But there are more gangs, more criminals and problems now since the plague. More empty houses are being broken into everyday. The Sheriff can not stop them, there are just too many and he is too few.” He walked behind the counter. Bent over and brought up an old double barreled shotgun laying it on the counter top.

“Maria does not like me to have this in the store, but I think it is a good idea.”

“I would have to agree with you on that Manny.” She answered as she picked up spices and chilies and added them to her cart.

“So what can I do for you today Seniora Betty?”

“Well I’ll take about a half order today Manny and throw in some of your special spicy sausages if you have any.”

“Oh Si, I have a fresh batch that will send your taste buds straight to heaven they are so good.” He smacked his lips and got busy with his task.

Samantha looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight. She was on the edge of the business district, surely there would be something open, someone that could help her, but everything looked dead. Nothing was moving, no cars, no kids, nothing. And dead was where she would be if she didn’t find help soon. She could hear the motorcycles off in the distance getting closer. So far she had managed to hide twice when they had come close before, but she was quickly becoming too tired to fight, too tired to run. She looked again...then...there, a sign. OPEN. At the end of the street the Mexican butcher was open. She started to move in that direction almost unconsciously, as if drawn by the light of that sign. Her bloody feet screamed with each step, she started crying and laughing and crying again. She was on the edge of madness and the only light at the end of her tunnel, her only salvation was fifty yards away in a neon red sign. The sound grew louder behind her and she started to run.

“Well how much do I owe you?”

“Oh Seniora Betty, take this as a gift. For you help with Maria.” He held out his hand.

“No Manny, I couldn’t do that and you know it. I only did what a good friend would do. Now how much is all that Manny, Please.”

They haggled for a few minutes, it was the ritual, before Betty put the money in Manny’s hand and made him take it. She gave him a hug and walked out the back door. She had just opened the door and was about to get in the Willy’s when she heard a horrific crash from inside the store and Manny’s voice loudly calling on the saints in Spanish. Without a thought she reached up above the visor and grabbed Murray’s old carbine from the spring-loaded rack. She quickly snapped in a thirty round magazine and racked the slide back and let it go. Popping the slide with her palm to insure it was locked forward she grabbed two more thirty round magazines and stuffed them in her jacket pocket. There were

two fifteen round magazines located in a pouch on the rifles stock, she looked down and checked those quickly...this would have to do.

She entered the back of the store cautiously in the combat crouch that Murray had taught her. She flipped the safety off. Up in the front of the store she could see Manny with his double barrel shotgun pointing towards the door. There was something, no someone sprawled on the ground just inside the door. They had knocked over the potato chip display and were partially buried underneath the bags of chips. There were small arms and legs sticking out from under the pile. But that was not what had Manny's attention, it was what was now coming in the door.

Betty moved to the right sliding along the wall aisle trying get a clear view of the situation. "I'm too old for this sh*t Murray!" She mumbled to herself.

The roar of more motorcycles could be heard through the open door. It was a Mexican Stand-Off, literally. Manny with is shotgun and two large filthy goons just inside the shop's door with their pistols. Betty stepped up on the base of the store fixture to poke the carbine across the top.

"You better back off wet back! This here b*tch is our property and we're takin her back!" The closer animal bellowed.

"Better put it down Muther F*cker or we'll rip out your F*cken Heart!" The second one yelled.

Manny stood his ground waving the double barrel back and forth between the two.

"You geet out of my store and leave the senorita alone! YOU GO!" He yelled. Betty could see the two bikers make eye contact, without thinking she knew this standoff was going to end in a few seconds and not well. Then suddenly she heard Patton's deep bark and someone's blood curdling scream echoing from the ally. The two thugs snapped their heads towards the back door and then one saw Betty. As the two made eye contact Betty's trigger finger instinctively squeezed. The one-hundred and ten grain soft point bullet crossed the distance between them before the bikers iris could fully expand to focus on the image of the silver gray head just barely above the display rack's top. Entering just above his eyebrow the force of the expanding lead round snapped his head back like a doll's head in a wind tunnel. The second biker looked at his partner as blood

sprayed out the back of his head against the door jamb and never saw the twin flashes from Manny's twelve gauge. The twin loads of double-ought buckshot caught him square in the center of his chest and propelled the biker out through the storefront window in a hail of flying glass.

Betty squeezed off three more rounds through the now empty doorway and dropped off the display base and dashed as quickly as someone her age could up to the front of the store.

"Manny its me!" She yelled over and over. All she could hear was his rapid Spanish, either praying or swearing both were equally effective and appropriate at the moment. From the front of the isle she could see the gang bangers gathering outside trying now to put their bikes and two trucks between them and the store.

"In for a penny, in for a pound." Betty mumbled to herself as she took up a firing position behind the stack of fifty pound flour bags staked on the endcap of the aisle. The bikers-thugs were just starting to look up when she opened up again. Two dirty skumbags went down rapidly as she traversed the carbine across the front of the store. One more tried to make for the protection of the pickup truck across the street before she clipped him in the leg and he spilled face first onto the hard blacktop. Two more rounds plowed into his side before he stopped moving. The magazine was empty.

She pulled out the empty mag and plucked one from her pocket and snapped it into place. She was amazed at just how calm she was, how focused her vision was, how quiet it was in the midst of all the carnage. She quickly jacked the slide and popped the carbine over the top of the flour bags and sighted in on one of the gas tanks of the three bikes parked out front of the store. Pop – Pop – Pop Thwack...WHUMP! The first bike's tank ripped open and went up spewing burning gasoline across the other bikes.

KABLAM! – KABLAM! Manny was back in the fight and shoveling hot buckshot across the counter into the street as quickly as he could. Several rounds struck the flour bags in front of Betty sending up puffs of white powder. The shots were coming from behind the pickup truck across the street that the dead biker had tried to reach. More rounds were coming in quicker and several more tacked the bags in front of Betty..."Not good!" She thought. She could hear sirens off in the

distance. "I hope that's the Calvary." She mumbled to herself as she took aim under the truck across the street and let fly a half a dozen rounds.

Her rounds ricocheted up off the black top and rained jagged shards of lead under the truck and into the exposed lower legs of several bikers behind the truck. She could hear the screams and the fire coming from that source stopped. Betty then concentrated her fire on the side of the truck where the gas tank was located. Her slide locked back and she reached into her pocket for the next full magazine and came up empty handed. "Sh*t!" Retreating behind the cover of the flour bags she searched for another magazine. Without realizing it she had gone through her all three large mags, ninety rounds and now had only the two fifteen rounders on the stock left!

She couldn't leave Manny here alone to hold them off while she went to get more ammo. The double barrel was just too slow to hold off a rush of any kind. She pulled out the empty mag and popped in the smaller fifteen rounder. She could hear the siren getting louder and louder and realized suddenly that it was quiet save for the increasing warble approaching. Slowly she peeked up over the top. It looked like hell out front. The bikes were down and burning as was the truck across the street. One truck was missing. "I wonder when that one left?" She thought to herself. There was only the crackle and pop of burning paint, tires and gasoline to be heard.

"Manny...are you ok?"

"Si, Seniora...and you?"

"Si Manuel, Si."

Samantha could feel soft clean sheets against her skin. The smell of lavender and wisteria lightly scented the air. It had only been a dream she thought to herself...a very, very bad dream. There was something else in the air. She took a deep sniff, it was the unmistakable aroma of chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven. "Mmmmmmm." Her mouth began to water. Then she moved and a wave of pain shocked her awake! She tried to open her eyes and could only see out of one, her right eye. There were bandages covering her head and wrapped around her many different wounds. Her first sight was of a man in a uniform, a young man with his arm around a small frail looking woman in the old photograph beside the bed. She slowly, painfully moved her head and looked around the

room. It was light and cheery...and clean. She could hear humming from the other room, a soft and friendly voice in the distance.

When next she woke there was someone in the room. A soft hand felt the side of her face.

“Hello, my dear. Don’t worry you’re safe now. Just relax and get well. If you’re hungry I have some fresh treats just out of the oven.” The sweet grandmotherly looking lady said to her. She smelled of Lavender and fresh chocolate chip cookies.

Samantha relaxed and drifted off to sleep with a smile on her broken lips. She was safe now, finally safe.

Desert Doc

Chapter 016 – The Law and Order

Max rolled into Mercy’s parking lot a few minutes after the breaking up the fight. The lot was more full than he’d ever seen. There were cars partially blocking the street, as well as parked haphazard in the lot. Several ambulances sat idle in the ambulance bays, as people milled around near them.

“This is all wrong.” Thought Max, as he wheeled the cruiser up closer to the ER doors. Not only was the situation wrong, but the fact that Max knew nothing of it until this very moment was wrong. The chief should have mentioned a disturbance at the hospital in the morning briefing. There wasn’t exactly any kind of violence or mayhem, but there was a lot of people and confusion. As he drove closer he could see some people laying prone on the sidewalk, with others attending to them. He saw few uniforms, and that made him jittery. Paramedic uniforms, cop uniforms, the scrubs of docs or nurses... They all meant that somebody was doing something about this mess. No uniforms meant that the crowd was on it’s own. It had been said that an individual person was smart, but a group of people are dumb and panicky and he firmly believed that. Max got as close as he could, then braked, and slid the gear selector to “Park.”

“Christ,” he thought. “We better get somebody up here to start clearing this place out.”

He reached down and picked up the mic on the radio “36, Dispatch.”

Dispatch replied quickly. “Go ahead, 36.”

“There’s a disturbance here at Mercy. We’re going to need a couple officers, and whole bunch of tow trucks.” Max spoke, as he pressed the bloody pack of 4”X4” gauze squares to the back of his head. Man, that throbbed.

There was an inordinately long pause on the radio. Max was about to pick up the mic and repeat his request when dispatch came over the radio. “36, that situation is being taken care of.”

Max heard voices in the background behind the dispatcher’s words. Strident voices. Worried voices. Screw it. He was in no mood or shape to argue. “10-04.” He swung the squad door open slowly, and made to get out. A man dashed across the distance between the ER doors and Max’s squad, did a double take and skidded to a halt ten feet from the car. It was one of the ER docs that Max had occasion to become acquainted with while bringing drunks into the ER. “Max, get back in your car and get the hell out of here.” The doc said, as he looked around almost wildly.

“What?” Asked Max, with slight confusion, gripping the car door. His headache was growing by the moment, and so far, this conversation wasn’t helping it a bit. “Doc, I need stitches, and I think I have a concussion.”

“Damn it Max, listen to me!” Words tumbled from the docs’ mouth in a panicked stream. “You can’t go in there! It’s the disease, Max. It’s getting worse by the minute. The bodies are stacked like cordwood in there, and if you go in there, you’ll end up like them. You maybe will already. Ahh, damn it. Look, all I know is that this thing is spreading. I don’t know how, or how to tell if you have it or not. It came on like a freight train. Started to get a couple cases in yesterday afternoon. Couple of folks who were on a shopping trip to Chicago. Since then, the numbers have increased exponentially. The staff that hasn’t run off or come down with it have their hands full. You aren’t going to get any help with your concussion or cuts in there.”

The doc paused, looked around again took a deep breath, then began in a more steady voice. “Nothing we tried touched it. The CDC knows it’s here Max. They’re sending in troops. What do you think they are going to do to stop it from spreading, Max? Huh? They can’t risk any more infected people running around than there already are. The nicest thing they’ll do is lock us all up. The worst...Well, I don’t want to think about it. And listen to this:” The doc pulled a portable radio out of his pocket, and rapidly tuned it to a local radio station. The tinny voice came over the speaker at once.

“ S...is a repeat announcement: Anyone with the some or all of the following symptoms should report immediately to Mercy Hospital. Fever, chills, cough with blood, bleeding from rectum, mouth, and nose. Muscle twitching and or

weakness. Twitching eyes. Blurred or darkened vision..." The doc clicked off the radio.

"Look back there, Max. Do you see any help? Why are they telling them to show up here? I'll tell you why. The military is going to roll up here any second. There's a Blackhawk on the roof landing pad, landed about 15 minutes ago. There is a colonel and his some of his boys in MOPP gear. They said help was on the way, and would be here within the hour. Max, I don't need the kind of help they are bringing, and I don't think you do either. You gotta go, Max. I would sew you up, but I am probably infected. I have to get home to..."

Just then they heard diesel engines in the distance. The doc resumed his running. Max looked around. Could it be true? Was doc into his own meds? He squinted up to the roof. There was indeed a black tail rotor visible from where he was. He looked around at the parking lot. More and more people were pulling up and exiting their cars, walking toward the hospital proper. Some were being carried by friends or family. It was decision time. The lot was filling up, and the engines could be the military. Max got back into the squad, and drove through the maze of cars toward the exit. His path was blocked as he attempted to turn onto the street by a darkly camouflaged HMMWV. The passenger got out, and Max could instantly see he was in CBW garb. He walked calmly to Max's squad window. Max fought the cop urge to get out and meet the soldier halfway.

"Hello, officer. Looks like you've been in a scrape. The docs fix you up in there?" Came the slightly muffled voice of the soldier.

Max smiled nervously and licked his lips. "No, actually, I haven't even gotten out of the car. I can't find a damn parking spot. Say, what's all this about?" He noticed several more HMMVs entering through other entrances to the parking lot, followed by several large military trucks. More soldiers in CBW outfits began disembarking from the trucks.

The soldier looked at the bloodied gauze on the front seat of the car. Max watched his eyes through the small windows, and thought " Oh Sh*t. He thinks I went inside."

"Why don't you come along with us, then, and we'll get you looked at?" The muffled voice came again.

It was decision time for Max. Most of his life, he had been a good citizen. He followed rules, and although it wasn't perfect, he believed the government meant more good than evil. But here he was: this soldier wasn't going to let him go. The soldier thought he was infected from the others in the hospital. Max thought of all the things that needed to be done for his wife. This thing wasn't going to be resolved easily. Dead people didn't work. People scared of becoming dead people didn't work either. With no one working, there would be no food deliveries,

no fuel deliveries, no police protection –he snorted to himself at that- no fire protection, no health care, no electricity, and no water service. In short, a sudden return to a harder life. She would need him. They could get through this. They had planned for an emergency. Not like this, exactly, but there were some provisions for this sort of contingency. But he couldn't help if he was trapped in the hospital. Or dead.

All these thoughts passed through Max's mind in the blink of an eye. "Still," he thought, "I'll give it one more shot."

"Thanks anyway...Sergeant. I'll live. I'll just go home and wash up." He said. He didn't think it would work. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the HMMWV. It would be close.

"Well, officer, I have to insist that..." Said the soldier as he slowly moved to take his M16A2 from his shoulder.

Max didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. He floored the accelerator pedal, and the big Ford Crown Victoria spun its rear tires and leaped forward, careening against the side of the HMMWV as it bounced by. The guardsman sped his unlimbering of the M16, while the surprised M-60 gunner in the ring turret swore as he bounced around from the impact and tried to bring the '60 about while cocking the weapon. By the time the soldiers had brought their respective weapons to bear on Max' squad, he was 50 yards away and receding quickly from view. The individual sharp "cracks" of the M16 were accompanied by the lower "thud...thud...thud" of the M-60. The squad car wove erratically from one lane to the other, but kept its steady acceleration. Seconds later, Max threw the Crown Vic into a controlled four wheel skid as it rounded a corner and sped out of sight. The rear window was shattered in a million pieces, most of which were inside the passenger compartment.

Max was shaking nearly uncontrollably as he kept up his speed and reached for the radio. He spoke excitedly into the mic: " 36, dispatch! I've been fired upon. I repeat, I have been fired upon! Soldiers at Mercy have opened fire upon me. Dispatch, do you copy?"

There were several agonizing seconds of radio silence, permeated only by the throaty roar of the Crown Vic's V-8 and squealing Michelins as he put distance between Mercy and himself.

"36, report to base immediately." Came back a voice that Max didn't recognize. "Oh F*ck." Said Max as he threw the microphone down into the passenger foot well. They'd be waiting for him there, too. Max tried to think and drive, and ignore the pain in his head. He reached for his cell phone, and dialed his home phone. He prayed that the cell phone system was still up. His wife answered on the

second ring.

“Baby, signal 5, and I’m not kidding.” He hung up before she could answer. He slowed the cruiser somewhat. Without thinking, he had driven close to Andy’s place. It was only a couple blocks away. He had to ditch the squad, just in case. He remembered that the Wilson’s had requested extra police patrols, as they had left for vacation in Vegas. They were only a block away.

He pulled the door shut on the Wilson’s garage, plunging the shot-up squad into darkness. This wasn’t a good day.

AGreyMan

Chapter 017—The Home Guard

It was just a few minutes before dawn. That special time of pristine silence and serenity that unveils the new day in shades of blue-gray, just that moment before the brilliance of the first rays of sunshine slice through the remaining night. This was a time for David that always held a special magic. No matter what was going on in the world or in his life, these last still moments before the day started had a way of refreshing and revitalizing the energies of mind and spirit. It had become a ritual for him to greet the new day, with a hot cup of fresh ground coffee steaming into the cool still morning air. David leaned against one of the front posts that supported the veranda as he took in the first golden rays of morning. The air was cool and clear with just a hint of morning mist floating in it. Today was going to be a good day.

He was thinking about the conversation last night with his wife as they ate dinner. He was pleasantly surprised by Denise’s response to the Torquemada incident. In a way she said that she was surprised that he had not left sooner when his boss’s attitude first came to light.

“You’re not angry?” He questioned.

“Not angry, or surprised.” She answered matter of factly.

David let out a breath. “Well that was easy.”

“I never liked the b*tch from the first moment I met her.”

David was a little taken back by her direct response. Denise had been prior service, that's where they met, but she was always very much the lady. A tough lady, but a lady none-the-less! When she did on very rare occasions swear like a bos'n it meant that she really, really didn't like someone or something. This was one of those occasions.

David began the morning rounds of the McMillan compound, or their Hacienda as Denise liked to refer to it. It was their new little piece of heaven. There had been another piece of land he had scouted out and purchased about midway through his military career with an eye towards building on it after he retired. But that had been well before he had met Denise, and well before what had once been a small community had suddenly sprouted up to become a moderately sized city with all the rules, regulations, noise and hassles that goes with sudden growth that one could imagine. That small piece of country property had been consumed by suburban sprawl and David wanted nothing at all to do with it any more. They made a fair amount from the sale, but taxes, fees and the like had chewed up an equally fair amount of the profit they expected. Still it was enough for them to pay off the twenty acres they now lived on and had provided a small nest egg, enough to cover the initial costs of building their dream home.

Rather than one of the current Nuevo middle class custom designed stick-framed ranch houses found popping up in suburbs over most of the West, David and Denise opted for the older style design that mimicked a Spanish courtyard adobe home. The compound appeared as nothing more than a large old world enclosure of rock and adobe architecture. To the average person it looked like an Old Spanish mission style building; to the trained eye looking for means of ingress it was a formidable fortress! With the additional assistance from neighbors and friends, and using simple slip-form construction methods for the walls with timber frame support the structure was easy to erect and secure, strong, and cozy.

The slip-form method of construction was made popular by Helen and Scott Nearing, who were often thought of as the grandparents of the back-to-the-land movement of the '70s. Using this simple method they built two homesteads pretty much by themselves. David followed the guidelines of more recent builders such as Karl and Sue Schwenke's in their book "Build Your Own Stone House" and Charles Mc Raven's Building with Stone. Most of the rock used in the walls and house David had gathered after work each day. He stopped for an hour along the riverbed and filled the bed of his pick up with river rock and then spent another

half hour or so of sorting the rock out when he got home. After a year of this he had more than enough material to begin building.

He spent the first summer off building the main house. Weather permitting through the next winter he spent most weekends working on the courtyard walls. By the end of his third summer he had completed his main shop, the garage, a small barn, the greenhouse and walled kitchen garden, all in stone. The main structures were complete and the entire homestead mortgage free after just five years of hard sweat equity.

Instead of the politically incorrect barbed or concertina wire around the perimeter of the property they had planted a mixture of Thorny Pyracantha (also known as Fire Thorn Bush), Catclaw Acacia, Jumping Chollas and Prickly Pears along an old barbed wire fence that outlined the original twenty-acre site. Hedgerows of these plants were enticed to grow thick and interlaced and had over a short time created an all but impassable barrier that kept their few livestock critters in and any four legged and two legged would be intruders out.

Their kitchen garden was surrounded by a six-foot stonewall that was more than adequate protection against the wild creatures and cold winter winds of the region. The lean-to greenhouse was situated against the southern wall of the enclosure and protected as it was, insured healthy green veggies through out the winter. The small solid barn provided safe and comfortable housing for their livestock that consisted of a pair of milk goats, and a hand full of chickens. David had begun construction of a raised concrete deck hog pen that would provide a home to several feeder pigs and was working on improving the small pastures on their limited acreage in the hopes that some day in the future they will be able to keep a head or two of beef cattle.

He could hear her behind him as she readied for work. David gave his wife a hug and walked her out to the pickup. She would be out on rounds for the better part of the day. Denise had completed her nursing degree shortly after they had been married. Here in the sticks she worked for the country health office providing an extended care health program to the rural folks of this rough region. Trained as an EMT while in the service she also doubled as a Paramedic for the local volunteer fire department. Their involvement with the local emergency services and the high school where he had briefly taught, had helped them become an integral part of the community in the very short time that they had lived there.

“How’s your day looking?” David asked, as he handed her the medical bag.

“Oh, not too bad I suppose.” She answered as she stepped up into the cab. “I’ve got to swing out over by the old man Johnson’s place and check his blood pressure again. Plus a couple of wound checks, giving school shots out near Cedars Crossing, and then I need to drop by Mrs. Appletree’s and make sure she’s watching her blood sugar like the doctor wanted. Plus a few other side trips and then I’ll be in the clinic for the rest of the day.”

“Sounds like that IS your day, out just running around the back hills.”

“Oh, and then there’s the new paperwork the state wants completed to justify our clinic’s existence...I hate bureaucrats!”

“Well hon, don’t have too much fun today.”

She scowled at him. “An just what is my unemployed husband up to today?”

“I wish! I’m hardly unemployed, I’ve just been demoted in pay.” He leaned through the window and gave her a peck on her cheek. “Got classes today out at the community school. Have to muck out the barn first. Then it’s off to educate young minds.”

When word got around about his leaving the high school and in a small town such things get around rather quickly, David sudden found many doors opening up for him. In this rural region at the extreme Northern end of the Republik of Kalifornia a good many people had pulled their children from the ever-increasing liberal school system. There were now more students being home schooled and community schooled (home-schoolers that had banded together) than were in the public school system. As much as the state education administrators and political bureaucrats had tried to stop this trend from spreading and regardless of the new public school attendance requirements passed at the state level, they were just too far out in the sticks to force the issue. It also helped to have the sheriff’s own kids being home schooled; such was the growing hatred for the P.C. brigades requirements in the school system.

David had another hour yet to finish up his morning chores and get ready to teach his new students. He chuckled as he worked his rounds, feeding the chickens, gathering up the morning eggs, and checking on the other creatures

that now inhabited their growing homestead. Here he was living in the twenty first century mucking out the stalls of barn animals before breakfast and teaching in a one-room schoolhouse almost like Little House on the Prairie.

Shortly after leaving the public school system David had been invited to teach the History and Government classes at a little known rural private school. Several parents had banded together to form the small school and took turns covering the various topics their children needed. David didn't mind the fact that he didn't receive a salary for his work. The assistance he and Denise had received in building their own home and out buildings, along with the starter pigs he would be housing soon, the small flock of Rhode Island Reds, and the pair of milch goats that now supplied them with fresh milk and cheese were all in lieu of regular pay and considerably more valuable in his eye. For the first time in as long as David could remember they were actually part of a community, a real community in every sense of the word.

The final straw for most of the locals came when the high school's Senior Educational Director Ms. Torgelson announced, the formation of the student Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Club starting on campus. David had missed the brew-ha-ha directly as he was no longer staff at the school, but still received calls from many parents concerned over the insanity of this new development and sought his opinion as to how they should handle this situation. While he hadn't directly instructed the worried parents to boycott the school, he had pointed out that generally money talked and bull-sh*t walked. David did inform the parents that schools received a large portion of their operating expenses based on the "DAILY" attendance records. No students, no pay. It didn't take long for the school attendance personnel to notice a significant epidemic in the making.

Every time Torgelson heard a reference to David the veins in her neck grew bigger and redder. When she had discovered that David was teaching in a now illegal and unauthorized school she had managed to have his teaching credential invalidated. She had even gone to the trouble of having him served with a cease and desist order. Of course David and the other families totally ignored the order and continued on with what they viewed as their personal business alone. As the issue heated up more students dropped out of the local public school system thus increasing the conflict between the parents and the state educational system. Funding of public schools began to seriously dry up as a result of the boycott. With fewer and fewer students using the public system some local schools were facing closure due to lack of operating funds. It was only a matter

of time until events reached a confrontational level and it was the state that blinked first.

David had just started his lecture on the Middle Ages describing the fall of the Imperial Roman system and the gradual growth of the feudal system of government when he noticed the several official looking vehicles driving up the dirt road. His attention was drawn to the school bus that followed the two sedans in the lead. This looked like trouble he thought to himself.

“Lisa, be a good girl and run up to the house and have your mother call up the neighbors will you?”

Little Lisa Bordan, a bright freckle faced eighth grader in the front row, glanced up from her book and looked out the window.

“Is there trouble coming Mr. McMillan?” She asked.

“Could be, run along and let your mother know...quickly now.”

Lisa put her work away and slipped out the back door and headed on a run towards the house a hundred or so yards up on the nearest hill. David knew for sure that it was trouble brewing when he recognized Senior Educational Director Ms. Torgelson getting out of the first sedan and leading several men in suits towards the front door of the schoolhouse.

“Students, “David said to them “its time for our evacuation drill...ready...set...GO!” There was a moments hesitation then complete pandemonium as the twenty-five students suddenly made for the back door and headed out into the field used for the playground. As one of the older students came past him, David caught his arm and whispered quickly to him.

“Tell Miss Thornton next door to get her students out of here. Take them into the woods and up to your dad’s place...quickly now, I’ll stall them as long as I can.”

Jacob nodded and disappeared out the door. Meanwhile David headed towards the front door. As he emerged from the schoolhouse Ms. Torgelson was leading the official looking men towards him.

“Detective Larson that,” She said pointing at David. “is David McMillan. He is in direct violation of a previous court order and this is an illegal school. All the children in there are to be removed and held by the Child Protective Services pending a court hearing as per the order issued this morning!”

“Whoa, just what is going on here.” David replied.

The one of two lead suits now standing just ten feet away from him said. “I’m sorry Mr. McMillan but I have a court order for your arrest in violation of the State Educational Code for teaching without a license, sedition and for Child Endangerment.” The agent stepped forward. “Now if you’ll just come quietly we don’t want to upset the children.”

“What children are you referring to detective?”

“Did you hear me Detective Larson? “ Her strained voice rising as she repeated her orders again. ”I want him arrested and the children in that classroom placed in protective custody...NOW!”

“I heard you Miss, er, Ms. Torgelson...now if you’ll let me do my job please.” The Detective said as he started towards David.

“Mr. McMillan, you are under arrest, please turn around and place your hands on the wall.”

“No.” David answered.

“What?” The Detective hesitated, not expecting that sort of answer from the teacher.

“I believe the response was quite clear...NO, I will not turn around. NO, I will not place my hands on the wall, and NO, I will not submit to your invasion of my privacy.”

David knew it would only take a few minutes for Jacob and Miss Thornton to reach the tree line less than fifty yards away behind the school. If he could only keep them busy out in front of the building, by the time they did enter the classrooms the children would be long gone. Once in the woods Jacob and Miss Thornton would get them all away safely before the goons that Torgelson had

brought with her could do anything about it. He just needed to keep them focused on him for a few minutes more.

“Mr. McMillan it would be in your best interest to cooperate with us.” The Detective said as he slowly moved forward.

“No.” David answered as he started to move to the side away from the detective. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you going to go quietly or are we going to have to do this the hard way?” The other detective asked in a tense voice as he moved to cut off his retreat.

David faked right and suddenly stepped back inside the door to the school. Slamming the door quickly he flipped the latch and set the heavy bolt, securely locking it against any intruders.

“Well that should hold them for a few minutes.” He thought. He could hear Torgelson pounding on the door and screaming at the officers. David crossed the room quickly and looked out the back door.

“Good, no sign of the kids, thank you Jacob!” He said to himself as he closed the door, not locking it. There was no need to now. David went over to his desk and began to square things away. It took them several more minutes to circle the building and figure out that there were indeed back doors to the two rooms that made up the school. Several very irritated detectives and one absolutely irate Senior Educational Director finally found the door and confronted David seated at his desk.

“Good morning gentlemen, how may I help you.” David said smugly.

David sat quietly in the back seat of the first sedan handcuffed and seat-belted in. Torgelson had nearly blown a gasket when he locked the door in her face and after the detectives had him hand cuffed and were leading him out of the school house she severely slapped him across the mouth. David just smiled at her defiantly as a small trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

“That will be enough of that Ms. Torgleson!” The detective growled at her.

They were just about to reach the main road when their path was suddenly blocked by a large farm truck. Coming around the blind corner the driver had to slam on the brakes to avoid broadsiding the truck and almost started a pile up from the following vehicles.

“What the hell!” The senior detective riding shotgun yelled out. He had just emerged from the car when he was suddenly confronted.

“That’s quite far enough there buddy.” Shouted a deep voice from the side of the road.

The detective looked around startled. Suddenly a well-camouflaged form stepped out of the bushes at the side of the road. But what caught the immediate attention of the detective was the black AR leveled at his belly less than ten feet away. He could now make out at least a half a dozen camouflaged shapes just back of the tree line and each had a weapon pointed straight at him...”this was not good.” He quickly thought to himself.

“Just keep your hands where I can see them detective and do exactly as I say and everyone will go home to supper tonight...understood?”

The detective froze and slowly nodded his head. The driver, his hand on his revolver, suddenly felt cold steel nudge against the back of his neck and a soft voice whispering through the open window.

“Best to keep both hands on the steering wheel...don’t you think?”

David’s door quickly opened and several more camouflaged shadows released him from his restraints and helped him out of the car. He could see Ms. Torgleson in the second car just furious with rage.

“Where had these saviors suddenly come from?” David wondered as the blocking truck suddenly fired up and began to pull out of the way.

“Officer’s you had best be on your way now and don’t bother Mr. McMillan again. This issue is over, drop it! And just for added consideration on this matter. I would like to emphasize that we know where your families are” He paused for effect. “all the time.”

David stood numbly at the side of the road and watched the sedans and school bus disappear around the corner.

“I don’t know who you gents are, but I really appreciate you getting me out of that mess.” David walked over with his hand out to the first forest shadow that had stepped out to confront the detectives hauling him off to jail.

He pulled off the camo hood and David suddenly recognized his face!

“Sheriff Eckhart!” He paused in shock. “We’ll I’ll be damned!”

Eckhart took David’s offered hand. “How did you think we pulled this together so quickly?” He motioned at the other figures emerging from the foliage. David was stunned!

“But aren’t those your detectives that arrested me?”

“Nope, they’re outsiders brought in by Torgelson, after we refused to get involved. After all, two of my kids go to your ‘illegal’ school, remember.”

“Yeah, well...I’m still in shock over this whole thing.”

“Well stand by for another shock there Chief...you’ve been drafted!”

“What?”

“Welcome to the Home Guard.”

Desert Doc

Chapter 018 – A Time To Sow

Eli Yoder climbed into the boxy black wagon, taking the reins into his callused hands and seating himself on the hard wooden seat. The meeting with the elders had not gone well. His farm was not the only one showing signs of this horrible...Eli hesitated. He hated to think it: Plague. That was what the elders thought it might be. A Plague. Mary’s inventory had not been that good of news. They had enough for the five of them for another few months, but it would difficult times. The garden was supposed to supply much of their food, as well as provide

enough to see them through the winter. The garden had looked worse with every hour that seemed to pass. The rate of deterioration had slowed, it seemed, lately. There were a few plants that looked untouched. The potatoes for instance, had briefly turned a yellowish-green, but seemed to be getting better. The tomatoes were also looking quite good, as was the apple tree. Much of what was left, well, Eli was not optimistic. The cattle or chickens showed no signs of distress. The grass was yellowing much like the rest of the plants, but it didn't seem to be harming them to eat it.

As the wagon clattered down the back road, Eli thought of what he could do. The elders, while concerned with the spiritual implications had not been helpful in the here and now. It was no use having Jacob squirrel hunt to put up meat: Already he could see that there would not be enough hay to feed the cattle through the winter.

"Perhaps," Eli thought, "I should put one or two down now. It would be a great amount for Mary to put up, but it would be better than wasting it."

The trip home was not a long one, and mostly Eli thought about how to feed his family. It was true that his people did without electricity, automobiles and tractors, but they weren't completely removed from society in the United States. He himself had been to Wal-Mart several times, the horse and black buggy looking anachronistic tied to a light pole in the parking lot. Some things were just more inexpensive to purchase than to make. As long as the elders approved it, there was no prohibition from buying food, hardware, or the like. The most significant problem was money. Farmer's -especially Amish farmers- didn't make that much money. Somewhere along the way, Eli decided a trip into the town was necessary. He would have to have Jacob do his best alone with chores, and he'd have to hurry to be able to make it back for prayer meeting. He would spend some of his meager savings to buy some food for wintering over. His bad feeling about the crops continued to grow as he drove past the fields, much of which belonged to the English farmers. It was mostly brown as well. Often the English did better with crops because they could afford to irrigate and fertilize and spray pesticides. Eli just planted what he could extra to make up for what the bugs ate, and what didn't grow so well.

As he rounded the final corner closest to home, he noticed many cars at the home of his neighbor, Mr. Thompson. Mr. Thompson was an English farmer, but got out of the dairy end of things to cash crop. He grew hay and soybeans, neither of which looked very good. The Brown had gotten Mr. Thompson's crops just like everyone else. Their house was a large farmhouse, with a tumbledown barn and a large pole shed housing a large combine and tractor. Mr. Thompson

had driven Eli and Mary into town when Jacob's delivery was not going well. He had also relayed emergency telephone messages twice in the past 20 years. Eli reckoned that he knew Mr. Thompson better than any of the other English. His children had all grown and moved away, and now it was just Mr. Thompson and his wife, Trudi.

As he drew closer to the Thompson farm, he saw the white haired form of Mr. Thompson come out the front porch, screen door creaking and banging shut behind him. He made for the road where Eli was going to pass, and waved Eli to stop.

"Whoa, girl." Said Eli as he brought the wagon to a stop and waited for the elderly man to cover the 50 yards or so to where Eli waited. Soon the he walked up to Eli's wagon and greeted him.

"Hello Mr. Yoder. Thank you for stopping to talk to me." He said

"Hello Mr. Thompson. You are looking well today, although I fear our crops are not." Responded Eli as he looked once again at the Brown that had infested the surrounding fields.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Eli. I don't know how much news you get, but this isn't just a bad year. The whole country is seeing this. There is also a disease, mostly in the cities, that is killing hundreds of thousands of people. Millions more are sick." Mr. Thompson broke eye contact with Eli and looked at the ground. "They say...." He cleared his throat. "They say it's some kind of germ attack."

"We want none of your wars." Said Eli reflexively. It was habit. Their religion taught strict pacifism. They were immune from the draft.

Mr. Thompson looked him in the eyes again. "I can understand that, Eli. I'm not real happy 'bout wars myself. But people who didn't care what we wanted did this. The governments got people trying to figure all this out, but I reckon they've got their hands full, with the crops mostly dying. And all them people dying.... The point is, Eli, that me and Trudi's cupboard is a bit bare. Especially since this whole thing has scared the Hel...everybody near to death and my kids come home and brung the grandkids. I got nine more mouths to feed all of a sudden. Trudi's got some preserves, and some green beans and such left from last year, but it's not gonna last eleven people very long.

"I seen the government in action plenty from farming, and I don't 'spect much help from them. So I figure we can do a little horse tradin', so to speak."

Eli felt uncomfortable. It was difficult to grasp that people would want to harm him. He had harmed no one. Why did they want him to starve to death? What had he done? His mind continued to reel. It wasn't just there. It was the whole country. Everyone would be scared and hungry soon, and they were well on their

way to both already. He didn't know how the English lived exactly, but he suspected that most of them didn't put up nearly the food that his people did. Right now, that didn't even seem like much. And the dead. A disease, a plague. The work of Satan and evil men. Could this be the start of the end times? The bible said that

"Eli?"

Startled from his thoughts, Eli looked again at Mr. Thompson. "Yes?"

"About the horse trading?" Mr. Thompson looked a little distracted himself.

"What's your bargain?" Asked Eli.

"Well, I know you have about 18 head of dairy cattle. I haven't been up to your place, but I'm betting you don't have much hay left. From last year." He looked around at his fields. "Doesn't look like either of us will get much put up this year. I have a few of the large round bales left from last year. They were sealed in the plastic, so they should still be purt-near fresh. I can give you three or four for two cows."

Eli thought hard. Normally this would be preposterous. Hay was cheap. A 1500-pound bale like Mr. Thompson's ran close to \$15. On the other hand, He was right: Eli didn't have much hay in the loft. Figure about 100 pounds of feed per cow per day....Unless something changed, they would be eating a great amount of beef.

"Mr. Thompson, how many bales do you have?"

"I just counted: I have six bales in the plastic, and another four that were just covered with a tarp. Some of the outer inch or two is rotten, but I got maybe 95% of it's good." Mr. Thompson replied

"Mr. Thompson, I'll give you four cows for four of your plastic wrapped bales, plus two of the rotten ones." Said Eli. It was a good bargain for neither of them, but this was about the best for both of them. Mr. Thompson couldn't eat his hay, and his own cows desperately needed it.

"Well, in better times, that would be robbing you, but I 'spect these aren't regular times. In fact, I'm askin you if you have any of Mary's preserves that you could throw in to sweeten the deal, so to speak?"

"We don't have much left, but I will see what I can find. Will a quart be enough?"

"That'd be just fine. I'll have Roger bring the bales over with the tractor. Do you want them in the hay loft?" The Yoder's barn had an earthen ramp leading up into the upper story of the barn.

Eli thought hard for a moment. "Yes, put all of the bales in plastic –you will leave them in plastic, won't you- and the others in the loft, please."

He picked up the reins and glanced up the road. "Have Roger bring some rope. He can lead the cows back to your barn with the tractor. Jacob will help. I have to go into town to buy some groceries."

Mr. Thompson laughed out loud, his voice with a near-hysterical edge to it. "Eli, there are no groceries in town! Everybody went in and went crazy. There's nothing left. The police had to come, and they shot some people. My son in law said someone shot at their car on the highway. It's like everybody has gone crazy." He looked around at the fields then back at the farmhouse, and swallowed several times and blinked rapidly. "I mean, you just sold me \$3600 worth of cow for \$90. It's just lunacy."

"Trust God, Mr. Thompson. He will guide you, if you let him. I suggest you pray. I will be." Eli flicked the reins and the horse clop-clop-clopped down the road. Mr. Thompson turned to walk back to the house when Eli had a sudden thought. He stopped the buggy raised his voice.

"Mr. Thompson, please have Roger block our driveway with two of the rotten bales. Between those and the stands of trees, we may discourage visitors." He seated himself once again and started the horse walking.

Mr. Thompson slowly nodded and walked toward the house.

Upon Eli's return, He found Jacob in the barn, playing with the kittens.

"There are some things I need you to do, Jacob. I don't have time to explain. I want you to put a quarter of Mama's food in a few plastic bags. Take a shovel and go into the woods and bury it a foot deep. Hide it well, but don't forget where you hid it. Then I want you to walk to the pond and dig up as many cattail roots as you can. Hang half in the barn to dry, and give half to Mama to can." Eli said. "I have to go talk to Mama," Eli smiled at his son. "Come, let us pray, then get started."

AGreyMan

Chapter 019 – A Friend in need...

Andy didn't hear the knock the first time, as he was intent on the voices and static emanating from the radio. An Icom IC-706MKII ham radio, it was a radio capable of receiving a broad portion of the electromagnetic spectrum: From the local AM/FM radio stations to the "short-wave" broadcasts from overseas, as well as it's primary function as a ham radio transceiver. He had a wire antenna strung through the tall pine trees on his property, which was "trapped", meaning it would work fairly well on several frequency bands. The wire and the traps in the antenna were painted a pale green, gray and black. When he initially put it up, he

had even hung a couple of plastic leaves from a dime store plastic plant from it. If you noticed it and really looked at it, it wasn't really much of a camouflage job, but it was easy not to see with just a glance.

He was listening to a conversation between two hams in Elgin, Illinois and Key Biscayne, Florida. Andy had come in on the middle, but what he heard was enough. The Navy was preventing ships and boats from entering or leaving US territorial waters off Florida. The ham in Florida was a MARS/CAP radio operator, meaning he could and would relay messages for the military to civilian family members. He said he hadn't received any traffic in that capacity. None. "Like them ships was holes in the water," the guy had said. The ham in Elgin said the power was out there. Scanner traffic the ham had monitored said that the power station didn't have enough staff to run the place because of the people who had died. He painted a horrific picture: In many places the dead were left on the streets and sidewalks, placed there by people trying to get the diseased people out of the area of the living. There had been no one to pick up the dead. Andy wondered how long it would be before the power went out for him.

The second knock was louder, more insistent. Andy jumped up from the seat and took the stairs up two at a time to the ground floor. He felt his CZ-75 pistol through his shirt for comfort. As he reached the top of the stairs, the knock sounded again, and he could tell that it came from the back door, not the front. He placed his hand on the butt of the CZ and moved to the back door, obliquely peeking out the small window in the door. It was Max, and he looked like hell.

Andy quickly worked the locks on the door and flung the door open. "Jeezus, Max! What the hell happened?"

Max walked in, quickly looking around outside before he did so. "I'll tell you all about it in a minute. Is Lisa here yet?"

"What? No, Lisa's not here. What's going on?" Andy looked confused. His best friend showed up at his back door in uniform pants and tee shirt, with his body armor vest hidden –albeit poorly- beneath a white tee shirt. Trails of mostly dried blood ran from a visible swelling on the back of Max's head. Staining the collar of the shirt. Small scratches abounded on his face, and tiny squares of tempered safety glass were lodged in his hair and clothes. "Were you in an accident?"

"Yeah. A big, big accident." Max sneered, remembering the voice of dispatch and

the other voices on the radio. “Like I said, I’ll tell you all about it. First though, I am not here. Got it? Except for Lisa, no one is to know I am here. Now come on: I have to get out of sight, and I need you to patch me up. You set up downstairs?”

“Ever since this started getting hairy this morning. I have been getting some scary info on the radio.” Andy said as he re-locked the door and followed his friend down the stairs.

“I got some real scary info in person.” Max said as he reached up to pick a piece of glass from his close cropped hair. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs “All right, what’s the best way to go about this?”

“Well,” Andy said, “Turn around and let me look.”

After Max had turned next to one of the overhead lights, Andy remarked “Looks like you need some stitches to close that. Any chance the hospital’s taking non-emergent injuries?”

Max said, “Short answer: No. You’re all I got, buddy.”

“OK. Why don’t you just jump in the shower and clean up with regular soap and water. The big lac on the back of your head will probably open up again a little, but just put some pressure on it as soon as you get out of the shower. I’ll give you some 4X4s to put on there. I’ll go to your emergency box and get you a change of clothes. I’ll leave ‘em on the sink.”

Andy referred to the box of equipment that Max had stored at Andy’s place for contingencies like this. It contained a small amount of food, ammunition, a couple changes of clothing, copies of insurance papers/birth certificates/passports/vehicle titles, two hundred dollars in cash, boots, sleeping bags and two Smith and Wesson Model 66 .357 revolvers. This was not intended to be a long-term survival kit. It was an insurance policy in case of a house fire, a flood, a tornado or any other calamity that could befall a single home. There was a near identical box in Max’s house, belonging to Andy and Darcy. The notable difference being that Darcy had undergone thyroid surgery in her teens to remove a malfunctioning thyroid gland, and thus required synthetic thyroid hormone to function normally. Skipping a day or two, or even a week was not a large problem, but much more than that and she would become more and more

lethargic and muzzy-headed. In the event of a disaster, Darcy and Andy wanted to ensure a supply of Synthroid. Thus, there was a 3-month supply in the emergency box, as well as other emergency supplies at her parent's home and in-laws, and anywhere she went with any regularity. It had taken organization and a good calendar to make a rotation schedule for all of the medication. Insurance would only pay for a ongoing dose, so Darcy had explained her wish to have "emergency supplies" at various locations to her doctor, who was more than willing to write out the paper prescription. Darcy and Andy had paid for the extra medication out of pocket initially, but their rotation scheme kept all of the medication relatively fresh.

Andy put Max's clothes and the 4X4s in the bathroom, then went out into the family room to set up his equipment. Since Andy and Darcy didn't yet have a family, the room was used mostly for hobbies. Andy's Icom 706 MKII was on a small desk in a corner, with some other electronic devices, such as an old laptop computer, a 24-hour clock, a small digital ham encoder called a TNC or Terminal Node Controller, and a notebook. A dusty television sat in the corner. There was a sofa sleeper and two comfortable chairs and an apartment-sized refrigerator rounding out the furnishings. There were several shelving units in a small room off the main family room. One of these was filled with Andy's recent purchases of freeze-dried beef, but also contained staples such as 5-gallon pails filled with rice, wheat, potatoes and dehydrated vegetables. Another shelf contained various gravy mixes and other spices and flavorings. Andy went to the shelf containing his medical supplies. Some were items wrapped in intact sterile packaging that nonetheless had expiration dates, causing the ERs or EMS stockers to set them out for disposal. Andy didn't feel too bad about pocketing a couple items such as this. Some other items weighed a little more heavily on his conscience. Some items he was able to order right through the mail. He had ordered IV fluids, IV tubing and IV needles through "Dixie EMS Supply" with no questions asked.

Andy located the supplies that he needed: A 10cc syringe, and 18gauge and a 27 gauge needle, a small bottle of "Shur-Cleanse" surgical soap, a 60cc syringe, a small bottle of "Betadine," and a small disposable skin stapler, and a pair of forceps. Back in the family room, he retrieved a small bottle of 1% Lidocaine from the 'fridge. It really didn't need to be kept cool, but like most medications, if kept cool, it was effective longer before getting "old." From the desk with his radio and laptop, and removed a flashlight with a headband. By this time Max had come out of the shower, holding the pack of 4X4s to the now reopened wound.

“You all set?” queried Andy.

“Yeah, where do you want me?” replied Max

“Just sit here in the chair. I’ll pull up a chair behind you.” said Andy.

Max sat in the chair and Andy put the supplies on a TV tray covered with a clean pillowcase.

Andy said “Why don’t you tell me what the hell is going on while I do this?”

Max complied and began telling the story of how the day had progressed. As he listened, and set to his task. He donned a pair of gloves out of habit, then removed the sterile cap from the 10cc syringe, affixing the large 18gauge needle to it. Holding the syringe between his fingers, he then removed the sterile cap from the Lidocaine bottle, exposing the rubber stopper beneath. He used an alcohol swab to wipe the stopper, then inverted the bottle with one hand and pierced the stopper with the needle and syringe in the other. He pulled back on the plunger, filling the syringe then removing the needle from the bottle. After tapping the air to the top of the needle and expelling it, he removed the 18gauge needle and attached the 27gauge. The 27gauge was referred to by some as a “dental needle” as it was what many dentists used to instill the numbing agent into the mouth. Andy needed the same qualities the dentists did: A thin, long and tough needle to go into the tissues and instill dollops of the numbing agent. He warned Max, then began to inject into the edges of the wound. When he could, he placed the needle nearly parallel to the surface of the skin, and slid the needle all the way in, parallel to the wound edges, then instilled the Lidocaine as he slowly withdrew the needle. In other places, such as in the walls of the wound itself, he merely punctured the wall of the wound every _ inch or so and instilled a _ cc. When he was satisfied that the area was quite numb, he probed gently with a gloved finger. No glass that he could feel, and no skull fracture that he could tell, either. He wished he had a sterile glove to go poking around his best friend’s scalp, but he didn’t. Andy then poured the Shur-Cleanse into one of his wife’s Pyrex glass 2 cup measuring cups, along with some water he ran through the drinking water filter attached to his tap. He filled the 60cc syringe with the soap and water solution, held Max’s bath towel wadded up near the wound, and blasted the soapy water into the wound. A doc Andy had worked with always used the mantra: “The solution to pollution is dilution.” After he was certain he

had flushed the wound thoroughly, he used the forceps to pull the edges of the wound together and secure them with the stapler. The head was a favorite spot to use the stapler, as the wounds could only be so deep, and most any scarring was concealed by hair. Andy and Max had watched on innumerable occasions when a doc in the ER had quickly stapled up a belligerent drunk on the way to jail. Andy wasn't that fast, and had to remove a couple staples that he misplaced or didn't get quite right, but Max was both numb and distracted by telling his story, and didn't notice. After he had finished, Andy squirted some Neosporin on the wound and spread it around with a Q-tip. He made it his business to know about his friend's medical history, and knew it had been just last year that he had updated his tetanus immunization. Head wounds generally didn't require a bandage, so when he was done, he simply pulled his chair around to the front of Max and listened to him finish his story with rising apprehension and worry.

"Jesus, Max! You think they might look for you here?" Asked Andy with an unconscious glance, as if seeing through the wall and soil into the driveway.

"I doubt it, now that I've calmed down a little. I bet they can't afford the manpower to chase down everybody who slipped away. Not yet, at least. Once they secure Mercy and get their ducks in a row, they'll be able to spare people to go after people. With any luck, they'll have their hands full with the others first. I plan to be off their radar screen." Replied Max

"Well, what we really need to do is figure out what to do about the plague. Lisa is already on her way over here, and Darcy should be home any second. Darcy's and I have been off for a few days, and I don't think we have been in real close contact with anybody...except now you." His voice trailed off as he looked at his friend.

"I haven't exactly been isolated." Max said, with a nagging feeling of guilt. He prayed to God that he hadn't just killed his friend. "But nobody that I was close to showed any signs of being sick."

"We'll just have to see. Too late to do anything new about it now. You took a shower. Maybe that helped. I'll go spray down the bathroom with a 10:1 water to bleach solution. Maybe that'll do some good, too. I'll feel better when the girls get here." Andy looked thoughtful and worried at the same time. "Listen, why don't you take a nap and I'll go upstairs to wait for Lisa and Darcy."

“What if you’re infected, too. What if I gave it to you? What happens when the girls get here? Will I give it to them too?” Max asked what was in both their thoughts.

“Buddy,” Andy said, “Here’s what I think. I think we won’t be able to keep the girls out of this house. IF you are infected, and IF you gave it to me, it’s already in the air. It’s already upstairs, so having them stay upstairs until we are sure we don’t have it won’t even work. With those two options out, there’s not much left. Hell, we don’t even know for sure HOW it’s transmitted. Just before you got here, the scanner was saying something about a mob at the Foodmart. Things will get worse when somebody sees what’s happening at Mercy.”

The girls can’t be out in that alone. They won’t go, and I won’t make them. So you see, my friend...” he said as he rose and walked to the stairs, “We’ll all hang together, or we’ll surely hang separately. Get some sleep. I’ll wake you if anything you can help with happens.”

Andy turned and walked up the stairs.

AGrayMan

Chapter 020 – Live by the Sword...

Mark was really concerned about the fuel gauge now. It was as low as he had ever seen it. After his nocturnal escape from the grid locked interstate, he had followed the gravel country road for miles, roughly paralleling the interstate. The more he considered this course of action, the less sense it made. If things were indeed getting worse, the closer he was to large populations of displaced people, the worse things could be expected to be. There would be spillover from the interstate, most on foot, but some in vehicles.

Like the locusts of the biblical plagues, they would descend on the small farming, vacation and rural communities and drain them dry. Even without force of arms, the sheer numbers of humans would overwhelm the residents of the communities. The farm families were mostly the “Christian” sorts, and most would do their best to help their unfortunate visitors, not realizing the sheer numbers of hungry, greedy mouths until it was too late to do anything about it. Gasoline would be the first item to go, then diesel and food. Water would probably not be a problem initially as most small communities and homes had

wells. That is, until the power went out. Then the efficient 220V well pumps would refuse to lift the water from the depths of the well -about 80 feet in this area- to the surface. There were surface sources of water, such as streams and ponds, but the other edge of the double-edged sword of rural life was that many of these sources contained agricultural runoff. Everything from manure to fertilizer could be found in varying amounts in the ponds and streams. The swarms of the thirsty would care little of the dangers when a source of clean, pure water was not readily available. Some would no doubt not venture far from the water source to relieve themselves, potentially causing further contamination of the surface water.

Mark's greatest advantage was that he was -as far as he knew- ahead of the pack. He may still be able to purchase some gasoline. Still far from home, he would need at least another tank full before he made it to his Mom's place. With the winding county highways and back roads that he intended to stick to, it was quite possible he would need more than that. He had considered the problem of fuel early on. He considered caching fuel along his route, but several problems arose. First, the relative instability of gasoline, even with the special chemicals added, it was unlikely it would be much good after a couple years. Second, the problem of where to stash it. Although he looked carefully along his route to his Mom's, he could think of no place that was safe to dig a hole unobserved, drop in two or three 5 gallon cans, and cover them back up. Much less be able to recover them and fuel his vehicle without interruption. Thirdly, his present situation made the possibility of caching fuel a moot point. What if his cache had been another five miles up the interstate? Fat chance he could have gotten to it with the conditions back there on the concrete slab. He had considered having a welding shop mount a spare tire carrier/gas can carrier on the back, just like the "safari SUVs" but it would stick out like a sore thumb, plus be pretty expensive as well. Another option had been to find a fuel tank that was larger to replace the present tank on the Eagle, but it wasn't really a hot aftermarket-type vehicle, and he came up dry. The best he could think to do was to purchase three of the one-gallon "Spare Tank" gasoline substitutes. Supposedly derived from gasoline and non-volatile, these one-gallon plastic jugs were marketed to be able to sit in your trunk until you ran out of gasoline, be poured in the fuel tank, and then drive to the nearest gas station. A drawback was that in order to make the stuff safe enough to ride around in the trunk, they had removed a lot of the "light ends" of the fuel, and thus, it had to be quickly poured into the tank after the car had sputtered to a halt. The hot cylinders helped to raise the fuel to a combustible temperature. The label said it wouldn't work in cold engines. Another drawback

was the cost: Nearly \$15 a gallon container. Mark decided that this was as good of a time as any to use the stuff. Leaving the Eagle running, he stepped out of the car and opened the trunk.

The morning sun was still low in the sky; it's golden rays peeking over the horizon, holding the promise of a beautiful morning. Mark felt as if this might all be a bad dream: The interstate blockage, his subsequent escape...how could this be the end of the American Empire? So it was a little traffic jam. Big deal. What was so bad about that? The reality of the situation began to intrude on his sleep-deprived wishful thinking. The Plague. The Brown. Napalm. Troops. The dead. Oh, God.

He tiredly unscrewed the cap on the "spare tank" jug and began to pour. After the third and final gallon was sent down the filler neck into the tank, Mark put the empty jugs in the trunk. As he turned, he noticed a dust cloud rapidly approaching from behind his car. Mark kept an eye on the approaching vehicle as it roared closer. He stepped around the Eagle to keep it between himself and the oncoming vehicle, now recognized as a truck. The brown, battered Ford F-150 driver slammed on the brakes and fishtailed wildly in the gravel of the road. A cloud of dust rose, obscuring the truck for a few moments. The driver had pulled in front of the Eagle, blocking its path directly forward. Mark's tiredness evaporated as he felt the grip of the Glock under his shirt. His heart hammered in his chest as he heard a loud yell from the truck, with the sound of at least one door creaking open. A young man in a tank-top tee shirt strode out of the dust cloud, holding a large revolver. In brief instant Mark took in numerous tattoos on the man's chest, and a cruel set to his face. As soon as he saw Mark, he raised the revolver quickly and touched off a shot. Mark turned his flinch into a dive to the ground behind the Eagle.

"It's the end of the world motherf*cker, and your gonna miss it!" The man yelled.

Another loud yell erupted from his throat, echoed a second later by another voice. Some small part of Mark guessed that this was the driver, second out of the vehicle because he had to take the time to put the truck into "park." Mark pulled the Glock 17 from his waistband. The man with the revolver had not slowed his advance, and rounded the corner of the Eagle in a moment and loosed another round from a distance of nearly ten feet. Mark lay on the gravel and was slow to bring up the Glock. He was dog-tired, and had just underwent a semi-controlled fall to a gravel road, but within an instant he had lined the Glock's

sights up on the still-advancing man's chest, and pulled the trigger. The pistol bucked repeatedly in Mark's hand. He kept pumping rounds into the man until he saw him stumble and turn around to begin to run. He suddenly fell to the ground, and began to scream.

He heard the crunch of the other man's footsteps on the gravel, coming around the other side of the car. Mark spun around to be in a position to face the other man as he rounded the car's back end. From his position semi-laying on the ground alongside the car, he could see a sliver of the man's chest through the side and rear windows of the car. He lined up the sights exactly where he expected the man's chest to appear. It was not actually that hard: Mark saw the barrel of a shotgun first, still pointed at an angle away from him. The man's position beside the car wouldn't allow him to bring the shotgun parallel to the side of the car until he himself was completely exposed. Additionally, he was pointing the shotgun parallel to the ground at waist-high level. He would have to depress the muzzle nearly a foot to be able to aim directly at Mark. Mark didn't give him the chance. Once again, he squeezed the trigger repeatedly while attempting to keep the sights on the man's center of mass. One of the rounds must have struck the shotgun, as it leaped from the man's hands as if by magic, dropping pieces of metal and wood along its path. The man turned and half ran/half staggered to the truck. Mark did not follow; content to be out of harm's way for the moment. He heard the truck's door creak slowly open, then the sound of something soft falling to the ground.

Mark listened to the relative quiet for a moment. The first man he had shot had stopped screaming, and was instead making wet, fast breathing noises. Mark turned to look at him; suddenly remembering the man may still have a revolver in his hand. Listening for the man by the truck, he trained the Glock on the crumpled form several feet away. He got to his knees and began to walk on them in a hunched posture, head below the line of sight from the pickup, keeping the front of his still-idling car as much as possible between him and the truck. The closer he went toward the front of the car, the more difficult this became. He risked taking his eyes from the form in front of him and glanced toward the pickup truck. No further sound issued from the truck. At least as far as he could tell: He was very nearly alongside the idling engine. The man on the ground in front of him hadn't moved. He could see the revolver some 12 inches from the man's hand. He lay down on his belly and looked under the Eagle's engine to where the truck was parked. He could see the other man sprawled on the ground on the far

side of the truck. He was moving slightly. That one was alive for sure...but did he have another gun?

Mark lay on the ground, gun trained on the man closest to him, roughly eighteen inches from the muzzle of Mark's Glock to the man's shoe. His orange, plastic shoe. Mark looked at the man more closely. He could see a crude tattoo in gothic script on the man's muscular forearm. "AWB" it read. There was a tattoo of a spider web around the point of his elbow.

"Christ," thought Mark. "That explains part of this: That guy looks like a con." He waited fifteen long minutes. Time was on his side. He knew he had got some hits on these guys. He also knew that a bullet kills four ways. One was disruption of the central nervous system. That meant a brain or high neck hit: The second way a bullet killed was blood loss. Quickly as in a heart or aorta hit, or slow as in an arm or leg artery. The third way was to cause a collapse of the lung, or filling of the lung with blood. Suffocation, in effect. Lastly there was infection, like a gut shot. He was willing to wait for the first three bullet effects, but not the last.

After the end of fifteen minutes, the shakes had set in. Fifteen minutes of re-living what had just happened. Fifteen minutes of knowing he had probably killed two people. Fifteen minutes of hoping their buddies wouldn't come along. Fifteen minutes of wishing he hadn't left his spare magazine in the car. Fifteen minutes of wondering what the cops would do to him. Fifteen minutes of fearing there were no more cops. Fifteen minutes of wondering what to do next.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He stretched out with the Glock and struck the man in front of him hard on the ankle with the barrel. There was no response. He glanced again at the form beside the truck that had not moved a great deal in the past fifteen minutes, and then stood, the Glock trained on the man in front of him. He stepped quickly to the revolver and kicked it away. He then kicked the man hard in the ribs. There was still no response. From above, he could tell that he had struck the man several times in the chest and abdomen. Several nine-millimeter Winchester Silvertip bullets had penetrated through the man's body and exited the tee shirt's back. He counted four bloodstained holes. With a foot, he rolled the man over. His eyes were open, but nearly opaque: They had not been kept moist by blinking so the corneas were already drying out.

Mark advanced toward the truck, trying to keep the bulk of the engine between him and the last place he saw the form on the ground. He began to "slice the

pie.” Proceeding around the corner of the truck slowly, keeping the Glock aimed at each new portion of ground behind the truck that came into view as he slowly walked in a sideways manner. He was aware that the figure laying on the ground could see his feet and ankles approach if he was looking in that direction, and shoot at them if he had a gun. He became aware of the man’s rapid, shallow breathing at nearly the same time the man finally came into view. He lay on his back staring upward. Mark saw his hands were empty.

“Don’t move,” Mark screamed at him.

There was no response from the man. He was wearing a brown county jailer’s uniform, though it was extremely ill fitting, dirty and bloodstained. Mark moved closer so he could see the man’s face. It was white, except for the red froth that coated his lips and drooled down his chin. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be moving his entire body in the act of drawing in air. Mark could see several bubbling holes in the man’s chest. With great effort, the man opened his eyes, and after a few seconds forced his eyes to focus on Mark.

“What...you...want?” he gurgled.

“Why the f*ck did you shoot at me?” Mark screamed. The pent-up adrenaline, fear and rage burst forth.

“Escaped...end...world...strong...survive,” he closed his eyes and swallowed slowly. A trace of a smile formed on his bloodstained lips. “We’re...kings.”

Mark could think of nothing to say, but kept his pistol trained on the man. In moments, Mark noticed longer and longer pauses between breaths. Within a minute, he had stopped breathing. Mark shakily walked back to his Eagle and sat heavily on the hood.

The shakes really began. He could barely hold the Glock, and tears began to stream down his face. Great heaving sobs wracked his body. Not for sorrow over the men he killed, but out of the incredible stress that was there and gone in the space of 20 minutes. He was a decent human, and decent humans in American society are not wired to kill. The Army had done it’s best to change that programming, while still maintaining control. It did not want an army of sociopaths, after all, but it’s a hard thing to erase. Mark began to retch from the adrenaline and other hormones that had been pumped into his body by the life or death struggle that had just ensued.

Another twenty minutes elapsed while Mark was gripped in the after-effects of his encounter. He had gone through this before in Somalia. He had waited until he got back to the barracks before succumbing to the emotional turmoil inside him.

It was easier this time.

AGreyMan

Chapter 021 – Render unto Caesar...

A lot had happened since that day Sheriff Eckert had pulled David's ash out of the frying pan and informed him that he had been drafted into the Home Guard- a local Patriot Militia group. Things would probably have heated up greatly over David's rescue if it had not been for everyone's attention suddenly being diverted by the nationwide plague outbreak. There was hardly a region of the country that was not affected in one way or another by either the sudden enormous loss of life, from a disease that no antibiotic could touch, or later by the even greater loss of personal liberty with a coast-to-coast as the blanket of martial law was dropped on the country via Presidential decree.

It had only been a matter of weeks after the shock of the plague had worn off that the food riots began. Transportation, manufacturing, and the retail infrastructure of the entire country slowly but inevitably ground to a halt from the huge vacancies left in the wake of the plague. Supermarkets that were normally stocked to overflowing with food and produce couldn't keep up with the demand when the stores stopped receiving shipments with the previous on-demand, just-in-time regularity. Shelves quickly became bare and finally empty as the surviving consumers raced to stock up on anything they could find. Even pet food quickly disappeared as all available food items became scarce.

The major municipalities hardest hit in the plague had lost, in many cases, over fifty percent of their maintenance staff and were struggling to keep the water running and lights on. Police protection in the cities and suburbs was practically non-existent and finally the President was forced to order up the National Guard and even Federal Military units were called up to maintain law and order. The inevitable clashes between hungry rioters and military finally lead to a suspension of civil rights.

That brought in the numerous alphabet agencies that had previously been restrained by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights not to mention numerous watchdog agencies. They suddenly found their shackles removed and under a plethora of Executive Orders that literally flew across the Presidents desk, they set out on their fervent mission to pacify the citizens of this stricken country, by any and all means necessary, and oh by the way, to find the perpetrators of the this heinous assault on the American people.

But the undertone was ominous as it echoed through the Democratic halls across the nation. Suddenly the Homeland Security Directors for each state began to assume more and more authority via the various Presidential decrees. Governors found their position usurped by these appointed lackeys from Washington and were helpless to reassert their proper elected authority under the new stream of laws. To say that this did not sit well with these professional politicians would be the understatement of the century. The in fighting at the state level only the situation worse and the power of the federal government greater.

BATF Agent McNeely was on a crusade. They had finally been given the authority to clean up his region once and for all. No newspapers, no ACLU, no media, the cuffs were finally off. He was now operating under direct orders of the President of the United States and the Senior Homeland Security Director. After the last several weeks of violent food riots in the big cities a strict curfew had been imposed across the nation. Movement was severely restricted, Civil Rights were suspended, and best of all...all gun owners had seventy-two hours to turn in their arsenals over to police authorities...without exceptions.

The seventy-two hours deadline had passed two days ago and now Agent McNeely had carte blanche to insure that the Presidents mandates would be fully complied with.

“And of course,” McNeely smiled to himself, “there was only one way to ensure that.”

SSgt Daniels stood ready with his squad listening to Agent McNeely from the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms. He couldn't believe the orders they had just received. This was not what his last twelve years of military service had been working towards. It was bad enough when the unit he was assigned to was under the command of the UN during the mess over in the Balkans. But to be under control of a civilian federal agent here at home...was intolerable.

“Anyone resisting a search will be arrested, anyone resisting arrest will be shot! This is Martial Law soldiers, you are operating under direct orders from the President of the United States, your Commander in Chief.” He continued. “Our nation is under attack and we will root out ALL TRAITORS! Remember your oath soldiers, ALL ENEMIES FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC!” He paused to let that set in.

Daniels could feel the bile rising in his gut. “This guy is Fricken nuts.” He mumbled to himself.

Twenty minutes later the platoon under Agent McNeely’s command had mounted up and was headed out to their first mission, to disarm a small town that was, “A hot bed of domestic terrorism.” As the BATF man had explained.

SSgt Daniels’ squad as the others followed their orders as did the rest of the company of rangers as they hit the community like Nazi Storm Troopers. Years of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training paid off, in just minutes they completely surrounded and neutralized the town. Then with loud speakers all the citizens were ordered to stand to on the sidewalks in front of their houses as four-man search teams cleared and searched every home and business. Special assault teams, of which Daniels’ squad was one, were assigned specific residences on the Agent’s list. These “special cases” were documented individuals that had at some time in the past lawfully purchased firearms. It didn’t matter if they said that they had complied with the current directives and turned in all their weapons, they were arrested anyway, their homes searched, and then they were loaded up to be taken away for further processing. This was not part of the orders as issued, but instead the orders given by the agents on the scene. Daniels was now becoming very, very concerned.

Twelve hours later the sweep was completed. In a community of over 15,000 American citizens they had arrested nearly a thousand. Yet had confiscated very few firearms. But the brutality of the agents and the soldiers in handling these scared civilians really bothered the SSgt. This was un-American, and uncalled for. These weren’t domestic terrorists, these were just average people that went hunting as their fathers and their fathers-fathers before them had. This was a small community like he had grown up in: Hard working, God fearing and honest people. There was no reason for the insanity of the day. Daniels sat in the dark

as the last light of the day faded over the far ridge with his squad as they cleaned their weapons.

“You know Staff” Began Corporal Tennyson “There is something just not right about this sh*t today.” He said softly, keeping his voice low.

The rest of the squad nodded in agreement. “Not right at all.” Came mumbled back in nearly a dozen different voices.

“Be careful there soldier.” Daniels cautioned. “Keep that sh*t to yourself, if one of those agents hears you, you’ll find yourself on the back of one of those trucks.”

“Is it true then Staff,” Private Myers asked. “That they arrested some of our own?”

“Yeah I heard...”

“Can the talk and finish cleaning your weapons!” Daniels answered through gritted teeth. His squad knew the conversation was over and they went back to diligently cleaning their rifles.

It was around midnight as SSgt Daniels made the rounds of the LP/OP’s (Listening Posts/Observation Posts) on his perimeter. He didn’t really expect any trouble, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. He knew there had been a lot of people missing from the town today, unaccounted for, especially older boys and young men. He had watched the various Agents in charge of the Ranger Company run roughshod over those that had stayed behind especially the wives whose husband “were out of town on business”. It was all he could do not to cap one of those government stooges right then and there. But he had no desire to end up in Leavenworth for the rest of his life, yet he was not going to take much more of this cr*p and that was for sure.

At the edge of his squads zone of responsibility he saw a shadow approaching. He gave the sign and received the counter sign so he approached the vaporous form.

“Jack...how’s it going?” He asked First Squad’s Staff NCO.

“Totally sucks Danny boy...who’d have ever thought we’d be pulling this sh*t on our own...this totally sucks!”

“How are your boys taking it?”

“Not good...not good at all. You heard about Sousa’s squad didn’t you?”

“Not the details, just the scuttlebutt. They got relieved?”

“Relieved hell, they damn near got shot and were arrested.”

“What for?”

“Seems they refused to arrest this pregnant women. Her husband was on the list and she wouldn’t cooperate...refused to answer questions or say a thing...a tough gal. Well that jack*ss Agent McNeely about had a kitty right there on the spot and pistol-whipped her! You know Sousa Man...he don’t take to that kind of stuff with women!”

“Whoa...the f*cker smacked a pregnant women...was he nuts?!”

“Must be...cause Sousa warned him not to do it again. When he did, Sousa dropped him with a butt-stroke right from infantry school. Laid the suit flat out!”

“Sh*t! Now he’s fucked!”

“You can say that! The suits ordered Sousa’s own squad to arrest him, they refused. The next thing they know Third Platoon has locked and loaded on them and they are being marched off to the stockade.”

“And the lady...was she alright?”

“Oh get this, after Sousa’s squad gets marched off under guard. That b*stard kicks her while she’s still on the ground and then walks off laughing...F*CKER WALKS OFF LAUGHING!”

“Jack we’ve got to get out of this operation...”

Silence.

“Jack?”

“Yeah I know Man...I know.”

“So?”

“So what!?”

“Danny...I’ve got a wife and kid back on post...I can’t...just. Man you know what I mean! I don’t like this at all, but what will happen to them?” he paused looking around, in a hushed whisper he continued. “You know Danny you’re talking mutiny dude! That’s not a small bust! They hang you for that sh*t man.”

“I know, I know.” The two soldiers stood in the dark, wrapping it around them like a cloak. “I took an oath Jack, same as you. To protect and defend the Constitution...that doesn’t include this cr*p today.”

“But you have to follow the orders of the officers Danny, if you don’t they’ll fry you!”

“Jack dammit, do you remember your oath?”

Jack slowly shook his head.

Jeeze man you’ve forgotten it already!” Daniels leaned closer. **“I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR (OR AFFIRM) THAT I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC; THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME;** and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officer appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. **SO HELP ME GOD.**” they ask for that on every promotion board!”

”It’s just words man, just words.”

”Jack you are so wrong man, so wrong. It’s why we’re in this outfit, it what we do and why. It’s all right there in the oath man, our first obligation is to **DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION** and that includes the **Bill of RIGHTS**. It is not to defend an individual, or a party, or a group, but to defend the Constitution itself and we sure didn’t do that today.”

“But Neely said they were ‘a hot bed of domestic terrorism.’”

“Neely don’t know d*ck! Did you see one shred of evidence of that today...huh? F*ck the only terrorism going on in that f*cking town today was from us!”

”But we’ve got to follow orders, man. You can’t refuse to follow orders!” Jack countered.

“If they are illegal orders you can and it’s right in the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice)! Listen to the oath Jack. **THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME** Our allegiance and true faith as soldiers is not directed towards a person or a place but to an ideal, a cause, a higher order, it’s to the Constitution, man.”

”The second half puts is all into perspective: “**AND** {sort of – by the way – oh...as an after thought} I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So as long as the President and the officers appointed over me operate in accordance with the first part of the oath and within the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice I will obey them....if they don’t...refer to the first sentence in the paragraph. **EVERYTHING** is balanced against our first duty Jack, it’s balanced against the Constitution itself.”

”To follow and serve a person is risky. They are fallible, they will fail to stay the course, they will f*ck up. It’s that absolute power breeding absolute corruption garbage. But a dream, an ideal will and has stood the test of time. I will serve my God and the Constitution of the United States. All others....beware!”

There was a long pause as both soldiers thought about what had been said.

Jack I’m not some fricken barracks lawyer, but I know right from wrong! And this sh*t is wrong...it f*cking wrong! Why do you think they replaced all our officers with these wanna be Agent jerk wads? Cause our officers would know this was wrong and we’d back them. Now we’re out here f*cking over these people, OUR PEOPLE...Americans and doing these goons dirty work for them. F*cking government REMF’s (Rear Echelon Mother F*uckers).

“But our orders come from the President himself, Danny, he’s THE commander in chief.”

“Yeah well, my first duty is to the Constitution, not the President. And if he gives me an illegal order...well...then I don’t have to obey it. Jack there is no way that what happened here today was legal. You know that and I know that.”

“We’re here to defend it against **ALL ENEMIES**, both those on foreign shores and here at home. Where ever they are! Whether those enemies wear foreign uniforms, towels wrapped around their heads or three piece suits and serve in Congress, or even sit in the White House. No one is allowed to violate the Constitution...no one. If you do, well then... you become my **ENEMY!** Period...it’s very simple.

Agent McNeely woke from a restful sleep just as the dawn was starting to fully light up the morning. He started to sit up but it felt as if his sleeping bag was caught on the military cot he was sleeping on. He pushed harder and heard a loud click and a strange “sprong” sound off to the left side of his cot. He quickly looked and saw something metallic spinning through the air away from him.

“Strange, what broke off the bed?” He thought, just before the reality of the spinning object flashed through his mind...“**HAND GRENADE!**”

The explosion echoed through the surrounding valleys reverberating against the heavy mists. The first explosion was quickly followed by several others in rapid succession. SSgt Daniels turned and looked back down the ridge to the bivouac area far off in the distance. Heavily laden combat troops humped past him intermixed with civilians from the town. The Civies knew the surrounding mountains and woods and where to live in them, the Rangers knew how to fight in them. Together they would become a team...an American team. SSgt Daniels gently and firmly grabbed a struggling older lady by the arm and helped her up the path as an entire town and nearly a full company of Rangers disappeared into the mountain mists.

Desert Doc