



# Escaping Home: A Novel (The Survivalist Series Book 3)

By A. American



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## Book 3 of The Survivalist Series

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After the collapse of the nation's power grid, America is under martial law—and safety is an illusion. As violence erupts around him, Morgan Carter faces one of his most difficult decisions yet: whether to stay and defend his home, or move to a more isolated area, away from the prying eyes of the government. He and his family are hesitant to leave their beloved Lake County, but with increasingly suspicious activities happening in a nearby refugee camp, all signs point towards defecting. Morgan and his friends aren't going to leave without a fight, though—and they'll do anything to protect their freedoms.

From the author of the hit survivalist novels *Going Home* and *Surviving Home*, *Escaping Home* describes the struggle to live in a world with no rules, and how, sometimes, the strength of family is the only thing that can pull you through.



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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

**A. American** has been involved in prepping and survival communities since the early 1990s. An avid outdoorsman, he has spent considerable time learning edible and medicinal plants and their uses as well as primitive survival skills. He currently resides in Florida with his wife of more than twenty years and his three daughters. He is the author of *Going Home*, *Surviving Home*, *Escaping Home*, *Forsaking Home*, and *Resurrecting Home*. [angeryamerican.net](http://angeryamerican.net)

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### **Prologue**

It took weeks to walk to home, but I made it. The entire time I was focused on just getting there. I never really gave much thought to what would happen afterward. Even my most pessimistic thoughts of how life would be at home didn't come close to the reality. Now our neighborhood is basically empty. Many have simply disappeared. We are down to our small group now: my family, my neighbors Danny and Bobbie, and Sarge and his gang. Fewer people around means more eyes on us, attention we certainly do not want.

In the Before, people used to talk about the FEMA camps and whether or not they would ever choose to go into them. In the Now, with the harsh light of reality shining on the situation, many of those who said they would never be taken to one of these camps were happy to walk in on their own. We've been the target of raiders and of the federal government, both apparently trying to force us into the camps. Now we must decide whether to stay and fight, or find someplace to retreat to. Escape may be our only option.

We have a place—the perfect place for long-term survival, really. But my family, Mel and the girls, may not be ready for it. While the rest of the country may have fallen apart, our preparations are mitigating the effects they feel. With running water, power and abundant stored food—at least for now—they see it as an apocalyptic holiday. But there are forces at play, beyond our control, that may bring about this last desperate move.

Life in the camps isn't what it appears to be. While there is food, water and warmth, the price is near slave labor and virtual imprisonment. In the care and custody of FEMA, backed up by the DHS, those inside the camp have no rights, no freedom and, worse yet, are exposed to the possible brutality of their caretakers. Every barrel has a bad apple, and over time those bad ones start to rot the good ones. Left unchecked this rot can take over the entire barrel. With so much absolute power over so many helpless souls, horrors are bound to be committed. Among those in the camp is our friend Jess, who walked with Thad and me on our long adventure home. We don't know how she's faring, but with the mixed reports about the camp, one thing is certain: surviving in the camp may prove far more difficult than the struggle outside.

## **Chapter 1**

Every day when her work detail was over, Jess would try and visit her brother. It was best to stay busy like that, otherwise the memories would return. It was the thoughts of her mother that were the worst. The image of her mother lying on the cold dirt as the light of the flames consumed what little they had in the world, the dark crimson stain on the ground around her. And her father . . . he'd resisted and was made an example to the others as a result. These images were burned into her mind like an overexposed negative.

Thinking back to the raid made her feel nauseous. Everything had happened so quickly. It was late in the evening when a couple of old trucks sped into their little hamlet of cabins. Before anyone could react, the shooting started. Her dad put up a fight even after he was gunned down. Her mother ran to his side, picked up the pistol and shot one of the raiders, but just after she hit him, she was immediately gunned down. Jess managed to make it into the woods with some of her neighbors, running as fast as her legs could carry her. Waiting as she heard the bloodcurdling screams and shots was agonizing. When she returned back to her home, she found the raiders had stripped the place, taking everything they could physically carry away. And to her shock, she found her brother, Mark, lying unconscious on the ground.

Jess sat on the ground with her brother's head in her lap, shocked. She tied off the wounds on his arm with her flannel and wrapped a blanket that she retrieved from one of the smoldering homes around his stomach, but there was nothing else she could do. She spent the night under the old oak trees, cradling her brother in her arms. Sleep never came as she kept checking his pulse, feeling it grow weaker and weaker with each hour. When the sun rose, she was relieved to see big white trucks show up, American flags painted on the sides and the letters FEMA on the doors.

The FEMA people immediately set about treating Mark, making him comfortable, bandaging his wounds and loading him into one of the trucks. He needed more treatment, and they told her that she could go with him to one of their facilities. She gladly climbed aboard. Once she was in the truck, a man in a uniform clipped a form to her shirt, the label DD 2745 emblazoned across the top of it. As they were pulling away, she could see others loading her mother and father into body bags. She began to cry. At least they would be buried.

Along the way, they stopped at small communities or refugee camps where others joined them on the trucks. Several more wounded were also loaded in beside Mark. All of the stories were horrible, though very similar to Jess's experience. The raiders would come in and take what they wanted: food, guns, tools, tents. The worst stories included people disappearing, women and children mostly.

After a few hours, the truck rumbled through a gate and stopped. When the doors opened Jess shielded her eyes against the midday sun and gazed upon the camp for the first time. Jess climbed down to see rows upon rows of tents filling an area the size of two city blocks. All around her were people in uniforms with guns. While the wounded were carted off to one area of the camp, she and the other healthy refugees were ushered to a large tent. Before entering it, they were subjected to a thorough and invasive search, in which suspect items were tossed on the ground by the guards. Jess's feeling of salvation was fading, being replaced with one of fear.

After everyone was processed, they were given food and a beverage that tasted like Gatorade. It was amazing to be eating meat loaf with mashed potatoes, and Jess savored it. As they ate, names were called out and each person went to a series of tables in the front, where they filled out forms. All sorts of information was collected—the obvious question about name, age, sex and religion, but also more interesting questions, about NRA membership, club memberships, political party affiliation and whether or not they were on any form of government assistance. Jess filled out the questions without a second thought, and it seemed that the others did too. No one was willing to question the process.

The last two stations were the medical station, where they received a very basic physical examination, and a station for a psychological evaluation. Jess answered the questions for the psych evaluation dully, unable to emote the anguish that she felt for her mother and father. Once through the last station, she was free to chat with others in the tent and continue eating her meal, though it was made clear that they were all forbidden to leave. Jess spent her time looking around, observing the disheveled masses that surrounded her. A short time later, a series of names were called and each person was photographed and issued an ID badge. Jess was

given a yellow badge. The little plastic card included her picture, name, Social Security number and, once again, the DD 2745 ID number that she was given in the truck.

Once the badges were issued, an announcement was made for everyone to gather under the flags that matched the color of their badges. This was where the first signs of trouble appeared. Families were separated into different color codes, and people began to protest. The agents in the tent assured everyone it was only a temporary situation and would be resolved shortly; the different-colored badges simply meant various kinds of additional steps were needed to secure their status. This satisfied most people and they quietly went off to sit in their assigned housing areas.

Jess sat sipping on her drink, absentmindedly observing the other people that were being processed. A few feet away from her, a middle-aged man sat giving his name and social security number just as everyone else in the room had. His info was entered into a laptop by a woman in a DHS uniform. She asked him to give her the tag on his shirt, which he did. She tapped away, then asked him some questions, which he answered. She looked back to her screen for a moment then looked up to one of the armed guards and waved him over.

Two of them approached, she showed them something on the screen and they exchanged words that Jess couldn't make out. The man was getting nervous. "What's the matter?" he asked.

They ignored his comment, and then one of the guards told him to stand up and put his hands behind his back.

"What for? I didn't do anything. I came here for help."

One of the guards drew a Taser. "I said put your hands behind your back! Do it now!"

The man leapt from the chair. "I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything!" he shouted as he tried to run for the door. There was a pop and the man crashed to the ground in front of Jess, writhing and screaming. She jumped from her seat and gasped, shocked at what she'd just witnessed.

The two guards were instantly on him, pulling his hands back. "Don't resist or you'll get it again!" The man tried to wriggle from the burly officer's grip. "Hit him again!" the guard shouted. Jess could hear the *clack-clack-clack* as the voltage pulsed through the man.

The sudden violence scared a number of people in the tent and they started to get up, trying to get out. Guards wearing gas masks blocked the doors, holding large cans that looked like fire extinguishers under their arm. "Return to your seats or you will be pepper sprayed!"

Jess knelt down in front of her chair. The man being cuffed was a mere four feet from her. She could see his eyes, wide with fear, tears rolling down his cheeks. He was quietly whimpering, "I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything."

Once he was trussed up, the DHS woman who started it all came up and spoke with one of the guards.

"Here's his paperwork."

"Which list is he on?" the man asked, looking the forms over.

"He came up on a couple. He's subversive by nature."

They grabbed the man by his arms and dragged him out of the tent. Jess slowly got back in her chair, thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?*

Once Jess was in her housing unit, a big military-style tent, she listened to the orientation speech given by a red-haired woman in a black uniform who identified herself only as “Singer”—no first name. The speech covered the *security protocols* in great detail. It was stressed that the security rules were for their safety and there was no acceptable excuse for violations. The lecture went on to inform them they would soon be taken to shower (*A hot shower!* Jess thought to herself. *I can’t even remember the last time I had one!*) and given a uniform. The guard stressed that it was mandatory to always be in uniform with your ID badge plainly visible on the outside of your clothes. And perhaps most important of all: no one was able to leave the camp without express permission of DHS officials. Even portions of the camp itself were not able to be accessed by civilians—the off-limits areas were identified on a large map of the camp. Some areas of the camp were simply marked as crosshatched areas. Nothing inside these areas was identified. She went on to say that they could use the common area just outside the tent but could not wander freely around the camp—again, for their safety.

Singer told them to each pick a bunk and get settled. As they were bustling around the room, she informed them that the next day they would get their work assignments, which caused a heated exchange as to why they had to work. Some women were up in arms about it, but Jess didn’t really care—it was something to do other than sit around and worry about her brother. Singer explained that the shifts for different duties would rotate, and while some were still grumbling, for the most part, the ladies settled down.

Jess approached Singer as she was headed out the door and asked whether she would be able to go to the infirmary and visit her brother. Singer replied that as long as she did her work, she could go. Jess was relieved to hear that; she was sick with worry over Mark. In the truck the medical staff had said they assumed he was bleeding inside his skull, but they had neither the facilities nor the personnel to address such injuries. Time was the only medicine they could offer. She decided that she would head over to visit him as soon as she picked her bunk, eager to leave behind the chattering and noise of her many tent-mates. It would be nice to get a little privacy after today’s activities, even if it only meant walking to see her brother.

Jess quickly settled into her new routine at the camp. Each day she and the others were woken up, put in formation and given breakfast before being told their work assignments. Sometimes these jobs lasted a day, sometimes several. All the jobs were mindless and boring. Jess often found herself reminiscing about being in her college classes at FSU—even her most dull ones were more exciting than the tasks she had been assigned so far at the camp. One morning during breakfast, she began to laugh, something she hadn’t done in a long time. A young black girl in front of her in line turned around with a puzzled look on her face.

“I’m sorry, but it feels like we’re in that movie *Groundhog Day*. We’re doing the same thing over and over,” said Jess.

The girl laughed and said, “You’re so right! Only we don’t have Bill Murray here to crack us up. We only have *Singer*,” she said, mimicking the DHS leader’s strut. Jess giggled and the girl offered her hand. “I’m Mary. I think we’re in the same tent.”

“Yeah, I thought I recognized you. We came in the same day. And I’m glad that I’m not the only one getting annoyed by our lovely leader,” Jess said.

That day Mary switched to the bunk next to Jess. They became quick friends, relying on each other to listen and for support. They both needed someone to open up to, to share the weight they carried. Unlike many of the women in the tent, Mary also felt as though the safety and security they hoped the camp would provide was beginning to feel more like a sentence than salvation. It was good to have a friend around, Jess thought. It broke up the monotony of their days.

When the shooting started, Jess was on a detail filling sandbags. The sudden long burst of machine gun fire

caused everyone to stop and look up. Then several more weapons began to fire in a terrifying fusillade of gunfire. The security detail with the work group screamed for everyone to get on the ground. Three men ran through the group pushing any slow-moving bodies down before falling into the deep sand with their weapons pointed in the direction of what was now obviously a battle of some sort.

Jess covered her head as the gunfire crackled around her, a now all-too-familiar sound that caused her to shake uncontrollably. Mary crawled over to her, hugging the ground.

“What’s going on?” Mary asked, fear in her eyes.

All Jess could do was lay there with the side of her head pressed into the sand. She was too scared to even speak.

The security elements’ radios were full of shouts and calls. Then the camp siren began its long wail, adding to the din. Just when Jess thought it would never stop, the gunfire ceased. Humvees and ATVs were racing all over the camp as the sound of the siren began to wind down. Shortly after, the security officers jumped to their feet and ordered everyone up. They began herding the work detail back toward the housing area.

The camp was a hornet’s nest of activity. Once they were back at their tent, they were ordered to lock down, which consisted of sitting on their bunks in silence. To most of the women in the tent, the idea of sitting in silence after witnessing such violence was a joke. As soon as the door shut, they were all moving around, offering their theories and breaking into their respective cliques.

Jess was sitting on her bunk with her arms wrapped around her knees, her face tucked into them. She was trying to calm down, shaken by the memories of the last time she had heard a firefight. Mary leaned over, smiling.

“Hey, girl, it’s okay! We’re safe now.”

Jess forced a smile in return.

“Hey. I counted twenty-seven today; that’s the most yet,” Mary whispered to Jess. Mary had been trying to count the number of government personnel working in the camp. It was something to do to pass the time. Until today, she had identified twenty-three.

“I wonder how many people actually work here?” Mary asked, seemingly to the air. Jess knew she was trying to get her to talk, but she just wasn’t interested.

Mary continued chatting. “Get this. Apparently the shooting was from people *outside* the camp. Rebels.”

Outside of the camp? Jess couldn’t believe it, even though her work detail was by the perimeter, and the noise was coming from that direction, the thought of being attacked by outsiders seemed unbelievable. The camp was supposed to be a safe place—and now people were shooting at it? She couldn’t take any more. Pulling her wool blanket up, she rolled over and closed her eyes.

## Chapter 2

Since I was in the lead, everyone followed me into my driveway. I drove around the house and stopped outside my workshop. Thad jumped out of the buggy he was in and rushed over to me. “That had to be Jess! It was, wasn’t it?”

“Man, it sure looked like her. It had to be.”

Sarge was in earshot. "Who, Annie? Was Annie in that camp?" "It sure looked like her, Sarge," Thad replied. "Why in the hell are you still calling her that, anyway?"

I asked, rolling my eyes at Sarge's nickname for her.

"I'll call her whatever I want!" The old man snorted. "I just wish we could have confirmed whether it was her or not. If them assholes hadn't started shooting we may have been able to."

The guys all gathered around as a lively discussion about Jess began. Jeff interrupted with, "Wait, wait. Who the hell's Jess?" All the guys stopped talking and looked at me expectantly. I gave him the elevator version: how I met her back when all of this chaos started, how she wouldn't leave me alone until I agreed to let her walk with me. Thad chimed in about how she and I met him, and how she took to calling him the black Incredible Hulk. Together we told him about the family we tried to help, and Thad told about the shooting where I was injured. Once Jeff was up to speed, the talk moved back to her being in the camp. Sarge wanted to go get her, but knew it would be foolish to even consider.

"How'd she look?" Sarge asked.

Thad looked at me, and we both gave a little shrug. "Looked okay to me," I said.

"Yeah, she looked all right. She was working, filling sandbags, from what I saw," Thad said.

Sarge nodded his head. "That's good. Anyone hurts that girl, I'll kill 'em deader than shit."

While he was stewing, I ducked into the shop.

"What the hell you doin'?" he called out as I crawled around under the shelves.

Spinning around on my knees, I held up a bottle of whiskey. The old grouch smiled, executed a perfect about-face and stepped out the door. I followed him out, twisting the top off the bottle as I did. I turned the bottle up and took a long pull on it. After what had just happened at the camp, I needed a drink. We stood around by the shop and passed the bottle. It wasn't long before my daughters Little Bit and Taylor came out. They were slightly more at ease around Sarge and his crew now.

Sarge saw Little Bit coming toward us and knelt down, holding the bottle out. "Want a sip?"

She screwed her face up. "Eeww, no, that stuff's gross."

Sarge smiled and looked at me, then back to her. "An' how do you know that?"

"'Cause it's whiskey. I know what that is."

Sarge smiled and patted her head as he stood up. Taylor grabbed my arm, laying her head against my arm. I looked over at her and asked if she was okay. She said she was fine, but I know her too well. Something was eating at her. She eventually got up and went into the shop and started to nose around the shelves of supplies. Sarge watched her as she went in, then jerked his head, indicating we should all walk away from the supplies for a bit.

"You guys know that after what went down today that staying here is a bad idea, right?" Sarge said quietly.

"Maybe, but they don't know it was us," Danny said.



“How many other people around here got wagons like those?” Sarge said, pointing to the buggies sitting in front of the shop. “You can bet yer ass they know who was out there, and they *will* be coming for us.”

“What do you think we should do?” Thad asked.

“It’s not what I think, it’s what’s got to be done. We need to un-ass this place. It’s time to go,” Sarge said flatly.

Danny and I shared a look. It was obvious to everyone that we weren’t on board with the idea.

“Look, guys, I agree with him. If we stay here, people are going to die,” Mike said.

“I agree,” Ted added.

“I personally don’t care what we do, as long as it keeps my ass alive,” Jeff said.

I looked at my house and property, then back at Danny. “I don’t want to leave. As bad as things are right now, at least my family has their home.”

“I know you don’t. Hell, a lot of people have lost everything recently.” Sarge paused and looked at Thad. “If you want to keep them alive, we need to get them out of here.”

“You’ve already got one daughter with a bullet wound, Morg. I know you don’t want to see it happen again,” Doc said.

“How about this,” Danny said. “We start moving some stuff out to the cabins, pre-positioning some supplies, and if things go south we can haul ass out of here with the rest of what we may need.”

This would be no small feat. The cabins were seventeen miles away on the Alexander Run. With only the Suburban and the buggies, it would take several trips and quite a bit of time to get done, which added to the urgency. If Sarge was correct and they did make a move on us here, we’d never get out with what we needed if we hesitated. Plus the sooner we started this and had people stationed on the river, the smaller the chance of someone else moving into the cabins. I started to change my mind on the matter.

It was agreed that we should start moving some stuff out as a precaution. Reggie said he wanted to take the pigs, which led to a discussion about how to pen them up. He said he had a solar-powered hot-wire rig. Sarge said we could use that and pen them up against the creek, using it as a natural barrier.

The next issue was how to secure what we took out there. Sarge started going over a head count and how we could split everyone up, but he was forgetting some people.

“Don’t forget about Mel and the girls, plus Bobbie,” I said.

Sarge paused for a moment. “Can they use weapons?”

“Bobbie can,” Danny said.

“Mel, Taylor and Lee Ann can,” I said.

“I can too!”

We looked back to see Little Bit standing there. Her comment got a giggle out of everyone.

"I bet you can," Ted said with a smile, shaking his head.

"I can. My daddy taught me."

"So there are thirteen of us, then. All right." Sarge laughed.

The plan we came up with would send Jeff and Mike out to the cabins. With only two of them, it would be tough to maintain a constant watch, but we hoped that being so far out in the woods would cut down on the number of potential intruders. In addition to keeping an eye on things, they would start on some of the projects we would need in place should we have to bug out. Sarge wanted us to do an inventory of everything we had that could be useful to take. With so many people, it was sure to be a substantial pile of supplies.

Sarge said he would take watch down at the barricade, and Thad volunteered to go with him. We all agreed to meet in the morning. Once everyone was gone, I went inside. Mel was just walking out of the bedroom, rubbing the sleep from her face.

"When did you get back?"

"Not long ago. How was your nap?"

"Good. I feel great. You hungry?"

"Of course," I answered as I headed for the living room to check on Lee Ann.

She was still on the couch, as she had been when I left, listening to music on the iPad and drawing. She looked up as I came in and stretched her arms out, the universal sign for a hug. Sitting down on the edge of the couch, I gave her a hug and she pulled the earbuds out. I asked how her leg was, and she said it was feeling better and asked if she could go outside for a while to take a short walk. Danny had come across a crutch from somewhere, and Lee Ann was using it to get around. I told her she could but to be careful and take her sisters with her. She started to hobble toward the back door. With her gone, I went in to talk to Mel about the plan to start moving some supplies out to the cabins. She couldn't remember where the cabins were located, even though we had seen them before when we kayaked down the run.

"What are they like?"

"Primitive."

"How primitive?"

"They're just plywood, really, but they're solid and will make a decent place should we need to go to them."

"Well, I hope we don't have to go to them."

"Me too, but it's better safe than sorry. And after what happened today, we may have to."

"Why? What'd you guys do?"

"I'll tell you later," I said as I headed for the back door. I didn't want to scare her right now. The girls were outside throwing a Frisbee around, with Lee Ann leaning on her crutch, catching the tosses that passed within arm's reach. It was nice to see them hanging out together, actually doing something besides bickering.

I stepped outside and intercepted the Frisbee from Little Bit, then threw it, tousling her hair as I continued to the edge of our property. It'd been a couple of days since I'd seen my neighbor Howard, which was unusual. I decided to go check on him; the last time I saw him he didn't look so good. I headed for his place, nervous about what I was going to find.

There was no answer to my knock so I tried again and waited. It was obvious no one was coming, and I couldn't hear any movement in the house, so I opened the door and called out. There was no reply, only a smell that assaulted my nostrils. Pulling a bandanna from my pocket, I covered my nose and ventured in. I found Howard lying still in his chair, a viscous discharge dripping from the dressing on his leg. His wife was on the couch across from his chair, slumped over with a syringe in her hand. It was just as Doc predicted—they were too proud to ask for help, and now they had reached their end. No wonder he had left them a bottle of morphine. In this new world, sometimes an option that you normally wouldn't entertain was the only way out for folks in dire straits.

The saddest part about standing in Howard's house looking at his bloated body was what I was thinking: I had two more graves to dig. It seemed like this was an almost-daily routine at this point. But it was getting late, and I wasn't about to start digging in the dark. I left the house—one more day certainly wasn't going to make a difference to them.

Once back inside my house, I told Mel I was going to Reggie's house to talk to him for a minute. She asked why and I told her about Howard. While she was certainly sorry to hear, Mel didn't know them very well and so the impact was minimal—just another death. She said she wanted to go to Reggie's too, just to get out of the house, which sounded like a good plan to me. She called the girls inside and told Taylor we'd be back shortly. Taylor asked if she could make popcorn—it was becoming a rare treat, but after witnessing the gruesome events next door, I felt like I wanted to give my girls whatever bit of happiness I could. Lee Ann wanted to watch a movie and Little Bit started going through the DVDs. With the girls settled, we headed out.

Mel climbed on the Polaris, wrapping her arms around me. As I pulled through the gate, I tooted the horn at Thad and Sarge, who both waved.

Jeff was splitting wood by the front door.

"Hey, man, where's Reggie?"

Jeff pulled his gloves off. "Out back, I think. Hi, Mel."

"Hey, Jeff, thanks for splitting some wood for us."

Jeff laughed. "Oh yeah, no problem. You did bring a hot dinner, right?"

I laughed at that one and we started around the house to find Reggie. He was at the barn cutting up a palm heart, throwing the pieces to the pigs.

"Hey, Morg." He nodded his head toward Mel. "Mel, you trust this clown to drive you around?"

"Yeah, I do now. Doesn't happen too often these days," Mel replied.

"I guess not. What's up?"

I told him about Howard and his wife. I didn't even have to tell him we needed to dig graves.

"I'll bring the tractor over in the morning," he said, sighing a bit as he said it.

"Thanks, man; it makes it a lot easier. When are you guys going to start moving stuff?"

"Tomorrow. The old man is making a list of what he wants to take first."

When I asked what kind of stuff was on the list, he laughed and answered, "Weird shit. PVC pipe, the gabions from the barricade, empty buckets, garden tools, fence, rolls of wire." The thing that really topped the list was that Sarge wanted him to go around and check every abandoned house for a water filter, and if there was one he wanted the purple stuff inside it.

"Potassium permanganate has lots of uses," I said.

"Like what?" Mel asked me.

"Water purification for one, explosives for another."

Reggie laughed. "Let me guess which one he wants it for."

"Sounds like lots of work to me. Guess we're going to be a little busy."

"Yeah, guess so."

We said our good-byes and headed out. Mel said she wanted to go to Danny and Bobbie's house, which was just down the road a bit. When we pulled up, Danny and Bobbie were sitting on the porch. They walked out to us and we chatted across the fence for a while. Neither of the ladies were thrilled at the prospect of having to leave. They understood the logic behind it but hoped it wouldn't happen. Danny and I agreed with them on both accounts.

Danny said he was going through his seed collection and thinking about trying to start some plants. I didn't have a lot of seeds, but I did have a few stray packs, enough to get a garden going. We'd always planted tomatoes, cucumber, squash, zucchini, green beans, peppers and onions. Between Danny and me we should be able to put out a decent garden. Mel suggested we use the egg crates we keep on top of the fridge to start the seeds in; we could set them out in front of the sliding glass door to give them plenty of light and keep them from the cold.

We left them and headed back home. The difference in the neighborhood between now and six months ago was very apparent. It was now a virtual ghost town. Riding back toward home, none of the houses had any sign of life.

"All the houses seem empty. Where is everyone?" Mel asked over my shoulder.

"I guess they all left. I know some of them went to that camp at the old bombing range; maybe all of them did."

She didn't say anything else, just tightened her grip around me. As we approached our gate I could see Sarge and Thad down at the barricade. Mel asked to be let off so she could start dinner, and after she hopped off, I headed down to see them.

"What's up?" I asked as I coasted to a stop.

Sarge leaned back and said, "We need to figure out who's gonna relieve us. We've got to keep this thing

manned.”

“I can come back later. Danny would probably come too.”

“Sounds good. You an’ him be here at twenty hundred; I’ll have some of the boys relieve you guys later tonight. Keep yer eyes open, bring yer NVGs and keep an eye out. Them bastards are prolly gonna try somethin’ soon enough.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“I think we need to plan on it,” Thad added.

“If they do, we need to be ready. Go tell Danny to stop by Reggie’s place to pick up some radios I’ve got. We’ll keep one here from now on. If anything happens, whoever is here will call for help an’ we’ll come a-runnin’,” Sarge said.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll go tell him. We can charge the radios at my place,” I replied.

“Good. On that note, you need to start thinking about what it’s going to take to get that solar power system moved. We’ll need it at the new location.”

I hadn’t even thought about this yet. It wouldn’t be physically hard, but it was a kind of psychological hurdle. By taking it down and moving it, it meant that moving was a permanent deal.

“Also, you gotta bring your rig down to Danny’s in the morning so we can load up his stuff first. He’s got a lot of things we can use,” Sarge said.

“Sure thing, no problem.”

I looked over at Thad, who was quieter than usual today.

He was fishing around his backpack and pulled out something.

Sarge leaned over and asked, “What’cha got there, Thad?”

Without looking up he answered, “It was my boy’s.” He pulled out a Transformer.

Sarge stiffened. “I’m sorry, buddy. I’m not going to tell you I know how you feel, ’cause I don’t. In my line of work a family’s a hard thing to have. I didn’t want to leave a wife an kid behind if anything ever happened to me.”

Thad rubbed his thumbs over the toy, then looked over at Sarge. “It ain’t no easier the other way around.”

I really felt for him. I couldn’t imagine it, losing my family in front of my eyes. I remembered how often he had spoken of his wife and son on our walk home. But what could I say? There just aren’t words for some things.

I patted Thad on the back. “I’ll see you guys in the morning,” I said.

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