

## **It took me awhile**

We married our senior year in college. After graduation I landed an IT job only four blocks from our 14th floor apartment. Mary had it even better. She worked at the bank branch located on the main floor of our apartment building.

Evenings we would explore the different local cuisine unless the weather was particularly bad. Then one of us would go to the local grocery and shop for the evening's supper. Weekends we would take the public transit to the beach or antique shopping out in the suburbs. That's how Mary found the bassinette and I found out that in seven months I would be a father!

Our spare room slash den slash guest room we made into a nursey. Walls repainted and trimmed in pink (yes it's a girl!). We took fewer trips to the beach and more trips to baby stores and resale shops. Mary told me to stop buying so many dresses and booties, little tiny shoes for my daughter.

We facetime our out of state parents with updates on Mary's pregnancy and emailed them videos of our progress on the nursery. Our life was perfect.

We were sitting in the Doctor's office for Mary's second trimester checkup. Waiting room TV was showing the world news, it caught us by surprise. Our TV wasn't connected to cable, just to the Internet (Netflix) and my Xbox One. We weren't complete naïve and our coworkers would try and get us into discussions about politics, isn't that why we pay the politicians? North Korea had launched another test missile but this one flew over Japan! Japanese were hoping mad. South Korea was mad. China wasn't responding to our Foreign Ambassador demands. Evidently our military knew something was up and had a Guided missile destroyer strategically placed to shoot the missile down...and missed.

The waiting room TV went off. The jokes about cable TV service being unreliable must be real?! Ha Ha Ha.

We started thumbing through the old magazines when a nurse told us that due to some of their test equipment malfunctioning, all appointments for today will have to be rescheduled. They apologized and will call us later to reschedule.

We still have the afternoon off, how about a leisurely stroll over to the new India restaurant then home to see where the night takes us!

Food was good. Waiter told us she had problems charging our credit card. She didn't think it was our card, same problem with their other customers too.

Morning sickness had let Mary alone and the second glass of wine let me sleep deeper than normal too. Sun was shining through the window when we woke. Late for work? Nightstand clock was stopped at 1:12. iPhone time 8:33 AM, we're late! Use my iPhone to call my boss and tell him I'm running late. Nothing. iPhone acts like its working but when I call my boss nothing, no ringing, no error message, nothing. Mary rushes to the bathroom to throw up, so much for

morning sickness leaving her alone.

“Mary. I’m going downstairs and let the Bank know you’re throwing up and will be in later. And I’ll use their phone to call my boss. Be back in a bit.” Mary’s response is “BLLLLLUCKACE”

Elevator was crowded, unusual for this time of day. I do my typical nod and “hi” routine. I get a few stares, what an unfriendly bunch this morning. I discreetly check, yea my zipper is up, wonder what their problem is?

Bank Manager sees me come in and waves me back to his office. “You tell Mary just to stay home today. And yes, use my phone, 9 for an outside line.”

The ride back up the elevator was just as strange as the ride down.

“Mary. Your Boss says you’ve got the day off. I need to get to work ASAP. Most of our servers are down and so is our Internet connection. No I’m not going to kiss you good bye vomit breath! Love you!”

What a mess. What’s the odds of four motherboards all dying at the same time? I had two spares and managed to get the critical stuff back up before the power went out. The building’s standby generators didn’t come on. Not much I can do without power. If our apartment lost power too, the elevators won’t work and Mary’s condition she shouldn’t be taking on fourteen flights of stairs, I’m head home!

Our building didn’t have power either. Stairway was full of tenants coming down. “Didn’t you hear? Radio announcements, we’re to evacuate the city!” When the blood curling scream echoed in the stairway, that’s when the panic shoving started. Ever try to be the lone person going one direction when everyone else was bound and determined to in the opposite direction with the downhill advantage? I saw a few people fall and the mass washed right over them. I hung onto the hand rail with both hands and pulled myself upward every chance I was given. Almost lost my grip when that suitcase to my ribs knocked the wind out of me.

Mary and I talked it over. It’s getting late. The buses and taxis will be busy. We have enough food in the apartment to put together a meal or two. We will stay here tonight; power will be back on in the morning, the panic over and everything back to normal.

We were wrong.

The next morning I stuck my head out into the hallway, “Hello? HELLO?” No answer. Without air conditioning our apartment was getting warm, time to go.

“You ready Mary?” We had the small backpack that we used on our trips to the beach stuffed with our get out of the city necessities. Three bottles of water, two beach towels, a box of goldfish crackers, aspirin in foil, \$23 in cash, a change of underwear and clothing for both of us.

We took our time going down the stairs. At each floor I opened the door and yelled. It was the

tenth floor that we got a response. “GO AWAY! LEAVE US ALONE! WE HAVE A GUN. DON’T MAKE US USE IT!” We moved on and didn’t yell at the rest of the floors. The closer we got to the main floor the more bodies we saw. Mary threw up and I joined her. The outside fresh air felt good. We’ve been waiting at the bus stop I’d guess for two hours, no buses, no taxis when the helicopter flew overhead dropping leaflets.

*“The United States has been attacked. You are ordered to evacuate the city immediately.”*

Whoever wrote that leaflet sure wasn’t much help. Evacuate in which direction? How? I guess we walk out?

Mary and I walked east. Stores still had their night security gates down. Further we went the more vehicles blocking the streets we saw. Guess that would explain why the public buses weren’t running? A few people were out and about. When we asked, “What’s going on?” or “Are we going in the right direction?” they’d dodged back into a building or crossed to the opposite side of the street from us, moving faster and not answering us.

We were out of water, crackers down to a few broken pieces. We didn’t find any restaurants or markets open. No way would we walk out of the city before dark. We was both tired, Mary was really pooped. Where could we spend the night and find food? Five policemen stepped out of a side street and walked towards us.

“Man are we glad to see you guys! My wife is pregnant and we are out of water and food. Are we going in the right direction and can you tell us what happen?” I ask the Sargent (two stripes on the sleeve is a Sargent right?).

“No you need to go that way” the Sargent points. As I turn to look in the direction the Sargent is pointing I’m thinking it’s strange that one of the cops is wearing white Nikes. My head explodes.

It’s dark. I try to sit up. The world picks up me and spins me around like an amusement ride gone mad. I pass out again.

A dog is licking my face as I come to. Daylight. Sitting up, everything starts whirling again, I lay back down. I slowly crawl to the nearest car. By leaning against the car I can tolerate the spinning until I’m finally in a sitting position. “mary? Mary? MARY? Pooch. Where’s Mary?” The dog cocks his head (yup I check, it’s a he) and looks at me like I’m speaking a foreign language. Or is the dog giving me that look because I’m totality naked? What happen to my clothes? Mary and I were walking to the beach and I wake up sitting against this car. “Pooch. What happen? Go find Mary! Go on, find Mary.” Pooch just stares at me. “Well you’re no help.”

Trying to stand was a mistake. Don’t think I was out too long. Pooch is taking a nap. I manage to get back to leaning against the car. My stomach growls waking pooch and making me realize I’m hungry and thirsty. I reach up and grasp the door latch opening the car door. Slowly, not to fast, I managed to lie on the back seat. Pooch jumps in, shaking the car and in turn makes my world start spinning again. It takes a few minutes for the world to settle down before I’m capable of hooking the door arm rest with my toes to pull the door shut.

Raining. It's raining when I wake up. How did I get here and why am I naked? The bus was late so we decided to walk to the beach. We got lost and asked a cop for directions...it all came flooding back to me, "MARY!!!"

If I didn't move too fast I could move without my head splitting open. I got out of the car. "MARY!?" Right here is where we met those cops, are they still around here. Mistake, don't turn to look so fast Idiot. How many times am I going to make that same mistake? Slowly I look around the area. The rain is cold and I'm shaking with cold. "MARY!" Back to my car, well if no one else claims it, then it IS my car. No keys in the ignition. Find the trunk release button and give it a push, trunk lid pops open. Slowly, walk slowly to the trunk. Two suitcases and a plastic bucket. The suitcases I bring in the car with me, Pooch is sitting in the driver's seat staring out the windshield. CRACK!

The lightning bolt had too hit close. Wonder how safe it is to be in a car during a lightning storm?

One suitcase had man's clothes and the other woman's. I used a ladies dress to dry off. Blood, where's this blood coming from? I reach up and turn the rearview mirror so I can see. I've got dried blood down the side of my face and neck. I stick a blouse out in the rain until it's soaked. Using the blouse and mirror I wash the blood off of me, ouch! I've got a lump on the back of my head the size of Mt. Rushmore. Bet when I turned that Sargent hit me with something. Bet they weren't real cops either. And I fell for it. Mary?

The man's shirt and the ladies pants fit me sort of. Man's underwear didn't fit. I'm not going to wear a woman's thong. The socks with sandals will do until I find something better. Now that I'm dry and out of the rain I'm warming up. It's getting dark out. Street lights aren't on, store fronts are all dark. City sure is dark without lights. I can't find Mary in the dark, time to make plans to find her.

In the glove box I find a flashlight with dead batteries, a handful of those crackers wrapped in cellophane that Chinese restaurants give you with their egg drop soup and restaurant packets of catsup and mustard. Pooch didn't like catsup or mustard on his crackers so he ate his plain. Now I'm really thirsty. All this rain and no water to drink. The bucket in the car trunk! I could've put the bucket out to catch the rain water. Great idea just too late, it had stopped raining.

It took me awhile before I found Mary.

Her clothes were torn and lying scattered around the sidewalk. Using one of the dresses from the suitcases I redress her. Laid her in the backseat of my car, covered her in a real nice blanket I stole. I locked the car doors and then we, me flip flopping in my sandals, went looking for that Sargent.

## **Chapter Two**

I flipped flopped around the City for two days before my revenge was replaced by my brains. What was I going to do if I found that Sargent? Sick Pooch on him? When he was ducking my thrown sandals I could garrote him with a female thong? I don't think so.

I was getting dark when I got back to our...my apartment. I was especially quiet passing the tenth floor stairwell landing.

I don't understand why we...I have water but we...I do. I took a shower. I learned later it was because water was pumped to storage tanks on the roof. A check valve in the basement prevented the storage tank's water from flowing back down into the public water supply. As long as the basement check valve did its job and there was water in the storage tanks or piping above my apartment I'd have water. This little bit of knowledge provided me with a reliable future source of water.

Dressed in my own clothes (and underwear) physically I felt better. Head was still throbbing a bit. I could move around without fearing of passing out. Mentality I was in shambles. Lost Mary and our daughter, felt like just ending my life too. How would I do it? No. I will not give that Sargent satisfaction. Evidently the Sargent thought he had killed me before they raped M...I can't go there...I will live to see the surprise on Sargent's face when I come back from the dead!

We...I had spare batteries and they fit the flashlight I found in the car. With the flashlight and Grandpa's pocket knife for my weapon, I headed to the Apartment Supervisor's work bench in the basement. Found what I was hoping for, a long pry bar and clear shipping tape.

At the tenth floor landing I put a small piece of clear tape on the door and jamb. If the door was opened, the tape would break letting me know the "we have a gun" persons was active. Pooch growled softly. I told him to, "shush". I taped the stairway door to my floor too, be nice to know if anyone was coming and going on my floor.

I started on the apartment across from my...blast it all OUR APARTMENT! Pooch sniffed around the door and gave me his dumb look. Third attempt with the pry door popped the lock. Pooch walked in, walked around in circles and laid down for a nap in the living room. Hope that means the apartment is safe! It was.

I took my time and checked every apartment on our floor. One apartment Pooched growled at so we didn't try and enter that one, just taped the door. Food, bottled water, blankets, clothing, anything I thought I would need I hauled back to our apartment. Spam fried over a decorative oil lamp was the best meal I had since...Pooch even had seconds.

Without air conditioning the apartment warmed up fast. Running around in boxer shorts was a short term solution, I had a better idea. I went back to the apartment across from ours and broke out one of the window panes. Did the same in our apartment. Cross breeze cooled the apartment to a tolerable level.

**BANG!**

Cross breezed caught the apartment door and slammed it shut. Scared the heebie jeebies out of me. Anyone left in the building now knows that I am here to! I reopened the door and used a pile of my “found stuff” to block the door open, did the same to the other apartment door too. My idea worked too well that night, I woke up freezing. Lazily I just pile more blankets on me and went back to my nightmare about Mary.

Woke the next morning to find my apartment door shut and locked?! My headaches have almost completely subsided. I don't think I would get up, closed the door and not remember it? I look out the door peep hole. Apartment across the hall, door shut too. Someone was on this floor while I slept! Bet it was the apartment Pooch growled at, 1414! I took the biggest kitchen knife we had, my pry bar and with Pooch we stealthy walked to 1414. Pooch growled.

I knock. “Hello? I'm Jason from 1457. Why did you shut my door last night? Hello?”

I try prying the door open one handed, got my knife for defense in the other hand. Dropping the pry bar on my big toe caused me to go into the stub toe dance and grasp at the door knob to get my balance back. Door knob turns, door wasn't locked. “I'm coming in!” Flung the door open and rushed into the apartment. The stench had me retreating back to the hallway. Elderly lady. Seventy or eighty years old? Oxygen mask on her face. Look like she fell trying to get out of her bed.

With the help of a shirt soaked in perfume and wrapped over my nose, I managed to get her body in improvised garage bags, sealed with shipping tape. Laid her back on her bed and pulled the covers over her. Poured the rest of the perfume bottle on the covers and then broke the windows to air the apartment out. Prescription bottles on the night stand have the name Martha Smyth.

Wonder how long she's been dead?

She wasn't the one that shut my door last night! I run to the stairway door, tape was broken. Whoever shut my door came from the stairwell! An enemy would have killed me. Must be a friend or at least friendly. Could “We have a gun” on the tenth floor be classified as friendly? Time to find out.

“My name is Jason. I'm from the fourteenth floor.” Nothing. “Pooch! Do I go right or do I go left? Pry open doors until I get shot or what?” Pooch goes left, trots down to the fourth door, sits and gives a yap.

“Hello. My name is Jason. I'm from the fourteenth floor.”

“Heard you the first time.” came a reply.

“Are you the one that shut my door last night?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Because you are an idiot and in a weak moment I took pity on you. Times like this and you’re sleeping with your door wide open with no security. You are not going to last long.”

“Yea? Well I’ve collected all the food, bottled water and stuff I’ll need for a long time from my floor. And my vicious attack dog...”

“I met your vicious dog last night, it loves Spam. And if you’re so smart why did you break into every apartment on your floor? Why didn’t you use the master keys hanging in the Super’s office?”

“You’re right. I know nothing. I got my wife and daughter killed by fake cops. I can network servers or build computers blindfolded. But when it comes to this survival stuff...I...got them killed.”

I hear a double click and some chain rattle.

“Open the door and come into my apartment slowly. Keep your hands where I can see them or you will be flying back out!” I did as I was told. That is how I met Ralph.

Ralph was a 68 year old military veteran with a crusty personality. When his knee wasn’t acting up he could get around real good. Married a few times, just didn’t work out with him being military and all, didn’t take me long to figure out he didn’t like talking about the married part of his life. He worked as the night janitor at the local library. I didn’t see any food or water around his neat but sparse apartment? Ralph must have seen my eyes wondering...

”Kid. Pull that drawer open. No, the middle one. Look on the bottom, the notebook will slide out. That is an inventory of anything you might need from this floor down to the fourth floor and where I hid it in that particular apartment. Don’t put all your resources in one location! Makes it too easy for someone to take if from you and if you have to bug out then you don’t have any supply stashes for backup.”

“What do you mean by bug out Ralph?

Sigh. “You are green aren’t you? What would you do if those cops came to this building and your only choice was to sneak out somehow? That is what is called Bugging Out, leaving a compromised area of operations for a safer one. And if you had to bug out wouldn’t it be handy if you already had a knapsack packed with essentials ready to go?” Sigh. “Follow me.”

Ralph led me to his bathroom medicine cabinet. With one hand he supported the front of the mirror and with his other hand he gave a sharp whack upward to the bottom of the cabinet. The whole cabinet came off the wall and Ralph laid it on the floor.

“Each apartment was heated by hot water before they converted over to electric. Behind every apartment’s medicine cabinet is a pipe chase, goes from the basement all the way to the roof. They removed the pipes for salvage. I use it to store a few things like this.” Ralph hands me a

backpack. “Here Kid. Help get this cabinet back up on the wall. Thank you. Bring that pack to the living room. I want to explain to you what’s in there and why.” A few hours later I had a general understanding what Ralph had backed in his backpack and why.

“Now Kid. Open those two overhead cabinet doors. Right one just a bit more, there! Now open that closet door all the way. Grab the clothes hanger bar on both ends and lift up, no leave the clothes on it! Careful! Now hang the bar on top of the two open cabinet doors. Yep, you’re learning. Back to the closet. On the shelf is a Phillips screwdriver. You know what a Phillips is? Well there is some hope for you yet Kid!

Turn those four screws a quarter turn clockwise. Yep, the back of the closet comes out. Those are MREs, military term for Meals Ready to Eat. Last a person a good long while if they are careful. Put everything back but the Phillips. Look at the toe kick under the kitchen cabinets. See the screws at each end? Same thing, quarter turn clockwise. Rifles and pistols. Don’t get them out now, we still have a few days for me to teach you how to use them. Recessed light above you in the soffit. The ring is held up by two springs, yep pulled down and unhook the springs. Now remove the bulb and those two screws, twist and lower the light fixture, let it hang by the wires. Reach up in the hole, feel those boxes? Ammunition for the guns. Never stash your guns and ammo in same place, makes it harder for someone to use your own guns against you.”

I put the light fixture back up in the soffit. “Ralph. What do you mean we have a few days...?” I turn to face Ralph and see Ralph pointing a big evil looking gun straight at me. I knew he had a gun on his hip but where he got that big thing he’s pointing at me...?

“Never turn your back on someone you don’t know and never underestimate someone just because they may be older”, Ralph said as he lowered that gun.

When I started to breathe again I finished my sentence, “What do you mean we have a few days for you to teach me.”

“I’m diabetic. I have plenty of insulin but without electric for the refrigerator to keep my insulin cool, when the ice I’ve placed in the refrigerator is gone, so I’m...a week maybe two at the most.”

“So all you need is enough electric to run that refrigerator? That’s easy.”

“What? How are you going to...?”

My IT job had required some afterhours work, so I had a key to the building. First thing I did was to collect all the UPSes from our servers. Hardest part was the multipliable trips carrying them up to Ralph’s apartment. Daisy chained them together and we had 120 VAC for his frig! Label on Ralph’s frig stated it drew 325 watts. With the number of UPS we had and the 325 watt draw, good 24 hours of keeping his insulin cool plus the ability to make more ice, adding another 3 or 4 days?

My Management had been in the process of having a solar array installed on the roof for a tax



write off. Management figured solar cells and computers were both “new guy stuff” so they had dropped the project into my lap. Ralph and I waited until dark to move the solar panels (that were still crated), the cables and inverter over to our apartment alley. With a rope & pulley system Ralph had devised the day before; he stayed in the alley as security and to connect a few manageable items at a time to the rope. I was the roof and muscle guy. It was a long night and my arms were now noodles.

The rest was easy. Laying the solar panels flat on the roof wasn't the most efficient way but we had enough panels to make it work. Connected the panels, lowered the cabling down the old pipe chase to Ralph's medicine cabinet access. Installed the 48VDC to 120VAC inverter behind the medicine cabinet and with some Romex we found in the basement, we fished the Romex from the inverter output over the ceiling to Ralph's apartment electrical circuit panel. Plugged the UPSes in a wall outlet and there we go. Solar panels provided power to Ralph's apartment via the inverter and charged the batteries in the UPSes at the same time.

I briefly thought I saw a tear in Ralph's eye when he turned to me to say, “You saved my life Jason.” He never called me “Kid” again.

### **Chapter Three**

Ralph explained to me the importance of what he called being a “Gray man”.

“See the tracks you left in the stairway? That told me someone was on the 14th. The pried open apartment doors told me that that someone was searching, probably for food and water. That Someone wasn't prepared for the situation. See that food wrapper covered with ants? Someone (you) was here recently. Only two apartment doors that aren't forced. That someone is living in one, or both of those apartments. “

“Wow! I never thought about that way. But really what difference does it make?” I asked Ralph. “It's just you and me, everyone was order to evacuate.”

“Are you sure? What about those fake cops? They didn't evacuate. They have your wallet, ID with your address! What stops them from giving you an unannounced visit? How about when people start coming back looking for resources? You want to leave them a trail pointing straight to you? A few may still have morals but I bet the majority will do whatever it takes to provide for themselves or their family.”

Being busy surviving has helped keep my mind off of...I haven't forgotten about those cops...didn't realize they had my address too, they coming to me would make my job easier...

“There are five apartment buildings within this complex. The center building had the boilers for all five buildings. Tunnels between the basements carried the heat the pipes. We can travel between buildings without being seen. From now on we never leave from this building; we use the tunnels and exit from one of the other buildings. You understand now Jason? Deception and misdirection is our motto.”

Most of the supplies I had collected from my floor we hauled over to 1414, Martha Smyth's apartment. Got her unwrapped and laid out in her bed as natural as we could. Use my pry bar to force the door on my apartment and then we left the pry bar in Martha's apartment. Now the only apartment on my floor that hadn't been forced open is Martha's. With a little luck any trespasser would assume Martha was the one that had broken into the apartments.

I moved down to the 10th floor and took an apartment beside Ralph, right across from the elevator.

Tapped into the solar power for my new apartment (the apartment didn't have the smell of Mary's perfume or the memories). Ralph moved half of his insulin over to my frig. The tunnel entrances between buildings we covered with boxes, shelving anything we could that would appear natural and hide the entrances.

I went back to my former work place and salvaged all of our security cameras and cabling. Would have been quicker to use Wi-Fi instead of hardwiring, but anyone with a working smart phone could find the Wi-Fi signal and trace it back to its source (us). I pulled the CAT5 wiring (power over Ethernet) while Ralph mounted the cameras. Ran the CAT5 to managed hubs (borrowed from work) and networked to our apartment computers (borrowed too). Loaded the software onto the computers and now we have building surveillance. Software records and scans all cameras, will lock onto the camera that "saw" any movement. I felt pretty good about what we had accomplished until that first night.

"Jason. What's that little red light on that camera?"

"Power LED. Tells us that the camera has power."

"You see any problems with that?"

"No...Yes! Power! We are telling anyone who sees it that there is a power source!"

At first I thought Ralph had slipped over to the girly man side when he came back from the 14th floor with a collection of fingernail polish. Camera housing was gray? He'd mixed the different colors of fingernail polish until he had the right shade of gray to paint over the red LED. No one could now approach our building or enter (basement tunnels included), stairwell or our hallway without us knowing. Which lead us to a smaller problem? Who's going to sit there watching the cameras?

Ralph is...was the night janitor at the library. He was use to staying up nights. I worked days and slept nights. So it was logical for Ralph to take the sunset to sunrise shift and me sunrise to sunset. Computer speaker would beep when a camera detected movement, whoever was on duty just had to stay within hearing range to hear the beep.

Ralph brought technical books from the library for us to learn while we were on duty, or we would cobble things together that we needed. Whoever was off duty, slept (nightmares for me), some free time and scavenging (we can't find 2-way radios.) One of the library books gave

Ralph an idea that solved another of our problems. How do we escape from the 10th floor? All someone would have to do is control the stairwell and we would be trapped. We talked about zip lines from our building to another or to several. Where would we get the steel cable? How would we anchor the cable to the other building? How could it be done without observation? How can we hide the cable or blend it in with the surroundings? Ralph solution was unique, a 10-speed bicycle!

Ralph mounted two worm gears (found in our basement, left over from the former coal fed heating boilers?) in place of the bike's rear wheel. This took the longest to design and build. Ralph said a few words I've never heard before. Once this part was built the rest was easy, well for Ralph it was. Using the elevator key from the Super's office we unlocked the elevator door. When the power went out the elevator was in the basement, this is good! The bike's new worm gears clamped over the elevator cable. The front of the bike slipped over the elevator cable, a bolt through where the front axle would be secured it to the cable. Ralph had bent the bike seat 90 degrees. Think of a bike hanging vertically on the cable that you can sit on. Peddling backwards lowered the rider down the elevator shaft. Downshifting and peddling forward would take you up! With Ralph's knee he could go up one or two floors, I didn't have any problems making it from the basement to the roof. We rigged all of the elevators doors (except our floor) so that they could only be unlocked from inside the shaft. Ralph made three more E-bikes (get it?), two we hid in the basement and the other two we kept on the 10th floor cables in case we had to bug out. Actually it was easier for me to peddle up to the roof to clean the solar panels then using the stairs.

I was off duty and out scavenging when I hit pay dirt! Bottom right-hand drawer of the desk in the office of maternity clothing shop, I found it! Before I could do an Internet search or ask Siri to find a merchant or location. Those methods don't work today. What I found a phone book with yellow pages!

A heating and air contractor four more blocks over. I was already out further than either of us had been. Ralph knew I was going to be back later than normal. While I'm out this far... I continued to do as Ralph has taught me. Keep to the shadows. Take a few steps then stop look and listen. If Pooch's ears went up or cocked his head I should stop and look in the same direction.

A heating and air conditioning company would do work on multipliable floors and could use 2-way radios for employee communications between floors; at least that was my reasoning. And I was right! Scored eight radios along with thirteen chargers. On the way back home I stopped at an appliance repair store for relays and a soldering iron. I can modify one of the radios, no, two radios to connect the computer speakers in our apartments. Then when a camera sees motion the warning beep will be transmitted over a radio too. I was chuckling to myself how a simple 2-way will make our lives so much easier when Pooch stopped.

Pooch didn't move so I didn't either. I'm not sure how long we watched. Sun would be setting in soon and Ralph would be wound up tight if I'm too late. There! Something white close to the ground moved. Now that I know where to look I can just make out body silhouette. Someone is standing in that doorway watching our building. The silhouette steps out onto the sidewalk and in

the fading light I can see it's a policeman. He looks in my direction and sweeps back to our building. It's Nike! He walks west down the middle of the sidewalk like he owns the place. I follow. He turns into an alley. Do I follow him in? I've got grandpa's pocketknife, some radios, Pooch and a lot of overdue revenge. Before I can make up my mind three of them come out of the alley and continue west.

After I update Ralph he tells me, "I know you have an aversion to firearms but in this day, carrying that finger nail cleaner you call a pocket knife for defense is nuts. Follow me."

I follow Ralph to a utility closet on the ninth floor. Using a ring of master keys he unlocks the door. "Move that junk out of the way", he tells me. Same as his apartment closet; the back wall has a false front. "Ralph! This hiding place isn't in your notebook!"

Ralph smiled at me, "Only a fool would put everything in writing. Here take this, TAKE IT! It ain't going to bite you! That's an AR-15. One shot every time you pull the trigger. Civilian cartridge is 223 or military 556. This is a Glock 17, shoots nine millimeter ammunition, very popular with law enforcement and military. Parts and ammunition for either is readily available. Here are two cans of ammo for them. Use that fingernail cleaner you call a knife to cut the plastic bags off the guns" Back in Ralph's apartment and with the blackout curtains closed he showed me how to field strip the AR and Glock, load the magazines, how to use the sights and practice dry firing.

"Treat every gun as if it is loaded. Never point a gun at anything you are not prepared to destroy. Always be sure of your target and what is behind it. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target." Ralph told me so many times that it kept playing in an endless loop in my mind as I slept that night. The first night I haven't had nightmares since...

The next morning when I went to relieve Ralph he was waiting for me. "Glad to see you're carrying the Glock. We got to find you a holster for it. Get your AR. We're taking the E-bikes to the basement."

Ralph had setup a simple rifle range in one of the maintenance tunnels. "Here. Thread these on your guns. We call them cans or suppressors. They muffle the sound so you can shoot without hearing protection. No one outside this tunnel can hear you practicing and more important the cans make it harder for a enemy to tell where the shot came from." Ralph had me start shooting close to the target, shoot two or three magazines, then field strip the firearm and repeat. Might have been the grin on my face because it wasn't very long before Ralph said he's going up to bed. "I'll listen to the cameras for you. Bring my E-bike back up with you? Don't forget to hide the targets and pick up the brass when you're done."

I practiced every chance I got. I felt rather bad about all the ammo I was using until Ralph told me not to worry about. "Plenty more where that came from" he told me. I got to the point where my shots went right where I wanted them, between the eyes of the Sargent target on the left and Nike on the right.

We saw Nike a few more times. He always headed west when he left our neighborhood. Ralph

had scored some Trail-cams. Why would a hardware store in the middle of the city stock Trail-cams? Ralph went out at night to place the Trail-cams. Every week we'd reviewed the flash cards, replace the batteries and move the Trail-cams as needed. We found a pattern at West Ornby Avenue and 6th Street.

Nike came from the north on 6th Street. Beginning of a week he'd turn east on Ornby. Middle of the week continues on south on 6th. End of the week west on Ornby towards our neighborhood. Nike was usually alone but sometimes with two or three others.

"Ralph. *If* you wanted to set an ambush how would you..."

"I recognize that look in your eyes, what do you mean *if*? Too risky for us to place Trail-cams north of Ornby" Ralph explained to me. "Their base has to be up that way and they'll have lookouts. Anything on 6th street towards us could lead them straight to us. That's leaves...let's split the difference 6th Street south of Ornby. I'd hit him at the beginning of his patrol. That gives you more time to dispose of the body and to leave the area. Locate several exit routes, plan the details. If everything doesn't fall into place then withdraw and try again another day. Never EVER use the same ambush site twice!"

The first week Nike was a no show on Sunday, Monday he turn a half block before he got to where I was waiting. Tuesday of the second week I was in a perfect spot in an alley. No store windows facing the alley. I was lying between a dumpster and the wall. No one could see me from the sides or from above. A few feet behind me is a sewer manhole with a lid I had managed to slide off to the side. From the drawings Ralph found at the library I knew I could use this as escape route #1. Escaped #2 was through the cut chain link fence at the end of the alley. I was ready just before daybreak.

I thought I had every angle figured but there was two I had missed. One was that ant that decided to take several bites of my leg before I got it squished. The other was the results of me laying down on a warm morning....zzzz... Pooch's "yap" woke me. A man had just passed the end of the alley. I had missed my opportunity again!

Pooch "yap" again but louder. The man came back and looked into my alley. "Hey mutt come here. Roasted dog would be a good change." Pooch stood in the middle of the alley, tongue hanging out panting. "Come on mutt..." White Nike shoes. When he stepped into the alley and did a quick look around I recognized the face. pffft.

I drugged Nike's body to the dumpster. I took his belt and holster, now I have a holster for my Glock and as a bonus another Glock and extra magazines. Didn't seem right him wearing a police badge so I took it off his uniform shirt before I rolled his body into the sewer manhole. I put the sewer lid back in place, covered the blood with dirt and then used the chain link fence exit.

I was rather surprised at myself. Taking a life was contrary to my college education and I wasn't sure if could do it. Sargent is next I thought just as I vomited all over my boots.

## Chapter Four

Fresh food was long gone. Plenty of water from the apartment's roof storage tank, we haven't even touch the water in the other four buildings. Between the scavenged can goods and Ralph's MREs it will be years before we'd be forced to start gardening. Our bounty made it hard to ignore survivors that passed our way, like that young family last week.

Their gaunt and dirty looks made it hard to guess the parent's age. Early thirties maybe? Three children with the oldest about six? Mother was carrying one child and the other two were in a little red wagon pulled by their dad. How they had lasted this long was a marvel. We watched as they stopped in front of the grocery store. Looks like the parents were having a deep discussion about if they should or not. The dad retrieved a hammer from the wagon and used it to break out the glass in the store's door. He wasn't in the store too long before he came with a few bags of the junk food we had purposely left behind. Ralph and I had cleaned out anything useful from the grocery long ago and hidden it in multiple caches. Parents looked resigned and at their wits end as they gave the food to their children.

"Don't give me that look" Ralph whispered to me. "How do you know they're not trap? It's like a big bosom barefooted blonde in a bikini top looking helpless along the side of a road. You stop to help her and before you know it you are sounded by a KKK biker gang from the Italian Mafia! All she was is bait! And how do we know that family isn't bait too? No! Absolutely no!"

It was a few days later before I had the nerve to tell Ralph what I had done. I had taken a knapsack and filled it with supplies the family would need. I followed the family until they were a good distance from our building. Then I worked my way ahead of them and left the knapsack in the middle of the street, easy for them to find it. Ralph laughed so hard he could hardly stand up. Slapping his legs while dancing a jig, twisted his bad knee, let out yep of pain before laughing even harder. "The knapsack...you...you left them was a green knapsack...wasn't it!"

"Yes but how did you..."

"They didn't have any knapsack when they were at the grocery store. But the dad was wearing one when I saw them pick up the supplies I had left for them...HA! HA! We both had the same idea!"

Another other group was hard to ignore too.

"Military", said Ralph. "See the guy up front? Point man. He's the lookout. Behind him...wait awhile...there! See them? One on each side of the street, up close to the buildings. Right behind them should be the main body. Yep here they come. Military for sure. Wonder if they are friend or foe? AK47. Should be M16s if they are ours. They just don't feel right. Stay down! There will be a rear guard too. From the bandages they got a few wounded too, bet from that firefight I heard two or three hours ago."

"Firefight Ralph? What firefight?"

“You were snoring too loud and I didn’t want to wake you. Northeast of here. Maybe three miles, with the echo it was hard to tell. We’ll give it a couple days and then go see what it was all about.”

“Ralph. Why don’t we leave as soon as the sun is up?”

“No. If I was them I’d leave one or two troops behind just to see who shows up.”

E-bike up to clean off the solar panels. Trips to the basement to get water from the test ports on the water main check valve. Installed more cameras further away from our building. Caught a bucket full of frogs from the complex’s swimming pool and showed Ralph how to cook them..hmmm... fried frog legs, sure hit the spot. Busy work for several days until Ralph looked at me to say, “It’s time. We leave at midnight.”

Clear night, almost no moon. I had topped off the rechargeable flashlight batteries the day before, Ralph said only use them in an emergency. Knapsacks with three days of provisions. Ralph said we can’t afford to get into a gunfight so we took only six magazines each for our rifles and pistols to cover our retreat. 2-way radios with VOX and earbuds. Our radio codes names were “Younger” and “Elder”. We head out east towards Ornby and 6th. Our plan was to pass 6th Street by a few blocks before swinging north. Somewhere north is where Ralph figured the gunfight happen and north is where Nike always came from. I’m planning on killing two birds with one stone.

Pooch acted as our point man like he was born to it, spooky. Trotting down the center of the street looking and sniffing. Ralph and I in the shadows on Pooches’ flanks. We had walked pass 6th Street to 3rd Street and just turned north when Pooch froze. I’m behind a USPS drop box. I can’t see Ralph.

“Younger. Don’t get tunnel vision. Concentrate from the center of the road to your side. Whatever dog is seeing is right in front of me” radioed Ralph. Pooch sits down. I scan the area like Ralph taught me, with my eyes, not by moving my head.

“Coon. It’s just a raccoon” Ralph radios. “Looking for something to eat.” Pooch gets up and starts heading north. I’d swear that dog could read my mind just like Mary could.

We found the source of the gun fight, a Police substation. Two dead Sentries at the front door. Most of the ground floor windows shot out? Smoke coming from the roof. Ralph said we should stay out of sight and observe until daybreak. Good thing we did.

Sun was now up far enough that I could see bullet pockmarks on the brick walls. Both Sentries looked like they had their throats cut, caught by surprise? A body hanging over the edge of the roof. Another sentry that was caught off guard? Took me awhile to find where Ralph was hiding, under a truck and the only reason I saw him was he was waving for me to get up. As I started to stand up Pooch growled so I froze.

“Elder. Pooch said wait.”

We didn’t have to wait too long. The front door of the police station open just far enough for a woman to come out. Late twenty’s, fairly clean, looking haggard. She just stood there looking around. When her arms jerked behind her I could see her wrists were handcuffed together and a leash from the handcuffs lead back into the station. The woman turned and went back into the station only to come back out with another woman. The second woman was cuffed and leashed too. The same age and appearance as the first but crying, having difficulty standing.

As the women started walking towards the street a man appeared behind them. The man was holding the other end of their leashes. The man was wearing a Police uniform. The man was Sargent!

“Stop your blubbering! Get up and walk! If you bring them back on me I’ll...” Sargent kicks the second woman so hard she screams. “Shut up! I told you to get up...I don’t need this. I’m tired of both of you anyway.” Before I could react Sargent draws his pistol and shoots her in the face. Then Sargent turns his gun on the other woman. I have my sights almost lined up when a second shot rings out. That makes two women I failed to protect. No she’s still standing. It’s Sargent on the ground with most of his head gone. I look over at Ralph to see him walking towards the police station. “Let’s go Pooch.”

## **Chapter Five**

I found the handcuff keys in Sargent’s shirt pocket. I unlock the cuffs from her wrists. Her name is Eleanor. Her friends call her Nell. Yes the police station is empty and no she would rather not go back in there. She hasn’t had any water or food for days; did we have any and what payment would we demand for it? Ralph and I looked at each other with puzzled looks.

We led Eleanor across the street to a café. We sat back from the windows so no one passing would see us but we could still watch the police station. Ralph gave her a bottle of water while I heated a MRE.

“Hot food! Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had hot food? All they would give us was ...” Eleanor’s body started shaking and with tears rolling down her cheeks. Ralph looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. No wonder his marriages didn’t last. Eleanor flinched when I put my arm around her shoulders. The terror in her eyes faded quickly when she realized I meant to comfort her. After she had it all cried out she told us her story.

Eleanor was a country girl who came to the city because of the employment opportunities and quickly landed a job as a Hospice nurse. She was caring for a terminally ill cancer patient at the patient’s apartment when the City’s evacuation was ordered. She didn’t have any luck contacting her boss but she managed to get a call through to the patient’s relative. Relative made every excuse not to come but finally wore down under Eleanor’s pleading. They will be there in an hour. After eight hours had passed Eleanor figured either the relative lied or was unable to come. The next day her patient died.



Eleanor thought a local hospital could use her training but wasn't sure where the closest hospital would be. Her Taxi passed a police station on the way to and from her patient's apartment, Eleanor was confident she could walk there. The police could then give her directions to a hospital or drive her there.

It would be an easy walk to the police station but because her Dad had always told her "One is none and two is one" she went through her patient's kitchen cupboards to scrounge up food and the rest of the apartment for whatever might come in handy. That's how she found the .380 Keltec with a six round magazine in the nightstand.

Her walk to the police station was uneventful. Three unmarried Officers remained; two rookies and a Corporal. The rest of the shift left to evacuate with their families. There were two prisoners in the holding cells waiting to be transferred up town. The Officers were discussing what to do with the prisoners when Eleanor walked in. After a brief exchange of information (Eleanor didn't know what happen and the Officers had lost all communications with Headquarters soon after so neither party knew what was going on) they asked Eleanor's opinion about the prisoners.

Ronnie Lamonte was a low level drug dealer. From his hygiene and physical appearance he used more of his product then he sold.

The other prisoner was Harry Little, went by the street name Big Stud. Harry would go berserk if any one called him Mr. Little, he thought they was teasing him about the size of his manhood. Anyone calling him Harry would be at risk too. Harry was the Leader of the neighborhood want-to-be gang. Petty theft, muggings and fencing stolen merchandise was the limit of the gang's criminal activity.

The Officers were running low on food. If they stole food from the local stores and the city went back to normal they would be arrested, tried and convicted. If they let the prisoners go their Officers Superiors may just overlook the infraction.

Eleanor had the same opinion as the Officers. Basically the decision was already made for them. Killing the prisoners isn't an option so releasing the prisoners and if things didn't get back to normal quickly, finding food for four is more manageable then for six. So that's what they did. The Corporal told Ronnie and Harry that if they promised to leave the city and never come back they would be released. Both prisoners swore on their mother's graves. Ronnie and Harry were released.

The police building was built back in the sixties when the emphasis was on security instead of today's lots of plate glass window style. They all felt secured with the doors locked. No need for anyone to lose a night's sleep. Eleanor had the one cell and the Officers bunked in the other.

Bang! Bang! Bang! "This is Levi! Let us in. I've got my wife with me. We couldn't get out of the city so we came back here." Bang! Bang! "Wake up and open this door!" Levi was one of the Officers that left the station to get wife and leave the city. One of the Rookies unlocked the

door and started to open it when the Corporal yelled, "WAIT!"

Big Stud with five of his gang buddies quickly over powered the three policemen, strip them of their uniforms and then beat them before throwing them naked into a holding cell. At gun point a sixth gang member brought Levi and his wife Debbie into the station. Levi was locked in with the other three unconscious officers. Debbie was clinging to what was left of her clothing trying to cover herself the best she could.

"The new one is mine" said Big Stud as he walked towards Eleanor. As Big Stud ripped Eleanor's blouse off she pressed the Keltec into his gut and pulled the trigger. Click. She hadn't known to load a round in the chamber.

At first the gang put on the police uniforms as a joke. But when they discovered they could walk up to stragglers without suspicion it became a rule. With the extra uniforms in the locker room each gang member had one. The uniforms were a gold mine for them.

A gang member would walk down a sidewalk or street alone followed by the rest of the gang. People who didn't leave the city would run up the Police impersonator asking for help or directions. That's how they scored their first victims. A young couple asking for directions. A night stick to the head killed the man, the woman they killed later when they all were done with her.

"What's wrong Jason," Eleanor asked me.

Ralph hit me in the ribs with the butt of his M16 to bring me back to the present "Jason! She asked you a question."

I got up without answering and walked across the street to the police station.

"Ralph? What's wrong with Jason?"

"I'm an idiot" replied Ralph. "The couple asking for directions the gang attacked? I'm sure that was Jason and his wife."

I know now that two stripes on a sleeve is a Corporal not a Sargent. I also know the one I call Sargent is dead. Had to be, Ralph's shot had shattered the skull. Logically I knew. Mentality was a different story. Ralph said I emptied a thirty round magazine into the body and was reloading before Ralph and Eleanor could pull me off.

I don't remember our trip back to our apartments. Ralph told me later that we had agreed to ask Eleanor to stay in our building and she is willing. She also asked us to call her Nell. All I remember is waking up the next morning in my own apartment with Pooch licking my face.

## Chapter Six

Nell took the apartment on the other side of Ralph's. We were cautious about how much she learned about our preparations but since we came back to our apartment building by the tunnels she knew about them. So I lead her back through a tunnel to one of the other apartment buildings. I picked a floor and apartment at random; using a master key I unlocked the door.

"Nell. In the sack are some clothes Ralph found for you. He guessed on your size. They are not very feminine but they are practical. The underwear ...I...we...Ralph wasn't sure on what style you would be comfortable with so we can take you shopping later for that." I could feel my face turning red. "Also there is some soap, shampoo, wash cloth and towel. Showers are limited to two minutes once a week to preserve water but I...we figure you being a woman and what happen at the police station...you just take as long as you need today. Here is the key to the apartment. I'll be in the hallway watching for trouble." I blushed again when Nell kissed me on the cheek. Nell shut the door and I heard the dead bolt click. Good she's cautious.

"Jason I am coming out"

"OK"

I showed her how we used a rag to dry the shower stall. I had brought a bag of the special dust Ralph had conjured and a paint brush. Once the stall was dry I sprinkled the dust and brushed it around. A person could never tell the shower had been recently used. Nell gave me a puzzled look.

"Ralph calls it operational security. If an outsider saw the shower had been used recently, they would assume someone is living close by and start looking for that someone, food, weapons or ...worse." Me and my big mouth! Why did I remind her of what happen to her at the police station? Nell's eyes watered up and she started crying. I leaned the AR against the hallway wall where I could grab it quick and then put my arms around her and held her close.

"You must think I'm an emotional female...always crying."

"No. We all have different ways of handling grief. I have the tendency to keep it bottled up inside of me. Trust me. Your way is better. If you ready Ralph wants to show you the E-bike he's building for you and what you can tell us about the group that attacked Harry's gang.

"E-bike?"

"E-biking sure beats using the stairs. You love it! If you're ready lets head back."

While Ralph was showing Nell how her E-bike worked I walked up to my old apartment. The window I had broken earlier for cross ventilation had allowed pigeons to enter and use the apartment as a roost. Half the pigeons in the city (OK I exaggerated a bit) lived in my old apartment! Just inside the door I untied the rope that held the guillotine door up. Lowering the

guillotine covered the broken window and trapped the pigeons in the apartment. I gathered some eggs and caught several plump birds for a breakfast.

“Egg and meat omelets. Are you guys for real? Next thing I know you’ll open the refrigerator for orange juice!” Ralph had a silly grin on his face. He open his frig and did exactly that. The look on Nell’s face was priceless. “How did...where did you...ARE YOU GUYS FOR REAL?”

The orange juice was easy. On one of Ralph’s exploratory trips he found two potted miniature orange trees on a penthouse balcony. With the pulley system we moved them to the roof of our building. The trees couldn’t provide a large supply but enough for special occasion like this morning.

“Ralph. Jason said you wanted to hear about the attack on Harry’s gang? Is now a good time?” Ralph nodded. “The four police officers. They left them naked, locked in the cell... they beat them and staved them...”

Ralph interrupted Nell, “You can skip that part, I saw what they did to them.”

“Thank you.” After a long pause Nell continue. “When Harry’s trusted Lieutenant Leroy didn’t return he went paranoid and took out his frustration on Debbie. Harry put two of his men outside on the front door, one as a look out on the roof and the fourth in the lobby. Harry kept us chained in the property room and after Leroy’s disappearance he started sleeping in there too with the door locked, just out of our reach.” After another pause she continued, “It’s was Harry yelling that woke me up. He wasn’t in the room so I started working on the pipe he had handcuffed us to. Then I heard a lot of gunshots. Harry ran back into the room, slammed the door shut and locked it. When he saw that I had tried to free myself he came at me with a night stick...I was saved by pounding at the door. I don’t know who was at the door but I do know they weren’t speaking English or Spanish. Harry yelled insults through the door at them. Several more attempts were made to break the door open. Then it got quiet, other than Harry’s heavy breathing. I don’t know, I’d guess about ten minutes elapsed before Harry started to unlocked the door. Do you really want to do that I asked him. They may be waiting for you outside just to do that. Then Debbie started screaming and Harry slapped her until she stopped. I didn’t know at the time if helping Harry was the right thing to do. I mean if all of Harry’s men had been killed I’d have a better chance to escape. The unknown was the who-evers that had tried to break into the property room. Like going from the pot to the fire.

I don’t know how long we stayed in that room. Between Harry’s body odor and the smells of the unsanitary conditions we were forced to live in made it hard for me not to gag. They didn’t have the brains to stockpile food or water. They would search for what they needed just for that day, end the day by getting drunk and if they won a bet against Harry, Debbie or me or both.

So we stayed in that room until Harry got hungry. Then he started opening the door just enough to peek out, lose his courage and slam the door shut. Open, peek, slam. Open, peek, slam. Over and over with the open, peek, slam. He was driving me nuts. Debbie would jump every time SLAM. So finally thought of saking him why he didn’t send me out and take a look? When he uncuffed me from the pipe I would hit him in the head with the loose end of the cuffs and make a

bolt for the door. Should I find a gun laying somewhere and this time I'd make sure there was a round in the chamber before shooting Harry.

This was the only time Harry displayed any intelligence. With another set of cuffs he cuffed my free arm, bent the arm behind me to cuff to my other arm. Then he unfasten the cuffs to the pipe. With my arms cuffed behind my back my escape plan evaporated. Then he unsnap the leash from the dog collars he made us wear and snap it to my cuffs. He unlock the door and open just enough for me to squeeze through. I went as far as the leash would permit me. Saw a shotgun lying on the floor but cuffed the way I was...

"What do you see? What do you see?" Harry kept asking.

"Nothing" I told him.

"How do I know you're not lying" he'd ask.

"Well I haven't been shot have I and I see food..." When Harry heard the part about food he followed me out. My lie about seeing food was rewarded with a hard slap across my face. At least the air out here was fresher. He tied my leash to something and went back into the property room, then he came out with Debbie cuffed and leashed the same as me.

Harry repeated the scenario at the front door. I'm outside the police station at the end of my leash, literally. This time I did see something. Across the street was an ATM mounted on a pedestal. Under the ATM I saw two feet; I'm guessing that was you Jason? Before I could make up my mind to tell Harry or not he shot Debbie. The rest you know.

"And guys. Believe me. There was nothing you could have done for Debbie." Nell looked me straight in the eyes as she finished, "Mentality she died when her husband died she was just going through the paces of living." Somehow Nell knew how close I had come to the same fate. It took me awhile but I've managed to adapt.

"Hey! Tell me!" Nell said looking at Ralph, "Who killed Harry?" Ralph started stammering, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, looking for a way to escape. "I thought so. Thank you Ralph" Nell said as she planted a kiss straight on Ralph's lips. Ralph turned beet red, got his bad leg tangled in the chair as he tried to stand up. Nell and I stated laughing as Ralph's discussed look was replaced with, if you can't beat them join them, as he sat back down and joined us in laughter.

**The End**