

The I-85 Chronicles

Exit 41

“OTW BABY!!!”

R.A.Bratyanski

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DEDICATION

To All the Forklift Operators

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Mouths to Feed Series

fewer

The Fingerless Hand

Die In Place

Short Stories

The Brawl on The Mall

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Softer Targets

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to actual persons, living or dead, are
coincidental.

1. BEAU

It began with a text.

Trudy Jackson: WTH! Are you seeing this?

Beau received texts all day from his wife, Trudy; she was constantly online with their prepper friends on the various social network platforms she liked to follow. Beau had no idea how she found the time to get any work done. He was taking a few quiet moments of “me time” sitting in a men’s room stall at work and didn’t want to respond immediately, but if he didn’t, his wife would just keep texting until he did.

Beau Jackson:????

Trudy Jackson: The NK Satellites, they say they’re gonna detonate them unless we pull our troops out of South Korea.

The sabers had been rattling even more than usual after the disastrous summit in Singapore. The eagerly anticipated summit, during which Kim Jong Un had announced to the world he had nukes installed on ICBMs that were fully capable of hitting the west coast of the United States and EMP-capable satellites in orbit over the United States. Satellites that were poised to send North America back to the 18th Century.

What the world had been lead to believe would be a meeting to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula had become a coming out party for North Korea's operational intercontinental nuclear weapon's program.

Harsh words were spoken by both sides and the North Korean dictator was ushered out of the room under the watchful eye of the Secret Service and hundreds of reporters from all over the world. President Trump was left to stumble through a few canned answers.

It was pointed out later that it could be commended that the Trump White house had at least anticipated the possibility of the North Korean double-cross, showing the administration wasn't taken completely off-guard. The President left a hurricane of questions in his wake and returned to Washington and a war of words had commenced.

That had been a few weeks earlier and in that time, the US Navy had moved additional ships to

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the region and the rhetoric had only gotten louder on both sides.

Those two satellites the North Koreans had in orbit were a popular topic of conversation at the Carolina Preppers Network, or CPN, Meetups even before all of the current drama. The specter of a nationwide Electromagnetic Pulse disrupting the electrical grid and possibly destroying every electrical circuit was ever-present for most preppers. Once EMPs became common knowledge after “One Second After” was published by Dr. William Forstchen, that book was credited with kick-starting the prepper movement.

It had definitely gotten Beau’s attention, and he spent what little free time and cash he had, prepping for one SHTF scenario or another.

It wasn’t that different from how Beau was raised in a rural part of Gaston County, North Carolina. They did some light farming and always had a few chickens or ducks and pigs. There wasn’t much money coming in and they had to make do with what they had, when they weren’t crawling all over the civil war battlefields that were his family’s vacation destinations.

While the rest of his classmates were at Myrtle Beach for spring break, Beau would be dressed in wool, reenacting some obscure skirmish in a swamp or deep in some pine forest sweating his ass off and getting eaten up by mosquitos or worse, chiggers, if they were over in Tennessee or Kentucky.

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As long as Beau could remember, the family canned the vegetables from his granddad's farm, as well as hunted and fished and learned all they could about living without all the modern conveniences. It wore thin at times and he rebelled against some of the more extreme ideas his parents would latch on to, like the spectacular nothing that Y2K turned out to be.

Beau played along until his mother died of pancreatic cancer after a very brief battle. No amount of preparation had been able to save her.

After his mother's death, Beau's dad lost the will to keep up the prepping lifestyle, or any lifestyle. He stopped putting in much effort at work, and gave up on church and his faith. Without his beloved wife, Beau's dad barely ate. He would disappear for days on his Harley and return, in the same clothes, smelling of beer and piss. The proud man never let Beau see him get drunk, but on one of those lost weekends, Beau got a call.

The North Carolina Highway Patrol had found Franklin Matthew Jackson's 2004 Harley Davidson Electra Glide smashed against a guard rail on the Blue Ridge Parkway near a scenic overlook. An extensive search turned up his broken body down in the deep ravine. His blood alcohol level was normal and there were no skid marks. The insurance company tried to say Beau's daddy had committed suicide, but heavy fog on the Parkway was a contributing factor according to a sympathetic State Trooper and, after a brief investigation, Beau received enough

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insurance money to pay off all of the debt from his mother's medical bills and whatever his daddy had let slide.

Beau Jackson: That's crazy; there must be more to it, we'll never pull out of Korea.

Trudy Jackson: The Forums are going nuts and...

Just then, there was an alert on the CPN Team app on Beau's phone, and therefore on Trudy's phone. Forrest, Their prepper network Admin had access to some information earlier than the mainstream media and when Beau looked, it said the North Koreans were firing on Seoul, the capital of South Korea with short-range ballistic missiles and there was a second report of multiple ICBM launches from North Korea. U.S. and Japanese Naval forces were engaging the missiles with interceptors fired from destroyers off the North Korean coast.

Beau Texted back immediately,

Beau Jackson: OTW Baby!

Then the lights went out in the men's room.

2. Beau

“GODDAMMIT!” Beau exclaimed, sitting on the toilet in the windowless men’s room. It was as dark as “Two feet up a well-diggers ass,” as his daddy used to say. Beau fumbled to turn on his phone’s light and placed it on the tank. He cringed at the thought of the nastiness on the top of the toilet tank infecting his phone, but he was in a bit of a bind.

Beauregard Longstreet Jackson, “Beau” to his friends, shook gently to keep the piss drops off his khaki’s. He wiped ten or fifteen times, because when you wipe in the dark, how do you know when you’re done? Better safe than sorry.

After He pulled up his pants and exited the stall, Beau went through the hand-washing ritual and was sure to use some hand sanitizer on his cell phone.

The Alert and the news from Trudy had him worked up. He checked his phone, but he had no signal. It still powered up, and the flashlight worked, but he had no internet and no cell service. It could be the EMP from the North Korean satellites. What he didn’t understand, was why his phone powered up at all.

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The Electromagnetic Pulse set off by an atomic detonation in the upper atmosphere could fry circuits for thousands of square miles, or so it was said. Nobody was exactly sure how effective it would be, or how widespread, it looked like they may find out. Recent articles had tried to downplay the possible effects, but some of the conspiracy theorists felt the government was trying to keep everyone calm and the utility companies were reluctant to make costly upgrades that would be required to harden the grid against EMP.

The power was out, and his phone had no service. The men's room was one of the few places he could actually text in the building. It had an outside wall, so some signal could get through. Maybe the same was true for an electromagnetic pulse. He suspected the pulse didn't penetrate the wall, that's why the phone still powered up, but the EMP killed the network out in the world, thus, no service.

Beau pocketed the cellphone, in case he was wrong and he moved out into the office, Maybe the same thing that usually blocked phone and radio signals in the building, was blocking cell service which was only weakened by the EMP. The building was old, and the roof was corrugated steel, over steel trusses. It usually acted like a faraday cage and insulated the electronics inside the cage to a certain extent. The phone powered up, but there was no cell service so it wasn't much good. It did contain a lot of pictures and a few books downloaded on the

kindle app that could be useful if the EMP was widespread. Beau had some survival and prepping manuals as well as a few novels he hadn't gotten around to reading.

The office was empty when he stepped out of the men's room. All the employees had wandered to the parking lot to take advantage of the power outage and get a little sun. It was July in Charlotte, NC and without the air conditioning; the temperature in the offices would climb quickly. Past experience had shown the offices were insulated well enough to keep the temperature a brisk 90 degrees, regardless of how hot it was outside, that was something to look forward to. The forecast called for highs in the upper nineties with humidity approaching 80%. It would truly suck if the power was out for long. Beau started to sweat just thinking about it.

"BEAU!" he heard Ronnie, his manager, call.

"Yep?" He answered. Beau was a man of few words.

"See if you can get the generator going and I'll go out to the parking lot to call Duke Energy." Ronnie directed. The office phones were VOIP, or Voice over Internet, so once the net went down, the phones died...

Ronnie wasn't a bad guy to work for, he'd come up from the bottom, just like Beau. He had a few kids, a wife and a mini-farm up in Mooresville. He spent his weekends on his tractor with a cooler full of beer by his side. As long as there was beer in the cooler, the tractor kept moving. When the beer ran dry, the tractor

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shut down and Ronnie retreated to his Barcalounger. Ronnie weighed about 350lbs. and was already sweating like he'd just stepped out of a sauna. The power had only been off for a few minutes, there was no way the temperature in the office had gone up more than a degree or two, so far. Ronnie just always perspired like that and once he stepped outside, there'd be a puddle of sweat pooling around the man's feet. It was a minor miracle the guy stayed hydrated at all. Beau often thought that the man needed to get off the tractor and get some exercise, or he wouldn't be around to see his kids grow up.

Beau walked out into the voluminous warehouse filled with cartons, crates and shrink-wrapped pallets of all types of goods stacked on racks from floor to ceiling. Blake Brother's warehouse was a public warehousing facility that was contracted by companies when they needed extra warehouse space. Beau was the warehouse supervisor and occasional forklift driver, plumber, custodian and today, the electrician. The first thing Beau noticed was the forklifts were still running. His crew was motoring around, moving pallets, crates and machinery from one end of the warehouse to the other. They spent their days unloading and loading trailer loads either with forklifts or, if the loads were "loose", by hand.

The operational forklifts made Beau wonder about the effects of the suspected EMP. He looked around the ancient warehouse. The steel trusses holding up the steel roof decking could

have something to do with the uneven electromagnetic pulse effects.

There were only four guys working in the warehouse at the moment. Percy was on vacation and Johnny had called in sick. That left three forklifts and two golf carts not currently occupied. The plan Beau had been working on since the day of the riots was getting adjusted in his head as Beau moved around the warehouse, taking stock of what was available. His plan was always a series of variables, or algorithms. If (a.) happened, you did (b,) if (c.) happened; you skipped (d.) and went directly to (g.).

Beau needed to at least try to start the generator to power the office computers and the phone system. They'd done this so often He had gone ahead and pre-wired some outlets so now all the girls in the office had to do was plug their power strips into different outlets. What usually happened was Beau would go to all of the trouble to set up the generator, getting his clothes all dirty and greasy and then power would go back on within minutes. He was really just going through the motions, because he didn't think the power was ever coming back. But he wasn't 100% sure so he put the work in, as usual, it was who he was.

While he worked, Beau was trying to recall how many propane cylinders he had on hand. The Generac generator ran on the same propane tanks that the gas grill used. They had retired the old gasoline generator after Beau had convinced Ronnie of the need for a change. He knew there

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were at least two tanks by the gas grill from the office Independence Day lunch. It should be plenty for the rest of the day, and the longest they'd ever been without power was a few hours.

Beau instructed his guys to get the generator going and he wandered out to the parking lot to see if Ronnie had gotten an update from the power company. His guys could keep working because the forklifts had headlights and the open dock doors let in plenty of light. OSHA wouldn't be pleased if they stopped by, but Blake Brothers had work to do, trucks to load and unload and a power outage wasn't a good enough reason to close down according to the bosses.

Beau was glad they hadn't put in electric dock levelers. There had been some discussion on the matter, but the cost was prohibitive. The lack of power wouldn't stop his crew, they suffered daily out in the heat and humidity, and they wanted to do the job and go home. It was too damn hot to fuck around and have to work overtime because they sat and waited for the power to be restored.

3. Beau

Beau stepped out into the harsh Carolina sunshine and was assaulted by the heat radiating from the parking lot. It was gonna be a hot one today and it was only 11:00am. He had been spoiled by his air conditioned office. Beau paid his dues, working his way up at various warehouses and trucking companies around Charlotte. He earned his air conditioning after years of loading and unloading containers of every manner of freight, from rolls of fabric to boxes of screws. The temperature inside ocean containers could easily reach 140 degrees or higher. It wasn't pleasant work, but it had paid his way through college. At least it had covered what the GI Bill didn't. His degree in history wasn't doing him much good, aside from the fact you couldn't get a decent job without a bachelor's degree. He had resumes out for some jobs that required degrees to even apply. Beau was happy working at Blake Brothers, but it never hurt to keep your options open. He often thought it

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would be nice to get home and not have to take a shower after work.

He'd been secretly pleased with himself the first day he went to work in Khakis. Not wearing a shirt with your name stitched on it was a big deal in the extended Jackson family. He wasn't ashamed of where he came from, but he was damn proud of where he was going.

The office staff was huddled around a picnic table under a carport installed years ago when everybody smoked. Not a single person at Blake Brothers smoked any longer, but the carport was the only convenient shade. Beau approached Ronnie from behind; the man was already sweating through his clothes. Rachel, the least bitchy of the office girls was complaining about something.

"How could none of us have service?" She screeched. That got Beau's attention, he already had one foot out the door, and the second was about to follow.

"Maybe the cell towers don't have power." Beth responded. Beth was Beau's favorite of the five office girls. She had three kids and a husband that doted on her. They'd been out to the house several times and Beth got along with Beau's wife Trudy. It helped that Beth's kids weren't too awful to be around.

Trudy loved to have them over but it broke Beau's heart to watch Trudy with the kids. Trudy couldn't ever have any children of her own, a horrific car accident as a teen had seen to that, the scars were faded but Trudy still wore a one-

piece swimsuit at the beach. It was kind of a shame, because her CrossFit obsession had her looking damn good. Her abs were better than his and her training at the MMA gym was making her aggressive as hell in bed. Beau loved every minute of it.

They talked about adopting all the time, but pulling the trigger on something that huge took a lot of preparation, and it wasn't cheap. Either Beau or Trudy could always find justification for waiting, but it was becoming clear to each of them separately that the other was dragging their feet.

Beau pulled out his phone and, as expected, still had no bars. "Anybody got service?" He asked the group.

"Nope." Ronnie said while mopping his brow with a dish towel he carried around like a security blanket.

They talked for a moment and then Chuck, the CFO, who was in town from Chicago, announced. "I'm going back to my hotel; I can work on my laptop." And he walked to his rental car. That prompted a wave of requests to go home. Beau stood back, he knew his guys could work through the outage and the paperwork could be done manually. He wasn't going anywhere, unless the shit had truly hit the fan and the indications were all pointing that way at this point.

The CFO walked over to Beau from his rented Impala and said.

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“My car won’t start; can you give me a jump?” Beau sighed; it was too fucking hot for this shit. He was fairly certain none of the cars on the lot would start, but they wouldn’t know until they tried them all and having just one of these cars start could mean the difference between life or death for some of his coworkers if this was really an EMP.

“Sure.” he answered and he pulled out his keys and mashed the button on the key fob to unlock the doors. It was going to be a furnace inside the car. Beau pulled on the door handle of his Hyundai and was surprised to find it still locked. He hit the button again and nothing happened.

“What else can go wrong today?” Beau asked the gods. The little green light on the fob lit when he pressed the button, so the battery in the key fob wasn’t dead.

He fiddled with his keys for a minute until he figured out how the real key could be extracted from the fob and he opened the door with that. Some of his coworker’s cars that were newer than Beau’s Hyundai wouldn’t even have that option. Newer and fancier cars didn’t have any keys.

Beau sat in the driver’s seat and tried to breathe in the superheated atmosphere of the Hyundai. He pushed the engine start button and nothing happened. No dash lights or any warning lights that usually come on for a second when you start your car.

“Oh fuck!” Beau moaned

Chuck walked over. “What’s the story, you coming to give me a jump or not?” He whined.

Beau stared at Chuck for a second and looked at the cars in the lot. He stepped out into the parking lot and he made a decision. No power, cars won’t start, no cell service, it was adding up to a whole pile of shit coming down the road and it was all confirmation of Trudy’s text and the CPN alert.

Beau interrupted the bitch session under the carport. “Everybody go try to start your cars, ours won’t, please see if yours will.” He demanded a bit more forcefully than he intended.

That started a round of questions about what Beau’s car not starting had anything to do with anyone else’s starting. Beau didn’t have the patience “Just do it.” He pleaded. Karen, the newest member of the office team stepped in front of Beau

“You think it’s an EMP, right?” She was standing uncomfortably close. Beau was aware of her perfume and he could see the perspiration at her hairline and upper lip, a bead of sweat made its way down her chest, glistening in the bright sunlight. Karen wasn’t beautiful, or really even that attractive, but she carried herself with so much confidence, she just oozed sex appeal.

Beau tensed at the question. If he said it out loud, did that make it real?

“Up here Beau!” Karen barked, causing Beau to blush ferociously and tear his gaze away from Karen’s sweaty cleavage.

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“Yes, I think it may be an EMP.” He replied and then, “How do you know about them?”

Karen looked at him like he was an idiot and said “I read.”

None of the other cars in the parking lot started, or even turned over. Beau called his guys out of the warehouse and he explained what he knew about EMP and CMEs.

“An EMP is an electro-magnetic pulse generated when a nuke goes off.” He explained.

“There weren’t no damn nukes!” One of the lift drivers responded.

“The best way to do it is to set it off up in the atmosphere, like a few hundred miles up. That way the pulse travels further.” Beau said.

“How do you know this shit?” Raymond, the lead forklift driver asked.

Beau looked at Karen and said “My wife texted me right before the power went out, the news said the North Koreans were threatening to nuke us from orbit with their satellites and they had started shelling the capitol of South Korea right before everything went dead.” Everyone stared at him with their mouths hanging open. It was probably the most any of them had ever heard Beau say in a month. Then he added, “There was a report of missile launches that the navy was trying to shoot down right before the power died.”

That started the discussion again, about where the missiles could be going and how many warheads did each missile have and could they reach Charlotte? CME or Coronal Mass Ejections

were brought up by Karen. She spoke on how the sun will occasionally belch out masses of plasma which affected the weather in space.

“Weather in space?” someone asked.

“Electromagnetic weather, and when masses are ejected, huge amounts of electromagnetic energy are shot out with it.” Karen went on.

Beau just shook his head; Karen was going off on a tangent and wasting time. He told them what he knew and what most likely had happened based on the evidence at hand, if they didn’t believe him, they could sit here and wait for AAA to come and give them a jump.

“And that could affect the earth?” Ronnie joined the conversation.

“Absolutely.” Karen said and then “Beau, where are you going?”

Beau never even looked over his shoulder, but he said loud enough for all of them to hear.

“HOME.”

4. Trudy

Beau Jackson: OTW Baby!!!

That was the last thing Trudy Jackson read on her phone as she sat at her desk in the veterinarian's office where she worked. Now she looked up from her deceased smart phone at her blank desktop monitor. Natural light flooded the building from all of the windows and skylights but it was clear all the overhead lights and desk lamps had gone off as well. Everything was dead. "Oh Shit!" Trudy muttered.

"Did we trip a breaker?" Her boss, the veterinarian called out from the back of the office. The tall man was a disabled Army veteran who had come back from Afghanistan minus a foot, but he'd managed to avoid the PTSD that afflicted so many of his "whole" battle buddies.

Jerry, the vet, had come home, done his therapy and received his prosthetic, and then he went to work. With his buddies committing suicide at an alarming rate all over the country, Jerry threw himself into school at North Carolina State University. Ultimately, he was accepted at

the Veterinary school and upon graduation he had gone to work for a small practice in Gastonia, ultimately purchasing the practice from the elderly vet that retired shortly thereafter.

All the dogs were going nuts, maybe they sensed what was about to go down. Trudy was close to freaking out herself but she was glad she'd gotten through to Beau before whatever this was happened.

"I'll check!" Trudy shouted back, hoping against hope that a breaker was the only thing wrong. She knew it was more. Her phone was dead and that was all the confirmation she needed. Trudy walked to the dark utility closet, which held everything from dogfood to pharmaceuticals and she opened the gray panel on the wall. There was enough light coming in from a solar tube mounted in the ceiling to illuminate the room. All the breakers were in their normal positions, so Trudy manually tripped them each back and forth one time.

"Anything?" The Veteran Veterinarian or Vet squared as he liked to call himself asked from a foot behind Trudy. He liked to sneak up behind people. Even with a prosthetic foot, the former Army medic thought he was a ninja. Regardless, he startled Trudy and she practically jumped out of her skin.

"Jesus, Jerry!" Trudy scolded and she punched him in the chest. "Don't do that!" And she shoved past him. "I swear you're like a fourth-grader! I'm going to hang a bell around your neck," and she walked out into the office. Milly,

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one of the vet techs was looking out the front windows onto Highway 74.

“Why are all the cars just sitting there?” Milly asked.

“Oh Shit!” Trudy said again and looked out the glass doors at the busy four-lane US Highway that ran all the way from one end of North Carolina in Wrightsville Beach on the coast to Duck Town on the Tennessee border.

Jerry stepped out of the utility closet staring at his phone and he moved to the windows beside the younger vet tech. Milly looked like she was barely out of high school but she was twenty-one and cute as a button. Trudy suspected Jerry and the Auburn-haired beauty were either seeing each other or they were about to pull the trigger. Trudy thought Milly was too young for the former soldier but who was she to stand in the way of romance, besides, it was probably just because the way Milly looked, she wasn't a teen. They were both adults and Milly was clearly putting it out there. The girl had some kind of hard edge to her that Trudy had seen before; she just couldn't put her finger on it. Milly acted pleasant enough and she was also eager to learn and smart as a whip.

Trudy had invited Milly to CrossFit but the girl said she didn't like working out, she just ran and did yoga. The vet tech had worn her workout gear to work on her way to yoga class one day. It was just a sports bra and yoga pants and Trudy saw the girl was built like an Olympic gymnast. She was lean and defined and her 6-pack made

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Trudy feel self-conscious. Of course the girl was at least 10-years younger than Trudy and age “had a way of killing you” as Beau liked to say. Trudy thought it was an excuse for letting your physical training slide, because Beau didn’t really do any. He absolutely despised running, but they hiked around Crowder’s Mountain State Park most weekends and the rest of Beau’s exercise came from farm work. There was always something that needed doing out at the farm which was why he went out there every night after work for at least two hours.

“Do ya’ll have service?” Jerry asked.

“My phone won’t even turn on; I know I plugged it in.” Milly whined. As Trudy expected, Milly, like young people all over the country, cut off from their devices, began to fall apart. Trudy looked at Jerry and just shook her head.

“It’s an EMP; the North Koreans had just started shelling Seoul and were threatening to detonate their killer satellites.” Trudy explained to Jerry, while Milly continued to try to resuscitate her phone.

Jerry listened carefully. He knew all about Trudy’s prepping and never gave her any grief about it. He was pretty easy going and once he made it home from Helmand Province alive and almost whole, he had tried to live as close to as normal a life as he could. He went to the VA for his checkups and the GI Bill had paid for NC State, but he wasn’t one of the guys that couldn’t let go of his time in combat, even though he had

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a constant reminder of his service hanging off the end of his right leg.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Jerry asked, catching Trudy off guard. He had already started throwing stuff he thought might come in handy into a bag, all the while concentrating on Trudy and Milly.

“Well, MY plan is to walk home and wait for Beau to make it home from Charlotte. I was just texting him when the system went down. He’s on the way.” Trudy paused, “What are you planning Jerry?” she asked cautiously as she slung her purse over her shoulder. The weight of the Beretta Nano was a comfort hanging by her side.

Jerry was in the middle of taking the phone from Milly’s hand and pulling her from the window. “Well, I figure I need to make sure you ladies get home, since you’re on the clock. He grinned. “I wouldn’t want to get sued or anything.”

Milly was just staring at the two of them. “I don’t understand why don’t we just wait for the power to come back on...? She was in the middle of asking when there was a shrieking sound from above and then the building exploded around them.

5. Beau

Beau was digging through his car for anything he might need, while his co-workers argued over a course of action. Hector and Manuel had already left. The two Honduran immigrants only lived a mile away and they seemed to be immune to the heat. They just grabbed their lunch bags, swapped their corporate mandated steel-toed boots for flip flops, filled up their water bottles from the coolers and walked away without saying a word to anyone.

Karen was right on Beau's heels, trying to figure out what to do. Her kids were at her mother's home in Concord, NC. They lived near the Charlotte Motor Speedway and that was at least fifteen miles from where they stood. Beau had parked at their house the previous Memorial Day. He and his buddies walked to the track for the yearly 600-mile race. Karen was waffling about whether she should start walking or wait or... what? Beau wasn't really listening, if she read as much as she said she did, she knew what to do, and how bad it was likely to get. Karen should already be gone.

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Ronnie and the rest of the employees were moving their huddle closer and closer to Beau's car. The discussion was getting heated. Beau put on his BassPro ball cap to protect his expanding bald spot from the scorching sun. He attached his Taurus 9mm in its kydex holster to his belt close to his appendix along with two spare 12-round magazines in their matching kydex carrier on the left side of his belt buckle. He would reposition everything to his battle belt once he decided what gear from the car was going.

Some gun geeks liked to piss all over Taurus, but Beau's PT111 Millennium G2 had never given him any reason to regret the ridiculously low price. It didn't matter how good the gun was if it never left the store's display case because nobody could afford it. The Taurus was good enough, you pulled the somewhat funky trigger, and it fired every time. He had duplicate pistols in each of the caches between Blake Brothers and the house, along with other useful gear.

The co-worker's conversation ended abruptly when Ronnie noticed the pistol.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ronnie erupted. "You know firearms aren't allowed on the premises." He wheezed. Beau looked at Ronnie and the rest of the people he'd worked with for four years.

"Are you gonna write me up?" Beau teased with a smile on his face and he began to lift up the trunk lid to access the rest of the gear he had prepped for just such an occasion.

Ronnie couldn't let it go. "I'm supposed to fire you for the pistol, is that what you want?" Beau peaked over the raised trunk lid and responded,

"If a pistol will get me fired, what'll this get me?" And he pulled an I.O. AK variant from its padded case in the trunk. Ronnie took a step back as Beau inserted a fresh thirty-round magazine and pulled back the charging handle and released it. He finished the movement by placing the rifle on SAFE and folding the Tapco side-folding stock down to make the rifle more manageable. Beau put his right arm through the single-point sling and lifted the bungee up and over his head to let the AK hang down near his right hip.

I.O. or the company formerly known as Inter Ordnance was another economy firearm manufacturer that Beau felt got a bad rap. He didn't fire thousands and thousands of rounds out of his two AKs like the professional reviewers and he'd never had any trouble. His rifles hadn't blown up, yet.

Beau shifted the AK on its single-point sling to a more comfortable position and turned his back to Ronnie and the rest of his co-workers to see to packing for the trip home. For a moment, he was reluctant to turn his back on them. Beau shook it off and got to work. It was a little early in the apocalypse to worry about your friends, he thought to himself.

His gear was neatly arranged in various MOLLE pouches hanging from every flat surface

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in the trunk. One of the local members of the Carolina's Preppers Network was the inventor of the M.A.R.S. Tactical Mounts that allowed MOLLE pouches to be attached anywhere. All of Beau's ammo, food, water, and the rest of his get-home gear was well organized and labeled.

Unfortunately, the car wasn't coming along, so Beau had to pack everything up that he thought he may need. He'd planned for that and had some lightweight duffle bags as well as two Midway USA Bail Out Bags. The Midway USA Bags had identical loadouts that included Sawyer personal water filters, some Tac-Bars survival rations, A generic multi-tool, too many knives, multiple fire starters, spare mags for the Taurus and AK and the usual tube shelter and space blanket as well as a poncho and spare socks and underwear. There was also a substantial first aid kit with all the bells and whistles Beau could afford from Skinny Medic's approved list. Beau had name brand, high-dollar gear at the house in his Bugout Bags and stashed at the Bugout Location at his grandad's farm, all he had with him now, was just to get him home. The gear just had to be good enough. It was also gear he wouldn't lose any sleep over, if the car was broken into or stolen. Blake Brothers wasn't in a very good neighborhood and break-ins were fairly common.

After double-checking to ensure it was dead, he ditched the solar/hand-cranked AM/FM radio, which he'd failed to insulate against an EMP, along with the Baofeng handheld and the

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Uniden FRS radio. He was mad at himself for not taking the time to protect his electronics he'd had in the car against EMPs as well as he had at home. If he ever ran into the Comms guys from the Carolina Preppers Network again, they'd give him no end of shit about not taking all of his comms seriously enough.

He wouldn't be able to contact Trudy on the Baofeng radio to let her know when he was getting closer. The units had never reached all the way from home to the office, but he'd spoken to Trudy from a few high points along the route home when they were testing the radios. None of that mattered now.

Sighing, he left all the comms gear and he checked to be sure he had some chem-lights and he grabbed the road flares from his auto tool kit. His phone was charged and the phone's light still worked.

Beau had a solar charger from Anker which he unpacked and plugged in his phone. The phone showed it was receiving a charge. It was odd that the charger worked, but the radio was dead. Beau tried the hand-cranked dynamo flashlights he had and they worked also. Beau had limited knowledge of an EMP's effects on any particular item; he only knew what he read. So far, it all seemed a bit hit or miss aside from the cars and the power grid. Going forward, he couldn't assume every electronic item would be dead, that was useful to know.

Karen and some others were watching and commenting to each other but keeping a bit of a

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distance from Beau. He was well-armed and moving with a purpose and they, for the most part, were lost.

Beau's co-workers, like millions of people around the country, were waiting for someone to come and tell them what to do, or to come rescue them. Meanwhile, precious minutes passed.

The more likely scenario was looters would come down the hill and break up the office meeting in the carport and commence raping and murdering the group of not-unattractive women standing out in the parking lot in one of the shittier neighborhoods in Charlotte. He couldn't worry about it, he needed to get home.

There was some additional crap he wanted to do before he left, but it was hot as hell in the parking lot so Beau just tossed everything into the duffles, slammed the trunk lid and carried everything to the smoking area under the carport.

His co-workers were still gabbing away and they grew silent as Beau dropped his duffles and began to organize the gear he planned to keep on his person at all times.

First he removed the holster and magazine pouches from his belt and placed them in one of the duffle bags. Then he pulled his battle belt out of the other duffle bag and secured it around his waist. The Battle belt was a padded pistol belt with various gear pouches and magazine pouches strapped on or hanging off the Olive Drab nylon belt. It was all based on the MOLLE system and was a mix of some Condor, Blackhawk, Voodoo Tactical and

other manufacturer's gear. Beau searched for sales and usually picked up whatever was on clearance. He didn't need the best, or the newest and lightest, he just needed something that worked.

Beau didn't make a lot of money so he had to make do. The belt held two 30-round AK magazines as well as two 12-round Taurus mags. Beau preferred canteens to the hydration bladders, mainly because he'd never been able to keep his bladders from getting funky after he used them and he was too cheap to buy the cleaning kits they marketed for that very purpose. It also allowed him to carry two canteen cups with stoves on his belt.

There was a KaBar fighting knife already attached along with pouches containing less extensive versions of the items in the Midway Bail out Bags. He'd be able to start a fire, filter water, catch a fish and plug a bullet hole with what he had in his pouches. Beau had some bouillon cubes as well as another Tac-Bar. Once the battle belt was securely fastened, Beau attached the Taurus' holster as well as the other double magazine pouch from his duffle bag to the battle belt, giving him four loaded magazines for the Taurus close at hand.

He jumped up and down a few times to settle the load. It rattled a bit, but he wasn't planning on creeping up on anyone, so he let it go. Satisfied with the fit and where the belt was riding on his hips, Beau slung the Bugout Bags cross body again. He rehung the AK on its single-point sling, scooped up the duffle bags, and, without another word, headed for the offices.

6. Trudy

The JetBlue 737 had lost power shortly after takeoff and the pilots had tried everything they could think of to restart the engines in the limited time available. Coincidentally, Sully's Airbus A320 from the "Miracle on the Hudson" was sitting, reassembled, in a museum, not a mile from where they had taken off from Charlotte's Douglass International Airport. There would be no miracle for this crew.

They concentrated on the ground, the airspeed and the traffic around them as a 767 fell from the sky and pancaked short of the runway, erupting in an enormous ball of flame that spread over the interstate. The JetBlue crew didn't have time to worry about it, they were going down and the co-pilot was screaming instructions to the cabin crew through the open cabin door, since the intercom was down, while the pilot tried to pull his own miracle out of his ass. Maybe some of the passengers could survive, stranger things had happened.

Their flight path was roughly west and they were just about parallel to the interstate, but that

was a sea of tractor trailers and fiery crashes. The pilot didn't have time to wonder why; he just didn't want to play tag with any eighteen wheelers. The next best thing was a four-lane highway running due west; they just needed to nudge the aircraft over to the left a bit without losing too much airspeed. That would cause them to stall and drop more quickly than intended.

It didn't work out and their right wing, with its turbofan still spinning almost soundlessly, comes down directly on top of the animal hospital.

Trudy was in the dark, buried beneath ceiling tiles and insulation and some heavier sheets of what seemed to be plywood. There was a heavy odor of fuel and lots of screaming. It took a moment for Trudy to realize she was the one screaming.

The debris started to shift around her as smoke filled the air. The sound of dogs barking was reaching a crescendo.

The last piece of debris was removed from over her head and bright sunlight poured in the hole where Trudy had been trapped. Jerry's bloody face grinned down at her.

"Thank god, Beau would kill me if I let anything happen to you..." and then, "OH SHIT! Don't move!" And he yelled "MILLY!"

Trudy didn't know what the problem was and she started to sit up, but there was some insulation in her face, she reached up with her right hand to brush it away.

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“That’s strange.” Trudy said in a conversational tone. Through the center of her palm was a rod of aluminum, approximately sixteen inches long and as big around as her thumb. She had almost poked herself in the eye as she attempted to clear the debris from her face.

If she’d looked closer, she would have noticed her pinkie was missing at the second knuckle.

The screaming began again.

In a moment, Jerry was back with a white-faced Milly in tow. There were dogs and cats crowding around them. Milly had been releasing all of the animals from their enclosures because the fires from the downed plane were spreading and Milly wanted the animals to have a chance.

The 737 had plowed a path a half-mile long path down Hwy 74, and miraculously, survivors were emerging, looking for assistance. None was coming.

They finished digging Trudy out from under the debris and then the two of them pulled the stainless steel exam table out of the ruined examination room. A bottle of water was used to rinse off the table after each of them had taken a sip. They sat Trudy on the table under the smoky sunlight and Jerry rushed around looking for needed items. The pain was becoming noticeable and Milly gave Trudy a Tramadol to take the edge off. The pet narcotic would be fine for humans she said, humans took it also.

The fact that she didn’t consult with Jerry before she pulled the bottle of pills from her

pocket would have spoken volumes, if Trudy had been listening.

There are quite a few drugs at a veterinarian's office that can be of use to those that can't find their fixes elsewhere. The security and hiring practices aren't nearly as rigorous as at a doctor's office or at a pharmacy.

Milly had a history and she knew how to keep Jerry distracted from her extra-curricular activities. A little flirting and a low-cut top went a long way. She had been at the point where she knew she was going to have to screw the cripple, but as long as he kept that stump away from her, she could get through it.

The plan was to skim as many drugs from the office as possible. Her boyfriend had put her up to it and Vince knew what he was doing. The only sticking point had been Trudy. That nosy bitch was in charge of the meds and she was too thorough with her inventory. Vince had talked about planting some pills in her car and getting her busted, but they hadn't gotten around to it yet. Now Milly had to deal with this power failure bullshit and the plane coming down on their heads. Milly wasn't sure what her next move should be.

Jerry used a local anesthesia and with Milly's assistance pulling from one end and Trudy pushing from the other end of the rod, they were able to remove the aircraft part from her hand and begin suturing with minimal pain.

"Is the smoke getting thicker?" Milly asked and when Jerry looked out the shattered window,

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he could see the pawn shop next door was burning.

“We need to hurry!” Jerry told the women, and he finished suturing and bandaging Trudy’s hand and finger while he sent Milly after all the meds in the supply closet. He didn’t know what he might need or what may become valuable, but Jerry finished up with Trudy and they grabbed anything of use in the shattered remains of the office. When they stepped out into the parking lot, choking on the smoke, they saw their cars were already engulfed in flames.

“Shit!” Trudy said, “My get home bag was in there.” And she took a step toward her burning Jeep Cherokee; just as the ammo started cooking off in her spare magazines stored in the car as the fire reached the cargo area.

The three of them moved away from the cars and the small herd of dogs and cats that had been congregating around them began to scatter at the sound of exploding ammunition.

There were people all over the street, running from the fires and trying to start their stalled cars. Businesses up and down Hwy 74, known as Franklin Boulevard in this part of Gastonia, had emptied and some Samaritans were actually running towards the flames to try to do some good. Jerry was feeling conflicted.

“I should go try to help.” He started to say. “NO!” Both Milly and Trudy said in unison. Trudy was being selfish, she felt sick to her stomach from the meds Milly had given her, along with the heavy dose of jet fuel. She wanted

Jerry around to watch her back until Beau could make it home, or at least until she got to the house. Trudy assumed Milly would follow Jerry wherever he went.

Milly just didn't want to be alone out on the street. She may look like she just graduated from high school but the young woman had been on the street since she was thirteen and was well aware of the shit that was going to go down once the initial shock of all of this wore off. It was going to be every girl for herself, and if she had to rub the cripple's nasty stump or toss Trudy to the wolves, to save her own tight ass, so be it.

7. Beau

Ronnie and the rest stood frozen for a moment at the sight of a visibly armed co-worker walking in the front door of the office. As far as most of them were concerned, this had “workplace shooting” and “film at eleven” written all over it. More than one of Beau’s co-workers struggled to remember if they’d given the man any reason to be “disgruntled.”

Karen had seen enough. She said, “I’m gonna see what he’s doing.” And she jogged to the front door, followed by everyone else.

Beau ignored everyone and everything and whistled a Christmas tune, as was his habit. It drove his wife nuts. He didn’t even realize he was doing it most of the time. Beau walked to his office and picked up a few personal items. There was a good chance he’d never be back. He took his wedding photo out of its frame and folded it so there wouldn’t be any creases over the faces and he looked hard at the happy couple. It was one of the few printed photos he had of Trudy, the rest were on discs or thumb drives in the gun

safe at home. Presumably they were protected in their Faraday pouches and foil wrap.

It was time to get rolling. Beau said to his wife's smiling image, "On the way, baby!" and he slid the picture inside the clear plastic map pouch in the front pocket of one of his Bugout bags.

Beau slung a BOB over each shoulder once again, the straps crisscrossed, creating an "X" on his chest and back with a bag resting against each hip. The slung AK rested comfortably atop the left hip bag, taking some of the strain off his neck. The AK wasn't that much heavier than the M4 he carried in the Army but that had been a while ago and if you weren't used to it, it tended to wear you down.

Beau gamed this very get-home scenario while playing Conflicted with his prepper buddies in the Carolina's Prepper Network several times. Conflicted is a card game that gives you scenarios and asks how you would respond. Beau was a semi-serious prepper who was in the middle of searching for a MAG or Mutual Assistance Group of like-minded preppers, but it looked like he may have waited too long. The shit had definitely hit the fan if this EMP was widespread. Beau looked out from his office into the warehouse.

The warehouse was filled with useful items, but for now, he had to get home, and that might be a problem. Home was in Gastonia and it was exactly twenty-six miles from his parking space to his carport.

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In the Conflicted scenario, the EMP had rendered all newer vehicles useless, but Beau wasn't planning on following the rules. He stepped out into the warehouse and put one of his contingency plans into motion. He jumped on a forklift and turned the key. The Hyster forklift started right up. Almost the very first thing Beau had taken note of after the EMP event occurred and all the power went out was that the forklifts had kept running.

Beau didn't know if the steel-framed building had acted as a Faraday cage to block all of the electromagnetic energy, but he was happy with the results. It was probably why his phone still powered up when he needed the flashlight in the restroom.

The forklift could safely carry three thousand pounds and it traveled about 4 miles per hour. Beau took his chosen forklift and scooped up a wire cage, used for transporting rolls of fabric and spare parts. The wire box was four-feet square and three-feet tall. Considering his next move, Beau saw Karen and Ronnie watching him and arguing with the rest of the employees. Beau really didn't care what they did, but Blake Brothers wasn't in the best neighborhood and he didn't want to be here once the looting started.

Rolling up to the propane cages sitting outside the back door of the warehouse, He unlocked the doors and considered his load. While he pondered the plan he'd been working on since some rioters had shut down I-85, Beau took the time to change out his current propane cylinder.

He was supposed to be wearing a face shield and heavy rubber gloves, but if the corporate safety man wanted to write him up, he was welcome to walk down from Chicago to do it. The tank on the lift wasn't empty, but Beau planned to start the trip with a full tank.

It seemed like five propane tanks would be sufficient. There were also hundreds of warehouses and commercial properties between Blake Brothers and Gastonia, if five propane tanks proved to be insufficient, there would be plenty more along the way. It was too bad these tanks were incompatible with his gas grill at home. Supposedly, you could use some form of regulator to make it work, but Beau didn't have one. It was another item on his ever-growing list of things "to do", or "to build", or "to buy". None of which would probably never happen now. That reminded him to get the smaller tanks that had already been set beside the generator. Beau considered taking the generator but he had two at home, so he left this one here, along with one of the appropriately-sized full tanks. He placed a 2-wheeled hand-truck on top of the propane tanks, cushioned by some old moving blankets.

Next stop was the vending machines. There was a long crowbar conveniently hanging nearby on the wall rack with the brooms and mops which Beau put to good, if felonious, use. The machines never stood a chance.

At the first swing, Ronnie came running. "What the hell!" He kept saying over and over,

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breathing heavily in the sweltering warehouse. Beau proceeded to take as many of the snacks that would fit in one of the trash can liners he'd borrowed from the supply closet.

More of the employees were wandering back into the building and they were understandably alarmed at the wanton destruction. They murmured uncomfortably and a few pecked at their useless cellphones.

“Beau, you could go to jail for that.” Laura commented. She was married to a Matthews town cop and was very straight-laced. The woman spent her lunch hours watching some preacher's online sermons from a local church that was gaining traction around the world. She'd tell anyone about it, at length, if prompted. It only took one conversation with her for Beau to come to the conclusion that Laura wouldn't be one of his “Friends from Work.”

Beau loaded the trash bag with all manner of Lance products. He purposely avoided any chocolate. In this climate, the chocolate would become a melty mess in minutes.

There was a soft drink machine but the effort required to break in to the machine didn't equal the reward. There was plenty of water available to Beau.

He did take a twenty-foot length of tow chain that was piled up in the corner next to the machines. The chain had been sitting there as long as Beau had worked at Blake brothers and the accumulation of dirt atop the chain told him the chain may have been there since the building

was erected. He didn't know if he'd need the chain, but like the orange 5-gallon bucket he loaded the chain in, you never knew you needed a bucket, until you needed a bucket...or chain. It all went in the basket attached to the forklift blades.

He turned to the assembled co-workers and held up his hands and said.

"I'm betting the power ain't coming back." He didn't give them a chance to respond, he continued. "Pretty soon our neighbors will be coming to strip the warehouse clean." Blake Bothers was an overflow storage facility for some of the big box stores. The racks were full of high end appliances.

Beau wasn't done. He figured he would give them all some advice.

"If I were ya'll, I'd start walking to the closest friend or family you have. Now I know, those of you with kids will try to get to their schools, and I wish you luck. I'm going home and I'm taking anything that may help me get there." He said while staring directly at Ronnie.

The crowd was determined to talk through all the scenarios, but Beau had done all of that months before, when rioters had blocked I-85 after a police shooting. He realized the hard crust of civilization was thin and brittle, and once broken, the anarchy beneath would bubble to the surface and turn desperate people into animals.

Beau wasn't an infantryman in the army, he was a truck driver, and he had done a tour in Iraq with his logistics unit, escorting container

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convoys around the country. Most of his time was spent sitting behind an M2 .50 Caliber Machinegun in the turret of an up armored Hummer. They didn't have the MRAPs when he was in Iraq. He'd been in a few scrapes with insurgents when he traveled outside the Green Zone. It got exciting at times and Beau was exposed to the evil that men are capable of once that crust was broken.

He walked to his forklift and placed the sack of Nipchee, Toast Chee and the rest, atop the propane cylinders resting in the wire basket. For his final "get", Beau went to the water cooler and took three 5-gallon water jugs from the "full" rack and they went in the basket also. As hot as it was outside, the water would be worth its weight in gold, even though gold wasn't worth the effort it took to carry it around at the moment. Beau put each of the 5-gallon jugs into a black trashcan liner to conceal what he had while he could. Eventually he'd have to open them up to get a drink, but to delay that eventuality as long as he could; he also filled six empty plastic bottles from the recycling bin with cold water from the water cooler. He drank his fill and stuffed four of the bottles in the appropriate slots in his get-home-bags. The other two went in the cup holders on the forklift. He would have filled more of the small bottles, but, he couldn't find any more with caps.

Ronnie walked up to him and said, "You'll be in an awful mess if you're wrong." and he

motioned to the shattered snack machine and the basket full of propane, water and snacks.

“I’m not wrong; you need to go get your kids.” He said. Beau paused for a moment and cocked his head. Ronnie heard the same thing.

“Are those gunshots?” Ronnie asked.

“You know they are.” Beau replied. As he turned to climb aboard the forklift he looked at Ronnie, the man was enormous, how would he ever walk the twenty-five miles to Mooresville? Beau gave him one last piece of advice before leaving on his stolen forklift.

“Listen, you better grab one of the other forklifts before my guys takem all.” And he drove the lift down the van ramp and out into the bright sunshine.

8. Trudy

Getting clear of the fumes from the jet fuel and the smoke seemed to make Trudy feel better. She wished she had her Get Home Bag. Trudy's bag wasn't as "tactical" as Beau's bags from Midway. She just used an oversized daypack from L.L. Bean she had picked up at the Goodwill store for \$15.00.

There had been some homemade capsules of Bentonite clay and that she'd put together after sitting in the Carolina Preppers Network Meetup in Charlotte that covered alternative medicines for first aid. It was taught by one of the CPN charter members, a long-time homesteader and Vegan herbalist who helped the CPN members by teaching skills like canning and fermenting as well as essential oils manufacture and their usage, Elle Mental was her Prepper Handle. She was a willing instructor who very generous with her time and patient with novice preppers.

Trudy was always looking for alternatives to the medicines and chemicals that doctors tried to force feed patients these days. That's why Trudy had made up her own capsules of clay for upset

stomachs, and a variety of other maladies. She had plenty more at the house and out at the farm, But her need was more urgent than that and she'd vomited a few times before the three of them managed to get clear of all the smoke and fumes. Once clear of the jet fuel, Trudy began to feel better almost immediately.

It was only two miles to the house. Trudy and Beau had wanted to move further out of town, to get away from all the noise and sirens and the crime that had always been a fixture in Gastonia. but it never made sense financially. The house was where Trudy had grown up and it was left to her when her mom passed away three years previously. The mortgage-free home was too good to pass up, and it allowed them to spend money on other things, like prepping and vacations, although they never found the time to go anywhere, and now...Trudy's thoughts drifted back to her mother.

The cancer had been quick, but there was no telling how long the woman had been suffering before she went to see the doctor. She never complained, ever. That's the way she had been all the years Trudy's dad had beaten her, right up until the day he took a swing at a cop that had been responding to a domestic disturbance call placed by Trudy's little brother.

Her dad died in prison. Racist rednecks didn't fare too well if they couldn't keep their mouths shut in the joint. He'd been stabbed in the shower and left to die before the indifferent guards could summon the ambulance.

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Trudy's mom left the house to Trudy and her brother, Travis. Travis joined the Marines as soon as he graduated from Ashbrook High School and never came back to Gastonia. He and Trudy exchanged emails and Facebook messages and they texted and sent photos back and forth. Travis was in Afghanistan when Trudy and Beau got married and was unable or unwilling to take leave. It hurt Trudy's feelings and she had watched for him to come bursting into the church, in one of those YouTube viral video moments to walk her down the aisle at the last minute in his dress blues. It wasn't to be; Travis was clearing compounds, one by one, in Kandahar with his squad, and had already lost three men in his platoon that week. What was the best week of Trudy's life was the worst of Travis'.

9. BEAU

Beau made a quick stop at his car to fetch his sunglasses, Croakies to keep his sunglasses on his head, and some more comfortable clothes to travel in. He had a fishing shirt from Walmart and some old BDU shorts that had paint all over them. Beau had to take off all of his gear and the battle belt but his work clothes were hot as hell. He sighed as he took all the bags, weapons and belts off in the reverse order he put them on and then Beau started over, stripping to his boxer briefs in the parking lot.

“I should have done this in the damn shade.” Beau said to himself as he pondered his wardrobe selections and cooked in the harsh sunlight.

His steel toed boots were heavy and hot and he debated wearing his Nikes. Beau knew he may end up walking at some point so the support the boots gave his ankles may be helpful. He tossed the Nikes in the basket, along with the clothes he'd been wearing. The battle belt and the Midway USA Bailout Bags went back on after he dressed again and he adjusted the position of his canteens so they didn't do irreparable damage to

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his kidneys on the bumpy ride home. Beau went through the jumping up and down drill again to settle the load and to verify a decent fit. Pausing to stare at his car for a few moments, something else occurred to him.

Beau popped the trunk and using the Ozark Trail multi-tool from his bags, He'd heard the economy brand referred to as "Ozark Fail" more than once. However, just like most of the gear he was carrying, it would do the job well enough a few times, or it wouldn't. Beau just had to get home, to Trudy and his preps and from there, they'd move on out to the farm.

Beau disconnected the cables and placed the car battery in the basket also, careful to be sure the terminals wouldn't contact any metal. He racked his brain for anything he may have forgotten and after cutting loose some wire to use with the battery, he paused when he heard another burst of gunfire. Beau decided it was getting late.

There were really only a few routes to Gaston County from Blake Brothers. He could go through downtown Charlotte on North Tryon Street to get to Wilkinson Blvd and take US74 home. Beau was reluctant to roll through uptown Charlotte with what may possibly be the only operational motor vehicle in the vicinity. There would most likely be a substantial police presence in the uptown area and confiscating his vehicle and all of his weapons was a real possibility.

All of those folks walking down the stairs of their office buildings and apartments would be

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flooding the streets. That meant a lot of hot, nervous people out looking for answers, and Beau wasn't racing away from anyone on a Blake Brother's forklift. They were governed down to a corporate –mandated 3.7MPH. Beau wasn't sure how the safety gurus came up with 3.7 MPH verses 3.8 or 3.6, but after suffering through more than one safety audit; he knew there had to be an entire industry, dedicated to determining what speeds were acceptable for which warehouses in which applications.

Beau suspected when the residents of the offices and apartment towers uptown became too desperate, things would get ugly. The trick would be to get home before the situation devolved to complete chaos.

All he knew was he was going home and the forklift could get him there quicker than walking. If and when somebody decided they wanted the forklift, they would pay a heavy price.

There was another disadvantage to the uptown route. A large homeless shelter discharged all of its residents out onto Tryon Street every day and although he didn't know how the homeless would be affected by the power outage, once some folks determined 911 wasn't working and the cops wouldn't be coming, there was no telling how the junkies and head cases from the shelter would respond. Beau considered the junkies, and the availability of drugs. Nothing good would come of this crisis, because if the junkies couldn't get their fixes from the usual sources, they'd look other places,

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and that usually meant in the medicine cabinets of average citizens or pharmacies or hospitals. The absence of power for alarms and 911 calls, would only make it that much easier for the looters, and he imagined the junkies and the casual drug users trying to score now, with no cellphone, or phones of any kind, or no old-school pagers and no resupply. Unless the addicts were growing poppies like that guy up in Catawba County, the heroin pipeline had just shut down. All the opioids like Oxycotin would become something worth killing, and dying, for.

Beau had some experience with drugs and the people that sold and used them. He'd thought he'd been a hard man as a kid, until he wound up in a room full of truly hard men with guns, knives, some missing meth and a lot of cash.

Beau barely escaped the gunfire and the investigation that followed. The only reason he didn't get arrested was nobody knew who he was, he had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong girl and neither of the parties in the drug deal implicated him from their hospital beds or jail cells.

Another route option was rolling straight down Sugar Creek Road to I-85. Beau was VERY familiar with the route, he'd driven it to work and back every day for a few years, but it lead him right past the Jackson Heights community, which was the home of a fairly notorious gang, named for the neighborhood, that had even made that A&E TV show about gangs. There were also a lot of prostitutes, pimps and drug dealers

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working Sugar Creek as you got closer to the interstate. Beau reluctantly considered that route.

That left going North on Tryon St. up to the Hwy29/49 split and accessing I-85 from there. The down side was it was several miles north and would add a couple of hours to his trip. Beau was in a hurry and after some mental ping pong, He finally decided on the most direct route, Sugar Creek Rd. It was really the only choice; the first of his caches was on I-85 at Graham Street at a self-storage facility. Beau had everything he needed, but it wouldn't hurt to have some better food for the trip and if anything happened to the forklift there was an old mountain bike in the storage locker with the rest of the gear. The caches weren't enormous and Beau didn't break the bank stocking them. Just like the stuff in his car, it would make do, until he could get home.

Going through uptown may be risky, but taking Sugar Creek directly to I-85 was absolutely dangerous. He had to be on his toes, because it wasn't like he could speed away from anyone. A fat granny on one of those grocery store electric scooter carts could probably lap his forklift.

It was time to go.

Without even a last look at his former employer, or any of his co-workers, Beau rolled out of the parking lot, taking care to negotiate the uneven ground where the driveway merged with the roadway.

He maneuvered around some stalled cars and cruised to a stop at the stop sign, out of habit. A few drivers stood in what little shade was offered

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by the one tree near the side of the road. Beau had no idea what they were waiting for, and he briefly considered telling them what he thought the deal was.

It wasn't going to get better. The cars would never start, the phones were dead for good, but after a second of indecision, He rolled by the stranded motorists as fast as the forklift would go. The solid rubber tires and lack of any suspension caused every crack in the road to be transmitted directly up through anything in contact with the forklift. At speed, it was a jarring ride and Beau knew he would be sore long before this ride was over.

Looking both ways, again out of habit, Beau turned left onto Sugar Creek Road. It was possible there could be older vehicles running. Cars and trucks built before the eighties were the ones most likely to be immune to the effects of the EMP or CME or alien intervention or whatever it was, and these low-income neighborhoods had a lot of old pieces of shit still running the streets.

Beau could see the Compare Foods grocery store across the wide street from where he was driving. People were running in and out pushing shopping carts full of food as they left the store. If Beau wasn't travelling alone, he'd take a chance and try to grab some food, but he couldn't leave the forklift. He motored onward.

There were a lot of people walking on Sugar Creek. It was a major thoroughfare and the street was currently filled with cars sitting where they

stalled. Quite a few cars had run into other vehicles and phone poles and anything else that usually lines a city street. Beau imagined the sudden loss of power steering and brakes. There would be a few seconds of terror until the car either hit something or rolled to a stop. These cars were only traveling 45 MPH or so. He wondered what chaos he would find out on the interstate, where cars generally sped through Charlotte at 70 MPH or greater. He'd see for himself shortly.

10. BEAU

Some motorists-turned-pedestrians were walking toward the interstate and they kept pace with Beau. He couldn't go full speed, the road was too rough, and it was beating him to death. There were businessmen and laborers and a lot of women. It was the middle of the day; the people usually driving around were driving for work, people that worked nights and stay-at-home moms and dads.

There were some strollers in the crowd and the kids were strangely quiet. Beau assumed the sun was sucking the life out of them. Everyone looked miserable, and the crowd around Beau grew as the forklift got closer to the interstate.

He was glad for the hat, but Beau was going to stop and try to rig a shade over the cab of the forklift once he reached the interstate. They were currently approaching the Jackson Heights neighborhood and Beau didn't want to stop anywhere close to the home of the Jackson

Heights Overlords. That was the local gang that had been featured on that gang-related TV show.

The crowd moved in silence, the pattern was always the same; Beau would see someone sitting on or near their car and they would start talking to someone in the crowd and the individual would grab whatever they thought they'd need from their useless vehicle and join the migration. Nobody had tried to stop or even speak to Beau, and he was fine with that. The crowd was clearly keeping pace with him for a reason.

There was a smaller gathering ahead at the gas station at the corner of Sugar Creek Rd. and Cinderella Lane. When Beau passed the station, he saw the clerk handing out drinks and ice cream bars. The ice cream would be melting pretty quickly without power so the store clerk must have decided to put it to use.

Beau's part of the crowd surged forward to get in on the drinks and soon the store was overwhelmed. He wasn't stopping, so Beau just shook his head as he saw the clerk trying to close the doors. His goodwill had backfired and now the hot, confused, and in some cases, angry pedestrians were stripping the shelves bare. Beau watched as a black kid in shorts and tennis shoes sprinted from the store with a 40 ounce beer in each hand and ran across Cinderella to a few older black men standing on the corner watching the crowd strip the store clean. The men took the 40s from the kid and sent him away, the young man running in the direction of Jackson Heights, just a block away. One of the older men kept an

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eye on Beau as the forklift rolled by the gas station.

Beau kept moving. Just a few of the crowd had kept pace with him, including a very young black mom with a stroller. He caught her attention and tossed her one of the water bottles from his Get-Home-Bag. She caught it and immediately gave some to her semi-conscious kids. Beau guessed they were 2 or 3. He was terrible with things like that, just like any guy without kids of his own.

He knew he should be hard and not share what he had with anyone. Tough times were coming and if the government report he pulled from the internet was right, 90% of these people could be dead within the year. The loss of power wouldn't stop crops from growing, but who would harvest the thousands of square miles of produce? Some diesel tractors might run, but once the crops were brought in, how would they be distributed? The vision of crops rotting in the fields while the cities starved was swimming around Beau's head when he heard a shot from behind him. He kept going.

A group of young black men arrived at the gas station and immediately began confiscating all of the food and drinks in the crowd. The men had guns and knives and anyone that protested was beaten, stabbed and if they still didn't get the message, they were shot. There were screams from some women as their purses were stolen and when the crowd was sent on its way, it was short a few people. The young men had stolen all

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of their money, jewelry and anything else that caught their eye. A few of the women were dragged off by the men. Nobody lifted a finger to help them.

The power had only been off for four hours.

11. Beau

A Charlotte-Mecklenburg police cruiser was sitting in the center of Sugar Creek Road, right in front of a strip mall just beyond the Convenience store. The doors, hood and trunk lid, all were open and the contents of the car lay scattered on the pavement. When Beau approached the squad car, he could see a figure lying on its back next to the driver's side door. There were empty shell casings littering the street and several of the cruiser's windows were shot out. None of the passersby bothered to check on the cop, the gaping wound in the woman's face made it clear the officer wouldn't be at roll call in the morning.

Beau and his companions kept moving. In a way, he was relieved. Beau knew that cops would probably try to commandeer his forklift if only to get the hell away from this neighborhood. Glancing at the cop's corpse he saw the woman had been stripped of her equipment and her vest. She lay there in a pool of blood, the flies were already swarming. Beau wondered if the young cop was better off dead, he didn't know what the gang would have done to her if they'd taken her alive, but Beau was certain the young officer wouldn't have enjoyed the experience.

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The forklift kept rumbling across the uneven asphalt. Beau hadn't stopped since he turned onto Sugar Creek and he had no intention of stopping until he hit the interstate.

"HEY!" Someone shouted.

Beau turned his head sharply to the right and saw a handful of young men emerge from one of the stores in the strip mall. The mall only held a few shops, plus there was a fish market. Beau noticed the fish market and thought the fish had to be getting ripe without the power to keep the freezers running as the day grew hotter. He shook his head and refocused on the approaching threat.

The men were headed straight for him; they were actually older teens. He willed the forklift to move a little faster, but Beau knew this wasn't going to end well.

"STOP MOTHERFUCKER!" one of the young black men yelled. He was holding a pistol. It looked like a Smith & Wesson semi-auto, maybe one of the M&P models. Beau looked at the young mother and the handful of pedestrians-formerly-known-as-motorists still keeping pace with him and he sighed.

"Ya'll keep going." Beau said and he took his foot off the gas. The forklift stopped immediately. There were six teens in the approaching group, Beau looked them over. He could see two guns; he wondered where the long guns from the squad car were. Usually, there was at least a shotgun in the cop cars, and some vehicles would have an AR15 variant of some type. As long as none of these punks had them, Beau wasn't that concerned.

The young men were carbon copies of each other. They were all skinny and black, with various lengths of dreads, shorts, sneakers and no shirts

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The men were a few yards away and as they slowed, the two armed thugs began to casually raise their pistols. Time slowed down for Beau. He could almost see what was going to happen next.

Beau didn't hesitate; He rolled to his left, away from the oncoming thugs and off the seat of the forklift. The alarm that sounds when you lift your ass from the seat while the motor is running started its piercing wail.

He was now behind the solid bulk of the forklift and he brought the AK up from where it was hanging on its sling and he pulled the trigger without aiming. One boy went down in a heap and the rest skidded to a stop. Absently, Beau noticed the recoil in his hands, but the AK shattered the quiet of afternoon. Everyone on the street flinched, including Beau. "Earplugs." He muttered to himself between clenched teeth, mentally adding hearing protection to a list of items he'd failed to bring along on the trip.

He wasn't sure if it was the heat, or adrenaline or what, but Beau felt like he was moving slow motion, or underwater. It was really strange.

The thugs should have just kept on coming; they probably could have easily overwhelmed Beau before he shot them all. Beau extended the folding stock with practiced ease and began servicing his targets without waiting to admire the results. He looked through the ghost ring rear sight and didn't hesitate. For a while, some of Beau's buddies tried to convince him to mount optics on everything in his gun safe, but the iron sights had proven adequate, with the addition of the ghost ring rear sight from Kreb's Custom Guns.

None of the young men were more than thirty feet away and although they never really had a chance, they

did get a few shots off. Beau fired until all the boys were on the ground. He took a quick look around and hopped back on the forklift, silencing the alarm. His ears were ringing and some wax broken loose by the auditory assault was rattling around in his right ear canal sending shivers through him until it dropped free.

Beau continued west on Sugar Creek toward I-85 and out of the corner of his eye, he could see that some of the young men were still moving. It didn't seem like it would be a good idea to hang around and execute these guys in their own neighborhood, so Beau let the survivors keep crawling away. He wasn't worried about payback, he'd be twenty miles away in a few hours and in a city full of cars disabled by the EMP, twenty miles may as well be a thousand.

There were screams from all around the scene, but Beau ignored everyone, he would occasionally look back toward the convenience store to check on the crowd that was still congregating around that corner. A handful of black men were trailing him, but Beau didn't know if it was in response to him gunning down the punks or not.

The young mother sprinted back into view and scooped up both of the thug's pistols from the scorching pavement. Beau watched her run back to the stroller and trot away while trying to quiet her screaming kids. She glanced sideways at Beau but said nothing.

He thought briefly about the young thugs he had just shot and felt...nothing. Was that good? He wondered briefly, his mind wandered to them laying there on the smoking hot asphalt. If they could get up, they would, or they would burn. A quick peek back revealed only five bodies. One of the young men had been able to get up

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from the pavement. The nearest hospital was miles away, he wasn't getting far.

Beau put his foot on the gas to follow the young mother and the other walkers that had run ahead. It was too hot to run for long and Beau started to catch up to the pack. He inserted a fresh magazine into the AK and glanced to his rear. Beau wanted to put some distance between him and the group of older thugs back at the gas station. He assumed they would be harder to reason with than the young punks bleeding on the street behind him and they must have heard the gunshots.

With five more 30-round magazines for the AK, he was okay on ammo, for now, but he didn't expect to have to use it all in the first hour of the trip. Beau definitely didn't want to get into any extended firefights. There was more ammunition in the caches, but there was no guarantee someone wouldn't beat him to the closest of his personal hidden ammo dumps.

Beau suspected once he got on I-85, things would improve. He was mistaken.

12. Beau

There was a crowd gathered by the entrance to Jackson Heights. It was men and women and kids. There were a lot of kids. It looked as if all of the schools in the area had sent the kids home. Or more likely, their parents just went and got them.

“Ya’ll may want to walk on the other side of the street.” Beau said to all of the walkers around him. His escorting pedestrians all looked up, the heat was oppressive and everyone was trudging along in a daze, head down, and upon seeing the gathering ahead, they trotted to the opposite side of the street. A heavily shaded city park with a disc golf course lined the street opposite the entrance to the community.

More and more cars had to be maneuvered around and in one case, all the lanes were blocked and Beau had to shove a Buick Regal out of the way.

In the distance ahead, Beau could see the snarl of abandoned cars at the intersections near the ramps to the interstate. There were the usual gas stations along with several cheap motels and fast food places at the Sugar Creek Road exit to cater to the heavy volume of interstate traffic. Traffic was bad on a normal day around

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I-85, today, it might be deadly. If Beau turned off the forklift's motor, he would have been able to hear the ever-increasing volume of gunfire coming from the direction of I-85.

There was a lot of smoke or haze in the air down that way and that was cause for concern, but his immediate problem was getting past the crowds in front of Jackson Heights.

A horde of elementary schoolers playing in the street forced Beau to stop. He had swapped the AK to his other shoulder, so he could cover his right side, the side where most of the crowd was. Beau didn't practice firing with his left hand as much as he should. All of his NRA instructor prepper buddies would give him shit about it if they knew, he told himself.

Most of the serious members of the 5000-strong Carolina's Prepper Network were probably half way to their bugout locations by now. Of course, those that were bugging in were locking down their homes or homesteads and collecting as much water and food as they could while they could. Some would run out for that one last item they meant to stock, and end up dying a half-mile from their well-provisioned home because they felt they needed another Jerry can of diesel or carton of cigarettes.

Some adult females walked towards Beau and he made sure the AK was visible.

"Don't get too close." He shouted so the women would be sure to hear him over the engine noise.

"Was that you shooting?" One of the older women asked. She looked like Beau's fourth grade teacher.

"Yep, those fellas wanted my ride, and I need it to get home." Beau responded, looking over his shoulder

for the men that had been following him. They were out of sight. He didn't want to get too distracted and miss someone sneaking up on his "six", or six o'clock position.

The woman said something to her companions and the three of them took a step closer to the forklift. Beau lifted the muzzle of the AK a fraction and they froze.

"Are you crossing 85?" The woman asked.

Beau looked at her and nodded.

"We need to get these kids across the interstate and back to my house; it's about a mile past the interstate on the right." The woman explained. Beau asked why and the woman said their school had lost power and the women had decided to have the kids stay together. They left a note for any parents that showed up looking for their kids.

"Can you come with us; there are some bad folks down there." She said, indicating the general direction of the interstate. Beau couldn't disagree with her assessment. Sugar Creek Road was littered with the dregs of Charlotte society. There were pimps and prostitutes of every race and gender, at any hour of the day. Drug dealers and users flooded the area and the low-rent motels were used for any number of illicit activities. Homeless men and women seemed to live in the underbrush along the interstate and they'd be out in force, looking for an easy mark. It wasn't a place for kids.

Of course he'd just shot and probably killed several men and he wasn't sure if he felt bad about it or not. Who was he to judge the scumbags down by the interstate?

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Beau looked at the crowd of kids; he estimated there were about thirty. They were mostly black with a handful of Hispanics mixed in, just like the neighborhood. The three women accompanying the children were African-American. The speaker appeared to be about fifty and carried herself like...a teacher. Her name was Mrs. Johnson and she wore a skirt and blouse with her hair up in a bun. Her glasses hung around her neck on a cord and she wore running shoes. The teacher's purse looked like it would hold just slightly less than the basket on Beau's forklift, and she clutched it like Beau held his AK. Beau guessed correctly, that she was carrying a gun in her purse.

The second woman was older. She looked like a grandmother and she said her name was Miss June. Miss June was a volunteer teacher's assistant who had retired from teaching and only worked to get out of the house. She looked like she could be anywhere from sixty to eighty years old. The kids were constantly wandering off but one sharp word from Miss June and the kids got right back where they were supposed to be.

The final teacher was young and pretty, beautiful even. Beau thought maybe she was a high school kid, but Ruth was a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina at Asheville and was in her first year of teaching. She stood just under Beau's 6-feet and looked a lot like Zoe Saldana with curves. She was struggling to get the kids to listen to her but Beau would follow her anywhere. The rookie teacher was wearing soccer shorts and a tank top that may have been comfortable, but Beau assumed it wasn't what she had worn to school that morning. If asked, he would have advised against

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the outfit for the EMP apocalypse. Miss Johnson caught him staring and cleared her throat.

“What was the question?” He said, blushing.

“Can you escort us across the interstate? Mrs. Johnson asked impatiently, but he wasn’t listening; Beau was distracted by something other than Ruth.

Beau noticed a large group of men with guns walking out of the entrance to Jackson Heights behind the women. He had waited too long.

13. Beau

The dozen or so black men ranged in ages from teens to mid-thirties and the oldest of the men walked up to Mrs. Johnson and removed the hat he was wearing.

“Is this man bothering you Mrs. Johnson?” The man asked respectfully. He was wearing a few gold chains and was dressed pretty well. The SIG Sauer pistol he was carrying was worth more than all of Beau’s gear.

“We’re fine Jerome; I’m asking this young man is going to escort us across the interstate to my house so we can put all the kids up. You know we got the pool and the playground out back.” She smiled at the younger man.

He looked Beau over. The AK was pointed directly at Jerome’s chest, and nobody was pretending it wasn’t. The young men that had arrived with Jerome were either chatting up Ruth, who looked extremely self-conscious, or playing with the kids under the watchful eye of Miss June. Two of the men stood to the side with shotguns, ready to blow Beau right out of the forklift’s seat if he made a bad decision. They were standing far enough apart that there was no way Beau could take them both out before one or the other gunned him down.

“Is that right?” Jerome asked Beau.

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After seeing no other options and no real downside, after a beat, Beau responded, “Absolutely, glad to help, I’m heading that way.” with a big grin on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Jerome looked the forklift over and said. “Why is your forklift running?” and then, “Wanna sell it?”

Beau stared back at Jerome, and explained about the EMP and that if there were any older cars in the neighborhood; they would most likely still work. Jerome called over a few of his men and sent six of them off in pairs.

“We got a few old cars close by, we’ll check it out.” Jerome said. And he suggested they could hook up a trailer to the forklift, which had a receiver hitch on the back for moving some equipment around Blake Brother’s lot. Beau had just happened to take the one forklift with the receiver hitch. Jerome sent another one of his men off in a separate direction.

The kids were getting hungry, so Beau broke his own post-apocalyptic rules and shared what he brought along from the warehouse. He had Ruth pass out some of the Lance products from the snack machine and he allowed one of Jerome’s boys to grab one of the five gallon jugs of water to open for the kids. A quick trip to the closest home on Sugar Creek Rd. produced some cups for the kids to share. Beau was conscious of the stares he was getting from other refugees walking past but Jerome’s men formed a ring around the kids and the forklift and they urged the crowds to move along.

“Is there anything else we should be doing until this blows over?” Jerome asked. Beau didn’t know how bleak he should make it. He didn’t give anyone staying in Charlotte much of a chance of survival but Ruth and

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Miss June and Mrs. Johnson were listening and clearly deserved the truth, so they could do their best to prepare.

Beau took a drink with his right hand, never taking his left from the pistol grip of the AK, and he said. “The first thing you need to do, if you can get a car running is take as many of your...friends, as you can, with as many guns as you have and confiscate ALL the food at Compare Foods down the street and any other grocery store you can get to before somebody else does.” Mrs. Johnson just shook her head, but Beau kept going.

“You should be going door to door and making sure everybody grills all the meat, before it spoils. It’ll last a little longer that way. And have everybody collect as much water as they can from their pipes and toilet tanks. There may not be much, if any, pressure in the pipes with the power off.” Beau stopped to take a breath and looked up at the sky. There were typical afternoon storm clouds gathering.

“Should we collect rain water?” Mrs. Johnson asked. She had produced a notebook out of her duffel bag-sized purse and handed it to one of the young men and motioned for him to take notes. The kid looked like he was about to object, but a hard stare from the gang leader shut him up quickly. The kid pocketed the Glock he was holding and began taking notes.

“What about the rainwater?” Jerome asked. Beau was ready to go. Trudy was going to be waiting for him, but he clearly was committed for the immediate future to helping the most notorious gang in Charlotte survive this EMP event and help these kids make it a mile down the street.

“You can, I do, but you gotta be sure to strain all the junk outta the gutters. You can put screens and cheesecloth or even tee-shirts over the downspouts, but you’ll have to clean out the filter every time it rains.” Beau explained. “You still gotta boil the water.” He told them.

“Why, if we’re doing all that other shit?” Jerome asked, the expletive earning him a nasty look from Mrs. Johnson and Miss June. “Sorry” He added.”

“All the roofs are covered in bird and squirrel...sh...poop.” Beau said, catching himself at the last moment. “It carries diseases and can make you real sick.” Beau paused, trying to think of anything else that may be helpful.

“Be sure to drain the water from the hot water heaters, you’ll get a lot out of those.” He supplied.

He turned to Mrs. Johnson. “You said you have a pool?” She nodded her head. Beau looked at Jerome. “Pretty soon, Water will be very valuable in this heat. Put a cover over any pools to keep the evaporation down, and no swimming.” The kids all whined at that.

Jerome’s man along with a few others came walking up the street dragging a landscaping trailer. It was about sixteen feet long and plenty big for everyone to ride. They went about removing all of the yard tools from the trailer.

“You might want to keep the mowers and anything with a small gas engine.” Beau told the men. They looked at him like they had no interest in anything he had to say. “Those riding mowers will probably start, if they don’t have too many electronics in them, and you can make go-karts and mini-bikes outta the string-trimmer and chainsaw motors.” The men were looking

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at each other. “Of course, come winter, you’ll be needing the chainsaws to cut firewood to stay warm.” Beau finished.

“It’s July! the power will be back by winter!” Mrs. Johnson argued.

“After that hurricane in Puerto Rico last year, the entire island lost power and some of them are still in the dark.” Beau countered. Now imagine if they have to bring repair trucks and equipment from Europe or Asia to start getting the power back across the entire country. How long do you think that will take?” Beau finished. The adults all looked horrified at the thought, and that wasn’t the worst of it.

In a few moments the trailer was emptied and attached to the ball on the forklift. Beau was ready to start loading, but it wasn’t going to be that easy.

14. Beau

The sound of muscle cars disturbed the unnatural silence of the afternoon while Mrs. Johnson and Ruth organized the kids for the ride up the road. As everyone looked up, three late 60's Chevys pulled out of the Jackson Heights subdivision and stopped beside Jerome. There was a Chevelle, an El Camino and an Impala. An elderly white-haired black man stepped out of the El Camino and walked up to Mrs. Johnson and Jerome.

"Nancy, what's this all about?" He said. The man was wearing an old web belt with a flap holster holding a government model 1911. The guy had old Marine written all over him.

Jerome started to say something but the man bristled and said. "I wasn't speaking to you, was I?"

"No Sir." Jerome said and turned to the side and took a few steps away, which put him an arm's length from the forklift.

Mrs. Nancy Johnson started filling in the elderly gentleman on current events and the need for his cars. She even explained what his cars would be used for. While this was going on Beau couldn't help but catch the vibe from the gang leader. A few of his men had walked up to talk to him but he'd told them to "fuck off" with a look, because Mrs. Johnson was still in earshot.

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“Is that your dad?” Beau asked for some reason. Jerome turned his head sharply.

“Hell no!” He said quietly and then “My ex-father-in-law.” And then Jerome lit a cigarette. “He hates my ass.” He looked over at the old man and shook his head. “Can’t say I blame him, his daughter took a bullet when some Mexican fools came lookin for me, at the house.”

Jerome shook his head again. “Can you believe that shit? Nobody comes to the Heights, but they did, shot up the house. She was pregnant too.” Jerome stomped out the cigarette as the elderly man came over to Beau.

“Is this EMP shit for real?” The man asked.

“As far as I can tell, yes.” Beau said. “It may only cover a portion of the country, or it may be the whole world, I’ll know more when I get home.” He finished.

“Why is that, you got a crystal ball at the house?” Jerome asked.

“Let the man speak, goddammit!” The old man said.

“Look here old Man...” Jerome started. Things were getting heated out there in the hot sun.

“HEY!” Beau shouted and honked the horn on the forklift. Everyone in the area turned and looked directly at the forklift. It made Beau nervous.

The men shut up.

“I read an official government report; I’ve actually got a copy at home that claims after an EMP or CME event like the one we seem to be in the middle of, up to 90% of the population of the united States would be dead within a year.” Beau said. They both just stared at him.

After a beat, the old man said. “How come we ain’t heard about all this?”

Beau explained how the Congressional report on the effects of an EMP attack originally was released the same time as the 9/11 Commission's Report and was understandably overshadowed in the media. Experts were aghast at the numbers of potential dead and the estimated length of recovery time due to the complete reliance on non-existent spare transformers that would have to be manufactured overseas and transported, in some cases on vehicles that would also have to be built to accommodate the size of the machinery. In addition to that, bridges would need to be raised or destroyed along with powerlines and overpasses. The power grid's complete restoration would take years, if not more.

Mrs. Johnson had been listening and asked, "But why so many dead?"

The old man was no dummy, but, like most Americans, he just hadn't thought much about this particular problem. "With no power, or vehicles, ain't no food coming to the cities." He looked around at the river of people walking past them on Sugar Creek Road toward the interstate and then back at Mrs. Johnson. "We're all gonna starve."

15. Beau

Everyone started talking at once, and Beau let them. He really needed to get moving. The sun was getting lower in the sky and they HAD to be across the interstate before dark. All the junkies and other criminals around the motels and fast food places surrounding the interstate would be out looking for anyone they thought looked weaker than them and the forklift, pulling a trailer load of kids, would be an awful inviting target.

“We need to get rolling, before it gets dark.” Beau said, cutting everyone off.

“And” he said, directly to the gang leader.

“If you want to get the food at the Compare Foods, you’d best get moving, before somebody beats you to it.” He started the forklift and motioned for Ruth to start loading the kids.

Jerome told his men. “Let’s go!” and to the old man he said, “Fred, do you mind if we take the El Camino, we can carry a lot of food in that.” The old man looked at the kids and back at Jerome.

He handed the keys to the younger man and said, “Somebody’s gotta protect these kids.” And he started handing kids up onto the trailer after practically tossing Ruth up. As Jerome climbed into the El Camino, Fred

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shouted after him, “Try not to kill any folks you don’t have to.” Jerome gave him a nod and sat behind the wheel. He had about a dozen men with him and they started off East down Sugar Creek Road, away from the interstate. The Compare Foods at the corner of North Tryon and Sugar Creek was their destination.

Beau wondered what he’d just done. The information he’d provided had definitely given a leg up to the most dangerous and notorious gang in Charlotte. Those men would go down to that grocery and take whatever they wanted. If they were smart, they would just stay there and have their loved ones meet them.

“Are ya’ll ready to roll?” Beau asked the adults.

Mrs. Johnson and Miss June both nodded and Ruth was silent. The old man leaned forward and reached across the Propane cylinder behind Beau’s head, hand outstretched.

“I’m “Fred Sanford, thanks for the lift.”

Beau shaking his hand had to ask, “Really?”

The man answered “Yes sir, but its Fred Q. Sanford. Who might you be?”

“Beau Jackson.” He replied

“No Shit?” Fred asked

Mrs. Johnson said “Frederick! The kids!”

With a grin Fred said “Sorry Nancy.” and he sat back on the wheel well of the trailer for the ride down the street.

The Forklift started out with a jerk, causing everyone in the trailer to shout out.

“Sorry” Beau shouted over the engine noise and he started at half speed, bouncing his way closer to the interstate, moving along with the thinning crowds walking toward the interstate.

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All along the street were briefcases and purses and other item abandoned because they were just dead weight. Everyone looked burned out. The white folks' exposed flesh was bright red and everyone was sweating torrents. Luckily the sun was behind the trees now, but the storm clouds were building for the typical evening thunderstorms. The humidity was off the charts. The tops of Beau's knees and arms were bright red and Beau cursed under his breath for forgetting to apply sunscreen. There were single-use packets in his first aid kit, but it was a little late now.

Beau noticed there were some women walking alongside the trailer and he didn't mind as long as they didn't get too close. There was some chatting going back and forth between Fred and the teachers and the pedestrians and after a while the women were welcomed aboard. It was their trailer, Beau didn't care. More and more people were crowding the fork lift as the individual groups of walkers compressed as beau approached the interstate.

There was a burning smell to the air that Beau hadn't noticed before and he could see some smoke up over the trees in the distance.

A mass of autos and trucks were blocking the lanes of traffic and Beau was weaving across all four lanes in an effort to avoid the stalled vehicles. The forklift alone was narrow enough to fit between many of the cars, but the trailer was almost as wide as the travel lane and it was getting tight until finally the traffic was blocked all the way across Sugar Creek Rd.

People were walking freely between the cars; it was about twenty yards to the first of the cheap motels on the right side of the formerly busy four-lane street. A

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Taco Bell, a McDonald's and a Bojangles Chicken and Biscuits restaurant sat on the left and all of them had been looted. The same went for the Wendy's and the convenience store on the right. There wasn't much noise, just the occasional gunshot in the distance and the forklift were all Beau could hear. Something in the bushes beside the street on the right caught his eye. It was a stroller.

16. Beau

“Damn, Damn, Damn!” Beau said to himself as he struggled with the decision. There was never really any doubt what he was going to do. He could see movement in the bushes and he had a pretty good idea what was going on. Beau turned off the ignition and dismounted the forklift, His ass was sweaty and it felt good to stand. He did a few squats and knee bends and he walked back to the trailer. The silence after the motor was shut down was eerie.

Fred stepped down off the trailer with his Colt 1911 in his hand. “Are we walking?” He asked.

“No, we can push through, but I’ve got something to take care of and there may be some shooting.” Beau handed the keys to Fred. “If I go down, you’re on your own, but if you leave me before I go down, I’ll kill you...fair?” Beau asked

Fred looked at him for a moment, “Sounds fair.” And then he turned to the ladies and kids. “There might be some shooting, everyone get real low and pray for Beau.”

Mrs. Johnson started to object. “Just hush, Nancy!” Fred told her.

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Beau didn't know exactly what to expect in the bushes or how thick they were so he kept his AK slung and he drew his Taurus PT111. The compact pistol felt familiar in his hand as he walked the short distance over to the stroller on the sidewalk. Beau could see what happened. The cars had stalled when the EMP killed their motors. When the cars finally stopped, or ran into something, they wound up blocking the street in such a way that the young mother had to push the stroller up onto the sidewalk to get around the roadblock. The detour put her in arms reach of anyone lurking in the overgrown hedges lining the sidewalk.

Beau had seen the woman pick up the two pistols from the men he shot near the squad car but the slight young woman had been walking in the hot sun for a few hours and was probably spent. She just didn't have much fight left in her and was shuffling along in a semi-coma when the attack came.

Beau walked up and saw the kids were still in the stroller, He was reluctant to check to see if they were still alive, he was just afraid to deal with it. With a quick glance back at Fred and the ladies, he sped up and burst right through the overgrown hedge and suddenly wished he'd kept the AK in his hands.

There were five black men sexually assaulting three women including the young mother on the ground behind the bushes.

The rapist's attention was completely fixed on their victims. One of the women was a young blonde on her knees and she was the closest to Beau. He made eye contact with her, as much as possible with her attacker thrusting himself into her mouth as hard as he could.

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Her eyes opened wider as Beau took two steps and shot the man in the back of the head from three feet away. Time stopped as the contents of the scumbag's head showered the assembled rapists and their victims.

Beau didn't hesitate; he turned slightly to his left and engaged the targets, left to right, aiming center mass, just like he trained.

He was trying to avoid hitting the three women who seemed to be frozen in place. The blonde was still on her knees, with her mouth hanging open in a silent scream, she was trying to cover her nudity with her hands. The young mother, lying on her stomach, was pinned to the ground beneath the dead man that was penetrating her, and the third woman, who was really just a girl, was curled up in the fetal position surrounded by the corpses that had been abusing her moments before.

Beau's pistol was empty, the PT111's slide locked back. Beau hit the magazine release button with a familiar movement of his right thumb, letting the empty magazine drop to the ground near his feet and he inserted a fresh magazine from the carrier on his battle belt. He pulled the open slide back a bit with his left hand in order to release the slide lock and to chamber a fresh round as the slide slammed forward. He spun around while completing the reload, checking the immediate vicinity for any more targets.

The silent scream turned into an audible screech mixed with vomiting. The young mother was gasping for air and trying to yell for help. The man atop her was at least three hundred pounds and his dead weight threatening to crush the slight young woman was making it hard, if not impossible for her to breathe. Beau looked at each corpse to ensure they were really corpses and he

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only had to re-kill one of the rapists. The single gunshot seemed much louder than the previous twelve. Once again, Beau's thoughts drifted to hearing protection.

"Help!" The young mother rasped. She had a very slim build; Beau couldn't help but notice when he was dragging the rapist off of her that she looked more like a tomboy. The woman said, "Turn around while I find some clothes." And then, "Help Them!" waving at the other two victims in the clearing.

It was clear the blonde definitely wasn't a tomboy as Beau pulled her to her feet and said, "Find some clothes, quickly!", waving an arm at all the discarded clothing strewn around the small yard. Then he went to check on the young girl. She appeared to be maybe 12 or 13 and she was almost catatonic.

"We gotta get you dressed." He said quietly, and he rooted around until he found a dress that was lying in the bushes. Beau sat the girl up, trying not to touch her anywhere inappropriate, but she was a naked pre-teen EVERYWHERE was inappropriate. He was about half done when the two other women jumped in and saved him, completing the task.

"We have to go, now!" Beau told them. He grabbed his discarded Taurus magazine from the ground where he had let it fall and he helped the women finish. Luckily the women's shoes weren't discarded when their attackers had stripped them. They were wearing a mixture of the rapist's clothes and some other clothing they found strewn in the bushes.

There were four other women in the clearing that Beau hadn't arrived early enough to save. The women were of various ages and races and were stripped nude

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and tossed aside. It was the fate that had awaited these three women if Beau hadn't shown up when he did.

He picked up the three pistols he found during his lap around the clearing and dropped them in his Bugout bags and Beau ushered the women toward the street.

The women emerged from the bushes ahead of Beau, supporting the girl between them. The three of them were almost shot by Fred when the young mother ran ahead to the stroller to check on the screaming kids who had been awakened by the gunfire. The teachers were shocked by the condition of the women and they did what they could for them after everyone loaded back on the trailer. The rest of the kids in the trailer stared at Beau with something between terror and awe as the young mother explained what had happened while she loaded the stroller and the kids onto the trailer and allowed Miss June to help her get cleaned up.

The other rape victims were covered in blood and fluids from their own assaults and their attacker's blood from the rescue. They looked terrible. Mrs. Johnson used more of the open 5 gallon jug of water to help them clean up.

Fred gave the key back to Beau who took a drink of water from one of the bottles on the forklift.

"I almost left you when the shooting started." Fred said, looking back at the trailer. "Was it bad?"

Beau took another drink and said, "There were five of them, raping the girls, they had already killed four others." He paused "Who knows how many more they woulda killed." Beau reached in the Bugout bags and produced the spare pistols. "Why don't you check these out and make sure the ladies know how to use them, we

may need their help.” He finished and started the forklift.

Fred nodded and started to turn away. Beau shouted over the engine noise to get his attention. “FRED!” and when Fred turned back around Beau reminded him. “I meant what I said, this forklift is my ride home and if you had tried to take it, I woulda killed you dead.”

Without waiting for Fred’s response, Beau turned back and started the forklift moving forward slowly, trying to keep the movements of the trailer as smooth as possible. He was going to have to get rough with some of these cars in a minute but the new passengers deserved a smooth ride and Beau was determined to give it to them.

The power had been out for six hours.

17. Beau

After unhooking the trailer and placing the basket beside it, Beau verified the old Marine was familiar with the AK and then he removed the sling and handed the rifle and a spare magazine to Fred and said,

“Cover me while I move some of these cars.”

It was starting to get dark and Beau wanted to get across the Interstate. They were encountering more and more vagrants loitering around Sugar Creek Road and that wasn't good. There were several cheap motels and fast food joints surrounding the Sugar Creek Road exit off of I-85 and the motels drew hookers and their pimps, drug dealers and their customers and day laborers by the hundreds.

The convenience store had already been looted. Beau didn't need an audience, particularly an audience filled with various miscreants and any number of desperate felons that had no idea how to survive the coming days without taking from someone else.

Beau picked a lane and he started lifting and pushing. His forklift wasn't large enough to pick up a car completely from the rear, the forks just weren't long enough, but he could pick up the ass end of a car or truck and shift it over a few feet and then get the car

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from the side and tip it over. If the current owners were around, they were going to be pissed, but that's why they made insurance.

Beau was almost finished clearing a lane to the I-85 overpass bridge when a shot rang out behind him. There was a haze in the air and he was about a hundred yards from the intersection where Fred and the trailer were parked. The haze was making it difficult to see that far clearly.

Beau turned the forklift around and as he neared the trailer he saw it was surrounded by a crowd and Fred was standing up on the trailer waving the AK around. The crowd was pressing in. There was water, food, propane, girls and guns in that trailer and the sharks were circling. The kids and the women on the trailer were screaming and slapping at grabbing hands as they reached in at them.

Beau hit his horn as he rolled slowly forward and raised the fork blades to ankle height. He was looking around for a specific item. There was little chance of sneaking up on anyone, so why try? He found exactly what he was looking for in the maze of stalled cars.

When Beau sounded his horn again, the crowd turned to face the only operational motor vehicle in the vicinity and they...just stood there.

Beau was tired. It had been a long, stressful day riding out in the hot, summer sun and he wasn't in the mood. He was sunburned as hell on the top of his arms and knees with the world's worst farmer's tan. The crowd, who apparently had been watching too many antifa and black lives matters videos on YouTube, seemed to fully expect Beau to stop when he reached the massed thugs. That wasn't the way it worked out.

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Beau moved at a walking pace and the tips of the fork blades extended about an inch beyond the sidewall of the Ford Ranger pickup that Beau had scooped up on his way back to the trailer. The small pickup truck was perfect for what Beau had in mind, because he could see over the truck while he had its wheels raised off the ground.

The assembled thugs, junkies, pimps, and assorted vagrants just stood there until the blade tips touched them and then they attempted to move backwards.

A scream rose from the crowd when the sharp fork blade tips struck flesh. The injured party tried to move out of the way, but the crowd behind him wasn't moving fast enough for Beau. At the same walking pace, Beau began shoving the mass of people away from right side of the trailer. The screams grew louder as someone got caught under the pickup truck resting on the forklift blades. The forklift started to bog down as the wheels met some resistance. It was most likely a limb or skull. Beau didn't care, he gave the forklift some gas and with a slight bump, the forklift rolled over someone, ending a scream abruptly.

The rest of the masses scattered and after a few minutes of negotiating the mess on the pavement, Beau was able to scoop up the wire basket and then back up to the trailer to re-connect.

Everyone was jittery as hell and the assembled punks and scumbags from the surrounding motels and housing projects were closing in on the group again. Beau worked as fast as he could, while looking over his shoulder, to crank the trailer down over the trailer ball mounted on the forklift. The day was winding down and the sun was just about set. Beau was worn out.

BAM!

A shot behind Beau's head dropped him to his knees, scraping his bare skin on the hot asphalt. He spun with his Taurus in his hand and saw the young black mother of the kids in the stroller holding one of the punk's handguns in both hands, arms outstretched. She had shot a man walking up behind Beau. The man was grasping a club or stick of some kind as he bled on the street. All the kids in the trailer were screaming again.

Beau stood up, looked around for other threats, and tried not to notice that the cheap cotton shirt the young woman was sweating through was practically transparent. Her hands were shaking but she held the Smith and Wesson up, as if expecting the man to rise and attack Beau again.

Beau reached up and put his hand over the top of woman's hands and said over the screaming kids.

"Thanks, he ain't getting up again. You can put it down." He said gently; mad at himself, when she flinched at his touch. "What's your name, ma'am?" Beau asked.

"Ma'am?" The young woman just looked at him, "how old do you think I am?" And then she looked down at herself as is remembering the situation and the last few hours and she started to cry. "My name is Carmella. I'm just the babysitter." And she turned to comfort the screaming baby's in the stroller.

Mrs. Johnson looked over. "Beau, cross the bridge, it's the fourth street on the right." And she turned back to the restless horde of kids on the trailer.

Beau made sure the trailer was securely hooked up and after a quick look back at the trailer's occupants and nod at Fred; he looked forward across the bridge, as the

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sun finally set. He started rolling forward and a trickle of people were lining the sides of the street, watching Beau drive past. About fifty feet from the on ramps to the interstate Beau saw a throng of people at the top of the ramp on each side of Sugar Creek Rd. He didn't know what was going on, but Beau had a suspicion, and it wasn't good. He maneuvered the forklift to the center of the street and began physically shoving cars out of the way, regardless of if they were occupied or not. Things were getting out of hand.

Beau called back to the trailer, "Stay alert, and keep the kid's heads down." As he got closer, his suspicions were confirmed.

18. Beau

The crowds of hood-rats had formed sort of an assembly line at the tops of the ramps leading on and off the interstate at Exit 41, the Sugar Creek Road exit. As stranded motorists from the Interstate made their way up the ramp, the welcome committee ushered them up with offers of shelter, food, water and gas. They had even looted a Family Dollar for poster board and markers to make signs. It was diabolical.

As they drove past, Beau watched an Asian family of four make it to the top of the ramp where the father and teenaged son were set upon and beaten down in seconds while the mother and young daughter watched in shock. Then the women were stripped and dragged away screaming as the men involved in the operation cheered like it was a high school football game. This all took place out of view of the next group of motorists coming up the ramp.

Beau could hear Mrs. Johnson begging him to stop but he just sped up, there were simply too many in the crowd to hold off and there were bound to be more guns out there. Honestly, he hoped they would stay distracted for a while. At least until the forklift got out of sight.

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Beau was watching for threats to his left and right and not really looking down at the interstate, but it had become full dark now and he couldn't help but notice the glow.

He stopped the forklift in the center of the bridge, much to the dismay of the trailer's occupants. Beau reached around beside him, grabbed the rail and stood on the seat. He then climbed up the roll cage using the propane tank as a step to reach the very top of the forklift.

Looking south from the Exit 41 overpass, I-85 was a sea of flame down past the next exit, which was Graham Street. There were small explosions that were muffled and it took a second for the sound to reach Beau. It had to be further away than it looked, which made it even worse. If the fires looked that big, that far away, it must be huge up close. The day just kept getting better and better.

"Beau!" Fred called, getting his attention, eager to mover further from the assembly line.

"I know." He said, and climbed down, resuming the trip across the bridge, which was about two hundred yards across.

There was a less extensive assembly line on this side of the bridge, with only about a dozen killers and rapists participating and they were currently concentrating on some women in the grass. Beau was determined to keep rolling but a teddy bear in the grass caught his eye and that was it. He knew he was going to act, and that he may die, right here.

This gang of young black men could probably get to him before he killed them all. He didn't care. He couldn't save the young family across the bridge, and his

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prepper buddies would tell him he couldn't save everyone, but they weren't here. He wished to god a few of them were, together, they'd run through these hood-rats like a scythe through wheat. Beau bet Jerome, the gang leader back up the street wouldn't put up with this shit for long. He'd probably send his boys down to waste all these fools the first chance he got.

Beau stopped the lift, turned off the ignition to keep the seat alarm from sounding and set the parking brake, to keep that alarm from sounding. He wanted the rapists distracted. He jumped down and raised the AK, extending the side-folding stock and centered the front sight post on the only man he saw holding a gun. The rest of the rapists were busy. Before Beau could release his wrath upon the scum of Sugar Creek Road, there was a rush of footsteps around him as all of the adults from the trailer with access to a gun, ran past Beau and started shooting the young black men sexually assaulting the three white women. It was Carmella, and Mrs. Johnson and the other white woman, Beau hadn't gotten her name, as well as Fred, blasting away with his 1911, one-handed. They rescued the women in the grass, who were in their thirties and were in pretty rough shape.

Beau held his fire and stood back, covering everyone, watching to see if there would be any resistance from the scum. There wasn't. They all died, without wounding any of Beau's people. He thought of them as his people now. He didn't even notice the kid's screaming anymore. Although most of them had passed out from the stress and heat and the Benadryl Mrs. Johnson had slipped them.

Mrs. Johnson wasted no time, she bundled up the white ladies and they were practically tossed onto the

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trailer, which was getting crowded as hell. With a final glance down the burning highway Beau rolled past the corpses of the rapists which were leaking rivulets of blood down the off ramp onto I-85 as a warning to any other stranded motorists that Exit 41 wasn't the safest exit on I-85.

Right before Beau started the engine, he heard Mrs. Johnson say to the young women on the trailer. "We're almost home." He knew that may be true for Mrs. Johnson, and he was glad for her, but if she lived in this neighborhood, pretty soon all those punks would start spreading out, looking for food, water, drugs, women and anything else that caught their eye. It would be more of a bloodbath than it already was. No place in the city limits, or even inside Mecklenburg County, would be safe.

Beau had twenty more miles to go, and as if on cue, the forklift ran out of propane in the middle of Sugar Creek Rd as he was about to turn onto Mrs. Johnson's street.

Beau changed tanks while everyone covered him. Once they were moving again, all the adults, even the recently rescued women, who were wearing only pieces of clothing, walked alongside as they made a few turns back into a tidy neighborhood of brick ranch homes with manicured yards. The lots seemed fairly large but it was dark as hell out here except for some solar lights that seemed to have avoided the effects of the EMP.

Beau wondered at the science that was involved in that and considered grabbing a few of those on his way out.

There were many mature trees that helped keep most of the neighborhood in darkness. The moon hadn't

risen yet and the stars weren't penetrating the worsening haze.

“HOLD IT!” A voice shouted out

Beau didn't have his lights on, there was no reason to advertise his presence, and he'd removed the bulb from the brake lights and the backup strobe. He shut down the forklift and kept his hands where he they could be seen. Everyone tensed, and the women moved closer to the forklift unconsciously, as if it would offer some protection. It would stop any bullets short of a .50 Caliber round, but it was also hot as hell around the exhaust and they were in danger of getting burnt if they got too close.

“Harlow?” Mrs. Johnson asked, clearly surprised to see this particular gentleman, who stepped out of the shadows with a single-shot shotgun.

“Beau, this is my brother, Harlow Johnson.” She explained. “What are you doing here? And where is LaDonna, and is that daddy's shotgun?” She peppered him with questions as she gave him a hug.

Harlow went on to explain that he and his wife Ladonna were in the neighborhood when the EMP struck and felt it would be safer to come to Mrs. Johnson's house than try to make it back home across town. They had a spare key and Harlow knew where the shotgun was kept in a closet with an ancient box of shells.

“Let's all get inside; I'll get the garage open.” Mrs. Johnson said. That began the process of unloading everyone into the house and garage. The kids were all half-dead and the victims of the assaults were suffering from varying degrees of shock, from near catatonic for the young black teen to business-like and ready to try to

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keep walking home for one of the moms from the exit ramp.

Her name was Margaret and her Camry died on the way to a meeting in Fort Mill. Her office was in Concord and she lived in Kannapolis. She had about a twenty mile walk, if she could get out of the city. She was tall, about 5'11" and relatively thin, and her face had taken a beating from her attackers. She'd lost a few teeth and there was a lot of swelling. She hadn't been taken without a fight. Currently, she was wearing a long, bloody, Tee-shirt and nothing else, no underwear, shoes, nothing, but she was determined to get home to her kids.

"Ma'am, why don't you try to get cleaned up a bit, and see if Mrs. Johnson can find you something to wear?" Beau said and motioned to the young schoolteacher Ruth offering to help her.

The woman paused, looked down at herself as if just remembering what had happened to her and said. "Oh." And her hand went to her face and she winced. "Is it bad?" She directed at Ruth, who tried to look supportive, but failed. Margaret turned back to Beau and said "Thank you." Then she walked off with Ruth.

Beau unhooked the forklift from the trailer in the driveway and debated just leaving. He was worn out, hungry, and he had to take a wicked shit. He had missed his lunch and his mid-day dump. He slowly backed the forklift up the driveway in the dark, careful not to hit any of the kids that were still being ushered into the house. And when he was inside the stifling two-car attached garage, he shut down the engine and climbed down.

Standing there, looking out over the neighborhood, he could see people in windows by candlelight and

lanterns. Folks were sitting in their driveways grilling, to avoid the oppressive heat inside the homes. The smell of something on the grill got his attention and he was suddenly starving.

He was painfully aware of the eyes on him and the forklift. He was pretty sure in an older, established neighborhood like this; there would be some cars that would start, just like the muscle cars back in Jackson Heights. Beau would remind Mrs. Johnson about that after he had a bite to eat. He closed the garage door and slid the bolt. Beau dug a lighter out of his Bugout bag.

That led him to an old sofa in the garage where he sat down and, for the first time in hours, without removing any of his gear, he took a minute to relax.

19. Beau

The sound of the garage door sliding up startled Beau awake. He jumped to his feet unsteadily, reaching for the AK. The rifle wasn't hanging from the sling where it was supposed to be. Then he went for the Taurus in its holster, which was also gone. Bright sunlight was streaming in and blinding Beau and he realized he was only in his underwear, and he really had to shit.

“What the hell!” He shouted, and then “Where’s my gear?”

Fred took a few steps forward with a coffee cup in his hand and held it out. “I cleaned everything after the ladies undressed you and put you to bed.” He said solemnly. “Your gear is on the forklift.” He finished.

Beau was shaking so badly from his adrenaline pumping he forced himself to sit down, after he glanced over to make sure the guns and gear was accounted for. He took the coffee with a “Thanks” and tried to breathe. His innards groaned loud enough for Fred to hear.

“Is there a bathroom close?” Beau asked.

Fred shook his head, “Sorry, the sewers are all backed up, the neighbors said the same thing. At first I thought one of the kids flushed something, but I guess

none of the pumps are working.” And he pointed outside. “We started on a latrine out back.”

Beau got dressed as quickly as he could and speed-walked out to the latrine pit, which was temporarily surrounded by multiple clotheslines. There was an orange 5-gallon bucket with a toilet seat mounted on top. The bucket was attached to a 2x4 frame that straddled a trench that was covered with a piece of plywood. Beau approved of the engineering. As the trench filled under the bucket, the plywood could be slid down the trench and the seat frame moved a few feet to a spot clear enough to start filling.

Beau dropped his pants before sitting down, he didn't want anything from his pockets dropping in the trench and almost as soon as beau sat down his guts erupted. At that same instant, he realized he had no toilet paper.

“This apocalypse sucks” he groaned as he did his part to refill the latrine pit.

After a few minutes of truly offensive bodily functions, Beau heard someone clearing their throat daintily.

“Beau?” A young lady said.

“Yes?” He responded, embarrassed that someone had been standing close by while he's been doing his best to shit a kidney.

“It's me, Ruth, We're out of toilet paper, but here's a phone book.” The young teacher said sheepishly. Beau marveled that anyone still had phone books, but he was happy to have it and he mumbled his thanks as he took the offered book when it was handed between the sheets hanging around the latrine pit.

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Business completed, Beau emerged from the latrine enclosure and surveyed Mrs. Johnson's yard. There were several pieces of playground equipment that looked like they belonged in a municipal park and an enormous oval above-ground pool with a deck built at one end. Beau was pleased to see they had taken his advice and covered the pool. Half the yard was covered by a garden, which was currently deeply green, but browning from the harsh sun. It hadn't rained in a week or so and that big a garden would be expensive to irrigate.

There were kids running all around the fenced yard and Miss June was sitting in a rocker in the shade, the Single-shot shotgun across her lap.

"Morning Miss June." Beau said.

"Beau, you leaving us this morning?" The ancient school teacher asked. Even though the temperature was already in the eighties with the humidity about the same, the proper old woman was completely dressed in borrowed clothes. Her hair and makeup were done and her handbag was close at hand. On a side table, next to her, there was a tall glass of what Beau assumed was water, with a slice of lemon in it as well as a small china dish holding a few slices of cheese and wedges of apple.

"Yes Ma'am. I need to get home to my wife, I'm sure she's worried sick and I'm worried about her." Beau replied. The old woman nodded her head in agreement and after a moment said.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but would you mind taking Ruth with you? I don't think things are going to go very well here. We have too many mouths to feed." She looked up at Beau. Beau struggled for just a moment; he knew something like this was coming.

“I can’t help you.” And he turned away without further explanation.

20. Jerry

They walked supporting Trudy between them. Jerry had rigged a triangle bandage as a sling so Trudy's hand was resting up near her opposite shoulder. It wasn't terrible comfortable for her, but the hand was above her heart, which would keep the throbbing pain down. As an amputee, Jerry was all-to-familiar with the constant waves of mind-numbing pain that had you dreading each heartbeat.

Milly was unusually quiet. The bubbly teen had scooped up as much useful gear from the office as she could in the limited time allowed before the fire took hold. She seemed almost like a different person, but crisis can bring out the best, or worst, in people. Jerry told himself. He never considered the wholesome, attractive, funny, young woman was playing him for access to his pharmaceuticals.

"I need to sit down a minute." Trudy said. And they sat in the shade of an industrial building on Franklin Boulevard, not far from the old Firestone Mill.

What was once the largest mill building in the entire world was now condos with attached shopping and a microbrewery. Jerry could go for a beer now. He wasn't used to this much walking. His stump was a little sore.

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He had a blade he was running on a bit, to get his conditioning back, but he'd just started that. Jerry removed his prosthetic and massaged the abused appendage, not noticing the revulsion flash for a moment across Milly's face. It was the first time she'd actually seen the stump and it was worse than she'd imagined.

They had a mile or so to go. Trudy was a trooper, the missing finger and hole in her hand weren't keeping her down, it was the nausea from the Tramadol and the jet fuel that was making her ill. Beau was a lucky man, Jerry told himself for the fourth or fifth time. He was attracted to Trudy's confidence. She was incredibly fit and undeniably prepared for what they were currently experiencing. Seeing her vulnerable had brought up some feelings in the former soldier. He wasn't sure what to do about that. Jerry had met Beau a few times and Beau exuded a menace that seemed unintentional but it was there nonetheless.

Jerry knew some guys in the Army that thought they were badasses, but when shit went down, they were the first to fold. The former medic had also come across a few other guys, the guys that lived outside the wire and hunted the Taliban. Some did it because it was their job and they were good at it, a few did it because they liked it. Beau reminded Jerry of those guys. He knew Beau was only a truck driver in Iraq, but there was something there, it's not like he tried to be scary, but there was something about the guy that Jerry wanted no part of and he definitely wasn't the type of guy whose girl you wanted to make a move on. Of course Beau worked in Charlotte and it looked like the shit had truly hit the fan. Who knew what would happen next?

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Jerry was fairly certain Milly was available if he wanted to go younger, but he'd been there, done that. He was a good looking guy with an easy smile and a good job. Unlike Beau, he could start and keep up a conversation. Jerry was also that one in a thousand, a "good listener". He was a good catch, the guy you brought home to mom and she would be planning the wedding by the end of dinner. The only thing that was missing was a foot.

His sister Natalie, up in Raleigh, likened it to guys hitting on her in a bars, until they found out she had to get home and pay the sitter, because she had 2 kids. Jerry felt a pang of guilt, it was the first time he'd thought about his sister all day. The EMP struck locally in the middle of the day. Nat would have been at work and the kids would have been at school. He knew his sister was losing her mind trying to reach the kids. Jerry couldn't remember for sure if the kids were in the same school or not.

They passed around a bottle of water until it was gone, getting some looks from passersby. The foot traffic had picked up as individuals decided to join the flow of pedestrians moving in each direction on Franklin Boulevard, also known as US Highway 74.

Retching sounds brought Jerry's attention back to Trudy, she was bringing up all of the water she had just drank and it was difficult for her to support herself unsteadily on her hand and knees with the other hand bound to her chest.

Jerry started to move to help her, but Milly beat him to it, the teen squatted next to Trudy and supported her while holding Trudy's ponytail back out of her face. If there was one thing Milly had experience with, it was

dealing with drunks and junkies vomiting all over the place. Ever since she found herself on her own, she'd been surrounded by addicts of one kind or another. Somehow, Milly had never picked up any of those habits, not even cigarettes. She wouldn't take an aspirin or antibiotic unless she was dying.

It was wrong, he knew, but Jerry had to admire the two attractive, young women bent over in thin scrubs in front of him. He couldn't help it, he was a guy.

21. Milly

“What the hell!” Milly screamed internally. She had looked over her shoulder while holding Trudy’s hair back and caught Jerry checking out Trudy’s skinny ass out of the corner of her eye. Milly knew she was way hotter and younger and way sexier than this old bitch.

What did the cripple see in her? Maybe it was all about her getting hurt. Milly was going to have to work fast to be sure Jerry didn’t change his focus from her to Trudy, because it didn’t look like things were getting any better and Milly didn’t want to be alone. Vince lived all the way in King’s Mountain which was too fucking far to walk before it got dark. She knew what was going to start after dark, the looting and raping would start in earnest and while she’d been raped repeatedly at the age of thirteen, she’d prefer to avoid any further assaults if she could. She’d survived this long, Milly wasn’t worried about adapting to her new situation... it was what she did.

She had been a golden child, who had it all. She was the little princess who danced and cheered and took gymnastics classes and dreamt the same dreams all little girls dreamed. Milly was almost never home, there was always a dance class or a cheer event or something going

on and she never paid attention to the rifts growing between her parents. They barely spoke. All of her activities, with their associated costumes and uniforms and travel costs added up. There was very little left over. Milly's dad did what he could, until he couldn't. He'd never been a very strong man and the constant overtime hours and side jobs along with a fast food diet, wasn't good for his health. He would have known if he went to the doctor, but he never took the time off work and one day, he was found at his desk, dead from a massive coronary. The years of neglecting his health, stress, smoking and poor diet had caught up to him.

Milly's mom tried to keep up the routine. But without any income, She'd quit work years before to concentrate on Milly's "career", all the classes and activities came to an end. Milly was twelve when her mom left her home alone for the first time with nothing but the internet to keep her company. She had never been one of those girls with her head stuck in her phone, she'd been too busy, but now, lacking any supervision or structure for the first time in her life, she was easy prey for every creep lurking online.

In weeks she was speaking to someone she thought was a sixteen-year-old names Kenny, who went to a high school about fifty miles away. It wasn't close enough for Milly to have any intimate knowledge of the area, and she wasn't likely to have any friends there, but it was close enough for Milly to think the boy was a "local".

In reality, the man was forty-two and a convicted rapist. He was violating his parole to even have a computer, but he couldn't have stopped if he wanted to, and he didn't.

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After a few weeks, toward the end of the summer, Milly had turned thirteen and her mother marked the occasion by working a double shift at the Denny's where she was waiting tables. Kenny volunteered to come take her out for ice cream for her birthday.

If Milly had any friends to confide in, maybe someone would have told her she was being stupid and to stop speaking to this random guy online. Unfortunately, all of her friends had been in dance, or she cheered with them, and once you were no longer a part of that world, you didn't really exist. Those shared experiences and inside jokes and long van rides where you exchanged secrets, were all closed to you as an outsider. She missed it terribly. Maybe Kenny could make her feel better.

Kenny said he could get his parent's minivan and meet Milly down at the corner. Milly briefly thought it was strange, but Kenny mentioned his mom had just gotten home and he was on his way and before Milly could object, the plans were set.

Milly spent the next hour doing what young girls do before their first date; they try to make themselves look older. She had started to "fill out" as her mother put it and she had bought her first pretty bra and panty set. She had no intention of doing anything, it was just ice cream, but it made her feel grown up. She put on some short shorts and a cute top and sandals and put her long auburn hair in a ponytail. She was the girl next door. When she looked in the mirror, she saw she had put on a few pounds since she stopped all the physical activity, but she thought it looked good on her. She looked less like a tomboy.

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After a while, nervously watching the clock, Milly stepped outside and locked the door behind her. She practically skipped down the street, unaware, “Kenny” was watching her from the moment she left the house though binoculars.

Milly stopped beneath a large shade tree, where she had actually waited for the school bus all through elementary and middle school. She was starting High school in a few weeks and that bus stop was at the other end of the street. She was lost in thought when a minivan with very dark windows pulled up beside her until the sliding passenger door was facing her. Milly moved to put her hand on the front passenger-side door when the sliding door slid back in a flash and two sets of arms reached out for her.

Milly had been an athlete all of her life, and she almost got away, she would have gotten away, but as she turned and started to run, one of the hands grasped her long auburn ponytail and with a sharp scream, Milly was yanked off her feet and into the van, her call for help silenced by a rough hand over her mouth and the extra soundproofing applied on the inside of the door once it was slammed shut.

The minivan drove off normally. Nobody in the neighborhood or driving by noticed the kidnapping, and nobody could hear the screaming and finally the whimpering as Milly was systematically stripped and raped repeatedly by the three men in the van. Through it all, Milly survived.

After a few days, the men sold Milly to some other men, who had a house where girls were kept chained to beds and used day and night. Still, unlike most of the girls, Milly survived.

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One of the men noticed that Milly wasn't like the other girls that usually gave up after a day or two. She constantly pulled at her restraints and tried to bite, or kick or head butt the men that were abusing her. It only made it worse for her with the clients. The more she fought, the rougher they got, and it was only a matter of time until one of the men would kill her. It happened often enough.

The man came in and threw a bucket of cold water over Milly to wake her up one morning. She was a bloody, crusty mess. She was covered in the fluids of a hundred men but there was still a certain look in her eye.

“I have a proposition for you.” The man said through a surgical mask.

22. Beau

Beau walked right into the garage after turning down Miss June's plea to take Ruth with him and he got geared up. He refused to feel guilty, he had done enough! Beau made sure the AK and the Taurus were loaded and he topped off his canteens and water bottles he was keeping in the forklift's cup holders from one of the five-gallon jugs. He noticed the jug he'd given to the kids on the trailer was back in the wire basket on his forklift blades. It was refilled and a baggie was over the opening with a rubber band around it. It was a nice gesture and possibly lifesaving in the heat.

He was already sweating profusely in the humid, still, air of the garage. At least on the forklift, the fan would be blowing on him. He heard people behind him and he turned with his hands on the AK. People changed their minds, and the forklift was an attractive piece of operational machinery that could also act as a generator. He couldn't drop his guard now.

Mrs. Johnson and her brother as well as Fred and Ruth and the three white women they had rescued from their assaults on the exit ramps along with Carmella, all flooded into the garage. The babies Carmella was responsible for were noticeably absent.

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“Ya’ll coming to gang up on me?” Beau asked, semi-seriously. Everyone that owned a gun was carrying one in plain sight, either in a holster in Fred’s case or a front pocket in Carmella’s.

Mrs. Johnson said, “No, June told us your answer and we can appreciate your desire to travel light.” Beau eyed her suspiciously; he was waiting for the “but”. It was provided by Fred.

“Who do you expect will watch over you while you’re sleeping?” The old marine asked. “The ladies stripped you, cleaned you up and put you to bed, and you never stopped snoring.” He finished. All the women were nodding in unison.

They had a point. It was a flaw in the plan from the beginning. If you’re walking, how far can you walk before you have to rest? Will you be walking down the road? Will there be obstacles in your path? Will you have to be somewhat stealthy to avoid possible threats? All of it can slow you down. It had taken a full nine hours to go six miles the day before. He had at least twenty more miles to go.

After seeing the fires burning on the interstate, he had no idea what kind of detours would be required. All of it would take time which meant he’d be sleeping again, probably two, maybe three more nights before he got home. He was grossly underestimating the difficulties that lie ahead.

“You need us!” Carmella said.

“Wait a damn minute!” Beau said angrily, ignoring the disapproval in Mrs. Johnson’s eyes. “I thought Ruth was the one coming with me?” He said, pointing at the young teacher who had changed from the soccer shorts

and tank top into some baggy khakis and a man's oxford shirt. She actually managed to make that look sexy.

"Carmella wants to come with you, as well." Mrs. Johnson said softly. She laid her hand on the young teen's shoulder and the girl flinched.

"After what you went through yesterday... and what about those kids..?" Beau wasn't sure how to bring up the rape of the girl in mixed company.

"I feel FINE!" Carmella snapped back. "I'm a little beat up but I need to get out of here." She hesitated, then went on. "If I can't protect myself, how am I supposed to care for kids?" She started to sob "They're better off here, even though this city is a fucking deathtrap!" The tears were flowing; it was hard for the young woman to admit she couldn't handle the responsibility.

"I won't have that kind of language in my home young lady!" Mrs. Johnson scolded.

"It's a good thing I'm leaving then, with or without Beau." And she turned on a heel and stormed back into the house followed by one of the white women who had two black eyes and bruises all around her neck who held a hand out in front of herself as she walked.

"I'm leaving NOW, if you're coming, put on your walking shoes, grab whatever you're bringing, water, guns and food would be great, and let's go!" Beau announced and started shaking hands goodbye.

Fred stepped up to him and said. "I hope Jerome got plenty of food at the store, because these kids is gonna eat a lot." And he looked down at the floor and then back up at Beau. "You did a good thing... several good things yesterday. I hope you get home and find your wife well." He paused. "Please try to look after them girls,

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and if you can, show mercy on people.” Beau looked at the old marine oddly for a moment

“You’re a weird old man Fred, you should get the hell out of town, Carmella is right. There’s not enough food here to keep everybody fed.” Beau reasoned. Fred just looked back and gave him a sly wink.

“I’ve been sweet on Nancy Johnson since high school, ever since her husband died a few years ago; I’ve been waiting to make my move.” He chuckled softly. “Ain’t no time like the present.”

Beau got hugs from all the women he saved, including the woman that had wanted to leave immediately after the rescue at the off ramp. The woman was so badly bruised that she could hardly move and her face was disfigured from what appeared to be multiple fractures. Deep blue and purple bruises had already formed over most of her face. She put up a fight, but she was paying for it now. Her name was Beatrice and she had decided to stay another day and then she would have to start walking north to find her kids and husband.

“They’ll go to the housh.” She slurred through broken teeth. From the way she looked and moved, Beau didn’t think she’d survive the trip to the county line, but people could do miraculous things when they set their minds to it. Sometimes the meaner you were, the easier it was to overcome adversity.

23. Milly

The masked man had a deal for her, in Milly's mind; it was a pretty good deal. The only problem was finding a way to trust the man to hold up his end. The truth was, she couldn't, and deep down, Milly knew that she might not survive the coming days, but she was determined to take some of these bastards with her.

Three new masked men had come and bagged her. They didn't put a sack over her head or just blindfold her. They bound her hands, elbows, feet, knees and ankles, gagged and blindfolded her and put her in an enormous duffle bag. It was the kind of bag Milly used to see at sporting events that teams kept equipment in.

After placing her unusually gently in the trunk of a car, Milly actually fell asleep. She couldn't remember the last time she didn't have to worry about someone raping her. She may never have to worry about it again, if this all worked out.

When she woke, she started getting pumped up, like before a competition. Hands worked the zipper and several sets of eyes stared at her abused skin, she could feel it. There were several sharp intakes of breath.

A woman's voice said, "We're going to carry you to the shower in the bag, you're disgusting, don't thrash

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about.” She had an English accent, which was kind of cool.

Once the bag was opened wide and Milly was dumped on the cool marble tile, she was warned not to remove her blindfold by the woman with the accent or she’d go right back to the other house, where she would be used until there was nothing left.

“It usually only takes a few days, but they tell me you’ve been at it for over a week.” The English woman said in awe. “It’s hard to believe.”

“A week, really?” Milly wondered to herself, only a week, it felt like she left her house a month ago. Milly tried to mumble, and a woman’s hands removed her gag.

“I’m an athlete, most girls are soft.” Milly said with a pride she didn’t think she had left, after what she’d been forced to do, she was ashamed of herself, but she had survived. Milly yelped when the shower was turned on and the all the scrapes and sore spots started to burn.

“We’re going to cut the zip-ties after we cuff you to the grab rail, the English woman explained. There’s soap and other products there in the shower, and a new toothbrush in the drawer. When you hear the door close, you may remove the blindfold, un-cuff yourself with the key here in the soap dish and wash. Take as long as you like. When you’re done, there’s a phone on the wall, in reach of the shower, it’s only an intercom, don’t get any ideas.” The woman explained. “When you pick it up tell the person that answers that you’re ready to come down.” And the door closed.

Milly yanked her blindfold off, and blinked in the harshly lit bathroom. It was all white marble and after being in the dark for so long, it hurt her eyes. She located the handcuff key and unlocked the cuff on her

wrist, leaving it dangling from the grab rail in the shower. Milly washed off her face and took her time to use hand sanitizer in her mouth. She rinsed as she gagged. It wasn't the first time she'd vomited in the last week. She then brushed her teeth for several minutes, scraping the inside of her mouth until it bled. Milly scrubbed at her skin until she was raw. The scratches and wounds all over her body bled freely and stung as Milly scrubbed with a washcloth and sanitizer. There was no telling what kind of diseases she had picked up from the dozens of men that had raped her, but she would do what she could to at least feel clean, if she ever could.

The abused areas where countless men had penetrated her, burned like fire, but she used the entire bottle of sanitizer to cleanse herself. She'd had no idea people did that in each other's butt, until those first men in the van had taken turns. Now the tears of anger flowed as she thought back on what had been done to her, and had been taken from her. She wondered where her mom was and if the police were still looking for her.

After washing off with regular soap and using the last of the shampoo and conditioner on her long Auburn hair she stepped out of the shower and wiped the mirror off. Milly was horrified to see what had become of the perky, young cheerleader she used to know. She was bruised and scratched from head to toe. Both eyes were blackened and her nose was broken. One of her ears had a serious bite wound that was bleeding and there were bite marks and scratches and cigarette and cigar burns just about everywhere she looked.

The shock was replaced by anger, and Milly picked up the phone to get the ball rolling. She had a date with

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one of her captor's best clients, and apparently the man had made someone very unhappy.

The English woman came in after two masked men. Milly was beyond feeling embarrassment, she stood there nude, bruised and bloody for all to see. The masked English woman handed her a robe.

"A little modesty dear, even in your current situation, have some respect for yourself." The woman said.

Was she serious? Milly was about to physically assault the bitch but one of the guards saw her tense and said, "Don't." He didn't raise his voice, or move a muscle, but he got his point across. Milly put the robe on and fumed in silence. The English woman picked up a phone from the vanity ignoring the interaction between Milly and the guard.

"Send him in please." She spoke into the receiver, and then to Milly she said, "We have a doctor, he's going to examine you and take care of the most obvious issues."

She put her hand under Milly's chin and turned Milly's face left and right, staring intently. It would have been a perfect opportunity for Milly to bite the woman's fingers, but the guard made eye contact with Milly and shook his head "No". Milly got the message. "We can cover some of the bruising with makeup, but we're lucky to have a few days to give you to heal, or you won't pass muster." The woman finished, and she turned as a seedy little man, possibly Hispanic or Middle Eastern, wearing a surgical mask stepped into the enormous bathroom.

What followed was the most complete physical exam Milly had ever experienced. Every possible test was done; her wounds were cleaned and in some cases closed

with a stitch or butterfly bandage. He set her nose, which prompted Milly to take a swing at the man. She failed to connect as her nose bled all over the floor. She was spitting mad, and the two masked goons were chuckling at the doctor bobbing and weaving to avoid the snarling Milly and her haymakers.

She was given several shots, anti-biotics, vitamin and antiviral meds to help with any infections or sexually transmitted diseases and she was given a “morning after” pill in case she’d gotten pregnant.

“I can’t help if choo got the HIV, but maybe choo get tested later.” The doctor said apologetically.

He inserted some type of gel into the open bite wound on her ear to make the shape more normal. “You need to wear Choo hair down miss.” The clearly Hispanic doctor said, explaining the gel could only hide so much and to use makeup to match the gel to her normal skin tone.

A complete gynecological exam followed with the doctor shaking his head and commenting, “Issa damn shame miss, choo maybe never have keeds.” As if Milly ever wanted to even consider sex again!

As The doctor left, he gave the English woman a bottle of pills and told her to feed her anything she could keep down, have her rest and leave the wounds uncovered if they wanted them to heal quickly. “Choo get scars, if choo don’t cover up.” the doctor said.

The English woman responded with, “we have a deadline, but she needs to be presentable.” The doctor just shrugged, and without another look at his patient he slipped out of the room. As he went out the door, Milly could see a man with some kind of rifle standing in the hall as an old woman, without a mask, pushed a cart in

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the room. The cart carried several paper plates with cheeseburgers, fries and other fast food items like chicken sandwiches and nuggets.

“There are some clothes in the drawers, the windows are barred and there are guards in the hall, if you even open the door they have orders to take you back to the other house and put you back to work.” The woman explained while she and the guards backed out of the room. Unlike the doctor, none of them ever turned their back on her. It seemed like a wise policy to Milly, since she was trying to think of how to kill the three of them with a spork

“Get some rest. The party is in four days.” The woman said.

24. Trudy

The walk to the house was exhausting in the heat, but nothing she couldn't handle, Trudy told herself. She was grateful to have Jerry along, for a strong shoulder to lean on when she got tired, but to be honest; he was a bit like a big Golden Retriever. The man was very sweet and loyal as hell, he would do anything for the girls, but he was kind of goofy. Trudy didn't know if the former US Army Medic really knew how bad things would get.

Milly on the other hand seemed like a different person. She moved with a purpose and watched the people walking around them and in the opposite direction warily. This was definitely a side of the flirty, flighty vet tech they hadn't seen before.

The three turned off Franklin Boulevard near the old Firestone Mill. It was condos and a Growler Pub now and the little mill houses around the place were being bought up and renovated. The neighborhood had been making a comeback, but that was over now.

It was only a mile to the house and Trudy was feeling better. At least her nausea had subsided. The wounds on her hand and finger were throbbing in time with her heartbeat and Trudy longed to just climb into bed and sleep for a week. She knew that wouldn't happen. When they got to the house, she needed to get everything ready in case they were stuck for while

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waiting for Beau. She knew he would move heaven and Earth to get home, but his office was in a horrible neighborhood and Trudy expected it to take a few days for her husband to make his way back to her.

Trudy was prioritizing the tasks at hand in her head.

The power was out, so water was the first task. After guns of course, lots of guns. Lost in thought, she was startled when Jerry spoke up.

“Let’s go.” Jerry said, helping her up and following Milly across the street. It was strange. People walked in the same traffic lanes as the cars would be travelling. The traffic hadn’t been terribly heavy here at the time of the EMP and there were only a few cars stalled in the road or up against the curb. There were quite a few people walking around and sitting on porches or under convenient shade trees. Everyone appeared to be waiting for something.

The smell of smoke was thick in the air. It was understandable; they were only about a mile from the edge of the debris field left by the plane that came down on top of the animal hospital. You’d think people would be more interested in walking down to check out the plume of smoke, visible over the trees. Most seemed content to be outside, grilling up whatever meat they had in their freezers and trying to stay cool in the oppressive humidity and out of the scorching sun.

The absence of the usual traffic noise and sirens was disquieting. Even the birds were quiet in the heat of the day.

They walked at Trudy’s pace, Milly and even Jerry with a single “Foot from the factory” as he liked to say, could have moved faster, but Trudy was spent, and

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paranoid, she kept her good hand in her purse resting on her Beretta every time they walked near anyone else.

There was a convenience store on the corner where they would turn into Beau and Trudy's neighborhood. Trudy could see it as they approached. She stopped at the little family store daily, sometime twice a day, usually for a cup of coffee or a Sundrop and a snack on the way to work or the gym.

Henry or his wife Serena were always there, they lived in a tiny house behind the ancient store with a single fuel island that only had two pumps that were so old, they didn't take debit cards. It was a cash business for Henry, mainly because he didn't trust the credit card companies.

There was a brand new QT fuel station and convenience store, the size of a small shopping mall, right down the street and despite all the modern bells and whistles, Henry and Serena stayed busy with long-time customers and those who chose not to deal with the bigger corporations.

Henry was also one of the local conspiracy "enthusiasts", and if there was something new to worry about, suspect, or prep for, Henry would know all about it. If an event or disaster occurred and was associated, however distantly, with one of his theories, Henry would have an "I told you so" conversation about it, with anyone that walked in the store.

He probably had something on his shelves that could be of use for any conceivable emergency. He wasn't just a talker, he walked the walk. Henry prepped with the best of them, and would have moved to the mountains year ago if Serena hadn't taken ill. Henry's wife of twenty-five years required dialysis several

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times a week. An EMP event may have been the worst possible case scenario for the couple and Trudy wanted to check on them.

Beau spent many Saturday afternoons sitting in the rockers out behind the store under the enormous Poplar tree, talking about the latest goings on or commiserating over how everything was going to shit.

Henry had one aisle reserved for Hunting and fishing gear that had turned into more camping and disaster preparedness since fewer and fewer locals did much hunting as the city folks bought up the neighborhoods around the old Firestone Mill. He kept a stock of the usual stuff like camping gear and hand-cranked radios, camping stoves and lanterns as well as any style battery flashlights you could want. There were usually some Mountain House foods and a variety of protein bars. A rack of multi-tools and knives as well as a few hatchets and axes sat next to the cast-iron cookware. If there was a useful little gadget for camping, Henry probably had at least one in the store. They did a brisk business any time a hurricane or ice storm came through the area, and their strict “NO RETURNS” policy kept the casual customers from buying up all the emergency gear for a particular crisis and then bringing it all back after the event proved to be less serious than predicted.

The book rack was filled with all the survival and gun magazines as well as maps and some How to books on everything from building a tiny house to reading a compass. He had plenty of compasses also.

Trudy saw there was a small group of people around the store, it wasn't a huge crowd, there were possibly fifteen people, but it was folks from the neighborhood. she recognized most of them. Trudy didn't know them

by name, but they were the neighbors she saw in the store, or out cutting their grass, or fixing their cars in their driveways.

Her instincts were telling her to keep walking, but Trudy was worried about Henry and Serena.

Milly urged Trudy not to stop. “Crowds are a bad place to be Trudy, tell her Jerry!” Milly pleaded. But the big Vet just faithfully followed along behind Trudy and they could hear the crying and angry voices as they got closer.

Trudy walked through the few familiar faces outside the store and she heard Serena’s soft sobbing when she walked through the door and stopped in her tracks.

The interior of the shop was stripped bare and there was a small group kneeling on the floor around two figures lying in an expanding pool of blood.

“MAKE A HOLE” Jerry’s unfamiliar command voice rang out behind Trudy as he shoved her aside and practically dove to the ground, knocking the assembled neighbors about roughly.

Trudy watched over his shoulder.

Henry was very clearly, messily dead. He has an enormous wound in the side of his head. Jerry ignored the cooling corpse and concentrated on the still breathing Serena. She seemed to have been shot in the chest.

“It was an axe” Serena whispered to the angels. Her eyes were unfocused and she was deathly pale. Jerry leaned in close and tipped her up. He found what he was searching for, a fist-sized exit wound. Serena never made a sound as Jerry laid her back down and simply held the woman’s hand until she died a minute or two later.

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Trudy stood back, aghast, that her friends were attacked and then she remembered the situation and pulled her Beretta from her purse. Her gun hand was bound to her chest, but she could shoot someone at close range with her left. She actually spent more time at the range and taking classes more often than Beau, probably because she hadn't grown up, running around the woods, shooting BB guns and .22s, and she needed the practice.

Seeing the gun, one of the neighbors, a forty-something bald man in a City of Gastonia Utilities uniform said, "We got one of them out back."

25. Milly

The day of the Party was a blur; Milly felt a hundred percent better. With rest and decent food, her teenaged body healed quickly and the bruises faded. They used makeup on the black eyes and put her in a beautiful dress. It made her look like a cartoon princess, complete with a tiara. When she commented on it as the Englishwoman supervised her elaborate hairdo, the woman grimaced as if smelling something unpleasant.

“That’s the point my dear, our guest has very specific tastes” The still-masked woman said.

Milly didn’t understand for a moment, then she got it, some of the men back at the “rape house” as she was thinking of it, had fantasies they acted out with Milly. This was to be no different.

Milly looked in the mirrors at the beautiful gown on the beautiful young woman with the dead eyes and she asked “I do this and I just walk away?”

The woman hesitated, “If you do this for him, he’ll keep his end of the bargain, shower, then follow the hallway out the door into the garage. There will be a car with the back door open. In the back will be a bag with clothes, shoes, and money.” The woman paused again.

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“The car will take me to the bus station?” Milly asked, not believing a word the woman said, but hoping nonetheless.

“Yes.” The woman took a sip of tea, and seemed to be staring intently at the bottom of the teacup. She wouldn’t meet Milly’s gaze. Milly knew the woman was lying.

“Listen Milly,” The English woman said. “You can put this all behind you and walk back into your life. Say you were kidnapped and raped and escaped.” She prompted. “I’d leave this last bit out though.” And that was the extent of the pep talk; it was time for the “party”.

The guests arrived, and the special guest she was waiting for was ushered into a private party room where Milly was standing on a small pedestal, like she was on display. He was a grotesque man, overweight, with long arms and a scruffy beard. There were no masks any longer, and her target looked like a gorilla. He wasn’t very big, so Milly didn’t have to worry about that. She did as she was told; she stood to be inspected and did a little twirl. The man noticed a few bumps and bruises on Milly and said something about rough handling to his host and the man shrugged.

“There is some breakage when we acquire new talent; they need to be trained to obey.” Milly’s captor explained.

“But she is a virgin, yes” The man asked in an odd accent. Milly would have laughed out loud if she wasn’t so nervous. She should have been more concerned that her captors were no longer worried whether or not she had seen their faces.

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After they talked business in a foreign language, which got a little heated, Milly was escorted to a master suite by one of the usual guards.

“There is a razor under each pillow, under every couch and chair cushion and in every drawer. No matter where he wants to fuck you, there’s gonna be a blade within arm’s reach.” He paused as if thinking about the plan. “Slice or stab him until he stops moving, then stab him some more.” He paused, “I’d prefer to shoot this goat-fucker in the face myself, but it would be bad for business, so that’s where you come in, do this and I’ll get you out of here.” And he walked her around showing her the various blades in the room and master bath.

There were only a few places that she absolutely had to avoid if she wanted to keep from being raped again. The huge bathtub had no convenient place for a blade, nor did the shower. There was a large expanse of open carpet that offered enough room for an orgy, so she needed to stay out of the middle of the room. Her mind was working it out as the guard went over the plan again and again.

The guard left her alone in the room and she started to visualize what would happen. She assumed there would be a lot of blood, and then she doubled it in her mind and then tripled it. Milly didn’t want to be surprised when the time came to butcher the “Goat-Fucker” she unconsciously grinned at the nickname.

26. Jerry

Jerry knelt in the blood beside the dead woman for a moment longer until he heard the utility worker say they had one of the attackers out back. He wasn't a violent man, he'd been a medic in the Army in Afghanistan and Iraq and had seen his share of combat, but Jerry never fired his weapon at anyone, he was usually too busy looking for pieces of his buddies after an IED had blown them to pieces or taking care of wounded locals. He never had time to shoot back.

Jerry had been moving to aid one of the wounded members of his platoon when he set off a second or possibly third IED for the afternoon. They managed to save his life and balls so he had that going for him, which was nice. He was shredded from the waist down by the blast. Which was why he never wore shorts, the scars were a little too gruesome for most people to deal with.

It's not that he couldn't, or wouldn't defend himself. He'd been in plenty of fights as a teen. You didn't get to be as big as he was and not have some idiot test you in high school or in the bars around Ft. Campbell.

Jerry got to his feet, realizing he had no other pants to wear and he'd have to borrow some of Beau's,

because his scrubs were soaked in blood from the knees down and the flies were already starting to swarm. He followed the crowd out the back door, keeping Milly's short Auburn hair in sight. She had beautiful hair; he wondered why she didn't let it grow out.

The assembled neighbors were gathering around a scruffy man, or actually an older teen, currently down on his knees under the big poplar tree. He'd been roughed up a bit, and Jerry began to wonder if the kid was actually guilty or if the locals just were looking for a scapegoat.

"What did you do?" Trudy asked quietly, her hand holding the Beretta Nano dangling at her side. She was standing just out of the young man's reach.

One of the neighbors, an older black man in a knockoff Bulls Number 23 jersey said, "His people drove off in an old pickup and left his dumb ass." And he paused, to slap the kneeling man in the head.

The utility worker added, "The older truck musta survived the EMP and they came down and looted the store and did all this to Henry and Serena." He added a kick which sent the man sprawling forward on his face. It was then that Jerry noticed the kid had his hands tied with some twine, very tightly. They were turning purple, but Jerry didn't think it would be wise to step between the assembled crowd and the target of their anger. Jerry had seen angry mobs in Iraq, and this was beginning to feel like that. The only difference was the humidity. It was hot as hell, everyone was worked up and the situation had everyone out of their comfort zones. Loved ones were missing and there was no way to know when, or if, they'd be reunited.

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The utility worker was explaining to some in the crowd what an EMP was.

“Are you OK young man?” A graying man with a matching woman that had to be his wife by his side asked. They were both carrying shotguns and wearing camo hunting gear, despite the heat.

“Excuse me.” Jerry asked and then he realized the man was referring to his blood-soaked scrubs. “I’m fine sir, it’s not my blood. I was trying to help inside.” And he indicated by nodding his head toward Henry’s store.

Jerry appreciated the fact these folks bothered to ask about him, he imagined in larger towns and cities, it wouldn’t be so cordial, but then he remembered why they were standing around the young man lying face down in the dirt. It wasn’t just the cities.

“That family has always been trash.” The old woman in camo said.

Jerry barely noticed Milly moving up to stand next to Trudy, her hand hidden in the deep pocket of her scrub smock. He turned to ask the woman about the family.

“They live up the road about two miles, in the big house with all the junk in the yard and the barn out back.” The woman’s husband explained. Jerry just nodded his head, they old man had just described half a dozen homes in that direction. Unless he narrowed it down a bit, Jerry would never be able to pick it out.

“The house with the bass boat on the roof of the shed.” The woman supplied.

That did it. The family was said to have tried to have started a bait and tackle shop in the distant past and they put an old boat hull up on the roof to advertise. Needless to say, the shed was barely standing, but the boat was still there.

“They been in and out of jail for as long as we had a jail.” The old man continued. He wife nodded and added.

“His granddad won’t be too happy about this.” She said with a grin and the young man struggled to get back to a sitting position with his hands darkening behind him. “He’s gonna lose them hands.” The woman added absently, as if she was discussing the weather.

Jerry put his focus back on Trudy because Milly was talking to her animatedly, trying to pull her away. She was clearly trying to get Trudy to continue on their journey, it was only a few streets over to Trudy and Beau’s home. They could relax for a minute and wait for Beau, while they plan their next move. Jerry couldn’t wait to get off his feet, or foot, or foot and stump, hell; he just wanted to sit the fuck down.

Trudy was motioning to the man on the ground with his back to them; his greasy long hair and sweat-soaked tank top were coated with red clay dust from being kicked around in the dirt.

Jerry took a few steps toward the pair of women he felt responsible for and he heard a sound he hadn’t heard in hours, it was an automobile engine.

Everyone turned to look.

“Oh Shit!” the old man in camo said. “It’s his people.” And he pumped his shotgun.

Jerry turned back around to grab the girls, just in time to see Milly pull something shiny from her scrubs, take a step forward and before Trudy could say a word or react, Milly yanked down on the young man’s long hair with her left hand, as she dropped to her knees, forcing his chin skyward. With her right hand, she drew

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what turned out to be a scalpel across the man's throat from ear to ear.

Blood sprayed outward in a fan, covering the first row of spectators who stood in stunned silence. The only sound that could be heard was the approaching Chevrolet Pickup carrying several armed members of the man's extended family.

Then the screaming started.

27. Milly

The Goat Fucker entered the room and Milly was already standing beside the bed. She'd been given instructions to keep the princess dress on. Her hair was up in the complicated braids and her makeup was perfect. She had kicked off the heels that hurt her feet and were impossible to run in and she had done as much stretching as her abused body could and the dress allowed.

The sweaty man couldn't get out of his clothes fast enough and he was talking the entire time. He was telling Milly about all the wonderful experiences she was about to have. The Goat Fucker even admitted to have taken several pills to help with his stamina. A few weeks ago, Milly had actually had to ask her Mother what one of those commercials was talking about and now she saw the pill's results, first hand.

The man strode up to her and spun her around, fumbling with the fasteners. Milly was aware of five blades she could reach. The Goat Fucker was losing patience and so was Milly, He started to rip at her dress and she said

“Wait please, let me” and she had him lay back on the bed with his feet on the floor, with his impressive

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erection pointing at the ceiling. She began to undress and the man watched her intently. She was nervous, but focused, and was careful to remain out of easy grasp. The blade she was going after was on the floor by her feet beneath the bed, hidden by the dust ruffle. When she was completely nude and the man was transfixed, Milly knelt between the Goat Fucker's legs, grabbed his erect penis with her left hand, bent her head forward to place the his cock in her mouth and with her right hand, she brought the razor up and sliced into the stiff member.

The Goat Fucker tried to react, Blood erupted from his engorged penis and Milly was only able to slice through about half way, it was much more difficult than she had anticipated cutting through. The man had simultaneously shoved Milly away and leapt off the bed while trying to hold himself together. Blood flowed from between his fingers and when he removed his hands to reach for Milly, it spurting.

The combination of pain and shock, and ultimately, blood loss, gave him no chance. Milly managed to stay out of his grasp as the Goat-Fucker tried to kill the instrument of his death, because he was well-aware he was dying, but Milly was nude and they were both covered in blood. She was slippery as an eel and his grip was fading. The video, which was available on the dark web later, went viral in that world and brought Milly some notoriety for her moves and the "Benny Hill" soundtrack was a nice touch.

Once the Goat Fucker started to fade, Milly started dashing in and slicing at him, like a Picador at a bull in the ring. For a minute, he fought on bravely. When he stopped reacting to the small cuts, Milly moved in and

sliced his throat from ear to ear, draining what little blood was left. He fell to the blood-soaked carpet, his drug-assisted erection finally deflating as the blood left it for good.

In the next instant she sprinted into the bathroom and stood under a scalding shower, the razor knife still in her right hand. She half-expected one of the guards to come in and kill her but she suddenly didn't care. She felt as if she was finished with that life. Killing the Goat Fucker had killed the old Milly. Standing in front of the mirror in the shower, she absently wondered why it wasn't fogged up. A hand placed on it confirmed it was heated. She took the razor knife and, after loosening her intricate braid from the pins holding it in place, she used the knife to cut her luxurious auburn locks off.

Milly opened the shower door and noticed her bloody footprints on the marble tiles. She avoided the blood and flushed the hair down the toilet.

There were clothes stacked on the vanity. Someone had been in the bathroom while she was in the shower and she never heard them come in.

She dressed in the jeans and sweatshirt, everything actually fit. There was a wallet with an ID a social security card and a thousand dollars in cash. The Name was Jillian Smith, from Boca Raton. Milly was from Orlando, and she wondered what this was all about.

The door into the bedroom where she'd murdered the Goat Fucker was locked so she went out another door into a hallway and the same guard was standing there. He had a satisfied look on his face.

"Nice" He said and then he held out his hand.

"I thought I was just walking out of here." She said accusingly.

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“You’re smarter than that, Slash.” And he extended his palm again.

Milly knew what he wanted and she handed over the razor knife. Then she preceded the guard downstairs to the room where the party was held.

Her captors and the Englishwoman were sitting in front of a big screen and the Englishwoman handed Milly a sealed Orange Juice which Milly drained, and then took another.

“Sit” Her captor said.

Milly hoped she’d walk away, but she never really expected to. She sat gingerly, there was still some tenderness from her time at the brothel and the recent exertions had torn some stitches and aggravated some sore spots. She got as comfortable as possible under the circumstances and waited.

Her captor started speaking.

“Hold out your hands.” He said, and Milly did as she was told.

“Not a tremor.” The Englishwoman said.

“Could be shock.” One of the guards said.

“I don’t think so.” He captor said. “I think she’s got a gift.” And he went on to explain he’d like to invite Milly to join their band of merry men and women as an associate who would do things, not unlike she had just done to the “goat Fucker”.

“I won’t apologize for what happened to you, because you wouldn’t believe it.” He said. It may have been the first truthful thing he’d ever said to Milly. He went on. “But you have two options,” He turned on the recording and Milly was treated to an HD recording of her torture and murder of the Goat Fucker. Her face was clearly visible, up until it was covered with blood.

“You can walk away and this recording will be leaked if you ever come after any of us, or you can join us and this video will be leaked if you ever betray us.” The recording stopped and Milly was almost sorry it did.

She was silent for a moment as she thought about her old life and her mother and explaining what happened to her and how she had been so stupid and daddy wouldn't have ever let this happen, no. She couldn't see her mother, not yet.

What was she going to do going forward? How could she go back to sitting in a classroom with all the talk and all the eyes staring at her. Everyone would know she had been raped, by a lot of men.

She had questions.

“Would I have to fuck anyone?” She directed at her captor. It was the first time she had ever used the word aloud. He stared back at her,

“Probably, in the course of doing, that,” he said, pointing at the screen where the murder had just played. “You may have to role-play, and it may be included. How you get close to someone would be up to you.”

That sealed it. “No thanks, I'll walk away, what's going to happen to the body and the crime scene?” She asked. That elicited a laugh from everyone.

“I told you.” The Englishwoman said.

“I had to try, I'm telling you, she's got the gift, she's a prodigy” Her captor said, beaming.

The Englishwoman said, “The body is on the way to the everglades to become one with the ecosystem and we're going to burn the house to the ground. There's entirely too much evidence in this house.”

“So that's it?” Milly asked

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“That’s it.” Her captor said, “Remember, if you go to the police, that video goes viral and you get famous.” He looked at the guards. “It looked to me like she was enjoying herself a little too much, didn’t it fellas.” And they all agreed.

Milly wanted to disagree, but she couldn’t, she saw the same thing they saw in the recording and she did like killing the Goat Fucker, she was taking out a few weeks of rapes and abuse on the man. He was the target of all that pain and anger.

The guards began pouring gasoline over every surface in the McMansion and Milly wondered what her next move was. She took out the fake ID and the thousand dollars, and stared at it in her hands. Milly turned to her captor and said,

“Make it five thousand and I’ll take that ride to the bus station.”

They settled on \$2500.

28. Beau

The trailer was staying behind. As jammed up as the interstate looked when Beau had climbed up on top of the forklift roll cage to scan their route the previous evening, there was no way it could navigate the mess on I-85.

Beau used some poly-sheeting material from work to wrap around the top of the forklift cage to create some shade from the brutal sun. The tops of his arms and knees were browned after the previous day's burn, and they would eventually peel. He didn't need to burn again. Considering the events of the previous day, if they were to be the norm, the chances any of them living long enough to have to worry about melanoma were slim.

Carmella was wearing some ancient cutoff jeans that had belonged to Mrs. Johnson's kids and a loose-fitting man's oxford shirt like Ruth was wearing. The ability to roll down the sleeves seemed to be what they wanted for some reason. Carmella had them rolled up for the moment. She wore a tee-shirt beneath the shirt and no bra; hers had been cut off during her assault the previous day. Her face was bruised and her lips were swollen from her attack. Mrs. Johnson had cleaned her up with some precious pool water and strong soap. Carmella wanted to use bleach, but Mrs. Johnson wouldn't let her, because

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she needed it to purify the pool water and any additional rain water they were able to collect.

The former babysitter carried a half gallon jug of water hanging by a man's belt over her shoulder and a Smith & Wesson M&P 9MM in her right front pocket. It only gave her seven shots, and she didn't have a spare magazine for it, but she knew how to use the pistol and firepower was why she was keeping Beau around.

Ruth was dressed much the same, except in khakis, and her pistol was a Taurus PT92 with a 17-round magazine. She had an old Boy Scouts of America canteen on a pistol belt that Mrs. Johnson found in the garage. The problem with Ruth, was, where Carmella looked like a kid in her dad's clothes, Ruth looked like the swimsuit model you brought home that was trying on the clothes in your closet. To say she was distracting was an understatement. At least she had her own undergarments.

The third member of their party was a woman Beau hadn't officially met. She was one of the rescued sexual assault victims from the off ramp. The tanned woman was about thirty, slight, but toned, with short hair and she squinted through two blackened eyes because she lost her glasses.

She didn't have a gun, but Mrs. Johnson's brother had given her a wicked filet knife he had taken the time to sharpen for her. The woman's name was Lorraine and she seemed very withdrawn, which was understandable, considering what she'd been through.

When she came out that morning Beau saw the woman putting on her "uniform" of oxford shirt over Khakis and tee-shirt with no bra. She had two complete upper-arm tattoo sleeves. She carried a gallon jug of

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water on a loop of rope she had wrapped a few times over her shoulder and across her body like a bandolier. The tattoos included American flags, Globes and Anchors.

“Where’d you serve Marine?” Beau asked

The woman stiffened. “Are you active duty?” Beau asked.

“Yes sir. I’m on leave, I just got back from Afghanistan, and I was on the way to Asheville to see my parents when this...” and she trailed off. She was practically standing at attention.

“At ease...what’s your rank?” Beau asked.

“Staff Sergeant” She replied proudly.

“I was in the Army, made E-5 driving trucks around Iraq, but right now, in case nobody told you, the mission is, travel west, out of Charlotte to Gastonia, to get to my wife. Gastonia is on the way to Asheville. We have plans after that, but let’s take it day by day. How does that sound?”

The Marine Staff Sergeant said, “Sounds like a plan, I’m a communicator, which is useless with all the electronics down, but every Marine is a rifleman.” she put her hands up to her swollen face. “Unfortunately, without my glasses, I can barely see past the end of my knife.” The woman said. She explained an IED had rung her bell the previous year and her vision had taken a hit. The Marine Corps was trying to decide if she would be separated from the service for the “Good of the Corps” while she was on leave.

“I didn’t think I’d be...a ...fucking victim on the first goddamn day... of the ...apocalypse!” The Marine struggled not to cry. Ruth and Carmella were trying not to listen but they were close enough to hear the anguish

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in the Staff Sergeant's voice and they moved in for what was looking suspiciously like a group hug.

"I swear to Christ I'll fucking cut you!" The Marine was back and she walked a few yards away.

"Are we ready to roll?" Beau asked, happy to change the subject.

Heads nodded all around and, while wiping her eyes, the Staff Sergeant walked over and with some effort, she was in some pain from her assault, she squatted down and she raised the garage door, before Fred could rush over to assist.

Muted sunlight filled the garage as Beau started the engine and he made sure everyone had a round chambered and their magazines dropped and topped off. It was helpful that all the pistols were 9mm, but another rifle or two would be nice.

With a nod to those staying behind, Beau rolled out of the garage and down the driveway. He carefully negotiated the drop to the street; one moment's inattention to a pothole or uneven pavement could tip the forklift on its side and then Beau would be walking, if he managed to avoid injury when the forklift tipped.

Beau had insisted the women have a bag of some kind with food of their own and a knife along with their water, He hoped they found some matches or a lighter and anything else each of them couldn't live without at Mrs. Johnson's.

Lorraine the Marine Staff Sergeant had several refilled water bottles in a gym bag she found in the garage. Beau insisted their hands be free while walking.

"You never know what's gonna happen out there on the road, and you don't want to drop your bag of food and water when the shooting starts." He explained.

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The garage door closed behind them and as they rolled down the street they could hear the kids playing in the back yard, even over the sound of the forklift. The neighbors and other folks in the tidy neighborhood of ranch houses were working in yards and on cars. All of these people were oblivious to the catastrophe that had befallen them. The smell of grilling meat and ripe sewage were mixing already. That would get worse, and disease would follow, if anyone was left alive after the food ran out.

Carmella and Ruth walked on each side and Lorraine brought up the rear, she could see well enough to keep the large yellow forklift in sight and if the forklift could drive over the obstacle, it was likely the optically-challenged Marine NCO could avoid tripping over it.

The more he thought about it, the less enthused he was about bringing Lorraine along. Beau stopped the lift before they reached Sugar Creek Road. He could already see a few people out walking around. He suspected they were up to no good. He called the women close.

“We’re going to see a lot of dead people today, and plenty of people that may want or need our help.” He paused. “Our first responsibility is to us, if you see a pair of glasses on a corpse or on the ground, pick them up. We’re bound to find something that can help the Staff Sergeant.”

“Just call me Lori” The Marine said, seeming more at ease now that they were moving.

“OK, we grab glasses and we ignore Every. Fucking. Body. Else!” Beau let that sink in. “Are we clear?” Lori nodded in the affirmative; the Marine was really in no position to disagree until she could see further that the

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end of her arm. Ruth and Carmella looked at each other and back at Beau.

“What about Kids?” Carmella asked

“What about them?” Beau responded

“What if they’re alone?” She added.

“You didn’t have any problem leaving the kids you know, so leaving strangers shouldn’t be any problem.”

Beau said roughly.

Tears filled Carmella’s eyes and she turned and walked a few steps away

“You’re an asshole!” Ruth said, and Lori looked in Beau’s general direction.

“Harsh.” Was all the abused Marine contributed.

“You know she left them there because she couldn’t protect them, she felt helpless after yesterday and she wanted them to be safe.” Ruth explained.

“You just helped make my point.” Beau said.

Beau didn’t say what he was thinking, that the babies may be the first ones to get eaten. He started forward again, expecting the women to keep pace. They reached Sugar Creek Road and turned left, back towards the Exit 41 ramp where Lori and the other two women were rescued. Beau could see people roaming around in the distance. There were a few restaurants like Cookout and a local diner that had already been looted. Beau ignored all of it and focused on the people.

There were a few cars moving. Word had apparently spread that the older cars would start. Beau stopped and said, “Cover Me.” He pulled out a monocular and scanned the area around the interstate about a mile away. There was a haze from distant fires making detail difficult to pick out but there weren’t nearly as many people around. Beau could see groups going from car to

car in an organized manner with what appeared to be baking pans. They would go under the cars and drain the gasoline into the pans which were dumped into open top barrels being carried in the bed of Fred's El Camino. It appeared as if Jerome was cleaning up the neighborhood. Bodies were being loaded onto a trailer not unlike the lawn care trailer Beau had used to transport the kids the previous day. He noticed the bodies of the rapists they had killed had been picked up from the ramp. Movement caught his eye.

The Chevelle that Jerome had borrowed from Fred the day before rolled into view and suddenly accelerated in their direction, maneuvering around the cars killed by the EMP.

"Fuck!" Beau commented.

"What is it?" Lori asked, with a tinge of panic in her voice. Not being able to see what everyone else could was freaking the Marine Staff Sergeant out.

"An old friend." Beau replied as he hopped down from the lift. "I hope." He added as the Chevelle rolled to a stop and six of Jerome's gang piled out of the car and spread out in a protective circle, all facing outward, which surprised Beau a bit.

Jerome slid out from behind the wheel; He was eating a banana and holding his Sig Sauer pistol in his right hand.

"Jerome." Beau said as a greeting. He held the AK at the ready, with the stock extended, but not aimed any anyone. Jerome nodded back at him.

"I don't remember your name; did you get Mrs. Johnson and them kids to her house?" He asked, between bites of the banana. "I was about to go check on them." He said.

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“Sure did.” Beau answered, we had a little excitement along the way with all those pieces of shit across the way there.” He added while pointing with his chin, across the interstate toward the intersection where Jerome’s other men were still policing up bodies.

“You lose any of them?” Jerome probed.

“No, and we were able to save a few more, but not nearly enough.” Beau finished.

Jerome stared down for a second, he looked like he had something to say and was trying figure out how to say it.

“The food was gone, wasn’t it?” Beau guessed.

Jerome looked up sharply, confirming Beau’s fears.

“Damn, that was fast.” Beau admitted, impressed at the efficiency of the looters. “The employees musta just packed all they could up and the neighbors probably stripped it clean.” Beau talked on for a moment, trying to come up with how the Compare foods that Jerome and his boys had gone to strip had been cleaned out before they could loot the place themselves.

Jerome looked stricken. “I don’t know what the hell to do. We got a lot of people that ain’t gonna eat after tomorrow...” And he just kind of stopped and starred at the horizon. Beau realized Jerome was already dead. The man wasn’t cut out for this shit. For some reason, Beau realized he cared, if it only meant it would keep Mrs. Johnson and the kids alive for a few more days.

“Quit being a little bitch!” Beau said, loud. Every one of Jerome’s boys heard that and they turned around to see what was going to happen next. For a second, Jerome looked like he was going to shoot Beau, but he didn’t have the fire in him anymore, Jerome just started

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crying, He dropped the Sig and he put his hands to his face.

“What the hell!” Beau thought to himself, cringing at the thought of the Sig hitting the pavement. He scooped up the pistol and verified it was loaded with a round chambered before handing it to Lori.

Beau was right; Jerome was giving up, because he saw the writing on the wall. There were too many people to feed and nothing to feed them. Beau couldn't worry about the entire neighborhood. He shouldn't be worrying about anyone but himself, however Mrs. Johnson and the rest needed any help they could get, now that Jerome was falling apart.

He gave it one more shot and turned away from Jerome, to the group of young thugs closing in on their former leader, disgusted at his show of weakness.

Beau took a chance. After a quick glance at his terrified trio of travelling companions hiding behind the forklift, He brought this meeting of the meanest gang in Charlotte to order.

“Which one of you motherfuckers wants to be in charge?”

29. Jerome

He didn't know what to do, the tears had started the night before, when he realized he wasn't going to be able to feed his family. When he thought of the Overlords, he thought of them as his family. They had always been his family, and Jerome had thought they always would be.

Now, he was kneeling on the asphalt, this white motherfucker that had clued him in to all the EMP shit and sent them to the Compare Foods, was talking to HIS family, and Jerome couldn't stop sobbing. He wished the dude had never told him a thing about the damn EMP.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” The leader of the largest and most notorious gang in Charlotte thought to himself. The white boy was talking.

“Which one of you motherfuckers wants to be in charge?” Beau was saying to the young men. They just looked down at their fallen leader and at each other.

“What about him?” The smallest of the six thugs asked.”

“Why the fuck are you asking me?” the white boy asked them, an evil look on his face. “This ain't my damn gang, but you saw them kids I took through here last night right?” The white boy asked.

“Yeah, we seen you.” The biggest of the six said. He was holding a shotgun.

“If I take care of Jerome for you, will you try to help Mrs. Johnson and those kids?” Jerome’s head snapped up when he heard the white boy ask this.

The little thug said. “You gonna kill him?” And he gripped his Glock more tightly. That really got Jerome’s attention.

“No, if somebody is gonna pop him, you should do it, I don’t want any bad feelings with his crew, but what I’ll do is, I’ll take him along with me, and ya’ll can run the neighborhood however you want.” The White boy finished his pitch and he looked over his shoulder and down at Jerome, who was still on his knees. “Is that cool with you? It beats a bullet, right?” the man asked Jerome.

Jerome struggled to stand, he was spent. The emotions of the last 24 hours had sucked the life out of him. He had been making all the decisions, now, he didn’t care what really happened, he’d prefer not to die, they were all going to die once the food ran out, weren’t they? He made one last decision.

“Sure, I’ll come along,” and then to Lori he asked, would you please give my pistol to Deshawn?” He asked, pointing at the smallest of the thugs. And then to the six young men who had been loyal gang members since middle-school he said. “I know it don’t mean shit, but ya’ll tell Dre and Clowny that Deshawn has my vote to lead this crew.” And he tossed the car keys to the tallest of the young men.

Deshawn’s chest swelled at the compliment paid by the former leader. The pride the kid felt was visible and would most likely lead to trouble down the road. There were no guarantees that the senior crew leaders would

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come to the same decision regarding who would be the new leader.

“Will you do what you can for those kids?” the white boy asked Deshawn. He waited half a beat and added, “They got a swimming pool full of water that ya’ll are gonna need.” The man reminded Deshawn.

Jerome didn’t know if the man had just hastened the deaths of Mrs. Johnson and everyone at her place by volunteering her pool to the gang, but Jerome knew that those kids wouldn’t last very long without some protection and some food. Maybe the gang could help with both. Regardless Jerome had forfeited his right to have a say in any of it by falling apart in front of his boys. The former gang leader thought he might have a chance of living through all of this mess if he stuck with the white boy. The man seemed to have his shit together.

Jerome looked around and saw fires and pillars of smoke in every direction. There were people walking by on Sugar Creek Rd travelling both ways and from where he was standing he could see folks moving around down on the interstate. Gunshots echoed in the distance and much, much closer. Jerome knew he had to get out of town. He’d always been a city kid and rarely left Charlotte, but if travelling with this redneck to Gastonia would keep him alive a while longer he’d go along with that, and the man could make all the decisions. Tears started forming again, but this time in relief. The stress of responsibility was melting away. Jerome’s entire body felt as if it had been clenched tight like a fist.

“Man, quit fucking crying and get the fuck outa here before we change our minds and waste you ourselves!” Deshawn ordered when he noticed the fresh tears.

The former supreme gang leader of Charlotte nodded and started walking toward the ramp to I-85. He didn't have any food or water or anything but the clothes on his back, but he was free and alive. He practically whistled as he walked down the ramp toward the devastation that lined the interstate. He heard the forklift start up and follow behind him.

Jerome was fortunate to get out of this situation alive. Normally, he would have never been able to leave the gang on his feet, but since it was just these six gang-members present, they didn't feel like they had the juice to take the boss out. There would be hard questions and nobody wanted to be the one whose finger could be placed on the trigger for that.

"Hey!" A voice called from behind him, freezing him in his tracks. He knew it; they had changed their minds and were going to kill him. He stopped and waited for the bullet. Deshawn ran up with an embarrassed look on his face.

The forklift was passing them on its way down the ramp. Jerome noticed the white boy didn't seem to really give a shit if he was behind, and them bitches ain't said shit the whole time. "They just strolled by." He thought to himself.

Deshawn leaned in close as if sharing a secret, "Man, none of us can drive a stick, how we supposed to move the car?" The teenager asked the "Old" Man.

30. Beau

The on ramp from Sugar Creek Road to Southbound I-85 was clear of vehicles. But there was a pileup at the bottom that had burned during the night and was now a smoldering mess. The tires still burned persistently, sending heavy black smoke up into the darkening morning sky. Storm clouds were building, but at least they wouldn't be baking in the direct sunlight. Beau would take the rain, all day long. It would give people a chance to collect rain water for drinking, if they were smart enough to take advantage of the opportunity.

Beau had passed Jerome on the ramp without slowing. He didn't really care what became of the man, but he hoped the Jerome's former gang would do something to help Mrs. Johnson and the kids. He didn't know how Fred Q. Sanford, the owner of all of muscle cars the gang was using, would react if Deshawn rolled up in Fred's Chevelle without Jerome to grease the wheels. It could get bloody. They would have to work it out.

He couldn't worry about it. That was behind him; He had to get home and the only way home was through this sea of burnt and broken cars on the interstate. Beau slowed as he approached the pileup at the bottom of the

ramp. It was obvious the cars on the ramp weren't able to stop quickly enough when the EMP struck. The uncontrolled merge with the southbound traffic, probably caused the enormous traffic jam.

Lori was looking in the cars for anything useful and she said "Cover me."

The Marine Staff Sergeant leaned in a smoking car and with Beau, Ruth and Carmella keeping an eye on the trickle of pedestrians walking along the interstate, Lori backed away holding a pair of glasses. "Yuck." she said as she pulled her fillet knife and began scraping something off the frames.

"What is all that?" Carmella asked.

Beau knew exactly what it was and was about to shut down the speculation, but a new group of walkers came jogging toward the forklift from under the next overpass to the North of where they stood. It looked like the people had been using it for shelter.

"Skin...hair...burnt blood." Lori responded causing Ruth and Carmella to recoil in disgust from Lori. As she tried the glasses on, she looked at the two women, A few hairs were still welded to the frames by blood and heat, but Lori could see a little better. "Where did you think we were going to find glasses?" Lori asked the women, and then she saw what Beau saw, only not as well.

"I can see a bit better, I'll keep looking." She said.

"Let's go." Beau commanded and then, "Don't stop for shit." And the forklift started rolling again.

"Hey!" A voice called and Beau turned his head but kept driving. The women were walking ahead, looking in car glove boxes and consoles, one of them always watching the other two and keeping an eye on the

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constant stream of pedestrians walking in both directions.

A man in a wife beater, dress pants and dress shoes pulled up breathing heavily beside the forklift. He was sweating rivers. The sun was hidden behind storm clouds for the moment, but the temperature was already around 80, and the humidity was spiking, it sure felt to Beau like a thunderstorm was approaching. The only air moving was from the fan on the forklift, so the interstate was turning into a sauna.

Under the shade of the makeshift canopy with the fan blowing on him, it was actually not that bad on the lift. Of course the forklift itself was throwing off a lot of heat, but Beau would take the heat under his ass to keep from walking the twenty miles home.

“Can you stop?” the man wheezed as the other in his party caught up. There were a few men and some women, no kids, thankfully, and nobody terribly old. These were just regular people.

“No, I gotta get home.” Said Beau from the moving forklift.

“Got any water?” a woman asked.

Beau made a point to look at her. She was in her thirties, sunburned and wearing a sweat-soaked blouse and skirt. The heels she had on were the wrong shoes to be wearing for a long walk.

“Sorry, not to spare, we’ve got a long way to go.” Beau told the woman truthfully. That caused some outrage amongst the seven or eight people walking beside the forklift. This was how it started the previous day; the forklift seemed to be drawing people like moths to a flame or flies to shit.

R.A.Bratyanski

“We haven’t had any water since yesterday?” Wife-beater said. Beau snorted in derision.

“Why the fuck are ya’ll still sitting here?” Beau said, pausing to maneuver around a stalled tractor-trailer. The trailer had been opened in the night and some machinery was visible.

“We were waiting for help to come?” Another woman supplied, she was dressed more sensibly with shorts and hiking shoes along with a tank top and a floppy hat. She looked pissed off.

“I’m not sure who you think is coming, have you seen or heard any helicopters or planes or sirens at all?” Beau asked. When nobody answered he answered for them, “Because nobody is coming.” and he stopped the forklift in exasperation and levelled the AK at the group. They all took a step back. “I should just shoot all of you now; it would be more merciful than what’s coming.” He said.

That comment drew a lot of questions and Beau answered a few and he reached a point where he had enough, he was out of patience and compassion. He’d spoken more in the last twenty-four hours than he usually did in a month, it was exhausting. The group continued to grow and Beau was watching the newcomers for any signs of trouble, as he explained the situation.

“Beau!” Carmella shouted from about fifty yards ahead. He didn’t realize the girls had kept walking when he stopped. He started to drive off to catch up to his travelling companions when Wife-beater stepped in front of the forklift.

“We want some of that water.” The sweaty executive commanded. The others in his party tried to convince

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him to move, and Beau looked for an easy way to go around but the way the cars were jammed up made this the path of least resistance.

“This is a teachable moment dipshit.” Beau said calmly to the man, and then to the crowd, a little louder he said. “Yesterday, I killed at least ten men to protect all you see here.” He let that sink in.

Wife-beater didn’t appear convinced. The crowd looked on, curious what would happen and eager for Beau to relent and give up some of his water.

“You all were lucky you didn’t go up these ramps yesterday; there was looting, raping and killing going on not a hundred yards from here.” Beau explained. There were a few gasps and some in the crowd were looking around as if expecting the hordes to pour down the ramps to rape and slaughter them all. It wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility when Beau thought about it.

There were also non-believers in the group, including wife-beater. Beau shouted to Lori, “Staff Sergeant, please explain to these nice folks what happened yesterday.” He saw her horrified look and it was clear she didn’t want to relive the events of yesterday. “You might be saving their lives, if you can convince them of the world of shit they’re living in.” Beau explained. He knew he was being unreasonable, but Lori nodded and she walked over and assumed the position of Parade Rest, staring straight ahead and in the same voice she would use to instruct new marines on their communications gear, she told her story.

“I AM Staff Sergeant Robinson, United States Marine Corps and yesterday after my vehicle was disabled by the...event, I evacuated the vehicle and

maneuvered to the next interstate exit, that exit.” She emphasized, pointing with her chin.

“I encountered two civilian women along the way and convinced them it would be safer if we walked together. I wasn’t going to leave them alone, on the road.” She paused, and looked at Beau.

He didn’t know that part. If Lori had left the women down on the interstate, they may have escaped the assaults that followed; it had to be difficult to bear that responsibility, Beau thought, and then, he let the less kind thought, “Shit happens.” Intrude on his empathy for the women. “They could be dead.” Beau said under his breath. The same shit could be happening to his wife, Trudy. Just the thought of her, helpless, under a gang of rapists was enough to send Beau over the edge.

Lori went on. “At the top of the ramp there were a few young men claiming they had food and water for stranded travelers, they had even made signs. We were thirsty from the long walk in the heat so we were appreciative; right up until the men jumped us.” Lori took a drink from her improvised canteen, which made Beau cringe, these people were thirsty.

We were stripped, beaten and raped repeatedly by an unknown number of assailants.”

The severe bruising and cuts and scratches visible on the Marines’ face, neck and arms, and the way she moved a little gingerly made her testimony all the more authentic.

She went on, “I fought back... we all did, but even my marine training wasn’t enough to keep all of those men from using me in just about any way you can imagine. I would probably be dead if these people hadn’t come along and killed my attackers.” She stopped, and

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with an angry look at Beau, she turned on a heel and limped back to Carmella and Ruth, who had that group hug look again and this time, Lori accepted the comfort without pulling her knife on anyone.

The women in the group that had gathered looked stunned, they were glancing around furtively at the men in their midst. Beau suspected they were sizing up the party, to try to determine which guy had the potential to be a rapist and who could be counted on in a fight against whatever horrors were coming. After observing the group, Beau didn't think much of their chances.

He looked at the stranded motorists. "I don't know if any of you are from the area, but be advised, you're standing in one of the worst neighborhoods in Charlotte, and it doesn't get any better for a while heading southbound. You're better off heading north; the population thins out after a few miles."

He was tired of trying to make stubborn people understand the situation, he had to get home. His last comment to the group was, "Look in the cars and find better clothes, supplies and shoes, those heels won't get you home. Look for plastic sheets or something similar, so if it starts raining, you'll be able to collect water in whatever you can..." There was so much more, but Beau was done, Trudy was waiting.

They would stay here and die, or walk on and probably die a little further down the road. It was up to them. He started the forklift, and noticed Jerome had finally made it down the ramp after his quick driver's education class. The former gang leader stood off to the side of the girls and looked around nervously.

"We want that water." Wife-beater said from in front of the lift. The man hadn't moved. He stood there

sweating through his wife beater and grinning slightly. He thought he was going to get Beau to relent. Beau sighed.

Jerome shouted, "You better move dumbass!"

"Last Chance." Beau said after a glance at Jerome, who was helping Lori get Carmella and Ruth behind some cars for cover.

The man didn't move.

Beau brought up the AK in a smooth, steady motion, took the weapon off SAFE and put the rifle to his shoulder. The front sight post was on the man's chest. Over the sights, Beau made eye contact with wife-beater and he gave the idiot one silent second to reconsider. Wife beater held his ground. Beau squeezed the trigger.

The power had been out for 24 hours.

End

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The I-85 Chronicles continue with:

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“The Search for Spork”

Coming Soon!

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