

Rendezvous - Prolog

Wayne Jackson watched the news religiously. He was a History Major in his final year of college and history in the making was fascinating. And more than a bit scary. Life on campus had put a serious crimp in his ability to prepare for what he was sure was coming in the near future. Guns of any kind were a no-no, as were large knives. There was even a move on to bar any type of pocket knife carry on the campus.

Not having a gun handy was only the most important of several other serious lacks in his preparedness stand. The campus dorm room he shared was small for two people, as it was. When he tried to figure out how to store more than a few days emergency supplies and still have closet room, he had to settle for a couple of cases of homemade MREs, four cases of bottled water, two preloaded Kifaru Navigator backpacks, and let it go at that. The twin backpacks were set up to ride a custom rear rack on his bicycle as panniers.

That didn't include his large Kifaru EMR backpack, configured for getting him to the group retreat the family owned a share of if something happened that called for relocating from the school. The EMR rode atop the rear rack that carried the Navigators. It was what he would take if he had to abandon the bike. It stayed within reach under his bed.

Since the retreat was between the college and his family's home, it was to be the rendezvous point. Besides, the family home, while equipped fairly well prep wise, was no place to be in a serious situation. It was in a large city, which was in serious decline. The family had decided to bug out for any major situation, rather than risk staying in the city.

Wayne got around campus on a very good mountain bike, a folding model Montague Paratrooper, and paid his roommate a small sum to ride with him in his car when he needed to go further than he wanted on the bike, and in severe weather. It worked out well, since their class schedules were nearly identical, and Marty Mays was always over budget and needing money for gas.

His book bag was another Kifaru pack, the Marauder. In it he had not only his books, and class work, but enough items to get him back to the dorm to get to his other gear in case of emergency.

Rendezvous – Chapter 1

Despite Marty's offer to let Wayne ride along with him for a Spring Break jaunt to Florida, Wayne decided to save the money he'd spend and hang around the campus during the break. He didn't tell Marty the real reason he didn't want to go. Well, one of the real reasons. First, he wasn't into that party mentality, second was the money. Third, and most important, was what was happening in the US at the moment.

Times were tough. The new President's new programs weren't working and people were losing millions in the Stock Market as it continued its slow, torturous fall. People were losing jobs right and left, and retirement savings were being wiped out as major companies declared bankruptcy and closed their doors.

International relations with several allies were strained, due to the new foreign relations policies being implemented under the new administration. It was at the point that the United States of America really didn't have a friend in the world.

That fact emboldened even small nations to try and destroy the country any way they could. But it wasn't just the small countries like Iran and Venezuela. China refused to buy more of America's debt and dumped most of what they had on the open market, bringing confidence in the US down to new lows.

Russia and China both began what could only be termed harassment of US military operations all around the world, with aggressive air encroachment of land bases and at-sea fleets. France, being what it was, was very critical of everything the US did. Great Britain, while not openly vocal about their disappointment in US policies, made it clear they were not happy with the situations.

All of which probably would not have mattered too much, had it not been for one lone fanatic, nationality unknown, sponsorship unknown. But he made his mark on the world when his home made nuclear weapon destroyed the heart of New York City. It was a small device, estimated to be only six or seven kilotons yield, of early A-bomb type straight fission design, not the much more powerful H-bomb fission-fusion-fission devices the major nuclear powers had.

But it was enough. The US went on high alert, and allegations began to be thrown about right and left. Russia went to a war footing, followed in a few minutes by China. It was North Korea, for some insane reason, which took the next major step. They only had three nuclear devices, but they launched all three. Two at South Korea, and one lone nuclear tipped ICBM at Anchorage, Alaska.

Much to the surprise of most of the world's population that was aware of what was happening, the US did not retaliate in kind. The President simply called for UN sanctions against Korea, and even backed down one notch on the military alert, despite pleas from the Joint Chiefs to stay at the higher level until Russia and China backed theirs down.

And to prevent panic, according to the Presidential spokeswoman, martial law was declared across the entire US, except for Hawai'i. Dusk to dawn curfew, daylight travel by local

authority permit only, a ban on the sale or purchase of arms and ammunition. A similar ban on the sale or purchase of precious metals. A ban on hard liquor sales. Wine and beer were still okay.

Wayne didn't hesitate. He took the folded up Paratrooper bike out of the closet and opened it up. He thought about just loading up and going, but he hated to leave the carefully assembled home-made MRE's behind. He just couldn't fit them on the bike with the three rear packs in place. And they came first.

He left the dorm, hopped on the bike, and headed for the bike shop he occasionally visited. It was just a street over off the campus. It took him only a few minutes for the overly eager clerk that was always bugging Wayne to get this or that whenever Wayne went in, to get the Cycletote long touring model bike trailer with brakes out of the back and assembled. Wayne attached the hitch to the Paratrooper and hooked up the trailer.

He quickly went through the shop, picked out a few more things, and then had the clearly ecstatic clerk ring things up. Wayne pulled out his debit card. The clerk ran it through, and Wayne breathed a quick sigh of relief. The banking system was still working. Of course, the purchase pretty much wiped out the account balance.

With the additional purchases piled in the trailer, Wayne headed back to the dorm. A campus security officer in a patrol car gave him a hard look, but didn't stop him. When he reached the dorm, Wayne parked and locked the bike. He stripped the packaging material from the new purchases, one of which was an additional cable lock. He locked up the trailer and hurried inside. It took him five trips to get everything he planned to take moved and loaded on the bike or in the trailer and secured.

Wayne watched carefully, waiting for the campus security car to make another round, so he could take off just after it passed the dorm, and would have the greatest amount of time to get off campus before they came around again.

When the car appeared and was again out of sight, Wayne took off. He could definitely tell the trailer was behind him, but he was still able to get up a good speed and left the campus before the patrol car reappeared.

Wayne knew the city well, and kept to side streets and residential areas to avoid any law enforcement that might be out enforcing the no travel rule. He had no intention of trying to get permission to travel. The chances of getting it were slim and none, and if he tried, suspected he would be put on a watch list.

That was why he stayed away from the interstate, taking mostly county back roads on his way east and south. It would make for a much longer trip, but the risks of getting caught were much lower than travelling the short route would bring.

He stopped at a convenient, out of the way spot and made a few adjustments on the trailer, tightening everything up that had not been properly firmed up when the bike shop clerk helped Wayne put it together.

Satisfied that everything was as it should be, Wayne took off again, finding an easy pace that ate up the miles, but didn't tire him out unduly. He kept a close eye out but saw no one. It surprised him. He'd expected to see at least a few people out and about.

Wayne shook his head and kept going. Others could do whatever they wanted, as long as it didn't adversely affect him. When he found a gravel side road as it was getting dark, Wayne turned onto it and looked for a suitable place to stop. He could see a thin looking spot in the wooded area and worked the bicycle through the trees. The trailer was less than three inches wider on each side as the handlebars, so he didn't have much trouble getting to the clearing that he'd suspected was there.

It was a perfect spot for the night. Wayne was very familiar with his gear and had camp set up in a short time. Though it was a bit chill, he didn't light a fire. Using a Peltz TacTikka LED headlamp with the red filter down, Wayne prepared an MRE entrée with the heater in the package.

Many of Wayne's homemade MREs included a regular MRE entrée with heater. He built the rest of the meal around them with items from the grocery store. It cost about the same, but he got exactly what he wanted.

Some of the meals were Mountain House Pro-pack individual meals, or their regular two-person entrées, again with other items in the Reynolds zip-lock vacuum seal bags to make a complete meal. With the MRE entrées he could use the heaters. The Freeze-dried entrées required getting out the MSR Dragonfly multi-fuel stove to heat water.

Wayne savored the meal. After the entrée he had a side dish of an individual cup of diced carrots, a cup of butterscotch pudding, a single-serve package of cookies, and added a water flavoring packet to his cup of water. He limited it to just the one cup, since he didn't want to be getting up during the night. He'd stayed hydrated during the day using the MSR 3-liter hydration bag in the Kifaru Marauder he wore while riding.

After packing up the waste and putting it in one of the trash bags he carried religiously when he camped, he put the bag in the trailer, got in the tent and undressed. He slipped into the sleeping bag and was almost immediately asleep.

Comfortable in the wilderness, Wayne slept soundly, and woke up well rested the next morning, to the sound of rain on the fly of the Mountain Hardwear Trango 3.1 tent. On the off chance that something had happened during the night, Wayne fished the NukAlert pocket radiation alarm out of his khaki pants and held it toward the front door of the tent. It was silent and Wayne breathed a sigh of relief.

The rain didn't bother him as he dressed in the tent and then made a quick breakfast under cover of the extended fly that provided a floorless space where he could make his breakfast.

Wayne did some personal business in the woods, having used the Cold Steel e-tool to dig the hole and cover the remains when he finished. The rain had dwindled to a mist, but Wayne decided to put on his rain suit, after studying the sky. It would rain more, he was sure.

The camp packed up and the components packed into the packs or the trailer, Wayne set off again. He eased his pace slightly from the day before. The Stash-Away II rain suit was made of Gore-Tex, but he would still overheat and get soaked with perspiration if he became too strenuous.

Only once that day did Wayne have to dodge off the road to avoid being seen by an oncoming vehicle. But the woods were handy and he got in their cover before the county sheriff cruiser drove by.

As he rode, Wayne listened to the Yaesu VR-500 handheld multi-band, multi-mode receiver he carried. He'd listen to the regular AM and FM bands for a while and then switch to shortwave, gleaning what information he could from the broadcasts. There wasn't much. Even the Amateur Radio bands were mostly silent.

The rain stopped in the afternoon and Dwayne removed the rain suit. It was clear and cool, the air still damp, so he put on his leather jacket and kept going until he found another good camping spot.

He kept up his steady pace, lying up during the worst of the rains that were hammering the area, listening intently to the news reports. Those reports were becoming fewer and less informative as things seemed to turn for the worst. The US government was clamping down on news dissemination.

Because of the near news blackout, Wayne kept his eyes out for not just good camping spots, but places where he could shelter for the duration if the nuclear tipped missiles began to fly.

Wayne had decided early on to cross the Missouri River at Hermann, Missouri, rather than a more populous area. There would, hopefully, be a better chance to get across without being stopped than anywhere else along the river.

Then, as it turned out, he got lucky, thought it sure didn't seem so at the time. He didn't get off the highway in time and a deputy sheriff stopped him outside one of the small towns that dotted the highway on the way to the retreat complex.

Right hand resting on the automatic on his hip, the officer approached Wayne, who was staying very still, both feet on the ground and hands held slightly up and away from the handlebars.

"Quite the rig you got there, old son," the officer, by his name tag, Deputy Peterson, said. "You know about the travel restrictions?"

Wayne did his best to look innocent and surprised. "Travel restrictions? What travel restrictions? I've been out camping and am headed... uh... home to visit my parents in Memphis."

"Memphis, huh? Kinda of out of the way route to get to Memphis. No matter where you're coming from. Climb off the bike and walk over here. Slowly."

Wayne sighed and did as instructed. He stayed silent during the process of handing over his driver's license and passport, and standing with his hands on the hood of the deputy's SUV while the deputy radioed the information in on the computer.

"Well, well, well..." said Deputy Peterson. Columbia, huh? Went there myself. You really expect to get to Memphis with all this going on?" The deputy made a vague gesture taking in pretty much everything in the universe, Wayne decided.

"I do have a place to stop... If something was to happen..."

"Yeah. I bet you know more than you're letting on. But as it so happens, I have a place for you to stay for some time. Load up your gear in the back of the Suburban."

Wayne sighed. Nothing much he could do but obey. The deputy was keeping it slow and simple, but wasn't going to give Wayne any chance to get away. And he intended to enforce the travel restrictions.

A few minutes later, still uncuffed, much to his surprise, and in the front passenger seat, Wayne looked around at the small town. Typical small town Missouri. Or just about anywhere in the country. Road construction, naturally, that Wayne eyed with interest. Deputy Peterson pulled up and stopped in front of the town hall.

"They got a jail, I guess?" Wayne asked.

"Do for a fact. You're going to be there for the duration. And..."

The deputy's words faded away and he looked up at the top of the building when the sirens mounted there began to sound their loud wail. Peterson whipped out his handcuffs and quickly had Wayne attached to the railing along the steps going up to town hall entrance.

Wayne barely got a look as people began to show up. Some were driving, a few that Wayne saw come from shops on the main street of the small town were on foot. All were in a hurry.

Deputy Peterson looked pale when he came back out and removed the cuff from the railing. "As much as I hate giving you shelter over my friends, you've broken the law and have to pay the price."

"I can fend for myself," Wayne said, not moving when the deputy started up the steps.

“Look, old son, I’m not above just putting a bullet into you and calling you a victim of the coming disaster. You should appreciate getting shelter. There’s not enough shelter for everyone. Don’t quite know what I should do.”

Deputy Peterson looked uncertain, but he hadn’t made a move to draw his gun and follow through on his implied threat. “I told people we needed to get shelters ready...”

“I can help,” Wayne said. “I know a lot about things like this.”

“You?”

Wayne nodded. “Did the warning come with a time frame?”

“No. Just to get ready for a nuclear attack. Probably not right here, of course, but we’re sure to get some fallout at some point, if it happens.”

“Yeah,” Wayne mused. “Well, you probably know the town well. Where else has a good basement with stout floors over them that can be covered with dirt for shielding? Who has some digging equipment to get the dirt up? Shovels to move it...”

“Hold on. You’re really going to try to help? And you know what you’re doing, not just yanking my chain?”

“I’ll help. I want to survive. But I have no wish to take shelter from some family that could stay in the jail cell I’d be in.”

“Maybe you aren’t so bad, after all. But... Okay. I’m going to get started. What else can we do?”

“You have a Wal-Mart or something?” Wayne asked.

Rather proudly, Wayne thought, Deputy Peterson said, “Sure do, old son. Brand spanking new super center just opened a few weeks ago. Still working on the roads to make access easier, but...”

“That’s all I needed to know,” Wayne said quickly. He didn’t need the promo that the deputy was about to give.

Peterson frowned and managed to get out, “We’re really growing. Got a new baseball field, too.”

Deputy Peterson saw Wayne’s eyes light up. “New baseball field? Does it have dugouts and bleachers?”

The deputy frowned. “Yes, of course it does!”

“Real dugouts? Not just a fenced area?”

“Yes. Real dugouts so people can see over them from the new bleachers.”

“Excellent! Okay. Take me down there and get me some men with tools and something to move dirt with and we’ll have shelter for a bunch of people.”

“At the ball field? But how?”

“You want to discuss it or do it?” Wayne asked.

The Deputy didn’t like it, but people were gathering around, asking what to do. Deputy Peterson raised his hand for quiet. “Okay. This guy says he can build shelter down at the ball park. He needs men with tools for something. And... You, Davey! Your backhoe is just up the street.”

Deputy Peterson looked at Wayne, questioningly. “That’ll work great,” Wayne replied. “But we need shovels, too. Plastic sheet from Wal-Mart. Some timbers and all the plywood and other sheathing you can find. And get all the canned and packaged food you can. Toilet paper, too. Blankets. Flashlights, batteries. Radios. Anything for camping. I saw some chemical toilets where the work on the road is being done. They need to be taken to the field.”

A dozen questions were shouted from the crowd, but Deputy Peterson, his mind made up, pointed at Wayne. “He’s in charge of the ball field project. Just follow his instructions. Now, I have to take care of some other things. Billy. You take him down to the ball park and help him get things done.”

The rather awkward looking middle aged man stepped forward and held out his hand to Wayne. The two men shook hands and Wayne followed him to his pickup truck, casting a longing look at the deputy’s SUV driving off with Wayne’s gear still in it.

People were scared, and any hope of getting fallout shelter space was enough to get them working, and working hard. Wayne repeated the list of things he wanted from Wal-Mart and Billy headed that way with two men, leaving Wayne standing on home plate of the new ball field.

Wayne looked the dugouts over. They couldn’t be better for what he had in mind. As a couple of guys showed up that had hand tools in their vehicles, Wayne had them begin to dismantle the bleachers that ran from just past the dugouts on both sides around behind the home plate backstop.

“We just got these together the other day!” protested one.

“You want to live or die watching the fallout from the bleachers?” quipped someone. “This guy seems to know what he’s doing, and I’m beginning to see what he has in mind.”

Word was spreading that there would be shelter at the baseball park, as people showed up at the other few useable shelters in the town and were turned away. Mothers with babies, children, and just enough related adults to take care of them were being allowed in the old Civil

Defense shelter spaces that still existed in many of the heavily constructed buildings in the small town.

Slowly the two shelters began to take form. Davey already had a huge pile of dirt dug up from the infield, which also brought a few soft complaints about how new the field was. As the aluminum bleacher planks were taken from the frames, they were leaned against the front top edge of the dugouts, side by side.

The first load of material from Wal-Mart showed up and plastic sheet was fastened down over the planks. Bracing, made from the bleacher frames and wood timbers, was put in place under the center of the planks and the edge of the roofs of the dugouts. Davey began to layer dirt onto the plastic covered planks as they were made ready.

Seeing the working progressing as he'd instructed, Wayne began to supervise the construction of two pairs of L-shaped entrances that would be placed one at each end of each dugout.

The chemical toilets were quickly cut down in height and maneuvered into the dugouts at one end of each, while it could still be done.

A skid steer loader joined the dirt movement process and the two shelters began to take shape enough that people understood what the objective was. With real hope now, just about everyone redoubled their efforts.

People were showing up carrying needed supplies. Load after load came from Wal-Mart. Wayne heard that the manager had exchanged a few words with Deputy Peterson, but the store was basically just opened wide for people to take what they wanted, but under the careful eye of some of Deputy Peterson's quickly named assistants.

When the Deputy returned to the ball field he was totally amazed at what had been constructed. "You really did it! Don't know if it is enough, but it sure will be close to it."

After considerable debate, which Wayne carefully avoided, it was decided to have women in one of the dugout shelters and men in the other. Supplies were beginning to be carried into the shelters as a final layer of plastic was secured over the top of the loose earth to protect it from being washed away in the rain that looked like it would begin falling shortly.

Suddenly, the project was essentially done. People looked around and the discussion began on what to do next. That dilemma was resolved quickly. The sirens began to sound again, and then it became eerily silent.

"EMP," Wayne said.

Deputy Peterson tried his radio. It seemed to be working, but he couldn't raise anyone. "Probably got the repeater," Wayne said. "Things with short or no antenna won't necessarily be damaged, but things connected to power lines, telephone lines, antennas and such probably just got fried."

One of Wayne's worst fears then occurred. Since the early days of his education about nuclear war, he'd speculated about just how accurate the enemy's targeting would be. It was one thing to have a single missile hit a small target and detonate. It was another for many of them to do the same thing in an EMP rich environment.

Wayne's only thought was someone had really missed their intended target when the sky, despite the clouds, lighted up brilliantly. The warhead landed west of them, basically in the middle of nowhere. No known targets that Wayne could remember were where that nuke had detonated. Perhaps it had been intended for Jefferson City, but it landed well south of there. It didn't really matter. They were in for fallout for sure, and soon.

"Thanks for your help, old son," Deputy Peterson said, going over to his Suburban. He had to use the key to open the rear doors of the vehicle. "Here's your gear. Have a nice life."

Wayne looked at the deputy for a long moment. "You're not letting me stay in the shelter?"

Deputy Peterson shook his head. "Barely enough room for my people. Appreciate your help. But you got yourself into this. You're resourceful, thankfully for us. You'll make it."

Wayne gritted his teeth holding back a comment. He silently reconnected the trailer to the bike and got aboard. He felt his back hunch, almost expecting a bullet in it as he pedaled away. He was amazed that the deputy hadn't kept his things and sent him off on foot. Probably didn't want him around that close.

But he'd be closer than the deputy might hope. Wayne sped as fast as he could toward the road construction site. He'd seen a couple of stretches with road plate down. He came to the first and was disappointed. There was only a narrow trench under it, he discovered after a bit of digging with the shovel that was part of the trailer gear.

Wayne moved on to the next stretch, casting a fearful eye to the west. He couldn't see a mushroom cloud, due to the heavy natural clouds, but he could almost feel the fallout getting closer. This time he was satisfied. The hole the series of plates covered was about the maximum width the plates could cover, and fifteen feet long.

It took an anxious hour to get the oldest piece of road construction equipment started and running smoothly enough to use. There was a light rain coming down when Wayne finished covering the road plate with three feet of earth and dug a right angle tunnel down so he could get into the trench, and a small opening for ventilation on the other end. He carried the bike and then the trailer down into the darkness just as lightning flashed and it began to rain softly but steadily.

By feel, Wayne got out his Petzl headlamp and put it on. The place wasn't much, but it would have to do. Wayne set up his camp in the stark LED light, checked his radiation alarm, and then turned in when there was no radiation indicated.

Wayne had always considered himself a loner, without a hint of claustrophobia, but the stay in the make shift fallout shelter made him decide otherwise. It was lonely, and there wasn't enough room to stand up. He left the bike and trailer at the door end of the trench, and dug a latrine pit with his e-tool at the other end.

He checked every few hours with his small radiation detector. There was little radiation leaking into the shelter, but when he approached the ventilation opening or the entrance, the alarm sounded. The detector only gave an idea of the radiation levels. It was more than obvious those first few days that Wayne wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon.

Wayne had a crank up LED light and read what reading material he had and then played endless hands of solitaire to pass the time. Until the radiation dropped significantly, he didn't dare expose himself enough to get the VR-500 antenna outside far enough to get reception.

But the time did pass, to a point where Wayne began to worry about his food and water supply. The food he could stretch pretty easily. The water was another thing. But while he was nursing his last bottle of water and wondering what to do, he checked the radiation level again. For a moment he thought there was none, but the little NukAlert fob sounded and then sounded again, with a long pause between chirps.

Wayne checked the back of the device and deciphered the chart listing chirps and radiation rates. The radiation was low enough for him to go out, at least for a couple of hours. But he'd need to stay in the shelter for a few more nights before he took off for the rendezvous.

He headed out immediately and found the road ditches still full of muddy water. It took a few minutes to take out the Sawyer Water Purifier bottle and strain water through a coffee filter into it. When the bottle was full enough he inserted the filter element and screwed on the lid.

It was a relief to be able to take a long drink through the straw. He drank his fill and then refilled the bottle to take back into the shelter. He enjoyed the sun and the breeze for an hour and then went back into the makeshift shelter, in much better spirits than previously.

The day finally came that Wayne decided the radiation level was low enough for continued exposure for the time it should take him to get to the retreat.

Staying well away from the areas of the town where he knew people would be, he made it around to the road on the other side again and picked up some speed on the bike. It was refreshing to be out, though muscles unused for days were protesting the renewed work.

The road, despite the rural aspect of the area, carried quite a bit of passenger vehicle traffic. He found a vehicle or two every few miles. They were sitting along the side of the road, usually with the hood up, obvious victims to EMP. Those that weren't locked, he searched, though he checked around carefully to make sure no one was in sight. He didn't want to get shot for looting.

He found one car whose occupant or occupants had been to a grocery store just before the EMP. He picked through the spoiled items, but found some canned and packaged things that

would extend his food supply more than enough to get to the retreat without resorting to trying to snare a few rabbits or squirrels. He wasn't seeing many of them, anyway.

Wayne maintained a high level of alertness, despite the grueling up and down hill travel he was doing on the heavily loaded bike with trailer. Several times he maneuvered off the road when he heard something in the distance. Each time it was a false alarm. Until he fifth one. He almost didn't get off the road and go into the light forest on his side of the road. But he did. And was very glad he had when a pickup truck came roaring over the hill in front of him.

Wayne made a quick count of the people in the cab and in the bed of the truck. There were a total of nine. Most were swigging bottles of booze and two of them were firing off a round or two from a rifle and pistol every few seconds.

After an hour wait, listening to the VR-500 for any local radio traffic, Wayne continued his journey. For a little ways. What he found two miles from where the truck had passed him earlier turned his face white and he began to wretch. Not so much from the slaughter of what was a precious commodity in this post apocalyptic world, milk cows, but the equal, if not more gruesome slaughter of the family that had once owned the small herd.

Three men and five women lay dead, shot up and hacked mercilessly, just like the cows. There was a travel trailer overturned in the roadside ditch with two more bodies, both children in their teens. There was no tow vehicle and Wayne decided it was the pickup the group had been in.

Wayne looked around. One of the cows had a chunk missing that wasn't laying around close. But there were the remains of a large fire and skin and bones all around it. The group had killed the people and the cows, and then feasted on perhaps ten pounds of meat in total. Everything else was going to be wasted unless Wayne could find some locals, soon, to harvest what was still useable.

Though it was difficult and disheartening work, Wayne took the time to dig shallow graves and bury the human bodies. The bodies and the trailer had been searched and everything remotely useful for a rampaging group taken. Wayne went ahead and recovered a few things he could use and left the rest.

It was two days before he saw anyone else. He was hesitant, but both the man and the woman were in State Trooper uniforms and were driving an old USGS pickup truck. Leary despite the uniforms, since anyone could have killed and taken them, Wayne watched the pickup making its slow way toward where he'd hidden.

Deciding there was no way to tell, except to expose himself, Wayne finally stepped into the clear and waved his hands over his head. The truck immediately stopped and a shotgun barrel appeared in the windshield opening. There was no windshield, just the opening.

"Okay you! Walk up here, slowly, with your hands up!"

The two people were scanning the forest all around them, and Wayne realized, that like him, they were worried about being ambushed. “Who are you? Where’d you come from? Where are you going?”

Wayne started to lower his hands, but the woman with the shotgun made a motion with it and he lifted them back up. He rattled off the details of his trip, putting the best spin on it he could.

“You think this is the guy?” the woman asked the man.

“Description is right. We got a message from Deputy Peterson a few days after the attack to be on the lookout for your body. He sounded a bit strange.”

“Well...” Wayne went on to tell them how he’d been run off after helping with the shelter he’d already told them about.

“Little guilty conscience, I guess,” said the man. “Okay, Julie. I think it’s okay.” As the woman lowered the shotgun, the man asked Wayne, “Where’s your bike?”

“Cached it when I saw you coming. Didn’t want to lose everything if there was a problem.”

“Probably a good idea. There’s a group of survivors running around in this area killing and taking what they want and destroying the rest. I’m Trooper Mathewson, by the way.”

Wayne shook hands with the trooper and then did the same when the woman introduced herself. “Julie Montana.”

“I think I ran into that bunch,” Wayne said. He paled again, as did the two State Troopers when he described the carnage. “All that killing and the waste...” Wayne’s words faded away.

“From what we’ve found out, it was a group that formed from people stranded in the small town down the way. They all got what are probably fatal doses of radiation. And know it. They’ve got nothing to live for and are trying to make sure that if they don’t survive, no one else will, either. They’ve been run off a few places around here, but have hit a bunch of lone family survivors here and there. You’re probably lucky they didn’t see you.”

Trooper Mathewson looked thoughtful when Julie fell silent.

“You think those punks kept going?”

“I suspect so,” Wayne said.

“We’ll send word up the ladder when we get back to town. That’s where we’re staying until we figure things out. You want a ride in?”

Wayne shook his head. “No thanks. I cut off before I get there.”

Again Trooper Mathewson looked thoughtful, as if mulling over something before he spoke. “You part of that group down in the resort?”

Wayne hesitated, but that very hesitation spoke volumes to the two troopers.

“They’re a hard bunch in there,” Mathewson said. “Try to influence them to lend a hand to the communities around here. We don’t have the manpower to make them do anything, and it wouldn’t be right, even if we could. They had the foresight to become prepared for this. Entitled to be left alone and live as they want. But at some point, they will need something outside their little world, and prior cooperation will go a long way to making sure they get it without problems.”

“Our attempts to liaise with them after we found out what the resort actually was were rebuffed at gun point.” Julie looked like she didn’t like that fact very much.

Wayne didn’t know what to say. His parents weren’t like that. But he hadn’t spent much time with the group, as a group. Everyone seemed pleasant enough. He was surprised at the attitude of not being willing to help.

“I... ah... I’ll see what I can do. My parents bought in... I might not have much influence...”

Both troopers nodded and Trooper Mathewson put the truck in gear and drove on past in the direction they’d been heading. Deep in thought, Wayne retrieved the bike and trailer, and headed for the resort retreat, feeling a bit of unease at what he’d learned.

Rendezvous – Chapter 2

Despite his thoughts, Wayne paid attention to the road. He was glad he did, for, when he turned onto the unmarked, innocuous trail cutting off the highway he came to a sliding stop when he saw the two guards. One of them was already pointing a wicked looking shotgun at him from behind what Wayne learned later was a reinforced firing point.

“Whoa there!” Wayne said, his hands going up as soon as he got the bike and trailer stopped.

“Turn around and go away or we’ll plant you in the forest like the others,” replied the man with the shotgun.

“Look, guy, my parents bought into this place, including a share for me. Why don’t you contact the office and get someone up here that can evaluate the situation without murdering someone.”

Wayne didn’t know he had it in him. He was as angry, but kept his voice low and reasonable. He just wasn’t one to get angry. He surprised himself by not just turning around.

“Watch your mouth, boy,” said the man. He nodded to his partner, standing casually behind another of the camouflaged firing points, one hand on his left hip, the right on the holstered pistol on his hip.

The man with the pistol pulled a walky-talky from a belt case and lifted it up to his mouth. Wayne couldn’t hear what the man said, and the radio hid his lips. Wayne was an accomplished lip reader, having picked it up as a child when he had ear infections in both ears on a repeated basis.

“Five minutes,” the man said, putting the radio back into the pouch. Both men simply stood where they were and stared at Wayne.

Figuring they wouldn’t talk to him anyway, Wayne simply did the same. Stood and watched the two as they waited. The man with the shotgun didn’t seem to like it much. After only a couple of minutes he said, “Go on over there and sit down where we can see your hands.”

“I’ll just wait right here,” Wayne said, again surprising himself. Being under the muzzle of a gun wasn’t a pleasant feeling, but Wayne decided not showing fear to these two men might be important in the future.

“I’m telling you...” The man spoke again, but the one with the pistol made some kind of hand motion and he fell silent.

It was closer to three and a half minutes than five when two men on horses rode up and dismounted. “Wayne Jackson?” asked the taller of the two men. He looked hard as rocks, dressed in western style, down to the single action revolver on his left hip, and a saddle scabbard Wayne suspected contained a western style lever action rifle.

It took a second, but Wayne recognized the man. It was the security guard that used to wander around the complex when his parents had brought him to the resort to get familiar with it after they bought in.

“He’s on the list,” the man barked. “Didn’t you check it?”

Both the two guards paled slightly. “Uh... Well, boss... He didn’t give us his name...” said the shot gunner.

“We’ll discuss it at the afternoon debriefing. Let’s go, Wayne. Just follow us down to the office and we’ll get you hooked up with your parents.”

The shot gunner glared at Wayne as he peddled past. Wayne had a passing thought that they probably wouldn’t wind up being friends. He smiled at the thought and the man glared even more forcefully.

“Got to admit, when your parents kept insisting you would be here, I didn’t give it much credit. Especially after the nukes and then it being so long.” The cowboy, whom Wayne had now decided was the new chief of security, if he hadn’t been that all along, just staying inconspicuous.

“Been a trip, for sure,” Wayne said politely. He wasn’t sure about the man yet. Dodge Simmons. That was the man’s name, Wayne remembered. At about the same time Wayne recognized the other man on horseback. The office manager during regular times, Sam something or other.

The road was nicely paved after the first turn on the road into the complex. A little further along and Wayne saw several people out working in a garden that had not been there before. He also noticed half a dozen men, standing here and there, obviously armed, but not really doing anything.

“Sorry about this,” said Dodge as he swung down off the horse and led the way into the office. “But it is procedure. Need to frisk you and go through your things. No weapons or illegal drugs allowed, you see. All part of the buy-in agreement.

Wayne was tempted to protest. It obviously wouldn’t do any good. He let Dodge check him over while Sam Something went through the packs and trailer outside.

“Excellent!” Dodge said after stepping back from Wayne and getting some kind of sign from Sam. “Been a few that didn’t want to follow the rules.”

“You’ll find I’m a pretty good rule follower,” Wayne replied, just as easily as Dodge had spoken. Something was going on and Wayne wanted to find out what it was before he did anything about it.

“You’re parents are on the way,” Dodge said after a woman came out of a back office and whispered into his ear. “Go on outside and wait on them. I’m sure they’ll be anxious to see you.”

It was a dismissal and Wayne knew it. He didn't like it, but now wasn't the time to do anything about it.

A few minutes after he stepped outside a golf cart style runabout sped up and his parent's got off. There were happy hugs and words exchanged.

"Let's go," said the driver of the cart after just a couple of minutes. "I got things to do."

Rather meekly, in Wayne's eyes, his parents hurried to get back on the cart. "Follow me, kid. And try to keep up."

Wayne was an experienced and now well broken in bicyclist and had no trouble keeping up, except on the steepest grades. The narrow paved paths went all through the complex. Wayne was breathing hard when he stopped beside the cart when it stopped in front of one of the many individual bungalows that the owners each had claim to while in residence.

As soon as Pete and Martha were off the cart the man sped away without a word. Parents and child were silent as they carried Wayne's gear inside the bungalow. With the last bag on the pile, Wayne turned around and quietly asked his parents, "What's going on here? You guys are shared owners of this place. But you look like inmates on a prison farm. You've both obviously been working in that garden I saw when I came in, or one like it."

"Well, son," said Pete, "We all have to lend a hand. It's going to be a long time before we can go to the grocery store again."

"I understand that, but..."

"Leave it alone, Wayne," his mother said. Martha had always been the leader of the family.

It was automatic. He did what his mother said. He did ask, "Where's Carolyn?" Suddenly fearful, he quickly added, "She's okay, isn't she? She made it down with you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course," replied his mother. "She's working in the diner today. She'll be home about nine."

"I can find the lodge. I think I'll go down and say hello." Wayne wanted to see his sister actually working. It really was not the sixteen year olds' favorite activity. She was a good kid, but a bit lazy.

"No. Absolutely not!" Pete said. "You'll just get her in trouble. And yourself."

"Are you telling me..." Wayne's voice started to rise, but a sharp look from his mother silenced him.

“You look tired. Go take a lie-down and I’ll have some lemonade and a sandwich for you when you get up.” His mother made her dismissing motion with her right hand and again Wayne did what he’d always done. He did exactly as she said.

It was a tearful reunion when Carolyn came in from her job at the diner in the lodge part of the complex. Wayne tried to bring up the subject of how the place was being operated, but the rest of the family quickly moved the conversation to other things.

The family went to bed late, and Wayne was far from rested when his mother knocked on his bedroom door in the bungalow and announced that it was time to get up. Wayne checked his watch. It was 5:00 AM.

A bit curious about why so early, Wayne got up, showered, and dressed, and then went to find his mother. She was making oatmeal in the kitchen. When asked she told him that his father was already gone and Carolyn had taken over the bathroom as soon as he’d come to the kitchen.

“Aw, gee, Mom! Oatmeal? You know I don’t like oatmeal!”

“Eat it and be quiet. Not everyone here is getting this much.”

“What do you mean?” Wayne asked sharply.

“You never mind. Just eat and get ready. One of the foremen will be around to pick you up to go work on one of the projects.”

“Projects?” Wayne asked, grimacing and then taking a bite of the oatmeal. It wasn’t as bad as he remembered, but it would never be on his favorites list of foods. He kept silent and ate, enjoying the large glass of orange drink his mother placed on the table for him. It sure wasn’t fresh squeezed juice, but it filled an empty spot he’d had in his food supply the last month or so.

He’d barely finished when there was a cursory knock on the front door and it opened.

“Hey!” Wayne said. “You don’t just bust in on someone!”

“You gonna be a problem, boy?” asked the man. “We have means to deal with problem children.”

“Please, Austin!” his mother pleaded. “He just doesn’t know the rules yet. Please give him some time to acclimate to the situation.”

“Well... All right. You all have been doing good. He gets a break. But only one. Come on, you,” Austin told Martha and then directed the last comment to Wayne. There was a large caliber revolver on Austin’s hip, and a cattle prod hanging from the other side of his belt. Wayne decided the best course was to keep his mouth shut and learn the routine. Find out what the real situation was and decide what to do about it. Because he sure wasn’t going to live in a place beginning to appear like a medium security prison work farm.

Bicycling uses one set of muscles and works them well, but digging ditches by hand used other ones. Wayne was tired and hurting when he went home that evening after working all day with only a sandwich and apple for lunch, handed out at the work location.

“How’s the grave site coming?” his father asked when Wayne got home to the bungalow.

“Grave site?” Wayne asked. His father looked chagrined at the way his mother looked him.

It suddenly hit Wayne that it was probably a trench for mass casualties he’d been digging. There was already a length of trench mounded over after having been refilled. “Why the blazes does this place need a mass grave of that size?”

It took an hour of placating and pleading for Martha and Pete, then Carolyn when she got home, to calm him down.

“There’s been some trouble... Some people killed. We can’t afford the manpower to dig individual graves for everyone...” It was lame and Pete knew it. So did Wayne, but Wayne finally accepted the answer and fell silent.

“Okay. I’m going to go along with this for a while, but I’m telling you now, I won’t be staying. I hope, when I have a plan, the rest of you will go with me.”

“Oh, Wayne!” his mother sighed. “We have it so much better here than outside. You’ve been there. You know, surely. People are sick, starving, and doing anything and everything to stay alive, including killing those like us that had the foresight to stock food and supplies for times like these.”

“Sure, Mom. Sure. Better to live on your knees with a guaranteed meal than stand up for what is right.” Martha slapped him and Wayne staggered back. The slap wasn’t that hard, but it had come as a total surprise.

“Martha...” whispered Pete.

Carolyn added her own soft, surprised, “Mom!”

“You watch how you talk to me, young man,” Martha said. She spun on one heel and marched from the room, head held high.

“Son...”

“It’s okay, Dad. I was out of line.” Wayne left his father and sister in the small living room of the bungalow and went to his bedroom to think. He finally fell asleep, having decided to give it a few more days of playing by the stated rules before he made his break. The problem was going to be getting his family out, with their supplies that were now in the group supply. He could leave anytime he wanted, he was sure. But he wasn’t going to leave his family behind.

It was a week later that Wayne was tasked with covering a dead body in the trench he had helped dig those first two days. It was a middle aged man, riddled with bullets. Two of the guards had dumped him in the trench and told Wayne to cover him fully.

Tight lipped, Wayne did so. Still, as he worked, just like he had the last several days, he kept a close watch on the goings on around him. It was becoming more and more apparent that the small security force the Mutual Aid Group had hired had taken over the complex during the time everyone was in the several large shelters on the property.

It was a total mystery to him why no one was doing anything about it. Not even protest. But that became more clear as time passed and he learned some of the details of the slow, careful take over.

It had all been planned from well before the event, Wayne believed. All the details led to that conclusion. Dodge had recruited a group he could trust that wanted the benefits of a MAG, without the buy-in. Or work. As long as the world was normal, the group drew nice salaries and had little to do but keep out those that might stumble onto the place that weren't members.

So, using pressing needs as an excuse, Dodge simply took control of the resources of the complex, and with the strict no gun policy for members, there was no one willing to fight back. Well. Not no one. It wasn't known for sure, but three of the more vocal residents had disappeared one night. Dodge said he'd given them food and water and sent them on their way as they didn't want trouble makers.

The thought of being out on their own in the PAW was enough to keep people quiet, even when the first trench grave was dug and then part of it refilled two days after the disappearance. Since then, the control had been absolute. Dodge seemed to be careful not to push things too hard.

There was no fraternization between the owners and the security force. Dodge had apparently thought of the problems it would cause and had a small contingent of willing women to keep his men happy in return for their safety and food. They had shown up just before the attack and were ensconced before the members could object.

And the work load was kept low enough, with enough food distributed, to keep protests down. But it all grated on Wayne. His attempts to convince his family to leave with him were fruitless. He decided he had to chance the possibility of them being disciplined for his taking off, but Wayne simply couldn't live under the lash of Dodge's security force.

He began to hide food and other supplies, taking them from the pantry shortly after they were distributed to each family each Monday morning before his mother could get a good count of what was delivered. They were already accustomed to a slightly smaller allocation each week.

When he had enough, Wayne waited for the dark of the moon, and gathered up his packs. They'd been stripped of food stuffs, but everything else was still in them. He struggled his way in the darkness toward the office building where his bicycle was parked, where the saddle horses the security guards used during the day were kept tied.

He almost came out of his skin when a hand touched his back. "It's me, Wayne. Let me help you."

"Dad?"

"Quiet. Let's just get you loaded and out of here."

"Aren't the others coming?" Wayne couldn't feature his father leaving Martha and Carolyn behind.

"No. Just you. And don't worry. If an alarm is sounded, I'll draw them away from the gate."

"No, Dad! I..."

"Just do it, boy. And try your best to come get your mother and your sister." With that, Pete put down the pack he'd been carried for Wayne, turned around, and strode away, but not toward the bungalow.

Wayne debated for only a few seconds. His father was willing to help in Wayne's escape, knowing there would be harsh repercussions. Pushing the bike by the handlebars, Wayne made his way to the track that was barely a road leading from the complex into the state forest that bordered on the south. It was seldom used, and Wayne frankly doubted more than a handful of the residents knew of it. The security force certainly would. But they might not guard it too closely.

Wayne was right. There was a walking guard force that passed by the spot occasionally, but no one seemed to be stationed there. He waited until the two men passed again, and then hurriedly, silently, pushed the bike and trailer onto the trail. It was too dark to try and ride, so he continued to push for several hours, going by feel as much as anything. If the bike would fit, that's the direction he went.

It worked for him, because when he made it to the service road through the state forest, he came out a quarter mile from where the actual trail met the road. And there were three men there, waiting, their horses tied nearby. Dodge was one of them. He had the pistol from his hip in his hand.

Wayne eased back into the forest and watched the three men. They were obviously upset and finally Dodge gave the order to mount up and head up the trail. As soon as the sound of the horses pushing through the overgrown trail, Wayne pushed the bike onto the forest service road and began to pedal. He was in good shape from the work he'd been doing and made good time. He stopped from time to time to get a drink of water and to listen for the sounds of horses.

He made it to the highway and turned toward town. It didn't take long to find the two troopers, Mathewson and Montana, and fill them in on what was going on at the resort.

“Sounds to me like they got themselves into something on their own. Something they wanted. Security at all costs.” Mathewson’s voice was harsh. The last few weeks had drained him. He had lost at least sixty pounds and looked gaunt in the uniform.

Julie didn’t look much better. But she was more willing to listen. “Do you think it will do any good if we even tried to help? Would they just go back to looking for someone to take care of them? Another gang, organized or not?”

“I think most have seen the light. There are a few as you say that seem to prefer the life under the thumb, but with the next meal guaranteed. Without weapons, I don’t know how they would be able to help in an attack, but...”

“We’ve got weapons to spare,” Mathewson said. “Seems three-quarters of the people that live in this area had at least a weapon or two. Salvagers are bringing them in right and left to try and trade for food. “We’ve gathered up the best of the bunch, just for the future... We could arm fifty people with a rifle with a hundred rounds or a shotgun with fifty. Not too inclined to hand out any handguns.”

“So you’re willing to try and do something?” Wayne asked hopefully.

“I’m willing to help you try and do something. I’m not risking any people to help a group like yours.”

“Even if we can be of help to the rest of the community?”

“Yeah. What have you done for me, lately?”

“Tim,” Julie said, putting her right hand on the man’s shoulder. “It is our duty to help. It’s an organized gang. If we do nothing, they will eventually get bold and start preying on the communities around the resort.”

Mathewson closed his eyes and puffed his cheeks with air. He let the air out slowly, opened his eyes, and told Wayne, “Come on into the headquarters and we’ll discuss what to do.”

It took a week to organize. Very few of the townspeople were willing to help, feeling much like Trooper Mathewson had expressed he felt. But six would join the troopers in a frontal assault diversion while Wayne distributed the guns and ammunition he would take into the complex under cover of night several nights in a row.

He slept through the daylight hours of the evening of the attack. He had twenty rifles and ten shotguns hidden around the complex. Wayne decided that was all he could risk. He would have to distribute them the best he could to those he could remember might be willing to fight.

Wayne had taken a rifle and pistol for his own use, and one of the troopers’ radios, and worked his way up the back trail to the complex. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said after keying the radio.

It sounded like a war for a few seconds as those at the main entrance opened up with rifle fire. All they intended to do was keep the heads down of the guards there, and draw a few more in so Wayne would have the best chance to do his part.

Wayne ran to the first cache and retrieved the guns he'd stashed. It was close to his parents' bungalow. When he knocked on the door, it swung open. He nearly gasped when he saw his father. There were bruises on top of bruises where he'd been beaten several times over several days.

He nearly lost it when his mother stepped around the door. She, too had been beaten. "Carolyn?" Wayne asked.

"She's okay. Dodge is afraid to do anything too harsh to a young woman in fear it will stir things up.

"Bout time, Wayne," Martha said, surprising Wayne when she grabbed a shotgun and box of shells from him."

His father took a rifle and stuffed shells in all his pockets. "Who else?" he whispered.

"You choose, Dad," Wayne said. "You know who will fight."

"That I do. Come on."

They had distributed half the weapons before one of the guards still in the main complex saw them. Pete fired immediately. A second guard stepped around the corner of a building and Martha fired the shotgun once and then again.

Wind up LED flashlights began to brighten windows and there were desperate calls to find out what was happening. Wayne handed out the rest of the guns to those that agreed to join the fight after a few seconds of debate. Each person seemed to have a specific grudge against a guard and they went looking to settle them.

Wayne, Pete, Martha, and three other men headed for the office. And they approached it firing their weapons. There were a couple of shots returned, but the handful of guards decided to bug out the back way. When the office was secure, Wayne left his mother and father there to defend it and headed with the three men toward the lodge where there was a battle royal going on.

Wayne was more than a little surprised that the guard force was turning and running instead of fighting. Though mostly drug store cowboys, there were a couple of experienced military men on the force. But then, there were quite a few ex-servicemen and women in the MAG. And they carried the battle.

There was still fighting at the front entrance when the lodge was secured. Wayne jumped on one of the shuttle carts and headed that way as fast as it would go. He got shot at once and wasn't sure if it was a guard or a resident that mistook him for one. He didn't fire back. As he

approached the last turn before the entrance, a man came running toward him, firing over his shoulder. It was Sam Something.

Wayne jumped free of the still moving cart and raised the rifle. He cut Sam down before Sam knew Wayne was there.

Not wanting to get shot by friendlies, Wayne took to the forest and approached the entrance. From what he could see, only Dodge was still able to fight. But he was making a good job of it. He was behind one of the firing points and had a full auto FN-FAL and apparently an unlimited supply of ammunition. He fired magazine after magazine at every flash from the muzzles of the attackers' weapons.

"Give it up, Dodge!" Wayne called. "I've got you covered from behind!"

Dodge did. He immediately stopped firing, dropped the FAL, and raised his hands. "Okay. I'm done."

"You got him covered good?" yelled Trooper Mathewson.

"Dead in my sights," Wayne yelled back.

With that assurance, the two troopers and six others that were helping moved forward, checking on the other bodies as the sky began to lighten. It was Julie that cuffed Dodge and held him under guard with her pistol as Trooper Mathewson headed down the drive to oversee the cleanup of the situation.

When the count was made, it became apparent that at least a couple of the guard force had escaped. And Wayne and his family found out why some of them didn't fight harder to hold the complex. The food stockrooms were down to half the supplies they'd started with. There was less than a year of food left for the residents, and that was mostly staples. The Mountain House and other high quality foods had been eagerly consumed by Dodge and his men.

There were calls to lynch Dodge and the four other prisoners. But the trooper held sway and got them gathered up with the help of the six towns' people. They would be taken to town and tried for crimes against humanity.

Trooper Mathewson was adamant about that. He considered what the MAG members had endured had been brought upon themselves by themselves. They more or less got what they deserved. But the wanton use of available supplies when people were starving was justification for hanging of those that did it. And the townspeople would most certainly see it that way.

"We'll be back for half of the supplies," Mathewson announced.

There were protests, but Wayne and his family quieted them. "Look," Pete said. "It was gluttony that caused the supplies to disappear so fast. We still have time to garden, and the idea someone had of turning the swimming pool enclosures into greenhouses will provide even more.

“We are going to have to cooperate. We might have been able to make it on our own for a long time, but the circumstances being what they are, we need the help of the community as much as they need our supplies.”

Rendezvous - Epilog

There were mutters and a few tried to argue, but Pete had been one of the main proponents in getting the MAG complex founded and set up and his opinion carried a lot of weight. So it would be. The community would get half the stored food and supplies, and the complex would gain the benefits of the community, not the least of which was the access to what stock had been recovered and was now being raised right in the town on vacant lots and in abandoned houses.

Much as many of the women of the community wanted to include the collaborating women in the group that was found guilty and hanged, they were spared their lives, given some supplies and sent on their way, never to be heard of again.

Not so for two of the men that had escaped the attack. They made the mistake of trying to attack and rob one of the transports carrying food from the complex to the town and died in their tracks as a dozen people, not willing to give any quarter, opened up with every weapon available.

It took years of slim rations and tough times before the recovery started to show any signs of real progress. But those in the community and the complex worked together to make things better for all. And they did.

End *****

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