

Chapter 1

Almost Alone

It spread faster than anyone could have imagined. Wednesday, St. Patrick's Day, people started getting sick, emergency. Thursday rooms began filling up and the media reported a wide spread epidemic. Friday the government initiated martial law and told people not to panic. People left the cities in a mass exodus. Saturday, people, dogs, cats, birds, all animal life just died where they were. People died in their cars on the way out of the cities adding chaos to pandemonium and mayhem. People died pushing grocery carts in the super markets. Streets became littered with bodies.

Sunday, there was no media, no government, no people, no animal life, nothing. There were a few survivors and this is the chronicle of one such band of survivors.

Frank knew he was in shock. He accepted the death of his wife Lisa and his daughter Nicki but he also knew he hadn't faced the emotional side of the situation. The mind is a wonderful organ. It can shut itself off when it needs to.

As he dug a shallow grave in the backyard, Frank tried to make sense of the whole thing. There wasn't any pain to speak of. People ran a low-grade fever and started feeling achy like the flu. Hell, maybe it was the flu. A strain that was resistant to all the medicine that man had concocted to fight the seasonal bug.

But it was different than the flu. People just went to sleep and didn't wake up. Even the ones who died on the street didn't look in pain or even sick, they just looked surprised. It spread too damn fast to be the flu so perhaps it was some kind of germ warfare agent released by some fanatic in a busy airport. That would fit. Before the TV went dead they were reporting outbreaks

in almost every metropolitan area and a busy international airport would be a perfect place to release such an agent.

Frank wondered that if it was a terrorist act, if they had an antidote. Perhaps they didn't know what the outcome would be and just died with the rest of the world before they had a chance to take credit for the act. The media was just a little busy those last days so maybe the terrorist never had the opportunity to get their needed press coverage. That would serve them right.

Maybe it was just God. He did the flood thing once; maybe he is trying something new. Frank was never religious but he did consider himself a theist. He pushed these fleeting thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the task at hand, burying Lisa and Nicki.

He realized that he was burying them more out of convention than need. I mean there were bodies everywhere so it wasn't a question of sanitation. He seriously doubted there were any scavengers so that was not a real concern. He was married to Lisa for over 31 years and she so loved these rose bushes in the backyard, it was the last thing he could do for her.

Nicki just turned 29 was unmarried and pregnant. She was a flake but Frank loved her. She returned home from California to get her life together and this time she seemed like she was going to make it when she died. He didn't want to think about his unborn grandchild but he suddenly remembered Briana, his only grandchild. She was in Austin with her parents. Frank had no way to know if they survived but in that single instance he formulated a plan to travel there. Frank and Lisa lived in Huachuca City right outside of Sierra Vista, Arizona. That put them about half way between their kids. Tim and Nicki decided on the bay area of San Francisco while Samantha and her sister Donna went to Texas. Samantha is Briana's mother and was the only

one of the four children who was actually married.

Frank realized that by going to Texas he would be driving away from his son, Tim, but life is nothing much but a series of choices. There were two daughters and a granddaughter in Texas and just Tim and his significant other in California. Besides he could always double back if he needed to do so. Of course, Frank had a brother and a couple of nephews on the West Coast but he had already decided to go to Texas.

Frank laid Lisa and his daughter in their graves. He covered them and then piled rocks on the mounds. He took the rocks from his neighbor's cactus garden, as he didn't think they would mind. Frank didn't pray. Not because he lost his faith but he just didn't think about it. He just stood there talking to them, telling them about his plans for Texas. The silence was absolute, and Frank went to bed and began to cry.

Frank woke up with the barking of a dog. He mumbled something under his breath, rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. It wasn't very long, perhaps just seconds; surely no more than a minute, he sat straight up and was instantly awake. Dog? He listened carefully but there was no barking now. Did he dream it? The only thing he heard now was his own breathing.

He was sure he heard it. He put on his pants and slipped his feet in his slippers and headed out the front door. He stood very quiet straining to hear what he knew he heard before but there was nothing. He stood there in his front yard and began to shiver because of the coolness of the morning air so he went back inside to try to find something to eat.

There was no electricity and no natural gas so coffee was out of the question at the moment. Frank thought to himself that he would have to get a camp stove or something so that

he could heat some water. Food wasn't a real problem for he could live like a scavenger for a while, for a long while. Water was the only utility working and that was because it was gravity fed, but eventually that would stop as well.

He didn't have any powdered milk so he made a mental note to get some. He sat at the breakfast bar and ate some dry cereal right out of the box. His mind went back to the dog, as he was certain that he heard it. If it was loud enough to wake him up, the dog couldn't be more than a couple of blocks away so he decided to make a systematic search of the area. It was a plan.

He went to the bedroom to get a sweatshirt and a windbreaker. He put on his socks and a pair of running shoes. He saw a pen lying on the dresser. He took it and went off looking for a small notebook in his computer room. When he found it, he wrote two words in it: stove and milk.

Going out the front door again, he headed toward Pima Street, about three blocks away because he figured the dog couldn't be any further away than that. Pima was one of the residential streets he knew about but did not frequent often because there was no need.

He almost reached Yuma Street when it occurred to him that the dog might not be friendly. He could search in the car but that would be a waste of gas. Not that was a big problem. He took out his notepad and wrote – siphon hose. He could arm himself but he didn't have a weapon, which was kind of strange, as he retired from the Army after serving 20 years. He wrote weapon on the notepad.

After giving it some thought, he decided just to continue on, rejecting the idea of a weapon as too paranoid. Hoping to find another living being, albeit a dog, and contemplating hurting it or even killing it was too absurd.

He turned the corner at Pima Street and was about half way down the block when he heard it again. This was no dream. He called to it and tried to determine its location but the best he could do was down the block some more on the right. He went down a couple of more houses and then he saw it.

It was little more than a puppy. It couldn't have been a year old, maybe eight or nine months old at the most. It was kind of a German Shepherd and kind of something else. It was just a mutt and it was chained to a tree in the backyard.

Frank cautiously approached the chain link fence to analyze the situation. The dog barked with valiant bravado, then stopped and watched Frank with curiosity and anticipation. When Frank moved, the dog started raising a ruckus again. Frank started talking in a calm and soothing voice,

“Calm down girl. It's just you and me. Don't you want to be my friend? I want to be your friend.”

The dog stopped barking and cocked her head to listen. She looked attentive and was trying to make sense out of all of it. Frank turned around and started toward the front of the house. The dog barked just once and not in anger that was probably dog talk for “Hey where the hell are you going?” Frank responded with, “Don't worry girl, I'll be back.”

Frank knocked on the front door. Knocking was crazy, but if the dog was alive, why not someone else? Naturally, there was no answer. He tried the door and was pleased when he found it unlocked. Searching the house he found a mother and two boys, ages about seven and nine, all in one bedroom. He closed the door to the bedroom and went to the kitchen and found a large pan and filled it with water.

He opened the back door and the dog responded immediately. The chain only allowed him to get no closer than about three feet but the dog tried to get closer nevertheless. Frank laid the pan on the ground and pushed it within the dog's reach. The dog was thirsty!

Frank went back into the kitchen and found some dog food, both dry and canned. He found the can opener and another pan. Mixing both types of food together in the pan, he took it outside to the dog. The dog was hungry!

Frank sat down on the ground just beyond the dog's reach talking softly to her. When the dog finished eating, she laid down and watched Frank. Her ears moved in rhythm with Frank's words. Eventually Frank reached toward her and she licked his hand.

Frank unchained the dog and the dog started running around the yard and barking happily. Eventually it came back to Frank, jumped up and tried to lick his face.

"Down girl, down", Frank said without much conviction and scratched the dog behind both ears. The bond was made. Frank didn't think to name the dog. He wrote dog food and leash in his notepad. He then erased the word leash.

He went back inside the house and found a brown paper bag under the sink. The dog started raising a ruckus at being left outside alone so Frank propped open the door and invited her in. She was hesitant at first but she came in and started exploring the whole house, smelling everything. When she came to the closed bedroom door where the mother and two children were, she started barking and pawing at the door. Frank didn't know if it was a good idea or not to open the door for the dog but he decided to do it nevertheless. The dog cautiously entered the room, sniffed at the bodies and then began to growl. It was a low-grade growl, kind of difficult to categorize but a sustained growl all the same.

“Well, it is just you and me girl, come on.” The dog stopped its growl and looked quizzically at Frank and then began shaking her tail. She took a final sniff, turned around and trotted out of the door without looking back. Frank closed the bedroom door and went back into the kitchen and placed what dog food he could find in the paper bag. He also packed some canned goods and dry spaghetti he found in the cupboard but he didn’t find any powdered milk.

They went out the back door and through the back gate and the dog started running. She ran maybe a hundred feet in front of Frank, stop, turned around and looked at Frank than ran back to him. She would lick his fingers as he petted her and then take off running again.

It was only a couple of blocks back to Frank’s place but they both arrived a bit winded. Frank worked up a sweat carrying the canned goods that seemed to get heavier the closer he got to his house. At one time he had to place the bag on the hood of a parked car to give his arms a rest. The dog was panting from running back and forth the whole way home.

He opened the door and laid the bag down on the couch. After asking for Lisa’s forgiveness, he invited the dog inside. This time the dog came in without hesitation. Frank got out a pot from the kitchen, filled it with water and gave it to the dog to drink.

While she noisily lapped up the water, he went over his notebook. Stove, milk, siphon hose, weapon, and dog food. There wasn’t much on the list but it was a start.

"Girl, you want to go shopping?" The dog stopped drinking and look at him attentively

"Well unless, someone left a door open, I guess , we are just going to have to break in to get what we need."He and dog went of the back door to the storage shed. Since most businesses have glass doors, he took the claw hammer and the rough push broom that he used sweep off the driveway and sidewalk. Frank never broke into anything before but he figured he could use the

hammer to creak the glass, the broom and broom handle to knock loose what glass gravity didn't take of and then sweep away the shards out of the way. He wished he had a crowbar but he didn't so he wrote crowbar down on his list.

They went around front where the Geo Metro was parked. Frank opened the hatchback, put the hammer and broom inside. The broom had to go in the backseat area but, it fit, sort of. He opened the passenger door and rolled down the window and told the dog to get in. The dog just stared at him with an expression that could mean nothing more than "What?"

"Never ridden in a car before girl? If I can get you inside, I think, you will enjoy it." He left the car door open, and walked around to the driver's side. The dog followed him and looked kind of hurt when Frank got in and closed the door. He patted the passenger seat and called the dog. She wagged her tail but didn't move, not quite understand what he wanted. Frank leaned down out of the dog's view but continued to call her. At first she jumped up on the driver's side with her paws against the pane just to peer into the window. When she ran around to the other side, Frank sat up, continued to pat the seat and call her. She finally slobbered all over Frank's face, *"I figured it out! I am a good dog! Aren't you proud of me?"*

"Good girl", Frank said as he leaned over to close her door. A Geo Metro is a fine economical car but There is not much room in it for a 240 pound man and a German Shepard mix. He took out his notebook and wrote SUV and then put the notebook back in his pocket.

Frank backed out of the driveway and started towards Sierra Vista. The dog struck her snout out the window, just as if she did this all the time. About halfway to Sierra Vista just before Fort Huachuca's East Gate, Frank saw an RV off to the side of the road.

"Now there is an idea better than a SUV", Frank said. The dog pulled her head out of the

window and looked at Frank as a matter of courtesy, she stuck her head out of the window again.

Frank pulled onto the shoulder behind the RV. He opened the door and let the dog out. They entered the side door of the RV where they found an elderly couple sitting in the front seats holding hands. They were just beginning to bloat and the smell of death was heavy. Frank hoped they were going to get used to that smell as there was not a lot he could do about it what with all the bodies laying everywhere.

He managed to pull both bodies out of the RV, and he laid them side-by-side, thinking they would appreciate the gesture. The dog sniffed at the bodies but did not growl as she did before at her house. She just took the whole thing in stride.

The keys were in the ignition. He opened all the doors and windows to try to air it out. He emptied the refrigerator. He placed the couple's clothing and other possessions by their bodies.

He discovered he had a working gas range, a VCR hooked to a television, a radio with a built-in CD player, running water, and an owner's manual. He didn't think the radio would do him any good but who knows. The CD player would come in handy if for no other reason than to fill the dreadful silence. The couple evidently were into country music, judging by the CD's he found. Frank neither liked nor disliked country music, but decided to keep them as something to remember them by. Strange but he found no VCR tapes. Either the VCR was broken or they just rented tapes when it suited them.

He was pleased to find the RV started right up and he had a half a tank of fuel. He shut the vehicle down and returned to his car to get the broom and hammer. He took his car key off his key ring and wrote a short note in his notebook. "If you find this note, you will be glad to know that there are other survivors. I exchanged this little Metro for a big RV. My dog and I are

headed to Waco TX because we hope to find family there. Good luck.” He dated and signed the note and left it on the front seat with the key.

He put the tools in the RV, closed all the doors but the side door and left all the windows open. They entered by the side door and he closed it. He sat in the driver's seat and patted the passenger seat for the dog. The dog jumped right into the passenger seat and laid claim to it, and barked once.

“ OK, girl. Let's get this show on the road.” Frank soon discovered there was a hell of a difference between a Geo Metro and an RV. It felt weird sitting that high off the ground so he drove slowly until he got a better feel for the vehicle.

He pulled into the Ace Hardware parking lot, right in front of the store. Before he got out, he partially rolled up all the windows so the dog would not jump out, as he he didn't want the dog to get a nose full of broken glass. He took the broom and hammer, went out the side door and closed the screen door. The dog was kind of miffed but didn't raise a ruckus as long as he could see Frank.

He tried the front door but it was locked. He was going to bang on the door with the hammer but had second thoughts. It would be kind of ironic for him to survive the holocaust only to be guillotined by falling glass. He stood back by the RV after letting the dog lick his fingers through the screen; he threw the hammer at the glass door, tomahawk style. The door exploded into about a million pieces, all about pebble size.

It surprised at first then he realized that it must have been made of tempered glass or something like that for safety. Hr knock down what glass remained in the frame and swept everything up in a neat pile.

He let the dog out and put the broom and hammer in the RV. They walked through the door just like they owned the place. Frank grabbed a shopping cart, and looked at his notepad. He crossed off SUV and went looking for a crowbar. In the garden section he saw some sun hats and gloves and took a couple of each. He also saw some Tiki torches, which prompted him to write Coleman lantern in his notebook.

When he found the crowbars, he had to make a decision as they came in several sizes. He took three, large, medium, and small that ranged from four feet to one foot. Nearby was an 18” 6-pound sledge. That might come in handy so he took it. He checked crowbar off his list and just started exploring up and down the aisles.

He found some spools of rope and took three of various sizes for no better reason that he might need some rope for something. He found a heavier pair of gloves and exchange them for the ones he first found. In the swamp cooler section he found some plastic tubing he could use as a siphoning hose.

When he got back to the gardening section he ran across the seed display. He didn't take them all, but he did take five of each kind of vegetable seeds. He wasn't planning on a garden but that would come eventually. He found gardening tools he rejected them as he had no use for them now. One of the long handled branch trimmers reminded him of the bolt cutters he had seen in the Army so he decided to look for them and he found them in a glass case. There were several sizes so he took the biggest one, about two foot long.

The dog started barking!

Chapter 2

Eden

Frank didn't know what startled him more, the dog or the girl but his first reaction was to crouch down and hide, after all he just broke into the building.

"Hello! I know you are in there. Please show yourself. I need to talk with you. Does your dog bite? Well the truth of the matter was that Frank didn't know if the dog bit or not all he knew for certain was she hadn't bitten him.

"I don't think so", said Frank as he stood up. She stood just outside the door and she couldn't be more than twenty. "Stay there for a minute while I rig up some sort of leash, just to be sure. The dog and I have only been together since this morning." He quickly threaded the end of the 3/8" rope, under the dog's collar. He looped it back for a couple of feet and held both ends of the rope as a makeshift leash. It was a bit cumbersome as most of the rope was still wound around the spool but it would do. The dog simply wagged her tail at the attention she was getting but she stopped barking.

"Come on back, I've got her leashed and under control. Are you alone", he asked?

She started back and answered, "Yeah! How about you?"

The dog started straining against the leash. "Easy girl, it is OK", he said softly and the he asked the girl, "It is just me and the dog. Are you OK? I mean, are you sick or anything?"

"Well I don't know if I am OK but I am definitely not sick. Up until five minutes go, I thought I was the only person alive in the world. Hey! This place doesn't smell half bad."

Frank hadn't noticed but she was right. The stench of death was not present here. "The dog is still a bit skittish so don't approach too quickly", Frank said.

“I know what to do, I had a dog” she responded.

As she rounded the corner she held out her hand and gently calls to the dog. The dog wagged her tail and looked back at Frank as if seeking his permission. Frank petted the dog assuring her that all was fine as he released her from his crude leash. The dog bounded toward the girl, licked her hand and tried to jump up on her.

“Wow, she is friendly dog. What’s her name?”

Frank eyebrows knitted together. “I don’t know”, he said. “I just found her this morning. What’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t talked to anyone for so long, I must have forgotten how. My name is Monika Washington, what’s yours.

“Frank Atman. How long have you been by yourself and what have you been doing?”

Monika thought for a minute and said. “It has only been two days, it just seems like forever. The day after my family died, I just stayed home and cried but I somehow managed to snap out of it. I buried them in our backyard. Do you have any idea on what is going on?”

“I buried my wife and daughter in our backyard too. Do you mean do I know why everyone died so quickly or why we survived?”

“Both actually, I don’t think it has to do anything with age. I am 16 and you are old, 50 maybe? You’re not from an interracial family or anything are you?

“I am 56 actually. My mother used to tell me we had Cherokee blood but I am a genealogist and have traced my family back to the 1600’s and haven’t found an Indian yet, Cherokee or otherwise. Why do you ask?”

“My Dad was black and my Mom was white. She was also from Germany so I thought that

might have something to do with it but I guess not. You asked what I have been doing. Exploring around my neighborhood mostly. I have been collecting up stuff to help me survive. Hey, do you think there will be other survivors or are we the only people on earth, like Adam and Eve?”

“That is an interesting thought, but no I think we will find other people. Sierra Vista is not that big of a city even when you include the surrounding communities and you and I survived so I am sure we will find other people in bigger cities. Hell, we might even find more people here.”

“I see you’re on a survival shopping spree”, she said as she was pawing over the stuff in Frank’s shopping cart. “What’s the plastic tubing for?”

“Siphoning gas from vehicles” explained Frank. “I’ve got a couple of daughters and a granddaughter in Dallas and I was going to drive there so I figured I needed a siphoning hose”.

“Cool, that’s a plan but maybe you should go to an auto parts store and see if they have a regular siphoning hose. I remember my Dad had one. It had a plastic bellows on it so you could pump gas into it, to start the process that way you wouldn’t have to suck gas or fumes in your mouth.”

“Good idea”, said Frank as he wrote auto parts store in his notebook. He saw her looking at him with a puzzled look on her face. “It is just my shopping list. I tend to write notes to myself”, he said somewhat embarrassed.

“No problem! Listen do you want some company when you go to Texas. I don’t have any relatives here in the States. My Dad was an only child like me and his parents died when I was just a little girl. I have an aunt and an uncle in Germany but I don’t see how I am going to get there from here.”

Frank and Monika finished shopping at Ace Hardware then went to Pep Boys, an auto parts

store, like Monika suggested.

“See here it is!” Monika said smiling as she found as she found the plastic gas siphon with the built-in pump bellows.

“Very good” said Frank “That will definitely come in handy. Let’s see what else we can find. Got any more good ideas?”

Monika seemed very pleased and went off exploring. It wasn’t too long before she found the emergency flares. “Hey! I found some flares maybe we can use them to signal other survivors or something?”

“That is an interesting possibility” Frank said as he wrote down flare gun in his notebook. “Maybe we ought to build a bonfire with a lot of smoke? If there are any other survivors around here may they will get curious and come to investigate”

“That’s cool! You want to burn down a building or something? She said.

“Nothing that drastic, I was thinking of starting a bonfire of tires. It will create a column of very black smoke but smells terrible. What I understand it will smolder and smoke for a long time.”

“Well after we light it, we don’t have to stay around. Maybe we could leave them some sort of message that would tell anyone who came where we went?”

“And just how would you leave them a message that they would find?”

“I don’t know. We could spray paint our message on the side of a building or use poster board or something?” Frank wrote down poster board and spray paint in his notebook. The dog ran back and forth between the two of them.

“Ok another good idea. Look for some spray paint, something we can use for poster board

like maybe the backside of placard, or a felt tip marker or something like it. Never mind, I found some spray paint in the touch up section and something we can use for a poster but we still need a marker or something.” Frank wrote felt tip marker in his notebook.

“I found one at the register” At the sound of her voice the dog ran back to her. Frank marked out the marker he just wrote down.

“Boy this dog is hyper! She is going to have a heart attack running back and forth. We really got to give her a name.”

“She was chained up when I found her so I think she is just enjoying her freedom and her new found friends. As for a name, I haven’t given it much thought so you pick one”

“Ok, I will try to think of one. “What else do we need from here?”

“Some gasoline container would be nice. We will need them to start of bonfire and we can carry extra gas on the roof of the RV”

“I saw some just a little bit ago. I should have thought of it myself. Hey why don’t we call her Ace, as that is where we all met or is that too much of a boy’s name?”

“It is your call but I don’t think Ace fits her.”

“Ok how about Bandit? After all we are breaking into these stores and there are girl bandits and she looks like she is wearing some kind of mask.”

“Come here Bandit!” Frank shouted out and the dog bounded toward him. “Bandit it is then. Are you just about finished?”

“Yeah, I will meet you up front. Come here Bandit!” The dog took off for her. She laughed as she rubbed the dog’s ears. “You’re a good girl, aren’t you Bandit?”

The three of them met up front and Frank said, “Looks like we got all we need except for

the tires. Let's load up the RV and then we'll come back for the tires. Oh I see you picked up some Bungi cord that will come in handy I am sure."

"Where do you plan on building this fire anyway?"

"I was thinking about the middle of the street away from any cars. I think that should provide a large enough firebreak so we don't burn the town down in the process. It might be too late to start it now. I was thinking about doing the first thing in the morning so people will have all day to see the smoke and have time to get here."

"Frank, this is going to sound kind of weird but would you just hold me?" and Frank embraced her. As it was getting late the three of them went back to the RV and all sort of slept in the big master bed.

Frank woke up with sunshine on his face. He frowned as he always felt slightly disorientated when he woke up in a strange bed. Maybe it was the smell of coffee that finally woke him up. He looked up and saw Monika cooking at the stove in the RV. It sounded like she was frying bacon but it didn't quite smell like it.

"Good morning" He said. "What time is it?"

"Morning sleepyhead, it's a little past seven so it's about time you woke up. You want some breakfast? We got Tang, coffee, pancakes, and Spam. The pancakes are a little strange because I made them without any eggs but I will guess they will do."

"I am impressed. It appears you have been busy."

"Yeah, I woke up a couple of hours ago and went shopping. The supermarket is only a couple of blocks from here so I picked up some Bisquick and powdered milk and the rest of the stuff. I also picked up some bottled water just in case because I forget to check if we had water

here before I left. We do by the way but I don't know how much or how long it will last."

"You should have woke me up; I would have gone with you. Where's Bandit? I don't see her."

"I fed her outside so she must be exploring somewhere but I don't think she would have gone far as we all sort of need each other and she knows that. As far as waking you up, obviously you needed the sleep"

"Well I glad I didn't wake up while you were gone that might have been enough to really throw me off the deep end." He said as he moved to the table.

"Silly! I left you a note on the floor just before the door. You would have found it and would have known where we went."

"That was smart thinking", Frank said impressed with this young lady.

"After breakfast I guess we better start building that signal fire you mentioned. How do you figure on doing it?"

Frank thought a moment and then said, "Well why don't we pile some of those tires in Pep boys into a pyramid in the middle of the street, saturate it with gas and then ignite it. I imagine that should work. If the fire is hot enough, it should sustain itself. I remember reading someplace that firemen hate tire fires as they smolder and smoke forever"

"Yeah that would work" Maybe we should light one out flares and toss it at our little bonfire, that way we won't blow ourselves up trying to light the fire. What should we say on our sign and where should we place it?"

"Another good idea", said Frank and was sorry he didn't think of that one himself.

"We could take one of those free standing advertising stand we saw in Pep Boys, reverse

the placards, place it in the middle of the street and say something like – Meet us at Ace Hardware parking lot one mile east of here”

Monika’s brows furrowed and she said, “Why not just stay here?”

“I imagine burning rubber is going to smell like hell so we need to put some distance between us and the fire. It will give us chance to see what our signal smoke will look like from afar besides if it smells bad to us just think what it will do to Bandit’s nose.

Just as if on cue, at the sound of her name, Bandit appeared outside of the door and barked.

Monika opened the door and said, “Welcome back girl, did you find anything interesting?”

The dog came in and greeted both of them then found a comfortable spot on the floor and took a nap. Monika continued, “I see. How long do we wait for someone to show up?”

“Well I say at least until tomorrow morning or afternoon, that way it will give people a chance to get here. I mean after all, people will have to realize that the fire was intentionally set and be curious enough to come check it out.”

“What will we do if no one shows up?” she asked.

“Like I said before, I am sure we will find other survivors maybe not here but somewhere. Anyway we will take off for Texas like we planned but first we will come back here and change our sign to let know people know where we are heading and when we left. I mean, people could show up after we leave and there is no sense in building someone’s hopes up and then dash them. If someone finds our sign and knows where we are going, it will give them purpose and hope. Who knows, weeks or months after we leave and long after our fire has burned itself out, maybe some will find our message and try to follow us. Wouldn’t you like to find a message like this somewhere?”

“Well then I suggest we cover out message in plastic or something to protect it from the elements so people will be able to read it when they find it”

Frank smiled, finished breakfast and he and Monika started to work.

Chapter 3

First Steps

By the middle of the next day, they could still see smoke from their fire which was a good thing but nobody showed up which was a bummer, Frank said, “Why don’t we spend one more night here and if no one shows up, we will change our sign and take off for Texas.”

Monika didn’t respond but nodded her head in agreement. The next morning they drove back to Pep Boys and changed their poster to read “Monika and Frank – On their way to Dallas” and dated it. They covered their new poster with some clear plastic and duct tape they got at the hardware store and weighted the base down with some more tires. Monika thought it would be a good idea if they spray painted their message on a nearby plate window.

“You know I always wanted to tag something but this is a lot harder than it looks”, said Monika

“Having fun yet? You had a good idea to spray paint our message. This overhang will protect it from the elements, Frank said as he held the step ladder Monika was standing on.”

“Should we take this ladder with us?”, he responded with “I don’t think so as it is too bulky and I am sure we can find another one along the way”

“I know there will be more ladders on way but I think we should take this one with us. If we strap it to the roof of the RV, it should be out of way. You never know when we just might need a ladder and they won’t be a convenient one around”

“Ok Monika, another one of your good ideas. We will lash it to the top, we have plenty of rope.” Monika climbed down from her perch, took a few steps backwards and examined her handiwork.

“Not bad if I say so myself” “It will do”, Frank said dryly, and then “Well lets pack up and get the show on the road”

“I will climb up on the roof and then you push the ladder up to me. Do we have everything else ready to go”, she asked. As she climbed the ladder attached to the back of the RV, Bandit started raising a ruckus.

“I think she is telling you to be careful”

“I think she is just jealous because she can’t come up here. So Frank, what’s the plan?”

“Well I think for our first leg, we’ll stop in Benson.”

“Benson! That is only thirty miles from here. At that rate it will take us forever to get to Texas”

“Actually, I think it is a little more than thirty miles from here but it will give us an idea how far someone could see our smoke signal. We could then build another bonfire there and leave another message”

“Do you think we will be able to see the smoke from our bonfire in Benson?”

“I hope so. Thirty miles is roughly 1 degree of the earth’s surface but if the column of smoke is high enough, I think, we should be able to make it out”

“Then what do we wait awhile or do we just drive on to Willcox?”

“Well Willcox is approximately 30 miles from Benson and in the right direction but I was thinking of going in the opposite direction to Tucson.”

“Why, because you think there will be a greater chance of finding other survivors?”

“That is what I was thinking Monika, it makes sense doesn’t it?”

“I guess, it does so push the step ladder up to me so I can tie it down and let’s hit the road,

but Frank..?”

“Yes’

“What about your daughter and granddaughter?”

“Well if they survived, they survived and if not they didn’t. I know that sounds kind of cold and heartless but we have to stay focused on the bigger picture”

“The bigger picture?”

“If we are going to survive, we are going to have to find more survivors. It would be nice if they were friends and relatives but not absolutely necessary”

“Otherwise, like I said before we might have to do that Adam and Eve thing, right?”

“Monika, I know you are being flippant but it might come to that. I know my head is not screwed up straight right now and probably neither is yours. There is a lot to consider. There is our emotional stability, our age difference, what will happen should you become pregnant, I don’t know anything about delivering a baby, do you?”

“No but women delivered babies thousand of years before there were doctors or hospitals.”

“That is true but thousands of babies and women died in the process.”

“Oh” she said a bit worried.

Driving to Benson was uneventful except for one point just south of Kartchner Caverns where there was a multi-car pileup they had to drive around. After surveying the situation, Monika said, “Can’t you just drive across the medium to the other side?”

“Probably could”, said Frank. “But this RV seems a little top heavy and I don’t feel comfortable going into that little dip in the medium”

“Chicken!”

“Cautious” Frank said, “Do you want to drive?”

“Sure, I betcha I can drive across the medium”

“Go ahead and try if you want”, he said as he got out of the driver’s seat, “but it is a twelve mile walk back to town if we can’t find another set of wheels”

After she adjusted the seat and the mirrors, she said, “I guess it better to be safe than sorry so I will turn this baby around and go back to somewhere it is safe to get the other side.” Once she got the RV turned around she said,

“Hey you can really see that smoke signal of ours!” Bandit sensing they were going back rose from her nap, stretched, then nudged Frank

“It is OK girl, Monika is just going back to find a place to drive around this little roadblock.

They only had to backtrack a couple of miles before they found a place to get to the southbound lanes to drive around the pileup and a couple of miles further they found a way to get back to the northbound lanes, more out of convention than necessity. They took the first entrance into Benson off of I-10 and ended up on 4th Avenue. They drove a couple of blocks before Monika said, “Does this burg even have a tire shop?”

“I am sure it does but if not, I sure we can find some gas station that sells tires or something. Did you notice you can still see the smoke from our bonfire in Sierra Vista off to the right? You can’t really tell exactly where the fire is but you can clearly see it is somewhere south of us.”

“Yeah, I see that or I saw it”, she said as she started into an underpass. A block or two later they found their tire store. Well it was an auto parts store but they sold tires.

Frank said, "I'll build a pyre out of tires and you leave a message saying that we're going to Tucson."

"OK, I will tell them that started off in Sierra Vista so if they see the smoke south of here, so they won't try to follow a false lead."

"Good idea and remember to date it. You might as well see what else is in there that might be worth taking with us."

There was not as many tires in the parts store as there were in Pep Boys but it was sufficient. Frank doused the tires with gasoline but he didn't fire it right away because he wanted to leave the area as soon as he did because of the awful smell. He walked into the store and yelled, "Hey Monika! I am ready outside how are you doing?"

"OK I found a few things we might be able to use. What do you think of our message? Across the front of the counter she used heavy black marker to write, "Monika and Frank were her on this date. Started off in Sierra Vista and are heading towards Dallas but we are going to stop in Tucson and Phoenix first looking for other survivors." Underneath the message she signed it and dated it.

"I guess, that says it pretty well but when did you decide we are going to go to Phoenix as well as Tucson?"

"I don't know it just sort of come to me. Tucson is only 30 miles from here and Phoenix is about an hundred miles further so why not? I think, the next big city heading east is El Paso and it's well over 300 miles from here so it just made sense to me. Are you mad at me?"

"No, why would I be? It does make sense. If I ever get mad at you or disagree with you, believe me, you'll know cause I will tell you straight up and I would appreciate it if you would

do the same. We are a team, equal partners; we might as well be married.”

“Is that a proposal because if it is then I accept?” she said as she appeared around the corner carrying a phone book. Side stepping her response he asked, “What is that?”

“It’s a phone book. I figure we can thumb through the yellow pages and maybe it will give us some ideas. You know remind us of something we have to get or something like that.”

“That’s a great idea, I don’t think, I would have thought of that. We can use it for brainstorming so we should make a point of getting one every time we stop somewhere.”

“That is going to be an awful lot of phone books; I think we only need to keep the biggest yellow pages we find and maybe the most recent ones we find along the way. But don’t change the subject on me because I want to talk about it.”

“And what subject would that be?”

“You know marriage and stuff.” Frank raised his eyebrows and smiled, “Stuff?”

“Yeah stuff, sex and stuff like that”

“My, my aren’t we the little tart”, Frank said teasingly and then he looked her straight in the eyes and asked seriously, “Monika, have you even had sex and why the big hurry?”

“Yeah I fooled around but I am still a virgin if you really want to know and no I am not in that big of hurry but I have been thinking about it even before we met when I felt like the last person in the world. We have just survived a period where we saw people die in a matter of days and God forbid I am not sure what I would do if you got sick or something.”

“Fair enough but there is an emotional component of doing it which neither us might be prepared at least I am not sure that I will be. The situation is weird when you think about it. An old man and a willing teenage virgin out to repopulate the world, I am flattered but I am not sure

I am even up to it after all you just a few years older than my granddaughter.”

She put the phone book on the counter and then hugged him and whispered in his ear. “It will be OK, I’m sure”

Frank hugged her back and held her for a long time before he said, “Well can we at least wait until we get to Tucson and find a hotel room? Let’s light this bonfire outside and get a move on girl”

Chapter 4

Tucson

She woke up with her arms around Frank’s chest and her leg draped over his like she was holding some sort of body pillow. She didn’t want to move and wake him but managed to lift her eyes to look in his face then she fell back to sleep, lulled in to bliss by his comfortable, hypnotic breathing.

He woke up about an hour later with a bit of surprise until he remembered last night then he pulled her toward him and kissed on the top of head.

“Good morning”, she said as she stretched catlike

“Well?”

“It was wonderful.” She said as her hand rubbed his back

“Do you want to do it again? She asked demurely.

“Hey, I’m an old man cut me some slack, girl.”

“It doesn’t feel all that slack to me.”

It was just about midday when they decided to get out of bed.

“I don’t know about you but I am hungry. Where’s Bandit?”

“We let her outside last night.” She said.

When Frank, opened the door to the motel room, Bandit jumped up to greet him and then ran inside to greet Monika.

“Hello girl, how have you been? Sorry to have left you out last night but Frank and I needed some private time. I am so glad you understand, are you hungry as well?” They both got dressed and Monika and Bandit went out to the RV to start breakfast. Frank went to the motel office where he found the yellow pages before returning to the RV.

“I guess we ought to build a signal fire like we did before. You know, there is a good chance that in a city this size, we might actually find someone here. You can just barely still see our smoke probably from Benson”

“Got any place in mind to build this little fire? She asked.

“I don’t think it will make much difference.” He said as he looked through the phone book for tire shops.

“I guess we should stick around at least for a few days to see if anyone shows up. I am sure we can find something to entertain ourselves.”

“Oh really! He said as he smiled and looked at her.

“You know go shopping, read the phone book and stuff like that. “

“Yeah, right, stuff like that.”

She laid bowls of oatmeal, some fried Spam, and coffee in front of them and sat down beside him. Frank took out his list.

“Looks like we got everything on our list except for maybe a weapon”

“Do we really need one? She asked

“Probably not but I would feel safer with it because you’ll never know what massive death and solitude might do to someone’s sanity and although it is unlikely maybe some predatory animal survived this mess and you might just look like a meal to him.

“Now I feel guilty about leaving Bandit out all night”

“Like I said, it probably won’t happen but it is better to be safe than sorry”

“What kind of weapon should be get, a gun?”

“That was what I was thinking, a couple of handguns and perhaps even a rifle and a shotgun.”

“Sound like you’re preparing for a war.” She said.

“I hope not. After building our fire and writing our usual message lets go to a gun store, or a sporting goods store to see what we can find. Then afterward we will have to do some practice.”

“I have never shot a gun before.”

“And let’s hope you never have to other than in practice.”

After their late breakfast they drove to a tire store and built their little bonfire in the middle of the street as before. Monika wrote her note on the reverse side of the placard telling them they were going to be in Tucson for a couple of days before moving on to Phoenix. She asked them to leave a note and told them they would be dropping by in a few days. Signed and dated it then left the marker so they would have something to write with. Afterwards they broke into a Wal-Mart and got themselves a couple of rifles and some ammunition. Frank taught Monika how to shoot and she even hit what she was aiming at a couple of time. Frank wasn’t much better. They drove back to the bonfire to see if anyone noticed their fire before returning to their motel. This time

Bandit slept inside with them.

Monika jump on the bed and shook Frank enthusiastically.

“Frank, Frank. Wake up. You are not going to believe this!” Bandit started barking.

“You are all wet!” Frank said somewhat disorientated.

“I was swimming in the pool. Come on get up I want to show you something.”

“You went skinny dipping?”

“Yeah, yeah – like who’s going to notice? Come on lazy bones, get out of bed, I have something to show you.”

She half drug Frank outside and pointed northwest and said, “Look!”

“I’ll be damned,” said Frank as he saw two very distinct columns of black smoke.

“Well you better get decent girl as it looks like we got neighbors to meet”

Frank shaved and made a cup of coffee while Monika got dressed. Bandit’s tail was wagging for she too was aware something special was about to happen.

Monika said, “Are you ready yet? I want to see who build this new signal fire.”

“Let’s stop by our fire first. Maybe they left us some sort of message. If there is nothing there then we will try to find the other fire.”

“Ok, let’s go!”

Sure enough there was a message under Monika’s message on the placard. The message read, “Thank God! We didn’t know where you were staying and couldn’t wait a couple of days till you came back so we build another fire in the K-Mart parking lot a mile down the road to signal you back. We are at 5945 E 26th Street just off of Sahuara, which is between Craycroft and Wilmot” The message was signed Sharon, Jim, and Rex

“Do you know where that address is Frank? Do you think Rex is another dog or what?”

“Slow down girl. Take a deep breath. I have a fair idea where it’s at and Rex could be a person or might be a dog. Who knows but I guess we are going to find out real soon”

They drove to 22nd and Craycroft then drove east towards Wilmot. When they found Sahuara they turned south then drove four block and turned east on 26th

“There it is”, said Monika excitedly. Before Frank could do anything, she leaned over and blew the horn. Three smiling people emerged from the house, a woman and two men. As soon as the RV was parked, Monika and Bandit flew out the RV. Monika hugged and kissed everyone. Bandit was barking and excited as everyone was petting her. Frank followed Monika a bit more slowly and extended his hand to shake. Rex took it shook it and then gave Frank a big bear hug.

They went inside of Sharon’s house and she asked what everyone wanted to drink.

“We got water, coffee, tea, warm beer, hard stuff if you want it, what would you all like?”

Rex said, “Sharon, I will just have water as usual.” Then he explained to Frank, “You see I am an alcoholic but I have been sober for eight years and I plan to stay that way but God knows there is reason enough to drink these days so I just have to keep working at one day at a time.”

“Water is fine for me too,” said Monika

“Sharon, do we still have coffee left over from this morning?”

“Sure we do but I can make another pot, if I need to”

“In that case, I will have a cup of coffee as well,” said Frank.

“Cream and sugar?” asked Sharon.

“Splenda if you got it,” responded Frank. Once Sharon got everyone their drinks, she sat down and then the stories began.

Sharon described herself as 36 and “just a housewife.” The holocaust took her two boys and her husband. She met Rex while shopping for canned goods at Safeway. She said she almost dropped dead when Rex first spoke to her at Safeway’s.

Rex was 44 lost his wife and three children, a boy and two girls. “I already told you I am an alcoholic but I am also a medical doctor,” he said.

“A doctor? That’s great,” said Frank, “We will need your skills if we are going to make it.”

“We will make it all right,” said Jim a 27 year old computer programmer.

“I met these two also at Safeway but not right away.” I thought someone was there before me so I camped out at Safeway, hoping they would come back. They did a couple of days later. By the way Frank, that signal fire of yours was a great idea.”

Monika said, “Now that we go two fires going, maybe someone else will show up as well.”

Monika, Frank and Bandit, slept in the RV parked just outside of Sharon’s house but the other three shared the house. It was shortly after nine o’clock when everyone went to sleep not so much because people were tired but because it was dark.

Everyone woke up at 08:10 from the racket caused by someone blowing their horn as this is the way Margo, Ken, and Vince announced themselves in their RV. Margo was 32 and a professional truck driver, 18 wheelers. Ken spent over ten years in the Air Force as a cook and was working as a baker when everything went south and finally there was Vicente, 32, who went by Vince. Vince said he was an ex-con who spent almost five years in Florence for armed robbery before being paroled for good behavior. He was washing dishes at Denny’s when everyone got sick.

“I told Margo and Ken that we should investigate that column of black smoke in the

southeast when we first saw it,” said Vince.

“Monika and I lit that one down in Benson and then lit the first one up here in Tucson.”

“Since we didn’t know where or who Frank and Monika were at the time, we lit the second fire here in Tucson to signal them back and it worked,” said Sharon,

“We are glad that you did,” said Margo. “It was the second fire that convinced us to investigate as we knew it was beyond sheer coincidence. We were so excited that we could hardly sleep but we decided to seek you out first thing this morning.”

“Frank and I were on our way to Dallas when we met the other three and now there is the three of you so perhaps we should stick around Tucson some more to see if anyone else shows up.”

“I agree,” said Frank. “I would suggest we stick around here for a least a week. If some one else shows up during that period, we should stick around for another week after that before we move on.”

“Sound like a plan”, said Ken. “Why were you going to Dallas?”

“I have kin there, a daughter, her husband and granddaughter. I was preparing to go there by myself when I met Monika in Sierra Vista. She doesn’t have any relatives here in the States and asked to tag along, like I was going to turn her down. We decided to come to Tucson before heading towards Texas, in the hopes of finding more people which turned out well. Monika decided in Benson that we should try Phoenix as well. We are kind of just taking things as they come. Now there are eight of us, nine if you count Bandit, we need to make some plans.”

“Like what?” asked Jim?

“So far we have been lucky in that everyone has been friendly and helpful but we should

consider the possibility that might not be true in the future. There is no telling what all this death and solitude would do to someone's mind. We might run across a band of crazies with no women who might figure it is their right to kill all the men so they could have our women."

"Or we might run across a band of Amazons who might want to kill all of us women so they can capture our men," quipped Monika.

"Not out of the realm of possibility," said Frank seriously. "I really think it would be a good idea if we armed ourselves and learned how to shoot just to be prepared for the worst"

"That is probably a good precaution," said Rex, "but let's not any harm to ourselves as well. Those of you who have had sexual partners since the holocaust, I would suggest you keep the same sexual partner for a while. I have no fucking idea why any of us survived but it would be pretty ironic if we all came down with AIDS or some other STD."

Monika said, "We found you because you left your address on the placard next to that little bonfire we lit. In lieu of Frank's concerns, do you think that is such a good idea?"

"Actually we left our address on a placard next to both pyres but you are right, Monika, it might not be the safest thing to do but if we don't leave our address how are we ever going to hook up with anyone else?", said Rex

"Well, we could build another pile of tires for them and leave them some gasoline and a flare and invite them to signal us back. That is the way we signaled Frank and Monika and they responded. Instead of leaving our address we will just tell them where to built the other pile of tires and that we will be watching for their signal."

"That should work and it is a good idea that we build the pile for them, in case they are incapacitated or are too weak to build it themselves," said Frank "and I think we should consider

electing a historian and setting up some sort of government. I have an idea on a government that you might consider. Does anyone want to volunteer for the job of historian?"

"Why do we need either? I mean there are only eight of us, nine if you count Bandit," said Ken, Bandit, lifted her head and started wagging her tail at the mention of her name.

"Having a historian is a positive affirmation that states we do have a future and what we do here today is important not only to ourselves but to our descendants."

"OK," said Monika, "I will take a stab at it. What do you have in mind for a government?"

s"When I was stationed in Thailand, I took an undergraduate course called *Cultural Anthropology since World War II*; I mean the final was like write an essay on the Bay of Pigs."

"What's the Bay of Pigs?" asked Monika

"Not important right now but I will try to explain later. Anyway the instructor gave out a lot of extra projects for extra credit. It was just kind of whimsical and, I think, she was just trying to make the course more interesting. The project, I took on was to invent a new system of government that has never been tried before. I had fun with the project as the way I figured, I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. I did earn enough extra points to get an A for the course and as outrageous as it sounds, I think it might work"

"We are all ears, tell us about it", said Margo

"Well I called it rule by committee; I know it already sounds like a bureaucracy. The basic unit of government was the basic committee that consisted of at least five people but not more than nine people. This could be a single traditional family unit or a combination of families. When a tenth person showed up the committee would split itself into two distinct committees."

"What would be the purpose of these committees?" asked Jim.

“Well the committees have two charges. First they set the rules for themselves - things like who does what household chores – basic family stuff. The second thing they would have to do is elect a member of their committee to the next higher level. This second level I called the tier-two committee. The purpose of this tier-two committee is similar to the basic committee – they set rules for themselves and the committees they represent and elected a representative to the next higher level of government or the tier-three committee which have a similar charge as the two lower committees. I think you see that the people governed grows exponentially, 5, 25, 125, 625 so the tier-four committee would be setting the rules for approximately 625 people.”

“I see, so when we find two more people we will break into two family groups of five each of whom will elect a representative to this tier-two committee and these two people will be our elected leaders for a while?”

“I like your attitude as you said when not if – but I think you have the concept.”

“What happens if these two people can’t agree on an issue?”

“Anytime you have an even-numbered group, there is a possibility that a simple majority cannot be reached. If that happens, I would suggest that we just agree to disagree and take no action. We will move one to another issue where we can either reach a consensus or simply majority”

“Sounds like a plan, so let’s see if we can find some more weapons and ammo, take down our open invitation to visit us here, and build another pile of tire for our new friend to signal us back.”

Chapter 5

Phoenix