



Surviving the Fog

By

Stan Morris

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Prologue

They drift through space in their own orbit unrelated to the orbits of the planets, the stars, or the galaxies. Their colonies stretch for thousands of light years. Their colonies have no shape. They may be elongated. They may be circular. They may even be cubed. Or their shape may be a combination of shapes like a dry but wadded paper towel.

They can be detected, but only by using the most sophisticated of instruments, and then only by the most advanced space faring societies. Otherwise, they are invisible and undetectable.

They can be killed. Sometimes they drift into the path of a star and they burn. Sometimes they drift in the void for too many eons and they dissolve. Sometimes they drift into the path of a spear of gamma rays from an exploding star and they are sterilized. If they are detected by a space faring society that understands what they are and has the capability, they are usually sterilized.

They can not procreate on their own. They must have a host. A star with an unfortunate oxygen bearing planet must spin its way into their web. Even when they are fortunate to infect such a planet, it takes years for them to coalesce in the atmosphere. While they coalesce, they must disguise themselves as a pollutant. But once they have coalesced they can become semi solid in a very short time. As short a time as twenty four hours.

Chapter One

"Something's Wrong"

"Something's wrong," said Mike.

"No, shit, dude," answered John.

The two teenagers were sitting on a ledge just inside a large depression carved into the side of a granite rock that was part of the southern Sierra Nevada mountain range. It would have been called a cave, but it was open to the air except for a large room tucked back on the east side. The ledge extended for several feet out from under the rock. The late May sun was trying to cast its rays inside the depression, but the boys were far enough back so that the heat could only reach their feet.

"Do you think that they are coming back?" asked Mike.

"Why wouldn't they?" answered his friend.

Before them was a long gentle green grassy slope that slanted down to a small river which entered the valley from the east. The swift cold river flowed west through the valley until it vanished into the tall green fir trees where it continued many miles until it fell down into the Southern California central valley. It was a large stream really, but the water was rushing too quickly to wade through, and it was much too wide to jump.

"Maybe their jeep crashed," hazarded Mike.

"Maybe Jackie is right?" answered John. "Maybe they can't get back."

On this side of the river, stood the five cabins of the boys' camping area plus the corrugated metal roof dining hall, and the Administrator's A-frame cabin. A narrow wooden bridge spanned the river. On the other side of the river were the five cabins of the girls' camp, the parking lot with the large yellow bus, and the beginning of the gravel road which led southeast over a small hill and then southward through the mountains until it reached a paved road leading southwest towards Bakersfield. Around the camp rose the heavily forested mountains of the Sierra Nevada.

"Maybe their jeep fell into a canyon. Maybe they're all dead," suggested Mike.

John frowned. "I wish you would quit saying stuff like that, dude," he groused. "When they come back, we're going to have to listen to those lectures. And they're going to force us to have fun."

Can't you just kick back and enjoy the day? Hell, check out the view from here, Mike. Look, Desi is coming from the showers. Wow!"

Sometimes, the boys felt like they were in a long oblong bowl running east to west with the camp on the east side. On the west side was a long meadow through which the river rushed. Most of the meadow was on the girl's camping side of the river. Violets, marigolds and chickweed dotted the meadow. All around the bowl, the mountains of the Sierra Nevada stood watch. The peaks of the chiseled mountains were covered with pristine white snow. Lower down, the slopes were forested by groves of southern foxtail pine. Closer to the camp grew stands of bristle cones and white bark.

"When do you think that they are coming back?" asked Mike.

"I don't know," muttered John as the well proportioned girl that he was watching disappeared into her cabin.

The trouble had started a week ago. The first indication that something was wrong came when the ancient post office jeep had not made its weekly delivery of mail that the boys and girls usually received from their anxious parents. Then the camp radio seemed to be having a problem. For some reason, it would not connect with the world outside of the valley.

The camp Administrator had decided to travel the thirty miles to the nearest town, get a back up radio, and collect the late mail. Three of the four counselors had elected to go with her, and take a well deserved break from their rambunctious charges. They had expected to be back in three hours. They had left the last counselor, twenty year old Jackie, in charge of the forty eight boys and girls. That had been six days ago. There had been no sign of the adults since then, and again today, the mail jeep had not appeared.

The first night, after the administrator and the other counselors had not returned, Jackie had insisted that they were late, and that everyone should go to bed as usual. The next evening, Jackie had suggested that the road was probably blocked by a landslide, and that the adults would be back as soon as the road was cleared. Since then, they had waited.

"Something's wrong," said Mike again.

"Yeah, but what?"

Mike was thirteen and John was fifteen. Mike was fair skinned, sandy haired and a little short for his age. John was a brown Latino with black hair, and he was a foot taller. The two typical California boys had become fast friends the first day of camp in spite of their

age difference.

"Eric knows how to work the radio phone. We should ask him to try to call someone," said Mike.

"Yeah, but the radio phone is in the Admin's cabin," argued John. "And her cabin is locked."

Mike looked at John. "It's been a week," he replied. "Something's wrong, John. And Jackie probably won't care if we go into the Admin's cabin."

John looked depressed at that statement. For the first three days, Jackie had frantically tried to keep their minds off the missing adults. Then she had gotten real quiet, and she had stopped trying so hard to pretend that nothing was amiss. Today, she had refused to get out of her bunk for a long time and then, after she arose, she had refused to leave the counselor's cabin.

"Jackie won't care," repeated Mike. "Let's go talk to Eric."

They found Eric in the dining hall. The cinder block dining hall was one quarter kitchen, and three quarters dining area. The kitchen appliances consisted of a large propane refrigerator, an oven, a stove, and two large freezers. The dining area contained several long white plastic tables and many white plastic chairs.

Eric was sitting on one of the plastic chairs engrossed in a paperback book. His feet were up on a cardboard box. He was rocking back and forth on the hind legs of his chair which was threatening to topple over. Eric was a small African-American boy with short curly hair about Mike's age. Many of the other campers considered Eric to be a nerd.

Cardboard boxes were stacked along the windowless north wall of the dining area. The boxes contained packets of condoms, diaphragms and birth control pills. These items were partly the purpose of the camp.

The camp was a creation of a religious organization called Abstinence and Protection. AAP, as it was known, had created the camp as a place to promote the value of abstaining from sex, but also to familiarize middle school and high school boys and girls with birth control methods. The organization had planned to hold four three week camps this year. The current group of boys and girls were the first campers. They were supposed to take some of the condoms and a few of the diaphragms with them when they left.

The camp Administrator was a doctor. Those girls who were at least sixteen year old were supposed to have been offered physical

examinations and birth control pills with the consent of their parents.

But the real emphasis of the camp was on abstinence, not just for moral reasons, but because the creators of AAP believed that the emotional repercussions of sexual intercourse were too difficult for young teenagers to contend with in the present societal environment.

As Mike and John came into the dining hall, Eric put the old dog eared book aside and tried his cell phone for the umpteenth time. He received a no-service message from his phone.

"What are you reading, nerdo," asked John.

"'Tunnel in the Sky'," answered Eric. "I finished 'MacKenzie's Rock'."

"Scifi?" asked John.

"Yeah. Some real old stuff. Like from Verne and Wells' time."

"You can work the radio phone, huh Eric?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, if it wasn't locked in the Admin's," answered Eric who added under his breath, Doofus.

Mike looked at John who looked back at Mike. Then John sucked in a breath and looked at Eric.

"Let's go," he said.

Eric looked at him blankly. "Where?" he asked puzzled.

"Come on," growled John with a bigger boy look.

Like all smaller boys, Eric knew that look. He shrugged and followed Mike and John. They led the way to the Administrators A-frame cabin. Mike and John studied the structure for a minute. The door had a sturdy lock.

"Think you could bust it open with your shoulder?" asked Mike.

"I think I could bust my shoulder," answered John. Eric rolled his eyes and waited patiently.

"We could break a window," suggested Mike.

"Hey!" exclaimed Eric. The other boys looked at him.

"Got a better idea?" asked John.

Eric glanced from John to Mike. He ducked his head and scuffed a toe. "There's a key under the mat," he muttered.

John gave Eric a menacing look, and then he retrieved the key. He opened the door. Mike and John boys went inside. After a moment, Eric followed, after looking around nervously to see who was watching them.

The A-frame cabin consisted of the bottom portion and a large loft. There was a ladder at the back of the cabin leading to the loft. The cabin had a double bed, and it had a sink that was fed by a small

water line that connected to the main water line serving the dining hall.

The main water line, made of PVC pipe came down from the river, and it had a large washable filter before the junction of the two lines. Gravity provided the pressure for the kitchen, bathrooms and the showers in the dining hall building. A solar pump provided additional pressure to this cabin's sink.

There was no bathroom in the cabin. The Administrator used a portable toilet just like the campers, except that she had one that was reserved for her alone. She usually allowed the female counselors to use it.

The other furniture in the cabin consisted of a sofa, two chairs, and a large desk. At the back of the cabin sat a large tool chest. On the desk was the radio phone. Several frequencies were available.

John handed the radio phone to Eric. Eric tried all the frequencies. Although there were some suspicious noises, they could not hear anything that sounded like a definite voice. On every frequency, Eric asked if someone could hear him. After a half hour they gave up.

"Maybe it's broken," said John. Eric looked at him.

"I don't think so," he replied.

"So why can't we hear anybody?" asked Mike.

Eric took a deep breath, and then he looked at Mike. His eyes had fear in them. "Maybe...maybe there isn't anyone to hear?" He asked the question with a look which suggested that he would be glad if they made fun of him.

All week, Mike's mind had been avoiding this very thought. Get up, play, do your chores, eat, play some more, and then go to bed. He had followed the camp routine. The adults would be back. His parents were at home. He had avoided considering any other scenario. But now, he had to face a terrifying possibility.

"There's something very wrong," he said, his voice shaking.

"Yeah," agreed John glumly.

"Do you think our parents are all right?" whispered Eric, his stomach fluttering. Mike really wished that Eric had not said that.

"We've got to do something," said Mike.

"Let's go talk to Jackie," suggested John.

"All right," replied Mike, but privately he didn't think that Jackie knew what to do any more than they did.

They left the Admin's cabin, passed the dining hall, and

tromped over the wooden bridge to the girls' side. Eric followed along silently. Mike and John ignored him. Of the five cabins on each side of the river, one was reserved for the counselors. Two counselors shared each cabin. The counselors slept in comfortable double beds instead of the bunk beds used by the teenagers.

They found Jackie lying on her bed on top of the covers. She was staring at the ceiling. Although the campers and counselors had brought sleeping bags, all of the beds were covered by a mattress cover, two sheets and two heavy woolen green blankets. Some of the campers preferred to sleep in their sleeping bags. Others used the blankets, so that they wouldn't have to roll up their bags at the end of the three week camp.

"Hey, Jackie," said John. The young woman looked over at him listlessly. Jackie was an attractive young woman with blond hair and a slim build, but her face seemed swollen now, and she did not smell very good.

"Hey, yourself," she replied, and then her eyes turned towards the canvas ceiling again. The boys looked at each other.

"Um...Jackie, when do you think the Admin will be back?" asked John.

"She'll be back when she's back," answered Jackie flatly. She closed her eyes. John looked at Mike helplessly.

Mike took a breath. "Jackie, we think that something is wrong. Something is really, really wrong, Jackie."

"There's nothing wrong. Now go away," answered Jackie.

"But, Jackie, Eric tried to get someone on the radio phone. There's no one there!" Mike's voice was rising trying to get through to the young woman.

"You stay out of the Admin's place!" snapped Jackie. "Now go away." She turned towards the wall.

The boys look at one another.

"So what's the lecture about tonight?" tried John.

"Just leave me alone," came a muffled reply that sounded like it was almost a sob.

Defeated, the boys left her cabin. Outside there were a several girls. They followed the boys until they were far enough away that Jackie could not hear them talk.

"She's been like that all day," said a black eyed girl named Makayla. "She just keeps saying that the others will be back soon. I'm really getting scared."

"Me, too," said another girl with a quiver in her voice.

"Do you think she's right?" asked a third girl.

The boys looked at one another.

"Not really," admitted Mike.

"When do you think our parents will come looking for us?" asked Makayla.

"I don't know," answered Mike.

There was nothing more to say. The boys went over to their side of the river. Eric went back to the dining hall, while Mike and John walked along the river. They discussed which of the three girls that they liked the best. They avoided the subject of the missing adults.

At one point they sat down, and they watched some girls who were practicing archery on the other side of the river. The girls were using hay bales. The boys were supposed to practice as a group also, but there were no male counselors to lead them. The girls obviously had decided to practice on their own. Another girl was running around the huge crude track that had been plowed around the meadow and flattened by truck tires.

"Who's the girl that's running?" asked Mike.

"I'm not sure what her name is," answered John.

"She's cute."

"Yeah, but she's no Desi."

"How old is she?" asked Mike hopefully.

"I think she's fifteen," replied John.

Mike grimaced. He had found that fifteen year old girls had little interest in thirteen year old boys. The boys returned to the boys' side of the river.

Since there were no adults around, the boys were starting to stay up later and later at night. That night, after the other boys had retired to their bunks, Mike went back to the Admin's cabin and retrieved the key. He let himself into the cabin, and he checked the radio phone again, only to find that they had neglected to turn it off. The battery was dead.

Disgusted, he laid it back on the desk. Turning around, he saw the bed. He took a step and stood by the bed for a minute. It looked comfortable. Slowly, almost cautiously, he lay down on top of the covers. He could see out the window on the front of the cabin. The stars were bright, and he watched them for a time.

After a while, he got up and removed his shoes, socks, pants

and flannel shirt. Wearing only his t-shirt and briefs, he got back in the bed under the covers. He felt like he was doing something that he shouldn't, but in a strange way he felt like he was at least doing something other than just waiting fearfully. He quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, Mike awoke late. He put on his clothes, and he went outside. He locked the door, but as he was about to place the key under the mat he hesitated. Instead, he put the key in his pocket.

He went to the dining hall looking for John. The kids in the dining hall were installing a new box of milk in the milk dispenser for their cereal. AAP had purchased large bags of dry cereal, cases of canned food and a lot of boxed milk that they usually mixed with powdered milk. They offered the usual canned vegetables and fruits. Mike found John wolfing down his second bowl of cereal. A boy he didn't know well, but whose name he knew was Jacob, sat on the other side of the table.

Mike looked at John for a moment, and then he asked, "What are we going to do when the food runs out?"

John paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. He had a look of unpleasant surprise on his face. He stared at Mike, and then he slowly finished eating the spoonful.

Carefully, he sat his spoon down, and then he asked, "All right, dude, I give. What will we do when the food runs out?"

"What ever we do, we better think of it now. How will we keep warm this winter?"

John looked even unhappier at that question. "Maybe some other adults will show up to help us. Not the Admin and the counselors, but some other adults."

"What if the adults who show up don't help us? What if they just take our food? What if they're the kind of adults who hurt kids?"

John scowled. "Man, you are really downing me this morning. Let me finish eating before we discuss the end of the world."

Mike went outside and walked down to the river. He walked downstream until he was opposite the bales of hay that were used for archery practice. He stared thoughtfully at the bales for some time, and then he went back to the dining hall. He waked around the building until he came to the storage room on the east end. Mike entered the storage room. In the storage room was the tank for the hot water that was produced by the solar panels covering the roof of the dining hall. Also in the storage room was the bin containing

empty aluminum cans. The only soda that was available to the children was diet soda. The boys seldom drank it, but the girls did. The boys preferred the cans of sweetened fruit juice.

Mike took several empty cans from a bin, and then he went back to the Admin's cabin. Once inside, he looked through the tool chest until he found a pair of metal snips. Carefully he cut apart an empty can, and then he flattened the aluminum. Then he cut out a piece of metal in the shape of a spear tip.

Mike left his work on the desk, and he went outside after making sure to lock the door. He walked east until he was deep in the forest. He searched for and found an old fallen tree with straight branches. When he was satisfied, he broke off a branch that was about as long as he was tall. He went back to the cabin. Inside, he found a box cutter in the tool chest, and he used it to split the end of the branch. He forced the blunt end of the aluminum spear tip into the split.

Mike left the cabin, and he went over the bridge and down to the hay bales. Standing a ways from a bale, he grasped his newly made spear, and he threw it at the bale. When it hit the bale, the spear tip and wood broke apart and the aluminum tip bent.

It would take Mike several days and many trials to get an aluminum spear head that would not bend, and to discover how to fasten it to the wood so that it would not come apart. Eventually, after folding a layer of aluminum around two other pieces of aluminum, he had a spear that would penetrate the heavy bale. By using a file he was able to get a very sharp edge on the side of the spear tip. He weighted the spear by attaching fishing lead to fish line and wrapping it around the shaft, just under the spear head.

On his way back to the Admin's cabin, he met Jacob at the bridge. He was about to pass by when the other boy called his name. He looked at Jacob. Jacob was wearing his backpack, and it looked full. Jacob had black curly hair like Eric, but Jacob's eyes were hazel instead of black.

"I'm going down the road," said Jacob.

Mike looked at him blankly. "Where to?" he asked.

"As far as I can go," answered Jacob.

Mike was alarmed. "Hey, that might not be such a good idea," he responded.

"Well, I'm going," replied Jacob. Mike did not know much about Jacob, except that he always seemed to be off by himself. He

thought that Jacob was a year older than him.

"Are you going to be back before night?"

"If I find someone."

"What are you going to do if you have to stay overnight?"

"I've got my sleeping bag. It's down. I'll be warm."

"You got food?"

"Enough for three days."

Mike stared helplessly at Jacob. He did not know what to say. This was stuff for adults to consider. This was not stuff for a kid like him to be worried about.

Feeling defeated, Mike said, "Be careful, okay?"

"Okay," Jacob said, and then he walked away. But after a few steps, he stopped and turning back he said, "Hey, Mike. Thanks."

Mike waved. "See ya," he said more cheerfully than he felt.

Jacob turned and walked away. Mike watched him climb the hill, and when he disappeared down the other side, Mike went back to his cabin to work on his spear.

Mike practiced everyday with his spears. Eventually John and Eric joined him. Two other boys, Peter and Howard, expressed interest in what he was doing, and they also began to build spears. Between the five boys, they found a design that was sturdy and could easily pierce the bales. They practiced daily.

Late in the afternoon of the sixth day since he had left, Jacob returned. Jacob was hungry and exhausted. There was a bleak look in his eyes. As he approached the camp, he noticed five boys out by the bales. When he realized that Mike was one of them, he turned that way, and went stumbling down to the bales.

Mike had just thrown a spear, hitting the paper target that the boys had fastened to one of the bales, when he turned and saw Jacob. At once, he hurried over to the returning boy.

Jacob was so spent that he struggled to remove his backpack. Mike quickly grabbed it and took it from him.

"Are you okay," he asked anxiously.

"I'm just tired. And really thirsty," answered Jacob in a weary and raspy voice. "I need a drink of water real bad. I didn't drink anything since last night. And I never ate yesterday or today."

"Pete, run up to the hall and get some water and food, quick!" commanded Mike. Pete swiftly ran to the dining hall.

"Did you find anyone?" asked Howard eagerly.

"Howard, let him drink something first," said Mike. Howard

grimaced, but he nodded. Mike understood his impatience, but he had gotten more and more worried each day that Jacob had not returned. Now that Jacob was back, Mike was more relieved than anxious for news.

Pete was fast, and shortly Jacob was drinking a bottle of water and devouring some sandwiches. The others waited patiently while he regained his strength. Presently he finished eating, lay back on the grass, and sighed sounding very sleepy.

"Well?" asked John finally unable to keep quiet.

"I walked three days," began Jacob. "In the morning of the third day, I didn't eat any of my food because I wanted to conserve some. That afternoon I found it. The fog I mean. It was about four o'clock. I know because I checked my watch. I was about a half mile past the seven thousand feet sign. The elevation marker.

"The road started going down real fast. I saw fog ahead of me. It was real strange because it was level. I could see over it. It looked like the ocean, except that it was brown, and there were no waves. There was a deer standing next to the road close to the fog. I stopped to watch it. Then it walked into the edge of the fog. The fog was only by the ground there. Then it walked down farther into the fog so that its feet and part of its legs disappeared. Then I saw its head come up, and it tried to, like, jump out of the fog. It fell down with its head and shoulders out of the fog. I could see it was trying to struggle. It was making strange sounds. Then it stopped moving. I think it was dead. Then I saw the body of the deer moving backwards into the fog like something was dragging it. Then it was gone. That really scared me. I was, like, not breathing and my heart was pounding. I watched for another hour, and I saw a bird fly very low over the fog. Something came out of the fog and grabbed the bird, and it disappeared. It was so fast that I couldn't tell what had happened. I climbed a little hill next to the road, and I looked over to the other side. There was more fog. It's like we're on an island in an ocean.

"That's when I turned around and started back. I felt sick to my stomach, and I didn't eat anything that day, I only drank water. I tried to conserve my food and water on the way back, but then I ran out."

The faces of the other boys grew grimmer and grimmer as Jacob told his story. Mike felt the hairs on his arms stiffen. John was thinking about the Admin and the counselors who had left to find some help. Had they driven into the fog?

Mike drew a breath. "Well," he said slowly. "Now we know."
"We'll have to tell the others," said Howard.

Mike nodded. "Yes, but not today. The sun's going down.
We'll tell them in the morning."

"Why not tell them now," asked Eric.

"Better to get scared in the morning than at night," answered John. Mike nodded.

"You come with me," said Mike to Jacob. "The rest of you, well, just don't tell anyone, all right?" There was a chorus of agreement.

Mike and Jacob walked up to the Admin's cabin. As they were entering they heard a shout. Jacob was too tired to turn back, but Mike looked towards the shouter. It was Ralph, at seventeen, one of the oldest boys in the camp. Hurriedly, Mike shut and locked the door just as Ralph arrived at the cabin.

Mike told Jacob to lie down on the bed. Outside, Ralph was banging on the door and demanding to be let inside. Jacob pulled the bed covers over his head, and soon he fell asleep. Mike ignored Ralph. He decided to climb the ladder leading to the loft. Upstairs, he found two separate futons. He laid down on one and waited until Ralph gave up and went away.

Sometime after midnight, Jacob awoke and insisted on returning to his own bunk. Mike accepted his decision reluctantly. He hoped no one was awake in Jacob's cabin to try to get Jacob to talk. He thought it would be better for everyone to hear the story at the same time. He walked with Jacob to his cabin. It was a bright night. The moon was just past half full, and there were just a few thin wisps of clouds in the sky. Mike was unsettled, and he wondered if John, Pete, Howard and Eric were getting any sleep.

Mike's late night anxiety caused him to sleep later than usual the next morning. Shortly after he left the cabin, he realized that one of the boys had talked. He wasn't surprised. He hadn't expected that news of this sort could be kept quiet for long. As he made his way to the dining hall, he heard boys whispering about monsters and aliens.

There were a lot of boys in the dining hall, and Mike could see why. Jacob was there eating a bowl of cereal. Many boys were pressing close, trying to talk to him, but John, Pete, Howard, and Eric were fending them off.

"Tell us what happened," demanded a boy angrily.

"Shit!" exclaimed John. "At least let him finish eating his Cheerios!"

Mike walked past the clump of boys, and he stepped on to the platform at the back of the building. "Hey!" he said in a loud voice. Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at him.

"Jacob's going to tell everyone what he saw. Give him a few minutes. Some of you need to go down to the girls' camp, and tell them that we're having a meeting."

"Who died and made you Chief?" someone sneered. Mike looked to one side, and he saw that it was Ralph who had spoken.

"Do you think Jackie will come up here, if you tell her what's happening?" Mike asked Ralph.

Ralph shut up. Everyone knew that he liked Jackie. He hesitated, and then he stood and left the room. Mike truly hoped that Ralph could get Jackie to come and listen to Jacob's tale. Jackie was the only person available who was close to being an adult.

Jacob finished eating and took his bowl and spoon to the kitchen window. Mike noticed that no one had done the dishes for days. While they waited, a few of the girls began to trickle in, and soon there was a crowd of them entering. Mike did not see Ralph or Jackie. Jacob stepped up next to Mike, and then Mike stepped to one side.

"Hey!" Mike called out. The teens stopped talking.

Mike continued. "Everyone come close so that you can hear him." The boys and girls crowded up against the podium.

Jacob told his story in a plain flat tone of voice. By the time he finished some of the kids were weeping, some were just sniffing. Mike looked down at his feet. He thought that he felt worse than when he had heard Jacobs story the first time, just from hearing all the crying. He felt like crying himself.

"Bullshit!" someone yelled. Mike looked up. It was Ralph. The older boy sounded as if he were about to panic.

"You're so full of crap! You never went there. You never saw anything. You're just making this up, you and Chief there."

Jacob stared at him. Then he said, "So go see for yourself. Go stand in the fog if you don't believe me."

Ralph looked angry and frustrated. "Screw you," he snarled, and then he left. Mike still saw no sign of Jackie.

"Are you telling the truth, Jacob?" asked a girl quietly. Mike realized that she was the girl that he had seen running around the dirt track. He had learned that her name was Yuie. She was Asian-American. She had black hair, large dark eyes and a fair complexion.

"Yeah, it's true. But I don't know what the fog is or where it came from," he answered.

"It must be aliens," said a boy.

"Oh, right," sneered another boy. "And NASA or nobody else saw it coming."

"Maybe it's something the Russians invented."

"Or the Chinese."

"Or Al-Qaeda."

"What ever it is," said Yuie. "There are monsters in it. Real monsters." At that, everyone fell silent except the few kids who were still crying.

"What ever it is," said Mike. "We have to decide what to do. We don't know if anyone but us survived the fog. We don't know if anyone is coming to rescue us. If they are coming, we don't know how long it will take them to find us. We can drink water from the river, but what if we run out of food? What if we are still here when winter comes? It's going to freeze. It's going to snow. What are we going to do?" For minutes there was no response.

"We can cut back on the stuff that we are eating," began a girl slowly.

"Yeah, we've been pigging it lately," said another.

"But how can we stop anyone from just getting food for themselves?" said a girl. The girls looked at Mike.

Mike had been thinking that same thing. "We might have to put a guard on the food," he suggested.

"A guard," someone repeated. There was silence.

"I've got to roll up my bag," someone said. Slowly the teenagers drifted away. Mike felt frustrated. He felt like almost no one wanted to tackle this dangerous situation that they were facing.

After a while, the only ones still in the dining hall were Mike's group of boys and Yuie. They decided to make a list of the problems that they would have to solve.

"First on the list is the food," said Mike. "We have to ration the food. We have to figure a way how to get more food."

"We could hunt game," suggested Yuie.

"Do you know how to hunt?" asked Pete. "If you catch something, do you know how to cook it?"

"Not really," admitted Yuie. "I can shoot a handgun or a rifle," but I've never hunted."

"There's forty-nine of us counting Jackie," said Mike. "Ask

around. Someone must know something about hunting or about cooking animals."

"I do," said Jacob. They looked at him surprised. "I hunt deer and birds with my Dad. I know how to cut the patches off and how to gut them and how to skin them. If we can kill a deer or a bird, I can get it ready to be cooked."

"All of us are probably good at something," said John. "We should make a list of what we know."

"And we should ask everyone else, and make a list of what they know, too," suggested Howard enthusiastically.

"I'm great at video games," laughed Pete. They all chuckled. Pete was popular, especially with the girls, but also with the boys. The handsome, blond, blue-eyed boy had a great personality, and he always made the people around him feel better.

"Could we live in here during the winter?" asked Eric. They looked around, seeing the dining hall for the first time as a possible shelter.

"It's pretty small for forty-nine people," said Howard. He scratched his short red hair.

"And it's got a metal roof," added Mike. "It's going to get real cold in here, I think."

"But we have the oven and stove to keep us warm," argued Eric. "And we have propane in the tank."

"I wonder how much propane is in the tank," said Howard. "How long it will last?"

Yuie knew the answer. "I heard the Admin say that she would have to order a refill at the end of next year."

"And they weren't planning to use it during the winter," Mike pointed out.

"So they were planning to use it for two seasons of camping," said Howard.

"How cold will it get here?" asked Eric.

"Below zero degrees, my father said," answered Howard.

"Will our sleeping bags keep us warm enough?" asked Mike.

"Some of the kids have mummy bags for below zero temperatures," answered Yuie. "Most of us have bags for about twenty degrees. If we are stuck here, we are going to need a lot of wood to make fires."

"I think we need to save the propane for as long as possible, and use it to run the frig," said Mike. "We probably won't need it for

the frig during the winter. Stuff will stay cold enough if we cover it with snow."

"So we stop using the oven and stove?" asked Yuie. "People aren't going to like that."

"Well, we gotta have some rules if we're going to stay alive," stated Howard. There was silence.

"Yeah," Deep in thought Mike replied slowly. "That's the hard thing. We've got to have some rules. And we've got to have some way to enforce the rules."

"There's a barbeque in the back," said Pete. "We could at least start cooking with wood."

"No one is using the stove now, anyway," said Eric. "I think most everybody is eating out of cans without heating it up."

"How much food do we have?" Mike queried Yuie.

"I don't know," she replied.

"We have a lot of hamburger patties," said John. "And there are a lot of hot dogs and buns."

"We have milk for awhile. It's frozen concentrated so we have to mix it with water. And they were cutting it with powdered milk so we have a lot of that," said Howard.

"Yuck, so that's why the milk tastes so weird," complained Pete.

"There are a lot of bags of rice and flour," said Pete. "Most of the other stuff is in cans, like beans, fruit, and corn."

"Don't forget the weenies," said Eric.

"We'd never forget you," joked John as Eric scowled.

"Let's disconnect the stove for the time being. And keep it to ourselves," said Mike. "And let's get the barbeque out of the storage room and build a fire in it. If we keep it going, maybe people will get use to using it." They all agreed. John volunteered to disconnect the stove.

"Too bad the cave only has that one part that's really a cave," said John. "That would be way big for us." There was a chorus of agreement.

"What if we made it into a real cave?" said Mike thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" asked Eric.

"What if somehow, someway, we put a front on it?" asked Mike. "We could all live in it for the winter."

"Just get a couple of girls to live with you in the Admin's cabin," cracked Pete. "You'll be warm and happy all winter."

Yuie exclaimed, "Shut up!" without any anger as the boys

laughed.

"Seriously, what about the cave idea?" asked Mike again.

"What could we use for a front?" asked Eric.

"What about taking the canvas tops off of the cabins and use them?" suggested Pete.

"Too cold," replied Yuie.

"Could we pile up enough rocks?" asked Howard.

"Maybe," replied John.

"We could use logs," suggested Mike. "There are hatchets and axes for chopping wood in the store room. What if we cut down a lot of small trees, and leaned them against the top of the cave?"

"I don't know if small trees would be tall enough to reach to the top of the cave," replied Eric dubiously.

"What if we used a combination of these things," suggested Howard. "What if we piled up rocks high enough so that small trees would reach to the top of the cave?"

"Too bad they didn't build the cabins in front of the cave," said John facetiously. "Then we would already have a front." The others stopped talking, and they looked at John. Then they looked at one another.

"We could move the cabins!" exclaimed Howard.

Chapter Two

Chief

"We could move the cabins!" exclaimed Howard again.

"Yeah, maybe even stack them. Put five on the bottom and five on the top."

"And then use trees to make the roof. Lean them from the front of the cabins to the top of the cave."

"That should be close enough so that we could even chop some of the longer trees in half."

"We would probably have to build a rock or wood floor first," cautioned Howard. "So that we could get the bottoms of the cabins level with the floor of the cave."

"Are you guys crazy!" groaned John. "How are we ever going to move those cabins? Man, they are heavy."

"They're bolted together," explained Howard. "Take off the canvas tops. Unbolt the walls, and move them."

"And maybe we could use the wood on the wall facing the cave to cover the rest of the wall on the side away from the cave."

"We'll call it, The Lodge," announced Yuie. The boys looked at her.

"Do we have to give it a name," asked Pete grimacing.

"Yes," she replied. That's how it became The Lodge.

John disconnected the stove by turning off the gas valve feeding it, and then he removed a piece of pipe leading from the valve to the stove. They found the barbeque, and they moved it to the front of the dining hall just outside the door. Then they trooped up to the cave to take a look.

"This is going to be a lot of work," said Pete sadly.

"How about moving the cabins onto the ledge?" asked Howard.

"That would take up too much room in the cave," replied John.

"But we could set the back ends of the cabins on the ledge," suggested Mike. "That way we would only have to build a rock wall for the front side of the cabins."

"The ledge is not wide enough for all five cabins. We'll need to extend the sides," said Yuie.

The real problem, they soon realized, was to convince the rest of the campers, or at least enough of them, to help them. They

decided to hold a meeting, that night, to explain their plan to the rest of the campers.

The meeting did not go well. Except for Yuie and an older girl who Yuie introduced as Desi, no girls attended the meeting. Some of the boys stoutly maintained that their parents would come for them soon. Others understood the plan, and they could see the need to prepare for the winter, but they declined to help. Ralph, who showed up for a few minutes, jeered at their group.

But a few boys did take them seriously. After most of the boys wandered off, usually to their beds, the group discussed their ideas. There were various opinions on how to proceed.

Eventually Mike said, "What we have to do first is to decide what would be the best thing that we could do to help us survive the winter."

Immediately Yuie responded, "Get into shape."

"What do you mean," asked Mike clearly puzzled.

"Just that. Weak people are not likely to survive, and they will not be able to help anyone else. Get into shape. All of you should run with me in the mornings. By the time winter comes, you will be healthy enough to survive the cold, and strong enough to build our shelter." She said it defiantly expecting scorn from the boys. They looked at one another.

"That's not a bad idea," said Mike slowly. "We could run a few laps around the track, and then we could practice throwing our spears." The meeting broke up, and John volunteered to escort Yuie and Desi back to their side of the river.

Yuie tried to explain the seriousness of their situation to the other girls, but her arguments fell on deaf ears. Except for Desi, the other girls refused to believe that the campers were in trouble. Most of them thought that Jacob had concocted the story of the fog.

"Why won't they listen?" exclaimed a frustrated Yuie.

"They're frightened," responded Desi.

Yuie looked at Desi. Up to now, she and most of the girls had the impression that Desi was somewhat of a bimbo. She always seemed to be flirting with one of the boys. She didn't have the nicest body and she wasn't the prettiest girl in the camp but for some reason the boys loved to be around her. Usually with their tongues hanging out, thought Yuie.

"You think things are bad for us, don't you Desi?" asked Yuie.

Desi looked solemn. "I think we are going to die if someone

doesn't take charge, or if we don't get help."

Yuie went to bed hoping that Desi was exaggerating.

In the following days the boys started running with Yuie. Instead of sleeping in like most of the campers, they forced themselves to get out of their bunk beds early in the morning. They had breakfast, and then they ran around the track. At first they huffed and puffed, and they had to drag themselves around the meadow. Mike refused to let the stronger boys greatly outpace the weaker boys. He said that it would be more fun to run as a group. By mid June, they could all run several laps before they got too tired.

After running, they spent an hour or so practicing with the spears. Some of the other boys joined them. Others laughed at them. Privately some of the group thought that Mike was just playing warrior, but they had to admit that it was a lot of fun. Mike established three levels, white, red, and black depending on ones skills. He asked the girls for ribbons and cloth that the boys could use as pennants for their spears. Some of the girls began to watch their practices and cheer for the best throws, especially if the thrower was Pete.

The boys began to carry their spears everywhere they went. Mike spent hours practicing, and he became especially proficient in throwing and hitting a target. Yuie decided not to be a part of the Spears, saying that she didn't have the arm strength for it, and besides if she was around, they couldn't make naughty jokes about girls. Publicly they were disappointed, but privately they were relieved. Yuie was already proficient with her bow and arrows.

Yuie convinced some of the girls to help her use the barbeque to heat up the canned food, now that the stove had mysteriously quit working. Other girls got exasperated at the mess in the kitchen, and it was swept and mopped. The dishes were done and everyone had clean plates and glasses again.

The group held a meeting every night. Mike always seemed to lead the meetings, and the others seemed content to let him. Gradually, most of the boys started attending their meetings, but except for Yuie and Desi, the few girls who attended did so sporadically. Ralph would usually show up for a few minutes at the beginning to make fun of them. He called them, the Tribe, and he called Mike, the Chief. Ralph's attitude had gotten worse since Jacob's return. Mike was sure that, sooner or later, Ralph would cause him real trouble.

It happened one morning while they were throwing their spears at the bales. Mike noticed Ralph coming towards them in a rage. Mike felt a pang of fear. He really did not want to be punched by the older boy, and whenever he was around Ralph, he thought that it was a possibility. To Mike, Ralph seemed to exude an aura of violence.

"Hey, Chief Shithead, where's the part that you took off the stove?"

"I didn't do it," protested Mike, and then he immediately felt ashamed. It was his idea. He should have taken responsibility. "But I'm the one who told someone to do it. We have to save the propane," he offered bravely, although his heart was thumping.

Ralph grabbed Mike by the front of his shirt. "Who did it?" he demanded.

John quickly shoved Ralph away from Mike. "I did it, dickhead," he yelled.

Ralph pushed John backwards and then, as John tittered off balance, he slugged John in the face. John reeled backwards. Suddenly Mike's fear exploded into rage. Using the haft of his spear, he savagely struck the backs of Ralph's legs. The taller boy cried out in pain, and he fell to his knees. Mike raised his spear, but before he could strike again, Jacob slammed his own spear against the back of Ralph's head. A thin line of blood appeared. As if it were a signal, the other boys began striking the kneeling boy again and again with their spears.

Ralph screamed in surprise and pain, and then he struggled to his feet while trying to fend off the painful blows. He stumbled away, and then he began to run. For an instant, Mike started after him, and then a premonition caused him to halt. He turned around, held out his arms, and commanded, "Stop!"

He was just in time. Jacob had his spear cocked back by his ear, and he was about to send it into the fleeing boy's body. His hazel eyes were angry.

Mike smiled at Jacob, and then Mike walked back to Jacob and clapped him on the shoulder. "We're cool," was all he said.

Mike looked at the other boys. Some were still angry; some seemed troubled and startled at the sudden surge of violence. Mike looked at John who was using his sleeve to stanch the blood from his mouth.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. He got lucky." There were chuckles from the

others, more from relief than from humor.

"Right," answered Mike. "All right, back to practice. Who's up next?" The boys returned to their task.

Ralph did not bother them again. A few days later, he unexpectedly crossed paths with Mike when the younger boy was alone. They stared at one another for a moment. Mike looked him right in the eyes, not backing down. After a moment, Ralph turned away.

To the younger boys, Ralph had always been somewhat of a bully, and word of what happened quickly spread. One result, that Mike found rather annoying, became apparent the day following the incident with Ralph. Nathan and Kevin, who were brown haired twins, and who were also a couple of the youngest boys, came running up to him calling, "Hey, Chief!"

When Mike looked over at them, they asked, "Chief, we want to go up the river to look for spear shafts."

"So go," he answered, puzzled as to why they were asking him.

They looked at one another, and then Mike realized that they were embarrassed. "Well, we don't know what kinds of things might be in the woods," one began.

"Can you send some of the Spears with us?" pleaded the other.

So Mike asked Pete and Eric to accompany the two smaller boys. After that, he noticed that most of the boys and some of the girls took to calling him, Chief.

When he complained good naturedly to John, the other boy took the situation much more seriously. "Mike, it's good that they're calling you, Chief," said John.

"Why?" Mike asked mystified.

"Because we need someone to be in charge," John answered. "We have to get ready so that we can survive this winter. To get ready, to have rules that get enforced, we have to have a leader. You're the leader, Mike. I know it's kind of crazy. You're one of the youngest kids here. But so far, you are the only one that's shown any kind of leadership."

"But, Jackie..."

John cut him off. "Jackie's sick, Mike. You know that. You're the leader, Mike. It's good that the kids are calling you, Chief. Accept it. Use it so we can get on with more important things."

Mike felt that this was dubious logic, but he didn't argue. There were more important things to consider. One thing was the food

situation. The Spears began guarding the food, and they rationed the amount that people could eat. There was some grumbling, especially from the girls, but most of them recognized that they had to conserve even if it was just until someone came for them.

Every night they held a meeting to discuss the day's progress. Some of the boys wanted to join the Spears. Mike told them that they could practice with the Spears, and if they got good enough, they could join. Most of them just wanted to carry a spear. Few of them actually practiced enough to be allowed to become one of the Spears.

Mike's core group was John, Howard, Eric, Jacob, Pete, and two other boys that quickly became proficient with a spear, Ahmed and Rasul. Every night, two of them would guard the food supply. One person would guard from midnight until four in the morning. The other would guard from four until eight. Soon, Mike realized that there were not enough people to keep up this schedule. So he recruited others, who were not officially part of the Spears, to help. In this way, he was able to ensure that the guards would have this duty only one night a week. Yuie was the only girl who was willing to be a guard.

Yuie always came to the nightly meetings. Sometimes Desi came with her. At first, John had escorted them back to their side of the river after the meetings, but Yuie put a stop to that. She and Desi liked to discuss what they had heard in the meetings privately.

Yuie was not surprised that Desi took such an interest in the meetings. She no longer thought of Desi as a bimbo. When she talked with Desi, she realized that the girl had a clear idea about one thing, and that was the need for someone to take charge. Desi realized that they were in a lot more danger than anyone else understood, except for Mike.

Desi had her own ideas about how to survive in this new world. One night, after the meeting had ended, Yuie was about to leave and she called for Desi.

"I'll come down later," said Desi, and she gave Yuie a significant smile.

Yuie looked troubled, but she nodded and left. As Yuie left, Mike, John and Desi were standing outside under a cloudy sky. It was the twentieth of June and the days were warmer although the nights were still chilly.

Mike and John were use to spending a few minutes each night

chatting together before John went to his bunk, and Mike retired to his cabin. The presence of Desi seemed unusual but not terribly awkward. Each thought that she would soon head down to the girls' area.

"Can I see the Admin's cabin, Mike?" asked Desi.

"Uh, all right," replied Mike who had not anticipated this request but saw no harm in it.

John looked at Desi. Then he looked at Mike. He frowned. "I'm going to sleep now, Mike," he said quietly. "See you in the morning." He stole one last glance at Desi.

"Night," replied Mike. John left. Mike and Desi walked up to the A-frame. Mike opened the door, and they went inside.

"Wow, this is nice," she exclaimed. "I guess this is your place now. Yuie calls it, Chief's Headquarters"

Mike laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's a good name for it," he answered.

Desi sat down on the bed. "Mmmm..., this is soft." She lay back on the bed, and then she clasped her hands behind her head and she smiled up at Mike with her soft brown eyes. Mike thought that the room suddenly seemed much warmer.

"Would it be okay if I stayed here tonight, Mike?" she asked in a voice that was soft and sultry.

Mike gulped. "Yeah...sure...okay," he replied with a squeak.

The next morning Mike left the cabin while Desi was still sleeping. He felt older and more experienced, and he felt great. He found John in the dining hall.

"Morning," he said to John. John looked at him, then he looked past him for a second, and then he looked back down at his cereal and grunted.

"It's a really good morning. I feel very very good, if you know what I mean," said Mike happily and a little slyly.

"Well, I'm so happy for you!" snarled John. He got up and stalked out of the room. Mike stared after him mystified.

"You idiot!"

Mike turned to see Yuie staring angrily at him.

"What's your problem?" he asked, annoyed at her. First John and now Yuie was acting weird this morning.

"You dummy! He likes Desi. Didn't you know?" demanded Yuie.

Mike was thunderstruck. "Oh, shit," he said.

But now that Yuie had clued him in, he realized that he should have known. John was always mentioning Desi to him. Mike realized that he was not the swiftest boy when it came to girl-boy relationships. But he should have seen this.

John avoided Mike the rest of the day, and Mike avoided Desi. Both John and Desi were at the meeting that night. After the meeting, before John could leave, Mike asked John to accompany him to his cabin for a private talk. Desi came with them.

In the cabin, Mike showed John the radio phone, and he told John that the battery was dead. He asked if John knew any way to recharge it. John answered in the negative. Mike tried a few other subjects. He didn't quite know how to proceed.

Suddenly he blurted, "Why don't you sleep here tonight, John? I miss my bunk. I think I'll sleep in my bunk. Desi won't mind sharing the cabin, will you Desi?"

Mike looked hopefully at Desi. She and John were clearly startled. Desi gave Mike a surprised frown, and then she looked at John. The boys held their breath.

Then she sighed and said calmly with a small rueful smile, "No, I won't mind sharing with John." Mike quickly left the cabin while breathing a sigh of relief.

Dumbfounded, John stared at the door for a moment and then he turned to look at Desi. Outwardly, she seemed calm. Oh, oh, he thought to himself. She is royally pissed.

"Uh, sorry about this, Desi," he said sheepishly. "You know, Mike's still just a kid. He...I guess..."

"So you guys didn't plan this?" she asked stonily.

"No!" John exclaimed. "I swear I didn't know that he was going to do this."

Desi was silent for a moment, and then she said, "Some of the guys say stuff about me."

"I don't," responded John. "At least, I don't say that kind of stuff."

"So you don't have a line you would like to tell me? Like, maybe, what's your sign?"

It was John's turn to be silent for a moment and then he said, "Yeah, I do have a line."

"So let's hear it," she replied indifferently.

John smiled at her. "I like you, Desi. I really like you and I would like to spend some time with you. But not like this. If you

want, I'll walk you to your cabin."

Desi stared at him for a while and then she looked down. She pondered his words.

"Well," she began slowly. "I really like this mattress. It's a lot more comfortable than mine. I guess we could share it." She looked up at John. "But just to sleep on," she warned.

"Okay," he answered quickly.

The next day, John was much friendlier to Mike. He and Desi shared Mike's cabin for four days. By that time they were publicly holding hands and stealing an occasional public kiss. The fifth night, Mike kicked them out of his cabin. He thought that he had sacrificed enough.

"You guys take the counselor's cabin," he said. So John and Desi moved into the vacant counselor's cabin.

Sometime later, Yuie cautiously asked Desi about the incident.

"I thought that Mike needed someone to talk to," Desi explained. "And I thought he that he needed a girlfriend to help him relax at night. I thought that it would be good for all of us. I didn't know that his best friend liked me. At first, I was kind of pissed that Mike wanted me to be with John. But Mike is too immature for me, right now. And I like John."

While John and Desi were sharing Mike's cabin, Jackie finally made an appearance. Mike found her, one morning, having breakfast in the dining hall. Mike was very glad to see Jackie. Even though she was not much of an adult, she was, officially at least, still in charge. But as he looked around, he realized that the other kids, especially the girls, did not seem so happy to see Jackie up and about. Cautiously, he sat down across from the young woman.

"Hey, Jackie," he greeted her. She looked up at him from her breakfast.

"Hey, yourself," she replied looking back down at her breakfast. "I hear you've taken over the Admin's cabin."

"Uh, well..." Mike sputtered.

Jackie shrugged. "It's okay. It's just another reason why we have been dumped."

"What do you mean," asked Mike.

"Don't you see? We've been abandoned. We caused our parents grief, and so they abandoned us."

"Huh?" asked Mike, really confused now.

A girl standing nearby asked timidly, "What about the fog?"

Jackie shrugged again. "That's just their way of making sure that we can't get out of the mountains and bother them again."

"My parents wouldn't abandon me," the girl protested. "They love me!"

Jackie looked at her with pity. "Sure they do. Then why did they abandon you? Probably, they blame you for their divorce. And now they're gone."

The girl was clearly shocked. "My parents aren't divorced!" she said angrily. Mike looked at her, and he gave a shake of his head, unnoticed by Jackie.

"Where do you think our parents have gone?" he asked the counselor.

Jackie thought for a moment. "Probably to heaven," she said.

Other kids had gathered around. They looked at one another. Some were shocked, some were bemused, and some were just sad. Clearly, Jackie had become mentally disturbed. Seeing no point in staying, Mike left. He felt more alone and more scared than ever. Secretly, he had always hoped that Jackie would collect herself and reestablish order. Now he realized that Jackie was barely able to take care of herself.

Still, Mike was determined to survive. He started requiring the kids who wanted to join the Spears to run several laps around the track before practice. He explained the winter situation to the kids at a night meeting, and he got them to agree to gather rocks to build the wall in front of the cave so that they could move the cabins. He asked Jacob to try to make snares to capture birds. Mike thought that they could eat the birds, and possibly get them to lay eggs. He did a dozen other things to try to prepare for the winter. And he made the Spears practice, practice, practice.

One day it came to him that of all the boys, the girls seemed to trust Ralph the most. He did not understand this until he realized that it was because Ralph was always trying to help Jackie to recover. Ralph liked Jackie, the way that John liked Desi. He thought about that, and then he acted. One morning, as Ralph was leaving the dining hall, he was surrounded by the Spears.

"What's up, Chief?" Ralph grunted. He didn't like Mike, and Mike didn't like him, but they had reached a sort of truce at least.

"Come with us, Ralph," ordered Mike.

"Why should I?" demanded Ralph truculently.

"Because if you don't, I'll hurt you," answered Mike coldly.

"You mean that you'll have your gang hurt me, don't you," replied Ralph angrily. "You're too chicken to do it yourself."

"Let's go," said Mike ignoring his taunt.

Ralph was furious, but he knew that he had no choice except to obey Mike. Most of the kids now accepted Mike as their boss, and even the ones that didn't, knew that the Spears would back him. Seething and surrounded by the Spears, he followed Mike down to the practice field. There, Mike handed him a spear and then pointed at a target on a hay bale.

"Throw," Mike said. Ralph gave the spear a half hearted toss that barely reached the bottom of the bale.

Mike handed him another spear. "Listen to me, Ralph," he said very seriously. "You're going to practice with us an hour a day, every day, until you can beat me in ten throws."

Ralph was astounded. "You can't make me do that!" he exclaimed.

"I can't make you get better," Mike answered grimly. "But I can make you come down here with us. Better get use to it. And if you want to stop practicing with us, you better be able to beat me. Now throw."

At first, Ralph tried to sabotage the practice. Then he tried to avoid the Spears. But he found that if he wanted to eat, he had to come to the dining hall, and when he did they would find him. Finally, he started practicing for real, determined to best Mike and be left in peace. He started practicing more than the others, spending long hours throwing the spears. Mike also practiced more than the others, and sometimes in the afternoon it would be just the two of them, grimly throwing the spears again and again.

One afternoon, two weeks after he began practicing for real, he and Mike were throwing the spears. The boys were matching each other target for target when Mike missed on the seventh throw. Ralph could barely contain his elation. He took aim, and he threw a bull's eye. Then Mike hit the eighth target. Carefully Ralph threw and hit the target. Then they each hit the ninth target. Ralph knew that if he hit the last target he would win regardless of what Mike did. Mike drew back, and then he threw at the tenth target. It missed. Ralph could barely contain himself. He had won. Confidently, he tossed his last spear. It was another bull's eye.

"Good enough for you, Chief," he demanded with a smirk.

"Good throw, Ralph," responded Mike.

"So, can I go now and not come back?" asked Ralph sarcastically.

"Yes, but one thing, Ralph," said Mike.

"What's that?" asked Ralph suspiciously.

"Keep your spear. Keep it with you always, especially when you're down in the girl's camp." Ralph gave a noncommittal shrug and walked away.

Ralph was annoyed that he had to keep the spear with him. But he obeyed Mike's command. He kept the spear, and sometimes when the other boys were not around, he snuck down to the practice field by himself. All of the boys became good at throwing spears. In early July, the teenagers discovered that this skill would save their lives.

It happened one morning. Later, someone said that it was about half past ten. The air was crisp, and the sky was slightly overcast. The faces of the blue bell flowers were wilting in the meadow. The Spears were down by the practice field. Some of the girls were in the meadow, some were hanging around their cabins, and some were over on the boy's side of the river.

The sound of a motorcycle was heard and then the sound of more than one. There were four of them, all large black bikes, and they came roaring over the hill on the gravel road leading to the camp. The men on the bikes seemed huge after all of the time that the kids had spent together without adults around. The man on the lead bike was bearded, but he was not wearing a helmet so that they could see his face which they would remember later.

Just over the hill he paused, looking around, and then he motored down toward the girls' cabins. Jackie, hearing the noise, was struck by a sudden surge of hope, and she came rushing out of her cabin. She ran toward the cyclist hailing him loudly. He rode over to her. She was trying to hug him, when he took a pistol from his right pocket and slammed it against her head. Blood spurted from the side of her head, and she slumped to the ground. There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the girls closest to the violence began screaming. Ignoring them, the man reached down and hefted Jackie's barely conscious form onto the cycle. He maneuvered her leg over the barrel of his ride, so that she was sitting in front of him.

At that moment Pete, who had not been down at the practice field with the other Spears, came running towards them screaming at the man to let Jackie go. The man raised his pistol, and he shot Pete

in the face, killing the boy instantly. Then he turned his cycle, gunned it, and quickly disappeared over the hill.

While this was happening, another of the cyclists had slowly cruised through the frightened crowd of girls who had gathered. He picked out a girl named Maria, and he gunned his bike toward her. She fled. When the man caught her, he grabbed her around the neck, and then he punched Maria in the face. He maneuvered the stunned and crying girl onto his bike, and he too quickly left the scene.

The third and fourth bikers were also scanning the crowd of terrified girls. The third biker picked out a girl, and then he began to chase her; but not to catch her so much as to tease and to taunt her. And that was when Mike finally arrived on the stage.

He had heard the screams, and he had shouted for the others to follow. There was a moment when they stood and gawked before hurrying after Mike. And so it happened, that the others were a few seconds behind Mike when he arrived at the cabins and saw the third biker chasing the terrified girl. Mike stopped, planted his feet, and threw his spear.

It was at that moment that the legend of Mike's Throw began. In later times, people on either side of the river that day, claimed to have seen him throw. But the truth is, that there were only a few kids who actually saw the man on the moving bike, the spear flying through the air, and the way it sliced perfectly through the biker's neck and severed his jugular vein.

The man gasped once, and he grasped his neck with both hands. His motorcycle traveled on for several yards until it hit a large rock and flipped over, causing the man to hit the ground hard and break his neck. But by the time the man hit the ground, he was already dead.

The fourth biker, seeing his fellow fall, cursed loudly, and he raised yet another pistol. But Ralph, who had come running down from the boy's camp, threw his spear wildly, and it struck the man in his aiming arm. The man cried out and the gun flew away. Without trying to retrieve his weapon, the brutal coward turned his motorcycle, and fled over the hill.

"They took Jackie, Ralph," a girl sobbed. "They took her."

"What do you mean? Where's Jackie," demanded Ralph.

"They took her," cried a girl. In a shaky voice, through her tears, she told Ralph what had happened. Ralph let out an

anguished yell. He turned to Mike.

"They got Jackie, Chief! They got Jackie!" cried Ralph wide eyed. "Please, Chief, please help me go and get her back!"

"I will, Ralph, I will," replied a shaken Mike. He turned to the other Spears. "We're going to chase those guys. We're going to get the girls back. Get some water and some granola bars. All of the granola bars."

He turned to Howard. "You're staying here. That's final," he ordered roughly as Howard was about to protest. "Get everyone across the river. Do what ever you have to do to make them go. Then get a lot of wood, and put it on the bridge. Get ready with the camp fuel, but don't put it on the wood unless they come back. If they do, then put all the camp fuel on the wood and light it. Try to burn the bridge down."

"Chief, how will you find them?" protested Howard.

"There's fog all around us," replied Mike. "They can't be far."

At that time, Mike did not realize just how large an area was above the fog, but in any case he was determine to follow the kidnappers.

He looked around, and then he spied the fallen pistol. He ran to it, grabbed the pistol, and shouted, "Anyone know how to use one of these?"

A few kids did. Mike gave it to one of the older boys, and he said to the boy, "Stay by the bridge. If they come back, try to keep them away until the bridge is burning good."

Yuie was there. "I'm coming too, Chief," she informed him, and when he would have demurred she whispered softly, "When you get Jackie and Maria back, I think that they might need a girl to help them, not a guy."

Within minutes, the supplies were gathered and stuffed into their backpacks. All the spears that they could carry in a hurry were lashed together. Yuie had her bow and arrows. Desi and John grabbed a last frantic tearful kiss as she begged him to be careful. And then they began jogging up the road, and soon they were lost to sight over the rise.

Meanwhile, Howard turned to the others. "All right, you heard Mike. Everybody go over the bridge to the other side. Right now!"

A few moved halfheartedly but one girl looked defiant. "I'm not leaving the girls camp," she stated.

Howard looked at her helplessly. Then out of the corner of his

eye he saw Pete's body. He had to take care of Pete as soon as possible. But first, he had to protect the other kids.

He raised the wood haft of his spear. "All of you," he said grimly. "Get over the bridge."

The girl looked alarmed, and she backed up a step, and then she stopped. "You're not the boss of us!" she shouted.

"You idiot," he's trying to protect you," exclaimed Desi.

Without another word, Howard stepped forward, and he swung his spear striking the girl a light blow on her shoulder.

"Ow..," she cried, and she stared at Howard in shock. Howard raised his spear again. Breaking into sobs, the girl turned and fled towards the bridge. Another girl balked, and she was given the same treatment on her buttocks by another boy. She, too, fled towards the bridge, and then the whole flock of girls turned and ran, crying and squealing over the bridge, closely followed by the boys.

Howard went into Jackie's cabin, and he took one of her green blankets. He laid it on the ground next to Pete. Gently, with help from others, he lifted Pete's body onto the blanket. They wrapped the blanket around the boy's body, and they carried it to the other side of the river. Already boys and girls were gathering brush and wood to pile on the bridge. Pete's body was laid on the north side of the dining hall out of the sun. Before the pile on the bridge was too bulky, Howard sent some boys to drag the damaged motorcycle over to their side of the river.

"Maybe we should let the girls get their stuff, too" suggested Kevin doubtfully. Howard thought about it. It might make the girls feel better.

"We'll pile the wood on the bridge first, but we'll leave a space for one person to get by. Then, one by one, we'll let them go back and get their stuff," he decided. So that's what they did, although it took them two hours for all of the girl's equipment to be hauled over to the boy's side.

With the help of several boys and girls, the motorcycle was turned upside down, and the gasoline was drained into a five gallon bucket. They placed the bucket next to the bridge, ready to be poured onto the pile of wood. Howard thought that the gasoline would catch fire much faster than the camp fuel.

"What about that guy?" asked one of the boys as he pointed to the dead body of the motorcyclist.

"Leave him for now," answered Howard.

Then they waited. It was a long fear filled day. They waited to see what would happen. Sometimes, some of them imagined that they heard the faint sound of a motorcycle. Noon passed, and still nothing happened. Then the afternoon passed. No one felt like eating, but Howard insisted, and he ordered some kids to make and to pass around tuna sandwiches. Night came. Howard ordered the boys to stack the tables and the chairs in the dining hall so that the boys could sleep in there. He sent the girls to bed in the boys' cabins. No one got much sleep that night. Everyone was nervous and frightened. Where was Mike, they wondered?

Chapter Three

The Hanging Tree

Mike had not led his troop far along the road when he remembered Pete. Cursing himself savagely, he hoped that Howard would take care of Pete's body. Briefly, he wondered if this chase was futile or maybe even crazy. But he was determined to find the girls and rescue them.

Now the time that they had spent running with Yuie came as a great help to them. They were all in good condition except for Ralph, and his fear and anger kept his adrenaline flowing. They jogged as long as they could, and then they walked, and then they jogged again. At noontime, they stopped for a fifteen minute rest. Ralph needed it by then. After their rest they walked awhile, and then they broke into a jog again.

Alternating, walking and jogging, they moved forward until the sun went down. There were a few clouds that night, but the moon was three quarters full and it was bright. They could easily see the road although it slowed them somewhat.

Two hours after sunset, they came to a side road leading up the mountain. Although the main road continued on, they turned on to this road because they could hear music coming from somewhere farther along it. The road was neither paved nor graveled. It was simply a dirt road, although it was well packed, and it seemed to be well traveled.

It was harder going uphill, but before a half hour had passed, they heard the rough voices and drunken laughter of men off to one side. The voices came from a clearing amidst a grove of white fir trees. Cautiously they crept closer until they could see the campfire of the men. Then Mike sent Jacob on ahead to scout the area, and to see if the two girls were there.

Soon Jacob returned. "Did you see them?" asked Yuie anxiously. "Did you see Jackie and Maria?"

Jacob glanced furtively at Yuie and Ralph, and then he whispered to Mike, "It's them. One guy has a rifle, and he's sitting down and watching. Another guy is standing and drinking a beer and watching the third guy. The third guy is on the ground ... busy."

Ralph made a sound, and Mike grabbed his shoulder. "We can't lose it, man," he whispered. "We have to keep ourselves

together, so we can help them." Ralph nodded, although his breathing was ragged. Mike turned to Yuie.

"Do you think you can shoot the guy with the rifle?" he asked.

Yuie was trying to control her shaking. "Yes, yes, I can do it," she whispered as her teeth were chattering.

"Okay, listen," he said to them. "We're going to move close to them on this side. Yuie is going to shoot first. She's going to hit the guy with the rifle. Ralph, as soon as she shoots, you and I will spear the same guy. The rest of you will spear the guy standing. Then we will all grab a second spear and get the third guy. Got it?" They nodded. All of them were nervous and frightened, but the teenagers were also resolute. They moved toward the men.

They were not particularly quiet, but the men had a loud boom box playing, and so they were not heard. They crept towards the clearing until they could see what was happening. It was a horror scene.

Jackie was lying on her back. She was naked, and there were three gaping wounds on her torso. It was immediately clear to them that she was dead. Maria, also naked, was making choking sounds because the man raping her had his hands around her neck.

As soon as he saw what was happening, Mike shouted and he drew back his spear. By the time he threw his spear, Yuie had already shot her arrow. It went straight into the stomach of the man sitting with his back to a tree and holding a rifle. The man looked down in disbelief, even as a spear pierced his mouth and lodged itself into the tree. The second man was hit in the back by two spears, and he fell forward onto Maria.

The man raping the girl yelled, and he stumbled to his feet, just in time to feel one spear pierce his shoulder and another spear glance off his head knocking him senseless.

The kids rushed into the clearing, rage and fear pumping through their bodies. As they pulled the man off Maria he groaned, and someone stabbed a spear down through his body. In their haste to reach Maria they ignored the rapist, but he was unconscious and not a threat.

Maria was gasping for breath, and when she caught her breath she began crying, great peeling sobs of deep anguish. She cringed away from the boys, but she allowed Yuie to take her in Yuie's arms. The two girls rocked and cried together as Yuie removed her jacket and covered Maria.

Mike turned away, overcome with emotion, only to see Ralph sobbing over Jackie's body. Then his courage broke and his tears flowed, and he didn't try to stop them, and he was vaguely aware that the others were crying also.

Mike never knew how long it took for him to collect himself. At last his tears subsided, and he looked around. Yuie and Maria were still sitting on the ground. Yuie was still holding the traumatized girl and talking to her in a low whisper. Maria had stopped crying. Ralph had covered Jackie's body with his jacket and shirt. He was sitting there lost in sorrow.

Jacob had found a large Recreational Vehicle nearby. Inside, he found a picture of a man and a woman. None of the motorcyclists matched the picture of the man. The kids never discovered the whereabouts of the man and the woman. There was a shack next to the RV that might have belonged to one or more of the bikers. Eric and Ahmad took the door off the shack to use as a stretcher for Jackie's body. Rasul dragged the unconscious man far away from Maria and Yuie.

Mike had them tie the hands of the unconscious man behind his back, and then they wrapped some cord that they found in the RV around his arms. He had to cajole and beg Ralph not to kill the man outright.

"I promise you we'll take care of him," he told Ralph in a whisper. "Just wait."

The prisoner regained consciousness. When he realized what had happened, he snarled at them and threatened them, and in return he received an occasional poke with a spear.

Mike and the others collected their weapons and those of the men. No one wanted to spend the night in this clearing, so when they were ready, they carried Jackie's body away from the clearing and down the dirt road. They pushed their prisoner ahead of them, and when he refused to walk, they gave him little stabs to keep him moving. When they came to the gravel road leading to their camp, they rested and then they began walking back toward their camp. Finally they stopped, threw themselves on the hard ground, and tried to fall asleep until daybreak.

At dawn, still weary and heartsick, they began their trek back to the camp. Jacob seemed less tired than the others, so Mike sent him on ahead to tell Howard what had happened, and to bring food and water. When noon came, they were about a mile from the camp.

They stopped to rest. There, they were met by Jacob, Howard and some of the other boys and girls who had hurried to them from their camp. Maria's friends accepted her from Yuie, and they tried to comfort her.

"Get some of these guys to take Jackie back to the camp," said Mike to Howard. Ralph took charge of the young woman's body, and he led the sad procession toward the camp while the others lay exhausted on the ground.

"What are you going to do with him," asked Howard anxiously, indicating the prisoner.

Mike had been thinking about this. And he had been looking for a tree. A hundred yards back, they had passed the tree that he had been looking for. It had a large root stretching out toward the road, and on the lower side of the root the land fell swiftly downward.

"I want you to go back to our camp, and bring the rope that we use to play tug-of-war," he directed. "And bring one of the big barrels that we use for the recycled cans. Turn it on its side, and roll it down here. Tell all of the kids to come down with you. We'll wait."

Howard looked troubled, but he nodded and left. Mike went to Maria and her friends. "I need to speak to Maria alone," he said.

"It's okay," said Maria when the other girls protested. "Leave us alone."

When they were alone, before Mike could speak, Maria said, "Thanks, Chief. Thank you coming for me. He told me that he was going to kill me just like he killed Jackie."

Mike felt terrible. "I'm sorry, Maria," he mumbled. "I sorry I didn't protect you."

Maria looked at him sadly, and then she said, "It's not your fault, Mike. You're just a kid."

Mike nodded, and then he told Maria what he intended to do. Maria paled, stared at the ground for a moment, and then she nodded. "All right," she whispered.

"Do you want to go back to camp first?" asked Mike.

Maria looked up. "No," she said with determination. "I'll stay."

Then Mike went to Eric and explained what he was about to do. "Are you okay with this?" he asked.

Eric searched Mike's face. "Because I'm black you mean?"

"Uh...yeah," answered Mike.

Eric looked at the prisoner who was still ranting at them. "I don't know. Maybe if he was black I wouldn't be. But maybe I would."

But anyway he's not black, so it doesn't matter. Yeah, I'm okay. And if he was black I think I would still be okay, because I was there. I saw what he did to Jackie, and what he almost did to Maria. You know, Chief, we were almost too late for Maria."

Mike shuddered. He didn't want to think about that. "Yeah, I know."

Reluctantly Mike went to talk to the prisoner. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Screw you, kid," the man smirked. "You better let me go if you know what's good for you." He struggled in his bonds.

Mike wanted to ask him many other things, about where he was from, what he knew about the fog, why he had killed Jackie and Pete, but Mike simply couldn't stand to be near him. Mike walked away.

Howard came back with the rope and the barrel. Almost all of the girls and boys were with him. Mike was hoisted awkwardly onto the barrel.

"All right, come close and listen," he shouted. The kids gathered around.

"Now, anyone who saw Pete get shot, raise your hand." A host of hands went up.

He saw one boy's hand who he knew wasn't down in the girl's camp when Pete was shot. He asked him, "Where were you when you heard the shot?"

"Uh...well..."

"Didn't you have KP duty yesterday?"

"Well, I came out right after I heard the shot."

"So you didn't actually see Pete get shot?"

"Well, no. But I know who did it!" he burst out.

"Listen to me," shouted Mike. "The next person who lies to me about what they saw is going to clean the toilets for a week." A lot of hands were quickly lowered."

"I saw what happened, Chief," said a girl who still had her hand up. "I was right by Jackie's cabin when she came out. I saw her run over to that guy." She pointed to the prisoner. "I saw him hit Jackie with a gun. Then Pete ran right by me. I saw that man shoot him, and I saw Pete's head fly back. I'm never going to forget that."

"I saw it, too, Chief," said another girl. "I was brushing my hair in my cabin. I heard Jackie say 'Hi, Hi,' like she was real happy. When I came out of my cabin, Jackie was lying on the ground, and that man was picking her up. Then he put her on his motorcycle. Then I saw

Pete running to them, and then that man shot Pete. I saw the blood come flying out of Pete's face."

"Is that the man who shot Pete?" asked Mike pointing at the prisoner.

"Yes, that's him."

"Are you really sure it's him. Maybe, it was one of the others."

"I'm sure that it was him, Chief. I screamed when he killed Pete, and that man looked right at me. He smiled. That's him alright."

One by one, Mike questioned the kids who saw the killing. He found five who definitely knew that the prisoner was the man who did the killing. Then he asked Jacob to tell the assembled kids what he had seen when he first went to the clearing. Then he let Yuie, Ahmad, Rasul, Eric and John tell the kids what they had seen. Ralph was just coming back, so he asked Ralph to tell them what he had seen. As the witnesses spoke, the kids grew quieter and quieter. Some walked away, so they couldn't hear any more.

Then Mike asked the man, "Did you kill the guy at our camp?"

The man laughed. "Maybe so, maybe no," he answered. "So call the police, and let me go, and I'll wait for them. I promise."

Mike was silent a moment, and then he asked, "What about the fog?"

The man scowled. "So maybe the police can't get here for awhile. You can't keep me like this. I know my rights. You got those spears, and I got no gun, so let me go."

Then he smiled a very strange smile, and he said in a soft voice, "Sooner or later I'm going to get loose. Then I'm going to find you, and I'm going to have some fun with you." There was such a vicious evil threat in his voice that all of the kids except for Mike, Maria, and Eric flinched and drew back.

Mike jumped down. He tipped over the barrel. "Help me," he said to the Spears. They helped Mike roll the barrel down the road to the tree. They put the barrel on the higher side of the tree root, so that the sharp drop was on the other side.

The puzzled kids had followed Mike to the tree. Mike took the rope. "Does anyone know how to make a noose," he asked.

There were some murmurs of shock, and the man, prodded to the tree by some of the Spears, exclaimed, "Hey!"

A boy stepped forward. "I know how to make one," he offered in a very tense voice. Mike handed him the rope, and with trembling

hands the teenager managed to make a noose.

Mike looked at the prisoner. "Bring him," he said.

The man began to yell and rant and he threatened the children. He told them in graphic detail what he would do to them if they did not immediately release him. Some of the kids were so frightened of the man, that they begged Mike to let him go if he promised never to bother them again.

The man struggled, but Ralph, John, and Howard held him firmly, and with some help, they pushed him to the barrel. Mike called for some kids to hold the barrel steady at the ends. Some of the Spears, and some of the other kids rush to help. Shortly, there were three or four kids at each end of the barrel.

Mike climbed onto the barrel. Carefully he balanced himself, and then he took the rope, and with some difficulty he worked it over the head of the struggling cursing man. Mike had to toss the other end of the rope several times before he managed to get it over the right tree limb. Mike jumped down.

Other kids had seized the loose end of the rope, and now they drew it taut so that the killer's head was lifted. They tied the rope to the tree. The man continued to curse and threaten them. Mike thought about gagging him, but he didn't just in case the man decided to pray or repent at the last moment.

The stronger boys lifted the man onto the barrel. They helped him steady himself, and then they stepped back. The man wavered, and then he caught his balance.

"Do you have any last words?" Mike asked the man. The man stared down at Mike, perhaps at last realizing that he was dealing with someone different. This kid, this small kid, this implacable kid was going to hang him. Finally, he was frightened.

"I'm sorry about your friend," he muttered hoping that this might save his life.

Mike went behind the man, and he stood next to the barrel. Howard stepped forward. "I'll help," he said. "I didn't go with you when you fought, so I'll do this." Mike nodded.

"I want to do it," demanded Ralph.

"No, not you," Mike said shaking his head.

"Why not," Ralph demanded. "I want revenge."

"That's why you can't do it," said Mike firmly.

"I'll do it," said Desi coming forward. When she saw Mike about to protest, she said fiercely, "One of us should be a girl."

She stepped behind the barrel. Some of the kids hid their faces. Most of them were scared, but they still watched. A few were just curious.

The three teenagers placed a foot against the barrel so that it was held firm against the tree root. They agreed to go on the count of three. Someone counted. On three, they pushed hard against the barrel. It lifted onto the tree root, and then it fell over and rolled down the slope. The man dropped. It sounded like something happened in his neck. He twitched for many seconds, and then he was still. His neck was bent over at an awkward angle. Some of the kids turned away and were sick. Others began crying. Others just stared at the body.

Gradually, they all made their way back to the camp, some pushing the barrel. Mike was exhausted that night, but he found it hard to sleep. He remembered the terrible sights that he had seen, and once he awakened from a bad dream. Sometimes he felt tears flowing down his cheeks.

The next day he asked Ralph to make a sign. Ralph agreed, and he made a sign, and he went over the hill and down to the hanging body. Ralph attached the sign to the stomach of the body. The sign said, "Murderer and Rapist."

After a few days, some of the kids wanted to bury the man, just as they buried Jackie and Pete at the west end of the meadow on the boys' side of the river. Mike refused to let them take the body down. It hung there until the following spring when Mike was finally moved to bury the bones, close by the Hanging Tree where they had buried the other three bodies of the bikers.

The following days seem to pass in a haze. The kids moved around in a stupor much of the time, except when someone breathlessly warned that something or someone had been heard. Then they would all cringe and cower for awhile, until it became apparent that it was just another false alarm. The wood on the bridge was removed, but it was placed close by in case it was needed. Howard found the cover for the five gallon bucket so that the gasoline would not evaporate. During this time, Mike posted a guard on the gravel road at the top of the hill.

Mike managed to get the kids to dig two graves. It was not easy to dig graves in the rocky soil with just the simple picks and shovels that they found in the storage room. But doggedly they stayed at it until Jackie and Pete had been buried. Much harder,

Mike discovered, was the need to say words over the graves as the sad group of campers stood by. Thankfully, a boy named Luis found the right words. On the third day, they moved the body of the dead motorcyclist from the parking lot down to the Hanging Tree.

On the fourth night after the hanging, Mike called a meeting. It was difficult to meet in the dining hall, because the boys were still sleeping there. This had caused problems.

"I want to get back in my bunk," insisted one boy. "Let the girls sleep in here for a change."

"We need more privacy than you guys," responded a girl.

"Yeah, that's another thing," said a boy. "They keep trying to come in and sneak peeks at us in our underwear." The girls hooted at that.

"Oh, like you have anything we'd like to see!" jeered a girl. "And besides, you guys keep trying to peep into the showers when we're in there." A few of the boys blushed at that.

"That piece of wood fell out accidentally," a boy protested.

"All right, all right," said Mike raising his hands. "We need to decide how to make it so that everyone has a good place to sleep."

No one spoke for a moment, and then a girl raised her hand and asked timidly, "Do you think it would be alright if we slept in our cabins again?"

That was the question on everyone's mind. Was it safe? How safe was it? Were there others around like the bikers?

Mike took a breath. Like the others, he was wondering about the answers to these questions, too. But unlike the others he felt that it was his responsibility to ensure the safety of his tribe.

"You can't sleep anywhere except on this side of the river. That's final," he replied. No one challenged him on this, although some girls resented that he could decide. All of them knew by now that the Spears would enforce Mike's orders.

"Can't we at least bring the bunks and mattresses over here?" asked Yuie.

"I guess that would be a good idea," admitted Mike.

"Does that mean that we can get our bunks back?" asked a boy eagerly.

"No it doesn't," answered Mike sharply to the crestfallen boy. "We are going to have to share the sleeping spaces." Everyone was silent.

"Look," Mike continued. "There's a lot of room in the Chief's

Headquarters. And there are futons upstairs. John, take a couple of mattresses and put them in the loft. Four girls should be able to sleep up there. I'll give up my bed for now. It's big so two girls can share it. John, you and Desi will have to give up the counselor's cabin. Six girls can sleep in that cabin. So, some of you guys can move back into your bunks. I'll need one though. Um..."

He stopped. That was about all that he could think of.

"Mike?" asked Desi. "Can John and I move into the cave? I mean into the small part that's really a cave?"

"Uh...well if it's okay with John, I guess so," he replied.

"Do you think that we could move one of the cabins over to this side of the river?" asked Rasul. "Since, we're going to move them anyway."

Not all of the kids had heard about this plan, so Mike had to stop and take the time to explain their plans for the cave. It was plain to see that many of the kids thought that the plan was crazy.

"But that means we would have to dismantle the cabin twice," objected Howard.

"True, but it would give us some practice," argued Eric. "We could find out if we really can move a cabin. If we can't, then we better make another plan."

"That's a good point, Eric," said Mike. "Okay. Tomorrow we'll try to move a cabin. Then the girls from that cabin can sleep in their own bunks." This brought a murmur of cheer from the girls.

After the meeting, some of the boys went to help move two mattresses to the loft of the Chief's Headquarters. With regret, Desi agreed that she and John would have to wait until morning before they could move into the cave.

The activity caused the boys and girls to cheer up. Things were moving forward again. It was good to have something to do. There was a lot of joking, boys offering kindly to share a bunk with a girl, girls politely declining. The task of moving more bunks and mattresses into the counselor's cabin took them until late into the night. The more they worked, it seemed the better they felt. Mike decided that everyone would get a late night snack. Pudding cups were opened and enjoyed.

Eventually, Mike went to his cabin. There he found a flurry of activity. He sat down at his desk. He had taken to writing down notes each night so that he could remember what had happened that day, what had been discussed, and what had been decided. Around

him girls were chatting and preparing for bed. When it got quiet, Mike turned to see what was happening.

The four girls upstairs were hanging their heads over the edge of the loft. The two girls downstairs were looking at him.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Um...Chief, we're ready to go to bed now," replied Makayla.

"Oh, okay, go ahead. I'm just going to work for a bit."

The girl blushed. "Uh, Chief, the thing is, it's kind of warm right now so...," she looked at the others for help.

"So we sleep in our underwear," explained a girl from the loft.

"Oh," Mike said looking at them. "Oh!" Hastily, clumsily knocking over a cup of pens and pencils, he got up. "Well, I'll see you in the morning," he called as he practically ran out the door. He made his way to his old cabin and to his own bunk.

The next morning they began the task of moving one of the cabins. It was slow going. First, they discovered that they would have to unbolt the wood braces connecting the corners. Fortunately, the campground was new, and the nuts and bolts had not yet corroded. Then they realized that it was difficult to remove the canvas cover without damaging it. Then they found that several kids were needed to brace the walls while they were lowering them.

Finally, they were ready to move the floor. But even with kids surrounding and lifting, the wooden floor wouldn't budge. Depressed, they stood around arguing until Ahmad discovered that the concrete piers beneath the floor had metal straps that were bolted onto four by four wooden posts which were then bolted onto the floor frame. Ahmad crawled under the floor, and he unbolted the posts from the frame. Then, with kids working shoulder to shoulder, they lifted the floor and moved it to one side, away from the concrete piers. By this time it was late afternoon, and Mike called a halt to the work.

The next day they discovered how heavy the concrete piers were. Mike almost despaired at this point until one of the boys remembered that there was a steel dolly in the shed. Using the dolly, and with two people pulling and one person pushing, they were able to move the concrete piers over the bridge to the boys side. Accomplishing this cheered them considerably, and in the afternoon they moved the walls over to the boy's side of the river. Once again, Mike called a halt to the work. He wanted to wait until morning to begin the difficult task of moving the heavy floor over the bridge.

Just after they called it quits for the day, Mike had to deal with a

new problem. A girl approached him as he was talking with John. Her name was Erin, and she was a beautiful blond and blue eyed girl who was very popular with both the girls and the boys. She was followed by three other girls.

"Mike, we want to talk to you," she began. Mike discovered that he was a little irritated that she had not called him, Chief.

"Yeah, what is it?" he asked brusquely.

"We've noticed that you're only asking certain people's advice when you have a decision to make. Why is that? Why don't we vote on these things at Meeting?"

"Because these certain people are people I trust," Mike responded. "That's why I ask them."

"But that's not fair, Mike," argued Erin. "You have to let everyone vote."

"No, I don't. That's why I'm the Chief. See, there is a vote taken. Only, I decide who gets to vote. People who have been helping out a lot get to vote. Not you."

"So how do we get to vote? How long before we've helped out enough that we get a vote? Do only the boys get to vote?" asked the girl angrily.

"Yeah, pretty much," replied Mike shortly. He was tired of this conversation.

"Does Desi get to vote?" asked another girl.

"Yeah, so?" replied Mike.

"She gets to vote because she's John's girlfriend, doesn't she?" charged a third girl.

"Yeah, so?" replied Mike again.

"So is that what we have to do?" said Erin, really angry now. "We get to vote if we have sex with one of the Spears?"

"Yeah, that's right!" snapped Mike. "Now get lost!" The girls' mouths dropped open as they stared at him in shocked silence. Abruptly they turned and stormed away.

Mike was just realizing what he had said. He turned to John who was shaking his head sadly. He blushed red, and then yelped when John bopped him on the top of his head with a fist.

"Not cool, dude. Not cool at all," said John.

"She started it," whined Mike. John rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I know. That was stupid," sighed Mike while rubbing his head.

"Yeah. There's going to be a lot of pissed off girls at Meeting

tonight. Yuie will be pissed too, and when Desi finds out that she can vote only because she's doing me...," John shook his head in pity.

Mike paled. "Oh, shit," he muttered. He looked at John anxiously. "Do you think that you could explain to Desi?" he asked.

"Man, I'll be too busy trying to explain why I was standing next to you," John replied.

"I guess I should apologize at Meeting," said Mike gloomily.

"Good idea," responded John.

During the day, the word spread about what Mike had said. As he stepped up to the podium that night, the room was obviously tense. Some of the boys had taken the girls' anger as an excuse to taunt them. This had made the girls even angrier, and they blamed it all on Mike. The room was abuzz with low angry voices. Desi stood at the back of the assembly glaring balefully at Mike.

"I apologize," he said immediately. This quieted down the room. Everyone wanted to know just what Mike was apologizing for.

"I apologize to Erin and to the girls who were with her today, and I apologize to all the rest of you. What I said was wrong. I shouldn't have said it." He paused and waited to see what the effect of his apology would have on the tribe.

Erin stood up, and she raised her hand. Mike pointed to her.

"All right, Chief, I accept your apology. We know you guys are in charge. We understand why. But it's worrying us. We believe you'll try to protect us from outsiders. But...well, it's some of you guys that we are worried about." She sat down.

"I glad you brought that up, Erin," said Mike. "As of tonight, I'm making a new rule about sex." Everyone got real quiet and real interested. This was one subject guaranteed to get them to listen.

Mike continued. "From now on, no one can have sex unless they're at least sixteen."

Some laughter broke out and some chuckles and some scornful comments, but some of the kids, both girls and boys, were relieved to hear Mike make this rule. This would take some pressure off the younger kids who made up over half of the camp. Now they could point to Mike's rule if they felt pressured.

"How are you going to enforce that," challenged one of the boys who stood amid laughter.

Mike stared at him. "I'll enforce any rule I make," he replied coldly. "Don't test me." The boy shrank down. The laughter died. Many of the younger girls smiled.

"I have another new rule," said Mike to the crowd. They calmed down and waited. "This is it. If any guy forces a girl to have sex, I'll hang him." This was met with stunned silence. "Do you understand?" Mike looked intently at a few boys, and each one nodded hastily.

After Meeting concluded, Erin made her way to the front and waited until Mike noticed her. When he did she said shyly, "Thanks, Chief. Thanks for making those rules."

Mike shook his head. "Erin, I should have made those rules a long time ago. Um...Erin," Mike continued. "The thing is, I really do try to listen to everyone. But sometimes I, like, poll people when I have to make a decision. And the truth is, if a guy has a girlfriend I usually let her have a vote, even if I know that she hasn't helped as much as the other girls. That's just the way it is."

Erin was not happy to hear this, but she replied, "Chief, I know that the boys helped you more than we did, at first. But now most of the girls are really trying to help, too. We're doing almost all of the kitchen work now. Don't you think that sooner or later we'll get to vote? When you get to know us, I mean?"

"Yes," answered Mike firmly. "And from now on, I'm going to ask your opinion on all kinds of stuff. I promise." Erin's face lit up with a bright smile. Shortly after, she left with her friends. They all seemed contented.

In the weeks ahead, Mike's authority would be questioned sometimes, especially when he was not around. Once a boy was complaining about Mike, and he asked a couple of the girls why they should listen to a kid who was younger than them.

"The Chief brought Maria back alive," was their blunt reply. The boy admitted the truth of that answer.

All in all, it was a good meeting, Mike thought. And afterwards, he was able to escape to his bunk without having to face Desi. She would calm down by the morning, he hoped.

Then the next morning, as they prepared to move the cabin floor, Jacob came rushing down from the guard post on the hill

"Motorcycle," was all he said.

Chapter Four

Hector

"Get across the bridge! Now!" Mike shouted, unnecessarily because there was a general rush for the bridge. Mike hurried up to the guard post with Jacob. He listened carefully for a minute, but he couldn't hear anything.

"Are you sure, Jacob?" he asked. Jacob nodded. If it had been anybody else, Mike might have had doubts, but he did not doubt Jacob.

Mike thought for a moment. "The place where we hanged that guy," he said. "That's where he stopped." Jacob looked down the road, and then he nodded again.

"Did it sound like more than one?" Mike asked.

"No. Just one."

Mike thought again, and then he said, "Go ask Yuie to bring her bow and arrows, and bring two more girls with their bows and arrows. Tell Howard to send the boys that have the pistols. Tell the Spears to arm themselves. Tell them to stay out of sight behind the girls' cabins. Tell the guy with the rifle to stay with the Spears. Tell everyone else to hide. I don't want to be able to see anybody from here."

Jacob rushed down to the camp. Shortly, Yuie and two other girls came running up the hill. Three boys carrying the hand guns followed them.

Mike explained his plan to them. They would move off the road and into the trees. If only one biker came over the hill, they would wait until he was down at the camp, and then they would come down behind him. Yuie would be in charge.

"Yuie, if you hear more than one motorcycle, don't come out of the trees," Mike commanded. "In fact, if there's more than one, move farther back into the trees."

"Yes, Chief," she said. Yuie was frightened, but she was determined to do her part to protect the tribe.

Mike waited on the hill. At last, he heard the engine of the motorcycle. He went down the hill to the cabins. The Spears were in place, and there was a boy holding the rifle. The boy with the rifle was wide eyed.

"I've never fired this, Chief," he explained. "I don't know if it's

sighted in. I don't know if I can hit anything with this."

"It's just for show," Mike assured the nervous boy. Mike hoped that he would be proved right.

The motorcyclist appeared at the top of the hill. He waited while he looked around. Slowly, he made his way down the hill. He came close to the cabins, and then he stopped.

"Hello!" he shouted. Mike shook his head at the others. They waited out of sight.

The man started his bike forward again. When he was almost to the waiting boys, Mike stepped sideways into his sight.

"Halt!" he commanded. He grimaced when his voice cracked. "We have you surrounded."

The man froze. He looked at young boy. He looked around. He was a man of medium height with black hair, light brown skin and dark intelligent eyes.

"It doesn't look like I'm surrounded, amigo," he said mildly.

"I'm going to call for the others to come out," said Mike. "Don't move. Come out, Howard."

The man's eyes narrowed when he saw the boys who were carrying their spears, and then he saw the boy with the rifle. Mike realized that he was about to turn his bike and flee.

"There are others, behind you," said Mike hastily, and then he called, "Yuie!"

Yuie and the others came out of hiding. The man looked around anxiously at them, and then he said in surprise, "You're all kids."

Mike didn't really know how to reply to that. What the man had said was true. They were all kids. "We can take care of ourselves," Mike said bravely.

The man considered him. "The man hanging from the tree. Did you do that," he asked.

"Yes. He was a killer and a rapist. He killed two of us, and he raped two girls. So, we killed him."

The man whistled. "Crap," he said and went on to say, "Look I don't want any trouble. I don't hurt kids."

Mike was undecided as to how to continue. This man could be a threat. Still, the man seemed a lot different than the other bikers. "Please, get off the bike."

The man hesitated, and then he nodded. He shut down the motor, and then he swung himself off the bike.

"Now, please, undress," said Mike.

"Pardon?" responded the startled man.

"You heard me," insisted Mike. "Take off your clothes."

"Why the hell should I?" demanded the man getting irritated.

"I want to see if you are carrying any weapons," Mike explained.

"Crap," said the man. He thought it over. "That's sensible," he growled."

Slowly, deliberately, the man doffed his baseball cap, and then he unbuttoned his brown flannel shirt and removed it. He sat down and removed his black work boots and his woolen socks. Next he unbuckled his leather belt and pushed down his jeans. Finally, he took off his undershirt. This left him standing in only his white briefs. At a gesture from Mike, he moved away from his clothes.

"Jacob, check his clothes," ordered Mike.

"Take it easy with my cap," demanded the man. "My papa gave it to me."

Jacob went forward, and he carefully pawed through the man's belongings. "No weapons except for this," he said. He held up a sturdy knife in a black case.

"Can I put my clothes back on?" asked the man politely.

"Um...sure," replied Mike.

As he was putting on his clothes, the man said, "My name is Hector. I'm a logger most of the time, but right now I am the caretaker at a logging camp. It's back down the road and up a side road. Do you know about the stuff covering the ground lower down?"

Mike realized that he had to make a decision. "He's okay," he said to the Spears, and then he gestured at Yuie to come to him.

"Yeah, we know about it. We call it the Fog. Do you know that it's dangerous?" Mike asked.

Hector looked up at him. "Si, I know that it's dangerous. I've been waiting weeks for the crew to show up for the spring job. When no one contacted me on my phone, I rode down and found it. I didn't want to ride into it. I saw a rabbit by the road. It was standing in just a few inches of the junk. Then I saw the rabbit get dragged into the junk. The Fog. It tried to escape. Then it went under. I couldn't see what took it."

Hector was finished dressing. "So who are you kids and what are you doing here? And where are the grownups?"

They all started talking at once, until Howard shushed them so that Mike could tell their story. Hector listened with interest, and then

with astonishment, and then with anger.

"Those bastards!" he exclaimed at last. "So that's what that smell was along the road. I thought it was a deer or a bear." He looked at the kids in wonder. "This sucks, but you kids are alive at least. Me, too. I hope we can all stay alive."

"Yeah, that's what we hope too," answered Mike.

"Say, do you kids got enough food?" asked Hector. "I got a lot up at my camp. The supplies for the summer and the fall logging crews were dropped off the first of May. I know I can spare some food and maybe other stuff. There were four women expected on the crew, so I found a lot of...uh...girl's stuff for when they have their period." There was a loud cheer from the girls.

"We have some food, too," said Mike. "But we don't think that it's going to be enough for the winter. Can you take a look? Can you see what else we need?"

The cabin floor that they were moving was abandoned for the moment. Mike gave Hector a tour of the camp. They were followed by many of the kids who were glad to see a helpful adult at last. Hector saw that they would need more food. He approved of many of the measures that they were taking. But when he saw the cave and heard their plans to build a lodge, he shook his head.

"This won't work," he stated.

"Why not?" asked Mike.

"A wall of rocks without using concrete will be unstable. There's too much danger that it would collapse and bring the whole thing down," explained Hector.

"Well, that sucks," said Howard. The others agreed.

"So we can't use the cave at all?" asked Mike.

"Maybe there is a way," answered Hector slowly as he considered the problem. "If I could get some logs down here, I think I could build a wall with them. I could use heavy duty metal straps to tie the logs together and then brace them. That should work."

"How are you going to get big logs down here?" asked Mike dubiously. "I don't think we can carry them. And how are we going to put one big log on top of another?"

"We have a machine that does that," replied Hector absently while studying the area. "It's got a grapple that grabs the logs and lifts them. We use it to put the logs on the truck. That's the problem. No one brought the truck yet. We need a truck to move the logs down here. Unless..." He looked back at the parking lot.

"Does that bus run?" he asked.

"The school bus?" asked Mike. "Yeah, I guess it does. But how could you put logs in it? The seats are in the way."

"I think I can take out the seats," replied Hector. "The real problem will be using the machine to get the logs in the rear emergency door. And doing it safely. But if I can load that bus, I should be able to bring a load of logs down here."

"How will you get the bus over the river?" asked Howard. "Will we have to carry the logs across?"

"I think I can bring the machines down here," answered Hector. "Usually we move them by flatbed truck, but some have tracks like a tank and the others have tires, so I can drive them down here. It'll take a long time because they are very slow. Then I can lie some of the logs across the river, and roll the bus across on them."

"The river's not running as fast than when we first got here," said Eric. "Why is that?"

"There is not as much water because a lot of the snow pack has melted," answered Hector. "How do you plan to use the bathroom during winter?" The teenagers looked at one another.

"We have Porta Potties," said Mike. "But they are full of crap. We made a place in the forest where we piss." Someone sounded the speaker calling the kids to brunch.

"We only eat two meals at day, brunch and supper," explained Mike as they walked back to the dining hall. "We've been trying to conserve our food. Jacob, here, has managed to catch a few birds. Some are okay to eat, but most don't have any meat. We're thinking of using the rifle to try to get a deer. Jacob says that he knows how to skin it and cut it."

Hector was thinking that this camp would be a better place to stay for the winter than the logging camp. He decided to sound the boys out about it. "Do you think you have room for one more person?" he asked. The boys looked at one another.

"You don't have to let me know right now," added Hector hastily.

"Mike's the Chief," said Eric. "He decides." Hector looked at Mike who blushed. Now that there was an adult around, he felt somewhat self conscious.

"If you're going to share your food with us, I guess it's only fair that we share our space. Just a couple of things. Mike told him the rules they had made. He emphasized the one about not forcing the

girls.

Hector stiffened. "I don't mess with kids," he said angrily. His voice and body language caused the kids to become nervous. They didn't want trouble with another adult.

Mike didn't back down. "Good," he said bravely. "I just wanted you to know. I mean, after what happened."

Hector calmed down. He nodded. "That's a good rule anytime, amigo," he admitted. "Looks like you guys got yourselves a good leader," he said to the others. The teenagers relaxed.

Hector agreed to eat brunch with them, and then they showed him how they were trying to bring a cabin across the river. Once again they tackled the wood floor. They managed to get it to the bridge, but the bridge was too small for more than two or three to stand abreast.

Hector solved the problem by angling the dolly under the side of the floor closest to the bridge, and then carefully balancing and pulling the dolly until the floor was covering the bridge with each side of the floor frame barely touching a different side of the river bank. Then the kids on his side of the river lifted the floor until he could get the dolly out from under the floor. Carefully, he stepped on to the floor with the dolly, and he made his way to the opposite side. Once there he put the dolly under the floor again. The kids on the other side lifted and pulled, and Hector balanced the floor until it was over the river.

"Whew," Mike said. "That was harder than I thought. I don't know if we could have done it without you, Hector. Thanks a lot."

"Yeah, that was a lot of work," Hector agreed. "But we did it. That proves we can get the cabins across the bridge. If we can build a wall, I'm sure that we can get the bottom cabins on the wall and ledge. The problem is how to get the floors from the other cabins on top of the first layer. They will have to be lifted a lot higher."

Hector decided that it was time to ride back to his camp. He wanted to take an inventory of all the items that he could bring back to the lower camp. To his surprise, Jacob asked if he could ride behind him.

"I'm going to look around a little," he told Mike. That worried Mike but he just asked Jacob to be careful. He knew by now that Jacob was the kind of guy that would always want to explore.

Jacob climbed behind Hector, and the motorcycle roared to life. They rode back over the hill, down past the Hanging Tree, and then

on to the junction of the road that led to Hector's camp. Hector paused when they came to the path on their right leading to the clearing where the dead bodies still lay.

"We need to bury those men," said Hector. Jacob gave a grunt. Hector gunned his cycle again. Before they came to Hector's camp they passed the entrance to another dirt road on the left.

"Where does that road lead to?" asked Jacob.

"The firebreak road? I don't really know," answered Hector. "I saw a man in a four by four pull out from it once. And once, I saw a woman on the road who was riding a horse. I think it must lead to another cabin or maybe a house."

"How far is your camp if I walked to it from here?" asked Jacob.

"Walking? Maybe an hour. The road goes up and down. It's muddy in places." They continued on until they came to the logging camp. There were several buildings and several pieces of heavy machinery. The equipment impressed Jacob.

"What do these machines do?" he asked.

"That one can take a tree and strip off the branches. The other one is a John Deere harvester. It can pick up a stripped tree, cut the end off, shoot a certain amount of it out one end and then cut it off, turning it into a log. That one over there can pick up the logs and load them on a truck. We were supposed to get a machine this year that could cut the trees down safely, but the company said that it would cost too much. So we still have big chainsaws to cut down the trees. It takes a lot more people to cut the trees with chainsaws. Luckily for us, because that's why they delivered so much supplies this spring."

"Do you have gas for all this stuff?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah, we have a big fuel truck back there. Thank heaven that it arrived before the Fog. The supplies came at the same time. Food, water and plenty of toilet paper. Plus the stuff for the girls."

"What kind of stuff for girls?"

"Sanitary napkins I guess, Jacob. Pads and all that stuff they need for their period. I don't know. Hey." He stopped talking and looked at the heavy equipment. "Maybe, we can use that to lift those cabin floors up to the second level." He pointed to a fork lift.

Most of the buildings were made of sheet metal. Hector led the way into the only cinderblock building. It looked like a combination office and storeroom. There was a bunkhouse in the rear. After a bit Jacob realized that Hector was searching for something. "Ah, here it

is," Hector said with a satisfied smile. He brought out a long box. Inside was a large roll of black plastic.

"What's that for," said Jacob.

Hector stopped smiling. "I'm going to use it to wrap those dead guys before we bury them."

"Why bother," said Jacob. "They were murderers."

"Because I'm not like them," answered Hector. "I may not be the best guy in the world that's left, but I'm not like them."

"Pete and Jackie didn't have any plastic to be wrapped in," said Jacob resentfully.

"I'm sorry about that, amigo. I truly am. But I got to do this."

Hector went outside, and he placed the box in a small pickup truck. Then he and Jacob got in the truck, and they drove back down the road. When they got to the side road, Jacob asked to be dropped off.

"Where are you going?" asked Hector startled at the request.

"I'm going to explore that road some," replied Jacob. "Can I stay at your camp if I get back there tonight?"

"Sure. I'll be back later. Hell, kid, I don't like the idea of leaving you here."

"I'll be okay," replied Jacob, and without another word, he lifted his backpack and walked away.

Hector shook his head, and then he started down the road again. When he came to the path leading to the clearing, he stopped. He took the box out of the truck, and he carried it to the clearing. The bodies were emitting a rank smell. Hector rolled out the plastic, and he cut two pieces. He placed one piece next to the body still stuck to the tree. Gingerly, he worked the spear out of the tree and through the man's mouth. It was unpleasant work, but he finally got the two bodies wrapped in plastic. Now he had to put the bodies in the truck.

Undecided, he stared at the wrapped bodies, and then he made a decision. He got back in the truck, and he drove to the kids' camp. When he found Mike, he explained what he had done.

"Jackie and Pete didn't have any plastic," said Mike grimly.

"That's what Jacob said," replied Hector. "I'll tell you what I told him. I'm not like those men. And I don't think that you are either. I want you to help me move them. I'm going to take them to the tree where you hung that guy and bury them."

"The one we hanged stays there," said Mike flatly.

"Why?" Hector asked puzzled. "He's long dead."

"He's a warning to anyone else who thinks he can hurt us."

Hector nodded. "All right. But let's bury the others."

So Mike and John went with Hector. They retrieved the bodies, and they buried them close by the Hanging Tree. Then Hector took Mike and John back to the camp. On the way, he told them where Jacob had gone.

When they got to the camp, Hector discovered that they were having difficulty leveling the concrete piers for the cabin that they had moved. There was a laser level in the truck, and he soon had the blocks leveled. Mike decided to give everyone a break for the rest of the day. Tomorrow would be soon enough to rebuild the cabin. He walked with Hector over the bridge and to the pickup.

"Thanks for helping us, Hector," he said.

Hector held out his hand. "Thanks for helping me, Chief," he replied. Mike shook his hand and laughed.

"I guess it's kind of goofy the way they call me Chief."

"No, it's not goofy at all. You've done a good job here, amigo."

"I've been really scared," Mike blurted his voice full of emotion. Then to his everlasting embarrassment Mike suddenly choked up. He couldn't speak, and his tears began falling.

Hector looked around. He and Mike were behind the truck, and there was no one else around. He reached out, and he pulled Mike into his arms. The boy cried silently on Hector's chest. Hector just stood there a short while until Mike was finished. Then Mike pulled away and wiped his eyes.

Hector got into the pickup. Through the window he said, "See you tomorrow, Chief." He started the pickup. Mike waved silently, and Hector drove away.

When Hector was passing by the place where they had retrieved the bodies, he decided to stop and search the area. He found many items that they could use, but the only thing he took at that time was the ammunition that he found hidden in the shack. He drove back to the logging camp. There was no sign of Jacob.

After Jacob left Hector at the junction of the roads, he hiked along the road he had chosen. Mushrooms were growing in abundance along the winding path. He followed the rutted road up and around the side of the mountain for a ways, and then the narrow road began to drop. Presently, he came to a small stream that fell from his right, went under the road by way of a galvanized steel culvert, and then turned and followed the road. The snow fed stream

skipped merrily over the stones in its bed, and Jacob was content to walk and listen to its music. The wind was blowing lightly through the tall green trees, and the scent of the aromatic pine was heavy in the air. Jacob and the stream followed the road until he grew hungry, and then he stopped, and he ate a tuna sandwich, an apple and a chocolate pudding cup that he had been saving.

After eating, he rested with his back to a tall red fir tree and watched a couple of brown squirrels quarrel. An owl flew by. He resumed his walk. He loved strolling through the woods, and he enjoyed his solitude. After a bit, he paused respectfully as a snake crossed his path. Blue gentians and yellow eyed daisies were growing along the sides.

The road would rise occasionally, and then it would dip a little deeper as it made its way around the mountain. He knew by the light that the sun was only a few hours from dropping below the horizon, but he did not worry that he would be caught out after dark. He didn't mind staying in the woods at night. He always seemed to find a sheltered spot where the blanket in his backpack could serve to keep him warm enough. He had waterproof matches, although he tried hard not to use them. He thought that they might be needed later in the year.

As the sun was just reaching the horizon, he came to small grassy valley on his right. It probably measured no more than twenty acres, and it was surrounded by steep slopes. The road continued on past the little dale, but the stream came to an end in a small pond. Jacob could see that the pond was man made. Someone had filled in part of a gully creating the pond behind it. It was almost filled to its banks from the spring runoff. Large corn lilies and blue eyed marys grew by the water. As Jacob watched, a golden trout jumped.

There was a dirt driveway leading away from the main road to a large beige house set a little ways off the road. The house had a steeply pitched roof. In front, there were some chickens pecking at the dirt. Next to the house was a large red barn. On one side of the barn was an attached solar room. Jacob could see a corral behind the barn with two horses in the corral. There were smaller buildings close to the house. Jacob supposed they were storage sheds. Farther back, Jacob could see a wind turbine turning in the breeze. He recognized it as the same type that provided electricity for the kid's camp. Far in the rear, were fields with some kind of grass or grain growing in them. Jacob noticed a brown hare nibbling at a

stalk. By the tree line was a structure that looked to be a raised water catchment tank.

Jacob hesitated. It was a little late for company, especially when that company was in the form of a stranger. Making up his mind, he strode towards the house until he was a ways from it, and then he shouted, "Hello! Hello!" Then he waited.

Presently the door opened slightly, and a young woman peered out. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Hello. I'm Jacob. I'm exploring," the boy responded.

The door opened wider, and the young woman stepped out. She had a slight build and her hair was black. She was carrying a shotgun.

"Well, hello yourself, Jacob," she said. "Where have you come exploring from?"

Pointing back towards the main road, he said, "Back down that road, then down the other road, then up to a kid's camp."

"You're a long way from home," the young woman offered.

Jacob thought for a moment, and then he asked, "Do you know about the Fog?"

"What fog?" she replied. At that moment, a small head peeked around her skirts.

Jacob found that he didn't want to tell her, but he said, "We're surrounded by a fog down about the six thousand seven hundred foot level. It's all around us. We can't get through it. There are some bad things in it. I think...something bad happens to anything that goes into it."

The young woman paled. "When is Daddy coming home?" a small voice asked.

The young woman bent down to the child. "Go back inside, Star," she said. "I'll be right outside. I need to speak to this boy for a minute." Gently, she pushed the girl inside and closed the door.

"All right, what's going on?" she asked the boy sternly. "Who sent you here? Is this some kind of practical joke?"

Jacob shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I'll leave now," he said. He turned around.

"Wait!" the young woman called. There was a sense of desperation and urgency about her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Jacob," the boy said again.

"And how do you know about this so-called fog," she demanded.

"The adults at our camp left to find out what was happening. They didn't come back. I got worried, so I tried to walk out of the mountains. That's when I found the fog. I saw a deer get taken into it. So I went back to the camp."

"When was this?"

"The end of May," Jacob replied.

The young woman's face turned ashen. She groaned softly, and then she sat down on the wood floor of the covered porch. She dropped her head into her hands. Jacob thought that she might be crying.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She raised her head and stared at him. Her eyes were misty. "Are you all alone?" she asked.

Jacob shook his head. "There are more kids. About fifty I guess. And we just met a man named Hector. He's from a logging camp. It's back down this road and then up the mountain."

"Yes, I know about the logging camp. Did you say that there aren't any adults at your camp?"

"I think Hector might stay with us. There was a woman named Jackie, but she was killed by some bad men."

She was experiencing shock after shock. She stared at the boy. She tried to collect herself, tried to tell herself that this story was too fantastic, tried to tell herself that her long over due husband would be coming around the corner any time now.

But there was a young boy here. And the sky was beginning to darken. "Come in," she said. "Let's talk. My name is Mary Brown." Jacob went up on the porch and entered the house behind Mary. Inside he saw two small children staring anxiously at him.

"Mama, who's him?" the little boy demanded.

"He's a visitor, Comet," Mary answered. "Now you and Star get your teeth brushed. Then you can play with your toys."

"When are we gonna get the TV fixed?" the little girl grumbled as she and her brother exited through a hallway.

The house seemed very cozy. It had the ordinary clutter of small kids without being messy. Mary led Jacob through the living room and into the kitchen. She motioned towards the yellow Formica covered table, so he sat down. She opened a cupboard, and she took out a bag of corn chips which she put on the table in front of Jacob. Then she opened the refrigerator, and she took out a can of juice. She put the can by the chips and said, "Help yourself."

Jacob stared greedily at the bag of chips. He wondered for a moment whether it was the last bag of chips in the world. He looked over at the two children peeking around the corner. A feeling of guilt came over him.

"I'm not hungry," he lied.

Mary gave him a glance. "If you're not, then you must be the only teenaged boy in the world who isn't. Eat."

"Uh...maybe just a few," he mumbled as he dug into the bag.

Mary sat down across from him. "All right, tell me what you know. And you two get into the bathroom and brush your teeth." The two young children scampered away.

Jacob began talking. He talked about the kids' camp. He talked about the incident with the motorcyclists. He talked about Hector. He repeated what he had seen when he encountered the Fog.

Mary had many questions, and it took a long time for the story to be told. At times, they were interrupted by the two children who seemed to realize that something was wrong. Jacob had to stop while Mary attended to her kids. At last, Jacob finished his tale. Mary sat silent. Jacob realized that he had eaten half of the bag of corn chips.

Finally, Mary spoke. "I knew something was wrong that day. First the television picture went dark. None of the channels worked. At first, I thought it was the TV. We have satellite TV and internet, and the internet went dead at the same time. Then the man from the gas station didn't come by to deliver the mail and messages from my husband, Davis. Davis went to Bakersfield in early May to visit his parents and to buy supplies. After the winter we stock up again.

"No one ever came from the gas station. And there were so many deer around. Herds of them started moving past the house in early May. It's like they had been spooked. They should still be grazing lower down the mountain at this time of the year. I've been getting more and more worried. I'll have to hitch the horses to the buckboard and go see for myself, of course."

"Are you an Indian?" asked Jacob abruptly.

Mary smiled. "I prefer to be known as Native American, Jacob," she responded. "But yes, I am"

"Were you born here? Is there a reservation nearby?" the boy asked. Mary laughed.

"No, I'm a valley girl. I was born in Los Angeles. I met Davis at

college. He was a geologist who fell in love with the mountains and the land. He always wanted to live in the Sierra's. We moved here about six years ago. At first, people thought that we were survivalists, but we just wanted a farm in the high country."

The woman and the boy talked for some time, and then the woman said, "It's getting late. You better stay here tonight. Do you mind sleeping in the barn? No offense intended, but I just met you, and I have small children to look after." Jacob took no offense, and he spent the night in the loft of the barn. He found it to be quite comfortable, except for the smell of the two cows down below.

The next morning Jacob was awakened by the sound of Mary calling him. It was still dark when she hitched the horses to the wagon. The two children were asleep in the back of the wagon. Mary had wrapped them in blankets, and she had laid them on old soft hay. Jacob rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

They traveled all day, stopping only to rest the horses. It was almost dusk when they arrived at the place where the mist covered the road. Mary stared at it for some time, and then she insisted on climbing the same hill that Jacob had climbed. In the darkening gloom it, indeed, seemed as if they were on an island. Finally Mary was satisfied, and she turned the wagon around. By moonlight, they made their way back. At midnight they stopped to sleep. Mary slept in the bed of the wagon with her kids, and Jacob curled up under the wagon.

The following morning, Mary let everyone sleep late. She made a fire, and she cooked eggs and hash browns with an iron grill and a frying pan. After months of existing on the camp's meager fare, Jacob eagerly devoured this delicious breakfast. Afterwards, they took their time going back.

It was after dark when they came to the turnoff to the logging road. Jacob asked to be let off. Mary protested that she could take him to his camp, but Jacob reminded her of the grisly sight that the children might see. Reluctantly she accepted his reasoning, and so, with a wave, she turned up the logging road, and the wagon was soon lost in the gloom.

Jacob turned toward the camp. It was a chilly moonlit night, but he was young and hardy and his fleece lined jacket was warm. He hiked in the moonlight wondering what would happen to Mary and to her kids. He hoped that she had enough supplies to last them for a while. He remembered that her husband had gone down to

Bakersfield to restock. Eventually he stopped to sleep. He rose early, and he made it to the camp in time for brunch.

Mike was glad to see Jacob, and he listened with interest to Jacob's report of the farm and its inhabitants. He was especially interested in the solar room attached to the barn. He promised Jacob that he would send someone to see if Mary needed help in any way.

Meanwhile, he told Jacob, Hector had shown up with a load of supplies the day before, and he had taken two boys back with him to help load and deliver the rest. That had taken all day and several trips. They had also scavenged the bikers shack and the RV for more supplies, and then they had brought the other motorcycles to the camp. Then Hector and Rasul had gone back to the logging camp for the night. Hector was going to drive the forklift down today, and Rasul was bringing his motorcycle.

"Yeah, that lucky dog," exclaimed John. He had wanted to ride the motorcycle, but Rasul had some experience.

By the end of July, Hector had managed to bring most of the machinery down from the logging camp. He removed the seats from the bus, filled it with logs and delivered them to the job site. With the help of the Spears, he built a log bridge that was stable enough to allow some of the lighter machinery to cross the river. In the first week of August, they began building the log wall in front of the cave.

Mike allowed Hector to stay in one of the three cabins still on the girl's side of the river. They had moved another cabin to the boy's side. It was still tight quarters with extra bunk beds jammed into each of the available cabins. Mike was still in his old bunk, but at least everyone had been moved out of the dining hall.

The mood of the camp had greatly improved. Privately and in groups, the kids had come to accept the reality of this new world. Privately and in groups, they had mourned the loss of the people they had loved and lost. Now their spirits were lifted, and they were looking forward. Children are naturally resilient, and in spite of some depression, they usually have a tendency to play.

At first Mike was so focused on surviving, that he resented the time spent on fun, but John and Desi reminded him that they were still kids, and that they needed to run, jump, skip, play and let off steam. One day John became so annoyed with Mike's solemn attitude that he grabbed the smaller boy in a headlock, and then he marched Mike out to the meadow to throw a Frisbee for an hour. Soon Mike was laughing, running, and screaming, and at the end of

the hour he realized that not once had he worried about food, shelter or winter.

After that, Mike asked Yuie to organized archery contests, baseball games, and kickball challenges. He made sure that everyone had some private time to just kick back and hang out. He asked Erin to explore developing natural substances for creating makeup, and to hold classes to teach the younger girls how to apply that makeup. All of the books in the camp were confiscated and a library was created. Eric was the camp librarian. The kids were glad to have a more relaxed atmosphere, and they seemed to gripe less about the tasks to which they were assigned.

There were plenty of tasks. Beside the effort, led by Hector to construct the Lodge, and the effort, led by Jacob, to supplement their food supplies by hunting, there was the hated kitchen duty, dreaded clothes washing, and never ending fire wood gathering. Mike charged the Spears with patrolling the perimeter of the camp. He set guard posts on the slopes overlooking the camp. He spent a lot of time thinking of ways to improve their situation and their chances of survival.

Sometimes, his ideas were eagerly adopted. Sometimes, they were not. One night at Meeting, he proposed a new idea.

"I think we should strip down to our underwear for three hours a day," he said confidently. There was a stunned silence, and then the uproar began.

Chapter Five

Making Plans

"Are you crazy?"

"Did the boys tell you to say that?"

"I'm not letting those girls see me in my underwear."

"I think that only the girls should strip. Especially Big Tits Erin."

"You shut up, Pencil Dick!"

"All right, all right!" shouted Desi. Everyone subsided into low mumbling and grumbling. Then Desi turned to Mike. She crossed her arms under her chest and demanded. "Why?"

Mike looked around helplessly. "Uh...um....well, it's going to be cold this winter, even in the Lodge. We'll probably be wearing our clothes most of the time. I just think it would be a good idea if we save them for when we really need them. If we wore just our underwear part of the time, our clothes will last a lot longer." There was a low murmur from the group.

"See," said Desi, talking to the kids. "He always has a good reason for his ideas, even his dumb ideas." She looked back at Mike and glared.

Erin stood up. "Chief, even if I didn't like the idea of taking my clothes off in front of everyone, it wouldn't work. We can't go without wearing our clothes because of the elevation."

"It's warm enough some days," protested Mike.

"It's not that, Chief. It's because there's not enough atmosphere at this elevation. We would all get severe sun burn."

Mike was thunderstruck. He had not thought of that at all. He felt like an idiot for not thinking about sun burn. "Oh," he said. "I guess that was a dumb idea." His statement was followed by hoots from the audience.

"Quiet!" yelled Desi, and when they calmed down she continued. "Look, the Chief had an idea. It won't work. But if we give everyone a hard time who thinks up a dumb idea, everyone is going to stop telling us their ideas. They'll be too afraid that we'll laugh at them. And then someone is going to have a really crazy good idea that they don't bother to tell. Maybe it will be an idea that will save someone's life. So when someone suggests something, even if it sounds crazy, we have to listen. Okay?" There was more mumbling after that, but generally people agreed with Desi.

"We have a related problem," said Yuie. "Some of us are growing out of our clothes." There was a murmur of agreement from some of the kids.

"The bigger kids are going to have to share some of their clothes with the younger kids," said Erin. This brought a protest from some of the older kids.

"What happens when we grow out of our clothes?" asked an older boy.

"If you are a boy then you can wear some of the clothes that we took from those men, or else you can wear some of the clothes that we found in the RV," answered Erin. "We girls might have to make some new clothes, although we have some of Jackie's things, some of the other counselor's things, and we found some ladies clothing in the RV."

"Where are we going to find more material to make dresses?" asked Makayla.

"We could use the tablecloths," suggested Desi. The boys began to get restless and bored, so the girls agreed to discuss this later.

"I have a new rule," said Mike when their attention turned to him again. The whole group groaned.

"What now?" moaned Kevin.

"From now on, no one can piss in the Porta Potties."

There was a chorus of outrage.

"Listen," insisted Mike. "We don't have any way to empty them. And they are almost filled up. You know they stink. You have to use the bathrooms behind the dining hall to piss, or else you have to go in the forest. And try to use the bathrooms behind the dining hall for number two, too. In other words, don't use the Porta Potties unless you absolutely have to. Hector said that he would use his truck to empty them in a few days. He's got to find a place. He'll need help."

"Oh, and another thing," he added to a chorus of groans. "The paper towels are off limits. You will have to use a towel to dry your hands."

"Why is that," demanded a camper.

"We need to save the paper towels for toilet paper," he explained. There was dead silence and not a single protest.

One day, some of the kids approached Mike, and they asked him why they didn't have any church services on Sunday. Mike was noncommittal about the idea, but he announced that on Sunday there

would be a service in the dining hall for anyone who wanted to attend. There was a lot of argument about the idea of a church service. Some argued that it was a good idea. Some argued that it was a bad idea. Some liked the idea, but they did not like how it was arranged.

On Sunday, late in the morning, Mike waited at the podium for the kids to come to the service. John, Desi and Yuie were in the dining hall waiting. The time for the service came and went. No one appeared.

"Where is everyone?" asked Mike mystified.

"They're probably not coming," answered Yuie.

"Why?"

"Some of them didn't want to do this anyway," said Desi. "And most of them are holding their own service down in the meadow, across the river from where we buried Jackie and Pete. Luis is saying the words."

"Ahmad did a thing on Friday," said John. "He got his blanket, and he put it on the floor of his cabin. He was trying to figure out how to point it to...um..."

"Mecca," finished Yuie.

"Yeah, Mecca," agreed John. "And Jacob did his thing yesterday."

"And Rasul shares my little shrine I built next to the cave," said Yuie. "He prays to his Gods, and I pray to Buddha. I wish I had a Buddha. I take my picture of my parents and my sister there, and I lean it against a rock while I pray. And I'm trying to make prayer beads."

"I don't think anyone is going to come to your service, Chief," said John. "Remember these were American kids. Still are."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Mike.

"They are Americans, Mike. They aren't going to a government church."

"What?"

"True. Here, you are the government, Chief," explained Yuie.

"Yeah, he's the Government Chief," joked John. The others rolled their eyes and groaned.

"Well, what do you want to do?" asked Mike as the strains of Amazing Grace came wafting up from the meadow.

"Let's play cards," said Desi.

"All right," agreed Yuie. "What about Spades?"

"What about Hearts?" offered John.

"How about Strip Poker?" joked Mike.

"You wish!" answered Yuie as she shuffled a deck. "With your rules, it'll be a long time before you get to see a girl naked." Mike glanced at Desi who gave him a small smile. Mike blushed, and he looked down at his cards.

The work of building the Lodge continued. By the middle of August the log wall was almost complete. In the last rays of the sun, many of the kids would sit on the grass below the unfinished wall and enjoy the breeze and their free time.

Erin and three of her friends could often be found there, enjoying the late afternoon sun. They talked about many things, and one of their favorite subjects was boys. They compared this one and that one, and they discussed their few good points and their many bad points.

"What about Hector?" said one of the girls.

"He's cute," said another. "But he's a little old."

"And Mexican," said a third.

"What's that got to do with anything? Are you prejudiced?"

"No! But what if he's illegal?"

The other girls laughed. "I don't think that matters anymore," said Erin.

"Well, I think Hector's really cute in a Latino sort of way. Maybe I'll make a play for him."

"Oh, yeah? Maybe he would rather be my boyfriend."

"I think Latino's prefer girls with bigger breasts," said Erin with a grin.

"Ha! Just because you are such a Moo Cow."

"I am not," exclaimed Erin. "I'm just right." The girls continued to jibe at each other, except for the fourth girl. She was quiet and thoughtful.

The next day, she found Hector working on the wall as usual. She was one of his regular crew. Their task was to carry buckets of thick mud from a low wet spot in the meadow up to the wall. Then they would pour the mud onto the highest log, so that when Hector put the next log on the wall there were no air spaces between the logs.

She approached Hector at the end of the work period. The other kids were hurrying away, glad to be free at last. She handed Hector a bottle of water.

"Thanks," he said, and he took a big swig from the bottle.

"Ah...you wouldn't think that you could get so hot at this altitude." He was breathing hard. "You're...?"

"Kathy. I'm Kathy. I work on your crew. I'm fourteen. And a half."

"Kathy. Well, thanks for the water, Kathy."

"Um...I was wondering if I could talk to you."

"Sure, Sweetie. Talk." Hector leaned back and poured part of the bottle on his face.

"Um...I was wonder if I could work with you. Not just carrying mud I mean. I don't mind that. But I was wondering if I could help you. I mean, I want to learn to work with the wood."

Hector took his bandana and wiped his face. He gave her a good look. She's a pretty girl, he thought. Kathy was blond and blue eyed. Her body was just now developing, but it was clear that, one day soon, she would be a lovely young lady. She wasn't tall so, since Hector was not a tall man himself, she stood just below his shoulder.

"You want to work with the wood? You mean you want to learn carpentry," said Hector.

"Yes," replied Kathy. "I used to help my Dad a lot. He wasn't a regular carpenter, but he worked with wood a lot. Mostly he built bird houses and things like coat racks, but he built the fence around our house and he built our garage. I helped him with that. Once, I helped him build a big tree house for one of our neighbors."

"That's more experience than most of these kids," Hector agreed.

"And I have an idea."

"Yeah?" he said skeptically. "What is it?"

"I was thinking about these braces," she said motioning to the heavy iron straps that Hector had retrieved from the logging camp. "You are going to make wooden pegs to hold them to the logs, right? But you can't get the pegs perfectly round, right? So there's bound to be gaps, right?"

"Right so far," agreed Hector, humoring the girl.

"I was thinking that, since we don't have any wood glue, we might be able to use the sap from trees to fill the gaps," she said.

"Now that's an idea, uh...Kathy," answered Hector slowly. He thought about it. "That is an idea."

"And since the sap is sticky, it might make the braces stronger. That would make the wall stronger, right?"

"Si," answered Hector. "That's not a bad idea at all, Kathy."

"I was thinking that if we heated up the sap and then rolled the pegs in the stuff, it might be easier to cover the whole peg."

"Damn, that is a good idea," Hector exclaimed enthusiastically. "Uh...sorry."

Kathy gave him a sweet smile. As if I don't hear the F word every day, she thought.

"So can I work with you?" she asked.

"Uh...sure. Why not?" he answered. "Tomorrow I'll explain what I'm planning to do here. But you might have to carry mud some times," he cautioned.

"I don't mind," she answered happily. She walked with him down to the dining hall.

The next day Hector sent her exploring for tree sap. Kathy spent most of the day gathering samples, but at the end of the work period, she was at the wall with a bottle of water for Hector. That evening, she and Hector whittled pegs and melted sap trying to find a combination that would be effective as glue.

For the next week they worked closely together. They finished building the wall, and they discovered that the sap covered pegs worked. Now that the wall was completed, it was time to dismantle the remaining cabins on the other side of the river, and move them over to the work site where they would be reassembled on top of the wall and the rock ledge.

But before they began to reassemble the cabins, Hector took the bus up to the logging camp, and he filled it with old branches, scrap timber, and the ends of logs. He drove the bus back to the camp, and the kids stacked this wood into the space between the wall and the ledge. They would use this lumber for firewood during the winter.

Hector was impressed with Kathy's intelligence and her knowledge of wood. And she was a fast learner. He could show her something once, and she would quickly understand. He showed her how to place braces under the floors of the cabins using log posts. She found some string, and she used it to measure the distances for the rest of the posts, thereby speeding up the work.

He found himself spending a lot of time in her company discussing the construction of the Lodge. Once, when she was scrambling along some scaffolding that he had built, he told her that she looked like a cat. They laughed together, and after that he started calling her, Kat.

He liked spending time with Kathy, he realized. He wasn't that much older than some of the kids, but he didn't feel that he had much in common with them. Sometimes he felt lonely. With Kathy, he had someone to talk to about something that he enjoyed.

And she was nice. It seemed like she always had a bottle of water for him after work. And when he was exceptionally busy and was reluctant to pause for lunch, she always had a sandwich handy. It was usually peanut butter and jelly, his favorite.

"Where are you from?" asked Kathy one afternoon as they shared their dinner.

"I was born in Zacatecas," replied Hector. "In Mexico. I worked with my father who is a carpenter. But there wasn't enough work, and my parents have five other children. So when I was twenty one, I road the bus to Ciudad Juarez, and I snuck across the border. From there I made my way to California. I got a job on this logging crew. They work all over the west. They needed workers, and they didn't ask questions. They usually paid us in cash. What about you, Kat. Where do you come from?"

"I was born in Concord, California. I lived in a small place called Clayton Valley. My Dad told me that it used to be a quiet country area, but now there are houses everywhere. There's a mountain nearby. Mount Diablo. It's not that high, and you can drive all the way to the top. I used to go there with my family, and we would have picnics."

He thought about that one evening after he had retired to his cabin. It was the last one standing on that side of the river. The others had been disassembled and reassembled on the wall. He was thinking that Kathy was unlike the other girls.

The other girls were much sillier, he thought. She wasn't athletic like Yuie, but she was strong. She could carry those buckets of mud tirelessly. She wasn't bossy like Desi could be, but if he needed her to supervise other kids, she could get the job done.

She wasn't like Erin, of course. Erin had those magnificent breasts. Kathy was still developing. But she was perfectly formed. And she did have a really cute face. He liked her lovely blue eyes. He loved the way those beautiful blond bangs fell down sometimes and covered her face. She really needed a haircut. And once, he had seen her in a towel coming out of the showers. Her legs were exceptional. She certainly had a cute butt. He could tell from those tight designer jeans that she was always wearing. He wondered how

it would feel to caress that cute butt. He wondered how it would feel...

He was jolted back to reality. What was he thinking? She was only fourteen. And a half. He was twenty three. He couldn't be thinking of her that way. He sternly told his body to settle down. Way down.

Unfortunately, in the following days, it seemed as if he was more aware of her physical presence than ever. And she was always inadvertently touching him, putting her hand on his shoulder or chest or back, or leaning back against him when he helped her lift a section of wall.

It started to drive him crazy. Once, when her denim covered bottom backed against his groin, he had to take off his cap and hold it over himself while pretending to be deep in thought. He began to think that he would either have to grab her and hold on for dear life, or else flee back to the logging camp. At night, in the privacy of his bed, he futilely tried to think of someone else. He tried being less familiar and more formal with her. Then, for some reason, she stopped wearing those tight jeans, and she switched to her skirts. Her short skirts.

One day she was standing on a plank laid across a pair of rough sawhorses. She asked him to help her while she rebolted a section of cabin wall. Obliging, he stood behind her, and he gripped the plank firmly to steady it. He felt a sudden gust of wind, and suddenly the rear of her little short skirt flew up to her waist. During the day, her panties had worked themselves up between her cheeks. There, before him, was presented the most wonderful twin moons that it had ever been his privilege to behold. Apparently she did not know what had happened. She continued to concentrate on the bolt. Startled, he almost pulled the plank out from under her.

As soon as she finished, he excused himself and went to Chief's Headquarters to see Mike. John and Desi happened to be there. Hector told Mike that Kathy might be better off working in some other capacity.

"She's not doing her work?" asked Mike.

"No, no, her work is just fine. Better than fine. She's good at everything she tries."

"Is she causing a problem on the crew?"

"Uh, no, not exactly."

"So, it's because she has the hots for you?" guessed Mike.

Hector's jaw dropped. "What did you say?"

"Gee, Hector," said Mike in an exasperated tone of voice. "I'm about the most clueless guy here when it comes to the girls, and even I knew that Kathy wants to be your girlfriend." John and Desi broke into laughter.

"Oh," said Hector feeling very foolish and somewhat disgruntled.

"Talk to her, Hector," suggested Desi.

"Yeah, dude," said John. "Women are hard enough to figure out when they do talk to you. When they don't, well, guys can't figure out shit."

"No kidding," agreed Mike. Desi just laughed.

Hector started to leave.

"Hector, it's okay to be her boyfriend, but don't forget the rules," warned Mike.

"She's a kid, Chief," Hector growled. "I wouldn't touch her."

Hector went back to the job site. He didn't know what to say to Kathy. The other kids left. He and Kathy were alone. Abruptly he said, "I'm too old for you, Kat."

Kathy stopped what she was doing. She turned to look at Hector. She had a serious look on her face, and she didn't pretend not to know what he was talking about.

"I know that would be true in the old world, Hector," said Kathy. "But I don't think that's true in this world."

"But..." He tried to think of something to say, but it seemed that his brain had ceased to function.

"I'm sorry if I make you feel bad, Hector," she said mournfully.

"Jeez." He put one arm around her neck, and he drew her close to him. "Kat, I just worry that it would be better for you to have someone closer to your age."

She put her arms around him, and she leaned her head against his chest. For a minute they stood there, and then Kathy said, "Hector?"

"Yes, Kat?"

"Can I wear your cap?" she asked quietly. She held her breath. After a moment, Hector sighed, took his cap off, and placed it on Kathy's head. Grinning, she stepped back and reversed the brim.

"Can I tell the other girls that you're my boyfriend? Please! Please!" she begged. "They'll be so jealous."

He smiled an exasperated smile. "Okay, go ahead."

"Yes!" she squealed, and she threw herself back into his arms. They stood like that for a few minutes enjoying the feel of each other, and then, linking arms, they started walking down to the dining hall.

"So, do you prefer me in jeans or in skirts?" Kathy asked mischievously.

"If I see you working in that skirt again, I'm gonna smack your butt," warned Hector.

"Yes, sir," responded Kathy demurely.

"And don't think we're going to do anything more than hold hands," grumbled Hector.

"I know the rules," responded Kathy. I can't wait until I get a taste of your tongue, she thought. I hope you like mine.

For the most part, the kids took the news of Hector and Kathy good naturedly. Of course, being teenagers they had to razz them. Late the next day, Erin and her friends were sitting in their favorite spot under the wall.

"That Kathy," grumbled one girl. "I said I wanted him first."

"No you didn't," disagreed another girl. "You just said that he was cute. I'm the one who said that I wanted him for my boyfriend."

"No, you said maybe you wanted him for your boyfriend."

"Erin, why do you think that Kathy wants Hector for her boyfriend?" ask a girl. "He doesn't seem like he would be her type. She always seemed to be afraid of older guys."

Erin thought about it. "Maybe fear is the reason," she answered. "It's hard not to be scared when we stop and think about our situation." The other girls nodded. "Maybe she feels safer when he's around."

"That Kathy," grumbled the first girl again.

Erin smiled. "Don't blame Kathy because she took a chance. We know what a chicken she used to be. She decided to be brave for once." Way to go, Kathy, she said to herself.

When the first row of rooms was finished, Hector used the fork lift to move the next group of floors up to the second level. This meant that both boys and girls were sleeping in the dining hall. It was very crowded, and they had very little privacy. Most of the girls had pajamas that covered them, but some had to borrow heavy shirts from the boys to be decent. Mike kicked the girls out of Chief's Headquarters, and he reclaimed his space for the first time in weeks.

Once the second group of floors was installed, Mike allowed the girls to occupy the first floor. There was still very little privacy, but at

least, except for John, there were no boys around. The one safety rule that Mike required was that anyone not working on the lodge had to stay out of the construction area during the day.

By the end of the first week of September, the rooms were done. Hector had built a parapet with rails along the edge of the upper rooms, and he built ladders that the kids would use to access the second floor. Hector used the cabin canvas tops to screen the individual rooms. Now they had to build a roof.

Hector had already vetoed the idea of laying the logs from the front of the rooms to the ground above the cave. Instead he used a scissors machine to raise four combinations of three logs tied together to be columns that ran from the floor of the cave to the ceiling of the cave. The middle log was a little shorter than the others, so that a space was created between the outer logs. Then a log was run between the spaces, so that it became a beam. Once Hector was satisfied that the columns and beams were stable, he used a block and tackle to position logs from the top of the rooms to the top of the beam. He covered these logs with black plastic, and then he laid a layer of smaller logs over it. It was certainly not airtight, and there was a large gap between the beams and the ceiling of the cave so that smoke could escape, but it was close enough to retain most of the heat from a central fire. Hector was worried that there would be too much smoke in the lodge, but by using only old wood they kept it manageable. Hector used the rest of the black plastic roll to insulate the outer walls of the cabins as best he could.

"Will it leak?" Mike asked dubiously as he studied the roof.

"Hell, yes, it will leak," answered Hector. "But it will get us by for the winter. Next year I'll make wood shingles. That should stop most of the leaks."

Jacob had gone hunting, and he killed a deer at the beginning of September. Mike found a jig saw in his tool chest, and they used it to cut the deer into pieces that they could store in the freezer. Some of the kids were reluctant to eat the venison, but most of them were glad to have the meat once they had a taste of it.

Mike wanted to save the canned food for as long as possible, so he sent out parties to hunt for rabbits, to catch birds, and to look for eggs in their nests. He allowed them to use the bows and arrows and their spears but not the firearms. He usually sent them in teams of four. In late September, Mike sent Howard on a hunting trip. With Howard were Eric, and the twins, Kevin and Nathan.

"Go east along the river for a day and a half," ordered Mike. Then spend the rest of the day, and until noon on the next day, hunting. Then start back. Look around. See what the area is like."

Mike was not hoping for a lot of success. His real purpose was for the members of the hunting party to get acclimated to the wild. He thought that they needed kids other than Jacob to be comfortable in the mountains and in the forest.

Once the hunting party had left, Mike went to talk to Hector. "I told Jacob that I would check on Mrs. Brown. Take Eric and Jacob and go see how she's doing."

Hector and the boys rode the pickup to the farm, stopping a safe distance away. Mary met them with her shotgun.

"Hello, Mrs. Brown," called Jacob.

"Hello, again, Jacob," she replied. "Who's that with you?"

"This is Eric from my camp and this is Hector; he's from the logging place." Our Chief sent us to see if you needed any help or maybe some food. We can share some."

She hesitated. The boys were okay, but the man worried her. "Well, come on in, then." The trio from the camp spent the morning looking over her place. They discussed swapping rice and dry cereal for potatoes and milk. The farm lady milked her cow every day, and her cow produced more than she and her children needed.

"I've got two big freezers so I could freeze the milk. It's not as good frozen as it is fresh, and it's good for only a few weeks, but it will do in a pinch. I can send some butter, too. I've got a lot of that."

"Wow," said Eric. "You can make butter? Real butter, not margarine?" Mary nodded. "Do you have, like, a churn that you use to make the butter? Do you have to pump it up and down?" Eric asked eagerly.

Mary laughed. "Fraid not, Eric. I use a blender and ice to make butter. I wish I could offer you more, but my husband was supposed to pick up our supplies for the summer. Except for milk and butter, the freezers are pretty empty."

Eric was especially interested in the solar room which could only be accessed from the barn. Mary had filled buckets with dirt, and she was growing cucumbers and tomatoes on trellises.

"Why do you have all these barrels of water in here?" Eric asked.

"I wondered about that too, when my husband, Davis, put these fifty five gallon drums in here. He said that water loses heat slowly.

He was right. It can be zero degrees outside, and if we have a sunny day; it will be too warm to stay in here without opening the door to the barn. And if we shut the door before the sun goes down, these barrels will warm this room for a long time."

Eric had a sudden idea. "Hector, could we move the solar panels from the dining hall to the roof of the Lodge."

"Yes, I could do that. But why? The roof of the Lodge is too high to use gravity to supply the water."

Eric was thinking. "What about making a closed system? What if we used the solar water pump from Chief's Headquarters to circulate hot water to barrels inside the Lodge? Wouldn't that keep the Lodge warmer?"

Hector was struck by the thought. "You're right, amigo. It would help a lot. And at night the solar pump will automatically shut down. The hot water in the barrels will stay there. We wouldn't have to burn so much wood. We could save wood, and it would not be as smoky. But, I don't think there are any usable barrels at the logging camp. I know there's a few in the storage room that we have for our recycles, but they don't have tops like these barrels."

Mary was listening. "I could lend you four barrels," she said. "That would help a little. My problem is going to be wading out here in the snow to milk our cow. We have a solar milking machine, but it still requires someone to attach it to the cow. My husband always did that in the winter. And when the sun doesn't shine, I have to milk the cow by hand."

"I wish I could come up and help you, Mary," said Hector. "But we have to save the gasoline. I don't think that we are going to get anymore."

"There'll be lots of times when the snow will be so deep that you couldn't even make it through, Hector," said Mary. The trio returned to the camp after eating lunch at the farm.

"Sounds like you had a successful visit," said Mike when they reported. "I hope Howard's group does as well."

Meanwhile, Howard led his party up the small river. It was much smaller now. In some places it could be waded through, even along the section by the camp. They had to be careful though. When it rained hard, it was not uncommon for the small river to become a raging torrent.

It started raining that afternoon. Everyone who attended the camp had been required to bring a poncho, and Mike had insisted

that they take them on this trip. Now they were glad that he had.

"I guess that's why he's the Chief," said Kevin grumpily as he stumbled along the path.

"I wish I was back at the Lodge," complained Nathan.

"You begged Mike to let you come with us," Eric reminded him.

"Yeah, but I didn't know that it was going to rain."

It rained lightly off and on that afternoon, and then stopped just as they were making camp. Once they were in their makeshift tent it began raining again, only now it rained much harder. They were thankful that there was no lightning. They passed the night cramped but dry.

Early the next morning, the knocking sounds of a white headed wood pecker woke them. They continued their journey into the dark green forest. At noon they stopped to eat, and then they spread out to look for game. Jacob had taught them how to make snares. By the end of the day, they had caught four rabbits and five grouse. They placed their catch in doubled plastic bags and built a fire. They roasted two of the rabbits for dinner to save the food that they had brought with them.

Although the wet conditions made them somewhat uncomfortable, it was fun to sit around the camp fire and talk. It was the usual boy talk, about animes and games they liked, and about the various attributes, mostly physical, of girls that they liked. Sometimes they talked about their lost homes and families, but this tended to depress them. They stayed up later than they should have, and then they crawled into their sleeping bags when it began to rain again.

The next morning it was still raining, and no one was much inclined to hunt. Still, the cramped conditions in the tent forced the restless boys to get out and look around. It was almost noon, and Howard was striking the tent, when Nathan came running into the area calling, "Howard! Howard!"

"What is it?" asked Howard.

"There's a lady back there," Nathan said pointing to where he had been. "I think she's dead."

Chapter Six

Howard and Jean

Quickly, Howard called the rest of the boys, and they hurriedly followed Nathan. Ten minutes later, they came to a clump of small redwood trees. In the midst of the trees they saw a human form lying face down on the ground. The long reddish hair indicated that it was, indeed, a female.

Howard kneeled by the body, and he turned it over. As he did so, it let out a painful groan. It was a young woman. Howard noticed right away that she was wearing the uniform of a United States Forest Ranger. Her uniform was filthy and torn. There was a smell about the Ranger as if she had not bathed in a long time.

One of the redwoods had a partially hollow area at its base. The boys carefully moved the young woman into the hollow so that she was out of the rain. There was room for one other person in the hollow, so Howard crept into the space. He felt helpless. He didn't know what to do.

He said to Eric, "Give me your canteen." Carefully Howard pressed the canteen to the woman's lips, and he let a few drops into her mouth. Immediately she coughed, and then she tried to raise her head toward the canteen. Howard tipped the canteen a little more, and she began to drink thirstily. She took several swallows, and then she lay back. Her eyes opened for a moment, and then they closed. She fell asleep. Howard shook her, forcing her to wake up. He made her drink some more water, and then he allowed her to lie back and sleep.

"What are we going to do?" asked Eric anxiously.

Howard thought for a moment, and then said, "You three go back to the camp. Tell Mike what happened. I sure he'll send someone to help. I'm going to stay with her. Leave me all the food. Eat the other rabbits tonight. Try to hurry tomorrow, but be careful. Nathan, Kevin, I'm putting Eric in charge."

"The Geek is in charge?" questioned Nathan with a dubious glance at Eric. Kevin grimaced.

Howard's eyes flashed. "Eric was a Spear before I was," he said fiercely. "If you guys give him any trouble, Mike's gonna kick your asses, and you'll never get to go out again." The twins turned startled eyes toward Eric. They had not known that about him.

"Hey, just kidding, Howard," answered Nathan hastily. "We know the rules." Kevin nodded.

"Better get moving, Eric," said Howard. "Good luck."

"You too," replied Eric. He and the twins quickly vanished back the way they had come.

When they got back to their gear, Eric changed the plan slightly. "I'm going to take some food, water and two sleeping bags back to Howard," he explained. "You guys are going to have to share a bag tonight."

"All right," the twins said. Eric hurried back to Howard.

"I brought you two sleeping bags," explained Eric. "Your's and Kevin's. He and Nathan can share for one night."

"Thanks, man," said Howard gratefully. He had not thought of that. Eric left the food and water and disappeared again.

Howard turned to the woman. She was asleep, and she seemed to be breathing normally. He wondered if she was just extremely fatigued. She was soaked, of course. There was not enough room to make a fire in their shelter, and it was raining again outside. He decided to put her in one of the sleeping bags.

Howard unzipped a sleeping bag, and he positioned it by her feet. He removed her shoes and socks. He started to tug the sleeping bag over her legs, but then he stopped. Her pants were soaked. Should he remove her pants? He quailed at the thought.

You have to do it, he told himself sternly. You can't put her in the bag while she's wet. He felt his heart start to pound as he unbuckled her belt. He hesitated, and then he pulled her pants down. Trying to avoid looking at her, one by one, he carefully lifted her feet and pulled off her pants. Next, he unbuttoned her shirt and awkwardly pulled her arms out of the sleeves. He wondered if she would suddenly awaken and beat the crap out of him. Finally, he had her shirt removed. She was soaked to the skin.

Now he faced a terrible dilemma. Should he remove her underwear? I can't do it, he thought. It's not right. She will kill me, or Mike will hang me. Still, maybe he should. If only it were dark. He looked outside. It would be hours before darkness set in. He needed to get her warm and dry.

He argued with himself for minutes, before he thought. What if it were me? Would I want her to take off my briefs? He finally decided that if their positions were reversed, he would want her to get him dry, however she did it. So he did it. Then hastily he pulled the

bag up over her legs. Then he lifted her using one arm under her back, and he pulled the bag over her hips. Eventually, he got her all the way into the sleeping bag, so that it was up to her neck.

Howard felt exhausted. He thought he had never worked so hard in his life. He took off his clothes, climbed into the other bag, and he slept. When he woke, the sun was low in the sky. It had stopped raining. He got out of the bag, and he put on his damp clothes. Note to Mike, he thought. Always take an extra set of clothes on these trips.

Howard crawled out of the tree and stood. He stretched and walked around for a few minutes. Then it began to rain again, and he crawled back into the shelter.

The woman began to make waking noises. As he watched, her eyes fluttered open. She seemed dazed. Howard took a piece of bread and held it to her lips. She ate it hungrily. He had brought a thermos of powdered drink which he helped her to drink. That was all the energy that she could muster. She lay back and fell asleep again.

The sun went down, and it got cold. Howard thought that it was the coldest night yet. He used his LED flashlight to check on the woman. She was shivering. Howard thought about climbing into the bag with her, but there was not enough room for the two of them. It was difficult, but he managed to unzip both bags and then zip them together. He was probably already in a lot of trouble anyway he decided, so he took off his damp clothes except for his briefs, and he got into the combined bags. He lay there next to her for a few minutes, but she did not stop shivering. Now thoroughly alarmed, he pulled her into his arms and held her. Soon, she stopped shivering. Howard felt her relax. She sighed in her sleep. Gradually, his eyes closed. He slept.

He awoke in dim light. He was still holding the woman. Trying to be quiet, he crept out of the bag. He looked out of their shelter. It was still very cold, but he crawled out, so that he could stand for a moment. His body was sore, and he felt very tired. He crawled back inside. He looked at the woman and froze. Her eyes were open and she was staring at him.

"Who are you?" she demanded. Another red head, she noted, seeing his long hair.

"I'm Howard."

"I'm naked," she said indignantly.

"I'm really really sorry about that," Howard answered hastily.

"You were really wet. I mean really really soaked. So I thought that I should..." He trailed off.

"You thought that you should take my clothes off. Wasn't that nice of you?" She scowled at him.

"I'm sorry. I thought that was what I should do."

"Where are they?"

"What?"

"My clothes!"

"Uh...look over here. See? I got a stick, and I hung them on the stick, and I leaned it inside this tree. I was hoping they would dry. But they didn't."

"And my underwear?"

"I put them in your pockets."

Howard could see that she was thinking about that.

"Are there any others with you," she asked suspiciously.

"Not now. I sent the others back to the camp to tell the Chief that we found you. I'm sure that he will send help. You looked kind of sick, so I stayed with you."

"Hm..." She just stared at him.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "I have some food. What's your name?"

She seemed to relax slightly. "I'm Jean. And yes, please. I'm very hungry." Howard gave her a sandwich, an apple and a can of wieners. She ate them ravenously, and then she drank a bottle of water.

"I've got more," said Howard. "But maybe you should wait for a little while before you eat again. Do you have any food?"

"Not for three days now. I managed to get water. Where did you find me?" asked Jean.

"Right here, outside this tree. I didn't want to move you, so we put you in here. Then I sent the other three for help."

"How soon will they be back?" she asked.

"They will get back to our camp late today. I imagine that the Chief will send someone tomorrow. They should be here the day after tomorrow."

Time enough to obtain some information, Jean thought. There is time enough to decide whether or not I should get the hell away from here. If he is not lying to me.

"Tell me about your camp," said Jean.

So Howard talked about the camp. He told her about the

Lodge that they were building. He kept mentioning someone he called, the Chief, which she took to be the man in charge.

At one point, she heard Howard mutter, "I hope he doesn't hang me for this." Her heart raced when she heard that. She feared the worst.

"You don't mean that, do you?" she asked. "He wouldn't really hang you, would he? I mean, it's not like he has actually hanged someone, has he?"

Howard looked at her. "Yes," he replied seriously. "He did hang a man. And I helped him. But the man killed two of our people, and he raped two of our girls. But no, I know he won't hang me. He might be pissed at me though."

Damn it, thought Jean. What have I got myself into? "So what will he do to you?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Howard darkly. "Maybe have the Spears smack me around some. Serve's me right, I guess, for taking off your clothes."

Jean stared at him in surprise. "He might have you smacked around for taking off my clothes?" she asked.

"Maybe. He's got pretty strict rules where girls are concerned."

"Is he the only one who decides, or will the majority rule?"

"Oh, he's in charge. There's no doubt about that. But he usually asks other people for their opinion. He's got, like, a council of people that he always asks. I'm in it. Most of us are the Spears. We get a vote on lots of things. And our girlfriends get a vote usually. And a couple of girls are on the Council, too," explained Howard.

"So your girlfriend gets a vote because she's your girlfriend," stated Jean.

"That's right. Not that I have a girlfriend," added Howard. And I'll probably never have one after this, he thought gloomily.

Male dominated society, thought Jean. Typical of what happens when civilization reverts to a more primitive situation. But it doesn't sound too bad. They seem to have a brute of a man controlling them, but it sounds like it's not a total dictatorship. At least he asks for varying opinions. Maybe I can live there until I feel better. And maybe I can use this kid.

"You know," began Jean. "I don't have to tell the Chief that you took off my clothes."

"Really?" Howard perked up. "You're not mad at me for that?"

"Not really. It was in a good cause, I suppose," said Jean

magnanimously.

"Oh, thank you," responded Howard. "You know," he continued eagerly, "I was thinking that I could make a fire and dry out your pan...I mean your underwear. At least you could wear them."

Jean blinked. "At least," she agreed. By noon, Howard had delivered a dry pair of panties and her bra to Jean.

"Uh...they got a little singed," he explained with a sheepish look.

Jean took her scorched underwear, looked at them and sighed. "They'll have to do," she said sadly. "Could you...," she pointed to the entrance to their shelter.

"Oh, sure," said Howard, and he quickly crawled out of the tree.

Jean put on her underwear. At least they were warm from the fire. She crawled over to her other clothes, and she felt them. Too wet, she decided. Much, too wet. She thought about it and shrugged, and then she crawled out of the tree. Howard was standing by the fire. He glanced at her, and then he quickly looked away.

"It's okay, Howard," Jean said. "We're going to be spending the day together, so it's no use trying to avoid looking at me. So take a good look right now, and get over it."

Nervously, Howard looked at her, swiftly moving his eyes up and down. Then he stared into her eyes and exclaimed, "Wow, you're beautiful!"

Jean almost laughed, but she kept her composure and replied politely, "Thank you." She had no doubt that Howard would think that any woman under the age of thirty would be beautiful, if she were dressed only in her panties and bra.

Howard looked away. Well, that was dumb, he thought. She's probably been told a million times that she's beautiful, and by a lot cooler guys than me.

Howard gave Jean more food, and Jean quickly wolfed it down. She was feeling better than she had in a long time, except that she felt the beginning of a headache.

It was warmer, but Jean was feeling chilled, so she crawled into the shelter, and then into the sleeping bag. Howard followed her into the shelter. Jean looked around.

"So where's your sleeping bag?" she asked. Howard looked at her, and he blushed. Jean's eyes narrowed. She looked at her bag more carefully.

"This is a double bag," she stated. "Where did you sleep last

night, Howard?"

"You were cold! You were shivering. I didn't know what else to do."

"So you thought that it would be a good idea to share bags, huh? Share body heat? With a helpless naked woman?"

"You're not going to tell the Chief, are you?" asked Howard feeling doomed.

Jean glared at him. "Were you naked, too?"

"No! I kept my briefs on."

"Your briefs." Jean thought about that. "All right. It's our secret then."

"Thanks, Jean," replied Howard with a sigh of relief. Howard wished he wasn't so tense and nerdy in Jean's presence.

Jean and Howard talked some more, but eventually her aching head made her want to sleep again. She closed her eyes, but after a while, she realized that she was not really warm. How can I get warm, she thought? She winced.

"Howard," she called. He was just outside, and he quickly crawled into the shelter.

"Jean, what is it. Are you okay?"

"Howard, I'm cold."

"Oh. I'm sorry, but there's no room to make a fire in here."

"Howard."

"Yeah?"

"Get in the bag."

Howard stared at her. Then he smiled. For some reason he didn't feel quite as dumb now. "You want me to get in the sleeping bag?"

"Got it on the first guess."

"With you?"

"Smart man."

"While you're wearing nothing but your underwear?"

"What? Do you want me to get naked again?" she exclaimed.

"Get in the bag!"

Howard started to get into the bag.

"Take your clothes off, first," said Jean wearily.

Howard paused, looked at her, and then he removed all his clothes except for his briefs. He got in the bag. They lay stiffly side by side.

"I'm not warm yet," muttered Jean.

"Lift up," said Howard. Jean lifted her upper body, and then Howard put his right arm under her shoulders. He pulled her on to him, so that her face was lying in the crook of his arm against his chest. He realized that she was somewhat shorter than him. He realized that he didn't feel doomed any longer. In fact, he felt good. He felt damn good.

"Are you warmer?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she replied drowsily. She fell asleep. After a little while, he did too.

Slowly, Jean realized that she was awake. She had trouble remembering where she was until, lifting her head; she looked into the face of the young man sleeping next to her. She felt hot, and groggy. It seemed to her as if she was in some kind of dreamlike state.

For a moment, she wondered if she was dead, if she had died after she had fallen, tired, worn out from two months of living in the forest, and terribly hungry. She remembered the rain beating down on her back. She remembered trying to rise and then failing. After that, she had accepted that she would die there beneath the trees. She went into her head, into a peaceful place. Her only regret was that she would never know what had happened to the world.

But no, she thought. She was not dead. This kid named Howard had found her. Had brought her back to life. Had fed her, and had given her water. Had sheltered her, and had warmed her. A warm feeling of gratitude flowed through her. She smiled at the sleeping boy. What the hell, she thought? So, what if he had seen her naked?

"You deserved it, Babe," she whispered. "You saved my life."

The whisper woke Howard. He opened his sleepy eyes to see the woman smiling at him. Then, to his surprise, she pulled his face close, and she kissed him. She slid her tongue into his mouth, explored, and then withdrew.

"Hi," she said cheerfully.

"Uh, hi," he responded.

"That's for saving my life," she added.

"Oh. You're welcome," he said. He was suddenly aware of her semi nudity. His body responded. She laughed. He blushed, and he tried to maneuver slightly.

"Don't worry about it, Babe," she said dreamily. Howard looked at her closely. He put a hand to her forehead.

"You're burning up!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, it is hot," she murmured, and then she complained, "My head hurts." A chill went through the boy. She was sick. She was sick, and there was nothing that he could do about it. He got out of the sleeping bag and retrieved his wet shirt. He pressed the shirt to her forehead. He opened the bag, even though she complained, and he let in some air, trying to cool her down.

Slowly, through the day, Jean seemed to worsen. The only thing Howard could do was to bathe her hot body with his wet shirt. That night was the darkest point for Howard since he had realized that he would never again see the grandparents who had raised him. Jean was not quite delirious, but in some kind of dream state where she alternated between thanking him for saving her life and then complaining that he had. He found himself begging her to live.

When morning came, Howard decided that they could not stay in the tree another night. He had to get Jean to the others. He thought that if they walked back towards the camp, they might meet the rescue party before sundown.

When Jean woke, he told her his plan. She was dubious, but she said that she felt better. He rolled up the sleeping bags, and he tied them to his backpack. Then he realized that, although his clothes had dried, her clothes were still wet. He debated having her wear them anyway, but finally, he made her put on his pants and shirt. He had to roll up the sleeves, but he made it work.

She complained about having to wear his clothes, and she insisted on wearing her own, but he used rough language with her; told her that, like it or not, she was going to wear his clothes and to shut up. She did, and he was surprised at her passiveness, until he realized that it was a reflection of how sick she was. Walking slowly, he wearing only his briefs and boots, they left the shelter of the redwood tree.

They stopped frequently, but by noon she was exhausted. They crawled into the sleeping bags for two hours, and then he asked her if she could continue. Gamely she stood, and they continued their difficult journey. That afternoon, they had to stop sooner and rest longer. At the end, with two hours to go until sundown, Jean fell down. She could not go any farther.

"Go on, Babe," she mumbled. "You can come back for me."

Howard was frantic. He got down on his knees, and he forced her to get onto his back. Then, stumbling occasionally, he made his

way down the trail, her arms wrapped around his neck, his hands under her legs.

"You don't give up, do you, Babe," she whispered.

"My grandparents taught me to be stubborn, I mean determined," he replied. He heard a little laugh.

"How old are you?" she asked sleepily.

"Seventeen. I had a birthday in August. How old are you?"

"Twenty four. I've been a Forest Ranger for two years. Do you think that this Big Chief of yours will let me stay at your camp? I'll be another mouth to feed."

"I think so. Of course, he will. What should I tell him about you?"

"Tell Big Chief that I'm your long lost girlfriend. Girlfriends get to vote, huh?" murmured Jean.

"Yes. All right, I'll tell him that you're my girlfriend. But I have to warn you. I was raised to be a very traditional man. I'll expect to be obeyed."

She let out a soft snort. "Dream on. Tell you what. I'll obey you one time. Only once, but whatever you tell me I'll do."

"Yeah, right," scoffed Howard.

"No, I'm serious. My word is good, and I'm giving you my word. One time. Whenever. Use it wisely." Jean slumped on his back.

They made their way down the trail until dark, and then they stopped. Howard was exhausted and defeated. He strained to listen for the sound of voices, but he heard nothing. They found shelter of a sort under an overhanging cliff. As they were unrolling their bags it started to snow. They zipped their bags together, and they snuggled together. Jean had improved during the day, but now she seemed to worsen again. Howard held Jean close and prayed, and then he fell asleep. Gradually a sprinkle of snow covered the tops of their heads.

That is how Jacob found them early the next morning.

Urgently he shook them. The smaller red head opened her bleary eyes and blinked them. "Hi, I 'm Howard's girlfriend," she said.

Jacob considered that. "You just met him," he replied.

"Never judge the depth of a relationship by the length of its existence," she lectured. She yawned and went back to sleep.

Jacob saw that Howard was waking. Howard looked at Jacob and gave a start. "Jean!" he exclaimed.

"Your girlfriend is okay, I think," said Jacob. "She woke up, but then she went back to sleep. Found them!" This was called out to

the rest of the rescue party hurrying up the path.

Howard saw Ralph, Rasul, Ahmad and Yuie. Quickly, they provided thermoses of warmed water to Howard and Jean. Then they placed Jean on a stretcher that Hector had made from tree limbs and a blanket. Howard leaned on Yuie as the other four boys carried Jean back down the mountain. The sky had cleared during the night. It was still cold, but Mike had thought to send a fresh set of clothes, including two pairs of socks, for Howard.

"Who is she," asked Ralph as they walked.

"Howard's girlfriend," answered Jacob.

Jean woke the next day in a comfortable bed. By the light, she could tell that it was well into the morning. She was bone tired. Her muscles ached when she sat up. She saw a short silent sandy haired young boy and a slightly taller black haired Asian girl staring at her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"This is the Chief's Headquarters," the girl said. Jean thought about that, and then her eyes narrowed.

"And is this the Big Chief's bed?" she asked sharply.

"Um.... yes," came the reply.

"Listen," Jean said seriously. "I want you to tell Big Chief that I already have a boyfriend. Howard." She fell back and closed her eyes. The two kids looked at one another.

Jean suddenly sat up again. "And tell Big Chief that Howard and I have already done it. Three times." She lay back down and closed her eyes.

"Um...gee," said the girl to the boy who was scowling.

Jean sat up again. "And tell Big Chief that I'm probably pregnant." She lay back down, and presently she began to snore.

The boy motioned for the girl to follow him out of the building. "Get Howard," he said.

"Now don't be hasty, Chief," said the girl.

"Get Howard. Now!"

"Yes, sir," the girl muttered, and she fled.

Howard appeared with Yuie a few minutes later.

"Did you do it with that woman while she was sick?" demanded Mike.

"Oh, Howard!" exclaimed Yuie.

"What? No! No, I didn't do anything except take off all her clothes!"

"Oh, Howard!" repeated Yuie.

Howard felt his stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick," he moaned. Mike and Yuie sprang away as Howard leaned forward and vomited.

Jean woke a few times that day. She began to feel much better. The boy was usually around. She wondered if Big Chief had assigned him the role of helping her. Or maybe he was guarding her. Was she a prisoner? Big Chief had not appeared yet, and she was getting anxious. She slept well that night, and the following morning she woke refreshed. Mike, she had learned the boy's name, was sitting at the desk.

"So, I hear that Big Chief is a real tough guy, Mike," she said casually to the boy, trying to probe for some information.

The boy looked at her. "He's not so bad. If you don't count the times we have to stand under freezing cold water for punishment. And, of course, the beatings hurt some, but we're tough. We can take it."

Jean was shocked. And then it got worse. She heard a moan from the loft. "What's that!" she demanded as the hair stood up on the back of her neck.

There was a look of pity on Mike's face. "Poor guy. He made Big Chief mad." Jean heard another moan.

"Jeez," exclaimed Jean. I am SOL, she thought. The next moment she heard a knock, and then a man opened the door and came into the cabin. He looked directly at Mike.

"Chief, I got the four barrels from Mrs. Brown," he said. "She says thanks for the food that we sent, and she sent back a truckload of potatoes and some beets. I guess she had a good crop this year." The man looked at Jean. "Hi. I hear you're Howard's new girlfriend. I'm Hector."

"Thanks, Hector," said Mike. "If that idea Eric has for a solar heating system works it will be a lot nicer in the Lodge during the winter. I'm sending Jacob back up there to try and kill a deer for her. That should stock those freezers of hers."

"Yes, that will be nice, amigo," answered the man. "Which reminds me. Kat has finished the platform for the Porta Potties. She'll drill a starting hole and cut out the spaces for the toilets today. I need the jig saw."

Jean watched as the boy retrieved a jig saw from a large tool chest. The man and the boy talked for a few more minutes, and then the man left.

The boy looked at Jean who was glaring at him. "Freezing cold water, huh? Beatings, huh?" she asked sarcastically. "So, you are Big Chief?"

Mike giggled. "Just, Chief," he replied. A moan came from above.

"Who's that?" demanded Jean.

"That's Howard," said Mike. "Whatever you had, he caught."

"Damn!" Jean sprang out of bed. She was wearing a man's long shirt, so she didn't bother putting on her dry pants before she climbed the ladder. She found Howard lying on a futon.

"Howard," she asked anxiously. "Are you okay?"

Howard opened his dull eyes. "Oh, hi, Baby," he greeted her. "I'm fine." He looked like a sick dog. "I'm glad you're better."

Jean leaned back on her calves and sighed. "Yeah, I'm better. Thanks to you." Howard closed his eyes and slept.

Howard was sick for two days. Whenever he woke, Jean was usually at his side. Sometimes, Mike shooed her out and when he did, Jean explored the camp, marveling at the things these kids and one man had accomplished. The rough Lodge amazed her.

Everywhere she went, kids would whisper behind her back, "That's Howard's girlfriend." Some of the girls clearly were not happy about that. Jean wondered whether she should deny or confirm the rumor.

Once, when she was up in the loft, she referred to their long walk. "I still can't believe you were only wearing a pair of briefs and your boots, Howard," she marveled. "You must have been freezing."

"It's not like I could fit into your clothes, Jean," he replied.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, and then Jean murmured, "You're something else, kid"

Howard looked up at her. "I'm not a kid, Jean. Not anymore."

"Yes, that's true," she acknowledged sadly. "You're not a kid. I think that's what pisses me off most about this situation. You kids should be hanging at the mall, playing computer games, and trying to decide how to ask a girl to the prom."

"Instead of trying to decide how to get you naked again?" Howard asked with a grin.

"You!" Jean smacked him on the head.

"Owww!" yelped Howard.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry, Howard. Dammit!"

Gingerly Howard rubbed his head, and then he asked, "So, do

you think I will ever get to see you naked again?"

Jean sighed. "Maybe. But don't rush me."

"All right." Howard took her hand. "I can wait."

When Howard felt better, he left Chief's Headquarters. He was eager to see what had been accomplished in the last week. Hector had been busy. He had walled the narrow spaces between the old cabins and the edges of the cave. On the west side, he had framed an opening for a door, and then he filled it with the door that had been used to carry Jackie's body. Presently, Hector was working on what Eric called a closed solar heating system, whatever that meant.

Howard was slightly unnerved by the sight of nine of their ten Porta Potties sitting on the two cabin floors that had not been used to build the Lodge. The mobile outhouses had been moved just west of the Lodge, but they were close enough that they could be reached in seconds from the door of the Lodge.

"How are we going to empty the Porta Potties in winter," he asked. He had helped Hector and some of the other kids empty them into a gulch just above the fog, soon after Hector's appearance.

"We're not," replied Kathy. "I removed the tanks and the bottoms from the Porta Potties and cut holes in the floors under each Porta Potty."

Stunned, Howard stared at Kathy. "No!" he said.

"Yep, the stuff will go right on the ground under the floor. That way we should be good for all winter. It'll be frozen until spring, and then covering it will be a really smelly chore. I wouldn't break many rules this winter if I were you."

"Where's the last Porta Potty?"

"It's in the bottom room closest to the door. It's next to the outside wall, and Hector draped some of the cabin canvas to screen it. It's for night emergencies only. There's a hole in that floor too, and below it is one of the recycle bins. Hopefully it will stay frozen for most of the winter. Don't forget. Night emergencies only," she advised. "The rest of that cabin is for washing, since we won't have the showers. We'll collect snow in buckets, and hope that it melts. I bet we all stink by March."

The camp got a heavy snowfall a few days later. It was October now, and it was time to make the last preparations for winter. The water lines were drained in the dining hall and in Chief's Headquarters. Hector attended to the fluids in the machinery. Jacob killed three more deer. They kept two and delivered one to Mary

Brown's freezer.

The solar heating system was working. Hector had scraped together every piece of pipe that he could find, even scavenging some from the buildings at the logging camp and from the dining hall. Eric placed the barrels at the entrance to the smaller offshoot cave to reduce the size of the entrance to the small cave. If it became dangerously cold in the Lodge, the plan was to gather everyone in the small cave. There would be too many of them in there for the amount of air that could circulate, but it would let them survive for a day before the carbon dioxide level rose too high.

Mike had one last idea. He asked Hector to talk to Mrs. Brown, and she agreed to his proposal. He thought about the various members of their tribe, and then he went to talk to Ralph. He and Ralph would never be good friends, but after Jackie's death they had reached a modus operandi, so Ralph listened respectfully to Mike's idea.

"You want me to live at Mary Browns house this winter?" he asked.

"Yes, and I want you to take four kids with you. I want them to be the youngest kids. It'll be less crowded in that house if you take the smallest kids. For starters, take the twins," said Mike.

"And which girls?" asked Ralph.

"That's up to you," replied Mike. "Try to pick two that can get along well with the twins."

"Kylie and Paige then, I guess. I'll talk to them. You tell the twins," replied Ralph.

Ralph went to see the girls. "Mike wants some of us to spend the winter at Mary Brown's house. I'm going, and the twins are going. I would like you to come too."

"Why us?" asked Paige. She was a small twelve year old girl, as was Kylie. They were good friends. Both were from Tonopah, Nevada.

"Because you get along with the twins so well," replied Ralph.

Kylie wrinkled her nose. "Not that well," she said. "They are both dorks."

"You get along with them better than the other girls," responded Ralph. "And Mrs. Brown will probably let you bake cookies." Paige looked at Kylie. That was a good reason. Both girls liked to bake pastries.

"Okay," they chorused.

Mike talked to the twins, and they were agreeable to the move. The day they left, he gathered the five and talked to them.

"You are going to be guests of Mrs. Brown, so do what she says. And do what Ralph says. I'll see you guys in the spring."

Suddenly Mike realized that he didn't want them to go. They were his people! They belonged with him! He swallowed the lump in his throat, and he hugged the girls. He fist bumped with the twins. Then he turned to Ralph.

"Take care of them," he said. "Take care of yourself. Good luck, Ralph."

Ralph shook his hand. "I will. Good luck to you too, Chief." The two former foes laughed. The boys got into the bed of the pickup, and the girls squeezed into the cab with Hector. With a last wave to Mike, they were off.

The food, except for the items in the freezer, was moved to the Lodge. All of their supplies and personal items were moved. The Chief's Headquarters was stripped of everything that they could use. The bed and the desk were brought into the Lodge and put in one of the downstairs rooms. Mike felt awkward using an entire room, but the consensus of the tribe was that he needed a private room to hold meetings.

Mike was willing to give John and Desi their own room, but he was privately relieved when they told him that they had agreed to share the room with Howard and Jean. That left five available rooms. Mike gave the girls all four rooms on the upper level. Mike decided to give the two couples the room furthest from the door. He took the next one, and left the last one for six of the remaining nineteen boys. The rest of the boys were housed in the small cave.

Mike felt bad about not giving Hector a private room, but Hector assured him that it was not necessary. He would be the cave room boss, Hector added. The only one who was really unhappy about the living arrangements was Kathy who definitely thought that Hector needed his own room.

"Can't you screen off part of the cave, at least?" she asked.

"Why would Hector want to do that?" asked Mike, puzzled at her request. Kathy glanced sideways at Hector who was frowning at her.

"Well...", she began.

"Chica, I agreed that we could make out," interrupted Hector. "Don't push it." Kathy just pouted for a while.

Chapter Seven

Winter in the Lodge

The kids were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Mike sent out a few more hunting parties, although they were receiving more snow than rain now. Mike cautioned the leaders, Jacob and Howard, not to go too far. Now that everything was in place, he was anxious that there should be no injuries. So far they had been lucky. Except for Howard's adventure, the only medical problems had been scrapes and bruises. Everyone that had been invited to the camp had been required to bring a tube of Neosporin, so they had plenty.

Mike asked Erin to dream up some ways to entertain the tribe during the long months ahead. Erin formed a social committee made up exclusively of girls. The committee began by asking each of the campers what kinds of talents they had. By the time it became too cold to play outside, the committee was prepared with a variety of activities.

When it got cold enough outside, they would move their large chest freezers to a level place just outside the door, and pack snow on top of the food. The freezers held three deer along with other items. Bags of potatoes, rice, dry cereal, powdered milk, and flour were stashed under the floors of the bottom rooms along with the canned goods from the logging camp. Mike hoped they had enough. He wondered if Jacob might be able to get one more deer. He wondered how long the road would be open to Mary Brown's house, so that they could restock their butter. Mike's first meeting in his new quarters concerned their food stocks.

"So, are we going to make it, Yuie?" he asked.

"Well, our original supplies are just about gone except for some rice, cereal, flour, and powdered milk. Switching to water in July helped a lot. We used up the stuff that we found in the biker's shack and the RV. We used up the first deer that Jacob killed, but we have three more in the freezers. We have twenty bags of potatoes and ten bags of beets that Mrs. Brown sent, plus those jars of pickles. And we have lots and lots of her winter squash.

"And we have the stuff from the logging camp. They had supplies for twenty people for six months. Most of it is canned stuff, like beef stew, vegetables, and beans. There are some apples and pears left, but we ate all the oranges. There a lot of lemons, but they

are all wrinkled. We plan to use them to make lemonade. That should provide some vitamin C.

"We are rationing food, and we eat less than big men, so I think the stuff from the logging camp will last about four months. With that, the deer and the veggies from Mrs. Brown, I think we can make our food last for about five months. We could go a little longer if we rationed a little more."

"It's almost November," said Mike. "So we can make it until the end of March. We will be getting hungry after that."

"Mrs. Brown will try to grow lettuce and chard in her solar room this winter," said Hector. And she's going to try to grow cucumbers and tomatoes in five gallon buckets. But she said that she didn't expect a lot of production from the tomatoes and cucumbers until after the twenty first of March. That's when the plants will get twelve hours of sunlight. She will be making bread from her wheat crop and freezing it. The road will be passable some of the time by early March. I think she will replant her wheat and oats in April."

"I should be able to get into the forest and hunt by March," added Jacob. "And I can still get into the forest for a few weeks more. What ever I bring back, we need to eat first, and save the canned supplies for later."

"You mentioned the trout pond at the Brown farm, Jacob" said Jean. "Fish should be a good source of protein. And I'll start classes on edible plants that grow around here."

"You think that you know which plants we can eat?" asked Kathy with a dubious look.

"Hey! United States Forest Ranger here," replied Jean.

"When that calf grows up it will give milk," said Eric. The rest of them looked at him.

"No bull, shit," said John. The guys looked disgusted, and the girls giggled.

"That wasn't nice," reproved Desi.

"Sorry, Eric," said John.

"Is there anything else we are going to run out of by the end of winter?" asked Mike.

"Toilet paper," said Yuie. "Sooner or later we will have to use worn out cloth. Which we will have to wash and reuse." She shuddered.

"Holey crap," exclaimed John.

"Okay, knock it off," said Mike. "Some of you haven't heard

Jean's story, so I going to have her tell it now." He looked at Jean.

"All right, but first, I want to thank you girls for offering to give me Jackie's clothing. I know that can't have been easy for you.

"This is what happened to me. I was sent by the Forest Service in the middle of May to visit an old lookout station, Baker's Point Lookout. The idea was to see if the Service needed to destroy it to prevent possible injuries, or to restore it as a National Historical Monument.

"It coincided with my plans to take some vacation time, so I spent a few days up there, kicking back and relaxing. When I left, I ran into the stuff you call the Fog. I didn't want to drive through it, so I thought that I would take a round-about way and bypass it. Only I couldn't. Everywhere I went, I ran into it again. And before I realized, I stupidly ran out of gas. So then I left my jeep, and I tried to make my way down to civilization. I spent a month going this way and that backtracking again and again. I had my sidearm with me, so I manage to kill and eat game at first. I caught some fish from some streams. But then I ran out of bullets. Later, I found myself northeast of here. I ran across a lodge called Eagle's Retreat.

"Now, at first I thought that I was saved. But as I made my way down the hill toward the lodge, I saw two men beating the hell out of another man. So I got a lot more cautious. I went down closer to see what I could find out, but I stayed out of sight. By the time I got close to the place, the three men were gone. I waited until the next day, when I spotted a woman pinning clothes on a clothes line. So I got close enough to call quietly to her. I had a good talk with her. She said that she was a nurse.

"It seems that there are two different groups at the Retreat. There is a group of student nurses and their instructors, and there is a group of artists doing their art thing. There were a few other people staying at the lodge besides the owner and his wife. Two of these other people were elderly ladies.

"The woman I talked to said that after the people realized that they were trapped things started turning ugly. A few of the men stole some firearms from the owner, took over, and started ordering everybody around. They threatened the owner when he protested.

"At first, they said that they were organizing things so that they could survive. But then one day, the owner and his wife disappeared. They haven't been heard from since. The men said that the owner had decided to leave. The other borders didn't believe them. Then

the two older women disappeared. The men didn't even bother to explain that. They just said that it wasn't their problem. The woman I was talking to said that one of the male nurses had disappeared the day before. Also, one of the female artists had been forced into a sexual relationship by the men. They withheld food until she agreed to sleep with them.

"Anyway, I hung around for two weeks while the nurse snuck some food to me. Then, one day, as she was coming to give me some food, I saw a man following her. I don't know if she told them about me, which I doubt, or if they thought that she was stealing and stashing food. I got out of there, right then. I spent two more weeks stumbling around in the forest before your hunting party found me. I had lost all my gear. I'm sure that I would have died there at that spot, if Nathan hadn't found me."

"More people," murmured Eric.

"More bad people," added Desi.

"Sounds like some of them are good. But right now they're trapped," said Howard.

"There's nothing we can do for them now," said Mike. "But, when spring comes, who knows?"

"One more thing," said Jean. "They had goats and sheep. I saw some of both, mostly sheep, wandering around."

Erin wanted to do something for Halloween, but no one had any good ideas, except for telling ghost stories. That didn't seem like such a good idea given their predicament. In the end, they asked a few people to sing songs to mark the night. So October turned into November. The days grew colder. Jacob brought in a few more rabbits, and to the surprise of everyone, a pig.

"A boar actually," said Jacob.

"It's pig out time," exclaimed Yuie.

"I was going to say that," complained John.

The next morning they sliced the boars belly in the deserted dining hall and ate bacon and the eggs that Mary Brown had sent.

Snow began to fall more and more. Hector made a last trip to the Brown farm. He reported that things seemed to be fine at the farm. The two little kids were happily forcing their new older companions to play with them. He had helped Mary winterize her machinery.

The campers broke apart some of the boxes in which the supplies had been packed, and they used the cardboard as sleds.

Some of the kids wanted to use the emergency bathroom, but Mike declared it off limits. They had to use the outside toilets as long as possible, he said firmly.

At the beginning of November, they experienced some days when the temperature rose into the seventies, although most of the time the high was in the fifties. By the end of November, they were glad to get an occasional day when the temperature reached sixty. It became a game to see how low the temperature would reach. One night at the end of November, many of them stayed up after midnight, and at four am they watched the temperature gage drop to five degrees.

The solar heating system was working well. On days when the sun shone for several hours, it became so warm in the small cave, that the boys who preferred cooler air would take their sleeping bags into the central area of the Lodge to sleep. Some boys, who had been assigned bunks in the boys' room, traded beds with some of the boys who were sleeping in the small cave. Mike knew that eventually it would be cooler in the girls' rooms than in the cave. He was worried that a girl would request that she be allowed to sleep in the cave. What would he say, he wondered? What should he do?

As December came in, Mike realized that his birthday had passed a few weeks ago. He was fourteen. He wondered how many other birthdays had passed unnoticed and uncelebrated.

In early December they got three days of continuous snow. Mike set a curfew. Everyone had to be in the Lodge by four o'clock. There was a lot of grumbling, and when the skies cleared for the next ten days, a lot of kids thought that Mike's curfew had been premature.

Then, a week before Christmas, on a clear day when most of the restless kids had abandoned the Lodge to play outside, a sudden storm blew in around noon. The skies darkened, the clouds opened, and an enormous amount of snow began to fall.

At first, the kids ignored the snowfall, thinking only of it as a chance for more fun. Then, as the temperature began to drop precipitously, they began to seek the shelter of the Lodge. Some went to the dining hall, thinking to wait out the snowfall. They soon realized that it might be difficult to wade back to the Lodge through the blinding stuff.

Mike had the Spears scurrying to and fro, rounding up the strays, helping the kids in the dining hall make their way to the Lodge, and taking a head count. When all the bathrooms were empty and

the head count complete, they were short four campers. There was a short intense meeting in the Chief's Room.

"Chief, we have to find them!" wailed Erin. "Maria is one of the missing."

"I understand how you feel, Erin," replied Mike grimly. "But I can't allow anyone to go out in that storm."

"Maybe they are still in the dining hall, Chief," said Howard. "We could make our way to the old Chief's Headquarters and then to the dining hall and check."

"I checked it, man, I checked it," stated Ahmad. "I made sure that I was the last one out."

"They might have gone in after you checked it and left," argued Howard. "They might have been down in the parking lot or something."

"I was down there, Howard," said John. "I sure didn't see them."

"Maybe they broke into the Chief's Headquarters," suggested Desi.

"We can't let them freeze, Chief," pleaded Yuie.

"Let me think!" ordered Mike roughly. Then he turned to Jacob. "Can you make one more check around the perimeter of our camp?" he asked. "And then check the Chief's Headquarters and the dining hall." Jacob nodded.

"I'll go with him," said Jean. "It'll be safer if two people are together."

"I'll go too," said Hector.

"No!" said Mike shaking his head. "I'm only risking two."

"There are kid's out there," exclaimed Hector. "I'm going."

Mike looked up at Hector. "I said, no," he repeated quietly.

"And I'm either the Chief or I'm not." He waited.

Hector breathed out harshly. "You're the Chief," he said.

Jean and Jacob left. The others waited minute by agonizing minute. Mike, Hector and Yuie stood outside the door waiting, straining to see through the blinding snow.

Suddenly Yuie shouted, "That's them!"

A few seconds later a person came into view, and then another, and finally it was evident that there were six persons making their way back to the Lodge.

The three watchers went out to meet them. Yuie was crying and hugging Maria and the others. Erin and Ahmad came out of the

Lodge to help. Gradually, Mike got them all shepherded into the Lodge. Mike looked in wonder at Jacob and then grabbed him in a bear hug.

"Thanks, man," Mike said his voice choked with emotion.

"Found them down at the end of the meadow," said Jacob panting from the cold. "They went into the forest to look for pine cones."

"Oh, Jeez," exclaimed Mike.

"They were smart," Jacob continued. "They were following the river back. They probably would have made it to the dining hall."

"It's my fault," confessed Erin. "I remember telling them I wanted some pine cones for our Christmas decorations. But didn't think about that when they were missing."

"Never mind, Erin," said Mike. "They're safe. That's all that counts."

The close call got everyone's attention. Mike made a new rule. Until further notice, no one was to go beyond the boundaries of the camp. There was no argument when he announced the new rule. That night the mood of the tribe was subdued.

Mike found Hector for a talk. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, amigo," responded Hector. "Good call, Chief."

"I know that you wanted to go and find them, Hector," explained Mike. "But you, Jacob and Jean are the people most likely to keep the rest of us alive. I couldn't risk all three of you. And I couldn't say that to you in front of the others."

Hector smiled down at the boy, and then he laughed. "Oh, I think there is one other person much more likely to keep us all alive. But I see what you mean." Puzzled, Mike watched him walk away.

In the close quarters, Mike often dealt with irritations and eruptions between individuals. Two campers, Tyler and Gabby, seemed to have an ongoing feud. Mike was constantly hearing about Tyler teasing Gabby, or Gabby taunting Tyler. He got a little peace by threatening to tie them together for a day, even when they went to the bathroom.

A few birds had made their way into the Lodge through the gap over the beams. They were living in crevices high in the rear of the cave. Jean said that they were white throated swifts. Mike wouldn't have cared except for the mess that they made on the cave floor.

One day Mike remembered that if the old world had not disappeared he would be in school. Since Jean was the oldest of

their tribe, he asked her to organize a school. Attendance was mandatory, he told the kids, from nine in the morning until noon. After that, there would be another two hours of school, but attendance was not mandatory. Of course, his announcement was met with a chorus of obligatory boos, but most of the kids welcomed the distraction. Most even went to school in the afternoon. And Jean was surprisingly effective, some even said threatening, as a teacher.

Jean was not that happy to be selected as the teacher. These kids could act an awful lot like, well, kids. Teasing each other seemed to be their favorite pastime.

“You need a hair cut. You look like a girl.”

“I do not!”

“Do to!”

“Do not!”

“Hey! I’m trying to teach a class here,” exclaimed Jean. “I need you to concentrate on wild onions, tubers, and berries.”

“I need a hair cut.”

Jean borrowed a pair of scissors, and she cut some hair.

They had a tree for Christmas, if not a lot of presents. To Mike's great surprise and lasting gratitude, Erin and her committee presented hand made gifts to each person in the tribe. Christmas Day, they had a sing-a-long which lifted everyone's spirits. The night before, there had been a lot of silent tears, and some not so silent tears as they lay in their bunks.

Tyler and Gabby celebrated New Years Eve by putting insects in each others sleeping bags which brought new threats from Mike. Howard and John flipped a coin to see which couple would get privacy in their room that night. Howard won. Hector agreed to let Kathy zip their sleeping bags together for that one night.

"As long as you wear your pajamas," he stated his condition firmly. Kathy searched in vain for a nighty, but had to settle for her heavy pjs. Not willing to take a chance, Hector wore his trousers to bed. Still, they enjoyed the moment when the watches turned twelve. Since there were many watches, and as not all of them were synchronized, there was some dispute as to when twelve o'clock actually occurred.

And so January arrived. Mike had given the kids a holiday from school, but a few days after the first of January, some of the kids asked Jean when school would restart, so Jean reluctantly restarted her classes. It was cold, but the solar heating system and the central

wood fire kept it bearable in the central area of the Lodge. The cave was comfortable. A few girls left their bunks and slept in the central area where it was warmer.

Mike hesitated to let people use the emergency bathroom during the day, and this precipitated a crisis. One day, as the Council was gathering in Chief's Room for a meeting, John and Desi entered obviously upset with each other.

"Chief, John and I are breaking up. You need to assign us bunks," Desi announced.

"Ignore her, Chief," said John. "She's just mad. She'll get over it."

She whirled on him. "I will not get over it," she said angrily. "You hit me!"

"I smacked you a few times on your ass. And you deserved every smack," countered John.

"I don't care what you call it. You hit me. And for no good reason."

"Um...I need to use the bathroom," said Mike. He left.

"See? He didn't ask anyone's permission," barked Desi.

"He's the Chief. Besides we all know where he's going," responded John reasonably.

"Wait a second," interjected Erin in disbelief. "John, you hit Desi because she used the bathroom without your permission?"

"Yes!" shouted Desi.

"Of course not," responded John. "I smacked her butt because she didn't let me know that she was going outside."

"Ah," said Hector. "She went outside to use the bathroom, and she didn't tell you that she was going. So you spanked her for that?"

"Why should Desi have to tell you that she was using the bathroom?" demanded Jean. "Are you kinky or something."

"Any time she goes outside, I want to be informed, so that if she doesn't come back in a few minutes, I can go check on her," explained John through clenched teeth.

"Oh," came a chorus of voices, and then there was a moment of silence as the others considered John's reasoning.

"That does seem reasonable, Desi," admitted Erin.

"I don't care if it is reasonable. He had no right to hit me. I'm not a child," answered Desi.

"A woman's never too old to spank," said Howard with a laugh. He glanced at Jean who was glaring at him, and he suddenly realized

what he had said.

"Not that I believe that," he stammered hastily. "That's just something I heard somewhere."

"At least he had a good reason," grouched Kathy. "Not like you were just accidentally innocently rubbing your boyfriend, and you ended up getting a smack on the butt." Hector winced as the others snickered.

Mike came back.

"We need a new rule for everybody, Chief," said Jean. "Nobody can go outside without finding someone to keep track of how long they have been gone." The rest nodded.

"All right," said Mike. "We'll announce it tonight." The meeting went on to other items on the agenda.

Afterwards, John said to Desi, "I'm sorry. I love you. I was worried."

"All right. I forgive you. That was the third time I forgot to tell you, I admit. You know," she continued. "Mike missed that whole discussion."

"I guess that's why he's the Chief," said John.

In the middle of January the temperature plunged. The skies were dark. Hector disabled the pump so that the hot water in the barrels was not circulated outside. Gradually, it grew colder and colder in the Lodge. The girls abandoned the upstairs rooms. Then the boys in the downstairs room escaped to the relative warmth of the small cave. Finally, the two couples and Mike admitted defeat, and they moved into the central area close to the fire.

"I'm worried about the amount of wood we are using," said Hector on the fourth day of the deep freeze.

"What else can we do?" asked Mike.

"Jean says that we should all move into the boys' cave. I agree with her. Whatever heat is left in the barrels might last until this cold passes. And we will be huddled together. That will keep us a little warmer."

"All right, let's do it. And unless someone can't wait, we'll only use the emergency bathroom. But keep a small fire going," replied Mike.

Quickly the entire tribe moved into the boys' cave. The boys dismantled the girls' bunks, so that they could be moved. Soon the small cave was crammed with bunks and people. There was not enough room for all the bunks.

"Double up," said Mike.

"I want Erin," came a voice from a group of boys.

"In your dreams," sniffed Erin.

"Every night," came the rejoinder.

Gabby yelped as Tyler pretended to pull her pajamas down, and there were a hundred other human interactions as the kids dressed in all their clothes and then got into their bunks. They found that pushing their bunks together and laying their mattresses crosswise allowed them to double up their sleeping bags. Some of the boys doubled with boys, some girls doubled with girls, and some of the doubles were mixed.

There were twenty two doubles, once they had paired off. Mike found himself sharing his bag and Yuie's bag. This made it warm enough to be comfortable. There was a lot of joking, a lot of teenage sexual innuendo, and a lot of snide comments. Someone told a story. Someone sang a song. Then, during a pause, came the sound of real music.

"What's that?" asked several people.

"It's Hector playing his harmonica," explained Kathy. There was silence for awhile as Hector played. Night came and passed. Dawn was a drear light. Jacob got up, and he checked outside.

"Still cloudy," he said when he came back. "And it's snowing again." There were too many in immediate need of the bathroom to use only the emergency bathroom, so precious heat was wasted each time someone went outside.

Mike gathered his Council together. "What are we going to do," he asked. There was no answer.

The tribe went back into the cave, and they got into their sleeping bags. As the day wore on, it got colder and colder in the cave. To avoid the danger of carbon dioxide, Mike made everyone leave the cave every four hours and go into the central area, while some of the kids flapped blankets to circulate the air. Mike and Yuie clung together that night and shivered.

The next morning after everyone had used the bathroom, Mike gathered his Council again. "We'll freeze if this goes on," he said. "So we are going to have to build the fire real high, even if it uses a lot of wood."

"I have an idea, Mike," said Eric. "What if we build a fire, and use it to heat up the barrels? When they are boiling hot, we can use blankets to roll them back to the cave."

Mike looked at Hector. "What do you think?"

"I think that's a good idea," replied Hector. "I'll take some of the canvas, and use it to cover the opening. We'll lose less heat that way once the barrels are in there, and we can huddle around the fire while we are heating the barrels."

"Might as well build two fires," said Jean. "Heat up two barrels at a time, and more of us can get closer to the heat."

"All right, do it, Hector," said Mike.

They set to work, and the activity helped to warm them until the fires were roaring. Hector disconnected the barrels, and two at a time, they were rolled on to the fire. It took some time to get the water in the barrels sufficiently hot for Hector to be satisfied. They banked the fires, then using blankets; they rolled the barrels just inside the cave. Hector used long pieces of timber to prop canvas against the wall of the central area. He hoped that this would keep the heat inside the small cave.

It worked. Within the hour, it became too warm to stay in their sleeping bags. They sat on their bunks, much happier now. They entertained one another, and talked about many things even philosophy.

"Jean, why do you think guys like caves better than girls," asked Erin.

"It might have to do with safety," answered Jean. "Thousands of years ago, when people lived in caves, the men had to leave and hunt animals for food. That was dangerous work. The men were much safer while they were in the caves. But women stayed in the caves much of the day doing traditional woman's work. I suspect that they were much more likely to catch a disease from staying longer in cramped confined quarters. So for them, being out of the cave in fresh air was probably healthier."

The hero of the hour was Eric.

"Good idea, Eric," said Mike as he praised Eric for the tenth time.

"Yeah, the Geek saved the day, all right," agreed John.

"Thank you, Eric," said Desi. "You are the brains in this tribe. The next time John gives you a hard time, tell me and you can take his place."

"Hey!" said John.

"Just kidding, Darling," said Desi.

The bitter cold and the dark skies continued that day and the

next, but the tribe was warm in the cave. Then the skies cleared, and the sun came out. Hector reattached the barrels, and the crisis was over for the moment.

January turned into February. The kids settled into a routine. There were the usual squabbles, but nothing too bad. Mike finally lost his temper with Tyler and Gabby, so he took a ten foot length of cord and tied them together for twenty four hours. They were stunned.

"What about when we go to the bathroom?" wailed Gabby.

"I guess you can't close the door," answered Mike. "One of you will have to stand outside while the other uses the bathroom."

"Even number two?" asked Tyler in disbelief.

"Even number two," said Mike mercilessly.

"Do we have to sleep in the same bag?" asked Gabby timidly.

"Yes," replied Mike. "Go zip your bags together, right now. Get some help and move your mattresses over by the fire. Don't get too close though." Twenty four hours later the two seemed sufficiently subdued. They lasted ten days. Then, just before bedtime, a furious Yuie came storming into Mike's room followed by Desi and a tearful Gabby.

"Tyler pulled Gabby's pajama bottoms down because two guys dared him," said Yuie angrily. "She wasn't wearing panties, because she washed them today, and they were hanging up to dry." Gabby stifled a sob.

"Find John," ordered Mike grimly. "You stay here, Gabby." A minute later, John arrived.

"Find Tyler. Find the two guys that dared Tyler to pants Gabby," instructed Mike. "Bring them here. Bring the Spears here with their spears." A few more minutes followed, and then John and the Spears arrived with three boys in tow. Two were obviously scared, and one was scared but defiant.

"You guys dared Tyler to pants Gabby," asked Mike solemnly.

"Yeah, so what?" sneered the defiant boy. "He's the one who did it. He didn't have to. We didn't do nothing." The other instigator nodded.

Mike looked at Tyler. "Loyal friends you have here, Tyler," he said sarcastically.

Tyler did not respond to Mike. Ashamed, he looked at Gabby and said, "I'm sorry, Gabby. I'm really sorry. I was stupid." Gabby choked back a sob.

"You three strip," ordered Mike. "We'll give Gabby a chance to see you three naked." Two of the boys hesitated, and then, red faced, they began to shed their clothes.

"Hell no, I'm not stripping," said the defiant boy. "I didn't do anything." Mike motioned to the Spears who grabbed the alarmed boy and began to remove his clothes.

"Hey! Stop! You can't do this!" He swung a fist, and then he yelped as John smacked him hard on the side of his head. He stopped fighting and held his aching head.

"Our food would last longer if we tossed this one out in the snow," suggested Desi coldly.

The boy lost his defiant attitude. "Oh, shit, don't do that. Please, Chief. I'm sorry."

"We'll let him stay. For now," answered Mike. He addressed the boy. "We're trying to survive here, dickhead. Now get your clothes on and get out. You too." He motioned to the other instigator. Hastily, the two boys pulled their clothes on and fled.

Mike turned to the last naked boy. "Tyler," was all he said.

Tyler turned white. "Are you kicking me out of the Lodge, Chief," he whispered.

"Not yet," answered Mike. He turned to the Spears. "Give him a beating," he said.

"No, Chief!" This outburst came from Gabby. "Please don't beat Tyler, Chief. Don't do it!"

Mike looked at Gabby. "Why not?" he asked.

Gabby started crying. "I don't want you to hurt Tyler," she cried. "It's partly my fault. I pulled his pajamas down last week. I accidentally got his underwear, too. But he never told on me."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," muttered Desi.

"Is that true?" Mike asked Tyler.

"Yes, Chief, but it's not the same. She didn't have any panties on, and beside I'm a guy. Go ahead and beat me," Tyler said bravely as his body shook in fear. "I deserve it for listening to those two assholes."

"No, Chief. Don't do it," sobbed Gabby.

"All right," said Mike. "You two have been causing me a lot of grief, so here's what I'm going to do. I'm officially pronouncing you boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Huh?" asked the startled twosome. Gabby stopped crying.

"You heard me," said Mike firmly. "You two are going to be

boyfriend and girlfriend until April. By the end of this week, Gabby, you are going to tell all of your friends that you like Tyler and that he's your boyfriend. Tyler, you are going to tell your friends that you like Gabby, and that she is your girlfriend." The baffled kids were thoroughly blushing by this time.

"I'm not sure that my friends will believe me," offered Tyler.

"Or mine," agreed Gabby.

"To prove it you each have one week to make each other a present," said Mike. "A very nice present. And if you don't...", his voice turned menacing. "And if you don't, or if it's not nice enough, then I'll have the Spears give Tyler a beating and the girls give Gabby a beating."

"Your present better be nice," Desi warned Gabby. "Or I'll kick your little ass." Gabby nodded; frightened of Desi.

"What kind of present?" asked Tyler puzzled.

"Think of something," snapped Mike. "Ask people. And I better see you guys holding hands and stuff. Now Tyler, put your clothes on and you and Gabby get out." The two kids left.

"You handled that brilliantly, Chief," said Yuie in admiration.

"No I didn't," grumbled Mike. "There's too much of this boyfriend and girlfriend crap going around, and I just added to it."

"Well, there are more couples since we were stuck in the boys' cave," admitted Yuie.

"And this is all your fault," Mike said, glaring at John and Desi.

Desi smiled at him. "You are so sweet," she murmured.

"I am not," he denied hotly.

At the end of the week, Gabby presented Tyler with a pair of deerskin moccasins. "Jean helped me make them," she said anxiously to Tyler. "Are they okay?"

"Wow, these are too cool!" exclaimed Tyler. "Mine is not that good," he said apologetically as he presented Gabby with a pair of clip-on turquoise earrings and a turquoise pendent.

"Oh, Tyler, these are so pretty," gushed Gabby. "How did you make them?" she asked as she tried them on in front of her envious friends.

"I pried the turquoise out of my belt buckle," he answered proudly. "Eric had a couple of itty bitty alligator clips that he let me have. Hector helped me bend the teeth over, so they wouldn't hurt your ears. Mike let me have some tiny screws that he found in his tool chest."

For a moment, Gabby was speechless. Then, right in front of everybody, she took Tyler's face between her hands, and she kissed him right on the mouth. No tongue, of course. When she finished, Tyler took a breath, red faced but pleased. Mike had no trouble from them for the rest of the winter.

"I wish someone would make me a present like that," grumbled Desi to Yuie as she glanced sideways at her boyfriend.

"Don't worry, Sweetheart," John assured her. "I was already thinking of making you a Mr. Potato Head. We still have plenty of potatoes." Desi sighed.

Yuie giggled, and then she asked, "Do you think that Mike would have really told the Spears to give Tyler a real beating?"

"What do you think?" replied Desi.

Yuie was troubled. "I'm just not sure anymore," she said.

After several months of living in the Lodge, some of the teenagers began to emit an unpleasant smell. One day, Mike got a whiff of a boy walking by. He stopped him, and he demanded to know when the boy had last washed himself in the washroom.

"It's cold in there, Chief," the boy complained. "And whenever it gets a little warm, it stinks in there." Mike was unmoved. He ordered everyone to wash their body at least once every three days. He endured a lot of grumbling about that order.

When March rolled around, Mike and the Council took stock of their supplies. There was a general consensus that they had done better than they had expected. They had been sparing on the meat, and they had encouraged everyone to eat vegetables. They had made lemonade once a week, so that everyone could drink a small glass of the juice. The pickles and beets had lasted, but the bread and rolls were almost gone. Still, by the middle of April they would start running out of food.

"We'll have to get into the forest by then, in spite of the snow," said Mike. "Hector, if you can power up one of the big machines, you might get through the snow to Mrs. Brown's house. She said that she would try to make bread for us during the winter. Maybe you can catch some trout, and maybe we can get some real milk. Beside that, I would like to know how our people are doing. Jean, see if you can find some of the plants that you have been teaching us about. Jacob, what do you think?"

"I'll go look. Mrs. Brown said that there were more deer than ever last year. If they stayed alive, I'll try to find them," Jacob replied.

Later Jacob came to Mike privately. "Chief?" Jacob looked around to see if anyone could hear him.

"Yeah?" asked Mike.

"I've been meaning to tell you something, but I wasn't sure if I should say anything yet. You remember when we dumped the Porta Potties? Well, the others didn't say anything, but I think the Fog wasn't as high as before."

Stunned Mike stared at Jacob. "Are you sure?"

"Well, not really," Jacob said. "But I noticed a strip of brown grass running along the edge of the Fog. At first, it looked like the rest of the grass that had died for the winter, but then I noticed this strip had, like, a reddish goo on it. I didn't say anything to the others because I didn't want to get everyone's hopes up. But as soon as possible, we should check it out."

"All right. Let's just keep it between us for now," said Mike.

There was plenty of snow on the ground, but the skies had cleared again, and there was a lot of sunshine in March. The solar heating system was working well, so the temperature in the Lodge was quite comfortable. One day the temperature outside got up to seventy degrees. Everyone was allowed to go outside again without permission, but they were required to stay within the boundaries of the camp. Jacob chaffed at this, but Mike was firm.

"A little while longer, please," he said.

"You're the Chief," Jacob grumbled.

The next day it snowed again, and the temperature plunged once again. It got down to five degrees that night. They endured three more days of intense cold outside, but, inside, the barrels and the fire kept it bearable. They had used only three quarters of their wood, so Mike allowed the fire to be built higher.

Then the skies lightened and it turned warmer again. At first light on the fifteenth of March, Mike let Jacob go into the forest, after making Jacob swear that he would return at the first sign of a cloud and not later than sunset. Jacob was back by noon.

"I slipped and fell into a gulch," he explained. "It was packed with snow. I fell though power up to my armpits. Something stopped me. I think I was standing on a body. I think it was animal."

Mike sent Jean and Howard with ropes to help Jacob. By sunset they had brought the body of a deer back to the Lodge.

"It's a doe," said Jacob with regret. Probably died in that big freeze we had.

"Do you think that the meat is safe to eat?" asked Mike.

"I think so," said Jean. "It must have frozen rather quickly and the stomach and intestines were not open. It will be gamey though. I'll eat a very small portion to start. If I don't get sick or have diarrhea then it should be okay."

The next day, they butchered the deer. They moved all of the remaining food into one freezer, and they packed the deer meat in snow until they were sure that it was safe to eat.

"Not bad, Jacob, for your first day out," said Mike cheerfully.

"Blind luck," muttered Jacob.

"I hope everyone at the Brown farm is also having some luck," said Mike with a frown.

Chapter Eight

Davis Brown Farm

At the Brown farm no one was hungry, or sick. There had been problems, but most of them were of a personal nature. Ralph and the other kids had said goodbye to Hector with mixed emotions. The younger kids were excited to be at the farm. The girls, especially, had missed the comfort of an older woman. They had never met Mary Brown, but everyone who had met her, claimed that she was a very nice person. The twins were excited to see the horses and the cows, but they were leery of being under the direction of Ralph. In the past, he had been known as something of a bully. How would he act toward them, they wondered?

Mary and her kids began by taking them on a tour of the farm. As they walked, Mary kept up a running commentary. "We planted ten acres of wheat, four acres of feed and one acre of potatoes. And I always grow plenty of winter squash."

Ralph looked at the fields that had been cut low to the ground. "You harvested the wheat and alfalfa by yourself?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, the combine did most of the work," Mary said with a laugh. "I cut it after that rain luckily."

"Where's the wheat now," asked Nathan.

"After fanning it, we put it in big plastic tubs with tight lids. Then we stored it in the sheds. If it has bugs in it, the cold will hold them down. The alfalfa is in the loft of the barn."

"Can we make French fries with the potatoes?" asked Paige.

"You bet," answered Mary. "I grow Green Mountain potatoes. They don't look as pretty as Russets but they taste sweeter. There are still a lot in the ground, and one of our biggest tasks will be to harvest the rest. Before this happened, I sold only my best produce at the stores down in the foothills, but now we need to harvest as much as we can for spring planting and to make bread and soup. Your friends at your camp will run out of food sometime in the spring. Our task will be to feed them as well as we can. I plan to make potato bread and potato soup for them. We'll freeze some and pack it in snow. But we will have plenty for French fries. I've got lard for that. I like to save the butter for my cookies."

"Yum, yum," exclaimed Kylie while rubbing her stomach.

Mary pointed to the water tower. "The idea was to try drip irrigation. We have about a thousand feet of black tubing. We never have used it though. Usually, we received enough rain and snow during the year to dry farm our crops."

She took them into the hen house and the rabbit hutch. "We have to remember to check their feed so that they don't run out," she warned them.

"That's my job," said Star proudly.

"Me too!" interjected Comet.

Then Mary showed them the corral and the barn with the attached solar room. The kids were surprised to see spinach and lettuce growing in the warm room.

"I thought that you had cucumbers and tomatoes in here," said Kylie.

"That was what I grew during the summer. I grow leafy vegetables in the winter time," explained Mary.

"Why is the cow so fat?" asked Kevin.

"She is going to have a baby soon, that's why," said Mary.

"After that she will give a lot of milk for awhile."

"Will the other cow give milk, too?" asked Nathan.

"She's about ready to breed, but I don't know if we can find a bull now," answered Mary. "If the calf is a bull then we can breed her in a couple of years."

"Yuck, that would be her brother," said Paige who wrinkled her nose.

"Yes, and that is definitely not the best combination," agreed Mary. "But we may not have a choice."

"If Hector could build another barn, this one could be converted into a house," suggested Ralph looking around thoughtfully.

"That is a good idea," replied Mary, "I've been thinking that same thought because there are so many kids at that camp. It's doesn't have a bathroom though, so we would have to build an outhouse. Maybe next spring, I'll talk to Hector about converting this barn into apartments."

Ralph looked at her. "You are doing a really nice thing, taking us in. You didn't have to do this."

Mary smiled at him. "Yes," she said simply. "I did. When you become a parent, you will understand why."

"Mama, I'm hungry," complained Comet. Mary showed them

the storage sheds, and then they went back to the house.

Mary's house had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a large kitchen, a large family room, a cellar to store food, and an attic. The campers had brought two bunk beds for the younger kids and one of the counselor beds for Ralph. The twins shared Comet's room. The girls shared Star's room, and Ralph slept in the attic. Mary was quite embarrassed about that, but Ralph assured her that he was very comfortable upstairs. The staircase was narrow, and the attic was unfinished, but Mary's husband had insulated it. The heat from downstairs rose and was trapped in the attic making it warm and livable. The living room had a large flag stone fireplace and the kitchen had a cast iron pot bellied stove.

"I sure appreciate Hector bringing me those cords of firewood," Mary said to Ralph. "I cut as much as I could this summer, but I still would have depended on the propane stove for heat by the end of winter, if he hadn't delivered that wood."

Everyone settled in as best as they could. At first the little ones were excited at the prospect of having someone to share their rooms with, but after a while they began to feel like their space was being usurped. It didn't help that Ralph would yell at the other campers sometimes, order them around often, and generally act obnoxious when he talked to them. By the end of November, Mary was feeling very stressed. Finally she gathered them all together for a talk.

"Look, we have a long winter ahead of us," she began. "We have to try to get along. We have to learn to make allowances for each other.

"Comet, Star, your rooms are these kids' rooms too. You will just have to make room for some of their things. Nathan, Kevin, Comet is a lot younger than you, and he plays with the kinds of toys that little kids play with. I know it can be boring, but try to play with him the way that you used to play with your toys.

"Paige, Kylie, Star is a little girl. Don't make fun of her dolls.

"Ralph, I appreciate the help you are giving me. Believe me, I do. And I appreciate that you feel that Nathan, Kevin, Paige, and Kylie need to help me with the chores around the house. It's okay to point that out. It's not okay to push them, or threaten them. If they don't help as much as you wish, you are simply going to have to back off and let me deal with them."

This talk was somewhat effective. Paige and Kylie felt guilty about laughing at Star's dolls. One day, they handed Star a lovely

hand written note, inviting her and her dolls to a tea party. With Mary's help they took over the living room and held their tea party. Star dressed all of her dolls in their finest clothes, and she sat them around the coffee table on pails. Mary let Paige and Kylie dress up in some of her frilly dresses instead of their jeans. For the next hour they sat around the coffee table, pretending that they were at a tea party. Mary made real tea, and she served it in her most elegant coffee cups. Kylie and Paige made polite conversation with the dolls, and the dolls responded in Star's squeaky high pitched voice. A good time was had by all. The boys thought the whole thing was silly, but luckily they were banished to Comet's room for the duration.

Meanwhile, Nathan and Kevin had agreed to play with Comet's toys, especially his plastic logs, his model cars, and his action figures. Lying on the floor, pretending to be Spears, racecar drivers and astronauts, they soon reverted to the children that they still were.

Mary's real problem was Ralph. He seemed to be socially challenged. He snarled at the girls, he sneered at the boys, and he even yelled at her. Once they got into a shouting match. Sullenly he offered to move into the barn. Mary briefly considered it, and then she realized that she would be constantly worried about him. So she vetoed the idea. It was unfortunate that he has such a surly attitude, she thought. With his dark hair, grey eyes, and strong chin, she considered him to be a very handsome boy.

And yet, for all the trouble he caused, she could not be unhappy that he was staying with them. He was a tireless worker. In a hundred different ways, he helped her cope with the struggle that was her life now. Ralph brought in firewood without being asked. The other boys would grouse if they were asked. Ralph helped her feed the horses and the cows. After the calf was born, he learned to attach the milking machine, and he learned how to milk the cow by hand, so that he was prepared for the days that the solar milking machine would not work. He watered the plants in the solar room. Once, after dinner, Mary was feeling so exhausted that she left the dishes, and she went to her room to take a short nap. She returned to discover that Ralph had washed and dried the dishes and was putting them away. If she asked the girls to do the same, she could count on hearing them whine.

And to her surprise, he was good with her kids. He never talked down to them. He admired Star's cartoon posters. He told Comet stories at bedtime. Comet, especially, became attached to

him.

She had to admit that the other kids did do some work. The girls would cheerfully help her clean the house, and the boys faithfully fed the rabbits and gathered eggs when the snow was not too high to wade through. And they had all helped to harvest the potatoes and to pile them into the insulated sheds or to stack them in the cellar.

They had a large meal for Thanksgiving, with ham, venison, fresh bread and real butter, spinach and potatoes, and delicious cold milk. It was a fun day, and Mary was thankful that the kids seemed to be happy and thriving under her care. But that night, she thought of her missing husband, and she cried for a long time.

A few days later, Mary was in the kitchen preparing dinner when Kylie rushed in the door almost in tears. "Come quick, Mrs. Brown," she begged. "Ralph is beating up Nathan."

Mary flew out of the house and ran to the barn. When she arrived, she saw that Ralph had Nathan in a headlock. The two boys struggled as Ralph tried to fend off Kevin who was circling them and kicking Ralph at every opportunity.

"Stop it! Stop it now," she cried. The boys sprang apart. They were panting heavily.

Mary had been toiling hard all day and she was tired. "What is it this time?" she asked wearily.

"He started hitting me for no reason," shouted Nathan angrily. Ralph was silent.

"Ralph told him to feed the horses, and Nathan said F you," offered Paige.

Mary was too tired to referee. "Ralph, you stay here. The rest of you get in the house." She waited until the kids left, and then said to Ralph, "I'll bring you your dinner in a little while."

"Don't bother," replied Ralph sullenly.

Mary exploded. "Don't tell me what to do," she yelled. "This is my place, not yours." She stalked out of the barn.

It was a subdued dinner. The boys avoided Mary's eyes. She suspected that they were feeling guilty. In a whiny voice Comet asked several times where Ralph was, and when he was coming in to dinner.

After dinner, Mary, in a voice that brooked no nonsense, told the kids to clean up, wash the dishes, dry them, and put them away. No one argued with her, or suggested that it was not their turn. Mary made a plate of food for Ralph, and then she went to the barn.

Ralph was mucking out the stalls. He looked up when she came in, and then he ducked his head, and he went back to his task. Mary sat down on a low wooden bench.

"Please, come and eat," she said.

Ralph hesitated. He wanted to say that he was not hungry, but the truth was that he had been working all day, and he was starved. He put down the square shovel, and he sat down on the bench next to Mary. Mary handed him his plate and a moist towel. Ralph wiped his hands and brow, and then he began to eat. Mary said nothing while he ate. As usual the food was delicious. At last, sated, he put his plate down, sighed appreciatively, and wiped his face.

"I want to talk to you," Mary began.

"I know. I screwed up again," Ralph grunted.

"I want to talk about that, too, but first I want to thank you."

"What?" asked Ralph.

"I said, I want to thank you. And maybe that's part of the problem. I haven't thanked you enough, and so I haven't been a good example," she said.

"You don't need to thank me. I'm staying alive because of you," Ralph replied.

"We are staying alive together, Ralph, but even if I was doing everything, I would still need to thank you now and then. For talking to me, if nothing else. I need adult conversation."

"Sorry, I don't get it."

"Why did you say, sorry?"

"What?"

"Just now, you could have said, I don't get it, but instead you said, sorry, I don't get it," she pointed out.

"Uh...I guess I was apologizing for not understanding," he answered.

"Yes, you were. You were apologizing. But why?"

"Just trying to be polite."

"No, you weren't trying to be polite, you were being polite," she pointed out again.

"Ralph, that's most of your problem. You are not polite most of the time, and most of the time you don't even try to be polite. Hear me out," she said before he could growl.

"Think about a little ball bearing," she began. "It rolls around on its track doing its job. But rubbing against metal causes it to heat up. It gets angry. And the metal gets angry right back. So something

has to be done to calm that anger. So grease is put on that ball bearing. It soothes the friction between the ball bearing and the metal. Bumping up against each other still makes the ball bearing and the metal a little peeved, but that grease cools off both of them. Ralph, politeness is human grease.

"Ralph, you are a decent person. I say that because I trust you with my kids. But you don't practice politeness on a daily basis. I want you to try a few things, please. I want you never to ask anyone in the house to do anything without saying, please. And anytime anyone does something that you have asked them, I want you to say, thank you. If you do that for me consistently, well then, at the end of a month if they don't start responding better, I'll, well, I'll...knock 'em on their butts."

Ralph laughed. "No you won't."

"Well, no I won't, but I'll want to," she answered with a laugh.

"Say, please and thank you, huh?" Ralph said. "All right."

"I have something else I want you to do for me," she said. "I want you to learn something about each of those kids. Where they come from, who their families are, and what they like. And I want you to tell them about yourself, just like you told me about yourself. Did you know that the twins are going to have a birthday in February? They will be thirteen years old. Talk to them about something other than work and survival. Trust me; it will help you and them."

Ralph stared down at his hands, and he said, "All right." Mary got up to leave.

"Mrs. Brown?" she heard him say. She turned. "Thank you for putting up with me."

She smiled. "You're welcome. And when we are alone, you may call me, Mary."

Ralph made an honest effort to do as Mary had asked. He curbed his sarcasm. He made sure that he said, please, when he asked someone to do something. On the rare occasion that someone actually responded he made sure that he said, thank you. It wasn't always easy. Sometimes he forgot. Sometimes he remembered, but his effort was not reciprocated. Sometimes he had to walk away and stew, but gradually things got better between him and the twins.

Talking to them about themselves or about him was harder. He was not naturally a loner like Jacob, but he was a more private person than most people. But he made an effort, and slowly his

efforts began to pay off.

Christmas was coming. Mary showed the twins a fir tree she wanted, so they chopped it down and carried it back to the house. The girls were busy making natural ornaments. The little kids talked about Santa and elves, and they watched Christmas cartoons on the VHS, over and over until the whole house could quote them.

One night after the kids had gone to bed, and Mary and Ralph were still up, Mary suddenly said, "The angel! I forgot to get the Christmas angel for the top of the tree."

Mary went to the hall closet and rummaged through it. "Found it!" she exclaimed triumphantly. She brought the angel to the Christmas tree along with a rickety old stool.

Good grief, thought Ralph to himself as she climbed the stool, leaned forward, and attempted to maintain her balance while placing the ornament on top of the tree. Ralph got up from the sofa, and he moved behind her, just in case. Mary set the ornament on the tree, and then she leaned back. At that moment, the stool wobbled dangerously, and with a gasp Mary fell backwards, right into Ralph's arms.

For a moment the startled pair looked at one another. Then together, they became aware of the feel of the other's body. As Mary stared into Ralph's eyes, she felt the strength of his arm under her knees and warmth of his other arm behind her back. Suddenly for reasons that she could not have identified, she blushed. Seeing her blush, flustered Ralph and muttering something incomprehensible, he lowered her feet to the ground.

Mary composed herself, and she gave him a nervous smile. "Well, thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. I guess I'll go to bed now," he answered, and he withdrew to the safety of the attic.

Later, as she lay in her own bed, Mary was troubled. For the first time since she understood that her husband was probably dead, she had responded to a man other than her lost husband with a rush of pleasure. She didn't want to feel that. She didn't want to feel that about a younger man who was living with her. But she was still a young woman in her twenties, and her body had other ideas.

Mary thought back to when she had been a young bride. After college, she and Davis had moved to Anaheim. Davis had taken her to Disney Land and to Knott's Berry Farm. He had shown her the La Brea Tar Pits. It was a wonderful time. And Ralph was not much

younger than Davis had been at that time. Mary tossed and turned in her sleep that night. For the next week, Mary and Ralph treated each other somewhat warily.

Christmas and New Years passed comfortably. The kids were contented. Comet made everyone laugh by pretending to be a reindeer. Then in the middle of January, there was a cold snap and a lot of snow. Ralph made his way to the barn, and he stayed there until the bad spell passed. Every evening, Mary talked to him on Star's walkie talkie, to assure herself that he was all right. During the day, Mary tried to balance the usage of wood and propane.

Finally the cold spell passed, and Ralph returned to the house. Mary was so relieved that, not thinking, she flung her arms around him and held him. Ralph was startled, but he responded in the same way. For a few moments they stood there, and then becoming aware of each other, they moved apart, both blushing. The twins saw nothing amiss, but Paige and Kylie exchanged worried glances.

The house returned to normal. Then one night Comet caused a new crisis to arise. Ralph had got into the habit of putting Comet to bed and tucking him in. Some nights, Ralph would read or tell Comet a story. The twins usually went to bed much later.

One night, after Comet was comfortably in bed, and Ralph was about to leave the room, Comet asked, "Could you read me a story, Daddy?"

Startled, for a moment Ralph thought that Comet had simply made a childish mistake. But Comet was watching him intently. Ralph did not know what to do or say. Finally, he decided to ignore the endearment.

"Uh...all right," he responded. He read Comet a bedtime story. Satisfied, Comet went to sleep.

The incident troubled Ralph, but he hesitated to burden Mary with any more problems. Then, a few days later, Comet called him, Daddy, in Mary's presence. Ralph could see that Mary was stunned. At the first private opportunity, Ralph tried to apologize to Mary.

"You don't have to apologize, Ralph," Mary assured him. "He was barely three when his father left. There is no way he is going to remember his father much longer. It's different with Star. She adored her father. If you don't mind him calling you, Daddy, then I can deal with it. When he's older, I will explain it to him. I'm worried more about Star's reaction."

The next day, Mary's words proved to be prescient. When

Comet called Ralph, Daddy, Star's eyes grew huge, and then she exploded. "He's not your Daddy," she raged angrily. "He's not our Daddy. Our Daddy is dead. He's just some old bully." She burst into tears and escaped to her room.

After that, Star's behavior took a turn for the worse. She was belligerent to Mary, mean to Comet, and nasty to Ralph. She refused to clean her room, help with the chores, or go to bed on time. This lasted for a week.

One day, Comet was in her room trying to get her to play with him. He happened to pick up one of her dolls. Angrily, she slapped him. Crying, he went to his mother to complain.

"Why did you slap your brother," asked Mary, bewildered at Star's violent behavior.

"I hate him," snapped Star. "He's a dumb dumb, and he's stupid. I hate him."

"That's enough out of you, young lady," admonished her mother. "Your brother is not dumb, and he is not stupid. You apologize right now."

"I won't," cried Star. "I hate him, and I hate you. You made Daddy go away. You made him die." Mary turned pale, and she slumped down, her heart breaking. Star ran to her room.

"I'll go talk to her," said Ralph quietly.

Mary looked at him tearfully. "Ralph..."

"It'll be okay. She'll be okay. I'll talk to her." He went to Star's room. Paige and Kylie were standing by the door calling to her.

"Go play with the twins for awhile, please," he requested. They left. Ralph knocked on the door.

"Go away," yelled Star.

"I'm coming in, Star," said Ralph. He opened the door and entered the room. Star was lying on her bed crying.

"Leave me alone you big bully," she sobbed. Ralph did not respond. He sat down on her bed and waited. Presently her sobs tapered off.

"I had a sister. She was five," Ralph said. Star kept her head against the covers, but Ralph could sense that she was listening.

"My parents were divorced when I was twelve. My Mom left us. Then my Dad remarried, and he and my stepmother had a baby girl. At first I was mad about it. But then I got to like her. She would follow me around, begging me to pick her up. One day my parents left her with me. She messed in her diapers, and I had to clean her

up. That was weird, but I did it. I cleaned her, and I powdered her butt, and I put another diaper on her. I don't think I ever looked at her the same way after that. Somehow she was not just their kid, she was my kid. When I realized that she was dead, I got crazy angry. I was so pissed. I blamed everyone and everything."

"Like me," said Star with a sniff, her head still pressed to the covers.

"Yes, like you. Now I realize that mostly I blamed myself," Ralph replied. Star began to cry again. Ralph reached over and began to stroke her back.

"It's all my fault," Star sobbed. "It's all my fault. I told Daddy that I wanted a new video, and I kept bugging him and bugging him, and finally he went to Bakersfield to get one for me and now he's dead. It's all my fault." Ralph waited until her cries tapered off again before answering.

"Your mother thinks that it's her fault," he said.

Star calmed down enough to ask, "Why?"

"She say's that she had been bugging him about dryer sheets and bleach and groceries. So he went to Bakersfield to get them. But I think that she forgets that he wanted to visit his parents. I think it was just bad luck that he happened to be in Bakersfield when this happened. I think it was just bad luck that I happened to be here instead of San Diego when this happened. Or maybe it was good luck. I don't know. I just know that it's not your mother's fault, and it's not your fault." Ralph took a deep breath. "And I guess it's not my fault."

"Did you ever go to the zoo?" Star asked. Ralph was confused for a moment at the change of subject.

"Oh. Yes. The San Diego Zoo. Yes we went there sometimes. I let my sister ride on my shoulders," he replied. "But the place we liked the best was the San Diego Wildlife Preserve. It had this huge open area, and the people were up high on a hill, so we could see everywhere all at once. There were walls around the whole thing, and there was a train that went around the whole place, so you could see everything like the lions and the zebras, and the giraffes."

Star looked up. "Lions?" she asked doubtfully. "In the open? Not in cages?"

"That was the best part for me. They didn't have to live in cages. They could just walk around free."

Star was silent for a minute. "Mama's gonna hate me, now,"

she sniffed. "Cause I hit Comet, and I said really mean things to her."

"Your mama will never hate you, Star," Ralph assured the little girl. "Your mama loves you and she always will. But she will want you to apologize to Comet."

"All right." Star wiped her eyes. Then in a small voice, she asked him, "Is it okay if I don't call you, Daddy? I mean, if you marry my mama someday, I can wait and call you, Daddy then, okay?"

Ralph felt like his heart had stopped. There was a ringing in his ears, and he had trouble drawing a breath. Slowly he breathed and then he said. "No matter what happens, you can always call me Ralph. I promise. You know what? When spring comes, I'm going to make a big sign right by the road. It's going to say, Davis Brown Farm. So everyone will always know that the name of this place is Davis Brown Farm."

"Davis Brown Farm," Star repeated slowly. "That's a good name. Davis Brown Farm."

There was a knock at the door. Slowly the door opened, and timidly Mary looked around the door. Star looked at her and then started to cry again. "I'm sorry, Mama," she sobbed. "I'm sorry. Please don't hate me."

Mary shoved the door open, and she flew into her daughters arms. "I love you so much, Star," she cried.

Ralph got up, and he went to the door. With one backward glance, he shut the door, leaving the girl and her mother to their grief.

Things were better after that. Star apologized to her brother, and she made a point of playing with him; even letting him choose what to play. Star wasn't perfect, of course. She was, after all, a little girl.

February arrived, and it was time for the twins' birthday. Mary baked them a cake. Comet gave each boy one of his toys as a present. They thanked Comet, and they asked if they might keep their presents in his toy box. He assured them that it was okay with him.

Then they watched an action DVD, while Ralph attended to the barn chores. After the movie, Ralph asked to speak with them. They went to the kitchen where Ralph presented them with spears made of old broom and mop handles and painted with lightning bolts.

"I thought it was time that you two had your own spears," said Ralph gruffly. "So I made these for you." The boys were amazed.

"Wow, this is so cool!" exclaimed Kevin. "Thanks a lot, Ralph."

"Yeah, I can't wait to show the guys at the Lodge," agreed Nathan. "This is really decent of you, Ralph."

Ralph looked uncomfortable, and then, behind the boys, he saw Mary looking at him and waiting for him to respond. "Um...you're welcome," he answered. Mary smiled at him.

"He has been working on those spears for a long time," said Mary. Ralph mumbled something.

The rest of February passed uneventfully, to Mary's relief. She was always aware of Ralph and where he was, and one time she had an erotic dream in which he made an appearance, but for the most part they tried to pretend that their feelings for each other did not exist.

In early March, Paige had a birthday. Again a cake was made, and again Comet presented her with a toy, but this time, instead of making Paige a gift, Ralph, to everyone's shock, suggested that they hold a dance.

Mary had an MP3 player that was chocked full of music. They hooked it to a pair of speakers and played a mixture of fast and slow music. The twins were not crazy about the idea, but since it was Paige's birthday they stoically went along. Once they started dancing, the twins had a lot of fun. Star demanded to be taught to dance, and Comet got in on the action by prancing around the living room. It was fun, it was silly and the house rang with laughter.

Afterwards, Kylie asked if they could have a slumber party in the attic. Ralph agreed to sleep in Nathan's bed for the night, and the six children tromped up to the attic. Mary knew that it would be forever before they went to sleep, so she decided that the next day would be an essential work only day.

With the kids gone, Mary and Ralph were alone. "Well, that was a riot," he observed. Mary laughed.

"It was great. I can't believe that you suggested a dance. That was a wonderful idea," she said.

"They're girls. I thought that they might like it. It was fun teaching them the steps to the slow dances. I used to dance with my sister like that. She stood on my shoes, and I moved around," said Ralph.

"My husband and I didn't know any dances, fast or slow. But sometimes we would get out on the dance floor and bounce around. If it was a slow dance we just held on to each other." Mary smiled at the memory. "Thanks for teaching me," she said.

The MP3 player was still playing. A slow number began to play. "Would you care to dance, Mary?" murmured Ralph.

Mary's heart began to pound. Are you kidding? Me and you? Alone? That's the craziest idea I've ever heard, she thought to herself. She thought of an old television show that she used to watch when she was a kid. She felt like stepping back, waving her arms like the robot, and shouting, danger, danger, danger.

"All right," she heard herself say.

She placed her hands on his shoulders. He placed his hands on her waist. Slowly, they began the steps. Their feet moved perfectly together. Gradually, they closed the gap between them. She moved her arms around his neck. He moved his arms behind her back. The music was lovely, romantic and suggestive. Their bodies responded to each other. Their breathing deepened. Then the music stopped.

For a moment they stood there, clinging to each other. Then Mary gave him a little nudge, and he released her. She didn't know what to say. Upstairs she could hear the sound of children laughing at something.

"Let's sit down and listen to the music," suggested Ralph.

"Good idea," agreed Mary. She walked to the sofa and sat down, expecting Ralph to take the chair, but he followed her and sat down beside her. He put his arm around her. His hand stroked her shoulder. Hesitantly, she leaned against him. She sat there, tense, waiting for something to happen. When he spoke, his words were a surprise.

"I really liked Jackie," he began.

"The girl who was murdered?" she asked.

"Yes. I really liked her. She was older than the rest of us, and the things we talked about were adult things. She told me that she had sex with her older boyfriend when she was just fourteen. Then her period was two weeks late, and she knew that she was pregnant. She cried and cried. She was terrified. She knew absolutely nothing about how to find help. Then her period came. It was a false alarm.

"After that she swore off sex until her senior year in high school, and when she began an intimate relationship, she made sure that she was on the pill. She made this guy date her for three months before she slept with him. She wanted to get to know him before they had sex. She wanted to discover if she could trust him.

"She said that she came to the camp as a counselor, because

she wanted to teach younger girls how important it was to wait until they were older to have sex, not just until they thought that they were ready. She said that a young girl can't know when she's ready to have sex until she understands the emotions of a relationship, and that you have to be older to understand those emotions.

"When I talked with Jackie, I felt older and more mature. She was a woman in the midst of all these girls. I felt like I was falling in love with her.

"But then this fog thing happened. At first, she tried to pretend that nothing had happened. Then, I don't know why or how, she changed. Something happened in her head. I wonder if it was the responsibility.

"Then she died. I think I went a little nuts myself after that. I stopped eating. Every day, I went down to her grave, and I just sat there. But then Hector came. Someone from outside the camp. Somehow, that made me wake up and get myself together. Strange.

"And now I'm here with you. I feel like I have something to live for now. Something, someone, several some ones to protect. Being with you is a little like being with Jackie, but better. My feelings for Jackie were like a crush on a favorite teacher. My feelings for you are like the feelings I think your husband must have felt. Not just feelings of desire, but feelings of caring and cherishing. I suppose it's wrong, but I can't help feeling like Comet and Star are our kids, not just yours. I hope you are not offended, Mary."

Mary, trying to swallow the lump in her throat, could not speak, so she shook her head. Giving up, she laid her head on his shoulder. Finally she spoke. "I'm not going to lie to you, Ralph. I do have feelings for you. I care about you very much. I love the way you interact with my children. I can see how much they mean to you. But I'm still mourning my husband. I need more time to come to terms with these feelings I have for you."

"I'm fine with that," he said, and he kissed her lightly. They went to their separate beds, and they slept surprisingly well.

Mary felt like the air was cleared between her and Ralph. Her mood lightened considerably. And she was busy. She was determined that when the kids emerged from the Lodge, she would be there to feed them. She baked and froze bread. She scrounged and washed every container that she could find, and she filled them with potato soup which she also froze. She knew that the taste and texture of frozen milk changed for the worse after a few weeks, so

she waited until two weeks until April before she began freezing milk. But she skimmed the cream off the milk, and she made plenty of butter in her blender.

On the first day of March, she had the boys empty the containers in the solar room and refill them with fresh dirt. Then she planted tomato and cucumber seedlings. She had grown chard and spinach all winter. What the house did not eat was cooked and frozen. She made the boys catch as much trout as possible. They didn't mind catching the fish, but they sure minded cleaning them. She had separated the potatoes when they were harvested, and she had soon replanted the thumb sized ones. Now the leaves of those tubers were poking through the snow. Except for meat, she thought that she could feed the campers for a month. After that? She would deal with that when it happened.

Mary welcomed the advent of spring. There was still snow on the ground, heavy in some places, but the sun had shone for much of March, so far, and now the plants would get more than twelve hours of sunlight. Soon she would need to get the plow ready to till the earth. She needed to get down to the camp, so that she could see if there was any available land to be tilled. Mary intended to put as much land as possible into production this year. She knew that it depended on the amount of fuel that was left. Hector had told her about the fuel tank at the logging camp. She needed to convince him that the best use of that fuel was for food production.

For the kids, it was a great relief to get out of the house. Even chores were welcomed if it meant getting out in the sun. Most of the chickens and rabbits had survived the winter. Fishing was fun, even if they had to clean them. Ralph enjoyed walking over the fields, marveling at the hardy potato plants, and practicing throwing the spears with the twins.

One morning he allowed Comet and Star to accompany him. They wandered around the fields, before heading for the water tank to see how it had fared during the winter.

"Carry me, Daddy!" demanded Comet. Star looked at Ralph, but she said nothing. She had grown used to her brother's endearment for Ralph. Ralph picked up Comet, and he set the boy on his shoulders. As they walked toward the water tank, he asked Star what she knew about her mother's plans.

"Mama thought that we could grow beans out here," explained Star. "We were going to use that black plastic stuff to drip irrigate the

plants. I know that we have a lot of seed. But mama never got around to it last year."

"What kind of beans?" asked Ralph.

"I think it was more like peas," replied Star. "I know she talked about peas from China, and snapping peas. Then she said she was going to try to grow black eyed peas and green beans. But she didn't think that green beans would grow very well here."

"Chinese and snap peas," said Ralph thoughtfully. "That's right. They are supposed to grow well in cool weather."

"Oooo...a tiger," exclaimed Comet.

Ralph and Star laughed. "You think you see a tiger, Comet?" asked Ralph.

"There," replied Comet pointing to the water tank.

Star gasped, and Ralph froze. It was not a tiger, it was a mountain lion. It was pacing towards them, head lowered. It seemed to be limping slightly.

Ralph lowered Comet to the ground. "Let's go back," he said.

"I want to see the tiger, Daddy," Comet complained.

Ralph and Star took Comet by his hands, and they began pulling him towards the house. The lion's pace towards them quickened to a slow lope. The trio had only moved a dozen paces before it became clear that the animal would soon catch them.

Chapter Nine

Jacob

Ralph stopped, and he placed Comet and Star behind him. He was frightened. The animal's coat was dirty, and its ribs were showing. Ralph thought that the animal might be starving. He wondered if it would attack. How would he stop it, he thought? It would surely go for Comet.

"Star, you need to be ready to take Comet and run to the house," said Ralph calmly. "I'll try to stop it." Ralph wished that he had brought his spear. The big cat stopped a few paces from the trio. Its tail was twitching.

"I'm scared, Daddy," whimpered Comet, sensing that something was amiss.

"Are you ready, Star," asked Ralph without turning.

"Yes, Dad," she replied. She took Comet's hand firmly. As young as she was, she could tell what was about to happen. The huge cat would spring. Ralph would try to wrestle with it. She and Comet would run as fast as they could to the house. Would Ralph die? She had a moment's regret that she had never told him that she loved him.

Then Star heard a yell. The cat's attention was diverted. Ralph heard the sound of his own spear whizzing by his head. The cat leaped back as Ralph's spear landed at the very place that the large cat had been crouching. The cat turned and fled as Nathan and Kevin, panting and out of breath, reached the trio. They were carrying their spears.

Ralph took a breath. His legs were shaking. Comet was clinging to his leg and crying. Regaining his composure, Ralph reached down and picked up Comet. He turned around to see Star sandwiched between Nathan and Kevin. In the distance, Mary who had been running to them with her shotgun, slowed to a walk. Everything is all right, he thought. My family is safe. Comet stopped crying.

Ralph looked at the twins. "Thank you," was all he could say.

They blushed, but they were pleased. "We were coming to get you," said Kevin. "I had your spear, because we wanted to practice throwing." Ralph looked back at the place where the mountain lion

had been. Dead center in the ground was his spear.

"Who made the throw?" he asked. Kevin raised a hand.

"You pass," said Ralph. The twins laughed.

"That was mostly luck," admitted Kevin.

Mary was almost to them. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Everything is all right, Mary," Ralph said. "These guys saved the day."

Later, the girls were excited to hear the story, and they were disappointed that they had been feeding the chickens and had missed the action. They oohed and ahed over Star's account of the two heroes. Suddenly the two boys, once thought of as dorks, gained a new status in their eyes.

In private Star told her mother, "Ralph is the real hero. He was going to fight that mountain lion, so that Comet and I could run back to the house."

Mary hugged her daughter. "I know, honey, I know."

A few days later, Mary called everyone together. "I'm going to the Lodge tomorrow. I'm going to take a load of food to them."

Ralph was worried. "Do you think that you can get the wagon down the road? The snow will be deep in some places. And why am I not coming with you?"

Mary shook her head. "I'm not going to take the wagon. I'm going to ride one of the horses and lead the other. I'll be back the day after tomorrow."

That night, Ralph grumbled about her trip, not liking it one bit.

Mary laughed. "You're just worried about your woman who you think is doing something that should be a man's job."

"You got that right," he grumped.

At the crack of dawn as Ralph looked on anxiously, Mary waved goodbye, and leading a horse loaded with food, she spurred the horse that she was riding away from the farm.

The going was not as bad as she had feared. There was only one rather deep snow drift to get through, and the horses made it easily. Taking her time, she made her way along the muddy road until she came to the road coming down from the logging camp. She turned right onto this road and began the downward part of her journey. Before noon she came to the gravel road and turned right towards the kid's camp. As the sun was sinking in the west, she was about to pass a tree when she noticed a noose hanging from a tree

branch. Looking closely, she saw the top half of a skull poking through the snow beneath the noose.

The sun had just gone below the horizon, when she crossed over the hill and came to the camp. As the horses made their way down the hill, she could see the logging machinery and the large yellow bus in the parking lot. On the other side of a narrow wooden bridge spanning a swiftly running stream, she saw the rough built Lodge, the A-frame cabin, and the deserted dining hall.

Mary rode her horse down the road until she came to the bridge. Then Mary dismounted, and she carefully led the horses over the narrow bridge. Continuing on foot, she began hailing the Lodge. After a few calls, the door opened and people poured out. She was quickly surrounded.

"Wait a second," she said raising a hand. There was quiet. She looked over the group. There were two adults, several older girls and boys, and some younger kids.

"On my way here, I passed a tree with a noose hanging from it. There were bones underneath. If my children had been with me, they would have seen that gruesome sight. Now, which one of you is responsible for leaving that person unburied?" Mary asked.

The two adults glanced at one another, and then they looked away. The older kids shuffled their feet or looked at the sky. Then, hesitantly, one of the smaller kids meekly raised his hand.

Mary stared at him in disbelief. "You're Mike? You are the one that Ralph calls, the Chief?"

"Um...yes."

Mary sighed. This was not what she had expected. "Well then young man, would you please bury that man?"

Mike gave her a stubborn look that she had often seen from Comet and Star. "I left him there as a warning to anyone else who might be thinking of harming my people."

Mary nodded. "I understand. That's what Ralph said. But a few bones on the ground are hardly a warning to anyone. It's time to bury him. Please." She watched as the boy turned his head toward the direction of the Hanging Tree. He was thinking.

"All right," the boy replied slowly. He turned to the adult man. "Hector, take a crew and bury him tomorrow. That is, if the weather is okay," the boy added firmly, and in that last sentence Mary caught a glimpse of the iron in the individual.

"Got it, Chief," the man said.

"Thank you," said Mary politely. "I brought food, but I need to sleep here for the night."

The kids eagerly helped Mary unload the horses and put the food in the almost empty freezer. Then they took Mary inside their Lodge and showed her around. Mary was amazed at what they had created. Hector was given most of the credit.

"It wasn't my idea though," he said. "I just took their idea and improved on it."

"Man, for what you had to work with, you did good," Mary said. She was led to a room with a double bed.

"You can sleep here," Mike said. He slept in a bunk that night.

"Thank you," Mary replied.

Erin held an impromptu revue that night in order to show Mary how they had entertained themselves during the long winter. There was singing and skits and jokes and Hector played his harmonica. Then Mary excused herself and went to bed.

The next morning was clear. At dawn, Hector started his truck, and with a group of boys smothered in their heaviest clothes and blankets, he went to bury the bones of the man under the noose.

Mary saddled her horse, and she led the two animals over the bridge. She rode up the hill, and then she turned to acknowledge the waving kids. She disappeared over the crest of the hill as the burial detail was returning.

"She's a nice lady," said Yuie.

"Yes, she is," agreed Mike.

"And now we know that our people at the farm are all right," said Rasul.

Gradually, the snow melted. It lingered in the deep woods and on the mountains above them. The road to the Brown farm became passable. One day, Mike, Jacob, and Hector hiked up to the farm. Hector had warned Mike that they needed to save their fuel for major projects and emergencies so they did not take the truck. They stopped for the night at the turnoff, and then they continued on the next day.

That afternoon, as they neared the house, the inhabitants came out. The older kids were excited to see their friends. Comet and Star trailed along behind Mary.

"Who's them, Daddy?" demanded Comet.

Mike raised his eyebrows as he looked at Ralph. "They are friends, Comet," calmly answered Ralph.

The girls had to have hugs. The boys were more reserved, but they were very happy to see everyone. Mary greeted Jacob cheerfully.

Mary invited everyone inside, and despite their protests, fed them dinner. Afterwards, she showed them the farm.

"We need to decide what kinds of food I can provide that will stretch the farthest. Personally, I think that the best thing I could do would be to plow a large portion of your meadow, and sow it with wheat, alfalfa and oats. You have more land in your meadow than I have in my fields. In the fall, I can cut everything with the combine, and then leave the combine there. We've got to avoid moving the machinery as much as possible to save on fuel. We can use the wagon to move the food from your camp to our farm, or to move it from our farm to your camp.

"Here at the farm, I plan on planting potatoes, winter squash, peas, beans and lettuce. Those crops, we can harvest by hand, although I would need you to send some kids to help. I don't think that we will get great results from beans, but they are important to supplement whatever meat your hunters can provide. I'll keep on growing cucumbers, summer squash, and tomatoes in containers in the solar room so that I can get some vegetables to you as soon as possible. I believe that I can provide enough grains and vegetables for everyone. And we will have milk, although we may have to do without for a year. Our new calf is a bull, but it will be at least November before he can cover our cows, so I don't expect to be able to provide you with milk next winter, unless we have a low snowfall." She stopped.

The campers were overwhelmed. "Wow," said Mike. "Mrs. Brown, you're like a super mom or something. I can't believe how you planned this. I just don't know..." he trailed away, unable to express himself.

Mary smiled at him. "I'm a mother and a decent farmer, and I have the skills that you need. That's why I'm doing this. But I will need your help to succeed." The campers gratefully voiced their thanks and their eagerness to help. Together with Mary, they talked well into the night, making plans for the coming year.

The campers spent the night in the loft of the barn. The next day, they helped Mary load the wagon with more food. By noon they were ready to leave. Ralph drove the wagon. The campers walked beside it. The twins were going with them, but the girls were staying.

They talked to Mike about it.

"Mrs. Brown said that we could stay if we wanted to," began Kylie. "I mean, we miss our friends back at camp, but..."

"But, we like it here, Chief," added Paige. "And Mrs. Brown needs us. And Comet and Star need us."

"It's okay," Mike assured them. "You're free to come and go as you like. And we'll be up here pretty often, so we'll see you. And you can come visit us whenever you want."

"Why can't I go, Daddy?" complained Comet.

"You will be the only boy left, so you have to stay, Comet," replied Ralph.

Comet did not think much of Ralph's reasoning, but his grumbling subsided for the moment. Standing beside his mother, sister and the girls, he waved goodbye. Slowly, the wagon rolled away from the farm.

The heavy load required them to travel much slower than they normally would have. At one point, the wagon got stuck in the soft mud of the dirt road. The campers had to push it out of the mud. They stopped for the night at the junction of the logging road and the gravel road. Early the next morning, they continued their journey. By twilight they came to the camp. It was a cold night, so they left the food in the wagon and unloaded it early the next day.

Ralph was anxious to get back to the farm. He said goodbye to his friends. Then he looked at Kevin and Nathan.

"Men," he said. "I truly appreciate everything. I'm sorry I was such an asshole at first."

"We should have helped you more, Ralph. We're sorry, too," Nathan responded.

Ralph shook hands with Kevin and Nathan, and then he turned to Mike. "I have an idea," he said. "I'm going to miss the help that those two gave me. I was thinking that you might be willing to send another pair. Actually, I was thinking that it would be a good idea for a lot of the guys to get some experience on a farm. Maybe, you could send a new pair each month. It might come in handy in the future."

"Yeah, that is a good idea," said Mike. "All right. I'll send Tyler and another guy up there in a week or two. The girls will want to have a chance too, Ralph."

"That's fine. I'll be seeing you, Mike."

"You're staying with Mrs. Brown? For good?" Mike asked.

Ralph nodded.

"Then I'll see you around," Mike said with a smile. They shook hands. Ralph climbed on the wagon. He left the parking lot, and drove up the hill. Mike watched until he disappeared.

Jacob was able to kill a deer that week, but he was not happy about it. "This is the worst time of the year to be killing deer. This is when they're mating," he explained. "The bucks I kill will not mate and sire foals."

"Bad karma," agreed Rasul.

Mike asked Jacob to come in for a talk.

"I've been thinking about those people at the Retreat that Jean came across," he explained. "I've been thinking about the sheep."

"Be nice if we had some," said Jacob. "We could breed them. We would have a steady source of meat."

"But it didn't sound like a very pleasant situation," said Mike. "It might be a good idea to scout the area. Do you think you could find the place if Jean gave you directions?"

"Maybe. She was in bad shape when they found her. I wonder if she remembers the way," replied Jacob.

"She doesn't," responded Mike. "She only knows the general direction. We know it's to the northeast about two weeks away, and we know where she was found. Would you like to go take a look?"

"Can't hurt to look," Jacob answered. He left that day.

Mike called for Tyler and Gabby. "You two are breaking up."

"We are?" asked Tyler.

"Yes, for April at least. If you want to get back together after that, it's up to you," Mike said.

Gabby sighed. "It was fun while it lasted," she said to Tyler with a grin.

Some of the kids asked Mike if the solar panels could be moved back onto the dining hall roof so that the showers could be made to work. Mike was enthusiastic about the idea so he consulted Hector.

"I can do that this year," agreed Hector. "But once Kathy and I get the roof fixed and the shingles installed, we'll have to permanently set the solar panels in place."

Jean was teaching her students to find edible plants. She would have like to have gone with Jacob but her knee was hurting her. Teaching was tiresome, and she felt like she needed to get into the forest by herself. A few days after Jacob left, her knee felt much better. The next morning, she told Howard that she was leaving, and

that she would be back in a day or so.

"You're going by yourself?" he asked.

"Yeah, just for a day or so," she repeated as she picked up her gear. She gave him a wink. "You'll survive."

"No," Howard said. She looked at him. He seemed tense.

"No, you won't survive?" she asked.

"No, you can't go. Not by yourself," he replied.

"What?" she asked. She did not understand what he was saying.

"I said, no, you can't go overnight into the forest. Not by yourself," he replied firmly.

Jean stared at him, and then she sat her gear down. She crossed her arms. She was not smiling now. "Look, Howard, I care about you. I don't know, maybe I even love you. But, I go where ever I want, when ever I want. You need to understand that," she said.

"You said that you would obey me," he replied.

"What?"

"You said that I could have one time when you would obey me. When ever I wanted. Well, I want it now. I'm saying that you can't go deep into the forest overnight by yourself. You said you would obey me one time. This is that time. Obey me."

Jean frowned. Had she really said that? She tried to remember. She had a sinking feeling that he was right. "I wasn't feeling well then," she temporized.

"You said that your word is good. Is it?" he asked.

That made her mad. "You're damn right, my word is good," she snapped. "So I can't go into the forest by myself, huh. So what, you are going with me?"

"I can't leave right now," he replied apologetically.

"I can't believe this," she said, grinding her teeth. "A fifteen year old boy can go alone into the wilderness, but a twenty four year old United States Forest Ranger can't."

Howard winced but said, "Sorry."

Jean was furious. "Shit!" she yelled. She kicked her gear and stormed out of the room. Howard listened as she slammed the door of the Lodge. Howard went to talk to Mike.

Later, Mike asked Jean in for a talk. He was living in Chief's Headquarters again.

"I screwed up by sending Jacob out alone," he said bluntly.

"Howard is right. We can't afford to lose either you or Jacob. When he gets back, I'm going to ask him to hunt and scout with you. I don't mean that you have to stay together in the forest. But, you do need to stay close enough to find one another and to help each other if something goes wrong."

Jean gave him a curt nod. "All right. If Jacob agrees, I'll do it."

Howard had fled to the relative safety of the dining hall. As sunset approached, he gathered his courage, and he went back to the Lodge. He pulled the canvas curtain back and cautiously looked in. Jean was lying on the bed. She looked over at him. She was not smiling.

"All right, you had a good idea. I'm still pissed at you," she said.

"Can I come in?" he asked hopefully.

She debated with herself. "Come," she replied.

Cautiously he entered the room. "Mike said that we could have his room, if we want," he said.

Interested, Jean asked, "Really? That would be nice. I'd like us to have our own room. I bet Desi and John would like it, too."

"I can move our beds now if you like," offered Howard.

Jean got up. "Why not?" she said. They moved their stuff into Mike's old room. Afterwards, Jean was noticeably more cheerful.

Later that night, Jean purred and said, "Oh, Baby, that was nice. I like what you do to me."

"So, you're not mad at me anymore?" Howard asked.

"No. Hell, I'm the one who gave you a one time obedience card," she mumbled as sleep began to claim her. "Can't blame you for playing it." She yawned, closed her eyes and snuggled up to him.

After a moment of silence, she faintly heard him ask, "Can I have another obedience card?"

"Sure," she mumbled as she drifted off.

Jean woke the next morning. She felt great, but something was nagging at her. In her mind, she replayed her last conversation with Howard. Her eyes widened. Abruptly she turned to him. He was already gone.

"Howard!" she yelled.

Outside the Lodge, Howard heard her yell. Smiling, he continued down to the dining hall. He hoped that Jacob was going to be okay with his plan.

Jacob was moving along a ridge of land between two mountains. He expected to walk for another week before he found

the mountain retreat. The light snow last night had turned into a light drizzle this morning. There were only a few trees here, but the brush was heavy on this ridge. At times Jacob was forced to backtrack and take another path. Jacob thought that he recognized current, gooseberry, and plum shrubs from what he had learned in Jean's class. The shrubs were sending out new leaves. There were only a few juniper trees among the shrubs.

Ahead, Jacob noticed another thicket. As he passed, his senses suddenly heightened, and he became fully alert. There was something in the thicket. What was it? Jacob stopped, and he made a point of drinking from his canteen. Turning slightly, he could see in the corner of his eye a hint of cloth in the bush. Not an animal then, he thought to himself. It was a human trying to hide.

Deciding, he turned suddenly and strode towards the thicket. His body language made it quite clear what he was about. As he drew near, a person sprang out of the brush holding a short thick club of wood. It was a young woman, not that much older than Jacob.

"Get back!" she cried. "Get back." Her eyes were wild, and there was almost a palpable smell of fear from her. She was panting, barely able to contain herself. Jacob thought that, at any moment, she might turn and run blindly away from him. Her long brown hair was dirty, and her face was streaked with grime. She appeared to be wearing two pairs of pants under a skirt, and her upper body was layered in several garments. Her worn out tennis shoes had holes in the toes. She was carrying some blankets and a large purple bag.

"Get back!" she repeated.

Jacob stopped. They stood there facing each other. Then Jacob sat down on the ground and crossed his legs. The woman regarded him warily. She stepped back. Jacob remained motionless. She took another step back. Jacob did not move. She turned around, and she began walking away from him. She was going the way that he had come from.

When she was almost out of sight, Jacob stood up. He looked down the path to where she had disappeared. He turned, and he looked the other way, to where he had been headed. He wondered what Mike would do if Mike were here. He thought that he knew what Mike would do. Giving the path to his task one last look of regret, he turned to follow the woman.

Lily was scared. She thought that she had hidden well, but the man had noticed her. At least he had not attacked her immediately.

Would he leave her alone? It was doubtful. She hurried along the path. If she could get far enough ahead, perhaps she could find another hiding place. She looked at the sky. It was still early in the day. After an hour of walking, she came across a patch of thorn bushes. Carefully trying to avoid the thorns, she crept into the bush. She waited. Less than ten minutes later, she saw him coming along the trail, not hurrying. When he was a few paces from the thicket, he stopped. Jean held her breath, and she kept perfectly still. The man turned, and he walked ten paces back. Then he sat down. He took a drink from his canteen, and then he settled himself. He waited.

Jean drew a breath. He knows I'm here, she thought. She needed the rest, so she waited five minutes, and then she crept out of the thicket. She stood, holding her club in front of her.

"Go away!" she said adamantly. "Go away."

"Are you hungry?" the man said.

"It doesn't matter if I am," she replied. "I'm not trading my body for food." She backed away, and then she turned and loped swiftly away from him. Jacob waited a few minutes, and then he followed her.

Lily tried to pace herself. Don't exhaust yourself, Lily, she thought. Another part of her said that she was already tired. She was very tired. She found another hiding place. She waited. Once again the man noticed her and sat down.

She left the shelter of the thicket. The man remained seated. She wondered if she could attack him suddenly with her club. She rejected the idea. That would place her too close to the man. Except that he was not a man. Now that she had her fear under control, she could see that he was younger than she had thought at first. He was a teenager about seventeen or eighteen years old. Still, he was dangerous. She had learned that truth during the last year.

"Are you thirsty?" he asked.

"I told you. I'm not trading my body. Not for food. Not for water. Go away. You're wasting your time."

When he stood, she turned and fled down the path. Her panic had returned. She wept as she ran. She stumbled, kept her feet, and hurried on. She was tired. She was so very tired.

Presently, she had to stop. She bent at the waist, trying to catch her breath. There was a pain in her side. Listening, she could hear him coming. She hid behind a tree. He came to where she hid, and he sat down. He opened his back pack, and he took something

out of it. He put something in his mouth, and he began to chew. Lily's mouth began to water. It had been a full day since she had eaten the last of the food that she had hidden from the men.

The teenager looked at the tree that she was hiding behind. She watched as he took something out of his pack. It was a plastic bag. Her eyes widened as he cocked his arm back and threw it at her. It missed the tree by a foot, so that it landed behind and a little to the side of her. Her heart was beating, but gradually she realized that it was not an attack.

She looked at the plastic bag. It looked as if it had been repeatedly used. There was something in the bag. Cautiously, she picked up the bag and looked inside. Inside was a roasted potato still in the skin, and a piece of brown bread.

Was he trying to drug her? She sniffed at the potato and the bread. She didn't smell anything wrong, but that meant nothing. It could be drugged. Her mouth was watering, and a part of her body was demanding that she eat the food. She convinced herself that he was trying to bribe her, and she wolfed down the food. Let him try a bribe, she thought. He wouldn't succeed. She was not giving in as had some of the other women. When she was finished eating, she regretted not saving some of the food for later.

She felt better. She took her water bottle out of her inner jacket, and she allowed herself two full mouthfuls. She knew that she was becoming dehydrated. There was some snow around the bottom of the tree. Carefully, she wiped off the top layer. She took some of the clean snow underneath, and she worked it into the bottle. With a start, she realized that she had not looked at the man for a few minutes. Anxiously, she glanced around the tree. He had finished eating and was just sitting there.

She left. He found her. They played cat and mouse for the rest of the day. As the sun settled onto the mountains, they moved into a more wooded area. Lily found three small fir trees growing closely together, forming an arc. She sat down in the middle with her back to the center tree and waited. Presently he found her. He sat down. He sat there for five minutes, and then he rose and left. Lily was startled. She wondered what he was doing. Was he trying to work his way around behind her? Perhaps he had given up. She held her club on her lap. Where was he?

Her thoughts were giving way to panic again, when he returned. He was holding a skinned rabbit. Lily watched as he built a fire and a

spit and roasted the rabbit. When it was thoroughly cooked, he doused the fire and left. She waited a long time. She looked at the rabbit on the spit over the remains of the fire. Was it a trap? Finally she stood, and she moved away from her stronghold while gripping the club tightly. She reached the rabbit. She grabbed the spit and hurried back to her place of safety. She held the club between her knees as she tore into the rabbit. It tasted wonderful. He had stuffed the rabbit with some kind of leaves that gave it a spicy aroma.

Lily ate it all. As she finished eating the rabbit, he returned. She tensed. She had eaten his food. He would be angry and hungry, she thought. She wondered if she should apologize. No, she would not apologize. If he got angry because she had eaten his food, well tough. Maybe he would realize that she was not a nice person, and he would leave her alone.

He didn't say anything, and he didn't seem angry or surprised that she had eaten his rabbit. It was another bribe, she realized. Night fell. She leaned against the tree, and she covered herself with the blankets. She pretended to sleep. But her eyes were heavy with fatigue.

Jacob found a soft spot on the ground without tree roots. He laid his backpack and mummy bag down, and then he lay down on the mummy bag and used his backpack as a pillow. He waited. The woman was pretending to sleep, but her body was still tense. Jacob enjoyed the twilight. The wind was soft, and occasionally the leaves of the trees would rustle. He listened to the sounds of the nightlife around him. Crickets were chirping.

He wondered about the woman. He thought that she must be from Eagle's Retreat. At least he might bring back some information. He had never seen, other than on television, someone so terrified. Things must be bad at that Retreat.

Presently, he rose and looked at the woman. She was breathing deeply now. He was certain that the exhausted woman was asleep. He picked up his mummy bag, and he tiptoed over to her. Carefully, he removed her club. If she suddenly awoke, he did not want her to strike him accidentally or on purpose. She did not awaken. He regretted the need to awaken her, but the night was going to be cold so he had no choice.

Taking a firm grasp on her blankets, he yanked them away from her. With a cry of fear, she woke. She saw him with her blankets, and more importantly, he was holding her club. Incoherent cries

came from her mouth as she shrank away from him. Her hands curled into claws as she awaited his attack.

Jacob dropped his mummy bag at her feet, and he walked away. He placed the club by his backpack, and then he laid one of her blankets on the ground. He lay down on that blanket, and he wrapped himself in the other blanket.

After a while, Lily realized that he was not going to attack her. At least not yet. The pounding of her heart slowed. She regained her senses. Relief was followed by tears. She put her head between her legs, and she silently wept. She wept out of fear. She wept out of anger. She wept because she was so tired and so alone. She wept for her friends who had died.

Eventually, she collected herself. She saw the mummy bag. This was another bribe, she realized. She got into the bag, and she slept.

Lily awoke to the smell of food cooking. The sun was just over the horizon. She sat up. The young man was roasting a fat grouse over the fire. He looked at her.

"It's ready," he said.

She got out of the bag. It was a sunny day. A yellow faced warbler flew down from the green canopy, snatched something on the ground, and fled back to the sky. Lily stood there trying to decide what to do. Finally, she walked to the fire and sat down. The young man tore a piece off of the bird. No, he was an older teenager, she remembered.

"It's hot," he warned as he handed the meat to her. Gingerly she took the piece and ate it. He handed her another piece. She ate that too. Shortly, she realized that she had eaten all of the bird. She looked at Jacob. He was peeling a hard boiled egg.

"Want some?" he asked. Lily shook her head. Jacob fished another piece of bread from his pack, and he offered it to her. She accepted and ate it.

When they were finished eating, Jacob rolled her blankets and tied them with a piece of dried vine. Then to her surprise, he handed the club to her.

He pointed down the trail in the direction that she had been traveling. "That way," he said. He started to walk away.

What should I do, Lily wondered? Do I follow him? If I don't, will he follow me? She decided to follow him for the moment. She could decide later if she should sneak away.

They walked until she was tired. She was about to ask him to stop when he paused. He sat down, and she did the same. He waited for ten minutes, and then he stood and resumed the journey with her following behind. After a few hours, she was tired again. Before she could ask, he stopped and they rested. At noon they stopped while he hunted. He caught another bird and roasted it. They ate, and then they resumed their journey. They walked and rested. This pattern continued for the rest of the day.

When night drew near, Jacob found the stump of a dead tree that had been hit by lightning. It was hollow but there was no way in, until Jacob made one with his knife and with his boot. They crawled through the hole that he had made. Jacob shared his food with Lily. Then he started to unroll the bedding.

Lily tensed. All day she had been dreading this moment. What would he do? His bribes had been generous, she had to grant. She was beginning to understand why other women at the Retreat had gradually succumbed to the subtle and to the not so subtle pressure from the men. She imagined a woman from the far distant past talking to her.

"This is the way it is," the woman would say. "A man finds you. He decides that he wants you. He feeds you and he shelters you and he protects you. In return, he expects to use your body for his pleasure."

"I won't have sex with you willingly," Lily said abruptly. "You'll have to force me."

Chapter Ten

Lily

Jacob glanced at her as he continued his task. "I'm not going to have sex with you," he said. Lily stared at him.

"Why not?" she asked, and then she furiously berated herself. You idiot, Lily, she thought. What does it matter? It looks like you might be safe for another night.

"For one thing, I don't think that it would be all that comfortable to have sex right here. For another thing, I'm not allowed to have sex before I'm sixteen. I won't be sixteen until August. But mainly, I'm not going to have sex with you, because you don't want me to have sex with you," Jacob said as he finished unlacing his bag.

For some reason, Lily's mind focused on his second reason. He is not allowed to have sex before he's sixteen? Lily looked at him. He was young. He was much younger than she had originally guessed. He was fifteen.

"Who are you?" she asked. She found it unbelievable that she had not asked him this until now. "Where are you from?"

"I'm Jacob," the boy replied. "I'm from a camp about five days away from here."

Lily thought about that. "What kind of camp?" she asked.

"It was supposed to be a camp about birth control for kids," replied Jacob. "There are kids there from all over California and Nevada. But then the Fog came. The adults all left except for one lady. Then she was killed by some bad guys."

Lily stared at him astonished and with disbelief. "You come from a camp of kids? There are no adults there?"

"There are two adults. Hector is a man from a logging camp who found us and stayed with us. Jean is a United States Forest Ranger," replied Jacob. He frowned. "I guess you could count Mrs. Brown as the third adult. She lives on a farm nearby."

Lily's mind was reeling. This was unbelievable. "What do you mean, the Fog came?"

Jacob looked at her. She could tell that he was startled by her question. "You don't know about the Fog?" he asked. Lily shook her head.

"Something has happened to the world. At least we think that it's all over the world. Some kind of fog is surrounding us. The only

land that's not covered, is above six thousand seven hundred feet," explained Jacob.

Lily looked at him like he was addled. "A fog," she said. "A fog that covers the whole world up to almost seven thousand feet."

"Yes. What did you think had happened?" asked Jacob.

"I saw what happened," she insisted. "Some men took over the Eagle's Retreat where I was staying. That was last year. They started mistreating people. They killed some people. They started raping women, and they intimidated others into having sex with them. They control the phones, they disconnected the TV's, and somehow they are blocking the satellite cable, and they did it all so that they could set up their own little kingdom, here in the mountains."

"How's their food situation?" asked Jacob.

Lily ducked her head. "Not good," she said. "We had a lot in the beginning. That's the other reason I escaped. I could see that we were running out of food. I don't know why they haven't resupplied. Maybe they are afraid that someone is going to find out what they are doing. They tried to slaughter a sheep and eat it, but everyone who ate some of the meat got sick." Jacob didn't say anything. He thought that she would find out the truth soon enough.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'm Lily," she replied. After that, they slept. When Lily awoke, she felt rested for the first time in a year.

Lily took over the cooking chores. When Jacob caught it, Lily prepared it. She cleaned up afterwards. She tried to give Jacob his mummy bag and take her blankets back. Jacob was gentle but firm. The answer was, no. She didn't press it. She was alive, and she was free, at least for the moment, and Jacob seemed intent on keeping her that way. She still didn't quite believe that the bad times were over, but at least he had not tried to force her to have sex with him.

Once, he asked her how old she was. She told him that she was twenty one. He responded by saying that she would be the third adult in their camp. She didn't tell him that she had no intention of staying in their camp, and that she was headed down the mountain as soon as possible. She knew that he was making up much of what he told her. She did not know why. She wondered how he would explain the fantasy when they got to where they were going, where ever that was.

On the third day of their travels together, they came to a

stream. Jacob turned right towards the west, and they followed the stream. The next day, the stream grew larger and faster, and the day after that, it became a river. About noon, Jacob stopped. Behind him, Lily stopped also. She could tell that Jacob was alert and listening.

For a moment her fear returned, but then Jacob said in a loud voice, "It's Jacob."

A minute later, she saw two boys come out of the woods. They hailed Jacob. The smaller boy was an African-American. The other boy was lighter but not by much.

"Hey, dude," the younger boy said. "You're back early." He looked at Lily with reserve in his eyes.

"Change of plans," said Jacob. "This is Lily. She's from the Retreat." He looked at Lily, and he pointed to the younger boy. "That's Eric. And that's Ahmad."

Lily had been examining the two boys. Startled, she looked back at Jacob. This was the first time he had indicated that he had already known about the Retreat. She kept silent, waiting to see what would happen.

"Do you want one of us to run back and tell the Chief?" asked Ahmad.

"No need. We'll be there soon enough," answered Jacob.

"How's your food?" asked Eric. "You hungry?"

"Nah," answered Jacob. "We've been eating. What have you got to drink?"

"Mrs. Brown sent us a whole canister of Kool-Aid," said Eric.

"The Chief is reserving it for the patrols. But you can have some."

"Cool," replied Jacob, his eyes lighting up. Eric handed him a thermos. Jacob took it and, ignoring the screw-on cup, drank straight from the thermos. Then guiltily he looked at Lily.

"Want some?" he asked, indicating that she could use the cup.

Typical boy, she thought. "No, thank you," she answered politely. She took a drink from her water bottle.

After exchanging a few more words with the patrol, Jacob and Lily continued their journey along the swiftly running river. At sunset they came out of the woods, and Lily got her first look at the camp. The sight of the crude Lodge astonished and alarmed her, but the A-frame cabin and the dining hall and the big yellow bus beside the heavy machinery in the parking lot conveyed some sense of normalcy.

"I need to check in," said Jacob. "But first, I think I'll use the

bathroom," he added with a blush. He headed for the Lodge. Lily saw a woman talking to a teenage boy. When she approached them, they were obviously surprised to see her.

"Pardon me," she said with a smile. "Can you direct me to the Administration Office?"

"Uh...it's over there," the woman said while staring at Lily. She pointed to the A-frame cabin. Lily thanked the woman, and she went to the cabin. She knocked on the door.

"It's open," came a voice from inside. Lily opened the door, and she stepped inside. She saw a young boy staring at her.

"Hello," she said. "Is the person in charge, here?"

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"I'm Lily," she replied patiently. "I came here with Jacob. I need to speak with the person in charge of the camp."

"Jacob's back?" the boy asked. "Where is he?"

"He is using the restroom. I really need to speak to the person in charge," replied Lily.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and then a man and the woman that Lily had just spoken to entered the cabin.

"Hey, Chief," the man said. "Everything okay?"

"I guess so," said Mike. "This woman says that she came here with Jacob. Supposedly he's using the Porta Potty."

Jacob came through the door. "Hello, Chief," he said.

"What's going on here?" demanded Lily. "Where is your Administrator?" Her fear had returned. She had thought that everything would soon be back to normal, but nothing seemed normal about this place.

Jacob, Hector and Jean looked at Mike.

"I'm in charge here," he said. "My name is Mike, but most everyone calls me Chief."

"This is Lily, Chief," said Jacob. "She's from the Retreat. She doesn't know about the Fog."

Jean gasped. "You're from the Retreat?"

Lily didn't answer. Her mind was numb. She sat down heavily on the bed. "This can't be happening," she whispered to herself.

Jean looked at her with pity, and then Jean said to Mike, "Chief, can I be alone with her for a minute?"

"Sure," said Mike. "Take your time. Let's go guys." The three males left the cabin.

"I didn't get to the Retreat, Chief," said Jacob. "I found her

about a week away. I decided that you would want me to stop and bring her here. I'm sorry."

"Good job, Jacob," said Mike. "You can go back later. I was already thinking that sending you there alone was a bad idea. About Lily. It's late, so I'm going to let her stay in my place tonight. I want you to stay there, too."

Jacob's mouth dropped open. "What?" he said.

"Upstairs," explained Mike patiently. "In the loft. Just so she'll have someone around who she's familiar with. Tomorrow, I'll move her to a bunk."

"Oh. All right," replied Jacob.

The next day, Lily feeling weary and subdued, met with Mike and his Council. She gave them an account of her experiences at the retreat.

"Jacob, why do you think that they got sick from eating that sheep?" asked Mike.

"Didn't prepare it properly. Sounds like they cut the stomach or intestines," replied Jacob.

"Have they tried to eat another sheep, Lily?" asked Mike.

"Not while I was there. No one wanted to take the chance," was her answer. "We were living on deer and goat milk."

"How many of those people are still alive?"

"When I left, there were five men, eight women and four kids, but one of the men was very sick," answered Lily.

"Seventeen people," said Mike slowly. He stopped talking and thought about it. Then he looked at Jacob.

"Jacob, do you think that you could prepare one of those sheep properly?" he asked.

"Yes, I could do that," Jacob responded. Mike thought about it some more.

"Lily, are they keeping a close watch on those sheep?" Mike asked.

"They didn't seem to be watching them at all," she replied. Mike nodded.

"Jacob, I want you to write down a detailed description of how to prepare the sheep for cooking. Lily, you draw some diagrams for him. When you are ready Jacob, I want you and Jean to go to the Retreat. Steal a sheep. Slaughter it so that it's ready to cook. Then leave it where they will find it. Attach the diagrams to the sheep." Mike finished speaking and looked around, waiting for their reactions.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then they all spoke at once. Mike raised his hand. "One at a time. Erin?"

"Chief, I get your point, but if you do this, you are letting them know that we are here. Or at least that someone is somewhere."

"They won't know what direction we are," answered Jean. "And I'm sure that Jacob and I can point them in a different direction."

"I not crazy about the idea," confessed Howard. "But there are children there."

Mike looked at his carpenter. "Hector?"

Hector shook his head. "Amigo, you never fail to amaze me. We have a choice, here. We can keep ourselves safely hidden from these evil people, or we can try to save the children. We already know what you are going to do." The room fell silent.

After a moment, Jacob spoke. "Yes, we know what the Chief will do. That's why he's the Chief. So let's get it done."

Two days later the plan took a drastic change. It began that morning when Gabby came to Chief's Headquarters to complain.

"Some one stole some food, Chief," she said. "They took some of the smoked meat that we save for the patrols. And they took some roasted potatoes that we were going to serve for lunch today. And they stole a thermos."

Mike was mystified. "I can see why some of our goofballs might steal some of the jerky. But why would anyone steal potatoes?"

A little later, Jacob came by. "Have you seen, Lily?" he asked. "I need her to draw some pictures of my instructions for preparing the sheep."

"I haven't seen her," replied Mike absently. Then a thought came into his head.

"She's having a hard time accepting that the Fog is real, isn't she, Jacob?"

"Yeah. I'm still not sure that she believes us," answered Jacob.

"Jacob, find her. As soon as possible," said Mike.

Jacob gave him a questioning look. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet. But go find her. Now."

Lily could not be found. But someone's backpack turned up missing. And the last one to see her was the girl at the guard post on the road overlooking the camp.

"Sure, I saw her, Chief," she said. "She said she was going down to the Hanging Tree to draw it. She said something about

drawing it for our history."

"Did you see her come back," asked Mike.

"Uh...no," she answered uneasily. "I got off my shift right after that. Did I screw up?"

"No, it's all right," Mike answered. Mike went to find Jacob. He told Jacob what he had learned.

"She's gone," said Jacob. "Chief..."

"Yeah, go find her," said Mike.

Jacob was on the road in minutes. He walked swiftly, not taking his time as he usually did. He was worried about Lily, more than he cared to admit to himself. Would she try to go through the Fog? He shuddered at the idea.

He walked far into the night, but he did not overtake her. Eventually, he had to rest. He slept for five hours, and then he set off again. He remembered the first time that he had made this hike. He was in much better shape now. The days in the woods had toughened him, and had honed his senses.

For a second day he followed Lily. Then, a few hours after dark, he stopped. She was close. He did not know how he knew, but he sensed that she was close. Then faintly he heard her crying. His blood ran cold, and he began to run.

"Lily!" he called. "Lily!"

"Jacob? Jacob is that you?" She stopped crying, and she called to him. He found her. She was just off the road in a small clearing. She flung herself into his arms, and she started crying again.

"Lily, are you hurt?" he asked urgently.

She wiped her eyes and gave him a shaky laugh. "No. Sorry. Just feeling miserable, that's all. I can't see very well. I should have stolen a flashlight, too, I guess. I saw a dog tonight. He scared me." Jacob did not respond to that. He doubted that the animal she had seen was a dog.

Jacob had his LED flashlight. He quickly made a fire. Shortly, they were warming their hands by its flame. Jacob saw that Lily had put on all her clothes again. She was carrying her blankets. And she had a club of wood.

"So you found out," Lily said as she stared into the fire.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for stealing your food. I'm sorry I stole the backpack."

"You could have asked," said Jacob flatly.

"Would your boss have given me some? Would he have let me go?" she asked

"We call him, Chief. Yes, he would have given you food. Yes he would have let you borrow a backpack. Yes, he would have let you go. He's not running a prison. He's trying to keep us alive. He's even going to try to keep those men at the Retreat alive, because he hopes that will keep those kids alive. You would have known that if you had asked me," said Jacob sadly.

Lily was silent, and then she spoke. "I'm sorry, Jacob. I not used to the freedom that your people have. But there must be a way out of here. I've got to find it."

Jacob sighed. "I need to sleep," he said. "Give me your blankets." Lily did not argue. She handed Jacob her blankets, and she took his mummy bag. Jacob rolled up in her blankets, and he fell asleep.

The next morning, Jacob said, "Let's go."

Lily balked. "Where are we going?" she demanded.

"To the Fog," he answered.

By the end of the day, they were barely a half mile from where Jacob had first encountered the fog. Jacob insisted that they stop. He didn't want to be closer than this to whatever was in the deadly mist. He didn't make a fire. They ate cold food, and then they lay in their sleeping gear talking.

"I wonder why the men at the Retreat didn't tell us that we were surrounded by this mist of yours," Lily mused.

"Good question."

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew about the Retreat," asked Lily.

"Didn't know if I should. Waited to talk to the Chief," he replied.

Lily thought about that. "You're very loyal to him," she offered. "Why is that?"

"He's loyal to me," was his reply.

Jacob slept next to Lily that night. Lily reflected on the fact that she did not feel disturbed at having him so close. She accepted it as a sign that she was recovering. She was glad that he was near. Once again, she imagined a conversation with a woman from the distant past.

"They are not all like that," the woman would say. "Some will feed you, clothe you, and protect you, and ask nothing of you in return. What ever you decide to share will be up to you. Some of

them will say that it's because they are decent. Some will say that it's because they are honorable. Some will say that it's because they are civilized. What ever their reason, they are why our tribe has not just survived, but actually grown stronger."

In the morning, they packed their gear, and they walked to the fog. As they approached, Lily stared in dismay at the dreary brown mist covering the ground. She stopped walking. Her eyes filled with tears. She turned and went well back up the road before she sat down. She put her head against her knees and sobbed.

But Jacob was intently examining the landscape. He looked at where he was. He looked at the land on either side of the road. He bent down, and he studied the ground. He took a large rock, and he started to throw it into the fog. Then he hesitated. He wasn't alone, he remembered. And besides, throwing the rock would only be an act of defiance. He went back to Lily.

"Lily," he said. When she didn't respond he said it louder. "Lily!" She looked up at him. "It's going down." Her eyes were bleak and red. She wasn't hearing him.

"Lily, listen to me," he urged. "The Fog is going down. The more he thought about it, the more excited he felt.

"What," she asked.

"The Fog. It's not as high as it used to be. Last year you would have been sitting in it."

She rubbed her eyes. "It's going down? It's receding?"

"Yes, it's going down." Jacob turned and looked at the edge of the fog. "It's going down," he whispered with satisfaction in his voice.

He looked around again. On either side of the road there was some reddish brown goo on the ground. But grass was growing through it. He looked up. For the first time he was struck by the fact that the trees whose trunks disappeared into the fog below, did not seemed to be dying. They looked perfectly healthy.

"We have to get back, Lily," said Jacob. "We have to get back and tell the Chief.

Lily winced. "Do you think I can go back? Do you think that your Chief will let me come back?"

He smiled at her as they started walking back the way they had come. "Oh, he'll be pissed. But he'll let you back in the tribe."

"After hearing you talk about him, I would think that he would devise some gruesome punishment for me," she muttered.

"Yeah, probably," he said cheerfully. "But look on the bright

side. At least he won't hang you."

"Ha, ha," said Lily with a scowl. But she was glad of one thing. Jacob seemed animated. He seemed happy. And Jacob's cheerfulness was infectious.

Three days later, the embarrassed woman stood in front of Mike, and she listened to an ear scalding lecture. It was humiliating, she thought glumly, for a twenty one year old woman to have to listen to a scolding from a fourteen year old boy. Still it was only proper that she take her medicine. Mike sentenced her to clean the Porta Potties for a month, which actually caused the rest of the tribe to generously forgive her theft. One boy even suggested that, at the end of her month, she steal something else. In addition to cleaning the toilets, she was to begin a visual record of their tribe.

"And the first picture that you draw will be the Hanging Tree," Mike said sarcastically. Lily winced.

Mike was excited to hear Jacob's report. He had Jacob describe what he had seen at Meeting that night. By the time Jacob finished speaking, the tribe was cheering.

"How low do you think the Fog is now, Jacob?" asked Eric.

"I think it's down to about six thousand four hundred feet," replied Jacob. "It went down about three hundred fifty feet in one year."

The cheers were slightly muted at that observation. It would take two decades for the Fog to dissipate at that rate. But they realized that there was a chance, that one day they would live once again in a world without the Fog.

"But the problem of my moss covered three handled greduenza remains," commented Mike the next day.

"Huh?" said most of the Council.

"Cat in the Hat," explained Gabby.

"Who let you in here?" asked Mike

"You know, Chief, it wouldn't hurt to have one of the younger kids on your staff," offered Gabby.

"One of the younger kids," repeated Mike. "Well, that would be me." Gabby looked surprised.

"How old are you, Chief?" she asked.

"I'm fourteen," he replied. Gabby giggled. "And a half," he added defensively. "Now get lost."

"Going, going, gone," she said airily as she left.

"Now where was I," he said.

"You were saying that we have a problem with a moss covered three handled gredunza," said Hector. "What ever that is."

"What I meant to say is that Jacob and Jean still have to go to the Retreat and do the sheep thing," said Mike.

"We'll be ready in twenty four hours, Chief," said Jean.

The next day, Mike met with Jacob and Jean before they left.

"Two weeks to get there, two weeks back, one week to do the job," he said. "Six weeks if you run into trouble. After six weeks, I'm going to get worried. After seven weeks, I'm going to get really worried. After eight weeks, I'm going to get pissed. And I want you to take the Admin's whistles. Use them if you get separated."

"We'll be fine," said Jacob as they left Chief's Headquarters.

"Famous last words," muttered Mike.

Outside, the two scouts found Howard and Lily. Jean didn't say much. She just wanted a few kisses, and she warned Howard not to pick up stray women.

Lily asked Jacob if he had enough food. He assured her he did. She asked him if he had enough water. He assured her that he did. She asked him if he had packed his tube of Neosporin. He assured her that he had. She asked him if he had packed enough clean underwear. Jacob blinked at that, and said that he and Jean really needed to leave now. Right now. So they left. It was the first day of May.

April had become May. The snow was gone at this elevation. Hector and Kathy were busy making shingles for the roof of the Lodge. Hector vowed that the roof would have less than five leaks come winter. Mike didn't have enough guilty people to cover the stuff under the Porta Potties, so Mike made everyone carry a few buckets of dirt to cover the excrement. The tanks were reinstalled in the Porta Potties to everyone's aromatic relief.

Mike sent another pair of boys to the Brown farm in May. Tyler returned eager to see Gabby. Gabby sat him down for a long talk, and she told him that although she was fond of him, she didn't think that she was ready for a serious relationship, being that she had just turned thirteen. Disappointed Tyler started to leave, only to find that Gabby had covered the plastic chair with a thin layer of glue. Mike threatened to make them stay in their underwear for a week, even if it took every tube of sun screen in the camp.

Desi and John were enjoying their single room, especially since some of the girls were camping in the bus at night. This meant that it

was not as crowded in the living areas of the Lodge. The bus got very warm during the day which made the vehicle a toasty place for the girls to gather together. The only problem that the girls had was finding enough coverings to hang over all the windows at night, since the area right outside the bus had become a favorite loitering spot for some boys. The girls asked Mike to intervene, but he was surprisingly unsympathetic.

Mary came down with her tractor, and she plowed some of the meadow. Mary planted ten acres of wheat, five acres of feed and five acres of oats. The kids griped about the loss of so much of their playing area, but they helped sow the seeds.

"I believe that we can make oatmeal and oat cereal," Mary said.

They were cutting the whole milk with water. Mary told the kids that if they built a chicken coop, she would give them some chicks. Mike said that, no, Hector could not help them. Hector did tell them about a metal wire supply area at the old logging camp. Several of the kids, led by Rasul, hiked up to the logging camp, and they carried the wire back. Hector didn't help them build the chicken coop, but Kathy lent them a hand. Kylie and Paige came to visit, and they helped, too.

Mike worried that the patrols were not covering the Brown farm. One day, he thought about the RV that was still in the bikers clearing. He asked Hector to see if the RV could be started. It could but just barely. The winter's cold had damaged the motor. But Hector got it started, and he and some of the kids managed to roll it down to the junction of the gravel road and the logging road. It became a guard house. Mike asked for volunteers to man it. Those who were willing to stay for forty eight hours had to walk to and from the RV. Those who were willing to stay for a week were taught to ride a motorcycle. There were several volunteers to stay a week, and Mike had to relent and allow girls to be RV guards.

This meant that one of the motorcycles was stationed about half way between the Lodge and the Brown farm. The Council agreed that this was a good way to speed communications between the two communities in case of an emergency.

By the end of May, Hector and Kathy finished shingling the roof of the Lodge. Hector told Mike that he wanted to take a stab at building a fireplace on the east side. Mike agreed provided that after forty five days, if he was not finished, he would replace the wood wall that he had removed. Hector began to gather stones and remove the

wall.

Lily's latrine duty was finally over. During the day she was busy making drawings in charcoal of the various historical sites of the camp, including the infamous Hanging Tree and the graveyard. The kids also insisted that she make a drawing of Mike's Throw. At night, she had been helping Howard to develop drawings of plants in the forest that could be harvested for food. Howard knew most of them by sight, but he wanted to wait until Jean confirmed their accuracy before he used the drawings. Together, they worried about Jean and Jacob. When the middle of June arrived, Howard and Lily went to see Mike.

"Where are they?" demanded Lily.

"Good question," answered Mike. "We knew that this might take some time. They know what they're doing. Let's give them another week before we panic."

Except for worrying about the two scouts, the year was passing pleasantly, so far. The grain was growing well in the meadow. The hunters had brought back another buck. They were getting regular shipments of vegetables, milk, butter and bread from the farm. There were the usual squabbles but nothing too serious. Even Tyler and Gabby were behaving.

But another week passed, and there was still no sign of the scouts. Seven weeks, thought Mike with a heavy heart. Seven weeks. Howard was grim faced, and he was becoming unpleasant to be around. The only one he would talk to was Lily.

Another week passed. The whole camp was worried now. Howard demanded that Mike send him and the Spears up to the Retreat to look for Jacob and Jean. Mike agreed to discuss it that night. After talking it over with the Council, there was unanimous consensus that they would have to go in strength to the Retreat.

But the next morning as they prepared to leave, the motorcycle from the RV guard post came roaring into camp with the message that Jacob and Lily were at Davis Brown Farm. Jacob had twisted an ankle, and they were both bone tired and in need of a long sleep.

"They got in late last night," said Ralph. "Mary is planning to bring them home in the wagon tomorrow. They really need to sleep today. Ralph had ridden one of the horses to the RV guard post, and the guards had agreed that this was an emergency.

There was happy relief in the Lodge. Ralph was thanked repeatedly for swiftly bringing the message.

"Thanks, man, for coming to tell us so quick. I really appreciate that," said Howard shaking Ralph's hand vigorously. Lily wanted to ride the motorcycle up to the farm, but Ralph convinced her that the two desperately needed to sleep.

"I promise you, Lily, that you will see them tomorrow," he said.

He met privately with Mike. "I hope you can make sleeping arrangements for all of us. The girls are coming. So are Comet and Star. I'll leave the boys to watch the farm and to do the chores. I need to get back, now. We'll need the horse for the wagon tomorrow, and I want her rested."

"Anything you need, Ralph. Anything," responded Mike. Ralph rode the motorcycle back to the RV post, and then he rode his horse home.

There was joy in the camp that day. Desi and Yuie suggested that cakes should be baked for a celebration. Mike agreed, but he suggested that they wait and bake them in the morning, so that the cakes would be fresh for the scouts who were expected in the late afternoon.

The next day everyone waited impatiently for time to pass. The cakes were baked, and then fresh butter was spread on top while they were still hot. Mike allowed people to wait at the top of the hill, but they were forbidden to go down to the Hanging Tree, because he was afraid someone's foot would get run over if there was a pressing crowd on the narrow road.

As darkness arrived, the wagon appeared and a cheer went up. Jacob and Jean were sitting on the bench next to Mary. Paige, Kylie, Star, Comet, and Ralph were riding in the back. The cheering got louder as the wagon approached. Jean waved to the crowd. Jacob appeared to be startled and annoyed at the fuss. The wagon came up and over the hill, and the boisterous crowd followed it down to the parking lot.

Jean and Jacob jumped down, and then they were immediately surrounded by the mob. Mike had to yell at them to let Howard through. Howard got to Jean and lifted her in his arms. He couldn't speak. He just held her for a long time. She put her arms, around his neck, and she buried her face on his shoulder. Finally, he placed her on the ground, took her face in his hands and kissed her. A long kiss. A cheer went up, and there was some good natured razzing.

When he finished kissing her, he growled, "Eight weeks?"

"Hey, you said it was okay if I went with Jacob," she replied

laughing.

He was clearly not amused. "Eight weeks?"

"What can I say? The kid held me up." She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "Sorry." They went up to the dining hall. Mike decided that he would talk to the scouts later. He went to the dining hall to have a piece of cake.

Eventually, only Jacob and Lily were left. He noticed her. She found that she wanted to hug him badly, but for some reason she felt too shy. She noticed that he was limping.

"How's your foot," she asked.

"Sprained it. Had to get back. Need to rest it," he replied.

"Lean on me," she said.

"All right." He leaned on Lily, and they made their way over the bridge.

"They have cake at the dining hall," she said.

His eyes lit with pleasure. "Cake?"

"Yes. I missed you," she dared to say.

"I missed you," he acknowledged. He and Lily went to eat cake.

After the party, Jean was tired and needed to rest. She and Howard walked back to their room in the darkness. Suddenly she stopped.

"Holy, shit," she exclaimed. "A fireplace." In place of the east wooden wall was a stone fireplace. Smoke was curling out of the chimney. "That is so cool. Does it work?"

"Of course it works," said Kathy who was following behind.

"Hector built it."

"I was only asking because I thought that maybe you built it," explained Jean.

"You are so funny, old lady," replied Kathy.

"Just kidding, kid. No, really, it's great. Too bad Desi and John got the room next to it," said Jean.

Meanwhile, Star came running up to her mother. "Can I sleep in the Lodge with Kylie and Paige and Gabby, please? They're going to have a slumber party by the fireplace."

Mary was noncommittal. "Uncle Mike is going to let us stay in Chief's Headquarters tonight. You are still a little young to be sleeping with the big girls," she responded.

"Please, please," Star begged Mary.

"Go ask Ralph," was Mary's answer. At that moment Ralph

arrived.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Dad, can I go to a slumber party tonight with Kylie, Paige and Gabby?" Star asked.

"Sure, why not," replied Ralph.

"Yaaaay! Thanks, Dad," said Star and she gave him a hug. Then she quickly ran off to find her friends, so she could tell them the good news.

Mary gave Ralph a critical look. "She always calls you, Dad, when she wants something," she said. "Sooner or later, you will have to put your foot down and say, no."

"I know," Ralph admitted.

That night, the four girls lay on mattresses by the fireplace, giggling, chatting, and generally just enjoying a girl night. The only person close to them was an older girl, who was sitting on one of the bus seats that had been placed in the open area of the Lodge. At one point, some boys with mischief on their minds approached

Suddenly the older girl stood.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a sweet but goose bump raising voice. Her face could hardly be seen by the light of the flickering fire. Her yellow eyes seemed to gleam with wicked intent. She appeared to appraise them as if she wondered how long they would take to bake. There was an aura of danger about her.

"N....no," the boys stammered, and they fled to the safety of their cave.

Satisfied, the young woman sat down, and glanced at the four girls. They had not been disturbed.

In the safety of their cave the boys shuddered.

"Did you ever notice how much she looks like a witch," asked one young man.

"Don't ever say that to John," cautioned Tyler.

Chapter Eleven

Rescue

The next morning, Jean and Jacob told their story at the Council meeting.

"We hustled our asses, and we made it to the Retreat in thirteen days," Jean began. "It took Jacob one day to find a sheep, kill it prepare it, and hang it where they would see it from their front door. So we were actually finished with the mission in about two weeks. So that got us thinking. Maybe we should scout around for a week and then head back.

"We found the road leading away from the Retreat and it seemed to be heading southeast. We took that road. About five hundred feet below the Retreat, we found a sheep barn. I never saw it when I was there alone. There is a lot of pasture close by and a lot more sheep. I guess those at the retreat just wandered up there. It looks like the sheep barn belongs to the Retreat."

"I thought that the road down the mountain might lead to another road running east and west," added Jacob. "I thought it might lead back to our area. I remembered that the firebreak road to Mrs. Brown's farm turned to the east. I thought that we might find that road."

Jean continued. "We went southeast along the road for another two days, and then the road forked. We debated about which fork to take, and since we hadn't seen evidence that either one was a road leading back to our neck of the woods, we decided that we would take the east fork. We thought that we would hike along that road for a day or two and then backtrack. You did say that you wouldn't be worried until six weeks had passed, right Chief," she said looking hopefully at Mike.

"True," said Mike. "Although I don't remember telling you that you could take off by yourselves. Howard, do you remember me saying that Jean and Jacob could go hiking off by themselves into the wilderness, if they completed their mission faster than we expected them to?"

"Don't get me started, Chief," growled Howard.

Hastily Jean continued. "Yeah, well, we hiked two more days and then things got interesting."

"At the end of the second day, we found the remains of two

bodies," said Jacob. "They had been shot. There were two motorcycles nearby. They were the same kind of bikes that we have. We found a jacket next to one of the bodies. It had a patch on it. Remember those guys we killed? Remember their jackets? They had the same patch."

"Oh, shit," said Yuie. "Our bad guys and these dead guys were from the same group?"

"You sure about that, Jacob?" asked Mike grimly.

"I'm not a hundred per cent sure," Jacob answered. "But I would bet on it."

"Anyway, the next day, we found a dirt track leading up a hill. It was rough, but we could tell that there had been motorcycles on it, and we thought that we could see some tire marks from cars," said Jean. "So we followed the track. It went up the hill, and then it turned east and went around the hill and veered to the north. At the end of that track we found them. We found the bikers camp."

Mike was astonished. "I don't believe this," he said. "What the hell were you thinking, Jacob?"

"I asked myself, where were they taking Jackie and Maria?" Jacob replied.

"What?" asked Mike.

"Where were they taking Jackie and Maria? That guy killed Jackie and he said that he was going to kill Maria, but what if he hadn't? They couldn't have been living at the place where we killed them. There weren't enough supplies. So, where was their real place? Who else did they have? I know now. They have a bunch of kids at their camp."

"Dammit," exclaimed John.

"No, oh, no," moaned Desi.

"I snuck up close. First I came across a gully. I found about twelve bodies. Three little ones," said Jacob.

Yuie quietly began to cry. Mike felt sick to his stomach.

"I got closer to their camp. They made themselves a big dugout, and they have it covered with all kinds of stuff. At night they keep the kids in an RV. They chain the door. I saw three cars, two pickups with camper shells, and two RV's. They hunt. I saw the bones of several deer."

"I circled their camp. From the south side I could see a road down below. The road that, I thought, had to be there. It runs northeast and southwest. I think that after the fog came, after they

realized what had happened, they were watching the road for traffic. When they spotted someone, they would go down and attack them."

"Bandits," murmured Mike.

"Yes," said Jacob.

"We saw ten kids," added Jean. "They range in age from about six to about sixteen. There are seven girls and three boys in the camp. We saw six bikers. They were all wearing the same jackets."

"I didn't know what to do." Jacob shook his head. "I thought about making contact with the kids. They let them run around free during the day. They put them in the RV at night. We didn't have enough food for them. I couldn't bring them with us. I decided that we needed to come back and report."

"So we went back to the road, and we made our way down," said Jean. "We came to the road running northeast and southwest. And that's when we found it. A camp site. It was fresh. We found some cans. They had held food. The markings on the side of the cans said, Property of the United States Army."

She stopped. There was astonishment on the faces of the Council. "Are you telling us that the US Army is up here with us?" asked John.

"Yes," said Jacob. He looked at Mike. "Chief, I honestly didn't know what you would do. I knew that I needed to get back and report. But, I didn't know how badly we needed information about the Army. Jean thought that we should turn back. But I decided to try and find them. It's was my decision, so you should blame me. It took us a week of hiking to the northeast, but we found their post. They have built an old fashion fort, and they surrounded it with a palisade."

"A what?" asked Yuie.

"A palisade. A wall of timbers. You know. Like you see in the old west movies," explained John.

"There was a sign. It's a unit of the United States Army Corp of Engineers," said Jean. "But we could tell that there are regular soldiers with them. We don't know why, and we didn't try to find out. And there are some civilians there, too. We saw a guy with some kids playing outside the walls. When it got dark, the guards yelled at the guy to get his ass into the fort."

"We didn't make contact. The morning after we found them, we turned around and high tailed our asses back here. It took us almost four weeks, but that's only because Jacob twisted his ankle. I think we could have made it in three weeks or less, otherwise."

"Man, were we glad to discover that we were on the right road. We saw the farm. Jacob knew that it was the Davis Brown Farm. He knew that we were okay. That Ralph is a good dude. He provided everything that we asked for."

The Council was silent. "We need to think about what this means to us," said Mike. "Jacob and Jean will tell their story tonight at Meeting. Everyone will be invited to express their opinion."

Hector waited until the others left.

"Yes?" asked Mike politely.

"I know what you are thinking, amigo," Hector said with a serious look at Mike.

"Um...", said Mike.

"You are thinking that we have to rescue those children." Hector stated. Mike was silent.

"I understand how you feel. I do. We have guns. We can try to rescue them. But remember. Some of our people are likely to get shot. If they get shot, they will likely die. Please, remember that, Chief," Hector said, and then he left.

It was a silent tribe that faced Mike that evening. By then, everyone had heard the news of the two camps. The information about the bikers was worrisome, but the news of a United States Army unit was the talk of the tribe.

"All right, you have all heard about the army guys," said Mike. "So here is what we are going to do. Everyone is going to have their chance to talk. We'll talk for two hours tonight. Then we'll stop. I want you to think about what you hear tonight. Talk to other people about it. Then, tomorrow night, we will all get a chance to speak again. See if any minds are changed."

"We should contact them immediately. They are the US Army. They're supposed to help us."

"We shouldn't have anything to do with them. They are the Army. They might be responsible for the Fog."

"They are too far away to help us, anyway. We have to depend on ourselves."

"How do we really know that they are the Army? What if they just stole the uniforms?"

"How will they treat us?"

Mike let them go on. He did not try to stop anyone from speaking of their hopes or fears no matter how silly the conversation sometimes became. When the arguments tapered off, he closed the

meeting. The tribe went to their beds. But once they were in their bunks, many talked far into the night.

The next day the arguments continued. Mike asked Ralph and Mary to stay an extra day, so that their voices could be heard. Ralph and Mary agreed to stay. They were just as concerned. The only ones not concerned were Star and Comet. Star was enjoying being with the older girls. Comet coaxed his dad into letting him go hiking with Nathan and Kevin.

The feelings of the Council were indecisive. Yuie was furiously against making contact with the Army. Erin thought that they should. Kathy worried that Hector would be taken into custody as an illegal alien. Ahmad worried that his background would be held against him. Jean pointed out that the Army might have a doctor with them. They discussed the kids at the biker's camp, but they were similarly divided.

Night came. Once again everyone had their say. Mike asked Ralph and Mary for their opinion. There was no consensus. At some point, John asked Mike what he thought. It was at that time that the tribe realized that Mike had not given them a hint as to what he thought. People began to demand that Mike make his feelings known. It was time to speak, Mike decided.

"I like the idea of making contact with them," he began. "But I would like to be cautious. We don't know how being trapped here by the Fog has affected them. We don't know how it has changed them. In the old world they would be the Calvary coming to our rescue. But we don't know if that's true now. I think we should watch them. Let's see how they treat people. If we have a medical emergency, then we might have to make contact. We know that the Fog is dropping. I think that we should wait until next year to decide if we want them to know about us."

Eric spoke. "Mike has been a good chief. He is always thinking of ways to keep us alive. To make sure that we survive. I think that we should trust his judgment now. He's right. Unless it's an emergency, we don't have to rush into anything. He's the Chief. He told us what he thinks. Now it's up to us to follow him."

There was a general murmur of approval. The meeting came to an end. The Council gathered around Mike.

"Good going, Chief," said Howard.

"Yes, we can wait a while," said Rasul.

The next morning, the Brown family left. After that, Mike

gathered his Council again. "I've been thinking," he said.

"Uh oh," muttered John.

"Shush," whispered Desi.

"Maybe we can get the Army to rescue those kids from the bikers," Mike suggested.

Surprised, Hector said, "Now that's an interesting idea."

"I'm going to think about it, Hector" said Mike. "One thing I'm sure of. It's going to use a lot of our fuel. Is it worth it to get those kids out?"

"Yes," said Hector.

"Yes," said John,

"You bet," said Jean and the others agreed.

So Mike began to work on a plan. He discussed it with Jacob.

"Tell me about the layout of the Army post, Jacob," said Mike.

"The post is built on a knoll," replied Jacob. "They have a clear line of fire on all sides, except that at the south edge of the knoll, there are bushes and one small oak tree. The east side of the knoll is too steep to climb. There is a cliff on that side about twenty feet high. The west side is steep but not as bad. I was able to climb it. That's how I got a look at that side of their camp. The road from the knoll leads north down to a saddle, but just before that, there is a short rise so that if you are on the saddle, you can't be seen from the camp. The road leaves the saddle and enters the forest. It looks like it's a lot drier there than here."

Mike talked to Hector. "Can you muffle the sound of the motorcycle," he asked.

"Si, I can use a potato," said Hector.

Mike talked to Erin, who was the person most interested in making contact with the Army. By the beginning of August, he had formulated a plan in his head. At Council, one morning, he explained his plan. There was a heated debate, at first, and then slowly the Council came to the conclusion that Mike's plan could be successful.

"So everyone's agreed?" Mike asked at last.

"I think it will work," said Jacob. The others nodded.

Mike looked at Erin. "Are you sure that you want to do this?"

"I'm positive," Erin replied.

Mike looked at his Council. "Then we're almost ready. Until I get back, Howard will be in charge."

A day later, Hector gassed up his pickup. They put Hector's motorcycle on a mattress in the back of the truck. Rasul and Jacob

got in the back. Mike and Erin squeezed into the cab with Hector. Lily and Kathy had a dozen last minute instructions for Jacob and Hector. They really boiled down to, "Be careful."

The rest of the Council watched anxiously as the pickup left. The truck stopped at the Brown farm to pick up Nathan and Kevin who were working that month at the farm. They waited until noon, and then they left. Hector drove carefully along the firebreak road. The day was very windy and the road was rather steep in a few spots. Not long after leaving the Brown farm, they passed a lake on their right. At the lake and at a few other places, they stopped to cache food.

In the dead of night, they slowly passed by the bikers hill with their lights off. When they came to the road leading to the biker's camp, they let off Jacob and Erin. It was a day before the full moon, and it was bright just as Mike had planned. There were only a few wispy clouds in the sky. They wished each other well, and then Jacob and Erin set off, hiking up the road. The others in the truck drove on.

A few miles from the Army post, before they left the cover of the trees, they stopped. Hector found a spot off the road to hide the truck. They took the motorcycle out of the truck. Then amid the blue sky pilots and the gray sage, they threw their sleeping bags on the ground, and they slept. By this time, Jacob and Erin were safely hidden, not too far from the biker's camp.

The afternoon of the following day, Mike and Nathan started walking toward the Army post. Mike timed their arrival so that the guard on the palisade spotted them just as the sun was setting.

The Ranger standing guard was astonished to see two young teenage boys walking toward his post. Quickly, he called for the gates to be opened. The boys were allowed into the camp.

Inside the wooden wall, they were met by a man in uniform with a single silver bar on each of his shoulders. The man, who identified himself as Lieutenant Kennedy, was African-American. There was a thin cut of hair on the top of his head. The sides of his head were shaven. Hastily he escorted them into a small log building, where they were taken to see another man who was sitting behind a desk. He was a sandy haired man with very short hair and a sprinkling of freckles.

"Here they are, Major Collins," the Lieutenant said.

The Major stood. He walked around his desk so that he could

get a good look at the two boys. Their clothes were filthy and torn, and their faces were streaked with grime. Their shoes had seen better days, he noted. One of the boys acted as if he were half asleep. He kept rubbing his eyes. The Major pointed to an old sofa and told the sleepy boy to sit down. Soon after the boy sat down, he curled up on the sofa and fell asleep.

"I'm Major Collins," the other boy was told. "This is Lieutenant Kennedy. Who are you, and where have you been living?"

"I'm, Mike," said the boy. "His name is Nathan. We came from the bad men's place."

The Lieutenant sucked in an audible breath. Major Collins looked at Mike intently. "The bad men's place?" he asked. "Do you mean that you have been living at a place with bad men? Why do you think that they are bad?"

"They have motorcycles. They have guns. They kill people. And they treat kids real bad," the boy said sadly.

The tension in Major Collins was palpable. "Mike, tell me about these bad men."

Carefully, Mike told the story that he had rehearsed at the Lodge. When he was asked questions that he could not answer with reasonable accuracy, he pleaded ignorance.

"It's them!" the Lieutenant exclaimed at last.

"Sounds like them," the Major agreed. "How many kids are there at that place?" he asked the boy.

"There are eleven kids still there," said Mike. "The bad men killed some kids."

The Lieutenant blanched. The boy could see that the Major was angry. "How many men are there," he asked in a clipped voice.

"Six," was the reply. "They sleep in their dugout at night. They make us sleep in an RV. But sometimes we sneak out and walk around. We always go back, because they have the food."

"Are you hungry?" the Major asked.

For some reason, the boy looked guilty, but then he answered, "Yes, because they didn't feed us today. They got mad because one of the kids stole some food. They said that all of us were going to get beat up tomorrow so they could teach us a lesson. That's why Nathan and I ran away."

Major Collins looked at the Lieutenant. "Let's get something to eat in here," he ordered. The Lieutenant went to make some arrangements, and the Major waited until the Lieutenant came back

before he continued asking questions.

"Mike, this is very important. Do you think that you could find your way back there tonight?" the Major asked.

"Sure," the boy replied. "Could I take a nap first?" He yawned.

"Of course," the Major said.

He woke Nathan and had a soldier lead the two boys to beds, and then he turned to the Lieutenant. "Get your Rangers ready. I'm not going to let those children be abused for another single day. We'll do it tonight. We'll give this young man a few hours to rest first. That way, we can catch them when they are sound asleep."

"I can muffle the truck," said the Lieutenant. "One muffled truck might be quieter than two jeeps."

"Do it," replied the Major.

Mike and Nathan were taken to beds in a roughly made barracks. Nathan fell into bed, and he went to sleep. Mike stayed awake. From time to time, he took his watch out of his pocket and checked it. When it was time, he rose. He made his way to Major Collins' office. It was about ten pm. Already the moon was bright.

"Do you want to me to show you how to find the bad men's place?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"We certainly do, young man," replied the Major. "Are you sure that you can find it in the dark?"

"Yes," replied Mike. "But they are on a hill. They might hear you coming. If you want to sneak up on them, then you should park your truck at the bottom of the hill, and then you should walk up."

"That's a good idea," said the Lieutenant. "Lucky for us it's a full moon tonight."

It's not luck at all, thought Mike.

About eleven o'clock the gates opened, and a single canvas covered truck left the compound and motored down the road. Watching from the rise above the saddle, Hector used Star's walkie talkie to alert Rasul who was standing by the motorcycle with Comet's walkie talkie.

Rasul started the bike, and he rode away. Three hours later when he got to the road under the bikers camp, he flashed the lights. Moments later, he saw the quick blink of Jacob's LED flashlight coming from a place on the hill below the dugout. Rasul pulled the bike off the road, and he hid it in the trees. Shortly after, the truck arrived.

Jacob waited and watched. In the moonlight, he saw the gray

shape of the truck halt at the junction of the biker's road. When he saw the vague shapes emerge, he knew that Mike had convinced them that they should approach the biker's camp on foot.

Jacob silently crept to the RV, and he unhooked the chain. He awakened the smallest boy. He ordered the kid to be quiet, and to help him wake the others. He counted ten kids. He realized with relief, that all of the kids were in the RV. At first, the kids were afraid of him. He tried to assure them that he was here to help them. In a low whisper, he told them that he was taking them away from the bad men.

"You're not going to hurt us, are you?" asked a little boy fearfully.

"No, I'm not going to hurt you," replied Jacob. "If you stay quiet until we get to the road, I promise that you will get a nice surprise."

He led the children quietly down the track. Part of the way down, Erin quietly joined them. Jacob faded into the night, while Erin led the children to the road. They waited. Shortly, they heard the grunting of men coming up the road. The frightened children began to weep. Erin called loudly to the soldiers. They stopped, and then a soldier came forward.

"I am a United States soldier," a man with silver bars on his shoulders told the children. "And I am here to rescue you." The children calmed down at this announcement.

"Are there any more kids up there?" the Lieutenant asked. The silver bars on his shoulders gleamed in the moonlight.

Erin shook her head. "I don't think so," she said.

The two oldest girls looked at each other. "No, we're all here," one said. "We were in the dugout earlier, but they took us back to the RV when they finished with us." Embarrassed, she hung her head. Hearing this made Erin's heart burned with anger. She looked at the grim faced lieutenant.

"I hope you kill all those bastards," she stated fiercely.

Some of the soldiers led the children down the road, while the rest started up the track. Just as the soldiers arrived, they heard a shot. The soldiers ducked for cover.

A man came out of the dugout cursing loudly and carrying a rifle. He demanded to know who was out there. Lieutenant Kennedy called for him to surrender. Instead, the man fired wildly in the direction of the soldiers. The soldiers returned his fire and shot a withering hail of bullets into the dugout. The men in the dugout fired

a few shots. Then the soldiers heard only groans, and finally there was silence in the dugout. At dawn the soldiers cautiously approached the dugout. They found six bodies.

By then, the children were safe and back at the Army post. Major Collins felt very satisfied with the effort that had rescued eleven children. Counting Mike and Nathan, he knew that he now had thirteen more mouths to feed. But he would do it. He was US Army, after all, even if he was an engineer.

Well below the dugout, in the safety of the trees, Jacob wondered if Mike would be mad at him. Jacob had carried a hand gun as part of Mike's plan, but firing into the dugout, as the soldiers arrived, had not been part of the plan. Maybe he would not tell Mike, he thought.

The post medic examined the children, and she pronounced them relatively healthy. Most were malnourished, and all of them were suffering from vermin on their bodies and in their hair. Almost all had been repeatedly molested. Emotionally, they were in bad shape. It would take a long time to overcome their trauma. But they were alive, which was more than could be said for the three small skeletons that had been found and buried, along with the adult remains. The major was tempted to leave the thugs to the vultures, but he ordered them buried, also.

Children are remarkably resilient, the major thought. After only a day, some of the children were noticeably more cheerful. The two boys who had been the first to find the post had found a baseball. They were playing catch not far from the edge of the knoll. One of the older girls, the only one who had adamantly refused to be examined, was actually sun bathing on the same side of the post, but she was closer to the wall. The major pondered what compromises she had made so that she could survive.

Mike was enjoying playing catch, but the game had a secondary purpose. He threw the ball past Nathan. Nathan had to run into the bushes by the small oak tree to retrieve the ball. He waited. A sharp eyed Ranger standing on the palisade parapet saw Nathan go into the bushes. When he didn't return in a few minutes, the Ranger yelled at Mike to find his friend, and to get him back in sight. Just then, Nathan emerged from the bushes. He and Mike walked back to the fort.

"You kids stay where I can see you," the soldier told them sternly.

"I had to pee," explained Nathan. I can't pee in front of people. And there's a girl here." He pointed to Erin, lying on the grass.

The young soldier looked over at Erin. There certainly was a girl here, he thought. And she was a real looker with a great rack. He felt a twinge of guilt. She had probably been abused, he admonished himself.

The following afternoon, the kids were back. The boys were throwing the ball. The same boy went frequently into the bushes to pee. He was only gone for a minute or two, so the Ranger did not yell at him. He thought that the kid might have a urinary problem from his experience at the biker camp. The girl was sunbathing. But this time she had taken off her shirt. Her wonderful breasts were only covered by her bra. The Ranger kept sneaking peeks at her.

Later that day, Mike was interviewed by Major Collins. He was assured by the Major that he was not in trouble, and that all of the kids were being interviewed so that a brief account of the crimes committed by the men could be recorded. The Major did not ask for graphic details. The Major smiled later when he thought about the interview. The boy was extremely curious. He asked more questions than the Major did.

"We were sent here to develop a training camp for the Rangers," the Major had explained while answering his questions. "They needed a high altitude mountainous camp. I can think of several reasons why. A squad of Rangers was detailed to us as a consultant group. We were not here a week, when this mist appeared. We started pulling in all the civilians that we could find. After a while, we realized that there was a gang of men preying on those people who were trapped in the mountains. We found some gruesome evidence. We've been looking for them ever since. I know we covered that hill. They must have set up their camp after we checked it."

The next day, the Ranger on the palisade catwalk watched the two boys play catch again. Once more the girl was sunbathing. This time she not only took off her shirt, she unhooked her bra to avoid getting a tan line. The Ranger watching her thought that this was not a bad duty to have. Unnoticed, the boy who needed to pee went into the bushes. He was gone several minutes. When the Ranger looked for him, he emerged zipping his pants. The Ranger did not realize that it was a different boy.

Later, Mike, Erin and Kevin conferred. "Everything is set,

Chief," said Kevin. "Jacob has both lines ready, and he made the trail that he wants them to follow. We should be out of reach by the time they start to search. If they do search."

"Oh, they'll search," replied Mike. Erin nodded.

"Are you still okay with this, Erin?" asked Mike.

"Sure, Chief," she replied. "I grew up around people like this. It's like home. I'll miss my friends, but I'll make some new ones. And, starting in May, I'll check the tree the first day of every month to see if there is a message from you. And don't worry about your getaway. I've got my own plan."

The next day the routine continued. The boys were out by the edge of the knoll. The girl was sunbathing with her bra strap unhooked. The Ranger stood watch, occasionally sneaking peaks at her. And then, as he watched, the girl started to rise. She fumbled for her bra. It dropped to the ground. Her wonderful beasts sprang into view. The young Ranger's eyes bulged. As he watched, she bent over at the waist and retrieved her bra. The Ranger sighed as she put it on and hooked it. Suddenly she yelped, and she fell to the ground, while clutching her leg.

In an instant, the young Ranger jumped down from the palisade parapet. He yelled to a fellow soldier to take his place. The Ranger rushed out the gate, and he ran to the girl who was moaning as she lay on the ground. She was still holding her leg. He helped her to her feet. Gingerly, she put her weight on her foot, and then she whimpered and leaned against the Ranger. He held her against his side as he awkwardly bent down and picked up her blouse. He helped her put on her blouse. She leaned on him as she limped into the fort.

Up on the palisade, the other Ranger watched enviously as his fellow soldier helped the well endowed girl enter the gate. When the two of them disappeared, he turned his attention back to the field and to the view beyond. The field was empty, but the view was simply magnificent.

At dinner, there was a head count. Two boys were missing. The Lieutenant reported to Major Collins that they were the two boys who had first found the Army post. The Major sent men out around the edge of the knoll to look for the boys. There was no sign of them. The worried Major swore, but there was no way to search for them in the dark.

The next morning, the soldiers searched again. They quickly

found a heavy rope tied to the small oak tree at the edge of the knoll. The Lieutenant and some of his squad climbed down the rope. They found fresh tracks, and they followed them. The trail led in a circular way into the forest. In the late afternoon, they followed the trail out of the woods and onto the saddle land. The trail disappeared. They searched the area, and they found signs of a camp. The Lieutenant reported back to the Major.

"We lost them, Sir," he said to the Major. "They seemed to have met some other people. The others had a vehicle with them."

The Major was mystified, but there were too many preparations for the winter still to be made, to worry about two boys who didn't want to be at the fort. But occasionally he thought about what had happened.

One day in December, Major Collins noticed one of the young Rangers talking to the big breasted girl that had been rescued from the bikers. A small notion occurred to him. He did some investigating. When he was certain, he called the girl in for a visit.

"Your name is Erin, I believe," Major Collins said.

"Yes, Sir," she replied.

"Erin, I have a question for you. Do you know what happens to spies?" he said sternly.

"Yes, Sir. In wartime, enemy agents of a foreign power are executed. In peacetime, they are usually exchanged for our own agents," the girl replied.

The Major's eyes widened. "You are remarkably familiar with the rules of espionage, Erin."

She grinned. "I'm an Army brat, Sir. Grandpa and Dad were both Army. I grew up at Fort Ord. My Mom and I lived in Monterey. Sir, I have a question. How did you figure it out?"

The Major stared at her, and then he laughed. "It wasn't easy," he said ruefully. "I saw you talking to one of the Rangers one night, and it suddenly occurred to me that you were in remarkably good mental health for a girl that had been systematically molested for over a year. Most girls have an aversion to men after that."

Erin thought about Maria. "Oh, rats," she said. "I should have thought of that."

"Then I remembered that you were one of the few people who were on the knoll, on the day that the two boys disappeared. I talked to the Ranger who was there that day, and I heard about your mishap. He finally confessed that it was not only your leg that you

had trouble with."

Erin blushed. The Major continued.

"So, I have a pair of boys who show up unexpectedly. They bring news of a gang that I have been aching to find. One of them knows the way back. We get there, and the kids are not in the RV, they are down on the road waiting for us. What luck. Lieutenant Kennedy did see the chain on the door, by the way. It finally occurred to me that, after the boys escaped, there should have been more security not less.

"So, we have a very successful mission. A few days later, the original two boys disappear, obviously with help from someone outside the post. I suppose that I didn't want to admit that I had been conned by a couple of kids.

"I talked to Lieutenant Kennedy. It turns out, that you were the one who met the soldiers at the gang's hideout. You told him that all the kids were there. And you were there, the day the boys disappeared. And you caused a remarkably effective distraction. And you were the only one who refused to be examined by our medic."

"Please, don't make me answer any questions about that," pleaded Erin suddenly embarrassed.

"I won't," replied the Major. "But now that the cat is out of the bag, I want you to have a medical examination. Don't worry. The results will be confidential even from me."

"Anyway," he continued. "I've talked to the rest of the kids. No one remembers you before that night. They thought that you were with us. It's time to come clean, Erin. Who are you, and where are your friends?"

Erin sighed. "I told you who I am, and that is the truth. My friends are back at our Lodge. We planned this so that you could rescue those kids. That was our only goal. I stayed to see what kind of people you are, and because I am comfortable around military personnel."

"Where is this Lodge?"

"It's somewhere to the west. I don't know for sure."

"Who is in charge there?"

"You met him. Mike. We call him the Chief."

"The person in charge is a boy?" asked Major Collins skeptically.

"I know it sounds crazy, but yes," Erin insisted. "Mike is in

charge. He's the Chief. You had to be there to understand. All of us were kids. He kept us alive. And the plan to rescue the children from those bastards was his plan."

"Leaving that aside, how many are there at this Lodge?"

"Um...fifty three counting the people at Davis Brown Farm. No, I'm here, so there are fifty two there."

"Fifty two people?" This was a surprise to the Major. "That's sixteen more people than we have here. Are there any adults at all?"

"If you count Mrs. Brown, there are four adults."

"All right, you can go," said the Major.

After she left, he pondered the news. He needed to find them, but it was too late in the season to send the Rangers to search for them. There was nothing that he could do to help them now. They would have to wait until spring. He shuddered when he thought of all those kids trying to survive with a minimum of adult help. He vowed that he would find them, and that he would take them into the protective embrace of the United States Army as soon as he possibly could do so.

Chapter Twelve

Petersburg

The hike from the Army post to the Lodge took three weeks. Mike found that he was in no hurry. For the first time in over a year, he had no responsibilities. The leader of their foursome was Jacob. It was Jacob's plan that had extricated them from the fort. If the Rangers had looked closely at the knoll, they would have found a smaller line on the other side, tied to a heavy bush. It had hand holds, and it went over the cliff. At the bottom, the boys had entered the woods, and within a few hours they had made their way to the saddle of land. By the time the Rangers had made their way to the saddle along the false trail that Jacob had created, the boys were miles away.

There was plenty of food in their caches, and they didn't try to travel fast. Jacob and Mike even allowed Nathan and Kevin to climb the road to the biker's camp to see where the excitement had happened. But the twins were sobered when they viewed the remains of the evil place. They hiked down the hill, and the four boys resumed their journey home. They stopped at a lake for a day to rest among the red fireweed and the green lady ferns. They caught and ate some golden trout.

"This fish is good," sighed Kevin. "But I wish that I could have a Big Mac."

"I like double cheese burgers myself," replied Mike.

"Fast food would be nice," agreed Nathan. "But what I really would like is the internet."

"Yeah!" chorused the boys.

"I miss WOW," said Kevin. "Did you play that, Chief?"

"Nah," replied Mike. "I was more into single player games. I had some Wii games that I really liked."

"I was into Everquest," stated Nathan.

"You mean Evercrack," snickered Kevin. "Once, a girl called him, and he wouldn't take the call because he was too busy playing."

"Oh, shut up, Kevin," said his brother with a scowl. The other boys laughed.

"I wonder how long it will take us to get to the Brown farm," said Jacob. "I'm tired of water. I want some milk."

By the time they arrived at Davis Brown Farm, they were

footsore. In Mary's kitchen, Mike noticed a calendar that had been hand drawn by Lily. It was two weeks past Labor Day in the old world. Mike hoped that Howard had given the tribe a day off. Mary wanted them to stay awhile, but by now they were eager to get home, so the next day the four travelers climbed into the wagon bed with Comet, and Ralph drove them home. As they left, they passed the frame of a new barn.

It was a happy homecoming for the travelers. The children had been rescued. Their mission was accomplished. They were welcomed as heroes.

There had been changes at the Lodge. The grain had been harvested, and it was ready for the winter. There would be a lot more food available this winter. The chicken coop was finished, and the chicks would soon become egg bearing hens. They had two roosters.

Some of the kids had suggested that they name their community. There were a lot of suggestions. One of the most popular suggestions was, Michaelsville. In the end, however, Yuie's suggestion carried the day. Their small village was named Petersburg.

"I thought that's what you would want," Yuie said to Mike as she waited anxiously for his reaction.

Mike smiled, and he suddenly hugged her. "It's perfect," he said.

Hector had been busy. The ladders to the second floor had been replaced by stairs. He had added a large loft over the central area of the Lodge. In addition to having a new sleeping area, the rear of the loft caught the droppings from their resident birds. The area under the loft was now a bird safe zone. There was a new covered walkway from the door of the Lodge to the Porta Potties. It would still be cold, but they could use the toilets in a blizzard. But to Mike, the best thing was the sight of a shower head in the wash room.

"But won't we use up the hot water that's suppose to heat the Lodge," he asked.

"There's no way that all of us can take a shower every day," conceded Hector. "But I borrowed that thousand feet of five eighths black tubing that Mary's not using, and I ran it up the hill and set it in the river, so that the point of intake is higher than the roof of the Lodge. So now we can mix cold water with hot water to take our showers, and we can add water to the system as we use up hot

water. It takes about four hours to completely heat the water in our system, so on days that we get six good hours of sun...," He stopped and waited.

"Two hours of hot water for showers," finished Kathy.

"If we allow ten minutes for a shower...," Mike did the calculations in his head. "Twelve people can take a shower that day. Wow. That's over a quarter of the tribe."

"Girls first, of course," said Kathy.

"Of course," replied Mike with an insincere smile.

At Meeting, Mike reported on what he had learned at the Army Post. Most of the kids were glad to hear that Major Collins seemed to be a decent person. To Mike's surprise, they were still reluctant to make contact with the unit. The kids seemed to feel that they were doing fine, and that they didn't need the added uncertainty and possible complications that might arise from a relationship with the Army.

"Yuie's really been dissing the idea," said Desi.

"Yuie? Yeah, she didn't like the idea of linking up with the Army from the beginning," said Mike remembering the discussion.

"Erin's friends are kind of sad," said Desi.

"Me too. But was her choice," replied Mike. "And it might come in handy for us have a friend inside their Post."

September passed, and October began. The rain changed to snow, but there wasn't much of it yet. Jacob brought in a deer. Luis and another boy brought back a large buck. The deer was killed and readied. A lot of it was thinly sliced and smoked. Jean and her students had what seemed like tons of edible plants. Lily's pictures were a big help. And from Mary Brown's fields they had what seemed like a ton of winter squash.

They missed Erin's social organizing skills, but one of her friends filled in. The social committee made plans for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. A fir tree had been marked for Christmas. They made sure that they had plenty of pine cones this year. Mike did not want a repeat of the lost gatherers.

Hector winterized the machinery, and he drained the water lines in Chief's Headquarters and in the dining hall. This year they decided to leave the freezers in the dining hall and make their way to them through the snow. This was on Mary Brown's advice.

"It may seem like it's cold outside," she said, "But it's still not consistently as cold as a working freezer would be." Eric thought that

their propane would last another year.

Nathan and Kevin asked Mary if they could spend the winter at her house. She happily accepted, and Ralph was glad to have their help. Their new barn was not finished, but it was framed enough that it would be possible to work on it until it got exceptionally cold, or until the snow was too deep to wade through. Star was disappointed that she was not allowed to stay at Petersburg for the winter. No matter how much she wheedled, Ralph and Mary said no.

Jean and Howard received their own room this year. The boys, who had previously occupied the room, were moved into the new loft. They had to climb a ladder to get to the loft which seemed so much fun that some of the boys in the cave asked if they could sleep in the loft too.

That started an argument over who got to sleep in the loft. If that wasn't enough, some of the girls complained that the boys could see into their rooms, and that the boys were spying on them.

Mike told Howard to deal with those problems. Since he had returned, Mike was relying on Howard more and more to handle the mundane details of the tribe. Howard was called on to settle squabbles, allocate resources and generally be the tribe administrator.

"He is a real King Salmon," said John in admiration.

"That's King Solomon, Doofus," replied Eric.

Howard got everything sorted out. The boys were allowed to sleep in the loft on a rotating basis. The girls were advised not to leave the canvas curtain open when it was time for bed. People started calling Howard, Admin.

"Hey, Admin, why can't we have mashed potatoes more often than French fries? French fries don't taste good without grease."

"Admin, we should reserve some Porta Potties just for the girls. The boys keep forgetting to put up the seat."

"Admin, nine is too early to start school. Let's start it at ten."

In the middle of October, Mike pulled the Spear patrols back to the boundaries of the camp. There was not a lot of snow on the ground yet, but he was taking no chances. The hunters were the only ones still allowed to go deep into the forest. Mike gave them until the tenth of November to hunt. After that, he wanted everyone close to the Lodge.

By the first of November there was enough snow to break out the cardboard sleds. Mike gave everyone a two week break from

school. There would be time for that during the long winter months ahead. The last trips to and from the Brown farm were made.

One of the hunters did not return to Petersburg. In the middle of November, they waited for Luis. Mike allowed Jacob and Jean to travel upriver for three days to search. They returned empty handed. Mike refused to let them go search again. He thought that it was the hardest decision that he had ever made.

"Luis should have been back ten days ago," said Ahmad gloomily. "Something happened to him. I know it."

"It's karma, bro," murmured John.

"Yes, the Gods take and give," said Rasul sadly. Luis did not return that winter. In January, the tribe held a memorial for him.

One day in early December, at the end of Council, Mike asked if anyone else had anything to report.

"I'm pregnant," said Desi cheerfully. There was stunned silence.

"Impossible," stated Mike, trying to close his mouth.

"Oh, it's possible all right," she assured him. "Believe me."

"Impossible," repeated Mike. "We have cases of unused condoms, years of pill packs, and plenty of diaphragms. How could you possibly get pregnant?"

"Well, I never did get an exam from the old Admin, so I didn't want to take the pills. And I don't actually know how to use a diaphragm. And as for the condoms, well, we forgot," admitted Desi.

Mike turned to glare at John. "Don't hang me, Chief," John asked meekly.

"How far along are you, Desi?" asked Yuie.

"One month," she replied. Everyone relaxed.

"It's way too early to tell for sure," said Eric.

"Yes, your period might start tomorrow," added Jean.

Desi just smiled. Mike looked at her glumly, and then he exchanged glances with John. They knew that smile. If Desi thought that she was pregnant, chances were that she was.

"First of August," muttered Mike. "At least it will be summer."

The procedures that had been established the previous winter were quickly set in place. The transition to a winter time existence was a lot smoother this year. The kids respected the curfew, they knew how Jean would run the school, and they knew how much hanky panky they could get away with before being hauled up before the Council.

The social committee did not have to invent all new entertainments. They knew which kids could sing, which kids could perform in skits, and which kids could dream up new jokes. And before Kevin and Nathan had left, the boys had taught some of the other kids the dances that they had learned last winter. Dance classes proved to be popular.

The Christmas tree was hauled into the Lodge. During the year, the social committee had made ornaments. These were hung from the tree. There were a few more couples than last year. This led to a few more presents. Christmas Eve, after John and Desi had retired to their room, John handed Desi a box. Desi had not been feeling well. Everyone hoped that it was morning sickness.

"Told you I would get that Mr. Potato Head done, Honey," he said with a grin.

"You, moron," she sighed as she opened the box. Then she just stared at the small ruby encrusted ring. "John," was all she managed to say in a strangled voice. Astonished, she looked at him.

"Will you marry me, Desi?" he asked gently.

"Yes, oh yes," she said through her tears. She grabbed him. They held each other a long time, before they lay back on their small bed.

Christmas Day, Desi showed off her engagement ring. The boys made the appropriate noises. The girls were ecstatic.

"This is so cool!" exclaimed Yuie marveling at the lovely rubies.

"It really is beautiful," agreed Kathy wistfully. She looked over at Hector who was talking to John and Ahmad. I'll be sixteen in April, she thought.

"Where in the name of Heaven did you find a ruby ring, John," asked Ahmad.

"I asked Mrs. Brown if she had a ring to trade. I owe her a month of work. I'll help Ralph finish the barn next year," said John.

"I don't suppose she has another ring that she would like to trade," said Howard. He looked at Jean.

"Uh, hey babe, I mean, I like you and everything, but..." Jean began to back away, panic in her voice.

"I'm thinking that Tyler might have to give Gabby another gift this winter," explained Howard.

Jean stopped short. "Oh. Oh," Jean said, relief and disappointment in her voice. Howard just smiled.

That night, Yuie said to Mike, "Did you see how flustered Jean

got when she thought that Howard meant to get a ring for her?"

"Howard does mean to get a ring for Jean," replied Mike. "I'm not that clueless."

The engagement lifted everyone's spirits, which had been depressed since Luis' disappearance. In January, they had a memorial service for the missing hunter. Tyler had known Luis well, and he offered to say some words. Luis was remembered.

It was cold in January. Many of the girls abandoned their rooms to sleep by the fireplace or by the central fire. A few girls snuggled up to the barrels just outside the boy's cave. The problem that Mike and Howard faced again this year, was that the boys' sleeping areas were warmer than the girls' sleeping areas. The loft had turned out to be a nice warm area, since the heat from the fires rose towards the ceiling of the Lodge. Mike and Howard were getting a lot of complaints from the girls that the sleeping arrangements were unfair.

"They love having those rooms until it gets cold," remarked Mike wryly.

"So, what do you think, Chief?" asked Howard. "Do we let them share a bunk with a boy? Some of them have boyfriends."

Mike looked over at Desi who was chatting with Lily and Jean. "Do you think that pregnancy is contagious, Howard?" he asked.

"That is a primitive superstition, Chief," answered Howard as he followed Mike gaze to Desi and Jean. "Okay. The girls don't get to share a bunk with their boyfriends. So then what?"

"Ask for volunteers from the boys to sleep in one of the upstairs rooms. Tell them that all volunteers go to the head of the shower line. If we get enough volunteers, move all the boys out of the loft, and then put some of the girls up there. The rest will have to sleep around the fires and the barrels."

Howard made the arrangements. "That was almost acceptable to everyone," reported Howard.

"Close enough for government work," said Mike. "And, after all, I am the government."

"You're the Chief," Howard agreed.

The only real complaint was that the boys in the upstairs rooms were spying on the girls in the loft as they were dressing. When Yuie reported this, Mike couldn't help himself. He started laughing, and he wouldn't stop much to Yuie's disgust.

"Tough," he said finally. When it got warmer, the sleeping

areas were rearranged again.

One day, two boys got into a fist fight. Mike had the Spears drag them into Council. They stood dejectedly in front of the Council. One had a bloody nose. One had a bloody lip.

“So what’s your problem?” asked their very annoyed Chief.

“He started it!” yelled the boy with the bloody lip. “He keeps telling people that Makayla likes him better than me.”

“No, Chief, he started it by telling people that Makayla likes him,” snapped the other boy.

“Get Makayla,” ordered Mike to Kathy. Moments later a subdued and nervous Makayla enter the room.

“All right, Makayla, which one of these bozos do you like?” asked Mike sternly.

Makayla’s face reddened. “I don’t like either one of them, Chief,” she answered angrily. “They are both dumb a’s. I don’t know why they are saying things about me. Tell them to leave me alone.”

Mike asked Makayla a few more questions, and then he excused her. He turned to the two boys.

“Makayla doesn’t like either one of you, see?” he said. The two fighters gave each other puzzled looks. Then they turned back to Mike.

“What’s your point, Chief?” asked one. John guffawed and Eric snickered. Some of the other Council members shook their heads.

Mike was about to explode when Howard hastily said, “You guys go outside and let us talk about this.” The two fighters left the room.

“I say we have the Spears give them a beating,” growled Mike.

“No we can’t have the Spears give them a beating,” said Desi. “Besides, they are already dying.”

“What?” asked a startled Mike.

“They are already dying of terminal stupidity,” said Desi. “It’s no use beating up guys like that. It won’t make anybody feel better.”

“It might make me feel better,” grumbled Mike.

“I don’t think that those guys have a very good chance of getting a girlfriend,” said Yuie. “So they probably won’t father any children. Thank goodness.”

“Yeah, they won’t pass their stupidity genes along,” agreed Jean.

“Think of it as evolution in action,” said Eric.

John looked at Eric. “SciFi writer?” he asked.

“Yeah,” replied Eric. “But I forget who.”

Mike separated the two fighters. He made one of them stay in the loft for three days, and he made one of them stay in the cave for three days. Makayla noisily made it clear that they were the Lodge idiots. After three days, the insulted boys agreed to fight over some other girl.

So January passed. Then in February there was another cold snap. This time the fireplace and the barrels were not enough to make any of the rooms comfortable. Once again, the tribe moved into the small cave. Everyone doubled up. Once again, Mike shared a double sleeping bag with Yuie.

Jacob offered his mummy sleeping bag to Desi who was showing by now. John was very grateful. Jacob took Desi's regular sleeping bag. Now he needed to double up with someone. It was at that point that he realized what a quandary he had made for himself. Everyone had a person that they were used to doubling with. The only one left was the new person, Lily. The intrepid hunter found that he was extremely nervous when he asked Lily to double with him. He hoped she wouldn't think the worst of him.

He needn't have worried. Lily was gracious when he made his offer. She thanked him and accepted. Jacob found that sharing a double sleeping bag with Lily was quite comfortable. They didn't need to make a lot of small talk. They both enjoyed listening to Hector play his harmonica.

The cold snap was short. After two days, the sun came out. The barrels got hot, and most of the tribe left the small cave, although many still kept to the central area instead of moving back into the rooms. Gradually, over the next week, the Lodge warmed enough to allow the rooms to be used again.

Mike kept waiting for the usual trouble between Tyler and Gabby. Although there was some bickering between them, there was never a major blow up. Tyler seems to be growing up, thought Mike one day. Then he laughed at the thought. He, himself, was only fifteen. Tyler and Gabby were only a year younger than him.

The winter was passing with much less trauma than last year. Having Howard to help him allowed Mike to concentrate on planning for the year ahead. Hector, their resident carpenter was always someone he liked to talk to when planning for the future.

"I need to oversee the barn at Mary's place," said Hector when they discussed the coming year. "There will be some minor work to

be done on the Lodge. What I really would like to do is to build a saw mill."

"A saw mill?" asked Mike. "How can you do that? Do you think that you can use the electricity from the wind turbine? It barely generates enough electricity for the lights in the dining hall and in Chief's Headquarters. We have to turn them all off, when ever we use the washer or dryer."

"I was thinking of water power," replied Hector. "I was thinking of trying to build a water wheel to generate power. Two centuries ago, that's how they built saw mills."

"The river," said Mike, understanding at last.

"Right, Chief. I just have to recreate the technology. Eric might be able to help. And if I could just turn out planks, well, there are a lot of uses for planks. I'm thinking that they could be used to build more A-frames. We know where we can get our hands on some engines. There are a lot of parts we may be able to use like camshafts, crankshafts, flywheels and gears. It's just a matter of adapting the stuff to build a saw mill."

February became March. The snow still fell, but there was a lot of sunshine, too. Some days, there were eight hours or more of usable sunlight on the solar panels. Some days, more than half of the tribe could take a ten minute shower. The ambience in the Lodge was noticeably better than last year.

One evening in late March, the tribe was hailed from outside. It was Ralph, and he was delivering a load of fresh food. The horses had made it through the drifts.

"Didn't have as much buildup this year as last. And last weeks rain melted more of it," he explained. "So I thought I would see if I could get through. It wasn't hard at all. Mary wanted to do it, but I talked her into letting me try. I'm a fair rider these days."

He grew grim when he heard the news of Luis. "I suppose that something was bound to happen, but that doesn't make it any easier," was all he said.

There was not much news from the farm to report. "We made it through the winter fairly well. We lost some chickens and some rabbits to the cold, but most of them survived. We all caught colds, but we all got better in a few days. Paige and Nathan hooked up for about a month, and then they broke up. Kevin and Kylie got mad at each other, and that made it uncomfortable for all of us. They made up, thank goodness. We made some progress on the barn. Mary

said to tell John that she is looking forward to getting a lot of hard work out of him. What's up with that?"

Ralph laughed when he saw Desi. "I should have known that it would be something like that." He left the next day, promising to tell Mary the good news.

On the first day of April, Jacob and Jean left to look for Luis. Mike had them take a large strip of black plastic. The scouts knew that Luis had gone upriver. Lily and Howard were anxious, but they understood that the scouts needed to search for a clue.

Mary and her clan came for a visit while they were gone. The kids in the tribe oohed and aahed about how big Star and Comet had grown. Comet asked why Desi had gotten so fat. Star was allowed to stay in the Lodge with the older girls again.

Nathan had been allowed to drive the wagon. Mary brought the plow. The fields in the meadow were prepared for seed. The tribe sowed the fields by hand. After a few days, Mary and her clan returned to their farm, taking with them a different pair of boys and John.

Tyler liked it when the Brown clan came. He liked Mrs. Brown and her kids, and he had enjoyed his time at the farm last year. And when he was at the Brown farm, he was not being called on the carpet in Petersburg.

He was being called on the carpet now, he thought to himself gloomily. And he didn't even know why. All he knew was that someone had been sent to tell him that the Chief wanted to see him. They hadn't said why. He wondered. Had the Chief found out about...? Nah, he thought. That was too long ago. Surely the Chief wouldn't hold it against him now.

He knocked on the door at Chief's Headquarters.

"It's open," he heard. He went in.

"You wanted to see me, Chief?" he asked politely.

"Oh. Tyler. Come in," said Mike.

Tyler entered the room, and he sat down on the bed.

"Tyler, I need to talk to you about something," said Mike. Tyler tensed.

"I've been thinking about Major Collins," said Mike. Tyler relaxed a little, but he was baffled. What did the Army have to do with him, he wondered?

"If he figures out where we are, I think that he'll send someone to make contact with us as soon as he can. I think that the earliest

date they could arrive is in the middle of May," said Mike. "So I want you to pick three people. The four of you will man a guard post a mile beyond the Brown farm. I've already talked to Mrs. Brown about it. You'll have to share the Brown attic, so it will be tight quarters unless you want to sleep in the barn. You'll be in charge."

Stupefied, Tyler stared at Mike. Then he stammered. "You want me to be in charge of a guard post, Chief?"

"Yes, Tyler," replied Mike mildly. Mike picked up the dead radio. "And I've got a plan."

Still dazed at the notion that the Chief was putting him in charge, Tyler listened to Mike's plan. When Mike finished, Tyler got up to leave.

"I want you to be ready to go by the seventh day of May," added Mike. "And Tyler. Don't take Gabby."

I can't take her, Tyler thought to himself with a grin. But at least I can tell her.

The third week in April, an exhausted runner came from the guard post upriver. Jean and Jacob had found Luis' body. They would be at the Lodge the next day.

It was a weary and grim pair of scouts that returned. They met with the Council in Chief's Headquarters. They described what they had found.

"His body was in a bad state of decay," said Jean. "But he was still wearing his jacket, and we could tell that he had been shot in the back by, what I think, was a high powered rifle. We found him about four days from the Retreat."

The Council was silent after they heard the news. Until now, they had supposed that Luis had been killed accidentally, or that he had been caught in the snow and had froze to death.

"Murdered," said Mike, stunned.

"Yes," said Jacob. "Someone from the Retreat? Maybe."

"Is there any doubt?" asked Howard angrily.

"Yes," answered Jacob.

"We wrapped him in the plastic. We didn't have the tools to bury him. We were so far away that we couldn't carry him all the way back, and still be here when we were supposed to be," said Jean.

"We carried him as far as we could in a day, and then we found an opening in the side of a hill. We put his body inside, and then we built a cairn of rocks. We know where he is. Give us some help, and

we will go get him."

"Yes, certainly," said Mike. "You guys rest for two days. Then take Nathan, Kevin, Ahmad, and Rasul, and bring him back. We'll bury him in the graveyard. Howard, pick a crew to start digging a grave."

"One more thing," said Jacob. "His rifle was missing."

"Not good," said Eric.

"It's the people at the Retreat," maintained Howard.

"Howard, we're not sure, but we're not taking any chances either. Jacob, make sure the burial detail is armed," said Mike.

"We'll post a guard or two behind us on our way back," said Jean.

"Good idea," agreed Mike. "When you get back to the guard post, leave some of the weapons there. We'll man it while you are gone."

The news caused fear and consternation in their community. The villagers still remembered the violence from two years ago. Mike had Hector make a list of all of the firearms and the corresponding ammunition that they had accumulated from the bikers. He thought about the Major and his unit, but he was not yet ready to contact them. He put Eric in charge of the spear throwing exercises, and he put Yuie in charge of the archery practices. Everyone in Petersburg, except for Desi, was required to practice one or the other for at least two hours daily.

The burial detail left. With them went Hector and Kathy to man the upriver guard post. Nine days later, Jacob and the others arrived at the site of Luis' cairn. Jacob sent Ahmad and Rasul farther ahead to serve as a rear guard. Then, carefully, he and Jean removed the rocks that protected Luis' body. They lifted the plastic covered body, and they placed it on the litter. It was noon, and they had been traveling for hours, so before they started back they rested.

After an hour, Jacob used the Admin's whistle to alert Ahmad and Rasul that they were leaving. The burial detail lifted the litter and began the sad journey back to Petersburg. Jacob estimated that their trip back would take them at least a day longer than their trip here.

Behind them, Ahmad and Rasul were watching the trail. When they heard Jacob's whistle, they prepared to follow. Suddenly Rasul held up a hand asking for silence.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Ahmad.

"Yes, I heard it. What do you think? A deer?" replied Ahmad.

"Maybe. Let's wait a few minutes."

They hid in the midst of some trees, and then they waited. Within five minutes, they could faintly hear something coming their way. Nervously, Rasul took a grip on the rifle that he carried. He wished that he had fired more than one round in practice, but the tribe was trying to save the ammunition for hunting game. Ahmad had his spear at least. Rasul wished that he had his spear.

The crashing in the brush was getting closer. What ever it was, it was in a hurry. A minute later, two women appeared running down the path toward them. The women were almost to the boys.

Rasul leaped out of his hiding place, and he yelled, "Stop."

The women screamed, and then they fell to the ground cowering away from the boy. Ahmad came to stand beside Rasul. They saw now that one of the women was carrying a baby.

"Oh, please, please, don't hurt us," sobbed one of the women. She raised her hands together in a pleading stance. She was not the one carrying the baby. "We'll do what ever you want. Anything. Just don't hurt us." The woman carrying the baby curled up in a fetal position while covering the baby.

"We are not going to hurt you," exclaimed Ahmad shocked at their appearance. "You're safe with us. Calm down. Who are you? Are you from the Retreat?"

The woman begging the boys not to hurt her was an older woman. She was tall, and she had short brown hair. The younger woman was shorter and, and she had long black hair like Yuie but this woman's hair was thicker. She looked vaguely Asian. Her baby was crying. Both of them were wearing ankle length dresses that were much too light for the present temperature. Their faces seemed emaciated.

The older woman said, "Yes, we are from the Retreat. We escaped four days ago. Who are you? You really won't hurt us? You promise?" She was panting while trying to talk. They seemed to have run a long ways.

"You're safe now," said Rasul. "Do you know Jean? The Forest Ranger."

"We heard of her," said the woman. "I'm a nurse. My name is Diana. Imee, here, is a student nurse. The woman who befriended the Forest Ranger is dead. The men killed her because she gave the Ranger some food."

"Do you know Lily?" asked Rasul. "She lives at our village."

Diana's eyes widen with an expression of joy. "Lily is alive? Oh, thank God," she cried. "I was sure that she was dead."

Ahmad heard something. He held up a hand for silence. Diana looked back the way she had come, terrified. "Are you being chased?" asked Ahmad. Diana nodded.

Ahmad looked at Rasul. "Damn," said Rasul. "What do we do now?"

Ahmad looked toward the direction of the burial detail. "If we go that way, we will lead our enemies to our people. But we also have the women to consider."

"Should we try to lead the bad guys away?" asked Rasul.

"Maybe," said Ahmad.

"What if we lead the bad guys in the wrong direction until dark? That should give our people a good head start," suggested Rasul. "Then we can sneak around the bad guys in the dark."

Ahmad looked at the sky. It was cloudy. There was a stiff breeze. "Good idea," he said.

Come," Ahmad said to the women. When they didn't move, he strode to them, and he pulled the younger woman to her feet. As he took the baby from her, she gave a cry. Ignoring her, he walked quickly away. Rasul followed. The women hurried after them.

Ahmad and Rasul moved sideways to the burial detail. Ahmad carried the baby. They had not hunted this far north, so it was slow going. They made sure that they left a trail that the chasers could follow. Once in a while, they stopped, and they listened. After a few hours, they realized that their chasers were gaining on them. They turned south in the general direction of Petersburg. The wind began to blow harder.

It was almost completely dark when Rasul and Ahmad accepted that the chasers would catch them in another hour. The women had kept up as best they could, but they were exhausted.

"Let's continue on for another fifteen minutes, and then we must find a place to hide," said Rasul. Ahmad agreed. After a bit, they came to a cliff. They turned to the side again, and they followed it until the land changed from a cliff to a slope.

"We can go down here," said Ahmad. Cautiously, fighting the dark and the wind, they made their way. Part way down, they discovered a patch of coffeeberry bushes that covered a hollow place. Inside the hollow, they were out of sight of the ridge.

"This is it, Rasul," said Ahmad. "We'll have to stay here."

"Yes," said Rasul. "It will be hard to find us in the dark."

After another hour, they heard the crash of someone stumbling in the brush above. A flashlight swept the area where they were hiding.

"See 'em?" said a cold voice.

"No, but they're down there somewhere. Hey! You stupid bitches! Come out. Come out, now!" another voice called

"We've been here before," observed the cold voice. "We found that kid here, remember?"

"Yeah, this was the place. He gave me this nice rifle." The man laughed. "Listen up, bitches. If I have to wait until tomorrow to find you, I'm gonna beat the shit out of you. Now, come out now."

Chapter Thirteen

Spears

In the hollow the two women were shaking with fear. Ahmad had covered the baby with his jacket to muffle the baby's cries. Luckily the wind was blowing in their direction, preventing the baby's cries from carrying toward the men. Rasul listened grimly. He believed that he now knew what had happened to Luis.

"Hell with it," said the cold voice. "They're down there. We'll find them first thing in the morning. They heard the men moving away from the ridge. Later they smelled smoke from a campfire.

"This is not good," said Rasul.

"No it's not," agreed Ahmad. "We can't move in the dark and we can't stay here. They'll find us in the morning."

"Yes, we've got to do something," said Rasul. "We need a plan. Where's the Chief when we need him?" Ahmad laughed.

"Who are you boys?" asked the older woman. "Where are you from?"

The teenagers began talking about Petersburg, frequently interrupting one another. The women were astonished to hear their story, and their spirits rose when they realized that there was a community of decent people that might be willing to help them.

"So you are Rasul and you are Ahmad," said Diana. "Are most of your people, uh, like you?" She was embarrassed as she tried to explain what she meant.

Rasul grinned and Ahmad laughed. "No you were lucky," said Ahmad. "You got the only Pakistani Moslem and Indian Hindu in the camp, here. I'm from Karachi and Rasul is from Mumbai. But don't worry. We are savage warriors and besides we belong to the Spears."

"Yeah, right," scoffed Rasul.

"We've got one thing going for us," Ahmad said, "They are looking for two ladies and a baby. They are not looking for two guys."

"True," said Rasul. "On the other hand, they have a flashlight and we don't."

"I have one," offered Diana.

"Why didn't you say so?" grumbled an irritated Rasul. "We could have broken our necks climbing down that slope."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I'm just so scared," she replied.

"Why are you out here anyway?" said Ahmad.

"Imee had to leave. They were going to do something to the baby. They didn't like having it around. They said it was a nuisance, and that it cried too much. I couldn't let Imee run away by herself. So I escaped, too." As Diana said Imee's name, the younger woman began to unbutton her dress. The boys watched wide eyed as she lifted up one cup of her bra so that the baby could suckle. They looked at one another, and then they averted their eyes.

"So you have a flashlight?" asked Rasul.

"Yes, I stole it from them. I thought that we might need it. We left five days ago. They had bragged about killing a kid in this area. We thought, if there was a kid here, then there must be some other people over here someplace. We thought that we might find someone to help us. Were you friends with that kid they killed?" asked Diana.

"He was a member of our tribe," said Ahmad grimly. He looked at Rasul. "I think that I know what the Chief would do if he were here."

"Hang them," said Rasul.

"Yes."

"We have a rifle," said Rasul.

"Have you ever fired one?" asked Ahmad.

"I never even held one before today, except for that one time when I fired a single shot," admitted Rasul. "And I wasn't even close then."

Ahmad thought. "I have my spear," he said.

"We took down the bikers with our spears," replied Rasul.

"Yes."

"If we could get close to them in the dark while they were sleeping, I could spear at least one of them," said Ahmad.

"And I could bash at least one of them over the head with the rifle," replied Rasul.

"What if one of them is on guard?" said Ahmad.

Rasul thought about that. He looked at the woman. "What if the man on guard thought that we were the women coming to surrender?" he said thoughtfully.

"How are we going to make him think that we are the women?"

"They are looking for two women."

"And a baby," agreed Ahmad. "We don't look like two women."

"If we attacked them when they could barely see us...I have a plan, Ahmad," said Rasul. He explained it to Ahmad.

"That might work," said Ahmad. "Even if one of the men is awake, it might work."

In the early morning hours, the man with the cold voice was watching. It was just light enough, that he was able to distinguish individual trees. The wind was still blowing hard. The man was tired, but he was alert.

He heard the snap of a tree limb behind him. He sprang up and looked around. He saw two shapes wearing dresses.

"It's the bitches," he yelled as he kicked his sleeping comrade. The two figures turned and fled. "Come back you stinking bitches," he roared as he followed them.

Abandoning their plan, Ahmad and Rasul ran as hard as they could. They ran up the ridge, away from the direction of the women. They could hear the pounding feet of the man following. He was closing in on them. He was screaming at them. Their hearts pounded with fear, and their breath was ragged. They came to where the cliff fell on their left.

"Rasul, fall down now," yelled Ahmad. He dove behind a boulder. Rasul looked back. He had never been so afraid, but he fell to the ground with the rifle beneath him. The man came running up. As he passed the boulder, Ahmad sprang out at him, and the boy jammed the wooden haft of the spear into the man's ribs. The man yelled from the pain. Ahmad forced him to the side. The man stumbled at the edge of the cliff, he lost his footing, and then he screamed as he fell over the cliff.

Ahmad turned to look for the other man, just as the other man swung his rifle and smashed Ahmad in the face. Ahmad fell backwards as blood gushed from his mouth and nose. The man raised his rifle to give Ahmad another blow, but instead he took a blow in his own face from Rasul's rifle. He staggered back. Rasul grabbed Ahmad's spear, and he shoved it into the man's belly. The man staggered back farther, and then he too fell over the cliff with the spear still stuck in his body.

Crying Rasul ran to Ahmad. "Ahmad, Ahmad," he yelled as tears flowed down his cheeks.

"Oh, man," gasped Ahmad. "That was one screwed up plan."

Rasul sat down next to his friend. He was weak with relief. "I thought you were dead, man," he huffed.

"I think I was already falling backwards when he hit me. I was so surprised to see him," moaned Ahmad. "Did we get them?"

"Yeah, we got them. I think they are both dead," said Rasul who was catching his breath.

"We better get back to the women," said Ahmad.

"You stay here," said Rasul. "It's getting light. I'll go back and get them. You rest."

"Help me back to their camp," said Ahmad. "They might have something there that I can use to stop myself from bleeding."

Rasul helped Ahmad to his feet. Slowly they made their way to the men's campfire. It was still burning. Gratefully, Ahmad sank down next to the fire. Rasul searched the men's packs, and he found a cloth that Ahmad could hold against his face. Ahmad thought that his nose was broken, and Rasul could see that both of his lips were split, but luckily none of Ahmad's teeth were damaged.

"My beautiful smile is intact," he mumbled.

"Yes," agreed Rasul with a grin.

Rasul went to get the women. Presently, he returned with the women and the boys' gear. Gently, Diana examined Ahmad's face. She wiggled his nose. He yelped.

"Yes," she said. "Your nose is definitely broken." She used a t-shirt from one of the men to bandage Ahmad's nose. She was surprised when Rasul handed her a tube of Neosporin.

"Chief's rules," he explained.

Diana gave him a wan smile. "He must have a good understanding of teenage boys," the nurse said.

"You could say that," croaked Ahmad.

Rasul looked at the women. They were dressed in the boys' clothing. Even Diana, as tall as she was, had struggled into Rasul's clothing.

"Um..about our clothes,"

"Oh, yes," said Diana. "I'm sorry. It's just that we have been so cold for so long."

Imee started to unbutton Ahmad's shirt. She shivered. Rasul looked at Ahmad who shrugged.

"Ah..why don't you wear them for a little longer," said Rasul.

"Only until the sun comes out," he warned.

"Thank you," said Diana. "But at least take back your jackets."

Rasul led the way as they walked. He carried Imee's baby inside his jacket. The women followed Rasul, and Ahmad brought up

the rear while alertly watching the trail behind them. The women answered some of the boys' questions as they traveled. The boys learned that Imee was from Hawaii. She was the daughter of Philipino immigrants. Diana was from Bodega Bay.

"I was there once with my parents," said Rasul. "We collected sand dollars along the edge of the ocean. That's where they filmed a famous horror movie."

"Yeah, The Birds," mumbled Ahmad.

They walked back along the ridge. When they got to the cliff they looked down. The two bodies were awkwardly arranged. One of them had a spear stuck in his belly. A large grey bird stood nearby. The bird looked up, and then it took wing. Already the scavengers were about.

Imee leaned over, and she spat down the cliff. She pointed to one of the men. "Diego's father," she said indicating the baby.

Rasul and Ahmad looked at one another. There was nothing to say. They found two rifles at the edge of the cliff. One of them belonged to Rasul. They left the cliff. There was no talk of burying the bodies.

It was a cold cloudy day. They made their way back towards their original trail. At noontime, Rasul could stand it no longer. He had to get out of this dress, and get into his own clothes. But, before he could say anything, they heard a noise.

The two boys quickly put the women and the baby behind them. They held the rifles in front of them. They held their breath. They could feel the fear emanating from the women. It matched their fear.

"It's Jacob," they heard. Ahmad breathed out. Rasul felt like he could weep. Jacob stepped out of the trees. He looked at them in the dresses. He didn't say anything. Ahmad and Rasul looked at one another.

"Jacob, I know that you like my pocket knife," said Rasul. "I'll give it to you, if you promise never to tell anyone that you saw me wearing a dress."

The next day they joined up with the burial detail. The detail listened to Diana, and then they heard the story of the fight on the cliff. There was a certain satisfaction in knowing that Luis' killers were dead. The burial detail made its way back to Petersburg.

By the time the burial detail returned to Petersburg, Tyler and his unit had left. It felt strange to Tyler to be leading a guard post unit. At any moment, he expected someone from Petersburg to catch

up to them, and tell to him that a horrible mistake had been made.

He would never forget the look on Gabby's face when he told her that the Chief had put him in charge of the guard detail. At first, she thought that he was joking. Then she was perplexed. She wondered what devious plan the Chief had conceived, that he would put Tyler in charge. To her surprise, no one else seemed to think that putting Tyler in charge was all that unusual. And then finally, Gabby had looked him with respect in the last couple of days before they left. He would always treasure that look. She had kitchen duty, and she had personally packed a set of two day rations for his unit. His unit. That sounded so cool.

Tyler's unit hiked southeast to the RV guard post, and they spent the night there. The RV guards kidded him good naturedly about his new found respectability. He just laughed. The other members of his unit treated him with respect. The Chief had not seemed amused that Tyler was in charge when he talked to them. They had the feeling that the Chief would not be happy at any sign of disrespect toward Tyler. And, after all, no one wanted to incur the wrath of the Chief.

The next morning, Tyler's unit continued on to the Brown farm. They arrived that evening, just in time for dinner. Meals at the Brown farm were definitely a perk. Everything tasted delicious, and there was always plenty to eat. That night they feasted on rabbit, chicken, mashed potatoes with plenty of fresh butter, peas and cold milk. Paige asked about Nathan.

The boys in the guard post unit were given the attic as their quarters. The only girl in their unit, Makayla, stayed in the girl's room at Mary's insistence. Comet demanded to be allowed to stay with the boys, but his dad refused to permit it. The older boys needed their privacy, he said. So Tyler had a serious talk with Comet.

"I need you to guard the back porch," he told Comet. "The Chief is expecting visitors. If they get past us, then you will be the next line of defense." Wide eyed, Comet agreed to protect the back porch from invaders with the blunt edged spear that his father had made for him.

Tyler set up his guard post a mile to the east of the Brown farm. One person stayed on the road. The other three were hidden in the trees, back toward the Brown farm and well away from the road. The guard on the road carried the radio phone. They alternated positions every day. It was boring to be the person on the road, but the Chief

had insisted that there must be no interaction between the guard on the road and the guards in the trees, unless they made contact with the Army.

In mid May one day, Tyler was the guard on the road when suddenly a hand reached around him and grabbed the radio phone.

"Hey!" he said as he spun around, thinking that it was one of the other guards. Instead he saw two men in United States Army uniforms. They had packs, and they were carrying rifles. Pistols were strapped to their sides. The older man had a sprinkling of freckles across his face. Tyler put his hands in his jacket pockets. He waited for them to speak.

"I'm sorry, son," said the older officer. "But I would like to arrive unannounced. He handed the radio phone to the younger officer.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with us," Major Collins told Tyler. Tyler shrugged, and he led the way. The three of them walked toward the Brown farm.

They had not gone far when the young Lieutenant remarked, "Sir, this radio phone is dead." He handed it to the Major. Major Collins studied the phone. Why carry a dead phone, he wondered?

Then Lieutenant Kennedy spoke. "Uh..Sir we have company."

The Major looked around. Two boys and a girl were walking quietly behind them. They carried what looked like hand made spears, and their feet were wearing moccasins.

The Major looked at Tyler who still had his hands in his pockets. "Apparently we were expected," he said.

Tyler nodded. "Mrs. Brown's place is over there," he said, pointing in the direction of the farm. "She has little kids there. I know she would like it if you allowed us to carry your rifles. I don't mean that you should surrender them," added Tyler hastily at the Major's stony look. "I just mean that we would like to carry them for you. We'll stay right beside you. You can keep your sidearms."

The Major looked at the Lieutenant, and then he looked back at the boy. "Very well," he said. He handed his rifle to Tyler. Lieutenant Kennedy handed his rifle to one of the other boys.

"Be careful with those," instructed Major Collins.

"Makayla, run and tell them that we are coming," said Tyler.

"Okay, Tyler," said Makayla, and she ran forward to the farm.

"How did you alert the others?" asked the Major. Tyler took his hands out of his pockets. He was holding a walkie talkie.

"Ah," said the Major. "You held the button down as we talked.

They heard everything that we said. Simple but effective."

"Yes," replied Tyler. "It was our Chief's plan."

"Do you mean, Mike?" asked the Lieutenant.

"I mean our Chief," replied Tyler with emphasis.

The Lieutenant nodded. "Your Chief," he repeated.

They were getting close to the farm. The Major noted the fields, the barns, and the other structures. A well kept place, he thought to himself. A lady, a young man, two little ones, and five older kids came out of the house. The lady was carrying a shot gun. The little boy had a toy spear.

"Welcome to Davis Brown Farm," the young man said. "I assume that you are Major Collins."

"Yes, I am," replied the Major. "And this is Lieutenant Lincoln Kennedy. I thank you for your welcome. It's the second one today." He looked at Tyler and smiled. Tyler blushed.

Ralph introduced his workers and the guards from Petersburg. Then he said, "This is my son, Comet, and my daughter, Star. This is Mary, their mother. And these are my nieces, Kylie and Paige."

"Please, come in," said Mary. "You are just in time for dinner."

"Uncle Ralph, me and Kylie will take dinner with the guards and the boys in the barn," said Paige.

"Kylie and I," corrected Mary.

"Kylie and I," repeated Paige. "That way there will be more room at the table."

"Thank you, Paige," answered Ralph politely. "That would be nice."

"We're not here to cause you any trouble," protested the Major.

"Oh, it's no trouble," Mary assured him. "The kids like to get together without adult supervision."

"Dad, can I go too?" pleaded Star.

"Me, too," insisted Comet.

"Yeah, you can both go," said Ralph indulgently. "But Tyler, you stay here." The officer's rifles were discretely locked in Mary's gun case.

Dinner was delicious, thought Major Collins. He could not remember the last time that he had been so full. When they were finished, the four adults and the boy went into the living room to talk.

"How is your area doing, Major Collins?" asked Mary politely.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose," Major Collins replied. "Given the nature of our situation. Our greatest difficulty is finding or

producing food for everyone at our post. We were glad to rescue those children, but of course then we had extra mouths to feed."

"Oh?" asked Mary.

The Major hesitated. "We have plenty of meat. We came across a shepherd with a flock of sheep. We've started a breeding program. Our men have brought in plenty of mule deer. Our real problem is finding starches and vegetables. We don't have enough of either. I'm afraid that some of our people are suffering from vitamin deficiencies."

Mary looked at Ralph, and then she looked back at the Major. "How many people are at your post?" she asked.

"There are a total of thirty five persons. There are nine Army Engineers, eight Army Rangers, five adult civilians if you count Erin, and thirteen children," replied the Major.

"Thirteen children. Thirty five in all," echoed Mary. She looked at Ralph. "That's not so many," she said. Ralph said nothing. It was Mary's decision.

She looked at the Major. "I think we can help you, Major," she said. "The problem is going to be transportation. But maybe we can let you take our wagon, or at least take it part of the way. We may need to dry some of the vegetables. A lot of them won't make the nineteen day journey."

"That would be very decent of you, Mrs. Brown," replied the Major gratefully. "And even if some of the produce spoils, we can use the seeds to replant. We are trying to develop a biodiesel fuel to run our trucks. If we ever manage that, we can cut the travel time down to about a day or two."

They talked well into the night. Tyler listened carefully. Ralph had taken him aside before dinner, and he had instructed Tyler to remember what was said. The Chief would want a report. Information was valuable.

Before dawn, the Army officers, Tyler, and Ralph climbed into the wagon, and they rode to the RV guard post. Ralph told them that he regretted not being able to take them the rest of the way, but that he needed to return that day. The Major thanked him. Shortly, after they arrived at the RV guard post, the motorcycle roared off towards Petersburg carrying the heaviest part of the officer's gear.

"And I thought that we could scout them quietly," said the Major to the Lieutenant with a rueful glance at Tyler.

"If we hurry, we can reach Petersburg by nightfall," said Tyler.

They hurried, and they reached Petersburg by nightfall. On the way, they passed a tree with a noose hanging from a branch. There were four graves nearby. Tyler gave them a brief account of the hanging. The officers looked at each other with worried concern.

There was no welcoming committee. The few people still out of doors looked at them with natural curiosity, and they nodded politely. Tyler was greeted warmly though. The Major noticed one young girl, hanging around, pretending to be busy, but she was obviously waiting for the boy to notice her.

"Hi, Tyler," she said looking bashfully at the Army officers.

"Hi," Tyler responded. "This is Gabby," he said to the officers.

"Gabriella, actually," said Gabby primly. They made polite noises, and then she followed them to Chief's Headquarters. While the officers and Gabby waited, Tyler knocked.

"It's open," they heard. Tyler and the officers entered. Gabby snuck in behind them. Tyler shut the door.

"Hey, Chief," said Tyler. "Got them." He pointed to the officers.

Mike looked at the officers. "One moment, please, Major," he said. He got up from his desk, and he went to Tyler. He stuck out his hand. Startled, Tyler shook it.

"Good work, Tyler," said Mike. "I knew that I could depend on you. Go get something to eat, and then come back here in a half hour. And take Miss Nosy with you." Gabby blushed, and she followed Tyler out of the room.

"So, hello again, Major Collins," said Mike. "I'm happy to see you too, Lieutenant Kennedy."

"Mike," acknowledged the Major. "You're looking well."

"You too," said Mike. "Thanks for getting those kids out."

"You're welcome. Of course, it was your plan."

Mike laughed. "What are you taking about?" he asked innocently. The officers chuckled. Then Major Collins turned serious.

"You could have explained, you know," he said.

Mike shook his head. "My people were not willing to make contact then. To be honest, they are not exactly happy about you being here now. But I knew you would come. So I thought that we might as well meet you."

The Major nodded. "Your man, Tyler, did well," he said.

"Yes. Look, it's getting late," said Mike. "You're here. Let's get use to that fact before we try to feel each other out. When Tyler gets back, I going to have him take you to a room in the Lodge. Just rest,

look around, and we'll talk in the morning. Okay."

Major Collins nodded, "All right. You're the Chief." Mike looked surprised.

Lieutenant Kennedy laughed. "We've already heard that a dozen times," he said. Mike grimaced.

The three of them talked until they heard a knock. "It's open," Mike said.

Tyler entered. "Tyler, take Major Collins and Lieutenant Kennedy to my old room in the Lodge," Mike ordered. "We've already cleared it out."

Collins and Kennedy followed Tyler up to the Lodge. They noted with interest the construction of the building. They saw the row of Porta Potties. Then they went inside.

"Wow," said Kennedy as he took in the whole area.

"Yes," agreed the Major. He looked up. He saw a catwalk in front of some rooms. There was a girl with a baseball cap on backwards hammering a small log into an opening between two other logs. A bird fluttered by.

"Quit whining about the noise," she shouted into the room. "You're the ones complaining that the guys can see your tits."

Behind her several grinning boys were hanging over the railing of a loft.

"You never let us have any fun, Kathy," said one.

A door opened, and a young pregnant girl stepped out from one of the rooms on the ground level. Seeing her, Tyler shrank back against the Major.

Spotting the boy, the girl said, "Oh, hi, Tyler. I heard you did a good job at the guard post."

Tyler seemed to relax. "Uh, thanks, Desi," he said.

"I think Gabby was really impressed," Desi replied. Then she smiled at the two officers.

"Your room is right there," she said indicating the door next to the Lieutenant's shoulder. "I hope the beds are comfortable. We only have twin size beds for you."

"Thank you," chorused the officers. "And thank you, Tyler," the Major added.

Kennedy opened the door and looked in. There were two bunks on opposite walls, a white plastic table, and two white plastic chairs. The officers went into the room and shut the door.

"Well," said the Lieutenant. "This community is not what I

expected. They are not exactly hanging on by their bloody fingertips."

"No," replied the Major. "Of course, first impressions are often false. But, I admit that they seem to be just as well organized as our post, and frankly this community seems to be healthier in body and spirit. Let's see what tomorrow brings."

It had been a long journey from the Army Post and they were tired. While many in the community were still awake the two soldiers went to sleep.

The officers were awoken by someone shouting, "Breakfast in thirty minutes!" Kennedy sat up. He looked at his watch lying on the table. It showed the time to be six o'clock. He yawned, stood up, and grabbed his pants and shirt. The Major was also on his feet.

There was a knock at the door. When Kennedy opened it, a teenaged boy handed him a basin of warm water. The men used the water to wash and to shave with the single plastic razor that they shared.

They left their room and looked around. All around them, sleepy eyed kids were rousing. Some were coming out of the rooms above and next to them. Some were climbing down the ladder from the loft. Some were emerging from a smaller rock room. Some had obviously just slept in the common area.

Kennedy mumbled that he had to use the latrine. He went outside. There was a short line, so soon it was his turn. He saw a girl leave one of the Porta Potties, and he went towards it.

"Put the seat up," she warned him as she passed by.

He used the Porta Potty, and then he went back inside the Lodge. Major Collins was standing at the entrance to the small room off of the main area. He was examining some barrels with interest. A man came out of the small room bare-chested but carrying a t-shirt.

"Morning," he grunted with a suspicious look.

"Excuse me," said the Major. "But is this a heating system?"

Hector introduced himself, and then he began to explain how the system worked. Quickly he warmed to the subject. They were joined by the girl in the baseball cap. She went to Hector, who lifted her on to her toes, wrapped his arms around her, and gave her a generous kiss.

"Morning, Kat," he said.

"Good morning, Hector," Kathy replied. "Stop talking shop, put your shirt on, and let's get some breakfast." She turned to the Major.

"We only have bread, butter and milk for breakfast, unless you want oatmeal. It's enough to get us going."

Kennedy joined them. "What, no eggs?" he said facetiously.

"We save them for brunch," answered Hector. The man and the girl left.

"I was kidding," grumbled Kennedy. The Major gave one last glance of admiration at the heating system, and they left the Lodge. Now that it was light, they could see around them.

The Major pointed to the fields encircled by the track. "Grain," he said.

When they were almost to the dining hall, Lieutenant Kennedy looked back at the two-story Lodge. He surveyed the latrine area, the log wall, the shingled roof, the solar panels, and the rock fireplace.

"Damn," he exclaimed.

He and the Major went into the dining hall. There were more white plastic tables and more white plastic chairs. They stood in a buffet line, and they were given a plate of bread, butter and a plastic cup of cold milk. They took their plates to a table, and they sat down to eat.

Gabby passed by them, as she was cleaning the tables. She stopped to talk.

"Did Tyler do as good a job as everyone says, or are they trying to make me think that he did," she asked, as she wiped their table.

"If your Chief would let me have him, I'd sign him up in a minute," replied the Major.

"That girl at the Brown's place sure thought he was something," said the Lieutenant.

Gabby stiffened. "Which one?" she demanded angrily. "Kylie or Paige?"

"Um...I think her name was, Star," answered Kennedy.

Gabby gaped, and then she huffed and walked away. Collins frowned at Kennedy.

Kennedy started laughing. "I'm sorry, Sir," he choked. "I just couldn't help it."

Major Collins saw Desi and a young man standing in the buffet line. The young man had his arm around her ample waist. Hector and Kathy waited behind them. A boy came into the dining hall, and he sat down across from the officers. He did not speak, but he nodded to them. Soon, the two couples had their plates, and they sat at the table with the officers. A young woman came by, and she

placed a plate with bread and butter, and a plastic glass of milk in front of the boy. The bread was buttered and cut into squares. The young woman sat next to the boy.

"Why do you rate such special service, Jacob?" complained the young man with Desi.

Jacob looked up at John, mystified. "I don't know," he replied. Kathy and Desi laughed, and Lily smiled. John grumbled under his breath.

The officers lingered over their meal. The others ate and left. Gabby came by again as she was wiping tables. Lieutenant Kennedy noticed an Asian-American girl enter the room. His eyes widened.

"Wow," he said softly.

"Oh, her," said Gabby. "That's Yuie. She's the Chief's Special Friend." She made quote marks with her fingers.

Kennedy scowled. "I see," he said. Gabby walked away with a small smile on her face.

The officers finished eating breakfast. They went back to the Lodge, and then they made their beds, military style. And then, to their surprise, Desi told them that they had been bumped to the head of the line for a shower.

"We can wait our turn," stammered the Major insincerely.

"No, you guys go ahead," said Desi. "These stinking boys can wait."

"Hey!" said a group of outraged boys nearby.

The shower was heaven. Ten minutes went by too fast, but it was wonderful while it lasted. Back in their rooms, Major Collins stared at the Lieutenant in stunned amazement.

"They have hot showers," Collins whispered reverently.

"Um..you know, Major, my term of enlistment is almost over. I was thinking of asking Tyler to recommend me for a job here," said Lieutenant Kennedy.

"L.O.L," growled the Major.

The Lieutenant's eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't think that you even knew what that meant, Sir," he said.

"I use the internet," protested the Major with a frown. "Or at least I used to."

There was a knock on the door, and when the Major opened it, Tyler said, "The Chief wants to see you if you're ready."

The officers went down to Chief's Headquarters. Mike was inside seated at his desk.

"Good morning," Mike said. "Our Council meeting will start in a few minutes, but before that I want to explain a few rules that we have made."

Mike told them the rules of Petersburg concerning sex.

Lieutenant Kennedy was outraged. "I can't believe that you think that we need a lecture from you on sexual protocol. Especially, since the rules apparently don't apply to you."

"Lieutenant," the Major growled.

Mike held up a hand. "Wait," he said to the Major, and then to the Lieutenant he asked. "What do you mean?"

"I know that even though you are not sixteen yet, the girl named Yuie is your Special Friend," sneered the Lieutenant.

Mike gaped at him in astonishment, and then he laughed. A moment later Yuie knocked and entered the room.

"Hey, Yuie," said Mike.

"Hey, Chief," said Yuie.

"Yuie, guess what? Lieutenant Kennedy, here, says that someone told him that you're doing it with me," said Mike.

"What?" exclaimed Yuie. She turned to Kennedy. "Who told you that bullshit," she demanded angrily.

"Conned again," murmured Major Collins.

"Oh, boy," muttered Kennedy. "I'm sorry," he said hastily. "I'm sure I misheard or maybe I misunderstood."

Yuie glared at him. "Military pig," she mumbled, just loud enough for him to hear.

"Now that that is settled," said Mike. "I want you to understand, that I tell these rules to everyone. It's not just you."

"Understood," said the Major. Kennedy nodded, and he gave Mike an apologetic smile.

The rest of the Council arrived. Mike allowed the officers to witness the Council meeting. Hector talked about his plan to build a saw mill. John reported on the status of the patrols. Yuie, with a sniff in Kennedy's direction, reported that Diana and Imee were settling in nicely. Diego was healthy. Diana had suggested that she give a physical examination to everyone in the tribe.

"We are receiving a steady trickle of refugees from the Retreat," said Mike. "Does anyone have any ideas on that?"

They discussed the Retreat for a few minutes, but there was no consensus on what to do. Major Collins agreed that the situation at the Retreat was serious, and he said that he would consult with his

people when he got back to his base. Lieutenant Kennedy explained that much of the Ranger's munitions had been expended on the rescue of the children. There were other reports before the Council meeting came to an end.

Then Mike suggested that the officers watch while a disciplinary hearing took place. A boy and two girls were brought into Chief's Headquarters. The boy was accused of deliberately urinating on the toilet seats. Two girls had reported him.

"I went in first, Chief," said the first girl. "And when I left, I made sure that everything was clean. Then he went in."

"And after he left, I went in," said a second girl. "There was piss all over the toilet seat. It was deliberate."

The boy smothered a laugh. "It was an accident," he said.

Mike asked the girls to leave.

Mike sighed. "This is the second time that you are in here for this offense. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," said the boy insolently. "The bitches just like to complain."

Mike looked at him a long time. Gradually, the boy's indifferent smile left his face. He grew nervous. He glanced at the unsmiling officers.

"I wonder, Major, if you can find a place for this person at your post?" asked Mike.

The Major exploded. He slammed his hand down on the desk. The boy gasped, and he jumped back. "Yeah, I've got a place for this shithead," the Major growled loudly. "In the bottom of a shithole. Let me have him. I'll teach him what it's like to clean a toilet from the bottom up."

"No!" squeaked the boy. "Don't let him have me, Chief. Please! I'll never do it again, I swear, Chief, I swear." He cringed away from the still growling Major.

"Give 'em to me, Chief," slavered the Major. The terrified boy thought that he saw drool dripping from the Major's red mouth. "Give 'em to me."

"No, Chief. Please, don't let him have me!" begged the boy, his eyes moistening.

Mike put up a hand. The Major sat back with a last growl.

"I'm going to give you one last chance," Mike said. "You are going to clean toilets for one month. But if this happens again, I'm shipping you off to the Major. Understand."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir," said the boy weakly.

"Now get out," said Mike.

With one last terrified glance at the Major, the boy fled.

Mike and the Lieutenant looked at the Major.

"Damn," said the Lieutenant. "When I grow up, I want to be just like you, Major."

"Me, too," said Mike.

"It was nothing," replied the Major modestly.

Chapter Fourteen

The Army and The Lodge

That night Major Collins and Lieutenant Kennedy talked about what they had witnessed in the village of Petersburg.

"I was going to demand that I be allowed to speak to these people," reflected the Major. "I was going to offer to take them to our post. I was going to offer to protect them. But the truth is, they are better off here, aren't they?" He looked at the lieutenant who looked uncomfortable and did not speak.

The next day, they had breakfast again. Gabby passed by smiling. Lieutenant Kennedy scowled at her. She stuck her tongue out at him.

Mike, Jacob, Lily, and Howard were sitting with the officers. Yuie came in and saw them. Reluctantly, she sat down across from Lieutenant Kennedy. He smiled at her. She frowned at him.

"Good morning," he said. Mike was sitting there. Yuie had to be polite.

"Good morning," she muttered.

"I hope you have forgiven me for thinking that you were romantically involved with your leader," he said winningly.

"You mean, have I forgiven you for thinking that I was screwing the Chief? Sure, I forgive you," she said sweetly. He winced.

He tried again. "I hope your boyfriend was not too upset about it?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," she snapped. She grimaced.

"Ah," he said with a triumphant smile.

"Damn," she muttered. And then she said, "Well, have you military guys cased this place yet? Figured out how to take us? I don't suppose that you have any nukes handy."

"I beg your pardon?" said Kennedy taken aback.

"Nothing," said Yuie with a private smile.

"So, are you one of those anti-nuke peaceniks?" he asked.

"Yes, I am definitely one of those anti-warmongering peaceniks that don't like you nuclear bomb dropping military types," she replied proudly.

Kennedy was annoyed. "The United States Military Command has only used nuclear weapons twice," he stated stiffly. "And that was in a dire emergency."

"Yeah, I bet that the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki thought it was a dire emergency," she shot back.

"It was wartime," he said in outrage. "Dropping the bomb saved countless lives by us not having to invade Japan."

"Why would there have been any need for us to invade, Japan?" she countered. "The Japanese were beaten. The only thing they had left was their homeland. Why should we have invaded? The war was over," she said triumphantly.

He was silent for a moment, and then he said softly, "I wonder, how do you think the Chinese would have felt about that?"

"What?" she replied confused at his question.

"The Chinese, the Koreans, the Vietnamese, the Thai, and a lot of other Asians were still living under the occupation of the Japanese Army. Murder, rape and torture were still happening. But not to us, of course. We could have just walked away," he said. He stood, and he went to dump his plate. Yuie stared after him. She looked around. Everyone was looking at their plates. Yuie got up, and she left the dining hall.

Two days later, Mike and the officers were walking out by the graveyard. The officers had heard about Luis. There was a fresh grave in the graveyard, making it the third grave that had been dug.

"We have been lucky so far," said Major Collins. "We have only had to dig one grave. One of my engineers had an accident." Collins hesitated and then he said, "Mike, I would like to hear your version of the hanging."

Mike looked at him, and then he looked back at the graves. "I thought that we would probably starve to death after we ran out of food, or maybe we would freeze to death during the winter. All of the adults were gone, except for Jackie, and she wasn't any use to herself, much less to us. It was just us kids.

"But I wanted to survive so I tried to convince the others that we had to prepare. And it seemed to be working. Some of the others started helping me. I began to think that we might have a chance.

"And then those guys came, and they killed Pete and took Jackie. Looking back, I guess it was crazy to think that we could get Jackie and Maria back. But we tried anyway. We were too late for Jackie, but we saved Maria.

"We killed three of them, but one of them was still alive. What were we going to do with him? Let him go? He would have come back and killed more of us, I believe. We couldn't hand him over to

the police. We didn't have a jail. Maybe we could have guarded him night and day. But we needed everyone's help just to get ready for the winter.

"I thought about all these things as we were marching back to our camp. And so I decided to kill him. But I didn't want to just kill him; I wanted to make sure that everyone understood why we were killing him. So I had everyone speak who actually saw what had happened. And when everyone was convinced that he was the person who killed Pete and Jackie, I killed him in a manner that they would think of as an execution not just a killing. I think that by killing him, I prevented us from having to dig more of these graves. And that's my answer, Major Collins." Mike turned and looked at the Major.

Major Collins stepped forward and stood beside Mike and looked at the graves. He wondered what he would have done had he been in Mike's place. Silently, he admitted to himself that he might have done the same thing.

"So what do you think of Petersburg, Major," asked Mike.

"I like this place, Mike," replied the Major. "I like what you are doing here."

"I've been thinking," said Mike.

"Uh oh," muttered the Lieutenant.

"I've been thinking about what our next step should be. I started thinking about it when I realized that you were probably coming here, Major Collins," said Mike.

"What made you think that I would come here?" asked the Major.

"Mainly it was the way that you handled that gang, Major," said Mike. "You rescued the kids immediately. That same night. You took my suggestion that you approach quietly on foot. You were more interested in rescuing the children than in capturing the gang. You took care of the kids. I bet that Erin really likes it there."

"I hired her as my orderly," admitted the Major. Mike laughed.

"Major," he asked. "Who does the Army report to?"

"Ordinarily the Army reports go up the ladder until they reach the Secretary of the Defense Department. Why?" asked the Major cautiously.

"Who do you report to," asked Mike. "A better question is, who will you report to?"

"I suppose that when I can contact a recognized civilian

government then I will report to them," said the Major slowly.

Mike turned. He stood in front of the graveyard, one of the most ancient signs of human civilization. His demeanor changed from the kid he still was, to the young man he had been forced to become.

"Very well, Major Collins," he said in a raised firm voice. "Report."

The Major stared at him. Now he knew what Mike had been planning, since Mike had realized that the Major would come to Petersburg to make sure that the people here were not in danger. He was telling Major Collins openly, I am the civilian authority here. I am the civilian government. You say that you will report to the civilian authority? Very well, report.

"I'm sorry, Mike, but I am not willing to recognize your authority just yet. Sorry," said the Major with a conciliatory smile.

Mike smiled. "Take your time, Major," he said easily. "This village isn't going anywhere. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do." The soldiers watched as the young man walked back toward his office.

"The kid's got big brass ones, I'll give him that," mused the Major. He looked at the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant was silent. The Major's eyes narrowed.

"You aren't thinking that I should report to him, are you, LT?" he asked.

Lieutenant Kennedy thought for a moment before answering. "Sir, I have a question for you? Suppose you were the civilian in charge here? Would you want me to report to you?"

The Major thought about it. "I take your point," he said reluctantly. "And the truth is, I would think that you should report to me. It's our way. The American Way. The Army reports to the civil authority because in the end every officer will someday be a civilian unless he or she is killed while serving. So give me your advice. Should I report to this government of kids?"

"Respectfully Sir, yes, because it is the fastest way that I can think of to get them to accept your advice and guidance, but there would have to be conditions."

"Conditions?"

"American governments are elected, Sir, not imposed."

"Ah. Another good point."

Dinner that night was pleasant until Lieutenant Kennedy and

Yuie got into another heated argument.

Finally, the Lieutenant demanded, "Name one war that America fought, in which we were the aggressors. Name one."

"The Mexican War," answered Yuie.

Kennedy opened his mouth, and then he shut it. Furious, he got up, and he left the dining hall.

"I guess you win that round," said Kathy. Yuie said nothing. She did not feel like a winner.

Major Collins and Lieutenant Kennedy went to the track the next morning. Yuie and Mike were running. The officers stripped off their shirts, and they ran a lap. When they finished, Yuie and Mike were waiting for them.

"I love these high ankle moccasins that Jean made," said Collins.

"Yeah, they're cool," agreed Mike.

"LT, Yuie, I wonder if you would excuse us for a minute?" said the Major.

As they walked away, Kennedy said to Yuie, "You were right about the Mexican War. It was a war of aggression."

Yuie sighed. "And I see what you mean about the atomic bomb and the people who were still living under the occupation. That doesn't mean that I like the military though," she said stubbornly. He laughed.

When they were alone, the Major said, "I thought about what you said. I have decided that I am willing to report to your government under certain conditions."

"Which are?" asked Mike.

"The Lieutenant pointed out that, in America, governments are elected not imposed, even by the most decent of people. I would be willing to report to an elected government," said the Major.

"I see," answered Mike slowly. "And the other conditions?"

"Just one. I want to see the title of Chief changed to Mayor."

"That's certainly not a problem," said Mike. "Those are the only two conditions?"

"Yes, Mike, but I do have a strong piece of advice for you," replied the Major.

"What's that?" asked Mike.

"Step down. Step down, and let someone else run the government for a while. It would be the clearest signal that you could give to the rest of the people in this village that you mean it when you

agree to change to an elected form of government," counseled the Major.

Mike looked up at the Major. He looked around the village that he had been instrumental in developing. He thought about the people he had protected. He decided.

"Major, the year before I came to this camp, my social studies class studied the presidents. My favorite President is George Washington," Mike said.

"Ah," said the Major.

Mike presented the Major's conditions to the Council later that morning. Some were troubled by the implications. Some were enthusiastic. Only Yuie was adamantly opposed.

"It's a trick," she insisted. "You can't trust them. We are doing just fine by ourselves. Mike," she pleaded. "You're the Chief."

In the end, she was outvoted. They agreed to form an elected government and to change the title of the head of their government to Mayor.

"One more thing," said Mike. They waited. "I am not going to be the Mayor. Some one else will take that position." There was a chorus of protest at his announcement, but he was firm.

"I've been your leader for two years now," he said. "Now I'm asking you to follow me one last time. This is what I want." Glumly, the Council agreed to honor Mike's decision.

Later, when one of them grumbled about it, another said, "He's the Chief. At least for now."

By the time that Meeting arrived, everyone had heard about the changes. It was a quiet group of people that night. Mike explained the situation. Then he announced that nominations for Mayor would be made the following night. The election would take place on July the Fourth. The following morning, Major Collins told Mike that he was leaving that very day.

"I'm leaving Lieutenant Kennedy as my liaison. But it will be better for Petersburg, if I'm not around when the nominations for Mayor occur. I assume that you have your choices in place?"

"Yes," admitted Mike.

"Good. There's nothing wrong with good old fashion politicking," said the Major. "Good luck, Chief, and come see me some time. You will always be welcome. And by the way, Washington is my favorite President, too."

Major Collins left the village. The guard was changing at the

RV post, so he rode the motorcycle to the post. He hiked up Logging Camp road to Brown Farm road, and soon after the sun went down he arrived at the Brown Farm. He retrieved his rifle. Ralph promised to deliver Lieutenant Kennedy's weapon to Petersburg. Mary offered him a late supper, and the Major gratefully accepted. Mary and Ralph were very interested to hear about the changes that were coming to Petersburg.

When Ralph heard that Mike would no longer be the Chief, he snorted. "Yeah, right. I don't care who will be the new Mayor, Mike will always be the Chief."

The next morning, Major Collins found that Mary had hitched her horses to the wagon. Ralph and the male members of the guard post were ready to go with him. He protested to no avail.

"Just for two days you understand," said Mary. "That will get you as far as the lake. It's another fourteen or fifteen days walk from there, according to Jacob. You can catch fish in the lake, and then, with the food that you take in the wagon, you will be well stocked for your journey to your post."

"You guys be careful," Mary admonished Ralph and the male members of the guard post. She kissed Ralph goodbye, and she waved as they rode off. She kept a firm grip on Comet's hand.

The night before, during Meeting, Mike opened the nominations for Mayor of Petersburg.

"I nominate Howard," said Yuie glumly as Mike had instructed her.

"I second the nomination," said Jean.

"I nominate Eric," said Desi.

"Me?" exclaimed Eric.

"I second the nomination," said Ahmad.

"What?" said Eric.

"I move that we close the nominations," said Rasul.

"I second the motion," said Hector.

The nominations were closed. The election for Mayor of Petersburg between Howard and Eric was officially set.

May came to its end. June began. The weather was warm. The grain was growing. Desi was also growing. John was worried about her, but Diana pronounced Desi fit and in good health. The baby was kicking. There were two months until she was due.

When the fog had first arrived, some of the tribe had been as young as twelve years old. Now, no one was under the age of

fourteen except Diego, Imee's baby. He was growing, too.

One day, Imee asked to talk to Ahmad. She stood before him nervously, carrying Diego. Her head was bowed, and she felt very embarrassed. She stared at her feet as she talked.

"My son needs a father," she said. "I need a man I can trust. I know I am not a desirable woman, but I am strong, and I am willing to work. I would do whatever you want, if you protect me and protect Diego."

Ahmad looked at her with pity. His voice was gentle when he spoke. "I'm sorry, Imee," he said. "But I am Muslim. When I take a woman, I want her to be of my own faith. But, Imee," he continued. "Talk to Rasul. He likes you a lot. Talk to him, Imee, and be sure to tell him that you will respect his religion and his culture."

A few days later, at Meeting, Ahmad saw his friend. Rasul had his arm around Imee's waist, and he was holding Diego. Imee looked happy.

"Allah Akbar," whispered Ahmad to himself. He went to sit next to Yuie.

Yuie and Major Kennedy could not get along. They argued about the changes that were taking place in Petersburg. They argued about politics. They argued about the role of religion in society.

One day, at breakfast, as Kennedy walked by, Yuie said, "Good morning, Linc."

The Lieutenant stopped, and he scowled at her. "My name is Lincoln," he said. "Not Linc."

"Oh, sure," she replied innocently. He waited. She returned to her oat cereal. Steaming, he walked away.

After that, Yuie called him, Linc, at every opportunity. No matter how many times he corrected her, she always pretended to forget. Then one morning, after she called him, Linc, he replied, "Hey, Yu."

Yuie sputtered. She looked around at her friends, expecting them to be outraged on her behalf. All she saw were covered grins. After that, relations only got worse between them. Everyone knew that things were coming to a head. Finally, he confronted her one morning after she had finished her laps. She watched him warily as he approached.

"Is it my race?" he asked her.

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"You heard me. Is that why you hate me? Is it the color of my skin?" he demanded to know.

"You're crazy. I don't hate you," she replied.

"Oh, right," he replied bitterly.

"I don't hate you," she snapped her anger rising. "I just despise you because you came in here with your militaristic bullshit, and you took over. Are you happy? You got control. You military types always like to be in control. You get a kick out of it. Control people, and if they don't do what you want, then kill them. Do you get a kick out of that too? Have you ever killed someone, Linc?"

"Yes, I have killed," he responded hotly. "Are you happy now, Yuie? Are you satisfied, now that you know that I'm a killer?"

"I knew it all along," she spat as she moved to within an inch of him. "Did you get a charge out of killing? When you saw their dead bodies, did you get a thrill?" Her voice was shaking. Her face turned red.

Kennedy grabbed Yuie's shoulders, and he pulled her tight against him. "What about you, Yuie?" he asked coldly. "Did you get a thrill when you killed that man? When you put an arrow into the man's belly, did you get a thrill? You're just as much of a killer as I am."

In an instant, Yuie's face went from red to white. Tears began flow down her cheeks. She tore herself out of his grasp, and she ran away, towards the wooden bridge.

Lincoln shuddered. His heart was pounding. He waited for his body to calm down. He watched Yuie's progress as she ran past the dining hall and Chief's Headquarters. Yuie disappeared into the Lodge.

Yuie was trying desperately to hold back her tears, as she knocked frantically on the door of John and Desi's room. When she was told to enter, she opened the door. She stood there, choking back sobs. Desi was sitting on the bed. When she saw Yuie, she simply held out her arms. Yuie flung herself at her friend. She started to cry loudly. Desi just held her and stroked her hair. After a while, Yuie's tears tapered off. Still, she clung to Desi and sniffed.

"Lincoln?" Desi asked. She felt Yuie nod. Desi sighed.

"Okay, Yuie, forget the fact that he is a soldier. What is really the matter?"

"I don't know," confessed Yuie. "It's just that everything is

changing. Mike's not going to be the Chief. We have to have elections now. I just don't want everything to change. I was happy with the way things were."

Desi smiled. She took Yuie's hand and placed it on her belly. "Feel," she ordered.

Yuie felt. Then her eyes brightened. "He kicked," she exclaimed in excitement.

"He's changing," said Desi. "I'm changing. Do you really wish that we wouldn't?"

Yuie laid her head against Desi's stomach. "No," she mumbled.

Desi stroked Yuie's hair. "If the fog had never come, Yuie, we would still have to change. We were just kids. We still are actually. Lincoln is like a change guy with a big sign. He's a stranger, new to us. We've been changing all together. He comes in, and we can see changes happening. But it's not his fault."

"I know," said Yuie. She winced remembering. "I said some really bad things to him."

"Hm... I don't doubt it. Sweetheart, I have to say this. Please don't be mad."

Yuie looked up at Desi. "What?" she asked.

"Time to grow up, Yuie," said Desi.

Yuie sighed. "I know. What should I do, so that he doesn't hate me?"

Desi laughed. "Oh, I doubt that Lieutenant Lincoln Kennedy could hate you if he tried," replied Desi. "But, Tomboy, it might be time to do the girly thing."

Yuie grimaced. "I'm terrible at that."

"I know. It's because you haven't practiced. Well, it's time to practice. Just like running. You have to stay in shape. How do you think I keep that knucklehead of mine in line?" Desi said.

"All right," said Yuie gloomily. "What should I do?"

"Guys like to be praised, and they like to be touched. Especially by girls they like," replied Desi.

"And I guess I should apologize," said Yuie.

Desi shrugged. "Not really. At least, not at first."

Yuie was surprised. "Why not?" she asked.

"Because, he won't believe you. The two of you have given each other so many fake apologies, that one more won't be believed. Wait until you are sure that he trusts you. Wait until you are sure that you believe him."

Down at Chiefs Headquarters, Lincoln waited sadly as Howard finished some work. Eventually, Howard looked up. "Hey, dude, what's up?" he asked.

Lincoln sighed. "I made Yuie cry," he admitted. "Sorry."

Howard lifted his eyebrows. "Shouldn't you be telling this to Yuie?" he asked.

"She wouldn't believe me if I did," replied the Lieutenant.

"So, what do you want me to do?" asked Howard.

"Actually, I came to see Mike. I know that he and Yuie are close. I thought that if I flung myself on his mercy, maybe he wouldn't hang me."

"Jeez, he hangs one guy, and no one ever lets him forget it," complained Howard.

"Sorry. Joking is better than crying," said Lincoln.

"Look, it's no use arguing with Yuie. She was born to argue. If you want to have a relationship with Yuie, you've got to change your strategy."

Lincoln looked up. "Who said I wanted a relationship?" he asked grumpily.

Howard just looked at him.

Lincoln coughed. "Well, just suppose, hypothetically I mean, that I did want a special relationship with Yuie. What do you mean, change your strategy?"

"When Yuie pushes, don't push back. Change the subject. And give her gifts. Girls like to get gifts," said Howard

"Girls like to get gifts?"

"Yes," said Howard firmly.

"You're only eighteen. How would you know?" asked Lincoln dubiously.

"Which one of us has a woman in his bed every night?" asked Howard.

"You got me there," admitted Lincoln.

"Believe me. Keeping Jean happy would make a man out of anyone," said Howard with feeling. "But anyway, I would say that the best thing that you could do would be to run with Yuie."

"How will that help?" asked Lincoln.

"Because, Yuie likes to run. Because you will be with her, but neither of you will be talking," replied Howard.

"Good point," said Lincoln.

Lincoln was not brave enough to approach Yuie for a few days,

but one morning as she was doing her stretching exercises, he walked down to the track.

Yuie saw him coming. The closer he got, the more nervous Yuie became. He sat down to exchange his boots for a pair of borrowed tennis shoes. Then he rose, and he stepped onto the track close to her.

"Hi, Linc," she said in a subdued voice, and then she added hastily, "I mean Lincoln."

"Its okay if you call me Linc, Yuie. My grandma use to call me Linc when I was a little kid. When I got older, I wanted to feel like a grownup, so I demanded that everyone call me Lincoln. It's silly now that I think about it," he said.

"Um...I don't mind, Hey Yu, that much," said Yuie. "It's kind of funny."

Lincoln was silent for a moment, and then he said, "Yuie, you were partly right about me. One day, when I was in Iraq, one of my people was killed in an ambush. We returned fire, and I killed two of the enemy. But my man, a father with two little kids back home, was dead. When I went and looked at the bodies of the enemy, I was glad that I had killed them. And I still am in a way. But I'm also sad that it changed me. I wish I had never killed anyone."

Yuie could not speak. There was something in her throat.

"Let's run," said Lincoln.

He and Yuie did two laps each. It was a long way around the meadow. There were twenty acres of grain inside the track. One side ran close to the river. Lincoln and Yuie passed some kids who were fishing. No one had ever caught a fish, but people swore that they had seen fish in the river. Mary Brown had suggested creating a man made pond in a wide spot, and then stocking it with trout from her pond.

Every day that week, Lincoln and Yuie ran the track together. They made a point of not talking much. After running, they would walk separately to the Lodge. Hopefully, no one would be taking a shower at that time.

Once, Lincoln forgot a change of clothes, and he had to come out of the shower room wearing only a towel. Yuie, standing there waiting her turn, was moved by the beauty of the soldier's hard body. But on his right side were two puckered scars. They puzzled Yuie, until she realized that they were old bullet wounds.

June moved along. The residents of Petersburg were

anticipating the coming election. Gabby did mock polls, and announced that neither candidate was likely to win. Eric made a speech and promised that, if he was elected, the shower would be converted into a mud bath. No one believed him. Desi accused him of pandering to the boys.

"I thought about saying that I would take down the wall and convert it into a girl's mud wrestling contest arena, but I was afraid that I would get all the boys' votes," confided Eric to Hector.

Hector was in a state of uncertainty. For some reason Kathy seemed nervous around him all of a sudden. He gave her a nonchalant pat on the butt one day, and she squeaked like a mouse. He took some time to think about it, and something dawned on him. She was sixteen now. He thought about it some more, and when he finished thinking he had a wicked grin on his face.

The next afternoon, he asked her to help him survey a site for the saw mill. He took her along the river, down to the end of the meadow, where they were out of sight of the Lodge. They talked for a bit.

Then Hector said to Kathy, "You are sixteen now aren't you, Kat?"

"Um...yes," she said, surprised at the change of subject.

"So," said Hector his voice changing. It became softer. "You're old enough now, aren't you, Kat?"

"Um...I guess," she said cautiously.

"The rules don't apply to you any longer, do they, Chica?" His voice was silky. He put his hard hand firmly on the back of her neck.

"Um...well..."

"We're free to do it now, aren't we Chica," he murmured, his voice becoming sensuous.

"Um..."

"We can make mad passionate love. Maybe right here. This would be a good spot for our first time. Right now," he said as his voice dropped to a whisper.

"Now?" she squeaked. Hector put his hands under her bottom and lifted her. She stared into his eyes. He kissed her long and deep. Then he set her down.

"Of course," he said while looking around, his voice back to normal. "It is a little cool today. And I think there are some mosquitoes buzzing around. We could wait a month or two until it warms up."

"Oh. Yes," replied Kathy catching her breath. "We could wait a month or two."

"It might be a cool summer. In that case, we could wait until next year," said Hector.

She stared at him for a moment, and then she understood. She jumped into his arms, and he caught her. "Hector," she said simply as she held him close. Silently they stayed that way.

Then Hector said, "We have a lot of time, Kat. A lot of time."

They walked back together hand in hand. Someday I'll look just like Desi does now, Hector, Kathy vowed silently. She saw Yuie trying to ignore Lincoln, and Kathy felt a pang of pity for the other girl.

Yuie and Lincoln were ignoring each other, except for the time that they spent running together. Howard was right, Lincoln thought. When we run together, we are comfortable together, and we don't talk. Talking just gets in our way.

The Lieutenant thought about some of the other things that Howard had told him. He thought about gifts. He should give Yuie a gift, he thought. But what? He thought about the traditional gifts that a man could give a woman. No florist shops around, he said to himself.

On the other hand, there were plenty of wild flowers. But how do I give them to her, he thought? What if she were embarrassed, or what if she thought that giving cheap wildflowers to a girl was stupid? Better give them to her in private, he thought.

He borrowed a clear plastic bag from the kitchen. Bring back the bag and the twist, he was told. He went looking for flowers, and he gathered an assortment of red monkey flowers, yellow marigolds, blue gentians and pink violets. He cut the stems at the bottom, and then he stuck the stems in the bag with a little bit of water. Then he used a plastic twist to hold in the water. He gently wrapped the bouquet in one of his clean t-shirts, and he put it in his bag. He was ready.

After their run, as Yuie was about to leave, Lincoln asked her to wait a second. He pulled out the bouquet, and he gave it to her. She stared at the flowers.

"These are for me?" she asked.

"Uh, yes," he replied.

"Oh. Thank you, Linc. I'm sorry. I meant to say Lincoln," said Yuie hastily.

"You're welcome," said Lincoln. "Yuie, you can call me Linc,

but just you, okay?" said Lincoln.

"Oh. All right, Linc," said Yuie. She left him, and then she went straight to Desi who was lying on her bed. She showed Desi the flowers

"They're nice. Where did you get them?" asked Desi.

"Lincoln gave them to me," said Yuie.

"Really?" Desi sat up. "He gave you flowers?" Her voice was full of excitement.

"Yes. What do you think it means?" asked Yuie.

"Dummy, it means that he likes you," exclaimed Desi.

"Are you sure?" asked Yuie with a doubtful look.

"Yes! Did you praise him? Did you touch him?" asked Desi.

"What?"

"Did you tell him that the flowers were beautiful and that he has good taste? Did you touch him? Did you, like, put your hand on his arm or something? Like I told you," Desi reminded Yuie.

"Oh. I forgot. He might not like to be touched," said Yuie.

"You'll never know unless you take a chance, Yuie," said Desi.

Lincoln and Desi made their usual run the next day. But Yuie did not walk away as she usually did. She lingered until she had gathered her courage.

"Linc," she asked. "Can I touch you?"

Lincoln looked at her. "Uh, sure. Right now?"

"If it's all right with you," she said

"Okay."

Yuie raised her hand, and she placed it on Lincoln's bare chest. She rubbed him. "So hard," she murmured.

Lincoln was trying desperately not to get hard. He was learning something. Sometimes a girl's touch can be torture. Sometimes torture can be sweet. He broke out in a sweat. Yuie stepped back.

"Thank you," she said politely. She turned, and she ran away. Lincoln stopped holding his breath.

Yuie went to Desi, and she told her what had happened. Desi gave her a blank look.

"You asked Lincoln if you could touch him?" she asked. Yuie nodded. Desi thought about that.

"How did he like it?" Desi asked.

Yuie frowned. "I don't know. I wasn't watching." Desi sighed.

"Well, did you like it?" asked Desi.

"Yes, I liked it," said Yuie.

"How much? Did you really like it?"

"Yes, I really liked it," said Yuie. Desi gritted her teeth.

"Did you really really like it?" demanded Desi through her gritted teeth.

"I loved it," admitted Yuie.

"Yes!" exclaimed Desi, and she pumped a fist.

Lincoln had really really liked Yuie touching him. I should give her another gift, he thought. He thought of the various things that he had heard that girls liked. Then it came to him.

Lincoln Kennedy had a dark secret. It was a secret that no one at the Army post knew about, even Major Collins. It was a secret that no one here in Petersburg knew about, even the Chief. He could share his dark secret with Yuie.

Yuie was surprised when Lincoln approached her after dinner. They usually avoided each other except when they ran.

"Meet me behind the dining hall during Meeting," whispered Lincoln.

Yuie was surprised. What was this? She thought about ignoring his command, but she was much too curious. When Meeting started, she slipped away.

He was standing away from the dining hall, near the trees. He gestured to her. Cautiously she approached him. He looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"Yuie," he whispered. "Will you trust me for one minute? One minute. That's all I ask. I promise that you won't regret it,"

Yuie stared at him. No Yuie, her mind screamed. Don't trust him. "All right," she heard herself say.

"Close your eyes," he said. After a second, she did. She was nervous now.

"Open your mouth," he said. Trust him, she thought. She opened her mouth. She felt the intimacy of his fingers as he placed something in her mouth. She closed her mouth.

It was too dark to see her expression, but Lincoln could feel her amazement.

"Don't chew," he warned her. "Suck on it."

Yuie sucked until she couldn't stand it any longer, and then she bit down. It was heaven. It was absolute heaven. Finally it was over.

"Lincoln," she breathed softly, amazed that he would give this to her.

"Don't tell anybody about this, Yuie," Lincoln warned her. "It's

our secret."

"All right," she said, and then she went straight to Desi.

Desi knew immediately that something was up. "What?" she asked.

Yuie shook her head. "I can't tell you," she replied.

"Is it about Lincoln?" asked Desi.

"Yes," admitted Yuie.

"Did you have sex with him?" asked Desi.

"No!" exclaimed Yuie.

"Hm...did he give you something?"

"Yes."

Desi frowned. "Hm...he already gave you flowers. What else? Maybe something to eat. But where would he get it? Oh, your head is bleeding," said Desi.

"It is? Where?" Yuie put her hand on her head.

"Here, let me look at it," said Desi. She leaned close to Yuie's head, and then she sniffed Yuie's breath. She sat back on her bed. She was in shock.

"Chocolate," she whispered. "You ate chocolate. Lincoln Kennedy gave you chocolate. I hate you."

"And it was good," said Yuie smugly. "It was really really good."

The next day Gabby said to Tyler, "Did you hear? Lieutenant Kennedy gave Yuie a piece of chocolate." Soon the whole village was abuzz.

"I'm so sorry, Linc," wailed Yuie. "She tricked me. She got close, and she smelled my breath."

The Lieutenant clapped his hand over his forehead. "Damn. I should have warned you. You have to drink some water afterwards to get it off your breath." He gave her another piece.

She hoarded her chocolate. She kept it close. Someone searched her bag. Finally, one day, she decided to eat her piece. She went to Chief's Headquarters.

"Hi, Chief."

"Hi, Yuie."

"Um...Chief, I'm tired and the Lodge is noisy. Can I take a nap in your loft?" asked Yuie.

"You want to take a nap in my loft?"

"Uh huh."

Mike scowled. "Just eat your damn chocolate, Yuie," he growled.

Chapter Fifteen

The Lodge and The Retreat

The election for Mayor was just a few days away. It was July. The grain was growing well. Their valley had received rain and a light snow at the right times. The flow of water in the river had decreased. Hector reported that the new barn at Davis Brown Farm was finished. He and Ralph were designing a remodel of the solar barn. They were considering how many people could live in it, when they were finished converting it into apartments.

"Digging the outhouses will be the hardest chore," said Hector.

Two days before the election, in the late afternoon, a guard came running down the hill from the road guard post.

"Someone's coming," she gasped, and then four bicyclists came riding over the top of the hill. A stir went up in the village. The bicyclists coasted down the hill to the parking lot where they were met by a small crowd. Lieutenant Kennedy was in the crowd. By the time Mike arrived, the Lieutenant was conversing with the new arrivals. Kennedy introduced Mike to one of the bicyclists.

"Hello, Sir," said one of the cyclists as he extended his hand. "I'm Corporal Cody Carter, Ranger in the United States Army. Major Collins extends his greetings. We're here to form a regular Army guard unit. I know that you and your people have done a great job. We are not here to replace them, Sir, only to supplement them."

Corporal Cody introduced the other two members of his squad, and then the fourth cyclist came forward. He was wearing a black suit, a white shirt, and a black tie.

"Hi," said the man. "I'm Don."

"Mormon?" asked Mike.

"Methodist. I'm a minister. I hope you won't mind my visiting. I've heard so much about Petersburg that my curiosity was killing me, so I begged Major Collins to let me go with Corporal Cody. The Major told me to tell you that if you don't want me here, then you should send me right back."

"It's cool for you to come here, Don," said Mike.

"Where did you get the bikes, Corporal?" asked Kennedy.

"We found them in one of the trucks on Evil Hill," replied Cody. "After you and the Major left, Sergeant Jenkins sent a detail to scrounge everything that we could find. I led the detail. We found

these four mountain bikes unassembled in one of the campers. We put them together and presto! You can tell that they have a lot of miles on them, but they are still in great shape."

"I bet Major Collins was happy to see these," said Kennedy.

"Yes and no," replied Cody. "He was happy to see them, but he was pissed that we hadn't found them before you and he left. We used them to establish an outpost at the junction to Evil Hill road. Major Collins said to tell you that he wants two of them back."

"How long did it take you to cycle from your post to the Brown Farm," asked Mike.

"We left our post in the morning, and we arrived at the Brown Farm this morning seven days later," answered Cody. "We only stopped there for breakfast. That Mrs. Brown can be very persuasive. Then we left and came here."

Mike and Kennedy exchanged glances. "Seven days," murmured Mike.

"Seven days?" exclaimed Eric excitedly. "Chief, we have got to try to make some bikes."

"Yes," said Mike. "See what you can do, Eric. How are the tires, Corporal?"

"They're solid. No tubes. They did fine."

Mike saw John talking seriously to Don. It dawned on him why. "Eric, find Lily," he said. "Tell her to start working on a marriage license for John and Desi."

"Huh?" asked Eric.

"Go," said Mike.

After talking to John, and after seeing Desi's condition, Don agreed to perform a wedding. A little stiffly, Don explained that he usually required the couple to undergo some counseling before he would agree to perform a wedding, but in this case it was obviously too late.

Lily hastily designed and drew an elegant marriage license on one of Hector's shingles. The marriage took place the following afternoon. The wedding was held on the grassy area below the Lodge, and almost every inhabitant of Petersburg attended. Yuie was the maid of honor and Eric was the best man. At Desi's insistence, Mike gave her away.

"You sure can hold a grudge, Desi," groused Mike. Desi just laughed.

Afterwards, Mike and Howard insisted that the couple take over

Chief's Headquarters for a few days. When John pointed out that it was a little late for a honeymoon, Howard smacked him on the head.

Corporal Carter had a present for Mike from Major Collins. As soon as Mike took the soft present which was wrapped in an expensive linen bag, Mike knew what it contained. He peeked inside to be sure.

The day came for the election. The vote was held at Meeting. The votes were counted immediately. Howard received thirty votes. Eric received sixteen votes. Mike declared that Howard was the winner, and that at midnight, Howard would be the new Mayor of Petersburg.

It was approaching midnight. Mike asked the excited audience for silence. When it was quiet, he and Howard opened the package that Major Collins had sent to him. Carefully, they unfolded the cloth. Using push pins, they tacked it to the wall board behind the podium as the silent crowd watched.

Mike stepped back. He turned his back on the crowd, and he faced the wall. Mike cleared his throat, and then he placed his right hand over his heart. The soldiers surged to their feet, salutes in place. Almost all of the residents of Petersburg rose also. Kathy removed Hector's hat from her head, and she held it over her heart.

Mike began to speak.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag..."

At midnight Mike embraced Howard. Mike was no longer the Chief.

Mike found the next few days to be a little awkward. People kept coming to him for advice or for help or for his opinion, when they should have been going to Howard. Howard suggested that Mike should become the Admin. Mike declined. One day, he decided to take a walk down to the guard post at Logging Road junction. He took his backpack. After staying over night in the RV, he decided to walk up to Davis Brown Farm.

He arrived at the farm at supper time. Mary insisted that he eat in the house, and not eat in the solar barn with the members of the Brown Farm guard post. After dinner, he asked Ralph if he could hang around for a few days.

Ralph shrugged. "No problem," he said. A few days turned into a couple of weeks. Mike was enjoying his stay. He helped around the farm. He did what Ralph asked, and he resisted the urge to give Ralph unasked for advice.

Howard wasn't happy that Mike had left, but he understood why. Still, with Mike gone, Howard was doing the work that had previously been done by two people. He wondered who he could appoint as Admin. Jean laughed in his face when he asked her. He asked Eric who looked back at him as if he was from outer space. Eventually, Ahmad agreed to serve as Admin. Temporarily, Ahmad insisted.

Howard's first big test came just after the middle of July. Jacob and Jean had gone upriver to keep an eye on the Retreat. They hastened into Petersburg with the news that the remaining people at the Retreat were on the move.

"They're headed this way," said Jean at Council. "I think they must have run out of supplies. They're headed for the river. I think they know that there are people down river. Meaning us."

"I counted three men, six women and five children," said Jacob. "Two of the kids are mid teens. Like us."

"What do you think, Lieutenant Kennedy?" asked Howard.

"I think we should meet them on the way, and we should not wait until they get here," said Kennedy. "We know the terrain between where they are and here. We need to pick a spot that will provide us the most effective opportunity to contain them and send them back, or to disarm them with a minimum of danger to our people."

"Which brings up the question. What should we do about them?" asked Howard.

"If they've committed murder, and it looks like they might have, we don't want them in our village," said Rasul.

"But the children at least are innocent," said Yuie. "And the women might be victims."

"True," said Jean. "For starters, we should decide what to do about the men. We can deal with the women and children later."

"I agree with Jean," said Kathy. "Disarm the men. Send them to Major Collins. Let the women and children stay with us until we see what kind of people they are."

There was a murmur of agreement.

Then Ahmad spoke. "Don't you think that we should inform the Chief, uh, Mike?" There was silence. Howard could see that several of them were thinking that same thought.

"Well?" he asked mildly.

"No!" To everyone's surprise this outburst came from Jacob.

"The Chief has done his part. If we can't figure this out on our own, we don't deserve to be who we are. He showed us the way. Let's show him that we know where to go."

"Yes," said John. "He expects us to be able to handle anything that's thrown at us. That's why he's the Chief."

There were smiles and murmurs of agreement.

"All right," said Howard. "We'll leave Mike out of this. Lieutenant Kennedy, when will you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning at first light," replied Kennedy. "We'll take the most experienced Spears, except for John, and we will take the best archers. I would like to handle this with a minimum of weapons fire."

After Council, John approached Kennedy. "Why am I staying?" he asked. "Is it because of..." he stopped.

"You're staying because you will be in charge of village security, John," explained Kennedy. "There's no guarantee that one of these guys won't evade us and get here. If one of them does, I doubt that he'll be friendly. I need you to take him out."

"Oh," said John with a look of relief. "I thought that it must be something like that."

Kennedy smiled. "You're the Chief's best friend," he said. "So I know that I can trust your competence." John blushed.

Four Rangers, two scouts, two archers, four Spears, and Diana set out the next morning. They traveled up the river for five days, and then that evening Jacob reported that the people of the Retreat were ahead, and they were coming towards the troop.

Kennedy looked around, and he decided that his troop's present location was a good place to confront them. They were in a small glen. The slopes on either side were somewhat steep, but they were still climbable. He placed an archer in the trees on either side of the glen. With each archer was a Ranger with a rifle. Corporal Carter stayed with Kennedy.

Kennedy called the scouts and the Spears together. "Jacob, I want you to lead your people around and behind their group. I suspect that the men will stay together out front. I seriously doubt that these kinds of people will leave someone to protect their women and their children. But they might, so be careful. And watch for the older boys. They may have weapons, and we don't know how they will respond if it comes to a fight. Diana, you stay with me, but stay back in the trees.

"Jacob, wait until you hear a shout that it's all clear, or until you hear shots. If you hear an all clear shout, and there are no weapons present in the main group, then secure the women and children. If there are weapons then use your judgment. There's no use taking chances on an accident if the men surrender.

"If you hear a shot, then secure the women and children, and prepare for one or more of the men to come back to you, or stay back in the trees and wait for us. Clear?" Jacob nodded.

"One more thing," said Kennedy. "If those men are together, I don't intend to let them get back to you. But I can't promise that they won't. Stay focused." Jacob nodded.

Jacob led his troop into the trees. Kennedy looked up at the side of the hill where Yuie was hidden. He hadn't had time to say anything to her, and besides it would have been inappropriate given the circumstances. Or so he told himself.

Keep your head down, Yuie, he thought. Stay safe.

He and Corporal Carter waited at the lower end of the glen. Soon, they heard the sounds of people making their way down the slope and through the trees. A man carrying a rifle came into view. At first, he didn't see them. He moved farther into the glen. Then he noticed them, and he froze. He said something over his shoulder. Slowly, looking from side to side, two more men moved into view. They were also armed with rifles.

The five men faced each other. The man in the front was calm, the Lieutenant noted. The other two men were nervous. They kept looking around, as if they suspected that the two men they faced were not the only men around. The man in front finally began to move toward the Rangers. He stopped just within a loud talking distance.

"Hello," he said.

"I am Lieutenant Kennedy of the United States Army," stated Kennedy. "Please, put down your weapons."

Kennedy could see that the man was considering him.

"So you are Army? Do you know what happened to the world?" he asked.

"Not really. Some kind of Fog. It's going down. It's down to six thousand feet now. It's dropping about three hundred feet a year," replied the Lieutenant.

The man considered. "So. One day it's back to normal maybe."

"Maybe."

"Hard to say what will happen then."

"Hard to say."

"People are doing what ever they can to survive. Maybe they did some bad things sometimes," the man opined.

The Lieutenant did not answer. But in that moment, he understood what the people of Petersburg meant when they said, "He's the Chief," and he understood why they said it. Some people, he thought, will do whatever is expedient to survive. Some people won't.

The man was thinking again. "Where's the rest of your men?" he asked.

"In the trees," replied Kennedy. "Waiting to see what you will do."

"They're real quiet," said the man.

"They're supposed to be," replied the Lieutenant.

"Maybe there's no one there," speculated the man.

"They are there. Now by my authority and the legal command of the United States Army, I order you to lay down your weapons," commanded Kennedy.

"I'll tell my friends," the man said. He began moving backwards.

"Get ready, Corporal," murmured Kennedy.

The man reached his friends. They seemed to be arguing. Then the men lifted their rifles over their heads. They moved toward the Rangers.

"Looks like they are surrendering, LT," said Carter.

With blazing speed the leading man brought his rifle down to his side, and he fired at the soldiers. Kennedy was anticipating it, and he had dropped to the ground at the first movement, but the bullet that was intended for his chest nicked his side. Carter fired back.

His bullet and Yuie's arrow arrived at the same time. The arrow pierced his ear. The bullet lodged in his chest. The other men were slower. By the time they took aim, the two Rangers hiding in the trees were firing. One man from the Retreat took several rounds in his body, and he toppled over. The other man got off one shot in the direction of the arrow, before he lay still.

"Yuie," gasped the Lieutenant as he struggled to his feet and then fell back. From behind the Lieutenant, Diana came running out

of the trees. From one side, Yuie was slipping and sliding down the slope. The Sergeant knelt by his side.

Diana pulled his shirt up and examined the side of his body. "He has a small wound," she said to Yuie who arrived white faced. "He'll be all right, but I'll need to stitch him up."

"Sergeant Carter, take your men and find Jacob," moaned Kennedy.

Above a small clearing, Jacob and his people were watching the six women and the five children. The two older boys were carrying rifles. They heard the first shot. Then they heard the firefight. Then there was silence. The women and the children became agitated.

"What's happening," cried one.

"Dad! Dad!" shouted one of the teenage boys.

"Put your weapons down," shouted Jacob. The boys swung their rifles in the direction of the voice, but they did not fire.

"Who's there!" demanded the bigger boy.

"It's Jacob," he heard.

The boy looked frightened as he scanned the trees.

"We have guns," the boy said.

"Yes, I see that. We don't have any guns," said Jacob. "So put your guns down, and we'll talk."

"Maybe you should do what they say," said one of the women.

"Shut up," snarled one of the other women. "Don't listen to her," she said to the boys. "We have the guns. There is nothing they can do. Wait until your father gets back."

"If you put down your weapons, we'll give you food," shouted Jacob.

"Mom?" asked the younger boy.

"Don't listen to him," snapped the mother. "They're trying to trick you. They probably don't have any food."

"We'll wait until you think it over," said Jacob. "We are going to eat now. Here's something to drink."

A plastic bottle was tossed from behind the boys into the clearing. The younger boy picked it up and opened it. He sniffed and then he drank, even as his mother was telling him to leave it alone.

"It's Kool-Aid," he announced. "Mom they have food!"

Up in the trees, Jacob met Corporal Carter and the Rangers who had advanced to find Jacobs's squad.

"The Lieutenant was shot," whispered the Corporal. "But not

seriously. The nurse is tending to him. We left the girls there. How are you doing here?"

"Two rifles," said Jacob. "I'm taking it slow."

"Your call," said Carter.

Down below the boys and their mother were arguing. They were obviously in charge. The other women and the other kids kept silent.

"When's Dad coming back?" asked the older boy.

The woman didn't answer. She had expected that her husband would be back by now.

"I'm hungry," whined a little boy. "When are we gonna eat?"

"Keep your brat quiet," snapped the woman in charge to another woman. The mother of the small child gathered him into her arms as the kid began to snuffle.

"Mom, we don't have anything more to eat," said the younger teenager desperately.

"Shut up," yelled his mother. "Let me think."

Then she called, "One of you come down here and bring us some food, and I'll let a couple of these kids go."

"All right," said Jacob. He went to the edge of the trees so that they could see him. He held a large bag.

"I hope you like egg and lettuce sandwiches," he said. The woman in charge caught her breath. Clearly she was surprised that these people had fresh food.

"Let that lady and her kid go into the trees," Jacob said.

The woman in charge looked around. Then she nodded. The woman with the small child stood up. She took the child who was hungry and another child by the hand, and she started hobbling towards the trees.

"Just one brat," said the woman in charge.

"Both of them," snapped Jacob. The woman and her children hurried into the trees.

"Now give us the food," demanded the woman in charge.

Jacob motioned to the younger boy. He came over to Jacob. Jacob handed him the bag.

"Give me your rifle," said Jacob quietly.

"We don't have any bullets anyway," muttered the boy. He handed his rifle to Jacob, and Jacob quickly slipped back into the trees as the woman in charge began to squawk.

Jacob handed the rifle to Carter, and then he turned to watch

the group eat. He noticed that the woman in charge took the lions share for herself and for her two boys.

"That's enough of that," he said. He walked back into the clearing, and he went directly to the older boy. The older boy was larger and heavier than Jacob, and when he saw Jacob coming, he pointed his rifle. Jacob ignored him. He reached the boy, and he snatched the rifle away. The woman in charge sprang to her feet blocking Jacob's retreat, but then the Rangers and the Spears rushed into the clearing. The woman and her son sat down.

The group was herded down to the glen. When the woman saw her husband's body, she gave a cry of anguish, and she knelt down by his side as did her boys. The other women ignored her and the other bodies. They were overjoyed to be reunited with Diana. They hugged each other and they cried, and they profusely thanked the people of Petersburg for their deliverance.

The Lieutenant was sitting on the ground. His shirt was off, and he had a bandage around his torso. Yuie sat nearby watching Kennedy anxiously.

"Are you sure he's all right?" she kept asking Diana, ignoring Kennedy's assurances. There were three stitches along his left side.

The troop from Petersburg stayed in the glen until they had buried the bodies. Then they started their journey back to the river and down to Petersburg. They made the woman and her two boys trail behind, but they fed them at least.

Someone muttered, "Why bother?"

Jean replied, "Because that's what the Chief would do."

At Petersburg, the residents were waiting anxiously for news of their troop. Mike returned two days after they left. He was surprised to hear about the people of the Retreat, but he didn't offer any opinions or any advice for that matter.

Howard suggested that Mike sleep in the loft until Jean returned, but Mike turned him down. Mike moved into the Lodge, and he took a bunk in the boys' cave. One night Imee sent for him. He found her in John and Desi's room. He and John waited most of the night. In the early morning hours, they heard a small high pitched voice wailing. Imee called them into the room. The newborn lay on Desi's chest.

"John, come say hello to your son," said Desi wearily. "Hey, Mike, come say hello to Michael."

After a while, Mike and John took a walk while Desi and the

baby slept. They found a private place to talk. Later, they promised each other that neither would ever tell anyone that they had held each other, and that they had bawled like babies.

A happy community welcomed their troopers back. If there had been any doubt about the Rangers integration into the community, it was forgotten. Together with the villagers, at the risk of their lives, they had protected their community. They were heroes.

Lieutenant Kennedy and Yuie were observed hand in hand to everyone's relief. Kennedy laughed when he found out that Yuie was from Berkeley, California. Her grandparents, she told him, had been political activists in the nineteen sixties.

"That figures," he said.

Yuie was not surprised to learn that Kennedy was a second generation soldier. She was surprised to learn that he was from Lubbock, Texas. He doesn't have much of an accent, she thought.

The returning troop was delighted at the news of Desi's baby, and everyone chuckled to see Mike carrying the baby as if he had done so all his life. But when he changed the baby's diaper in the dining hall one day, there was some grumbling about the smell.

"Tough," was his reaction.

Now that Jacob was back, Lily wanted to go find the edge of the Fog, so that she could check on its progress. So Jacob packed their things, and they set out. After a three day journey, they came to the Fog and verified that it was, indeed, much lower. They moved away from the Fog, and then they found a place to camp for the night.

It was a pleasant night and she wanted to talk. She managed to get Jacob to tell her that his father had owned a gas station in Oakdale. She told him that she was from Watsonville.

"Artichokes," he said. She nodded.

Lily thought that Jacob was being tight lipped even for him, so she finally asked, "Jacob, what's wrong?"

Jacob said nothing for a few seconds, and then he said, "It's my birthday today. I'm sixteen."

"Oh, Happy Birthday, Jacob," Lily said, and then she said, "Oh."

Lily put her arm around Jacob's shoulders. "Happy Birthday, Jacob," she whispered, and then for the first time, she kissed him.

The villagers were pleased when Jacob and Lily reported that the Fog was receding. The summer was passing. The grain was high, and it needed to be cut. Mary was due to arrive in the village any day to start the combine. Eric was trying to build a working

bicycle. Ahmad's position as Admin was making life easier for Howard. Most of the people from the Retreat were adjusting to life in Petersburg.

Life for Lieutenant Kennedy would have been just fine, except for the fact that Yuie was depressed. She hid it well, but Lincoln knew her better. One day he forced her to talk about what was wrong. Gradually, haltingly, she began to talk about that day in the glen.

Staring straight ahead, Yuie said, "I didn't want to kill again, Linc." She turned her head, and she looked at Linc. She started to cry. "I didn't want to kill anyone ever again." Lincoln pulled her head against his shoulder. He put his arms around her and he held her as she cried.

"I know Yu," he whispered quietly. "I know Yu." Eventually, Yuie's emotional health began to mend. So did Lincoln's.

Howard had reestablished Labor Day last year. This year he turned it into a fair of sorts. Everyone was encouraged to make something to trade for something else. The Brown Farm Community came to the fair. Mary started the combine.

"I'm not going to cut yet, but it was a good opportunity to check it," she explained. Ralph got a chance to talk to Howard about who should be chosen to live in the Solar Apartments.

Lincoln used the excuse of the fair to suggest a deal to Yuie.

"I'll trade you my last four pieces of chocolate for four kisses. My choice of time and place," he said.

Yuie laughed and agreed. Lincoln gave her the chocolate. Then Yuie surprised him by taking the sweets to Comet and Star. She gave them two pieces each. Star was seven years old now, and she could barely remember chocolate. Comet didn't remember chocolate at all, and he looked suspiciously at the brown sweet. He said that it looked like poop.

Then he carefully took a tiny bite. His eyes lit up, and he popped the whole piece into his mouth. He hugged Yuie. As Lincoln watched Yuie give the children her precious chocolate, he shook his head. I'm falling in love with a peacenik from Berkeley, he mused.

He asked Yuie to take a walk around the track with him. When they were away from everyone else, he gently took her shoulders and turned her. He pulled her back against his chest. Then he asked her to lift her arms behind his head. Yuie did so, and Lincoln laid his chin on her head, and they stood there together down at the far end of the

meadow.

Then Lincoln said, "Yuie, I have another deal to offer you. Here it is. I promise to teach our children to respect people who question their government, who demand accountability of our representatives, and who respect the right of people to protest against the government when they think it is wrong, especially when the government sends our people to fight and die.

"In return I would like you to promise to teach our children to respect the people who wear the uniform of our country, and to teach our kids that it isn't the military who make the choice of when to fight and die; but that their duty is to faithfully carry out the orders of their civilian government. Do you accept this deal?"

Yuie said, "I do." Then she turned, and she kissed him. She accepted now that she was in love with a second generation Army officer. She realized to her surprise that she was happy.

On the grassy area below the Lodge, Mike, John, and Desi watched the two lovers at the end of the meadow. Desi sighed when Yuie turned to kiss Lincoln.

"I always thought that Yuie would end up with you, Mike," she said. She was holding Michael.

Mike laughed. "I liked her at first, but later she was kind of like my sister. I never even kissed her even when we shared a double sleeping bag."

"Oops," said Desi. "Gotta change Michael. Come help me, John," she commanded.

John sighed. "Yes, dear," he said, and the two of them went into the Lodge.

As Mike looked out over the panorama of his village, he felt intense satisfaction. He took in the golden fields, the running stream, the buildings of his village, and his people. He glanced again at Yuie and Lincoln walking on the track. He saw Hector and Kathy down by the river, busy as usual, measuring a spot for the saw mill. He saw Howard and Jean talking with Eric and Cody. He saw Rasul holding Diego and escorting Imee into the dining hall, where the fair was centered. Some of his people were not here. Even on a holiday, the guard posts at Davis Brown Farm, Logging Road junction, the hill and upriver had to be manned. Then Mike glanced sadly at the three graves, and he noticed that someone had recently placed fresh flowers on them.

Suddenly, Mike had an urge to see Major Collins and Erin

again. I could take a walk, he thought. I could go see the Army post and the new post below Evil Hill. The Fog is going down. There are all kinds of places I could explore. But he wouldn't tell that to Howard today. He would wait a few days. Today was a time for fun. Mike walked down to the dining hall.

The day after the fair, Howard sent Nathan and Kevin to Davis Brown Farm. With them went Paige and Kylie, who had stayed behind. The four of them rode the bicycles. Ralph had warned the four kids not to dawdle.

Howard knew that he needed to send two of the bikes to Major Collins. He just wasn't sure how he was going to accomplish that. He wanted the other bikes to be used to convey messages from David Brown Farm to Petersburg. Using a bicycle, it took only one day to get a message from place to place. This made the horses happy.

The rest of the day was dedicated to cleaning the village. Petersburg needed a good cleaning before winter set in. The villagers worked like dogs, but by nightfall the village sparkled.

Before dawn, Mike was roused from his bunk. The Mayor wants to see you, Ch...Mike," said Tyler.

Mike rubbed sleep from his eyes. "Do you know what it's about, Tyler," he asked.

"Only that one of those guys from the Retreat is in trouble," replied Tyler.

"Shit," grumbled Mike. He used the Porta Potty, and then he went down to the Village Office, which used to be Chief's Headquarters. Howard was there, along with John, Eric, Ahmad, Rasul, and Jacob. The original Spears, thought Mike. He didn't like the looks of this. Tyler waited outside.

"This clown has been pressuring one of the artists to have sex with him," said Howard.

Mike looked at the older boy from the Retreat. "Is that true?" he asked mildly.

"It's none of your business," said the boy sullenly. "I have a right to get laid, even by your stupid rules."

"He told the woman that, if she didn't put out for him, he would tell everyone in Petersburg what a whore she was. That she was every man's lay at the Retreat. He told her that she was a worthless bitch, and that no man in Petersburg but him would ever want to touch a used up cunt like her," stated Jacob flatly.

Mike glanced at Jacob and recognized the intense anger beneath his friend's calm surface, and then he looked back at the boy. He doesn't know, thought Mike. This stupid shit doesn't even know that he's lucky to still be alive.

"Calm down," he said to Jacob quietly. "We'll take care of it." He waited until Jacob relaxed slightly.

"You didn't ask Kennedy to be here?" said Mike to Howard.

"No, Ch...Mike. I wanted Kennedy to be able to say that he knew nothing about what we did to this dickhead," replied Howard.

Mike nodded. He looked at the boy. "Have you been down to the Hanging Tree?" he asked. The boy became agitated.

"I haven't done anything wrong. I didn't rape her. I only talked to her. She's a lying bitch if she says differently," he protested.

"How did we get the evidence," asked Mike.

"Lily and I overheard him, Ch...Mike," said Jacob. "We've been sleeping out on the lawn in front of the Lodge. So we can be together, you know? We heard her go to the Porta Potty. Then he came out of the Lodge. When she left the Porta Potty, he started talking to her. She started crying." He gave the boy a contemptuous look. "He didn't realize that we could hear him. And he didn't realize that I had my Spear."

Mike looked at Jacob. "Thanks for not killing him, Jacob," he said. The others added their thanks. The boy turned white. At last, he began to realize the danger that he was in.

Mike looked at Howard. "If we hang him there is no way that the rest of the tribe won't hear about it. We'll probably have trouble with his mother and brother. We'll have trouble with Kennedy. And he didn't actually rape her. At least, not here.

"So here is my advice. Put him in the storage room for the night. Set a couple of guards on him. Call a Meeting tomorrow morning, first thing. That will let everyone know how serious we take this. Let everyone who knows him have their say. And if we decide that he's guilty, then we'll banish him. Let the guards know that if he shows up here again, then he is to be killed on sight. But that's just my advice. If you are going to hang him, tell me now. Otherwise, I'm going back to bed." Mike waited. The rest looked at each other.

"All right," said Howard. "Ahmad, you get Tyler, and put this scumbag in the storage room. If he tries to leave, spear him."

Mike and the others went back to bed. The next morning, Howard let out the word that there would be a Meeting immediately

after breakfast. The rumors were flying when the Meeting began.

Diana was asked to tell what she knew about the teenager. Then Imee was asked to describe her experiences with him. Jean had carefully scripted the order of the witnesses. The strongest went first. Watching them gave confidence to the other victims. Slowly, the vileness at the Retreat, and the teenager's part in it, became apparent to all of them.

The boy's mother interrupted at the beginning of the interrogation. Howard quickly kicked her out of the Meeting. She was taken under guard to the storage room. The boy's brother sat silently.

Jacob and Lily testified to what they had heard. Then Lily testified to what she had seen at the Retreat. Then the victim was asked to testify. It was difficult for her, but she gave a halting account of what the boy had said to her. She described other times that he had extorted sexual favors from her at the Retreat; in return for food and protection. Finally she told them what he had said to her while they were at Petersburg.

Then the boy was allowed to give his side of the story. He said that he was forced to do those things to her at the Retreat. He said that she was always willing. He pointed out that he had not actually had sex with her in Petersburg.

When the Meeting was over, Howard said that the Council would meet, and that they would decide the fate of the boy. One hour later, the Council reappeared. Howard announced that the boy was banished from Petersburg as of tomorrow. He would be given food and water for three days. If he returned, then he would be killed.

"That's a death sentence," said Lieutenant Kennedy grimly.

"Probably," said Mike sadly.

At sunrise, Eric, Ahmad, Nathan and Tyler marched him out of Petersburg. The boy's angry mother and his silent brooding brother went with him. They were given three days of food and water, also. At sunset, they came to the Logging Road junction guard post. They spent the night there.

"Why are you doing this?" the older boy asked that night.

"Don't you understand that the world has changed? It's all about survival. Men are in charge again. It's like in the ancient times. We are the strong ones. We are the smart ones. Women are the weak ones. Women are the stupid ones. We have to take care of them or they'll die, right? So we get to have them. It's our right. You can't

punish me for doing what's natural."

Eric looked at him. "You don't get it do you?" he said. "Your crowd hasn't survived. Almost all of you are dead. We're kicking you out of our community, because we want to survive, and we can't survive with dumb asses like you around. Our way is not just one way to live. It's the only way to keep living. Our chicks aren't weak. They aren't stupid. Every one of them has contributed to our survival. They protect us as much as we protect them."

Before dawn, they marched again. At noon, the guards from Petersburg stopped, and they told the trio to continue until they were out of sight. Then the guards went back to Petersburg.

A week later, the younger brother, starving and haggard, stumbled into the Logging Road junction guard post, begging to be allowed back into Petersburg. His mother had gone crazy, he said. One night, she had decided that the three of them would go through the fog the next day. His brother had agreed. He had waited until his brother and mother were asleep, and then he had sneaked away. From deep in the trees he had watched them walk into the fog. When they started screaming, he had covered his eyes and ran away.

Howard consulted Diana who agreed that the boy should be allowed back into Petersburg. By that time, Mike was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Mike

Mike had wanted to leave Petersburg quietly, but that was not to be. As he was explaining his plan to Howard, Gabby's face appeared over the edge of the loft.

"You're leaving, Petersburg, Ch...Mike?" she asked.

Howard winced. "Sorry, Mike. I forgot that she was up there. She's been feeling a little ill, and Diana didn't want her to give something to the whole village." He looked up at Gabby. "You keep this to yourself, young lady," he warned

"Of course," she replied innocently. By nightfall, the whole village knew of Mike's plan.

Howard confirmed it at Meeting. Mike wasn't there. "He's leaving in the morning. He's going for a visit to the Army post. He's going to see Erin. If he wants to say goodbye to you, he will. Otherwise, leave him alone."

Mike wanted to make this trip alone. Howard had no intention of letting him do that, of course. He made his own plans. He did let Mike sleep in the loft that night, so that Mike wasn't pestered all night with questions.

When morning came, Mike went to see Desi. She was in her room alone with Michael. Mike was used to the sight of Desi breast feeding, by now. He hardly noticed it.

"So you're off," she said.

"Yeah."

"Mike, thanks for everything," she said.

Mike became uncomfortable. "Everybody helped," he protested. "It took all of us to make Petersburg."

"I don't mean that," she said. "I mean thanks for John and me. And for Michael. You could have kept me for yourself, you know."

Mike started laughing. "No, Desi," he said. "No way, I could have kept you." She laughed as she threw a pillow at him.

"See you, Chief."

"See you, Desi."

Mike walked to the graveyard. Someone had recently changed the flowers on the three graves. Hector found him there.

"So," said Hector.

"Yes," said Mike. Hector put his arms around the boy, and he

held him tightly. Mike felt drops on the top of his head.

"Vaya con Dios, mi amigo," whispered Hector.

"See ya, Hector," replied Mike.

Mike went to the dining hall. He ate breakfast. Tyler came in, and he sat down at the table. Mike finished eating. Gabby passed by. Mike noticed that she was wearing the earrings and pendent that Tyler had given her.

"You two behave yourselves," he said. They laughed.

"We will," said Tyler.

"We know the rules," said Gabby.

"Don't get Gabby pregnant, Tyler," said Mike.

"Chief!" protested Gabby.

"Don't worry, Mike," said Tyler. "Diana had Hector make this stick with a round knob at the end, so that we could practice putting a condom on it."

"Tyler!" protested Gabby. Mike chuckled. He got up, and he left the dining hall. At the bridge, he met Lieutenant Kennedy and Yuie.

"Hey, Ch...Mike," said Yuie.

"Hey, Yuie," said Mike. "Lieutenant, please, take care of her."

"Roger that, Mike," said Kennedy. He and Mike bumped fists.

In the parking lot, Mike found Howard, Jacob, Eric, Ahmad, Rasul, and John. They had their spears.

"We thought that we would take a walk with you for a ways," said Howard with a grin. Mike shook his head in disgust, but secretly he was pleased.

"You don't want to wait for the motorcycle?" Mike asked Ahmad and Rasul.

"Motorcycles are for pussies," sneered Rasul. "Real men march."

The Spears marched up the hill. Mike turned, and he waved once to Yuie. Then they passed out of sight of Petersburg. They marched down the road. When they got to the Hanging Tree, Mike stopped. He looked at the graves. He looked at the noose still hanging from the branch. He looked at Howard.

"If I had it to do all over again, I would do the same thing," he said fiercely.

"So would I, Chief," said Howard. "So would I." Howard shook hands with Mike, and then he started back to the village.

Then Howard stopped. "Hey, don't forget," he said. "You're still

a resident of Petersburg. Behave yourself."

Mike laughed. "I know the rules. Hell, I wrote most of them."

At nightfall, they arrived at the Logging Road junction guard post. They spent the night around a campfire, laughing and telling old lies.

In the morning, they waved goodbye to Ahmad and Rasul who were taking up the watch at the guard post. The other four trudged up Logging Camp road, and then they turned right at Davis Brown Farm road. They ate supper around Mary's table.

The next morning, John informed Mike that they were taking the bikes. Mike was surprised and delighted. Mike said goodbye to the girls and boys. He said goodbye to Mary and her kids. Finally, he turned to Ralph.

"You know, it might be a good idea to figure out some way to paint that barn," he said.

"Yeah," chuckled Ralph. "I'll get right on that."

"And the chicken coop really should be expanded."

"Good idea," said Ralph.

"And the trout pond needs to be weeded around the edges."

"All right," said Ralph.

"And the horse stalls could be mucked out a little better."

"Chief," warned Ralph.

"And the solar wall needs cleaning."

"Get lost, Chief," growled Ralph. Mike started laughing. He climbed on his bike, and the four boys pedaled down the road.

"Get a haircut, Chief," yelled Ralph. Mike laughed and flipped him the finger.

The four boys bicycled past the guard post with a wave. They began the difficult journey through the towering mountains. Sometimes they were forced to get off and push their bikes. Sometimes they coasted for a long way. Two days later, they arrived at the old campsite on the clear blue lake. White lilies had taken up residence among the fireweed and lady ferns. They spent the day fishing, relaxing, and giving John a hard time about Desi.

"Big talk from guys that aren't getting any," he replied. That shut up Mike and Eric. John noticed that Jacob had not harassed him. There was a dirt road leading north from the lake. Jacob told them that he was going to take a ride north for a day. He agreed to meet John and Eric in two days at their camp by the lake.

Jacob and Mike rode their bikes to the turnoff of the north road.

They got off of their bikes, and then they looked awkwardly at each other.

"Um..Jacob," said Mike. "I was wondering why you didn't want to come and get me, so that I could help you guys with those people from the Retreat. Did you really think that I had led you guys long enough, and that you guys needed to prove yourselves to me? Or did you think that all of the time that I spent in Chief's Headquarters meant that I was getting, like, soft or something? Or did you think that there was not enough time to come get me?" He paused, and he looked expectantly at Jacob.

Jacob said, "Yes."

Mike started laughing. "Bye, Jacob. Be careful today," he said.

"Bye, Chief," said Jacob. He got on his bike, and he rode away.

Mike got on his bike, and he rode back to where Eric and John were packing. Together, they rode northeast for a day, until they came to a steep slope. The road climbed the slope by way of some switchbacks, and then it disappeared around the north side of the rocky mountain. At the bottom of the slope, they made their camp. In the morning, Mike said goodbye to John and Eric. He started the long climb up the slope.

As Eric watched Mike, he asked John, "Why did you want me to come with you guys? I would have thought that you would have liked to be alone with Mike for this trip. You're his best friend."

"Are you kidding, dude?" said John. "You had to come and see him off. Shit, man, you are the guy that started all of this."

"Me?" said Eric in surprise. "What did I do?"

"You told us that we should be hearing someone on the radio phone, remember? After that is when Mike got serious," replied John. "After that is when he started thinking about how we could survive on our own. A bunch of kids on our own. Hell, Mike was only thirteen."

"Yeah, that's right," said Eric remembering. "I always wondered why all of you older kids did whatever he told you to do."

"We were scared, and he was the only one taking charge," replied John. "Someone had to."

John shaded his eyes from the early morning sun as he watched Mike reach the top of the slope.

"You know," he said. "If Pete hadn't gotten himself killed, we'd probably be living in Geek City. Yeeoowww!" John yelped suddenly when Eric used his spear to goose John between his legs.

"Geeks rule! Jocks drool!" cried Eric, laughing as he jumped on his bike and quickly rode away.

"Come back here, you little shit," yelled John as he jumped on his own bike.

High on the slope where the road bent around the mountain, Mike was laughing as he watched the antics of his friends. He watched John chase Eric for a few minutes, and then he turned his bike, and he continued his journey around the mountain and down the other side.

That night, Mike made his camp in a green grassy vale, and then he turned in early. The sky was clear, the moon was a thin crescent, and the stars were brilliant. He lay in his sleeping bag with his hands behind his head watching the skies. Occasionally a shooting star flashed by from the east. He was truly alone for the first time in years. There was no one within miles of him.

He thought about his lost family, and he dripped tears for a while. But inevitably, his thoughts wandered back to Petersburg. He hoped that his friends were happy. He hoped that his community was safe. He hoped that they would all survive and grow, and that one day when the fog was gone, and when someone from outside made contact with them, those who found them would find a thriving vibrant town.

In next day he pedaled hard, only stopping for a few minutes. At dusk he was hailed, and he was told to stop.

"Who are you?" a man in a uniform asked.

"I'm Mike," he said. "I'm from Petersburg."

"Hold on." One of the soldiers was sent to the rear. He came back, and then Mike was allowed into the post. He was escorted to another soldier.

"You say that your name is Mike? And that you're from Petersburg?" she asked skeptically. Later, he learned that she was Sergeant Annie Jenkins.

"Yes, and I have a letter from the Mayor of Petersburg that's addressed to Major Collins," Mike replied.

"I'll take that," she said brusquely.

"I'll give it to the Major personally," replied Mike.

She scowled. "Fine," she said. They found Mike a billet and even offered him a meal which he accepted.

Mike was planning to leave in the morning, but he was told that he would have to wait until the following day, when Sergeant Jenkins

was leaving for the Army post. His bike was confiscated for use by the Army.

So he cooled his heels for a day, and then he was allowed to accompany Sergeant Jenkins. They rode two of the bikes, so they made the trip in two days. They went to the building that housed Major Collins' office, and then Sergeant Jenkins told Mike to take a seat outside the inner office while she went in to see the Major.

"Sir, I have a civilian in custody who says that he has a letter for you from the Mayor of Petersburg," Mike heard her say to Major Collins.

"Really? Well, show him in, Sergeant," the Major replied.

The Sergeant came to the door, and she motioned Mike to come into the room. He did. The Major's face lit up with pleasure.

"Mike!" he cried. "Mike, how are you. So you came. Wait a minute." He looked at Sergeant Jenkins.

"Did you say that you took him into custody, Sergeant Jenkins?" he demanded.

The Sergeant opened her eyes wide. "Uh..." she said.

"You took our top civilian leader into custody," he asked furiously.

"Uh..." she said.

"Sir, I'm not a leader or anything anymore, remember?" said Mike hastily. "I'm just Mike. Howard is the Mayor now. He's the one that sent the letter."

The Major winced. "Sorry, Mike. Like everyone else, I've got into the habit of thinking of you as the Chief." Mike said nothing.

"Sorry, Sergeant," said the Major. "That will be all."

"Yes, Sir," said the Sergeant. As she passed she glared at Mike. He tried to shrink a little.

"Annie Jenkins is a good soldier," said Major Collins. "Even if she is a little too much by the book." He sat down behind his desk and read the letter. When he finished, he looked at Mike.

"Do you know what this says?" he asked. Mike said nothing.

"Stupid question," muttered the Major. "You probably wrote it." Mike just smiled.

"All right, then. Fill me in, Mike. What has happened in Petersburg since I left?" Mike and the Major talked for over an hour, and then a young woman popped into the room.

"Hi, Chief," she said grinning at him

"Hi, Erin," he said with delight.

"Ah, here's my orderly now," said the Major. "Perhaps you could take our famous visitor and find him some quarters, Erin. Get him something to eat. Show him around. Oh, wait, I forgot. You already know where everything is. Including the way out." The Major laughed.

"Hey, I said that I was sorry about that," complained Mike. He laughed too.

Erin escorted Mike from the Major's office, and then she gave him a hug. They talked as they walked to the mess hall. Erin told Mike that her boyfriend was meeting her there.

Erin's boyfriend was nice, and everyone was friendly until Sergeant Jenkins passed by. She stopped, and she gave him an unfriendly look.

"So, you were the big shot in your little pond, huh," she said. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen," replied Mike. "Almost sixteen."

"Almost sixteen," she repeated with a smirk. "A real experienced guy."

Erin stood up, and she faced Annie. "Yes, he is," she said in a loud voice. The room quieted as the people turned to listen to Erin. Her eyes flashed as she stared back at the Sergeant.

"His name is Mike, and he became the leader of our people. He began by organizing a bunch of kids into a fighting unit. He used that unit to compel the rest of us kids to face the reality of the Fog. He started guarding and rationing food. He made a plan for the winter so that we wouldn't freeze to death. He made rules that protected us girls from sexual intimidation."

"Jeez, Erin," muttered Mike.

Erin looked around the room to make sure that she had everyone's attention. "When we were attacked, and one of us was murdered, he single handedly killed one of the attackers with a home made spear. It's still known as Mike's Throw. He led his fighting unit on a chase to catch the murderers. He was too late to stop one girl from being raped and killed, but his unit arrived in time to stop a man who was in the process of raping and strangling another girl. His unit killed two of the men, and they captured a third man. Not a boy like Mike and his guys. A big evil man. Mike personally put a noose around that man's head, and with the rest of us helping, he hanged him.

"There are a lot of other things that he did; although it's true that

he had a lot of help. We were happy to help him, because he was determined to keep us alive. His name is Mike, and he's not perfect, but I am proud to tell you that he is, and he always will be, the Chief of our Tribe."

She stopped talking. Many of the curious soldiers and civilians crowded around, eager to be introduced to a very embarrassed Mike. Mike glanced at Annie. She stared back at him with a blank expression, and then she turned away. Mike wondered what she was thinking.

For a few days, Mike just relaxed. He had no responsibilities, and he had no duties. He slept late. He tended to find himself out on the edge of the knoll. He checked for the small nylon line that he and Kevin had used to leave the post. To his surprise, it was still there. He was eager to explore the new barracks building. It was circular. It was made of timbers, and the roof was also made of timbers. There were no windows.

"It's not the usual Army configuration," confided Major Collins. "But it retains heat better than a rectangular building would. The central fireplace makes for a more even distribution of the available heat. I wish that we had glass that would retain the heat. I miss having windows."

"How about using windshields from abandoned cars?" suggested Mike. "Would those retain the heat?"

The Major looked interested. "That might work, Mike," he replied.

After a few more days, Mike realized that he was bored. Everybody was busy but him. Erin and the Major were working and they didn't have time to entertain him. And the post was much more regimented than Petersburg. The mess hall closed at a certain time. Late to breakfast? Sorry, we don't reopen, even for the Chief of Petersburg.

Then the Major sent a message asking to speak to him. "I have a chore for you if you are willing," the Major told him.

"Sure. Anything," replied Mike eagerly.

"I'm sending Sergeant Jenkins north on a scouting mission. I would like you to go with her. Three weeks out, three weeks back. That should put you back at the post by the middle of November."

Mike's heart sank. He was definitely not one of Annie Jenkins' favorite people. She had made that clear by ignoring him ever since the incident in the mess hall the first day. He wondered if he should

say something to the Major, but in the end he decided to stay silent. He thought that the Sergeant would probably find a way to ease him out of the mission.

"Can I take my spear," he asked.

"Why not?" replied the Major. Sergeant Annie Jenkins did try to talk Major Collins out of sending Mike with her. Her attempts were unsuccessful.

"Sir, he's not only a civilian, he's a kid," argued Jenkins. "I can't do my job and nursemaid a boy, too."

"He's no ordinary boy, Sergeant and you well know it," replied the Major. "Now get your ass out there, and do your duty." Steaming, Annie made her preparations.

The post had visitors before the expedition left. Don came riding into the post on the Brown wagon. It was carrying a load of vegetables and other food. Nathan, Kevin and Ahmad were with him. Ahmad was riding a bicycle. Mike was delighted to see them.

"Whew," said Ahmad as he jumped down. "Getting this wagon here was no piece of cake. We had to unload a few times, so that we could push the wagon up a steep place. Then we had to carry our cargo up and repack the wagon. I hope the horses are grateful."

Mike was eager for news of Petersburg.

"I performed three more weddings," said Don. "Ralph and Mary are married now. The Mayor issued a provisional death certificate for Davis Brown. The little girl seems reconciled to their marriage. And the Mayor and Jean are married, although I'm surprised that we didn't have to drag her, kicking and screaming, to the podium. She kept muttering about some kind of obedience card, whatever that is. And Rasul and Imee are married."

"Makayla is going to stay at the Brown Farm with us this winter," said Kevin. "She and Paige are sharing the attic. Kylie is staying in Star's room."

"Rasul and Imee are moving into the solar apartments," added Nathan. "The Mayor thought that we needed one of the nurses at the farm. Kevin and I are moving in there, too. Poor Comet will be all alone with those four girls."

For a few days, Mike enjoyed the villagers visit, but then they climbed back onto the empty wagon, and they waved goodbye.

The next day, Sergeant Jenkins and Mike left the post, and they headed north. At the first opportunity, she said to Mike, "Listen up, kid. I didn't want you with me, but that's not my decision. So, you

and I are going to accomplish this mission, and we are going to do it successfully. My role is to do everything. Your role is to keep your mouth shut, and follow me. Got it?"

"Yes," said Mike meekly. Annie who had been expecting an argument, glared at him suspiciously, and she glanced contemptuously at his home made spear.

They trekked north for a week, skirting the edge of the Sierras. It was a much drier climate than Petersburg. From time to time, they came right to the edge of a long slope dropping steeply down into the extreme eastern plain of California which was hidden by the brown soup. After a week they moved farther into the mountains.

For the most part, they got along. Annie led the way. Mike followed. Mike did as he was told. He set up camp. He made the meals, he cleaned up afterwards, and he struck camp the next day. Annie was polite if not overly friendly. She was annoyed that he managed to spear several grouse. But his successes saved her bullets.

Her problem was that she was curious. She couldn't help herself from digging further into the details of the incidents that Erin had described. It wasn't easy. She began to appreciate that he was reluctant to overemphasize his importance.

"So you doubled up in your little cave?" she asked. "Wasn't that taking quite a chance, allowing some of the boys to double up with the girls? What about your rules?"

"There wasn't a lot of room between one pair and the next," Mike explained. "And it was so cold that we had to put on all of our clothes. I managed to wear two pairs of pants, three shirts and three pairs of socks. Besides, I think we were all too scared of freezing. Other than the cold, the biggest problem we had was that a couple of kids wet their bags. That was a mess."

His comment reminded Annie of just how young those kids had been two years ago. "So you were thirteen then?" she said.

"No, by that time I was fourteen," he replied.

"Have you improved your Lodge since then?" asked Annie

"Oh yeah, it's a lot better. Hector built a loft, so we have a lot more sleeping room. He covered the walk to the Porta Potties. The fireplace is so cool. But the best thing is the hot shower. Everyone loves that."

Annie stared at him. "Bullshit. There's no way that you could have a hot shower in a cave."

Mike shrugged. "Ask the Major," Mike said. "He took one."

Annie did not reply, but she resolved that she would ask the Major to confirm or deny Mike's claim. Hot shower's, she thought with a shiver. She felt weak with pleasure at the very idea.

When they had traveled for three weeks, they stopped. They had not seen any sign of life. They struck gold however, but not the metal kind. They found them in a small green valley. Snow water from the surrounding mountains had collected in a low area, and they were drinking.

"Horses," Mike said with delight.

"Yes," said Annie.

It was a small herd of five mares, three yearlings, and a stallion. Annie and Mike watched them for a long time. Mike thought that Annie seemed comfortable with him for the first time. Annie couldn't help smiling to herself as she observed Mike's excitement. He wasn't that bad, she decided.

They found a place to camp, and they did so quietly so as not to disturb the herd. Mike and Annie had mummy bags made of synthetic down so they didn't need a tent. Mike made a small fire, and they roasted a large bird and some of the potatoes that Ahmad had brought to the Post. Earlier that day, Mike had found some wild onions and some tubers and some kind of green leaves that he used to make a salad. Annie admitted to herself that she was constantly surprised at the amount of food that Mike could supply from their surroundings.

"Our Forest Ranger taught me," he explained. "I think she was in a bad mood one day, because some of the kids were complaining about how she cut their hair. She insisted that I should start coming to the classes that she was teaching. Actually, I enjoyed her classes. I always liked school."

"Not me," replied Annie. "I couldn't wait to get out of school. When I turned eighteen, I dropped out and joined the Army. They took me, but they told me that I had to get my GED. So I did. Then when I got out of AIT, I volunteered to join the Rangers. I got in, but they made me take more classes."

"Where are you from, Annie?" asked Mike.

"That's Sergeant Jenkins to you, kid," replied Annie with a frown. "I was born and raised in Carlsbad, New Mexico."

"Oh, they have some caves there," stated Mike. "Did you ever see them?"

"Sure, lots of times," answered Annie. "You have to walk down this long series of switchbacks at first. It gets colder, the farther that you walk down. When you get to the bottom, there are lots of different rooms to walk through."

"Is it really mysterious and spooky," asked Mike eagerly. "Are there, like, bats and things flying around? Did you think that you ever saw, like, ghosts and other weird stuff?"

Annie laughed. "Yeah, there's weird stuff down there. Tourists, I mean. Really weird tourists. The place is full of them. All running around and bumping into people. And yapping. Always yapping."

"Oh," said Mike disappointed.

"But it is interesting, Mike," continued Annie. "There are bats at the entrance, but they don't fly during the day. They come out at sunset. Probably too hot for them during the day."

"Is it really hot in Carlsbad?" asked Mike.

"Hell, yes, it's hot," said Annie emphatically. "One time it was one hundred fourteen degrees in the shade. My boyfriend and I went to the caves that day to get out of the heat. Afterwards, we rode the elevator back to ground level, but we weren't allowed to go outside the visitor's center until we had adjusted to the change in the temperature. It was sixty degrees in the caves, and it was eighty degrees in the visitor's center."

"Wow," exclaimed Mike. "I don't think I've ever been someplace that was over one hundred degrees. San Francisco usually doesn't get to ninety degrees."

That perked up Annie's interest. "Are you from San Francisco, Mike?" she asked.

"Yeah," replied Mike. "My family lived on a small road just off Geary Boulevard. It's not far from Golden Gate Park. My Dad was a teller at a bank on Market Street. Every work morning, he would take the bus to Powell Street, and then he would ride the cable car down to Market Street. That is, if it had room. In the mornings, it usually did, but in the afternoon he usually had to walk back up to Geary Street and catch the bus home, because there were too many tourists on the cable car by then. There is a turnaround right by the bank, but in the afternoon there is a line of tourists waiting to ride the cable car."

Mike was silent. Memories came flooding into his mind. He was remembering walking up to Coit Tower, and eating shrimp cocktails at Fisherman's Wharf, and the times that he had shared a

chocolate sundae with his brother at Ghirardelli Square. Tears gathered in his eyes.

Annie was watching him. She knew that he was remembering. For a moment, her own thoughts drifted back to her lost home. She remembered sitting on the bluffs over the caves. From there, she would imagine that she could see down into Texas. She remembered passing through oil stinky Artesia, the day that her boyfriend stole his fathers car and drove them to Roswell to visit the silly alien museum and the more interesting Goddard Museum.

There were, Annie realized, things that she and this boy had in common. Enough melancholy, she thought to herself. She searched for a subject guaranteed to take Mike's mind off the past.

"So since you are from San Francisco, does that mean that you are gay?" she asked nonchalantly.

Mike broke away from his thoughts. "What?" he asked.

"Are you gay," Annie repeated. "Do you like boys?"

Mike laughed. "Believe it or not, almost all guys from San Francisco like girls." He looked at her. And then suddenly, she saw the gleam in his eyes.

"Oh, yes, Annie," he said softly. "I like girls."

For some reason, Annie blushed. Ignoring the gleam in his eyes, she muttered, "That's Sergeant Jenkins to you, kid."

Shortly after that, they crawled into their sleeping bags. In a little while, Annie heard Mike's slow breathing. Annie was restless. She tried to think about how she would write her report. She tried to focus on the day ahead. But her mind kept coming back to that gleam in Mike's eyes. She had no doubt; she admitted to herself, that Mike liked girls. And for some reason, her body had chosen that night to remind her that she liked boys.

It was time to make their way back to the post. They traveled farther to the west going back. It was wetter. There were several days when it snowed.

They were about a week from the post one morning. They were traveling down a deer trail. There was a light sprinkle of snow on the ground. Mike was following Annie.

Mike heard Annie gasp and, at the same moment, he heard a loud spine chilling roar.

"Back, Mike, get back," she yelled. She was slinging her rifle off of her shoulder. Mike stumbled back on the wet ground, and he fell to one knee. He heard another enormous growl. Annie was

trying to back away, when she stumbled over Mike. She fell to the ground, and her rifle slammed into the snow covered mud.

"Get back, Mike," she yelled again as she frantically tried to lever a cartridge into the chamber. But the rifle was jammed. Cursing she looked up. And she froze.

It was a scene from somewhere out of the distant past. The California brown bear stood on all fours, growling, his snout was thrust forward. The boy was standing motionless facing the bear. His spear was cocked behind his ear. Annie could only watch. There was no time to clear her rifle. What ever happened would happen.

"Mike," she whispered, fear and wonder coursing through her.

"Be quiet, Annie," he murmured firmly.

The bear's growls subsided. The huge animal stood there silently watching Mike. Mike did not move. Annie held her breath. The bear growled one last time, and then it swung around and disappeared down the trail.

Annie felt like she needed to pee. Her fear began to morph into anger. Growling not unlike the bear, she sprang to her feet. When the boy turned, she grabbed the front of his jacket, and she lifted him onto his toes.

"You better get this straight, Chief," she growled. "When we run into danger like that, you get to the rear."

"No."

"What did you say?" she asked incredulously.

"No."

She flung him back. She was breathing hard. She pushed past him, and then, angrier than she had ever been in her life, she started up the trail. Mike followed.

They caught a break. Before nightfall, they found an old miners shack. There were two ancient beds with plain old fashion springs and filthy mattresses. They were too tired to care. They threw their bags on the mattresses, and they sacked out.

Annie awoke just after midnight. She lay there in the darkness, thinking about the incident with the bear. She remembered vividly the sight of Mike fearlessly facing the bear. No, not fearlessly, she thought. He had been afraid. He had been very afraid. So, why did he do it, she wondered. Why didn't he run like she had told him?

You know why he didn't run, she admitted to herself. He wouldn't have run in any case, because there was someone he had to protect. But even more, he would not have run, because she was

the one that he was protecting.

In the past five weeks, she had sensed the way that he felt about her. Why, she wondered? She hadn't been exactly friendly towards him. She had ignored his attraction. And she had ignored the way that she was coming to feel about him. But she was attracted to him.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, she thought. It was those damn horses. It was that day in the green valley, when they had sat there together, watching the beauty of those animals. As she had watched the mares running and the yearlings prancing against the backdrop of those majestic snow covered granite peaks, she realized that she was glad that it was Mike who was there with her.

But he's just a kid, she thought. Well, all right, she admitted to herself. He is somewhat more than a kid. But he's what? Sixteen years old, now? She was a cradle robber.

And you were only eighteen when you realized that you were trapped in the Sierra Nevada Mountains by this damn fog, Annie, she thought to herself. For the first three months, you were scared shitless.

Mike stirred and turned over.

"Mike," she said softly.

"Yeah," she heard him say.

"Come here."

Mike got out of his bag. He lay down on the mattress next to Annie who was still in her bag.

Annie tried to speak. "I..uh..today..uh..."

Mike rolled over, and he took Annie's head between his hands, as if it was the most natural thing to do. He kissed Annie long and tenderly, just as Desi had taught him so long ago.

Annie kissed him back. She kissed his mouth and his forehead, and she kissed his ears, and she kissed his chin. Eventually, she let her hand slide down the front of his body.

"Um....," she said in a soft voice. "I think you're ready."

Mike stiffened. "I can't," he said.

"Oh, I think you can," she replied, her voice sultry.

"No, I mean, it's against the rules," he said.

She moved back a little. "What?" she said.

"I'm not sixteen yet," he explained. "I have to be sixteen before I can make love with you."

"Who the hell made up that rule?" she exclaimed.

"I did," he said.

Annie lay on her back and laughed. She laughed long, and she laughed hard. Finally, through tears of laughter and maybe some of relief, she sat up and she wiped her eyes.

"So, when will you be sixteen?" she asked.

"Next week," Mike answered eagerly.

"Ah," said Annie.

Epilogue

Two and a half years later, Mike sat on the lawn below the Lodge. It was the middle of May, in the late morning. Desi sat on his right. She was nursing her daughter. John sat on his left. They were watching Michael and Diego. The little boys were just below them, giggling and laughing as they chased butterflies.

"There's another contrail," said John while pointing at the sky.

"Yeah," said Desi. "I wonder where the plane came from."

"Maybe Denver," answered her husband. "Eric says that they have that airport up and running. I suppose that they would have to since that's where they moved the Capitol."

"Something's wrong," said Mike with a frown.

"Nothing's wrong," said John.

"I'm telling you that something is wrong," insisted Mike. "She threw up this morning and, well, please don't tell her that I said this, but she's gaining weight. I think she might have some kind of eating sickness."

"She's not sick," said Desi. She rolled her eyes, and she looked behind Mike's back at her husband.

John mouthed, "Clueless. Totally clueless."

Mike absently scanned the village. It was noisy, now that Hector and a very pregnant Kathy had the saw mill running at the lower end of the meadow. The Army engineers had been a great help. He could see that progress had been made on the hole that would become the trout pond.

Not far from the river on this side, were four A-frame cabins. They faced east and west. Each cabin had a metal fireplace made from the gas tanks and the exhausts systems of abandoned automobiles. On the south side of each cabin was a window, made from a pane of glass from their old school bus. It allowed the sun to shine in and heat up the cabin. Around the four cabins was a covered walkway with a high pitched roof. In winter, it would be easy for the residents to move from cabin to cabin.

"They found five more cars yesterday," said John. As the Fog receded, a treasure trove of automobiles had been discovered. No bodies had been found, but what looked like blood stains were often noticed. There was a friendly competition between the Army post and Petersburg to find useful items as the Fog diminished.

"The Mayor said that they found all kind of stuff at the

convenience store,” said Mike. “Hector loved the welding equipment. And he says that he can get the gas pumps working. We could sure use the fuel.”

“The Fog is down to five thousand feet now,” replied John. “We’re going to be finding all kinds of stuff in the next couple of years.”

“What did Eric mean, when he said that someone knows what happened?” asked Mike.

“The Mayor thinks it was some kind of Dark Matter.” replied Desi.

“Something like that. At least that’s what some scientist is saying over the radio. Supposedly the Earth drifted through a cloud of something in space, and that caused something to be triggered in our atmosphere. Kevin says that he understands,” replied John.

“So the twins want to move to the Retreat, huh?” said Mike.

“Yeah, but the Mayor wants them to wait one more year. I wonder if Paige and Makayla will go with them,” answered John. “And Reverend Don is talking about moving there, too. Since Major Collins moved his command to the Retreat, it’s become a popular place to live.”

“Poor Star,” said Mike. “She’s going to miss Paige.”

“I miss Yuie,” said Desi.

“She and Lincoln will be back next year,” said John. “Besides if she was here, Mike would be at East Post.”

Mike noticed Eric step out of the Village Office. Tyler and Gabby were close by. Gabby’s belly was growing. Tyler kissed Gabby, and he walked over to Eric.

“Time for Council,” observed John. Mike saw Eric and Tyler go inside the Office. He saw Ahmad, Nathan, Kathy and Lily also making their way to the Village Office.

“So, Ahmad is still Admin?” asked Mike.

“Yeah,” replied John. “He’s been Admin since Howard’s time. But Eric’s refusing to run for Mayor again this year so Ahmad will have to take that job. Some people are trying to get Erin to come back and run for it, but she likes working for the Major.”

“Howard was a good Mayor,” said Mike. “He was good about bringing different people on to the Council. He will be a good manager at East Post. But Eric’s doing a good job, and Ahmad will be a good Mayor, too.”

“Eric should have asked you to serve on the Council, Mike,”

complained Desi.

"Nah," said Mike. "He doesn't need me looking over his shoulder."

Mike looked at Gabby again. Then he looked at Kathy. "Oh!" he said.

"Finally," Desi muttered.

"Gotta go," said Mike. Mike waved to them, and then he went down to his cabin. He opened the door and went inside. Annie was sitting in the rocking chair that Hector had made for her.

"Are you pregnant?" asked Mike.

"Yep," said Annie.

"Then everything is okay," said Mike.

The End