

Sulfur Springs

"Done!" Melody stretched to ease her aching back, then wheeled the mop bucket out of the saloon and dumped the filthy water into a drainage ditch before carrying it back to the maintenance shed. It was one of the few buildings that had water, though her grandfather had had the rest of the ghost town wired for electricity years ago. She took a final tour through all the buildings, making sure she hadn't missed anything while getting ready for the season. The first tour group would arrive at the Sulfur Springs Mine and Museum in three days, a school field trip. She'd guided hundreds of groups through in the last ten years, she'd learnt the spiel by heart when she started working summers at fourteen, and had spent her summers here before that. Strange as it might seem, this was the only place she felt at home.

Inside her trailer, she headed straight for the shower, and washed the sweat and grit away. She reveled in the hot water until it ran out, then wrapped in a towel, headed to the kitchen. The flashing 'messages' light on the answering machine caught her attention. A press of a button started the playback while she rummaged in the fridge for something that looked good. The first two messages were confirmations from tour groups, but the third....

"Sergeant Corbett this is Lt. Stuart, We've been activated. Use the phone chain to alert your team, and report to the armory ASAP." The message had been time-stamped Nine-fourteen A.M. The robot voice of the answering machine announced the next message, left only a few minutes later. Her platoon sergeant, leaving the same message. There were three more messages, all left by the company clerk, telling her to call in immediately and report to the armory. The clock on the wall read six-thirty-three by the time she finished her fried egg sandwiches. She had nothing to lose by eating before she called, but once she acknowledged the message...

Following SOP, she called the three squad members she was responsible for, leaving messages. She called the armory. It rang for a long time before a breathless voice picked up. It was the company clerk. By habit, he identified himself and the unit. Melody identified herself, and asked for more information. "Those riots have spread, we have rioters here, right outside the fence." The armory was in an older part of the city, The once pristine subdivisions and immaculate townhouse apartments that had grown up around it years ago were now filled with immigrants of dubious legality. Last drill, they'd road-marched three miles to the fire department training site. As they went along the streets doors slammed shut and fearful inhabitants had peered at them from behind drawn shades. In the countries they were from, if the army was in the streets, it meant blood would be shed. Here, they'd only had blanks they'd used for urban training. "Get here as soon as you can." he went on. "I am not authorized to tell you to bring your own weapons." This was unofficial code for, 'if you don't have a weapon, you might not make it to the armory alive'. He cursed as a spate of gunfire sounded in the background. "Hurry, as soon as we stop 'em here, were moving out." He hung up.

For a moment she just stood there. There had been riots over the last week in all the major cities, starting with New York. She hadn't seen much news, working alone up in the mountains, but she'd heard the new flu had something to do with it, making people crazy, but she'd also heard it was terrorists spraying the cities with psychoactive drugs. Melody shook her head to clear it,

then hurried to her room, dialing as she went. The phone rang. "Pick-up. Pick-up." Her sister's voice answered the phone, but it was only the machine. "It's me, Mel. Melissa, it's me, pick-up. I got alerted for the riots, things are looking bad. Bring the kids up to the mine now, there probably won't be classes anyway. Hurry, you won't have much time if..." The machine cut her off with a beep. She made one more call, arranging for someone to be at the museum to meet the tour group in the morning, then got to work.

A few minutes later, she was in her truck, shotgun beside her, along with her LBE, the ammo pouches filled with shotgun shells in place of the thirty-round magazines they were designed for. Her ruck was on the floor of the passenger side, with everything she needed for a week in the field, she always kept it ready, just in case.

There was no traffic until she hit the freeway. There were no services at the offramp connecting the mine to the outside world, and anyone going to the towns on the other side of the mountains would take the freeway, that route was much faster. She turned on the radio to get some news, but reception was poor, and the only station she could get alternated between Emergency Alert System broadcasts to 'Stay in your homes', and the DJ's ranting about reports of cannibalism among the rioters as being racially motivated.

It was full dark when she hit the roadblock. Two Highway patrol cars blocked most of the inbound interstate, and the officers signaled her to pull through to the outbound lanes and turn back. Instead she pulled up to the cars. They didn't say a word about her shotgun, just look one look at her uniform and MP brassard and waved her on. The trickle of outbound traffic grew into a steady stream, apparently she wasn't the only one who didn't trust FEMA's platitudes. Well, at least FEMA would let her keep a weapon. The most recent announcements gave locations for 'Evacuation Centers' but having worked with them before, she knew anyone showing up at a center would be disarmed and almost certainly relieved of any excess food.

The city streets were nearly deserted, except for the outbound arteries. Power was out in many of the neighborhoods she passed through on the way to the armory. She caught brief glances of people skulking in alleys, or pounding on doors. Some of them left off what they were doing to chase her, but she quickly outdistanced them. One set her heart pounding when she stopped at a flashing red light. A man in ragged bloodstained clothes smacked a bloody palm against her window, leaving a dull red smear. She pulled quickly though the intersection while he stumbled after her.

As she neared the armory, she heard firing. The unmistakable bark of M-16s mixed with the duller sound of pistols. Ahead in the glow of the emergency lighting high on the two story brick walls of the armory, she saw the half full parking lot and a crowd of people hammering on the side door.

She cut her lights and coasted to a stop. This wasn't some riot. Rioters screamed and threw things, all these people did was moan and pound on the metal doors. It was all eerily wrong. As she watched, a helmeted head stuck out from a second story window. Whoever it was looked around, then studied the mob below. When the soldier looked up, she flashed her lights, twice.

Some of the mob must have noticed, because they started towards her idling pickup. The figure in the window lit a flare, waved it wildly in response, then yelled and threw the flare in front of the door. The mob turned their attention to the soldier in the window, moaning louder. Some even tried to climb the brick wall to reach the distant figure. More flares were thrown down, they bathed the area around the side doors in flickering red light. The mob below stayed away from them, but the commotion drew an even bigger crowd.

The firing had long since stopped, The soldier disappeared from the window and the mob quieted down. They seemed both attracted to the light, and repelled by the flames of the flares. A few people who had been walking towards the armory turned and headed for her instead. Without the gunshots urging them on, they seemed attracted by the sound of the idling engine.

Melody put the truck in gear, and let the truck ease closer to the armory. The people following her gradually fell behind, even though they should have been able to catch her easily. Were they sick? There was that nasty flu, but if they were well enough to walk around, why didn't they go to the hospital? She drove around one who staggered in a circle, was shirtless and had what looked like bite marks all over his body.

A spate of gunfire caught her attention, A half dozen of her fellow MPs came out of the side door shooting. At least twenty of the mob went down in the first three seconds, but that didn't seem to bother the rest. They closed in on the little group as they ran for the parking lot. Another mob of people followed them out of the armory. She gunned the engine and pulled into the lot. They saw her and three of them ran towards her, dragging a fourth. Two more hopped into a Jeep, They cranked the engine, and careened out of the lot just before the last man reached them. Melody slowed just enough for the four to hop in, then made for the fallen soldier.

M-16s barked in the bed of her old pickup, and more of the mob fell. But it didn't do any good. He screamed as they bit chunks of flesh from his arms, then the screams died in a gurgle as one of them got to his throat. Someone pounded on the roof of the cab and yelled to her "Go! Go!" More of the mob poured out of the building, headed for her truck, but the ones who tried to block her path went under the wheels with a sickening crunch. In her rearview, she saw Top bash one of the rioters in the head as he tried to climb over the tailgate. She recognized the others by sight, but they were in another platoon and she couldn't remember their names. Melody couldn't see the wounded man.

Top slid open the back window. "Sergeant Corbett, You're late." He sounded relieved rather than angry. "Good to see you in one piece."

"Came as soon as I got the word First Sergeant, where are we going?"

She saw his haunted eyes in the mirror. He met her gaze, then looked away. "Last orders we got, before we got overrun, move to secure the stadium at the community college. FEMA camp there, taking in refugees from the 'riots'."

"What is that anyway? The radio said some kind of flu, but those people acted weird."

"We don't know, the Captain thinks drugs, they can take center mass shots and keep coming, but one to the head puts em down." He glanced behind him and lowered his voice. "Me, I think they're already dead...."

She studied him in the rearview. He was serious. "You mean like zombies?"

"That's exactly what I mean. They heard us in the armory, and we went out in riot gear to disperse them. Most of us didn't come back. Some who didn't joined the 'riot'...." His voice trailed off, she couldn't remember ever seeing Top worried, not even while running patrols in Iraq.

A police car passed them going the other way, lights and siren blaring. Shortly they came to a section of road with streetlights still lit, and she slowed but did not stop for a red light. As she accelerated through the intersection, the captain sat up, moaned, and grappled the soldier next to him, biting him in the neck. The other pulled the captain off his buddy, and had to hold the captain away from himself. Top hesitated only a moment, then stuck his .45 under the brim of the helmet and fired one round into the skull behind the captain's ear. He twitched once, then flopped lifeless to the bed of the truck.

Top passed the captain's Barreta and extra magazines through the window to Melody. "I was afraid of that, He was sick with that flue when he got to the armory, and it didn't help that they bit him." He looked at his watch. "He was still alive less than fifteen minutes ago."

The unwounded soldier pulled him away from the window and said something Melody couldn't hear. Top argued with him in a low voice, and finally simply ordered him to 'shut up and drive on'.

A knot of rioters congregated around a Volkswagen Beetle. At least thirty of them pounded on its windows and top. She slowed down and yelled. "Top! I think someone's in that car, shouldn't we do something?"

He looked at the car, then behind them before he answered. "Ease up and stop about fifty meters away." He gave orders to the other two, and they took up firing positions, resting their rifles on the passenger side wall. Top stood up to fire over the cab. She turned to the left as she stopped, trying to give them a good angle. As the first shots rang out, she put the ammo and pistol in the pockets of her BDU jacket.

When she looked up a good half dozen of the crowd were down. Five more went down in as many seconds, but the rest started towards them. The last went down a good ten meters short of the truck. Without being told, Melody drove up next to the little car. When she stopped again, Top barked an order and one of the men fired again, and again. In her side mirror, Melody saw another crowd coming up from behind them.

Top jumped down and peered through the blood smeared windows, then gestured to whoever was inside. The rifle behind her barked every three or four seconds while he talked the occupants out of the car. They were a couple about her own age, Top ordered them into the cab with her,

then climbed back in. "Go sergeant, three more stoplights then turn left."

Melody already knew how to get there but didn't say anything. Instead she gunned the engine. After she made the turn, the man next to her seemed to come out of his shock. "You guys killed all of them, you can't do that! I saw everything!."

Melody grunted as she avoided another one of them. "And saved your life."

It was like he hadn't even heard her, For the next five blocks he kept it up, then the woman with him grabbed his ear and swung his head around to face hers. 'Shut up Thad.'

"You saw what they did!"

"Yeah and I also saw those cannibals eat a little girl. You wouldn't even stop to help her. When this is over you I don't want you even near me again."

"Hey Sandy, you're just overwrought, you know you need me."

He started to press his point with the woman, but Melody cut him off with an elbow to the ribs. "Shut your mouth Romeo, or you can walk to the FEMA camp." He shut up.

The arena parking lot was a madhouse. There were cars parked every which way, as well as a mob of people struggling to get through the gates. The local mech infantry company was already there, firing over the heads of refugees who ran for the shelter of the open doors. As they pulled up, one of the Bradleys parked out front let off a stream of 25mm rounds into the dense packed mob. It would have saved a dozen people, but instead of sprinting towards the AFV, they panicked and ran away from it, straight into the arms of the mob chasing them.

Top tapped her on the shoulder "I don't know how long they can keep that up, but we can't get through that mess. Try around back at the service entrance. Melody pulled back onto the street, and around the sports center. The rear parking lot had a light scattering of cars, and at the far end, a Bradley and a pair of Hum-vees were parked in front of a loading dock. There was a cleared area, with a six foot chain link fence around it. The area in front of that was carpeted with bodies. The co-ax machine gun on the M-2 fired a warning shot in front of the truck, then when she didn't stop fast enough put a burst into her engine.

The truck shuddered to a stop. The man next to her reached over the woman and opened the passenger door, then shoved her out and stepped over her. Melody threw on her LBE and rucksack, while top helped the woman up. The man was more than halfway to the doors when she caught sight of him again. He tripped, rather it looked like she tripped but when he tried to get up she saw that someone had a hold on his legs. More of the bodies she'd assumed were dead crawled towards him. She looked away only to see that the people who'd been milling around the cars in the parking lot had been drawn to the sound of gunfire. They stumbled towards the fence. "First Sergeant, we've got rioters incoming."

"I see 'em." He looked around, then headed for a concrete retaining wall at a fast walk. He

dragged the woman along with him. "This way, be careful, some of these bodies might not be dead, you know the drill." They did, it had been a favorite AIF trick play dead and shoot from behind. The wall was only seven feet high, and Top boosted the woman up, then gestured to Melody.

She shook her head, "Don't think so Top. I'm not wounded, besides, I'm lightest, I should go last."

He nodded, and boosted the wounded soldier up next, then got an assist from the other. The wounded man, Tompkins, aimed his rifle as she boosted the other man, but Top ordered him not to fire. She passed up her shotgun, then Top caught her hand and pulled her up. They worked their way along the wall. Melody brought up the rear, nervous because of the moaning mob just below her. As they neared the fence, the area opened up and they able to move away from the edge. The mob had trouble climbing the wall, it was only six feet high where it met the fence, but it stopped them despite their frantic struggles to reach what was left of Melody's unit. Not only did they pull each other down, but they seemed to lack the coordination needed to climb the wall.

The wall merged with the loading dock. Top reported in to the lieutenant in charge of the service entrance. He seemed disgruntled that they'd led another mob up to the gate, but he send the woman inside, and one of his men took Tompkins to the infirmary. "First Sergeant, I'll take you to report to the C.O. Your people can stay here and help."

Melody walked over to the M-2, climbed up and rapped on the gunner's hatch. When it opened she looked at the kid, and he was a kid, he might be all of eighteen, then at the single stripe on his BDU jacket collar. "Explain to me soldier, why did you shoot up my POV?"

The kid looked like he was about to cry, "Sorry sergeant, I'm supposed to make sure no one rams the fence like they did out front."

"Right, well when everything gets back to normal, you're paying for it." He looked relieved at the concept of normal, she wished she felt that way, but this was just too big. Her gut told her that 'normal' might never come again.

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Melody woke to shouts and gunfire. She groaned and checked her watch. Three hours, more than she'd really expected. She stuffed her poncho liner into her ruck, and grabbed the rest of her gear. She was disoriented a moment, then realized the firing came from inside the arena. She walked over to the roll up doors, and peered outside. Nobody on the loading dock, but there was a gunner in each of the Hum-Vees. She went back to where she'd been sleeping, and kicked the other soldier from her company on the bottom of his boots to wake him up. He only groaned and rolled over on the stack of empty cardboard boxes. She kicked harder. "Wake up Roland, something's wrong."

He sat up and fumbled with his rifle. "Sergeant?"

"Get your gear together and outside, I got a bad feeling about this." The predawn air was chilly, but that wasn't what made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Rioters moaned and pushed at the fence. They stood three deep in places, and even from the loading dock, she heard the fence creak. "Who's in charge here?"

One of the gunners pointed to the tracked vehicle. She climbed up next to the turret, and rapped on the commander's hatch. After a moment it popped open. A sergeant she hadn't met before looked her over. "What's going on in there?"

She'd been about to ask him the same thing. "Where's the rest of your platoon?"

He jerked his thumb at the bay doors behind him. "Inside, the CO sent everyone but two per vehicle to deal with a disturbance, some of the refugees getting violent."

She pointed to the crowd straining against the fence. "I think you better do something about that before it falls down."

"I think you're right, there were only half as many there an hour ago." He picked up the handset for the vehicle radio, and winced as he hit his bandaged hand on the rim of the hatch. It squawked as he held down the push to speak button. "India-Charlie-Six, this is India-Charlie-Two over." He waited, then tried again. There was no response. "Any station this net, any station this net, this is India-Charlie-Two."

The responding voice was male, young and scared, but followed procedure. "India-Charlie-Two, this is India-Charlie-Three over."

That was the third platoon, stationed in front. "Charlie-Three, what is the situation? Over."

Gunfire came through on the radio seconds ahead of the sound from the front of the building. "We got a minor breach in the fence, then word came down from Six to thin out the crowd. Then first platoon all went to the infirmary some kind of riot there. Over."

"Rodger that, we'll thin out here too. Out." The sergeant nodded to her, "Looks like we better thin them out." He eyed the mob beyond the fence. "I don't think we should do it from here, don't want to weaken the fence. On the other hand last orders we got were to stay in the vehicles ready to move. An you two take care of it?"

Specialist Roland had joined her on the track while the sergeant was on the radio. She looked at him, and he nodded. Melody held up her shotgun. "Problem, I don't have that much ammo." Wordlessly, the infantryman passed her his rifle and some extra magazines. She left her personal weapon with him, and walked slowly towards the fence followed by Roland.

The mob moaned their excitement as she approached the fence. The chain link gate swayed alarmingly as they bunched up behind it, some of them trying to bite their way through the wire mesh to reach her. Roland stopped about five feet from the fence, and aimed carefully at a skinny woman. His rifle barked as he squeezed the trigger and the woman went down. He shot another,

then another.

Melody picked out a fat man wearing only dingy boxers and smeared blood. She looked into his eyes, and saw only a vacant hungry stare. No sign of intelligence, or spark of life. His flabby hand was pressed flat against the fence, and she positioned the barrel carefully in the middle of his palm and fired. She watched his eyes carefully, but there was no change as the bullet tore through his hand. There was no blood either. She fired again, into his heart. A single drop of blood oozed from the hole. "Top was right, they're already dead."

Roland was changed magazines, and aimed again. The pressure on the fence was visibly lighter. He aimed and fired again before replying. "Ever know Top to be wrong?"

She put one between the eyes of the fat man, the dead fat man. He flopped to the ground. "He says he was once, back in ninety-five, so I guess it could happen again." She picked wearing a motorcycle helmet next, and put him down with a single shot as well. She tried to keep her tone light, and her face calm.

They burned through all their ammunition, leaving only a couple dozen of the dead still rattling the fence. In the distance another twenty or so made their way through the parking lot towards their position. Melody got her shotgun back and hurried behind a dumpster while the sergeant reloaded his magazines. What was left of last night's dinner came up, and she dry heaved for a long while after.

Shaking and ashen faced she made her way back to the Bradley. If the others noticed, they didn't say anything. She nodded to the radio. "You hear anything else?"

"No, third platoon doesn't answer anymore either. What I'd like to do is leave you in charge here, and go find out what's happening." He held up his bandaged hand. "I'd like to visit the infirmary too, One of them bit me while we were closing the gates, and it's killing me."

Melody exchanged a glance with Roland, "Alright, one hour, if we don't hear anything we'll...."

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The hour came and went. She decided to give the infantry sergeant another half hour before she went looking. The crowd behind the fence acted different with the sun up. Some of them rattled the fence with even more fervor than before, but others just stood there. A few had even wandered off. One of them pounded on the windows of a car in the outer lot.

The unmistakable sound of a chaingun echoed around the parking lot. It was joined by another and several automatic weapons. Melody snatched at the handset. "India-Charlie-Three, this is India-Charlie-Two. Status. Over." She tried again, and again, as the fire dwindled, faltered and finally stopped all together.

Someone broke squelch on the freq, then after an agonizing pause, she heard the same voice as before over the speaker. "Ch-charlie-two?"

Melody did her best to project a calm assurance she didn't feel. "India-Charlie-Three, this is India-Charlie-Two. Status. Over."

"Charlie-Two, the refugees... they..." The voice trailed off, but over the open mike, she thought she heard sobbing. She realized she was holding her breath, and forced herself to a slow steady rhythm. "India-Charlie-Two, I am inside Track Three-One, hatches locked. The ramp was down on the other track when they hit us. Some of the refugees came running out the main doors, followed by more rioters." The voice paused, but continued, although shakier. "They just walked right over us. Everyone else is dead. They ate them."

Melody felt the stares of the others on her, the drivers had come over to get whatever word she might have to give them. "Charlie Three, we are going to extricate you in thirty, I say again Three-Zero Mikes, Hold tight with what you have. Over." She hoped the pounding of her heart didn't show.

"Charlie-Two, I understand hold position, be prepared to move in three-zero mikes."

"Specialist Roland, go find out who the rankinest man here is."

He snorted at the old joke. "Yes, sergeant."

Melody keyed the mike again. "Make a radio check every five mikes. Break." That should give the soldier something else to worry about, and she needed the time to find out for sure what had happened. "Move to the driver's station and make the checks from there. Over."

"Wilco."

"Hang in there soldier, Charlie-Two out." She hung up the mike, and bent down to where she could see the driver. "Come on out here, stock up on ammo."

Eckert, the PV2 who'd shot up her truck crawled back to the crew compartment. She made sure his ammo pouches were filled, then sent him to get extra from ammo point in the loading bay. Roland was back first.

"I've got date of rank on the other guys."

"Right. Post a guard on the doors leading from the bay to the rest of the stadium, I think it's been overrun. Load up all the ammo, and all the food you can. Put as much as you can on the outside of the vehicles. You have thirty minutes max."

Roland looked nervous. "What are you going to do sergeant?"

"I'm going to see if I'm right, and find Top if I can, he wouldn't leave us behind. If I don't come back, head up to my place." She gave him directions to the mine.

In the warehouse, she used Five-Fifty cord, green nylon parachute line, rated to hold five hundred and fifty pounds, to tie all but one set of doors shut. For the last, one of the sets that opened in, she used a forklift to move a pallet stacked with five gallon cans of coconut oil close enough that there was just enough room to slip through. Eckert followed her around like a lost puppy.

Occasional shots still echoed down the maintenance hallways, but either things were almost back under control, or ... She didn't even want to think about that. A last look around the room showed her that Roland had everything under control. He'd taken the drivers out of the Hum-Vees and had one of them helping him shift the reserve ammunition while the other watched the doors. She almost reminded him to make sure he was there for the radio check, but realized it was only her nervousness. Instead she checked the shotgun, and satisfied squeezed through the door, beckoning Eckert to follow her.

Fortunately the lights were still on, the generator was located in a room off the loading bay, and still had half a tank of fuel. The floor was coated concrete, shiny, but not slick. She took a guess and pointed "This way to the CP?"

Eckert seemed startled by her question. "Yes, sergeant, the freight elevators go up to the infirmary and the CP is next to that."

Melody had a vision of the elevator doors opening to reveal a crowd of them and shuddered. "No, we need stairs." Their footsteps echoed down the corridor, she didn't know what she'd expected, but it wasn't this emptiness. Fortunately there was a stairwell, next to the freight elevator. She listened at the door, distant thumps echoed inside. Opening the door just a crack, she saw several bodies on the floor, they'd fallen from the stairs to land in the middle of the stairwell.

The red paint on the floor was tacky under her boots. It took her a moment to realize the 'paint' was blood, much more than could be explained by the bodies on the floor. Bloody footprints led up the stairs, and the walls were smeared with dull red handprints. Shots again, sounding from inside the arena, M-16s on full auto, then nothing but a faint moaning roar.

The skylights in the arena concourse made it easy to see through the windows in the stairwell doors without exposing herself. Scattered bodies and blood smears littered the tiled floor. A few of them wandered aimlessly. Eckert pointed past her, and she jerked away heart pounding so hard she didn't catch his first words. "... corner, and the infirmary was set up on the other side of the main lobby."

"The CP?" she whispered?

He moved to the side and squinted, voice very low. "I can see some tables we were using, nobody around them."

"You set up the CP and infirmary in the corridors?"

He nodded. "I don't think that things would be wandering like that if anyone was still there."

He was right. Melody tied the door to the rail. Normally it would need a key to open, but someone had pried it loose from the frame. She started up the stairs, towards the pounding. She stopped at Eckert's whispered "Sergeant?" The kid's face was pale and he held his rifle in a white knuckled grip. "Where are we going?"

Melody pointed up the stairs with her shotgun. "I figure if anyone is alive in this place, they'll be up there."

"Those things are trying to get to someone?"

"Only one way to find out..." She took the stairs quietly, one at a time, stopping to listen on each landing. The five flights of stairs seemed to take an eternity to climb. Several times, she had to step over bodies, the tops of their heads blown off. Someone living had definitely come this way. The lights at the top threw crazy shadows down the stairwell, they shifted as whatever waited moved.

As she rounded the last corner, she was grateful that whoever had built the stairs had made them 'wrong' they spiraled up counter clockwise, making it easy to aim across the gap. She stepped over another body and fell across it as it grabbed her leg. The M-16 was deafening in the close confines of the concrete shaft. The bullet blew through the skull of the woman she'd stepped over ricocheted off the concrete stairs, the wall and the steel rail before its deformed shape skittered across the black painted tread just under her nose.

The shadows stopped moving on the far wall. Melody held her breath trying to hear over the ringing in her ears. She thought she heard a vague moaning, then saw a bloodstained sneaker move on the landing above and behind her. Wishing she had time to put in earplugs, she rolled over into a crouch, shotgun ready. A gentle squeeze on the trigger rewarded her with an even louder report, and the sneaker's owner falling to the landing. She moved to the next landing, opposite, and fired three more times as the zombies stumbled down the stairs.

She yelled at Eckert, hoping he could hear her. "Headshots! Shoot them in the head!" She emptied her weapon, and reloaded. Eckert fired with a steady precision that she hadn't even hoped for. Bodies tumbled down the stairs and the landing opposite became a seething mass of writhing limbs as the zombies struggled to reach them. One fell over the edge in its haste, but the rest either realized they couldn't walk on air, or the railing stopped them.

They had to have been packed like sardines on the landing above Melody's head, they just kept coming. She emptied her shotgun twice more and switched to the captain's pistol. Their fire was joined by the booming of a .45 above them, and suddenly it was over. She reloaded and gestured for Eckert to watch behind them. A shadow moved on the wall, at first she thought it might be another of them but she held her fire as Top limped into view. He said something, but she couldn't hear it.

Melody tapped Eckert on the shoulder to get his attention and they picked their way up the stairs. She prodded each corpse as she climbed, making sure it was really dead. She had to stifle a hysterical giggle at the thought. The stairs led to a maintenance area for the lights, catwalks led from the room to racks of spotlights around the circumference of the arena.

In the shadows of the room, it took her a moment to make out the figures as people. She recognized one of them as the woman they had picked up. Sandy held a baby in her arms and a little boy slept next to her, his head in her lap. Next to her, a woman cradled a toddler, and tried to reassure an older girl. Several people argued with Top while he secured the door, but she couldn't hear what they said. She counted heads, thirteen, including Top. It would be a tight squeeze, but they could do it. If half of them weren't kids, they wouldn't have enough room in the vehicles.

Melody moved out to the catwalk, and looked down into the brilliantly lit stadium. It was full of tiny figures that wandered aimlessly, except for a moaning mass at one end. She could hear them, a good sign because it meant her hearing was returning. They pressed in towards the center of the mob, tiny hands held up, reaching for.... Melody pulled a small pair of binoculars from her breast pocket, and trained them on the basketball hoop in the middle of the crowd. A child, probably a boy from the close-cropped hair, sat inside the metal hoop suspended only feet above a straining mob of zombies.

"He's still alive. I don't know how he got there, but I think we can get him out." Top's voice sounded dull and flat, she didn't think it was all due to her ringing ears either.

"We don't have enough ammo to take them all out."

Top shook his head, "No but we have some cables that should support someone small and light." He pointed to a kid in scruffy clothes who whispered reassurances to a white-faced girl about his own age. They were probably fifteen or so. "Paco was going to try..."

Her stomach sank, she knew what he meant. She looked into his eyes and saw what it was going to cost him to ask. "No, I'll go. I'm smaller and we did that rappelling last year." While they made a safty harness and climbing ropes from Five-Fifty cord and electrical cables Top cut with his bayonet, she filled him in on the situation. "This is going to take longer than we have." she finished. "The way should still be clear, we could start the civilians down."

Top agreed, and organized it while she finished up. The safety harness was tight, with no give in it at all. It bit into her thighs as she walked over to Eckert. He had the boy who'd been asleep on Sandy's lap on his back, tied there so his hands were free. "Eckert, you get everyone out safe and we'll call it even on the truck." She put out her hand and after a moments hesitation he took it. "Be careful."

"You too Sergeant." He seemed about to say something else, but Top called him over and gave him some final instructions before sending him on his way.

Top barred the door behind them, and nodded to the man who'd stayed behind. "Lets get this

done.” Between them Top and the man in coveralls carried the heavy cable to a point above the backstop. The drop was probably only fifty feet or so, but it seemed a long way down to Melody. After Top tied it off to an overhead girder, she attached the climbing ropes then attached the safety harness. She hung on the rubberized cable with all her weight and bounced to make sure both that she wouldn’t slip and that the cable could take the weight.

While the other man lowered the end of the cable an arms length at a time, Top took her aside. “Be careful down there, don’t get bit. That’s what happened down there, the ones that came in bitten died and turned.”

The tug of the cable lifted her off the catwalk. She eased herself over the railing, and stood in the climbing ropes. She’d set up a three rope system to be safe, one for each foot, tied securely around her boots, and another for the safety harness. The ropes could be moved, but if they were supporting any weight at all, they wouldn’t slide over the cable. She went down slowly at first, shifting her weight from one foot to the other and sliding the ropes that didn’t have tension on them. After she got the hang of it, it went faster, but the slight swing she started with increased as well. Before she knew it she was level with the pole supporting the backstop.

She’d heard the moans increase in urgency as she descended, now they echoed from walls in an overwhelming wave. Her hands shook as she grabbed the pole and eased herself along the top bar. At the end, she lowered herself directly behind the backstop, and balancing against the pull of the cable, bent over.

The kid had his eyes shut so tight, the brown skin of his eyelids and cheeks were pale from the strain. He jumped at her touch, and would have fallen from the basket but for her hold on him, but didn’t open his eyes. She pulled him up, and tied him to her safety harness. When she tried to ascend the cable, she lost her balance, and it the weight of it tugged her off the backstop. She spun wildly as she arced over the crowd and felt hands brush her feet before she swung back to slam against the pole.

She hung stunned for a moment, hands tugging at her boots. She’d instinctively wrapped the child in her arms when she fell. He seemed unhurt, but kept his eyes shut tight. Her helmet hat stopped her from bashing her skull open, but it took a major effort to get her limbs working again. They couldn’t quite grab hold of her feet, and soon she was out of their reach again.

Her legs burned from the effort and the adrenaline by the time she reached the catwalk. Top reached down and lifted them both over the railing, then cut the harness off her while she shook with relief. The maintenance man took the boy, carrying him in one arm, then picked up a metal bar and started for the door.

She stumbled after him, and dry mouthed asked how long she’d taken. “Twenty five minutes. You made it though.”

They hurried down the stairs, redoubling their speed at the sound of an M-16 firing single shots. An alarm bell sounded as they left the stairwell. She hesitated, but Top waved her on. Eckert and Paco stood by the open elevator, and a part of her mind identified the alarm as the elevator stop

button even as she spotted the fresh bodies in the corridor.

Back in the landing bay, she parked the forklift right up against the doors and left it there. The sound of the generator died away, and the lights went out. One of the soldiers ran out of the generator room and back to his Humvee. Top waved her into the commander's seat of the Bradley, while he argued with the guy in the suit again. The guy wanted places for himself and his family inside the armored vehicle, but Top ordered him off to make room for the little kids.

They buttoned up, and Top took the gunner's position. She followed his example and put on the vehicle crewman's helmet, a cloth helmet with earphones and a microphone plugged into the station. His voice came over the intercom. "I think you have the right idea, a place like yours is perfect. You take charge of the convoy. I'll be here if you need me."

It made sense, she knew the way, but the responsibility terrified her. He gave her a calm smile, and she nodded her agreement. She clicked the push-to-talk switch on the side of the helmet. "Charlie Three, Charlie Three, this is Charlie Two. Over.

Response was immediate. "This is Charlie Three. Over." He sounded calmer, and relieved. She was late, and Roland must have told him where she'd gone.

"Charlie Three, we are ready to move. At this time, turn off your radios, start your track and then report status. Over"

He sounded competent enough, but people forgot things under stress and it didn't hurt to remind him that starting the engine with the radios on could fry them. She heard the distant roar before he came back on. "Charlie Two, Ready. Over.

"Carefully move to the outer parking lot. We will drive past, fall in at the rear of the column. Over."

"Wilco."

The revving of his engine and the unmistakable sound of tracks echoed around the building. Melody hit the kill switch for the radios and signaled the driver to start. Once he had she turned them back on, popped the hatch and signaled for the Humvees to start up and follow. The zombies in the parking lot had started for the sound of the other track, but now they headed straight for her group. Most of the ones surrounding vehicles in the lot left off beating at them to follow.

She spoke into the intercom. "Eckert, stay buttoned up, take us through the gate and straight as you can to the main road. Keep your speed between fifteen and twenty miles per hour, we don't want to throw a track." Melody didn't really know exactly what would make them lose a track, but knew that high speeds made the risk greater. The engine revved and they lurched forward. She felt the jar when they hit the gate, and saw the chain snap when they flew open, but couldn't hear it over the sound of the engine.

An RV started moving soon after they did, headed for the exit, but it moved slower than they did. A maroon mustang with glass t-tops raced in from the far edge where it had sat unmolested by the dead and pulled up behind it. A four door Tracker that had been surrounded flipped on its lights and weaved frantically around the zombies to follow the convoy, and a rusty compact car that hadn't been visible because of the crowd around it fell in at the rear.

Eckert made a right at the main road and then another at the corner. As they came around the building, she saw the other track moving slowly, followed by a huge mob of the dead. "Charlie Three, I have you in sight. We have seven vehicles in convoy, fall in at position eight." The other track acknowledged, and she had Eckert steer them around to pass in front of what was left of the third platoon of the infantry company.

Melody suspected the freeway would be jammed, at least until they were out of the city, so she led the convoy down side streets to the outskirts. As they passed a water treatment plant, Charlie Three crackled over the radio. "Two, this is Three, I am on reserve fuel now, how far do we have to go? Over?"

Instead of replying, she asked Eckert about his. They only had a quarter tank left. "Make a left and pull up to the gate." When he stopped, she took a last look round. There were a zombies visible far behind them she couldn't tell how many, and a stumbled out onto the road ahead, attracted by their engine noise. "Pull around to the back after I open the gate."

She climbed down the front of the track, blew the lock off the gate with her shotgun and slid it open. She waved Eckert through, heart pounding. She kept looking behind her to make sure none were sneaking up on her even though with the gate locked from the outside the place had to be empty. The other vehicles followed him in, and she shut the gate, tied it closed and ran after the convoy.

When she got there, Top had them in a tight defensive perimeter. A knot of civilians clustered around him. His voice sounded unusually strained. "... a secure location. No, I won't be going with you, Sergeant Corbett will be in charge."

Several voices raised in question to his announcement, and the man in the suit objected in a loud voice. "Her? Your going to shuffle us off with a woman in char...." His voice trailed off as Top cocked his .45 and pointed it between the man's eyes.

She'd seen Top harangue troops before, she'd been one of them once, and thought she had seen him mad. The icy calm in his voice chilled her blood in its veins. "Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you now before you cause trouble."

The man stammered, but his wife stepped in. "Please, he won't cause any trouble."

Top relented, and turned to her. "Sergeant Corbett, you'll be in charge of this detachment from now on, I'll leave you written orders to execute this man if he jeopardizes the unit."

The words left her confused. "Top," she whispered, "I understand taking charge of the convoy, I

know where we're going, but leaving me in charge? I'm not ready for that."

He laughed mirthlessly, "What would you do next?"

Her answer was immediate. "Leave the tracks here, cross load the ammo into the reliable vehicles and move out before they surround us."

"Exactly. You'll do Melody, you'll do." She hadn't thought he'd known her first name. He raised his voice so they could all hear it, but pitched it so it wouldn't carry far. "Listen up, I'm only going to say this once. Has anyone here been bitten?" Everyone denied it. "Anyone who tries to hide a bit will be killed. That's what happened back there, I saw it happen. Their bites are infectious, everyone who gets bit dies, and when they die they come back as one of them."

He drew his bayonet and cut off his pants leg. There was a nasty bite on his calf, it wasn't bleeding, but had turned black and the veins leading up his leg were black as well. "You see that? It hurt like Hell, then that faded and it doesn't hurt at all anymore. I guess I have three hours or so before I turn. Sergeant Corbett will be in charge, not only does she have the rank for it, but the new evac location is her private property." He held up his notebook. "Written orders placing her in charge, and ordering her to evacuate to any location of her choosing, with only the civilians she feels she can protect." He looked around, and saw that Roland at least understood the *carte blanche* he'd just given her. "So you just do what she says and she'll keep you alive until relief comes."

Roland started to ask a question, but changed his mind at Top's headshake. She accepted the notebook and a deep breath, willing herself to be calm. "Roland, take charge here, crossload the ammo and food into the reliable vehicles. We're only taking the ones that will make it a hundred miles without breaking down. Prioritize. People, weapons, ammo, food, medicine. Everything else comes after that. Leave all the 25mm here." She turned to her driver. Eckert, you and Charlie Three pull security."

"Sandy, right?" When the woman nodded, she went on, "Get all the kids into the RV, it's the safest we have." She turned to the kid who'd volunteered to go down the cable. "Paco? You check everyone, see if they've been bit." Most of the civilians froze when they heard that.

"I'll check him, and someone else will check me. Last chance to admit to it. We find it and we leave you behind, tell us now and we'll give you a chance."

"No!" Top broke in, "You can't take chances like that."

She held up the notebook "You put me in charge." She said, then lowered her voice. "Bound and gagged, I'm taking your word that it happens, but does it happen all the time?"

He nodded in agreement, then climbed to the top of a Bradley and scanned the area.

The woman who'd spoken up for her husband seemed to have been waiting for a chance. She started toward Melody, her husband tried to stop her "Don't do this Cindy."

She shook him off and spoke in a nervous voice. “You don’t need to have me searched.” The woman rolled back the sleeve of her sweater. There was a bloodstained bandage around her forearm, black lines traced her veins from it up past her elbow.

She stared for a moment, then looked into the woman’s tear-filled eyes. She’d been right, she couldn’t leave her behind “What do you want to do?”

“Do I have a choice? He says that I’m going to…” her voice broke. “turn into one of those things.” Her husband wrapped his arm around her and glared at Melody.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore?” Cindy shook her head. “I’m sure you don’t want to be left behind.”

“No, and you can’t do that you have to help her, take her to a hospital.”

Even knowing that worry for his wife drove him, Melody wanted to hit him upside the head with her shotgun. Instead she ignored him and took off her leather gloves. The woman’s flushed cheeks were hot to the touch. “First, you’re going to check me.” She demonstrated that she hadn’t been bit, her BDUs weren’t even torn. Then she took the woman to the Tracker, You’ll ride here, but before we leave we’ll make it so if you do turn, you won’t hurt anyone. Resting should slow it down at least, I’ll send your son over and you can visit with him.”

The kid looked worried when she told him, and ran to the SUV. She had meant to check out the other civilian vehicles but Top caught her eye and waved her over. He climbed down from the M-2, and stacked his gear on the ground. He took her by the arm and led her into the trees that hid the plant from view “I’ve seen it happen. Before it was over they got cold, so cold.” He took out his wallet, pulled out a plastic encased photo and tossed the rest to the ground. “I never did like the cold.” She said nothing, just watched him as he stared at the picture. He handed it to her. The faded photograph showed much younger version of himself embracing a very pregnant dark-haired girl. “The baby would have been about your age. I like to think she would have been as brave as you.” He studied her with tear-filled eyes. “It’s my time to join them, but I can’t stand the cold.” He handed her his .45. “Do it for me, I can’t do it myself, it’s a mortal sin. Don’t let me turn into one of them.”

She took the pistol, a sick feeling in her stomach. “I… I don’t know if I can do that Top.”

He took her hand gently in his, and turning sidewise to her stuck the muzzle of the .45 in the hollow behind his ear. “Don’t tell me when, just do it. Give me this last mercy.” He folded his hands and bowed his head in prayer.

She couldn’t do it. She tried to squeeze the trigger, but her finger wouldn’t move. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she thought of him coming after them. She wouldn’t want to be like that either, or put anyone she was responsible for at risk. His voice was a faint murmur, almost drowned out by the wind in the trees. She tried again, and again. Blam! It came as a surprise. Top’s body dropped to the ground, and she fell to her knees beside him, weeping.

* * *

Never give an order you know won't be obeyed. That was why she'd let the men from the infantry company talk her into this detour. Two of them had family in town, and if she'd ordered them to leave them behind, she was pretty sure they'd have deserted. It was much easier to order people to do things they were going to do anyway.

They were down to five vehicles. The compact had been left behind with the IFVs. This made her convoy faster, more fuel efficient and much quieter. She rode in the RV, because Roland had set it up with a radio from one of the tracks, in addition to the CB already installed. The lead vehicle pulled off onto a side street, running over a walker, then eased to a stop in front of a two story house. The front yard was a meticulous green, highlighted by flowers next to the house.

The driver checked in over the radio and as prearranged two men from the rear vehicle joined him before he entered the house. She saw him use his keys on the front door, and hoped that meant his parents and little sister were okay. She winced as the machinegun on the trailing Humvee fired. Three short bursts, no more than four rounds each, but the noise would bring more. They'd had proof of that when they left the water treatment plant.

A rifle barked inside the house, and her heart sank. Two more shots, then a single boom from the .50 cal on the lead vehicle. She looked out the windshield and saw the body topple over. The gunner must have gotten the creature's spine, because instead of getting back up, it crawled towards them. She picked up the handset. "Charlie one, if that thing gets too close, eliminate it. We don't want it biting anyone."

"Wilco."

She'd given each vehicle a call sign, based on the order they had in the convoy. She was still two, and the survivor from the third platoon was still 'Three'. He rode in the Tracker with the high school junior who'd driven her two friends to the arena. Their parents were supposed to have met them there, they had almost certainly been inside when it fell.

The infantrymen came back out of the house carrying rifles and boxes. She opened the door and waved them over. Looking at his face, she didn't need to ask. "I'm sorry."

"At least I know. Thanks for coming." The M-60 fired another short burst. He looked both ways down the street, then back at her. His eyes were wet, but she knew he wouldn't admit to it. "Give me five minutes and I'll empty the pantry."

The M2 boomed again and a zombie's head exploded. "Make it three, we have another stop."

His eyes flicked to the gunner who'd just fired, and he nodded. The boxes were heavier than they looked. She opened one, ammunition and a pair of pistols.

Four minutes later they pulled out. The lead Humvee swerved and crushed the skull of the crippled zombie. They traveled over back roads sighting several lone zombies and an occasional

group. The M2 on the lead vehicle opened up just once to thin out a mob that blocked their path. They pulled into a grade school parking lot and stopped.

Melody frowned, they should have been going to an apartment complex. “One, this is Two. Why did we stop? Over.”

She saw the gunner reach down into the Humvee, and pull up the handset. “Two, that yellow building on the other side of the playground is ours. Over.”

She looked across and saw the horde in the parking lot, then the sheet with ‘Help’ painted on it fluttering in the breeze. “Wait one, Break.” Melody peered through her binoculars. There were at least five hundred milling around, pounding on ground level doors, and trying to climb the stairs. About half of the ground level doors gaped open, but nothing moved on the balcony. The metal staircase was blocked at the landing by furniture and bicycles. They didn’t seem capable of climbing over the obstruction. The staircase led up to one end of the balcony, at the other end a fire escape dangled over a grassy area. There were too many to be sure of getting them all without being overrun. She didn’t know if they could overturn a car, but people could so she didn’t want to take chances. Then there was all the ammo they’d have to use. And the noise they would make, how many more would that bring down on them?

“One, which apartment is yours? Over?”

“Second floor, third from the stairs. Over.”

“Drive past slow, make a lot of noise, see if they’ll follow you. Don’t use more ammo than you have to, but stay alive. We’ll get your family out and your baby’s gonna need his daddy. Over.”

“Wilco.”

She called the other vehicles and explained the plan, she had to do it twice because the Mustang only had a CB. Before she finished, the Humvee honked it’s horn, then fired into the crowd on the street to clear a path. It moved so slowly she was afraid it would be overrun by the converging zombies, but the gunner skillfully cut a path for the driver and once ahead of the pack fired single shots spaced ten or twelve seconds apart.

They moved out of sight followed by most of the horde. “Charlie One, worked like a charm, we’re going in now.”

The old man driving the RV nodded once and put the vehicle in gear. “Your first sergeant was right, you’ll keep us alive.”

“I’ll do my best sir. There is a fire escape on the far side of the complex, pull under that if you can.” There were still about thirty of them when the convoy reached the parking lot. The mustang shut down and coasted to a stop on the street. They would sit tight and keep an eye out for more. The Humvee and the Tracker stopped in the middle of the lot. The ’60 gunner stayed ducked down out of sight, and as she’d hoped, they all kept their attention on the still moving

RV.

The old man crept up to the side of the building, gave the fire escape a hard look and shook his head. "Ain't gonna work." He backed up running over one of the quicker walkers, then pulled in again. "Too low, close as I can get, sorry."

Melody stood on the table and popped open the skylight. "It'll do." The hinged brackets that propped the skylight open were held on with wing nuts. She took them off, then eased the brackets off the bolts. As she'd hoped, the two by three foot skylight opened fully. She started to ask for a boost, but the man's wife was already there. She was surprisingly strong for someone in her fifties.

The zombies let out moaning howls when they saw her. The ones that had lost interest in the no longer moving RV heard their cries and started back. There was a ladder on the back of the RV she'd been afraid they might climb it, but none did. The ladder was within easy reach. It slid down when she put some weight on it, so she pushed it as far as it would go and only then did she climb up to the balcony.

One of them, perhaps smarter than the others held on to it for a while, then gave up and let it retract itself. She was met at the top by a burly man with a huge pot belly. His beard and hair were straggly and disarrayed, one massive hand held a metal baseball bat. He offered the other to help her over the rail. "You'll be looking for Mrs. Peterson."

He was strong, but his skin was clammy, and his skin was blotchy. She drew back her hand quickly. "Yes, we're evacuating civilians."

"Don't worry, I don't have the flue. Quarantined myself as soon as it hit, but I've been stretching my insulin. Almost out now. Shoulda took the chance to get more, but now it's too late." He turned and puffed towards the other end of the balcony. "Come on, just her and the kids up here, but I think there's someone downstairs." She followed him to the door, he raised his hand to knock and behind them the M-60 opened up.

Melody whirled around. Two people dashed from one of the apartments below toward the idling Humvee. One of them bled bright streams of blood over the asphalt, and fell halfway there. The other made it to the vehicle and demanded entrance, cursing profanely. The gunner shot down five of the undead before they reached the wounded man. The rest swarmed him.

Melody turned away, and knocked on the door. The woman who answered held a semi-auto pistol in her hand. She looked exhausted, with bags under her eyes and milk stains on her blouse over each breast. The huge man jerked a thumb at Melody, ignoring the gunfire behind him. "Your ride's here Tabitha."

The dark haired woman laughed, a tinge of hysteria in her voice, "I told you, didn't I? Somebody always come over or calls every time I get him to sleep. Why didn't Brad come?"

"He's fine, he led them away so we could pick you up." Obligingly the boom of the .50 cal

echoed in the streets. “That’s him.”

“Thank God.” Tabitha hugged her hard. “We’re ready to go, I just need to wake up the kids.”

“Kids? He said you have just one.”

Tabitha picked up a duffle bag and handed it to the burly man, who carried it out the door. “I baby sit, their mom never came home last night. I guess we’ll meet her at the arena.”

In the bedroom she woke up two children, a preteen boy and a younger girl. Melody helped the girl with her shoes while Tabitha picked up her baby and another bag. When they got outside the Tracker was gone, and the M-60 fired with deliberate haste towards the apartments. Melody took a child’s hand in each of hers and ran for the fire escape.

Behind her glass shattered and a familiar voice shouted. “Quick! move now! I’ve gotcha, bend your legs!” he cursed and a rifle barked below her. The Tracker’s engine revved and it squealed in a circle, stopping behind the Humvee. The gunner stopped shooting at the building and fired three very short bursts to take out a trio of undead that shambled into the parking lot.

Melody carried the girl and rode the ladder down until it slammed to full extension. Sandy was on the roof, waiting. She took the girl and handed her down while Melody went back up for the boy. He refused to climb over the railing.

Tabitha hugged the fat man, “Thank you, you saved our lives. Come with us please!”

He shook his head sadly, and gestured to himself with splayed fingers. “Look at me, I can’t run. I can’t hide. Without insulin I’ll be dead in a week. All I can do is get other people killed. Go, take care of your baby, your husband needs you.” She climbed down, tears in her eyes. He fixed Melody’s eyes with his own. “I don’t know how much room you have, but you might need more.” He hung a key on a chain around her neck. “To my van, the big blue one against the wall.” She started to protest, but he cut her off. “You really want to do something for me? Prove me right, I think the Arabian Flu is causing this. I swear I didn’t catch it, and they won’t get me up here. I have a bottle of painkillers and three bottles of bourbon. Come back later. If I haven’t turned into one of them, that’s enough proof for me.” He picked up the protesting boy and handed him over the railing. “Good luck.” He lumbered back to his apartment.

She was halfway down the ladder when his door slammed shut. Once down on the roof of the RV, the boy was more than willing to climb down inside. Four more bodies did make a difference, and what would they do if they had a breakdown? She moved up next to the driver. “Back up towards the street.”

He looked at her puzzled, then shrugged and complied. “Ok sergeant.”

“Call me Mel. See that blue van? Pull up next to the sliding door.”

“No problem Mel,” He winced slightly as they ran over a still twitching body, but kept up a

facade of composure. "I'm Howard and this is my wife Martha." He stopped the RV less than a foot away from the van. "Close enough for you?"

"Yeah, it should do." She slid open the door, then opened the side door of the van. There were only a few inches between the doors and the sides of the vehicles, it would be safe enough if they hurried. She started it, then went back to the RV. "Cindy, can you hear me?" The woman looked dazed, but she nodded. "We're going to move you into the van, your husband will go with you." She took the woman's feet and helped her husband carry her into the back of the van, then she crossed over and asked Sandy to drive them.

The M-60 fired near continuously, as more and more of the dead were drawn to the sound. Melody called all units on the radio and the convoy surged into motion, the Humvee in the lead.

* * *

The only radio station still broadcasting was on a loop, telling people to stay in their homes and away from the rioters, and only to evacuate to the FEMA shelters as a last resort. Sensible in a way, but one of the centers listed was the arena they'd fled. Another was a hospital that had been overrun. If what she'd seen was any indication, all off the announced locations would be deathtraps.

The van behind them flashed its lights and honked. Melody scanned the area, just fields on either side with a few farm buildings in the far distance. "One this is two. Halt." They eased to a stop. She checked her shotgun, and opened the door. Tommy, Cindy's son, was right behind her. "You stay here." She wished she could hope Top was wrong, but the sick feeling in her heart told her he was right.

"But my mom! Something could have happened."

"If it did, she would want you to stay here." She shut the door in his face, cutting off any protest.

Sandy met her halfway, behind her, the van wobbled as someone moved around inside. "Your boss was right, she changed into one of them. I'm not going to drive with her in there."

Melody patted her shoulder, then handed over her shotgun. "No, I'll deal with it. You see any of them, shoot them in the head."

Richard got out of the car, he wasn't wearing his suit coat anymore The collar and right side of his white shirt were wet with fresh blood. "No, you can't kill her, she can be cured!" He took a few steps towards them. "I'll take her to a hospital, just let me get our son and we'll go."

Sandy brought up the shotgun, not quite pointing it at him. "She didn't want you to do this, I heard her tell you."

That explained the blood; he must have taken her gag off. Melody drew Top's pistol. "You don't want me to take care of her, that's fine. You want to stay with her, your choice. She bit you, and you're going to change just like she did. I'm not going to let you murder your son. Get her out of

the van, we might need it to keep him alive.” He hesitated, flexing his hands, like he was weighing the odds. “Do it now or I’ll shoot you and do it myself.”

Sandy hissed in surprise. Without looking away from Richard, Melody sent her to check on the other people they’d recovered. She took a step forward and aimed right between his eyes. “Just you and me, decide.”

He folded, not calling her bluff. Yet it wasn’t really a bluff, and knowing that made her sick inside. If he hadn’t caved, she would have had to shoot him, and she would have. Cindy snarled and tried to bite him as he half lifted, half dragged her out the side door. Melody blamed herself, if she’d had someone else there to watch him... But it was too late for that.

Sandy came back followed by only one person, a dark haired brown skinned man wearing a flannel shirt, one sleeve bloody to the elbow. “The pregnant girl’s asleep, she’ll be ok where she is, they already checked her. I checked Enrique, none of that’s his.”

Enrique made her uneasy, and she wondered whose blood it was. “Can you drive this?” Driving would keep him busy.

He nodded eagerly. “Get in, follow the RV, not too close.” When he was inside, she passed the captain’s pistol to Sandy. I don’t like that guy’s looks, take this just in case. Sandy swallowed hard, and traded weapons.

Richard had his nerve back now. “You can’t just leave us here. We have rights!”

Melody leveled the shotgun at him. “Sandy, get in, lock the doors. If he tries to break in, shoot him.” Cindy thrashed and moaned, managing only to roll into the ditch. She backed away from them, then turned and ran to the RV, ignoring his pleas.

Tommy tried to come out when she opened the door, but she pushed hard, and he stumbled back long enough for her to close the door. She felt bad at having to do it, but it was better than letting him see his father and what was left of his mother at the side of the road. She reached past him for the handset. “One, this is Two. Go.”

The boy tried for the bedroom, but she grabbed him. The both fell to the floor as the RV lurched into motion. Melody held him tight. “Tommy, your mother wants you to live. Her last words were to keep you safe.”

He struggled to get away. “No! Mom!”

“She’s gone, your father too. She wouldn’t want you to see.” She held him until he cried himself out.

* * *

Two hours later they pulled up the winding gravel road to the old mining town. She’d been gone

less than sixteen hours, but it felt like a lifetime. The gate was open. She hopped off and waved the rest of the convoy through, then locked it behind them.

Mrs. Morrison's Jeep was parked to the side of the office, and before all the vehicles stopped the old lady was on the porch. Melody waved to her, and she visibly relaxed. "That school bus never showed up honey." She said when Melody reached her.

She hadn't thought it would. "Did you see the news last night? Or this morning?"

The old woman smiled, "Honey, you know I never watch that stuff, all doom and gloom. Anyway, I tried to call the school, but there's something wrong with your phone. I don't know what's keeping those children..." Her voice trailed off as she took in the scene in the parking lot. "Who are all these people?"

"Let's go sit down and I'll explain it to you."