

COLLISION COURSE



A NOVEL OF SURVIVAL

DAVID CRAWFORD

Author of *Lights Out*

COLLISION COURSE

DAVID CRAWFORD

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To my father, Jim, who taught me right from wrong, my most valuable survival skill

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CHAPTER 1

DJ Frost was a likable guy. Most thought him a little on the eccentric side, but they couldn't help being pulled in by his happy-go-lucky personality and brilliant smile. DJ, they would say, could have sold ice to Eskimos. Many wondered why he wasn't in sales instead of security. But DJ liked working security. People respected him, and he enjoyed helping strangers, like Valerie. DJ had turned the corner just as three guys pulled her into a van. He'd chased them down and shot out their tires. Then he had single-handedly apprehended two of them. The police caught the other a few days later. DJ earned the Employee of the Year Award, and he and Val started to date. It didn't last long, but it had been good for a while, and they were still friends.

The uniform did seem to have an effect on women. DJ was no Robert Redford in the looks department, but he wasn't an ogre, either. He worked out regularly and groomed himself meticulously. That, coupled with the uniform and his disarming smile, gave him more than his share of attention from the babes.

The other thing he liked about his job was being able to carry a firearm. Weapons were DJ's passion, second only to women. He had a nice collection and shot them often. Sometimes he was able to combine his two favorite pastimes by taking a woman to the range with him. Most were hesitant at first, but once they fired a few rounds, they were usually hooked. That always put a big smile on his face.

DJ wasn't smiling now, though. In fact, he had a scowl on his face. Things were not good. He'd always told people this could happen. Most of them had laughed at him. Some to his face, but the majority had done it behind his back. They would politely listen as he talked about preparedness, but he knew they were rolling their eyes the minute they turned their backs. He wondered how those people were doing now. Hopefully at least some of them had taken what he had said to heart. Maybe some would make it through unscathed. If the phones were working, he would have called to check on the ones he knew best, but that wasn't possible now.

He sat in his town house apartment, listening to the radio and eating a bowl of SpaghettiOs he'd heated up on his backpacking stove. The news was getting worse. Many people were running out of food, and the governments, both local and national, were losing control. DJ had heard shots down the street just last night. It was probably time to get the hell out of Dodge, he thought, as he listened to the droning reports. He decided that he'd start loading up and head to his bug-out location. He would have left earlier, but once before it had looked as if things were going south and he'd bugged out prematurely. The economy had turned around before anything bad happened, and when he got back, he found that he'd lost his job. He really liked the job he had now and didn't want to lose it, so he had waited. By the time it had become obvious that this was the real deal, the arteries out of the city were clogged. Then martial law had been declared. It would be a risk to leave, but not as big a gamble as staying in the city once the authorities lost complete control over the situation.

There were many theories on what had caused "the Smash." It seemed as if there were new experts on the news every day, and each had his own pet hypothesis. That was before the electricity had gone out yesterday. Some of the authorities had said it was fuel prices; others blamed the shrinking value of

the dollar. The bursting of the housing bubble had some proponents, and a few even thought the government had done it deliberately. Three or four had less popular theories, but all the so-called experts agreed that this was the worst thing to happen to America since the stock market crash of '29.

Most people were shocked that things could get so bad in such a short time. It had even surprised DJ to some extent. Of course, the buildup had spanned many years, but the end came astonishingly fast. It really didn't matter to DJ what the real cause was or how fast it had happened. He'd been preparing for this for years, and had tried to get others to do the same. He had succeeded in a few instances, but most people didn't want to be bothered by DJ's gospel. He figured the reason most didn't listen was that they'd have to admit something bad could happen, and most people just couldn't bring themselves to believe that.

When he finished his dinner, he put the dishes in the sink and turned the faucet on. Water came out, but the pressure was low. He knew it was only a matter of time before there would be no running water at all. He had plenty stored for when that happened, but he planned to be long gone by then. The loss of electricity had caused the crime rate to double overnight. At least that's what the radio had said. DJ suspected it was actually much worse, and he knew that the loss of water would push even the law-abiding over the edge.

He finished the dishes and put them away. It seemed foolish to do such mundane things when the world was falling apart, but DJ knew routines should be followed whenever possible. It helped one deal with the bizarre to do the ordinary.

He grabbed a flashlight and headed downstairs to his garage. His trusty old Toyota pickup sat in the bay closest to the stairs, but it wouldn't be the vehicle he'd use to leave the city. The news had covered the mass exodus when the unprepared hordes had tried to leave. The lucky few who departed early had hardly any problems, but the ones who left only a few hours later had damned themselves from the start. As more and more people saw the handwriting on the wall and tried to get out of the city, highways that weren't designed for so many cars became death traps. As the routes filled to numerous times their optimum capacity, travel slowed to a crawl. Cars ran out of gas. Emergency vehicles were unable to reach the scene of wrecks to clear them and help the injured. Fights broke out first at gas stations along the routes and then on the actual roads themselves.

Finally the criminal element moved in on the helpless motorists like spiders on insects caught in their webs. Many people—at least the lucky ones—had been forced to walk back to their homes, leaving behind most of the possessions they'd packed. The unlucky were still on the highways, silent as their useless vehicles. The governor had had no choice but to call out the National Guard and restrict travel. Heavy military trucks had been fitted with snowplow blades and had cleared lanes on the impacted roads, but now Guardsmen sat in machine-gun-topped Humvees with orders to stop anyone who tried to use those roads without authorization.

DJ walked around the truck and used his flashlight to find the propane lantern on the shelves loaded with his survival equipment. He hung the lantern on a hook and pulled a lighter from his pocket. A second later, the garage was bathed in a yellow glow. He turned and looked at his ultimate escape vehicle. It was a Polaris Sportsman 800. The ATV was the biggest and baddest ever built. It had a top speed in excess of seventy miles per hour and a huge payload and towing capacity. Attached to the back was an off-road trailer that would haul a thousand pounds of cargo. DJ had done some modifications to it so that, between the trailer and the racks on the quad, he could easily carry all the gear he needed for his trek.

The bike had less than five hundred miles on it. He and his girlfriend had bought two smaller quads a couple of years ago. When they broke up last year, DJ traded the older pair in for this new machine.

He reached down and turned the key. The twin-cylinder motor fired almost immediately. However, instead of the roar that the stock exhaust system would have made, the quad made a *putt-putt* sound that was barely audible over the hissing of the lantern. DJ had installed a second muffler that quieted the four-wheeled beast to a level even a librarian wouldn't find offensive. Hunters most often used the aftermarket exhaust system so they wouldn't spook game animals. It cut the performance of the big bike a little, but the trade-off in power was well worth the stealth it afforded. That wasn't the only modification he'd made to the big bike, either. DJ smugly turned the machine off. He checked the oil and water levels. They were fine. Then he twisted off the fuel cap and topped off the tank. Next he examined the tires. They were all overinflated, but that was on purpose. The higher air pressure made the bike quieter and easier to handle on pavement. When he got off the pavement, he could easily let some of the air out.

The tires checked, he began packing the trailer. He'd practiced this over and over, developing a meticulous system for where everything went. It took less than ten minutes to load the trailer. He finished off by placing four five-gallon jerry cans on the custom mounts that ran down the sides of the trailer. These, combined with the four gallons in the tank, would give DJ over four hundred miles of range, more than enough to get to where he was going.

Next he grabbed a big plastic box that mounted to the rear rack of his Polaris. It took only a few seconds to lock it down, and then he began loading it, mostly with food and cooking gear. When it was almost half-full, he closed the lid. The front rack had a built-in waterproof storage space under it. He quickly filled it, and then a medium-sized duffel bag was bungeed down on the top. He opened the door to his truck and removed several items from inside. One was a small satchel of maps. He looped the strap over his neck to take upstairs with him. Next was a military-type day pack that had enough of everything he would need, except for guns and ammo, to live for three days. That went into the plastic box. Finally he removed his GPS from the mount in the Toyota and placed it in the one on his quad's handlebars. He rechecked everything and was almost done. All that was left was to get his firearms and clothes, but he would load those right before he left. He turned off the lantern and headed back upstairs. Halfway up, he stopped and slapped his forehead. With the aid of the flashlight, he found a roll of duct tape, pulled off two pieces, and placed them over the taillights on the four-wheeler. A little slipup like having a red light showing could ruin his day, he thought.

Back upstairs, he packed a small duffel with a week's worth of clothes and toiletries and laid out what he'd wear in the morning. Then he went to the spare bedroom, opened his large gun safe, and pulled out the weapons he would take. If he'd been able to use his truck, he would have brought all his guns. But since he just had the quad and trailer, he'd take only what he absolutely had to have: three rifles, a shotgun with an extra barrel, and four handguns. They were all cased except for one rifle and one handgun. He placed the handgun in a drop-leg holster that he'd wear. The rifle would go into a custom scabbard that gave DJ access to the rifle while he was moving. It had taken a lot of work to get the scabbard right, but DJ was very proud of it. It was not far from what the cowboys had used a hundred years ago, although his steed and his rifle were unlike anything someone from that era had ever seen.

DJ pulled an odd-shaped container and a .30-caliber ammo can from one of the shelves in the safe. The ammo can was heavy. It had a small wad of cash in it, not that cash was worth much these days. What made it heavy was the assortment of old silver coins and the few gold coins that it held. The coins would ensure him more than just a meager existence when he got to his destination. DJ closed the safe with the hope that he could one day come back here, if for nothing else than to get the rest of his gun collection.

Finally he opened a metal cabinet that sat next to the safe and pulled out loaded magazines for the two guns that weren't cased. Extra ammo was already loaded, some on the quad and quite a bit in the trailer. He put the magazines in a vest that had pockets set up just to carry them and a few other essentials. He carried all of the stuff to his room and placed it at the foot of his bed.

He looked at his watch. It was almost nine. He found his map satchel and pulled out an atlas of his state. He turned to the back where there was a map of the city. He already knew the route he would take, but he traced it with his finger anyway. Examining all of his backup routes, he searched for any other means to get out of the city he might previously have missed. After thirty minutes of scouring the map, he yawned. He stretched and looked around the apartment. On the desk in the corner of the living room sat his now useless computer.

Talk on his favorite Internet survival forums had increased ten- or twentyfold before the Web had gone down. Most of the traffic on those survival and preparedness Web sites was from newbies who were coming face-to-face with the new reality. DJ tried to help them as much as he could, but he knew most of them were screwed. He wondered how the regulars on the sites were doing. Many were more prepared than he was. They lived out in the country and already had gardens and livestock. Others were more or less in the same boat as he was. They had places to go, but would they be able to get there? He hoped so, even for the ones who normally disagreed with him.

He had continually preached that everyone who intended to bug out should have a plan other than automobiles and interstates. Some had listened and taken what he had said to heart. Many had bought dirt bikes or quads like his. Some were not so far that they couldn't walk to their retreats in a few days. DJ even had a plan for going on foot if it came down to it, although he didn't relish the thought of a three-hundred-fifty-mile hike. He wished his retreat was closer, but when his group had formed, that was the closest they could find acreage that was in their price range. Other than distance, the place was perfect. The soil was fertile, there were plenty of hardwoods for firewood, and it was far enough from a big city that if a mass exodus took place, the hordes would be thinned out before they got that far.

DJ yawned again. Better get some sleep, he thought. He set the alarm on his wristwatch for three thirty a.m. He figured most of the troublemakers would be in bed by four. If he left then, it would give him at least a couple of hours to get well out of town before dawn. Invisibility would ensure his safety so his plan was geared toward moving in the darkness and sleeping during the day. The most danger would come in the first twenty miles of his escape route. After that, it would fall off as he got farther and farther from town. DJ had played out this scenario over and over in his mind. Now that he was going to have to put his plan into action, he was filled with excitement and a little trepidation.

He took a shower. Even though the water was cold, he enjoyed it. It might be the last one he'd get for a while. He hit the sack and tried to sleep, but his mind kept racing over his escape plan. Would he make it out of the city without incident? What would happen to those who stayed in town? Would this all blow over in a few days as the government was promising? DJ was pretty sure he knew the answer to that one. He turned over and tried to make his mind slow down. Distant gunshots could be heard occasionally, which didn't help, but he finally drifted off into a fitful sleep.

* * *

Gabe twisted the top off the bottle and poured the amber liquid into a glass. He stared at the drink blankly for a second and then threw it back. It burned going down and boiled once it hit his stomach. He absently poured again, staring at this second glass for a moment. He hated the alcohol. He hated

what it did to him. He hated what it had done to them. Basically, he hated everyone and everything.

CHAPTER 2

When the alarm beeped on DJ's watch, it jarred him into alertness. A few minutes later, he was up and dressed. Normally he would've made the bed, but he was in a hurry. Besides, he thought, what would be the point? He quickly fixed some breakfast and ate. He thought about leaving the dirty dishes, but he didn't want to have a vermin problem if he ever came back, so he hurriedly rinsed them off and put them in the dish strainer.

It took three trips to carry his guns and other gear down to the garage. He placed all of the carefully selected equipment next to his quad. With the aid of his flashlight, he went back up to the apartment and walked through one more time, checking to make sure everything was squared away. He opened his safe and looked lovingly at the firearms he was leaving behind. He would have liked to take them but there was only so much room. If fortune smiled upon him, he could make a trip back for them. Hopefully, the massive gun safe would protect them until that time. DJ had done his homework, and this was the best safe that would fit through the door of his apartment. Not only did it have the best locking system, but it was also fireproof. DJ had bolted it down to the floor, even though it was against the apartment complex's rules. It would be almost impossible for someone to open it as long as it sat in the apartment, and it would take a tow truck to remove it from its position.

He closed the door and spun the dial. He finished his last inspection and, satisfied that everything was good to go, locked the kitchen door behind him. He packed most of the items he'd brought down that morning in their carefully prepicked positions and then checked his load once again to make sure he had everything and that it was properly secured. This was it, he thought. This was what he'd been planning for. He shivered slightly as he turned the key on his ATV. The machine fired immediately and purred perfectly. DJ really appreciated the electronic fuel injection on this bike. Not only did it increase the fuel economy, but it also didn't have to be choked and warmed up before it ran smoothly the way his old carbureted quads had.

There were five items left on the floor. DJ bent over and picked up the black rifle. He put a loaded magazine in it and chambered a round. After checking that the safety was on, he put it in the special homebuilt scabbard. Next he threaded the drop-leg holster that held his custom pistol onto his belt and cinched up the leg straps. Then he donned his bulletproof vest. He'd bought it used over the Internet. It was rated to stop up to a .30-caliber non-armor-piercing rifle bullet. DJ hoped he never had to find out if that was true. On top of the body armor, DJ put on a load-bearing vest containing several magazines for his rifle, a few for his pistol, and some other important survival equipment. If, God forbid, he was to lose the rest of his gear, he could scrape by for several days with just what was in the vest. The last item was the oddly shaped case he'd removed from the safe last night. He picked it up, opened it, and pulled out the night-vision goggles. Next to his four-wheeler, they were the most expensive piece of equipment he had and, in many ways, the most important. He opened the storage box on the back of his quad and put them in the case. He removed the Kevlar helmet from the box and closed the lid. The NV goggles attached to the helmet. He turned off his flashlight, hit the power on the goggles, and put the light in its place on his vest. DJ was almost giddy at the excitement. He'd planned this exodus for years, but he had obviously not been able to actually rehearse it. He had, though, run through the part

he could and had thoroughly thought out the others.

~~He peeled back the heavy curtain over one of the windows and looked out. No one was to be seen. He lifted up the garage door and then slowly pulled his quad and trailer out onto the driveway. A few seconds later, the garage door was shut and locked and DJ was whizzing down the street.~~

It was still warm outside, but the wind from his thirty-mile-per-hour speed made it seem almost cool. Two blocks down the street, he saw three guys trying to break into a car in a driveway. DJ watched them closely. When he was half a block away, they heard his tires on the pavement. They began to look around to see what was coming, but he was past them before they could spot him. DJ smiled.

A mile down the road, he came to his first major street crossing. DJ brought the big quad to a stop where he could see both ways but still stay well back of the stop sign. He saw a police car coming down the road shining its spotlight at the front of the businesses that lined the street. He slipped the transmission into reverse and slowly backed up behind some cars parked on the street. It seemed to take forever for the police to pass, but when they finally did, they never even shined the light in his direction, and DJ's tensed gluteus muscles relaxed.

He pulled back up to the intersection. Through the night-vision goggles, he could see he wasn't the only one who hid from the cops. Two blocks up, a couple of people were working on a business's door with what looked like a crowbar. DJ gave his machine some gas and crossed the six lanes with no one the wiser. He was happy so far. Everything was going according to plan.

Five minutes later, the scenery changed. The middle-class neighborhoods he'd been driving through gave way to one of the poorer sections of town. DJ tightened his grip on the handlebars. More people were out and about in this area. Some were sitting in front of their houses with rifles or shotguns across their laps, and others were visiting on street corners. DJ wondered if they were just talking or there was some kind of drug deal going down. A few were sneaking around houses that were dark and quiet. DJ hoped that there was no one in those houses.

Occasionally people would hear his tires and start looking for him, though dark as it was, they'd almost never spot him until he passed them. DJ increased his speed slightly. His tires would make a little more noise, but the faster he put distance between himself and them, the better.

As the area got worse and worse, a shiver went up DJ's spine. He looked hard for the eyes he could only feel. It was said that even the cops wouldn't come to this neighborhood without sufficient backup, and now DJ understood why. He'd driven through here in his truck during the daylight hours and, other than the run-down houses and gang graffiti, it didn't seem too bad. But here in the pitch-black night without two tons of steel around him, it gave him the willies. He imagined he could hear screams coming from inside the dilapidated old buildings. Every bush or tree seemed to hold some unseen goblin. Every dark shadow was a demon wanting his soul. He found himself leaning on the throttle until his speed was almost fifty.

He knew he had only a couple of miles before he hit the railroad tracks. They would offer him a safer route out of the city, but first he had to get there. He tried to focus on the street, though he couldn't help noticing more and more people lurking about. When he'd planned his escape, it had seemed less risky to take the short route, even if it was through the shady part of town. Now he found himself questioning his logic.

Suddenly the streets appeared to be empty. DJ relaxed some, but he kept his speed up. Two more minutes, he thought, as he approached a slight curve in the street. The moment he could see around the bend, his heart jumped into his throat. There was a line of cars parked side by side blocking the street.

DJ yanked the brake lever as he cursed himself. He knew there was a possibility of running into a

roadblock, and he had practiced turning around quickly, but not at the fifty miles per hour he'd been going. Hopefully they hadn't heard him, or better yet, maybe the automotive barricade was unmanne

DJ's hopes were dashed when a set of headlights shined right on him. The night-vision goggles automatically shut down at the sudden blaze of light, and DJ pushed them onto his helmet. Two more cars turned their headlights on, and he squinted through the blinding beams. He felt the back brakes lock, and the heavy trailer pushed the bike to the right. Just then, he saw a muzzle flash and heard the report of a rifle over the top of the barricade. A fraction of a second later he heard the angry buzzing of a bullet passing him. He immediately slid off the seat to the left, holding on with just his hands and his right leg, which was hooked over the top of the bike. His left knee was on the floorboard on that side and his body hung below the top of the quad. This stance would help shield him from the gunfire and keep the bike from turning over.

DJ looked to his left and saw an empty driveway. He released the brake, and the bike began to change directions as the wheels started to roll. He turned the handlebars toward the driveway and pushed the throttle a little. The big bike dashed into the drive. He thought he could hear another bullet scream by as he continued turning around in the front yard of the old house. DJ mashed the throttle more and sped across three or four yards until one filled with junk forced him back onto the road. He pulled himself back up on the seat and looked over his shoulder as he rounded the bend in the street. He prayed they wouldn't follow him. He was quick, and off road, no full-sized vehicle would be able to keep up with him, but on the pavement he'd be no match for a car.

He flipped on his headlights and continued to accelerate away from the roadblock. Three blocks down, he turned right, went a block, and then turned right again. He slowed and turned off his headlight. A second later, he heard a car scream past. He placed his night-vision goggles back over his face and looked around. He couldn't see anyone. At the next corner, he turned left and resumed his practiced speed of thirty miles per hour. He noticed that his heart was pounding hard, and his whole body seemed to be shaking. He tried to force himself to calm down by taking some slow, deep breaths. It didn't work.

A minute later, he turned back to the right. This put him back on his original heading, even if he was eight or nine blocks to the south of his original course. DJ began to pay attention to where he was and this seemed to have a small calming influence. He checked the GPS and saw that he only had a few more blocks until he turned onto Davidson Drive. This was part of his primary escape route. Davidson went through an older, industrialized section of town and crossed the railroad tracks that would take him out of town. He would be on it for an extra half mile now, but it should be fairly deserted. He made the right turn and was thankful that nothing appeared amiss.

Three minutes later, DJ turned onto the dirt road that ran along the tracks. This was railroad company property, but he didn't expect they'd mind, given the circumstances, even if they did see him. In fact, DJ was sure that there wouldn't be anyone along this route. He'd used the Internet and a site with satellite pictures of the earth to examine every foot of this course. It only passed through industrial areas and became more and more rural each mile he went.

DJ looked at his watch. It had been fifty minutes since he left his apartment. He'd made better time than he had allowed, even with his unexpected detour. DJ thought about the mistake he'd made by traveling faster than the speed at which he could easily control the bike. He vowed not to vary from his carefully crafted plan again. After about a mile, he stopped his bike and inspected it for damage. Thankfully, there was none, so he continued on.

The next hour passed quickly and quietly. DJ had to climb onto the tracks to cross a few creeks on the bridges, but he'd expected that. He was always careful to look for trains before he put the quad

between the rails. Once, on a longer bridge, he even turned off the bike and put his ear to the rail to make sure no trains were coming. He suspected the trains weren't running, but he didn't want to find out differently at a precarious point.

DJ finally reached his first waypoint. It was an area along a creek where the trees grew thick and he could camp for the day with little danger of being seen or bothered. When the bike was in the middle of the small wooded area, he turned the four-wheeler off. He pitched his tent, ate a quick snack, and covered the quad and trailer with some surplus camouflage netting. He climbed into the tent just as the horizon was turning pink. With the adrenaline worn off and his rifle by his side, he fell almost immediately to sleep.

* * *

Gabe heard the car door slam. He was almost asleep in the chair, but not quite. He jumped at the noise even in his drunken state. He struggled out of the chair and staggered to the window. That damn boy! What the hell did he want? Gabe stumbled to the door of the trailer and opened it, almost falling out onto the small landing.

"This ain't your day," he slurred. "What the hell do you want?"

"Mr. Horne, my mom and I came by to make sure you knew what was happening."

"Oh yeah? And what would that be?"

"Things are getting really bad, Mr. Horne. It's like the world is ending or something. The government has de—"

"Do I look like I give a shit?"

The boy's eyes got big at the interruption.

"Well, do I?" Gabe shouted.

The young teenager said nothing.

"Now, you get the fuck out of here and leave me alone. It's not your day." Gabe took a wobbly step back into his house, forgetting to close the door. He wasn't able to see the boy climb back over the gate and into the old pickup, but he heard the engine start as they drove away.

Why would I give a shit anymore if the world ended?

He poured himself another shot of whiskey.

CHAPTER 3

DJ woke up and looked at his watch. It was just past noon, and the air in his tent was warming up. He pulled his boots on and stepped outside, his rifle in hand. Nothing looked as if it had been disturbed, but he carefully walked around the perimeter just to make sure all was as it should be in the small wooded area. Content that nothing was amiss, DJ looked out beyond the trees. Fields surrounded his camp, except for the creek, the tracks, and one lone farmhouse, which looked to be a mile or more away.

He would wait for dark to continue his trek. That gave him about eight hours to kill. He fixed himself a nice meal, taking his time. Once he'd eaten, he strung up a net hammock between two trees and pulled out a book. As he read, cottonlike clouds began to move in on the breeze. They covered the sun and dropped the temperature a few degrees. The breeze, cloud cover, and large meal were just the right formula for a nap. DJ didn't even notice the book slip from his hand.

A faint rhythmical thumping woke him up. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it wasn't right. He dumped himself out of the hammock and clutched his rifle. At first, he thought that a piece of farm equipment might have been causing the sound, but a quick look around revealed no machinery in any of the fields. When he listened closer, he realized it was coming from down the tracks. It didn't sound like a locomotive, at least not one of the big ones. Maybe it was a small engine used for track maintenance. DJ checked to make sure nothing in his campsite would give him away without a thorough search of the woods. The white pages of the book lying on the ground could be visible through the trees. He quickly picked it up and stuck it under the cover on his ATV. Satisfied that his hide was now as secure as it could be, given the situation, he peered down the tracks to get a better look.

DJ almost laughed when the old Cadillac rounded the bend. One side's tires were inside the tracks and the other's were on the outside, but still on the wooden ties. As the car neared, DJ could see that the whole thing was shaking. The suspension was unable to absorb the bumping the evenly spaced ties caused.

The Detroit dinosaur was only advancing at twenty or twenty-five miles per hour. As it crept toward DJ's woods, he moved behind a tree where he could conceal himself but still see. As the car finally passed, DJ could only make out a driver. The old man appeared to be in his seventies or early eighties. He looked straight ahead as he passed with a grip on the steering wheel that had turned his knuckles white.

When the fins on the old car disappeared around the next bend, DJ glanced at his watch. It was almost four p.m. He returned to his hammock and book and read for about an hour and a half. He fixed another meal and ate. Then he pulled out his maps again and scoured his route for the night. He'd have ten hours of darkness, and he planned to make a good distance tonight. His next hideout was about a hundred and fifty miles away. He'd stay on the tracks for about two-thirds of that distance. A section of gravel county roads was after that, and then he would head down a power line easement. He hadn't been down the easement before, but he'd gone down every road that intersected it and had marked it both on his map and in his GPS. Happy with the plan, he put the maps up and tried to get a little more

sleep before he left.

~~He dozed, fitfully, his previous nap having taken the edge off his tiredness. Finally it started getting dark, so he broke camp and loaded everything up. It wasn't completely dark when he left, but it was close enough.~~

The first few miles went just as he planned, but the road beside the tracks became gradually rougher the farther he went. This wouldn't normally have been a problem. The quad and trailer were made for much rougher conditions than these, but his night-vision goggles severely hindered his depth perception. Many of the potholes and bumps he was hitting just looked like flat ground, and a few times, he almost got pitched off the big bike. He was still making good time, but it wasn't as fast as he'd planned. He could take off the night-vision goggles and use his headlight, but that would make him more vulnerable if someone was waiting along the tracks. He decided the best thing to do was to continue at a cautious pace.

DJ also found that he had to climb up onto the tracks more often than he'd anticipated, and not just for the creeks. He knew where all of those were. He was also forced to avoid many downed trees, which had fallen over the access road. DJ figured this section of the road must not have been used in quite some time. In many places, the grass had grown up quite tall, and he had to be especially careful of uneven ground in those spots. Between creeping through the grass and navigating around the trees every few miles, he finally decided that riding on the tracks like the old man in the Cadillac would be faster, but would it be safe?

No trains had traveled down this track in the eighteen hours he'd been next to it, but that didn't guarantee there wouldn't be one. DJ wondered if he should risk it. He'd be able to see a train coming toward him, and although he was worried about the possibility of a train sneaking up from behind, he figured he'd probably be able to hear it approaching. He decided it was worth the risk. He wished he had a rearview mirror on his bike, but he never thought he'd need one. Oh well, he couldn't think of everything.

DJ wondered how old the satellite pictures he'd used to plan his route were. He wouldn't have thought the railroad would let their access road get so overgrown, but they obviously had.

The trailer was equipped with taillights, but he'd left them unconnected. He decided to hook them up. They would hopefully be visible to a train if it approached and perhaps the engineer would blow his horn if he got too close. *Besides*, DJ thought, *I really don't have to be that concerned about anything but a train from behind me, so the taillights are okay.*

The tracks proved to be a lot better than the road had been, and DJ was able to pick up his speed. He had to deal with the unevenness of the ties and the gravel between them, but that was minor, and the bike easily soaked up the bumps as long as he kept a reasonable pace. He made sure to check behind him every minute or so.

At midnight he began to get hungry. He pulled the four-wheeler off the tracks and found a nice little open spot. Opening the storage box on the back of the Polaris, DJ removed and opened an MRE with the aid of his red LED headlamp. He activated the chemical heater with a little water and slid the meal course into the heater pouch. While he waited for his chicken and noodles to warm up, he snacked on the crackers and cheese spread. MREs weren't DJ's favorite food, but they were easy and filling.

When he had finished the meal, he stuck the trash into a large Ziploc bag. He'd burn it when he got somewhere safe enough to build a fire. He started the quad up and put his night-vision goggles on. Back on the tracks, he continued making decent time, happy that things were working out almost as well as he'd expected.

A little while later, DJ was rounding a long, slow bend in the tracks. As he finally got to where the

tracks straightened out and he could see for quite a ways, he hit the brakes on the quad. At the moderate speed he was going, the big bike stopped almost instantly. There was something on the tracks about half a mile in front of him. It was hard to judge distance with the goggles, so he removed them, but all he could see with his naked eyes was blackness. He put the goggles back on and slowly pulled the bike down into the tall grass beside the tracks. He was careful to keep the engine rpm as low as possible in order to remain discreet.

He shut the bike off and dismounted, deciding it would be best to go check it out on foot. He removed the black rifle from the scabbard and set it down next to him. Then he draped the camo netting he'd packed over both the quad and the trailer. Picking up his rifle, he checked the chamber to make sure it was loaded and slowly started to make his way toward whatever was on the tracks.

DJ moved carefully through the tall grass. Every fifty steps, he crept up closer to the tracks until he could get a look at the obstruction. He was very cautious to only stick his head up just enough to see. This would present whoever or whatever was down there the smallest target possible if they were watching for someone.

He'd covered almost half the distance when he finally recognized the Cadillac that had passed his camp that afternoon. DJ watched the car for several minutes but could perceive no movement around or in it. He wondered what had happened. Had someone jumped the old man? Maybe he'd broken down or simply run out of gas. Or could this be some kind of trap? He slowed his pace even more, using all of his senses to examine his surroundings.

He got closer and closer to the car, but he didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. He moved past the car about a hundred yards to make sure no one was set up on the other side. Once he was satisfied it was safe, he sneaked up to the car. Peering inside, he saw the old man lying on the front seat. DJ wondered if he was asleep or dead. The backseat was full of all kinds of stuff; pots and pans, clothing, tools, canned food, and many other goods were stacked from the floor to the top of the seats.

DJ crept around the car looking for any signs of foul play. He didn't see any, but he did identify the reason the Caddy had stopped. One of the tires had rotted, and the front tire of the big car had fallen through and become wedged between the tires.

DJ caught movement from inside the car out of the corner of his eye. His head swiveled around to see the old man sit up behind the wheel. DJ instinctively ducked down behind the car, gripping his weapon a little tighter. Brake lights washed out DJ's view through the goggles. He pulled them off his face as he heard the hum of an electric window.

"Is anyone out there?" the old man called out.

DJ wondered whether to answer or not.

"Is anyone out there?" the old man repeated, a little louder.

What could the old man do to him? "Yeah," DJ answered.

"Do you think you could help me get my car unstuck? I can pay you."

"Do you have any weapons?"

"Just an old shotgun and a revolver," the old man said, "but I need them. I can pay you cash, though."

DJ found the man's answer amusing. He had no need for relics. "I don't want them. I just want to make sure you're not going to shoot me."

"You don't worry about that, sonny. I wouldn't do no one no harm unless they was trying to harm me."

"That's good to know. Do me a favor. Take your foot off the brake pedal."

The brake lights went out.

“Now turn on the interior lights,” DJ said. Then he saw the dome light come on. “Please stick your hands out of the window.”

“What for?” the old man said.

“Do you want my help or not?”

“Yes.”

“Then please do as I ask. Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt you. I just have to make sure it’s safe,” DJ said with authority in his voice.

“Okay, my hands are out of the window.”

DJ stepped out from behind the car and activated his weapon-mounted light. He shined it in the old man’s eyes as he continued to move clockwise. “Now use the outside door handle and open your door.”

The man did as he was told.

“Step out and put your hands on top of your head and interlace your fingers, please.”

Again the man complied. His back was toward DJ, who shined his light up and down, looking for a weapon. Nothing was visible.

“Now turn around and face me.”

When the man was facing him, DJ again looked for a weapon and sized him up. The old man was average height but very thin. The look on his face said he wasn’t dangerous, but DJ knew looks could be deceiving.

“Where are your weapons?”

“The shotgun is in the trunk, and my handgun is in the glove box.”

“Good. We’re almost done here,” DJ assured the man. “Turn back around, and I’m just going to pat you down a little.”

The man turned, and thirty seconds later, DJ was convinced he wasn’t a threat. He turned off his weapon light.

“Sorry about all of that,” DJ said, “but you can’t be too careful, you know?”

“I guess that’s right,” the man said thoughtfully. He stuck out his hand. “My name is Jacob Kessler.”

DJ grabbed the hand firmly. “DJ, DJ Frost. Where are you headed, Mr. Kessler?”

“Please call me Jacob. Everybody does. I’m going to my son’s place. At least I was until I got stuck. He lives about twenty miles from here, I think.”

“I see. Aren’t you afraid a train might come along?”

“No. I live beside the tracks just outside of town. Some days, there are eight or ten trains that go down these tracks. Four’s about the fewest there ever is, but there hasn’t been a single one since the electricity went out. I guess they need power to track where the trains are and run the switches and stuff.”

DJ hadn’t thought of that, but it made sense. He looked at his watch. It was pushing three in the morning. Obviously he wouldn’t be making anywhere near the distance he’d planned. He would help the old man out and then try to find a good spot to hole up for the daylight hours. He’d packed plenty of extra food just in case he got delayed a day or two.

“Where did you come from?” Jacob asked.

“I came from town, just like you.”

“Where’s your car?”

“I don’t have one,” DJ said.

“You’re not walking, are you?”

“No, I have a four-wheeler about half a mile down the tracks. I just walked up here to make sure this wasn’t a trap.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jacob said. “Both the four-wheeler and checking for a trap, that is.”

“Well, let’s see if we can’t get you unstuck.” DJ pulled a small flashlight out of the cargo pocket of his trousers and shined it on the problem wheel.

“I can’t get her to budge forward or backward.”

“Do you have a jack?”

“Yes, but I already tried that. It’s one of those scissor jacks and the place you have to put it is too close to the tracks to get it under the car.”

“Let me see it,” DJ said.

The old man opened his car’s passenger door and retrieved the jack from the floorboard. DJ tried to get the jack behind the stuck wheel, but there wasn’t quite enough room. He looked in front of the tire but there was no place where the jack could mate up. It was made to only attach to the vehicle at the four jack points. Probably some lawyer design, DJ thought. If only he’d been able to bring his truck, he would have had his high-lift jack. But there was no use dwelling on that—he’d just have to make do with what he had.

He examined the back of the car and saw that it was slightly farther away from the tracks than the front. Probably a result of the old man spinning the tires as he struggled to get out, he thought. DJ tried the jack in front of the back tire, and it slipped into place with almost no room to spare. It would fit here and might raise the whole side of the car up enough; they’d just have to see.

DJ attached the handle and began to crank. What the little jack lacked in versatility, it made up for in lift. As the car began to rise, DJ watched the front tire. It remained stuck between the ties until the jack was almost as high as it would go. Then it popped out.

“All right!” Jacob said as the tire finally came free.

DJ smiled and finished cranking the jack up the last inch or so. “Now we just need to find a board or something to bridge the broken tie,” he said.

“What if we just fill the hole with gravel?”

“Why not?”

The two men took positions on each side of the wheel and used their hands to pack as much gravel as they could in the hole. When they were satisfied, DJ let the jack down. The tire was almost level with the others. Jacob started the car and easily pulled forward. He got out of the car with a huge smile on his face.

“Thank you so much, DJ.” He pulled his wallet out and retrieved a hundred-dollar bill. DJ could see that there wasn’t a lot of cash in the leather case. “Here you go.”

DJ almost waved the old guy off. After all, the money was probably not worth much, but he realized it might come in handy.

“Thank you, Jacob,” he said as he stuffed the bill down in his pocket.

“Is there anything else I can do for you? Would you like a ride to my son’s place? It’s not much, but you could get a decent meal.”

“Thanks, Jacob, but I just better be on my way. Good luck to you.”

“Same to you, DJ. You stay safe,” Jacob said.

“You might want to keep that revolver where you can get to it quickly. No telling in these times what you might run into.”

“So noted,” the old man said. “Thanks again. If you change your mind about coming by my son’s place, it’s about five miles north of the tracks on Route Eighty-seven. Just look for the bigmouth bass.”

mailbox that says Kessler.”

“Thanks,” DJ said with a single nod of his head.

Jacob climbed back in the Cadillac and started down the tracks. DJ walked back toward his quad, thinking about how he hadn't even made a third of the distance he had planned. When he reached the vehicle, he noticed that there were enough trees and other cover right there to hide him well enough until tomorrow evening. He pitched his tent and hit the sack.

* * *

Gabe woke up. He smacked his lips and made a face. His mouth was dry and gummy, and it tasted as if mice had nested in it. He got out of bed and trudged to the bathroom. The face in the mirror looked like crap. Bloodshot eyes, four days' worth of beard—coming off a three-day bender could do that to a man. Of course, a genuine hatred for one's self didn't help any. The face stared back with the same abhorrence that everyone held for Gabe. Well, almost everyone. He put some toothpaste on the brush and began the long process of making himself half human again. Next came a shower and then a shave.

As he combed his hair in the dresser mirror, he almost recognized himself. He was thinner, and his face was haggard, but he still looked a little like the Gabe from before. This thought pulled his eyes to the picture of the three of them. He only let himself look for a second, though. Any longer would send him back to the whiskey.

After dressing, Gabe walked into the living room and surveyed the single-wide mobile home. Nothing looked damaged or too out of place, indicating that he'd just drunk until he passed out this time. The front door was open, and he wondered why. Had someone come to see him? He couldn't remember for sure, but it seemed that someone had. He closed the door and then hurriedly straightened up the rest of the house.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach. Had he eaten in the past three days? The single plate in the sink said yes, but he couldn't remember when or what. He fixed some bacon, eggs, and biscuits and sat down at the table. He ate quickly, as his hunger really manifested itself after the first bite. When he was finished with breakfast, he quickly grabbed his hat and headed for the door. There was dirty work that needed to be done, and he was just callous enough to do it.

CHAPTER 4

DJ slept soundly until about ten. He probably would've slept longer, but the sound of voices jarred him awake. A little disoriented at first, he needed a minute to remember where he was and why. When it came back to him, he began to wonder if he'd been dreaming. The answer came when he heard them again. He quickly and quietly dressed and stepped out of the tent, rifle in hand.

He stood outside the door and listened. A moment later, he saw movement, and he squashed his instinct to hit the dirt. Even though he was more exposed than he'd like, it was safer to be still. He tracked the movement with his eyes, and a second later he identified two people on bicycles. A young man and a young woman were heading the same way he was going. They both had their mountain bikes loaded with gear, and the man had a trailer attached to his bike. It was one designed to carry children. DJ didn't know if it held its intended cargo or just more gear, but he thought it was a good plan. Not as good as his, but without night-vision equipment and a quad, it would be hard to improve on.

Of course, they shouldn't be talking, and he didn't see anything for self-defense, but it was still a good plan. They were moving quickly, the bikes were quiet, and they were able to carry a good bit of gear. Fortunately they passed without even knowing DJ was there. He relaxed and was thankful they were moving quickly because in daylight he realized the woods he'd set up camp in weren't as thick they'd seemed in the dark. His tent stood out the most, so he took it down and packed it. He moved the quad into a better spot and covered it again. Satisfied that things were as good as he could get them, he decided to fix some breakfast.

As he ate, he realized he had to be more careful about where he set up camp. If the bicyclists hadn't been talking to each other, he probably wouldn't have woken up. He wondered if anyone had passed when he was asleep. He doubted it, but it was possible. He might have to start using some precaution just in case someone did stumble onto his camp.

Later in the day, DJ was playing solitaire when he heard voices again. They were coming from down the tracks, and he guessed they were at least fifty yards away. It seemed as if the tracks were turning into a main thoroughfare.

I've got to get off these tracks as soon as I can.

He carefully moved to where he could see down the tracks. A small group of four or five was walking between the rails in a tight cluster. They were moving too fast to be watching for ambushes but too slow to cover much ground. The one in the lead had a shotgun, but DJ couldn't tell about the others, and the group was making no effort to be quiet or conceal themselves. DJ wondered how they'd made it this far with their lack of noise discipline. He could take them out easily if he had the notion. It was a good thing for them he was one of the good guys, he thought.

He was thankful for their leisurely pace, though. It gave him time to examine his camp once again. The four-wheeler was still not hidden as well as he would have liked, but the camouflage cover helped. If these people were looking for threats as they should have been, it might have been a problem, but DJ was sure they would pass right by just as the bicyclists had.

He found a spot where he could watch them as they walked by, but they wouldn't be able to see him

He lay down on his stomach with his rifle in front of him. His heart was beating at an increased pace, and he concentrated on his breathing to bring it back down to a normal level. The walkers were getting closer, and he was able to make out some of the words.

“. . . tired . . . when . . . stop . . .,” a distinctly female voice said. The response by a male voice was too muddled to discern.

“. . . sucks!”

DJ snickered quietly. After a few more minutes, the travelers came into view of DJ’s hide. There were four of them, a family from the look of things. The father was in the lead carrying a huge backpack. He also had a hunting-type shotgun in his hands. His overlapping belly almost balanced out the backpack. A woman was behind him, presumably his wife. She wasn’t as fat as her husband, but she was close. She had a large purse draped across one shoulder and a small duffel-type bag over the other. A teenage girl followed next, trailed by a preteen boy. The kids both had day packs, probably the ones they used for their schoolbooks. They were both in decent shape, especially compared to the parents. Mom and Dad were sucking wind, but the kids didn’t seem to be too overworked.

“Can we at least stop and rest for a few minutes?” the mom asked. It was the same whiny voice DJ had heard before. He held his breath—he didn’t need them resting this close to him.

“Look, Linda, we can’t stop every five minutes if we want to make it to your sister’s before we run out of food,” the father said. “It’ll be dinnertime before too long, and we’ll take a nice rest then, okay?”

The woman said nothing.

DJ breathed a sigh of relief. He wondered how far the family was going. Probably not too far at the pace they were going. As they got even with his camp, he noticed that the girl, while not beautiful, had a cute face and a superb body.

She might have been sixteen or seventeen, he thought. She began to look side to side as if she knew someone was watching her. DJ realized that he was staring at her and he quickly averted his eyes. He had heard that people could feel when they were being watched. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that the girl had just started looking around.

“Hey, Dad, what’s that?” she asked.

DJ realized she was pointing right at his four-wheeler.

“I don’t know,” the dad answered. “It looks like stacks of boxes that somebody covered up. I’ll take a closer look.” He dropped his pack. The woman dropped her two bags as well and plopped down on the duffel.

The man was stepping over the track as DJ positioned his rifle. He didn’t intend to shoot the man, but DJ had to cover him just in case. The man was only twenty-five or thirty yards away, and his shotgun could make mincemeat out of DJ at that range.

“Hold it where you are,” DJ barked. The man froze, his grip on the shotgun tightening. Slowly he began to turn toward DJ.

“Please don’t move,” DJ said. “I have a rifle on you, and I’ll have to use it if you point that shotgun at me.”

“Don’t worry,” the man said nervously. “It’s not loaded.”

What a moron, DJ thought. He wondered if the man was a bigger idiot for carrying an empty gun or for admitting that it wasn’t loaded. Of course the man could have been lying, but DJ had a strong suspicion that he was telling the truth. DJ thought about how easy it would be for someone to kill the man, woman, and boy and take the girl.

Lucky for them I’m not that kind of guy.

“Well, there’s no way for me to know that for sure, so how about you just set it down?”

The man complied. His eyes moved back and forth searching for whoever was talking to him.

“The stuff you see is mine, and I’d just as soon you didn’t mess with it,” DJ said.

The man’s head turned toward DJ. His eyes were still looking, but his ears had at least narrowed down the search field. “I understand. We’ll just be on our way.” He started to bend over and reach for his weapon.

“Don’t do that!”

The man stopped at midbend. “I can’t leave my gun here.”

“I don’t expect you to. Let’s just get your daughter to pick it up and carry it until you get out of sight.”

“Whatever you say, mister. I don’t want any trouble.” He backed up to his pack. “Tammy, go pick up my gun.”

Tammy looked back and forth as though her dad was talking to another person and she was trying to figure out to whom. DJ was amused by the girl’s reaction. He decided to have some fun.

“Yes, you, Tammy,” he said. “Walk over to your daddy’s shotgun.”

The girl obeyed.

“Now put your hands up and turn around so I can make sure you don’t have any weapons.”

The girl did as she was instructed, and DJ watched, but not for weapons. He smiled. “Even better than I thought,” he said to himself.

“Okay, now pick up the gun and make sure the muzzle is pointed straight up. You can give it back to your dad once you round the next bend.”

Tammy just nodded and continued to follow instructions. DJ wondered if they would make it to where they were going. The way they were traveling, making noise, and walking down the middle of the tracks in broad daylight, their odds weren’t good. He could have helped them, but he was already behind schedule, and slowing to walking speed would only throw him further behind. He couldn’t afford that, especially now that more people seemed to be using the tracks. He would just give the man some advice.

“Listen, buddy, when Tammy gives you the gun back, I’d suggest you load it and stop making so much noise. Anybody could have killed you before you even knew they were there if they wanted to. I heard you four or five minutes before you even got here. If you’re smart, you’ll get off the tracks and walk in the brush. Quietly.”

“Okay, mister. Thanks for your help.”

DJ watched them walk out of sight and wondered if they would take his suggestions to heart.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Finally it was time to leave. DJ packed up what little he needed to and pulled a fuel can off the trailer to fill up his bike. It took a little more gas than he’d expected, probably because he’d needed to slow down to avoid obstacles. It was all right, though. He had brought extra gas just in case. He examined the tracks to make sure they were clear. Then he mounted his machine. Pulling up between the tracks, he was glad to be on his way.

* * *

Walking down the steps of his trailer, Gabe looked up at the sun. He didn’t need a watch to know it was three thirty. That was another indication he’d really tied one on. He saw that weeds were trying once again to take over his garden, pulled a hoe out of the shed and fought back the undesirable flora. Sweat from the heat and the work poured out of his body. He could smell the toxins he’d poisoned

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