



Liberators: A Novel of the Coming Global Collapse (Coming Collapse)

By Rawles James Wesley

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The *New York Times* bestselling author of *Patriots* and *How to Survive the End of the World as We Know It* returns with another riveting postapocalyptic tale

New York Times bestselling author James Wesley, Rawles has won a large readership among the growing ranks of survivalists and preppers with novels that combine fast-paced adventure with useful how-to information. Set against a backdrop of global socioeconomic collapse, *Liberators* features Afghanistan War vet Ray McGregor and Phil Adams, a Defense Intelligence Agency officer. When the United States is engulfed by chaos, a tyrannical army of occupation ruthlessly restores order. Operating out of a sparsely populated town in remote western Canada, the two men fight the occupiers to ensure not only their own survival, but also the future of North America.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Liberators*

“[A]nother entertaining and thought-provoking novel, describing steps people can take in the event of a global collapse.”

--The Huffington Post

Praise for James Wesley, Rawles:

“Rawles is an amazingly gifted author who has singlehandedly reignited the postapocalyptic thriller. *Survivors* is an instant classic.” – Brad Thor, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Rawles' *Survivors* is well worth reading. . . well-written and informative, and speaks with an honesty and bluntness often missing from the policy prognostications of the political elite.” – *The New American*

Praise for *Expatriates*:

"A wonderful work of fiction" –Alphecca

"*Expatriates* doesn't disappoint in the technical nor page-turning sense" –Survivor Jane

“Rawles’ latest novel, set during a future global collapse, features characters in different parts of the world coping with life stripped of modern conveniences and technology... readers [can] jump into the beginning of the end at any point. For dystopia and action fans.” –*Booklist*

“Meticulously researched with a wealth of local and technical details.” –Fourmilog

“As with all of Rawles’ books, you get a lot of knowledge of survival stuff and [*Expatriates*] is no different. He tells you why, how, and what product they used which is very helpful to other survivalists.” –Space Coast Preppers

“*Expatriates* is a very entertaining read, especially in perilous times like these.” –*Western Courier*

About the Author

Former US Army Intelligence officer James Wesley, Rawles is a well-known survival lecturer and author. He is the founder and editor of SurvivalBlog.com, the nation’s most popular blog on family preparedness, which gets more than 300,000 visitors per week. The *New York Times* bestselling author of four previous survivalist thrillers and a nonfiction survival guide, Rawles lives in an undisclosed location west of the Rockies.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Phil Adams—Defense Intelligence Agency counterintelligence case officer with the Defense Clandestine Service (DCS) Task Group Tall Oak, Washington at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

Jacob “Jake” Altmiller—Hardware store manager in Tavares, Florida.

Janelle (McGregor) Altmiller—Real estate agent in Tavares, Florida. Wife of Jacob Altmiller. Sister of Rhiannon (McGregor) Jeffords and Ray McGregor. Daughter of Alan and Claire McGregor.

Lance Alan Altmiller—Son of Jacob and Janelle Altmiller. Eleven years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Terrence Billy—Garbage truck driver, Williams Lake, British Columbia. Member of the Secwepemc tribe.

PO3 Jordan Foster—Navy SEAL BUD/S student, United States Phil Bucklew Naval Special Warfare Center (NSWC), Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, California.

Larry Guyot—Owner/manager of Guyot Railway and Engine Maintenance, Ltd., Prince George, British Columbia.

Jerry Hatcher—Cessna 180G bush pilot, Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

Dustin Hodges—Deputy sheriff, Bradfordsville, Kentucky.

Peter Jeffords—American missionary from New Hampshire.

Rhiannon “Rhi” (McGregor) Jeffords—Missionary originally from Bella Coola, British Columbia. Wife of Peter Jeffords. Sister of Janelle (McGregor) Altmiller and Ray McGregor.

Sarah Jeffords—Daughter of Peter and Rhiannon Jeffords. Seven years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Hal Jensen—Section chief, DCS Task Group Tall Oak, Washington, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

Joshua Kim—NSA security officer, Washington, D.C.

Jean LaCroix—Son of Megan LaCroix. Three years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Leo LaCroix—Son of Megan LaCroix. Five years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Malorie “Mal” LaCroix—Younger sister of Megan LaCroix. Former machinist in Kearneysville, West Virginia.

Megan LaCroix—Intelligence analyst NSA contractor at Fort Meade, Maryland. Divorced mother of Jean and Leo LaCroix.

Ken Layton—Former mechanic and member of the Northwest Militia.

Stan Leaman—Dairyman from Anahim Lake, British Columbia.

Sylvia Leaman—Cousin of Stan Leaman. Sixteen years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Kevin Lendel—Member of the Northwest Militia.

Alan McGregor—Retired cattle rancher, Bella Coola, British Columbia. Father of Ray McGregor, Janelle (McGregor) Altmiller, and Rhiannon (McGregor) Jeffords.

Claire McGregor—Wife of Alan McGregor. Mother of Ray McGregor, Janelle (McGregor) Altmiller, and Rhiannon (McGregor) Jeffords.

Ray McGregor—Afghanistan War veteran and military historian. Originally from near Bella Coola, British Columbia. Living near Newberry, Michigan. Son of Alan and Claire McGregor. Brother of both Rhiannon (McGregor) Jeffords and Janelle (McGregor) Altmiller.

Brian Norton—Defense Intelligence Agency counterintelligence case officer and electronics expert with DCS Task Group Tall Oak, Washington at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

Scott Paulsen—Defense Intelligence Agency counterintelligence case officer and Russian linguist with DCS Task Group Tall Oak, Washington at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

Lamar Simons—Mayor of West Hamlin, West Virginia.

Rob Smith—Cessna Amphibian float plane pilot, Tavares, Florida.

Chad Sommers—Grandson and adoptive ward of Ron and Tracy Sommers. Eight years old at the onset of the Crunch.

Ron Sommers—Rancher and former Marine Corps 3002 ground supply officer, living near Alta, Wyoming.

Tracy Sommers—Wife of Ron Sommers, living near Alta, Wyoming.

Clarence Tang—Defense Intelligence Agency counterintelligence case officer and Chinese linguist with

DCS Task Group Tall Oak, Washington at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

Aaron Wetherspoon—Retired U.S. Navy chaplain.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Unlike most novel sequels, the storyline of *Liberators* is contemporaneous with the events described in my four previously published novels, *Patriots*, *Survivors*, *Founders*, and *Expatriates*. Thus, you need not read them first (or subsequently), but you'll likely find them entertaining. For those who have read them, you will find that this novel ties together the four previous books. My regular blog posts are available at: <http://www.SurvivalBlog.com>.

1

EXIGENT CIRCUMSTANCES

The backbone of surprise is fusing speed with secrecy.

—Carl von Clausewitz

Seattle, Washington—October, the First Year

To Phil Adams, it seemed that his life had become jammed in “fast-forward.” Even though his job as a contract counterintelligence agent with Defense Clandestine Service (DCS) Task Group Tall Oak, Washington at Joint Base Lewis-McChord was already fast-paced, recent global socioeconomic events were spinning out of control. The mass media was abuzz about the inflation jumping above 100 percent, annually. Federal debt obligations had reached absurd numbers, the stock markets had reached dizzying heights, and there were rumblings about foreign repudiations of U.S. Treasury paper.

As he drove toward a routine security paperwork inspection with a defense contractor, Phil Adams had his attention glued to the car radio. He punched the radio's scan button often, jumping from news report to news report. The stories that he heard this morning were the worst yet: rioting in Detroit and Cleveland and rumors of mass demonstrations being planned by “community activists” in many other major cities. Phil muttered to himself, “This is starting to damage my calm.”

Then Phil got a call on his cell phone from his manager, Hal Jensen.

“I need you to either get back to the Section office or get to a STU phone, pronto!” Hal said.

“I'm on my way to Peregrine Systems for a quarterly,” Phil answered. “I'm just a two-minute drive from there. They've got a secure phone. I'll call you in five mikes or less.”

Just three minutes later, Phil called Hal on the secure line. “What's so urgent?”

“I just got a priority tasking via the high side. We've been ordered to fully update and upload all of our electronic holdings, clean our Section out of the SCIF, degauss and destroy all of the Tall Oak local classified holdings, and turn over the entire SCIF to the FEMA staff. I've also been directed to close out all employment contracts—both full-timers and the ad hocs.”

Phil was stunned. After a long pause, he replied, “Okay, I’ll make some excuses here and be back at the office ASAP.”

• • •

Phil drove back to JBLM—still listening to the bad economic news on the radio. Phil was thirty-two years old, of average height, with a handsome face, brown hair, blue eyes, and short-cropped hair that was turning prematurely gray. The gray hair was an advantage on post, where everyone seeing him in civilian clothes assumed that he was either a field-grade officer or a senior NCO who was off duty. Even though he wasn’t tall, soldiers had a tendency to step out of the way when he walked down the hall. His physical bearing triggered immediate respect.

As he walked into the Tall Oak Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF), he could immediately feel the tension.

Hal spelled it out tersely: The economic collapse had forced a drastic cutback in federal programs. For the first time ever, intelligence agencies had their budgets axed, and the deepest of those cuts were made to agencies with contractors. They were to destroy all of their holdings and shut down the Section. Their communications equipment would all be handed over to the FEMA staff. However, three of their computers designed specifically for handling SCI traffic would be useless to the FEMA staffers without their removable hard drives. But that was of little concern to the departing Tall Oakers.

Tall Oak had one locked storage cage in the far end of the building that was used to hold their Field SCIF gear. This cage contained some dusty equipment in plain view: two pallets of coiled concertina barbed wire, three folding tables, a half dozen folding chairs, a bundled GP small tent, two sledgehammers, a shovel, a four-wheeled utility cart, a two-wheeled dolly, and a tall stack of galvanized forty-gallon steel trash barrels that could be used as burn barrels. None of this gear had been used in recent memory, and the only time that Phil ever saw it was when he was escorting visiting inspectors. In the context of their work, the Field SCIF gear was essentially a collection of relics and an administrative nuisance—just a few more items to count each time that they had to do a PBO inventory.

Fortunately, with digitization, the volume of hard-copy classified material that DCS Task Group Tall Oak stored had decreased in recent years. Most of their holdings were in the form of magnetic media that could be destroyed by degaussing them—passing them through an intense magnetic field. But the task of destroying all of the paper documents would still be enormous.

Since the SCIF had only three crosscut paper shredders, Jensen decided to set up a temporary Field SCIF in the motor pool area behind the building to burn most of the documents. Stringing the three strands of concertina wire went quickly. They didn’t bother staking it down. Inside the concertina wire enclosure, eight burn barrels were set up in a semicircle. Green plastic Scepter cans of diesel fuel were hauled out and used to stoke the barrels since documents stacked more than five pages thick did not burn well, just by themselves. There were also fire extinguishers nearby, if needed.

Many cartloads of documents were wheeled out of the SCIF and down the hall to the burn barrels. The flames were a hazard (since the barrels had to be stirred regularly with a length of pipe), and the smoke was irritating. Intermittent rain showers made the work miserable as wet ashes began to cling to every surface.

As they worked, Phil’s coworker Clarence Tang listened with earbuds to news reports on a compact FM jogging radio, which he had strapped around his upper arm. He relayed the news headlines tersely and sporadically, half shouting, “There are still riots in progress in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles. Now in California there are also riots and looting in Oakland, Stockton, and San Francisco. So far

there is just sporadic looting in Portland and downtown Seattle. They say that Vancouver, BC, seems almost normal, except for a couple of protests by ‘the usual activists.’ They’re describing the freeway traffic like it’s rush hour, but at midday. Seattle traffic is definitely slowing down, and they may be closing Sea-Tac airport since there are riots in so many destination cities. Seems like most metro areas with populations over a half million are in trouble. Part of Miami is in flames, out of control.”

Phil discovered that the reinforced concertina wire–handling gloves worked well at protecting his hands when he stirred the drums of burning documents. Meanwhile, inside the SCIF the bulk degaussers were kept humming, demagnetizing various media. The various “wiped” removable hard disks, disk drives, and tape cartridges were then carried out and smashed with sledgehammers, and then burned for good measure. Hal even had them burn the stacks of generic classified document cover sheets, even though they themselves were not classified. (Jensen always held a “belt and suspenders” attitude about some things.)

Next, they checked the serial numbers of all of their handguns and locked them in one of the GSA high-security drawers. Unlike the others, Phil kept his holster, because it was his personal property. He reminded Hal that he had a SIG P228 at home and asked if he could keep his two issued spare thirteen-round magazines.

Hal nodded. “Sure. Keep them—and here are three more for you. Magazines are classified as ‘expendable’ items and aren’t even listed in our Property Book. Consider them an early retirement gift from Uncle Sam.”

An inventory of all badges and credentials followed. Finally came the SCI debriefing for Phil, Brian, Clarence, and Scott. It seemed strangely surreal, as they sat and watched the same debriefing DVD that they had shown to countless others. They were all exhausted, sweaty, and grimy with ashes, and they smelled like diesel fuel. Once they had signed their DD Form 1848 debriefing memorandums (which reminded them that they were still bound by the strict terms of their DD Form 1847-1 SCI nondisclosure agreements for the rest of their lives), they were officially read off of SCI.

While they were signing their debrief/nondisclosure agreements, two members of the FEMA staff arrived. These men seemed confused and uncertain of what they should do in the Mother of All Emergencies. They soon gravitated to the television and watched CNN, transfixed, like millions of other Americans.

After signing out for the last time and a few handshakes out in the hall, the Tall Oakers simply drove off to an uncertain future.

• • •

Phil returned to his apartment exhausted. He grabbed some leftover sushi takeout boxes from his refrigerator and ate, sipping a bottle of lemon-flavored sparkling spring water. He then resumed organizing his gear—a process that had started a week before. Most of his field gear was sorted into a stack of forest-green Rubbermaid storage totes. Alongside it were his two Pelican long gun cases and nineteen military surplus ammunition cans, six cases of MREs, a tan military surplus water can, and two white cardboard case lots of Tannerite binary exploding target powder.

Phil had two vehicles: a 2012 Chevrolet Malibu, which he used to commute to work, and a 2015 GMC Canyon midsize crew cab four-wheel-drive pickup truck. Just a few months before the Crunch, he’d traded in his blue 2009 GMC Sierra for the Canyon. Outwardly, it looked similar to his old Sierra pickup, but it was scaled down for better gas mileage. Immediately after buying it, he purchased a T.A.G. Crown-S camper shell for his pickup, a common accessory to have in western Washington’s wet climate.

When he first bought the Canyon pickup, it had seemed fairly roomy. But when he did a test load using his

storage totes and gun cases, he could soon see that he would have to rethink his “Get Out of Dodge” packing plan. While his plastic totes could be stacked two-deep in his Sierra pickup, there was not quite enough room in the Canyon, so he had to buy a set of half-height totes to use for the second layer.

In his final preparations, Phil had to be selective about what was going with him and what he’d abandon in his apartment. He first pulled a few useful items out of his car, like road maps, a tire-pressure gauge, a digital recorder, a Maglite flashlight, and some road flares. Then he filled up the back end of the pickup almost completely, and crammed some clothing and his extra sleeping bag in the gaps around the bins and ammo cans. He also loaded up both of the seats on the right side of the pickup’s cab. He left only the driver’s seat and a driver’s-side rear seat open, knowing that he’d need room to recline his seat to sleep on the long trip ahead.

He always made a habit of leaving his pickup topped off with gas. This served him well today, since every gas station within fifty miles of Seattle had enormous queues of waiting customers.

Although technically Phil still had DCIPS termination paperwork to complete, as far as he was concerned, that could wait until “normal” times. He said to himself, “They have their SIGs, they have their badges and credentials, and I’ve been read off. Everything else is just piddly paperwork. That can *wait*.”

2

THE HISTORIAN

Fear not, but trust in Providence, Wherever thou may’st be.

—Thomas Haynes Bayly

DuPont, Washington—October, the First Year

Phil Adams had met Ray McGregor when they were both deployed in Afghanistan, stationed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Robinson, in Helmand Province. They both had a fascination with military history. They struck up a conversation in a MWR tent when Phil noticed that Ray was reading the book *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*, a history of the Soviet army’s invasion of Afghanistan. They were both Christians, and both were politically conservative and viewed politics with a jaundiced eye. They became fast friends.

After leaving active duty, Phil Adams became a counterintelligence contractor at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, in Washington, but he kept in contact with Ray via e-mail and Skype. Ray was the oddball of the McGregor family. After his service with the Canadian army, Ray studied military history at Western University, in London, Ontario. But he had dropped out in his senior year to work on a book about World War II veterans in Michigan. Often living in a fifth-wheel “Toy Hauler” camping trailer towed by his pickup truck, he’d first encamped in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and later in Newberry, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

With the exception of some things that he’d left in storage at his parents’ ranch, everything that Ray owned fit in his pickup and Toy Hauler trailer. This trailer held his enduro motorcycle, a hydraulic wood splitter, two chain saws, fuel cans, and his various woodcutting tools. He also carried a small emergency food reserve in the trailer, which included two Rubbermaid tote bins filled with canned foods and three cases of Canadian military individual meal packs (IMPs). These were packed in heavy-duty plastic-foil retort pouches and were the equivalent of U.S. military MREs.

Ray had already toured the inside of a B-24 at an air show in Georgia. That plane was the world’s only

restored flying B-24J, owned by the Collings Foundation. But Ray also wanted to see where they were produced, so he made arrangements via e-mail and completed the short drive to the Willow Run plant. Originally built by the Ford Motor Company, it was an enormous five million square feet in a 1.25-mile-long building. The size of the building was awe-inspiring. At the height of production in 1944, the plant was producing a Liberator at a rate of one every sixty-three minutes, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. By the war's end, the plant had produced 8,685 B-24s. At one point, forty-two thousand people worked at the plant.

After a change in ownership and several repurposings, the plant was finally shut down in 2010. Ray walked through the empty shell of the building, accompanied by a security guard as his tour guide, in the summer of 2013. The guard, who drove Ray between sections of the building in an electric golf cart, was part of a skeleton crew at the plant. The guard was mostly quiet during Ray's hour-long tour, though he mentioned that most of the people whom he drove around the plant were retired Ford and GM employees. Some of them, he said, had made M16 rifles there, for GM's Hydramatic Division, during the Vietnam War. But a few were "the real old-timers," who dated back to the days of B-24 production. As the golf cart hummed them back to the guard office for Ray to sign out, his guide mentioned one last fact: "The lore here is that the turntable two-thirds of the way along the assembly line was put in for tax purposes. That gave each B-24 a ninety-degree turn before final assembly. That way, the company paid taxes on the entire plant to Washtenaw County, because the county taxed at a lower rate than Wayne County did. The airport, you see, is in Wayne County. And you know, General Motors still pays five million a year to Ypsilanti Township in property tax on this building and the 335 acres it sits on."

Ray was sad to hear that the plant was scheduled to be demolished, and GM was faced with \$35 million in environmental cleanup costs.

Other than a few articles that were published in *Military History* magazine, Ray was a failure as a history writer. He had never found a literary agent, and his four uncompleted book manuscripts had never been published. He made most of his meager living cutting firewood.

When Ray moved near Newberry in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, he kept his trailer parked at a sprawling farm that belonged to the Harrison family. Four generations of the Harrisons had lived on the farm. Ray had met them when he began a series of taped interviews with Bob Harrison, who had been a B-24 bomber pilot in World War II.

Ray's own great-grandfather Samuel McGregor was a cattleman. He had been a remittance man from near Greenock, Scotland—a city west of Glasgow. He settled in British Columbia in 1913, and Ray's family had been there ever since. Ray had two sisters, Rhiannon and Janelle. While Janelle and her husband, Jacob, ran a hardware store in Tavares, Florida, Rhiannon had moved with her family to the Philippines to do missionary work.

The last e-mail that Ray sent to Rhiannon before Internet service was disrupted read:

Dear Rhi:

Things are getting bad here, even in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I parlayed the last of my cash into food and fuel. The inflation is so crazy that to wait just one day would mean that I'd only get half as many groceries for my money.

I talked with Mom and Dad, via Skype. (I'm not sure how it is in the P.I., but here in the U.S. the phone lines are getting flaky AND are jammed with calls.) Dad said that they are doing okay, but they sound befuddled by the economic situation. Dad asked me for advice on finding a stock that would be safe to invest in. Ha! I

suggested putting all of their remaining cash in food, fuel, salt blocks, baling twine, and ammo.

My old friend Phil Adams told me that I need to “Get Out of Dodge,” ASAP. The plan is for Phil to meet me at the ranch. I’m not sure if I can get enough fuel to get out West though. I think I can trade some ammo for fuel . . . I also have a few silver dimes and quarters, but those are effectively now my life savings. (They are now worth a fortune, at least in terms of the Funny Money U.S. Dollar.)

I’ll be praying for both you and Janelle and your families.

May God Watch Over You,

Ray

3

DAILY GRIND

Of all the modern notions generated by mere wealth the worst is this: the notion that domesticity is dull and tame. Inside the home (they say) is dead decorum and routine; outside is adventure and variety. . . . The truth is, that to the moderately poor the home is the only place of liberty. . . . It is the only spot on the earth where a man can alter arrangements suddenly, make an experiment or indulge in a whim. . . . The home is not the one tame place in the world of adventure. It is the one wild place in the world of rules and set tasks.

—G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong With the World*

Charles Town, West Virginia—September, the First Year

After serving in the military, Megan LaCroix did her best to keep everything in perspective. It was amazing what conditions a human being could get used to. The right wheel well of the Ford 350 Econoline that she was riding in always prevented her from really getting comfortable on the long vanpool commute from Charles Town, West Virginia, to Fort Meade, Maryland. By the time she hit Frederick, Maryland, she could think only of how incompatible her long legs were with the van. But on days that she did not have to drive, the front passenger seat did offer a power port to plug in her old clunker Toshiba laptop. Megan would access her favorite blogs before leaving the house in the morning and then save them in a date-indexed folder for that day so that she could read up on the blogs and news feeds that she liked, such as the *Paratus Familia* blog, Patrice Lewis of Rural-Revolution.com, ChrisMartenson.com, and others. Most of her news links came from the DrudgeReport.com, and that particular morning took her a few extra precious minutes to get all the news feeds on Governor Martin O’Malley’s new Comprehensive Safe Citizens Firearm Safety Act, which had caught her attention. Even though she was not a Maryland resident, she did work in that state and ultimately it was its restrictive gun laws that caused her and her former husband, Eric, to choose Kearneysville, West Virginia, as a place to put down roots and raise their family. It was the early 2000s when they were first stationed at Fort Meade/NSA-Washington (NSA-W) together, and they wanted to live away from the hustle and bustle of the Beltway where gas was only \$1.43 a gallon and credit was easy.

Megan was a former Marine, and while in the USMC she had been a Marine Corps intelligence specialist. Her career started out rough with an unexpected emergency leave during boot camp, but she quickly excelled in her MOS during her first duty station at Company I in NSA-Hawaii. It was there that she had met Eric Turner, a Navy CTR3. After they’d gotten married and started their family in Hawaii, their respective career detailers assigned them both to Fort Meade, Maryland, otherwise known as NSA-Washington. This was the

headquarters of the NSA. Megan was assigned to Company B and continued to progress professionally as an analyst.

Now life was much different for her; she was divorced, a single mom of two young boys, and she was underwater with her home's value. When her lease was up on her BMW 325i she simplified her life by buying a 1996 Honda Accord for two thousand dollars cash. The car seemed like it always needed something, but despite its multiple kinks would always start up, thanks largely to the maintenance and repair work of Malorie LaCroix, her younger sister.

Although it went against her nature, Megan eventually stopped paying her mortgage. She had tried to communicate with her bank, Bank of America, but they were impervious to working with her at all. So she got their attention the only way people could before the Crunch, by mailing them her house keys. Megan still kept up on the taxes and made sure that the power bill got paid, but she didn't feel bad about no longer paying the mortgage. By then Bank of America was essentially a "federal utility."

The federal government tipped over the critical domino that would lead to the inevitable Crunch with the passing of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) Act. This essentially threw open the doors of the U.S. Treasury and the banking cartel would "plus up" all the bottom lines of their franchise constituents. Banks were no longer concerned with meeting the bottom line; they had access to the tap where the money comes out and "too big to fail" meant all the new "wholly owned subsidiaries" were indeed getting theirs.

The Fed chairman was running the printing press in high gear while the Treasury secretary was trying to find a higher gear yet. Between the two of them they perpetuated their predecessors' invention. One Beltway pundit called it "Ben and Tim's self-licking ice cream cone." This was a monetization scheme euphemistically called Quantitative Easing, wherein one part of the government sold its debt to the other part of the government. It was an ongoing travesty that far eclipsed the brief Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac disasters. The American people, for the most part, lay down for it, and although there was substantive pushback from conservative and libertarian pundits, few elected officials were willing to stop the music. It was, after all, creating a semblance of a "recovery," and the stock market was soaring.

As the commuter van cruised along, Megan read up on the new gun-grab legislation. "Here I am commuting two hours each way and barely making ends meet, and MOM wants to grab more guns from law-abiding citizens. Soon only the criminals will be able to carry guns," she mumbled to herself.

Chuck, the man whose turn it was to drive that morning, heard her speaking and said, "What was that?"

"Nothing," Megan replied, "I was just talking to myself." She knew better than to open that can of worms with Chuck. Chuck was a committed liberal who had searched on eBay to find a "Kerry-Edwards" sticker to round out the "Hope and Change" motif he had on the back of his Toyota Prius.

The morning commute from Charles Town, West Virginia, to NSA-W averaged two hours, and starting the day with the alarm clock's buzz at 3:30 A.M. was torturous. The lack of sleep was aging Megan well past her biological age of her late twenties, though not wearing any makeup allowed her to streamline her morning routine. If she hit the rowing machine for twenty minutes, took a shower, downloaded her news feeds, and grabbed a piece of toast with peanut butter on the way out the door it was a good day.

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Malorie LaCroix was usually awake by 6:00 A.M. She would get her young nephews, Leo and Jean, ready for the day, pointed in the right direction to do their chores, fed, and in their seats to start homeschooling by 8:00 A.M. sharp. She had motivated them by saying that they could eat only after the animals did—a lesson

underscored when they had to memorize II Thessalonians 3:10 one morning on empty stomachs after refusing to feed and water the chickens and sheep.

Megan's modest three-bedroom house on six acres offered her the solace on weekends that she desired along with her two sons and Malorie, who lived with them. Kearneysville was a small, quiet town in Jefferson County along Route 9 between Charles Town and Shepherdstown.

Megan bought the house with Eric, who wanted to live out in the country to raise their family. Kearneysville had a downtown consisting of a bank, a post office, an insurance agency, a used car dealership, and a Presbyterian church. The gun laws were much less strict than in neighboring Maryland, and West Virginia offered an incentive for new residents to move in, enticing young professionals with lower taxes.

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Megan was able to briefly tune out Chuck and Carol bantering about some superficial topic by listening to the AudioHopper.com downloads that she had remembered to check her RSS feed for last night. AudioHopper.com was a collection of short podcasts that were popular blogs read aloud and recorded for busy people on the go. As she stared out the window watching the fall colors streak by, she thought about how different life was for her now. She had never imagined she would be in this position: divorced with two young boys, struggling on one income in a job she hated, all while stepping up preparations for an uncertain future.

The commuter van was on I-70 now passing Mt. Airy and traffic was mercifully light. Megan scrolled through more news feeds about North Korea's saber rattling.

Chuck eased off of the highway to the Canine Road exit and got the van in the queue for the Vehicle Control Point (VCP). The morning pair of DJs on the radio played off each other's apathy while reading the morning news. Silver was up to forty-four dollars per ounce, France and Poland were petitioning the EU to ban all U.S. GMO crops, oil was trading at \$142.88 a barrel, and the stock market was climbing above sixteen thousand points on the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

As Chuck lowered the radio, he said, "Sounds like the president's reinvestment in the economy really achieved the jobs objective—sixteen thousand thousand points on the Dow! I bet somewhere in Alaska, Sarah Palin is looking for a Russian visa." Carol giggled, which only encouraged Chuck. "Don't bother rolling your eyes, Megan. We're only joking about your Caribou Barbie."

The NSA cop at the gate dutifully scanned everyone's badge. One of the advantages of driving in the commuter pools was that the parking was much better. Any car that got on campus after 7:30 A.M., depending on where they worked, would have to park a long way off and negotiate their way to one of the entry points into the Puzzle Palace.

Megan always took the stairs, seven flights up to her office in OPS2A. Her coworkers were not especially cheerful; there had been a lot of lost time and wages with the newly implemented furloughs.

Megan surveyed the milieu in the office and thought, "Wow, they sure are getting a lot of mileage out of this sequestration—it's still a net increase in spending over last year!" She quietly got to her cubicle before Heidi, the head of the section, spotted her. Megan logged on to the four accounts she had to monitor: NIPRnet, SIPRnet, NSA-Net, and JWICS.

Anywhere within NSA, people noticed the rift between those who wear the blue badge (those trusted civilian servants of the government) and the green-badged personnel—the contractors. For most green-badge people

their professional aspiration was to achieve a blue badge by any means. The illusion was that blue badgers were secure, couldn't possibly be fired, and would retire with full bennies from Uncle Sugar forever—guaranteed by the full faith and credit of the U.S. federal government. However, as the news of the economy only worsened, the furloughs only seemed to clue in the thousands of people who worked for the Agency. Everyone, blue or green badge, could not help but notice that the goose that kept on laying the golden eggs might not be able to keep pace forever.

As Megan brought up her NSA-Net (“high side”) account, the lead story on the NSA-Daily home page was about the budgetary crisis stemming from the lack of an actual budget being passed. As usual, Republican senators were getting the yellow journalism treatment for their unwillingness to just spend the tax. All NSA-ers were urged to contact their elected officials to ask that they pass a budgetary measure to continue to fund national security efforts, especially in the wake of the brewing turmoil with North Korea. “Wow, nothing like appealing to fear,” Megan said to herself as she began to triage her in-box.

4

CHOOSE CIVILITY

At its core, then, political correctness is nothing more nor less than the unjust intimidation of others into thinking and speaking a certain way. As such, it is pure totalitarian mind control.

—David Kupelian

Friedman Auditorium, NSA-W, Fort Meade, Maryland—Six Months Before the Crunch

April was usually warm and humid in central Maryland, but this was one of those countertrend cold snaps that lead to more than a few global warming jokes around the water cooler. It was the monthly Equal Opportunity, “Choose Civility,” and counter-complacency strategy meeting for Megan’s department. Megan was not one for touchy-feely subjective policies, but such was the way of the federal government in those days. “If you want their money, you have to put up with their rules,” she said to herself as she found a seat in the Friedman Auditorium toward the back left. “You never know, I may even be able to make an early discreet exit, this way.”

Megan had given up soft drinks more than two years before, but she was going to need something to keep herself awake for another “insomnia proofing” EO meeting. The speaker giving the talk this morning was late, and the improv MC, who looked like a model for a Calvin Klein ad, was making small talk and asking for everyone’s patience as he gave some statistics about the new Howard County program called “Choose Civility.”

Megan had routinely endured the “moonshine” jokes from her colleagues jeering at the recycled glass jars she used to transport green tea with her to work. Today she was grateful for having given up the chick purse for the “maternal urban assault pack,” as Malorie called it. The large satchel allowed her to carry a lot of valuable things with her, including an Altoids tin filled with small survival items; a six-inch nonmetallic knife with the sheath sewn to the inside of the bag for easy presentation; a Gideon’s pocket New Testament, paper maps of the Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Virginia areas vacuum-sealed in a pouch; a made-in-America Maglite LED XL50; and, of course, baby wipes. “No mom should be caught without them,” she would tell herself. She also carried her green tea sweetened with local honey in the outside pocket of her satchel.

Joshua Kim was a rather laid-back NSA cop. He had made an easy transition from U.S. Air Force Security Forces NCO to work as a “blue badger” at NSA. He still believed in “to protect and to serve” and was driven by an innate sense to help people, which was counter to the training that most law enforcement officers received these days. Typically he arrived before the morning pass-down brief and get breakfast. Getting in early meant that he could traverse the campus easier before the traffic, get a cup of Starbucks coffee from the Sodexo kiosk, and catch up on the news headlines, albeit from the Communist News Network (CNN)—he was sure to keep his filter on.

Joshua happened to be on the Headquarters Building rotation that morning. After being called in to settle a parking dispute between two senior executives over who could get the last coveted parking spot near the Headquarters Building, he resumed his hall patrol. Preferring the stairs to the escalator for the free daily exercise, he would inconspicuously time himself by starting to hum the melody of a hymn on one hallway and seeing if he could finish it by the time he reached the end of the hall on the next floor. It was not uncommon that he was stopped by someone asking for directions; the NSA campus could seem like a maze for a newbie who didn’t know how to carry a map in his head. He finished “How Great Thou Art” in the Elvis Presley style, ascended the third-floor stairs, and took a right at the top landing to enter the Friedman Auditorium.

Joshua saw Megan sitting toward the back of the auditorium and noticed the satchel by her feet and the unintended gleam from the glass jar peeking out from under her satchel’s cover. Unconsciously he had switched from internally singing to audibly humming the melody of the next hymn at the top of the third-floor landing. When he approached Megan to inquire about the glass jar, she recognized the tune first and reflexively asked, “Excuse me, but is that the tune to ‘Be Thou My Vision’?”

“It is. I didn’t realize I was humming out loud. I was hoping to ask the questions here, though. Is that a beverage in your bag?”

“Yes, it is—Officer Kim, you caught me,” Megan admitted, surreptitiously glancing at the name badge on his uniform.

“I’m going to have to ask you to remove it from the auditorium immediately; the signs posted at the entrance prohibit food or beverage.”

“Since you asked so nicely, I suppose that I could throw it away. My office is a long walk from here.”

“However you remove it is fine with me.”

Megan’s hand disappeared for a brief second under the flap to grip the jar, and she blushed a bit as she excused herself past Joshua at the end of the row. Joshua had not previously noticed, but she was wearing a long skirt, what he guessed to be a merino wool top, and Dr. Martens boots, which was not typical of the fashion that most women donned while at the NSA. Joshua had made it down the aisle to the front of the auditorium and was on his way back while the improv MC was starting in on “equal access to marriage rights” in his sugary, heavy lisp. Megan had just come back from her walk of shame to duck into her row when Joshua was returning up the aisle. He was impressed with her modest choice of attire and decided he might try small talk with the woman he had just admonished about the beverage.

“Are those Dr. Martens Aimees?”

“Actually, they are. Are you still asking the questions here, or am I allowed to ask one myself?”

Normally cops eschew sarcasm, but this girl clearly had a knack for it, and he was intrigued and—if he was

honest with himself—also attracted to her. He was unfiltered now, and answered with an unconscious eyebrow raise.

“Why were you whistling such an old church hymn earlier?”

“Usually when I’m on foot patrol I pick a hymn and sing it in my head to give me an informal time hack on how much ground I’m covering. ‘Be Thou My Vision’ was the last song that we played at church on Sunday. Plus the tune was so hauntingly beautiful it stuck with me since then. Why the Dr. Martens?”

“You know, usually cops have one hand on their pistol while standing behind the B pillar when they talk to the common citizen. I wear Docs because I learned in the military that the only reliable transportation you will ever have is—”

“Your feet!” Joshua could not believe that he overrode his professional manner to interrupt her like that.

“Yes, Officer Kim. Your feet are the only means of transportation that one can depend on. So I always wear shoes that I can get around in if need be. You can say that I like to be prepared. What church do you attend?”

“I can tell that you’re not into this guy’s presentation here.”

“He’s not even the featured speaker. As a former Marine, I have a thing about punctuality. It’s seventeen minutes after the scheduled start time. Moreover, I just do not get why we have to be lectured on why we should accept the ‘alternative’ lifestyle as legitimate, and if I somehow disagree I have committed the last sin left in society, the sin of intolerance. So are you dodging my question?”

“No, this just isn’t the right venue, and I’d like to speak with you, the common citizen, as you say, in a more informal setting. I take lunch around eleven-forty-five. Would you care to meet me in the OPS1 cafeteria?”

“I usually bring my own lunch, but I’ll consider it. After all, out of the two of us, you’re the only one carrying a pistol here. I suppose that makes your argument somewhat persuasive.”

“Don’t let the pistol persuade you, an argument *ad baculum* is not persuasive at all—it simply does not follow. A man persuaded against his will remains unconvinced still.”

“*Ad baculum*. Where did you learn Latin?”

“I went to Catholic school. Eleven-forty-five, I usually sit at a table by the round couch across from Einstein Bros. Bagels—look for the guy with the pistol, and I’ll save you a seat. Good day, citizen.”

Megan smiled and shrugged with noncommitment as he walked away. She wasn’t used to someone who was not put off by her sarcastic defenses and could even dish it out himself. As the featured speaker, a black female who was assistant deputy to the NSA general counsel on EO, finally took the stage a full twenty-three minutes late, Megan mentally checked out of the indoctrination and realized that Officer Kim was both in shape *and cute*.

Perhaps she could bring her lunch to the OPS1 cafeteria today after all.

Parsimony, and not industry, is the immediate cause of the increase of capital. Industry, indeed, provides the subject which parsimony accumulates. But whatever industry might acquire, if parsimony did not save and store up, the capital would never be the greater.

—Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book II, Chapter III

OPS1 Cafeteria, NSA-W—Six Months Before the Crunch

Megan was sitting in the OPS1 cafeteria at eleven-forty about where Officer Kim had described he would be sitting. She didn't see him there, but she hated to be late so she unpacked her food and was peeling her hard-boiled eggs from her pasture-raised chickens when Joshua walked up carrying his tray and said, "I wasn't sure if I would see you or not."

"You know how I feel about being late, and besides, that briefing left me worn-out thinking of how I was being held there against my will. Any chance I had of a daring daylight escape vanished when I had a conversation with an Agency cop about my contraband beverage—I forgot to thank you for that, by the way, Officer Kim."

"Well, we're certainly off to a great start. Please, call me Joshua. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"I'm Megan LaCroix, pleased to make your acquaintance. Not at all, please have a seat."

Trying to lighten the mood yet not sure what to say, Joshua asked, "Do you always brown-bag it?"

"Pretty much. I come from a long line of Quebecois who refuse to pay what Sodexo charges for food."

"Yeah, I've heard people joking about how some of the cafeteria employees look like persons of interest in their areas of operation. You mentioned that you were an ex-Marine."

Megan was somewhat taken aback by the characterization of how people look when she triangulated in on another push button of hers. "That's *former* Marine. You're an ex-Marine only if they kick you out—the Big Chicken Dinner so to speak. Once a Marine, *always* a Marine."

"I sit corrected." Joshua was rather self-conscious now. He hoped that his subtle use of sarcasm resonated with her in some way, and he looked to change the subject. "By the way, Agape Community Church."

"That's where you attend church? Where is that?" Megan asked.

"Not far down 32 in Columbia, or the People's Republic of Howard County, I should say. It's the large brick building on the hill on the right that reads GATHERING PLACE on the outside."

"Oh my, that's a *Christian* church? I got the vibe that it was religious in some way, but I thought that it was a Unitarian place of worship or something since there is no cross on the building. I would have never thought that it was Catholic, though."

Joshua laughed. "Yeah, we get all kinds of questions about that. It's one of the gotchas of living in Merryland, where the do-gooders use the pen more mightily than the sword. I'm *not* Catholic, but I was raised in a Catholic orphanage in Nashville, Tennessee. The lack of a cross actually goes back to the days when a man named Rouse founded the municipality of Columbia and passed an ordinance that no one faith group could have a single-purpose building for worship."

"Okay, you've officially piqued my interest. I want to hear more about the orphanage, but first, define

‘single-purpose.’ If I own a bowling alley in Columbia, isn’t that single-purpose?”

“Wow, you *do* have the gift of wit,” Joshua retorted.

“Malorie, my younger sister, tells me that it’s my spiritual gift.”

Not exactly sure how to proceed, Joshua continued, “Yeah, but bowling alleys do not make spiritual, nonphysical claims, so they are of little trouble to those looking to build the utopian state. Actually, public schools are more like temples of social thought than any modern church.”

“Interesting choice of words. I must say that I agree with your sentiment on public schools. Seems like the liberals own the whole system, which is why we homeschool our kids.”

“Whoooah, perhaps I shouldn’t be having lunch with you alone.” Joshua sensed that he was inadvertently crossing a line at that very moment. “Are you married?”

“No, I’m actually divorced, but thank you for asking. Had you reacted otherwise in some opportunistic way, I would have thought much less of you. My sister, Malorie, and I were both homeschooled, and she lives with me now and helps take care of my children—hence my reference to ‘our’ children.”

“Homeschooling, that’s cool. I’ve never really given it much thought. I mean, after all, we pay taxes to the system, so we should probably use it. Do they learn Latin, too?”

“Of course, how else will they be able to read the classics?” Megan said.

Joshua adjusted his body armor so that it would not choke him as he ate his soup and said, “Hmmm, the classics—too many memories of ruler-toting nuns, perhaps more on that later. Anyway, Agape Community Church was planted as a Great Commission Church and the building is shared jointly with a Messianic Jewish congregation. The building is also rented out for private parties, weddings, that sort of thing. I actually play bass in the worship band at Agape in a rotation and this is our week to play. Service starts at ten-thirty on Sunday mornings.” Joshua realized he was leaning forward in a very interested way, but thought it was best to check his body language lest she think he was too pushy. He sat back for a moment before continuing. “Would you care to come? Since the building is not single-purpose we have to tear down all the sound equipment after service, so if you wanted to join us for lunch we usually shoot for around 1:00 P.M.”

“It sounds lovely, but I don’t make this commute on the weekends. It sucks the life out of me during the week, so to avoid it two days a week provides my sanity standard. Besides, it gives me a chance to catch up on the chores around the homestead and to play with the boys. Thank you just the same, for the invite.”

“Homeschooling and homesteading? Maybe I shouldn’t be having lunch with you after all, Ms. Megan, the glass-jar-smuggling homebrewer.”

“Yeah, check the NSA-Daily tomorrow. Maybe Big Sis Janet Incompetano will have something about us right-winger homeschoolers up there. You can never be too sure about people who eschew debt and have their kids memorize the Declaration of Independence. Sounds like the exact type of citizen I would want to turn my Gestapo on.”

Joshua was picking up on the fact that sarcasm was gold with Megan and that she could dish it out as well as take it. He decided that he definitely wanted to get to know more about her. Megan was different from a lot of the twenty- or thirty-somethings eligible bachelorettes at NSA. She was confident, dressed very modestly,

and witty. “So where do you work?”

“OPSEC, Officer Kim. You are not read onto that compartment of Megan yet.” Megan, a single mom, had perfected her poker face without having an alpha male around and raising two boys. She wanted to see if Joshua was only after one thing, and to find out if she pushed, whether he would push back or simply lose interest. Megan had had to sit and listen to a lot of other single moms at the Agency cry on her shoulder because they had fallen for men who valued the chase but not the catch.

Sensing that this was a test, he decided to lay a marker on the table and show that he was still interested. “Referring to ourselves in the third person, are we?” He tilted his head twice over his left shoulder to point in a specific direction, “You know, there are Occupational Health shrinks right over in the next building; I can see about getting you an appointment.”

Megan burst out laughing while trying to cover her mouth and not spray any homemade sprouts. She wasn’t used to someone absorbing her darts so well, but regained her composure and confided, “I’m a threat analyst for SADCOR.”

“SADCOR?” Joshua furrowed his brow. “You mean “SOUTHCOR, as in Southern Command?”

“No, ‘SADCOR’ is what the people who work for CENTCOR call their parent organization. While they look romantically at their counterparts in SOCOR and refer to that as ‘HAPPYCOR.’”

“I see, maybe. No, wait, I don’t get it.”

“Just about everyone who works for CENTCOR doesn’t like it, myself included. I’m employed by contract for the Agency, but I work in an office that has a liaison officer (LNO) capacity to CENTCOR on behalf of the National Security Agency. I basically analyze the area of operations and assess our ability to gather intelligence in foreign areas that are nonconsensual to our exploits.” Megan paused for effect, carefully trying to get a read on Joshua, and then continued, “I basically push paperwork from one side of the desk to the other.”

Joshua saw that she was, in fact, a real person with real hurts, so he trod carefully, seeing if he wanted to dig deeper or not. Not knowing fully what to say, he keyed in on an earlier part of the conversation and said, “Sounds like that is rather unfulfilling for having to give up so much time during the week to work and not be home with the kids. Did you say that you had boys?”

“Yes, two sons. They are everything to me, and the reason why I get up in the morning to do this at all is for them.” Megan kept it on a professional level and said, “I was a signals analyst in Company B of the Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion here at NSA-W. Before that I was stationed at the RSOC in Kunea with Company I, with my ex-husband, Eric—you don’t have to ask, yes, he is an ‘ex,’ not a ‘former’ husband. You might say that he earned his Big Chicken Dinner with me.” Megan caught herself in an uncharacteristically unguarded moment and couldn’t conceal her flash of anger. She felt that she had said too much, and decided not to reveal anything else.

Joshua didn’t want to say something stupid, nor did he just want to fill the space with empty pleasantries. So he smiled and said, “I generally walk through your section in the late mornings. Do you mind if I knock on the door and see if you would like to do lunch again next week?”

Megan was not one to live for others’ approval, so she had stopped feeling sorry for herself years ago. If Joshua was willing to link up again for lunch, then that was worth exploring, based on her initial impression of him as a thoughtful and seemingly kind Christian. She thought it over for what felt like an awkwardly

long pause and said, “Okay, Officer Kim, we can do that. But I have to ask you not to stop by the office. A lot of my office mates hate their lives and long to turn their lives into the soap operas they so diligently DVR every day. My SID is ‘mclacro,’ you can find me on SEARCHLIGHT. You never know, I might even reply.”

Joshua was smitten. He nodded and said, “Have a good day, Miss LaCroix.”

6

DIFFUSED RESPONSIBILITY

Now, I’d like to ask people in the room, please raise your hand if you have not broken a law, any law, in the past month. . . . That’s the kind of society I want to build. I want to guarantee—with physics and mathematics, not with laws—that we can give ourselves real privacy of personal communications.

—John Gilmore

Odenton, Maryland—Six Months Before the Crunch

Subject: Lunch?

Unclassified: FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Megan,

Hello. I hope that this finds you well. I have been thinking a lot about our lunch meeting and I would love to meet again to talk and get to know you better. How about lunch sometime next week? Do you like Korean food?

Looking forward to it,

Joshua

Unclassified: FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

She replied:

Re: Lunch?

Unclassified: FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Joshua,

Okay, I’m game. I do like Korean food, as a matter of fact. I don’t eat out very much, but some of the girls here in the office rave about Mona’s Gourmet Carry Out on Annapolis Road in Odenton. They say that it is best to call ahead and place your order or else Congress is more likely to pass a budget before they get your food to you. I can take at most one hour for lunch. Give me a call on my high side phone: 962-4589.

Megan

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Megan was a confident woman and she knew better than to call men. She and her sister, Malorie, grew up as the apple of their papa's eye and they never felt incomplete without a man's attention, especially if it was the fleeting kind of attention. Most women who were single moms would find themselves compromising proper judgment when it came to dating candidates and subsequent physical intimacy just because they felt less appealing to men because they had children. Megan was content to keep on working to provide for her boys whether or not the phone rang. But she did hold her breath when the National Secure Telephone System (NSTS) phone did ring five minutes later.

"Four-five-eight-nine, this is Contractor LaCroix."

"Megan, hey. This is Joshua. Is this an okay time to talk?"

"Well, I was just about to lower the ocean levels, win the war on terror, save the San Francisco Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, and secure world peace with this PowerPoint presentation, now that the fonts are in cornflower blue instead of ocean blue."

"Right, be sure to hit Save. You wouldn't want to trust the fate of the free world to the default settings on that, would you? Hey, about lunch, I was going to suggest Mona's Gourmet Carry Out, so I'm glad that you mentioned it. I'll be at the range this Thursday and Friday for my weapons requalifications. What day works for you next week?"

Megan noticeably lowered her voice so that she would not be adding fuel to the gossip inferno in her office. "Do you get to Mona's by cutting across Fort Meade and going out the Mapes Road gate, to Telegraph Road?"

"Yes, that's usually the route I take."

"Well, how about Tuesday, then? I usually like to hit the thrift store over on post and it's only open Tuesday through Thursday. You can find some good stuff there sometimes."

"Done. What sounds good to you? I can phone in the order."

"Surprise me, I'm not picky."

"Okay. How about we meet by the PG-165 facing Canine Road out the gate for OPS2B Tuesday at noon?"

"Sounds good. See you then."

It had been so long since Megan had been on any sort of a date that she did an Internet search using DuckDuckGo.com for "conversation starters" when she got home and added that to her morning reading for the next few days' commute. If Joshua was worth adding to her life, she wanted to get past the superficial pleasantries that usually transpire before the magical third-date threshold was crossed. Since the women in Megan's office were notoriously generous with the gory details of their love lives, she knew it was generally acceptable for a woman to "give it up" after the third date. If Joshua wasn't several orders of magnitude off that standard, she would never have replied to the e-mail in the first place. But the dating sea had a lot of sharks swimming around in it, and she wanted to be sure that she could get to know him as a real person.

• • •

On Tuesday, Joshua was fifteen minutes early to meet Megan. He thumbed through his pocket testament to read through a psalm while the band Switchfoot quietly played in the background. Megan, notoriously punctual, was walking through the turnstiles at three minutes until noon.

“Hello, Megan, good morning. How have you been?”

“Good morning to you as well, at least for the next two minutes. I’m well, buckled up, and excited for some Korean food. Hey, that isn’t an I6 I hear. What are you running in this rig?”

“I didn’t know that you were into trucks. That’s a small-block Chevy, naturally aspirated with a mild cam and a HEI distributor—not too flashy, but rock-solid reliable.”

As they proceeded slowly down Mapes Road, passing the Defense Media Activity, Megan said, “My sister, Malorie, got the motorhead gene; mine is a bit more recessive. She is very handy with a wrench and would love to pick your brain about your Jeep. Is that a four-inch lift on here?”

“I went modest; I could have gone with a six-inch lift, but I wanted a reliable vehicle versus a finicky trailer queen. Hence the simplicity small-block, and I have a spare circuit board for the HEI distributor in a small tin in my toolbox, uhhhh . . .”

“You carry a what?” Megan feigned an incredulous tone; she wanted to cut to the quick and sort Joshua into either the “keeper” or “do-not-bother” category.

“Well, the Chevy 350 is the most popular engine in the world, parts are ubiquitous, and these engines are a cinch to work on. However, I started to read certain blogs and I realized that the whole world is deeply connected and the linchpin is electricity.”

“Hmmmmmm, sounds like you’ve been doing some threat analysis; one of the blue badgers in my office is getting ready to retire—maybe you could apply?”

“I should have taken into account that you were a threat analyst before I opened my mouth . . .”

“Joshua, please don’t be shocked about my inquisitive tone; I *really do* want to hear more about your thought process.” Megan gripped the roll bar instinctively as she had on so many trips out in the backwoods of Maine with her family as the Jeep slowed down and turned right into the seedy rear parking lot of Mona’s Gourmet Carry Out.

“This Jeep is my sole means of transportation. I maintain it meticulously, but I got to thinking that the stretch of land between Baltimore and Quantico is such a huge target—what if some rogue terrorist group were to pull up in Baltimore Harbor and set off an EMP? Or if those same people were to fly a small aircraft on approach to Tipton Airport and set it off over the NSA campus? Most cars, say ninety-five percent, would be dead—but I could be back on the road in twenty minutes.”

Joshua was sure that he had just put himself on the weirdo do-not-return-phone-calls list, but little did he know that Megan was very impressed with his “prepper indicators” and that his stock value had just gone way up with her.

As they entered Mona’s Gourmet Carry Out, Megan immediately noticed that they accepted only cash, a sign of a good place to eat. “Wow, everything looks great,” she said. “What did you order for me, by the way?”

“I ordered the Kimchi Bokkeumbap for you; it’s reliably very good.”

“What’s your favorite thing on the menu here?”

“I’m Korean by ethnicity, but I never grew up in the culture. I much prefer fried banana peanut butter sandwiches on account of my origins, but I do love the Beef Bulgogi and the Spicy Korean Beef Soup combo here.”

Megan was in full analyst mode. “I couldn’t help but notice your facial features.”

“You mean that I don’t look very Korean? You’re right. I did some study on this—all of us orphans are obsessive about our origins—and I concluded that my mother must have been Chinese, or perhaps my father and/or mother were ethnically Chinese, but somehow I ended up with a Korean surname.”

Joshua carried the tray back to the table, and they sat down. Megan did not want to waste any time during their lunch hour so she started out by asking, “I really want to hear more about you. So tell me, are you from Memphis?”

“Since I was raised in an orphanage, where I’m ‘from’ is quite relative, but I claim Tennessee as home. I’m an average guy, I live off of Haviland Mill Road near the Brighton Dam in a rented room above a garage, I name Christ as my Lord and Savior, and I can’t relate with anyone on the first ten pages of *Details* magazine.” Joshua paused for effect, arranged the items on his tray, then continued, “I was left on the doorstep of a Memphis Catholic church when I was a newborn. My birth parents were never identified. They only left a note with my name, ‘Joshua Kim,’ and I was raised in an orphanage in Nashville.”

Joshua pleasantly noticed that Megan was proficient with chopsticks as he continued, “I was raised to be Catholic and all in all I would say that my upbringing was pretty good. I had a lot of different exposure to other cultures, growing up. We had one nun from Ghana who taught us classical literature, a Jesuit priest from Bolivia who taught all of the math and physical sciences, as well as a nun from France. Eventually, I learned enough French to pass the CLEP for college credit when I was a junior enlisted airman.”

“Vraiment? Tu parles le Français? Je suis Québécois.”

“So you’re telling me that I’m winning back some cool points for the tin foil hat comment about my spare HEI distributor?”

“You’re all right with me, Officer Kim. We happen to believe in spare parts and putting things away for a rainy day at our house, too. Please continue with your story.”

“Well, if you’ve never been to an orphanage, it is rather hard to explain. The one thing that got me through was my best friend, Dustin. He and I were inseparable; we basically are *brothers*. He lives in Kentucky now, and we still talk all the time.”

He paused for a moment, and went on. “One summer we both earned a trip to a boys’ summer camp that the local Diocese puts on every year in southern Illinois. We were both pretty nervous about the new setting, but since we had few worldly possessions and we were also used to daily routine we adjusted quite well. The first afternoon we got our bunk assignments and there was this one shy boy prone on his stomach flipping through an off-road truck magazine. He was tall and skinny with red hair and was pretty much minding his own business when a few kids who were sent from a rough Chicago parish decided to raise their collective testosterone level and bully this kid reading his magazine. The boys reached over him, grabbed the blanket on the other side of the bed, folded it over to envelop him, and in one motion jerked him down onto the floor. Two kids held him while the other two had bars of soap in a sock and started to hit him. Well, these kids did not factor in Dustin or his high sense of justice—probably what makes him such a good sheriff’s deputy

now. Anyway, Dustin swept the legs of the nearest kid and delivered a sound knee to the right side of his torso, taking the wind out of him. Without missing a beat he grabbed the back of the shirt collar of the other boy who was hitting the kid, who appeared to be the ringleader, and put him right down on the ground with his knee on his chest, and said, 'Get!' It was really something to see, at eleven years old."

Joshua took a quick bite, and then continued. "Dustin does not suffer bullies or fools at all. The other two, who were holding the blanket, saw the trend and decided that they did not want any part of Bunkhouse Justice 101, and promptly left. Dustin and I helped the kid up and asked him if he was okay. His name was Ken Layton, and ever since he's been one of my best long-distance friends. All three of us got to be great friends over those three weeks at camp. Ken told us all about drive trains and differential ratios, which started my long and expensive hobby of off roading. Turns out that Ken could also shoot pretty well, too. On the .22 range, he consistently took the top scores even with those old worn-out bolt action rifles. I'm getting long-winded here, but Ken went back to his house in Chicago and Dustin and I faithfully wrote back and forth with Ken for years, first by snail mail, and later by e-mail. Ken later met a guy named Todd Gray, who planted the seed with Dustin and me on preparedness."

"Preparedness?" Megan was nearly finished with her lunch and Joshua had not really touched his, but she was enjoying his story.

"It's the concept of redundant options. It's like insurance."

"I've heard of that." Megan figured it was time to lay a marker on the table here. "I first realized that the world was not capable of growing exponentially ad infinitum when I came across a link on the website peakprosperity.com called The Crash Course by Chris Martenson."

Joshua asked, "You like Chris Martenson, too?"

"Indeed," Megan said. "He made too much sense to ignore. I just wish that I had started listening to him years ago. Eric was into guns, but not prepping. They are not coterminous."

"I've got to say that the whole idea of one rifle and a backpack in the woods or a pallet of MREs and a box of ammo in Laurel, Maryland, are dangerous myths."

"Guns are useful tools, but I figure that they truly solve very few problems in and of themselves. That's why Malorie and I have been studying all we can with permaculture and how to produce nutrient-dense food reliably in quantity. You may want to add the 'survival seed pack' to that list of dangerous myths. You've seen how crazy it gets when Snowpocalypse hits the D.C. area every other winter."

"When I-95 or I-70 closes, there aren't enough supplies on the shelf, the trucks can't get through to deliver more, and people panic. All of this happens in the *good times* when there is law and order present."

Megan knew that Joshua was speaking honestly and even reluctantly about things that most people never got to hear about, so she was careful to sound empathetic. "You're correct: Batteries, flashlights, camping gear, toilet paper, disposable diapers, and bottled water are all the first to go."

"That's right. In law enforcement we see this all the time, even if most cops never put all of these philosophical thoughts together into a coherent concept. We still see incrementally the best and worst in society."

The conversation was moving at a brisk pace and Megan was fully engaged now. She asked, "That is what some would call the creep of 'positive law.' When the government becomes the guarantor of all things, then

they *must enforce law positively*; that is to say, 'The Constitution is a living document, the law is whatever we say it is, subject to change at any time.' When that happens, there is no other end result but that the haves are systematically robbed by degree until wealth redistribution becomes 'economic justice' and legitimate civil rights are exchanged for 'social justice.'"

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Joshua replied. "Sounds like you and I have been reading the same books! Then, in times of relative peace, we hardly notice the thin veneer of cordial civil conduct, and all it takes is one natural disaster like an ice storm and fights break out over disposable diapers, flashlights, or bottled water."

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