

COLONY
Book One: The End

Walter Stephen Geeding

Colony Book One: The End is a work of fiction.

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ISBN-13: 978-1511723138

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to my dad, Oren Geeding. He always told me to never give up; just keep trying. I did; I'm here! Thanks Dad

Love, your son.

I would also like to dedicate this book to my oldest grandson Kyler who is already a very good writer. Keep at it.

Love, Grampa

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge life, a lot of which has passed by with all those fictional and real people that inspired me to write this book. I guess my bees need special recognition because those guys are the ones that got me to thinking what would happen if they all left.

I would also like to acknowledge, aspiring artist and illustrator, Hope Wolfe. She managed to capture my vision of this book in her drawing of the cover. I thank her for her contribution to this book – from one artist to another.

CHAPTER I

Once upon a time in another world, another culture, a different place, I raised honey bees. Now in their own unique way, they raise and nourish me and mine. I and those with me have become dependent on the honey bee for survival. We are an insignificant part of hive life: tolerated because we threaten nothing; Ignored in the fact we are so few and so weak. Hiding out in an unseen underground world, shielded from whatever is happening outside. Our existence is oblivious to others if in fact there are still others as we are oblivious to them. Nurtured by the very creatures I once cared for.

I had gotten into raising bees for a hobby. It was a neat stress reliever from my hectic life as an attorney. Busy little animals, they kept the Earth's crops pollinated and helped to feed an ever-growing hungry population. My son told me once of some ancient philosopher or sage who long ago wisely noted "When the last honey bees wings stop fluttering, mankind as we know it will cease to exist." An astute observation and made in a time when man didn't truly use bees to sustain mass agriculture and commercial farming. The author had no idea just how close to the truth his prophecy would turn out to be. Even I, in my time, would have the unfortunate opportunity to see what happened to the earth when the last honey bees' wings stopped fluttering; beyond comprehension, beyond unpleasant.

The world started noticing around the mid 1980s and 90s bees beginning to disappear wholesale. They weren't dying or being killed, although disease was taking its toll, bees just disappeared. And all the king's horses and men couldn't find those bees again. In other words, for all our vast technology and progress, scientists couldn't figure out what was happening. And the world needed bees. One thing man hadn't figured out how to do was pollinate or make honey. Two things bees were masters at. Oh the technological world crowed about making robotic bees that could one day pollinate and thus one day eliminate the need to rely on bees. Creating several billions of those little robots wasn't feasible and the world, not knowing it then, would have no time in which to do it. It sounded good though to the

unlearned masses. This was what those in authority had always attempted to do; reassure everyone in the face of disaster with how mighty and invincible man has always been. Man would turn out to be not so mighty and not quite as invincible as he would have liked.

I put those thoughts away, merrily harvesting my small crop of honey each year and babying my bees. Then some of my fellow bee keepers in the county had bees vanish without a trace. Kind of creepy really; science fiction stuff. Enjoying my hobby, me and my bees formed a symbiotic relationship. I took good care of them. In turn they gave back the fruits of their labor. But now, In the back of my head a nagging question began. Where are all the bees going? Guys who hauled truckloads of bees around the country to pollinate crops began going bankrupt because their bees had just left the hive to pollinate one day and never returned. Besides bothering me, it made me determined to make sure my babies stayed put and at least around my neighborhood, I'd keep the flowers blooming. This is just what happened for the next year or so as the world turned on around me. For a while, like all the rest of the world, the “nothing will happen to me” mindset kept my mind blissfully unaware of just how wrong that concept was. Earth's clock was ticking away with or without my knowledge or permission.

Being a country boy' the woods were my second home. That and the awareness of bees disappearing is probably why I spotted the little guys flying around a place in the middle of nowhere. Deep in the trees, next to a high bluff, I was deer hunting, and after a while, started noticing three or four bees at a time zipping straight up the bluff. One by one those fellows went up until going out of sight and didn't come down. Didn't go into a tree, weren't flying into a crack in the rocks, just up and then whoosh, gone. Hours went by hunting and waiting for one bug to reappear. No deer came by and no bees showed back up either. Intrigued now, and since the hunting was lousy that day anyway, up the bluff I went. It was a long dangerous haul, especially for someone who's not a climber. Huffing and climbing until there weren't any more handholds, a bee could still be seen once in a while flying up past me and then out of sight. It was totally frustrating watching those bees going out of sight and not being able to find out the secret of how, or to where. Stubbornness is

one of my traits good or bad, so a trip back down was necessary to get climbing gear.

Some days later the climb was attempted again. Not being a climber, the necessary gear got bummed from a buddy who was. Looking at the borrowed bunch of thin rope, a hammer and some oversize nails or pitons self-preservation nervousness from exactly zero experience began setting in. The nails had a place you could secure your rope that didn't look like it would hold an oversize kid, which I'm not. One nail at a time edged me up another forty feet or so to a flat place where the bluff leaned inward. It was about mattress size, big enough to sit on and stretch out a little, not much more. As my breath slowed I started looking around. Being a good one hundred and twenty feet or so up and with the ledge sloping in, the ground wasn't visible straight down; only out and down, way down. One could have easily imagined being the only person on earth sitting out in the woods, up high on that rock. Nothing manmade was visible anywhere, just me and the great big universe; peaceful and serene. Times like that didn't come often enough. As it would turn out soon, times like that wouldn't be happening ever again. Peaceful and serene would become antiquated words known only to a very few people; survivors.

There was a fairly serious cross-wind up that high that blew pretty steady and it paid to hang on. That's when the bee came up from below. It seemed to be heading upward then the crosswind gently deposited the bee right between my feet, and right between my feet, that bee pulled a disappearing act. Crawling between my legs the bee walked under a protrusion of the rock that had become my temporary chair, and never reappeared. Looking under the rock netted me nothing. Feeling around underneath, the whole chunk seemed pretty solid, so I pulled upwards. That did the trick; in aces. The whole three or four foot protrusion of rock came up in my hands, off the main piece, and flipped me off backward right on off the ledge; almost. That little nail hammered in and that skinny piece of rope saved me. However, dangling by my waist one hundred twenty or so feet above the ground wasn't at all fun or entertaining. In fact, peaceful and serene became a thing of the past right then and there. Now it was just plain terrifying. After the screams quit, and my

brain could function again, the praying started. Lord get me out of this and I'll do anything you ask. Oh boy, what's that about hindsight? That prayer pretty much got accepted at face value. Didn't know it at the time but anything covered a bunch of territory; and a lot of time; a lot of time. I promptly, if not quicker, pulled myself back to safety. A closer look was taken at the rock that had just tried to kill me. Flat stone, rounded and about four and a half feet around now tilted at a forty five degree angle upward. Underneath there was nothing. Basically, there was a four to four and a half foot around hollow that ran into the bluff beside me, before disappearing into darkness. With no flashlight, and more than a little unnerved by the fall, I laid the rock back down. Amazingly, once put back, the edges seemed unnoticeable and only the treacherous little protrusion remained. The climb down was made with an idea to come right back complete with flashlight and accessories to see how deep the hollow was, and what was there.

Life got in the way again. Back then, before living became just surviving, life could get in the way. You worked slept, loved; and did it all over. Humans the world over basically did the same thing day after day. Life was taken for granted. It had been this way forever and always would be this way. So, just like any other guy, better than two months passed me by before the opportunity to make it back presented itself. Now thinking treasure, curiosity and greed goaded me forward. Loaded with batteries, a couple of sandwiches, water, and more rope, back up I clambered; and almost missed it. Amazed again at the natural fit, the rock was flipped up again and peered into; nothing, like the first time, just black going in and down. The hole got somewhat bigger about ten feet in, so the trip started by stooping and crouching; moving forward and down facing in. At ten feet, I turned around and looked back. The way out already seemed to be growing far away and dim. Thirty feet in there was room to totally stand upright, stretch out my arms and walk; but the far end beam of light still showed no end in sight.

Another couple of minutes, and looking back, the entrance seemed to have shrunk to basketball size. The passage just kept on; slightly down then took a gentle turn. At that point the opening disappeared. Just rock walls now, going each direction: gently up,

gently down, until fading into nothing. Not seeing the entrance any more produced a bit of a tingle from down deep. Well I was here to check out the cave, so my feet kept on moving forward. Besides that, what could be in a hidden cave to hurt me? The way in had been covered, so there couldn't be any wild animals here. "The only thing to fear is fear itself" the old saying went. So far just a twinge of nervousness was tweaking the remote reaches of my sub consciousness. Being a little nervous was certainly not enough to keep the intrepid explorer inside from going on.

Zip, something went past me droning into the darkness and was engulfed by the ink past the beam of my light. Quiet was so intense it could have been a bullet that had gone by but there was no gunfire, no flash, no nothing. Walking along for what now seemed like days, silence had become customary. Quiet that was broken once in a while by the crunch of small gravel on an otherwise fairly smooth rocky surface of the passage where only one person drew a breath, me. Any noise was magnified. Finally, I checked the time. By my watch three hours had gone by. Surely my watch's battery was getting weak. It seemed like much longer than that. As if on cue, light slowly began growing shorter on the path in front of me; illuminating less and less of the tunnel. It was time to switch out batteries. Being without light didn't have much appeal right then; especially since it was just me. Brave explorer or not, light to see by was comforting in a dark confined area.

No sooner had I decided to switch out batteries than panic set in; stupid me. There were plenty of batteries but only one flashlight. In order to change batteries it was necessary to take the flashlight apart. That meant it was going to get dark in a hurry. Sitting down, back against the wall, my pack beside me, I pulled out the batteries, put them in my lap and unscrewed the top of the flashlight. Unearthly black immediately flooded me inside and out. Fighting back an unreasoning urge to give in to panic, quivering fingers shook out the exhausted batteries. Adrenaline was pumping so hard the top of the light got dropped. While feeling around for it my trembling legs rolled the new batteries onto the tunnel's floor. Scared now, my shaking hands began feeling around the ground close by. Found one! Dropping that battery in, my fingers kept looking for the other one.

Breathing became torture. There was no air anymore. Now the lid of the flashlight came into my grasp. Screwing the top on by feel and pushing myself onto my knees, the search was expanded for the other battery by crawling forward about three feet. Suddenly realization set in; my pack! The pack with food, water and more batteries was now somewhere behind me! My lifeline to make it back to the world had become lost. Not finding that pack meant certain death.

Walls began to quietly creep in as the fairly spacious walkway began getting smaller and smaller in the dark. My heart was a very real sound in total silence as it threatened to break out of my chest from fear. Black became a tangible danger that gripped me and started strangling. Although the tunnels sides were unseen, closeness became overpowering. A palpable feeling of being squeezed took over. At that point control left my head. Clutching a useless flashlight, with one battery, fear told my body to leap to its feet and run. An immediate explosion struck without warning. Lights danced in total darkness. The only sanity was a flashlight missing a battery that, like my consciousness, slipped from nerveless fingers as my body bounced back from the blow. Then hands gripped nothing as the unseen floor hit and night settled in.

The headache was intense, more than just painful. That much was a no-brainer and it saved my life. Regaining my senses, my eyes, well one, opened of their own accord: to nothing. One eye was stuck shut. Reaching up, my hand encountered a sticky painful mess. It ran down my face and my mouth tasted blood. Pain kept madness at bay for a few seconds. That was long enough. My watch! Feeling for the button, a push illuminated the face. That was enough. Saved, any light, however small, was better than before. Brain and body functions started working. Now rational feeling told me my back was on the floor with my face looking up into blackness. Both arms had been flung out backwards and a rock was jabbing into my side. While feeling for the rock, it morphed into the flashlight. Putting the flashlight in my mouth, and flailing around above my head with my hands again, the pack was encountered not two feet away. Crying out of one eye, the pack was carefully dragged over toward me. My lifeline to salvation was that bag. No one on earth knew this place

existed, no one. This hole was nowhere to die, never to be found and have everyone think I'd ran off somewhere. That's good, get pissed off. Don't panic again or you're dead. Feeling around the bag nabbed me another battery. Too petrified to move, the battery was brought to my mouth. Taking the flashlight from my mouth, I replaced it with the battery and gently clamped down. That battery's not going anywhere this time! Now having both hands free, the top was unscrewed once again. Tucking the top underneath my chin freed up one hand. Removing the battery from my mouth and carefully feeling which direction positive was, that battery was slid it in. The lid was screwed on, and the button hit.

My God! Light flooded my little dungeon. Still flat on my back a system check started feeling for further injuries. Whatever had happened hadn't got me any worse than my head. Unscrewing a water bottle, then dumping some on my head and rubbing my eye slowly loosened the gunk. Now both eyes worked. Once my body was pushed to a sitting position, survival seemed possible again. Along with light came a semblance of calm. There was the other lost battery. With a start, knowledge of what happened dawned on me. I had freaked out plain and simple. Jumping up to run in the dark was a mistake. That move had brained me on the opposite wall. The resulting blow knocked me straight backward and down on my back. Now although feeling very foolish, it was a very relieved foolish.

Adventure was over. After three hours walking, and another half hour out cold, the romance was gone, no fun, and definitely not interesting. It was time for this boy to go home. Getting to my knees, my hands pushed me on up to my feet. Crunching sounds under my hands had now commanded my attention. Playing the beam over the tunnel's floor made me suddenly remember why the climb clear up here was made in the first place. It also gave me a cold chill. What was mistaken for gravel making noise while walking turned out to be something very different. As far as the light reached were tiny little bodies: bees! Some appeared just to have died. Other small bodies were mere filigree that fell apart if you breathed hard; hundreds of dead bees. Now the presence of so much death became overwhelming. Heart jumping into my throat, pack in one hand, I began running back out away from this mausoleum. Every other step,

the only noise heard besides my breathing was those tiny little crunches. Each crunch told me about another body that had not made the trek in and out but had died here alone in the darkness. Each crunch made my legs pump that much quicker. Those crunches made me that much more determined not to add my body to the countless other ones that littered this dark passage.

The way in had been a gradual downhill slope. The way out was just the opposite and fear pushed me. An hour and a half of half trotting up hill and my sides hurt. My breathing was more like gasping. Taking a break and sitting, my mind forced itself to calm down a bit. The little bodies lying around didn't bother me so much now as make me curious. What the heck were outside bugs doing deep inside a cave? There was no food here, no light, very little water; why would bees fly in here just to end up dead on the floor? No answer came to me so the question went away. It would return in time in a distinctly different fashion.

A couple of sandwiches from my pack were munched while taking a breather and playing the light around. Nothing, there was just a dusty floor in the light with dead bees. That was curious. Bees were lying around in a depression of mostly hard base rock with loose stuff here and there. Some bees had a covering of dust on them; so old the light went right through them. Other bees looked like they had just dropped out of the air and died. All of them lay on another layer of dust in the shallow depression. The rock maybe went twenty or thirty feet with regular indentions. Each indention was covered with dust and dead bees. It was sort of like what you make walking in soft dirt or mud; somewhere tracks would be left. Jesus! My hair started crawling. Those little evenly spaced places looked just like the dinosaur footprints I remembered looking at in pictures; starting out from nowhere and ending up nowhere. Just a snapshot in time from some ancient exploring beast lost to the world millenniums ago.

Now my mind started playing games. Who or what else had walked this hidden path eons past? The way those holes were covered with age it had been a very, very long time. I took another closer look. Just fifteen or twenty dusty steps that were covered with

mystery lay there. The tracks all pointed on in toward the cave like the explorer kept going. Other than that they yielded nothing more than a few certainties. The nut standing here staring had not been this cave's original explorer, the other explorer had been here a long time ago, and finally the bees for some reason had flown this direction long after the first tracks were made. There was one more certainty. I wanted out of here and gone from this hole.

My head hurt, my feet were tired and my brain was telling me some creature was sure to jump out around the next corner. Oh yea; no corners; just that blasted cave which had become very tiresome hours ago. Sick of it and crept out at the same time, my feet started moving without my command and headed me on and up toward the entrance. Within ten minutes the cave shrank to a little tunnel. It became necessary to stoop a bit. This was where the hole had been when crawling in, but there was no entrance now. Oh God! Trapped in a narrow little cave underground with no way out was no way to die. Sweat broke out all over me. Only a little breeze kept it from trickling down my face but salt made the cut burn. Then my head popped out of the hole. Stars were shining all across the sky. For the second time that day an idiot stood in my shoes.

Day had become night while inside. I had been underground for the better part of five hours. Now it was dark. The view was great from one hundred twenty or so feet up, but my little table size perch did not give me a great sense of security. Besides that, this whole escapade had soured. Now the trick was to figure out how to climb down a cliff in the dark, on a rope, while holding the flashlight at the same time. Man! The thought came uninvited; what are you doing here? Oh shit; here we go. Dropping the rock back in place, and taking a deep breath, that flashlight got put back in my poor mouth again. Hooking up to the rope, my body inched over the side. Now there was a great view of rock a foot in front of my face and nothing else. Figuring there was pretty much no choice, which there wasn't, I lowered slowly. Feet would grip an unseen rock and down the rope played out for another foot. My arms began aching and night blindness set in. The calves of my legs started cramping up, my jaws were screaming and drool dripped off my chin. Forty feet slide by on the rope without any serious mistakes on my part. Straight up rock

became steep climbable bluff rock with scrub brush and handholds. My feet finally hit ground you could stand on. Unhooking the rope, the flashlight was pried out of my locked jaws and my body flopped down to rest. With the bottom still some sixty or eighty feet below it was no picnic of a walk to get there. At least I'd just bounce, slide, and hit trees and rocks until dying of multiple bruises and contusions instead of dropping straight down and killing myself all at once. Somehow, in a warped sense that was a small measure of comfort. Putting the flashlight back in my mouth, the rest of the way down was accomplished in a few minutes and solid earth was beneath me again.

Walking two or three miles out to the truck in the dark was nothing unless you counted that one low limb that jumped me in the dark and reopened the wound in my head. The headache started all over as blood slowly ran onto my eyelid and on down my face. After giving the limb a good cussing, on I went. So what if that limb got me. Being alive has a way of putting stuff like that in perspective. After being buried inside a mountain, in the blackness, knocked senseless, a boogie man in my brain from the past, lurking just beyond the light chasing me back to the surface over millions of tiny dead bodies, then climbing down a skinny little rope after nightfall, this wasn't half bad.

This wasn't no hill for a stepper. Gore and all, me and my truck put it in gear and motivated away from a bad memory with no intention of ever reliving what had become a nightmare. Nothing could make me crawl down in that hole again, nothing or nobody. Nothing or nobody was more wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

I never intended to go in that hole again but the world changed my mind. My bees left for no reason. Just there one day and then gone the next. It wasn't because of me. Those hives of mine contained some of the most babied bees on the planet. They had been fed, sheltered and watered. Something else was going on. What else, the world would never discover. The effects it would discover all too soon. Bee disappearances began happening all over the world now faster and faster. The first year wasn't that awful except that thirty three percent or more of the world's crops were pollinated by bees. That meant thirty three percent less pollination, with that much less in corresponding crop production. There was much less of everything to go around. Likewise, all the wild plants started going south. Ninety percent of wild plants are pollinated by bees and there weren't any bees to be had. Wild plants started to thin out creating food shortages for wild animals. Wild animals now began eating already shortened crops planted by man. This led to animal management. Read in animal eradication on a large scale. Bee growers that supplied hive owners went out of business; no Queens; no eggs; no hives. With no commercial pollinators to be had huge commercial farms that supplied us and the world collapsed. Our bread basket started getting empty.

Stocks plummeted. Commercial crops went to hell. Grain became in short supply as did fruits and vegetables. As a country that first year we were more or less able to take care of our own. But we weren't the cornucopia of earth now, and couldn't feed the world anymore. Neither could anyone else and by the start of the second year, third world countries already living on the edge of hunger fell off the cliff. Starvation reached critical mass then exploded. There was no foreign aid to be had. If someone was foolish enough to try and help somewhere they were quickly overcome by the sheer magnitude of the situation. A couple of national disaster relief agencies tried at first. When shipments of food arrived, agencies were overrun by starving people, killed and every scrap of anything edible was taken. Dictatorships took control of what was left by force as usual, hoarding everything for the hard times that were now. The very soldiers that hoarded the food began fighting among themselves

to eat. There was no more man at the top who controlled by fear. Hunger knew no fear, and the soldiers were hungry. The guy at the top was killed, then his successor and on down the line. Entire armies began disintegrating as they killed each other for scraps. Neighboring borders were crossed in search of food. Huge battles began and ended over a stockpile of grain or a railroad car of canned goods.

Africa, South America, Mexico, China, most of Arabia and Asia began having food riots in the cities on a daily basis. Livestock still living was slaughtered for food till there was no more livestock. Even India's cattle that were not to be eaten through religious beliefs disappeared. Religion took back seat to a hungry belly. China, Russia, The United States, Canada, and a few more countries closed themselves to the world. It was now dog eat dog. We had always lived in plenty. Our dog was a little fatter and much more protected except to the south by oceans. The neighbor to the North had far less population to worry about, so typical of our country, we didn't worry about them. The crisis for some months seemed distant, somehow surreal, and to most just didn't apply to the good old U.S. of A. The President reassured us all was well, and typical of our entitlement mentality, encouraged by successive administrations, no one got very concerned for several months. Golly gee our country will take care of us. This time that would not happen. Those months were the critical times.

Because of raising bees and already being sorely pessimistic of our leadership, early on, the handwriting on the wall to me seemed very clear. The world was going to get mighty hungry. Like everyone else, and well before most, my hoarding of supplies and gas had begun. I'm ashamed to say it, but at my direction, and orchestration, my sons with two others cleaned every canned good they could get hold of from a grocery store. A fire was set that sent every cop and most citizens of the small town streaking the other way to help out. Transformers had been shot out. Other than emergency services, there was no light anywhere. The better part of a semi full of non perishables was made off with and hidden in the woods by my cabin. The whole truck was tarped down with camouflage and left hidden for another day. That other day would come sooner than expected.

People in cities became unemployed, hungry and mean as

stores and businesses closed by the thousands. Unemployed mean hungry people left town and began roaming looking for money and food. In time, over a period of several months, money became worth less and less; then people just looked for food. Folks found out pretty quickly that a hundred dollar bill stunk as a sandwich. A couple of cans of Vienna sausage on the other hand were valuable barter material. Within months, gas began being rationed and martial law was instituted. Folks couldn't cross state lines without a pass and a reason. The reason had to be very good and interstate passes were slow in coming. For a while forgers did a thriving business in creating passes until they too were starved out. Nobody had money or food to pay with. After a while the whole pass thing became a joke too. People came and went where they pleased. Police and military began breaking down as families had to get protected and personnel just walked away to take care of their own.

The third time into that hole was serious business. Earth was literally blowing itself to hell. Every day, all that was heard on local or international news was starvation and food riots. Countries were beginning to fight countries. If survival was on my agenda for me and my family, which it definitely was, space, light, water, air, food to last a good long while was needed and a place to hide it and us. A cave was the logical choice. After some consideration the hole I found seemed to be a likely candidate that might work. This time my son Eric went along. He realized the urgency since his wife and kids were now very much in danger of being killed or worse.

Eric's bigger than me and about as good a climber which meant he was terrible with heights. He looked at those pitons hammered in the cracks and then at me. "You're shitting me dad" he said. "I'm gonna die out here in the woods falling off a cliff in the middle of nowhere." "You enjoy breathing?" I countered slowly making my way up. "You're going to die otherwise." "Have you checked the world out lately? Get a move on you big chicken." Inside there was no doubt how he felt. It was all coming back to me and truthfully, the big chicken was me. I still felt myself flip backward off the bluff another forty or so feet up, then dangling by that skinny rope we were now using again. The terror of absolute darkness injured and all alone came rushing back. The ancient footprints, starting nowhere and going nowhere, filled with dead bees flashed in

my head. Thoughts of some unknown cave man, who had made those tracks, and mentally chased me all the way back to the entrance resurfaced. My heart pounded and hyperventilation started up just thinking about it. Facing away, the tough guy act got played. “Let’s go son. We’ve got to find a hidden place. Our choices are do this or oh yea do this anyway. If we don’t get a hiding place soon we and our families die! Is that what you want? I’m not there yet. If you can’t hack it, give me your gear and wait here.” Shamed now Eric inched up the cliff the same way I did months ago. Both of us slowly climbed along and made it to the little shelf without falling.

We got our breath and sat for a minute. Once again I was taken at the tranquility and solitude up there. Not one glimpse of humanity. Nothing to indicate the world was tearing apart in a big way; just quiet and a strong breeze; the same breeze that had dropped the bee between my feet. No bees now and that’s the problem. No food, starvation, riots, and countries closing their borders. Our own country rationing food and gas; closing State borders. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out things were going to get a lot worse. Like it or not, in today’s world the mighty United States wasn’t immune. Even though I got kicked out of boy scouts, “be prepared” had always been my motto. I hadn’t got this far being lazy or stupid, a little lucky maybe, but not lazy or stupid. The time to begin hiding was yesterday, not tomorrow.

“How much farther dad?” broke into my thoughts. “We’re here” I said. That got me a funny look. “Tell me when you find the entrance and we’ll go on in. Just don’t take all day.” Eric looked around, up and down and in both directions. “Dad you on crack? There’s nothing here.” He was sitting just about where my seat had been before with his feet on the rock covering the entrance. Just rocks all around, nothing to indicate a sizable hole was within inches of him.

Like before, the fit amazed me. A flat rock on a rock ledge up against a rock bluff just doesn’t command your attention. “Eric; move your feet and give that rock a tug on the side facing out. Just be careful.” One little lift and the stone came right up sticking open about three quarters of the way up. Out of nowhere without a sound, the entrance came into being with inky black staring back at us.

Dumbfounded Eric looked at me. “Wild isn’t it? I had the same feeling when that thing opened up on me” I said. “Only there wasn’t much time to wonder after falling off backwards and hanging by that rope there. Lucky the undies didn’t have to be changed after that one.” That got a chuckle. We picked up our gear, put on our spelunker hardhats, stooped over, and went in.

Ten feet in and we were walking normally. Less than a hundred feet in we were walking side by side. Funny how a backup gives you a new outlook on things. Seemed like a mile when all by myself. I showed Eric the bodies of bees that covered the floor. “This is spooky stuff dad. Why all these bees? Why clear up here, and clear in here?” “Haven’t got a clue and right now that’s way down on my list to figure out” was my reply. A pedometer was now on my ankle to see how far we were going. Two hours later, and better then three miles in, the footprints to nowhere appeared. “Check those prints out son. Now that’s really some spooky stuff. Unless my head’s screwed up these are human.” “Dad you are screwed up in the head and so am I for being here” Eric mumbled as he knelt down to examine the indentions.

“Look how these things are full of dust and bee bodies. This is like watching a million year old picture of someone cave exploring. It’s neat and at the same time I’ve got the willies thinking about where they went. This far in and no flashlights like us, whoever made those tracks probably died in the dark in here somewhere.” “Try finding them alone after braining yourself on a cave wall. Come on.” Ten minutes later, there on the cave floor were two dead batteries and the one new one dropped the first time around. This was where my fun had ended. Knocking myself out and my watches’ light had probably saved me from being somewhere in here dead since it had allowed me a few minutes to calm down, think clearly and fix my flash light. While the story was related to Eric, his face changed. This wasn’t just an adventure now; it was necessary to survive. Suddenly the whole exploration thing took on a new tone. It was life or death. Realization of just how close I’d come to losing my life wasn’t at all funny.

We changed out our batteries right there one at a time. Each of us had brought enough batteries to change out four times. My

hope was that somewhere within the next couple of hours or miles or whatever, we'd find a place big enough to hole up two or three families. Neither one of us said much to each other after passing the dead batteries. It just kind of changed the scenario from exploration to a scramble for a chance to live. So far that scramble had done no good which did not cheer up either of us.

Another two hours, and another three miles we stopped. Eric had heard bells. He looked at me. "Hear that? That sounds like bells." I'm hard of hearing but in that silence a tiny tinkle of noise finally came to my ears. "Yea; what the heck?" "Let's check it out" Eric said. We took off walking in the direction of the bells. The walk wasn't very far. Four or five hundred yards later and better than six miles inside the Earth finally appeared a shot at survival.

It was a beautiful little waterfall about ten feet high that dropped into a little black pool before leaving to who knows where through a fissure in the opposite wall. That wasn't all; the area around the pool widened out into a much larger cavern, probably as big as or bigger than five or six football fields before shrinking down again to the corridor we had been following. Not knowing if the water was good I figured to test it. Eric was the natural choice. After all, what good is a brain if it's dead? Scooping up some water in my canteen then switching when Eric wasn't looking we both drank up. Fifteen minute later Eric said "you ok dad? Who knows what's in this water." "Yea" was my innocent rely; "you?" "Sure" he replied looking over. "Why wouldn't I be?" "No reason; just asking" was my innocent comeback. Since Eric still looked healthy as a horse I took a big swig; pretty good water, sweet and cold.

Our batteries picked that time to start dimming again. We changed batteries knowing that these were our return lights. Once switched, we hurriedly checked out the room. Big, flat, dry, and empty; just what we were looking for. "Well Eric; we got a shot. Now all we need is light and to get our food and families one hundred twenty feet up and six miles in." Eric's a techno geek among his other interests. "Light and heat are no problem. We get us a little water turbine in here and a castle will be going in no time." "One problem son we're six miles or so deep, and over a hundred feet straight up." "Now who's the downer dad? We'll be dead otherwise;

figure it out.” So a temporary solution came to me.

“How much weight you figure son?” I asked as we checked out the room. “Turbine, generator, wire all will weigh in the neighborhood of four or five hundred pounds not counting heating and lighting” he replied. “We get us a couple of those carts for hauling deer and drag it in” I said while sticking my light through the opposite side of the room. The corridor kept going but now there were several small openings on each side going who knows where. This point looked like a good place to back out. No time to get lost in an off chute or drop in a hole. I definitely did not want to find old bones in some little off chamber right now. My nerve only goes so far and it was stretched out. “This is the place; let’s get out of here while we got power.” Eric definitely had no problem with that and we headed back to chaos in the making.

“Block and tackle;” startled, Eric jumped. “What?” “Block and tackle with a long rope; hundred twenty feet up remember son? How long you figure to power up Eric?” “State of the art supplies and if we run into no problems, three hours” he replied. In my time on this earth there had never been a project that went exactly according to plan. There were going to be some kinks somewhere along the line. “There’s always problems son. Never has been a project that went smooth. This one is going to be a killer.” How prophetic that statement would turn out to be.

“Who’s buying dad? I’m broke” Eric said. “I’m springing for everything” I said “and so is everybody else. My thought is that we spread out and spend my cash that’s in my checking account and my stash. Then we spend my savings, sell the farm cheap and spend that. We all get credit cards and if or when we have to, steal or write bad checks on the rest.” Eric just stared again. “Dad you used to prosecute that stuff. You’re kidding.” “Look boy the earth’s blowing apart. By the time anyone figures out the checks are no good there won’t be any law. If we’re lucky we can get our supplies that way. If not, we take them. No time to be civilized anymore. We have got to be quick, ruthless and relentless if we hope to make it. That’s still my idea.” We talked logistics working on our plan for survival during the long walk back out and down. If cost was not a factor, which it wasn’t, putting a livable shelter together was doable; not easy but

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doable. All that was required would be a few truckloads of supplies smuggled in so no one else would see anything, and putting it together the same way. Darn the plan sounded easy; it wasn't.

CHAPTER III

Once back we put our plan in action. Most of what we needed was innocent looking enough and plentiful for the time being. The whole world saw this as a hiccup in the grand scheme of things, and for a few months, as long as supplies lasted it was business as usual. We on the other hand, anticipating the worst, began getting prepared as early as my buyers could start spending.

Every time it was possible to get away from court, I would drive and walk back to the hide-out or cliff where the cave was located. While getting the lay of the situation, a couple of huge pines caught my eye up above the cave. Using these for markers, I went around the bluffs. It took a few hours of hiking. But, after making it up a slope on the backside and walking through the woods, the big trees were spotted. Another few minutes of looking down and around, there it was. Fifty feet lower was a little ledge nobody but us knew about that contained our new world.

Many months in advance of what my heart felt was coming, and what everyone else in their ignorance and what our government in their arrogance denied, my preparations started. I began to work at the end of the first growing season without bees. If wrong, I was broke. If right, my family lived. Get two of everything and parts I said. We gathered our wives and selves to plan. Most of the U.S. and probably the world still figured stuff would turn around. It had gone too far. Not acting now was suicide. Twelve miles of fifteen hundred pound cable, parts to build a six mile pulley, conveyor parts, turbines, generators and everything else tapped my cash. After that we wrote checks on me till the bank account was emptied. The farm was sold and we had more resources for awhile. The group swiftly burned through the better part of four hundred thousand dollars cash. However, as time went by, cash became a lesser commodity then trade goods so we had to travel farther and farther to get supplies. And the world kept getting more violent.

From the beginning the girls that worked for me knew something was up and I finally told them my plans. Both had families and there was no way to leave my friends. Our group now contained seven families; twenty three adults, and forty one kids. This of course also meant a massive amount of supplies, food and so on. On the plus side extra people meant extra help and faster work time.

With help from the women and adult kids to buy the supplies, twelve men, two grown sons, and a big fourteen years old made huge progress. The buyers were to buy in as large amounts as possible without arousing attention. Money was not the object. Obtaining as much as possible in as short a time as possible was. Trying to stagger our shifts and avoid detection, the work moved forward around the clock. We wheeled in the little water turbine and generator. Within hours real light was shining in our hideout. Life inside the earth became a real possibility and not just wistful thinking. Block and tackle was rigged to the trees. The first way up was left attached but kept hidden as a last resort if needed. A small four by four platform built for moving supplies and us was raised and lowered by either an ATV parked up on top or a 110 volt pulley powered by generator or solar panels that we had purchased.

There was so much to do putting my plan in motion and trying to keep up my façade of work that time got away from me. A small mountain of supplies was building since a six mile pulley system takes a bit of time to construct.

After about twelve weeks the pulley slash conveyor belt finally made its first revolution. I took a break and looked around outside my own little universe. It was starting to get bad. People were beginning to group up for protection. The legal system was stretched to breaking and getting tighter. Robbery and theft were beginning to be commonplace. Within weeks of our starting, the buyers had taken out credit cards from anywhere possible. Every card was maxed out as hurriedly as could be done to every business who would accept them while credit cards were still not a joke. Two or three people to a

truck or SUV went each direction with a list and loaded guns. If any distance had to be driven, a large box truck went along so the buyers could unload and get back to work without a long drive back.

As months drifted by, businesses started to go south because gas was in short supply. Since gas was in short supply places could get no parts or food to sell which equaled no more jobs. World supplies of just about every commodity began drying up. Almost everybody was going broke. One day, in the second spring, probably around fourth or the fifth month, my law business door shut for the last time. It wasn't for the lack of business; it was the lack of a way to pay. The legal system was beginning to be a joke anyway. Except for entering my appearance for any of our group caught for anything, and requesting jury trials that would never happen, I walked toward my future without looking back.

Good fortune was mine to have a hunting cabin far back in the woods; down a little one lane goat path. Neighbors were miles away and minded their own business. However, we were making a lot of trips in and out. Game cameras and sensors were set up four miles out at the nearest dirt road and every one hundred yards or so all around the perimeter of our project. These cameras were connected to solar powered laptops backed by twelve volt batteries and watched very closely. Two or three of the teenagers always patrolled the perimeter with strict orders to call in as soon as they saw anything; then come in themselves

Acquiring and preserving food was an issue. Six beeves and six hogs from neighboring farms were bought, butchered, and prepared. Then we butchered six more beeves. An entire ton of salt was purchased just for jerking and salting of meat. Meat was jerked, smoked and salted and packed in every container we could lay our hands on. Two smokehouses and salt sheds were created. One was underneath and the other by the cabin. All processing was done there. Half a dozen commercial dehydrators ran day and night while electricity was constant. After that, they ran by solar power during the day and storage batteries by night. Both shed's smokers vented

through the cabin's fireplace to avoid detection, and the meat was run up the bluff in the dark. In turn, the meat would be lowered to the cave the next morning. Twenty five rick of dry wood was purchased fifty miles away, drove in at night, and stashed nearby in the woods. There were loads of provisions and all manner of other supplies hidden everyplace that could be kept secure.

To keep security close the ones who obtained supplies elsewhere took them to one of three isolated day houses. From those places my truck and perhaps one other, now with camper shells, ran goods in around dark. This had the dual purpose of not alarming any neighbor that might be looking and cut down on unusual looking activity around the area. As days became weeks, and then months, you could see comprehension dawning on more and more faces. Folks began to realize that things were not getting better. Food was becoming very scarce and expensive. This did not bode well for us. Now that the population was becoming more food conscious, a slip meant disaster, and very possibly death.

Four months into the second year, civil war was happening in every third world country worldwide. Countries with food were zealously and violently guarding their borders against intrusion. Though international and national media officially didn't recognize it, the civilized world was rapidly fragmenting. As the third world countries became more and more dangerous, consulates and embassies began quietly closing. Nobody was paying any attention to polite discourse and political maneuvering anyway. If one country had food and was weak, another country jumped in and took it. Military started pulling out of our myriad "police actions" around the world. These units came to our southern border and set up shop. In time all military would be brought home to guard and completely close this border, and to a more limited extent, the northern border.

Our hideout had almost been found by outsiders more than

once by people who like me, finally figured out hiding was the only way to make it. Unfortunately for them, they were far too late and had little or no way to cope with reality. At present, the only reason they still lived was that the U.S. still persisted in telling everyone “This too shall pass” and most still believed the useless deadly rhetoric. Further, police were becoming very uncompromising with theft by now. National Guard began assisting the police to keep order, and for a while this left the United States in a quasi state of normalcy. Martial law was big on the agenda of politicians, and there was only a matter of time before its full institution.

Those little caverns off the main cavern proved to be a fantastic boon for us. There were at least a dozen, with even smaller pockets going off of them, some of which just kept on going on. By now every room had been wired. The larger rooms were being filled to the ceiling with supplies. Clothes, medicinal, and hardware piled up. Books, games, fitness, and educational items took up another so that we could remember who we were and keep occupied for who knew how long. Each family claimed some space. Mattresses and bedding were hauled up. Each space soon took the shape of a home to be. Work now went around the clock, preserving, procuring, and moving goods to that hole and on in.

Six months in we were found. Game cams caught a group of six coming in fast on foot, armed to the teeth. One of the kids zipped in close on a dirt bike and led them into a pre-determined ambush. Since the veneer of civilization still clung to our consciousness, a command to drop weapons was given. That command was not listened to and we had to shoot as three managed to get their guns up and firing. That command also cost me a grandson who was standing right beside me and took the rounds probably directed toward me. Zack was buried under a tree in a peaceful little glen. Civilized veneer shredded then and there. Pain and bitterness wracked me as my oldest grandchild was laid in the ground. Even then, grief was a luxury that came in the night and when not working. Living still

commanded fast work and no slacking. For the rest, a quick burial was conducted by backhoe hidden in the woods. Their cars were found, and parked miles away to prevent operations from being found. But it was getting too close. Time to begin finishing preparations if preparations for something like this could be finished. It was time to get ready to close the lid on the world when it finally came time.

As the eighth month of preparations was drawing close, we were finishing our quarters. One day awareness struck of just how prepared we were not. While taking a leak on the floor a sudden thought hit me. If sixty plus people do this we are going to be ankle deep in pee. The information was passed to the others. A decision was made that we had better build some halfway decent latrines. We had no showers. There was water but it was cold. Another excursion was instituted into the still partially civilized world for some more somewhat specialized equipment. Hundreds of feet of small PVC pipe, glue, small water heaters some canvas and shelving and wood was acquired. Now individual bathrooms and showers could be constructed. While obtaining the waste supplies we decided to get more generators. The water turbine worked famously for generating electric. However, it did not generate enough electric for seven different rooms and water heaters so we hooked up the second system. That necessitated two more turbines and two more generators for back up. Nobody wanted to be in pitch dark if the working ones failed at some point. With the exception of the danger of getting about, procuring these parts was now fairly easy. Places that sold items like this had long since shut their doors for good due to lack of business. Parts were findable and gettable since nobody was working and just trying to survive.

The plan was mostly snatch and grab. Martial law was now beginning to be full blown. If the law or military or anyone else saw you stealing, you were shot on sight. Luckily items like these were way down on most folk's vision of survival tools. We weren't

bothered. Sniped at a few times maybe but a couple of shots back quieted things right back down. Cops didn't check out shots fired anymore. There had to be killings before response and that was slow in coming. As with anything else nowadays, as much as possible, going out at night was preferred. Keeping backing roads and alleys got the job done. All this was carted back up to the cave a few pieces at a time.

It was impossible to place lateral lines for the sewage in the solid rock floor of the cavern. Latrine-like little rooms set up high, ran the piping down. God help me, I didn't want to but there was only one place to pipe put the waste. Piping ran into the fissure that disappeared on the far side of the cavern and deep into the earth's core. I hoped we didn't further desecrate mother earth so bad that she killed us too. How little I knew about earth at that time. Time would become the great educator.

Eight months in, despite all we could do, a clear trail led to the tall pines where our major supply operations had been going on. Even deep in the woods it was visible. The time had come to close the trail. A semi three quarters full of canned goods stolen months before was still hidden in a ravine close by covered with camouflage. Now was time to make or break it. There was no other way, no more extensions of time allotted. Eric broke out the truck. Me and Mike drove to three more hidden locations filling it to capacity and headed for the hole. We were led by one truck and followed by one. Every truck had an armed guard besides the driver. Each of us wore vests and carried side arms. Each of us carried assault rifles. Most of us had to use them.

Within minutes of getting on the last road home with that eighteen wheeler, we were hit. Since semi's no longer had much to haul, they were very conspicuous and great targets. By this time, counting everyone we are expecting to be in our group, we numbered sixty four. That was about to change. No sooner than the truck had

wheeled out onto the road, an armed man ran out between the lead truck and me opening up with an assault rifle. At least fifteen rounds hit the front window before the truck hit him. Just as he started firing back, Mike took two in the chest and one in the face dying instantly with the back part of his head spread out on the back glass. Two sledge hammer blows rammed me in the chest, one round grazed my neck, and one got me high in the right arm. Staying conscious became a real effort but the truck kept going. Two pickups pulled out in front of Frank and Nicki cutting off the road. Six guys jumped out and fanned across the front of them. All six had rifles and began firing, cutting them to pieces while they were shooting back. Frank's truck hit the ditch burning while the semi slammed into the roadblock and beyond, sending shooters flying and trucks flipping out of the way. Eric followed close behind with Oscar in the back. Two trucks behind them riddled his truck with holes. Oscar got lucky; taking out the lead driver and passenger. When that truck slid, the other pickup hit it. Rear tires blown, Eric's truck slid sideways and Oscar flipped out. He was dying anyway after having been shot at least six times. My son hit the ground running and firing at the people in the second truck as I screamed to a smoking stop. Slowly slumping over, fading in and out, realization it was over hit. The only sound was deadly quiet.

In those brief seconds we had lost four friends and relatives. Eight more dead and dying men lay in the road around us. We couldn't even bury our own from fear the noise would draw others. Out of our six, two thirds were gone and we had to leave them lying in the road like the dogs that attacked us. The windshield and vest had saved my life, but my brain was scrambled and I was bleeding like a stuck pig. Only Eric remained unscathed, if you didn't count part of one earlobe missing and a crease across the side of his vest. Running to the passenger side, he pulled Mike's body out and dragged me over. Jumping into the driver's seat, he took the wheel getting us and that shattered truck out of sight, the remaining few miles down the road, and into the field toward our woods. We made

it without another incident; which we would not have survived.

Medical supplies were plentiful since a clinic had donated to us. Both my wounds were superficial but hurt like hell. My neck and shoulder got patched up while the truck was being unloaded; then a trip to la la land seemed in order. Upon waking, it appeared the truck had pulled a disappearing act; hidden and camouflaged, never to be seen again.

We never reported the attack, it was never investigated. No one looked for anyone. The law for all intents and purposes did not exist anymore. Unless you lived in a city or town, you were on your own; all within eighteen months. The mess on the road was cleaned up and forgotten. Officials contacted Eric and Cricket about her sister and husband's killings. They got the bodies back and had a quick burial. Their two kids were taken in and that was it. Nothing else came from the cops. This was an everyday occurrence now. Civil disobedience was a death sentence. You kept your mouth shut and the cops left you alone. Otherwise, they shot you, took what you had and then left you alone. Oscar was just an illegal who was summarily forgotten. I said a prayer for Mike, took in his son, and stayed away, knowing he would understand. Mike was put in a pauper's grave along with his attackers and Oscar then covered over. The world rolled on over all of them. Except for ourselves and a few final loads of supplies our hideout was prepared and ready. Our number was now sixty.

