

A Reluctant Hero

By Douglas Fox © 2013

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All characters, situations and actions are completely fictitious. Any resemblance to reality is purely coincidental. These teenagers practice unsafe sex repeatedly. No one should do this in real life. Real unsafe sex leads to pregnancy, AIDS and death. Be safe!

(Mf slow mil impreg)

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Chapter 1

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November 7, 2013

“Jeez Mom, let me sleep longer!” Josh Warner whined as he was shaken awake. He cracked an eye open, finding only darkness. “It isn’t time for school yet!”

“IT’S 0500, CORPORAL!” the tall sergeant in digital camo fatigues barked sharply, nudging the sleepy soldier with the toe of his boot.

“Sorry, Sarge,” Josh responded quickly. “It’s been so long since I had a good night’s sleep. I forgot where I was.”

“Sedro-Woolley, soldier. The attack kicks off in two hours,” Sergeant Cooper answered. He added wearily, “It’s been too long since any of us had a good night’s sleep.”

“I’ll get Tyler and do a quick check of ‘Homewrecker’s’ gun system,” Josh said as he unwrapped himself from his sleeping bag.

“That’s static, Corporal,” the sergeant answered. “I’m going over to talk with Captain Frye at company HQ for a couple minutes. See that everything is ready in twenty.”

“Will do, Sarge,” Josh agreed readily as he peeled out of his sleeping bag. He shook Tyler Serna, the draftee private slumbering beside him. “Out of bed, Tyler. Sarge wants us to run diagnostics on the gun system and make sure everything is ready for this morning.” Josh glanced past Tyler and saw an empty sleeping bag lying beside his friend. Zach Rice, the tank’s driver, must be up and getting the big M1A1 Abrams tank ready for battle.

Josh headed outside to relieve himself. The morning was chilly, probably close to freezing, but it still felt better than it had in Canada during the cold, wet month he had spent there. That time ended

abruptly two weeks ago when the Chinese broke through the I Corps line northeast of Vancouver. Josh looked east at the Cascade Mountains. The first hint of orange foretold the sun's rise. The sky was cloudless and the stars sparkled overhead. That beat the damn mist and fog he had seen further north when they held the line near Chilliwack.

Josh forced memories of the God awful retreat out of Canada and the Battle of the Border from his mind. He walked over to 'Homewrecker,' the big M1A1 tank that was the center of his life since the war started ten months ago.

"How's our girl?" Josh asked Zach Rice as they met. Zach was checking bogey wheels and track on the left side of the tank, closest to the municipal shed where the men in their company bedded down last night.

"Everything's static, Josh," Zach reported as he ran his hand over a big gouge in the sloping front armor of the tank. A Chinese tank round had left the mark three weeks ago when the round failed to penetrate. "This is a great ride."

"That she is," Josh agreed as he climbed up on the tank and inside. Josh lit the inside of his tank with red, night vision saving light. He got to work checking the gunnery computer. He knew the routine well by now. He had completed basic training and advanced individual training at the army's armor center in Fort Benning two years ago.

Tyler Serna joined Josh in the tank turret a couple minutes later. The eighteen year old draftee watched closely as Josh ran through the gunnery system diagnostic. The Fremont, Nebraska native had been with the 'Homewrecker' crew for two and a half weeks and had a lot to learn. The army drafted Tyler two days after he graduated from high school earlier that year. He spent four months at Georgia's Fort Benning doing basic and AIT (advanced individual training) at the Armor Center.

Serna arrived at the front in Canada after Lt. Patrick Williams and Sergeant Aaron Dolan were killed by a Chinese bombing raid during night time resupply. Lt. Williams commanded 'Homewrecker' and also the First Platoon of Company C, 1st Battalion, 185th Armor. Loss of two men of the four man tank crew shook assignments up radically.

Josh switched from driving the 'Homewrecker' to being the gunner and second in command in the tank. Zach took the driver's seat, giving the new guy, Tyler Serna, the loader's job. Charlie Company's CO, Capt. Dennis Frye, assigned his company sergeant (senior enlisted man), David B. Cooper, to take command of the First Platoon. He also took Lt. Williams' place in command of 'Homewrecker.' First Sergeant Cooper was known as D. B. around the company. Sergeant Cooper's mother was horrified forty-two years ago when the hijacker, D. B. Cooper, jumped into infamy by hijacking a plane and parachuting into the Washington forests and history. She tried valiantly to keep her six month old son's name David, but the rest of the world nicknamed him D. B. The sergeant long ago accepted the nickname.

Josh liked Sergeant Cooper. He was demanding but fair. He treated the men in his platoon well and saw to their care, feeding and general welfare. Most important, he had rallied the spirits of the men after the platoon lost two of their four tanks and ten of the sixteen men in the initial fighting in Canada. That was emotionally hard in a National Guard outfit like the 41st Division's 81st Heavy

Brigade Combat Team. All the members of their platoon hailed from Seattle or Olympia. Josh had trained with and known every one of those fallen comrades since he joined the guard two and a half years ago.

Josh joined up to earn a scholarship for college. His father, Robert, sold tires for a living. His mom, Laura, worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office. Josh was gifted with computers and had the grades to go to Stanford for an Information Technology degree. His family didn't have the money for tuition and Josh couldn't get enough scholarship money to swing the pricey university.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were winding down when he graduated from high school in 2010, so he figured it would be safe to join the National Guard. He worked for Geek Squad, fixing computers and helping people with their software while he earned enough money to get through four years at the prestigious college. Josh did his six months of active service soon after joining up at Fort Benning, Georgia at the Army's Maneuver Center (MCoE).

Josh's local armory in Olympia housed C Company, 1st Battalion, 185 Armor, so Josh ended up as a tanker even though his ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) indicated he would be an excellent computer tech for the Guard. Josh did well in tanker school and got along with the other, older members of his company back in Olympia. The Guard demanded a weekend a month and two weeks each summer from their members.

Josh liked his job with Geek Squad. He'd much rather be back home in Olympia dealing with WANs, raid arrays and configuring people's hardware and software than sitting in a cold tank running diagnostics. God, how he hated the damn Chinks. They turned his comfortable world upside down ten months ago. If only it were a dream...

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0615 Hours, Sedro-Woolley

Zach Rice maneuvered the Homewrecker into the end of the line of tanks departing the municipal maintenance yard where their company spent the previous night. C Company was on the tail end of the 1/185 Armor Battalion's march through Sedro-Woolley to the start line on the northwest end of town. Abrams tanks from the 1/303 Cav would follow their battalion.

Sergeant Cooper had briefed the entire platoon on the plan for the attack half an hour ago, before the big column got on the road. The 41st Division would attack due west, two brigade combat teams abreast, across the plain towards I-5 and Burlington. Their 81st Heavy BCT would take the right side of the attack. The 116th Cav BCT would attack on their left. The 41st BCT would follow in reserve, ready to assist wherever needed. The 82nd Cav Regiment would protect the flank of the attack. The 2nd Infantry Division would cross to the north side of the Skagit and be ready to reinforce the attack, if needed, or exploit the breach with an attack north to Bellingham and Deming.

Sergeant Cooper coolly talked with the other tanks in the platoon as they clanked north through the town. Josh Warner watched their progress through town on the aiming scope of his gun. Josh bit his lip nervously as they rolled forward. He had been in the thick of eight or nine battles in the past three weeks, but he still felt frightened about what was coming. He glanced over at Tyler Serna, his

loader. He could see that Serna was pale and sweating, even in the red light illuminating the tank interior.

Tyler caught Josh's glance. He attempted a halfhearted smile and leaned close to Josh. "Does it always feel like you're about to shit yourself?" he whispered nervously. "I sure could use a joy stick right now."

"Huh?" Josh whispered back.

"A boom," Tyler explained. Josh gave him a blank look. "Ganja? Weed?" Josh furrowed his brow as he realized what his crewmate meant.

"You can't do pot in the army," Josh declared quietly. "The army will ship you off to someplace worse than here if they catch you lighting up."

"Worse than being in an attack at the front lines?" Tyler asked. "What's worse than here?"

"How about outside as an infantryman?" Josh replied. "I'd rather be in Homewrecker listening to bullets ping off our sides than outside cowering in the mud."

"Well... yeah," Tyler agreed.

"Are you doing pot now?" Josh asked. "That'll get you in deep shit with the Sarge."

"No, my last time was the night before I reported for basic," Tyler responded.

"Didn't they test you for drugs when you got to basic?" Josh asked. "They washed half a dozen guys out for drug use when I did basic."

"They don't anymore," Tyler explained. "They're drafting guys now. If doing some weed could get you out of the army, they wouldn't be able to keep any draftees. They did find out about me doing weed. I had to do a lame-ass drug awareness lecture and get tested every week during basic."

"Keep the drug shit out of here," Josh cautioned. "Sarge will have a fit if he hears about you doing that stuff."

"I know," Tyler agreed. "I won't do it. I came through the so called 'Battle of the Border' and it was... well, nothing. We never even saw any Chinese. I can't help wondering... you know, what it's going to..." Josh was quiet for about five seconds. "It's just... well... all of this..."

"Scares the hell out of you," Josh said, completing Tyler's sentence. "I understand. I've been in action a dozen times in the past three weeks. It scares the hell out of me too. Don't worry. Sarge is a good commander. He'll spot the right targets for us. You keep feeding me shells and I'll blow the sons-of-bitches to hell. We WILL come through this OK."

The two sat quietly as their tank rattled north through Sedro-Woolley. D. B. Cooper had overheard most of the whispered conversation between his subordinates. Tyler's past drug use wasn't a

surprise to him. He got a head's up from the S1 at the BCT to keep an eye on Tyler. Watching out for draftees with a past history of drug use was now SOP [standard operating procedure] for the army.

D. B. thought Josh handled Tyler's past drug use and worries about how he'd perform in battle well. D. B. was pleased to find the young corporal was turning into a quality soldier. They formed a bond the afternoon and night they spent helping hold off the Chinese breakthrough of the Chilliwack line. The two had worked without a loader, both helping with the task as their other duties allowed. Josh had an eye for gunnery too. He had taken out at least a dozen tanks that night. D. B. had seen instructors at Maneuver Center that didn't shoot as well as his gunner.

The column turned left onto the Cook Road out of Sedro-Woolley and headed for their start line. About two hundred yards west of the townhouse development that marked the extent of Sedro-Woolley, they followed their battalion due north to form up. The Abrams from the 1/303 Cav from their BCT were forming up on the south side of Cook Road.

The ground rumbled at 0650 hours, as the nine 155 mm batteries tasked with supporting the attack opened up on the Chinese infantry line a mile distant from the start line. Lt. Colonel Owen's "Move out!" crackled across the radio network ten minutes later. Zach Rice put Homewrecker into gear and rolled forward, maintaining alignment with the other tanks in C Company.

Josh turned back from his station, patted Tyler on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs-up. "You keep feeding me shells. We'll come out of this just fine." Tyler acknowledged the encouragement with a nauseated half smile and a nod.

The 140 Abrams rolled across the plain. D. B. Cooper swiveled his command turret aft and saw the Bradleys of his BCT and Strykers of the 116th Cav following behind the tanks, carrying their infantry support. The long line of tanks churned forward across the fields for a couple minutes, not drawing any reaction from the Chinese troops they were approaching.

"Maya Alpha-6, I have Tangoes on the hill north of me," Maya Alpha-5 reported. Maya Alpha-6 was the call sign for Alpha Company's commander. Tangoes referred to the NATO phonetics letter "T", designating targets. Maya Alpha-5 was on the far right of the 1/185 Armor's line of tanks.

"Maya Alpha-5, ident[ify] Tangoes," Capt. Frye asked. "Make sure it isn't the Cowboys [82nd Cav Regiment].

"Gook BMPs," Maya Alpha-5 answered. "Must be twenty plus."

"Roger. Vanilla or..." Maya Alpha-6 queried. The Alpha company commander wanted to know if they were the standard infantry fighting vehicles carrying 10 Chinese troopers or one of many variants armed with guns, rockets or anti-tank missiles. The answer came in a rush, but not from Maya Alpha-5.

Josh Warner found the answer too as a searing light streaked across his night vision gunnery screen. Zach Rice saw it too, out his vision slot. "Fuck!" Zach growled over the local comm channel. "Fucking missiles."

Sgt. Cooper spun his command turret around to spot the new threat. He was in time to see three American tanks explode to his north.

Multiple heat blooms blossomed in Josh's scope. "Sarge!" Josh announced. "We got ZHZ99s in front of us. Multiple incoming rounds..." Josh knew the heat signature of the Chinese main battle tanks by now.

"Here's Tango-1," Sgt. Cooper announced as he swung his turret back to face the threat to their front. The target cursor appeared over one of the Chinese tanks, only its turret visible on Josh's screen. The enemy tanks must be hull down.

"We got canister in the tube, Sarge," Josh warned. The 120mm shell contained 1,100 3/8" diameter tungsten balls. It was deadly to infantry within 2,000 feet but would have no effect on armor at more than three times that range.

"FIRE!" Sgt. Cooper growled.

"2,342 mikes," Josh announced automatically, indicating the targeted tank was 2,342 meters away. "Firing," Josh said a split second later. He understood the Sarge now. It was faster to waste the canister round than to unload the round and replace it with the proper round.

"Load sabot, Serna," Sgt. Cooper ordered. This round was meant to kill tanks. Tyler manhandled the 49 pound round into the breach of their cannon.

"2,328 mikes," Josh announced as he prepared to fire at Tango-1, the Chinese ZHZ99 tank in front of them.

"Fire!" Sgt. Cooper announced. Josh pressed the button. The gun barked as it shot out the depleted uranium projectile. The sabot peeled off the uranium bolt as the projectile left the cannon. The bolt needed about a second and a half to travel across the valley. The small dense bolt punched through the thick armor of the Chinese tank, flaking and spalling slivers of metal and sending them throughout the crew section of the tank interior. The Chinese crewmen were sliced to pieces with barely time to realize they were hit.

Josh and Sgt. Cooper both saw the satisfying puff of smoke waft from the turret hatches as the round hit home.

"Tango-2," Sgt. Cooper announced as he placed his targeting reticule on another Chinese tank.

DDddooonnnnGGGG! The Homewrecker shuddered when a Chinese round plowed into the Chobham armor of the big M1A1. Josh glanced back at Tyler. The young man's eyes were the size of saucers. "That's the good sound," Josh mouthed to his crewmate. "Our armor held." Josh turned back to his gunnery computer. "2,277 mikes to Tango-2."

"Fire!"

“Firing.” Josh pressed the button, sending another depleted uranium bolt at the Chinese. A second and a half later he watched the explosion as his shot hit home.

“Tango-3,” Sgt. Cooper announced mechanically. Josh was zeroing in on the new target when their tank was rocked by a large and very close explosion. Sgt. Cooper wheeled to find Maya-2, the tank that joined their platoon two days ago, with smoke pouring out of the popped open hatches. Cooper watched as a blackened crewman tried to crawl out, only to slump over, half in and half out of the tank.

“2,253 mikes to Tango-3,” Josh announced.

“Fire!”

“Firing,” Josh answered as he hit the button. This time he didn’t see the satisfying explosion of a dead Chinese tank. “2,231 mikes to Tango-3.”

Sgt. Cooper didn’t get time to answer. The whole crew heard the whoosh followed by the Baa-wumpf of an explosion on the back of their tank. Homewrecker rocked as the missile hit.

“Red-16, this is Red-3, over,” a voiced announced of the platoon radio link. Re-d3 was the call sign for the third tank in Sgt. Cooper’s 1st Platoon.

“Go ahead, Red-3,” Sgt. Cooper announced. Josh and Tyler looked around their compartment. The halon fire suppression system hadn’t activated. The tank hadn’t been penetrated.

“You took a chink missile in the back of the turret,” Red-3 reported. “Pretty big fire on your rear deck and back of your turret. Looks like your personals are going up in smoke.” Abrams crews stored their sleeping bags and pads, as well as their personal gear in bins on the back of the turret, outside the armor.

“Take out Tango-3,” Sgt. Cooper commanded. “Serna, give me the extinguisher.”

“Firing,” Josh said as he pressed the button. “Are you sure you want to pop the hatch? It’s pretty unfriendly out there.”

“That fire is a big spotlight on our tank,” Sgt. Cooper explained. “We’ve got to get it out or we’ll attract the attention of every Chinese tank from here to Bellingham.”

Tango-3 blew up in a spectacular fireball as Sgt. Cooper popped the commander’s hatch open. Josh smelled the smoke from the fire outside. The Chinese ZHZ99’s turret must have flown 50 feet in the air before crashing back down. Most likely their shot touched off the propellant in a Chinese shell.

“I’ve got Tango-4,” Josh announced. He knew Sgt. Cooper would want him to keep up the fire on the Chinese while the Sarge was busy putting out the fire. It was how they worked three weeks ago during the eighteen hour fight to plug the breach in the Chilliwack line. “2,199 mikes to Tango-4. Sarge, get in. I’m ready to fire.” No answer. “Sarge?”

Josh glanced back at his sergeant. Instead of standing on a rung of the ladder where he could get his head and torso outside, the sergeant's boots were on the compartment deck. His knees were buckled. Josh looked up and saw a red stain spreading down the front of his sergeant's camos.

"Tyler!" Josh barked, trying to hide his own panic. "Check the Sarge!" His intonation managed to convey his urgency to Tyler. Tyler maneuvered around to the command position.

"He ain't got no head!" Tyler wailed when he managed to get to Sgt. Cooper.

"Stay inside!" Josh ordered. "I'm firing." He rechecked the range. "2,168 mikes... Firing!" Their cannon boomed as another bolt of depleted uranium flew across the fields to the Chinese. Josh stayed with his scope long enough to see Tango-4 disappear in a cloud of smoke.

Josh squeezed around to get to see the sergeant's condition himself. It looked like Cooper's head had taken a direct hit from the Chinese 125mm shell. Little remained of his commander above the neck. "Push Sarge's body onto the turret top," Josh commanded. "We don't have room for him in here." Josh didn't add that he knew Tyler would freeze up if he had to share the compartment with the headless corpse of their sergeant.

Josh flicked the comm switch to put himself on the platoon link. "Red-3, this is Red-1, over."

"Go ahead Red-1," Red-3 responded.

"Sarge is dead," Josh reported, trying to keep his voice as even as possible. He really wanted to scream, but it wouldn't do anyone any good.

"You sure, Red-1?" Sgt. Holder, the commander of Red-3 and now the senior sergeant in their platoon.

"He took a 125 (125mm shell) in the head," Josh answered. "Yeah... I'm sure."

"Red-3 is now Red-16," Sgt. Holder reported over the platoon net. This confirmed that he was assuming command of the 1st platoon.

"Red-1, can you keep your unit in action?" Sgt. Holder asked Josh. "We need everybody."

"Is the fire out on our back deck?" Josh asked.

"It is, Red-1," Sgt. Holder responded.

"We're good to go then," Josh answered.

"Continue in line with the rest of the platoon," Sgt. Holder instructed. "Aztecs are taking care of the chink BMPs. Fire at will at the Tangoes in front."

"Wilco [Will comply]. Out," Josh answered into the radio. He switched back to the internal comm. "Did you get Sarge stowed up top, Tyler?"

“Yeah,” Tyler answered shakily. “I got the body up top.”

“Body?” Zach interjected. “What happened?”

“Sarge took a round in the head,” Josh explained. “Keep in line with the rest of our platoon and continue forward.”

“You got it, Josh,” Zach agreed.

“Give me another sabot [APFSDS] round,” Josh ordered. He scanned his gunnery screen for his next target. “Tango-5, 2,017 mikes,” he called out automatically, as he was trained to do. No one was paying attention to the firing data anymore. “Firing!” The round hit home, blowing up another Chinese tank.

Josh switched over to the platoon comm link, so he could hear any orders Sgt. Holder might give. Sgt. Holder was temporarily in command of the 1st Platoon again, now that Sgt. Cooper was dead. Josh got the gist of what was happening off to his right. The Chinese missile BMPs had shot up and put most of Alpha Company (Aztecs) out of commission. Lt. Colonel Owens ordered Bravo Company to deal with the threat.

Josh took a shot at another Chinese tank. He didn’t achieve the satisfying explosion but the tank ceased firing at the Americans. A second shot produced a cloud of smoke, indicating a clean kill. Josh was lining up a shot on Tango-7 when a loud Ka-CHUNK rattled the Homewrecker. The tank immediately lurched left and spun around on its left track.

“Back the right track immediately!” Josh yelled. “Get us facing the enemy again, Zach!” The Abrams’ front armor could stop Chinese 125mm shells from penetrating at 2,000 meter range. The side armor wasn’t as thick and could be vulnerable to hits there.

Zach managed to point the Homewrecker generally toward the west and the Chinese tanks that had been firing on them since the start of the battle.

“Red-16, this is Red-1,” Josh announced into the platoon comm link. The only answer he received was a tremendous explosion off to his right that shook and rattled the Homewrecker.

“Holy shit!” someone squawked on the link. “Red-3 just took a gook missile in the ass.”

“Josh, I ain’t got nothing on the left track,” Zach interjected.

“ID yourself, soldier,” a voice demanded. Josh recognized it was Capt. Frye. “Maintain radio discipline. Who is this and what is the status of Maya Charlie-3?”

“Hernandez from Red-4, sir,” Sgt. Hernandez of Red-4 reported. “Red-16 is burning like a Roman candle. The crew’s KIA, sir.” Josh recognized the voice of Staff Sgt. Luis Hernandez. He had been in this Guard unit for half a year, after completing his five year, active duty tour. Luis chose to join

the Guard so he could enjoy the camaraderie of a unit rather than serve his remaining time in the Army Reserve. Josh and Luis had gotten to be friends in the past six months.

“You command 1st Platoon now, Red-14,” Capt. Frye instructed. “What’s the status of Red-11?”

“We took a hit in the left track or boogie wheel, sir,” Josh responded. “We’re immobilized but we can keep shooting at the Chinese.”

“Good for you, soldier,” Capt. Frye said. “Give us covering fire. Red-14, guide on Red-25 to your right. Conform to 2nd Platoon’s actions.”

“Wilco, sir,” Josh responded. Luis Hernandez from Red-14 responded affirmatively too.

“Take the gunner’s seat, Tyler,” Josh instructed. “I need to get in the cupola and see what the hell is going on around us.”

“Me?” Tyler squeaked.

“Get a grip!” Josh commanded. “Load a sabot round in the gun and get in the gunner’s seat. I’ll find us a good target.” Tyler didn’t answer but did take the gunner’s seat.

Josh noted the blood coating the area around the top of command cupola. He forced down the bile trying to rise in his throat. There wasn’t time now to mourn Sgt. Cooper. He needed to pull himself together and help Zach and Tyler survive.

A quick scan to his left and right showed way too many plumes of dark, inky smoke rising from the carcasses of dead American tanks. A few crewmen who made it out alive were retreating away towards town. Some of his battalion and some of the tanks from the 1/303 Cav continued advancing west. Josh forced himself to look west towards the Chinese. He found a target and placed his targeting reticule on it before announcing “Tango-8.”

“Um.... Uh...” Tyler murmured.

“Pull it together,” Josh demanded. “This is just like in training, Tyler.”

“20... uh... 91 meters,” Tyler managed. “Mikes... I mean mikes.” Josh felt the turret swing around as Tyler put the aiming reticule on the target. The cannon elevated slightly too.

“Fire!” Josh commanded. The big 120mm cannon belched and sent another depleted uranium bolt towards the Chinese. Josh noted with satisfaction as the turret blew off the top of the tank he had targeted. “Good job, Tyler.”

“I got the mother-fucker!” Tyler chortled. “I got the bastards!”

“Tango-9,” Josh announced, placing his targeting reticule on another Chinese ZHZ99 tank.

“2,115 mikes,” Tyler announced.

“Fire,” Josh ordered. The cannon boomed and sent another bolt at the Chinese. Josh didn’t get to see the results of the shot. The tank they targeted belched fire and smoke. Josh swore he could see the shell coming directly at them. He flinched instinctively, even though it would give him no protection. He was dead if the shot hit his command cupola. If it hit in front or in the turret, they were safe.

DddooooonnnngGGG reverberated through the crew compartment. Josh looked out to find that the shell hit neither hull nor turret. Their cannon barrel was indented and the last four feet was bent down at a weird angle. The cannon tube had taken the hit for them.

“We’re out of commission, guys,” Josh announced. “That one bent the cannon tube.” Tyler had another shell in his arms, ready to place it in their cannon. “Stow that shell back in the ammo hold and seal it up. We’re not firing anymore until they get us a new track and a new tube.”

“Red-14, this is Red-11,” Josh announced on the command comm link.

“Go ahead, Red-11,” Sgt. Hernandez responded.

“Good hunting, guys,” Josh said. “Red-11 took a hit in the cannon tube. It’s bent to hell. We’re going to have to sit this one out.”

“Roger that, Red-11,” Sgt. Hernandez responded. “Hang loose and wait for tank recovery to come and get you.”

“Wilco,” Josh answered.

“What now, Josh?” Tyler asked. “Do we take a walk back to town or stay here?”

“I think we stay inside our tank,” Josh answered. “We’re too far away for the Chinese tanks to take us out. Zach, how about you lay down some smoke for us?”

“You got it,” Zach agreed.

“Smoke?” Tyler asked.

“I want us to blend in with all the dead tanks,” Josh explained. “Homewrecker’s taken enough hits for the day. I want the Chinese to ignore us.”

“Makes sense,” Tyler agreed.

Josh scanned the horizon again. He noted with satisfaction that the tank that put their cannon out of commission was dead. Their turret was upside down beside the smoking tank body. He continued swinging his cupola around to the northwest. He could see a thin line of Abrams tanks a few hundred meters ahead, continuing the advance on the Chinese lines. He scanned further north. He saw maybe half a dozen Bravo Company (Inca) tanks engaging the Chinese BMPs firing missiles at

their battalion. He couldn't pick out more than two runners among the Alpha Company tanks closest to the Chinese hill. Some of the Bradleys from the 1/161 Infantry were burning too.

Josh swung his turret around past the plumes of smoke marking other American tanks lost earlier in the battle. The sight to the south and south west wasn't as grim. The 1/303 Cav and the 116th BCT further south were faring better against the Chinese. Josh swiveled around to the west again and watched the battle proceed for a couple minutes.

"Tangoes!" someone unidentified shouted on the command net. Josh was still monitoring it. "There's a shitload of gook BMPs coming out of the woods. Multiple Tangoes to the north!" Josh swiveled his turret to face north. He lost his breath as he watched at least fifty BMPs drive out of the woods into the fields. Some were infantry carriers. More were missile or cannon armed. As soon as they cleared the edge of the woods, another fifty appeared behind them and drove out onto the north end of the field. ZHZ99 tanks appeared next.

"Fuck!" Josh growled. "We need to get the hell out of here... NOW!"

"What?" Tyler gasped.

"Get the M16 and any sidearms we have," Josh ordered. "We're going out the belly hatch."

"Why would we..." Zach asked. Pings from Chinese machine gun bullets off the Homewrecker's armor answered Zach before Josh could explain. Zach grabbed the M16, while Tyler grabbed three M9 pistols. Josh took a thermite grenade after his friends exited and placed the grenade as he was taught at Armor School. Josh hurriedly squeezed out the bottom of the tank and crawled around the front left track to take shelter on the southern, less exposed side, of Homewrecker.

"Give me a pistol, Tyler," Josh demanded. "Let's get the hell out of here! This thing'll blow in a few seconds." Josh took the pistol Tyler offered him before the three dashed east across the field, hunched over as they tried to present as small a target as possible. The grenade blew when they were about 75 meters away. The puff of smoke and the men's movement attracted the attention of Chinese machine gunners. They dove for cover behind a wrecked Abrams as the Chinese found their range.

"I didn't expect to be a crunchie today," Zach remarked. Tankers sometimes referred to infantrymen as "crunchies" for the sound of their bones cracking if they got run over by a tank. It wasn't a term of endearment.

"Better a live crunchie than a dead tanker," Josh agreed.

"I don't want to get captured by the chinks," Tyler added. "I've heard all about how sadistic those sick bastards are."

"Nobody's getting killed or captured," Josh declared. "We'll get back to Sedro-Woolley, hook up with our unit and get a new tank. We'll be fine." He peeked around the end of the tank. "Fuck! The chinks are through Alpha already and engaging Bravo Company. We've got a couple minutes, at most... to get the hell out of here."

“I’m static with that,” Zach declared.

“Let’s head for that tank over there,” Josh said, pointing towards Maya-2 without recognizing the remains of that tank.

“Together or one at a time?” Tyler asked.

“All together,” Josh answered. “We’re going to attract attention from the Chinese either way. The third guy would be toast for sure if we went one at a time.”

“You take the lead, Josh,” Zach offered. “Follow Josh, Tyler.”

“Haul ass, guys,” Josh said. “Keep intervals... we don’t want the chinks getting all of us with one burst.”

Josh dashed as fast as he could manage across the open field. He glanced back when he was half way to the burnt out tank. Tyler was about twenty feet behind him. Zach was a little further behind Tyler. The Chinese gunners spotted the three men fleeing and targeted them. Bullets were uncomfortably close when Josh dived behind the wreck of Maya-2.

Josh looked back in time to see the bullets dancing perilously close to Tyler’s heels. He dove for cover behind the tank. Both watched Zach stumble about forty feet from safety.

“Go! GO! GO!!!” Josh shouted to his friend as Zach stood. The delay was too much. He sprinted for cover. The next burst of machine gun fire raked across his body. Zach fell to the ground, about three feet from safety. Josh crawled ahead to his friend, grabbed him by the shoulders of his fatigues and heaved. Tyler helped pull when Josh got Zach behind the tank.

“FUCK! Fuck... fuck...” Zach snarled. His strength was ebbing quickly. Josh and Tyler surveyed the damage to their friend. He took a bullet in the left thigh. It wasn’t too bad. Another bullet ripped into his belly. That wound was pouring his life’s blood onto his fatigues and the ground. A third shot hit Zach in the chest. That wound wheezed as Zach struggled for breath.

A look of surprise came over Zach’s face. “Josh... tell my...” Josh grabbed his friend’s hand. “...Mom...” Zach sputtered and a bloody froth came out of his mouth instead of words.

“I’ll tell your mom your last thoughts were of her,” Josh said. He felt Zach squeeze his hand slightly before he went limp. Zach’s eyes went unfocused. “Rest in peace, buddy.” Josh looked up at Tyler. Tyler was in shock, staring blankly down as the dead body of his crewmate.

“C’mon,” Josh said as he shook Tyler gently by the shoulder. “Take the extra M9 from Zach. We have got to get out of here right now if we don’t want to end up like him.” Josh grabbed the M16 from beside his buddy. “Stay with me, Tyler. OK?” Tyler took the pistol and nodded his agreement silently.

Josh scouted for cover. The nearest was the small patch of woods about 200 meters southeast of the wreck of Maya-2, back at the start line for the attack that morning. "Follow me," Josh instructed as he pointed towards the woods. "Go to ground if the Chinese zero in on you. We'll crawl the rest of the way, if we have to." Tyler nodded yes. Josh took a deep breath and added, "Let's do it!"

"I'm right behind you, Josh," Tyler answered as Josh sprinted across the open field. Josh almost reminded Tyler to keep an interval but then figured 'What the hell?' If he got hit, Tyler wouldn't be much help, given his current mental state. Josh didn't blame Tyler. He remembered back to his first day in combat. Lt. Williams and Rob Dolan had helped him calm down... a whole lot. He was the senior NCO now and he needed to do the same for Tyler. If they kept their wits, they could get out of this mess and back to safety.

The two men caught the attention of a couple Chinese machine gunners halfway to the woods. The gunners laced the ground all around Josh and Tyler. Both men dropped to the ground and hugged it for dear life. Josh turned his head north, to try to spot the Chinese as he pressed himself to the dirt. Miracle of miracles! They were in a shallow depression and the Chinese were out of sight. Another burst of bullets whistled over them, scant inches above their prone bodies.

"Crawl, Tyler!" Josh demanded. "We have got to get out of here." The two men crawled for the woods, careful to keep from exposing themselves. The Chinese gunners knew they were there and laced the area with fire. The shallow depression provided just enough cover to save their lives... for now.

The three minutes it took them to crawl into the woods were the longest three minutes of their lives. They paused to look back when they were inside the trees. A small group of farm buildings was four hundred meters north of their position. Chinese tanks and BMPs were about a hundred meters north and west of the farm buildings. Josh and Tyler exchanged glances. They both jogged south through the woods, safe from aimed fire. Stray bullets whistled through the trees as they headed south for Cook Road.

They reached the edge of the woods at the back yards of four houses that fronted Cook Road. Josh glanced west. Chinese tanks and BMPs were approaching from that direction, maybe a thousand meters away. He looked south. South of the road the 116th Cav BCT was beating a hasty retreat for Sedro-Woolley and the bridge over the Skagit. Chinese tanks were firing down the road, preventing anyone from leaving the battlefield that way. Josh and Tyler stayed in the southern edge of the woods, working their way east to Sedro-Woolley.

The two soldiers started towards the road, planning to stay out of line of sight and fire on the north side of the road. Multiple simultaneous explosions forced them to head northeast, away from Cook Road.

"Are they mortars?" Tyler puffed as they dashed across the field.

"No... Millers," Josh replied as he puffed.

"Huh?"

“Multiple Launch Rocket System,” Josh called as they cleared the 150 meter wide farm field and made it to the cover of a house, and a couple sheds that were set back a couple hundred meters from the road. They had been fortunate when they crossed the open field. The woods they just escaped kept them from view of any Chinese machine gunners.

Josh looked north. He found the Bradleys of the 1/161 Infantry that should be supporting his battalion’s attack were retreating back towards Sedro-Woolley. Chinese BMPs and tanks were chasing after them.

“Where the fuck are our tanks?” Tyler demanded.

“I don’t expect there are many left,” Josh answered. “Our platoon lost three of our four tanks. Last I saw before we bugged out, Alpha and Bravo were hit harder than us.”

“We’re in deep shit, aren’t we?” Tyler asked.

“Up to our eyeballs,” Josh confirmed. Both men looked towards Cook Road. They could hear heavy vehicles moving down the road from the east towards them. Josh motioned for Tyler to follow him when they could see that it was a column of six Strykers moving towards Sedro-Woolley at high speed.

The two dashed across the yards, waving and screaming, trying to attract a ride to safety. As they got closer to the road, they saw Chinese tanks pursuing the 116th Cav’s Strykers. The vehicles roared by the desperate men without slowing. Either the 116th troopers didn’t see them or they weren’t willing to risk stopping. The Chinese tanks were around 800 meters behind them. The troopers probably choose wisely. The last Stryker was hit by a Chinese 125mm shell and exploded when Josh and Tyler were about fifty meters away.

Josh and Tyler dashed east for the next property. The various sheds gave them some cover from the Chinese. Chinese machine gun and tank fire continued down Cook Road. Another of the Strykers that passed them blew up as they passed through the first lot into the backyards of more houses on the next street.

“I think we better stick to cover for a while until we get to the street that goes back to the bridge,” Josh suggested.

“No argument from me,” Tyler agreed. They ducked through side yards and across a residential street. The houses seemed deserted. The civvies must have left in a hurry when the town was evacuated. Some garage doors were open. They dashed between two more houses, across the back yards and past more houses, finding themselves at the end of a cul-de-sac. The street led north.

Josh and Tyler looked at each other. Josh shrugged. “It’s a short street. We probably move faster and work our way south again from the next street.” Fences, bushes and a hedge had slowed their way through the last block of houses.

The two soldiers sprinted 50 meters to the beginning of the cul-de-sac and ran east on the connecting street. They found the north-south street they wanted 100 meters ahead. They turned the corner and headed south... BOOM! Boom... boom... ka-boom.

Artillery was shelling Cook Road where it came into Sedro Woolley. Josh and Tyler swerved north, dashing between houses again. They clambered over two more fences before nearly tumbling down a slope into a retention pond in the next development. They managed to keep out of the water as they trudged around the pond. They climbed another chain link fence to get into the next street. Chinese shells were still raining down on Cook Road, a hundred meters or so to their south.

Josh figured they were still west of the bridge, so they dashed between houses on the next street. There was an open field behind these houses. Tyler spotted a group of Bradleys, due north of them. They were driving down the road on far side of the field that ran from northwest to the southeast. Josh and Tyler sprinted across the field, yelling and waving for a ride.

The field was bigger than they expected. It was probably 350 to 400 meters across. The Bradleys flew by without stopping for them. Josh and Tyler stopped on the side of the road, panting and searching for safe haven.

Two Abrams tanks were up the road about 600 meters from them. They were blocking the road just past the edge of Sedro-Woolley. The two tanks were holding off the approaching Chinese tanks and BMPs. Josh and Tyler silently thanked the two crews from their battalion, whoever they were, as they dashed down the road for the center of Sedro-Wooley.

They realized they were running down F&S Grade Road from the road sign when they passed Hawthorne Street. The road intersected with West Borseth Avenue 270 meters ahead. Josh's first instinct was to go south on Borseth, but both men paused when they looked down the road and saw it turn and go west a few hundred meters ahead.

Instead the two soldiers dashed into the Lawrence Industries plant – at least that was what the sign in front of them said the plant was called. They ran about 500 meters diagonally across the plant, probably following the old path of F&S Grade Road. The next road they found ran north and south. It was wide and had on-street parking.

"I think this one will get us through town," Josh speculated. Tyler followed as his leader ran south. The two had no doubt where they were on the next block. They were in the center of Sedro-Wooley. They ran south past the deserted buildings – passing cafes, drug stores, banks, hardware stores and more. They passed an outdoors store on the next block. The owner was advertising specials on winter sleeping bags, winter coats and waterproof boots.

Josh chuckled to himself. In another time and place he would spend an hour in that store browsing through their offerings. Josh's family went camping frequently when he grew up. He knew and loved the beauty and quiet of the Cascades. What he wouldn't give to be up in the mountains, fishing along one of the peaceful lakes.

The next four blocks were lined with homes instead of stores. Josh and Tyler could hear shelling, the chatter of machine guns and the boom of tank guns off to their west. The two managed to extricate

themselves from the worst of the fighting. The street they were following, Metcalf, dead ended at Nelson Street.

Josh and Tyler faced a chain link fence protecting a long parking lot. A series of one story buildings paralleled the parking lot along Nelson Street. Josh looked west and saw the street turn abruptly and go north. On a hunch, Josh pointed east towards a school building. Josh thought this looked like it probably was the town's high school. The two soldiers jogged down to the main school building and turned the corner to head south on Third Street. They stopped abruptly as they turned the corner.

"Help," an overloaded teenaged girl begged. "Help me please." Josh and Tyler couldn't help but stare at this seventeen or eighteen year old vision. She stood about 5'-6" tall and had exactly the right curves to drive teenaged boys crazy. She wore white, very stylish and tight fitting jeans, a Sedro-Woolley letterman coat (obviously from a male admirer) and the latest in women's sneakers. Josh recognized them. His sister Ashley had begged her parents to get her the \$200 fashion statements for Christmas last year. She had to settle for what she termed "bo-bos" instead.

The girl was burdened with two large suitcases, a smaller suitcase and an overstuffed day pack. The end of a cord and the business end of a hair dryer stuck out the top of the day pack. "Can you help me?" the girl begged. Tyler's eyes neared bugged out of their sockets as she straightened up and thrust her chest subtly forward towards the two soldiers. "Plllleeeaaassee?" she begged, syrupy sweet.

"Sure!" Tyler blurted. "We'd be happy to." Any neutral observer knew Tyler was a goner already. Anything that this pretty girl asked for – he'd do it instantly. Josh could see the attractiveness of the young girl too, but the ominous sound of machine gun and rifle fire to the north and northeast of town focused Josh's attention on the task at hand – survival.

"What in the fu... uh, hell are you doing here?" Josh demanded. "I thought they evacuated the civilians a week ago."

"They didn't start evacuating the town until two days ago," the girl answered sharply. "The army wouldn't allow anyone to leave in their cars. They made us come to the high school and take dirty old buses out of town."

"Why didn't you take the dirty old bus?" Josh responded.

"My family had to go in the last group," the girl answered. "My dad is the emergency management director for the town and had to stay around. My mom, Mike and I refused to leave without Dad."

"That still doesn't explain why you're the only one out here," Josh said.

"Obviously I needed to get a few things before the bus left," the girl sniffed, like Josh was a moron for not knowing that. "I want to know where the last bus is. It isn't supposed to leave for another twenty minutes."

“The Chinese changed the timetable,” Josh commented dryly. “If you want to discuss the matter with them, stay right here. They’ll be here in about five minutes.” Josh turned to Tyler and added, “Let’s move it! We need to get to the bridge before they blow it.” Josh started down the street. Tyler, who had both of the girl’s large suitcases, started to follow. “Drop the damn suitcases!”

“But...” Tyler stammered. Josh stalked south down Third Street. Tyler looked back at the girl apologetically, dropped the suitcases and followed Josh.

“You can’t just leave me here!” the girl shrilled.

Josh turned back towards her and retorted, “Leave the God damned hair dryer and shit and come with us.” Josh started down the street again.

“But I need my things,” she protested.

“I’m sure the Chinese will be happy to help you,” Josh called back as he walked.

“The Chinese!” the girl squeaked in fright. “You know what the Chinese do to girls they capture.”

“Then leave the fucking shit and come with us,” Josh called out as he continued south. Josh managed to suppress a smile when he heard the girl curse and then run to catch up to him and Tyler. The last thing he needed now was this bitchy cheerleader type girl making things difficult for him and Tyler. Still... he couldn’t leave her behind for the Chinese to rape and probably kill.

“I’m Tyler Serna,” Tyler explained when the girl caught up with them. Josh stared due south and hustled down the street past the high school building.

“Molly... Molly Lawrence,” the girl answered in reply to Tyler. The sounds of the fighting were getting close to them. They were headed downhill, almost certainly towards the river now. Hopefully they’d be across the bridge and on the south side of the Skagit in ten minutes or so.

Josh paused briefly when they got to Jameson Road, a street leading west. He decided to head closer to the river rather than going towards the Chinese position.

“Does the asshole in front realize that this isn’t the fast way to the bridge?” Molly asked Tyler. Josh forced back a smart remark, spun around and faced Molly.

“That way is faster?” Josh demanded. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Molly responded sharply. “I’ve lived this hick town full of lumberjacks all my life. I KNOW the way to Seattle.”

“Thank you,” Josh responded, trying to force a smile to his face. He did appreciate having someone who knew the town helping them. “Let’s hustle before the Chinese catch us.” Josh jogged off west on Jameson Road without waiting for comment from the other two. They followed behind him. They got halfway past the football field when Josh realized what was in the distance – the town’s maintenance yard where they spent last night.

“Let’s hustle!” Josh demanded. “I know where I am now.” They three jogged down the street towards Route 9, on the other side of the maintenance yard. They could see Humvees, Bradleys, trucks, Strykers and an occasional Abrams tank flying down the highway at high speed. Random Chinese shells were dropping around the highway.

They were past the end of the tennis courts at the end of the football field when they spotted something new. The American vehicles had stopped. Between the maintenance buildings, they spotted two Chinese tanks on Route 9, heading south. The tanks were shooting up any vehicle within reach further down the highway.

“FUCK!” Josh growled as the group abruptly stopped. The Chinese gunfire from the north was coming closer too. It couldn’t be more than a couple blocks away.

“What if we followed this line of woods over here?” Tyler suggested pointing to a line of trees heading south-southwest.

“Is the bridge that way?” Josh demanded as he stared at Molly.

“Those trees grew up where the old railroad line went,” Molly answered. “The railroad bridge is right beside the highway bridge.”

“Let’s go,” Josh directed. The threesome took about three steps south towards the woods when a massive series of explosions detonated in the direction they were heading. The cloud of smoke and fire seemed centered on the river valley, a little less than a mile ahead of them.

“Was that the bridge we want to cross?” Tyler asked. He clearly was more frightened than he had been since they got into the town.

“Don’t know,” Josh answered. The explosion was centered right on the river, near where the woods they planned to follow ended.

“That is where the old railroad bridge is at,” Molly added. “Would the army blow it up?”

“In a heartbeat,” Josh said as he motioned for the group to continue south. Thirty seconds later a second series of explosions reverberated through the river valley. They could see chunks of concrete and steel fly up above the tops of the trees in the distance. He motioned for the three to stop. “THAT was the highway bridge.”

“What do we do now, Josh?” Tyler asked, nervously. Josh could see the cumulative effects of D. B. Cooper’s beheading, Zach’s death and all the near misses the two of them had were ungluing his friend.

“Simple,” Josh answered. He managed to hide the quaver in his own voice. He was in charge and he needed to keep their confidence up. “Survive, evade, resist and escape.” SERE was the military acronym for their survival training. “How far up river is the next bridge?”

“Over twenty miles,” Molly answered. “It’s the one in Concrete.” Josh and Tyler furrowed their brows at the name. “Concrete is a town a couple towns upriver from us.”

“We’ll never make that ahead of the Chinese,” Josh said. “We need a place to hide and we need it damn quick.”

“What about the high school?” Molly offered. “I know it real well.”

“Too big,” Josh responded. “The Chinese are going to use it for an HQ, a medical center or a supply dump. I guarantee the building will be crawling with Chinese in about ten minutes.”

“What’ll we do?” Tyler asked.

“Let’s find some house in the middle of town,” Josh suggested. “Something non-descript. Something that the Chinese will ignore.”

“We could hide at my house,” Molly suggested. “It’s a couple blocks east of the school.”

“Point the way,” Josh agreed. The three took off east on Jamison Street, past the school again. They ran a couple blocks east of the school when Molly pointed north at the next intersection.

“My house is two blocks up this way,” Molly offered. The sounds of Chinese troops were getting much closer.

“We don’t have time to go that way,” Josh announced. “We’re going to grab a house on this street.” He dashed half way down the block, surveying the available hiding places. He chose a small house with a couple large pine trees and some overgrown shrubs in desperate need of trimming in the front yard.

“This is Mrs. Gill’s house,” Molly said.

“I doubt she’ll mind if we hide here tonight,” Josh said as he pushed between shrubs to the front door.

“She won’t,” Molly agreed. “I had her for second grade. She retired a couple years after I finished her grade. She won’t mind at all.” Josh tried the front door. It was locked. The three hurried around to the back. Josh was ready for break a pane in the door’s window when Molly waved him off. “No one worries about locking all their doors. It’s Sedro-Woolley. Nothing ever happens here.”

Josh tried the door and went right in. Tyler and Molly followed him inside. Molly went for the light switch. Josh knocked her hand away.

“We’re keeping a low profile,” Josh explained. “Let’s find an interior room with no windows. We can hunker down, keep quiet and hopefully the Chinese don’t notice us until we can work out a plan to get over the river. Tyler and Molly agreed to Josh’s plan. They found the bathroom was the only room that did not have exterior walls. Molly had a seat on the toilet lid. Josh and Tyler sat on the

floor. The men broke out MREs from their backpacks, sharing one with Molly. Molly was hesitant but eventually decided that the vegetarian lasagna wasn't too bad.

They were half way done with their meals when they heard the sound of Chinese tracked vehicles on the street outside. The Chinese drove down the street but no one checked individual houses. Molly, Josh and Tyler sat immobile and silent as they listened. Josh broke into a big smile when they heard the sound of the BMP recede into the distance.

The three finished their meal in the dark room. The sounds of the fighting could be heard in the distance. Josh estimated that the sounds were most likely over on Route 9 near the river. They decided after another half an hour it was probably safe to spread out more inside the house, as long as they stayed away from the windows.

They ended up in Mrs. Gill's living room. Josh lay down on the couch to try to catch a little rest. Molly and Tyler sat on the floor since the other chairs were too close to windows. Tyler purposefully sat close to Molly. He was still a horny teen and she was a good looking girl.

"You a senior in high school?" Tyler asked quietly. "You're too attractive and grownup looking to be any younger than that."

"I AM grownup already," Molly snipped. "I AM eighteen... well, almost... though I'm stuck in that stupid high school for another half year."

"Really?" Tyler responded. "I'm eighteen too. I graduated last June... the seventh of June. We're almost the same age. When's your birthday?"

"Next month... December 10th," Molly answered.

"Cool! A Sagittarius," Tyler said. "You're thoughtful... a positive person... outgoing..." Tyler didn't notice Molly's raised eyebrows as he continued. "Libras are good matches for Sagittariuses. My birthday is January 23rd."

Josh had his eyes closed but he hadn't fallen asleep. He listened as Tyler tried to attract Molly's interest. Why would he try to get somewhere with astrological signs? That was so lame.

"Uh-huh," Molly allowed to Tyler's astrological reference. She dealt with horny teen-aged boys every day at school.

"I know this has been a tough day for you," Tyler offered as he edged closer to Molly. "Getting left behind... separated from your family... hiding out from the Chinese... I'm here for you if you need anything." Tyler misread the signals as Molly stiffened.

"I'm here if you need a shoulder to cry on," Tyler offered, "...or if you need a hug." Tyler slipped an arm around her back and held her left shoulder. He pressed against her right side as his other arm went around her tummy to complete the hug. He was about to lay his head down her shoulder and give her a hug when she bolted.

Molly stood, spun around and smacked Tyler hard on the cheek with her hand. She jumped away, snarling, "Keep your God damned hands to yourself, you... you... fucking perv." Josh sat up from the couch and pulled his revolver, ready for action.

"I just..." Tyler stammered. "I wanted... I..."

"You wanted to score," Molly snorted. "As if... I'd never consider doing it with a smelly, dirty draftee like you," she sniffed.

"I'm sorry," Tyler whined.

"Jesus! Be quiet you two," Josh shushed. Molly finally noticed Josh had drawn his gun on her. She stood stock still. "Your noise is going to bring the whole fucking Chinese army down on us."

"I'm sorry, Molly," Tyler said in a low voice. "I didn't mean that. It's been a tough day and everything. I just wanted to reassure you."

"I don't put up with groping!" Molly insisted.

"Nor should you," Josh agreed as he put his gun down again.

"I really just meant it as a hug," Tyler insisted. "I'm sorry."

Josh lay down again and closed his eyes. Molly sat on the floor across the room from Tyler. She looked arrows at Tyler for a few minutes. Tyler continued groveling and talking with Molly. Josh managed to nap for a little while. By the time he woke up again, Tyler had managed to mollify Molly. They were talking quietly, though at opposite sides of Mrs. Gill's living room.

"Is the other guy always such a hard ass?" Molly asked.

"Give Josh some slack," Tyler responded. "It goes beyond us getting our asses kicked by the Chinese today or us having to hide out to avoid capture. The commander of our tank was beheaded by a chink shell this morning. Josh has been working with him for two and half years. After we lost sarge our tank got put out of commission. Zach, Josh and I had to bail out and run for our lives. Zach got laced by machine gun fire. He died in Josh's arms. They were really tight."

"I didn't realize," Molly answered quietly.

"As days go, this one is about the suckiest you could ever have," Tyler said.

"Did he really need to ditch my things?" Molly asked. "What am I going to do without my things?"

Josh was awake. He propped himself up on one elbow. "Look, Princess," Josh said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "If Tyler and I carried your suitcases when we tried to get away, we'd both be dead now. The Chinese would have caught us... for sure. You'd be some Chinese squad's fuck toy now. Is that what you want?"

“No,” Molly answered quietly. “You don’t have to call me Princess. I have a name.”

“I know your type,” Josh shot back. “Miss Perfect... homecoming queen... head cheerleader... the girl with the perfect hair, the perfect clothes, the perfect friends and the perfect life... who make everyone else’s life hell.”

“We didn’t have homecoming,” Molly snapped. “They canceled the football season for this damn war.” Molly relaxed her anger momentarily and admitted, “I was supposed to be the head cheerleader, if they hadn’t canceled the cheer squad.”

“Your name’s Lawrence,” Josh continued. “I suppose the big plant on the north side of town is your daddy’s.”

“My grandfather’s,” Molly snapped. “What of it? My family is just a normal family. Dad works for the phone company and mom works at a doctor’s office.”

“Second generation well-to-do,” Josh retorted. “Life’s been handed to you on a silver platter. You don’t get the situation we’re in. The Chinese are outside that door and they will KILL you at the drop of a hat. Everything about your privileged life is gone... forever. If we’re smart... and lucky, we might live until tomorrow night.”

“Listen to Josh, Molly,” Tyler added. “He kept me alive so far. We’re in good hands.”

“What I need is information,” Josh declared. “Princess, you told me that the nearest bridge upriver is at Concrete... like twenty miles upstream?”

“Twenty-two miles by road,” Molly answered. “Why don’t we get my dad’s car? We can get to Concrete in half an hour that way.”

“And don’t you suppose the Chinese might shoot first and ask questions later when they see a car drive through town?” Josh answered. He paused for a moment. “Though... it’s not a half bad idea. We could hike out of town and grab a car from one of the farms outside town. We might not get noticed by the Chinese that way. Anyway, I want to get across the river sooner than if we head upriver. Does anyone have a boat of some kind in town? Where would we find one?”

“There’s a boat launch along the river south of town,” Molly said. “Maybe we could find one there. There are eight or ten houses fronting on the river. I know those people have fishing boats, canoes and row boats. Would that work?”

“It would,” Josh agreed. “Let’s get some rest and go after dark. That will give us the best chance of getting across the river without being seen.”

Chapter 2

[Reader's Note: Chapter 3 goes into a detailed description of how and why World War III and the campaign for the Pacific Northwest began. If you find Tom Clancy novels tedious and boring, read the synopsis below and skip on to Chapter 4. I will not be offended. For military buffs like me who want to know in more detail how the Chinese and American armies came to face each other near Sedro-Wooley, Washington, skip the synopsis (Chapter 2), and start at Chapter 3.]

Synopsis

While most of the world celebrated the coming New Year on December 31, 2012, the Chinese armed forces attacked north and east into post-Soviet Russia. Western intelligence agencies and the Russian KGB never noticed over the past few months as the massive Chinese armies crept north between satellite passes and positioned themselves along the northern border between Russia, China and Mongolia, the Chinese nation's secret ally.

The U. S. President countered by sending a carrier task force to the Yellow Sea to caution and deter the Chinese aggression. Chinese fighters and bombers, in far more strength than any Westerner imagined, attacked and sank all ships of the task force, killing 12,000 American sailors. The United States reacted with white hot anger at the dastardly attack of the Chinese. The new Congress was sworn into office the following morning. In an act of bipartisanship not seen in decades, the Congress declared war on the People's Republic of China the same afternoon. The President ordered our other Pacific carrier group to rendezvous with the rest of the Seventh Fleet off the eastern coast of Japan. The ships were positioned to support our Japanese allies in case the Chinese decided to go after Japan or Taiwan after they finished with the Russians.

While the world focused on China, Russia and the U. S. on January 4th, the Indian Army shocked the world by dropping a Para Commando regiment on Pakistan's nuclear weapons stockpile. The Indian army swarmed across the Pakistani border as soon as the nuclear bombs were secured.

The next shoe dropped three days later as the carrier met the Seventh Fleet ships about a hundred miles east of Hyuga, a port on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. The ships should have been out of range of Chinese fighters, but... the Japanese showed their true allegiance. Chinese fighters shuttled forward to Japanese airbases and then took out after the American combat air patrol [CAP]. Chinese bombers followed after the CAP went down. Five hours later, oil slicks and random flotsam was all that remained of this second USN carrier group. 13,500 more Americans were dead.

Americans reacted with righteous anger to the betrayal by their Japanese ally of six decades. The president called for Congress to bring the nation to war footing. All National Guard units were nationalized and ordered to undergo war training to prepare for the coming contest. The draft was re-established. The U. S. would need a truly massive army if the country was to take on the Chinese, the Japanese and possibly the Indians.

Chinese forces rushed across Siberian Russia nearly unopposed. One group of armies headed east for Vladivostok, the Aleutians and the Bering Straits. More armies poured west towards European Russia. The Indians pushed through Pakistan and on into Iran and Afghanistan. The Asian forces seemed unstoppable.

Chinese troops and air forces used the small Aleutian islands as stepping stones, hopping from one island to the next through the spring, advancing towards their next prize – Alaska. The massive state was weakly garrisoned by about 10,000 soldiers and airmen. They were no match for the air, paratroop and amphibious assault on Anchorage and Valdez in the beginning of June. 200,000 Chinese soldiers brushed away the out-numbered Americans and occupied the remainder of Alaska. The U. S. and Canadian military chiefs expected the Chinese to pause when they got to the Alaskan border. They didn't. The Chinese forces plunged into the Yukon and Canadian Rockies.

Once again the North American high command misjudged the Chinese intentions. They expected them to head for the western plains on the east side of the Rockies. Li Chang, the Chinese commander, out-maneuvered the Americans again. They penetrated down through the Rockies, heading for Vancouver, Seattle and points south on the Pacific coast.

U. S. and Canadian forces, commanded by the U. S. I Corps, assembled around the small Canadian city of Chilliwack, digging in along a line between two lines of mountains. The defense line was about forty miles east of Vancouver. The position covered the most likely approaches to the key port city. The defense line was strong except for one thing. It was split in two by the Fraser River

The I Corps commanded two U. S. divisions, two Canadian brigade groups (BG) and a separate U. S. brigade combat team (BCT). They faced the Chinese 16th Army, consisting of three divisions and two brigades. Li Chang, the Chinese front commander, had a corps of three divisions of paratroopers available too.

The Chinese and Canadian brigades were roughly half the size of a division. The U. S. brigade combat team was roughly one third the size of a division. The Chinese enjoyed a two to one advantage in combat power. The Chinese Air Force, far larger than pre-war U. S. estimates, dominated the skies. This dominance prevented the U. S. Navy from entering the theater of war. They were docked down in San Francisco and San Diego, out of effective range of the Chinese bomber fleet.

The Chinese forces spent two days forming up in front of the North American corps' defense line. They launched a few probing attacks. The full Chinese plan began on October 11, 2013. They dropped their three divisions of paratroopers into the area around Vancouver's port and central city. American armored cavalry managed to race ahead of the paratroopers and secure the airport, but they were overwhelmed before American troops from Bellingham, Washington could come ahead to support them. Chinese reinforcements poured in by air and eventually by sea.

Li Chang's opening move unbalanced the North American defense. The Canadian government insisted their own troops be disengaged from the front and sent to retake Vancouver. The American reinforcements from Bellingham had to disengage from the Vancouver area, cross the Fraser River and relieve the Canadians, so they could return to Vancouver.

Li Chang's main blow fell while the I Corps was rearranging their forces. A Chinese special operations battalion was dropped by helicopter in the rear of the Chilliwack Line. The Chinese bombers carpet bombed a path through the southern end of the line. Chinese armor blitzed through the stunned American troops. Gallant and intense fighting by the 81st Heavy Brigade Combat Team, including Josh Warner's 1/185th Armor Battalion, slowed the Chinese onslaught for sixteen hours to allow the Americans to evacuate Chilliwack before they were surrounded and captured.

The Ist Corps fell back to a line from Sumas, a small U. S. town at the northwest edge of the Cascade foothills, through Canadian town of Abbotsford and north to the last two North American held bridges over the Fraser River at Mission, B. C. The Chinese bombers intensified their attacks on the remaining bridges, bringing them down hours later. 11,000 Canadians and Americans were trapped on the north side of the Fraser River.

Li Chang's next blow fell quickly. Three divisions broke through the makeshift American line at Sumas, a small town just south of the U. S./Canadian border. Chinese armor dashed along the border for the Salish Sea, trying to cut off the entire I Corps forces in Canada. The American corps commander, Lt. General Roger T. Coleman, trained as a paratrooper, was comfortable with enemy forces in his rear. He did not panic. He made the most fateful decision of the Battle of the Borders, to counterpunch. He launched the 81st Heavy BCT and a second armored cavalry BCT to attack through the tail of the Chinese armor before the Chinese infantry could consolidate the ring encircling the Americans and Canadians. The 1st Corps forces streamed south to safety in the U. S., less the 11,000 unfortunate soldiers trapped on the north side of the Fraser River, around the town of Mission.

The I Corps fell back along the I-5 corridor through Bellingham and continued south. General Coleman determined the best place to fight the Chinese was the Skagit River line. A division of Marines would join him there. The Chinese forces followed south along the I-5 corridor.

Much to Coleman's surprise, the Chinese sent no forces down the valley between Deming and Sedro-Woolley. The valley runs north-south, six to twelve miles west of and paralleling the I-5 corridor. The Americans settled in behind the Skagit River, with the 1st Marine Division solidify the center of their line.

Li Chang's forces drove straight down I-5 and tried to bash their way across the Skagit River through the Marine's defenses. General Coleman studied the Chinese dispositions as the battle developed. His forces continued to hold Sedro-Wooley. He planned to surrender the town when the Chinese pressured him, but they didn't. His intelligence reported that a weak brigade of infantry was covering the flank of the Chinese 16th Army from attack from Sedro-Wooley.

General Coleman pondered the possibility for a day before making a decision. The Chinese 16th Army was tied down astride the Skagit River. He would counterpunch again, sending his 41st Heavy (Armored) Division through Skagit-Wooley to crush the Chinese flank guard brigade. This would put his forces on I-5, in control of the Chinese lines of supply. He could roll up the Chinese forces, surround them and end the Pacific Northwest campaign in a matter of days. Orders went out and forces took their places. The 41st Division's attack would launch at 0700 hours, November 7, 2013.

[Chapter 3 is a detailed description repeating Chapter 2 synopsis of the action leading up to the attack from Sedro-Wooley. Skip forward to Chapter 4 to pick up with Josh Warner, Tyler Serna and Molly Lawrence hiding from the Chinese troops in Mrs. Gill's house in the center of Sedro-Wooley.]

Chapter 3

While most of the world celebrated the coming New Year on December 31, 2012, the Chinese armed forces attacked north and east into post-Soviet Russia. Western intelligence agencies and the Russian KGB never noticed over the past few months as the massive Chinese armies crept north between satellite passes and positioned themselves along the northern border between Russia, China and Mongolia, the Chinese nation's secret ally.

The Chinese were in Vladivostok within 48 hours. The Chinese rolled across the frozen Siberian steppes for Lake Baikal, the towns along the Trans-Siberian Railway and for Kamchatka. While Americans nursed their hangovers and watched college bowl games on New Year's Day, the U. S. president ordered CVN-76, the Ronald Reagan, to sail from Japan to the Yellow Sea. He wished for a show of force and to let the Chinese leadership know his displeasure with their attack on Russia. The U. S. and Russia were not allies, but they were not die-hard enemies anymore either.

The carrier task group reached their assigned station on January 3rd. Hundreds of Chinese fighters took on the carrier group's combat air patrol (CAP). The Chinese lost half their fighters but they took down the CAP. Chinese medium range Tu-16 Backfire look-alike bombers came in, in far greater numbers than the CIA ever suspected the Chinese possessed, and launched six hundred Russian made Kingfisher anti-ship missiles at the American task group.

The two Aegis cruisers, three destroyers and six frigates did their best to defend the Reagan, but were totally overwhelmed by the massive barrage of missiles. The ships shot down 92% of the incoming missiles, but 48 hits were more than enough to sink the Reagan, the Antietam, a Ticonderoga class cruiser, all three destroyers and three frigates. The USS Lake Champlain, another Ticonderoga class cruiser, was dead in the water. The remaining frigates were all damaged and attempting to rescue the sailors from the sunken ships. The USNS Bridge, a replenishment supply ship, was undamaged.

The Chinese Air Force returned late in the afternoon and finished the job. Every American ship was swept from the surface of the Yellow Sea. The USS Key West, the attack submarine assigned to cover the carrier group, withdrew at top speed before they found anymore Chinese surprises. Twelve thousand American sailors died on that sad day. The Japanese Self Defense Force's navy rescued two hundred American sailors.

The United States reacted with white hot anger at the dastardly attack of the Chinese. The new Congress was sworn into office the following morning. In an act of bipartisanship not seen in decades, the Congress declared war on the People's Republic of China the same afternoon. The President ordered the CVN-74, the John C. Stennis, and her escorts to rendezvous with a task group from the Seventh Fleet off the eastern coast of Japan. The ships were positioned to support our Japanese allies in case the Chinese decided to go after Japan or Taiwan after they finished with the Russians.

While the world focused on China, Russia and the U. S. on January 4th, the Indian Army shocked the world by dropping a Para Commando regiment on Pakistan's nuclear weapons stockpile. The Indian army swarmed across the Pakistani border as soon as the nuclear bombs were secured.

The next shoe dropped three days later as the Stennis met the Seventh Fleet ships about a hundred miles east of Hyuga, a port on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. The ships should have been out of range of Chinese fighters, but... the Japanese showed their true allegiance. Chinese fighters shuttled forward to Japanese airbases and then took out after the American CAP. Chinese bombers followed after the CAP went down. Five hours later, oil slicks and random flotsam was all that remained of this second USN carrier group. Over 13,500 more Americans were dead.

Americans reacted with righteous anger to the betrayal by their six decade long Japanese ally. The president called for Congress to bring the nation to war footing. All National Guard units were nationalized and ordered to undergo war training to prepare for the coming conflict. The draft was re-established. The U. S. would need a truly massive army if the country was to take on the Chinese, the Japanese and possibly the Indians.

The Fifth Fleet ordered the carrier group based around the CVN-71, the Theodore Roosevelt, to take its big stick and retire to the southern side of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Army rolled through Pakistan and continued on into Iran. The Chinese rolled on through Siberia and Kazakhstan, gobbling up more of the Russian Far East.

The Chinese and Japanese prepared for their next blow against America after they finished removing the Russians from their Far East possessions. They began hopping island by island up the Aleutian chain towards Alaska, mimicking the American strategy in the Pacific in World War II. Each island was blanketed by Chinese and Japanese air power and then taken by Chinese and Japanese troops with the support of their navies. The U. S. Navy couldn't intervene. We didn't have sufficient air power in the area to guarantee the safety of any of our nine remaining carrier groups.

Chinese, Japanese and Indian forces continued their attacks west towards European Russia. The European Union rallied to support Russia as the Asian powers reached the Urals. The British Commonwealth countries Australia and South Africa supported the European Union, along with the Egyptian, Libyan, Tunisian and Moroccan armies.

The Canadian Army and the U. S. Army went to war footing and frantically trained their forces for the coming war to support Russia and to defeat the brutal and dastardly Chinese, Japanese and Indian nations.

The attacks on the Aleutian Islands alarmed the nation. The Air Force dispatched fighters and bombers to Elmendorf Air Base near Anchorage to ensure that the Chinese did not get a foothold on the Alaskan mainland. Chinese knockoffs of the Russian Tu-16 Backfire bombers blanketed the radar network across the Alaskan frontier, bombing it furiously. The radar coverage was damaged but not out. On June 5th, they picked up the approach of the Chinese carrier towards Anchorage and Valdez. The U. S. and Canadian air forces launched a massive attack on the carrier, to take it out while it was within reach.

The Chinese carrier was offered as bait. The western air forces took the carrier, three Chinese destroyers and four frigates out, along with two Japanese destroyers. Meanwhile the Chinese sent a massive wave of fighters over Elmendorf and took out the CAP. Wave after wave of Chinese and Japanese transports brought the Chinese 15th Airborne Corps in and dropped it on Elmendorf Air Base. The three parachute divisions overwhelmed the 1st and 4th Brigade Combat Teams of the 25th Division, capturing Elmendorf Air Base, Anchorage and Valdez.

U. S. fighter pilots were forced to bail out and crash their planes along the Alaskan coast. Most of the bombers had the range to return to Canadian or continental U. S. fields. The Chinese used oversized cargo ships and Korean and Japanese car carriers to move the Chinese 16th Group Army to Valdez. All of Alaska was in Chinese hands by the end of June.

Canadians and Americans in the northwest were in a panic. The Canadians had four small brigades of roughly 13,500 men in British Columbia. The 2,000 man remnant of the U. S. 25th Division helped man the border with Alaska. The combined force was outnumbered 10 to 1 and had no hope of holding, even with the advantages the rough, mountainous terrain afforded them.

The 2nd Infantry Division, based in Fort Lewis, was combat ready and could protect Seattle and Vancouver. The 1st Marine Division, based in Camp Pendleton outside San Diego, had recently returned home from deployment abroad. It needed time to rest and refit before it could be ready for battle. The California National Guard's 40th Division was assembling and in training. The Washington, Idaho and Oregon Guard's 41st Division was assembling in Fort Lewis and training for combat. Neither Guard Division was considered combat ready.

The bulk of the U. S. Regular Army was based in Texas, across the southeast and along the Atlantic coast. The various National Guard Divisions were assembling, taking in draftees to reach full strength and training to prepare for combat. The Joint U. S./Canadian high command assumed the Chinese would strike through Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and into the American heartland. The Canadian Army was assembling around Winnipeg while the Americans covered the Dakotas, eastern Montana and Wyoming.

The NorAmJC (North American Joint Command) expected it would take the Chinese and Japanese until the spring of 2014 to get their logistical bases set up and to prepare for the drive into the North American heartland. Preparations were geared to that timetable. Marshal Li Chang, the Chinese commander in North America, defied conventional thinking.

The Chinese 16th Group Army attacked out of Alaska into the Yukon Territory after a two week pause at the Canadian border. They attacked south through the foothills and eastern Rocky Mountains, never emerging onto the western plains of Alberta. Two Canadian brigades covered Edmonton and Calgary. The other two western brigades fell back in front of the Chinese advance, fighting a delaying action as best they could as the Chinese pushed down the Alaskan and Trans-Canadian Highways.

Lt. General Roger T. Coleman commanded the U. S. I Corps, based in Fort Lewis, outside Seattle. General Coleman was tasked with protecting Vancouver, Seattle and the U. S. Pacific Northwest. He prepared a defensive line where the mountains left a narrow, ten mile wide gap between the Cascades and the British Columbian Rockies. He would post the 39th and 41st Canadian Brigades on

his left in the hills overlooking the gap. The 2nd and 41st Divisions would cover the gap. He would keep the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in reserve. He sent the 82nd Cavalry Regiment (armored cavalry that was part of the Oregon National Guard) forward to assist with the delaying action as the Chinese moved south. Hopefully the 1st Marine Division and the 40th Division would be able to help hold the line. General Coleman would have nearly equal numbers to the Chinese, if his reinforcements arrived in time.

Li Chang's forces defied conventional logistical expectations again, clearing its way through the Canadian Rockies around October 1st. The two Canadian brigades fell back to rest and take their place in line while the 82nd Cav fought a final delaying action north of Harrison Lake before falling back behind General Coleman's Chilliwack defensive position. The 25th Division's 1st and 4th Brigade Combat Teams fell back to the U. S. to rest and refit before joining the battle again later.

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Roger Coleman stared at the big map in his command trailer. The general pondered 'Would his plan work?' At 6'-0" tall, 175 pounds with closely trimmed brown hair, graying at the temples, Roger Coleman looked every bit the commander and former paratrooper that he was. He graduated from West Point fifth in a class of over a thousand in 1977. He served the normal command and staff responsibilities as his career progressed. Coleman served as S3 (operations staff officer) for the 101st Airbornes' 2nd Brigade Combat Team (502nd Regiment) during Desert Storm. He commanded the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. His promotion to command the famous 101st Airborne Division in 2009 and his leadership in Afghanistan seemed to mark him for high command in the army when he returned home in 2010.

Coleman served as Director of Operations, Readiness and Mobilization in Washington, D. C. upon return from Afghanistan. Scuttlebutt around the army said he was being groomed to be the next Vice Chief of Staff. The new Chief of Staff decided otherwise. Roger Coleman was sent out to Seattle to command the I Corps at Fort Lewis. Coleman and his wife Marjorie discussed it and decided that I Corps would be his final command. They would return to his family ranch in Texas and enjoy retirement when his assignment in Seattle ended in 2014.

The Chinese threw those plans all to hell. The general stiffened and shook his muscular body as he stared at the map. Had he remembered everything from his staff schools and the war college? He had the high speed avenue of advance covered. Flanks? The Canadians were ensconced in the mountains on his left flank. The 2 Battalion, 75th Rangers performed the same flank guard function in the Cascades on his right. The 2nd Infantry Division was dug in from the Fraser River across the gap to the foothills of the Cascades. The good old "Indianhead Division" was regular army. They were top notch and would fight well.

The 41st Division, a National Guard outfit, seemed better than he had a right to expect. Over half the citizen-soldiers had served a tour in Iraq. Coleman was incredibly lucky with the political appointee commanding the division. Brigadier General Keith V. Sanders was a West Pointer, Class of 1990. He had served two tours in Iraq and two tours in Afghanistan with the regular army before retiring last year after a twenty year hitch. Sanders knew his business and would handle his division well.

The 41st's 81st Heavy Brigade Combat Team would serve as the corps' fire brigade, to cover breakthroughs or counterattack enemy penetrations of the line. The division's other two brigade combat teams (BCT) would hold on the line. The 196th Light Infantry BCT would serve as his strategic reserve.

Coleman decided his plan was good... at least as good as he could make it with the resources at hand. He'd feel better if the 1st Marine Division and the 40th California National Guard Division were here, but they were three to four weeks from deployment. His forces could handle the one armored division, two infantry divisions and two infantry brigades his intelligence officer IDed in the advancing Chinese 16th Group Army.

What about the Chinese paratroops? He didn't have resources to deal with a paratroop landing in his rear. His line was too thin. If only the Air Force could get enough planes in the air to give him some semblance of air cover. He now understood how the Iraqis felt during Desert Storm and Desert Freedom operating under hostile skies. Strafing and bombing attacks by the ubiquitous fighters and fighter-bombers reduced his commands performance materially. The attacks by American made F-15s and F-18s flown by Japanese pilots were especially infuriating.

Roger Coleman had the personal assurance of General Daniels, the Air Force chief of staff, that his command would make full effort to get more planes to the west to contest the current Chinese air superiority. His plan could work if Daniels followed through on his promises.

The general was well read in military history and science. He admired the audacity and drive of generals like Rommel and Patton, but understood that there was more to fighting successfully than their flashy maneuvers.

“Amateurs study tactics,” the short, red-haired lady guest lecturer from the Army War College preached during a staff ride tour of Gettysburg he had taken years ago. “Professionals study logistics.” Coleman had an excellent line of communications to provide his soldiers with food, ammo, fuel and other supplies necessary for a modern army. His lines were out of reach of the Chinese.

Coleman would never want to exchange places with Marshal Li Chang. His seaborne supply line back to China and Japan was being interdicted by American attack submarines. Supplies landed in Anchorage or Valdez and had to be hauled 2,200 miles through the Alaskan, Yukon and Canadian Rockies wilderness to his men.

Li Chang was going to have trouble providing for his men if Coleman's I Corps could hold here. Winter was coming. By spring the U. S. and Canadian armies massing in the center of the country would be ready to counterattack and drive invaders back to Asia. Everything depended on holding... here and now.

“General...” Major Andrew Gorski announced as he poked his head inside the door of the general's trailer. Major Gorski was the head of the I Corps operations staff. “Message from Colonel Perez. The 82nd Cav pulled back from Agassiz this morning. They reported the bridge over the Fraser was blown as planned.” Agassiz was a small town on the north side of the Fraser River, about eight miles northeast of Chilliwack and his main line of defense.

“Thank you, Major,” the general answered. He allowed himself a grim smile. The Chinese would be testing his line in a couple days.

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On October 5th, I Corps G2, Intelligence, reported that the Chinese 46th Division and 68th Brigade were heading for Sasin and Derouche Mountains. That suited General Coleman just fine. The two Canadian brigades could handle those troops in the mountains at the north end of his line. Intel said the 69th Infantry Division, 4th Armored Divisions and 48th Infantry Brigade would face the two U. S. Divisions in their prepared positions.

Weather was providing the Canadian and U. S. troops protection from the air while making their personal lives difficult. The area was blanketed with low clouds, fog and drizzle for the past five days, greatly hindering the accuracy of the Chinese fighters and fighter-bombers. That helped but with the temperatures hovering between the mid-forties and mid-fifties, life in the field was difficult.

The Chinese approached the main line and skirmished with the combined U. S. and Canadian forces for five days, exploring the line for weaknesses. The sun broke out on the 8th of October. The Chinese Backfire bombers, fighters and fighter-bombers pounded the allied troops. Good weather and the pounding continued for three days.

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October 11, 2013

“General, wake up,” Sgt. Haskell, General Coleman’s orderly said as he tapped the general on the shoulder. “Wake up, sir.”

“What... what time is it?” the general muttered.

“0410, sir,” Sgt. Haskell replied. “Major Gorski thought you should see this immediately.” The orderly handed a message to his commanding general. The general put on his reading glasses and read the message. The Vancouver Police were reporting that Chinese paratroops were landing in the open areas surrounding Vancouver and North Vancouver. The general sighed and sat at the side of his bunk for a moment before dressing.

“What’s the word from the Duke of... uh... Whoever’s Recon (Duke of Connaught’s Own Regiment), Colonel?” General Coleman demanded when he reached the operations trailer. He gave Colonel Antony Rodrigues, his chief of staff, a hard stare. “Are the Chinese coming down the valley toward Squamish?”

“No, sir,” Rodrigues answered. “The Duke of Connaught’s Own Regiment reports the valley is clear.” General Coleman had trouble keeping the Canadian regimental names straight since the two Canadian brigades joined his corps two months ago.

“Good!” General Coleman stated. “Get orders out for the 196th BCT (Brigade Combat Team) to secure the airport and docks in Vancouver. Airport takes priority. What’s the status on the BCTs from the 25th [Division]?”

“Refitting in Bellingham,” Major Duncan, the corps G4 officer reported. G4 staff officers handled supply and logistics. Bellingham is a city about sixteen miles south of the U. S./Canadian border along the northern coast line of Washington. “They have most of their new equipment but it hasn’t been issued to lower units yet.

“They are to receive a new batch of replacements tomorrow,” Major Wilson added. The major was Corps G1, the personnel staff officer.

“None of that matters just now,” General Coleman said. “I want those two BCTs on the road for Vancouver by noon today. The 196th won’t be able to handle the Chinese 15th Airborne Corps by itself. Get the replacements and equipment following them ASAP. They can marry up while they’re underway. Tell the 2nd ID [Infantry Division] to send the 4th BCT to Vancouver too.”

“General Cunningham is going to question how he’s to hold seven miles of front with two brigades, Sir. What do I tell him?” Colonel Rodrigues asked.

“Tell him to do the best he can with what he has,” Coleman answered. “That’s all any of us can do. Get an ETA [estimated time of arrival] for the 1st Marines [Division] and the 40th [Division]. We’re going to need all the help we can get if we have 45,000 Chinese paratroopers in our rear.”

“Will do, Sir,” Colonel Rodrigues answered. “Let’s go, men. Let’s make this happen.” The staff dispersed to their duty stations to cut orders and get the troops in motion. The general finished dressing and had some breakfast. He knew it was going to be a long day.

Colonel Rodrigues reported back ten minutes later with news about the reinforcements from California. The 1st Marine Division was entraining as they spoke. They should arrive in five days. The 40th Division was still scattered in a dozen spots across California. They weren’t due to assemble as a whole division for another ten days. General Coleman shouldn’t expect their help for at least three weeks.

The general monitored progress of his units and received reports from the Vancouver Police about the location and progress of the Chinese paratroopers. The Chinese had the docks on both sides of Vancouver Harbor secured, in North Vancouver and Vancouver proper. They were driving for the airport, but had not gotten through the city yet.

General Coleman spoke with the commander of the 196th BCT, to clarify his priorities. Securing the airport came first. The docks and the rest of the city were a distant second priority. The 2nd Infantry Division’s 4th BCT, a Stryker brigade, spent most of the morning disengaging from the front line and regrouping for the move west to Vancouver. They sent their recon battalion, the 2nd Squadron, 1st Cav, which was currently out of the line, immediately towards Vancouver. They were expected to arrive at the Vancouver International Airport by noon that day.

The general got news as he was eating lunch that the 2/1st Cav had secured the bridges over the Fraser River nearest to the airport. They had to drive a platoon of paratroopers off the island, but it was secure, until the Chinese could get larger forces in position to capture the airport.

The flood of refugees fleeing from the Chinese troops made travel difficult for the 196th BCT and the remainder of the 4th BCT. The Chinese and Japanese air forces were harassing the move too, further slowing progress to Vancouver.

Roger Coleman hadn't finished eating before his orderly, Sgt. Haskell, bothered him.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," the sergeant apologized. "General Kuhn from Fifth Army wants you on the line, PDQ! His words, sir."

The general left a big sigh. The last thing he needed was Bill Kuhn, and most likely Bill's boss, the army chief of staff, looking over his shoulder while he tried to deal with this crisis. Sgt. Haskell took care of the general's tray while the general headed back to the office. Signals had General Kuhn on the line a minute later.

"Hello, Roger," General Bill Kuhn said. "I'm sorry to be calling you like this. I expect you're up to your armpits in alligators right now, but I need you to make some changes in your dispositions."

"What do you have in mind, Bill?" General Coleman asked. Bill Kuhn and Roger Coleman had been classmates and close friends for the past thirty-some years.

"You need to send the Canadians back to clean up the mess in Vancouver," General Kuhn explained.

"You do realize they're engaged with somewhere between nine and twelve battalion combat groups of Chinese in the mountains on my left flank, don't you?"

"I've read your reports, Roger," Bill Kuhn answered. "I know this is going to be difficult but you have to do it. It comes from the top."

"It's Howerton, isn't it?" Coleman responded. "The SOB wants to fuck with me." David C. Howerton was the Army Chief of Staff who passed over Roger Coleman for Vice Chief two years earlier. There was little love lost between the two men.

"General Howerton didn't make this call, Roger," Bill Kuhn said. "This order comes from the very top. The prime minister spoke with the president. They want the Canadians taking the lead in retaking the city. It's a point of national pride."

"We don't have time for national pride right now," Roger huffed. "I'm stretched thin as it is. How the hell am I to disengage the Canadians and get them over to the city in time to allow them to accomplish anything? I am sending my last reserves to Vancouver as we speak. Unless I divert the 196th BCT back to relieve the Canadians, I have nothing to send up in the mountains. How about if I send the BCTs from the 25th Division up there as soon as they come up to the line?"

"It'll do for now," Bill Kuhn agreed. "I know you're in a tough spot, Roger. I'll do my best to run interference for you as long as I can. You will have to get the Canadians involved in clearing the Chinese out of Vancouver eventually."

"Clear them out?" Roger Coleman snorted. "Hell, I'll be lucky to hold the key points in the city as it stands now. I have one squadron of cavalry holding the airport. The rest of the Stryker Brigade from the 2nd ID [Infantry Division] and 196th LIB [Light Infantry Brigade] are stuck in traffic jams caused by the Canadian refugees fleeing."

"Do your best, Roger," Bill Kuhn told his friend.

"Any idea when the jarheads will get here?" Roger Coleman asked. "I'll give those Marines big wet, sloppy kisses if they can get here in the next day or two."

Bill Kuhn chuckled before responding, "I'll pass that message on to the Marines. I'm sure they'll be looking forward to it."

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The Fraser River split into three arms as it flowed through the Vancouver metro area on its way to the sea. The Chinese landed on either side of the Vancouver harbor, in North Vancouver and downtown Vancouver. The North Arm of the Fraser River separated the Chinese from the airport and the city of Richmond. The South Arm separated Richmond from Ladner, Delta and Whaley. The Middle Arm split off from the North Arm, separating Sea Island, where the airport was located from the Richmond area.

The 450 men and 48 Stryker recon vehicles of the 2/1 Cav were spread thinly across the approaches to the airport. They held the two highway bridges across the North Arm from downtown Vancouver, the light rail bridge across the North Arm and the highway and light rail bridge across the Middle Arm leading into the airport. The bridges were clustered within a one mile circle of the split between the Middle and North Arms. The 2/1 Cav didn't have nearly enough men to control the other bridges further east that crossed from downtown Vancouver.

The Knight Street Bridge was located about two miles east of the Cav's defensive position. A swinging railroad bridge was another four miles upstream on the North Arm. The Queensborough Bridge was located another two miles upstream from the railroad bridge.

The Chinese launched two attacks in the afternoon to drive the 2/1 Cav off the bridges and out of the airport, failing each time. The remainder of the 4th BCT was crossing the South Arm from Delta into east end of Richmond when they ran into fire from the Chinese, who were just then crossing the Queensborough Bridge a quarter mile east by the split in the North and South Arms.

The brigade dropped off a company to guard the bridge they just crossed and raced on for the airport. The East-West Connector Highway was clear of refugees, so the BCT sped past the cranberry bogs. RPGs from the Chinese knocked out three Stryker vehicles a half mile east of Knight Street. The Chinese were now in the center of Richmond!

Brigade headquarters radioed ahead to the 2/1 Cav to warn them of the threat to their rear. The troops of cavalry on the west side of the Middle Arm managed to pull back onto the island before the Chinese attacked them from the rear. Chinese troops poured across the bridges into Richmond, intent on driving the cavalry out of the airport. More Chinese headed south through Richmond along the south bank of the Middle Arm towards the last bridge at the south end of Sea Island.

A company of Chinese paratroops commandeered boats from the north shore of the North Arm and crossed over, landing on the western end of Sea Island. The commander of the 2/1 Cav was facing attack by that company from the rear, attack across the bridges at the north end of Sea Island by an estimated three battalions and loss of their line of retreat if the Chinese took the last bridge at the south end of the island. He reported the situation back to his BCT commander and was given orders to withdraw.

Lead elements of the 196th BCT met the retreating cavalry as they crossed off of Sea Island, just ahead of the Chinese troops trying to take the last bridge. The extra troops helped the 2/1 Cav hold off a minor attack across the bridge from the airport and from the troops who sought to cut them off.

The first Chinese transports landed at the airport ninety minutes after it fell. Colonel Farrar, the commander of the 196th BCT, suspected the Chinese had planned an air assault on the airport. There was no way the planes came from Alaska in the amount of time available since the airport fell. The U. S. troops watched helplessly as Chinese air assault troops landed on the north side of the quarter mile wide Middle Arm. General Coleman ordered a battery of the I Corps air defense brigade to set up as close to Sea Island as possible to interdict Chinese aircraft landing at the airport.

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The 39th and 41st Canadian Brigades needed two days to disengage from the mountains and shift west to reinforce the line along the South and North Arms of the Fraser River. The Chinese and Japanese Air Forces pounded the I Corps lines around Chilliwack. Their strafing and bombing also made travel between Chilliwack and Vancouver difficult.

The main Chinese attack opened up just as the Canadian troops were disentangling themselves from the mountains. The Chinese Airborne XV Corps attacked east from Vancouver. The 4th BCT and 196th BCT were stretched too thin across the nearly twenty miles of river they had to cover, so the paratroopers quickly captured bridges over the Fraser and Allouette Rivers. The redeploying Canadians ran smack into the Chinese attack, preventing General Coleman from pulling one of his BCTs back to his main line.

The paratrooper attack was coordinated with the 16th Group Army's attack on the Chilliwack line. Four brigade combat teams were spread across the ten mile Chilliwack front. The 1st BCT of the 2nd Infantry Division was north of the river. The 2nd BCT of the 2nd ID and the 41st Infantry & 116th Cavalry BCTs covered the remainder of the front south of the Fraser River. The only uncommitted reserve left in the I Corps was the 81st Heavy BCT.

Three days of attacks penetrated the American lines. The 81st Heavy hurried from crisis to crisis, counterattacking or plugging the holes until the line could be reestablished. Chinese fighters,

fighter-bombers and bombers strafed, bombed and napalmed the American forces night and day, taking full advantage of the unusual clear weather.

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Josh Warner and C Company of the 1/185 Armor battalion were in the thick of the fighting. They were in action half a dozen times over the first three days of the Chinese attack and lost two of their sixteen tanks. The 1/185 Armor pulled into the resupply depot around 12:30 AM, early in the morning of October 17th after repulsing yet another Chinese penetration of the lines.

They refueled the big M1A1 Abrams tank first and then reloaded them with ammo. Josh moved 'Homewrecker' out of the depot and parked it in formation with about half the tanks of the company, a couple hundred yards from the depot. The group was waiting for the rest of the company to resupply so they could move back to their reserve positions and bivouac for the night.

The roar of Chinese bombers flying over forced everyone to dive for cover wherever they could find it. Josh Warner and Zach Rice both took refuge inside 'Homewrecker.' Nothing short of a direct hit would harm them while they were holed up in their tank. Lt. Williams and Sgt. Dolan were still back at the depot, picking up some electronics parts and mail for the platoon when the bombers struck.

The first couple minutes of the air raid weren't too bad. The bombs seemed to be dropping in the west end of Chillwack, rather than on them. Things were quieting down and Josh was ready to signal Zach to open up the hatch when a single bomber came over and dropped its load much nearer. The blast reverberated through the tank. A split second later the big, sixty-eight ton tank was rocked by a gargantuan explosion. The sound was deafening, even inside their steel protector. Secondary blasts continued for three or four minutes.

"Maya-1, report," crackled over the radio inside the tank. "What's your status LT?" Maya-1 was the Homewrecker's radio call sign. Josh and Zach stared at each other for a moment before Josh grabbed the headphones and put them on. Josh had been a corporal for nine months. Zach was still a private, first class.

"This is Maya-1, sergeant," Josh reported. He recognized the voice of company sergeant D. B. Cooper over the radio. "Lt. Williams and Sgt. Dolan are still at the depot." Another big explosion rocked the tank. 50 caliber machine gun rounds started to pop and zing by their tank. "Maya-1 seems in good shape. Do you want me to go get the rest of the crew?"

"Negative," Sgt. Cooper answered. "The depot took a direct hit. Our battalion is moving out now! Our company will follow Alpha and Bravo [companies]. Maya-1 will lead Charlie [Company]. Follow Bravo's tail end out of here. Got it?"

"Roger, sergeant," Josh confirmed. The roar of the Abram's turbines starting up could be heard over the pop and crackle as ammo in the depot continued to "cook off." "Get in the commander's seat, Zach. I need you for a second set of eyes."

“What about LT and Sarge?” Zack asked as Josh squirmed down into the driver’s seat. He fired up Homewrecker’s engine before replying.

“We don’t have time to wait for them,” Josh explained. “Let me know when Bravo company clears this bivouac.” Zach was quiet for a half a dozen seconds.

“Shit!” he exclaimed. “They’re whippin’ [hurrying]! One of those assholes from Alpha ran over the guardrail and sign down at the end of the road when he made a louie [left].”

“Keep an eye out for the end of Bravo,” Josh instructed. “I don’t know where we’re going and I don’t want to lose the rest of the battalion.”

“Got it, Josh,” Zach agreed. It took a couple minutes for the twenty-four Abrams and four Bradleys of Alpha and Bravo companies to pull out of the field where they had bivouacked. Josh put his tank in gear and followed behind them.

“How many do we have following us?” Josh asked Zach once he negotiated the turn out of the small street onto the larger road.

“Seven tanks,” Zach answered a few seconds later after he swiveled the commander’s turret to look back.

“Shit!” Josh growled. Their company should have fifteen Abrams and two Bradleys left. They lost Maya-2 from their platoon eighteen hours ago. The tank was hit in the rear by a Chinese anti-tank missile. It exploded in a ball of flame, probably from a hit in the aviation fuel tank. The army said it wasn’t supposed to explode, but it did anyway. The turret blew off and flew fifty feet in the air before crashing to the ground. All four men in the crew were KIA [killed in action].

“Wait... nine... ten... eleven... twelve...” Zach grunted excitedly. “Everybody’s there.”

“Thank God!” Josh whispered to himself.

The battalion drove about ten minutes to another field about a mile from the supply depot they had abandoned. The tanks lined up in columns by platoon and company. Josh shut his tank down and climbed out of the Homewrecker.

Sergeant Holder, the commander of Maya-3 came by. “Any word on Lt. Williams or Sgt. Dolan?” Josh asked. The sergeant was the most senior man present in the platoon.

“I haven’t heard anything, corporal,” the sergeant answered. “This has been a cluster fuck. I’m going to see if Capt. Frye knows anything more.”

Josh and Zach waited half an hour before they got an indication of what had happened. Captain Frye, Sgt. D. B. Cooper, the company sergeant, and Sgt. Holder returned. Sgt. Holder gathered the ten men of 1st Platoon together with their company leadership.

“I have sad news to pass on,” Captain Frye announced to the assembled soldiers. “Lt. Williams and Sgt. Dolan were caught in the secondary explosion back at the supply dump an hour ago. They found shelter from the initial attack but were caught in the fire ball when ammo that was cooked off by the fire blew up one of the aviation fuel tankers.” The Lieutenant paused for a few seconds to let the message sink in. “I think a moment of silence in their memory would be appropriate.” The twelve men bowed their heads.

Josh thought about the two men. Lt. Williams was a strict but decent platoon leader. The lieutenant kept a distance from the enlisted men, but that was expected. Officers and enlisted weren’t supposed to fraternize. Sergeant Robert “Rob” Dolan was an entirely different story.

Rob Dolan had been Josh’s mentor since he joined the guard. Rob... er, Mr. Dolan taught science at Reeves Middle School, Josh’s former middle school. He didn’t have Mr. Dolan as a teacher, since Mr. Dolan started teaching the fall that Josh started high school. Josh’s sister, Amanda, a high school senior, and his younger brother Jacob, a sophomore, had Mr. Dolan for science in seventh grade. Both loved him as a teacher.

Rob Dolan had been a college senior when the twin towers came crashing down on 9/11. He had been moved to join the army once he completed his last year of college, instead of going straight into teaching. Rob served a five year hitch in the army, participating in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and spending twelve months in Afghanistan in 2006. Rob found a job teaching in Olympia when he got out of the army in 2007. Rob was a dedicated patriot and signed up for duty in the National Guard as soon as he had settled into his new job.

Capt. Frye interrupted Josh’s memories. “Sgt. Cooper will take command of 1st platoon, effective immediately. I expect we will get a tank and crew to replace Maya-2 in a week or so. The open crew slot in Maya-1 should be filled within 48 hours. Does anyone have questions about the command arrangements?” No one did. “Sgt. Cooper will take it from here.” The captain turned and headed back to the company HQ.

“I will take Lt. Williams’ place in command in Maya-1,” Sgt. Cooper announced. “What is the status of our vehicles? Are we topped off with fuel and ammo? How about MREs [Meals, Ready to Eat – the military’s version of trail food]?”

“All three vehicles are static, Sergeant,” Sgt. Holder responded. “We had finished resupply before the attack. We have enough food for nearly a week.”

“That’s excellent,” Sgt. Cooper responded. “2nd Platoon was half finished and 3rd platoon was waiting their turn when the Chinks hit. We’re fortunate. Get some shut-eye, men. Tomorrow’s going to be another long day.”

The other crews headed back to their tanks. Sgt. Cooper followed Josh and Zach back to Homewrecker. “I know both of you are MOS 19K,” Sgt. Cooper said as they reached their tank. The sergeant was referring to military occupational specialty 19K, armor crewmen. “Rice, how much time have you logged driving this beast?”

“Not much, Sergeant,” Zach answered. “The LT preferred to have Josh drive. I have my time at Armor School and not a lot more.”

“You can handle this machine, if I need you to?” Sgt. Cooper asked.

“I can do it, if that’s what you want, Sir... er, Sergeant,” Zach hastily correcting his faux pas.

“We will be spending a lot of time together,” Sgt. Cooper said. “I don’t intend to stand on formality here. You guys can call me Sarge.”

“Sure thing, Sarge,” both agreed. Sgt. Cooper turned to Josh. “You’re most senior on the crew. I want you in the gunner’s seat. Can you do that for me?”

“Certainly, Ser.... Sarge,” Josh agreed quickly.

“Good!” Sgt. Cooper declared. “You men bed down and catch some shut-eye. I have to go back to HQ and pick up my things. Where do you normally sleep?”

“We’ve been bedding down under Homewrecker,” Josh explained. “It gives us some hard cover.”

“Yes,” Sgt. Cooper agreed, chuckling. “Sixty-eight tons of hard cover.” He headed off to company HQ.

Josh and Zach pulled their sleeping gear out of Homewrecker, stripped down to skivvies and set up for the night. They dried their feet and changed socks. Rob Dolan and Lt. Williams had been fanatical about foot care. They spread out their sleeping mats, crawled into their bags and laid down.

Zach Rice broke the silence after a few minutes. “I cannot believe Rob is dead. Four months ago we were at his house celebrating Memorial Day.” Rob Dolan had hosted all of the enlisted men from the 1st Platoon to a barbecue at his house that Monday, while they had a break from training at Fort Lewis.

“I know,” Josh agreed. “I feel horrible for Terry, Travis and Austin.” Terry was Rob’s thirty-one year old, extremely attractive wife. Travis and Austin were Rob’s sons, eight and five years old, respectively. Josh and Zach had spent the afternoon playing with Travis and Austin, when they weren’t wolfing down burgers and Terry’s delicious potato salad. The boys were fun little kids who had enjoyed rough housing with the young men barely out of high school.

“What are they going to do now?” Zach wondered.

“I don’t know,” Josh admitted. “It’s going to be hard.” The two lay on the ground, considering the six men they lost that day – Lt. Williams, Rob Dolan and Sgt. Price, Corporal Kelly and Privates Lopez and Lott from Maya-2. Thankfully numbness and fatigue stilled their minds and allowed them precious sleep... for a few hours.

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The next Chinese attack came early – before dawn on October 17th, around 0430. The Chinese broke the thinning line of the 2nd Division's 2 BCT at the northeast end of Chilliwack, close to the Fraser River. General Coleman ordered the 81st Heavy BCT to counterattack to restore the American lines. They succeeded, at the cost of six tanks.

The clouds cleared as the sun rose a few minutes after seven o'clock that morning. The 81st Heavy was still engaged in mopping up northeast of Chilliwack when the largest concentration of aircraft and helicopters seen so far in the war pounded the 41st BCT lines at the southern end of the Chilliwack lines.

The aircraft pounded and suppressed the American anti-aircraft units, ZHI-9 and 10 attack copters flew through and shot up any visible Stryker, Humvee or truck and then the Chinese tanks came on, en masse. Roger Coleman had been waiting for days to see where Li Chang put his 4th Armored Division into the fight. Now he knew, three hours too late. The 81st Heavy BCT would never disentangle itself from the fighting on the northeast side of Chilliwack and get across the valley to oppose the main attack.

The Stryker equipped infantry brigade was no match for close to 300 of the new Chinese main battle tank, the ZTZ99. Strykers were eight wheeled, lightly armored vehicles intended to carry infantry and cavalry recon into battle, not stand up to main battle tanks armed with 125 mm guns. The Chinese armor crashed through the main line in an hour's time, followed by a brigade of infantry.

Chinese ZHI-8 transport helicopters flew overhead and dropped a battalion of infantry around the southern-most bridge over the Chilliwack River, about four miles behind the advancing armor. Even a West Point cadet could see the Chinese plan now. They intended to break through the American line, link up with the troops at the bridge and cross the Chilliwack River. The river would provide a shield as they drove northwest across the valley. When they captured Suma Peak, the large hill straddling the valley and hugging the Fraser River, they would have the American troops surrounded and cut off from the United States. Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest would be virtually undefended.

General Coleman issued urgent orders for the 81st Heavy BCT to pull back down the Trans-Canada Highway, get across the Chilliwack and confront the Chinese tanks before his command was surrounded and disintegrated. The 41st BCT, the 116th Cavalry BCT and 2nd Infantry Division's 2nd BCT were to hold firm while the 81st cleaned up the penetration.

Fifteen minutes after the orders went out, Major Andrew Gorski (I Corps G2, Operations officer) delivered a message from the 4th BCT, 25th Division. The Chinese troops had seized Derouche Mountain, on the north side of the Fraser River. This peak overlooked the entire valley and was northwest of Chilliwack and behind his defensive line. Chinese troops on the mountaintop could call down air support, artillery and rockets on anything that moved in the American lines.

The general slumped in his chair and let out a big sigh. He was out of reserves and out of options. The tired troops from the 25th Division weren't up to a counterattack to retake the peak. The 81st Heavy BCT would slow and might stop the Chinese, but it certainly couldn't drive them back and

restore the original lines. General Coleman issued orders for the three BCTs on the east side of the river to fall back to the west side.

The Canadian brigades, who were fighting the Chinese paratroopers north of the Fraser River, would fall back on Mission, the last bridge over the Fraser that was in friendly hands. The 2nd Division BCT on north side of the river would cover the Canadian's and 2th Division's withdrawal and then cross the Fraser themselves. General Coleman would try to organize a new line around Abbotsford and across the river from Mission.

The new line would extend eleven miles from the Fraser River down to the foothills of the Cascades in Washington State. When... and IF... he got everyone into position, Coleman would have nine brigades to defend a shorter line than he had to start with. Of course, any chance of recapturing Vancouver was over until his corps received substantial reinforcements.

The 81st Heavy BCT wasn't in time to stop the Chinese tanks from crossing the Chilliwack, but it did manage to pen them in the triangle formed between the Cascades and the 4 mile section of river that ran almost parallel to the mountains. The BCT had a strong stop line established between the bend in the river where it flowed north to the Fraser and the hills on the south.

The 81st BCT fought an eighteen hour battle to hold the Chinese attack and allow time for the troops around Chilliwack to fall back to Abbotsford and the new line of defense. They were outnumbered 3:1 by the Chinese ZTZ99 tanks but managed to hold, thanks to the narrow front they had to defend. Losses were heavy among the Josh and Zach's unit, the 1/185 Armor, but their 1st Platoon still had their three tanks when the order was given to pull back at 1730 the next evening.

The 116th Cav formed a rear guard as the 81st Heavy BCT withdrew southwest of Abbotsford for rest, resupply and refit. The Chinese air attacks changed targets when the fighting along the Chilliwack River subsided. They targeted the bridges over the Fraser River at the town of Mission.

The 1st BCT of the 25th Division was across the river when the attack started. The 4th BCT was crossing and the Canadians were queued up, waiting for their turn. The 2nd BCT of the 2nd Division was holding the edge of the town, acting as rear guard for the remaining troops. The Chinese dropped the highway bridge first. Troops continued crossing on the railroad bridge for another twenty-two minutes, until the Chinese destroyed that bridge too.

Almost 11,000 Canadian and American troops were trapped on the wrong side of the Fraser River. Roger Coleman no longer had enough troops to properly defend the line he had chosen. Major General Daniel Bell, the Canadian who was assistant corps commander, happened to be on the north side of the river. He took command of the trapped forces.

The long term outlook for the trapped forces was grim. I Corps did not have sufficient bridging equipment to bridge the Fraser so the troops could withdraw. Bell ordered troops to commandeer the personal small boats docked at the marina near the destroyed railroad bridge. The boats ferried men across the Fraser River to safety. No one wanted to face capture by the Chinese.

Atrocity stories about the Chinese treatment of prisoners of war had been circulating since they invaded Alaska. They shot surrendering troops when Anchorage fell. Everyone knew how the

Japanese treated POWs during World War II. The Chinese similarly mistreated American POWs during the Korean War, as did the Vietnamese during that war. How could these men expect to fare when captured by the Asians?

Everyone in Canada and the United States heard about the atrocity committed by the Chinese as they marched from Alaska through the Yukon. The mayor of the small town of Watson's Lake refused to take down the Canadian flag flying over the town hall. The news media reported that the Chinese shot the mayor on the spot when he refused. They drove the 1,000 town residents out and torched the town, reducing it to smoldering ruins.

True? Not true? No one in free Canada or in the United States could say for sure. None of the 11,000 men trapped north of the Fraser River wanted to find out how the Chinese treated their prisoners first hand. General Bell had relays of small boats ferry troops across the 1800 foot wide river. They arrived on the south side with nothing but small arms. Chinese fighters spotted the rescue effort and strafed the boats until they sank half a dozen and cleared the river.

The boats returned to ferrying troops across the river when darkness fell. Close to 900 men got across the river under cover of darkness. The remainder of the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry joined their comrades on the southern shore. That battalion had been crossing when the Chinese destroyed the bridges the previous evening.

Every man north of the Fraser prayed for fog, rain and low clouds on the morning of the 18th, just like they had for much of their month in Canada. They were bitterly disappointed by the clear skies and reappearance of Chinese fighters. All they could do was wait, hope and fight the division of paratroops and a division and a half of Chinese infantry during sunlight.

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Lt. Colonel Jonathan Owens, the CO of the 1/185th Armor, ordered all vehicles fueled and reloaded with ammo as soon as his battalion was safely bivouacked southwest of Abbotsford near the town's airport and behind the new line of defense. Some men grabbed MREs while others simply crashed after the long ordeal they endured the previous day and night.

It was late afternoon and Josh woke with a start as he heard Zach Rice bang a hatch closed on the Homewrecker. As he looked up he could see the sun hanging low on the horizon. It was nearly evening.

"Gentleman," Sgt. Cooper announced. "We have a new arrival. Meet Private Tyler Serna. He will be filling our loader position." Zach turned around to see the newcomer while Josh stood to greet him.

Tyler Serna was a couple inches taller than Josh and the Sarge, both 5'-11". Their new crew member looked too young to be in the army. He looked to be sixteen... maybe. He appeared to shave very little, if at all.

"Tyler, this is Corporal Joshua Warner, our gunner," Sgt. Cooper said by way of introduction.

“Welcome to the Homewrecker,” Josh said as the two shook hands.

“Homewrecker?” Tyler asked.

“Our nickname for our tank,” Josh explained. Tyler gave Josh a confused half-smile.

“This is PFC Zachary Rice, our driver,” Sarge added. Zach and Tyler shook hands and exchanged greetings. “Help Serna get his gear stowed. I am going to catch a little shut eye. I suspect we are going to need all the rest we can get before tonight.”

“You got it, Sarge,” Josh agreed quickly. Sgt. Cooper lay down while Zach and Josh helped their new crewmate get settled. The sergeant was asleep before the three finished. The guys grabbed some MREs. Josh and Zach had their rest. Now they needed sustenance. Tyler grabbed a meal too and followed the other two to the other side of their tank, where they wouldn’t disturb their platoon leader.

“Mmmm... Menu #6, beef patty,” Zach hummed. Josh knew this was one of his friend’s favorite meals.

Tyler looked at the package quizzically. “Is this any good? I haven’t had this one yet.”

“It’s the bomb!” Zach answered.

“It’s not bad...” Josh allowed, “... if you put the bacon cheese spread and barbecue sauce on the bread. The patty is pretty good.” The three tore open their meal bags and heated up the beef patty. The meal came with cheese crackers, a bag of nut-raisin trail mix, energy drink mix, gum and coffee. Once they had their burgers and coffee heated, they assembled the sandwiches and began eating.

“What part of Washington are you from?” Josh asked amiably between bites of burger.

“The Nebraska part,” Tyler answered, giving the other two a mischievous grin. “Fremont, Nebraska. I’m not Guard. They drafted me.”

“There’s a lot of that going around now,” Josh said.

“What did you do before they drafted you?” Zach asked.

“Before they drafted me?” Tyler replied. “I was a high school student.” He snorted. “Five months ago I was dancing with my girl at the prom. Two days after I graduate from high school I get my draft notice. They rush me through basic and AIT and now... here I am. Did both of you join the National Guard?”

“Yeah,” Zach allowed. “I wanted money for college. I had hoped to get a soccer scholarship after high school, but I didn’t get interest from any colleges. Eastern Washington will let me try out as a walk on for their soccer team... if I can afford to pay my own way the first year.”

“What do you... er, did you do before the war?” Tyler asked.

"I was a shift manager at a McDonalds in Seattle," Zach said, "...since I finished high school. I guess I was a grade ahead of you in school. I've been out for a year and a half."

"How about you, Corporal?" Tyler asked as he looked at Josh.

"Call me Josh," Josh said. "My story isn't much different than Zach's. I was accepted at Stanford, but I didn't have enough money to go. The Guard seemed like a good idea... at least it did two and a half years ago. It doesn't seem like as good an idea as it did back then."

"You would have ended up here anyway," Tyler said. "They're drafting anybody our age who has a pulse and is breathing. What did you do after you finished school... other than serving in the guard?"

"Don't laugh. I worked for Geek Squad," Josh explained. "I want to get a degree in computer science... eventually. What did you plan to do after high school?"

"I wasn't real sure," Tyler admitted. "I was signed up to go to junior college, but I hadn't really decided what I wanted to study."

"Totally understand, man," Zach said. He shrugged. "I guess it don't matter now. We're here and we're soldiers."

"I'm sort of surprised to be assigned to your unit," Tyler commented. "Everyone in the group of replacements I was in expected to end up reinforcing the 25th Division. They took a beating up in Alaska, from what the news has said."

"They did," Josh agreed. "Our unit has been pretty involved in all the fighting the last week. We're kind of the fireman for our corps. Wherever there's a problem, we get sent in to plug the hole or counterattack and put out the fire."

"What's... uh..." Tyler started before pausing. "What is combat like?" He stared the weary faces of his new crewmates and understood that was a question that should stay unspoken. "Never mind, I guess I'll find out soon enough."

Zach snorted, "Tonight... most likely." The three finished their meal in silence.

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The new U. S./Canadian defense line ran from the foothills of the Cascades, through Sumas, Washington, across the border and around the Canadian town of Abbotsford, up to the Fraser River, near the destroyed bridges from Mission. The men of the 81st Heavy Brigade Combat team received an unexpected quiet night on October 19th-20th. The Chinese mounted a few probing attacks to locate and understand the defensive line. The troops in the front line easily repulsed the attacks. Marshal Li Chang and the 16th Group Army needed time to bring up supplies and fuel from their dumps twenty miles east, on the east side of Chilliwack.

General Bell managed to get the last 300 men of the 25th Division's 4th BCT and 300 men from the Royal Westminster Regiment of the 39th Canadian Brigade Group over the Fraser under cover of darkness. Chinese paratroopers from the 43rd Parachute Division and troops from the 46th Division tightened the ring around Mission. The 41st Canadian Brigade Group and 2nd Division's 2nd BCT held the perimeter.

Low clouds and heavy fog covered the battlefield as morning broke on the 20th of October. The Chinese knew the low visibility weather was coming. That wasn't surprising. They had destroyed much of the Western satellite network, blinding the Western weather forecasters. The Chinese weathermen knew what to expect since they had excellent coverage of the northern Pacific rim.

The 43rd and 45th Parachute Divisions used the poor visibility to stage river crossings at Queensborough, where the North and South Arms of the Fraser split, and five miles upriver by the ruins of the Port Mann bridges. They had no difficulty getting lodged on the south side of the river. The 196th BCT and the 2nd Division's 4th BCT had over twenty-six miles of river to cover between the Vancouver Airport and the Golden Ears Bridge.

General Coleman ordered Richmond abandoned, so the 196th BCT could concentrate on blocking the paratrooper's river crossings. The 81st Heavy BCT was dispatched to block the new threat. They needed the rest of the morning to travel over to the New Westminster section of the City of Surrey to block the paratroopers.

The cloud and fog lifted around lunchtime and the full weight of the Chinese air force appeared. This time their target was the small town of Sumas, Washington and the southern end of Abbotsford. Bombs, napalm and barrages of artillery shells and missiles rained down on the troops of the 116th Cav BCT, the defenders in the area.

The Chinese 4th Armored blasted through the softened and shaken defenses. The 116th's 50 M1A1 tanks could handle the Chinese ZHZ99 tanks, one on one. The four companies of tanks were outnumbered six to one. General Coleman knew he needed to send reinforcements, but he had committed his reserve already, nearly thirty miles to the northeast. Orders went out recalling the 81st Heavy BCT and ordering the remnants of the 25th Division's 1 BCT to reinforce the 116th Cav.

Neither brigade combat team was able to reinforce the line before disaster struck. Chinese mechanized infantry infiltrated through the southern end of Abbotsford and through Sumas, just south of the international border. They covered the way for anti-tank missile armed troops. The 116th Cav was forced to pull back to the southwest to stay out of the 4,500 yard range of the HongJian missiles.

Li Chang ordered his 4th Armored Division forward along the border, using the anti-tank missile screen as a shield. Random units of the 41st BCT, holding the line farther north in Abbotsford, tried to slow the Chinese advance, without success. By late afternoon the hole in the Western line was beyond plugging or repair. The 81st Heavy BCT and the 1st BCT from the 25th Division were still ten miles north of the breach. Chinese armor and armored personnel carriers (APCs) had penetrated to the western edge of the Abbotsford Airport, 5 miles behind the I Corps line of defense.

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“General, the Chinese took the Abbotsford Airport,” Colonel Rodrigues, I Corps chief of staff, reported breathlessly. “They’re heading west, paralleling the border.”

“The airport! Damn it!” the general growled. “What the hell is the 116th Cav doing?”

“The tank companies are down to around 40% strength,” Colonel Rodrigues explained. “They’re pulled back to cover the bridges over the Nooksak River at Lynden and Everson.”

“What is the ETA (estimate time of arrival) for the 81st [Heavy BCT]?” Coleman demanded.

“They’re approaching Aldergrove now,” Colonel Rodrigues answered. Aldergrove was a town 5 miles northwest of the airport. “They’re experiencing serious delays due to Canadian refugees trying to get to the United States.”

General Coleman let out a big sigh. “Thank you, Colonel. Could you assemble the staff in five minutes?”

“Will do, sir,” Colonel Rodrigues replied before exiting the general’s office. Roger Coleman sat and pondered momentarily. It was his ill luck that chance dealt him the first active combat command of this war. As a student of military history, he well understood the fate of many of the first U. S. combat commanders. Irvin McDowell was shuttled aside within days of losing the Battle of Bull Run at the start of the Civil War. Walter Short was cashiered days after Pearl Harbor. Lloyd Fredendall was gone within days of the disaster at Kasserine Pass, also early in World War II.

Would future American commanders remember him in the same way as McDowell, Short and Fredendall? The general shook off his introspective mood quickly. He was a professional! He had a duty to perform and he would do it – to the best of his ability.

There was little chance of stopping the Chinese if their goal was to cut off the U. S./Canadian forces by driving a wedge to the Salish Sea to the west. Did Marshal Li Chang expect being cut-off to cause him to panic? Most likely. Being cut off and surrounded was not an unusual feeling for him – after all, he was a paratrooper himself. Airborne forces were used to operating while surrounded. That was an expected part of their operations.

Top priority had to go to protecting the route south into the United States. Bridges needed to be protected and wired for demolition, in case they were about to fall to the Chinese. His 555th Engineer Brigade was coming north from Fort Lewis in Tacoma. He had intended to use them to bridge the Fraser River so he could extract the troops trapped on the wrong side of the river in Mission. They could prepare to demolish the bridges over the various rivers and creeks cutting across western Washington.

He looked over his map. There were bridges over the Nooksack River at Ferndale, Lynden, Everson and Deming. The Squalicum Creek had numerous crossings just north of Bellingham. There were two bridges over the Skagit River west of the Cascades. The engineers and the 116th Cav could cover the way south – for a few days. The 82nd Cav, currently patrolling the passes and valleys of the Cascades, could send most of their troops west to help too.

Coleman had the route south covered, if that was Li Chang's intent. What if he was driving to the sea? The I Corps couldn't stop them. Roger Coleman decided to let the Chinese go that way, if they wished. What if their intent was a short hook to circle behind Abbotsford and take it from the rear? Roger Coleman smiled at that possibility. His 81st Heavy Brigade and the 1st BCT from the 25th Division were positioned perfectly if the Chinese came that way.

A plan was forming in his mind. He needed a shorter, more defensible perimeter. He needed to draw his troops in closer to Abbotsford and form an all-around, hedgehog style defense. The general remembered some of the World War II histories he had read over the years. The Germans on the Eastern Front often found themselves surrounded after the Soviets broke through. Many times they were able to punch through the Soviets surrounding the pocket and break free – if they acted quickly.

That's it! Let the Chinese tanks dash to the Salish Sea. He would wait for darkness and then send the 81st Heavy BCT crashing through the line of Chinese surrounding them. Our troops had superior night vision equipment and could beat the Chinese infantry before they got too settled or numerous. The rest of the troops in the pocket would follow the 81st to safety.

General Coleman assembled his staff and issued the necessary orders to pull his troops back into a tighter perimeter around Abbotsford and to prepare for a night attack. Every soldier in his command would need to move that night, assuming the 81st Heavy BCT was able to punch a hole in the line of Chinese surrounding them.

Coleman faced two unpleasant phone calls. The first was to Bill Kuhn, his superior and commander of the Fifth Army. The second was to Dan Bell, the gallant Canadian commanding the troops in Mission on the north side of Fraser. Roger Coleman had grown to deeply respect the reserved, but thorough and meticulous Canadian officer over the past two months.

Bell totally agreed with the decisions Coleman explained to his subordinate. Preservation of the bulk of the corps was essential. Bell promised to tie down as many Chinese for as long as possible before his command inevitably surrendered. It was a shame to lose this brave man and the 10,000 men of his impromptu command.

Bill Kuhn called a few minutes after Roger Coleman finished with his call to Dan Bell. Kuhn reported that the 1st Marine Division was travelling through Portland, Oregon as they spoke. The troops would not arrive in time to help hold the border, but they would be available the help with the aftermath. Coleman studied the map when Kuhn asked where he wanted the Marines to go. Burlington, Mount Vernon and Sedro -Woolley was his answer. They could secure all the crossings of the Skagit River and give the I Corps a rallying point after this retreat was over.

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Marshal Li Chang read the reports carefully as they came in from the morning's attacks. The paratroops did their jobs drawing that U. S. armored brigade away from the point of decision at Sumas. General Mo Xi Huan's 4th Armored was free of the Americans and heading west for Blaine and the sea. The 48th Infantry Brigade was following through the breakthrough and would turn

south behind the armor to capture bridges over the Nooksak River. General Fan Jiang Guo's 69th Infantry Division was following the armor too, with orders to establish a strong line of defense to trap the Americans in Canada, where they could be destroyed.

He would have to watch Fan Jiang carefully. The man was careful, almost deliberate on the battlefield. He wasn't Li Chang's first choice to command a division in this critical operation in North America but his brother-in-law was on the Central Committee. Li Chang understood how things worked, politically. Li Chang called General Chuang Ji, commander of the 16th Group Army, to remind him to oversee the 69th Division's move. The division needed to be ready for an American counterattack that night.

Li Chang had studied Roger Coleman carefully for the past six months. The man was a counter-puncher. Li Chang knew there would be an attack to break out of the pocket that night. He would be prepared. The 69th Division would have a strong screen of anti-tank missiles and RPGs to deal with those damned Abrams tanks. The Americans made an excellent tank. They just didn't make enough of them.

----oooOooo----

For want of a nail, a shoe is lost. For want of a shoe, a horse is lost. For want of a horse, a gun is lost. For want of a gun, the battle is lost. Friction, the myriad of minor, unrelated events that confound every military, sprinkled a few grains of sand into the cogs of Chinese military machine that day.

Ku He Rong, a thirty-two year old reservist lieutenant, working the signals section of the 16th Group Army Logistics Department, found the private he delegated last evening to get replacement parts for the HQ generator from rear depot hadn't done his job. Of course the main generator for the HQ chose that precise moment to sputter and die. They had a backup generator... in Rosedale, twenty-two miles to the rear. It had been left behind in their haste to chase after the retreating Americans a couple days earlier. The 16th Group Army HQ was out of power and communications for about two hours that evening.

General Chuang Ji drove forward from HQ to deliver Li Chang's message personally and to oversee defensive preparations. His driver took a wrong turn as they passed through Sumas. He left the shattered U. S. town heading south instead of east. The first clue that they were on the wrong track was when they blundered into an American outpost a couple miles south of the town. A fusillade of 50 caliber and 5.56 mm ammo met the Chinese Humvee (actually called an EQ2050 Utility Vehicle). The driver managed to reverse and get the general away and avoid capture.

The cost of the mishap was high. One of the general's aides was killed outright. The general was wounded in the shoulder, apparently hit in an artery. Spurts of red blood soaked the back of the Chinese Humvee. The other aide managed to pack off the wound and slow the blood flow. He demanded the driver take the general to the nearest aid station immediately.

The critical message went undelivered. Oversight to ensure proper action according to Li Chang's plan was now absent. More sand in the gears.

----oooOooo----

Col. Michael England, the forty-five year old commander of the 81st Heavy BCT, did not waste the precious hours before his attack. Colonel England was an experienced Guard officer. He had taken ROTC in college and served in Desert Storm in 1991 as second lieutenant. He completed his required service as a regular in 1993 and transferred to National Guard. He had been with 81st Heavy for 18 years, commanding it for the last three years. In civilian life Colonel England was a mid-level manager at Boeing.

Colonel England conferred about the night attack with Colonel Thomas McCarthy, the commander of the 1st BCT, 25th Division around 1800 hours that evening. They agreed one of the keys to success was securing the low heights between Aldergrove and the Abbotsford Airport. Colonel McCarthy sent his men forward an hour later and occupied the hills. They found it was home to an extensive quarry. This provided excellent cover to troops posted there.

Chinese troops blundered into the American positions around 2100 hours, shocked to find Americans occupying the line they had been ordered to deploy on and defend. General Fan Jiang Guo pulled his men back to the airport and tried to set up a proper defense in this new location.

At midnight the 81st Heavy BCT rolled around the edges of the 1st BCT's position and drove south. The 1/185 Armor Battalion was on the right. The 1/303 Cav Battalion took the left of the advance. The 1/185 Armor met virtually no opposition as they drove south into the United States. The troops of the 4th Armored Division were already miles to the west heading for Blaine and the Salish Sea.

The 1/303 Cav, supported by the 1st BCT, attacked into the airport. The Chinese 69th Division hadn't deployed their anti-tank missile screen yet. RPG armed infantry slowed but could not stop the American tanks. The division pulled back towards Sumas after a forty-five minute fight.

General Coleman was shocked at the ease with which his troops broke the line encircling his command. By 0100 on October 21st, the whole I Corps was in motion, heading south for Lynden, Everson and safety. Troops and vehicles continued streaming south as day broke. The troops thanked God that the Vancouver fog and drizzle returned, masking their retreat from the Chinese air force.

Late morning a regiment of the Chinese 4th Armored Division attacked east from Blaine to try to cut off the American retreat. The 1/185th Armored Battalion was able to stop the attack and hold the roads south open. The Chinese 69th Division counterattacked too. They could not dent the 1st BCT's positions.

The Abbotsford, Aldergrove area was covered with smoke and shaken by explosions as Americans blew up dumps of supplies and equipment that they could not take out to safety. In spite of poor weather, the Chinese air force pressed in to try to disrupt the American retreat. The U. S. Air Force finally showed itself over the battlefield. The F-15s from the 142nd Wing disputed the Chinese fighters but lost heavily. Chinese fighters and bombers still got through, dispersing and disrupting the retreating American formations. By nightfall every living American and Canadian that had been south of the Fraser River was in the United States and south of the Nooksack River.

General Coleman ordered the 116th Cav BCT and 82nd Cav Regiment act as rear guard. The 81st Heavy BCT was ordered to withdraw the whole way to Mt. Vernon, thirty-five miles south of the Nooksack River, for rest and refit. Any thought of holding Bellingham disappeared as Roger Coleman watched his corps retreat. He wouldn't have enough strength to hold the city. The next line of defense would have to be at the Skagit River, where he would have 19,000 Marines to help his depleted and weary forces.

----oooOooo----

Marshal Li Chang tried to disrupt the American retreat by sending the 4th Armored Division down the coast to seize a crossing of the Nooksack River south of Ferndale. The bridge was too light to carry his main battle tanks, but it could take APCs. He hoped their presence on the American's flank would cause more panic. American engineers blew up the bridge before the Chinese could seize it.

Li Chang had other challenges to deal with too. The 9,500 Americans and Canadians in Mission took the attention of too many of his precious troops. He had the 4th Armored Division, the 69th Infantry Division and the 48th Infantry Brigade, along with two regiments from the 43rd Parachute Division, to pursue the retreating Americans.

Li Chang had planned to drop his last parachute division, the 44th, at the major highway bridge where I-5 crossed the Skagit River. Aerial reconnaissance identified a new formation of troops bivouacking on the planned drop zone. Later they were identified as a Marine division, most likely the 1st Marines, coming up from southern California. The planned drop was canceled.

Bellingham fell on October 23rd. Li Chang tried to circumvent the American rear guard troops by seizing the bridge over the Nooksack at Deming. A valley led from Deming due south through the hills south of Bellingham down to Sedro-Woolley and one of the crossings over the Skagit River. The 82nd Cav held the special ops group off long enough for the engineers to blow the bridge.

Li Chang gave up his efforts to outflank the Americans as they retreated. His troops concentrated on hurrying the American rear guard through the hills along I-5, pressing them as hard as they could in the rough terrain. General Coleman had the 2nd Division's 4th BCT replace the 116th Cav as the rear guard. The 116th Cav headed south to rejoin the rest of the 41st Division for refit and to receive replacement equipment and men to return the division to full strength. The I Corps was going to need its heavy division fit and ready for action for the fight to hold the Skagit River line.

Progress through the hills was slow for the Chinese. They had to deploy troops at every American blocking position. They sent troops up into the hills overlooking the position to flank the Americans, only to watch the Americans pull out as soon as they were flanked. The Americans would fall back a couple miles and repeat the process. Overcoming each blocking position could take half a day. The 82nd Cav fell back down the valley between Deming and Sedro-Woolley, keeping even with the retreat of the 2nd Division's 4th BCT. They Chinese did not appear to be following down the valley after the 82nd.

The 4th BCT abandoned its last blocking position in the hills near Alger on October 28th and pulled back across the flat Skagit River valley through Burlington and across the Skagit River. They fell

back through the 1st Marine Division's lines and rallied with the remainder of the 2nd Division to rest and refit. The Engineers blew all the bridges across the Skagit River from Burlington to the sea. Roger Coleman had the 82nd Cav hold Sedro-Woolley on the north side of the river.

Roger Coleman was curious to exactly why the Chinese ignored Route 9 from Deming to Sedro-Woolley and concentrated exclusively on the I-5 corridor. He decided to hang on to Sedro-Woolley and their two bridges and see how the battle developed. The bridges were wired and ready for demolition at couple minute's notice. What harm would there be in preserving an option to re-cross the river in case a favorable opportunity came up?

----oooOooo----

Li Chang's troops probed the Skagit River line at the southern end of Burlington. They found the Marines' line was strongly held. The Chinese marshal was satisfied bringing his troops forward along the north side of the Skagit River and bringing supplies forward for the next attack.

The Chinese paratroopers relieved the 46th Division at the perimeter around the mixed Canadian/U. S. troops trapped in Mission. The division headed south to rejoin the 16th Group Army.

General Chuang Ji did not recover quickly enough from his wounds to remain in command the 16th Group Army. Li Chang promoted General Mo Xi Huan take over for Chuang Ji, after temporarily filling the command slot himself. The senior colonel in the 4th Armored Division took command of the division. General Fan Jiang Guo was "promoted" to command the detachment of paratroopers and the 68th Infantry Brigade surrounding Mission. It was a task where he could do the least harm.

One of the probe attacks found the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Marine Regiment posted on the far side of the Skagit River from the main defenses. The river looped in behind the I-5 crossing of the river. Failure to occupy this section of Mt. Vernon on the far side of the river would have allowed the Chinese to fire into the rear of the Marines' main defense at the I-5 crossing. The 2/1 Marines' perimeter was about a ¼ mile from the bridge back to the U. S. held side of the river.

Any Chinese troops foolish enough to close in with the 2/1 Marines would find themselves under enfilade fire from both flanks by Americans on the opposite sides of the river loop. On October 31st, a Chinese recon company found out the hard way about the enfilade fire when they probed the Marines' lines in this area. Six of their six wheeled recon cars exploded in less than sixty seconds when they tried to get too close.

November 2nd, the Chinese tried to cross the Skagit at the last bridge before the river flowed into Skagit Bay. It was located about five miles southwest of the 2/1 Marines position in the river loop. The 4th BCT of the 25th Division made sure the Chinese stayed on the north side of the river.

General Roger Coleman watched the Chinese moves with growing confidence. The 41st Division had absorbed its replacement soldiers and vehicles and was nearly at full strength. The 2nd Division was undergoing refit now. California's 40th Division, National Guard, had assembled in Sacramento and was being shipped north now. They would join his corps in less than two weeks.

General Coleman was curious why the Chinese were concentrating all their efforts on the river in the area from Burlington/Mt. Vernon and Skagit Bay. They paid no attention to the river east of Burlington around Sedro-Woolley. The 82nd Cav, which Coleman expected would be forced back across the river, maintained its presence in Sedro-Woolley. Their probes showed a thin line of Chinese infantry posts halfway between I-5 and Route 9. They found no Chinese in the valley that led north to Deming and Canada.

The more Roger Coleman studied the maps and the Chinese dispositions, the more he thought Li Chang was handing him a grand opportunity. The Skagit River flowed southwest from the Cascades to Skagit Bay. The Chinese kept sidling further and further to the southwest, away from I-5. Sedro-Woolley was firmly on the left flank of the Chinese forces. The situation almost begged for an American attack across the plains north and west of Sedro-Woolley to cut I-5, the only line of supply and communications the Chinese had to Vancouver, Alaska and home.

Roger Coleman reviewed his ideas with his staff and discussed his budding plan with Bill Kuhn, his boss at Fifth Army. Bill Kuhn gave his approval for an American counter attack. The attack would occur when the Chinese tried to force a crossing of the Skagit River. The 41st Division would lead the attack and the 2nd Infantry Division would follow up and help exploit their success.

On the 4th of November, the Chinese air force concentrated their attacks on the American lines in the loop of the river just west of the remains of the I-5 bridge. The Chinese artillery pounded the area, starting at 0400 hours, early the next morning. Two hours later assault boatloads of Chinese troops paddled across the river and attacked the Marine defenses on the south side of the river. The Marines fought hard, but were overwhelmed by superior Chinese firepower. The Chinese gouged out a bridgehead a couple hundred yards deep and a quarter mile wide.

Roger Coleman shifted a BCT from the 25th Division closer to the Chinese bridgehead, allowing the Marines to commit their division reserves to blunting the Chinese attack. Orders went out from corps headquarters setting the planned counter attack in motion. The 41st Division headed for the bridges into Sedro-Woolley, but stayed on the south side of the river until darkness. The 555th Engineer Brigade moved two mobile bridges up to provide more crossing points when the attack moved off. The 2nd Division took position behind the 41st, ready to exploit any successes after the counter attack. The 41st waited until 1800 hours and dusk on the 6th to start moving across the bridges into Sedro Woolley. The attack was set for 0700 hours, November 7th, 2013.

Li Chang, like a chess grandmaster, was thinking many moves ahead of Roger Coleman. He foresaw and encouraged the American attack at Sedro-Wooley. The Chinese needed to capture Vancouver early in their offensive so they could bring in reinforcements – the 38th Group Army. The 38th normally garrisoned Beijing. It was the elite of the Peoples' Army, two mechanized divisions and an armored division with supporting artillery, helicopters, engineers and special ops troops.

The three divisions of the 38th Group Army were carefully concealed from American reconnaissance prior to the Sedro-Wooley attack. Thanks to the marshal's careful planning, the three divisions appeared in front and on the flank of the attack, destroying the Americans minutes after they left their start line.

The disaster at Sedro-Wooley was nearly complete. Roughly 25% of the fighting strength of the 41st Division reported for duty on the south side of the Skagit River on November 8th. The rest of the division was scattered across Sedro-Wooley, dead, captured or in hiding.

Chapter 4

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1700 Hours, November 7, 2013 – Mrs. Audrey Gill's house, Sedro-Wooley, WA

Tyler and Josh took advantage of Mrs. Gill's electricity to charge their cell phones. Molly couldn't. She left her charger in her luggage back by the high school. Josh judged that the cell phones might come in handy if they couldn't get a boat to get across the river that night. They had another MRE for dinner and waited for total darkness. The weather helped their cause. Clouds rolled in during the afternoon, bringing drizzle along. Surprise... surprise... it is Washington state. The clouds would obscure the nearly full moon, giving them more chance to escape undetected.

Molly tried to call her dad's cell phone but it died before she could reach her dad. Tyler had no signal. Josh loaned his buddy his phone but he couldn't get a connection. Josh called his home too. His dad answered.

“Josh?” a clearly confused Robert Warner asked when he answered his phone.

“Hey, Dad,” Josh replied. “You’re going to get a really ugly letter from the army in a day or two. Relax and ignore it. It is going to say I’m missing in action.”

“Dear, God! What is going on?” Bob Warner gasped.

“I’m fine,” Josh answered quickly. “I don’t know how much news you’ve gotten, but our attack today didn’t go real well. The army was forced back across the Skagit River. I didn’t make it across before they blew up the bridges. I’m trapped with Tyler Serna here on the north side of the river behind Chinese lines.”

“Serna?” Bob Warner asked.

“I told you about the new crewman in our tank when we Skyped a couple days ago,” Josh said. “We’re hiding in one of the houses here in this little town, Sedro-Woolley.”

“I know the town,” Bob Warner said. “We went to their Loggerodeo one summer on the way to Mount Baker. Do you remember? You were probably pretty little.”

“That was here?” Josh replied. “I vaguely remember some logger show we went to. I was... like... five? I remember camping at Baker Lake better. I think it was the first time we camped there.”

“It probably was,” Bob agreed. “Do you think the army will retake the town? What are you planning to do now?”

“We’re going to go down to the river later tonight when it’s dark and find a boat, so we can get back across to American lines,” Josh explained.

“Be careful, son,” Bob said. “Maybe you better talk to your mother for moment too.” There was a long pause while Bob got his wife, Laura, and explained the situation to her. She was frantic when she took the phone.

“Josh... be careful,” she begged. “Don’t do anything stupid tonight.”

“I will be careful, I promise,” Josh answered. “We’re back to safety in a few minutes tonight, if we find a boat. We will come back here if there are too many Chinese down by the river. We can hike out to the country, grab a car somewhere and drive up into the mountains if we can’t get across the river tonight. Don’t worry.”

“I will say a prayer for you,” Laura Warner promised. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Josh replied. “Tell Jake he can’t have my stuff when that letter comes from the army. I’ll be back for it... I promise.” Jacob Warner was Josh’s fourteen year old brother. There was another pause while Laura conveyed Josh’s information to Bob.

“Josh, your mother told me your alternate plan,” Bob Warner said. “Remember the things we taught you about travelling in the mountains. You need emergency food, water, sleeping bags and extra warm clothes.”

“I understand, Dad,” Josh said. “You taught me well. We’ll be prepared if we head into the mountains. One more thing, Dad... could you call Tyler’s parents on a land line and let them know what is happening? Tyler couldn’t get through on his cell.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Bob Warner replied. Josh gave his dad Tyler’s contact info. “I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Dad,” Josh replied. “I’ll be careful. See you soon.”

----oooOooo----

Around 1830 hours, the three carefully checked the outside for signs of Chinese troops. Everything seemed quiet. They sneaked out the backdoor of Mrs. Gill’s house and headed west in the alley behind her house. They kept to the edges of buildings and in shadow as much as possible. They could hear Chinese vehicles running and troops talking to the west, around the high school. Their part of town seemed deserted.

Molly took them three and a half blocks east to Township Street, where they headed south for the river. Josh took the lead, carrying the M16 at the ready. Molly stayed in the middle of their group. Tyler covered the back with his M9 pistol. They scurried across the front yards, staying close to the houses so they had a place to hide if a Chinese patrol came by. None did. It took them about fifteen minutes to get the half mile through town and down to the boat launch.

The big parking lot was deserted. They checked the road down to the river and the boat launch itself. They found no boats.

“Now what, boss?” Tyler asked.

“Which way to the houses on the river?” Josh asked Molly quietly. “The ones that might have boats for us?”

“They’re not too far down this way,” Molly said, starting to walk towards the houses. A Chinese flare went up downstream, closer to the bridges. Josh motioned for everyone to stop. He directed Molly back to the middle of their group. An American and a couple Chinese machine gunners exchanged fire downstream from them. Josh held the group still until about five minutes after the fire died down.

Josh led the threesome downstream in the woods above the river bank towards the houses. They found nothing at the first house. Tyler scouted ahead to the second house while Josh covered him. Nothing. The group moved down to a group of low trees and bushes beside the third house. Tyler tried around the boat shack first. Nothing was outside and the door was locked.

The three could hear Chinese troops a few hundred meters down river from their position. Tyler motioned that he was going to check along the river bank. He came back a minute later, gesturing excitedly.

“I didn’t find anything on this side,” Tyler whispered. “There’s a row boat on the far side of the river. It can’t be more than 600 feet to the other side. I can swim it easy and bring the rowboat back for the rest of you.”

“That’s ice water,” Josh commented as he pointed towards the river. “You’ll freeze if you go for a swim.”

“Nah, I won’t,” Josh countered. “My town does a polar bear swim on January 1st every year. I’ve done it since I was fifteen. I can do this.”

“Your clothes and boots are going to weigh you down,” Josh responded. “That river is snow and glacier melt.”

“I’ll strip down for the swim,” Tyler said. “You guys can bring my clothes and gear along when I come back with the boat. I know it’ll be cold while I cross. I’ll get numb soon enough and the swim will keep me warm.”

“You’re sure?” Josh asked.

“I like a five minute swim better than Plan B,” Tyler answered. “I don’t want to take a hike through the mountains in the winter. That sounds like a great way to freeze to death. I lifeguarded at the Fremont pool for three seasons. I’ll be fine.”

Tyler was half undressed when Josh finally said, “OK, do it.”

Tyler was down to his boxers when he gave Molly a Groucho Marx leer and pulled them off. "Baby, if you see anything you like, you can sample it when we're all on the other side of the river." He gave her another fake leer and added, "Wink... wink... nudge... nudge." Molly just shook her head.

Josh and Molly stayed in the bushes at the edge of the river when Tyler waded in. "Shrinkage!" Tyler shrilled as he stepped in above his waist. He dove in the rest of the way and swam across using the side stroke, to avoid splashes and loud noises. The river's current pushed Tyler downstream as he swam.

Josh and Molly watched Tyler's progress. They lost track of him before he reached the far side. They saw him again when the white of his naked body showed in the dim light when he crawled ashore. He gave the two a wave and two thumbs up. The row boat was about a hundred meters upriver from where he was. He walked up the bank for the boat. He was half way there when another Chinese flare rocketed skyward, bathing the river in light.

Tyler froze but it didn't help. His white skin showed clearly in the flickering light against the trees and brush in the background. Moments later a Chinese gunner loosed a burst of machine gun fire his way. A second gunner targeted the naked soldier. The bullets ripped into Tyler's body and head. He dropped to the ground like a sack of rocks and didn't move.

Josh and Molly watched, horror struck. Molly started to sob. Josh reached his arm around Molly and held her. "Shhhh...." He cautioned. "We'll grieve for him, but not here or now." Josh rocked and cuddled Molly for a minute while she tried to pull herself together. "We have got to get out of here or we'll end up like Tyler."

Molly wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded her agreement. Josh led her away, backtracking their path to Township Road. They sneaked through the deserted streets of Sedro-Woolley, ending up at Mrs. Gill's house again.

"Now that you got your buddy killed, what's the plan, Mr. Smart-ass?" Molly demanded. Josh bristled but silently counted to ten before responding. Molly unknowingly was channeling Lauren Nye, the head cheerleader, high school diva, social trendsetter and queen bee of all that was cool at Josh's Avanti High School. Since a third grade playground spat, Lauren had made it her personal mission to make Josh's life a living hell throughout their time in school. She had been spectacularly successful as her social status rose in high school. Her favorite epithet for Josh had been Mr. Smart-ass – in honor of his curve-wrecking grades.

"Get some God-damned sleep!" Josh growled. "We will hole up here during daylight tomorrow and work on Plan B for tomorrow night."

Josh plopped his daypack beside the couch and sprawled out on it. Molly sniffed at the big oaf's attitude. She lay down in Mrs. Gill's bed and fell asleep.

----oooOooo----

November 8, 2013, Sedro-Woolley

Josh woke up around 0530 in the morning. He decided the smartest thing to do was go back to sleep. He and Molly weren't going to accomplish much during the daylight hours. They would need all the rest they could get if they were going to head into the mountains that evening. He managed to sleep until 0800. He cleaned up in Mrs. Gill's bathroom and then went out to the kitchen.

Josh found her refrigerator was fully stocked. He grabbed eggs, cheese, butter, jelly and bread. He was half done cooking cheesy scrambled eggs with toast when Molly came out to the kitchen.

"You're stealing Mrs. Gill's food?" Molly demanded. "Why aren't you eating your gray plastic bags of food?"

"We're going to need those when we head into the mountains," Josh replied evenly. "Mrs. Gill won't be back in time to use this food before it spoils. It's better for us to eat it than for it to go bad in her refrigerator, don't you think?"

"I suppose," Molly allowed.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Josh asked.

"Um... I guess," Molly said. Josh dished out the food he had already prepared for Molly and cooked another batch of eggs and toast for himself. Molly started eating while Josh prepared his own food.

"Thank you for making and sharing this with me," Molly commented. "You're not too bad a cook."

"Thank you," Josh replied. "That's partly my Mom's influence and partly from being a Boy Scout. Both Mom and my scoutmaster insisted I had to learn to cook."

The two ate without further conversation. Josh washed the dirty dishes and frying pan when they finished. Molly said nothing but she was impressed that he took the trouble to wash up when he didn't expect Mrs. Gill to return to her home for quite some time, if ever.

"What's the grand Plan B you mentioned last night?" Molly asked.

"We rest and plan while we hide out here during the daylight," Josh explained. "Tonight we pick up the things we'll need and then head east into the mountains – by car if possible, on foot otherwise."

"You do realize that it is November, don't you?" Molly questioned. "Do you think we can walk through the mountains? How deep will the snow be? We'll freeze up there."

"We won't, if we are prepared," Josh agreed. "I hope we will be able to snag an SUV or truck outside of town so we can drive to safety. I want us to be prepared in case we have to walk instead."

"That's crazy!" Molly retorted. "Suppose we can get enough warm clothes to survive the cold. Do you really think we can carry enough food to last in the mountains until someone finds us? What about avalanches and wild animals? We would be much better off trying the river again tonight. We know there's a boat on the other side."

“We are NOT going back to the river and try to cross where we went last night,” Josh insisted loudly. “Tyler died that way. That is NOT an option anymore.”

“You’re awfully cavalier about Tyler’s death,” Molly shot back. “You just don’t give a damn, do you?”

“You have no idea!” Josh insisted hotly. He bit his tongue for a moment before continuing. “I wouldn’t expect a princess like you to understand anything about me. Tyler and I served in a tank with a four man crew. I’m the only one left from the crew. I’ve lost five good friends in the past three weeks. You DON’T get to tell me how I should feel.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right,” Molly answered quietly. “I didn’t realize you lost that many friends.” Molly stared at Josh for a few seconds before asking, “How do you propose to get someone like me through the mountains? I don’t camp.”

“Never?”

“Never,” Molly confirmed. “My family always went somewhere nice for vacation... you know... like Hawaii, Acapulco, Fiji or the beaches in southern California. Why would anyone want to go to the mountains with all the bugs, rain and little critters running around in the dark? Ick!”

“California beaches are the only one of the places you went that I’ve gone too,” Josh said. “My family loves camping in the mountains. Nothing’s better than the peace and quiet, the sounds of the little critters running around at night and the flavor of a good meal cooked over a campfire. You can’t beat dropping your lure in a peaceful mountain lake and spending the afternoon fishing.”

“Do you really know how to camp in the snow?” Molly asked. “I don’t see how I could possibly survive that.”

“I did winter camping when I was a Boy Scout,” Josh said. “I can teach you how it’s done. All we need are thermal sleeping pads, zero degree sleeping bags and some kind of tent or shelter.”

“Where are we going to get those things?” Molly demanded. “I doubt Mrs. Gill has much camping equipment here at her house.”

“I have the answer to that question,” Josh answered smugly. “We pick them up from the outdoors store in the center of town.” Josh chuckled. “I saw they’re running a sale on winter camping equipment right now. Are you familiar with them?”

“Skagit Outfitters on Metcalf Street?” Molly sniffed. “As if... THAT is not the kind of store my friends and I go to.”

“That kind of store may save your life,” Josh answered. “Go through your things this morning. We are going to need to travel light. Leave anything you don’t absolutely need here. I want to devote most of the weight in our backpacks to food. I think we should carry at least three weeks of food.”

“OK.”

“We’re keeping all the ammo we have and leaving two of the pistols behind,” Josh added. “Do you know how to use a pistol?”

“I grew up in this hick town full of deer hunters,” Molly answered. “What do you think?” Before Josh could answer, she added, “My daddy taught me about guns when I was in elementary school. You aren’t planning on shooting things out with the chinks, are you?”

“No, not at all,” Josh responded. “I want to know if there is a point in you dragging a pistol along. That last thing I want to do is get in a firefight with the Chinese. My M16 and your pistol will be strictly for emergencies. Why don’t you get to sorting through your things?”

“OK,” Molly agreed. She headed into the living room. Josh dialed his father’s phone.

“Josh? Thank God, you’re alive!” Mr. Warner exclaimed when he answered Josh’s call. “Are you safe? Are you with American forces again?”

“I’m fine,” Josh answered. “I’m still hiding out on the north side of the river. We couldn’t get across last night. It wasn’t safe.”

“At least you’re alive,” Mr. Warner said, relief evident from a hundred miles away. “Are you going to hike into the mountains to get away?”

“That’s the current plan, Dad,” Josh answered. “We’re going to outfit ourselves at the local camping store tonight, hike east out of town and try to get a car or truck and drive the rest of the way up into the mountains.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Mr. Warner agreed. “I don’t know where our family will be when you get out. The governor is ordering that all civilians in the state evacuate. The news has very little on the progress of the fighting. I gather that things are not going well.”

“I watched my division get smashed yesterday,” Josh answered. “I don’t know how things are going anywhere else.”

“Be careful tonight, Josh,” Mr. Warner said. “We want you back with our family when this is over.”

“I want that too,” Josh agreed. “Did you talk to the Sernas yet?”

“I talked to them last night right after you called,” Mr. Warner said. “They were relieved to hear that their son was OK.”

Josh sighed before saying, “I wish you hadn’t been able to get through to them. The Chinese shot and killed Tyler last night.”

“Oh, God!” Mr. Warner responded. “Am I going to have to call those poor people back and tell them their son is dead?”

"No, Dad, that is not your job," Josh answered. "Call my National Guard armory and leave word with them. The Army can handle informing the Sernas about Tyler's death. Tell the army he died a hero. He swam across the river to get a rowboat so he could come back for Molly and me. A Chinese flare caught him in the light. A couple machine gunners cut him down on the south bank. I don't know if that will be much consolation to Tyler's parents, but it is all I can give them."

"I'll call the Army as soon as we're done talking," Mr. Warner promised. "By the way, who is Molly?"

"A local high school girl who missed the evacuation," Josh explained. "She's been with me since yesterday. She's going to head east with me and try to rejoin her family eventually."

"Should I try to track them down?" Mr. Warner asked. "What's her full name?"

"Molly Lawrence," Josh answered. "She lives here in Sedro-Woolley."

"I'll try to get the information to the evacuation office the state is setting up," Mr. Warner said. "They will have the best chance of tracking Molly's parents down."

"I probably won't be calling like this when we get into the mountains," Josh said. "We'll have to ration our power once we leave this house. I don't know what kind of reception I'll have either."

"Remember your WWII history, Josh," Mr. Warner added. "You have read about what the Germans did with the dams above Aachen. They used the Ruhr dams to send a flood down the river when the Americans were ready to cross. The Chinese will know to send people up to secure all the dams on the Skagit to prevent us from doing that to them. I would stay clear of the dams and lakes, if you can."

"Thanks for reminding me," Josh said. "It's been a long time since I read 'A Soldier's Story' [Gen. Omar Bradley's memoirs from World War II]. I love you, Dad. Pass that on to Mom, Ashley and Jake."

"Be careful, son," Mr. Warner answered. "I love you."

----oooOooo----

Chinese Humvees drove down Jamison Street three times during the day while Josh and Molly hid out. They didn't do a house to house search. Josh assumed the Chinese were just patrolling and looking for any stragglers, like them.

Josh checked Molly's daypack after lunch, to make sure she wasn't taking too many things. The two had a big argument about whether she really needed shampoo, scented soap, makeup, lipstick, a hair brush and an iPod Nano. Molly kept the iPod Nano and hair brush after fifteen minutes of heated argument. The weight saved by leaving the rest behind could provide for an extra day or two of food for their trek.

Josh and Molly used more of Mrs. Gill's food for lunch and dinner. Josh wanted to save the six MRE meal packs for their hike into the mountains. He hoped they would find freeze dried trail food at the

outfitters, but he couldn't be sure of that. Josh found a hammer and a couple screwdrivers at the house. He planned to take them along, to help him break into the outfitters store. He could kick in the glass front door at the street but that would attract too much attention from the Chinese.

The two laid low until around 2100 hours. They left Mrs. Gill's the same way as the previous night – by the alley. Molly had Josh head east to Sixth Street, half a block from Mrs. Gill's. They figured they would be less likely to run into Chinese if they stayed further from the high school. They could see the Chinese coming and going from the high school building, as they sneaked across Bennett Street. Apparently it was being used as some kind of headquarters for the troops in the area.

Josh and Molly stayed close to the houses on the west side of 6th Street and they crept north for State Street, one of the town's main streets. A block past the elementary school, Molly had Josh head west in the alley that ran parallel to State Street. Josh heard a vehicle approaching from the west on State Street as they dashed past a church parking lot with an open view from State Street to the alley.

Josh and Molly ducked behind a fence and hid until the two Chinese Humvees passed their hiding spot. They waited a couple minutes before continuing their journey west to the center of town. The next block was through the backs of residential houses. Fences, trees and shrubs gave them the sense that they were hidden. They passed banks, diners, pizza parlors, a hairdresser, and a tattoo parlor in next two blocks.

Josh peered around the corner of the coffee shop when they reached Metcalf Street. The outfitter was located on Metcalf, half a block north of State Street. Josh and Molly planned to break into the store from the alley in the rear. Josh and Molly had to wait a minute until a Chinese Humvee went by down at the southern end of Metcalf near the high school. They dashed across Metcalf, taking cover by the bank building. The two crept forward quietly to the front of the bank. State Street was deserted. They dashed diagonally across the street, into the alley behind the stores fronting Metcalf.

Some civilian cars were parked in the alley, thankfully providing Molly and Josh cover while they broke into the outfitters. The fourth building up the alley was marked as, "Skagit River Outfitters."

"I'll be damned," Josh whispered when they looked at the door. The door frame was splintered and the door was half open. "This part is going to be easier than I expected." Molly and Josh ducked into the store, feeling safer and more protected than they had been since they left Mrs. Gill's house.

The glass counters of the gun displays were broken and half the cases were empty. Whoever came ahead of them came for guns. Josh shined his red glowing flashlight towards the fishing, camping and clothing sections. Nothing was disturbed there. Josh sent Molly over to get winter clothing for herself while he searched for ammo for her pistol. The store had it. Josh took one box. He also found ammo for a Colt AR-15. That was the semi-automatic civilian version of his M16. He took two boxes of ammo for his gun.

The two found a veritable gold mine of supplies for their trek at the store. They picked up waterproof boots suitable for trekking in the snow, winter clothing, snow shoes, sleeping bags, Therm-O-Rest pads, water purification tablets, a light weight stove and fuel, matches, bowls, spoons and canteens for Molly.

Josh had Molly try a couple backpacks for size before settling on one for her. Josh took a large pack for himself. Josh picked up a light weight two man backpacking tent. Molly took an identical tent for herself.

“We don’t need that,” Josh whispered.

“If you think you’re sleeping in the same tent as me... THINK AGAIN!” Molly snapped.

“Ssshhh!” Josh whispered back harshly. “This tent weighs about five pounds,” he said as he pointed at the marking on the box. “That’s two or three days of food. We need the food more than we need the privacy.”

“Don’t you dare think you are going to sleep with me!” Molly growled.

“If I wanted to hop in bed with you, I would have made my move already,” Josh retorted. Josh headed for the trail food display area, muttering, “I should let her here. She’s not worth the aggravation.”

“What?” Molly gasped. Josh started picking bags of food off the display and stuffing them in his backpack.

“Maintenance is too high on the damn preppy cheerleader types,” Josh muttered as he worked. “I’m going to carry half her stuff for her. She nags and bitches about everything. Why should I...”

“You CAN’T leave me here!” Molly insisted. “What will happen to me?”

“Do you think you know more than me about camping?” Josh asked. Molly shook her head no. “I won’t leave you behind... IF you listen to me and do what I tell you.”

“I’ll listen,” Molly said. “One tent is OK.” Molly dropped the extra tent on the floor. Josh helped her load her backpack up with trail food. Josh noticed the book section while Molly was in the bathroom filling up her canteens. The store kept a complete selection of trail maps for northwestern Washington State. Josh grabbed a set of topographical maps for the area they were heading into. Josh filled up his canteens before the two left.

Josh and Molly backtracked to the alley south of State Street and followed it east through town. Two Chinese Humvees went by while they were heading out of town. They were able to get to cover before the patrols passed by. Molly suggested they use a back road to head east instead of following Route 20. They would have a better chance of avoiding the Chinese that way.

The two hiked about a mile out of town that dark, cloudy night. They passed a few houses but continued on. Josh felt they were too close to town. The two passed a small patch of woods before finding a row of houses on the north side of the road. They checked each house but found no vehicles. They passed a junk yard before coming to a small farm. A Ford F-350 pickup was parked beside the house.

Josh turned and gave Molly a big smile. "I think our ride awaits." The two walked over to the truck and checked it over. Josh checked the ignition, the visor, the ash tray and under the driver's seat. No luck... no keys.

"Can you hot wire it?" Molly asked. Josh chuckled.

"I'm a computer geek, not a motor head," Josh said. "Remember... I should be at Stanford right now studying computer science."

"So... what are we going to do?"

"Elementary. The keys will be in the house somewhere," Josh answered. "We go in and have a look around. Even if the owner took a set of keys with him when he evacuated, he'll most likely have a spare set in the house... somewhere."

Molly slammed the car door as she shut the passenger door. "Jeez! Keep it down," Josh cautioned.

"No one can hear us back in town," Molly answered. "It's no big deal."

"Let's keep it down anyway," Josh said as he motioned for her to follow him to the porch of the farmhouse. Josh tried the front door, but it was locked. He broke a pane of glass in the door with the butt of his M16.

"Now who is making all the noise?" Molly teased.

"I needed to do that," Josh answered as he reached through the broken window and unlatched the door. The two stepped into the kitchen of the house. They shined their flashlights around, looking for hooks, shelves or other likely places for the owner to place his car keys.

"FREEZE, LOOTER!" someone bellowed to their left. Light blinded them temporarily when someone turned on the lights in the room. Josh instinctively raised his M16 and turned toward the voice. Molly did the same with her pistol. "Don't move!"

They didn't move while their eyes adjusted to the brightness. They saw a short, muscular man in his late forties holding a hunting rifle on them when their eyes adjusted to the light. A thin boy, maybe 5'-6" and fourteen years old, flanked his father and held a shotgun on them.

"I'm sorry," Josh said. "I thought everyone had been evacuated north of the river. We thought your house was deserted."

"It ain't," the farmer growled. "You better explain yourself before I shoot both of you."

Josh lowered his rifle and reached across and pushed Molly's gun down towards the floor. "We mean you no harm. I'm a soldier who got trapped on the wrong side of the river. She got separated from her family when they evacuated town. We are looking for a ride east to Concrete."

“...and you thought you’d steal my truck,” the farmer snapped. He seemed less tense now that Josh and Molly lowered their weapons.

“I understood everyone in the county had evacuated the area,” Josh answered. “We thought of it was an abandoned vehicle.”

“The sheriff came by three times trying to get us to leave,” the farmer said. “This is my home and the government ain’t going to tell me what I can and can’t do. I’m staying right here and defending my place!”

Josh pushed Molly back towards the door a step and stepped back too. “We’re not here to bother you or steal anything,” Josh explained. “I understand your feelings about defending your home but I’m not sure how wise that is. The Chinese aren’t far behind us and 15,000 men with tanks and artillery already tried to stop them yesterday morning. We failed. You and your son don’t stand a chance if the Chinese come to this farm to take it. You’ll be dead as soon as they find you.”

“I ain’t given in to no government... American or Chinese,” the farmer declared. “This is my home and we ain’t leavin’!”

“It may be your home, but you’ll be dead just the same,” Josh said. “Why don’t you give Molly and me a ride up to Concrete? Save yourself and your family. You can always come back to this farm after the army kicks the Chinese out of our country. Wouldn’t it make more sense to live and leave than to die fighting hopelessly for your property?”

“It’s mine and that’s that,” the farmer declared. “I ain’t takin’ no orders from anybody from the government.”

“I wouldn’t presume to give you orders,’ Josh responded. “The two of us don’t mean you any harm. May we leave? We prefer to head east and avoid the Chinese. I’ve seen too many of my friends killed by them. I intend to survive this.”

“I don’t care one way or another,” the farmer said. “Leave here, as long as you don’t take nothin’.”

“Sorry about the window,” Josh said as he and Molly backed towards the door. The farmer and his son made no attempt to stop Molly or Josh as they left. The farmer and his son kept their guns on Josh and Molly and watched the two leave from their porch. Molly and Josh noticed a couple bumper stickers on the back of the pickup truck. One was a National Rifle Association sticker. The second one said, ‘I’ll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands’

“I wonder if Charlton Heston meant that literally.” Josh mused as they hurried down the driveway.

They overheard the farmer comment to his son, “That’s how you take care of looters.”

“I feel bad for the poor kid,” Molly said as they walked down the road away from the confrontation. “I don’t know his name but I recognize him from school. He’s a ninth grader. He and his family will all be dead in a few days.”

“Exactly,” Josh agreed. “That is why we are heading for the mountains.”

Josh and Molly passed a couple more houses close the farm. They didn’t see any cars or trucks outside so they kept walking. About a third of a mile down the road they found two farms, one on each side of the road. The one on the south side had a nice Ford Expedition parked in the driveway.

“We’ll knock at the door and see if anyone is home before we break in this time,” Josh explained as they headed for the front porch.

“If they meet us with a shotgun?”

“We will politely ask if they can give us a ride up river to Concrete,” Josh answered. They knocked politely at the door at first. They banged louder until only the deaf could have missed the knocking. Josh went back to the SUV and searched for keys in the vehicle, without luck.

Josh and Molly returned to the house and found the front door unlocked. They entered with their guns at the ready. Josh called out when they were inside but no one answered. The two went to work, searching for the keys to the SUV. They found a set of Ford keys hanging from a hook by the back door.

Molly and Josh piled their backpacks in the back of the big SUV. Josh backed out onto the road without headlights. He had no desire to attract anyone’s attention. Driving in the dark without lights was slow and tense, but they made it down the road without running into anything. They came to a “T” intersection three quarters of a mile ahead. Josh continued straight to the east. The other road probably would take them up to the main highway.

They proceeded through the countryside slowly. Josh continued east at the next two intersections. At the third intersection, a sign marked the road east as a dead end. Josh turned north and was on that road for a few minutes. He turned east again at the next crossroads.

“This is Minkler Road,” Molly explained. “We’ll be on Route 20 in a couple minutes. We’re about four miles out of town. Do you think you could turn the lights on and drive faster?”

“I’d rather take it slow and not announce our presence with headlights,” Josh explained. “I’m guessing Concrete is fifteen or sixteen miles away. We should be there in under an hour, assuming we don’t get spotted and shot. Slow and easy is better than quick and dead.”

“You’re the soldier,” Molly agreed.

“I’ll be happy to turn the SUV’s lights on and drive like a bat out of hell when we get to Concrete and get across the bridge,” Josh promised. “I expect we will run into engineers at the bridge anyway. The engineers will blow the bridge if the Chinese try to catch us after we cross over.”

“This is a relief,” Molly said. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to be able to get us out of this mess.”

“We’ll get out,” Josh responded. “I promise you.” Josh pulled the SUV onto Route 20 five minutes later.

“Keep an eye out behind us,” Josh asked. “I don’t want the Chinese to drive up our asses and surprise us.”

“You got it, Josh,” Molly agreed. Josh puttered along at about fifteen miles an hour, managing to keep the Expedition on the roadway, even if not exactly in the correct lane.

They were on Route 20 for about twelve minutes when they saw a sign announcing “Welcome to Lyman.” Fifty feet later a highway sign announced, “Hamilton-3 miles, Concrete-14 miles.”

Half a minute later, Molly squeaked, “Josh, I see lights behind us.” Josh looked in his rear view mirror. There was a definite glow on the horizon behind them. They watched as Josh continued down the highway for about thirty seconds. The lights were definitely getting closer. The thought flashed through Josh’s mind, ‘Flee or hide?’

Josh could cover a lot of road if he turned his lights on. A Chinese Humvee could probably keep up with the SUV in the dark. Josh chose to hide. He pulled into the parking lot of a closed gas station/convenience store. The sign out front announced, “Cascade Mercantile.” Josh parked the SUV like they were customers.

“Grab your pack,” Josh commanded. “We’ll hide in the woods until whatever it is passes.” They ducked into the woods directly behind the store. A couple minutes later they found out who was behind them.

A column of fifteen Chinese six-wheeled infantry fighting vehicles went flying by at about fifty miles an hour, lights blazing. They paid no attention to the store, the SUV or the two people hiding in the woods. Josh and Molly waited a couple minutes to make sure there weren’t any stragglers before stepping out of the woods again.

“Now what?” Molly asked.

“I expect we will hear a big explosion in fifteen or twenty minutes when that Chinese column gets to Concrete,” Josh replied. “That will be the bridge we wanted to cross disappearing. Let’s find a building where we can hide out and study the maps I picked up. We need a new plan.”

They pair headed east across the parking lot and through a tree row. A plain one and a half story house stood about seventy feet off the road. Josh and Molly headed around to the back door. Banging on the door brought no response from inside. Josh used the butt of his rifle to break a pane of glass and let them into the house. Josh and Molly headed for the basement, where their flashlights were least likely to be spotted by anyone outside the house.

Josh studied the charts for about ten minutes. The two heard a muffled explosion off in the distance. “We have to figure that was the bridge at Concrete,” Josh commented. “We should expect the Chinese to go after the dams at Lake Shannon, Baker Lake, Diablo Lake and Ross Lake.”

“Why would they care about the dams?” Molly asked.

“Our side could blow up the four dams and send a deluge down the Skagit River. It would take out whatever bridges the Chinese have erected at Burlington and isolate their troops on the south side. It would leave them in an ugly situation. The Germans did the same thing to us in World War II.”

“So, what do we do?” Molly asked.

“We’ll take the car as far into the mountains as we can get and ditch it,” Josh answered. “We probably can get around here to the back side of Mount Baker. We’ll have to hike from there through some of these valleys to the upper end of Baker Lake.”

“Where to then?” Molly asked.

“Ross Lake drives everything,” Josh explained. “It’s twenty miles long and runs north-south. We can go around the lower end by this dam,” Josh said as he pointed to the southern end of the lake. We should figure the Chinese will be at the dam. We should head for the north end of the lake. We can get east that way.”

“How far is that?” Molly gasped.

“Fifty or sixty miles, as the crow flies,” Josh answered.

“We’re not crows,” Molly said, blanching at the distance.

“No, we’re not,” Josh agreed. “It’s going to be a long walk. Now you see why I had us pack so much trail food back at the outfitters.”

“Should we rest up here and head out tomorrow night?” Molly asked.

“Let’s grab some food from here and stash it in the car,” Josh said. “We can use it for tomorrow’s meals and save our trail food for later. I think we need to get off this main road and into the mountains tonight, before the Chinese have time to settle in here in this valley.”

Josh and Molly grabbed some cans of food from the cupboard and frozen hamburgers from the freezer. They found bread in the bread drawer. Josh remembered to grab a frying pan and spatula too. The pair jogged back to the gas station and loaded their larder in the back of the Expedition.

“Let’s stock up on some snack items from the store before we head out,” Josh suggested. “We need to stick to things that are light weight, high energy and will last a couple weeks – things like beef jerky, granola bars, Gummis, Twizzlers, etc.”

Josh couldn’t pry the back door open so they went around front and bashed the front door’s window in. They found more jerky, granola bars and candy than they possibly could carry. Molly grabbed a couple bags of potato chips. They would be handy later that day.

Josh drove east on Route 20 about 1 mile before turning north into a road leading into the Baker Wilderness Area. Josh glanced at his watch. It was 0330 hours. The road was paved for the first half mile. It was well packed stone after that. Josh proceeded slowly north with his lights out.

Three miles later the stone road intersected another paved road. Josh glanced at the map and confirmed they were in the right place.

Josh turned left and followed the paved road up the valley towards the base of Mount Baker. The night sky became overcast. The clouds thinned and broke up as the traveled up the valley, revealing glimpses of the full moon.

They reached an intersection about seven miles off Route 20. Josh turned right. A sweeping turn took them around the end of a mountain. The Nooksack River glimmered in the moonlight as Josh drove east parallel to the river. Josh turned the SUV's headlights on once they were behind Mount Josephine. Josh increased his speed to thirty miles an hour.

The road paralleled the Nooksack, a few hundred feet above the valley floor. The road was about a thousand feet below the snow line, so they made good progress. Twenty minutes later they looked up the side of the mountain and saw the crest of Mount Josephine pass behind them. The paved road turned sharply to the right and began climbing up the hillside away from the river.

Josh stopped and checked his maps. He saw the dirt road in front of him would take them further north towards Baker Pass, his preferred destination for the day. Josh and Molly had climbed 1,200 feet in elevation since they turned onto the road beside the river. The snow was only a few hundred feet above them.

Josh shifted the SUV into four wheel drive before continuing up the dirt road. The road was rutted and rocky. Josh and Molly bounced as they continued north. They had to ford two small creeks on the way. They reached another paved road after a couple miles.

Josh and Molly both glanced to the left. The Twin Peaks rose in the distance to their right. The tires spun in the mud as Josh eased their SUV onto the snowy pavement. The four wheel drive got them onto the firm roadway. Josh headed east following the general direction of Wanlick Creek between Loomis Mountain and an unnamed peak to Loomis' south.

Josh and Molly were in the snow zone now. The road was slippery but passable. The first couple miles weren't too bad as they climbed higher towards the pass. The road twisted back and forth to follow the mountain's contours as they continued upwards. The SUV slid a couple times but Josh managed to keep it on the road.

The road followed a severe dog leg up Loomis Creek and back again as they approached Baker Pass. A couple minutes after the road made a sharp cutback to follow Wanlick Creek again, Josh turned a corner in the narrow road. A wall of snow, tree branches and pine needles covered the roadway.

"Oh shit!" Josh growled as he slammed on the brakes. "Look out!" The SUV skidded about twenty feet and nosed into the mountain of snow, stopping abruptly. "Are you OK?" Josh asked as he looked across the seat to Molly. Molly's eyes were wide and the color had drained from her face. Her arms were up on the dashboard to brace herself.

"Yeah... I'm OK," Molly managed after she caught her breath. "What are we going to do now? You can't get through this snow and you can't back down this road until you can turn around."

“I’m not going backward,” Josh answered. “I knew somewhere up here we would run into snow, downed trees or a rock slide that would stop us from going further with the car. This is where we start walking.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Molly remarked. “I sort of accepted that we were going to be hiking through mountains, but...” Molly paused and looked up towards the peaks towering over us, “... I had no idea how big all of this would be. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You’ll be fine,” Josh reassured. “We’re here,” he explained, pointing to the map. “I figure we have maybe another hundred feet to climb to the top of the Baker Pass. It’s all downhill to Baker Lake from there. Baker Lake is around elevation 800, just a little higher than you’re used to in Sedro-Woolley. We’ll be out of the snow in a few hours where it’s warmer.”

“I’ll have to trust you on that,” Molly said dubiously.

“Why don’t we fry up those hamburgers for breakfast?” Josh suggested. “Get us something filling and warm before we work our way across this fall zone.”

“Fine,” Molly agreed. “I am getting hungry.”

The two went to back of their “borrowed” SUV and added more layers of clothing. The temperature had been in the mid-forties when they left Sedro-Woolley. Up here, almost 2,500 feet higher, the temperature was probably right around freezing. Thin ice had formed on the puddles.

Josh fueled the backpacking stove and primed it. He let the gas burn for a minute before pumping up the stove.

“Do you know how to cook, Princess?” Josh asked, “Or did your servants handle all those tiresome details for you?”

“I know how to cook,” Molly answered. “I’m a pretty good cook and my family doesn’t have servants!” She paused briefly before adding, “If you don’t count the cleaning lady who comes in twice a week.”

“Uh-huh,” Josh said as he handed Molly the frying pan and spatula they “borrowed” from the house down in Lyman. “You cook the burgers. I want to review the map some more and plan out our route from here a little more carefully. I want to make sure we stay out of sight of the dam at the lower end of Baker Lake.”

“That would be good,” Molly agreed. Josh sat in the SUV and used the dome light to study the map. Molly fried up the burgers on the SUV’s back tailgate.

Josh wanted to plan out their next couple camping spots so they didn’t end up halfway up the lake along the shore at evening. Josh couldn’t discount the possibility that the Chinese would patrol the lake by boat after they secured the dams. Josh decided to do a short hike that day, about six miles. The following day they should be able to hike the western perimeter of the lake and get part way up

the Baker River at the north end of the lake. The woods should provide them good cover to stay hidden from the Chinese. The next day's hike would be longer, over ten miles.

Molly called Josh when their burgers were done. The burgers were quite tasty, if a little unorthodox for 5:45 AM breakfast. They finished up a bag of potato chips and some sodas that they "procured" from the house in Lyman.

Josh and Molly put on the waterproof boots and snow pants they brought from the outfitters in Sedro-Woolley. Josh instructed Molly to add layers of clothing to what she had on. Backpacks came next. Josh helped Molly adjust the straps so her pack rode correctly.

Josh checked his phone for service before they started hiking. He hoped to let word with his family that he and Molly made it out of town and into the mountains. He had no bars but found he could text. He sent off this message: "SAFE, NEAR BAKER LAKE, HKNG EAST, LOV JOSH"

"Are you ready for this?" Josh asked, giving Molly a smile.

"NOoooo," Molly answered, "...but let's do it anyway. I'll follow you."

"I won't push hard with the hiking until you get used to this," Josh said as he started around the SUV.

"Thank God," Molly muttered. "I wasn't made to be a pack animal." Josh heard her comment but didn't acknowledge it. He knew she was going to have a tough time of it for the first few days.

The snow slide from the avalanche was packed fairly solid. The two sank in a few inches as they picked their way through the debris from the slide, but didn't sink in too deep. It took about five minutes to clear their way through the slide. The road crested a hundred yards beyond the slide. They followed the snowy road over the crest of Baker Pass and started down the other side. A hundred yards later they followed a curve to the left.

The canyon they were in opened to the valley below. The morning's first light reflected off the snow on top of Mount Shuksan. The two stopped and stared at the inspiring sight.

"Wow, is it going to be like this the whole way?" Molly asked after absorbing the gorgeous view.

"Much of the trek will look like this," Josh acknowledged.

"Are we going to climb that mountain?"

"No, we're not," Josh explained. "We go around the east side of it along Baker Lake."

They followed the road down from the pass. About twenty minutes later the two found the first of the switchbacks on Josh's map. A wide valley opened up below them. In the distance to the east they could just make out a bit of Baker Lake by the early morning light.

"Are we going to the lake today?" Molly asked.

"No, not that far. I want to camp at a spot near a gap in between the two hills." Josh pointed towards the spot he had picked out on the map.

The two zigzagged down the two switchbacks to the valley floor. They were below the snow line. Josh and Molly had to unzip their outer layers to avoid overheating. The morning was warming up nicely. They crossed two creeks in succession and hiked another $\frac{3}{4}$ mile across the valley floor before crossing two more creeks. The two hiked down the roadway about a mile and a half to the gap in the hills at the valley entrance. Josh spotted the gravel pit he had used for reference on the map.

"We're going to camp here today," Josh announced.

"I can go further, if you want," Molly answered. "My shoulders and hips hurt a little from the straps, but I can go further."

"I can too," Josh agreed, "...but we need to do eleven more miles if we go any further. I don't want to camp near the lake, so we can avoid Chinese patrols. I want to be able to hike the whole way to the north end of the lake in one day and into the woods beyond it. Are you up for another six hours of hiking?"

"No. This looks like a great place to camp," Molly replied.

Josh and Molly set their packs on the road while Josh searched for a flat place in the woods, not too far from Rocky Creek. He found it halfway between the road and the creek. The carried their things over to the spot and started setting up. It took Josh a little time to figure out how to set up the tent they took from the outfitters.

"I thought you knew all about camping," Molly snapped after a couple bad starts with the tent.

"Patience, Princess," Josh retorted. "I've never used this type of tent. I'll figure it out."

Molly grumped while Josh worked out how all the poles went together. He needed ten minutes to get it up, but he got it done.

"This is all there is?" Molly sniffed when Josh was finished. The tent was four and half foot wide, seven feet long and the peak was around forty inches above the floor. "You expect both of us to squeeze into this tiny thing?"

"This tent weighs five pounds," Josh answered. "We would have to give up three days' worth of food if we brought two tents. I'd rather lose privacy and eat three more days than carry two tents and starve for three days."

"My pack is overflowing with food," Molly said. "How are we going to run out?"

"See that mountain over there," Josh said as he pointed to the mountain on the far side of Baker Lake. "We will find mountain after mountain when we get past Baker Lake. We will need every scrap of food we are carrying to get out of this wilderness."

"If we have to share this tiny tent, there will be NO nonsense!" Molly groused.

"As if I'd want a high maintenance princess like you," Josh responded. "I'm unloading my gear and taking a nap. Rest would do you good, but do what you want."

Josh napped for a few hours, waking a little after noon. He didn't think Molly had rested while he was in the tent. She wasn't outside when he climbed out. The sun was high enough in the sky to shine over the hill south of their campsite, putting their camping spot in the warm sun. Josh was surprised. It felt like the temperature was in the fifties, which was quite pleasant.

Molly came back a couple minutes later carrying two canteens there were full and dripping from water. She unscrewed the cap and hoisted it up for a drink.

"STOP!" Josh barked. "Don't drink that yet."

"What?" Molly gasped, startled at Josh's harsh command.

"Did you treat that water?"

"Treat it?" Molly answered. "This is the clearest water I've ever seen. It's fine."

"How do you feel about puking and diarrhea?" Josh asked. "Giardia is a real bitch. Assume ALL water sources we find are unsafe. We have to treat or boil every drop of water we use."

"Oh... kay..." Molly said. "How do I treat this? I'm thirsty and need more water."

Josh took the purification tablets from his pack and demonstrated how to properly treat the water. Molly was surprised that she had to wait half an hour until the water was safe. Josh offered her one of his canteens to drink while they had lunch. Josh broke out a couple of MRE Meal #22's for their lunch.

Molly found the sloppy joes mix to be OK. The peanut butter, jelly and candy hit the spot. Josh made sure Molly made the Gatorade pack. The electrolytes would help her tomorrow when they did their first long hike.

The two spent the afternoon sorting through and cataloging the food they brought from Sedro-Woolley. Josh estimated that they had about fifteen days of food with them. They reviewed the maps and worked out a tentative route through the mountains before dinner. Josh suspected they might have to ration the food as they went.

Josh taught Molly how to build a campfire at dinner time. He showed her how to find a pine knot and to use it for a fire starter. She was shocked when it lit after Josh poured water over it. They had two cans of Spaghetti-O's for dinner. The temperature dropped as soon as the sun dropped behind the mountains to their southwest.

"We should get to bed," Josh suggested.

“It’s six o’clock,” Molly complained. “It’s way too early for bedtime.”

“We can’t use our flashlights every night and hang out after dark,” Josh explained. “The batteries will be dead in a week. We need to follow the sun. We get up when it comes up and go to bed when it sets.”

“This is downright weird,” Molly said. “I guess it won’t hurt tonight, since we didn’t get any sleep last night.”

Josh and Molly took their clothing from their packs and hung the packs between two trees. It would discourage the wildlife from getting into their food overnight. Josh let Molly change in the tent while he waited outside.

“Make sure you change and sleep in dry clothes,” Josh instructed once she was inside the small tent. “Better yet, sleep in the nude.”

“Better for you to take advantage of me tonight,” Molly retorted. “I DON’T think so, you pervert.”

“Suit yourself,” Josh answered. “You have clean, dry clothes for tonight. Tomorrow night when everything you have is damp, you’ll understand.”

Josh turned on his cell phone to see if by a minor miracle, he could pull in text messages. One popped on his phone as soon as it started up.

“GREAT NEWS J GOOD LUCK LOV MOM&DAD”

Josh was shocked when bars started appearing as his phone honed in on some cell tower. He had two bars! He dialed his Dad’s cell phone.

“Josh?” Mr. Warner said as he answered the unexpected phone call. “How’d you get through? I thought you were in the mountains.”

“We are,” Josh explained. “I don’t know how I am getting reception in this little valley but I am. We are about three miles west of Baker Lake. We’re planning on hiking upriver from Baker Lake up to the Canadian border, swinging around the north end of Ross Lake and then work our way east until we get to civilization.”

“OK,” Dad responded. “I’ll try to follow where you’re at on maps.”

“That’s good,” Josh said. “Are they still planning on evacuating you?”

“It’s started already. We’re all camped out on cots in the high school gym tonight. Buses are taking us south to Oregon tomorrow morning. The news tonight speculated that a Chinese tank army broke through from their bridgehead on the Skagit River today. They don’t expect to stop them before Seattle falls.”

“Good luck and don’t let anyone wander away,” Josh said. “That is how I came to have this girl with me. She ran home for a few things and missed the evac.”

“I will watch Jake like a hawk,” Mr. Warner said. “That sounds like something he’d do.”

“It does,” Josh agreed. “Can you ask around and see if the army will give you a number for search and rescue? If I can get them on the line, maybe Molly and I can hike far enough away from the front that they can pick us up by chopper. That would be better than hike the whole way out of this wilderness. Text the number to me if you get it. I don’t know how long we’ll have cell reception.”

“I’ll do that right now, Josh,” Mr. Warner promised. “Take care of yourself.”

“Love you, Dad,” Josh agreed. He stripped off his outer layers of clothing and stashed them in a plastic bag beside the tent.

“You in your sleeping bag?” Josh asked.

“I am,” Molly answered. Josh opened the tent door and sat down on his bag, his feet hanging outside the tent. He stripped off his boots, pants and boxers before climbing inside and climbing into his sleeping bag.

“Who were you talking to, Josh?” Molly asked.

“Can you believe it?” Josh answered. “I got cell reception here. I gave my Dad a call so he would know we’re OK.”

“My battery died yesterday,” Molly asked. “Do you think we’ll get out of this mess?”

“I do,” Josh answered. “I think our chances are good as long as we stay clear of the Chinese when we’re near the lakes.”

“I hope it doesn’t get any harder than this,” Molly said. “That pack was killing me this morning when we hiked down here.”

“You’ll toughen up,” Josh answered. “It will get harder but I’ll help you through it.”

Chapter 5

November 10, 2013 – 3 Miles west of Baker Lake

Josh stirred while it was still dark outside. His bladder was full, so he had to go outside to relieve himself. Clouds had rolled in overnight. The soft, damp ground now crunched when Josh walked across it. The temperature had dropped below freezing overnight. Josh hustled back inside and burrowed into his warm sleeping bag.

The sun was up over the mountains on the far side of Baker Lake when Molly woke up. Josh was softly snoring. She pulled on clothes and went outside to water a bush. Josh was out of the tent when she came back, pulling on his layers of outer clothing. Josh warmed up cans of corned beef hash for breakfast on a small fire.

Josh and Molly were underway by 8:30 in the morning. They walked down the road, turning left onto a park service road after less than a quarter mile. The service road took them north before turning east and taking them to the main park road. The park road was well clear of the lake, so they had little worry about being spotted by Chinese patrols.

Josh and Molly stopped at the Boulder Creek bridge for lunch, half a dozen miles into their hike. They passed three of the camping areas in the Mount Baker Wilderness Area as they hiked for the head of the lake. Josh's family had camped here many times when he was growing up. It was one of their favorite places to vacation. The park was always busy when they were there. It was deserted now and felt eerie. The road turned east and ran along the edge of Baker Lake after they passed the third campground.

“Keep a sharp eye on the lake,” Josh cautioned. “Tell me if you see ANY activity on the lake. I don’t want to get caught by the Chinese while we’re exposed.”

“I’ll watch, Josh,” Molly said. “How much further is it to the end of the lake? This pack is killing me.”

“Hang in there, Molly,” Josh responded. “It’s about three miles to the end of the lake. You’ve done great today.”

The two trudged on. The clouds from the morning had cleared as they headed north. The sun warmed the hikers. They each stripped off a couple layers. The day turned out to be beautiful. It was calm and the temperatures rose to the mid-fifties. The two cleared the end of the lake a little after four o’clock. They followed the park road north another $\frac{1}{2}$ mile. The road stopped at a gate. They followed the foot trail north along the Baker River for another $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. They set up camp about a hundred feet from the river.

“God, I am beat,” Molly gasped theatrically as she plopped down on a log beside the trail. “I’ve never worked this hard in my life.”

"You did well, for your second day on the trail," Josh responded. "The hikes will get harder, starting tomorrow. Can you put the tent up today? I want to get firewood collected and get our cooking fire going before it gets too dark."

"I'll try," Molly promised. Josh pulled the tent out of his pack before he headed into the woods to collect firewood. Josh came back ten minutes later with a big armload of firewood. The tent was pulled out of its bag, unrolled and left piled in a heap on the ground. One tent pole was assembled and lying on the ground. One corner of the tent was half-heartedly pegged to the ground. The rest of the pegs were scattered across the ground. Molly was sitting on the ground by her pack with her head down, apparently resting.

"Jesus Christ!" Josh exploded. "Are you fucking incompetent? I leave you with one simple thing to do and you screw it up and take a nap. Why the hell am I bothering to drag you along, Princess? You're a useless ornament out here in the woods."

Molly kept her head down for a few moments as her own fury grew. She glared up at Josh, her eyes on fire. Josh didn't notice the redness around her eyes or her damp cheeks.

"Ornament?" Molly spat out. "I am not Survivorman like you. I don't camp." Molly stood up and confronted Josh. "I've never done more than take a walk in a park. Do I know how to put that stupid tent up? No, of course not! I've never done it before." Molly wagged an accusing finger at Josh. "You treat me like I'm a pack mule. I've never carried so much weight in my life as I did today. I've never walked this far either. I'm exhausted. Why are you surprised I can't do things out here, you doofus?"

Before Josh could answer her verbal assault, she turned and fled down the trail about a hundred feet. She leaned against a tree and began to sob. Josh stared at her for a few seconds and saw... his little sister, Ashley.

----oooOooo----

It happened three years ago. Ashley had gone to a party with Aaron Reed. Ashley was fifteen and in tenth grade. Aaron was sixteen, had his license and was in eleventh grade. Josh was in twelfth grade then. Josh knew Aaron from school. Aaron played soccer and basketball and was talented at both. He was well thought of by his classmates. Josh felt his sister was safe with him. Aaron coaxed Ashley into too many wine coolers at a party.

The two headed for one of the popular make out spots around 10:30 that night. Aaron got grabby after some making out. Ashley was a little drunk and allowed it. Aaron got her hot enough that she didn't object when his hand went down her panties. Her slightly pickled brain finally came to attention when he ripped her panties and pushed her down on the back seat of his car.

"C'mon baby, this'll be fun," Aaron slurred as he clambered between her legs. Ashley grabbed her date by the hips, finding just bare ass cheeks. She struggled as he tried to hold her down and enter her womanhood. Ashley managed to apply her knee to Aaron's balls before he penetrated her.

She bolted out of the car as he lay writhing in pain. He drove off in a huff once he gathered his breath again. Ashley called home for help. Their parents were gone that evening, so Josh came to rescue Ashley. He arrived to find her leaning against a tree sobbing about the disastrous date. She looked exactly like Molly did now.

----oooOooo----

Josh cursed himself under his breath. His Mom would skin him alive if she found out how he lost his temper with poor Molly. He knew he had a bad temper and tried to control it – not always successfully. Josh walked over to Molly.

“Molly, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you that way,” Josh offered. He put his hand on her far shoulder. She continued sobbing but didn’t flinch at his touch. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to do better at teaching you the things you need to know.”

Josh sidled up to her side and hugged the sobbing girl. “I’m sorry,” he said as he cuddled her shoulder to his chest and rubbed her other shoulder. “I’ll help you through all this, I promise.”

The sobs gradually subsided. Molly turned around to face Josh. “I know I don’t carry my share of the load here.” She stifled a sob. “Show me how and I’ll try to do better.”

“I’ll try not to yell so much,” Josh agreed.

“All this is so hard... and so foreign for me,” Molly whimpered. “I lost my family... my school and friends... and watched Tyler die. It all happened so quickly. A couple weeks ago I was a normal high school girl. I had friends. I had good grades. All that is gone now and I’m out here in the wilderness, not knowing if I’m going live or die. It’s... it’s all so much to deal with.”

“I understand,” Josh agreed. “I really understand. This war sucks. Please forgive my temper. I wouldn’t wish the things I’ve seen in the last month on anyone. I had two mentors who made a soldier out of a skinny computer geek. They’re both dead. I lost three close friends too. One died in my arms and another died as I watched from the wrong side of the river.”

“A computer geek?” Molly asked. She couldn’t suppress a smirk. “That’s hard to picture.”

“I was a tall, skinny, 145 pounds weakling when I was in high school,” Josh said.

“The war might suck but the army did you some good,” Molly replied. “You’re definitely not a geek anymore.”

“Let’s go back,” Josh suggested. “I’ll teach you how the tent goes up and then we can have some dinner.”

Josh managed to exhibit more patience as he taught Molly how the tent went up. She paid closer attention than she had the previous evening. The two finished up the last two cans of Spaghetti-Os and half a bag of Oreos that they picked up in Lyman. The two were going to live on trail food from now on.

----oooOooo----

November 11, 2013 – North of Baker Lake

Clouds rolled in overnight. The sky looked threatening. Josh and Molly made breakfast and packed up quickly so they could get on the trail before the rain soaked everything. The morning temperature hovered just above freezing. Josh warned Molly to get ready for a cold, wet day.

The pair followed the Baker River northeast from their campsite, following a good trail maintained by the forest service, for about a mile. The trail dead-ended at a campsite just inside the North Cascades National Park boundary. Josh and Molly walked up the wide gravel and sand bar created over the millennia as the Baker River meandered back and forth across the valley floor.

Molly stared up at the towering peaks to their left as they passed Sulphide Creek. Clouds covered the tallest. “How are we going to keep from getting lost in all these mountains?”

“No problem,” Josh answered. “We watch the landmarks around us. That’s Mount Shuksan.” He pointed to the tallest, cloud covered mountain to the west. “That’s Seahpo Peak,” pointing to the much lower peak on a spur of Shuksan due north of them. “The next one is Blister Mountain. We follow the river valley upstream until we pass Blister Mountain. We hang a left and follow the little creek uphill to Chilliwack Pass.”

“You’re sure?” Molly asked. “All these mountains look the same to me.”

“I learned map reading in Boy Scouts,” Josh responded. “The army reinforced what I already knew when I did basic training a couple years ago. Trust me, I’ll get us through this.”

“I guess I have to,” Molly said. “You’ve done all right so far.”

The pair spent the morning working their way upriver across the gravel and sand bars beside the river. The creek veered close to the woods in a couple places. Molly and Josh bushwhacked through the trees until they could get back to the open river bank again.

The clouds closed in during the morning. The temperature hovered around 40 degrees but the air was damp. Drizzle started to fall around eleven o’clock. They pulled on their rain gear and hiked on. Josh showed Molly how to use the flameless heating packs in the MREs. They started heating their lunches and continued hiking.

They stopped around noon at the base of Blister Mountain. The rain was coming down steadily now. The warm lunch felt good on the cold, wet and dreary day. They marched on after their lunch break. The pair passed Blister Mountain a little after two o’clock and found Pass Creek, the small creek that would lead them to Chilliwack Pass tomorrow.

The pair had climbed 400 feet in elevation in the nine miles since they left their camp. The next mile was much rougher. Josh's map showed an 800 foot climb. Josh hadn't expected to find a trail along the creek, but there was a narrow trail that probably had been worn in by hikers going this way in the past. Josh and Molly had to stop frequently to catch their breath. They pressed on for another couple minutes before stopping to rest again. The rain continued to fall and the wind picked up. The gusts chilled them more.

The trail leveled out some after the first mile. Patches of snow dotted the woods as they pressed upward. Josh called a halt after another $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. The pair camped right about the snow line on the mountain. They found a fairly level area by the little creek. Molly managed to set up the tent with a little coaching from Josh. He set up their stove and got water ready to rehydrate their dinner. Josh grabbed a bag of beef teriyaki with rice for dinner.

The rain stopped and a cold front blew the clouds away as they sat down for dinner. The temperature dropped ten degrees while they ate. They hustled to get their packs hung and then went straight to bed. It was going to be a cold night!

----oooOooo----

Molly woke Josh a couple times during the night as she tossed and turned in the small tent. The third time it happened Josh asked, "What's wrong, Molly?"

"I'm freezing," Molly answered. Josh could hear her teeth chattering. Josh was a little surprised. The air was certainly below freezing but he was comfortable, almost toasty in his sleeping bag. Molly shouldn't be shivering.

"Do you have your hat on?" Josh asked as he reached for his flashlight and turned it on. Molly didn't have her knit cap on. "You lose a lot of heat through your head. Always wear your cap to bed."

"OK," Molly said. She pulled the cap over her head. "Maybe I should put more clothes on too."

"More clothes?" Josh asked. "Are you wearing clothes now?"

"I wore today's clothes to bed," Molly explained. "I knew it was going to be cold tonight and I wanted to stay warm."

"Do you ever listen?" Josh huffed. He took a deep breath and let it out. "I told you already that you shouldn't wear clothes to bed. They're damp from perspiration and humidity. That's what is making you cold. I'm nude and I'm comfortable in my bag."

"TMI, Josh. Way too much information," Molly answered. "It seems backwards to undress to warm up... but I'll do what you say."

"All of the clothes you wore today are damp and keeping you cool," Josh explained patiently. "You put a wet compress on someone's head to cool them down on a hot day. You're putting wet clothes on your body and wondering why you are cold. It's exactly the same thing."

“Roll over and close your eyes,” Molly said. “I need to strip down.”

“You got it,” Josh promised as he rolled over and pulled the cap down over his eyes. “Good night, Molly.”

“Good night, Josh.”

----oooOooo----

November 12, 2013 – Beside Pass Creek south of Chilliwack Pass

Josh woke up around 7:30 in the morning. Their breath had condensed and frozen to the sides of the tent, so Josh knew it was below freezing. Molly was rousing herself as he dressed and exited their tent. There were a few clouds in the sky. The pair wouldn’t see the sun for quite a few more hours in this deep valley.

Josh and Molly had some granola for breakfast before packing up for their day’s hike. They continued following Pass Creek up the valley towards Chilliwack Pass. The rocky sided mountains towered over the valley they were hiking in. Molly struggled with the climb up to Chilliwack Pass, about three miles above their campsite. Josh made frequent breaks so Molly could catch her breath as they climbed.

The ground was covered with snow above their camp. It wasn’t too deep when they started. It was over their boot tops after half an hour of hiking. Josh taught Molly how to use the snow shoes they were carrying. The shoes slowed their progress up the hill but did allow them to walk without sinking into deep snow.

Temperature dropped steadily as they climbed higher, even though the sun finally cleared the top of Blister Mountain. Josh and Molly bundled up in all their layers and wore their hats and gloves to keep their ears, cheeks and fingers from freezing. The small thermometer on the zipper of Molly’s pack reported the temperature was 20 degrees as they reached the small lake a quarter mile below the pass.

The two pushed on, reaching Chilliwack Pass around 11:00 am. The sky was clouding up. Josh expected they would see more rain or snow that afternoon. The wind was gusting at the pass. Josh pulled his cell phone out and turned it on to see if he could get any reception. To his surprise, he got three bars. He sent a text off to his Dad to let him know where they were. He found the text from his dad with the phone number for the air force search and rescue center. Josh dialed the number his Dad sent him.

“Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Sgt. Wise speaking,” the voice said. “How may I direct your call?”

“This is Corporal Joshua D. Warner, Serial No. 20945308,” Josh replied. “I was cut off when my division retreated south from the Skagit River. The bridge at Route 9 blew before I could get across the river. I’ve managed to elude the Chinese for the past five days. Can I arrange a helicopter to pick up me and the civilian with me?”

“I will need to go through IDENT procedures for you before we can decide on dispatch of a helo[copter],” Sgt. Wise answered. The sergeant spent a couple minutes questioning Josh before he was satisfied that Josh was who he claimed to be.

“What are your coordinates, Corporal?” Sgt. Wise asked.

“I can’t give you grids,” Josh explained. “I didn’t have time to get the military maps before I destroyed our tank. I’m working off hiker’s trail maps. I can give you lat[itude] and long[itude]. Our location shouldn’t be hard to find. We used an abandoned car to drive up into the Northern Cascades National Park. We hiked up into the mountains for the past two days to stay clear of the Chinese troops that headed east from Sedro-Woolley three days ago. We are currently at Chilliwack Pass, about 1.8 clicks [kilometers] northeast of Mineral Mountain.”

“Is your current position secure?” Sgt. Wise asked. “Could you hold there until we dispatch a helo to pick you up?”

“Negative,” Josh said. “We’re secure from the Chinese here but the position is too exposed to the weather. It’s twenty degrees up here on this pass and the winds blowing hard. We need to drop down lower in elevation so we’re below the snow line. I plan to head north to the Chilliwack River and follow it to Chilliwack Lake. Could you pick us up at the lake tomorrow?”

“Chilliwack Lake is reported to be occupied by the Chinese,” Sgt. Wise said.

“We expect to get to the north end of Ross Lake in about four days,” Josh said. “Perhaps you could arrange a pickup there?”

“That’s a possibility, Corporal,” Sgt. Wise agreed. “Can you check in with us on this phone to confirm pickup when you reach Ross Lake?”

“Probably not,” Josh replied. “I’m surprised I have cell phone reception here. I doubt I will be able to reach you again until we get to Ross Lake.”

“We could preposition a sat[ellite] phone up there,” Sgt. Wise suggested. “Can I call you back in five minutes? I need to talk with someone familiar with the park to arrange a drop off point.”

“No need to do that,” Josh responded. “My family went camping around Ross Lake a lot when I was growing up. Can you put it in the ranger’s station near the Hozomeen Camping Area entrance?”

“That sounds do-able,” Sgt. Wise agreed. “I will put you on the list for pickup in four days, assuming we get confirmation over the sat phone from you when you reach Hozomeen.”

“That’s a plan, Sergeant,” Josh agreed. Josh gave Molly a big smile. “We got a ride out of here in four or five days.”

“Thank God!” Molly said. “If you’re done here on the pass, let’s get down lower where it isn’t so damn cold.”

“Follow me,” Josh said. The trail down into the Chilliwack River valley was about a mile through deep snow. They dropped 1400 feet as they stepped and slid down the mountainside. Josh and Molly could feel the air temperature warm as they descended. Molly’s thermometer reported the temperature was 27 degrees when they took a break at 11:30 am. Josh and Molly got out their MRE lunches and activated the heat packs before continuing down the trail towards Chilliwack Lake.

They traveled about a mile down the valley. The hiking was easier since the snow wasn’t as deep as it was higher on the mountain. They stopped and ate lunch at a primitive campsite. Molly and Josh came to an interesting feature a quarter mile after their lunch stop.

The park service had erected a cable car stream crossing over the river. The car was a steel cage suspended by two pulleys from a cable about a dozen feet above the river. You climbed in the cage and pulled yourself hand over hand across the river to the far side. Josh went first with his pack. Josh used the attached rope to pull the empty car back to Molly. He helped her propel herself across the river.

The pair walked about eight miles in the afternoon, crossing two footbridges and passing two campsites before reaching Josh’s preferred destination. They endured some snow flurries in the afternoon as they hiked. The trail got progressively easier as they headed downstream and lower in elevation.

Josh wanted to stay in the last campsite before they crossed into Canada and reached Chilliwack Lake. He wanted to minimize their time along the lake as they proceeded north and east towards Ross Lake.

Molly was delighted to stay in an established campsite. The site had a pit toilet, which sure beat squatting in the woods. They got a bonus when they found a camper had left a full roll of toilet paper under a coffee can at the pit toilet. That precious commodity was getting low so the additional roll was very welcome.

The campsite was nearly below the snow line. Patches of snow dotted the ground around the campsite. The lower elevation helped warm the air that evening. It was 37 degrees when Josh and Molly went to bed that evening.

----oooOooo----

November 13, 2013, One mile south of Chilliwack Lake

“This is a nicer day than yesterday,” Molly commented as she crawled out of their tent in the morning. “It’s not so damn cold.” The sun was peeking over the mountain top to the southeast, bathing the campsite in warm morning sun.

“It is nice, compared to the pass yesterday morning,” Josh agreed.

“Do you think the army will send a helicopter to pick us up when we get to Ross Lake?”

“The sergeant I talked to yesterday seemed to think they could handle it,” Josh allowed.

“This walk wasn’t as bad as I expected,” Molly said, “... but I’ll be glad when we’re done. I don’t see how people can come out here in the woods and carry all the shit we have and call it fun. They’ve got to be crazy.”

“Backpacking IS fun,” Josh answered. “Out here in nature, enjoying the peace, quiet and beauty? Who’d want to be in some crowded mall with a million other people?”

“Me,” Molly answered.

Josh and Molly ate some cold granola, stuffed some beef jerky in their pockets to eat on the trail and headed north for Canada and Chilliwack Lake. The trail north to the border was in good condition, making for easy hiking. They reached the cleared swath of forest that marked the border between the United States and Canada.

The Canadians maintained a good trail that connected up with the Park Service’s trail. Josh and Molly made excellent time walking north to the south end of Chilliwack Lake. They two stopped dead in their tracks when they reached the southern end of the lake. The breeze was blowing and small waves were crashing on the beach in front of them. Waterlogged sticks and tree limbs hovered between the water surface and the sandy bottom of the beach. Sun broke through the clouds that had gathered since they got up and sparkled on the wavy surface of the dark blue lake. The tall mountains on either side cast shadows across the water.

“Wow!” Molly gasped.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Josh commented.

“I guess I see why people backpack,” Molly said as she stared up the long lake stretching north from them. “This is just... just... uh...”

“Breathtaking?” Josh offered.

“Yes, that’s the word I wanted,” Molly agreed. “Breathtaking.”

“Keep an eye on the lake for boats,” Josh said as they started walking north along the eastern shore of the lake. “I don’t want to be surprised by the Chinese if they have patrols out in the park. We’re going to hustle up the shore and head into the first valley we come to. I doubt the Chinese will be looking for us up there.”

“You’re the boss, Josh,” Molly agreed. Josh stepped off a faster pace as they headed along the steep mountainside at the edge of the lake. Molly was the first to spot a spec on the horizon ten minutes later.

“Haul ass, Molly,” Josh commanded as he broke into a jog. “We got to get to cover before whoever that sees us.” The two were opposite high rocky cliffs. The fringe of woods between the cliffs and the trail was too thin to hide two people. Molly struggled to keep up with Josh as they ran for cover

in the woods in the valley ahead. They were two hundred yards from hiding when they could see two heads in the boat and the wave kicked up by the bow. The two sprinted for the woods. They dashed into the woods as soon as they cleared the cliffs and clambered uphill away from shore. Molly hid behind a large rock. Josh pulled his pack off, threw it behind a large downed tree and jumped behind the tree too. The two stared down the hill as the little boat motored closer. They could make out the sound of the motor when it was a hundred yards from shore. The boat headed directly for the spot on the trail where they dodged into the woods.

Josh stared down the hill, aghast. The trail by the lake was bare. About twenty yards into the woods you could clearly see two sets of footprints in the snow leading straight up the hill to where they were hiding.

Josh waved to get Molly's attention. Josh waved his M16 so Molly could see it. She drew the pistol from a pocket in her pack. They watched as the two Chinese soldiers landed their boat at the shoreline directly below them. Josh lowered his gun and clicked the safety off.

The Chinese soldiers pulled their boat up further onto the shore and then walked up to the trail. They examined the trail carefully before they split. Each followed the trail about fifty yards to the north and to the south. The one closer to Molly stopped, turned and stared up the hill, into the woods. Josh fingered the trigger of his gun. He would have preferred if the two soldiers had stayed closer together so they were easier targets.

The second soldier called out to the first. The first jogged back to the boat while the second soldier jogged over to meet him. Neither Molly or Josh breathed until the Chinese soldiers climbed back in the boat and motored south towards the southern end of the lake. Josh and Molly stayed hidden until the little boat disappeared from sight as it headed for the north end of the lake.

Josh silently motioned for Molly to head back down to the trail and then hoisted his pack back on.

"Oh God, I thought we were dead," Molly gasped as she stumbled out of the woods. "I know they saw us when we were hiking along the side of the lake."

"They may have," Josh agreed. "We would have taken those two out if they came after us. We would have had the advantage of surprise."

"I don't know if I could have shot them," Molly whimpered. Josh gave Molly a brief hug when they met on the trail.

"We're safe now," Josh reassured. "Let's get moving. I don't want to hang around here to find out if the Chinese come back. Let's go."

The trail continued a few hundred yards to a paved park road. The pair followed the park road up the Depot Creek valley. They hustled to put distance between them and the Chinese. The road continued a mile and a half up the valley before ending. A park hiking trail continued up the valley another half mile.

Snow covered the road most of the way as they hiked up the valley, starting out as a dusting but getting progressively deeper as they hiked up the valley. Josh and Molly stopped where the trail petered out to put on their snow shoes. The snow two miles up the valley was up to the top of their boots and making traveling difficult.

A full throated roar of jet engines from the direction of the U. S. attracted their attention as they prepared their snowshoes. Both stopped and stared as four F-22s in a loose V formation streaked overhead, afterburners spewing flame out their tails.

“Raptors,” Josh commented. “It’s about damn time I saw the Air Force doing something.”

“They’re ours?” Molly asked. “Maybe we can wave them down.”

“They’re over...” Josh said as he pointed west. He was going to say ‘Vancouver by now,’ but stopped short when he saw a couple dozen dots on the horizon to the west grow into the form of Chinese interceptors.

The American formation split into two pairs as they maneuvered for the fight. Josh and Molly watched as the Raptors shot missiles at the incoming Chinese. The Chinese returned fire. Josh and Molly stared skyward and watched the aerial duel. The four American fighters took out five Chinese fighters before succumbing to overwhelming numbers.

Two American planes exploded in midair, leaving their pilots no chance to bail out. A third pilot did manage to get free of his plane before it crashed. He floated down far north of them. Josh figured he probably would float down in the town of Chilliwack, scene of his first battles as a soldier. The last plane streaked overhead, trailing smoke and flame. It barely cleared the top of Mount Spickard, at the head of the valley they were climbing. Seconds later a ball of fire erupted skyward from the direction of the F-22.

A gaggle of Chinese fighters streaked overhead, heading the direction the last American had flown before crashing. Josh and Molly found out what the dogfight was about a minute later. Somewhere between 70 and 100 Chinese planes flew over them, keeping careful position in formation. The stream aircraft flew slightly south of due east across the border.

“What this all about?” Molly asked.

“I learned this type in our aircraft recognition class,” Josh answered. “They’re IL-76MDs... Chinese transport aircraft.”

The two stared skyward at the Chinese. As if on command, every aircraft opened their back, drop doors.

“Paratroopers,” Josh explained. “Somebody is about to have a really bad day.”

The stream of aircraft took five minutes to pass. Josh and Molly did not see any aircraft drop parachutes while they were in sight. “Where do you think they’re going?” Molly asked. Josh pulled his maps out for a moment and pondered the question.

“Oroville or Omak,” Josh answered. “They probably will want one of those airports.” The maps didn’t show much else that direction until Idaho and Montana.

“What are they going to do there?” Molly asked.

“I have no idea,” Josh replied. “We need to get moving again. I want to be over the pass and into the next valley before tonight. I don’t want to camp any higher in elevation than necessary.”

“I certainly agree about that,” Molly said. The two trudged up the mountain. Going was tough as they climbed higher through the snow. The temperature dipped below freezing as they crossed the cleared swath of forest that marked the U. S./Canada border. They hiked for a mile and a half in the U. S. before crossing back into Canada.

The last half mile to the pass was brutal. The snow was deep and loose. Wind gusted around them and it felt like it was ten degrees. Both hikers bundled up in their winter coats, wore knit caps and gloves and kept their hoods up to protect themselves from the cold. They had a five hundred foot climb up to the unnamed pass. It was three in the afternoon when they finally made it to the top. Josh stopped briefly to check for cell phone reception. He had none.

Molly was exhausted and needed rest but didn’t object when Josh insisted they keep moving. The wind chill at the top of this pass was excruciatingly painful to someone used to the moderate temperatures Sedro-Woolley experienced in the winter.

Josh and Molly struggled a little over a mile down the valley before stopping for the night. Molly collapsed in the snow bank when she took her pack off. This day had sapped all her strength. Josh dug a pit in the snow before setting up their tent in the pit. He encouraged Molly to get her things in the tent and to take a nap while he made dinner.

Josh fired up their stove and surveyed his surroundings while he waited for the water to boil. Mount Rahm, to their south dominated the scene. The camp was set up near the southern edge of the woods, not too far from Maselpanik Creek. Josh could see the valley extend north to another range of hills. The map showed them to be on the far side of the Skagit River. Josh mused that they should probably be able to get across that damn river tomorrow.

Josh was surprised at how long it took the little stove to boil the water for dinner. Josh had winter camped and had camped at in the mountains for years, but never at 4,300 feet in elevation. The water took about fifteen minutes to reach a slow simmer. Josh added the water to a packet of freeze dried beef stroganoff and rattled the side of their tent and called Molly.

“Dinner’s ready, Molly.”

“Huh...” she grunted about fifteen seconds later as she roused herself from her nap. “Can you bring the food in to me? It’s so cold outside.”

“Sorry, no can do,” Josh answered. “Remember what I taught you about bear procedures. We never have any food in the tent... ever! I don’t want some bear waking us up in the middle of the night trying to get to the food he smells.”

“Yeah... give me a minute to get dressed,” Molly said with resignation. She popped out of their tent two minutes later and walked the hundred feet over to their ‘dining area.’ “What’s for dinner?” Josh told her. Molly dug into the pasta dish, eating the warm food quickly.

“That was pretty good,” Molly said as she licked her bowl clean. “I thought trail food was going to be nasty and tasteless. This isn’t a Big Mac but it’s still tasty.” Josh chuckled.

“We’ll see if you say the same thing ten days from now,” Josh teased.

“We’ll be out of the mountains before that,” Molly gasped. “I can’t do many more days like today. I wasn’t sure I was going to make it up that last hill this afternoon.”

“It was a tough day,” Josh agreed. “I figure we hiked twelve miles, much of it through the snow and climbed 2,500 feet in elevation. The next couple days are all downhill.” Josh gave Molly a big smile. “Tomorrow we should be able to cross the damn Skagit River... finally.”

“Thank God!” Molly agreed. “How long until we reach Ross Lake and can get a ride out of here?”

“I’m guessing we are three days from Ross Lake,” Josh answered. “I don’t know how those 10,000 or 15,000 Chinese paratroopers will change things. I hope the search and rescue people are able to come and pick us up.”

“They better,” Molly snorted. “They can’t leave us here in the wilderness to rot and die.”

“The army will do whatever it needs to do for its benefit,” Josh responded. “We are an afterthought to them. We’ll do whatever we have to do to get to safety.”

Josh and Molly didn’t dawdle over their dinner. They washed their dishes, hung their packs and went straight to bed. The temperature dropped precipitously when the sun went down behind the mountains.

Josh and Molly took zero degree sleeping bags from the outfitter in Sedro-Woolley. Josh’s putting their tent in a hole in the snow protected them from the cold... somewhat. Still, this was the coldest night the two had spent since they left Sedro-Woolley last week. Josh woke up numerous times during the night. Usually Molly and her sleeping bag were adhered to his. Josh didn’t mind. She helped keep him warm. He could feel her boobs pressing against his back, making him pop a woody a couple times during the night. He sighed. Nothing could be done about that.

----oooOooo----

November 14, 2013, Maselpanik Creek Canyon

Josh checked the thermometer on Molly's pack when he brought the packs back from the tree where they hung them last night. The thermometer reported the temperature was -4 degrees. Josh and Molly decided it was a good morning for one of the hot breakfasts. Josh scavenged a couple MRE accessory packs to get coffee for himself and some apple cider for Molly.

"God, I can't believe how cold it is up here," Molly said as she sipped her hot cider.

"It was cold last night," Josh agreed. "Be prepared. We'll probably have some camps up this high in the mountains again if we aren't able to catch a helicopter out of Ross Lake."

"Those army guys better give us a ride," Molly responded. "I'm not prepared to be a backwoods woman."

"You've done well so far," Josh said. A rumble off to the west focused their attention that direction. Fifteen seconds later multiple squadrons of Chinese fighters flew about five thousand feet over their camp. There were too many fighters to count. Two minutes later a massive group of IL76MD transports flew over, going the same direction as yesterday.

"That is going to be a really bad day for somebody," Josh observed. "I hope wherever they're going is far from Ross Lake." Molly agreed. "Let's get packed up and get hiking. We'll warm up when we get going."

Molly finished packing her things in record time. The two put on their snow shoes and headed north, down the valley. The valley was more open than they had seen so far on their trek. Josh and Molly found the park trail about an hour's hike downhill from their campsite. The sun came over the mountains to their south and helped warm them. Any water was frozen solid and it was still damn cold, but it was warmer than when they got up. The exposed skin on their faces no longer stung from the bitter cold.

Snow depth decreased as they marched north. They crossed the Maselpanik Creek to the park road and continued downstream. By lunch time they were able to take off the clumsy snow shoes and hike through the three or four inches of snow on the road. They stopped for lunch soon after reaching the road.

"What's the temperature?" Molly asked as she chowed down on some MRE beef stew.

"Twenty-three degrees," Josh replied after he looked at the thermometer on the back of her pack.

"It feels balmy now," Molly said after another spoonful of stew, "...like I could shed my coat and sweatshirts and go running through the field."

"I think you might want to keep them on," Josh responded. "It'll stay warm a couple more hours and then the sun will sink below the mountains again."

The two headed down the road after they finished their meal. They made good time travelling on the gravel road. Josh and Molly crossed a small river a little before two o'clock.

“Good riddance, Skagit River,” Molly said as they crossed the small bridge.

“Not yet,” Josh explained. “This creek is called...” Josh scanned the map in his hand for a few seconds, “...Klesilkwa River,” Josh laughed, “...at least I think that’s how you pronounce that name. The Skagit is 3 ½ miles down this road.” Josh pointed to their right.

Josh and Molly moved quickly down the paved park road. They left the snow behind when they did the last switchback before they got down to the river valley. It was a pleasant afternoon for hiking. Ice in the puddles along the road was breaking up and melting. Josh and Molly felt warm for the first time since they left Chilliwack Lake.

The sun was beginning to set and they hadn’t reached the Skagit River yet. Josh decided they should head into the woods out of sight of the road and set up camp. They made supper, hung their packs and turned in early. Josh kind of missed having Molly cuddle with him.

----oooOooo----

November 15, 2013, Skagit Valley Provincial Park

The sound of low flying jets woke Josh up in the morning. Josh and Molly got moving quickly. The morning was considerably warmer than yesterday, but still cold at twelve degrees. They had breakfast, packed up and headed downriver on the park road.

Twenty minutes after starting their day’s hike, Josh and Molly followed the road around a big bend and found it – the Skagit River! They jogged to the bridge and ran across. Molly raised her arms in victory when they reached the east side.

“OH... MY... GOD!” Molly gasped. “I never thought I’d be soooo happy to cross this river. I never give the muddy old Skagit a second thought when my family and I fly down I-5 to Seattle and other civilized places before the war.”

“It is good to finally get across,” Josh agreed. “Remember, this is just a minor waypoint. Our destination today is the ranger’s station at Ross Lake.”

“I’m not forgetting,” Molly responded. “How could I forget the army giving us a ride out of this wilderness back to civilization? I am SO ready for a shower and something leafy and green to eat.”

“It will be nice,” Josh agreed. “Let’s get moving. Ross Lake is a long way from here.”

The two headed south along the park road. Hiking was easy. They were below the snow line by a few hundred feet so the roadway was bare. Chinese fighter jets went overhead, heading southeast or northwest nearly all day. A few more of the IL-76MD transports went over too, though not nearly as many as the previous two days.

About 1:30 in the afternoon they passed a pedestrian bridge over the Skagit River carrying a trail to the west side of the lake. Ten minutes later Ross Lake was in sight. Josh and Molly hurried

through the Canadian park complex and across the border into the U. S. They reached the ranger station about four minutes after they crossed the border.

Josh tried the door. It was unlocked. Molly and Josh stepped into the office. A Post-It note was centered on the counter. "LC JW BROOMS" was what the note said.

"The search and rescue people made this easy," Josh commented as he walked around the end of the counter.

"Huh? What's this mean?"

"Corporal Joshua Warner," Josh answered. "The message tells me our satellite phone is in the closet." Molly followed Josh around the counter and over to the broom closet at one end of the Ranger Station. Josh opened the door.

"MREs... cool," Josh said as he looked down at the two cases of food the search and rescue team left them. An oversized cell phone with a thick stubby antenna sat on top of the two boxes a second note explained: "KEY: LAST 6 DIG JW S#"

"Another riddle?" Molly asked.

"Not really," Josh said. "Military SAT phones can be locked to prevent unauthorized use. I think they're telling me to use the last six digits of my serial number to unlock the phone."

"Well, call them," Molly said. "We told them to pick us up today at Ross Lake. We're here and ready."

Josh picked up the phone, turned it on and punched in "945308." The screen came up, waiting for Josh to enter the phone number he wanted to call. Josh punched in the number he had for the search and rescue center. The phone rang a couple times.

"Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Airman First Class Pedroza speaking," the voice said. "How may I direct your call?" An airman first class was the air force's equivalent of an army corporal.

"This is Corporal Joshua D. Warner, Serial No. 20945308," Josh replied. "I called in four days ago to arrange a pickup from the north end of Ross Lake."

"Let me put my LT on the line, Warner," Airman Pedroza replied. "He can help you with the details of the extraction."

"Thank you, Airman," Josh replied. Josh waited a minute or so for the lieutenant to come on the line.

"Lt. Andrew Davis speaking," the lieutenant said. "Corporal Warner, can you give me your IDENT?"

Josh went through the steps to properly identify himself to Lt. Davis. "Very good, Warner," Lt. Davis said when Josh finished identifying himself. "I'm glad you made it through the mountains to the rendezvous point."

"I'm glad too," Josh agreed. "Thanks for stocking some MREs here for us too. They're a welcome sight."

"We weren't sure how you were set for food," Lt. Davis replied. "Bring what you don't eat now along when we come to pick you up."

"When will that be?" Josh asked.

"The air situation is too hot for a daylight extraction," Lt. Davis said. "We will come in after dark. Figure on a 0200 hours extraction tomorrow morning."

"0200 hours, got it," Josh agreed.

"Can you find the Canadian Visitor's Centre?" Lt. Davis asked. "That is the best place for us to put a bird down."

"We passed it on the way here," Josh said. "We will be there, Lieutenant."

"I have your SAT phone number," Lt. Davis said. "I will contact you if the plan changes."

"Very good, sir," Josh responded. "I will do the same if the Chinese show up and put a hurting on our plan."

"Your call sign will be 'Frosty Boot' if call you in again," Lt. Davis said. "Good luck, Corporal."

"Thank you, sir," Josh answered.

"Well... well?" Molly begged expectantly as Josh finished the call. "How soon will we get out of here?"

"0200 hours... um, 2:00 AM," Josh answered. "We have to hike back up to the Canadian Visitors Center. The air force said that it will be better for them to land up there."

"So... now what?"

Josh gestured towards the two cases of MREs. "Have some supper and relax until after dark."

Josh and Molly opened up the two cases of MREs and sorted through to see what offerings were available. Molly decided meatballs in marina sauce sounded good. Josh chose a packet of Mediterranean chicken with cornbread stuffing.

Josh and Molly hung out inside the ranger office that evening. In retrospect they probably could have walked around outside and enjoyed the views and later the stars. They only Chinese they saw were ones flying over to the east or southeast at ten thousand feet.

Josh and Molly were comfortable in the insulated Ranger office as they waited for the appointed time. The temperature outside dropped sharply when the sun set, aided by the crystal clear skies outside. The stars shone brightly outside on the nearly moonless night.

Josh called his dad and talked while they killed time in the evening. Josh did not tell his dad that they were expecting to get a helicopter ride out later that night. He didn't want to get his family's hopes up. Molly tried calling her parents too. She ended up leaving a voice mail when no one answered.

The pair hiked up the road to the Canadian Visitors Center around midnight. They wanted to be in position in case the helicopter was early. Josh and Molly sat at one of the picnic tables in the camping area beside the visitor's center and watched the stars as they waited. They were bundled up again against the chilly, ten degree air. Molly spotted two shooting stars as they waited for their ride.

Around 1:45 AM as they watched to the south, Josh spotted light flashes over Little Jackass Mountain. Almost a minute after spotting the lights they heard the dakka-dakka-dakka of heavy automatic weapons fire echoing through the quiet on the lake.

"This is not good," Josh observed as they watched the light show. An explosion in the distance brightened the sky behind the mountain. The dakka-dakka-dakka continued for another minute before the sound of the explosion reached them. The heavy weapons fire continued after the sound of the explosion.

"I hope they sent two helicopters on this mission," Josh commented. "The Chinese must be firing at somebody."

"I hope so," Moly agreed. "I don't want to have come this far and lose my ride back to civilization at the last second."

The firing died away. Josh and Molly sat in silence for a couple minutes. Molly shifted and stared intently south. "Do you hear it?"

"What?" Josh asked.

"I think I hear a helicopter."

Josh needed another thirty seconds before he could make out the thucka-thucka-thucka of the helicopter. They waited expectantly and watched the lake. Forty seconds later they spotted the helicopter come around the end of Little Jackass Mountain, about a hundred feet in the air above the lake. Unfortunately being able to spot the helicopter a couple miles away on this dark night was a bad... very bad thing. The copter had an orange glow coming from intake and outlets of the engine.

A bright flame shot out of both ends of the engine and the thucka-hucka-thucka of the rotors lost their steady beat. A ball of fire shot out from the engine compartment and the helicopter nosed down violently.

“NNooooo!” Molly wailed as Josh growled, “SHIT!” The helicopter shuddered as the pilot struggled to control it momentarily before it dove into the cold waters of Ross Lake.

“Move it,” Josh commanded. “We have to see if we can help... if anybody survived that.” The pair jogged back across the border and headed south down the main road towards the Hozomeen Campgrounds. Josh’s satellite phone rang when they were about 100 yards past the ranger’s office.

“Frosty Boot,” Josh announced when he answered the call.

“Frosty Boot, this is Capt. Foster from the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center,” the captain explained. “Negative on extraction tonight.”

“I know,” Josh answered. “We saw the second helicopter go down in the lake about a mile from the pickup point. At least I assume that was the second helicopter. We saw a big explosion light up the sky down towards the dam about five minutes before the second chopper went down. We’re heading down to the crash site now to see if we can assist any survivors. The chopper went down about 100 meters offshore. Survivors may be able to make it to shore.”

“Thank you, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster responded. “By the way, you saw our third chopper go down, not the second. We lost one as we flew over Winthrop.”

“Winthrop?” Josh queried. The small, central Washington town was fifty-some miles to their southeast. Josh had planned to make for that location when they got through the mountains. “I didn’t know the Chinese got to Winthrop.”

“We didn’t know either until we lost a helo over the town,” Capt. Foster replied. “The Chinese landed a division in Omak two days ago. No one knew they had troops extending that far out from their airhead. Report back to me when you reach the crash site and let me know if we have survivors.”

“Will do, Captain,” Josh said.

Josh and Molly needed about fifteen minutes to jog down to the crash site, encumbered as they were with heavy packs. The shot-up tail and one main rotor protruded from the water, marking the crash site. No survivors were on the beach or floating in the water.

Josh called the Air Force’s rescue center back.

“Frosty Boot, reporting in for Capt. Foster,” Josh announced when an airman answered his call. It took a minute to get the captain on the line.

“Frosty Boot, what is the status of the crew?” Capt. Foster asked as soon as he came on the line.

“No survivors, sir,” Josh replied. “The chopper came down in shallow water. The tail and one rotor are sticking out. It doesn’t look as if any of the crew made it out of the chopper.”

“Any chance of survivors still in the helo?” Capt. Foster asked.

“It’s ten degrees air temp here,” Josh explained. “The water temp is probably thirty-three degrees. There is no chance of survivors in the chopper.”

“When will they send another chopper?” Molly interjected. “How soon can they pick us up?” Josh tried to wave off Molly’s questions. Molly shot him a poisonous glare. Josh got her message... loud and clear.

“Captain, it’s 0240 hours now,” Josh began diplomatically. “Is there any chance of another helicopter can make it here to pick us up while it’s dark?”

“No chance, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster reported. “The air boss has suspended all helo operations over your part of the state until we can map out the full extent of Chinese positions and air defenses.”

“OK, I see,” Josh said, trying to keep his voice even. “What do you recommend for us?”

“Evade and hike on out,” Capt. Foster answered. “I wish I had a better answer for you, Corporal.”

“Any recommendations on directions?” Josh asked. “I expected the Chinese to be down at Ross Dam, south of us. You said they’re in Winthrop too?” That town was southeast of Josh and Molly’s position. “The Chinese paratroopers landed in Omak.” That town was thirty miles east of Winthrop and about thirty-five miles south of the U. S./Canadian border. “It sounds as if we should stay north to avoid the Chinese.”

“That sounds like a plan, Corporal,” Capt. Foster agreed. “Keep the Frosty Boot call sign and report in every two days. We may be able to blast a hole in the air defenses and send someone in to pick you up.”

“That would be great, Captain,” Josh agreed. “Thank you for the attempt tonight.”

“Good luck, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster replied. “We’ll be waiting for you when you get out of the wilderness. It will be my treat on beers when you get out.”

“Thank you, sir,” Josh replied before shutting down the phone.

“Well... well? When are they coming for us?” Molly demanded.

“They’re not,” Josh answered.

“WHAT?” Molly squawked. “What do you mean they’re not coming for us?”

“The Air Force lost three choppers and I’m guessing somewhere between twelve and twenty men died while trying to pick us up,” Josh explained. “No rational person would pay that kind of price to get us. We’re on our own.”

“They can’t do this!” Molly snapped. “They HAVE to come and get us. Are they going to leave us out here to die?”

“You’re being a princess again,” Josh retorted. “Knock it off. We are on our own. That isn’t news. We’ve planned and expected that we would have to walk out of the wilderness on our own. We can do this.”

“Are we going to have nights as bad as the one we spent near Chilliwack Pass?”

“We may have nights worse than that,” Josh replied. “I promise you that we can do this. The army gave us a whole bunch more food to keep us going. We have a satellite phone now. We can arrange another helicopter ride if the army gets the Chinese troops and anti-aircraft cleared between us and safety. We WILL make it.”

“I hope you’re right, Josh,” Molly said as she slumped her shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“We will make it,” Josh promised again. “Let’s get back to the ranger’s office and get a few hours of sleep. I want to hike out of here early tomorrow. I expect this wreck will attract the Chinese when the sun comes up.”

Chapter 6

November 16, 2013 – Hozomeen Camping Area Ranger's Office

The ranger's office made a nice, warm place to sleep. Josh woke up around 7:00 AM. Spots of sunlight flashed against the tops of the mountains on the far side of Ross Lake. Josh roused Molly and then stepped outside to take care of his morning business. Opening the door was a shock. The cold air stung Josh's face as he hurried outside to empty his bladder.

They made some coffee and ate a bag of granola cereal before packing up their bags. Molly tried to pick her bag up but couldn't lift it.

"God, this is ridiculous," Molly moaned as Josh helped her get the bag on. "This weighs too much."

"We added a lot of food," Josh responded. "We're going to need every bit of it if we have to head through the mountains to Oroville. That is the direction the captain at the rescue center recommended we go."

Josh helped Molly get her pack on, clip her hip belt and adjust the straps. "Can you manage that?"

"I think so," Molly replied. Josh hoisted his own pack on. The pair headed down the park road to the Hozameen Campground. The trail into the mountains started from the campground. The first couple miles were steadily uphill. Clouds rolled in, blanketing the sky as they hiked up into the snow zone again. The damp chill in the air foretold the coming snow.

Snow flurries were falling when they reached Stromberg Cabin at the west end of a long meadow at Willow Lake. Snow gently coated the pines surrounding the meadow. Flurries added to the white blanket. The frozen lake was the perfect centerpiece to the idyllic scene that could have come from a Currier and Ives Christmas card.

Josh and Molly sat on the cabin porch while they warmed up and ate their lunch. "Why don't we stay here tonight, Josh?" Molly asked. "You know I'm not much for being out in nature but... this place is so gorgeous that I am glad we are here. This is a marvel."

"It is beautiful," Josh agreed expansively. "Under normal circumstances I'd agree that we'd stay. I could spend days at this cabin... if we could afford it." Josh's face went serious as he turned to Molly. "Do you remember those men dying in the helicopter crash right in front of us last night?" Molly nodded yes. "We're in a struggle for our lives. We have to keep pushing hard to get out of these mountains somewhere away from the Chinese. We have a very limited amount of food and a very long way to hike. We have to push ahead as far as we can every day. Maybe we won't run out of food before we reach help... maybe."

"I get that," Molly replied. "Finally I get that. I didn't understand our predicament when we left Sedro-Woolley. I began to get it when those two Chinese soldiers were looking for us back at the last

lake. I certainly got it last night. The men in that helicopter are dead. They died coming to save us. No one else is going to risk their lives for us. We're on our own. I'd love to stay in this pretty spot but you're right. We need to push on. Where do you think we can get to tonight?"

Josh pulled out a map and spread it out on the cabin porch. "I would like to get to this shelter this evening," Josh explained. "We're about half way there."

"Sounds like a plan," Molly agreed. "How's the trail look between here and there?"

"Not too bad," Josh answered. "It's about like the last four miles we did."

Josh was right. The hike down Lightning Creek wasn't hard. A couple inches of snow covered the trail but the footing was good. They headed east up the Three Fools Creek valley when they reached the Deer Lick Cabin. They followed the trail about three miles up the valley before reaching the Little Fish Shelter.

The open front of the small but sturdy three sided Adirondack style shelter had a wide overhang that extended almost to the fireplace in front of the shelter. The shelter had a sturdy wooden floor about eighteen inches above the ground. Josh and Molly put their packs in the shelter. Molly pulled things together for dinner. Josh headed out and gathered some firewood for a fire.

Josh kept the fire going after they finished dinner. It helped warm the shelter. The temperature hovered in the mid-twenties, as it had all afternoon. Flurries and light snow drifted down from the low clouds that hid the tops of the peaks around their shelter.

"Do you want to help plan out our route?" Josh asked as Molly finished packing up their pots and dishes in the packs. "We need to change the route I originally planned."

Josh spread the maps out so Molly could follow. "I planned for us to head through these valleys towards Mazama and Winthrop. They're the closest towns clear of the Ross Dam. The captain I talked with last night said Chinese anti-aircraft shot down one of the three helicopters they sent to pick us up near Winthrop. We need to keep clear of those towns."

"OK," Molly agreed. Josh pored over the maps. Molly tried to follow along too but was confused by all the squiggly lines and blotches on the maps. Math, science and geography hadn't been priority subjects for her or her friends in school. For the first time in days, she thought about Amber, Kimberly and Evie. Where were they? Were they all right?

Molly watched as Josh studied and measured things on the map. After about fifteen minutes Josh sat back and smiled. "I got it."

"Where do we go?" Molly asked.

"Captain Foster said the Chinese are in Omak and Winthrop," Josh explained as he showed her on the maps. "He suggested we stay further north... towards Oroville." Josh pointed at the small town near the Canadian border, about fifty-five miles to the east of them.

“I think we keep on the Boundary Trail we’re on,” Josh said. “We take it up over this mountain and head for Frosty Pass.”

Molly wasn’t well versed in map reading but she understood what the small “x 6128” meant on the map. “Climb that mountain? It’s over 6,000 feet. We froze at Chilliwack Pass. That was a lot lower. How can we survive up there?”

“We put our tent up inside a snow shelter,” Josh said. “That campsite didn’t have enough snow for a snow shelter to protect and insulate our tent. You won’t wear damp clothes to bed again. Right?”

“Yeah, I did do that, didn’t I?” Molly admitted. “Couldn’t we keep following the creek valley up to Frosty Pass? We did that after Baker Lake where we didn’t have a trail. It looks shorter on the map too.”

“It is shorter,” Josh confirmed. “We had a wide gravel bar along the creek on Baker River. That made the walking easy. This is a tight valley. All we’ll have if we follow the creek is steep hillsides or walk in the creek bed in the water. That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“Can we at least try it?” Molly asked. “Going up on top of the mountains scares me.”

“We can look at it in the morning,” Josh agreed.

Josh and Molly put the maps away and hung their packs for the night. Josh built the fire up before they went to sleep. It would help warm the shelter... at least for part of the night. The shelter had room for six or eight hikers to sleep inside. Molly and Josh had plenty of room to spread out when they went to bed.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Josh woke up with the feeling he was pushed up against something. Half awake, he assumed he’d rolled over to the wall. Before he moved he realized whatever it was to his side, it was soft and warm, not hard and cold. Molly had snuggled up against him. Unconsciously, Molly pressed tighter against his side. Josh could feel those lovely... oh so delectable breasts pressing against his side. Blood rushed to fill his penis.

All Josh could do was groan silently. It was too cold to go outside and beat off. He couldn’t do it here beside Molly. He tried to will his organ to deflate, without success. Josh tried to go back to sleep but thoughts of Molly’s pretty body competed with memories of his last time sleeping with a girl – last fall when he had dated Allison Morgan for a month. He fell into a fitful sleep after half an hour of dreaming.

----oooOooo----

November 17, 2013 – Little Fish Shelter, Six miles west of Ross Lake

The snow had stopped and clouds were lifting when Josh woke up in the morning. He wandered down to the creek to fill his canteens and to scout the creek route. The creek bottom was a jumble of brambles and undergrowth. It was totally unpromising as a hike route. Josh sent Molly down to the creek when she got up. She looked glum as she carried her water bottles back up to the shelter.

“We’re climbing that damn mountain, aren’t we?” Molly asked.

“I think it is the best way to go,” Josh replied. “We could be tied up in that jungle in the creek bottom for a week.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Molly said. “That mountain scares me.”

“Do you trust me?” Josh countered. Molly nodded yes. “I will get you through this and I will take care of you. I promise.”

“I believe you,” Molly managed in reply.

The two had breakfast and packed their things for the day. Molly noticed Josh pull some bags of food from her pack when he thought she wasn’t looking. It was very decent of him. His pack already was considerably heavier than hers. He normally carried the tent, stove, fuel, pots and pans in addition to his half of the food.

Josh instructed Molly to pack her pistol in her pack. He did the same with his M16. The only way they would see any Chinese that day was if they flew over the pair at the top of the mountain. Josh expected that to happen. They heard Chinese planes fly over yesterday, above the cloud cover.

The trail started up the hill almost immediately after they left the shelter. The pair were fortunate. The trail turned onto an exposed face of the mountain about half a mile from camp. The winds blew most of the snow off the trail so the footing wasn’t too bad. They trudged up the mountain slowly, zigzagging across the side as the switchbacks carried them higher. They climbed for a few minutes at a time and then stopped to catch their breath before proceeding again.

Molly and Josh took it easy climbing the hill. They cleared the tree line a little after ten o’clock that morning. The skies had cleared and the sun lit the Elbow Creek basin below them. The sun helped warm them. Molly’s thermometer said the temperature was ten degrees. A gentle breeze blew across the face of the mountain, stinging any exposed skin. The pair continued climbing slowly and carefully up the big mountain.

They reached the crown of trees ringing the top of the mountain an hour later. They hiked along the side of the mountain just below the crest, passing the spur of Skagit Peak. They stopped around noon at a saddle between the peak they just passed and the next one ahead on their trail.

Josh and Molly sheltered at the edge of the trees where they had a little protection from the wind but were still in the sunlight. They rested while their MREs reheated. They took a nice long lunch break. It was needed after the 3,600 foot climb up the mountain. Josh knew they weren’t going to do the usual ten or twelve miles that day. Making it to the top of the mountain was damned impressive.

Josh and Molly hiked on when they started to chill down after their lunch break. They followed the knife’s edge of the ridgeline northeast and east passing below a couple small peaks, two or three hundred feet higher than the trail.

About forty-five minutes after lunch, they heard a distinct rumble ahead of them. Josh stopped in his tracks and scanned the hillside ahead. Molly peered around Josh. They could see trees shaking and then a mountainside of snow and smashed trees rumbled down into the Elbow Creek basin half a mile ahead of them.

Josh and Molly stood, dumbfounded at the awesome power of Mother Nature. A great cloud of snow rose from the valley as the mass of snow, trees and rocks slumped to rest below them. Josh was the first to speak.

“I’m glad we’re here and not there.”

“Are we going that way?” Molly asked.

“We are,” Josh answered. “Now you see another reason I didn’t want to be hiking the creek valley.”

“We would have been killed,” Molly murmured.

“Buried under twenty or thirty feet of snow and rock,” Josh agreed. “I want us to stick to ridge tops instead of valleys as much as we can while we are in this mountainous portion of the state. I don’t want us in deep snow while there’s a chance of us getting caught in an avalanche.” Josh pointed at a peak ahead of them. “See that one? The trail goes along the side of that peak. We may leave the trail and stay on the peak if we find too much snow on the trail.”

“Where did you learn so much about avalanches?” Molly asked.

“Emergency Preparedness Merit Badge,’ Josh answered with a smile. “Boy Scouts taught me a lot.”

“I guess it is a good thing I’m hiking with a Boy Scout,” Molly said.

Josh and Molly hiked on. The snow on the trail wasn’t too deep. Half an hour later they passed above the avalanche zone. The snapped trees and ripped earth testified to the power of the snowfall. The trail near the next peak was covered by a few inches of snow. Josh and Molly did not have to climb to the top of the peak to get through safely.

Fifteen minutes later they crossed a saddle, where the trail turned and headed down the far side of the mountain with a series of switchbacks. The snow wasn’t deep but there were signs that the snow slid down into the valley already. They descended 1,600 feet in the next three quarters of a mile. The air was noticeably warmer when they reached the woods down closer to the valley floor.

They got to Face Creek around 3:30 in the afternoon. Josh decided they should camp there, so they would have a good supply of water. Josh cleared the snow from the spot where they would set up the tent. Josh hoped to get the tent burrowed into the snow so they’d have more insulation. The snow was only six to eight inches deep in the woods where they were camping, but it would have to do to protect and insulate them.

Clouds rolled in while Josh and Molly were preparing supper over their campfire. That was fortunate for the pair. The clouds kept in what little heat the valley had after the sun dropped below the top of the mountains. Josh and Molly piled more wood on the fire and hung out by its warmth after dark.

The pair hung their packs and headed to bed after an hour of watching the fire smolder down to ashes. The clouds dumped flurries into the cold forest as the two fell asleep. Molly snuggled up against Josh overnight even though it wasn't nearly as cold as last week at Chilliwack Pass.

----oooOooo----

November 18, 2013 – Campsite on Face Creek, 9 miles east of Ross Lake

Josh gradually became aware of three things as he woke up that morning – 1) he'd rolled over sometime during the night; 2) Molly was now nestled tight to the front of his sleeping bag; and 3) he had a raging erection. Josh tried to shift away so he didn't poke Molly with his erection. Josh's eyes bugged out as Molly followed him and bumped against his hard-on. God, did she just rub on it? Josh rolled over to get the evidence of his lust away from his tent partner.

“You’re awake,” Molly said cheerfully. “Did you have nice dreams?”

“Um... um... yeah,” Josh managed to gulp. “How about you?” he added feebly.

“I did,” Molly asserted. “I expected to be cold way up here on this mountain side but I found the perfect place to be warm and comfortable. You told me to trust you yesterday when I was afraid. I do. You take care of everything I need.”

“Um... yeah,” Josh agreed. “Give me a minute to get dressed and then I’ll get out of here and give you some privacy.”

“Sure,” Molly agreed. Usually Molly rolled over so her back was turned while Josh dressed. Today she peeked. She could see Josh’s back was muscular and well developed. She caught sight of his tight, well-formed ass too. He might have been a geek when he was in high school, but he was all man now. She smiled as she turned away while he finished dressing.

She had been so shallow and stupid when Sedro-Woolley was evacuated. Josh had rescued her and gotten her out of a situation where dying was likely. He had protected her through the worst moments as they escaped sure captivity with the Chinese. She was lucky... damn lucky he was around to protect her.

It wasn’t as cold climbing out of the sleeping bag as Josh expected. The cloud cover last night must have held some of the heat in their valley. Josh dressed and climbed out of their tent, trying to keep his raging hard-on pointed away from Molly so she wouldn’t think he was some kind of perv.

Josh found out the light snow had continued through the night as they slept. An inch of new snow coated everything with its clean whiteness. Josh headed up hill into the trees, away from the camp and the stream.

Thankfully the only human being within ten miles was still in their tent. Josh's hard-on tented his pants obscenely as he waddled up the hill. A good long piss didn't relieve his erection. It had been almost two weeks since he'd relieved his balls with a good jerk-off. Josh, Zach and Tyler studiously ignored their crewmates at night if one of them needed to "spank the monkey."

Josh whipped his erection out and started stroking in spite of the cold. It was the only way he'd get rid of his damned erection. His hand was a blur as he tried to climax before he froze. He imagined himself on top of Allison again, like he had been on one of their dates last fall. He remembered the feelings as he humped and pumped her. Less than a minute later the thrill burst up from his gut. Josh squinched his eyes shut and imagined climaxing last year. His mind stared at those beautiful breasts he remembered and then his mind's eye continued up to her face. Josh's pent up spunk blasted across the woods as he stared into... Molly's imagined face.

Josh's body pumped spurt after spurt out until he was drained. His face turned red as he realized who he had been dreaming of fucking. The last damned thing he needed was to get involved with some cheerleader/princess type of girl! Josh wiped off and tucked everything back inside quickly to avoid frostbite. He headed back to the campsite.

"You OK, Josh?" Molly asked. "You look flushed."

"Yeah... yeah, I'm fine," Josh answered guiltily. What would she do if she knew what he'd been imagining?

Josh and Molly headed over and retrieved their packs. They heated an MRE pack breakfast and some coffee. The pair packed up and hit the trail as the snow started to taper off, around 8:30 in the morning. They headed up the trail as it zigzagged back and forth as they climbed up the side of the next ridge. It took an hour for them to reach the top of the ridge, about 1,200 feet above Face Creek and their campsite.

The pair hiked along the top of the ridge, passing over or by six peaks before they reached Castle Pass around 12:30 p. m. A sign marked the intersection where the Boundary Trail, which they were following, intersected with the Pacific Crest Trail, which ran north to the Canadian border and south to the Mexican border.

Molly's thermometer stayed steady at ten degrees through the morning. The snow stopped but the wind picked up as they ate lunch. Josh and Molly did not linger over their meal. They climbed a thousand feet up to Frosty Pass and dropped down the east side into the Frosty Creek basin. The next four miles were slow going as the trail descended into the broad valley. They broke out the snow shoes part way down the hill when the snow got deeper. Josh used a long stick to probe the firmness of the snow as they travelled. He didn't want to get caught up in an avalanche.

Josh felt more comfortable when they reached Frosty Lake, at the base of the hill. They followed the trail near Frosty Creek down the broad, wooded valley until around four o'clock.

"How are you feeling, Molly?" Josh asked when they stopped for a break.

“It’s been a long day, but I feel pretty good,” Molly answered. “What’s up?”

“Normally I’d say let’s camp here,” Josh answered. “There’s a cabin about two and a half miles down the valley. We probably would be a lot warmer there than outside in our tent.”

“I could walk that far for a warm place to stay for the night,” Molly agreed.

The two pushed on down the valley. Light was fading as they reached the cabin down at the end of the valley. Josh had to break the lock to get into the cabin. They found they had hit the mother lode when they explored the cabin. It had a gas lantern, with fuel, a stove, bunks, a table and chairs and a stock of emergency rations. The pair dined on thawed canned ham, baked beans and peas for dinner, instead of their usual freeze dried fare.

Eating food that wasn’t rehydrated was nice. So was being able to sit on chairs at a table and enjoy time in the evening with light. The cozy little log cabin almost felt... civilized. Josh used the extra time in the evening to study the maps carefully to confirm their route plans.

Molly and Josh took advantage of the shelter and warmth to take bandana baths too. Josh headed outside to give her privacy after she warmed water for her bath. Josh took the satellite phone along. He wanted to check in with the army and see if they could take advantage of an opportunity.

“Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Sgt. Deboer speaking,” the voice on the phone reported.

“This is Frosty Boot,” Josh replied. He felt a little silly using the code name, but that was what protocol demanded.

“Frosty Boot?” Sgt. Deboer muttered.

“Code name Frosty Boot,” Josh added. “Is Capt. Foster on duty tonight? He tried to arrange a pick up for my group three nights ago.”

“Oh... Frosty Boot... let me get the captain for you,” Sgt. Deboer answered.

“Frosty Boot, good to hear from you,” Capt. Foster said when he got on the phone. “I’m glad you’re surviving up there in the mountains. What can I do for you?”

“I’m after information,” Josh answered. “We’re staying at a cabin about three miles northwest of something marked on the map as the ‘Pasayten Air National Guard Center.’ I was wondering if there was anything of value there to help my partner and me or if it would be possible to pick us up. The map shows some sort of airfield there. Maybe you could get in with a small plane instead of a chopper?”

“I know the Pasayten field,” Capt. Foster responded. “There isn’t much more than a grass field at the site. No food or survival gear is there. I doubt we could get a plane in this winter. I’m sure the field is covered with quite a bit of snow.”

“I’m sure it is too,” Josh agreed. “It’s been snowing off and on for the last two days up here. Any chance of a chopper ride out?” The snow was settling down from the clouds as Josh spoke. It started again sometime after dinner.

“No chance, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster answered. “The Chinese air defenses are multiplying. They have positions in Mazama, Winthrop, Twisp, Okanogan and Omak. We don’t have information north of those towns. I would suggest you stay north towards Oroville, Loomis or Tonasket. Northport, Kettle Falls and the Grand Coulee Dam are still American held. I suggest you aim to hike out at one of those points.”

“Thanks for the info, Captain,” Josh replied.

“Have you seen any enemy?” Capt. Foster asked.

“No,” Josh answered. “I would have called in if I had anything concrete to report. We’ve been socked in with low clouds for two and a half days. I can hear Chinese aircraft flying over us but I can’t give you numbers, type or strength.”

“That’s fine, Frosty Boot,” the captain said. “Good luck on your hike. Call in every couple days and let us know your progress. Maybe we’ll get the Chinese air defenses suppressed and can save you some walking.”

“That would be much appreciated, Captain,” Josh agreed.

Josh hung out outside for a while, enjoying the stillness and whiteness of the wintery forest. Molly called him about fifteen minutes later when she finished her bandana bath. He came back inside and heated water for his bath. He told her about the call to the search and rescue command while he waited. She wasn’t surprised that the air force wasn’t coming to get them.

Molly promised to turn her back while Josh washed. She kept her promise and didn’t watch... much. She caught glimpses of Josh’s sturdy, well defined legs and tight, smooth ass. She saw a man with strong, ripped back muscles. Molly caught her breath when Josh turned in silhouette. She spotted his beefy penis. Damn! It had to be five or six inches long and he didn’t have a boner!

Molly was no virgin. She saw her first boy penis when she was twelve. By fourteen, the attractive young girl had learned to give head to keep her many dates from pushing her too far. She lost her virginity just before the end of ninth grade to Thomas Alderston, the senior who was a star tailback on the football team and had a scholarship to play at Eastern Washington State in college.

Josh’s penis... wow... it was a big one. Most guys’ penises were boners when they unveiled them to her. She knew how to get her dates or boyfriends off, so she knew what they looked like flaccid too. This one was a big one, probably the largest she’d ever seen. She was intrigued and stared too long.

“Uh...” Josh gasped as he realized Molly was watching him. His face turned bright red and he turned so his back was towards her.

"I thought you were done," Molly exclaimed lamely. "Sorry about that." She wasn't. Not in the least.

Josh dressed while Molly tried to calm her too active imagination. Molly climbed into bed. Josh turned off the lantern in the cabin and stumbled his way over to the second bed and climbed in. The two beds were head to head. Josh pulled off his boxers and dropped them on the floor. He zipped up his sleeping bag, rolled over and promptly fell asleep.

Molly didn't. She couldn't get the sight of Josh's big penis out of her head. She pulled up the bottom hem of the T-shirt she was wearing and slipped a hand between her legs. God, it had been too long since she got laid!

Her mind went back to her last date three weeks ago with her boyfriend (former boyfriend?) Evan Coker. They had gone to a movie and then went parking down by the river. Evan gave her a good fucking in the backseat of his car... twice. Mr. Coker had decided Sedro-Woolley was entirely too close to the war and was moving his family to Colorado. The Cokers left the morning after her last date with Evan.

Molly rubbed herself as she remembered the sweet, 6'-5" tall, shaggy black haired boy fucking her earnestly. Evan was an attentive boyfriend and sweet too. He was handsome, the captain of the basketball team, travelled in the right circles at high school and was a good catch... for Sedro-Woolley. Did Molly love him? No, not really. She liked him a lot and they had fun together, in bed and out. Could she expect more from a boyfriend in high school? Probably not.

Molly had responded to the teenaged hormones that started flooding her body five and a half years ago. She was a sexual being. She was at the top of the right social circles at her high school. As the granddaughter of the town's richest man, as a knockout herself and as the top cheerleader at her school, Molly had the pick of the boys in Sedro-Woolley over the last four years. She had no difficulty filling her sexual needs – even multiple times a week. Going without for three weeks? That hadn't happened since tenth grade.

Molly thought about the big penis she saw and continued rubbing. Could she go all the way with a tire salesman's son? Worse, he was a computer geek too. Molly got sore before she could bring herself off. She wiped her hand on her T-Shirt hem and rolled over and went to sleep.

----oooOooo----

"NOOOO!!! STOP!" a high pitched voice wailed. Josh bolted upright in bed. His gun was over by his pack. He rolled out of bed and across the cabin floor. He had his M16 trained, at the ready, in moments. He peered around the cabin without seeing. No light filtered into the small building.

Josh heard sobs from the other side of the room, by the beds. He reached down and grabbed his flashlight. He shined it towards where he thought the door was first before scanning the rest of the cabin. Josh lowered his gun when he realized the door was closed and no one was inside with him and Molly. His light stopped when he saw Molly.

She was sitting upright in bed, half out of her sleeping bag. She was wearing a T-shirt. Her head was down and she was sobbing uncontrollably. Josh put his gun down and walked over and sat down beside the hysterical girl.

“It’s all right Molly,” Josh consoled as he put his arm around her shoulder. “What’s wrong?” She didn’t answer, just continued to sob. Josh rubbed her shoulder, side and back as he continued trying to calm her. “It’s all right. You’re OK,” he chanted as he soothed her.

“They... they...” she gulped as she calmed a little. “The... the... Chinese... they...” She gasped before continuing. “They... shot you.”

“It’s a bad dream,” Josh consoled. “Nothing but a bad dream. The Chinese are miles from us. We’re both safe here.”

“It... it was... horrible,” Molly managed as she settled herself. “We were hiking over one of these mountains and came over... the other side and... four Chinese soldiers were over there... and... they shot you.”

“It’s all a dream,” Josh soothed. “Relax. We’re OK.”

“They grabbed me and dragged me down the mountain to a little cabin,” Molly explained. “They ripped my clothes off and... they...”

“I understand,” Josh said. “There are no Chinese here. You’re safe. Nobody is going to rape you. You’re safe with me.” Molly turned and embraced Josh. She held onto him for a minute before letting go.

“Sorry if I scared you,” Molly apologized. “The dream seemed so real.”

“It’s fine,” Josh reassured. “Really... you’re fine.”

Molly had calmed down by now but she enjoyed being held by the strong man. She also had a glorious view of Josh’s penis. A thick curly, dark brown bush of hair crowned the large penis. Molly clung to Josh’s chest as she gathered her wits. The impressive, five inch long flaccid penis was just inches from her. It rested on a pair of hefty balls covered with some wisps of hair. Altogether, his package was quite impressive.

“We need to get some more sleep, Molly,” Josh finally said. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” she answered as she looked up into his eyes. “Thank you.” She gave him a kiss on his stubbly cheek. He didn’t quite have a full beard yet, but he wasn’t bare cheeked anymore, like he had been eleven days ago when he rescued her.

“Um... you’re welcome,” Josh mumbled. He climbed back in his sleeping bag. Only then did he realize he had spent the past ten minutes stark assed naked holding Molly. Molly couldn’t see how red Josh’s face got from embarrassment. To make things worse, Josh’s cock decided now was the

perfect time to get erect. Josh was too close to Molly to jerk off. She'd hear him. He tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable while sporting a big, hard sword.

----oooOooo----

November 19, 2013 – 18 Miles east of Ross Lake

Josh used powdered eggs from the cabin's emergency rations, more thawed, canned ham and some Parmesan cheese to make omelets for him and Molly. They packed their things and headed outside for the day's hike. Light snow had continued to fall during the night and the temperature had held steady around ten degrees. After a night in a warm cabin, the air felt quite cold. Josh and Molly headed up the valley towards the north, continuing to follow the Boundary Trail east, to safety and civilization.

They had a 1,200 foot climb over the next ridge and then switchbacks took them down to a narrow creek valley. The valley took them down to the Pasayten River. Josh and Molly headed north, downstream, for half a mile. The forest service had a hiker's bridge over the 60 foot wide stream. The pair stopped for lunch on the east side. The snow stopped while they were eating.

Josh and Molly followed the trail north after lunch. A cold front blew the clouds out but chilled the hikers as they climbed. The trail went up the valley of the Bunker Hill Creek. The 3,200 foot climb up the mountain was brutal. The temperature dropped from lunchtime's seventeen down to minus four degrees by the time they reached the crest of Bunker Hill at mid-afternoon.

The pair continued along the crest of the ridge for another two and a half miles. They dropped down to a saddle between two peaks. The area was tree covered. Josh and Molly conferred briefly before agreeing that this was probably as good a camping spot as they were likely to find that night.

Josh had Molly get their stove fired up. The only water source at this site would be melted snow. Molly had learned enough over the past ten days to be useful around camp. Josh went downhill and started digging a hollow in a cluster of pines. The hole in the snow was about four foot deep. This hollow would provide some cover for them that evening.

The temperature dropped rapidly as they set up camp. Josh and Molly ate dinner quickly and headed to their tent. Molly's thermometer reported the temperature was minus fifteen degrees. Josh knew they would have a cold night. The pair bundled their heads with their hats pulled down low. Molly rolled in close to Josh. He didn't mind. It was going to be a long cold night.

Josh woke sometime later in the night from shaking beside him. "Molly, are you OK?" he whispered.

"I... I... I'm ffff... freez... frreeezing," Molly stuttered. Josh understood. His back, buttocks and legs were cold too.

"Roll over and lean your other side against me," Josh offered.

"I've bbbb... been doing tha... tha... that every ten min... utes," Molly said. "I'm so... so cold... I ca... ca.. can.. can't sl... sl.. sleep."

Josh rolled over and wrapped himself over her as best he could without getting out of his bag or crushing her. "I guess the temp dropped below minus fifteen," Josh whispered. I wish the outfitters had sleeping bags we could borrow that went to twenty below instead of fifteen below like these bags."

Molly shivered less with added protection from Josh's body but she was still freezing. "Josh, could we share one bag and use the other sleeping bag as a blanket over us for more insulation?" Molly asked.

"Um... um... are you sure?"

"We would share body heat better with two of us in one bag, wouldn't we?" Molly asked.

"Yeah," Josh agreed, "...but..."

"What?"

"I'm not wearing anything," Josh replied.

"My dignity won't do me any good if I freeze to death tonight," Molly countered. "Please share a bag with me. It'll keep us warmer, won't it?"

"I suppose," Josh replied. "But it really isn't... uh... you know..."

"You'd be embarrassed to get a boner if I'm in there with you, aren't you?"

"Well... um... yeah," Josh admitted.

"I'd be disappointed if I didn't give you a boner tonight," Molly said. "I would have lost my touch. C'mon, Josh... let me share your bag... please?"

Josh's mind whirled as he considered the proposal. He knew Molly was freezing. After last night's dreams, Josh wasn't sure if he'd control himself appropriately. Should he... shouldn't he? Josh's mind debated back and forth.

"Please, Josh," Molly begged. "I'm freezing to death. You've taken care of my up to now. Don't desert me when I need your help most."

Molly's appeal cut through Josh's indecision. "OK," he agreed.

"Thank you... thank you..." Molly gushed as she unzipped her bag to join Josh. "Jeeee.... sus!" Molly snapped as the frigid air bit her skin. "Unzip and let me in!" Josh pulled the zipper of his bag down. He gasped as the sub-zero air nipped at his skin. Molly scrambled over top of him and slipped into his bag quickly.

Josh hadn't been hard when Molly's shivering woke him. Josh knew Molly kept a T-shirt for sleeping. He'd seen it before. Josh's eyes went wide as Molly's shirt rode up as she slipped in the sleeping bag. Her bare bottom rubbed down the length of his cock as she got in position. She wasn't wearing any panties! Blood flooded to Josh's groin.

Once she was inside Josh's bag, she sat up, unzipped her bag and laid it over them as a blanket. The pair fumbled for a few seconds to get settled in the tight sleeping bag. They ended up spooned on their sides, Molly in front of Josh. Josh's cock was still swelling when Molly pulled her bag up to their necks and zipped Josh's bag shut.

Molly would have noticed Josh's bright red face, had there been light in the tent. Josh suffered in embarrassed silence as his cock became fully hard. Molly was cold enough that all she noticed immediately was how warm it was sharing Josh's bag. She stopped shivering and warmed up after a few minutes. Molly noticed a lump against her backside a few minutes later. She squirmed a little and the lump slipped into the crack between her ass cheeks. She undulated so she could feel the extent of the lump. It was more like a big stick. Josh definitely had a boner for her. She smiled as she settled to sleep.

Josh backed up in the sleeping bag as far as he could to keep Molly from discovering his hard-on. She kept squirming closer and pressing against him. Josh was mortified when she squirmed and lodged his erection against her ass cheeks. Josh's lust rose. His hard-on throbbed as he tried not to cum. Josh eventually fell asleep, but it wasn't a comfortable sleep.

----oooOooo----

November 20, 2013 – One Mile east of Bunker Hill Peak

Molly's stirrings woke Josh in the morning. "Good morning, Molly," Josh said when he saw Molly's head lift off the mat.

"Morning," Molly acknowledged. "I suppose we need to get moving this morning."

"We do," Josh confirmed. "We have a long way to walk to get to civilization. I'd like to get there as fast as I can while we still have food to eat."

"Can't argue with you there," Molly agreed.

"I'll pull my hat down over my eyes while you get dressed," Josh offered.

"That's silly," Molly said as she unzipped the sleeping bag. "We've spent most of the night together in one sleeping bag. You're naked. I'm nearly naked too. I don't think modesty is necessary anymore."

"True," Josh agreed, "...but this tent is small. It'll be a little crowded if we both try to get dressed at the same time."

“Very true,” Molly replied. “I’m closest to the zipper. I guess I’ll go first. You don’t need to hide your eyes. It really doesn’t matter if you see... things.”

Molly rolled out of the sleeping bag onto her sleeping mat, pulling her sleeping bag along to help cover her a little while she rounded up her clothes.

“It isn’t nearly as cold as it was last night when you let me join you in your sleeping bag,” Molly commented. Josh pulled his sleeping bag back over his body, trying to hide his morning hard-on. She caught sight of it.

“Yeah, it does seem to have warmed up some since the middle of the night,” Josh said. Molly was still focused on the big tube of flesh she spotted briefly in the morning light. It was definitely longer and perhaps a little thicker than any of the boys she had been with in the past.

Josh continued making small talk as Molly dressed. Molly thought about her opinion of Josh when she first met him. She thought of him as a hard assed soldier at first. He was demanding, belligerent and totally unappealing. As she grew to know him better, the whole computer geek thing was a turn off too. Molly wondered, ‘Had she misjudged Josh?’

A gush of arctic air flooded the tent when Molly climbed out. Josh dressed hurriedly, trying to get layers of clothing on to protect him from the frigid air. He heard the deep rumble of aircraft, off to their northwest, as he was putting on his boots.

“Holy shit!” Molly exclaimed. “They’re so low!”

Josh popped out of the tent in time to see the lead plane fly over their mountain about five hundred feet above the peak to their east.

“Count’em!” Josh ordered. “How many planes?” He stumbled out of the tent, shoes laces untied, counting too. They were Chinese IL-76MD transports. He counted frantically as they streaked by. “What did you get Molly?”

“Fourteen... I think,” she answered.

“That’s what I got,” Josh announced as he dashed for their packs. Josh grabbed a compass and took a bearing the flight’s direction before grabbing the satellite phone. Josh turned the phone on and dialed the Air Force Search Command. It took a minute for the switchboard to connect him to the duty officer.

“This is Major Smith, Frosty Boot,” the duty officer said when he came on the line.

“I’m a ...” Josh began to explain. The major cut him off.

“We all know who you are, Frosty Boot,” Major Smith said. “Are the Chinese threatening you?”

“No, they’re not,” Josh answered. “Captain Foster asked me to report any significant air formations coming over. Fourteen IL-76MD transports flew over my position about sixty seconds ago, heading on azimuth 326 degrees, magnetic. My lat-long is 48-58-21 North and 120-26-05 West.”

“Excellent report, Frosty Boot. Hang on the line for a second,” Major Smith said. Josh overheard the major ordering a subordinate to expedite his information to the air force’s operations center. “I appreciate the level of detail in your report, Frosty Boot. It is timely and hopefully can be put to good use. The Chinese have significantly degraded our radar coverage of central and eastern Washington State. This information could give us a shot at taking out a couple battalions of Chinese infantry or some loads of heavy weapons before they hit the Chinese airhead. Good work.”

“Thank you, Major,” Josh replied.

“Keep reporting in, Frosty Boot,” Major Smith added before ending the call. “Good luck on your hike out.”

Josh finished dressing while Molly retrieved her pack. She started the stove and got hot water ready for breakfast while Josh took care of tearing down their tent and packing it. The pair spent extra time at breakfast melting enough snow to fill their canteens before they started the day’s hike. Their route took them along the top of the ridge for half a mile before the Boundary Trail followed along the side of the ridge. Josh noticed the snow was quite deep in the area at and above the trail. Josh decided it would be better if they followed over the top of the ridge and stayed off the deep snow on the south side of the mountain. Josh judged the risk of an avalanche was too high.

Josh and Molly continued over a series of small peaks that made up Quartz Mountain. They came down off the end of the mountain and headed across the head of the Peeve Valley for Peeve Pass. They stopped for lunch at the pass. The going was slower since they had to contend with deep snow or rocky, steep mountain tops. The temperature held steady all morning about seven degrees below zero. Gradually the air warmed as Molly and Josh descended down from Peeve Pass on the flank of Sheep Mountain.

Josh and Molly were just below Peeve Pass when 20-30 Chinese fighters zoomed over their position, about a thousand feet above them and well below the thick grey clouds. Josh called in to the air force to report the flights. He doubted this report would do much good. The planes had to be moving at least 500 miles an hour. They would be wherever they were going and have fired their loads by the time Josh got the phone turned on, had connected with search and rescue, and search and rescue passed the information on to the air force’s operations center.

Josh did get some good news from the phone call. Capt. Foster was the duty officer that afternoon.

“That info you gave us this morning was golden, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster reported. “We were able to scramble fighters at low level and take the bastards out. The Chinese air cover expected us to come in at Angels 20 (20,000 feet). Our guys hit the transports 1,000 feet off the deck and massacred them. Twelve of the fourteen transports went down in flames. The thirteenth made it on the ground but burst into flames before it finished its roll-out. Thanks to you, the Chinese didn’t get any reinforcements today.”

“I’m glad it worked out,” Josh said.

“Keep sending in your reports as long as your batteries hold out,” Capt. Foster said. “You’re doing good work.”

“Will do, sir,” Josh agreed. Josh passed the news on to Molly. Both were glad they had been useful to the war effort. They hadn’t felt that way in some time.

Josh and Molly continued descending, reaching a shelter right after they crossed the Ashnola River. The shelter was another Adirondack style, three sided shelter. This one didn’t have the wooden floor. Josh and Molly brushed the snow out of the shelter and set up their things on the ground under cover. Josh cleared the fireplace in front of the shelter and built a big campfire. The warmth felt good after two days of near and sub-zero temperatures.

Josh and Molly lingered over the fire after dinner. The thermometer reported the temperature was four degrees. They felt great, absorbing warmth from the blaze. It was much nicer than that cold, miserable night they spent on the saddle between Bunker Hill Peak and Quartz Mountain last night.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a pain in the ass to you, Josh,” Molly commented after staring at the flames for a couple minutes. “I moaned and complained constantly when we started out. I was a real bitch. I know I don’t carry my share of the load. Thank you for helping me through all of this. I know I would be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“I just did the right thing,” Josh answered modestly. “I couldn’t very well leave you for the Chinese.” Josh chuckled. “Though... by the way you were pushing my buttons in the beginning, I was tempted.”

Molly gave Josh a radiant smile.

“You do carry your weight,” Josh stated.

“Your pack is way heavier than mine,” Molly countered.

“Not by proportion of body weight. You probably hiked into the wilderness carrying 50% of your body weight in that pack. I doubt I made it to 40% of my weight.”

“I would literally be lost out here without you,” Molly replied. “I have no idea where we are today or where we’re going. I know nothing about camping.”

“Hah! You’re kidding,” Josh snorted. “You’ve been camping and hiking for almost two weeks in the toughest conditions imaginable and you’re surviving. Who made dinner tonight?”

Molly laughed. “I can rehydrate [freeze dried food] with the best of them.”

“You’re handling all of this very well,” Josh replied. He gave her a devilish grin. “... for a cheerleader.”

“Josh, you’re studly...” Molly retorted, sticking her tongue out. “...for a computer geek.”

“I will take that as a compliment,” Josh answered.

“We can joke around, Josh,” Molly answered. “I want you to know I am grateful for all your help. You are a lifesaver.”

The pair talked a bit more, enjoying the fire. Josh threw more wood on the fire before they got ready for bed. The shelter was eight feet wide but Molly put her sleeping mat up against Josh’s when they set up for bed. She completely unzipped her sleeping bag and laid it down on her mat. She began stripping her clothes off.

“Um... I’ll get out of here,” Josh mumbled as he tried to give Molly privacy.

“No need for that,” Molly shot back. “We’ve seen pretty much everything already. There’s no need for modesty anymore. Not if we’re sleeping together in the same bag.”

“Um... I thought...” Josh stuttered. “We don’t need to... um...” Josh’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when Molly pulled her inner T-shirt off, leaving herself bare breasted.

“Silly, get undressed,” Molly commanded. “You need to get in the bag first. I’ll slide in after you and cover us up.”

“But...”

“I’m not freezing like last night,” Molly added. “Just do it.”

Josh obeyed. He stripped out of his clothes quickly, pausing momentarily before pulling his boxers off. He blushed as he scrambled into the sleeping bag. He hurried partly from embarrassment, partly from the cold, five degree temperature. The air felt far better than yesterday on the mountainside, but it was still cold by any measure.

Molly stripped and joined him. She snuggled up against his body as she zipped them into their sleeping bag. It felt warm and comfortable in the bag. Molly was curvy and soft in all the right places. Josh... well, Josh wasn’t soft. He was hard and muscular from nine months of army training and three months of living in the field. His hardness extended to his groin. His cock felt like a red hot rod of steel. Molly’s squirming as she settled for the night didn’t help. Josh thought about networking protocols, pages of code... anything to get his mind off his hard-on trapped between him and the nearly naked girl.

----oooOooo----

November 21, 2013, 35 miles east of Ross Lake, 30 miles west of Oroville, Wa.

“Give it to me,” she begged. “Give it to me, Joshie.” The exquisite feelings as Josh drove his hard cock into this wonderful girl were... just beyond words. “Fuck me!” she squealed. “Fuck me hard.”

“I love you, Joshie!” the girl exclaimed as Josh bucked and thrust his cock in and out.

“I love you too, Heather,” Josh proclaimed as his approaching climax welled up in his groin.

Josh’s eyes popped open suddenly as someone elbowed him in the chest. He blinked from the bright, morning light. His near wet dream vanished like wisps of clouds on a windy day.

“Sorry, Josh. I didn’t mean to do that,” Molly apologized. “You were moaning and mumbled something about ‘loving Heather.’ I’m guessing you were having a good dream.”

“Yeah, I was,” Josh admitted. He realized he had an erection then and it was... well... it was somewhere warm and soft and... “Oh GOD! I’m sorry. Did I take advantage... of...” he blurted when he realized where his hard-on might be.

“No, you didn’t ‘take advantage’,” Molly said. “Your dick ended up tucked between my legs, not inside me.”

“Sorry,” Josh replied apologetically. Molly reached down and rubbed the head of Josh’s cock. “Um... I wouldn’t do that, Molly. Not unless you don’t mind a mess. I’m... um... uh... ready to... Why don’t I just get up and go find some privacy so I can...”

“I have to pee,” Molly said. “I’ll get up and give you privacy so you can take care of that boner of yours.”

Josh shuddered as the cold air rushed into their sleeping bag when Molly climbed out. It wasn’t the biting cold of two mornings ago, but it was still damn cold. Molly laid the spare, opened sleeping bag over Josh before dressing quickly. Josh laid there stunned at Molly’s forwardness. He idly fisted his hardness until she was gone. He grabbed a few sheets of toilet paper before working his rod until he reached a heavenly climax.

Molly was unembarrassed when Josh met her outside the shelter a few minutes later. A couple inches of fresh snow fell during the night while they slept. Snow flurries continued drifting down as Josh and Molly ate breakfast and packed their things for the day’s hike.

Josh decided they should leave the Boundary Trail when they reached a trail junction a quarter mile from the shelter. The Boundary Trail went over Bald Mountain. They would follow another trail up the Spanish Creek and hike around Bald Mountain instead. The valley was wide and mountain sides were less steep. Josh felt the danger from avalanches was minimal in this area.

Josh and Molly spent most of the morning hiking up the creek valley around the mountain. They reached the Boundary Trail again around 11:30 in the morning. They decided to march on to Remel Lake, about a mile ahead. They left the Boundary Trail for good halfway to the lake. The trail would continue up over Cathedral Pass, over 7,600 feet in elevation. If they followed that trail, they would have to camp around 7,000 feet again. Josh figured they could find a good spot for them along the Remel Creek, a couple thousand feet lower, and likely much warmer that night.

Josh and Molly stopped for lunch in a cluster of pine trees along the edge of the small mountain lake. Wind blew the snow clear of the flat icy lake surface. Two inviting meadows opened up, one of the far side of the lake, the second off to their right, downhill of their lunch spot. It would have been a beautiful spot to camp, but they needed to press on.

Josh and Molly had been hiking in the wilderness for almost two weeks. They had eaten six days' worth of food since the air force resupplied them with MREs at Ross Lake. Josh estimated their packs were ten to twelve pounds lighter. Molly was turning into a good hiker. The pair covered the five miles downstream to where Four Point Creek joined the Chewuch River in a little over two hours.

Josh and Molly camped in a patch of pines near the river that evening. The snow stopped for a few hours in the afternoon, but returned that evening. The temperature warmed to ten degrees in the afternoon. It was the warmest night they had since they left Ross Lake. Molly still insisted on sharing a sleeping bag with Josh. Inevitably, Josh got hard. Molly continued to bump into and rub against his erection. She fell asleep long before horny and frustrated Josh could.

He lay there thinking, with a hard-on that likely wouldn't go down until morning. Josh had taken an instant dislike to the haughty cheerleader princess when they met. He knew their type – too well from high school. Molly had lost her haughtiness, stopped her bitching and soldiered on through some very tough situations since they left Sedro-Woolley. She started hiking with a pack that weighed around sixty pounds and carried it through incredibly tough terrain in circumstances that taxed anyone's abilities to survive. Josh was an experienced camper and backpacker and this hike had challenged his skills. Molly was one tough young lady.

There was no doubt that Molly was attractive. Both of them needed baths desperately, but she was still attractive. Could Molly be more than a travel companion as they tried to escape Chinese captivity? Josh didn't come to an answer, though it sure felt nice to have the girl snuggled up next to him in bed.

----oooOooo----

November 22, 2013 – 32 miles west of Oroville, Wa.

Josh and Molly continued down the Chewuch River valley most of the day. The temperature climbed into the mid-twenties by lunchtime. The low clouds that had covered them for much of the last week broke up for an hour or so in the morning. Josh saw a couple Chinese fighter squadrons and a bomber squadron go over. He called the report into the air force. They thanked him for the report. They informed the pair that the Chinese air defenses still had the air force stymied. Josh and Molly needed to continue hiking. No air rescue was possible.

The clouds returned and snow came drifting down again after lunch. Josh and Molly climbed 1,200 feet up out of the Chewuch valley and over a pass to the east. If they followed the Chewuch Valley, it would take them south to Mazama and Winthrop. Both towns definitely were held by the Chinese. This new route would take the pair southeast to Loomis and Tonasket.

Search and rescue had confirmed the Chinese held Mazama and Winthrop. They had no information about whether the Chinese had occupied Loomis and Tonasket. The unknown was better than hiking into towns confirmed to be in enemy hands.

Josh and Molly needed an hour to complete the climb to the pass. They continued half a mile downhill, reaching a 25-30 foot wide gravel road. They continued down the road about three miles, finishing their day at the deserted Long Swamp Campground. Snow started to fall as the pair made camp. Previous campers left an ample supply of wood piled near the fire ring. Josh and Molly enjoyed a big campfire during dinner.

They threw a few more logs on the fire after dinner and relaxed. The temperature dropped a few degrees when the sun went down, but it felt nicer than it had in many days. The two sat and talked until 7:30 p. m. Josh announced it probably time for bed. They hung their packs away from the tent.

“Josh... my parents have always gotten on my case for forgetting to say thank you,” Molly said while Josh unzipped the door to their tent.

“Yeah,” Josh acknowledged as he stood back up.

“You’ve been so helpful,” Molly said. She stepped up to Josh and wrapped her arms around him. “I’d be dead or some chink soldier’s plaything now if you hadn’t saved me.”

“It’s all right,” Josh replied as he stooped a few inches and returned Molly’s hug.

Molly squeezed tighter and went in to give Josh a kiss on the cheek. Josh turned to look at Molly just as she kissed. Sparks flashed through their bodies as their lips met accidentally. They pulled their lips apart and stared into each other’s eyes. Wordlessly, they brought their lips together again and kissed. They kissed quickly, experimenting at first. The kisses deepened. When their tongues touched, the shock forced them apart. Josh and Molly stood there, staring at each other.

“Um... Uh... Well...” Josh mumbled incoherently.

“I just wanted to thank you properly,” Molly explained.

“Um... uh... you’re welcome,” Josh answered. The two said nothing more as they undressed and climbed into their shared sleeping bag. Molly did snuggle against Josh’s naked body as she went to sleep.

----oooOooo----

November 23, 2013 – Long Swamp Campsite, 14 miles west of Loomis, Wa.

Josh awoke in the morning. He realized Molly’s hand was over the back of his hand, pressing it into... “Shit!” Josh exclaimed as he realized. His hand was over one of Molly’s tits. “Sorry...”

“It feels good,” Molly murmured back. Josh realized at that point that his hard-on was wet and... warm? He shifted, finding it was trapped between her legs and... uh... Molly reached down and

pressed the tip of Josh's cock. Josh's eyes shot wide open as he realized Molly was pressing his cock between her labia and trying to rub her clitoris with his tip.

"NO!" Josh insisted. "We shouldn't... I... we..."

"It feels good," Molly answered.

"No! We need to get up and get hiking," Josh insisted. He managed to pull his hand away from Molly's breast and pulled his hard-on back from between Molly's legs. She tried to scoot backwards to keep him in contact. He pushed her away with his free arm.

"We could make it to Loomis tomorrow," Josh explained. "We could be back to civilization and safety tomorrow, if we get our asses in gear and get hiking."

"Yeah, that will be great," Molly agreed. "I'll get up." She unzipped the sleeping bag and crawled out to dress. Josh took advantage of the privacy when Molly got out of the tent to stroke himself. No lubrication was required. His cock was soaked in Molly's slippery secretions. He imagined himself screwing... not some faceless girl; not Heather Serrano, his first serious girlfriend in high school, nor Allison Morgan, the last girl he slept with last fall. He imagined doing Molly. He came long and hard.

Molly and Josh confined themselves to small talk over breakfast. They'd eaten all the trail food and MREs meant for breakfast, so they had lemon pepper tuna, tortilla, cherry-blueberry cobbler, cookies and a dairy shake drink. It beat the ratatouille. They hadn't broken out any of that yet.

County Route 39, the road they followed, was paved east of Long Swamp Campsite. The hiking was easy. The road followed the Middle Fork of the Toats Coulee Creek east and southeast. The day was pleasant. Molly reported the temperature was 31 degrees when they got up. The snow and ice were melting as they hiked downhill and east.

The route along the county road was long but easy. Josh called in information about two flights of Chinese aircraft that flew over their position, heading for Omak. The duty officer thanked them for the help. He wasn't able to give them more info whether the Chinese had occupied Loomis or Tonasket. Two long sweeping switchbacks took them down off the mountain during the day. Josh and Molly made camp twelve miles later at the North Fork Nine Mile Campsite.

It was a gorgeous day for a hike. The temperature climbed over forty degrees. They stripped off a couple layers and walked with their coats unzipped. It was fabulous to enjoy warmth again after freezing up in the mountains for two weeks.

Molly couldn't get the feeling of Josh's big, hard boner rubbing her clit in the morning out of her mind. Josh didn't fit her preconception of a high school geek at all. He had saved her from Chinese captivity and likely abuse. He had helped her hike through the mountains. She never dreamed she had the strength or ability to face the Cascades at the start of winter.

Josh was not an Adonis, like many of Molly's past boyfriends. He may not be top sirloin beefcake, but he wasn't chopped liver either. He had a rugged handsomeness and was strong and well-muscled. Josh had a quiet strength that had comforted Molly through their ordeal.

Molly knew how to attract the attention of a boy without appearing to be the aggressor after four years of practice in middle and high school. Molly flirted with, touched, leaned against and joked with Josh throughout the long hike down the valley. She was increasingly outrageous as the day wore on. Josh acted oblivious to her interest. Molly grew increasingly frustrated with her inability to entice Josh's interest.

They finished their long hike when they reached the North Fork Nine Mile Campsite. It was very similar to the one they stayed at the previous night, though it had a big sign announcing: "Camping by Permit Only. Apply at Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Parks Department. Violators will be arrested."

Josh pointed at the sign, laughed and announced, "We don't have a permit. Come and get us DNR. Please?!"

"Only in our dreams," Molly laughingly agreed. "I will be so glad to get to safety tomorrow!" Molly gave Josh a big hug and kissed him directly on the lips. She pushed her tongue against his lips, seeking entry.

"NO!" Josh barked as he pushed her away. "No... you have the wrong idea. Don't expect to reach safety tomorrow. We have no idea what we will find in Loomis."

"But... I..." Molly stammered. She was shocked that Josh rejected her. No boy had EVER done that!

"The Air Force told us the Chinese are in Omak, Winthrop and Mazama," Josh insisted hotly. "They DID NOT tell us anything about whether the Chinese are in Loomis, Tonasket or Oroville. We need to be on guard tomorrow against running into Chinese. We will be in more danger than any time since we hid from the two Chinese soldiers back at Chilliwack Lake. This is no time for fooling around!"

"FINE!" Molly shouted back. "No fooling around! I get it completely." She grabbed their tent and stalked off to set it up. Molly was hurt that she had offered herself to Josh and all the God damned computer geek could talk about was the fucking Chinese!

Josh pulled firewood from the stack conveniently near the fire ring and built a fire for their supper. Josh thought about the exchange with Molly as he worked. Her kiss had startled him. Her cavalier expectation that they would reach safety tomorrow scared him more.

The trees were thinning out as they headed east. He could see much of the hillsides were bare to their east. They would have very little cover to hide in soon. Josh suspected that the Air Force couldn't say whether the Chinese held Loomis, Tonasket or Oroville was because the Chinese probably did hold them. The local sheriffs or other government officials would certainly report the

towns were safe, if the Chinese weren't around. The lack of information pointed towards the towns being enemy held and very unsafe.

Josh could feel it in his bones. Tomorrow was going to be dangerous. The increasing respect he felt for the tough girl who carried a big pack through the mountains evaporated with that kiss. His initial impression of a flighty, unserious cheerleader type of girl on the prowl for her next boy toy was confirmed. He sniffed, she was no better than that stuck up Lauren Nye back at his high school – two peas in a pod.

Dinner was strained that evening as Josh and Molly nursed their grievances. After they finished the dinner dishes, Josh announced that they should get to sleep early. He wanted to get up at dawn and hit the road. Darkness would help hide them in case the Chinese could observe the fairly open valley they would be traveling down tomorrow. Josh counseled that they needed to be on their highest guard.

Molly slept in her own sleeping bag that night. The temperature was still above freezing when they went to bed, so sharing a sleeping bag for warmth wasn't strictly necessary anyway.

----oooOooo----

November 24, 2013 – North Fork Ninemile Campsite – Seven Miles West of Loomis, Wa.

The clouds that held the heat in the atmosphere the past few days dissipated overnight. Josh's alarm woke him at 5:00 AM. He got up and headed outside to take care of his morning business. Molly was up when Josh returned. Josh brought their packs back while Molly tore down their tent by the light of her flashlight. They heated breakfast in the dark. Beef brisket, biscuit, cheese spread, cookies and lemon tea weren't the worst thing for breakfast. They still had their ratatouille meal packs left. Josh had tried that MRE months ago and hadn't liked it. Molly didn't think it sounded appetizing either.

They packed their things after breakfast. "Make sure you keep your pistol in a side pocket today," Josh demanded. "I want to be ready in case we run into the Chinese."

Molly was surprised to hear Josh say that. She believed that his "rejection" last night was personal and unrelated to their escape. "Do you really think there's a chance we'll run into them?" Molly questioned. "I don't think I want to get into a shootout with them."

"I think there's a better than even chance we run into them in Loomis," Josh agreed. "I don't want to get into a firefight either but we need to be ready, just in case." Josh hoisted his pack onto his back. He hung his M16 from his shoulder overtop of the backpack strap. "Make sure the safety is set on your pistol and pack it in a pocket where you can get to it quickly."

"OK," Molly agreed. She followed as Josh led the way down the road towards Loomis and civilization. The thermometer on the zipper pull of her pack said it was fifteen degrees. Molly marveled at how she had gotten used to the cold since she left home. The stars sparkled overhead in the cold, crisp early morning. The crescent moon rose above the eastern horizon.

There was enough light for them to make their way down the road towards Loomis. Soon the eastern horizon glowed to announce the coming sunrise. The first hour of their hike was along the open, treeless, north side of the valley. A long sweeping pair of switchbacks took them down to the South Fork Campgrounds. They followed the road east along the creek. Trees provided more cover for them. They found no signs of the Chinese. As a matter of fact, the only signs they found of people being in the area was some tire tracks in the snow where trucks had headed south into another valley.

Josh and Molly continued east on the road, which paralleled the creek. They crossed the creek a couple times as they hiked on. They left the snow behind around 9:00 in the morning. By mid-morning they neared the end of the valley where it joined the Sinlahekan Creek valley. The road took a long horseshoe bend to the north before meeting the road into Loomis. Josh decided they should follow a farm lane back across the creek and stay closer to the tree cover along the creek. The map showed the road was in the open around the entire mile and a half horseshoe bend.

Josh and Molly followed the dirt lane for about twenty minutes before they reached buildings. They could see that they were crossing a cattle ranch. All the barns and sheds were locked up. No animals or people were around. It was unsettling. The ranch wasn't abandoned. They could see signs that the farmers had been here within the past few days. Very strange... why would the rancher leave?

"Let's be real... real...careful," Josh suggested when they finished checking the lock on the last shed. "This is not normal. It's the middle of the morning on what should be a normal workday. Where are the cars, the people and the livestock? I think war found its way to Loomis."

"I think you're right, Josh," Molly agreed.

"Move your pistol to your coat pocket," Josh instructed. "Keep the safety on."

"OK"

"Our main goal is to hide," Josh said. "If we have no choice but to shoot it out, I'll take out as many as I can with my M16. You get the rest with your pistol."

"OK," Molly answered quietly.

"This is critical," Josh added. He stared back into Molly's eyes. He could see her fear. "I'm going to get you through this. You're a great girl. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise you."

"OK," Molly repeated. She took a deep breath. "I can do this if I have to."

"You have my back," Josh said.

"I have your back, Josh," Molly confirmed. She moved her piece into her coat pocket. Josh led them to the front of the shed and peered around to get a look around at the ground between them and the highway into Loomis. It was eerily deserted... no cars, no people and no animals. They double-quicked up the quarter mile farm lane. Two metal gates were padlocked shut.

Josh surveyed the road before helping Molly climb over one of the gates. Josh followed right behind her. They looked both ways on the main road, finding no signs of life. They hiked down the road, heading southeast towards Loomis. Josh had Molly check behind them constantly to make sure they didn't get surprised by people or cars coming from behind them.

Josh and Molly hiked about half a mile along the highway, on guard against surprises. The first sign of Loomis was three houses, two on the southwest side of the road and the third on the northeast. The first house they came to, the first on the southwest side of the road, appeared deserted – no cars, no lights, no signs of life.

“Let’s check it out,” Josh said as they walked up the driveway. “Watch my back.”

“Got it, Josh,” Molly agreed.

Josh stepped up to the stoop by the front door and knocked loudly. Molly followed, literally watching for anything behind Josh. No answer. Josh knocked again.

“Somebody’s at the next house,” Molly announced as she tapped Josh on the shoulder. “I saw the curtains move over there.” She pointed at the other house on the southwest side of the road. Both turned to watch the house. Within thirty seconds an old lady came out the front door and walked across the lawn towards them. She motioned for them to come over to her.

“Quickly... quickly...” she exhorted. “It’s not safe out here.” Josh and Molly jogged over to the other house. The lady was stooped and might be 5’-4” tall. She was quite old. Her long white hair was pinned up in a bun on the back of her head. She led them inside. “Quickly... quickly, please.”

She held her door open for Molly and Josh, who ducked inside. The lady followed them inside, shutting and locking the door before turning to observe her visitors. “Lordy, you two took a chance. If a Chinaman patrol had come by, they’d have scooped you up for certain.”

“Thank you for getting us out of sight, ma’am,” Josh answered politely.

“Are the two of you campers?” the lady asked. “I assume from your knapsacks and looks you were up in the national forest camping when the Chinamen invaded.”

“Not exactly,” Josh allowed. “Forgive my manners. I’m Corporal Joshua Warner of the 81st Heavy Brigade Combat Team.”

“I’m Molly Lawrence,” Molly added.

“We were caught up in the fighting in Sedro-Woolley three weeks ago,” Josh explained. “We got trapped on the wrong side of the Skagit River when they blew up the bridge.”

“Lord of mercy!” the lady gasped. “You mean you traipsed over the Cascade Mountains to get here?”

“We did,” Josh confirmed.

“Mercy!” the lady remarked. “That explains your looks.”

“I apologize,” Molly offered. “I’m sure we look terrible and smell worse.”

“Think nothing of it,” the lady answered. “Eighty-four years of working a ranch and raising four kids taught me not to mind anything. Take off your knapsacks, sit down and take a rest. I’m sure you could use it.”

“Thank you... uh... ma’am,” Josh said as he set his pack down.

“Forgive my manners,” the lady said. “I never introduced myself. I’m Lydia Dahlstrom.” They shook hands. Mrs. Dahlstrom chuckled as she added, “I presume you hiked by my ranch... er... my son’s ranch for the past mile to get here.”

“The one back there,” Josh said as he pointed to the ranch they’d cut across. Mrs. Dahlstrom nodded yes. “I hope you don’t mind. We cut across the ranch. I wanted to stay closer to the trees so we could hide if any Chinese came by.”

“That is a very prudent precaution,” Mrs. Dahlstrom said.

“How likely are we to run into the Chinese as we head east?” Josh asked. “We’re trying to make our way back to American held territory.”

“You hike in the day and you are going to get caught by the Chinamen,” Mrs. Dahlstrom answered.

“Do they occupy the town?” Molly asked.

“They don’t occupy our little town, not exactly,” Mrs. Dahlstrom responded. “They’re based down in Omak, Riverside and Twisp. Patrols come out to drive through two or three times a day. Sometimes they’ll go out for a night drive too.”

“Is there somewhere where we can hide until dark?” Josh asked.

“You’ll stay right here,” Mrs. Dahlstrom replied. “I wouldn’t send two young people such as you out where the Chinamen could find you. Sit... relax. I was about to make some lunch. What can I make for you?”

“That’s very kind of you,” Josh said. “Anything is fine.”

“Anything that isn’t powdered or freeze dried,” Molly added.

“I was going to have soup and a grilled cheese sandwich,” Mrs. Dahlstrom said. “How does that sound, honey?”

“It sounds delightful,” Molly answered, beaming. Josh and Molly shed their winter jackets and sweatshirts and sat down at Mrs. Dahlstrom’s kitchen table while she worked. She asked questions

about their backgrounds, where they were from and how they came to be in Sedro-Woolley three weeks ago.

"I notice you have electricity," Josh commented during a lull in the conversation. "Would you mind if I charged my phone? It's getting low on juice."

"You're welcome to charge it," Mrs. Dahlstrom answered. "It won't do you much good. The Chinamen shut off the cell towers in this part of the state. You won't find service. You're welcome to try my wall phone. We still have local service, if that will help you. We mostly lost long distance about a week ago. I suppose the Chinamen are responsible for that."

"I have a satellite phone that still works fine, at least until the battery dies," Josh said. "I would much appreciate it if I could plug it in and give it a charge."

"The rivers keep flowing down through the power dams, so we have power," Mrs. Dahlstrom replied. "Feel free to charge your telephone up all you need."

"Good," Josh stated. "I want to call into the Air Force and let them know what's up with me."

Mrs. Dahlstrom gave Josh a funny look. "You're not that ambitious young man who's been radioing in reports of the Chinamen's aircraft, are you? They're saying on the evening news that the young man is a real hero."

"Um... uh... I've been calling in reports," Josh stuttered. "I'm certainly not a hero. I'm just trying to do my job to help the armed forces win this war."

"Oh well," Mrs. Dahlstrom commented. "Whoever that young man is, he most definitely is a hero. They praised him for helping bring down a whole bushel of Chinamen aircraft a few days ago. I actually saw part of the dogfight. A pair of low flying American jets came whooshing over my house after breakfast while I was starting my laundry. I saw one of them hit a Chinamen aircraft with a missile. The Chinamen crashed north of here, near Palmer Lake. On TV that night they reported this young man was responsible for helping bring down fourteen Chinamen aircraft. That's a whole lot of Chinaman that aren't here today."

"Was it five days ago?" Molly asked, grinning. Mrs. Dahlstrom thought for a few seconds before nodding yes. "That was the morning we were up on top of the mountain – the night we nearly froze to death. They're talking about you, Josh."

Josh blushed. "I'm not a hero," Josh protested. "It wasn't a big deal."

"A lot of Chinamen didn't get to Omak," Mrs. Dahlstrom responded. "That's close enough to a hero for me."

"How did you hear about me?" Josh asked.

"It was on TV," Mrs. Dahlstrom answered. "We had reception until about three days ago. My son thinks the Chinamen shut down transmitters in our part of the state. We are still able to listen to

American radio stations. I suppose you're featured on the news because there hasn't been a lot of other good news to talk about."

"What's been going on in the past three weeks?" Molly asked. "Have we stopped the Chinese yet?"

"No, the war news is poor," Mrs. Dahlstrom. "Our army is falling back through Seattle. We haven't been able to stop them anywhere. I do wish the army would get itself organized and chase these miserable Chinamen away. I am quite tired of hiding in my house from them."

"Amen to that, ma'am," Josh agreed. Josh plugged his phone into the wall socket in the kitchen. Mrs. Dahlstrom continued making small talk with Josh and Molly while she cooked their lunches. The grilled cheese sandwiches were buttery, crispy and oozed melted cheese. They each wolfed down two of the tasty sandwiches. Mrs. Dahlstrom's soup was homemade chicken noodle. It was the best either had ever had.

"You said your son owns the ranch next door," Josh commented while they ate. "The ranch looked deserted. Did he manage to get away from here before the Chinese arrived?"

"My daughter-in-law, Alice, was down in Cheyenne visiting her sister when the Chinamen landed," Mrs. Dahlstrom answered. "John and his sons Junior and Justin took our livestock up into the hills after dark yesterday. They're getting the stock settled where we hope the Chinamen won't find them. My son and his boys should be back after dark tonight."

"That explains the tire tracks we saw in the snow this morning on the way down out of the National Forest," Josh replied.

Josh and Molly finished their sandwiches and soup. Mrs. Dahlstrom started to clear the dirty dishes.

"No, let me do that," Josh offered. "You've been so kind. The least I can do is wash the dishes for you."

"That's not necessary, young man," Mrs. Dahlstrom protested. "I am quite capable of doing the dishes."

"I know you are," Josh agreed. "This is a way for me to say thank you for your hospitality. Have a seat and relax. I've got this covered."

"I'll help dry," Molly volunteered. Josh ran a sink full of gloriously hot water and added soap. It felt wonderful as he dunked the first bowl in the sink and washed it clean. Josh stopped and laughed after he handed off the first bowl to Molly. He held his hands up to show Molly and Mrs. Dahlstrom.

Josh had developed a deep tan from his six months of living outside. Of at least that is what he thought. Most of the "tan" on his hands and wrists had washed off in the dishwater. Mrs. Dahlstrom chortled in amusement as Josh's displayed his nearly white hands while his forearms were tannish-brown.

“I’m not any better,” Molly added, laughing at her white hands.

“You go take a nice long, hot bath,” Mrs. Dahlstrom insisted as she hopped up. “I’ll finish rinsing and drying. You leave your clothes outside the door. I’ll launder them this afternoon while you wait for dark.” She gave Molly a wink and laughed. “I have to make sure this big lug here doesn’t get my best china too muddy.”

“That big lug does quite well at cooking and cleaning,” Molly added before heading for the bathroom to clean up.

“There’s a bathrobe hanging on the door in the bathroom,” Mrs. Dahlstrom called out. “Use that, dear, until I have your clothes clean.”

“That is very generous of you to let Molly clean up,” Josh said as he washed the next bowl. “Roughing it the last few weeks has been hard for her. She’ll enjoy the bath.”

“You need one too, young man,” Mrs. Dahlstrom insisted. “You smell like a herd of cattle. You march into the bathroom and clean up after your girlfriend is finished.”

“Molly isn’t my girlfriend,” Josh answered. “She’s a high school cheerleader who stumbled into me when we were trying to escape from Sedro-Woolley.”

“Not your girlfriend?” Mrs. Dahlstrom chortled. She shook her head, stared over top of her glasses and insisted, “That girl likes you, Joshua. I can see it in the way she looks at you and talks about you. You’re the cat’s pajamas to her.” Josh gave Mrs. Dahlstrom a bewildered look.

“We fight like cats and dogs,” Josh countered. “What would I want with a rich, pretentious, cheerleader type of girl? With respect, Mrs. Dahlstrom, you’re mistaken. She considers me to be a geek and an oaf.”

“You’re misreading the young lady, Joshua,” Mrs. Dahlstrom replied. “This young lady toted a big knapsack over two hundred miles from Sedro-Woolley to here through the Cascades at the beginning of winter. She’s more than a pretty face. She’s one tough cookie.”

“I’ll grant you that,” Josh agreed. “I expected her to be a lot more trouble on the hike than she was. Still, being tough enough for the trek and being my girlfriend are two very different things. She barely tolerates me because I’m useful to her right now.”

Mrs. Dahlstrom pursed her lips and shook her head at Josh. “I’ve learned a few things in my eighty-four years. That girl has eyes for you. Mark my words.”

“I don’t think so,” Josh answered.

“My eyesight may not be the best,” Mrs. Dahlstrom replied as she tapped her glasses, “... but I see what I see. Be good to that girl. She has eyes for you.”

“I’m doing the best I can to get us out of the jam we’re in,” Josh said.

“I’m sure you are, Joshua,” Mrs. Dahlstrom agreed.

Molly finished her shower and reappearing in a fuzzy bathrobe half an hour later. Josh did a double take when she came out. She looked... well... fabulous – better and more alluring than he’d ever seen her before.

“Joshua, time for you to look like a civilized person,” Mrs. Dahlstrom announced. “Go get yourself cleaned up. You smell like a stable.” Josh did as directed, carrying along the old work clothes that belonged to Mrs. Dahlstrom’s dead husband. The gloriously hot water cascading down over his body felt wonderful to Josh.

Josh came out half an hour later, feeling like a human being again. Mr. Dahlstrom’s old clothes didn’t fit particularly well, but they would do while his uniform and other clothing went through the laundry.

Mrs. Dahlstrom greeted Josh with a big smile when he came back out to the living room.

“I spoke with my son-in-law, Bob,” she explained. “Bob doesn’t think it would be safe for the two of you to hike to Tonasket. He is willing to drive up here and bring you back to his house... or my son John could drive you down after he and the boys get back from hiding our stock in the hills.”

“That isn’t necessary,” Josh said. “I wouldn’t want to put you or your family at risk.”

“Pppshaw...” Mrs. Dahlstrom huffed. “We may not be able to make the Chinamen leave but we’re not without our ways to make life difficult for them. Bob is a high school teacher who works with the fire department and the emergency management people for our county. He and his friends have been watching out for and making life difficult for the Chinamen for quite a few days. Don’t fret. They will take good care of you. You and Molly need to relax a spell and enjoy the warmth. You probably haven’t been comfortable in weeks.”

“It is nice to be inside,” Molly agreed.

“John and the boys will be back after dark tonight,” Mrs. Dahlstrom added. “It’s a fifteen minute drive from here to Bob’s house. We will get you down there safe as can be.”

Josh and Molly enjoyed the warmth and Mrs. Dahlstrom’s hospitality for the rest of the day, waiting for darkness and John Dahlstrom’s return from the hills. Mrs. Dahlstrom made a wonderful chicken stew with dumplings for dinner. She finished the meal with slices of the apple pie she made the previous day.

Chapter 7

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November 24th, 11:30 pm, Dahlstrom House in Loomis, WA

“Grandma... grandma... we’re back,” a tall, slim teen announced as he burst in the front door of the house. He stopped short when he saw Josh and Molly sitting on the couch in the living room. “Where’s my...” he stammered before Mrs. Dahlstrom appeared from the kitchen.

“I’m glad you got home safe and sound, Justin,” Mrs. Dahlstrom announced as she gave the six foot tall, shaggy haired teen a hug.

“Who are...?”

“These are our guests,” Mrs. Dahlstrom as her grandson shut the front door. “I’d like to introduce you to Joshua Warner and Molly Lawrence.”

“Nice to meet you,” Josh and Molly chimed in unison.

“This is my grandson, Justin,” Mrs. Dahlstrom explained.

“Why are they...” the teen protested.

“Shush!” Mrs. Dahlstrom insisted. “Get your snowy boots off and take off your coat. I’ll make you some hot chocolate.”

“But...”

“No buts!” Mrs. Dahlstrom insisted. “I’ll explain about our visitors after your dad and Junior get back. Will they be long?”

“Shouldn’t be, Grandma,” Justin answered. “They want to mess up our tire tracks so the chinks don’t know we put the livestock up in the hills. They were almost done when they sent me ahead.”

Justin shed his hat and coat, took off his wet boots and followed his grandmother out to the kitchen, leaving Josh and Molly alone again. Grandmother and grandson were returning to the living room when the door opened again. A man in his mid-forties stepped inside, followed by a slightly taller, more filled out version of Justin Dahlstrom, sporting a few days’ growth of whiskers. Justin, at thirteen, still had a baby-smooth face.

Mrs. Dahlstrom introduced Josh and Molly to her son, John, and her sixteen-year-old grandson, ‘Junior,’ more properly John, Junior.

“Our visitors have traipsed the whole way over the Cascades from Sedro-Wooley,” Mrs. Dahlstrom explained when all the introductions were completed. “Joshua is the hero they’re going on about on the radio. He has been reporting about the chinamen’s airplanes that fly over every day. He was the one who brought in our Air Force to shoot down those cargo planes a few days ago.”

“That was very helpful to us,” John Dahlstrom said.

“I’m really not a hero,” Josh protested. “I’m just a soldier trying to do his duty and get back to safety.”

“Anyone who allows our fliers to shoot down a couple thousand Chinese troops is a hero in my books,” John said.

“You’re really him?” Justin exclaimed. “You were calling in our pilots?” Junior added excitedly.

Josh patiently narrated the story of how he and Molly escaped Sedro-Wooley, trekked through the mountains, helped U. S. forces with their observations and made their way to the Dahlstrom homestead. Junior and Justin interrupted repeatedly with questions while Josh told their tale.

When he finished, Mrs. Dahlstrom announced, “John, I need you to drive these two down to Anna and Bob’s house tonight while it is still dark. Molly needs to get back to her family. Joshua needs to get back to his army unit so he can help remove all these... these... damnable chinamen!”

“Grandma!” Justin teased. “Momma’s gonna wash your mouth out with soap, if you’re not careful.”

“I DON’T like these chinamen!” Mrs. Dahlstrom snapped. “Not one bit! They can all just go back to China and let us in peace.”

“I’ll be happy to drive these two down to Anna’s,” John agreed. “Bob will take good care of them and get them across the river. He’s got contacts with people with boats.”

Josh and Molly loaded up everything while John walked back to the farm to get his pickup truck. Mrs. Dahlstrom insisted on sending them with venison sticks, venison jerky, crackers, peanut butter and some of her homemade gooseberry jam. The pair were going to eat well for a couple days, once they got back to hiking.

John Dahlstrom pulled up in front of his mother’s house in an extended cab Ford F-350. Josh and Molly thanked Mrs. Dahlstrom, Junior and Justin for their hospitality and help before loading their packs in the back of the pickup. Josh and Molly gave Mrs. Dahlstrom and her grandsons a grateful wave as the truck pulled away and headed east.

John Dahlstrom drove east through the tiny town of Loomis. He turned off his headlights when he reached the far side of the town. He drove slowly and carefully, to avoid being spotted by any Chinese patrols that might be on the road that night. A couple miles out of town a lit billboard advertised a campground on Spectacle Lake. They found the lake a couple minutes later.

The road followed the edge of the lake. The night was cloudy and moonless, but they could see it once their eyes adjusted to the darkness. The blackness of the lake extended for miles. This was probably a nice vacation or picnic spot... in better times.

John Dahlstrom told them more about his family and background. John was the third of four children. His oldest brother, Edward (53), lived in San Francisco with his wife Jill. John's sister Mary was between him and Edward. Mary, age 49, was married to David Graham. They lived in Omak. No one in the family has heard anything from David or Mary since the Chinese parachuted into eastern Washington State.

John was forty-five years old. He took over the ranch from his father since Edward had no interest in ranching. John was taking Josh and Molly to his younger sister's house. Anna Dahlstrom married Bob Kelly six years ago. John's mother was certain her thirty-five year old high school librarian daughter was bound to be an old maid. Bob Kelly, the new science teacher at the high school, rescued Anna from that fate.

John considered Bob to be a bit shy around the ladies, but a good man, none the less. His shyness explained why he was still available at age 38 when he met Anna. The courtship lasted a year. The happy couple had three-year-old twin daughters, Emily and Erin. In addition to teaching chemistry, biology and physics at the high school, Bob was active as a volunteer fireman with the Toncaset Fire Company and worked with the county's emergency management department.

John pointed out Whitestone Lake a couple miles after they passed the end of Spectacle Lake. Josh could just make out hills on the far side of the river as they passed the end of Whitestone Lake.

“The Chinese have guard posts at every bridge over the Okanogan River,” John explained as he drove. “Bob has lots of contacts and should be able to find a way to smuggle you across the river.”

“That's good to hear,” Josh agreed.

“Another damn river!” Molly added. “I am so sick of crossing rivers. Will it ever end?”

“We won't have any more trouble with rivers, once we get to American held territory,” Josh replied.

“My brother-in-law will do fine getting you two across the Okanogan,” John promised. “No problem at all.”

“That's a relief,” Josh said. “I appreciate all the risks you are taking for us.”

John turned off the main road before they reached the river and headed north. Half a mile later he pulled into a driveway opposite a large orchard. “Let's hustle,” John instructed. “Get your packs inside quickly. We never know who is watching.”

Josh and Molly grabbed their gear from the back of the truck and followed John. The door swung open before they reached the stoop. John led them inside. A man, presumably brother-in-law Bob, slammed the door shut quickly when they were inside. John greeted his sister with a hug.

“Sis!”

“Johnny!” Anna Kelly replied as he gave her older brother a hug. Anna Kelly was about 5'-5" tall, an inch or so shorter than Molly. She was well built for a forty-one year old lady. Anna wore her dark brown hair short. Altogether she was quite attractive – for a middle-aged mother of two.

John introduced Josh and Molly to Bob and Anna Kelly. Bob Kelly was shorter than John Dahlstrom or Josh Warner, probably around 5'-10" tall. His thinning brown hair was short and neatly trimmed.

“Carrying those packs looks uncomfortable,” Bob offered. “Why don’t you drop them and come sit down in the living room.”

“Thank you, sir,” Josh replied as he put down his pack and leaned it against the foyer wall. Molly started pulling hers off too.

“Would you like some coffee, Johnny?” Anna asked. “How about the rest of you? I can get a pot started. Josh accepted the offer of coffee. Molly asked for tea, which Anna was happy to provide.

“I have to hit the road, Sis,” John answered. “Bob, do you know if any chink patrols are on the road tonight?”

“I’ll call down to Tonasket and find out,” Bob answered. He disappeared for a minute to call while his wife prepared drinks for their guests. Bob had a smile on his face when he returned. “Larry reports no patrols came north through town tonight. You shouldn’t be noticeable to the group over on the Ellisforde bridge as long as you keep the speed down and wait to turn on your lights until you get to Whitestone Lake.”

“Excellent!” John answered before turning to Josh and Molly. “Good luck from here. Keep up the good work, Josh. Do whatever you can to help get these Chinese out of our country.”

“I’ll do my best, John,” Josh promised.

“Thank you for all your help,” Molly added. John gave his sister a good bye hug before heading back to Loomis.

Josh and Molly narrated their adventures over the past three weeks as they drank their coffee or tea. They spent half an hour relating their hike across the Cascades. Bob glanced at the clock as the two finished their tale. It was 2:15 in the morning.

“I’m sure the two of you are exhausted,” Bob said. “We have one guest bedroom. One of you...”

“I can sleep on the floor or on the couch,” Josh offered, interrupting Bob. Josh knew after their fight yesterday that he would NOT be sharing a bed with Molly.

“Not the floor,” Anna insisted. “You’ll wake up stiff as can be. I’ll get some sheets, pillows and a blanket. The couch will be more comfortable.” Josh laughed.

“I’ve been sleeping on hard, rocky ground for three months,” Josh said. “I have a sleeping pad and bag.” Josh laughed again. “Sleeping on a warm, level floor with no rocks sticking me in the back sounds luxurious.”

“The sheets, pillows and blanket won’t be any trouble,” Anna replied. “Are you sure about the floor?”

“It’ll be fine,” Josh responded.

“Let’s get everyone to bed,” Bob said. “I’m sure you’ve had a long, hard day.” Bob and Anna took Molly upstairs to the guest room while Josh settled down on the living room floor. It took Josh no time at all to fall asleep after he lay down.

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“Who’s dis?” Erin Kelly asked in her high pitched, three year old voice.

“Don’t know,” Emily, her twin sister answered. “Turn on cartoons.”

Josh awoke with a start to the sound of a firecracker exploding on TV. It was daylight in the living room. He rolled over to find two of the cutest three-year-olds mesmerized by a Tom and Jerry cartoon on the TV. “Hi there. You must be Emily and Erin.”

“Yeah,” Emily answered.

“I’m Erin,” her sister added. “Who are you?”

“I’m Josh Warner,” Josh answered. “I’m a soldier your dad and grandma are helping out. I hiked across the mountains to get away from the Chinese.”

“Oh, OK,” both twins agreed without further questions. Josh grabbed his pants and slid them on inside his sleeping bag. Three year olds didn’t need to see a strange man dressed only in boxers first thing in the morning. Josh grabbed his shower gear from his pack and headed upstairs to the bathroom Bob showed him last night. Josh came downstairs again when he finished cleaning up for the day. He heard someone banging pots or pans in the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee and cooking beef wafted into the hallway. Josh followed the smell into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Anna Kelly said pleasantly. “I hope the girls didn’t wake you too early.”

“They were fine, Mrs. Kelly,” Josh answered.

“We go by Anna and Bob, Josh,” Anna Kelly replied. “We don’t stand on formality around here.”

“Habit from the military, ma’am... er, Anna,” Josh answered. “Your daughters are very cute.”

“They just love the Cartoon Network,” Anna said.

“They were fine,” Josh said. “I watched it when I was young too.”

“I hope you’re ready for a hearty breakfast,” Anna commented. “Johnny keeps our freezer well filled with meat. I thought you and your girlfriend might enjoy steak and eggs after weeks of eating freeze dried food up in the mountains.”

“Steak and eggs sounds really good,” Josh agreed.

“Steak?” Molly chimed in as she wandered into the kitchen. “It’s been too long since I had anything like that.”

Josh noticed Molly looked freshly showered. He grabbed a cup of coffee before heading upstairs to shower. Josh felt almost human again when he came downstairs fifteen minutes later. Bob was downstairs when Josh returned. The twins joined their family in the kitchen for breakfast.

The steak, fried eggs, and English muffins with huckleberry jam were excellent. The twins politely asked to be excused when they finished eating. They dashed off to watch more cartoons while Anna, Bob and Josh enjoyed more coffee. Anna made tea for Molly.

“Well, I guess I should get started finding the two of you a way across the Okanogan,” Bob commented after they enjoyed their coffee for a few minutes.

“Anything we can do to help?” Josh asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Bob answered. “You two should rest up and relax. From what you’ve told me, you’ve had a hard few weeks.”

“Thank you,” Molly said. “A rest would be very nice.”

“Thank you for taking us in and helping us,” Josh added.

“Josh, I should be thanking you,” Bob replied. “You have been risking your life for months to try to protect us from the Chinese. You deserve all the help Anna and I can give you. It’s just the right thing to do.”

“It’s just my job,” Josh answered modestly.

“I’m going to get on the phone and track down a way to get you to the other side of the river and on your way to safety,” Bob said.

Josh and Molly relaxed in the living room while Bob worked the phone. Both were close enough in age to kids to enjoy the cartoons that Erin and Emily were watching. Bob called Josh and Molly back to the kitchen an hour and a half later.

“It took me longer to track down a boat than I expected,” Bob announced. “I found out the Chinese have been collecting boats up and down the river. Every contact I have that lives along the river had their boats confiscated. I found a buddy on the east end of Tonasket who is into white canoeing and

kayaking. The Chinese took his good boats he had in the back yard, but haven't found out about his old boats in the garage... yet. He's willing to help us out."

"That's good," Josh said.

"I will drive over to his house after lunch today and check out the condition of these boats," Bob explained. "Mike told they haven't been in the water in years."

"You can drive across the river?" Josh asked.

"Why don't you just take us along when you go over the river to Tonasket?" Molly added. "That sounds a whole lot simpler than hauling boats back here and having us paddle across the river."

"It's not that simple," Bob cautioned. "The Chinese issued IDs to all the residents. The two of you will be arrested if you show up at one of the bridge check points."

"Couldn't you hide us in the car and take us across that way?" Molly asked.

"No, the guards at the check points have infrared imaging," Bob answered. "They'll spot your heat signature immediately, regardless of how well I hide you. Boats are the best way across."

Well... OK," Molly allowed grudgingly. She headed back to the living room while Josh hung out in the kitchen with Bob and Anna. He'd had enough cartoons for the morning.

"Molly seems skittish about boats," Anna noted. "Is she afraid of the water? Can she swim?"

"I'm sure she can swim," Josh replied. "I suspect she's a little freaked out by our experience back in Sedro-Wooley the night we were trapped. We had another guy, a crewmate from my tank, with us when we tried to cross the Skagit River. He swam across the river to bring a rowboat back for Molly and me. The Chinese spotted him and laced him with machine gun fire – not more than 200 feet from where we were hiding."

"Oh my, that must have been traumatic for Molly," Anna responded.

"We have lots of river," Bob added. "The Chinese are too spread out to patrol all of it. We shouldn't have any problems like that tonight."

"That's good to know," Josh said. Bob headed off to prepare for the evening. Josh decided his down time was perfect for studying his maps and planning their route once they got clear of Tonasket.

The FDR Lake and Kettle River proved to be the deciding factor for their route in the near future. The lake extended from the Coulee Dam forty miles south of Omak northeast almost to the Canadian border. Josh found three crossings of the lake/river – the dam, a bridge at I-395 and a couple bridges at Northport, a couple miles south of the border. There was no way Josh and Molly could hike south through Omak and onto the Coulee Dam without getting caught by the Chinese. The Chinese most likely had troops right at the dam securing it now.

Josh and Molly would need to head northeast again into the hills and away from civilization to reach Northport. The maps showed the hills were bare. Josh expected they would be similar to Pickens Mountain that he could see out Anna's kitchen window. Josh and Molly were going to need to hike at night and rest and hide during the day if they were going to avoid detection.

Bob was gone most of the afternoon, scouting out his friend's boat and planning the river crossing. He returned home as Anna started supper. "Any problems at the bridge?" she asked as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Routine," Bob answered. "Checked my ID, searched the car, the usual."

"My heart is in my throat every time you go out for one of these missions," Anna said.

"They are necessary, honey," Bob answered as he gave her a hug. "We can't passively sit by while the Chinese enslave us. We have to resist."

"My head understands that," Anna replied. "My heart is still going a mile a minute while you're away and at risk."

"I am careful," Bob insisted. "I will be fine." Bob turned to face Josh. "Everything is set for tonight. Mike's canoe is old and patched, but it will stay afloat long enough to get you, Molly and your gear across the river tonight. I scouted out a crossing spot on the way to Mike's house. The river is narrower and the spot is $\frac{3}{4}$ mile south of the Ellisforde bridge. It is out of sight of the guards at the bridge. Both banks have some trees and brush for cover. It should be a good spot for the crossing."

"That's sounds promising," Josh agreed.

"What sounds promising?" Molly asked as she entered the kitchen to hear what was up. Bob repeated what he told Josh.

"When is it going to happen?" Josh asked. "I hope we're doing this after dark."

"Of course," Bob agreed. "Mike will bring his canoe up to his side of the river and paddle across to meet us. We agreed to do the crossing at midnight tonight."

"That's sounds good, Bob," Josh said. He turned to Molly. "Do an inventory of the food you have in your pack. We need to make sure we have enough to get us to Northport. It's ninety-five miles, as the crow flies. I figure we will need a minimum of two weeks of rations to get us there."

"Bob and I will help any way we can, if you're short, Josh," Anna offered. Bob agreed.

Josh and Molly got to work inventorying food, checking gear and preparing for weeks hiking in the cold eastern Washington winter as they trekked east through the hills and mountains. Anna was able to add some food items to their larder to help them reach Northport.

Josh called in to the Air Force Search and Rescue Command to let them know where they were and give a report of what they observed in Loomis and on their way to Bob and Anna's house the previous

night. The captain Josh talked with said he thought the intel would be valuable to the civil affairs people. Josh's report was the first word that had gotten out of the Loomis/Tonasket area since the Chinese paratroopers landed.

Anna prepared a nice spaghetti dinner with garlic bread and a fresh salad. Molly hadn't had a salad in weeks. Josh hadn't eaten anything green and leafy since a dinner at the rest center south of Sedro-Wooley where his unit reorganized and rested after the Battle of Border. The salad was great. They finished dinner off with ice cream – also great.

Josh and Molly waited nervously as the evening passed slowly. They were gathering things together around 11:00 pm for the half mile hike across the fields behind Bob's and Anna's house down to the river when the phone rang. Bob answered it immediately.

"Phil?" Bob said as he listened. He nodded his head a couple times. "Does Mike know about this?" He listened briefly before hanging up the phone. "The crossing is off tonight," Bob commented before dialing the phone again.

"Mike, it's Bob," Bob explained after the call was answered. "The Chinese are out early and too active tonight. We need to abort. They have patrols rolling up the roads on both sides of the river. Get your canoe away and button up for the night. Hopefully we can try again tomorrow night."

Bob turned to Josh and Molly. "I guess you figured out that conversation. The Chinese have half a dozen Humvees loaded with troops heading up the river valley this evening. It would be suicidal to be outside tonight. I guess you'll have to stay as our guests a little longer."

"We appreciate your hospitality and help," Josh said. Molly seconded Josh's thanks. Molly headed upstairs to the guest room again. Josh bedded down on the floor in the living room.

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Molly and Josh rested and waited at Anna and Bob's house through a second, tense day. The Chinese patrols had been active overnight but pulled back south to Omak during the day. Josh and Molly played some games with Erin and Emily to relieve the tension a little. Bob monitored the Chinese by phone.

Josh, Molly and the Kelly family caught the war news on the radio over lunch. Things were not going better for the United States and Canada since Josh's brigade combat team was decimated three weeks ago. The news anchor reported that Redmond fell to the Chinese yesterday. The governor ordered the immediate evacuation of all civilians in the western and central portions of Washington.

The news hit Josh hard. Redmond! That was halfway between Sedro-Wooley and his home in Olympia. Where was his family? Were they alright? Josh decided to try to call his parents. His satellite phone was fully charged. He could recharge it that afternoon to replace any power he used for the call home.

Josh dialed his home number. The phone service reported the number was not in service. He dialed his dad's cell phone next. It went to voice mail after reporting that the phone was unavailable.

"Hey, Dad, this is Josh," Josh explained in the message. "Molly and I are hiding out with a family near Tonasket for a couple days. We made it through the mountains safely. The locals are going to help us cross the next river and then we're hiking east until we reach safety. I hope you, Mom, Laura and Jake are OK. I hear you're evacuating. Good luck. Love you all."

"That's a nice thing to do," Molly commented when she overheard Josh's message. "Would it be alright if I tried to get a message to my parents?"

"Sure, that would be fine," Josh agreed. He handed the phone to Molly. She didn't do as well. Both of her parents' cell phones were out of service. She didn't get an opportunity to leave them voice mail.

Bob kept in touch with Mike throughout the day. Everything looked good for them to tackle crossing the Okanigan that night. Anna fed Josh and Molly a nice supper. The pair waited nervously through the evening, checking equipment and waiting for a phone call to postpone their escape. None came. Bob called his Tonasket contacts at 10:30 pm. There were no signs of Chinese patrols coming north from Omak that evening. Mike called to confirm his departure around 10:40 pm.

Bob led Josh and Molly out the back of the house and headed east through the fields. The overcast skies from earlier in the day were breaking up. It was a dark, moonless night, which slowed their progress for a few minutes until their eyes adjusted to the darkness. The three managed the third of a mile to the river without falling or twisting any ankles.

Josh judged the black river was about 400 feet wide. It flowed quietly south past them. The banks were low and sloping, so Bob, Molly and Josh easily climbed down to the water's edge. The three peered across, waiting for Mike to appear with the canoe.

Molly was the first to hear Mike canoeing quietly downstream towards them. She tapped Bob and Josh on their shoulders and pointed. It took Mike a minute to paddle down and reach them. Bob steadied the canoe as Mike hopped out and waded ashore.

"What happened?" Bob demanded. "I expected you to follow the trail across from us."

"I had a snag," Mike reported. "That gate you said would be unlocked? It wasn't. I couldn't get the canoe up and over the fence, so I drove upriver and parked at the junk yard. I didn't have any problems getting the canoe launched from there."

"OK... I guess," Bob replied. "You're sure you are out of sight of the bridge?"

"It was fine," Mike promised.

"Mike, this is Corporal Joshua Warner and Molly Lawrence," Bob said as he directed Mike's attention to the others. Mike shook hands with Molly and Josh. "This is Mike Dixon, a good friend and fellow teacher."

“Let’s get this going,” Mike said quickly when introduction were done. “Molly, let’s get you and the packs across on the first trip. I’ll come back for Josh when you’re across and safe.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Bob agreed. Bob helped Mike and Josh load the packs into the center of the canoe and then helped Molly into the bow. Bob pushed the canoe off when Mike was in his stern seat. Mike paddled the pair up the river, staying close to the west bank. They disappeared from sight.

Bob and Josh waited about ten minutes for Mike to return. Mike beached the canoe bow first to make it easier for Josh to climb in.

“Thanks so much for all your help,” Josh commented as he climbed in. “I don’t know how I can repay you, Anna and the rest of your family for sheltering Molly and me for the past few days. Thank you.”

“Get back to the army and get these damned Chinese out of our country,” Bob answered. “That will be all the thanks I need.”

“I’ll do it,” Josh agreed as Bob pushed the canoe into the river. Josh grabbed a paddle and turned back towards Mike. “Which side, Mike?”

“Port,” Mike answered. Josh dipped his paddle into the water on the left side before Mike even realized he meant to tell his novice passenger ‘left side’. Mike watched Josh paddle a few strokes.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Mike asked.

“Canoeing Merit Badge as a Boy Scout,” Josh answered quietly. Mike chuckled.

“I was a Boy Scout too,” Mike answered before chuckling more. “Still am, actually. Last summer was my fifteenth season on staff at Camp Bonaparte.”

“I did four summers at Camp Hahobas when I was younger,” Josh commented.

The pair paddled a couple minutes. Josh could see the river bending towards the west ahead when Mike called out, “Sweep.” Josh stretched out with the next stroke and pushed the bow to the starboard. He felt Mike’s powerful J-stroke turn the canoe until they were headed directly for the far bank. A dozen strokes later the bow of the canoe crunched into the sandy bank. Josh hopped out and steadied the canoe while Mike climbed out.

Both men froze when they spotted a flashlight beam probing the darkness in front of them. The beam swept along the shoreline until it stopped on Josh and Mike.

“Jiùmìng a! Měiguó rén,” an alarmed voice shouted. [Help! Americans...]

Josh swung his M-16 down from his shoulder and pointed it at the frantic man shining his light on them. “Jiùmìng a!” Josh loosed a short burst of bullets at the Chinese soldier, who collapsed to the ground. His flashlight rolled down the bank and stopped a couple feet from Josh.

Combat veteran that he was, Josh dropped prone on the ground, searching the darkness for the next threat. Mike stood motionless, stunned at the sudden violence. A pistol barked and flashed ahead. A man screamed and two quick shots followed in succession.

“Josh?” Molly’s voice called tremulously from the darkness ahead. “Josh?”

“Are you OK, Molly?” Josh called back. “Do you see any more Chinese?”

“No, just this one here,” Molly answered.

Josh hopped up and grabbed Mike by the shoulder. “Get us to the fucking truck... NOW!”

“Um... um... yeah...” Mike stuttered. He followed Josh up the bank and to the fence surrounding a junk yard.

“Molly?” Josh called. She emerged from a clump of bushes. A dying Chinese soldier lay at the back corner of the fence, not more than ten feet from Molly’s hiding place. “Grab your pack and let’s hustle.”

Mike shook off his shock and motioned for the pair to follow him out to the road and his pickup truck. Josh and Molly grabbed their packs and hurried after Mike. The packs got tossed in the back before they piled into Mike’s truck. Mike threw the vehicle into gear and sped off, heading south to Tonasket and away from the Ellisforde bridge and the Chinese checkpoint.

Josh stared out the window of the truck, his gun at the ready, as Mike barreled south down the narrow highway. Josh saw lights from a Humvee turn onto their road, north of the junkyard. Josh assumed the Humvee came from the bridge. He watched as the driver drove south cautiously. The Humvee stopped at the junkyard.

“I think we’re going to be OK,” Josh allowed after another minute of watching.

“Are you sure?” Mike asked. A tremor in his voice told Josh how scared the school teacher was – extremely.

“The rest of that crew don’t seem real aggressive,” Josh answered. “Molly shot their lieutenant.”

“I did?” Molly gasped.

“I saw his insignia when we went by,” Josh answered. “I doubt the other grunts at the check point will be real enthusiastic about taking us on without more aid from their friends. How long will it take forces from Omak to drive up here?”

“Omak? Probably half an hour,” Mike allowed. “Maybe thirty-five minutes.”

“How long until you can get us into Tonasket?”

“Five more minutes,” Mike answered. “I guess I’ll hide you at my apartment for now.”

"That would probably be best," Josh agreed. He turned to Molly. "Are you all right?"

"Uh... yeah... I guess," Molly answered tentatively. "I've never shot anyone before."

"You did well," Josh remarked as he slid his arm over her shoulder. "I didn't know you had your pistol unpacked. What happened back there?"

"I was hiding in the bushes when he came around the corner of the fence from the road," Molly answered. "That was just as you shot the other soldier down by the river. The Chinese guy in front of me had a machine gun. I was afraid he'd kill the two of you."

"So you shot him," Josh said calmly.

"In the back," Molly confirmed. "He didn't see me as he walked right past me. He made it easy for me."

"What were the second and third shots for?" Josh asked.

"My dad will be disappointed in me," Molly allowed with a small grin. "I shot him in the back but I didn't hit anything vital. My dad drilled into me to go for the kill if I'm going to shoot an animal. The second and third shots were in his head to make sure the Chinese bastard was dead."

"That was a good job," Josh said. "All of us could be dead if you hadn't killed the lieutenant."

"You two make me feel hopelessly inadequate," Mike added. "My friends and I pretend to be resistance to the Chinese, but we haven't done anything like what you two did. I am in awe. Have you seen much action, Josh?"

"Too much," Josh answered. Mike didn't pry into that curt answer.

Mike drove them through downtown Tonasket a few minutes later. It was a small town. He turned onto Route 20, went a block before turning into an apartment complex. Josh and Molly followed Mike upstairs to his second floor apartment. The apartment was a small one bedroom, sparsely furnished, as you might expect for a bachelor.

Mike suggested that Molly and Josh spread their bedding on the living room floor. He worked the phones to gather information about the Chinese reaction to their encounter in Ellisforde. Mike's contacts reported Humvees full of Chinese were heading north from Omak at top speed, lights blazing. Mike, Molly and Josh had stirred up a hornets nest. Mike was still on the phone when Josh and Molly nodded off.

----oooOooo----

Josh woke up the next morning to a dark apartment. He found a note on top of his pack. It said, "Make yourself at home. Eat anything you want from the fridge. Take a shower. I've been up too long the past few nights. I expect to crash until ten or so in the morning."

Josh showered, had some cereal and waited for Molly and Mike. Molly got up half an hour later. Mike came out of the bedroom a little before ten o'clock. He grabbed a cup of coffee, commented, "I've got to find out what happened after last night's dust-up," and disappeared again into his bedroom. He returned half an hour later shaking his head.

"I knew we would stir up trouble with the shooting last night," Mike said. "I didn't know how bad it would be. I wasn't able to reach any of the three contacts I have in Ellisforde. I can't reach Bob Kelly either. The one contact I did reach is on the west side of the river. He saw a couple hundred Chinese soldiers swarming through Ellisforde, searching house to house."

"Sorry I caused so much..." Josh began.

"STOP!" Mike insisted. "We all know freedom isn't free. We're not going to get rid of these Chinese without paying a price. You two did exactly the right thing last night. You had to shoot those two soldiers or we would be dead."

"I know you're right," Josh said. "I'm a soldier and it's my job to pay the price and take on the Chinese. The people back in that town shouldn't be paying the price for what I did."

"Don't blame yourself," Mike answered. "Civilians in the occupied areas will be paying a price until our country wakes up, arms itself properly and we kick the Chinese the hell out of here."

"I'm worried about Bob, Anna and the twins," Molly said. "Do you think they might have gone back to Loomis to hide out with Anna's mother?"

"Mrs. Dahlstrom? Yes... that could be," Mike considered. He smiled and nodded. "I'll try there. I bet you're right." Mike grabbed a phone book and looked up the number. He went ahead and dialed it.

"Mrs. Dahlstrom?" Mike commented after a few seconds. "Is your son-in-law with you?" Mike smiled, nodded yes to Josh and Molly and waited half a minute for Bob to get on the line.

"Thank God, Bob," Mike exclaimed when his friend got on the line. "I was worried about you." Mike explained what he had found out about the happenings in Ellisforde last night. He listened to Bob for half a minute before agreeing, "I do need to get these two out of here ASAP." He listened a little longer. "Ellen and I leave? No... no, I don't think so." After listening a little longer, Mike agreed, "I'll think about it. I'll keep in touch, Bob." Mike hung up the phone.

"Bob, Anna and the girls are safe?" Molly asked.

"Bob ran back to his house after the shooting started," Mike explained. "He had his family in the car within five minutes of the first shot. They high-tailed it up to Loomis in record time. Bob, Anna, Emily and Erin are safe up there."

"That's good news," Josh said.

"Bob recommends I get you two out of here as soon as possible," Mike said. "I think he's right too. The Chinese confiscated all the guns they could find when they did their initial survey of the area and issued ID cards. They're going to tear Ellisforde apart until they find the guns used last night. Bob thinks they will target Tonsaket if they can't get satisfaction up there. I want to drive you east out of town tonight after dark. I suspect it will be too hot to leave now."

"OK, that sounds good," Josh agreed. "Who is Ellen and why does Bob think you should leave too?"

"Ellen is my fiancée," Mike explained. "She's a couple years younger than me and teaches at the high school too. Bob feels that with the school closed indefinitely, that Ellen and I should just hop in my truck and leave with the two of you so we can all find a safe place behind American lines. I don't know."

"That sounds like a good plan to me," Josh replied.

"I grew up in Omak," Mike answered. "I've lived my whole life in central Washington. Ellen was raised in Oroville. How can we abandon our homes so easily and flee? That's not how I was brought up. I've got contacts through school, the fire company and EMS. I think I can be useful here behind enemy lines."

"How old are you?" Josh asked.

"Twenty-nine," Mike answered.

"You're in good physical shape," Josh said. Mike stood about 5'-11" tall, about 165 pounds. He obviously worked out regularly.

"I ran track in college," Mike agreed. "I'm a phys ed teacher. I need to set a proper example for the kids."

"Which will be more effective removing the Chinese?" Josh asked. "You driving around in the dark in a pickup truck or driving after them in an Abrams tank? You could pass the physical and make a good soldier. Hell, half my platoon were older and more out of shape than you when my Guard unit was called up."

"I guess," Mike admitted. "Maybe I need to go have a talk with Ellen this morning."

"You said something interesting a few minutes ago," Josh said. "The NRA wasn't totally paranoid about their guns."

"They weren't," Mike said, laughing. "It wasn't the UN in black helicopters. It was Chinese soldiers in green Humvees. They rounded up the sheriffs first, but they disarmed the gun owners as soon as the police were out of the way. Some die-hard NRA gun owners tried to resist but the Chinese put that down. Forty or fifty soldiers armed with submachine guns will fix that. They shot the gun owners and their families and then burned their houses to the ground. "Literally, it was a scorched earth policy."

“Not too many guns left in this area,” Josh said.

“A few are probably hidden away, but not many,” Mike replied. “Can the two of you hang loose for a while? I need to go over to the other building and talk with Ellen about Bob’s suggestion that we leave Tonasket.”

“That’s fine,” Josh agreed. “We’ll stay hidden and quiet in the apartment until you get back.”

----oooOooo----

Mike returned around noon. He made sandwiches and soup for his guests.

“What did you decide?” Josh asked as they were eating. “Are you and Ellen going to head east with Molly and me?”

“No, we’re not,” Mike answered. “This is our home and neither of us is willing to flee. I may not be able to do as much damage to the Chinese in my pickup truck as you can in your tank, but still, I can harm their occupation and help take care of the people here. It’s the right thing for Ellen and me.”

“It’s your decision,” Josh said. “I wouldn’t want to stay around and live with the Chinese.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Molly added. “Hell... I hiked across the Cascades to get away from my home. That kind of tells you how much the Chinese scare me.”

“I understand,” Mike replied. “Ellen and I might feel different if we had time to evacuate before the Chinese dropped into our lives. They’re here now and it seems risky to run away.” Mike saw Molly’s face fall. “That doesn’t mean I won’t help the two of you get out of here. I will. Ellen and I talked about it. I’ll drive the two of you east on Route 20 and then down Route 21 to the Coulee Dam. I expect that should get us clear of the Chinese. I can take you down there and be home before first light.”

“I appreciate that, Mike,” Josh said, “...but I don’t think the dam will be safe. The Chinese have been capturing all the dams in eastern and central Washington. We better plan on them being Chinese held. I studied the maps yesterday at Bob and Anna’s house. We are planning to head towards Northport.”

“Not Kettle Falls?” Mike asked.

“Air Force Search and Rescue suggested keeping well to the north, near the border,” Josh explained.

“I don’t think I can drive you all the way to Northport and get home again in one evening if I take all back roads,” Mike said. “I can take you part way there. What route did you plan to take if you were on foot?”

Josh spread his maps out and reviewed his planned route with Mike. After a bit of discussion, Mike agreed to drive Josh and Molly over to Curlew and drop them off where the dirt road they wanted to

follow left Route 20, about a mile west of the little town. Once the plan was settled on, all the three could do was wait for darkness.

Some Chinese vehicles drove by Mike's apartment building during the morning but no Chinese entered the three buildings in the complex. Mike briefed Josh and Molly on a hiding place, in case trouble came. It wasn't necessary.

Mike turned on the radio over lunch to catch the war news. "Chinese aircraft attacked two supply ships, an attack tanker ship and three patrol craft yesterday as the Navy worked to evacuate the Bremerton Navy Yard today. All ships were lost. Casualty figures among the crewmen is unknown at this time," the crackling radio announced.

"Army and Marine troops continue their rear guard action as they fall back through downtown Seattle and Bellevue today. All civilians in western Washington must report to evacuation centers immediately for transport to Oregon or California. No news is available through armed forces spokesmen about the situation in central Washington between Omak and Mazama. Unconfirmed internet reports are conflicting. Some say the Chelan and Grand Coulee, and Coulee dams have been captured by the Chinese. Other reports say they are still held by American troops."

"Any news on the hero of Omak, Joe?" a second announcer asked. "For those who haven't followed the story closely, this intrepid soldier, whose identity is classified, has been hiking across the Cascade Mountains since getting separated from his unit in the fighting at the Skagit River three weeks ago. He was personally responsible for the death of nearly a regiment of Chinese paratroopers when he called in air sorties that shot the paratroopers out of the air."

"The man's a hero in my book, Mark," Joe, the first announcer, agreed. "I hope he makes it to safety, if the Chinese ever force him to abandon his perch up in the mountains. I'd like to shake his hand and tell him, 'Job well done!' The man is a real life John Wayne."

"Amen to that, Joe," Mark, the second announcer added. "Moving on to other news... The War Commodities Board is ordering rationing of..." Mike flicked the radio off.

"People are going to be excited to see you when you get back to civilization, Josh," Mike commented. "Did you really call in air strikes to take out a Chinese regiment?"

"I have no idea," Josh admitted. "I called in sighting info when Chinese cargo planes flew over the mountain top we were camping on. The search and rescue folks told me my information helped shoot down a bunch of Chinese planes. I don't think it makes me anybody special."

"The residents around here think it makes a difference if a regiment of Chinese soldiers dies while trying to invade our homes," Mike replied. "There's too damn many of them already. You're a hero to us if you got rid of any of these invaders."

"All I want to do is get back to safety and back to my unit," Josh said. "That's enough for me."

"I'll do my part to make that happen," Mike promised.

----oooOooo----

Chinese patrols came through their end of Tonasket four times during the afternoon. They cleared town and headed south before darkness. Mike verified their departure with a couple people in his network of observers in town and on the road south to Omak. Mike served Josh and Molly a good supper before helping them pack their things. The three waited until seven o'clock to ensure complete darkness for their drive east.

The clouds from earlier in the day had lifted. The crescent moon was setting on the western horizon as they loaded their packs in the back of Mike's pickup. Everyone loaded up in the front of the truck. Mike flipped the headlights on as they pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Josh asked.

"It's safe enough," Mike answered. "Everyone reports the coast is clear. I want to make some time on Route 20. This will allow us to double our speed."

"You're the boss," Josh agreed.

The threesome flew east down the state road. The road was bare but there was some snow piled along the sides. They had traveled about forty minutes when Mike posed a question.

"We're about five minutes from our turn off for Curlew," Mike said. "Are you sure you don't want to check out the bridge at Kettle Falls?"

"I don't know if we should risk your life that way," Josh said. "I want to make sure you get back home before daylight."

"It's about half an hour west of Route 21," Mike answered. "I can make it just as easily from Kettle Falls as from Curlew. Anyway, if the bridge is in American hands, the two of you are home free. Half an hour to get free of the Chinese... I think we should try that route."

"Half an hour?" Molly asked. "What could it hurt?"

"I don't want to come this far and get caught now," Josh retorted. "We've been through hell trying to get away from the Chinese. We have to be super cautious, Mike, if we try that bridge. One sign of trouble and we stop, reconnoiter and then get the hell out of there if it isn't safe."

"I agree completely," Mike answered. Mike continued straight ahead when they reached the intersection with Route 21. The highway snaked up the sides of the valley towards Sherman Pass. Mike flipped his lights off and slowed after about twenty-five minutes of climbing. He noticed a faint glow ahead towards the pass as they rounded a sweeping curve to the right.

"Stop!" Josh ordered. "I'll check this out on foot." Mike and Molly agreed. Josh grabbed his M16 from his pack before starting up the road on foot. The road was snow covered. Josh shivered at the cold. The air temperature was well below freezing, probably in the low teens. A slight breeze from the northwest chilled him further as his boots crunched through the packed snow. He kept to the

right along the steep rock hillside, where he was less likely to be silhouetted by backlight. The far side of the road had a low guardrail and then the ground dropped precipitously into the canyon below.

Josh walked cautiously ahead for about ten minutes. The highway curved left around the flank of the hillside. The light ahead was brighter, so Josh knew he was approaching whoever was at the pass. Josh dropped to his belly when the road curved to the right again. He slid ahead along the rock hillside, slowly and quietly until he could see. Dark green Humvees with red stars on the side!

Josh backed away on this belly carefully, so he didn't make any sounds to give away his presence. When he was safely out of sight, he stood up and walked cautiously west to rejoin Mike and Molly. He jogged back once he was far enough away that the Chinese could not hear him.

"Bad news," Josh reported breathlessly when he met his friends. "A platoon of Chinese are holding the pass. They've got half a dozen of their humvees up there. We need to get out of here and damn quick! No lights!"

"Now we know what we're facing," Mike agreed as Josh climbed back into the pickup. "I was hoping this route was clear, in case the county commissioners decide that we need to start evacuating civilians from our area. So much for that idea."

Mike proceeded down the mountainside, driving slowly with his lights out. It took the three an hour to reach Route 21 and turn off for Curlew.

"Why don't you head back to Tonasket?" Josh suggested. "Molly and I can head into the mountains and keep hiking the way we did before before we reached Bob's mom's house. You get home and stay safe."

"No, I'm not dropping you here," Mike replied. "I promised to get you to Curlew and that's what I'm going to do."

Mike flipped on the headlights once the truck was safely into the next valley as they headed north on Route 41. The road took them along the east side of Curlew Lake. It took about twenty minutes to reach the town of Curlew. The place was quiet and the streets were deserted. Mike crossed the bridge to the east side of town and followed a side road east up into the hills. About a mile and a half out of town Josh spotted the turn off that would take him and Molly deeper into the wilderness.

Mike did a U-turn in the roadway and stopped at the dirt road. "You guys ready for this?"

"Yeah... we're ready," Josh agreed. He looked over at Molly. She gave him a weak smile.

"I'm ready," she answered, trying to appear confident. She added, "We're going to freeze our asses off," as she put on her pack. Josh heard but ignored the comment. He knew she was right. Molly checked the thermometer hanging from her pack. It said it was twenty-three degrees.

"Good luck to both of you," Mike called out as they started up the dirt road.

“Be careful getting home,” Josh called back. Both of them waved to Mike as he pulled away and headed back to Curlew and Tonasket. Three days of sitting around inside warm houses had left their muscles tight. They worked out their kinks as they climbed the hill. They hiked about two and a half miles and climbed around five hundred feet when the dirt road crested and started back down again. A couple hundred yards ahead the road dipped and crossed a small stream. A quick glance at the map told Josh that they were at the South Branch of Day Creek. It was close to midnight. They decided to make camp here and catch some sleep before they pressed on in the morning.

Chapter 8

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November 28, 2013, South Fork, Day Creek – 45 Miles east of Tonasket, WA

The faint orange glow on the side of the tent told Josh it was nearly sunrise when he woke up. Molly's body was pressed up against him, undoubtedly for warmth. Josh's exposed nose and cheeks told him that the temperature had dropped since they went to bed. It must be in the single digits.

Josh's body reacted as you might expect when a cute coed was plastered against his body. He got hard. Josh was trying to will his swollen organ to go down when he realized Molly was shaking. Molly sniffled a couple times and whimpered as Josh shifted to hide his erection.

"Molly, are you awake?" Josh asked softly. Molly's head nodded up and down as she sniffled again. "Are you cold?"

"No," Molly answered softly. She tried to stifle a whimper, unsuccessfully.

"What's wrong?"

"It's ... it's... the... soldier," Molly sobbed. "I... I... killed him."

"You did," Josh confirmed. He pulled his arms out of his sleeping bag and wrapped them around the girl. "You had no choice. You killed him before he killed us." Molly pulled her arms out of her sleeping bag and clung to Josh as she cried. Josh kept repeating, "It's all right. You had to kill that guy. You saved our lives."

Josh held the sobbing teen for about five minutes before she calmed down. Molly continued clinging to Josh after she stopped sobbing. Josh held her and waited. After a minute or so he asked, "Are you OK now?"

"I'm... OK," Molly managed to squeak out. "Was it this bad the first time you killed a chink?"

Josh's mind wandered back to that first day on the Chilliwack line when his unit counterattacked a Chinese penetration. He had used the bow machine gun to mow down almost a squad of Chinese infantry that were heading for his platoon's position. Josh had felt revulsion initially until Lt. Williams praised his work. Josh never had time to really process or accept what he'd done. Crisis upon crisis kept the "Homewrecker" and its crew too busy for introspection.

"It's real hard," Josh answered, feeling a little guilty for the white lie. "You did what you had to do to survive. You're alive and he's dead. War is like that. This is the reality we face every day until we can kick the damn Chinese the hell out of our country."

"Yeah, it is," Molly agreed.

"I may need you to do that again," Josh added. "Can you?"

"I think so," Molly agreed. She hugged Josh and gave him a kiss... on the lips. Both felt a jolt of electricity as their lips met. They pulled apart quickly in shock. "Thank you for everything you have done for me, Josh."

"No problem," Josh mumbled as he disengaged from Molly. She let him dress first. Josh took care of his morning business and retrieved their packs from their hanging spot by the time Molly emerged from the tent. The pair enjoyed some of Lydia Dahlstrom's homemade gooseberry jam on home-baked bread Anna Kelly sent with them. It was a far superior breakfast to eating one of their MREs.

Josh and Molly followed the gravel road as they climbed higher into the mountains. Numerous dirt and gravel roads branched off. Josh and Molly turned onto a dirt road as they passed a cabin. The dirt road led them uphill on a shortcut before rejoining the gravel road they had been on.

There had been patches of snow on the ground back where they camped. The snow cover filled in the bare spots. They climbed on, their boots crunching in the snow covered gravel. They turned and followed another gravel road soon after they returned to the first. Josh's maps showed most of the roads on this side of the mountain dead-ended, presumably at old mine sites from before the area was turned into a national forest.

The pair followed the narrow gravel road about a quarter of a mile until it crossed a small frozen-over creek. This was the spot where Josh needed to demonstrate his map and compass prowess. The road network on the west side of the mountain did not connect with the roads on the east side. They needed to hike cross country up the mountain side until they found the next road. The map showed the gap between roads was about a quarter of a mile and a three hundred foot climb.

Josh and Molly climbed slowly straight up the steep mountainside, through deepening snow. They were nearing the top of the mountain twenty minutes later without finding the road they were aiming for. Josh knew they had walked over the snow covered road they wanted, so he led Molly towards a saddle in the ridge nearer the small stream they had paralleled as they climbed the mountain. It took the pair a few minutes at the saddle to locate traces of the roadway.

They followed the road east a few hundred feet below the crest of the mountain. The view down below of the Lone Trail Creek Valley was amazing. The valley was covered in a blanket of pure white snow. Green pines stuck up through the white hillsides, draped in garlands of snow. The pair spent most of the day travelling along or near the top of the fifteen hundred foot high ridge overlooking the valley. The roadway was ankle to calf deep with snow, slowing their progress.

They stopped to eat lunch near one of the mountain tops. The view was gorgeous. The valley floor was slowly rising to meet them. Josh and Molly trudged on through the snow after eating. Thankfully the road they were on was near the top of the mountain, so they didn't need to worry too much about avalanches. Mid-afternoon they did hear the rumble and crashes of an avalanche on the far side of the mountain.

Josh and Molly had hiked about ten miles when they reached the head of the Lone Pine Creek as it crossed under the roadway. Both hikers felt in good shape, so they pressed on. Another small creek would cross the road a couple miles ahead, just below Green Mountain.

Josh and Molly reached the creek an hour and a half later. It was frozen over. They evaluated the site and decided it was as good a place to camp as anywhere. It would be at least another day before they could reach the Kettle River and get out of the high altitudes.

The temperatures hovered between fifteen and twenty degrees most of the day. It dropped as they climbed up towards Green Mountain as the sun set. They were in shadows by the time they reached camp. Molly glanced at the thermometer on her pack as she took it off.

“Seven degrees,” Molly moaned. “You better plan on sharing your sleeping bag tonight. I’ll freeze my ass off if we don’t huddle together to stay warm.”

“Are you sure, princess?” Josh asked. He was still smarting from the silent treatment Molly gave him after she tried to kiss him the night before they reached Loomis. “I wouldn’t want to annoy you like I did five days ago at that last park we camped at. It’s lonely enough trekking through the mountains without you giving me the cold shoulder too.”

“Giving you the cold shoulder?” Molly snapped back. “What in the hell do you mean about me giving you the cold shoulder? I offer you a kiss to thank you for everything you’ve done and... and... well to offer you more.”

“More?”

“It’s silly, never mind,” Molly answered.

“No... what?”

“I hoped you’d want to be more than friends when I offered you that kiss,” Molly replied. “It was stupid. You made that clear enough when you yelled at me about the kiss.”

“I wasn’t yelling about you kissing me,” Josh answered. “You acted like you expected us to stroll into Loomis the next morning to a grand parade to city hall where the mayor would give us the keys to the city. You were counting too heavily on getting back to civilization the next day. I was trying to temper your hopes in case there were Chinese in Loomis. I didn’t want you going to pieces if we found them in the town.”

“That’s all you meant?”

“It was,” Josh replied. “I was startled when you kissed me. I thought you still considered me to be a muscle bound, dumb soldier who wasn’t good enough for the well-to-do daughter of Sedro-Wooley’s finest family.”

“I don’t think of you like that at all, Josh,” Molly said. She stared down briefly before looking back into his eyes. “...at least not anymore. I was a dumb girl who risked her life to get a hair dryer back then. I should be on a truck or bus right now, heading for Oregon or California and safety with my family. Instead I’m here with you... and very grateful to be here too. I’d be dead now if it weren’t for you helping me through things I couldn’t have ever imagined doing a month ago.”

“I couldn’t leave you behind,” Josh said.

“Yes, you could have,” Molly retorted. “I never in my wildest dreams imagined I could camp in sub-zero temperatures, hike through the knee deep snow and climb mountains this time of year. You helped me survive through all of this. You are anything but a muscle bound, dumb soldier. I’ve learned enough to know when to say thank you.”

Molly wrapped her arms around Josh’s neck, pulled his head down and planted an intense kiss directly on his lips. Josh was staggered by the heat of the kiss.

“Um... um... you’re not the stuck up little girl I thought you were when we met,” Josh stammered. “I didn’t mean stuck up... uh... um... and you’re not a little... um...”

“Shhhhh!” Molly responded as she held a single finger up to Josh’s lips. “You were right. I was a silly girl when we met three weeks ago. You... this whole experience... it taught me what really matters. You made me grow up very quickly.”

“I understand,” Josh said. “Look at me. I should have started college this semester. Instead I’m a soldier who had to command a tank. I’m too young for all the shit I’ve had to do too.” Josh stared square into Molly’s eyes. “This war is forcing us to do anything that we need to do to survive. Do anything. Just survive.”

“Yeah,” Molly acknowledged quietly.

“The next thing we need to do to survive is to get camp set up,” Josh suggested. “I can just taste Mrs. Dahlstrom’s jam on more of the homemade bread Anna sent with us.”

“I can too,” Molly agreed.

The experienced pair of campers set things up quickly. Josh put a pot of snow on the fire to melt into drinking water after they found the small creek the map showed near their campsite was entirely frozen over.

Night falls quickly in the mountains in late November. The pair had their packs hung and headed to bed immediately after dinner. It was too damn cold to hang out outside, even by the fire. Josh climbed into their shared sleeping bag first. Molly shimmied into the tight space after him.

----oooOooo----

“Don’t shoot him!” Josh’s eyes shot open as he scanned the darkness for the threat. “NO! Don’t kill, Josh!” Molly trembled and then threw an elbow back into Josh’s side. Josh relaxed a little as he realized she was having another nightmare. He wrapped an arm around Molly’s bare torso and leaned his head in close to the frightened girl.

“Shhh... It’s OK,” Josh murmured into her ear as he gently rocked her. “Wake up, Molly. You’re safe. I’m safe. We’re OK.”

It took about thirty seconds for Molly to come to and relax. "It's OK," Josh murmured reassuringly in her ear as she calmed down.

"Thank you," Molly said quietly. "That Chinese officer was going to shoot you again."

"It's OK," Josh soothed as he cuddled against Molly to reassure her. "He's dead. You shot him. We are safe, both of us. We're OK."

Josh Warner was a normal, healthy, twenty-one year old male. He hadn't gotten laid in months. He hadn't jerked off in over a week. His mind was focused on comforting Molly. The rest of his body... Hot Damn! Here's a cute, sexy, nearly naked girl rubbing against us! Josh's cock flushed with blood and grew to a hard erection.

As luck... or fate would have it, his cock was pointed straight away from his body as it grew. It thrust forward directly into the V where Molly's thighs met. Josh's eyes shot open in embarrassment. He tried to back away to free his hard-on. Molly's body backed up with him to keep the comforting contact.

Molly Lawrence was a normal, eighteen year old girl who was sexually experienced. She knew what was trapped between her legs. She had been with her former boyfriend more recently than Josh had been with a girl, but she was used to regular sex; had been for the last year and a half.

Molly wiggled her bottom to allow Josh's cock to penetrate further between her legs. She felt a rush of warmth run through her body as she felt the obvious sign of desire from her protector. The man who was saving her life saw her as a desirable woman.

Molly squeezed her thighs together and reached down with one hand and grasped the head of his cock and began rubbing.

"Molly... noooo..." Josh moaned. "Please... nooooo..."

Molly had been with less experienced boys. She knew this was nervousness talking not a lack of interest. She continued rubbing. Josh lasted a minute or two at the most. His panting turned to a long, low moan as he shot a load of cum into Molly's hand.

Molly had been in this situation a couple years ago on dates before she went all the way with guys. You couldn't let the guy's cum splatter all over the car's upholstery or carpet. She had gotten used to swallowing. Molly brought Josh's load of semen up to her mouth and licked it clean. She kind of liked the funky sweetness of it. She rubbed her hand against her belly to dry it when she was done.

"Why did you do that?" Josh murmured as he recovered from his climax.

"I wanted to say thank you for everything you do to protect me," Molly answered back.

"No, thank you," Josh replied. His now limp cock slipped from between Molly's legs. He left his arm draped over her side, his hand resting on Molly's tummy as they fell asleep again.

----oooOooo----

November 29, 2013 – Below peak of Green Mountain, 10 miles west of Curlew, Wa.

The sun was peeking over the pass between Green Mountain and Marble Mountain to the south when Josh and Molly woke up. The morning wasn't as cold as Josh and Molly expected, around 11 degrees. Josh built a nice little fire to heat coffee for them before they enjoyed more of Mrs. Dahlstrom's jam and bread.

While they were eating Josh commented, "You didn't need to do what you did last night."

"That hand job?" Molly answered. "I thought you would enjoy it. I just wanted to say thank you for everything you're doing to save my life."

"It was appreciated but wasn't necessary," Josh replied. "I don't want you to feel pressured."

"It was just a thank you for all you've done," Molly answered. She gave him a wink. "Now... if you should happen to want to return it with a little 'you're welcome,' I won't mind..."

The whoop... whoop... whoop... of approaching helicopters interrupted Josh before he had time to ponder exactly what kind of 'you're welcome' Molly had in mind – verbal or...?

Both Molly and Josh hopped up and watched expectantly to the southeast. Half a second later four sunlit green choppers appeared over the dark mountainside to their south. Josh almost waved to get their attention before he spotted the big red star on the front of each chopper, just above the windshield.

"Down!" Josh commanded. Molly followed instantly. She saw the Chinese markings too. The four choppers headed almost over their position and disappeared over Green Mountain in seconds. Josh dashed for his pack and the satellite phone as soon as the choppers disappeared. Molly grabbed their compass and took a bearing on the choppers' direction of travel.

"58 degrees magnetic," Molly reported as Josh dialed the number for the Air Force.

"Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Sgt. Romano, how may I direct your call?" the voice reported when he accepted Josh's call.

"Frosty Boot calling for the duty officer," Josh responded smoothly.

"Good to hear from you, Frosty Boot," Sgt. Romano responded. "It's been a few days. Let me get Capt. Foster."

"Thank you, sergeant," Josh replied.

"Frosty Boot! Good to hear from you," Capt. Foster remarked enthusiastically when he got on the line. "It's been too long since we heard from you. What can I do for you?"

“I have an urgent sighting for you,” Josh answered. “Four Zhi-8 transport helicopters flew directly over our position a minute ago, on azimuth 58 degrees mag.” Josh relayed the grid coordinates to Capt. Foster. “These choppers are something new. We haven’t seen them before today.”

“You’re over sixty miles east of where you reported five days ago,” Capt. Foster noted. “You must have been humping your asses off to hike that far.”

“No, we contacted some locals in Loomis,” Josh explained. “They helped us to Tonasket, where more locals helped us out. One of them drove us out to Curlew a couple days ago.”

“What intel can you give us about conditions in Loomis, Tonasket and Curlew?” Capt. Foster asked. Josh related the full tale of their adventures over the past few days. The fact that the local EMS and fire companies were acting as resistance to the Chinese was news to the captain.

The whoop... whoop... whoop... of helicopters interrupted Josh’s conversation with the captain. They were approaching from the northeast, the direction the four choppers had flown a few minutes earlier. The choppers flashed overhead again, heading southeast as they disappeared over the ridge beyond Mable Mountain. Two extra choppers accompanied the four transports.

“Captain, I have two Zhi-10 attack choppers escorting the four Zhi-8s,” Josh announced into the phone.

“237 degrees magnetic, Josh,” Molly added after checking the course of the choppers. Josh relayed the course to the captain.

“Any chance of getting a chopper to come pick us up, Captain?” Josh asked after he finished reporting on the Chinese choppers. “We’re pretty far west of Omak and the anti-aircraft batteries that gave your guys so much trouble a couple weeks ago.”

“Negative, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster answered immediately. “Your report just now about the attack helos makes it highly unlikely. Our forces are stretched thin and our main focus has to be on the Pacific front. The Air Force has been tasked to provide maximum air cover for our rear guards as we fall back through Seattle. You and your young lady will need to continue hiking east.”

“Understood,” Josh acknowledged. “Could you help me with a personal message? I’ve been trying to get word to my family that I’m still alive and hiking east to safety. I’ve called my home but there is something wrong with the phone. I can’t seem to reach them by cell phone either. Is that because they’re evacuating?”

“I would assume it is,” Capt. Foster agreed. “Civilians in that area were evaced a week ago. I’ll have the public affairs officer interface with the Evac Coordinators to locate your family and get them word.”

“Could you do the same for Michael... uh...” Josh added.

“Michael R. and Sandra L. Lawrence,” Molly added.

“Michael R. and Sandra L. Lawrence,” Josh added into the sat phone. “Molly would like her family to know she’s safe and going to get out.”

“Will do, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster acknowledged.

“Any chance of getting intel from you?” Josh asked. “What is the status of Northport? Is it in American hands or have the Chinese occupied it? It would be nice to know where we can find safety with friendly forces.”

“I don’t know,” Capt. Foster responded. “I will get that information for you and have it ready for your next call-in.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Josh answered before ending the call.

Josh and Molly went back to finish their interrupted breakfast. They were packing their gear after breakfast when Josh commented, “We’re going to have to be very careful this afternoon. We’re going to cross I-395 and the Kettle River, which are a little less than eleven miles away.”

“So we’ll get their mid-afternoon,” Molly added.

“Right,” Josh confirmed. “We may need to hide out in the woods and wait to cross the highway and river after dark. I don’t want to blunder into Chinese in the daylight.”

“Good plan,” Molly agreed. “I’m up for a little night hiking, if that is what we need to do.”

“Let’s do it!” Josh declared.

The trail wasn’t difficult. They followed the snow covered dirt road downhill around the flank of Green Mountain and continued down, following the Middle Fork of Little Boulder Creek. The sky was clouded over with low gray clouds, but the temperature warmed anyway as they descended. A few miles down the hill they reached a paved, snow covered road. Their pace picked up.

Three and a half hours later the paved road they were following turned and headed uphill. Josh and Molly turned east and followed County Road 595. They followed this dirt road for about fifteen minutes before taking a break for lunch. They were getting closer to I-395 and it was time for caution.

Josh and Molly continued down the dirt road. The afternoon was warming even though the wind picked up. Snow was melting and little rivulets meandered down the roadway. Half an hour later they came to a ranch gate. The house was visible uphill a couple hundred yards through the sparse trees.

“Would this be a good place to hide out until dark?” Molly asked. Josh pondered the question for a minute.

“It may be,” he agreed. “Be cautious. Is your pistol handy?” Molly patted her coat pocket. Josh had insisted they have the arms ready in case of trouble that morning. The two walked up the lane to the edge of the trees. Two German Shepherds were lying dead on the front lawn, halfway between them and the house. The front windows were broken and the door was kicked in, hanging only by its bottom hinge.

“What happened?” Molly asked quietly. Both could see that this was not an abandoned ranch. It was well cared for until... whatever.

“Nothing good,” Josh murmured back. “Let’s get out of here. This doesn’t feel safe.”

“It gives me the creeps,” Molly agreed. They quietly crept down the hill to the road again. They headed east, keeping to the edge of the road where they would be less visible. They hiked for an hour down the valley, encountering nothing but silence.

Josh and Molly reached the edge of the mountains and the half mile wide plateau before the river. They found another house close to the road on the right. The front of the house was riddled with bullets and the front door was flapping in the wind. All the front windows were shot out or broken.

“I think we better hide out here until dark,” Josh suggested.

“What if they come back?” Molly asked. Josh could see the alarm on her face.

“If you mean the owners, I doubt they’ll be back,” Josh answered. “If you mean the Chinese... why would they return? They seem to have taken care of whoever was here already. We’re half a mile from the interstate here and I don’t want to go wandering around too much longer in the open. We’ll get spotted and picked up if the Chinese have patrols in this area.”

“Which they probably have,” Molly added.

“Exactly,” Josh agreed quietly. He signaled for her to pull her pistol before taking his M-16 off his shoulder. They approached the house cautiously, guns at the ready. No one interfered before they reached the house. Josh gestured for Molly to press herself against the wall while he went in. He entered the way he was taught in basic training. He burst in the front door, stopped and scanned the room with his eyes and weapon.

A forty-some year old man was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. A deer rifle was laying on the couch by the front window. Josh scanned the steps for signs of life before advancing past the body into the next room – the dining room. A couple chairs were knocked over and a glass was broken on the floor but there were no other signs of people.

Josh advanced into the kitchen. There had been a struggle here. The flour and sugar jars were overturned and spilled on the floor. Chairs were overturned. Josh stared at the green and white checked table cloth over the kitchen table. It had spots of blood on it in numerous places. Near the edge beside the overturned chairs he spotted a few yellow stains on the white squares. Josh recognized these dried stains immediately. Sometimes as a boy he’d used a white gym sock to wipe up his cum after he jerked off. After a couple days they looked like these semen stains.

Josh had a choice to go back to the stairs and living room or follow a door to what most likely was the pantry or laundry room. He went that way but stopped short when he poked his head in the door. A blond haired woman in her forties was lying face down, naked from the waist down on the floor. She had been shot, execution style with a bullet hole in the back of her head. Josh's guess at the table had likely been correct. This was the scene of a rape and two murders.

Josh turned back to the kitchen, bumping into Molly. "Jesus!" Josh snapped. "I told you to wait outside!"

"Is she dead too?" Molly asked, trying to hold her emotions together.

"Out!" Josh insisted. "This is no place for us to hide out. Out!"

Molly did as she was told. She and Josh exited the house and headed back to the road.

"She was raped, wasn't she?" Molly asked as they caught their breath on the road.

"Most likely," Josh agreed.

"Thank you for getting me out of Sedro-Woolley," Molly said. "You saved my life."

"And your virtue?"

Molly laughed. "You'll have to talk to Tom Alderston about that. He took it when I was in ninth grade."

"Your great Romeo?" Josh teased.

"No, it was more like the big old senior tailback on the football team and big man in school deigned to take a lowly freshman out one Saturday night."

"Bad first time?" Josh asked.

"No, not really," Molly explained. "He was a decent lover but a little too selfish. All he wanted to do was go out the bluffs, park and screw – first date, second date, third date. I got tired of it quickly. I wanted him to take me to a movie, hang out with friends... you know, do more than screw."

"I was a nerd in high school," Josh answered. "I don't know. I got turned down by a lot of girls when I asked them for dates. I didn't get a serious girlfriend until I was a senior. Our first time was the night of the senior prom. Going all the way with Heather was sweet but awkward at the same time."

"That was all the other girls' losses," Molly said. "I'm sure you've learned to become a very considerate and thoughtful lover by now."

"I don't know," Josh responded. "I try hard. Let's get moving. That house is a bad place and I want to get out of here. Keep to the side of the road."

Molly followed Josh as they continued down the road. A third of a mile east they spotted the ruined embers of the next ranch across the valley. The blackened chimney and some wall studs marked the house. Remains of the barn and two sheds were visible. Josh and Molly continued down the road, careful to remain out of sight of the interstate ahead. They hiked ahead around a mile and a half, the road staying near the top of a small ridge as it intersected the interstate at an angle.

Josh's map didn't show any more little black squares that would indicate houses between their location and the Kettle River. The map was last revised in 1992, so there might be newer houses it didn't show. Josh decided they should duck into the brush and trees of a small creek about a quarter of a mile before they hit the interstate.

The pair ate a cold dinner of the last of Mrs. Dahlstrom's jam, Anna's bread and two cans of cold baked beans Mike gave them. Half a dozen times during the late afternoon and early evening groups of Chinese Humvees roared up or down the interstate. Most likely they were involved with the troops the four choppers had ferried in that morning, somewhere to their north.

Josh and Molly stalked closer to the highway after dark. The hills and interstate were quiet. The only sound was the gurgling of the water down in the river. Josh and Molly dashed across the deserted interstate after five minutes of watching for danger. No one challenged them. They hustled into the woods alongside the dirt road and worked their way forward, staying quiet and hidden as they approached the bridge over the Kettle River.

Josh made Molly wait while he crawled ahead to scout the bridge when they were a couple hundred yards away. He crawled on his belly from tree to tree, approaching the bridge stealthily. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the bridge. The Chinese hadn't felt a need to garrison this crossing. They felled half a dozen pine trees across the road to prevent any vehicles from crossing. He walked back and picked up Molly. The pair were across the Kettle River in five minutes time, safe as could be.

Josh and Molly hiked up the gravel road as it climbed into the hills ahead. The hill rose steeply on their left. A small creek tumbled down the hill in the woods on their right. About a mile up the hill they reached another house. The house appeared deserted.

"You ready for a break?" Josh asked. "We've probably put in fifteen miles since this morning. I think we need to hole up and rest until tomorrow night. We're not hiking on trails in the woods anymore. We need to travel by dark."

"I agree," Molly said. "I'm beat. Do you think we'd be safe in that house?"

"I suppose so," Josh answered. "It looks deserted."

The house had a couple broken windows in front, but otherwise didn't seem to be in as bad a shape as the houses they saw in the afternoon. The front door was locked when Josh tried it. He climbed in the front window to get inside.

The house was a mess, furniture overturned and broken knick knacks and glass scattered across the floor. Josh carefully surveyed each room of the one story house, gun at the ready, before deciding it was safe to let Molly inside too. They turned the furniture right side up. Josh found a broom and swept the broken glass up. The two worked by flashlight. They didn't want to risk anyone finding out they were there.

Josh and Molly checked the kitchen cupboards to see if any food was available to replenish their stock. The kitchen cupboards and refrigerator had been stripped bare. They explored the house again after checking the kitchen. It had two bedrooms. The first had a bed. The second bedroom appeared to be used for storage. Josh offered to let Molly sleep in the bed. He'd sleep on the couch in the living room.

Josh hung his coat and clothes over the arm of one of the chairs and lay down on the couch, using his sleeping bag as a blanket. He fell asleep quickly.

----oooOooo----

Josh woke up when someone prodded him in the face with a cold piece of metal. He opened his eyes, only to be temporarily blinded by someone shining a flash light in his face.

"You're a soldier, aren't you?" the voice behind the light demanded. Josh's eyes adjusted enough so he could see the piece of metal was the barrel of a shotgun.

"I am an American soldier," Josh replied.

"Don't make no never mind," voice insisted. "What are you doing in my house?"

"I was tired," Josh replied. He didn't know if the person knew about Molly. She wasn't in the living room. "I got separated from my unit in Sedro-Woolley. I'm hiking over the mountains to reach safety."

"I can't have no soldier hidin' in my home," the man insisted. Josh could see him more clearly beyond the glare of the flashlight. He looked to be in his sixties. "The chinks will murder me and my wife, for sure. They'll burn my place down too. They did it all up and down the valley last week. Anybody who resists gets kil't."

"I DON'T MEAN YOU ANY HARM," Josh insisted, louder than necessary. "YOU'VE GOT THE GUN. I'LL DO WHATEVER YOU SAY!"

"Shush!" the man insisted. "Get your clothes on and get movin'. You can't stay here."

"May I get up?" Josh asked. "I need to get my clothes." The man looked around the room briefly. Josh saw his eyes widen.

"Why'd you clean things up?" the man demanded.

"I thought you'd want things in order," Josh replied. "Somebody could get cut with all the glass on the floor. Did the Chinese do this to your place?" He saw the man relax a little as he listened to Josh explain.

"No, I did it," the man answered. "I wanted them damn chinks to think my place had been ransacked already so they'd leave me and my wife alone."

"Good idea," Josh said as he gestured towards his clothes. "May I get dressed?" The man nodded his consent. Josh grabbed his clothes and returned to the couch. He put on his socks and started putting on his pants when they were interrupted.

"Drop the gun, mister!" Molly insisted. She was behind the home owner with a pistol prodding his back. The man lowered his gun to the floor.

"Step away from the gun," Josh insisted as he jumped forward to grab it. "Thank God, Molly. Good work."

"Don't kill me," the man pleaded. "I just wanted to run you off so me and my wife don't get kil't by them chinks."

"We're not going to hurt you," Josh said reassuringly. "It's exactly as I said. The two of us have hiked through mountains from Sedro-Woolley, where we got cut off by the Chinese."

"Sedro-Woolley? The whole way on the coast?" the man asked.

"We're tired and wanted a place to bed down for the night," Josh explained as he dressed. "We don't want to impose. We will be on our way in a few minutes."

"Really?" the man remarked as he visibly relaxed.

"Is your wife somewhere safe?" Josh asked.

"She's down in the cellar. The chinks won't find her."

"That's a wise precaution," Josh said as he slipped on his boots. "We ran across too many people that the Chinese raped or killed today. Your torn up upstairs was convincing. We thought you and your wife had fled or been killed. Sorry for cleaning things up."

"That's all right," the man responded. "Your heart was in the right place."

"How did all of this trouble get started?" Josh asked. "The Chinese haven't been this brutal in the other communities we hiked through."

"That damn old fool, Jim Carter," the man responded. "The fool had to take some shots at the chinks when they come to his ranch. They kil't him and his wife. God knows what become ah his kids. The chinks went on a rampage after that. Burnt the whole place to the ground. Shot up nearly every home around here. All started at Carter's place, over across the river from here."

“I think we hiked past the place yesterday,” Josh said. “We’ll clear out and you can disguise your place again. Sorry for troubling you.”

“If ‘n you git, there ain’t no harm done,” the man replied.

“We’ll be out of your way in a couple minutes,” Josh answered. “By the way, we put all the broken glass in your waste basket in the kitchen, in case you want to spread it out again to give the illusion of this place being trashed and abandoned.”

“Thank you,” the man said. “You’re a polite one... for a soldier.”

“I try,” Josh responded. “The two of us aren’t any different from you and your wife. We’re just trying live through this damn war.”

Josh and Molly packed their things, slung their packs on their backs and headed out.

“I hope you don’t mind, sir,” Josh said as they stepped out the door. “I am going to put your shotgun and shells out in your mailbox. I don’t want to get shot in the back as I leave. Give us five minutes before you come out to pick them up. I wouldn’t want to have to shoot you.”

“Fair precaution in these times,” the man agreed. “I’ll give you two a good head start. Good luck on your walk out of here.”

“Good luck to you and your wife,” Josh replied. “I’d think about driving out of here to safety, if you can.”

“We’ll take our chances until the army comes in and drives these foreigners out,” the man answered.

“That may take a while,” Josh said. “The war hasn’t been going well for our side. Good luck however you choose.”

Josh looked back as he and Molly walked across the front lawn to the road. The old man watched them through the broken front window but made no effort to stop them. Josh removed the shells from the shotgun and placed gun and loose shells in the mailbox. He gave the man a smile and a wave as they started east on the snowy, dirt road.

“Thank you for having my back,” Josh commented. “How did you manage to get the draw on him?”

“I had to pee a little earlier,” Molly explained. “After I went back to bed I heard someone walking from the kitchen into the living room. You were still snoring, so I knew it wasn’t you. I guess I was just lucky.”

“We were both lucky,” Josh said. “Thank you for looking after me. I doubt we would be waltzing out of his house this way if you hadn’t gotten a gun in his back.”

Josh and Molly walked about half a mile east before Josh checked his watch. It was almost 4:00 AM. "I think we better head up into the woods and set up camp now. I don't want to be on the road in daylight."

"I could use the sleep too," Molly said. "I'm dead on my feet."

They stopped at a spot where there were a bunch of tracks on the side of the road, up to the edge of the woods. They ducked into the woods, careful to make sure their boot prints didn't stand out from the rest. They climbed the hill a couple hundred yards. They found a large rock outcropping with a flat space to the south. They set up their tent so the outcropping would hide them from anyone along the road. Even though the temperature was in the mid-twenties, Molly insisted on sharing a sleeping bag with Josh. Both very tired youths fell asleep seconds after their heads hit their makeshift pillows.

----oooOooo----

Molly woke up at what must have been early afternoon. The clouds from yesterday had broken up and the sun was shining on the western, exposed side of the tent. It was almost too warm in the sleeping bag. Molly unzipped it a little to let some cooler air inside.

It felt so cozy nestled up against Josh – so safe... so comforting... cuddled with her protector... no, her savior. Molly's mind flashed back to the sight of the dead woman across the river who had been raped and executed. There but for the grace of God... and Josh, go I.

Rape and death could have been her fate if chance hadn't put Josh and Tyler on that street corner with her that horrible afternoon back in Sedro-Woolley. Josh and Tyler would probably have had an easier time getting back to American lines if they didn't have to drag her and all her junk along with them. They had risked their lives to save her. Josh had gotten her equipped properly, taught her how to hike and camp in miserable winter conditions and had brought her almost two hundred miles across the state safely.

Josh could be gruff but he cared about people and would do anything to help and comfort them. Josh didn't need to be kind to the old man last night after she had disarmed the him. He treated him well and left the warm house to sleep outside rather than disturb the man and his wife. It was so... Josh. He had a physical strength and a strength of character that was appealing.

Molly cuddled up, feeling totally safe and warm beside her protector. As she backed up against him she found Josh had an erection. The lump nudged against her back. That was fine. As Molly jostled, Josh's arm slipped off their sides, across her tummy and ended up with his palm pressing into her right breast. Her nipple hardened and tingled. That "itch" in her bottom returned.

Molly realized that it had been over a month since she'd been with a boy – sweet Evan, the senior whose family moved to Colorado a few weeks before the war hit Sedro-Woolley. She hadn't gone a month between boys since... well... since before Christmas of ninth grade. Molly reached between her legs to rub herself. It had been too damned long!

Molly was getting into the finger-play. Her body shimmied as her lust and need rose. That beautiful hard prick of Josh's was inches away. God, if only... Molly grew hornier as she rubbed herself. Why not?

Molly scooted up in the sleeping bag, allowing Josh's hard prick to jut out from his body. She scooted back down, allowing the hard-on to nestle between her thighs, millimeters from her aching pussy. Josh's hand slipped off her breast as she moved. She carefully placed it back on her breast before continuing to rub. She shimmied her body, loving it as Josh's hard-on rubbed the sensitive area between her anus and her pussy.

"Mmmm... Heather... yeah!" Josh murmured into her ear. His hand squeezed and rubbed her breast. Molly vaguely remembered Josh saying his first serious girlfriend's name was Heather. Josh almost certainly was having one very erotic dream right now. That was fine, as long he continued feeling up her breast.

Molly continued rubbing her bottom against Josh's cock while she diddled her clitoris. Josh continued mumbling sweet things into her ear. Her pleasure was rising, edging closer to climax.

"SHIT! WHAT THE..." Josh gasped as he awoke. "OH... Jesus!" he pleaded as he yanked his hand off Molly's breast. "I'm so sorry... I didn't mean too." Josh paused for a second. "Shit! I'm not trying to take advantage. I'm sorry. I was having a really good dream and... and..."

"Shhh! It's fine," Molly responded. She reached over and pulled Josh's hand back and set it on her breast again. "I want this. Please..."

"Um... um... I don't... we shouldn't..."

"We should, Josh," Molly insisted. She held his hand on her breast so he couldn't take it away again. She continued rubbing her bottom against his hard shaft between her legs. "I need more than this, Josh."

Molly shifted hand holding Josh's hand on her breast down between her legs. She grasped the end of Josh's prick and shifted it so it pointed up against her hole. "I need all of you!"

"Umm... um..." Josh stuttered. Molly scooted down, engulfing and inch or so of Josh's prick inside her pussy. "I don't... we shouldn't... Oh... oh, shit... nooooo..."

"You don't want me," Molly snapped. "I'm just a damn high school brat to you. You think I'm too ugly to have sex with."

"No... no... not at all," Josh answered. "I know you're not the brat I took you for three weeks ago when we met. You're a great girl... no a great woman. It's just that... I don't know..."

"You don't want to fuck me," Molly retorted.

"NO... it's not that," Josh replied. "I do want to, but... It's just a horrible idea. We've got too much to worry about right now to add sex to the mix. I don't think..."

“You don’t want fuck me.”

“I do,” Josh answered. Molly immediately impaled a couple more inches into her body. “It’s a bad idea. We shouldn’t...”

“I think you’re special and I want to, no I need to do this,” Molly insisted. “I NEED you to do this, Josh.” She forced another inch of prick into her body.

“Oh... FUCK!” Josh growled. He thrust forward, skewering all of his prick into Molly’s tight, hot pussy. The force of the blow expelled all the air from Molly’s lungs.

“Yes!” Molly gasped when she recovered her breath. Josh had by far the biggest prick she’d ever had. It felt so wonderful to be filled this way. Josh was definitely longer than Evan, her longest to date. He was thicker too, even thicker than the squat little prick on her tenth grade lover, Adam Everson. Josh stretched her in ways she had never experienced before – and it felt WONDERFUL!”

“Are you alright, Molly?” Josh begged. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean too...”

“I’m fine,” Molly answered. “Go ahead and fuck me. It feels great!”

Josh was a soldier and, almost by definition, it had been too long since he had felt the hot embrace of a woman’s pussy wrapped around his rod. He started thrusting slowly, withdrawing and then spearing his prick back into Molly. He rubbed and caressed the breast in his hand as he humped and fucked this cute coed on the end of his prick.

Josh rocked back and forth, pulling out some and then poking his prick back into Molly’s hot, tight womanhood. It had been way, way too long since he had felt this wondrous pleasure. Molly groaned and panted as she felt Josh’s manhood prodding and massaging her insides. Josh nuzzled and kissed the back of Molly’s neck as he boffed her.

Josh picked up the pace. Molly chanted “Yeah... yeah... that’s it,” as Josh screwed her brains out. The mating was too intense to last more than a couple minutes. Molly had continued to diddle her clitoris as Josh fucked her. Molly reached orgasm first.

“FUCK ME!” Molly demanded as stars burst before her eyes. Her vagina spasmed in ecstasy while Josh continued thrusting. Her whole body shimmied from the joy. Molly’s pussy’s spasms and clasping at Josh’s already primed prick did what nature intended. Josh’s balls pulled tight to his body and he thrust hard one more time into Molly. His prick throbbed and he spurted his wet essence into Molly’s welcoming vagina as he tried to grind more deeply inside her. Molly’s cervix dilated and spasmed, suctioning all the semen and sperm it could get into her uterus.

The sated couple collapsed, Josh rolling on his back and Molly laying half on her side, half on Josh. Josh’s softening cock stayed inside Molly for ten or fifteen seconds before softening completely and plopping out. A few dribbles of semen ran out of Molly onto Josh’s balls. The couple panted and gasped for air as they recovered.

“Damn, that was good,” Josh murmured first as he recuperated. “I don’t know if we should have, but...”

“Of course we should have,” Molly replied. “Best sex in my life. We definitely should have.”

“We’re not in love,” Josh responded. “This will complicate our getting...”

“Shhh!” Molly answered. “You’re a very special person to me. You’ve rescued me from near certain rape and death. You’ve helped me survive in these mountains. You’ve taught me what a real man should be with your strength of will, calmness and decency.”

“I’m just doing what needed to be done.”

“Nonsense,” Molly retorted. “You would have been better off leaving me behind in Sedro-Woolley. We both know that. You took care of me when you had every reason to ditch me. You protect me and help me through all of this.” Molly rolled over so she was facing Josh. “I think I’m falling love with you.”

“Don’t say that,” Josh said. “You’re too...”

“What? Young?” Molly answered. “You’re only two years older than me. That is nothing. Don’t think of me as a high school kid.”

“I don’t,” Josh said. “You’re a very beautiful woman. I understand that, but our ages are closer to three years apart. My birthday is in a few days.”

Molly laughed. “My birthday was December 10th. When’s yours?”

“The fourth.”

“OK, we’re two years apart in age,” Molly insisted. “There is nothing wrong with a woman being two years younger than her man, is there?”

“No,” Josh agreed. “It’s just that...”

“You don’t have feelings for me,” Molly pouted. “You don’t care for me.”

“No... no... it’s not that. I do care,” Josh replied. “You look great. I never, ever expected you to handle all this backpacking as well as you did. You’ve saved me just as many times as I’ve saved you. Remember back on the river north of Tonasket? You killed the Chinese officer who would have murdered Mike and me. You didn’t give it a second thought. You protected me. Think about last night. You made sure that old man didn’t blow my head off with that shotgun. I care about you deeply. I just don’t know if this is the right place to fall in love.”

“Do we get to choose where it happens when we fall in love?”

“No, I guess not,” Josh conceded.

“Let’s give this a try,” Molly added before laughing. “You’ve already seen me at my worst. I get better – a lot better.” She gave Josh a wink. “Especially if I had my hair dryer.”

“You are special,” Josh admitted. “Maybe we see what happens, especially after the way you just rocked my whole world now.” He gave her a big, Cheshire cat grin. “Maybe... if you pulled your hair up in a ponytail or wore a cap until we can get you that hair dryer.”

“Behave!” Molly retorted as she gave him a playful swat on the chest. They stared into each other’s eyes for a couple seconds before embracing and exchanging a scorching kiss – their first as a couple.

----oooOooo----

Molly and Josh decided they needed some lunch after necking for a while. The sky was bright blue with a few wisps of clouds. Molly’s pack zipper thermometer said it was 44 degrees out. It was a great day. Unfortunately, the couple was forced to stay hidden in the woods, well clear of the road and any traffic that might come by. They hung out outside for half an hour after lunch, enjoying the beauty of the warm day.

“We probably should try to take a nap,” Josh suggested after a while. “We need to be well rested if we’re going to hike all night. It’s too dangerous to hike in daylight among all these houses.”

“You’re right,” Molly agreed. “I’m not tired yet but maybe... we could try a little afternoon delight so we’re tired enough to sleep.”

“I could go along with that.”

“I thought you might,” Molly responded. “Not many guys refuse when you offer them sex.”

“No, not many,” Josh agreed.

“Get that big prick of yours back in the tent and show me what you can do with it,” Molly said as she reached over and tickled Josh’s side. Josh broke into uncontrollable laughter. She continued tickling.

“No... no... please...” Josh begged, tears running down his cheeks. “Stop...” he begged, his half an octave higher than normal. “Please stop.”

Molly stopped tickling. “Hmmm... ticklish, that’s good to know. Let’s get you inside. I want more from you than laughter. Give me your best.”

“I’ll try,” Josh agreed as he tried to regain his composure.

Their tent was in the sunshine, so it was even warmer inside than the temperate fall air outside. Molly laid open one sleeping bag, undressed and lay on her back for Josh. She spread her legs wide for her man as he finished disrobing. Josh scrambled between her legs. “Do you want to get straight to it or maybe... uh...”

“Let’s make out a little first,” Molly suggested. “I’m still so sloppy from your cum down there that we probably could go straight to fucking, but a little foreplay would be nice.”

Josh pulled back a little. “SHIT!” he growled. “I wasn’t thinking this morning. We didn’t have any protection. What if I got you pregnant? Oh... SHIT!”

“Shh! Relax, it’s OK,” Molly answered. She pulled Josh’s hand over and ran it over a small bump under her skin. “I have a birth control implant. You didn’t knock me up earlier.” She laughed. “My parents had no choice when they learned I was having sex back in tenth grade. I’d have been knocked up for sure, multiple times, if it wasn’t for this.” She tapped a little bump on her left arm.

“That’s a relief,” Josh said. Josh leaned down and kissed Molly. Molly embraced him as the two rolled to their sides, continuing to make out. Molly wrapped her legs around Josh as they continued. Josh’s cock sprang to a painfully hard erection. It rubbed against their bellies as the two continued sucking face.

Josh kissed his way down to Molly’s breasts after a while. He had seen them frequently in the past three weeks, but this was his first chance to really inspect them closely. Molly’s chest was graced with two firm, grapefruit size mounds. Quarter size areolas were crowned with pencil eraser sized nipples. Josh quickly found that Molly loved to have her nipples licked, sucked and tickled.

“You ready?” Josh asked after his nipple play unwired Molly’s brain just as much as her tickling had to him earlier. All she could do was giggle and nod her agreement.

Molly rolled onto her back and spread her legs wide. Josh positioned his cock at her hole and thrust forward carefully. Josh went slowly at first as he pressed a couple inches into Molly. She glowed and gave him a big smile of approval. He pressed firmly and smoothly inserted the remainder of his seven and a half inch prick into his lover.

“Mmmm... wonderful,” Molly sighed as Josh’s pubic bone crashed into hers.

Josh pulled part way out and thrust back in, quickly finding a delightful rhythm. “Some girls I’ve been with think I’m a little big. Are you OK?”

“Fucking fantastic,” Molly answered. She wrapped her legs around Josh’s butt. “Keep doing exactly what you’re doing. It’s perfect.” Josh continued pumping in and out as Molly caressed his sides and back with her hands. “Little faster,” she urged.

Josh picked up the pace a little. “When you hit bottom, grind here,” Molly suggested as she rubbed her clitoris. Josh leaned down a little and rubbed his furry pubis against her clit the next thrust. “Yeah... oh, yeah... like that.” Molly continued giving Josh directions about how to pleasure her. He followed her advice carefully. “Wiggle your butt.” Josh did and was rewarded with more sighs and groans of pleasure.

Molly face turned pink and then red. The crimson spread down across her shoulders onto her chest. Molly grunted and panted as she demanded he fuck her faster and harder. “Go... go... go...” she

chanted as Josh fucked her furiously. “YES! Oh God... YES!” Molly exclaimed as a big orgasm hit her. Molly clung to Josh and squeezed his butt in tight to force all of his delicious prick into her pussy. All Josh could do was rut since he couldn’t withdraw his cock.

Molly clung tight to her guy as she shook and panted through the orgasm. She released her tight grip after twenty or thirty seconds. “Should I keep going?” Josh asked solicitously. “Is this too much?”

“Keep... fucking...” Molly managed to gasp between pants. Josh did. Molly began giving instructions again as she regained her composure. Josh followed her advice carefully. He soon had her worked up close to another orgasm. Molly could see Josh was close too. His thrusts were less syncopated. She grasped a buttock in each hand and encouraged Josh to keep time. He was dripping sweat onto Molly. His face was as flushed as hers. Molly managed to coax Josh to give her a couple more hard thrusts before he froze above her. Molly’s body flooded with endorphins as she reached rapture. Two seconds later Josh pressed his hard prick in to burrow it deeper into Molly’s belly and blasted a big load of semen and sperm into her belly.

Josh whimpered and collapsed on top of Molly as his cock flooded her insides with his life’s essence. The big soldier dominated the small high school cheer leader. Molly wrapped her arms around the small of Josh’s back. She didn’t mind having a guy lay on top of her for a while after a good fuck.

Josh definitely gave a good fuck, she noted with satisfaction. He listened and followed direction much better than many of her high school guys. His big prick stretched her exquisitely. Magazines she read back home said big cocks didn’t matter, how you handled it was what mattered. Those writers hadn’t been fucked by Josh. He was big AND he knew what to do with his cock too.

“Am I too heavy?” Josh muttered as he came to his senses.

“You’re OK for a little bit,” Molly answered. She withdrew her arms from around his back. Josh rolled off her and lay on his side, staring at this wonderful girl who had just blown his mind for the second time in one afternoon. Molly felt a few drops of semen drip out of her, but not much. Her body seemed to like Josh just as much as her mind did.

The two cuddled and exchanged kisses as they recovered. “That was the most intense sexual experience of my life,” Josh said after a kiss.

“You were pretty damned good, yourself,” Molly replied.

“I’m not that experienced,” Josh continued. “I was a computer nerd in high school. That didn’t get me ANY interest from the girls. My first girlfriend in high school was pretty plain. That was probably why she’d go out with a nerd like me. She and I fumbled around when we took each other’s virginities. I’ve been with a few girls since high school. We didn’t know much more than Heather and I our first time. I did learn little with a prosti...” Josh blushed and hesitated.

“Prostitute,” Molly continued. “It’s OK.”

"It was one Saturday night when I was at Maneuver Center down in Georgia," Josh explained. "Some of the guys and I went out for drinks. We went to this strip club and... well you can figure out the rest. I learned a lot from that girl. She was talkative during sex and told me what she wanted. Kind of like you did."

"You listened well," Molly stated.

"Why not?" Josh responded. "You seem to know a lot more about what you're doing than me. Not that I think you're a slut or anything."

"I'm not," Molly replied. "I've had a lot of experience the last few years. I am choosy about who I sleep with."

"The most popular girl in school," Josh added. "You pretty much had the pick of any guy you wanted."

"You're pretty close to the truth," Molly agreed. "I never lacked dates. I wasn't easy. No going all the way on first dates. I got asked out a lot. If the guy was half way nice and considerate, I'd be willing to do him after a few dates. After three years like that, I've learned a few things. The most important thing I learned was that I needed to tell a guy what I liked."

"And I appreciated the help," Josh said. "I suspect that is why this was so spectacular."

"You listened well, were gentle and considerate," Molly added. "That is why this was so spectacular. I have a lot more experience than you but this afternoon still blew me away. I've never enjoyed sex as much as I did with you today."

"All due to you."

"No, you were a big part of it," Molly insisted. "You listened to me. A lot of guys think they know it all and have to demonstrate what a big man they are. You listened and that made it better for both of us."

"I guess," Josh agreed.

Both Molly and Josh froze. The sound of a large vehicle straining to climb a hill rumbled in the distance. They listened as it crested the hill near the old man's house and then continued on the road below them. Thankfully the truck or Humvee didn't stop. They listened as the sound disappeared to the east.

Chapter 9

Evening, November 30, 2013, Woods above County Road 595. Nineteen miles west of Curlew, WA

Josh and Molly's sexual escapade tired the two out enough so they could enjoy naps. They lay on top of one open sleeping bag and used the second as a blanket. They slept naked, side by side. Josh woke up first. The orange glow on the western side of the tent told Josh it was time to get up and get going. They packed their things and climbed down the hill through the trees carefully. Their eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness. The snow cover, lit by the crescent moon in the western sky provided enough light to hike without turning on their flashlights.

Josh and Molly followed the dirt road east. They passed a few more houses, all of which seemed to have been ransacked and deserted. They didn't investigate further for fear of finding someone else like the old man hiding nearby. They passed a sign announcing, "Colville National Forest." They didn't see more houses after that.

The temperature dropped quickly after the sun set. Molly and Josh saw ice forming on puddles along the road. The snow began to crunch under their boots. Hiking kept them warm, even though the wind gusted and blew, further cooling them.

An hour and a half later they reached a cross road. A paved road headed north. Their dirt road continued east and began a slow ascent of the hills to their east. The road roughly followed the Pierre Creek. The pair took a short break about once an hour to rest. The trudged east as the moon sank down behind the mountains to their back. The winter stars sparkled overhead after the illumination from the moon disappeared.

Josh and Molly took a half hour break around midnight near Klein Springs, the high point in their hike that night. They had climbed about 1,000 feet in the ten miles since they left camp. They snacked on parts of a couple MREs before pushing on down into the Big Sheep Valley. About an hour later they found the road winding along a steep hillside. The blackness of Elbow Lake contrasted with the surrounding snow and tree covered hills. They stopped for a minute to enjoy the view.

"How are you feeling?" Josh asked. He pointed across towards the hill on the far side of the lake. "The map shows a campsite on the far side. We could set up camp there and get some sleep. We're in the national forest out of sight again, so I wouldn't mind doing most of tomorrow's hiking in the daylight."

"I feel pretty good," Molly answered. "I could put in a couple more miles if you want, Josh."

"I figure the campsite is about a mile away," Josh replied. "That will leave us about ten miles to the bridge at Northport for tomorrow."

“Another bridge?”

“We’re going to be running into rivers and bridges – the Columbia, the Pend Oreille, the Kootenai, the Yaak, the ...”

“Enough,” Molly insisted. “I get the picture. We’re going to be fighting to get across rivers until we reach American territory, wherever that is.”

“Yes, exactly,” Josh replied. “I think it’s best if we camp over there, get up late this morning and do the eight or nine miles to get us close to Northport and then camp and rest until darkness tomorrow. We can scout a crossing after dark.”

“That’s a plan,” Molly agreed.

Josh and Molly needed half an hour to get around to the campsite overlooking Elbow Lake. They set their tent up on a nice level spot. A long handled, hand operated water pump was in the middle of the camping area. Water would be no problem in the morning. Molly’s thermometer read “18”, so the pair decided to share one sleeping bag again for warmth. It was around 1:30 AM when the two dropped off to sleep, too tired for any monkey business.

----oooOooo----

December 1, 2013 – Elbow Lake, 9.6 miles west of the bridge in Northport, WA

Josh woke up around eleven in the morning. The sun was shining brightly on their tent but it was still a little chilly inside, quite unlike the previous mid-day. Josh dressed and headed outside to take care of his morning business. He returned to their tent.

“Molly, it’s eleven o’clock,” Josh suggested from outside. “It’s time to get up and have something to eat.”

“Too nice in here,” Molly answered. “Let me sleep a little longer.”

“I want to get down close to Northport while it’s light,” Josh explained.

“Come back to bed for a while,” Molly retorted. “Your lady is unsatisfied.”

“Unsatisfied?”

“I need you to slip me your beef,”

“Huh?” Josh stammered. He thought he knew what Molly meant but the concept of going to bed with the same woman two days in a row was totally foreign to his experience. It had never happened in his lifetime. Usually it was weeks or even months between the times he got laid.

“I need you to boff me until my brains leak out my ears,” Molly snapped. “I want you. Is that plain enough?”

“Umm... um... yeah.”

“Get in here,” Molly added as Josh unzipped the tent flap. “You don’t want me in a pissy mood all day, do you?”

“No, that would be terrible,” Josh agreed. “Boff you ‘til your brains leak out? I’ll do my best.”

Molly pulled her night T-shirt off while Josh disrobed. He joined her under their sleeping bag/blanket. The two made out. Josh may not be the most experienced guy in bed but he knew about foreplay. What he didn’t know, Molly happily showed him. Within a few minutes Josh was pounding away, merrily trying to force Molly’s brain matter out her ears. The two collapsed into a sweaty but happy heap when they finished.

“Do I need to tie a rope to you and lead you around?” Josh teased as they recovered. “Did I succeed forcing your brains out?”

“I have a few brain cells left,” Molly answered. “You won’t need to lead me around. I can manage to think and see.” Molly laughed. “You did a good job trying though. It was fun.”

“It was,” Josh agreed. “Actually it was a lot more than fun. Yesterday and just now are the only times in my life where I had sex without wearing a rubber. It feels so much better this way.”

“For both of us,” Molly replied. “That has been one of the benefits of having my implant. No worries about the stupid old rubbers.”

“And you can’t get pregnant?”

“No, not going to happen,” Molly answered. “I’ve been taking boys to bed for three years without getting knocked up.”

Josh glanced at his watch. “We really do need to get up and get hiking. I’d like to get close to Northport before dark.”

“Sure... no problem... whatever,” Molly answered agreeably. “I’m a pussy cat when I’ve been satisfied.”

“I’ll have to see to that in the future,” Josh agreed.

The pair packed up, tore their tent down and had some lunch before heading down the road. The road they followed paralleled a small creek, which joined a slightly larger creek. Around an hour and a half later, the small creek intersected the Big Sheep Creek. The creek ran through a wide meadow between two mountains. Further down the road the flanks of Belshazzar and another mountain pinched together, leaving their road in a steep narrow valley. They followed it downhill a few more miles.

The hiking was easy. The snow on the road wasn't deep. The temperature hovered around freezing all afternoon. It was a nice day to hike, especially compared to the trials they went through a couple weeks earlier in the high Cascades. Josh could see they were approaching the Columbia River valley as soon as the road turned right and the creek dropped sharply downhill and went to their left. They climbed a small ridge to the top of a plateau. Josh was cautious as they crested it, lest they end up in sight of any Chinese sentries in Northport. They needn't have worried. The long flat plateau shielded them from view in Northport. They followed the road across the plateau almost two miles.

The road bent left and started downhill. Josh was in the lead as they hiked. He motioned Molly backwards as soon as they made the turn. Josh could see a large oval track in the distance with the bridge and town of Northport beyond it. They backtracked a hundred yards and slipped into the trees on the north side of the road. All they could do was hang out for a few hours until it got dark.

Josh and Molly pulled their food supplies out of their packs at dinner time to take inventory. Both knew their packs were considerably lighter than a couple weeks ago when they added MREs back at Ross Lake. The two had devoured all the food Mrs. Dahlstrom, Bob and Anna and Mike had given them.

Josh scanned the pile of MRE meals that remained. They had three beef enchiladas, a veggie burger, a sloppy joe, two spicy penne pasta and two vegetable lasagna packs left. They also had half a dozen uneaten odds and ends left over from previous meals.

"I think we need to start rationing our food," Josh suggested. "We suspect the Chinese will be here at Northport. We are going to have a hard, twenty to thirty mile hike across the wilderness from there to the next town, Metaline Falls. If the Chinese have it, we have another 50 miles plus to Bonner's Ferry, over in Idaho."

"We're doing what... maybe twelve or fifteen miles a day?"

"We are," Josh confirmed.

"We better find some friendly people like Mrs. Dahlstrom and Bob and Anna," Molly replied. "This food isn't going to get us to Idaho."

"It will, if it has to," Josh countered. "We may be a little hungry when we get there, but it will get us there. Pick one of the MRE packs. We'll share it."

"Let's get the worst out of the way," Molly answered. "Let's do the veggie burger tonight."

The two warmed the veggie burger and split the remainder of the meal pack. Half a banana nut muffin, a handful of dried fruit, a couple sticks of gum, weak lemon tea and half a veggie burger with BBQ and hot sauce on wheat snack bread was their meal.

The pair hung out, out of sight in the trees and low brush until around 7:00 PM that evening, an hour after dusk. Josh wanted to make sure the roads were quiet. They walked forward along the road, listening for any sound of people or vehicles as they walked. Twenty minutes later they stood in front of a sign announcing "Northport International Speedway."

There was a chain across the driveway and the lights were out at the speedway. Josh decided they should see if they could get a better vantage point from the sloping hill on the far side of the track that normally provided seating for race patrons. Josh and Molly crossed the dirt race track and climbed the small hill. Josh's hopes for clear intelligence fell when he looked across to the bridge and town. The small hill was the edge of a large plateau. Josh could barely make out the east end of the bridge and Northport in the distance. He couldn't see clearly enough to know whether the Chinese were there or not.

The plateau was completely bare of cover, so Josh and Molly headed southeast from the raceway towards the river, keeping the edge of the plateau between them and danger. They needed about ten minutes to cover the brushy ground to the road. No buildings were in sight. They crossed the road and approached closer to the river. The end of the plateau gave them cover until they were right up to the river bank. It was a steep sixty foot drop down to the Columbia River. The plateau towered a hundred feet above them. Josh laid on his belly and crawled out among the fringe of brush at the top of the river bank.

From this vantage point, Josh could clearly see the entire bridge. Each end was brightly lit. He could make out people congregating on the west end, but couldn't see any details about who they were or what they were doing. He watched for a minute, trying to judge who these people were.

Josh heard the answer before he saw it. He made out the firing off of big military diesel engines. Thirty seconds later two boxy tracked vehicles with small turrets on top wheeled around the corner into view. They proceeded across the bridge. They were marked in the Chinese camouflage pattern, not the U.S. one.

“Shit!” Josh growled.

“What?” Molly asked. She was laying the grass behind Josh out of sight of the bridge.

“The Chinese definitely hold the bridge into Northport.”

“What do we do now?” Molly asked.

“We go south along the river,” Josh replied. “Hopefully we can find a boat of some sort so we can get across, like we did at the last river.”

“Maybe we’ll find some friendly people who can get us some food,” Molly added.

The two backed away from the river and backtracked to the road again. They walked south along the edge of the road, ready to jump to cover the second they heard any vehicles on the road behind them. They walked a couple hundred yards south before finding the first house. It was located a couple hundred yards off the road, along the top of the bluffs above the river. No driveway was visible. Josh decided it would be safer to approach potentially friendly houses as open visitors rather than by sneaking across the field. They continued south, watching for signs of life at the house. They saw nothing.

Six hundred yards down the road they found a spot where two driveways joined the road. One angled back towards the dark, first house. The second went into a house about a hundred yards back. They could see the yellow glow from some of the windows. Josh looked at Molly questioningly. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded yes as she pointed towards the house. Josh led the way.

He walked boldly down the driveway just like he was going to see old friends. He made no attempt to hide. A second driveway peeled off to the right. Josh and Molly continued ahead to the first house they spotted. Josh walked right up to the front door and knocked.

Josh and Molly could hear scrambling inside. Josh knocked again. The door cracked open half an inch and a bearded middle-aged man peered out with one eye. "What do you want?"

"I'm an American soldier," Josh explained as he opened his coat to show his military issue shirt. "We're trying to get away from the Chi..."

"You have to leave right now!" the man responded insistently. "This isn't safe."

"Do you have a boat we could borrow?" Josh persisted. "We want to get across the river before the Chinese catch us."

"Do you know what the Chinese did to the people in Ellisforde?" the man demanded. "Some fool tried to help American soldiers cross the river below that bridge. The soldiers killed a couple chinks. The chinks executed every man and boy in the town and burned it to the ground a week ago. Did the same thing north of Orient before that. It ain't safe for you to be at my door. Get along!"

"If you have a boat, we'll be gone in seconds," Josh began.

"I'll sic my dogs on you!" the man growled. "Buster! Billy! Come!" They heard the claws of two dogs scratching the wooden floor as they responded to their master's command.

"We're leaving, sir," Josh apologized. "Sorry to have troubled you."

Josh and Molly retreated down the driveway to the spot where another driveway went south to the next house. Josh shrugged his shoulders and marched towards that house. They walked up to the front door and knocked. An older man peeked at them from the window beside the door before opening it for them.

"What can I do for you two young ones?" he asked pleasantly. He gave Josh and Molly a slight smile.

"I'm an American soldier trying to get across the river and escape back to American territory," Josh explained as he exposed a bit of his fatigues.

"Get inside quick," the man said. Molly and Josh hurried inside the house. The old man slammed the door shut. "You stopped at my son-in-laws a minute ago, didn't you?" Josh and Molly acknowledged that they had.

"We don't have much time. I'm sure my son-in-law is on the phone right now with the sheriff's department. The Chinese will be here in about ten minutes. We're going to have to hurry to get you two across the river before they catch you. I assume that is where you're trying to go."

"Yes... umm... how did you..." Josh stuttered, momentarily flustered at the man's correct guess. The man pulled Josh towards the window and pointed outside.

"There's a path back of the garage that will lead you down the bank to my dock and fishing boat. Take the boat and get you and this pretty young lady over to safety. Work your way downstream about a mile south of town. After the far shore bends away, make for the small island. When you reach the island, head for the east shore of the river and beach my boat in the little inlet by the railroad. Pull it up beside the little creek near the railroad. Got the directions?"

"Um... mile downstream on this side, make for the island and put your boat in the inlet beyond it near the railroad?" Josh stammered.

"Exactly," the old man answered. "Now, you need to step outside young man, and bust down my front door while I go find some rope."

"Uh... what?" Josh stuttered.

"Bust down my door," the old man said. "Young lady, lock the door when your friend is outside. I have to get some rope so you can tie me up. It wouldn't do for me to claim I know nothing about you two when the Chinese come. I can convince them that a strong, young soldier overpowered an old man and stole his boat. They'll believe that."

"Ohh... Kay," Josh agreed. He was astonished at the quickness of the old man's mind. He was right. He would be much safer from the Chinese if it looked like he'd been overpowered. Josh stepped outside and waited for the click when Molly locked the door. He waited a couple seconds and then kicked the door in. He'd practiced this in basic training. Real life was actually easier than the simulation back in Georgia. The frame splintered at the lock and the door flew open.

The old man was seated on a kitchen chair. Molly was starting to tie his legs down. "Don't make it too loose," the man instructed. "This has to be convincing." Josh helped Molly tie up the old man.

"Is this OK?" Josh asked. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Don't fret, I'm a tough old bird," the man answered. "Duct tape my mouth shut now."

"Why are you doing all this?" Josh asked as he tore a piece of tape off the roll.

"You're that hero they're going on about on the radio," the man answered. "You get this pretty young lady and yourself to safety then come back and kick these Chinese out of here again. I'm counting on you."

"We're just trying to survive this war," Josh answered. "I'm not a hero."

"You'll do for now," the man replied. "Now, get this finished before the Chinese show up and catch you."

"What about your boat?"

"You put it where I told you and I'll be able to go fetch it," the man answered. "If not, no big deal. It's an old boat and I don't mind losing it for the greater good."

"Thank you for everything," Josh said. Molly echoed Josh's thanks. He put the duct tape over the old man's mouth, careful to make sure he didn't cover his nostrils too. The man nodded his approval as Josh and Molly left. They ran across the yard, past the garage and down the steep trail that led to the river. The old row boat had a small outboard motor. Josh decided it would be better to row down river.

Molly and the packs went up front. Josh took a seat in back and pushed off the makeshift dock. The river was still. Josh decided they were in backwater as he rowed a half dozen yards off shore. He paralleled the west shore, trying to keep their boat in the shadows of the tall bank.

Josh rowed downstream for a couple minutes. "You've done this before, haven't you?" Molly asked.

"Rowing Merit Badge my third summer at Boy Scout camp," Josh answered. "Anyway, I grew up on the water. I live about four blocks from the sound back home."

"Is there any outdoor skill you don't know?" Molly teased.

"I'm sure there are plenty of them," Josh huffed as he pulled on the oars. "Keep a lookout ahead. I don't want to run into any rocks or downed trees along the shore." The wind was blowing from the south, making Josh work harder to row downstream in the nearly calm river.

It was a long pull into the wind, but eventually Molly and Josh saw the far shore pull away from them. Josh had to row part way across the channel but eventually they spotted the small island the old man told them about. Josh rowed past it and followed the eastern bank until he found the inlet. Josh rowed up the inlet right to the creek. Josh beached the boat on a sandy patch beside the creek. A tall stone retaining wall apparently held the railroad up above the river. A small culvert allowed the stream to run under the tracks.

Josh and Molly hoisted their packs on their backs before scrambling up the steep, brushy bank to the railroad. They searched both ways before crossing. Northport was well north of them. This area was dark. They hurried across the tracks and scrambled up another steep bank to Route 25.

Josh's map showed a lane leading to a quarry was a couple hundred yards north of their location. The two jogged up the highway, then jogged up the dirt lane until they were out of sight of the road. They continued ahead to the old quarry. The pair needed twenty minutes to reach the old quarry. They passed a couple sheds, but they decided they needed more distance between them and Northport before they could rest that night.

They followed a little used dirt road around the west and northern edge of the quarry. They followed a small, indistinct trail north between two hills. The trail petered out after a quarter mile. Josh and Molly bushwhacked ahead. Josh's map showed a small lake ahead. They spotted the blackness of the water ten minutes later. A house overlooked the lake from a small hill to the north. Thankfully, the house was dark. Molly climbed the hill, staying clear of the house. They continued north on the house's driveway. The driveway followed the base of the mountain between them and Northport. They passed a couple more driveways leading to other houses. No one disturbed them as they hiked by.

The walking was easy. The homeowners had cleaned the snow off the long shared driveway. Half an hour later Josh and Molly reached a county road. The county had cleared the road down to pavement. The pair headed east on the road. They passed half a dozen houses as they hiked towards the mountains and safety.

They found a cluster of houses at a crossroads close to midnight. They took a dirt road marked, "Black Creek Canyon Road" as they headed up into the mountains. The past couple miles had been flat. This road wasn't. Josh and Molly slowed down as they steadily climbed towards the pass above them. Clouds and a chill wind blew through them as they climbed. They passed a couple homes as they climbed. Josh and Molly didn't want anyone knowing where they were going, so they quietly passed each house.

The road ended at the last cluster of houses. They followed what appeared to be traces of an old logging road up further towards the pass. Forty-five minutes later the logging road started switchbacks up a mountain spur.

"Bed time?" Josh asked. He knew Molly was slowing and she wouldn't mind. It was past 2:00 AM.

"Bed time," Molly agreed quickly. The two found a level area for their tent, set up and stowed their packs in trees for the evening. They shared a sleeping bag but neither had any interest in hanky-panky. They fell asleep cuddled together within minutes of lying down.

----oooOooo----

December 2nd, 5 miles east of the Columbia River bridge at Northport, WA

Molly and Josh slept through the morning. They deserved it. The pair had hiked 45 miles in the past four days, including close to twenty in the past 24 hours. Their hike had been physically draining. Emotionally, it was even tougher. They had faced possible capture by the Chinese at two river crossings, witnessed firsthand evidence of Chinese atrocities, faced off with a shotgun wielding homeowner, escaped minutes ahead of capture by the local sheriff aided by the Chinese troops and still crossed the mighty Columbia River and hiked safely into the mountains again without being detected.

The sun had passed midday when Molly finally awoke. Molly noticed some time in the night that one of them had knocked off the second sleeping bag they used as a blanket on cold nights. The inside of their sleeping bag was toasty and warm. Molly snuggled up against Josh, enjoying the luxury of sleeping in.

Josh may have been asleep but his male physiology reacted per instinct to the soft, warm female cuddling with him. Molly soon was rubbing against his hardness. Josh awoke with a start after a brief, but very intense erotic dream.

“Ohhh... umm...” Josh stuttered.

“I need you inside me,” Molly replied. She pulled his hand across her body and placed it on her breast.

“I don’t want to... uh... take advantage...”

“Nonsense! You protect me,” Molly declared. “You give me comfort. I need your comfort.” She wiggled her backside against Josh’s erection. “Please???”

Josh provided the comfort she requested. The coupling was reassuring. The two were learning each other’s rhythms. A few minutes later Josh rolled on his back after he climaxed. Molly laid on his chest and gave her protector kisses.

“That was wonderful, lover,” Molly said between kisses.

“Is that what we are?” Josh asked.

“Maybe? I think we’re heading that direction.”

“I don’t know,” Josh replied. “Would any of this be happening if we weren’t caught up by the war?”

“Probably not,” Molly conceded. “So what? I wouldn’t have considered dating or anything more with a soldier or a high school computer nerd. We both know what you thought about cheerleaders. That would have been our loss.”

“I feel I’m taking advantage of you,” Josh retorted. “I’m in my twenties. You’re a kid who hasn’t finished high school. I don’t know if there will be any kind of future for us together.”

“I may not have finished high school yet, but I certainly am not a kid today,” Molly answered. She snorted. “The last month made damn sure I wasn’t a kid anymore. What we just did is good for both of us. It gives us hope and a reason to live. I don’t know if we have a future. Do any of us in this war?”

“Fair point,” Josh agreed.

“Let’s enjoy what we can do for each other while we get ourselves out of here and get to safety,” Molly said. “The future will have to take care of itself when... and if it gets here.”

“When did you get so smart?” Josh asked before returning Molly’s kisses. They exchanged kisses for a couple minutes before getting dressed and packing their things. Josh and Molly shared a single MRE for their meal. Josh studied the map while they ate under low, gray clouds.

The whoop-whoop-whoop of multiple helicopters interrupted their meal. Josh and Molly flew into action. Molly had their compass out before the helicopters appeared over their camp. Josh was dialing the number to Air Force Search and Rescue Center.

“Course 70 degrees,” Molly reported coolly.

Josh counted eight Zhi-8 transports and four Zhi-10 attack copters as he waited for the rescue center to answer. Josh quickly IDed himself and reported the Chinese choppers. Sgt. Rivera, the duty clerk thanked Josh when he finished the report.

“Sergeant, do you have a second for helping with some intel for us?” Josh asked after the sergeant passed the report up the chain of command. “We’re not certain where to cross the Pend Oreille River. Could we get information about whether the following places are American or Chinese held?” Josh read off the latitude and longitude for Metaline Falls and the Boundary Dam, 9 miles downstream and a mile above the border with Canada.

Josh waited a minute while the sergeant in Colorado’s Search and Rescue Center checked. He came back and reported the Chinese took the town, Metaline Falls, two days ago.

“Item at 54-26, 4-74.5 is held by friendly forces,” Sgt. Rivera added. He was referring to the dam on the river.

“Confirm... friendly?” Josh asked.

“Affirmative. It is friendly,” Sgt. Rivera answered. “I suggest you and your companion head that direction, Frosty Boot.”

“Thank you, sergeant,” Josh said.

“Keep up the great work, Frosty Boot,” Sgt. Rivera replied.

“What’s friendly?” Molly asked expectantly.

Josh laid the map down on the ground where Molly could see it. “The Search and Rescue Center reports that the Boundary Dam is still held by our forces.”

“Thank God!” Molly gasped. “That’s not that far. We can be there in two or three days. Get another MRE. I’m still hungry.”

“Bad idea,” Josh replied. He placed the compass down on the map, traced a line from their position on the map along a 70 degree line. It headed straight for the Boundary Dam. “Where do you think those Chinese helicopters are going?”

“The dam,” Molly answered quietly. Josh could see the elation deflate from her as she said it. “Where do we go now?”

“We head for the dam,” Josh answered. “They said the dam was held by friendly forces. That means the army is holding the dam. We don’t know that the Chinese will be able to capture it today. We hike for the dam, approach it cautiously just like every other river crossing and see what we find when we get there.”

“So we stay on half rations?” Molly asked. Josh nodded his agreement.

“I want to get over this mountain this afternoon,” Josh explained. “We can rest up until dark and then we can hike across the next valley. The map shows we will be out of the national forest there. I don’t want to hike through it in daylight, not after the experience we’ve had with the locals at the last two stops.”

“I understand,” Molly said.

“We can get back into the forest with a few hours of road hiking tonight, get a good night’s sleep and continue hiking in daylight until we get to the dam.”

Josh and Molly finished their meal, loaded their packs and headed up the mountain. The pair needed an hour to climb the 1,400 foot high, bare, rocky mountainside. They took a rest in the meadow by the remains of an abandoned ranch. The snow covered dirt road they followed paralleled the O’Hare Creek as they descended towards Cedar Creek and the next north-south valley.

The low clouds and deadening silence promised snow was coming. Josh and Molly reached a small cabin hidden in the woods in the valley around 4:30 in the afternoon. The cabin was run down but it was shelter from prying eyes and snow. It was a couple hundred yards from the main road in the valley.

Josh and Molly shared another MRE for dinner while they waited for darkness. The promised snow started near dusk. The pair waited another half hour until complete darkness before they continued on. The snow flurries didn’t accumulate on the ground. The pair hiked out to the main road, turned right and headed south. They passed two houses, one lit, the other dark. No one from either house noticed their quiet passing.

Twenty minutes later they found the side road back to the national forest. A sign announced “Colville National Forest 1.5 miles.” Josh and Molly followed the wide, snow covered, gravel road up the valley between two mountains. Forty-five minutes later they were in the national forest, away from observers. They continued up the valley, reaching the crest around eight o’clock. Josh and Molly decided they were feeling good, in spite of the raw, sub-twenty degree temperatures and continuing snow flurries. Promise of finding American forces at Boundary Dam motivated them to press on.

The road ended in a long meadow. They crunched across the snow in the meadow, heading north. They found a tributary of the Cedar Creek at the far end of the meadow. They followed the creek down the valley until they reached a small, frozen lake. They were out of the national forest again.

Two houses overlooked the lake. Both were dark. Josh and Molly pressed on along the driveway down the hill to the next road. The road was paved and plowed, so progress was easy. Josh and

Molly followed the road east towards the next mountain. They pressed on for another hour before they reached the national forest boundary again. They hiked about fifteen minutes into the forest before calling it a night. Josh and Molly set up their tent, hung their packs and went to bed before midnight. It has been a long, but productive day. They hiked around thirteen miles in the past twelve hours.

----oooOooo----

December 3rd, 6 miles west of Boundary Dam on the Pend Oreille River

Josh and Molly had a full eight hours of sleep before stirring. Molly insisted on a romp in bed before she would let Josh get up. He didn't mind. He was getting used to regular sex for the first time in his life. It was pretty sweet.

The light snow from last night left a dusting of white on their tent and backpacks. Josh and Molly ate an MRE before packing and continuing their hike. The dam was only six miles away as the crow flies. The road followed long switchbacks along the flanks of spurs from Hook-Nosed Mountain, adding over five miles to their day's trek.

Mid-morning a flight of Chinese fighter-bombers flew by to the north, appearing to roughly follow the Pend Oreille River valley in Canada. Josh was in the middle of calling in the sighting when four American F-22s flew over them and engaged the Chinese aircraft. Two Chinese fighter-bombers went down before over a dozen Chinese fighters arrived. Capt. Foster was the duty officer who answered Josh's call. Josh gave the captain a blow by blow description of the action.

The Americans sparred briefly before turning and zooming back south towards their home bases. A pair of Chinese fighters chased after them. Josh and Molly had a clear view when the one of the Chinese Su-27 knockoffs launched a pair of missiles. One missile missed while the other exploded against the wing of an American jet. The jet spiraled overhead, smoking as it streaked over the top of hook nosed Mountain. The ejection seat fired off, freeing the pilot from the mortally wounded fighter.

Josh and Molly watched helplessly as two Chinese jets made strafing runs at the pilot as he descended on his chute.

"Jesus!" Molly gasped. "I can't believe they did that."

"It's war," Josh answered. The Chinese jets streaked northwest, satisfied they had taken out the American pilot. The parachute drifted down, dumping the unmoving pilot into the trees about a mile south of them.

"Capt. Foster, you have an F-22 down," Josh reported into the satellite phone as he watched the scenario unfold. "The pilot is going to land near us – maybe a mile away. The two of us will hike over and see if we can assist him."

"Very good, Frosty Boot," Capt. Foster replied. "Call back when you reach the pilot and give us a status report on him."

“Roger that, Captain,” Josh replied.

“Do you think there is any chance he’s alive?” Molly asked after Josh’s ended the call to the Search and Rescue Center.

“I don’t know,” Josh answered. “If we find he’s still alive, there is an excellent chance that the Air Force will send a chopper to pick him up. Being near this pilot could be really good for us.”

“Why would the Air Force risk a chopper to pick him up if they won’t come for us?” Molly asked.

“The Air Force puts great priority into taking care of their pilots,” Josh explained. “It’s best for the morale of the rest of the pilots to know they will be picked up if they get shot down behind enemy lines. I’m a ground pounder and not a high priority to the Air Force.”

“And I’m a civilian and an even lower priority than you,” Molly added.

“Now you got it,” Josh answered.

The two backtracked down the road about half a mile before spotting the parachute uphill a few hundred yards. They struggled to climb the steep, snow covered hillside to reach him. His parachute caught in the tree limbs. They found the ejection seat first, laying on its side. A red light on the back blinked. A hundred yards uphill they found the pilot. He was hanging limp in his harness.

Josh could see the Chinese pilot’s handiwork. The American pilot took a couple rounds in the head. More rounds hit his chest. No question – this pilot was dead. Molly hugged Josh and hid her eyes from the sight. The two moved downhill again to the road.

Josh called the Search and Rescue Center. They operator connected Josh with Captain Foster when he reached the center.

“Frosty Boot, what can you report?” Capt. Foster asked.

“The pilot is KIA,” Josh replied. “I hoped we would be able to help him. I hoped we would be able to catch a chopper ride out of here when you came for him. I guess there’s no chance of that happening.”

“Roger that, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster agreed. “All assets are tasked already. We will not have time to get you or the pilot’s body tonight.”

“I understand,” Josh said.

“Your position is roughly five miles west of a certain large concrete object, correct?” Capt. Foster asked.

“You mean 54-26, 4-74.5?” Josh asked.

“Exactly that one,” Capt. Foster agreed. “Tonight would be a good night to be on the hill overlooking that structure.”

“I understand the structure is friendly?”

“Negative, Frosty Boot,” Capt. Foster replied. “The Chinese took possession yesterday. It is still a good night to be on the hill overlooking that concrete object. Watch and see.”

“Wilco,” Josh replied. The captain ended the call.

“Interesting,” Josh commented as he put the phone away. “The Chinese have captured the dam but Capt. Foster wants us to get over there before tonight. It sounds like the military has something planned.”

“Do you think they’ll rescue us tonight?” Molly asked.

“He didn’t say that, but I think that is what he is implying.”

“Let’s get hiking,” Molly declared.

Josh and Molly needed until mid-afternoon to reach the hill overlooking the Boundary Dam. They stopped inside the woods on the west edge of one of the main power lines taking power from the dam back to the power grid. Josh couldn’t make out much around the dam since they were about half a mile away. The pair settled in and watched to see what the night brought.

Josh decided it would be safe to get a closer look at the dam and the Chinese after dark. Molly and Josh dashed across the open area under the power lines into the woods. They walked through the open woods until they reached to the east edge of the plateau. Josh could see the Chinese more clearly from this vantage point.

Half a dozen eight wheeled Chinese ATVs carrying four Chinese soldiers each were stationed around the dam. A pair of what appeared to be overgrown jeeps mounted anti-aircraft guns and possibly missile launchers too. Josh knew he and Molly wouldn’t be crossing at the dam unless Captain Foster’s hinted assistance arrived. If help came, there had better be a lot of it too.

Molly tried to nap while Josh studied their maps by the red light of his flashlight. There had to be somewhere to cross. He started studying the Canadian stretch of the river. There was one dam downstream. Could they get across there? Doubtful. The Chinese held Northport and the Boundary Dam. Why would they skip that one?

Josh looked at the map south of Boundary Dam. There was another small dam shown south of Metaline Falls and another at Ione. The map showed more homes south of Metaline Falls, so they might find a boat like they did at Northport. If nothing happened tonight, he and Molly would have to go south. Hopefully they could make it on the scant rations they had left.

----oooOooo----

FLASH! BAA... VOOM! Josh and Molly, totally startled, bolted up and gazed down at the flash below them. As the fireball died down, they could see one of the two Chinese anti-aircraft vehicles blazing away. Josh saw the next streak flash across the sky and strike the second Chinese AA vehicle now that his attention was directed down to the flat area above the dam. The remaining Chinese scurried around the dam, searching for their adversaries. Twenty seconds later Josh and Molly heard the thumpa-thumpa-thumpa of incoming helicopters. Surprisingly, they were approaching from the north.

The Chinese fired small arms wildly into the sky, attempting to hit the incoming helicopters. Josh and Molly watched as three attack copters rose into sight above crest of the dam. They devastated the Chinese troops and ATVs with mini-guns and Hellfire missiles. Blackhawk helicopters swooped in after the attack choppers softened up the Chinese. Ropes dropped as they hovered over the flat area above the dam and squads of special forces dropped to the ground. Were they rangers? Josh wasn't sure at this distance.

"Let's go!" Josh commanded. "Get your pack and move it. We've got to get down there, ID ourselves and get hell out of here!"

"Is it safe?" Molly gasped. Josh's practiced ear told him that the Chinese were barely returning fire. He heard scattered fire from Chinese weapons. M-16 fire quickly silenced the remaining Chinese soldiers.

"The dam is ours," Josh answered as he pulled Molly to her feet. "We've got to hustle."

The pair struggled to get down the steep slope to the dam through the thick brush. Josh watched as the American teams scattered. The squad from the first chopper secured the flat area nearing the burning Chinese anti-aircraft vehicles. The squad from the second chopper headed across the dam, taking out the last couple Chinese soldiers resisting their assault. The third squad disappeared into one of the dam's buildings.

Josh and Molly had to pick their way down the steep, rocky hillside as they worked their way down to their potential saviors. They had to skirt a rock outcropping. Josh estimated it was about 600 yards to the landing zone where the American Blackhawks had set down after dropping their squads of special forces. Halfway down they found a stone road. They followed it down the hill. As the road turned away from the dam, Josh motioned for Molly to stop.

"We need to be real careful when we make contact with our forces," Josh explained. "Guns away. We announce ourselves by shouting 'Americans' as we pop out of the woods. We come out with our hands up so they know we are no threat to them. Got it?"

"I got it," Molly agreed. She put the pistol she was carrying into her coat pocket where it was out of sight. The two jogged down the gravel road. The main entrance road was in sight when Josh and Molly heard rotors of the American choppers spin up to full power. Josh and Molly ran, turning the corner onto the paved road.

“We’re Americans,” both shouted as they threw their hands in the air. They dashed down the roadway towards the landing zone, waving their hands and shouting out their ID. One Blackhawk and then a second clambered into the sky, their turbine engines screaming at the effort.

The last squad of soldiers were dashing for the farthest chopper when Josh and Molly spotted them. They sprinted towards the soldiers, shouting their IDs and waving frantically. They were too far away. The final soldier belly flopped into the helicopter as it took off for the dark sky.

“FUCK!” Josh snarled in disgust. “Fuck! Fuck! FUCK! I can’t believe this fucking disaster!”

“Call search and rescue,” Molly suggested as Josh slowly cooled down. The six choppers were already out of sight, though not out of hearing. “Maybe one can come back and get us.”

Josh got the phone out and called immediately.

“AFSRC, Sgt. Mattingly speaking,” the voice answered when the phone stopped ringing.

“This is Frosty Boot,” Josh said. “I need the OOD immediately.” The sergeant called for the officer on duty.

“Major Brown here. What can I do for you Frosty Boot?” the officer on duty asked.

“The Rangers or Special Ops have an operation on at coordinates 54-26, 4-74.5,” Josh explained. “My hiking companion and I are present – ON SITE. Can you recall a chopper to give us a lift out? They departed less than a minute ago.”

“I am familiar with the op,” Major Brown replied. “I can try but I don’t know if I can get the Army to recall the flight.”

“Just give it a shot, please?” Josh begged. “We’ve been hiking through the Cascades for the past month. We are short on rations and running out of energy. We need a lift to safety.”

“I will give it a shot, Frosty Boot,” Major Brown promised. “Call back if you don’t have a chopper ride in five minutes and find out what your orders will be.”

“Wilco,” Josh answered before ending the call. He turned to face Molly. “Let’s scout around and see if the Chinese have anything useful to us while we wait to see if a chopper is going to come back for us.”

They avoided the two burning AA vehicles. The other four were shot up but safe to search. Josh and Molly debated taking Chinese submachine guns in place of the M-16 and pistol they currently had. Josh vetoed taking them. Molly had no experience with automatic weapons. He feared she would be as likely to shoot him as the Chinese, in case the weapon was ever used.

“Hey Josh, this one has something real useful,” Molly announced as she looked in the back of the last of the four ATVs. “I think it’s MREs.”

“Are you sure?” Josh called to her as he finished searching the ATV he was at. “Do you know Chinese?”

“The packages look a lot like our MREs,” Molly answered. “They have Chinese characters and English. This package says ‘2-Fried Rice with Sausage.’ She held up a tan colored plastic package that looked very similar to U. S. MREs. “Here’s one that says ‘1-Egg Rolls with Pork.’”

“That sounds like MREs,” Josh called back as he hurried over to join Molly. “Unload them. We’ll stock our packs with food if a chopper doesn’t come back for us.”

Josh and Molly sorted through the two cases of Chinese meal packs. The Chinese Army did not have as many options as the U. S. Army for meals. They found meals 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10 and 12. Josh glanced at his watch. It had been ten minutes since he talked with Major Brown. It was obvious that a chopper wasn’t returning for them.

Josh called into the AF Search and Rescue Center and got confirmation of the obvious.

“I’m sorry to report you are on your own,” Major Brown answered to Josh’s question. “The army is unable to reroute any help your way. Hike east and do your best.”

“Roger that,” Josh answered. “I’ll report in as long as I can. My phone is down to one bar. I doubt I will get you many more reports. Can you give us any intel about what we will find at the Kootenai River? I’m figuring on heading for Bonner’s Ferry or for Creston, up in Canada.”

“I’ll check for you, Frosty Boot,” Major Brown reported. He came back on the phone a minute later. “Both Creston and Bonner’s Ferry are friendly at this time. Expect them to stay that way. We are marshaling reinforcements to stabilize Idaho and the eastern British Columbia area.”

“That is good news, Major,” Josh said. “I will give you a call if I see unfriendlies heading your way.”

“Good luck, Frosty Boot,” Major Brown responded. Josh clicked the phone off immediately. He might have enough power for another phone call. Maybe not.

“We’re still on our own,” Josh announced. “We may have a shot at getting to safety at Bonner’s Ferry.”

“How far away is that?”

“About fifty miles,” Josh answered, chuckling. “As the crow flies.”

“And as the hiker hikes?” Molly asked. Josh just shrugged his shoulders.

“Let’s get this food loaded in our pack,” Josh added. “Carry as much as you can. I bet we’ll be hiking another eight to ten days. We need to get out of here before the Chinese return to retake the dam. I guarantee they will be back.”

The two loaded all the food that would fit into their packs before making their way across the crest of the dam. Water was roaring out of every discharge pipe at the base of the dam. Josh understood the purpose of the special ops raid. They wanted to empty the dam so the water behind it couldn't be used to flood the Columbia while U. S. troops were on the wrong side of the river. He knew the army was abandoning Seattle. The most obvious defensive spot was along the Columbia around Portland, Oregon. Preventing floods from taking out the bridges around Portland would ensure the U. S. troops could retreat safely from Washington State to continue the fight against these Chinese bastards.

"We need to haul ass, Molly," Josh declared as they started across the breast of the dam. "The Chinese usually hit back hard after an American counterattack. I expect their choppers to be coming in anytime."

"I'm following," Molly agreed as she hurried to keep up with Josh. They had no choice at the far side of the dam. They had to scramble through the brush and trees up a steep, 250 feet hill to reach the park road to the picnic overlook area above the dam.

"You up for an hour of hiking?" Josh asked. "There is a campsite by a lake about two and a half miles from here. It should be a decent place to camp for the night."

"I can do it," Molly aid. "Hiking will feel good. It's starting to get cold tonight. My thermometer says it's 18 degrees now."

The hike wasn't difficult. The stars twinkled in the cold, clear sky. The visible sliver of moon reflected off the snowy landscape. The road sloped uphill most of the way, but wasn't difficult for two experienced hikers. An hour later they reached Crescent Lake. They set up camp in the campsite farthest from the road on the opposite side of the lake.

Their campsite had a bear box where they could stow their packs overnight. Molly checked the temperature before they went to bed. It was down to 12 degrees. No comments were made. They shared a single sleeping bag.

"Happy birthday, Josh," Molly said after they cuddled together.

"Thank you," Josh replied. Molly turned so they could exchange a kiss before they went to sleep.

Chapter 10

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December 4, 2013, 49 miles west of Bonner's Ferry, Idaho

The sun was peeking over the hilltop to the east when Josh woke up. He stretched and then tried to disentangle himself from Molly so he could relieve himself outside. That woke Molly. She rolled over and greeted Josh with a kiss.

"You ready for your birthday present?" she asked. She snaked a hand between their bodies and rubbed his hard-on."

"Bathroom first," Josh gasped as she rubbed his erection. Molly let go of him. "You're insatiable, you know..."

"A girl knows what she likes," Molly retorted. "I like you. Come back quick."

"I can do that." Josh threw some clothes on and hustled outside to take care of business. Most unusually, he was able to use a real pit toilet instead of squatting outside in the woods like normal. That was good. The morning was chilly.

Josh returned to their tent, stripped and rejoined Molly in their sleeping bag.

"Oh! You're cold," Molly gasped as Josh's hands touched her body.

"Sorry."

"It's OK. I'll get you warmed up soon enough," Molly replied. Josh tried to keep his hands off Molly as he shimmied into the tight bag, face to face with Molly. The pair kissed for a bit before ratcheting things up. Josh warmed up enough that Molly enjoyed him caressing and fondling her breasts. A few minutes of foreplay left Josh and Molly ready for intercourse. The pair fumbled around until Josh was straddling Molly before he thrust his hard cock into her body.

"Mmm... nice," Molly breathed as she felt the long, hard shaft skewer her. "Nice and slow until I get used to that big dick of yours."

Josh couldn't help but smile when Molly called his cock big. What guy wouldn't? Josh pumped slowly at first. Molly cooed and sighed as he screwed her.

"Little faster," Molly directed. "Mmm... yeah... like that." Molly's commentary continued as Josh thrust in and out. "Yeah... faster... harder now..." Josh continued pumping in and out.

"AAEEEeeeeeee...." Molly squealed when Josh managed to rub hard against her clittie. "Again..." Molly gasped. "Do my clittie again.... Pppllleaseee?"

That was an easy request to honor. Josh was pressed tight against Molly's body by the tight confines of the sleeping bag they shared. Her hard nipples bored holes into his chest.

“OOooohhh...” Molly moaned. “Fuck... fuck me!”

Josh leaned down and gave Molly a kiss while he continued boffing her. “You do like to talk during sex, don’t you?”

“I can try to be quiet,” Molly responded.

“No don’t. I like the way you tell me what you like. You make it so easy for me to try to please you. Not all the girls I’ve been with expressed themselves so clearly.”

Josh chuckled as he remembered his first serious girlfriend and the way the two of them fumbled together as they learned how to have sex. He never knew if Heather enjoyed what they were doing or if she was enduring it to keep Josh satisfied so he wouldn’t look elsewhere for another girlfriend.

“Oh yeah...” Molly gasped. “You’re hitting my clittie nearly every time. Keep it... Ooohhh.... UP!”

Josh concentrated on bumping his pubic area and rubbing against her clitoris with each thrust. Molly gasped for breath as the feelings overwhelmed her.

“FUCK!” Molly gasped. “Fuck... fuck... fuck me...” Molly’s words lost coherence as she grunted and begged Josh to continue plugging her hard and fast. “OOooooooooohhhh... fff... ffff... fu.... fffuuuc... FUCK!”

Molly’s eyes glazed over as she let herself go the ecstasy. Molly hugged Josh tight to her body as she shook and squealed from her orgasm. Her pussy throbbed and pulled at Josh’s bare cock as he tried to keep up his rhythm. He growled, poked his cock hard into Molly’s body and let go. The euphoria engulfed Josh as his semen welled up out of his groin, shot through his cock and splattered out inside Molly’s desperate vagina.

Josh collapsed on Molly as powerful spurts drained his essence into Molly’s body. Josh managed to roll the two of them onto their sides in a tangle of sweaty limbs and bodies. Both lay still and panted as they tried to recover their senses.

“Thank you for the wonderful birthday present,” Josh commented. “It’s the nicest thing anyone ever gave me.”

“Wow!” Molly gushed. “That was great for me too.”

“I appreciate you telling me what you enjoy when we do this,” Josh said. “You make it easy to satisfy you. Not all the girls I’ve been with let me know if I was doing OK or not.”

“Their loss,” Molly laughed. “I learned after my second boyfriend to be demanding. Jared was bit of an asshole in many ways but he was very good in bed. I decided after I dumped him that I better let my guy know what I liked if I wanted to enjoy screwing.”

“I guess we should get moving this morning,” Josh sighed. “I figure we have around fifty or sixty miles to go – four to six days to go to get to Bonner’s Ferry. AFSRC seems to think there’s a good chance we’ll find friendly forces there.”

“Yeah, we should get moving,” Molly agreed. “I guess we can find out what these Chinese MREs taste like.”

“Yeah, we can,” Josh responded. “It’s them or we break out the Ratatouille MRE.”

“Pork fried rice sounds a little better for breakfast,” Molly answered as Josh unzipped their sleeping bag. They dressed quickly and packed their things. The morning was bitingly cold – around twelve degrees. The heated pork fried rice was odd for breakfast, but it was warm. The energy bar in the Chinese MRE was actually pretty sweet and tasted good.

Low clouds moved in overnight. They hovered just above the peaks of the surrounding mountains. Josh and Molly would hear helicopters operating off to the west but couldn’t see them. Josh assumed it was the Chinese reoccupying the Boundary Dam. The pair loaded their packs and headed south along the paved road for about three and a half miles. They followed a gravel road east that paralleled Slate Creek. They steadily climbed the valley between Boundary Mountain and Crowell Mountain.

Josh and Molly found two cabins and a spring in the mid-afternoon. Josh’s maps showed little water ahead on the trail after they left the cabins until they climbed over Crowell Ridge. Josh decided that it would be best to take advantage of the shelter and rest there that night. They had been pushing hard to cover the miles the past few days on too little sleep.

Both cabin doors were padlocked shut. A sign indicated they were rental cabins operated by the National Forest Service. Josh used a rock to bash the lock on the nicer of the two cabins. Josh and Molly looked in when the door swung open. They were surprised at what they found.

The door opened into a family room furnished with nice chairs and a couch. The large stone fireplace dominated the great room. The left side of the cabin had a fully appointed kitchen and dining area. Walls closed off the back half of the cabin.

Josh and Molly stepped inside and shook their boots off on the mat inside the door. Josh surveyed the room, noting the stove was fired by gas. The two ceiling light fixtures had gas mantles.

“See if you can get a fire started,” Josh suggested. “I’m going to look around and see if the cabin has a propane tank. I think we might have light and a working stove tonight.”

“You’re better at building fires than me, but I’ll give it a try,” Molly agreed.

Josh went around to the back of the cabin. The hillside dropped off rapidly behind the cabin. He found the propane tank near the southeast corner of the cabin. He opened the valve to turn the gas on. The first snowflakes were drifting down when Josh returned inside.

Molly hadn't got the fire started yet. Josh lit the gas lights inside. He and Molly could explore the lit cabin better. Molly found a small bedroom behind the partition wall with the living room.

"Holy shit! This place has a real bed and everything," Molly exclaimed as she ran her HAND across the blanket on the bed.

"Really? That'll be nice for you tonight."

"For us," Molly responded.

"I wonder what is upstairs," Josh mused as he climbed the steep, open wooden steps outside the bedroom. Josh shone his flashlight into the upstairs room. It was an empty loft with some boxes in the back. Josh headed downstairs again to rejoin Molly.

"This must be a great place for a family vacation in the summer," Josh commented. "Mom and Dad sleep downstairs. The kids have a great loft above to sleep in. Do you need a hand getting the fire started?"

"I've got it," Molly answered. "I needed time to get the tinder ready. I'll have the fire blazing in a few minutes."

"I'll see if I can get the shutters off the windows so we can have a little light in here."

"Sure, Josh," Molly agreed quickly. She paused and then laughed. "I've come a long way haven't I? Who would have thought I would know how to build a fire a month ago?"

"You have done well," Josh replied. "Better than I expected a cheerleader to do." He chuckled. "I guess I've learned a lot too. Don't judge a girl by her pom-poms."

"You're bad... very BAD," Molly teased as she headed for the pile of firewood.

Josh headed outside to open up the shutters that protected the cabin's windows. The wispy snow flurries from a few minutes earlier had grown to large clumps of flakes dropping from the sky. Josh decided he had chosen wisely that afternoon to knock off hiking early. It looked like they might get a good snow storm that evening.

Molly had a small fire of tinder and kindling going when Josh returned inside. She was feeding larger pieces of kindling onto the little fire. Josh stared at her for a moment as she worked. In spite of the grime from the past two weeks in the wilderness, Molly was quite attractive. Back in high school she would have been way out of Josh's league. He never would have found the courage to ask a cheerleader out, even if he hadn't been in a long term hissing match with Linda Nye, the cheerleader who made it her personal mission to make his life hell in school.

Josh realized he had been blessed that afternoon when he bumped into Molly back in Sedro-Wooley. Molly Lawrence was good looking and seemed to care about him. She had an inner toughness that he hadn't expected when they met. Linda Nye would have absolutely died out here in the wilderness – not metaphorically, but literally. She did not have anything like the toughness and smarts that

were allowing Molly to survive... and that was assuming she didn't irritate and enrage Josh to the point where he'd kill her just to end her nagging and bitching.

This cabin was a great place for him and Molly to clean off the accumulated two weeks of dirt and grime with bandana baths. Josh decided they could use water as they settled in.

"I'll go out and see if the spring is still flowing," Josh offered. "Give me the big pot and your canteens so I can fill them."

"Sure, sounds good," Molly agreed.

Josh found the blue blazed trail behind the second cabin. He followed it down the hill about fifty yards to a small spring. He had to crack the ice in the small pool at the spring, but he had no problem filling up with water.

"You aren't going to believe what I just found," Molly gushed when Josh returned to the cabin. She held open a kitchen cabinet door and pointed to the sign. "The cabin is stocked with emergency rations in case of inclement weather. Please use what you need. You can reimburse the N.F.S. at the district office when you check out of the cabin. The rations are kept in the metal trunk in the loft."

"Reimburse the N.F.S.?" Josh chuckled. "They can dock my army pay for it."

"Let's go see what's for dinner," Molly added enthusiastically. They grabbed their flashlights and headed upstairs to search the loft. They located the large metal trunk quickly. It was stocked with enough freeze-dried or dehydrated food to last a family of four a week. It contained a mixture of Richmoor, Mountain House and Harvest Foodworks products.

"Thank God we don't need to eat that Chinese crap now," Molly gushed as she sorted through the contents of the trunk.

"It isn't that bad," Josh countered.

"They're fine, when that is all you have," Molly insisted as she waved a packet of food around. "We have lasagna tonight. None of the rice and shit for me."

"Lasagna sounds good," Josh agreed. "We can sort through this trunk after dinner and restock our packs. We'll leave behind any of the Chinese MREs we don't want, in case someone else gets stuck back here and needs rations."

Josh and Molly headed downstairs, boiled some water and reconstituted the lasagna. It was a much better meal than the Chinese MREs. They relaxed and watched the big clumps of snow fall outside as they enjoyed their meal. The wind picked up and howled through the eaves of the cabin by the time they finished dinner. They made the raspberry crumble they found upstairs. The sweet treat hit the spot.

Molly stoked the fire and then relaxed on the couch facing the little blaze. Josh gathered up his maps and spread them out on the table. The opportunity to study the route that evening in a well-lit cabin was too good to pass up. Josh spent about forty-five minutes fine-tuning his planned route for the next few days and working out which river crossing they would head for – Creston in British Columbia or Bonner's Ferry in Idaho.

“Got it all worked out?” Molly asked when she wandered over to check out Josh’s plans.

“I think so.”

“What do we have coming up?” Molly asked.

“We have a set of mountain peaks tomorrow,” Josh explained as he pointed his intended route on the map.

“6885? That’s the height of the mountain, right?”

“It is,” Josh confirmed.

“We’re really going to climb up to the top of a mountain that tall after in this storm?” Josh hadn’t looked outside since dinner. The snow was pouring down. The wind was blowing it horizontally past the cabin’s windows.

“OK, maybe not tomorrow,” Josh conceded. “We’ll be climbing it the next day we can hike. I think we got lucky... real lucky that we came across this cabin tonight.”

“No doubt about it,” Molly agreed. “What do we have after we get across these mountains? Do we have another damn river to cross?”

“We have at least one more big one,” Josh replied. “It’s the Kootenai. “Our choices are to head into Canada and cross at Creston, about eight miles north of the border or to head for Bonner’s Ferry, about 22 miles south of the border. I think we should head for Bonner’s Ferry. The SRC [Air Force Search and Rescue Center] says it is American held.” Josh pointed his proposed route over the mountains to Upper Priest Lake, down along the lake to Priest Lake and then east to the town of Bonner’s Ferry.

“Isn’t this more mountains?” Molly asked as she pointed at the brown squiggles on the map. “7,000 feet elevation? Wouldn’t we do better following around to the bottom of this lake to this little town?” Molly pointed at the lower end of Priest Lake and the town of Coolin.”

“Coolin is a vacation town,” Josh explained. “I expect they’ve evacuated that town by now, what few winter residents it might have. We’re better off going for one of the larger places... like Bonner’s Ferry.”

“And climbing over these... uh...” Molly asked as she pointed towards the 7,000 foot high series of mountain peaks.

“Selkirk Mountains,” Josh added. “We’re not climbing to the top of them. We’ll head up this valley and go between the peaks. The elevation at the pass by these lakes tops out around 5,800 feet. If we plan our camping spots right, we don’t have to camp anywhere near that high in elevation again.”

“That’s a relief,” Molly said. “We did enough of that already. Do you think our chances are good of finding safety in Bonner’s Ferry?”

“We’ll see,” Josh answered. “Don’t get your hopes up yet, but the signs look promising. The whole time we’ve been hiking east, the Chinese have been flying east over us. They haven’t done that since we crossed the dam last night. I think we might have a chance of getting to safety at Bonner’s Ferry if we don’t see any Chinese transports or helicopters go east over us.”

“How long do you think it will take us to get there?” Molly asked.

“Four to six days, if the weather isn’t too bad.”

“That’s a relief!” Molly exclaimed. She smiled and added, “I know, don’t get my hopes up. Be prepared to hike further. You make no guarantees.”

“You are getting it,” Josh teased. A particularly fierce gust of wind rattled the cabin’s windows and drew their attention to the storm blowing outside. “I wonder how bad it is out there.”

“I’ll see soon,” Molly replied. “I need to pee. Did you see if these cabins have an outhouse?”

“It’s on the east side of this cabin,” Josh answered. “You’ll like it. It has a seat, four walls, a door and a roof. You’ll love it.”

“I’m sure I will,” Molly agreed. She snorted. “I can imagine what my girlfriends back at school would think. ‘Sitting in a dirty, smelly outhouse and considering it luxurious.’ They’d think I was crazy... at least until they had to spend a month peeing behind the bushes.”

“It’s all context,” Josh answered. “A lot of things are changing because of this damned war.”

“Muddle through and do your best to survive,” Molly said. “I’ve learned that from you, Josh.” She gave him a big smile. “I am very grateful for what you’ve taught me.”

Molly put her coat, hat and gloves on and stepped outside. She stuck her head back in the cabin almost immediately. “Get your stuff on. You need to see this.”

Josh got dressed for the outside and then joined Molly on the porch. The wind had momentarily died down. The snow fell in large clumps. Josh and Molly stared out at the still scene. The valley dropped off steeply below them. It was blanketed with over a foot of fresh, powdery, brilliant white snow. The white decorated the boughs of the pine trees.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Molly whispered against the stark quiet of the forest.

“It is,” Josh murmured back.

The pair stood on the cabin porch and admired nature's beauty for a couple minutes before nature forced Molly to answer its call. Josh headed back inside. The pair relaxed and cuddled on the couch in front of the fire. The romantic setting had the expected effect on the young pair. Cuddling led to kissing, which escalated to more. Eventually they shared their bodies.

Josh built up the fire when they finished lovemaking. The pair headed to bed where they tested the strength of the old bed with another romp. The bed held. Josh fell asleep, more deeply satisfied than he had ever been on a birthday.

----oooOooo----

December 5-7, 2013, Cabin along Forest Road 3155, 6 Miles west of Boundary Dam

The unrelenting blizzard continued pouring snow onto the mountains of northeast Washington. Molly and Josh had no choice but to stay at the cabin until the storm passed. Josh guessed the wind gusted to 30-50 miles an hour. They couldn't estimate the snow depth. The wind whipped whatever snow fell to the ground into immense drifts. The road by their cabin had a six to eight foot drift across it. The valley echoed with loud cracks as the weight of snow snapped the limbs on the pine trees.

Josh and Molly stayed inside most of the time, except to get water or go to the outhouse. They had plenty of firewood to keep the cabin warm. The National Forest Service's chest of emergency rations had plenty of food to allow them to wait out the storm. Josh found a dutch oven in the cupboard. He taught Molly how Scouts used the big cast iron pot to bake things. The ration chest had a supply of flour, baking powder and dried milk. Josh made biscuits to go with the freeze dried seafood chowder one evening.

They heard the distant rumble of avalanches four times while they were storm-stayed at the cabin. The hills in their immediate vicinity weren't steep, so Josh felt they were safe staying in the cabin. What they would find once they got hiking again after the storm ended would be an entirely different matter.

The two days of enforced idleness was good for Josh and Molly. They needed the rest. Out of sheer boredom, Josh measured the length of the route they traveled since they left Sedro-Woolley twenty-eight days ago. Josh figured they had done around 395 miles, mostly on foot since the night after the failed attack.

Josh and Molly spent a lot of time cuddled together on the couch, enjoying the romantic fire warming their cozy cabin. The time and the place, as well as the enforced idleness, led to quite a few romps in bed for the couple. They took advantage of the warm setting to bathe. Molly loved when Josh washed her hair. Josh savored having the half-dressed teen wash and then massage his back and shoulders. They ended up in bed making love.

The blizzard waned mid-day on December 7th. The wind continued whipping the snow around after the clouds rolled through and the sun came out. The blizzard completely changed the landscape outside. The road uphill of the cabin disappeared. A series of tall drifts took its place. The valley

below their cabin was filled with deep snow. At the bottom, they could see the upper parts of trees poking through the high snow. Further up the hill more evergreen boughs were visible among the piles and drifts of white.

----oooOooo----

December 8, 2013, Cabin along Forest Road 3155, 6 Miles west of Boundary Dam

Josh made a nice breakfast for Molly and him using the last of the powdered eggs from the emergency rations. Biscuits and gravy made from a powdered gravy mix topped off their breakfast. They left some of the Chinese MREs behind in the emergency rations chest and filled their packs with freeze dried meals. Josh planned to use Chinese MREs for lunches and the freeze dried food for dinners. They managed to load up about 10 days' worth of meals in their backpacks.

Josh and Molly wore their snow shoes, which were essential to climbing over or around the sea of snow drifts blocking the way east. They followed the gap in the trees where the buried roadway presumably followed along the hillside. Occasional clear spots would show the black asphalt of the road.

They traveled about half a mile before they found the switchback where the road climbed up towards the Lead Hill. They guessed where the invisible foot trail was and headed southeast across the valley floor towards the hills to the south. Josh was a skilled map reader. He estimated their course based on the lay and shape of the hills and valleys ahead of them. An hour later they passed a flat, snow covered lake, confirming that Josh was navigating correctly.

The morning was brutally cold, in spite of the still air. The glare from the sun on the bright white snow made it hard to see. Both were relieved mid-morning when clouds rolled in and hid the sun. Molly's thermometer said the temperature was dropping through the teens into the single digits as they climbed higher into the mountains.

The pair made it to a set of steep switchbacks on the side of a ridge overlooking Slate Creek by lunchtime. They ate their Chinese MREs quickly. They needed to keep moving to stay warm. Luckily the winds from the blizzard blew the snow off the trail they were following. Snow shoes came off and the pair climbed the canyon side faster.

Snow began to pile up again as they approached the head of the canyon. Josh decided to abandon the trail temporarily and bushwhack straight up the last couple hundred feet to the crest of Crowell Ridge. The top of the ridge was clear of snow. They took off their snow shoes and picked their way through the jumble of rocks that made up the jagged ridge top. They worked their way up to the crest of the mountain and then picked their way carefully down to the lower crests on the ridge as they followed it north.

Josh and Molly crested three small peaks as they followed the trail north. The ground shook just as they crested the third one. The shaking deepened to a rumble. Molly and Josh turned back in time to see a wall of snow slough off from the mountainside and go cascading down into the Slate Creek Valley. Rocks tumbled and trees snapped off and plunged down with the avalanche of snow. The

avalanche site was a little more than three miles east of the cabin where they spent the previous nights.

“You knew that was going to happen, didn’t you?” Molly commented after the mountains grew quiet again and powdery veil dropped from the slide site. “We wouldn’t have hiked ten miles over these mountains, would we?”

“I suspected that there might be avalanches if we went straight up Slate Creek,” Josh allowed.

“You kept us safe from death again,” Molly responded. “Like you always do.”

“I’m just trying to get us out of here,” Josh replied modestly.

“How much further do you think we’ll get?” Molly asked. The sun was low on the horizon. It was a little past three o’clock. “We aren’t going to get out of the mountains tonight, are we?”

“No,” Josh agreed. He pointed down the hillside. “Do you see that flat area? There should be a turnaround at the end of one of the roads. I thought we should be able to find a flat area for our tent tonight.”

“No chance of getting down further from these mountain tops?”

“No, I’ll be happy if we can climb down about a thousand feet to the end of the road,” Josh answered. “That will put us at about 5700 feet. The map shows it ends at a saddle between Leola and Gypsy Creeks. We should be safe from avalanches for the night.”

“Lead the way,” Molly agreed. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Thankfully the trail meandered back and forth across the end of the ridge, staying out of the deep snow. Josh and Molly needed an hour to get down to the turn-around. It was completely covered with snow, but Josh was sure they were in the right place. It was the only clearing in the trees and brush within a quarter of a mile.

Josh dug out a depression in the snow for their tent. Molly got a pine fire going and heated water for dinner and to refill their canteens. They sat down and ate dinner about half an hour later. The sun had set and they were in shadow as they finished their meal. Molly’s thermometer reported the temperature holding steady around five degrees, in spite of the setting of the sun.

Josh decided it wasn’t necessary to hang their packs that evening. No right thinking animal would be out and prowling that mountain top in this blasted cold. Molly and Josh hurried into their tent and cuddled together in one sleeping bag with a second sleeping bag as a blanket. They cuddled together, slowly warming up. The pair danced the horizontal mamba once they warmed each other up. Getting their blood moving was probably a good thing before they dropped off to sleep.

----oooOooo----

December 9, 2013, 40 miles northwest of Bonner’s Ferry, Idaho

Josh and Molly were warm and comfortable when they awoke. They cuddled for a bit, glorying in the sunshine warming their tent. It wasn't nearly as warm after they abandoned their sleeping bags and got out of the tent. The temperature still hovered in the mid-single digits. They ate breakfast quickly, packed camp and got on the trail. They followed the general path of the trail down the Leola Creek Valley. They needed their snow shoes some of the time. Other times they could slog through the ankle deep snow without them.

They were down to Sullivan Creek by mid-day. They had lunch before climbing the seven hundred foot ridge to get to the next valley. Josh and Molly spent the rest of the afternoon hiking and snowshoeing down the next valley until they reached Hunter's Meadow.

They passed one critical monument on their way down to the meadow. A tall concrete pillar marked "IDAHO" announced that they were finally leaving Washington State. They danced a little jig in relief before hiking on. The temperature climbed as they descended further down the valley.

Josh's maps showed a small black square not too far off their route. Sure enough, when they reached the meadow, they could see a cabin in the distance. Josh and Molly hiked over to it, overjoyed to find an identical mate to the cabin they stayed in two nights earlier. Josh broke the lock on the door. The accommodations were familiar.

This cabin had an emergency ration trunk in the loft but it was nearly empty. Josh and Molly ate a meal they brought from the first cabin instead. Josh built the fire up in the fire place and had the cabin warmed well before bedtime. Josh and Molly helped each other bathe again. It felt great to feel clean so often. The couple made love before falling asleep that evening.

----oooOooo----

December 10, 2012, 33 miles northwest of Bonner's Ferry

Josh and Molly started their morning off with a six hundred foot climb up to Cabinet Pass before they descended again into the Priest River valley. The overcast from the past two days had cleared overnight. The Priest River valley was wide and flat. The sun warmed the land. The blizzard hadn't hit this valley as hard as Slate Creek. Above melting temperatures helped clear the dirt road they followed as they headed south for Upper Priest Lake.

Upper Priest Lake was in sight about a mile south of them when they stopped for lunch. Josh and Molly were eating lunch when a squadron of a dozen Chinese jets flew over them heading southeast. Josh called into the Air Force Search and Rescue Center. The phone went dead seconds after the duty sergeant answered the call. Molly and Josh had to watch helplessly as a dozen Chinese bombers went by. The pair were now just bystanders in the war.

"How are you feeling?" Josh asked. "There's a campground on the west side of this lake ahead. There's another one at the north end of Priest Lake too."

"It's a nice, warm day. The snow isn't too bad," Molly answered. "Let's keep going."

Josh and Molly pushed on along the west side of Upper Priest Lake. They reached the beach and camping area at the north end of Priest Lake a couple miles after they left the upper lake. A couple summer cottages were a quarter mile west of the camping area. Josh and Molly decided to hike further south. The map showed a group of buildings clustered a half mile south of the campground.

Josh hoped they would find a fancy cottage with a fireplace. No such luck. The six cottages looked similar. Josh broke the glass in the door of the first to let them inside. This cabin was fairly rustic. The electricity did not work. The propane stove did. Josh and Molly made dinner, relaxed a bit and then headed to bed. Josh and Molly enjoyed the luxury of bathing a second day in a row using water heated on the cabin's stove. The king sized bed in the cabin was comfortable.

The couple made out some when they went to bed, as had become customary. Josh played with, kissed and suckled at Molly's breasts, to her immense enjoyment. To her utter shock, Josh went down on her after he finished with her breast. Josh had been instructed in the fine art of cunnilingus back in Georgia the evening he and his buddies visited the local house of prostitution. Molly enjoyed Josh's attention immensely before they finished the evening with good, old-fashioned intercourse.

----oooOooo----

December 11, 2013, 23 miles west of Bonner's Ferry, Idaho

Josh was awake before Molly that morning. He gave her a hug when she woke up and rolled over, half on his warm body.

“How does it feel to be a legal adult now?” Josh asked before giving her a kiss. “Able to make your own decisions... vote...” Josh chuckled. “...not be jail bait anymore.”

“It feels sticky,” Molly replied.

“You’re the one who wanted to do it a second time last night,” Josh retorted.

“I’m not complaining,” Molly answered. “I loved my ‘birthday present’ last night. It’s just that... I don’t feel any different. I just feel lucky to be alive... to be here with you... to...”

“I know,” Josh agreed. “We are very lucky to be alive and together.”

“We have one more set of mountains to climb before Bonner’s Ferry,” Molly said. Josh nodded his agreement. “What happens when we get to Bonner’s Ferry?” She stopped abruptly. “No... I know... I know... The Chinese may be in Bonner’s Ferry ahead of us. We need to be prepared to hike to wherever – Bonner’s Ferry, Montana... hell to Chicago if we need to.”

“You’re beginning to understand our situation,” Josh added.

“What IS going to happen when we get to safety, wherever that may be?” Molly asked.

“You get to rejoin your family,” Josh replied. “I’m a soldier. I go wherever they tell me to go. Back to the front... rejoin my unit... back to training... wherever they need me.”

“And then we are apart,” Molly stated. “I can’t accept that.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t accept being separated from you,” Molly reiterated. “You literally saved me from torture or death. You brought me through the mountains in winter. I never imagined I had the strength to do that.”

“You’re stronger than you think,” Josh inserted.

“I didn’t know how to survive the mountains in the winter. You taught me how. You took a pain in the ass high school cheerleader and turned her life around.” Josh laughed.

“You were a pain in the ass back then,” Josh said. “You proved to be so much more than I expected. You’re drop dead gorgeous. I counted that against you a month ago. My experiences with drop dead gorgeous high school girls has been... uh... less than ideal.”

“Disastrous,” Molly said. Josh smiled and nodded agreement.

“You are so much more” Josh continued. “You’re smart, tough as nails and won’t quit, no matter how bad things are.” Josh stopped and smiled. “That didn’t come out right. You’re still drop dead gorgeous. I guess I shouldn’t tell a girl she’s tough as nails. It isn’t uh... lady-like.”

“No... I understand,” Molly answered. “Tough as nails is a compliment when you spend a month in the wilderness. You brought something out in me I didn’t know I had.”

“You’re so much more than any girl I’ve ever dated... or... uh...”

“Slept with?” Molly added.

“Or slept with,” Josh agreed. “Drop dead gorgeous, smart, tough as nails...” That drew a big smile from Molly. “...won’t quit. I have uh...” Josh swallowed hard. “...feelings... uh... I uh... Oh, Hell! I love you, Molly. I don’t want to lose you after we reach safety.”

Molly’s smile was as wide as the Columbia River. “I’ve been feeling that since before we started sleeping together. I love you too, Josh. I LOVE YOU!”

Josh pulled Molly on top of his naked body and hugged her as they exchanged deep kisses. “Make love to me, Josh,” Molly demanded after a couple minutes of kissing and making out. He did. The two lovers managed to bring each other to mutual, orgasmic explosions. They separated once they were spent.

“How far today?” Molly inquired after a half minute of silence. “Will we make it past the next mountain today?”

“Maybe,” Josh allowed. “It is about twelve miles to Two Mouth Lakes. It is a sort of pass between peaks in the Selkirks. Maybe we cut the day’s hike short so we don’t end up camping too high up in the mountains.”

“What is the elevation of these two lakes?” Molly asked.

“5800 feet, I think,” Josh replied.

“5800? That’s nothing,” Molly harrumphed. “Push on today. We get to wherever we get to.”

“Are you sure we need to hurry?” Josh asked. “When we reach safety we may not be together anymore.”

“We will be,” Molly insisted. “You and I together... we can beat anything. I know it. Let’s get to safety... to warm, clean clothes; regular showers; fresh food and a nice warm bed to share in a heated room. Let’s get rolling and get to all those things. We can make everything else work so we’re together.”

Josh and Molly sealed their agreement with a deep kiss. The pair got up, dressed and made some breakfast before hiking on. Their route took them down parallel to the edge of Priest Lake about two miles. They turned east when they reached Two Mouth Creek. They followed the dirt road east up the valley towards the mountains. The road was covered with patches of snow. Quite a bit of the snow from the last storm had melted before they reached the area. Even though the air temperature was between fifteen and twenty degrees, the creek was flowing fast and full.

Josh and Molly reached the end of the road around lunch time. They were going to bushwhack the rest of the way up the valley to Two Mouth Lakes. No trail approached the lakes from the Priest Lake side of the Selkirks. The peaks of the Selkirks looked steep and foreboding. You could pick out the dip between two of the granite mountain tops ahead. Josh told Molly that was where the Two Mouth Lakes were.

Snow was deeper off road. Josh and Molly put on their snow shoes and continued clambering up the valley. Josh and Molly were excited that they hadn’t seen any more Chinese aircraft heading east other than the flight of bombers escorted by fighters yesterday. Seeing no Chinese transports or helicopters was excellent news. Maybe Bonner’s Ferry would be their salvation.

The last thousand feet of the climb was steep. Josh and Molly took their time on the slope. The sun was sinking close to the horizon when they finally reached Two Mouth Lakes. They set up camp on the far side of the nearer lake. The area around the two lakes was flat and covered with a scattering of tall pines. The lakes were frozen and covered with a blanket of snow. The scene deserved to be on a Currier and Ives card.

Josh and Molly walked the three hundred yards over to the edge of the bowl they were in and looked down into the steep valley below. “Bonner’s Ferry is at the end of this valley?” Molly asked.

“It is,” Josh confirmed. “It’s about fifteen miles to the town.”

“Goody, we could be there tomorrow,” Molly remarked.

“Not so fast,” Josh replied. “We need to take this carefully, just like we did when we got to Northport and Boundary Dam. I don’t want to rush in and get captured because we got careless. We’ll move down close to town tomorrow and hide out until after dark. We can reconnoiter and see if it is safe tomorrow night.

“I leave those decisions in your capable hands,” Molly agreed. “I wouldn’t want to get this far and then get nabbed by the Chinese.”

Josh and Molly headed back over to their campsite and built a big fire. The temperature was down in the single digits as the sun set. They made big helpings of freeze dried Turkey Tetrazzini. It was a tasty delight to end a good day. Josh and Molly hung their packs and went straight to bed. Well... at least to bed if not to sleep. They enjoyed a sex romp before they fell asleep.

----oooOooo----

December 12, 2013, 15 miles west of Bonner’s Ferry

Josh and Molly woke up early that morning. They shared excitement at the possibility of ending their trek across the mountains that day. The pair wolfed down a Chinese MRE, packed up and headed east. The trail hugged the bottom of a steep rock incline as they started down into the Myrtle Creek valley.

The temperature was around seven degrees when they left camp. It steadily climbed as they descended in altitude and hiked down the valley. Patches of dirt road showed as the snow cover became sparse. The hiking was easy and hope drove them forward faster than their customary pace. Josh recognized Cook’s Pass to their south as they passed it around 11:30 that morning.

The creek was dropping down the valley floor faster than the road they were on. Josh figured it was a couple hundred feet below them when they stopped for lunch. They were over halfway to Bonner’s Ferry now. They ate some pork fried rice and the energy bars before continuing their march down out of the mountains.

Around three o’clock the pair emerged from the woods. The road continued winding along the side of the treeless ridge. Bonner’s Ferry was just visible in the distance in the Kootenai River valley.

“Should we stay under cover?” Molly asked. “The way we did before Northport and the dam?”

“I think we’re around six or eight miles from the town” Josh replied. “I think we’re safe to keep hiking. We’re not going to be visible at this distance.”

“You’re the boss,” Molly agreed. The pair hiked on. An hour and fifteen minutes later they rounded the end of the ridge. The road took a series of switchbacks to drop down the 600 to 700 feet to the valley below them. An institutional style looking building and parking lot was visible below them. No one seemed to be at the building.

Josh felt exposed out here but decided to press on through the first short set of switchbacks. The sun was setting to their backs when they stepped off the road into the trees. It seemed like a good place to take cover until after dark. They heated some Chinese MREs for dinner. Josh studied the map. It showed them about four and a half miles from Bonner's Ferry.

Chapter 11

December 12, 2013, 1645 hours, 3.7 miles west of Bonner's Ferry, Idaho

Josh spotted activity on the road between the town and their position. He had Molly lay down. Both removed their guns from safe keeping. They watched as the dark green vehicle flew across the river's flood plain towards the buildings below them.

Josh observed it closely as it approached. His heart was pounding. Had they been spotted? The vehicle was definitely military, but whose? It looked vaguely like a Jeep, except the wheel base was too wide for the traditional Willy's Jeep. At five hundred meters, it was too far to make out the soldiers in the vehicle. It followed a switchback south and turned back north as it headed up the hill. The next time it passed into sight it was only about 250 meters away.

Josh could make out some details of the soldiers' uniforms. They were dressed in camo, but not an American or Canadian pattern camo. It looked close but not exactly like the Chinese camo. Their helmets were most puzzling. They definitely weren't Chinese. They looked similar to the old American helmets from the early 90s. Who would have them?

Josh and Molly hunkered down, trying to blend into the terrain. Josh thought about who might have old U. S. helmets. The traitorous Japs! He knew from intel briefings that they had a brigade of paratroopers too. After stabbing us in the back in the Sea of Japan when our carrier, the John Stennis, went down, would they join in with the Chinese? It was entirely possible. Josh clicked off the safety on his M-16 and motioned for Molly to get her pistol ready too.

They could hear the vehicle bouncing up the road out of sight on another switchback. Molly's eyes were wide with fright. Josh's heart was pounding in his chest. He motioned for Molly to scramble a little further into the brush. Hopefully these soldiers wouldn't be able to see them in the growing dusk.

The soldiers came into sight four minutes later. Josh readied his weapon as he stared at them. The three soldiers stopped their vehicle about a hundred meters from Josh and Molly. They climbed out, advancing up the road with their weapons at the ready. They advanced carefully, keeping a good separation from each other. Josh silently cursed to himself. They were too far apart to take out with one automatic rifle burst. He sat tight and watched them approach.

When they were about 50 meters away, the lead soldier in the "V" shaped formation called out, "Yankees, vem para fora! Identificar-se."

Josh shot Molly a confused look. "It's almost like Spanish," she whispered back.

The soldier repeated, "Yankees, vem para fora!" The second soldier turned on a flashlight and shined it directly at Josh. The first soldier announced, "Vem para fora! É seguro."

Josh looked at Molly and shrugged. He stood up and lowered his weapon. Molly did the same.

“Larguem as armas, levantar as mãos sobre a sua cabeça e avançar para a nossa posição,” the soldier announced. All Josh and Molly could do was stare and shrug their shoulders. The first soldier repeated the command while the second soldier pantomimed. He placed his gun on the ground and raised his hands over his head. Josh and Molly did the same.

The first soldier motioned for them to come forward as he commanded, “Yankees, venha a nós. Você está seguro.”

The third soldier collected their guns while they stepped up to the first two soldiers.

“Who are you?” Josh asked.

“Pára-quedistas brasileiros,” the first soldier answered. “Yankees.” He pointed towards Josh and Molly. “Pára-quedistas brasileiros,” he added as he pointed to himself and then the parachute pin on his fatigue collar.

“Brazilian paratroopers,” Josh exclaimed as he finally understood.

“Sim … sim … brasileiro,” the first soldier agreed, nodded his head vigorously.

“Does anyone speak English?” Josh asked.

“Inglês? Não… Não,” the first soldier said, shaking his head no. The other soldiers helped Josh and Molly remove their packs. The soldiers carried them back to their vehicle while motioning for the pair to follow. The first soldier helped Josh and Molly into the back. One of the soldiers joined them. The two packs ended up on their laps. The other soldiers climbed in front.

“Capitão Ramos fala Inglês,” the first soldier announced before starting up the Jeep like vehicle. “Vamos ver o capitão Ramos.” He pointed towards Bonner’s Ferry. “Capitão Ramos fala Inglês.”

The three soldiers talked in Portuguese as they flew down off the hillside. “I guess we are safe,” Molly whispered to Josh.

“It would seem so,” Josh agreed. “How Brazilian paratroopers got to Idaho must be an interesting story, but yeah… I think we’re finally safe.” The soldiers grinned back at them when Josh mentioned Brazilian paratroopers.

Twenty minutes later they were waved past a checkpoint and drove into the town. A few minutes later they pulled to a stop in front of the Bonner’s Ferry High School. The first soldier led them inside while the other two carried Josh and Molly’s packs for them.

“Capitão Ramos, temos dois caminhantes yankee para ver você,” the soldier reported after giving a crisp salute to his captain.

“Ahh... the hikers we spotted,” Captain Ramos commented as he motioned for the two of them to sit down. “Backpacking is a dangerous thing to do this time of year during a war.” The captain’s English contained barely a trace of any accent.

“I am Corporal Joshua Warner, of the 81st Heavy BCT,” Josh explained. “This is Molly Lawrence from Sedro-Woolley, Washington.”

Captain Ramos stood, smiled and bowed slightly to Molly. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lawrence.” The captain turned back to Josh. “Sedro-Woolley? How in the world did you end up here?”

“You can contact the Air Force Search and Rescue Command for more information about us,” Josh explained. “Use code name ‘Frosty Boot’ for us.”

“The two of you are ‘Frosty Boot’?” Captain Ramos exclaimed. “We’ve been expecting you. Excellent! Most excellent that you made it out of the Cascades.”

“Expecting us?” Josh asked, totally flabbergasted.

“Your fame preceded you,” the captain explained. “Actually your fame is nation-wide. Everyone knows about the two of you helping us take out a full battalion of Chinese paratroopers.”

Josh sighed. “I think this may be overblown. I just called in an aircraft sighting the one morning. It was something any soldier would do.”

“While hiking across the Cascade Mountains in ice and snow of November and December?” Captain Ramos asked. “I think not. Whether you are a hero or not is not my call or your call. The people of West Hem will decide that.”

“West Hem?” Molly asked.

“Western Hemispheric Defense Alliance,” Captain Ramos reposnded. “Do you not know about the alliance?”

“We’ve been out of touch for five weeks,” Josh said. “I guess we have missed a lot of things while we were in the mountains.”

“I’m sure you and Miss Lawrence will catch up quick enough,” Captain Ramos remarked. “Let me call the brigade HQ and let them know you are here. I know your arrival will stir interest up the chain of command.”

The captain phoned his headquarters and spoke with a couple people during the three minute call. The second person was clearly the captain’s superior. Captain Ramos turned back to Josh and Molly when he finished his call.

“I am going to take you over to the local hospital for a check-up. You will be able to shower and get clean clothes there. I’m sure you are hungry too. We will arrange to have meals ready for you when the doctors are finished with you.”

“We had dinner already tonight,” Molly answered first. “A nice green salad and something sweet for dessert would be wonderful.”

“We haven’t had anything like that in weeks,” Josh added.

“I’m sure we can send someone off to the local store and pick up something tasty for you from their bakery section,” Captain Ramos said. “Let’s get you over to the hospital so you get checked out and can get comfortable tonight. I’m sure sleeping in a real bed will be a treat.”

Captain Ramos motioned for them to follow him outside. The captain insisted Molly sit up front in the vehicle. Josh and the captain climbed in back.

“This is an interesting vehicle,” Josh commented as they drove by the small homes lining Main Street in Bonner’s Ferry. “What kind is it?” Captain Ramos laughed.

“It is a Gaucho, a joint Argentine/Brazilian design,” the captain explained. “It is our airmobile version of your Humvee.”

“Nice ride,” Josh commented. “Do you mind if I ask a personal question?” The captain nodded yes. “I’m impressed you speak English without an accent. How did you...”

“University of Pennsylvania, Class of ’96,” Captain Ramos reported proudly. “I also did a couple years of training in Fort Benning. Do you know this fort?”

“I did basic training and armor school there,” Josh said.

“You were probably there more recently than me,” Captain Ramos said. “Is Charlie’s Subs still there on Ingersoll beside the Pizza Hut?”

“It is,” Josh acknowledged, laughing. “I spent more than one Saturday night chowing down there.”

The Gaucho sped across the Kootenai River as the two talked. Molly stared out at the water below them.

“Amazing!” she commented. “We spent the past five weeks fighting and sneaking our way across river after river. Here we go across this one without a care in the world while the two of you talk nonchalantly about sandwiches. I guess we are finally safe.”

“You are quite safe here,” Captain Ramos replied. “The Brigada de Infantaria Pára-quedista will guarantee that, Miss Lawrence.”

The Guacho turned left off the main road and sped up the hill and around the curve. The sprawling, one-story hospital was on the left. The driver pulled under the overhang by the emergency entrance.

Captain Ramos led them inside. He sent the driver on an errand – pick up a dozen donuts for Josh and Molly to nibble on later in the evening, after the doctors were through with them.

A Doctor Britt and Nurse McKoy met them inside. The doctor gave them a cursory exam before sending them off to shower. Nurse McKoy brought Josh and Molly back dressed in surgical scrubs. The clothing they wore should have gone to the bio-hazard storage area. The dumpster outside ended up with the putrid clothing.

Doctor Britt did thorough exams on Josh and Molly. “Both of you are in astoundingly excellent health,” Dr. Britt explained when he finished. “You are underweight for your respective heights, but other than that, are in perfect condition. I expected you to be malnourished after five weeks in the mountains.”

“We ate well on trail food we picked up in Sedro-Woolley and at various NFS cabins along the way,” Josh explained.

“We picked up some Chinese MREs at Boundary Dam too,” Molly added.

“They certainly kept you going,” Dr. Britt agreed. “We are going to keep the two of you overnight for observation. Captain Ramos has a treat prepared for you in the visitors’ room. I want to make sure your bodies react well to the ‘greens’ and ‘sweet treats’ he has for you.”

“Green and crunchy?” Molly asked hopefully. Dr. Britt smiled. “Sweets too. Captain Ramos knows how to take care of his guests.”

Nurse McKoy took Josh and Molly back to the room where patients received visitors. Captain Ramos, along with two younger paratroopers had a table set for them. Two large bowls of salad were ready for them. They had a selection of dressings, croutons, bacon bits and other assorted toppings to choose from to top their salads. Josh and Molly dove in and devoured the salads.

Captain Ramos’ aide brought fresh made peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies back from the local bakery for their dessert. Nurse McKoy insisted they limit themselves to two cookies each that evening. Their digestive systems weren’t ready for too much sugar too quickly.

Captain Ramos sat with them after they finished eating. He listened as Josh and Molly related stories from their five weeks crossing the mountains of northern Washington. He asked a few questions but generally acted as a friendly host rather than a military intelligence officer.

Josh had one question for the captain. “You commented that you knew we were coming. It seemed like your patrol knew exactly where to find us tonight. How could your men spot us when we were four miles from town?” The captain chuckled.

“We weren’t watching you from four miles away,” Captain Ramos explained. “We were watching you from a couple thousand feet up. Our brigade has two small reconnaissance drones. We spotted your tent at Two Mouths Lakes last night. We monitored your progress all day. I was impressed. The two of you maintain a rapid hike pace.”

“That comes from five weeks of climbing mountains,” Josh replied.

“The trail today was excellent,” Molly added. “We were hopeful that we’d find you here and we’d finally get away from the Chinese. I think we hiked a little faster than usual.”

“I’m sure you did,” Captain Ramos agreed.

“Do you think we could use a phone?” Josh asked. “I’m sure my family and Molly’s family will want to know we’re safe.”

“I’m sure we can get phones for each of you,” Captain Ramos answered. “I’ll see to it.” He left the room for a minute. He came back and led Josh and Molly to empty hospital rooms next door to each other. Josh sat down at the chair and dialed his dad’s cell phone number when Molly headed next door to make her call. The phone rang three times.

“Hello?” Josh’s dad asked. Josh recognized his voice immediately.

“Dad, it’s Josh,” Josh gushed. “Molly and I made it! We’re safe here in Bonner’s Ferry, Idaho.”

“Josh... Josh...” Josh could hear his father struggling to maintain his composure. “That’s... that’s wonderful news. Are you healthy? How are you?”

“We’re at the local hospital,” Josh explained. “The doctor checked us over. He said we’re fit and healthy. He teased we’re ready to run a marathon if we wanted to. We’re a little thin but otherwise quite healthy.”

“That’s wonderful,” Mr. Warner gushed. “I am so relieved.”

“Is Mom there?” Josh asked. “Can I talk with her?”

“Your Mom went down to the latrine a few minutes ago,” Mr. Warner answered. “Ashley and Jake are at school. It’s just me here at our tent right now.”

“Tent? Latrine?” Josh asked, trying to disguise his concern. “Where are you at?”

“We are at the evacuation camp in Redding, California,” Mr. Warner explained. “We were evacuated here about three weeks ago. They are putting us in tents but that is no big deal for our family. The kids here in the camp started school nearby. They are double shifting the school to fit in all the local kids and the evacuees too.”

“I’m glad everyone is good,” Josh said.

“When are you coming home?” Mr. Warner asked. He laughed. “When are you coming to visit us at this camp?”

"I have no idea, Dad," Josh answered. "I'm a soldier in the army. I go where I'm told. A brigade of Brazilian paratroopers is holding Bonner's Ferry and they're looking after us. I have no idea if my army even knows I'm here yet. I guess I'll call when I hear more."

"Please do that," Mr. Warner replied. "What number are you at? I know your mother will want to talk with you when she gets back." Josh read the number on the phone back to his father.

"I'll wait to hear from you and Mom," Josh said. "I want to see how Molly is doing. She's calling home now too."

----oooOooo----

Molly tried her father's cell phone and received no response. The same thing happened with her mom's number. She called her Grandfather Lawrence. No answer. In desperation, she dialed her Aunt Ellen's land line. Molly didn't have her aunt's cell phone number.

"Hello, Howard residence," a woman's voice answered.

"Aunt Ellen, it's Molly," Molly replied. There was no response. "Aunt Ellen?"

"Molly?" replied the shaky voice of her aunt. "Molly? Oh... my... God... you're alive!"

"Well... yes, I am," Molly replied laconically.

"OH... MY... GOD!" Aunt Ellen thundered. "John! Molly's alive! She's on the phone!"

"Aunt Ellen?" Molly said, trying to catch her frantic aunt's attention again. It took a minute before her aunt calmed down enough to listen.

"Where are you?" Aunt Ellen demanded. "What happened that you missed the last bus? Are you safe? Do you know where your father and brother are?"

"Slow down, please," Molly inserted. "I'm fine. I'm with troops in Bonner's Ferry, Idaho. It's safe here. I called you because I'm trying to find my dad and mom."

"You never met your dad or Mike?" Aunt Ellen explained. "They went to look for you when you missed the bus. You have no idea where they are?"

"No, I didn't know they missed the evac bus too," Molly said. "Where's Mom at? Do you have any idea?"

"No... no, I'm sorry, honey. I don't," Aunt Ellen answered. "You are the first person from your family I have talked to since your Mom called from the bus as it was heading south out of Sedro-Woolley. She told me about you missing the bus and your dad and brother going off to look for you. No one has heard or seen them since November 7th. We haven't heard from your mother since that phone call. John and I have been frantic, trying to find someone who knew anything about you or your family."

This news staggered Molly. No one heard from any of her family since November 7th? What had happened?

“Molly?” Aunt Ellen prompted. “Are you still there, Molly?”

“Yeah... yeah, I am,” she acknowledged.

“How in the world did you get to Idaho?” Aunt Ellen asked. “Why would you take off when the evacuation bus was ready to leave? What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking, Aunt Ellen,” Molly answered. “A soldier back in Sedro-Woolley helped me hike through the Cascades to get here in Bonners Ferry. He saved my life.”

“Hiked through the mountains?” Aunt Ellen asked. “What happened to my niece who squealed about the ‘yucky bugs and the nasty outdoors?’”

“That was someone else, Aunt Ellen,” Molly replied. “This war is forcing everyone to change. It certainly forced me to rethink things.”

“I suppose,” Ellen agreed without really understanding. “Do you have enough money to travel out here to California? Uncle John, your cousins and I can take you in until we find where your parents are.”

“I don’t have money but...”

“I’ll wire some to you, dear,” Ellen responded immediately.

“I’m sure the army is going to get me out of the front lines,” Molly answered. “They certainly don’t want a penniless girl hanging out here. I’ll call in and let you know my progress.”

“I’ll keep working on locating your mom, dad and brother,” Ellen said. “I’m sure they’re having trouble getting through in all the confusion the evacuation of Oregon and Washington is causing for everyone.”

“I’m sure that’s it,” Molly agreed. “I love you, Aunt Ellen. I’ll give you a call when I know where I’m going next.”

Josh stuck his head in the door and gave Molly a big smile. He waited until Molly finished her call with her aunt. Molly seemed alright while she was talking with her aunt. He couldn’t decipher her mood after she ended that call.

“How are your parents?” Josh asked.

“Oh... oh... Josh...” Molly sniffed. Josh could see she was trying to hold her emotions together.

“What’s wrong, Molly?”

“They don’t... sniff... know where my parents are.” Molly flew across the room and hugged Josh desperately. “They don’t... sniff... know... where...” Molly couldn’t choke the rest of the sentence out. She clung to Josh and bawled her eyes out.

Josh did his best to comfort Molly. Over about five minute’s time, she managed to spill out the details her aunt told her. He stroked her back and comforted her.

“We’ll find them,” Josh promised. “We’ll find them somehow.”

“Really?” Molly asked, looking up into Josh’s eyes. “Can we?”

“We’re survivors,” Josh answered. “We will make it through this. I promise I will help you track down your parents.”

Josh and Molly continued to cling to each other as Molly slowly calmed down. Captain Ramos found them comforting each other. He allowed them a couple minutes of privacy before interrupting them.

“I’m sure you’re tired after your long trek,” the captain said. “The hospital has accommodations ready for the two of you. Nurse McKoy will show you to them.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Josh replied.

“Yes, thank you,” Molly echoed.

“I have word from NorthCom,” Captain Ramos added. “They are sending an officer to escort the two of you out of here tomorrow morning.”

“Do you know where we’re going?” Josh asked.

“What’s NorthCom?” Molly asked.

“Northern Command is responsible for all forces in Saskatchewan, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Mexico and west, General Paul Blackburn, commanding,” Captain Ramos explained. “I have no idea where you’ll be going from here. I suspect you will be visiting some higher headquarters. Corporal Warner has become famous.”

Josh shook his head. “It’s all overblown. I was just doing what I could to help with the war.”

“That is a good attitude to take,” Captain Ramos replied. Nurse McKoy showed up. She took the three of them down another hall. She led them into a four bed room. No other patients were there.

“This will be your room, Mr. Warner,” Nurse McKoy explained. “Your room will be down the next hall, Miss Lawrence.”

“What? No!” Molly gasped. “I want to share this room with Josh.”

“That is out of the question,” Nurse McKoy snapped. “That is against hospital policy.”

“They spent five weeks sharing a tent,” Captain Ramos commented. “What difference will it make if they spend the night in the same room? Miss Lawrence is upset about her family. I would think it would be good for her to spend the night close to Corporal Warner for her comfort.”

“Hospital policy is very clear,” Nurse McKoy insisted. “Male and Female patients may NOT share a room.”

“You do realize that Boundary County is now subject to martial law?” Captain Ramos insisted. “Do not make me get a direct order from my general-de-brigada.”

“This is highly irregular,” Nurse McKoy complained.

“Make yourself comfortable here, Miss Lawrence,” Captain Ramos stated. “Irregular or not, you may spend the night here with the corporal.”

“Thank you, captain,” Molly gushed. “Thank you so much.”

The nurse and the captain left Josh and Molly in the room. A minute later two paratroopers carried their backpacks to their room. Josh and Molly decided to sort through their things and see what they wanted to keep from their gear. Someone at the hospital could take care of the rest of it when they left.

The phone in their room rang while they were sorting. Josh answered it.

“Hello?”

“Josh?” Mrs. Warner asked. Josh recognized his mom’s voice instantly. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, Mom.” Josh related the general story of their trek across northern Washington State and what little he knew about what happened next. He even put Molly on the phone for a minute so his Mom could get to know her a little.

“My battery is running low, Josh,” Mrs. Warner commented after about fifteen minutes of conversation. “You two are probably sleepy. I should let you get some rest. I doubt you had much of that in the mountains. Do you know if you will be able to visit us here in California?”

“I hope the army gives me some leave. I will high-tail it straight to you guys if they do,” Josh promised. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Josh,” Mrs. Warner replied.

Molly was down from missing her family and hearing about Josh’s family. The two cuddled in one of the beds. They ended up sleeping in separate beds when they found out their room didn’t have a lock on the door.

----oooOooo----

December 13, 2013, Boundary Community Hospital, Bonner's Ferry, Idaho

Josh and Molly woke to the sound of a helicopter landing on the pad about 150 feet from their room. Josh watched as a sharply dressed U. S. Army major climbed out, followed by two aides. They headed for the front of the hospital.

"This is probably for us," Josh commented. "Do you want a shower first or shall I go?"

"Go ahead, Josh," Molly answered. "I need time to wake up."

Josh was in the shower when a nurse knocked at the door. She announced breakfast would be ready in twenty minutes. Josh and Molly would eat in the hospital cafeteria rather than their room. They finished showering and dressing in hospital scrubs again. A nurse came by and took them down to the cafeteria.

Molly and Josh were half way through their breakfast when a nattily dressed U. S. Army major strutted into the cafeteria trailed by a couple enlisted men. The major headed straight for Josh and Molly. Josh jumped up and snapped to attention. He threw his best salute to the superior officer.

"Stand easy, Warner," the major instructed as he returned Josh's salute. "Sit down and finish your meal. I'm sure you need all the chow you can get." The major sat down across the table from Josh and Molly. Josh sat down after the major sat down. The two assistants stood at ease behind the major.

"I'm Major Jonathan Van Dyke, with the NorthCom public affairs section," the major explained. "You must be Molly Lawrence." He extended his hand across to shake Molly's hand. She returned the shake. "You've done very well to survive five weeks in the mountains in the winter, Miss Lawrence."

"It's all due to Josh," Molly replied. "I never would have made it without him."

"You also did very well too, sergeant," Major Van Dyke said.

"Um... excuse me, sir," Josh said. "I'm an E-4 Corporal."

"Negative sergeant," Major Van Dyke responded. "You are an E-7 sergeant first class, Warner. Your promotion is dated November 20, 2013." Josh didn't immediately recognize the date. It was the day that his sighting report allowed the air force to shoot down the transports full of Chinese paratroopers.

"Um... three grades..." Josh gulped, "...sir? What did... I... uh... how..."

"The war has not gone well for us," Major Van Dyke explained. "That disastrous attack at Sedro-Woolley, the beating the 1st Marine Division took at Everett, losing Seattle – the list is too long. Your trek through the Cascades and assistance in shooting down a battalion of Chinese paratroopers

is about the only piece of good news our country has had in months. You have become a national hero."

"I didn't do anything special," Josh protested. "I just evaded and escaped the way I was trained to do. Calling in the sighting of the transports was simply me doing my duty as a soldier. It wasn't anything..."

"You ARE a hero," Major Van Dyke insisted. "You symbolize American persistence and relentless drive to survive. You did whatever it took to live out there, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Josh responded.

"Do you know how many men are listed as missing from the Sedro-Woolley operation?"

"No, sir."

"435 men are MIA," Major Van Dyke explained. "We know of six men who managed to swim the Skagit after the bridges were blown. What you did is exceptional. You could easily have been among the 435 we presume are Chinese prisoners now."

"I guess so, sir."

"Our country needs a hero and you will do quite well," Major Van Dyke explained. "Do you understand, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," Josh acknowledged.

"My assistants will get you into a proper uniform, Warner," Major Van Dyke said. "They will get you properly dressed too, Miss Lawrence. The two of you will be on national TV when we take you out to the helicopter this morning."

"On TV?" Molly gasped.

"Really?" Josh added.

"There are a gaggle of reporters and TV crews camped outside the front door of this hospital. We won't be able to avoid them. I think a brief statement from the two of you would be appropriate. Do not take questions from press. That will come later after intelligence has debriefed the two of you."

"A press statement? Is that really necessary, sir?" Josh asked. The prospect of being on camera terrified him.

"You're huge news and the country wants to know about you," Major Van Dyke explained. "You have no choice, sergeant. Speaking with the press is NOT optional for you. Miss Lawrence, you are a civilian. You may address the press or not. That is your choice."

"I guess I can say something if Josh does too," Molly allowed. The major talked about their statement to the press while they finished eating. The assistants took Molly and Josh back to their room so they could change.

The assistants presented a selection of clothing for Molly. She took a pair of jeans, a blouse and a nice sweater. Josh put on the crisp new uniform he was given. He marveled as he looked down at his collar – three chevrons with two arcs below. Damn, he was higher ranked now than Rob Dolan had been when he died. Rob had served in the army and National Guard for years to make staff sergeant. The uniform even had the sunrise patch on the right shoulder representing his 41st Division. Someone had been very thorough when they got this uniform ready.

The assistants carried Josh and Molly's packs out when they were finished dressing. The Major met them inside the front door of the hospital.

"Take a deep breath," Major Van Dyke instructed. "Let it out. Let's go. Time to face the media!"

The major led the way out the door. Josh and Molly followed and then the assistants took the back. They turned left towards the helipad and were confronted by a throng of reporters, cameramen, bright lights and microphones. The throng pressed in close to the front three while the assistants stayed to the rear. Major Van Dyke waved his hand to the crowd.

"Get quiet, people," the major announced. "Sergeant Warner and Miss Lawrence have brief statements they would like to make to the press. We will NOT have time for questions. I need to get these brave young people to Colorado Springs for debriefing. Sergeant First Class Joshua Warner..."

Major Van Dyke stepped aside. It seemed like a hundred microphones were shoved within an inch of Josh's face. Josh gulped, blinked a couple times from the bright lights and began.

"Molly and I want to thank the Brazilian Paratroop Brigade for bringing us in yesterday. We also need to thank the Air Force Search and Rescue Center for their assistance during the past five weeks. Our hike across Washington was difficult and trying. It is a relief to be back safe with friendly forces."

"Josh, where did you find food?" "How did you keep from freezing to death?" "Did you get help from local people?" "Did you run into Chinese?" Josh ignored the shouted questions the way Major Van Dyke directed.

Molly stepped forward and slipped her hand into Josh's. "I have to thank Josh for saving my life. I would have died in Sedro-Woolley or somewhere in the mountains without his help, teaching and guidance." Molly gave a big smile and chuckled. "I'm not a camper. At least I wasn't until five weeks ago. I owe my life to this wonderful man."

Molly reached up and grasped Josh's face. She pulled him down to her height and gave him a hard kiss on the lips. "This man is my savior." Josh turned bright red in embarrassment.

"That's it for now," Major Van Dyke added immediately. "No questions. We need to get these two down to Denver."

The major's assistants kept the press away as the major led Josh and Molly along the side of the hospital, across the parking lot and over to the helipad. An Army Blackhawk sat waiting for them. The flight crew helped Molly and Josh climb into the chopper, get settled and buckled up for the flight.

"You did very well, Miss Lawrence," Major Van Dyke shouted over the roar as the rotors spun up to full power. "May I call you Molly?"

"Sure, that's fine," Molly agreed.

"You presented yourself brilliantly," the major gushed. "I liked the kiss on Josh's cheek. That was very personal – a great human touch."

"I meant it," Molly said.

"What is the plan for today?" Josh asked.

"The chopper will take us to Kalispell, Montana," Major Van Dyke explained. "A jet will take us on to Fort Carson in Colorado Springs. The intelligence people want to debrief you on your experiences. I understand General Blackburn wants to meet with you too."

"General Blackburn? The NorthCom commander?" Josh stammered.

"The very same," Major Van Dyke confirmed.

The Blackhawk flew east over a series of mountains and another long, thin lake. Josh and Molly both were glad they didn't need to figure out a way across that one. It had to stretch at least forty miles from the northern end down to where the river continued south. A plain opened up below them about thirty-five minutes later. The chopper settled down on the tarmac of a small airport. The sign on the outside of the terminal said they were in Kalispell, Montana.

A sergeant met them when they disembarked. He led them over to a military version of the Learjet, which they boarded. Within minutes they were airborne again, heading south for Colorado Springs. An hour and forty-five minutes later, their plane dropped down and landed at the Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs. Humvees took the party south to Fort Carson.

They were dropped off at a large administrative building. The sign out front said, "NorthCom Operations Center." Major Van Dyke got them by the MPs at the security checkpoint inside the front door. The major led them down a couple hallways before reaching a small conference room. An MP stood guard outside the door.

"Is the MP necessary?" Molly asked.

"This is a secure building, Miss Lawrence," Major Van Dyke answered.

"We don't have a security clearance," Josh added. "They're doing 'Need to Know' things here that we don't need to know about."

"Exactly," Major Van Dyke agreed. "We are on war footing and security is tight."

Three men stepped into the room as the major finished speaking. The oldest, probably in his late thirties, spoke first. "I am Lieutenant Colonel Murphy, the assistant G-2 for NorthCom. This is Lieutenant Cook and Lieutenant Banuelos. We want to hear more about your trek across the mountains. Pay particular attention to any encounters you may have had with the Chinese, their strength and dispositions and their intent."

Josh, with some help from Molly, told their story in mostly chronological order. They talked through the remainder of the morning. Lunch was brought in for everyone. The officers were less interested in the Chinese troops at Sedro-Woolley and on the road to Concrete than they were on the later encounters. Their encounter at Ellisforde drew special interest from their interrogators.

"Do you know anything about the massacre that happened?" Lt. Col. Murphy asked.

"I heard about it from a civilian in Northport," Josh replied. "I don't know how much credibility I'd give him. His father-in-law said he was cooperating the Chinese. His information had to be third hand and Northport is a good 75 miles from Ellisforde."

"The old man who gave you a boat to cross the Columbia?" Lt. Banuelos asked. Josh nodded yes.

"All I can confirm is that a couple hundred or so Chinese swarmed through Ellisforde the day after Molly and I shot the two soldiers," Josh continued. "That information is from Mike Dixon, the fireman who helped us cross the river. It is based on an eye-witness account by a close friend of his. Mike didn't say anything about his friend seeing them shoot all the men and boys."

"Any other atrocities you can confirm?" Lt. Col. Murphy asked.

"Something bad definitely happened a couple miles north of Orient," Josh responded. "This first home we came to was all shot up. Molly and I didn't feel comfortable there so we headed down the road. The next house was shot up too but we needed shelter for the night. We found the husband dead in the living room. The wife was in back of the house. No question she was raped and then executed. The next farm was burned to the ground."

"We crossed the uh..." Molly added. "What was that river, Josh?"

"The Kettle River."

"We crossed the Kettle and headed up the hill," Molly continued. "The next place we came to was all shot up and seemed deserted. We decided to spend the night there."

"We bedded down for the night," Josh added. "Molly took the bedroom and I went to sleep on the couch. I woke up with a shotgun pointed at me. Molly saved my ass... um... backside, sir. She disarmed the old man. It turned out he shot up the front of his house and ransacked it to make it

appear like the Chinese had already done that. He and his wife were hiding in the basement. Some of the people back there are pretty desperate.”

“They are,” Lt. Col. Murphy agreed. “We have sporadic contact with civilians in the Chinese occupied area. We had independent verification of the massacre at Ellisforde as well as drone photos that we suspect may be mass graves. You may discuss your personal experience and direct contacts regarding Ellisforde when you do interviews, but do not reveal further information regarding this massacre except through your personal knowledge.”

“Interviews?” Molly asked quizzically. “Are we doing interviews somewhere?”

“Are we?” Josh added as he turned towards Major Van Dyke. Van Dyke beamed.

“Of course you’ll be doing interviews,” he crowed. “You’re the hero of Omak. You are in huge demand now that you are back to safety. You’re booked for the Today Show, Sixty Minutes and Leno.”

“The Today Show, Sixty Minutes and Leno?” Josh stuttered, unable to say more. Finally he mustered his shaky courage.

“Um... I don’t know, Major,” Josh responded. “I’d be in way over my head, Major. I’m just a tank gunner not a polished speaker. I hoped to get a few days leave and then get back to my unit. I don’t know if I’m cut out for any of this.”

“Sergeant!” Major Van Dyke asserted. “You are a member of the U. S. Army! You WILL follow your orders. As of 2100 hours, 13 December, you are detached from the 41st Division and assigned to the NorthCom Public Relations Section until further notice. Is that clear, soldier?”

“Yes, sir!” Josh snapped immediately.

“Now relax,” the major added, abandoning his command tone. “I will be beside you the whole way to help you through this. Miss Lawrence... may I call you Molly?” Molly nodded yes. “You are a civilian and not subject to military discipline. You are free to accompany Josh or not as he fulfills his duties. What do you say? Are you willing to tell the fascinating story I just heard here to the rest of our country? They need to hear about American persistence and fortitude. The two of you look great together and exhibit exactly the virtues our country will need to get us through this war.”

“I guess I can,” Molly agreed quietly. “I don’t really have anywhere else to go unless I go out to my aunt’s in San Francisco.”

“Enjoy some travel on the government’s nickel,” Major Van Dyke said. “You’ve earned it with the help you gave Sergeant Warner.”

Lt. Col. Murphy and the two lieutenants reviewed what parts of their story could be made public. Josh’s unit name, actions during the attack at Sedro-Woolley, and any mention of a developing resistance movement behind Chinese lines were to be kept secret. Discussion of Chinese massacres and misbehavior was allowed.

The debriefing finished up mid-afternoon. Major Van Dyke led Josh and Molly, with an MP as escort, to the top floor of the administrative building. Josh drew up a little taller as he was led into the reception area of an office marked, “NorthCom Command, Gen. Paul M. Blackburn, Commanding.”

Major Van Dyke talked with an orderly at the front desk before having Molly and Josh take a seat. They waited ten minutes before they were ushered into the commanding general’s office. Paul Blackburn appeared to be in his late forties or early fifties. He was Josh’s height, trim, and dressed in a perfectly pressed Air Force uniform. Sight of the four stars on his collars caused Josh’s knees to weaken momentarily.

Josh came to attention and gave the general his best salute. Molly straightened up beside her companion.

“Welcome back to civilization, sergeant,” Gen. Blackburn remarked with a big smile after he returned Josh’s salute. “Welcome back, Miss Lawrence. The two of you did great work while you were up in the mountains. Our radar installations on the west coast were the first thing the Chinese took out when this damned war started. Your reports from the mountains gave my boys a fighting chance against the Chinese air force.”

“I was just trying to do my best to help out, sir,” Josh replied stiffly. He had ZERO experience talking to brass, especially brass bearing four stars.

“Stand easy, sergeant,” Gen. Blackburn replied. “I’m sure you aren’t used to dealing with generals.” Josh relaxed slightly. “The first report you gave us was dynamite. It allowed my boys to take out almost a battalion of Chinese. That was damned fine work. The other reports were helpful too, though not in as dramatic a fashion as that first one. Tell me more about your experiences up in the mountains.”

Josh and Molly gave the general the five minute version of their trek across northern Washington and Idaho. The general nodded and listened attentively as they described their trek. He gave them a big smile when they finished.

“That is a true tale of perseverance and fortitude,” Gen. Blackburn said. He looked Josh straight in the eye. “I am going to ask you to do something you are probably uncomfortable with and unprepared for. I need you to tell that story to the nation. They need to hear about true American grit and determination. Can you do that, sergeant?”

“I will do my best, sir,” Josh stammered. The general turned his attention to Molly.

“Miss Lawrence, your country can use your help,” the general said sweetly. “Are you willing to do a PR tour with Sergeant Warner? Our countrymen need to see what dedicated, strong young men and women we have if we are going to win this war.”

“Um... I guess,” Molly stuttered. “I’m eighteen now, so I guess I can decide for myself. I haven’t been able to contact my parents yet.”

“You haven’t? That’s terrible,” General Blackburn replied. “Major, have Captain LaPorte get on that right away. I want this young lady reunited with her family.”

“Yes, sir!” Major Van Dyke snapped. “Molly reuniting with her parents will make great visuals, sir.”

“What do you say?” Gen. Blackburn repeated. “Can you help your country out?”

“I guess so, General,” Molly agreed.

“I understand you are still a high school student?”

“Yes, I am,” Molly replied. “Or at least I was until we evacuated Sedro-Woolley. I guess I should be since I don’t have a diploma yet.”

“The Major will get you an escort and a tutor to accompany you on the tour,” Gen. Blackburn promised. “We will take excellent care of you. I promise that.”

“OK, I’ll do it,” Molly agreed. She tried to hide her happiness at the news. She was going to get to stay with Josh for a little while longer. “An escort isn’t necessary. Josh has taken good care of me over the past five weeks.”

“I guess he has,” Gen. Blackburn agreed. “Thank you so much for agreeing to help, Miss Lawrence. Good luck on the tour. You will be doing a great service to your country.”

Josh, Molly, Major Van Dyke and his assistants stopped off at the mess hall on base to get an early dinner. They headed for the airport after dinner for their flight to New York. Molly called Aunt Ellen on the way to the airport to report what was going on. Aunt Ellen had no further information about Molly’s family. Josh called home too.

“Hi, Josh,” Mrs. Warner answered when he called.

“Hi, Mom,” Josh replied. “Do you have access to a TV?”

“TV? They have a couple in the camp rec center,” Mrs. Warner said. “Why?”

“Watch the Today Show tomorrow morning,” Josh explained. “Molly and I are flying to New York in a few minutes. We’re going to be on the show in the morning.”

“Really? The Today Show?” Mrs. Warner gasped. “You’re going to be on TV?”

“The Army is sending Molly and me on a public relations tour,” Josh explained. “They seem to think people will want to hear about our time in the mountains.”

“I guess that is to be expected,” Mrs. Warner said. “You do realize the whole nation heard about you two crossing the Cascades. Some of the media have been calling you the ‘Hero of Omak.’ Did you know that?”

“I did,” Josh answered. “I heard about it when we were in Loomis and Tonasket. They are able to get radio reception there.”

“Good luck, son,” Mrs. Warner said. “Ashley, Jake, your father and I will do our best to watch tomorrow morning. I love you, Josh.”

“Love you too, Mom,” Josh replied.

The Humvee dropped them off at the Peterson AF Base terminal a few minutes after they finished their calls. Major Van Dyke’s paperwork was in order. The party was aboard an Air Force Learjet headed for New York City in twenty minutes time. The flight to New York took over four hours. A military van picked them up from LaGuardia Airport and took them into Manhattan.

“What’s on the schedule for this evening?” Molly asked.

“We make one stop before we get to our downtown hotel,” Major Van Dyke explained.

“Clothes I hope,” Molly said. “I can’t go on TV in this.”

“No, you most certainly can’t,” Major Van Dyke agreed. “I have a designer bringing a selection of clothing to our hotel. The stop is at a salon. You need a bit of a touch up to bring you back to this wonderful look.” The major held up a picture of Molly dressed as a cheer leader. She recognized the photo as coming from her high school’s daily bulletin, “The Bear Facts.” It was a shot of her cheering at a football game a year ago.

“That was a year ago,” Molly said. “I must look a horrible mess. I haven’t had a thing done to my hair since October.”

“Gabriel Frederick is one of the best in Manhattan,” Major Van Dyke replied. “He will have you sparkling tonight, Molly.” Major Van Dyke turned and looked Josh in the eye. “Grizzly Adams over here needs to be pruned too. I want you to be clean shaven – a fresh faced all-American boy-next-door. One of Gabriel’s assistants will have you looking like a proper soldier in no time tonight.”

“I have no objections to that, Major,” Josh replied. “I would have shaved out the in wilderness – if I had a razor, soap and regular access to warm water.”

“I understand, Sergeant,” Major Van Dyke replied. “Your furry look was perfect this morning, the day after finishing a trek across the mountains. Tomorrow morning you will look like every mother’s dream son.”

“You’re the boss, Major,” Josh said. Josh was pleased at the idea of losing the bushy beard he’d grown since his break from the line before the attack at Sedro-Woolley. His hair was a lot longer than he normally kept it too. The only thing giving Josh pause was that they were going to a salon. Josh was satisfied with the services of a simple barber normally.

An expressway took them across Queens into downtown. The expressway ducked under the East River in a tunnel before surfacing in Manhattan. Josh and Molly didn't recognize anything until the SUV turned north on Madison Avenue. They headed fourteen blocks north. The airman chauffeuring them turned left onto 51st Street and went two blocks west. He pulled to a stop in front of "Beauty by Gabriel."

"Beauty by Gabriel" was dark. Major Van Dyke knocked at the door. A light popped on inside and an assistant let them into the shop. Both Josh and Molly had to stifle a laugh when Gabriel pranced out to meet them. His spiked hair, the loud outfit and his off-the-wall demeanor was beyond the experiences of either of them. The Warners were average, simple people. They didn't follow haute couture. Molly and her closest girlfriends from high school thought they were up with the latest in style, but they were from a lumberjack town – Sedro-Woolley. They weren't quite as with it as they believed.

Gabriel took Molly off to one room for her styling. The assistant took Josh off to another room. Major Van Dyke headed off with Molly and Gabriel. Lt. Martinez, one of the major's assistants, went with Josh and the assistant.

Josh had a seat in the barber's chair. The assistant decided to work on Josh's beard first. He sheared much of the growth off with scissors. Clippers took the rest down to stubble. The assistant washed and cut Josh's hair next. The job was professional and to military standards. A straight razor shave came next. Josh's cheeks were smooth as a baby's bottom when the assistant finished. A manicure brought his rough, outdoor beaten nails to an acceptable appearance.

Josh and Lt. Martinez sat out front in the salon while they waited for Molly and the major. Half an hour later the major and Gabriel escorted Molly out front. Josh's breath caught when he saw her. She looked... well... like a knock out or a supermodel. Gabriel hadn't gone overboard with Molly. Her hair had more body and some curl to it. She looked... just... stunning.

"Wow!" Josh blurted out. "You look... great!"

Major Van Dyke smiled triumphantly to Gabriel. "Well done, Gabe."

"Do I ever let you down, Jonathan?" Gabriel responded.

"That is why I brought Molly here," Major Van Dyke replied. "Nothing but the best will do."

"Thank you, Gabriel. This is amazing," Molly gushed.

Josh puzzled over the seemingly close relationship between the slightly off the wall hair stylist and the regular army major as the group loaded back into their SUV. They seemed to be friends. That certainly was out of the ordinary.

Their hotel was a few blocks away. The major got a block of rooms for the group. Josh was in 1204, the major in 1206, his assistants in 1208 and Molly in 1210.

“Not this again!” Molly snapped. “I spent five weeks sharing a tent with Josh. He’s the only person I’ve got other than my aunt and uncle out in San Francisco. I am staying with Josh!”

“A twenty-one year old army sergeant will NOT be registering to share a room with an eighteen year old high school student,” Major Van Dyke insisted. “PERIOD!”

The major relaxed a bit and added patiently, “Room 1210 is already set up with your wardrobe choices. You would do well to stop in there, Molly, unless you plan to appear on national TV tomorrow morning in the clothes you wore today. Now... once you get your wardrobe selected...” He paused and gave Molly a smile. “Do I plan on doing bed check tonight?” He winked.

The major turned to Josh. “You will find six uniforms in your room. Check them out. You should have two Class A’s (full dress) and four ACU’s (Army combat uniforms). Try them on and make sure everything is squared away. Tomorrow’s uniform will be Class A. Wake up will be 0600 hours. We have to be in studio by 0700.”

“Got it, sir,” Josh replied. The group headed up to their rooms. Josh found two service dress uniforms with a pair of spit polished shoes and four digital camo uniforms with a pair of boots. All the brass was polished and in perfect shape for tomorrow. Josh tried on one Class A and one digital camo uniform as well as the shoes and boots. Everything fit perfectly. He waited around watching TV until Molly came down the hall to join him for bed. Josh and Molly’s return to civilization headlined the newscast he watched. They gave his brief statement outside the hospital that morning. He was watching a CBS station, so no mention was made of them appearing on NBC’s Today Show tomorrow morning.

Josh called his parents again. He left them an e-mail when his dad’s cell phone went to voice mail. Molly joined him half an hour later. She was wearing one of the new dresses. She looked stunning. Molly was in a playful mood so she did a striptease to the opening music of the Tonight Show.

Josh egged her on as she disrobed. Molly took a second to hang the new dress up before joining Josh in the big king-sized bed. The couple took full advantage of the chance for extended foreplay. Too much of their love-making over the past few weeks had been done in the dark in too small of a sleeping bag. They took full advantage of the light and room to explore each other’s bodies.

Josh and Molly made love while Jay Leno’s show droned on in the background. The night’s musical guest was playing when they engaged in round two of shaking the bed. The two cuddled and exchanged kisses when they quenched their needs for the night. Josh idly glanced at the clock. It was 12:26 am.

The announcer on TV intoned, “The lineup for Monday’s show will include: The hero of Omak, Sergeant First Class Joshua Warner, his hiking companion, Molly Lawrence, Rob Reiner and our musical guests, the Wallflowers.”

“I guess we’re flying to L.A. soon,” Josh commented as the satisfied couple cuddled.

“It appears that way,” Molly agreed. She gave Josh a final kiss before turning on her side to sleep.

Chapter 12

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0600 hours, December 14, 2013 – Downtown Manhattan, New York City

The jangling phone awoke Josh with a start. He groaned and reached for the receiver. “Huh?”

“This is your 6:00 AM wakeup call, Sergeant Warner,” the night operator reported. “Major Van Dyke needs you dressed and ready to leave for Rockefeller Center in thirty minutes. The major said that you should not worry about packing. One of his assistants will handle that for you.”

“Thank you,” Josh managed to grunt as he cleared his head. Bags? What bags did he have? Certainly he didn’t mean their backpacks. Josh and Molly hadn’t brought them in from the car last night.

“Time to get up,” Josh said as he gently shook Molly. “Why don’t you grab a robe and head down to your room to get ready this morning. The major is giving us a half hour to get ready.”

“A half hour!” Molly exclaimed as she sat upright. “A half hour? There’s no way I can get ready in half an hour.”

“I’m sure you will make it,” Josh responded.

“I got to run,” Molly exclaimed. She slipped into the robe from Josh’s bathroom door, grabbed her dress and headed down the hall. Josh grabbed a clean pair of boxers and sauntered into the bathroom. Comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, mouth wash, razor, hair brush, shampoo, soap and towels – everything he needed was ready for him. This hotel certainly was well prepared for unprepared guests such as himself.

Molly almost bumped into a lady in her late twenties outside Room 1210. “You must be Molly,” the lady said with a smile. “I’m Marsha. I am here to help you get prepared for today’s show.”

“Um... thank you,” Molly stuttered. Marsha followed Molly into her room.

“Wear the shower cap when you shower this morning,” Marsha suggested. “Gabriel did a fabulous job with your hair last night. We can touch things up before you go on air. We’ll do a little base make-up before we leave here but Antoine will do most of the work once you get to your dressing room down at the studio.”

“OK,” Molly agreed. She headed into the bathroom to shower and prepare. Marsha’s help made Molly feel like a queen. They used the entire half hour to get Molly ready for her first TV appearance. Marsha suggested a different dress than Molly had planned for the day. Molly followed Marsha’s suggestion.

Major Van Dyke, Josh, the major’s assistants, Molly and Marsha met in the hallway outside the rooms. Lt. Martinez was delegated to look after their luggage. The major led the group outside,

across 51st Street and into Rockefeller Plaza. Josh and Molly both recognized 30 Rock and the ice rink. They walked across the plaza to the low building marked “NBC News.”

“Morning, Kathryn,” Major Van Dyke announced cheerily. “You look lovely today.”

“Thank you, Jonathan,” the receptionist replied. “You’re always the charmer. Your group is in Dressing Room C today.”

“Thank you, dearest,” Major Van Dyke answered. He led the group back into the studio complex without further guidance.

“Are we going to get a chance to have breakfast before we go on air?” Molly asked.

“There will be a selection of breakfast items in our dressing room,” the major replied as he continued walking. “You can enjoy a fine repast while they do your hair and makeup this morning. We’re scheduled for the 8:30 segment, so we should have plenty of time to get ready and to relax.”

“Relax sounds good, sir,” Josh added. “I’m a little nervous about all this.”

“You will do great, sergeant,” Major Van Dyke replied. “Sit down and have a casual conversation with Matt and Savannah. They’re nice people and will make you feel totally comfortable. You’ll see.”

They were passing Dressing Room A when a well-dressed man stopped Major Van Dyke. “Jonathan, you’re back!” he exclaimed. “The military is keeping you well dressed.”

“They have to, Bill,” Major Van Dyke allowed.

“How are Ann and the boys?” Bill asked.

“Great,” Major Van Dyke replied. “Michael turned nine last week. I missed his party. I had to watch him blow out the candles on my smart phone.”

“That sucks,” Bill responded. “How’s Chad?”

“Shooting up like a weed,” Van Dyke answered. “He’s twelve... going on seventeen.”

“They grow up fast,” Bill agreed. Bill headed down the hallway away from the group. Major Van Dyke conducted them to Dressing Room C.

“You aren’t regular army, are you, Major?” Josh asked when they got inside. “You know way too many people too well to be a regular officer.”

“ROTC, City College, Class of 1998,” Major Van Dyke replied. “I did my active duty and switched over to the Army Reserve. The army decided last year that they have a need for officers with my particular talents in this war. They called me up nine months ago and assigned me to public relations with NorthCom.”

“What do you do normally?” Molly asked.

“I manage talent for the Empire Agency here in the city,” Major Van Dyke explained. “I’ve been backstage here dozens of times with my clients. You’re in good hands. Bill Woods will take care of you when it is time for your segment later this morning. Do what Bill tells you to do and you’ll do great.”

“You’re the boss, Major,” Josh replied.

“Why don’t the two of you grab a little breakfast,” Major Van Dyke suggested. “The staff will do your makeup and hair shortly.”

Josh grabbed a Danish and some coffee while Molly nibbled on a croissant and drank some orange juice. A makeup artist and hair stylist went to work on Molly when she finished eating. Major Van Dyke reviewed what subjects were off limits during the interview with Josh.

Molly looked stunning when the makeup lady and stylist were finished with her. They needed only a few minutes to tweak Josh’s hair and do his makeup. Josh and Molly watched the show on the monitor while they waited for their turn. Watching was revealing for Josh. He never watched the Today Show back home before the war. Matt Lauer seemed like a nice guy next door that you could have a casual conversation with. Savannah Guthrie seemed nice too.

Major Van Dyke preached to Josh and Molly to relax and have fun. He wanted them to feel like they were sitting down on the patio at home and talking about their experiences with old friends. They wouldn’t face a studio audience, though there would be people outside in Rockefeller Plaza watching them through the windows. Josh felt almost comfortable before air time. He had a few butterflies in his stomach though not as many as before the attack at Sedro-Woolley.

Bill Woods popped his head in the dressing room and announced, “Five minutes to go. Follow me out the ready area.” Josh, Molly and Major Van Dyke followed Bill through the studio complex to the off-stage area where they would wait for their cue. Bill gave them a heads up when they were down to thirty seconds.

“Our next guests this morning are two intrepid young people who have caught the imagination of our nation,” Matt Lauer announced seconds later. “Please welcome the Hero of Omak, Sergeant First Class Joshua D. Warner, and his hiking companion, Miss Molly Lawrence.”

Josh led the way and Molly followed out to the stage. They sat down on the couch beside Matt and Savannah.

“Welcome to the Today Show,” Savannah announced. “Sergeant, Miss Lawrence. May I call you Josh and Molly?”

“Sure,” Josh agreed. “No problem,” Molly confirmed.

“Our whole country has watched and waited for weeks as we followed your exploits hiking through the Cascade Mountains as you dodged Chinese patrols, called in air support to combat the Chinese and survived in the bitter cold of the northern Washington State’s mountaintops. How did the two of you come to find it necessary to brave these bitterly cold conditions to get to safety?” Matt asked.

“You are a tank driver, aren’t you, Josh?”

“I was a tank driver when the war started,” Josh answered. “I was promoted to gunner while we were still up in Canada at the Chilliwack Line.”

“How did you go from riding a tank to hiking across the State of Washington?” Matt asked.

“My tank got hit during the fighting at Sedro-Woolley five weeks ago,” Josh explained. “We took one hit in the track or boogie wheel that stopped us. We had a missile hit the back of our turret that burned up our personal gear. We lost the sergeant who commanded our tank when he got out to put out the fire.”

“You took command then?” Matt asked.

“I was a corporal then,” Josh replied. “The other two guys in the tank were privates, so yeah, I took command. We kept firing at the Chinese. We had plenty of targets. A few minutes later we took another hit but it didn’t damage anything critical. A minute after that a Chinese tank clanged a round off the barrel of our cannon, bending it all to hel... heck.” Josh barely caught himself before he cursed on national morning TV.

“I ordered the guys to abandon our tank once we couldn’t shoot,” Josh continued. “I set charges to destroy key components of the tank and we took off across the fields northwest of Sedro-Woolley. We lost one of our group to Chinese machine gun fire within a couple minutes. The other guy and I made it back into town without getting killed.”

“May I ask the names of the crewmen?” Matt asked politely.

“Sorry, I can’t answer that,” Josh answered. “The Army instructed me that I cannot tell unit or personal names during interviews. The other soldier and I were forced back into the middle of Sedro-Woolley by Chinese artillery and mortar fire. We got turned around and didn’t realize they were forcing us away from the bridges over the Skagit River and safety. We jogged through the middle of the town and ended up at the high school.”

“That’s where Josh and Tyler found me,” Molly added. Mention of Tyler Serna’s name drew an off-camera glare from Major Van Dyke.

“The civilians had been evacuated from the town,” Savannah asked. “How did you end up standing outside the high school?”

“I was an idiot,” Molly replied. “I’ve learned so much over the last five weeks, it is amazing how little I realized about war back then. The last evac bus was leaving that morning. My dad forbade me from bringing things along that I thought were essential.” Molly gave the camera a big smile. “You know girls, cosmetics, your curling irons, a hair dryer, magazines and all those other things we’ll just

die for if we don't have." Molly snorted. "War has a way of sorting out priorities. I made the stupidest decision of my life five weeks ago in walking away from my family for a bunch of useless junk."

"I guess your parents are relieved now that you're back in American hands, safe and sound," Savannah commented.

"I don't know," Molly said. "If you're watching this Mom or Dad, give the Army a call. They can help you get in touch with me."

"You don't know where they are?" Savannah asked, clearly alarmed.

"I do not," Molly replied. "Back to our story – I tried to help Josh find our way down to the bridges over the Skagit River. We got about a quarter mile away when they blew up one of the two bridges. A minute later they blew up the other one."

"We were trapped on the north side of the river with no way across," Josh explained. "The three of us ran back into town and hid out until dark. We headed down to the river with the idea that we would borrow a boat and cross that way, out of sight of the Chinese. The only boat was on the far side of the river. I must credit the other soldier with me..."

"Tyler?" Matt added helpfully.

"The soldier I can't name," Josh insisted. "He was a stronger swimmer than me. He offered to swim the ice-cold river and bring the row boat back for Molly and me. The current was stronger than he thought and it pushed him downstream into sight of the Chinese. A machine gunner mowed him down before he could get under cover when he reached the far side of the river."

"He was so brave," Molly added.

"We hid out in a house in Sedro-Woolley the next day," Josh explained. "I figured we would need to head east to get away. My buddy and I passed an outdoor outfitters when we jogged through town as it was falling the day before. I figured Molly and I could outfit ourselves and head into the mountains to escape."

"The plan was to drive out, not hike through the mountains," Molly added. "I was NOT an outdoors girl at that point in time. I was terrified of going up in the mountains."

"After dark the second night we sneaked across town and got into the local outfitters," Josh narrated. "We got packs, boots, winter clothes, canteens, sleeping bags, snow shoes, trail food, a stove, a tent and maps from them." Josh looked directly at the camera and smiled. "If you own Skagit River Outfitters and are watching, you can send the bill to the U. S. Army."

Matt Lauer, Savannah and Molly all laughed at Josh's joke. "Did you simply grab a car in town and head east?" Matt asked. "Didn't the Chinese notice?"

“They would have,” Josh agreed. “We hiked a couple miles east of town before we ‘borrowed’ a car from one of the families that evacuated town. I drove away from Sedro-Woolley with the headlights out, to make it harder for the Chinese to spot us.”

“I watched out the back window for the Chinese,” Molly added. “Josh was worried that they might send troops out to capture the bridge at Concrete, a small town about twenty miles east of Sedro-Woolley. Sure enough, we’re about halfway to Concrete when I spotted a bunch of headlights behind, catching up to us, real quick.”

“I spotted a small convenience store and pulled into their parking lot,” Josh explained. “It was a good place for us to hide in plain sight. We hopped out of the SUV we ‘borrowed’ and hid in the woods behind the store. About a dozen big Chinese six-wheeled APCs flew by at high speed. I knew they were heading for Concrete and the bridge we wanted to cross. Molly and I broke into a vacant house and huddled to plan out our next move.”

“My heart sank when we heard the bridge blow up,” Molly added. “I knew Josh was going to make me walk through the mountains. I was scared as hell.” Molly blushed when she realized what she’d said. Matt and Savannah ignored her faux pas.

“It was fine,” Josh said. “I told you it would be. Molly and I sneaked into the house adjoining the store so we had a place to figure out our route through the mountains.”

“How in the world did the two of you manage to find your way through all those mountains?” Savannah asked. “I’m sure I would have gotten lost.”

“We were lucky,” Josh explained. “Skagit River Outfitters were a distributor for USGS quads.”

“USGS quads?” What are they?” Savannah asked.

“U. S. Geological Survey topographical quadrangles,” Josh replied. “They are super-detailed maps that show every road, trail, building, stream and patch of woods. They show the elevation and shape of the land. They are the gold standard for outdoorsmen, Boy Scouts, and the armed forces for navigating in unfamiliar terrain.”

“Did the army teach you the skill to use these maps?” Matt asked.

“Actually, the Boy Scouts taught me first,” Josh explained. “Molly and I loaded back into the car and took back-roads up into the mountains. We made it almost to Baker Pass before the SUV got stuck in deep snow. We made some breakfast and then got to hiking.”

Josh related a barebones account of their five week trek through the mountains. “How did you manage the cold at night?” Savannah asked. “Do you have any idea of the temperatures you faced?”

“My pack had a thermometer zipper pull,” Molly explained. “We saw temperatures lower than minus twenty and up into the fifties.”

“The nights we had to camp on the mountain tops were brutal,” Josh added. “Those were the worst times for cold.”

“How did the two of you manage with just a tent for shelter?” Savannah asked.

“We put the tent in a snow pit whenever we could,” Josh explained. “That helped us stay out of the wind. The snow provided some insulation too. Some nights we just had to huddle together to share body warmth.”

“Josh taught me all of these things,” Molly added. “I would never have been able to survive without his knowledge.”

“I know you couldn’t have carried enough food to last five weeks,” Matt commented. “How did you manage to find enough to keep going?”

“We took about ten days of food from the outfitters,” Josh explained. “I can’t go into details about the aborted rescue attempt, but they did manage to pre-position ten days of MREs along with the satellite phone.”

“A satellite phone?” Matt asked. “Is that how you communicated with U. S. forces? Let’s talk about how you came to be known as the Hero of Omak.”

“I don’t care much for that nickname,” Josh said. “I’m just a soldier trying to do his duty. I was able to use the phone to call in sightings of Chinese planes as they flew overhead.”

“The U. S. Army credits you with providing the information that allowed them to shoot down fourteen Chinese transports carrying a thousand Chinese paratroopers,” Matt said. “That sounds heroic to me.”

“It was an awful morning,” Molly added. “We were camped at the top of a mountain. It was one of the worst nights we spent out there. Josh was so cool, taking the planes’ bearing and calling in our location. Mrs. Dah...”

“We don’t talk about people we met in the Chinese occupied area,” Josh interjected quickly. “What I did is what any good soldier would do if he was in my situation.”

“You said the night was awful, Molly,” Savannah interjected. “Do you have any idea what the temperature was on that mountaintop?”

“Not that morning,” Molly answered. “Josh and I were too busy that morning to check the temperature. We had mornings where it was twenty below zero that felt warmer than that night. I would guess it was thirty below or maybe colder.”

“Your equipment was warm enough for such dangerous conditions?” Matt asked.

“No, it wasn’t,” Josh answered. “Burrowing our tent into the snow gave us some insulation. We had to cuddle together to keep warm.”

"How does it feel to be sitting here in this warm studio after spending five brutal weeks hiking through the mountains?" Matt asked.

"Surreal," Josh responded. "Two days ago we were in a tent on top of a mountain. The ground was covered by snow. We set up our campsite beside couple of small lakes. It was pretty up there but cold. One day later we're in a hospital, showered and sleeping in warm comfortable beds. Today we're here with you."

"It is fantastic to be in this nice warm studio," Molly added. "I'm clean. I'm wearing nice clothes again. Your people helped me get my hair looking nice. It is such a relief to be here."

"Did you encounter any Chinese troops while you were trekking across the mountains?" Matt asked.

"We had encounters or near-encounters with them numerous times," Josh replied. "We dodged the Chinese as we left Sedro-Wooley. We avoided patrols out searching for us. We watched roads and crossed after the Chinese troops went through. Most of our route planning was driven by our need to avoid the Chinese along the way to safety."

"There have been reports of the Chinese committing atrocities in occupied Canada and the United States," Matt asked. "Did you see any evidence of that as you hiked across Washington State?"

"We did, Matt," Josh replied. "We found houses that were shot up and burned in Orient. We found dead Americans. We found a woman who had been raped and killed. Bad things are happening to Americans in the Chinese occupied areas."

"Do you have any knowledge about the biggest atrocity story?" Matt asked. "Rumors have gotten out of the occupied area about the Chinese massacring the residents of the small town of Ellisforde."

"Molly and I were not in Ellisforde at the time it happened," Josh said. "We weren't too far away and we knew something was happening up there. I can't say more about it other than that due to national security and for the safety of citizens in occupied territory."

"Did you receive help from people behind the lines?" Savannah asked. Matt shot her a dirty look.

"I can't say," Josh replied evenly. The stage manager off camera motioned to Matt Lauer.

"I want to thank Joshua Warner and Molly Lawrence for taking time to visit us this morning," Matt announced. "Their courage, perseverance and heroism are an inspiration to everyone in our country. They showed us what America's youth can do today as we face this grave threat from Asia."

The light on the camera went off. Techs unclipped their microphones while Josh and Molly thanked Matt and Savannah for hosting them on the show. They headed off stage while Matt and Savannah prepped for the show's next segment. Major Van Dyke was beaming as he escorted them back to the dressing room.

“You two were fabulous!” he gushed. “You both looked great. You presented yourselves well. The two of you were the epitome of patriotic young Americans ready to fight for our lives and freedom.”

“I’m glad you we did OK,” Josh allowed. “What is next?”

“We will get the makeup cleaned off the two of you, Lt. Martinez will bring our car around and head up to the CBS Broadcast Center,” Major Van Dyke explained. “We begin filming your 60 Minutes segment this morning. Tomorrow will be a travel day. We hit L. A. on Monday for Leno.”

“The Tonight Show?” Josh asked.

“Jay Leno? Cool!” Molly added.

“The very same,” Major Van Dyke confirmed. Molly changed into less fancy clothes. Josh switched to digital camo fatigues. The makeup people helped Josh and Molly clean up. The group loaded up into an army SUV and headed for 57th Street. Traffic was brutal. Josh called his parents on the way.

“Hello, Josh,” his Mom said when she answered his Dad’s cell phone.

“I didn’t expect you to answer, Mom,” Josh said. “Where’s Dad?”

“We’re on the road,” Mom replied. “Your father handed me the phone. We saw you on the Today Show. You looked thin, dear.”

“I’m glad you and Dad saw it,” Josh said. “I probably am a little thin, Mom. I spent two months on campaign with the army and five weeks hiking through the Cascades with a sixty or seventy pound backpack. Don’t worry. The major leading this publicity tour is taking care of Molly and me.”

“That’s good to hear, son,” Mom said. “Your Dad sends his love.”

“I want to get up to northern California to visit as soon as I can,” Josh said. He glanced over at Major Van Dyke, who just shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know when, but I’ll catch up to you as soon as I can.”

“I love you, Josh,” Mom said. “I hope to see you soon.”

“Me too,” Josh agreed. Josh clicked off his phone. He turned to Major Van Dyke. “Any progress tracking down Molly’s family?”

“We have Molly listed in the refugee database,” Major Van Dyke answered. “We have done searches for Michael R. Lawrence, Sr., Sandra L. Lawrence and Michael R. Lawrence, Jr. in the refugee database. We are interviewing Sedro-Wooley residents to assist us in the search for her family. We do not have any information available at this time.”

“Thank you for your efforts,” Molly said. “Are you trying to get through to my grandfather, John R. Lawrence? Grandpa was evacuated with his plant when they declared the plant a war critical

industry a few weeks before the rest of the town evacuated. Grandpa warned us he would not be able to get in touch with us for a while after he left, due to national security. He's somewhere helping get the production line going again."

"We know," Major Van Dyke said. "We have gotten word to your grandfather that you are safe."

"Thank you," Molly said.

Their SUV pulled to a stop in front of a block long brick and concrete building. The awning at the entrance announced, "CBS Broadcast Center." Major Van Dyke took them upstairs to the 60 Minutes offices. Just like at the Today Show, Major Van Dyke seemed to know everybody they met. He took them to a conference room where they met the producer for their segment, Robert V. Smith.

Bob Smith spent an hour questioning them in great detail about their experiences hiking through the mountains to safety. Bob ordered out for lunch, so they could keep preparing for their interview time later in the afternoon. Josh and Molly worked with the staff cartographer for an hour after lunch to help the cartographer follow their route through the mountains. Bob felt it was essential for viewers to see graphics of their trek to fully understand its difficulty.

Josh changed into a Class A uniform. Molly dressed for the on-camera part of the interview. Steve Kroft joined them on the set. The filming took the rest of the afternoon. Cameras filmed Kroft asking them questions. They would rearrange the setup and then Molly and Josh would answer Kroft's questions. Their packs from the trek miraculously appeared for them to display to the TV audience.

The whole process was easier on the nerves but much more exhausting than appearing on live TV had been. It all seemed terribly involved for a story that would run for thirteen minutes the next evening. Josh and Molly were wrung out by the time the interview was done. They changed into informal clothes.

Major Van Dyke pulled Josh aside while Molly was having her makeup removed. "I have observed over the past couple days that you and Molly have become close through your ordeal," the major observed. "I wasn't completely candid this morning when Molly asked me about her parents' status."

"It's bad news?" Josh guessed. Major Van Dyke nodded briefly.

"I couldn't get a casualty notification officer and chaplain to join us until late this afternoon," the major explained. "I will have them sit down with Molly after dinner tonight. You and Molly have become close..." The major stared into Josh. "...very close." Josh wilted under the major's gaze.

"Boyfriend and girlfriend," Josh acknowledged.

"I would like your opinion," Major Van Dyke said. "Would it be better for Molly to get the news on her own or with you at her side for support?"

"I'll be there for her," Josh said.

“I think that will be best,” Major Van Dyke said.

Josh managed to hide the bad news when he met up with Molly again. The major took their party out to an up-scale burger restaurant for dinner. Josh and Molly loved the classic Americana food that they hadn’t had in months. The group headed back to their hotel for the evening.

Two army captains met them in the lobby. One captain introduced himself as Captain James Phillips. The other was Chaplain John Dillard. Josh noticed Capt. Dillard had a cross on his collar, signifying he was a chaplain. Capt. Phillips took them upstairs to a suite. Major Van Dyke accompanied them. His two assistants were dismissed. Capt. Phillips motioned for Josh and Molly to have a seat on the couch. The other officers took seats in the semi-circle of chairs in front of the couch.

“We have information about your family, Molly,” Capt. Phillips announced. Josh slipped his arm around Molly’s back to let her know he was supporting her. “There is no easy way to give you this news. Your family was observed boarding the last evacuation bus out of Sedro-Wooley. Chinese fighters were strafing traffic on that road on 7 November. It appears that the jets’ bullets hit the driver of the last bus about ten miles south of Sedro-Wooley. The bus careened through a guardrail, plunged down a steep bank and burst into flames when it hit the bottom.”

Josh slipped his free hand over and clasped Molly’s left hand.

“There were no survivors to the crash,” Capt. Phillips announced. Josh felt Molly stiffen. He gave her hand a squeeze.

“My Mom is dead?” Molly squeaked.

“No, I am sorry, Molly,” Chaplain Dillard said soothingly. “Your whole family was on the bus. They are all dead.”

Josh felt Molly straighten up. “That’s wrong!” she snapped. “My Mom called Aunt Ellen, her sister, after the bus left Sedro-Woolley. Mom told Aunt Ellen that my Dad and Mikey got off the bus to look for me before it left.”

“Are you sure?” Capt. Phillips asked.

“My Aunt Ellen knows her own sister’s voice,” Molly insisted. “Mom told Aunt Ellen that my dad and my brother didn’t take the last bus out of town. They went off to look for me. Your information is wrong. Are you even sure if the bus was the last bus out of Sedro-Woolley?”

“That information is solid,” Capt. Phillips answered. “We have multiple witnesses from Sedro-Woolley who confirmed that the bus was the one your family was observed boarding. The WSEMA was able to get down to the crash site before the area was overrun by the Chinese a couple days later. They could not recover the passenger manifest your father should have had with him, nor were they able to ID or recover any of the bodies. There wasn’t enough time.”

“Molly, your aunt confirmed that your mother was on the last bus out of Sedro-Woolley, didn’t she?” Chaplain Dillard asked. Molly nodded her agreement. “Let us say a prayer for your mother. It is

nearly certain she perished in the crash and has gone on to everlasting life.” The chaplain led Molly and the other through a prayer for Sandra Lawrence’s soul.

“We will keep looking for your father and brother, Molly,” Capt. Phillips promised. “I am sorry for the confusion when we first met with you tonight. Casualty notification has become chaotic as the war has continued. We have too many families to notify and too little information to give. I promise we will keep a watch on all refugee and P.O.W. lists for your father and your brother. We WILL find them if they reappear in our side of the lines.”

Major Van Dyke thanked the captains and dismissed them. Josh and Molly headed back to their room to relax for the rest of the evening.

“You took the news that your mom is dead surprisingly well,” Josh noted once they were alone in their room.

“The news about Mom isn’t a surprise,” Molly replied. “Mom and Aunt Ellen talked on the phone nearly every day. If Mom were alive she would have called Aunt Ellen.” Molly sniffed. “I had my cry for Mom last night. I suspected she didn’t get away from the battle safely.”

“What about your dad and brother?” Josh asked.

“I don’t know what to think about them,” Molly replied. “Are they Chinese prisoners? Did they find a way across the river that you and I couldn’t find? Did they flee east by car? The only thing I’m sure of is that they didn’t try to hike across the Cascades the way we did.”

“That is probably a safe assumption,” Josh agreed.

“Could I use your phone to call my aunt?” Molly asked.

“Sure, go ahead,” Josh agreed as he handed his cell phone over. Molly dialed the number three times, getting a busy signal each time. She left a message asking her aunt to call back.

The pair settled down and decided to spend their evening watching TV. It had been too long since Molly had enjoyed watching. It had been even longer since Josh had time to relax and watch the tube.

Aunt Ellen called back half an hour later. “Molly, are you sitting down?” Aunt Ellen asked after Josh handed his phone to Molly.

“I am.”

“There was an accident with the bus back on November...” Aunt Ellen began.

“I know about Mom,” Molly interjected. “The army sent a chaplain and another officer to talk with me tonight. How did you hear the news?”

“Your Grandpa Jim [Loring] called me,” Aunt Ellen explained. “A casualty notification team came to see him this evening. How are you holding up under this terrible news, honey?”

“Better than I would have expected,” Molly answered. “I bawled my eyes out when you told me that Mom hadn’t been heard from since November 7th. I think I knew what that meant yesterday evening. I still expect to hear from Dad and Mikey. I know it is possible to get out of Sedro-Woolley after the Chinese captured it. I did it. They certainly could have too.”

“I hope you’re right, honey,” Aunt Ellen answered.

“Have you heard anything from Grandpa John [Lawrence]?” Molly asked.

“Just that he is setting up his factory somewhere south of here,” Aunt Ellen replied. “He’s making some critical part for the war effort and it’s all very top secret. I can’t get any information from the army or anyone else. He’s doing fine as far as any of us know.”

“Did you see the Today Show?” Molly asked. The two talked for about five minutes about Molly’s experience with the show. Molly told her aunt about their tours next stop, the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Aunt Ellen wished Molly luck on the show before they ended the call. Josh and Molly watched TV until around ten o’clock. Their bodies were still on backpacking time. The sun was long set so it was past time for bed.

They cuddled together on the king-sized bed in the room registered to Josh. Molly “officially” had a room down the hall. Major Van Dyke knew they were together and didn’t seem to mind at all. Josh gave Molly a passionate kiss when they were settled.

“Do you want to have some fun tonight?” he proposed.

“Just hold me,” Molly answered. “This has been a tough day.” Josh wrapped his arms around Molly and the two relaxed, enjoying the physical closeness. They lay together for a few minutes. Josh felt Molly shudder.

“What’s wrong?” Josh asked quietly.

“I was thinking about the people on that bus,” Molly answered. “My friend Amber Holmes and her family were on the last bus too. They’re gone.” Molly turned to face Josh. “It’s weird. If I hadn’t been such a brat that day and run home to get my ‘essentials,’ my Dad, my brother and I would all be dead too.”

“Fate, blind luck, God’s hand, whatever you call it, we need more of it in this war,” Josh said. “There has been too much dying.”

“Amen,” Molly agreed. “I know my Dad and brother made it out of town somehow.”

“I’m sure they did,” Josh agreed. He wasn’t as sure as he let on. If Mr. Lawrence and Mikey made it out of Sedro-Woolley, they most likely did it by car. Why hadn’t they turned up yet? Josh didn’t have an answer to that question and he didn’t care to trouble Molly with it. She was dealing with enough with the confirmed death of her mother.

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December 15, 2013 – Downtown Manhattan, New York City

Sunday morning Josh, Molly, Major Van Dyke and the rest of the major's retinue packed and headed for the airport. The group debarked at the Bob Hope Airport in Burbank early in the afternoon. The major put them up in first class accommodations – the Hilton in Universal City. Their rooms were on the twentieth floor of the hotel, giving them a wonderful view of the Hollywood hills. The group grabbed lunch downstairs at the café in the hotel. The café served fresh pizza from a wood fire brick oven. The pizza was heavenly.

Shopping was the activity for the afternoon. Josh and Molly needed various and sundry items for the publicity tour they were starting – toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo, razor, shaving cream, luggage, more casual clothes for Molly and the replacement for the blessed hair dryer Molly left in the street in Sedro-Wooley. The most important item to Molly was a replacement charger for her cell phone. Her charger got left on the street back in Sedro-Wooley too. She could get in touch with the rest of the world again.

Major Van Dyke took the group out to a Mediterranean restaurant for dinner. The grilled kebabs were excellent. Major Van Dyke gave Josh and Molly the evening to relax. Josh and Molly decided to take a walk. They had been shuttled from stop to stop for three days. The last time they had stretched their legs out was back on the hike into Bonner's Ferry.

Josh and Molly were back in time to watch their segment on Sixty Minutes that night. The producers did a good job editing the day of taping down to a fifteen minute segment. It told their story accurately and reflected the difficulties and effort it took to cross the mountains in late fall.

Josh called home after Sixty Minutes was over. Molly decided to try to reconnect with the world, now that her cell phone had a charge and bars too. She started with her voice mail.

The first one was time stamped November 7, 2013, 2:17 PM. Molly froze she heard her father's voice demand, "Molly, where are you? Your brother and I are searching town for you. If you get this message, head for our house. We will meet you there." Her dad left two more similar messages later in the afternoon.

The next message was from 8:42 PM. "The town isn't safe, Molly," her father explained. "God, I hope you are getting my messages. Mike and I heard the bridges over the river south of town blow up. All of us need to get out of town immediately. Mike and I are taking the SUV and going east on Route 20. Do you remember the convenience store at Lyman? It's eight miles east of Sedro-Wooley. We will wait for you there. Try to get a ride, take a car or walk if you have to. Get out of Sedro-Wooley now!"

At 9:32 PM Molly's father reported, "We are at the convenience store. It's called Cascade Mercantile. It is closing soon but the owner said it was OK for us to wait for you in his parking lot overnight. Hurry and join us here."

There were no more voice mail messages until 6:28 PM on November 8th. "The police are ordering all civilians to evacuate to Winthrop right now. That's a town on the east side of the mountains, about 85 miles east of Lyman. Find someone to help you and get to the east. Mike and I are leaving now and heading east on Route 20. I will lose cell reception soon. Call and leave any messages with Aunt Ellen and Uncle John. We will do the same. Love you, Molly. Be careful and head east!"

Molly could hear her younger brother, Mikey, in the background telling her Dad, "She used her cell phone so much yesterday that she drained the battery again." Her brother was right. Her phone was nearly drained of power the afternoon Sedro-Wooley fell.

"My dad and brother were in Lyman at that convenience store you and I stopped at a few hours ahead of us," Molly announced. "They headed east on Route 20 about 6:30 the night we got to that store."

"That's good news," Josh said. They should have cleared Concrete before the Chinese captured it."

"I knew they were still alive," Molly said. "My Dad said they were heading for Winthrop."

"Where they could have run into the Chinese paratroopers," Josh said. "That would explain why you haven't heard anything from them."

"Do you think they're OK?" Molly said. "We saw what the Chinese did to some of the people behind their lines."

"The Chinese raped and murdered people who resisted them," Josh replied. "Hopefully your father and brother kept their heads down."

"I hope they did," Molly said. She paused a moment and then gave Josh a smile. "I believe they're out there and I will see them again. I feel better now that I know they got out of Sedro-Woolley."

"It is excellent news," Josh agreed.

Josh turned on the TV to catch up on the news. "Chinese armored spearheads drove south through Olympia today," the announcer intoned. Josh shook his head. He was officially homeless like Molly.

Molly moved on to checking texts. "WHERE R U? BUS LEAVING" was the first, around November 7th, 1:37 PM from here close friend, Amber Holmes. It was followed by another five minutes later. "OMG WHAT R U THINKING? TXT ME AMBER." She had several more the same afternoon and evening from her other best friends, Kimberly Lyons and from Evie Lynch, all in the same vein.

There was a gap of a couple of days before the next text. Molly found it had a photo attachment. It was a picture of her and Amber Holmes taken last spring. Amber and Molly were smiling and waving to the camera. The text was heartbreaking: "11-7-13 RIP AMBER & MOLLY LV U 2 KIM & EVIE." Molly knew what she had to do. Molly flipped to her directory and punched the button to call Kimberly.

“OH MY GOD! MOLLY!” her friend squealed when she answered after a couple rings. “Oh my God! You’re alive! Where are you?”

“I’m fine,” Molly replied. “I’m in L. A. Where are you?”

“I’m in aucky refugee camp between Junction City and Harrisburg in central Oregon,” Kimberly explained. “The make us live in filthy, cold canvas tents and go to the bathroom in outhouses. It’s rained or snowed every day since we arrived here five weeks ago. Can you believe the temperature goes below freezing every night? I’m in a horrible place and I don’t know when we can leave.”

“That’s too bad,” Molly consoled. Molly managed not to laugh at her friend’s griping. She knew that central Oregon couldn’t be as cold as the mountains she and Josh had hiked through.

“How exactly did you get to L. A.?” Kimberly asked. “Everyone thought you and your family died with Amber and her family when the last evacuation bus crashed and fell down the ravine the afternoon we left Sedro-Woolley.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t watch Sixty Minutes tonight,” Molly replied.

“No,” Kimberly answered. “Why would I watch that boring old program?”

“I was on it,” Molly replied. “Josh Warner, the soldier who found me in Sedro-Wooley, helped me hike across the Cascades to safety. You’ve probably heard of Josh by another name, the Hero of Omak.”

“The Hero of Omak?” Kimberly gasped. “Everyone knows about him shooting down all those Chinese paratroopers. You really know him?”

“Josh is sitting beside me on the couch our room,” Molly explained. She passed the phone briefly to Josh. “Say hi to my best friend, Kimberly.”

“Hi, Kimberly,” Josh said amiably before handing the phone back to Molly. Molly gave Kimberly the five minute version of their trek across northern Washington State and Idaho. The girls had to keep the conversation short. Charging cell phones at Kimberly’s camp was problematic and she didn’t have much charge on the battery. Kimberly was blown away by the whole story. She promised to pass the word around the other Sedro-Wooley residents at their camp about Molly’s appearance on the Tonight Show the next evening.

----oooOooo----

Monday, December 16, 2013 – Los Angeles, CA

Major Van Dyke and his retinue took Josh and Molly out for breakfast before heading for downtown L. A. The City Council adopted a proclamation commending their war efforts. The Mayor presented them with framed copies of the proclamations. The Mayor hosted Josh, Molly, Major Van Dyke, the army PR team assisting the major and the city council to a fancy dinner. The whole scene was

surreal to Josh and Molly. A week ago they had been sitting on logs eating Chinese MREs to stay alive.

The Mayor and Major Van Dyke gave the press a photo opportunity with Josh and Molly. The forty to fifty photographers in their face shooting photos were intimidating. Both Josh and Molly were glad when that was over. The group loaded up and headed for Burbank and the Tonight Show taping.

Backstage at the Tonight Show wasn't much different than being backstage at the Today Show. They had a dressing room. People came in to do their makeup and hair. They helped Molly choose a dress for the evening and made sure Josh's dress uniform was perfect.

Jay Leno popped in while they were preparing. Jay and the major seemed to be old friends. He talked with Josh and Molly and helped them relax before the taping. He seemed friendly and down-to-earth.

Josh and Molly watched on the monitor in their dressing room as Jay Leno started his monologue for the audience. The taping was done about eight hours before the show would air. A handler took them to the back stage area before Jay finished his opening. They waited nervously about two minutes, until Jay announced, "I would like to introduce my first guests, Sergeant First Class Joshua Warner and his hiking companion, Molly Lawrence."

The handlers pulled the curtains open and Josh strode through. Molly instinctively grabbed Josh's left hand and followed him out into the glare of the TV lights. Josh and Molly walked across the stage, smiling and waving, to the loud cheers of the audience as the band played an intro for them. Josh sat down in the chair beside Jay's desk. Molly let go of Josh's left hand when he sat down. She took the seat on the couch beside Josh, immediately grabbing his right hand again.

"Welcome to the show," Jay announced. "It is a great honor to have true heroes such as the two of you visit."

"I'm just a soldier trying to live through the war and do whatever I can to help out," Josh replied.

"Like providing key information so our Air Force can shoot down a thousand Chinese paratroopers," Jay responded.

"I did what I could," Josh agreed.

"Sounds heroic to me," Jay said. "How did you manage to survive hiking through the mountains in winter? Here in L. A. we put on winter parkas if the temperature goes below 55 degrees."

Josh and Molly spent a few minutes describing how they trekked through the Cascades as Jay and the audience marveled at their tale. Jay showed a picture of Molly to the audience. Molly recognized it as her senior picture for the high school yearbook. She wasn't sure how the Tonight Show got hold of it.

“How does a lovely young woman such as you manage to survive five weeks in the wilderness and come out looking as spectacular as you do today?” Jay asked Molly. “Certainly you didn’t take hair brushes, a hair dryer, makeup and other lady’s essentials into the wilderness, did you?”

“No, Josh made it clear all that had to stay in Sedro-Woolley when we met,” Molly answered, laughing. “The day pack full of that kind of junk stayed in the street in front of my high school, where I met Josh. We had to travel light. We took a tent, rain gear, snow shoes, sleeping bag, insulating pad and lots and lots of food.”

“One tent?” Jay asked, raising an eye brow. Josh didn’t bite on Jay’s implied question about his relationship with Molly.

“Carrying a second tent would have taken the place of two or three days’ worth of food,” Josh explained patiently. “We needed the food more than we needed the privacy.”

“We would have frozen if we had taken two tents,” Molly added.

“Did you do much camping when you were growing up, Molly?” Jay asked.

“None at all,” Molly admitted. “I hated camping. I didn’t want anything to do with the outdoors.” Jay laughed.

“You hiked across the Cascade Mountains from your hometown, Sedro-Woolley to Bonner’s Falls, Idaho and hate to camp?” Jay asked. “That’s about 270 miles, as the crow flies.”

“That’s right, I did,” Molly agreed. “You do what you need to do to survive.”

“How about you, Josh?” Jay asked. “Did you have any camping experience or were you as much a novice as Molly?”

“I grew up in a family that loves to camp,” Josh responded. “I belonged to the Boy Scouts. I earned my Wilderness Survival Merit Badge. I did survival training with the army. I spent three months camping out with my unit in Canada and the U. S. this fall as we fought the Chinese. This hike was challenging but nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Josh literally saved my life,” Molly added. “I would have died if he hadn’t taught me how to camp and take care of myself living outdoors.”

“Did you two have any encounters with the Chinese?” Jay asked.

“We ran into them a number of times,” Josh explained. “Most of the time we were able to avoid them, except when we were crossing the river at Ellisforde. We borrowed a canoe for the crossing. Molly went across first and then I followed on the second trip. I found a Chinese soldier on the bank when I got to the far shore. I had to shoot him.”

“I shot the other soldier who came to investigate when Josh shot the first soldier,” Molly added.

“Molly was amazing,” Josh said. “She shot a Chinese lieutenant in the back and then shot him twice in the head.”

“I had to,” Molly added quickly. “He wasn’t dead yet.”

Jay’s eyes grew wide as he shifted his chair away from Molly. “Shot him twice in the head? I guess you don’t have much trouble with your dates getting fresh with you.”

“Not really,” Molly admitted.

“You said this happened at Ellisforde, Washington,” Jay asked. “There have been reports circulating about a Chinese atrocity that occurred near that small town. Did you see anything to confirm the rumors?”

“We didn’t,” Josh answered. “Molly and I high-tailed it out of the area as soon as we shot the soldiers. We hid out a few miles away. We did hear something was going on at the town the next day but can’t confirm exactly what happened. We can confirm other atrocities that we found as we hiked across Washington State. We saw homes shot up, people killed, women raped and farms burned down. The Chinese are brutal to the residents left behind their lines. The people desperately want us to get the Chinese out of their lives as soon as we can.”

Major Van Dyke smiled as he watched from off-stage. Josh’s passion on this topic was exactly what he wanted to see presented to the American people. Jay asked a few more questions about details of how Josh and Molly survived in the wilderness before it was time for a commercial. Jay thanked Josh and Molly for appearing on the show while they waited during the break.

“Welcome back,” Jay announced when the camera light turned red again. “My next guest has a statement he’d like to read before we announce him.”

“I’d like to thank Jay Leno and the Tonight Show crew for getting me and my family down here,” the voice announced. Josh froze as he recognized the voice – his dad! Josh didn’t notice the camera zoom in on his face as it recorded his look of surprise and delight.

“Dad?”

“I wasn’t sure this reunion would happen when I took a phone call from my son five weeks ago,” Bob Warner continued. “My son reported he was cut off behind Chinese lines. My wife and I were desperately afraid we would never see him. Now, we...” Josh recognized the quaver in his father’s voice as he struggled to control his emotions.

“I would like to introduce Robert and Laura Warner,” Jay announced, “and his younger sister and brother, Ashley and Jacob.”

Josh flew across the stage to meet his family halfway between the entrance curtain and Jay’s couch. “God, it’s so good to see you!” Josh declared as he wrapped his mom in a bear hug. Josh’s dad hugged his wife and son. Ashley and Jake joined the group hug on center stage.

“God, it’s so good to see all of you,” “We missed you so,” and “I’m so glad you’re safe,” mixed together as everyone tried to talk at once. Jay gave Josh and his family twenty or thirty seconds before he ushered everyone over to their seats. Bob Warner took the chair beside Jay’s desk. Josh sat down at the end of the couch beside his father with his mother on his other side. Ashley and Jake took seats on stools behind the couch. Molly slid down to make room for Josh and his mom.

Jay interviewed Bob and Laura Warner about their experiences as they listened to the media as their son became a national hero trekking across the mountains to safety. Jay asked about their experience evacuating from their home and fleeing south before the Chinese offensive.

Laura Warner noticed how downcast Molly looked as Josh enjoyed his family reunion. She patted Molly on the knee and promised, “There are guests back there for you too.” That information earned Laura Warner a big smile.

Jay had a couple more questions for the Warners before it was Molly’s turn. Jay gave the audience a big smile before announcing. “I don’t want Molly to feel slighted. Please give our next guests a big welcome. Molly’s grandfather, John R. Lawrence, and her aunt and uncle, Ellen and John Howard, welcome to the Tonight Show!”

Molly bolted off the couch and dashed across the stage to meet her relatives. She hugged her grandfather. He wrapped his arms around his granddaughter and lifted her from her feet as they kissed.

“God, it is so good to see you, Grandpa,” Molly gushed.

“I was afraid we’d lost you,” Mr. Lawrence responded. Aunt Ellen and Uncle John gave hugs to their niece before Molly led them back to Jay’s couch. Josh and his family took seats on stools behind the couch while Molly sat down with her grandfather, aunt and uncle.

“Mr. Lawrence, I understand you cleared out of Sedro-Wooley a couple months before the Chinese arrived,” Jay commented. “It seems to be good planning on your part. Why didn’t you take the rest of your family?”

“It was good planning on the Defense Department’s part,” John Lawrence answered. “My company makes marine and aviation parts. The Defense Department didn’t want us staying near the war zone. They evacuated me, my workers and all our equipment last August as a war critical industry. We’re in a location I can’t disclose, safely out of the war’s path.”

“You couldn’t take Molly and her family with you?” Jay asked.

“Workers and their immediate family only,” John explained. “I wanted to bring my son, Michael, and his family along but the DOD forbade it. Michael and his family wouldn’t have gone anyway. He was the emergency management director for Sedro-Woolley and he took his duties seriously. I haven’t seen or heard from any of them until Molly popped up a couple days ago.”

John Lawrence glanced over Molly. “I have no idea where the rest of my family is at.”

“I know about Mom, Grandpa,” Molly whispered. He nodded his understanding.

“I do know about my daughter-in-law,” John said. “Chinese fighters strafed the civilian bus she was on when she evacuated Sedro-Woolley. She died in the attack. My son and grandson disappeared into the maelstrom of war as Sedro-Woolley fell. No one knows if they have survived or not.”

“I do,” Molly interjected. “Josh made me leave my cell phone charger behind with my other junk when we left Sedro-Woolley. I got a replacement charger last night and finally got to reconnect to the world. I found half a dozen messages that Dad left me as the town was falling. He and Mikey made it out to Lyman, about ten miles east of town. The police ordered everyone to evacuate to Winthrop. I suspect they got caught up there when the Chinese paratroopers dropped in.”

“That is a relief,” John Lawrence sighed. “I feared the worst for too long.”

“That is excellent news,” Jay inserted, trying to regain control of his interviewees.

“Daddy,” Molly declared as she stared straight into the camera. “If you’re behind Chinese lines, get out! The Chinese are spread thin and can’t cover every way back to our lines. Please find a way out and rejoin me. I need you, Daddy.” Molly hesitated a second. “I need you back too, Mikey, even if you are a pest of a little brother.”

“Do you expect your family will hear that appeal if they’re in Chinese territory?” Jay asked. Molly explained about how the radio and occasional TV signal was still available while cell phone and land line phones couldn’t reach out to us.

Jay talked with Ellen and John Howard about Sandra Lawrence’s final call and how the loss of her sister was affecting them. Jay gave everyone a big smile when he finished questioning Ellen and John.

“It’s time for a break,” Jay announced to the audience. “I want to thank John and Ellen Howard; John and Molly Lawrence; Robert, Laura, Ashley and Jacob Warner; and the hero of the hour, Sergeant First Class Joshua Warner for appearing on our show this evening. Let’s give them a big round of applause!”

The audience applauded enthusiastically as Josh, his family, Molly and her family departed from the stage. Major van Dyke greeted them enthusiastically when they were off-stage.

“Fabulous job!” he gushed. “Just a fabulous job! Your discussion about the Chinese atrocities you witnessed was spot on. Make sure you work that into every interview you do from now on. Your outrage at the atrocities was palpable.”

Yes, sir,” Josh answered.

“What’s next, Major?” Molly asked. “Will we have time to spend with our families?”

“I thought everyone could go out to a nice restaurant for dinner,” Major Van Dyke responded. “Your families are staying at our hotel, so you will have time for visit with them tonight. Tomorrow, Josh,

Molly and the rest of the P.R. group head for Denver for a reception and press conference. The families will return to their homes."

"Thank you for giving us the opportunity to catch up with our children," Bob Warner added.

"Yes, it was most gracious of you to arrange this meeting," Ellen Howard agreed.

The Tonight Show staff helped the group remove their makeup. Major Van Dyke herded the group out to three stretch limos. The caravan headed about a mile down the street to a small Italian trattoria. The major reserved a private room for the group.

The restaurant served the group an antipasti and a salad before bringing out the main course. The group had a choice of lamb, Angus steak medallions or free range chicken. Molly sat beside Josh at the long table. Josh's family sat to his left. Molly's grandfather, aunt and uncle sat to her right.

Molly nudged Josh after she finished her salad. "This makes you miss the Chinese MREs, doesn't it?"

"Like the red bean energy bars?" Josh replied, laughing. "I think I'll take this food over that."

The families asked Molly and Josh about their trek across northern Washington. John Lawrence was quite direct.

"How did you learn the skills to allow you and my non-camping granddaughter survive in the mountains?" he asked. "I was a draftee in the army way back when. I didn't receive training about how to survive those kinds of conditions." He laughed. "Of course in 1965 the army wasn't focused on mountain warfare. Jungle training was the rage. I did a year in Vietnam."

"I learned most of what I know about surviving in the wilderness from the Boy Scouts," Josh replied. "The army did some survival training... like for a day or two."

"Our family does a lot of camping too," Bob Warner added. "We spend time in the mountains every year."

"Boy Scouts," John Lawrence commented with a big grin, "...a fine organization. Did you make Eagle Scout, Josh?"

"I did," Josh confirmed.

"Excellent!" John replied. "I made Eagle too... barely." He gave Josh a grin. "Between going to the National Jamboree in Valley Forge, getting a girlfriend and trying to do well my senior year, my life was pretty full the year before I turned eighteen. I was a member of Sedro-Woolley's own Troop 712 at the Lutheran Church."

"We're in Troop 17 at First Methodist in Olympia," Josh said. Josh nodded towards his younger brother Jacob.

“Are you going to make Eagle?” John asked as he gave Jacob Warner a smile.

“I hope to,” Jacob replied.

“But you have to finish Star and Life first,” Josh added.

“How much time do you have left, Jacob?” John asked.

“I just turned fifteen last month,” Jacob answered. “I have plenty of time before I’m eighteen.”

“I hope you make it,” John said. “It is an important and worthwhile goal for a young man.” Turning back to Josh, he asked, “What merit badges helped you survive the snow and cold in the mountains?”

“Wilderness Survival, Emergency Preparedness and Backpacking,” Josh answered. John laughed.

“I don’t think any of those topics were merit badges when I was a scout. I vaguely remember Michael, Molly’s father, talking about taking Lifesaving instead of Emergency... uh...”

“Preparedness,” Josh added.

“Emergency Preparedness,” John repeated. “Michael never was much of a camper and didn’t make Eagle. He stalled out when he was sixteen and a Star Scout. He met Sandra... the love of his life and Molly’s mother.” John paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “God rest her soul.”

“God rest her soul,” the group repeated. The tables were quiet for a few moments while everyone thought about Molly’s mother’s death. The next course came a couple minutes later. They were excellent. The group’s mood picked up as they enjoyed their main dishes.

Josh and Molly entertained their families with tales from their trek across the northern Cascades. The pair intended to keep their budding relationship secret but were unsuccessful. Their whispered comments to each other, the unnecessary touches and shared glances revealed the truth to even the most obtuse of the group.

The adults skirted the topic of the pair’s relationship during dinner. Josh’s sister, Ashley, a high school senior and within a few weeks of the same age as Molly, gave the pretty and slightly intimidating cheerleader space and privacy. Jacob Warner, Josh’s tenth grader, fifteen-year-old brother had less class.

Jake headed to the restroom between dinner and dessert. Josh and Molly happened to share a whisper and an under-the-table hand hold as Josh returned to their private dining room. Jake announced loudly as he passed Josh and Molly, “So Josh, is Molly your girlfriend or what?”

He leaned and whispered in Josh’s ear, opposite from Molly, “So... she let you bone her yet, bro?” Jake asked much too loudly. Most of the table overheard the question. Molly blushed as Josh turned bright red.

“Jacob!” Laura Warner growled. “That is improper and none of your business!”

“Sorry,” Jake responded immediately, his head down as he took his seat again. Everyone stared at each other for a moment before John Lawrence stared directly into Josh’s eyes and broke the silence.

“I guess the question is necessary,” Mr. Lawrence said. “What are your intentions towards my granddaughter?”

“That’s a hard question to answer, sir,” Josh admitted. “I’ve grown very close to Molly since fate threw us together six weeks ago. She’s an amazing young woman. She’s smart, beautiful, and... I mean this in the best way possible... she’s tough as nails. She literally saved my life numerous times on our trek through the wilderness.”

“You saved mine too,” Molly protested. “I guarantee I would be dead now if you hadn’t found me in front of the high school and taken me with you.”

“What are you asking?” Josh added. “Is Molly my girlfriend?” Josh looked towards Molly as she stared back at him. “I certainly hope she considers us a couple. I am growing to love her.”

“I think I’ve fallen for Josh too,” Molly added.

“What about the future?” John Lawrence demanded. “She’s a high school girl.”

“We are still trying to figure out what our future might be, sir,” Josh responded, politely, but forcefully. “We just finished trekking across the mountains where all we could see of the future was how do we stay alive today and how do we cross the next river. We haven’t had time to talk more about what our future together may be in the whirl since we reached Bonner’s Ferry last Friday night.”

“What future can the two of you plan?” John Lawrence challenged. “You are a soldier, Josh. You go wherever they tell you to go. I suspect we are short of frontline soldiers from what I hear on the news at night. Will you go onto the line again?”

“I can answer that question, Mr. Lawrence,” Major Van Dyke said. “We have an extensive, months-long publicity campaign planned around Josh and Molly. Josh will not be going back onto the line anytime soon.” The major was warming to his sales pitch.

“Josh and Molly represent exactly the kind of young people our country desperately needs to see and hear,” he explained. “Their story of courage, perseverance and never-say-die attitude represent exactly the traits we want to inspire in our young people if we are going win this war. I want to have them tell their story to as wide an audience as possible until our young people rise up in righteous anger and drive Asiatic fascism out of this continent.”

“I support the war effort as much as anyone,” Mr. Lawrence responded. “I’ve moved my business, my workers and myself from our homes and family so we could continue our critical war work. My granddaughter is still in high school. I think you are asking too much of her. She needs a proper education more than she needs to be bouncing around the country doing talk shows and appearances.”

“Grandpa... I love you dearly, but...” Molly interjected. “What is special about December 10th?”

“It’s your birthday, of course,” Mr. Lawrence answered.

“I turned eighteen last week,” Molly said. “It’s not your call whether I do the PR tour, go back to San Francisco with Aunt Ellen and Uncle John or you take me to your undisclosed location where the factory is at. I am legally responsible for myself. I agree with the major that Josh and I doing this tour is good for our country and this is a way I can help win this damned war and I am going to do it.”

“And your education?” Mr. Lawrence asked. Molly turned towards Major Van Dyke.

“I happen to agree with Grandpa,” Molly declared. “I DO need a proper education. I want to graduate from high school at the same time as my classmates. You promised me a tutor when I agreed to be part of this tour, major. When can I expect him?”

“Tomorrow,” Major Van Dyke responded. “Remember, the two of you came out of the wilderness last Friday night. This tour so far has been quite improvised. I obtained the services of a tutor for you yesterday morning, Molly. I could have had him fly in to L.A. but chose not to. The tutor is from Denver and we will be in Denver tomorrow afternoon. He will meet us then. You can study to your heart’s content tomorrow evening. Is that acceptable, Molly?”

“Yes”

“Mr. Lawrence? Mr. & Mrs. Howard?” Major Van Dyke asked. Molly’s relatives nodded their assent too.

“One more thing, everyone,” Molly announced. “Josh and I may not know our long term future together but we do know the short term future. If any of you come by my room tonight to give me a good night kiss, make sure you knock before you come in. Josh may or may not be dressed when you stop by.”

Jacob Warner’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as he realized his big brother was “boning” the pretty cheerleader after all. A lot of hand lotion would be expended that night as Jake dreamed of exchanging places with his brother and sleeping with the buxom eighteen-year-old.

John Lawrence didn’t take Molly’s comment as well. “I respect that fact that you are legally of age,” John agreed, his brow furrowed with concern. “You MAY do as you please legally but we are still your family. We love you and care about your health, safety and well-being. Will you at least listen to what we have to say?”

“You’re my family,” Molly responded. “I will listen to what you recommend and then make my own decisions. Isn’t that part of growing up – making your own decisions and dealing with the consequences?”

“Yes, Molly. It is,” John Lawrence conceded.

Some of the group had the bread pudding with cinnamon gelato for dessert. More had the warm espresso brownie with vanilla bean gelato. A few had the tiramisu. Everyone enjoyed their desserts. Major Van Dyke had the SUVs come by and drive everyone back to the hotel after dinner. Josh and Molly spent time with their own families until around ten o'clock that evening. The major had the PR group scheduled for an early departure to the airport, so Molly and Josh said good bye to their families before bedtime.

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Tuesday, December 18, 2013 – Universal City, Burbank, CA

The 5:30 AM wakeup call came much too early for Molly and Josh. They showered, dressed and headed downstairs to meet the rest of the PR group for their continental breakfast. The group headed back to the Burbank Airport and Denver.

Major Van Dyke spent much of the two hour and fifteen minute flight reviewing Josh and Molly's performance on the Tonight Show and how they could improve at future events. Their plane landed at the Denver Airport instead of Colorado Springs like on Saturday. A caravan of SUVs took their party into downtown Denver.

They met with the Denver City Council and Mayor in the City Council chambers. The Council adopted an ordinance recognizing Josh and Molly's courage and fortitude during their trek across northern Washington and Idaho. They appeared at a press conference for the local print media and did one-on-one interviews with each of the major TV stations in Denver. SUVs took the group back to the airport.

Molly wasn't surprised to see a man standing at the foot of the steps into their private aircraft, as she was expecting to meet her promised tutor that afternoon. She did not expect what she got.

The gentleman in question stood about 5'11", weighing roughly 175 pounds. He was bundled up against the gray, cloudy sky and cold wind blowing across the terminal's small plane embarkation area. Molly and Josh didn't mind the cold. Their bodies were still used to the sub-freezing temperatures they experienced in the mountains. Today's mid-thirties temperatures felt comfortable to them.

"Welcome aboard, Dave," Major Van Dyke remarked as he shook hands with the stranger. The major turned to Molly. "Molly, this is David Eggleston, your tutor for the duration."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Eggleston," Molly said as she shook hands with her new tutor. Molly was surprised at the youth of her tutor. He couldn't have been much past twenty-five years old.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lawrence," Mr. Eggleston replied. Major Van Dyke introduced Josh to Mr. Eggleston too before the group trooped up the stairs and boarded their plane.

Mr. Eggleston took a seat not too far from where Josh and Molly were sitting. Molly stared as her tutor pulled off his winter clothing. His knit cap came off and revealed close cropped light brown hair. Molly saw he was muscular and well-built once he removed his bulky winter coat and scarf.

The air crew on the military jet delivered dinner to the passengers once they were in the air and up to cruising altitude. Mr. Eggleston waited until after dinner to slip over to the empty seat beside Molly. He gave her a big grin before announcing, “I have exactly what every student wants; an exam for you to take.”

Molly groaned. “You’re joking, aren’t you, Mr. Eggleston? It’s evening. Why do I need to study now?”

“You had a five or six week vacation from school,” Mr. Eggleston explained. He gave her a wink. “We have a lot of catching up to do to get you up to speed and ready to graduate with your classmates.”

“I guess,” Molly admitted.

“This test doesn’t count towards any grade,” Mr. Eggleston added. “I need to find out what you know already so we don’t waste time on it again. I plan to tailor your instruction to the things you will need when you take your GED next spring.”

“OK,” Molly agreed. Mr. Eggleston handed her a four page test papers and two pencils. Molly got to work. Mr. Eggleston sat back down in his seat a couple rows in front of Molly, opposite Josh.

“Mr. Eggleston, how did the army end up getting you here as a tutor?” Josh asked pleasantly. “Are you Army or Reserves?” Josh brushed the neatly trimmed side of his head as he nodded towards Mike Eggleston similarly close trimmed haircut.

“I’m officially a civilian working for DOD...” Dave Eggleston explained, “...though I’m sure my time in service accounts for them calling me for this job. I did four years active duty and four years reserve. My reserve duty was over about six months ago.”

“Wow!” Josh exclaimed. “I didn’t imagine anyone as young as you would have put in eight years.”

“I enlisted as soon as I turned eighteen, when I was a senior in high school,” Dave Eggleston explained. “It was back as we were invading Iraq to kick Saddam’s ass. I was fired up to help fight the terrorists and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. The army seemed like a good idea at the time. I served a tour in Iraq and another in Afghanistan.”

“Much action?”

“Too much,” Mike Eggleston replied. “I got in some firefights with hajis. I got my MRAP [Mine Resistant Ambush Proof vehicle] nearly blown up by an IED. Thank God the haji on the trigger miss-timed it. How about you, Josh? I suppose you saw a good bit of action too.”

“Chilliack, Battle of the Border and that illustrious attack from Sedro-Woolley,” Josh answered.

“You regular army?” Dave Eggleston asked. “What unit are you with?”

“No, National Guard,” Josh explained. “I’m part of the 81st Heavy BCT with the 41st Division.”

“I served most of my active duty with the 2nd ID [infantry division],” Dave replied. “You run into any of them boys up north?”

“I did,” Josh agreed.

“Some of my buddies re-upped when their enlistments were up,” Dave continued. “They’re in the 2nd BCT. I guess they’re POWs now. That was one of the units jammed up in Mission when the Chinese destroyed the bridges across the Fraser River.”

“Tough duty,” Josh commented. “There were too many of the damned Chinese for us to hold the line. We tried but...”

“Hey, I get it,” Dave agreed. “Been there... done that.”

“I guess you did college when your active service was up?” Josh asked.

“I decided teaching sounded like a good career move when I got out,” Dave explained. “I went to Colorado State University when I got out of the army. I finished my student teaching this past spring and have been looking for a full time job since graduation last May. I subbed at any school in need within about fifty miles of Fort Collins since then. This is my first full-time teaching...” he laughed. “Or tutoring job, I guess. The army tells me I’ll be at this for four to six months, until Molly finishes up her high school equivalency exam.”

“The PR tour is going to last that long?” Josh muttered as he shook his head.

“Such is the life of a national hero,” Dave offered. “How about you? Why did you decide to join the Guard?”

“Money,” Josh answered. “I was accepted at Stanford to study Computer Science. I didn’t have enough money to afford the tuition. I figured the National Guard would be a good way to earn my college education. I didn’t expect to find myself in a war like this.”

“Did anyone think the Chinese would be this crazy?” Dave asked. “That is why I think what you’re doing is so important. We need to wake up the people our age to what it will take to beat the Chinese.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Josh admitted. He felt a pang of guilt. It looked like the army planned for him and Molly to fly around the country, enjoy nice hotels and food while the other Guardsmen in his unit faced the cold, poor food, bad weather and the Chinese. Josh pondered that the rest of the two hour and fifteen minute flight to Chicago.

Major Van Dyke spent an hour in the evening reviewing points he wanted Molly and Josh to discuss at tomorrow's Chamber of Commerce luncheon. The major wanted them to take the lead in telling their story instead of simply answering questions posed to them. Josh and Molly finally got to their room after ten o'clock that evening.

----oooOooo----

Josh and Molly were up early to appear on Wakeup Chicago. They did two radio interviews and were received in the City Council Chambers by the City Council and Mayor. The entourage headed across town to the Chamber of Commerce luncheon. Josh and Molly narrated their story of their trek across the mountains after a meal of overcooked chicken and rice pilaf.

The PR group flew off to Boston after the luncheon. Molly worked with Dave Eggleston on calculus and English on the flight. Major Van Dyke sat with Josh and critiqued his performance at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon. The major's aim was to turn Josh into a professional speaker who could hold the audience spellbound as he spoke.

Josh had taken public speaking in high school. He had gotten more comfortable speaking in front of groups when he became Senior Patrol Leader for his Boy Scout troop. Speaking in front of 300 to 400 businessmen was taking public speaking to a whole new level. Surprisingly Josh had felt comfortable on the podium talking about his experiences. He listened carefully to the advice Major Van Dyke gave him.

Thursday morning brought a morning show TV interview, another radio interview and then a tour of downtown Boston. Josh and Molly spoke at a lunchtime rally on Boston Commons. Major Van Dyke led them across the street to the State House, where the Governor, the state senate and the state legislature met them.

The governor took them through the Hall of Flags. Images of Massachusetts battle flags filled the hall. The press took photos of Josh and Molly with the governor using the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer's battle flag as a back drop. The 54th was the regiment of soldiers made famous in the movie "Glory."

Josh and Molly mingled and made small talk with the legislators and guests in the Great Hall, to the rear of the Hall of Flags. Limos took the group across downtown to the University of Massachusetts Club for dinner with the Downtown Rotary Club. Josh and Molly were the featured speakers after dinner. The group hustled over to the Boston Garden after dinner to catch the Celtics vs. the Knicks game that evening. The Celtics had a brief ceremony at halftime to honor Josh and Molly for their courage and fortitude in crossing the Cascades in the snow and ice of late fall.

Josh and Molly didn't reach their room in the Marriot Long Wharf until after ten o'clock. Molly allowed Josh to shower first before taking her turn. Both trekkers enjoyed civilization's benefits now that they were available. Josh laid on the bed watching the late news while he waited for Molly to finish.

Molly's ringtone drew his attention to her phone sitting on the nightstand beside their bed. She had been exchanging texts and occasional phone calls with her girlfriends back home for the past two days. Josh wasn't surprised by the phone call.

"Molly, your phone is ringing," Josh called out.

"I'm busy," she answered. "Who is it?"

Josh picked up her phone and froze. The phone showed a picture of a man around forty years-old. The title at the bottom of the picture said, 'DADDY.'

Chapter 13

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Thursday evening, December 19, 2013 – Boston, MA

Josh picked up her phone and froze. The phone showed a picture of a man around forty years-old. The title at the bottom of the picture said, 'DADDY.'

"You need to get this one... NOW," Josh yelled back.

"My face is soaped up," Molly replied. "Answer it."

Josh shrugged, punched the "On" phone button and asked, "Mr. Lawrence?" Josh couldn't suppress the tremor in his voice.

"Who is this?" the voice demanded. "Where is my daughter?"

"Joshua Warner, sir," Josh answered. "Molly is indisposed at the moment. I'll get her." Josh called out to the bathroom. "You need to take this call... right NOW! It is your father."

Josh heard something heavy drop into the sink. "My father?" Molly stammered. She flew out of the bathroom wearing nothing but panties and grabbed her phone from Josh.

"Daddy?"

"Thank God you're alive," Mike Lawrence gasped when he heard his eldest daughter speak. "Where are you?"

"I'm in Boston tonight," Molly replied. "Where are you? Is Mikey OK too?"

"Mike and I got into a refugee center here in Spokane earlier tonight," Mike Lawrence explained. "We cleaned up and had some dinner. I called as soon as my cell phone had a little charge. Mike is fine. He's here."

"Hey, sis," a higher pitched voice called out.

"Did you and Mikey get caught up by the Chinese paratroopers?" Molly asked. "I got your messages from the day Sedro-Woolley fell when I got back to civilization a few days ago."

"We did," Mike Lawrence confirmed. "Some really great people took us in and hid us from the Chinese, fed us and kept us safe until they could smuggle us across the Chinese lines to safety."

"We had to hike the last thirty miles on foot in the snow," Mikey Lawrence called out. "How'd you get to Boston?"

“Yes, how did you?” Mike Lawrence added.

“I walked,” Molly answered simply before laughing, “... at least the first four or five hundred miles.”

“My sister?” Mikey teased. “My hates-to-camp sister? That is hard to believe.”

“You really walked out of Sedro-Woolley?” Mike Lawrence asked. “Like that guy they are calling the ‘Hero of Omak’?”

“The ‘Hero of Omak’ is Josh,” Molly explained. “You just talked to him a minute ago.”

“The ‘Hero of Omak’?” Mike Lawrence asked. “Does that explain why you are in Boston? Is your mother with you?”

“Um... no,” Molly mumbled. “Um... where are you at Daddy? I’ve got to get out there to talk with you right away.”

“They have a refugee center set up here at North Central High School,” Mike Lawrence said. “Are you able to travel? Can you get here?”

“The army got me to Boston,” Molly said with determination. “They certainly can get me back west to see you and Mikey. I assume you are on your cell phone. Can I get you on it when I get to Spokane?”

“I don’t know,” Mike Lawrence replied. “I’m surprised my poor phone hasn’t run out of juice.”

“Turn it off and call me back in fifteen minutes,” Molly instructed. “I’ll go talk to Major Van Dyke and get him started on getting us out to meet up with you.”

“OK, I’ll try to find an outlet and get more charge on my phone,” Mike Lawrence said. “I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” Molly answered before ending the call. She turned towards Josh. “We need to get Major Van Dyke right now. I need to arrange a flight to Spokane tonight!”

“I doubt we can arrange a flight before tomorrow morning,” Josh replied. “Get dressed and we’ll go down the hall and talk to the major.”

“I need to get to see my Dad as soon as I can,” Molly insisted. She slipped on an oversized T-shirt and grabbed a robe from the bathroom. Josh slipped on a robe too before they headed down the hall to see the major.

The major was groggy when he answered the knocks at his door. “What?”

“My Dad just called me,” Molly blurted out. “He and my little brother are safe and in Spokane. I need to get an airplane out there as soon as possible.”

“We have obligations in Philadelphia,” Major Van Dyke insisted as he tried to straighten up and get himself together.

“I have to go!” Molly insisted.

“Impossible!”

“I must...” Molly began. Josh wrapped his arms around Molly and pulled her back up against his chest.

“Shhh...” Josh cooed to her. “Relax, we will work this out.” Josh stared straight into the major’s eye.

“I’m a soldier, sir,” Josh stated. “I follow orders. You tell me to be on a plane to Philadelphia tomorrow morning and I will be there. Molly is a civilian... and an unpaid civilian volunteering to help the Army. She is free to come and go as she pleases.”

“Arrangements have been made,” Major Van Dyke insisted.

“My girlfriend is free to tell you to take this PR tour and stick it where the sun don’t shine, SIR,” Josh stated evenly. “She has been ripped from her home, lost her mother and trekked across some God awful wilderness. She just found her family again and she NEEDS to see them. She is not being unreasonable to want to reunite with her family.”

“Well... true,” Major Van Dyke replied. “We have half a day of interviews and talks in Philly. The ten day break we planned for Christmas starts tomorrow night. We can send Molly to Spokane for the break instead of sending her to San Francisco to see her aunt and uncle.”

“I need to see my Dad now!” Molly insisted.

“Major, the purpose of the this whole PR tour is to publicize our trek across the mountains and to help people our age get mentally ready for the challenges facing us as we fight the Chinese,” Josh stated. Major Van Dyke nodded his agreement. “What better story could you give the media than ‘heroine reunites with her family?’ Certainly that will bring us more attention than our tenth speech to a Chamber of Commerce.”

“It’s the Union League tomorrow,” Major Van Dyke said. “Though I take your point, sergeant. We will generate intense interest nationwide with a reunion. Couldn’t we do both? Couldn’t we do Philly and then reunite you with your family on Saturday, Molly?”

“I want to see my father as soon as possible,” Molly insisted. “You need to do this for me if you want me to continue with the PR tour after Christmas. I WILL call my aunt and uncle and have them get a ticket for me from here to Spokane if I have to.”

Molly glared at the major for a few seconds until he relented. “OK, I will make arrangements for the group to head to Spokane tomorrow morning. Will that do? It will take me half the night to track down the flight crew and get our arrangements changed anyway.”

“Flying to Spokane in the morning is fine,” Molly agreed. Her cell phone went off just as she accepted the major’s offer. “Daddy?”

“Yes, it’s me,” Mike Lawrence agreed.

“Things are getting arranged,” Molly said. “We’re flying out to Spokane tomorrow morning. We should arrive... uh...” Molly stared at Major Van Dyke.

The major shrugged his shoulders. “Say in the afternoon.”

“In the afternoon, Daddy,” Molly continued. “Stay put at the refugee center until we get there. What is the name of the high school your center is at?”

“North Central High School,” Mike Lawrence answered. Molly repeated the name to Major Van Dyke.

“I love you, Daddy,” Molly said “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Molly nearly skipped down the hall to her room. Josh stayed with the major momentarily.

“You need to arrange for a casualty team when Molly meets her dad and brother,” Josh said. “They don’t know Molly’s mom is dead. I don’t think it is Molly’s job to tell them the news.”

“I agree,” Major Van Dyke said. “I will arrange it.” He sighed. “I guess I can get some sleep on the flight west tomorrow morning. I don’t think I will get any tonight.”

“Thank you for your help, Major,” Josh replied.

“Thank you for keeping Molly aboard,” Major Van Dyke answered. “Get some sleep so you’re ready to face the press in Spokane.”

Josh headed back to his room. Molly was already in bed when he came back, wearing the long T-shirt.

“Interested in some fun tonight?” Josh asked as he climbed in bed and spooned with Molly.

“Just hold me,” Molly answered. “I’m excited. I’m nervous. I’m... uh, all over the place since I found my Dad and Mikey.”

“I understand,” Josh replied. “It has been an emotional evening.” He draped his arm over Molly’s belly and pulled her closer to his body.

“Did you mean it tonight when you called me your girlfriend?” Molly asked.

“Of course,” Josh responded. “What else would you call us?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know I didn’t think much of you when we met,” Josh explained, “... or at least not the type of person I thought you were. I always thought you were stunningly beautiful. As I got to know you better I realized there was a lot more to you than that. You have strength and courage I didn’t see in the beginning.”

“I thought you were a bossy, arrogant fool when we met on that street corner,” Molly replied as she rolled over so she faced Josh. “I risked my life to get stupid things. I hated you for making me throw away the things I ‘needed.’ Now I understand you literally saved my life that afternoon.”

Josh caressed Molly’s cheek as he explained, “I began to respect you as I got to know you better. That respect grew to more as we spent more time together out in the wilderness.” Josh stared intently into Molly’s eyes. “I’ve grown to love you.”

“That’s good,” Molly replied. “I’ve fallen in love with you too.”

They sealed their declarations with a kiss.

----oooOooo----

Friday, December 19, 2013 – Boston, MA

Josh woke with a start from the jangling of the phone beside his bed. “Hello?” he grunted groggily into the handset.

“This is your 6:00 AM wakeup call, Sgt. Warner,” the night clerk announced. “Major Van Dyke asked me to inform you he needs you and Miss Lawrence downstairs in half an hour, ready for breakfast and check out. The major says I should tell you that you will be catching an early flight to Kennewick, Washington this morning.”

“Thank you,” Josh managed before hanging up the phone. “Kennewick? Where in the hell is Kennewick?”

“I know that,” Molly said as she sat up. “It’s a town in southern Washington, southwest of Spokane. Why are we talking about Kennewick?”

“We are flying there this morning,” Josh answered.

“Why would we be flying to Kennewick?” Molly asked. Josh could detect her alarm. “I HAVE to get to Spokane to see my Dad!”

“Do you remember how we had to take a helicopter out of Bonner’s Ferry last week?” Josh asked soothingly. “We had to fly low until we got out of range of the Chinese fighters. Do you want to fly to Spokane and get shot down within sight of your dad and brother?”

“No”

“Trust the major,” Josh counseled. “Kennewick is a hell of a lot closer to your family than Philadelphia is. We will meet up with your dad today. I am sure of it.”

“OK,” Molly agreed.

“We need to hustle,” Josh added. “The major gave us thirty minutes to shower, dress and pack up for departure.”

“Thirty minutes?” Molly gasped. “Oh shit!” She flew out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. Josh dressed and hoped Molly would leave him two minutes in the bathroom before they had to be downstairs. She did leave him three whole minutes to shave and brush his teeth in the morning. They were downstairs in the lobby promptly at 6:30 AM.

Major Van Dyke greeted them with a haggard smile. “We’re off to retrieve your family after breakfast, Molly.”

“Thank you for doing this,” Molly responded.

“It will all work out,” Major Van Dyke said. “The plan is for a team to pick-up your father and brother and drive them down to Kennewick Airport, where we will meet them. They can board our aircraft and then we head for Redding, California. We will do the press conference announcing you reuniting with your family there. We will drop Sgt. Warner off for his Christmas leave. The plane will take you and your family to whatever destination is appropriate. I suppose it will be San Francisco where you and your family can join your aunt and uncle.”

“I don’t know,” Molly answered. “We will have to wait until Daddy joins us and we can discuss things.”

“That’s fine,” Major Van Dyke replied. “Let’s get some breakfast so we can get this show on the road.”

The group had breakfast before loading into two vans. Traffic was miserable getting to the airport, but fortunately they didn’t need to go far. Logan Airport was just a tunnel trip under the harbor from their hotel. The military group passed through security, quickly boarded their jet and headed west.

Dave Eggleston worked with Molly on her tutoring while they flew west. The plane landed in Colorado Springs to refuel and to drop off Dave. He had a ten day break for Christmas to visit his family in Fort Collins.

“Here’s your supply of books and assignments for the vacation,” Dave announced to Molly as he prepared to deboard from the plane. “Make sure you do your work. We have six weeks of school to catch up on if you want to graduate on time in the spring.”

“You’re joking!” Molly gasped as she received the backpack of books. “I have to work over Christmas?”

“Yes,” Dave confirmed. “You have to work on your vacation to make up for the time you spent in the wilderness. Have a Merry Christmas.”

“Yeah... you too,” Molly responded unenthusiastically.

Their plane was back in the air before noon. As their two hour flight west was concluding, Major Van Dyke slipped into the seat beside Molly.

“I want you to know that the party that picked up your family included a chaplain.”

“Does that mean Daddy and Mikey will know about Mom?” Molly asked.

“They will,” Major Van Dyke confirmed.

“Thank you. I wasn’t looking forward to telling them about Mom.”

“It is taken care of,” the major reassured her. “You can concentrate on the good aspects of reuniting with your family.”

“I really appreciate you rescheduling our stop in Philadelphia,” Molly said.

“No problem at all,” the major replied. He didn’t look as wiped out as he had when they boarded the aircraft in Boston that morning. He had slept nearly the entire way to Colorado Springs.

The aircraft touched down around 1:00 PM, local time. Major Van Dyke had everyone stay on the aircraft. The stop in Kennewick was simply a touch-down, pick up and go. Molly watched as an Air Force sergeant escorted her father and younger brother across the tarmac to the plane. Molly met her father in the aisle with a big hug and kisses once they got aboard.

“It’s so good to see you, Daddy,” Molly explained.

“It’s good to have you safe in my arms too, Pumpkin,” Mike Lawrence replied before giving Molly another kiss on the cheek.

“Mikey! I never thought I would say it is good to see you,” Molly said as she gave her fourteen year-old brother a hug.

“Sis! You got muscles,” Mikey exclaimed as they finished the hug.

“I hiked the whole way from Sedro-Woolley to Bonner’s Ferry, Idaho carrying a fifty pound backpack,” Molly said.

“That’s hard to picture...” Mikey began.

“We’re on a tight schedule everyone,” Major Van Dyke announced. “Please take seats and belt up. We have a press conference scheduled for 3:00 PM in Redding, California. We need to get moving.”

Mike and Mikey Lawrence took seats, Mike sitting beside his daughter and Mikey sitting across the aisle beside Josh. Molly introduced Josh to her father and brother while they waited for take-off.

“Your brother and I learned a little about your hike through the mountains last night from other people at the refugee center after we finished talking last night,” Mike Lawrence said. “I need to hear the whole story from you, Pumpkin.”

Molly narrated the story, with an occasional assist from Josh. Molly had gotten to the point where they were fleeing Sedro-Woolley by car towards Lyman when the captain interrupted with an announcement.

“We’re going to hold on the ground for a few more minutes,” he stated. “Air traffic control reports that a flight of Chinese fighters is inbound about twenty miles out. We don’t want to be in the air if they come by. I know this jet will lose a speed contest with a Jian-10B every day of the week.”

“Where was I?” Molly asked after the intercom went quiet. “Oh, yeah... I was watching the lights grow in the distance behind us as Josh drove us towards Lyman. Josh pulled into that convenience store where you were waiting for me. We hid out while a bunch of Chinese armored cars flew by us heading for Concrete. It is amazing that we missed each other by no more than two or three hours.”

“It is,” Mike Lawrence agreed.

“We heard the bridge at Concrete get blown,” Molly said.

“We were about a mile west of it when the engineers blew it up,” Mikey added.

Molly continued her description of their adventures as they hiked through the Cascades, across northeastern Washington and into Idaho. The plane took off about twenty minutes into Molly’s narrative.

“You really shot a Chinese soldier, Sis?” Mikey exclaimed when she got to the part about crossing the river near Ellisforde.

“I had no choice,” Molly explained. “He would have killed Josh if I hadn’t. I would have ended up dead, or raped and in a prison camp.”

Mike Lawrence gave his son a wink. “Are you going to stop teasing your sister?”

“Duh... yeah, I think so,” Mikey agreed. “She’s strong enough again that she can beat me up or knock me off.”

“I’d never do that...” Molly explained leaned over and gave her brother an evil grin. “Not unless you REALLY annoyed me.”

“Continue the story, honey,” Mike Lawrence said. They listened spellbound as Molly told the tale. The plane was somewhere over Oregon when Molly finished. Mike Lawrence looked at his daughter with awe.

“I never imagined you would be capable of a feat like this,” Mike said. “I’m astounded and I’m proud of you.”

“I have had to grow up a lot in the past six weeks,” Molly replied. “How about the two of you? How did it take you six weeks to get back to safety? I assume you ran into the Chinese paratroopers too.”

“Our story is not nearly as exciting as yours,” Mike Lawrence said. “We continued east on Route 20 after they blew the bridge at Concrete. I thought about heading south on Route 530 at Rockport, but the Army had the bridge wired for demolition. They forced us to continue east on Route 20.

“We were one of the last cars of refugees heading east. We passed Diablo Lake and Ross Lake safely. It was about three in the morning when we crested Washington Pass. The roads were snowy, icy and treacherous. I was coming down the long hill to the hairpin turn below Kangaroo Ridge when I lost it. Our Jeep slid off the road and into the ditch.

“Thank God, we slid off the right side of the road. If we had slid off the left side... well we would have rolled and tumbled the whole way down to the bottom of the hairpin turn.”

“We wouldn’t have survived,” Mikey added.

“Mikey and I couldn’t push the car back on the road,” Mike Lawrence explained. “We had no choice but to wait for help. We were prepared.” He laughed. “Maybe I should say we were semi-prepared for this. We had the old propane camp stove along and a box full of can goods to eat. I packed two extra jugs of gasoline to keep our car going. We packed blankets and warm clothes too. Mikey and I were stranded on the highway for two days before a country snow plow came by and found us.

“He took us back to Mazama,” Mike Lawrence continued. “The fire company was housing refugees. They had about twenty of us in the fire hall banquet room to start. Over the next few days they slowly moved us out for Spokane. Mikey and I and a couple from Lyman were the last ones at the fire house when the Chinese showed up. One of the firemen hid us in his house when the Chinese came. Another took the other couple home. We never found out how they fared.

“The firemen and EMS people kept their communications network going. They helped us the whole way, almost like a resistance movement to the Chinese occupation.”

“You cannot mention that fact publicly,” Major Van Dyke interrupted. “Do not put anyone trapped behind Chinese lines at risk by mentioning who they were or how they helped you escape.”

“We had the same experience in Loomis, Ellisforde and Tonasket,” Josh added. “We don’t mention that at our appearances.”

“OK, I agree totally,” Mike Lawrence responded. “I wouldn’t want to risk any harm to those wonderful people who saved us. Anyway, to continue our story... those unnamed people needed weeks to smuggle us from Mazama, through Winthrop, Twisp and down to Pateros. It took a few nights for conditions to be right for us to cross the Columbia River. Two days ago after dark Mikey

and I paddled a borrowed canoe across the river near Pateros. Our helpers gave us a map showing the back roads we could hike to get to Mansfield.

"We hiked what had to be at least twenty-five or thirty miles that night and early the next morning to reach safety in Mansfield. They stuck the two of us on a bus to Spokane and the refugee center. I guess you know the rest of the story." Mike Lawrence shook his head in wonder. Two nights ago we're risking our lives to paddle across the Columbia River. Now we're in a jet flying to a press conference in California. It is mind blowing."

"I know how you feel, Daddy," Molly answered. "Thursday night last week, Josh and I were camping in a tent in sub-zero temperatures on top of a mountain. The next night we were safe in a hospital in Bonner's Ferry. The following day we fly to Colorado Springs and then New York City. It is a lot to handle."

Molly went on to describe her activities over the past week. Stories of the Today Show, the Tonight Show, Sixty Minutes and the many radio shows, political appearances and luncheons amazed Mike and Mikey Lawrence.

"We need you to make one decision now, Mr. Lawrence," Major Van Dyke explained when Molly finished talking. "We are flying to Redding to drop off Sgt. Warner today for his two week Christmas leave. His family is staying at the refugee center there. We originally planned to take your daughter to San Francisco tonight to stay with her aunt and uncle. We can do that, if you wish, or is there another place you would like us to take you while this PR tour is on break?"

"Um... I would hate to put Ellen and John out," Mike Lawrence responded. "They have a small house and my whole family invading them for the holidays might be a bit too much. Could you take us to my father's place... wherever it is? I assume you know where they relocated his factory to."

"I do, but is not an option," Major Van Dyke answered. "That is a secure location and I cannot take you there."

"Maybe the refugee center in Redding would have room for us temporarily," Molly offered. She knew her dad wouldn't be interested in spending Christmas with Aunt Ellen. Her dad didn't get along all that well with Aunt Ellen.

"That might be a possibility," Mike Lawrence allowed. "At least until I found out if I still have a job or not."

"Where did you work?" Major Van Dyke asked.

"For Verizon as an account manager," Mike explained. "My guess with all the dislocation from evacuating northern Washington, Verizon will need all the help they can get keeping up with demand for cell phones and new accounts for displaced people. I guess I could sleep on a cot in a gymnasium or cafeteria for a few weeks until we know what we are doing."

"I understand from Mr. and Mrs. Warner that this refugee center is a tent center," Major Van Dyke explained. "Each family has a tent for shelter, so there is some privacy."

“I guess Redding is good enough for now,” Mike Lawrence said. Molly beamed at the opportunity to stay close to Josh over the holidays.

The plane headed down for its landing in Redding. Josh looked out the window as they approached the ground. The large open field to the west and southwest of the runway was covered with army wall tents. The refugee center apparently was beside the airport.

Josh and Molly weren’t conscious of it as they walked hand in hand across the tarmac to the terminal. Mike Lawrence did note the closeness between his daughter and Josh. He was grateful to Josh for rescuing his daughter from death or captivity. He wasn’t quite as comfortable with this fully grown man getting too close to his high school aged daughter.

The army prepared a raised dais with a podium in front of the terminal. Major Van Dyke conducted the press conference there. Molly, her dad and brother were the focus of most of the media’s attention. Josh was fine with that. The press conference lasted about half an hour. Josh, Molly and her family went back into the terminal when it finished.

“I will be in contact about pickup arrangements on January 2nd,” Major Van Dyke explained. “Our jet will drop in to take you to wherever our tour begins. Make sure you pack all your belongings. I expect we could be on the road for a couple months minimum before you get a chance to rejoin your family.”

“OK, will do, sir,” Josh agreed. Molly agreed too. A Humvee showed up to take Molly, Mike and Mikey Lawrence and Josh over to the HQ for the refugee center. The vehicle stopped in front of a National Guard armory with a sign out front that announced “132nd Engineer Company, Multi-Role Bridge.”

Josh and Molly were surprised to find their backpacks from their trek alongside the luggage they collected in the past week as Major Van Dyke outfitted them for the PR tour. Josh slung his backpack on his back and grabbed his duffle bag. Molly put her pack on. Her Dad and brother carried her luggage inside.

“Welcome to the Vargas Refugee Center,” a smiling corporal announced as they stepped up to the welcome table.

The group noticed a poster on the wall behind the welcome table explaining the name of the refugee center. It was to honor Lt. Jose Vargas, a member of the 132nd Engineer Company, who was killed during operations on the Skagit River on Nov. 7, 2013. The lieutenant dashed onto the Route 9 bridge over the Skagit River under heavy enemy fire to detonate the explosives just before Chinese forces could cross the bridge. He was severely wounded prior to reaching the explosives but managed to detonate them as the Chinese were crossing the causeway. Six Chinese tanks fell into the river, along with Lt. Vargas as the bridge collapsed. The bottom lines of the poster announced, “The heroic efforts of Guardsman Vargas allowed the Coalition lines to stabilize after the defeat in Sedro-Woolley. His commanding officer has recommended that Lt. Vargas be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroic actions that day.”

“Now we know who to thank for trapping us on the wrong side of the river,” Molly commented.

“Not his fault,” Josh responded. “If six Chinese tanks were on the bridge when he blew it, we weren’t crossing there.”

Before Molly could respond, the corporal at the table blurted out, “You were there?”

“North of the bridge,” Josh explained. “I’m Sgt. Joshua Warner. I am on two week leave to visit my family. They’re staying here at...”

“Of course, Sergeant. Everyone knows about you,” the corporal replied laughingly. “I guess you are familiar with Lt. Vargas’ exploits that day. Were you close to the bridge when he blew it?”

“We were about a quarter mile away,” Josh allowed.

“Everything is setup for your stay, Sergeant,” the corporal replied. “We moved a cot and an extra chair down to your family’s tent this morning. Your family is in Tent #422A, off of Street D.” He handed Josh a map of the refugee center. “Do you need any sundries – towels, soap, shampoo, toothpaste or such?”

“I’m good,” Josh answered. “The army took good care of me last week. I’m all set.”

The corporal turned to Molly and her family. “I presume you are the Lawrences. They sent word over forty minutes ago for us to locate a place for your family.”

“We are,” Mike Lawrence confirmed. “I appreciate you taking us in. I hate to be a problem, but my son and I are arriving with only the clothes on our backs. We escaped through Chinese lines a couple days ago on foot. We spent last night in a refugee center in Spokane. The army picked us up today and reunited us with my daughter, Molly.”

“No problem,” the corporal replied. “We can fix you up with all your immediate needs right now. What bank did you do business with back home?”

“Wells Fargo,” Mike Lawrence replied.

“No problem, Redding has a couple branches of that bank around town,” the corporal said. “FEMA can help with a temporary loan for necessities if you end up short.”

“I should be OK until I find out if Verizon needs workers here,” Mike said. “I suspect my old job as an account manager in Bellingham is gone but they should require help providing service for all these displaced people.”

“You’re probably right,” the corporal agreed, “... if the phone business is anything like providing other services to the displaced.” The corporal straightened up in his seat. “There is a mall 1/3 mile from camp when you can pick-up other, non-emergency items. We also have shuttle buses departing here every fifteen minutes on a loop around Redding. You can hop on or off wherever you want on the loop. The shuttles are no charge to camp residents.”

“That will be handy,” Mike Lawrence commented.

“Your son and daughter are school age?” the corporal asked. Mike nodded yes. “Our public schools are running two shifts of students a day. The locals use the buildings from 7:00 AM to 2:30 PM. Displaced children use the schools from 2:30 PM to 9:00 PM. Your children can catch a school bus from behind the armory at 2:00 PM on weekdays. You will need to stop by the school Monday morning to register them.”

“For Mikey only,” Molly added. “Josh and I are part of the army’s PR tour. I have a tutor who is working with me. He gave me home study to do until the tour group meets again on January 2nd.”

“Is that the best thing for...” Mike Lawrence began asking.

“We’ll discuss it later, Daddy,” Molly replied firmly. “It is already decided.”

“OK,” Mike said. Turning back to the corporal, he asked, “Where are we staying?”

“You will be in Tent #527B on Street E,” the corporal replied as he handed a camp map to Mike Lawrence. “Also, you and Sgt. Warner’s family will both be dining in Dining Hall B. It is located here.” The corporal pointed to a spot on the map not too far from the tents they were assigned.

“Is there anything else we need right now?” Mike asked.

“No, I think I covered everything,” he replied. “I will get you transportation down to your tents now.”

Josh, Molly Mike and Mikey found two golf carts waiting for them outside. Josh helped Mike and Mikey pile Molly’s luggage into one cart. His pack and duffle bag went in the other. Mike and Mikey sat with the driver in one cart. Molly climbed in with Josh. The two carts headed south on the driveway between the armory and the airport. The road took them 800 feet south before turning right and heading into the camp.

Double rows of the big, 12-man army tents stretched across the field from the northwest to the southeast. The two golf carts drove onto a forty foot gap between tents labeled “Street 1.” They passed to the double row of tents and found a perpendicular forty foot gap between tents labeled “Street A.” They continued past “Streets” B and C before turning left and heading south on “Street D.” The north end of each tent was marked with a sign stating the tent number and an ‘A.’ The army appeared to have divided the twelve-man tents into two six-man units. The south end of each tent was marked with its number and a ‘B.’

The procession of golf carts crossed over “Street 2” before stopping off at Tent #422A, on the right side of Street D. Josh and Molly climbed out. She helped him pull his pack and duffle bag out of the cart.

“I know where you’re staying,” Molly commented.

"I guess your tent will be behind mine and down five tents," Josh responded. They two were separating for the first time in six weeks. It felt awkward. After a few seconds pause Molly grabbed Josh in a big hug. He slipped his arms around Molly and clasped her to his body. They stared into each other's eyes, embracing for ten seconds... twenty seconds... lost to the outside world.

Josh gave Molly a quick kiss... except it wasn't. Her tongue slipped into his lips. His tongue dueled with hers. The two were lost in their private world, quickly heating up their passion and need for each other. Mike Lawrence cleared his throat loudly, bringing the two back to reality.

"Um... um..." Molly gasped as she blushed in front of her family. "Call me before you go to dinner. Maybe our families can meet."

"Good idea," Josh groaned. Hopefully his hard-on for Molly wasn't too noticeable to her father and brother. "That's a good idea."

"Let's go Molly," Mike Lawrence snapped. Molly's dad did not appreciate this... this MAN taking advantage of his young, high-school-aged daughter... not one bit. And yes, the bulge in Josh's pants was noted. The two golf carts headed south without another word from the Lawrences.

Josh composed himself as best he could, hefted his pack onto his back and carried his duffle bag into his family's tent. Josh's mom, Laura Warner, was the only person home when Josh stepped into the tent.

"It's so good to have you home," Laura gushed. "We'll get the whole family under one roof tonight." She laughed as she waved her hand to display their domicile. It measured 16 feet by 15 feet. A nylon "wall" separated their half of the army tent from their neighbors. They had a plywood floor, so they weren't living in the mud.

The army provided five cots, five chairs and a small table. Laura Warner had strung a rope between two tent poles to provide a place for everyone to hang their clothes. Numerous milk crates and boxes provided storage for their smaller personal belongings. The tent had two lights to provide illumination in the otherwise dark and drab interior of their home.

"I'm glad to be home too," Josh replied. "I assume Ashley and Jake are at school now. Where's Dad?"

"He's out looking for a job," Laura Warner explained. "He should be back around 5:15. He planned to take the five o'clock bus back from town."

Josh noticed a container of cupcakes on the table. He stepped over to take a good look at them. They were chocolate with cream icing. "Something to recognize your soldier son's return home?" Josh teased as he tried to open the plastic container.

"No!" Laura Warner insisted. "They're for the whole family for a belated celebration of your 21st birthday. You can't have any until Ashley and Jake get home from school tonight."

"Ahhh... Mom!" Josh whined like he would when he was younger.

“Sit down and have some tea with me,” Laura Warner suggested. “It’s been too long since we had time for a heart to heart talk.” She brewed tea on a hot plate while she and Josh sat and talked. It felt great to Josh to relax and talk with his mom. It had been too long since they had an opportunity like this.

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Josh gave Molly a call around twenty after five. The two families met outside Dining Hall B at 5:30 PM. Josh introduced his parents to Molly’s family and Molly introduced her father and brother to the Warners. The group went inside.

The dining hall was a large army tent with a cafeteria style serving line and rows of tables and chairs where the residents could sit and eat. They picked up trays and went through the serving line. The food wasn’t the gourmet fare that Josh and Molly enjoyed for the last week but it was better than freeze-dried food and a damned sight better than the Chinese MREs they ate for a while.

The conversation was mostly of a getting-to-know-you sort over dinner. Laura Warner invited the Lawrence family to come over around 9:30 PM to help celebrate Josh and Molly’s belated birthdays. Mike Lawrence sent Mikey over to the dessert table to grab a couple extra cookies and sent him ahead to their family’s tent.

“I appreciate everything you did to save my daughter’s life,” Mike Lawrence stated as he fixed his gaze on Josh. “I know you and Molly have become close during your ordeal. I need to know exactly what your intentions are towards my daughter.”

“Intentions?” Josh mumbled. He hadn’t anticipated a question like this. “Uh... um...”

“I know what you’re asking, Daddy,” Molly interjected. “Yes, Josh and I are a couple. We lo...”

“Unacceptable!” Mike Lawrence thundered. “A grown man should not be seeing a young high school girl. It is completely unacceptable!”

“Josh is barely more than a boy himself,” Bob Warner added. “My wife and I saw Josh and Molly together last Monday when we taped the Tonight Show. They are a sweet couple. You’ve raised a wonderful girl.”

“Girl!” Mike insisted. “My daughter is too young for this man.”

“Father!” Molly asserted. “Have you forgotten we are going over to visit the Warners later tonight to celebrate my eighteenth as well as Josh’s twenty-first birthdays? I’m legally of age. I get to make decisions about my life now, not you.”

“While you’re living...” Mike Lawrence began. He stopped when he realized how silly he would be finishing his statement – ‘in my house.’ He didn’t have a house anymore. “There is too much difference in age between the two of you.”

"You were dating Mom when you were a college sophomore," Molly stated. "What grade was Mom in..." Molly hesitated for effect. "... which grade in high school?"

"Senior," Mike Lawrence replied to his daughter.

"What did Grandpa Loring think of a college man dating his sweet young, high school-aged daughter?" Molly asked.

"Not much," Mike admitted.

"So what if Josh and I a year further apart than you and Mom?" Molly demanded.

"Josh is a soldier," Mike Lawrence stated. "Long term, how can he provide for you? What happens if he's sent back to the front? There are too many unknowns for this to be a good idea."

"I admit, I am subject to whatever orders the army cares to give me," Josh stated. "Right now my highest value to the army seems to be doing this publicity tour to encourage young people our age to commit to what will be necessary to beat the Chinese and kick them out of our country. The army is paying for everything on the tour – food, lodging, clothing and other necessities. My living expenses are minimal right now and all my pay goes straight into my bank account. I will have a good nest egg accumulated when I finish my commitment to the army. The army will pay for my college tuition too. I plan to go to Stanford and get a degree in Computer Science. I don't know if Molly and I will last long term, but I think both of us want to try to see if we can."

"And the army could change their minds tomorrow and send you back to the front lines," Mike countered.

"Yes they could," Josh agreed. "Our country is at war. Look where all of us are sitting. Who would have predicted two years ago we'd be having dinner together in an army tent in California? That our homes would be gone? This is an uncertain time and all of us are going to have to live with uncertainty and make the best of it. The best I can do I believe will be with Molly."

"I don't want my daughter to get hurt if..." Mike stated. He stopped short of saying, "...if Josh gets killed?"

"All of us want the best for Molly," Josh replied. "I love your daughter and I think we're both better off together than apart."

"I love Josh too," Molly added. "This is very different from all my high school boyfriends. Very different and more serious."

"Serious?" Mike asked, clearly alarmed. He stared hard at Josh. "Have you violated my daughter's honor? Josh wilted under the cold stare. Molly just laughed.

"Father!" Molly insisted. "Tommy Alderston, a senior, got 'my honor' three years ago. No news there. Why do you think Mom had the knock-down, drag-out fight with you to get me on birth control in ninth grade? I'm eighteen and sexually active. Period!"

“You and this MAN better have been careful if you’re... you’re... doing it,” Mike Lawrence said. “I doubt you grabbed five weeks supply of condoms when you left Sedro-Woolley.”

“Father! I have a birth control implant,” Molly countered. “Josh and I are perfectly safe.”

“Do you remember the doctor’s appointment you had a couple days before Thanksgiving?” Mike Lawrence asked.

“Appointment?” Molly asked blankly.

“To get your updated birth control implant?” he reminded. All the color drained from Josh’s face.

“Molly, you said...” Josh mumbled.

“It’s fine, Josh” Molly reassured. “I’m sure a birth control implant doesn’t stop working instantly as soon as it’s due to be replaced.”

“Maybe Molly and I should take a walk over to the mall after dinner and visit the drug store,” Laura Warner suggested. “What do you think, Mike? Sometimes a girl needs another female’s perspective. Molly?”

“Sandy always handled these things,” Mike said. “I don’t know.” He no longer looked like the fierce father defending his daughter. He looked defeated.

“Let’s allow the ladies look after the things they know best,” Bob Warner suggested. “I have some beer in the cooler back at my tent. Tonight might be a good time to have a brew.”

“Yes, it might,” Mike agreed.

“Mr. Lawrence, if Molly is... is... you know...” Josh stuttered.

“The word is pregnant, son,” Bob added.

“If Molly is pregnant,” Josh continued. “I’ll do the right thing. I won’t run off or abandon her.”

“Any son of mine WILL take care of his responsibilities,” Bob confirmed.

Laura Warner and Molly headed for the drug store in the mall. Bob, Mike and Josh headed back to Tent #422A. The three made small talk as they enjoyed their beers for a bit. The conversation was interesting but everyone was on edge about the unspoken topic. Finally Mike couldn’t avoid the topic any longer.

“I’m too damned young to be a grandfather,” Mike insisted. “I’m only thirty-nine.” Josh and his dad both noticed the math on that admission – a thirty-nine year-old dad with an 18 year-old daughter. Molly’s mom is two years younger than her dad.

Josh was numb at the possibility of being a father so soon. He barely sipped at his can of beer. He never drank much and this was his first legal drink.

“You feel like you’ve been run over by a freight train?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” Josh admitted.

“Been there, done that,” Mike responded. “Sandy and I dated my last two years in high school. We agreed to see other people when I went off to college. A funny thing happened to that. Neither of us wanted to date anyone else. We saw each other during breaks and the summers until she graduated. Sandy ended up going to a junior college near Washington State so we could be together more after she finished high school. It was great until this one winter weekend. There was a party and... well you can figure the rest. Molly was not planned.”

“Nature has its way,” Bob remarked. “It does happen when you least expect it.”

“Molly has been a blessing and a... uh...” Mike said before pausing. He smiled. “A handful. You may see in your time, Josh. You may see.”

“I expected my time for children would come someday,” Josh agreed, “...but today?”

“Your mother and I, and I’m sure Mike, too, will do everything we can to help you and Molly,” Bob Warner said. “Having a child when you’re young isn’t easy to deal with, but it has been done before.”

“All my son and I have are the clothes on our backs, but we will help you and Molly out... somehow,” Mike said. “Maybe I better go and get my son. He has to be wondering what is taking us so long.”

“Do that, Mike,” Bob Warner answered. “We have some pop in the cooler too. He’s welcome to some.”

Mike Lawrence returned about five minutes later with his son, Mikey. Mikey grabbed a pop. Bob and Mike grabbed second beers. Josh was still nursing his first. They talked for a minute or two before deciding to turn on the radio and listen to the news. The reporter did some local news before switching over to war news.

“Chinese troops identified as the 16th Group Army continue their build up and bombardment of Western Hemisphere’s defenses along the Columbia River opposite Longview, Washington today,” the announcer said. “A brigade of Argentinian paratroops is reinforcing the U. S. forces defending along the Columbia River. The anticipated assault crossing of the Columbia is expected any day.”

“In other news from the front, the Chinese 38th Group Army hit American defenders along the Woodland to Amboy line with probing attacks again today. Hemispheric defense forces are rushing to Oregon and Washington to solidify our defensive lines. NORTHCOM headquarters media relations officer, Capt. William Carmichael, reports that General Paul Blackburn expects the lines to stabilize over the next few weeks and that we should be able to hold the Columbia River line and our bridgehead on the north side north of Portland, Oregon.”

“The news sounds promising,” Mike noted.

“Hmmm,” Bob snorted. “I’ve heard all this before. They said the same thing at Chilliwack, at the Battle of the Borders, at Sedro-Woolley...” Bob nodded towards Josh before continuing. “They were going to stop them at Everett, at Redmond, at the defense line north of Seattle, at Tacoma, at Olympia, at... well you get the picture. The army hasn’t held at a single spot since the war began. I see our troops continuing to fall back for months to come.”

“That’s awfully pessimistic,” Mike replied. “Don’t you have faith in our troops?”

“I have full faith in the troops,” Bob answered. “It is the leaders I lack faith in. I’ve studied and read about military history since before I was Michael’s age.” Bob pointed towards Molly’s younger brother. “Our country’s military leaders performed poorly at the start of nearly every war we’ve ever fought. You probably missed the New York Times exposé last week on the command bungling at the front.”

“We didn’t get to read that, no,” Mike agreed.

“General Coleman wasn’t pulled back to Washington D. C. because he was needed there,” Bob explained. “The Times revealed he was pulled from command of the I Corps for incompetence. He was outsmarted at every turn by China’s Marshal Li Chang. He blew it in Vancouver, at the Battle of the Borders and especially at Sedro-Woolley. Do you know why the Chinese paratroopers went in at Vancouver?” All who were around the circle of chairs shook their heads no.

“The Chinese needed the damned port,” Bob explained. “The Times article claims that the Chinese 38th Group Army was landing the day after the port fell. The Chinese kept those troops under wraps until they set the trap at Sedro-Woolley.”

“That explains where all those BMPs and tanks came from on our flanks,” Josh agreed. “Our intel expected negligible resistance on our right flank. Instead we ran into a buzz saw that morning.”

“Exactly, son,” Bob agreed. Josh talked about the events from his battle in Sedro-Woolley for the first time as he described the action to his and Molly’s family. The men and Mikey were still talking war news when Laura Warner and Molly returned. Everyone looked expectantly at Molly and Laura.

Josh recognized the look of determination on his mother’s face. He knew this wasn’t going to be good news. Molly displayed no emotion whatsoever. Was she stunned? What was up?

“I’ll cut to the chase,” Laura said. “We picked up a home test at the drug store. Molly used it and the test is positive.”

“Oh God!” Mike Lawrence snapped. “God damn it!”

“The test isn’t definitive,” Laura responded. “It shows there is a good chance that Molly may be pregnant. I would be happy to take her over to the family clinic on the other side of the airport on

Monday so we can get confirmation. I've worked with them as a temp for a few days. I used to work as a receptionist at a doctor's office back in Olympia."

"I can handle my own family's problems myself," Mike responded. "Michael, Molly, let's go. We have family business to discuss privately that doesn't concern you." Molly stared at Josh in alarm.

"With due respect, Mr. Lawrence," Josh insisted. "This concerns me a great deal. I am just as guilty of bad judgment as Molly is. This affects both of us. I think it would be best if Molly and I had a few minutes to talk privately before everyone else decides what should be done."

"Molly?" Mike Lawrence asked sternly. "We are leaving! Let's go." Mike reached for his daughter's elbow. She twisted away.

"Josh is right, Daddy," Molly said. "This involves him too. How did Grandpa Jim [Loring] react when you and Mom told him she was expecting me? From the stories I heard, I suspect Grandpa wasn't too happy about the news. Shouldn't you treat Josh with the respect Grandpa should have offered you?"

"Well..." Mike responded. Molly had played exactly the right card to sway her father.

"Why don't we let Josh and Molly take a walk?" Bob suggested. "We all could use a few minutes to absorb this news and calm down a little. Nothing will be solved tonight so we don't need to make hurried decisions."

"I suppose," Mike allowed.

"Molly, do you want to take a walk with me?" Josh suggested. She agreed. The two hurried out of the tent to avoid Molly's father's angry glare.

"I'm so sorry, Josh," Molly apologized when they got outside. "I never dreamed this could happen. This is all my fault."

"No, it's not," Josh countered. "I was there. I know pregnancy is possible if I put my bare cock inside a girl. I got carried away when we started. I was horny and not thinking straight. I could have insisted we stop."

"I don't know about that," Molly replied. "I was horny too and needed a man bad. You were available to satisfy my needs."

"There is no use in pointing fingers," Josh said. "I was there. You were there. We did what we did. Now we face the consequences. I want you to know I will stand by you 100%, whatever decision you make."

"Decision I make?" Molly snapped. "You're not dumping the decision all on me!"

“NO! No... no, that isn’t what I meant,” Josh rued. “All I mean is I will be there for you if WE decide to keep the baby. I will be there for you if we decide to give the baby up for adoption. I will support you if you can’t carry the baby to term.”

“Abortion?” Molly asked. Josh nodded yes. “One thing we’ve never discussed, Josh. Are you religious?”

“My family and I aren’t atheists,” Josh said. “We aren’t very regular at getting to church but we consider ourselves Christians.”

“My family gets... got to church every Sunday,” Molly said. “We’re Lutherans, not at all like the Catholics. We don’t believe you’re condemned to an eternity in hell if you have an abortion. Still, my pastor taught that we should hold all life valuable and God-given. I don’t know if I’m ready to have a baby, but I don’t think I’m ready to get rid of it either.”

“Thank God,” Josh purred. “I would support you if you decided you wanted an abortion but I’m relieved you don’t want one. I think your pastor has the right idea. A baby is a gift of life.”

“We agree on one thing,” Molly sighed. “That’s a relief.”

“What’s next for us?” Josh asked. “In spite of our mismatched backgrounds and personalities, we’ve fallen in love. Can we make this relationship work long term? Do you want it to work long term?”

“I was so delighted when Major Van Dyke told us he wanted us to go on a PR tour together that could last months,” Molly answered. “I was happy to get to civilization when we reached Bonner’s Ferry, but I was worried about the army shipping you back to your unit and me never seeing you again. Is this a sideways proposal of marriage, Josh?”

“Not a proposal,” Josh responded. He laughed. “I doubt this is the way you imagined a proposal when you were growing up.” Josh pointed up at the bare light at the intersection of “Street 3” and “Street D.” “Consider this more an exploration of the idea. If it fits us, I can do a proper proposal in a nice restaurant over dinner.”

“I like the idea of us getting married but can we make it work long term?” Molly asked.

“Can we plan anything long term in this war?” Josh responded. “I see us taking things one day at a time. We love each other. We want to be together. It looks like we are going to have a child together. It certainly is a good start for building a life together.”

“True,” Molly said. “Daddy is going to absolutely go ballistic at the idea of me marrying this young.”

“How old was your mom when she married your dad?” Josh asked.

“Nineteen.”

“You’re eighteen,” Josh said. “That’s not much different than your mom. We should be able to reason with him and remind him about how old he and your mom were when you were born.”

“Do you remember how we felt after we crossed each of those Chinese-held rivers?” Molly asked. “We were relieved, frightened and just wiped out emotionally every time. Think about what my dad has faced in the last two days – escaping from the Chinese, sneaking across the Columbia River, reaching safety behind American lines, finding out I’m alive, finding out Mom is dead and now finding out I may be pregnant. He’s been through hell.”

“True,” Josh agreed. “What do you suggest?”

“Listen to them,” Molly responded. “Let them sell us on what we should do about this pregnancy. It won’t conflict with our own plans as long as they don’t decide I need to get an abortion. Let our parents think they are in control.”

“You’re devious,” Josh said, laughing.

“I’ve been managing parents for half my life,” Molly replied.

“Give them the illusion of control,” Josh said. “I think it’ll work. Are you ready to face them?”

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Molly agreed. The two walked back to the Warner tent holding hands.

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Molly’s read on her father was accurate. Josh’s parents broached the subject of abortion but Mike Lawrence shot the idea down. The families debated whether the child should be put up for adoption or could one or both families help Josh and Molly raise the child. Living as refugees in a tent city left too many unanswerable questions to allow the families to resolve the issue. They did agree on one thing. A woman’s touch was necessary for Molly when she went to get confirmation of the suspected pregnancy. Laura Warner would take Molly to the health clinic on Saturday morning.

Molly and Laura’s visit to the health clinic brought clarity, if not good news. The doctor confirmed Molly was a little over four weeks pregnant. He estimated her due date to be August 28, 2014. Molly and Laura informed the two families at lunch. Josh and Molly decided to take a walk over to the mall near the camp after lunch.

“So, does this scare the hell out of you as much as it does me?” Josh asked when they were outside and alone.

“Surprisingly, no,” Molly answered. “I expected to be a mom someday, but not this so soon. We have faced so much since we left Sedro-Woolley. We’ve faced down Chinese soldiers. I killed one of them. We made it through the mountains in the winter and hiked the whole way across Washington State. I don’t think having a baby will be as intimidating after everything else we’ve gone through.”

“I promise I will help every way I can,” Josh said. “What I don’t know is what the army is going to have me do after we get done with the PR tour. I could easily be put back on the line to fight the Chinese. I don’t know if I will be any help.”

“My dad and your parents are willing to help,” Molly said. “It will be hard but we will muddle through, together.”

“Together?” Josh sniffed. “As if the army is going to have me fly around the country doing publicity for them. What happens when I get sent back to the line? What do you do then?”

“I don’t think that is going to happen,” Molly replied. “The army is busy building you up into a big hero like Sergeant York in World War I or Audie Murphy in World War II. They wouldn’t put you back in combat where something could happen to you. You’re famous now and that is going to keep you safe.”

Josh was surprised and impressed that Molly had rattled off Sergeant York and Audie Murphy’s names so easily. The more he learned about this blonde haired cheerleader the more she impressed him. He already found out she had courage and willpower. Molly obviously had listened in History in school to know those two heroes from sixty to eighty years ago.

“I hope you’re right,” Josh allowed. “If it weren’t for the army... well... if I could determine my own path through the next few years, I would be asking you to marry me. I don’t know if I can with all the uncertainty with the army and the war.”

“You can, Josh,” Molly answered. She stopped and stared into Josh’s eyes. “You can ask. The war be damned.”

“Serious?” Josh asked.

“Deadly serious,” Molly answered.

“This isn’t the appropriate place,” Josh replied. “Not here on a dusty, dirt street in a tent city. We can go out to dinner after Christmas. I’m sure I can find someplace appropriately romantic.”

“A girl does have dreams,” Molly said. “I’m glad my big computer nerd recognizes my need for romance.”

“I’m not a hopeless nerd,” Josh retorted, laughing. “My momma raised me better than that.”

“She did,” Molly agreed. “I think she raised you well. I like her.”

Josh and Molly walked the third of a mile to the mall holding hands. They talked and joked comfortably. For better or worse, the two had come to a decision about where they wanted their future to head. The couple shopped for Christmas presents for their families. Josh was helpful when Molly searched for a present for her 14 year-old brother, Mikey. Josh appreciated Molly’s thoughts as he looked for a nice gift for his sister, Ashley. She was a couple months younger than Molly.

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Mike Lawrence took his son to the local high school on Monday morning and registered him for classes. He was assigned to the afternoon/evening session like most refugees. Jake Warner took

Mikey under his wing and showed him around the school that evening. Both boys were ninth-graders. The two quickly became fast friends. Jake taught Mikey about hunting and fishing, his passions. Mikey taught Jake enoughs that he became a decent, though not a strong, soccer player. It was a vast improvement over being picked last in gym class every time the class played soccer.

Mike Lawrence Sr. received great news when he checked in at the Redding Verizon office. An hour later he had a job, a better title and a raise. Verizon was desperate for competent help so they could repair and restore the network of users they had before the war. Mike and Mikey's stay in the refugee camp would be short lived.

Good cheer was slightly forced for Christmas at the refugee camp. The loss of Sandra Lawrence was felt by both families. Discussion of Molly's predicament and how it would be handled added to the strain. Mike Lawrence pushed for Molly to give the baby up for adoption so she could go on to college the next fall. Bob and Laura Warner offered their help in any way possible, whatever the final decision may be.

Josh and Molly kept their counsel guarded for now. Neither spoke of marriage until a couple days after Christmas. Josh took Molly out to the nicest restaurant in Redding to propose marriage. Molly accepted eagerly. The news was not met with joy in either tenth. Josh's parents were "concerned" how a couple as young as Molly and Josh would handle the pressures and responsibilities of marriage. Molly's father was less than "delighted" too.

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"You're marrying that boy over my DEAD body!" Mike Lawrence declared for the tenth time.

"I am eighteen and I can do whatever I want!" Molly blustered back. Mikey was still in their tent. He tried to blend into the background so he wasn't obliterated by any of the shells the two were heaving at each other.

"That son... son of a tire salesman is totally unsuitable for someone of our station and means in life," Mike blustered back. "I forbid this marriage!"

"See this calendar?" Molly countered, holding the calendar app open to December, 2013. "I became a legal adult on this day," she insisted as she pointed towards the 10th of December. "That means I get to choose when and who I marry. He saved my life and I love him."

"He did save you," Mike allowed, trying reason rather than volume to budge his obstinate daughter. "I owe the young man a great deal for returning you to us, but I do not owe him my only daughter. Your great grandfather, your grandfather and I have worked hard to attain a certain status in society. This working man's son is not a suitable husband for a Lawrence. Would you hitch a Triple Crown winning thoroughbred to a beer wagon?"

"I am not a Triple Crown winner and Josh is not a beer wagon," Molly answered. "He is a smart, decent man who would have been studying computer science at Stanford if his family had more money and if the war hadn't started. We live in a new world, Daddy. Get used to it. Josh is a survivor. That is what our country needs if we are to survive and then win this war."

“Stanford?” Mike asked.

“Josh was accepted at Stanford,” Molly confirmed. “The only reason he joined the National Guard was to raise money so he could afford college.”

“Even if Joshua is capable of graduating from Stanford, you are much too young to get married. You should give the child up to a couple capable of raising him or her properly. Get your college education. You can see if you and Josh still feel the same way after you have your degrees. You can start a family with him then if you still feel the same way.” Unspoken by Mike Lawrence was the question, ‘Would Josh survive this war?’ If Josh didn’t survive, that would neatly solve his dilemma.

“We are getting married in a few weeks, Daddy,” Molly retorted. “Your only daughter is having your first grandchild in seven and a half months. If you want to be a part of our lives you better accept that I love Josh and he is the man I plan to build my life with. The marriage will go ahead with or without your blessing. I hope it is with your blessing.”

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Josh had an important detail to work out too. His parents were concerned but accepted the fact that their son would be marrying Molly Lawrence. They did their best to help their future daughter-in-law. Josh was an enlisted man in the military. His life was not his own to make final decisions. He needed permission from his superior officer before he could marry someone.

Josh had no idea how to contact anyone with the 41st Division, so he called Major Van Dyke the night after he proposed to Molly.

“Major, how do I get in touch with the C. O. [commanding officer] of the 1/185 Armor?” Josh asked after the major took his phone call.

“The 1/185th?” Major Van Dyke asked. “Why do you want to contact them?”

“Um... Molly and I would like to get married,” Josh replied.

“It’s about damned time,” Major Van Dyke replied. “When is the baby due?”

“Baby?” Josh stuttered. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t think you packed a six week supply of rubbers in that backpack of yours,” Major Van Dyke answered. “When is the baby due? How much time do I have to show Molly off in public before she is too large?”

“Um... the doctor said she’s due August 28th,” Josh replied. “I don’t know when... uh... she’ll show. I don’t... I mean I never...”

“I can work that out from her due date,” Major Van Dyke replied. “I am guessing we will have to stop showing the two of you off sometime in April or May, if we don’t want to broadcast the dirty details of your trek across Washington to the nation.”

“I would appreciate it the whole world didn’t know we’d been this stupid to make a baby,” Josh said. “What about my C. O.? How do I contact the 1/185th to get permission for the marriage?”

“You were to receive your new orders when I flew in to pick you up next Thursday,” Major Van Dyke explained. “You are being detached from the 41st Division and assigned to NorthCom HQ in the PR group. I guess that will make me your new commanding officer.”

“What paper work do I need to do?” Josh asked.

“I will get Lt. Gutierrez going on the necessary forms,” Major Van Dyke answered. “We will make this happen for you and Molly.”

“Thank you, sir,” Josh replied before ending the call.

----oooOooo----

Josh and Molly were sitting down for lunch in the dining hall tent when they heard, “Joshua! Joshua!”

Both looked up and saw a short haired brunette, who looked to be around fifty, waving to them. Molly had no idea who the lady was. Josh knew immediately. He forced himself to smile and wave her over. It was Zach Rice’s mom, Mrs. Katie Rice.

“I guess you’re here to visit your parents,” Mrs. Rice said as Josh shook her hand.

“The army gave me a few days leave for Christmas,” Josh confirmed. “I didn’t realize you were at this camp.”

“A lot of Olympians ended here in Redding,” Mrs. Rice explained. “I think half my neighborhood ended up here. I bumped into your parents a couple weeks ago... before you made it to safety.”

“I didn’t realize,” Josh said.

“I need you to tell me something, Joshua,” Mrs. Rice explained. “What happened to my son?”

“The army didn’t tell you?” Josh asked guardedly.

“All they can tell me is that he is missing in action,” Mrs. Rice answered. “What does that mean? The chaplain who informed Jim [her husband] and I of Zach’s status couldn’t tell us anything about the circumstances. Is there any chance he is a Chinese prisoner or made it out of the battle alive and is hiking through the mountains the way you did?”

“The army didn’t tell you anything else?” Josh asked. “I don’t know if it’s my...”

"Joshua! I'm his mother," Mrs. Rice insisted. "I deserve to know what happened to my son. I want to know the details of what happened that day."

"Are you certain you want that?"

"I am," Mrs. Rice said. Her eyes glinted with determination. "Tell me."

"Sit and I will," Josh agreed. He related the full story of the attack out of Sedro-Woolley on November 7th, leaving nothing out but Sgt. Cooper's decapitation. "Your son was a good solider, Mrs. Rice. The Chinese machine gun got him a few feet from safety. I dragged him to cover and he died in my arms."

Josh stared into Mrs. Rice's watery eyes. "I swear I am not making this up. His last words were, 'Tell my mom I love her.' He died thinking of you." Josh and Mrs. Rice hugged and cried together, remembering the faithful son and friend whose life they had shared.

"Thank you for being brave enough to tell me the truth, Josh," Mrs. Rice said as she gained her composure again. "You are a good man."

"I just try to do the best I can to do my job," Josh replied, modestly.

"It is wonderful what you and Molly..." Mrs. Rice said, looking over at Molly. "I assume you are Molly Lawrence, the brave girl who trekked through the mountains with Joshua."

Josh formally introduced Mrs. Rice to Molly. They talked for a couple more minutes about their experiences in the mountains as they hiked to safety. Mrs. Rice thanked Josh and Molly again for telling her the truth before she headed off.

"That was rough on you, wasn't it?" Molly asked after she disappeared.

"Brutal," Josh agreed. "I have to do that at least one more time too. I owe Tyler's parents an explanation of how brave he was too."

"I want to help with that," Molly added. "I was there and Tyler was saving me just as much as you when he swam that river."

"That would be great," Josh said. "Hopefully Major Van Dyke can set that up some time when we are in Nebraska."

----oooOooo----

Bob Warner had been searching for work for over three weeks without success. He finally struck pay dirt two days after Christmas. On a whim, he stopped in at a chain pharmacy store to see if they had any openings. They had nothing in Redding but were looking for a store manager for an established store in McKinleyville, California. McKinleyville was a small, coastal town in northern California, about a four hour drive from Redding. The previous manager was getting promoted and

opening a new store in another town. Construction was delayed so Bob's new job wouldn't start for another two weeks.

Josh and Molly's leave from the speaking and publicity tour ended much too soon for either of them. They spent much of New Year's night packing their things so they would be ready when Major Van Dyke came for them the next morning. Bob and Laura Warner accepted Josh and Molly's decision to marry. Mike Lawrence didn't like it but was starting to accept that his strong willed daughter would have her way on this. He hoped it wouldn't prove to be a big mistake. Time would decide whether Molly or Mike was correct about Josh and his future prospects.

The two families couldn't move forward with the wedding plans. Major Van Dyke was still firming up all the speaking engagements Josh and Molly would be doing. He guaranteed both families would be present for the wedding.

----oooOooo----

Major Van Dyke worked more speaking engagements and fewer interviews into the PR group's schedule. David Eggleston worked with Molly on her school work while Major Van Dyke worked with Josh to make him a polished speaker. By and large the major was successful. Josh felt uncomfortable as he gave his first few lectures but the fears slowly disappeared as he spoke more often.

The major coordinated schedules with the Lawrences and Warners. Everyone settled on February 15th as the wedding day. Mike and Mikey Lawrence had moved out of the refugee camp into an apartment in Redding by then. Bob Warner had started his job in McKinleyville. The family was now living in a rented half of a house there until they could get their finances in better shape. Jake loved living along the coast and close to the hills of northern California. It was a great place for a budding outdoorsman like him.

The wedding was a low key affair. John and Ellen Howard made it up from San Francisco. The army flew John Lawrence up from his secret plant in Tucson, Arizona. The Warners drove down from McKinleyville to meet the happy couple.

Major Van Dyke scheduled the next speaking engagement for Josh and Molly in San Francisco. He left a three day window in the schedule so the newlyweds could enjoy some private time together for their honeymoon. The couple were rested and relaxed when they resumed their tour.

----oooOooo----

The U. S. military situation was grim in early January when Major Van Dyke picked up Molly and Josh from Redding. The Chinese 16th and 38th Group Armies were driving south for Portland and a crossing over the mighty Columbia River. Josh's 41st Division was tasked with acting as a rear guard as the Chinese approached Vancouver, Washington, just north of Portland, Oregon. The division was decimated in the defense, but they bought time for more Western Hemispheric units to bolster the Columbia River defense line.

Chinese bombers, rockets and artillery reduced Portland to rubble but it didn't help them dislodge the desperate defenders. Three weeks of intense fighting ended in stalemate by the 1st of March. West Hem forced the Asian Alliance to pause for the first time since they burst out of China and attacked Russia fourteen months earlier. The 41st Division was withdrawn from the front lines and sent to rest and refit.

Major Van Dyke arranged for the press to cover Josh's reunion with his old comrades in arms. The result graphically illustrated the extent of American losses, which was not the intended effect the major desired. Capt. Dennis Frye was now Major Frye, now commanded the 1/185 Armor Battalion. Lt. Colonel Owens and the other three company commanders were all missing or dead. Sgt. Hernandez commanded the 1st Platoon, C Company of the 1/185th. Luis Hernandez teased Josh about Josh outranking him now. Hernandez was a twenty-six year old reservist who had five years active service as well as another year in the guard. Sgt. Hernandez's driver, Corporal Brandon Skaggs, was the only other member of the 1st Platoon that Josh knew. Josh talked with Major Frye, Sgt. Hernandez and Corporal Skaggs for about thirty minutes before the reunion press conference.

----oooOooo----

Molly continued with the speaking tour until the middle of April. Major Van Dyke, Josh and Molly made no secret of their marriage. Still, there was an undercurrent of whispering about the unexpectedly early pregnancy that didn't help the speaking tour at all. Molly headed back to Redding to stay with her father and brother until the baby's birth.

Major Van Dyke pared the speaking schedule down so Josh got to spend about a week a month in Redding with his wife, father-in-law and brother-in-law. Mike Lawrence slowly grew to respect and finally like Josh as he saw how the man doted on his daughter.

The PR tour officially came to an end about a week before Molly's due date. Thankfully the major didn't push the due date any more. Josh touched down in Redding on August 22nd. Molly went into labor twelve hours later. She delivered a healthy, 7 lb. 2 oz. daughter at 6:34 AM on August 23, 2014. Josh and Molly named their daughter Sandra Michelle Warner, after her deceased grandmother. Josh received two weeks leave from Major Van Dyke so he could have time to get to know his wife and daughter better.

----oooOooo----

Friday, September 6, 2014 – Andrews Air Force Base, Outside Washington D. C.

The presidential helicopter met their jet when the PR group, including Josh and Molly, landed. It whisked them straight over the city and deposited them on the lawn of the White House. Two Marines in full dress blues guided the party across the lawn and into the White House. Josh's dress uniform sparkled from the attention it received from Major Van Dyke's assistants. Molly wore a tastefully long dress that managed hide that fact that she was now a mom who had given birth two weeks earlier and emphasized her youth and natural beauty.

A presidential aide briefed Josh, Molly and the major on the medal ceremony. The president would have a few remarks, call Josh and Molly forward and then present the medals. Josh and Molly were relieved when they heard they would not need to speak at the ceremony.

An aide conducted them to a hallway outside the East Room, where the press was waiting for them. Josh and Molly nearly froze as the president smiled and shook their hands before he entered the East Room.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Sgt. Warner and Mrs. Warner," the president said. "I am so glad they were able to mesh your schedule with mine so I could present this award personally."

"It is an honor, sir," Josh replied.

"It is, sir," Molly echoed. The president gave the couple another smile before disappearing into the East Room. Camera flashes and calls from the reporters for the president's attention filtered out into the hallway while they waited for their cue. They heard the president's press secretary call for quiet before he introduced the president.

"It is my distinct honor and pleasure to present two awards to two young people who represent the best our youth has to offer our country in this, our time of need. Please give a big welcome to Sergeant Joshua D. and Mrs. Molly Warner, the two, intrepid young people who trekked out of the Battle of Sedro-Woolley to safety in Idaho."

Josh and Molly stepped into the East Room. The camera lights blazed at their eyes and camera flashes popped as they walked to the podium beside the president.

"I know everyone watching tonight has heard the story of how these two escaped the maelstrom of battle at Sedro-Woolley and spent six weeks trekking through the mountains to safety in Idaho. Their courage and perseverance is a beacon guiding today's young men and women and demonstrating how they must act if we are to defeat the scourge of the Asian Alliance trying to destroy the Western World.

"Faced with certain death or capture by the Chinese, Sgt. Warner made a third way for himself and his future wife, Mrs. Molly Warner. They hiked through snow, cold and high peaks of the Cascade Mountains. They did more than simply persevere through these tribulations. They did their duty to their country. Sgt. Warner's direct actions brought about the deaths of roughly 800 Chinese paratroopers bent on conquering north central Washington State.

"I have heard you say on Leno, Sixty Minutes, Letterman and other interview shows, that you were simply doing your duty. I agree – to an extent. At a time and place where many would simply be satisfied with surviving brutal conditions, you did your duty. You had the means to affect the war – and you used them. You DID your DUTY!"

"It is a great honor for me to bestow on Sergeant First Class Joshua A. Warner, the Soldier's Medal for service and valor at great personal hazard," the president said. Josh stepped forward and leaned his head down as the president slipped the ribbon with the medal over his head. Blinding camera

flashes punctuated the climax of the ceremony. Josh couldn't see the pride on his parents' or siblings' faces as they watched the ceremony.

The president stepped away from the microphone as he shook Josh's hand again. "You are a true inspiration to your generation. Thank you, sergeant, for all that you have done." The president stepped back to the microphone and continued.

"Mrs. Warner... Molly, you earned this honor every bit as much as your husband. The generals informed me that I cannot award a Soldiers Medal to a civilian. However, I can award you the highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, for your actions ten months ago. On behalf of the United States of America and the Western Hemispheric Defense Alliance, I award you this medal."

Molly stepped forward and bowed her head as the president slipped the ribbon over her neck. Molly provided a radiant smile to the press corps as they photographed and recorded video of the ceremony. Molly stepped back beside Josh as the applause died away. Her hand found Josh's automatically.

The president concluded the ceremony by announcing, "I hope and I believe that these two young people will serve as an inspiration to millions of young people throughout the Western World through their demonstration of courage, perseverance and attention to duty until we defeat the Asian Alliance and send them back to their homelands where they belong."

Epilogue

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The awards ceremony at the White House concluded the national PR tour for Josh and Molly. Josh never returned to duty with the 41st Division. He was assigned to work at the NorthCom Joint Survival and Evasion School in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas in central California. Josh spent the remainder of the war teaching soon-to-be pilots the skills he learned saving his and Molly's lives at the beginning of the war.

Josh's dad, Bob Warner continued managing the pharmacy in McKinleyville, California throughout the war. Ashley volunteered to become a nurse six months after she graduated from high school. Ashley served in a variety of close-to-the line and more distant hospitals and surgical centers during the war. She continued in nursing after the end of World War III.

Jake Warner continued high school with mediocre grades for the next three years. He received his draft notice two weeks after graduation. The ASVAB test demonstrated Jake's high intelligence, so he was assigned to the army as a helicopter pilot.

Jake did his survival and evasion at the school Josh was assigned to. He did not have his brother as an instructor. Jake befriended a young Air Force pilot during training, Mark Whiting. Jake happily shared his outdoors knowledge as he and Mark prepared for their final exam at the school. They were dropped off in the middle of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and given a week to find their way back to base using nothing but the contents of an aircraft emergency kit. Jake and Mark both passed.

He served his two years of front-line duty flying a close support helicopter supporting armor and armored cavalry operations in Idaho and eastern Washington State. He finished the war as an instructor pilot.

Mike Lawrence, Jr. was drafted a week after Jake Warner. Mike had shattered his leg playing goalie on his high school soccer team when he was in eleventh grade. He did not pass the physical. Mike Jr. spent the duration of the war working for his grandfather at the Lawrence Industries plant, which had been relocated to Tucson, Arizona at the beginning of the war.

Mike Lawrence Sr. stayed with Verizon at their Redding office for the remainder of the war. He remarried about six years after the death of his first wife, Sandra. Jake and Molly agree that their step-mom, Kimberly, is a good lady and just what their dad needed to be happy.

Molly and Josh moved into base housing when Josh took up his assignment at NCJSE (North Com Joint Survival and Evasion School). Molly took some accounting and secretarial courses as she raised sweet little Sandra ("Sandy" to all who fell for the cute preschooler). Molly ended up working at the NCJSE office as a civilian administrative assistant for the rest of the war. Josh, Molly and Sandy were blessed with an addition to their family, Cody Andrew Warner, three years after they moved to the NCJSE.

The Warners and the Lawrences were blessed to survive World War III as relatively unscathed as they did. Sandra Lawrence was the only death suffered by the two families during the conflict. Most families lost more. The fall of Beijing nearly ten years after the Battle of Sedro-Woolley was an immense relief to Josh and Molly. Sandy and Cody would not face conscription and possible death in the war. Josh retired from the military as a master sergeant when he moved his family back to coastal Washington State, where they would rebuild their home and lives at peace... at last.

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The End

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I would like to thank Al Steiner for allowing me to play in his "A Perfect World/Greenies" backyard. Obviously this story was inspired by Al's "North of the River." I enjoyed that story when I first read it and wished to know more about how it ended. "A Reluctant Hero" is the result of my imagining where that story could have gone.

I want to thank CouldBeWorse for helping me edit this story. It is a stronger story thanks to his efforts. Any remaining errors are mine.

Jake Warner and Mark Whiting maintained their friendship through the war. Mark prevailed on Jake to try Orbital Mechanics in college at the end of the war. Are there Warners on Mars three hundred years in the future? Time and inspiration may tell, if I am moved to write another story in Al's wonderful Greenies universe.