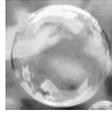




EXCHANGE

Dale R. Cozort

Exchange



Chapter One

THE PRELUDE TO the Exchange announced itself with a gust of ionized air, a shift of electrical charges that made Sharon Mack's skin tingle. Eleven fifty-eight. Two minutes early by Sharon's watch. Hot sunlight poured from a cloudless sky onto strip-mall parking lots running along both sides of Highway 25 on the outskirts of Rockport, Illinois. Under the supervision of surveyors, a team of hastily drafted civilians stretched yellow and black warning tape at the boundary of the Exchange Zone—the EZ. A curved line of white stakes stretched left and right—marking the calculated fringe of Bear Country.

Sharon stretched her back and wiped perspiration from her forehead before returning to her assigned task—keeping the clueless from wandering under high-tension power lines. Overhead a crew worked on the wiring, freeing cables and dropping them to the ground. It was better to drop the lines in a controlled manner before they were cut by the Exchange than chance them snapping afterward. A trickle of sweat ran into her eyes. She blinked at the sting.

Marines, rifles at the ready, patrolled the inside edge of the EZ. Illinois State Police had jurisdiction outside; tan-clad officers watched over a work group digging up a natural gas pipeline to seal the end. A stream of trucks carrying workers, equipment, and additional Marines rumbled along the four-lane highway into the EZ.

Dale R. Cozort

In the opposite direction, bumper-to-bumper traffic jammed the highway—refugees fleeing Rockport. Sharon glanced at the cars and hoped Bethany was in one of them. Her stomach knotted.

Bethany. Her daughter. Seven years old.

The sky rumbled. As she watched, state troopers stopped the flow of cars.

Someone behind her said, “Any minute now.”

The troopers ushered cars and civilian workers out of the interface zone.

A Marine shouted, “Look out!”

An oversized, iridescent-blue pickup truck pulled out of the stalled traffic and raced on the shoulder of the highway, making a desperate run. A state patrol car moved to cut it off, but the truck slewed over the shoulder and—with clumps of dirt and grass flying—roared toward the EZ. It turned toward Sharon’s work party. The civilians scrambled to get out of the way, dropping their shovels and rakes. The truck’s engine growled. It headed straight toward Sharon, moving too fast to evade before swerving at the last second. She glimpsed the driver and passengers—a half-dozen, scruffy-looking men.

The truck rolled over an abandoned rake. A front tire exploded. The driver fought the steering wheel. The truck, out of control, careened toward the EZ.

At 12:01 Sharon heard thunder from the clear June sky. The sun stood directly overhead. Surrounding it, the sky was clear, but only in a perfect, off-center blue circle stretching to the horizon. From outside the circle, dark, ominous clouds moved in quickly. The perfection of the circle lasted only a few seconds before the edges blurred as the air from the timelines mixed. Sharon felt a cool wind and raindrops on her face.

Outside the EZ, the strip mall had disappeared—replaced by a low hill covered with prairie grass and patchy clumps of trees. The cab of the pickup truck was gone. Momentum kept the amputated truck bed going—its front

Exchange

edge plowed thick grass and dirt. It crashed into a tree and flipped, dumping passengers into the brush.

Too much happened at once for Sharon to grasp it all. The highway now abruptly ended in a grove of trees. A massive elm, sheared in half, stood where the shoulder had been. Its other half was gone, carried with the chunk of Bear Country that was now part of the old world. The half-tree creaked and leaned before the trunk splintered and it fell. Marines scrambled to get out of the way as branches crashed onto the hood of their Humvee. A pizza place at the end of the strip mall was missing a wall. Its roof tilted, sagged, then collapsed.

Sharon rushed toward the mangled truck, approaching a stocky, prematurely gray-haired man in a form-fitting T-shirt who brushed leaves from his body. Angry, he pointed at her. A tattoo of a rifle covered his sculpted forearm.

“Weren’t for you, we woulda’ made it.”

Sharon stared at him, bewildered.

“What?” she said.

One of the other guys from the truck yelled, “It’s a bear!”

Sharon gasped. The approaching animal was longer than the truck bed and almost as tall at the shoulders, like a bear, but leaner. Its eyes held a feral, predatory look. One of the men from the truck ran when the bear was still thirty yards away. Sharon barely had time to blink before the bear covered those yards and casually swatted him with an oversized paw. The man’s body cartwheeled.

A Marine Humvee raced toward the bear with lights flashing and horn blaring. The massive animal stood on its hind legs and roared. The men from the wrecked truck staggered to their feet and circled, moving slowly, trying to get behind the Humvee without drawing the bear’s attention. Several limped; two dragged the dead weight of an unconscious man.

Dale R. Cozort

With arrogant swagger, the bear approached. Running toward the scene, three Marines fired their weapons, startling the bear. It stopped, glared down at the humans, and snorted—before turning and ambling away.

Sharon took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly.

And that's why they call it Bear Country.

She stood for a moment, catching her breath and enjoying the cool breeze. That earned a glare from a barrel-shaped, female Marine standing guard beside her. *Palmer*, her name patch said.

“Best stand back in case one of the sparkies drops a wrench or something, ma’am,” Palmer said, gesturing at the workers descending from the suspension tower. The polite words had the tone of an order.

“I’m a computer jockey, not a construction worker,” Sharon said as she moved away from the pylon. When martial law was imposed and the call, backed by armed Marines and State Police, came for *volunteers*, they gave her no time to change into work clothes or find gloves. She’d been pounding stakes; she lifted sore hands and winced at the blister on her thumb. Then she brushed sand off her gray dress slacks and white blouse, now stained with sweat and dirt. The calculations gave them only three hours of warning, three hours to mobilize and prepare for the Exchange.

Time. Not near enough.

She glanced back at the Marine.

“Could you handle that bear if it kept coming?”

Palmer grunted. “It moves, I shoot it.”

“And if it keeps coming? It would take a cannon to kill one of those things. And, what if we’re attacked by some other ice-age animal on steroids?” Palmer said nothing. “And that’s not all of it,” Sharon continued. “Can you shoot a bug, a bat smaller than a grasshopper, or a virus? That’s what they’re really afraid of. If Bear Country animals get loose back in the world and start breeding or a disease comes back with us—”

Exchange

Gunshots. A hundred yards away.

The survey crew gawked in the direction of the shots. Raindrops splattered on dirt, pavement and grass. Wind stirred the trees. Three helicopters, painted with green and brown camouflage, arced low. Sharon moved under a tree to get out of the drizzle.

A lumbering cargo helicopter, engine screaming, swooped in and landed close enough that she felt the downwash from the rotors. Men and women in camouflage uniforms swarmed it—unloading bundles of twelve-foot fence posts and barbed wire.

Sharon stretched the protesting muscles of her lower back and stared out into Bear Country.

“Did you ever think you’d be standing twenty feet from another world?” Sharon said. Palmer ignored her. “Not really another world, I guess, but a different version of ours. Here, our ancestors died out or never developed. Too much competition? Killed off by climate or disease?”

Palmer looked bored.

“You already knew that? Maybe you don’t care...” Sharon noticed most of the stakes marking the EZ were gone. “The eggheads guessed wrong by two minutes and by a good three feet. That’s not reassuring.”

Palmer grunted. “If that’s the worst screw-up we run into, I won’t complain. Those guys in the truck? Friends of yours?”

“No. Never seen them before.”

“You know they’re AKs?”

“Aryan Kings? The street gang?”

“That’s what the tattoos said. And more are coming.”

A bright blue pickup identical to the amputated one pulled up. The driver, wearing a radio earpiece, sharp chinos, a form-fitting black T, and reflective sunglasses got out. He towered over Sharon.

Dale R. Cozort

“Getting a good look at you. There are a hundred cops around. There won’t always be.” He took out a cell phone and clicked her picture. “Our brothers would have made it if you weren’t in the way.”

Sharon glared at the Marine.

“Are you just going to stand there?”

Palmer pointed her rifle. “Shut up and hit the dirt.”

“What?”

“Down! Now!”

Sharon hesitated before going down on one knee. Palmer’s rifle barked. Sharon, open-mouthed, stared at the Marine, then glanced back at Bear Country. Dozens of long-legged, green-furred monkeys boiled out of the grass on the far side of the firebreak. They ran so fast they looked like a movie playing in fast-forward.

Palmer yelled, “Down! Flat! You’re in my line of fire!”

A monkey lunged before Sharon could get the rest of the way down. She kicked at it, missed, and sprawled in the grass. She rolled and came up in a fighting stance. The AK from the pickup was on one knee with a stunned expression on his face. His cell phone lay on the ground by Sharon’s foot; she kicked it into the weeds. A second monkey raced in and hit Palmer in the face with a rock. Palmer dropped her rifle, swayed for a second, then fell to her knees with hands covering her face. Blood seeped through her fingers. Most of the pack was already past. They raced into the thick brush—Sharon’s eyes had trouble tracking them once they hit the weeds.

A monkey at the rear of the pack skidded to a stop, then darted back and grabbed the Marine’s rifle. Sharon jumped forward to seize the barrel end. She lifted the rifle, with the monkey still clinging to it, and slammed the animal into the ground. It let go and staggered a few steps.

Sharon smashed the rifle butt into the monkey’s head. The impact knocked it off its feet. Moving in drunken slow motion, the animal tried to get up. She hit it again. It stopped

Exchange

moving. She started another swing, but someone grabbed the rifle.

“That’s enough, ma’am. We’ll take it from here.”

Sharon turned to face a tall, well-proportioned blonde in a well-tailored, light-green dress. A soldier sprinted past Sharon and draped a net over the monkey. The tall woman released the rifle butt. With intelligent brown eyes, she studied Sharon.

“Did any get past?”

Sharon’s adrenaline rush faded. She felt weak and short of breath.

“Yeah, dozens.”

The blonde pulled out a radio.

“Monkeys in sector three. Get choppers and trackers over here ASAP.” She put the radio away. “Marine butt will fry over this. They had three hours to set up a perimeter, but the fence is still in pieces. So much for operational readiness.”

Sharon strode over to Palmer, who sat on a tuft of grass with her hands on her face.

“Are you okay?” Sharon asked.

“Yeah. Broke my nose, but I’ll be fine.”

Sharon stared, realized Palmer was serious, and shook her head.

Lady Marines are tough.

The blonde strolled over and lifted Palmer’s hand.

“Get that cleaned up and bandaged, Marine. Make sure you tell the medic you got up close and personal with an LGM.”

Palmer touched her nose gingerly with her bloody fingers.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sharon watched Palmer amble off. She turned to the blonde.

“Are you in her chain of command?”

“I *am* her chain of command,” the woman said.

The AK got up. “Where’s my cell phone?”

Dale R. Cozort

Sharon stared at him. “Who cares? Do you know where you are? Do you know what we’ll be going through for the next two weeks?”

“You screwed with us. Don’t think this is over.”

The blonde grimaced. “Whatever it was, yeah, it’s over. You’ll spend the next two weeks piloting a shovel.” She gestured at Marines surrounding the truck and pointed to the gang members. “Get these bangers doing something useful.”

As the Marines escorted the men away, the blonde turned to Sharon.

“Someone you know?”

“Never seen them before today. I didn’t do anything to them. Why’d they come after me like that?”

“Because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Take some free advice—steer clear of them. You handled the LGM pretty well. Martial arts?”

“Some. LGM?”

“Little Green Monkey. Jump on a truck and get to the shelter before curfew.”

“I want to make sure my daughter got out.”

“How old is she?”

“Seven, but she’s...”

“What?”

“She has issues. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Okay. Special needs or not, if she’s seven they weren’t supposed to draft you. Is there anyone you can call? Husband? Boyfriend? Family?”

“Ex-husband—restraining order. The sitter was supposed to gather my daughter’s things and get her out. The soldiers wouldn’t listen. They gave me a choice of work crew or bullet.”

The woman shrugged. “They screwed up. Sorry. They were in a hurry. Okay, you’ve done your part. We have enough warm bodies.” She handed Sharon a laminated card. “This will

Exchange

get you through security. See the sergeant, get briefed, then find your daughter.”

The wind tossed Sharon’s hair. She brushed it back from her eyes and strolled over to a burly man in a tan, brown and gray Marine combat utility uniform. He looked up from his clipboard and she showed him the card.

The sergeant glanced at it.

“Get-out-of-jail-free card? Good for you. Ground rules: Stay in Rockport. Stay away from the EZ. You have an hour until curfew. Go home. Lock your doors. Close the shutters if you have them. Stay there. If you’re caught driving after curfew your vehicle will be confiscated. Cell phones will work as long as the cell tower batteries hold up—a few days at most. Don’t waste power trying to call the old world. It’s not there. You can’t recharge your phone, so emergencies only. Beyond generators running key facilities, there is no electricity. You may or may not have running water. Avoid the Bear Country animals. Even the small ones have teeth, claws, and sometimes venom.”

Sharon tried not to think about Bethany—hiding her impatience as the sergeant went through his list.

Come on! Come on! I have a daughter to check on!

Finally, he said, “Exchanges average two weeks. We’ll have emergency medical care, food, and water at city hall, the hospital, and the high school. Use your food and drink at home first. Questions?”

“No.”

“Any medical problems I should know about?”

“No.”

“Three hours before the Exchange ends we’ll know it’s coming. You’ll hear a pulsed siren. When you hear that siren, report to the high school for evacuation into quarantine facilities. Make sure you have your important papers with you. Got it?”

“Yes.”

Dale R. Cozort

The sergeant handed her a printed list of the rules.

“One hour. When you hear the sirens, that’s curfew. The patrols won’t mess around. If you’re out, you’ll be shot. Beat it.”

Workers piled onto flatbed trucks. Sharon showed her card to a driver.

“My house is on Eleventh Street. It’s on the way if you’re headed toward town. Will you drop me?”

The driver handed the card back.

“These cards are hard to come by. You know Anna Morgan?”

“Who’s Anna Morgan?”

The driver studied Sharon’s face for a moment.

“I’ll drop you. Jump in back.”

The truck bed was already crowded, but a young man wearing a NASCAR cap helped her up. Two soldiers stretched a chain to hold them in. A tap on the truck’s side told the driver they were ready. The vehicle started with a gassy cloud of diesel and heaved into motion.

Sharon smiled at the NASCAR man. “Thanks.”

He shrugged.

The truck weaved through parked equipment, workers, and soldiers directing traffic and rumbled onto Highway 25. At the exit to Eleventh Street, the driver pulled to the shoulder. Sharon slipped under the chain and jumped down. The truck lurched back into motion. The young man tipped his cap and grinned, and Sharon raised her hand in reply. She jogged up the off ramp—glanced at her watch. Twenty minutes until curfew. Time enough. She turned the corner by her house.

Oh, no.

Mary’s car was still in the driveway.

Why didn’t she leave?

Sharon vacillated between relief at not being separated from Bethany for two weeks and fury at Mary for not getting her daughter out of the danger zone.

Exchange

She climbed the steps and pushed the door open.

The door abruptly jerked from her hand. Her ex-husband, Anthony, grinned.

“Hi, honey.”

Sharon almost got her arm up in time to block the Early Times whiskey bottle he swung at her head.



Chapter Two

A DOG HOWLED.

The howl went on and on, mixed with yaps, deep-throated barks and a whoofing noise that sounded almost human. Sharon thought vaguely about throwing something at the dog, but her head throbbed whenever she moved. It throbbed when the dog howled too, and even when it was silent, but not as much.

She toyed with the idea of getting up and finding an aspirin. *Maybe Bethany can*—“Bethany!” Her mind snapped into focus, and she opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor of her living room. The room was dark except for the last sunlight of the day, which cast a weak pool of fading daylight in front of the partly open door. The late evening sun reflected off towering clouds, turning the sky red.

Sharon’s hands were tied behind her back. She tried to move and found that her legs were tied too. Spots formed in front of her eyes as she raised her head and scanned the room. It was empty of people. The whoofing sound she had heard earlier was coming from the spare bedroom. The only sound in the living room was a faint hissing of static from a battery-powered radio.

Sharon managed to sit up. She groaned as pain radiated out from her jaw and down from the top of her head. She sagged back against the wall and waited for the worst of the pain to subside. The dog howled again and she finally

Exchange

recognized the sound: her neighbors to the west chained their mixed-breed—a German Shepherd head and body on stumpy Dachshund legs—in their back yard when they went to work.

And they didn't come back for it. Nice people.

Sharon jumped as the radio suddenly came to life with the DJ saying, “This is Bill Simkin from WGNB radio. We’re back on the air thanks to an emergency generator loaned to us by the United States Marine Corps. We’ll be broadcasting twenty minutes of emergency information three times a day for the next two weeks, until the Exchange reverses and we rejoin The World. In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re now in another reality—totally isolated from the rest of humanity, except possibly for several hundred convicts who escaped when their maximum security prison went over in an Exchange years ago.”

Sharon brought her knees up and braced her back against the wall, then lifted her hips and wrestled her hands in front of her. She half listened to the DJ as she waited for the throbbing in her head to subside.

“—tell our listeners when and where the first Exchange happened, Tracy?”

“The first Exchange was five years ago on New Zealand’s North Island,” a female voice, apparently Tracy, said. “That’s actually one of the best places it could have happened. New Zealand is one of the most geographically isolated large land masses on earth, so the Bear Country animals weren’t able to spread far, even though we didn’t have a response ready. Also, the Bear Country animals on New Zealand were harmless—flightless birds and primitive rat-sized mammals. There have been over two hundred Exchanges since then and we haven’t always been that lucky.”

Sharon looked out the door at her neighborhood. It appeared unchanged—with neatly mowed lawns in front of ranch-style brick houses on a curving street. Cars still sat in front of many of the garages. A basketball nestled in the gutter

Dale R. Cozort

at the end of one of the driveways, straight down from a basketball hoop mounted on the garage. There was no movement on the street; no joggers, nobody walking their dog, nobody driving to the grocery store. And no sound other than the dog howling and the radio.

The DJ was saying, "A lot of people expected glaciers. Can you explain why we don't see that?"

"We didn't go back in time to the ice age. We went sideways into another reality. Animals like mammoths and sabertooths survived in Bear Country. They didn't back in The World. The climates are pretty much the same."

Sharon brought her wrists up to her face, studied the ropes in the fading light and swore at the tidy knots her ex-husband had tied.

Why didn't you do a half-assed job on this like you do on everything else?

She went to work on the ropes with her teeth. That set her jaw to throbbing even more.

On the radio, Tracy said, "—big mystery of Bear Country is what you call the weird stuff. The bats are the weirdest, but around twenty percent of the large animals in Bear Country are in the wrong place. There are kangaroos in North America. There are monkeys from Africa in North and South America. The weird stuff's been here millions of years, though, so there's nothing exactly like it in our timeline. The extra competition gives Bear Country animals their edge."

"How did animals get from Africa and Australia to North America?"

Tracy laughed. "That's the million-dollar question. It doesn't seem possible since Bear Country continents are in the same places ours are."

The light through the door faded as Sharon worked at the knot. She paused only when the pain in her jaw brought tears and gritted teeth.

Exchange

On the radio, the DJ asked, “If you went out into Bear Country, what would you be most afraid of?”

“Don’t go out there,” Tracy said. “It’s against the law. And, of course, it’s just plain dumb.”

“But what is the most dangerous animal in Bear Country?”

“Try the bears,” Sharon said. The whoofing sound from the bedroom got louder. “Bethany?” The sound stopped. “Mary?” It started again. The dog had stopped howling for a while. Now it started again too.

“—and there are amber wolves, cheetahs, plus the tough plant-eaters like Mastodons and the big kangaroos.”

“I don’t think of kangaroos in the same danger class as sabertooths.”

“These are. Don’t mess with them.”

“There are a lot of things we don’t want to mess with in Bear Country.”

“That’s why we quarantine Exchange Zones,” Tracy said. “Bear Country animals are tougher than ours. They would take over if they got loose in The World, especially the little seed-eater bats. Think rabbits in Australia.”

Sharon tried to get her fingers around so she could get at the knots. She glanced down at her dress pants. No sign of them having been disturbed. *Which means I’ll kill him fast and without a whole lot of pain.* She looked for something to help pull the ropes off. The cover of her living room computer was off as usual, with a couple of memory sticks sitting beside it, waiting for her to swap them in. She couldn’t remember if she left a screwdriver over there. The computer was silent, of course.

The radio broadcast ended and the whole house was quiet for a time, uncomfortably quiet. She found herself almost hoping the dog would howl. The huffing from the bedroom came again. *What is that? Bethany?* She called her daughter’s name out loud.

Dale R. Cozort

The huffing sound came and then the dog's howl. "Save your breath, will you?" *Or keep howling until someone comes to take care of you and maybe they'll find me.* She tried to trace the knots on her wrists in the fading light. She bit a knot and pulled at it, pain radiating from the bruise on her jaw.

She thought about who might come by and help her. Her sister was still in Texas. Her parents would have been evacuated along with the rest of the people in the retirement community at the edge of town. *They'll spend the next two weeks worrying about their granddaughter—and maybe thinking about their prodigal daughter a time or two. Just long enough to say how like me it was to not get her out, to not make sure she's safe.*

And still I miss them. Pathetic. She had a flash of her dad leaning on his cane and peering down at her. "Well, this is what you get when you marry a nice car, a nice head of hair, and the paranoid nutcase who came with them." *And then he would say something about Anthony causing Bethany to be the way she is.*

A faint sound from outside caught her ear. A car. She turned, half expecting to see her dad's meticulously clean and polished black Crown Victoria pulling into the driveway. Instead, she watched a Humvee in camouflage paint go by, moving slowly, but gone before she could react. *No other cars moving. After curfew—no traffic at all.*

Shadows pooled in the street and lawns outside the open door. She turned so she could keep an eye on the yard while still pulling at the ropes with her teeth. The dog howled again, but the howl choked off abruptly. The street and yard suddenly seemed much darker. She waited for the howling to start again, pulling at the knots more frantically in the dying light as the silence lingered.

The knot finally loosened a little. As she tore at the ropes, she heard a faint sound from the street, a scraping that teased the edge of her hearing. It eased away as she focused on it, then came a little louder as she went back to tearing at the knot. *Still no sound from the dog.*

Exchange

Sharon felt the muscles in her arms and legs tense and her heart raced. She took a deep cleansing breath and let it out slowly, willing her muscles to relax. That helped a little, but she tore at the rope even harder. It slipped out from between her teeth. *Shit*. She fumbled for the strand in the near total darkness.

The sound from the sidewalk teased her ears again and a light dazzled her.

“Who’s there?” It was a male voice, deep and strong.

“I’m in my own house,” Sharon said. “Who are you?”

The sound was closer this time. Sharon tried to see past the light, but could only make out a low squat shadow, not much more than waist high. The shadow seemed far too short for the voice. The voice came again, saying, “Computer lady; I recognize you now. What are you doing on the floor and why is your door open?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re in my neighborhood. That makes you my business.”

“Who are you?”

“You alone? That nutcase of an ex-husband still hanging around?”

“Don’t know as you need to know that.”

The figure behind the flashlight got closer. “You’re tied up. Did Anthony crawl out of his whiskey bottle and do something to you?”

“He brought the whiskey bottle with him. Who are you?” The light neared the bottom of her steps and Sharon tensed, ready to slam her side against the door to shut it.

“Neighborhood watch, what’s left of it. I can’t help you with the ropes.”

“I’ll get them.” Sharon got a better look at the man behind the flashlight. “You can’t because you’re in a wheelchair and you can’t get up the steps. You’re the guy who sits at the

Dale R. Cozort

corner at rush hour.” *The old guy who creeps me out.* She recognized the silhouette of a shotgun in the man’s wheelchair.

“Name’s Elroy Campbell. Intended to get over and let the dog out but it took a while to get the shotgun from where I hid it so my daughter wouldn’t find it. Yeah, she’s always here to tell me what I can’t do, but did she come get me when the going got tough? Nope. Old coot might have slowed her down. Young healthy thing with a big, strapping husband and no kids. But *she* got out—and left me here. Well, I *can* handle things myself, no thanks to her.”

“Can you get the light out of my eyes? Actually it would help if you turned it on the ropes.”

“I’d have told her to take a hike if she had come, but she should’ve come anyway.”

Sharon found the strand she had been working on and got it in her teeth again. Her jaw still throbbed, but she pushed the pain to the back of her mind.

“Haven’t heard from that dog lately.” Elroy flashed his light toward the side of the house. “Thought I saw something move back there. I hope the dog just went to sleep. I’m not counting on it though.”

Sharon kept pulling on the ropes.

“So Anthony hit you and tied you up?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were some big martial arts guru.”

“Black belt,” she mumbled through the rope. “Which means I almost got my hand up instead of standing there with my mouth open.”

“Almost doesn’t cut it on blocking whiskey bottles. Want me to call the Marines?”

“I can handle it.”

“Really? How long have you been laying there?”

Hours at least. Too many. Sharon didn’t say anything, but she tore at the rope with renewed vigor. The knot loosened a bit more.

Exchange

“He took your daughter. I saw them leave.”

“I know. Will you shut up and let me get these knots?”

“Marines won’t do anything anyway. Domestic dispute. Custody battle. They don’t have time to care, even if you tell them he’s taking her to Sister West.”

“He isn’t. They kicked him out. Shut up.”

“Snippy. You realize I used to be a cop.”

“I don’t care. Shut up.”

“Real snippy. Maybe I shouldn’t toss you my pocket knife.”

Sharon glared at the old man. “You haven’t even started to see snippy. Give me the knife.”

Even with the knife it wasn’t easy to get the ropes off with her hands tied. Sharon tried to get up after she got the last rope off and fell against the wall. She leaned there until the worst of the dizziness passed, then looked into the flashlight beam. “Thanks. Be back in a minute.”

She found a flashlight and ran to the bedroom. “Bethany!” She was disappointed but not surprised to see the chubby, sixty-something face of her babysitter, Mary, who was tied up and gagged on the bed. “Where’s Bethany?”

Mary shook her head and made the whoofing sound Sharon heard earlier. Sharon yanked the gag out. “What happened?”

“Your husband—”

“Ex-husband. Where’d he take her?”

“I don’t know.”

Sharon untied the woman and led her to the living room. Elroy was still sitting in front of the porch. “I was wondering what happened to your babysitter. If your husband didn’t head straight to Sister West and her bunch of nutjobs, he’s probably at that fried-out trailer his dad used to own north of town. He’ll probably have his brothers with him.”

“How do you know about the trailer?”

Dale R. Cozort

“I used to be a cop,” Elroy said. “Your daughter has the face of an angel but she has some issues. You need to get her back before Anthony and company decide to give her an exorcism.”

“They—” Sharon stopped. *Might actually do something that crazy. Anthony can't admit it was probably in his genes. It has to be something I did or the government did or the big corporations did.*

“He'll get around to blaming the devil eventually,” Elroy said. “All she'd have to do is say something and have it come true, like—”

“Shut up.”

“Babysitter told me she said *crash* a good ten seconds before two cars ran into each other a while back.”

Sharon glared back at Mary. “Somebody talks too much. She's not psychic or possessed. She sees details and puts them together.”

“I know. She's a Dustin Hoffman.”

“Huh?”

“Rain Man—or Rain Girl, I suppose. Idiot savant. Probably autistic and OCD too. I know that and you know that. I'm not sure your ex-hubby accepts that.”

Sharon didn't respond. Elroy turned his flashlight off. “Batteries won't last forever.”

The beam from Sharon's flashlight seemed lost as she directed it into the dark street. The houses on her block blended into the darkness. No porch lights. No lights in the windows. Not even a flickering candle. Sharon said, “I wonder why the dog stopped barking.”

Sharon sat in her chair in the dark living room and listened to Mary snore in the guest bedroom. She held her car keys loosely in her hand. *I have to wait. Marines are on hair trigger tonight. No point in getting shot.* Logic didn't help her fall asleep. *Bethany with him, with his temper always a glance or a word away from exploding, especially after a few drinks.* The thought drove away sleep and

Exchange

kept it away. Sharon turned the radio up, hoping that the white noise of the static would help. It didn't. Neither did pacing the darkened room or doing karate katas.

The night passed, and Sharon must have slept, because the radio came to blaring life and she woke with her head and her jaw aching.

The DJ said, "If you're listening to this you made it through the night. Curfew is lifted until eight o'clock tonight. Do not use your car unnecessarily; you won't be able to get more gas. Do not use your cell phone unnecessarily; that's your lifeline in case of an emergency. Do call authorities if you see any unfamiliar animals. Do not approach any animal you see, familiar or unfamiliar."

Sharon thought about the dog. She went to the back yard and leaned over the fence. Nothing. The chain went from the stake out into the grass, but the dog was nowhere in the yard.

As she stood by the fence, Elroy wheeled his chair through the gate. "It's broken. I don't think that little dog is strong enough to do that."

Sharon looked at her neighbor closely for the first time. He appeared to be in his seventies, with broad shoulders and heavy arm muscles but with a big belly and spindly legs. His face was deeply but pleasantly lined, as if he'd spent a lot of time smiling. He bent down as far as he could in the wheelchair. "Yep. Snapped off clean. Not stretched. No rust."

"Any blood?"

"Nope. More than one type of paw print though. No sign of a fight. I'm guessing a big cat—panther-sized at least—got annoyed by the yapping. If that's what happened, at least it was quick."

"And I was lying there helpless, thanks to my ex-husband. One more score to settle with him. Too bad about the dog."

Dale R. Cozort

“Yeah, even if he was annoying. So there’s probably something loose around here already, in spite of the Marines. Big predators are curious and they cover a lot of territory. Watch yourself.”

“I won’t be here. I’m going. I shouldn’t have wasted time looking for the dog.”

Elroy nodded. “You were curious. What are you going to do about your daughter?”

“Get her back.”

“I got that part. How?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, you might want to figure that out. Your hus—”

“Ex-husband.”

“Whatever. He’s bad enough. Sister West and her crew are in a whole different class. Go up against them and you’ll end up dead, or brainwashed and selling flowers in some airport with your head shaved.”

Sharon walked to her back door. “Sister West and company kicked him out, so hopefully I won’t have to go up against them. I’m not going to let him take my daughter.”

“He’s already done that. I hear Sister West is pulling out.”

“What? Where could they go?”

“Bear Country.”

“That’s crazy!”

“So are they.”

“How do you know that?”

Elroy gestured back toward his house. “Amateur radio—runs off a solar panel.”

“How would they get past the Marines?”

“The Marines seem to be setting up along the freeway and pretty much ignoring anything north of it. That leaves Sister West and her nutjobs on the outside.”

“Why?”

Exchange

“Who knows? Maybe not enough people to cover it all. You’re going no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

“Yes. After Anthony. And soon. The trailer is just south of the freeway, but Anthony would know how to sneak past the Marines if he wanted to.”

“Got a gun?”

“Yes.”

Elroy rolled his chair over to the neighbor’s side of the fence. “I bet it’s a little lady-gun. A twenty-two. Maybe a thirty-eight. Know how to use it?”

“I have a trophy or two that says so.”

“Marksmanship, huh? That body *and* you know how to shoot a gun; my type of woman. Want to have my baby?”

“No. And you just went from neighbor back to creepy old man.”

“Creepy old man, huh?” Elroy chuckled. “You wouldn’t have thought that thirty years ago.”

“Yeah, because I wasn’t born then.”

“Well, I guess you told me.” Elroy smiled up at her. “Okay, neighbor. I’m going to loan you a real gun and give you some advice. I’ll meet you at your car.”

Sharon went in and quickly changed into jeans, a long-sleeved shirt and hiking boots. She woke up Mary and sent her home. Elroy rolled up as she rushed to her car. He handed her a couple of gallon jugs full of water. “This isn’t enough if you have to chase him out into Bear Country, but you probably didn’t think to bring any.”

Sharon thought about mentioning the twelve-ounce bottle in her backpack. “Some. Not enough. Thanks.”

He handed her a revolver and a box of ammunition. “It’s a forty-five. Brace yourself to shoot; it kicks.”

“How does this help?”

“It gives you a very small chance of surviving against some of the stuff you may run into out there instead of no

Dale R. Cozort

chance at all. I wish I could give you something better, but this is the best I have. Ever shot anything alive?”

“No.”

“You may freeze the first time. Try to just see a target.”

Sharon put the revolver in the glove compartment.
“Thanks.”

“Here’s the advice part: Don’t go. He has two brothers, both of them just as mean as he is. If you do go, don’t follow him out into Bear Country. If you do go out into Bear Country, don’t get out of your car. If you have to get out of your car, head back to Rockport as quick as those gorgeous legs of yours can carry you.”

“I’ll try.”

“Are you going out of love or are you going out of duty?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course I love my daughter.”

“You probably do, and I admire you for it. The thing is, it’s awfully tough to keep up that love when you can never touch her because of the OCD and you can never carry on a normal conversation with her, and you know that she’ll never be independent, never be able to raise a family.”

“You know way too much about my business.”

“Cop habit. Hard to break. Plus, I think about my neighbors. You’re one of the good ones. If life gives you a bad hand, you play it the best way you can. Your ex-husband gets the same hand and runs away from it every way a man can run.”

“Well, you nailed that.”

“One other thing. There have been maybe two hundred of these Exchanges. As near as I can figure, at least seven of those times the part of our world that went over to Bear Country came back with *no* people and everything that *could* burn, burned. Do you know why?”

Exchange

“I’d never even heard about that happening. Well, there was the one where the convicts got loose and burned down a bunch of stuff.”

Elroy nodded. “That was only fifty miles from here, which is another reason not to follow Anthony out there. The other cases didn’t make the headlines the way you’d think they would. And now, courtesy of ham radio, I know why.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me. Not yet.”

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