

Chapter 1. The Plan

“Tell me about your trip here, Gonzo,” Justin said as they studied the map that was laid out on the table in front of them. The entire security team was assembled in the cafeteria down in the basement. No one said anything, as they gave Justin time to think about what he wanted to do next. They weren't the only ones wondering, Sharon, Dan, and Dr. Shepard joined them.

“I need to know which roads were the safest to travel on,” Justin again spoke.

Justin, like almost everyone else, hadn't been more than thirty miles from the school since he'd joined the people sheltering there. His men had just made the long journey from Pennsylvania recently, and if anyone had an idea what they were going to run into on their mission to save Frank, it was his men.

Frank, their Ham radio friend in Ohio, had contacted them just an hour before to let them know his farm had been overrun by Captain Roberts and the group of men he commanded. Everyone that stayed there had to run, even though they had nowhere to go, and didn't know what to do next. From what Justin had been able to learn, not everyone had gotten away.

Justin, with the help of Parka, who grew up in the area, set up a place to meet Frank in Toledo. At normal times, it would've been a simple day trip there and back, but he knew that wouldn't be the case this time. Justin was thankful neither Parka or Frank actually said where they were meeting, since they'd found out their conversation hadn't been private.

Captain Roberts interrupted while Frank and Justin were talking. Even though Roberts threatened to find the Michigan group and attack the school next, Justin knew they needed to take the risk and rescue Frank and his people. They'd all agreed at the beginning to help those that needed it if they could, and they

planned to bring Frank's people back to their growing community. There was safety in numbers, and Frank's people were all welcome to stay as long as they worked hard and contributed however they could. Justin also knew that Captain Roberts would need to be dealt with, and soon.

Justin was glad that the men from his old Marine unit had contacted him and joined his family. Juan Gonzalez, Tom Gilbert, Cameron Parks and Paul Ziegler, also known as Gonzo, Gilly, Parka, and Ziggy, were some of the best that ever served under Justin's command in special forces.

Thankfully, Justin retired and left the marines not too long before the war began, but he'd given all his men the address where they'd be able to find him if they ever needed anything. Although the majority of his unit hadn't survived, these four men had been on leave, and camping deep in the woods of Pennsylvania when the bombs went off. They'd stayed where they were for weeks before finally deciding to see what happened at their base. It'd been destroyed.

Not knowing what else to do, they remembered the Major telling them where he'd be, and that there was a place for them if they ever needed it. They'd talked it over and turned their trucks toward Michigan. It wasn't an easy trip, and it had taken them weeks of slow travel towards Justin's place before finally making contact with Mason, one of the communities Ham operators. Justin nervously awaited their arrival after talking with Gonzo, but they finally made it to the school, where the survivors there had worked hard to build a new community and welcomed them.

"You want to avoid any big cities," Gonzo answered. "That's where we ran into trouble most of the time."

"What kind of trouble?" Charles asked.

“Roadblocks, snipers, people following us,” Gonzo again answered. “I don’t know exactly what they wanted, but if we saw guns in their hands, we didn’t stop to ask, and a few shots fired at them from the trucks made them back off. There’s also still the risk of radiation poisoning; I’m not sure how long it’ll be until it’s safe to get anywhere near where the bombs landed.”

“It depends on where the bombs were dropped, how big they were, the type of radiation,” Dr. Shepard tried to explain, “but I remember hearing that it could be as little as a few days, up to hundreds of years.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Sharon told her.

“The big cities took the majority of the bomb hits,” Gonzo said, “from what we heard, Washington D.C., Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, I can’t even list them all, but they’re pretty much gone. There’s probably some survivors, but supplies are scarce, and I wouldn’t try to go in any city if I can avoid it, they aren’t safe.”

“It isn’t just the big cities,” Gilly added, “even some of the smaller towns have closed themselves off, they’re protecting the resources they’ve got. We found it best to go around any city, town or village, no matter what size it was, if possible. I don’t think they’re all bad people, but why take chances.”

“You didn’t talk to anyone the whole way here?” Justin asked.

“We had to stop a few times, but were very selective in who we trusted,” Ziggy said. “Some of the roadblocks let us through for a few MRE’s.”

“That’s going to add on a lot of miles if we go around every little town. The most direct route to Toledo would be straight down I-75, but that would take us right through a couple of

those big cities, mainly Flint and Detroit,” Justin said, as he studied the map. “I don’t think we want to go too close to either of them.”

“You don’t,” Parka assured him. “We didn’t come through there on our way up here either, so I don’t know exactly what we’d find, and I don’t really care to find out. We learned early, the bigger the city, the more dangerous it is, especially if people think you’ve got something worth taking.”

“You can’t watch everything around you either, there are too many buildings, and too many places to set up an ambush,” Gilly added.

“Which way did you take to get here then?” Justin asked.

“We jumped roads a lot because we weren’t sure what the best way was,” Parka again answered, he turned back to the map and started to point at the roads they recently traveled on, “we had to zig-zag a lot, but I know we were on 52 for a long time. We went around most of the populated areas when we came to them; there’s plenty of backroads or farming roads if you look for them. Thankfully we didn’t run into too many people on those.”

“What about before that?” Stanley asked.

“We were on so many roads,” Gonzo answered, “but I think we can take this one, 223 southwest. That’ll get us close to Toledo. After that, we’ll have to see what’s out there.”

“We could also take the 23. It would take us further west than we’d like, but it would avoid a lot of people. We can take the map and skirt any areas that don’t look safe,” Parka added.

“You didn’t have any trouble on the backroads at all?” Justin asked.

“Major,” Gilly began, “we had trouble on just about every road, those just didn’t seem as bad as the rest. People are getting desperate. They’ve run out of food, medicine, and just about everything else they need to survive. What we ran into on the way

here, may be totally changed by the time we go back through there.”

“People see our trucks and they assume we’re coming to help them. I can’t blame them; they’re hungry and scared,” Ziggy added. “I wish we could’ve done more for them, but we couldn’t, we barely had enough food and water to get our families and us here.”

“While you all figure out a route,” Stanley said, “why don’t you tell me what you want to take, and me and Charles can start getting it together.”

“We’ll take both the transport trucks. Gilly and Gonzo can drive,” Justin said after thinking for a minute. “Take one of the 50 cal guns, a couple of boxes of grenades and a grenade launcher. Make sure we have enough ammunition for all the guns. While you’re in the storage room look around, if you see anything else you think we’ll need, grab it.”

“We should take the Gieger counter,” Dave suggested, “since we don’t know which way the wind was blowing, we don’t know where radiation might still be high.”

“Good idea,” Stanley said.

“What about food?” Charles asked. “How many days should we pack for? I’ll get Edith and the ladies in the kitchen working on that now.”

“I think we should make it there and back in three to four days, but let’s take at least a week worth, just to be sure,” Justin said.

“I think you should take two to three weeks worth,” Sharon, who’d been quiet up to this point, said, “you may need to take a longer way back, or need it to trade.”

“What would they trade for?” Brayden, the youngest member of the security team, asked.

“Information,” Justin answered before Sharon could, “good thinking Sharon.”

“Don’t feel bad, Brayden, I didn’t think of it either,” Charles said, he was a bit embarrassed he didn’t think of it himself. He’d served in the army for a long time. “How many people are going? Edith will need to know.”

“Me, Gonzo, Gilly, Parka, Ziggy, Stanley, Nick, Dave and you. That’s nine of us,” Justin said, looking around. “That is, if you’re all willing to go. I’m not going to lie; there’s a good chance we all won’t come back.”

“I’m in,” came the reply of all the men he named.

“What about the rest of us?” Gary asked.

“We can’t leave this place undefended,” Justin told him. “I need you to keep training the kids and women how to shoot. They may make the difference if we’re attacked.”

“I can do that,” Gary answered.

“I was planning on going,” Kyle Carver said, “but if you don’t need me, I’m sure I can find plenty to do around here.”

“You’ll be needed here to help run security for the truck drivers,” Justin told him. “If we’re going to move some of those shipping containers here to make places for more people to live, the drivers will need security.” Kyle just nodded.

“You don’t need a sniper?” Peter asked.

“I thought about taking you,” Justin said to Peter, “but we only have five truck drivers, and we need those containers moved here. I’m already taking Dave, that limits you to four.”

“There were a lot of people that wanted to go,” Jessica said to Justin, a bit disappointed that she wasn’t on his list.

“Look,” Justin said to the group, “this is going to be a dangerous mission. We can’t take the chance of losing a bunch of

people. I want to take the most experienced in combat situations.” They all nodded their understanding.

“We’ll get the supplies together,” Charles said as he and Stanley left the room.

“You’ll need a medic, just in case there’s trouble,” Maggie Shepard, their only doctor, said, “I’ll be going with you.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Dr. Shepard,” Justin told her. “You’re too valuable to us, but we could take Shelly.”

“I’m no more important than you and these men,” she answered, “and I’ve told you already, call me Maggie.”

“I prefer Doc,” Gilly said, jokingly.

“I can live with Doc,” Maggie teased back, “but I’m going. I won’t send Shelly; she’s got a son to take care of. Too many of these kids have already lost their parents.”

“Ok, Doc,” Justin said, “but you’ll do as you’re told, and not put yourself in any danger.”

“Agreed,” Maggie said.

“Jessica and Gary,” Stanley said to the two disappointed members of the security team, “I’d like the two of you to find out where to go to see about getting some of those shipping containers. If Captain Roberts comes after us, we may not be able to get away again.”

“I already know where to go,” Peter interrupted. “I worked at the ports in Port Huron and Bay City.”

“Which do you think is closer?” Stanley asked.

“Bay City to the north is closer,” Peter said, “but I think we should go to Port Huron, it’s a bigger place. More containers will be there.”

“Will it be hard to get through the city?” Justin asked, concerned after the talk they’d just had.

“If we come in from the north we won’t have to go through the busiest part,” Peter answered, “and I know the road from that direction well.”

“Then the three of you work together and see what you can do,” Stanley said, “but if it looks too dangerous, just forget it, we’ll come up with another plan.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Jessica assured him.

“I’ve been showing Jason how to drive a semi; I think he’s ready and can take Dave’s place. We’ll need Kelly to work the crane. I’m sure someone else could figure it out, but not as fast as she can,” Peter said.

“Just make sure someone from security stays with her,” Justin told them. “We need everyone here; I don’t want to take any chances with losing anyone.”

“Mark may not want her to go,” Jessica said.

“He probably won’t,” Gary agreed, “but Mark’s a smart man. He knows she’s the best person for the job and we’ll do what we can to keep her safe.”

“Just be careful, and don’t let anyone take any unnecessary risks,” Justin said as he turned back to the map and continued planning his own mission.

“What are you guys up to?” Jessica asked Mark, Stephen, and George. The three men were in a different corner of the cafeteria making their own plans. There were papers spread across the table in front of them.

“What do you think of this?” Mark asked and turned the paper they’d been working on towards her.

“What is it?” she asked, looking at the diagrams they’d drawn.

“Another base if we can get those containers,” Mark explained. “That field across the street out front must be at least the size of a football field. If we can box it in with the containers, and make a gate, it should be fairly secure. A lot of people could live over there, and the area in the middle could be used to grow more food.”

“How many containers do you think we’ll need?” Jessica asked, looking at the elaborate plans.

“A hundred would work,” George said.

“A hundred?” Jessica asked. “Why so many?”

“I’m guessing the containers are about forty feet long,” Mark said, “ten across on each side, and five at the ends.”

“That’s only thirty,” Jessica said.

“I’d like to be able to stack them two high,” Mark admitted. “That’d be much more secure for anyone living over there.”

“I’m not sure anyone’s going to want to leave the conveniences in the school,” Jessica told him. “We’ve got hot water, electricity, heat and most importantly, toilets that flush. More than most people have anymore.”

“We’ve talked about that too,” Mark said and turned another paper towards her. “I think we can make them livable. We’ve got enough building materials from all the trucks we’ve found and hauled here.”

“Plus solar panels and wire,” George added, “I’m sure I can run some electricity to them if we have enough batteries. It may not be as comfortable as living in the school, but people would have more privacy. We could dig and build a few outhouses to use during the night, but they’d still have to come across to the school to shower.”

“We’ve got some extra cameras we haven’t set up, that will help with the defense of that area,” Stephen added.

“That’s still only sixty containers,” Jessica said, “what do you plan on doing with the other forty?”

“I don’t like the back wall we made,” Mark said. “We’ve only got the semi-trailers back there, and it’s so far from the school. We thought we could replace the trailers with the other forty containers back there, and do the same thing to make them livable. Once we’ve got people living back there, there’s less chance of anyone getting in here, Plus, just like across the street, we’d have more room for people.”

“More people means we’d be even more secure,” Stephen added.

“You’ve really thought this through,” Jessica said, nodding at them. “I like the idea of helping more people, but this seems like an awful lot of work.”

“If you can get us the containers, we can do the work, and most importantly we’ll have plenty of room to take in more survivors,” Mark again told her.

“We’ll be going tomorrow to see what we can find,” Jessica assured them before turning to walk away. She had a lot to do, and a lot to think about before morning.