

“When a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no choice but to become an outlaw.”
—Nelson Mandela



PART I: ESCAPE— DATE 2131

1.

The tunnel was barely big enough for one lean person to crawl through at a time. Grant Cochrin gritted his teeth and clawed his way forward, a small flashlight duct-taped to his hat illuminating only the next five feet. Everything beyond was pitch black. Gravel dropped around him as his backpack scraped and caught against the crumbling ceiling. He felt his claustrophobic panic rising. As a petroleum geologist he had always worked in the great outdoors or in a comfortable lab. He had never been any good in closed places, and he couldn't imagine one much worse than this. But for the sake of his family and friends crawling along behind him, he couldn't say a word. He had to keep moving and stay positive.

The smell of damp dirt centered him, in this case, the aroma of glacial deposits laid down twenty-two thousand years ago in the Late Wisconsin Glacial Episode. Cochrin's geological training always kicked in when he was close to dirt. He loved dirt. If he could keep thinking about the dirt, maybe he could kick the claustrophobia.

“How much longer?” From behind him came the voice of his wife, with a clear note of desperation. He couldn’t let her know he was feeling the same way.

“Not long. Just about ten more minutes for this part of the ordeal, honey. One step at a time.”

“One step?”

Dana could be a dead-serious critical thinker at times when Grant didn’t think he needed critique. And now, ten feet underground, she was trying to be a comedian. Which was, as always, exactly what he needed.

“Okay,” laughed Grant, “one bloody knee-scrrape at a time.” In spite of the fatigue and claustrophobia that he and certainly everyone else was fighting, he guessed this would actually be the safest part of their journey. But he didn’t want to scare his family and friends any more than they already were—with the possible exception of his fearless friend Bryan, who had helped plan the escape and who was more aware of the risks than anyone. As Grant struggled along, he found himself muttering, “Please! We could really use some help now—and even more after we get to the end of the tunnel!”

“Say what?” asked Dana.

“Nothing,” answered Grant. “Just pushing some dirt out of the way.” This whole thing had been Grant’s idea. He had worked hard to convince Dana and the kids, and his friends that it was well worth the risk. Now, only minutes into the reality, he found himself wondering if his family and friends (besides Bryan) were up to the challenges that lay ahead.

Grant thought back to his discovery of the entrance to the tunnel behind their kitchen sink years ago while fixing a drain, well before he had any thoughts of escape. He had accidentally poked a hole in the wall with a pipe wrench, and was surprised to find a vertical shaft dropping about eight feet, complete with a

polyester rope ladder. At the bottom there was enough room to bend over into a crawl. Perhaps foolishly, he had braved his claustrophobia, and explored the tunnel by himself. He found that it continued horizontally for about 300 feet, gradually ramping deeper underground, passing under the footing of the work camp wall, finally emerging into an old drainage cistern. From there, a large concrete pipe led about a quarter mile under one of the streets of the abandoned and deteriorating city of Minot, opening along the bank of the Souris River. Why and how the tunnel got there, Grant did not know, but now it seemed like a God-send. Some enterprising inmate must have spent years digging it. Who knew how many inmates had used it to escape—or had died trying?

But today, there was no going back. It was a one-way trip down the tunnel and out the other end. If all went well, Grant and his gang would be at least a mile down the riverbank before any of the guards or coworkers at the work camp noticed they were missing. The guards might never understand how they had escaped. Bryan, the last person down the shaft, had carefully replaced the bottles of detergent and brushes under the kitchen sink and re-secured the paneling with screws from the back before descending the rope ladder into the shaft. He had also used bug and drone disabling devices to block any surveillance by the guards, who probably weren't awake anyway.

Grant's attention was yanked back by Dana. "Are you guys still behind us?"

"Well, yeah," Grant heard his 16-year-old daughter Lissa answer. "Where else would I be? Are we almost there? This is scary!"

"Wus!" came the voice of his 9-year-old son Tadd. "It's totally cool! I want it to go on forever!"

“Tadd,” called Dana. “Show some respect for your sister. We’re all in this together.”

“Just a few more yards, honey,” called Grant to his daughter. “I’ve been down here, and it doesn’t go on forever. Sorry, Tadd.”

Grant never wanted to do it this way. He would have preferred it if Warden Davis Grimhaus had just let them walk away. The Wilderness—anywhere outside the work camps, the big city safe zones or transportation corridors—was near suicide, according to Grimhaus and his guards. So why not just open the gate and let them go? Grant suspected that the Wilderness wasn’t such a dangerous place after all. He was banking on that. His family’s life was on the line, as well as the lives of his friends. And in any case, the further they crawled, the more committed they were. Once anyone, citizen or inmate, set foot in the Wilderness, there was no coming back, according to Federation law. The Feds might kill you, they might let you live, but you could never return to safe zone civilization or the work camp again, dead or alive.

Grant had been the only petroleum geologist in the Minot Work Camp, the hub of oil drilling and pumping operations in the still-productive Bakkan Formation, stretching from Minot in the former state of North Dakota northwest into what had been Montana, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Grimhaus really couldn’t afford to let Grant go. It would be next to impossible for Grimhaus to offer a big enough salary to score a citizen petroleum geologist to work out here. An inmate with Grant’s abilities? One chance in a million.

Both Grant and Dana had spent their lives in the work camp. Although he had no academic degree, Grant had learned geology from his father who took great pains to give him the equivalent of a BSc in geol-

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ogy, including a foundation in the other sciences. His father had been incarcerated at the age of 15 along with Grant's grandmother and grandfather, a university geology professor sentenced to the camp in the religious purges following the Final War in 2062. That was 69 years earlier. It was now 2131.

The Final War, along with a series environmental disasters and pandemics, had left the world's population at about a tenth of what it had been. The World Federation had dissolved national boundaries and reorganized the world into Autonomous Regions. With law enforcement personnel at a premium, citizens were restricted to governable and heavily defended Safe Zones surrounding the cities that survived. Everything else—the vast amounts of sparsely inhabited territory in the world—was Wilderness. It was off-limits to citizens (allegedly for their protection) and the Safe Zones were certainly off limits to anyone from the Wilderness.

Had the Cochrens not stubbornly persisted as Christians, they would have been released from the Minot Work Camp long ago and sent back to the comforts of Safe Zone civilization. But the Federation, from its magnificent capitol in Carthage, Tunisia, had declared religion a big no-no. It had sent all who practiced religion, and who refused to sign an Affidavit of Renunciation, to work camps—like the one in Minot—that dotted Wilderness areas around the world. Camp inmates served the Federation and industry by extracting resources—oil, coal, timber, minerals, metals, geothermal, water and wind energy...