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The Adventures of John McCloud

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The Adventures of John McCloud – Chapter 1

John McCloud was not a happy camper. Actually, he hadn't been camping in over fifteen years. The last time had been with his Uncle Rick 'Pale Moon' McCloud when John was twelve. Many things had happened to John since that short trip to learn outdoor skills.

His parents had been killed in a plane crash. Instead of going to live with his Uncle Rick, he'd been placed in a foster care home. Rick was a Marine, on active duty, and moved around too much for John to live with him.

The Strantons had been a nice enough family, although very liberal in their thinking. John didn't have many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors while he lived with them. Which was until his eighteenth birthday. He left then, off to college, on a sports scholarship. For baseball. There his dark good looks, due in part to his one eighth American Indian heritage, attracted the attention of the ladies. Quite a few gave up on him when he trashed his knee sliding in to home plate in a game in his sophomore year.

One didn't give up. Rebecca Henderson had her eye set on John and pursued him during the low times when he found out he'd never play college or professional sports. Rebecca was there every time he turned around, it seemed, and he wound up falling madly in love with her. They were married three days after they graduated.

Three months later Rebecca was pregnant with their first child. Three months into the pregnancy she was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. Another month and she and the unborn child were dead. His Uncle Rick got leave to come home for the funeral. John took the deaths hard. Rick did his best to bring his nephew out of the doldrums, but wasn't sure he'd had much success when he had to return to Iraq.

John found a job in his minor, going into teaching at the Junior High School level. He seemed to be all right, but the few that knew him very

well at all could tell he still mourned his parents passing, and most especially, Rebecca and his unborn child.

One of those that did manage to get to know him was a fellow teacher at the Junior High School. Samantha Gudengast taught English to John's history. They began to date and to others, John seemed to be coming out of his despondency. Samantha knew better. She went with him every few months to visit Rebecca's grave and put flowers down. He wasn't over his former love.

John didn't really push for intimacy, but Samantha did, slightly. They got to the point where they would sleep together, without sex, for comfort. Samantha didn't want to just be there to support him. She wanted something more. But not the way John was now. She wouldn't allow sex, when John finally asked. The intimacy they shared of sleeping together in one another's arms was all they could have until John had some sort of closure with his past.

Samantha tried all she knew, and sought out professional help, to no avail. When Uncle Rick was killed defending a convoy of Iraqi refugees from insurgents, it got worse. John was despondent. Samantha worried about him, but he seemed to finally come out of the worst of it.

It was three months after Uncle Rick's death that his personal belongings were shipped to John as Rick's next of kin. Samantha thought she'd lost him for a while. Then John suddenly seemed to cheer up. Samantha's hope grew.

The Adventures of John McCloud – Chapter 2

“How are you feeling, John,” Samantha asked as they enjoyed a quiet dinner together at Samantha’s apartment.

“Pretty good,” he replied. “This is a great meal. I’ve never really appreciated how good a cook you are.”

“Why, thank you, John. That was a sweet thing to say.” Samantha wondered if tonight might be the night.

“Oh, by the way,” John started.

For no reason she could think of, Samantha’s heart fell.

“I’m planning a hunting trip this fall. I’ll have to take a week off from school. Who do you think I should suggest they get to temp for me?”

“Hunting trip? You’re not a hunter.”

“Uncle Rick and I always talked about going. And Rebecca loved the outdoors. She probably wouldn’t have enjoyed the hunt, but she would have enjoyed being out there camping with me while I hunted.”

“I see,” Samantha said softly. She had to be careful. It would be easy to turn John away, the way he was acting.

“I’m not much of an outdoor person, but I’ll see about getting time off to go with you.”

“Oh. No. I wasn’t suggesting that. Just thinking out loud. This is something I want to do alone. Do you have any recommendations for some one to sub for me?”

“I’ll have to think on it, John. I’m sure one of our regular temp teachers could do it. You have excellent lesson plan outlines. Are you sure you want to go alone? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“My uncle trained me well. I’ll be fine. It’s just something I want to do. I’ve been trying to get a ram sheep permit, and I did this year. Uncle Rick always wanted to go after a ram. He never got the chance. I’m going to do it for him.”

“Sheep? They live so high in the mountains. Again, isn’t that a bit risky?”

“Not if you know what you’re doing. Uncle Rick would have been a good teacher. I learned a lot from him on our adventures.”

Samantha was sure she’d heard John say he and Rick had only had a couple of times to go camping when John’s parents were still alive. But she also knew now was not the time to press the matter.

Press the matter she did, however, over the next few weeks. To no avail. John was going on this trip. At least he was taking good equipment. She had insisted, though he already seemed to have that in mind. Samantha even went shopping with him a couple of times as he gathered the gear.

First it was the bike. He was going to the high country and didn’t want to mess with horses. He didn’t really know horses well and decided on mechanical transport from the trail head. With Uncle Rick’s insurance money, John bought a ROKON two-wheel drive motor bike. It would easily carry the gear he anticipated on having, and with one two-and-a-half gallon container, plus the liquid tight wheels of the bike full of gas, he’d have more than enough to do what he wanted. Uncle Rick had talked about getting one when he retired.

Since it was going to be cold at the altitudes where he was going to be, he wanted a good four-season tent. With the gear he’d have, a two or

three person tent also made sense. After researching on the internet, he decided on the Mountain Hardwear Tranga 3.1. It would do nicely.

Even though he'd be on the bike until he made camp, which would be his base for daily on-foot hunting trips, he wanted a good pack to carry everything on, even on the bike. Again, using some preparedness and hunting forums to gather ideas, he decided to go with a two pack arrangement. A large cargo pack and a smaller daypack that would piggy-back on the large pack for transport.

The daypack would essentially be a 72-hour kit for emergencies, plus the daily needs for the hunt. The large pack would contain the camp goods and everything else John didn't wear. The large pack would be a Kifaru EMR pack, and the piggyback daypack the Kifaru Marauder.

It would be cold at nights, so a good sleeping bag was in order. John selected the Slumberjack sleep system consisting of two sleeping bags using Quallofill insulation. A light bag for warm temperature, a medium bag for cool to cold temperatures, which, when combined, would allow sleep down to -20°F. Colder if insulated underwear was worn in the bag. The Therm-O-Rest sleep pad would help that, too.

He would be gone a total of nine days. That would take food and a means with which to prepare it. A MSR multi-fuel stove with two fuel bottles, and a MSR cook set took care of the preparation part of it. The food would be half a dozen MRE's the first two or three days, and then Mountain House freeze-dried camping food. Mostly the two person packages since he would need the extra energy due to the cold.

There was also plenty of tea and hot chocolate packets. Even a couple packets of one-cup steeper bags of coffee. He didn't drink coffee, but Uncle Rick had. Besides the jerky and gorp in the day bag, he had three pounds of jerky and ten pounds of gorp for extra energy between meals. He wasn't too worried about bears finding his food, but for smaller animals he would carry three telescoping poles to make a nine foot high

tripod from which he could suspend his food to keep it out of the tent, and away from hungry ground animals.

He would also need water. Besides that in the 72-hour emergency kit, he had two MSR 10-liter water bags, and a three liter hydration system that would go with either pack. There was also a Katadyn Pocket Filter with charcoal after filter to replenish the bags from streams and any snow melt. There would probably be snow in places.

John got a UCO candle lantern with several replacement candles. He added an LED headlamp, and a Mag-Light two AA flashlight, both with extra batteries. That took care of his lighting situation.

As for clothes, Uncle Rick had sworn by Filson, Carhartt, and Columbia. John picked up several pairs of silk long handles, three each woolen shirts and pants from Filson, and decided on Columbia Parka and insulated bibs for the cold weather. He had Red Wing ten inch lace up work boots, with several pairs each of heavy and medium weight wool socks, along with half a dozen silk sock liners. To go with the Columbia cold weather wear he had Thinsulate winter gloves with Gore-tex liners.

Half a dozen blue bandanas were stuffed here and there in the pack. He'd be wearing his uncle's old Outback wide brim field hat to keep the sun out of his eyes and the snow off his face when it wasn't cold enough to have the parka hood up.

He had Ray-Ban sunglasses to protect his eyes from glare and the UV at altitudes, carried on a neck leash. For a field knife he picked up a Cold Steel ODA. He already had a good Swiss Army Knife and a Leatherman Wave for small tasks.

Like the SAK and Leatherman, he had, or Rick had willed him, most of the rest of the items he was taking with him. The items from Rick included a Brunton Pocket Transit, a Colt 1911 .45 ACP with two dozen magazines, (he was only taking four spares), and a near mint condition Savage 99A model in .308 Winchester. The Savage would be the hunt

gun. It wore a Bausch & Lomb scope on QD mounts, with ghost ring iron sights as back up.

As the day came closer for heading out, John seemed happier and happier. Samantha was still a little worried about him, but got caught up in his enthusiasm. Though she didn't know much to start with about the equipment, she enjoyed shopping with him and learned quite a bit, too.

The day finally came for him to head out. Samantha gave him a long kiss and cautioned him to be careful. A friend from school helped him load the ROKON and the gear into the back of his pickup and they headed for the trail head.

The Adventures of John McCloud – Chapter 3

It was a beautiful late fall day. The temperature was in the low sixties, with clear skies, and very light breeze. John loaded the bike with his gear, pulled the start rope, and climbed aboard. He was on his way up the mountain to what his Uncle had once told him were ideal hunting grounds for sheep. John patted a pocket. He had his hunting license and the ram tag.

He knew, even as he rode carefully up the mountain, that he wasn't coming back. He might or might not try to take the ram, but he wouldn't be coming back with it, either way. It just hurt too much any more thinking about his parents, Rebecca and the baby, and Uncle Rick. Letting himself fall asleep in the cold in just his long handles should do it. If it didn't, there were always the Colt and the Savage to take care of business.

He made camp early, to have plenty of light to set up his first camp. He knew it wasn't smart to be going without having tried the equipment out first, but he figured it didn't really matter. But it was all good equipment and he figured things out as he went.

Two days on the trail on the ROKON had him in a good area, according to the USGS map he carried. He searched the area and found a good spot for his base camp. It was near a small trickle of water coming from higher up, so he would have water. A light snow dusted the ground that night. The next morning, John transferred a few things from the EMR to the Marauder and set out on foot, his uncle's 99A slung over one shoulder, the .45 on his hip, and the Brunton 8x30 binoculars hanging on his chest.

He would cross a ridge at a low spot and then sit down and scan the upper reaches of the mountain with the binoculars, taking a long slow time watching for sheep. John saw nothing the first day and made his way back to the camp. He was a bit above the tree line, so his only fire was the MSR cook stove and the comforting light from the candle

lantern. There was enough earth to dig a cat hole with the Cold Steel Special Forces shovel and do his business.

He woke up to a light drizzling rain the next morning and appreciated being able to cook a hot breakfast under the canopy of the vestibule of the tent. He pulled on the Columbia cold/wet weather gear and headed out again, wearing the Marauder on his back, weapons and binoculars at hand.

He began to see signs of sheep, and finally spotted a few up much higher than he was. John began to make his way upward, cautiously, checking occasionally to see if the sheep had moved on. There was at least one ram with them, though separated from the flock by a good distance.

Higher and higher he went, following the sheep as they moved. He didn't even think about lunch, the tracking was going so well. The lesson's Uncle Rick had taught him coming back as if it had been only a few days previously that he had learned them.

It was only when it began to get dark that John realized how late it was. And suddenly also realized that he had been watching the sheep, especially the ram, and had not been watching his back track to make sure he could get back to his camp.

"Uh-oh," he muttered softly, looking around in the fading light. It would be foolish to try to find the camp tonight. He would just hunker down and wait for morning. There was a small pool of collected rain water just on the other side of the ridge he'd come up. He'd set up camp beside it. Being doubly careful, John eased down the rise toward the pool.

His carefulness didn't do him any good. The sleek she-cat cougar that had been stalking the sheep before John had intruded into the process decided it was a good time to attack this man-thing that had ruined her hunting. It would be a good substitute. She'd found one before, after it fell, and it had been easy pickings.

A slight slip on a wet rock saved John. The lioness had leapt, but only managed to slash John's left thigh as she flew past the falling man. The swipe furthered John's falling journey and he wound up wallowing in the pool of water. It took him precious seconds to gather his wits, working the Savage off his shoulder and working the lever to chamber a round.

He wiped his eyes quickly, looking for whatever had hit him. He saw the flash of golden hide and fired. It was a snap shot and he missed, but it was enough to scare the big cat away. For the moment.

It was only when he stepped out of the pool of water that he realized the cat's claws had raked him. He stumbled on his left leg. Gathering his wits, and trying to remember Uncle Rick's training, John quickly unzipped the leg of the bibs up to the waist to expose the claw marks.

"Oh, lord!" John muttered. "That hurts." The pain was seeping through the shock. John un-slung the Marauder and opened it up. He took out his SAK from its belt pouch and used the scissors to cut away a patch of the pants leg to give him full access to the wound. Opening the first-aid kit Zip-lock bag he cleaned and bandaged the wound, and then re-zipped the leg of the bibs.

The rain was beginning to come down harder, mixed with a little snow. He located the most protected spot by the water and shook out one of the ponchos in the bag. It took a few minutes to tie in the liner of it. He laid out the other poncho on the ground, laid down on it and wrapped the poncho with the liner in around him. He threw the sheet of plastic over all of it to protect his bedding from the rain-and snowfall. John drug the Marauder pack closer to him and went through its contents by the light of the Mag-Light.

John tore open one of the Mainstay lifeboat ration packs and began to eat the break-off section containing 1,200 calories. He re-wrapped the rest and put it back in the pack. After he'd finished the ration he took a

drink of water and reached for the jerky. He had several pieces of jerky, and then ate a handful of gorp.

After that he closed the pack, shifted it around so it would act as a pillow, and wrapped himself up as well as he could in the two ponchos under the plastic to wait out the night, 99A and Colt close at hand.

The Adventures of John McCloud – Chapter 4

John was shivering and there was an inch of snow on him and the surrounding ground, but he had made it through the night, even managing a little sleep. He quickly looked all around, but there was no sign of the cat.

As he worked to get the Tommy cooker from the pack lighted so he could fix a hot drink for breakfast John suddenly stopped working and stared off into space, an epiphany grabbing him by the very soul.

He didn't want to die up here. Uncle Rick wouldn't want it. Rebecca wouldn't want it. Samantha wouldn't want it. He wanted to get home to Samantha. Rebecca would have liked her. He wanted that other step of intimacy with Samantha. He had to let Rebecca and Uncle Rick take their places in his past, and move on with the future. He was a shell of a man, good for no one. Yes. He wanted to live. Not die.

With renewed vigor John lighted the Trioxane fuel for the little folding stove using the disposable lighter. He had water in the canteen cup on the burner quickly. As he waited for the water to warm so he could add it to the collapsible stainless steel cup, John thought back on his life and the time he had wasted. Well, not any more.

He ate another section of the lifeboat ration waiting for the water to heat. The ration didn't make one thirsty, but John took several swallows of water anyway. It would be easy to get dehydrated up here.

Finally the water was boiling and he added it to the cup with a packet of hot chocolate. It tasted so good. He had the chocolate, then a cup of tea as he ate some jerky and a handful of gorp. He was going to need energy in a few moments.

John nearly screamed when he tried to get up. His lower body was numb from the cold, except for the wound area. It was just flat out painful.

John worked some circulation back into his feet and legs and then got up. It was slightly overcast and between the sun and the transit, John determined his orientation. Now he knew where north, south, east, and west were. It took several minutes matching topographical features to the USGS topo map to figure out where he was.

That known, John repacked the Marauder, put it on his back, picked up the Savage and headed back to where his camps should be. It was hard going. The cat's claws hadn't been that deep, fortunately, but the wound hurt whenever he moved.

Another problem he had was that though he hadn't noticed it the night before, his outer clothing had become soaked in the pool of water. It hadn't come through to his skin, but the clothing was frozen. He could walk, but the cold was sapping his strength. He had to decide to try to find camp, which at the speed he could move, would take at least two days, or head down the mountain to the tree line so he could gather wood and make a fire.

John decided to head for the tree line and materials to make a fire that would dry the clothes out. He marked his position on the map, turned down hill, and moved on. It was still slow going, but he got to the tree line in early afternoon. He had to go deeper in to begin finding deadwood he could use to make a fire. Once, as he picked up a piece of the wood, he heard what he was sure was the cat's cry. It sent shivers through him. The cat was still close. Possibly tracking him. Yet another reason to have a fire.

He wanted to save the matches he had for worst case scenarios so he took out the Blast Match from the Marauder pack. John took many long minutes to create fuzz sticks from three of the small limbs of dead wood he'd gathered, using the ODA. He built a teepee of small sticks with the fuzz sticks inside. Then he log cabined slightly larger sticks up around the teepee, leaving a place where he could get a lighted piece of tinder in under the fuzz sticks.

Finally the preparations for the fire were ready, just as dark was falling. John set the tender close to the fire preps, positioned the Blast Match, and pushed it down sharply. The cascade of sparks ignited the tinder and John shoved it under the fuzz sticks. They caught quickly and started the teepee of thin sticks, which in turned began to burn the log cabin of larger wood. John had two pieces of limb ready to set on the tiny fire. He gave a sigh of relief that the heavier wood took fire. Another piece of wood and he had his fire going.

John breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back to rest before arranging himself for the night in the light of the fire. This time he was able to string a line of 550 cord between two trees and tie off one of the ponchos as a lean-to. He added two tent stakes to secure the lower corners. The plastic sheet from the 72-hour kit became the ground sheet.

As the fire burned, John lengthened it, parallel to the lean-to, from the large pile of firewood he'd accumulated. He made himself a couple of hot drinks to go with the dry food. With the emergency supplies from the 72-hour kit, John was able to stay hydrated, warm, and well fed.

By the light of the fire John redressed the wounds. They looked okay, with no sign of infection. Apparently he had cleaned them adequately the first time. With the fire burning the entire length of the lean to, John exposed his legs to the fire, hoping to start drying them out. He also moved the Savage close to hand, with the .45 by his head. He watched the fire and stoked it for a long time, but finally fell asleep.

When he awoke the next morning the fire was out. It didn't take long to get it going again, a small one, to comfort him while he heated water for hot drinks to go with breakfast. He studied the map as he chewed jerky after eating the 1,200 calorie lifeboat ration bar. His leg still pained him, but he thought he could make it more than halfway to the camp. It would be the third day into the ordeal and he would be out of food. He'd have a couple teabags and packets of hot chocolate left after lunch and supper today, but that was all. He would have to find water today or stop and melt snow.

Limping badly, after he'd repacked the Marauder, John set off, compass and map in hand. The terrain features were matching the route he was taking. When he got to the edge of the forest early that afternoon he debated for a few minutes whether to continue or stay. He wouldn't reach the camp by nightfall, but he'd be considerably closer for the following day, but he'd be spending a night in the open again.

He thought about his uncle again, but not with anguish. This time he was simply trying to remember anything his uncle had taught him as to what to do in this situation. Food really wasn't an issue. He was well fed up to in the morning. He should have the stamina to make it all the way from here. There was snow around that he could melt and filter to fill the drinking bladders, using firewood instead of his stove. Camp here for the night, he would.

The first chore was gathering wood. It was a bit more sparse here than the other camping spot and it took a while. With his leg bothering him, John took a chance and left the Savage at the camp, depending on the .45 on his hip to get him out of trouble if the cat showed up again. He hadn't heard or seen anything since that one cry the night before.

He was a hundred yards from the camp when he turned around with an armful of wood and found the cat fifty feet away, creeping up on him. The cat crouched and watched John. John began to ease down to drop the wood, and draw the .45. He saw the cat's tail twitch once, and then it sprinted toward him.

The wood fell and John was drawing the .45, but the cat was on him. John fell back and the cat landed on his chest. But John's movement had thrown the cat's timing off and he overshot John. John rolled onto his stomach, the .45 in his hand stretching before him. He fired three shots rapidly and the cat ran off.

John laid there and watched for a long time, but the cat didn't come back. He'd felt at least one rib go when the cat landed on his chest with

the cougar's full weight and momentum. John eased up and knew he wasn't going to be hauling any more wood.

He headed back to camp, limping, holding one arm tightly across his chest, breathing shallowly. It was a painful process to get the dry camp set up again, but John did so, knowing he had to. He replaced the partial magazine in the Colt with a full one and put the gun in his lap. He laid the 99A over his thighs and leaned back against the backstop he'd painfully made, the poncho and liner wrapped around him, sitting on the plastic, under the poncho lean-to.

Again he fed the fire until he fell asleep. Rather weak and weary, and hurting all over the next morning, John got up, started the stove burning, and had the last of his hot drinks. He'd finished the food the night before.

Using his good side arm, John picked up the pack and slid just the one strap over his good shoulder, his right. He carried the Savage in his right hand and limped toward the base camp. He stopped often to rest, and to check his map. With the especially slow progress it was almost dark when he finally stumbled into the camp.

He dropped the rifle and Marauder pack and crawled into the tent, zipping it behind him. He pulled the sleeping bag around himself and fell asleep.

When he awakened the next morning he was stiffer and more sore than ever. It took him two hours to get his MSR stove going and heat water to add to a packet of Mountain House beef stew for breakfast. When the sun was highest, and the tent warm, John took off his outer garments. He got the first-aid kit out and wrapped himself slowly and painfully, to protect what he knew was one broken rib and probably two, with a couple more cracked.

By the end of the day, working slowly and resting often, John readied everything to head back to civilization on the bike. The risks were just

too great to get on the bike and leave everything else behind. He would have to camp out at least two more nights.

He missed the fire here on the open mountainside, but was warm enough in the tent, bundled up, and in the doubled sleeping bag. Again he kept both guns close. He thought he heard a rustle during the night, but nothing happened and he fell back asleep.

When he finally managed to get up the next morning and go outside, the tracks of the big cat were evident all around the camp. As were traces of blood. John must have hit the cat with one of his shots, but not done much damage. He decided to push it a little. He made a quick breakfast. At least, as quick as he could, under the circumstances.

It hurt him to get the packs on the bike, and he really hurt when he pulled the starting cord, but the ROKON fired right off. John braced himself and headed down the mountain. It was a rough day on the bike but he managed. Camp was again difficult, but he wasn't going to sleep out in the open if he could avoid it. He didn't think the cat would track the bike, especially hurt, but he wasn't taking chances. Not any more.

John had to wait the next day for the stiffness to ease before he loaded up and headed out. There were no signs of the cougar anywhere. He was close to the trailhead that evening, but it was too dangerous to continue. He made camp again.

Even though the routine was painful, it was a routine. John was up and about, painfully, before noon the next day. He reached the trailhead just before dark. His friend was waiting for him. So was Samantha. They waved at John as he came down the last stretch of trail, but John kept his hands on the handlebars of the bike. He wasn't going to fall over now.

With alarm in their eyes, Greg and Samantha hurried over when John stopped the bike. Though he kept her at arms' distance to avoid her hurting his ribs, John managed to kiss her and tell her something she'd been waiting to hear for months. "I love you. Will you marry me?"

End *****

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Rick's Teddy Bear

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Rick's Teddy Bear – Chapter 1

“You about ready, Sam?” John McCloud called up the stairs to his wife.

“Just about. How we doing on time?”

John glanced at his watch, and then squatted down to pick up their son, Rick, when Rick eagerly reached his arms up to his father. “We’re on track. So far.”

Samantha came down the stairs, grinning at John. She was wearing a backpack and carrying a duffle bag. “Record time.”

John smiled back at his wife. He’d given her a little friendly grief over the time it took them to be ready to hit the road last time they ran a preparedness drill. The school was closed until after the first of the year, and they’d decided it would be a good time to run a drill and spend time at their vacation and retreat cabin in the mountains.

Four year old Rick was reaching out to his mother, so Samantha handed John the duffle bag and took him. They walked out to the Suburban and trailer parked in the driveway of their small house.

The house was on a narrow lot, with a small front yard made smaller by the driveway to the converted garage space. The back yard was huge, however. Plenty big enough for a small greenhouse, large outdoor garden, utility shed, a couple of apple trees and two pecan trees, with room enough for a large doghouse and run for their three year old Malamute, Sky.

Sky watched the trio approach the modified Suburban, tail wagging. She loved to travel with the family and didn’t mind the short wait tied off to the trailer hooked to the Suburban.

“I think Sky is ready to go,” Sam said, putting Rick down beside the dog. Sky nuzzled Rick, and a laughing Rick threw his arms around the dog.

It took but moments to add the pack and duffle to the other items in the back of the Suburban. The trailer was kept loaded, sitting beside the house for real emergencies and had only needed to have the fuel cans stored in the shed added to it before John had hooked up to it.

John put Rick in his car seat in the seat behind the driver, while Samantha got Sky up in the seat on the other side of the Suburban and attached her safety harness to the seat belt. Samantha then trotted back up to the house to lock it up while John started the SUV.

When Sam was buckled in, John looked at his watch. “From alert to leaving, twenty-eight minutes. Not bad. Well under the forty-five we allow ourselves for a full bug-out.”

Sam nodded. “Rick and Sky haven’t slowed us down as much as they might have.”

“I think it’s that we’re just getting better and have streamlined the process.” John leaned over and Sam turned her head so they could share a quick kiss. “It’d take most of the rest of the time to don CBR protective gear.”

“Yes. We should practice that again pretty soon. Get Sky more used to it. She hates being cut off from us when she’s in that protective bag.”

“Good idea. What say a gear up and shelter-in-place scenario?

“With utilities out. That’ll be a good one. So. We waiting for something?”

“Just this.” John leaned over and kissed her again. After that he checked the mirrors and saw Sky making her turnaround before she would lie

down on the seat beside Rick. Rick was playing with one of his toys. “They both travel so well,” he said as he pulled out of the driveway.

Since there was no real emergency the trip out of the city went smoothly. They’d practiced bugging out during holiday rush hour traffic a couple of times to get the feel of it. It wouldn’t be the same, but it was the best they could come up with to test their planning.

“We’re supposed to have pretty bad weather by the time we get there,” Samantha said, setting aside the National Weather Service radio she’d just checked the weather report on. She’d put it back on alarm status before putting it down.

“This should be a good test of the systems,” John said. “I wish we could get some of the others to run drills.”

Samantha put her hand on John’s shoulder for a moment. They were in a group of like minded people, but they mostly just got together to compare notes and plan. None of the other twelve people actually ran drills the way they did. John and Sam weren’t even sure that some of the others actually put up storage supplies or had bug out bags and vehicles. The others talked a good game, but seemed disinclined to actually do anything.

They had plenty of fuel to get to their property and back, but just like they would do in a real emergency, they stopped to get fuel when the primary tank of the Suburban was approaching half empty. The Suburban had dual tanks, both aftermarket extended capacity versions. Since there wasn’t an emergency, acquiring fuel was no problem.

With the two tanks and the fuel reserve in the cans in the trailer they had a road range of twelve hundred miles in the diesel powered vehicle. Somewhat less than that with any off road activity. The last ten miles to their cabin almost qualified. It was just a track in the wilderness.

Despite the three or four inches of snow already on the ground, and more beginning to come down, they had no trouble reaching the cabin up high in the mountains. Sam put Rick in a hooded snow suit and boots, added a long scarf and gloves to the ensemble and turned him loose to play in the snow under Sky's watchful eye as she and John unloaded the equipment and supplies from the Suburban.

They weren't certain which had the most fun, Sky or Rick, when they brought them inside to the roaring fire in the cabin and began to unwrap Rick. Sky just shook herself and lay down near the fireplace and kept a watchful eye on the proceedings.

Food from their BOB's had sufficed for the road trip, but a good meal was on the agenda that evening. It would, however, be prepared using the Long Term Storage food that was at the cabin.

John got out the recipe book and began pulling appropriate #10 cans out of the LTS food supplies after putting a pot of water in the fireplace to heat up. Sam began to help while Rick tired with the play, laid down in front of the fire and promptly fell asleep. Sky curled up near him and did the same.

Sam woke Rick later, when the food was almost ready, and got him ready for dinner, as John put the finishing touches on the meal. The family spent the evening quietly, until it was time to put a worn out Rick to bed in the smaller of the two bedrooms. After a very short discussion on what to do the rest of the evening, John and Samantha both got that certain look in their eyes and quickly headed for their own bedroom.

Rick's Teddy Bear – Chapter 2

A good six inches of snow fell during the night, and it was still snowing when John and Sam got up the following morning. John got fires going in the kitchen woodstove and the heating stove in the living room. The doors were closed on the fireplace after John cleaned it and set things up for another fire.

They had an LTS food breakfast and then began to gear up for some outdoor adventures in the snowy weather. They had two tasks in mind for the trek they would be taking. To look for a good Christmas tree for the cabin, and to practice their outdoor skills.

All three were garbed in warm clothing. John went to the enclosed shed attached to the side of the cabin and returned with two regular sized pulk sleds and a much smaller version. It didn't take long to arrange appropriate supplies on the two large ones, and a few things on the smaller.

Sky stepped into her harness eagerly and she was soon attached to the small pulk. With Rick balanced comfortably on the goods in John's pulk, John and Sam consulted a map, GPS units in hand, and then set out on their journey. Both had trekker poles to help with pulling the sleds. Like the packs that John and Samantha wore, Sky too wore a version, in addition to pulling the small sled.

At first Sky led the way, looking back often to get clues to the direction John wanted her to go, but after a little while she dropped beside John. Samantha stayed in John's track for the most part, but broke trail for time to time to give John a little rest. They'd had a hearty breakfast, but broke early to rest and have a warm drink. Samantha started water heating on a MSR Firefly stove while John got Rick off the pulk and unhitched and de-packed Sky.

The two played for just a few minutes, and then Sky came over to lie down near Samantha, waiting on her warm treat as much as Rick was

waiting for his hot chocolate and energy bar. Sky would get warmed up gravy style dog food and a treat. Sky was carrying her consumables and some foul weather gear in her pack and small pulk sled.

They had a hot meal at noon, and then turned their direction to go over near the border of their property, the other side of which was a popular ski area. There was a good place to shoot on their property and that's where they were headed, but seeing the avalanche warning signs out on the ski trails they decided to forego the shooting practice. They practiced fairly often at a range near the city, but had wanted to see what it was like to shoot in these conditions.

"Maybe next time, honey," Sam told John. "Maybe even later on, if conditions change."

John nodded. He wasn't going to risk an avalanche just to practice. Their cabin was well protected, the way it backed against a solid rock up-thrust ridge. They'd carved a fallout shelter out of the ridge when they'd built the cabin. If an avalanche came down their way, which wasn't likely the way John had picked the location, it would sweep over the ridge and across their roof with little or no problem other than knocking down the chimneys. And they had replacements, just in case.

So they'd shoot John's Savage 99A in .308, his Para-Ordinance P-14, Sam's beloved Marlin Camp Carbine in .45 ACP, and her Colt 1911 .45 another time. Half way home on their trek they found the tree they wanted. While Sky and Rick looked on with interest, John and Sam used the pocket chainsaw from John's pack to cut down the tree in short order. It was put on Sam's lightly loaded pulk and they headed back to the cabin. It had never stopped snowing.

When they got home John put up the tree while Rick and Samantha took a nap. Afterwards John, Rick, and Sky built a gigantic snowman out front while Samantha fixed dinner. John had started the small diesel generator so they had electricity, just to test it out, as per their plan.

After dinner they trimmed the tree with the things they'd brought, and some popcorn strings they made from popcorn popped in the fireplace. Rick was put to bed and Sam and John fell asleep in each other's arms under the afghan on the sofa, watching the fire.

When they got up the next morning it was more of the same. Another foot or more of snow had fallen. Rick was eager to go on the 'buzzers' as he call the two snowmobiles kept in the shed. John and Sam had mentioned exercising the units the previous day and Rick was all for it. He loved to ride the sleds that were pulled behind the snowmobiles. One had a small enclosure with windows in which he rode. Sky rode the other, fastened to a safety harness.

While it seemed a wild ride to Rick, Sam and John kept the speeds down when they were towing passengers. The sleds just moved a bit more than the snowmobiles themselves. "What say we go down to the lodge at the resort and see what's going on," John said. "I wouldn't mind a run or two on this new powder."

"I suppose we could do that. Doesn't really fit in with our emergency drill, though."

John laughed. "I know. But there is only so much we can test. The rest of it is just staying here until we go back. I like board games... his eyes shined for a moment... and other games... but we do need to keep up relations with the ski people. They're our only real neighbors up here.

"Well, it just happens that I brought a new ski outfit with me. Just in case," Sam said with a laugh.

"Why am I not surprised? Okay. Let's get ready."

They enjoyed their time on the slopes, having turned Rick over to the Bunny Slope master. Sky didn't like it much, but she didn't fight the restraint when she was tethered out of the way at the small lodge with a large pan of water.

Keeping Sky in mind, they didn't stay on the slopes for long, but got in three good runs before they picked up Rick and Sky and headed back to the cabin. They didn't get very far. Even over the sound of the engines of the snowmobiles they heard the loud crack that reverberated through the air, and then the hiss/swish of a large avalanche. They turned back to look toward the ski area and saw the snow boiling in the air.

"We better go back and help," John said. Besides the FRS radios they each carried, and the weather band radio Sam carried, John carried a portable public service band scanner. A few seconds after they had turned around, a call went out from emergency services about the avalanche. They were requesting anyone with experience to help with recovery efforts.

It took only a few minutes to get back to the lodge. Only a few more for John and Samantha to decide for John and Sky to stay and help in the hunt for buried skiers and for Sam to go back to the cabin and prepare some hot food for the rescuers and rescued. The lodge only had snack food and beverages. Sam could easily make up several gallons of soup using the LTS food stocks.

The two switched snowmobiles, Sam taking the one with the protective shield for Rick. She had to keep the speed down some, but she hurried. Rick loved every moment of it. When they got to the cabin Samantha put Rick in the living room with plenty of toys to play with and got busy. She started water heating and then quickly sanitized a ten gallon trash can and lid that were in the shed. She also found a piece of one by four that she also washed and sanitized to use as a stirring paddle.

Using several of the cans of freeze-dried vegetable beef stew, she made up eight gallons of the hearty meal in the trashcan. She'd wrapped several blankets around the can, securing them with duct tape as the water heated, to provide insulation.

With the can tied off to the snowmobile sled, she gathered a sleepy Rick and put him back in the sled. She had to go very slow, much to Rick's disappointment, but she made it back without spilling any of the stew. It was well received.

"Honey," John told her when he was taking a break, "We're going to be at this all night. There's a chance that they'll bring up something in the choppers, but would you mind going back and having something ready in the morning if I don't contact you?"

"Of course."

"I love you. I need to get back to it. You can't believe how well Sky is doing. Like she was trained for it."

After a quick kiss Samantha gathered up Rick and headed for the cabin once again. It was late afternoon. The snow had stopped for a bit and the sun had broken through for a few minutes around noon, but the clouds had closed up and it was snowing again.

Having planned on running the snowmobiles for just a short while, they hadn't put much fuel in either one, so it would be nearly empty when they finished. There'd been no worry about running out, since they carried a two and a half gallon container on the sled. But it was annoying when Sam heard the engine sputter and try to cut out.

Sam immediately stopped and turned off the engine before it could suck all the fuel out of the lines. It would take too long to restart if she ran it completely dry. Saying a mildly bad word, Sam climbed off the machine and took Rick out of the sled.

When she opened the box on the sled that contained the gasoline can, she also took out her Marlin. They'd put the firearms out of sight in deference of those at the ski resort. Slinging the compact rifle over her back, Sam took the can of gas out and stepped toward the snowmobile.

“Mommy! Mommy! Look! A big teddy bear that walks!”

The words didn’t really register on Sam, but Rick’s insistent pushing and pulling at her snow suit leg did as she was opening the fuel can.

“Honey,” she said, turning to look at her son. What she was going to say to him faded away and she muttered a soft, but heartfelt “Crimeny!”

A small grizzly bear was advancing toward them. “You should be hibernating,” she said aloud. Suddenly she looked down at Rick. He was staring at the bear. Quickly Sam grabbed him and set him on the other side of the snowmobile and said, “Stay right there!”

Several options ran through her head in fractions of a second. The one she wanted to do most was hop on the snowmobile with Rick and get out of there. But the engine had been trying to die on her and she didn’t have the fuel in it yet. Her other viable option was the Marlin Carbine. She brought it around from behind her back and aimed at the bear, wishing she had the Savage. Or something more powerful.

The bear had paused and was standing on its hind legs studying them. When it saw the stick come up and point at it, the bear dropped to all fours and charged. A human with a stick like that had made a loud noise and something had gone wrong with its right forepaw in the early fall. The forepaw had hurt ever since. Enough so the bear had not been able to get around well and get enough to eat before the time to go into hibernation.

He had finally gone to the den he’d used the year before and curled up to sleep. But the pain from the paw had kept him from falling into that deep sleep he needed. He’d crawled out into the snow and been wandering, waiting to find something on which he could take out his rage from the pain. The fact that it was one like that had hurt him was good. Even though the paw hurt, he was getting up speed.

The suddenness of the move caught Samantha off guard. It was a long second before she reacted and started firing. The first of the .45 hollow

points grazed the bear's shoulder. That brought the bear to a slow stop. It reared again and roared.

Sam pumped three more rounds from the carbine. She thought she was hitting the bear, but it roared again and then dropped back down and resumed its charge. All Sam knew to do was to keep firing. She didn't know if the .45 would penetrate the skull, but she was aiming, best as she could, at the forehead of the bear.

Time seemed to slow down for her as she fired each shot. She was sure she hit the bear again, for it staggered, but kept coming. She lost track of the number of shots she'd fired.

The bear felt the bullets tear into its chest, but the rounds had not hit anything vital. More stings came. Then a hard blow to the skull. Hard enough to make him stumble. Then a terrible blow. One to his right eye, through it and through the thinner bone behind. He was dying. But one more roaring cry.

Samantha saw the bear falter and start to go down. The bear's mouth opened in an agonizing roar. She let go another round and the bear plowed into the snow covered ground a dozen yards in front of her. When the rifle clicked empty Sam hastily changed magazines and brought the rifle back up.

"Mommy?" a very subdued Rick asked. Sam continued to watch the bear for a moment, and then slowly approached it, carbine at the ready. Several of the .45 ACP rounds had hit it in the face. The head was a mess. But it was dead. Sam looked around, and then ran back to Rick to pick him up and whirl him in the air. "It's okay, baby. The big bad bear is dead." It had taken fifteen rounds to do it, but do it, she had.

That was about the time she saw the fuel can. Up-ended where she'd dropped it in her haste. "Doggone it!" She set Rick down and righted the fuel can. She sighed in relief. The can held perhaps a pint. Enough to get them back to cabin. There was plenty of gas there.

Upset that it had happened, but exhilarated by her abilities that had just been proven, Sam didn't want to leave the bear for predators, but she knew she couldn't butcher the animal by herself, but she was determined to save at least part of it.

Rich sat on top of the cooling carcass as Sam, using her Cold Steel ODA knife, and the Cold Steel rifleman's tomahawk, skinned out and cut loose both rear hindquarters of the bear. She had two large pieces of bearskin and two rather ragged looking bear shanks. She definitely was not a butcher, but she'd got the job done, without getting an undue amount of blood on herself.

Sam hung the pieces of skin and the two pieces of meat up in the shed when they got back to the cabin. It was more than cold enough to keep them. She was glad to get in the shower herself after giving Rick his bath. They had a simple meal, sitting cozily in front of the fire that evening. "Whew!" she said. "What a day," to herself, for she thought Rick was asleep. But he surprised her.

"Yes, Mommy," Rick said in his best grown up, but sleepy, voice. "You don't see a big teddy bear like that every day." Rick had used one of his father's favorite expressions.

A surprised Sam had to laugh and gather her baby up to her. "You're certainly right there, my little man." She put him to bed and got a few things ready for the next morning.

Sam was up early the next morning. She had everything ready to go before she got Rick up. He was still half asleep when she put him in the sled. She added the big blanket wrapped plastic dishpan that contained the scrambled eggs with bacon she'd prepared from their LTS supplies. There was another container of biscuits, also insulated. She headed out, anxious to get there and see how things were going, but a little eager to tell John what had happened.

John certainly believed her. He wouldn't quit asking if she was okay. Some of the others, Sam was sure, thought she was making it up. But they all appreciated the hot food. They had hot coffee, tea, and cocoa available all night, but they were hungry.

Sky lay near the three as John and Sam talked. Rick tried to get Sky to play, but she was just too tired. She'd worked all night alongside John. The rescues had gone well. They dug out many in time. But not all. John was a bit subdued, even with Sam's exciting news.

There would be people up to do some clean up and repair and they asked John if he would help. They offered to pay a little, and pay Sam for fixing food for them for the two days it would take to finish. Both agreed.

On the way back to the cabin, Sam showed John the carcass. Wolves, coyotes, or wild dogs had been fighting over it. She could see the damage to the carcass and the signs in the snow. None of the animals were visible, other than some signs of movement in the trees nearby.

John went to bed as soon as they got to the cabin and Sam and Rick spent late morning and early afternoon working and playing in and around the cabin. The snow had slacked for much of the day, but it started up again in earnest about the time John got up. Sam had a meal waiting for him.

"Honey," she said as he began to eat. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Sure, babe. What is it?"

"I've been thinking about the gasoline that spilled. It was late in the day. If there had not been that little bit left Rick and I would have been stranded all night."

“You want to carry a second can of fuel? That’s not a problem. We’ll make space.”

“No, John... Or... Well maybe that is a good idea. But what I was thinking is that we should include some of the wilderness skills in our drills. Mostly what we’ve done relates to bugging in or bugging out to the cabin here, or the other places where we’d be welcome. I think Rick and I should learn how to survive in the wilderness, starting with shelter in conditions such as these.”

“Oh. Okay. You’re right, of course. It’s just that someone that is prepared would very seldom have to do so... But there are those times...”

“Exactly,” Sam replied. “It could have been last night for Rick and me.”

“Well, there’s the two days before Christmas, after we do the work at the ski place. We could spend a night in a shelter out in the woods.”

“I want to. Something like what would have happened yesterday if I had not had enough gasoline to get here.”

“Okay. We’ll plan on it.”

Rick's Teddy Bear – Chapter 3

Things went well the following two days and the ski area was more or less back to normal, with much more stringent rules about when and where people could ski and when and where they couldn't. Despite that activity, Sam had time to read up on snow country wilderness survival.

"I can't believe they got so upset over the bear," Samantha said as she checked the contents her Kifaru Navigator back pack and accessory pockets.

"I know, Honey," John said, trying to sooth Samantha's feeling.

"I was just trying to make a good filling meal. I thought fresh meat would be good with the LTS soup vegetables."

"And every single one of them liked it until you mentioned it was bear meat. And then only a couple of the old timers would eat any more. More for us..."

"If I'd known they would get so upset I would have kept it and jerked it when we got home. Now we've only the one to do. That would have been a lot of good jerky."

"The soup is good," John said, treading lightly.

"I would like to have seen what one of them would have done in the same situation. If I could have made it away from it with Rick I would have. It was self defense. Some of them acted like I murdered the bear." Sam was near tears.

John stopped her work on her packs and took her into his arms. "I know. I know. You just can't let them get to you. There are some people that are just like that. No perception of reality at all. Life is a Disney movie for them where all the animals sing and dance and never hurt anyone or anything. They just don't have a clue."

Sam wiped away the tears and leaned back against John's encircling arms. "I know I shouldn't get upset, but they made me mad. And hurt my feelings a little bit."

"I know. Are you going to be okay? I don't want you out in the weather if you're this upset and crying. It's not just snowing now, the temperature is dropping. Plus, I wish you'd let me do this with you."

"No, John. You agreed. It's going to be like it was when the bear attacked, only without the snowmobile. We'll just have our packs and what's in nature. And I did say you could go with us and give us some pointers."

"Me and my big mouth," John muttered. Samantha smiled.

Rick ran up, carrying his small backpack. "Is it right, Daddy?" He held the pack out to John. The Kifaru E&E pack was just a bit large for Rick, but he would grow into it. The pack was lightly loaded, to suit Rick's tiny carrying capacity, but he wanted something like John and Sam carried and they'd indulged him after their first camping trip after he was old enough to verbalize his wants.

John sat down on the sofa and went over the contents of the pack with Rick while Sam finished checking hers.

"First, what do you have around your neck?"

"That's my safety whistle. If I get lost outside I blow it three times and count to as many as I can and blow it three more times until someone comes to help."

"Very good. You have your emergency blanket. What's it for?"

"To keep the rain and snow off and keep me warm."

“Which side is the inside, toward you?”

“Oh. The shiny side, Daddy. The other side goes out.”

“Very good.”

“A bottle of water.”

“That’s to drink or mix with the powder so you or mommy can make me a hot drink.”

“Yep. Right again.”

“And these?” John asked, holding up a heavy duty zip-lock bag of beverage mixes.

“Those mix with the water. I like the hot chocolate the best.”

“Okay. And this?”

“My own personal cup so we don’t do germs.”

“Speaking of germs, what’s this?”

“That’s P...p...pur...Pure El.”

“Purell. That’s right.”

Before John could continue Rick was saying. “To clean my hands better after I wash them or if I get them dirty and there’s no water to wash with.”

“Good enough,” John said.

“And these?” John held up a package of Mainstay lifeboat rations.

““mergency food in case we don’t have real food.”

“Very good.”

“This?”

“That’s gorp. That sounds funny.” Rick laughed, but got a serious look back on his face as he continued. “Quick energy food, in case I have to work really hard really fast.”

“That’s right. And this one?” John lifted the next zip-lock of individually wrapped hard candy.”

“Those are treats for when I’m tired and need something to cheer me up.” He reached into the pack and took out the last item. “And Bubba.” He hugged the small teddy bear in a zip-lock bag to his chest for a moment and then put it back in the pack.

“Very good, son. I think you have everything you need for your emergency kit.”

“When do I get a knife and fire like you and mommy?” Rick helped John repack the items into the pack.

Samantha squatted down and took Rick’s little shoulders in her hands. “Remember what we said. When you’re old enough and your daddy and I think you are responsible enough to have a knife and be safe. The same thing with fire. We want you to practice a lot more with us before we give you either one by yourself. Okay.”

“Okay, Mommy. I was just checking if it was yet.”

“You ready for this adventure?” John asked Rick, as John stood up and helped Samantha put on her pack.

“Yes, Daddy. Mommy said it would be good ‘sperience for me. And I get to help do stuff. Not just play.”

“That’s right. Now let’s go outside and let Daddy put Sky’s pack on her for our trip.”

It took only a minute or so to buckle the small panniers onto Sky. She was used to carrying at least part of her own food when they camped out. John fastened the snowshoe bindings on Sam and Rick when they stepped into them.

“You sure you can make it, sport?” John asked Rick as he handed the lead of the rope fastened to Rick’s pack harness to Sam.

“Just stay in my tracks, Rick,” Samantha said, shushing John.

As Samantha and Rick headed for the trees a dozen yards away, John put on his own snowshoes and followed after them in the gentle, but heavy snowfall. He stayed in the path that Sam and Rick were making. Sam went slowly, allowing Rick to set the pace. She checked on him visibly often. He was trudging along with dogged determination. Sky was pacing them, off to Rick’s side.

John couldn’t express the pride he felt in Rick when they reached the edge of the thick woods. He let the two look for a suitable tree under which they would make their nest for the night. Samantha finally decided on one and turned to look at John.

“Good choice,” John said. “Plenty of snow built up around it, and it looks like there’s plenty of space beneath it.”

The snow had drifted heavily against the base of the large evergreen tree, creating an open space with little snow directly under the limbs of the tree. Taking off her pack, Samantha set it down and motioned Rick to come closer. She helped him off with his pack and set it beside hers,

and then did the same for Sky. She removed her snowshoes and did the same for Rick, placing the snow shoes by the packs.

“You two stay here and guard the packs while Mommy gets under the tree and cuts some of the limbs.”

“Can I help, Mommy?”

“Not right now sweetie. In a few minutes.”

Rick had edged over to where he could see his mother a bit better as she used the pocket chainsaw to cut away several of the lower limbs of the tree, leaving higher ones still loaded with snow as a partial roof for the shelter.

Sam set the cutoff limbs on one side of the trunk of the tree and came back out from under the tree on the side she had gone in on, the side with the least snow. As Rick watched curiously, Sam removed an eight by ten foot tarp from her pack and went to the tree again. The tarp was fastened to the tree trunk just below the lowest limbs that were left with some 550 cord, spread, and the outer edges fastened to limbs.

Rick joyfully helped Sam throw up snow against the branches that were over the poncho. Sam used the Cold Steel Special Forces shovel attached to the outside of the pack. Rick just used his arms to throw the snow. He didn't add much to the effort, but he was participating and was happy.

Sam then used the shovel to move all the snow on the ground around the tub like floor of the enclosed space to where the doorway would be. She carefully laid the branches she had cut over the simple trench through the snow that had been created by her movement in and out from around the tree. The driest ones she left where they were.

Again they threw snow, this time against the tree and over the branches, making a tunnel entrance to the shelter. They moved their packs into the shelter. Sam took out a GI poncho and spread it out as a ground cloth.

Then she turned to Rick. Sky was in the shelter with them, looking on curiously.

“Okay, Rick. And you too, Sky. I want you to stay here for a few minutes while Mommy goes and gathers firewood. Can you do that?”

Rick looked a bit uncertain and Sam took out a pair of Motorola FRS radios from the pack. “I’m going to give you one of these. You can reach me if you get scared and I’ll come back. But I need a little time. Okay?”

Rick nodded reluctantly. With a hand motion and a firm “Stay,” to Sky, Sam left the shelter, the pocket chainsaw and tomahawk in hand.

She’d already spotted a deadfall and was almost back to the shelter when Rick’s voice came over the radio. “Mommy?”

“I’ll be right there, sweetie.” And she was, within moments. Rick was smiling. “I watched Sky. She did real good. She wasn’t afraid or nothing.”

“Or anything,” Sam corrected.

“Or anything,” responded Rick.

“Now I need to do that again. You be a big boy for me again?”

Rick nodded, putting his arm around Sky protectively.

Two more trips, neither with a radio call, but Sam saw that Rick was getting restless. “Can you help me this time, Rick?”

Rick eagerly nodded and scrambled out of the shelter behind his mother. Her previous trips had made a reasonable path. Rick was able to trudge down it behind Sam, without his snowshoes, Sky bouncing along beside him. Sam gave Rick a couple of small branches after she cut them, and then did another armload for herself.

“I can carry more, Mommy,” Rick said.

“Next trip, we’ll see.” That was good enough for Rick, for when his parents said we’ll see or maybe, they really meant it. And indeed, Rick carried three branches back the next two trips. Sam could tell that Rick was getting tired trudging through the snow so she stopped for a few minutes, set up the MSR Firefly stove from her pack and heated water for hot chocolate for both of them as they sat in the shelter.

It was beginning to get dark as Sam made a last few trips for more wood while Rick waited patiently. John had been waiting patiently all afternoon. Samantha had been taking the steps he would have done himself. “You did good, my wife,” he told her, stepping up and giving her a kiss on the lips.

“I’ll keep the radio on. You call me if things get out of hand,” he said, finally releasing her. The snow had just about filled their track from the cabin to the tree. It had also blended in the snow movements Sam had done around the tree. Only the track to the dead fall was open.

The reluctance he felt showing in his posture, John started back toward the cabin on his snowshoes. Sam deposited the last load of wood in the shelter and then retrieved the snowshoes, putting them at the entrance of the tunnel entrance.

Sam set her Marlin carbine in a safe position and then took out a UCO candle lantern and lit it, hanging it from an exposed limb. “Mommy, I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, Sweetie. Just hold it for a bit longer and Mommy will get the bathroom ready, after she gets a fire going. Here. You help me with the fire.”

Carefully Rick took the light tinder and placed it on the bed of broken sticks Sam had arranged well clear of the poncho floor liner. Sam

handed Rick the larger pieces of tender and he stacked them carefully. Samantha helped Rick to hold the match and striker to light the match. Rick quickly and carefully put the match to the tinder. He had been brought up to respect fire. Sam added the butt ends of two of the branches she brought to the fire and turned to her pack.

Removing a medium sized container with a snap lid, she took a roll of plastic bags from it. Opening and placing one bag in the container she helped Rick use the facilities and then did so herself, on the other side of the tree. She sent Sky out to do her business. The malamute was back in just a couple of minutes.

Ablutions taken care of, she proceeded to make a good hot supper from the supplies in her pack, with the stove again just past the edge of the poncho floor of the shelter. After they finished their dinner, Sam cleaned up and reached into her pack again.

“You getting tired, Baby?”

Rick nodded and then yawned. Sam shook out another poncho, this one with a quilted liner in it and arranged it along one side of the shelter. Rick saw what she was doing and dug out his space blanket.

Sam built up the fire just a bit and then helped Rick out of his outer layers of clothes, leaving him in long underwear. He quickly wrapped the space blanket around him and huddled under one edge of the poncho sleeping bag. He watched as his mother did the same thing. She slid under the upper half of the poncho sleeping bag and then maneuvered Rick to the outer edge.

Sam didn't want him in a position where he might not get enough air. She'd keep them both covered, and if she didn't he would wake her if he got cold. In that position she was still able to reach one arm out and add branches to the fire and put out the candle lantern.

“It was cold, but now I'm warm again,” Rick said, rather sleepily.

“Me too, Sweetie. Now try to go to sleep. That’s what I’m going to do.” Sam figured to watch the fire and feed it a few more times before she tried to sleep, but the physical activity of the day had drained her more than she thought. She fell asleep after the next feeding of the fire. She would wake occasionally and adjust the fire, just keeping a low flame going.

She had to smile when she noticed that Sky had curled up against Rick’s form through the poncho cover. Sam saw Sky come alert once, but after a minute or so Sky settled back down, curled up into her ball, and went back to sleep.

As morning neared Sam began to build up the fire slightly. She’d brought their outer clothes into the poncho sleeping bag to use as pillows and brought them deep into the bag with them to warm them when she was ready to get up. In the heat reflecting from the snow Sam quickly went to the bathroom and then got dressed. Rick was still sleeping soundly.

She had hot chocolate ready for them when Rick finally woke up, needing to go to the bathroom. She helped him again, and then let him huddle up in the poncho and space blanket while she fixed them a quick freeze-dried scrambled egg and bacon breakfast. When they were done Sam got Rick dressed and they crawled out of the shelter, having to move an appreciable amount of snow from the entrance. It must have snowed all night, Sam decided. The openings among the tree branches above them had allowed plenty of oxygen in, while blocking the wind during the night.

They had barely stood up when John appeared out of the swirling snow that was still coming down.

“We did it!” Sam cried, leaping toward John to give him a big hug and kiss. “Nary a problem,” she added a moment later, turning toward Rick.

She knelt down and gave him a warm hug. “And Rick was a super big boy all through it. He was a big help.”

“I knew you would, you know,” John said, enjoying his wife’s and son’s obvious joy. “But let’s get packed back up and go to the cabin. We had a visitor last night.”

Samantha’s eyes sudden got wide and round. “Oh, my Lord! Last night was Christmas Eve! I totally lost tract over the last few days. And you had to do...” Her words faded and she looked over at Rick, who was playing with a frisky Sky.

“Come on, Baby,” Sam called to Rick. “Let’s pack up our things. There’s a surprise in the cabin for you.”

“I like surprises.”

“We all do,” John said, taking them both into a big hug before he let them go back into the shelter.

End *****

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