

1. Introductions

Saturday 6th August 2071 AD

Aviemore

Cairngorms National Park

Scotland

Due to the lack of a breeze, the blue/grey smoke from the farmhouse chimney rose lazily in a thin column.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, and where there’s smoke from a chimney, there are people.” The unmistakable taste of woodsmoke registered with Bill. He used the substantial hedgerows along the far side of the main road to conceal his approach.

When he was opposite the overgrown road, which led to the farmhouse, he paused and peered through the bushes. A weatherbeaten wooden signpost at the farm entrance proclaimed ‘Eagle’s Nest Farm - Bed and Breakfast’. Beneath the fixed sign with its faded paintwork hung a narrow board suggesting ‘*No Vacancies*’.

Bill continued along behind the high hedgerow until he was two hundred metres beyond the farm. He crept out through a gap, checked that there was nobody around and ran across the road. When he located a low wooden fence, he climbed over and made his way towards the back of the large farm complex, using the surroundings to conceal his presence.

For twenty minutes, he assessed the buildings and was sure he heard several voices. The sounds were indistinct, mainly thanks to the clucking of several hens which were in the area to the rear of the main building. Due to the thickness of the undergrowth and hedges nearby, it would be almost impossible to get close without being seen. Bill stayed at a safe distance and continued his appraisal. It seemed highly unlikely that it would be Patsy Mayne in residence, so Bill headed back to the road, crossed over and went back along the hedgerow on the far side. He returned to the point where he’d left the other members of his team. The next phase of their plan began.

Bill sauntered up the main road and turned into the entrance of Eagle’s Nest Farm. He ambled along the driveway, avoiding the large clumps of undergrowth which had found weaknesses in the private road and taken up residence. Like most tarmac surfaces the years had not been kind to the narrow track. When Bill was still one hundred metres away, it became evident that the farmhouse wasn’t a standard, modern oblong shape. He confirmed that the side of the building nearest to him was as long as the frontage of the house.

Was it square-shaped? No, because the roof sections suggested a rearward extension added to the original building.

“Of course, it’s a conversion to create the bed and breakfast accommodation.” As he reassessed the number of outbuildings, he wondered if the place had been used as a farm simultaneously while operating as a B & B hotel.

More to the point, who had a fire burning indoors? Surely this could not be the new home of Patsy Mayne, murderer and mother to a wild child?

If she had moved here from the cave near Loch Awe, she had certainly stepped up in her choice of accommodation. Again, if this was where Patsy had reached, she had come a long way. She had been in a small rowing boat when Bill had seen her with her daughter two weeks earlier.

Bill reached the corner of a long barn and paused. He was wary of booby-traps and the possibility of ambush. He held his laser rifle in the ready position, the butt into his shoulder and the business end pointing where his gaze fell. It occurred to pull back the large sliding door of the barn to take a look inside, but there was the possibility of it making a noise. He left it and continued walking towards the house.

“Stop there—I’ve got a gun on you ... don’t turn around.” It was a woman’s voice.

Bill halted and slowly held his arms out to the sides, the weapon in his right hand—no longer a threat. He was eager to demonstrate a passive response.

“Place the rifle on the ground *really* slowly.” She paused. “You move too quick—I’ll shoot.”

Bill was sure it wasn’t Patsy, so he squatted slowly and spoke without turning. “You’re in charge.” He placed the laser rifle on the ground and stood slowly, still without turning, his arms still outstretched. “I’ll take a step away from the rifle, so you’ll see I mean no harm.” As he moved, he saw a young and slim blond man walking toward them from the farmhouse, staring wide-eyed.

The woman behind Bill said, “Josh, get Helen out here.”

Bill was reminded of his introduction to Sandy and Flint in the glass corridor. The two soldiers had been astounded to see survivors. Bill had known it would be risky to tackle the first meeting here in this way, but in such circumstances, it was better not to be viewed as aggressive or suspicious.

Josh turned and ran back to the house, “*Helen! Helen!*” He paused after pushing the front door open and spoke animatedly. When Josh stepped back, a curvaceous woman with shoulder-length auburn hair stepped outside. Her lips parted as she stared at the visitor.

Bill smiled as the dark-haired woman and the blond man approached. “I’d advise moving slightly to one side as you approach—if your friend behind me misses, she might hit one of you.”

“Don’t worry,” the woman with the gun whispered. “I don’t bloody miss.”

Helen looked about late-thirties. She appraised Bill as she approached. “Who ... where ... how —”

“My name is Bill Kane, and I’m one of a group of survivors who live about one hundred miles from here.”

“Have you come here alone?”

“No, I’m a member of a small scouting party ... and there are four of us; two men and two women.”

“Where are the others?”

“The two women are armed with spears, but the man has a laser rifle like mine. Unless I’m mistaken, it will presently be aimed with accuracy at the cautious young lady behind me.”

Helen looked along the driveway on which Bill had approached, and then she half-turned to gaze towards the nearby fields of crops. “I don’t see anyone.”

“If your friend behind me lowers her weapon I’ll get them to show themselves.” He smiled, partly because they’d found more survivors and partly because they were so cautious.

“Do any of you have *the sickness*?”

“No, we’ve been underground since the bombardment.” He paused. “I’d like to lower my arms so if one of you wants to search me, you’ll see that I have a hunting knife but no other guns.”

“We’ll take this slowly if you don’t mind.” Helen half-turned. “Josh, go and get Glen—quickly.”

Josh ran off to the house again but didn’t shout this time. He opened the door and spoke quietly. Within seconds, a tall and muscular young man with curly ginger hair stepped outside and turned towards the other three people.

“Who is he, Helen?” Glen walked purposefully toward the group. He was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and training shoes, just like the others.

“He says his name is Bill Kane and he’s got three friends with him and they don’t have the sickness.”

“Where are the other three?” Glen’s manner was brusque though not unfriendly.

Bill said, “They’re nearby, and I’ve already offered to have them show themselves. I’d prefer it if your friend behind me was to lower her weapon first. A mutual show of good faith would be helpful.”

Glen glanced at the laser rifle a few feet away on the floor. “Where did you get that from?”

“It’s a long story, Glen, as I’m sure yours is too. It would be more comfortable to discuss over a hot brew.” Bill looked at the three people in front of him. The woman was definitely in her thirties and probably too young to be the mother of the two young men. The latter looked very different and were in their twenties.

Glen nodded towards the barn. “Turn around and place your hands high against the wall.”

Bill complied slowly, moving his feet apart to assume a position with which he was well-acquainted, but usually as the person conducting the search. “If you touch the knife, Glen, be careful, it’s very sharp.”

Glen stepped forward and made quick work of running his hands over Bill’s arms, combat jacket and trousers. He used his forefinger and thumb to lift the hunting knife from the scabbard and then dropped it beside the rifle.

Bill glanced over his shoulder. “We now have what used to be called a Mexican Stand-off.”

“A *what?*”

Bill remained in position, leaning against the barn. “I’m unarmed, and though you have a weapon aimed at me, there is a rifle trained on one of you. We ought to reach a compromise and show some trust before someone gets hurt.”

“Okay,” Helen said, “step away from the barn, and you can relax your arms.”

Bill stepped back from the barn and turned; relaxed. “*Helen*, if I may call you Helen—do you know where the mains fusebox is in the house?”

Helen nodded but squinted. “You *may* call me Helen ... but why do you want to know about the fusebox?”

Bill spoke casually. “Do you have electricity?”

“Of course, not—we haven’t had electricity since—no, *why?*”

“I’d like to gain your trust.”

“I know where the fusebox is,” Josh said, “but there’s no electricity available. What magic are you going to produce?”

“With respect, mate,” Bill said, “locate your fusebox, trip the main switch and then the smaller ones, and try any indoor light which has a bulb.”

“Why—”

“Please, Josh,” Bill said and smiled. “Oh, before you do it—make sure the cooker is switched off.”

Josh turned to Helen, who nodded and then turned to look at Bill, but she didn’t speak.

Josh ran back to the big farmhouse.

Helen looked Bill in the eye but didn’t address him. “Lower your rifle, Amber.”

“Are you sure—”

Glen, the big ginger-haired man nodded to the woman behind Bill, and then like Helen, stared at the visitor.

The four people stood silently waiting, and Bill finally, slowly half-turned, and got to see the woman who had the gun.

Amber was the same height as Bill. She was pretty and slim with wavy brown hair. Held low across her body wasn't a rifle, but a double-barrelled shotgun which looked surprisingly comfortable in her care. Amber was in her twenties and wore the local regulation T-shirt, jeans and trainers.

"Helen," Josh gasped as he walked towards the group. "The electricity is *on*."

She half-turned and squinted. "In the kitchen?"

"In the whole bloody house." Josh's expression and tone demonstrated his disbelief.

Helen closed her eyes briefly and nodded to Glen. "Let's meet Mr Kane's friends."

"Okay, Mr Kane," Glen said, "call your people out, but if anybody looks threatening, you'll be the first one to die." He nodded to Amber.

Bill half-turned and shouted towards the wheat field less than fifty metres from the farmhouse. "Come on out guys, and *Jay-Dee*, please hold your weapon by the end of the barrel in one hand."

Slightly behind Amber, there was a noise as the young Asian nurse stood up and stepped out from his hiding place. Jay-Dee immediately raised his rifle, holding it by the barrel in one hand, the way Bill had suggested to him earlier. Jay-Dee used his other hand to wipe the loose leaves from his face and neck. He also used his free hand to adjust the straps of his bergen slightly.

"Hello." He strolled forward, looking relaxed except for the arm holding the rifle out to the side.

From the edge of the crops closer to the group, Victoria and Cherry were five metres apart when they stood and stepped out of the long stalks of wheat. In both cases, in their right hand was a long wooden spear and in their left, they each carried one of Bill's two small backpacks. Both of the women were wearing their bergens and a smile.

"Hi there," Victoria said, as she looked from one of the younger people to the next.

"Hello, guys." Cherry grinned. Her even white teeth contrasting with her flawless ebony skin.

The farmhouse group stared at the newcomers as they advanced.

Bill smiled as he looked at their expressions of disbelief. "I'd like to introduce from left to right, Jay-Dee, Victoria and Cherry ... who, by the way, is responsible for you having electricity."

Helen said, "And none of you has *the sickness*?"

Victoria shook her head, "No, but we could all do with a cup of tea."

Helen burst into tears.

Victoria handed her spear to Cherry, dropped Bill's backpack and went forward to embrace the woman who appeared to be in shock. "I can see we're going to have a lot to talk about."

Jay-Dee slowly lowered his rifle and used the sling to hang it upside down from his shoulder.

"Who have we got here?"

“Glen,” the red-haired man said, and they shook hands. “This is Josh and Amber. The woman that your friend is comforting is Helen.” He turned to Bill and offered his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Bill.”

“Likewise, mate,” Bill said and returned the firm handshake. He turned and grinned as Amber moved her shotgun over to take his hand.

“We’re a bit cautious—” Amber smiled.

“You did well,” Bill said, “and thanks for keeping your cool.”

When handshakes had been performed all around, the large group stood together.

Helen wiped her eyes and regained her composure. “We’d better invite you inside now, and you can have that cup of tea—and meet the others.”

“Others?” Cherry said.

Five minutes later the Auchcarn team met Emma, Imogen and Quincy—all in their early twenties and all, like their friends, dressed in T-shirt, jeans and training shoes.

Victoria said, “Do I hear children somewhere nearby?”

“Yes,” Imogen said. “Quincy and I have four-year-old twins, and Glen and Emma have a three-year-old.”

*

The main building complex was made up of the original modern farmhouse and then extensions to the rear on both ends which created the bed and breakfast rooms—three on each side. The entirety formed a U-shape, or as Bill referred to it, ‘an open-ended square’. In the space between the buildings at the back was a sizeable square garden with four long picnic tables complete with wooden benches. A variety of playground apparatus was set up, including swings, a slide, a see-saw and a sandpit.

Off to one corner was a chicken coop and the ten birds wandered freely around the garden.

While the adults sat around two of the tables, the three small children were happy to play together, not so much ignoring the new faces but avoiding them with wary glances.

All of the farmhouse companions were eager to know of survival apart from themselves. As had been agreed earlier, Bill rapidly summarised where they’d come from. He said that as far as they knew, there was nothing but desolation in every direction except north—where they’d now reached.

Tears flowed for several minutes. Helen and the younger people accepted what they’d long suspected. All hope of their loved ones’ survival had been forlorn.

For a few minutes, apart from sobbing, and whispers of reassurance, there was no conversation. It was Victoria who grasped the chance to move things forward.

“Could you tell us how you all ended up here, Helen?”

“I’ll give you the basics, and then my friends here will be able to fill in the blanks, later.” Helen explained that she had been a teacher at a sixth-form college on an official trip. “I had the college mini-bus and brought some students with me to spend a week here in Aviemore. The aim was for them to gain practical experience with livestock and in arable farming.” She paused. “There were eight students—“

Amber reached out and placed a reassuring hand on Helen’s arm. “We’ll explain about the others later?”

Helen nodded. “Anyway, I suppose that explains why my companions are all the same age.” She forced a smile. “When we arrived here six years ago, I was a thirty-two-year-old teacher who was trusted to take a bunch of sixteen-year-olds out for a week.” She looked around the table. “For at least four of the past six years they’ve been taking care of things, including me.”

Glen laughed. “Don’t listen to her, guys, if it wasn’t for Helen’s quick-thinking and leadership in the beginning, none of us would be around now.”

Victoria said, “Where was the college you were all from?”

“Glasgow,” Emma said. She pushed her long fair hair back from her face and wiped her eyes. “We’ve tried to accept that there isn’t much left of the world as we knew it, but it’s still hard.”

Cherry said, “From where I’m sitting, I think you’ve all done extremely well, both in support of each other and how far you seem to have come.” She looked around the others’ faces. “Our group were all adults when our survival story started, but some of us still go through dark periods—it’s a sign that you’ve still got your emotions.”

Quincy, a dark-haired and muscular man, said, “How many are there in your group?”

“Twenty-five adults and eight children,” Cherry said and smiled. “All of the children have been born since we became a group.”

Bill said, “Helen, what made you decide to stay here instead of trying to get back on the road?” He avoided using the word ‘home’.

“I was stuck with eight young students who were depending on me because our vehicle was taken. Hundreds of the townspeople and tourists panicked. We were all out in a field as a group, and one of these guys ... it was you, Josh, wasn’t it ... saw the convoy?”

“Yes,” Josh said. “We were in the middle of a field about half an hour from here on foot. Something caught my eye, and I turned to see a continuous line of fast-moving vehicles on the main road.”

Glen took up the story. “We ran back to the farmhouse as fast as we could, but our mini-bus was gone, and so were the three cars which were outside. I got back here close on Imogen’s and Amber’s heels—the girls are all more athletic than me. The front door was open, and the six people who should have been here were gone, and, as I said, so were the vehicles—including ours.”

Jay-Dee said, "I know it's a farm, but how did you get by in the early days?"

Imogen nodded towards Helen. "Our teacher saved us." She grinned. "I ran back here after checking the main road. I told the others that nobody would stop to tell me anything, and every vehicle was going fast. We switched on the television and caught a bulletin which told us the bad news." For a moment, she stared at the table. "We all thought we were going to die in this farmhouse. For a while, we sat and cried together in the living room."

Quincy put a muscular arm around his partner and kissed her on the cheek. "Helen kept her head. She got us to hitch up the two-ton grain trailer onto the big tractor. We all climbed inside the trailer and Helen drove us the short distance into town. There wasn't a soul around. Outside the biggest building in Aviemore, The Cairngorm Hotel and Spa, there was a sign saying, '*God, protect this place,*' but it was locked up."

Helen said, "The Cairngorm Hotel and Spa was the town's safe haven and secured from inside."

Cherry shook her head. "What did you do?"

Glen said, "Our teacher became a superhero—*Resourceful Woman*." He smiled. "Helen drove our tractor back to the supermarket on the edge of town and parked outside. She told us to get ready to shop."

The Auchcarn team were all mystified and looked from Glen to Helen and back again.

Glen continued, "Helen lifted an iron bar that was on the tractor and forced open the main doors of the supermarket. She told us to get inside and fill trolleys, but we were all to go to different sections." He laughed briefly. "I think it helped that we were teenagers, and Helen's attitude inspired us. I can't remember how long we did it, but we were ferrying out trolley-loads of everything, and there were eight of us at that time."

Cherry said, "You just brought the cans and packets out and threw them into the big trailer?"

"Yes," Amber said. "A two-ton grain trailer takes a shitload of stuff. Helen told us not to touch chilled or frozen goods and to avoid bottled drinks except water. She was in the trailer with a side panel dropped, stacking the gear as fast as we could get it out to her."

Quincy said, "By the time we stopped it was easier for a couple of us to hang on to the big tractor for the ride back, rather than try to get everybody into the trailer. We got back here, and Helen drove the tractor and trailer straight into the barn. All the buildings in this farm complex are interconnected. We came through to the house to catch up with the news."

Victoria said, "What was on the news by that time?"

Helen said, "Grace Jeffries, the Prime Minister, was pleading for everybody to go to their safe havens. We knew by then, of course, the local safe haven was already full of people and closed to us. The tractor wouldn't have taken us very far, but I knew that Hamish who owned the farm had

made preparations. I briefed everybody quickly on what we were going to do, we grabbed a load of food and drink and went down into the basement.”

“Did you have any facilities down there?”

“Yes,” Helen said. “We had running water, a camping stove with a large gas container, and there was a small but functioning toilet.”

Imogen, the curvaceous blonde said, “For a while, we cried, and then we tried reassuring each other although our situation seemed hopeless. I remember after a while, we even discussed how we could perform a mass suicide, but Helen wouldn’t hear of it.”

Helen laughed briefly. “I think that was my incentive to keep it together. And *that* was how our journey of survival started.”
