

Chapter 5

The CMPA solar field covered roughly a 2,000-square-mile triangular region of Indiana and Ohio, with South Bend at one vertex and Columbus and Toledo at the other two, and with a little carve out around Fort Wayne. There were no towns or facilities of any kind in the area but Jim expected it would be fairly easy driving on roads that were used mostly by maintenance crews. He started into the solar field headed south on a gravel road, surprised that there wasn't a fence around the expansive energy facility.

The solar field was eerie. Its individual solar panels, each about ten feet by ten feet square, were set atop posts about twenty feet tall spaced uniformly over the landscape. The panels weren't horizontal. Instead, each was tilted to the south at an angle prescribed by latitude and the seasonal average meteorological conditions. The ground under the array of panels was laced with drainage channels and culverts, to manage rainwater and erosion, and there was little vegetation. And although the solar field was not secured by a fence, it was evidently not entirely unsecured: pole cameras were positioned at regular intervals along the gravel road. Jim presumed his progress through the field was being monitored. He didn't expect to attract attention, though; his plan was to zig-zag east and south as roads permitted, without stopping, until he reached the field's eastern boundary north of the Columbus metro area.

It was dark under the array. After a while, through gaps between the solar panels, Jim saw the sky fill in and thicken with dark clouds. Soon it was raining... lightly at first, then heavily, and before long the roadway became soft, crisscrossed with rivulets of water. Jim shifted into four-wheel drive and continued slowly as conditions deteriorated.

The first few bands of heavy precipitation gave way to a more moderate but steady rainfall which continued to erode the roadway and Jim's hope that conditions would soon improve. Straining to see through the Jeep's rain-spotted windshield, with the wipers slapping back and forth on high, Jim began to see lights up ahead. Not car headlights, which would

be aimed forward more than in any other direction, but something more like service station or construction-site lights which illuminated a broad area more indiscriminately. Jim brought the Jeep to a stop just as he drove into an area lit up by the bright white lights. What appeared to be a single-story white building blocked the road ahead. But as Jim surveyed the situation he noticed people sitting at a large table under an awning that extended from the side of the building, and that the building had wheels. One of the people got up from the table, pulled the hood of their raincoat over their head, and began walking toward the Jeep.

Jim rolled down the window when the person, a middle-aged man with dark hair and sun-browned skin, reached the Jeep's driver's-side door. "Can I get by?" Jim asked.

"Pretty sloppy weather," the man said, pulling his hood a little tighter around his head. "There's no way around the transport there, the ground's too soft, and the road ahead is pretty much impassible because of the rain. You're going to have to wait it out here for a while, or head back I guess."

"Is there another way around?" Jim asked.

"Not nearby. There's a river just south of here, and the nearest bridge over the river is about five miles west. Why don't you pull up under the panel there," the man said, gesturing to a solar panel just off the side of the road where the ground didn't look so muddy, "and come on over under the tent. We're just getting supper together. Got plenty if you want some."

A little perplexed by what was before him, Jim thought for a moment and replied "Okay, a break would be good. I've been bouncing along here in the rain for a couple hours. Thanks, I'll meet you over there."

After parking the Jeep under the solar panel, Jim got out and walked to the awning with Smudge trailing along behind him. Smudge wandered around sniffing what he could. Jim was greeted warmly by everyone.

Someone handed him a cup coffee which was too hot to drink right away, and eventually he ended up sitting across the table from the man who had originally met him at the Jeep.

"Name's Jim," he said, extending his hand across the table. "What are you all doing out here?"

"I'm Mateo" the man said, shaking Jim's hand. We work for CMPA, maintaining the solar panels. We live and move around in the transport, fixing what needs fixing, out for a month, home for a week. Believe it or not, there are almost 500 million individual panels in this array. Our crew is one of a dozen or so that constantly move around doing electrical maintenance and fixing what we can. As you can probably imagine, there is no shortage of things that need fixing."

"I've read about crews like yours. Tough work I imagine," Jim replied.

"It's not so bad. We've got a good crew here and mostly have what we need in the transport. The food is great, usually," Mateo said. He spoke with a vaguely hispanic accent. "Speaking of food, I think supper today is some kind of soup with bread. The soup is synth but the bread is the real thing, man. That coffee too," Mateo added with a grin.

Jim took a sip of the coffee—it was delicious, obviously not synth—and after swallowing said "Holy shit, you're right. This is real! Where the hell do you get real coffee? And bread?"

"We get what we need," Mateo said, still grinning. "The coffee's from South America, where it's still grown in small towns. Not much of it makes it here to the States, though, for whatever reason. Maybe because they don't want to sell up here. Same for the other things like flour. We don't have a lot of that, but on days like today, the cook takes care of us."

Mateo and Jim talked for a while then someone nearer the transport called out that dinner was ready. They walked over, lined up with the others, and got their servings: a steaming bowl of what looked like pea

soup and a generous slice of bread, still warm from the oven. Jim grabbed a bottle of soda too, a brand he did not recognize, and sat down at a large round table with a group of other crew members. The crew was mostly male, but there were a few females too, and Jim had heard them all speaking a mix of English and Spanish among themselves. Jim knew he should introduce himself but instead of doing that he impatiently dipped a corner of the bread in the soup and took a bite.

Synth food had come a long way since the ag collapse. Most of the newer foodstuffs were just sources of nutrition, nuggets and pastes and the likes, which engineers hadn't tried too hard to formulate as replacements for any particular original food. Some synth foods did imitate original items, and a few came pretty close. But not bread. It had proven impossible to create in a vat the taste and texture of fresh bread.

Jim had not noticed that everyone around the table had stopped talking until he looked up after savoring the portion of bread. A woman across from him said "Pretty good, huh? When's the last time you had fresh bread?"

"I can't even remember," Jim replied. And after introductions were made all around he said "Who knew I'd find all this in a rain storm in the middle nowhere?" There were some chuckles and statements of affirmation which dissolved into general table talk while everyone finished their meal.

As darkness fell, the rain slowed to a light drizzle. Everyone in the camp had chipped in to clear up after dinner, and when Jim asked about Smudge's whereabouts he was told that Smudge had wandered back to the Jeep. Some of the crew members had apparently gone inside, but most sat down under the awning in chairs arranged in a loose semicircle around a large portable heater that was powered by a cord plugged into the side of the transport.

Jim found a seat between Mateo and Rita, the woman who had first spoke to him at supper, and he enjoyed another cup of coffee while listening to the idle talk that went around. As he tried to tune into the various conversations Jim noticed that none of the people had their comdevs out. Everyone here had one, there was no doubt about that, but apparently these people passed time by talking with one another rather than retreating individually into their tiny comdev screens, which was remarkable. What could these people possibly have to talk about night after night when they sat together in the evenings like this regularly for weeks on end?

As Jim was taking it all in, someone from the other side of the semicircle said "Hey Jim. How'd you end up here? Tell us your story."

"Well, I left Upper Peninsula of Michigan a couple days ago and I'm on an old-school road trip to West Virginia," Jim replied.

"That's cool, but, like tell us your story," the man pressed. "Where do you come from? Where are you going? We all know each other pretty well; some of us are from the same families. We don't need Mateo to tell us again about the time he fell off the roof of the transport again. Tell us about you."

The group sat in silence waiting for Jim to reply. While he was not accustomed to talking about himself, and even less so with so many people, the group had been very welcoming... he took a breath and started telling them his story.

"Not sure how much you want to hear, but here's the short version..."

"I've lived in the U P my whole life, in pretty much the same place. Went to school in Marquette and worked as a mechanical engineer for thirty five years before I packed it in. Designed components for wind turbines. Nowadays I putter around on the Jeep there and travel around a bit."

Rita asked "Got a wife and kids and all that?" loud enough so everyone could hear.

“Never married, no kids,” Jim replied.

“Why not?” Rita pried.

Thinking maybe things were getting a little too personal, Jim just said “Never got around to it.”

“What’s in West Virginia?” a man across the semicircle asked.

“Lot’s of things... but for me, there is a small town on the Ohio border, right on the Ohio River, called Point Pleasant. I used to go there a lot. Knew someone there... she’s not in Point Pleasant anymore, and I haven’t been back for quite a while, but seemed like the time was right this fall to make the trip again.

“A lot has changed over the years,” Jim went on, noting that all the crew members were much younger than him, most looking to be in their late twenties or early thirties. “Used to be able to drive there without all the rigamarole of the corridors and comdevs; heck, used to be able to drive all around the States—to Mexico, Canada, Alaska even—just get in the car and go. Much more freedom back then.”

Mateo jumped in: “I get that. Funny, but we knew you were coming. Well, not you, but that someone was. The ass gave us a head’s up.”

“The what?” Jim asked.

A few chuckles went around and Mateo clarified “The automated security system... the A S S. You probably saw the cameras. There’s a portal in the transport, with a display that shows the vehicles driving around in here. Your blip was a little unusual, though; we didn’t get an ID. Apparently you don’t have your comdev turned on.”

Jim said “No, I don’t. In fact, I don’t even have it with me. Is it going to be a problem?”

“Not with us,” Mateo said. “It’s all good. I confirmed with the ass that you’re here with us. But you probably should wait until the morning to leave.”

Before Jim could say anything a new voice from across the semicircle said “Who did you know in Point Pleasant? My family is from there, believe it or not. I never lived there but my folks did.”

Jim thought for a moment about how much to say. He’d never told anyone anything very specific about Rachel, or about what happened in Point Pleasant. And these people were strangers. But maybe this was all part of the trip; maybe telling the story, or at least part of it, would help him finally find some closure, before it was too late. So he started again.

“Her name was Rachel Klein. If your parents lived in Point Pleasant in the late forties I’m sure they heard of her.” Jim paused. Not because he was waiting for a reply, but because now that he had said her name out loud, he was not sure he wanted to continue.

But the voice from across the semicircle spoke up: “Rachel Klein the teacher? The one who was murdered? They never found out who did it.”

“Yes, that’s who I knew in Point Pleasant,” Jim said. And he paused again, but this time no one spoke up to fill the awkward silence. He thought *Well you can’t push toothpaste back in the tube, Jim*, and then said “I knew her for about ten years, right up to when she was killed. And you’re right, no one was ever charged with her murder.”

Again, there was a long silence. Now that he had gone this far Jim knew he had to continue, in some way at least.

“I was in Point Pleasant the day before they found her. On the way back to the U P I got in a car crash. Went to the hospital. And then the police showed up. They held me for a few days on suspicion, after they got cell-phone location records—we didn’t have to have devices back then,

but most everyone did, and there was a lot of tracking going on—but ultimately they didn't charge me because DNA evidence wasn't conclusive."

Rita interrupted "I think I heard about this when I was in school. They never found anyone with matching DNA, and cases like hers were used as justification for National DNA database everyone has to give samples to now."

A new voice said "Do you know what happened to her?"

"No I don't," Jim replied. "Other than that someone strangled her, and that investigators thought it was most likely someone she knew. Before she died, she didn't tell me about anyone who might have had reason to do anything to her."

"Anyway, I haven't been back to Point Pleasant since then. I guess I'm going to say goodbye one last time. Or something like that."

Rita said "It's a shame they never found out what happened to her. Must've been hard to go through."

"It was. Still is, even though it was a long time ago," Jim said. "Rachel was the biggest part of my life when she was in it. But then one day she wasn't. You know, the thing about relationships that gets me is that we always know the firsts, right when they are happening, but unless we make it so, we never know the lasts until afterwards, sometimes not until a long time after."

"When you meet someone, you know right when you meet them that it's for the first time. You know the pleasure of a first date, right as it is happening. You know the first argument in real time too. But you never know in the moment if any argument that follows is the last. You never know when a shared meal is the last, or a conversation. You never really know when you are with someone, unless you make it turn out that way, if it is for the last time."

"I can't say if it would be better if we did, but it doesn't matter because we don't.

"I can say that if I had known the last time I was with Rachel was just that, I would have done things differently."

Jim stopped talking and the group sat in silence. The rain had stopped too, but drops of water still fell steadily from the edges of the solar panels, softly plunking onto the ground around.

Later that night, reclined in the Jeep's driver's-side seat, Jim fell asleep thinking about when he and Rachel met.