

## Clueless - Prolog

“Oh no, Jack! We’re out of salad dressings! And Susan and Ken, and Doris and Davey will be here soon!”

“Better check the grill propane tank, too, I guess,” Jack replied to his wife, Alicia. “I haven’t filled it since the last party we had.”

“That would be so embarrassing, Jack. Can’t you get two of the tanks?”

Jack frowned slightly. “I don’t want to tie up money in a second tank when I just have to go a few blocks to get it filled at Henderson’s station.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right. But hurry. You know Ken. He’s never late. Usually early.”

“Yeah. I know. Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Alicia went back into the kitchen. She heard the patio door open and close, and then silence. She busied herself with the preparations for the small get together with their friends. It was their turn this month and she wanted to at least equal Susan’s last party, if not best it.

She kept glancing at the clock, wishing Jack would hurry up and Ken wasn’t so prompt. With everything ready, Alicia went to her and Jack’s bedroom to take off the apron that had protected her undergarments and slipped into her dress for the evening. It was only the second time she’d worn it. After freshening her makeup, Alicia went back to the living room to wait.

She didn’t have long to wait. Moments after sitting down on the sofa, the front door opened and Jack came in, followed by Ken and Susan. Alicia jumped to her feet and went to greet her guests.

She started to close the door, but Doris and Davey were coming up the walk. She held the door for them and then greeted them all, after getting their coats hung up in the entry closet.

“So good to see you,” Alicia gushed, giving the women a kissy face as Jack shook hands with the guys. They followed Jack out to the patio to hook up the propane tank and get it ready for the steaks.

Alicia began to serve the before dinner drinks, as she caught up on gossip with the two women. The men were doing much the same, discussing their various jobs and who had done what with whom when Alicia called to Jack that the drinks were ready.

The three men returned to the living room and the talk turned to non gender specific issues. Mostly how the children were doing, the weather, the state of the economy, and plans for the next party.

All in all, it was a pleasant evening, with only one interruption when, Ellie, Jack’s and Alicia’s two year old daughter came into the living room asking for a drink of water.

“Oh, honey,” Alicia cooed, “Of course you can have a drink of water.” She smiled at the other two women. It was pretty much par for the course during these parties. Each of the families had children, and Ken and Susan Morgot had one child and a dog, while Doris and Davey Klein had both a cat and a dog, along with their two children.

Inevitably, one of the children or animals would need something during the course of the party. Alicia came back into the living room after seeing to Ellie’s needs and getting her back to bed, and asked, “What did I miss?”

“Nothing much,” Jack replied as Alicia sat down on the arm of his chair and put one hand around his shoulders for balance. “Just starting to discuss further the state of the economy.”

“Such as it is,” Ken said. “I don’t know what things are coming to. Fully a third of my clients are wanting to get into gold and silver. I don’t understand it. The stock and bond markets are active and you can make money whether they go up or down.”

“Well, aren’t there gold stocks available?” asked Davey. “Mining company stocks and such?”

“Yes. That’s what I try to get them to invest in, but some of them are having me sell stocks and bonds to buy actual silver and gold. Coins and even bullion bars. It’s crazy.”

“Jewelry, I could see,” Jack said, looking thoughtful. “But gold coins and bullion? You’re right. It’s crazy. We’ll never go back onto the gold standard. Gold and silver are just commodities like wheat and what do they call them... Pork bellies?”

The six laughed. “Yes. Pork bellies,” Ken said. “I don’t do commodities, as you know. Too risky. But better pork bellies than gold. Everyone has to eat, after all.”

There was another laugh. But things turned a little more somber when Alicia said, “And that is getting more expensive every day, it seems like.”

“I know,” Doris said. “We just had to adjust our budget, because of the increases in the prices of everything.”

Quickly Davey said, “Just the matter of a couple of adjustments. Annoyances. No more.” It was obvious to the others that he was not going to admit to any financial stress. Not to these people.

But he wasn’t alone in his feelings. Jack said, “We had to make a couple of adjustments, too. But I’m expecting that raise I didn’t get last time. The company is doing pretty good, despite everything.”

Ken wouldn’t be left out. “We’re actually doing pretty good. My personal trading has kept us in pretty good shape, even with the number of clients that have left the market.” Ken winced slightly. He hadn’t meant to mention his slowly declining client base.

Then another round started when Jack patted Alicia's knee. "Of course, Alicia is an expert shopper. We always get the best for less. Isn't that right, Sweetheart?" He looked up at her face. Only he could tell how hard it was for her to agree.

"Yes. A little middle class, but I do shop for the best bargains. No sense in throwing away money."

"True," Doris replied. "I've even picked up the coupon habit, silly as that sounds. I save a bundle on everything."

"Yes," Susan added. "I believe it's just sensible to be practical, no matter how well off we are."

"I think we'd better be on our way," Ken said, standing up. "No need to pay the baby sitter another hour if we don't need to. It was a wonderful party, guys. Thank you."

That started a round of 'thank yous' and good nights. Alicia and Jack both sighed when the door was closed and locked.

"Can you believe that Ken is losing clients?" Jack said with a shake of his head.

"And Doris couponing. Such a shame," Alicia said.

A few more minutes and they were checking on Ellie and then getting into bed. Both fell asleep wondering just what kind of shape the other two families were actually in. They knew that they'd stretched things a bit... more than a bit... about their own situation. If Jack didn't get the raise he was anticipating, things were going to get tight. Very tight.

Clueless

“Jack,” Alicia said just shy of a month later. “Ellie needs a few things for daycare.”

“Sure,” Jack replied, not even lowering the paper he was reading at the breakfast table. “Just put it on the child care credit card.”

When there was no response for several seconds, Jack lowered the paper and looked over at his wife. She had her lower lip in her teeth and was obviously trying very hard not to cry.

“Alicia? What is it?”

“The child care credit card is maxed. I had to use it to get groceries this week. The household budget card is maxed, too. That party cost us a lot, with the higher prices.”

Jack set the paper aside. “Both cards are maxed? What have you been buying?”

“Don’t accuse me, Jack. I checked all the card balances when I couldn’t use the child care credit card. You’re maxed out on all but one of your cards.”

“That. Well... Yes... But I had very good reasons...”

“And buying food and things for the baby, and keeping myself looking nice for you aren’t good reasons?”

“No. I didn’t mean that like it sounded. Doggone it! I should have got that raise! They as much as promised me. But no. I’m now assistant to the VP for sales. A stinking title! A title doesn’t pay the bills!”

“I know, Jack. I know. It wasn’t fair. But you can’t fret about it too much. Remember your heart. The doctor said you had to get rid of some stress or risk a serious heart attack. That little glitch last week is just a warning sign.”

“I know. I know. But what am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Alicia said. She turned around so Jack wouldn’t see the tears flow openly.

It wasn’t until that evening, after Jack got home from his job that they actually discussed the situation.

“Honey... Look... I know you love the charity work you do. You’re good at it, and people appreciate it. But I don’t know what else to do. You’re going to need to spend more time at home so we can eliminate the child care costs.”

“Oh, Jack!” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I love Ellie! But she enjoys the time at the center so much...”

"I know, Alicia. I do. But between the child care costs, and the costs you have associated with your charity work, we can save enough to maybe get a couple of the credit cards paid down. They are eating us alive with interest."

"What about you, Jack? What are you giving up?" The tears had slowed, but there were still plenty in her eyes left to fall.

"Yes. Yes. Of course. I'll have to cut back, too..."

"Your golf Sundays... the premium liquor and cigars..."

"Aw! Alicia!" Jack wanted to protest. But seeing the look on Alicia's face caved him in. "Yes. I'll stop those events. It's almost winter, anyway. We're just going to have to rewrite the budget and start saving everywhere we can. Both of us."

Again Alicia turned away so Jack wouldn't see the rest of the tears falling as she put away the supper dishes from the dishwasher.

With the decisions made, things went a little easier that week. Until Friday. Jack was pasty white when he came into the house. Alicia was playing with Ellie on the living room floor when Jack came in. She saw his face and quickly climbed to her feet.

"Jack! Jack! You're so pale! Is it your heart?"

Jack just shook his head, handed Alicia an opened envelope, and more or less collapsed onto the sofa. He didn't protest when Ellie climbed up onto his lap for a snuggle. She was fast asleep when Alicia had finished reading the contents of the envelope. She was just as pale as Jack.

"They can't, Jack! You've been there for years! They can't lay you off now! You just got that promotion."

"Some promotion," Jack said bitterly. "Did you read the letter closely? All assistants are being laid off. If I hadn't received that new title, I'd still have a job. The guy that moved into my position is staying. He's only been there three years and makes half of what I do. I think they knew this was coming and gave me the title just so I'd be cut and someone that costs them less could take over my old job."

"Can they do that?"

"Yes they can. Seniority doesn't mean much at the company anymore. Only the bottom line."

"What are we going to do, Jack?"

"I don't know, Alicia. I just don't know. The severance will pay the mortgage next month, and the 401(k) the next couple. But that's all. Unemployment won't even come close. We have three months to come up with something. I'll think of something. I have to."

That month's party was the next day. Jack and Alicia couldn't think of a reason not to go. They both thought about just saying they couldn't get a sitter for the evening, but that seemed too lame. They couldn't afford one, so they broke protocol and took Ellie along with them for the evening.

"I hope you don't mind," Alicia said as soon as Ken opened the door to greet them. "Finding a suitable babysitter is getting impossible. We decided to bring Ellie along rather than miss the party."

"Oh. Well... sure. Come on in." Ken turned toward the kitchen and called to Susan. "Suze, the Penningtons are here. They brought Ellie along."

"What?" asked Susan, when she came into the living room. "Oh. Ellie." Susan recovered her composure at this blatant disregard of the three couples' unwritten rules of party etiquette.

Ellie was looking around sleepily. It was already past her bedtime. "She should go right back to sleep," Alicia said.

"Yes. Of course. We can put her in the spare room," Susan said, leading Alicia, carrying Ellie, toward the downstairs bedroom hallway.

Ken was hanging up Jack's coat when the two women returned. Jacked helped Alicia out of her coat and Ken put it away, too. They'd barely turned back to the living room when the doorbell rang.

It was Doris and Davey. Both had on only light jackets and were shivering when they entered.

"Getting cold out there," Davey said, helping Doris off with her jacket. "A touch of snow as we parked."

"Yes," Ken said. "Supposed to be an inch or more accumulation tonight. I don't know about this weather. The scientists keep saying global warming, but the winters seem worse the last three years here."

"It's getting to the point where I don't believe anything the media is saying about anything," Davey said. He handed Ken Doris' wrap and shrugged out of his own light jacket.

"Well," Ken said, a little hesitantly, "I'm not so sure I'd go that far... But I sure don't believe much of what is being said about the economy recovering."

Ken winced when Alicia announced Jack's employment situation. "Jack was laid off this week. All without notice."

"You're kidding!" exclaimed Ken. "You've been there for years!"

"Yeah. Didn't make a cotton picking bit of difference."

“What are you going to do?” Doris asked.

“Actually,” Jack said, “I was hoping to pick all of your brains to see if you could help me come up with something. Thought there might be something available with one of the outfits that you work for.”

“Ah...” Ken ushered them into the living room. “Man, I don’t have a clue. The agency has put a freeze on hiring. I don’t know why. The market keeps getting stronger. It’s those dang gold bugs that are ruining things for the rest of us.”

“We’re having some layoffs at the plant, too,” Davey said. “So far I’ve missed the cuts.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Doris said. Her annoyance was obvious.

“I didn’t want to worry you, my dear.”

Doris looked around at the others. “We’ll discuss it later, Honey,” Doris said, stressing the ‘Honey’ when she told Davey.

“Of course. Something smells delicious,” Davey said, anxious to get the subject changed.

“Yes. Susan is making her world famous beef stew tonight. Home baked bread, and I just uncorked a very nice Bordeaux that should go well with it.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had your beef stew, Susan,” Alicia said. “Is it a special recipe?”

“Handed down from my grandmother,” Susan replied. “It’s a big hit at family reunions. I’m the only one with Grandmother’s recipe.”

“Must be something,” Jack said. “Sure smells good.”

“Drinks all around?” Ken asked.

While Ken prepared the usual drinks that each had at almost every party, the talk turned back to the weather. When Ken handed Jack his drink and Jack took the first sip, he cut a quick look at Ken. Not only was the drink short on liquor, it wasn’t the same premium that Ken always served. It certainly wasn’t rot gut, but it was far from a premium.

Alicia’s eyes met Jack’s. She’d noticed the difference in her drink, as well. Doris and Davey didn’t seem to notice.

Jack was again surprised when they all sat down to eat. There was only the one bottle of wine, where they usually went through two bottles during a party. And it wasn’t anything to write home about, Jack decided, despite what Ken had said.

Nor was the stew anything special. Jack knew his meats. Was something of a snob when it came to quality meats. The stew meat was just that. Grocery store stew meat. He'd been expecting a premium piece of meat cut into stew chunks. Not so.

Dessert, however, was up to Susan's normal standards. Excellent presentation and the flavors were perfect. The only thing Jack decided, was that though excellent, it was one of the cheapest of the desserts that Susan usually made.

When it was time to go, Jack and Alicia said their thank-yous, bundled up Ellie and headed for home. "Did you notice the drinks?" Alicia asked Jack as he drove slowly through a heavy snowfall.

"Yes. The wine, too. Even the meat in the stew was second quality. Not like Ken and Susan at all," Jack said.

"Do you think they may be having financial problems?"

"I suspect so. They paid too much for the house, and didn't pay enough down. Their mortgage, Ken told me, is close to five figures. This housing bust must be devastating to his net worth. That house is probably worth half... two-thirds at most, of what they paid."

"So it isn't just us?" Alicia asked.

"I guess not," Jack said.

Both seemed rather pleased at the idea, rather than sorry for Ken and Susan.

Nothing much changed in the month following. Jack was still looking for work, and Alicia was staying at home, taking care of Ellie. A little desperate for the quality of life they'd once led, Jack and Alicia were really looking forward to the month's party at Doris and Davey's. Of the three families, they usually had the best spread. Not only were they disappointed in the food and drink selection at the party, the talk was mostly about the For Sale sign on the front lawn of the Klein house.

"Just decided to upgrade a little. What we're looking for is something smaller, but in a better neighborhood, preferably a gated community. We're both so busy with things that keeping up with this big old house just doesn't make sense."

Davey didn't catch the look that Ken and Jack shared. Both were painfully aware that Davey was trying to make it sound like they were going from good to great. Both had the same thought that not only was it going to be hard for the Klein's to sell the house, but when they did buy something else, it wasn't going to be anywhere as nice as what they already had.

The only other topic of conversation besides the economy was a mention of the world political situation. But Alicia, Doris, and Susan quickly put an end of that topic when Doris said, "Oh, let's talk about something not so depressing."



Alicia and Susan quickly added their like comments. But there didn't seem to be anything else to talk about, so after an awkward silence Jack abruptly said, "I think we'd better get Ellie back home. She wasn't feeling too well this evening, and I think our luck might be about ready to run out."

Though it was an outright lie, Alicia quickly made a similar comment. "Yes. And you know how they are when they aren't feeling well." She smiled thinly and stood up. "Jack, if you'll warm up the car, I'll get Ellie bundled up."

"Of course! I'll sure be glad when this winter is over. Worst in years. It should be in the forty's, not the twenties."

Ken and Susan got up, too, Ken saying, "I think we'd better head for home, too. The baby sitter is going to want to get home before it gets as cold as the forecast says it is going to get tonight."

A few minutes later Davey closed the front door, and turned to Doris. "What are we going to do in three months?"

Doris shook her head, a lone tear streaking her makeup.

Jack and Alicia were wondering what they were going to do the next month when it was again their turn for the party.

All three families should have been discussing the news, and what to do if things got worse than they were. Parties suddenly became the last thing on their minds with the President's announcement of the breakdown of negotiations with the new Afro-Asian alliance over the reduction of nuclear arms in Asia and North Africa, including the Middle East.

The New Persian Empire that came into existence after the overthrow of several of the primarily Islamic States in southern Asia and the Middle East. Hard line Shi'a religious leaders took over the governments of each of the counties and formed, with Iran Shi'a leaders at the head of it, a New Persian Empire.

A few weeks of consolidation and the expulsion, incarceration, or killing of all non-Islamic peoples within their borders and the Emperor declared that Israelites had six months to move lock, stock, and barrel out of the current country of Israel, in preparation for the new Palestine Caliphate that would be part of the Persian Empire.

China and Russia were one and two in recognizing the new government and signing a non-aggression pact and new trade agreements.

Anyone not a Muslim still in the country after the deadline would be summarily executed and their bodies burned in public places. No man, woman, or child would be exempt. Only those that could prove they followed the Islamic faith would be spared.

Five months had passed in negotiations, primarily with the intention of negating the Exit Plan, but with strong nuclear weapons issues also a part of the talks. Two hours after the Persian negotiators called a halt to the talks and left, headed directly to the private jet that would fly them home, a five-hundred-forty kiloton nuclear device was successfully tested in Iran.

The Emperor announced that the deadline stood. Israel would be no more in one month. Despite riots protesting the actions in almost every country around the world, the Empire would not back down.

Troops and matériel were moved en mass toward every border of Israel and warships headed for the coasts.

“What are we going to do if war breaks out?” Alicia asked Jack after the President’s announcement of the breakdown of the talks and Persia’s detonation of the nuclear device.

“I don’t know, Alicia. I don’t know,” Jack said softly. “Just wait and see, I suppose.”

There were millions of people with the same opinion.

At the Pennington’s, it was February 14, 9:28 in the evening when the lights went out suddenly and the house shook violently. The events occurred during the quiet, inexpensive Valentine’s Day celebration Alicia and Jack had managed to put together on their tight budget, based on Jack’s unemployment check. They, like Davey and Doris, now had a for sale sign in their front yard.

The sign, poorly installed, slammed into the huge front window of the living room seconds after the lights went out, breaking the glass into hundreds, if not thousands, of sharp shards. The massive burst of wind moved a few things around in the living room, including Alicia and Jack, on the sofa.

“Oh, no! What is going on?” Alicia asked, brushing the shards of glass from the window off her negligee. Mostly she just cut up her hands and drove some of the slivers through the thin material of the negligee and into her skin. She screamed in pain.

“Easy,” Jack said, carefully getting up off the sofa, straining to see in the darkness. Fortunately, he still had his shoes on and stood up. He shook himself, throwing most of the glass off his back. He was still wearing his regular clothing, and very little of the glass penetrated.

“Here. Let me help get you to the bathroom. We’ll get the glass off...”

“I can’t see, Jack!”

“I know. It’s dark. But the nightlight should be burning in the hallway. Wait. There is glass all over and you are bare foot. Let me get my arms under you and I’ll carry you to the bathroom.”

Alicia screamed again as the movement pressed more of the glass shards into her body. Jack was having a hard time holding her. She was almost covered in blood from the glass wounds.

Crying, Alicia held on to Jack as he walked, every footstep crunching glass until he made it to the carpet in the hallway.

“Mommy!” Ellie was out of bed, standing at the head of the stairs. “I’m scared!” The nightlight in the upstairs hallway barely lighted her form.

“Honey,” Jack said, “Go back to bed. Daddy will be there in just a minute.”

“Is Mommy sleeping?”

“Yes. Now be a good little girl and climb back into bed. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jack carefully set Alicia down on the edge of the bathtub in the hallway bathroom. Though there was an LED battery backup night light in the bathroom that was shining softly, he left the door open to get what little additional light he could from the similar nightlight in the hallway. “Get your clothes off, Alicia. I’ll check on Ellie and then come back down and help you.”

Whimpering and still crying, Alicia began to do as Jack suggested, tiny tinkles of sound coming from the glass shards falling from her body.

When Jack made it to Ellie’s room, she was already asleep again, lying on the blankets of her bed. She only roused slightly as Jack got her back under the bedding and tucked her in securely.

Jack tried to figure out what was happening, but could only come up with the idea that it must have been an earthquake. That didn’t explain the wind, though. Too worried about Alicia to think about much of anything else, he headed back down to see about her.

When Jack entered the bathroom where Alicia was, he found her still sitting on the edge of the tub, nude, trying to remove more of the shards of glass. But with blood coated fingers and blood coated glass shards, she wasn’t having much luck. Alicia was sobbing and her hands were shaking so hard it was doubtful she’d have been able to remove the glass, anyway.

“Easy, Alicia. Let me do it. I’m going to fill the tub so you can get cleaned up while I remove the glass.” Jack reached around Alicia and turned on the faucets. He was stunned when no water came out. “Oh, no! The water is off, too!”

“Help me, Jack!”

Jack carefully began to remove the remaining shards of glass from Alicia’s skin, wiping his hands after every piece on one of the luxurious guest towels. It was as bloody of a mess when

Jack pulled the last shard free of Alicia. He used that towel, and then both of the others to wipe as much of the blood off her body as possible.

“Let me carry you out to the stairs, clear of any glass. I’ll help you up the stairs and into bed.”

“I want a bath... I feel terribly sticky.”

“There isn’t any water, Alicia.”

“Oh. I forgot.”

“Oh, no!” Jack whispered. “Shock. It has to be shock.” Trying desperately to remember the first-aid course he’d had to take as part of his work, Jack picked up Alicia and headed for the stairs.

“I can’t carry you up the stairs, Alicia. But I’ll help you up.”

Silently, Alicia lifted her right leg and placed her foot on the first stair. Jack had to literally lift her up for her to get her left leg up another step. It was a slow process, with Alicia seeming to get weaker with each step.

Jack swept her up in his arms on the next to last step to keep her from falling and carried her to their bedroom. He put her on her feet, but held onto her with one hand while he threw back the comforter, blanket, and top sheet of the bed. “You are so going to kill me later for this,” Jack muttered. Fortunately Alicia didn’t hear him.

Moving her gently, Jack got Alicia, streaked now with dried blood, onto the pristine white sheets and covered her up. “That’s it,” Jack suddenly thought. “Keep a person warm. And... Yes... Lift the legs...” He leaned over Alicia and grabbed the two pillows on his side of the bed and flipped the bedding back again so he could put the pillows under Alicia’s knees to lift them up.

He covered her again. She was either asleep or unconscious. Jack shook her shoulder slightly. She opened her eyes, but didn’t seem to be able to focus. She fell asleep again when Jack didn’t say anything. “At least it is just sleep. I hope.”

Hating to leave her side, Jack ran back downstairs, intending to clean up the glass on the floor in the living room, hall, and bathroom. But he came to a skidding halt when he saw through the broken window the distant ugly sight of a mushroom cloud just clear of the horizon.

“They nuked us! Oh, no! They nuked us! This can’t be real!” Jack muttered. Thoughts of cleaning up the glass were pushed aside as he tried to remember everything he could about what to do in a nuclear attack. But the possibility had seemed so remote that what information he’d been exposed to, had been ignored completely.

The only thing he could think of was that there would be fallout. They would need shelter. “The basement!” Jack ran to the door off the kitchen that led to the basement and almost fell down the stairs in his excitement and the darkness. There were no nightlights in the basement. It was pitch black.

Jack turned back and more felt his way around than looked, because the kitchen didn't have a night light either. He found what he was sure was Alicia's junk drawer and opened it. Sure enough, there was the flashlight he remembered she kept there. Only it wouldn't come on. Jack angrily bounced it on his palm trying to make it come on. It simply wouldn't.

Digging into the drawer again, he felt around until he found a package of batteries. He looked up at the ceiling and said a prayer of thanks that the batteries were there and were the right size. It was his first prayer in so long he couldn't even remember the last time.

He fumbled the batteries into the flashlight and turned it on. It shone brightly now. Moving back to the basement door, Jack went down the stairs carefully. He hadn't really seen much damage to the house, except the broken window, but the basement stairs felt unstable when he went down.

Once in the basement Jack looked frantically around. It was a walkout basement and Jack decided, more by instinct than knowledge, that it would be better to be further back. Back into the unfinished section of the basement.

It took some time to strip the bedding from the basement bedroom and get it arranged in the other section of the basement, along with the sofa pillows and all the extra bedding that was in the linen closet that served the basement.

When Jack went upstairs again, he thought he heard some sirens, but the only thing he could see outside was the fading colors of the mushroom cloud. He hurried up to get Alicia. She barely stirred when he threw back the covers and picked her up again. It was a desperate struggle, but he got her down to the ground floor and then down the basement stairs without accident, though it was very close more than once.

He put her on the mattress he'd moved into the unfinished portion of the basement and covered her up again. Breathing heavily now with all the exertion, he ran back up the stairs to Ellie's room and bundled her up in a blanket. Again he made it back to the basement without incident and put the still sleeping Ellie next to her mother.

The next few minutes were spent moving everything heavy against the wall on the finished side of the basement. He didn't know how much help it would be, but he seemed to remember that mass, weight, was supposed to slow down radiation.

Finally, exhausted mentally and physically, a pain in his chest beginning to worry him. Jack started to stretch out on the mattress, beside Ellie and Alicia fully clothed, but thought suddenly about the glass that had been on his clothing. He carefully, well away from the bedding, removed his outer clothing and dropped it to the cold floor before joining Alicia and Ellie on the bedding. He was still trying to think of what should be done when he fell into an exhausted sleep. It was almost midnight.

Jack woke up cold in the darkness. Alicia had pulled the bedding over, as she was prone to do, leaving Jack half uncovered. Goosebumps covered his skin. The whole terror of what was

happening came back to him as he adjusted the bedding and resettled Ellie between himself and Alicia. Fortunately neither Ellie nor Alicia had wakened.

This time Jack didn't fall asleep immediately. The image of the mushroom cloud and Alicia covered in blood haunted him. As did thoughts of what was to come. "At least we have FEMA," he muttered as he finally fell asleep.

Ellie's, "I'm scared. It's dark. Daddy!" woke both Jack and Alicia.

Alicia shifted position, barely awake, and whimpered. "It's okay, Ellie. Daddy is here."

"Jack... What... Oh, Lord! I remember! Oh, Jack!" Alicia said in the darkness.

"Mommy, I'm thirsty!" Ellie said next, happy with the fact that her mother and father were both there with her.

"I'll get you something in just a minute, Sweetie," Jack said. "Let Mommy rest."

Jack slipped out from beneath the covers and shivered. Before he could grab his clothes, Ellie was saying, "I'm cold, Daddy!"

Jack quickly tucked the blankets back around Ellie as she snuggled against Alicia. The goose bumps were back as Jack felt around for the flashlight. He found the clothes he slipped out of during the night. Jack carefully shook the clothes out, well away from the bedding. He slipped into them wondering why it was so cold.

The furnace... was electric. And the power was off. For no telling how long. With the picture window in the living room gone there was nothing to keep the house from dropping to the same temperature it was outside.

"Daddy, I'm still thirsty," Ellie said in the dim light the flashlight cast. "Mommy, you don't have any clothes on!" said with some wonderment.

Alicia shifted the bedding over herself a bit better, moaning again as the dozens of cuts on her body were scraped by the cloth.

When Jack was dressed, he opened the door to the finished part of the basement, there was a little more light. Apparently the sun had come up as expected. Jack had wondered for a moment if it would be there.

It was, shining dimly through the basement windows. Jack suddenly remembered the possibility of radiation and hurried to the bathroom that served the basement. Still no water. Jack muttered. No water. And Ellie was thirsty. What was he going to do? His baby needed water.

He thought hard for a moment and then remembered there were several bottles of Perrier in the bar. Jack quickly grabbed one and went back into the other room. "This will taste a little funny," Jack told Ellie, helping her sit up to take a drink after he took off the cap.

"It tickles my nose!" Ellie said and giggled. "I'm cold again, Daddy. And I need to go potty."

Jack felt helpless. "Okay, Ellie. Let me think a minute. Okay. I'll wrap you up nice and warm and carry you to the bathroom."

"Okay, Daddy. My feet would get cold out there, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they would, Sweetheart." Jack bundled her up in one of the blankets and carried her to the bathroom. When Jack flushed the stool he breathed a sigh of relief that it worked. But he heard the gurgle as it emptied without additional water coming into the bowl or the tank. "Oh, no!" Jack thought. He was going to have to come up with a way to go to the bathroom without the water working.

"I'm hungry now, Daddy," Ellie said as he put her back onto the bedding and covered her up. "Why are we sleeping here, Daddy? Can you turn on a light, Daddy? I don't like it here. It's dark."

"Ellie, I'll find you something to eat in a minute. But we have to stay here for a while. There's... There's been an accident and it isn't safe upstairs yet."

"What happened, Daddy? Was it a car accident?"

"No, Ellie. It wasn't a car. It was... Something I'll explain when you get older."

"Okay, Daddy." Ellie snuggled against Alicia once more and Alicia stifled a groan.

"Honey," Alicia said, "I need to go to the bathroom, too. Jack, help me with a blanket."

"We'll have to go upstairs," Jack replied, leaning down to help his wife up off the mattress on the floor."

"What is the matter with the bathroom down here? And why are we here in the first place?"

It was obvious that Alicia was coming out of her shock and beginning to think.

"Water is off. Only one flush per toilet. And the window blew out, so I moved us down here." Jack's eyes went to his daughter's inquisitive ones, looking up at him so trustingly. "I'll tell you the rest when we go up."

When they were out of Ellie's hearing, Alicia asked, her voice pleading for the answer she wanted, "It was an earthquake, wasn't it, Jack?"

Jack bit his lip and then shook his head. His arm was around Alicia's shoulders and he supported her when she started to slip down to the floor when he told her, "It was an A-bomb, Alicia. Someone bombed us. I saw the mushroom cloud last night."

Alicia didn't say anything else on the way to the bathroom in the master suite. He hurried to the hall bath on the second floor and did what he needed to, as well. He'd flushed the toilet before he thought about waiting and getting at least one more use out of it before doing so.

He hurried, but Alicia had already flushed the stool in the master bath. He didn't say anything, but stood ready to help when she came out and said, "I'd better get dressed."

Her voice seemed listless and Jack quickly said, "Better be some jeans or something sturdy," when she pulled out a dress from her closet.

He began to change clothes as well, opting for the work jeans he wore when puttering around the place. Alicia stood silently for a few moments, but then hung up the dress and took a pair of her designer jeans and underwear from the walk-in closet.

Hating to add anything to her worry, Jack nevertheless urged Alicia to hurry. "We need to get back down into the basement. Fallout..."

Alicia blanched. "Fallout? Radiation? We're going to die!"

Jack wasn't so sure she wasn't right, but he couldn't let her get too distraught. If they were going to survive, they were going to have to be calm about things. He suddenly bit his lip again when a pain shot through his chest and he suddenly had trouble breathing. Jack shook the pain off without Alicia knowing. He was going to have to be careful, too, or he could wind up dead, leaving Alicia and Ellie to fend for themselves.

"We'll be okay," Jack quickly said, taking Alicia in his arms. "We have a basement. I remember it being said that people in basements would be okay."

"I don't remember that," Ellie said. She buttoned the flannel shirt she'd put on, wincing as the material scraped over her cuts. "What are we going to do, Jack?" she asked, burying her face in his shoulder.

"I don't know, Alicia. We just have to play it by ear, I guess. Let's get back into the basement. I'll grab something for breakfast and bring it down."

Alicia didn't waste much time. She did take the time to grab some clothes for Ellie and then went down to the basement.

Jack grabbed a box of Ellie's favorite cereal, the carton of milk, and three bowls and spoons before he joined Alicia and Ellie. He propped up the flashlight so they could see in the dark room.



It was obvious when Alicia poured milk in Ellie's bowl, there wasn't going to be enough to go around. "You take the milk, Alicia. Dry is fine."

Alicia blinked back tears as she added the last of the milk to her cereal.

Jack absently ate the cereal, thinking about the situation. It didn't take him long to finish it. There'd been only a bit left after Jack had filled Ellie and Alicia's bowls.

Long finished with the bit of cereal in his bowl, Jack was lost in thought when Alicia helped Ellie get dressed after they'd eaten.

"Jack, what do we do?" Alicia asked finally.

Jack started slightly and then looked at his wife. "I don't know, Alicia. Let me think. Let me think."

Alicia hugged Ellie to her and simply rocked back and forth. Ellie looked at her parents with huge eyes. She'd never seen them like this.

Ellie fell asleep after a few minutes and Alicia settled her on the mattress. "Jack? Jack?"

Jack turned haunted eyes toward his wife. "I don't know, Alicia."

"The radiation? Are we going to die?"

"I don't even know if there is any," Jack replied. "I don't feel any different."

"How can we know? Should we go somewhere? FEMA..."

"That's a good idea, Alicia. FEMA. They are supposed to help in times like these. Will you be okay for a few hours? I'll go look for them."

"Oh, Jack! Will it be safe?"

Jack hesitated, but shrugged. "I don't know, Alicia. But I have to try." Afraid he'd lose his nerve, Jack got up and went upstairs. He grabbed his heavy coat and gloves and went out the front door.

He looked around, seeing the destruction around the area for the first time. He was surprised that he hadn't smelled smoke. There were three houses burned to the ground nearby and two more partially. But the wind, a very cold wind, was blowing toward them and not toward his house. He paled, realizing that only the fact that the wind was away from his house was the only reason it hadn't caught fire and burned when the others did.

Suddenly Jack looked up and had to squint. There were fine particles in the air. When he looked closer at the street he saw small strips of the powder being swirled by the wind. "Fallout!" he whispered. He started to go back inside the house, but thoughts of his family turned him back around. He had to find some help.

He went into the garage from the outside door and tripped the garage door opener. Nothing happened. "Power... No power." It took Jack some time to get the garage door opened manually. He'd never had to in the past. But finally, with it opened, he got into his car and turned the key.

The starter kicked in and spun the motor, but despite the engine turning over it just wouldn't start. "Now what?" Jack grumbled. He got out and went over to Alicia's car. Exact same thing. It wouldn't start. Jack couldn't understand it. Both the cars were in good shape. He didn't have a clue about EMP.

With a sigh, Jack got out of the car and went outside. It was too much of a struggle to close the garage door so he left it up. Dreading what he might find, Jack headed down the sidewalk, headed for the nearest fire station, thinking, "If anyone can help, it'll be them."

He kept his eyes averted from the burned houses after his first glimpse of a burned body stretched out a few feet from one of them. Jack wondered why there were no fire trucks at the scene of one of the houses, which was still burning.

The fire station was next to Henderson's station. Jack couldn't believe it. The fire station was all locked up. He could see into the equipment bays. The equipment was there, but no one answered his heavy pounding knock on any of the doors.

He heard a shout and turned toward Henderson's, relieved to hear a voice. Someone was still operating somewhat normally. Jack ran toward the station, but drew up short when he saw a man holding a rifle on Henderson at the pumps.

"Hey! What's going on?" Jack yelled out, taking a tentative step toward the two men facing Henderson.

It took a moment to realize that the sound he heard was a shot. A shot aimed at him. He dove for the ground, rolling painfully behind a decorative raised flower bed at the edge of Henderson's property.

He heard two more shots and then the sound of a car roaring off. After several moments Jack raised his head and looked toward the pumps. Henderson was on the ground. Jack started toward him to check and see if he was hurt when he noticed the small flame flickering on top of a small slick of gasoline.

His eyes widened and he turned to run when he noticed that the fill nozzle the men had used to try and get fuel from the dead pumps on the ground. There was no gushing, but from the glance that Jack had, there was at least some gasoline trickling from it.

He'd barely made five running steps when the explosion knocked him down. He went tumbling down the sidewalk. He felt the heat on his back, even through his coat. He scrambled up, wincing, and ran back toward the house. Ready to give up, at least for the moment, Jack noticed the fancy mountain bikes he and Alicia had bought not long after Ellie was born. They'd intended

to do a lot of riding, and even had a stroller trailer attached to Alicia's bike so they could take Ellie.

Jack simply had not thought about them when he left the first time. Feeling the pressure to do something, Jack quickly took his bike off the wall rack and climbed on. The Morgot house was the closer of his and Alicia's two friends. It wasn't in his mind to go check on them and perhaps help. He headed that direction hoping to find help for his family and himself.

He did see a couple of people outside their houses, but when he was seen, each one moved out of sight. Jack thought about stopping when he saw someone, but the way they were acting, and what had happened at Henderson's, he just kept peddling toward Ken and Susan's.

There were many burned out houses, and many that seemed to have collapsed without burning. When he turned onto the street where the Morgot's lived he breathed a sigh of relief. Their house looked just fine. Although... When he got closer, Jack saw that the windows in the front of the house, the side facing where the nuclear blast was, were knocked out.

There was no movement and no sound when Jack climbed off the bike near the front door of the house and called out a hello. He went up to the front door and started to knock, but the door was already partially open.

Hesitating for a moment, Jack then pushed open the door. "Ken! Susan! Are you here?"

He started to turn away, not sure what to do, when he heard a weak shout from the kitchen. "Help! Someone help!"

Reluctantly Jack moved toward the kitchen. He nearly gagged at the sight of his friend sitting in a chair beside the kitchen table. He was covered in blood, but not as much as the lifeless bodies of Susan and little Janey, stretched out on the table.

Ken looked around at Jack, didn't seem to recognize him for a moment, but then muttered, "Jack. Help..." Ken looked back at the table. "I tried... But the glass... It cut them up so much..."

Jack made himself walk over to the table and check the bodies. He'd seen enough medical TV shows to know to check the pulse in the necks. But lifeless eyes staring at him convinced him they were both dead without the need to touch the bodies.

Samson, the Morgot's dog, lay whimpering on the floor at Ken's feet. Ken looked around at Jack again and asked, "What do I do, Jack? I tried to call 911 but I didn't get anything. What am I going to do?"

Again very reluctant, wanting someone to help him and his family, Jack nevertheless managed to get Ken up off the chair and into the living room. But Jack quickly realized it wasn't the place to be. From the looks of the blood and glass on the floor, Susan and Janey dead, and Ken cut up, Jack decided they must have all been in the living room when the blast came, shattering the huge set of windows in the front of the house.

Turning Ken around, with Samson following silently, Jack took Ken to the family room and got him sitting down on the sofa. "I'll get some water and we'll get you cleaned up," Jack said. Ken just sat there without replying.

Hoping against hope, Jack tried the faucet. No water. But there was bottled water in the refrigerator. Jack took a bottle, and a dish cloth and returned to the family room. Ken was still sitting there, listless.

As Jack carefully began to wipe away some of the blood with the wet cloth, Ken suddenly started talking. "We were in the living room. Susan had Janey in one arm and was just getting ready to close the drapes when the window blew in. I was right behind them, planning to take Janey up to bed when it happened.

"Some of the glass hit me, but it just cut them to pieces. Susan dropped Janey and screamed. Janey was screaming. I picked her up and helped Susan into the kitchen to check her cuts. But... they didn't make it. Janey was dead and I put her down. Susan had fallen and I picked her up and put her on the table to try and help her, but she just quit breathing. The blood... There was blood everywhere."

Ken turned his face toward Jack. "Why, Jack? What happened? Why Susan and Janey? They never hurt anyone. Why did they die and I live?"

"I don't know, Ken. It was an atomic bomb. I saw the cloud. It blew out our windows, too, and Alicia got cut up some, but she's okay. And so is Ellie."

"Oh," Ken said. "What do I do, Jack?"

"I don't know, Ken. I went looking for FEMA but there was shooting and the fire station was closed. I don't know what to do. There is fallout..."

Ken's eyes seemed to focus for a moment. "Fallout? A nuke? Someone nuked us?"

Jack nodded. He was getting worried about Ken. He wasn't acting rationally.

"Guess we're all dead, then. Maybe it was best they went quickly." Ken suddenly leaped up and ran for the kitchen before Jack could react. Jack ran after him, but it was too late. Ken had grabbed a kitchen knife from the rack and slit his left wrist to the bone.

Jack tried to get him to drop the knife so he could try and staunch the blood, but Ken swiped at him with the bloody knife. Jack watched as Ken's eyes dulled and then shut as he fell to the floor.

As soon as the knife fell from Ken's hand, Jack stepped forward and knelt beside his friend of twenty years. Already the blood flow from his wrist was slowing, the blood beginning to thicken in a circle around Ken.

Jack dropped his head. There was nothing he knew how to do to save Ken. A few minutes later Jack stood and slowly walked to the front door. When he reached it he looked for the bike, but it was gone. He looked up and down the street, but there was no sign of the bike or who might have taken it.

With a deep sigh, Jack stepped off the entry porch and turned toward home. But something occurred to him and he went back inside the house. There'd been some food in the refrigerator, as well as more water. Keeping his eyes away from the dead, Jack found a couple of folded up grocery bags and began to clean out the refrigerator and then the kitchen cabinets. "The Morgot's won't need it," Jack whispered. As it was, there wasn't much. Like Alicia and Jack, the Morgot's shopped nearly every day, getting food for the evening meal. Only a few breakfast items were ever continually on hand, and not much of them.

Jack began the journey home at a fast walk that slowed a little with nearly each step. When he saw people this time he hurried on past, fearful someone would try and take the two shopping bags from him. But the people just stared or turned and hid.

Alicia was frantic when Jack finally returned. "Where have you been, Jack? Oh. You got us food! Where is FEMA? Will they have more?"

"Let's get Ellie fed and I'll tell you what happened."

Only when Alicia held the flashlight steady did she notice the blood on his clothes. She blanched. "What happened, Jack? Are you okay?"

"After Ellie, Alicia. Please?"

Alicia bit her lip, but nodded. She cut a sharp look at Jack when she opened the grocery bags and saw the food. She was expecting MREs. That was what FEMA always handed out.

Ellie was a bit fussy about eating foods she wasn't accustomed to, but Alicia finally got her to eat the baloney sandwich. Jack was leaning against the back wall of the basement when Alicia joined him. It was rather dark. Alicia had left the flashlight with Ellie so she could see to eat.

"You can't believe what it is like out there, Alicia," Jack said slowly, his arms crossed in front of his chest as Alicia looked on and listened. "They shot Henderson. The station blew up. There wasn't anyone at the fire house. I came back, but saw the bikes and decided to go see if the Morgot's could help."

Alicia brightened appreciably. "They gave you the food?"

"Not exactly," Jack replied. "Susan and Janey... It was like you, only worse. The front window, that huge floor to ceiling front window blew in and just cut them to pieces."

"Oh, no! Jack! It killed them?"

Jack cleared his throat and nodded. "Yes. I guess Ken did what he could, but there really was no hope."

"Why didn't Ken come back with you?"

"He snapped, Alicia. Just like snapping your fingers. One moment he was explaining what had happened... and the next... He cut his wrist, Alicia. All the way to the bone. He wouldn't let me do anything until he passed out. And then it was too late. Ken is dead, too."

Alicia began to cry. Jack took her in his arms and held her for a long time. Only when Ellie walked over and looked up at them, the now dim yellow light from the flashlight barely enough to see them, and asked, "Are you sad, Mommy?"

"Yes, Sweetie. Mommy is sad. So is Daddy. Please be a good girl and go lay down."

"It's scary, Daddy," Ellie said. "I can't see very well."

"I know, Ellie," Jack said. "I'll get some more batteries for the flashlight."

"Okay, Daddy." Ellie reached up and handed the flashlight to Jack and then she went back to the bedding and stretched out. But it was a long time before her eyes closed. They'd been focused on her mother and father. Something was wrong. But she couldn't understand what.

After a while, Alicia and Jack ate. Only a little. Ellie was going to have to come first. After the meager meal, the two stretched out on either side of Ellie and tried to get some rest. It wasn't easy. Too many things running through their heads.

But doze they did, for a little while. When they awoke, Ellie needed to go to the bathroom again, as did the two adults.

There was still one bathroom with a stool that hadn't been flushed. Jack cautioned Alicia not to flush after she and Ellie were finished. He needed to go, too, and would flush after he was finished.

Alicia nodded and the three hurried up out of the basement and upstairs. "Don't take too long," Jack admonished. "There is fallout. I saw some."

Alicia paled and ushered Ellie into the bathroom. When the three were done and back in the unfinished part of the basement, Alicia began to play with Ellie, hoping to tire her out so she would sleep well when needed.

"Jack, do you think the Klein's could help? I know it is a long way... Oh. You didn't say why you didn't take the car before."

"Wouldn't start. Neither of them. And now that you mention it, I only saw the one car running. It was the old pickup truck at Henderson's."

“But with the bike, could you make it?”

As much as he hated to admit it, Jack told Alicia that the bike had been stolen while he was in the Morgot’s.

“Oh. Well, there is still my bike,” Alicia finally said.

“Yeah. Perhaps that is better, even. With the stroller attached, maybe I can find some more food and water. I guess I should go so I can get back before dark.”

“Be careful, Jack. We don’t want to lose you.”

Jack nodded and left the basement. He wasted no time. Jack rode as fast as he could, headed for the Klein’s. Again, those few people he saw that didn’t hurriedly get out of sight, Jack made a point of passing quickly, without making eye contact.

It took almost an hour and Jack was beginning to regret having started on the journey. Even if he just got some supplies from the Klein’s and headed home, it would be dark before he got there.

He began to feel a little better when he noticed there was considerably less destruction the closer he got to the Klein’s. But there were more people, too. Several were holding guns and Jack was glad when he made the last turn, onto the Klein’s street.

Jack started to haul the bike and trailer up onto the entry of the Klein’s house, hoping to avoid it being stolen when a shout came from inside.

“Go away! I’ve got a gun! I’ll shoot!”

“Davey! It’s me! Jack Pennington!” Jack called back. “Let me in!”

“Go away, Jack!”

“But Davey! We need some help!”

The door opened a crack, stopping when the safety chain went taut. “Go away Jack,” Davey repeated. “We don’t have enough to help anyone.”

“Surely there is something...”

Jack took a step back when what he considered an ugly black automatic was suddenly pointing at his face. “Davey? You have a gun?”

“My Grandfather’s. From the war. Now get out of here.”

“But Davey! We’re friends! We can help each other! We don’t have any food and...”

The gun tilted downward and Jack jumped when a shot splashed concrete chips against his feet and legs.

“I only have enough for us. And it may not be enough. So get out of here!”

Nearly heartbroken at the turn of the events, Jack moved the bike and trailer back down onto the ground and climbed aboard. “What am I going to do?” he asked himself over and over. He started pedaling home.

It suddenly occurred to him there was another fuel station with a quick mart two streets over from the Klein’s. He made a turn and headed for it. Again he was disappointed. There were no crowds, but from the broken windows and a quick look inside, confirmed by a man that came out of the store, “There ain’t nothing left. Nothing. You have food?” A crafty look came over the man’s face. He stuck a hand in his pocket. “I’ve got a gun. Give me your food.”

“I don’t have any!” Jack said, his eyes on the man’s exposed wrist and the bulge in his coat.

“Yeah. Sure. Get off the bike!” The man made a motion with his hand in his coat pocket.

Jack wondered, but only for a moment, if he should just pedal away, hoping the man didn’t have a gun, or if he did, he wouldn’t shoot Jack in the back. He climbed off the bike and the man waved him back, again motioning with his hand in his pocket.

Stepping back, Jack simply watched the man as he removed his hand, pointed his forefinger at Jack and moved his thumb, mimicking a gun. “You idiot!” he laughed and jumped on the bike and pedaled away. Jack took a step forward, but just couldn’t make himself try to physically stop the man.

Tears in his eyes, Jack headed for home, again on foot. He picked up his pace when he saw flames here and there and the sound of gunshots. Jack was running when he made the turn up the sidewalk to the house.

“It’s me, Alicia!” he called as he started down the basement steps. He had to pause for a moment when a sharp pain shot through his chest. But he straightened up and went down the stairs.

“Did you get some food?” Alicia asked as soon as Jack stepped into the unfinished area of the basement. Jack was a little surprised that the flashlight was again shining brightly. “No. No. Davey... Davey ran me off with a gun.”

“A gun! He wouldn’t help?”

Jack shook his head.

“What are we going to do, Jack?” Alicia asked, hugging Ellie to her. Ellie’s wide eyes seem to be accusing Jack of something.

“I’m hungry, Daddy. Mommy said you would bring something good. Do you have hamburgers?”



“No, Sweetie, I don’t,” Jack forced himself to say. “I’ll go upstairs and find something...” He looked at Alicia. “It’s getting dark. I’ll need the flashlight.”

“I just put batteries in it. Jack... I don’t know...”

“I’ll find something. We must have something in that pantry.”

Alicia winced. She knew what was in the pantry. Very little. She handed Jack the flashlight and he turned to go back upstairs. Ellie began to whimper. “I need to go potty, Mommy.”

“When Daddy gets back, Ellie. You can wait that long, can’t you, Ellie? Like a big girl.”

“I don’t like the dark, Mommy.”

“I know, I know.” Alicia said, gently rocking her baby.

Jack searched the pantry and the refrigerator again. All he could come up with was a half jar of peanut butter and a large stalk of celery. Reluctantly, Jack went back down to join his wife and child.

It took a while to get Ellie to eat the celery, liberally filled with peanut butter. Despite not having the water to flush, Jack again took Alicia and Ellie up to the upstairs hall bathroom. He made sure to close the door on the way back to the basement. The smell was already getting strong.

There was little else to do except sleep. Jack woke up once during the night. He barely reached the bathroom in the basement before he upchucked what little food he had in his stomach. He took precious little water to rinse his mouth before he crawled in beside Ellie and Alicia.

Ellie was crying the next morning and it woke Jack. He felt lousy. But he got up and took Ellie up to the master bathroom for her morning ablutions. Alicia was up by the time Jack carried Ellie back down. When she rejoined them, Jack was trying to persuade Ellie to eat more of the peanut butter and celery. He wasn’t having much luck.

“Jack?” Alicia said, the word a question, as she began to try to get Ellie to eat.

“I’ll go again... I don’t know what else to do. There is only one more bottle of water and no more food. There has to be someone that will help. I can’t believe Davey turned me away.”

Jack, still feeling sick to his stomach, slowly went up the stairs, grabbing his coat as he did so. Having had no luck the day before, Jack decided to try a different route. “Maybe City Hall...” he wondered aloud and headed that direction.

He was surprised to see fewer people out than the day before. It was warmer and he opened his coat up as he walked along the streets. It was eerily quiet as he trudged on his way. He changed his mind on the people out. There were several dead bodies that Jack encountered the closer he

got to downtown. Many looked to have been shot. Some were being ravaged by dogs and Jack had to stop to throw up again.

Only once did someone approach him. It was only a boy and he ran out to Jack from a house he was passing. "Mister! Mister! You have any food?"

Jack shied away, shaking his head. He muttered, "No. No food. Go away."

The boy looked dejected and turned, walking back to the house slowly. Jack kept going, wondering if there was any help to be had. His spirits picked up slightly when he finally made the turn on the street where the City Hall was located. There were several people around, some talking, with some going in and out of the building. But Jack noticed that no one was carrying anything that looked like food.

"What's going on?" asked Jack when he came up to a group of three men.

"They won't let us in the shelter!" one said.

"Keeping everything for themselves!" said another.

The third man pulled a pistol from his pocket. "When we get in there, the Chief is going to get it first."

"That's if you're still alive when they come out," called over a woman with two children clutched to her sides. "Radiation will have us if we don't get in there. They should at least take the kids."

There were more calls, mostly similar. When Jack saw a set of welding tanks being dragged up the steps, he decided that he would never be able to get any of whatever the mob might find in the shelter. And the woman's words had scared him more than the threats of violence.

Jack turned around to go back the way he'd come, but someone was driving a semi truck with an equipment trailer down the street. The trailer held a bulldozer. He wanted no part of the violence that was starting to erupt and continued toward the far end of the street, intending to circle back to head for home.

But there were more people on the side street and Jack just kept going. The next street was clear and he turned down it. He started to cut back across, but the sound of gunshots from that direction had him hurrying on his way. He was angling further from his home with each step now and Jack turned again, hoping against hope to find something, anything, that he could take back with him to his family.

He had to stop again to throw up. He stepped behind a bush that decorated the lawn of the house he was passing. But it was dry heaves. There was nothing left in his stomach. Suddenly an old pickup truck roared past him and turned into the alley just ahead. Jack caught a glimpse of a man in the back of the truck with a rifle as the truck disappeared.

“He’s guarding something, I bet,” Jack thought and hurried to the corner of the alley. He eased his head around the hedge that lined the alley on his side. The truck had stopped and the driver and the man in back both left their positions in the truck. The one with the rifle stood at the rear of the truck as the other man opened the tailgate and dragged plastic grocery bags out of the bed and went through the walk gate that broke the hedge where the truck was.

Jack wracked his mind to try and figure out how to get some of the food, probably stolen. After two trips the man doing the carrying heatedly told the rifleman, “Come on and help! I ain’t unloading all this by myself!”

“What if someone comes and...”

“Anyone with half a brain is in a shelter somewhere. I don’t know how I let you talk me into looting that store.”

“You were eager to go. Okay.” The man slung his rifle and grabbed four of the heavily laden bags. Both men disappeared.

Scared nearly out of his wits, Jack couldn’t resist the temptation. It had taken the lone man at least three minutes to make a round trip. Jack ran to the back of the truck, afraid to look at the gate through the hedge. He grabbed six of the remaining bags at random, two of the six-packs of water, and turned and ran back to the street. He heard the shout and curse as he ran down the sidewalk. The men had discovered their loss. But Jack decided they couldn’t have seen him as there were no shots. At the first place he could hide he did so.

The bags were heavy and Jack wasn’t used to running, much less with any weight. He was afraid to look in the bags, fearful that the contents wouldn’t be food but something inedible. Jack left his concealment and ran for a ways again, ducking behind something whenever he saw someone. He wasn’t about to share any of what he’d found unless it was at the point of a gun.

He was surprised when he made it home without being stopped by someone. Jack waited, again behind a bush, when he was close to the house to make sure no one was around. And to control the pain in his chest. But finally Jack made the last dash and was in the house.

He set the bags down, breathing hard, and went over to look out the missing living room window, peaking around the edge to see if anyone might be following him. After a couple of minutes and a very terrified call, “Is that you, Jack?” from Alicia down in the basement, Jack picked up the plastic grocery bags and went to join his family.

“You got food!” Alicia exclaimed when Jack came through the door into the unfinished portion of the basement.

“I hope so,” Jack said, placing the bags on the floor.

“What do you mean?” Alicia asked, reaching over to open one of the bags. “Surely you know what you bought.”

“Uh... We’ll discuss it when Ellie is asleep,” Jack said. He couldn’t bring himself to explain that he’d stolen the things, even though he had stolen them from people that had stolen them in the first place. Not in front of the inquisitive Ellie.

“We’re going to need a can opener from upstairs,” Alicia said. She was taking cans of food, obviously from her statement, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief. At least some of it was food.

Jack knelt on the bedding beside and helped Alicia unload the bags. He’d been luckier than he had any right to expect, Jack decided, when they’d taken everything out. There was even quite a variety.

Ellie was already trying to open one of the bottles of water. Jack took it from her and opened the bottle. He suddenly was staring straight ahead. “The pool! We can use the water in the pool!”

“We can’t drink that, Jack! It has all kinds of chemicals in it. Believe me, I thought about it,” Alicia said.

“No. To flush the toilets! We can flush the toilets!”

“Oh, Jack! That is wonderful! The smell is...”

“Yeah. I know,” Jack said. “I’ll go up and get a bucket of water and the can opener.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Alicia said, looking at him with wonderment in her eyes.

Jack wished he deserved the look. It was his responsibility to care for his family, no matter what. He should have thought of the water before. He went upstairs and then to the garage to get a bucket. Jack stopped in the kitchen and fumbled around in the knife drawer for the can opener, close to panic when he didn’t find it immediately. Alicia, when she used cans, which was seldom, used the automatic opener on the counter.

But finally Jack had the manual opener in one hip pocket and went outside to the pool. He pulled one corner of the cover off and dipped the bucket in the water. He staggered slightly with the weight, his arms already sore from the weight of the grocery bags he’d been running with. He was out of breath when he got back in the basement.

Jack was feeling faint and his heart was pounding by the time he’d flushed all the toilets in the house and came back with a full bucket to the basement. Alicia had a couple of cans open and Ellie was eating cold ravioli from her cereal bowl. It was still an adventure to her, Jack was glad to see. Cold ravioli was going to get old real quick.

But Ellie finished the ravioli and took the bowl of sliced peaches when Alicia wiped the bowl clean and added the peaches. “Jack?” Alicia asked, holding a bowl of the ravioli up for him.

Jack felt his stomach contract and he ran for the basement bathroom, again to dry retch for several minutes.

“Are you okay, Daddy?” Ellie asked when he returned. Even Ellie could see how pale he was in the dim light from the flashlight.

“I’m okay, Sweetie,” Jack lied. “I think I’d better go get some more batteries for the flashlight. It’s getting dim again.” He trudged back upstairs and found the last pack of D batteries. Fortunately it was a large multi-pack. They’d still have light for a while. He stopped in his tracks before he got to the basement stairs, another idea coming into his head.

“Candles! We have candles!” It took several minutes for Jack to find the box of candles Alicia had bought for Valentine’s Day. He got a booklet of matches from her junk drawer and went back downstairs.

“I was getting worried, Jack,” Alicia said when he returned. “What took you so long?”

“Me, too, Daddy,” Ellie said. She could barely keep her eyes open. “I was worried, too.” She yawned hugely and then was fast asleep against Alicia’s thigh.

“Candles,” Jack said softly. “I finally remembered the candles.”

“Oh, Jack! I should have thought of that! But let’s not waste them. Ellie is asleep. And you look like you need to get some rest.”

Jack nodded and knelt on the bedding, being careful not to jostle Ellie. He stretched out and felt his eyelids getting heavy. “Jack, what happened? Where’d you get the food?”

He was able to explain what he’d done before he nodded off. Alicia was soon asleep beside him, the uneaten food carefully set aside so it wouldn’t get spilled.

Over the next few days, Alicia had to make Jack eat. He was protesting that she and Ellie needed the food more than he did. But she managed to get him to eat occasionally, though she wondered if it was doing any good. He threw up, it seemed, everything he ate.

But after four days, Jack seemed to be feeling better and went all day without throwing up after eating more heartily than he had since the whole thing started. Ellie was surprising both Jack and Alicia. She’d adjusted to the circumstances and wasn’t giving them any trouble over the cold food and limited water, and sleeping in the basement.

“We’re almost out of water, Alicia. I’m going to have to go see what else I can find.”

“Jack, can’t Ellie and I go with you? It is so depressing in here.”

“It’s dangerous out there,” Jack said. “I want you and Ellie safe.”

“Oh, all right. But can you bring something different this time? The food is just not what we’re used to.”

“I’ll try, Alicia. I’ll try.”

When Jack left he zipped his coat up to his throat and turned the collar up. It was cold, with a light snow coming down. He had no idea where to go to get more food. He’d lucked into the last batch. So he decided to try a different area of town. He would be going near the Klein house. Debating on whether or not to try again, Jack decided it better if he never saw Davey again. He would just keep going when he got to their street.

His nose suddenly twitched and he followed the smell of cooking meat. It led him directly to the Klein house. Jack approached cautiously. He made it to the side of the house and edged his way toward the fence around the back yard of the house. When he peeked over the wooden fence he saw Davey at the outdoor grill.

He started to call out, but Doris came out of the house, carrying an empty platter. Jack could see that she was crying. He shivered when he heard her say, “I can’t believe we are eating Suzy and Tom. Couldn’t you have found something else?” Suzy was the Klein’s dog, a collie, and Tom the huge, old mixed breed cat they’d had for years.

“Can it, Doris. I’m not going to starve or let you starve. And the animals were going to starve to death anyway. Better we eat them than let them go to waste.”

Jack felt sick and turned away. He hurried back to the sidewalk and kept going the Klein’s never knowing he’d been there.

There was a large super store nearby, and Jack decided to check it out. To his surprise there were several military vehicles parked in the parking lot and military personnel, all armed, in evidence.

Jack stayed out of sight for a while, watching. He finally decided the military was controlling the entrance and exit to the store. People went into the store empty handed and returned a few minutes later with a sack or two of something. Food, Jack hoped.

One of those carrying two grocery sacks came near and Jack stepped out from his hiding place. Before he could say or do anything, the person turned and ran back toward the store, yelling, “Help! Help!”

Jack suddenly had a dozen guns leveled at him. He put up his hands and followed the order to approach.

“What are you doing?” asked one of the soldiers. “We’re giving away the food and water. All you have to do is stand in line for a while. Why try to take it?”

“I wasn’t! I just wanted to ask what was going on.”

“Come on. You’d better talk to the Lieutenant.” All but two lowered their rifles and went back to what they were doing. Two, however, continued to keep an eye on Jack as they took him to see the officer in command. There was a military shipping container as the command post.

“What’s going on here?” the Lieutenant asked as the two soldiers saluted and he responded in kind.

“Someone thought he was trying to take food from them. He claims to just trying to ask what was going on.”

“I see.” The Lieutenant, the name tag on his chest being Wilkins, looked Jack over. “A little ripe. Were you about to steal that food?”

“No, sir! I was out looking for food and saw this place. I just wanted to ask what was going on. I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“I see. Where have you been holing up?”

Jack hesitated. “My family…”

“We aren’t going to go looking for them. We are the good guys here. Now I suggest you give the Corporal here the particulars and get in the line to get something. If you check out, you’ll get enough for your family for a week. If not… Well, best you just tell the truth.”

There was a sudden commotion at the far end of the parking lot and the Lieutenant and two soldiers ran off in that direction when gunfire erupted. But the Corporal continued to sit at his desk. “Sit down and give me your full name.” He started typing into a laptop computer that looked like it could be run over by a bulldozer and survive, Jack thought, as he began to tell the Corporal everything about the Pennington family.

Jack had a hard time concentrating as the gunfire continued for what seemed like an eternity to him. But the Corporal was calm as you please and kept asking Jack questions like there was nothing going on.

“Okay,” Cpl. Jones said finally. A printer spit out a sheet of paper and the Corporal handed it to Jack. “Give that to the Sergeant at the door when you get to the head of the line. I suggest you be patient and don’t make waves. We’re doing what we can to feed everyone, but there is only just enough to go around. Try to abuse the system and you won’t like the consequences.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said, standing up. He realized the gunfire had stopped.

“Don’t call me sir, Sir. I’m not an officer. I work for a living.”

“Uh…”

“It’s an old joke, Pennington,” said Lt. Wilkins. “I take it everything checked out, Corporal Jones.”

“Yes, Sir. He is on the up and up. Got him set to feed one adult male, one adult female and one female child.”

“Go see to your family, Pennington,” Lt. Wilkins said. “And spread the word that we’re here to help. Trying to take without going through the process will only get you killed. We’re shooting looters on sight.”

“I will. I will... What about... fallout? Radiation? I guess everything is all right or you wouldn’t be here...” Jack stuttered, wanting to get in line to get food, but scared about the radiation.

“Explain it to him, Smith. And get him in line.”

“Yes, Sir!” said the soldier that had brought Jack to the Lieutenant. Smith saluted and Lt. Wilkins returned it and then turned his attention to Cpl. Jones and the sheaf of papers he was holding out.

“Let’s go,” said PFC Smith. “The radiation danger is as low as it is going to get for a long time. The fallout was limited, so the dose rate was limited. Anyone in a good shelter has nothing to worry about. Where did you shelter?”

“Our basement,” Jack replied, feeling better.

“Oh. A shelter in the basement or just in the basement?”

“Uh... Just in the basement.” Jack hurriedly added, hoping for reassurance, “but at the back, away from the windows and door.”

“I see. You had any symptoms of radiation poisoning?”

“I don’t think so,” Jack replied. “My hair isn’t falling out.” He reached up and ran his right hand through his hair. When he looked down at the hand he was shocked to see several strands of his hair wrapped around his fingers.

“You throw up any?” asked PFC Smith.

“Yes... Do I have it? Am I radioactive? Am I going to die?”

“Whoa! Hang on there. You aren’t radioactive, but it does sound like you have been exposed to enough radiation to get sick. You’d better see one of the doctors while you’re here. Better do that first. They might want to give you some extra food or types of food if you and your family have had much radiation.”

Now much disheartened, Jack followed PFC Smith to another of the military containers, this one an aid station.

“Vomiting and losing hair,” PFC Smith told the nurse screening those coming up to the aid station. He looked at Jack. “I’ll be around when they’re done with you.”

“Thanks,” Jack said.



It was a grueling hour for Jack. He was poked, prodded, and gone over for most of that time and answered dozens of questions. And was basically told to take two aspirin and call again the next day.

It wasn't quite that bad, but Jack learned that there wasn't much that could be done for him except lots of rest, lots of liquids, and eat as well as he could of the food available. The doctor wrote out something that Jack couldn't read on the paper Cpl. Smith had given him. "Next!" said the doctor and Jack went back outside.

"What's the diagnosis?" PFC Smith asked as he guided Jack toward the end of a long line of people waiting to go into the store.

Jack was distracted for a moment as a military truck drove past, the bed of the truck holding bloody bodies. "Uh... I was exposed and have radiation poisoning. Only time will tell if I live or die."

"Cheer up, guy. Unless you were out in it when it was coming down, you should be fine."

The PFC didn't see Jack blanch. That wasn't good to hear for him. But he put it out of his mind when he got in line and PFC Smith left. The doctor had given him a bottle of nitroglycerin pills for his heart and instructions on how to use them. Jack was tempted to take one when pain shot through his chest again as he waited. But it was a tiny bottle. Jack decided to wait until he really needed one.

The woman that Jack was standing behind turned out to be a talker, full of gossip, with a little real information thrown in. Jack learned about the massacre at City Hall where all the sheltered people were finally drug out from the shelter and killed after the shelter door was breached.

"Should've hung the people that did it. But the Mayor should have given some food out, too," said the woman. "And those that looted early on. Hope they catch them all. And shoot them if they don't hang them. Stealing food from those that need it."

"Those two men they tracked five days ago were only the tip of the iceberg. Got what they deserved. Big shoot out on Bradberry Street."

Jack almost gasped. "Bradberry Street?"

"Yep. Nice neighborhood. Two guys broke into a Mom & Pop grocery store, killed the owners and helped themselves. They got them before they could even open a can of that food. They're still looking for the third man. Not all the food was there. They figure a third man took his share and took off. Doubt they'll ever find him. Or her. Been some women looting, too, you know. Don't think they're even looking any more. The food would be eaten by now."

Jack nodded. He was afraid to speak. It had been in the alley behind Bradberry Street where he'd taken the food from the pickup truck. It was finally the woman's turn to go into the store and Jack handed his paper to the Sergeant sitting at the desk by the door.

It took a couple of minutes for the Sergeant to check the inventory and write on the paper what Jack could get. Jack was relieved when he saw the list when the Sergeant handed it back. "Don't even try to get more. We're checking against the list as you exit. And if you try to add something to the list, we'll know and you won't get a thing and will wind up in the stockade they're building."

"Yes, sir... Er... Sergeant," Jack said.

Another soldier waved Jack into the store and rolled a cart toward him. "Be quick about it. They'll check you out at the regular stands; just don't have to pay anything."

Jack nodded and hurried away. It didn't take very much time. The list wasn't that long. But it was enough food to last for a week if they were careful with it. And he could get it home intact.

When Jack went back outside, the grocery bags weighing him down more than he thought they should, yet another soldier step up to him. "Sir, do you need an escort home? There have been some problems with people being stopped and robbed after they leave here."

"Yes! Yes. That would be good."

Jack was led to a HMMV with an open rear section with benches. He took his place with five other people and the driver asked him for the address. The second soldier in the front of the vehicle said, "I've got it. He's last."

It was almost dark when Jack was dropped off at home. Alicia met him at the door. She was nearly frantic when he entered the house. Bundled up to her ears she managed to give Jack a bear hug when he came in carrying the grocery bags. "I was so worried, Jack! What took so long? Was that an army truck that dropped you off?"

"Yes. The military is in charge, I guess. They took over one of the big box stores and are rationing food." Jack looked around cautiously. "Alicia, never, ever, mention where I got the food the first time."

"What? Why?"

"They killed the guys that took it and know someone else took some of the food. They might shoot me on sight if they find out. They're shooting looters when they find them."

"Oh. I won't say anything, Jack. But you were taking from thieves, not stealing it yourself..."

"Doesn't matter. Just don't say anything else about it."

"Okay. What did you get? And did you find out about the radiation? Is it gone?"

"For the most part. I guess I got a pretty good dose early on. The throwing up and now I'm losing hair... Signs that I got too much exposure."

“What about us, Jack? Ellie and me? I threw up while you were gone and Ellie doesn’t want to eat. She said her tummy was feeling funny.”

“Oh, no! But they said any protection is better than none and that most people in this area will survive, even if they show some of the symptoms. It’ll be a few weeks before we know for sure.”

Alicia leaned against Jack for a moment, numb. It would be weeks before they knew if they were going to live or die. “I guess we just have to wait and see,” she finally said. “Is it okay to bring Ellie up now?”

“Yes. But it’s so cold. I haven’t figured out how to cover the windows. It’s warmer in the basement.”

“I know, Jack. But she needs some fresh air. I’ll get her winter clothes and bundle her up. I want to go outside for a bit too.”

“Okay. Let me put these things in the basement and I’ll come back up and stand guard while you are outside in the back yard.”

Alicia nodded and headed for the stairs to the second floor. Jack went into the basement greeted by a squeal from Ellie and a big hug. Jack looked her over as he hugged her back. “Please, please, please, let her be all right!” Jack prayed silently.

## Clueless - Epilog

Jack was surprised the next day when a military truck stopped and five soldiers, led by a Cpl. Winter got out. He was terrified for a moment that they'd found out he'd been the one that had taken the food from the looters. But the men were cheerful and dragged out a couple of tarps and ladders, along with some hand tools.

It didn't take them long to get the windows blown out by the nuclear blast wave covered with the tarps. "Afraid it is the best we can do, Mr. Pennington," said Cpl. Winter. "I know winter should be about over, but the experts are saying winter could last quite a bit longer. If things get too rough, we're setting up shelters. If you can't keep warm enough here, be sure to go to one of the shelters."

"Thank you, Corporal. We'll try to stick it out here."

"Okay. But the shelters are available if you need." With that the soldiers took off, headed for the next house with occupants that needed a helping hand.

The next few days and weeks of waiting to know if they would die or not were hard on the family, especially when Jack had to take to his bed when his symptoms came back, worse than the first time, compounded by his heart troubles. Alicia had to go to the food distribution point the last two times before Jack could get back on his feet.

Alicia and Ellie had developed some of the symptoms of radiation poisoning, and then they'd faded. But it wasn't until they'd gone through it again and were feeling all right that they were sure they were not going to die.

Though they made it though the worst winter in recent years staying at home, there just was no way they could make it on their own. The city sewers finally backed up and the toilets could no longer be flushed with the dwindling supply of water from the pool. It was being said that the authorities were trying to get city services back up, but that was only going to be for downtown for a long time.

They knew nothing of growing a garden, and without any tools, much less seeds, Jack and Alicia finally talked it over and decided to go to one of the local camps. At least there they would get two solid meals a day, for doing a minimum amount of work. And additional work meant additional supplies, including what were now luxuries. There was no shortage of work.

Jack was a bit worried about running into Davey and Doris at the shelter, but found out after discreet inquiries that the entire Klein family had died of radiation exposure. They had a basement, but it was a full walkout basement and it simply had not been enough to protect them, especially since they didn't stay in it most of the time the way the Pennington's had in theirs.

A big comedown in lifestyle, but they'd made it through a nuclear war, despite being totally clueless.

End \*\*\*\*\*

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