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CME

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CME - Prolog

Robert DeLancie couldn't believe it at first. But there it was on his computer screen. "Diagnostics," he muttered, starting the program that would check the computer and the software for problems. It would take a half hour to run. If everything checked out okay and he got the same results, he would call someone. "But who?" he asked himself. "Who will believe me?"

"No one. That's who," Bobby, as he was known to the few friends that he had left, muttered to himself. He did that a great deal now. Muttering to himself. Didn't have much chance to talk to people any more. "They can call me crazy if they want, but this is going to happen." He spoke aloud, firmly that time, staring at the results on the computer screen once again.

Bobby reached for the telephone again. The person he was calling now would believe him. It was like preaching to the choir.

"Hello, Mr. Shaunessy? Yes, sir it is. It's happened. I can't get anyone to believe me. I wanted to let you know. You've helped me out several times in the past and I've always appreciated it. I wanted you to know. The cycles all coincide. In four years, six months, two weeks, and three days, there will be a monster mass coronal ejection toward the earth. Yes, sir. I'm as prepared as I can afford to be. Thank you, sir."

He hung up the telephone slowly. Yeah, he was as prepared as he could afford to be. Which meant the only preparations he'd made were to sharpen up the dime-store ice-pick he'd picked up the last time the chest pains had been so bad. The nitro had helped, but not that much. And the headache the nitro caused was worse than the chest pains. Bobby thought about trying to hold on just to see if it really happened.

"It'll happen." He was muttering again. At eighty-three years of age, much of it misspent, it took a while to finish his preparations. All the

documentation was in order. Rewriteable DVD's with all the data were burned. The website was updated with the latest information and projection and a DVD burned of it. Bobby put the items into a small fire-resistant safe and locked it.

A few more minutes and all the utilities were scheduled to be turned off by noon the next day. Everything he could do, was done. The one man he knew that might make a difference now knew. It took only an instant to run the ice-pick deep into his heart. Only moments for him to die.

CME - Chapter 1

Dick Shaunessy hung up the phone and turned to the young woman studying the large computer screen taking up part of one wall. "Why are you showing me all this?" she asked, turning to face him.

"Your grandfather has been working on a theory for many years, Miss DeLancie. I believe him."

Claudia shrugged. "I know his theory. That's all it is. No one can predict solar activity."

"Of course it can be predicted. To a degree. The prediction that the sun will rise every morning in the east is simply one of the predictions that are made. That was your grandfather on the phone. He said it would happen in four and a half years. On a specific day."

"Four and a half years! But that's so much sooner than he thought!"

"So you do believe in his theory, just as I do."

Claudia was frowning. "I'm not one hundred percent sure. But the theory does have some merit. It is basically is a matter of time. Of when, not if. But predicting the exact moment that the sun will have a Mass Coronal Ejection in alignment with the earth...

“I just don’t see how he could predict something like that. It’s bound to happen eventually. But to predict it down to a day four and a half years from now? I don’t know. There are definitely some cycles that do come into play... but... I just don’t know if I believe the whole thing. I love Grandfather, but I can’t quite bring myself to commit to this plan of yours.”

“I can’t save everyone in the world. I do think I can save a few people, including myself, first and foremost. I don’t want to mislead you, Miss DeLancie. I’m doing this in my own self interest. I’m only forty-four.

“I would like to live at least as long as I possibly can. I’m financially secure. For the most part, I’ve prepared for most types of natural and human caused disasters. This one is an extreme one. Others would survive, no doubt. But I would like to see the species go on. This event might prevent it.

“Your grandfather’s theory is not the only thing I am worried about. There’s global warming, the possibility of another ice age, nuclear holocaust, and the list goes on. Most I’m prepared for on an individual and family scale. For some things, that is not enough. I would like my children to have the opportunity guaranteed, as much as it can be, that there will be a future for the human species.”

“What you have in mind will take a sizable fortune.”

“I have one. And it’s getting bigger. I’ve no qualms about using up most of it in the next four and a half years. If I’m wrong, the investments that I will be making will just enhance it that much more. If it turns out nothing happens, I will still enjoy a very comfortable life.

“I got a break when I was a young man. Someone helped me out. I do what I can now, but these preparations could be the difference between life and death for hundreds of people. And those hundreds could affect

perhaps thousands positively. What do you say? Will you take the lead position on this? The position is the equivalent of a presidency of one of my companies, with attendant remuneration. Though I doubt that will have much affect on your decision.”

“You’re right. It won’t. Let me talk to grandfather this weekend. I’ll let you know Monday.”

“Fair enough. We have time to accomplish what I envision, but I don’t want to delay too much.” A smile curved the man’s lips. “There is an opportunity to acquire some property suitable to my endeavor next week. I’d like you to handle it.”

“I will let you know Monday morning, Mr. Shaunessy.” Claudia strode from the room without further ado.

It was six o’clock and happy hour had just begun at the bar that Claudia could now patronize. She’d turned twenty-three just a few days previously. Gloria, one of Dick Shaunessy’s numerous other employees, had invited her to the local watering hole that many of them used after work.

“My stomach is bothering me. Galliano,” she told the cocktail waitress. Gloria and she had managed to snag a booth. “I don’t know, Gloria. It is an important position. I’ve only got the two years of college and the job I have is a good one, with good pay. It’s taking care of me and of my grandfather.”

“But, you nitwit, this could take a whole lot better care of the two of you. How can you even think about turning it down? Whatever it is.”

“You know I can’t tell you. And it’s the principle of the thing. Everything everyone has told me about Mr. Shaunessy leads me to believe it is a legitimate offer. I thought maybe he was just trying to seduce me, but it really doesn’t seem that way.”

“Honey, that man couldn’t seduce a prostitute. It just isn’t in him. He’s a nice guy. Married to a nice lady. None too bright, but not stupid, and as nice as he is. Their kids are great. He’s not after your body, nice as it is. Now, Rodney, in processing... that’s another story.”

“Yech!” Claudia said. She took a sip of the Galliano after the waitress had set it and Gloria’s Tom Collins on the table. “I try to be nice to everyone, but he is a creep. I’m surprised Mr. Shaunessy lets him work there.”

“Mr. Shaunessy doesn’t. I doubt he knows about him. He’d probably fire him and Rodney’s dad for hiring him.”

“Oh. That explains a couple of things.”

“Yeah,” replied Gloria. “You’ve got to pay more attention to things, Claudia. Just doing your work isn’t enough. You have to know what’s going on in and around the office. I mean, whether or not you take the job he’s offering you... especially if you take the job, you need to keep a handle on things around you.”

“I know. I’m getting into the hang of it,” Claudia protested. “This corporate world just isn’t what I thought it would be.”

“This is not the corporate world,” Gloria said firmly. “Shaunessy, Inc. is small potatoes, as such things go. I worked for big outfits and it’s the same, except for scale. And believe you me, the scale makes a difference.”

“I guess so,” admitted Claudia. “You’re not the first one to tell me that. But... I can tell you this, as long as you don’t spread it around... This would be a really big step up for me. I guess I am qualified for it. At least, compared to anyone else I know in the company.”

“Then what’s the hold up?”

“I don’t know. I’ll talk to my grandfather about it. Maybe that’s why I’m wavering. I’m sure he’ll be all for it.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Gloria asked. “I know he’s old and a little frail, from what you said, but you seem to value his judgment.”

“On some things, yes. On some others, he’s... a little eccentric.”

“Well, if you do take the job, keep me in mind for a position. The boss likes to promote sideways as well as upward. People have taken others with them to new projects and the like.”

Claudia finished the drink she had been sipping on and paid the waitress. Gloria was going to stay for a while, but Claudia wanted to get home and talk to her grandfather about the telephone call he’d made to Dick Shaunessy.

Such case was not to be. When he didn’t answer the doorbell to his apartment, Claudia let herself in with her key and found him. She could tell it would do no good to try CPR. It was obvious he had been dead for several hours. Not tears came. They would later, but for the moment, Claudia was her usual efficient self. She called 911 and explained the situation. She noted the fire safe, but made no move to open it.

She signed the papers she needed to sign when the authorities arrived. Claudia explained about her grandfather’s heart condition and the pain he’d been in recently. She didn’t mention the phone call or his theory.

The other phone calls he’d made that day did come out after his death was reported. He’d made something of a name for himself with his supposed crank calls to radio and TV stations and to newspapers.

The various government officials he'd called the day of his death were only too happy to tell the story he'd given them. That of impending doom within a few years. Claudia had to admit the obituary wasn't as unkind as it might have been. Her grandfather had been a well liked person, despite his ways. It was only on the one subject and with certain people that he had built the reputation of a crazy old doom-and-gloom prophet.

Claudia was thankful that Mr. Shaunessy didn't press her about the job offer the following Monday. She was in the middle of making the funeral arrangements. They could only be carried out after an autopsy was performed, due to the fact that he had committed suicide.

She took the few days off, thankfully, that Shaunessy had offered. By Thursday everything was done. The service had been small. She was Robert DeLancie's only living relative. His handful of remaining friends had come and given their condolences. It was raining the day of his internment. She was the only attendant, other than the funeral home personnel.

She went in at noon on Thursday and asked to see Mr. Shaunessy. She only had to wait for a few minutes before she was ushered into his office. "Thank you for the flowers, Mr. Shaunessy. They were beautiful."

"You're most welcome," Dick replied, motioning her to one of the chairs facing the desk. "Do you need some more time? It's quite all right to take the rest of the week if you want."

"No, sir," replied Claudia. "I'm doing okay, now. Thank you for the time you gave me this week. It made things much easier. What I wanted to talk to you about was the job you offered me."

"There is still time for you to make a decision. I had Johnson handle that property acquisition. There's no rush because of it."

“I know. I heard about it through the grapevine.” A wry smile curved Claudia’s lips. “You might want to watch how you do things. People are talking about that deal in rather uncomplimentary ways.”

Shaunessy smiled. “I’m not surprised. I didn’t really give any valid reason for buying it. Just told the team I wanted it done. One of the reasons I am interested in having you take on this set of responsibilities, despite your age and lack of experience, is your willingness to express yourself openly and sincerely. That means a lot to a person in my position.”

Claudia nodded. She wasn’t offended by his mention of her youthfulness. The kind of responsibility he was asking her to shoulder would frighten anyone other than someone with a very high opinion of himself or herself. Claudia was a bit daunted, but she felt she could handle it, and so did Mr. Shaunessy.

“Speaking of which, Mr. Shaunessy. I know I’ve just returned to work, and it is outside my bailiwick, but you might want to make inquiries into Rodney Silverstone’s activities here at the office.”

“Silverstone? In processing? There’s a Wayne Silverstone. He’s the head of processing. I’m not sure I know a Rodney Silverstone. Are they related, by chance?”

“I understand that to be the case. It is just hearsay, but some of my coworkers have commented on the situation. I thought you should be made aware of it.”

“Thank you. You obviously don’t want to say more. I assume because you don’t really have further information. Rest assured. I will look into the situation.”

“About the job... I looked at all my grandfather’s research. He was

convinced. I'm not. But there was a great deal of other information that he had gathered. Much of it you referred to last Friday. In light of the possibilities, and your willingness to approach them with a positive outlook, I'm willing to consider the job. I would need more details as to staffing, budget, and so on. I am willing to take the offer, if those details are to my satisfaction."

Shaunessy was smiling slightly. "You're not afraid to lay down a few rules, are you? Not afraid I would take this all wrong and just let you go?"

"Not really," Claudia replied. "You don't seem to be the type to do that. Besides, I can get another job easily enough. Part of the reason you want me for the position is my forwardness, and, I think, the long list of jobs that I've had since I was thirteen."

"Exactly." Shaunessy looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I can't go over the details at the moment. Would tomorrow morning be an acceptable timeframe?"

"Yes. Of course." Claudia stood and extended her hand. "Pending that discussion, we have a deal."

When he shook her hand, Dick Shaunessy found it a firm, full handed handshake. "Excellent. I will see you at nine in the morning. And again, my condolences about your grandfather. I considered him a very wise, perceptive man."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaunessy."

The concept was breathtaking in scope. Dick Shaunessy wanted to have, under his corporate auspices, the workings of a civilization, in microcosm. The basic foundation of civilizations at the very least. Something rather more than that at the very best. He wanted it spread

out across the United States, as well as outposts around the world.

It would be a daunting task, to be sure. But Claudia, aside from the reasons for it, found the idea intriguing. She was as surprised at the budget as she was the scope of the process. There was seed money, to be sure. A great deal of it. But each of the elements was to be not only self-sustaining, but profitable to the corporation.

The third big surprise was the size of the staff. She started to object, but as she thought about it, the idea of only a core group administering the plan itself did seem to make sense. The overwhelming bulk of the day to day activities would be performed by those doing the very same work they would be doing, anyway.

Shaunessy had not been kidding about the remuneration. It was the equivalent of a presidency in one of his existing companies. It amounted to a directorship of the corporation. Director of Preparedness. One of her duties was to incorporate emergency preparedness concepts into every existing business under the corporate umbrella, the corporation offices, and any and all new business that would be bought or formed under the overall plan.

“You have the gist of it,” Shaunessy said. “There is only one more requisite that I have. That is that you will not only administer the plan, you will, for all intents and purposes, live it. I expect you to be as prepared, yourself, personally, as well as the situations you will be creating for me, will be. Is that acceptable?”

Claudia studied his face for a moment. “It is. I will accept your proposal. When do I start?”

“As of nine this morning,” he replied. “You are now officially in charge of corporate preparedness. Only my wife and I, you, and your staff will know the full scope of my plan. And I will leave it to your discretion just how much of the scope any given staff member knows. It is all right if

they know it all. I trust your judgment as to the staff selection. But it is all right if you prefer to compartmentalize, too. A suggestion and suggestion only, is that you find yourself an assistant as quickly as possible.”

“I have someone in mind. It would be a major promotion for her, but I believe she would be more than capable of accomplishing the tasks.”

“It’s in your hands. I do retain oversight authority, of course, but I do not anticipate any problems. Pick an office suite here in the building as headquarters, but feel free to obtain working quarters wherever you think necessary.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll report on those details by close of business today.”

Claudia’s first stop after leaving Dick Shaunessy’s office was at Gloria’s workstation in accounting. “When you take a break, come see me in my office,” Claudia told Gloria.

“Your office? I didn’t know you had an office.” Gloria’s eyes widened. “You took that position!” she whispered forcefully.

Claudia nodded. “I’ll see Richard. Arthur Roundtree’s office is still vacant. I’ll be using it.”

“Whoa! That’s a corner office with two waiting rooms and an office for a private secretary. Not to mention an assistant’s office.”

“I know. He said pick an office suite. It’s the only one I know is vacant. I’m not going to eject someone.”

“There are only a few offices better than that one, anyway. Look. I need to finish up this task. I’ll take my break in about fifteen minutes.”

Claudia nodded and went to find Richard. He wouldn't authorize any changes in the office until he talked to Shaunessy. When he came back from his office, his attitude had changed. He was no longer the aloof office manager. He had not been rude before, just cautious about a relatively new junior executive trainee requesting one of the best office suites in the building.

"Just give me a list of what you need, Miss DeLancie. We just cleaned the office yesterday to ready it for a new tenant. Mr. Shaunessy didn't exactly say the sky is the limit, but he did say you had carte blanche as to office space, personnel, equipment, and supplies. I will detail Helen to handle your set up needs."

"Thank you, Richard." He was fifteen years her senior, but her past experience, and the implication that Dick Shaunessy had given, decided Claudia to play it very professional. She was his superior now and should act like it. She'd been on the receiving end of bad management styles and did not intend to follow that type of example. She'd follow the example she had seen Dick Shaunessy set. Friendly, but professionally distant.

"That will be fine," she continued. "I have a meeting with Gloria Albertson when she takes her break. She will probably be transferring to my team. Arrangements will need to be made to replace her in accounting. And I will have a job skills list by early afternoon. I'd like your suggestions as to who in the organization are most qualified in those skills."

"Certainly," replied Richard. "I believe I can be of some assistance with that."

Claudia gave him a smile and said, "I thought you might. Thank you, Richard. I'll need a telephone, a table and two chairs as soon as possible."

“Consider it done, Miss DeLancie. I’ll contact housekeeping myself.”

“Thank you.” Claudia went to the desk she had been using in the purchasing department and gathered a few things. When asked if she’d been fired, Claudia couldn’t help but smile broadly. “No. A promotion.” It was gratifying, that no longer than she had been in the organization, she was congratulated, quite sincerely.

By the time she returned to the fifth, and top, floor of the Shaunessy building, and entered her new office there was a table with a telephone on it and two chairs. Richard hadn’t tried to set things up completely. He understood that she would be picking the furniture and equipment that she wanted.

It took only moments to set up the temporary workspace. She opened her notebook and began writing in a small, neat hand. It was only a few minutes before Gloria knocked on her office door and followed the sound in.

“We’ve become friends the last few weeks, Gloria. I need to know straight away if you can work for me without any problems having to do with my age, time with the company, and level of authority I will be wielding. I’ll be reporting directly to Mr. Shaunessy. You would report directly to me, as my assistant.”

“Boy,” Gloria said. “You get right to the point, don’t you?”

“I have to in this position. It’s important to Mr. Shaunessy and it’s important to me, to do a good job. I want people able to follow instructions promptly, but know when they should question them.”

“There’s no problem that I can see. I can and will take orders. And you know me well enough already to be aware that I will ask questions when I feel it important. I don’t have a problem working with and for a friend. I can keep them separate when necessary.”

Claudia smiled with relief. Gloria was something of a free spirit. It was a good quality for what they were going to be doing. But it did come with some problems. Gloria had not been bashful about giving Claudia advice. That had been fine. It was fine for it to continue, but there was a line between advice and directive. Claudia couldn't and wouldn't tolerate the latter. She trusted Gloria to know the difference most of the time. She would remind her if necessary.

“Okay then. You are my assistant on this project. There will be quite a bit of non-standard hours and quite a bit of travel. You able to do that?”

Gloria nodded. “I have a good cat sitter. Can watch Tabby any time.”

“Good. The pay will reflect the travel and the hours. I think you will be happy. I don't have a budget set yet. That is one of the things you'll be helping with. I've asked Richard about helping find another person or two. I'll want your input on that as well.”

Again, Claudia grinned. “You know everybody in corporate and most of the subsidiaries and wholly owned.”

“Who are you looking for? Or should I say what?”

“We'll get to that later. Right now, I want you to make the arrangements that you need to start working with me on... would next Wednesday give you enough time to finish up any projects you are working on or get them transferred?”

“More than enough. I should be able to start Tuesday morning, if that's okay.”

“If you can arrange it, yes. But don't short anything. We are going to be dealing with just about everybody in every department in every company at some point. I want relations kept as friendly as possible.”

“No problem,” replied Gloria. “I finished one project just now, and one can be transferred without any problems. The other one I’ll have finished Monday.”

“Good, then. That is it for the moment. I’ll brief you first thing Tuesday morning.” She grinned at Gloria then. “I thought about easing that curiosity of yours Saturday or Sunday, but I need to know you can tough things through. There will be times, at least initially, that you’ll be doing things without knowing all the details as to why. Besides, you’ll need your rest this weekend. We’ll probably be traveling late next week.”

“Okay, Boss. Just be that way.” Gloria grinned back. “I’ll go get on it. The sooner next Tuesday comes, the better.”

Claudia followed Gloria out the door. It didn’t take her long to go over the two lists she gave to Richard. “And Gloria Albertson will be working for me, effective next Tuesday. She assured me that there would be a smooth transition.”

“There will be,” Richard said. “I talked to Frances, her department head. She hates to lose her, but there will be no lack of continuity.”

“Excellent. If Mr. Shaunessy comes looking for me I’ll be in stores, picking out furniture and equipment. To whom do you recommend I speak?”

“Ask for Ricky. He’ll be the one in the wheelchair.”

“Thanks, Richard.”

By the end of the day, she had the arrangements for her office suite finished. She nodded to Shaunessy’s secretary. “Is he in?”

The secretary, Barbara Babcock, had been with Dick Shaunessy for years. This was the first time that anything had gone on that she didn't have prior knowledge. But he would fill her in when he got around to it, she was sure.

"He said you'd be by with an update for him. Go right in."

Claudia flashed Barbara a thank you smile and did so, after knocking. He motioned to a chair in front of the desk and she sat down. "The wheels are in motion. I'm transferring Gloria Albertson from accounting effective next Tuesday. I'm looking for two more people from inside and will post for two more specialized positions on Monday. I'll be using Mr. Roundtree's old office suite here."

Leaning back in the leather and wood executive chair, Dick Shaunessy interlaced his fingers on his stomach and grinned at her. "You're a great deal like him," he said. "He wanted close enough to get to me when he wanted, but far enough away that I wouldn't be bothering him unless it was important."

"I'm going to miss him. But it is good he left when he did. He doesn't have that many years left and he deserves to enjoy them. He and his wife are traveling the country in a motorhome. But that is of no importance to this. What else?"

"Nothing at the moment. I'll have an action plan ready on Monday for your review. There will be a preliminary budget covering the activities through the end of the year by next Thursday. I plan to fly out with Gloria to check on a couple of acquisitions in the Midwest on Friday. I will know by the following Friday if we will want to acquire them."

"Where and what?"

"I don't know yet," Claudia replied smoothly. "I'll be making those decisions next Thursday."

“I see. Definitely a plan. Keep me informed. And keep Mrs. Babcock in the loop. She needs to know what I know.”

“As you wish, sir. Is there anything else? I am anxious to get started on the plan.”

“Nope,” Shaunessy said as he stood up. “This is a good start. Keep it up.”

“I plan to, sir.” Claudia left as Shaunessy went to the closet to get his overcoat.

On Monday morning her office suite was equipped just as she had instructed. She inserted the DVD-RW into the desktop computer and pulled up the plans she’d worked on during the weekend. The drive read them properly and she hooked up one of the six laptops that had been delivered. Each one read the data just fine.

Claudia went onto the internet to research the types of properties she had in mind to acquire for the plan. Richard had assigned her a temporary secretary. She buzzed Claudia and announced a Bradley Bennett was there to see her.

She didn’t know a Bradley Bennett, but her curiosity was aroused. She met him at the office door and introduced herself.

“I’m Bradley Bennett. Arthur Roundtree’s nephew. He asked me to stop and pick up a box of personal effects. He was anxious to get on the road and simply forgot to come back in and get the last box. He didn’t even remember it until this past weekend. He called me to ask me to pick it up for him. He said he would call and okay it with someone.”

Claudia reached for the phone. “I’ll have to check. I just moved into this

office today. All of the previous contents were put into storage on the first floor.” She dialed an extension. “Ricky, it’s Miss DeLancie. Are you holding a box for Arthur Roundtree? You are. Good. His nephew is here to pick it up. Mr. Roundtree was supposed... Oh. He did? I’ll send him down.”

She put down the telephone and looked at Bradley. “Your uncle contacted Ricky directly just a little while ago. Ricky knows all about it. I’ll send someone down with you.” She buzzed her secretary, June, and asked her to come in.

“June will see you to Stores and Ricky will take it from there. I suppose Reception sent you to me, since I was using this office.” She rose and Bradley did the same.

“I imagine so. I just asked for Uncle’s old office. They sent me here. I didn’t even know your name. DeLancie. I know that name from somewhere.”

“I think there is a character actor with the last name DeLancie. That’s probably where you’ve heard it.” Claudia was walking him toward the office door. She couldn’t keep from admiring his profile as he stepped along beside her. He was three inches taller than she, despite her one inch pumps. She was relatively tall, anyway, standing a full five feet eleven in her stockings.

He had a very nice profile, she decided. She took a good look at his face when he stopped and turned to face her. She missed his words at first, as she took in the full effect of his appearance.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have several things on my mind. I didn’t mean to be rude, but I missed what you just said.” She wasn’t about to tell him what had been on her mind.

“You looked like you were far away there for a second. I was saying it

wasn't some actor it was a theorist by the name of DeLancie. Died just recently."

"Robert DeLancie. He was my grandfather."

"Yes. Robert DeLancie. A remarkable man. He didn't get the credit he deserved. I've read some of his stuff he published on the internet. Very interesting. I am not sure I agree with his timing, though he does make a creditable case. The timing doesn't matter. It is a matter of when, not if. Just like every other disaster scenario. They've all happened in the past. They'll all happen in the future. When. Not if. When I do a preparedness consultation I use his theory as part of my presentation.

When June came in, Claudia said, "Never mind, June. I'll take care of this myself. Thank you." She held the door open to allow June, and then Bradley to walk out.

"To what do I owe this sudden honor?" Bradley asked with a smile.

"Your profession," Claudia replied. She started down the hall toward the elevators. "From what you said, you are a preparedness consultant."

"That's right," Bradley said. He fished a card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. It read Bennett Consulting on one line, and underneath that was printed Knowledgeable In All Aspects Of Preparedness.

"All aspects. That covers a lot of ground." Claudia punched the down button at the bank of two elevators. "I have an interest in preparedness, myself, as you can well imagine."

"Of course. With Robert DeLancie being your grandfather, you would have to have an interest in it."

"It is part of my job, actually," Claudia replied. She stepped into the elevator and Bradley followed.

“You’re the preparedness person for this outfit? My uncle says these corporate offices are the administrative center for businesses all over the country and a few foreign ones, as well. I’m impressed.”

“Thank you. But don’t be too impressed. I did learn a few things from Grandfather, but I just started in this position. I’m planning to look for a consulting firm to do some of the work. We’re starting almost from scratch. I’ll have a job prospectus prepared by the end of the week. If you’re interested, I’ll send a copy over and you can submit a bid.”

“I certainly would. I don’t know if you realize it, but a corporation like this can make a tremendous positive impact on a community. Not only are the employees protected on the job, but those skills are taken home and into other areas of the community. And if you make some of the more difficult and expensive equipment and supplies available through payroll deductions, many more people will reach a much higher state of preparedness much more rapidly.”

Claudia laughed. “I like your enthusiasm. But I have to look at several possibilities before I make a decision on which firm to hire.”

“You’ll hire me. I may not have the cheapest rates, but I am very, very good at what I do. I am a bargain for the money.”

They exited the elevator and walked the short distance to Ricky’s office. “Rick, this is Bradley Bennett. Mr. Roundtree’s nephew.” Claudia turned and offered her hand to Bradley.

He shook her hand and said, “Thank you for bringing me down. And for the opportunity to bid on the project. I look forward to receiving the packet.”

“And I look forward to seeing just how big a bargain your services might be, Mr. Bennett.”

Bradley grinned. “You will.”

Claudia went back to her office and the search for suitable properties.

CME - Chapter Two

“I had a feeling,” Gloria said Tuesday morning when she saw Claudia walking toward the elevators in the parking basement. “I figured you for an early starter,” she continued when she came up to Claudia, who had waited for her when she saw Gloria approaching.

“You don’t really have to start this early every day,” Claudia told her. “I am an early starter, but I don’t require everyone to be. There will be plenty of hours to put in, including some mandatory early ones, as well as the late ones.”

Claudia smiled. “But since you are here, we can get a few things done before the rest of the staff start showing up.”

“You’ve already hired more staff?”

“No, I narrowed down the lists that you and Richard gave me. I’ll be interviewing half a dozen people this morning for the other in-house positions. I want you to check on preparedness consulting firms this morning and compile a list for me to send out bid sheets for some of the work.”

“Sure thing. What else?”

“Oh, I’ll let you know as things come up. Just get the offices arranged and supplies put away.” Claudia then added, “There is something else. Check locally for concrete dome structure contractors as well as a search on the internet. Compile a list for me.”

“Consider it done. You got yourself a bargain in me. I’m a whiz on the internet.” Gloria saw Claudia smile at her. “I’m serious,” she added.

“I know. So was he.”

“He? You have a ‘he’ in your life and you didn’t tell me?”

“No, it’s not like that. Just a possible consultant. He has a high opinion of himself. Much like you.”

“Then that’s the one we want, no matter what the field is. You get two of my caliber and you’ll have a vice presidency out of this job. And you will take along those that helped you achieve the position, I hope.”

Claudia laughed. “Of course.” They were in the office suite. “Now get busy. I have several things to do myself.”

Someone was approaching and Gloria dropped her familiar tone. “Yes, Miss DeLancie. I’ll get right on it.” She winked at Claudia.

Claudia just smiled and went into her office, laptop case strap still over her shoulder.

By noon, Claudia had picked the rest of the members of the team.

Harry Emerson was a long time employee well versed in financial matters of the corporation and the other businesses that made up Dick Shaunessy’s business holdings.

Cecilia Green was a property specialist for the company. Both real property and business acquisitions.

Ricky Kendall was the company’s best person in supply. He’d be the

procurer and distribution person for equipment and supplies.

Drusilla Jenkins was involved in the transportation aspects of the corporation and affiliated business. She was Claudia's transportation captain.

Claudia decided to retain June Jones as secretary, despite her rather giggly nature. June was efficient. She was also Barbara Babcock's protégé.

Their jobs would be to advise Claudia and do their specialized work under her direction.

Harry, Cecilia, Ricky, and Drusilla would all be transferred effective the next day.

After lunch, Gloria knocked and entered Claudia's office from the connecting office. "I have those lists for you, Boss. Not as many domers as I thought there would be and ten times as many preparedness consultants. Some are listed in that category due to a big imagination. I weeded out the mercenaries and the single service companies. Only the broad spectrum candidates are on the list. Did you know that Robert's nephew is in the field?"

"I did, as a matter of fact. How does he shape up in comparison?" Claudia asked.

"I can't really tell from the yellow pages add. Definitely not the largest one, but it's not just a listing, either. Looked professional to me."

"Okay. How many on the list?"

"Twelve."

"Okay. Get references from each one of them and check them out."

Gloria was writing on her palm computer. “Will do. There were only three local dome structure builders that looked even remotely adequate for our needs. Assuming we’ll be using them more than just once. Another half dozen regional and national outfits. Do the same with them?”

“Yes. Check each of them out. We may wind up using more than one company for structures, depending on... things. Okay. Hold down the fort. I need to fill in Mr. Shaunessy.”

Gloria nodded. It took only a few minutes to bring Dick Shaunessy up to speed on the progress of setting up her staff.

“Still planning to fly out Friday?”

Claudia nodded.

“Any decisions on the properties?”

“No, sir. Harry and Cecilia will go over the prospects I picked out. I’ll make the decision on Thursday. I will inform you which properties I’ll be checking before I leave Friday.”

Dick smiled. “Okay. Point taken. You have given me all the information that has changed that I didn’t know.”

“I’m not trying to be obtuse. It just doesn’t occur to me to explain anything that hasn’t changed.”

“I know. That’s fine. I’ll get used to it. Makes these updates go quick and easy.”

Claudia relaxed slightly and smiled. “I assure you, there will be much more to report in the near future.”

“I’ve no doubts. It is a good start.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll get back on the job.”

“Very good. Update me when you think you should.”

“I will.” With that Claudia stood and went back to her office. She made a note to herself to set up a briefing format to include all aspects of the project, despite what Shaunessy had said. After that she began working on the budget outline again. It would be ready for them to all sit down on Wednesday and fill in the numbers.

She booked the conference room on the fifth floor for the meeting at ten the next morning. Claudia had the job description ready shortly before quitting time. She looked over the revised lists that Gloria gave her and marked the companies to which she wanted the descriptions sent. Gloria would get them out before they left.

The list of dome builders she transferred to her computer. She would contact them the next day. It was a quarter after five when Claudia put her coat on and slipped the strap of her computer case over her shoulder.

June left at five. Gloria was just coming back from taking the packets to the mailroom. “We’ve accomplished quite a bit today. You want to stop at Merlin’s before you go home?”

“I do for a fact,” Gloria replied. “You sure don’t waste any time, do you? This is the busiest I’ve been since we bought out the clothing outlet on twenty-fifth. Had to work sixteen hours straight to get the paperwork ready for signing. That was before I moved to accounting.”

“And he turned around and sold it three months later,” responded Claudia as she waited for Gloria to gather her things.

“For a tidy profit. The man is uncanny, sometimes,” said Gloria. “He does something like that just often enough to give me the shivers. And it’s not like he hasn’t lost money on a few deals. Every so often. But he’s willing to hold something until a better opportunity arises. Very seldom does he not at least break even on a deal.”

“I know. Part of the reason I accepted a position here was the attitude of acquiring properties, then improving them. From the research I did, that is what happened with that clothing outlet. Mr. Shaunessy put a little money into it, straightened out the personnel problems, and turned it into a solid business establishment in just three months.”

They were headed down to the parking garage. “I think his biggest strength is in his personnel skills,” Gloria said. She grinned at Claudia. “He did approve my hiring. And yours. And he put you into this position years ahead of what most bosses would have.”

Claudia laughed. “Yes, he did, didn’t he? I’ll meet you there.” They were in the garage and each headed to their own vehicle. Gloria drove a nearly new Chrysler LeBaron. Claudia was using her grandfather’s old Dodge Charger. Normally she drove her own modest Volkswagen New Beetle, but until she could sell the Charger, she wanted to run it from time to time.

Her grandfather had kept it garaged and went down to start it weekly. He hadn’t actually driven it in years, but it had been his pride and joy when he was younger and had kept it for sentimental reasons. And as an investment. The thing was heavily customized and the bids on eBay were starting to climb.

When they met at the door of the bar and grill Gloria looked at her with large eyes and said, “Wow! That is a bomb you’re driving! Way cool. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Don’t be too impressed. It was my grandfather’s, from his wilder,

younger days. I'm auctioning it off on eBay. When I sell it..." She interrupted her words to Gloria to speak to the hostess at Merlin's. "Hi. Thanks. A booth, please."

When they were seated, Claudia continued. "When I sell it, I think I'll use the money from it, trade in the Beetle, and get something rather more preparedness oriented."

"You really do take things seriously, don't you?"

"When they are serious. I like to think I'm jovial, when it's appropriate." Claudia had made the statement in a very serious tone of voice."

"Hey. I didn't mean to imply... I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Gloria quickly said.

Claudia was suddenly grinning at her friend and co-worker. "Lighten up, Gloria. Like me."

"Oh, man! You got me. I thought I'd really hurt your feelings." She looked up as the cocktail waitress stopped at their table. "Your usual?" she asked Gloria and Gloria nodded. "And you, miss?" she asked Claudia.

"I think... Today... Galliano. Straight up."

"All righty. Back in a jiff."

"If you don't mind getting back to more serious things," Claudia said with a smile, "I thought I'd fill you in on more of the details of what we'll be doing for Mr. Shaunessy."

"Good," replied Gloria. "I'm dying to know as many details as you can give me."

“Okay. This isn’t top secret, of course. People are going to start seeing the changes going into effect pretty soon. But the scope of what we’re doing shouldn’t be broadcast. Let people draw their own conclusions about what the pieces add up to being. I doubt many will give it much thought beyond the direct impact it has on them. Only the few that will be seeing the big picture will wonder about it. And perhaps not even then.”

Claudia paused as the waitress delivered their drinks.

“Go on. I really am curious,” Gloria said, after taking a quick sip of her drink.

Claudia, too, took a sip of her drink and marshaled her thoughts, before she continued.

“As you are aware, we’ll be preparing the employees, and the companies, to be ready for a whole host of natural and man-made disasters. Floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and such.”

“A very good idea. Just look at last winter. That blizzard.”

“Blizzards are on the list, too.” Claudia’s smile faded. “So are nuclear war, economic collapse, and many more.”

“The scenarios themselves are kind of depressing. But the preparation end of it does sound exciting,” said Gloria. “Especially the shopping end of it. I do love to shop. Especially with other people’s money,” she added.

“There is definitely a shopping aspect to it. A large one. We’ll need to find good deals on quite a few items of equipment and supplies. But Rick is good at that. The difficult part will be the training required to have everyone comfortable with the equipment and supplies. Especially the procedures.”

“Procedures?”

“Part of what we’ll be doing is setting up emergency procedures to be followed in the event of the different disasters. Not only to protect lives and equipment, in that order, but to maintain the best chances for quick recovery if there is damage or loss, at the least expense.”

“Wow,” was Gloria’s only comment.

“We’ll probably use some specialists in business disaster recovery working with the contractor, if we use one, to coordinate the physical aspects of protection with the business aspects of the protection.”

Claudia paused and they each sipped their drinks for a moment. Gloria set her empty glass near the edge of the table to signal a refill. She then said, “As exciting as this all is, it seems pretty straightforward. I take it there is more.”

Adding her glass to the tray when the waitress came by, Claudia indicated she wanted another. She resumed giving Gloria the information. “There is. There are several disasters, among them nuclear attack, that have the potential of changing civilization. Mr. Shaunessy wants to insure that the people that are within his area of influence can adjust to the aftermath as quickly, smoothly, and effectively as possible. In doing so, he hopes that the ability will spread to even more people.”

“We talking families having gardens and learning to walk instead of ride in cars, or, what I suddenly suspect we’re talking about... Society as a whole?”

Claudia nodded. “In a small scale, but yes. Society as a whole. Shelter, food, housing, transportation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Thus the people you brought in to help. Each in specific fields to

accomplish the tasks required to make it possible.”

“Yes. What do you think?”

“I think we have our work cut out for us. Just how soon does he want this to be ready to go? This won’t happen overnight.”

“As soon as economically feasible, of course, but within four years. That leaves four months for final testing and evaluation of all the elements, and two months to make any required changes.”

“It sounds like you have a specific date in mind.” Gloria looked at Claudia questioningly. “And maybe even a specific event.”

Claudia sighed. “Yes. There is something definite in mind. But what we’re setting up will be applicable for many of the civilization changing scenarios. Nuclear war; rapid climate change, like an ice age or global warming; meteorite or comet impact; major tectonic plate activity that could result in earth changes; a rotational pole shift. You get the picture.”

“I do. And I suspect there is at least one more that you didn’t mention.”

Claudia nodded. “You know my grandfather had some strange theories about the sun. That like sunspots, other solar events are cyclical, as well.”

Gloria blanched. “It’s not going to blow up, is it? Or go out?”

With a shake of her head, Claudia explained further. “No but there is a possibility of a coronal mass ejection impacting the earth.”

“I saw a special a year or so back on Discovery Channel. They showed CMEs, I think is the abbreviation. Those big, long, looping tongues of gas. You can see them sometimes during a full solar eclipse.”

“No,” Claudia corrected. “Those are flares and prominences. Sometimes CMEs will be associated with a flare or prominence, but they occur on their own, too. Where most of the mass of prominence falls back into the sun, huge amounts of mass are sent at high speed into space. You can see the ones shooting off to the side.

“But the sun is a ball, of course. They happen in the direction away from the earth, too. And toward the earth. CMEs are harder to detect, but they can be detected by a solar observation satellite. With the recent data from that satellite and some others, plus archeological evidence, Grandfather has predicted that there will be a very large Coronal Mass Ejection in a little over four and a half years. Actually, from the day he died.”

“But,” Gloria protested, “If I remember right from that program, CMEs could cause problems with satellites, make it dangerous for astronauts, and bad ones could disrupt electrical distribution.”

“True,” Claudia agreed. “But this one would be much worse than bad. The magnetosphere could be severely affected. Possibly partially destroyed. That would allow massive amounts of hard radiation to reach the surface of the earth. The Van Allen belts would be destroyed and so would the ozone layer. They both protect the earth from pretty nasty stuff.”

“Oh, my!” Gloria said, rather softly. “That’s terrible! But what if he’s wrong?”

“Of course we’re all hoping that. Including Mr. Shaunessy. But it will happen someday. Just like there will be another ice age. It is all a matter of when. Not if. But there is a huge variability in that when. Could be today. Could be ten thousand years from now. A million.”

“But you think, and the big Boss thinks, it’ll happen in less than five

years.”

“I don’t know if I believe it or not. But with the countries that have nuclear weapons, and global warming, and the idea of all those meteors passing so close to earth, I’ve become convinced that people should make preparations. Preparations for a lot more than a twenty-five year class blizzard or category five hurricane.”

Gloria nodded, and then said, “Four years is quite a bit of time to get ready. What happens if it happens, or one of those other things, before we’re ready.”

Claudia could only shrug. “We’d do the best we can with what we’ve got. I just want to have more to do with, and have a plan with which to use everything we have now, and will have in the future.”

“I sure hope one of those preparedness consultants knows what he or she is doing. I keep a flashlight and water and some granola bars, but I doubt I’d be able to survive anything lasting more than a few days without help.”

Claudia nodded. “Grandfather has always insisted I keep some supplies. I have more than most, probably. But not for one of the civilization changing events. I intend to be set up well before the timeline we’re working on gets close to the end, for my own piece of mind. Grandfather was so sure of himself.

“One thing is sure, what we are doing will help people in situations like the blizzard last year here. And we have businesses on the coast that have gone through hurricanes. Every place we do business has some natural disaster that will happen at some point in time. The more prepared our people and companies are, the better prepared are the communities in which our people work and live.”

“That was kind of eloquent,” remarked Gloria. “We really aren’t doing

this just for ourselves, are we? The boss is trying to set things up to help... everybody that survives!”

Claudia nodded. “In a nutshell, yes.”

“Wow!” Gloria said again. “This could really impact a lot of people.”

“If we have any say in it, civilization will continue, no matter what.”

They sipped their drinks now, each lost in private thoughts. Gloria was thinking she should call her mother. It had been a month since she’d talked to her. Her mother had been a whiz in the kitchen. Gloria could remember eating home canned peaches when she was a little girl. She at least needed to learn how to fry an egg and cook a hamburger.

Claudia, on the other hand, was remembering Bradley Bennett’s profile. And his voice. He had not been arrogant when he’d boasted she would hire him over the other possibilities. He simply sounded self-assured and confident. She wondered if he was married.

The waitress came up to the table. “Refills, ladies?”

“Not for me,” Claudia said, draining the tiny amount left in her glass and setting it on the tray.

“Nor me,” Gloria said. “I need to cut down on the alcohol.” She cut her eyes over to Claudia and saw approval in her eyes. It wasn’t like she drank to excess, but lately she was drinking three drinks a night, four or five nights a week. She needed to get into better condition. Just because.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Gloria told Claudia as they headed for their separate cars after Claudia had paid the check.

“You really don’t have to come in as early as you did today.”

“I know,” replied the newly determined woman. She was forty and had been feeling more like fifty lately. She didn’t feel like she was thirty, but she sure felt more her age. Which wasn’t that bad, at that.

Gloria pulled in right behind Claudia the next morning. There was a resolute look on her face when she approached Claudia at the elevators. “I’m not saying I’ll be here every day this early, but this is important work. I aim to see my part of it is done properly.”

“I won’t argue it with you, Gloria. I appreciate your dedication. I’d like to get the conference room set up for the briefing right away. And set another place. I suspect Mr. Shaunessy might just show up for this.”

Claudia was correct. Dick Shaunessy sauntered down the hall as the others were filing into the room. “Thought I’d stop in and get everyone’s reactions,” he told Claudia.

She smiled and said, “I thought you might. We have a place set for you. Out of the way.”

He smiled in return. “As it should be. This is your show.”

Harry Emerson, Cecilia Green, Ricky Kendall, and Drusilla Jenkins were arranged two on each side of the long conference table near one end. A pad, pen, and water glass were arrayed in front of each, along with a laptop computer. Another place was set the same for Gloria on the side with Ricky and Drusilla, next to the end of the table. Claudia’s computer sat at the end of the table.

Dick Shaunessy took the chair with the same setup, minus the computer. It was two chairs down from where Cecilia was sitting. As Claudia moved to her chair, Gloria closed the doors of the conference room and then took her seat.

“Thank you for being here today. We’ll start off with a briefing then get

to some initial projects. Mr. Shaunessy, would you like to say a few words about our project.”

“Just that it has my full support. I think this is a team that can accomplish the goals I set for it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Shaunessy,” Claudia said, standing again. The others murmured similar statements. “The goals that Mr. Shaunessy referred to,” Claudia continued, “include getting the corporate operation, and all of the operations that the corporate structure serves, ready for just about any natural or manmade disaster. The operations themselves, and our employees and their families.

“And in doing so, we will be creating the environment for the communities in which we operate to enhance their readiness, as well.

“The corporation is already somewhat diversified, even disparate, in some ways. We will both increase our diversity, as well as improve the chain of supply for many of our operations. Where possible we will own and operate the sources of raw materials, processing, and delivery to produce the products, as well as the distribution to the outlet on the sales end of the market.

“In a few cases we will also own the raw materials sources and the sales outlets. Though not in every case.” Claudia looked at each of the team members for a moment, and then continued.

“Each of you has special knowledge and skills to help accomplish these goals. I’m counting on each one of you to contribute to the final goal of turning this corporation into a streamlined, nearly self-sufficient, widespread, broad spectrum, community partner across the United States and in several places around the world.

“Now, I know there will be some questions, which I will try to answer in just a bit. For the moment, are there any immediate questions about the

basics of what we plan to do?” She sat down.

“What is the time frame?” asked Harry. “Quicker the better, I’m sure, but that has significant cost ramifications.”

“While we will be doing it as quickly as possible, the as possible includes wise financial decisions. The overall time frame is four years to have everything going the way Mr. Shaunessy envisions it.”

Cecilia spoke next. “Will we be selling off or dismantling some of the existing operations? We will obviously be acquiring some.”

“Yes. Mr. Shaunessy was looking at divesting some ventures, anyway. The divestitures will be handled in such a way to acquire some of the types of operations we need to add to the mix.”

Claudia looked at Ricky and Drusilla when neither made a move to speak.

“I have a few tactical questions,” Ricky said in response to her look. “Nothing strategic.”

“Ditto,” added Drusilla.

“Mr. Shaunessy,” Claudia said, looking toward him. “Is there anything you would like to add before we get down to the particulars.”

“No, Miss DeLancie,” Dick said, rising from the chair. “You’ve covered things quite nicely. I’ll leave you to the details. Carry on.”

“One of the first things we need to do is set a budget. I have preliminary numbers on each of the computers, if you’ll pull up the project budget file.” Claudia did so herself.

Ricky whistled when he saw the numbers. “As you can see,” Claudia

said, “we do not intend to simply buy everything we want. Each item will be evaluated on its merits as a profitable business.

“Some aspects of some of the operations will not make much, if any profit. The increased efficiency and cost savings in the supported operation will justify the investment and pay the costs of the supporting operation in several cases.

“Much of the money for later projects will come from early projects as well as general funds. The initial purchases will come out of the current acquisitions budget. That is where we start. Harry, is that figure a good estimate for what we can start with?”

“Yes. There is actually more available in acquisitions account, but I am assuming you want to have some in reserve in case something comes up.”

“Precisely. Mr. Shaunessy has indicated that the acquisitions budget will go up for the next fiscal year. We can pull from general funds, on Mr. Shaunessy’s okay, if the situation warrants it.”

“I see there is a significant budget for training. Will part of the supplies money come from that, since supplies will be used in training?” asked Ricky.

“Yes,” Claudia replied. “To a limited extend. As you can see, there are separate line items for corporate supplies, the business group, employees, and employee purchases. It is our belief that many of our employees will want the same items supplied for the company. We will make them available, at reduced cost, on a payroll deduction basis.”

“I can see that,” Ricky said. “Once a person is exposed to the benefits of preparedness, that person is more inclined to set up their own program.”

“Precisely,” Claudia said. “We want to encourage that heavily. It will be

part of a new, enhanced, safety program, but will have several separate elements. Cecilia, do you see any problems with acquisitions, budget-wise?”

“Without knowing precisely what we will be trying to acquire, no, not really. I know we contract most of our transportation at the moment. I take it that is going to change.”

“It is. That is where Drusilla comes in. You oversee most of the shipping for most of the operations. Do you envision any problems putting together our own transportation system?”

“It will be expensive, unless we operate it as a for-hire operation. It’s a competitive business, but if the base costs are covered by internal operations, the for-hire operations will pay for themselves and turn a profit. I would recommend...” She saw the look on Claudia’s face and hurriedly said, “But that can wait until later. It’s doable.”

Claudia smiled. “Thank you, Drusilla. There will be time to work things out in detail, but for the moment we just need an overview. And in that light, there is a regional trucking company based in southeast Missouri. I need opinions from you, Drusilla, as well as Harry and Cecilia.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Drusilla said, after pulling up the appropriate file. “They are good. The way I understand it, the owner is now elderly and just wants out from under the hassles. The employees are trying to buy it, but there isn’t much hope. They’re short by, like, sixty percent.”

“If that is the case,” said Harry, “you should be able to get it for less than you have listed.”

“That’s true,” added Cecilia. “We’ve looked at carriers before. I don’t know the particulars of this one, except for what you have listed. It’s a good value for the price, as it is, but we need to conserve where we can.”

“Even if it is a token few thousand,” Harry said, “negotiate. Mr. Shaunessy is adamant about paying a fair price, but we’re well within the scope on this.”

“Okay,” Claudia said. “What about the other property in Missouri. The lead mine.”

“I’ve no clue on that,” Harry said.

“Nor I,” Cecilia said.

“And,” Harry continued, “I’m not quite sure how it fits into the overall picture.”

Ricky Kendall spoke before Claudia could. “Since some of the preparations are going to involve protection from radiation, it’ll be a source of shielding material. For a lot less than retail.” He spoke rather absently, as he continued to study the files Claudia had installed on each of the laptop computers.

“Correct,” Claudia said. “That is precisely why. There will be several similar acquisitions to keep the overall costs down. Now about the two farms in Kansas. Comments.”

“The notation on the small farm is that it is being sold because the owner can’t make a living working it. Is this something we should be acquiring?” Cecilia’s skepticism was obvious.

“I’m a little skeptical about that one, myself,” Harry said.

“The plan is to convert the farm to an organic truck farm, rather than the commercial crop farm it now is. The man already keeps a couple of animals. Ground will be set aside for more animals, with the meat a crop in and of itself, but with the added benefit of providing manure for use as a natural fertilizer. We will add greenhouses to make up some of the

land lost to use by the greater number of animals.

“It will take two or three years to bring it up to speed, but if we keep the current owner on as tenet farmer and work with the local high school and college vocational agriculture organizations, we should be in full production by the end of the third year. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll lease out the land. Every acre available in that area is put into production. We’ll more than make our money back if we lease it.”

“Then why not just do that? It’ll still be farmland.” Harry asked.

“We want food production in that area, including meat and dairy. Low-tech production. It’s close enough to our Kansas City operations to provide for them in major emergencies.”

“So we are going for coverage for the biggies, too,” Ricky commented. He began making additional notes on his pad.

“That’s right,” Claudia confirmed. “We’ll be anticipating some highly unlikely scenarios. Most of the preparations for those are only extensions of quote, normal, unquote, emergencies. It is just easier to cover for the worst. Then the less than worse, when it happens, is more or less a walk in the park.”

Gloria looked over at Claudia, and then put her attention back on her computer. Claudia had not mentioned the potential CME. Gloria wouldn’t bring it up either.

They discussed, or basically approved, the rest of the acquisitions and changes that Claudia presented. The initial slight skepticism faded as Claudia explained each additional item on the agenda. They finished just before the noon hour.

“You know where we’re going, Drusilla,” Claudia said as they gathered their things. “Make the arrangements this afternoon for Gloria and me.

Anyone with ideas that might help, feel free to bring them up at any time. If no one has anything else, we're finished for the moment. Thank you all for being here and for your input."

Claudia had brought her lunch and she ate in her office. Gloria came in a bit before one, after having gone out to get a quick bite. "Good. You're here. What do you think? Everyone going to be on track with this?"

"I think so," Gloria commented, taking a seat across the desk from Claudia. "Especially Ricky Kendall. For some reason I was a little surprised at his gung-ho attitude."

"He, better than anyone, knows what it means to make preparations. Being in that wheelchair means he has to plan ahead for many things, I suspect."

"Hadn't thought about that," Gloria replied. "You could be right. Anyway, all four of them seemed inclined to make a real effort to get things going. I do think part of it is that they basically like doing their specialized jobs. They'll have the opportunity to use their skills quite a bit more than normal. Not that they don't work hard as it is. They do. But this will be intense work for quite a few months."

Claudia smiled. "True. Things will be intense for a while. Speaking of which. With airport security the way it is, let's plan on being at the airport early."

"Do you know when, yet? Has Drusilla brought the information on the flights?"

"Not yet. Have to give her time to get some lunch," Claudia said with a laugh.

"I'm just a bit anxious, I guess. We're really doing this. I want this to go well."

“It will,” Claudia reassured her. “Now...” Claudia’s intercom buzzed.

It was June, announcing Drusilla.

“Got your itinerary,” Drusilla said, as she came through the door. “All set for Missouri first. Leave Friday morning at 9:10am. Fly out Sunday afternoon at 1:05pm for Kansas. Back Wednesday. Cars both places. SUV’s, actually. Weather should be okay, but with the variability, I thought it best to go with something to get you through, no matter what.” Drusilla smiled. “Might as well get in the habit, huh?”

“Very good, Drusilla. Thank you.” Claudia took the packet when Drusilla handed it to her. “As you get time during the transition from your other duties, put together something for an expansion of the carrier to nation-wide, if it looks doable. If not, see what you can find in other regional’s. We definitely do not want to buy a national carrier. Be better to build from the ground up, I think.”

“I’ll check it out and let you know. Reefer, box, and flat only, or do you want other types of services available?”

“All types,” Claudia replied.

Drusilla nodded and said, “Will do.” With that response, Drusilla gave a small salute and left.

“Back to matters at hand,” Claudia said. “I think we need to be a little cautious on this trip. We’re both a bit anxious, as you mentioned. I certainly think these are good deals we’ll be checking. Since I came up with them, I want you reviewing and questioning everything. Harry and Cecilia had rather limited information. You will be right there. You’re my checks and balances on this trip.”

Gloria nodded. “I understand. You can count on me.” She smiled. “Just

be sure you understand I'm following your orders when I give you a hard time about something."

"You can remind me of that, too, if need be. In the mean time, you go do your stuff and let me do mine. I want to check several more things on the internet before end of day."

"Will do, Boss," Gloria said, rising to go to her own office.

Claudia kept a window open on the computer so she could take notes as things occurred to her, as well as notes on the things she was looking up.

CME - Chapter Three

"Mixed results," Claudia told Dick Shaunessy as she began the briefing the following Thursday morning. "The lead mine looks good. There is enough room on the site to set up a foundry. We can pour the lead into whatever shapes we want to have a mold maker do for us. Sheets and bricks for the most part, I imagine."

Shaunessy sat quietly, fingers tented, as he listened to Claudia continue. "The trucking company deal looks very good, too. The owner just wants out. I was able to negotiate a better deal, and the employees seemed quite co-operative. They're thankful to be keeping their jobs. There is a great deal of trucking going on there, which means lots of competition. A few of the employees would have been able to get jobs with another outfit, but not most.

"The trailers and support equipment is in pretty good shape, but the tractors are nearing the time they will need to be replaced. When I pointed that out, the price came down. The owner just wants to retire. He's not interested in making a great deal of money. He already has plenty, he said.

"Now, it didn't go quite as well in Kansas. The farmer, when I explained

what we were going to do with the farm, with him as tenant, decided he could do it on his own. And he is probably right. The cannery and bottling plants in Kansas City look okay. The ranch in central Kansas is just fine, except we won't be able to expand. The surrounding land owners are not going to sell any time soon.

"It'll supply most of the meat for our immediate needs, but we'll need to find alternatives for fruits and vegetables. I did get a lead on another property that we'll check out. And of course we'll be checking for the same types of operations in other areas of the country.

"Still nothing on the overseas operations. And the bids came in from the preparedness outfits. I'll go over them the next couple of days and have a recommendation ready Monday. The revised budget will be ready tomorrow. The others have been working on it while Gloria and I were away. They all seem to be taking this operation quite seriously. Especially Rick Kendall."

Shaunessy leaned forward, his hands resting on the desk. "That sounds good. Every contact is not going to result in a perfect deal. We've made a start. Just be sure to follow up on each of the acquisitions."

"Of course," Claudia replied. "That'll be the key to our success. We have to follow up. Just getting the pieces won't do. They have to be put together. I intend to see that they are."

"All right. Keep it up and keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

Claudia returned to her office, to find Gloria waiting with a stack of proposals from the various preparedness consultants sent requests. "Is there one from Bradley Bennett in that stack?" Claudia asked Gloria.

“Yes, I believe so,” Gloria replied, looking down at the stack of papers in her hand. “Right on top, as a matter of fact.”

“Have you gone over them yet?”

“Just to see if they sent anything close to what we asked. All but one did. It was the one you had doubts about to start with.”

“Okay. Let’s go over the rest of them in detail.” It took most of the rest of the day to compare the eleven preparedness consultants’ bids on the work that Claudia contemplated them doing.

“Any of these three,” Gloria said, indicating the short stack of papers.

“Yes,” Claudia said, leaning back in her chair. “Any one of them would do.”

“I know Bennett Consulting has the highest bid of the three, but there was something about his submission that really stood out. The completeness... It really seems he would be more than willing to assist in some of the community aspects of the operations, even though they were not actually in the job description.”

“I picked up on that, too. I’m not too concerned about the slightly higher bid. There is only one problem I can see.” Claudia frowned.

“The fact that he’s related to a former employee? I don’t think that would be a problem. His bid really does have enough additional work listed to make the bid price acceptable to Mr. Shaunessy.”

Claudia sighed. “It’s not that. It’s... I guess I should just tell you.” She paused for a moment. “I found myself attracted to him when he was here picking up Arthur’s things. I don’t want that to influence my decision. I’m sure I could work with him without it being a problem.”

“You are a consummate professional,” Gloria replied. There was a slight gleam in her eyes that Claudia missed. “I’m sure you wouldn’t let the attraction interfere with the work, or influence any decisions.” Having worked for Dick Shaunessy for several years now, she was sure what his reaction would be. Similar to her own.

“Just let Mr. Shaunessy pick one of the three,” Gloria continued. “You can give him your... our... recommendation and let him decide.” She was fairly sure what Claudia’s reaction would be. She knew she was right when Claudia spoke.

“I think you may be right. I’ll tell him of my conflict of interest and let him decide. Any of the three really will do.” Claudia looked up at the clock on the wall. “I’ll see if he’s available now.”

It took only a moment to buzz Barbara and find out that Dick Shaunessy was still in his office and could see her. “I’ll run these over to him so he can study them tomorrow.”

Just as she’d been sure of what Claudia’s reaction would be, and Dick Shaunessy’s, Gloria was just as sure that the decision would be made immediately, not the next day. She was right again. Claudia came back only a few minutes later and stepped into Gloria’s office. Gloria noted the slightly stunned look on Claudia’s face.

“I told him,” Claudia said, “and he just told me I could handle it and said to hire Bradley. Bennett Consulting.”

“Well, that decision is done. What say we knock off early... actually, it is past five already. Let’s stop in at Merlin’s for a moment. I’ve been a very good girl and want to prove to myself that I can have one and not two.”

Claudia smiled. Gloria had been adamant on not drinking while they’d traveled, even wine with dinner. Claudia could take alcohol or leave it. It

was a nice relaxer at times, but only under specific circumstances. She knew Gloria drank regularly, but had seen no signs of a problem. But apparently Gloria wanted to reduce her consumption. That was fine with Claudia.

“Sure, Gloria. I wouldn’t mind a curative, myself. I didn’t realize I was stressing over Br... that decision on the consultants.”

“You seem to be fine with it, now,” Gloria commented as she gathered her things.

“I am. I’m not in a position to pursue a relationship now, anyway. Don’t really want or need one. It was the thought of it that bothered me. Now that I know we’ll be working together at times, I find it easy to put romantic thoughts out of my head.”

“Of course,” Gloria replied, not meaning it at all.

It was busy at Merlin’s. Gloria was pleased with herself that she was able to get one drink, enjoy it, and not need another. She’d already lost a little over a pound and cutting back on the alcohol would help the weight loss program she was putting herself on. Feeling pleased with herself, she goaded Claudia just a bit before they left Merlin’s.

“It’s good to know you won’t be affected by the afterhours work, late meals, and traveling with Bradley Bennett. Like we had to do on our first trip.” It looked like Claudia blanched just a little under her tan. Gloria was happy with the way the day was wrapping up.

It went just fine the next day, as well. Claudia asked Gloria to make the call to ask Bradley to come in for an initial interview. Claudia still insisted there be an interview before the final decision was made. “I’ll want you to sit in on the interview,” Claudia told Gloria when she asked her to make the call. “You’ll actually be working with him as much, if

not more, than I will.”

Gloria managed not to grin. Instead, she nodded and turned to look up the number in order to call Bradley. She knew that Claudia had intended that the interview be the following week, but it so happened, that he was available this afternoon. Gloria had asked specifically the earliest he could come in. He’d been eager to do it.

She let Claudia know, and again noted that Claudia paled ever so slightly. There was definitely an attraction there. The interview was scheduled for three in the afternoon. Claudia seemed able to put it out of her mind, Gloria saw, after the first indication of nervousness. They managed to go over quite a few things with the team, including the updated budget.

Ricky had quite a few items already priced out and ready to order. “We’ll let Mr. Bennett look this over, but I think you’ve done an excellent job, Rick.”

“I also have quite a few other things I think we’ll need, but I know there is a need to space the purchases out. We couldn’t process in and distribute much faster, anyway. Plus, there is the training element. There are several of the technical items that we will acquire that will be essentially useless until training takes place. I thought we’d coordinate that with Bennett.

“I think you made a good choice there,” Ricky continued. “I talked to him a few minutes that day he picked up Mr. Roundtree’s stuff. He seemed very knowledgeable. And willing to think outside the box. I think we’ll need that. He clued me in to a way to increase my mobility.” Ricky shook his head. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself, it is so simple.”

He pointed to two pieces of formed, pierced aluminum hanging on each side of his wheelchair. “Simple ramps,” he said. “I can lay them down to

cross uneven or soft ground. Even get up on a rise that's too high for me to surmount normally. They're miniature versions of bridge ladders off-roaders use. Simple, but very effective.

"Can't say I'm fast when I use them, but I can get around places now, I couldn't before. With thinking like that, he should be a benefit to the organization."

They were all smiling at Ricky's enthusiasm. "I'm glad to know he's already been a help, Rick," Claudia said. "I'm sure he'll work out. Now. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to go over?"

"I'm looking at some transportation options again that didn't seem viable before," Drusilla said. "I'm not quite ready to bring them up, yet, but just wanted you to know. Also, Harry, Cecelia, and I should have some numbers on expanding the trucking company by the end of next week."

"Very good. Well, if that's all, let's break this up and I will brief Mr. Shaunessy on the revised budget.

"Don't forget the interview with Mr. Bennett," Gloria said reminded Claudia. Claudia waved a hand in response.

They went their separate ways. Gloria brought her laptop to Claudia's office shortly before three, in preparation of the interview. "You have a few minutes to freshen up, if you want," Gloria told Claudia."

Rather absently, Claudia replied. "No. I'm fine. You go if you want. I'll have June have him wait until you get back."

A bit disappointed, Gloria said, "No. I just thought you might want to. I'm ready if you are. We can go over a few things while we wait, if you want."

Claudia buzzed June and said, “June, bring Mr. Bennett in as soon as he arrives.”

“He’s here now, Miss DeLancie. He’s been waiting a few minutes. I’ll bring him right in.”

June ushered Bradley Bennett into Claudia’s office. Claudia stood and shook his hand, then indicated a chair across the desk from her. “This is Gloria Albertson. You’ll be working closely with her on many of the projects we have in mind, if you are chosen to be our consultant.”

“Gloria,” Bradley said, half rising from his chair to shake Gloria’s hand.

“Mr. Bennett.”

“Please. Bradley.”

“Bradley, then.”

Claudia cleared her throat and began. “We’ve narrowed the choice down to three consulting firms, Mr. Bennett. You are slightly higher in price. However, your proposal shows a willingness to, as one of my team said, ‘work outside the box.’ I need to know that you will keep things in the box, where necessary, while incorporating procedures and methodologies that might not be standard in the industry. The job description did not list every last detail as to what all you will be preparing us to withstand.”

“I suspected as much,” Bradley said. “I talked to my uncle. He said Dick Shaunessy was a very thorough man. Everything he does, he does completely. I’m prepared to give advice and training for every conceivable scenario, including what most would consider the end of the civilization. Or, TEOCAWKI. The end of civilization as we know it.

“It is my firm belief that humankind can and will survive, then prosper,

after any event that does not literally destroy the planet. Might even be able to survive that, in some instances, given a breakthrough or two.”

“Very good,” Mr. Bennett. We do have in mind preparing for some things that others might not. Such as what Grandfather theorizes. Theorized.”

Bradley nodded. “That is simply one of several scenarios for which preparations need to be made. I must say, that I do not believe in just buying a bunch of supplies and leaving it at that. You indicated that there would be training as part of the preparations. That is a must, or I’d rather not take the contract.”

“Training will be a big part of the process,” Claudia said. “As indicated. As will be obtaining equipment and supplies needed for even the most extreme situations. While preparations will be made for the survival of the corporation, we intend to have our employees preparing themselves and their families, with corporate help, to the fullest extent they are willing to do.

“In addition to the straightforward physical survival aspects, we want to be able to resume operations, to a significant degree, as soon as practical after the event takes place. In order to help ensure this, we will be working to ensure our supply and distribution lines survive the event, too. We would like you to provide assistance in that, where possible.

“The ultimate goal is to have in place the structure to provide for not only the survival and recovery of the corporation and its employees, but also the communities in which we live, work, and do business.”

Bradley emitted a low whistle. “”Remarkable plan. This will involve many, many, aspects of which several will be quite expensive. Is the commitment there?”

“Yes,” was Claudia’s one word answer.

“I would be very interested in getting involved all aspects of the plan, if I might. I know it would a bit outside my area, but I suspect it will be an intriguing operation.”

“While we want your input, I am not sure we could allow a contractor to be involved in the actual process. We’ll have to see, as the process develops. Now, especially with these additional aspects just mentioned, the job will require quite a bit of travel. Will you, or your employees be able to do so?”

“Yes. I have a travel crew that can go just about anywhere in the continental United States using company transport. They have with them all the equipment and supplies required for training. Individual and small teams can be sent anywhere in the world using commercial transport. There would need to be some on-site equipment and supplies pre-positioned or supplied by you in some instances.

”I have a very good office manager. I can travel anywhere, anytime I’m not actually on site or doing training elsewhere, myself. My training staff all had strong backgrounds in their field of specialty, and I trained them in the techniques I prefer myself. I have a small staff, but they are very effective since most of the training we do is hands on. People learn better and more quickly that way, in my opinion.”

“I tend to agree,” Claudia said. “This sounds very good. What is the downside, if I hire you?”

“As you said, I am a bit more than a few of my competitors. I do feel I am worth it. I am very strongly opinionated. I will be quite insistent that some things be done certain ways and within certain timeframes. Probably not to the point of being dismissed, but sometimes to the point of annoyance to my customers. I believe in what I do, and want the client to come out of the relationship with the knowledge, skills, equipment and supplies to cope with whatever I was contracted to help

them prepare for.

“Sometimes that means going outside the box, as you put it. Other times it means pushing the envelope. I’m not afraid to do both. That does not always set well with clients. I am very opinionated in general, and particularly so where it comes to preparedness.

“If someone has contracted me to do something very specific, that is what they will get. Someone that contracts the full range of services gets my opinion and attitude right along with the rest. To some, that has been a negative.”

“I believe we can handle a little bit of attitude, and a great deal of opinion, as long as it is understood that the goals of the corporation come first, and that financial survival is part of that. I believe we have an adequate budget for this, but we won’t be extravagant. We’ll get the best we can get for a situation. I will not say price is no object, since it is, but you will find us willing to spend the money when it needs to be spent.

“With all this in mind, are you still interested in taking on this responsibility?”

It was Bradley’s turn to give a one word answer. “Yes.”

“Gloria,” Claudia then said, “Do you have any questions or comments you’d like to direct to Mr. Bennett?”

“Just one. I’ve already had a taste of the travel we will need to be doing. Bradley, you will be traveling with and working with five women, in addition to two men, on the corporate level. Is this going to be a problem for you? Or for your wife or girlfriend?”

Claudia frowned. “I’m sure Mr. Bennett...”

Bradley laughed. “I don’t mind answering, Miss DeLancie. It’s not a

problem at all. I'm not married and am between girlfriends at the moment. Precisely due to the reason to which you alluded. I'm gone quite a bit, and I have worked closely with women before. It was a problem for my ex-girlfriends.

"I've been told I'm married to my work and there is no room for a woman in my life. So other than the occasional dinner or drink with a handful of female friends I have, romantic relationships are of no consequence to me."

"Well," Claudia said, "I think that answered that to your satisfaction, didn't it, Gloria?" Claudia's tone and posture made it clear that it better have.

"Most adequately. I feel like we'll be able to work well together, Bradley. Assuming you get the assignment."

"Which we will let you know, shortly," Claudia said, standing. She shook his hand again, as did Gloria.

To try to forestall any consequences from her actions, Gloria, as soon as Bradley left, told Claudia. "Well, it's good to know there won't be any problem. I knew you would be uncomfortable asking about a potential problem, like we had with Rodney Silverstone." It wasn't the same, of course, but they were related situations. It gave Gloria the breathing room she needed.

"Well," Claudia said slowly. "I suppose we did need to know. I'm not sure that was the best way to find out. Leave that to me in the future, if you will. There are things in all of our jobs that can make us uncomfortable. We just have to deal with them. Let's go ahead and wrap things up. I'd like to get out of here on time for once."

"Big plans?" Gloria asked.

“I want to go car shopping. The bids are high enough on the Charger for me to sell it now. Just a matter of who the final bidder is. I can start looking for something besides the Beetle.”

“You want some company? I’m of a mind to get an SUV myself. I liked that one we had in Missouri. What was it? A Jimmy? Cool name, too.”

“I want more than a cool name,” said Claudia. “And it was too small for my taste. I want more carrying capacity. That Ford Explorer wasn’t bad we had in Kansas. I’ll look for something like that.”

“We should have asked Bradley what he would recommend,” Gloria said.

“I want to have some idea what’s available, first,” replied Claudia. “I want to be able to ask some intelligent questions when I do ask him for his opinion.”

“Smart,” Gloria replied. “And I just had a thought. Though I liked the Jimmy, it might be a good idea if we got the same thing. Spare parts and stuff would be interchangeable. I know enough to get spares. Especially the computer things. Everything is computerized and won’t run if the computer doesn’t work. I understand they’re expensive, but they are critical.”

“That’s true,” Claudia said musingly, as they headed for the parking garage. “We probably need to standardize on company vehicles, too, with that in mind. Not just one specific vehicle for all uses, but limit the number of different vehicles. Right now the corporate fleet has just about everything imaginable in it. We need more than one type of vehicle, but forty or more is a little ridiculous. We’ll have to talk to Drusilla about it next week.”

Apparently Claudia was acceptable to the idea of them looking for vehicles together, Gloria decided when Claudia asked, “You want to

take mine or yours or each take our own?”

“How about we each take our own? I’ll drop mine off at the apartment and then ride with you, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” replied Claudia. “I’ll follow you there.”

They hit most of the major dealerships in the area before Claudia dropped Gloria off back at her apartment. Each had a stack of brochures extolling the virtues of a wide selection of sport utility vehicles. Claudia also had some featuring economical passenger cars and a couple of hybrid gasoline/electric vehicles.

“I think I know less than when we started,” Gloria said as she exited the car. “Information overload.”

“I know. They’re all so similar, yet each one has some little detail that is touted as being the best thing since sliced bread. I’ll go over these in more detail this weekend and do some research on the internet. I’ll give you my opinion on Monday.”

“I’ll do the same,” Gloria responded. With that, she closed the door of Claudia’s Beetle and Claudia drove off. Gloria was smiling when she went up to her apartment. It had been a very good day.

Monday wasn’t bad, either, Gloria decided as the clock hands approached 5:00pm. Claudia had called Bradley and told him he had the contract. He showed up an hour after the call. He and Claudia worked together most of the day. Gloria was working with Harry and Cecilia on further property acquisitions.

The acquisitions included a property trade deal to acquire a small gold and silver mine in Wyoming in exchange for a large furniture plant in Louisiana that produced mid-grade, mass-market furniture. The corporation also owned a fine furniture shop in Maine that they intended

to keep. Gloria found the idea of acquiring a gold mine exciting.

Harry and Cecilia had been working on it for a couple of days. The proposal was ready for Claudia to take to Dick for approval. Gloria found the notation to check on minting operations and she began searching for such after Harry and Cecilia left her office.

With the mine in Wyoming, it looked like it would be better to buy both refinery equipment and the minting equipment and install it all at the mine site. They would hire their own mining team, since the original owners had worked the mine themselves.

It would take only two people most of the time, with a third at times. Another person to do the assay work and refining, and a fourth full time person to run the minting equipment. Since the production would be only several ounces every few days, they would batch process the ore and take product in to a safe deposit box as soon as it was finished. There would be little need for additional security.

Enough of the production would be sold to pay for the operation. The rest would go into the corporate coffers as a hedge, an investment, and as future hard assets to be used in the aftermath of a major disaster. Gloria hoped the deal went through. She wanted to see the operation when it was up and running.

When she left her office to see if Claudia wanted to go to Merlin's after work, she found Claudia and Bradley standing by June's desk. June had an enraptured look on her face as she stared at Bradley. Claudia didn't. But she did look pleased. "It's personal business, and I won't do it on company time.

"Gloria and I occasionally stop at a place on the way home to have a drink after work. If you would, we could go there and discuss this."

"Sounds okay," Bradley said. "I don't drink much, but sure. I wouldn't

mind having a quiet one while we discuss vehicles.”

“You buying a new car?” June asked.

“I’m thinking of getting an SUV. Mr. Bennett is offering some advice.”

“Wow! Me, too. Could I come and listen?”

“That’s up to Mr. Bennett. It’s fine with me, but he may not want to do that much extra work today. He’s been pretty busy.”

“Oh, no,” Bradley said, flashing a smile at June. “The more, the merrier. It’s just as easy to give free advice to three as it is to two.”

“I’ll get my jacket and purse,” June said quickly, standing and heading toward the employees’ break room.

As they waited for June to return, they saw Ricky Kendall rolling his way toward them. “I’ve got a couple of questions, if you have a minute before you leave,” Ricky told Bradley.

“We were headed down to Merlin’s for a drink and a discussion of preparedness vehicles. You want to come along?” Claudia asked Ricky.

“Sure,” Ricky replied. “I’ll head down now and meet you there.” He spun the wheelchair smartly and headed for the elevators.

Gloria took out her cell phone and said, “I’m going to call ahead and reserve one of the large tables.” She stepped away and made the call, walking along behind the others as June returned and the group headed toward the elevators, too.

The impromptu meeting turned into something of a debate. June, quiet and efficient at the office, was quite opinionated away from it. Apparently her family, for the last three generations, had been die-hard

Ford fans. Ricky, on the other hand, favored General Motors vehicles. It turned out that Gloria was rather enamored of Chrysler, Dodge, and Toyota products, in that order.

Claudia and Bradley wound up mediating a couple of rather heated exchanges on the relative merits of the different makes of vehicles. Since Claudia was determined to obtain the same make and model of vehicle that the corporation would be buying for the preparedness tasks, the discussion turned to business matters, after all.

It was almost seven by the time the group broke up, everyone having gone ahead and ordered a light meal from the grill that was part of Merlin's establishment. Everyone was still pretty much convinced their favorite make was the best, but a consensus was reached as to what the corporation would probably start buying. A couple would be bought immediately, for use by the team. As other vehicles were retired, they would be replaced with a small handful of models.

Simply for buying power, Claudia made it mandatory that they stay with one make only for the small vehicles. The final determining factor was what Dick Shaunessy ordinarily drove. He had several vehicles, but he usually drove his Cadillac Escalante.

They weren't going to use Escalades for the corporation. Instead, the large SUV would be the Chevrolet Suburban. Chevrolet Blazers would be the small SUV. Pickups would be full size Chevrolet Silverados. Full size passenger cars would be Chevrolet Impalas. Compact passenger cars would be Chevrolet Cavaliers.

Gloria was scheduled to call her mother that evening. She and June left just before seven. Claudia, Ricky, and Bradley stayed and talked for a few more minutes, discussing the equipment and supplies that the company vehicles would carry.

By the time they left Merlin's at seven fifteen, a general plan was in

place. Claudia had insisted on picking up the tab when the discussion turned corporate. She paid the bill as Bradley waited. Ricky was already out, heading for his wheelchair-converted van.

“A promising start,” Claudia said as they walked toward their vehicles. “I noticed you didn’t actually say all that much when we were discussing the vehicles. Just features.”

“When you take the fleet aspect out of it, any of the major makes are fine. The biggest factor is the dealership. Buy from a good dealer that will take care of the vehicle. Hopefully one that will be around after the fact, though that is not something to count on. You made the right choice sticking with one make for the corporate vehicles.

“Ricky is happy with his GMC van. June will probably get the small Ford SUV. I never quite got a take on Gloria’s choice. She’s very quiet and observant, I’ve discovered. Only speaks when she has something constructive to say.”

“She is a great help to me on this project.”

“I can imagine,” Bradley replied. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Miss DeLancie.”

“Of course, Mr. Bennett.” Claudia had noted that Bradley drove an older model Land Rover, stretched, with tandem rear axles. He obviously took good care of it. The exterior was immaculate. She decided the interior would be, as well.

There was a heavy-duty rack on the top. The rack had lights front, rear, and both sides; and contained a spare tire, a Hi-Lift jack, a pair of bridge ladders, and a long handle shovel.

The front bumper of the vehicle sported a brush guard carrying another spare tire and additional lights. The bumper incorporated a receiver hitch

and a winch. The hood had a third spare, in classic Land Rover style.

The rear had another rack, this one with a fourth spare, three gas cans and a water can. It looked like there was a short shovel and a pick behind the tire. Like the front, the rear bumper had a winch and receiver hitch.

“What is that pipe on the side of the truck?” Claudia asked in the gathering darkness.

“That is a snorkel. Keeps the engine air cleaner in dusty conditions, and I can ford a stream as deep as the level of the door glass, if it isn’t too swift and has a solid bottom. The exhaust is elevated, too, for the same reason.” Bradley pointed out the top of another pipe just clear of the rack on the side of the truck away from them.

“Wow.” Claudia said. “That is some vehicle.”

“I have a combination utility trailer and barge I tow when I go into the wild. Provides extra supplies and makes the Land Rover amphibious in just a few minutes. There is a good Land Rover dealer here in the city, plus I have an extensive spare parts inventory myself, and the tools and knowledge to install them.”

“Which is what we will be doing with our vehicles,” Claudia said, stepping over to her Beetle. “Thank you again for this additional help.” She smiled. “Despite the minor disagreements, a lot was learned tonight.”

“Any time,” Bradley said. “I don’t mind the extra hours.” He was standing at the door of the Land Rover. “I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

Claudia nodded and gave a little wave as she climbed into her car.

As was now their custom, Claudia and Gloria met at the elevator in the parking garage. “How’d it go after we left?” Gloria asked.

“Fine,” replied Claudia. She was taking her gloves off. It was a cold, rainy morning and she hadn’t waited for the Beetle to warm up more than enough to run the defroster. “We have a preliminary plan we will start, effective today. I’ll get it set up, if you’ll continue to work with Harry and Cecilia. I also need to talk to Drusilla today to see how that trucking outfit upgrade is coming.”

“I’ll schedule her in for you.” Trying to keep it nonchalant, Gloria then asked, “Did you feel comfortable around Bradley?”

“Oh, sure,” Claudia responded. “He is opinionated, but he’s easy to work with. Everything went fine yesterday. I don’t know why I was concerned. Once we started working together all those feelings I thought I had simply didn’t reappear. I should have had more confidence in myself.”

For a moment Gloria felt disappointed, but suddenly she smiled and said, “Good. Good for you. I knew things would work out.” She didn’t add that she was sure that with Claudia not looking for romance, it would come up and grab her when she least expected it.

“What did you decide on? Or did you?” she asked.

“I thought about a Range Rover, like Bradley’s, but with the company going with Chevy’s, I’ve decided to do the same.” Claudia grinned. “With some additional modifications.”

Gloria grinned back. “Yeah. Some of those ideas espoused last night were interesting. To keep it in the family, so to speak, and simple, I think I’ll get a Blazer and have it equipped like the company ones.”

“I think you’re making a good choice,” replied Claudia. “Let’s go up. Allow enough time with Drusilla for us to go over the preliminary specifications of the vehicles.”

“Will do, Boss.”

They were silent as the elevator took them to the fifth floor of the building. They each went to their respective offices and began to work.

And so the days went. And the months. And the years.

CME - Chapter Four

It was two weeks and three days before the expected event. The four years of preparations had been tested over the past six months, as well as during a dozen different localized natural disasters during that preparation and testing phase. The last two months had been used to address the minor problems that had cropped up during the four months of testing. Everything was in readiness.

Claudia announced over the new corporate wide communications network that a final test would be made on Thursday, June 14th. Where the other tests had been local and regional in nature, this one would be nationwide, and worldwide. At least it was being called a test. Only the small handful of people knew it was for real reasons.

Dick Shaunessy had moved his family to the new corporate headquarters complex in the most secure location they had come up with. It was a veritable fortress of a site. Started three and a half years earlier, the final touches had been applied the month previous.

Dick Shaunessy had wanted a facility capable of sheltering and

providing for hundreds of people. And it had to pay for itself, if nothing happened. So, after several brainstorming sessions, it was decided that rural, northern Nevada needed a Mega-Mall and apartment complex. Only Elko, Nevada, and Winnemucca, Nevada had any significant shopping between Salt Lake City, Utah, and Reno, Nevada, along Interstate 80. There was a growing need for bedroom housing to satisfy the growing mining operations in that area of Northern Nevada.

One thing, among many unique features of the mall, set it apart from other malls and most housing developments. It was almost completely underground. The bulk of the structure was built two stories down into the ground, with a clear polycarbonate roofed atrium in the center of each of its fifteen interconnected sections.

Another feature not commonly found in most malls was the space set aside for professional service businesses and offices, along with the retail establishments. And while there were the normal types of Mall stores, Claudia had arranged for several types of stores not normally found in a mall environment, such as a large national chain food store, buyer's club, and a national chain auto parts store, among others.

One of the few businesses that wasn't underground was the sixteen automotive pump and eight semi-tractor-trailer pump fuel station associated with the mall. The repair garage had five automotive bays and one semi-tractor bay.

Also partly above ground where the five five-story parking garages that served the complex. All four parking garages had separate access to the covered top parking floor for large vehicles and vehicles with trailers. There was a separate above ground lot for semi-tractor-trailer rigs.

With an outlet in the mall area for its products, and using three of the fifteen sections of the complex, was an organic farming and ranching operation. Five hundred acres of land adjacent to the mall complex was open fields for crops and pasture, with another thousand acres of BLM

land under lease for grazing.

There were six large earth-bermed greenhouses near the underground complex sections, of which two were used as barns for the farm and ranch stock. There were horses, beef cattle, milk cows, bison, sheep, goats, swine, chickens, and turkeys. The third underground section the farm used contained the farm and ranch processing shops on the upper floor and fish tanks on the lower floor.

Associated and connected with the mall was a hotel, build in the same manner as the mall, with its own parking garage.

Four deep wells served the bulk of the mall, with an additional two wells for the exclusive use of the farm and ranch operation. Sanitation needs were met with a sewage treatment plant on-site, also underground. Trash and garbage was hauled to a local waste dump by the complex' own small fleet of garbage trucks. The complex was served by the regional power company, though there were standby generators and battery banks for electrical power if commercial power failed.

Besides Dick Shaunessy's luxury suite, Claudia, Gloria, Bradley, and the others of the main team, had taken apartments in the upscale residential section. The rest of Shaunessy's corporate staff had apartments in the other residential sections. One of the residential sections was set up for two, three, and four bedroom family apartments; and the third residential section was all one bedroom and efficiency apartments.

The grand opening of the mall, though it only had 65% retail occupancy, was Thursday, June 14th, the same day the final test started, by design, and scheduled to run through Sunday, June 17th, for appearances sake.

Not knowing the actual time of the CME, only the day, Claudia had taken a late nap the day before, and stayed up the night of the 14th, ready to press the button to sound the alarm if there were indications that the CME began before the scheduled time of the test, at 9:00 AM Pacific

Time.

The rest of the team filtered into the command center just before nine. Claudia wasn't the only one showing nervousness. Only Dick Shaunessy seemed calm. "I believe it is time," he said, as the countdown clock hit zero.

"Wait," Claudia suddenly said, as Dick reached for the button that would start the test. Dick's hand froze, inches from the button. "Something just occurred to me. Grandfather said the CME would occur today. But how long does it take to get here?"

"Two and a half, three days," Rick immediately said. "I assumed that had been factored in."

Gloria was quickly inserting Robert DeLancie's DVD into one of the computers on the console. "Look," she said, finding the passage she wanted. He's very specific. The CME will occur today. There is no mention about when it arrives."

"No direct mention," Rick said, rolling his wheel chair to the computer. "Here," he said, scrolling rapidly down the pages of the data on the DVD. "Here. 'Normal transition time of a CME is approximately three days, or just a little less.'"

"We're three days too early," Claudia said. She looked out through the one way glass into the operations room of the command center. Everyone in the operations room was looking at the big mirror that was their side of the one-way glass.

Claudia looked at Dick Shaunessy. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "No need. I missed it, too. Okay. reschedule the test for Saturday afternoon."

“We’re going to lose some people,” Bradley quietly said. “There will be some that won’t participate in what they believe is just another test on their day off.”

“Can’t be helped,” Dick said. “Except... When you make the announcement, include the offer of a thousand dollar bonus for everyone that participates on Saturday. That should get quite a few of those that wouldn’t otherwise participate to do so.”

Bradley still had the cautious look on his face. “You think they’ll fall for it?”

Three people spoke up at once, including Claudia. “It’ll be for real, not a gimmick.” She looked over at Dick. “Am I not correct?”

“You are,” Dick said. “Make the announcement.”

Claudia keyed the intercom and told those in operations what needed to be done. There were many curious looks cast at the mirror, but none asked any questions as the word began to go out. Only those in the control room knew about the CME.

Rick was still at the computer. “Look at this,” he said aloud and rolled back out of the way so the others could gather around the monitor. “Robert DeLancie still has a lot of followers. Some of them are proclaiming the end of the world today.”

“Oh, my!” Claudia said, her right hand going to her mouth.

“It’s not getting any TV coverage,” June said, checking the half a dozen TV’s out in the operations center. “Wait. There’s one of them being interviewed.” She reached for the controls to turn up the volume in the command room.

The man being interviewed was giving a heartfelt rendition of the

DeLancie theory. The network switched from him to a man at NASA. “We watch for these things continuously. We have satellites in place. There is no warning going out, because we have no evidence of such an event. Modern science cannot predict the sun’s activities the way this group is saying DeLancie did.”

“There you have it, folks. Just one more end of the world hoax,” said the anchor. The station cut to a commercial.

“You think they will announce it when the satellites pick up the fact that there is one coming?” Gloria asked.

Claudia was still the biggest skeptic of the group. “If it does come. We really won’t know until it happens.” She decided to stay in the control room while the others went out to see how the grand opening of the mall was going, and to participate in the activities that had been planned, but no one thought would take place.

Dick Shaunessy had several speeches to give in various parts of the Mall, Barbara Babcock told him. With a jauntiness in his step that the others didn’t have, he led them out of the command room. Bradley was only gone a few minutes. He came back to wait with Claudia.

He finally talked her into getting some sleep and then going out and seeing how the Mall Opening was going. There was only a moderate turnout, but quite a few people indicated that they were coming back for the much announced Saturday festivities. It made Claudia feel a bit better. There might actually be considerably more people in the mall when it happened Saturday. Again, if it happened.

On Friday, Claudia again spent much of her time in the command room of the operations center. To break up the monotony, she went on one of the organized tours of the organic farm and ranch operation.

She and the others were ready Saturday morning. They were watching

the morning news shows, killing time before they started the test. The plan again was to start the test at 9:00 AM Pacific time.

When the news show they were watching announced that their guest speaker had just cancelled his appearance, Dick Shaunessy looked at Claudia. “They just found out about it. Sound the alarm. And announce it is not a drill.”

Claudia jumped for the alarm button and pressed it, then keyed the intercom. “To all points. This is not a drill. Take immediate shelter.”

“Not a drill!” came the incredulous remark of one of the communications dispatchers.

“You heard the woman,” said Gregory Townsend, the man in charge of the operations room. “Not a drill. Take shelter immediately. Send it. All points.” He sounded calm, cool, and collected.

So did Dick Shaunessy when he said, “Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for making this possible.”

Claudia didn’t feel calm, cool, or collected. She felt nauseated. Her eyes were on the monitor connected to an outside camera.

Bradley suddenly stood up. “I can’t do anything about the distant operations, but I think I’ll check on the locals. Lend a hand, if I can.”

“I’m with you,” Rick said, spinning his wheelchair around smartly. “We have our radios,” he said, looking over at Claudia. “Give us a call when it hits.”

Claudia nodded. “Assuming I recognize it.”

“You will. The sky is going to light up like... that!”

Everyone turned toward the monitor. The sky was like the brightest Aurora Borealis on the darkest night. Huge, violent swirls of color. The view lasted for a few seconds, and then the monitor went blank. The camera had succumbed to the Electromagnetic Pulse generated by a plasma containing trillions upon trillions of electrons and protons impacting the atmosphere.

“We need to make sure people stay away from the entrances. There’s bound to be some reflected radiation at the entrances,” Rick said. He and Bradley hurried off.

The intercom from the operations center buzzed. “We had contact with everyone at least long enough to give the warning. Everything is down. We’ll have to do some tests when things calm down to see how much equipment we lost.”

“Very good. Might as well go to a skeleton crew. It is going to take a few days before radio communication is again possible.” It was more than a few days. It was months.

Not only had the EMP destroyed much of the world’s electronic equipment, the other effects of the CME were just as devastating. Billions died from the hard radiation that the surface of the earth was subjected to as it spun on its axis the three days it took the CME to pass, and then for over a week as the magnetosphere stabilized and again began to provide its radiation protection to the surface of the earth.

Scientists, years later, estimated the magnetosphere lost ten percent of its thickness, resulting in increased rates of mutations and cancers for all surviving species on earth. In addition to the loss of the magnetosphere, perhaps as much as three percent of the atmosphere was lost to the gravitational drag of the CME. Thankfully, the ratio of oxygen to nitrogen, CO₂ and the other gasses of the atmosphere remained the same. There was slightly less pressure at all levels of the atmosphere

from sea level to the top of Mount Everest.

Wildlife, like human life, was decimated. Burrowing animals and insects survived fairly well. Only time would tell if other species had survived in enough numbers to continue to reproduce. Predators that survived became even more vicious and less selective of their prey. Prey became more cautious and timid.

Sea life suffered, too. It was discovered, that though most of the plankton was killed by the radiation, there were a few species of plankton that were resistant enough to survive. With the much smaller food chain the surviving plankton flourished. Two years after the CME sea life made huge comebacks, with all the plankton available, and then life all up the food chain came back, especially without billions of humans eating it.

Electronic hardware, and some electrical hardware, suffered the highest losses of material goods, as did goods that depended on electricity to construct, run, maintain, or repair. With the remaining population unable to maintain them, the cities and their infrastructure, with few exceptions, were abandoned. The rural life was the only way most people that did survive, could continue to survive.

Mother Nature and Father Time both took heavy tolls on additional elements of the infrastructure that humans had built up, particularly along seacoasts. With no new building to speak of, the existing structures began to be taken by the oceans and seas.

But there were oasis's in the wilderness. Like the ones Dick Shaunessy and Claudia DeLancie had provided. Even those had some problems. Mostly it had to do with personalities.

“Claudia, you and Mr. Shaunessy better get up here to the main entrance. We have problems,” came Rick’s voice over the short range

radios. They were unaffected by the EMP in the underground complex.

Bradley and Rick had gone to check what was happening after the outside camera went out. Mall security was letting people in, but not out, and some of them didn't like it. Rick started to hand the bullhorn he was carrying to Dick, but Dick motioned to Claudia. She reluctantly took it.

But Shaunessy stood right beside her on her right, and Bradley moved to her left. Claudia hesitated a moment longer, then raised the bullhorn and addressed the milling crowd. "Listen, everyone. Please. Calm down and I'll explain what is happening."

The crowd did quiet down and she continued. "We are in the midst of a coronal mass ejection from the sun. While you can't see or feel the actual radiation, I assure you it is out there. We are safe here inside the mall. We have plenty of supplies to get us through the next several days as the CME passes."

Someone called from the back of the crowd. "I don't know what you are up to, but you can't keep us here against our will! I have family to see about!"

Slowly, regretfully, Claudia keyed the bullhorn again. "No. We can't. Anyone that wishes to leave may do so. You are only going to your deaths if you leave now." She looked over at the security team standing across the opening to the main entrance/exit of the mall. "Stand aside," she told them.

There was a rush for the door and its access to two of the parking garages. Only seconds later, there was a similar, though disappointingly smaller inrush back inside. People had seen the remarkable sky and changed their minds about leaving.

The emergency response team for the mall went into action, getting people dispersed and made comfortable. The regular mall spokeswoman

took over the explanations, after Claudia briefed her.

Quite a few more people trickled back in after having tried to start vehicles that wouldn't, due to the massive EMP the CME had created. Others set out on foot, anxious to get to their homes and loved ones. Those that left didn't make it. The massive dosages of hard radiation they received in those first hours of exposure on their way to their homes were enough to kill them.

Those with minor exposures suffered the effects of radiation poisoning over the next few days and weeks. Several that spent considerable time in the partially protected garages trying to start their vehicles succumbed to the radiation in less than a month, as did several latecomers to the mall that received heavy dosages of radiation.

Claudia and her team had done what they could. It was now up to those that had been trained and prepared by the team to carry on the day to day life in the mall in its capacity now as shelter and safe haven.

When the radiation instruments indicated that the radiation had fallen to safe levels people were notified. The auto parts store did a land office business selling replacement electronic parts for the EMP damaged vehicles. Those people that couldn't afford, or those with vehicles for which the store had no parts, were given rides home by those that had useable transportation.

The mall provided rides as well, with their fleet of vehicles that had been protected against the EMP. Many chose to return to the mall when they found their homes without electrical service and food rotting in their refrigerators, with no communications with the outside world.

Recovery teams were sent out on the fourth day after the start of the event. They recovered semi-truck load after semi-truck load of consumables from the surrounding towns and cities, as well as the trucks they found on the roads.

As more and more people came to the realization that it was truly the end of civilization as they knew it, they began to go to the mall staff with offers to help in any way they could. The offers were accepted gratefully, and the people assigned living quarters and jobs suitable for their abilities.

As life at the mall settled into a routine in the weeks and months that followed the event, communications with Dick Shaunessy's other holdings were re-established. Most had fared as well as the mall. A tiny handful not as well, but survive they did. All were designed to be locally self-sustaining and retain the ability to function in the business they were set up to do.

Most sites began to erect the photovoltaic panels that had been stored before the event. Only a few for minor applications had been installed prior to the CME for fear of damage from the EMP. It was a wise decision. Those few panels that were installed burned out, and in doing so destroyed the equipment to which they provided power.

One of the first operations brought back on line was an old, small refinery in Texas that had been purchased, refurbished, and tested. It drew from a series of small wells not far from the refinery site.

The plant had key electronics pulled and placed in faraday cage rooms for safe keeping, and the rest of the plant mothballed. It took three months to get it going again, but when it was, it began producing enough fuel to keep all of the Shaunessy operations supplied. A fleet of semi-truck fuel tankers was based at the refinery. All of the Shaunessy facilities had over a year's worth of stabilized fuel, so the refinery would be able to fill its storage tanks before it needed to begin shipping fuel.

With the confirmation that fuel would not be problem, there was a collective sigh of relief. While each local area was relatively self-sufficient, the expansion of civilization was going to be dependent on

fuel.

Claudia, according to plan, soon had each facility convert to a gold standard. Every chief operating officer at all of the facilities had been entrusted with a stock of gold and silver coins to be used after the CME. With Shaunessy's companies about the only going enterprises of a commercial nature, and with them acting as a bank, the use of gold and silver caught on quickly with all the survivors, even for person-to-person transactions. It made commerce much easier.

It also quickly put things on a commercial footing, as Shaunessy was a believer in the free enterprise system. He helped where he could, but expected people to make it or not, on their own auspices, once the event was over and things stabilized. There was more than enough work to be done by all the survivors.

With the resources he had accumulated, he made many cooperative agreements with people to start up, or continue existing businesses. With the very intent of having some semblance of government intact, several local politicians and government officials had been invited to the opening of the mall.

Dick Shaunessy was cooperative with those remaining politicians and government officials, but refused to turn the operation over to them. His political advisor, John Redman, talked to many key survivors and presented the politicians with his findings. The survivors preferred for the people that had prepared to be in charge. Not the people that had done nothing to prevent the event from happening, or prepare for it.

Dick did insist on elections, as soon as it was practical for the survivors over the entire nation to participate. That was going to be a year or more. In the mean time, the politicians could advise. They couldn't do more than that. They found they had much more support locally when they cooperated, than when they tried to take over. It was much the same in the other Shaunessy locations.

CME - Epilog

There were survivors other than Shaunessy's groups. Several other people had taken heed of Robert DeLancie's predictions posted on the internet. Others, mostly survivalists, were relatively well prepared for many things. Some even for a CME. Not all survivors were friendly. Seven months after the event, one of the moderate size operations adjacent to Interstate 70 in Kansas failed to make their scheduled radio contact. Ronald Deever loaded up a team to go investigate.

A week later he radioed back that the small complex had been overrun and everyone killed. Obvious supplies and the animals had been taken, but the bulk of the supplies were still intact in hidden caches. Ronald asked permission to go after the perpetrators.

Claudia knew that Dick had been dreading such an encounter. He had authorized the preparations for such an event, so the ability was not in question. Only the okay was needed. He finally gave it and Claudia passed it on.

The members of the command staff were beginning to get worried when they had not heard from Ronald in almost two weeks. Finally he contacted them, and in a cheerful voice, declared that the situation was resolved.

"And the losses?" Claudia asked. Dick would want to know.

The voice was less cheerful this time. "Two minor wounded on our side. Seventeen dead and five wounded on theirs."

"Give them to the locals," Claudia replied. The compound had

mentioned a few other survivors locally. Good ones. “Stay long enough to give your testimony at their trial, and then close up the place for reopening later. Head back when you’re done there.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The Kansas incident wasn’t the only incident of one of Dick Shaunessy’s holdings being attacked, but it was the only one that was defeated in battle. A year later, volunteers from several of the US locations repopulated the waypoint for transport of goods across the nation.

Claudia had seen to it that there existed an ark of a nature to try to ensure the survival of some species of wildlife that were not expected to survive the CME on their own. Hundreds of hives of bees were protected during the days of the bad radiation.

Birds were not expected to survive well in the wild during the heavy radiation of the CME; so many mated pairs of useful birds of many kinds were kept under protection, and then released after the radiation danger passed. The same thing was done for small and medium game animals. Multitudes of rabbits and squirrels were released into the wild, as were pairs of white tail deer in the east and mule deer and elk in the west.

The team was not at all confident that their efforts would be enough to insure the survival of those species, but they had decided to try.

In five years nature stabilized. In ten those species that had survived were thriving, taking back habitat once used by humans. One rather frightening aspect of the return of wildlife was the number of zoo animals that had survived, housed inside concrete structures. Unable to take care of them any longer, those few zoo keepers that survived the CME turned their animals loose to fend for themselves. They too

flourished in the wilderness that began to once again grow.

Plant life had been left to fend on its own, except for non-hybrid garden and field crops. Large stores of the self-perpetuating varieties had been put by for distribution after the fact. All farming and ranching activities that the Shaunessy team had bought or developed had already started using non-hybrids exclusively, well before the CME.

On the personal side of things, Gloria, a newly svelte Gloria, had become enamored of one of the dome structure builders they used for many of the company's new installations and additions to older structures. They had been married two years before the CME.

Claudia and Bradley had kept their relationship strictly business right up to the time right after the CME. After several long, private conversations, Claudia and Bradley moved from their individual efficiency apartments to the two bedroom apartment originally meant for Claudia, but which she had initially refused. She was pregnant within the week. The wedding date would be in November, just before Thanksgiving.

Despite good bloodlines, Dick and Jenny Shaunessy's two kids had turned out to be less than stellar heirs to the fortune. In the will he wrote a few weeks before the CME event, over Claudia's strong objections, Dick left his fortune to Claudia, with the stipulation that his children be provided for in a fashion dictated by future lifestyle possibilities. "Make them work, if you can," he told her privately.

Fortunately, the will wasn't needed until late in Claudia's life. Dick and Jenny's children died before Dick did, shortly after Jenny's death at 71, twenty years after the CME. Dick didn't last all that long after Jenny's death, either, outliving his children by less than a year. He was revered for many decades after his death as the savior of civilization, with Claudia and the others footnotes in the history books.

End *****

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