

Haroldsville

“Harold!” Lois yelled to her husband. “Get these boxes out of my kitchen!”

“Yes, dear,” Harold said with a sigh. “I was just taking a rest before I took everything down to the basement.” He set the glass of water down on the coffee table, making sure he used a coaster, and hurried back into the kitchen.

“I don’t know why you waste your money on all this nonsense,” Lois said, her hands on her hips as she waited for Harold to take the first of the three boxes down to the basement. “That better go on your side of the basement. I don’t want it cluttering up my side.

“Yes, dear,” Harold said again. “I sh... sh... should have used the outside entrance. I’m thorry. Uh... s... s... sorry”

“You should be. Now hurry up. I’m having my sewing circle over in a bit and I want this place spotless. And don’t start that stuttering and lisping. You always do that when you’ve done something wrong. I know you can control it. You do most of the time. I won’t be embarrassed by you when my friends get here.”

Harold took the first of the three boxes downstairs and set it on a bench in the unfinished side of the large basement. He hurried to move the other two boxes, and then remembered the water glass he’d left in the living room. Lois saw him, but didn’t say anything. Just gave him the evil eye, as he thought of that accusatory look.

A few minutes later Lois’ sewing club members began to arrive and Harold put in his required appearance for five minutes and then hurried down to the basement, making the right turn at the foot of the stairs to go into his side of the basement. He hadn’t stuttered or lisped, though it had been close. He still did both when he started stressing. Life with Lois tended to be stressing now.

He took a few deep breaths and drank half a bottle of water from the small fridge under the bench. He needed to be calm before he did what he planned to do next. When he was ready, Harold slid a tall cabinet to one side on silent rollers to expose a vault door set in the wall. Harold quickly worked the combination, spun the spoked handle to release the plungers to allow him to push the door open.

Harold walked down the short corridor that connected the vault room under the garage with the basement. Going over to a large upright safe, he opened it and stood there for a few moments admiring the contents.

Much to Lois’ disgust, Harold was a collector. But not of nice Art Glass like her. Of course her hobby did make it easy to buy her presents. Any piece of Art Glass was fine, as long as it was expensive.

Harold collected, among other things, quality firearms. Not just fancy ones, though he did have a few of those, but firearms that could be used. Working firearms. Even the fancy ones were quite useable.

He closed that safe and opened another. Where the first one held long guns, the second one held several hand guns, and box after box of ammunition, for the handguns as well as ammunition for the long guns.

Next to the two tall safes was a tall, wide, very heavy duty cabinet. Stacked on its shelves were more boxes of ammunition and reloading supplies, except for primers. A smaller cabinet held Harold's large collection of primers for reloading.

Finally, there was another of the upright safes. It too Harold opened, just to gaze at its contents. Wasn't really much to see. Mostly heavy cloth bags. Each bag weighed approximately twenty-five pounds and contained either \$500.00 face value pre-1965 US silver dimes, quarters, or halves, which was approximately 360 ounces of silver content; or 300 ounces of US Gold Eagle Bullion coins in 1 oz, ½ oz, ¼ oz, and 1/10 oz sizes.

The only thing to really see was a shelf that held the odd lot of gold and silver coins Harold had, in plastic tubes, to make it easy to keep them sorted. This safe had a key locked inner compartment. Harold opened it, too, to take a look at the small, heavy plastic bags, each with a 1.00 carat to 1.05 carat round brilliant cut diamond rated IF clarity and D color, with attached GIA certificate of identification. Each was worth approximately \$20,000 in the current gem market.

Harold hardly paid any attention to the cash stacked inside the compartment, next to the diamonds. Several bundles of every current circulating denomination. Satisfied now, Harold closed the last safe, feeling a bit silly at being so prideful of his wealth. He needed to work on that. Monetary wealth was fine. But you couldn't eat it. Nor guns and ammunition. And it didn't help people locked away in a safe.

Food and water, on the other hand, was something that everyone needed, on a daily basis. Harold had plenty of that, and added the three cases of MRE's that had come in that day at his office. He seldom had anything prep related sent to the house. It upset Lois.

Harold wondered if his 'Humanitarian Aid' supplies he'd put up would help counter his pridefulness. He was well prepared for his and Lois' continued existence, come what may, but fully one-fourth of what he had stored was for relatives, neighbors, and friends.

After adjusting his inventory on the computer, he printed out a copy and put it on the clipboard and tossed the previous copy. He pulled up the internet on the computer and checked the forums for new information. Wasn't much new. Next he checked the satellite TV news channels. Same ol' same ol'.

Harold unhooked and grounded all the antennas, turned out the lights, and left the vault room. There wasn't much in the house for him to do with Lois' sewing circle in sessions, so he

went out the outside entrance to the basement, closing the heavy door behind him. It was counterweighted for ease of opening and closing.

He wondered why he was so restless as he checked the fuel levels in the tanks buried under the yard shed, the jerry cans inside the shed, and the wood pile behind the shed. The large coal bin was full to overflowing. Going inside the yard shed, he ran his hand down the neatly stacked shelves in the shed, looking at the large collection of prep related stores for yard and garden.

Everything in the greenhouse was just fine. There was nothing planted at the moment, but Harold had everything needed to start up a highly productive greenhouse garden, and conventional garden, in the greenhouse and garden support shed.

One end of the green house opened to the swimming pool enclosure. On the far side of the pool was the pool house with change rooms and a pair of shower baths. One room of the pool house held the pool pump and filter, along with plenty of treatment chemicals. It also contained a fire pump that could draw from city water, the garden well, or the pool. Everything was in order, as it always was. Harold saw to that. The pool house roof was covered with hot water collection panels, with enough PV panels to run the electric controls and pumps to keep the pool at a comfortable temperature year round.

The barbeque area was essentially a complete outdoor kitchen, set up, unbeknownst to Lois, as a canning and food preservation center. There was plenty of wood in the bins, with a dozen cords more stacked behind the yard shed, under a wide overhang of the building. The gas cook top portion of the barbeque center could burn natural gas, which was the norm, or be switched to propane, if needed. The propane tank was one of the fuel tanks buried under the yard shed.

Harold walked out to the garden area. It, like the greenhouse, had lain fallow since Harold had set them up. Manure from several horse owners and small farms had been incorporated every year since, with a cover crop put in and worked into the soil as well by one of the farmers that brought manure.

Strolling the orchard next to the garden, Harold checked the condition of the fruit trees, nut trees, grape vines, and berry patches. The large hedge of thorny wild roses was doing as well as all the rest of the plants, having produced a huge crop of rose hips that fall. All the plants, well cared for by Harold's professional gardener, were good producers.

Continuing his walk, Harold went up the other side of the house and stopped at looked at the three condenser units for the zoned HVAC system of the house. Next to them was the whole house standby generator. It had its own buried fuel tank near the fence on that side of the house.

Circling the rest of the way around the house, Harold walked into the six-bay detached garage. The finish gleamed on his 'Cowboy Cadillac' semi-truck based motorhome. So did the fiberglass of the MacGregor 26 motor sailor. Two bays were currently empty, and the other two were set up as a working home garage, with a lift and set of professional tools. There was a room in the garage almost as big as the bays that held repair and replacement parts, as well as large

stocks of consumables. There were buried gasoline and diesel tanks with dispensers at one corner of the garage.

Putting a hand on the tall concrete wall that went around three sides of the place, the security it helped provide the place was almost palpable. The fourth side, facing the street and sidewalk, had a high security, high tensile steel vertical bar fence, set in a concrete base, to continue the security the concrete walls provided. Lois had protested the fence, at first, but it was more than decorative enough to satisfy her sense of aesthetics.

Harold finished his stroll in the attached four car garage. He religiously kept three of the bays pristine, so he and Lois could keep their respective vehicles inside, with plenty of room around them. The fourth bay was Harold's workshop where he did his various projects and stored more of his supplies and equipment.

Feeling better just seeing everything and understanding he'd done just about all he could for come what may, Harold entered the kitchen through the garage and checked the refrigerator for a snack, knowing he didn't really need one. Since there wasn't one, anyway, he went to the den by the back hallway, avoiding the sewing circle.

He pulled up the Anderson plans on the computer and studied them. It was going to be a two million dollar house, and all his hints of building in safety features had fallen on deaf ears. He made the few changes in the plans the couple had asked for and e-mailed them to the document print house that would create the sets of blueprints.

Harold decided to take a look at the prep forums again, to see if there were any new stories or chapters of stories posted. He'd just been checking for news earlier. He found a couple of things he hadn't read and did so, killing time until Lois' group was finished. Lois always insisted they go out for dinner after one of the meetings. That was okay. Lois was a mediocre cook at best. She'd taken to serving the fancier heat and serve dishes when she cooked. Harold did at least half of the cooking, and cooked mostly from scratch. He didn't feel like it that evening, either.

He waited patiently as Lois slowly ushered out her guests, and then took close to an hour to get ready to go out. Harold's stomach had worked its way up from wanting something simple to premium surf and turf with a bottle of champagne and a real dessert with a drink to top it off.

Lois was a bit surprised when Harold asked her to drive, and suggested the restaurant he did. Sewing circle dinner was usually one of the nicer dinner houses. "You are in a mood, Harold. What's going on? Did you have a good day at the office?"

Harold smiled, leaning back in the Cadillac's soft leather upholstery. "More or less normal. I'm just especially hungry tonight. You know, I'm not sure I ate lunch. I can't really remember."

Lois didn't respond, blending into the traffic expertly, the engine in the Cadillac more than equal to her aggressive foot. But Harold only winced once, when she cut across three lanes of traffic to make a right hand turn onto the street where the restaurant was located. She pulled

into the parking lot a few minutes later and took one of the available handicap parking spots. Taking the handicap tag from the console she hung it on the rearview mirror.

Harold knew she no more needed the handicap permit than he did, but she had a very good relationship with her doctor, and he had signed off for it for her.

When he'd decided where he wanted to eat, Harold had made reservations. They were seated with only a couple of minutes of wait. Harold was enjoying himself. For whatever reason, perhaps Harold's own attitude, Lois was open and talkative, vivacious as only she could be. It brought back the good times when they were first married.

They were eating their shared desert when lightning flared outside the window and a tremendous clap of thunder sounded. Lois jumped slightly. When the power went off she gasped. "Harold?" she asked. Harold marveled at the little girl quality of her voice.

"Give it a few seconds, Honey," Harold said, reaching over in the dark to take her hand in his. She was shaking.

Moments later the emergency lights came on and Lois began to relax. "Sorry, Harold," she said, pulling her hand from his. "Don't know what came over me. I'm not usually frightened by storms." She was back to her current self.

"It was quite a flash and bang," Harold replied. The wind had picked up and a hard rain was blowing against the window.

"I'm ready to go," Lois said, her voice firm. The earlier mood was gone.

Harold signaled for the check and the server hurried over. She looked a bit frazzled. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Just the check," Lois said. "And make it snappy."

"Yes, Ma'am," the young woman said.

"Don't call me 'Ma'am,'" Lois barked. "I'm not old enough for you to be using that term for me!"

The server hurried away, tears in her eyes. Harold thought about saying something, but decided it would only make things worse. He'd fix it on the bill. Lois was nearly incensed when the server came back with the check and said, "I'm afraid our credit card machine isn't working, with the power out."

Harold left a short note of apology, and a hefty tip with the cash in the check holder. He held Lois' chair for her as she got up and asked, "Would you prefer that I drive, Dear?"

"I am perfectly capable of driving in the rain, Harold!"

Deciding, as always, that acquiescence was the best way to handle Lois' now quite frequent outbursts, Harold said, "Of course, Dear. My apologies."

Usually a very aggressive driver, Lois was hesitant on the way home, running one traffic control signal red light due to inattention, and waiting at a green light until someone honked at her, causing her to hit the accelerator even harder than normal, the big engine in the Cadillac squalling the tires on the wet pavement.

The gate opener and then the garage door opener both worked, and the outside illumination lights came on when Lois pulled up. The automatic switchover to the generator had happened as designed. Their house was the only one in the cul-de-sac that had lights showing.

As soon as they got inside Lois told Harold, "I'm going to bed. I plan on sleeping late in the morning. Fend for yourself."

Harold simply nodded and went about checking the house the way he usually did before turning in himself. As always, everything was secure. He went to his bedroom. Since he tended to sleep warm, often with nothing but a sheet over him, and Lois slept cold, needing two blankets as well as the sheet and comforter, they had been sleeping in separate bedrooms for years. Only when Lois was in the mood did she come to Harold's bedroom.

With a soft sigh Harold slid between the sheets and turned his mind off, hoping for sleep to come quickly.

Lois was true to her word. She didn't make an appearance the next morning when Harold got up, prepared for the day, and went downstairs to fix his own simple breakfast. He was partial to granola cereal and, often now, had it with milk and a cup of coffee on the mornings Lois didn't get up. He ate the cold cereal while he watched the news on the kitchen TV.

The storm had raged all night and the skies were just clearing up as Harold took a stroll around the back of the property, coffee cup in hand. Everything had survived the storm without problem.

Harold pulled his SUV out of the garage a few minutes later. When he drove past his nearest neighbor's house he saw lights blink on. Apparently the power had come back on. He wasn't worried about the house generator. The controls would delay a few minutes and then shut the generator down, switching back to commercial power automatically.

Harold was watching the news in his office during his lunch some three weeks after the storm. Global warming was in the news again, in a big way. The mildest winter in generations was expected for North America. And the driest.

After working on a set of plans for a small home in one of the St. Louis suburbs, Harold leaned back in his button tufted leather executive chair. His hands behind his head, Harold mulled over the probable future. The plans he'd just finished had originally incorporated several

preparedness related features. They had fallen by the wayside one by one as the couple switched from safety to luxury in their thinking.

He couldn't push his ideas on anyone, but provided the opportunity to every one of his clients to build a home suited for a very unstable future. Extra insulation was one thing. He seldom had trouble getting the R-factor for walls and roofs up. The same couldn't be said for windows. When it came to doubling the R-factor of windows, people began to balk. They wanted marble Jacuzzi tubs instead.

With a shake of his head Harold stood up and left the office. "Might as well check out the lead on that property," he said aloud. He started the Cadillac Escalade ESV and headed out of the city.

Harold did have one client considering preparedness issues. Sort of. He'd replied to the man's posts on one of the prep forums, answering some questions about building a small home set up for a prepper's lifestyle. The man had given a link for the real estate agency handling the sale of the land. The land was a few miles from I-44, out near Onondaga Cave. The real estate agent was in Sullivan.

It didn't take long to find the agent's office when he got to Sullivan. She had to make some quick arrangements to cover the small office so she could take Harold out to the property. Harold was headed for his Escalade ESV when the real estate agent said, "We'd better take mine. It's a bit rough where we're going."

Assuming she just didn't want him to get the rig dirty, Harold smiled and walked over to her Jeep. It wasn't a rock climber, but it was far from stock. And it was rather battered looking. After climbing in, Harold fastened the five-point harness, beginning to wonder just what he was getting himself into.

He didn't doubt that the Escalade ESV could have made the trip, but it not only would have been dirty, it would have been scratched up no end from forcing its way through brush and brambles.

"It's sixty-two acres, and this is the only way in," Anna Fitzgerald told Harold when they reached a sign nailed up on a tree that said "No Trespassing and No Hunting". "The access is deeded, so that isn't a problem. Are you sure you want to get out?" she asked Harold when he unbuckled the harness. "Those dress clothes won't stand up well out here."

"I see that," Harold said, stepping out of the Jeep into ankle deep wet leaves. Anna had put on hiking shoes and followed Harold as he walked deeper into the property. "There is a small spring over here that you will have to contend with," she said, pointing toward a bench that dropped off almost fifteen feet when Harold got to it.

He could see the glint of the sun on the small stream the spring fed, and hear the slight noise the water made running over the rocky streambed. "There are a couple of restrictions that go with the land. They won't let you do much with the spring. Just a bit below where it emerges from the rock, if you cut the maximum number of trees the restriction will let you, is probably the

best view. You'd have to pipe the runoff from the spring around the home and put it back into the original streambed."

Harold just nodded. "And back here?" he asked after looking in the other direction for a few seconds.

"The ground rises for a ways and then slowly drops away toward the State Forest land."

Heading that way, Harold decided he'd sacrifice the shoes he was wearing. They'd be a lost cause if he investigated much more of the property. But he wanted to see more. He traipsed over more of the property, going down to get a closer look at the spring, before going back to the Jeep.

He noticed something about it a little out of the ordinary. On a hunch, he went back to Anna's Jeep, where she was waiting, talking on her cell phone, and asked, "Not any caves to fall into here, are there? This is cave country, after all."

Anna closed her phone and shook her head. "You don't have to worry. Almost all of this area has been mapped and cave openings closed off for safety."

Harold nodded and said, "That's good. I guess I've seen enough." He got back into the Jeep and buckled up once more.

As soon as he got back to his office he got on the Internet and PM'ed the man interested in the property.

It was two days before the man responded. Harold couldn't say he got the reply he was hoping for, because he really did want to help the guy. The reply indicated that the man was no longer interested in the property. He'd found something else.

Harold didn't know he was smiling so largely when he dialed the real estate agent's number. Never one to pay more than necessary, Harold made a counter offer to the listed price. It was another three days before the agent called him back and said the buyer had accepted.

First Harold had a copy of the original owner's CC&R's for the property faxed over, and then hired a surveyor to confirm and mark the boundaries of the property. Next he looked for and found a firm that did underground survey work with ground penetrating radar.

After reading the CC&R's, Harold decided that the real estate agent had put the worst spin on the restrictions, probably due to not even having read them. There were restrictions that went with the land, including one about the spring's natural flow. The preliminary plan that had come to Harold when he saw the spring was easily doable under the restrictions.

Another of the restrictions was that if any trees were removed, other than diseased trees, at least two additional trees had to be planted, except, one-for-one planting was okay if the planted tree was a fruit or nut tree. That worked right into Harold's burgeoning plans for the property.

He made arrangements to have a water well driller check the property and give an estimate on a well. Likewise a plumber specializing in difficult septic systems. The spring was going to complicate the placement of the septic system. And, if the ground radar proved Harold's hunch about a concealed cave on the property, it would also have to be taken into account.

Knowing he was getting ahead of himself, Harold went ahead and ordered fruit and nut tree seedlings and saplings to be transplanted when he had an area cleared for them. He would be selectively thinning the forest somewhat, besides clearing a couple of areas. There was a great deal of brush growing under the tree canopy and Harold wanted it removed. It was a huge fire danger.

The decision to where the main open area would be would be made after the surveys for water and sewer. Harold wasn't too concerned about a 'view' that the real estate agent had been pushing.

Again, even before the papers were signed, Harold ordered a custom concrete monolithic dome style garage large enough for the motorhome.

After the flurry of activity of making the arrangements, assuming he would get the property, things slowed down on the project. It was the following spring, on an unusually hot day that early in the year, that things began to heat up in other ways, as well. The deal was closed and Harold took title of the property.

The lumbering firm started the tree cutting, with the first cutting making space for the well drilling rig to get in to do the water well. The plumbing company showed up the next day, to install the oversized septic system Harold had requested. The cave had been confirmed by ground penetrating radar, and a specialty earthmover was there to form an access point for it. Two days later the firm that would build the garage showed up with their equipment.

Harold, closing the office for a few days, took the motorhome to the property to keep an eye on the proceedings. Lois took the opportunity to go visit her mother for a few weeks.

With flashlight in hand, Harold investigated the cave, such as it was, going down a ladder placed down the hole that had been cut and blasted through the ridge of rock that covered the cave. There was only the one large chamber the radar had indicated. Roughly thirty feet long, ten feet high and sixteen feet wide, the chamber was slick rock, the roof slightly narrower than the floor, and higher at one end than the other.

Harold discovered the source of the spring coming from the bench. At least the local source. There was a large wet area on the tallest end of the chamber, constantly dripping water to a small pool at the base. A shallow channel ran along the side of the chamber, disappearing into the rock at the shortest and narrowest end.

Having read up on caves and the way they formed, Harold decided that there had been a small pocket of limestone that had slowly, over the millennia, dissolved away from the action of

the seep of water that had probably first come through a tiny crack from the wet wall to the exit wall, starting at the top of the chamber and making it larger as time passed.

The floor of the cave was relatively flat, with some high and low spots. The walls and roof were smooth, but rather 'wavey', as Harold thought of them.

The air wasn't musty, so there were some points in the cave that allowed air to circulate. He couldn't see anything specific, but Harold knew they had to be there. With the constant flow of water, small as it was, the cave would have been damp if there wasn't air flowing through it.

He noticed one ragged crack in the wall near the outlet of the water and put his hand up to it. Sure enough, there was air movement against the back of his hand. Working his way around the perimeter of the chamber, doing the same thing, Harold found at least once source for the air coming into the cave. Like the crack near the water exit, there was a similar one just above the almost perfectly round wet face of the end wall. Air was coming from it.

After orienting himself, Harold climbed out of the cave, and went exploring above ground. He found the air outlet near the spring outlet. If one looked very closely, a tiny movement of the leaves of a vine growing on the face of the bench could be seen.

Going to the other end of the cave, above ground, Harold looked around. He couldn't see anything at all that could be the air entry point. He looked up the slope. It could be anywhere. Probably on the other side of the ridge line. No telling where the water was coming from, either. One of the small rivers common to the area was probably the source, though the aquifer that led to the cave.

All-in-all, Harold was happy with his discovery. He sketched out how he wanted the entrance covered, and where he wanted another entrance made. It cost him some expense for the down time as one contractor did the work before the garage builder could get to his work. But when the work was done, the big entrance was hidden in the garage floor, with wide steps going down into the cave, and a smaller hole, with a permanent ladder installed, hidden under several slabs of the naturally occurring rock in the area. The escape tunnel, as Harold thought of it, was well into the woods that would be left standing around the small clearing.

Once the processes were started, Harold went home, and back to work, checking on the progress of the various contractors every week or so. The well was finished first and turned out to be a good one. The water was clear, cold, slightly hard, but not contaminated by any pathogens. As good as could be asked for. Harold would use a softening system, on general principles, though it probably wasn't necessary.

A solar pump was installed, with a PV panel and dedicated battery, the discharge piped to the same cistern that held the water collected from the garage structure.

The septic system, after what turned into a rather heated argument between the contractor and the plumbing company owner, was finally finished, oversized just the way Harold wanted it, against the plumber's objections that it was wasted money for a hunting camp. That was what

Harold was telling people he was building. It was true, in part. Harold had decided to take advantage of the surroundings and learn to hunt.

Harold, and the workmen on the site, found one of the few drawbacks of the place. Even with the thinning of the trees going on, the area would still be considered heavily forested. The wind blew in the tops of the trees. Not much reached the surface of the ground.

With temperatures often above one-hundred-degrees Fahrenheit, working conditions on the property were rather miserable. With Harold's permission, the various contractors got together and rigged up a misting system using the cold well water to provide a cooling station the workers could use to avoid heat illnesses.

Harold's business, always steady, since he was very good at designing homes that fit individuals' lifestyles, began picking up, mainly in his specialty line of designs. Those designs being for people uncertain about their security in the future. He had three preppers' homes in the design stage that summer. He usually had one, sometimes two, a year.

The weather forecasts, more particularly the climate forecasts, called for more heating. Global warming, whatever the actual cause, was accelerating. Despite the problems seacoast cities were beginning to have with rising sea levels, there was a large element of society that welcomed the increased arable acreage and longer growing seasons.

The thrust toward bio-fuels had initially hurt the production of grains for human consumption, but that was changing. There was more than enough production to go around now. For the moment.

There were losses from the heat, and extended spells of drought in places. But there were many other places that the increased rainfall produced because of the high evaporation rates over the oceans increased production by anywhere from ten percent to fifty percent. Prices dropped as availability increased, but not by much. Farmers were raking it in. If they lived in the right spot at the right time.

Along the Mississippi River, from St. Louis south, the increased rains had created constant flooding problems. Efforts were being made to put in new, higher dikes, further away from the river, to create a flood plain that could contain the massive quantities of water going down the river.

But people were suffering in some other areas from the heat and drought. The Phoenix megalopolis, during the summer Harold was building his hidden retreat, stayed over ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit at night, and over one-hundred-ten during the day for ninety-three straight days.

There were several heat related deaths every day. That number jumped when the power grid went down from huge overloads of the electrical system due to air conditioning loads.

Desert conditions became the norm for Southern California, the Southern tip of Nevada, all of Southern Arizona, Southern New Mexico, and into the western tip of Texas. The always on

the books water rights wars began to get out of hand, the people involved leaving the courtrooms to go to the riverbanks, guns and knives in hand. That summer alone, seven people died violent deaths because of water rights issues.

Then the Gulf Stream submerged beneath the freshening North Atlantic, from off the Carolinas northward. The New England area, Eastern Canada, and Western Europe couldn't tell the difference until the winter after the record breaking summer.

While the rest of the country enjoyed a mild winter, those northern areas around the North Atlantic, their weather tempered for centuries by the Gulf Stream, set record lows. With the oceans pumping moisture into the atmosphere many times more than the old norm, snow levels were in the tens of feet in some places. People died by the hundreds when the ample supplies of fuel oil simply could not get delivered.

By the end of that winter, Harold had either moved what he wanted from the house to his new retreat, or had purchased additional equipment and supplies just for it. There were stacks of firewood all over the property and Harold dropped a few dollars on a Bobcat 5600T Toolcat utility vehicle. He used it to haul the firewood from the remote locations to the retreat compound, a few loads each time he was there. It also gave him a way to travel over all of the rather rough property.

With the garage nearly impenetrable, short of explosives or sophisticated tools, Harold had a few amenities installed in the garage, for when he brought the Escalade ESV instead of the motorhome. Plenty of space was left for the motorhome, the Toolcat, and one other vehicle.

The bad weather took a back seat in the news when the mainstream media got onto the story of a Near Earth Object projected to cross Earth's orbit in less than three years. About the time Earth was at that same point in the orbit.

Harold was glad he'd made his preps before the panics. 'Survivalism' took on yet another meaning, this one closer to the original positive one of the seventies. Of course there were those that claimed that it was various Gods' wills, and wanted people to surrender their possessions and go to their end in repentance.

After Harold openly advertised prepper friendly home designs his steady business boomed to the extent of hiring a couple of recent drafting school graduates to assist him in the production of designs. Harold supervised every one of them, but much of the tech work was done by the two new employees.

He and Lois were spending less and less time together. That abruptly changed after the two drafting techs were hired. One of them was a woman. A very good looking younger woman. Lois did not like it very much.

At first, Harold thought his wife had just taken an interest in his work, since the weather and the NEO were in the news often. But when Catherine mentioned, in passing, that Lois didn't

like her working for Harold, did the light dawn on Harold. Lois was jealous. That was remarkable, in and of itself. Her displaying it was even more remarkable.

Harold decided to take advantage of it, to try to get the closeness back in their relationship that had faded over the years. Lois became even more suspicious initially, thinking Harold was trying to cover up something, but finally relaxed after Catherine began wearing a wedding ring to work. Catherine never actually said she had married, but the presence of the ring was enough for Lois to go back to her normal routine and attitudes. Harold began to wonder how much longer their relationship would last.

Harold threw himself into his work. Lois still checked on him from time to time when he called to tell her he was working late, but Catherine was never around when she got to the office, 'to bring him something to tide him over until dinner'.

Every chance he got he went to the Retreat, to get away from Lois and the oppressive heat of another record breaking summer. Since the garage was earth-bermed concrete, it stayed relatively cool, but the cave was even more so. He had a thermometer mounted on one wall of the chamber. It never varied much from sixty-two degrees Fahrenheit. It would climb perhaps a degree from his body heat in the small space, but drop right back down to sixty-two when he left the cave.

The water passing through was only fifty-six degrees, the same temperature it was when it exited as the spring. Despite being fairly sure the cave wouldn't flood, since it hadn't even during some of the furious thunderstorms in the region that were now common place, Harold had built everything up off the floor of the cave, just in case.

He had also purchased enough heavy polymer plastic pallets to cover the floor so he wasn't walking on the cold, rough floor, trimming the pallets to sit level, rather than chiseling the rock to make the floor level.

After bringing in a large, shallow, steel bowl he'd had made into the cave, along with some wood, Harold started a fire. Once he was sure it would burn and not set off the carbon monoxide alarm, he went outside to see if he could see any smoke coming out of the ground near the spring.

His nose twitched. Harold could smell the smoke, barely, but it wasn't visible. "Good!" Harold said, satisfied with his experiment. He stocked the shelter with firewood and kindling for his fire bowl, bringing down the accessories he'd had made for it. They included a spit, swing arms for pots, a swing around griddle, and a swing around grill. He felt like a kid equipping a hidden cave, for the fun of it. He certainly wasn't a kid, but he sure was equipping a hidden cave, just for the fun of it, since the earth-bermed garage provided the security he wanted.

The social unrest because of the weather extremes and the possible impending NEO impact, made its terrifying way to Harold's home late that fall. It was still in the low nineties at Halloween and people were restless. Though there probably many children out and about Trick-or-Treating, hopefully accompanied by adults, there were far more adults, costumed or not, roaming the streets Halloween evening and into the night.

The crossover rural/suburban enclave where Harold lived was a gated community, though only fenced along the county road. It was hilly terrain, heavily wooded, with large wedge shaped lots build around a series of cul-de-sacs.

People did get turned around in the area, if they didn't live there, but that was usually a relative or delivery person looking for a specific address. When you had an Oak Street, Oak Lane, Oak Place, Oak Circle, Oak Way and about three more Oak-named roads it was fairly easy to get turned around.

While there was never any evidence the mob that came through Halloween night targeted the complex specifically, it was the one that came under violent attack by the mob turned angry. It was probably just the time and place of the situation. When the mob reached the boiling point they were at the entrance of the enclave.

It was a sign, to the mob, of wealth and advantage. There'd been some local, fortunately small, brush fires nearby, and the fact that the enclave had a private paid fire station located near the gated entrance, in easy view of the county road, seemed to set the mob off.

After smashing the small gate kiosk, the now raging mob attacked the fire station, setting all three of the fire vehicles on fire while holding back the firemen until there was nothing for them to do but watch the fire burn itself out. Moving on, the mob hit the cul-de-sacs at random, starting more fires and throwing Molotov cocktails at some of the houses, as well as anything else small enough to throw and still do damage to the houses.

"What is going on?" Lois asked, stepping out onto the small front porch of the house. "It sounds like a mob." she said, turning to look at Harold as he joined her.

"Lois, I think you might be right," he said after a few seconds of hearing the shouting, some screams, and then the sight of flames coming from a cul-de-sac two over from theirs.

"Get inside," Harold said, "Quickly," taking Lois' arm rather roughly to pull her inside.

"I beg your pardon!" Lois said, jerking her arm free of Harold's grip. "How dare you man handle me that way?" She was incensed. But Harold was already headed into his den.

Harold began to flip switches on a control panel, and activated several cameras that displayed in a grid on a large video monitor.

"Harold, I demand..." Lois said, coming into the den, ready to lambaste him for his actions.

But Harold said, "Lois! Look at this!"

Frowning, Lois moved around so she could see the monitor. It was like something out of a bad Halloween monster movie. There weren't any fiery torches, but there were plenty of people with flashlights and lighters. Many were in costumes. They all seemed to be shouting. What,

Harold wasn't sure. The external microphones were on, but the noise was incomprehensible. It was just shouts and screams of anger.

Harold was watching various indicator lights and finally eased his position. "I've got us locked down, now Lois. We'll be all right."

Lois, watching the scene on the monitor was beginning to realize the danger they were in. "Harold?" she asked, turning frightened eyes on her husband.

"Come on, sit down. We're okay. I'll get you a drink."

Lois couldn't take her eyes off the monitor. She took the drink Harold handed her without look. But then she looked up at Harold again. "What are we going to do?" She was nearly hysterical.

"Lois, please. Don't worry. You know I built this house so we would be safe. I've turned out all the outside lights and the security shutters are closed on all the doors and windows. The fence is there. We'll be fine."

Lois didn't look convinced. She turned back to the monitor. Harold sat down beside her and worked the remote control of one of the cameras. The mob had skipped the first house on the right in the cul-de-sac. Harold's and Lois' house was the next one.

Harold was calling 911 on his cellular as he operated the camera controls with his other hand. "Yes. There is a riot... Okay. Please don't take too long," Harold said and folded close the phone.

Lois looked at him. "They already know and have a riot control team on the way," Harold told his wife.

Both of them looked back at the monitor. The security fence seemed to have thrown the mob into an even deeper rage. People were throwing everything they could get their hands on at the house. Harold had designed the space from the front fence to the house so only a professional baseball pitcher had any chance of hitting the house with anything that might damage it.

Harold couldn't figure out where the Molotov cocktails were coming from, but two were lighted by the mob and given to the best throwers. The Molotovs fell short, but the gasoline began to burn brightly.

Hitting another switch, the front yard sprinklers came on, dousing the fires in moments. It infuriated the mob even more. A human pyramid was built against the security fence and two men climbed up and jumped down on the house side of the fence. They were tossed two more Molotovs and they lit them in turn. Running forward, they waited until they got close to the house without anything happening to them other than getting wet from the sprinklers, and then threw the Molotovs. Both hit the brick façade of the house and burst into flames.

A flick of another switch and the under eave sprinklers came on, again dousing the flames. Harold finally turned on the outside lights and spoke into a microphone attached to the control panel.

“You better leave before someone gets hurt. The police are on their way.”

Harold’s announcement over the outdoor speakers didn’t seem to affect the mob one bit. With the lights on now, the fact that the doors and windows had security shutters closed on them became known. More people started to climb the pyramid to get into the yard.

“Harold?” Lois asked, looking at him with worried eyes again.

“Stay calm,” Harold said. He reached into one of the desk drawers and pulled out a handgun and two spare magazines. He slipped the magazines in one pocket and the pistol in the other.

“Go into the bedroom and lock the doors. Don’t come out until I come get you.”

“But...”

“Do it, Lois! Please. I don’t think there is much danger, but I’m not going to take a chance with your life.”

Lois hurried off and Harold turned back to the monitors. He’d taken the gun out to comfort Lois, not intending to use it. It would take anyone hours to break into the house without some serious tools or explosives.

Harold’s attitude changed suddenly. Someone in that mob had a gun. Harold saw the flashes at it was fired several times. He heard the sounds of the gunshots on the control panel speaker.

“Back away before someone gets hurt!” Harold’s amplified voice startled the people into immobility. For an instant. Then the advance continued, as did shots from outside the fence. He wasn’t worried about the shots. All the exterior walls were the Skouson design. They’d absorb any rounds that penetrated the reinforced brick façade. But it annoyed Harold no end.

He had a whole book of options up his sleeve, but he went with a less-than-lethal one. He turned on the high intensity pulse strobes and triggered the disruptive sound speakers. He watched on the monitors as people staggered around, temporarily blinded and deafened by the riot control system.

Those of the mob inside the fence ran toward it again, trying to get away from the light and sound. But they couldn’t get over the fence without the human pyramid to assist them. Harold took a chance, a slight one he thought, and released the small sidewalk gate. One of the mob finally saw it and guided the others to it and off the property.

Harold closed and locked the gate remotely, and turned off the disruptive lights and sound system. It was as people began to scatter that the riot squad showed up, with two police helicopters in support.

After putting away the pistol and magazines, Harold shut down the other security systems, the illumination lights first and the sprinklers second. Next the security shutters were raised or lowered, depending on the individual window treatment. Then he triggered the driveway gate to open.

Harold went to the front door, turned on the porch light and stepped out onto the porch, his hands in the air. "Thank you for showing up when you did," Harold said, as the police officer approached him with gun drawn, aimed at Harold. Harold didn't like that much, either, but he didn't do anything about it.

"What's your name?" asked the officer.

Harold told him.

"You live here?"

Harold told him.

"What's the address here?"

Harold told him.

"Anyone else here?"

"My wife is in the bedroom safe room."

"Anyone hurt?"

"No."

"Any damage?"

"Won't know until in the morning when I can take a look. Some bullet holes, I expect. I heard shots and saw the muzzle flashes."

The officer began to relax. "Had to be sure you were you." He holstered his gun, finally.

Harold looked over the officer's shoulder. It was more of a madhouse now than before, with the riot squad trying to chase down and hold some of the mob. They weren't having much success.

"They seemed to be breaking up when we got here. You have any idea why?"

"I turned on the outside lights and used a PA system to tell them that you guys were on the way." It was the truth. Not all of it, but the officer didn't ask for any details.

"Any clue as to what got them started?" Harold asked the officer, who was scribbling rapidly in his report book.

"The heat, I guess," replied the Officer, not looking up from his report. "Something sure did. They left a trail of disasters from the front gate house to your place. You're lucky they didn't have a chance to do more damage."

"That's the truth," Harold agreed. His stutter and lisp were trying to come back, but he controlled his voice carefully.

"Can you identify any of them?" the Officer asked after more writing.

"N... No, I'm afraid not. It was dark most of the time, and none of them got that close."

"Read this and sign it." the Officer handed Harold the report book, looking at him curiously.

Harold couldn't make out half of what was written. The man's penmanship was almost nonexistent. But he signed it and handed the book back to him.

Tearing out a copy of the report, the Officer gave it to Harold, along with one of his cards. "If you think of anything else, call me or the station." With that, he was gone.

Harold watched the mop up activities for a while from the front porch, but suddenly remembered Lois. He hurried upstairs and knocked on the door. It took him three tries before she would open the door.

He had a key, of course, but didn't want to use it and startle her. Finally she opened the door. Lois didn't hesitate when Harold held his arms open. She stepped right into them and cried for a while.

Harold got her another drink after she calmed down. Lois finally looked over at Harold and said, "I'm fine, now. I'm going to bed. Make sure you set the security alarm."

It was a dismissal and Harold knew it. He'd heard many like it. Lois hated showing any weakness and was always somewhat angry after she did.

Two days later the same officer that he'd talked to the night of the riots came by the office. "I need you to come to the station with me."

Harold's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Some of those we managed to arrest are accusing you of attacking them. The ADA wants to talk to you."

“Me attack them?” Harold shook his head. “Back just a few months ago I would think you were kidding me. Not now. You aren’t going to handcuff me, are you?”

The Officer shook his head. “You aren’t under arrest. They just want to talk to you to straighten this out. Victims have rights, you know.”

“Some victims,” Harold started to say, but held his tongue.

When the ADA finally called him into the office after an hour’s wait, Harold repeated the things he’d told the original officer, almost verbatim.

“You say you turned on your security lights and used a PA to warn them that the police were on the way?”

It was exactly what Harold had just said. “Yes,” Harold said anyway.

“Do you understand that the defendants in the disorderly conduct case say your lights and PA caused them pain? What do you say about that?”

“What is there to say? Some people are more sensitive than others. Look. That group of people threw four Molotov cocktails at my house, and fired I don’t know how many rounds into it. And they say I did something to them?”

“We have to investigate these matters. Criminals have rights, too.”

“So I’ve heard. Is that all?” Harold was getting angry, which he didn’t want to do.

“I suggest you watch your step. Do not contact any of these people in any way. We will call you to testify in their case, if we need you.”

Harold left without saying anything else.

The process took months and the hooligans were released without any punishment, having spent only part of the one night in jail. A week later the night time shots at the house started. Harold reported every one of them. After the third shot in two weeks, he began keeping the security shutters closed on the front of the house, and set up a camera to watch the cul-de-sac roundabout.

The police did send a car to check the house from time to time, but the shots only came after the police had been there. Despite the tapes with the vehicle in clear view getting turned around and then the rifle barrel appearing in the window, followed by the sound of a shot and the muzzle flash of the rifle, the police were unable to find any leads. Even the rubber marks from the tires, which the driver of the vehicle chirped every time as he sped away, were of no help.

After a total of six shots, Harold began staying up and watching for the car to show up. It was almost a week before a car, lights off, rolled quietly around the roundabout and stopped. Knowing the house was in no real danger, Harold waited for the shot. When it came, he tripped the flood lights by remote control, having adjusted two of them to light up the cul-de-sac brightly.

Harold was hiding near the front security fence and jumped up, his Nikon digital camera snapping shot after shot of the car and the two men in it, in the few seconds of total surprise the men went through before the driver floored the accelerator and the car sped off.

Harold dialed 911 and reported the shooting, just as he always did. Knowing it would be several minutes, if not a full hour, Harold hurried inside the house, downloaded the pictures to his laptop in the den, and printed them out. He took the printed pictures and the memory card from the camera back outside to wait for the police.

When they showed up they were not happy. They were getting tired of Harold calling, having as much as accused him of making false calls. They had found only a couple of the bullet holes in the brick façade of the house.

Waiting at the driveway gate, Harold handed the officer in the passenger side of the patrol car the pictures and memory card. "Maybe now you can ID these punks," he said and turned around.

Harold didn't know if the police even tried. The shootings stopped, either because the police had successfully taken the shooters off the streets, or Harold's camera work had scared them off.

But it didn't matter to Lois. Two weeks after the confrontation with the snipers, with nothing else having happened, Lois came into Harold's den where he was working after dinner. She handed him a legal document folded in a blue cover. She turned around and walked out, without speaking.

He read the papers requesting a legal separation. When he'd read them through, he got up and stepped out of the den. Lois was carrying two suitcases through the kitchen and into the garage. Going to the front door and opening it, Harold watched his wife of fifteen years drive away.

Harold went back into the den, sat down, and fought back tears. He'd seen it coming, but had ignored the signs. Slumped in the desk chair, Harold picked up the papers and read through them again.

She really wasn't asking for anything all that unreasonable, Harold decided. A condo in the city in lieu of selling the house and splitting the proceeds; a million in the bank; a new Cadillac; her clothes, jewelry, and Art Glass; and the MacGregor 26. Harold put the papers back on the desk, asking himself, "Why does she want the boat? She's only been out on it twice with me."

The next day Harold took care of some business first off at the office and then took the papers to his lawyer.

“Pretty straightforward, Harold,” Tony Akruba said, after reading the papers. He looked up at his occasional golf partner. I’d say what she is asking is about half of your combined net worth.”

“But why the boat?” Harold asked.

“You’ll have to ask her that,” Tony replied. “But one thing I don’t like is reason she stated for the separation. Mental cruelty. Have you been abusive in any way at all toward Lois?”

“No!” Harold said adamantly. “And that bothers me, too. We’ve had that sniper shooting at the house. She had a hard time dealing with it. I spend a lot of time working lately, at the office and in my den. I have my hobbies... We don’t spend much time together...”

“I’ll try to get that changed to irreconcilable differences. You really don’t want ‘spousal cruelty’ on your record. Are you going to contest it?”

Harold had been thinking about that since the evening before. Finally he looked over at Tony and said, “No.”

“Want to make it a divorce?”

Again Harold said, “No,” and then added, “She doesn’t believe in divorce. It would be a huge fight if I tried to divorce her.” Harold’s answers put the case on the fast track.

It took two months to finalize the separation. Harold threw himself into his work, letting Tony deal with Lois’ attorney. The marriage had been strained for some time, but Harold had simply ignored the problems. He blamed himself more than Lois for what had happened.

It was something of a strain on his finances to give Lois what she wanted, without dipping into his preparations reserves. Figuring that if the world situation did happen to turn around, he had plenty of years to build up a conventional retirement again, Harold held onto his preps and signed over three life-annuities to Lois in lieu of the million in cash.

She would be able to cash them out and get more than a million up front. He wrote a check to the Cadillac dealer when Tony brought him the information that Lois had picked out the one she wanted. She was holding onto the other one, which was only two years old. That Harold found a bit annoying.

What was really annoying was the situation when Lois came out to the house to get the MacGregor 26. She was in her new Cadillac, cradling a miniature poodle in her arms, accompanied by a real bruiser of a guy with a big Dodge four-wheel-drive dually pickup truck.

Harold could only stand and watch as the man hooked the MacGregor’s trailer up to the Dodge, and then walk over to Lois to give her a big, theatrical kiss. He looked over at Harold

and gave him what could only be called a smarmy look, before getting back into the Dodge. He followed Lois out of the cul-de-sac, shooting Harold the bird as he drove away.

“At least I know why, now,” Harold said through gritted teeth. That particular possibility had never occurred to him. He wondered how long the two had known each other and how long something had been going on. The thoughts hurt. Harold put them out of his mind and went back to work in the den. He was drawing up plans for a small gated community for a mutual aid group of preppers.

Assuming the twenty-million dollar deal went through, Harold would be able to recoup his retirement, and then some, for the property plans he was working on. If he got any of the individual house plans out of the deal, and he was sure he would, he’d be sitting pretty. “Sitting pretty, but alone,” Harold sighed as the thought came to him. He had no idea he would miss Lois as much as he was, despite the person she had become. Again he blamed himself.

It had been a while since he’d paid any real attention to the news. Harold was shocked when he finished up a project early one afternoon at the office and turned on the TV to see what was happening.

He watched the Weather Channel for a bit, amazed at the amount of severe weather New England was getting for an October. “That Gulf Stream situation had really hit them hard,” Harold muttered. Though it had been hot during the summer in Eastern Missouri, the previous winter had been mild, and the one coming up was being forecast as another mild one.

But that was to come. What was happening to the Plains States west of Missouri was cause for worry. A massive storm front was building, already cold air riding the jet stream down from Canada, with a large moist front being drawn up from the Gulf. The storm would hit the St. Louis area some time the following day.

Since nothing was immediately pressing that his staff couldn’t handle, and Harold had wondered for some time about the water flow in the cave, he left the office to Catherine to run and went home to get the Kenworth Motorhome. He got to the Retreat shortly after 10:00 pm, backed it into the garage and decided to stay in the motorhome the rest of the night.

The next morning, after a simple breakfast of cereal and milk, plus coffee, Harold put on some outdoors clothes and began to look over the property in detail. First he went into the cave through the access point in the garage and checked things out. The water flow was just the same as it had been the other times he’d been in the cave. He made a few chalk marks along the water’s path, so he could discern any changes in the flow later.

Harold fired up the Toolcat, locked the pallet forks on the front lift arms, and left the garage. He’d decided to move some more firewood while he was out and about. Stopping to pick up one of the empty pallets stacked beside the garage with the forks, Harold then headed for the far side of the property, taking a round about route, just to see how the now open forest looked.

He had to admit the logging company had followed his instructions to the letter. Every diseased and deformed tree had been cut down and cut up for firewood.

It had taken some additional money and hard talking to get the loggers to gather up even the small branches and the underbrush into bound twig fagots for use in the wood stove in the garage. It almost doubled the amount of fire wood that was harvested. Only enough brush was piled in the few small ravines that cut the property to provide habitat for small game animals and birds.

The skies were already beginning to darken when Harold reached the far side of the property and stopped by one of the firewood stacks. He took the tarp off and began to load the bed of the Toolcat to capacity, and then stack the pallet full. There was a bit left, so Harold covered it back up and headed for the garage, going past one of the areas that had been clear cut except for a few old growth trees.

Harold had hired some college kids majoring in ecology and conservation to plant the seedlings and saplings he bought. Three large areas had ash planted, for future firewood coppicing and they seemed to be doing okay despite how hot the summer had been. They had been planted on a four-to-one ratio of new trees to removed trees.

Next Harold checked the orchard. Even though the requirement was only for a one-to-one planting exchange, Harold had done two-to-one on the fruit and nut trees, not even counting the strawberries, blackberries, and wild roses he'd had planted as well. Though there were wild blackberries, black walnut trees, and hickory trees, he'd planted more of each.

Like the coppicing firewood patches, there were three orchard plots with a wide variety of trees planted. It would be a few years before they began to produce, but Harold thought the wait would be worth it.

Lightning was visible in the distance to the west and thunder sounded softly as Harold pulled up to the main firewood storage area by the garage. Harold set the pallet load of firewood beside the others, and after laying down another pallet, transferred the wood from the bed of the Toolcat to the pallet. He went to the garage to get another tarp and covered the additional wood up to protect it from the weather.

It started to rain as Harold was putting away the Toolcat. He stood in the open garage door and watched the storm continue to approach. With lightning getting close and the thunder hurting his ears, Harold closed up the garage and went down into the cave, putting on a sweater as he went down the stairs.

He checked the chalk marks. The water level hadn't changed. After starting a fire in the fire bowl, using a bow drill he'd bought on the Internet, just to have it, Harold took a seat in the old leather recliner he'd brought down on one of his previous trips. He drifted off to sleep, the storm pounding outside unheard in the small cave.

Harold woke up hungry. He checked his watch and was amazed the he'd slept for over four hours in the comfortable chair by the cheerful fire. The fire was burning down so he added a pair of split logs to it. He used the chemical toilet behind a Japanese silk screen, and then went to look at the chalk marks again.

He couldn't see any difference in the face of the rock that dripped into the pool. It was still crystal clear. The water in the channel was no closer to the chalk marks than it had been earlier. Harold went up into the garage, and then outside, standing in the personnel door of the garage. It was still raining hard, but the violence of the lightning and thunder seemed to be gone.

Harold took a steak out of the motorhome's refrigerator/freezer, along with a potato and ear of corn, and went back down into the cave. Working with the fire for a moment, he got the coals where he wanted them, wrapped the potato and corn in foil from a box setting beside the fire bowl, and worked them into the coals.

He gave the vegetables a few minutes to start cooking and then threw the steak on the grill and swung it over the coals. Rather pleased with himself when he raked the corn and potato out of the coals, and forked the steak from the grill to his plate, all three being done just the way Harold liked them, he tore into the food, suddenly ravenous.

The scraps went onto the fire, to be burned up with the wood, and the dishes into a plastic container that he would add hot water to from the kettle being warmed on the fire. A bit of detergent and he would wash them. The waste water would go into a wheeled waste water container he would take outside and dump into the septic system when the container was full.

The storm worsened again that afternoon, though Harold didn't know it. He was working on his laptop contentedly, amused once with the thought of working on a computer by firelight. He kept an eye on the clock display on the bottom left corner of the screen and shut things down at seven that evening. He wasn't hungry after the huge lunch he'd had, so just went up to the motorhome and got an ice cream bar from the refrigerator/freezer and had dessert as his evening meal.

Again he checked outside. Harold realized from the look of the area in the fading light that the rain had been heavy the entire time he was in the cave. Going back down into the cave Harold banked the fire for the night and went back into the garage, securing the hidden entrance to the cave before he went into the motorhome to turn in for the evening.

It was still raining when Harold got up the next morning, but lightly. The satellite TV dish on the Kenworth wouldn't work inside the garage, so Harold hooked up the garage's system to the external antenna connection on the motorhome and watched the weather, and then the news as he had breakfast.

The weather should be clearing by noon where Harold was, he saw. He'd do another load of firewood after the rain ceased, before he left to go back home. It was snowing in New England; The Mississippi, from St. Louis to Memphis, was going into flood stage; Phoenix was suffering with ninety-plus temperatures again; Kansas was recovering from tornadoes the storm that Harold had just weathered had spawned; and Florida and the Gulf Coast were bracing for Winston, a cat three hurricane, building toward a cat four.

Harold shook his head and switched to the news. It was equivalent to the weather. Troubles all over. And it was still not determined if the NEO would impact the Earth or not. It was definitely going to be close.

He checked the cave again just before he left, to make sure the fire was out, and to check the chalk marks. The water had, indeed, risen. But by only a fraction of an inch. It was still well inside the channel it had cut in the rock floor.

When Harold got back to the office that afternoon, going there directly from the Retreat, in the motorhome, Catherine was visibly excited. "They sent a check, Boss! A big one!"

"Who?" Harold asked, taking the envelope Catherine eagerly held out to him.

"The MAG! They're buying the property, based on your preliminary drawings. And I've fielded five calls from MAG members wanting you to do their individual house plans." Her exuberance faded somewhat. "People are getting scared, Boss."

"I know," Harold replied, taking the check out of the envelope. He gave a small whistle. Catherine had not been joking. Though the separation had never actually put him in the red, he was close to it. The check put him well into the black, with more to come.

"I think this calls for a celebration. How about some surf and turf on me this evening?"

"Suits me, Boss," Kevin Sanderson said. "I've never actually had real surf and turf. Uh... that is lobster and filet mignon, right?"

Harold laughed. "Yes it is. Catherine?"

"I'm in," she replied. "Should be enough for me to have leftovers for a couple of days."

"Is that a hint for a raise?" Harold asked, enjoying the mood.

Catherine turned bright red. "No! Of course not! I just... I like leftovers..."

Harold laughed and Catherine's red face finally faded.

"You two wrap things up and I'll make the reservations."

The three had a good time and Harold was feeling rejuvenated, between his time at the Retreat, and the news from the MAG.

Harold took on two additional drafters, to do the grunt work, while he, Kevin, and Catherine took care of the work directly relating to making the homes suitable for the concerned preppers that were building them.

It did seem as though none of the MAG members liked exactly the same layout in their houses as the others. Every one of the fifteen homes Harold's firm did the blueprints for was

significantly different from each other, while incorporating similar aspects the individuals wanted.

Harold, becoming more concerned about the NEO when it dropped out of the news, began asking for, and receiving, payment in face value gold at a highly discounted rate for his work.

Most of those wanting the work done understood his reasoning, and at the rates he was quoting in gold they were getting significant savings. Harold was using a \$1,500.00 per ounce exchange rate while the actual spot price for gold was hovering around \$2,000 per ounce.

Though the two new people wanted cash, Kevin and Christine took half their pay in face value gold and prep goods, which they got at a discount by putting in large orders with Harold, who was now including supplies for the home as well as the design.

The prepper forums were filled with people asking about the NEO. None of the governments were talking and those people with quality home observatories that had the capability of tracking the NEO fell silent when the governments did. Many of them were nowhere to be found.

More and more concerned, Harold checked some of the older posts, when the NEO first became a concern. Talk then was the asteroid would cross the Earth's orbit shortly after Christmas of this year. Using Christmas Day as his target date, Harold began making arrangements to have the office shut down for the holiday by December twentieth, at which time he would hunker down at home, but with everything set up to be able to go to the Retreat if he felt the need.

His two new employees were totally unconcerned with the situation, but Harold could tell that Kevin and Catherine were becoming nervous, too. When he offered them both places in his shelter, come the day, they both relaxed. Both also moved most of their personal preps they'd begun gathering after they started working for Harold to the basement of his house. It was the basement that they considered the shelter, since it was built as such. Harold had never mentioned the vault room to either of them.

Harold spent the Thanksgiving Holiday long weekend at the Retreat, taking a few more items with him to round out his equipment and supplies for the next to worse case of an NEO impact. He figured the worst case was the NEO would land on top of him and there simply was no preparation for that.

Fearing a run on the banks if there was any additional bad news on top of what the weather was doing, and the encroachment of the sea into many coastal towns due to global warming induced sea level increases, Harold cleaned out all of his bank accounts, down to the limit of maintaining free checking. He couldn't bring himself to close them, given the very real chance that there would be no impact.

The news broke after millions of people saw the series of bright flashes in the night sky deep in space a week before Christmas. A series of nuclear tipped missiles had been launched

and detonated on or near the NEO to try to divert it. Government authorities all over the world announced to their citizens of the impending doom of large pieces of the NEO hitting the earth the next day.

Harold's newest employees didn't show up for work the next morning. Kevin and Catherine did. They hurriedly faxed, e-mailed, and surface mailed everything left pending and then headed for Harold's house, wondering if Harold's missed target date would prove detrimental to them.

The first fiery streaks of light began to appear as the three, driving their individual vehicles, made their way to Harold's house. It was sudden pandemonium. There were literally people in the streets shouting, screaming, pointing at the sky, running every which way, or just standing and staring.

Harold had told Kevin and Catherine to follow closely behind him so they wouldn't get separated. For no apparent reason Harold could see, people began to attack the moving vehicles, bringing Kevin's to a stop. He was third in line, but Catherine's frantic horn honking and head light flashing got Harold's attention and he stopped.

Somehow Kevin managed to get out of the car before it was turned over, his new BOB in hand. He ran forward, towards Harold's Escalade ESV. The group, done with Kevin's little car, attacked Catherine's. Kevin stopped to help her, and the both of them ran for Harold. He had one foot out of the Escalade and suddenly began firing the pistol he'd started carrying in the SUV.

He wasn't trying to hit anyone, but wanted the rounds to impact close enough to people to scare them away. Someone else had a gun and didn't like what Harold was doing. Fortunately the man was a lousy shot. Two bullets bounced off the pavement and hit people in the crowd trying to turn over Catherine's car.

Harold spun around when he realized what was happening and snapped a couple of shots at the guy, to get him to stop shooting long enough for Catherine and Kevin to get into the Escalade ESV. One scrambled in on each side and Harold sat down on the driver's seat, dropped the selector in drive, and gunned the engine. The acceleration forced the door closed, helped along by a bullet hitting the frame. It left a dent, but didn't break the door glass.

Never intending to run over anyone, Harold had to give up trying his best and go for minimal damage, rather than stopping completely. People were bouncing off the fenders as he picked up speed. It seemed to be an isolated event, for once he was away from the mob, the rest of the people they saw seemed to be headed somewhere in a hurry, on foot or by vehicle. That became the new danger. Erratic drivers.

Harold managed to avoid a serious accident, but the Escalade ESV looked rather the worse for wear when Harold hit the side streets and worked his way home. There was no one in the kiosk at the entrance to the development.

Gun in hand, looking around constantly, Harold got out of the SUV and went into the kiosk. He worked the gate lift mechanism, ran back to the Cadillac and pulled it through. He took the time to go back and close the gate.

He saw a few people standing outside, looking at the sky. He didn't bother to stop and tell them to get to their basements. Harold debated for a moment on whether to put the Cadillac inside the garage or not. The risk was about the same between something hitting the house and collapsing it onto the SUV and something hitting the SUV itself. He decided to leave it outside.

He led Catherine and Kevin to the house, but suddenly stopped and looked up at the sky again. He said, "Everything is going over the top of us! Look at the angle of the contrails. And they are starting to disappear in the east. Those we've been seeing are impacting well west of here." After watching and thinking for another few seconds Harold added, "But there can always be a stray! Come on!"

He led the way into the house and then into the basement. "Make yourselves to home," Harold said absently and went to the second of three control stations for the home automation features of the house.

Catherine went to find a bathroom and Kevin watched over Harold's shoulder. Harold aimed one of the external cameras at the sky and the two watched as the meteor shower moved on to the west as the Earth turned on its axis. He buttoned up the house from the control panel. Catherine had just joined them in front of the camera monitor when something flashed between the camera and the sun, creating a momentary shadow.

"Oh my... Was that what I think it was?" Catherine asked.

"A really big piece of it, at the very least," Harold said. The danger suddenly dawned on Harold. "Come on! Hurry! He ran for the door to the unfinished side of the basement and struggled the cabinet hiding the vault door out of the way so he could get to the lock mechanism. Catherine and Kevin were right behind him.

Once he had the door open he ushered the two down the hallway and closed the vault door and locked it, hurrying after the other two. Both had stopped when they entered the vault room and were staring at everything.

"Down! Down!" Harold cried. "Lay down, away from each other and the walls!" He did as he had instructed the others. They quickly followed suit. Long moments passed and then a minute. Harold was starting to think he'd misjudged the possibility of a heavy ground shock when it occurred.

All three of them gripped the carpet with their fingers, trying to stay in place as the whole room danced. Harold was thankful he'd secured the safes and cabinets to the wall. They surely would have toppled during the earth movement if he hadn't.

Harold cautioned the other two to stay in place when the shaking stopped and they made moves to get up. Sure enough, three more shocks rattled things, with a longer period of stillness

between each one. Finally, after ten minutes had passed without another shock, Harold carefully stood up. The others followed suit.

“You think it’s over?” Catherine asked.

Harold shook his head. “It’s just getting started. I want to go up and see how the property fared, before we get fallout.”

“Fallout?” asked Kevin. “That was a nuke?”

“No. There might be some radiation involved, but I’m mainly talking about the millions of tons of debris the NEO is sure to have put into the air when it impacted. You two can stay here if you want.”

“Oh, no!” Catherine said. “If were going to be stuck in here because of fallout I want a last look at the sky.”

“It won’t be your last,” Harold said firmly. He led the way out of the vault room and into the finished portion of the basement. There was some damage, but the basement held up fairly well. Harold carefully opened the door at the top of the basement stairs. It was a bit difficult to open. Even with the extra stout construction, the house had shifted slightly, taking it out of plumb.

There were a few knick-knacks lying on the floor, and pictures were down in the hallway. Things had been ejected from the higher shelves in the kitchen. The door to the garage opened without to much difficulty. The water heaters were still attached firmly to the wall. It made him think of the utilities. He wasn’t sure if they had lost power and the generator had kicked on, or if they still had commercial power.

He doubted that fact and had to use some force to get the back personnel door opened so he could go outside. Harold hurried around to the natural gas meter. He went ahead and shut off the valve even though the earthquake valve had closed the line. He could hear the generator running now and went to the electrical access panel and pulled the main. It shouldn’t matter with the automatic transfer switch for the generator, but Harold wasn’t going to chance anything.

Kevin and Catherine followed Harold around curiously, as he ran out to the front fence and went to one knee. He turned the water meter off. Looking around, he checked the security fence. It was in good shape. So were the gates. Looking back toward the house he breathed a sigh of relief. The Cadillac was okay.

He began to explain what he was doing from that point forward. “Wanted to get the commercial utilities turned off for safety reasons, and check the local stuff for damage.” He went through the pool house, which had stood the impact caused earth tremors. So had the other structures. “We’re coming through this with flying colors so far,” Harold said. “But I don’t want to jinx it. Oh. Looks like the north wall is leaning slightly. Shouldn’t have said anything. The detached garage had held up just as well as the other buildings. The Kenworth based motor home

was fine and Harold suddenly wondered how the MacGregor 26 had fared. He hadn't replaced it yet.

Suddenly hot ash and rock began to fall, burning Harold's skin, as well as the others. They all ran for the garage and Harold went into the house, still running toward the den. It was the closest control panel.

He checked the roof of the house. It was a metal roof covered almost entirely with photovoltaic panels which were also relatively fire resistant. The hot rocks were making some marks, but Harold didn't think it would catch fire. Each of the other buildings had enough of the PV panels to provide individual electric power when the commercial power was off and the generator wasn't running, above their metal roofs.

The outer walls of the house were brick façade, so he didn't worry about them much, either. He would have to keep an eye on the roof and start the roof sprinkler system if it became a problem. When he trained one of the cameras on the ground, there were spots where it was starting to burn. He turned on lawn sprinklers.

Harold decided to add more water to the pool, just in case. He made sure the large pump on the well was pumping into the pool, from which the fire pump would be getting its supply of water if he Harold had to run it. The yard sprinkler pump and well were more than holding their own at the moment.

Catherine began to cough slightly, and Kevin did the same a few seconds later. "It's the fumes or gas from the fallout," Harold said. "Best to get into the basement."

All three made their way down and Catherine and Kevin both began to breathe easier, as Harold explained why. "There is a separate HVAC system for the basement, and then another for the vault. If we still have problems in here, after a while, we'll move to the vault. I can totally isolate us there."

The other two took chairs near Harold when he sat down at the home automation controls. The material that was falling was small gravel size, down to mere dust. Worried about the PV panels, Harold went ahead and started the fire pump and turned on the roof sprinklers on all the buildings.

Catherine began to cough again and the carbon monoxide monitor in the basement sounded off. "Not good, guys," Harold said. "Into the vault."

It didn't take much encouragement. They could all breathe much more easily when they were in the vault. Harold, just so they would know in case something unexpected happened to him, showed the pair the filter systems in the vault.

"That's the escape tunnel," Harold said, opening a hatch about waist level in one of the vault walls. It goes to a point where you can release a couple of dogs and a hatch will fall open, letting sand fall down into the pit. You can push up through the sod then and get out.

“Just as important as that is the fact that the tunnel has an air inlet into it at the far end, too. It is a rock crib adjacent to the tunnel, with a screened opening to the crib. The crib is full of large rocks, which disperse and absorb any shockwave that might occur. It’s that decorative design element near the north wall.

“There are a couple more air inlets, six inch steel pipe, hidden in the house structure to pull air incase the rock crib becomes compromised or blocked by snow. Though it takes a pretty good snow to keep air from filtering down.

Harold closed the access hatch to the tunnel. “The air from the tunnel goes through a set of CBRN filters, which can be changed safely if they do stop up. They are way oversized for this much cubic space, but I like it that way. The air blower will run on the generator, or the twelve volt system, and can be manually operated.

“In the case where the CBRN filters don’t filter the contaminate, and that includes carbon monoxide, we can seal off the system by closing these valves...” Harold showed them how to operate the valves.

“And last several hours on the air here in the vault. If the CO² level gets too high, I’ll start the stand alone CO² absorption filter. That would give us several more hours before the oxygen level gets too low. Then I add medical grade oxygen to the room from a well insulated liquid oxygen tank buried outside. It’s not an easy supply to get. I have a sympathetic doctor that gave me a prescription.

“Just keep changing the absorption chemical, and adding oxygen, and we can stay isolated for several days, if need be.” Harold walked over to the home automation control panel they were familiar with from the den and basement versions. “CO, CO², and oxygen monitors for the vault here, and a humidity meter. On the off chance the humidity does rise from our breathing, there is a stand alone dehumidifier I can start.”

“Wow!” Kevin said. “I had no idea this level of protection was possible, except in the government shelters for the politicians.”

“You have to have some friends in the right places to get things like LOX. Same goes for medications. Only a friendly doctor can help you out with them, too. Cutting-torch-grade oxygen might be okay, but I can’t get any clear answers on that, so I wouldn’t use it. Simple compressed air would work, too, but it really takes up more space than practical. Liquid oxygen is the way to go.

“There is a back up to this system,” Harold continued, going over to one of the myriad cabinets in the room. “SCUBA rebreathers. Does the same thing as the vault system, but for individuals, using a face mask.”

There were plenty of things to occupy time in the shelter and Harold showed Catherine and Kevin all of them. From board and card games, to computer games, to a huge library of DVD movies and regular books, including a whole separate library for starting up society again after a disaster.

Harold spent most of his time at the control and communications panels. Catherine just made herself familiar with all the aspects of the vault shelter. Kevin read and listened to his music. His BOB contained a CD player and his favorite CD's.

It had been a long day, but no one was hungry. Catherine, and then Kevin, followed shortly afterwards by Harold, each claimed one of the several bunks in one of the alcoves of the shelter.

Harold was up the next morning before the others and started coffee. The smell of the coffee wakened Kevin and Catherine and they joined him at the control console. "Still coming down," Harold said, letting them see the camera monitor themselves.

"I turned the sprinklers off. There's enough ash accumulated to protect anything flammable that hasn't already burned. Look at the temperature," he said then, pointing to one of the remote reading instruments.

"Is that correct?" Kevin asked, incredulous. "One hundred and ten? In the dark?"

"The dark is from the ash in the air. It's almost nine am, the day after the event. And yes, I'm sure it is correct. I'm going to shut some systems down so the fine ash doesn't ruin them. The generator for one. So take showers and fix some breakfast now. We'll go on battery power afterwards and I want to keep the use low. I'm not sure how long this will last."

"Have you been able to get anything on the Amateur radios or Shortwave?" Kevin asked.

Harold shook his head. "Just static. It could be weeks or months before anything approaching normal radio communications is possible."

"Oh," Catherine said softly. "I wonder... How many people survived, do you think?"

Harold could only shrug his shoulders. "There are some simple jump suits in the closet by the shower room, if you want to get your shower now."

Catherine nodded and moved away.

"I'll get some breakfast started. I'm hungry," Kevin said.

"Just look and see what we have and you and Catherine pick something. I'll eat whatever you fix." Harold continued checking the instruments for any indication of the fallout subsiding.

But that was not to be for over a week. The gravelly ash and debris had stopped after two days, but the finer stuff continued for a week, the accumulation growing to five feet. More where the winds had drifted it.

Harold was surprised there hadn't been storms, particularly violent thunder storms during the dispersal of the debris. But there hadn't been any, at least where they were. That changed

about the time Harold went outside on the first day fallout couldn't be seen on the monitor. When Howard suited up and went out, he found that a very fine powder was still falling.

The temperature was down to the low nineties. He sank to his knees and could feel the residual heat that the accumulation was holding. Harold decided waiting was more practical, if less heroic, than trying to dig out now.

All he did was clear the rock crib air intake and the generator, with Kevin's help. Catherine had tried, but at only five feet four inches tall, she would sink too deep into the ash to be effective. She stayed inside the house after the first try, and began cleaning up the house, wearing a dust mask, after Harold and Kevin came back in, bringing a small cloud of the dust with them.

They were all careful to wear either a respirator or a P-100 dust mask to keep the dust out of their lungs. Harold suspected it would be high in silica, like volcanic ash, and could have long term health implications if much of it got into one's lungs.

The rains started not long after lunch that day. With no radiation danger, or toxic gases present any more, the three of them sat around the living room and watched the rain come down out side. It was literally mud when it first started, the rain washing the fine dust out of the air. It was an amazing sight to watch.

At first the accumulated fallout absorbed the rain, swelling the surface layer slightly. But then it began to run off, carrying the fallout with it. The first couple of light rains had channels cut deep into the accumulation, but the next day, when it began to storm, huge torrents of the wet fallout began to flow. Dams in the flow appeared and then were demolished as more wet ash came streaming down from higher elevations.

Harold was as glad as Kevin was that they had not attempted to clear very much of the ash earlier. The rain was doing it much faster, more widespread, and in a cleaner way, than they could have ever hoped for.

With heavy rain still coming down the third day after it had started, all three of the group suited up, with respirators and rubber boots and gloves and went outside, to do what they could to direct the ash still accumulated in areas where the rain couldn't get to it.

They were covered head to toe with the stuff by the time they decided to go back inside. Using a garden hose on an outside bib they washed each other down before going into the garage to get out of the suits.

The weather abruptly changed. From abnormally warm for January, it began to snow and became bitterly cold. The group had discussed going exploring 'in a few days', but the weather change changed their minds. Not until spring came and the bad weather faded, or it became obvious that the weather wasn't going to change, would they venture out further than the gated entrance of the community.

Using the Escalade ESV, after a thorough cleaning, the three checked on the rest of the community. It was a disturbing task. They found not a living soul or animal. There were plenty dead of both. After the initial work of burying their immediate neighbors in the cul-de-sac, none of which had survived, they gave up on the task. There were just too many bodies and with the ground now frozen, it was a hopeless task.

Though the fallout was gone from inside Harold's walled compound, the snow began to accumulate. All three took turns clearing paths to the outbuildings, and clearing the snow off the PV panels. That job was as critical as it was dangerous. Though Harold had a great deal of fuel, all treated for long term storage, there was no way to know how long they would be confined to the property. The generator was only run, to charge the battery bank, when the PV panels were covered with snow and couldn't be cleared due to the weather.

Early on Kevin and Catherine had expressed great concern over the food supplies they had stashed, but Harold was able to allay that concern by showing them his LTS food supply in the vault. But, like the fuel, there was no telling how long they would need to use that food. So, with the house connected to the pool enclosure, and it to the greenhouse, a greenhouse garden was started. But without running the generator to power the grow lights the greenhouse had, the garden did only marginally well.

But every little bit helped, the fresh food adding greatly to the livability of the situation. When June rolled around, with a light snow falling, the group decided to go looking for other survivors. It didn't look like the weather was going to be back to normal for years, so taking some risk now might pay off in the long run.

With snow and fallout still piled head high in many places because of the early rains and then the windy snow storm, Harold had a difficult time going anywhere. Cutting the trip short, after a discussion and agreement to do another run latter on in the summer, Harold took them back to the property.

It was a great relief when radio communications slowly became possible again. Though there had been no real doubt that there were other survivors, it was nice to know for sure. The bad news was that there weren't very many.

Harold, Catherine, and Kevin, along with many others on the Amateur Radio Network that developed, learned some of the details of the NEO strike. There were a myriad number of relatively small strikes beginning in the foot hills leading up to the Rockies, from Canada to Mexico. This shotgun effect of small strikes continued for several hours, peppering the Pacific Ocean and on into East Asia, Indonesia, and northeast Africa.

But the main strikes, and there were at least two, with some reports saying as many as four major impacts, took a chunk out of the Continental Divide and then the Sierra Nevadas, the debris from which buried everything west south west of the impact points hundreds of feet deep.

The same piece impacted just inland of the coast of California, cutting a hundred mile long, two mile deep trench far out on the continental shelf. It created a series of huge tsunamis

that blasted the eastern coasts of Asia and Africa. But there were more tsunamis created by a second huge piece of the meteorite impacting just east of Hawaii.

The combination of the impact itself, earthquakes it created, and the tsunamis, essentially wiped Hawaii off the face of the earth. Only bare volcanic rock survived the two thousand foot high initial wave. There were six more after it, only slightly smaller, plus the return waves when the waves reflected back toward the east after inundating East Asia and East Africa.

Even northern Australia was subject to the tsunami strikes. A third strike was reported in the heart of China, and another one in the Northern Pacific, but there wasn't much in the way of confirmation.

The impact east of Hawaii opened a vent on the ocean floor, thus creating a new Hawaiian Island, still unnamed, growing rapidly. It contributed to the ash and rock fallout that circled the world. But most of it came from the many other volcanoes that erupted all around the Pacific Rim due to the impacts.

After months much of the debris in the skies had fallen to earth, but the volcanoes were still erupting and adding more all the time. You could easily see the sun and the moon, even the bright stars at night, but the haze that continued was enough to create the so-called nuclear winter.

Harold, with Catherine and Kevin agreeing, decided that if they were going to make contact with other survivors it'd had better be soon. There was not going to be much winter travel during the traditional winter months. Traveling in the summer for the next several years would be much like traveling in very early spring or very late fall in the old days. Chances for severe weather would be a constant threat.

With a solid contact near downtown St. Louis, Harold and Kevin took the Escalade ESV to try and get to them. The survivors were holed up in a mall and the few people that had stayed had survived on the food in the mall eateries and by scavenging the entire area nearby.

While some of the fallout had washed away, there were still whole streets impassable for many blocks. What would have taken an hour of driving before the impact took three days of travel, stopping early every night to hole up and do some scavenging for food for the mall survivors.

Harold had brought along some food, and a great deal of water, but he wasn't ready to open up his LTS food pantry to everyone that might be hungry. It was going to be a fine line to walk, but Catherine and Kevin both agreed with Harold.

Vowing to look for some heavy equipment to use in future expeditions, Harold and Kevin used shovels to move drifts of fallout and snow several times to get to the location of the upscale mall. They were met by several men, who immediately, without being asked, much less told to, began emptying the Escalade ESV of the supplies that it contained.

One of the men turned and asked Harold, "Is this all?"

"I'm afraid so. We salvaged all we could find on the way. It's going to take some organized..."

"What have you been living on?" asked the apparent leader of the small group.

"I had some stored, and we've salvaged enough to make it through."

"Stored, hunh? We've got someone here that says you have more than 'some'. Bring her out!" he called to one of those standing by the entrance of the mall parking garage.

Four men came out a few moments later. Two held a sobbing Lois. Another two held the battered body of the man that had come for the MacGregor 26.

"Please Harold! We're starving! They've started eating those that die!"

"Shut up or you'll be in the soup pot yourself," said the leader, turning back toward Harold. "Take us to your place or we kill the two of them."

"And I should care, why?" Harold asked, killing time, trying to think of something. "She left me and took up with the other guy. I don't even know his name."

Out of the corners of his eyes, Harold saw movement of some of the group trying to get behind him. "Get in the truck and start it," he said out of the corner of his mouth to Kevin.

Kevin hesitated, but moved slowly to the SUV.

"Hold it there, buddy," said the leader. "You go any further and you'll have the lives of these two on your conscience."

Kevin stopped, right at the edge of the open passenger side door of the SUV. "Turn them loose and I'll tell you where my office is," Harold said. "I have some stuff stashed there."

The man spun around and backhanded Lois. "You didn't mention any office stash!"

"I didn't know! I didn't know!"

"She didn't!" Harold said. "Leave her alone!" Despite the separation, Harold couldn't stand to see Lois treated this way.

Worried about those trying to encircle them, though he'd yet to see a gun in evidence, Harold decided to play out a bluff. "Turn her loose and get the office supplies, or we'll just drive away and leave you to your own devices. We'll stop and pick up the supplies so you won't get them. I don't think you're going to try to follow us home."

The man thought about it for a moment and then motioned to the men holding Lois and her friend. Lois staggered forward and began to run toward the SUV. The friend just dropped to the ground and one of the men that had been holding him said, "He's dead."

"Okay!" yelled the leader of the group. "Where's your office?"

Harold grabbed Lois and got her into the rear passenger seat. "Look it up! I'm in the book!" he yelled and began to get into the Cadillac, drawing a pistol as he did so. He fired three shots to scatter the men and distract them enough for him to get the SUV started and for Kevin to get in.

Gunning the engine, Harold spun the wheel and sped back the way he'd come in, making for the nearest street exit that wasn't blocked. Kevin was crouched low in the seat, gripping the gun that Harold had given him, but not even attempting to use it.

But no shots followed them and Harold slowed down, but kept a steady pace back the way they had come in, afraid to look for a different way out, incase they got stuck in one of the drifts. It was starting to snow and their tracks should be covered pretty quickly.

"Lois. Lois!" Harold said, rather forcefully. "Do they know where the house is? Lois!"

Barely audible, Lois finally said, "Yes. I told them. I had to, Harold. They kept threatening me and beat up Lance and were going to skin me alive and cook me if I didn't."

Harold shook his head and began thinking. If they did find his office, they would have supplies for ten for a month. "How many of them are there? Lois!" He had to keep being forceful. She was fading in and out on him.

"How many of them are there?"

"Twenty-two. I'm the only woman left. We were okay until Butch and his boys showed up. They... they used the other women after they got there and wound up killing them all. The children, too. They were the first ones they ate when the food ran out."

"How did you avoid..."

"Lance hid when he saw them coming. He would sneak out and find food... somewhere... I never ate any... any of the people. But they caught him two days ago, and made him tell them where I was. The only reason they didn't do to me what they did to the other women was your radio contact. I... I... I let it slip that it was you and you were a survivalist. That you'd have food you would share. If they gave me back to you."

Harold had a feeling she was leaving a few things out, and glossing over some others. But he put it out of his mind. She'd suffered enough. "Do they have any vehicles running?"

"I don't think so," Lois replied, beginning to calm down slightly. "They said they were on foot."

Harold made a sudden U turn, startling both Kevin and Lois.

Lois was almost hysterical in an instant. "You aren't going to give me back to them, are you?"

"No. I want those supplies at the office. It's only a little out of the way." Driving faster now, Harold made his way to the office. With Lois cowering in the back seat of the SUV, Harold and Kevin ran in and grabbed the totes that held the emergency supplies for the office. They nearly filled the back of the Escalade ESV.

Despite the snow coming down more heavily, the two men were sweating when they got back in the SUV. They had worked as fast as they could. Retracing the path yet again, Harold headed for the home out in the suburbs.

He knew he'd made a terrible mistake when another SUV loomed out of the snow and approaching darkness. Harold spun the wheel and the Escalade ESV went into a skid. It prevented the other vehicle from T-boning the Cadillac, but the front bumper did a number on the driver's side rear quarter panel.

Harold lost control, and before he could get his foot off the accelerator he'd driven into one of the deep drifts of combined snow and fallout ash, banging his head on the windshield. He hadn't buckled his seatbelt. Harold tried, in the few seconds he had, to get the Cadillac free, but it was stuck until it was dug out.

Blood streaming down his face, Harold rolled out of the SUV, pulling his pistol as he did so, thinking he'd never be this careless again. Or as lightly armed.

At least one of the men that climbed out of the other SUV was armed, for a bullet hole appeared in the sheet metal beside Harold. Harold scrambled out of the way, trying to find some kind of cover, or at least concealment.

He felt a sudden burning sensation on his left leg and went down hard. He turned over onto his back and raised the pistol, just waiting, gritting his teeth with the pain.

Suddenly the driver's side passenger door opened and the leader of the group had Lois by the collar of the coat she had on, a revolver held to her head. "Drop it or I blow her brains out. What few she has."

Harold wracked his brain for something to do. The only thing he came up with was to drop the pistol.

The man was shaking his head. "You fool. I've got your woman, your supplies, your vehicle, and I know the way to your house. You loose it all." He shook Lois, her head flipping back and forth. Then he looked at Harold again. "You have no idea what is in store for this one. I and my men are going to enjoy her for a while, and then into the stew pot, just for grins."

Harold tried to struggle to his feet. "Oh, no," said the man. He pointed his revolver at Harold and said, "I'm not going to kill you, I think. Leave you alive to die slow, thinking about this." Again he shook Lois.

Though Harold could barely see her in the now very heavy snow, she was silently pleading for help. Harold screamed when the gun went off in the man's hand and Harold's left knee cap shattered from the impact of the bullet. "Lie there and die, nice and slow, while we take care of your wife."

"Please Harold!" Lois wailed. "Please!"

Through the pain, Harold felt for the pistol he'd dropped. Cold fingers wrapped around it. He knew that even if he shot the man, the rest of the men would still take Lois. Blinking back tears, asking Lois and God to forgive him, Harold sighted down the pistol and squeezed the trigger just before he lost sight of the two. He passed out not know what happened.

Lois, in the micro second between the impact of the bullet in her heart and her death, said a short prayer. Not for herself. For Harold. It was enough to tip the balance in her favor. She was smiling at the bright light she saw as she died.

Her body pulled free of the man's grip on her jacket and he turned, furious. Kevin, two steps away, unseen in the snow, reached out and pulled the trigger of his gun, the muzzle just inches from the man's head.

He went down just like Lois. But his judgment was rather different. He saw no white light when he died.

Emboldened, Kevin moved to the rear of the Cadillac and began shooting at the men trying to get the totes out of it. No one shot back. They all dropped what they were carrying and ran off, more shots following them. He heard the other SUV start up and the lights glare in the driving snowfall. Kevin fired the rest of the magazine toward it as it rapidly disappeared.

Kevin collapsed to the snow covered ground, fumbling, and barely managing to change the magazine in the pistol the way Harold had shown him just before the trip. He waited what seemed an interminable time, but was only a few minutes before he could get up.

He grimaced when he moved Lois' body and the body of the man he'd shot. It looked like there were a couple more out there on the ground, but Kevin ignored them, just as he ignored Harold. Kevin took the shovel from the back of the SUV and stood it up by the vehicle. He gathered up all the totes he could find. All were still intact. It looked to him like there were at least some missing after he stacked all he could find back in the Cadillac.

It took him only a few minutes to get the Cadillac dug out where he could finish getting it turned around under power. Only when the Escalade ESV was ready to go, engine running, lights pointed down the street, did Kevin check on Harold. He was alive, but unconscious. It was probably a good thing, Kevin thought, as he wrestled Harold onto the rear seat of the SUV and cut his pant leg open with the shears from the large first-aid kit Harold kept in the vehicle.

Far from an experienced first-aid practitioner, Kevin did what he knew to do, and left it at that. “Maybe Catherine will know what else to do,” he said.

Harold came to; feeling more pain than he thought could be experienced. “Lois?” he managed to get past gritted teeth.

“She’s dead,” Kevin said softly. “I killed the guy and ran the others off. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to prevent...”

“It’s okay, Kevin. Kevin. Please stop! I’ve got to take something for this pain. I can’t stand it!”

Kevin stopped, but left the engine running, and got out the first-aid kit. Harold managed to guide Kevin through the contents until Kevin found the narcotics Harold’s cooperative doctor had made available for emergencies. Harold took three of the tablets and a sip of water from a water packet in the first-aid kit.

“Just take it as easy as you can,” Harold said, lying back down on the seat. “Just get me home, if you can.”

Kevin nodded and did his best, hoping Harold hadn’t overdosed on the morphine tablets. Kevin didn’t try to stop and set up a camp, since they’d opened the road on the way in. He did stop for a catnap, wakened by Harold when he asked for more morphine.

He took another dose when they reached the house and waited for it to take effect before he would let Kevin and Catherine move him. As it was, it was more than he could stand and Harold passed out while being moved. He came to on the sofa in the living room, with Catherine working on him.

But the morphine was fully in his system now and he wasn’t feeling much, barely being conscious. He went out again as Catherine continued to work on his knee, with Kevin’s rather marginal help.

Finally Catherine stood up, having been on her knees for over an hour, and said, “That’s all I can do. It’s a good thing he had all the first-aid stuff.”

“Good thing you knew what you were doing,” Kevin offered.

“That too.”

“Will he be able to walk?”

“I don’t know,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “The pain might be too much. For sure he’ll have to wear a brace, and the leg will be stiff. The knee will never carry his weight. I won’t know other than that until he’s capable of trying.”

Harold had taught both of his companions the ins and outs of the security system for the house and grounds. Kevin lost a lot of sleep over those few initial weeks of Harold's recovery, keeping an eye on their security, fearful of the group from the mall finding them and extracting revenge for what he and Harold had done to them.

Knowing he had to taper off the narcotics, Harold slowly did so, substituting some OTC medicines, of which he had a very large store, until he was on the OTC's exclusively. Then he started tapering off them onto some marginally effective herbals.

Harold decided he would have to live with a certain amount of pain, or wind up killing himself with the drugs. It was three months before he was able to get around on crutches by himself, and that was painful, not to mention awkward, with the left leg held stiff by a brace that Kevin had helped Harold fabricate in the shop in the garage.

He could lock it straight, or unlock it and let his knee bend, though it was painful in the process. He could still drive the Escalade ESV since it had an automatic transmission, but he was very slow getting in and out.

Though always on the watch for anyone from the mall incident, when none had shown up during the short summer, Harold decided to check on his Retreat, just in case they had to leave the house if they were attacked by those from the mall, or others. The radio network was filled now with reports of small groups of survivors attacking those that were fairly well supplied, through planning, like Harold, or happenstance, the way the mall was initially.

Though they could hold out a very long time at the house, having options, Harold believed, was important. Catherine was reluctant to stay at the house alone, after the mall incident, so she went with Harold and Kevin stayed at home, to keep an eye on it, and tend what garden they had been able to plant. If something did happen, Kevin was to lock himself in the vault and call for help on the radio.

Harold and Catherine took the Kenworth Motorhome. Harold felt that it would be able to bull through anything they might run up against in the way of snow and fallout accumulations. After a bit of practice right after they left the housing development, Catherine had the hang of driving the Kenworth and drove the entire way. It was still slow going, and it took two full days to get to the Retreat.

There were signs of survivors on the route, but no contact was made. When they got close to the property all signs of human activity were gone. There was some animal life, but not a great deal.

Catherine eased the motorhome up to the garage, though she was right on it before she recognized it for what it was. Harold eased his way out of the motorhome and guided Catherine as she backed the Kenworth into the garage after he opened the door with the remote.

Everything was intact. Even the several PV panels were clear of fallout ash and snow. As it had around the development, the rains and wind had carried most of the fallout and ash off

sloped areas and deposited it in low areas. Harold decided to leave the Retreat property essentially as it was.

Harold hesitated for a moment before he opened up the hidden access to the cave. But Catherine had become a trusted friend, just as she'd been an excellent employee. He trusted her. "Give me a hand, please," Harold said when Catherine came out of the motorhome as he was thinking it over.

Harold could have done it alone, but he was glad for Catherine's help to move the cabinet to expose the floor hatch, and then a stabilizing hand to go down the stairs. "Holy cow, Harold! This is amazing!"

Grinning in embarrassment, Harold said, "I don't know. It was just sort of an impulse at the time."

Harold didn't have to show her around. She did that on her own, as Harold limped over to his recliner. "All the amenities. You could hold out here, hidden, for months, if you brought down enough wood and had enough waste storage," Catherine said, going over to the three legged stool Harold used when working at the fire.

"Does it flood?" she asked Harold.

"No, not as long as I've had it. There isn't even any indication the level came up during all the heavy rains." Harold showed her the chalk marks, still intact on the rock bank of the little stream.

Catherine noticed the fire bow drill and board sitting alongside the fire bowl. "You don't even need matches! Does this really work?"

Harold told her the procedure, and Catherine soon had a fire going, the slight amount of smoke coming off the seasoned wood drifting toward the crack near the spring exit. "Oh. But people would see the smoke, wouldn't they?"

Shaking his head, Harold said, "It entirely dissipates on the way through the opening. You can go look at the spring. You won't see any smoke, though you might smell it."

Catherine hurried outside, and then back into the small cave. "You're right. It would drive people crazy trying to find you."

"You're awful interested in hiding out," Harold said lightly.

Catherine's reply wasn't so light. "I guess I am. Kevin is putting a bit of pressure on me to get together with him." Quickly she added, "Nothing inappropriate, Harold. Just basic flirting, hoping for more. I'm the only game in town... Kevin is nice, but he's used to female companionship."

"I see," Harold said. "Your not... Uh... Interested in me..."

Catherine laughed. “No Harold. I’m not out to jump your bones. Don’t worry. You’re a great friend and an excellent boss, but, at least for me, you aren’t marriage material. I didn’t hurt your feelings, did I?”

Breathing a slight sigh of relief, Harold quickly told her, “No. You didn’t hurt my feelings. Scared me, a little, I guess. I like our relationship the way it is.”

“Good,” Catherine said. “I like it, too.”

Things went quiet for a while, as Catherine went about making them a meal on the open fire, again, with Harold’s simple instructions. But Harold was thinking hard about the situation at home. There were biological imperatives at work all over the world. It was Harold’s firm belief that humanity would triumph over nature and evil people.

He was still thinking about it when Catherine drove them back to the development. Over the next few days, he took some time alone and investigated the other houses in the cul-de-sac. All were of good construction, though not as prep friendly as Harold’s. All had large back yards, again, not as big as Harold’s. “It’s doable,” Harold said after checking the last house three days after he had started the tour, as he thought of it.

Calling one of the occasional meetings with Kevin and Catherine, Harold explained his plan. “Now, I can’t do very much to implement this, with my physical limitations, but I can provide the start. I’d like to get more survivors moved here. Enough to make a viable community.

I have a water supply, and we can plumb a water line for the other homes. They all have septic systems just like we do. We’d all have running water and flush toilets. We have a great start on gardening, with the greenhouse.

“Everyone would have to help with traditional... well, intensive type, gardening. And we’d need some animals, both for food and for transportation when the fuel runs out. But two of the houses have large decorative barns that would work fine. We could even use my detached garage if needed, though I’d like to keep it as a central shop to build projects in.”

“Wow, Harold!” Kevin said. “You’ve given this a lot of thought, haven’t you?”

Harold nodded. “The three of us need more than just each other, especially with my limitations, now. We could probably survive several years on stored food, plus what the greenhouse, garden, and orchard will provide, especially as the weather begins to improve. But do we really want to just survive? I’d kind of like to be remembered as more than just a survivor. I want to be remembered as one of the survivors that helped society and civilization make a comeback from this catastrophe that has befallen us.”

Softly Catherine said, “I think it is a good plan, Harold. Thank you. It addresses many of the concerns I have begun to feel as the initial shock of just staying alive wears off.”

“Ditto that for me, too,” Kevin said. “I’m all for it.” His face fell slightly. “But we need to be careful. We don’t want anyone like that bunch that had your wife.”

“I think we can be selective enough to avoid that,” Harold replied. When Harold had made an intense effort to inform everyone on their radio network about the situation at the mall, there had been a huge outcry. As far as could be determined, everyone at the mall died that winter from starvation.

“I’d want people willing to defend themselves from another group like that. People that will work for what they need and want.”

“I guess about the only thing we can do is make a few radio inquiries, and perhaps visit some of those closest to us, if they’ll give away their location.” That had been standard on the radio net. Almost no one was willing to give out their specific location.

Much like the meetings he, Catherine, and Kevin had, Harold asked for a radio network meeting. It took a month to get it arranged. On the first of January the leaders of the various area groups, along with dozens of listeners, tuned to the same Amateur Radio Frequency.

Harold announced his plans to host a group of people in the houses of his cul-de-sac. He explained the resources he had in place, leaving out the amount of food he had stored. He gave the sizes of the other houses in the cul-de-sac, and his estimate of how many people the small community could support.

He listed what would be required to be a part of the community, in terms of food to get everyone through until the gardens could be prepared and a harvest done, and either fuel for vehicles, or horses for transportation and working the conventional gardens. Those that wanted to come would also need to bring arms and ammunition to help protect the community against those that might be inclined to attack it once it was a going concern.

Harold asked for reciprocal agreements to provide goods and services the community couldn’t make or do on their own, in return for what the cul-de-sac could produce in excess for trade purposes.

It was agreed by the leaders of the other sites to get the information out to their local populations, and another radio net meeting was set for early June, so if some people did decide they wanted to come, there would be enough summer to allow the trip.

And so the winter passed, slowly, but when June did roll around and Harold, Catherine, and Kevin eagerly tuned in the radio network. Though many of the other small communities were doing okay, with no takers for Harold’s offer, there were many individuals and small families affiliated with, but not part of, those communities that had expressed interest and were more than willing to come to join Harold’s tiny group.

Harold had decided that the cul-de-sac could handle thirty adults and perhaps twelve children, if some of them were twelve years old or older, since all four of the other houses had at least three bedrooms and all had basements.

Having set a rendezvous point some distance from the development, Harold and the others showed up a day early in the motorhome. They wanted to be the first there to be able to keep an eye on everyone that arrived, to get an initial idea of what they were like. Kevin stayed out of sight, armed with one of Harold's rifles. Never again would any of them go anywhere without being heavily armed.

The small groups began to show up on the day set. There were a few individuals, but it was mostly family groups.

Fortunately Harold didn't have to pare down the group when everyone showed up at the rendezvous. There were the twelve children, but only twenty-seven adults. Had there been one or two more than he wanted, Harold had decided to allow them to come, if they were well equipped, to avoid confrontations.

Harold was favorably impressed with most of the people. His biggest fear had been a parasite or two type personalities would show up, perhaps a real gang. He was prepared for it, but with only three exceptions, Harold thought it was a very good group of people. All had proven themselves survivors, having lasted as long as they had.

All had brought the requested minimum items, again, except for the specific three. That included enough small wood stoves to ensure the other four houses would have enough heat to be livable in the winters. They all had at least one working fireplace, with one of the houses having two.

Three of the five extended families had livestock of one sort or another, including five horses. There were three grown sows and a boar, with a mess of piglets, twenty chickens, two milk cows, a bull, and three calves, two female, one male. Harold never did get an accurate count of the rabbits. They seemed to be a staple with quite a few of the survivors.

All had food for the summer, which surprised Harold. He was expecting to have to carry at least a few of them through the rest of the summer, all the way through the next, when they should start getting some harvest.

Even the three that Harold had decided were the weak links had food. And a very precious commodity each. One was driving a semi tanker rig, heavily overloaded, with two seven-thousand trailers and a three-thousand gallon pup. Harold could only shake his head. It must have been a nightmare getting the rig through all the mess the impact and hard winters had left behind.

Harold considered the fuel, fortunately treated with the Pri-G and Pri-D that the guy had found as well, was more than adequate compensation for not having brought anything else useful.

The second loner was a doctor. As much as Harold appreciated the skill, and how needed it was, the man was arrogant to a fault. He did have food and medical equipment, all packed away in a garden cart. He'd been walking for several days, pulling the big garden cart the entire way, and was in something of a mood when he realized they weren't at the final destination.

The third person Harold questioned slightly was a woman. She was armed to the teeth, but had food, and just as importantly, hundreds of packets of non-hybrid seeds. She didn't like to be approached closely, and her head was almost like it was on a swivel. She was checking around constantly for threats. Harold could only wonder what had made her that cautious.

Three of the families had vehicles, with limited amounts of fuel. Each had enough to make the final trek to the development, but that was about it. None of the different groups had any type of farming equipment, except for plenty of hand tools. It was a disappointment, but not an unexpected one for Harold.

They camped where they were for two days, to allow those that had traveled on foot to rest up for the last short leg of the journey. At least, that's what Harold said when asked why they were waiting.

Actually, Harold just wanted to see how everyone interacted and how much cooperation there would be. Everyone got a chance to take a shower in the motorhome, and a meal of other than what each group or individual had been eating for the last several days, everyone adding something to the potluck that was set up.

On the third day, right after everyone had breakfast, Harold gathered together the leaders of the families and the individuals for a meeting. "I think we should get on the road. We'll have to go slow to allow those on foot to keep up."

The people all looked around at one another and, to Harold's relief, and hope, began making arrangements among themselves to get everyone a ride so they could go faster. The motorhome would take most of those on foot, but their gear was distributed on the other vehicles.

The only exceptions were the two families with the large live stock. There was one livestock trailer among them and it was arranged for one member of each family to stay behind with the stock that couldn't go in the trailer on a first load, and wait for the truck and trailer to come back and get them and the stock.

With the arrangements made, Kevin put in an appearance at Harold's signal. Kevin would stay with the stock, too, since he was much better armed than the two men staying behind. There were some surprised looks when he walked into the camp, but no one questioned Harold about it.

They still had to travel rather slowly, compared to pre-impact days, due to the overloaded vehicles and the deteriorating condition of the roads. They made it to the cul-de-sac well before nightfall and used the time before twilight to get things settled about who would live where.

Harold saw Hillary talking to Catherine. Catherine came over to Harold and asked if it would be all right for Hillary to take the other bedroom in Harold's house. "She just isn't comfortable staying with any of the families, and certainly not the single men.

"Not a problem," Harold said, and turned back to watch the others sort themselves out. He stayed out of the process and let them make their own arrangements. Harold did put a crew of

the teens to hauling water to each of the houses from the pump at his house. Enough for drinking and flushing the toilets a couple of times. They'd run pipe as soon as possible to provide running water. At least all the houses had their own septic systems, which made life much easier.

Having done all he could, Harold turned in. He was tired and his leg was hurting. He was up early the next morning, and took a cup of tea out the front door and down to the street to take a look to see if anyone else might be stirring. All the houses had side fences, but Harold's was the only one that had a front security fence and rear fence. There was quite a bit of privacy while still being in a position to lend one another a hand in defense if it ever became necessary.

Harold was very pleased when he saw members of the two families with livestock getting ready to go get the remainder of the stock and Kevin and the two family members. He waved as they drove past in the old pickup and nearly new stock trailer. It was only a few hours later that Harold saw them return and Kevin walked up to the house when they let him out by the gate.

"We have some good people, I think," Kevin told Harold when he found him in the den. "Both of those boys are very responsible and capable. Makes me think the two families they belong to will be, too. How did everyone settle out?" Hillary came in carrying a cup of tea for Harold and Kevin said, "Oh. Hello. We barely got to meet. I'm Kevin."

She hesitated, but took Kevin's hand in a handshake after putting down Harold's tea. "I'm Hillary." She hurried away.

"I say something wrong?" Kevin asked Harold when the door to the den closed.

"No. I think she's been traumatized since the Impact and is very leery around men. Kind of keep that in mind in dealing with her. She's taking the other bedroom here in the house."

Kevin nodded. He'd heard what Lois had said before her death. He vowed to himself to keep it low key with Hillary. He wouldn't add anything to the pain she'd already been through.

With a decent source of fuel for the moment, teams were sent out looking for small scale equipment for the gardens. There was a Kubota dealer not too far away and two tractors and various implements were quickly transferred to the compound and gardens planted. A couple of the mid-teen boys were sent fishing at the nearby river with instructions to catch as many fish as they could and to keep the best ones alive to stock the tanks in Harold's greenhouse. And to bring back as many worms as they could dig.

The piping for the water turned out to be easier than anticipated. Harold had planned to acquire some pipe and a trencher and lay a line to connect each of the houses to his well. It was Dr. Kavanaugh that suggested just closing the valve on the main that fed the cul-de-sac. The pump was already connected to Harold's house plumbing and would back feed into the main and supply the other houses. Normally that wouldn't have worked too well, with the house line too small to carry the back feed to the other four houses, but Harold had designed the house with oversize water service line, for the fire pump. It would carry enough back to the main to be practical feeding the other houses.

With that done in the first days after the group move in, life became much easier on everyone. Water and sewer were basics for a life of any quality. Power was the next on the agenda.

One of the houses, besides Harold's, had a small PV system. The other three didn't. But there were quite a few other houses in the area that did. There were even a few in the development, but Harold asked that those not be touch, just on a hunch.

Among all the other things done that summer, limited electrical power was established in each of the homes that didn't already have it. Quality of life went up another notch. The other big project that summer was to get additional greenhouses for the other homes. Large ones.

With the short growing season the conventional gardens were used for what would grow in that length of time. Everything else went into the greenhouses. All of them were heated for winter use, and grow lights installed, with a separate PV system on each one to run at least a few of the lights during the winter for fresh vegetables year round.

The orchard and berry patches provided some fruit, but the harvests were only moderate, with the weather the way it was. Though with excellent care, the trees and plants were kept viable until the summers again started to be summers.

With the ravine that was the rear property line of most of the cul-de-sac, an existing tall concrete wall behind the area where there was no ravine, similar to Harold's, and a newly constructed gate into the cul-de-sac, the residents of the compound felt relatively secure from attack. There were more than a few firearms among the inhabitants, but Harold filled in some of the holes in the armament with some of his collection.

One of the married men was a veritable encyclopedia of useful information, which, when coupled with Harold's extensive library, the two experienced mechanics in the group were able to equip both the Kubota's with wood gas generators, so they would be viable workhorses even when the stabilized fuel ran out.

Most of the rest of the fleet was also converted to wood gas over the years, but the tractors and two pickups, plus Harold's motorhome and it generator were converted the first two years.

Harold's house became the community center, with its paper and electronic libraries, the pool, canning kitchen, adequate power to run the TV and DVD player, and communications gear. Harold's willingness to share those things contributed, too.

The cul-de-sac became a viable, almost self-sustaining community, with only a few external needs, salt being one of them. That was the first trade deal Harold made with another community. He traded one of the wood gas driven generators he'd financed the construction of for a lifetime supply of salt.

He soon became the regional banker, using his precious metal coins as the new currency, redeemable at a set rate that was basically food and fuel standards. The activity soon spread and became the standard of exchange.

By the third year, Harold was getting requests for other people to become residents of the community. It wasn't really Harold's to say, since he actually owned only his one lot and house. But if they were going to ask his permission, he would be as careful as he was the first time. People began to fill the other cul-de-sac of the development. A water well drilling rig was found, with someone to run it, and precious fuel was used to put wells in each of the cul-de-sacs that became populated.

People looked far and wide for PV panels, batteries, and inverters so electric pumps could be installed in the new wells. With generators being converted to wood gas fuel electricity was become more available. Firewood was a huge business. Harold got a couple of thumbs in that pie, too.

Hillary became solicitous of Harold, becoming his platonic companion, taking care of him like a nurse would a patient. Kevin gave up trying to romance Hillary, just as he had with Catherine. But the population of the area was growing and he soon found a marriage inclined farmer's daughter to settle down with.

Catherine and Kevin were once again Harold's employees, taking over the daily business activities as Harold's health began to decline. One summer, a few years later, Hillary took him up to the Retreat, where he often went to be alone, except for Hillary. He began to think often of Lois, remembering their early life together.

He was in his recliner one evening, watching the fire, when Hillary went down, carrying the light supper she'd prepared for him. He had died in his sleep. When Hillary took the body back to the development there was a large service for him, and he was laid to rest in the cemetery that was now a part of the development.

The residents renamed what was now a small town in and of itself, Haroldsville.

End *****

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