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Home Sweet Bunker

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Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 1

Lew Norton had thought about it long enough. Things were getting worse environmentally and politically. Violent storms were not only more violent, but many more of them were hitting the coast lines of the world. Tornadoes were breaking records in number and severity. Volcanoes dormant for thousands of years were heating up, and active, but quiet for years, other volcanoes were erupting and pouring ash and gasses into the atmosphere. Enough that the emissions were affecting the climate.

Global warming was a fact and those that looked at the patterns without cash colored glasses didn't see that the current warming, mostly caused by the activities of the sun, was a precursor to another ice age. Mini or major. No one would know until it happened.

So Lew called GreenWorld Design and began the negotiations that would soon, hopefully, get him into a highly disaster resistant home, with a bunker for extreme situations. And if he could just convince his brother Ernest to get out of Dodge, as the saying went, the two of them could share some costs and get an even better deal. But Ernest was as hard headed as they came. It would be a tough sale.

With GreenWorld working on a custom design for him for a one-thousand square foot home and a bunker double that size or larger, he needed to follow up on some other things. If it was just him, Lew would have been happy living in a bunker. His wife Verna could be persuaded to go into a shelter if there was a real disaster, but living in one was out of the question.

And Verna had some wants... make that needs... Actually, make that ironclad requirements that had to be incorporated into the place. One was a Jacuzzi tub in the master bath. Another was a small greenhouse for her prize winning roses. Third was that all the appliances had to work when she wanted them to work. In other words, an adequate and reliable electrical power system. No wait until the sun shines again stuff.

There had to be enough garage space for her to keep her Cadillac SUV inside and accessible, no matter what Lew wanted in there. Then there was Ernest. He was not in any way, shape, form, or fashion going to live with them. Bunker okay, but not live in the house with them. And finally, the house had to look 'normal'. No castles, fortress or bunker look to the house. The bunker itself was okay. She didn't expect to be in it at any time, anyway. She wasn't what could be call fully on board with the prepping.

But Lew was making good money and she got pretty much whatever she wanted, so he could buy and play with his toys to his heart's content. Well, there was one thing about prepping. There had to be a working indoor toilet and plenty of toilet paper to last however long it needed to last until she could get more at a store.

Lew fired up his version of a Rufus Super-Suburban PAWV and headed for the real estate agent he was using to buy a piece of land he had found, and Verna had approved, for the new home location.

Linda-Sue was happy to see him. This particular piece of land had been for sale for three years with no takers. Mainly because of the lack of utilities and expense of getting them installed, and the difficulty of getting to the place. It wasn't that it was so far from town, it was that it was located on the far side of the State Forest, on the wrong side of the river, and unless you blazed a path through the forest, you had to go way around to get to the nearest town, and then further to get to the city.

Lew had been a bit surprised that Verna okayed the purchase and agreed to live there. But she did love driving that Caddy SUV and liked showing it off to her friends. An hour to town and then on into the city was fine with her.

It was just chance that the property worked for both of them. Ernest wouldn't care. The further he was from civilization the better he liked it. The land would be a selling point to get him to move out there.

“So, Linda-Sue, what’s the deal? The guy take the counter offer?”

“He hemmed and hawed, but he finally agreed to the offer. Made it sound like he was losing his shirt, but I know better. We can close in a week.”

“Excellent. He give you the keys to the gate?”

“Reluctantly. But yes. Don’t start any construction there until you have the papers, but you can go out and do some planning and staking if you want to.”

“That is what I wanted to hear,” Lew said, taking the key proffered by Linda-Sue.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Lew?”

“Not a thing I can think of,” Lew replied. “I’ll see you in a week then.”

Linda-Sue nodded. It was just too bad Lew was married. Anyone that could buy property like that for cash was someone she wanted to get to know better. But that was out. He’d not picked up on any of the clues she dropped every time they talked.

Lew was relieved to be away from Linda-Sue. She was a bit too interested in him, as a person rather than a client. He and Verna had a good relationship. They understood each other and allowed each other their idiosyncrasies. They’d been together a long time and were a well matched couple. Linda-Sue didn’t have a chance.

Triggering the cell phone hands free Lew called Verna and told her he was going up to the property. Just before he hung up he told her he loved her. Just because. Next he called Ernest and asked him to come out to the property. He gave his brother precise directions. The man had a

tendency to get lost at times. Like the difference between New York and New Jersey lost. Lew clicked off and said a little prayer that Ernest would find the gate and Lew wouldn't have to go looking for him.

Whistling lightly, Lew pulled up to the gate that was several yards away from the State road. There was a pipe fence running off in both directions, but it ended just a few yards on either side of the gate, running up almost to the deep creek bank on one side, and into heavy timber on the other.

That was another thing Lew liked about the property. Though he knew he would have to engineer or build an automatic gate opener system. No way was Verna going to get in and out to open and close a gate. Especially if it was muddy, pouring rain, or heavy snow, which they would have from time to time, guaranteed. And for her to go down from the house, when it was finished, to open the gate for friends was out of the question, just as leaving the gate open was out of the question for Lew.

But that was all right. He'd install a camera system to keep an eye on the gate, get remotes for the vehicles, and a wired remote in the house for the gate so visitors could be checked out before opening the gate. Verna would actually like the security aspects of that system.

Lew pulled through the open gate and stopped. He leaned the driver's seat back, lowered the wide brim hat he wore down over his eyes, and waited for Ernest to call and ask Lew to come find him.

But, lo and behold, thirty minutes later Lew heard a vehicle turn off the pavement onto the gravel approach to the gate. It was Ernest. Lew waved him through and then got out and relocked the gate. Back in the truck, Lew led the way up the slight incline to the open pasture area at the top of the rise.

That pasture was the only open ground on the property, and was the highest point around for some distance. One of the selling features

Lew had hoped for in his search for a primary safe residence. He was still looking for a couple of places to put in ‘hunting cabins’ to have BOLs just in case they did have to leave the main residence. It would take something extraordinary to make them leave, but there were always some things that could trigger an evacuation.

Lew took a one-hundred foot measuring tape, heavy hammer, and some marking stakes and marking tape out of the back of the custom Suburban. With Ernest letting out a grunt or ‘hum’ every once in a while, he helped Lew stake off several areas of the lush pasture.

After most of it was done, Lew walked up to Ernest and said, “Don’t know about this other area.”

“Okay. I see what most of the areas are for. What are you thinking about for the rest of this space?”

“Well, I had a thought that you might want to put in a house similar to the one I’m putting in. Single bedroom, but sharing power, water, sewer, bunker and other things.”

“I haven’t been planning in moving. You know that. I like my little place. Bunker, hunh?”

“Yeah. That’s why I didn’t just stake it off. Might want to stake it anyway. Might put in a rental or something.” The seed was planted and Lew shut up. It would take Ernest at least a couple of days to mull it over before he agreed to put in a place on Lew and Verna’s property. Lew wasn’t about to put in a rental house, but couldn’t quite justify paying for a place for Ernest.

Lew didn’t like the idea, and besides, Verna would squash the idea if he even brought it up. So he would let Ernest think it through until it became his idea. Ernest had already had a few good offers for his current small homestead, and with the money in his trust fund, would have no

problem paying cash for the house and half of the bunker and off-grid utilities.

“I need to get home to check the animals,” Ernest said after a few minutes of watching Lew sketch out what he’d staked out on a note pad in a nice leather portfolio.

“Just another minute,” Lew said. He added a couple of things to the drawing and then snapped the portfolio closed. “Okay. I’m ready to go.” Lew led the way back down to the gate and opened it. Ernest drove out without a wave or good-bye. Lew shook his head and pulled through the gate, relocking it behind him.

Lew was about to give up on his brother after three days had passed without hearing from him. Figuring nothing could be lost in the act, Lew e-mailed Ernest the information on the house and bunker on order.

Sure enough, another two days passed, but Ernest e-mailed him back asking if the one bedroom 878 square foot disaster resistant house would fit in that last area that they’d staked out that day.

Lew e-mailed back a “yes”.

As soon as Ernest had had time to read it, he e-mailed Lew for information on the bunker and wanted to know how much his part of the total deal would be, besides the house, ‘if they did it up right’.

Lew knew he had him hooked. He didn’t give Ernest a hard number. Instead told him that his part would be forty-five percent of the total for everything except the two houses. Each of the brothers would pay for their own house. But everything else would be split forty-five fifty-five.

Lew could almost hear Ernest squawk about the split, but Ernest e-mailed back that they could discuss it. That was all Lew needed to know.

He let Verna know that Ernest would be living on the property, but in his own house. She waved it away, with an ‘Okay, I guess’.

He began making calls to various vendors to get pricing and availability for the off-grid utilities, fencing, greenhouses, and the like. But the first call was to the trust fund manager to get money transferred to a building account for the project.

“That’s odd,” said the man. “Your brother called and requested the same thing for him. Are you two both moving away?”

“Nope,” Lew replied. “Not away. Just outside of town. Fewer hassles and all. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. But I’m a city boy from way back. Well, good luck on the project. The money will be available tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks! I’ve got another couple of projects in mind. But I’ll talk to you about them later.”

Lew said a short prayer thanking his paternal great-grandfather for his foresight and generosity in setting up the trusts for his grandson’s children so many years ago. He’d invested wisely, and the trust had grown over the years to a very respectable amount.

It was split into two different trusts when Ernest reached twenty-two and Lew was twenty-one. Both men had a good career and were rather frugal about things for the most part. They only touched the money a couple of times, and very little of it, the last three years.

Ernest was making a good living as a plumber, with his homestead generating some income selling home produced goods at the farmers’ markets in the area during harvest season.

Lew had gone a different route. Sort of. He became an electrician to Ernest’s plumber. But Lew now specialized in off-grid power

systems, which would make the acquisition of the off-grid systems for their place easier and quite a bit cheaper of needing to hire someone to do the work and material.

With Ernest doing the plumbing work and him the electrical, they should make out like bandits.

Ernest put his homestead up for sale. It was only listed for one day before he had a taker. He decided to sell lock, stock, and barrel, taking away only his personal belongings and two trailers. One was a small camping trailer he used to get away from things, and the bug out trailer he would use if he had to abandon the homestead. He could pull both of them at the same time with his one-ton tricked out truck. Not quite on a par with Lew's Rufus, but close.

So Ernest simply moved in the day of the closure. He turned the plumbing business over to his senior employee for two months to be able to stay on the property and supervise some of the construction, and to do the plumbing work.

Lew did the same, putting the electrical business in the hands of his manager to concentrate on the new property.

The first thing they did was bring in a nursery man to plant a living fence around the open pasture. It would consist of thorny roses, not Verna's price winning roses, thorny blackberry brambles, and thorny honey locust trees closely spaced and interwoven with wide mesh welded wire fencing.

While the nursery man and his crew were doing the fence, Ernest and Lew talked to the water well driller he contracted for jobs that required a well. At Ernest's insistence, two wells were drilled, one where the utilities building would be, and another some distance away as a backup.

With the nursery man now putting in the fruit and nut orchard, along with strawberry towers, blueberry patches, and a small vineyard, Ernest began the installation of the oversize septic system that would serve all the buildings, and any future building that might take place. It would be a state-of-the-art system, with large polymer septic tanks, grease traps, back flow preventers, inspection and cleanout ports, filter systems, and a huge Infiltrator leaching system installed on the lowest point of the pasture.

A grey water system was considered, but it was decided the benefits were not enough to outweigh the problems.

While that was going on, Lew, not wanting to take equipment from his or Ernest's businesses, bought a new Bobcat A700 skid steer/all wheel steer multipurpose unit and a Bobcat 5600T utility machine, with a whole truckload of attachments. Not only were they needed for the construction phase, but would be put to use on the property when the building was finished.

The first thing used was the trencher unit on the A700 to dig a trench from the gate to the house location. The side fences, of two inch black iron pipe, were left as is and incorporated into the new gate posts and gate with remote controlled opener.

Beside the gate control wiring, Lew added additional cables suitable for whole house automation to make the installation of the cameras and intercom easier. He didn't really know if all the features would ever be needed, but the houses and bunker were to be wired, too, and having the ones to the gate just seemed a reasonable addition.

With those projects completed, Lew and Ernest consulted on doing some defensive landscaping. Both were in favor of it, but had a difficult time deciding just what to do. The main question was whether or not to have outside fighting positions linked with the bunker by tunnels, and or be stand alone.

Lew won out, and the two of them began the landscape work and tunnel installation using the two Bobcat machines. They could do only so much until the GreenWorld Design crew was ready to install the two houses and bunker.

One of the key features of the landscaping, besides the tunnel connected firing positions was that the grading of the berm was such that the near vertical wall was on the down side of the ditch. A wedge shape section of the ground was simply removed, with the near vertical section on the downhill side. The entire downward area was still in sight of the house, as was the slope going down to the bottom of ditch.

Aggressors would have to run up the lower slope, scramble down the wall in full sight of the house, and then start up the upper slope, again in full view of the house. It was counter intuitive, but it created a huge open area with nothing to hide behind but a few blades of grass.

Any vehicle that made it to the home site, if it didn't stay on the driveway, would go nose down into the trench unless it was going fast enough to jump the obstacle, which was unlikely, given the terrain. A plus was the terracing aspect of the defensive landscaping, that would catch and hold runoff from all the upper part of the property. It would be directed to a pond built up with the dirt removed from the wedge shaped trench. The pond would be sealed with bentonite.

While they were digging, the brothers decided that despite two wells, they wanted some water storage. So measures were taken to install polymer cisterns after the houses were finished. But Ernest wanted to go a step further and convinced Lew to investigate Invisible Structures Rainstore³ run-off storage system.

It didn't take Lew long to agree with Ernest that the extra water storage would be worth the investment. So more digging was done, this time with a rented excavator to do the nine foot deep rectangular excavation that would have a gravel base laid down, an impervious

barrier sheet spread out, and the stacks of the Rainstore³ components installed.

Enough space was left to get into the assembly for inspection and to clean out the tank when necessary with a wash down system to a sump with a pump to pump it dry if ever needed.

The impervious barrier would be brought up and over and sealed, and the whole thing backfilled. Filtered inlets for the surface water and runoff from the out buildings to enter the tank were installed, made so they could be cleaned out easily. While the cisterns would provide drinking water run through a purifier, the Rainstore³ water would be used for the garden, animals, lawn sprinkling, and the wash down system on the roof and walls of the two houses. The outlets would have a large simple contaminant filtering system.

The Rainstore3 system, when installed correctly, could support the weight of even heavy trucks. So the area above the system was fitted with Invisible Structures GrassPave2, a system that provided a support structure that allowed grass to grow up through, while preventing the vehicle wheels from cutting ruts or killing the grass.

The excavations for fuel tanks were also done before the excavator went back. The three large diesel fuel tanks weren't a problem, just rather expensive. Getting the propane capacity they wanted took a bit of sleight of hand on Lew and Ernest's part. There were four propane companies in the area. One would provide up to a single 1,100 gallon tank tops, one would do up to three 1,100 gallon tanks, manifolded together, and the other two would do a single 3,300 gallon commercial tank each.

So Lew ordered the delivery of the various tanks one supplier at a time. When one was installed, it was back filled and another company called to install their tank, or in the one case, the three tanks. So they wound up with a total safe fill capacity of 10,000 gallons of propane in six tanks.

The last, single 1,100 gallon tank had a wet leg and was installed on a slab behind Ernest's house. There was a small shed holding the scale to weigh the smaller bottles of propane when filling from the wet leg, with racks for empty and full bottles. The tank was bermed and covered except the valve area for safety. It would be the tank that was used and refilled regularly, since, though they would only allow one tank, their fuel prices were usually cheaper. Both houses would be pulling from that tank, and the other five tanks had lines run and connected to both houses, but left turned off. They would only be used if the one supplier couldn't or wouldn't fill Ernest's tank.

Though the houses would not have basements, they would have a set of stairs leading down to a walk through tunnel leading to the bunker. The other buildings would have the same. The fighting position and escape tunnels were only thirty inch inside diameter and would have tracks put down to use a trolley to get back and forth from the bunker to the fighting positions or hidden exits.

From the start of the project, electrical power was furnished by a medium sized diesel 115v/230v generator. But the GALE vertical windmills had arrived. Two again at Ernest's urging. For an old spendthrift, Ernest was turning loose of money as if it was on fire.

They swapped out the excavator for an off-road crane with enough reach to install the turbines on their poles. They would be above the tops of the trees, but would not be very noticeable until close to the property. With the vertical turbines colored green, they would be really hard to see from any distance at all.

Lew set up a temporary electrical panel for the windmills, using a single set of six Surrrette 8-CS-25PS, 8 volt 820 amp hour to match the 48 volts the windmills produced. The solar PV system using Sunpower E/19 320w/48v panels would also be running at 48 volts to feed the Xantrex/Trace XW6048 120/240vac/50v input 6,000 watt stacked inverters to produce 18kw of 120v/240 volt AC electrical system. A total

of six banks of batteries would be purchased dry, with one of them added to the first set for normal use, the others to go into storage for future replacement. Everything would be backed up with twin Isuzu 21kw diesel generators.

When Lew was ready to order the electrical components, Ernest asked him to include a separate 6kw PV system for him, with two sets of batteries, plus an Isuzu 12.5kw generator for his place. “You do know you’ll be tied into the main system,” Lew told Ernest.

“Yeah. I know. I just like to have my own backups.”

“Well, okay. It is your money.”

“Yep. What else do we need to do before the builders get here?”

“I talked to GreenWorld Design and they are sending over the footing and floor concrete pour drawings, so I guess we need to get them in so they can cure for a while before the builders get here.

They concentrated on digging and pouring the footings, foundation, and rat slab first. After the trenches were dug for the footings and foundation, one foot of $\frac{3}{4}$ ” gravel base was leveled and compacted. A PolyGuard Underseal under slab self-sealing water proofing membrane went down, and then Expanded Poly Styrene (EPS) under slab insulating panels. Next Certainteed Form-a-drain foundation drainage system was installed and a Certainteed Energy-Edge floor edge insulation system.

They called out the cement trucks and worked a very long day to get all the concrete poured. They only did a two inch thick wire reinforced rat slab as the houses would have an interior wood floor forty-two inches above the slab. Neither Lew nor Ernest liked slab on grade construction and since they didn’t really need basements with the bunker installation, both agreed on the raised floor to get away from the

hard concrete floors and to make wiring and plumbing much easier to do and repair if there was ever a need.

The utility building and six bay detached garage had thick concrete floors to handle the vehicles in one and the batteries in the other. One of the design changes to Lew and Verna's house had been the addition of a large one car finished and heated garage just for Verna's Caddy with household seasonal storage incorporated. It would also be where the stairs down to the bunker tunnel were located.

The brothers had a full two weeks of working on ancillary projects before the construction team arrived with their gear.

Three US Tower free standing 55' telescoping crank over towers were installed, with several antennas attached to each. The coax and control cabling was installed in grounded metal conduit. Only the balanced-line feeds were in the open, but they would be kept grounded unless in use. Satellite TV and Internet dishes were set for each house.

The greenhouses, not one, but three, were delivered and installed. One fairly small one for Verna, and two large ones for Lew and Ernest.

Then the crew arrived with the housing material stacked on a couple of semi-trucks. The GreenWorld Design rep introduced himself and Lew and Ernest went over the details of the installed foundations and the special elements that had been requested for each of the structures. Everything was copacetic and the team got to work. Lew and Ernest just stood back and watched in awe as the lightweight wire truss reinforced insulating foam panels went up one after the other.

In the matter of a couple of days Lew, with Ernest's help, was stringing wire and roughing in switch boxes, wiring boxes, and receptacle boxes for the electrical system and then for the home automation systems.

Once all of the buildings were ready, the shotcrete was applied, inside and out, in the colors Verna had picked out. A few days later Lew and Ernest signed off on the construction and the GreenWorld Design guy and his crew were gone. It was up to Lew and Ernest to finish the built out themselves, or with the help of a couple of temps a time or two.

But the buildings were finally finished, in time to be moved into before Thanksgiving. Verna's friends were invited over for a combined house warming and Thanksgiving Day celebration. Ernest stayed home and Lew kept a low profile. True to her word, Verna said not one word about the bunker. She extolled the features of the house, but that was all. The house was a big hit, as was the turkey dinner Lew helped Verna make. Verna was a whiz of a cook, but needed an extra pair of hands to take care of everything on a timely basis.

After dinner, Verna took the ladies out to her rose greenhouse. Lew began the kitchen clean up while they were out there. When Verna came inside she was glowing. From the chill in the air and from the excitement.

"You did a good job, Sweetheart," Verna told him. "You are all that can be asked for in a partner. I love this house. I feel safe. And the girls were very impressed that you did so much of it yourself. You and Ernest. I noticed he didn't come over."

"No. He prefers the big games to eating. I'll take something over after we clean up things."

"You are a dear. I'll go clear the table."

It took over an hour to get things back to normal, but a very happy Verna went to take a nap while Lew took a platter over to his brother. Ernest was waiting at the door. "Saw you coming on the monitor," he said, grinning. "I like this security system. Top notch."

“Yep. We did do a good job of picking products. You can barely hear that dishwasher we have. And the off-grid electrical system is running all the electric stuff just fine. I am glad we decided to go propane for the cook stove and clothes dryer. That would have stretched things too much if they were electric.”

Lew had one more set of projects in mind before Christmas. Ernest wavered one way and then the other. And Verna said she didn't care one way or the other. So after a little persuasion, Ernest agreed on connecting the two houses, the utility building, and garage with ten foot tall, four foot thick masonry walls with dirt fill between them. That fence would go around the back of the buildings. He'd had the fences in mind when they did the security landscaping. They would complement each other nicely.

The front fence would be an eight foot heavy steel bar decorative fence, with masonry posts, with a remote control gate like the property entry gate. A series of fixed ladders with a platform to stand on the inside of the wall would allow for observation and act as a firing point to cover those three sides of the enclosure. There were electronic surveillance devices covering the area, and the terraced defensive barrier with firing positions, too.

To complete things, a concrete driveway was poured from the tree line to the walled enclosure and inside the enclosure flagstones were laid in a decorative pattern. Verna came out to see it when the workmen were gone and gave her seal of approval. The house might be smaller than the ones some of her friends had, but nothing as simple and elegant as hers.

The turnoff was also paved with concrete, from the state highway edge, through the gate and for enough past that one could park on either side and manually work the gate without walking through mud when it was rainy.

Lew and Verna sold the old house, finally, and, reluctantly on Lew's part, contacted Linda-Sue again. Verna liked the woman for some

reason that he couldn't fathom. But Lew wanted a couple of small parcels of land, the more remote the better.

Nothing had turned up when the brothers were needed back at work. They worked the winter through, though there were a couple of weeks with no jobs. The economy was tanking and building was way down. Most of the work each was getting was repair and remodeling jobs. But they paid the bills without having to touch the trust funds for living expenses.

Lew and Ernest both felt that the economy was in a mess. There was a war brewing in the mid-east as Egypt and Iran took the first steps to form a new Caliphate for the Twelfth Imam who was supposedly on this earth and ready to lead the world into Islam.

Though they both ran good equipment for their businesses, it was getting older now. Deciding to turn their dollars into hardware, both men began to sell off their current equipment and buy new, with an eye to using it at the new homestead if things ever required it.

Then three things happened. One, a local equipment dealer decided to go out of business, due to the economy. Two, a logging company contacted Lew and wanted to buy the lumber rights to the piece of forest Lew and Verna owned. Three, Lew found Verna dead in their bed on the day of their wedding anniversary. He had slipped out of bed early to fix her a fancy breakfast. When it was ready and he took it to the bedroom, he couldn't rouse Verna.

A 911 call brought an ambulance and a Deputy County Sheriff SUV to the house. Lew wasn't showing much emotion when he let them into the house, after having opened the gates to give them access.

The Deputy looked over the scene, talked to the two paramedics, and then quizzed Lew on what had happened. All Lew could tell him was that he'd left the bedroom to make breakfast and when he took it in, she appeared to be dead, so he called 911.

Dutifully, the Deputy wrote everything down, gave Lew his card, and admonished Lew not to leave the area.

The paramedics were bringing Verna's covered body out of the master bedroom. They stopped and one asked Lew, "Did your wife snore?"

"Some," Lew replied. "A little more lately, but not all that bad."

"She ever tested for Sleep Apnea?"

Lew shook his head.

"Well, we'll have to let the coroner decide, but I think your wife died in her sleep due to lack of oxygen, related to Sleep Apnea."

"You aren't off the hook, guy," the Deputy told Lew. "Stay handy." With that, the Deputy and the paramedics left with Verna's body.

When he didn't show up to help Ernest that morning, Ernest went to check on Lew and Verna. He saw the Deputy's SUV and the Ambulance leave. Fearing the worst, he ran into the house. He found Lew on the sofa in the living room, crying silently.

With more care than some would have thought possible from Ernest, he helped Lew get through the day and to bed that night. He even stayed in the second bedroom to be close to his brother in the night.

Lew looked a bit better the next morning, but was obviously still down. "What can I do?" Ernest asked. "What do you want me to do?"

Lew shook his head. "Just see about the business, I guess. I need to go in and make arrangements... Try to find out what really caused this."

“Okay. But if you need anything, you just let me know. We’re brothers. We’ll stick together through this.”

“Thanks, Ernest. I’d better get ready to go in. Sorry about not...”

“Don’t even say it, Lew. It isn’t a problem. I’m going to head into town and let your crews know you won’t be in for a few days.”

Lew started to protest, but Ernest shushed him. “You need the time. You and Verna were a pair for a lot of years. It is going to take some time to adjust to this.”

Noting that Ernest had not said, ‘Get over this’, he took heart. He’d never get over it. But maybe, just maybe, he could adjust. So he nodded, saw Ernest to the door and then went to the bedroom to finish dressing.

It was a gut wrenching day. He was off the hook with the Deputy. The coroner had deemed the death natural. Due to the Sleep Apnea neither she nor Lew had known she had. Two days later Lew had to admit the funeral was beautiful, in a way. Verna had dozens of friends and they all showed up, most of them crying, nearly inconsolable.

The flowers were beautiful, many of them having come from Verna’s own greenhouse. One of the florists bought roses from Verna occasionally and had offered to use some of her flowers from the greenhouse for the funeral. The memorial service was quiet, dignified, much like Verna had been in her life. Lew said his last good-byes and the casket was lowered into the vault already in the grave.

Lew waved off an attempt by Linda-Sue to comfort him and let Ernest drive them home. He took a couple more days off, helping Ernest with his project. While doing so, the two discussed the first two events that had happened.

Well, being willing to make an extra dollar or two, Ernest and Lew decided to buy out the equipment dealer, and turned down the offer for

the lumber contract. That, they decided, was something they could do on their own. But those two projects called for more investment, the creation of a new company, joint this time, and the hiring of a couple of extra hands.

Over the course of a year, the brothers had turned the equipment company around, purchased the equipment they wanted for the homestead for a huge discount, and then sold the operation back to the old owner for just what they'd paid for it when it was going under. They'd pulled their profits out in getting the wholesale pricing for their equipment.

Steven Haley was so overjoyed to get a viable company back, at the price he'd paid, that he threw a big fish fry for the employees and invited Ernest and Lew to it. "I don't know how you did it, but I sure am thankful to you. Equipment is my life. I don't know if I could have turned it around the way you boys did. But the economy is a little better. Probably that."

"Yeah, Steven. I'm sure that is what it was." Ernest rolled his eyes, looking at Lew behind Steven's back."

Lew grinned and told Steven, "Thanks for the invite, Steven, but I'm full up on fish and hushpuppies. Time to head for home and let the belt out a notch or two."

"Sure thing, fellows. And don't be shy about coming in for your equipment needs. You'll always get a good discount from me."

Lew nodded and he and Ernest headed over to Ernest's pickup truck. "What do you think, Ernest? We need any new equipment?"

Both men laughed. They bought more than they'd planned, but most of it would pay for itself over time. They now had everything they needed to turn the homestead into a farm. Small farm, but one that would

provide for their needs, with a surplus to sell at the farmers' markets in the area.

They needed only one more thing. Well, three, actually. A stock barn, an equipment barn, and a general farm barn or building. Another call to GreenWorld Design and the three buildings were on the drawing board. They would be installed in less than three months.

It was beginning to look like that three months might be too long to get the barns. Syria had shot down two Turkish warplanes, and Russia was backing Syria. Iran was still denying any nuclear arms interest but it was with obvious tongue in cheek. It was almost certain they now had at least one or two usable nuclear weapons and the means to use them.

China wasn't resting on its laurels, either. With grim determination, they were aiding and abetting a build up along the North Korean border, as well as their east coast facing Taiwan. They'd warned the US and Japan to stay out of anything that might develop in the region.

The brothers sweated it out every day, making plans and improvements to the homestead. Lew would never had considered more than Ernest's milk cow and a few chickens, much less swine on the property, but without Verna there, may she rest in peace, Lew did feel like he had a few more options than before.

After considering horses and abandoning the idea, movable steel pipe fence sections were installed for the stock they would eventually get. The well driller was called back out to add three irrigation wells where they would be putting in feed crops for the animals.

The small lumber operation was going strong, with a tree harvester attachment for one of the four A700s they now had, a stationary debarker, and an Oscar 52 portable lumber mill. One or the other was with the small crew they'd put together, working four days a week while the weather was good.

A portable firewood processor was kept fed with another of the A700s. The smaller stuff that wasn't worth putting in the lumber mill was turned into firewood and the really small stuff into mulch.

Portions of the forest were clear cut to eventually be farmed, but the rest was selective, with some of the mature trees left while clearing the medium and small stuff. Some of the cuttings were stacked in rain runoff gullies to provide for small animal habitats.

One of three Carraro Tigercar CC PL 8400 transporters hauled around the necessities for the operation. The other two would be used in the farming operation with four Carraro TTR 10400 bi-directional isodiametric tractors.

A Carraro SRX-10400 orchard/vineyard tractor, a much narrower version of the TTR, would work the vineyard and orchards. Though it would be another couple of years for some of the trees to bear, and quite a bit longer for others, 2 Crendon 65-5 orchard self-propelled pruning tower/cherry pickers were already available as were the two tree shakers. They would get some use fairly quickly, as there were quite a few hickory nut trees and black walnut trees in the forest. They were being carefully maintained for their nuts and future prime lumber production.

A pair of BCS 853 walk behind tractors would serve the outdoor garden and the greenhouse areas not being used for Vertigro vertical tower hydroponics growing.

As they had the Bobcats and Carraro tractors that had front end loaders and other implements, the two 'gently used' Mercedes Benz U500 4x4 trucks didn't have much in the way of attachments other than a much larger snow blower than the Bobcats could handle. One of the U500s would be used with the Savannah Road Master Road Maintenance Implement to keep the gravel section of their drive in tip top shape, and earn some income maintaining some of the county's gravel roads. The second would be a general utility truck.

Things held off for the most part the rest of that year, allowing the three barns to be erected and finished. Ernest and Lew did most of the interior work themselves, putting in a milking stall, a birthing area, swine farrowing stalls and so on in the stock barn. Stainless steel lined processing rooms were installed to handle the milk, eggs, and meat that would be produced.

Ernest had a fantastic set of tools he'd collected over the years and they, along with several new fill in and specialty tools for the equipment, were all set up in the equipment barn in mobile and stationary tool boxes and racks. Winter was coming on and farming supplies were about as cheap as they got, so the brothers stocked up, nearly filling up the farm barn.

With the poor summer for farming, many of the farms around were looking for any way to make money they could. So when Lew went around asking about obtaining manure from several of them, he wasn't able to get it for free, as he'd hoped, but did manage to get far more than enough for the garden and greenhouses, with a good start on a couple of the crop fields that had been turned and prepared for winter.

That was where they stood three days before Thanksgiving. They were just planning on being at Lew's for the holiday with a prepared dinner from one of the grocery stores that had a good food preparation operation.

But Lew got a call from their trust fund manager. "Lew, I have some really bad news."

Lew felt his stomach seem to fall. "The markets..."

"Yeah. I could get in a lot of trouble telling you this, but the market is about to tank. I'm not talking a few points, or even hundreds of points, but thousands."

Lew whistled. “That bad. And we need to do something about the trusts?”

“Yes. You know I’ve kept things pretty consistently. But I don’t know what to do about this. I’m not sure I can get the cash out in time to...”

“Turn it all into gold and silver. US Gold Eagles, all four denominations, Silver Eagles, and pre-1965 circulated US silver dimes, quarters, and halves. Sixty percent gold, evenly between the four, twenty percent Silver Eagles, and twenty percent circulated silver coins at one third each.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. I am not kidding. Can you do that before the dive starts? And do it without any records of where the money went?”

“Well... I don’t know. I know I can convert. I guess I probably can use a couple of my shell companies to run the transaction through. There will be a trail, but it won’t be easy to follow. The dollar is up just slightly, despite everything, and gold is just slightly down, so I guess it is as good an opportunity as any. I just don’t like not being diversified.”

“Well, I have my diversification here. We’re turning the homestead into a small working farm, and we have... Never mind that. We’re diversified enough. Hang on. I see Ernest coming. I assume you were going to call him, too?”

“Yes. Right after I hung up with you.”

“Give me a couple of minutes and he’ll be back on line to tell you what he wants done.”

“Okay.”

Lew quickly described what Dick Arlington had just told him and what he'd decided to do with the trust fund money.

“I think I'll take a bit and lay in some more prep supplies, a couple of guns and more ammunition. The rest just like you said.”

“That's a good idea. I'll let him know about the change and then you can talk to him direct.”

Ernest nodded and Lew put the phone back up to his ear. “Dick. Slight change. Transfer a hundred thousand to the bank, and do the gold and silver with the rest.”

“Well... Okay. It is your money. What does Ernest want to do?”

“Here. I'll let him tell you.” Lew handed the phone to Ernest.

“This Dick?” Ernest asked. When Dick said it was, Ernest just said, “Ditto,” and handed the phone back to Lew.

“I take it that means do the same for him,” Dick asked. Lew was easy to deal with. Ernest was enigmatic enough that sometimes Dick had to decipher what it was he was talking about.

“It just occurred to me,” Dick said as Lew was about to hang up. “Where do you want to store the precious metals?”

“Right here on the farm,” Lew said.

“That'll take an armored car!”

“It won't be that much weight,” Lew protested.

“It isn't the weight or volume, it is the value. You don't move that much value around in the trunk of your car.”

“Whatever it takes,” Lew said. “And if you would listen to a piece of advice from me, get out of what you are in, buy up all the long term storage food you can, find yourself a building with a deep basement, get some PMs and be ready to duck and cover.”

“You’re serious!”

“As a heart attack.”

“What I ought to do is come out there and stay with you until this is over.”

“Do what I suggested, except for the basement, and bring that stuff with you when the armored truck delivers and I’ll put you up for a small fee. Since you’ve been such a good friend of the family.”

“Getting a little back, huh?”

Lew laughed. “Turnabout is fair play. So, we’ll be seeing you in a couple of days?”

“Uh. More like four or five. But yeah. I’ve thought it over... Didn’t even think about my girlfriend. Geez!”

“She good people?” Lew asked.

“Very. I’m just waiting for the right time to ask her. Got the ring and everything.”

“In that case, I’d marry her, convert her monetary assets the same way I suggested to you, and bring her along.”

“I’ll think about that... But thanks, Lew. I know that invitation didn’t come lightly.”

“No. It didn’t. But you and your lady are welcome. Just get here before the missiles start flying.”

Dick actually gulped audibly. “Yeah. I think I’d better hang up and get started.”

Lew closed his phone and went to find Ernest. He was home and just yelled, “Come on in!” when rang the doorbell.

“Need to tell you something, Bro. I asked Dick and his soon to be wife to come out and stay until this is over. He’s been really good to us these past few years.”

“Yeah. And he is good people. His pappy and our Great Grandfather were thick as thieves, according to what Dad said.”

“I’m glad you’re okay with it. What are you planning now?”

Ernest was at his laptop, on the kitchen table. “Doing some LTS food orders and ordering some ammunition. Look it over when I’m done and I’ll just double it if that is okay. Might as well get the maximum discount on the product, and the lowest freight rates possible.”

“Good idea. And with the way Walton Feed fills their orders, it might be a good idea to get a Hotshot truck to go get the order there and pick up Emergency Essentials stuff on the way back. I guess the other stuff will just have to be shipped normally.”

Ernest pushed over the pad he’d been writing on and Lew went over the list of items he was ordering.

“You know, I think I’ll order some things from Lehman’s. Those Country Living grain mills are good, but that Diamant 525 is almost a production machine. Be better if we have to grind for other people.”

“Yeah. Good point. Do up an order for Canning Pantry and Tattler lids. I’m beginning to think we may be doing more than just growing some crops.”

“You’re right. I’ll go work on that. I’ll let you take a look before I order so we can coordinate that Hotshot. Think Johnny Reb will take the load?”

“Lew, me and Johnny Reb got a history. You know that. He’s trouble, Bro. Get someone else.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t thinking. All he has is a flatbed, anyway. We’re going to need a box. Okay. I’m on it.” With that, Lew hurried back to his house and got busy.

When Lew had his orders ready, he went back over to Ernest’s to show him. “Looks good, Bro. Get it ordered and the truck dispatched. I’m going in to Hank’s. See what he might have that I just can’t live without.”

Lew laughed. “I’ll go in with you. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Sure.”

There was a great deal that he could live without at Hank’s Gun Shop and Range, but Ernest did pick up a few items and a lot of ammunition. All of Hank’s stock in several calibers and gauges. Even more reloading materials.

Lew didn’t buy as much, since he and Ernest had similar tastes and Ernest had beat him to the punch to the ammunition. But he, too, was loaded down when they went out to the truck carrying everything except the ammo, which Hank was wheeling out on a dolly. He had to make three trips to get all the ammunition transferred.

“Boys,” said Hank, “I might just hang out the closed sign and go fishing.”

“Mighty cold to be fishing,” Lew said.

“Well, I might just stop in at Charm’s Bar and fortify myself first.”

The three men laughed and then Ernest and Lew headed for home. It started to snow just as they left Hank’s and there was a good inch on the ground when they got home and the snow was coming down even faster.

“Looks like we just beat the weather,” Lew said, carrying part of his purchases to his house.

“Yeah. Might not be able to go in to get our turkey dinner in a couple of days if this keeps it up.”

“Ernest,” Lew laughed, “You know good and well we can make it to town even with two feet of snow on the ground. And that’s without firing up a snow blower on a U500.”

“Yeah. Guess you’re right.” Ernest grinned. “I sure hope they fix enough. I’m getting hungry already.”

They had already shut down both the plumbing shop and electrical shop for the week of Thanksgiving with only a couple men on emergency call for that time period. So Lew and Ernest just rested and watched the news on television and on the internet for the next two days.

Lew and Ernest took Rufus in early Thanksgiving morning to pick up their Thanksgiving meal. And it was snowing again. When they were ready to check out, one of the clerks they both knew asked Lew, “Can I get a ride home, Mr. Norton? Mom dropped me off but she’s afraid she can’t get here and back home with all the snow. We’ll be closing in a

few minutes. Only two orders left to be picked up and then we're all going home."

Lew looked over at Ernest, who gave a very slight nod. "Sure Lydia. We'll take you home. Since it would be a few minutes, Ernest said, "I'm going over to the liquor store. Might stock up on a few things. Didn't think about it the other day."

"Okay. You know what I drink. Get what you can."

Lew watched Ernest run across the street. He was still showing some of his athletic prowess that made him captain of both the football and basketball teams when they were in high school. But that fall he'd taken helping their dad roof the house had ended his potential career. That was when he began to withdraw from things.

"Okay, Mr. Norton, I'm ready to go."

Lew turned away from the window and nodded. "You have everything you need?"

Lydia grinned. "Mom is doing our dinner. These are really good, you know, but not like home cooking."

"Yeah," Lew said softly, remembering some of the meals that Verna had prepared over the years. He led the way to Rufus and helped Lydia up onto the rear passenger seat. It was quite a step for the young lady.

"Where is your brother?" Lydia asked, buckling up carefully. She'd seen Rufus plenty of times from the outside, but never inside. It looked like every nook and cranny had something interesting in it, except for the clear area between the wheel wells from the second seat to the read doors.

"Over at the liquor store. Just take a minute to go in and get him."

“Okay, Mr. Norton.”

Lydia waited patiently, talking to her mother on her cell phone until Lew and Ernest came out of the liquor store, each carrying a case of something. In the same fashion as Hank at the gun store, the clerk at the liquor store had to make three trips with the hand cart, each one loaded down. And Lew and Ernest each made two more trips with a case each. It all fit in the back, after the turkey dinner sacks were moved a bit.

“Wow!” Lydia said when Lew and Ernest got back into the front seats of the truck. “That is a lot of stuff!”

“Laying in a stock for winter, don’t you know,” Lew said.

“Oh,” Lydia said. “You know where I live, don’t you?”

“Yep,” Lew said, making a turn at the next light. It was a few minutes before they got to the house, and Rufus was in four wheel drive. The snow had been coming down moderately since they’d been in town, but it was really coming down now.

Ernest got out of Rufus when Lydia did, surprising Lydia and Lew both. “Like to have a word with your mother, Lydia, if you’d ask her to come to the door.”

“Well... sure... I guess... I didn’t know you knew Mom.”

“Long time ago. Just want to say hello.”

“Oh. Okay.” Lydia hurried inside while Ernest waited on the porch.

“Don’t you want to come in out of the weather?” asked Grace Collins when she came to the open door.

Ernest shook his head. Lew was looking on curiously when Grace stepped outside, her arms around her for warmth. Lew was sure Ernest was trying to convince Grace of something, since she kept shaking her head no.

Finally Lew saw a nod, and Ernest headed back to Rufus.

“Should I ask about that?” Lew asked when Ernest was buckled in.

“I’ll tell you later. Man! That wind is cold.”

“Yeah. I can feel it shaking Rufus here a little.”

“Well, drive carefully. I don’t want that liquor and dinner mixed until I do it myself.”

Lew laughed and backed out of the Collins’ driveway. They made it home, safe and sound. Lew had moved Verna’s Cadillac SUV to the detached garage and was parking Rufus in the attached one. It made it much easier for them to get things unloaded. They simply set the boxes from the liquor store down in the heated garage. They’d move them to the bunker later.

For now it was football time, and a little later, turkey time. A little after four, Lew’s cell phone rang. It was Dick. “Man, it is coming down like blazes out here.”

“Where are you?”

Dick told him and added, “I got some more information. The banks won’t open Monday, and neither will the Markets. Much to my surprise, I was able to do as you asked. It’ll be at your place Saturday, if they can get through at all. I should be right behind it.”

“I didn’t expect you to be driving on Thanksgiving,” Lew said.

“Things are getting squirrely in New York City. It’s almost like people feel like something is going to happen.”

“Well, you are the one that said it was.”

“Yeah. But I have insider information. No one outside a very limited circle of people is supposed to know. Well, that circle is leaking like a sieve and one of my buddies from college picked up on it and passed it to me. I don’t know what is stirring everyone else up.”

“Don’t you watch the news?”

“Financial news, sure. Why?”

“Ah, man! We could be at war with China or Russia, or both any minute!”

“Oh. That. Naw. No one will be the first to push the button. I’m a lot more worried about the economy when this bank holiday happens.”

“Well, either way, you be careful. We’ll see you on Saturday.”

“If I’m careful, you will,” Dick said.

Lew snapped his phone closed. “Dick is on his way. Says it is snowing to beat it. And things are getting, as he put it, squirrely in NYC. Also that he should be right behind the armored car when it gets here Saturday.”

“I hope things hold off until then.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” It was only a few minutes later that Lew’s cell phone rang again. It was Harlan Massey, the Hotshot truck driver. “Calling to let you know I’ve made all the pickups and will be headed that way in the morning. Should be there Saturday.”

“Saturday is good. Be careful. This weather system has spread and worsened.”

“Tell me about it. Chain orders up on the interstate at all the passes. Gotta go. Looks like an accident up ahead.”

Lew closed his phone again as Ernest looked at him. “Harlan is on the way in the morning with the full load. Should be here Saturday, too.”

“Like I said, I hope things hold off until then.”

“I hope they don’t happen at all,” Lew said softly. Ernest just grunted and directed his attention back to the wide screen TV in Lew’s living room.

Both men were relieved to see clear skies Friday morning. It bode well for things. Hopefully, anyway. The two spent the day moving the liquor to the bunker, and arranging things so there would be room for the other deliveries.

Twice Ernest had to take the long trip to town to pick up packages that couldn’t be delivered due to the condition of the roads. Even though the weather had moderated, the roads, especially the back roads, were a mess, and the delivery drivers knew from past experience that their vehicles just wouldn’t go to some of the addresses on the packages. Besides, there were a lot of packages in each delivery. One by FedEx, and one by UPS.

Fortunately Ernest thought about the mail on his second trip in. Sure enough, the last of the independently shipped orders was there. They’d paid for premium shipment, and it had come through all right, considering the weather.

Then it was just a waiting game until Harlan Massey showed up with the truck load of food, the armored truck with the PMs, and Dick Arlington. Lew was hoping Ernest would open up and tell him what the

deal was with Grace Collins, as he had said he would, but Ernest remained silent about everything except preparing the homestead for whatever might happen.

The two did talk well into the evening, with Fox News on the TV, the sound low and the subtitles on. But the talk was about future plans for things if the worst did happen and the economy tanked on the Monday after Thanksgiving. Ernest left shortly after nine, foregoing the tunnels in favor of walking through the snow and breathing the fresh cold air that was nectar to his system. He dreaded the time they might have to be in the bunker, but knew he could do it if necessary. His last thought before falling asleep was of Grace and Lydia.

Lew, on the other hand simply did a turn around the house, making sure everything was secure, and went straight to bed. Saturday and the days after could be long ones.

Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 2

Lew was up early the next morning, dressed, fed, and ready for the day by seven. A look outside showed that the snow fall had stopped, but it hadn't stopped before putting down a thick layer of snow during the night.

Wondering why Ernest hadn't put in an appearance, Lew took the tunnel to the bunker, and then the one from the bunker to the barns. He checked over the snow blower on one of the U500s, and when he was sure it was ready to go, opened the big lift door and drove the truck out into the snow, the snow blower adjusted to blow the snow out of the way of anything they might need to do before the snow could melt.

He quickly decided that using the blower to clean the homestead area wasn't a good idea. All he was doing was putting piles of snow where he'd already plowed. So he headed for the gate in the security fence and began to clear the driveway. That was an easy task until he came to the lower gate. He cleaned around the gate. After opening the gate, he cleared all the way out to the state road and across it, and then up and down it from curve to curve that it took each direction from the driveway.

Lew headed back up to the house, widening the path somewhat. He saw Ernest on one of the A700s with a snow bucket on it clearing the yard, pushing and stacking the snow out of the way where it could melt and drain down into the terraced ground to capture the water.

Ernest pulled into the equipment barn shortly after Lew backed the U500 back inside. Lew closed the door as Ernest climbed out of the cab of the A700.

“About to give up on you this morning, Bro. You sleep in?”

“Yeah. Didn’t sleep well.” He didn’t speak further, except to say, “I’m going back to the house to get some breakfast. Holler at me when they get here.”

“Will do,” Lew replied, and watched as Ernest walked out the personnel door of the barn. He turned around and began to clean and service the U500, snow blower, and the A700. He fiddled around in the barn for a bit, just looking at the various pieces of equipment. Lew shook his head. They’d spent a substantial fortune on the equipment and parts and supplies for it, and it would be usable for years, if there was need for it.

Despite the investment, Lew wished fervently that things would turn around and he and Ernest would just have to start up another business or two to get full use of the equipment. He headed back to the house using the walk that Ernest had cleared. It was early for lunch, but Lew fixed a turkey sandwich from the last of the leftover turkey and sat down in front of the TV to watch Fox News.

There just wasn’t much going on at the moment, it seemed, and Lew wondered if Dick had got ahold of some bad information. Even overseas things seemed to be cooling down. Lew shook his head. The price of gold had fallen another dollar and the dollar was up a percentage point against the Euro. Crude, gasoline, and diesel were all about where they’d been for a week.

Lew jumped slightly, having nodded off on the sofa, when his cell phone rang. “Lew.”

“Lew, it’s Harlan. I’m here in town with, believe it or not, an armored truck, and an SUV with a couple in it that all say they are supposed to get out to your place. No way any of us will make it until the snowplows leave the interstate and get on the state roads.”

“Hang tight for a minute. Let me check something.” Lew hurried over to the kitchen desk. Verna had liked to keep up on happenings in

the area and her public service band scanner was still there and connected. He turned it on and locked into the DOT frequency the plow trucks used.

There was a lot of chatter for a couple of minutes and then Lew heard dispatch direct two of the trucks to get on the state roads since traffic was bunching up in town.

Lifting the phone to his ear again, he told Harlan he was back. Before he could continue Harlan said, "Looks like a truck is headed your way. I'll follow it out. I assume the others will, too."

"Okay Harlan. Thanks." Lew closed the cell phone and picked up the radio he wore when out working. He called for Ernest and told him, "The vehicles are following the County snow plow out this way."

"Okay, Lew. I'll fire up one of the A700s and attach a set of forks to unload Harlan."

"Very good. We'll unload right into the garage. I'll get Rufus out of the way."

"Roger."

Clipping the radio to his belt, Lew triggered both gates to open, put on his outdoor gear and went into the garage. It only took a couple of minutes for him to move the customized Suburban and park it at the detached garage.

Ernest pulled around the side of the house with the A700 with pallet forks. Both had almost decided to call Harlan again, it was taking so long for them to arrive. But an air horn sounded, signaling that Harlan was on the way up.

The brothers waited as the short convoy made it up the driveway. Harlan pulled his truck parallel to the security fence, but well away from

it, with the rear of the trailer right by the open gate. The armored truck was next and it pulled up to the open garage door. Lew pointed toward the detached garage and Dick headed over that way to park.

Ernest went into the garage to get the hand trucks kept there and got with the driver of the armored car. The two went around to the back of the truck and the driver knocked the door in a coded signal that all was well. The guard in the back began to hand bags to Ernest as the driver stood guard. It took five trips in all to get everything into the house going through the garage.

Lew had gone over to talk to Dick while Ernest was unloading the PMs. “I see you made it, Dick.”

A woman got out of the SUV passenger side and Dick introduced them. “My fiancée Carolyn. Carolyn, this is Lew Norton. The one I was telling you about.

Carolyn shook Lew’s hand and then asked, “Bathroom?”

“Oh. There is one in the garage, but it is sparse. Into the house through the garage and take a left down the hall past the kitchen.”

“Thank you. Been a long trip this morning.” Carolyn hurried off toward the house.

Ernest and the two guards with the armored truck walked over to join Dick and Lew.

“Need some signatures,” Ernest said.

One of the guards was carrying a clipboard. Lew, Ernest, and Dick all had to sign multiple documents. The guards signed them and gave half the sheath of papers to Dick. “Everything is hunky dory. Need us again, give a call. Try not to make it so far or so wintery.”

“I’ll do that,” Dick said. He looked through the papers and gave Lew and Ernest each a pair. The others he folded and put in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Harlan had the curtains of the curtain wall trailer unfastened and out of the way. He headed over to join them. Dick asked before Harlan got there, “Garage, kitchen, left, bathroom?”

“You got it. You must be freezing. You and Carolyn make yourselves at home. We’ll get Harlan unloaded so he can be on his way.”

With the armored car gone and out of the way, Ernest climbed back into the cab of the A700 and drove out to Harlan’s truck. The pallets were stacked two wide and two high. Ernest was able to carry the double stack pallets to the garage without a problem. He went down one side of the trailer and then the other in the space of a half an hour.

Lew and Harlan were marking off each pallet on the manifest papers as Ernest moved them. When they were finished, Harlan began to secure the trailer walls again and Lew went inside to get him a check. But he thought about what Dick had said and couldn’t bring himself to give Harlan a check that he might never be able to cash.

So he went down into the bunker and opened the safe and got out enough cash to cover the shipment, plus a little extra for the expert and timely service. Dick and Carolyn were in the living room watching the news.

“A check would have been fine,” Harlan said when Lew handed him the cash. “I don’t like to carry cash around.”

“I think you’ll be glad you have the cash. Just a feeling,” Lew said.

Harlan looked over at the garage, the door still open, and considered the load he’d just delivered. “Yeah. You boys don’t mess around. I think I’ll go in and get a few things...”

“Smart man,” Lew said. They shook hands and Harlan got into the truck and headed for town.

Lew closed the garage door and went into the house to join Dick and Carolyn while Ernest took the A700 back to the equipment barn. He joined the three a short time later.

“What’s up?” he asked when he saw the looks on the other three’s faces.

“Not good, Bro. Looks like China is going to move on Taiwan. They’ve moved more men and matériel to the coast and are putting out statements to not interfere in any way in anything that might occur in the region in the next month.”

“That is not good,” Ernest said.

Dick and Carolyn both looked shocked beyond words. “They can’t,” Dick said when Fox News went to a commercial. “Not now. Things are so...”

“Screwed up beyond belief?” Ernest asked.

“Yeah. Something like that,” Dick replied.

“Dick,” Carolyn said quietly. “I’m sorry. You were right.”

Carolyn turned to look at the brothers. “I gave him a really hard time when he cashed everything out and did the same thing you did. I just couldn’t believe things could possibly get this bad.”

Lew smiled over at Dick. “Followed our advice for a change, I take it.”

Dick managed to smile back. “Yes. Nothing to the degree that you have, but I cleaned out all of my accounts, put some into gold and silver and hit the local Wal-Mart. It has a section on Prep foods and gear. The SUV is full to the brim.”

“Good for you,” Ernest said. “It would have been fine, but having your own supplies will make you feel a lot better about things.”

Dick and Carolyn were both nodding. “I’ve always paid my way,” Dick said. “I just couldn’t come out here empty handed. This could easily turn into a life and death situation.”

“I know, Dick. You’ve done us good service over the years. And been a friend, even if at a distance,” Lew said. “Without your expert handling of our trusts, we would not have been able to do what we’ve done.”

“Is this going to put a strain on things here?” Carolyn asked. “I noticed the house isn’t all that big.”

“Big enough,” Lew replied. “And the bunker is set up to handle a lot more people than just we four. If push comes to shove, we can bring in more people that we think will be a help in the PAW, if the worst happens.”

“PAW?” Carolyn asked.

“Post-Apocalyptic World,” Ernest said. “It’s a matter of degree. If it is just the financial end of things, that is one thing. If it is nuclear war, it is another entirely.”

“Well, despite the news, I’m hoping nothing happens,” Carolyn responded.

“Amen to that,” all three men said.

“We just won’t have to go to the store to buy food for a couple of years,” said Ernest with a smile.

It was nearing dinner time, and everyone was tired of watching the talking heads carry on and on with theories, no matter how outrageous. Dick and Lew went to unload Dick and Carolyn’s SUV. Carolyn, tired from the trip, went to the second bedroom for a nap. Ernest began taking the PMs down into the bunker to store in the vault that was part of the bunker.

When they were done, Lew started supper and Ernest headed home for something. It didn’t take long to prepare the meal and Lew went to knock on the door to rouse Carolyn and Dick.

The meal was a simple one, a casserole and accompaniments. No one wanted a desert, so they finished up fairly quickly. Carolyn insisted on taking care of the dishes and would not take no for an answer. So while she did that, Ernest went home again, and Lew began to show Dick around the property, after they stopped at Dick’s SUV for him to get a heavy jacket. The sun was going down, and the temperature was beginning to fall even lower than earlier.

Dick was suitably impressed with the operation and amazed at the extent of the bunker when Lew took him and Carolyn down after Dick and Lew returned to the house. “You’re ready for about anything, aren’t you?” Carolyn asked.

“As much as possible. An asteroid lands on us without warning, and we’re just as gone as someone not prepared for dozens of other disasters. The bunker is designed to handle twenty people comfortably, as many as twenty-four or so with some crowding and sleeping in shifts.

“There is one real bedroom... Well, for Verna and I, but I see no reason tying it up if we have to come down here. For now, you can consider it yours. But it will depend on who all we invite to join us. It

might be used for private time for any couples that must sleep apart in the three dorms.”

“Why three?” Carolyn asked. “Men and women. What else?”

“For the little ones, if there are any. Otherwise we’ll lighten the load in whichever other dorm is the most crowded.”

“You’ve thought of just about everything,” Dick said.

“I sure hope so. Not only for our safety, but to be able to rebuild what we can, if it is bad enough to be required.”

“Wow,” Carolyn said softly. “I hope it doesn’t come to that. But it would be much better to be on the fixing end than the destroying end of things.” They headed back up into the house.

“That’s the way I look at it,” Lew said. “Well, Tour is over. You guys are welcome to stay up as late as you want, but I’m going to go to bed. I want to get everything into storage tomorrow.”

It was a lazy breakfast the next morning. Ernest was out on his own doing something. Carolyn insisted on taking over some of the household chores. Dick supported her and Lew finally gave in and let her start breakfast.

When they were done, Lew and Dick began the arduous task of moving the food and other supplies in the garage into the bunker. The bunker not only had good interior headroom, the floor, of hardwood, was raised forty-two inches above the concrete floor. So there was adequate space to get everything into storage.

Ernest showed up shortly after they started and the process began to go much more quickly. Still, it took until noon. They hurriedly

finished moving the contents of the last pallet and went in to have lunch after Carolyn told them it was ready.

Once again Ernest went to do his own thing, and Lew and Dick updated Lew's computer lists of what they had in stock in the bunker. Dick was amazed at how much the two brothers had, but Lew cautioned him, "It looks like a great deal for a couple or even four people. Put that up to twenty, and it isn't so much.

"We have to make that food last from the time of the disaster, if there is one, to the time when we can harvest and process fresh foods. At the wrong time of year, that could mean well over a year. And it will be another year before some of our perennial crops are producing much, if anything.

"We aren't experienced farmers, either, though Ernest has a lot more experience than I. There could be some lean harvests until we get the hang of it or can find and hire a real farmer to either guide us or run the operation for us. We don't have any stock animals at the moment and will have to either buy or gather them up in the PAW, and depending on just how bad it is, that could be difficult."

"You've thought all of this out thoroughly, haven't you?" Dick asked.

"I like to think so. But I worry sometimes about maybe I haven't thought of that one little thing that will make all the difference in the world at some point in time."

"I guess it would be impossible to have everything available all the time. The investment would be billions. That is what our economy amounts to. But you do have substantial holdings of gold. I can't feature you doing without something really important, if a situation came up."

Lew shook his head. "I don't expect PMs to be of much use early on in a major physical disaster. Economic, sure. Even after things settle

down, PMs might not be worth much, though I have a hard time seeing that way. It is the way many people look at it. If you can't eat it, drink it, or shoot it, they don't want anything to do with it."

"But gold..."

"Has been a form of currency for over six thousand years. I know. But others think this time it will be different."

"Hm." Dick looked disturbed and thoughtful. "Carolyn and I could be in a tough situation if PMs aren't worth anything. I never planned on you and Ernest taking care of us long term. This is just to get us through the first week or month of this money crisis. I really didn't believe the possibility of a war with China, nuclear or otherwise. After something like that a lawyer and trust fund manager won't be of much use, I am beginning to believe."

"I know. But there is always something to do. You and Carolyn basically will have first crack at anything we need done that we can't do for some reason and need a hand with whatever it is. Some of it could be physical labor, but you and Carolyn both look fit."

"Yes. I'm proud to say that we both have stayed on an exercise plan and controlled our diet pretty closely the last few years. I ran a marathon last year and it didn't kill me, though I was a wet noodle when I crossed the finish line."

Lew nodded. "Good for you. I have a feeling you won't need an exercise program to stay fit. It'll be daily work that will keep you fit."

"Now you're scaring me," Dick said. He laughed softly, but there was an element of truth in his statement.

All four of them were up early Monday morning and at Lew's place to catch the morning news in time for the New York Stock

Exchange to open. There were people besides Dick that had figured out something was wrong, for the media was well represented at the time the opening bell was to sound. The building was closed up tight. It was the same all across the country at the other exchanges, including the Chicago Board of Trade.

Every other camera crew available must have been sitting in front of the major banks in the country. Though people could be seen inside a few of them, no one was answering the insistent knocks of bank customers wanting to do business.

There was nothing forthcoming from any of the major players in the administration. But there were more than enough sound bites from everyone else to fill the time the newscasters weren't speculating wildly.

Not until noon on the west coast was any information forthcoming. And that was simply that the President would be speaking to the nation and the world at seven eastern time.

The four ate early, and Lew served drinks before they sat down before the widescreen TV a few minutes before the President was to speak.

Good evening to all that are watching this telecast. It is with a heavy heart that I speak to you at this time. I will get right to the point. Due to the opposition's efforts to sabotage my economics policies, and almost every other domestic and foreign policy I have tried to implement, I have declared a bank and market closing. Until appropriate action can be taken, the markets will remain closed and the banks will reopen in one week with certain restrictions on transactions.

In addition, I have declared a recall on all gold and silver bullion holdings, no matter their form. Every person will be compensated at prices I will determine in three days. That is when the program will begin. I advise all that have gathered up precious metals in an effort to sidestep my financial policies be ready, willing, and able to turn over

their ill-gotten gain without fuss. There will be harsh penalties for those caught using or hoarding anything that can be considered a bullion item, as described in the Executive Order signed by me this morning.

Another Executive Order was signed to help to make sure the steps I am taking to bring back this nation's economy are carried out without problems. All automatic and semiautomatic weapons of any type are to be turned in to Federal authorities. Compensation will be made on the basis of one dollar per pound of weapon without accessories. In addition, any weapon capable of holding more than six rounds total will be turned in under the same condition. As with the precious metal recall, penalties will be harsh, up to and including immediate execution of anyone resisting with a firearm of any type.

To further guarantee these elements to help our nation recover its economic might, all elections, from Federal, down to and including State level elections are hereby cancelled until I have determined that these actions have taken place and the economy is once again running appropriately.

All US armed forces will be brought back home starting tonight to do their duty here, maintaining order while these actions are being taken. All foreign armed forces now in our country for training will be sent home.

And, in closing, I warn all foreign nations to be patient and not interfere in these actions. All payments and aid from the Federal Government to all Foreign nations is now on hold. Once the US economy is back on track, such payments and aid will be resumed, on a case by case basis.

Thank you and good night.

The four were speechless. They had expected something bad, but nothing on the order of a total take over by the President. Ernest finished

his beer and set the bottle down. “This tears it. There will be a rebellion for sure. People are not going to take this lying down.”

“I know,” said Lew. “There will be blood in the streets, before it is all over.”

Dick and Carolyn both were ashen. They were being exposed to things they’d never even imagined.

“Lew, can I talk to you for a minute?” Ernest suddenly asked Lew.

Lew, surprised, nodded. “Sure.”

“In private.”

“Oh. Okay. Sure.”

The brothers went into the kitchen. Quietly Ernest told Lew, “Lew, Grace and I had a summer fling a long time ago. We took precautions, of course, but something didn’t work, I guess. Lydia is the result, but if you remember, the family moved away for those three years. Grace wasn’t allowed to contact me then and I had no idea she’d left pregnant.

“When they returned, when Lydia was almost three, Grace called me and told me about Lydia. She begged me not to try and see herself or Lydia. They had a reasonable story about the father of the baby, and Lydia had no idea she was illegitimate.

“I’ve carried a torch for Grace from the time we met in Junior High School. I love that woman. And Lydia. I’ve kept up on her progress from the time I found out and supplied Grace with child support under the table so they wouldn’t have any worries financially.

“The other day when we took Lydia home, I made Grace promise to come out here with Lydia if things got bad. So, if things get out of

hand, expect me to head in and bring them out here on a moment's notice.”

“Geez, Ernest! I had no idea!”

“I know. But you need to know now, because if something were to happen to me, I want you to see to their safety and wellbeing.”

“Of course, Ernest. Of course. But nothing is going to happen to you.”

“I'm not going to give up my PMs or my weapons. You know me. It just isn't in me.”

Lew sighed. “Yeah. I know. I may not be quite so adamant, but I believe the same thing. You may be pulling her out of the pan into the fire.”

“No. I'll take all the responsibility for all the gold and all the weapons. I want you out of it so you can help them if need be. Dick and Carolyn are going to need you, too.”

Lew didn't like it, but it just might come down to it. They had weapons galore, a collection from past generations to the new ones they'd bought recently to have state of the art weapons for some given situations.

“Okay. You have my word.”

“Thanks, bro. I love you. Now, I need to go get my trailer hooked up and ready to live in when I bring them out. They'll have the house. I'll stay in my trailer.”

“Wouldn't you rather stay in the bunker?” Lew asked. He never questioned Ernest's decision to let Grace and Lydia have his house.

“You know I hate being down there. I’d rather stay above ground for as long as I possibly can, if it does come to having to use it.”

“Okay. Your decision.”

“Everything okay?” Dick called from the living room.

The brothers walked out of the kitchen and both nodded. “Just some family business.”

“I’ll see you guys in the morning. Got a couple of things to do.”

“I’ll help you,” Lew said immediately, but Ernest shook his head.

When Ernest left, the three had another round of drinks and then headed for bed.

Lew was surprised the next morning when he heard the road gate intercom sound. It was Pricilla Johnson. She was here to clean Ernest’s house.

Lew tripped the gate control and let her in. She was in a four wheel drive pickup truck and had no trouble getting up the slope despite the additional two inches of snow that had come down during the night.

Lew knew Pricilla. Verna had used her at the old house, and the new one from time to time to help with the heavy cleaning. She was a good worker and nothing seemed to distract her from her work.

When she came up and through the upper gate, Lew went out to meet her. Ernest was already there. He’d heard the gate signal, but Lew had beat him to the response.

“Hi, Pricilla,” Lew said. “Would you have time to do my house as well? Since Verna died... And I have house guests. It needs a good going over.”

Pricilla looked at her watch. “Will havta reschedule a client. I don’t normally put someone in front of a scheduled cleaning, but with the drive out here... Okay. But there will be a surcharge for the short notice.”

Lew managed to not chuckle at the expression on Pricilla’s face. She was trying to look fierce, but even at fifty, Pricilla had a friendly face.

“Of course, Pricilla. Fully intended to offer, anyway.”

“Ah. That’s good then.” The smile was back.

“I’ll be out on the property, Pricilla, while you work,” Ernest said.

“Either way. Doesn’t bother me. I’ll get started.” She took her cleaning supplies tote from behind the front seat of the club cab pickup and headed for the house.

“I’m going to pull everything from the last lumbering location back up here. We won’t be using it until spring, if then.” Ernest continued after a moment. “It all needs to be cleaned and serviced and put into storage. I could use a hand, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” Lew grinned. “Might as well get Dick some experience. If this thing goes the way I’m afraid it will, he’s going to need to know how to run some of the equipment.”

Ernest smiled. “Good point. Make sure he has on enough clothes. It is nice now, compared to what it is going to be this afternoon.”

“Will do. We’ll be out shortly.”

When Lew asked Dick about lending a hand with the operation, Carolyn immediately offered to help, too.

“Well...” Lew cocked his head just slightly. “I know. You can shuttle us back down to the site in the truck as we bring up the various rolling stock. My Suburban is a stick. Can you manage that?”

“Yes. It’s been a while, but I was pretty good in my first car and it was a stick.”

“Okay then. Both of you dress warmly and I’ll get out a couple of heavy parkas for you for when it cools off this afternoon.”

Dick nodded and the pair headed for their bedroom to change clothes. Lew went to his bedroom and got one of his extra parkas and one of Verna’s that would fit Carolyn.

The three left the house and met Ernest at the detached garage. He looked at Carolyn, and then Lew, who gave a slight nod. “I guess we’re ready. I’m taking the truck so we’ll have the supplies. I take it you’ll bring down Rufus?”

“Yep,” Lew said. “Carolyn will shuttle us back down as we bring up the equipment.”

“Ah. Good idea. I just figured on walking. This will speed things up considerably.”

Ernest got into his truck and Carolyn climbed up behind the wheel of the Suburban. Dick took the passenger side rear seat and Lew got into the front passenger seat. He pointed out the controls and ran her through the gears before she started up the diesel engine.

Carolyn struggled for only a couple of shifts before she had the hang of it. She followed Ernest out of the enclosed yard and down toward the area last worked in harvesting lumber and firewood.

“Ernest called the Suburban ‘Rufus’,” Dick said, chuckling.

“Yeah. I read a Prep fiction story online about a guy who customized a Suburban in much the same way I’ve done with this one. The thing was named Rufus in the story and I just sort of picked it up.”

“Well, it sure is some vehicle,” Dick said, looking around.

“True, but the things it carries are what makes it special in my opinion. Lots of vehicles can go where Rufus can, but they can’t carry the load that I have on here. Set up for a lot of different possibilities. I’ll run you through them sometime. But for the moment, we’re here.”

Dick was a quick study and took the first piece of equipment up to the equipment barn as soon as Ernest checked the oil and what not before starting it. Once the A700 was running, Dick drove it around the spot a little and then indicated he was okay and he and Carolyn headed back up the slope.

All the equipment was kept in tip top shape, and needed little work done. It turned out they were working after lunch in the equipment barn since everything was already moved. Carolyn had even used the Suburban to pull the portable sawmill from the site to the barn without a glitch.

She proved to be an excellent helper, after Ernest showed her and Dick around the equipment barn and the tool cabinets. Lew went to his house for a few minutes to check on Pricilla. He got her the cash for both Ernest’s cleaning work and the work in his house. He added a bit extra to what Pricilla said they owed her.

On a hunch, Dick asked Pricilla, “I don’t suppose you know how to can and put up food for storage do you?”

“Not to be self-serving, as that is not the way I am, but yes, Mr. Norton, I do know how to can quite well. Been doing it since I was big enough to help my mother. You don’t need to know how many years ago that was. Why, may I ask, do you ask?”

“We’re probably going to have a large garden next year and will want to put up quite a bit of what we produce. If you like, you’d have a job teaching us, and doing some of the work.”

“Well now, I just might take you up on that. This thing with the government has me a little spooked. I’m grateful you paid me in cash, as I can’t get my money out of the bank until they reopen.”

“Well, just pencil me in on your calendar for next harvest season, if you will.”

“Consider it done, Mr. Norton.”

“Okay. You just finish up and you can take off. You be careful going home. The weather is supposed to turn any minute.”

“Ah. I’m a quite good driver, Mr. Norton, and have a good vehicle. I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

Lew left Pricilla to her own devices and went back out to the equipment barn to help finish up with the equipment.

All four were tired when they finished up. More so from the cold than the actual work. They were out of the wind and weather inside the equipment barn, but it was still cold inside. Lew and Ernest had agreed not to use the heaters in the barn. Fuel might just become extremely precious and the type of work they were doing didn’t call for precision actions.

So, when they were finished, Dick and Carolyn used the two bathrooms in Lew's house to take warm showers to warm up a bit while Lew caught the news. It wasn't any better than Monday's. The President's announcements and actions were not receiving the warm welcome he seemed to expect from the supposed majority that had put him in office.

With Dick back in his and Carolyn's bedroom, Lew entered his bedroom and cleaned up. When he came back to the kitchen, Carolyn was well into the preparations for supper. It was going to be a simple one. Salads and bowls of chili that had been simmering since noon in the crockpot.

Ernest joined them for supper and then an evening of Monopoly. Which Dick won handily. But he was a good winner and the others good losers, so everything was fine when everyone headed for bed.

There had been very little news the previous day, except surprisingly quiet discussions by the various newscasters of the speech the evening before. That changed Wednesday. The day the gun turn-in started in full. It did not go well for either side; the government and the gun owners and more than a few people that didn't own guns and had never owned guns got in the way, or were misidentified.

Hundreds died that first day, mostly gun owners that stood up for their natural right to keep and bear arms as enumerated in the Constitution of the United States of America. But those taking the guns lost people, too.

There was quite a bit of coverage of the events in large cities. The next day, when the gold and silver turn in started, more crews were out with cameras. The turn-in prices were two dollars per ounce silver, and twenty-five dollars per ounce gold.

There were fewer deaths in the precious metals operation that opening day than had occurred with the weapons turn in. But people were arrested in massive numbers and a few that fought to keep their property were killed.

By Saturday there was a Presidential mandated news blackout. More than a few, surprisingly, news operations ignored the blackout and disappeared over night. Many unknown talking heads were on screen at stations that managed to stay on the air. Many stations and even some networks, noticeably Fox News, were shut down completely.

Dick and Carolyn had worried looks on their faces almost constantly. They had no weapons, but did have the PMs that Dick had bought through the same shell companies that he'd used to acquire the brother's.

"Look," Lew told them the next Monday, "If you want, you might take a motel in town for a couple of weeks to get away from this place in case the Feds decide to visit us. If they do, it'll mean either a fight, or holing up in the bunker for some time. And you can do a bill of sale for your gold to us you can show if pressed. Put the heat out here where we can deal with it and you don't have to."

"I don't want to put you in that position!" Dick protested. "I did what I did on my own. You aren't responsible."

"Well, it was my suggestion. We aren't going to throw you out, but you and Carolyn think it over and discuss it before you say a final no."

"Okay, Lew. But I'm thinking we'll stay," Dick replied. Carolyn didn't look as sure.

But the world turns, and things change, sometimes minute by minute. That was the case over the next few days.

The cities were being targeted first by the administration it was discovered through Amateur Radio Operators reports.

The US armed forces were pulled from the most active zones first. Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, and the rest of the Middle East. Later on would be the various smaller bases around the world and finally Europe.

As soon as American forces left Taiwan, South Korea, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, Taiwan was invaded by China, South Korea was invaded by North Korea, civil war on a wide scale erupted in Afghanistan, and in the Middle East secular wars began the consolidation of the area into a new Persian Empire with the ultimate goal of destroying Israel.

What news coverage there was, given the black outs, very spotty, but some reports were getting through and then spread by Amateur Radio networks.

The recalls of guns and precious metals was not going well in the cities, and in the rural areas it was not going at all to speak of. Dozens of Federal Agents were killed in ambushes when the operations were beginning to spread to the rural areas where guns and hunting and patriotism went hand in hand.

Then, for no discernible reason, as the President was keeping a hands-off policy concerning the events all around the world, China launched nuclear tipped missiles at the US. The alarms sounded down the line of warning and Ernest, Lew, Dick, and Carolyn all heard the All Hazards Alert Radio warning buzzer sounding as they sat at the table for lunch. The announcement came within five seconds that there were missiles in the air aimed at the US from China.

“Lew,” Ernest said urgently, “I’m going in to get Grace and Lydia.”

“Right. I’ll get the bunker ready to go. Open up the outer entrance.” Lew turned to Dick and Carolyn. “You two can go ahead and get into the bunker. Take a couple of changes of clothes. And if you would, transfer everything in the fridge and freezer up here to the ones in the bunker.”

Ernest was gone and Dick and Carolyn stood up and headed for the kitchen. Lew headed for the garage and down the stairs to the tunnel to the bunker. He got the blast doors open on each end of the bunker so people could get in easily.

Next he started up the ventilation system. The bunker was on the cool side, but that would change once six people took up occupancy.

When Ernest arrived at the Collin’s house he found Grace and Lydia with two suitcases packed, ready to go, on the porch. When he knocked on the front door, a white faced Grace opened. She went into Ernest’s open arms.

“What is going on?” Lydia asked. She was almost as ashen as her mother.

“I’ll give you the details later, Lydia. For right now, all you need to know is that Ernest Norton is your real father and he is here to take us to safety at his place.”

“What? My father! I don’t understand!”

“You will, soon,” Ernest told the girl. “For now, please just grab anything you don’t want to lose and come with me.”

“We have bags packed...” Grace, standing firmly now, said.

“I saw them, Grace,” Ernest said. “But I figure it is only clothing and some personal items. I want you to gather up anything that you don’t want to lose. There is no telling what will happen here in town with this

attack and everything else. I'll load the bags you have while you get everything else you literally can't live without."

Ernest went back outside, grabbed two of the suitcases and ran to the truck to put them in the back. He had the second set loaded when Grace came out carrying another suitcase and a large trash bag she was trying to keep up off the snow.

Ernest grabbed the trash bag and loaded it and then the suitcase Grace handed him. She ran back for the house as Lydia came out. She, too, had another suitcase, but instead of a garbage bag, she had a backpack filled to overflowing.

She handed them to Ernest one at a time and he loaded them in the truck. "Anything else? Computer? Anything?"

Lydia's eyes widened. "Yes! My computer! It has all my music on it. I can't believe I forgot it!" She ran back into the house and met her mother coming out.

"Lydia! Hurry!" Grace told Lydia.

"That's it," Grace said. She looked at the house. "I'll go get Lydia." But before she could move Lydia came out carrying a large computer case. She stopped and closed and locked the door automatically before she joined her mother and new found father at the truck.

Breathing heavily, Lydia told them, "I guess that's it. I want to take everything, but I know we can't. Oh, no! What about Irving?"

"Irving?" Ernest asked.

"My boyfriend! We plan to get married when I graduate next spring."

Ernest looked at Grace. “He is a good young man, Ernest. Working a good job and going to college on the internet. I wasn’t aware of the marriage plans, but he could be an asset in the future. It’s up to you, but...”

“If he is to be family, he goes. Ernest was surprised at Lydia’s calmness now. “In the back seat with that, Lydia. And buckle up tight. We’ll be moving fast. And Grace, up front. I want both of you to have your heads on a swivel. I have to watch the road, so I need you to watch out for trouble.”

“What kind of trouble, Mr.... Mr. Norton?” Lydia asked.

“Any kind. There are a few people that might be inclined to invite themselves out to our place at a time like this. By force. I’m not going to allow that.” Ernest leaned forward slightly and pulled a Para Ordnance P-14 .45ACP pistol from a holster in the small of his back. He slid it under his right thigh.

Pulling out two spare magazines he handed them to Grace. “I may need you to reload for me. You remember how?”

“It’s been so long... But yes. It’s like a 1911. Push the button to drop the magazine and slide another one home.”

“You got it. Good memory.”

“You know how to shoot a gun, Mom?”

“From long ago. When I knew your father from before. I promise I’ll explain, Lydia, but not right now. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lydia said. She snugged her seatbelt up tight after putting the computer case down on the floor where she could keep it in place with her feet. She told Ernest Irving’s address and Ernest put the truck in

gear and headed that way. They had not gone far when Lydia suddenly called out and pointed.

There was a young man in a loping run with a massive pack on his back headed toward them on the sidewalk. “That’s Irving! Stop, please! It’s Irving.”

Slowing the truck, Ernest pulled over to the curb and Lydia called out through the window she’d rolled down. “Irving it is me! Come on, get into the truck!”

The young man looked at Ernest through the windshield. At Ernest’s nod, Irving ran over to the truck, swung the pack down and around, and put it in the back of the truck. He climbed in the truck beside Lydia.

“I was coming to get you and your Mom, Lydia. There is a place in the high school that is a good shelter. I’ve got some food and stuff...”

Ernest had turned the truck around and was headed for the interstate. He looked in the review mirror, studying Irving’s face for a few moments before putting his eyes back on the road. Traffic was horrific. There wasn’t all that much, but people were driving crazily.

“You prepared for something like this?” Ernest asked, meeting Irving’s eyes in the mirror this time.

“Yes, Sir, Mr. Norton. To a degree. We’ll have to really stretch the food, but there should be some we can salvage in the school kitchen...”

“We’re not headed for the school,” Lydia said. She was holding Irving’s hand tightly in hers now. “We’re going to Mr. Norton’s place.”

“But we need good shelter. I know the school is safe. I scoped it out.” Again Irving and Ernest meet eye to eye in the rearview mirror.

“Got it covered,” Ernest said. “Shelter and food to go around. Lydia and Grace will be safe there. And you, too, as long as you behave yourself.”

Irving looked startled, and then a bit angry. “I would never...”

Ernest smiled slightly. “It’s okay, Irving. Just wanted to see what kind of man you are. You’ve made a good impression so far. I trust Lydia’s judgment and Grace’s as well.”

Irving relaxed, and then suddenly asked, “Why are we going out there, anyway? I’m glad, if you can take better care of Lydia and her Mom than I can, but I have to ask why?”

“He’s my father,” Lydia replied softly.

“Your father? He’s dead. You said he died when you were a baby.”

“I don’t know the details, but Mom said so and so did he. We’ll have to wait to find out more. But I’ve always liked both Mr. Nortons. I have to trust my Mom. She’s never lied to me before... Well, I guess not about anything but this.”

Ernest was about to decide they were home free as they neared the exit to the state road at the edge of town. But a blue Ford pickup roared up beside them and motioned for Ernest to pull over. It was ‘Johnny Reb’ Calhoun.

Rather than slow down, Ernest speeded up, taking the exit much faster than normal. But the crew cab dually truck was steady as a rock. Not so the Ford on its highly lifted suspension. Johnny didn’t roll it, but he did go off the road and into a small copse of trees on the interstate intersection grounds.

Lydia was turned in the seat, watching the truck. Ernest was doing the same in the rear view mirror until it was out of sight. He slowed down to a safer speed, but still pushed it hard.

“Good driving, Mr. Norton,” Irving said. “That was Johnny Reb. He’s not a very nice man.”

“You just went up a notch in my eyes,” Ernest said. “Good character judgment about Johnny Reb. He and I go back a long way. And it was not a pleasant experience.”

Suddenly Ernest spoke again. “Irving, I didn’t even think to ask about your parents...”

“They don’t live here, Mr. Norton. After my graduation last year they moved to Florida. I stayed here and got a job to be near Lydia.”

“I see. You doing okay? Making ends meet?”

“Yes, Sir. It is... was... a good job. I have a checking account, credit card with zero balance, and a savings account, plus an emergency fund.” Irving sighed. “And I can’t get to any of it now. Even if it is still worth anything when things get back to normal.”

“Do not worry too much about finances, Irving,” Ernest told the young man. “Things have a way of working out in the end.”

“I sure hope so, Mr. Norton. Nuclear war though...”

“Is survivable with the right preparations and mind set. I have no doubt we’ll make it.”

There was silence in the truck until they came to the turn off to the driveway. Harlan Massey had his truck parked across the gate and there were three other cars parked. Harlan was standing by the cab of his truck, arguing with the seven people from the other vehicles.

Everyone looked around when Ernest stopped the truck. “Stay in the truck,” Ernest said as got out, the P-14 in his right hand, the two spare magazines stuffed in his left front pants pocket. He recognized everyone there.

He frowned when he heard Irving get out of the truck behind him. “I said to stay...” he started saying, but saw the pistol grip shotgun in Irving’s hands. “Okay. Back my play, but do not start anything.”

“Yes, Sir. The truck driver is armed.”

“He’s on our side. Just follow my lead.”

Ernest approached the group. He noticed that Harlan wasn’t the only one of the group armed. Three of the other seven people had guns of one sort or another. “Okay, people. The missile warheads have undoubtedly impacted and fallout is on the way. I suggest you all go back into town to city hall, the main fire station, and the schools. All of them have shelter. Trent, you and your family can stay. The rest of you get going.”

“It is common knowledge you have a concrete house up there, Norton. We aim to take shelter there.”

Trent Gunderson had moved further away from the other six. He was ready to dive into his car to protect his wife and their seven year old son if the shooting started.

“Let’s keep this peaceable,” Ernest cautioned softly when two of the men shifted slightly, bringing their guns more in line with Ernest and Irving. Ernest heard Irving take a couple of side steps to give a little room between them. He had the shotgun at low ready and Harlan’s hand was on the pistol on his hip.

“There isn’t room for all of you. Trent has family. You adults can take care of yourselves. Go to the places mentioned and take shelter before the fallout arrives. Now, take off, or something bad is going to happen. Be a shame for anyone to die by another American’s hand in a war with China.

“You can take them,” urged a heavy man at the rear of the group. It was Zander Yawn, a prominent lawyer in the city.

“Just for that, Zander, you are the first to go down if anyone starts something. Then you Jackson.” Ernest chose those two out of the others to try and intimidate, because Zander was nothing if not self-serving. And Jackson was a coward through and through.

“Hey now,” Zander said, “I’m not even armed!”

“But you are promoting the violence.”

“Why me?” squeaked out Jackson. I ain’t done nothin’!”

“No, but you would if you had the opportunity to do it from behind us. Speaking of which, you have someone behind you right now that can take two of you before anyone else can act.”

“You can’t possibly expect us to believe that,” Zander said with a laugh.

“I wouldn’t laugh too hard,” came a woman’s voice from behind the group of cars. “Ernest is right. I’ve already got Chuckie in my sights and can down him and get old Nick Saturn before he can even lift his gun.”

Slowly Zander turned around. He began to shake when he saw Gwendolyn Sanchez behind the cover of the engine compartment of Trent’s car. She had that deadly over-under shotgun she used in competitive skeet and trap shooting pointed right at Chuckie Stollen.

When two more voices broke the sudden silence, Chuckie, Nick, and the third man with a gun, Hastings Timberlake, all carefully lowered their guns. It was Lew at the front bumper of Harlan's truck and Dick at the rear of the trailer. Both had rifles pointed at the group of six men.

Then the six carefully went to the vehicles, got in, and drove off, squalling tires in the process. They had a long way to go, and fallout might reach the area at any time. They'd neither seen nor heard any nuclear detonations, but the alarm had said the missiles were inbound. Either the US defense system had taken them out, or the warheads had impacted, just not in their city.

Ernest and the others gave sighs of relief. Lew and Dick joined Ernest, Harlan, Irving, and Gwendolyn.

"Harlan?" Lew asked.

"I was hoping to use that cave on your property to shelter me and my family."

Lew looked up at the cab of the truck. Two heads popped up. Harlan's wife and their daughter, the same age as Trent's son.

They all looked over at Gwendolyn. "Had exactly the same idea. Got my Jeep parked back a ways. Saw what was going down and decided to see if I could lend a hand. Sure would like to get up there and get set up if you would allow me. Otherwise I've got a long haul to get to the next possible place with a cave."

"No. No cave. We've got room in the bunker. But we're basically full up now. Let's get everyone up and under cover before the fallout starts." Lew took a remote from his pocket and triggered the gate to slide sideways out of the way.

Harlan climbed back up into this truck and Gwendolyn headed back down the road to get her Jeep. Trent entered his car and started it. Ernest did the same, with Irving getting back into the rear passenger seat with Lydia.

Ernest saw the look of sheer awe she gave Irving. Her man had just stood up and defended her, all on his own devices. A slight smile curved his lips. If not before, Lydia was surely hooked on Irving now.

Harlan pulled around out of the way and first Trent, and then Gwendolyn drove through the gate. Harlan went next and then Lew and Dick climbed into the back of Ernest's truck and he headed up last. Lew triggered the gate closed.

It was snowing up at the home site, and looked like it was going to set in and start snowing down at the lower elevations.

When they got to the upper gate, Lew had Harlan park the hotshot rig out of the way, on the GrassPave2 area, and did the same with Trent and Gwendolyn. Everyone pitched in to move things from the vehicles to the attached garage at Lew's house.

Gwendolyn managed on her own. She worked a heavily laden game cart out of the back of the Jeep and rolled it up to the house and into the garage. She went back and took a large backpack, though not as large as Irving's, out of the Jeep and locked it up.

With her things in the garage Gwendolyn helped the Gunderson and Massey families get their things moved. Trent had a back seat and trunk full, and Harlan had several horizontal feet of trailer space loaded up.

"Hurry!" Carolyn said, coming into the garage from inside the house. "The meter is off the peg and climbing."

Lew had left Carolyn in the house when he and Dick saw what was going on at the gate. She was monitoring a remote reading radiation monitor for the arrival of fallout. With the snow coming down, it wasn't very discernible to those outside.

But with the warning, Lew and Ernest quickly brushed the fallout contaminated snow off of everyone and swept it outside. Urging the newcomers to get a change of clothes and anything else they would need for the next forty-eight hours, Lew began running everyone through the showers in the house and the decon shower in the entrance to the bunker. There was one at each end, but Lew decided it better to do it all from his end rather than go out into the fallout to Ernest's house or track it through the bunker to get to the shower on his end of the bunker.

After each person was showered and dressed again, Lew took all the clothing out into the garage, right by the big door. It would be washed after enough time had passed for the radiation to be lower.

Lew was the last one in the bunker after locking the house down. Ernest had gone over through the tunnel to lock up his place and returned. If he was feeling closed in, he didn't show it.

Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 3

Ernest sat down at the communications station and began to monitor the radiation level that was slowly rising, and the exterior cameras that were all over the property. He tried the regular broadcast bands, but there was only static.

Lew was showing the three families around the bunker and getting them settled. Dick and Carolyn, already familiar with the bunker, started putting together a supper from the fresh and frozen foods they'd brought down from the refrigerator and freezer in Lew's house, and the food Ernest had brought down after locking up his place.

Davey Gunderson and Holly Massey were over in one corner of the living area of the bunker watching a video on the TV there. The adults all congregated in the open area that contained the kitchen, except for Ernest. Some took seats and some stood, including Lew.

“Well, we are fortunate that it is only the thirteen of us here in the bunker. Designed for twenty, we have some space to spare, to keep things from feeling too closed in. There is only the one bedroom. It has an individual bath as you saw in the short tour. The adult couples will rotate the use of it for privacy every three days.

“Everyone should stake out a bunk and locker in the bunkrooms for when you don't have the bedroom. The kids will have the middle bunkroom. The other four beds there can be used for additional storage.

“Even with this many people, the three additional bathrooms will have to be shared, one in the men's dorm, one in the children's dorm, and one for you ladies so you can keep personal items out but private. All the adults will either prepare a meal in turn, or help with preparing a meal and the cleanup. Grace will be in overall charge of the kitchen, with Carolyn as her back up.” Lew looked over at Ernest and smiled slightly. “Ernest does not do any cooking. Only help and cleanup.”

“I heard that,” Ernest said, but turned back to the monitors on the desk and wall.

There was quiet laughter, but Lew then continued. “As soon as the radiation peaks and then goes back down to a safe enough level in the houses, we’ll bring down your other things for the long haul stay we may have to have if the fallout is heavy.

“The houses are decent protection from radiation at the lower fallout levels and we’ll move up there and just sleep in the shelter when the radiation level allows it. I am hoping that Gwendolyn, who is a paramedic, has some things with her that might help with any depression or claustrophobia that might develop while here in the bunker.”

All eyes went to Gwendolyn. She nodded at Lew, indicating that she did have what might be needed.

“Now, we need to keep a continuous monitor on the radiation and on the property. Ernest is taking a watch now. He can show everyone how to use the monitors and what to look for. We will rotate the night watches, but only three or four of us will need to also pull daytime watches. That will be Ernest, Dick, me, and...”

“I can do it,” Irving said quietly.

“Well then, Irving, too. Everyone, I hope, will be taking advantage of the library here in the bunker to study up on a subject that will be important in the PAW, post-apocalyptic world. It should be something you would like to do, as well as being needed. We can discuss those choices tomorrow, once we see how long we will have to stay sheltered.”

“I have a spreadsheet that calculates that,” Irving said.

“Tired Old Man’s spreadsheet?” Lew asked.

Irving nodded. "I've got his CD if we have a working computer. I figured to pick one up as salvage after things quiet down."

"I have my laptop," Lydia said. "You can show me how to use the spreadsheet."

Everyone except Irving noticed that it had been a statement and not a question. Grace smiled. Her daughter was going to be a lot like her mother.

"And the two of you will also be in charge of the younger children when the other adults are otherwise occupied. If anything was to happen, which I hope will not, you two will be the last line of defense, down here in the bunker with them. I take it you can shoot, Irving?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm very good with a shotgun and decent with a rifle. Not shot much pistol."

"Well, as soon as circumstances permit, we'll get you up to speed and teach everyone else that needs instruction on the safe handling and use of our weapons. Gwendolyn, can you handle that?"

"Yes. I only have my competition shotgun and a pocket pistol. If we can use something from your stocks suitable, I can teach it."

"Very good. Now, does anyone have any questions?"

"You want me to add my food to your stocks or eat off mine alone?" Gwendolyn asked.

"The same question for me, too," spoke up Irving. "I have enough for Lydia, her mother, and myself for at least two weeks. Less, of course, shared with everyone."

Lew smiled. "Tell you what, unless you both have items that won't keep, why don't you coordinate your food stocks with Grace. After the

meal we have in a few minutes, I'll show her the inventory and she can work your items into the menus."

"Works for me," Gwendolyn said. "I love my jerky, gorp, and the Millennium bars, but appetite fatigue sets in after two weeks straight."

Irving added, "I have Mountain House camper's freeze dried food in pouches, and some MRE entrees and some of the sides."

"Those we might hang onto in case we have to pull a patrol or something. We have plenty in stock, but there is no point in using something that could fill a niche need in the future."

Irving nodded.

"Any other questions?" Lew asked.

No one spoke up, except Carolyn. "This is ready if everyone wants to serve themselves."

There were five tables with four chairs each in the area, and everyone except Ernest got a plate of food and sat down at one of them to eat. Dick and Carolyn were thanked for a good meal when it was finished.

Lew opened up one of the kitchen cabinet doors and brought out a package of cookies. "Might as well finish up the fresh milk with some cookies," he said, opening the package and putting it on the counter.

"I'll get the milk," Carolyn said.

It didn't take long for the cookies and milk to disappear. When they were gone, Peggy Gunderson, and Amanda Massey did the kitchen clean up. It was getting late, and with the stresses of the day, everyone was tired and ready to go to bed.

Grace went over to Ernest, who was still at the communications and monitoring desk, and whispered to him. He shook his head a couple of times and Grace headed for the women's dorm room, looking a bit dejected.

Harlan and Trent tossed a coin to see who got the bedroom for the first three nights. Harlan won and the group began to split up. Irving went over to join Ernest at the communications and monitoring desk and said, "If you can show me what I need to know, I'll take over the shift after you, Sir."

"No need to keep calling me Sir, Irving. Ernest is just fine. And sure, sit down. This isn't overly complicated, but there are a lot of things to deal with."

Lew joined them and said, "If you take it to midnight, and Irving takes the midnight to four shift, I'll take over then. Be sure and wake me, Irving. No taking extra shifts when you don't have to."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Norton."

"Make it Lew, Irving. Just Lew."

"Yes, S... I will, Lew."

Grace saw Lydia look over at Irving and sigh before she entered the women's dorm. "You don't know the half of it, child," Grace whispered to herself. The two children were put in the children's dorm room on opposite sides of the aisle by Peggy and Amanda, before Peggy joined Grace, Lydia, and Carolyn in the women's dorm and Amanda joined Harlan in the bedroom.

Dick, Trent, and Lew went to the men's dorm, leaving Ernest to teach Irving everything he would need to know to keep solo watch.

Irving was good as his word. Promptly at four the next morning Irving was whispering Lew's name to wake him up. Lew opened his eyes and blinked slightly in the light coming through the open door of the men's dorm.

"Anything on your shift?" Lew asked quietly as he rolled out of bed and pulled on his pants.

"No, M... Lew. The radiation stabilized and then started dropping at just after one. I took that reading and then the one an hour later, and every fifteen minutes after that until just now. I didn't think it would matter until tomorrow to get TOM's spreadsheet running and plug in the numbers to see how close we are."

Lew started to say, "Good boy," but changed it to "Good man," for that was what Irving was now. A man at eighteen. Ready to do whatever it took to take care of his future wife and her family, and the rest of the group, as well.

"Okay. See you in the morning. You can sleep in an extra half hour."

"Okay, Lew. Good night."

Lew kept an eye on the survey meter and scanned the various video monitors. The scene outside was eerie with the infrared cameras. He couldn't tell when the fallout actually stopped, but the snow eased off about six and had stopped by seven when people started to stir. Breakfast was started and Ernest joined Lew at the communications and monitoring desk to get a quick look at the log book and to check the outside monitors.

"A foot and a half of snow," Ernest muttered. "That ought to keep people at home, even if the radiation doesn't."

“Yeah,” Lew said, equally softly. “There are going to be a lot of deaths, even with the low radiation levels we’re getting. Apparently China didn’t have as many warheads as we thought, or some failed or were brought down.”

Dick came over, a cup of coffee in his hand. “I’ve had breakfast. I can start my shift now, Lew. Get something to eat and catch a few Zs.”

“I think I will,” Lew said. “Thanks Dick.”

Lew entered the men’s dorm as Irving came out. Lew noted that Irving was fresh and ready for the morning despite his late night watch shift. “Youth,” Lew muttered and got ready for a good nap.

The group settled into an easy routine, with a nightly movie, and educational tasks during the day. The children were schooled every day by Peggy Gunderson. She was a substitute grade school teacher and Lew and Ernest had stocked the bunker with home schooling material as part of their general just in case mindset.

Ernest was still holding up well after the first week, but Trent Gunderson and Amanda Massey both asked Gwendolyn for something to help them sleep. They were okay during the day but were having a great deal of trouble sleeping.

At the end of two weeks, Lew and Ernest left the bunker and took a good look around. Most of the snow had melted and the radiation was down under 0.4 R/h. Inside the houses it was still a bit too high to take up residency again.

The two decontaminated and re-entered the bunker, giving the anxious occupants the good news that nothing had been disturbed and the bad news that the remote reading survey meter was correct. The radiation was still too high to risk exposure outside unless a life and death emergency occurred.

Christmas came and went with only an extra nice meal, and a pair of FRS walkie-talkies as gifts for the two seven year olds.

Everyone was elated to hear Ernest announce that he had been in contact with several Amateur Radio Operators on his night shift and learned that there were a lot of survivors, things were hard, but people were coping. But still no word from the government.

With the level in the Lew's and Ernest's houses below 0.2 R/h, Lew and Ernest decided to let the others go upstairs to move around a little, go through their belongings in Lew's garage and bring down fresh clothing. No one went outside. Despite the draw to do so, the weather was just too bad to make it pleasurable, so everyone enjoyed the open space of the houses and then returned to the safety of the bunker.

At the end of three weeks after the attack, with the radiation down to 0.2 R/h outside and under 0.1 R/h inside the houses, they began using the houses during the day, but continued to sleep in the shelter.

Another two weeks and the outside radiation was down under 0.1 R/h outside, safe enough to spend some time outside. Everyone was ready to do so, even if it meant suiting up in protective gear to help in the decontamination of the areas around the homes and barns.

Lew, Ernest, and Harlan put the equipment to good use, moving the major remaining amounts of fallout contaminated snow down to the terraced trench so it could melt and run into the holding pond.

Davey and Holly were only allowed out for a few minutes a day. The rest of the time either Peggy had them working on school work, or Lydia was in charge of them and kept them entertained in the house.

Despite Lew's initial thoughts on everyone sharing the cooking and cleaning, the five adult women pretty much took it over on their

own, with Grace in overall charge, as she was the senior woman of the group.

That left the outdoor tasks to the five men. No one had shown up at the road gate or on the property anywhere they could see. There had been the occasional vehicle drive past the gate the last few days, but none had stopped.

Two months to the day of the attack, the men were again working outside, getting ready to prep the larger garden area for spring planting. Lydia was with the children on the patio of Lew's house, getting some fresh air. The five women were all busy with household tasks.

The ground suddenly shook, enough that it was felt by everyone on the property. "An earthquake?" Trent asked. "Never felt one before."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Ernest said and began scanning the horizon, especially to the west.

"Why the bad feeling..." Trent's words faded when Ernest pointed toward the tops of the trees.

"Down! Everyone get down!" Lew yelled, dropping to the ground himself. The others hit the dirt, though Trent was a bit slow to do so. He was down on his knees when the blast wave from the nuclear detonation knocked him the rest of the way down.

Dick, Trent, Harlan, Irving, and Ernest got up and took off running to check on their loved ones. Lew calmly set about closing up the shop in the equipment barn before he walked over to his house. Everyone was inside. It wasn't quite pandemonium, but close.

Everyone was asking question after question when Lew showed up. "Hey! Everyone! Listen up. We won't know if that was a delayed detonation or if someone else has taken the opportunity to attack us while we are weak. Probably the Russians.

“For the moment all we can do is close up the houses and take shelter in the bunker again. I have a feeling this shelter stay may be a longer one.”

There were a few tears shed, and many prayers said as everyone went about getting ready to head down into the bunker again.

Lew turned out to be right. Though not by much. And there was no snow with the fallout coming down three hours later.

Ernest was at the communications and monitor desk from the moment he got into the shelter. He suddenly said, “Well nuts!”

“What’s up, Ernest?” asked Lew as he hurried over to join his brother. The others gathered around, except for Lydia, who was getting the children calmed back down with some quiet games.

“Look,” Ernest said. “There might not have been a major EMP or HEMP when the Chinese attacked, but from the looks of those two vehicles, there was this time.”

“That’s Pricilla Johnson’s green Ford!” Lew suddenly said. “Anyone recognize the other vehicle?”

Trent, Harlan, and Grace all studied the monitor for a few seconds before replying in the negative.

“Nuts!” Ernest said again. “Lew?” He looked at his brother.

“We have to,” Lew said quietly.

“Yeah. Me and you.”

“Yep.”

“I’ll go...” Irving was saying when Lew cut him off.

“No, Irving. You can’t afford any more radiation exposure than absolutely necessary. Leave it to us older folks. We’ll be ready for the grave anyway by the time any cancers develop. I hope.”

Irving looked over at Lydia and then back at Lew. “Okay. I understand. But anything else, you can count me in.”

“That’s good, Irving. Thank you,” Lew said and Ernest nodded.

“Let’s get suited up and get out there before they get too large a dose of radiation.” Lew and Ernest headed for the tunnel to Lew’s house and began to don the protective gear. Ernest opened the locked cabinet by the bunker door and took out his and Lew’s gun belts. There was no way they were going out into an unknown situation without being armed.

They took Ernest’s truck down the driveway to the gate. Neither man triggered the driveway gate opener. Instead, they unlocked it manually and just slid it open enough to get through.

Lew ran over to Pricilla’s truck. She was sitting inside, calmly watching the activity. But when Lew came up to the driver’s side door, she rolled the window down enough to talk to him.

“What are you doing out here, Pricilla?”

“Was going to my daughter’s. Guess I won’t make it now. This old Ford has never failed me. Until now. Guess I just sit here till the end comes. I sure can’t walk home. The radiation will take me pretty quick, I think.”

“You’re not going to die out here,” Lew insisted. “And don’t blame the Ford. We’ve had an EMP of some type. The Ford might be

old, but it still is young enough to have electronics to control the engine. Now, climb out of there and let's get you to Ernest's truck."

"But what good will it do? Unless you have a radiation suit like that in my size."

"The suit isn't... Never mind, Pricilla. Just trust me. You'll be okay if you come with us." Lew helped Pricilla out of the truck and gathered up her suitcases. She followed him over to the truck. He put the suitcases in the back, and helped Pricilla up onto the rear seat of the truck.

"I'm going to see what is keeping Ernest."

When Lew approached Ernest, Ernest made a small motion with his left hand. So Lew kept the car in line with him and the man Ernest was talking to. "What's up?" he asked when he could see the man.

"You leave us be," the man half yelled. He was shaking and had a small pistol in his hand, pointed at Ernest.

Lew had seen the three children in the back seat of the car and the woman in the front passenger seat. All seemed to be crying. "Man," Lew said, looking back over at him. "What are you doing? We're trying to get you to safety."

"It is the Lord's will that this has happened. We were destined to die on this trip, now that I have looked back and studied the events leading up to this second attack."

Lew heard the absolute fury in Ernest's voice, though he spoke softly and slowly. "You cannot send your family to their deaths for your beliefs."

"They are my family's beliefs. They will understand when we stand before the Lord to be judged."

“Ask her what she wants to do,” Lew said, pointing at the crying woman in the car.

“What she says is of no import. I am the head of this family and what I say is what will be.”

Lew knocked on the passenger window of the car. The man stiffened and lifted the pistol a bit higher. “What are you doing?”

“Just getting an opinion,” Lew said. Turning to the car again, Lew leaned down slightly when the woman cranked the window open slightly. “Ma’am, do you want to die out here with your children? We have shelter where all of you can be safe.”

“Oh, Please! Please! Help me and my babies! I don’t want them to die!”

“You hear that?” Lew asked the man. “She doesn’t want her children to die any more than she wants to die.”

“We will die here! It is the Lord’s will.” The man turned the gun toward the windshield and lifted it in line with his eyes.

Lew scrambled for his pistol, but Ernest beat him to it by long fractions of a second. The man did get off a round, and it cracked the windshield but did not penetrate. Ernest hesitated for another fraction of a second and yelled for the man to put the pistol down. But the man lifted it again, ready to pull the trigger.

The woman was screaming, as were the three children. Ernest squeezed the trigger of his P-14 and the man crumbled to the pavement, dead before he hit. The woman hurriedly got out of the car and ran to the dead man. “Why? Why?” she cried. She bowed her head in prayer and then turned to Lew. “This is the Lord’s will. I thank you for your help. What should we do? The car won’t start.”

“Come along with us,” said Pricilla coming from the truck. “You get the rest of my things from the truck, please, and I’ll deal with this.”

Lew and Ernest decided that Pricilla could handle the woman and children much better than they could, so they hurried to comply with her instructions. Lew hadn’t seen the things behind the seat of the Ford, or noticed what was in the bed. It took him and Ernest two trips each to get everything moved.

Pricilla had the children in Ernest’s truck, and was helping the woman up. “Our things!” the woman cried out again.

“Don’t worry, my dear. These young men will get them.” Pricilla turned around and instructed Ernest and Lew to get everything from the car.

Ernest rolled his eyes at Lew, but they both did as instructed. With everything moved, and everyone in Ernest’s truck, Lew opened the gate fully. “We’re going to check the road for a little ways each way, just in case there are others.”

Both men were thankful that they didn’t find anyone else, though they did find one other vehicle stopped in the middle of the road. But no one was around. So they hurried back to the property and went through the decontamination process with the woman and children as they’d done with the other families.

Grace and Lydia immediately began helping Pricilla and the woman with the children. They ranged from barely two to seven, the same age as Holly and Davey. The woman finally let the others settle the children and sat down herself. Lew motioned the others back and began to ask the woman about herself and the situation.

“I’m Norma Myers. My husband is... Was Matthew. He is... was a lay preacher. And a shoe salesman. My children are Mary, Joseph, and

Moses, youngest to oldest. We were moving to get away from the prejudice against Matthew and his preaching. He was only trying to help. Prepare people for the end...”

“I see,” Lew said. “And you share his faith?”

Norma bit her lower lip. “I am unworthy. I am weak. Matthew would not let me participate in the church.”

“But do you believe the way he did?”

Almost too soft to hear, Norma said, “No. I was raised outside of any church. I just want to take care of my babies and be left alone.”

“Well, we can help you with that. But it will be close quarters for a while. We’ll make sure you are okay and can get a fresh start after we can leave the bunker for good.”

“I will do as directed,” Norma said. “May I have a bed and take a nap? I can’t seem to keep my eyes open.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Lew said and motioned Carolyn over to show Norma the women’s dorm and bathroom.

“My children?” she asked before entering the dorm. Carolyn showed her the children’s dorm. They were all fast asleep in a single bunk with Lydia keeping an eye on them.

With Norma and the children down for naps, Lew and Ernest explained what had occurred. “I don’t know,” Ernest said. “I hate to leave the body down there, but the radiation is still climbing. I don’t think we can risk further contamination.”

Lew and Ernest looked over at Pricilla and then away when she said, “You might as well say it out loud, boys. I could be a goner. So could Norma and the children.”

Lew was shaking his head. “Not necessarily, Pricilla. You will probably have some symptoms of radiation poisoning, but will likely be all right. The same for Norma. The kids... I don’t know. They might be okay. The radiation wasn’t nearly as high as it is now.”

“Well, I’ll take every day I have,” Pricilla said. “No chance of contacting my daughter, I suppose?”

“When we can use the Amateur radios again, we might find a contact close enough to your daughter’s location to get a message to and from her.”

Pricilla nodded. “Good enough. So. What are my duties to be around here?”

“We’ve pretty much got things covered,” Grace said. “Could you help with the children? Lydia has been doing it mostly by herself. She could use the help.”

“I can certainly do that. But for the moment, I think I’d like to nap for a while. This has been quite the adventure for me.”

“Of course,” said Grace. “We’ll get you settled in.”

“Easy now, girl. I’m not a child or an invalid. Just point me in the right direction and I can take it from there.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course. The door over there is the women’s dorm with a bathroom on through. I’ll have Lydia clear out the locker she’s been using and strip the bunk. She can stay in the children’s dorm.

“Thank you. You are a dear.”

Pricilla picked up her suitcase and went through the dorm into the bathroom while Lydia switched her things from the women’s dorm to

the children's. Lydia didn't seem to mind, as she was taking care of the children much of the time, anyway.

The original occupants quickly settled back into the bunker routine. And so did Pricilla and the children, for the most part. The youngest was two, with all that entails, but between Lydia and Pricilla, things were kept from getting out of hand.

Norma, on the other hand, was not doing well. Gwendolyn counseled her and gave her something to help her sleep, but she was still listless and slept most of the time.

It was only a week before radiation symptoms began to show up in Norma, her children, and Pricilla. Only in Norma and her two year old, Mary, did it get serious. And without a full hospital at their disposal there wasn't much they could do except make them comfortable.

Pricilla and the two boys pulled out of it, weak and tired, but Norma just didn't seem to be willing to battle it at all. She was lucky, perhaps, in that she died three days before Mary did. The boys were still quite ill and didn't really understand what was happening.

Ernest and Lew were talked out of taking the bodies out of the shelter and put in one of the body bags that the brothers had stocked for just such an event. Dick, Harlan, and Trent insisted on doing the work. They were only out of the shelter and into the garage for about fifteen minutes, and the dosimeter each wore showed only fractions of a REM exposure.

Pricilla went on a reduced schedule when she was up and about, but insisted on helping Lydia as much as she could. It wasn't until after Pricilla and children were on the mend that Ernest and Lew began to show minor symptoms of radiation poisoning. But they didn't last long and they were young enough to bounce back to near full speed by the time the outside radiation had dropped enough for outside work.

Again they were instructed that they couldn't go out until the radiation was down even further. Dick and the others would take care of things during that time. Though he had no intention of doing so, in getting to know Lydia, mostly while she was working with the children, Ernest began to bond with Joseph and Moses. They still didn't quite understand where their mother and father and little sister were, but one or the other usually went to Ernest when he went over to talk to Lydia while she was supervising their play time.

Grace was well aware of the bonding going on, as was Lydia. Neither seemed to mind, especially Grace. Grace eased out of the lead role for the women, that Pricilla easily assumed, to spend more time with Lydia and Ernest, and the children. She gradually gained the two boy's trust, as had Ernest and Lydia.

A few days before everyone could leave the shelter for good, hopefully, Grace took Ernest aside and told him, "I think we've been adopted, Ernest."

Ernest looked a bit startled at first, but slowly nodded. "Yes. I guess we have. How do you feel about that?"

"I feel fine. I would have no qualms raising them, if you were by my side."

"Truly?" Ernest asked.

"Truly," Grace replied.

"Well, in that case, would you consent to be my wife?"

"Yes, Ernest. And I'm sorry for making us both wait for so many years."

“Water under the bridge, Grace. Let’s not dwell on the past. We are going to have a tough future ahead, but together I think we can make it.”

That was all that was said at the moment and they made no announcement at the time, nor asked to be put into the bedroom rotation. Everyone noticed that they were spending more time together, with the children, and during quiet times.

Finally, with everyone else outside or in one of the houses, except for Lydia monitoring the children while they were napping, Ernest and Grace told Lydia about their past history.

“Why did Gramps and Grandma not let you get married?” Lydia asked.

“I didn’t know I was pregnant until after we moved. They decided that I was better off at home with them and that marrying someone like Ernest who was beneath me.”

“But Mr. Nor... But he’s such a good man! Why did they think that?”

“I don’t really know, Lydia. But they hated the Nortons. That’s why I didn’t tell them I was seeing him until after I got pregnant.”

Ernest sighed and said, “It goes way back to our great grandfathers. They butted heads on a land deal and hated each other ever since. And it was passed down the generations, until, I’m proud to say, our generation broke the feud and got together.”

“But when we moved back here... Why not then?”

“It was my fault, Lydia. We’d settled into a decent life. People didn’t know you were born out of wedlock. I don’t know. I was just

scared. It was easier to live the lie than break the news to you or other people about what happened.”

Grace looked over at Ernest for a moment and then back at Lydia. “But Ernest has been watching your progress as you grew up. He faithfully paid generous child and spousal support so we wouldn’t have to do without anything we really wanted. He didn’t have to do that. I’d made him promise not to contact you, and he was still willing to take care of us.”

There were tears in Grace’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Lydia. Ernest. For not letting you into our lives until now.”

“It is all right, Grace,” Ernest said, taking her hands in his. “You did what you thought best at the time. Don’t look back. Look forward. We’ve got a tough row to hoe, with everything that has happened. But together we’ll get through it all.”

Grace wiped her eyes and nodded. “Yes. I feel the same way.”

“What do you want me to call, you? Dad? Pop? Father?”

“Any of those is fine, Lydia. You don’t even have to refer to me as your father if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t do that! You are my family, and I want people to know it.”

Ernest smiled. “Thank you. Dad will do. Father is a little stilted for my taste. And Pop, well, I just prefer Dad.”

“Dad it is then, Dad.”

Joseph was waking up, saying he needed to go potty, but Grace asked, “How do you feel about having a couple of much younger brothers?”

Lydia was picking Joseph out of the second bunk. “These guys? Yeah. That would be cool. A pain in the behind at times, but cool, anyway.”

Joseph let out a wail and Lydia hurried into the bathroom with him.

“You have raised a remarkable daughter, Grace. I couldn’t have done it any better.”

“You were a help... Look. I’m starting to cry again. Let’s let Lydia do her thing. I need to get out into some fresh air.”

They joined the other adults outside and began to help with the preparation for the garden that had been interrupted. It was still cold, but it was June and things should start warming up. If nothing else, the greenhouses would be planted until the weather was better.

They had not reached the point after the first shelter stay of scraping the surface of the garden plot, so it took only a single shallow scrape to have it decontaminated. By the end of the day the garden was ready for the last stage, which would be done when the ground was warm enough for planting.

Ernest had finally made contact with an Amateur Radio operator in the same town where Pricilla’s daughter lived. It took five days for her to get back to Ernest about Renee’s situation. Renee, her husband, and children had all died, apparently in the second nuclear attack.

Pricilla took it fairly well, though for three days straight she asked Gwendolyn for a sleep aid. She was very quiet and introverted for those three days, but had put things behind her when the subject of canning fresh foods came up.

She was in her element and did a couple of classes without canning anything to get people ready for the work when it would be needed.

As the weather continued to warm up, though spring was definitely late, the subject of who was going to stay and who would leave came up. Lew and Ernest made it clear that everyone was welcome to stay for the duration. They would have to sleep in the shelter until housing could be acquired and installed.

The various families talked it over and Trent and his family decided to at least go inspect the area around their home, and the home itself. Harlan's family decided the same thing. Gwendolyn was anxious to check out one of the clinics to find out if they had a spot for her to work and live. Dick and Carolyn said they would look for an abandoned home and move in with the others if something was available.

Grace would be staying with Ernest, and Irving wasn't going to leave Lydia. He'd stay in the shelter until he could marry Lydia. In the meantime he would work for Lew and Ernest and look for suitable housing.

Pricilla, if they could get housing to the property, and move her things she would stay and help with the children, garden, and food preparation, particularly the preservation of fresh foods for later use. Until housing was arranged she would use the second bedroom in Lew's house after Dick and Carolyn moved out.

It was a good set of plans. They just didn't work out very well. First, Harlan's small place had been stripped and mostly burned down, including all his trucking paraphernalia and other small equipment.

They were going into town in teams of three men, to do the checking. It was a good thing, for when they went to Trent's, they found it partially dismantled, apparently for firewood in the houses on each side of them.

Lew, Trent, and Ernest didn't hang around to ask questions when a shot, a warning shot thankfully, was fired and skipped on the pavement

in front of Rufus. So they went back to the property and all sat down together to discuss things.

It finally came down to Dick's statement. "If we can find a group of houses all together, I would consider that. But from what you've described, I don't think I want to be off on my own."

"We can try my neighborhood. It is gated and everyone has propane, and most of the houses have dual wood burning and propane fireplaces." Gwendolyn suddenly frowned. "But, I just thought, the sewer and water are city services. And where I am, I can't think of an alternative other than hauling water, drilling a well, and putting in septic tanks. I'm beginning to like the idea of staying here. But I just don't know about the clinic work. The community is going to need it. Does need it, I'm sure, if you guys didn't see any signs of one in operation or anything."

"I'm afraid not," Trent said.

"Same here," added Harlan.

"We can set up a mobile clinic. Keep it out here and take it in two or three days a week, in different areas of the town at first and then the city until other opportunities present themselves." Lew looked over at Ernest and Ernest nodded.

Gwendolyn looked like she was all in favor of the idea, and then said as much. "But what about fuel?"

"We have enough at the moment. But we are going to have to find, and possibly subsidize, a biodiesel operation." Lew went on to say, "We need to find several more things, too. Housing for out here, some livestock we can get, either by purchase or just taking if it is clearly abandoned. Not sure how much might have survived the last attack."

“We might have to go a good ways, out of the path the fallout took, to find some,” Ernest added

“What about schooling for the children?” Peggy Gunderson asked. “I’m okay up through middle school, but am weak in junior and senior high school subjects.

“Well, for right now, it will just be the young ones. Lydia can finish her senior year learning home economics, farming, and everything else that has to be learned to pass on to the younger generation when the time comes.” Ernest looked over at Lydia. “Is that okay with you, Lydia?”

“Sounds like a heavy load on a seventeen year old,” Lew said.

“I can do it,” Lydia said. She was holding Irving’s hand under the table.

“And I can help. I did really well in school, and tutored several different subjects for those that were having trouble with one or the other. And my internet college grades are... were good, too”

Sounds like a plan,” Lew said.

“Trent, Harlan, Dick, Ernest? You want to check out some housing we can move out here? And something for a clinic. Going to need wood heat ultimately. Propane won’t last forever.”

“Doesn’t matter much on the housing, bro,” Ernest said. “With an outside multi-fuel furnace with solar PV panel electrically run blowers and controls, we can use anything that is well insulated.

“I should have thought of that,” Lew said. “There is that new place on the far side of town that specializes in them.”

“That’s what I had in mind. Hopefully it won’t be stripped. We need to consider mining a few other places for things that are going to be needed for the housing, and just for things that will be useful that we can’t make ourselves.” Ernest looked around. There were a couple of disapproving looks.

“By mining and salvage, I mean totally abandoned items.” Ernest added quickly. “We can buy what we need if there is an existing legal owner. And we’ll keep a record of what we take with a note to tell the owners, if they show up, that we’ve taken the items and if they contact us, we’ll pay them for the items.”

Gwendolyn, one of those that had frowned, nodded. “Seems reasonable. But I have to tell you, I don’t have much capital to buy anything with.”

The others were nodding in agreement, except for Dick, Carolyn, and Ernest.

“Everyone has been pulling their weight around here the entire time. If you are willing, you can keep on helping out and Ernest and I will start providing a wage for the work, plus room and board, of course.”

“I don’t mind working, and I really like the idea of being out here,” Trent said, “but taking pay for something that we should be doing simply for you putting us up during the attacks doesn’t sit well with me. I want to pay my way.”

Harlan was nodding. “Same thing with me, guys.”

“You have to understand,” Lew said, “that we will have to hire help to run this place, even if you help out. Might as well be you all, since you’ve already proven yourselves able and willing to do what is necessary to get by in hard times.”

Those in the group looked around at each other. Finally Harlan nodded, followed quickly by the others, including Grace and Lydia. Ernest started to tell them they wouldn't have to do anything, since he was well off enough to care for them without any help. He realized that they would insist on helping, just like the others, so he didn't voice his thought.

With living and work arrangements more or less settled, talk turned to the other topics just mentioned. The items the little farm would need, to new clothing to fit the growing children were discussed.

The next day a team headed out on a scouting mission, and to acquire the housing units they would need for the rest of the farm residents. The team, led by Lew in Rufus, with Harlan in one of the U500s with fuel, batteries, and tools, and Dick, now an accomplished equipment driver and user, had the other U500 with a flatbed and a trailer.

They didn't run into any trouble the first few days. They were only approached by a couple of people wanting to know what they were doing. When Lew explained they were equipping a farm outside of town and would need workers that would be paid in food, the people responded the same way. "Can we get a job with you?"

Lew explained the initial work was being done, but laborers would be needed for a few other projects. "Spread the word. Work for us and get paid in food. And a little bit of hard money. Old US circulated coins that we'll convert for other things you might want to buy."

Trent was more than a little surprised at the reactions. "Those people seem eager to get to working."

"Some of them probably have families that are near starvation," Lew replied.

It was at dinner when Trent was explaining what had transpired that day that Pricilla suddenly let out a gasp. “Oh, my! I have been so remiss. Because of Renee, I suppose. How much would it take to feed these people?” she asked.

Lew shook his head. “We can’t save everyone, Pricilla. We have plenty of food, but if we give it all away... well... to put it simply, we risk not having enough for ourselves if this first crop doesn’t turn out well.”

“Oh. No. I understand that. What I am thinking of, is my root cellar at home. If it hasn’t been ‘mined’, as you put it, there are hundreds of jars of food there. I’ve build up quite a stock since Renee left home. Even been giving some to the food banks when they ran short. There is enough to feed quite a few people.”

“You know, Pricilla,” Lew said, rather softly. “If we just give food away, people are going to start expecting it, even when we don’t have a surplus...”

“Of course you are right, Lew,” Pricilla said. “But I already knew that. I have in mind a trading situation where I get some things I want and need in return for the food.”

“Oh,” Lew said, rather surprised, “That would certainly be up to you.”

“I say then that it is what I wish to do. We probably need to get the things from my place and bring them out here where they will be safe.”

“Very well,” Lew replied. “That will be the first thing on the agenda tomorrow.”

The original team, plus Pricilla, with the same equipment as the first attempt went into town the next morning. Pricilla had asked for and been given a pistol. She’d wanted something, but nothing with heavy

recoil. So Lew gave her the Beretta Tomcat .32 ACP that they'd acquired at the same time they did Norma and her children.

Lew didn't have to show her much about the pistol. "I was a crack shot in my youth," Pricilla said. "Just need familiarization and I'll be fine."

The trip was wildly successful. Her house and the root cellar had not been touched. Pricilla had not been kidding when she said hundreds of jars of food. There were actually over two-hundred 12-jar boxes of food, many of them meat of one type or another. They didn't leave much space in the trailer. What space that was left, Pricilla filled with her canning and other food processing items, along with some clothes and personal items.

Not only was the food recovered, but a street over the group found a big diesel pusher Class A motorhome with four slide outs sitting just off the driveway of a huge house. The owners had either not known of the threat of radiation, or had simply decided not to fight it, for four adults and five children were all in the house, laying on the tops of their beds, fully clothed, dead.

A quick search of the place found the keys, and a few other useful items. With the addition of an external multi-fuel furnace, Priscilla would be set. With the trucks loaded and ready to go, Lew worked on the diesel engine for some time before he could even get it to start, and even then, it wouldn't run for more than a few minutes before dying.

So the group went looking for an older model tow truck that would run so they could tow it to the property. That took less time than they thought it would, and the group got home well before dark. But it was too dark for setting the motorhome up.

The next run was to the outside furnace dealer's. The business was fairly new, and the concept still hadn't caught on in the area, so there were plenty of units in the showroom and stock room. They'd brought

one of the A700s with forks so they could load up the units if they found them.

They loaded all the units they could fit on the beds of the U500s and headed for home. They'd get the last few units the next day, along with the good supply of fire wood and wood pellets, and the small supply of bagged coal for use with the furnaces.

The streak of good luck lasted for almost a month before they ran into any real trouble. They didn't have everything they wanted, but had acquired suitable housing for everyone on the property. The furnaces were installed and the remainder stored. Water and sewer lines were connected to the more than adequate utilities originally installed. Electrical power was another separate thing. There wasn't enough power to go around, so individual set ups were obtained and would be installed when they had time.

The easy times of the thirty-five days of mining and salvage ended with a bang. Ernest, Dick, and Harlan, were cleaning out a good size open mall for everything they found that they might need at some time. Lew was along, in Rufus, to have the entry equipment needed to get into some of the more secure shops.

While the other three got the easy stuff, Lew used a burning bar assembly to get into locked places, safes, and vaults. Lew gave up on the banks, since all they held was the useless paper currency. And Lew wasn't quite comfortable opening up the lock boxes with people's personal items in them. Besides, the time used and burning bars used didn't have a good return when used on the banks.

Coin shops and pawn shops were a different story. Once Lew had one open, the others would go through the aisles and take whatever they thought they could use, while Lew used a burning bar on any safes or vaults. Three times in a row, when Lew opened up a safe, there was some jewelry, but very little if any gold. However, each of those places had a vault within a vault, either a free standing safe, or a floor vault.

Two of the three were chock full of illegally held gold and silver bullion products, to the tune of several hundred ounces total. Not everyone had obeyed the order to turn in the metals.

There were also quite a few of the guns on the prohibited lists in the main vaults, with none on display.

Lew had stowed his gear and was carrying out the last coin bag from the last pawn shop he'd cut open when two shots rang out. Crouching low, Lew ran to Rufus, tossed in the bag of gold coins, and then began to look around, his P-14 in his hand.

Another shot rang out and Dick let out a loud yell, followed by a flurry of shots from one or more of the other three. Lew was able to open up the passenger side front door of the Suburban and retrieve the M1A there, along with the FMCO vest set up for it with eight spare magazines and sundry other items.

Lew moved to the back of the Suburban, picked a spot that should give him a good line on the attackers. From the shots, it sounded like at least four people, perhaps five, all shooting from time to time. There could be others that hadn't shot for one reason or another. Suddenly Lew made a dash to get behind the garbage truck standing in the middle of one of the traffic lanes on the mall property.

He got a good look at two of those shooting at him from a rooftop and as soon as he was behind cover, he eased out and shot one of them right off the bat. The other was crouching down and it looked like he might make a run for it.

But the man was assuming concealment was cover. Lew knew the difference and put a series of shots through the false front of the shop above the wall line. A scream came and then died out.

Ernest shouted a warning and began to shoot. Lew, still behind the garbage truck, stepped out to see what was happening. The guy coming

at him was either very brave, very stupid, or just didn't know any better than to run out in the open expecting to get a good shot off.

Lew had his rifle at low ready, where the guy had his AK-47 clone out of position to take a shot. So Lew simply brought the M1A up and fired two quick rounds and watched the man fall, skidding a foot or more on the pavement.

Shouting at Ernest and the other two, Lew said, "I'm going up to check on the roof! Keep an eye out, but don't shoot me by mistake.

Not knowing for sure how many there were, Lew was very careful when he went behind the McDonalds he had been in front of. The lock on the ladder to the roof was missing and the door to access it stood open.

Lew slung the M1A and drew the P-14. He kept the pistol in his right hand and used the left to slowly climb the ladder. When he was near the top of the ladder, just below the roof line, he stopped and waited for two long minutes before inching his head up to get a look at the roof.

What he saw startled him and he almost paid a dear price for it. There was a young woman, tied up and gagged, laying on her back next to an air conditioning unit. When she saw him she tried to yell through the gag and kept motioning toward the other A/C unit further down the roof.

Lew nodded, but rose from his crouch and lifted the P-14. Three shots into the ductwork coming out of the A/C unit and a scream sounded. A man, still screaming incoherently rose up with a rifle in hand. But Lew already had the P-14 up and ready. A double tap put the man down, with one round in the center of his chest and one in the center of his forehead.

Crouching again when he heard more gunfire over close to where Harlan, Dick, and Ernest had been. Lew scooted over to the woman and pulled the gag free.

“Untie me!”

“How many are there?”

“Untie me!”

“How many first. I have no way of knowing if you are a plant or actually a victim.”

“Okay, Okay! There were six. Six dirt bags. I hope you killed them all! Now untie me!”

“In a minute,” Lew said. He moved over to the edge of the roof, rose enough to get his head above the false wall, and called out to Ernest. “There were six! How many did you account for?”

“Two!” Ernest yelled back.

“I got four. Keep an eye out. I’m bringing down a hostage.”

Lew rejoined the woman and started to squat down. “Untie me, you big oaf!” And then she swung her legs around, almost knocking Lew off his feet.

“All right! All right! I’m untying you. But if you try anything...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just untie me. I really need to go to the bathroom.”

As soon as Lew had her untied, she made a run for the roof ladder and was down it in a flash. Lew stayed right behind her until she ducked

behind the dumpster almost against the wall. “Stay right where you are,” said the woman.

Ernest, Dick, and Harlan were approaching. They saw Lew frowning. “Thought you said there was a hostage.”

Before Lew could answer, the woman came from behind the dumpster, still buttoning her Levis. She walked over to Lew when he turned around. “That would be me.” She didn’t stop. Instead she stepped right up to him and hit him with doubled fist right in the stomach.

“Hey!” Lew said, trying to catch his breath. She’d caught him right in the solar plexus.

“That’s for not untying me sooner. I almost didn’t make it. At least you didn’t try to peek. You must have some couth.”

“I have... Never mind. What...”

“First, I want my guns back. That pack of lowlifes got my PTR-91, Glock 21 SF, and Mossberg 590A1. The two lunkheads on the McDonalds didn’t have them. Did you find anything on the other four?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Dick said. We gathered up everything except what was on the McDonalds.”

“Show me. And there’d better be a leather money belt with... Never mind with what. I want that money belt back.” She’d been facing Ernest, Dick, and Harlan. She then turned to Lew. “I want everything those six men had. I can’t take it out of their hide, and want all my stuff back and then some.”

“The victors usually get the spoils,” Lew said.

“Yeah. Well, I delayed the battle and saved your lives, if you must know.”

“What? How?” Lew asked.

“Distracted them for a couple of minutes when they were getting ready to open up on you. They had you in their sights.” She lifted her left hand to her left cheek. “The jerk caught me by surprise and slugged me, before I jerked.”

“I guess we can give you the benefit of the doubt,” Lew said.

“I guess you should just believe me because it is true.”

“I think she is right,” Ernest said, hiding a smile.

“Yep,” said Dick.

“I agree,” Harlan added.

“What are you... Never mind. Okay we believe you. You can have what they took from you and whatever else of theirs they have here with them.”

“Clever. Just what they have here. I guess that is fair. But I get a piece of the action when I take you there.”

“Oh. You’ve been there?”

“Yes. This morning. I almost walked into the house they’re using for now while they clean out this area. There was no real sign of them there. I got too close and one of them saw me. Took four of them to take me down, though.”

“They... Uh...”

“No. Didn’t have time. They were already just about ready to leave for here. They knew someone was working ‘their’ mall and were setting

up an ambush. They were afraid I'd get loose, so they brought me with them. That's enough jabbering for now. I want my guns back."

"Over this way," Ernest said, ushering her toward their vehicles

"I'll go up and get the ones on the roof here," Lew said, turning back to the McDonalds.

It only took a couple of minutes for Lew to get the gun the man on that roof used. He decided to just strip the body rather than try to get it off the roof for the woman to look at. "Dang!" he suddenly thought. "She never did give her name or what she is doing here."

Lew climbed back down and walked over to the U500s. He tossed the clothing and other things down on the bed with the other things that had been gathered.

"Excellent," said the woman, picking up a brown belt with a zippered inside pouch. She unzipped the belt an inch or so. Just enough to see the flash of gold color. She flexed the belt to make sure what was supposed was actually there, without unzipping the thing all the way. She threaded the belt through the belt loops of her Levis.

She went through the other things, selecting what she wanted and tossing the rest aside. The men saw the occasional flash of gold coin. "I don't see my guns. I was sure they brought them with us." She glared at Lew.

"Don't look at me. Maybe they are still there where they caught you."

"They better be. Come on. Let's go. Their rigs are over behind the next row of buildings. She held up a string of five keys. "Quads. Older ones, but they run. I'll lead the way if you want to bring your vehicles."

She was striding off without another word and the men scrambled to get in the trucks and Rufus to follow her.

They had to take the long way around on the travel lanes of the mall where the woman had just cut straight across. “About time,” she said, sitting on one of the quads, the motor running. Lew and the others took note of the things piled on the rear rack of the quad the woman was on. It looked like she’d stripped the other quads of useful accessories.

Lew didn’t get a chance to ask her what her name was or anything else. She took off as soon as they pulled up. It was a fairly short ride. Lew wondered that they hadn’t run into the group earlier. “Probably just working another area before they worked this one,” he mused.

The woman pulled right up to the porch on the house and stepped off the quad. She strode up onto the porch, leaned back and lifted her right leg. With a hard thrust of her leg at the door lock level, the door swung open.

“Ah! There are my beauties! Safe and sound.” She went over to a badly used sofa and went over the guns piled there. It was the three she had described as missing. She belted a gun belt around her slim waist and then checked the Glock before sliding it home into the holster.

She checked the PTR-91 and the Mossberg 590A1. That seemed to satisfy her and she went over to a pair of duffels sitting in a corner of the room. She opened an end pocket and pulled out a small pistol, ankle holster, and two spare magazines. “They missed this one, the idiots,” she said as she raised a foot to the scarred up coffee table and put on the holster on her left ankle and the double magazine pouch on her right.

She went looking through the rest of the house, with the four men trailing along. The woman gathered up a few items and handed them off to one of the men as she found them. Finally, going out the back door she found other items she was eager to get back into her possession.

“That looks like a game cart,” Lew said.

“What do you know? A good eye. Close, but no cigar. It’s based on a game cart, but built as an evacuation or bug out cart. Two 8-gallon totes on the bottom, and five on the second row. Plenty of lashing points to tie gear onto, like the gun cases. I’m going to assume I can pack these away and just carry the two handguns.” She looked over at Lew.

“Of course,” Lew said. “Shouldn’t have any more trouble before we get back to the farm. Are you coming along or heading out on your own again?”

“I’d like to see your set up before I decide what to do.”

“What is your name, by the way?” asked Lew.

“Rachel Stubens. And you guys are?”

Ernest did the introductions.

“Well, fellows, if you’re ready to go, I’d like to go and get a shower and a few hours’ sleep. I’ve been up since the wee hours of the morn.”

It took her only a few more minutes to have everything loaded onto the bug-out cart and secured. But before she took it out the front door she stood in the center of the living room and did a slow turn, mumbling, “Now where would six low lives hide their really valuable loot?”

After a couple of minutes of thought, she walked over to the brick faced fireplace and began to tap on some of the bricks with the hilt of the sheath knife that was on her gun belt. After the four same slightly ringing sounds came a dull thud. “Bingo!” Using the knife to remove the putty with a thin coating of mortar dust, Rachel pulled out the brick and then three more.

She reached in with one hand, grunted loudly and pulled out a small bank money bag. Then another and finally a third. Reaching in one more time, this time deeper, and Rachel pulled out not a money bag, but a wide cloth money belt loaded to the gills with gold and silver coins.

“Pick two,” Rachel told Lew. “The other two are mine.”

“Don’t you want to check and see what is in them?”

“Nah. Found money. Doesn’t matter. It will give me more than I already have and that’s fine.”

“Go ahead, Lew,” Ernest said.

Lew hesitated for a second, reached for the cloth money belt, but then pulled his hand away. He reached for the smallest bag and then the second smallest.

“Pushover,” Rachel said. “But a deal is a deal.” She leaned down, picked up the money belt and other bag with just a bit of a struggle, and added them securely on the game cart under some other things.

“How’d you know it was there?” Lew asked, handing off the two bags he’d selected to Dick and Harlan.

“Idiots were talking about their loot. Arguing more than talking. That’s when I showed up. I heard ‘loot’ and tried to leave, but that’s when they got me.”

“Okay. It is getting late. We’d better hit the road. As it is, our wives slash significant others, are going to be all over us for not having showed up or called in by now.” Dick and Harlan looked a bit uneasy at Ernest’s words.

“What?” Rachel asked Lew. “You don’t have anyone waiting to tan your hide for being late?”

“Nope. Widower. You?”

“Widow.”

Lew and Rachel suddenly seemed uncomfortable and both headed for the smashed door, Lew to Rufus, and Rachel to the quad. She used the existing harness and pull ropes of the bug-out cart to hitch it to the quad. Climbing on board she started the quad and waited for Lew to take off first. She fell in line behind him, with the two U500s trailing behind.

It was full dark when the convoy pulled up to the upper gate and stopped. A small crowd of upset women was waiting. Ernest, Dick, and Harlan had their ears chewed for a few moments until the women saw Rachel.

“Got a handy bathroom with a flush toilet and working shower, by chance?” she said, ignoring the men and joining the group of women. Pricilla took her inside while the other women demanded an explanation.

It took some time, but they finally seemed satisfied and everyone headed for their own residences. Lew went inside his home and headed for the master suite bathroom. He stripped and took a long shower, donning clean clothing before heading to the kitchen to prepare some supper.

He needn't have bothered. Pricilla already had food on the table. Rachel was there, at the table, eating rather ravenously.

“When was the last time you ate, Rachel?” Pricilla asked.

“This good? Before the first attack. Been pretty slim pickings since then, especially on the road.”

“Where from and to?” Lew asked as he sat down across the table from her.

Rachel's hand stilled for just a moment over the bread plate. "I guess it doesn't matter. You look like an upright group here. Things were too wild for me where I was. Medium sized town. Just went crazy. Shooting and killing and robbing to beat it. I decided my skills were better used elsewhere."

"Skills? Lew asked.

"I'm a doctor. As in MD. General practitioner. Family doctor. However you want to express it. I know a lot about a lot, but don't know everything. I'm planning on joining a clinic somewhere that will make things better for some people."

"Ah," Lew said.

"We have a paramedic here," Pricilla said. "She wants to do the same thing. Would sure be nice to have a doctor to go along with her. Wouldn't it, Lew?"

Lew had avoided looking at Rachel the last few minutes. Having caught a glimpse of her face and hair after her shower, he thought it best not to look because it could easily turn into a stare. But he looked up and saw Rachel's eyes watching him carefully.

"Uh... Well... Yes. I suppose. Gwendolyn did say she would like to find a doctor and couple of nurses to be able to really have a good working clinic. But you said you were headed somewhere."

"As in anywhere I can make a difference." Rachel dropped her eyes and resumed eating.

Lew did the same. Pricilla sighed and said, "I'm off to my place. There are fresh linens in the second bedroom."

Rachel saw the startled look on Lew's face and quickly said, "I don't have to stay indoors. The weather is nice and I can set up my tent..."

"That's silly," Lew said. "If you don't want to sleep in the extra bedroom, we have twenty beds and bunks down in the shelter."

"Sleeps twenty? Must be some set up. I take it that is how you and your group survived."

Lew nodded. "I can show you... or tomorrow if you want. Up to you. It is a lot more comfortable in the second bedroom."

"Sure. Why not?" Rachel said. "I could use some real sleep in a real bed that wasn't infested with who knows what. Okay. I'll take the bedroom. But first I'll clean up the..."

"Don't worry about it. Our systems still work. I'll just put everything in the dishwasher. It's been a pretty hectic day for me. I'll be heading for bed as soon as you finish up."

"Okay. Just a few more bites," Rachel said.

It was more than a few, but Rachel was hungry and the food was excellent, so she ate until she was full. The first time in months. "Okay. I'm off to bed then. Wake me in the morning when you all get started."

Lew was moving dishes to the kitchen and nodded.

Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 4

Lew decided to let Rachel sleep as long as she was able. He prepared some bacon and a pan of biscuits. He left a generous serving of the bacon and half the biscuits and a place setting on the table with butter and a couple of jars of preserves, before he went outside to coordinate the daily work schedule with the others.

Everyone was standing around in front of the detached garage, including Lydia, who was keeping a close eye on the children as well as the group of adults.

“Well?” Asked Pricilla.

“Well? Well what?” asked Lew. He was walking over to the Suburban with the intention of unloading it.

“Rachel. What about Rachel,” asked Carolyn.

“I don’t know. Just talked to her for a few minutes. She is a doctor. Headed for wherever to help set up a clinic.”

“Well, that’s great!” Gwendolyn. “Having a doctor would take a lot of pressure off me. When do we start?”

“Start what?” Lew asked.

“The clinic. We were going to build a clinic on wheels and provide clinic service to survivors in this area.” Gwendolyn looked disappointed.

“Oh. That. Yeah. We can start looking for something to use to set it up in. Either self-propelled or a trailer. We’ve all been kind of watching for something, but haven’t spotted anything yet.” Lew had the rear hatch up and the bottom Dutch doors open. He grabbed a couple of the money bags and headed for the house.

Dick, Trent, and Harlan started to do the same thing, but Carolyn, Peggy, and Amanda suddenly had something for them to do.

Ernest asked Grace, “You going to let me help Lew?” He was smiling.

“For the moment,” Grace replied, smiling back.

Ernest grabbed two of the bags and followed Lew. Irving took a long look at Lydia, and then said, “I’m going to service the U500s.” He walked over to one of the trucks and climbed in to take it to the equipment barn to work on.

“Well, well,” Pricilla said. “That sure stirs the pot.”

“What do you mean?” Lydia asked. She had to grab Joseph before he made it to the other U500. The five year old was determined to get in one and drive. He played with his toy cars, but really wanted his hands on a real one.

“I’ll explain later,” Grace said. “Let’s get the kids back inside. And give Rachel a chance. I have a feeling she isn’t looking for conquests.”

“Conquests?”

“Yes. Come on. I’ve got Joseph. You head the rest toward the house. I’ll explain inside.” Lydia shook her head but corralled the other three young ones. She headed them to Ernest’s house that was now home to the orphans, Grace, and Lydia.

A grinning Pricilla headed for her motor home, happier than she had been for a long time. This was her family now, and things were happening. For the good.

When Ernest and Lew came back from the attached garage, Rachel was with them. “Where should I put the things I don’t need in the bedroom?” she asked Lew.

“In the garage. As soon as we can get you housing set up we can help you move it.” Lew looked around when he reached the Suburban. “Where did everyone go?”

Rachel chuckled. “Well, I suspect the other ladies took their fellers out of danger.”

“Danger? What danger? We’re safer here than just about anywhere else we could be.”

“That would be me,” Rachel said. “You tell him,” she said, speaking to Ernest. Rachel went to the quad and began to disconnect the cart from the machine and headed for the garage with it.

“That is some woman, there, Lew.”

“I suppose. But I don’t have a clue about what she was talking about.”

“You’re a little dense, sometimes, little brother. Rachel, as a single, unattached, very pretty edging into beautiful, articulate, and capable woman is a threat to the other women until she settles down with someone.”

Lew looked at Ernest in surprise. “You’ve got to be kidding! And I sure have no plans to ‘settle down’ with anyone.”

“Sure. Bro. Never happen. Let’s get the rest of this stuff moved.” Taking two more of the bags, Ernest headed back to the garage.

When Lew followed with more items he gave Rachel a strange look, which she interpreted correctly. She smiled at Lew and kept on going to the quad to unload the rear rack.

It wasn't until Lew and Rachel both had their vehicles emptied did the other men reappear to help with the unloading of the U500s and the trailer. When Rachel pitched in and began to help, Peggy, Carolyn, Amanda, and Irving all showed up to help again.

It didn't take long to get the trucks and trailer unloaded. Irving had already serviced them, so they were ready to go on another mining run. "Okay, Lew said, "looks like Irving and who else going today?"

"Count me in," Rachel said. "There are some things I need to get while I have transportation for them I couldn't get before. I take it that the mining, as you put it, is a share and share alike?"

"Sort of. Everyone looks for things that the group needs, but can take some time to salvage whatever they want for themselves. Someone needs help, someone else has always pitched in."

"I don't think Trent or I will go in today," Peggy Gunderson said. "There are a couple of other projects we need to work on."

"Same here," Carolyn said.

Harlan looked over at Amanda and then back at Lew. "Guess that means me, too."

"Ernest?" Lew asked.

"Remember? I'm planning on prepping the main fields for planting today. Only have a couple more days to mine. Everyone will be needed here, then."

"Well, I guess it is just us," Lew told Rachel and Irving.

“Don’t worry, Lew,” Rachel said quietly after they had entered Rufus. “It won’t be long before they see that I’m harmless.”

Lew headed down the driveway, followed by Irving in the U500 with the trailer.

“I don’t see what they have to be afraid of. It’s not like you are a danger to us.”

“Exactly. But they have to determine that for themselves. Now. What are you after today?”

“Need to keep an eye out for something that can be used for a clinic. We’re always on the lookout for fuels. We’ve managed to recover five double trailers of diesel, one double of gasoline, one double trailer with split load, and four diesel singles. That, I’m afraid, is going to have to last us until someone in the area can start making biodiesel. We’re willing to work a share cropping basis, where we supply the equipment and they farm and process the seed.”

“Sounds reasonable. What else?”

“Stock. Of almost any kind. Prefer the standard four, but it is getting to the point where we’ll take rabbits, goats, ducks, geese, or anything else.”

“The standard four? Cattle, swine, Chicken? What is the fourth?”

“Milk cow.”

“Ah. Makes sense. You haven’t found any?”

“No. I’m afraid time is getting short. If we don’t find something pretty quick, there is a good chance they’ll all have died of neglect by the time we find any.”

“Hm.” Rachel gave Lew an analyzing look. “Make a deal with you. You help me mine the next pawn shop and coin dealer, fifty fifty, and I’ll provide the stock and, I think, the biodiesel.”

“What, just snap your fingers and they’ll appear?”

Rachel grinned at Lew. “Pretty much. But it is a ride. I take it you haven’t gone much of anyway out and away from the Interstate.”

“No. Too big of a risk.”

“Well, this place is rather like your place. Remote without being way out. Get off the interstate and go south on the state road.”

As soon as Lew made the turn, Irving keyed up the mike on the CB in the U500. “Where are we going?”

“A new place, Irving. One that Rachel knows about.”

“Okay. Just wondering.”

There was silence for a while and then Rachel indicated another turn, then shortly afterwards another. Finally Rachel pointed at a gated driveway.

“We are out in the boonies.”

“Yeah. One of those places like yours. Just can’t get there from here. Have to go someplace else first. Hang loose. We’re being watched.”

“How do you know? I don’t see anyone.”

“They always have someone at the gate or on the monitor for the gate.” Rachel climbed out of the Suburban and approached the locked

end of the gate. She manipulated something on a metal box and said, “Hey the house. Got someone looking to do some trading or buying.”

Lew couldn't hear what came over the speaker, but a man suddenly appeared in the driveway from the neighboring forest. The man went to the gate and unlocked it. It took the man and Rachel both to swing the gate open over the rough rutted driveway.

When the Suburban and U500 were both through, Rachel helped close the gate and then got back into the Suburban. “Just up ahead. Don't drive too fast. Could be stock or children anywhere on the property.”

Lew was careful and needed to be. There were both children and stock around the next bend in the driveway. But both hurried out of the way and Lew pulled Rufus up to a car park holding a dozen vehicles.

Rachel climbed down out of the Suburban quickly. A girl, about thirteen or fourteen, Lew thought, ran out from the porch, hampered somewhat by the crutches she was using. She dropped the crutches to give Rachel a big hug.

Lew stepped up and picked up the crutches for the girl.

“Brandy, this is Lew. He helped me out of a jam yesterday.”

“Wow!” said Brandy. She took the crutches and began to hobble back to the porch. There were three men and two women on the porch. One of the men and one of the women were on a porch swing. Both looked to be well into their eighties.

The way another of the men and the second woman were standing, hands linked together, Lew took to be a couple. In their fifties. The other man was the spitting image of the second man.

Rachel made the introductions. “And what brings you out here?” asked the elder Dwight Smith.

“Sir, I’m looking to buy some stock. Enough to maintain solid herds and flocks. A milk cow or two, a couple beef yearlings, and a couple of weaned calves, a bull and three breeding cows. Two boars and ten sows, couple of roosters and twenty layers.”

“Hm.” The middle Dwight Smith asked, “You can take care of that many?”

Lew nodded, but the man looked at Rachel. “What do you think?”

“They have the land and seem to have the ability,” Rachel said.

“What else?” asked the Junior Dwight Smith.

“Biodiesel, and perhaps enough hay and straw to get through this next winter until our pastures and hay fields are in full production.”

“What are you offering?” asked Senior Smith.

“Food, though it looks like you probably don’t need any of that. I’ve got some silver and gold. It’s a little far for labor, but we could offer some help in specific times of the year.”

“Don’t be too quick to judge by appearances, young man,” Senior Smith admonished. “Salt. We have a need for salt. A bit of table salt, but not much. Quite a bit for food preservation.”

“What would 10 pounds of table salt and four hundred pounds of canning salt get me?”

“Give us a minute,” said Middle Smith.

Rachel and Lew walked a little ways away. Irving was leaning against the U500 grill.

A few minutes later Junior Smith called Lew and Rachel back to the porch.

“Sugar? Cocoa? Coffee? Tea? Tobacco? Girl stuff?”

“Can do one hundred pounds of sugar, five pounds of cocoa, fifteen pounds of coffee, five hundred teabags, ten pounds of tobacco.” Lew thought a moment. The girl stuff... My wife had plenty set aside. Don’t quite know how much. I think she said enough until she didn’t need it any more. That would be about thirty years for one. So... twenty years’ worth for one.”

Lew and Rachel saw Middle Smith’s wife squeeze his shoulder slightly. Apparently it was a yes signal, for he said, “That would cover everything except the biodiesel. There is a guy down mid-state that has an operation. Talk to him on the radio ever once in a while. Said he’d set us up if we could come up with some hard money. He didn’t mean greenbacks or those colored bills, either. Gold on the barrelhead. Twenty ounces would do it and give us a little operating capital. A silver round per gallon.”

Lew thought about it for a few minutes. The others waited patiently. It would be an important deal for both sides. “That’s a little high on the per gallon fuel.”

“That is us delivering,” added Middle Smith

“Okay. I have to talk it over with my brother, but I’m sure he’ll agreeable. Give me two days to get things sorted out and brought down?”

“We can deliver the stock in a week. Need to let a couple of the calves wean. You sure you got enough feed for them?” It was Junior Smith.

“Actually, that could be a problem,” Lew said. “We have plenty of good grass pasture now, but no feed rations. What would it take to get a truck load of grain and a trailer of hay?”

Senior Smith’s wife leaned over and whispered to him. When he straightened back up he looked at Rachel and then Lew. “Got some young’uns, and a couple on the way, besides us getting old. We need medical care from time to time. You be willing to let Rachel here doctor on us when we need it?”

“Uh... Not really my call. She just suggested you might have what our place was needing.”

“You didn’t have to ask, Dwight,” Rachel said. “I’ve already told you that if you can get word to me, I’ll come a-running.”

“So. You two aren’t...” asked Middle Smith.

“No!” Lew said quickly, and just a bit forcefully.

“You been gone a long time, Rachel,” said Junior Smith. “Figured you was all hitched up and all by now.”

“Nope. No plans too, either, just like before.” Rachel looked at Lew. “They have my care anyway. You’ll have to offer them something else for the stock feed.”

“How are you fixed for the delivery equipment?” Lew asked the Smiths.

“Pretty fair shape. Got a couple old ten wheeler 3,000 gallon tankers that run,” Senior Smith said.

“How about I set you up with two double trailer rigs, and two 4,500 gallon bob rigs. All a bit old, but in very good shape. Run like tops. My brother Ernest saw to that.”

The Smiths conferred again. All were smiling when they looked over at Lew again. “You got a deal, mister,” Senior Smith said.

“One of the doubles and both of the bobs are empty, with one trailer of another double empty. When we empty out that second trailer on the second set of doubles we’ll bring it down. The rest will be here in a couple or three days.”

That seemed to be the end of it, as Rachel tugged on Lew’s shirt sleeve and headed him back to the Suburban. “So. You knew these people were here and had what the property needed?” Lew asked.

Rachel smiled. “Yes. Of course. Note that I didn’t get anything out of it.” Rachel looked away for a moment and then back at Lew. “I was in pretty bad shape when Junior Smith found me on one of their fields, literally the back forty. He got me home and the Lady Smiths nursed me back to health. It was a long haul. I probably won’t live an extended lifespan from the amount of radiation I picked up getting away from home the second time.

“I did some doctoring of my own on the family when I was able. Young Smith thought he was in love with me. I put a stop to that right quick.”

“I see. It sounds like you handled the situation quite well. Yeah. Well. Maybe. Sure want to get that clinic up and running.”

The trip had taken most of the morning, so Lew limited the rest of the trip to the mall on the edge of town that they hadn’t hit yet. And instead of just going in and starting the mining process, Lew drove around the area, looking for anyone that could be a danger. When they

couldn't find anyone, they got to work. There was a work boot store right next to the pawn shop. Irving concentrated on cleaning out the boots, and Lew and Rachel tackled the coin shop.

It was very disappointing in the pawn shop. It looked like the owner had followed the rules and turned in the gold and silver. Lew could see that Rachel was disappointed and he told her, "Don't give up yet."

Lew had to get the burning bar set up to get into the pawn shop vault. Still nothing of value. But Lew had learned to look very closely at things in these places. "There!" he suddenly said, pointing to one of the shelving units.

"What?" Rachel asked, shining her headlamp at the shelving. "I don't see anything."

"Down. On the floor, under the front left leg."

"Oh. Hey! It's a floor safe!"

"Yep. Lew fired up a fifteen inch burning bar and burnt the locking mechanism. After waiting a few minutes for the lid to cool, still wearing the heavy leather gloves he wore when using the burning bars, Lew took the Stanley thirty inch entry bar that was part of his equipment and pried the lid up and off to one side.

"Holy Mackerel!" Lew said. "Look at this! It's not a simple tube vault. It is a lazy Susan vault."

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked, trying to get a look into the vault over Lew's shoulder.

Lew raised up and studied the floor for a moment before tracing a faint line in the concrete floor. "This is the outer diameter of the vault. It

is thick walled, so it isn't as large inside, but the lazy Susan has four rings.”

Down on his knees, Lew began to hand out long gun after long gun, each one in a silicone gun sleeve, to Rachel, who stacked them on the other shelving. Then he began lifting plastic tubes up and out of the vault. The first three were filled with handguns, also in silicone sleeves, and the last four contained the easy to identify bank coin bags. Lew had a feeling they weren't numismatics in the bags.

Rachel poured out the bags and opened one. Sure enough, it was gold Eagle coins in ten of the bags, and circulated US pre-1965 silver coins in six, and four of Silver Eagles.

Irving was still working on moving the boot store into the U500 trailer and ignored what Rachel and Lew were doing. They brought out all the precious metals and put them on the floor of the Suburban between the front and rear seats,

Then they began to check each of the tubes that held the handguns. Lew even gasped a little when he pulled out the first gun. When all the guns were checked and loaded into the back of the Suburban, Lew whistled. They hadn't found one each of a bunch of different guns. They had found a bunch of just several models. Some that a seasoned prepper would have paid top dollar back in the day, if they'd had it.

“They aren't all new,” Lew told Rachel. “I have a feeling this guy was buying up the good stuff and squirreling it away for when the bans were lifted. He would have made no telling how much on these guns.”

Irving came up to the two. They were sitting in the back of the Suburban, catching their breath. “Got boots for years for everyone. Trailer is full, but what do we go for to load the U500?”

“What do you want to hunt for?” Lew asked Irving.

Irving dropped his eyes and shrugged.

“Come on, Irving. You obviously have something in mind,” Lew said.

“Well... I read a story on one of the forums. It seemed kind of silly to me at the time, but I’ve been thinking about doing what one of the characters in the story did.” He fell silent again.

“And what was that?” Lew prompted.

“He set up a bar and grill. There were pool tables and darts and a couple more of those kinds of games. It had a stage and was equipped with a killer sound and video system. With a juke box, and karaoke. And a dance floor. People could come in and have a drink and a snack, and listen to the singers and dance. Some of the singers were good and some not so good, but it was live entertainment. The guy would buy whoever would sing, good or not, a drink, to keep the singers coming back, so the others would keep coming back.”

“I see,” Lew said after Irving was silent for a few seconds. “You want to set up a bar like that?”

“Something like that.” Quickly Irving added, “The major I was going for doesn’t really matter anymore, but my minor and hobby was the performing arts. I played in a band in high school and did school plays and such.

“But it won’t be for right now. I just want to get the equipment and stuff and put it in storage so I’ll have it when the town and maybe the city starts coming back and people will be willing to buy a drink or two, dance, and listen to the juke box or karaoke.”

“Sounds like quite the endeavor.” Rachel was looking at Irving. “But a potentially excellent one. Things will come back. I keep telling myself that, and honestly believe it.”

“Well, if that is what you want, lead on. I take it you’ve researched the places where the equipment will be.”

“Yes sir! I know just where to go.”

“Well, you lead and we’ll follow. Just keep a good eye out for trouble,” Lew told Irving.

Lew’s and Rachel’s thoughts were elsewhere as Lew followed Irving. It was a bit of a drive, and as Lew had done, Irving drove around the area a bit, looking for any potential trouble. He found none, and parked the U500 handy to the front doors of an electronics and music equipment store.

“Well, well, well, would you look at that?” Rachel said, pointing to a store front down the street half a block.” It was a coin shop.

When they were out of the vehicles, Lew told Irving, “We’ll help you in just a few minutes. Bring the things you want up to the front door and we’ll help you load them onto the truck bed.”

“We won’t be gone long,” Rachel added.

Irving was anxious to get his hands on the equipment. It only took a good lunge against the Stanley entry bar to pop the lock of the store and in he went, after handing Lew the tool.

Like the pawn shop earlier, the coin shop looked pretty bare. Not much on display. Unlike the pawn shop, the safe inside the vault didn’t contain any guns, and only four bags of gold and silver coins.

They took those back to Rufus and began helping Irving load the U500 bed. Some of the items were heavy enough to call for the use of the material handling boom to get them lifted up high enough to slide onto the bed.

With the enthusiasm of youth, Irving was still feeling great when the bed of the truck was loaded and overloaded just a bit.

Rachel and Lew were dragging a little bit. They took the time to down a bottle of water each. "I'll get some more of the stuff next time," Irving said. Rachel and Lew groaned. But they were smiling.

There were no incidents on the way back, but since they were going through an area they hadn't searched before, they were able to find something that would work perfectly for what Rachel and Gwendolyn wanted to do.

It was a pair of big diesel pusher motor homes under construction at an up-fitter. It was getting dark, but Lew and Rachel checked things out while Irving stood guard.

"What do you think?" Lew asked Rachel.

"If we can get the equipment and get it installed, they'll be perfect."

"Both of them?" Lew asked. "You don't want one to live in?"

"Rather have a completed one to live in. These engines, just sitting there with no electronics hooked up, inside a metal building, should run. If we use them both, we can handle a lot more things and carry more supplies."

"Okay. Mark it down for the next trip."

"Done," Rachel said and smiled over at Lew. It caught him by surprise and he smiled back.

With the address marked, Lew let Irving lead the way in the U500. The rest of the trip was uneventful, though Lydia was a bit worried about

Irving. He'd never gone that long without radioing her about where he was and what he was doing.

But she understood when he started telling her about the equipment they'd discussed more than a few times for setting up a PAW business.

They left the things to unload the next day and Irving went over to Grace and Lydia's for supper and Rachel joined Lew. But this time it was Rachel that did the cooking, convincing Lew that it was only turnabout fair play. "I don't expect to be treated like a guest. Everyone seems to pull their weight around here and I plan to do the same, as best as I can. I have to protect my hands and my eyes, but I can still do plenty of things."

"Well... I guess you are right. What are we going to have?"

"I saw what I need for tacos in the pantry this morning. That sound okay?"

"Sounds great. We even have lettuce and tomatoes already from the small greenhouse."

"I saw that, too," Rachel said. It turned out that Rachel was three times faster in the kitchen than Lew would ever be.

They talked very little while Rachel was making supper. Lew had brought up one of the all mode all band radios from the bunker and hooked it up in the living room. He was running the bands, looking for any signal he could find. There had been quite a few early on, after the second attack, but they had slowly fallen silent, most of them giving notice that they wouldn't be around much longer due to radiation poisoning and other situations and illnesses that couldn't be treated in the PAW.

Rachel called Lew to the table and he turned off the radio. He complimented her on both the quality of the cooking as well as the speed at which it was prepared.

“Comes from being a doctor,” Rachel said. “Don’t have much time to eat, so you have to do it quickly, and since I have to keep my own health up to treat others, it has to be nutritious.”

“Makes sense,” Lew said. He wiped his lips and set the napkin on the table. “I’ll do the cleanup.”

Rachel started to protest, but Lew spoke again. “Until we find you habitation, you’re welcome to make yourself at home. Got lots of books and videos. My wife was an avid reader and loved the movies. I don’t think she ever sold one or traded one off in all the time we were together. So the wide screen works, as does the blue-ray, DVD, and VHS decks. I’m going to do the cleanup and then shower and go to bed. That truck load of electronics took it out of me.”

“You had a pretty good exposure to radiation, didn’t you?” Rachel asked, putting her own napkin on the table.

Lew sighed. “Yeah. The EMP of the second attack stopped cars right down by the gate. Pricilla was on her way to her daughters, and another family was headed somewhere. The man got out of hand and tried to kill his family, so we were forced to shoot him. The wife and two year old got too much radiation and didn’t make it. Ernest and I were out in the heavy stuff for several minutes.

“Ernest had a few problems, but I’m more sensitive apparently. It took me longer to recover, and I think I’m still off more than a bit than I was before.”

“Yeah. I understand. I got a pretty good dose, too. Was lucky I didn’t lose my hair.”

“It is nice hair,” Lew said without thinking about it.

“Why thank you, Lew!”

“Oh. I better get that cleanup done. I really am beat.”

“Of course. I won’t be up much longer myself.”

Ernest, with much more experience growing things, more or less took over the leadership in the garden and crop fields. With the small, but high quality equipment designed to work on sloped ground, it was fairly easy to break the others in on safely farming the rolling ground.

Lew tried to lend a hand, but the others all sent him off to do other things. So, after clearing the deal with Ernest, Lew put together the items he would take to the Smith’s in exchange for the stock.

He checked over the fencing and animal barns to make sure they were ready for the stock. He couldn’t find a thing that wasn’t ready. So, when the second trailer of the second set of doubles was emptying into the underground tanks, Lew called everyone together and asked for some of them to help with the trip.

“Sure, Lew,” Irving said. “What do I do?”

“Just what you do around here some of the time. Drive one of the bob tankers to the Smiths,” Lew replied. “Need you on one of the sets of doubles, Harlan.” Harlan nodded. “I can take the other double,” Lew then said, but I need someone for the second bob tanker, and the Suburban with a trailer. Ernest needs to stay on the planting.”

“I can manage,” Rachel said when no one else spoke up.

“What about your hands?” Lew asked.

Rachel held up her hands and wiggled her fingers in the gloves she was wearing. "I'll be fine. Either the truck or the Suburban either one. I had an uncle in the used equipment business. He let me learn to drive the long-haul trucks around the storage yard."

"Mom?" Lydia said to her mother, "I could use a break from the kids. I can drive the Suburban."

Grace looked a bit uneasy, but Ernest spoke up. "She can do it, Grace. And Irving and Lew will be right there."

"Well, Okay then, I guess."

A light, chilly rain started to coat the windshields on the way down to the Smith Farm. The rain was fine, but chilly for the time of the year. It would not be a good thing if they were to get a freeze right after and during the planting. But there wasn't anything they could do about it, so Lew put it out of his mind.

He set a slow pace, to save fuel, and so as not to out run anyone and leave them behind. But they made it without any problems what so ever. Some of the Smith clan climbed up into the trucks when Lew, Irving, Harlan, and Rachel got out of them. They disappeared around the back of the house.

Lew could hear the cows lowing, swine grunting, and chickens clucking. "Sounds like you're ready to go, too," Lew said to Middle Smith.

"As soon as the goods are unloaded and we have the coin in hand."

Lew nodded and pulled out a drawstring bag. He counted out the twenty gold Eagles and put them back into the bag and handed it to Middle Smith. There was a swarm of children and grownups at the trailer. It was emptied in a matter of minutes.

It took only a few more minutes for the Smiths to mount up in their trucks and pull out from behind the house.

There were four old semi-trucks, two with the stock, one with a very large load of hay, and a covered hopper trailer of feed for the animals.

Lew took over the controls of the Suburban and the others found seats, with Rachel riding shotgun, much to Harlan's chagrin. With Lew in the lead, the convoy headed back north. The going was slow. The old semi-trucks were on their last legs. The semis that were under the double trailers were going to be a great help to the Smith family.

It wasn't until they reached the property that Lew realized they didn't have any storage for the feed. He walked over to Middle Smith and gave him the news.

"Not a problem. We've had our eye on a newer trailer for our own use. We'll just leave this one with you and pick up that other trailer on our way back. No charge. We both got a good deal. Keep in touch."

"Sure thing," Lew said. He headed over to supervise the stock unloading while Irving and Harlan ran two of the A700 Bobcats with forks to unload the hay. They had it unloaded and tarped by the time the stock was unloaded and exploring their new home.

The feed trailer was parked where it could be used to supply the feed for the animals when needed, and then the Smiths were gone.

That had killed the day, and everyone ate and went to bed early. Life on a working farm was long hours and sleep when you could.

Lew decided to take a day off from everything and just lounge around. The others didn't need him for the work they were doing, but it seemed that Rachel was welcome to join the farm work crews, with the strict proviso that nothing could endanger her eyes or hands.

With her working side by side with the other adult women, the tension was finally broken. It was decided that Rachel was an excellent addition to their group. Three days of that, and two days of Lew doing some phone book research, and the two were ready to hit the road again. Since teaming with Irving had worked so well before, they recruited him away from the farm to help them on more mining expeditions.

Besides, Irving was chomping at the bit to get more items for his and Lydia's future business. With Rachel more than capable of driving one of the U500s, they took both of them, with trailers, and the Suburban. Lew led them to clinic after clinic that he'd located in the city using the yellow pages telephone books.

It quickly became obvious that Rachel only wanted the best in her clinics. She would go through each of the clinics and choose only a few items from each. But after a week of that, and another three days in abandoned hospitals, she declared that they had enough to start installing things in the two motorhomes.

Lew got the engines hooked up and made sure they would run before going any further. Fortunately the cab area, floors, and walls, except for the back wall, were all installed. So were the four slide units. There just weren't any fixtures or anything else in the living area.

So Lew and Irving, with the very occasional hand from Rachel, began installing not only the medical equipment, but also a bathroom in each of the units. Rachel was kept busy sorting through the medical supplies she picked up at the clinics and hospitals. Some of the medications were over expiration, but Rachel knew which were safe like that, and what wasn't. She had been more than a little surprised to find the narcotics cabinets all intact, except for one in one clinic.

The work was going well, and at about three each afternoon, they knocked off and went to a store or two that Irving wanted to check out. Lew and Rachel quit asking why this and why that. Irving had a

perfectly good explanation every time, but it was just easier to fetch and tote what he pointed at when he pointed at it.

But the here and there explorations for his equipment and the things for the clinics led them to parts of the city they had not investigated before. They weren't seeing a lot of people, but they were seeing some.

Their travels, besides what they were looking for at the moment, found them three moving vans that Irving claimed for use for storing his goods at the property. He'd just been stacking and tarping some of the things, but the moving vans were perfect to keep everything clean and in good condition.

Rachel also found another diesel pusher Class A motorhome, this one having had the engine being rebuilt at the time of the attacks. It, like the other Class As they'd found had four slide outs and was in immaculate shape. Lew and Harlan finished the job of putting the engine back in the chassis and tested it. It ran a bit rough at first, but then smoothed out to normal.

This motorhome was set up for pulling both an enclosed trailer and a towed vehicle. The trailer was empty, but the towed vehicle, like the motorhome itself, had a new engine in it. A four door Jeep with a Cummins 4BT non-electronic swap in. It was more than Rachel could have asked for. Rachel and Lew both were quiet when Lew helped Rachel move her things to that last motorhome.

Mid-summer came and went without a hitch. Lew and Rachel finished the clinic motorhomes with a few suggestions made by Gwendolyn. The rear panels were installed and then they were road tested and the equipment tested. After all the time in the up-fitter's shop working on the motorhome, no one had noticed the two matching trailers parked in the rear storage yard of the place. It was Irving, looking for a part out there, that discovered them just days before they were ready to take the rigs home.

The trailers had potable water and drain water tanks installed, a fuel tank and second generator, to supplement those in the units themselves.

The crops were looking good as fall approached. Rachel and Gwendolyn put their heads together and developed some signs to put up and hand out in both the town and the city to announce that the clinic would be at a certain place at a certain time to perform minor medical operations. And the notices were asking for a couple of nurses to lend a hand.

Due to the lack of problems for the last several months, Gwendolyn was willing to go into the city with just the two rigs and Rachel. But Rachel was cautious about it and Lew down right forbid it. Something like that would have usually put Rachel into a real rampage, but she happened to agree with Lew that it was too dangerous.

So on that first working trip in, Lew, Harlan, and Ernest all went in with them, Lew in the Suburban and Harlan and Ernest in the units to give a few tips on handling the big, heavy machines.

They made it to the Wal-Mart parking lot in town that would be one of the meeting places well ahead of schedule. They parked and extended the slide outs on each of the units. Lew disappeared with his rifle shortly after they arrived, leaving Harlan and Ernest at the units for close in protection.

It was almost noon before the first person approached. She did not look at all well, and Rachel and Gwendolyn immediately took her inside the lead unit. It was some time before she came out of the unit, still looking poorly, but moving much better.

Another woman showed up a few minutes later and was ushered into the lead unit. When she came out a half an hour later, there was a group of five more people waiting. One turned out to be a nurse, there to

volunteer. After Rachel talked to her for some time, Cathy Hutchison was put in charge of taking preliminary information, freeing up Harlan and Ernest to keep a better eye on the growing group of people seeking medical attention.

It looked like everyone had brought the requested medical item as a payment. Rubbing alcohol, peroxide, bandages, over the counter medications, just about anything Rachel would take as payment for the medical care.

The stories of survival were amazing. People had been tremendously creative in some of the ways they managed to avoid radiation exposure. But the numbers Ernest and Harlan were hearing about were under ten percent of the pre-war population levels in the area. And now the food was beginning to run out.

Ernest was surprised they hadn't had any of the people out trying to hunt game on their property. At least half of the people asked about good places to hunt. It got Ernest to thinking about some things that the group had discussed briefly, but had tabled for one reason or another.

When the team made it back to the property, well after dark, Ernest, after the inevitable questions from the others, took Lew aside to talk to him. "Bro, we're sitting on a gold mine. But it is loaded with dynamite that could blow at any minute."

"Okay. You lost me. You aren't talking about our gold holdings, I'm sure."

"No. I'm not. I'm talking about food. Pricilla's food, to be exact. I'd like to buy it from her and set up a stand in the city when we take the clinic into town. Some of those people are starving."

"It's like I told Pricilla when we went to get it, if we just hand out food, people will be expecting it in the future. And we will eventually be down to only what we can produce ourselves."

“I know. There’d have to be a compensation system, probably labor, perhaps some goods we can use. Or services.”

“I’m not against it, Ernest, but we’ll have to talk to Priscilla. And discuss it with the others. But I’m inclined to do it, if we are very careful. Sick people aren’t usually much of a danger, but hungry ones sure can be.”

“Okay. I’ll bring it up at tomorrow’s meeting.”

With the clinic idea such a success, there was plenty of support from most of the group. Excepting Pricilla. “Now, I’m not against the idea, mind you, but it is my food and I’d like to do something on my own with it.”

“Pricilla,” Ernest said, “We’ll pay you a premium price for the food.”

“It’s not that, Ernest. Selling to you and then you selling just makes what would need to be charged somewhat higher. If I sell it direct, with whoever helps me getting a piece of the action, I can sell it cheaper than you can and still make a modest profit. Which is all I’m looking for.”

“Oh. Well,” Ernest said, “That sounds doable. I wasn’t sure how I was going to do it. I’ll be needed here pretty soon to supervise the harvest.”

“And I will need to be here to supervise the canning, smoking, and dehydrating of that harvest. So I will need someone trustworthy to take over after a learning time.”

“If I didn’t have to look after the children,” Lydia said a bit wistfully, “I’d like to help.”

“Well,” Peggy said, “One of the children is mine and I should be taking care of him more than I am. I don’t see why we can’t all look after our own when you need to be in town.”

“Very true,” Grace added quietly. “You aren’t totally responsible for them. I think between Peggy, Amanda, and I, we can manage a day or two here and there.”

Amanda chuckled. “It would be a struggle, but sure. I think it would probably be good for them to be around a parent more than they are. I just hope I can keep up with them the way Lydia does. I don’t know how she keeps them entertained, educated, and acting as proper young men at their age.”

Lydia turned red, but Pricilla was nodding. “It would please me greatly if you would be willing to help.” Pricilla then turned to Lew. “I’d need some help getting set up. And I would only go when and where the clinic is going to be.”

“We can do that,” Lew said. “And I think, at least for the time being, we should have at least two guards with you all at all times.”

“With Lydia out there,” Irving said quietly, “I’d like to be there to help.”

“Understandable,” Ernest said. “I think that Trent, Harlan, Lew, Dick and I can rotate with Irving on that duty.”

“Hey! Don’t forget about us,” Amanda said. “There only needs to be one of us here to watch the children. Ernest said that we have all picked up the shooting well, and can handle what might come up.”

Trent, Harlan, Dick, and Ernest all voiced a protest.

“You want to rethink that comment, Harlan?” asked his wife Amanda. The other three women didn’t say anything out loud, but the looks they were giving the men said plenty.

“We’ll... We’re due for another firearms training session, so, I guess, after that, you three could all go in the rotation.” Ernest said it reluctantly, but the looks on the women’s face told him it was a good thing to have said.

Rachel had been silent up to that point. “And don’t forget that I can lend a hand with the defense if it becomes necessary. And if you keep a vehicle ready and a couple of you on call with a radio, we can call for help if we need it.”

“That’s a long hour to get to the various places you plan to use. More when you go to the city.” Lew looked doubtful.

“You think it would be a long hour for Harlan to get there if Amanda was in trouble?” Rachel was smiling.

“She has a point,” Harlan said.

“Okay. If need be, lend a hand. Hopefully we are all past that.” Lew didn’t look too sure of that being the case.

There were several Amens and the group broke up.

Harvest was several days away yet, and after agreeing to make these runs into the city before harvest started, the last ones for general items, the group pushed hard to get as many done as they could.

Lew and Irving concentrated on finding Pricilla a suitable vehicle or vehicle and trailer combination for the farmer’s market she would be running. Their first try was a success, primarily because they knew they wanted another Class A and Irving looked in the yellow pages for RV dealers.

The closest one was in another area they had not done any mining in. They investigated the three Class A diesel pushers and found that only one of them would start and run properly. It was another one in the shop for engine work. It was already in the motor home and needed only to be connected.

Since they were so handy to have around, Lew decided to take not only the one that ran, but to tow to the property the other two. Lew was no slouch at diesel engine mechanics, but Ernest was a real whiz. If anyone could get the other two motorhomes running, it would be Ernest.

The only difference in the three motorhomes was the one that ran was the seemingly very popular four slide out model. One of the others had only two slide outs and the third had none. After getting the units home, Lew and Irving picked up the things they would need to convert the one that ran into a farmers' market.

Two large refrigerators, a pair of chest type freezers, racks for the boxes of home canned foods, and shelving for the fresh produce were installed and the power generator replaced for a larger one, which would run everything, including the three air conditioners.

Though there was no fancy matching trailer for any of the units, three large rental trailers were found and brought out to the property. Like the clinic units, the trailers would carry extra water, fuel, sewer tank, an extra generator, and a pair of chemical toilets built in for convenience of the customers.

There was room in the two clinic trailers to do the same to them, since there could be quite a wait in line, and they would always park out in the open parking lots for safety.

The next time the clinic units went in, to a Costco this time, Irving drove the market motorhome and trailer in. The notices had been passed around and posted during the last salvage runs that there would be some

food available this time. There were more than a dozen people waiting for the food, with only one or two waiting for the clinic.

But when it was obvious there was enough food to go around, people dropped out of that line and went in to see Rachel and Gwendolyn. Cathy, the nurse from the first trip in was back, this time with a friend, who was also a nurse. Rachel interviewed her quickly and said she was hired. The two women would get some food, a little fuel, and some silver coinage.

Pricilla's request for payment had been canning jars, unused lids, any fresh food the customer wanted to trade in on the home canned items, silver coins, and labor agreements for future projects that Pricilla might want to do.

Pricilla and Rachel were both warned to stay away from a couple of places and to always keep a good look out when they were in town. There were at least one gang from the old days, and some brigands that had met up and were taking whatever they wanted from not only abandoned places, but stealing from people that had any food or fuel.

After that, Lew always went in, plus whoever else was on the schedule. And he always hung back a bit when the convoy headed for home, to see if anyone was following. There'd been no one following that he had been able to determine. But late in the fall, which came early, Lew was glassing the perimeter of the Sam's Club parking lot with binoculars when he saw what would surely turn into trouble.

It was 'Johnny Reb' Calhoun in his tricked out blue Ford pickup truck. And he was using binoculars to study the group out in the middle of the parking lot.

Lew walked over to Rufus and opened the front passenger seat door. He reached in and picked up the microphone for the Cobra 148GTL SSB/AM CB radio. He changed channels to the one he knew Johnny Reb had used most of the time in the past.

“Johnny Reb, that you out there I see spying on us?”

“Not spying, you lying dog! This is my territory and you ain’t welcome. So, I suggest you pay the tariff and then get in your small trucks and head for home. The tariff just happens to be three motorhomes with trailers. Walk away, hero. You won’t be a hero if you are dead.”

They’d only been there for an hour, but Lew didn’t want to take on Johnny Reb with other people in the area that could get hurt. He went into the front clinic unit to talk to Rachel. Cathy blocked his way. “Lew, Rachel is doing minor surgery. You can’t come in.”

“Dang! How long?” Lew asked.

“Not long,” Cathy said. An hour, perhaps.”

“That’s too long,” Lew muttered. He knew Rachel well enough now that he was positive that not only would she not cut the operation short, no matter how minor it was, she wouldn’t be willing to leave the people there for her help.

Lew moved back to Rufus and used the business band radio in it to notify Irving, Grace, and Ernest that Johnny Reb was out there.

“I’ll take care of this,” Ernest said.

Lew heard Grace say, “No Ernest!” But Ernest didn’t respond

Lew knew where Ernest was situated. He looked over that way and Ernest was not where he should have been. “Nuts!” Lew said forcefully.

He grabbed the M1A and FMCO vest out of the Suburban. Wearing the vest and carrying the rifle at port arms, Lew headed for the

blue truck at a slow run, keeping his eyes on the driver's door. He could just barely see Johnny Reb sitting there, with the binoculars to his eyes.

Lew sped up when he saw Ernest approaching the truck from the rear. Something must have given Ernest away for the truck was peeling rubber toward another entrance to the huge mall.

Slowing, Lew changed direction toward Ernest. Lew could see that Ernest was livid. "It amazes me how some useless low-lives make it through something like this when so many good people die."

"We're going to have to do something about him and that other group," Lew said softly.

"And that we will, Bro. I guarantee it."

"Just keep a good look out. I don't think he'll show up now that he knows we are aware of him, but he just might."

"No way to get out of here early, is there?" Ernest asked Lew.

"Nope. No way at all."

Ernest went back to his perch to keep an eye out, and Lew went back to the units. "What's going on?" Irving asked, helping a lady out of the market trailer. He handed her the bag of food and she went over to the table outside the clinic trailer.

"Trouble. Diverted for the moment, but keep your weapons handy. You see a blue pickup, you let me know ASAP."

"Okay, Lew."

Slinging the rifle, Lew followed the elderly woman. He spoke to the group waiting for treatment. "Anyone here know anything about Johnny Reb Calhoun?"

There were some uneasy looks between some of the people, but no one spoke up. Lew took a one ounce gold eagle out of his shirt pocket and held it up. "Whoever tells me about Johnny Reb gets this."

Several people, obviously scared, moved away. Three men and a woman were left. They exchanged looks and the three men left. "What do you have?" Lew asked.

"That real?" the woman asked.

"Very real. I can make it ten one tenth ounce coins if you want smaller denominations."

"You won't let on who told you? I'm expecting a baby and I don't want nothing happening to me or him." She cupped her hands under her swollen belly.

"No one will hear it from me," Lew reassured the woman.

"I want the small coins."

Lew pulled a leather change purse out of his left front pocket and opened it. He counted out ten of the small denomination coins and handed them to the woman. Lew slipped the purse back in his pants pocket and the single coin in his shirt pocket.

"What do you have?" Lew asked.

"He's an animal." The woman was adamant. "Doesn't matter what age or how hungry anyone is, if he finds food, he takes it. Usually beats up someone just to prove how tough he is."

"He said this is his territory. That right?"

“Oh, no! This is Lister’s area. The Reb just showed up a week ago. Someone found out that Lister had chased him out of his old territory.”

“How many men does Reb and Lister have?”

“Reb at least ten. I don’t know about Lister. More than ten.”

“That all you know?”

“Just one more thing. He’s looking for someone called Ernest. Said he’d give food to anyone that told him where he lives.”

“I see. Think he really will?”

“You mean, give food?”

Lew nodded.

“I think so. But he’d probably take it back if you didn’t eat it immediately.”

“Tell you what, if you’ll get a message to him I’ll give you ten more of the tenth ounce gold coins.”

The woman’s eyes got huge. “He’ll kill this Ernest. He doesn’t do it face to face, they say. Always from behind, with no one else around.”

“Yeah. Well, give him this piece of paper...” Lew wrote out instructions on how to get to the property. “And tell him if he wants Ernest he has to come through Lew first. Now, see the doc, and take good care of yourself. Don’t do anything that will bring his wrath down on you.”

“What’s wrath?”

“Anger. Extreme anger.”

“Oh. Don’t worry. I’ll be like a church mouse.”

Lew nodded and went back to the Suburban to get the binoculars and take up an observation point again.

It was a long, hot day on the pavement. But the generators powering the air conditioning units were good ones and those getting food or treatments had some relief for a while. They were finally packing up, just at dark.

Lew hung back further than usual this time. He was sure he saw some headlights at one point well out on the state road. He smiled. It wasn’t his place to put the property in danger, but he thought it better to manipulate a situation where they had advantages than getting caught by surprise.

When Lew pulled in and closed the top gate and got out, he realized that the weather had taken a drastic turn since they left the parking lot. It was now quite cool, and a light snow was falling, being blown about by the strong winds.

The next day was to be a quiet day, but Lew and Ernest stirred things up when they explained about Johnny Reb. Other than Ernest, no one but Lew was keen on the plan he had to lure Johnny Reb and his men into an attack on the property. One they would be ready for.

“This slug has no patience,” Ernest said. “If he knows our location, and thanks to Lew he probably does now, he will attack within three days at most. I think we can stay ready for that amount of time if we have to. If he doesn’t attack, I’ll just go get him on my own.”

Grace looked as frightened as Lydia.

“We’ll set things up in the fighting positions, and since it might be freezing or above freezing, I’m going to spread a little bentonite powder

on the approaches and wet it down slightly. If it freezes, all the better, but just the damp bentonite will play havoc with them climbing the slope.”

“You can’t cover the entire top of the property!” Rachel asked. “Or can you?”

“Nope. But unless we’re attacked by trained troops and quite a few of them, the defenses we have in place give us a huge advantages. There are only a few places one can approach the living areas. Getting through anywhere else just puts them at risk for getting bogged down.

“The bentonite and ice will be on all approaches they are likely to use. And I’ll flood the terracing trench after cutting off the gate for it to fill the pond. I’m going to start on that, if Ernest will get you all up to speed on what your part will be in the attack.”

Lew was busy all day long and decided to not take a watch that night. He was very doubtful if Johnny Reb would attack without at least trying to look the place over somewhat.

But the next night proved Ernest right on Johnny Reb’s impatience. The security cameras on the road gate caught five men working their way along the steel pipe fence on one side of the gate. All five made it far enough to climb over without mishap.

The sensors were able to pick them up again at the tree line where the open area began. They spread out along the edge and flopped down. Each one had binoculars and they were glassing the area for over three hours.

Once informed, everyone made sure they looked like they weren’t aware of anything and went about their normal routines. The men left before four in the morning. Two vehicles, including Johnny Reb’s pride and joy tricked out Ford, picked the men up and disappeared back toward the town.

“What do you think, Ernest?” Lew asked. “In a couple of hours, tonight, or early tomorrow?”

“Not tonight. Already missed too much sleep and will want to pin those guys down on the details they were able to see. I think he’d too lazy to do it real early tomorrow morning, but just before daylight and into the morning hours will be the time.”

“Okay,” Lew said. “Everyone set their alarm for four, and go to your assigned location. Don’t shoot until they fire first. And when you do fire, shoot to kill. And Rachel, I know you can handle a gun, but I want you in with Lydia, Pricilla and the children in the bunker. You are our ace in the hole if they by whatever means they breach the houses.

Rachel looked like she wanted to argue, but saw the look in Lew’s eyes. She would not win this argument without a real shouting match and she wouldn’t do that to the group.

Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 5

Rachel, in the bunker watching the monitors, spoke quietly into her microphone. “Bogies at the entrance. Twelve people. She kept up a running litany as the group of eleven men stood around while another one used a torch on the gate lock mechanism. It took quite a while for good steel had been used and the man wielding the torch didn’t seem to be very good with it.

“They aren’t really even looking around. Just standing around the end of the driveway. Wait a minute. There is a blue pickup coming up the drive. Lifted and with big tires. Two people in front and four people in the back. And another pickup. Ugly yellow. Two and two. Two people walking.”

Everyone was ready when the trucks cleared the tree line. But the orders were wait until the attackers fired first. That was hard for several of the people on the property, for both trucks began to accelerate up the slope, spread apart, off the driveway.

Suddenly the yellow truck began to lose speed and fish tail. It still was making progress, slowly, despite the screaming engine and spinning rear tires. The left front wheel slipped over the lip of the terracing trench. The rear end slid around the other way and the right front tire went over the lip, too, causing the truck to high center. There wasn’t enough momentum for the yellow truck to go forward into the trench, so, still with no response from the defenders, the two men in the cab got out and jumped down into the trench.

They had no idea how deep the water was, or how deep the trench and went up to their shoulders in the water that had a thin layer of ice on it. One man struggled to get out and made it up the slope a bit, but was on the wet bentonite and was just slipping and sliding on his stomach.

The water was cold, with that ice on it, and the second man must have been shorter and with less resistance to the temperature, for his head went under the water and didn't come back up.

When the two men in the bed of the yellow truck jumped out onto the grass behind the truck one landed badly and screamed when he broke his left femur. The other man hit the ground well, but slid down the slope a good twenty feet before he could scabble enough to stop himself. He was still trying to stand up and walk up to pick up the gun he'd dropped, but kept falling down on the slick surface.

The blue truck was making better progress, with Johnny Reb behind the wheel. The big tires would spin down to bare dirt and lunge forward a few feet and then do it again. And as the driver of the yellow truck found out, it wasn't just a short drop off into the terracing trench.

Johnny Reb had the truck going a good five miles an hour when the front wheels went over the edge of the trench. There was enough momentum to carry the pickup forward, nose down, into the water. The impact threw the four men in the back over the cab, across the hood, and into the shallow water of the upper side of the trench.

The second man in the cab was screaming that he was drowning as Johnny Reb opened the driver's side door and slid out into the deepest part of the water. He lifted the AK-47 clone, converted to select fire, and emptied a drum magazine wildly at the houses from around the side of the truck door.

Had Johnny Reb not done that, things might have turned out quite differently. But the signal for the defenders to fire had been one of the attackers firing on them. Ten people fired on Johnny Reb's men, one shot after another until their magazines were empty. But Ernest had Lew's Vigilance VR-1 .408 CheyTac rifle in his hands and put a round through the door of the Ford, through Johnny Reb, that stopped deep in the dirt of the side of the trench.

Just to be sure, Ernest fired three more times as the others emptied their magazines. Harlan and Lew were reloaded and ready to go out and check on the wounded. Ernest signaled that it was all right for them to leave the fighting positions just outside the security fence. Ernest would keep watch and take down any of Johnny Reb's men that made a move toward a weapon.

Wearing crampons on their boots so they could walk on the slick slope, they started down toward the trench. Harlan stopped first. He dropped to his knees and began to retch. It was a near thing with Lew. All twelve of the men were dead, and several were literally riddled with bullet holes. They might not have been experienced soldiers, but the things about shooting that Ernest had taught the others had been right on. Slow, steady, accurate fire.

The man with the broken leg had not been spared, nor even the man that had drowned. His floating body had a share of the rounds. One of the men that went over the cab of Johnny Reb's truck had broken his neck, when he hit, but had also taken half a dozen rounds just to make sure.

Lew had everyone wait another fifteen minutes, with Rachel watching for any movement on the outside monitors. When nothing came into view, she hurried outside with her bag. She insisted on checking each body, despite the visual evidence that they were all dead. Rachel was grim faced when she joined the others. "I think that problem is solved."

"Yes," Lew said. "We've got one more though, and I don't think it will be as easy as this one."

"The other group you said the woman mentioned to you?"

Lew nodded. "But for the moment, let's clear up this mess and have a day or two to recover."

Everyone was for that, but the cleanup boiled down to Ernest, Lew, Harlan, and Irving. The others just weren't up to it. Rachel would do it, but Lew preferred for her to not do it and she acquiesced without an argument. There wasn't much useful found on the bodies so they were buried without ceremony and the two vehicles towed to places on the property where they would become parts of the defensive structure of the place.

Winter set in, but everyone seemed ready for it this winter. The survivors were a hearty group for the most part. With so many tasks completed there was time of people to have some private time for personal tasks.

As long as the weather was at least decent, Rachel and Pricilla continued to operate the clinic and the market. Lew, with a large pack on his back rode in with them and the guards they were still using, and would disappear for two weeks at a time before showing up at the property again.

Not even Ernest seemed to know what he was doing. It really bothered Rachel and she braced him the week before Christmas. "Just what are you doing out there weeks at a time? You're upsetting some of the group."

Lew didn't ask whom. Ernest was keeping him informed of the situation on the property while he was gone. Lew started to just ignore the request, but it would be a severe snub for Rachel and he simply didn't want to do that.

"Reconnoitering the Lister camp. I found them on my first trip out and I've been observing them on subsequent visits. We are going to have to hit them soon. They made a raid two weeks ago. Lost a couple of men, and didn't get much, so they are going to be desperate to raid again before long."

“Oh. You don’t plan on taking them on by yourself, do you?” Rachel asked.

Lew shook his head. “There are twenty-three... rather twenty-one now after the loss. They are in a gated community on this side of the city and keep a guard on the front gate all the time. A raiding party is only fifteen at a time, while the others remain at the community to keep it secure. I’m trying to decide how to take them on with the least amount of risk and highest probability of success.”

“Well, count me in on this one. I’m not sitting another one out. I might have been needed.”

“I don’t think...”

“So don’t think. It isn’t an option you have a say in.” Rachel turned around and headed back to her motorhome.

Lew frowned and headed for his house to begin the plan that would put the gang out of business for good.

Two days before Christmas Eve, Lew rode in with the team again. Pricilla was taking in a good load of food, primarily, with the clinic along for just in case. Lew disappeared as soon as the vehicles stopped.

Rachel watched him get to the mall buildings that surrounded the parking lot. She had more a frown of worry than one of displeasure.

“He’s getting under your skin, isn’t he, Dearie?” Pricilla asked from just behind her.

Rachel jumped and turned around. “Don’t scare me like that. And no, he is not getting under my skin.”

Lew was on a different mission this time. He’d scouted out what he needed to know, and gathered the things he needed to aid in defeating

the gang on their own ground with the least possibility of harm to what he considered 'his' people.

Working every night up to two days before the New Year, Lew placed the explosives he'd rounded up whenever he ran across them in a shipment or at a mining supply company, of which there were several in the city. Several Radio Shacks had given him the requirements for time detonators. If this didn't work, it would be a terrible waste of resources, and might make the situation worse.

Getting the dual sport bike he kept stashed in town from the first scouting mission, with the plan already taking shape in his mind, Lew headed back to the property. He got there early morning and called everyone together.

"Okay. I've set things up for a raid on Lister's base of operations. They are out on a raid right now, but seldom are gone more than a day and a half. If we hit them late in the afternoon of New Year's Day, I think we can catch them liquored up and off guard."

"You have no right to plan something like that without consulting us!" It was the first time Trent had shown any resistance of the way Lew and Ernest were running things.

"I know. And no one has to participate. And I'll do everything in my power to make sure any survivors aren't aware of where I came from."

"Lew," Rachel asked quietly, "Is this really necessary?"

"You heard what the people coming to you and Pricilla for medical care and food are saying. Johnny Reb was mean, but he was stupid. This Lister is playing a game, for very high stakes. If he is crossed, that person pays a terrible price. Beheadings, disembowelments, and worse. I'll not see him staying alive if there is a chance I can take at least him out."

“Can’t we wait for them to come to us?” asked Grace. “That worked great the last time.”

“We might be successful. But we came off without a single injury that time. Even with the defenses we have, there is a great risk of someone being severely wounded or killed if we get caught by surprise. And I don’t like sleeping with one eye open all the time.”

“I’m with you, Bro, but I sure hope you have a good plan.”

“I do, Ernest,” Lew responded, “But I’m going to need you here during the operation. I’ve got to have the best back up for the safety of this place as I can get. And that means you here while I’m out there.” They would argue it later, but Lew finally convinced Ernest the plan would be better if Lew went to the field and Ernest held down the home fort.

In the meantime, Lew looked around at the group. “Okay. I’m in,” Harlan said when no one else spoke up.

“Oh, Honey!” Amanda said. Harlan just shrugged. Amanda stood tall and said, “Well, then I’m in, too.”

Harlan tried, but if he went, Amanda went. There was no other choice. And Lew had pulled Harlan out of a few scrapes in the past. He owed it to him to lend a hand.

It went much the same with Dick and Carolyn, Irving and Lydia, and Grace and Ernest. But when the battle was over, they would go, all of them, except Pricilla, Ernest, and Lydia. Even Trent agreed to go after the others agreed, and Peggy would be going with him.

Lew didn’t let them think about it very long. They needed a couple of hours to prepare before they left the next morning and needed to be fresh for the battle. So equipment, supplies, and weapons were readied,

early suppers eaten, and everyone went to bed except for the rotating night watch.

The group going was on the road the next morning by ten, and got to the drop off point at one. It would take another hour to work their way on foot to the positions that Lew had marked off on a map for each one of them. Lew cautioned that they be ready, and went as far as to have them hack watches to synchronize them so all would be reacting at the same time. Fifteen minutes after two. He extracted a promise from Grace to wait with one of the clinic motorhomes and Gwendolyn until she was sent for or everyone came back.

Lew had his M1A and vest, plus the Vigilance VR-1 and a couple of magazines. He settled down in the spot where he could see most of the gated enclave. It was already obvious that the group was well on the way to being drunk. He glanced at his watch and began the count down in his head. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now.

Everything wasn't quite synchronized, and a couple of the explosions came a second or so later than the others, but all were effective. Lew was watching through the VR-1's scope and found his first target. The man had been caught in the blast at the gated entrance and Lew put him out of his misery. The women began to fire at targets of opportunity and the other men began advancing, firing as they went.

Lew got off three more shots with the VR-1 before he left it and headed down at a run with the M1A at the ready. He knew what Lister looked like. The others had deferred to one man, and one only. That had to be Lister.

He'd yet to put in an appearance. Stunned, dazed, and disoriented by the blasts, Lister's men went down one after the other. There were some gaps in the shooting, when someone had to reload, or there was a lack of targets.

Now inside the gated community, Lew stopped the other men from advancing further. "Take up good cover positions and take out everyone that tries to get away. There aren't many left and I'll flush them out."

There were a couple of feeble protests, which Lew ignored. None of the others really wanted to go house to house with killers like Lister.

The first three houses were empty when Lew made his way through them. The fourth house held one man, injured from the blasts. But when he raised a rifle Lew shot him. Fifth house nothing. Sixth nothing. Lew nearly lost his life in the seventh. There were four men and they were ready for him. They thought.

Lew was entering each building a different way. This time it was a rear door. The four men were keying on the living room door. The first two didn't know what hit them. The third got off a shot before he died, and the fourth took a plug out of Lew's left arm. But they were all dead. Lew took a moment to apply a Soldier's Tourniquet on the arm before he advanced.

He made it through the next four houses on that side of the street, checked the three facing the cul-de-sac, and started down the other side of the street. Lew was feeling the tension as he cleared one house after another with no sign of Lister. And his arm was hurting something fierce.

Lew was about to decide that Lister was under some rubble, or had escaped, when he saw, seemingly in slow motion, a gun barrel appear in the doorway of the very last house to check. The one closest to the gate on that side of the street.

Even as he brought the M1A up and in line with the shadow in the doorway, he could tell he was going to be too late. But even with the searing pain of a bullet hitting his left shoulder blade and ricochet toward his left arm, Lew pulled the trigger of the M1A three times before he hit the ground like a sack of cement.

Lister didn't have a chance. If the three rounds that Lew had stitched down his front from his neck to his belly button hadn't killed him, five or more shots from each of the other men by the gate would have killed him anyway.

Harlan took charge and waved the women down. He sent Irving, the fastest of them on foot, for Rachel and the clinic vehicle. Everyone was keeping a close eye out. No one wanted another wound or death. Working carefully, while waiting for Irving, the women searched the houses and bodies. Like the Johnny Reb group, these men had very little, except liquor. They gathered up the arms and ammunition and left everything else stay where it was.

Irving showed up with the motorhome. Rachel jumped out of the door before he had the big vehicle stopped. It only took one look at Lew for her to have the men carefully lift him and carry him into the motorhome. They put him on an exam table and strapped him down. Gwendolyn ushered the others out, put on exam gloves as Rachel did, and turned to help Rachel save Lew if there was any chance of doing so.

The others radioed the property and informed them of the situation. Ernest wanted to come down to see to his brother himself, but stoically stayed where he was, to keep an eye on the place the way Lew wanted.

Rachel and Gwendolyn worked on Lew for three hours before Rachel began to sew him up and said, "It's up to him, now. Let's get him home."

Gwendolyn opened the door and was immediately bombarded with questions. "Rachel wants to get him home. He's stable now, but it is too soon to tell."

Irving strode forward and climbed up into the driver's seat. He started the big diesel engine and got the rig turned around. The other

vehicles had been brought down and everyone else climbed into them and headed back to the property.

The storm that had been threatening since the day before began as light snow, but in the long three hours it took to get back to the property, it became a nasty snowstorm. After getting Lew into his bed, Rachel ushered the others out.

Ernest was the most reluctant to leave, but Grace finally convinced him that he could help Lew more by taking care of the needs of the property and other members of the group than sitting and just waiting for Lew to wake up.

Rachel had Gwendolyn watch Lew for a few minutes while she ran over to her motorhome to get a few things. Gwendolyn headed for her trailer just as the skies opened up and the snow storm became a full-fledged blizzard.

For three days the snow fell and the winds blew, proving out the purpose of the tunnels connecting the various structures. Ernest, Grace, Lydia, and Irving, who had moved in with them during the blizzard, were able to use the tunnels to get to the barns and take care of the stock without exposing themselves to the weather. Everyone else just stayed inside and kept in touch with their short range radios.

The solar power system shut down for lack of sunlight, though the GALE windmill was able to just keep the batteries charged. The generators ran long hours to provide everyone with electrical power.

Even after the snow quit falling, the wind continued to blow fiercely and everyone decided not to venture out until the weather moderated. It took four more days for that to happen. The first thing everyone did when they could get out was check on Lew. All noted the somewhat haggard appearance of Rachel.

“Did you get any sleep at all, Rachel?” Gwendolyn asked. “You should have let me stay and help.”

“I slept. Not much. But I did.” Then, to each one that came to the house to check on Lew, she said the same thing. “He’s past the worst of it. No infection, and I had enough IVs to keep him going. It might be a while until he wakes up. I’m keeping him suppressed so he doesn’t try to do something stupid. Like try and get out of bed.”

“Why don’t you take a break and let me watch him a while, Rachel. You really do look a mess.”

Rachel turned to look at Lew for long moments before she nodded. “Okay. I could use a shower and a few more minutes of sleep. I’ll be back in here in a few minutes.” With that, Rachel went into the second bedroom to undress and take a long hot shower. She dried off and then dressed in fresh clothing before going back to Lew’s bedroom.

“I finally saw the cot on the other side of the bed, Rachel. You’ve been sleeping right here by his side, haven’t you.”

“He might have needed something,” Rachel replied simply. “If you don’t mind staying a few more minutes, I’ll catch a few Zs.”

“Of course. That’s what I wanted you to do.” Gwendolyn quickly added, “But use the other bedroom, why don’t you?”

“I’d rather be close,” Rachel replied, sitting down and then laying back on the cot. She adjusted the pillow a bit, but was asleep before her head had settled on it. Gwendolyn let her sleep, but called Ernest to come over and sit with Lew so she could get some rest herself and something to eat.

Ernest was happy to do so. Gwendolyn pointed to the sleeping Rachel on the cot between the bed and the wall, and then whispered, “I nearly had to threaten her to get her to shower, change, and get some

sleep. She's been sleeping in here the entire time. I don't know the last time she had anything to eat.

So Ernest took over the vigil, sitting in a chair by Lew's bed, holding his free hand and praying. He was there for several hours and neither Lew nor Rachel stirred. That is, until about seven that evening. Lew groaned and Rachel was up and at his side immediately, trying to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

"You're not Gwendolyn," Rachel said absently, checking Lew's vitals quickly and efficiently.

"No. I spelled her several hours ago."

"Hours? I was only going to nap for a few minutes."

"No harm, no foul. This is the first sound he's made since I got here. How is he?"

"I'm going to ease off the sedative and see if he wakes up on his own." Rachel made an adjustment to one of the IV bags and then checked Lew's vitals again. "Everything seems to be getting back to normal. I think he's going to be all right."

As the two watched and waited silently, another hour passed before Lew began to stir. A couple of grunts and groans, and then Lew opened his eyes. Rachel was right there to check them.

"Hey! That's bright!" Lew managed to croak out. "I'm thirsty." A few seconds later, he added, "I'm starving, too. What happened? Where am I?"

"I'll get you something in a few minutes," Rachel said. "How are you feeling, from shoulders on down?"

Lew groaned when he tried to move his left arm. It was in a sling, tied firmly to his body. “Can’t move it, and it hurts, but it seems okay.”

“Again. What happened?”

“What do you remember, Bro?”

Lew looked thoughtful and then said, “Lister. I had Lister in my sights. I think... I think I fired... But I can’t remember.”

“You got him, Lew, but he got a round into you while you were doing it.”

“Shoulder, right?” He had looked over at Rachel for an answer.

“Yes. Hit the shoulder blade, but glanced and went down your left arm a ways before lodging under the skin.”

“I think I’m going to be sick!” Lew said suddenly, looking very pale now.

“Help me get him into the bathroom,” Rachel said, moving quickly to unhook the other IV she’d been feeding him with. “This is going to hurt,” she said then, reaching under the sheet to pull the urinary catheter she’d had to insert that first night.

“I’ll say!” Lew groaned. He looked at Rachel. “I guess you’re the one that put it in.”

“I was. Now, let’s get you up and to the bathroom.”

Lew was ready to swing his legs over the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor when he suddenly stopped. “I’m naked.”

“Yeah. And I’ve seen it all before,” Rachel said. “So don’t think about it and let us get you into the bathroom. I don’t want to have to clean up this room after you.”

Lew tried. He really did. But his legs just didn’t want to work. Ernest got under his good arm and Rachel gingerly supported his injured one and finally got him to the bathroom. “You better stay with him,” Rachel told Ernest and left.

After a few dry heaves, Lew turned around and sat down on the stool. There was a knock on the bathroom door and it opened a few inches. Rachel handed Ernest a robe for Lew.

Finished, Ernest helped Lew into the robe and then supported him back to the bed. “That was harder than I thought,” Lew said. “Thank you.”

“Un-huh,” Rachel said. “I’ll go fix you something to eat.”

“I can...” Lew started to say, but the look that Rachel gave him shut him up quickly.

When Rachel left to go to the kitchen, Ernest quietly filled Lew in on what had happened after he’d been shot. Including Rachel’s dogged insistence to stay with him and care for him.

“Remarkable woman,” Lew said, staring at the open bedroom door.

“Yeah,” Ernest said. “She is that, for sure.” Ernest began to fill Lew in on the rest of what had been going on the last few days. “The snow is nearly four feet deep.”

Lew interrupted him. “It snowed?”

“Yep. Started just as we headed back here with you. Been snowing fairly heavily for three days and nights. We’re keeping a couple of paths

open, but most everyone moved to the bunker after the first day when it looked like it was going to get really bad.”

“Ah. Oh. No one else was hurt, where they?” Lew’s voice was a bit panicky.

“Nope. You’re the only one that took a hit. You almost didn’t make it, Bro. Rachel pulled you back a couple of times.”

“Oh. Funny. I don’t feel any different, except for the arm.”

“Yeah. Well...” Rachel came in carrying a tray and Ernest fell silent.

“I hope you like chili,” Rachel said, setting the tray on a side table so she could help Lew sit up better in the bed. She added pillows behind his back to support him. Besides the chili, there was a small plate of crackers and a large glass of water. “Can you feed yourself or do I need to do it?” She asked as she put the tray on Lew’s thighs.

“I can do it... I think...” Lew picked up the spoon and took a small bite of the chili. “Yep. I can do it. Uh... Could you crumble the crackers into the bowl? That’s kind of hard one handed.”

Rachel did so without saying anything. She left the room and Ernest picked up where he’d left off.

“Gwendolyn told us that Rachel just wouldn’t give up on you. You should even be able to regain use of the arm, which Gwendolyn said is solely because of Rachel’s expertise and determination to make it so.”

“I owe her a great deal, I guess,” Lew said softly, staring down at the bowl of chili without really seeing it.

“Just doing my job,” Rachel said. She’d heard Lew’s remark as she entered the room. “Still eating, I see. I’ll be back in a bit. I need to check

on a couple of people in the shelter. I think we have a cold bug going around and I want to minimize the danger.”

“I’ll clean up after him, Rachel, if you want to take a break after you see to the others,” Ernest said.

“I’ll need to check his vitals after he eats, but then I would appreciate the relief.”

Ernest nodded in return and Rachel was gone again. Ernest had turned back to Lew in time to see the longing in his eyes, which was quickly masked as Lew took another bite of the chili. “She isn’t just remarkable. She’s good looking. And single.”

“Yeah. I noticed. I don’t think she has,” Lew said. “She doesn’t seem too fond of me.”

“Hm. You sure about that? You think she’d put out the kind of effort she has if she didn’t at least like you?”

“Sure she would. She’s a doctor with a conscience.”

“Well, I’m telling you, Bro, you don’t want to mess things up. Verna has been dead for a long time and there has been so many things under the bridge I can’t even count them. This is your best chance to have happiness during the coming years. Things may get a little worse, for a while, but they will eventually get better. Not like the old days, but a new normal.”

“I don’t know, Ernest. She just doesn’t seem interested.”

“Well, give her a chance to show her interest. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“Yeah. Well. Maybe. Why don’t you make yourself useful and get me another bowl of this chili. It is good.”

“And she can cook,” Ernest said over his shoulder as he took the tray, headed for the kitchen with it.

“Argh!” Lew grunted. He didn’t need any reminders of Rachel’s abilities, talents, or attractiveness. He’d noticed them early on. And they were haunting him.

Ernest decided he’d done all he could after taking the second, half empty, bowl of chili and the tray back to the kitchen and helped Lew to the bathroom again. So he helped Lew adjust the pillows again so he could lie back and get some sleep that wasn’t unconsciousness, and then left.

Lew was asleep again when Rachel came back into the room. She debated on whether or not to wake him so she could take his vitals. But deciding it could wait, and still short on sleep, she laid down on the cot, intending to cat-nap for a few minutes and then wake him up to take the readings.

It was Lew that woke up first. It took him a few moments to place the sound he was hearing. Finally, he leaned his head over the edge of the bed and saw Rachel there on the cot, sound asleep.

Though it hurt his arm a bit, Lew couldn’t draw his eyes away from Rachel’s face. Relaxed in sleep and her hair rather disheveled, she still looked beautiful to him. Her beauty was different than Verna’s had been. But equal or greater in many ways.

Suddenly Rachel’s eyes opened, to the sight of Lew looking down at her. Neither said anything for a long moment, and then Lew lay back onto the bed and Rachel climbed up off the cot.

“It really isn’t necessary for you to sleep on the cot,” Lew said, not meeting Rachel’s eyes as he spoke. “The other bedroom...”

“I’ll start sleeping there, and go back to my place as soon as you are well enough and the weather clears. I guess you don’t need me sleeping in here anymore.”

“It’s not that...” Lew got out before words failed him.

“Not that? Then what?”

Lew was sure that he saw tears forming in Rachel’s eyes. He decided to be perfectly honest. “Well... To be honest... I guess I’d rather have you in my bed, than on the cot. I’m falling for you, Rachel. In a big way.”

Rachel was shaking her head. “That’s just the gratitude that patients often feel for the doctor that treats them for serious conditions.”

“No, Rachel, it isn’t. Not in this case. I’ve had these feelings for you for a long time. From shortly after you arrived.”

“You mean that?” Rachel asked. “Truthfully?”

“Yes,” Lew replied. “I’ll make any oath you want. That is how I feel.”

Rachel had been taking tiny steps toward the bed during the conversation. She was now up against the side of the bed. She leaned down and carefully planted her lips on Lew’s. Both had to breathe deeply when Rachel broke the kiss and stood up.

“I need to think about this,” she said softly and then hurried from the room, forgetting to take the vitals readings. But that didn’t last long. She remembered them, but instead of doing them herself, sent Gwendolyn up to do them and to make sure he was secure in bed.

Pricilla saw the distracted look on Rachel’s face when Rachel came into the kitchen area of the bunker to get a cup of coffee.

“My, my. You do looked distracted, my dear. Would you be, finally, seeing the interest that Lew has for you?”

“How did...” Rachel began, but Pricilla laughed.

“Didn’t, for sure. But you pretty much just confirmed it. You could do a lot worse than Lew Norton. I’ve known those boys from birth. They are both forthright, upstanding, honorable men.”

Rachel nodded, but didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes. “But I don’t know... I don’t know if I could be a good wife. My work...”

“Honey, doctor’s wives and doctor’s husbands have been dealing with that since forever. The two of you are more than capable of working out an appropriate arrangement if you were to marry. Might want to think about it pretty hard and quickly. It appears that Ernest and Grace, Lydia and Irving, and Dick and Carolyn are planning to get married on the first trip to town. Seems a minister has moved into the area and has agreed to do the services. Might think about making it a quadruple wedding.”

“Oh, my! I need to think!” Rachel said, ignoring the coffee for the moment. But a few moments of meditation, the look on Rachel’s face when she picked up the coffee cup again and took a sip told Pricilla that she had made the decision. The right decision.

Pricilla smiled when Rachel set aside the coffee cup with a determined look on her face. Rachel got up from the chair and headed for the tunnel to Lew’s house. She met Gwendolyn coming down. “How are the vitals?” Rachel asked Gwendolyn.

“All fine. But he seems restless.”

Rachel nodded. "I'm not surprised. Thanks Gwendolyn." Rachel marched on up the stairs into the garage and then into the house. But her footsteps slowed as she neared Lew's bedroom door. She moved up to the door and looked in. Lew looked like he was asleep and Rachel started to turn away.

But Lew's eyes opened and turned toward her. "Don't go. Stay, please?"

"Are you sure? You look..."

"I'm sure. No matter how I might look, I like having you around. But... was there something you wanted? Is there a problem?"

Rachel quickly reassured Lew, and then paused. "There is one thing..."

Lew looked at her inquisitively.

"About... About... Well, you and me. I need to know... How serious you are. About me. About us. Is there an us? Can there be an us?"

Lew could see the vulnerability in Rachel's eyes and face. He saw the need and the want that he felt himself in her. "I don't have a ring, and I can't get down on one knee, but, Rachel, will you marry me?"

"You're sure?"

"Very."

"Yes. I'll marry you." As she had before, Rachel had been edging closer to Lew's bed. And again she was against it.

Lew decided she was moving too slowly and reached up to cup her cheek and bring her lips down to meet his. And again they had to breathe

deeply when they separated. Not wanting to be a glutton, or cause Lew any pain, Rachel sat down on the chair beside the bed. She took his free hand in hers. “I believe Grace and Ernest and Lydia and Irving and Dick and Carolyn are getting married the next time we can go in. A minister is in town in the area and will perform the marriages.”

“In that case, can you be ready by then? I don’t really know the situation. Ernest said the snow is still deep and it will be a few days before we attempt to go anywhere.”

“It would take a great deal more to keep me from marrying you than some snow.” She leaned forward and kissed him again, this time just a short one, before getting up from the chair. “You just lie here and get well. You aren’t quite up to the event yet, anyway.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Lew said. But he didn’t try to roll out of the bed. That left arm and shoulder was still a ways from being healed.

“I’ll bring you something to eat when we have supper down below. In the meantime, sleep all you can. That will help the healing process.” With that she left the room.

Lew was grinning and felt like doing a dance, but changed his mind as soon as he thought of it. Instead he leaned back against the pillows and relaxed. He was asleep in just a few minutes.

The sling on Lew’s left arm held the arm tight against his side at the ceremony. Ernest had helped him get dressed since Lew couldn’t quite manage it. About the only thing he’d done from the time he’d asked Rachel to marry him was get out some of the things he’d mined on one of the salvage trips. Irving and Ernest were with him when he opened the jewelry box.

“I’m giving Rachel this set,” Lew said, picking up an engagement ring, wedding ring, and companion ring, with this one for me.”

“You mean I can just have one of these?” Irving asked.

“I think you’ve earned it helping with the mining. Just pick what you think Lydia will like. And I’d suggest a matching wedding band for you.”

Irving looked and touched and looked some more before making his choice.”

Then it was Ernest’s turn. “I need something to match this...” He held out a ring box and flipped the lid open. “This I got... Well... A long time ago. I always planned to let Grace pick the wedding rings.”

“You want me to show her the selection?” Lew asked his brother. “Some women prefer to be in on the selection.”

“Really?” Irving asked worriedly. “Maybe I should...”

“It’s up to you, Irving,” Lew said. “Just do what you want.”

“Well, I like these. I think Lydia will, too.”

While Lew was counseling Irving, Ernest made his selection of matching wedding bands. “These will work well.”

With that the three broke up and Lew put the large jewelry case away again. He hadn’t picked up that much jewelry on his mining runs. Only the very top quality pieces with investment grade stones. None had been in the open display cases. All had been in the various jewelers’ vaults, locked up in separate safes. The guys gave the ladies their respective engagement rings as soon as they found them.

The plan changed slightly. Lew just wasn’t up to going in for the wedding on the first trip to town. But that gave Grace, Rachel, Carolyn, and Lydia a chance to do things up right. Wedding dresses, and

everything needed for a small reception. Or not so small it turned out. The word had been passed around the area of the quadruple wedding and anyone that expressed an interest was invited to the reception, though the wedding would just be those from the property.

Though Pricilla had to scramble to seat and feed everyone that came to the reception, it worked out well. The party consolidated the ties between those from the property to those left in town, the city, and many of those in the rural area.

Three major worries were eliminated when the Smith farm family introduced Lew and Ernest to three other farm family groups. Two reliable sources of biodiesel, one small and one large, were contracted to supply the Norton operations. They both could provide some hay and feed, as could the Smiths, but another farming group could provide plenty of hay, straw, and feed on a steady basis. Two of the farms were raising horses of three different breeds, but it would be some time before trained animals old enough to be put to work would be available.

The Nortons would continue to provide a significant amount of food for town and surrounding area. Also, since they had the equipment that would still work, Lew, Ernest, and the group would provide those services to the community as a whole for free, with individuals needing to pay for work they had done for themselves.

All three of the farms, as well as the Smiths, would take goods and services in trade, or accept US bullion coins for payment. The coins, slow to be accepted at first, were beginning to become the primary form of payment for most transactions. Even the various one dollar metal coins had a place.

There were no precious or semi-precious coinage that could be easily divided down to a dollar, so, since Lew and Ernest had agreed to accept them as change up to nine dollars' worth in any transaction that the gold and silver couldn't make an even payment, they would be used. Pretty much everyone just priced things by the dollar, per ounce of

silver, or per ounce of gold, which eliminated most of the need for the otherwise useless dollar coins.

If an agreement on the change portion of the transaction couldn't be agreed upon, a labor barter slip was written out for it and then Ernest or Lew would buy them up, several at a time, to give the holder some real money for the labor they might not need. Many transactions were made with just the labor tickets. People trusted Ernest and Lew to back their dollar coins and labor tickets with real goods, services, or bullion coins, depending on the total worth of the barter tickets.

That spring, after the successes of the previous fall and winter, and despite the harshness of the weather, was the turnaround point for the area. Rachel and Lydia were both pregnant, the spring came a bit late, but there was plenty of rain between the days of sunshine. The non-hybrid seeds went in and came up. The stock was doing well, multiplying plus providing desperately needed high grade protein for everyone.

The only sad part of that time was Trent and his family leaving the property and moving to town. But it wasn't as bad as it might have been. Ernest and Lew set him up as local banker, centralizing and simplifying the barter, trade, and precious metals transactions. It would be a long time before newly printed paper money, backed by the bank, would be accepted, but it finally was.

Those weren't the only changes over the months and years. The fruit and nut trees matured and began producing good crops, as did the vineyard and berry patches. The living fence was now thick enough and strong enough to keep the deer off the property, and provide a haven for rabbits and squirrels.

That was another thing that made a comeback. Wild animals from the squirrels to deer, and even elk and black bears, and everything in between were reproducing in large numbers. And with the game came

some predators. The bears for one, wolves, and cougars were all being spotted now and again, along with the smaller cats and raccoons.

The area had pretty much been systematically mined out, with only the occasional needed item looked for, that the Nortons hadn't already picked up and stored. Three large warehouses, located on the near edge of the town to the property held countless numbers of items. When the stocking was completed and things were no longer being found by individual salvagers, Dick and Carolyn moved to town near Trent and the bank, and set up a trading center in the parking lots of the three warehouses. Lew and Ernest would get a portion of the proceeds.

The next to leave the property was Harlan and his family. With some surpluses, and other communities in the area with their own surpluses, plus needs, Harlan began working with Dick providing transportation for the deals that Dick was making.

Irving and Lydia didn't leave the property. They spent another two years helping where needed on the property. But travel was up, much of it on horseback now, and an economy was spreading, beyond the city, with the town the hub. Irving was always asking questions of those that had moved to town what the social situation was. He finally got the message he was looking for. After a long talk with Ernest, Ernest talked to Lew, and the two agreed to help Irving and Lydia set up a business there on the property.

Ernest and Lew were able to find reliable farm hands, so one or the other of the brothers could be helping Irving and Lydia while the other supervised the farm work. The wives would help as the other one, with Pricilla's help, took care of the children.

All four of them, Ernest and Grace, and Lew and Rachel, were more than impressed with what Irving had planned, with Lydia's support. It was a bar, but it wasn't a simple board across two barrels of a frontier bar.

Irving had long beforehand acquired the equipment, some of it at the time causing Lew or Ernest to shake their heads. Now, with the resources he had acquired, including some precious metals, Irving hired laborers to build the building using the timber harvested and dried before things went bad. It was a stout timber framed building, over built by a margin of two.

It was built on the slope just up from the tree line alongside the driveway. That allowed part of the building to be two stories without digging much, so they could have a needed basement for the features Irving and Lydia were incorporating.

It took a year, and most of their available precious metals to get the place ready. Even though several liquor stores had been stripped of all stock, Irving had made a deal with Harlan to pick up everything he could in the way of alcohol and soft drink components, such as bag in box soda syrup of any and all flavors. And CO₂ tanks, twenty pounds and up, preferably way up. Also tobacco products of any and all kinds, especially pipe tobacco and cigars.

There were four fifty-three foot reefer trailers, and four fifty-three foot box trailers full of consumables. Two huge battery banks fed by a roof full of PV panels provided the bulk of the electricity, with a pair of well muffled and sound proofed diesel generators ready to pick up the load if needed.

What got Lew so much was that Irving had managed to acquire all the parts for a four lane bowling alley as part of the establishment. And he had made arrangements so just about anyone could come to the place. There was even a child care facility, and a space for teens to gather when their parents were in the over drinking age area. A hat, coat, and gun check counter was available. Most people went armed, it seemed, but quite a few of them didn't want to have them in the way on the dance floor. Those that did were limited to handguns, preferably concealed. Besides the small gravel parking lot, there was a hitching rail with water trough for horses.

A smoking room with walk in humidor, library/reading room, pool and darts room, wine tasting room, two bars, a karaoke and small band stage with a large dance floor were included. A slightly larger theatre stage, a small wide screen movie theater, and a restaurant rounded out the amenities.

The karaoke and small band stage were equipped with an extended set of band instruments for a house band if one could be put together. Fully wired for mikes, instruments, lighting, and effects, a raised control booth at the rear of the audience seating controlled everything. There was a booth to one side of the stage where karaoke singers could sign up to sing, with monitors showing the rotation list with singer name and song. And there was a four hundred disc juke box for those times when there was no live music.

The performance stage was likewise wired and equipped for live performances if a local or travelling group was ever formed to produce plays and other types of performances. It had an orchestra pit well equipped with instruments and the stage had several lift sections and a full flying system.

The home theater style movie theater was equipped with five four-hundred disc Blu-ray and DVD players providing up to two thousand different movie selections and the ability to play guest provided discs.

Lew and Ernest finally realized why Irving had cleaned out several music stores, electronics stores, DJ and karaoke stores, and the three theatrical supply stores in the area.

Irving decided to start out slow, opening up only a couple of sections of the place until it became known. The karaoke stage, dance floor and one bar were the only parts that patrons could use for the first four months. They went over with a bang, and people were anxious to see the other parts open.

But it was quickly decided that in order to get enough business to make a living, Irving and Lydia were going to have to provide transportation to and from the town, and especially the city, to the place. People just couldn't afford the fuel for the long drive, and with alcohol involved, there was a safety factor of people driving after drinking, or having vehicle trouble and being stranded on a road that didn't see much traffic, especially at night.

A couple of the diesel fueled school busses were refurbished and put into operation shuttling people back and forth on an hourly schedule. A bus would leave the hotel that had been opened in the city, with a stop at the hotel had been re-opened by someone else about a mile away from the bank and trade center in town at eleven in the morning. The last run back to the town and city left at midnight.

So, if one was a traveler, it was easy to get a room, and enjoy some entertainment without having to worry much about anyone interfering. And the locals were asked to use the shuttle as well, to avoid having all that traffic on the property. They were more than happy to do so, with fuel being so scarce and expensive.

Irving opened up one feature after another, as he found qualified people to do the various jobs required. Once it was in full operation, it was the highlight of the area. Irving kept the rates low and the service up, and Lydia was a sight to behold up on the stage introducing karaoke, and performing the first and last numbers each night she was there.

To prepare for the day when all the current alcohols were gone, Irving set up three local people in the beer, wine, and liquor business. The wine and beer would be available in plenty of time before the commercial stuff was consumed. The liquors, on the other hand, would be five or six years down the road, to allow the various kinds to age properly. There would be some decent un-aged liquors within a year to start replacing the regular distillery products, mostly for mixed drinks, until the semi-premium stuff was ready for bottling.

He did something similar with a tobacco grower in South Carolina that Harlan ran across. As making the papers for cigarettes was difficult, Irving opted for cigars and pipe tobacco, with whatever cigarettes could be made, if at all. He didn't smoke and didn't like to be around it, thus the separately ventilated smoking room. But people wanted their vices, and Irving was willing to cater to them. To a point.

There would be no professional ladies associated with the place, though he'd been asked several times by potential customers and even a couple of professional ladies working the town and city on their own. Irving finally convinced them all it wasn't going to happen.

Gambling, on the other hand was allowed, with a small casino room limited to a couple tables each for poker and blackjack, with a craps table, and roulette table, along with a dozen video poker and slot machines using quarters as tokens. There were armed guards in opposite corners of the room.

There had been only one bad incident in the place, which Irving himself put a stop to unequivocally, with a .45 ACP slug to the chest of a man trying to rob the register, despite the security team that was there to prevent such things.

The town, more so than the city, became a hub for travelers, in part due to the services Irving was providing, the lack of lawlessness that was still going on in several places, and the fact that a limited bus service to other towns in the area, along with Harlan's freight service, made travel cheaper, safer, and more available.

The town began to gain population as the word spread that it was the place to be if you were a hard worker, but liked a break from the daily grind from time to time. Plus there was Rachel. She still practiced, with Gwendolyn and the nurses that had joined them in the early days. Rachel was one of the few doctors that managed to keep supplied with supplies with Harlan's help, and she established a clinic in town staffed by a couple other doctors that took a share of the profits, with Rachel

getting a share for the use of the clinic and the supplies it contained. She still went to the rural areas in the motorhome clinics, though.

A regular farmers' market was established in the city, so Ernest and Lew parked the converted motorhome and just delivered to the market what produce they had.

Lew found himself looking up at the sky from time to time. Rachel asked him about it once when they were walking back home from a nice night at The Roadhouse, as Irving was calling his and Lydia's establishment.

“What is it with you and staring at the sky for minutes at a time?”

“I don't know,” Lew said. “I just have a bad feeling. I used to read Tired Old Man's stories. Even bought the disc with most of them on it. He had this theory that things come in threes. I keep getting the feeling that we're due for one or more things to happen.”

Rachel laughed. “Come on now, Lew. Things don't happen in certain numbers.”

“I hope not. But we had that thing with the precious metals and gun grabs with the economy in the dumpster. And then the war. I count both attacks as one incident. If Tired Old Man is right, something else is bound to happen.”

Rachel laughed again. “And you expect something to come barreling out of the sky?”

Lew shrugged. “Who knows? We might live out the rest of our lives without anything else major happening, so I'll try to quit worrying about it.”

“That's good. Because you have something else to worry about. I'm pregnant again.”

“That is great!” Lew said. He stopped walking to lean over to give Rachel a hug and a kiss. “A boy this time?”

“Too early to tell, Lew. We’ll do an ultrasound when it is time. But do you really want to know if it is a boy or girl?”

Lew started walking again. “Naw. I think not. Boy or girl doesn’t matter. Brenda will be able to take over things, if she wants to, when it is time for you and me to retire.”

“That’s good. I’ll just have Gwendolyn check for any issues and keep the sex of the baby to herself.”

With things going as well as they were, Lew was able to put things out of his mind. Most of the time. A pregnant Rachel, and the growing herds of animals plus the year round greenhouses and three season field crops, Lew was kept busy. For a while.

Home Sweet Bunker - Chapter 6

It was coming up on spring after a relatively mild winter. Unfortunately, what happened on April 1st of that year was no April Fool's Joke. It started small, with a temblor that shook things up a bit. But Lew and the others working in front of the equipment barn just looked around, shrugged, and continued working on the equipment.

It was only a while later that the loudest sound any of them had ever heard began to hurt their ears. All clapped hands over the ears to shut out the sound. It finally faded and everyone looked around at the others.

“This is not good,” Lew said. “It's either a large space object impact or one of the Super Volcanoes has erupted. Either way, we'll be getting ash or other debris anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of days, depending on what it was and where it was. Let's batten down the hatches and get ready for a bunker stay.”

Lew left the hands to begin getting things arranged for whatever might come. Lew got on the radio and called for information on the now well established Amateur Radio Survival Network.

What he heard was sketchy. Yes, there was an event; Yellowstone had erupted on a massive scale. Yes there was ash falling mostly to the east of it. But that was all. With the information infrastructure limited to the Amateur Radio Operators, there was no glut of news on several channels of TV with satellite shots of the event, or weather forecasters giving information on wind patterns and ash fall paths.

Lew signed off and went down to help Irving and Lydia batten down the Roadhouse. When he arrived, Lydia was already on the radio with the shuttle bus driver, cancelling any trips for the duration.

Ernest told her, “Get Trent and Harlan on the radio. See if they are coming out here or staying in town. A very pregnant Rachel, with Grace

and Irving helping, were closing up the place. Being overbuilt the way it was, it included heavy wooden shutters that could be closed up tight. Lew began to help. When they were satisfied that the building was secure, Rachel headed for the bunker, picking up Pricilla and the children already in the house.

Lydia and Irving, along with Ernest, followed Lew back up the slope to help getting the animals rounded up to be held close to the barns. They wouldn't be moved into the barns until it was clear there would be some ash fall, but Ernest didn't want to take the time, when the time came to shelter them, to have to round them up. One of the portable fences was moved to keep the stock together.

Irving and Lydia headed for their home, to gather up everything perishable or important, to take to the bunker. Ernest and Lew took a look at their feed stocks. Both breathed a sigh of relief. Neither had been on hand when the Smiths had made their last delivery. Ernest liked to keep the hoppers and bins close to full from early spring to late fall in case of a severe winter like they'd had early on after the war. But the Smiths had picked up the products from the other farmers and delivered just two days prior.

Not only did they have full feed and hay stockpiles, there was plenty of straw for the stock, and biodiesel to keep everything running for a long time, if the solar PV panels became unusable. After a short discussion, it was decided to go ahead and tarp over all but a handful of the panels to protect them. The uncovered ones would keep the batteries charged at the low use rate they would be on in the bunker.

They decided to do the same at the Roadhouse. When they went back up to the barns, the three hired hands were waiting. "We're going home, Ernest, Lew. We have families."

"Of course," Lew said. "But are you sure you don't want to bring them out here?"

“I don’t think so, Lew. We appreciate the offer, but we have pretty good shelters where we are. Nothing like this, but enough to do us. We could sure use our pay, in foods, if possible, though.”

“Sure thing. Ernest and I’ll be back up with the food, if you want to move your trucks over by the big house garage.”

Even though it was spring, there was still a good surplus of home canned foods from the previous fall. Not only had it been a bumper crop, there were others that were now furnishing food to the area, and Lew had let their stocks grow to levels as high or higher than before the war.

They brought up box after box of home canned jars of food, including a nice variety of vegetables, fruits, and some meat. It didn’t take long for it to be loaded up in the three men’s trucks. Ernest and Lew shook their hands in turn and asked them to keep in touch.

As the three men left, Trent, Harlan, and Dick all pulled up, each with their pickup truck bed and large cargo trailer loaded down. The women, and the children as well, were in dire need of a bathroom and hurried to the bunker to settle in while the men stayed with Ernest and Lew to discuss things.

“What do you think, Lew?” Dick asked. “Take shelter now or wait?”

“We’ve got the stock gathered, but not sheltered. I want to wait until we know it is coming before we put them in the barns. They’ll probably be in there for some time.”

The three men nodded. “I’ll break out the dust masks,” Dick said, walking over to his truck. The others went with him.

“What all do we need to take inside first?” Lew asked. He accepted a dust mask from Dick as the others hung them around their necks.

“I want to get the bank contents into the vault as soon as possible,” Trent said. “I know there isn’t much risk here, but I’m responsible for quite a few people’s fortunes and I don’t want to take a chance.”

“I’ll help you with that, Trent,” Lew said.

“We all have perishables and necessities in the pickup beds,” Harlan said. “My trailer, at least, can just be parked as is.”

“Same here,” Dick said.

Trent was opening the tailgate of his truck and said much the same.

“Okay. Dick, Harlan, and I will start moving the pickup contents while you guys do the bank stuff,” Ernest said.

All five men pitched in, and then Irving and Lydia joined them. It didn’t take long for everything to be moved and the trailers parked out of the way and the trucks, including Rufus, put under cover or tarped.

They needn’t have hurried. It was two days before the ash began to fall. Trent, with Harlan as guard, took some of the bank assets back to town that afternoon when people got on the radio, using the frequency he’d left on the bank door for emergencies, and asked for their money.

They took one of the vehicles they wouldn’t mind losing if they had to travel during the ash fall getting back up to the property. For a little while, Trent wasn’t sure he’d brought enough funds in. He’d brought some of the new cash notes, but people pretty much wanted their money in gold and silver coin, and wanted all of it.

That was okay with Trent. They’d limited the number of banknotes to only one quarter of the precious metals they had available. It was the depositors’ money, notes or coins, and he would see that everyone would get theirs. In two cases he advanced families enough to get some supplies laid in while there was still a chance.

That chance wasn't long lived. Trent kept the bank open the second day from dawn until about seven. As he was locking up, the last customer having left ten minutes before, a fine ash began to fall. Trent and Harlan ran back inside the bank, got the rest of the funds, and headed back out to the vehicle, an old diesel Mercedes Benz car that was on its last legs. Trent threw the money bags into the rear seat and climbed into the front passenger seat while Harlan took the wheel. Trent decided to leave the safe door open as well as the building door so no one would be prone to destroy them trying to get to gold that wasn't there anymore.

The sun had disappeared and the skies were black to the west. The Mercedes was struggling when it climbed the slope to the old vehicle lot. Harlan could barely see out of the windshield, scratched by the wipers scraping the abrasive ash across it.

The two men had worn the dust masks for the entire trip and were beginning to have trouble breathing through them from the amount of ash that had entered the car. They grabbed the money bags and headed for Lew and Rachel's house, being guided only by the light over the garage door it was so dark.

There were clean clothes brought up for them to put on after they took decontamination showers in the house bathrooms before going down into the bunker.

The two hurried over to the communications desk to check in with Lew, who was monitoring the Amateur Radio Survival Net. He shook his head at their unmasked question, and then said, "The ash is falling all over the area, from Canada to Texas. There is no way to tell just how long it will fall or how much will accumulate. We're going to have to keep an eye on some things. Can't let the ash accumulate. If we keep the roofs flushed off with the roof sprinklers, I don't think we'll have much trouble."

“I take it the stock is safe and sound?” Harlan asked.

Ernest answered. “We were watching to the west and when we saw the cloud coming, we got everything in, fed, and watered well before the ash hit us.”

It was late and everyone was hungry. But it didn't take long to put together a meal from the fresh foods each family had brought. The meal seemed to calm the children down, especially afterwards when a video was put in one of the players and they were parked in front of it while the adults met to discuss everything.

“How long will we have to stay in here this time?” Trent's wife asked.

Lew shook his head. “No way of knowing. This isn't like radiation that can be tracked and a shelter stay time frame developed, thanks to Tired Old Man's spreadsheet. Yellowstone could erupt for weeks or months, and continue to spew the ash for that time. And the more we get, the harder it is going to be to clean up and carry on.”

“The only good thing about the ash,” Ernest said, “If we don't get too much, it will help enrich the soil in the area. What we can't move off the fields we'll work into the soil so it can start to decompose.”

“But like the radiation, there are dangers associated with the volcanic ash,” Lew added. “While it is good for a soil to an extent, it is hazardous to breathe. Some of the ash is like tiny shards of glass that can get into the lungs and just cut them to pieces.

“Same thing with the eyes. Once we get out you can look at that junker Mercedes that gave its last few miles up getting the guys here home. Your eyes could look like that windshield, and believe me, you don't want that. So after we get out, we will be wearing goggles every time we do go out, especially early on. And that goes double for the

kids. Goggles and masks without fail when they go out at some point in time.”

Rachel chimed in then. “And I don’t have much in the way of treatments for the ash injuries. But I do have plenty of the masks and a few sets of goggles to supplement the others in stock.”

Old hands at staying in the bunker, things went fairly smoothly for the first month. But the children were all older now and more difficult to keep entertained. Both houses were cleaned of the slight amount of ash that filtered into each one and everyone began to spend more time out of the bunker and in the houses and barns. The children nearly took over the animal barn, playing with the docile animals and using the huge space for their play.

Most of the milk produced by the milk cows was turned into cheese that could be kept. Eggs were carefully stored away in crocks of liquid sodium silicate, also known as water glass. The produce from the greenhouse, while it lasted, was either consumed, canned, or dehydrated.

The tunnel system proved its worth in the situation even more so than during the fallout after the war. People could get from one building to another, except for the Roadhouse. Irving kept an eye on it several times a day, just in case someone thought they could take advantage of the situation to come in and clean it out.

It wasn’t likely, but Irving was proud of his achievement and didn’t want anything to happen to it. Not that there was much he could do except snipe from the armored copula on top of the house.

They were able to keep a good eye on the property from the copulas when a couple of the cameras became covered with ash. It was a bit daunting to see the ash slide off the various roofs when the sprinklers mounted on each one were turned on to clean every couple of inches of ash. All that ash fell down at the edges of the roofs, building up a ridge all the way around the buildings. Only the fact that the roofs all had

significant overhangs prevented the ash from accumulating right up against the house walls more than it did.

The amount of ash falling slowly lessened. But not until another full week had passed did anyone leave the buildings. When they did, in mid-August, the job of clearing the area of the ash began. It was a messy, difficult, and dangerous task. Wrapped up in hooded Tyvek suits, with full respirators, they taped their gloves and boots to the suits to keep out as much of the dust as possible when they went out.

Moving the ash was hard on the equipment, too. Their stock of filters for the various pieces of equipment were stretched dramatically when Ernest and Harlan put together several cyclonic pre-filters that could be attached to whatever equipment they were using on a given day. Ever so slowly the ash was removed from inside of the security fence, the garden plot, and most of the fields. The orchard and vineyards were done next. The area around the Roadhouse was cleaned and then finally the driveway.

The process took a month. It would have taken more if they hadn't had several rainstorms in that time. It helped wash away the thin layer that was left after the machines cleared an area. That meant there wasn't much of the broom and dustpan work that would have been extremely tedious and difficult.

Everyone took a break for a week and discussed what to do about the town. There had been half a dozen Amateur Radio Operators, plus several CBers in both the town and the city that had communicated regularly with Lew and Ernest. Only two were still on the air. It was decided after a bit of sharp discussion, to have a team clear the road in and check on their interests in town.

It took another week of hard work to clear a single lane of the State Highway though the drifts that had accumulated. There were long stretches of open road, especially when they got to the Interstate, but the drifts had been there a long time and been wetted and dried several

times, making them more difficult to move than those at the property that had been somewhat protected by the surrounding trees.

When they arrived in town, they checked the bank first. Ash had drifted on that side of the street and piled up against the building. Without a lot of work, they wouldn't be using it for a bank again.

The warehouses and trade center was mostly intact. It too had mounds of ash against it and enough had accumulated on one roof to bring it down into the building. One door was clear and Lew, Trent, and Dick entered. There was ash on everything, with the items in the one corner buried under fifteen feet of ash at its deepest.

They found Harlan's trucks and trailers about half buried, but they seemed none the worse for wear. It would just take a little work with the Bobcat that Harlan and Dick had salvaged to use around the place to clear them.

The next stop was one of the Amateurs they knew well that hadn't been on the air. They were pleased to see him out shoveling ash, a bandana tied around his mouth and nose. He thankfully took a break to talk to the three men.

"Yeah. Lost the antennas early on. Shouldn't have been using them with the ash falling. I found out it is conductive and when I keyed up Big Bertha it shorted out bad enough to bring it down in two pieces. My long wires are buried. How're things at your place?"

"We're good," Lew said. "What do you know about anyone else?"

Armand shook his head. "Me and the Missus have been isolated since the antenna went down."

"You need anything?" Lew asked.

Armand hung his head. “Yeah. Food. And a way to filter water. Shoulda done something before it happened to be more ready. Same deal as before?”

“Sure,” Lew said. “And don’t worry about paying things off real quick. It’s going to take a while to recover from this.”

“Thanks Lew. You’re a good man.”

Lew headed for their next stop, the clinic. From the looks of it, the building was fine, but when they opened the front door the stench drove them out to get their respirators. Sure enough, one of the doctors and two of the nurses were dead inside, their bodies badly decomposed. The three men looked at one another and left the building.

“We’ll deal with it later,” Lew said, removing the respirator.

Their next stop was at the City Hall. A lot of the survivors of the nuclear fallout had sheltered there. As they approached they began seeing signs of people being about, though they didn’t see anyone. When they turned onto the street was when they saw a group of people standing around a table.

There seemed to be some type of verbal altercation going on when Lew drove up and stopped. Making sure their handguns were clear, the three joined the others at the table. The table was nearly covered with home canned foodstuffs.

“What’s going on?” Lew asked the man that seemed to be in charge. It wasn’t the new mayor that had been elected after the war.

“None of your business,” said the man.

“Lew, we’ve been getting food from everyone around here since right before the ash stopped. Getting it killed a few people, including Tom, the mayor.” The woman speaking was one of the nurses that had

been helping Rachel. “We barely had enough food through that. Now that we can get out and start salvage and trading, Brock here says he is in charge of all the food and will distribute it based on his perception of who needs it the most. He and his men seem to be the ones needing it the most.”

“That true, Brock?” Lew asked.

“None of your business. You aren’t a townie and you have no say. Someone had to take over. Even if Tom hadn’t died from ash in his lungs I would have anyway. He wasn’t giving the right people enough food.”

“The ‘right’ people?” Lew asked, his ire rising.

“Yes. The right people. Those that are capable of taking care of themselves. Those that just want a handout aren’t going to get one.” Brock puffed out his chest as three men standing behind him agreed vocally with him.

It was Ernest that asked, “Did you go out when the ash was falling to bring in food?”

“What? Are you nuts? Everyone that went out wound up dying. Not me, buddy.”

“So you were getting handouts at the time, off the backs of dead men that were willing to sacrifice themselves to make sure women and children were fed.”

“Oh, he got his ‘fair share’,” Catharine, the nurse said.

“You’d better watch it woman,” Brock said, glaring at the woman. “You want any food from me you’ll keep a civil tongue in your head.”

“I don’t cotton to men threatening women,” Harlan said. “And Tom was a friend of mine. One of the most giving men I’ve ever known.”

“So? You threatening me?” Brock asked and barked a laugh. His men laughed with him.

“We don’t threaten,” Lew said. Seeming to relax in submission.

“Anyone going to speak up for these guys?” Ernest asked loudly. There was silence in the crowd, except for the murmurs coming from Brock’s men.

“You know,” Lew said, taking a couple of steps back. “There were some raiders and such after the war. They were handled.

“Now, we have some resources that we will share, willingly, with only some labor asked in return. We produced it and we preserved it.”

“You should know, Lew,” Catharine chimed in then, “That all the food was donated. Those that died all died of starvation for a lack of anything left to eat. Those farmers you work with were willing to give up some of their food for the same thing. Some labor from the townspeople to make sure they can continue to operate even after this ash. We arranged it before the radio quit working.”

“So this is donated food, to the town, not salvaged from those that no longer needed it?”

Several people spoke up then.

“Yes!”

“It belongs to all of us!”

“It should be distributed by a vote of everyone on who gets what,” said another.

“Not gonna happen, people,” Brock said again. “Me and my men will decide who gets what. And these outsiders aren’t going to have anything to say about it.” He turned to look at his men, to get their agreement. He noticed the sudden looks on their faces and whirled around, lifting the lever action he’d been holding by one hand.

Lew, Ernest, and Harlan, having moved about slightly while the talking was going on to get both the crowd and the food out of the line of fire, now all held an automatic pistol in their right hand, with a spare magazine in their left.

“You can leave for good, or you can die,” Lew said.

“You said you didn’t threaten!” Brock whined, suddenly looking cowered.

“We don’t threaten,” reiterated Lew.

“We can take them, Brock,” one of Brocks men said. “There’s four of us.”

“Maybe,” Ernest said. “But just for the record, Lew will take out Brock first, and I’ll take out you first and Harlan... Well, he’ll have his pick of the other two that he takes first. Then we all shoot the last man standing.”

“Brock...” one of the two men that had been the quietest said hesitatingly.

“Shut up,” Brock growled. He stared at Lew, but slowly lowered the rifle. “Okay, you. Tough guy. You win this round. But you’d better watch your back.”

“Now, is that a threat you’re making?” Lew asked calmly.

“No. That’s a promise! You are a dead man.”

“That’s what I thought,” Lew said. The pistol was already lined up on Brock’s chest. All he had to do was pull the trigger to take care of the problem. So he did. Brock went down without a sound, though there were some screams and gasps from the crowd.

Lew looked at Brock’s men that Harlan and Ernest were still holding under the gun. “You, with the mouth,” Lew said, speaking to the man that had urged Brock to fight. “I will say again. You can leave for good, or you can die.”

“You just shot him!” the man said. “In cold blood!”

Lew smiled a smile that seemed to curdle Brock’s man’s blood. “Yes. After he said he was going to kill me. What? I wasn’t supposed to believe him?”

“That ain’t fair, man!” one of the other men said, his lip trembling. The front of his pants suddenly was wet.

“One more time. Leave for good or die.”

The three turned tail and ran. Several people shouted out that if they were seen again they would be shot on sight. That seemed to spur them on. They disappeared around the corner.

“Okay,” Lew said as he and Ernest and Harlan holstered their handguns and the spare magazine each had held. There were some disbelieving looks on the faces of the crowd when they looked around at the three men. “What is the situation, the best you know?”

Catharine spoke up again. “Maybe a hundred people, Lew. Everyone that took to heart what happened before had put up extra food

and they just stayed inside and made it. But it's been a long haul. People don't have much left, and it will take several days to get to the farms for more."

"Well, that won't be necessary for now. We'll head back and bring in enough food to keep everyone going for a couple of weeks until we have a good handle on what the overall situation is. I want to get down to the farms and see how they are doing. Did Tom say much about them?"

"Just that they were making it, but were beginning to have a hard time of it."

"Okay. Make up a list of who didn't make it and we'll make arrangements to give them a decent burial. I guess that includes Brock. And leave the clinic alone. It is a mess in there. We'll gear up and take care of it when we come back."

The next few days, going into two weeks, were heartbreaking for all the survivors. They buried their dead, and with the Norton families' help cleaned up an area of the town where the survivors could stay close together. They decided to set up near the bank and warehouses. Radio contact was finally made with the survivors in the city. They were doing much the same.

While Ernest and the others worked with the survivors in town, Lew, still with the snow plow on the front of Rufus, headed for the Farms. It took him a grueling three days to get there, opening a single lane in the ash, where it was drifted across the roads. He had a couple of near misses until he learned that the ash could be worse than quicksand and began scoping out the road carefully before advancing.

Once at the Smiths, he got a tour of the property. They'd fared rather well, with only one barn roof collapsing under the weight of rain soaked ash. And it had been an equipment barn, so no stock was lost. It

would take them a few more days to dig out everything completely, but they would be able to do so.

It was much the same at the other farms. Like many of the townies, the farmers had learned a hard lesson during and after the war. They'd stocked up for a minimum of a full year of feed, hay, and straw for the animals, and six months of food for themselves. But one farm did lose a few cattle, but no horses. Unfortunately, the family did not take adequate precautions and two people died from the ash in their lungs. One of the men, and a baby.

The last farm was almost a total loss. At least in life. Both the barns and the house had collapsed, apparently midway through the event. All the stock in the barns and everyone in the house was buried. Lew decided to see to it that they were dug out and buried. But he also decided that the area couldn't afford to waste resources, so everything else would also be dug out and everything useful would be salvaged and either used by the Norton clan, or put into the warehouses for later barter or use.

The population in the area was close to a genetic die off, but, as had happened before, the remains of the town became the focal point of the area, with the Norton place the key to keeping things going long enough for a recovery.

It didn't happen overnight. It took years. Life went on, and there were deaths at the place. But before Irving and Lydia were middle aged, the Roadhouse was once again open for business, to give some relief from the difficult life that would continue for several more years.

End *****

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