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Indecision

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Indecision

“I don’t know, Kell.” Ritchie Stang said. “I know things are getting kind of... I don’t know... interesting...”

“Interesting?” asked Kell Reed, Ritchie’s best friend when they went to the same middle school and junior high school. Kell’s family had moved during their Freshman year and they’d lost contact.

But recently the two ran into one another by accident at a restaurant both families had frequented when they were living near one another. They’d picked up their friendship like no time had passed at all.

At least that was the way it seemed initially, to Ritchie. Kell had changed, Ritchie discovered as they became reacquainted. Once the school clown, Kell was now a quiet, thoughtful sort, not given to the antics of his youth.

It had taken some time for Ritchie to discover the reason for the change. It came out when he asked Kell about his family.

“Lost Mom on 9/11. She was at the World Trade Center on business. She was one of the ones that didn’t make it out.”

“Oh, Kell! I had no idea! I’m sorry.”

“Over and done with,” Kell replied. “Same as my father. He drank himself to death after Mom died. He was supposed to go with her on the trip, but cancelled to go play golf with his buddies. Never touched a club after that, and started drinking all day, every day. He was dead in a year.”

Ritchie honestly didn’t know what to say. It would certainly explain Kell’s more somber attitudes. “And,” Ritchie thought to himself, “it would explain his involvement in the survivalist movement. Or rather, as

Kell insisted, the Prep movement that was gaining ground in the US and several other countries around the world.

“It is interesting,” Kell continued, “I’ll admit. But more importantly, it is important. People are losing rights left and right. They’re even talking about making having a garden illegal. Food prices are going up and some in positions of power want gardening a thing of the past.”

Though his voice was low and quiet, it carried a lot of passion.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’ve read some of the things on those websites you gave me. But what do I do first? It seems so overwhelming.”

“You take it a step at a time, Ritchie. That’s what I did, and I’m in decent shape now, no matter what happens in the future. You’re a good guy, and I’d like to see you make it through what’s coming. But I won’t carry you. It wouldn’t be good for you, and I certainly shouldn’t be expected to do it.”

“I’d never ask you to...” Ritchie protested.

“No, probably not. Under any normal circumstances.” Kell replied. “But the point could come down to a life and death situation on your part. You’re no fool. You’d ask.”

“I don’t know. I don’t see anything that would put me in a life and death situation.” Ritchie was adamant.

“And if there is another terrorist attack? Say, with nukes this time?”

“Won’t happen. DHS...”

“DHS tries. At least some of the time. But the bad guys are always coming up with new ways to inflict terror on people. Americans especially. And what about a natural disaster? There is nowhere on earth

that is immune to everything. Each area has one or more things that are dangerous.”

“Okay. I give you that one. But the risks are not that high here. Are they?”

“It’s not just a matter of risk,” Ritchie. “There is the factor of the potential degree of the disaster. There might be a fairly low chance of any one thing happening, but some of what could happen is truly catastrophic. If it happens, and you aren’t prepared, you will suffer, and then die. You aren’t going to die a small percentage. You’ll either live or die in some of those situations, when they do happen, no matter what level the risk of it happening was.”

“But...” Ritchie said, and then paused. “Where do I start?”

“Just like I’ve told you. Start buying food, and an initial supply of water. Those are keys to survive almost all potential disasters.”

Ritchie sighed. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll start tonight on my way home.”

“Good,” Kell said, smiling now. “I’ll pay the tab and we can head out. I want to stop at the gun shop before I go home.”

Kell didn’t see Ritchie’s frown. Ritchie really wasn’t much of a gun person. He’d never thought they should be banned, but he wasn’t sure he wanted just anyone having access to one. But he said nothing and followed Kell out of the bar and grill they’d made their new place.

Ritchie watched Kell go to the old crew cab Ford pickup truck he drove. Ritchie had ridden in it a couple of times and had to admit it was in as good shape, if not better shape, than his nearly new car. It wasn’t that his car was in any way in bad shape, it was just that the old Ford was as solid as could be and could really go when Kell punched the accelerator.

Though he wasn't quite sure what Kell meant when he explained the truck, when Ritchie mentioned Kell having 'restored' it. "It's a little more than a simple restoration." That was all Kell had said at the time and every time Ritchie thought to ask more about it, it was in a situation like this, with Kell already on his way somewhere else.

Ritchie shook his head and climbed into his Kia, ready to go to the store and start stocking up.

It was several days before Ritchie and Kell met at Bernie's again. Ritchie was anxious to tell Kell about the shopping trip he'd gone on after their last meeting.

After their drink orders were taken, Ritchie eagerly began explaining to Kell how he'd taken his advice and stocked up. "They were having a big sale! I spent almost double what I usually do, and got a good four times as much food. My freezer is packed full." Ritchie looked at Kell triumphantly.

"You... uh... bought frozen foods?" Kell asked quietly.

"They had a big sale. I've got every kind of vegetable there is, in several different forms."

"Much meat?"

Ritchie shook his head. "Naw. Only the frozen foods were on sale."

"Ritchie, what are you going to do if there is a power failure? And you aren't really a vegetable guy, anyway."

"Power failure? Oh. That... That only happens..."

"About once a year, on average, here. But one of the things I'm worried about is rolling black outs due to trouble with the generating plants or

the distribution grid. With the current administration's restrictions on coal use, the retiring of some nuclear power plants and no new ones being built, and more and more demand, we are soon not going to have the generating capacity to meet all the needs. I mean soon. Like in a few months."

"Oh, I'll have them all eaten by then, I'm sure."

Kell hung his head for a moment and then looked at Ritchie with a sad look on his face. "Ritchie, the point isn't to buy and then eat until it's gone. The point is to increase what you have and keep rotating it. It's not a one shot deal."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess I knew that." Ritchie's face fell. "And thinking about it... eating all those vegetables... I think I should have bought meat." Looking suddenly more cheerful, he added, "I'll wait for a sale on fresh meat and stock up. Might even give away the vegetables... Keep the potatoes, though. They'll be good with the steaks."

"Fresh meat? Ritchie? We just talked about the power situation."

"Oh. Yeah. I didn't think..."

"Yeah."

Ritchie sighed. "I'm just not sure what to get... I guess I didn't think about getting meat was because I like it fresh. Frozen... It just isn't the same, sometimes. And after keeping it a long time in the freezer..." Ritchie shook his head.

"Aw, Ritchie! I'm not trying to discourage you. Just the opposite. There are some adjustments that need to be made in lifestyle. Sometimes they can be minor. You're just going to have to decide if you're willing to make a change or two."

"I don't like change, much, Kell. You know that."

Kell did know, for a fact. Ritchie was the most indecisive person he knew. Sometimes it would take him five minutes to decide on a fast food order. And he was ten times worse when there was a change involved. It was bad enough with it was a decision between two things he was familiar with, but if there was a new option there was the decision of an old standby, or try something new. And if something new, which one. Ritchie just hated making choices.

“Tell you what, Richie. There is another way to go about stocking up. Hadn’t really intended to bring it up until you had a good level of food stocks and water in your pantry. Can you drop by the house after work tomorrow and I’ll explain in more detail then. I’ve only got time for one drink right now.”

“Sure. I can do that,” Ritchie replied. The talk turned from preps to sports. Ritchie was somewhat of a fanatic about sports. All sports. As a spectator. Never a participant. Any time he could watch some sports, he was in front of the big screen TV, remote in hand. He would switch from channel to channel, watching each game for a few minutes before switching to another. He could never decide which game he’d rather watch and miss the others.

Ritchie parked his Kia in the driveway behind Kell’s Ford and got out. Kell came walking around the corner of the house and called to Ritchie. “Over here, Ritchie. Come on back. I need to finish up in the garden.”

“Sure,” Ritchie replied and walked over to join Kell. It had been a while since he’d been to the house Kell had inherited from his parents. It was almost unrecognizable. Other than the general shape of the house, everything was different. The house had a new brick façade, still shiny sheet copper roof, and a newly install copula. There was a small covered front entry that was new.

Also new was a brick planter set out from the house on both sides of the porch with plants growing to just below the line of windows. And the windows had shutters, if Ritchie was right about the box shaped things at the top of each window and the front door. But there were also side mounted shutters. He couldn't figure it out.

Ritchie followed Kell but kept looking around. A wrought iron front fence stretched between the side fences. And the side fences were overgrown with a neatly trimmed hedge. There were two rows of small trees just beginning to show fruit between this side of the house and the side fence.

When Ritchie got to the back yard, he got quite a shock. There were a lot more changes here than in the front. A large green house was attached to the back of the house. A large brick structure matching the rest of the house was just far enough away from the greenhouse so as not to shade it from the southern sun. The water in the in-ground swimming pool rippled in the light breeze. So did the leaves of more of the fruit trees, along with the leaves of some additional, larger trees.

Out of the corner of his eyes Ritchie saw a quad set of grape arbors supporting many grape plants. Amongst some of the trees were several beehives. There was a new building near the back fence, which was also covered with hedge now. It had a large garage door facing the house.

"Lot of changes," Ritchie said when Kell stopped at the edge of a large garden plot. Ritchie recognized the corn growing, but didn't know what else was there. It didn't look like any garden he was familiar with.

"Yes. I'll give you the nickel tour before we go inside." Kell squatted down beside a small fiberglass enclosure that looked rather like a dog house. But what it covered when down, Kell explained, "This is the main garden watering system valve. Got several buried lines in the garden so I can subsurface water from the well in the work shop. That's the building back in the corner of the yard on the alley. It's got solar

panels on it like those on the house and an outside wood and coal furnace.”

Kell closed the valves, lowered the cover and stood up again as Ritchie looked back at the house. Sure enough, mounted on the copper panels of the roof were shiny black solar panels. A lot of them.

“Going green?”

Kell smiled slightly. “Yes. Sort of. Now, over there are black walnut and pecan trees. Those tarp covered mounds are cords of firewood. You saw the fruit trees. More on the other side plus some strawberry towers.”

The mention of towers took Ritchie’s gaze to moderate height antenna towers, one on each end of the house. Now that he was looking, he saw the pair of vertical antennas mounted directly on the roof. The two towers had a series of antennas on each, mounted on standoffs, plus a large antenna like none Ritchie had ever seen before. One was huge. There were two just like it, one above the other, on the other tower, just smaller.

“Log periodic antennas and verticals and discones to cover just about any frequency I might want to listen to or talk on. The towers telescope down and fold over so I can do any maintenance I might need to perform.”

Ritchie nodded like he knew what Kell was talking about, but then looked back at the garden. “What are you growing in the garden? All I recognize is the corn.”

Kell smiled. “Not the usual garden, I admit. I have wheat, rice, and hull-less oats, in addition to the corn. There is an asparagus patch back in the corner. There are melons growing at the base of that movable pegboard-like stand that I’ll arrange the vines on with supports for each fruit.

“Over there are potatoes growing, and here are turnips for the greens as well as the roots. I’ve got grapes, apples, sweet cherries, peaches, and kiwi fruit trees.”

“Wait a minute! You said you were growing rice? But don’t you have to have a water filled paddy to do that?”

“Nope. Just good irrigation and I have that.”

“What’s that?” Ritchie asked, pointing to another large square of the garden.

“Sweet clover. It’s a cover crop. Green manure. I rotate the crops from section to section, with one-fourth of the garden fallow every year with sweet clover grown to enrich the soil and pull up nutrients from deep down. If you look close, that small structure in the corner is a compost and manure storage bin. I get manure from several people that have horses and cattle.”

“Oh. Okay,” Ritchie said. He didn’t like the idea of manure. It just seemed... well... yucky.

“Don’t want to overwhelm you,” Kell said, taking a look at Ritchie’s face. “I’ll explain more some other time.”

“Wait. What’s this? If you have a garage out back...”

“That’s my root cellar and fallout shelter,” Kell said softly. I’d appreciate that the information doesn’t go anywhere else. On the permit papers and plot drawings it’s a garden shed.”

“Oh. Sure. You can count on me. Fallout shelter, huh? Wow.”

“Yeah. Come on in.” Kell had left out much of his outside preps when he was giving Ritchie the tour. He’d see a few more in the house, but

that was okay. Ritchie might be a procrastinator, but he was as good as his word. He'd never intentionally tell anyone about Kell's preps.

"Haven't changed much inside," Kell told Ritchie when they entered the back door into the kitchen.

"Holy cow! These new walls must be a foot thick!" Ritchie exclaimed when he went through the door.

"Yep. The siding on the house was solid, but I poured a new foundation on the outside of the original, built a Skousen wall, and then bricked it over."

"What is a Skousen wall?"

"It's a steel framed wall, filled with screened gravel, with three quarter inch ply-wood on the outside. The existing outer wall is the inner sheathing of the new wall. It's extremely bullet resistant without using expensive armor plate, and it isn't really noticeable.

"And there are conventional security shutters over the windows and doors, plus there are hinged shutters that swing closed to enhance the bullet resistance. They are made of layers of one-quarter inch four hundred Brinell sheet steel and one-half inch marine plywood fastened just a bit loosely together. My own design after doing some research on the internet."

"Wow. A bullet proof house!"

"Well... bullet resistant. Don't like the term bullet proof. One just can't be sure."

"Oh. Okay."

"Want a drink?"

“Just water,” Ritchie replied. “It’s a hot one today. Nice and cool in here though.”

“The mass in the walls really moderates the temperature. Not quite as good as underground, but close.” Kell took a pitcher of water from the fridge and poured both of them a glass of water.

Ritchie downed his and Kell filled the glass again. Kell put the pitcher back in the fridge and then opened the pantry door next to it. “There were some changes.”

“Boy, I’ll say! That pantry is three times bigger than it used to be.”

“Yes. And this is what I wanted to show you.” Kell stepped inside the pantry. He had just enough room to turn around easily. “Those are fifteen gallon water casks. And on these shelves I have part of my supply of regular packaged and canned goods. On this side is the long term storage, that’s LTS, foods.

“Now, these LTS food should last of upwards of thirty years. If you don’t want to deal with a lot of rotation and keeping track of everything, you can get these, with a few additions, and just sock them away until needed. I’m pretty sure they will be needed before the thirty years is up.”

“But are they any good? I mean, I like real food. Is this cardboard stuff actually edible for more than a few days?”

“Tell you what, I’m rotating some older supplies. I’ll fix supper with all storage foods and see what you think.”

“Well... Okay. I guess.”

Kell stepped back into the kitchen, Ritchie right behind him. “Grab a seat. I’ll get things started.”

Ritchie sat down at the kitchen table and watched the TV that Kell turned on. It was on the channel Kell watched the most. The Weather Channel.

“Wow,” Ritchie said. “Look at that hurricane! It’s huge!”

Kell smiled, but didn’t turn around. About the only time Ritchie watched the Weather Channel was to check the forecast for the days sports events on the weekend.

“Yes. I’ve been watching that develop,” Kell said as he removed the plastic lid of an already opened can of LTS food. Ritchie was entranced by the hurricane and Kell went about making them supper without much talk.

Kell was in the process of putting a salad together from the greenhouse and garden produce when Ritchie finally looked over to see how things were going.

“That’s from a can?” Ritchie asked incredulously.

“Not the salad. It is from the garden and greenhouse. I have freeze dried vegetables, but a salad goes better with spaghetti. Everything else is from cans or buckets. It’ll be ready in just a couple of minutes.”

Kell took a pan from the oven and put the garlic bread in a napkin lined serving basket.

“Not the bread, though,” Richie said.

“Even the bread. Ground the wheat this morning and put the ingredients in my bread machine. I took it out when I got home. The bread machine is cheating a little, I suppose, since it is electric. But I have baked various breads in the oven when I had the time and they turned out just fine, too.”

Ritchie looked impressed. Even more so a few minutes later when he took his first bite of the spaghetti. “Hey! This is good! Is this really all survival food?”

“Sure is,” Kell replied, smiling. “Freeze-dried beef, freeze-dried tomato chunks, long term canned spaghetti seasoning and pasta. The bread is from last year’s crop of wheat, but I have several pails of wheat I’ve bought over the years just in case the garden doesn’t produce.”

“Okay. I think I could go for this. Maybe not the bread. But the spaghetti is really good. Meat tastes real.”

Kell shook his head and smiled. “It is real, Ritchie. It isn’t TVP, textured vegetable protein. It’s real ground beef freeze-dried and canned for long term storage.”

“Wow. Are all the things this good?”

“Quality wise, yes. Some of the prepared meals I don’t care for the seasoning. That’s why I mostly have basic ingredients so I can put together my own dishes and season them the way I like.”

“I think that’s what I would want to do. I’m... well... kind of a picky eater.”

“Yes. I know,” Kell said and laughed.

“I’m not that bad!” Ritchie protested.

“Well... maybe not. But you really are picky. But there is now a good range of products available. Before you leave, I’ll give you a couple of catalogs and some websites for you to check out.

“Okay. Dish me up some more of the spaghetti.”

It was the following Sunday when Ritchie came over again. He needed help on deciding which foods to get and Kell told him he would help. It was about what Kell had expected to happen, so he was ready with a list set up on his laptop.

“I didn’t notice the automatic gate last time,” Ritchie said when Kell ushered him into the kitchen.

“Not automatic. When I saw it was you I slid the gate open from in here.” Kell nodded to a color video monitor suspended from a cabinet near the TV.

“Oh. Wow. You can see most of the front yard.”

Taking a small remote from his pocket, Kell proceeded to cycle through the different cameras connected to the monitor.

“You can see the whole place! That’s cool!” Ritchie exclaimed.

“Yes, it is. With the house so tight, I can’t hear much from outside. There are microphones with each camera. There just isn’t much to hear right now. And each camera has a motion alarm with it so the interface will switch to that camera if there is movement in the area.

“I can set the system to scan each camera every few seconds, but I find it really distracting. I usually just leave it on the front to watch for people stopping here.” Kell held up another remote. “This one is custom. Operates the gate, the garage door, the house door and window security shutters, and the exterior lights.”

“Oh. Must have set you back a bundle.”

There was a sad look on Kell’s face for a moment as he thought about his parents. “The insurance my Father carried on Mom and him paid for most of it. I’ve been making other improvements out of pocket since it

mostly ran out. I still keep a chunk of it in the bank for emergencies as well as some cash here.”

“I thought you said not to trust banks the other day.”

“I did and I mean it. It’s only a couple of thousand in the bank and I have a debit card so I can access it in an emergency.”

“Credit card would be easier.”

“Don’t like credit cards. I’m just susceptible enough to buy more than I should if I use one. The debit card acts as a credit card when needed, but I don’t have the risks of someone putting a lot of charges on it before it’s discovered there is a problem. It’s limited by the amount in the account. If I need to make a larger purchase on line or something, I just put more cash in the account.”

“Kind of a hassle, isn’t it?”

“Oh, a little. But the bank I use has a branch just down the street, so it’s easy to do. I feel like a little hassle is worth the security I get from the plan. Okay. I see you brought the catalogues with you. I’ll get us a couple of beers and we can get started on this.”

“Uh... Is that real beer or your root beer? Do you still make it?”

Kell grinned at Ritchie. “My root beer. I quit for a while after Dad died, but picked it up again a couple of years ago.”

“Well, okay. Those were pretty good, actually.”

“I always thought so,” Kell replied. He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of his home brew root beer.

“Hey! Those look like Grolsch beer bottles! They have the swing top!”

“Yep. They aren’t Grolsch bottles. I bought a more than life time supply of these swing top bottles and replacement rubber rings from a home brew place.”

“Wow! Cool!”

Kell opened the freezer door and removed two heavily frosted glass mugs and brought the four items to the table where his laptop was. He set down the mugs and handed one of the root beer bottles to Ritchie.

The two men took a moment to release the caps of the bottles and pour the brew into the mugs.

“Okay,” Ritchie said after taking a sip. “This is even better than I remember. It isn’t real beer, but it sure is good, anyway.”

“Well, push come to shove, I can make regular beer. Stout actually. That’s about the only beer I care to drink.”

Ritchie’s eyes widened. “You can make real beer too?”

Kell nodded. “And wine and mead, too. And as much as I like it, and thought about making it, I’ll have to leave champagne production to someone else if the balloon goes up. That is a long, difficult process I don’t think I’d want to spend my time on in the PAW. Especially when there wouldn’t be much of a market for it by preference and because of the cost. Most people will want beer, hard liquor, and wine. The mead and stout are more for me.”

Ritchie shook his head. “You really get into things, don’t you?”

Kell smiled. “Yes. I suppose I do.” He took a long draught of the root beer and sighed. It was some good stuff, even if it was him thinking it. He had, though didn’t normally use, a commercial concentrate, to make the root beer. Instead he had a large collection of natural ingredients

stored, and had most of them growing either on his property or up in the hills where he knew they were.

“Kell,” Ritchie said, interrupting Kell’s thoughts. “I still don’t know where to start. There are so many different choices. And some of this is really expensive.”

“I know, Ritchie. But all we have to do is be logical in the selection and you’ll have enough food to get you by for some time when the grocery store shelves are empty.”

Ritchie looked at Kell sharply. “Are empty? Not ‘if they empty?’”

“Yes. I’m serious about this, Ritchie. There are bad times coming. I’m sure of it. Just what it will be, I’m not sure. But something.

“There is this guy on some of the same prep forums I’m on that has, at last count, one-hundred-thirty-seven different types of disasters he thinks about when doing his preps. Some are pretty farfetched. He’s a little... well... different. Makes these long, detailed lists about just about everything.

“Anyway. One of those things on his list, or something he hasn’t thought of yet will happen. It’s just a matter of when. And just about every situation will interrupt the food supply. If whatever it is affects the electrical power system not only will we be out of electricity, but often the water supply, and pretty much always, and most importantly, sewer service. Trash pickup usually gets delayed or stops completely in many of the situations.

“It’s not just a need to have food and water. Got to have a way to take care of sanitation, too.”

“Oh... You have a way to do that?”

“Yes. Several, in fact. But we can discuss those later. First, let’s get you some food and water.”

Kell turned the laptop computer slightly so Ritchie could see the screen easily. “Okay. Here is a spreadsheet of possible foods. I left out a few that I don’t like, but if there is something you think you might like as we progress, ask. It might just be available and I don’t like it.”

The two men went down the list one item at a time. Kell had to explain in detail many of the selections. At one point Ritchie sighed and said, “I didn’t realize I eat all the things I do. The little stuff. Salt and pepper, for instance. I was just thinking about some beef steaks.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know a source of freeze-dried beef steaks. Mountain House had them available way back when, but don’t offer them to the public any more. Pork chops are available, but they are one of the higher cost items,” Kell replied.

“Um...”

It took four hours of looking, checking on the internet, discussion, and prompting by Kell for Ritchie to decide on what items and how much of each to get. Kell lost count of how many times Ritchie said, ‘I don’t know.’ Each time, Kell patiently explained the whys and wherefores of the situation.

“That’s a lot of money,” Ritchie said, sitting back in the kitchen chair.

“Come on Ritchie. You know you can afford it.”

Not only was Ritchie a procrastinator, or perhaps because of it, he was also something of a tightwad. He didn’t spend unless he had to.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.” There was silence for a long time. Kell just kept quiet. He thought he could almost hear the gears in Ritchie’s head turning. Slowly. But Ritchie finally broke the silence. “Okay. I guess we

can order it.” He reached into his left hip pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed Kell a platinum American Express card.

“Knew you could afford it. Should have suggested more items.”

“No, more,” Ritchie said. “Not now. This is a big chunk of money on something I won’t use for years, if then.”

Kell didn’t bother to contradict his friend. He just reopened the sites they’d been on and put in the orders for Ritchie, using the AmEx card number.

Over the next three weeks the supplies trickled in. Each day an order arrived, Kell, at Ritchie’s request, went over to Ritchie’s and helped him unpack and store the foods. The storage was a bit of a problem. The apartment Ritchie rented was only a one bedroom, and but the bedroom was fairly large.

Ritchie had already used up most of the storage space. With Kell’s help, things were shifted around and space made for the LTS foods and water totes. Much of it became the new platform for Ritchie’s king size bed. After long deliberation, Ritchie decided to donate the frozen vegetables he’d bought to a soup kitchen, opening up the space in the large bottom mount freezer compartment of his refrigerator. Instead of frozen vegetables, the space was now taken up with coconut oil, and a couple of other items that would have a longer life if kept frozen, though it wasn’t required.

“I don’t know about this, Kell,” Ritchie said after they put the box springs and mattress back on the stacked boxes. “It’s a little overwhelming.”

“You’ll be glad you have it, one of these days,” Kell replied.

“Yeah. I guess so. You don’t have any more big ideas that area going to cost me money, do you?”

“Actually, I was thinking about talking to you about getting a BOB together. And perhaps even getting you into the shooting sports.”

“What’s a BOB? And you know I don’t cotton to guns very much.”

“I know. A BOB is a bug out bag, primarily for use if you have to leave home due to a temporary type emergency. Kell hesitated for a few moments, making a hard decision. With Ritchie looking at him with curious look, Kell added, “Something for you to have to get you from wherever you might be either home... or to my place. If things get as bad as I think they might, your apartment isn’t going to be a good place to be.”

Ritchie’s eyes widened slightly. “You really are concerned, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I am. I’ve been going it alone for a long time now. To be honest, I think it would be better to have at least a couple of people to help if things get really bad. You’ve been a good friend, Ritchie. This isn’t something I’d offer to just anyone.”

“Yeah. Wow. Thank you. You know I have doubts and yet you still offered. That’s something.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll have many doubts left when the big balloon goes up. There’ll be some lesser events first. Mark my words.”

It was Ritchie with a thoughtful look on his face. “Kell... If I’m going to go to your place if things get bad... Well... shouldn’t my supplies be over there?”

Kell nodded. “Actually, they should. But if you’ll reciprocate, and consider some of these supplies mine, I’ll allocate a share of mine as yours. That way we don’t have to physically move anything.”

“Why would you want some things here?” Ritchie asked.

“As many preps as I have, something could happen that would make the place untenable for a while. I’d like to have a place to go if that was to happen instead of trying to find other accommodations in a hurry.”

“Done deal,” Ritchie said and held out his hand. Kell shook it, a little amazed that Ritchie hadn’t hemmed and hawed any about making the decision.

“Just remember, Ritchie, this is... not to be dramatic or anything, top secret. If the word were to get out that either of us has preps, it could get sticky when something does happen.”

“Uh-oh...” Ritchie said and looked down at the floor.

“Oh, no, Ritchie! You’ve already told someone?”

“Just about stocking up some things. I never mentioned your name. Just that a friend was coaching me about preparedness and survival.”

“Well, that’s something anyway,” Kell replied. “At least you didn’t mention my name.”

“Uh...”

“Ritchie? What are you not telling me?” Kell asked, seeing the hang dog expression on Ritchie’s face.

“She wants to meet you. I told her we usually stop in at Bernie’s after work on Wednesdays. She said she’d be there this next Wednesday.”

“Oh. Well, I just won’t show up. You can make some excuses.”

“Uh... She’s kind of persistent, you know.”

“How would I know?” Kell asked, rather confused.

Ritchie hesitated for a long second. “It’s Magdalene Yohansen. You know how she is about a story.”

Kell was incredulous. “You told Magdalene Yohansen about your preps? An investigative reporter? Ah, man! Ritchie!”

Ritchie shrugged, looked sheepish, and shrugged just slightly. “I don’t really know how it happened. We were just talking and it turned to some of the things you’ve talked about... And... Well... It just sort of slipped out.”

“Where in the world were you, and how did you manage to spark a conversation with her?” Kell just couldn’t feature how Ritchie and Yohansen would be at the same place at the same time. Talking to her if he had a chance, sure. Ritchie was a real flirt, given the opportunity.

“She was doing a piece on the homeless shelters and soup kitchens when I donated the frozen vegetables. She just started talking to me. Right out of the blue. The donation discussion turned to why they were needed and I said bad things were coming, according to you. But, really, I didn’t use your name.”

Kell took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Okay. No big deal, I guess,” Kell said, not wanting Ritchie to beat himself up over the slip. ‘As long as I don’t show up, and you don’t give her my name, things should be okay. I hope.’

Ritchie gave a heartfelt, “Me, too.” But that didn’t change the feeling inside that Magdalene Yohansen would find out about Kell, come you know what or high water.

A week later Ritchie's feelings were proven correct. And you know what hadn't come, and neither had high water. What had come was a trip to the local firing range to let Ritchie try out some of Kell's firearms in preparation of Ritchie getting a gun of his own. Maybe. Perhaps. Possibly. Ritchie wasn't sure.

Ritchie still wasn't sure after firing each of the weapons Kell had brought with him to the range. They were carrying the weapons cases back to Kell's crew cab Ford when someone called to them. Ritchie turned around. His jaw dropped, and he wasn't able to say anything.

It wasn't until Kell had the gun cases in the bed of the truck that he turned to look at whoever it was that had called out.

He literally groaned when he saw the woman. It was Magdalene Yohansen.

"So. This must be the friend you told me about, Ritchie." She addressed Ritchie, but her eyes were on Kell.

"Quite the coincidence you showing up here when I would be here," Kell growled.

"I'm not psychic, I assure you. Though I do have a talent... No matter. Actually, I was here to get in some practice." She looked around a moment, and then leaned forward rather conspiratorially and said, "Yes. I'm a shooter. Don't let it get around. Would ruin the image."

Ritchie chuckled. Kell just frowned.

"Real hard case, huh? No wonder Ritchie has you helping him. By the way... Hello. I'm Magdalene Yohansen."

Reluctantly Kell held out his hand and shook hers when she offered it. It was a surprisingly firm grip, Kell thought as their hands parted.

Magdalene lifted her eyebrows in expectation. “And you are?”

“Nobody. Really. Let’s go, Ritchie.”

“Aw, Kell! No need to be rude,” Ritchie said. “You know she is going to find out. All she has to do is run your license plate.”

“That would be an invasion of privacy,” Kell said, knowing it was true. “And not entirely legal.”

Magdalene grinned widely. “Yeah. But strange things happen when I put my mind to something.”

Kell sighed. “Kell Reed. I don’t really wish to be interrogated about anything.”

“Come, now, Mr. Reed. Could I call you Kell? Interesting name. I don’t interrogate people. I just ask some questions to get to the truth of the matter, whatever matter that might be.”

“Yes. Of course. Sorry,” said Kell. “I’ve seen your work. You’ve done some good spots on some things.”

“Then why the reluctance to talk to me about survivalists?”

“Because the only thing I know about survivalists are what the media make them out to be. I’m not one of those portrayed in some of the hit pieces that have been done on people and groups that just want to be left alone to get on with life, come what will. I’m a prepper, not a ‘survivalist’ by the media definition.”

“Whoa! Some real passion there. I’d like to know more.”

“I don’t think so, Ms Yohansen. I’ve no wish to become the object of public scrutiny, much less linked to the small handful of those that do fit the main stream media definition of ‘survivalist’.”

“And if I tell you that my interest is personal, not professional?”

“You really expect me to believe that?” Kell asked, amazed at the old trick question.

“I assure you that is why I asked Ritchie to set up a meeting with you.” Magdalene looked around again before she spoke again. “I’m a closet prepper and I need some advice. Ritchie thought it would be better if I asked you, rather than him, since he is so new at it.”

Kell was staring at Magdalene. He suddenly noted that she was actually a very pretty woman. No classic beauty, but pretty in a girl-next-door way. And she had those incredible bright blue eyes. That seemed to glow with sincerity.

Before he knew what he was saying, he said it. “Okay. But I just give advice. No questions about my preps at all. Or even if I have any.”

“Kell,” Ritchie said, “She already knows you have preps. It’s kind of obvious from the conversation.”

Kell frowned over at Ritchie. “Okay. Given. But still no question about them.” He looked back at Magdalene. “Okay. I’ll be at Bernie’s this Wednesday. We can discuss things then. Get in the truck, Ritchie.”

“Thank you. I think,” Magdalene said with a chuckle. “See you Wednesday.”

Kell was about to turn off the range driveway onto the county road when he noticed the vehicle behind him. It was Yohansen. “So help me... If she’s following us...”

But Kell pulled out onto the road when traffic was clear and Magdalene turned the other way.

“Relax, Kell. She’ll know all about you in a couple of days. You know how she works. You said yourself she was good at what she does.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better at all.” He didn’t say anything to Ritchie, but Magdalene’s choice of vehicles had surprised him. She was driving a vintage Chevrolet Suburban. Four wheel drive model. And it had looked to be well equipped. At least on the outside.

Kell was good as his word. He showed up at Bernie’s at the normal time. And he had his laptop with him. If she wanted advice, then she’d get the best he could give. Kell wasn’t one to shirk on an agreement.

Magdalene and Ritchie were already there, drinks at hand, including his regular order of a Drake’s Imperial Stout. In the bottle, unopened, with a glass. Ritchie looked on amused as Kell sat down, setting the computer on the booth seat beside him and then went into his normal routine of opening and pouring the stout.

The Drake’s Imperial Stout came in a flip top sealed bottle. Kell always carefully opened the bottle and just as carefully poured the stout down the inside of the glass that he held at an angle.

After setting the empty bottle aside, which he would take home with him for reuse in bottling his root beer, Kell took a long draught and then sighed. “I needed that.”

“Not because of me, I hope,” Magdalene said with amusement, having watched the careful process that Ritchie had said Kell would go through.

“Well... Okay. Not entirely. Just a tough day at work.”

“What do you do?” Magdalene asked.

“He’s got a cool job!” Ritchie said, laughing.

“You know I hate that joke,” Kell said. He looked over at Magdalene. “I own a HVAC company. Heating, ventilation, air conditioning. Had a rough installation today. Owner didn’t have a clue as to what he was asking us to do. But we got it done.”

Magdalene noted the note of pride in Kell’s voice. “Interesting,” she said.

“Not really, to a layman, I imagine. Just some detail work that was more difficult than usual. My guys handled it fine.”

“With you there to provide help and expertise, I bet,” Magdalene replied. She lifted her glass and took a sip of her drink through the straw.

“That’s the way he is,” Ritchie said, shaking his head. “He’s the owner of the business, but still goes out on work calls.”

“Gotta make a living. The work is just part of the work. If you understand my meaning.”

Magdalene and Ritchie both nodded.

“Okay. I’m here. What is it you wanted to know?”

Kell’s voice was a bit harsh, but Magdalene was used to the attitude, and smiled slightly. “Bit of a chill, all of a sudden, seems like.” She was looking directly at Kell when she said it.

Kell saw the humor in her eyes and felt a little disappointed in himself. “I’m sorry. Don’t mean to come off that way.” More congenial, Kell added, “What is it you would like to know?”

“Everything, actually,” Magdalene said, surprising herself slightly. “I’m new to prepping.”

“So was I when I ran into Kell again,” Ritchie quickly inserted. “He knows it all.”

“You’re not helping, Ritchie,” Kell said.

Ritchie grinned. Kell was acting more or less normal. But not quite. There was more going on in Kell’s head than just an annoyance at him and Magdalene.” He cut a quick glance at her and realized she had a similar look in her eyes as Kell did. He suddenly grinned.

“You really need to be more specific,” Kell said, keeping his voice light. “Perhaps if you tell me what you’ve done so far, I can guide you in the direction you are seeking.”

Magdalene hesitated again. The subject was interesting, and she really did want to know how to prepare. Things were getting hairy out on the streets. But most of all, there was something about Kell that prompted her to open up slightly.

She bit her lower lip slightly for a moment and then said, “I’ve got some bottled water and no-cook food in the apartment.”

Kell waited for a moment, but Magdalene didn’t say anything else. “I see,” Kell finally said. “That is a good start. How much?”

“Enough for two or three days. I... uh... eat out mostly. Never seem to have time to cook or anything. I’m kept hopping on my job.”

“I can imagine,” Kell said. “Well, the first thing is, you need a lot more food and water, plus a way to get more water. Do you carry anything in your vehicle, in case you break down or get caught in a traffic jam or something?”

Again that little lip bite that drew Kell’s eyes as she shook her head. “I know I should, especially with my car the way it is.”

Kell was surprised. “That Suburban you were in the other day? Those are generally pretty robust, though you still need to carry something.”

“That was a loner. My car was in the shop. That’s the only thing the mechanic had that would run.”

“Oh.”

The disappointment was slight, but Magdalene could see it in Kell. “I have a classic Corvette,” she said, hoping it would in some way impress Kell. She didn’t know why she wanted to, but she found herself hoping.

“Wow! Cool car!” Ritchie exclaimed. “I always wanted a ‘vette.”

“Never were really my style,” Kell said. “I’m more a truck guy.”

“Old truck guy, actually,” Ritchie said. “His truck is older than he is.”

“Yes, but it’s easy to work on, and is non-descript, and has what I want in the matter of accessories.”

“It’s a classic?” Magdalene asked.

“In a sense,” Kell said. “From an age standpoint. But it really doesn’t qualify. It’s been highly modified to be the truck I want. It is far from stock.”

“Oh. What kind of modifications?” Magdalene asked, finding herself more curious about it than she would have thought.

“That’s really not a discussion for beginners,” Kell said truthfully. “Better to get you ready for the most likely scenarios than get you a BOV.”

“BOV?”

“Bug out vehicle,” Kell said. “For when you need to get away from some disaster and to a prepared place to take up temporary residence.”

“Oh. I hate the thought of running away from something.”

“It’s the reporter in you,” Kell said. “Always curious and wanting to be where the action is. It gets reporters and camera people killed from time to time.”

Magdalene looked startled. “Yes. Yes, it does. I lost a good friend when he lost his footing getting what would have been a spectacular shot. At least it wasn’t one I asked him to get. I don’t think I could handle the guilt of something like that.”

“I understand. But back to the discussion at hand. Getty ready for staying at home during a situation. Apartment or house?” Kell asked.

“Apartment.”

“That makes it more difficult,” Kell replied.

Ritchie chimed in with, “That’s my trouble, too. I live in an apartment.”

“You have a house?” Magdalene asked Kell.

Before Kell could answer, Ritchie was talking again. “He sure does! It is a sweet set up for prepping, I hope to tell you.”

The hard look Kell gave Ritchie shut him right up, but it peaked Magdalene’s interest even more.

“Again, not a subject to be discussed now. If ever. Okay. What floor is the apartment?”

“Third. It makes a difference?”

“Yes. What kind of utilities?”

“Uh... The standard, I guess. Water and electricity.”

“And obviously sewer. Natural gas?”

“Well... not me... But the building water heater and boiler are natural gas. My stove is electric.”

“Gas has some drawbacks, but it has some advantages too. No matter. There is always a way around things.” Kell took another long drink of the stout. “What are you most worried about? What disaster is first and foremost in your mind that you need some preps?”

“I don’t know,” Magdalene said. “Everything I guess. Things just seem so unsettled now. The financial situation. The political scene. All the storms the last few years.”

“Okay. Getting you ready for things like that isn’t too difficult. “You’ll need a BOB to keep with you wherever you go. A dedicated car kit and stranded kit. The BOB will work as a Get Out Of Dodge kit... GOOD. Leaving town before the bad stuff happens.

“What’s the difference?”

“GOOD bags are usually a bit more complete and with more consumable supplies. The BOB standard, more or less, is for three days to get you to your selected Bug-out location.”

“A retreat?”

“Not necessarily,” Kell replied. “For most things a family or friend’s house some distance from home. Preferably a couple or more places in different directions in case one evacuation route is blocked. Can even be a motel room if you get out early... And I have a feeling that won’t be the case.”

“Uh... Perhaps not... But I understand the concept.”

“You’ll need a BIB, Bug In Bag. Which usually is really a series of totes of some kind. The things you’ll need to stay at home and be able to have water, food, heat, cooking facilities, communications, and the means to take care of sanitation.”

“You didn’t mention guns.” It was suddenly crucial to see what Kell had to say about them.

“Guns aren’t needed ninety-nine point nine percent of the time. If you want to go that route, that will come later.”

“Actually,” Magdalene said, “I kind of have that covered. I have a concealed weapons carry permit. Because of my job and going into some dangerous places I was able to get one. That’s what I was doing at the range the other day. Getting in some practice time.”

“I never even thought about what you were doing there. Okay. That’s good. Very good. If you’re any good, anyway.”

“I am.”

“Figured as much. Okay. Keep that fact under your hat. You’ve been through the course and know when to use it, and how. It really won’t be a major part of your preps unless you get into to it pretty deep.”

Magdalene nodded and decided he wasn’t a gun nut, which had been in the back of her mind when she saw him at the range.

Kell was opening up his laptop and turning it on as Magdalene watched. Ritchie went to the bathroom, and to get another round of drinks.

“Okay,” Kell said, sliding a little further around in the booth. Magdalene did the same, and suddenly they were thigh to thigh, the laptop angled so both could see it. Both felt the sudden warmth, but neither mentioned it.

Kell continued, “Let’s get started. I’ve got some spreadsheets with information you can fill in to get an idea of what you want and need, and an approximate cost. Some of these prices are pretty old, and shipping isn’t included. So figure on ten to fifteen percent more than these numbers indicate.”

“Okay.” Magdalene’s eyes were going over the lists on the computer. “I need all this stuff? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No. You don’t need all this stuff. There are a lot of alternatives for the same function. It’s a pick and choose list. You only fill in the amounts of those things you need and disregard the rest.”

“Oh. I do okay, but those lists look expensive.”

“They can be, for sure. But for almost every item there is a cheaper alternative that is adequate for the task, if you aren’t going for the top of the line, most versatile equipment available.”

“Okay. What’s first?”

“Air. You live in an apartment with natural gas in it. Are there sprinklers?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Then a good escape hood should do to get you out if there is heavy smoke. Mark one of these, just to get a base number. You can research them on your own and come up with a final decision later.” Kell turned the computer a little more to let Magdalene use the keyboard easily.

“Water next.”

“I have some water. But... probably need to get more,” she added. She studied the list for a moment as Kell remained silent. “Probably a couple of these v water jugs.” She looked questioningly at Kell.

“Good choice. But you’ll need a purifier or filter to make sure additional water you have access to can be used safely.”

Again Magdalene made a choice and they went to the next subject. Food. And then down the list. Ritchie had left the two to themselves after delivering the drinks. He was charming the bartender for something to do. He should probably be listening in, but he wasn’t sure he would even be noticed if he was there. Better to talk to Sheila to spend the time.

Ritchie finally went back over to the booth. “Guys, I’m heading home.”

“So early?” Kell asked.

“Take a look at your watch,” Ritchie said with a smile.

Kell and Magdalene both checked their watches. “Nine o’clock! I had no idea,” Kell said. He looked over at Magdalene. “Hope I didn’t keep you too late.”

“I’m a big girl. Sometimes I’m just getting started at this time. When I’m on a story. But I’m not doing a story now and need to get home. I have a couple interviews lined up early in the morning and need to get some quality rest.”

“You two okay to drive?” Ritchie asked. He’d cut himself off early, just in case. He didn’t think the two had consumed more than two drinks apiece, but he’d become sidetracked when he’d been asked to participate in a dart game.

“I’m fine,” Kell said. “Only had the two.” He looked over at Magdalene.

“Same here. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.” She slid around and out of the booth. “Can I talk to you again about this after I’ve taken care of some of this?” She held up the note pad she’d been taking notes in as they’d worked with the worksheet.

“Okay. We’re usually here on Wednesday afternoons.”

Magdalene nodded and headed for the exit.

“Dude! Why didn’t you get her phone number, at least?” Ritchie asked.

“What? Why?”

“You need to get out more, Kell. Never mind. I took care of the bill. We’re free to leave.”

“You didn’t have to do that! I’ll be sure and get it next time.”

“Okay. I’ll see you next Wednesday, if not sooner.” Kell took the two empty Drake’s bottles, just as he did each time. He always put them in the back of the truck to avoid a chance stop and an open container violation.

Kell was busy, including through the weekend, and didn’t have much time to think about Magdalene very much. He didn’t realize it, but every time he did think of her he smiled. And he found himself rather eager to get to Bernie’s the following Wednesday. Just in case she showed up.

He took their regular booth and Sheila brought over a Drake’s and chilled glass. Kell’s cell phone rang and Sheila just left the bottle and glass as Kell answered the phone.

It was Ritchie on the phone. “Me, Kell. I’m running a little late. And I’m starving. Could you get us a pizza for about seven? I’ll be there about then.”

“Okay, Ritchie. Sure thing.” Kell slipped his phone back in the holster on his belt. “Going to be a boring evening,” he muttered.

“Why’s that?” asked Magdalene. She’d come up from behind Kell when he was on the phone.

Kell quickly looked up. “What? Oh. Ritchie’s delayed and I didn’t think you were showing up.”

“Is it okay if I join you? I have some news and more questions.”

“Of course!” Kell said, sliding from the booth to stand while Magdalene slid into the booth on the other side of the booth.

“Old school, huh?” Magdalene asked with a smile.

“Well... I suppose so,” Kell replied, sitting down again. “My mother... and father, too... taught me to be polite. I can’t break the habit.”

“Well, I’m pretty independent, but I appreciate the sentiment.” Magdalene looked over at the bar.

“I’ll get you a drink,” Kell said, again sliding out of the booth. “Same as last time?” he asked.

“I’m in the mood for beer tonight. I think I’d like to try one of those Drake’s you drink. Never had a stout before.”

“It’s a different taste. You might not like it.”

“I’m willing to sample it. If I don’t like it, you can have it.”

Kell shrugged. “Sure.”

He came back a couple of minutes later with the bottle and chilled glass. “I ordered a pizza for Ritchie and me. I got a large, so if you’re hungry, feel free.”

“Okay. I will. I missed lunch today and I’m getting hungry.”

“So... were you able to get any of the items we discussed the other day?” Kell asked, a bit cautiously.

“Sure did. Can’t say all. Can say most.”

Kell’s eyes widened. “Well... good.”

“You weren’t sure I wasn’t just playing you along, were you?”

“Can’t say the thought didn’t cross my mind.”

“Well, I have to admit, I did some checking. I didn’t want to get linked to one of those groups you were so adamant you weren’t a part of.”

“The rogue survivalists?”

Magdalene took a sip of the stout before she answered. She made a face and set the glass back on the table and pushed it toward Kell. “You’re right. Not to my taste.”

Kell lifted an arm and Sheila was there within a few seconds. “A regular beer. Budweiser. That stout isn’t for me.”

Kell smiled at the look on Magdalene’s face. It looked just like one would picture someone with a bad taste in their mouth.

After a moment, Magdalene spoke again. “Yes. I did some checking. There isn’t a lot out there on the internet about you.”

“That’s good to hear,” Kell replied, studying Magdalene’s face. He was trying to figure out if she really was looking for prep information, or a story.

“Makes it tough on people like me.”

“Reporters?”

“Curious people. Did find out where you live. But not much on your parents, either.”

Magdalene saw the hurt in Kell and decided asking about them would be a bad idea. Instead, she pulled her note book out of her bag and put it on the table.

Ritchie came up and slid into the booth beside her as she moved over. “I see you two started without me.”

“You thought we wouldn’t?” Kell asked with a chuckle.

“Not really. How far out is that pizza? I’m starving. Missed lunch.”

“You make a great couple.”

Ritchie looked curiously at Kell.

“I think he means the fact that we both missed lunch,” Magdalene said with a smile.

“Oh. Sure.”

“You I can understand,” Kell said, looking at Magdalene for a moment. But he turned his eyes to Ritchie and added, “But you very seldom miss a meal. What happened?”

“Big upset at the company. We’re being downsized. I’m three people from being laid off. I didn’t even see it coming.”

“What do you do, Ritchie?” Magdalene asked. “I know Kell is in the heat and air conditioning business from last Wednesday.”

“I’m in sales. Automobiles. For a family owned set of dealerships. Several different manufacturers. I didn’t realize my sales had dropped off so much. Not as much as others, so I still have a job, but a lot. I’m used to up and down checks, as the seasons come and go. But all the checks recently have been smaller ones. I just didn’t see it.”

“That’s too bad, Ritchie. You’d mentioned once you had a pretty short check one month. It’s good you have your preps. It is one of the most important reasons to have them,” Kell said.

“Oh. Didn’t think about that. But I’m sure this is just a temporary slowdown. GM got the bailout, and a couple of the others were still doing okay. Things will pick back up.” Ritchie looked thoughtful. “Maybe I should have bought a couple of new suits instead of the food. You know. Improve my image?”

“Aw, Ritchie! You’re image is fine. You’re a great salesman.” Kell looked over at Magdalene and added, “He’s been top salesman for the dealerships for two or three different years. It’s not your work, Ritchie. It’s the economy. You very well may need that food to live on for a few weeks if you have to go looking for another job.”

Ritchie paled visibly in the low light of the bar and grill. “I haven’t had to look for work since I got back here from college. Working for the Bloominghams is the only job I’ve ever had.”

“Maybe things will turn around,” Magdalene said. Kell cut her a sharp glance.

She frowned back. “He has to have some hope!” she said softly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.” But Kell wasn’t going to imply in any way that the economy was suddenly going to turn around. “If things come to push or shove, I’ve got a spot in the office you can fill. I won’t take work from my regulars, but Sally left on maternity leave and never came back. I still haven’t filled the position.”

“Thanks, man! I appreciate it.” Ritchie perked up considerably. Part of it was the pizza was brought to the table, along with his standard Heineken. Sheila had seen him come in.

Kell took a piece of the pizza, but let the other two really tear into it while he thought. He was pushing it a bit, offering Ritchie the position. He hadn’t filled it because his own business was tightening up.

After the eating frenzy calmed down, the talk turned again to Magdalene’s preps. She’d followed most of Kell’s suggestions. She had made a couple of substitutions, both good choices to fit her needs, Kell thought, and told her so.

“So, I’m set now?”

Kell smiled slightly. “For now. You’re just getting started, depending on just how far you want to get into this. That Corvette worries me if we ever have to evacuate because of a hurricane.”

“We don’t have hurricanes here,” Ritchie said. “Too far inland.”

“Actually,” Magdalene said, before Kell could speak, “we have had a hurricane here. I was researching hurricanes back when Katrina hit NOLA. Back in the thirties there was a monster of a hurricane that made it this far before it faded away completely.”

“That’s right. And with the apparent increase in both number and intensity of hurricanes, for whatever reason, we are at risk of needing to evacuate due to a hurricane.”

“You’d go? With that house of yours?” Ritchie exclaimed. And then looked down, contrite. “Sorry.”

“Your house is something special?” Magdalene asked, her interest peaked once again. “Hurricane proof? Like that dome monolith home the Weather Channel had on its series about hurricanes?”

“No home is hurricane proof. Resistant, yes. But no absolute guarantee of not having some damage.”

“I see. Must be something I missed. It looked like a normal brick façade house to me when I drove by this weekend.” There was a pause and then “Oops.”

Kell was staring at Magdalene. “You came by my house?”

“I told you I found your address,” Magdalene said defensively.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, you did. You didn’t say you’d been by there. And weren’t going to tell me, if I’m judging your reaction correctly.”

“Well, I wasn’t hiding the fact!” Magdalene said a bit forcefully.

“Easy, guys,” Ritchie said. “No need to get into a spat over something that’s water under the bridge.”

“We’re not in a spat,” Kell growled at his friend.

“No, we’re not!” Magdalene said in close to a growl.

Ritchie held his hands up in mock defense. “Okay! Okay! I stand corrected! I’m glad. This conversation was getting interesting. Are you really sure we could have a hurricane?”

“It’s low risk of happening, but if it does happen, there is a high risk of major damage. Not much built to a hurricane code around here.”

Apparently the trip she’d taken to see where Kell lived after she’d found the address was forgotten. Magdalene spoke again. “I really didn’t think of the ramifications at the time I was doing the research. It was just some historical facts. I didn’t link it with a real disaster here.”

“Most people don’t. They see the minimal risk of something happening and equate it with the risk of possible damage. They are two different traits that must be looked at and analyzed separately. You can have something very likely to happen, that doesn’t cause too much havoc. But other things that are likely can be terrible, just like the hurricane.

“In the middle of the road are the things that have some good chance of happening, with resulting damage being nearly off the scale. A HAZMAT train wreck, for instance. Fairly likely, and with the possibility of killing half or more of the city residents, depending on the chemicals involved and the wind direction.

“I find myself prepping for the severity of an event rather than the degree of probability of it happening. There are things that are almost sure to happen, with only minor effects, and then the others that really aren’t likely, but if they occur, it’s... well... really bad. Preps for the one are sorely inadequate for the other.”

“Wow. That’s pretty...” Richie didn’t continue.

But Magdalene did. “That’s pretty insightful. Never looked at things like that before.”

“You’ve just started thinking of things like this,” Kell said, feeling a little foolish for his simple lecture. “I’ve been thinking of them for a lot of years.”

“Did Kell tell you about his parents?” Ritchie asked and then groaned. “Did it again! Sorry, man!”

“Not the details,” Magdalene said, her eyes on Kell. She again saw the hurt there, and anger, too, now in this second look. “But that’s okay. I don’t need the details.”

“What do you say we wrap this up,” Kell said suddenly. “I’ve got a tough install to do tomorrow.”

“Sure, Kell.” Ritchie laughed, hoping to ease the sudden tension. “And don’t forget. You said you’d get the bill this time.”

Kell had to smile at his friend. “I sure did, didn’t I? I’ll take care of it and see you next Wednesday.” He didn’t look Magdalene.

But before he could leave the table after sliding off the booth seat Magdalene said, keeping her voice casual, “I’ll get the next one then.”

Kell hesitated, but didn’t say anything and headed toward the bar to pay the tab.

“I’m sorry,” Ritchie told Magdalene. She was watching Kell walk away. But her eyes went back to Ritchie. “You won’t tell me what happened, will you?”

Ritchie shook his head. “Never should have said what I did.”

“That’s okay,” Magdalene replied. She didn’t say the thought that continued. “I’ll find out on my own.” She slid out of the booth and told Ritchie, “I’ll be here next Wednesday.”

Ritchie shrugged. “Okay. I’m not sure Kell will. His parents’ deaths are a very touchy subject for him.”

Magdalene’s teeth were worrying her lower lip as she watched Kell leave the bar after paying the tab and head for the exit. “Interesting.”

Kell met with Ritchie on Saturday, again to go to the range to try and narrow down the firearms selections so Ritchie could get his own. Soon. There were noises in Washington that a new gun bill was in the works. And it would be the worst so far.

“I just don’t know, Kell. I liked yours, and I like some of these we rented. Just can’t make up my mind.”

It was no surprise to Kell. “Okay. Tell you what. You shoot each candidate three times. Best three shot group wins for that type of firearm.”

“Hey! That’s a good idea!”

“We’ll see.”

An hour later and Ritchie had made his choices. And they had very little to do with the accuracy tests. He just decided on the Para-Ordinance .45 for a handgun and a PTR-91 for a rifle. He decided to forgo a shotgun, sniper rifle, and any hunting guns.

“I know, I know Kell. I just couldn’t make up my mind. And I’m not sure I want to spend any more than what these are going to cost me.”

“I understand. Especially since you will need to get ammunition, cleaning gear, and plenty of magazines for the two.”

Kell looked around a bit warily when they went back out to his truck.

“No sign of Magdalene,” Ritchie said, seeing the look on his friend’s face. “I’m really sorry about saying anything the other night.”

“Not your fault,” Kell said immediately. “I’m just too sensitive over the subject. It’s not fair to you. And it’s not fair to Magdalene. It sure looks like she is really interested in getting prepped in a hurry.”

“So am I. But she sure makes decisions faster than I do. Seems to know just what she wants.”

“That’s true,” Kell said.

They were in the truck, headed for the gun store for Ritchie to order the two guns, ammunition, magazines, cleaning gear and other accoutrements when Kell asked, “Since you are set up, or will be shortly, on food, water, and firearms, how much further do you want to go?”

“There’s more?” Ritchie laughed at the expression on Kell’s face.

“Yeah. There’s more. If you want to get into it. Comms for one thing.”

“Comms? What are comms?”

“Communications. I have half a dozen short range handheld radios. MURS band. But I only have one pair of longer range handhelds. It would be good if you had at least one of them yourself. We’d be able to communicate over the entire area here, handheld to handheld, and for a pretty good ways out, handset to mobile or base. You wouldn’t need a base, though a handheld and a mobile would be nice.”

“What kind of money are we talking?” Ritchie asked. Kell had a tendency to go top of the line when it came to his preps.

Kell told him and Ritchie whistled. “There isn’t anything cheaper?”

“There are some amateur radios, but they are much more likely to be overheard than on the Business Band Low Band frequencies. And the only real handhelds I know of don’t get to those VHF low band range frequencies, only some man-pack radios. Which I have, for long distance HF frequencies.”

“Let me get the guns and stuff and I’ll think about it.”

“Sure,” Kell replied.

Ritchie didn’t bring up the upcoming Wednesday night at Bernie’s. He’d need to wait to see if Kell or Magdalene either one would show up.

But they both did, at nearly the same instant. “Kell! I’m glad you’re here. I have something I want to talk to you about.”

“Uh... Okay.”

The two joined Ritchie at their booth and Sheila brought over the first round of drinks. Richie and Kell could both tell Magdalene was anxious to speak, but she held her peace until Sheila was gone. She leaned forward, conspiratorially and said, “I ran across some information doing research on a story. It’s not good.”

“We’re listening,” Ritchie said as Magdalene took a breath and then a sip of her drink.

“I found out that the Governor is going to Washington for a top secret meeting with all the governors and their state National Guard Commanders, the President and DHS officials, most notably FEMA. Also NorthCom. A few key Congressional people.”

“How good is this information?” Kell asked.

“It’s good. I do my research thoroughly. I confirmed through three different leads that all said exactly the same thing.”

“Which usually means it’s a plant,” Kell said. “Disinformation. Three sources seldom get the information the same, especially if it came through the back door.”

“You have a point,” Magdalene replied. “And there were a couple of minor differences. But I checked with half a dozen different Governors’ PR agencies to try and set up meetings in that timeframe. No dice on any of them, which is what I expected. One or two. Fine. I’m not universally known, I suppose, but usually a feel good story approach will get the PR guys falling all over themselves to set something up that is going to make their guy look good.”

“Hmm...” Kell looked thoughtful. “Same certainty on NorthCom being there with FEMA and the rest of DHS?”

“Less so, but I’m convinced it is real. What do we do?”

“If the Federal Reserve was included, I’d say it had to do with probable action to deal with the economy.”

“There was no mention of Federal Reserve,” Magdalene said. “But I didn’t exactly get the agenda papers.”

“There are just so many things going on,” Ritchie said.

“Exactly,” Kell said. “Could be anything. Though it sort of feels like it’s internal to the US. But that’s just a vague feeling. If there was a major external event expected, the White House would want to get everyone on board. What is the time frame?”

“Starting two weeks from next Monday.”

“Gives us eighteen days plus however long the meetings take place to get any final preparations done and get hunkered down for whatever it is that is going to happen.”

“You think it will be immediately after the meetings?” Ritchie asked. “What if it is getting ready for something down the pike they just want to prepare everyone for?”

“Doesn’t matter. Whenever whatever it is comes out, there won’t be a can of food, bottle of water, or gallon of fuel left to buy at any price after the first seventy-two hours. Could be wrong.”

“But what if it is something simple? Like a hurricane?” Ritchie asked. He was beginning to get the feeling things were rushing past too fast for him to cope with.

“If it was,” Magdalene said, “there wouldn’t be this much fuss or secrecy. Would there?” She looked at Kell.

“That’s my opinion.” Kell hesitated. “Look. I don’t want you to get in trouble over this, but do you think you could do some more investigation? I’m not too inclined to throw up to half of the money I have put away for retirement into last minute preps.”

“You’d do that?” Ritchie asked.

“If I think the big balloon is going up, I sure would. Half of it. There’s never any guarantee. I simply don’t put all my eggs in one basket.”

“What could you possibly hope to add?” Ritchie asked, intrigued. “You already have more than most grocery stores.”

“Not hardly,” Kell said. “But there are things I’d like more of, and a few things I have budgeted for the future, but haven’t bought yet.”

“I’m a babe in the woods here, even with everything I’ve done the last week. And my bank account is empty,” Magdalene said. “I’m not sure what to do. I’ve got a lot of credit available.”

“Same here, Kell. I’ve got some plastic I could use. What should we do? You already have a plan.”

“You both have to make your own decisions. I’m not going to be responsible for your expenditures and actions. This could be nothing. You use credit to buy things on the spur of the moment and nothing happens, you’ll be in big financial trouble.”

“I’m convinced enough to risk it...” said Magdalene. “Though I may have a better solution. I get offers on the Corvette all the time. If I sold it and got something more suited to future needs and cheaper, then I should have enough money left over to get a few things.”

“You know,” Ritchie said thoughtfully, “That made me remember. I have my dad’s old stamp collection... I wonder if it’s worth anything.”

“If you aren’t interested in keeping them for posterity or as keepsakes, I’d say now is a good time to find out.” Kell shook his head. “Be a shame to get rid of something that reminds you of your father.”

“I have plenty of other things of his,” Ritchie said softly. “The stamps were something he did before I was even born.”

“Ah,” was all Kell said in reply.

“Okay. So we both have some money to use,” Magdalene said, looking at Ritchie. “What do we get? What are your ideas, Ritchie?”

“Geez! I don’t know. I’m not any good at things like this. Especially on the spur of the moment. I need time to think things through.”

Magdalene and Ritchie both looked at Kell. He sighed, and after a moment, said, “Okay. The short list. Things that are going to be hard to find after a short while, that will be in great demand. At least, in my opinion.

“Canned meat. Of all kinds. I do mostly roast beef. Tuna, chicken, turkey, SPAM. I don’t do the snack food meats like potted meat and Vienna sausages. They are cheap, but they aren’t what one needs in a stressful situation. Real meat is.

“Sweets, if you are the least inclined to indulge. Great for barter uses, just like the meat. For you, Magdalene, lots of feminine hygiene supplies. For yourself and for trading for other things.

“Spare tires and dry storage batteries with battery acid for your vehicles. Fuel, too, but you have no way to store it effectively, above a couple jerry cans.

“Salt, sugar, canning supplies, particularly reusable lids. Mostly for trade when they are no longer available. Batteries, the same. Rice and beans you can eat yourself or trade. Ditto over the counter medications.

“There are lots of lists on the internet about trade goods. But remember, if nothing happens, you are stuck with all these items, and very little or no money to use to get other things in a normal situation.

“Just go through your mind all the things you use in a day, week, and month, and decide which ones you really don’t want to do without.”

“That’s a pretty good start on things, Kell,” Magdalene said. She was still writing quickly in her notebook, taking notes on what Kell had said.

“The fuel, Kell... You said you had some tanks... If I bought the fuel, could I store it at your place?” Ritchie looked at Kell hopefully. “I sure don’t want to be on foot if things happen.”

“Sure,” Kell said. “I was going to top off the tanks, anyway. But I’d figure on some alternative transportation besides a car. A bike or motorcycle would be better for many things and use a lot less fuel.”

Ritchie nodded. He was taking it all in, storing it in his mind, the way Magdalene took notes.

Magdalene hesitated but finally said, “Ah... Look... You’ve only known me for a few weeks... Would that offer go for me, too? Chances are I’ll be all over the place, documenting what happens and need a steady supply of fuel for whatever I get in the way of a vehicle after I sell the ‘vette.”

Kell hesitated, too. He’d found himself enjoying the time he spent with Magdalene. And she certainly seemed sincere. “Yeah. Okay. You can both give a little to the fuel fund and I’ll get them topped off.”

There was more hesitation before Kell added, “And if you want to store some supplies at my place, that would be alright, too. Just have to trust me not to use them or trade them off if something happens.”

“You’d never do that,” Magdalene said, sure of her words.

“Yeah,” Ritchie added. “We’ve already got supplies at each others’ place.”

Magdalene looked over at Kell. He didn’t say anything and she let the subject drop. “What else should we look to get?”

“Clothing, if you don’t have plenty of warm clothes. It’s coming up on winter, and if the infrastructure goes down there won’t be power for electric heat, or for running other types of fueled heaters with electric controls.”

Again Kell hesitated.

“Come on,” Ritchie said. “Give. You just thought of something else.”

“All right. You might consider something to make a living with if things go bad long term. You both have professions. But neither is going to be

of much use in the PAW. Well... Come to think of it, a newspaper would be pretty good, but you need the equipment and supplies with which to do it. The hardware isn't hard, I suppose. But paper and ink could be."

"Hm..." Magdalene looked thoughtful. "I may check into that."

"What about me?" Ritchie asked. "I've been a salesman all my life. What am I going to do if it is long term? I never really thought about that before. Just getting through a short whatever it is." He looked a little pale at the realization.

"There is a list of trades and skills on one of the prep sites. Take a look at it and see what might interest you. Some of them don't take much equipment or investment, but do require specialized knowledge. There is always just being a laborer, but that's a hard way to go. It is what most people will be doing, because they don't have anything else as a back up."

"What are you going to be doing, Kell?" Ritchie asked. "Just so we don't choose something you've already got covered."

"Well, I'm set up for several things. I've got the fruit and nut orchard. Small, but more than we could use. I've got a Diamant 525 grain mill with plenty of spare parts, including the electric conversion. I'll be able to grind grain for those that have grinders that don't work well, or for those that gather the grain and don't have a grinder at all."

Kell quit talking and Ritchie and Magdalene continued to look at him. "That's all I have, off the top of my head," Kell said finally, shrugging his shoulders. "Lots of good ideas on the prep sites on the internet."

Kell could tell Ritchie was mulling things over in his mind, trying to make a decision that wouldn't come right away. But Magdalene, though she looked thoughtful in the same way Ritchie did, seemed to be coming to some conclusions.

“Okay. I’ve got a couple of ideas,” Magdalene said. “I need to go and get started on the first one. I’ll take care of the tab and be on my way. See you next Wednesday.”

“I’ll get...” Kell started to say he’d get the bar bill, but Magdalene was already moving toward the cash register. “She didn’t have to do that,” he said to Ritchie after watching her for a moment.

“She’s one that carries her own weight, I think,” Ritchie said.

“Yeah. I think you’re right. I think I’ll take off and get a couple of things put on order. You mind if we break it up now?”

“Fine with me. Can’t drink any more tonight, and I need to look for my father’s stamp collection. It’s buried somewhere in one of the boxes in my bedroom.”

“Good luck,” Kell said and chuckled. Ritchie had his work cut out for him. There was barely room to turn around in the bedroom or living room of Ritchie’s apartment now. “Looks like we get together next Wednesday.”

“Yeah. Hopefully I’ll have found the stamps and they’ll be worth something.”

The two men headed out doors and found themselves running to their vehicles due to heavy, very cold, rainfall.

Kell realized he trusted Magdalene’s research when he began moving money out of the conventional retirement plan he had in addition to his own, rather more prep style retirement package. He’d done well, and had been conscientious about putting money into it from nearly the beginning of his working career.

He went down his Excel spreadsheet listing his wanted equipment and marked off several of the items he'd purchased over the internet. All had delivery dates well short of the self-imposed deadline the three had agreed upon.

When he pulled into Bernie's parking lot the following Wednesday, he was surprised to see Ritchie stepping out of an older model Jeep Wrangler. And there was Magdalene, walking away from a Suzuki Samurai. And it wasn't just any old Samurai. It was tricked out as a hard core off roader.

Kell could only see the front, but that showed the winch, front spare tire carrier and the front of the roof rack that looked loaded. Kell couldn't tell for sure as the roof rack had a form fitting tarp strapped down tightly, covering whatever it held.

"Well," Kell said as the three converged. "I see you both have new vehicles."

"New to me," Ritchie said. "But it's like new. Little old lady only drove it to church on Sundays." Ritchie laughed and Kell and Magdalene joined in.

"About the same for me," Magdalene said, glancing back at the Suzuki. "The new to me part. From what the owners told me, it's been running the back country for several years and just got a freshening up, as they put it. I've got a whole list of what was done, Kell. If you'll look it over and let me know if it needs something else, or something removed, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure thing," Kell said. "I think you both made some good choices. If they were just diesel..."

Magdalene and Ritchie both grinned. "You read minds or something?" Magdalene asked. "The Samurai has a VW turbo diesel in it."

“Wow,” Ritchie said. “Great minds think alike. Kell had mentioned diesel was the way to go. Took me a while to find this Jeep, but it’s been converted to diesel, too. Non-electronic, if that’s something important. The guy seemed to think it was.”

“It’s good,” Kell said. “I’m impressed with you both. If you’ve made similar decisions on the other things, we should all be good to go, no matter what it is that is coming up. I hope.”

Eagerly Magdalene said, with a nod of thanks as Kell held the door to Bernie’s open for her, “Yes. I not only got a lot more for my ‘vette than I was expecting, but I managed to get much of the stuff you suggested on sale.”

The three slid into a different booth, as the one they usually used was taken. “But it seemed like what wasn’t on sale, wasn’t available, anyway.”

“You know,” Ritchie said, “I ran into the same thing. There were a couple of items I couldn’t find at all.” He grinned. “And I got a whole lot more for my father’s stamp collection than I ever dreamed it was worth. Had I known, I probably would have sold it and wasted the money. It sure is easier to make decisions when you have the money to pay for them without having to scrimp so much.”

Sheila delivered the first round of drinks, took the order for deluxe nachos, and disappeared. Kell caught Ritchie watching Sheila. “She’ll never go out with you if you don’t ask her,” Kell said.

Magdalene looked over at Ritchie. “You kind of sweet on Sheila?”

When Ritchie looked back around at the two, he shrugged sheepishly. “Yeah. I kind of guess so.”

“Take it from me,” Magdalene said, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “She’d be amenable to being asked.”

Ritchie's wide eyes stared at Magdalene. "What? How do you know?"

"Just a feeling, based on a short conversation I had with her when I paid the tab last Wednesday. Just ask. All she can do is say yes or no."

"Yeah. Maybe..." Ritchie looked over at Sheila again. She happened to look over at the same time. She smiled at him, and Ritchie smiled back. Broadly.

Kell cleared his throat and Ritchie brought his attention back to him and Magdalene. Ritchie blushed slightly and said, "Okay. What are we talking about tonight?"

"Hopefully that Magdalene found out her information was incorrect," Kell said, his eyes going to her.

Magdalene sighed. "I wish it were so. But everything I'm coming up with is confirming the original information. Mostly by negative responses. I'm running into blank walls everywhere I turn. Sources that are usually a font of information are clamming up. Can't get anything out of some of them. And just the run around from some others.

"Only one source confirmed what I picked up early on. And she swore me to secrecy and begged me not to broadcast or print the information. That doing so could get her in serious trouble. 'Killed', actually, is what she said."

"But if people aren't talking about it..." Ritchie said in a questioning voice.

"Means they know enough to keep their mouths shut about it. A blackout like this pretty much confirms it in my mind," Kell said.

"Same here," Magdalene said. "I wasn't sure if you'd see it that way, but that has been my experience."

“So we have eleven days or so before whatever it is happens, or gets announced,” Kell said. “I’ve put things in motion to be as prepared as I can afford to be before then. Just waiting on deliveries of a few things.”

“So have I, to a degree.” Magdalene looked at Kell for a moment before adding, “But I’m still a little concerned about physical security. My apartment... well, it is a good one, but I doubt if there is anyone else in it that is the least bit prepared.”

It was a moment before Kell spoke. Ritchie and Magdalene were both looking at him expectantly. “There is security in numbers. At least, in some numbers. I have the room, if you want to consider my place as one of your bug-to locations.”

“Really?” Magdalene asked. “I was kind of hoping... but I can’t really return the favor. My apartment is no place to go to in a disaster.”

“I know. It’s okay. Ritchie, that includes you, too.” Kell looked over at Ritchie and saw him breathe a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. Means a lot, my friend.”

Kell nodded. “But that brings up a subject. You’ve both got your bug out bags and GOOD kits, too, I’m assuming...”

Both of the others nodded and Kell continued. “Well, that’s all well and good, but you have to be able to get to my house.”

“We both have good vehicles now,” Ritchie said. “You said so.”

“But if you get cut off in traffic, the roads blocked, or there are restrictions on vehicle use... or whatever. Could be any of a dozen or more things that would put you on foot.”

“Well, I do have pretty good bags for my kits...” Magdalene said, not sure what Kell was getting at.

Ritchie said as much. “What are you talking about, Kell?”

“It’s just that you might have to be traveling on foot. And you aren’t going to want to stand out in any way. Richie, I’ve seen your pack. It’ll pass for an everyday piece of gear. How about yours, Magdalene?”

“Mine are all dull colors, but are civilian packs, if that’s what you were getting at,” she replied.

“It was. But also, you might just have to ditch or cache the packs if things are really out there. That means a kit that you can have on you that doesn’t look like you have anything at all.”

Ritchie looked confused. “How can you do that? If you’re wearing the stuff the military does, it’ll stand out like a searchlight.”

“I know,” Kell said. “I have several items of military LBE, that’s load bearing equipment, but for more clandestine situations, I’ve found something I think would work for both of you, too. I thought about fishing or photographers vests, but everything is still kind of in sight. And it is obvious that you do have something.

“You could wear a jacket over them, but that might be out of place, depending on the weather. So I picked up a Scottevest on line. It’s basically a high quality photographer’s vest, only the pockets are all either on the inside, or very unnoticeable. All you see when someone is wearing one of the vests is a normal appearing, rather plain looking vest. Or jacket. They make jacket models, too, as well as pants, hoodies, and some other things.

“The only items that concerned me were the vest and jacket versions. There may be others making something simple, but the one I found I

think is plenty good enough, if a little expensive. Though no more than putting together a military LBE. I'm wearing one now."

Ritchie and Magdalene both looked at the khaki colored vest that Kell was wearing. He unzipped the vest and opened it a bit after looking around to make sure no one was watching them.

"Holy cow! You've got a ton of stuff in there!" Ritchie exclaimed.

"How's it carry? Isn't it heavy on the shoulders?" Magdalene asked.

"Not bad at all," Kell said with a shrug. He pulled the zipper back up half way. "I've got a very basic bob here. Some Millennium food bars, vacuum Zip-lock of jerky and one of my homemade Gorp. Pen, note pad, flash light, multi-tool and Swiss Army knife, two bottles of water, a bandana, two fire starters and some tinder, oh, and a few other things."

Kell rapidly ended his description as Sheila approached the booth with another round of drinks. Both he and Magdalene watched as Ritchie hemmed and hawed a bit, as Sheila lingered slightly after setting the fresh drinks on the table and removing Magdalene's and Ritchie's empties.

"I... uh... know this is kind of corny, Sheila... But I was wondering... If you'd like to get something to eat with me when you get off..."

It was all Kell could do not to chuckle at the puppy dog look on Ritchie's face. That look suddenly changed to a huge grin when Sheila replied. "Sure, Ritchie. I'd like that. I'm off at eight tonight. One of the other ladies wants some extra time and I'm letting her take part of my shift."

"That's nice of you," Magdalene said.

"Yeah. She's like that," Ritchie said, bringing a pleased smile to Sheila's face. Sheila left and Ritchie finally turned back to the other two. He

reddened slightly, but said, “You were right, Magdalene. That wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. I really like what I know about her.”

“That’s good,” Kell said.

Before he could continue, Ritchie asked, “Kell... I’ll probably tell her about preparing for something... No way I could just let things happen to her, now that I know she’ll go out with me.”

“I was just about to suggest you might want to ease her into it a little at a time. For a non-prepper, what we’re doing can seem rather extreme.”

“Yeah. You’re right... But... Does my invitation to your place include her now? I’ve got some money left from the sale of the stamps. I can get her at least the same amount of food as I have, if I can store it at your place.”

“Of course, Ritchie. That’ll be fine.” Kell found himself looking over at Magdalene, rather dreading the answer to the question he was about to ask her, in light of Ritchie’s situation now being resolved. “You... uh... have someone you want to include?”

“No. Not in a long time. My last attempt at romance didn’t work out too well. My job kept getting in the way. No. It’s just me, now.”

Kell nodded to acknowledge her answer, managing not to grin the way Ritchie had moments before. “Okay. That settles that. There is easily room for the four of us, if the time comes.”

Suddenly there was a buzzing sound and Magdalene took out her cellular telephone. “Yohansen,” she said. Then she listened for a long time, her face becoming animated several times at what she was hearing.

Three minutes later, Magdalene put her phone away and said, “I hate to break this up, but I’m got a lead on a story I need to check out. Next Wednesday?”

“As long as nothing happens between now and then. If it does, head for my place.”

“You can count on it. I’m really getting scared. And I tell you truthfully, I don’t scare easily.”

“Okay. Well, be careful. Or do you want me to go with you?”

“No. This source will never show himself if there is someone else anywhere nearby.”

“Okay,” Kell said. “Just be careful. If what we think is happening really is, and someone figures out you know about it, you might have some trouble.”

Magdalene paled slightly as she stood up. “Oh. I didn’t even think about that! Don’t worry. I’ll be more careful than I normally am.”

Ritchie watch Kell watching Magdalene as she left Bernie’s. “You starting to really like her, aren’t you?” Ritchie asked.

“I don’t know,” Kell said looking back at Ritchie, knowing it wasn’t quite the truth. “Maybe.”

“Maybe nothing,” Ritchie replied.

Kell glanced at his watch. “Almost eight. I think I’ll go ahead and go home, since you will be otherwise occupied in a few minutes.”

“Okay. See you next Wednesday.”

“The same goes for you, Ritchie, that I told Magdalene. If things happen before we’re expecting, figure out how to get Sheila and yourself out to my place. With or without your supplies.”

“I will, my friend. I will.”

Kell had a hard time falling asleep that night, worrying about Magdalene. Sure, she was armed, but sometimes that wasn't enough.

He woke up rather groggily when the telephone rang. Kell quickly answered it after a glance at the clock on the bedside table. It was almost seven thirty in the morning. He'd slept an hour later than usual.

“Hi, Kell. It's Magdalene. I just got home. I wanted to let you know everything went okay last night. And thank you again for the invitation for when things... what's the expression you used that time? ‘When the balloon goes up?’”

“Yes. That's the expression. You're just getting home?” Kell was still worried.

“Yes.” Kell heard her yawn through the phone. “I'm going to get some sleep and then go see my editor. I've got the information for a story I've been working on for months. With what I got last night, I should be able to break open the story on... Well... I'd better not say, in case Frank shuts the story down. He's on good terms with... Well... You'll see it in the paper, perhaps on TV, if I do the story.”

“Okay. I'll look forward to it. Just you be careful.”

“Don't worry, Kell. I'm being as careful as I've ever been in my life, with things going the way they are.”

Kell hung up the phone slowly, wondering if Magdalene meant the entire situation, or perhaps a little about getting to know him the way he was her. But he shook his head and threw the covers back. He needed to get going. There was another big job scheduled for the day, but they couldn't start until ten, which was fortunate, the way he was feeling.

The following Wednesday was a beautiful late fall day. The sun was shining, the temperatures were mild, and the winds were nil. The weather didn't match Kell's mood. He was worried about Magdalene.

The networks had picked up Magdalene's story on corruption in the city government, due to the tune of over ten-million dollars of federal aid having been miss-spent, with some of it going into half a dozen politicians' pockets.

At that level of corruption, people had been known to disappear or wind up dead, if they were the one that exposed it. Kell had almost called Magdalene several times, but fought the urge. Their relationship was somewhat tenuous and Kell didn't want Magdalene get the feeling he was trying to control her in some way.

So he waited expectantly in their regular booth at Bernie's, glancing at his watch every few minutes. Ritchie and Magdalene were both late and Kell had his cellular phone out, ready to call Ritchie to see if everything was okay.

But Magdalene walked in and was headed for the booth. Kell breathed a sigh of relief and put his phone away when Ritchie came in a few seconds after Magdalene. It wasn't until they were almost at the table that Kell noticed that both of them had on Scottevest vests. Or a vest on Magdalene, and a jacket on Ritchie.

Ritchie's jacket was black and Magdalene's vest was a subdued red. At first Kell thought the color choice a bad one. The red drew the eye. But it was just a red vest, that went well with the rest of Magdalene's outfit. She wouldn't stand out much in a crowd dressed normally for the season.

And that went for Ritchie, too. He had on black jeans and a pale yellow shirt. With the jacket un-zipped, he looked just like half the men in the room, just a different color of shirt. Black was in. Again.

Magdalene slid around the booth next to Kell and Ritchie followed her, his eyes on the bar. He smiled when Sheila gave a big wave and indicated she would be right over.

“I take it things went well with Sheila,” Magdalene said.

“Yes. Very much so. We have a lot more in common than I ever dreamed. She’s not a prepper, per se, but she comes from a long line of farm families and still lives the lifestyle with a big pantry and even a balcony garden at her apartment. I think she’s going to fit in quite well.”

“That’s good,” Kell said. “Did you give her much information on our... project?”

“Not much. I thought you and Magdalene should be a part of that. She’s taking off early tonight to join us. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Magdalene said.

“Fine with me,” Kell said, finding himself more comfortable with the idea than he thought he would be. “I saw your story. It’s all over the news and internet. You really burned some big time crooks.”

“I saw it, too,” Ritchie said. “Congratulations.”

“Have there been any repercussions?” Kell asked.

“Just the standard stuff,” Magdalene said with a shrug. “Nothing I’m concerning myself with.”

“I see. But there has been something?” Kell asked, not willing to let it pass.

“Well, sure. There always is. People making threats to ‘get me’, and such. Never happened in the past.”

Magdalene could see Kell starting to protest, so she quickly added, “But I’m taking all the extra precautions. I think having the Suzuki probably helps. I was pretty well known in that Corvette. With the Suzuki and a slightly different ‘look’ I have now, I’m not as noticed as I used to be. Which normally would bother me some. Being well known in the business has some advantages. But not with the situations the way they are now.”

“Well, okay,” Kell finally said. “I see you both went with the Scottevests clothing.”

“You think the red is a little too flashy?” Magdalene asked.

Kell shook his head. “It’ll draw the eye, because of the color, but shouldn’t arouse any suspicions. And you said your pack was subdued. You should be fine.”

All three in the booth looked up when Sheila came over with their drinks, plus one for herself. She set the drinks out and then said, “I’ll be right back. I’m off the clock now.”

Nothing else was said while each took an initial sip of their respective drinks. Then Sheila was back. Ritchie slid out of the booth to let her in and then sat down beside her. Close beside her, Kell noted. But Sheila didn’t seem to mind.

“Ritchie has sort of been preparing me for some type of information involving all of you. Some that could be bad for all of us.”

Kell nodded. With Magdalene adding a bit from time to time, Kell explained the situation they were worried about, and what they were doing about it.

“Oh, my! That sounds... Well... Not very good. Not very good at all.” She shook her head. “My father always said that there were some bad times ahead for the US and everyone living here.”

Hesitatingly, Kell asked, “Do you think your family will be able to handle the situation if it comes about?”

Sheila bit her lip. “Ritchie didn’t tell you? My family is all dead. There was a fire...” Sheila began to cry and Ritchie put his arm around her.

“I’m sorry!” Kell said, chagrined at bringing the subject that was so obviously painful to Sheila.

“That’s okay. Don’t talk about it much. But you deserve to know that you’re only getting me to worry about and not my entire family.”

Kell nodded. Magdalene handed Sheila a tissue, but didn’t say anything. A few moments of silence, as Sheila wiped her eyes, and then she looked okay. Putting a bright look on her face, she asked, “Now that I am a part of this, what should I do? I’ve only got four days, if your timetable is correct. I do have my savings to draw on...”

“I’m afraid I have to give the same answer to you I did to Ritchie and Magdalene. “You have to make your own decisions. I’m not going to be responsible for your expenditures and actions. This could be nothing. You use your savings to buy things on the spur of the moment and nothing happens, you could wind up in big financial trouble.”

“Ritchie said you laid things on the line. When you were willing to talk. I saw the piece Magdalene just did. That had to take some research. With your research that good, I’m inclined to believe what she’s found. I’m in. Up to half my savings. What do I need to get?”

Sheila, Ritchie, and Magdalene all looked at Kell.

“Me again, huh?”

All three smiled and nodded.

Kell began to describe the most important needs and requirements for a significant event, natural or human caused. Like Magdalene had done, Sheila was taking notes. Only on a napkin, rather than in a note book.

It took a while, and Kell could tell Sheila was getting overwhelmed with information. “Tell you what...” he said. “Those are the main things. I can furnish everything else you might need. Richie and Magdalene paid for some fuel to fill the tanks at my place. If you want to do the same thing, we’ll call it even.”

“Ritchie?” Sheila asked.

“I’d do it. Well, actually, I did do it. You can trust Kell to give value for value.”

“Okay,” Sheila said, turning back to Kell. Then she looked at Ritchie. Will you help me get these things? I’m going to have to figure out where to put them.”

Ritchie looked over at Kell, the question in his mind unspoken.

“You can keep some at my place, if I can consider some of your supplies at your place mine in case I have to leave the house.”

“Did that, too,” Ritchie told Sheila.

“Okay. Deal. I’ll get started first thing in the morning.”

“Kell,” Ritchie asked, “have you figured out what the whatever might be? I wish we could target some of these things to something specific so we know we’ll have exactly what we need.”

Kell was shaking his head even before Ritchie finished. “I’ve thought through dozens of scenarios the last two weeks. It could be anything. We have to be ready for anything and everything that we can. Fortunately most preps are good for most of the possibilities, with some requiring

special equipment or supplies. But I've got us covered, to the best of my ability, for any of those really out there possibilities that I consider survivable."

"You were ready for all of this before this came up, weren't you?" Sheila asked Kell.

"For the most part, depending on just what the situation is."

"What all are you prepared for?" Sheila then asked.

"Too many to list," Kell replied.

"There are that many things to worry about?" Sheila look amazed.

"Technically there are many. But realistically there are only a handful that are likely. I'm more worried about the human caused than natural ones. But it could be either." Kell paused. "What do you say about meeting here Sunday at the same time? There may or may not be any information available at the time, but we can discuss further preparations then, depending on what everyone has at that time."

"That's good for me," Magdalene said. "There are still a couple of things I want to pick up. I've got a couple of internet order items coming in, too."

"Fine with me," Sheila said. "I just hope I have enough time and money for whatever it is."

"Don't worry," Ritchie said immediately. "What's mine is yours."

"Oh, Ritchie! That is so sweet!" Sheila said softly. She leaned over and gave Ritchie a long kiss.

"Well, I guess that raps things up," Kell said, looking around at the other three. "This coming Sunday, unless something happens before then?"

“Aw! You two should stay!” Sheila urged. “There’s a great band tonight.” She looked at her watch. “In just a few minutes. “They play a lot of good dance music.”

Kell was shaking his head. “Uh... I’m not really a good dancer...” He managed not to look over at Magdalene.

“That’s okay,” Magdalene said with humor in her voice. “I’m a good teacher. Stick with me and you’ll be able to go pro in a while.”

“Really?” Kell asked.

“Well, perhaps not professional, but you’ll be comfortable on the dance floor.”

Kell, known for his quick decision making process made a snap judgment. “Sure. Why not. It’ll be fun. Could be the last chance for a while.”

The last statement couldn’t suppress the excitement Kell and Magdalene suddenly felt. So, for the following four hours, disasters and preps were out of their minds, and having a good time with personable people was of the utmost importance.

Kell literally couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a good time. Though he had to get up early the next day for a job, he stayed as long as the others wanted. But all four were ready to leave at midnight.

They left Bernie’s together, with Sheila joining Ritchie in his Jeep. Kell walked with Magdalene to her Suzuki Samurai. She had the driver’s door open, but didn’t enter. Instead, she turned around and told Kell, “I had a really good time, tonight, Kell. If things don’t develop the way we think, I wouldn’t mind doing this again sometime.”

“Count on it,” Kell said.

“Good,” Magdalene said. She didn’t offer to kiss him, and Kell made no move either as she slid into the SUV.

He watched her drive away and then walked over to his Ford, unaware of the huge grin on his face.

Though thoughts of Magdalene, and the possible impending event, crossed Kell’s mind occasionally the next few days, his main attention was completing a large job. Not only was it a matter of pride, there would be a good payoff, with a bonus attached for early completion, if he finished before the first of the next week. And Kell knew just what the money would go on Sunday morning if he and his crew finished up Saturday.

He was tired and dirty when he went home Saturday evening, but he was smiling. He had deposited the check for the work, plus a nice bonus check, just before his branch bank closed. If all went well Sunday, those funds would be converted to gold and silver coins.

Figuring it wouldn’t make much difference, Kell slept late Sunday morning. But once he was up, he hurried. The coin shop where he got most of his gold and silver closed at one in the afternoon on Sundays.

Kell was there well before then and walked out, hunched over from the weight of the two one thousand dollar face value bags of pre-1965 US coins. One bag of dimes and one of quarters. The gold coins in his pockets were nothing to the weight of the silver, but were worth five times the amount dollar wise. And that bank account had the sum total of eight dollars and ninety-eight cents left in it. Nothing to worry about if he lost it for some reason.

He’d had the TV on at home, and the radio going in the truck, while he was out. There was nothing out of the ordinary on the news, except a

moderate storm hitting the North East of the country. But that was normal at this time of year.

Kell decided to head to Bernie's early, as eager to see Magdalene as he was to watch the National News for some indication of what was going on in Washington. Kell decided that it might be prudent, in case there was some drastic news, to be ready for anything.

So he added a few items to the pockets of his Scottevest, and a bag with a few extras went into the truck. Kell couldn't tell if he felt any different than usual, and then decided he did. But wasn't sure if it was due to the possible events, or seeing Magdalene again. "Getting as bad as Ritchie," Kell muttered.

He locked up the house carefully, including the security shutters covering the garage door after he drove out of the garage. Thanksgiving was a week away, but already the city was putting up Christmas decorations. Kell shook his head. He didn't mind the decorations, but not this early in the season, not with the economy the way it was. Especially after Magdalene's report on the corruption in the city government.

That all left Kell's mind when he saw Magdalene talking to Ritchie outside Bernie's. He noted Magdalene's red vest, and Ritchie's black jacket. Magdalene saw Kell pull into the parking lot and waved. Ritchie waved as well, and then turned and went into Bernie's.

Magdalene waited for Kell to park and join her. "You're early, too. It's like I'm on pin and needles. I don't want anything bad to happen, but if there is nothing, it means that my research was all wrong."

"There's no assurance that anything will be obvious tonight. Just because the meeting happened today, doesn't mean the event, if there is one, will take place now. Or even right away."

"I know. But I have this feeling... That we will know for sure if there is something or not."

Kell nodded and opened and held the door for Magdalene to enter. Ritchie was talking to Sheila at their booth. Sheila greeted Kell and Magdalene and then headed back to the bar. She would be on duty for another hour, but would join the three as soon as she got off. Just in time to see the news.

She brought the drinks over. Kell, Ritchie, and Magdalene all had made a similar choice. None of the three ordered alcoholic drinks. All wanted to have all their wits about them. Not that any of them ever overindulged, but they just thought not drinking was better than even getting a slight buzz.

So it was diet coke for Magdalene, a Pepsi for Ritchie, and a cup of hot tea for Kell. Eyes went to the closest big screen TV from time to time, but the normal Sunday afternoon programming was on. Nothing special at all.

The talk was more or less random, with Kell doing something he seldom did. Talk about his work. But he was proud of the job he'd just finished. He didn't mention the allocation of the money, but he did mention the bonus.

"That's great, Kell!" Magdalene said. "You should advertise with us."

"I'm doing about all I can now," Kell replied. "I'd have to expand, and I'm not sure the economy would support that. This last job is the last big job I have lined out. Building is slowing down."

"And it may all be a moot point, anyway, depending on what we hear tonight," Ritchie said.

"True," Kell agreed. "But it may just be nothing."

"But you don't believe that," Ritchie said, more a question than a statement.

“No. I don’t believe that.” Kell looked around Bernie’s. Everything was normal. People having a drink and a good time. Some eating, but mostly just watching the football games on the big screen TVs throughout the place.

Though Magdalene looked over at the nearest screen from time to time, she spent more time studying Kell as Kell and Ritchie discussed the game. Neither of the men got over excited, just commenting on a particularly good play or bad one, no matter which team did what.

The game was over with little fanfare. It had been close for a while, but then one team had taken a strong lead and never let it go. Magdalene saw Sheila take a remote and change the channel on the screen nearest them to a news channel. It brought a few groans, but there were plenty of other screens to watch and things fell quiet as Sheila joined the three at the booth, a cup of coffee in her hand.

Ritchie moved to let Sheila slide in beside Magdalene. “I’m jittery,” Sheila said. “Shouldn’t have poured myself this coffee. She set the cup away from her and all eyes turned to the television screen as the commercial went off and the news set appeared.

“Looks normal,” Kell said. “If something is up, he sure doesn’t know anything about it.”

But that changed abruptly. The news reader lifted a hand to his ear and his eyes grew wide as he listened to something his producer was saying through the earphone in the news reader’s ear.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we take you live to the press room in the White House for an announcement from the President of the United States.”

“Here it comes,” Kell said. But then all were silent. A silence spread across Bernie’s as people whispered across to one another the President was making a speech. There was no need to change the channel on any

of the other TVs. Each station, no matter what the programming, was switching live to the White House.

There were a couple of minutes of murmuring and then the President was introduced and silence fell once again.

“My fellow Americans,” said the President. “I come to you with grave news. Due to a series of natural events that have occurred over the last month, and in anticipation of several more forecast by experts in their fields, I am now declaring Martial Law across the entire United States. The combined forces of our National Guard, Canadian Armed Forces, and several detachments of United Nations Troops will enforce the rules that will be outlined shortly.

“I ask you all to cooperate with these authorities to ensure the health, safety, and well being of all American Citizens, as well as all Citizens of all Nations around the world.”

When he was obviously finished, dozens of questions were being asked by the press corps in attendance. But the President simply turned and walked away from the podium, Secret Service members gathered around him protectively.

It became obvious why the extra security was in place. It wasn't an American that stepped up to the podium next. As soon as the Russian General spoke, there was an outcry from the press corps.

Speaking in very good English, the General began announcing the actions that were going to be taken by UN forces that the President had authorized under a series of Executive Orders. He didn't get past announcing the immediate collection of all firearms in the hands of Civilians before the press corps shouted him down. For those few seconds before the live feed was cut off, Russian soldiers clubbing down the protesting reporters was visible to all those that were watching the broadcast.

Ritchie was the first to speak when the screen showed the national newscaster, and then went blank. All the TV screens in Bernie's did the same thing. Just white noise that was almost palpable in the silence in the place for a few seconds. Then there was pandemonium as people began discussing what they had seen, seeming all of them doing so at the top of their lungs.

Kell, Magdalene, and Sheila all had to lean forward to hear Ritchie. "This is not good. Kell, what do we do?"

"We head for my place to discuss this and decide what we are going to do. And try to find out what the 'natural events' the President mentioned, past and present, are and why the powers that be felt the need to control the US population."

Kell gave Sheila enough money to pay the tab, and he, Ritchie, and Magdalene waited by the door for her to join them after going to the cash register.

They were in convoy, with Kell in the lead when the town's lights all around them went out. Kell flipped on the high power lights mounted on the front of the roof rack of the Ford and continued toward his house.

Magdalene stayed close to him, and Ritchie, with Sheila beside him, close to her. Traffic was rapidly becoming horrendous. As soon as they were all parked at Kell's and exited the vehicles, Magdalene asked, "The traffic was terrible! Why? And what happened to the power all of a sudden?"

"People are already panicking. Heading home, trying to get fuel, check your cell phones..."

"No signal," all three of the others said in unison. Kell hadn't bothered to check his. "They've cut the power and phones. They want people home, with as few resources as possible. How they plan to carry out the

Executive Orders is beyond me. And with foreign troops. There is going to be a blood bath.”

Kell opened the protective shutters for the garage and then motioned Magdalene and Ritchie to put their vehicles in the garage, as he did the same. That done, Kell lowered the security shutters for the garage and led the way into the house from the garage, Magdalene, Sheila, and Ritchie carrying their BOBs. All four were wearing their vests. When he flipped the light switch, the kitchen lights came on.”

“You have power!” Ritchie said. “Is it back on all over?”

He went to a window, but Kell had left all the other shutters down.

“I don’t think so,” Kell said. “I have alternative power systems. Including redundant generators. But for the moment, we’ll run on the battery and inverter system.”

“I’m cold,” Sheila said. Ritchie put his arm around her.

“Temp is normal,” Kell said, after taking a look at the house automation system monitor.

“Just feeling cold inside,” Magdalene said. “So am I.”

“I’ll make coffee... or tea... or hot chocolate. Who wants what?”

The other three all opted for hot chocolate, so Kell made a large pot for all of them. They sat around the kitchen table, talking to Kell across the kitchen counter as he worked.

“What do you think this means, Kell?” Ritchie asked.

“I think it means war in the streets,” Kell said somberly. And that is on top whatever prompted the civil actions. That could be worse than the martial law. Though I’m not sure just how.

“See if you can get the Weather Channel. I’m sure the cable is out, but I’ve got a small dish satellite system, too. I’ll switch over to it.”

Kell disappeared for a couple of minutes and the TV suddenly came to life. Magdalene had the remote in her hand and began to switch through the channels. The Weather Channel was only one of a half a dozen channels broadcasting. And all the others were running their normal pre-recorded programming for a Sunday night.

The meteorologists looked strained. “We may not be on the air for long,” said one of the two at the desk. “But here is the information we have so far. The warm waters of the Gulf Stream have sunk beneath the colder, fresher, water of the North Atlantic. Things are going to get very cold in Europe, Eastern Canada, and the northeastern US very quickly as winter approaches.

“In addition, our experts, before they were ordered out of the areas, were checking on several volcanoes in what are thought to be the early stages of eruption. Many of them are large volcanoes, with at least one super volcano showing the same signs.

“If these volcanoes erupt in any type of short time frame, the ash load in the atmosphere will be tremendous and will add to the cooling effect that...”

There was the sound of gunfire and the huge triple monitor behind the meteorologists shattered and both dove to the ground as another burst of submachine gun fire erupted. Seconds later all the satellite signals were gone.

“Blocked or took out the TV satellites,” Kell said. He handed mugs of hot cocoa to the others and took a seat at the table with his own mug.

“Kell?” asked Ritchie when Kell looked thoughtful, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m thinking. Trying to decide what should be done. The guns you guys bought recently will probably be targeted. I suggest you give them up without a hassle. Distaste at the process, yes. But nothing to prompt an overeager soldier from pulling the trigger.”

“What about you, Kell? I know you have guns, too.”

“None of mine are papered. All were face to face purchases, for cash, with people I don’t know and who don’t know me. Same thing goes with your supplies. Things purchased recently, with a paper trail I bet will be taken, under the Executive Orders and Martial Law. I suggest you bring everything that isn’t on paper over here, with just enough left to get you through a couple of days in case they do come a knocking and take your LTS foods.”

“I paid good money for all those goods!” Magdalene was angry and it showed. “I’m not just going to give them up!”

“I can hide you here, for as long as you want. But I don’t see you just sitting around twiddling your thumbs, doing nothing, while this is going on.” Kell’s voice was calm and convincing.

“You might get by with bringing half of your LTS foods over here and declare you’ve been trying out what you bought and the portion you keep at your place is all that is left. They’ll search, and search good, but if they aren’t in the apartment, and you hold fast, they might just accept it.”

“Well... Perhaps...” Magdalene looked over at Ritchie and Sheila. “What are you going to do?”

“Well... I don’t know...” Ritchie said. “Kell, would the same thing apply to me and Sheila? Half or so of the food here?”

“Half of yours. Probably only a third of Sheila’s. She hasn’t had hers long enough to use up half of it.”

“Okay,” Sheila said. “I’ll bring over a third of it. I sure hate to lose it. That was a big part of my life savings.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Kell said slowly, “There is the probability that your money won’t be worth anything in a few days, anyway. And I expect to recover some, if not most of what they take in this area.”

Magdalene’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, recover?”

Kell’s eyes were on Magdalene’s. She was looking deep into his. “I plan to fight. I plan to disrupt their plans and make it as difficult as possible for them to do what they are trying to do until enough people get upset enough to really fight back en-masse.”

“They’ll kill you!” Magdalene said.

“Perhaps. But my set-up here will probably be intact. The three of you, if you keep your noses clean and obey their rules, might just make it without getting into too much trouble.”

“If you fight, I’m going to, as well,” Ritchie said. There wasn’t a hint of procrastination in him.

“So will I,” Magdalene said. She looked over at Sheila, who was looking frightened.

Before Shelia could say anything Kell spoke up. “We’re going to need someone to be here and be a contact point for the rest of us.” He looked at Magdalene and Ritchie. “If you two insist on helping, working out of my place will be the easiest. You’ll be able to keep all your supplies and equipment, except perhaps your weapons. And again, I have enough already to equip you, even if we don’t get yours back.

But you will have to go underground, for the most part. It won't be easy, and it won't be fun. It will be dangerous."

"I'm in," Magdalene said.

"So am I," said Ritchie, again with no hesitation or indecision.

"I can do the home thing, I think," Shelia said slowly. "Yes. I'm in."

"Here's to the resistance," Kell said, and held out his mug. The others touched mugs and said, 'The Resistance'.

"For now," Kell said a few seconds later, "we get some sleep. And then, early in the morning, we rob your apartments. I just came up with an idea that might let you keep all your new possessions."

"Rob our... Oh," Magdalene said, surprised evident on her face for a moment. "We stage robberies to cover the fact that our goods are all gone."

"Yes," Kell replied. "It may not fool them, but there are going to be so many similar events, probably some of them legitimate, that I doubt they'll investigate each one very thoroughly. Especially if they can't find the owners. Or find them dead."

"Uh... Dead?" Ritchie asked.

"It's not something I expect you three to help with, but if we run across any dead bodies... well... I intend to use them to throw off some suspicion by planting ID and such on them in appropriate situations."

"That sounds... Gruesome." Sheila shivered.

"Yes. But useful," Kell said.

It was only a few minutes later that Kell took the empty mugs, rinsed them out and showed the other three the bedrooms in the house. Sheila and Ritchie didn't hesitate. They both entered the first bedroom. "See you at four in the morning," Ritchie said. It was the agreed on time to go do the burglaries.

"Here, you go, Magdalene," Kell said. "There's an en-suite bath. Should have everything you need."

"Thanks, Kell. I'm sorry I was right, but I'm sure glad I met you in time."

A small smile curled Kell's lower lip. "It all might just be worth it, meeting you. Good night."

Kell missed the startled look on Magdalene's face. And the subsequent large smile as she went into the bedroom, BOB in hand.

Kell had coffee brewing the next morning, shortly before 4:00 AM. Magdalene was the first to come into the kitchen. One hand covered her mouth as she yawned. "Good morning. That sure smells good."

With a smile, Kell poured and handed a cup of the coffee to Magdalene. "Never acquired a taste for it myself. I drink tea and hot chocolate."

Magdalene sat down and watched as Kell started breakfast. "You want me to help?"

"Got it covered," Kell said without looking up from the preparations. He did look up when Ritchie and then Sheila entered the kitchen. Ritchie poured Sheila and him cups of coffee and the two sat down with Magdalene.

There was very little conversation until after Kell served breakfast and the four ate. But as Kell put the dishes in the dishwasher, the questions started.

“What exactly are we going to be doing?” Magdalene asked.

“Yeah,” Ritchie added. “I get the basic concept, but if we just take the items from our places, it is going to look fishy.”

“That’s why we hit a few other places, too. We don’t really even try to take anything, just make it look like the areas were hit by people looking to get some food and supplies put away before they run out. There are going to be quite a few people out there actually doing it.”

Kell had no idea how prophetic his words were. But the four of them found out when they stopped at Sheila’s apartment building. They could see from the Ford’s cab three police cars, and a large group of people milling around them.

“We’ll stay here,” Kell said. “Sheila, see what you can find out.”

“I’m going with her,” Ritchie said. Kell didn’t even try to stop him. Ritchie had it bad for Sheila and it showed. He seemed to Kell to be losing some of his tendency to procrastinate.

The two weren’t gone for very long. When they got back into the truck, Ritchie looked over at Kell. “You didn’t get up last night and come do this, did you?”

Kell grinned, but shook his head in the negative.

“Well, pretty much what you were planning took place for real. Several apartments were broken into between two and four this morning. A couple of people were hurt when they tried to stop the thieves from taking food.

“Sheila’s door showed the marks of attempted entry, but they must have been scared off about then. The high security locks I put on her door kept them out.”

All four looked over when the sirens on the police cars sounded and all three of them pulled away at high speed, leaving the crowd milling about in the cold morning air.

“Well, let’s load up everything and get out of here,” Kell said. “This is probably happening all over the city. I just didn’t think it would happen this quickly. Someone, probably one of the gangs, is planning on making out... well... like bandits.”

Sheila declared loud and long that her apartment had been hit as she rejoined the other residents of the apartment building. “I’m taking what’s left and getting out of here.” She kept an eye out for Kell, Ritchie, and Magdalene as the apartment was emptied of everything of value.

Kell made sure any names on some of the boxes they were moving would not be seen by the few spectators still out and about. Fortunately most had returned to their respective apartments to get out of the cold, or get dressed. Most had been still in pajamas.

“That was easy enough,” Ritchie said as Kell headed for his home. The truck was too full with items other than the food to pick up things from either Ritchie’s or Magdalene’s places.

“Yeah. Don’t think it will be as easy the next time,” Kell said. “I was expecting to do all three places before six this morning. We’ll have to wait until tonight to do yours and Magdalene’s places. I just hope it doesn’t happen for real at either one.”

“It won’t,” Magdalene said. “At least, not at mine. I’ve got good locks, too. And the building can’t be entered without someone in the lobby knowing it. I’m not sure how your plan will work at my place.”

Kell smiled. "I have a few skills that might let us get the job done. If not, then we'll take it a few boxes at a time. You're a good Samaritan that has been giving some of your food to those that don't have enough. Which will be the case in just another day, for sure."

"You have a plan for everything, don't you?" Ritchie asked Kell.

"I try to," Kell replied.

"What do we do now?" Sheila asked after they'd unloaded the truck at Kell's.

"Life as usual. At least, as usual as can be now. I say go to work and just keep your eyes and ears open for any information that might help us get through the next few weeks and months."

"Months?" Ritchie asked. "You really think it could be months?"

"Or even years," Kell said somberly. "Depending on how many American people object and take up arms. I'm convinced that it will take that to bring things back to what they should be."

Ritchie and Sheila headed out in Ritchie's Jeep and Magdalene left, a little reluctantly, in her Suzuki Samurai. Kell locked everything up and took the Ford in to his HVAC shop. There was no job scheduled so he put his three current employees to doing an inventory of everything in the shop, from display models down to the last screwdriver.

"What do you think about what the president said last night?" asked Steverino, his senior tech and installer an hour later.

"Don't know," Kell replied. "Business has been slow, as you know. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep the shop up."

"Man! I was afraid of that!" Bonnie, the office manager and, well... actually... the entire office staff now with Sally no longer there. "I don't

like guns, but I sure don't like the idea of Russian's taking them from people. Part of my family came from Russia. They left there for a variety of reasons. One of them was the always present fear of being wakened in the middle of the night and people disappearing, along with their goods. Always for breaking some silly rule that shouldn't be a law, anyway. Kell... I think I'll move in with my son and his family. I don't think I can handle this situation if it goes the way the guys have been talking about this morning."

"You do what you think best, Bonnie. I know you got paid, but I'll write you a check for two weeks. Wish it could be more..."

"No, Kell. Don't feel bad. I, better than anyone, know how tight things have been lately. You don't have to write that check, but I sure won't turn it down if you do."

Kell smiled. "Bonnie, you're always looking out for my best interests. I'll miss you. And hope this situation resolves itself quickly so you can come back and we can do what we do best. Serve the public with our training and expertise."

"You got a way with words, Boss," chuckled Mikey, the newest and youngest of Kell's employees. But the chuckle faded away. "Man... if this gets bad... How am I going to feed my family?"

"The kid has a point, Kell," Steverino said softly. "I won't take food out of a babies' mouth. You call the kid when you need some help. I think I'll head out to my brother's place in Idaho. Some good people out there. People that are not going to take this situation sitting down. If you know what I mean."

"I know. Let me get that check for Bonnie, and I'll cut one for you, too. You've been my good right arm for a lot of years, Steverino. Going to miss you around here."

Gruffly Steverino muttered, "Don't get all sappy on me, Kell."

“Boss... I don’t know what to do.” It was Benson, the third employee. “If you can’t keep me busy... Well, I’ll have to look for something else.”

“I understand,” Kell said. And he did. Benson had a gambling problem and needed a steady income to feed the habit. He had come to work a couple of times sporting bruises he always had some lame excuse for. Kell was sure it was the result of being late on vigorish payments to his loan shark or bookie. Even in this day and age, you don’t come up with the vig, you could get your legs broken.

Benson had never let the problem interfere with his work, other than asking for all the overtime he could get.

“Let me get those checks...” Kell went into the tiny office of the shop and sat down at his desk. It was small, but everything had a place, and everything was in its place. Kell was something of a neat freak and liked things right at hand when he needed them. Bonnie, Steverino, and Benson were gathering their personal items up and were all three waiting for Kell when he came out of the office.

“Here you go. And good luck all of you.”

Mikey turned fearful eyes on Kell. Kell had given him a check for two weeks of straight time, just like the others. “You’re firing me?”

“No, Mikey. Just an advance. I suggest you take it and cash it today and buy up all the non perishable food you can. Pay days could be few and far between now, and food may be really hard to get.”

“You really think food won’t be available?” Mikey asked. “But people have to eat. Someone has to make sure there is food. The government...”

“The government now seems to be a bunch of Russians and other UN members,” Steverino said. “Everything except grief is going to be hard to come by. Do what Kell says. Stock up some and don’t buy too much

at any one store. Hide it away in a lot of different places when you get home.”

“But...”

“If you don’t want it, kid, I’ll take it off your hands,” Benson said. He folded his check and carefully put it in his shirt pocket. “See you around guys. Hope things work out for you.”

“You, too,” Kell said.

“No, Benson. I’ll do like Steverino said. I don’t like the idea, but it does make sort of sense.”

A few minutes later and Kell was alone in the shop. With determination, he turned to converting seemingly random parts he’d been collecting over the years and storing out of the way into devices that should prove quite useful in the coming future.

It was some time before the need and then the opportunity came up for Kell to use some of his non-HVAC related handiwork. It was well after Magdalene and Ritchie suffered, along with others in their apartment buildings, fake attacks on property Sheila had almost suffered for real, and had made it look real for the neighbors.

Police reports were filed about the supposed break-ins, but only basic statements were taken. It was happening all over the city. And according to some amateur radio communications, it was happening all over the US.

Mainstream news, what there was of it now, didn’t report any of it. Former networks that might have were no longer broadcasting, most notably Fox News. All the other networks, by choice or coercion, were broadcasting the UN propaganda.

Stories of what the UN troops were doing were being whispered about and passed along from person to person. As retaliation began against the enforcement of Martial Law, and especially the atrocities perpetrated by many of the UN contingents, Canadian forces were quickly recalled to Canada and their border with the US closed tightly.

The whole reason for the Martial Law seemed to be forgotten by the majority of people. But that reason began to become more and more obvious as the northern hemisphere headed into winter.

Winter came early and it came hard. With the absence of the warm waters of the Gulf Stream moderating the weather in Western Europe and the Eastern US, it got cold. Very cold. With snowfalls measured in feet.

Despite the restrictions on travel that were part of Martial Law, many people tried to move out of the northern areas into the southern, much warmer areas. But that was illegal now. Those that tried, and got caught, which was most of them, had their possessions confiscated and were put into the FEMA camps that had often been argued about before the event. The ones that said there were camps were right.

And every major Wal-Mart store was soon stripped of goods, then the shelving removed, and the buildings became processing centers, using the inventory tracking software and the computer scanners to register every person caught up in the dragnets. Every person got a bar coded wrist tag.

It didn't matter for many. They were long dead, any show of resistance being met with violent force. Any goods they had with them were confiscated and went into the pool of food and supplies that would feed, marginally, those taken into custody.

As the winter worsened, and food became scarce, the widespread search and seizure of home food stocks began. Despite trying to fight the order

to surrender customer lists, all the major suppliers of long term storage foods were finally forced, at the point of a gun, to turn them over.

There was as much resistance to the seizure of up to ninety percent of foods held in the home as there was to the ongoing collection of firearms. Often the two went together. And just like those fleeing the frozen north, resistance was met with violent force, with whole families wiped out and their goods taken. And the atrocity tales grew and spread. It was down to trying to hide the women and children first, and then defending the home, second.

The family owned dealerships that Ritchie worked for were no more, and Ritchie began to help Kell with the small amount of work he was getting. It was mostly repairs on heating units as the cold zone spread south.

Surprisingly, Bernie's managed to stay open, with a source of alcohol that seemed unending, so Sheila was able to continue to work. Though it was a hardship, as the UN troops moved into the area, with Bernie's the only place open, it became their place, driving away almost all of the regular customers. They didn't have the money to spend on booze, anyway.

But Sheila was able to glean some useful information from time to time that she passed on to Kell.

Magdalene was the first of the group to come into the UN troops' sights. She was on a food company list. The four were keeping an eye on the apartments Sheila, Magdalene, and Ritchie had used before they'd moved in with Kell. One of the residents that Magdalene talked to from time to time told her that the UN had been there, looking for her, to get her food and guns. The woman was shocked to learn that Magdalene had guns. Or food, for that matter.

Seeing the look in the woman's eyes, and her quick glance at one of the signs posted in the building requesting information on anyone known to have guns or food, Magdalene quickly made herself scarce.

Those posters were up everywhere, asking neighbor to spy on neighbor, with the promise of a portion of the food recovered to go to the informant. Magdalene finally gave up trying to do her job. The paper she worked for, and the TV station she freelanced with, both were shut down. As the winter worsened, and more and more people began dying, Magdalene took over the job that Sheila thought she would be doing.

Keeping the home fires burning and taking care of the place while Sheila, Kell, and Ritchie were working. It chafed on her until Kell had her start monitoring several frequencies on the Amateur Radio bands. She wrote down the blocks of numbers, and gave them to Kell when he got home each day he was able to work.

"Can you tell me what it is you're doing, Kell?" Magdalene asked early in the situation.

"Better if you don't know, Magdalene," Kell replied, turning away from the laptop computer screen to look at her. "Anyone caught with these codes, or information about them is summarily executed. And if it is a woman... well... I'm not putting you in jeopardy. At least, no more than you already are."

"But I could be..."

"No," Kell said, and turned away, ending the conversation.

It was shortly after the first of the New Year that Ritchie was located by the UN looking for gun owners and food 'hoarders'. Kell was held at gunpoint while Ritchie was dragged away for interrogation inside the warmth of a Russian armored personnel carrier.

Kell was debating on what to do an hour later, when Ritchie was shoved out of the APC and those watching Kell climbed into it, leaving Ritchie sprawled on the ground. Kell ran over and helped his friend get up.

He looked terrible. He had two shiners already forming, there was blood running from his nose and a split lip. “Ritchie! I’m sorry! I should have done something...”

Ritchie managed a smile. A very small smile. “No, Kell. You would have just got us both killed. Can you help me over to sit down? They worked on me pretty hard. My solar plexus is aching to beat it.”

Kell helped Ritchie over to the Ford and got him into the rear passenger seat. “I’ll take you home...”

“No,” Ritchie said adamantly. “They’ll be watching. I’m sure of it. Just let me rest here for a bit. I don’t want to chance them following us home. They aren’t too patient. If we don’t do anything except continue the work, I’m hoping they’ll believe the story you helped me come up with.”

Kell hated to do it. Ritchie was in a lot of pain. But Ritchie was also right. If they looked guilty, they would be treated as if guilty. And for the crimes of owning guns and hoarding food, that meant a bullet in the back of the head.

Kell managed to finish the job by himself and then take Ritchie to the house in a roundabout path. It wasn’t easy to shadow a vehicle using an APC, so either the UN troops were using some domestic vehicles, or they were convinced of Ritchie’s story.

Sheila was still crying when Kell took her in to Bernie’s to go to work after he got Ritchie home and she saw him. Magdalene was tending to his injuries when they left. When Kell returned, she met him at the door.

“We can’t just let this go, Kell! They could have killed him, just questioning him!”

“It’s happening all over, Magdalene. We have to pick our times and places... but we aren’t letting things like this go unanswered.”

“Tell me what you are up to! I really want to know. I’m sure I can help.”

“If something comes up that justifies the risk, I will ask you to help. But for now, please let it be. We’ve already lost several people...”

“So there is a resistance?”

“Yes. And that is all you need to know, at the moment.”

Magdalene didn’t like it, and she made sure Kell knew it. But she went about taking care of the house and greenhouse without shirking the work.

Then it was Kell’s turn to come under scrutiny. It wasn’t about guns or food. There was no record of any purchases. The UN inspector was there to tell Kell he was out of business. “You no more fix heaters. People must report to camps if they are cold. You get ketched and you will go to camp, too. Show me your food.”

As soon as the inspector and his bodyguard had shown up on the street, Ritchie, Magdalene, and Sheila had quickly disappeared into the tunnel from Kell’s basement to the shelter. So Kell led the inspector on a tour of the house, starting with opening up the kitchen pantry without comment. There were exclamations of glee from the four soldiers and they quickly moved inside and began loading up the food.

“How much can I keep?” Kell asked, hoping he was showing enough worry, but not too much.

“You lucky you keep any. Was supposed to turn extra food in. Show me rest of house.”

Kell did so. The inspector looked into closets, under beds, and behind furniture. But Kell had expected such a visit at some point in time, so only the few days of food for one person was in the pantry, and there was no sign of anyone or anything else out of the ordinary in the rest of the house.

An hour after they arrived, they left, carrying all the food from the pantry and 'garden shed', after the inspector saw the greenhouse and the few things growing in it. "You have food. Better than many. We take all that will keep. You no like, you take up with President!" He laughed heartily and turned to leave.

From the discussions among the four troopers, that food wasn't going to keep for long, even if Kell couldn't understand the words. Apparently one of the troopers didn't like the look Kell had on his face and suddenly threw a butt stroke with his rifle into Kell's stomach. "More if you resist!"

Kell slowly straightened up and watched the men return to the APC and the truck they were using before he closed the door. He waited another half an hour before he turned on the intercom and told the other three they could come out.

Magdalene immediately saw the distress Kell was in by the way he was standing, slightly stooped over from the pain of the blow. "Are you all right, Kell?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just got one little taste of what happened to Ritchie." He straightened up, ignoring the pain.

"Hey! They took everything!" Sheila said, standing in the pantry doorway. "I thought they were supposed to leave a certain amount behind!"

"Seems that our greenhouse food qualifies as that certain amount," Kell replied.

“That’s just not right!” Sheila said.

“We have other food. We’ll be okay,” Kell said, trying to calm Sheila down.

“I know! I know!” Sheila suddenly sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. “It’s just... I’m pregnant!” She started to cry and Ritchie hurried over to comfort her.

“I see,” Kell said. “Well, I have supplies, including food for mother and baby.”

“Really?” Sheila asked, looking up at Kell with hope in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Ritchie said. “Kell is the man. He’s ready for almost anything.”

Magdalene went over and sat down beside Sheila, taking both her hands in hers.

“Ritchie is right. We’re all here for you.”

“But what if there are problems?”

“We’ll handle them,” Kell said, with more assurance than he felt. His go-to doctor for such situations was sitting in a FEMA camp somewhere.

“Let’s get you to bed for a nap,” Magdalene said. She pulled Sheila to her feet and the two women head for the bedroom. “This has been stressful and a nap and some time will help.”

“Wish it was that simple,” Ritchie said softly, watching the two women go down the hallway.

“Yeah. So do I. But we’re in the real world, and there is a job to be done.”

Ritchie looked over at Kell quickly. There was a tone in his voice that Ritchie hadn’t heard before. “What do you mean?”

“It’s time the resistance goes on the offensive. We have an operation planned for tomorrow night.”

“I’m in!” Ritchie said immediately. His days of indecision were over

“No. You. Are. Not.” Kell said. There was steel in his voice now. “Before, yes. Not now. You have a baby on the way and the woman that is bearing it to take care of now.”

“But Kell...”

“He’s right,” Magdalene said, coming up to them. She’d heard most of the conversation. “You need to be here with her as much as is humanly possible. She told me her family has a history of difficult births. That’s why she is so scared.”

Magdalene looked at Kell. “I’ll be taking Ritchie’s spot. Won’t I?”

Kell almost said no, even knowing it would be a fruitless attempt to keep the woman he was falling in love with away from harm and safe.

He searched her face for a long time, and then, giving in to the plea in her look, nodded and said, “Yes. You’ll be taking Ritchie’s place. This particular operation it will work better, anyway. Come on. I’ll fill you in on the details.”

“I’ll sit in and...”

“You will no such thing, Ritchie. Sheila needs you. Even asleep, she’ll feel better with you there with her.”

Ritchie frowned, but he headed down the hallway to the bedroom he and Sheila shared.

“Okay,” Kell said. “Let’s go down to the tunnel, and I’ll show you the plans.” The tunnel was used for storage as well as access to the shelter from the house.

Magdalene smiled slightly, having won what was a major victory for her. But the thought of what they were undertaking began to overwhelm her and the smile faded, replaced with a look of concern.

“This is something I can do, isn’t it, Kell? I don’t want to put other people at risk...”

“You’ll do fine. As I said, it will work better with a woman as part of the team. Much more distracting than Ritchie dressed up as one.”

“Ritchie was going to dress up as a woman?”

“He didn’t know it, but, yes, that was part of the plan. Come on. I’ll lay it all out for you.”

It was ten in the morning two days hence when Kell and Magdalene returned from the attack on UN forces. Ritchie and Sheila were waiting anxiously for their return. They’d been expected back early in the morning.

“Are you okay?” Sheila asked when Kell and Magdalene entered the kitchen.

“How it’d go?” was the question Ritchie asked.

“Oh, my! You’ve got blood all over you, Magdalene! Are you hurt?”

A weary Magdalene shook her head. “It’s not my blood.” She shuddered and blinked back tears. “One of the guys... Didn’t make it... I tried...”

“It was too late and too devastating an injury, Magdalene. He didn’t have a chance. You did everything you could to ease his passing.”

“Oh, no!” Sheila said softly.

“He was our only loss,” Kell said. He was as tired as Magdalene looked. The death had affected him as deeply as it had Magdalene. He was the one in charge of their part of the mission and the loss was his.

“What happened?” Ritchie asked.

“Ambush at the UN headquarters for this area. Magdalene ran in, half dressed, screaming bloody murder and ran back outside, with a slew of the troops after her. We’d managed to wire the vehicles with the devices I’d made up and we blew them as soon as Magdalene was clear. We opened up with small arms then and pretty much got the whole bunch.

“But there were a few still inside. That’s where Harley got it. As we cleared the building one of the UN troops popped a grenade. Harley was too exposed and took the brunt of the explosion.

“We finished them off and took off, but one of the roving teams was just coming back. We had to split up and make it back home watching for road blocks. I think there just weren’t enough troops left to set any up. I got word on the radio just before we came in that everyone had made it home safely... Besides Harley. He was a good guy...”

“It wasn’t your fault, Kell. You told him not to get so far ahead of the team.”

“Yeah. But I should have made sure of it. I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. Wake me if something appears to be happening. Ritchie, would you secure the weapons in the shelter?”

“Sure,” Ritchie replied, taking the weapons that Kell and Magdalene had taken on the mission.

Ritchie and Sheila watched as the two went down the hallway, again to separate bedrooms, to clean up and get some sleep. Each alone. Ritchie put his arm over Sheila. “Too bad,” he said.

“Yeah,” Sheila said. She was much more comfortable with her pregnancy now, after Kell had shown her the medical gear he had in the tunnel to the shelter.

That mission was part of the first large scale organized resistance to the UN being in the US. Individual National Guard personnel had been deserting and turning their weapons on the UN troops since the very first. But now whole units were refusing to follow the Martial Law orders and joined the resistance.

Similar plans had been carried out all over the US. And they continued. But the UN wasn't the only reason Americans were dying. The cold was intense in February, and with it came more and more snow. Climate change was occurring faster than ever thought possible.

The UN troops were moving south, leaving behind people stranded in the camps with no heat, water, or food. Thousands died every day.

But those mostly successful first missions were only the beginning. The world's largest armed force, American Hunters, was getting organized. And where it wasn't organized, lone individuals and small groups took their squirrel rifles and deer rifles and target rifles and expended their supplies of ammunition on the UN troops. And when they ran out of ammunition for their own rifles, they picked up the weapons the fallen UN troops dropped and kept shooting.

Kell had the satisfaction of using one of his IEDs on the very APC that had been used when Ritchie was so badly treated. Precious fuel was used, not to flee the cold, but to make firebombs to inflict as much damage as possible on the UN troops and their equipment. People made the choice to resist rather than flee.

March came and went without a break in the weather. With little food for their own people, the UN nations with troops in the US essentially abandoned them to their fate. They wouldn't be going home to use up the supplies of food still left in their homelands.

The weather began killing as many of the UN troops as the American resistance was. Those that could speak well enough to get by shed their uniforms and tried to blend in with the rest of the refugees heading south by any means possible. But most were found out and suffered the same fate they'd been perpetrating on Americans.

A new war started at the Mexican border as those seeking the warmth south of the line were turned back en-mass, at the point of a gun or bayonet. The fences so hated by so many that wanted an open border were now being kept up and new ones built to keep those in the US, including those here in the US illegally, in the US and out of Mexico.

The beef herds of Texas were slaughtered to feed the masses, leaving few to reproduce for future needs.

But that was all now south of Kell's house by many miles. There was little threat from UN troops any more. They were all dead or on their way south. But that didn't end the danger. Now even more desperate people were looking for every scrap of food and place to get warm that they could. And were willing to kill for it.

"I hate this!" Kell said after the four held off another attack on the house by some of those people. "Killing foreign troops is one thing... Killing fellow Americans is another. I hate it!"

“What choice do we have?” Ritchie asked, after a glance over to his now obviously pregnant wife. They’d been married in late March during a relatively quiet time.

“How long can we hold out, Kell?” Magdalene asked.

“A long time,” Kell replied. “I believe we are south of where the glaciers will form. But food is still going to be problematical when we run out of stored food. We’re good for a couple of years on food, and almost indefinitely on hardware. Fuel will be the first thing we run out of, if we can’t get an oil crop in and make some biodiesel.

“And we’ll need to get some farm animals for a continuing meat source. That could be really hard to do. What weren’t butchered and eaten in the area have probably frozen to death.”

“So, what is the plan?” Sheila asked. Her faith in Kell was obvious.

“Well, there are a couple of options I want to check out. But they mean I’ll be gone for a while.”

“What? Why? Where?” Magdalene had a hard time keeping her voice calm.

“I’d rather not say. It’s pretty iffy if things will work out the way I’m hoping.”

“I don’t like it,” Magdalene said. “If you go, I should go with you. Watch your back.”

“Didn’t think you wouldn’t,” Kell said. “And I would value your presence. But you are needed here to help Sheila, and help Ritchie with defense of the place. The way things are set up, the two of you should be able to manage anything those that are left are likely to be able to throw at you.”

“What about you, Kell?” Ritchie asked. “You out there all alone? Anything could happen.”

“I know. But I think the risk is worth the potential benefits.”

“Well, at least tell us what those benefits are,” Magdalene insisted.

But it was to no avail. Kell wouldn't tell them where he wanted to go or why. And a week later it was the same thing as he added a bottle of water to his Scottevest and put on his heavy parka over it.

“I've got enough food and fuel to easily get there and back, as long as there are no problems,” Kell told the other three as they watched him head for the garage door in the kitchen.

“You all know the ins-and-outs of this place. You'll be fine. I'll be in radio contact as often as I can.”

There were tears in her eyes when Magdalene stepped forward and suddenly had Kell in a bear hug. Then she tipped up her face and kissed Kell on the lips. “You just make sure you get back here okay. I've fallen in love with you and I want you around for a long time to come.”

“Now, that is good news. I sort of have a case for you, too.” This time it was Kell that instigated the kiss. “I'll be back. Count on it.”

The trip was easier than Kell thought it would be, though Sheila, Ritchie, and especially Magdalene, worried about him every minute he was gone. But it did take longer than he expected. He radioed in every evening, keeping them informed of his progress, but they still worried.

On a sunny June day, with the temperature a mild fifty eight degrees, Kell pulled into the driveway, the back of the truck loaded up almost to the height of the rack, with a long trailer behind it.

Magdalene ran out and he had her in his arms for a long kiss before explaining what he'd done.

"We've got a while before we have to unload the truck and trailer," Kell said. "Let's go inside and I'll tell you all about it."

"Do I hear chickens?" Ritchie asked, the last one into the garage.

"Probably," Kell said with a chuckle. Magdalene fussed over Kell, getting him a cup of tea ready as he took off his vest and hung it over the back of the kitchen chair. "I've got two dozen chickens, with the equipment and food to get them established."

"Where..." Ritchie started to ask, but Kell held up his hand. "Let me tell it in order."

Ritchie nodded and fell silent.

"Well, I'd been in contact with a guy before all this happened. And he joined the resistance, just as I figured he would. We maintained coded contact all through everything. He managed, by hook and crook, to keep from losing his farm. It's way back up in the hills. A more or less self-supporting farm and ranch. He didn't run a great deal of stock, and was able to hide it all in a cave on his property when things got really bad.

"To be honest, I'm not sure he would have been able to deny people the food, if they'd known he was there and what he had. But his family is all loners, except for family, and the access to the farm and ranch are pretty difficult. So, though he was found by the UN, and they took some of his food, they simply couldn't find the stock, and with the way Bruno had arranged things, it looked like he'd already butchered it all and given the food away.

"They didn't like it much, but didn't do anything extreme. All his kith and kin were there, obviously armed. Even with the APC, the troops were afraid to try anything he said. So, to make a long story short, I

bought enough meat, on the hoof, and paid them to butcher and package it for me, to last us a couple of more years.

“He was already into biodiesel, and I bought plenty of his future production to see us through. Same way with cooking oil, and sugar beets for sugar. Three kinds of wheat for flour, some oats... Well, pretty much everything needed to have a balanced and complete diet. So almost all our food needs are covered, with what we can grow here.”

“You said you bought...” Magdalene said, her words fading for a moment. “I mean, money doesn’t seem to be any good. And we obviously can’t produce enough things that they need to trade even up...”

“Not entirely true, Kell said. “He wants to remain anonymous and isolated. So I agreed to handle all the food distribution from his farm and ranch for him, keeping the source secret. Also, with the few social outlets they did have for the clan’s eligible young people to meet and find spouses no longer available, Bruno asked me to take one or two with me on each trip to look for suitable mates for those old enough now, and in the future, as the younger ones mature.”

Magdalene’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Oh, really? That would include some young women, no doubt.”

“No doubt,” Kell said. He was grinning and had no idea just how close he was to being on the receiving end of a little mayhem. “So,” he continued, in the nick of time, “I thought that you might travel with me, to do research on that book you want to write about what has happened and our small part in it.”

“Oh,” Magdalene said, caught up in the idea she’d been thinking about from early on, when things were at their worst. “I can do that. That’s actually a very good idea. But that still doesn’t explain how you bought so much. Surely he didn’t give you everything, based on future events.”

Kell grinned. He reached into his shirt pocket and brought out two coins. A one ounce US Gold Eagle and a one ounce US Silver Eagle. “Bruno read a story on the internet about a post apocalyptic world scenario where a survivor that had bought heavily into gold and silver coins set up things to be a banker in the PAW. He was never able to acquire the precious metals to do it with. I did. But I don’t want to be a banker. Just a husband and father, and small time food distributor.

“So he leaped on the chance to acquire enough precious metal coins to set up a bank to aid in the ongoing coping with the climate change. And keep it in the family so they can do the same with the recovery when things change in a few years... or centuries.”

“Just how much gold and silver do you have?” Magdalene asked.

“Not as much as I used to. But plenty to keep us going our entire lives, and, like Bruno, enough to keep our descendents going for a few generations.”

Magdalene sat down on Kell’s lap and gave him a quick kiss. “So. I’m marrying into a rich family, I take it.”

“You sure are.” Kell kissed her back.

End *****

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