

Is The Mail Here Yet? - Chapter 1

Regina Prescott walked down the driveway to get the mail from the mailbox just recently repainted with the Prescott family name on it. Regina and Hadley, with their two children had moved in a month ago and were just now getting their mail forwarded from their old house.

“That’s funny,” Regina said, when she pulled a sheath of papers out of the box, along with the regular flyers and bills. “Someone is in a bunch of trouble,” she thought to herself. “Not supposed to be anything put in a mailbox except USPS mail.”

When she got inside the house she started to throw the literature away with the flyers she never looked at, but the word Katrina seemed to jump out of her. Setting the bills in the mail holder on the wall for later handling, Regina sat down at the kitchen table and looked over the papers in more detail.

One of the women Regina worked with at the temp agency had relatives in New Orleans when Katrina laid waste to the city. Her mother had died, and the rest of the family lost everything. They were now still spread out in a couple of the host towns they’d been bussed to during the trouble.

Regina intended to just scan through the material, expecting to see some kind of sales pitch at the end. But sections of it kept catching her eye and she wound up reading the entire packet through.

She sat back in the kitchen chair thoughtfully. There was no sales pitch, just information on how to prepare for various disasters that could happen. There was no contact information. Regina smiled for a moment. Probably a good thing for the one that had gone to the trouble of putting it in the mailboxes. Someone was bound to turn them in, if they could find out who it was.

Just from the way some of the information was formatted, Regina was sure it was printed off an internet website. Taking the sheath of papers over to the kitchen computer she plugged in a couple of the web addresses from the material. Sure enough, some of the information displayed was the exact same thing printed on the paper.

Suddenly, a bit alarmed, she called her next door neighbor. “Hi, it’s Regina. Next door. Did you get some strange papers in the mail today?”

“I certainly did!” Mrs. Thompson’s voice was shrill. “And if I find out who put them there I aim to get them arrested. Have you ever seen such nonsense? Talk of nuclear war, like it was the ‘50’s or ‘60’s! The nerve of some people! Just wanting to stir up trouble.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thompson.” Regina hung up the phone slowly, still thinking. It wasn’t directed at the Prescotts alone. Just to make sure, Regina made a few more telephone calls. The reception she got was about the same as Mrs. Thompson’s. Those in the neighborhood certainly didn’t like the idea of non-mail things in their mail boxes, especially something pointing out potential problems.

Not all were as adamant as Mrs. Thompson, but the undercurrent was one of anger, fueled, Regina was beginning to think, by fear more than anything else. Fear, perhaps, that the information might be correct. Only one woman had not expressed dismay, at the least, of the information packet. Karen Lyons was cautious about it, but was interested in what Regina thought about the information.

“I don’t know,” Regina said. “Sure has stirred up something. The people I’ve talked to are out to get whoever put the packet in mail boxes.”

“The person must have been foolish to do that, don’t you think?”

“I think so, Karen. Whoever it is could get into a lot of trouble over using mailboxes for something like this. But you don’t seem as incensed as the others. What do you think about the information?”

“I think it is something to think about. I’m sorry. Someone is at the door. I have to go.”

Regina hung up the telephone slowly again. She tried a couple more numbers, getting them from directory assistance for the homes in the area. It seemed the material had just been placed in the mailboxes of their small development.

Late that afternoon, right after Hadley pulled into the drive and Regina was about to show him the information, a car pulled in right behind Hadley’s. Two men got out and identified themselves as US Postal Inspectors.

“We’d like to talk to you, Mrs. Prescott.”

Hadley looked at his wife questioningly. “I’ll explain later,” Regina told him. “Come in, officers. I think I know what this is about.”

The two entered and took the seats at the kitchen table that Regina offered. Hadley stood behind her chair after she sat down. “It’s this, isn’t it?” She slid the packet of information over to one of them.

He pulled out a set of the papers from inside his jacket pocket. “We have a copy. Several. What do you know about this?”

“Nothing, really. I found it this morning in the mailbox. I knew someone would be in trouble, since people aren’t supposed to use the mailbox for anything except official mail, if I’m correct.”

“You are correct. You seem to know quite a bit about it. Most of the people that called in and complained said you had contacted them about the material. Are you trying to stir something up, Mrs. Prescott?”

“Wait a minute, now!” Hadley said, his hand going to Regina’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Honey,” Regina said, patting his hand with hers. “I didn’t distribute this,” she told the Postal Inspectors, “if that’s what you are asking.”

“An awful lot of interest in something not to be a part of it,” said one of the men. “Do you have any idea of who might have done this?”

Regina thought about Karen, but didn’t mention her name. “No. No, I don’t.”

Both men looked at Regina carefully, but she was a very good poker player. Her expression gave nothing away. “What do you plan to do about this?” she asked.

“Oh, we’ll find out who it is. Then we will enforce the law.” The man that had spoken gave her one of his cards. “Call us if this happens again, or you find out any more about the situation. I might caution you about calling and talking to people about this. You might be considered an accomplice if this turns out to be a homegrown terrorist trying to scare people, leading up to some kind of an attack.”

The two men left, leaving Regina in a minor state of shock at the Inspector’s last words. Hadley moved around and sat down across the table from her. “What is this all about, Regina? Those guys weren’t playing around.”

“I know. And Honey, not that you would ask, or anything, but no, I didn’t have anything to do with this. I just got curious and made a few telephone calls to see who might have received the same information. I think you should read it.”

“No, I wasn’t going to ask. I know you. You wouldn’t have done this.” Hadley picked up the sheath of papers and began to scan through them, the way Regina had at first.

“No, Hadley. Read it all. While I get supper started. The kids should be home pretty soon from school.”

If Regina wanted him to read all the information, then Hadley would. She had a reason or would not have asked him. He wasn’t finished when Ray and Gina got off the school bus and came into the house, one asking what was for supper and the other if she could go to the mall after dinner.

“We’ll see,” Regina said, giving each of the children a quick kiss as they passed by her, headed for their room to put away their school things.

It wasn’t until after dinner, and Ray had been persuaded to drive Gina to the mall, that Hadley finished reading through the information. “Okay, Regina. I’ve read it. Now what is up?”

“Hadley,” she said, curling up on the sofa beside him in the living room, “you can not believe how upset people were about this. I mean, sure, putting something in the mailbox is against the law, and I understand people objecting to that, but almost everyone was angry. I mean

really angry. I think some of them took a look at that information and got scared. And you know what happens when people get scared.”

“They get angry,” Hadley said for her. “I know. You didn’t get angry, from the looks of it.”

“No. But Hadley... It has scared me, too. More than a little.”

“You think we should do something about this?”

“Hadley, we don’t even have a decent first-aid kit. Every time one of us gets sick, I have to run to the pharmacy and get NyQuil or whatever. Look what happened in Katrina. Marley’s mother died, for heaven’s sake! What if we get the earthquake they keep talking about? And you watch the news. Things going on all over... Yes, honey, I’m scared and I think we should do something about it.”

“Where do you want to start?” Hadley asked.

“With this,” Regina said, picking it up from Hadley’s lap. “I want to read this again.” She thought for a moment and then said, “And then I want to talk to someone I think might be able to help. I checked the telephone book. There aren’t any survival stores listed.”

“Who do you think might help? And how much might it cost?”

Regina grinned. “I bet the help won’t cost anything. The doing, on the other hand, just might. But you love having a project going. You haven’t had anything to do outside of work for a couple of months. Time to get you started on a new project.”

“Your really think that’s wise?” Hadley asked with a laugh. “You know how I am with a new project.”

Laughing too, Regina said, “I know. And this time I might be right in there with you.”

“Well, you just point me in the right direction and I’ll get on it.”

“Oh, you!” Regina said, still laughing. “Be careful what you ask for. You might get it.” She punched him on the arm lightly and bounced up off the sofa. “I need to get things ready for tomorrow.”

“Be sure to bring enough toilet paper this time,” Hadley said to his wife’s retreating back.

“Never make that mistake again,” Regina said over her shoulder. She stuttered in her step, but caught herself without falling. “Toilet paper. What if...” Regina shook her head. “Surely TP can’t be that big of a deal...”

It had been a big deal when the last time they went camping Regina had failed to add additional TP to the camping tote. Though no one came out and said it, the family had cut the trip short because of it.

The TP was the first thing she checked. There was a new 4-roll pack in the tote. Regina breathed a sigh of relief. She checked the rest of the four totes in the garage that contained most of their camping supplies. The tent, sleeping bags, stove, and lantern were all in their own bag or case. The ice chest was there, too, ready to be loaded the next morning from the refrigerator and pantry.

“Better check that, too,” Regina said to herself and went back into the house. Sure enough, they were short on bread. And better pick up more milk. Gina, and especially Ray, could go through the milk.

On her way back into the living room, to watch a television show with Hadley, Regina saw the information packet on the kitchen counter. She debated whether or not to call Karen. “No,” Regina said to herself. “It’s too late tonight. Monday, after we’re back from the campout and settled again.”

During the campout with a few friends from church, Regina found herself looking around at the various families and wondered if they were prepared for some or any of the things in the packet of information that had been in the mailbox. The weather cooperated and everyone had a good time. Regina made several mental notes to herself about the group camp out.

One was that the camp had bathrooms and showers. It also boasted electrical and water outlets at each campsite. Each campsite also had either a fire ring or charcoal grill, or both.

That following Monday, after she got Gina and Ray off to school, and Hadley off to work, Regina quickly did her daily cleaning, Then, with a cup of hot tea, the sheath of information, and a notebook, Regina called Karen Lyons and said, “Karen, it’s Regina Prescott. Do you have a moment to talk?”

“Actually, I’m in the middle of getting ready to go out.”

“Oh. I see. Well, I won’t keep you then.”

“What was it you wanted to talk to me about?” Karen asked.

“That information we got in the mail. It started me thinking, and you’re the only one that didn’t get upset over it. I’d just like to talk it over.”

Karen was silent a long time and Regina thought she might have hung up, except there was no dial tone. Finally Karen said, “I have a doctor’s appointment. If you really are interested, I usually treat myself to a coffee at Starbucks when I’m in that area of town. Would you like to meet me there?”

“I would. What time?”

“Ten-thirty?”

“That is fine for me. I’ll see you there, Karen. And Karen... Thank you.”

Both women hung up. Each a bit unsure about how their meeting might turn out. Regina arrived first and had just picked up her coffee when Karen walked in. “Karen?” Regina asked, walking over to her.

Karen nodded and held out her hand. Regina shook it and said, “I have us a table if you want to get your order in.”

Karen nodded again, still not having said anything. Karen stayed at the pickup point until her drink was ready, and then joined Regina. “I hope this isn’t an imposition,” Regina told Karen.

“No, of course not. What is it you wanted to know?”

She seemed very nervous to Regina. Linda kept looking around, as if to see if there was someone watching them. It suddenly dawned on Regina that Karen might be worried about being set up about putting the information packets in the mailboxes.

“Karen, but we start, I want you to know a pair of Postal Inspectors visited me last Friday afternoon.” Regina could see Karen’s face tense up even more. Before Karen might blurt out anything that could get both of them in trouble, Regina quickly said. “I had to tell them that I didn’t know who might have put those papers in the mailboxes. I’d hate to see someone get in trouble that was obviously only trying to help people. I just hope whoever did it, doesn’t do it again and never brings the subject up around anyone. Hopefully the subject will just go away without anyone being any the wiser.”

“Yes,” Karen said, rather quickly, almost breathlessly. “Yes. Perhaps whoever did it knows better now and will just let it be. That would be wise, I think.”

“Me, too,” Regina replied, smiling as Karen began to relax. “Now. To the subject at hand. I’m assuming you’ve read the material,” Regina said, drawing another small smile and a nod from Karen.

“So did I. From the calls I made to other residents in the neighborhood, I doubt if any of them did. More than a quick glance, anyway.”

“That’s too bad,” Karen said softly. “I think the information could be useful. For someone that sees what is happening all around us.”

“That’s what I think, too. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. You’re the only person I know to talk to about the information. The implications... I don’t know what I should do.”

“You should prepare. For all the reasons in that packet, and more,” Karen replied earnestly.

“I’ve come to that conclusion,” Regina said, just as earnestly. “I just don’t have a real clue as where to start.”

“In the grocery store. Double buy shelf stable foods that you use. And other consumables.”

“Like toilet paper.”

A slight smile curved Karen’s lips. “Oh, definitely TP. It’s a running joke in the prep community, but it is, in fact, important.”

Regina was nodding. “You said prep community. Are there many people doing this?”

“I don’t know the real numbers. My only contact with other preppers is through Internet websites, particularly the forums.”

“Oh.” Regina’s disappointment was obvious. “It seems like it would be easier if there was a group.”

“That’s why I... I think that’s what the person who put the information in the mailboxes wanted. To get others involved. To get the whole community prepared. The more prepared people there are, the better it is for everyone.”

“I see... And I think you are probably right about that person wanting to have help. I know I do. I just... well, I wouldn’t be much of a help to anyone. I’m just learning.”

“Well, we’ve started, but just barely, ourselves. That’s why I was hoping for a group. The same reasons you think one would be good.”

“I guess we could start our own group,” Regina said.

“It would be a start. And I can give you some websites to check out for you to get an idea of what some other people are doing. Just... Just don’t get discouraged. There are people on some of the sites that have been prepping for years and have just about everything I could hope for, and more. If you will take some time to look over these...”

Karen handed the list she’d been jotting down as she spoke to Regina. “If you will check some of these sites out and get back to me when you’re ready to discuss things further, it will be a step in the right direction. I just as soon no one knows about this. I don’t want the word to get out that Frank and I are preppers. And please. If you don’t want to be involved in this, at least let me know. As soon as possible.”

Regina looked over the list. "I will. And I am interested in being involved. I have enough spare time to look at these sites." Regina looked up at Karen. "I won't mention it to anyone but my husband, Hadley. I will call you in a couple of days, okay?"

Karen nodded and both women rose, taking their coffees with them, and left the Starbucks.

Regina went directly home and fired up the kitchen computer. She set her cooking alarm to signal her when she had to get ready to go to the women's shelter where she volunteered three afternoons a week.

She was so engrossed in one of the websites that it took her a minute to realize the alarm was ringing. Frowning, Regina stepped back out of the site, after adding it to her favorites, and shut down the computer.

Hadley was home, preparing supper when she returned to the house, just a few minutes before the children got home. Regina kissed him and said, "You won't believe what I've been up to this morning."

"Part of my new project, I hope," Hadley replied, draining the spaghetti.

"Yes." Regina began to set the table as she spoke. "I met with Karen Lyons, today. The one I told you about that wasn't upset about the papers."

"Un-huh. And?"

"Well, whoever put the papers in the mailboxes, we figured they were looking to get stir our little community up enough to get off its collective rear ends and get prepared for things."

"Things?" Hadley poured the spaghetti into a serving bowl and poured the meat sauce over it as Gina and Ray came into the house.

"Looking good, Dad," Ray said. "I'll definitely be right back down."

"You made salad, too, didn't you, Daddy?" asked Regina.

"Of course he did," Regina replied, taking the salad bowl out of the refrigerator and putting it on the table.

"I'll tell you after supper," Regina told Hadley and Hadley nodded.

After Ray and Gina had gone upstairs for the evening, Regina began showing Hadley the websites that Karen had told Regina about. After just a few, Hadley said, "This could be much more than a project, Honey. This could very well turn into a way of life, from the looks of it."

They were in the study and Hadley turned the desk chair around. Regina took a seat across the desk from him. "Almost a secret second life," Regina said, "The way some of the

people on some of the forums talk. Secrecy about what one is doing seems to be a very prominent theme.”

“Well, I had no idea anyone was doing any of these things, much less the Lyons specifically.”

“I don’t know how much she does do,” Regina remarked. “We didn’t really talk about that. She almost swore me to secrecy not to tell anyone but you.”

“Considering some of our neighbors, I think the secrecy is probably a good thing. I still don’t have my drill back from Dave.”

It was a sore spot for Hadley. He had a very good set of tools and took good care of them. He seldom loaned any out for reasons like Dave. She managed not to grin. Instead, she said, “We do have some high maintenance neighbors, I must admit. Every time Dana needs to make cookies or something for Scouts or whatever, she comes over and borrows half the ingredients.” Regina looked thoughtful for a moment, then, all sense of humor gone, added, “When I have them. Which is certainly not every time.”

Hadley was leaning back in the desk chair, his fingers templed over his chest. “The Weather Channel is always having a piece on preparing for hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and all kinds of other disasters. Honda and a couple other standby generator companies advertise there, too. Remember last year when the power was off for half a day?”

Regina nodded. “It didn’t really affect us, since we were all either at work or school. But to hear the neighbors it qualified as an unmitigated disaster.”

“You realize,” Hadley said, rather musingly, “That we are in the process of talking ourselves into doing this... prep... thing.”

“I believe you are right. You want to skip the rest of this step and move on to the next?”

“Might as well. I think the decision has made itself.” Hadley spun the chair around, and rolled it up against the computer E11 of the desk.

Regina got up and moved behind him again, this time taking a chair with her so she could sit down and watch the computer monitor. “Make a note of any good websites you find,” Hadley was saying. “You said the first step that Karen said to do was start buying double in the grocery store. You do that, and I’ll look into a standby generator.”

“Shelf stable stuff, she said,” Regina said. “I guess that is probably what it sounds like. Foods that won’t go bad on the shelf?” It was more question than statement.

“I think you’re right. Let’s see what Yahoo! comes up with.”

The two worked late into the night discussing things as they found more and more information on the net, spending an hour reading one of the PAW fiction stories they found. The

last thing Regina said before they turned in for bed was, “We need to get Ray and Gina in the loop. They deserve to be in on some of the choices, and so they won’t just start talking about our preps as casual conversation with outsiders.”

On Wednesday Regina called Karen and told her that she and Hadley were going to start prepping and would like talk to Karen and her husband about some choices they were thinking about. A pleased Karen gave a time, date, and place, and Regina said, “Hadley and I will be there.”

They met at the Red Lobster that next Saturday. After introductions were made, and the appetizer and drink orders were placed, Regina got down to business, keeping her voice low, but managing not to lean forward in a conspiratorial way.

“Hadley and I have decided to start preparing and would like your opinion on several purchases we are contemplating.”

“There area usually several good choices for most major purchases,” Frank said. “And many of the foods are a matter of taste. What is it specifically are you contemplating?”

“A standby generator,” Hadley said. “I thought about natural gas, since it is pretty reliable, but it’s still a risk. So it’s either propane or diesel. Generac or Kohler. 45 kw to 50 kw. I’m leaning toward the Kohler 50kw propane unit.”

“Is it an 1,800 rpm model?” Frank asked.

“Yes. What do you think?”

“I think you’re making the right choice. We have one of their smaller units. We’ve had good luck with it.”

“Now,” Hadley said, “Regina is going to start buying double some of the food we eat regularly. Shelf stable items, she tells me.” He smiled over at Regina and she smiled back.

“But I’d like to start adding long term storage foods, too.”

Frank looked at Karen, who spoke up. “Can’t beat Mountain House for their entrees. And Emergency Essentials is a good place to get them, plus they have their own line of freeze dried and dehydrated products. I’ve had good luck with them.”

“Their website caught my eye,” Regina said, nodding. “I looked at several other preparedness food sites and found an item here and there that Emergency Essentials don’t have, but they’ve got the best selection I’ve found.”

“Same here,” replied Karen. “For dehydrated food, and mixes and such, packed for long term storage, Walton Feed is really good. But you either need to have a really large order, or try to do a group order to keep the shipping costs down. Or go get it yourself.”

They all fell silent as they were served their appetizers and drinks.

“I’ll check them out, too,” Regina said, after the server left the table. “If I find some things I want, I’ll let you know and maybe we can put in a combined order.”

As they sampled the appetizers, Hadley asked, “Can I ask, are there more people prepping around here?”

Frank sighed and replied. “Not as far as I know. We’ve... uh... tried a few approaches to contact people, but without success. It’s hard to make contact, and get the message across, without giving up too much about yourself, unless there is an obvious interest. Everyone is pretty secretive. For good reason, I might add.”

“Regina and I discussed that aspect and believe it is a good policy. We are going to tell the kids about it. Any suggestions on that?”

“It’s real tricky,” Frank said immediately, “From what I’ve read in some of the forums. Really young children just don’t have the concept of secrecy, and if they do, the authorities are immediately on the parents about the fact that their children won’t talk about some things, and want to know why. Older kids understand, and either choose to keep the secret, or not. It’s a very individual thing.”

Regina and Hadley looked at one another, and then Regina said, “I think they’ll be cooperative. We’re a pretty close family.”

“That’s good,” Karen said, rather sadly. “We don’t have that particular problem, yet.”

Frank reached over and rubbed his wife’s back. “We will.” He looked back at Regina and Hadley. “It’s something private. Sorry.”

Hadley and Regina waved the episode off and began asking more questions, Hadley first. “I noticed on several of the forums that weapons seem to be a big part of some people’s preparations.”

Again Frank and Karen exchanged glances. “Yes, well...” Frank said, slowly. “That’s true. But it is a very personal decision. I don’t know if we should talk about it here.”

“No problem,” replied Hadley. “Food is here, anyway.”

The conversation went to mundane things as the two couples ate. But as they lingered over desert and then coffee, the conversation turned back to preps. “Regina and I only touched on shelters in passing,” Hadley said. “What do you think about shelters? If we do a real MAG, like some of the others talk about, would we want to do a group shelter or individual shelters?”

“Well, we’ve prepped the house for quite a few things, but we don’t really have a shelter shelter,” Karen said. “We have a piece of property outside the city we plan to go to if things get too bad here in the city. We don’t have a shelter there, yet, but it is in our plans.”

“Do you know what type you want to build?” Hadley asked. He shifted forward. It was a subject that really interested him.

“We’d like to get a concrete dome home, earth sheltered. But to be honest, it is something of a pipe dream. We’d have to sell our current house in order to do it. Had we known then, what we know now, we probably would have gone that way instead of buying the house we’re in.”

“I saw some sites about dome homes. They are intriguing. What about some type of shelter here in town?”

“If you could get permits for it, I’d say one of the aboveground shelters. The water table is pretty high here, if you didn’t know. Makes for good backup water supply, but it’s a real problem for underground shelters.”

“I guess it would be. Do you have back up water?”

“A well with a hand pump on it.” Frank replied.

Karen smiled. “Its right out in front of the house, as a decoration, but it’s a real working well.”

“Clever,” Regina said.

“We had the water tested. It’s safe.” Karen’s nose wrinkled a little. “But it’s not as good tasting as the city water, even the way it’s treated. If we use the water from the well for drinking, we’ll purify it. We have a couple of water filters.”

“I’ll probably have another one put down in the back yard, if we ever get around to putting in a small garden,” Frank added. “Hopefully it will taste better.”

“Well,” Regina said at the lag in conversation. “It’s been a lot to take in, and it’s getting late. Give us a while to stew on this and come up with some more extensive plans. Then I’d like us to get together again to discuss them.”

“Just give Karen a call. We’ll set something up again.”

They made their separate ways out of the restaurant and headed home. Both couples had much to think about. The following Monday both men did almost the same thing. Each began to make discreet inquiries about the other. Both were pleased with what they found out.

On Wednesday, Hadley broached the subject of preparing for disasters with Ray and Gina. “What do you two think about us trying to get a bit better prepared for natural disasters? Say... Like Katrina?”

“Dad, we don’t get hurricanes up here,” Ray told his father.

“But what about earthquakes and tornadoes?” asked Gina. “They both scare me.”

“You never mentioned anything before,” Regina said to Gina.

“Why? What can we do? If it happens, it happens.”

“But there are things that can be done,” Ray quickly said.

“Such as?” asked Hadley, very curious about what Ray might say.

“Stocking up on food and water for one. Though we don’t have to worry about hurricanes much, Gina’s right about the earthquakes and tornadoes. We’d probably get some help after a tornado, but if it’s a big earthquake? Forget it. It’ll be like Katrina, only worse.”

“You’ve thought about this, then?” Hadley asked his son.

“Some.” Looking rather embarrassed, he added, “Come up to my room. I’ll show you.”

The family went up to Ray’s bedroom and he opened the closet door. Inside were several six-packs of bottled water and a large box that Ray bent down and opened. It was full of power bars, jerky, and dried fruit.

“You did all this out of your allowance?” Regina asked.

Ray nodded. “I just didn’t want any of us to wind up like those refugees in Katrina, with no food or water.” Suddenly he grinned. “I like to eat too much.”

“I’m proud of you, boy,” Hadley said, giving Ray a respectful look. “You’ve been doing what your mother and I are just starting to get around to doing.”

Hesitatingly, Gina spoke up again. “I kind of do some things, too. I’m afraid I’ll get caught without...” She turned a bit red, but continued, “monthly supplies. I’ve got enough saved up for half a year.” She looked at Regina. “For both of us.”

“Oh, sweetheart! That is so thoughtful of you!” Regina gave Gina a big hug, which Gina wriggled out of.

“Mom! Come on! It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It is, in a way,” Hadley said, his pride in his children making it difficult to speak. “It shows me that we’ve raised two children better than we ever dreamed. You both have been thinking more about the family, in some ways, than your mother and I have.”

“Come on, Dad!” Ray said earnestly. “You’ve set things up so we have money for college, and a start on retirement. And your own retirement is set.” He grinned then. “So you won’t be dependant on us to provide for you, in case we turn out to be useless, and Social Security goes belly up.”

Hadley shook his head. "You have a way with words, Ray. That isn't the reason I started the annuities for us. It's just sound financial practice."

"I know, Dad. I was just trying to be funny."

"Try harder," Gina said.

"Look. Let's resume this conversation over the dinner table. The hot food is getting cold and the cold food is getting hot," Regina said, and began ushering her family back downstairs.

Once they were at the table again, Hadley said, "So I take it that both of you would be onboard a program to improve our readiness for various disasters?"

Both children nodded, and then Ray asked, "This won't cut into our allowances... much... will it?"

"No, son." Hadley shook his head again. "You'll still get your allowance. Perhaps even an increase for both of you, to do some additional preps on your own, for yourselves, that you feel important."

"Wow! Cool!" Gina said. "I want to get more feminine supplies. And toilet paper. Remember when we ran out on that camping trip?"

"We'll handle those items," Gina said. "I've already started buying double at the store of things we use all the time. Including TP. I'll add feminine needs to that. I can't believe I didn't think of it myself."

"There is one aspect of our preparing needs to be discussed and agreed upon," Hadley said then. "It's about staying low key about all of it. The few people that know about what we are doing the better. Your mother and I have discussed this, and we plan to include some extra supplies, just for neighbors, friends, and for the church. But we don't want to be considered the local supply house if, God forbid, we do wind up in a disaster situation."

"I'm all for that!" Ray said, rather adamantly. "I made the mistake of mentioning that I might start doing what I'm doing before I started doing it, and three of the guys said, and I quote 'We'll come to your house, if something happens'."

"Yeah," added Gina. "I'm the go-to girl for feminine supplies if someone forgot theirs or the machines are out in the girls' bathrooms. Which is often. The fewer that know, the better, in my opinion."

"Well then," Regina said, "we have a consensus." She looked over at Hadley. "That was easier than I ever thought it would be."

"You raised them well."

Everyone laughed at the expression on Regina's face.

"Okay, guys," Hadley said when the laughter died down. "We're new at this, and we're getting some help and advice from Karen and Frank Lyons. Now I'm sure they aren't going to tell us to the last detail what they have or plan. There is no need, even with them, to discuss everything we might wind up doing, either. Just so you know. And, since you both seem to have thought about this to a degree, we'd like you to make any suggestions and recommendations you think pertinent."

"Are we going to get guns to protect ourselves?" Gina asked, surprising the other three no end.

"Well..." said Regina.

Hadley spoke up when Regina hesitated. "We've only had a small discussion about arming ourselves. How do you feel about it?"

"I think we should. You heard what happened to women in the Super Dome in New Orleans. I don't want that to happen to me or to Mom. I know what I want if we get guns. A Ruger 10/22. I shot one out at Nancy Harrison's last summer."

Hadley and Regina looked a bit shocked.

"You know. When a bunch of us stayed over for her birthday party?"

"You never mentioned shooting a gun," Regina said.

"Uh... Well... We kind of agreed amongst ourselves not to bring up the subject. Some of the parents wouldn't be too happy if they knew... Just how much trouble am I in?"

"You realize, whether we agree or not, that it is the parents' responsibility to decide whether they want their children around guns," Hadley said in his best parental voice.

"I'm a bit disappointed that you didn't tell us. Your mother and I would have discussed it with you." He looked over at Regina a moment and then continued. "And if we were convinced that it was safe, probably would have given you permission."

"I'm sorry," Gina said, hanging her head.

"It's all right. Keep it in mind in the future when you think about doing something you think we might not approve of you doing. You might be surprised," Regina said.

"So," Hadley said, "That water being under the bridge, how did you like shooting?"

Understanding she wasn't going to be punished for her indiscretion, Gina eagerly said, "It was fun. A twenty-two rim fire... That's what a Ruger 10/22 is... is loads of fun. Mr. Harrison

made us all wear hearing protection and eye protection, and we had to follow all regular firing range rules, even on his little home range.

“It’s really easy to shoot because it doesn’t recoil much. He even had some long magazines for it. And it’s magazine,” Gina stressed, “not clip. Twenty-five shots without reloading.” Proudly Gina added, “I made the one-hundred-yard eighteen-inch diameter gong ring nine times out of ten, twice in a row.”

“Geez, little sister,” Ray said, “I’m proud of you. That must have been pretty cool.”

“It was!”

“So, I take it you are both on board arming ourselves. If your mother and I agree to it?”

Both children nodded eagerly, and Gina asked, “Could we shoot just for fun, too? Mr. Harrison said we could use his range just about any time we wanted, if we prearranged it, and agreed to follow all the safety rules.”

“Let your father and me discuss this a bit more in private and we’ll get back to you on that particular subject,” Regina said.

Then Hadley told the children what Regina already knew. “We’re getting a standby automatic generator for the house, so if we lose power like we did last year, we’ll still have electricity.”

“Wow!” Ray said, “That’ll be cool.” Then his face fell. “But I can’t even tell the guys about it. Rats!”

“Oh, I think you’ll live,” Hadley replied with a grin at his son’s sudden disappointment.

“Now,” Regina said, “I’ve already told you I’m stocking the pantry. Make a list of foods you want me to be sure and stock. Needs to be shelf stable... that means storable without refrigeration or other special considerations.”

“Chili,” Ray immediately said.

“No beans, though,” Gina quickly added.

“Well, perhaps canned chili without beans,” Regina said. “But there will be beans in storage. But there is a product called Beano that reduces the gas produced. I saw that in one of the stories I read in a prep forum. I’ll see if I can find some.”

“Please do, Mom,” Gina said, giving Ray a hard look.

“Hey! It’s a natural body function. What can I say?”

“Double stock the Beano, Mom. Okay?”

“Sure, sweetie. Double Beano it is. Now you two need to finish up with your kitchen chores and then get on your homework. Your father and I have some things to discuss.”

Discuss things, they did. Late into the night. Several decisions were made that would be carried out over the next several months.

As an upper middle class family, they were able to do many of the things discussed, soon after a decision was made. But a few things had to be put off. A major effort at an all-purpose shelter was one. However, after the basement was cleaned up and items rearranged, the family could boast a good tornado shelter.

After many meetings with Karen and Frank, the Prescotts agreed to buy half of the retreat property the Lyons had. Neither was quite comfortable with joint ownership. But they would coordinate with one another what went on the land, to avoid unnecessary duplication of facilities and increase the overall effectiveness of the property as a retreat site.

The original purchase by the Lyons had been ten acres, in an almost perfect square. Six-hundred-sixty feet and a fraction by six-hundred-fifty-nine feet and a fraction. The two families each had a three-hundred-thirty feet by six-hundred-sixty feet parcel, the ten acres enclosed on three sides by state forest, fronting a deeded access road, maintained as a fire road.

The property right across the fire road from theirs was a large lot of one-hundred-sixty acres, also surrounded on three sides by state forest. From what Frank had been able to find out about the other property, it was held by an insurance company as an investment for future sale and development as the area grew.

With the money from the sale of the land, the Lyons fenced three sides of their property, and from the fund the Prescotts set up and contributed to every month, they fenced three sides of their property, which gave a security fence all the way around the ten acres. There was no fence between the two five-acre plots.

The Prescotts and Lyons had slightly different goals in mind, so the division of labor and resources were agreed upon and began to be implemented shortly after the land deal and fencing installation.

As much due to their own wants, as Gina's request of a secure shelter because of the events during Katrina, Hadley and Regina agreed to construct and equip a shelter large enough for both of the families. They calculated the minimum space requirements using information from the internet, and then agreed to double that for the six of them, as the minimum space that the Prescotts would build.

After private discussions, Hadley and Regina decided to double that again, and began the preliminary preparations to install the shelter. First came the proposed positioning of the shelter, with some input from Frank and Karen. No mention was made of the increased size.

With an agreed upon location for the shelter on the Prescott side, and a planned garden and greenhouse complex on the Lyons side, Hadley brought a well driller in and had a well drilled and a solar powered pump installed, with a hand pump back up.

A large water storage tank was put in place and a solar pump installed in it to provide water for irrigation and other outside uses. The tank was plumbed to allow for more pumps to provide for the planned shelter, and the trailers that would provide non-disaster living quarters if wanted.

Next came the septic systems. One for the shelter and another for the Prescotts intended trailer. Frank and Karen had a septic system put in for their intended trailer at the same time, sharing mobilization and demobilization fees for the equipment the contractor used.

The two septic tanks were filled with water so they wouldn't float out of the ground, come a hard rain.

Frank and Hadley made a deal with some local farmers and ranchers that could provide manure for the large garden plot on the Lyons property. Frank and Karen started the process of prepping the ground for, ordering, and installing a large freestanding greenhouse.

The two families camped out on the property that fall, before school started. The Prescotts invested in a chemical toilet, sunshower bags, and two privacy enclosures for the toilet and shower for the camping trip.

They used the time to have a friend of Frank's show them how to cut, split, and stack firewood. First they cut up the trees that had been cut down and the stumps removed for the installations that had all ready been done.

After a few trees were cut down by Frank, Hadley, and Ray, the man told them he'd taught them all he could and took his small agreed upon wage of a cord of the wood that had been cut. Hadley had rented a self-contained splitter and bought the thing after they were done. They'd tried splitting a bit of the wood by hand. The splitter was much faster and easier on all parties concerned.

They all took turns running the rototiller that Frank had bought, to incorporate the loads of manure they were getting into the earth of the garden. It wasn't a preferred job for any of them, but all took a turn or two, including Gina, dressed in coveralls, rubber boots, gloves, a floppy hat, a dust mask, and safety glasses. There was no way she was going to get any of the stuff on her.

With both families at the limits of their prep budgets, not much was done during the winter, except stockpiling food and other consumables. Regina and Karen put their heads together and put in a large order at Walton Feed, with delivery expected the next spring.

All the Prescotts had been studying up on firearms, and discussed the pros and cons of different calibers, weapons platform types, possible uses, and how much they should invest in the weapons. The only thing not questioned was the idea of becoming an armed family. That decision had been made, unanimously.

The discussions faded away as more mundane things took precedence in their lives. School for Ray, now a senior in high school; and Gina a Junior. Sports and other school activities took up quite a bit of time, but all four were constantly aware of the news and the dangers life could throw at them.

Thanksgiving came, and then Christmas morning rolled around. To Ray's and Gina's total amazement, they were given the rifles for Christmas that had been on the list of prep items to get, sometime in the future.

It wasn't just the rifles they got. Included in the package, but unwrapped, were cleaning supplies, spare magazines, ammunition, load bearing equipment appropriate for the individual weapon, and a few other accessories.

Hadley and Regina stood by proudly and watched their children thank them over and over for the guns. "Until just recently it never would have occurred to me that I would be giving my children firearms, much less them being this excited over them."

"Things change, Mom," Ray said, giving Hadley a hug, and his mother a peck on the cheek, in thanks.

Gina had received her favored Ruger 10/22. Ray a HK-416 carbine in 5.56mm.

Then, to Regina's total surprise, Hadley took a package out of the hall closet and handed it to Regina.

"What? What's this?" she asked.

"Open it, Mom!" cried Gina eagerly.

"Yeah, Mom!" Ray added his urgings to Gina's.

"Oh, my goodness! Hadley, you didn't!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I did," he said, leaning down so Regina could give him a quick kiss.

Like Ray, Regina had favored the 5.56 military cartridge in a lightweight weight carbine. Hadley had bought her the same package the two of them had bought for Ray.

"But what about you, Dad?" Ray asked.

With a small smile, Hadley walked back to the closet and took out a case similar to the ones that the other three had for their weapons and opened it. He'd had his preferences, too, and indulged them when he bought the setup for himself.

He thought the family should have something with a little more range and power than the .22 rim fire and the 5.56mm, so he'd opted for something in 7.62mm NATO. He had a fondness

for German engineering, and had opted for a full dress HK-91. He'd paid a premium for a pre-ban, slightly used rifle, but it had all the options and accessories he wanted with it, except for the number of magazines. There were only two with the rifle. He'd remedied that lack.

"Now, at some point in time, you two," Hadley said, addressing Ray and Gina, "We'll get you handguns, and possibly a shotgun. But for the moment it's just the rifles. Your mother and I, however," he said, taking a box from within the gun case, "have decided to go ahead and get a handgun for each of us."

"Oh, we did, did we?" Regina asked.

"Sure we did. Not necessarily at Christmas, but the decision was made, and I happened to get a very good deal on the entire package for all of us."

Regina opened the box. Regina had fairly weak wrists, and had had some trouble firing the several handguns she'd tried in the gun shop pistol range. She'd fallen in love with a Walther PPK that she'd shot. It was a .380 ACP, but a round you can shoot accurately is much better than a more powerful cartridge you can't.

"Wow!" Gina said, watching her mother carefully handle the small pistol. "Cool!"

"Okay, Dad," Ray said, "Give! What'd you get for yourself?"

"Just a plain Jane Glock 21, like the one we shot at the range that day."

"Excellent! That's the one I want when I can get one."

The firearms were put away, and the family opened the other few presents they'd purchased or made for each other.

They had a chance to sight in the new weapons, and become familiar with each others selection, late the next week, just before school picked back up. But the day before school started two things happened that caused the Prescotts to make a couple of major changes in their plans.

The first thing that happened was Gina broke her leg. She was with Regina, getting groceries, when a car trying to hurry and get a parking space pinned her against the bumper of another car. Gina tried to jump out of the way, but caught between the two bumpers the impact fractured the left tibia and fibula.

Regina had no more than taken her home from the hospital, a cast on her leg, than a small earthquake occurred. Fortunately it was relatively minor. It was bad enough to interrupt most of the utility services. The house had been built after the latest changes in building codes, so it stood up quite well.

The standby generator kicked in, they had electrical power. There was plenty of bottled water to drink and Ray filled all three bathtubs in the bathrooms for hand washing water. The chemical toilet was set up in the largest bathroom, so they had a working bathroom.

Though Hadley had the jets to switch over the natural gas appliances to propane, it was deemed not worth the trouble. The camping gear was more than adequate to carry them through, as long as things didn't get worse. Since the propane tank had a wet leg, they could refill the twenty pound tanks they used when camping.

Regina and Hadley had both picked up the habit of keeping the family vehicles above half a tank, which was a good thing, as all the local stations shut down for lack of electrical power.

The family sat around in the living room, wearing sweaters, a small enclosed bottle propane catalytic heater taking the chill off, and watched the event unfold on television.

Suddenly Ray sat up straight. "Look. Mom. Dad. That's the way we'd be going to get to the retreat property if we had to evacuate."

There were quite a few people trying to leave the area, fearful of another, much larger, earthquake. There had been a series of accidents on that road out of town, and from the looks of it, many had tried to leave without adequate fuel to get them there.

"We'd be stuck, if that happened in a bigger emergency."

"We talked about that, Ray," Hadley said. "We have packs and... Oh."

They all looked over at Gina.

"We need another optional plan," Ray said.

Hadley and Regina agreed. Gina was still a bit loopy from the pain medication and wasn't tracking the conversation very well.

"I've got an idea!" Ray suddenly said. He got up and went to the kitchen computer. "Internet is down," he said, coming back into the room. "I was going to show you something on the Cabela's site, but I can't."

"What is it, Ray?" Regina asked, looking a bit worried. There was always the chance for a bigger quake, or something else that would cause them to have to evacuate on foot.

"There's a thing called a game cart that's used by hunters of big game to get deer and other big game animals out from where they are shot, to the camp or vehicle. There are a couple of single wheel units that take two people to handle. I was thinking one of the two wheel units would work to carry Gina if we had to. Or any of us, of course, if we were injured and couldn't walk. And we'd be able to carry a lot more stuff than just our back packs if we had one or more of them."

"That's not a bad idea, son," Hadley said, thinking hard to find an alternative himself. "Better than the bicycles I was just thinking about. Cabela's, you say?"

Ray nodded.

Hadley looked over at Regina. “You two be okay for a while? I want to check this out now. Just in case.”

“We’ll be fine. You two just be careful. It looks kind of bad out there, from what we’re seeing on the TV.”

“We will,” Hadley said. “Come on Ray. Let’s go down to Cabela’s and see what they have in stock.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Both put coats on over their sweaters and went to the garage to get in Hadley’s Mercedes-Benz G55 AMG SUV. He’d traded in the two year old R350 SUV not long after the family’s involvement with preparedness. Likewise, Regina’s sporty two-seater had been replaced with a Mercedes-Benz E350 all wheel drive small wagon.

Hadley took extra care driving. People were not reacting very rationally, it seemed to him and Ray. The traffic control lights weren’t working and most of the intersections weren’t manned, although critical ones had a police officer directing traffic. It took a while to get to Cabela’s. It wasn’t quite a madhouse, but it was close. The store was illuminated by various lanterns and each of the sales people had a lantern or flashlight. The check out was being done on paper.

Camping gear was going like hotcakes. Lanterns, stoves, chemical toilets, flashlights. All sorts of things. But when Hadley and Ray made their way back to the hunting accessories area there was virtually no one there. One of the store clerks saw them and walked over, holding his lamp up high. “How can I help you two gentlemen?” the lightly bearded, elderly looking man cheerfully asked. “Looking for earthquake items? Not really many right here.”

“No,” Hadley said. “Actually, in a way. What do you have in the way of...” Hadley looked at Ray.

“Game carts,” Ray quickly said.

“Oh, yes. We have several in stock. Not sure what they have to do with earthquake preparedness, but here you go.” The clerk held the lantern high so Hadley and Ray could look over the differences of the models and the options.

“I’m thinking this one. Ray?”

“Looks good. Get the dual wheels and it would handle quite a bit more weight.”

“Good thing your sister isn’t here to hear that,” Hadley said with a chuckle.

“Oh, yeah!”

“Might as well go full out and get the wheel brush guards, too.” Hadley stood up and asked the clerk, “How many of these do you have?”

“You want more than one?” he asked, a bit amazed.

“Four,” Hadley said, and then looked at Ray. “One for each of us, if needed. Always leave one behind if it isn’t needed or can’t be used.”

“Good idea, Dad. We could move a lot of stuff with four of them if we needed to.”

“We’ll take four of them, if you have them. All with dual wheels and wheel guards,” Hadley told the clerk.

“I’ll have to check the back,” the clerk replied. “Excuse me a few minutes.”

Hadley and Ray stood out of the way, watching the pandemonium gradually slow as the store sold out of those things that people thought they needed or wanted in the aftermath of an earthquake with utility failures. “I bet the rental places are having a field day renting out generators,” Ray said.

“No doubt. Anybody with a generator could probably sell it for twice what they paid for it.”

The clerk came back a few minutes later with three large boxes and six small ones on a hand cart. “I’m afraid I only have three of these in stock. Would you like to take one of the other models?”

Hadley shook his head. “No. Those will do for the moment. We’ll pick another up when they’re back in stock.”

“That shouldn’t be long,” the clerk said, pushing the cart toward the check out stand, Hadley and Ray following behind.

Hadley had taken to carrying more cash than he was accustomed, for emergencies. He paid cash for the three game carts, despite the fact that the store was taking credit cards by hand.

Out of curiosity, Hadley drove past one of the rental agencies in town. Their big announcement board said, “No Generators Left”. Going past an Ace Hardware, they saw a mob much like the one at Cabela’s. Suddenly two men began to fight and Hadley picked up speed and left the area. He looked a bit grim to Ray.

“Dad, what’s up?”

“That fight. It made me realize just how bad things could get in such a short time. I hate the idea that we might actually have to use those guns we bought.”

“I know,” Ray said. “I think about that sometimes. I don’t know if I could. Well... Unless Mom, or Gina...”

“Let’s just hope it never comes to that,” Hadley said and they were silent the rest of the way home.

For something to do, the family put the carts together. Gina was cognizant enough to read the instructions for the other three to follow as the units were assembled. Suddenly she looked down at the cast on her leg. “Hey! You guys got these so I could go if we had to bug out?”

“We did, Honey,” Hadley said. “In case any of us are hurt, or if we have to go afoot, we can take much more stuff than just our back packs.”

“That’s cool,” Gina said, her eyes tearing up a bit. She still was somewhat under the influence of the pain killer.

For three days they lived a post disaster life, and then, slowly, things started to return to normal. Ray and Gina went back to school, and Hadley returned to work on a full schedule, having only gone in for two hours a day for the three weekdays of the event.

Over the next several weeks waterproof cases that would fit on the carts were obtained and loaded up with things the family wanted in addition to their back packs. It was decided to keep the fourth unit, when they picked it up, empty, but with plenty of extra tie down straps on it to carry any last minute items the situation might demand.

That included Gina, so Regina sewed up a set of leather covered hard foam pads to make it a more comfortable ride if it was ever needed.

The entire family noticed a flurry of activity of people hurriedly getting basic preps after the earthquake. Gina and Ray stayed silent about their family’s preps, though it was difficult hearing some of the plans other families had come up with.

They did occasionally interject a suggestion or two, when the discussion was of a general nature, such as a simple bull secession. Hadley found the same thing at work, giving as much information as he could, as an opinion, when the talk turned to the recent earthquake and the chances for another one.

Regina didn’t hear much about it at the women’s shelter. Everyone there had other problems they were dealing with. She did notice something going on at the grocery store. Certain items were in short supply for a few weeks after the quake. “Dollars to donuts,” Regina said to herself, “they just use it up when nothing happens for a few more days or weeks.” It didn’t matter to her. She double bought what she could, and continued to work on an order for Emergency Essentials and a handful of other LTS food suppliers.

Spring was coming up, and that brought up several topics of conversation. Ray already knew where he wanted to go to college, and had been accepted. Gina would be a senior the next year and had her driver’s license.

Per the agreements made several years before on how well the children did in school and stayed out of trouble, it was time for the family to start looking for a used vehicle for Gina. But Ray and Gina had been talking and had a proposal for their parents.

Gina liked Ray's 2000 Jeep Wrangler and was more than willing to start using it and let Ray get something he wanted. When the subject came up at diner, Ray made his pitch. "I'm going to be a long ways from home..."

He stopped when Regina winced. "Don't remind me," she said.

Ray continued. "And since Gina really likes the Jeep, I was thinking of getting something better suited to a long drive, in case of emergencies."

"I would think that the Jeep would be ideal," Hadley said slowly, a bit perplexed.

"It is my second choice," Ray said, and I don't mind keeping it if you want to get Gina something else. But what I had in mind was an older model 4x4 pickup truck with a non-electronic engine."

"You're thinking EMP attack," Hadley said.

"Or worse, Dad. The news has me spooked. Everyone seems to have nukes, and a grudge against the US. I'm afraid it's only a matter of time before terrorists set one off, or some country does. Like China."

"I understand, Hadley said. "I've been seeing the same news as you. And you have a point. We have three very capable vehicles, but they are all gasoline, and with sophisticated electronics. Having an EMP resistant vehicle in the family isn't a bad idea. You've put some thought into this. Have you found something that might do already?"

Ray nodded and took a page from a car trader's paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Hadley.

"I called the guy, Dad. The work is almost complete, but his wife is going to have a baby soon and they really need the money. I got him down a thousand from what's listed."

Hadley gave a little whistle. "Not bad, son. Have you seen it?" He looked up at Ray.

"Yes. I went over last weekend. It's as he has listed in that ad."

Hadley handed the paper to Regina, and said, "We'll go take a look at it this weekend. You think it will still be there?"

A bit sheepishly Ray said, "I put down fifty dollars earnest money for him to hold it until the end of the month. I told him I'd know by then."

“How will you finish the work? This is a bit more than high school auto shop teaches. Oh. Were you thinking Stanley might help you?”

Ray nodded.

“He could sure use the work,” Hadley said thoughtfully. He turned to Regina and asked, “What do you thing, Hon?”

“I think it’s a good idea on all three counts.” She looked at Gina. “You sure the Jeep is what you want?”

Gina nodded eagerly. All of her friends thought it was a cool ride. “Yes, I do, Mom. Ray has taken really good care of it.”

“In that case,” Regina said, turning back to Hadley and Ray, “Let’s look at it this weekend and if we think it’s suitable, Ray, we’ll pay for it.”

Pleased smiles on both their faces, Ray and Gina went back to eating. Regina rolled her eyes at Hadley. He smiled and the two adults also continued with their meal.

That weekend Hadley and Ray took the G55 AMG and picked up Hadley’s old friend, Stanley Harper. Stanley had lost his wife the previous year and in his grief turned to alcohol. He was slowly making a comeback, thanks to his friends and the church.

Stanley had pulled himself together, for the day at least, to go with them to look at the truck. He checked what had been done, and what was left to be done. Then he took Hadley and Ray aside and told them Ray was getting a pretty good deal.

He’d be able to have the truck ready long before Ray needed to head for school in it, with Ray’s help on weekends. So Hadley wrote the man a check for everything. Stanley would make the arrangements to pick up all the pieces and parts and take them to his garage the next weekend, giving the check plenty of time to clear.

Spring came, and with it, one of the severe storms that seem to be the norm now. The Prescott home was in no danger of flooding, but again the power went out, this time for almost a week. The family learned much about prepping in that time, including the number of people that hear about one house having lighted windows when almost all of the rest of the development didn’t.

More than one family came by, asking, in some cases, begging, to be allowed to put frozen food in various stages of defrost in their refrigerator or freezer. It was hard to turn them down, but their refrigerator and freezer were both full.

Though it was easy to say no to those that demanded the privilege, it wasn’t so easy to get by with it. A couple argued for several minutes that it was their right since they didn’t have a generator and the Prescotts did. They finally quit opening the door fully, leaving the safety hook

on and opening it just enough to speak through clearly. More than one person pushed against the safety hook, but none tried more than just a hard push, leaving in a huff.

Fuel was again hard to come by, for the same reason it had during the hours and days after the earthquake. Lack of electrical power. The entire family was careful to arrange the vehicles so no one could see them refueling from the fuel cans kept in the yard care shed.

Regina prepared their meals from stored food, leaving what little was still in stores after three days to those that needed it. The telephone lines were still open and Regina called Karen. They were having similar experiences. Karen seemed rather unsettled to Regina.

But the crisis passed, and all concerned went about their business. Kevin Jacobson, the Prescott's next door neighbor to the west, hailed Hadley one day when he was parking the G55 AMG. "Hadley! Got a minute?"

"Sure, Kevin. What's up?" Hadley asked, walking over and shaking hands. They were on a first name over the fence basis.

"I couldn't help notice that you had power when we were out the other day. Do you have one of those generators like they advertise on the Weather Channel?"

What could Hadley say? It was obvious that he did. No point in trying to lie about it. "I do. A Kohler. You want to take a look?"

"Please. If you don't mind. Helen is almost due, and being out of power is a risk. Fortunately, we were out of town most of that week. But I'm worried it might happen again at a critical moment. Seems to be happening more than it used to, despite progress."

Hadley led the way around to the side of the house where the generator and air conditioner units were. "I noticed when the propane tank was installed."

"Same time," Hadley explained. "I thought about getting a natural gas generator, but I'm afraid we'd lose the gas in a big earthquake. This one will actually run on natural gas, but it's set up for propane." Hadley didn't want to sound too well off. "It's not big enough to run everything in the house. To use the high power appliances we have to turn several other things off."

"Still, you had lights and refrigerator and freezer, didn't you?"

"Yes. We never lost natural gas, during the quake or during the storm, so our heat and hot water heater continued to work. They're both natural gas, but need AC power for the controls. Same way for the cook top and the ovens."

"Really?" Kevin said. "Ours must be the same. I kept trying the cook top, and never got it going. Power came back on and everything was okay. Didn't give it a thought after that." Changing subjects, Kevin said, "I noticed it's pretty quiet. Couldn't tell you were running it from inside the house."

“I didn’t want something that would annoy you and the other neighbors. I got one of the quietest available.”

“That’s good. Though I must say, I wouldn’t mind a bit of noise if I had power.”

“It really wasn’t as much for us,” Hadley said, “It was for the neighbors. But it is nice, we don’t hear it inside, either.”

“What’s it take to get one?”

Hadley gave Kevin a ball park figure, not willing to disclose exactly how much they’d paid for theirs. “But it’ll be different for each installation,” he hastened to add. “How big the generator is, the size of the propane tank you put in, if you go that way, the size of the transfer switch, and whether you go automatic or manual start and switchover. The costs of the electrical box rewiring. Quite a few little details. Shouldn’t say little. They’re all important.”

“Wow!” Kevin said softly. “More to it than I thought.”

“I suggest you talk to one or more of the dealers and get some quotes. You might find something better for what you want than what I have for quite a bit less.”

“Who did you use, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Hadley told Kevin the name of the dealer where he’d bought his unit, and the propane dealer that had installed the tank and run the fuel line. “I’m happy with them,” Hadley added.

“Okay, Hadley. Thanks. I’m definitely going to look into it.” He held out his hand and Kevin took it.

“I should mention,” Hadley said, feeling obligated to tell Kevin the bad news, too. “There are a couple of problems.” They were walking back to the front of the house.

“Oh. What? I can’t think of one.” Kevin looked puzzled.

“Sometimes people want to take advantage of your forethought. We had several people want to use our freezer and refrigerator for their food. A couple even wanted to bring their appliances over and hook them up to power in our garage.”

“Really?” Kevin asked.

To Hadley, Kevin asked the question like he already knew the answer. “Really,” Hadley replied. “We just couldn’t do it. Our fridge and freezer were full, and there just isn’t enough power to go around for several more appliances.”

Hadley didn’t mention that the freezer was half full of frozen water bottles, rather than food. It wasn’t any of Kevin’s business, just as it hadn’t been those who asked for the space.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kevin said. He gave a small wave and went back to his driveway and then into his house.

“What was that all about?” Regina asked when Hadley entered and gave her the customary kiss.

“Kevin is interested in getting a generator for their home. From what he said, I think Helen may be having some difficulty with the pregnancy. Kevin wants to have power, just in case.”

Regina was nodding. “I was talking to her before the storm. She is a bit worried. Well, if they do, maybe it’ll take some of the strain off of us. The more that are prepared, the less we have to look forward to asking for our help.”

“I kind of warned him about that. From the reaction I got, I think he’s been talking to some of the other neighbors.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. We didn’t make any friends during that power outage.”

“I’m thinking we should come up with an alternative to a straight ‘no’ when the situation comes up.”

“Like what?” Regina asked, tending to the oven, where their supper was just about done.

Hadley chuckled. “Haven’t come up with anything yet.”

“This is ready. Could you get it out of the oven for me? It needs to set for a few minutes.”

A few minutes later Ray and Gina came in. “Wow, Mom,” Ray said, “That smells great!”

“How’d you two get hooked up?” Hadley asked. “I thought you were going to be working on the truck.” He was looking at Ray.

“I did. Gina needed the Jeep and came by and picked me up after she was through.”

“Oh?” Regina asked, looking at her daughter.

“Oh, Mom! It was nothing. We needed to get a few things for the gym decorating party tomorrow.”

“How many passengers?”

“Just Amy. I know the rules.”

“Okay, then,” Regina said, relaxing. Her children were growing up and she didn’t know if she liked the idea or not. The thought of Ray going off in fall... She turned around and busied herself so the rest of the family couldn’t see the tears trying to form.

The truck was ready and well tested by the time Ray and Regina needed to visit the campus where he'd be attending college that fall. He asked about taking the truck and Regina agreed. She wanted to know a bit more about it, since Ray was going to be on his own with it for at least four years. And if something happened, she wanted to make sure he had something that would get him home, no matter what.

Ray, having seen his mother teary-eyed several times lately, and suspecting the reason, offered to let her drive when they were packed and ready to go.

"Sure," Regina said brightly, "Why not?" She grunted a bit getting up into the driver's bucket seat of the crew cab truck. She checked everything out, adjusted the mirrors to suit her height, and then fastened the seat and shoulder belt.

"This is a lot longer than yours or Dad's rigs. The Jeep especially. It takes a forty acre field to turn it around."

"I doubt that," Regina said. But she was extra careful backing the truck out of the driveway. She said a short prayer thanking God for having Ray warn her about the length of the truck. Regina was sure she would have run over the trash cans if he hadn't.

"It's got really good brakes," Ray said. Just before Regina hit them and they slammed back into the seats, the tires chirping just a bit.

"That's good," Regina said. "Good brakes are important." She got the transmission in first gear and headed for the main street that connected with their side street. It took her a few minutes, but by the time they were on the interstate, she was comfortable with the truck. It had been some time since she'd driven a stick, but it was coming back to her.

Ray hadn't said a word while she was getting used to driving the truck. But as they traveled down the Interstate at an easy 75mph, he finally asked, "What do you think, Mom?"

"Well, I have to admit, I had my doubts about a vehicle this old, but you and Stanley have done a good job. And I think your father and I got a bargain."

"Not really," Ray said, truthful as always. "You guys let me equip it the way I wanted and that cost as much as something a lot newer would have."

"We look at that as part of our preps. This is as much our family Bug-out vehicle as it is your personal ride."

"I know. But you still aren't getting your money's worth in my opinion. You won't even have access to it for months out of the year, for years."

"Don't remind me," Regina said, fighting back tears again.

"Sorry, Mom."

“Don’t be, sweetie. It’s all part of growing up. Even for me.” She reached over and held his hand in hers for a moment, then put both hands back on the wheel as they started around a semi tractor trailer rig.

By the time they got home, both were more than satisfied with both the truck, and the college. Besides making arrangements for on campus housing, Ray rented a small storage room in a secured facility so he would have a place to store prep items that wouldn’t fit in the room he shared with another student. It also allowed him to have a weapon relatively close. He couldn’t take one on campus.

They had brought the preps, and stashed them first thing, before going on campus. They picked up the weapons on the way out of town. Regina was as sure as she could be that Ray was going to be all right. He’d handled himself just fine getting everything taken care of on campus. She’d mostly just stayed out of the way and watched. And signed checks.

Once back, the truck was used up until the day before Ray had to leave for college. Mostly for work at the retreat site. More wood was cut, split, and stacked. The family camped out on site while doing the work. Hadley kept an eye on the contractor constructing the shelter.

The monolithic pour of footings and floor had been done as soon as the weather had permitted that spring. The walls were now going up, with two parallel walls around the entire space, set five feet apart. The area between the parallel walls was filled with earth fill and compacted.

More manure was spread and tilled into the garden, and then a winter cover crop was planted. It would be tilled under the next year, adding more nitrogen to the soil. Large propane and diesel tanks were set on each lot, and the smaller gasoline tank on the Prescott’s lot.

The pads for two small manufactured homes were poured and rough plumbed. The units would be installed the next summer. A third pad was poured, for a small motor home.

Stanley, making a comeback from alcohol abuse, was going to start staying on the site, to reduce the chance of vandalism. It gave him a place to park the small motorhome he lived in, without charge. The deal included free water, sewer, and propane. The motorhome had a propane fueled generator, so he would make his own electricity, primarily just to keep the main batteries charged.

Ray had to leave for college before the roof went on the shelter. The last thing the truck was used for before he left was to haul the containers and contents for two caches on the route from the house in town to the retreat.

Each cache consisted of four Hardigg medium size shipping cases, 2 20-litre water cans, 4 20-litre gasoline cans, and 2 20-litre diesel cans. Despite all of the cases and cans being very environment proof, they were still individually double wrapped in heavy gauge plastic sheeting.

The Hardigg cases held food, tools, hygiene and first-aid supplies, two spare magazines and ammunition for each weapon, ponchos with Ranger Rick type liners, and a change of outer clothes and two changes of underwear for each person. There were windup lights and radios; means to cook; plus tarps, stakes, poles, and cord for making shelter. A few other things that each person thought important.

Both caches were spotted in out of way places, not far off the road on public land, out of sight from the road. Having scouted the spots several times before hand, Hadley judged them safe enough to use. And both were easy to set.

The sod was cut and moved from the area. The foot of the slope was cut back, and the soil above brought down on top of the case, and then the sod replaced, with an E-tool just under the surface at one corner. Three days later a moderate rain removed all traces of the work that went into burying the cases.

The shelter was finished before Thanksgiving, and Ray had a chance to see it completed then. With the deal with Stanley going okay, both the Prescotts and the Lyons' moved essential supplies to the shelter and stored them.

That year's Christmas was another prep themed one. Mostly odds and ends to make life easier in the aftermath of a disaster. But it wasn't all odds and ends. There were many books given and received by all four Prescotts. Both the children received \$100.00 in face value pre-1965 US silver coins, and 10 one-tenth ounce US Gold Eagles.

All four spent quite a bit of time in front of the television. The news was not good. Despite all the UN talks and sanctions, multilateral talks, Greenpeace appeals, and everything else that was going on to try to reduce the world's armament of nuclear weapons, they were proliferating at a remarkable rate. Many nations that were gaining the ability to deploy nuclear weapons had to be called, at the least, aggressor nations.

Also much in the news was report after report of unseasonable weather and weather extremes. It seemed a new weather record was being set nearly every day. Hadley and Regina, with their new awareness of potential problems, gave Ray and Regina each a debit card for use in emergency, along with a packet of currency for the same reason. The two items, plus the precious metals, were insurance to help get them out of trouble and home, if necessary.

"You shouldn't need it," Regina told Gina when they gave them the cards and the money, but there are times your father and I might not be available. Use your best judgment with these. It might be tempting... But they really are for the same kind of emergencies we prep for, not quote 'emergencies' unquote."

"I understand, Mom," Gina replied. "I've got my own emergency stash, saved up out of my allowance, for regular emergencies."

"Ditto," said Ray, putting away the card and the cash. "Thanks, Mom, Dad. It's a scary world out there, sometimes. It's good to know I have a safe place to come home to, and the means to get here. Thanks."

He gave both his parents tight hugs, and then one for Gina. “I miss you guys at college. A lot.”

Regina fought back her tears, and noticed that Hadley had to blink back a tear or two as well.

Ray had the truck loaded and fueled on January second and headed back to college. He had chains on all four wheels due to the foot of snow that had fallen over the last three days, and left during the continuing snowstorm.

Regina kept her cellular telephone handy until Ray called the following day and told her he had made it safely. Then things went back to what passed as normal in the world today.

Is The Mail Here Yet? - Chapter 2

Things stayed more or less normal. Which meant they kept getting worse. The world's weather and the world political situation. But nothing happened that directly affected the Prescotts, until the end of the semester at Ray's college.

The president had a special news briefing the evening before Ray planned on leaving for home. He asked for the help of everyone in the nation to try and locate anyone with any knowledge of several nuclear devices that DHS had evidence had been smuggled into the United States by terrorists.

The request was too little and too late. Eight nuclear devices were detonated by terrorists the next morning, just after 10:00 am EDT. Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles on the west coast; Chicago and Houston in the north and south of the country; and New York, and Washington, D. C. on the east coast.

These were not the small, easily concealable suitcase nukes most thought the terrorists had. They were old Russian ballistic missile warheads, estimated, much later, to be in the five-megaton range or larger. All had been smuggled in by sea and detonated on the water.

The eighth device was different. It was much lower yield, and was a high altitude burst. From the significant effects, the experts believed it was a high technology device produced specifically as an EMP warhead. It was launched just after the other ground burst devices went off, from a small container ship off the east coast.

The Air Force was unable to destroy the missile, despite being able to track it from shortly after launch. They were able to sink the ship before the two jets that had been scrambled toward the launch point went down. The two jets sent after the missile were caught in the blast wave of the EMP bomb. The pulse would have taken them down, anyway.

Ray had one of the few vehicles in the middle of the country that didn't die from the mid-continent EMP burst. He had to do some fancy driving to avoid those vehicles that suddenly lost power, and, as often as not, the ability to be steered when the power steering died with the engine.

Worried about the truck being commandeered by the Highway Patrol or local Sheriff's deputies, Ray quickly got off the Interstate and found a place to stop where there weren't any other vehicles and check his road atlas.

After picking out a route that would, hopefully, avoid as many potential commandeering authorities as possible, Ray fired up the truck and head toward home again, this time on the back roads. He maintained a slow, steady pace, both to avoid the occasional stopped vehicle that always seemed to be just around the next bend in the road, and to conserve fuel.

At first he saw a few people on foot, which he managed to get past without being stopped or running over anyone. But after the first hour or so, most of the people that were stranded on the road had walked to somewhere away from the roads.

He saw quite a few people at every major highway junction. He learned quickly to backtrack a ways and find another route around those junctions. Ray gritted his teeth and kept going. "There is no way I can help all of them," he thought to himself. "All that will happen if I stop is I will lose all my supplies and probably won't get back home. Mom will kill me."

So, controlling his normal instinct to stop and help, Ray continued on the back roads, avoiding contact with anyone. He was pretty sure he got shot at once. Perhaps more than once, but he never saw the shooter or shooters.

He kept glancing at the RadDetect key fob on his keying, but it neither lit up nor sounded off. He was okay as far as fallout, at least for now. The only thing he was certain of was the EMP strike. Ray had tried the radio numerous times but all he got was static. There was no news of what else might have happened. He just knew he wanted to be home with his family.

As darkness began to fall it began to get eerie. The dark was darker than normal. There were no faint glows off in the distance where the city lights would be reflecting from the clouds. Worried about fallout, since he didn't know the extent of the attack, Ray decided to drive through the night. Only occasionally did he see light of any kind, none of which were another vehicle.

He traveled throughout the night, stopping only to go to the bathroom. Though he had plenty of food in the truck, he didn't feel like eating anything. The knot of worry in the pit of his stomach about his family was too big. Every so often he said a prayer for their safety.

Ray needn't have worried. When the lights went out at work and the computer died, despite being on a UPS, Hadley didn't hesitate. He hurried out to the parking lot without a word to anyone and tried to unlock the G55 AMG with the remote. It wouldn't unlock.

He fumbled with the key to unlock the vehicle, put the key in and tried the starter. The engine cranked, but wouldn't catch. "Has to be EMP," he thought to himself as he opened the rear hatch and grabbed his Bug-Out Bag (BOB). Hadley locked the vehicle manually. He thought the remote was probably working, but not the circuitry in the SUV.

He resisted the urge to run, but began quickly making his way back to the house to meet up with Regina and Gina. People were milling around, asking what was going on. Hadley ignored them and kept going, praying that the rest of his family was all right.

Gina started to do essentially the same thing as her father had done when the lights went out. Go out to the parking lot and start on her way home. But the teacher was adamant that the students stay at their desks until official word came from the office.

Hadley and Regina had taken steps if something like that happened. Gina pulled out the permission slip she always kept handy. It said, in essence, in the event of an emergency, Gina was to be allowed to leave the school grounds at her discretion. There was a copy in the office, too.

Gina showed the slip to her teacher, but she just waved it away. Resolutely, knowing what she should do in the circumstances, simply ran out of the room before Mrs. Huntley could stop her.

There were quite a few people out in the hallways, discussing what was going on. And she wasn't the only one going to the parking lots. Both the teachers' lot and the student lots. The battery on the remote for the Jeep had died long ago and Gina unlocked the Jeep with the key just as always. She tried the engine, without much hope, understanding what the sudden blackout probably meant.

The first two times she tried, the engine wouldn't start. On the third try it caught and began to run, though roughly. Several people, mostly students, but with a teacher or two in the mix, began running toward her.

Gina didn't waste any time. She put the Jeep in low and gunned the engine. She thought she had made a mistake when the engine stuttered, but it caught again and the wheels chirped as she sped off, thankful she always parked with the nose of the Jeep pointed out.

Those running after her quickly stopped as she shifted gears and took the turn out of the parking lot on two wheels. Gina quickly slowed down to a safer speed. Like Ray, Gina had to weave in and out of vehicles stopped on the streets.

She managed to get to the house without further incident. When she ran into the house, calling, "Mom! Mom!" Regina grabbed her in a tight hug and said yet another prayer.

"That was quick," Regina said. "How did you get here so fast? My car won't start."

"The Jeep did, just barely. It isn't running right, but it got me here. Any word from Dad or Ray?"

Her lips in a tight line, Regina shook her head. "We just have to trust they will make it. We have to concentrate on getting ready to go to the retreat."

There wasn't that much to do. For the most part the game carts were loaded and ready. Regina had been taking the other necessary steps in preparation of Bugging-Out to the Retreat. Hoping against hope that Hadley's G55 AMG was still working, Regina and Gina waited anxiously for Hadley to get there. If he wasn't by the predetermined designated time to leave, the two of them would head for the retreat on their own.

They were about ready to try and load the contents of the game carts into the Jeep when Hadley came striding up. With quick hugs all around, Hadley told Gina to start the Jeep before they started transferring things from the carts to the back of the Jeep. The empty carts would be folded up and put on the roof rack.

It was well they tried to start the Jeep. It simply wouldn't start. The starter would grind and grind, but the engine wouldn't even try to start. There were tears in Gina's eyes. "I shouldn't have stopped the motor! It was running before."

"It's okay, Baby," Hadley said, using the pet name for her he hadn't used for years. He hugged her again and then took a quick breath. "Chances are it wouldn't have run much longer, anyway. Let's get things finished and head for the hills."

Hadley ran to shut off the generator manually and shut off the propane to it, and Regina cut the main breakers as a precaution. Gina used the wrench hanging on the natural gas meter to turn it off. The water was turned off and the lines opened to let as much water out of them as possible. RV antifreeze was added to the drains. There was no telling when they might get back. If the house had to go through the next winter they didn't want things freezing up and bursting.

Gina was waiting with the game carts and the back packs on the driveway, with the checklist for evacuation in her hand. She began to read down it when her parents ran up to her. One of the three replied to each of the points on the card. The only unanswered one was Ray's whereabouts. The three huddled for a moment, said a prayer to see him safely to the retreat, and then Hadley turned the fourth game cart, which was still empty, upside down on his and the three of them headed for the retreat at a moderate walking pace, pulling the carts behind them.

"Do you think the Lyons are doing the same thing?" Gina asked as they turned the corner onto the main street in their development.

"I'm sure they are," Hadley said. "They've been at this longer than we have. But we can't worry about them too much. We have ourselves to think about." He had one of the CDV-715 survey meters setting on top of the tarped load of the game cart and checked it regularly.

"Anything?" Regina asked.

"Not yet. Let's just hope it was just one EMP blast. I was out in the open the entire way home from work and didn't see or hear any close detonations, fortunately."

The first person to ask them what they were doing looked rather stunned when Hadley gave the cover story of heading for the hills to camp out during the crisis, since there wasn't any electricity.

"Don't you think it will be back on?" the man asked, a woman gripping his arm tightly as they stood on the sidewalk.

"No," was the one word answer Hadley gave. The three had slowed, but not stopped walking when the man asked the question. They picked the speed back up when the man suddenly noticed the holsters on Regina's and Hadley's hips.

"Are those guns?" the man half yelled. "I'm going to report you!" followed the family as they hurried away.

When they were well away from the inquisitor, Hadley said, "Regina, I think we'd better put jackets on, even though we don't need them. I want the handguns handy, but they are already drawing too much attention."

They all stopped to allow the Regina and Hadley to don light windbreakers. They were long enough to cover the holstered weapons, but not so heavy to cause Regina or Hadley to overheat.

They were questioned several times, much as the first man had. Hadley gave the same answer each time. They were going to camp out during the crisis in the woods outside of town. It seemed to give some people the same idea. Several of them hurried back into their houses, apparently to get their camping gear to do the same thing.

Afraid to push things too hard, for fear of running out of energy before they got to the retreat, the family took several short breaks. Their packs all had hydration bladders so they were able to sip water on the way.

They reached the site of the first cache, but didn't really need anything from it, so left it alone. The spot had been chosen, in part, because it was close to a good spot to shelter if fallout started. There was a long drainage tunnel under the road that they could use as shelter, as long as it wasn't raining really hard.

Even at that, since they planned to use the two e-tools they had with them to block one end of the tunnel completely, and the other end partially, they could still use the tunnel if some rain came. Hadley and Ray had stashed a small platform nearby that could be put in the tunnel for them to sit on, above the very bottom of the culvert, even if some water was running through.

They set up camp as it was getting dark. They ate an MRE each, and Gina got set to keep watch until Regina took over, and then Hadley for the rest of the night. They were well away from the road and had no trouble during the night, though they heard several people still walking on the road, headed toward the city.

Up and on the way again shortly after daylight the next morning, they found people every so often that were staying with their stalled vehicles, waiting for help. Twice, because there were babies or small children involved, the family shared some of their water with stranded people. It wasn't a hardship. They kept their own canteens and containers and replenished them from the first stream they came to, using one of the water purifiers they carried.

Finally they cut away from the main roads and were on county back roads. They didn't see anyone, though there was the occasional abandoned vehicle. They passed the second cache, again needing nothing from it, but camping nearby.

According to their plan, they circled around slightly, going somewhat past the retreat, and then turning back toward it. Now the story, if they needed to give one, was they'd been camping and where headed back to the city.

Ray reached the retreat late the second day of travel. He'd had to stop for a while to take a catnap, despite his resolve to drive through. He had taken a side road and found a hiding spot in a small copse of woods for his nap.

He was disappointed when his family wasn't at the retreat. But Stanley was there. He came out of his motorhome when Ray pulled into the compound and stopped.

"What'cha doing here now, Ray? I wasn't expecting anyone to come up for two or three more weeks."

"Don't you know?" Ray asked, incredulously.

"Know what?"

"The President asked people for information on some nukes they thought had been smuggled into the country two nights ago. Then just about everything electrical went dead yesterday morning. I think it was a high altitude EMP blast, so I headed straight here from school. I haven't been able to get anything on the radio since."

"You don't say? Didn't notice anything. My generator works okay. Charged up the rig's batteries just this morning."

"That's good," Ray said. "Let's get the retreat opened up, in case there where more nukes and we get fallout. My family should be here... soon, I hope."

"Stanley," Ray said, suddenly noticing the manufactured housing units had been installed. "When did the houses show up?"

"Three weeks ago. Man, that crew was a bunch of griping misfits. Complained the whole time about being out in the boonies."

It didn't take long to get the retreat opened up and the ventilation system started to air it out. It sat for long periods closed up and the air could get a bit stale.

Ray checked all the operating systems. Everything was as it should be. He fired up the shortwave receiver and was pleased to hear some activity. The radios in the shelter had survived the EMP, as had all the other electrical systems.

The biggest concern was for the PV panels. Ray checked the current flow to the battery bank from the solar panels. They were being charged. The panels had survived.

Next Ray checked the houses out. "Have the Lyons been up since the houses were installed?" he asked Stanley.

"Nope. You're the first since late last fall. You ought to check them out. Lot nicer than I thought they would be."

Ray did so, with Stanley giving him the nickel tour. Ray kept looking outside, hoping to see his family coming through the gate.

“Have you tried the motors on your truck and the motorhome?” Ray asked.

“No. Should I?” Stanley asked.

“I would. EMP can fry vehicle electronics.”

“Didn’t know that. Don’t know what EMP is, either. But no matter. If you say I should try them, I will.”

Ray waited outside as Stanley went into his small motorhome. The engine growled a bit, but it started. It was understandable since it hadn’t been started in several months. The old Chevy LUV pickup truck Stanley drove started right up.

“Okay,” Ray said when Stanley got out of the truck. “That’s good. Maybe Dad’s G55 AMG is running.” But his face fell. If it was, the family would have been here the day before.

Ray looked at his watch and yawned. He was tired. He’d take a quick nap, and if the rest of the family wasn’t at the retreat when he woke up, and there was no fallout, he’d go looking for them.

Three hours later he woke up and started to go looking for his family. But he hesitated. The plans the family had made called for anyone making it to the retreat to stay at the retreat, until it was determined that it was safe. Everyone in the family knew what to do. They would be doing it.

Despite the plans, Ray pulled out of the gate of the retreat compound and began to back track the path that his family should be traveling the next morning. Three miles from the retreat he found them. They all looked exhausted. The hugs lasted for long, expressive moments.

Regina and Gina didn’t protest when Hadley and Ray loaded up the game carts onto Ray’s things that were still in the truck while they climbed into the rear seat of the crew cab truck and relaxed.

“You know you shouldn’t have come looking for us,” Hadley chided Ray as he drove back to the compound.

“I know. But... With no fallout or anything, I thought it would be safe. And I didn’t want you guys out there in the open any longer than necessary.”

“It’s all right,” Regina said from the rear seat. “This time.” She smiled then. “But we proved we could do it. We would have made this last stretch by early afternoon. And you made it from school,” Regina added, reaching forward to touch Ray’s shoulder.

“I take it the other rigs wouldn’t run. You think it’s EMP, Dad?” Ray asked.

“Almost has to be. Have you heard anything about... anything? Are the radios in the shelter working?”

“They work. There are people talking outside the US. Most of what I heard wasn’t in English.”

“Could you tell if any more devices went off?”

“I never saw anything on the way, and my alarm never went off.”

“Ours either,” Hadley replied as they pulled into the retreat compound. “Aren’t the Lyons here?”

“Haven’t seen them,” Ray said. “Stanley hasn’t either. But notice the houses. We don’t have to stay in the shelter if there isn’t any fallout. Maybe this was just the EMP attack.”

“Let’s hope so. Systems all working?”

“Good,” Gina said from the rear seat. “I’m due a long hot bath.”

“And I’m right behind you,” Regina said.

Hadley laughed. “Ok. You two got dibs on the baths and showers. Ray and I will get things unloaded and unpacked, and then it’s my turn.”

That evening, with the family all together at the dining table in the dining room in the manufactured housing unit, the family held hands and said another prayer of thanks. Then tore into the meal that Ray had prepared while the others were getting cleaned up and settled in.

The Lyons hadn’t shown up the next morning so the family had a meeting. With Ray’s truck and Stanley’s LUV working, and still no fallout, it was decided to explore both routes into the retreat and see if Frank and Karen were stranded somewhere.

Hadley would ride with Stanley in the LUV and Regina would go with Ray in his pickup. Gina would hold down the fort. They tried the handheld radios that had been stored in the shelter. They worked just fine, but didn’t have the range to get talk between town and the retreat. They were short range radios purchased to use in and around the retreat compound.

But Hadley and Regina both took one. They at least had short range comms. The two parties headed out, leaving Gina looking a bit forlorn and lonely.

They traveled slowly, so they could watch the sides of the roads for any signs of the wayward couple. Besides, it saved fuel, reduced the chance of being spotted, and allowed for reaction time if they did come upon someone besides the Lyons.

It seemed like an empty world up in the forest, but as each team reached major roads they began to see evidence of people. Twice Ray drove past vehicles that were being worked on. At one there were two horses tied up to the car being repaired. Ray and Regina waved and passed on by both times.

Stanley and Hadley ran into a similar situation, but the two men working on the tricked out pickup truck stepped out and waved their arms to stop Stanley. "Hey there buddy," said one to Stanley through the open window. "We need you to tow us into town."

Hadley leaned over and spoke out the window to the two men. "We're looking for someone. We'll be glad to come back in a little while and give you a hand."

"Now there," said the other man, leaning down on the edge of the door, "my buddy here said we need a tow. That means now." He pulled a Colt .45 pistol from a holster in the small of his back.

"Just be thankful we don't take you're measly little truck and leave you stranded on the side of the road."

Hadley could see Stanley steeling himself to floor the accelerator and take off, but Hadley put his hand on Stanley's shoulder. "Okay. No need for violence," Hadley said. He exited the LUV and guided Stanley into position in front of the two men's truck.

The one man stayed out of the way, the Colt semiauto in his hand. The other man got a tow strap from the toolbox built into the truck's front bumper and helped Hadley get the two vehicles hooked together.

The man with the gun pointed at Hadley. "You. In the back of the truck." Hadley started to get into the back of the LUV, but the man stopped him. "No. Back of our truck. Don't want you where you can do anything."

When Hadley was in the back of the pickup, the man with the gun got into the LUV beside Stanley and the other man got behind the wheel of the stalled truck. Stanley took up the slack in the tow strap and then followed the instructions of the man with the gun to get to a garage on the outskirts of town.

Still holding the gun at the ready, the man ushered Hadley out of the back of the pickup and into the cab of the LUV. "You two are really lucky I don't just shoot you. Now get out of here and don't even think about trying to get revenge." He held up the pistol. "I'll blow you away."

Stanley was furious as he drove away from the garage. "Take it easy," Hadley said. "I'm sure they'll get their comeuppance at some point in time."

"I don't like having a gun held on me. Never did, never will," Stanley said through clenched teeth.

“I understand,” Hadley replied, “I’m not too fond of the feeling, myself. At least I was able to keep an eye out for the Lyons. No sign of them, and if they’d come this way, it is the route they would have taken. Get us back on main, and well finish the route.”

Once Hadley thought he saw someone on a horse in the distance behind them, but didn’t think anything about it. They made it to the Lyons’ house just as Ray and Regina drove up. Ray pulled onto the driveway and Stanley stopped on the street.

“Anything?” Hadley asked. Regina shook her head.

The two walked up to the house and Hadley knocked. “Hey! Frank! It’s Hadley! You guys in there?”

Hadley’s hand went to the pistol on his hip, under the light jacket he wore, when there were noises in the house, but no vocal response. He waved Regina back and reached for the door knob. The Glock came out of the holster as the door suddenly flew open.

But Hadley slid it back into the holster when he saw Frank. “Frank! Are you okay?”

Frank didn’t look okay to Hadley. He was unshaven, his clothes disheveled, and the gun in his hand was shaking. Gently, Hadley took the gun from Frank.

“What’s going on, Frank?” Regina asked. “Where’s Karen?”

Frank stepped out of the way and Regina hurried inside, her nose wrinkling with the smell. Frank stepped in behind her and led her to the master bedroom.

“Oh, my Lord,” Regina whispered. She’d found Karen, in her nightgown, huddled on the floor in a corner of the walk-in closet.

Anger was her first reaction and she turned on Frank. But seeing the look on his face and hearing his words, the anger faded and she knelt down beside Karen.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Frank said. “When I made it back from work on foot, I found her here, just like this. She’ll ask for water, and will go to the bathroom on her own. She’ll eat if I feed her. But she just huddles there. I can’t get her to get dressed or even get up, unless she needs to go to the bathroom. She’s been like that since the power went off and the generator came on.”

Ray came running into the house. “Dad! Dad! Trouble outside!”

“Stay with them,” Hadley told Regina and hurried after his son, who was already running back outside.

Hadley slid to a stop on the front stoop, beside Ray. There were two men in uniform, on horseback, talking to Stanley. It was much more argument than it was a discussion.

“What authority gives you the right to take my truck?” Stanley asked loudly.

“Mayor declared martial law. We’re commandeering all operating vehicles for city use,” said one of the men. He swung down off his horse. “Now, don’t get all knotted up, there.”

“Don’t Stanley!” Hadley said, taking a step off the stoop, when he saw Stanley make a move to draw the pistol under his left arm.

But both officers drew their own handguns and the one still on horseback covered Hadley and Ray as the other one covered Stanley. But Stanley, after just a moment’s hesitation, continued the motion he had started and pulled the revolver from the holster under his left arm.

“Oh, no!” moaned Hadley when the officer shot Stanley point blank before Stanley’s revolver cleared his jacket. Then he stiffened, anger flooding his system when the officer stepped forward to Stanley where he’d gone down, pointed his pistol at Stanley’s head and fired again.

“You didn’t have to do that!” Hadley yelled, taking two steps further out onto the lawn. “He was down!”

Both officers were holding their guns on Hadley. “Shut up and back up. You want a piece of this we’ll give it to you. We’re commandeering this vehicle and that’s a fact. We’d have given him a receipt.”

The second officer laughed and the first gave him a hard look. “Grab the reins of my horse and get going. I’ll get the truck.” Suddenly he looked over at Ray’s truck, and his eyes narrowed.

“Does that one run?” he asked. “Looks old enough.”

Before Hadley could react Ray was speaking. “Nope. I thought the same thing. Been trying. Won’t even turn over.”

The officer looked skeptical as his partner rode away, leading the second horse. Ray suddenly added, “Give it a try. You’ll see.”

Looking more than a bit tempted, the officer, still holding his drawn gun on Hadley, finally shook his head, and moved over to the LUV. Moving quickly he jumped into the open door of the truck, had it started and was pulling away by the time Hadley got his gun out. But Hadley didn’t shoot.

He did turn angry eyes on his son. “Ray, why in the world did you tell him to try it. What if he had?”

Ray smiled. “It wouldn’t have even turned over, like I told him. I flipped the security switch when I got out of the truck. It’s habit with me now.”

“Oh. Well... Okay.” Suddenly he had Ray in a bear hug. He released him and then turned toward the street. “I’d better check on Stanley.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ray said.

“You don’t have to,” Hadley said. “This isn’t going to be pleasant.”

“It’ll take the two of us to move him, Dad. This may become common. I might as well get through it now.”

The two walked slowly out to the street. There was no question about whether or not Stanley was dead. There was a huge pool of blood around his head, and a smaller one beside his chest. His eyes were open and vacant, lifeless.

When Ray suddenly went to his knees and began to retch, Hadley was only a few seconds behind him. Neither saw Regina watching them from the door of the house, her face showing sympathy for their plight. She’d seen the execution.

After several minutes the two climbed to their feet and Hadley took the rest of the steps needed to reach Stanley, bend down, and close his eyes. “Let’s get a blanket or sheet or something,” Hadley said, standing back up.

He saw Regina leaning against the door frame and shook his head. She turned away, tears falling slowly. Stanley had come so far since his time of trouble. It wasn’t fair he die like this.

Hadley waited with the body as Ray went in and asked his mother to help him find a sheet. They just stripped one from the bed in the spare bedroom and Ray took it back outside. He looked around when he didn’t see his father, wishing he had a handgun. The HK-416 was in the pickup. He hadn’t thought about that when he told the officer to try to start it.

But there his father was suddenly, carrying two shovels. “Let’s cover him and then dig the grave. No need to move him twice,” Hadley told his son. With a nod Ray took the shovel Hadley handed him and followed him back around the house.

It took a couple of hours to get a grave deep enough to suit Hadley. During that time Regina was working with Karen, trying to bring her out of the almost catatonic state she was in. She and Frank seemed to be having some success. Karen was beginning to respond, at least a little, to their soothing talk.

Ray came in and asked Frank to help move Stanley. When the two left, Karen seemed to snap out of it, much to Regina’s surprise and relief.

“I need to take a shower,” Karen said, and began to climb to her feet. She looked at Regina and asked, “Could you fix me something to eat?”

Smiling, her relief showing, Regina replied. “Of course, Karen. Soup?”

Karen nodded and left the walk-in closet and turned toward the bedroom en-suite bath. Her steps light, Regina headed for the kitchen. Less than a minute later she was running back to the bedroom, after hearing a gunshot from that direction.

She nearly passed out in shock when she ran into the bedroom and saw Karen crumpled at the foot of the bed, a pool of blood forming near where she'd dropped the gun after putting it to her temple and pulling the trigger.

Hadley, Ray, and Frank came running in the house, having heard the gunshot as well.

"No! No! No!" Frank cried and he fell to his knees and brought his wife's body to his chest.

"She said she wanted a shower and some food. I was only gone a minute," Regina said, beginning to cry on Hadley's shoulder.

"I'm sorry Frank! I'm sorry. It was only a minute..."

"It's not your fault, Regina," Hadley said softly.

Ray turned and left, deciding he'd be of more use digging another grave than staying with them in the bedroom.

Frank rocked back and forth with Karen in his arms for a long time. Hadley finally went to one knee and gently disengaged her from Frank's clasp. As soon as Hadley had Frank away from the body, Regina flipped the coverlet off the bed and covered Karen with it.

Hadley took Frank out into the living room to continue to console him. Regina couldn't stay with the body. She hurried outside to find Ray. Silently, she picked up the other shovel and began to help Ray dig. Ray didn't know what to say, so he just kept digging.

It was a sad group of people that climbed into Ray's truck just before dark. Stanley and Karen were both buried, with words said over them by Hadley. The Lyons' supplies were loaded into the back of the pickup. Hadley drove, with Frank silent in the front passenger seat.

Ray and Regina rode on the bench seat of the crew cab, keeping an alert eye out for anyone that might see them and try to follow. Hadley took an even more roundabout route than usual.

Everyone in the truck could hear the relief in Gina's voice when Regina called her on the walky-talky when they got into range. "We'll be there in a few minutes, if you want to get the gate," Regina told her.

Just as they'd heard her relief, Gina heard the sadness in her mother's tone and didn't ask any questions. She hurried out to the gate and rolled it sideways to let the truck in and then rolled it closed and relocked it.

Regina was the first out of the truck and she grabbed Gina in a tight hug and then led her off to one side to explain what had happened.

“We’ll unload in the morning,” Hadley said as he, Ray, and finally Frank, got out of the truck.

“Your house is all ready for you, Mr. Lyons,” Ray said. “I’ll show you where everything is.”

“Thanks,” Hadley mouthed to his son as Ray led Frank toward the manufactured housing unit. Hadley went to talk to Gina and Regina. The three were talking quietly in the dining area of their unit when Ray came in and hung up his jacket and put the HK-416 in the closet.

“I offered to fix him some supper,” Ray said, joining the others at the table. “But he said he wasn’t hungry. I’m not either, to be honest.”

“I don’t think any of us are,” Regina said quietly.

Ray could see the fresh tear tracks on his mother’s face. They mirrored those on Gina’s. “I’ll take the first watch, if that’s okay,” he said.

“Do you think we need to keep a watch?” Regina asked Hadley.

“Probably not... But just in case... Ray and I can handle it tonight. You two get some sleep. Things will look brighter in the morning.”

“I’m too tired to argue,” Regina replied.

“I can take a turn,” Gina said, but Hadley shook his head. “Not tonight. We’ll all be doing our share of late watches, unless things get much better than they are now.”

With that the family split up, Gina going to her bedroom, and Regina to hers and Hadley’s. “I’ll be over at midnight, son,” Hadley told Ray when he took down his jacket again in readiness to go to the shelter where the major security equipment was. The lines were laid for the hook ups in the housing unit, but nothing was connected yet.

When Hadley didn’t show up for breakfast the next morning, Ray went to the shelter to check on him. Ray found Hadley engrossed in the shortwave program he was listening to. “Go tell the others,” Hadley told Ray. “I’m getting some information on what is going on.”

Ray ran back to the house and then back to the shelter, followed by Regina and Gina. The three huddled around Hadley as he fine tuned the radio. “The BBC,” Hadley said in explanation.

Breakfast forgotten, the family listened enraptured to the broadcast. It was the first real information they had heard.

When the broadcast started over, Hadley went to the 12 volt TV in the shelter and turned it on. He tried the satellite dish first, but there was no signal. Connecting the local antenna, he found two stations operating. There were cries of joy. One of the stations was in the city, and the other from some distance away that they were occasionally able to get.

They watched as essentially the same information as the BBC had broadcast was given on the TV, with some camera shots of the affected areas.

“I just thought,” Hadley suddenly said. “Frank will want to hear this. Ray?”

“Sure Dad. I’ll go get him.”

Ray ran out again, this time to Frank’s house. He knocked several times, but got no answer. He ran back to the shelter and told Hadley. “I couldn’t raise him.”

“Probably still sleeping,” Regina said. “He was exhausted, physically and mentally.”

Hadley hesitated a moment, but then nodded. “We’ll give it till noon, and then wake him if he isn’t up. He needs to know what is going on.”

The family finally knew of the terrorists’ nuclear attacks around the country. All breathed a sigh of relief that there would be no fallout where they were. But the destruction and death toll was horrific. Millions had died outright, millions more had serious to minor injuries. Every burn bed in the nation was filled, as was every other type of hospital bed.

The President had declared martial law and there were travel restrictions being enforced. No one was to be allowed to travel more than twenty-five miles from their homes during the period of martial law, without special documentation as to need.

Everyone outside the directly affected areas were encouraged to conserve and share resources until something could be done about getting production and distribution resources up and running again. That applied most importantly to water and food, with fuel for emergency operations only.

State governments were meeting to figure out what to do within their states, and the Federal government, what there was left of it, was meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, to do the same thing.

With the stories beginning to repeat, Regina urged her family back to the house to eat what was now a cold breakfast. Ray lagged behind to make the connections so they could continue to watch TV in the house, after he made the connections there.

Fortunately, Hadley and Regina had made arrangements for the housing unit to be furnished on a turnkey basis. The Lyons had done the same. So with the connection made in the shelter, Ray made the similar one at the house, and they had TV. Ray turned it on and tuned to the local station, and then went to join the others at breakfast.

The story of how the station had made it through the last few days was being told, and they half listened to it while they ate. “Has it only been four days?” Regina asked.

“Seems like forever already,” Ray replied.

“Yeah. Me, too,” added Gina. “What are we going to do? Stay here or go back home?”

“There was no mention of the city services being back on,” said Hadley. He looked over at Regina.

“I think we should stay here for a while. But I’m a little worried about the house.”

“We can’t get caught coming and going,” Ray said. “They’ll take my truck and probably our supplies, too. I think if we go, we should stay.”

“That leaves the retreat vulnerable, with Stanley... gone,” Regina said.

“Mr. Lyons might not want to go back yet,” Gina added rather tentatively.

“That’s true,” Hadley said. “I’m not so sure he should be isolated on his own right now, though. Speaking of which, I don’t think we should wait until noon. I’m going over to wake him up. Maybe knowing that the rest of the world is still out there will help him.”

Ray and Gina gathered up the dishes and did them while Regina became more familiar with the place. She’d only given things a cursory look the evening before, having taken her shower and gone to bed shortly after arriving.

She knew immediately something was wrong when Hadley came in a few minutes later. It was the look on his face. “Oh, no! Frank didn’t...”

“A whole bottle of Karen’s sleeping pills,” Hadley said and sat down heavily in one of the chairs in the living room.

Regina sat down on the arm of the chair and touched Hadley’s shoulder. Ray and Gina came in from the kitchen. No one said anything for a long time. Finally Hadley got up and looked over at Ray. “Ray, I hate to ask, but...”

“It’s okay, Dad. I’ll get the shovels.”

Regina went with Hadley back to the other housing unit and helped him get Frank ready for the grave. There wasn’t much to do. They talked it over for just a couple of minutes about taking him in to the city, but decided the risks outweighed any benefits. Hadley showed Regina the letter Frank had left on the kitchen table.

She read it and handed it back to Hadley. He carefully folded it and put it inside his shirt pocket and buttoned it in. “What are we going to do?” Regina asked.

“I’m not about to lay claim to the house, but we might as well take anything we want or need. Eventually someone else will, if we don’t.” His eyes brightened somewhat. “Some of the supplies... We can turn them in, or hand them out ourselves. As far as what is here, at the retreat, we just keep the note and bring it out if anybody ever brings it up.

“Since Frank wanted to get the property out of his name, and we put the whole property in our names with the agreement that half was still his, there shouldn’t be any problem with it. It’s legally ours, the way Frank wanted to do it. Neither of them has family. It’s doubtful if anything will come of it.”

“Just doesn’t feel right,” Regina protested.

Hadley shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. But nothing about this situation does.”

With the body wrapped in a sheet, Hadley went to get Ray and one of the game carts. It made it much easier moving the body than just carrying it the way they had Stanley and Karen. It was late afternoon when the grave was filled in and Hadley again said a prayer over a victim of the attack. For that is what the family considered it. All because of the terrorist attacks.

For a week the family stayed at the retreat, watching the news on TV and listening to the radio. More and more stations were coming back on the air as the equipment that was destroyed by the EMP was replaced or repaired.

Only when the local TV station started showing the National Guard coming into the city and reestablishing order from the gangster like control the Mayor and his police force had instituted did they talk about leaving.

The decision made, the family took a day to secure the retreat, with Stanley’s, Frank’s, and Karen’s IDs in hand, which they’d taken from the bodies in Frank’s and Stanley’s case, and from her purse in Karen’s case.

They went directly home and checked the house. It was untouched. Swinging by the Lyons, after unloading the truck, they loaded up what they wanted and took it home. The last load they took to City Hall and asked for someone in charge. Gina and Ray waited with the truck.

A haggard looking Captain received them in the Mayor’s office. “What is it this time? They steal some gas or food?”

“They?” Hadley asked.

“The Mayor and his thugs.”

“Murder, actually,” Hadley said, handing over Stanley’s ID. They took his LUV truck after shooting him. The officer shot him, and when he was down on the ground, put another bullet in the back of his head. We buried him behind the house where these people lived.” He handed over the other ID’s.

“They kill them, too?” asked the Captain.

“No. Karen couldn’t deal with things, I guess, and killed herself. We buried her and took Frank...” There was a tiny hesitation, but the Captain didn’t notice. “home with us. He took a bottle of Karen’s sleeping pills. We buried him up in the forest where we were camping out.”

“I see,” was all the Captain said.

“We brought some food and things that the Lyons had at their place. I think they would want someone to use them in this crisis.”

“Why didn’t you just keep them? That’s what most folks would do. Take it and not say anything.”

“It wouldn’t be right,” Regina said.

“Back to Stanley,” the Captain said then. “Can you identify the man or men that killed him?”

“If I see them again, I’m sure I could,” Hadley replied.

“We’ve got a few of the group in the jail. If you have a minute I’d like you to take a look.”

Hadley nodded in reply. “Anything else we need to do about the Lyons?”

“Not much to be done, unless you know next of kin.”

This time Hadley shook his head. Regina said, “Neither of the Lyons had family. Stanley had... maybe has... a daughter. She was in Los Angeles...”

“We’ll file the deaths. If anyone shows up, someone will deal with it then.” In a louder voice the Captain said, “Lieutenant, take these people down to the lockup and see if they can spot that killer we have in there.”

“Yes, sir!” the Lieutenant said, standing at the door. Hadley and Regina followed him out.

“And take the supplies off their hands that they brought in.”

“Yes, sir,” the Lieutenant said again. He showed them the way down to the city jail in the basement of City Hall. There was no formal line up. Hadley just walked down the line of cells and pointed to two men. “That one killed Stanley, and this one watched.”

“Okay,” said the Lieutenant and marked something on the clipboard he was carrying. He looked at the prisoner that Hadley had said had killed Stanley. “One more notch on that gun belt of yours. Say your prayers. The Lord is coming to take you away. When you hang.”

“The Mayor! The Mayor told us we had immunity because it was martial law.”

“The Mayor was wrong and will pay the same price you will,” the lieutenant told the man. There was a loud moan from a cell nearby. “The Mayor... rather, ex-Mayor of the city.” The Lieutenant followed Hadley and Regina out to the truck, picking up three soldiers as they went.

He whistled when he saw the cardboard boxes and of food and water. “These’ll be appreciated, he said. He eyed the fuel tank in the bed of the truck. But the Captain hadn’t said anything about fuel.

It took just a few minutes to unload the truck, and Hadley had Ray get them home as quickly as possible without breaking the law. When they were home and in private, Regina asked Hadley, “You think there will be some repercussions on us?”

“I don’t think so,” Hadley replied. “The National Guard seems to be trying to do the best they can under the circumstances. I think we’re okay. We really didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Neither did Stanley or Karen or Frank...” Regina’s words faded away as the tears came again. Hadley held her until she stepped back. “If you’ll get the generator going, and have one of the kids turn on the natural gas, I’ll see about getting us some food.”

Things slowly returned to normal. The City had access to some of the Guard’s generators and had the water and sewer going within a month. The Prescotts ran their generator for a couple hours a day. The power came back two months later. It too was available only for two hours in the morning and evening for a long time.

Food and fuel once again became available, in rationed quantities. The parts for all three of the other Prescotts’ vehicles came in and Ray installed them that summer. When Ray ordered the parts, he ordered two extra sets each. Either it wasn’t a problem, or it slipped through the cracks, since all six sets of electronics came in. One set of spares went in a faraday cage in each vehicle. The others were stored at the retreat, in the shelter.

One day a tow truck with Stanley’s Chevy LUV pick up in tow stopped at the house. Ray signed the papers for it and the driver disconnected it, leaving the small pickup behind.

“Why’d they bring it here?” Ray asked his father when Hadley got home that evening from work. “I guess we’re the only contact point they had. We’ve got it. Might as well use it.”

Long distance travel was still restricted, and with fuel rationed, Ray quit using his truck, except for going in once a week for his ration of diesel fuel. Hadley did the same with the G55 AMG. Once both were full of fuel, the family only used the LUV, Jeep and the E350 to do everything in town. All four fuel rations went to those three vehicles, giving them plenty for what traveling they were doing.

Time came for Gina to visit the college. She would be going to the same one Ray was. It was something of a hassle to get permission and fuel permits to allow the trip. Regina went with her, using the Jeep.

Though it was early for Ray to go back, he went when Regina and Gina did, towing the Jeep to save the fuel, which is one of the reasons they were able to get the permits. He showed Gina around the campus. Regina went on the tour as well, not having been able to do it when she had brought Ray for his initial visit.

Ray had made arrangements before he left the previous fall to rent the same room he had during his first year. With the probable lack of renters, as quite a few of those that planned to attend the school would not make it, Regina was able to work a deal on an apartment for Gina as well, with a substantial savings over renting them individually.

Gina and Regina went back home and Ray found a job he could continue to do after school started. Being early, before the school year started, he was able to get a good one.

Phone service was intermittent, as the system was being worked on constantly, and cell phone service was non-existent. The wireless companies were getting service up locally in the major cities first. It would be a long time before long distance became common again, especially for cell phones.

Hadley and Regina found someone they could trust to live at the Retreat and take care of it. They had to pay a nominal amount of cash, a spot in the shelter if ever needed, plus the use of the motorhome, for the retired Marine vet and his wife to not only keep an eye on the place, but start a regular garden and specialty and year round crops in the green house.

As soon as the preparedness supply businesses opened up again, Regina and Hadley replaced all the items they'd used, and added a few more. Things with China didn't look good. Information coming out two years after the terrorist attack indicated a near nuclear confrontation with the Chinese the day after the nukes went off in the US.

Attitudes had changed somewhat. Preparedness was in again. Or at least as much as it had been in the 1950's and early '60's. Besides the small group of quality preparedness suppliers, many more had opened up again, much as they had in the late '70's and early '80's during the initial 'survivalist' movement. But prices were high. It was no easier to prepare now than it had been before the terror attack.

An area west of St. Louis, Missouri was voted in as the new permanent seat of the United States Federal Government. Since it was all new facilities, and times were rather tough, the government complex was much more streamlined than Washington, D. C. The District of Columbia as a separate entity was disbanded and the property returned to Maryland, to come under its state government control.

The UN, with much of New York City a nuclear mess, moved to expanded headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. It was interesting to note that there wasn't as much competition to become a UN delegate or a support person at the new UN as there was when it was in New York

City. With the massive recovery operations going on in the US there was little money left to go to the UN. The US kept its permanent seat on the Security Council, and continued to participate, but the UN slowly began to lose what effectiveness it had up to that time.

The political northeast began to lose much of its influence as time passed and politicians from around the country were exposed to the values of the middle of the country.

The Mississippi had been a major transportation route since the Louisiana purchase made it a part of the US. With the destruction of five ocean, Gulf, and lake seaports, the Mississippi became even more important to the nation. Though imports did come through other ports on all three coasts, New Orleans and the Mississippi River began to carry fully one half of all imports.

As Russia and the Republics once again turned to Marxist/Leninist/Stalinist communistic forms of government and began to rearm, China increased her buildup of military forces, including militarizing space. The new USSR was right behind, and the US, lagging by at least two years, attempted to catch up. The term 'Star Wars Gap' was heard often in the US as they lay under the gun of space based weapons of the USSR and China.

Only around the new Capital Complex were there effective anti-missile systems to protect against the quick delivery weapons in space.

One positive aspect of the terror attack and subsequent losses, particularly to the electrical infrastructure of the US, power production and distribution systems were rebuilt and/or modified to new, EMP resistant standards. In addition, government, industry, and commerce took steps to protect critical operating resources from EMP. Much of the preparations were the protected storage of replacement parts, in lieu of the very difficult, if not impossible task of hardening many items to withstand EMP.

Just over two years after the terror attack, the US announced their own plans to put military hardware into space, to bring about parity with the new USSR and China. A few weeks later, China announced that Taiwan would again come under the authority of Beijing. The USSR announced they would side with China in the matter.

The US began moving three Aircraft Carrier Groups to the area. It was far too little, far too late. The US had lost its strategic edge. China pulled the trigger of the nuclear gun and the battle was on.

The US had gone to a launch-on-warning status shortly after China placed the first nuclear warheads in space. The computer program that analyzed the various signals from the monitors that watched for submarine, surface, and space launched missiles did its job admirably. Less than a minute after China released her space-based warheads on the US, the US missile fleet was being launched and ready aircraft were leaving the ground, with the still undetected submarine nuclear missiles held in reserve.

Despite several non-aggression pacts, and military co-operation agreements, the new USSR turned on China, and China on the USSR. Less than an hour later, as other governments

learned of the attacks, those with nuclear weapons, other than the big three, decided they'd better use them before their enemies used theirs on them.

All the known players launched. The Middle East became a glass slag pool for the most part. India and Pakistan laid waste to one another. Great Britain joined the fray, on the US side, taking retaliatory hits from both the USSR and China.

Much to everyone's surprise, France, too, decided to join the battle. It was never quite clear if it was intentional or not, but many of France's warheads landed in Germany, not quite making it to the USSR.

A very much larger surprise was the fact that the reunited Germany had pulled off a Manhattan Project of their own over the last few years. They had a small nuclear arsenal. Old grudges die hard. Most of their warheads went into the USSR. Several impacted on France. Whether the ones on France would have been launched if France hadn't attacked Germany is still unknown. But each attacked the other.

Japan had done much as Germany had. In secret, they developed nuclear weapons of their own. They launched on China and both Koreas. The Koreans were exchanging warheads of their own, medium range missiles having been put in South Korea by the US only months before. Belatedly, North Korea and China retaliated.

Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil had all developed, bought, or stolen nuclear capability and used it all, too. None of the devices left the continent. Though there weren't that many, there were enough to destroy every major city.

Apparently China had designs on the entire Pacific, including Australia. When they launched on the US and USSR, Australia lost all her major cities from Chinese missiles, too. So did Japan, just after their launch on China.

South Africa eliminated several competitors for control of all of Africa. Some country, identity unknown, took out Cape Town and Port Elizabeth afterwards. Most of Africa became territorial again, with much ethnic and internecine warfare taking place not long after the outside interference stopped.

Canada took several hits when China attacked the US from space. It is believed that Mexico had an agreement, much like China's agreements with the USSR, that Mexico would be allowed to take over the Southwestern US, if they offered no resistance to China taking over Canada, the Northwest and Central areas of the US, leaving the Eastern Seaboard for the USSR.

Mexico's deal with China worked about as well as the one with the USSR. China hit Mexico City with a nuke. When things started to settle down and pre-positioned troops started to march on the US southern border, a US submarine peppered northern Mexico with small nukes, and Mexico City three small ones, in addition to what China had done.

Is The Mail Here Yet? - Chapter 3

Ray and Gina had just arrived home for Christmas Break when China made the announcement about Taiwan. Both Prescott children had matured, and both were involved with someone special. They'd brought them home, as well as a friend each, too.

Ray had met Paula Kane in his second year at college and hit it off immediately. They had dated since that time, and Ray wanted his parents to meet her before he asked her to marry him. Ray had also brought along Patrick Giavoni, his campus housing roommate since their freshman year. Like Ray, Patrick was quiet and unassuming, and studious. He'd lost his parents the previous year and really had no place to go during the Christmas break, so, with his parents' permission, Ray had invited him to join them.

Gina's two guests were brother and sister. Tony was the same age as Ray, a year older than Gina. She had met him through his sister, Sheila, a classmate that shared many of the same opinions and beliefs that Gina had. Gina had no intention of getting married before she graduated, but wanted her parents to meet Tony anyway. Tony's and Sheila's parents were on a Christmas Cruise for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, so Gina had asked brother and sister to visit, again, with Hadley's and Regina's permission.

"Boy," Patrick said, as family and guests watched the news. "Ray, you said China would make a move some time this winter. You hit the nail on the head."

"Do you think the US will interfere, Mr. Prescott?" Shelia asked. "Gina says you really keep up on the news."

"I do think they will," Hadley said. He looked over at Regina. "And I think there might be war in just a few days."

Ray and Gina exchanged looks. There'd been more to asking their friends to join them for Christmas than just courtesy. They both had seen things deteriorating over the last couple of months.

"How much do they know?" Hadley asked, directing the question to both of his children.

Patrick, Paula, Sheila, and Tony looked on curiously as Ray and Gina exchanged another glance. Ray spoke first. "I think Paula suspects."

Then Gina added, "I don't think Tony or Sheila know."

"Know what, guys?" asked Patrick. "What's the secrecy?"

"We are preppers, Patrick," Hadley said. "Some would call us survivalists, though that is a dirty term when the media uses it. We've been trying to be prepared for something like this, if it happens again."

"You mean the terrorists?" asked Sheila.

“This time, I think it’s going to be the major powers.”

“Surely not, sir. With what happened over two years ago, surely no one would use nuclear weapons again.” Patrick sounded very uncertain about his statement. He seldom was like that.

“I’m glad you are,” Paula said. “Ray hasn’t told me anything outright, but I’ve seen his actions and reactions to current events. He always seemed concerned about them, but not frightened. Any time I asked a question about things he always had a well thought out answer, no matter what the subject.”

“You have guns?” asked Tony.

“Yes,” Gina told him. “I have my own rifle. I love to shoot recreationally.”

“I see.”

Gina got a sinking feeling in her stomach. Tony had never really expressed an interest or resistance to firearms.

“I think this could get out of hand very quickly,” Hadley said, bringing attention back to the television report. “We have a retreat outside of the city. I plan to take my family and go there in the morning. Any of you four that want to come are welcome, as long as you understand that it is our way or the highway.” Regina had moved over to sit on the arm of Hadley’s chair. Her hand was on his shoulder.

“Don’t let him scare you,” Regina said. “But it is a serious matter. If you don’t approve, that is your right and responsibility. But if this war happens, it is going to be bad. We don’t want any trouble within our community. There will be enough outside.”

“Do I have time to go shopping for a few items?” Paula asked. “I’d like to get some personal things, in case we have to stay in the shelter very long. And at least contribute some to the common food stocks I take it you have.”

“Of course,” Regina said. “Every little bit helps.” She looked at Hadley. “You were thinking of a supply run, anyway, weren’t you?”

Hadley smiled slightly and nodded.

Patrick was thinking furiously, as he watched the news continue about the announcement. Tony guided Shelia a bit from the rest of those in the living room and they began to discuss the matter. At least, that was what it looked like to the Prescotts.

Suddenly Patrick said, “I’m in, if that’s okay. I need to get to a branch of my bank as soon as possible. I don’t have much available, but I want to get some supplies, too.”

Hadley and Ray were both nodding. Then all looked over at Tony and Sheila. The two finally quit whispering and Tony turned to those in the living room. "If you'll accept us, we would both like a place in your shelter. I've been somewhat against violence, but its beginning to look like violence is going to find me whether I want it or not. We, too, would like to go get some things."

"Okay," Hadley said, standing up. "You are now part of our family, so you get family support. We have an emergency fund for last minute acquisitions, if the opportunity presents itself. We seem to have time to get a few last things."

Ray dug out the keys to the LUV from the rack on the kitchen wall and gave them to Patrick. Tony asked Patrick, "Mind if I tag along with you?"

"Sure. Who else is going?"

"If it's okay, Gina, I'd like to go with you," Sheila said. "You know what needs to be done."

"Okay."

"Ditto that, Ray," Paula said. "If you'll take me, I'll get the things I want and what you recommend."

"Looks like it's me and you, Dear," Regina said, taking Hadley's hand in hers.

"Give me a minute before you go," Hadley told the others and hurried upstairs to his and Regina's bedroom. When he came back down, he handed packets of cash to Patrick, Tony, Sheila and Paula.

All four began to protest, but Hadley asked for quiet and then spoke when he had it. "Like I said. You're family now. We help one another. We'd be spending it on your behalf, anyway. This way you can get the things you want. Just be thoughtful about the situation. Why you are buying." The last was directed at Patrick and Tony. Sheila and Paula would both be with experienced preppers and would have the benefit of their knowledge.

The group left, going their own ways. Hadley made several telephone calls before he and Regina left. One was to his work to let them know he wouldn't be in the rest of the week. He'd only planned to take the one day off. Hadley and Regina were the first ones back despite the initial delay. They had the experience and knew what they wanted in last minute preparations. It was beginning to snow as they parked the G55 AMG in the garage, with Regina pulling her E350 in beside him.

It was still early, but Regina started supper, with Hadley's help. It was growing dark when the others returned, a pair at a time. Each vehicle was unloaded and the items stacked in the garage for sorting and repacking.

Everyone was ready for supper when Regina announced it was ready. The TV was switched to some Christmas entertainment, and for the moment, the looming disaster was forgotten.

But it all came rushing back the next morning. Hadley was already dressed, a cup of coffee in his hand, watching the news when people began to straggle down from upstairs, and from the den, where Patrick and Tony had spent the night.

There was a sense of urgency that morning, as breakfast was prepared, the vehicles packed, and the house readied for closing for the duration. The four guests looked on in amazement as the Prescotts readied their supplies. Then the equipment and supplies the guests had picked up the previous evening was added to the vehicles, mostly the back of the LUV. The light snow had turned heavy during the night, leaving six inches behind before stopping while the group had breakfast.

At eleven that morning, a veritable convoy of vehicles left the locked-down Prescott home, on the way to the family retreat.

Ray and Paula led the way with his truck, followed by his mother in the E350. Next came Gina and Sheila in her Jeep, followed by Patrick and Tony in the LUV. Hadley brought up the rear to keep an eye on the LUV, which was two-wheel-drive and might have trouble in the snow.

With the snow beaten down in front of it, the LUV made it all right, since it had good tires, though there was some spinning and sliding going on in some stretches. Unlike the first real run to the Retreat, this one was made without incident.

The convoy met another convoy, this one coming from the retreat. It was made up of delivery trucks. Three of Hadley's calls the day before, beside the one to his work, had been to fuel suppliers.

All the tanks had been topped off, and a semi-truck load of split dried wood had been dumped near the stacked cords that the Prescotts had cut themselves. Lieutenant Gunderson had left the gate open for the family's arrival, as one of the calls Hadley had made had been to him, letting him know they were coming.

Both housing units were ready to occupy, as was the shelter. There was a short debate whether or not to unload everything, or give it a couple of days to see what happened before doing so.

The debate ended when several high altitude detonations occurred to their east. The attack defense system around the Capital Compound outside of St. Louis was doing its job, destroying the warheads meant for the US Capital. The detonations were visible, but too far away to be a threat to the Retreat. They were the sign needed to get everything unloaded and moved to the shelter.

Lt. Gunderson locked down the housing units he'd just opened up, and secured the motorhome he and his wife lived in. In less than twenty minutes Hadley closed the outer entrance door and then the inner. They were in the shelter for the duration.

Hadley and the Lieutenant went into the airlock between the outside and the shelter while the others were getting themselves settled. There was a wire antenna cable leading into the airlock so a radio could be hooked up. They had several of the inexpensive radios for just such monitoring. If one got fried by EMP, they'd have another they could use, tucked away inside the main part of the shelter.

They didn't listen long. There was nothing to hear but static. Taking the radio with them, they reentered the shelter. Not long afterwards the shelter shook and then the blast valves on the various air and plumbing systems slammed closed.

Hadley looked at Regina, as all the others started at him. "That had to be the city," Hadley said softly. He went over to the communications desk and added batteries to the CDV-717 remote reading survey meter. Nothing yet. But it wasn't long before the needle began to move.

Though they were to the southwest of the city, the mushroom cloud was large enough that it dropped significant fallout on the Retreat for a few hours. The readings were recorded to pin down the peak dose rate, so the time-in-shelter could be calculated.

At first it didn't look too bad. The radiation had peaked and started to go down rapidly. But two days later the readings started to climb again slightly as fallout from Whiteman Air Force Base and Kansas City began to reach them.

When that peak came and then went, Hadley recalculated their probable shelter stay time, assuming no additional radiation. The much touted two week shelter stay wasn't going to be enough to be as safe as Hadley wanted them to be. More like twelve weeks. There were groans all around at that announcement.

But the family was well trained and knew exactly what was needed, and the guests quickly caught on. Hadley was a bit leery of both Patrick and Tony at first, but both dropped into the shelter routine without any problems. Regina had already taken Paula and Sheila under her wing and thought of them as her new daughters.

The final design of the shelter, as it was built, was set up for twenty people for two years, to give time for gardens to be planted and harvested after a shelter stay. Many times in the future Hadley said a prayer of thanks for having had the idea to double up the size of the shelter and amount of consumables planned initially when it was just the immediate family, the Lyons, and Stanley and the possible two or three guests.

Even as large as the shelter was, space was at a premium. Everyone felt the need to be alone at times and cooperated with one another when someone indicated by body language the desire not to be bothered.

The time passed slowly, but mid-March finally rolled around. The radiation level was well below 0.5 r, low enough to spend time outside, as long as everyone still spent half the time in the shelter.

There wasn't much to do outside. Paths were shoveled in the snow to get from the shelter to the other buildings. But without equipment the compound could not be decontaminated well at the moment. There was still three feet of snow on the ground, and it still snowed every few days. It was just too difficult to move the fallout contaminated snow.

The greenhouse was cleared of snow and the heater fired up to get the greenhouse warm enough to start a garden. Lieutenant Gunderson's wife Henrietta was an avid gardener and guided the others in what to do and how to do it.

Hadley began to notice the long looks toward the distance Tom was making from time to time. He and Sheila often talked together quietly. It came to no surprise, to Hadley at least, when Tom announced he was going to go try to find his and Sheila's parents in mid-June, when the snow cover finally melted away to just an inch or so.

"I'll walk if I need to, but I was hoping to borrow the LUV, since it is a surplus vehicle for the group," he said as he talked to the rest of the group after supper one day. "I have to know what has happened to them."

"Don't you know where you are?" Hadley asked. "That you came here for Christmas?"

"We told them," he admitted.

"Don't you think they'll try to find you if they are alive?" Hadley asked then.

Tony shook his head. "I don't know. I suppose they might."

"Since they know where you are, and you don't know where they might be, don't you think it logical to stay and wait for them to find you?" Ray said.

"Logic doesn't play into it, I think." Patrick said.

Hadley, Regina, and Ray all saw the devastated look on Gina's face. Even having discussed it beforehand, she was having a hard time dealing with it.

Hadley and Regina couldn't stand seeing their daughter like that. "What about Gina?" asked Regina. "You just going to leave her and go off on a nearly hopeless cause?"

"We've discussed it," Tony said. "I offered to take her with me, but she has refused."

Gina moved over to stand beside her parents.

"And Sheila?" This time it was Hadley.

“She’s going with me,” Tony replied.

Looking at Sheila, Hadley, as earnestly as he could, told her, “You’re welcome to stay. The fact that Tony is leaving doesn’t affect you and your status here.”

Sheila was biting her lip, tears in her eyes. “I want to find my parents, too. But...” Her voice trailed away and she looked at Tony.

“It’s up to you,” he said. It was a rather cold reply all the Prescotts thought.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Patrick said, “Mind if I tag along, Tony? I might be of some use.”

Tony was surprised, but quickly nodded, a bit relieved. He was determined to do this, but going alone scared him more than he wanted to admit.

With sudden vehemence Patrick turned to Ray and said, “I don’t think I want to stay with a bunch of hoarders and survivalists, with no concern over anyone except themselves.”

It came as a total surprise to Ray and his family. At first Ray was hurt, and then he got angry. “Now wait a minute, Patrick! How can you say...”

“I don’t want to hear it, Ray,” Patrick said. “There are probably starving people out there. People needing medical attention. People needing clean water. You have all that. You could be sharing. But you aren’t. You are hoarding it all for yourselves. Keeping it hidden here, out of sight, guarding it with illegal guns.”

Hadley had heard enough. “Tony, Patrick, Sheila, get your personal things and wait outside. You can have the LUV, plus four cans of gasoline, and a month’s food, each. We’ll get it ready while you wait.”

Patrick obviously didn’t like to be ordered around, but he made no effort to protest. He was the first one out of the shelter. Tony gave Sheila a nudge and she followed Patrick, obviously somewhat reluctantly. Tony, as he started toward the inner door of the shelter stopped, turned and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know Patrick felt that way. I don’t.”

Hadley just nodded and Tony left the shelter. “Ray, monitor the situation. Don’t start anything. I know you’re angry, but don’t let it affect your judgment about people expressing their opinions and choosing a path to travel.”

Ray nodded, spoke quietly to Paula for a moment, and then followed the other three outside, picking up his HK-416 as he went out the door.

“Paula, will you help me get things ready?” Hadley asked, seeing Regina taking Gina over out of the way, trying to comfort her.

“Of course, Mr. Prescott.” Paula had taken an active role in the shelter and decontamination, giving good input when asked and working as hard as the Prescotts.

It took only a few minutes to put together enough food for three people for a month. It was put in some of the empty cardboard boxes the #10 cans had come in. Hadley wasn't about to give them the expensive shipping containers much of the equipment and supplies were stored in.

Outside, Ray stood some distance from Patrick, Tony, and Sheila. Patrick had already gone to the LUV and had it started. He called to Tony and the two of them began to move the gasoline cans from the small bermed shed that protected them.

“Just the four,” Ray said quietly when the two men headed back to the shed after loading the first four twenty-liter cans.”

“Figures,” Patrick said, just loud enough for Ray to hear. “You going to shoot me if I get more?”

Ray didn't answer. Patrick had a look on his face that said he really wanted to get more of the fuel. But he didn't.

A few minutes later Hadley and Paula came outside, Hadley carrying two boxes and Paula one. “Ray, there are two more boxes.”

Ray headed for the shelter, pointedly handing his carbine to his father after Hadley put the boxes he was carrying in the back of the LUV. He stepped away and waited for Ray. Paula stood beside him, to show her support for what he was doing.

It was only moments later that Ray came out with the other two boxes of food. “Better get a container of water, too,” Hadley told Ray. Ray went back into the shelter and returned with a collapsible five-gallon container of water and put it in the truck, too.

“Be on your way,” Hadley said, looking at the three. He handed the carbine back to Ray and took the remote for the gate out of his hip pocket. Touching a button the gate slid to the side, opening the way for the three to leave.

“What about a gun?” Tony asked hesitatingly.

“We won't need one,” Patrick said coldly.

Hadley, Ray, and Paula turned around when Gina, standing in the outer doorway of the shelter said, “Here's my Ruger 10/22. I need to graduate to one of the HK-416's, anyway.” She held it out, but didn't leave the door of the shelter, her mother standing beside her.

“Gina...” Tony said, walking over to get the rifle. “I...”

“Goodbye, Tony,” Gina said as she handed him the rifle and a fifty-round box of cartridges. She turned and went back into the shelter, followed by her mother.

With a sigh, Tony went over to the LUV. Patrick and Sheila were already inside. Tony slid the Ruger behind the bench seat and climbed in beside Sheila. As Patrick put the little pickup in gear, Hadley said, "Don't bother coming back. You won't be welcome."

"Not likely," Patrick replied, venom in his voice. "And don't be surprised to see the masses at your door step. I plan to tell everyone I see what you have here. And when we find the authorities, I plan to tell them about your guns."

It was a very near thing. Hadley had his right hand on the butt of the Glock 21SF in the inside-the-waistband holster in the small of his back in an instant. It took all his control not to pull it free and put a bullet in Patrick's head. But stony faced, Hadley merely said, "Do what you think you must. And try to justify what you've said with the fact that you stayed here, in safety, the entire time, eating food we had put aside for just such an eventuality."

Patrick cut loose with a string of obscenities and floored the accelerator of the truck, spinning the rear tires as he steered it for the open gate. Hadley, Ray, and Paula watched the vehicle until it was out of sight. It was the last the family ever saw or heard of the three.

Lt. Gunderson lowered the old M1 Garand from his shoulder and quietly made his way back inside the greenhouse to help his wife from where he'd been standing at one corner of the retreat, keeping an eye on the situation.

Paula asked to be taught how to shoot, in order to contribute to the Retreat's defense if Patrick did, in fact, incite survivors to come and try to take over. But nothing happened and the family quit worrying about the specific possibility of someone finding out about the Retreat from Patrick. Being discovered was a risk, anyway, and they acted accordingly.

It took only a few days for Gina to return to her normal self. She and Paula became fast friends as time passed. If the subject of Tony came up, which it seldom did, all she would say was, "It was his choice. Water under the bridge. He's no longer a part of my life and never will be again."

As the weather finally warmed up, the outdoor garden was put in, primarily root crops and crops needing quite a bit of space, like corn. In July, after a family meeting, which included the Gundersons and Paula, it was decided to go exploring. To see if there were other survivors in the area. The Retreat was equipped with a shortwave receiver, but there had been very little radio traffic in the months they'd been in the shelter.

Hadley and Lt. Gunderson would go, taking Ray's pickup in case they found anything they needed to bring back. They couldn't get close to the city. The radiation levels were just too high to be safe. With enough food and other supplies for a week, the two men turned the truck around and began to investigate the area around the Retreat.

After making a complete circle around the area where the Retreat was located, they made their way back. In a way, it was good news that they gave the others in the Retreat. But it was mostly disappointment that everyone felt when they heard the news.

There simply weren't many survivors in the area. The few they'd met were sickly and barely scraping out an existence hunting the few animals in the area that survived, and growing gardens that wouldn't produce much until much later. Most had salvaged food from surrounding houses, that had kept them fed this long, but there was no more of that to be had.

It was a long, solemn discussion that took place on whether or not to try to help some of the locals in need. Though no reference was made to Patrick, the accusations he'd made haunted a few of the family. The decision was made to keep the supplies to themselves. The chance of the others surviving through the coming winter, even with some help from the Prescotts, was very slim. The survival of the family was more important.

As hard of a decision it had been to make, it turned out to be the correct one. The harvest from the conventional garden was small, cut short by the early winter that began in October. The quality of the harvest was good. There just wasn't much of it.

Lt. Gunderson and Ray went out often, looking for wild game, but found little. Like the other survivors, human ones, the animals had not fared well with the levels of radiation the area had experienced. The area would eventually repopulate, as game entered the area from clean areas. They would prosper, since there would be little competition for the resources for a long time. But that would take years.

Despite the amount of supplies they had, the Prescotts met again the following spring and considered on whether or not to move southward, to warmer climes. Perhaps all the way to the Gulf of Mexico for the resources it would supply.

But with small signs of the return of small and large game, and Amateur Radio reports of a recovery effort being made by the federal government, the group decided to stay with the Retreat as their base.

There were just too many advantages at the Retreat to abandon it. But it was decided to try and make contacts south of them. That seemed to be where the most activity was. The Retreat was on the southern edge of where the severity of the winters precluded attempts to restart civilization. St. Louis and the nation's capitol was on the same north south boundary.

So another reconnaissance trip was scheduled. This time Gina insisted on going with Hadley and the Lieutenant. There was no talking her out of it. Come the first break in the weather, with a month's worth of supplies for three people, and all the diesel the truck could hold in its tanks and in containers that would fit in the back, the three of them headed for the Ozarks of Missouri, due south of the Retreat. There had been some contact in the area and a tentative welcome to visit.

But first the trio would approach St. Louis and see if the government was actually running and whether or not it was friendly to survivors, particularly preppers. So, with the goodbyes said, Hadley put Ray's truck in gear and the three adventurers left the Retreat.

As the previous scouting trip had shown, there wasn't much going on near the Retreat. Not until they approached the furthest outskirts of the Capital Complex did they run into any significant activity.

Though they didn't approach any of them, the trio saw several farms that seemed to still be operated. What they did do, was slow down and stop, with their firearms ready, but out of sight, when they approached a farm bob-truck on the road.

The other vehicle began to slow. And the two occupants weren't hiding their weapons. The large truck stopped well ahead of the pickup. "Well," Hadley said, "One of us has to make a move." Slowly he opened the door of the pickup and slid out of the bucket seat onto the ground, his HK-91 held up over his head. He pointedly put it back inside the truck and stepped away from it, his hands still in the air.

"Okay if I approach?" he asked, lifting his voice slightly so those in the bob-truck could hear him.

"Come ahead," came the call back. "Keep your hands up where we can see them."

Hadley did as requested, walking slowly up to the large truck. "We're looking to make contact with the Federal Authorities," he said when he stopped a few feet from the driver's side door. "Is that a good idea, or not?"

"What do you mean, or not?" asked the driver. He held a lever action .30-30 just out of line with Hadley's body. "They've been starting things back up. Slowly. But they're making progress."

"It was just..." Hadley hesitated slightly. A little white lie wouldn't get him barred from Heaven, he hoped. "There've been some rumors they're detaining people and taking away their supplies."

"Just rumors," the man replied, rather angrily. "The new President is doing everything he can to get the country back on track. As long as a person isn't being an outlaw, stealing and robbing from those that made it through the war and aftermath, they'll help with food and a little fuel. You turn out to be an outlaw, preying on the helpless, you'll hang."

"I see," Hadley replied. "That's what I wanted to know. Thanks. Is there a best way to approach the Capital Complex, or just drive up?"

"You have a funny way of putting things, mister," said the man. "Of course you just drive up. They'll want to get survivor information and kind of do a census. Check you for communicable diseases and all, but they aren't going to take your stuff away from you. Not unless you make real trouble."

“Okay, thanks.” Hadley put his hands down and started back toward the pickup, flinching slightly as the driver of the bob-truck put it back in gear with a loud clash coming from the transmission.

Once back in the pickup and the bob-truck past them, Hadley filled in Gina and Lt. Gunderson. “What do you think?” he asked them when he had finished.

“I think you should let me off before we get there and the two of you go on in. If you don’t come out in a reasonable amount of time, I’ll do what I can to get you out. Can’t make promises, but I’ll try.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Hadley said and once again headed for the Capital Complex.

They began to see signs of the military presence as they approached the Complex. They didn’t seem to draw much interest from those that saw the truck. Lt. Gunderson had Hadley stop at a likely place and he faded into the woods with his Garand and pack.

It wasn’t until they came to the check point to enter the Complex itself that they had to stop for a road block. It was a conventional security entrance set up with a guard shack and a barricade arm across the roadway. “State your business,” said the Corporal that stepped out of the guardhouse when Hadley brought the pickup to a stop.

“We’re trying to find out what is going on,” Hadley said. “We survived the war just outside Jefferson City and are looking for information on how to get work and buy supplies. And just check in to let the authorities know we survived.”

“Okay. Two of you?” the Corporal asked, looking into the cab of the truck. “Give me a moment.” The guard stepped back into the guard house and seemed to be working on a computer. Less than two minutes later he stepped back out and handed Hadley two simple ID tags.

“Wear these at all times until you get registered. They’ll give you a new ID. Holstered handguns are okay. Leave your long arms in the truck. Go directly to processing. Anyone finds you anywhere else with these initial badges and you risk some serious trouble. Understood?”

“Processing?” Hadley asked.

“Just follow the signs.” The professional look softened a bit. “Don’t worry. We’re not the autocratic rule so many predicted before the war.” He winked at Gina and she colored slightly.

“Okay. Thank you, Corporal,” Hadley said and drove into the Complex when the bar was lifted.

“He seemed nice enough,” Hadley said, smiling at Gina.

“Oh, hush!” Gina replied, turning a deeper shade of red.

It took a few minutes to get to the processing center, but the route was signed well. “This doesn’t look too foreboding,” Hadley said as he parked alongside a similar truck. There was quite a bit of activity in and around the building, with the only sign of military presence the two armed guards flanking the entrance of the building. “We do like the Corporal said, Gina. Side arms only.”

During the shelter stay and afterward, Gina had insisted on learning to shoot one of the HK-416’s the family had acquired, as well as a pistol. Like her mother, she opted for a PPK in .380. With both Hadley’s rifle and Gina’s carbine behind the front seats of the truck, the two exited it and locked all four doors.

Still somewhat tense, the two headed across the parking lot and up the steps of the processing center. The guards gave them a look and then one opened the door for them.

Processing center was right. It took them a long time to go through the process of becoming a United States Citizen again, but there were no micro-chips implanted, or numbers tattooed anywhere. Just background information taken, and existing ID’s checked.

They were checked by doctors, but since both could and did state truthfully that they had not contacted any diseases since the war, and had suffered no radiation sickness, they didn’t even get any shots. With new ID’s and a clean bill of health, they entered the next to last stage of the process.

It was one of the longer ones, and involved as complete an accounting of their activities since the war as possible. They were also asked about the presence of any other survivors and their state of affairs.

Hadley was confident enough of the situation to give the clerks the information about the family, though he didn’t say anything about the Gundersons. He was given similar ID’s for Regina, Ray, and Paula, with the request that they contact the closest authorities as soon as they could for verification and official inclusion in the census that was being taken.

The final process brought them back together in a room with a dozen or more tables manned by one or two people each. It was, in effect, a recruitment center. There was much work to be done to rebuild the country, and any help from the surviving citizens was welcome, though not mandatory.

Hadley and Gina went around the room, checking each of the work programs out. Hadley’s business experience could be put to use as a local representative for the area around the Retreat, until local government could be reestablished. There was a small stipend for the work.

Another thing Hadley signed up for was to provide a location with a secure water and sanitation system for personnel that would eventually come into the area of the Retreat. Again, Hadley would be compensated for the service the Retreat would supply.

Gina didn't find anything that she could do at the Retreat, but there were many openings in the Complex and at several of the sites that had been set up around the country to help in the rebuilding process. She took the information with her. She didn't know about Hadley's offering of the Retreat as a bivouac area.

It was late when the two got back in the pickup and left the Complex. They met Lt. Gunderson at the appointed spot and filled him in on the operation. "I tell you, Edward, that it all looks legitimate. I think the powers that be, no matter how they came into power, are trying to do the best they can to get the country back on its feet, with the original values that made the country great."

"Okay. I'll go in tomorrow and get tallied in with the rest."

They set up their small camp in an out of the way place the Lieutenant had found and were undisturbed during the night. The next morning Hadley and Gina took him to the same gate they'd used before.

"You're back, I see," said the same guard that had checked Hadley and Gina in the day before. "With reinforcements. That's good. Can't blame you for being cautious. Things were tough in the early days." He was talking to Hadley, primarily, but his eyes stayed mostly on Gina.

Hadley drove to the processing center after the Lieutenant got his preliminary ID and dropped the Lieutenant off. Then he and Gina did a bit of sightseeing. On foot. The US Capital Complex wasn't the sprawling District of Columbia city of Washington. Built in lean, streamlined design, the complex was efficient, with a beauty all its own in the simplicity of style and structure that led to streamlined government that was the new norm.

There were a few things that were the same, and Hadley and Gina had no real objection. They couldn't go into certain building armed. But unlike the old days, where the weapons were discouraged to the point of making it obvious that weapons weren't wanted at all, much less in the buildings where opinions could fly and tempers flare, there were lockers available to secure weapons that were the expected norm now.

One of the places where weapons weren't restricted, quite fittingly, was in the building where the original copy of the Constitution was kept, in the same type of special protective display that had survived the terrorist attack on Washington, D. C. so many years ago.

"Nice to know we're going back to our roots, doesn't it?" Hadley asked Gina, in a quiet voice befitting the lofty stature of the document.

"I've learned so much since we began to prepare, way back when," Gina replied, her voice also quiet. "What they were teaching us in schools back then... Even after the terrorist attacks... It is amazing the government didn't just turn over and hand the country to those that wanted to see us destroyed."

Hadley put his arm over his daughter's shoulder and gave her a hug. "Times change. Even in the worst of times, good things can happen."

Suddenly, from behind them, came a voice speaking just as softly as Hadley and Gina had. "It's an amazing document, isn't it?"

Startled, Hadley and Gina spun around, both reaching for their side arms.

The man that had spoken gave a small wave of his hand to four men that were also in the process of drawing weapons. "Sorry to spook you," the man said. "It's just we get so few visitors, I just had to speak."

One of the men obviously guarding the speaker said, "Five minutes, Mr. President."

Again the wave of acknowledgement.

"Mr. President?" Hadley asked.

The President held out his hand. "I'm afraid so. President Alexander Hutchison." Hadley shook his hand and then so did Gina.

"I knew we had a President," Hadley said. "Just didn't know who. We haven't had much contact with the outside world the last few years. Just came in from the cold. So to speak. From what I'm seeing and hearing, you are doing a good job."

The President chuckled. "Thank you, sir. So, you were a surviva... Oh. I believe the proper term now is prepper?"

Hadley nodded. "Southwest of Jeff City."

"That close?" President Hutchison said, rather sadly. "And we just now are making contact? I take it you didn't participate in the election, such as it was?"

"We didn't try very hard to make contact, sir," Hadley hastened to explain. "We didn't hear about an election. We're on the edge of the bad weather patterns. It's probably more important to take care of the areas where there are more survivors, anyway."

"Perhaps," the President replied. "I've found it difficult to set priorities. The changes in weather patterns have had an affect on decisions. By necessity, I'm afraid. We don't want to forget anyone, but still..."

"Mr. President," said the leader of the security detail.

"I'm sorry. It was good to talk to you, Mr..."

"Prescott, sir. Hadley Prescott and my daughter Gina. My wife and son, and his fiancé are at the Retreat."

President Hutchison began walking backward, toward the security detail, obviously reluctantly. "I say, if you come around again, feel free to stop in and say hello."

"We will, sir. Thank you," Hadley replied, still a bit dazed by the chance meeting. His guards surrounded him again as the President hurried off to do whatever it was that needed doing this time.

"Wow! Dad! That was really the President! Talking to us like normal people."

Hadley laughed. "Like normal people? You don't think we're normal?"

"Oh, Dad. You know what I meant."

"Of course I did. It was rather amazing. I wonder if he really meant that invitation?" Hadley mused as they headed for the door.

"I bet he did. Wouldn't Mom get a kick out of meeting the President of the United States!"

"Can you imagine?"

"Dad, do you remember President Hutchison from before the war?" Gina asked as they headed back to the parking lot where the truck was.

"The name rings a bell. I didn't want to embarrass us by asking him what department he was the head of after they moved the Capital, before he became President."

When they arrived back at the processing center they unlocked the truck and sat down inside, leaving the doors open as they waited for Lt. Gunderson. They didn't have long to wait. Having heard the process from Hadley, the Lieutenant was able to get through it a bit faster than Hadley and Gina had.

"You look a bit... What should I say?" asked Hadley when the Lieutenant came up to the truck. "Astounded?"

"I suppose so," Lieutenant Gunderson said, stopping to lean against the side of the truck. "They recalled me to duty. Offered, actually. It wasn't mandatory. They want some of the old timers back in the force. Though that wasn't quite how they put it." The Lieutenant laughed.

"When I told them I was part of a group over near Jeff City, they put me in command of the area. I have to take a month's training, and then I'll be issued a vehicle, with an allotment of fuel and food for Henrietta and me. You said you were going to let the military billet people, so I figure I can operate out of the Retreat, if that's okay?"

"Of course," Hadley replied. "I don't see any problem with it. When do you start the training?"

Rather sheepishly Lieutenant Gunderson said, "Tomorrow. I've got chits for food and accommodations to stay here during the time."

"What about your wife?" Gina asked.

"She's a good one. She'll understand. I just wish we could get word to her a little sooner than when you get back."

Hadley looked at Gina. "I know we were going to the Ozarks to check it out, but I believe this is more important. We can go back home and make that trip later. What do you think?"

"I think it's the right thing to do, Dad," replied Gina.

"Let me get my gear and you guys can do what you need to do," the Lieutenant said, reaching into the rear passenger compartment of the truck and pulling out his rifle and pack.

Hadley and the Lieutenant shook hands and Hadley said, "We'll see you then, in about a month."

The Lieutenant nodded. "Probably just over. Tell Henrietta I love her and will be back as soon as I can."

With that, Hadley and Gina got back in the truck and headed for the gate. A well worn Humvee stopped beside the Lieutenant and he got in, headed for his temporary quarters.

When they reached the gate it appeared that the guard was being changed. There was a line of outgoing vehicles and Hadley had the truck stopped well back from the vehicle in front of him. Hadley noticed that the guard that had checked them in both days was walking toward them, apparently on his way to his barracks.

Hadley wasn't the only one that noticed. Gina quickly rolled down her window, getting it down just before the guard came up, crossing over between the pickup and the vehicle in front of it, to be on the passenger side of the pickup.

"Leaving?" the guard asked, stopping and leaning against the side of the truck. "How'd it go? Where's your friend?"

"He's joining up again," Gina said. "He's going to be the head of the Military presence in the area around our Retreat. My father is the Civilian contact for the area."

"Wow! I'm impressed. You guys are important people!" He chuckled, showing he was joking. A little. Suddenly he added, "You think your friend will have a detachment with him?"

Gina looked over at her father. Another vehicle went around them to leave as Hadley spoke. "He didn't say specifically, but it was implied that he'd be in command of a small detachment."

“What do you know?” said the guard. His nametag read Kennedy, Gina noticed. “I’ve been thinking about asking for a field assignment. Things have settled down here.”

“Maybe we’ll see you at the Retreat then, Corporal Kennedy,” Gina said.

“You just might, at that. I’m Jay Kennedy.” He reached out and Gina took his hand for a quick hand shake. “Gina Prescott,” Gina replied. “And my Dad. Hadley.”

“Mr. Prescott,” Jay said, with a nod at Hadley.

“Corporal,” replied Hadley. He was going to find it hard to wait to tell Regina all about the episode.

The guard at the gate whistled and waved Hadley forward. Gina rolled up the window, a thoughtful look on her face as Hadley drove up to and then through the gate. He saw Gina cut her eyes toward him, and then quickly away. He didn’t say anything.

Regina and the others were delighted at the news, and the early return of Hadley and Gina. Henrietta took the news about the Lieutenant calmly. “Should have figured he’d get involved again, if he could. Didn’t take to well to his retirement. Except for this last job. Thanks to you and your family, Hadley.”

“We were lucky to have you with us,” Hadley replied. “If you want, you can go check in personally, with Regina, Ray, and Paula when they go. Give you a chance to see him.”

“I’ll go, to get registered. If I know the Military, he’ll probably be out on maneuvers.” Henrietta laughed.

With detailed directions, Regina, Ray, Paula, and Mrs. Gunderson headed for the Capital Complex two days after Hadley and Gina returned.

A little over a month after the second group returned to the Retreat, Lieutenant Gunderson returned as well, with two squads of soldiers. They set up camp just outside the Retreat fence, and had the equipment to set up flush toilets and showers for the detachment, using the water supply and septic system on the Retreat.

Jay Kennedy was the Lieutenant’s aide. He and Gina spent quite a bit of his off time together.

It wasn’t long before several of the other survivors in the larger area migrated to the immediate area for the real advantages of having support structures available through the military. A tent town arose, and then portable buildings and housing units. Hadley set up a trade store, to make transfer of goods easier, though gold and silver coins were beginning to make a comeback as currency.

A military chaplain, making the rounds of the various military outposts, performed the ceremony of marriage for Ray and Paula, and Gina and Jay.

Word began to spread of the slow recovery in central Missouri, due in large part to Hadley's statesmanship, and the assistance the military was providing. When the next election was held, Hadley was encouraged to run for Governor of Missouri and won by a slim margin over his only real opponent, another Retreat Compound leader, located in the Missouri Ozarks.

It would take another one hundred years for the nation to become a real nation again, but it happened, with Hadley's family in the forefront of the process.

End *****

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