



Jerry D. Young

www.jerrydyoung.com • jerrydyoung@hotmail.com



The Fifth Key

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The Fifth Key – Chapter 1

Sam, short for Samantha, Crain unconsciously tugged at the key suspended from her neck on its rawhide keeper. She often did so when in deep thought. And she was in deep thought now. Thoughts about how she and her charges were going to make it through another year.

Eighty years had passed since her ancestors, and the ancestors of those she felt responsible for, had survived a nuclear war. All the stories and legends put it down to her Great Grandfather's foresight and abilities. The stories also said that Kevin had always maintained that it was his Great Grandfather, and a set of keys that had included the one around her neck, that had allowed those on the Homestead, the Farm, and in the Town to prosper during those tough years of just surviving.

But survive the three groups had, with Kevin's hand at the helm. More than just survived. They managed to prosper while those outside the group, even with the group's help, died off, one or two here and there, a family gone, then another. Admittedly, a few of those people had opted for warmer climes when the weather changed after the Great Yellowstone Eruption sixty-two years ago, just as real recovery from the nuke war had begun.

The population stayed fairly constant, with births matching deaths almost uncannily. A few people joined the group over the years, adding variety to the bloodlines.

The reins of authority had passed from father to son, and then, with no male heirs, to Samantha, at the ripe old age of 21 after her parents were killed in an encounter with some of the growing groups of animals that were the offspring of zoo, private zoo, and private preserve animals released during the war. Though some in the area wondered about her ability to lead the group, considering the severity of this newest threat to their existence, most believed in the Crain family almost devoutly. .

Sam had a doubt or two herself, but quickly put them out of her mind. She had the lineage, and the training, to handle things. Just as her ancestors had. First the radiation, then the ash fall, and then cooling temperatures blamed on the eruption. But most had expected simply another “Year Without a Summer” as had happened after previous volcanic eruptions on the other side of the globe.

And it seemed to be the case. Though the temperatures were lower for three years, they did start to climb again. At least where they were located. Amateur radio reports indicated that not everywhere was warming up.

The complex had adjusted, finding several more greenhouses to continue to grow enough plant foods to supplement their large herds of stock animals. But when the temperatures started to drop again, and didn’t stop, each winter more severe, and each summer with a shorter growing season, the additional greenhouses simply weren’t enough for the supplemental foods. And now the Farm Manager had come to Sam and told her that the farm was at the limit of producing feed for the current level of the herds and flocks. And bio-diesel production was way down, as well, for lack of oil producing crops.

Deciding a ride would clear her mind, Sam saddled her favorite horse, Queenly, one of the Spanish Barbs the Farm had decided to concentrate on breeding for riding and light draying work. With the horse saddled and ready, tied to one of the hitching posts now in place along the front of the Homestead main house, Sam called, “Jackson!” as she went inside.

“Yes, Miss?” asked the elderly man. He’d been the houseman since long before Sam was born. But he was still more than capable of taking care of the needs of the Homestead, with the small staff he had under him.

“I’m going for a ride.”

“Yes, Miss. Should I pack a lunch?”

“I’ll get something at the Ranch,” replied Sam, taking a small pack from the closet by the open front door and slinging it over one shoulder. “Got my emergency kit in the bag, if I get caught out.”

“Very well, Miss. Any instructions in your absence?”

“Just like always. Take care of things.” Sam, already wearing a gun belt with pistol, knife, and a variety of pouches, grabbed one of the rifles from the gun case and slung it over her other shoulder.

It was only a few minutes and Sam was down by the lake, headed toward the Farm along the shoreline. It was a lot quicker than the road that went around, but much longer than the trans-water route. But the small flotilla of power boats the community boasted was kept for emergencies. The sailing rigs were used for fishing, but none of them were really useable for transport of anything but a few fish, the way the Munson Landing Craft and the even the Nautica International 41’ cabin RIB.

Sam kept a weather eye out. Storms could blow up in the matter of a few minutes, and when it stormed now, it really stormed. But she kept checking the edge of the forest, as well. There were rumors that the wild animal population was growing. Both predator and prey. And it wasn’t just a few cougar and black bear and wolves.

All had made a comeback, but the biggest risks were the descendents from the zoo animals released during and after the nuke war. Many had died from radiation poisoning early on, and a few more were taken down by survivors, but with the human population dropping rapidly to only ten percent of the pre-war level, the animals had plenty of open space to reproduce and spread out from their original zoo locations. The ash fall had only slowed things, not stopped them.

It had been a small herd of elephants that her parents had encountered on

one of their long range salvaging operations that had been the death of them. A big bull had charged the three vehicle convoy and demolished the vehicle Anna and Hiram Crain were in, killing them almost instantly. And there were rumors that the zoo animals were on the move to the south, because of the cooling weather.

So Sam monitored the forest for anything that might be a danger to her, Queenly, or the community. What she wasn't expecting was a soft whistle emanating from the forest, slightly ahead of her. She felt a flash of eagerness, but quickly frowned and called out, "Is that you, Henry?"

"Surely is, Miss Sam." A man stepped from the forest and put his hand out to give Queenly a slice of apple when Sam drew her up.

"Don't 'Miss Sam' me! You know I hate that."

Henry grinned. "Oh, yeah. I forgot?" he replied, making the final statement a question.

"You don't forget anything. What are you doing out here?"

"Doing what I do. Exploring. Scouting. Getting out of real work."

Sam had to smile at Henry's candor. But her smile faded when she recalled some of the incidents during their training years. Even though Sam was three years older than Henry, he matched her, and just bettered her a little bit, in almost every class they took together while growing up. Henry could even modify and mend clothing with a hand needle and thread or with a treadle sewing machine a bit better than she could. And could he run!

Her only match to him was in cooking. She had a real knack for it. Henry could make a meal of just about anything, but couldn't match her culinary talents. A minor thorn in her side from day one, she still always got a little rush when she saw him.

Henry claimed never to have had a haircut and most believed him. His hair, when he let it down completely, came down to his thighs. It was a deep, smooth brown, with red highlights in it when he was in the sun. And he wasn't wearing a hat.

He was seldom without his hat. Or his rifle. Or pistols. Or knives. Or... Sam forced herself to quit thinking about Henry and find out what he was doing.

"Why are you scouting around here? You know this area like the back of your hand." Sam found she didn't like the implied control Henry had over her since he now held Queenly's bridle as she looked for another slice of apple. He controlled the horse at the moment. Not her.

She quickly swung down off the horse and took the bridle from his hand. "You spoil her. You spoil all horses," she said.

Henry shrugged. "I just like keeping them happy. And there are reports of a big tiger out here somewhere. I'm going to see if I can find it and drive it away."

"Not just kill it?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"You really think there is a tiger in the area?"

"With the other animals that have been drifting through over the years, I think probably so. Found some sign, but it was inconclusive. But it did indicate a tiger, if not a complete track."

They began walking along the shore, toward the Farm as silence fell for a moment. Then, surprising Sam slightly, Henry asked, "What do you know about this tract of forest?"

“The forest. I’m not sure. Why?”

Just curious. There is something about it. It’s different than the rest of the land around the lake.”

“I guess I could look in the family files and see what I can find out. I doubt I’ll find anything. The family never owned it. How’s it different?”

“It’s relatively uniform. And there isn’t as wide of a variety of plant life, especially trees. I don’t know. Just something about it.”

“If you’ll come by this evening I’ll have the files out.”

“Thank you,” Henry said. And then he was gone into the forest where a finger of it stretched out closer to the lake.

Sam shook her head and climbed back up on Queenly. She put her into an easy lope, still keeping her eyes peeled. If Henry thought there might be a tiger, there was probably a tiger. She had her rifle, but still...

She spent most of the day with Hadley Brand, the current Farm Manager, going over the situation with the farm.

Sam was tired and ready for supper when she made her way back to the Homestead along the lake. She had Queenly going at a ground eating lope almost the entire way. Sam unsaddled, brushed down, stabled, and fed Queenly before she went inside the house.

“Jackson! I’m home! I’ll be down in a few minutes.” Sam hurried upstairs and took a quick shower. She changed into a pair of old, comfortable jeans and chambray shirt and put the woolen pants and shirt she’d worn during the day into the hamper to be cleaned.

Jackson met her in the dining room with a bowl of stew and freshly baked bread. "I'm starving," Sam said, digging into the food as soon as it was placed before her. "Never did get around to eating lunch at the Farm. Oh. Before I forget, Henry Mueller is stopping by in a little while."

"Yes, Miss."

Seeing the twinkle in Jackson's eyes Sam blushed and quickly added. "It's not a date! He's... We're checking on something about the property between us and the Farm."

"Of course, Miss. Never entered my mind." With that, Jackson turned and went back to the kitchen.

"Yeah. Right. You and my parents been trying to get me married off since I was sixteen," she muttered. "Until they died, anyway." Lost in thought, Sam finished her meal and Jackson placed a piece of apple pie before her, with the one glass of sweet iced tea she allowed herself per day. The tea was a precious commodity and she wasn't one to take more than her share.

"Thank you, Jackson. I'll be in the study when Henry gets here."

"Yes, Miss. About a half an hour for your dinner to settle?"

"Not that he would know, but sure, if it works out that way would be perfect. It would give me time to dig out the old records."

"Very good, Miss. I'll bring him in at that time."

"You act like you know exactly when he'll get here."

"Yes, Miss. He's here now, out helping in the greenhouse. He insisted, since I insisted he have a bite of dinner while he was here."

“Well, gee willikers! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Your time is valuable, Miss. You must use it effectively. Even your quiet times.”

It was a speech she’d heard before. Usually when she was wasting time in some way. “Yes. Well. Have him brought to me as soon as possible. I’m tired and want to get this over with.”

“Yes, Miss. It will be done.”

“Jackson... Wait. I didn’t mean that quite the way it sounded.”

“Of course, Miss. I read nothing into the request.”

Sam sighed and left the dining room, going into the study down the hall. She left the door open and went to series of file cabinets that now adorned one wall of the room. Sam was down on one knee, checking a set of files when a slight cough sounded behind her.

“Henry! Good. You’re here. I’m not sure what we might find in here. The family has never owned the property. Seems a little strange, actually, that we haven’t just taken it over the way we did the property between the Farm and Town.”

“I’ve wondered about that, too,” Henry replied, going to one knee beside Sam. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know. Just start on the on the other cabinet. These two have all the oldest records.”

It was quiet in the study for a long time. Jackson smiled each time he did a silent check on the situation. It was close to midnight when Henry, a packet of papers in his hand, said, “Here’s something that might be

relevant.”

Handing the papers to Sam, he stood and moved to the windows beside the fireplace and looked out. “It’s getting late. I believe I’d best be going. If it’s okay, we can go over those tomorrow. Or at your convenience, of course.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s only…” Sam looked at the grandfather clock. “Uh… It’s later than I thought. But it will just take a few minutes to look these over.”

“Okay. Good. I was hoping you would say that.”

Sam sat down behind the large desk and Henry took a seat in front of it. As she scanned each page, she slid it over to Henry to look at. There was obvious disappointment initially, but Henry looked up from the page he was reading and asked Sam, “Did you see this about the harvest?”

“Yeah. Someone cut some trees down.”

“But why would your family have this record if they didn’t own the property? And from what I read here, it wasn’t some trees. It was a clear cut.” Henry moved around the desk and leaned down to read the paper in Sam’s hands.

“Yeah. See here. Clear cut. With replant of the total acreage with these specified species.” Eagerly, Henry went on to the next receipt. “And here. A bunch of earth movement. A whole bunch!”

“Let me think,” Sam said, very aware of Henry’s presence so close beside her. “The dam. When they raised the main dam there were a few inlets that they didn’t want to flood. They built a whole series of earthen dams to protect them from the rising lake. I remember that from history class.”

Henry had gone back to his seat. “That’s right! I should have thought of that. And with the way the land is contoured, it would act as a spillway to get rid of water if there was a potential flood. That land is under constant danger of being flooded by the lake if the level gets too high!”

“No wonder it was never really used. That was a time when there were a lot of floods going on all over the Midwest,” Sam said, leaning back in the desk chair. “Again, if I remember history correctly. We had good references, but still, there are gaps in our knowledge, no longer than it has been.”

“I know. It’s frustrating sometimes. But that explains about the property. Those particular trees are perfect for coppicing firewood. They’ve never been harvested. I guess they just weren’t needed. And without knowing for sure, in the early days, that your predecessors owned it... It’s just been allowed to grow up naturally.”

“Henry, that long stretch of concrete along the lake edge... Would that have something to do with the spillway aspect of the land?”

“Yes! Of course! You’re brilliant! They would have poured concrete to protect at least the lake edge of the earth dam so it wouldn’t wash away during an overflow.”

The two looked at each other, pleased. Then Henry rose and said, “Thank you. This has been bothering me for some time. It’s good to know for sure what is going on.”

Sam smiled. “Sure thing. I know how it is to not know something you feel you should.”

“The cloak of authority weighing heavily on your shoulders?”

The smile turned wan. “Something like that. Yes.”

“If there is anything I can do to make it easier on you, let me know. I’d better get on my way. I want to be out early tomorrow. I saw more signs of that tiger today.”

“Yeah. You can make it easier for me. Find the lock this key fits.” Sam held up the key. Before Sam could decide on whether to ask Henry to stay in the house, since it was so late, Jackson was at the door. “I have a room set up for Mr. Mueller.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go on home...”

“Nonsense,” replied Jackson. “Come along. I’ll show you to your room. Good night, Miss.”

“Good night, Jackson. Good night, Henry. And you might as well give in. Jackson is almost impossible to dissuade.”

Henry smiled. “Okay. I was taught not to argue with my elders.”

Sam frowned and Jackson hid his smile. Henry saw neither as he headed for the staircase to the second story bedrooms.

The next morning, Sam found herself feeling a bit eager at the thought of having breakfast with Henry. Even though she hurried slightly, when she reached the dining room no one was there.

Jackson, as always seeming to sense her presence nearby, came into the dining room carrying a serving tray.

“Henry isn’t down yet?” Sam asked, pleased with the idea that she was up before him.

“Oh, yes, Miss. Henry had breakfast and left over an hour ago.”

“Oh,” Sam said, ignoring the slight feeling of disappointment. Quickly she added, “What’s for breakfast this morning?”

“I thought a pair of fresh eggs from our chickens and a bit of pork sausage from the Farm. You’ve been denying yourself many things since the weather changed and production is down.”

“It just that so many are beginning to struggle again. Just like we were told in our history classes how things were right after the war.”

“Still, you must maintain your strength for the days ahead.”

“What? You know something?” Sam asked, placing the napkin across her lap.

“Only that things will change, as they always do after a time period.”

“That’s true, I suppose.” Sam dug into the meal and Jackson went back to the kitchen.

She spent most of the day going over inventories and projected production numbers that were part of her weekly routine. Already on a visible down swing when she inherited the responsibility, the numbers were looking worse almost every week.

After lunch she checked in with the radio monitor that was on duty at the Ranch. A radio watch was kept almost continuously, largely for the safety of the local population, but also a long range watch to try and keep abreast of what was going on in the rest of the country and the world.

“Nothing much going on the last few days,” Jeanie said, looking over the reception log that was kept of each contact. “Especially from the north. We haven’t had any contact north of us in several days. You saw the report that a whole town was picking up stakes and moving to the

gulf, I suppose.”

“I did, Jeanie. I did. Keep up the good work.”

That very same subject had come up in the last full community meeting. Taking what they could and moving south, at least into northeastern Texas, if not all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Sam hated the thought of it. They would be giving up so much if they made the move. But if the weather continued the cooling trend, it might be a necessity. And if that was the case, the sooner it was done, the less disruption and pressure to get it done there would be.

“I need to talk to someone with experience. At least, historical experience,” she said aloud, looking out the window in the study toward the forest between the Homestead and the Farm. Henry’s family had come to the area several years after the war. They’d done a massive move, though not on the order that moving the Town, Farm, and Homestead would be.

She found Jackson and told him she was going out to look for Henry in the forest. “I need to discuss something with him.”

“Best if you leave word in town and let him come here. He intimated that a tiger was prowling the area.”

“He said possibly. He’s not one-hundred percent sure. Besides, I’ll have my rifle.”

“I think young Henry would much prefer you not go out there without an escort.”

“Phooey on Henry,” Sam said. “I’m 21 and as good... almost as good a shot as Henry. I don’t need him protecting me!”

“Yes, Miss. As you wish. I do wish we had portable radios, though.”

“You know almost all batteries for stuff like that are long dead. Even ones that didn’t get used slowly lost their charge over the past eighty years.”

“Yes, Miss. Well, be sure you have your signal whistle with you.”

Muttering under her breath, “Be sure you have your whistle with you... Jackson worries too much.” However, the thought didn’t prevent her from making sure she had one of the whistles most people kept handy while out and about away from the Farm, Town, or the Homestead.

Likewise, she made sure her pistol and rifle were both loaded before she went to saddle Queenly. She’d no more than reached the lake and turned along the shore when there was that soft whistle again. Not one of the shrill whistles. Henry was a good whistler. He could mimic many different kinds of birds. But this whistle was just to let her know he was there. Just like the last time.

Sam shook her head when Queenly nuzzled Henry’s hand for the bit of apple he had there. No point in protesting. He’d do it anyway. Well, unless she made a real case of it. And there was no good reason to do that. She swung down from the saddle and adjusted the hang of the rifle slung over her shoulder.

“I was looking for you, actually. I thought I’d have a hard time.”

Henry knew it was a question about why he was there. “Yeah. Usually is. But I’ve been tracking that tiger... And it is a tiger. Big male marking his territory. Must have just moved into the area. From the north, I’m thinking.”

Sam looked around the area, but saw only forest and lake. “We’d better warn everyone at the next group meeting. Until you run it off, it is a

danger.”

“I know. But with it staking territory, I have a feeling I won’t be able to get it to follow me out of the area and set up a new territory. I wanted to do that before he set up his perimeters here.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean follow you out of the area? Why would it just follow you away from here?”

Henry shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, just get close enough to get its attention as a predator stalking prey. It would have followed me far enough away for it to probably set up a new territory when it ran across other game.”

Sam’s jaw had dropped. “You mean make yourself a target and let it try to catch you? No! I forbid it!”

Sam saw the way Henry’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Well...” he said, slowly, “It’s a moot point. Don’t think it would work now. So. Why were you looking for me?”

“Oh. That. I was hoping you and perhaps your father would have some insights into a big group move, since your family did something similar a few years after the war.”

“Sure. Pop knows a lot more than me, though I’ve heard the stories. Several times. Pop is kind of sentimental and reads the old journals family members kept back then.”

“What can you tell me?”

Subtly, Henry had begun to move Queenly and Sam along the lake, keeping close to the water line. His eyes went to the forest often as he began to speak.

“Like your family, we had a Patriarch that was worried about how things would go given a nuclear war or major natural disaster like a meteorite impact or the eruption of a super volcano. He had his family well prepped. But much further north. When Yellowstone blew, and things began to get really bad, the family decided to come this way to get out of the worst of the ash and bad weather.”

Sam nodded. “That was Heinrich, right?” Some of the Mueller story was part of the local history she’d learned in school. But she needed details.

“Yes. He died on the trip. He spent too much time out in the ash fall and it cut his lungs to pieces.”

“That’s so sad.” Sam put her hand on Henry’s shoulder for a moment.

“Yeah. He was a great man. Like your Great, Great and Great, Great, Great, Great grand fathers were. Men that didn’t shirk from the truth and met challenges head on.”

Henry was silent for a moment and Sam waited for him to continue. “So. Anyway, Grandpa Heinrich packed up lock, stock, and barrel, almost literally, and headed south. There were over fifty semi’s, with different kinds of trailers. You know. Those that are parked outside of town all this time?”

Sam nodded. “I know.”

“Well, since Heinrich was a metal worker... and I mean from processing ore all the way through to producing finished metal products... he wanted to be able to continue to do that, especially as an aid to the recovery of the nation, most particularly, wherever they would settle.

“He brought a small production foundry, blacksmith shop, machine shop, and assembly shop. Plus the shop he loved to work in. The gun shop. They could build any kind of gun you wanted from scratch. As

long as it used standard ammunition. And of course, they did regular gunsmithing

The word is he tried to get a brass extrusion plant, but it just was too big of an operation and really wasn't available, anyway. It would have involved making gun powder, too, and he didn't really want to do that."

Henry unslung the rifle he carried. "This was one of the guns Heinrich and Minor built just before the war. A custom 'Scout' Rifle' it's called. Uses the .350 Remington Magnum round. Lever action operating a rotary bolt. Integral suppressed barrel. Single round & stripper clip loading. 10-round rotary magazine. Leupold Model 4 CQ/T 1-3 x 14 scope on receiver mounted QD see-through mount. Peep sight. In stock recoil reducers. Sling. Custom 12" OKC-3S style bayonet. Five .380 ACP to .350 Remington Magnum chamber adapters for small game hunting."

"You have a bayonet?"

Henry slung the rifle and pulled the knife she'd seen many times before. "Yes. But it's a Randal R-1 pattern blade, so it does double duty. It just has the bayonet attachment mechanism."

"I didn't know."

"No big deal. Neither is the pistol I carry that my Grandfather made. When the salvage teams found a large amount of .50GI ammunition and reloading components, he built this."

Sam took the pistol from Henry and checked the chamber. It was loaded. She handed it back.

"It's basically a Para-Ordnance P-14 frame with the slide, barrel, and magazines made for the .50GI round. I inherited them both, another of the full size ones, a compact model, and four derringers that he made.

Father is real big on the production of spare parts for the area's equipment. He never had the interest in the gun operation, so I got all of Grandfather's weapons, knives, and tools.

"I didn't know you were still making firearms. Not with ammunition so hard to find, now."

"Oh, I dabble. I can make just about anything. But since we have just about all the working guns we'll ever need, I only make the occasional fancy gun. You know. Carved fancy wood. Engraved and inlaid metal work."

"Who does that for you?"

"Well... Actually... I do."

"Oh. Sorry. I had no idea you were artistic. Oh, wow! That gun Tom Matheson is always showing off! Is that one of yours?"

Henry smiled a bit shyly and nodded.

"That thing is beautiful. I'm surprised he uses it."

"All the Mueller made weapons are first and foremost working tools. The fact that they can be beautiful objects is secondary. But important when someone wants one."

"I see. That's good. Could you tell me more about the move?"

Henry smiled. "Sure. Well... Along with the equipment, they brought all the raw materials they had, and all they could collect along the way. That included a trainload of coal that is used in the foundry and forges. By the time that was done and they quit, for the winter, the trucks were just about wore out. They've been parked since."

“Okay,” Sam said. “What about how the move went?”

“According to Heinrich’s journal, talk about trials and tribulations! There were problems galore. But he had a firm hand and was a very smart man. He made sure they were all taken care of, and the fewest number of people left or were hurt.”

“People left? Went out on their own?”

“Sure did, Sam. Some thought it was a bad decision. I expect all of those changed their minds a few years later when things got worse for a while.”

“Hum...”

“There were a lot of vacant houses here. I guess that is where the group settled?”

“Yes. All over the area. You know, of course, that Heinrich bought the old shoe factory for his use.”

“I remember that from history class. Paid gold coins, and a whole bunch of food.”

“Even that far into the situation, we had plenty of food. Heinrich had seen to that in the early stages of the move. He wanted to be able to make a place in whatever community they settled and decided buying in was better than trying to just slip in.”

“Been hard to slip in that big of a group!” Sam said and laughed.

Henry swallowed hard at the sound of the Sam’s laugh. It was a glorious sound.

“Henry, what do you think of picking up stakes and moving?”

“Be hard. Harder than we Muëller’s had it back in the day. The equipment was still in good shape. We had the gold and the food to buy our way into a working community. And the majority of people were in favor of the move and willing to help out to see it went well.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah. All the gold the Crain’s had is still in the community, but I don’t know if people would contribute much to a buy in if we find a place. And we sure don’t have the food. And the equipment... Could it be fixed?”

“Sure. Salvage half and fix half with it. But this community is much larger than what Heinrich started with. His was just the group that wanted to come. I have a feeling you’d want everyone to go.”

“Well, sure! We’re all in this together!”

“Sam, I have to tell you... We’re not. There’s been talk about this. There are a lot that want to go, but many want to stay. Many of them, until the rest of us get situated, and they can move into a going proposition.”

Sam frowned. “Are you sure? I haven’t heard anything like that. Just some reluctance...”

Seeing the look on Sam’s face hurt Henry when he shook his head. “I’m sorry. But there are several groups, each with a different agenda.”

Sam bit her lower lip for a moment, sighed, and then said, “I guess I’d better call a meeting and discuss this situation.

“I’ll talk to Dad. See which way he’s leaning. We really haven’t talked about it.”

“Thanks, Henry. I guess I’d better go back and start lining up some ducks.”

Henry nodded and held Queenly's bridle until Sam was aboard. When she turned the horse around and headed back to the estate, Henry followed along slowly, silently, his eyes on the forest most of the time. When Sam was safely back on the Homestead property, he turned around and jogged back toward where the concrete spillway began.

He moved among the trees on the back slope that led away from the lake. The spot that had intrigued him since he'd first seen it. Ever on the watch for the tiger, or any other dangers, Henry began looking at the ground. If anyone were to see him, it would appear that he was looking for something specific. Twice he spun around, going into a crouch, lifting the Scout Rifle to his right shoulder. After scanning the forest and seeing nothing, he turned back to his task. "Come on, you. I know you're here somewhere."

It was nearly dark when he found something. While keeping watch for the tiger, Henry began to notice a pattern in the trees closest to the lake, in the runoff area. He stopped and studied the trees toward the lake and then turned around to study those further down the slope.

"Why would they space the trees near the lake so sparsely, and those down slope so much more heavily? The spacing down there is nearly perfect for coppicing." He walked the area, letting his subconscious mind take and tally the information his conscious mind was acquiring. He stepped past one more tree just like all the other trees and saw it.

Henry stopped and looked to his right, down toward where the road would be, and to his left, toward the lake. The trees planted just after the clear cut harvested the timber back in the elder Kevin Crain's time left a sort of corridor, with gentle turns here and there. It was filled with natural growth over the years, with much smaller trees that had grown up naturally when the plantings became old enough to reproduce.

Following back toward the lake he became convinced that the way the

trees were planted was a deliberate attempt to leave a useable road from the lake to the road that ran along the far side of the property.

When he stopped again, he was looking up the face of the dam, faced with concrete, that prevented the lake from intruding any further into the low area behind it. There was no real reason for the dam that Henry could see. The low area only extended a short ways further and then the land began to rise again.

Henry realized that this back face of the dam was a bit steeper than he'd really realized. Someone had gone to a lot of work for no reason that he could see. "Unless..." Excited, Henry headed home. It was dark by the time he got there. He ate the supper his mother always left out for him when he disappeared for a while, and then went to bed. It was hours before he went to sleep, but he woke the next morning early and headed back around the lake. In addition to the items he normally carried, Henry had a long handled shovel, the blade of which had been repaired several times.

With a diminishing hope, Henry dug exploratory holes, some quite deep, along the back face of the dam, for three weeks. He didn't see Sam once during that time. His attitude changed abruptly when the ground gave way under him while he was digging on the Homestead side of the dam, up close to the top. He hadn't dug many holes along the upper area, thinking there simply wouldn't be anything there.

Henry landed rather awkwardly, the shovel handle knocking the wind out of him. As soon as he got a breath he checked the Scout Rifle. It was fine. Taking the crank-up LED flashlight from his pack, Henry cranked it and looked around. It was a small room, with three log walls, floor, and roof. The fourth wall was concrete.

Most of the logs were still in good shape, but some were rotted almost completely away. Such was the case with the ones in the roof where he'd fallen through. The heavy steel door in the concrete wall was very

evident in the light from the LED flashlight. And, sure enough, there was a heavy brass American Lock brand lock. Henry touched it with more than a little awe.

Finally satisfied that he'd found what he was looking for, Henry looked around the room with an eye out for a door to the surface. There wasn't one. Henry decided the intent was to just break into the room from the outside. It was only an access to the real door.

A few minutes of work and Henry had dug enough dirt from behind some of the rotted logs to build a platform so he could reach up through the hole in the roof. Ever wary of the tiger in the area, Henry was cautious coming out of the hole, looking all around before climbing out, when he would be the most vulnerable.

He could barely contain himself. Henry fell into his distance eating lope, headed toward the Homestead. When he came up to the house, he found Sam sitting on the steps of the front porch. Henry was sure she wiped away some tears before rising to meet him.

"You okay? You look like you've been crying," Henry said, the thought of the fifth cache taking second place to Sam's needs.

"Of course not!" Sam insisted. "But you were right. There is no consensus on staying, going, when to go if we go, anything! I thought... I thought you'd be at the meeting..."

"I intended to, but I fell asleep," Henry said sheepishly. His absence at the meeting, he suddenly realized, had hurt Sam. "I'm really sorry, Sam." Then he smiled. "But I think I can make up for it. Get your gear. I want to show you something."

"Now isn't really a good time, Henry," Sam replied.

"It will be worth it. I promise."

“Might as well. Don’t have anything better to do. They said I’m not part of the decision making process any more. I’m just another citizen.”

“What! What are you talking about?” Even Henry’s surprise faded from thought when Sam’s tears began again.

“At the meeting... Michael Norton made a motion to remove me from a position of power. He nominated Hadley Brand and Victor Moore to share leadership duties.”

“But Hadley is your Farm General Manager!” Henry exclaimed.

“Not any more. It no longer belongs to the Crain family. It’s a community asset.”

“It always has been. Under your family’s guidance.”

Angrily, Sam wiped away the tears again. “Yeah. Well, they LET me keep the Homestead for my own use. Including the boats. They got a good laugh out of that.”

“Come on, Sam,” Henry said. “I think I have something that will cheer you up.”

“Just about anything would, the way I feel. Let me tell Jackson I’m leaving for a while.”

Henry had Queenly saddled when Sam came back out of the house with her gear in place. Even feeling bad didn’t mean she wasn’t still aware of the dangers of the times.

Henry took off, going right into a lope, and Sam urged Queenly to follow. When they reached the dam, Henry stopped and Sam brought Queenly to a halt, sliding off the saddle smoothly to stand beside Henry.

“Okay. You’ve mentioned this place. What did you find?”

Sam started to tie Queenly to a nearby sapling, but Henry stopped her. “We might be a while. She’ll stand ground tied, won’t she?”

“Of course. Henry, you’re starting to worry me. Just what do you have in mind?”

“You’ll like it.”

“I’ll like it, huh? Henry, I like you, but if you think...”

Henry blushed. “Well, at least it brought some color back to your face,” he told Sam, seeing her going red, more from anger, though, than embarrassment.

“Just trust me for a few minutes. I’m serious about Queenly. That tiger is around. She needs to be able to run if it shows up.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You really think she’s in danger? Well? What about us?”

“It’s a minimal, but real, risk. And I don’t think the tiger will follow where we’re going.”

“Going? What do you mean? Will you please get on with it?”

“Follow me. And watch your step.” Henry led her to the hole in the ground and dropped through.

“You found a cave?” Sam asked, looking down into the hole.

“Come on down. I’ll help you.”

“Yeah. You just watch where you put your hands...”

“Absolutely.” Henry helped Sam down into the small room, and then put his hands on her shoulders. He turned her toward the steel door in one wall of the enclosure. He turned on the LED flashlight and pointed it at the door.

Sam gasped. “The fifth key!” she said softly. She scrambled to get the rawhide keeper over her head. Her hands were shaking. They were still shaking when she tried to slip the key into the lock.

“Oh, no! It’s not...” she nearly cried when she couldn’t get the key to go into the lock.

“Here. Let me try,” Henry said, handing her the flashlight and taking the key from her shaking hands.

He had the lock off in just moments. It took a couple of hard shoves to get the door to open into the open space behind it. Henry waved his right hand toward the open door, ushering Sam to go inside first. The flashlight held before her, Sam entered the cavernous room, broken by several thick columns.

“It’s huge!” Sam said, her voice low. “I can’t even see the other side!”

“I think the whole dam structure is just a dirt covered warehouse.”

“But how’d they get things in? And, more importantly, how do we get them out?”

“I’m sure your ancestor had a plan. Let’s look for some paperwork. Didn’t the one that did all this always have an inventory?”

“There was, but there was nothing about what was in the cache the fifth key fit. The only thing on that inventory that wasn’t found was some gold and silver coins.”

“Shine the light over by the door. Just maybe...”

Sam did so, and the light reflected off plastic. Henry stepped over and took the old zip-lock bag off a nail pounded into the concrete wall. Despite the age, the plastic was intact, including the seal. There were three layers of the one gallon bags, one inside the other. Henry took out the papers inside the inner bag, handed them to Sam and took the flashlight from her.

He stood close to her, holding the light so she could read the first page of the thick sheath of papers.

‘Well, son? What do you think? About what I’m sure I’ll explain to you when you’re a little older than you are as I write this. Thought I ought to leave a record of things, for posterity. Ha Ha.

‘This is the first of several caches I plan. I’m going to include a map of the other locations I’ve picked out. This one, of course will only be word of mouth, since it is the most important one.

‘I’ve given this a lot of thought over the years as the world situation continues to worsen.

‘Hm. Not sure why I’m putting all this down. I’ll have told you all about it by the time you need to use the items cached here. Still...

‘Anyway... I wanted this first cache to be capable of dealing with just about anything that might come up. But I wanted it nearly impossible to find without having been told it even existed.

‘So I came up with the plan to throw up the dam. People thought I was a little nuts, to protect such a small area. Ha, Ha, on them!

‘I used several different contractors to put this place in after the lumber was harvested, so they could get in. Built the warehouse and then the dam around it. Wanted the lake side protected, thus the concrete, which will explain to anyone asking about why I needed so much concrete. I hope.

‘So, the floor was poured, the sides and columns built, and then the roof pour was done, and let me tell you, that was a real pain. I brought in everything, and then poured the fourth wall and finished up the burial and tree replant. Left just the one hidden entrance to get inside.

‘Going to take some work to dig out the rear face of the slope and knock out the one section of that warehouse wall that is unreinforced block construction. It’s just big enough, and the internal columns are set just so, that you should be able to take the mobile equipment off the blocks and just drive them out, though it will be a tight turn on a couple of them.

‘There are supplies and equipment to keep things running at the Homestead and Farm for a few years, until things settle down and you can grow crops again. That’s assuming it’s nuclear war, which is what I expect.

‘But those same supplies will carry you through a move if you have to abandon the area due to a nearby warhead or the climate changes, or the meteor will hit close to here, or any other reason to leave what I think is one of the best places to weather what may come in mine or your lifetime.

‘When you have to use what is here, I’d keep the other caches secret unless you really need them. They are a back up to this one.

‘You know my propensity for lists (Ha Ha) so the rest of this packet is mostly lists so you can figure out what you have and the best way and time to use them.

‘Oh, by the way... I got really lucky when I first started planning things after Y2K and managed to acquire quite a collection of gold and silver coins. Some I’m keeping out for the other caches, but most of them are here. Don’t spend it all in one place. Ha Ha.

‘Son, I really hope you never read this and everything here is found hundreds of years in the future and the legend of a crazy old Prepper Kevin Crain will begin.’

“Wow!” Henry said, finishing up the last line just after Sam. “Sure didn’t work out the way he intended. What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, deep in thought. “Must have been when one of my Great, Greats passed on before passing on to his children that this was here. I do know that Great, Great Grandfather died suddenly and left the keys to his grandson, with no explanation except they were the keys to the kingdom. He found and used the other four caches, but never found this one, obviously.”

“I see. What’s all is here?” Henry asked as Sam shuffled the papers.

“Let’s wait until we get back to the Homestead to look at them,” Sam said. “I want to let people know as soon as possible about the find!”

Sam didn’t see the look of caution that crossed Henry’s face. “Well... Okay. Let’s just take a quick look around.”

Together the two walked through the stacks of equipment and supplies, ending up on the far side of the warehouse where several semi-trucks with trailers were up on blocks, their tires wrapped in shrink wrap plastic. “The tires look okay,” Henry said, taking a close look at one.

“But only airing them up will tell the tale.” He looked around. “I don’t think I’d better be the one to move these out. See that column, and over there the concrete block wall we have to remove?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sam replied. “I bet Jackson can do it. He drove a truck when we were still using them occasionally.”

“That’s good. I guess we’d better go. It’ll be getting dark soon. The tiger will be on the prowl soon if it isn’t already.”

Sam wasted no time locking up the door after Henry finally got it shut. He went up through the hole first, breathing a sigh of relief to see Queenly calmly munching grass a few feet away.

He lifted Sam out of the hole, and Sam had to marvel at his strength. He didn’t look that strong, and he was barely eighteen, but appearances can be deceiving, she decided.

It was full dark when they returned to the Homestead and stabled Queenly. Jackson greeted them and announced that a supper was available whenever they wanted it. Too excited to eat, Sam showed Henry into the study and they began to go through the rest of the papers in detail.

Without asking, Jackson brought in a tray for each of them at eleven. Both ate, without really knowing what they were eating, pushed the trays out of the way, and went back to the papers.

“This couldn’t come at a better time!” Sam finally said, sitting back in her chair. “It’ll make the move so much easier. I think people will rally around when they find out I’ve found... You found... the Fifth Key Cache.”

When Henry didn’t react immediately she looked over at him. “What?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just not sure announcing the find now, without investigating it more, would be a good idea. The rest may have decided you aren’t in charge of anything but the Homestead, but you have a responsibility to do what’s best for everyone. Including yourself. I simply don’t believe the various groups that have been formed would handle the use or distribution of the things in the warehouse in a way that is best for everyone. I believe you can. And will. When the time comes.”

“But everyone so wants this cache to be found!”

“So they can have what’s in it. This community has had it pretty easy for eighty years, all things considered, thanks to your family. But things are getting tough again. Very similar to things before the Nuke War. Different factions wanting different things. Many of them thinking they are owed this or that, simply because someone has produced it and they don’t have one.”

Sam sighed. “You could be right. It just doesn’t feel right to keep this from people.”

“It’s been kept from them for decades. A few weeks or months more isn’t going to be anything different. It’ll allow you to develop your power base again, so you can do things the way you think they should be done. Just like your Great, Greats. And your parents. Everyone followed them without a thought. It’s just because you’re inexperienced that people doubt you. That and the fact that they just want things to be different than they are with no effort on their part.”

“Okay. I’ll sleep on it and decide in the morning. I’m beat. I don’t know how to thank you for finding this for me,” Sam said, a gesture taking in the papers.

“I’m a good follower. Have no interest in being a leader. Helping leaders

is my goal in life.”

A small smile curved Sam’s lips. “I see. Back room politician, huh?”

“Not quite.” Henry smiled. “But close, from what I’ve read. Okay. I’ll head on back home.”

“Of course not. Jackson will have a room ready for you.”

“I sure don’t want to ruin your reputation. This is twice in a short time I’ve spent the night here. People will talk.”

“Let them talk. I’m not too happy with some of them, anyway.”

When the two left the study, Jackson was waiting for them. “Mr. Mueller’s room is ready.”

“Thank you, Jackson,” Sam said. She headed up the stairs. Henry was gathering his gear from where he’d left it outside the study door. But it didn’t keep his eyes from traveling up the stairs to watch Sam.

“She’s a beautiful young woman, wouldn’t you say?” Jackson asked.

“She is that,” Henry said, and then added, “But she’s much more than just that.”

It pleased Jackson no end to hear the comment. “Yes. Yes she is. I’ll have breakfast ready at five.” He started to turn away, but Henry protested.

“You don’t have to...”

“Breakfast at five,” Jackson said firmly.

“Okay. Breakfast at five.”

The Fifth Key – Chapter 2

The next morning Sam hurried downstairs well before six and entered the kitchen. “He’s already gone, isn’t he?” she asked Jackson, obviously disappointed.

“Yes, Miss. Breakfast at five and out the door at five ten. That is one intense young man. Takes life seriously. But still has a sense of humor.”

“Haven’t noticed his sense of humor yet,” Sam said, sitting down at the kitchen table. Jackson began to serve her breakfast. “Do you know, he was planning on letting the tiger track him as prey, to lead it out of the area so he wouldn’t have to kill it?”

“Remarkable,” Jackson replied, putting a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Sam.

“Just like that. Going to risk his live to save a tiger. Remarkable my left foot! It was foolish! And I told him so.”

“Oh? And did he agree?”

“Well, he said the tiger has already taken game here and marked the territory. It probably wouldn’t leave just to follow him, anyway.”

“I see. And what is on the agenda for the household today, Miss?” Jackson asked.

“Same ol’, same ol’. I’ve got some thinking to do so I should be here all day.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Sam went to the study, sat down at the desk, and picked up the papers from the newly found cache and began to go over them again, making notes as she did so. At one point she shook her head, in awe of what she was reading. Her ancestor had tried to cover every need for an isolated community to survive and prosper any survivable event.

The inventory lists were long and detailed. She really needed to talk to Henry’s father. He had stayed silent during the meeting the other day, not commenting on or committing to anything. But not today. She was exhausted and decided that, since they didn’t want her input, she’d take a little time for herself and let the rest manage things as they wanted. Let her mind mull over possibilities.

Sam had a sudden thought and left the study, a smile on her face. She might not be in charge, but she could certainly still go to town, to enjoy some of the services it provided. And she’d go in style. With what she knew, she decided to ‘waste’ some fuel. Biodiesel was not going to be the problem it was becoming, at least for her. Items on the inventory list of the cache included a biodiesel production unit and literally tons of the chemicals needed to process raw vegetable oil into fuel.

“Jackson,” she said, going into the kitchen.

“Yes, Miss?”

“I’m going into town tonight for some fun, so don’t worry about supper for me.”

“Very good, Miss. It will do you good to have a nice night out.”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m thinking. Oh. I’ll be taking the Nautica.” She left the kitchen and went upstairs to take a shower, and get dressed in something a bit more ‘nice night out’ ish.

When she came down an hour later, Jackson was just coming out of the kitchen. One eyebrow lifted slightly. “You look extremely nice, Miss.”

“Thanks Jackson. Haven’t worn a dress in a long time. Wasn’t sure any that I had would still fit.”

“You maintain your weight and figure very well. Your entire family has been the same.”

“Thank you. Again. Should have waited until I got the Nautica ready before I changed. I’ll have to be extra...”

“No need, Miss. The Nautica is ready for you. Would you like me to go along to watch the boat while you are in town?”

Sam looked over at her firearms and then down at the dress she wore.

“Yeah. Maybe you should. Being a little girly tonight, I have to say the gun belt and rifle don’t really go with the outfit.”

Her laugh was shy, and Jackson simply nodded and said, “Yes, Miss. I’m ready whenever you are.”

Sam realized that Jackson had planned on going, whether she wanted him to or not. He would have come up with a way. With jacket from the hanging rack in hand, Sam went out the front door, Jackson right behind her, after he grabbed her weapons.

It was already getting dark, and the air was cool, but Sam was too excited to notice. She took the helm of the Nautica, inside the cabin, and pressed the engine start buttons. Both engines started right up, Jackson had seen to that. She eased the 41’ Cabin RIB out of the boat house, swung it around and headed for town.

Sam eased the throttles forward slowly, until they were just skimming

the water. It didn't take long to get to the town's marina. She brought the boat to a stop among the many canoes and other small boats, and Jackson quickly secured it.

"I'll stay with the boat, Miss," Jackson said.

"Nonsense," Sam replied. "Just deactivate the engines and come with me. You're entitled to a fun night out, yourself."

"Very well, Miss."

A few moments later, the two were walking up the walkway. Despite the dim light, Sam noticed the decay of the entire marina. Things were going to pot in ways she hadn't noticed before.

The marina had been some distance from town at the time of the war, but the town had slowly migrated closer to it when it became a major supplier of food and lane of transport. Sam was headed for one of the few structures that looked up to pre-war standards.

Jackson opened the door to Jazzies' and Sam walked in ahead of him. It had been a long time since she'd been there. She looked around. Everything seemed the same. Jazzies' was one of the few establishments that still boasted twenty-four hour electricity. Quinton Harleson had inherited the large number of deep discharge batteries that his family had collected over the years.

While many places had working solar panels and the electronics to go with them, good batteries were nearly impossible to come by. Even with the electrical power, Quinton didn't squander the battery capacity. There were a few electric lights, but the multitude of candles around the room provided most of the low light that was present.

Sam quickly looked over at the small stage as Quinton hurried over, having spotted the door opening immediately.

“Samantha! Welcome! You are a lovely sight tonight. What can I get for you?”

Sam turned around to ask Jackson what he wanted, but Jackson had already faded into the background. Not surprised, she turned around again and told Quinton, “Some of your best Root Beer. Jackson is around somewhere. See what he wants, too. And we’ll need menus at some point.”

“Of course, Samantha. One Root Beer coming right up. I’ll have Allie come out in just a few minutes.”

As Quinton turned to go behind the bar, Sam quickly asked, “Is the karaoke machine still working?”

Quinton grinned. “Perfectly. Found a couple more TV’s so I’m good to go for a while, barring other trouble.”

Sam smiled in reply and made her way to a table at the edge of the dance floor and stage. It was still early, and Sam was the only customer in the main room. She couldn’t see Jackson anywhere.

Though she knew the song selection by heart, she got up and retrieved one of the old, rather ragged looking karaoke song books and thumbed through it. The page protectors were yellowing, and small cracks marred some of them. But, if she held the book just right, the light from the nearest electric bulb provided enough light for her to read. She double checked some song numbers and then put the book back in the rack.

Allie showed up, with the Root Beer. “No paper menus anymore,” she told Sam. We have to conserve what paper we have left. But Quinton came up with these old school slates and chalk from somewhere.” She handed the slate board to Sam.

Sam had a hard time reading it. Not from the lack of light, but the handwriting, printing, actually, was atrocious. Some personal skills were not being taught very well by some families.

“I guess the buffalo burger with cheese. And a baked potato.”

“Good choice. No salad stuff today. Slaw all right?”

“Of course. Thanks, Allie. How’s little Gwen?”

“Better, Samantha. But she still has us worried.”

“She’ll get better. I’m sure of it,” Sam said encouragingly.

“I hope so, too,” Allie replied. Then, rather eagerly, she asked Sam, “You’re going to sing, aren’t you?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Please do, Samantha. You’re great! Back before the war, I bet you’d be a professional.”

Sam blushed slightly, but it went unnoticed in the faint light. “Many regulars coming in?”

“A few. Word gets around you’re here, there’ll be a bunch. Would you... Would you do a duet with me? I’m afraid to sing by myself.”

“Still? Well, if I do sing, I’ll do the duet with you.”

Allie went back to the kitchen, rather eagerly, Sam thought. Since it would be at least a while before she sang, Sam went over to the CD jukebox at one side of the room. It, too, still worked, though the bubbler and most of the lights were out.

After fishing some coins from her pocket, she dropped a silver Eagle into the machine and made ten selections. They were all quiet numbers, suitable for a pleasant meal. She took a long draught of the Root Beer when she sat down again, wiping the foam from her lips with the cloth napkin.

She heard the front door open and turned around to see who it was. A frown turned her lips down when she saw Hadley Brand come in and go to the bar. Quinton made not only the Root Beer, but regular beer, wine, and hard liquor, too. Sam knew Hadley drank. But it surprised her when he ordered a double with a beer chaser.

Hadley had essentially inherited the manager's position at the Farm, rather than having been independently selected by her father. He did a decent job, but that was it. He was beginning to have a hard time getting hired hands, because of his harsh ways with the workers. There had been a time that many women worked as laborers at the farm in return for food. That had changed shortly after Hadley took over.

Sam turned away, deciding nothing was going to ruin her evening out. She was in tune with the music, swaying slightly, lost in thought, when Allie returned with her burger, potato, and slaw.

"Thanks. Put whatever Jackson is having on my tab, will you?"

"Sure, Samantha. We'd feed him anyway, for free. He's in the kitchen, helping Quinton with his books."

"Figures," Sam muttered as Allie left. She took a bite of the buffalo burger, and sighed in appreciation. It was a nice change from the regular beef they had most of the time. Buffalo were making a big comeback, according to radio reports around the country, but they were still scarce in this area.

Sam noticed peripherally that the front door was getting a lot of use

while she ate. She even nodded to a few people as the tables in front of the stage began to fill up. Still, it was a surprise when she finished her meal and looked around the room. It was as full as she'd ever seen it.

Sam returned many waves and greetings. But there were some less than enchanted looks cast her way, as well, mostly from one section of the room. Sam decided she'd just ignore them, wondering why so many people were showing up. It wasn't the normal karaoke night, which did draw a good crowd for Quinton. Entertainment was scarce in the area.

Quinton's movie night drew crowds, as did karaoke night. There might not be any professional entertainers in the area, but there were many good amateurs and karaoke brought them out to enjoy themselves, while providing entertainment others. Quinton didn't charge for using the karaoke machine. It was free to use, he made his money on the volume of drinks and meals he sold.

Movie night was different. There was a token charge, with children free, as long as some type of other service was purchased.

Still wondering about the crowd, Sam looked around when she heard a hearty voice greet Quinton behind the bar. "Quinton! Been a while. The best for me and my family. We're celebrating!"

"Sure, Mr. Mueller! Allie will be right over to get your orders. Sit anywhere."

"That I will," Hank Mueller said, mostly under his breath. "That I will."

Sam was more than a little surprised when Hank ignored Hadley and walked toward her table. "Would you mind, Miss Crain? There aren't many tables available," he said when he stopped, the rest of the family behind him.

"Of course!" Sam said, starting to get up. "I'll move to one..."

“No, no, Miss Crain! We’d like to join you. If you wouldn’t mind.”

Sam’s glance went to Henry, trailing the rest of the family, one of the clan’s babies in his arms. She smiled, relaxed, and nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

In the matter of a few seconds and three tables were rearranged and the Muëller family joined Sam. She suddenly had a baby in her lap as part of the group headed for the bathrooms. Henry was grinning at her from across the table. “Should of said ‘No’,” he mouthed to her.

Sam lifted her eyebrows and let them fall, trying not to drop the squirming baby. It disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared, one of the teen girls taking over the duty. “So,” she asked Hank when he sat down, “What’s the celebration?”

A deep chuckle rumbled from Hank. “You, Miss Crain. You. Word has spread like wildfire that you are singing tonight. You have quite the fan club.”

Sam was truly and completely shocked. “Me! You must be mistaken! I sing a little, sure, and I’m not terrible, but...”

“You’re better than you think,” Henry said from across the table.

The last song selection on the juke box finished and only a low murmur could be heard. Quinton himself took the stage and fired up the karaoke equipment. There was already a line to submit selections. Many of those attending were there to see Sam, but that wasn’t going to prevent others from participating.

Sam sat back and enjoyed the first rotation of singers. The dance floor had been full during every song. As the last one was finishing Sam went up and told Quinton which song she wanted to sing.

“Okay, Samantha, you’re up.”

Sam felt the silence when she stepped up and took the microphone. She’d never felt nervous singing karaoke before, but she certainly was now. But the music started, and she began to sing automatically.

The other singers had received polite, even enthusiastic applause. The response to Sam’s performance was several orders of magnitude greater. Applause and compliments followed her back to her chair.

But when Henry and Hank both suddenly turned to look toward the back of the area, Sam did as well. It was the small group that had avoided her. They weren’t applauding or complimenting. There were soft boos and negative comments.

They were quickly shushed by those nearby. A bit disconcerted, Sam stumbled slightly as she took her seat and Hank put a hand out to steady her. “Ignore them, Miss Crain.”

“Part of karaoke. Most people appreciate the fact that one gets up to sing when they are terrified by the idea. But there’s usually one drunk that has to voice a complaint about everything.”

Sam sat down, and when Allie stopped at the table she put in an order for another Root Beer. She sipped the drink when it was served and enjoyed the singers in the rotation until it was her turn again.

“Quit wasting our time. Let someone that can sing, sing.”

The words stopped Sam short and she turned to look at Hadley. “You’re talents are very overrated.”

Like the group, there were immediate calls for Hadley to shut up. Sam hesitated, but with grim determination she went onto the stage and began

to sing when the music started. She had to keep her eyes away from the bar area. Hadley was glaring at her venomously.

Again she ignored the few taunts she received and just concentrated on the applause when she finished the song and went back to sit down. “I think I’d better go,” said, draining the last of the Root Beer from the mug.

“Why don’t you,” said Hadley. He was right behind her.

“Take your comments elsewhere, Brand,” Hank said calmly, but firmly. Sam noticed that Henry no longer had a baby on his lap. He looked ready to leap like the tiger he’d been tracking.

“It’s okay. There are a lot of people that want to sing besides me,” Sam said, beginning to rise.

“You’d better remember which side your bread is buttered on, Mueller,” Hadley told Hank. “You’re dependent on the Farm for your food. And we’re your best customer. It would pay for you to side with me on this. Crain has no authority or power anymore. Taking her side will cost you dearly.”

Sam couldn’t move. There was such vehemence in Hadley’s voice. He apparently hated her. As startling as Hadley’s remarks had been, Hank’s reply to Hadley was just as shocking.

“I’m behind Samantha Crain one-hundred-percent. She is still the leader of this community as far as I am concerned. What she decides to do, I will back her. My entire family will back her.”

“I’m with you, too, Samantha,” said Quinton, pushing through the crowd that was now growing around the table. “Me, too,” called one, then half a dozen more people, several of them movers and shakers in the community.

“I’m warning you people!” Hadley called out. “Side with her and you’re cut off from the Farm! It’s my way or the highway!”

It was then that Tim Mohegan came running inside. He slid to a stop, looking at the crowd, not sure what was going on. But his news was too important not to share it. “Hey! Everyone! It’s started snowing. I talked to the I-70 group just a little while ago. It’s snowing heavily there and they still have snow on the ground from last winter!” Silence fell. The last snow from the year before had only melted away less than a month previously here.

A plan suddenly coalesced in Sam’s mind and she stood up, to face the crowd, not Hadley. “Okay. Here is my plan. I am moving the Homestead south, to a yet to be decided upon location in two years. Anyone that wants to go with me on that time table is welcome.”

“Two years!” Hadley exclaimed, putting his right hand on Sam’s shoulder to turn her to face him. “That’s crazy! We have to move now! Just take what we need. Hook up with a place already going. Take it over, if we have to!”

Sam saw Henry and Hank both beginning to move toward Hadley. They had not liked his putting his hand on Sam. But Quinton spoke and they stopped where they were.

“Get out of here, Brand,” Quinton said. “You’re patronage is no longer wanted. Look at the sign. ‘We reserve the right to refuse to serve anyone for any reason’. You’re barred. Guys.”

With that simple word, the two men and one woman that was Quinton’s security team stepped forward and surrounded Hadley. “Easy or hard. You choice, guy,” said the woman.

It seemed to infuriate Hadley and he tried to swing on her. But the three

were a team and it showed as they controlled Hadley and took him outside without further ado.

“I’m sorry, Samantha,” Quinton said. “I didn’t know he was like that.” Before Sam could reply, a scuffle started between those that had been jeering Sam and her fans. Quinton headed that way.

“Don’t worry, Miss Crain,” Hank said. “We’re behind you, just like I said.” He looked over at Henry. “My boy says it’s the right thing to do, and I agree with him. Your family has the uncanny knack of coming through when things are tough. I hope you can do it again.”

Sam looked over at Henry smiled and winked. Sam found herself blushing. “I just hope I’m not making a mistake.”

“You’re not,” Henry said. “I trust you.” He had a baby in his arms again and Sam had to laugh at the young man as he struggled to keep squirming tot in his arms.

From behind her, to one side, came Jackson’s voice. “Ready for departure, Miss?”

Sam sighed. “Yes. I think so. Let me take care of the bill and...”

“All taken care of, Miss,” Jackson replied. “Mr. Harleson picked up the tab, because of the business you brought in this evening.”

“He can’t afford to do...”

“Yes I can. And I, like Hank, am behind you in whatever you decide. Just let me know as plans progress so I have time to get my things ready.”

“Okay, Quinton. Thank you.” Sam led the way outside, Jackson just behind her, and the Mueller’s behind him. She looked up and shivered as

the snowflakes melted on her cheeks, wondering if she had just made a huge mistake.

The Mueller family disappeared into the darkness, except for Henry. He walked with Sam and Jackson until it was just the three of them. “You’ll need someone to scout out a place...” Henry said.

“You willing to be gone from your family for that long?” Sam asked, feeling like the fate of the world was in her hands if Henry said no.

“Sure I am. I’m with my father on this. What you say goes. I’ll be ready in two days. You just have a list of what you want me to look for and I’ll start looking.”

“I’m going with you,” Sam said, her eyes steady on Henry.

“I don’t think that would be a very good idea. I know you ride well. And probably have all the skills needed. But...”

“What will people think?” Sam finished for him.

“Well... Yes... There is that. But mostly, to put it bluntly, you’ll slow me down. I am very good out in the world. Lots of experience since I was little. You’d do fine, but at a much slower pace.”

“Because I’m female.”

“No. Because you don’t have the experience. We... You... need a place to head for as quickly as it can be found. Me, traveling alone will provide it. I promise.”

Sam sighed. Henry had a point. “But it’s not safe, one person traveling alone.”

“Not in my case. I can take care of myself out there better than anyone

in the community, if I do say so myself.”

Sam sighed and dropped her head for a moment. When she lifted it, Henry knew she had given up on the idea of going with him. “Okay. But you’d better be careful. Not only do we need the information you’ll be gathering... well... Just be careful.”

“You know I will. I’ll be over in three days, ready to go.”

“Very well,” Sam said. She reached up and took the key from around her neck. “I want you to look over things in the cache. See if there is anything that will help you in your quest.”

“You sure you trust me with this?”

“I trust you with my life.”

Both Sam and Henry blushed in the darkness. “Uh... Okay. I’ll bring the key back when I come over to leave. No one will know.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in three days. I’ll have something ready for you... Not sure what... But there will be something.”

With that, Henry turned and was suddenly lost in the snowy darkness. Sam felt the jacket that Jackson removed from his shoulders and draped around her. “We’d best be getting back. The others will worry, Miss.”

Sam nodded and the two walked down to the dock where the Nautica 41 Cabin RIB waited for them.

Her thoughts were racing as she readied for bed. “Why did I shoot off my mouth like that?” she wondered. Suddenly her mind went to Henry. He had not hesitated. He would leave, on his own, to look for the location that could be the Homestead’s salvation. She fell asleep still thinking of Henry.

The two days passed and then it was the morning of the third. Arms crossed, Sam stood on the porch waiting for Henry. It was still dark and there was a light breeze, accompanied by a light, very fine, dry snow. Sure enough, Henry appeared out of the darkness well before six. He was riding a horse and had two as pack horses.

“You’re up,” Henry said. “I was just going to wait until six to knock.”

“No need,” Sam said. “Come on in.”

She waited for Henry to tie the horses to the hitching posts and followed him into the house after opening the door for him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Sam asked, looking up into Henry’s light brown eyes for any doubt.

“I’m sure.” Henry was all business. “Here’s a list of the things I took from the cache. I’ll keep an accounting of the gold and silver. I have my own money for regular purchases, but I thought there might be a need for some persuasive coin to change hands.” Henry smiled.

“Of course. It’s not a problem. I trust you.” Sam finally sat down behind the desk in the study and Henry sat down in front of it.

For something to do, Sam looked at the neatly handwritten list of items from the cache. Her eyes lifted. “The food was still good?”

“The freeze dried, dehydrated, and naturally long term stable things seemed to be from what I checked. The MREs didn’t fare so well. There might be some good ones, but of the four meals I checked out of four cases, not a one was still edible. I took some of the Mountain House freeze dried, vacuum packed campers meals as emergency rations.”

“What are MREs?” Sam asked.

Henry explained MREs and then Sam asked, “All that food isn’t any good?”

“I don’t think so. But they were a very small part of the provisions. You know the trailers we saw, hooked to the semi trucks, plus the ones parked?”

Sam nodded.

“Those are all loaded. Many of them with buckets of long term storage foods. I checked a couple that were stored in the cache, but not in a trailer. They were good. So were the dry pack cans of freeze dried, dehydrated, and naturally long term stable items. I took some items for the trip.”

“Sure. Anything you need. That’s why I gave you the key.”

“Oh. You’ll need that back.” Henry reached into a pocket and pulled out the key and rawhide keeper. “I wasn’t sure when you’d go back in so I covered up the access hole and camouflaged it. I don’t think anyone will stumble into it.”

“Henry,” Sam finally asked, “Are you really sure this is the right thing to do?”

“I do. It is my opinion you’ll be helping more people doing things the way you announced than simply distributing the things in the cache. Everything is yours and your future family. It came from your forebears. Yes, they intended to help others, but under their rules. May seem a bit selfish, but I don’t see it that way. I guess I should be going. The longest journey starts with but a single step.”

“Yes. I guess so. Henry... Be careful. Please?”

“I will, to the best of my ability that doesn’t interfere with getting the job done.”

It was not what Sam wanted to hear, but she knew it was the best she was going to get. She followed silently as Henry went back outside, untied the horses and mounted the saddled one. He rode away without a look back. Sam wished he’d waved or something. It seemed so permanent, him just disappearing into the snowfall.

“He’s a savvy young man, Miss,” Jackson said, coming up behind Sam. “He’ll do fine.”

Sam jumped slightly. She was used to how quietly Jackson moved, but her attention had all been on Henry and she had not had a clue Jackson was even about.

“I know. But I worry. Probably more than I have a right to.”

“Oh, I think you’re entitled. Now come on inside and I’ll get you a hearty breakfast. You’ve a lot to do over the next several months. Have to keep your strength up.”

Sam just sighed and preceded Jackson inside the house. After breakfast, she and Jackson did a complete inventory of equipment and supplies. Hadley Brand had made it clear the Homestead wouldn’t be getting anything from the Farm while he was still there. There would be some following his lead and wouldn’t sell or trade with her either. But the Homestead was nearly self-sufficient.

She went over the inventory from the cache time and again, catching an item she’d missed the first few times each time she went over it. Preliminary plans kept her busy for a week. Then came the radio call from the Town. Hadley and group were leaving the following morning.

Sam and Jackson were at the Farm’s lake landing early. The Farm was a

beehive of activity. It was several minutes before they saw the smoke coming from the main house. Sam started to run toward it, but there was Hadley, gun in hand. Sam was well armed, as usual, and she knew Jackson would be, too. But when Hadley said, "I'll shoot your lap dog first, and then you, if you try to interfere," Sam stepped back and just glared at Hadley. Soon the smoke and then the visible flames took her attention.

She wasn't aware of it, but there were angry tears dripping down her cheeks. The group of vehicles was suddenly a convoy, and Hadley began to walk backward toward the lead vehicle. One of the Farm's Unimogs.

When he reached the Unimog he quickly climbed into the cab and the driver put it in gear. The convoy slowly began to move. Directly behind the Unimog was a 14-wheel tank truck pulling a pup tank, obviously full of fuel.

As soon as they could, Sam, Jackson, and several other spectators that had shown up by boat, horseback, and on foot, dodged between the vehicles and ran up to the house. It was the last time that those that planned to stay behind cooperated with Sam's group that would be leaving in two years.

But as much as they worked side-by-side, the main Farm house was beyond saving. One of the wooden barns was a total loss, as well. But several other small fires were extinguished. Blackened and bruised, Sam finally stopped and surveyed the damage.

"Wait a minute? Where is all the stock? The convoy only had three stock trailers." Sam ran over to one of the earth sheltered barns, fearful of what she might find. But their barn was intact and empty.

"He's scattered what stock he didn't take with him, Miss," Jackson said, coming up to her just as she turned around. "And look..." Jackson nodded toward the tank farm that now held only bio-diesel and alcohol.

“He broke through the protective berm, drained the tanks and tried to set them afire, too. Someone didn’t know what they were doing, fortunately.

“The greenhouses have been run into with the trucks, breaking some of the panels and bending some of the frames, and they are essentially unusable the way they are.

“Why, Jackson? Why? Why did he try to destroy everything he couldn’t take with him that might make things easier for the rest?”

“Just what you said, Miss. It would make things easier for others. I suspect Mr. Brand wants things easy for him and hard for everyone else.”

The two began to go over the Farm and take a mental inventory. Sam had gone from wondering ‘why’ to a deep burning anger at the destruction Hadley had wrought. To top it off, Randy Stanton came up, hand on the gun in a holster on his right hip and said, “Leave! This is part of the town, now! What’s here is ours. We need it to get through the next few years until the weather changes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Randy! We’re going to need to cooperate. I’m confident you’ll come around and go with us when the majority leaves.” It was a real strain, but Sam had kept her voice level and calm, and had not touched her own pistol.

“Not going to happen, girl. Now you two get in your fancy boat and get out of here.”

Still calm, Sam asked, “Can we at least take some of the things that you can’t use? We might be able to get them going with our resources.”

Randy laughed. “Your resources? You’ve got a dozen people at the Homestead. There are fifty of us.”

“How about it? You can’t use those old semi’s and trailers. None of the Unimogs are useable now. Hadley apparently took every diesel powered vehicle that they could salvage parts for and repair. He even tried to burn the bone yard to destroy the remains of the other vehicles and equipment stored there.”

Looking thoughtful, Randy thought for a moment. “It cost you. I’ll get with Jake and Ben and we’ll decide how much it will cost.” Suddenly Randy looked eager. “You probably still have gold, don’t you?”

“We managed to hang onto a little. But you know most of the gold and silver my family had is circulating around here as currency.”

“Yeah. And we need more to circulate. I’ll talk to the other two, but you can expect we’ll want a big chunk of the gold you have left from the old days.” Like Hadley, Randy walked backward away from Sam and Jackson, his hand always on the gun on his hip. When he was at his horse, he climbed aboard and shouted to the two, “Now, get off my property!”

Teeth clenched, Sam turned around and strode stiffly toward the Nautica 41 Cabin RIB. Jackson stayed right with her, keeping his body between hers and Randy. Sam calmed herself down before heading the boat toward the Homestead.

With the boat in the boat house, Sam and Jackson walked up to the house. Several of the people that worked at the Homestead were milling around. “We saw smoke! Is everything all right?” asked one of them.

Jackson began to fill them in as Sam went into the house, more determined than ever to make the move in two years a success for those that stood by her. After calming down more, and she began to think of things that needed to be done immediately. She went to find Jackson.

“Jackson, do you think we could round up some of the stock Hadley ran

off from the Farm?”

“Good thinking, Miss. I’ll see to it.”

“I don’t want you doing it yourself, Jackson. Get some of the hands. Maybe some of the Townies that are planning to go with us.”

“Yes, Miss, of course.”

“Jackson, I didn’t mean...”

“That I was too old and feeble?” Jackson asked with a laugh.

Sam smiled slightly. She sure didn’t want to alienate Jackson with a careless word. “Yes. Do it however you think best.”

“I will. Now, why don’t you lie down until lunchtime? Let that fertile mind of yours work on some of these problems we now face.”

“I think I will. I wonder how Henry is doing?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine.”

Sam walked up the stairs, her brain already working on the problems Jackson mentioned. When she came down for supper she heard cattle lowing and pigs squealing. The sound of chickens was a normal one, since the Homestead already raised them.

“There is plenty of grass for the cattle, and the swine can make do for a few days, but they’ll need some feed as the weather gets worse,” Jackson told her.

“I see. How are we going to keep them here without installing fences?”

“I think, with the available food, and a rotating crew to keep an eye on

them they'll be fine for some time. If need be we'll clear out a couple of the out buildings and pen up any trouble makers."

"Good. How many did you get?"

Sam was surprised with his answer. "According to one of the men that came from the Farm that wants a place here, we captured probably half. The rest will go wild and we'll hunt them rather than butcher the herd."

"Oh? Someone came over from the Farm? Not a spy, do you think?"

"No, Miss. It's Pete Peters and his family. Plus Barbara Dean, and Charlie Hunt and his family. They were the ones that notified the radio operator in Town that the move was starting. They didn't want any part of it."

"Okay. But keep an eye open. I'd like to keep things we do quiet for the most part."

"Yes, Miss."

Her first order of business the next morning was to get out the gold in the safe in the study. "No way," she muttered. She poured a third of the coins out into her hand. There was a mix of Gold Eagles in 1/10 ounce, 1/4 ounce, 1/2 ounce, and 1 ounce.

She put the bag away in the safe and counted out the coins on the desk. A total of seven and three-quarters of an ounce. She put the 1 ounce eagles in one pocket of her pants, and the fractional ounces in another. Half an hour later she was on the way to the Town, riding Queenly. She had a couple more stops to make away from the lake, so she didn't take one of the boats.

It turned out that Randy, Jake, and Ben did indeed represent those that

were planning on staying on in the area. Also that they were greedy. Greedy for gold, rather than many other things Sam would have been willing to trade to them to make their life easier, rather than gold.

Sam met with the three men representing the Town, and now the Farm, at the Farm. She handed Randy the list of items she wanted to remove from the Farm. He immediately handed it to Ben. Sam realized that Randy was probably illiterate.

Ben read off the list emotionlessly. Randy's face went through several shades of color. Jake listened intently, nodding occasionally. When Ben finished, Randy asked, "What do you want all that junk for? None of it is usable."

"I think we can salvage some of the trucks. And reassemble the greenhouses when we get to where we're going. You say it's junk. You must not want much for it."

Randy turned beet red. "I didn't mean it that way. You'll pay, and you'll pay well for everything you want. Let see the gold. Don't even need to bring out any silver. Gold only. US coins. None of that foreign stuff."

Sam reached into her right pants pocket and pulled out the four 1 ounce gold Eagles. Immediately Randy said, "Not enough! And we want some small coins, too. It's too hard to break a 1 ounce Eagle sometimes."

"How much do you want, Randy?" Sam asked. "Remember, it's been eighty years since this gold was accumulated. You know we can't have much left from that original amount."

"Six more ounces," Randy said immediately.

"Can't do it. One more, all fractional coins."

Randy was getting angry. "Six more ounces or no deal," he said.

“Wait a minute, Randy,” Ben said. “We have a say in this, too.” He looked over at Sam. “What’s your best offer. None of this used car salesman back and forth stuff.”

Sam pulled the other coins out of her left pocket. There were many 1/10 ounce coins, with a few 1/4 and 1/2 ounce coins rounding out the three and three-quarter ounces. “It’s all I’m willing to give. I won’t say it’s all I have, but you can imagine how much was spent over the years. And Randy said it. The things I want are junk and of no use to you, the Town, or the Farm, now.”

“We could rebuild the greenhouses ourselves,” Jake said.

“No deal,” Sam said. “Hand me back the gold.”

Randy looked panicked. He really did not want to give up the gold. He took a step back. “Okay! Okay! The stuff is yours. I don’t want to see you here again. Send someone else to get the things. And your people will have to handle everything. No help from any of us or our people. If they want a drink of water you’d better have sent it with your crews.”

“If that’s the way you want it,” Sam said. She swung her leg up and over Queenly, reined her over and started away. “I’ll have a crew here tomorrow to get started. You give them trouble and you’ll regret it.” With that she snickered to Queenly and the horse broke into a trot.

Sam’s next stop was at the Mueller compound in Town. “Have you had any word from Henry?” she asked as one of the teen children took Queenly’s reins.

“Come on in, Samantha,” Hank said. “We haven’t heard anything. With no batteries for radios, he’ll only be able to contact us if he runs into people with a base station with power.”

“I know. I’m just worried about him.”

“Don’t be. I taught him well, if I do say so. He can handle just about anything.”

Sam nodded. “The main reason I stopped by was to see if you could arrange for a couple of work teams to salvage things from the Farm. I paid for them, in gold.”

“Shouldn’t have had to do that,” Hank said. “This has been a team effort for many years. It is not good that the team is broken up.”

“I agree. But reality is reality. This is just another situation we’ll have to deal with. Our families have been doing it for generations.”

“True. I’ve been feeling out people recently, to see which way their intentions lean. Over half of those here plan to stay. Take over everything that is abandoned. They honestly think they can outlast the coming weather.”

“That is their choice.”

“Yes, it is. How many people do you need? And to do what?”

“Well, since I’ve been barred from the Farm, there will need to be someone in charge, plus at least one person that can drive a big truck. And a different one that can handle a Unimog with forks and other implements, and one to drive an A300 skid steer with different attachments. The rest will be physical labor.”

“I’ll round up a couple of teams. I’m sure my brother will take the responsibility of seeing that the work is done properly and on a timely basis.”

Sam smiled. “Good. Henry said I could count on you and your family.”

“Henry was right. He said much the same about you. What do we have to do to get that initial equipment running? I was told that there wasn’t anything left that was usable or even repairable.”

“We put up most of our mechanical equipment on blocks. The tires are the main weakness. Eighty years is a long time for tires to last, even if they aren’t being run much anymore.”

“Very true. But you obviously have a plan or you wouldn’t be asking for the rolling equipment at the Farm.”

Sam smiled again. “I do. Please trust me on this.”

“Absolutely. Just give me a list of what you want, and in what order, and I’ll get people on it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mueller.” She held out a hand and Hank shook it firmly.

“Oh. What about fuel? Didn’t that lunatic drain all the tanks?”

“He did, but we have enough to get started at the Homestead. And I’m on my way to see about getting more.”

“Okay then. Anything else I can help with?”

“That’s it. It’s more than enough. Now, I need to be on my way.”

Hank opened the front door and whistled. Queenly and her handler showed up immediately from the side of the house. Sam thanked the girl and climbed aboard. “I’ll be in touch,” she called over her shoulder as she headed toward the old part of town.

The Town was well behind her an hour later when she turned off the

disintegrating pavement and headed Queenly up a well tended gravel driveway. She was met at the top of the drive by two men, both well armed, though they made no move toward their weapons.

“Mr. Taggart? I’m Samantha Crain. I’d...”

“Know who you are. What do you want? You’ve already cost me my best customer.”

“You mean the Farm?” Sam asked, staying aboard Queenly.

“Yes. The Farm. That Brand was a hard man to deal with, but he bought my rapeseed oil and a few other things and always paid in decent food and finished biodiesel.”

“I’ll do the same, Mr. Taggart. I want to buy your raw oil to make biodiesel until we move away. Also some grains.”

“I thought the Farm was the only place that could make biodiesel,” Taggart replied, looking surprised.

“No. I have the equipment and supplies other than the oil.”

“How about food? You going to be able to grow enough in the Homestead garden and greenhouse to supply us with food?”

“Yes. Even meat. We rounded up much of the stock Hadley ran off before he left.”

“Okay. Depending on quantity and quality, you’ve got a deal. You’ll have to pick up the oil and drop off the other things. We don’t get away from this place very often.”

“That’s not a problem. In a few days I’ll send over a tanker rig to pick up the first load of oil. They’ll be bringing some beef, pork, chicken, and

raw vegetables. You have a way to preserve the food?”

“We’ll process all of it. Rather get the whole animals, if you don’t mind. Butcher it ourselves when we need it.”

“That’s even better for us, Mr. Taggart. Thank you.”

“If that food isn’t up to snuff, there’ll be no oil or grain.”

“Understood.” Sam turned Queenly and headed back down the driveway. She was tired and it was dark when she got home to the Homestead. But the process was started.

As the days passed, one piece of equipment after another was moved from the Farm to the Homestead, using the Homestead’s Unimog, semi-tractor, equipment trailer, and A300 skid steer that were operable.

None of the equipment that was moved had decent tires. Some of the engines in the equipment wouldn’t run, but all of it was brought to the Farm. The Homestead mechanic and one from town went through all of them, planning on salvaging what they could from other equipment to get some of the Farm items running.

But Sam passed word to them to just analyze the problems and make lists of what was needed in terms of parts and labor. There were a few people becoming a bit leery of what Sam was doing. It seemed she was just shuffling unusable equipment from one place to another. Only one semi truck was brought to life, and it took all the tires that had any life left in them to equip the truck and a trailer so they could be used in the move.

It was only after one more tire failed that Sam decided to go ahead and get into the cache. At least on a small scale. Deciding she needed a bit of help, she told Jackson about the cache. “Yes, Miss. I suspected you and young Henry had found it. How can I help?”

“I want to dig out a small access point, without opening the entire wall. I’ll be doing it with the A300 with backhoe attachment. If I don’t tell you about it before hand, you would probably have a search team out looking for me.”

Jackson smiled slightly. “Yes, Miss. Probably so.”

Sam grinned. “I’ll leave it to you to keep the others in the dark about the entire thing.”

“Of course, Miss.”

With most of those that stayed at the Homestead gone most days to the Farm, getting the items ready to be moved, Sam was able to take the Bobcat Toolcat 5600T with a backhoe mounted down to the cache point without being noticed.

Getting an opening into the cache so she could bring a few things out was the easy part. Actually getting the things out was the difficulty. As the trucks and trailers all had shrink wrapped tires mounted on them, though they were on blocks, a relatively large area was taken up by individually shrink wrapped tires of several sizes, about half of each size already on rims.

The truck tires were heavier than Sam had imagined. She could barely handle them from where they were stored to a point where she could use the Toolcat to take them outside, and from there to a point where they could be loaded onto one of the Unimogs or semi trailers.

She left them there for several days, partly to rest up for the next step, but also to wait for the next snow storm that was bound to come through. So when the snow came, and the work at the Farm stopped, Sam had the trailer used to haul the Bobcats hooked up to the Unimog. She said she’d be gone for a couple of days and not to worry about her.

Several of the residents were surprised that Jackson didn't stop her, or even caution her. Sam enjoyed her time away, though she only went a few miles, after stopping and loading the tires she'd placed where she could get to them with the Unimog.

She mostly just went over the nearly endless inventory sheets, and let her mind wander, as plan after plan came to her and was discarded. After three days of camping out, and the snow stopping, Sam fired up the Unimog and went back to the Homestead.

There were immediate questions about the tires. Not much of one to out and out lie, Sam told everyone that Henry had found them. All but Jackson assumed she meant that he'd found them on the trip he was on. Neither Jackson nor Sam corrected the mistaken idea.

After replacing the nearly bald tires on the one Unimog, two of the semi truck and trailer combinations had theirs replaced. Her next mission, coinciding with the next big snow storm, was to recover the biodiesel plant in the cache, along with enough chemicals to make all the fuel they'd need during the next few months and during the trip.

The Fifth Key – Chapter 3

Again she stayed away for several days, and she got some very curious looks when she returned with the equipment and supplies, plus more tires. The snow was covering her tracks adequately, but Sam knew that soon she would not be able to keep the secret. But after two more undiscovered trips to the cache with the Toolcat, moving things from the cache to the road where she left the Unimog, Sam changed her tactics. On her last trip Sam covered up the access to the cache, after building a door for the area she had opened up in the wall of the cache.

Though quite a bit of firewood had been cut during the summer, Sam used the excuse of at least this winter and the next being very severe, and the time to cut wood being limited as they got close to the time to leave for whatever place Henry found, to start a wood harvesting program.

With another A300 working, its hydraulics ran the chain saws the men used to fell and trim the trunks. Though the tiger in the area was seen a few times initially, after the first week there was no further sign.

The location was just below where the cache was. Sam ordered clear cutting, with the trees cut to allow good coppicing to take place. The initial cutting opened a road into the rest of the tract. The trees were trimmed, and topped at the sixty foot mark, if the tree was that long or longer.

Skidded to one area, a bottom layer of logs was put down and the rest carefully stacked on the platform to keep them out of the mud they were creating working in the snow. The plan, as all but Sam and Jackson knew, was that the logs would be pulled a few at a time when firewood was needed.

Sam had told Jackson that they would transport all of the logs they possibly could to wherever they were going. One of the items in the cache was a portable lumber mill, and a mobile firewood processor. If they needed lumber to build structures at the new site, they'd have the means and the raw material, without cutting down too much of the local forest when they got there.

The days passed, as did, weeks, and then months. Randy had raged when he saw the new tires on some of the equipment now being used to recover the rest of what Sam wanted from the Farm. He demanded more gold and Sam flatly refused. The work teams, though composed of armed individuals, now had a security team to watch over them while on the Farm.

Randy also found out that Sam was getting oil for biodiesel for the equipment, and grain for the stock they'd rounded up. He threatened the Taggart's and was chased off their property at gun point.

Still no one said anything about the possibility that Sam had found the cache, even if one or two suspected.

And then the snows came again to the Town, Farm, and the Homestead. Earlier than the year before, while there was still snow on the ground in protected north facing areas. The group that lived north of them was no longer in contact.

At least, that is, until they showed up on the Town's doorstep. They were on the move, heading generally south, with no destination in mind. They didn't have a single mechanized vehicle. There were a few vehicles converted to horse or ox drawn, mostly pickup trucks.

Sam went in and talked to their leader, one Tim Matson. "Why did you wait so late to come south?" she asked.

"We just didn't think it would get worse," he replied. Matson looked as haggard as Sam felt sometimes. Leadership was a difficult proposition, any way you looked at it. There was two feet of snow left from last year when the first blizzard hit this year and we made the decision to move. We're short on resources. Any chance you can give us something to get us through to next summer?"

Before Sam could mention trade, Tim added, "We don't have anything to spare to trade. We'll need everything we have and more to get us through."

Had Matson offered some trade in the future, when their group got settled, she would have been a bit more generous. But she had a group that needed supplies, too. Three beef cattle, five hogs, and a dozen

chickens were driven or carried to the nearest point the new group would pass on their way around the lake.

“Is that all?” asked Tim of Sam.

“Make sure you let us know where you settle. We’ll make sure and give you plenty of room when we head that way.”

“That was uncalled for,” Tim protested, looking like his feelings were hurt.

Sam suspected it was all an act. She flicked the reins and turned Queenly away from the group. “Let’s go!” she called to the herding team. They too turned their horses around and began to ride away with Sam.

Several of Tim’s group had to scramble to keep the stock from following Sam and her riders. At least the chickens had been handed to someone. There were pig squeals and cattle lowing sounds audible for some time as Sam and the others went back to the Homestead.

Sam didn’t realize they were there for a few moments. She was just sitting on Queenly, her unseeing gaze just out toward the forest. Only when Jackson touched her leg and said, “Miss?” did she come out of her daze.

“Oh. We’re here! I was just... Well... I was thinking about Henry. How he’s doing and if he’s found anything suitable.”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Jackson said.

It was only then that Sam noticed the additional horses in the corral. She turned in the saddle and almost fell off in her haste to dismount. She let Jackson take Queenly’s reins and ran to a rather different looking Henry.

Before she knew it she was in his arms, in a bear hug. One she gladly

returned. After a few moments, each released the other and looked around. Everyone except Jackson had made themselves scarce.

“Uh... How was the trip?” Sam finally got out, her eyes roving over Henry. She’d considered him a man at eighteen. Now, just turned twenty, he was definitely a man. Though not the hardened look of an old timer, Henry’s journey had matured him to a degree that amazed Sam.

“Educational, to say the least,” Henry replied. Even his voice was different. Slightly deeper, even more assured than before. “Jackson filled me in on what’s been going on. Are you okay?”

Sam nodded quickly, trying not to tear up. “Now that you’re back, better,” she managed to get out. She turned hurriedly and added, “Come on into the house and tell me everything.”

When she sat down in the study desk chair she was fully under control again. Henry took the seat opposite her and sighed. “Good to be back.” He reached into one pocket and withdrew a leather pouch. “Here’s what I didn’t use. Glad I took what I did. Came in handy a couple of times.”

Sam couldn’t look at him enough. She was silent for a long time, and then started. “Oh. Yes. Of course.”

“If you’ll put out the maps I’ll show you the spot I found.”

Her thoughts now on the destination and the trip that would be undertaken to get there, Sam became all business.

With the old Rand McNally road atlas on the desk, Henry began to trace a route from where they were, south and slightly westward, and then almost due south. His finger stopped in the faded blue of a lake. Toledo Bend Reservoir on the east border of Texas and west Louisiana.

“I went all the way around the lake. The dam still looks to be in

excellent shape, with no real fear of it failing soon and losing the advantages of being on a lake. There are several good spots, so this one I picked out isn't necessarily the one we'll ultimately use. But I do think this is the best general location. There are other people on the lake, but very small scale. Not particularly friendly, but not at all aggressive. Live and let live kind of thing. I made it clear we'd be bringing resources to the area. That helped."

"Excellent!" Sam said. She was almost quivering with suppressed excitement. "And the journey? The route? What is it going to be like?"

"That's what took me so long," Henry said with a sigh. Lots of rivers to cross between here and there. Not a lot of bridges. The landing craft would work for the smaller vehicles, but there's no way we can transfer the semi trailers. The Munsons we have just aren't long enough. Means taking some round about trips, to hit bridges that are still standing."

"How long, do you think, for each trip?" Sam asked.

"Two months for the pioneer trip. Anything we do right now will have a slim chance of lasting the winter and spring. You're timetable is right on. We leave early next spring, and the pioneer team can have a route open in two months. After the route is opened, three weeks per trip for the rest. I'm assuming it will take more than one trip, though Jackson did say you've managed to get quite a few of the original vehicles going. Will we have enough biodiesel?"

"I'll take you on a tour after lunch, but for the most part yes and yes. It will take several trips with the semis to move everything I want to move. And we're stockpiling biodiesel in semi trailers as quickly as we make it. I don't think it will be a problem. How's the cropland situation?"

"About like it was here five years ago. It is all going to depend on how far the permanent snow pack line comes south. If you want, I can go and look for something on the Gulf Coast."

Sam could tell he was sincere. He was obviously tired of travelling, but he would go. She shook her head. "If you think this is a good place, this is the place we're going." Sam was adamant. She saw Henry relax slightly.

Jackson knocked and entered, to announce lunch. Sam watched Henry eat. He thoroughly enjoyed the meal, eating slowly and savoring every bite. He'd lived off the land for the most part during the trip, and was very good at obtaining what he needed, and had taken plenty of the basics, and topped off his supplies every chance he had. But a good home cooked meal was something to be appreciated.

After the meal, Sam was as good as her word and took Henry around the Homestead to show him some of the things they had accomplished in his absence. "Your Great Great really knew what to cache," Henry said at one point.

"Just think if we didn't have this. It would make the move so much harder. But think about it. This was supposed to be the first cache opened. How lucky are we that it wasn't found during the last eighty years? I'm sure the equipment would be in nearly as unusable shape as ours is now, if it had been in use all these years."

"True. And even the fact that much of the equipment was bought used and refurbished to nearly new condition before it went into the cache didn't affect how well it held up."

"You knew some of the equipment is used? I didn't figure that out until just recently."

Henry grinned. "Ill spent youth. I loved the mechanical stuff when I was a kid. Searched out and read every piece of paper that had anything about vehicles on it. Plus the pictures and some of the videos.

“The two big semis with the equipment trailers are really old AutoCars. I mean really old. They were probably thirty years old when they went into the cache.”

“Wow!” Sam said. “I had no idea. I just thought used, as in a couple of years. I think working around so much of what is new is affecting my thought processes.”

Henry laughed and Sam shivered inside. To take her mind off it, Sam asked Henry, “Any sign of Hadley Brand and his group?”

“They cut a wide swath up on this end of the trail, but they went much further east than what we will. Did some trading, I learned, but had a bad habit of just taking what they wanted from an area. A few places we’ll be going through had bad experiences with them. That puts us at a disadvantage, but as long as we’re civil and contribute a bit to the given area, I don’t think we’ll have any real problems. Not with humans, anyway.”

“Humans?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. The wild animal population has skyrocketed since the ash settled and things started growing again. It is hard to imagine, but there are huge herds of herbivores out there, including animals from all around the world, from zoos and such. And where there are herbivores, there are predators. Lots of them.

“Every time we camp, we’ll have to maintain a watch for some of them. Shouldn’t be too much of a problem as long as we’re cautious, but believe me when I tell you that lions and tigers are out there with the native wolves, cougars, and bears. Also dangerous herbivores like rhinoceros and elephants.”

Sam paled at the mention of elephants, remembering when Jackson had come to her room one afternoon and told her of her parents’ deaths by

rampaging elephants.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned them,” Henry said, tuning in to her feeling as soon as she had it.

“No, Henry. It’s all right. I needed to know ahead of time so I can be prepared.”

“Okay. So what is left in the cache? I take it everyone knows about it now. You keeping a guard?”

“Slow down!” Sam said with a laugh, her tension gone. “We’ve barely touched anything other than the equipment and supplies to get our old equipment going. Whoever thought of putting those tires in the cache was a genius. The biodiesel equipment and supplies to make it, too.

Almost all the food is still there. We haven’t touched anything already packed in the trailers, just some of the boxed, canned, and bucketed items.

As far as who knows about it, it is kind of an open secret. Only myself, Jackson, your dad and his brother, and a couple more have been to it. I’m sure most of our group knows, but is keeping it quiet so those planning to stay behind don’t try to take it over.”

“Trouble with those staying?” Henry asked. “Jackson didn’t mention that.”

Sam sighed and said, “Yes. Barely on speaking terms. Randy Stanton has taken over the Farm for his and the Town’s use, though I suspect that the Town is paying dearly for everything they get from the Farm. Quite a few people have started to pull windows out of abandoned houses and make green houses. And your father says the demand for ammunition is great. He’s selling it steep, and limiting the amounts any one gets so it isn’t likely to be used against us. We all go armed almost

all the time.”

“Too bad. I had hoped those that didn’t leave would come around to your way of thinking while I was gone.”

“So did I, Henry.”

Now standing down by the lake, Henry stretched and said, “I’d better get home. My parents are going to hear I’m here and didn’t stop there first.”

“You probably should have,” Sam said.

“Wanted to fill you in first,” Henry said and turned back toward the barn so he could get his horses. “The lake is down quite a bit.”

“Been falling steadily. I think the evaporation is all going into snow, and the drain rate is now higher than the river can supply. Don’t think it will dry up, but it sure won’t be the same in a few years if the weather stays the same.”

“You made a good choice.” Henry’s pack string had grown while he was on his quest. He’d started with three horses, all three capable of taking a rider or a pack rig. He now had two horses under saddle and four packhorses, moderately loaded.

Sam looked at him questioningly. “I’ll tell all of you some time. It was an adventure.” Henry snicked at the horse he was on and the string of horses headed down to the lake to take the shore route to Town.

The Fifth Key – Chapter 4

Henry fell into stride, working with Sam on getting things ready for the move the following spring. He paid particular attention to getting the Unimogs ship shape, along with the attachments they’d moved from the Farm plus the ones already at the Homestead. That gave them a total of

seven highly capable Unimogs, with the four repaired ones from the Farm, the one from the Homestead, and the two in the cache.

Likewise, the five Bobcat Toolcat 5600Ts utility vehicles and six Bobcat A300 skid steers were readied, with their collection of implements.

Henry used one of the Unimogs with a backhoe attachment to bring down the rest of the large opening into the cache. And just as Sam predicted, Jackson got the first AutoCar fired up and eased it and its trailer gently out of the cache, barely scraping one spot on the trailer, but without any real damage.

The second AutoCar and trailer Henry drove out of the cache, hard on Jackson's heels. Both low heavy equipment beds had tarped loads. The tarps were a bit crumbly, but held together enough for at least one more use.

Sam had gone over the inventories several times, trying to figure out what was on the trailers. She'd even tried to peak under the tarp but had not been able to make anything out. When the tarps came off she grinned and slapped Henry on the back. "Great job! More greenhouses!"

"Wonder why they weren't on the inventory?" Henry asked.

"Who knows?" Sam replied. "I'm just glad they put them in. There was a lot of damage to the greenhouses at the Farm, thanks to Hadley Brand. This will give us a leg up on getting fresh vegetables as soon as possible after we get there."

Since the two AutoCars had rear deck winches and the equipment trailers, the green house components were unloaded and stacked out of the way, to give room for four of the Bobcat units, some of their implements, and several of the Unimog attachments that were critical for use to pioneer in roads where there were none, or fix those that were in good enough shape to make it practical. The eighty years of neglect on

top of the ash fall had done much damage to many of them.

The other trucks with trailers were moved out of the cache, the items in the trailers checked against the inventory. One semi was used to maneuver the tightly parked individual trailers so they could be opened and inventoried.

Each find of useful items eased Sam's mind a little bit more. About the only thing that they couldn't use were the MREs and the occasional package of other food. There were sixteen total trailers, with the four semi trucks. With what they'd recovered from the Farm and outside of town and put back into service, the Homestead had a total of forty-eight trailers of various types and twelve working semi trucks to pull them.

It was only when the last trailer was moved from the back of the cache did Sam and Henry discover the other vehicles parked there. Four ROKON two-wheel-drive off-road motor bikes with replacement diesel engines, a selection of implements for them, and a Suburban.

According to the paperwork with the Suburban the body was a stretched $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton version on a Chevy 1-ton 167" pickup truck chassis, reinforced and gusseted for strength. There was a long list of customization items. The rear cargo area, as long as a conventional suburban with the rear seats down, even with the front seats and second row seats up, was loaded to physical capacity of Hardigg shipping crates. There was an inventory in the Suburban for what it contained.

"Your Great Great sure wasn't very consistent in his inventories. Some of them are very complete, but others don't list everything." Henry shook his head.

"I know. Even with the inventories we do have, I'm not too surprised when we find something not listed."

Henry had been looking over the Suburban. "Think we found our

command vehicle.”

“Boys and their toys,” Sam said, laughing at the look that crossed Henry’s face.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Doesn’t make it any less useful,” Henry replied, grinning in turn. I’ll give you first crack at it.”

Sam took a step back. “Uh... no. I’ve never driven a vehicle, except equipment...”

“Very well,” Henry said, “If I just have to, I’ll take it outside.” Henry checked the batteries in the Suburban. Like those in the other equipment, the batteries were brand new, but without acid. Taking enough for the batteries in the Suburban from the shelf along one wall of the cache, Henry filled the batteries just like he or someone else had on every piece of equipment using a battery.

The grin on his face was even larger when he climbed down out of the Suburban after he parked it than it was when he got into it.

Henry and Sam both jumped when a brilliant light flashed several feet away, striking one of the many stumps of the harvested trees. Thunder sounded and the two looked up. The approaching weather front looked like a solid wall of snow coming toward them.

“I’ve got a feeling we may be finished for the winter, except for some small stuff,” Henry said.

“But we have so much more to do!” Sam said. She was standing beside Henry, her arm linked with his. She had no idea how she’d wound up there. Quickly she released him and stepped to the Suburban, wondering if he’d noticed. “Let’s get up to the house.”

“Okay,” Henry said. He got back into the driver’s seat of the Suburban

and Sam climbed into the front passenger seat.

“Holy cow! Look at all of this radio equipment! And what’s this?” Sam touched a joystick control and the rear of the Suburban jerked to the left. “Sorry!” she exclaimed and put her hands in her lap.

“Has a four wheel steer system, I guess,” Henry replied, as the joystick centered itself. Henry slowed down to a crawl when he knew he was getting close to the house. Visibility was almost nil.

When the house was in sight, Henry parked it and the two ran for the house as another lightning bolt flashed. The thunder and lightning didn’t last long. The snow did. Four feet deep before it ended three days later.

A team using Unimogs and A300s with snow blowers attached cleared the immediate area around the Homestead and a path to the cache, so some work could continue inside the three-quarter empty space.

And the work continued, better than Henry or Sam thought possible. Those that were going south with them in the spring were now quite convinced it was the right thing to do. The Homestead even picked up a few recruits that winter, due to the harshness of the weather.

There were some fears that the weather wouldn’t moderate that spring, but it did, only slightly later than usual. With the equipment they were running it was a relatively easy task to clear up the areas where they needed to finish off the work in preparation to the pioneer team leaving to make sure those following would have a road to follow when they headed south.

Sam thought long and hard on whether or not she should go on this first trip or stay behind to see things through on the Homestead end. Finally, the others talked her into going. Hank Mueller would be in charge of the operation while she was gone.

With snow still on the ground, Henry led the pioneer convoy away from the Homestead. He was driving the Suburban, with Sam as passenger. The other rigs fell into line. The initial day went fine, with only a few shake down adjustments being needed when they stopped that evening to set up camp.

The same could not be said for the following days. The route Henry had scouted out was better than the alternatives, but after eighty years of neglect the highway and bridge system was in serious disrepair. But with the equipment they had, making the road passable was relatively easy.

Not so the stream and river crossings. Some bridges were intact and useable after a careful inspection. Others looked all right but upon the inspection the decision was made to avoid them and make another crossing. And some bridges were destroyed, with only remnants in view.

Henry's route avoided much of the worst of the blockages, but with several truckloads of the long logs brought along for the purpose, temporary bridges were erected over narrow streams, some as low water bridges where they were laid down on the bottom of the stream for traction. Others were full bridges, but there was a strict limit that Henry and Sam enforced. They weren't bridge builders and limited themselves to simple spans supported from beneath.

It was a grueling task, even with the equipment. Progress was slow, but steady. Everyone on the pioneer team was glad when they reached the final destination. The fuel they'd brought with them was almost gone. With the last bit of the journey on a decent road, Henry and Sam went ahead in the Suburban. When Henry stopped the rig and got out, he was nervous as a long tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs.

But he relaxed moments later when Sam turned to him and said, "You did good, Henry. Might not be perfect, but it sure looks like it to me. Thank you." Before she knew it, she was giving Henry a happy hug, which he readily returned. He finally made himself release her.

He stepped back and said, “Over here is where I thought the orchards and vineyard would be. The housing units over there. Barns further back. There are open areas in the woods still that can be tilled and planted while we are in the process of clearing more land in a bit closer.”

Sam watched and nodded as he pointed out the features of the property. When he pointed out the location he planned for the boat house, Sam asked, “What about our lake neighbors?”

“Five groups, all seem fairly stable, except for one, but I doubt they’ll be a problem for us once we’re settled.”

“Okay. Good. Here come the rest!” Sam waved at the truck in the lead.

Henry motioned to the spot he wanted it to stop, the others all stopping in turn. Henry and Sam had to stare as more trucks than they’d started with showed up a few minutes later. “Boy, timed that right,” Henry said. The first of the follow up convoys had left a month after the pioneer column. They had managed to keep up a much faster pace and caught up with the others just minutes after Henry and Sam had gone ahead.

The next week was hectic. There were projects going on all over the place. The youngest orchard trees that were already of bearing age had been moved from the orchards with one of the Unimogs with a tree spade and loaded into a semi rear dump trailer. That Unimog was kept busy moving the trees from where the dump truck spotted them to the designated orchard.

The portable lumber mill that had been in the fifth key cache was set up and a team began turning the rest of the logs left after bridge building into timbers. Another team began using one of the Bobcat A300 to cut down and skid the logs from the trees that needed to be cleared from the immediate area. They, too, went into the lumber mill.

At Henry's urging, and based on the few sightings they'd had of predators roaming almost the entire route, a trench was dug and logs emplaced vertically to form a tall palisade. All the housing would be inside the palisade, at least for the foreseeable future. The barns would be inside another walled enclosure. Having seen as many of the predators that they had, meant there were many more out there. There were native species as well as many descendants of zoo and preserve animals released during the war.

It went double or triple for the prey of the predators. The pioneer team had begun to see huge numbers of all sorts of herd animals once they were well south of the old Homestead. American bison grazed alongside water buffalo. Pronghorn antelope shared the open spaces with gazelles. Even without the cattle and swine that would be brought down later, there was plenty of meat to be had by hunting.

Another convoy showed up two weeks later and things really began to happen. When the rigs that were going to be taken back for more loads were unloaded, a long convoy headed back to the old Homestead. Again Sam wavered about going or staying. Not a small part of her decision was based on the fact that Henry was going back. But Sam decided her place was at the new Homestead, seeing that things were accomplished.

While the chickens and swine were trucked down, the herd of cattle at the old Homestead was moved in an old style cattle drive. A pasture area was fenced and the cattle turned into it for time being until a barn was built and permanent pasture areas delineated. A constant guard had to be kept on all the animals due to the roving predators.

The next convoy to arrive included every working semi truck with a trailer. The attempt to double up the trailers on some of the trucks had not been successful. The marginal bridges simply couldn't support the loads. No one was hurt, and they didn't lose any loads, but it was a near thing until the second trailers were dropped.

When it was down to the last trip back to the old Homestead, Sam rode along. She wanted to be there when it was closed down. A heavy snow was falling when they pulled in, the first of the coming winter. Protected spots still had snow from the previous year. The permanent snow line was definitely moving southward.

Because of it, three additional families decided to go with the Homestead people. Apparently it sent Randy Stanton into a screaming rage. All three families were highly productive residents of the Town and would be sorely missed by those remaining.

Hank Mueller and the rest of Henry's family were travelling with them on the final trip. As his ancestors had brought to the original homestead, including the steam fired electrical generators, acetylene generator, oxygen accumulators, other equipment, and all the remaining coal from the first move, was moved again. The amount of coal was almost half of the original. Again, every semi in the fleet was in use.

Henry waited at the Suburban while Sam took a last long tour of the Homestead main house, shedding more than a few tears. Despite everything, she'd had a good life growing up here.

But, with a last tear wiped away, Sam joined Henry at the Suburban. After she buckled in and looked up she was tempted to get back out, gun in hand. Randy, with a group of at least fifteen people, was standing at the edge of the compound.

She sighed and swallowed, and said, "I'm ready. Let's get out of here before I lose my temper."

Henry nodded and put the Suburban in gear. He checked the rearview mirror several times. With most of the convoy rolling, he saw Randy and the group storm into the house and out buildings. He didn't mention it to Sam.

Many resources had gone into preparing the road for the convoys. Sam decided to delay at each point some of those resources could be recovered, primarily the logs. They would all be needed for the construction at the new place.

The snow followed them south as they travelled. But it was only a very light dusting coming down when they reached the new Homestead. Sam was amazed at how much had been accomplished.

“You think we’ll be all right here?” Sam asked Henry.

“I think so. Can’t promise anything for the future, but I believe in my heart that the snow pack will stop well north of us.” There was a long pause, and then Henry asked, “How do you feel about children?”

Sam looked at Henry with a suddenly shy smile. “I’d like to have two or three. How about you?”

“If they are ours, I’d say that would be great. Should I ask Jackson if I can ask you to marry me?”

“Can if you want. But it doesn’t matter. I think I already had plans on asking you if you didn’t ask me pretty soon.” The two leaned over the center console and shared a kiss.

“Yep,” Henry said after the kiss. “This is going to be a fine place to bring up kids. I intend to see to that.”

Sam was smiling broadly when she got out of the Suburban and surveyed the new Homestead. She clutched the Fifth Key, still on the keeper around her neck, and said a little prayer to bless the new Kingdom that would arise because of it.

End *****

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