

## The Liddy Scenario

Brody Cunningham watched the news, fascinated. He didn't quite believe that the north east coast of the country, and the southern coast of California got what they deserved, but the thought wasn't far from his thoughts.

It was the 1989 Liddy scenario almost verbatim. At least in the actions. The probable perpetrators were more likely Iranian sponsored Islamic Extremists rather than a communist cell.

The results were the same, plus a degree, due to the additional attacks in California that weren't in Liddy's memo to the president.

The terrorists had hit EHV transformers, shutting down the entire electrical grid to New England. The same thing in California, isolating it, too, from the electrical supplies produced in the middle of the country.

Choke points on the railroads all over the country were destroyed, limiting rail traffic to mostly local use, which wasn't that much in demand. Coal fired power plants began to run out of fuel all across the country.

Enhanced EMP devices were used in New York City; Washington, D. C.; Houston, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Atlanta, Georgia; and Los Angeles and Sacramento, California. Fortune 500 Corporate records, Federal reserve banking information, IRS and Social Security records, California and New York State and City welfare and entitlement records, and much private information was wiped from computers. Depending on the degree of secure back up, which wasn't much for some of the systems, it would be months to years before computer records were re-created from paper records.

Almost every major natural gas pipeline was hit and either the lines blown where they crossed rivers, or the pumping stations taken out. More power plants went down.

Refineries in California and all along the Gulf coast were hit with RPG's, creating explosions and starting fires that burned for days.

Fully two dozen aircraft were shot down just before landing or after takeoff. Flight was restricted to military aircraft, with fighter escorts that could use countermeasures on the shoulder fired missiles that had taken down the commercial craft. At first that seemed unnecessary, when the attacks stopped for a day, but three more flights, given special permission to fly, were shot down. All commercial traffic was stopped then. For the duration.

The attacks took place over three days, near the end of June. The Federal Government's first and third benefit and Social Security checks for July did not go out. That's when the riots started in Washington, D. C., all over California, primarily in Los Angeles, and in New York, when the state entitlement checks didn't go out, either.

Brody had gone in to work the first day of the attacks, at the big box home improvement store where he was a warehouseman. The power went out around noon, when another section of the power grid, trying to carry the load around the blown transformers, had a cascading fail that blew many of the primary power interconnect transformers.

As news of the widespread attacks became known, one employee after another was sent home, with the instructions to call in an hour before shift during the following days to see if the store would be open, and if so, where the individual employee would be needed.

Brody knew he was low man on the totem pole at the store. He went in and signed up with a temp service again. That was what he had been doing since he got laid off at his previous job and got the warehouseman's job.

The people at the temp service weren't too hopeful. More and more information was coming in about the countrywide effects of the terrorist attacks. So Brody stayed home, conserving his cash, calling in to the store every morning, and staying by the phone the rest of the time, hoping for the temp service to call.

Getting low on fresh food on day six after the attack, Brody walked to the local grocery store where he normally shopped. "Should have known," Brody said under his breath. The shelves were bare. With limited fuel, not many trucks were going anywhere. That included grocery store supply trucks, though they were getting priority over everything except fuel deliveries, and medical transport.

Brody turned around and walked out without buying anything. "Prep time," he said to himself, going back to his apartment to get his mountain bike and trailer. He still had a month's worth of LTS food in the apartment, but he decided to move some from the storage room he rented in case non-motorized travel was restricted, too. Better to save fuel for more important needs.

It took him three trips to get what he wanted, getting the manager from the office each time to open the gate to the facility. It was electronically controlled and wasn't working, though the power was on. Supplied for a few days, Brody continued to try to find work. Then work found him. The temp service called and asked if he could operate small construction equipment like backhoes, skid steer loaders, and such. Brody said, "Yes, I can."

It had been several years since he had, but he figured he could pick it up again quickly. He didn't ask where the job was going to be, but he shrugged after he hung up and decided it really didn't matter.

The next day Brody checked the address three times when he arrived at what he thought he'd read. He was right the first time, too. It was a cemetery. There was no office, as such. Only what looked to Brody like a garage. Which, Brody decided, only made sense.

After locking his truck, Brody walked over to the building. Sure enough, it was a garage, with the access door on the other side. There was an elderly man there tinkering on a Case tractor backhoe.

“Wha’cha’ doing here, boy?” the old man asked.

“I’m Brody. The temp service sent me down here to work.”

“Bought time they brought in somebody. You ever dug a grave before?”

Brody shook his head.

“Well, come on along. Got the old goat to going.” The Case rumbled to life and the old man put away his tools. Climbing into the seat of the open ROPS cage, he started to pull out of the garage just as Brody started to step up and ride beside him.

“No riders, boy,” the old man said. “OSHA don’t like it. You walk. I’ll ride.”

Brody nodded and easily walked along side the old backhoe. The old man wasn’t pushing it very fast. He watched as the old man used the backhoe to carefully dig a grave, where the sod had already been removed. Brody knew enough about running equipment to know that the old man was an expert.

The old man maneuvered the backhoe away from the grave. There was another plot with the sod removed. “You do that one. Just like I did this one.” That was all he said before he turned around and walked off.

Climbing onto the backhoe, Brody worked rather slowly, until he’d acquainted himself with the eccentricities of the backhoe. Then he was able to dig a bit faster, though he knew he was nowhere as fast as the old man, nor as precise. He’d just finished the grave when another man, dressed in soiled coveralls, came up and pointed off in another section of the graveyard.

“Hop to it. We got nine more today.”

“Nine?” Brody asked.

The fellow hurried off without answering. Brody put the Case in gear and headed in the direction in which the man had pointed. It didn’t take him long to find the next plot needing to be dug. He worked steadily until after one and then went to his truck to get his lunch. He slipped out of his shirt, leaving on his T-shirt. It was really getting hot.

Brody had barely taken a bite of his sandwich when the old man came walking up slowly. “Hurry it up, boy. We gots lots more to do.”

“Don’t I get a lunch?” Brody asked, a bit annoyed.

“You got it. Now hurry up. I hope you know enough to stay out of sight during the ceremonies.”

“Sure,” Brody said, not having had a clue. But it made sense. Still eating his sandwich, and grabbing a bottle of water to take with him, Brody headed back to where he’d parked the backhoe. “Where next?”

“Pick a spot without a headstone, that isn’t already a fresh grave. Do the best you can peeling and saving the sod. Quantity is now the goal, over quality.”

Brody shrugged. “Sure thing. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Emit Smith. What’s it to you?”

“Nothing,” Brody quickly said. “Just wanted to know what to call you.”

“Don’t call me. This is my last day. You’re on your own as of right now,” Emit said. “Just gotta get my lunch bucket and I’m out of here.”

“But... What am I supposed to do? Who will sign my timecard?”

“Take it to the coroner’s office. He’s in charge of this mess. This part of it, anyway.”

Brody was confused. But when he took on a job, he completed it. Doing as Emit had said, Brody picked random undisturbed plots and kept digging all afternoon, until six. He had well over his eight in, without a real lunch, plus.

There was no one around when he parked the Case backhoe in the garage and closed the door. Another hearse was pulling into the cemetery as he pulled out. He had to stop and look at a telephone book to find out where the coroner’s office was. He drove down to the city morgue and asked for the coroner.

The person was on their way out the door and just pointed down the hallway. Brody went down it and found the office door marked Coroner’s Office. He knocked on the door and went in when a voice said, “Come in.”

“Yes? What is it?” The man looked up then. “Oh. Who are you?”

“Brody Cunningham. I’ve been digging graves at the city cemetery. I’m a temp. I was told you would sign off my time card.”

“For crying out loud! This should be taken care of by the City Cemetery Administrator. Who told you me?”

“Emit Smith. He said it was his last day.”

“You’re kidding! That old geezer is quitting? He’s been grave digger at that cemetery since he was nineteen.”

“He told me it was his last day. I’ve no way of knowing if he means it or not. He sure looked like he did.”

Brody held out the time card to the coroner. According to the name plate on his desk his name was Dr. Steven Crane. “Dr. Crane?”

Crane essentially snatched the card from Brody’s hand. “Let me see! I might as well... Wait. This card goes through Sunday. I’m not about to sign it and let you put any hours on it you want. Looks like you’re already fudging. Nine and a half hours today?”

“Emit had me work through lunch, and I had to finish the grave I was on. He had me dig a bunch of them. What’s going on?” Brody’s inquisitive nature had gotten the best of him.

“People die. They need graves. Here. Bring this back when you have Saturday and Sunday entered.”

“You want me to work the weekend?”

“People die every day of the week, or didn’t you know that?”

“Yes, sir. I know that. But...” Brody needed the work. Why not? At least he wasn’t digging the graves by hand. “Okay. Saturday and Sunday it is. Can I take a lunch?”

Dr. Crane suddenly looked thoughtful. “Well... Of course you’re entitled to a lunch... But make it a short one.”

The telephone rang and Dr. Crane answered it. He hadn’t given Brody the time card back so Brody waited. And listened to one half of the conversation.

“How many?” Pause “Aren’t we going to get Federal help?” Pause. “I imagine so, but...” Pause. “Have you seen the weather forecast?” Pause. “That means we’re going to have to go to extreme measures.”

Dr. Crane hung up the telephone slowly. Suddenly he looked up at Brody, startled. “You didn’t hear any of that. You understand?”

Brody nodded. Something was up. Not only was he curious, he did need the money.

“Oh. Here. Have Julie Anne take care of this tomorrow.”

“Julie Anne?” Brody asked, taking the card when Dr. Crane held it out.

“Julie Anne Baumgartner. She’s the Cemetery Administrator. She’ll be out there in the morning to give you some instructions. If she isn’t, you give me a call. You have a cell phone?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Brody asked, taking out his Motorola and showing it to the doctor.

“Take my card. Call me if she isn’t there and start doing what you were doing today.” With that Dr. Crane put his head down and began reading the material he’d been reading when Brody had gone in.

Taking the card, Brody left. “Something is up,” Brady said to himself as he went back out to his pick up. It seemed even hotter now with the sun going down than earlier in the day. Brody hadn’t seen the weather forecast that morning. He turned up the AC in the truck and the cab was just getting cool by the time he got home.

Brody flipped the light switch when he went into the apartment, but noting happened. He turned on the battery lamp on the bookcase by the door of the apartment and then, without thinking, tried the TV remote. “Dummy!” he said to himself and tossed the remote back onto the sofa. Brody pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and began checking boxes that were stacked along the wall of the apartment. It took him only two tries to find the small battery operated TV. He had thing organized fairly well.

There were batteries with the TV and he put them in and turned the unit on. All five local stations were broadcasting. Just to find out, Brody hooked the cablevision cable to the TV. Nothing. He went back to the TV’s built-in antenna. He watched his favorite station. They were running on backup power the anchor woman said.

“The best information we have is that this is a cascade failure related to the terrorists’ attacks on the electrical grid in other parts of the nation. The city authorities are asking that everyone that doesn’t have a critical job function to stay home until this situation is rectified.

“Anyone in critical need of food should call one of the food banks that have been set up. The numbers are scrolling across the bottom of your screen. The hospitals are already overloaded. Only in the most serious cases should you call 911 or take someone to the hospital.

“Mike, how is the weather going to cooperate?”

The scene changed to the weather set. Mike didn’t look too hopeful. “Janice, I’m afraid the weather is not going to cooperate at all. The temperatures from this new system will continue to climb just slightly tonight and then zoom to over one-hundred tomorrow. Janice.”

“Thank you, Mike. Definitely not good news. As with those needing food, a few ‘cooling centers’ have been set up around the city. Those numbers are now scrolling at the bottom of the screen. Please...”

The TV screen went snowy. Brody tried another channel. They were still up and running. But saying the same things. Hot and hotter the next few days. With no word on when the electricity might come back on. Limited fuel and food deliveries, if any.

“Not good,” Brody said. He opened up the windows of the apartment and got ready for bed. Not much to do but sleep. He didn’t want to waste battery power reading or watching what TV there was. He set his alarm for the next morning just before he went to bed.

Brody was bathed in sweat when the alarm woke him up the next morning. Crossing his fingers he went to the bathroom. There was no water pressure. He used the bathroom, realizing that after the one flush, he would have to start using the chemical toilet.

He used some of his bottled water supply to take a quick sponge bath and then got dressed. The roads were a mess, with all the traffic signal lights off and not enough police to direct traffic at all the major intersections. A few civilians were trying to do the directing, but they were ignored for the most part.

Brody had expected it and took the long way around to get to the cemetery to avoid the grid lock. He had the garage opened up and the Case running, after a bit of fiddling with it. A few minutes later, Brody was about ready to call Dr. Crane, but he saw a car pull in and park next to his truck.

“Miss Baumgartner?” Brody asked when he met her halfway to the garage.

“Ms, if you don’t mind. And you are?”

“Brody. Dr. Crane said you’d have some instructions for me this morning?” Brody lifted his cap and ran a sleeve across his forehead. It was already hot.

“Yes. We are... to be blunt... having a burial crisis in the midst of this larger crisis. We are going to have to stop doing individual graves, except for those that are willing to pay extra. The bodies are stacking up in refrigerator trucks and we’re running out of diesel for them. I will show you where I want slit trenches dug for mass graves. You’ll dig one for immediate use, and then start on the others, filling the first as bodies are added.”

Brody was stunned. They were turning to mass graves already. It was inconceivable. “There are that many deaths already?”

“Yes. Now don’t stand around. Get the tractor and follow me.” Julie Anne Baumgartner was all business.

Brody followed slowly behind her as she walked to several places in the cemetery and pointed out what she wanted. After the fifth spot she motioned for Brody to join her on the ground. He stopped the engine on the backhoe and hopped down.

“This is the one I want you to start with. Come back to the car with me. I have gloves, masks, and Tyvek coveralls for you. You’ll have to help with the bodies. We’re short of body bags so many of the deceased will be in the clothes they were in when they died.”

“But I didn’t...” Brody started to protest. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be handling dead bodies. Even with personal protective equipment.

“Look, mister, if you don’t want to do it let me know right now and I’ll get someone who will.”

Brody suddenly noticed how haggard Julie Anne looked. Despite the professional business clothes, the perfect makeup, and tidy bun her hair was done up in, Julie Anne was on the edge of collapse. Brody felt sorry for her.

“No. I’ll do it. But I want a couple of things in return for going well above and beyond the job description.”

Julie Anne’s lips were pursed angrily, but she said nothing.

“I want all the PPE required. If you don’t have a large enough supply, I suggest you get one. I won’t work without it. And bottled water. It’s going to be hot. I’ll need a very large supply. Finally, things may get way out of hand here. I want to be paid in pre-1965 US junk silver coins.”

“You have to be kidding me! Why pre-1965 coins and where am I supposed to find them, even if I did agree to this... blackmail?”

“Careful throwing around words like blackmail. You need me more than I need you. I’m not out to gouge you. You can convert at whatever the last spot price was on silver. Several of the local coin stores have junk silver coins.”

“You’ve worked temp before. You know we don’t pay you. We pay the temp agency and they pay you. You’ll have to work out that deal with them.”

“See ya,” Brody said and started walking toward the parking lot.

“No! Wait! Okay, okay! I’ll see what I can do.” She joined him and the two continued toward the parking lot to get the initial set of PPE for Brody. When they got to the car Julie Anne used the remote and opened the trunk.

Brody was satisfied with the quality of the PPE. The protective hooded and booted coveralls were the good stuff, as were the rubber boots and gloves. There was a box of 3M P-100 masks. “Try to get me a Millennium full face CBRN mask and a box of filters. I’m afraid the P-100’s might not be adequate.”

Julie Anne’s brow wrinkled. “You seem to know something about personal protective equipment.”

“I’ve used it before. I want the best. This is going to be a risky job before it’s over.”

“That’s fair. I’ll see what I can do. The water shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll pick up a case...”

“Three cases to start. At least. It’s going to be over a hundred for days, I expect. I’ll drink almost a case a day. I’ll stick with you as long as this takes, if you look out for my needs. I’m not going to have the time, it looks like. That includes food. It’s hard to come by. MRE’s are okay if you can get them. They can come out of the pay.”



Julie Anne had started to frown, but at Brody's assertion he'd stick with her made a difference to her. She believed him. "Okay. I'll make it at least a case a day. And some food. For each of you."

"Each of us?" Brody asked.

"Isn't Dwayne here?"

"Didn't see anybody else. Oh. You must mean the guy that was here yesterday. No. I haven't seen him today."

"I'll have to try to find someone else if he's left. Emit I understand. He's way past retirement age. No need for him to endure this situation." Julie Anne sighed.

"Um... I know someone that will probably do it. Same terms as me."

"If you can get at least one more reliable, hard worker, I'll do everything I can to get you the silver coins in payment. If I have to take it out of my own salary."

"One I can pretty much guarantee. Two maybe. More than that, I don't think so, though I'll ask if you want me to."

"Please do."

Brody took the boxes out of the trunk and carried them to the garage. Julie Anne carried the rubber boots. There were six pairs, two pairs of three different sizes, still tied together in pairs from the store.

"Will you trust me enough to go ahead and start working?" Julie Anne asked. "The first two or three... deliveries... will be going in the private graves."

"Give me your word you'll give it a real try, then we have a deal," Brody said.

"I do. Give you my word I'll do my best." She held out her hand.

Brody just said, "Your word is good enough. Don't wait too long on that water." He turned and headed back to the Case to start digging. As he walked he pulled out his cell phone, mentally crossing his fingers that cell service was still up. It was.

"Hey, Ranger! Yeah, it's Brody. Got a gig for you if you're interested. Hard, nasty work, PPE provided, possibly pay in silver. Don't you want to know what it is?"

Brody laughed at Ranger's response and then told him the address of the cemetery. Next he called two more of his acquaintances. Neither one was interested. They preferred to stay holed up where they were and wait out the troubles. Both were well enough equipped and supplied to do so.

It was almost noon when Julie Anne and Ranger both showed up within minutes of each other. Ranger introduced himself there in the parking lot and Julie Anne had him carry the water and other items from her trunk to the garage.

“Please tell Brody that I made the arrangements he wanted. You should be able to find him. He’ll fill you in on what you are required to do.”

“Very good,” Ranger replied and took off at an easy trot, despite the heat, to find the source of the sound he was hearing. It didn’t take long.

When he trotted up to the Case backhoe Brody saw him and shut down the machine. “Hi, Ranger! I see you found the place. You still okay with the work?”

“Why not? Just a job. Met the boss lady. She said she’d made the arrangements you wanted. That the silver?”

Brody nodded. “You want to take over. I need a break, a bottle of water, and a bite of lunch.”

“Sure, buddy. Looks like an eight foot wide slit trench. Going to be a mass grave, I take it.”

Brody nodded, and climbed down off the backhoe. The ROPS threw a little shade, but it sure would have been nice to have an air conditioned cab instead of the open framework of the rollover protective system.

Ranger was an experienced heavy equipment operator and went right to it after getting on the backhoe. Brody didn’t have to worry about him and headed for the parking lot to get his lunch out of the truck.

He saw three hearses pull in as he was walking. They were headed for the individual graves that were still open. After getting his lunch box from the truck, Brody went up to the garage. He saw the six cases of bottled water and three cases of MRE’s. There were two boxes, each containing a Millennium CBRN respirator, and two boxes that contained ten replacement filters each.

“You really came through,” Brody said aloud. He sat down after pulling one of the bottles of water free from the case and slowly ate his sandwich. It was the last of the fresh food he’d had in the fridge when the power went out.

The freeze bottle in the insulated lunch box was still cold and he ran it luxuriously over his face and his arms, relishing the coolness as he ate. He used the porta-jon that sat on the back side of the garage and washed his hands with water from the bottle he’d been drinking.

The hearses were leaving when Brody headed back to where Ranger was working. He stopped at each of the three graves. The caskets were still sitting on the lowering apparatus at each one. Brody checked it out and figured how to operate the equipment. He lowered the caskets

in turn and took the equipment back to the garage, making several trips to get everything moved, including the mats covering the mounds of dirt.

After that, Brody used his truck to carry stuff. Apparently Emit had used the backhoe bucket to move the stuff around, but with it tied up constantly, Brody decided he could invest a little in the effort. The diesel tank by the garage was full, so he could get replacement fuel.

The dreaded sight of a semi truck pulling into the cemetery came just as Brody was going to join Ranger, in the truck, after getting sidetracked with the graves. The driver of the truck saw Brody and drove up and stopped beside him. "Where do you want me?" he asked.

"Follow me," Brody said and headed for the first slit trench. He'd loaded the PPE he and Ranger would need to handle the bodies safely.

Ranger saw them coming and moved the backhoe out of the way. He met Brody at his truck on the narrow lane that ran through the cemetery. "Got the... Oh. I see it in the back. Fun starts now, I guess."

"Yeah," Brody said, giving a bit of a sigh.

The semi driver was getting parked where it would be the easiest to unload the bodies from the trailer into the slit trench. He was opening the trailer doors, wisps of frozen vapor trailing out as they opened. Brody and Ranger had the protective equipment on and began to move the bodies.

"Aren't you helping?" Brody asked the driver through the voicemitter of the Millennium respirator.

"Not bloody likely," replied the man. "These are all yours. I'm just the transport. Here's the manifest."

"After we're done," Brody said. It was a struggle to get the body bags out of the truck and carried down the slope at the end of the trench and laid out side by side. Brody managed not to gag at the idea of the frozen bodies inside the body bags and wondered how much worse it was going to be if the coroner did run out of body bags.

With the last body in the trench, Brody and Ranger each took an independent count, both of which matched the manifest the driver handed Brody. Brody signed it and the driver hurriedly left, having closed up the trailer as soon as the last body was out.

Brody wished he'd waited. It would have been nice to spend a few minutes in the reefer trailer to cool off. But he couldn't so he went back to work on the backhoe, giving Ranger a chance to go get water and take a rest.

Brody covered the bodies they'd just laid out, leaving a ramp so they could do the next batch. When he'd finished that he filled in the other three graves and met Ranger back at the slit trench.

They took turns running the backhoe and resting, unloading one more truck late that afternoon. Julie Anne showed up to tell Brody that it was the last load for the day, but there would be more the next day. "Can you work a while long and get more trenches dug?"

Brody looked at Ranger, who nodded. "We'll get done what we can. It's actually easier on us to do the digging in the cooler hours of the evening. Not that it's that much cooler. But it helps. Is there any chance you could get us a rental machine? Just a Bobcat if not another backhoe. We waste quite a bit of time moving the hoe back and forth. If we had something with which to backfill that we could leave at the trench in use, it would be easier."

Julie Anne nodded. "Makes sense. I'll see what I can do."

Julie Anne left and Brody and Ranger went back to work.

The two men switched off and on until midnight, taking turns napping and digging. Since Ranger lived quite some distance away, he went home with Brody and stayed at his place. They were back at the cemetery, working, when Julie Anne showed up the next morning.

"My! You two have done an amazing amount of work! How late did you work last night?"

"Midnight. It was a lot nicer, even at eighty-five degrees, than it was earlier in the day. Not as hard on the Case, either."

"That should be better. The Bobcat skid loader should be here any minute. Is there anything else you need?"

"I'm a little uncomfortable burying these people with no good ID to each location."

Julie Anne's face fell and she looked about to cry. "I know. But we just don't have the means. The manifests indicate which trench, but that is all. We have to be careful to make sure the trenches are marked as to which each is."

"There is a map in the garage I've been marking with what I know," Brody said.

"That's good."

All three turned when the rental delivery truck showed up, right on the heels of the first reefer tractor trailer. With sighs that Julie Anne noted, Brody and Ranger suited up for the handling of the bodies.

"Just have them park it here," Brody told Julie Anne. "We'll come get it when we need it. Oh. And I'm using my truck to get around faster. Just replacing the fuel from the cemetery tank. I hope that's okay. Speeds things up a great deal."

"I suppose that will be all right. But just what you use. Fuel, even for the city services, is almost gone."

Brody nodded and he and Ranger got into the pickup and led the semi to the slit trench. It was as hard as Brody thought it would be when the body bags ran out and the frozen bodies were in only the clothes they'd died in, in most cases. A few were wrapped in bed sheets or blankets. It made the bodies much harder to handle, too. The body bags had handles. The bodies didn't.

Julie Anne, good as her word, showed up Monday morning with several tubes of silver coins. "I thought we'd better just do it and I'll work out the required financial details with the city later."

"Excellent!" Ranger said, as Brody counted out his share and then pocketed his own.

"Thank you," Brody told Julie Anne. "I know this was a bit out of the ordinary, but it was important to us."

Julie Anne shrugged. "The price of things is going up and even cash isn't taken everywhere. I've already seen one service station that has their sign posted 'No checks. No credit cards. No cash. Gold or silver coins only.' I guess you aren't the only one with the same idea."

Brody and Ranger exchanged a glance. She had no clue.

"What is the cause of all these deaths?" Brody asked the question that had been on his mind for days.

"Heat and dehydration for the most part. Without power there's no AC or water. The cooling shelters are full, but even they are limited as to what they can provide. Without fuel the generators aren't running. There have been several deaths from people on electrically powered respirators and other critical life support systems. Even those with battery backups are dying as their batteries die and can't get recharged. The hospital generators are out of fuel for the most part and the city hasn't been able to get more.

"I was in the EOC this morning before I came out here and it's like this all over the region. All over the country." She looked down at the ground for a long moment. "I don't know how much longer I'll be able to keep our bargain. I've got all the water I could round up, and MRE's. The silver... Well, to be honest, I bought all the junk silver, as you called it, three coin stores had. Two more didn't have any. They'd already sold out. Only numismatics were left, and I didn't think you wanted those at that value. "What I have is only enough for another full week for the two of you."

"Well," said Brody slowly, "Let's just get through this week and see where we stand."

"You'll continue to work this week?" Julie Anne asked. Her body language was saying she had her doubts.

"I said I'd stick by you for this," Brody said. "Ranger?"

“I’m good. As long as I can stay at your place,” Ranger replied. “My rig is half full, but I don’t know when I’ll be able to get more fuel.”

“Okay. That’s settled,” Brody said. “You have your crew for the week.”

“Thank you,” Julie Anne replied. “It means a lot to me.”

So Brody and Ranger worked the week, putting in ten to twelve hour days, through Sunday. Julie Anne hadn’t shown up much. Only once with three more cases of water and a case of MRE’s.

Brody and Ranger lost several pounds each over those few days, between the work and the heat. They conserved water and food as they could, but couldn’t take the chance of becoming dehydrated or lose strength due to lack of food.

They used only a case of the water between them per day, and one MRE each per day, supplementing both from Brody’s prep stocks. Ranger would give him some in return, once he could go to his place and get them. To save fuel, Brody was leaving his truck in the garage at the cemetery and riding his bicycle back and forth. Ranger had his bike in the locked down in the back of his truck and they both rode.

It was a month after the attacks, and Brody had put in two weeks and three days at the City Cemetery, along with Ranger. The number of bodies they were burying went up every day. Fortunately the city had recently enlarged the cemetery and there was enough room for the slit trenches.

Monday after the two full weeks rolled around Julie Anne showed up at the cemetery right after Brody and Ranger rode up on their bicycles.

“You don’t look good,” was the first thing Brody said when she got out of her car.

“I guess I haven’t eaten in a couple of days...” her words faded away as she stood up outside the car and swayed slightly.

Brody grabbed her on one side and Ranger the other. They got her sitting down on the edge of the back seat of her car. Ranger ran around to the other side of the car and opened the doors on that side to collect what little breeze there was.

“Why haven’t you said something, for heaven’s sake?” Brady asked. He turned to Ranger. “Get one of the MRE cookies and a bottle of water.”

With a quick nod Ranger was off like a shot to the garage and was back only a couple minutes later with the requested items. Brody was fanning Julie Anne’s face. The heat wave hadn’t broken and it was already ninety-five degrees at seven in the morning.

Ranger handed Brody the water first and Brody wetted his bandanna with it and bathed Julie Anne’s face gently. She finally came around and Brody helped her get a sip of water and

then took the cookie that Ranger had unwrapped. "Nibble on this," Brody said and guided her hands with the cookie in them up to her mouth.

It took a few bites for her to come fully cognizant of what was going on. She tugged her hands gently from Brody's. "I'm okay, now. Thank you."

"Why haven't you been eating?" Brody asked.

Julie Anne gave a slight shrug. "Sometimes I forget, and there just isn't much around. And I can't get any money out of the bank for what is available."

Brody looked around at Ranger. "You bring the rest of the MRE?"

"Right here," he said, handing the package to Brody.

Against Julie Anne's rather feeble attempts to prevent it, Brody made sure she ate everything in the meal package, over the next hour. Ranger had gone on and fired up the equipment, getting ready for the expected deluge of corpses.

"Please stop fussing over me," Julie Anne managed to say with a show of her old self. And you should have Ranger stop what he's doing. I don't have any more money to pay you."

"Don't worry about that right now. Why'd you come out here, anyway? Things are working fine."

"I can't let you work for no pay. I can't even get you any more food or water. And the fuel must be about gone in the cemetery tank. I can't find any to refill it. We'll have to stop pretty soon, anyway."

"Well, for the moment you just sit here and relax. Let Ranger and me worry about whether or not we get paid. The fuel could be a problem, but I have an idea about that." Brody moved off, got on his bicycle and headed off to talk to Ranger.

When Ranger saw Brody coming, he stopped the Case. They were stopping it every time now, to save fuel.

"She's doing okay, now," Brody told Ranger. "Look, she's admitted she can't pay up anymore. No more food or water. And the diesel is about gone..."

"You want to keep going, somehow," Ranger said. He knew his buddy pretty well.

Brody nodded.

"I'm okay with it, since we have food and water to eat. Need to be doing something, even if we don't get paid. But I don't know about the fuel. No way to dig all these graves by hand."

“Yeah. About that. You’re right. But... You know... We could actually fill them by hand. Just dig them with the backhoe and Bobcat until the fuel runs out. Maybe hold onto a reserve for some kind of emergency.

“And this isn’t an emergency?” Ranger asked dryly.

“You know what I mean,” Brody said with a short laugh. “You in?”

Ranger nodded. “I’m in.”

“Okay. I’ll tell her. It should make her feel better.”

Ranger waved in acknowledgement and Brody rode back to the parking lot. Julie Anne was sitting in the back seat, her legs inside now, with her head back on the seat. Brody hated to bother her, but decided she would rather know as soon as possible.

“Ms Baumgartner...” At Brody’s words Julie Anne came awake abruptly. She looked around frantically for a moment and then relaxed when she saw Brody.

“I’m sorry to wake you.” Brody looked at her quizzically. “You not only haven’t eaten, you haven’t slept much the last few days, either, have you?”

She shook her head, too tired to put up a front.

“Well,” Brody said, hoping the news would cheer her as much as he was hoping it would, “Ranger and I came up with a plan. We’re going to keep working. The pay, if any, can be straightened out later. We have enough food and water to get us through for a while. To conserve fuel, we just going to dig the trenches with the backhoe and Bobcat. We’ll fill them by hand as we get more... deliveries.”

To Brody’s astonishment, Julie Anne began to cry. “I thought you’d be pleased!” he hurriedly said, having no idea how to handle a crying woman.

“I... I... I... am. It’s just such a relief... and I don’t know how to thank you... or pay you... or even if this is legal.” Julie Anne swayed on the seat and then fainted, leaning over to one side.

It looked uncomfortable and Brody reached into the car and straightened her up. She was breathing fine, and Brody decided she was just too tired and worn down. She’d be okay if she got some sleep. Working as gently as he could, Brody shifted her again, this time to a prone position on the back seat. He closed the doors all around, after rolling down all the windows. He’d check on her occasionally, but a semi was coming in and he needed to get back to work.

Grabbing his PPE, he climbed on the bicycle and headed for the semi. He gave the driver a ‘come with me’ sign and pedaled toward the slit trench now in use. Ranger saw them coming and met them there. Brody and Ranger suited up as the driver opened up the trailer.



After the bodies were laid out in the bottom of the trench, Brody rode back to check on Julie Anne, and got a shovel from the garage before he went back to the trench. Ranger was waiting. "Where's my shovel?" he asked.

"Well, since this was my idea, I figured I'd do most of the shoveling, and let you do most of the digging." Brody saw Ranger start to protest. "Don't worry. There is going to be plenty of shovel work to go around, after we run out of diesel."

"Okay... I guess," Ranger said, rather reluctantly. He headed back to the trench he was working on.

It was hard, grueling labor in the heat, shoveling the dirt back into the trench. And it was worse when he had to put his PPE back on to continue. Some of the bodies had been well into decomposition when found, and now, as they began to thaw in the heat, since it was taking so long to cover them, the smell was terrible.

But with the respirator in place, and acting quickly to get at least an inch or so of dirt over the bodies, Brody was able to take off the respirator again, and shove the coveralls down to his waist, tying the arms to keep them from falling down to his boots.

He had to take a break or pass out himself, so he got on the bicycle and went to check on Julie Anne. She was still asleep. Brody got a bottle of water out of the garage and downed it. He took another down to Julie Anne's car and put it where she would find it if she woke up before he returned.

Brody watched her sleep for a few minutes, as he rested, and then forced himself to go back to work. It was noon the next time he checked on Julie Anne. Ranger rode up on his bicycle and asked, "How's she doing?"

"Okay, I think. She fainted and then fell asleep. I'm beginning to get..." Brody's words faded when Julie Anne groaned and sat up, her face bathed in sweat.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. Seeing the water she reached for the bottle eagerly and drank half of it in a very unladylike manner.

"Oh, that is so good!" she said, between sips now. "How long have I been out?"

"It's a little after noon, now," Brody replied.

"Oh, my Lord! I should have been at the office hours ago!" She scrambled out of the back of the car.

"Wait a minute," Brody said, laying a hand on her arm as she swayed slightly. "You're going to eat something first, and drink some more water."

"I can't. I need..."

“You need to stay hydrated and nourished,” Brody insisted. “Come on. You can eat lunch with us.”

Brody didn’t exactly drag Julie Anne with him, but she would have had to struggle to break his firm grip.

“But this is your food and water!” she protested when Ranger tossed her one of the MRE’s.

“We’re in this together, now,” Brody said.

It seemed to satisfy her, for Julie Anne quit protesting and let Ranger and Brody help her get the meal pack open and the entrée in the included heater. She finished the first bottle of water, and after only a moment’s hesitation reached for another in the half empty case. There were two cases under it.

“It is so hot,” she said a few minutes later. “I really don’t want any more of this.”

Brody decided he’d pushed all he could. “Okay. At least you ate something. And don’t worry about it going to waste,” he said with a grin. “Ranger and I will finish it up.”

Julie Anne managed a small smile. “That’s good. Waste not, want not. Right?”

“Exactly,” Brody said. He reached into the case of water and handed Julie Anne two more bottles. “Take these with you in case you can’t find any where you’re going.”

“But...”

“Take it,” Ranger said. “Brody and I can fend for ourselves pretty good.”

“Well, then, thank you both. I do have to get back to the office. I just hope I have enough fuel.”

“Maybe you’d better take my truck,” Brody said, drawing a startled look from Ranger, though he didn’t say anything.

“Oh, I couldn’t do that!” Julie Anne protested.

“It’s got city diesel in it,” Brody said. “So, why not?”

“I really don’t think I have enough fuel... The warning light came on last night.” She was hesitating, but Brody decided his silence was better than more encouragement. It was.

“Well, since it is city fuel, I will take it. But you’ll be compensated in some way in the future for its use, and the work you’re doing now,” she said firmly.

Brody took the keys out of his pocket and handed them to Julie Anne. "Uh... It's bigger than your car, by quite a bit. Be a little cautious about getting into small spaces with it."

Ranger chuckled.

Very seriously Julie Anne said, "I will. Thank you for this."

Brody watched anxiously as Julie Anne got into his pride and joy and started up the truck. She backed it up just fine, but when she put it into drive, she chirped the tires when she pressed the accelerator. It had a lot more 'go' to it than her little hybrid.

"I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it," Ranger said as Brody watched his truck disappear, driven by what amounted to a total stranger.

"Yeah," Brody said, turning back to his bicycle with a sigh. "Me either."

Brody breathed a little sigh of relief when he and Ranger biked up to the garage and saw Julie Anne pulling into the cemetery just before seven that evening. Brody thought she looked as bad as she had that morning when she climbed down out of the truck.

"How'd it go?" he asked as she walked wearily up to the two men.

Julie Anne sighed. "No end in sight," she said and sighed. "I can't thank you enough for doing this."

"Yeah, well, what about you?" Brody asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll get paid next month. Maybe there will be some food deliveries. And fuel. And the electricity will come back on. And the water will come back on. And..." She was starting to get tears in her eyes again and obviously hated the fact. She wiped them away angrily.

"I'll be fine," she said after a pause.

"Do you have enough fuel to get home?" Brody asked.

"I don't know... Even if I get there, how do I get back? The Mayor is expecting all of us to do our jobs, despite everything."

"Well, if it were me, I'd tell the Mayor where to get off," Ranger said. "Either get me the tools I need, or the job doesn't get done."

"Ranger isn't too fond of the Mayor," Brody explained when Julie Anne looked shocked.

"But I have to do the best that I can with what I have available," Julie Anne insisted. "It's part of my job. And besides, you are doing the same as I am."

“Yeah... Well... I’m doing it for Brody. Not the Mayor. And... well... for you, too. You’re showing gumption that... Never mind,” Ranger said. “We just need to figure out how to keep going. If these bodies aren’t buried or burned, there is going to be an epidemic, for sure. The city doesn’t need that. We don’t need that. I don’t need that.”

“Burned! We couldn’t possibly...” Julie Anne looked horror struck. “Even the mass graves...”

“There is the problem of fuel to burn them, anyway,” Ranger said. “Bodies don’t burn well on their own.”

“That’s enough, Ranger,” Brody said softly. “Look, Ms Baumgartner, we will continue to do what we can, but there is a limit.”

Julie Anne sighed. “I know. And I’m almost at mine. I honestly don’t know what to do. I may not even be able to get home.”

“You should stay with us until things get better,” Ranger suddenly said.

“What? That’s preposterous!” Julie Anne said, rather outraged at the suggestion.

Brody quickly entered the conversation. “Wait,” he said. “Ranger does have a point. You obviously don’t have any food at your place, no electricity, no water, out of fuel to get around... We need to conserve resources, not only for this job, but for our own well being.

“You’ve helped us out above and beyond the call, at your own detriment. Sure, we’ve been working, but we’d probably be helping out in some way, anyway...” Ranger harrumphed.

Brody looked at him, but looked back at Julie Anne. “Ranger and I are...” he looked over at Ranger again and Ranger gave a slight nod, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Well,” Brody continued, “Ranger and I are preppers. We have equipment and supplies stored for emergencies.”

Julie Anne looked shocked. Her anger was obvious when she started to respond. “You’re survivalists! You mean to tell me...”

But Brody cut her off. “We are not survivalists the way the media describes them. Yes, we have food and water. But without the additional supplies you provided, the work that has been done, wouldn’t have been done. Ranger and I are helping. You can’t deny that. If we let ourselves go the way you have, what good would we be?”

Julie Anne was frowning, trying to understand. “Okay. Yes, if you hadn’t agreed to help I don’t know what I would have done. But hoarding... at a time like this.”

Ranger stiffened and Brody saw it.

“Is it hoarding to have made preparations beforehand for something like this? We took only enough from you to get by while doing the job. You know good and well all the city departments that had the means were doing the same thing you were doing to get the job done. Providing needed supplies to those doing critical work. That food wouldn’t have been distributed to the masses. It was for internal use from the first. So it isn’t hoarding in any way, shape, form, or fashion.”

“Well...” Julie Anne was thinking about it, Brody could see. “I suppose there were several of us using in house supplies to help maintain a working group. Perhaps I was a bit harsh in my judgment.”

Ranger began to relax.

“But that doesn’t mean...” Julie Anne suddenly continued. “What would people say, my staying with my employees?” She blushed.

“Who’s to know?” asked Ranger. “I’d bet you a mint people are grouping up and helping each other wherever they can.” He suddenly smiled. “Of course there are those that are holed up, waiting this out. That’s what I would be doing, except for Brody. And you.”

Brody could see she was wavering. “But I’d still need to get some things from my apartment...” She said.

“We can take care of that,” Ranger said, much to Brody’s surprise. “We leave your rig here until we can find fuel for it. Same with mine. Take Brody’s rig to your place, and then mine, to get what’s needed, then find you a bicycle so you can still get around. We fill up Brody’s truck and the equipment one last time, and then what fuel is left in the cemetery tank is for life and death emergencies.”

Julie Anne looked like she was trying to find fault with the plan, but couldn’t. She closed her mouth and nodded.

“Brody?” Ranger asked.

“Best plan I’ve heard all day,” Brody replied with a smile. “Let’s do it.”

Resigned to the plan, Julie Anne locked up her vehicle and joined Brody and Ranger in Brody’s truck. “Where do you live?” Brody asked her.

When she told him, Brody said, “We’ll go there first. Ranger is further out.”

They were all silent as Brody drove. Once they were stopped by a city police officer on horseback. He was going to commandeer the vehicle until Julie Anne showed her ID and said it already was commandeered.

“Pay’s to have friends in high places,” Ranger said with a grin when Brody started up the truck again and they continued on their way.

The two men waited outside while Julie Anne went into her apartment to pack some things. She came out carrying one large suitcase, and one small one. Brody and Ranger put them in the back of the truck.

Then they headed for Ranger's house on the outskirts of town. Brody had to do quite a bit of weaving around, avoiding cars whose owners had simply run them until the fuel tanks were empty, rather than parking them with a useable amount of fuel. For emergencies.

Ranger had Brody stop at a house near his in the darkness. All of the block was dark, except for the house where they stopped. "Better let me go up alone. Harvey is a bit touchy," Ranger said.

Rather cautiously, Julie Anne thought, Ranger started up the walkway to the front door of the house. He didn't get far before several bright lights came on and illuminated the entire front yard.

Through the open window of the truck Julie Anne and Brody heard the challenge come from the house. "State your business. I am armed and will shoot to kill if you make any aggressive moves."

"It's Ranger. Code word 'memorabilia'."

"Okay, Ranger. Come ahead. I see others. They staying put or coming in?"

"Staying put," Ranger replied and entered the house when the front door opened and the outdoor lights went out.

Ten minutes later the garage door opened and Ranger pushed a bicycle toward the truck. The garage door closed, there never having been any light shown while it was open. Ranger put the bike in the back of the truck and climbed back into the cab beside Julie Anne.

"Got you a bike," Ranger said with a smile. "You owe me ten bucks face value junk silver coin. When you can come up with it."

"Okay," Julie Anne said, "Thank you." Ranger just shrugged and looked out the open window, a slight smile on his lips.

When they arrived at Ranger's, all three went in after Brody parked the truck, bed toward the garage door. Ranger turned on a battery lamp in the living room when they entered. "Be just a few of minutes," he said, heading for the bedroom. "You guys can start moving stuff from the garage. Brody, you'll know what to take. The containers area marked."

"Sure thing," Brody said, pulling his compact flashlight from a pocket. "Let's go." He pointed the flashlight toward the kitchen and led the way to the garage.

After opening the garage door, Brody checked the shelves against one wall that held much of Ranger's preps. Checking each container, he pointed out one to Julie Anne and she headed out to the truck with it, followed by Brody with another.

They met Ranger at the truck. He'd carried another of the totes from his bedroom and headed back for more, as Julie Anne and Brody did the same. By the time Brody closed and locked the garage door and went outside through the kitchen and then living room, Ranger had the last tote he wanted in the truck, too.

"Get what we need?" Brody asked Ranger.

"Yep. We should be good for a while, except for water. And we can get that from some of the ponds and lakes in the city parks."

"The Mayor made an announcement about not doing that," Julie Anne said. "People started doing that and got sick, right off the bat."

"We won't," Brody said. "My filter will clean it up more than necessary for use."

"Ditto mine," Ranger added.

"I think they may be guarding them, to keep people from getting the water and getting sick." Julie Anne looked worried, though the two men couldn't see it, even in the dash lights.

Brody looked past Julie Anne at Ranger, and then brought his eyes back to the road. "Not going to be a problem," he said. "Ranger and I will be able to get the water, even if there are guards."

"I can be pretty sneaky, if the situation calls for it," Ranger told Julie Anne.

"I just don't want anyone hurt or arrested on my account," she replied.

"If it comes to that, we'll be careful. There could be other options."

There was silence the rest of the way back to Brody's apartment building. It was approaching midnight and all three were exhausted by the time everything from the truck was carried up to Brody's third story apartment.

Brody showed Julie Anne the bathroom and chemical toilet, along with the small basin for hand washing. Brody opened up some meat spread and a box of crackers for their late supper and then changed the sheets on his bed for Julie Anne to use. He and Ranger would flip for the sofa. The loser got the floor. They were all asleep by one in the morning.

They were all also up at six the next morning. Julie Anne had been more than a little concerned for her privacy, but both men went well out of their way to give her all she wanted and then some. Brody had breakfast ready for them when Julie Anne and Ranger had finished in the bathroom and were dressed. He did the same while they ate.

Since they were going to fuel up Brody's truck, they all rode it, with the bicycles in the back. Brody dropped Julie Anne and her new bicycle off at City Hall, and he and Ranger went out the rest of the way to the cemetery. The first thing they did upon arriving was refuel the truck and the equipment. Ranger dropped the measuring stick in the tank and read it. Less than fifty gallons.

They'd barely finished when the first semi showed up. Things were getting worse. The truck had fuel for its engine, but none for the reefer trailer. The bodies would no longer be frozen, or even chilled. Even with the PPE on it was a terrible experience. The driver of the truck, after the first whiff when he opened the trailer doors, began to throw up and ran to the cab of the truck to get away from the smell.

It wasn't the first time they'd laid a baby to rest, but under these conditions the three that they did that morning were harder than any of the others. The two men could see the tears in each others eyes when they looked at one another after the last one was set down. Brody and Ranger covered the bodies with an inch or so of earth just as quickly as they could after they were in the trench and then slowly worked to finish filling the section.

That was the last semi. Apparently there was no more fuel for the big trucks. That is not to say the bodies quit coming. They didn't. But it was one or two at a time, in whatever city vehicle had a little fuel. Ambulances, street maintenance trucks, even some commercial trucks that still had a little fuel had been commandeered for the cemetery runs. More than one vehicle was left at the cemetery parking lot, without enough fuel to get back to their assigned station. A few of the drivers took off walking. Some caught rides with vehicles that still had fuel.

Brody had made a point of parking his truck in the cemetery garage and closing the door that morning. It was noon time, and Brody and Ranger were sitting outside the garage, eating their MRE lunch. There was only one more MRE left.

Julie Anne showed up on her bicycle, looking what could best be described as disheveled. She obviously wasn't a regular bike rider. At least she'd decided on wearing pants instead of one of her usual business suit skirt, blouse, and jacket combos.

"I hurt in places I didn't even know I had," she said, stepping off the bicycle when she got up to them. "I guess it's better than walking, but remind me not to plan any trips on one."

Brody and Ranger looked at one another, and then back at Julie Anne when she continued.

"How are you guys holding out?"

"It's tough," Brody said. "Without the reefers... It's just bad."

Julie Anne's face fell. "They've already run out of fuel and started using the small stuff?"



Ranger nodded and swept an arm to include the vehicles on the lot. "Small stuff is running out of fuel, too."

"What are we going to do?" Julie Anne asked, accepting the MRE and bottle of water that Brody held out to her. She sat down on an upturned bucket the way Brody and Ranger were to eat.

"All that we can do," Brody said, after taking a sip of water. "If the city can't get the bodies here, we can't bury them."

"But what happens then?" Julie Anne added a bit of water to the entrée heater pack and slipped the entrée in.

Brody and Ranger exchanged another of their meaningful looks.

"The way I see it," Brody said slowly, "is when we reach the point where we simply can't do anything else, we either decide to hole up at my place... Or we boogie on out of here for greener pastures."

"Leave?" Julie Anne asked. "We can't just leave!"

"Why not?" asked Ranger.

"Because... Well... Because... We just can't! What about the city?"

"You're in the know at the EOC," Brody said. "What is the city doing? And for how much longer can it do it?"

Julie Anne bit her lip. "People are trying. The ones that are left. Some left early on... A few more, every day. You've buried some that didn't have any supplies or couldn't take the heat or died of dehydration in their sleep. The Mayor keeps asking for help from the State, and the Governor is asking for help from the Feds. Everything is just falling apart! No one can get paid. And even if they did, there's no food or fuel to buy. And it is so hot all day and all night!" She was blinking back tears.

"It's like this all over," Brody said gently. "People are helping people where they can. But everyone has to do what they can for themselves."

"I know," Julie Anne said. She sat there holding the MRE entrée without eating it. "But how?"

"You just plug along and don't give up," Ranger said. "That means eating when you can."

Julie Anne began to eat, silently. She ate all the components of the MRE and drank a full bottle of water. "I need to go back to the EOC and see what the situation is, now."

“Be careful,” Brody cautioned her. “People are desperate. Someone might even try to take your bicycle to get out of town on.”

“Surely not! I’m a City Employee!”

“So?” Ranger asked, very softly for him.

“I’m trying to help!”

“Of course you are,” Brody said. “But they won’t know that ahead of time and might not care if you even get a chance to tell them. For what it’s worth, we’ll come looking for you if you aren’t back here by seven.”

It was more the last statement that scared her than the earlier statements. “I’ll be careful. And I’ll be back in plenty of time.” With that she climbed back on the bicycle and pedaled away.

“Things are getting out of hand, dude,” Ranger told Brody. “She’s almost clueless. This city is going to go up in flames if things don’t get better, and you know that isn’t likely. We really need to be thinking about getting to Toby’s place.”

“I know, Ranger. But there is just something about her... She’s a babe in the woods about some of this, but she’s working like a trooper, doing everything she can of her job.” Brody looked at his friend. “Let’s see what she has to say tonight, watch what news we can get, and then make some kind of decision.”

“Works for me,” Ranger replied. He stood, tossed his trash in the can beside the garage door, and hitched up the Tyvek coveralls tied at his waist. Brody did the same, and they headed back to continue filling the trench over the last body that had arrived.

Brody was pacing back and forth at six thirty that evening, in front of the garage. Julie Anne hadn’t showed up yet. But then he saw her pedaling toward him and relaxed slightly. When she stopped beside him she slowly got off the bike. Brody could tell she’d been crying.

“What is it?” he asked as Ranger looked on.

“They are starting to burn the bodies!”

“Where in the world are they getting the fuel?” Ranger asked.

“They got a tank car in, but it was decided it was better to burn the bodies near their point of death using some of the diesel to get the fires going than it was to bring them out here. There’s dysentery and cholera going around.”

“There really isn’t that much risk with most communicable diseases for transmission from corpses. But cholera is one of them. It’s nothing to play around with,” Brody told Julie

Anne. "It could turn epidemic quickly, if proper procedures aren't used to handle the bodies. Things like we've been doing."

"There aren't enough suits and respirators and gloves and boots and... There just isn't enough to go around for everyone exposed to some of the corpses." Julie Anne sighed. "Maybe they are right to burn the bodies where they are."

"It would be better to bring them here and keep a burning pit going in one of the slit trenches," Ranger said. "Use less fuel and keep the danger as isolated as possible."

"I'll suggest that in the morning. Right now... Can we go home? I'm exhausted," Julie Anne said.

Only a few minutes later they three were pedaling their way toward Brody's apartment building. Though Julie Anne was oblivious to the fact, Ranger and Brody had seen the activity ahead of them. Someone was planning on ambushing them.

"Turn left! Turn left!" Brody said urgently, nearly running over Julie Anne as he did that very thing, before she could react.

"What? Why? This isn't the way to your apartment."

"There are some people up that street laying for us," Ranger quickly said, stopping when Julie Anne did, turning the bike around to watch the street intersection.

"Come on, Ms Baumgartner! We need to travel quickly!" Brody was speaking urgently. He started off, looking backward at her. "Come on!" Ranger will keep watch and delay them until I can get you away."

"Me? Safe? What is..." At least she'd started pedaling, following behind Brody. She looked back at Ranger and gasped at what she saw. He had a handgun drawn and was pointing it toward the intersection where they'd turned.

She looked around at Brody, who was pedaling slowly still trying to urge her to more speed. "Come on!"

"He's got a handgun," she protested when she pulled up even with Brody. "They're illegal!"

"Yeah, well..." Brody ducked when he heard the sound of a shot.

Julie Anne looked around. "What's he shooting at?"

"That wasn't him, Julie Anne! That's someone shooting at us! Come on, will you?" Brody reached over and gave Julie Anne a push on her back to speed her up. She was looking behind her and she saw the muzzle flash of a gun aimed at them. Then the flash of Ranger returning fire.

She didn't hesitate after that, suddenly terrified at what might happen to her if caught... There had been stories going around the EOC about women caught out... Julie Anne stood on the pedals and was pedaling for all she was worth, following Brody.

"What about Ranger?" she called over to Brody.

"He can handle himself! You just stay with me! When you're safe, I'll go after Ranger!"

Julie Anne wasn't sure she could pedal another stroke when they arrived at Brody's apartment building. Brody tossed her his keys and spun his bike around. They could still hear gunshots from the direction they'd come.

"I'm going back," Brody yelled. "Get in the apartment."

There was no argument this time. Carrying the bike, Julie Anne hurried up the steps as quickly as she could, shying away twice when someone opened an apartment door, having heard her banging the bicycle against the walls in her haste.

She fumbled the keys getting into the apartment, but finally got inside, ready to collapse. But she moved over to a window and peeked out. It was fairly dark now and she could see muzzle flashes, though she wasn't hearing the sound of the shots. But they stopped and she neither saw nor heard anything for a long time.

Julie Anne thought she'd jumped out of her skin when a loud knock sounded on the door to the apartment. "It's me and Ranger," came Brody's voice through the door. She hurriedly went to the door and unlocked it for them to enter. Both were carrying their bikes.

"Are you both all right?" she asked, looking at them intently after turning on the battery lamp.

"Got a little nick from that first round," Ranger said, very obviously quite annoyed at the fact.

"Get the first-aid kit," Brody told Julie Anne. "It's not bad, but I want to get it cleaned and covered. He's sweating like a pig and it might contaminate the wound if there is something on his clothes from handling the bodies."

Julie Anne saw Ranger turn pale at Brody's words before she headed off to the bedroom. She'd seen a tote marked first-aid kit. When she carried it back into the living room Ranger was sitting down and Brody had the battery lamp held close to his right arm.

"Should be fine," Brody said, handing the lamp to Julie Anne to hold for him after she set down the first-aid kit. She watched, entranced, as Brody helped Ranger get his shirt off and then began working on the short crease on his upper right shoulder.

He cleaned it thoroughly, and then held it closed with one hand as he applied wound closure strips to it. The entire time Ranger had stayed silent, lips a tight line from the pain. With the wound closed, Brody went through the first-aid kit and pulled out a bottle of over-the-counter pain reliever and gave Ranger three of them. Julie Anne went to get a bottle of water for him to wash them down with.

With Ranger taken care of, Julie Anne suddenly found herself shaking uncontrollably. Brody saw her and quickly went to her. She didn't object when he took her in his arms and held her for several moments.

He released her and, looking deep into her eyes, asked, "You want to talk about it?"

Julie Anne bit her lip and shook her head. "I'm okay. I just am going to have to be more careful. I can see that."

Brody let it go at that, but kept a close eye on her as they went about the evening routine of getting sponge baths to wash away the day's sweat, get into clean clothes, and have something for supper.

Julie Anne was watching Brody in amazement as he put together their supper, using storage supplies and two single burner camping stoves. "This is good," she said when Brody offered her a taste. Brody smiled in return.

They settled in early after their supper, tired from the day anyway, but exhausted from the hard ride away from danger they had taken.

The next morning, as he changed the dressing on Ranger's arm, Brody saw Julie Anne acting hesitantly as they got ready to leave. "You want me to go with you to the EOC this morning?"

Eagerly she asked, "Would you?"

"Sure." Brody looked over at Ranger. "You in?"

Ranger nodded. "Just a scratch. I'm good to go. Strength in numbers." He looked at Julie Anne. "I don't suppose you'd want to carry a piece, just in case?"

"A piece?" she asked quizzically, and then, when it dawned on her what he meant, she shook her head. "No. Positively not. Handguns are against the law in this city. I'm certainly not going to turn you in, but I don't want any part of it."

Ranger nodded and didn't press the matter, which surprised Brody. "Well, if everyone has everything they need, I guess we should be off, if we're going to do this."

Julie Anne let the two men go first to check the area around the apartment building entrance. No, she didn't want a gun, but she did admit to herself that there was more than a little comfort in knowing that someone had one, and was on her side.

Brody motioned to her and she joined them on the street. As they rode at an easy, steady pace toward the EOC in City Hall, all three began to feel a bit eerie. There was almost no activity or noise to be seen or heard. They saw two dead bodies on the way, but didn't approach them. Brody made a note of where they were so they could be picked up and dealt with.

Brody and Ranger waited outside the building, talking quietly about future plans, while Julie Anne went inside. She wasn't there very long. It wasn't a particularly happy smile, but she was smiling slightly. "They agreed to keep taking bodies to the cemetery and burying them in the trenches. Dr. Crane, the coroner, said without a huge amount of diesel we'd never be able to burn the bodies. It is harder to do than I knew."

Her smile faded. "But they won't allocate any more manpower or equipment."

"Well, that's just great!" Ranger said, his anger obvious. "What do they expect? For the dead to get up and walk there on their own?"

Julie Anne kept her composure at Ranger's outburst. "No. No. I got them to agree to fill the cemetery diesel tank, and offered the use of Brody's truck and you two to take the reports that come in to the EOC. We'd get the bodies ourselves."

"We?" asked Ranger, a bit more calmly.

"I thought... I can't handle the bodies... But I can drive." Julie Anne's response was soft, and both men could tell it was costing her. "I should do more than just sit around."

"You'll still need to wear PPE," Brody said.

Julie Anne held up the bag she'd carried out of the building. "I have what I need. We can get another box of filters, but that's about it."

"Ranger," Brody said, "It's up to you. I'm willing. But this is far more than I asked you to do."

"What the hey?" Ranger said after a few seconds. "In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Thank you," Julie Anne said. "Both of you."

"Let's get this dog and pony show on the road," Ranger said, straddling his bike. Brody took the bag from Julie Anne and put it on the rack on the rear of his bike and strapped it down. The three started pedaling toward the cemetery.

The fuel truck was already there, filling the fuel tank. All three noted the pistol belt around the driver's waist and the grip of the pistol in the holster. Julie Anne stared at it for a moment, but said nothing.

“Sign off on this,” the fuel truck driver said as soon as the tank was full. “I want out of here. Criminy. A delivery in a cemetery. Don’t seem right. It is spooky.”

Julie Anne signed the delivery receipt and handed the clipboard back to the driver. He tore out the yellow copy of the form and handed it to Julie Anne. “Good-bye and good luck. I am so out of here!”

Placing the receipt in her hip pack, Julie Anne took out a relatively short list. “These are the reports the EOC got in during the night. The two bodies we found were already on it.”

“I’ll get the truck out, Brody said. Ranger and Julie Anne stood silently as Brody went into the garage and opened the garage door, and then drove the truck outside. Ranger went in and closed the door as Brody stopped the truck and got out.

All three put on their PPE, leaving off the respirators. “How do you stand this, in this heat?” Julie Anne asked, beads of sweat popping out on her forehead as soon as she zipped up the Tyvek coverall.

“Goes with the territory. Expect to loose weight,” Ranger said.

“At least something good will come of it,” Julie Anne said.

“You don’t need to lose any, and there is a lot of other good coming out of this,” Ranger said gruffly and moved over to the truck. He got in the cab and slid over to the middle of the seat.

Julie Anne’s eyes widened in surprise and she looked over at Brody. “He’s a surprise a minute,” Brody said.

“I guess,” Julie Anne said, walking over to the truck, trying to get adjusted to the over boots she was wearing over her athletic shoes she been using since she got the bike.

Neither man said anything at the initial awkward moments as she drove the truck away from the garage in spits and spurts. She turned red and kept her eyes straight ahead until she managed to get the feel of the boots and driving the truck in them.

It was a horrendous day for the three. Their first stop was to pick up charred bodies that others had tried to burn with some of the diesel and failed. After almost throwing up into her respirator at the first body, Brody and Ranger insisted she stay in the truck while they handled the bodies. They appreciated her effort, but they needed her in condition to drive.

All the past efforts had been to handle the bodies as respectfully as possible, never putting one on top of another, but that went by the wayside. Brody and Ranger had to stack the bodies like cordwood in the bed of the pickup, and then again in the slit trench to minimize the amount of dirt work they would have to do with the equipment.

Julie Anne had brought, along with her PPE, ID tags and personal effects bags with her. Brody and Ranger quit trying to check the bodies where they found them. The few people that were about nearly went ballistic when they saw Brody and Ranger going through the clothes of the bodies, looking for ID.

Brody had Julie Anne write down the description he gave her of each body and the location found. The bodies were searched at the cemetery, and ID's found, where they existed, and personal effects were bagged and tagged before the bodies were put in the trench.

Many of the bodies had already been disturbed, some with indications they'd been searched and valuables taken. Some had suffered depredation from the many feral animals that were roaming the streets of the city. Some were in their homes or apartments. Many, like the two the team had seen that morning, lay abandoned on the street, placed there by people fearful of disease.

None of the three could stomach a lunch, though they went through the rest of the bottled water Julie Anne had provided. They finished picking up every body on the list that Julie Anne had been given, but it was already late in the day and none of the three were up to going back to the EOC and to get another list. The bodies they'd recovered were covered, filling the trench they'd been using. Brody drove Julie Anne and Ranger back to the apartment.

Brody insisted they all eat something, though, like the other two, he didn't eat much. But they consumed several bottles of water between them.

"Time to get more water," Brody said, surveying his remaining supply. "Before we go traipsing out at night, let's try the boiler and hot water heater in the basement."

"Is that water safe?" Julie Anne asked. She'd started to protest on other grounds, but decided they really did have to find some water.

"Should be, anyway, but we'll filter it all, just in case," Ranger said. He pointed at the stainless steel appliance on Brody's kitchen counter. "That's a Crown Berkey purifier. We just pour the water we recover into the top, and draw off the filtered water at the bottom."

"Nice," Julie Anne said. "I use a Brita pitcher to get the bad taste out of the water. I guess that's just a big version."

"Little more process than a Brita," Brody said, "but yes, essentially the same thing. A Brita would probably work for the water we're going after tonight, but I'd be leery of it for water from the lakes, ponds, and the river. We may have to resort to that pretty soon."

As they made their way down to the basement, carrying several of Brody's now empty water containers, Julie Anne asked, "What about the other tenants. Won't they need some of this water?"



“First come, first served,” Ranger said. “If there were babies... or pregnant women... I might try to see that they get some. But people are responsible for themselves. It’s not up to me to provide for all their needs because of their shortsightedness.”

“I see,” was all Julie Anne said, and let the subject drop.

Brody set down the two five-gallon containers he was carrying and pulled out his keys when they got to the basement access door.

“You have keys for the basement in your apartment building?” Julie Anne asked.

“Uh... Unofficially,” Brody said. “This basement will provide good shelter space in case of a nuclear attack. I want to be able to get into it easily. I kind of borrowed the super’s keys once and had a key made for me.”

“Oh, Brody!” Julie Anne said. “How do you two manage to stay out of jail?”

“Practice,” Ranger said, grinning.

“A lot of it, I bet,” Julie Anne replied, a small smile curving her lips.

“Okay,” Brody said when he had the door open. “Over this way.”

Brody knew his way around the basement, and all three of them had brought flashlights, so it didn’t take long to fill the containers. Julie Anne couldn’t quite handle one of them full, so she held the flashlight as Brody and Ranger carried theirs upstairs and then for Ranger when he went down for the other two. Brody was pouring water from one of the containers into the top of the Crown Berkey when they returned.

With clean drinking water, and plenty of water to bathe with, Julie Anne didn’t object when Brody offered her a hot shower instead of a sponge bath. He heated water on the camp stove and filled a sun shower bag with the water and showed her how to use it in the tub in the bathroom.

All three took advantage of the sun shower and then Brody and Ranger went back to the basement to refill the containers while Julie Anne prepared a simple meal for them all.

They listened to Brody’s battery radio that evening before they went to bed. The news wasn’t good. Even in the Mid-West, where there had been few attacks, things were getting very bad. Julie Anne, Brody, and Ranger could attest to that.

There was tremendous loss of life, again for the same reasons the three were seeing in their city. The heat and resulting dehydration due to lack of water, lack of medical care and sanitation, even starvation as the situation continued. Violence was rampant as those most desperate made every effort they could to provide for their families, on top of the ordinary crime that was a part of life in modern society.

Julie Anne went to bed, a very thoughtful look on her face.

The next five days went much as that first one. The heat wave still had not broken and even young, normally healthy individuals were succumbing to it, lacking adequate water. When they stopped at the City Hall on that sixth day, Julie was about to enter the building when shots rang out inside.

Startled, Julie Anne just stood there until Brody ran up the stairs and grabbed her. “Come on! Let’s get out of here!”

“But...” Julie Anne tried to protest, but one of the front windows was smashed from a bullet coming from inside the building. It had been aimed at her. She joined Brody and Ranger in the truck and Brody sped away.

“What is going on?” Julie Anne asked.

“I don’t know, but I think the city government is no more,” Ranger said. “Anarchy reigns for the moment. Brody! Look out!”

Two men, armed with rifles or shotguns, stepped out into the street from behind vehicles. Brody, with nowhere to go, floored the accelerator. One of the men got off a wild shot before the right front fender knocked him flying. The other man had jumped back in time and began firing at them as Brody made the first turn he could.

All three of them on alert, Brody took a roundabout route back to the apartment building. When they were all in the apartment, Brody turned to look at Julie Anne and said, “Okay. Things are out of hand. I’m not risking my life or Ranger’s out in that anarchy. It’s time to bug-out. We have a place to go. You’re welcome to go with us.”

Julie Anne’s habit of biting her lip when in difficult thought showed itself again. “I... I... I so want to help in the city...” She took a deep breath, released it, and then continued. “But I think you are right. Until authority is reestablished in the city, it’s not going to be safe on the streets. Is there any way we can stay and try to help in the recovery, when it happens?”

Ranger was shaking his head. “Not during this phase of the collapse. A lot of people are going to have to kill each other off before a recovery can take place. Until then it’s better to crawl in a hole with supplies, and pull the entrance in behind you.”

“Ranger is right, Ms Baumgartner. I have supplies for another month for the three of us, but it could be many months... even years... before the city is safe again.”

“But what would I do? I can’t live off you. It’s not right.”

“You have two good hands and a head on your shoulders. Will mean helping out on a working farm, but I believe you could handle it,” Ranger said.

Brody was nodding. "Toby will find a spot for you at his place, if you're with us."

"Who is this Toby? Where does he live?"

"He's in the more rural area outside the city about fifty miles," Ranger said.

"Has a primitive farm. Kind of like the Amish, but he's not Amish," Brody explained.

Ranger added a little more. "Farms with horses and oxen. Has a huge garden and a couple of greenhouses. Milk cows, pigs, chickens. Real old fashioned operation. We sometimes go out during harvest and lend a hand."

"Toby lets us keep supplies there," Brody said. "Does several of us preppers. We consider it our Retreat, though it belongs completely to Toby. He keeps the place going on minimums, just to make a living, but the place will support quite a few of us, if we all help."

"And you say I would be welcome? I'm not a prepper, the way you are. I don't have anything to offer," Julie Anne said.

Both men could see she was wavering, but hated the idea of charity. Ranger addressed the idea directly. "Believe me, it wouldn't be charity. You would be working everyday, except Sunday. Only the absolute necessary things are done on Sundays. Toby is big on observing the Sabbath."

Brody added his thoughts, "Cooking, washing, cleaning... You're a management type. You could help with the books and record keeping. There is a lot of it, because Toby has a very precise breeding plan for all his animals. He does all that himself, now."

"What if the place is full when we get there?" Julie Anne asked. "You said there are several of you. Won't they all be there, if that was the main plan?"

"We have reserved spots," Ranger said. "That included Brody and me, and a companion each."

"Oh. I see," Julie Anne said, frowning slightly. "You understand that I don't plan on being anyone's companion, don't you?"

"Of course," Brody quickly said.

Ranger agreed just as quickly. "But since neither of us have anyone, that means there is space and supplies for you."

Julie Anne sighed. "I don't think I could survive on my own. Do you think we'll be able to make it, with things going the way they are?"

"We'll make it," Ranger said, rather grimly, Julie Anne thought. "If we're going, let's get to it," he added.

“First we consolidate the supplies. I think we can take everything between us we have left.” Brody looked over at Julie Anne. “Anything else in your apartment you need?”

She shook her head.

“Ranger?”

“Nope. I left the house the other day without expecting to come back for a long time.”

“Then let’s get to it.”

It took three hours to get everything rearranged and loaded into Brody’s truck. Julie Anne said nothing when Ranger and Brody came down with the last load, wearing handguns, with long arms slung over their shoulders.

“I’m going to top off the fuel,” Brody said when they were in the cab of the truck and he’d started the engine.

“It’s on the way, anyway,” Ranger said. He chambered a round in his Bushmaster M-4 carbine, and held the carbine with the barrel just slightly out the window on his side of the truck.

Brody had put his rifle behind the seat when he got in the truck, but he took the pistol from the holster on his hip and stuck the barrel between the seat and seat back so he could get it if needed.

There was no trouble on the way to the cemetery. Brody was fueling the truck from the cemetery tank when he said, “I’m filling all three tanks, this time. I’d like to take some more. I saw a couple of drums in the garage, Ranger. See if one of them would work for fuel. We have just enough room, I think.”

“You’re not going to believe this,” Ranger said, coming back outside, a big grin on his face. “One of the drums is almost full of gasoline and there is a transfer tote full. For the weed eaters and lawn mowers I guess. Never thought to check it out, before.”

“They’re nuts storing gasoline like that!” Brody said.

“May be nuts, but it turns out to be our advantage. I’m going to fill my rig. And Julie Anne’s. We can take all three. Give us some back up if there is trouble.”

“Ms Baumgartner?” Brody asked. “You up to a convoy with us?”

“I’m not real sure about doing this...”

“The fuel, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Consider it back pay,” Ranger said. He was coming out of the garage with the wheeled tote. He headed for the parking lot. “Your keys?” he asked, stopping by Julie Anne.

“Very well,” she said and handed Ranger the keys to her hybrid.

It took Ranger five trips with the tote to fill both gasoline vehicles. Like Brody, he had three tanks on his pickup. The drum was empty, but the tote was full when he’d finished. Brody helped Ranger load it up and secure it in Ranger’s pickup. “You want to move some stuff from your truck to mine?” Ranger asked.

Brody shook his head. “No. I want to get out of here.”

“Okay. Let’s load that empty drum and fill it with diesel.”

Julie Anne was keeping an eye on the entrance of the cemetery, as asked, though she doubted anyone would be coming here, considering the circumstances. With the drum in Brody’s truck loaded and filled, the three huddled together.

Brody and Ranger showed Julie Anne the route on a map she had in her car, so she could find it if they got separated for some reason. “Ranger, take it easy. We want to move, but Julie Anne isn’t experienced in convoy work. I’ll bring up the rear.”

“Got it,” Ranger said. “But if we hit trouble before seeing it, you know the drill. Bull through it at high speed, guns blazing.”

“That was what you did this morning,” Julie Anne said, looking at Brody. “Only you didn’t have guns.”

“Oh,” Ranger said, “I had one, but just a pistol. And Brody got us out of there toot sweet.” Ranger touched the rifle slung on his shoulder,” the next time, if there is a next time, it’ll be different.”

Julie Anne shivered at the vehemence in Ranger’s voice. She was nervous at first, following Ranger out of the cemetery parking lot. But he made it easy on her, signaling well ahead of turns, and going a modest speed.

It turned out to be an uneventful ride. They saw a few people, but all at a distance. Julie Anne thought that several were armed, but she couldn’t be sure. She stopped behind Ranger’s truck when he stopped at an innocuous looking gate on a gravel road just off a country road, out in the rural area southwest of the city.

Ranger just sat there for what seemed to Julie Anne to be an interminable time. But since Ranger was waiting patiently, and Brody was too, behind her, she just tapped the steering wheel in time with the music on the CD she was playing. It was nice in the car, since she had plenty of fuel at the moment, she’d run the air conditioning the whole time they were on the road. She felt

a bit guilty at doing so, but the cool air felt wonderful after days without it. Brody hadn't run the AC in his truck when they were working, to save fuel.

Finally someone came out of the woods the gravel road was cut through, startling Julie Anne, since he seemed suddenly just there. The man waved at Ranger and then unlocked and opened the gate to let the three vehicles through.

The man looked at Julie Anne curiously, but simply waved her on. Brody came through the gate after her and the man closed and relocked it. Brody waited for the man to come up and get in the cab of the truck with him before he followed Julie Anne up the road.

She parked beside Ranger when he stopped the truck alongside another non-descript pickup parked on a gravel parking lot. Brody pulled in beside her and all exited their vehicles. Brody motioned Julie Anne over to join him and the man that had opened the gate.

"Ms Baumgartner, this is Toby Green, owner of this farm."

"How do, Miss?" Toby, asked, touching the brim of his wide hat. Julie Anne quickly decided it wasn't worth the effort to correct him over the Miss and Ms.

"Hello," she said, holding out her hand. "I hope I'm not intruding. Brody said it was all right if I tagged along."

"Sure 'nough," replied Toby, taking her hand for a quick shake and release. "We still have a lot of room. Only a few of the guys have shown up. Kinda surprising. I was expecting more." He looked over at Brody. "You seen or heard from Katrina and Patrick?"

Brody shook his head. "Just me and the Ranger," he replied. "Who else is here?"

Toby ran through a string of names that Julie Anne knew she wouldn't remember until she met the people attached to them.

"Okay. Let's get you settled," Toby said. "You have luggage, Miss Baumgartner?"

Julie Anne nodded and moved over to Brody's truck. Brody and Ranger handed the two suitcases out. Toby took the big one, but let Julie Anne carry the smaller. "You'll be up in the house with the other unattached ladies," Toby told her and headed off toward the building that Julie Anne took to be the house.

"What about Brody and Ranger?" she asked, picking up her pace a bit to keep up with Toby.

"Ranger will take a bunk in the bunk house. Brody has a trailer out in the woods where he stays when he's here."

"I see. I want to thank you for allowing me to stay during this... whatever it is."

“Pure old disaster, if you ask me. The old balloon went up big time. Thought we’d be at war first, but this is just as bad. Them terrorists sure knew what they were doing when they took out the infrastructure. How bad was it in the city?”

Julie Anne’s face told much of the story to Toby. “Bad, huh?” he asked before she spoke.

“Very bad. We tried so hard...” Feeling safe now, Julie Anne was having a hard time keeping the emotion in check.

“Yeah. Brody would. Little surprised the Ranger helped out.”

“You know what we were doing?” Julie Anne asked in surprise, getting her emotions under control enough not to start crying.

“No. Just that Brody would be doing anything he could to help. What was it you do that he was helping with?”

“Burials. I’m the City Cemetery Administrator. My two people left and Brody said he’d help and then he called Ranger and he helped, too. I got them some gear and fuel and a little silver, but they just kept working when that all ran out and they had to use their own supplies and they took care of me, and...”

“Easy there, girl,” Toby said, as Julie Anne’s words came faster and faster and began to edge into hysteria.

Julie Anne took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. They were at the house and Toby led the way inside. They were immediately met by a short, heavysset woman that turned out to be Toby’s wife, Patricia.

“This is Miss Julie Anne Baumgartner. She came in with Brody and the Ranger,” Toby said, to introduce them. “My wife, Patricia. You’ll be helping her out where you can.”

“I’m sure that Brody told you there would be work here,” Patricia said, taking the large suitcase from Toby. “No idle hands on this farm. No siree. Idle hands lead to bad things. Come along up the stairs, young miss. We’ll get you settled right in. And then there is work to do.”

Rather at a loss as what to do or say, Julie Anne followed along silently. Patricia stopped in front of one of several doors lining the hallway in the second story of the house. “You’ll be sharing with Darlene. Baths are both down the hall. Darlene uses the bed on the left as you go in. Plenty of hangers and you have half the drawers. Laundry is on Mondays. Get settled in and come on down to the kitchen. I’m sure you can find it.”

Patricia set down the suitcase she had carried just inside the door and turned and left, leaving Julie Anne to her own devices. It hadn’t occurred to her that she would be sharing a room. “Beggars can’t be choosers,” she said and went about unpacking after exploring and using the bathroom.

The bedroom was neat as a pin, and Julie Anne felt quite comfortable. There didn't seem to be any air conditioning running, as the windows were open, but it was comfortable in the room.

Everything put away, with a tiny bit of room to spare, Julie Anne went downstairs. It wasn't hard to find the kitchen. Delicious smells were coming from it. When she entered Patricia and two other women, much younger than their hostess, were working. It seemed to be bread baking day. There were pans cooling, pans in the oven, pans of dough rising, and more dough being worked. By hand, Julie Anne noticed.

"This is Julie Anne. She's new to all of this," Patricia told the other women. "This is Peg and Samantha."

Julie Anne acknowledged the introductions, foregoing handshakes as both women's hands were covered in flour in one case, and bread dough in the other.

"Wash up," Patricia said. "You'll be helping Peg knead dough."

"Is there enough water?" Julie Anne asked automatically.

"Of course. Good well water," Patricia told her.

Julie Anne felt a bit embarrassed and said, "We've been out of water in the city for weeks. Just bottled..."

"Well, don't go to wasting any," Patricia cautioned, "but don't be a'feared of using it, either."

Julie Anne scrubbed, using the bar of soft soap. It was unlike anything she'd used before and had a wonderful lavender smell. She dried her hands on a flour sack towel and joined Peg at the freestanding butcher block where she was kneading a portion of dough.

"I have no clue what to do," Julie Anne said, words she hadn't had to use in years.

Samantha showed Julie Anne which bowl of risen bread to take to the block and turn out on the fresh flour she sprinkled on the block for her. Samantha turned back to doing what she was doing, and Peg took up the instruction on how to knead dough prior to a second rising and subsequent baking.

Julie Anne's back, arms, and hands were aching by the time the last loaf of bread was ready for the wood fired oven build into one brick wall of the kitchen. She washed her hands yet again, and despite the fatigue, asked, "What should I do now?"

Patricia smiled at the game look on Julie Anne's face and said, "You've done enough for the moment. Kneading dough can really take it out of you, the way we do it, baking enough at once for the whole week. Why don't you go soak for a bit and take a lie down before you help get supper ready."



“Thank you,” Julie Anne said thankfully. “I think I will. I might fall asleep. Would someone wake me if I do? I don’t have an alarm clock.”

“Sure thing, sweetie,” Peg told her. “I’ll knock on your door as I come down.”

“Thank you,” Julie Anne said again and headed for the stairs. Still reluctant to use too much water, she took a shower instead of a soaking bath, and lay down on the bed in the bedroom, wearing her robe.

She groaned a bit when the knock came that Peg had promised. Julie Anne quickly dressed again and went downstairs. Patricia put her to work slicing some of the fresh bread, using a long bread knife and a wooden guide block to make even slices.

Peg and Samantha were doing other tasks, and there was another woman helping that Julie Anne hadn’t met yet. “I’m Julie Anne Baumgartner,” she said and held out her hand to the other woman.

“Darlene. You came in with Brody, I hear.”

“Oh. My roommate. Yes. Brody and Ranger were both kind enough to invite me out here until things get better in the city. Toby and Patricia were kind enough to agree to it when we got here.”

“Yeah. Brody always did have a soft spot. You and him got something going?”

“Enough of that, young lady,” Patricia said sternly. “You will not have those types of conversations in my kitchen.”

Darlene grinned and mouthed the words to Julie Anne. “We’ll talk later.”

Julie Anne wasn’t sure what to make of it so she just ignored the situation and did her assigned job. She heard activity in the large dining room as the last few things were done for the supper. Patricia led the way out of the kitchen to the dining room, carrying a platter of fried fish. The other women each picked up a dish and followed her.

Julie Anne hurriedly arranged the sliced bread in a towel lined basket and folded the towel over. She followed the others into the dining room and paused suddenly at the sight of half a dozen men of several ages standing behind empty chairs. Brody wasn’t one of them. There were already three women seated.

Following the example of the other kitchen helpers, Julie Anne set her bread basket on the table and then stepped in front of the chair Ranger was behind. The men seated the women, and then took seats themselves.

Immediately all the others bowed their heads and Toby said a very heartfelt Grace, welcoming Julie Anne, Ranger, and Brody to the farm as well. Julie said a soft 'Amen,' with the others, wondering where Brody was.

She couldn't remember ever having fish prepared the way this fish was. It was coated in salted cornmeal and had been fried in a large kettle of hot oil on the wood stove in the kitchen. There were French fries, hush puppies, and coleslaw to go with it. Not much of a fried food eater, Julie Anne found herself eating more than she probably should. It was good.

It was only after she talked to Ranger for a moment after the dinner that she learned she'd eaten catfish raised on the farm. In fact, almost every item on the menu had been grown or produced on the farm, except for the salt, and the sugar used in the pecan pie and ice cream that was dessert. The tea and coffee were two more items not produced on the farm but purchased.

Even the corn was grown and ground, as was the wheat for the bread and pie crust. Milk and cream for the ice cream was from the farm's cows. That was the limit of the conversation. The men were ushered out and Patricia, Julie Anne, Peg, Samantha, and Darlene took care of the clean up.

Julie Anne joined them for a few minutes in the living room after the work was done, but none of the men joined them. Julie Anne excused herself and said she was going up to go to bed. She was suddenly exhausted. This time she did take a soak before she went to bed.

Quite some time later, when Darlene eased into the bedroom and asked, "You awake, Julie Anne?" Julie Anne feigned sleep, though Darlene's movements had wakened her. She didn't want to discuss Brody or Ranger.

But she couldn't avoid it the next morning after Darlene's windup alarm went off. As soon as Julie Anne opened her eyes, Darlene was asking her about both of the men. Julie Anne made it quite clear she wasn't involved with either of them. And found herself a little annoyed at Darlene's expressed joy at the fact.

It was several days before she saw Brody long enough to talk to him. "Ms Baumgartner," he said when she came up to him talking to Toby on the front porch of the house. Toby went into the house.

"When are you going to start calling me Julie Anne, like everyone else?"

"I guess now," Brody said, not quite smiling. "Julie Anne."

"That's better. I haven't seen you. Is everything all right?"

"Just tired. We're pulling twenty-four seven security. There are only a few of us and I'm putting in a lot of hours patrolling."

"Patrolling? Like in the Army?"

“Like all the services. But yes. This place is a ripe plum, ready for picking by anyone with enough firepower. Fortunately there isn’t much of an organized group in this area. We’ve run off several individuals trying to sneak in and steal food from the fields.”

“People are hungry,” Julie Anne said. She didn’t want to start an argument, but she had to express her beliefs.

“I know. Toby knows. He has some, what we call ‘humanitarian supplies’ for people in real need. Primarily families with children, pregnant women, women with babies...”

“Ranger said something similar once,” Julie Anne replied.

“Almost all of us in this group feel that way. Not everyone does. But we have to be careful. If word spreads far and wide enough, this place will be swarmed with unprepared people. At least unprepared except for arms and ammunition to try to take it over. Always seems like people that are anti-gun are more than ready and willing to use them to get what they want.”

Julie Anne was taken back by Brody’s bitterness. “I... I... Perhaps I should go,” she said.

“I need to go get some sleep. I’m on duty again in a couple of hours.”

Julie Anne watch Brody walk away, his shoulders slumped. She didn’t know what to do. Ranger was acting chipper at breakfasts and suppers, which he had, along with the other single people, in the house. Only Brody, as far as she knew, was eating alone. Those with families had bungalows or trailers on the property and prepared and ate their meals as family units.

Going back into the kitchen, Patricia saw the concerned look on her face and asked, “What’s troubling you, dear?”

“It’s Brody. He doesn’t look good. He just seems... different.”

It was Darlene that told her, before Patricia could. “He had to kill a man two days ago. He was trying to steal a horse and started shooting when Brody braced him.”

“Oh, no!” Julie Anne said. Brody and Rancher had spoken of using firearms so casually. Apparently it wasn’t a casual thing, at all.

“Brody’s taking it hard,” Patricia said. “He’s a sensitive man and always wanting to help people. Something like this hits a man like him hard.”

“I think I’ll go check on him,” Darlene said, a gleam in her eye that Julie Anne didn’t like. “Did he say where he was going?”

“To get some sleep,” Julie Anne said firmly. “I don’t think you should bother him.”

“I’ll let him tell me that,” Darlene replied, already taking off her apron and heading for the door.

Julie Anne watched Darlene leave, but did nothing else, except frown.

Two days later Julie Anne took Ranger aside after supper and told him, "I want to learn to shoot. Can you teach me?"

"I could, Julie Anne, but I'm not that good of a teacher, and I'm pretty busy with security patrols. You should ask Toby. He taught several of the people here now how to shoot. They all do very well for people that shoot very seldom."

"I will ask Toby, then. Thank you, Ranger."

She found Toby where he usually was after supper, in his den, listening to shortwave and Amateur Radio traffic. Julie Anne knocked on the open door and waited for Toby to invite her in.

"How are you acclimating, Julie Anne? You certainly seem to fit in here quite well. Patricia says you've taken to the kitchen with a vengeance."

"I just want to do my part. Which is why I wanted to talk to you. Ranger said you might be able to teach me to shoot."

"Oh, I'm quite sure I could. Most people can learn to shoot. If they really want to. Not everyone is cut out to own and use weapons."

Julie Anne bit her lip for a few moments. "I really want to. I think... with things the way they are... I should learn to defend myself effectively. There might not be someone around to save me the way there has in the past."

"Think it over tonight. If you still want to do this, catch me in the morning and we'll set up a training schedule. I take it you don't have any firearms."

Julie Anne shook her head.

"Well, don't worry. We have some loaners on hand."

"Thank you, Toby," Julie Anne said and then turned and left.

After a month of daily practice Toby declared her ready to defend herself. She immediately asked, "Can I go on the sentry duty rotation?"

Toby whistled softly and then drew in a breath. "Julie Anne, that is a huge responsibility. You don't just have to know how to shoot, but when. You learned that in a personal defensive situation, but sentry duty is rather different. You are usually dealing with people for a while before gunplay enters into it, if it does at all.

“Are you sure you’re up to supporting the Farm’s values, responsibilities, and goals? I have a feeling they aren’t quite the same as your personal values.”

“In the past... I never could have done it, I know. But I’ve learned things the last few months. About myself and about the world out there.” Julie Anne made a vague gesture to include everything outside the Farm.

“Okay,” Toby said after a long hesitation. “I’ll put you with someone with experience.”

“Brody?” asked Julie Anne.

“No. It will be one of the other women who pulls sentry duty. Probably Angela. She’s experienced and patient with newbies. She’ll give you some more training in the specifics of sentry duty.”

Julie Anne nodded. Angela was one of the women with a family at the Farm. Her and her husband both did sentry duty and farm work.

“I’ll have her contact you when she’s ready to take you under her wing. Could be a few days before we change the schedule.”

“Okay. Thank you, Toby.”

Pleased with the situation, Julie Anne threw herself into the kitchen work as she waited for Angela to contact her.

Ranger noticed the new energy Julie Anne had and asked her about it after supper a couple of days later.

“Toby taught me to shoot, and how to defend myself. Angela is going to teach me how to do sentry duty. I feel better about being here and doing my part.”

“Not everyone has to pull sentry duty,” Ranger said. “Very few of the women do.”

“I know. But I want to do this. Brody, and you, especially, probably have saved my life two or three times. I want to be able to do that for myself, and perhaps help save someone else if it becomes necessary.”

“Good for you. There was a time when I wondered... But you’ve come through this with flying colors.”

“I suppose I doubted myself, too. And I still feel bad about not helping out in the city more.”

“I think you did well beyond the call of duty.”

“Maybe. But you and Brody didn’t have that call at all, and yet you did help.”

Ranger made light of it. “Yeah. That’s just us. Good Samaritans.”

Julie Anne smiled slightly. “I suppose so. I need to get back to the kitchen. A large pile of dishes awaits me.”

Ranger watched her walk away, lost in thought. Ranger wondered if she was thinking of him, or Brody.

Another month passed and Julie Anne was comfortable standing sentry duty. It would be some time before she was allowed on the roving patrols, though. That was another training scenario entirely.

Angela had become a good friend and mentor. Julie Anne spent some of her free time at Angela’s helping to take care of the three children in the family. Something else she’d never done before. She found she liked being around the children and asked to be reassigned from kitchen duty to child care.

There was no problem with it, and Julie Anne became a teacher, using home schooling materials that were at the Farm, in addition to her sentry duties.

Her first encounter with outsiders went fairly well, considering. Angela and Julie Anne saw the three men walking along the county road. All three carried hunting rifles and had revolvers on their hips.

“I’ll cover,” Angela whispered and shifted position just enough to be able to watch what was happening, but be out of the men’s line of sight. She raised the MURS radio to her lips and notified the house that something was up.

Julie Anne waited to see if the men checked the gate. As often as not, she’d been told, people seeing the locked gate walked on by. Not these three. They stopped in the middle of the county road and discussed something. Julie Anne was sure the discussion was about the locked gate, though they were speaking in low tones and she couldn’t hear them.

When all three stepped toward the gate, Julie stepped partway out from behind the tree she was using for concealment. “Far enough,” she said firmly, her carbine pointed about two-thirds of the way between her and the three men.

“State your business,” she said, marveling at how calm she was.

“Looking for game,” said the apparent leader of the three. “Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter. This is private property. And the owner isn’t giving out hunting permits anymore. I suggest you try your luck further on.”

“Who are you to say if we can hunt or not?” asked one of the other men. He looked to be the youngest.

“Private land, private use. Move along.” Julie Anne was forceful but calm.

“Maybe we just want to have a little parley with you.” This from the third man. Julie Anne felt chills go down her spine at the way he was looking at her.

“No parley or anything else. Move along.”

All three men took a step closer to the gate. “One more step and I shoot you,” Julie Anne told the leader.

The other two seemed more than willing to risk the man getting shot, but he had other ideas. “Okay, guys. Let’s just back off here a minute and see what kind of agreement we can come to about hunting here.”

The third man, with a laugh that was more bark than anything, said, “I know what I’m hunting.” His eyes were boring into Julie Anne’s, in an attempt to intimidate her. He stepped forward.

Julie Anne shot him square in the chest, without hesitation. He went down like he’d been pole axed. The carbine was aimed at the leader now. “Move along, and take his body with you, or we can continue this the hard way.”

The younger man looked a bit sick. “You said you’d shoot him,” he said, pointing at the older man.

“Oh, gee. Thanks,” said the leader. He looked angry. Julie Anne suspected the anger was directed as much at the man she’d shot and the younger one than it was at her. With Julie Anne’s carbine aimed square at him, he told the other man, “Let’s get him and get out of here.”

The two picked the third up, one on each side, their shoulders under his arm pits. They started back the way they had come. Julie Anne started to relax, lowering the carbine slightly. Suddenly the younger man dropped the one they were carrying, spun around, drawing his revolver and shouted, “He was my brother!”

A shot came from behind Julie Anne and the young man went down. Julie Anne drew a bead on the leader, who was running as fast as he could go down the road. She couldn’t pull the trigger and shoot the man in the back.

Julie Anne looked around. Angela was there, along with Brody, Ranger, and Toby. It was Angela who had shot the young man. She looked a bit sheepish. “I think you probably had him, but I couldn’t take the chance.”

“I... I... Uh... I don’t...” Julie Anne went to her knees and lost her lunch and part of her breakfast.

Angela knelt down beside Julie Anne and put her hand on Julie Anne's back, saying, "Let it out. Happens to almost everyone the first time. Did me."

The three men were checking the two bodies. When Julie Anne was able to stand up again, she noted that the men's guns and equipment had been removed and Ranger and Brody were moving them to the side of the road.

It was Toby that told her, "I'll send someone down for the bodies. They'll get a decent burial. And, by the way, you did the right thing, not shooting that man in the back. Sometimes it's necessary, but I think he learned his lesson."

Julie Anne, pale as a ghost, nodded. "Come on," Angela coaxed. Brody and Ranger will take the rest of the shift."

"No, I should..."

"It's standard procedure," Brody said. "A confrontation like this is hard for anyone to deal with. Better you take it easy for a couple of days. But don't cut yourself off from people. If you want to talk... Well... Feel free to stop by the trailer to talk to me."

"Or me," Ranger said.

"Me, too," Angela added.

Julie Anne nodded and walked up the gravel driveway with Angela.

"What do you think, Brody?" Ranger asked. "She going to handle it, or loose it?"

"She'll handle it," Brody said firmly. "She's tough. Tougher than she looks or lets on."

"I hope so," Ranger said.

"Come on. Let's get out of sight. Those shots might bring someone else to investigate."

Though it was unrelated, Brody's thoughts proved prophetic. In the months that had passed, and martial law declared for the entire nation three months into the situation, no one with any authority had stopped at the Farm. That changed three days after Julie Anne's confrontation.

Toby was summoned to the gate the afternoon the authorities arrived. Seeing Brody as he headed down the driveway at a slow trot, Toby waved him over. "I need you to come with me and back me up. This could be the trouble we've been dreading."

Brody nodded. What would be done had been discussed time after time. Only a general plan had been proposed and accepted. Toby trusted Brody to handle the situation appropriately, no matter which way it went.



When they got close, Toby continued down the driveway and Brody drifted into the woods and made his way down to one of the good look out points the sentries used to watch the gate.

There was a small military convoy parked on the county road. "Who's in command?" Toby said as soon as he reached the gate. There were three officers standing near the lead Humvee. Two of them came over to the gate.

"I'm Captain Collingsworth. This is my second in command, Lt. Randal. You are Toby Green?"

"Yes, Captain. We've been waiting for someone to show up."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes. We've been stockpiling food for distribution as soon as some way became available. Our feeble efforts early in the disaster were not successful. I can show you and your second around to see what we have available, and how much we can continue to produce ongoing."

Captain Collingsworth's surprise was evident. He and his men weren't used to being welcomed. At least not when they showed up to collect, rather than distribute.

The third officer walked up to Lt. Randal and whispered into his ear, and then went back to the Humvee. "Sir," the Lieutenant said, "infrared shows two additional hostiles in the woods, about thirty meters back and three meters off the road."

Capt. Collingsworth looked at Toby.

Calmly Toby said. "We have security here, just as you do. Not as well equipped, obviously."

"Bring them out," the Captain said. There was no question. He meant bring them out or his men would, dead or alive.

Toby gave the signal and Brody and Ranger stepped out into the driveway, holding their rifles at port arms.

"Bring them down," the Captain said.

Toby waved at the two and both men approached cautiously, making no move to draw the ire of the military.

"I want no trouble, Captain," Toby said earnestly. "We have it good here, compared to many places. But we are prepared to help, and help a great deal. But we want to do it as honest,

upright, loyal citizens to the United States, cooperating to with all parties to get through this time of trouble.”

Lt. Randal spoke before the Captain could. “You don’t dictate to the military. You are under martial law. We dictate to you.”

“Dictate as in the President is now a dictator?” Ranger asked angrily, “And you’re his jack boot thugs to carry out the dictates?”

“Easy, Lieutenant,” Captain Collingsworth said as Lt. Randal’s right hand moved to his holstered sidearm. Looking back at Toby, the Captain continued, “We’re not used to people offering cooperation. I must say we’ve had to be... forceful... to get some needed supplies and material. Convince me why it should be different here. Some of your people are obviously not in tune with this necessary aspect of the recovery effort.”

Toby unlocked the gate and ushered the Captain and Lieutenant inside. “An escort, sir?” the Lieutenant asked.

Captain Collingsworth shook his head slowly. “I believe we can trust Mr. Green not to execute us or take us hostage. He knows full well that the rest of the command would lay waste to this property.”

“Stay here,” Brody whispered to Ranger, and fell into step beside Toby as he walked up the driveway with the two military officers.

The Lieutenant looked at Brody harshly, but the Captain neither said nor did anything in objection to Brody’s presence, so the Lieutenant didn’t either.

It was a long tour. Toby didn’t leave anything out, except the large, well equipped underground fallout shelter. Toby gave the Captain a running account of what was on hand, ready for distribution, and what their production capabilities were, given the current weather conditions and staffing situation.

“If we could get military security, it would turn several people loose to increase production by three or four percent,” Brody said. It was the first time he’d spoken on the tour. “Perhaps as much as five percent.”

“Captain,” Lt. Randal said, “the material on this farm could feed five hundred people right now. I respectfully advise we take everything except subsistence rations for everyone here.”

“He’s probably right, Captain,” Brody said. “But if we continue as we are, we can feed at least three-hundred-fifty people on a continuing basis. Isn’t that better than five-hundred one time? For a full recovery it is paramount to maintain breeding stock and seed stock. If you take everything the way the Lieutenant wants, we would probably not be able to take care of ourselves, and you’d have another fifty needy people to take care of.”

They had made their way back down to the entrance gate to the Farm. “My orders are to bring in everything we can find. I will contact headquarters and see what I can do. I like your idea of ongoing support and re-supply.”

The Lieutenant was not a happy camper, but he followed the Captain back to the Humvee and they got in. The convoy drove off, with the Captain’s Humvee in the lead.

“You want us to start digging in more defenses?” Ranger asked eagerly.

“No. Settle down, boy. I’m not risking one life taking on the US military. They outnumber us and out gun us. It would be a massacre. There is no point to it. If need be I’ll start over. We’ll start over.”

Fortunately cooler heads prevailed. Three days later the convoy showed up again and the Captain told Toby, “Higher ups approved my request to use you as an ongoing supply source. No dice on a security detachment. You’re on your own there. We expect to be able to pick up weekly.

“I would suggest you do your best to fulfill the obligation you have taken on. It was a very mixed reaction to my request. Any problems and I will get, and carry out, orders to take everything except enough for you to live on for a month. That includes the property. It will be manned by military staff and continue to operate.”

Toby nodded. Brody did as well. Ranger was livid, but said nothing. Neither did Lt. Randal. He was just as displeased with the situation as Ranger.

To make sure there were no confrontations, Toby, knowing Ranger, sent him off on an errand that would keep him out of sight and mind for the duration of the presence of the military.

Wanting to be as cooperative as possible to minimize problems, Toby had already arranged for the promised goods to be prepared for shipment. It took only an hour for the combined efforts of Toby’s people and the military personnel to get the military trucks loaded.

“Keep your fingers crossed,” Toby said as he and Brody watched the convoy drive away. Brody locked the gate behind them. “We’re getting off easy, compared to some.”

“True,” Brody said. “But I plan on being ready to take off if they change their minds.”

Toby was disappointed, but could understand Brody’s feelings. Brody turned to look at Toby. “But I won’t leave until I know you and everyone else has the best chance to survive, too.”

With a nod, Toby turned around and the two men walked back to the ranch house, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

The next pick up of food brought a major surprise. Julie Anne happened to be helping load one of the military trucks and asked one of the soldiers, “How is the city doing? When I left, there was a shoot out going on in City Hall.”

“Heard about that,” Cpl. Long said. “Supposed to have been real messy. To bad the way it turned out. From the reports we got when we first showed up, the Mayor and his team were doing about as well as could be expected. This new Mayor... Well, it’s not up to me to say. That’s civilian business and only the Captain up deal with them.”

“There was a new election?” Julie Anne asked in surprise. “Who’s the new Mayor?”

“No election. The Dog Catcher, believe it or not, claimed right of succession and took over until elections can be arranged.”

“Harvey Tinsold? You have to be kidding! Even if there was a line of succession, he’d be way down the list!”

“Everyone seemed to be okay with it. I wouldn’t want him as my Mayor, from the things I’ve heard, but the Martial Law lawyers said it was as good as any way of getting things back on track.”

“For goodness sake,” Julie Anne said. “The man is a drunkard. There had to be someone else in that line of succession willing to take on the job. I mean, I was Cemetery Administrator and I would have been ahead of Tinsold in any line of succession.”

“You’re kidding! I think you’d better talk to the Captain. Come on.”

A bit annoyed with herself for having spoken up, Julie Anne followed Cpl. Long as he went to find the Lieutenant.

“Lieutenant,” the Corporal said, “I think the Captain should talk to this woman. She was in city government.”

“I see,” the Lieutenant replied. “Odd to find you out here, instead of in the city, doing your job.”

Julie Anne took an instant dislike of Lieutenant Randal. The Corporal made himself scarce, thankful he didn’t have to deal with the Lieutenant very often.

“There was a gunfight going on when I left,” Julie Anne said, with some heat in her voice.

“Yes. Well. Come along. I’ll let the Captain decide on what to do with you.” Julie Anne followed along, seething inside. Only in part of due to the Lieutenant. She was beginning to feel like she’d done the wrong thing in leaving the city. Especially if Harvey Tinsold was now in charge.

“Captain Collingsworth, this woman was in the city government, before she ran out on them and came here.”

"I beg your pardon!" Julie Anne said, going red in the face at what was a clear accusation. "I stayed until the shoot out in City Hall. We worked weeks without pay, keeping bodies off the street. We had no idea that there was even any form of city government left."

"That's enough, Lieutenant," the Captain said. "You're dismissed."

The Lieutenant acknowledged the dismissal with a salute, which the Captain returned.

"My apologies, Miss..."

"Baumgartner. Ms Julie Anne Baumgartner."

"My apologies for Lt. Randal, Ms Baumgartner. Now, what is this about you being a city official?"

"I was City Cemetery Administrator, Captain. My employees and I worked above and beyond to keep the bodies off the streets. We buried hundreds in slit trenches. In 100 plus temperatures, for weeks on end, without pay, using the employee vehicles at the end. I do not appreciate being maligned in the way that Lieutenant Randal just did."

Her color faded to pink from red. "We stayed and worked, on our own, with very little support, until the shootout in the City Hall, using my own money to pay the laborers."

"I understand your annoyance, Ms. Baumgartner. I'll have a word with Lt. Randal. But, that aside, brings us to what do we do with you. Our orders are to try and bring stability to local governments. If there is some impropriety in the current government personnel I intend to put it right. I am not all that pleased with the way Mr. Mayor is conducting himself and his government. We have been told, by several people with grudges against Mayor Tinsold, of this misconduct. But I'm beginning to believe there may be some credence to their reports."

"Well, it's always been my goal to serve the community, but I never had any intention to run for Mayor. Perhaps in my future... my future before the terrorists attacks... But not now."

"Why not? You certainly couldn't do any worse job than Tinsold."

"That's not much of an endorsement," Julie Anne replied. "And besides, I wouldn't know where to start."

Captain Collingsworth reached into a gear bag in his Humvee and brought out a sheath of papers. It was stapled copy guide for civilian administrators under martial law. "Read this and get back to me. I think you'll find everything you need to know in there. You are not expected to go beyond the confines of the topics in that manual.

"You would be expected to follow the tenets closely, and do everything you can to maintain peace and order while the country is in redevelopment. One key factor is elections at normal intervals."

Julie Anne noticed a slight change in the Captain's demeanor when he added, "Despite the hold on federal level elections. Do you think you could serve a temporary term, knowing very well you might not get re-elected, due to the fact you were in line of succession rather than elected initially? Tinsold isn't even trying to get elections organized."

"Believe it or not, I enjoy serving the public. If the public was to decide they didn't like the way I served, I would expect to be voted out of office."

The Captain smiled slightly. "It sounds as if you are at least considering the job."

"I must admit, the possibility intrigues me. We put in a great deal of time and effort doing what we could at the time. Had there been any possible way for me to continue to help, I would have stayed. We were chased off at gunpoint. We talked about staying and helping... But... The two men that were helping me dissuaded me from trying. To wait until the anarchy had run its course and things were ready to settle down."

"To be honest with you, they were probably right. The more information I get about Tinsold, the more I think he's just a minor thug that lucked into a way to get power and pad his nest."

The Captain gave Julie Anne an open radio frequency for her to contact him on when she'd made up her mind for sure. As she left, Lt. Randal came up. From what little she heard before she was out of range of the Captain's deceptively soft voice, Lt. Randall was getting read the riot act for his conduct.

It was a very thoughtful Julie Anne that went back up to the house. She would be on sentry duty in a little while, so she took the time to read the guide the Captain had given her. To be sure she was able to stay alert to the surroundings while she was on sentry duty, she put the thoughts of becoming mayor out of her mind. But she tossed and turned a great deal that night, thinking about it, before going to sleep, decision still not made.

She went to talk to Angela about it. And then Toby. Ranger. And finally, Brody. Angela and Toby had been supportive, saying essentially the same thing. "Which ever you chose, I'll do whatever I can to help."

Ranger, as she suspected and dreaded he would be, was adamantly against the idea. But he too offered his support, even if she did go, adding, "You will probably need a bodyguard. Keep me in mind if you do go crazy and take the job."

It was something she hadn't thought about. Partly due to the fact that she could take care of herself now, but in part because it hadn't occurred to her she would need one. From the information they'd been getting, she just might.

Brody's reaction was hard to read. He was supportive, either way she decided to go, but wasn't at all enthusiastic about either choice. He seemed very preoccupied. Julie Anne found herself very disappointed that Brody didn't offer more constructive advice. She didn't admit to

herself until the offer didn't come, but Julie Anne had been hoping he'd offer to help her, the way Ranger had.

She made contact with the Captain that evening and said she was interested in helping out however she could. As Mayor, or any other capacity.

Julie Anne and Ranger had two days to pack up and get back to the city. Tinsold had gotten wind of the situation and the Captain warned her she might be in danger when she got there.

"Too bad Brody can't come," Ranger said, after Julie Anne gave him the warning and thanked him again for coming with her. They were in Ranger's pickup, with Julie Anne's hybrid on a trailer they'd borrowed from the Farm.

"Did he... ah... Did Brody say why he couldn't?"

Ranger turned startled eyes on Julie Anne. "Didn't he tell you?"

Julie Anne shook her head.

"I don't know if I should... Everyone seems to know..."

"What, Ranger? What's going on with Brody?"

"He has diabetes, and no more insulin is available. Hasn't been for months. He's almost blind now. He doesn't expect to live much longer."

"Oh, my! I just... I just talked to him... I didn't notice a thing!" Julie Anne started to cry.

"He's been hiding it from everyone but me and Toby. He only told us when he couldn't pull sentry duty any longer."

"I can't leave him alone like this!" Julie Anne said through her tears.

"I don't think he wants your pity," Ranger said. "Darlene figured it out and is helping him where she can."

"Darlene! But... I..." Julie Anne fell silent and brought her tears under control. After a long time she spoke again. "I suppose... If that's what he wants... I should leave it alone..."

"I think you're making the right choice, Julie Anne."

Julie Anne put Brody out of her mind. It wasn't an easy thing to do. But apparently he'd made his choice, and she would just have to live with it.

Three day's later Julie Anne was officially the new Mayor and elections were scheduled for the following November. Lt. Randal was dead, as was Tinsold and several of his buddies. Ranger was sporting an arm in a sling where he'd taken a bullet meant for Julie Anne, and the Captain was in the closest military MASH unit. It all happened in the span of a few minutes.

Captain Collingsworth led the small group into City Hall and to the Mayor's office. The group included Lt. Randall, Julie Anne, Ranger, and two enlisted men. They had no more than entered the Mayor's office when the shooting started, Lt. Randal opting to assist the Mayor and his henchmen.

The first person down was one of the enlisted men, shot by Lt. Randal. He was turning his gun on the Captain, as the other enlisted man was shot by one of the Mayor's men, when Ranger shot him.

The Captain, suspecting possible foul play, was ready. He had his service pistol out and shot the Mayor, who was aiming a revolver at Julie Anne. Ranger bumped into Julie Anne hard, the bullet the Mayor fired taking him in the upper left arm as Julie Anne fell to the floor, in the act of drawing her own pistol. But the Mayor was dead from the Captain's fire before he could fire again.

The firing continued for just a few seconds, the Mayor's other four cohorts dying under the guns of the Captain, Ranger, and Julie Anne.

Julie Anne had a couple of bruises from the fall, and one very slight crease on her left shoulder. The Captain had three wounds, none fatal, though all serious. But, as the standing sentries at the front entrance of the City Hall came running in, the Captain was able to get an explanation out before they could shoot Ranger and Julie Anne before asking questions. Then he passed out.

It was years before any real sense of normalcy returned. In the months of Julie Anne's term of office, the area began to recover. But the stigma of how she came to power, much as Tinsold had, cost her the election she fought so hard to see happen. She and Ranger, married now, went back to the Farm, at Toby's invitation, after she lost the election. She'd had enough of politics and just wanted to live out her life in a productive manner. The Farm gave her that opportunity, as a teacher.

Once a year, on the anniversary of his death, Julie Anne and Ranger, along with Darlene, visited Brody's grave there on the Farm, mourning the loss of the person that had been such a large part of their lives, for such a short period of time.

End \*\*\*\*\*

Copyright 2007  
Jerry D Young