

## X Marks The Spot

William Burton and Tony Bridgemont were buddies from childhood. And competitors. In sports, in the classroom, with vehicles, cars, and jobs. They worked at the same corporation, in different divisions, and were both climbing the ladder quickly. A friend once said she thought they picked opposites, just to have something to argue about.

There were a few of things that they agreed on. Though they had competed for girls' attention when young, they married sisters. Politics was another thing they agreed on, for the most part. Religion, as well. And both had a consuming passion for geocaching. Unlike many, they used traditional methods exclusively to place and recover items. Topographical maps, pocket transit, and map overlays. It was the old X marks the spot for them.

Both did use GPS units as backup and for safety sake in case they got turned around, but anything found with GPS help was considered a loss, not a win. Both had Brunton GEO transits, for the angle and grade measurement capabilities. The capability was needed, for the items placed were not always buried on flat ground. Or even buried at all.

There was an ulterior motive for the geocaching competition. It was to stay in practice for finding another kind of cache. They had several caches between their homes, located near each other, and three different Bug Out Locations. For William and Tony were preppers. They were about as ready for come what may about as well as anyone with their financial situation.

The caches contained some equipment, but mostly consumable supplies, to enable the two, with their wives, to get to one of the three locations where they had more cached equipment and supplies near small earth sheltered bunkers. There were enough things cached so even if they had to leave with only the clothes on their backs, they would have the gear they needed to survive.

The preparedness caches GPS coordinates were in the Garmin Oregon 550T GPS units each carried, listed in code. Just in case. But there was the possibility the GPS satellite system could go down, or get blocked, so route maps were drawn on clear map overlays, with locating marks to align it with a regular topo map.

The men kept copies of overlays and a set of maps in several locations, and often as not had them on their person when out adventuring, in case the balloon went up when they weren't home.

There were always several maps included with the overlays so anyone that might find them would have a difficult problem trying to match up the right overlay with the right map. They were coded so Tony and William had no problems matching them up, but the string of letters and numbers on the edges of the maps and overlays wouldn't mean anything to anyone else.

The reason they practiced so often was to avoid leaving some sort of trail to the caches that someone could follow. Once a year one of the caches was visited, using the maps to locate it

precisely to make sure it had not been found or disturbed by someone else. So far, all the caches were still intact.

It was a good thing, both decided, when Iran, then North Korea, Venezuela, and Brazil detonated nuclear weapons within a seven month period. To top it off, leaked intelligence reports stated that Germany and Japan both had a few nuclear weapons in stock and were building more as quickly as they could. The same reports indicated that South Africa was resuming their production of nuclear weapons.

The Russian and Chinese governments didn't take the news well. Both made similar statements. Preemptive strikes would be authorized at the slightest indication that any of their interests outside their national borders were being encroached upon.

That didn't set well with several governments, most notably Germany and Japan, ancient enemies of Russia and China respectively. Both of those countries made almost identical statements as well. If they perceived the need, they would strike preemptively to deflect a preemptive attack against them.

The UN was in an uproar. Accusations and counter accusations were flying. The US ambassador tried to act as peacemaker, but was shouted down and accused by all sides of trying to take advantage of the situations. The threats were extended to include the US specifically if they tried to interfere in any way with the various situations.

The two couples met at William's and Mary's house to discuss the situation. Rather William and Tony discussed it. Neither Mary, nor Tony's wife Brenda, were much into the prepping that their husbands were. They went to the living room to talk while William and Tony talked in William's small study.

"Maybe we should go ahead and Bug Out," William suggested.

"I don't know, William," Tony said. "The BOLs aren't meant for long term residency. I know Brenda would never go for it, and I doubt Mary would, either."

"True," William replied. "But I feel like we need to do something. Just going about our day to day activities seems like we're going backward, not even maintaining the status quo."

"Perhaps we could take them on a camping trip, to one of the BOLs. They both like to camp, as long as we don't tie it to preps."

"That's a good idea," William said.

"But it needs to wait a couple of weeks. I've got that trip to Cinncy next week. It'll take the week after to assess the possibility of acquiring that company."

William sighed. "Yeah. Forgot about that. Okay. But let's start the planning. And working on our wives to get them ready for the trip. That might take the two weeks. We're getting the full week off for Labor Day. That would be a good time to go."

The two weeks passed slowly for the men. The world political situation was getting out of hand. Nations with and without nuclear arms were going to a war footing. What were ongoing minor conflicts were escalating, including the one between Pakistan and India. North Korea went silent, but mobilized troops and equipment on the edge of the DMZ.

Iran, having taken over in Iraq after the US pullout, then overran Jordan with little resistance. The New Persian Empire was now, by all appearances, quietly getting ready to attack Israel. Which meant, to most of those that were acutely aware of the situation, that Israel was about ready to do their own preemptive strike.

That was the situation when Tony parked his daily driver slash Bug Out Vehicle Chevy Suburban in the Burton driveway. William's Ford F250 pickup truck was parked outside, loaded down as heavily as the Ford.

Mary met Brenda and Tony at the front door. "William is in the basement, doing some last thing. Come on in, Brenda, and we'll have a cup and talk while we wait. Talk about women making men wait. Ha!"

Tony went downstairs. He could be going into his own basement. The two were nearly identically laid out and decorated. "William?" Tony asked when he was about three-quarters of the way down the stairs. Sneaking up on William wasn't a good idea. The same was true about Tony. Both men had excellent reflexes and tended to react strongly when startled.

"Yeah, Tony. In the back."

Tony went through the door that separated the finished 'Mary' area of the basement from the unfinished, 'William' side. William was just closing up his gun safe.

"Give me a hand?" William asked, nodding at the firearms lined up on the reloading bench as he spun the dial on the safe.

"You taking everything?" Tony asked.

"Not everything. But close," replied William.

"Yeah. Me, too. PMs and trade goods, too," Tony added.

"Same here. Let's get these loaded and be on our way." The two gathered up the five weapons Tony had set out and headed upstairs. They didn't exactly sneak past the kitchen door, but they didn't make any unnecessary noise.

William had a spot already set to take the guns. They were added to the F250 and the two went back inside. "You guys ready?" Tony asked Mary and Brenda.

"We've been waiting on you. Let's go," Brenda said.

“Might as well get this over with,” added Mary. With that, the four went to the vehicles and hit the road, Tony in the lead.

“You navigate,” Tony told Brenda, reaching behind him and pulling forward a map with overlay already rolled up with it.”

“Use the Tom-Tom,” Brenda replied. “I agreed to go along, but I’m not playing that ‘X Marks The Spot’ game you and William do.”

“We’re not doing that. Just wanted you to be familiar with the route. Just in case something happens.”

“Nothing is going to happen,” retorted Brenda.

“Please?” Tony asked.

“Oh, all right! But you’d better not let anything happen.”

Tony didn’t know it, but William was having a similar conversation with Mary. For the same reason. They really did want the women to be familiar with where they were going so they could, in case it was ever needed, get to this BOL.

When William called on the FRS/GMRS radio to say, “We’ve got a turn coming up. Need to watch for it,” Tony picked up the radio and handed it to Brenda.

“Okay, William. I have it spotted. I’m navigating for Tony.”

It was Mary’s voice that came back, not William’s. “Now isn’t that a coincidence,” Mary said. “I’m doing the same for William. Didn’t want to use the Tom-Tom.”

“You don’t say?” Brenda looked over at Tony.

“Honest! We didn’t get together and plan it like this. I guess we both just had the same thought.” Tony quickly put his eyes back on the road.

“Un-huh,” was Brenda’s reply to that. But with the two women doing the navigating with the map, they had reason to talk back and forth on the radios occasionally. There was a bit of competition in them, just as there was in their husbands. It became a game to them to see who could pick the best route to the red X marked on the map overlays.

Neither William nor Tony said anything when Brenda guided Tony one way and Mary took William another way. They fell out of radio contact, but only for a few minutes. They both hit the same intersection within seconds of each other and continued on the same route the rest of the way.

“I didn’t know we were going to the middle of nowhere,” Brenda said when the four climbed down out of the vehicles and stretched when Tony and William stopped the Suburban

and the truck. They'd been in four wheel drive the last six miles on partially washed out fire roads in the national forest.

"Me either," Mary said. "You better have packed the chemical toilet or we're heading back right now."

"I brought ours," William quickly said.

"Ditto." Tony went over to a tree and looked around the trunk. "Here it is."

"Here's what?" Brenda asked. "What are you two up to?"

"Well... It a blaze mark. Just a piece of ribbon attached to the tree. With what is going on, we thought a trial run would be a good idea," William replied, looking at Mary with a worried look.

"Trial run?" asked Brenda.

"This is one of those BOL spots you guys bought a few years ago, isn't it?" Mary asked.

"Well, not right here," said Tony, emphasizing the 'here.' "It's through there a bit further. Normally we'd leave the rigs here, locked down and disabled and hoof it, but I think this time we'll just drive on through." He looked at William.

Considering the looks on the two women's faces, William quickly agreed. So they piled back into the vehicles and Tony led the way again, weaving in and out among the trees, watching for the blaze marks. They were on the BOL side of the trail, so Tony would miss one occasionally and have to back track to find the way again.

But half an hour later they were at the leaf covered mound that was the BOL bunker. "Might as well use the cached shovels," William said to Tony while the two women looked around at the forest.

"Got to admit it is a beautiful place to camp," Brenda said.

"It is that," replied Mary, "But I don't like being hornswaggled in to doing something I might not have done otherwise."

"Oh well. We're here now. We might as well enjoy the outdoors while we're here. I guess the guys are just looking out for us in their own, rather twisted, way."

Mary chuckled. "Yes. I suppose so. Where did they go?"

Both women looked around the edge of the tiny clearing. Brenda saw them first. Each man had a D-handle round point shovel on one shoulder.

"What are those for?" Brenda asked. "You said you brought the chemical toilets."

“We did. But just for back up and practice. We actually have something better. Watch,” Tony said.

Tony and William climbed up onto the mound of dirt and began to dig. They didn’t dig long. Mary and Debra had followed them up and saw and heard one of the shovels contact metal.

“Bingo.” Tony moved out of the way and let William finish uncovering the hatch.

“There’s something down there?” Mary asked.

“Sure is,” William said. “A snug little getaway from the world’s problems for a while.”

William stepped back and Tony leaned down, cleaned a bit of dirt from the lock that held the hatch closed and inserted the key he took from his pocket. The lock snapped open and Tony lifted the hatch.

Mary looked down. There were enclosed steps leading into the darkness. “Give us a minute,” Tony said and headed down into the darkness. It wasn’t dark long after William joined him. “Come on down,” Tony called up to the women after the bottom of the stairs were bathed in light.

Tony was closing a hatch on a metal bench when they came down. William was doing the same on the other side of the room. “The batteries still have a good charge so the pumps and LED lamps are working okay. We’ll get the solar panels out and set up in a few minutes. The bathroom is over there.” Tony pointed to a door nearby.

Mary went in first. When she came out, Brenda went in. “A flush toilet,” Mary said. “How did you manage that out here? Where’s the water come from. And where does the waste go?”

“I’d like to know, too,” Brenda said, joining Mary as she continued to look around while waiting for William or Tony to answer her questions.

It was Tony that answered. “There’s a year round creek not too far away. We dug in a pipe from a collection point we created in the creek bed. We have a pump we pump the water with from there to a big tank under the shelter. And the waste goes to a small septic tank and drain field. Same with the sink. I’m sure you saw the shower stall. Have to heat water and fill solar shower bags to take a shower, but there’s plenty of water and we have six one-hundred pound propane tanks stashed to run a stove so we can cook and heat water.”

“Come on, Tony,” William said. “It’s getting dark. Let’s get the panels up so they catch the sun first thing in the morning. Need to set up the antenna, too.”

The two went outside, carrying tools, the solar panels, antenna, and mounts. The walls and ceiling were reflecting the light from the LED fixtures so there was enough light to see.

Brenda and Mary checked the place out closely, expecting bugs, spiders, and possibly rodents. But none were in evidence.

There really wasn't much in evidence, come to that, they decided. Two sets of metal frame bunk beds, a round metal table bolted to the floor with quarter round perforated metal bench seats, also bolted to the floor. The two long metal bench units on opposite sides of the room that Tony and William had already accessed.

The counter was stainless steel with integral bowl. It was mounted on a sturdy metal shelving unit. Mary tried the single handle faucet. Water came forth, just as it had in the bathroom.

"You think we should unload the trucks?" Brenda asked Mary.

"Let's wait and see what those two still have up their sleeves."

They didn't have to wait long. The PV panels were already rigged and there was a pipe buried, ready to take the pole that supported the panels. A few minutes after they left, they were back, carrying, besides the tools, a load from each of the vehicles.

"What would you like us to bring in?" Mary asked. "Obviously not everything."

"Don't worry about it. William and I will unload. It's a hassle going up and down the mound." Tony nodded his head toward the bench on the other side of the room. "There are some things in the bench you can take out and set up, if you would. We're not going to break out the big propane tanks. We'll bring in a couple of one pounders to use with the stove."

"Okay. You guys be careful going up and down out there in the dark." Mary's voice was firm.

"We will," William immediately said. It took several minutes, but the men had planned and packed knowing they would be using the bunker. Everything they needed was at the rear of the vehicles.

After the last load, despite the remoteness of the area, both men disabled their vehicle, set the alarms, and covered them with camouflage. Mary and Brenda were already preparing a meal on the propane camp stove they'd removed from the bench, along with a couple of one pound bottles of propane.

"What about ventilation?" Mary asked when the two men were back inside. "I don't look forward to dying from carbon monoxide poisoning in my sleep."

"Not a problem, Mary," Tony said. He stepped over to another door in the far wall, next to the bathroom and went in. There was the faint sound of a ventilation fan running when he came out.

"Thought of everything, have you?" Brenda asked.

“Sure hope so,” Tony asked.

“Well,” William added slowly, “I doubt we’ve thought of everything. It’s almost impossible. But we did consider many possible scenarios when we built these things.”

The sisters exchanged a look. It was Mary that spoke. “This is where you guys were disappearing to for those two week jaunts a few years ago, isn’t it?”

“Yes. You two weren’t too inclined to get involved.” William shrugged.

“How’d you pay for all of it,” Brenda asked, looking at Tony.

“Used our discretionary funds. Made sure not to touch joint funds.”

Mary wanted more information. “And there are three of these?”

Both men nodded. “What about all that X Marks The Spot stuff? That have something to do with these?”

“Yes. They are practice for us to make sure we can find these places, and the caches on the way to them.”

“There’s more? Caches?” asked Brenda.

“Just in case we don’t have time to pack or can’t take everything like we did this time,” William said.

“Or have to Bug Out from work and can’t get home first.” Tony added.

Then William spoke again. “Or get stopped at a check point and have our gear confiscated.”

“Yes. And then there is...”

Brenda cut Tony off. “Okay. We get it. All on your own time and money. On top of everything you do at home. The shooting and reloading and storing supplies.”

Tony nodded and William said a simple ‘yes’.

“Well, I’ll give you credit,” Mary said. “You haven’t shorted us while doing all this. Guess I can’t complain too much.”

“I guess... me, too,” Brenda said. But she gave Tony a hard look and added, “But we’re going to discuss this in more detail later.”

“So will we,” Mary said.

With any repercussions, if any, postponed, William and Tony went about setting up the bunker to suit them using the things they brought with them. The nearby caches wouldn't be touched. Well... not unless... Both men put the possibility out of their minds and turned to set the table for the dinner Mary and Brenda had ready.

It turned out they didn't spend much time in the bunker. The forest was beautiful and the area full of things to see. All four took long walks together and separately, to enjoy the scenery and just the cool fall weather.

When the week was up everyone was on solid footing again. The long walks, taken several times by each couple resulted in deeper understand of why William and Tony were doing what they were doing.

It helped, in a way, hearing the news on the shortwave radio they listened to in the evenings. Brenda and Mary had not been unaware of the situation, but it had been a distant worry they thought little about. But now, seeing how William and Tony had prepared, and hearing the same things from other people that the two men talked about, brought them around. Couldn't call them preppers yet, but they were on board with the idea at least.

The mound was secured again, the area around it and on top of it salted with additional leaves brought from elsewhere in the forest to hide what few scars they'd made in the ground. Tony led the way out of the forest, Brenda again acting as navigator, now with a new attitude. With only the one trip in and out with the vehicles, they left little indication they'd been there, especially with the weather changing to cold and rainy.

Pleased with the way the trip had gone, William and Tony took a couple of days before Thanksgiving to go on another X Marks The Spot run, this one having nothing to do with preps. They left town going different directions, placed their innocuous caches and met for dinner with their wives that evening to exchange maps.

The next day each man went looking for the other's cache item. It was beginning to get just a little too easy for them. Only a couple of hours and they were back at the local bar they occasionally went to, to compare days.

"Going to have to start including city areas," Tony said, paying for their beers.

"I think so. There could come a time when we might need to actually cache some things here in town. Primarily for the girls, in case we're separated somehow. What was that?"

"Earthquake?" Tony asked.

Before they could speculate any further a man ran into the bar. His face was white and his eyes looked wild. "A nuke! Mushroom cloud! We've been..." He grabbed his chest and fell to the floor. The bartender and one of the waitresses hurried over to him as several people stepped outside. They came back in looking much the same as the first man, though none of them collapsed.

What they did do was hurriedly pay their bill and run back outside. William and Tony were right with them. They looked around and saw the cloud glowing in the dark sky.

“West of us,” Tony said as they ran to their vehicles, parked side by side in the slots furthest from the door to the bar.

“Means we go north.” William said. Sliding to a stop the two men looked at one another silently and then shook hands. “I’ll see you there if I don’t see you sooner. Let’s try to meet up at the first north side exit. Just like the plan.”

“Will do,” William replied. “You be careful.”

“And you.”

The two were in their vehicles. Both had a quivering moment before trying to start the engines. Both vehicles had non-electronic Cummins Diesel engines in them and started right up. The same couldn’t be said for the majority of other vehicles in the parking lot. Upon seeing Tony and William headed for the driveway access, several people ran toward them. Their intent was clear. They wanted the operating vehicles.

But neither Tony nor William hesitated. They poured the fuel to the engines and sped away before anyone could catch them. It was something of a wild ride until they got to the development in which they both lived.

Dodging stalled cars and arm waving people became second nature. It was quieter in the development, but people were outside, staring toward the still rising mushroom cloud. It was eerily dark, driving along the streets, with the electrical power out from the same HEMP device that had fried engine electronics. The two split up at the next street, headed for their individual houses.

Much to Tony’s surprise, after he opened the garage door manually and went inside, he saw that Brenda already had totes carried up from the basement. The same totes they’d taken camping. He jumped out of the Suburban and closed the garage door. She’d also set out some candles and a couple of windup flashlights.

Tony grabbed her in a hug. “I love you! You rest a minute. I’ll start bringing up more. Don’t want to try and load things until we can both be up here to keep watch.”

Brenda’s eyes were wide. She was scared. But she nodded in understanding. “Better get me my .22.” Tony gave her another hug and headed downstairs. He made three trips before Brenda recovered enough to go back down to help. Her rifle was now leaning beside the front garage access door. So was Tony’s M1A. Plus he’d strapped on a pistol belt carrying a Para-Ordnance P-14 .45 ACP pistol and pouches for four spare magazines and several other things.

They took a two minute break after the Suburban was loaded. Tony went to the garage door, in order to open it, but cautiously looked outside, first. Sure enough there was a crowd

milling around outside. Not so much congregated in front of the Bridgemont house, but spread about everywhere.

“Honey, the people at the bar tried to take the Suburban and William’s truck when ours started and theirs didn’t. It’s going to be the same here. These are our friends and neighbors. I don’t want to hurt any of them unless absolutely necessary.”

Brenda was holding her Ruger 10/22 rifle in front of her and nodded. “So, I want you to get in the Suburban, crouch down under the dashboard and just hold on for dear life. I’m not going to open the garage door. They’d be on us before I could get back in the rig and get it in gear. We’re going out fast and loud, right through the garage door.”

Searching his face with her eyes, Brenda asked, “Can the Suburban do that?”

“I’m sure of it,” Tony replied. My only worry is the stuff on the roof rack. But we’ll just have to chance it. Let’s go.”

Brenda hurried into the Suburban, locked the passenger side door and crouched down in front of the seat, just like Tony suggested. Tony moved to the garage door and carefully turned the latch to release the locking lugs on the sides of the doors before he got into the rig himself.

He started it, waited only moments, turned on the lights, and then put it in gear. He eased the stout front bumper against the door and then gunned the engine and sounded the horn. The tires squalled for a moment, even louder than the horn that Tony kept sounding.

Fortunately no one was close to the door. But several were headed that way after hearing the truck start. Everyone jumped out of the way, or stood transfixed and the Suburban, shedding pieces of the garage door, reached the street and made a hard right turn, lifting up on two wheels for just a moment.

Tony wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard the sound of gunfire behind him. “Okay, Brenda. You can come up now.”

Brenda struggled up onto the seat and cradled the Ruger in her arms. Again Tony had to weave back and forth to avoid a few stalled vehicles, but mostly groups of people. “Why are they just standing there talking?” Brenda asked as they went past another group of wide eyed near neighbors.

“A deer in headlights. They’re transfixed. Won’t be for long, though. There is going to be pandemonium, at the very least in a few minutes.”

“Everything I ever said, or even thought, was an annoyance about you getting ready for something like this I take back now and forever. Thank you. Do you think William and Mary...”

“They’ll be fine. William’s pickup is set up much like the Suburban. He shouldn’t have any trouble. We’re going to try and meet up at the first north side intersection.”

Brenda nodded, but suddenly said, "I've got a bad feeling, Tony. Can we go check on them?"

Tony wanted to say no and keep going. He wanted Brenda safe. But Mary was her sister and they had some kind of a link that told one the other was having problems. So Tony took the next left and headed back into the development, taking an alternate route to the one he'd come out on. Wishing he had night vision equipment so he could turn off the headlights and still see, Tony nevertheless managed to get to the street the Burtons lived on.

The sound of gunfire was unmistakable. Tony brought the Suburban to a halt well back from the group of people taking pot shots at the Burton home. Every once in a while a shot came from the open garage door.

"Tony! Oh, Lord! Tony! Mary! That's Mary lying on the driveway!"

Tony had to grab Brenda as she tried to get out of the truck. "Not that way. You'll just get shot. I'm going to see if I can break up the crowd. You be ready to help Mary."

Putting the Suburban in gear again, Tony drove toward the group of people firing at the house from behind cars stopped on the street. Most turned and ran when it became obvious that Tony had no intention of trying to avoid them. One didn't move fast enough out of the way, instead turning his pistol toward Tony. The Suburban clipped him and he spun away, the pistol flying off into space.

Another tried the same thing, but Tony had his own pistol out, and shooting left handed from the open window, fired several shots. Not really aiming, he just wanted the others to keep their heads down and stop shooting.

It worked for the moment and Tony brought the Suburban to a quick halt in front of William's Ford truck. Brenda was already out of the Suburban before it stopped, kneeling down beside her sister.

Tony fired from time to time, keeping everyone's head down. He nearly shot William when he limped out of the garage, headed to where Mary was now sitting up with Brenda's help. "Get her in the Suburban!" Tony yelled, making a quick magazine change in the pistol. "Come on William! Get in the Suburban!"

"No! You take Mary out of here! I'm not leaving the truck!" Limping badly, after checking on Mary and helping Brenda get her into the rear passenger seat of the Suburban, William worked his way back to the open driver's of the F250, firing occasionally, like Tony, to keep the now dispersed group at bay.

Getting Mary and Brenda out of harm's way took precedence over trying to get William into the Suburban. Tony put the rig in reverse and sped away, far enough to be safe. He put it in park and got out of the Suburban, pulling his M1A from behind his seat. Going prone, he began to take aimed shots at the flashes of the guns still being fired at the Ford William now had moving.

William backed the Ford pickup out onto the street and then switched to drive and gunned the engine. The heavy bumper knocked vehicles around enough to discourage the shooters.

Throwing it in reverse again, William backed up to where Tony was still firing. Tony leaped up and got back into the Suburban. He followed William in turning around and getting out of the neighborhood.

They didn't go far. The Ford suddenly drifted over to the curb and came to a stop. "Keep an eye out, Brenda," Tony said. Taking the M1A with him, Tony hurried up to the driver's side door. The windows were all busted out, and there were bullet holes in the door.

William was leaning down against the steering wheel. "How bad is it?" Tony asked.

"Not too bad," William said, lifting his head and looking at Tony. "I can get to the north side BOL."

"Let Brenda take a look at you. Patch you up some first."

"No. I want her to take care of Mary. How is she?"

"She was talking to Brenda. Brenda didn't say how badly she was hurt. She would have if it was bad."

"Then let's go." William put the Ford into gear again and began to drive off. Tony hurried back to the Suburban and followed suit. All game playing was done. William and Tony both turned on their Tom-Tom navigation systems and took the most direct route to the BOL north of the city. Halfway there the GPS satellite system went off-line. But the northern location had been the previous one checked on before going to the western site on the camping trip and William was able to drive to the point where they had to turn off the road onto the fire road.

The Ford came to a stop, so Tony stopped the Suburban behind him, got out, and ran forward. "You're going to have to go on without me," William said told Tony when Tony got to the cab of the Ford.

"We're not leaving you behind." William's appearance in the lights from the dash scared Tony. "Look. Mary is okay. Just a graze on her temple. Has a terrible headache. Brenda can drive the Suburban. I want you to switch seats. I'll take the Ford the rest of the way."

William wanted to argue, but he was just too weak. Even switching seats had him pale as a ghost. After telling Brenda what was going on, Tony ran back to the Ford. When he climbed into the driver's seat he wished he'd thought to wipe it off. He was sitting on bloody leather. He wondered how much blood William had lost. Nothing to do about it except to get him to the bunker and let Brenda work on him. They had plenty of medical supplies cached. Everything Brenda knew how to use, plus things only a doctor could use. If they could find a doctor at some point.

It took almost as long to go the last mile to the bunker through the forest as it had to get to the turn off. William hurriedly went to get the shovel buried nearby, and opened up the hatch in the roof of the bunker. The headlamp he wore made all the difference in being able to work effectively, without trying to hold a light.

Brenda was doing essentially the same thing, as she worked on the blood covered William. Working by the light of the headlamp and the lights of the Suburban, she checked William over as well as she could with him in the seat of the Ford. She was afraid to move him until Tony was ready to help.

But finally he was and the two half carried William up the slope of the mound covered bunker and then down the steps into it. Not bothering with any kind of cover for the steel chain bunk bed platform Tony and Brenda got William onto the bunk.

Tony ran to help Mary into the bunker and then ran again to get the advanced first-aid kit in the Suburban. Mary was sitting on the floor at the head of the bunk, slowly stroking William's face as Brenda began to cut away his clothes after Tony opened the first-aid pack for her.

"I'm going to go dig up one of the caches. There are more first-aid supplies and some other things we will need."

"Fallout?" Brenda asked.

"If it starts, I'll be coming right back inside."

"Be careful," Brenda said and then turned back to William. It was going to be touch and go. He'd lost a lot of blood from the several wounds he'd suffered. None that life threatening by itself, the combination was.

The first cache Tony uncovered was the one with the additional first-aid supplies. He carried them inside. "We have saline solution, D5W, and Ringer's Lactate and plenty of IV sets."

"That's great! You probably just saved William's life," Brenda said, digging into the tote to find the IV products.

Mary looked a little better. Brenda had given her something for the headache, after determining there wasn't a concussion on the way to the BOL. Mary still looked like death warmed over, with blood in her hair and on her clothing. But not as bad as William looked.

Tony wanted to do more, but Brenda had the knowledge and he didn't. He turned and gathered up the solar panels and antenna parts and headed back outside. He worked most of the night, digging up the caches and moving things to the bunker. He unloaded both vehicles and secured them for the duration.

Finally, exhausted, he closed the hatch of the bunker and sat down on one of the metal benches ringing the table in the center of the main room of the bunker. There had been no fallout

from the hit on the city. The winds had been with the group. But when Tony hooked up the remote reading survey meter a few minutes later, it chirped and the needle jumped just a bit. They were getting fallout now. Tony had finished just in time.

Mary had obviously taken a shower and changed clothes. Her head was bandaged and she sat on one of the totes Tony had brought in, holding William's hand. Somehow the two had managed to get him shifted over enough to lay down one of the sleep pads onto the metal supports of the bunk bed and roll him back over onto it. He was covered with a blanket, now, the tubes of two IVs trailing from where the bags were hung on the upper bunk to his arm.

A mask covered William's mouth and nose, the clear tubing from it going to the oxygen concentrator that had been in the cache.

A very tired looking Brenda, still covered in William's and Mary's blood, stood up and came over to sit beside Tony. "You look a mess," she told him. He too was streaked with blood, but he also had plenty of dirt mixed in with it.

"You, too, if you must know," Tony replied, taking her hand in his. "Why don't you get a shower and a change of clothes? And then some sleep. I'll keep an eye on things."

"No," Brenda said. "You first. When I'm clean and lay down, I'll be out for a while."

"You sure?" Tony asked.

Brenda nodded. "Don't take too long. I may fall asleep just sitting here."

Tony hurried. But he felt like a new man when he came out of the bathroom wearing clean clothes on a clean body.

Brenda immediately entered the bathroom. Tony saw that she had finally managed to get Mary to lie down on the other bottom bunk. Mary was fast asleep. Tony looked down at William. He was still pale, but looked much better than he had earlier. Tony sat down on the tote where Mary had been sitting and took William's free hand in his. He prayed for a long time, for William's sake, Mary's, and Brenda's. He said thanks for the foresight he and William had been given to get the equipment together that were probably going to save William's life.

When Brenda came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, Tony had the two top bunks prepared with sleep pads and sleeping bags. "If he comes too, or anything happens, wake me up," Brenda told Tony. "I have to get some sleep if I'm going to be of any use tomorrow."

"That's actually, 'today', since it is a little after six in the morning," Tony said.

"Yeah. Whatever. Wake me if you need to."

Tony dozed from time to time as the hours passed. But he wasn't going to disturb either woman until they woke on their own. He thought he saw William's eyes open once, but they

were closed when Tony looked closer. He fixed a pot of coffee about noon, and had a snack with it. The caffeine jolt kept him going for a few more hours.

He'd been checking the radiation meter regularly and caught the peak and subsequent drop in radiation levels. It would take plugging the numbers into TOM's spreadsheet to be sure, but it looked like they could leave the bunker in less than three weeks, barring additional fallout.

The coffee was gone and Tony was sitting on the tote again, leaning against the upright of the bunks beside William when Brenda and then Mary woke up and got up. Brenda touched Tony's arm and he came awake.

"How is he?" were Tony's first words as Brenda examined William.

"Stable. Give me some room. I want to change the IVs."

"How are you, Mary?" Tony asked as she stood nearby watching her sister tend to her husband.

"I'm okay. I don't know how to thank you for having done all of this. We'd be dead for sure if you hadn't. And if you hadn't come back for us..."

"William is doing fine," Brenda told Tony as she gathered her sister in a hug and let her cry on her shoulder.

"I'll get some food started," Tony said and yawned greatly.

"Don't worry about it, Tony," Brenda said. "I'm rested now. I can fix something for us. You need to get some sleep."

"Yeah. Okay. Wake me if anything happens."

"Of course," Brenda said, resolved to do no such thing unless it was absolutely necessary.

The two let him sleep even after the food was ready. Both women ate voraciously. It had been some time since they'd had anything. They sat some aside for Tony and cleaned up the dishes.

Working quietly, they investigated the various totes and cases Tony had carried in the night before and stacked them in related groups around the bunker to give more useful room and to have everything at hand.

It was two more days before William came to, asking for water and then some food. Brenda checked him over carefully and declared that he was infection free and should be fine. "In a few weeks."

"I think I..." William lay back after trying to sit up. "I think I'll just stay here. But I need to go to the bathroom."

It took all three of the others working in concert to get William to the bathroom and then back in bed. He closed his eyes and was out again after the strain. But the two women had some light food prepared for him when he woke up again an hour later.

William managed to eat it all, but was exhausted by the effort and went back to sleep immediately. That was the way things went for the full three weeks of the bunker stay.

Tony listened to the radio for hours a day. There was very little the first few days, but then, as the atmosphere became less charged, he was able to contact a few Amateur Radio operators here and there around the world.

The news wasn't good. The dreaded for so long Global Thermonuclear War had occurred. Billions died, and more were dying from the effects of the war. An equal number were already dead from lack of clean water, good food, and medical attention. More would die for the same lack.

And then there were the local wars between historic enemies that weren't involved in the nuclear exchange. Even some small surviving groups were slowly chipping away at the numbers of survivors in battles and raids over available resources. Nothing even resembling a national government was still intact. A few smaller jurisdictions were intact, even a couple of state governments in the US. But the area in which they were of any effect were very small, located around the state capitals at best.

Tony ventured forth from the bunker when the radiation outside was under 0.1 r/hr and took a look around the area on foot. Tony shook his head at the sight of the Ford F250. It was the first time he'd seen it in daylight since The Day. There were bullet holes everywhere. He'd suspected as much, from the fact that several of the totes he'd taken from it had bullet holes, or the bullet itself in them.

Tony went heavily armed, but saw no signs of any people or animals at all. What he did see was a foot of snow on the ground, with more coming down by the minute. It wasn't unusual to have some snowfall in the area in mid December, but this amount was uncommon. Not unknown, but not common. The thought of a nuclear winter crossed his mind, but it was going to be a long time before it became apparent, even if it was true.

Mary and Brenda were standing on top of the bunker mound, looking around when Tony trudged back into view. He waved and they waved back, happy to be out of the bunker for a while even in the cold and snow.

William was up and dressed, sitting at the table when the three went back in. Tony was shivering. He'd underestimated the temperature when he first stuck his head above the hatch of the bunker and gone out with only two layers of clothing on, and a coat. When he checked the thermometer attached to the coat's zipper pull it had been just above zero. No wonder he was shivering.

“You up to some planning discussion?” Tony asked William, taking off his jacket. It was plenty warm in the earth-sheltered bunker.

“Yeah. Tired. I’m always tired. But I can think and talk. I think.”

Brenda and Mary joined them at the table. “Here’s the situation as I see it,” Tony said as the others listened. “For the moment, we are on our own. There is a lot of violence out there now, and we need to decide our future.”

“We can’t live on stored supplies forever,” William said. “We have six months at each of the BOLs and a month at each of the route caches, assuming we can get to them and they haven’t been discovered.”

“So we have a year or so before we have to be producing more food, then?” Mary asked.

Tony nodded, as did William. “We have garden seeds and the tools to put in a large garden. Somewhere. Here isn’t the best place. Of the three BOLs the west one is probably the best. But again, it’s just another bunker like this one and the one we were in during the Labor Day Holiday.”

“I have to tell you,” Mary said, rather reluctantly, “I don’t think I can hack living the rest of my life in a bunker.”

“I know, Sweetheart,” William said, putting his hand over hers and squeezing gently. “None of us want that. These bunkers were our safety link. Our plans for a permanent retreat slash retirement home site were just not far enough along to be of any use.”

“If we hadn’t held you back...” Brenda said, looked chagrined.

“No, Brenda. No. It’s simply a matter of money and time. We didn’t have enough of either, no fault of the two of you.”

“That’s right. We’re better off than the overwhelming majority of people that survived this. We’ll do okay. As long as we have a plan,” William reassured the two women.

“What about the government?” Mary asked. “FEMA?”

Tony shook his head. “You heard some of the broadcasts on the radio. Very few government entities are intact. Everyone is up against the same wall. Water and food. Decent shelter with alternative heating methods. Transportation with fuel supplies. Medical care beyond basic first aid. Everyone needs them all. At least at some point in time.”

“There is salvaging. For a while,” William said. “Just taking what we need that’s been obviously abandoned.”

“Looting?” Mary asked, disapproval evident in her voice.

“No. Mining the resources that are now out there for the taking,” explained Tony. “We would never take something that belonged to someone in obvious possession. Many of the things we might salvage will have a limited shelf life. If they aren’t taken and used, they will just go to waste.”

“I think I understand what you are saying,” Brenda said. “But that still leaves long term alternatives. What do we need for that? Is there something available just for the taking that would work?”

“A farm,” William and Tony said almost at the same time. William continued. “A working farm with food animal livestock.”

“The thing is, none of us know enough about farming to make a go of it alone,” Tony added.

“Which means, most likely, either trying to join an existing farm where the people have survived and will take on unskilled, but willing workers.” William was beginning to show some fatigue.

Tony took up William’s train of thought. “Or, we can find an abandoned farm, and look for skilled people to help us run it.”

“I guess either would work,” Mary said slowly. “I don’t cotton to the idea of being a milk maid all my life. But it would be better than starving to death, I guess.”

“Absolutely,” Brenda said.

“We have, between us, some useful skills that would be of benefit to any group we joined,” Tony said. William nodded.

“Brenda’s skilled nursing skills. Mary, your sewing and cooking skills. Once William is back on his feet, he and I could do some pretty labor intensive work.”

“But on the other hand,” William said, wincing slightly, “We do have things we can provide others, if we have our own farm and need people to work it. Those same skills, of course, but we have the extensive medical gear and supplies you used, Brenda. Plus we have stored a lot of things that are going to be hard to come by that I think would be better as part of a work package than just trading away for a couple of meals.”

“Such as?” Mary asked.

Again Tony took over for William. “Salt. Sugar. Cocoa, Spices. Leavings. Flavorings. Open pollinated garden seeds. Lots of them. A huge library of books related to living a self-sufficient life. A very complete set of tools for primitive living. We have other things just for trading, but some of those I mentioned would be a big draw for people to have foods prepared and seasoned much like they are used to as part of their wages. If we can grow okra, we can dry

the seeds, roast them, and have a coffee substitute that with what coffee we have stored to make it taste very much like real coffee, would last twenty people for several years, if it is rationed.

“And we have the food basics, in six gallon Super Pails packaged for long term storage. Enough to ensure an adequate diet for several years as a supplement to food we need to grow ourselves.”

“I think it is going to be a tossup as to which we do. It depends on the situations we find out in the world,” William said as he stood up slowly. “I need to lie down for a little while.”

“Okay. I’m going to get the Suburban ready to go. I’ll go take a look around the area and see what property might be available.”

“Not by yourself,” William said, grunting as he stretched out on the lower bunk. “You’ll have to wait until I’m able to go with you.”

It was Mary that spoke up, rather than Tony. “I don’t think we should wait. I’ll go with Tony.” She shifted her gaze from William to Tony. “You’ll need to show me how to use Brenda’s .22.”

William tried to protest, as did Tony. Brenda brought the discussion to a close. “I need to stay here with William. We need to get started on our future. Tony doesn’t need to be out there alone. Mary is the logical choice to go with him.”

None of the other three could dispute her analysis, so it became the plan of action for the next few days. Scout out an abandoned farm they would take over, or find an operating farm that needed extra help and supplies.

Tony and Mary didn’t venture far the first day, nor the second. The third day, venturing a bit further, in the opposite direction on the highway than they’d gone the first two days, proved just as disappointing. But the fourth day, they hit what they considered pay dirt. At least at first.

A man on a tractor was plowing snow clear of the driveway up to his place. Showing open hands, Tony stopped the Suburban and walked over to where the man had stopped the tractor.

Tony noted the double barrel shotgun lying along the man’s leg, his left hand on the grip. “What’cha want? Ain’t got no food to give away. I’ll blast you if you try anything.”

“Actually, we’re looking for a working farm where we can hire on. We can contri...”

“You and the woman in the truck? She your wife?”

“Uh... No. She’s not my wife. There are four of us and...”

“Go away. Don’t want nobody ain’t properly wed up.”

“We’re both married. Just not to each other. My friend is laid up for a while, but he’ll be able to work a bit pretty soon. It is his wife in the Suburban. My wife is taking care of...”

The shotgun was now resting across the man’s legs. “Sounds kinda fishy to me. You’re not married, but suddenly you are. There’s more of you, but one can’t work and two are women. I think you’d better get back in that fancy rig of yours and hightail it out of here. I’ll be warning my kin in the area about you. Might want to steer clear of the rest of us. I’m the easy one to deal with. ‘specially now.”

Tony had his arms up and spread slightly, to show the man he wasn’t going to try anything. He backed up to the Suburban and got in.

“It thought he was going to shoot you,” Mary said.

“I wasn’t sure for a moment or two there, myself. We’re going to have to be really careful. Another of us gets hurt and it will really limit our capability.”

“You’re right.” There was a long silence and then Mary said, “I don’t know if I could shoot someone or not.” Her head was down and she was looking at the Ruger 10/22 she held between her knees.

“I know, Mary,” Tony replied gently. You must use your best judgment and let your conscience direct you.”

“I know. But let’s try looking for a place we can use without having to confront anyone.”

“That’s definitely my preferred action,” Tony said. “But I don’t know if we’ll have a choice.”

They looked all that day and the next, without finding anything suitable. They did find one abandoned farm, but all the livestock was dead from radiation poisoning, as were the farmer, his wife, and four children.

Tony left that place hurriedly, his face white and drawn. That evening, as they ate supper in the bunker, Tony brought up the subject. “I think we may have to go a bit further afield. Somewhere with no residents, but with the animals still living. Somewhere at the edge of the fallout pattern in this area.”

“We’ll have to get some of the fuel out of the cache,” William said. He was obviously feeling better, and had even been outside a couple of times, but he was still too weak to try and work or travel. “The Suburban tanks must be about empty.”

“I know. I’m planning on it tomorrow before we head out again.”

“Maybe I’ll be able to help you out s...”

Three resounding voices all said “No!”

With the new plan in place, the Suburban tanks topped off, Tony and Mary headed out again the next morning. They cut tracks in the new snow that had fallen the night before and was still coming down softly. It would take a real heat wave in the area to not have a white Christmas.

Picking up the search just past where they had stopped the afternoon before, Tony was driving slowly, partly because of the snow, and to watch for anything out of the ordinary. Something caught his eye off to his left and he stopped the Suburban.

“What is that?” he asked, backing the Suburban up even with what he’d seen.

“I don’t see anything, Tony? What are you looking at?”

“See how the snow is undisturbed there, starting at those two fence posts sticking out of the snow. Like a white road running through the trees. I think that’s what it actually is. Keep an eye out. I want to check and see if the road ditch has a crossover here.”

Mary kept looking around, but much of her attention was on Tony. He didn’t sink into the snow the way he would if it had just blown over level with the ditch the way it was in many places.

When he got to the fence posts he kicked the snow from around it and found a heavy cable running between the two posts. “I never would have seen it if we’d been going any faster,” Tony told Mary when he came back and up to the Suburban passenger side door. “I’m going to cut the cable so we can head up that way and see what is what.” Tony got the small cutting torch set out of the back of the Suburban and went back to the fence.

A few minutes later, with the cable lying on the ground in the snow, Tony eased the Suburban across it and then kept it centered between the trees on either side. If it was a road it was a very bad one. Without four wheel drive he wouldn’t have made it very far.

After a hard left turn and then a hard right, Tony and Mary could see structures ahead. Tony stopped the Suburban and turned to look at Mary. “Look. I’m going to turn the Suburban around, and then go up there on foot while you keep an eye on things. If something happens, just put the Suburban in gear and take off.”

“No!” Mary said adamantly. “I’m not going to leave you!”

“You might have to. If there is someone up there, they might not want visitors.”

“Then let’s go find another spot,” Mary suggested.

“No. If this place is abandoned, and it very well may be, it’s already got one thing going for it. This entrance. Unless you know it’s there, or are looking for it, you’d probably miss it. I almost did. I want to see more of the place.”

“Oh, Tony! If anything happens to you, Brenda will have my head.”

“No she won’t and nothing might happen. I just need to know for sure.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mary said firmly.

Tony just looked at her.

“Well, nuts! I’d be no good if something happened. Do what you have to do, but be very careful.”

“Always,” Tony replied. He took out his load bearing equipment and the M1A. He was already wearing his pistol on his pants belt. Moving over to the tree line, Tony began to work his way toward the structures. It was getting harder to see as the snow came down more abundantly, with enough wind to keep it swirling.

Mary suddenly realized she could no longer see the structures or Tony. But she kept watching in that direction. She was nearly frantic with worry, and then almost shot Tony when he loomed up out of the snowfall suddenly.

“You scared me half to death!” Mary said, barely able to speak. “I almost shot you right through the window.”

“Sorry, Mary! I was just anxious to get back. Slide on over. This is the place.”

“What do you mean?”

“It will work for us, I’m sure.” He shook his head. “I feel for the family... But if they haven’t made it back by now, I suspect they won’t be coming back. Either case, even if they do, I’m not going to leave the animals to just starve. Or turn them loose. They are too valuable.

Tony was in the Suburban, backing the rest of the way up the drive, rather than turning around again. Mary saw Tony’s tracks going from the edge of the forest to the house, and then a set to the side by side barns, and finally back down the track.

“I’m going to tend to the animals. See what you can find in the house. I just gave it a quick once over. And take the twenty-two,” he added the last when Mary got out of the truck without the Ruger.

With the M1A slung over his shoulder again, Tony trudged over to the barns. Faintly Mary could hear a horse whinny and what had to be a cow or steer lowing. The door of the house was unlocked. It didn’t look like Tony had broken it. It must have been unlocked when he got there first.

The place was immaculate. Everything had a place, and everything was in its place. No dirty dishes, the beds were made; a fire was laid in the fireplace. A minivan and a pickup were in the garage. The only thing out of place was the piece of paper on the kitchen table.

“If anyone finds this, take what you need and please leave the rest intact. We’re going into town to try and find shelter. If you would be so kind as to check on the animals, it would be much appreciated. We’ll work out something when we get back, after... this... is over.”

It was signed “Jack Carter.”

Mary went out the back door and headed to the barns. Her nose was burning slightly before she got there. Tony had the big double doors open and a faint haze was drifting out. With her palm over her nose and mouth, she went inside.

Tony saw her coming and said, “You might not want to stay in here. It’s pretty bad. Not all the animals made it.”

Gagging, Mary hurried back outside into the clean fresh air and breathed it in deeply. She wandered around the rest of the group of buildings, taking in the two old style silos, plus five smaller ones of modern construction of corrugated metal. There were several more buildings, but Tony called to her and she headed back to join him. The barn doors were closed again.

“They had plenty of food, but ran out of water. Probably just a couple of days ago. Stressed the weaker animals enough to kill them. Not being an expert, I think the others will make it if we take care of them properly.”

“Did you see the note in the kitchen?” Mary asked.

“I did. That Jack Carter must be quite the man. He did everything he could for the animals and then, essentially, opened up the house for someone to use caught out in everything when it happened.”

“I hope they are okay, even if it means we can’t have the place.”

“With things the way they are, I suspect we’d have a good chance hiring on.”

They were back at the Suburban. Tony put the M1A and LBE back behind his seat and climbed in behind the wheel. Instead of turning left, to retrace their rout, Tony turned right, to continue following the highway.

“We’re not going right back?” Mary asked.

“No. I want to see what’s up this way. Just for the general knowledge. If there are some people in the area we need to know before we get too settled.”

There was silence for a while, until Tony went around a sharp turn in the old highway. Mary yelped and slammed both feet against the floor boards, trying to stop the Suburban. But Tony was taking care of that. But it was close. Even no faster than they were going, Tony had almost run the Suburban into a tractor parked sideways in the middle of the road.

Fearing an ambush, Tony threw the Suburban in reverse and backed around the corner again. But nothing happened for several minutes. "Stay here," Tony said, getting out of the Suburban with his pistol in hand.

"Be careful," Mary replied.

Tony made his careful way around the bend and surveyed the situation. The snow was undisturbed, mounded here and there, drifted against the tractor's tires. Then he saw the body hanging halfway out of the open door of the tractor's cab. There was no glass in the door. Fearing the worst, Tony went over to the humps of snow. He brushed the snow gently with his boot. "Oh, Lord!" he said softly. It was a dead woman. The other two humps of snow were both much smaller.

He could barely bring himself to check them. But he did. Two children. A boy and girl in their early teens he estimated. Going up to the tractor, Tony managed to retrieve the dead man's wallet. Tony hung his head. It was Jack Carter and his family.

Piecing it together in his mind, Tony decided that when the HEMP disabled their other vehicles, it hadn't affected the old tractor so they headed for town. But someone had attacked and killed them, for what reason, Tony couldn't even guess at.

He went back to the Suburban, his face as white as the snow still falling.

When he got into the Suburban, Mary saw how pale he was and asked, "What is it, Tony?"

"The Carter family won't be coming back to reclaim their farm."

"Oh, no!" Mary cried, looking over her shoulder at the bend in the road when Tony turned the Suburban around and headed back the way they'd come. Neither said anything the rest of the way back to the bunker.

The relief at finding a suitable spot to set up long term was tempered by the knowledge of the death of the family that originally lived there. But the group couldn't dwell on it. What was done was done.

The first order of business was to give the family a decent burial, the second was to get William moved and settled in to have someone in residence if others came looking for the same thing the group had.

It took several days of hard work to get everything moved from the bunker to the farm, including the rest of the items in the caches associated with the bunker. It had to be done in between taking care of the animals and clearing the barn of the dead ones. No easy task. But the tractor the Carter family had used to try and get to shelter was still operable, and that made the

task easier. But there was a limited amount of fuel available, so the use of the equipment was reserved for the next spring for planting after the animals were buried.

Once settled, with Christmas long past, as well as the New Year, the four simply worked to become familiar with the farm, what was in storage, what equipment was available, and what they would need to do the coming spring. The extensive library of how-to books on the computers that had been in Faraday cage containers held enough information for Tony to take care of the minor problems here and there with the livestock.

With the weather still very bad, the urge to seek out other survivors was limited to radio contacts. By the time spring rolled around, late, Tony had lined up six farm hands willing to help work the farm for room and board and a piece of the action.

With hard work and unending perseverance the four established the working farm, ensuring their continued existence, along with those that came to live there to help. A few years later, William and Tony even began the X Marks The Spot game again. With the old caches still in place, and new ones for whatever might happen in the future.

End \*\*\*\*\*

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