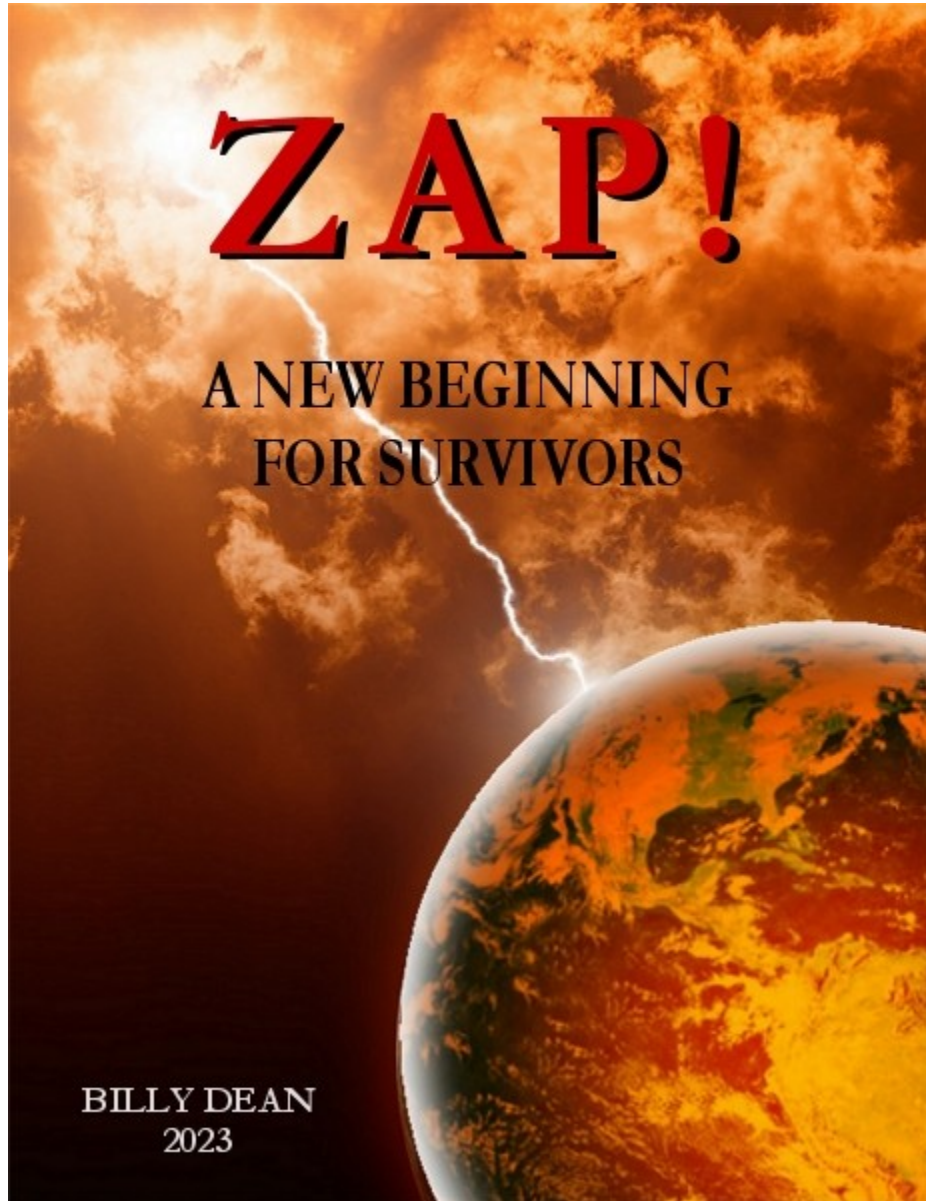


ZAP!

**A NEW BEGINNING
FOR SURVIVORS**

**BILLY DEAN
2023**



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jack Nakni > retired Marine Corps sniper
Linda Hale > Jack's girl friend
Mike > trucker Jack meets on freeway
Susan > Mike's girlfriend
Bob Ewing > Pilot Jack meets on freeway
Cheryl, Larry, Tina > Bob's family
Tim > accountant Bob meets on freeway
George > Fair Oaks guard - retired cop
Dave > veterinarian - Linda's father
Woody & Carol > former Marine cooks
Peter > terrorist & part-time guard
Harold > owns cemetery & crematorium
Rose & Paul > expert archer & plumber
Margaret > gardening/cooking expert
Max > history & politics professor
Frank > lives near terrorist cell house
Mary > Tim's mother - retired nurse
Steven Miller > National Security Advisor
Stuart Williams > Dir Central Intelligence
Daniel Woods > US President (dead)
Shirley Adams > Vice President (kidnapped)
Richard Davis > Speaker of House (dead)
Henry Waters > President Pro Tem (missing)
Jennifer Edwards > Secretary of State
Patricia Perkins > Secretary of Treasury
Michael Erickson > Secretary of Defense
Dean Anderson > US Attorney General
General Obrien > Chief of Staff Chairman
General Monday > Army Chief of Staff
Admiral Wayne > Navy Chief of Staff
General Eastwood > Air Force Chief of Staff
General North > Marine Corps Chief of Staff
General Kirk > Space Ops Chief of Staff
General Sokolov > Russia's Defense Minister
Ivan Petrov > Russia's President
Colonel Nakni > Jack's Choctaw father
Moreen Sullivan > Jack's Irish mother
Carl > former Marine - turbine expert
Cathy > Carl's wife - seamstress
Penny > Carl's daughter - musician
Butch > Marine - solar power expert
Beverly > Butch's wife - gunsmith
John > Butch's son - electrician
Shirley > John's fiancé - computer expert

CHAPTERS

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | <u>Zap!</u> | 26 | <u>Flash Bangs & Frags</u> |
| 2 | <u>Trucks & Tuna</u> | 27 | <u>Safe at Fair Oaks</u> |
| 3 | <u>Eye Candy</u> | 28 | <u>Radios & Reunion</u> |
| 4 | <u>Balls & Bullets</u> | 29 | <u>Bad Riddance</u> |
| 5 | <u>Story Fire</u> | 30 | <u>Jerky & Hide</u> |
| 6 | <u>Mister E</u> | 31 | <u>Football & Fallout</u> |
| 7 | <u>Core of Four</u> | 32 | <u>The Situation Room</u> |
| 8 | <u>Guns & Dots</u> | 33 | <u>The War Room</u> |
| 9 | <u>Shades of Gray</u> | 34 | <u>Drop Kick</u> |
| 10 | <u>Fair Oaks</u> | 35 | <u>The Two Man Rule</u> |
| 11 | <u>Lights On</u> | 36 | <u>America's Big Sticks</u> |
| 12 | <u>Burn or Bury</u> | 37 | <u>The Buck Stops Here</u> |
| 13 | <u>Now is Forever</u> | 38 | <u>Nahcheenot</u> |
| 14 | <u>Fallout</u> | 39 | <u>Kaboom... Kaput!</u> |
| 15 | <u>Infidels</u> | 40 | <u>Phooey on FEMA</u> |
| 16 | <u>Stay or Bugout</u> | 41 | <u>Walmart Has a Heart</u> |
| 17 | <u>Safe Not Sorry</u> | 42 | <u>Goons & Guns</u> |
| 18 | <u>Core of More</u> | 43 | <u>Game Over</u> |
| 19 | <u>Where When How</u> | 44 | <u>Fairwell to Fair Oaks</u> |
| 20 | <u>Wait & Watch</u> | 45 | <u>Colonel Knock Knee</u> |
| 21 | <u>Lights Out</u> | 46 | <u>Home is Here</u> |
| 22 | <u>Terrorists Attack</u> | 47 | <u>Top Down</u> |
| 23 | <u>Peter's Struggle</u> | 48 | <u>Bottom Up</u> |
| 24 | <u>Snipers & Scopes</u> | 49 | <u>Jack & Linda</u> |
| 25 | <u>Shots Fired</u> | 50 | <u>Epilogue</u> |

ZAP!

Tuesday — January 13th — 8:15 AM

Jack, a former Marine sniper, was done hunting terrorists in bombed-out buildings, rock-studded mountains and wind-blown dunes. He steered his Rover out of the Van Nuys airport and began the long drive to his ranch and retirement in northern California. An hour later, driving east on the Antelope Valley freeway, a blinding flash of light lit up the sky. He heard the screech of tires as people in the vehicles around him slammed on their brakes and crashed into each other. A red Camaro slid to a stop in front of him, sideways to what moments before had been the flow of traffic. Jack felt the shivery energy of fight or flight. He swerved around the Camaro, steered to the shoulder and stopped at the off ramp to Aqua Dulce.

He hit the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. Like lightning, an electro magnetic pulse had disabled everything electronic and electrical between it and the Earth below. Was this just an attack on Edwards Air Force Base? Or one of dozens of EMPs to bring America to its Infidel knees? Had China zapped the entire world to expand its empire beyond Taiwan?

Jack didn't care who or why. The world he had known and the retirement he had planned were gone. Somewhere high above America, and perhaps other countries as well, a nuclear device had put him back in the deadly game of hunting terrorists and surviving the scarcity of food, water and civilized behavior. All that mattered now was being a survivor, not a victim. The collapse had begun.

Some of the people on the freeway might be able to restart their vehicles but most wouldn't know they could and those that did would find the freeway too cluttered to continue driving. Jack had installed copper mesh under the hood of his Rover and an EMP protection device between the battery and the ignition circuits. His satellite phone and other electronic gear were in an EMP hardened box beneath the floor boards.

He watched the chaos and confusion unfold for a minute or two, then put his Rover in gear and drove down the off ramp toward Soledad Canyon. It would take him through the back country into Palmdale where he could use US 395 to get to his ranch in Bridgeport.

As he pulled away he heard a woman scream. She was struggling to get out of her car. She'd crashed into the divider and couldn't open her door or release her seat belt. Jack was over six feet and 200 pounds of muscle, grit and self-determination. He jumped out of his Rover, ran to her car and pulled his survival knife from his cargo pants. The knife had a sharp, glass-breaking point at the base. She was dazed, searching Jack's face for an answer to her nightmare.

"Turn your face way from the window. I'm going to break the glass."

She leaned away from the window and put her head down. Her Tesla was equipped with laminated rather than safety glass on the driver and passenger side windows, so he had to hit it twice to break it. He cleared the

sharp edges, reached in and cut her seat belt, then helped her out.

"Get across the freeway then get as far away from here as you can."

Jack wanted to save them all from this disaster but knew he couldn't. The woman, like everyone else, would have to work things out for herself. On his way back to his Rover, he saw the driver of the Camaro get out, raise the hood and look inside. Then he saw another hood being raised. Then another and another. The sight and sound of hoods going up and down made the stalled cars and trucks look like wounded birds flapping their broken wings, squawking about being trapped on the ground. They were hoping to see something they could fix but Jack knew that when it came to cars, most people were about as sharp as a marble and wouldn't be able to fix anything. They couldn't fix their mobile phones either so the freeway became littered with cell phones tossed in anger at the hard concrete.

Both sides of the freeway became crowded with people stunned, shocked and surprised the world could end at all, and certainly not the way it did. No bang. Just a flash in their windshields, then the screech of tires, the crunch of metal and the primal screams of terror and disbelief.

Most wandered aimlessly, but some gathered in small groups, orphaned children seeking comfort from their aloneness. Jack joined a group gathering around a tall, muscular truck driver. His height would draw more people to him. He was young, good looking and exuded that confident sense of immortality that life and disasters like this had not yet stripped away.

Jack had watched him struggle to keep his 18-wheel rig from rolling over when it slammed into several stalled cars. He was a skilled driver with an agile mind and strong hands. Somebody to join up with when shit hits the fan, and it had.

"What happened?" asked a man in the crowd. Blood was dripping down his arm and he had a terrified look on his face.

"Someone detonated a nuclear device in the upper atmosphere," said the guy on Jack's right. He was wearing a suit and had a military look about him. Short hair streaked with gray. In-charge, well-informed and in better shape than someone who only plays a round of nine on Sunday mornings.

"A nuclear device!" yelled a woman next to the man with a bleeding arm. "That's a bomb, right? Why aren't we all dead?"

The man in the suit said, "It wasn't a bomb that can kill people. It was a device that generates an EMP, an electro-magnetic pulse that disables cars, cell phones ... anything electronic and electrical within its range."

A man in blue overalls holding a hard hat looked at the man in the suit. "You said the upper atmosphere. Why up there?"

"The closer the nuclear device is to the ground the less damage the EMP can cause. So whoever zapped us with this one detonated it at a height that would maximize the damage it would do for its size. Probably less than a hundred kilotons. If it was detonated 300 miles above North America, it probably zapped the power grid of the United States, Canada and Mexico."



Jack nodded. "You're right. An EMP detonated 120 miles above Kansas, the center of the US, wouldn't affect the east and west coast. So it's more likely the device was 300 miles above Kansas. If so, the whole country could be toast, not just here. And if this is only one of several HEMPs, Europe and other allied countries might be toast as well."

"Yep," said the truck driver, "for all we know, everything's been destroyed. All five power grids in the US, our satellites and missile defense systems. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised to hear they brought Air Force One down."

"No," said the man in the suit, "it's hardened against HEMPs, but any commercial airplane without a low glide ratio has already fallen out of the sky like a rock."

"Glide ratio? What's that?" asked the man in the blue overalls.

"The ratio of an aircraft's forward motion to its descent when it loses power. Light, propeller-driven aircraft tend to have high glide ratios because they depend more on the lift of the wings than on the power of the engine. If they lose engine power, the distance they move forward compared to the distance they drop is high, so the angle of descent isn't as steep as jet-propelled airplanes which depend more on the power of the jet than on the lift of the wings."

The man in the blue overalls shook his head in dismay. "Damn it, can you imagine how many planes were in the air when that EMP zapped us? And the fires we're gonna see. Christ, those airliners damn near always go up in flames when the fuel bursts out of the wing tanks."

The thought of airplanes plummeting to earth made Jack remember how the lonely drone of an airplane overhead had always caused a sadness to wash over him.

A woman standing next to a dark green Honda said, "Oh my god. What can we do?"

Some women can divert a man's attention from anything, even a disaster

like this, and she was one of them. The men turned to look at her but her eyes were on the truck driver. Like him, she was young and good looking. He gave her a subtle smile. She noticed.

"Not much," said the truck driver. "We can't call Triple A. Our cell phones are dead. Even if we could call them, their trucks would be down too."

Jack didn't have a cell phone. He had a satellite phone and kept it in an EMP-hardened box. Later, when he was alone, he'd check to see if he could contact the Marine Corps training center near Bridgeport.

"You're right," said Jack. "The microwave repeaters are down, so even if our cell phones still operated we'd have zero bars. And except for some of the older cars and trucks, especially those with mechanically fuel injected diesel engines, most of the vehicles out here on the road are dead."

"Yeah," said the truck driver, "I saw an old Mercedes 300D, a '56 Chevy pickup, and a VW bug working their way up the freeway after the EMP hit."

The man in the suit nodded. "My Mercedes is diesel but it's electronically fuel injected. The computer operates the injectors, the ignition...damn near everything electronic or electrical in the vehicle."

The truck driver turned to Jack. "Is your Rover diesel?"

"No. Thought about converting it but I spent several years in foreign countries where gas stations with diesel were rare as hen's teeth."

The truck driver nodded. "Well, that might work to your advantage. If you can get it running again, cars with gasoline to siphon won't be rare as hen's teeth."

Jack didn't want anyone to know his Rover was hardened against an EMP so he said, "Chances of that are nil and none. Like your truck, it's toast."

"And we'll all be toast too," said the truck driver, "if we don't get away from the freeway as soon as possible."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the woman standing next to the Honda.

"I listen to Howard Stern on my long haul trips and he said the most common scenario is that terrorists unleash a small bomb to disable the vehicles and electronic devices in a target area then an hour later kill everyone with a big bomb or by terrorists armed with assault weapons."

The group stood there looking at the truck driver. The silence became uncomfortable. The woman leaned into her Honda and sighed. "An hour? Could we get far enough from here in an hour to be safe from an actual bomb?"

The man in the suit looked at the truck driver. "Yes, military strategists tend to focus on that as a potential scenario. I train pilots to prepare for disasters like this, but the freeway is an unlikely target for a nuclear weapon or armed terrorists. It's more likely that Edwards Air Force Base was the target of the HEMP we experienced down here on the freeway. If Edwards is attacked by a more deadly bomb, your survival would depend on how powerful the bomb is. My family is more than an hour from here, but they'll expect me to give it my best effort, and I suggest you do the same."

"You work at Edwards?" Jack asked.

"I do, and if this is as widespread as I think it is, the base will be locked down tighter than a drum. Good luck everyone."

Jack and the other people in the group watched him walk back to his Mercedes, pull a Camel Back hydration pack from behind the seat and begin jogging up the freeway, weaving in and out of the stalled cars. This guy is more prepared than most, thought Jack. If he doesn't stop to sleep, he'll be home in a couple of days.

The man in overalls looked at Jack and then the truck driver. "Looks like that's our only option." He put his hard hat on his head and began walking up the freeway.

Everyone except Jack, the truck driver and the woman by the Honda joined the man in overalls walking up the freeway. The woman walked over to the truck driver. "So we're sitting ducks. All of us and the whole country. Who could have done this? And why?"

"We're the ugly Americans," said the truck driver. "Everyone hates us."

Jack said, "The question isn't who or why. The question is how are we going to respond to what's happened. My answer is to be a survivor, not a victim."

TRUCKS & TUNA

Tuesday — January 13th — 9:30 AM

Jack was eager to get back to his Rover and put some distance between him and the freeway. And he didn't want to be burdened by what appeared to be a pathetically helpless woman. She had nothing to offer but good looks. He extended his hand to the truck driver and said, "I'm Jack. Like the man in the suit said, we better get away from this freeway as soon as possible."

The truck driver shook Jack's hand. "Name's Mike. Big Mack on the CB, usually channel 21."

"Never been a trucker but enjoyed chatting on the CB with them. Usually single side band on channel 40. I was Running Bare."

"You're a big guy but you look more like a runner than a bear."

"You're right, and I am a runner, but it's B-A-R-E, not B-E-A-R."

"Ah, got it. Bare 'cause you ain't runnin' an amp."

"Yeah, just five watts. Never had—"

"I know you boys enjoy talking about your toys, but could I interrupt your CB reunion? I'm Susan."

Jack and Mike gave her an apologetic grin. "Glad to meet you, Susan."

She offered her hand. Mike shook it, keeping in mind his grip could crush a baseball. She turned to Jack and shook his hand. Jack gave her a gentle squeeze. Like Mike, he was a big guy with a bone crushing grip when he needed it.

Susan turned to Mike. "Why are those people walking up the freeway? That man in the suit said the next bomb will kill us."

Jack said, "A more deadly bomb isn't the only reason to get off the freeway. The veneer of civilized behavior is only three days thick. After that, most will do anything to keep themselves and their families alive."

"I agree," said Mike, "the biggest threat to our survival is other people. The other reason is that I couldn't get my truck around people walking and vehicles stranded on the freeway."

"But you said your truck is toast," said Susan with a suspicious tone in her voice.

Mike exhaled through puffed lips then looked at Jack as if he were asking him how to answer Susan.

Jack gave Mike a subtle smile. "I'm pretty sure the diesel in your truck is a Cummins 855, the Big Cam model from the late 70's. I can understand why you didn't want anyone to know it's mechanically injected and that your glow plugs—"

"Weren't fried. They're electrically controlled through relays, not electronic circuits. Yeah, my gut told me you knew my Mack would live to see another day. Ditto for your Rover, right?"

"Right, and my gut told me that you knew my Rover—"

"Your trucks still work?" interrupted Susan.

She looked at Jack, then turned her head back to Mike. He had the same strong, self-assured demeanor as Jack but was closer to her age. "Let me go

with you, Mike. Please.”

Mike heard the pleading in her voice and saw it in her eyes. “Look Susan, I —”

“Okay, the world is turned up side down but I know how to do things and I’ll do anything to stay alive!”

Mike smiled. “Anything?”

Susan frowned. “This is no laughing matter. If you leave me here...”

Mike and Jack knew exactly how dangerous it would be for any woman, especially an attractive woman like Susan, to survive in a helter skelter world like the one they were in now.

Jack turned to Mike. “It’s none of my business what you do, Mike, but for what it’s worth, you and Susan might be a good match.”

Mike looked at Susan. “I’ll show you how to drive my Big Mack. But first I gotta unhitch the trailer. It’ll suck fuel and make it impossible to maneuver on back roads or hide when we stop.”

Susan jumped into Mike’s arms and kissed him on the lips. “You won’t regret this. I promise.”

“I can help you with the trailer,” said Jack. “You’re on your own with her promise.”

Mike laughed. “Yeah, that’s a one man job but I could use another pair of hands with that trailer.”

Mike paused to rub his chin. “I noticed you stopped at the top of that off ramp over there. You had a good reason, right?”

“I did. Soledad Canyon winds through the back country to the southwest end of the Antelope Valley. Good access to Highway 18 and then to US 395.”

“Which way you going?”

“North. Just retired and was heading home when we got zapped.”

“Looks like I’m retired too. Not by choice though. What’d you do for a livin’?”

Jack sighed. “Something I’d rather forget. Let’s get that trailer off your tractor.”

“Yeah, I got some things I’d like to forget too. Okay. See that handle under the trailer? You’re gonna crank the landing gear down while I disconnect the air lines, the electrical cable and release the jaws on the fifth wheel.”

When that was done, Mike climbed in the cab to start the engine but it just cranked over without firing up the engine.

“Damn! It’s not that cold out here. Glow plugs should be okay.”

Jack nodded. “The relays for your glow plugs might need a reset.”

“What do you mean?”

“Disconnect and reconnect the battery.”

Mike got out of the truck, lifted the cowl on the engine, and loosened the nuts on the positive terminal of his 24 volt battery. He pulled the cable off the terminal, waited a few seconds, then reconnected it.

“Okay, let’s give that a try.” He got back in the cab and turned the key. The engine whirled for a few seconds, then started.

“Jack. You’re a damn genius. That’s the most beautiful sound I’ve heard all

day! Ya fucking hoo!”

Jack said nothing but stood there smiling with both thumbs in the air.

Mike got down from the cab to let the engine warm up. He grabbed Susan and began dancing her around and around. When they were done, she turned to Jack and said, “Do you think he’s happy?”

“I do. He’s got a truck that runs and a woman—”

Jack stopped. Susan smiled. “I keep my promises, Jack, and what the hell. I like the guy.”

Mike got back in the cab and moved his tractor forward until the trailer slid off the back of the fifth wheel. Then he swung his tractor around to face the offramp at Aqua Dulce.

“Okay. We’re all good to go. You’re gonna show me the way up Soledad, right?”

“I am but I got a few more things to do. Take your tractor down to the bottom of the off ramp and hide it in those cotton wood trees. I’ll be down in ten.”

Mike started to get in his tractor but Jack grabbed his arm.

“Wait a second. I’m curious about what you were hauling in that tractor.”

“Four thousand boxes, each with 24 cans of tuna. Half of them to an Amazon fulfillment center in Lancaster and the other half to a sea food restaurant in Bakersfield called the Red Lobster.”

“Holy mackerel!” yelled Susan.

“No, tuna.” said Mike.

Susan tossed her head back and rolled her eyes up. “Of course, what was I thinking?”

They all laughed, then Susan said, “I stopped buying tuna to avoid the mercury.”

Mike shook his head. “This tuna is mercury free. Some company called Safe Catch says they check every damn fish.”

Jack looked at Mike, then Susan. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Holy mackerel.” said Susan.

Mike opened his mouth but Susan said, “Don’t say it big boy. It was funny once but not twice.”

Then she turned to Jack and said, “Yes. Grocery stores will be empty before the week is out. Where are we going to find food? I sure as hell don’t want to starve to death. Let’s load as much of that tuna as we can into your Rover and his truck.”

“You’ll die of thirst long before you starve.” said Jack. “Thirty days without food but only three days without water.”

“But she’s right, Jack. Food is gonna be a big deal. There’s ten nylon straps on the back of my tractor for tying down cargo on a flatbed trailer. I’m guessin’ we could stack quite a few of those tuna boxes around and over the top of my fifth wheel.”

Susan put her hands on her hips. “Then let’s get to it, boys.”

Mike glanced at Jack. “She’s spunky, ain’t she?”

“She is and I’m guessing those hands on her hips are only the beginning

of coming attractions.”

They unloaded two dozen boxes of tuna, strapped them to the back of Mike’s tractor and on top of Jack’s Rover. The people walking up the freeway didn’t pay attention to what they were doing. Each box had a label that identified the contents but the lettering was too small to see from a distance.

When they finished loading the tuna onto Mike’s tractor and into Jack’s Rover, Jack said, “Is your CB still working?”

“My CB? I don’t know. Let me check.”

Mike got in the cab of his Mack and keyed his CB. “Well I’ll be damn. It works. I figured everything in here would be dead.”

“That’s good news. Only explanation I have is that the skin effect of your tractor and trailer created a Faraday Cage that protected you and your electronic equipment from the EMP.”

“Skin effect? Faraday cage? Give it to me in plain English, okay?”

“Okay, here’s EMP 101 for dummies. When the EMP was detonated, most of the electrical current traveled along the metal skin of your tractor and trailer—not through you and your CB, your cell phone and your GPS equipment.”

“Most?”

“Yeah, some of it got into the engine compartment where it stunned your CDI and the relays for your injectors. And that aluminum wind deflector above your windshield probably aided the skin effect and might have added some protection to everything in the cab. You’re a long haul trucker so I’m guessing you’ve survived more than a few lightning storms in Tornado Alley for the same reason.”

“You’re right. Last one was in Oklahoma. Scared the crap out of me. We’re taught to pull over, shut the engine down and keep our hands off anything metal. So where’d you learn stuff like that? You knew how to get my Mack going. You knew why my gear is still up and—”

“My job required me to know stuff like that.”

“Your job. Yeah, and if you told me you’d—”

“That’s why I won’t tell you.”

They gave each other a knowing smile, then Jack pointed to his Rover. “I’ve still got my old Cobra. I’ll put it on channel 21 so we can keep in touch.”

“Roger that, Jack.”

Jack watched Mike drive down the off ramp, then walked back to his Rover.

EYE CANDY

Tuesday — January 13th — 10:50 AM

As Jack slipped into the seat, he noticed a woman walking briskly towards him from the freeway. Her long legs flashing in the late afternoon sunlight were a welcome contrast to the carnage of people and vehicles on the freeway.

Jack enjoyed watching a good looking woman as much as any man but he was always looking for some thing that didn't match the other things. Nice face but fat legs. Great hair but big ears. Slender figure but surgically enhanced breasts. But everything about this woman fit the rest.

He couldn't see her eyes but her head was pointed directly at him. Eyes can tell people more than you want them to know, so Jack set his reading glasses on the radiator and put on his polarized sunglasses. Nobody, not even an apparently unarmed woman, should suspect he was repairing his Rover. When she got near him, he closed the hood.

"Can you help me? I can't get the trunk of my car open. My suitcase is in there with all my clothes."

Jack could but knew he wouldn't, despite her pretty face and persuasive figure. Her eyes might be difficult to resist, too. They reminded him of the agate shooter he used when he played marbles in the school yard. Large, honey and hazel amber. This woman's eyes were large too but soft and liquid. Like honey swirling in butter.

"Sorry ma'am but I'm occupied with my own problems."

"Please. I'm cold and worried I'll freeze to death tonight."

"Yeah, you look cold. Shorts and a thin blouse. What were you thinking?"

She put her hands on her hips and said, with an exasperated sound in her voice, "I didn't know this would happen."

"Neither did I, but it's January. If your car—"

"Will you help me or not?"

"No. I won't risk my vehicle being vandalized while I'm helping you. And where would it end?"

"Where would what end?"

"My help. There's nothing in your suitcase to save you from thirst, hunger and that."

Jack pointed to people breaking into vehicles and fighting over who owned what.

"Even if I do help you get your clothes, you'll still need water, food and a weapon."

What he said came back as hardness in her eyes and a tightness in her jaw. A lesser man would have withered under her steely gaze but Jack didn't even blink.

"You don't want me dependent on you for those things."

"I'm not saying I have those things. Most of those people wandering around up there will mind their own business unless they know you have something they need. But some would kill you just to find out what you

have.”

“You said you’re too busy to help me but that’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it? You think I’m trying to find out if you have those things so I can bash you over the head and take them. That’s crazy. I only—”

“No. I think you might be eye candy to lure me away so your husband or boyfriend can break into my stuff while I’m helping you break into yours.”

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t—”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, lady, the world ended less than two hours ago and it’s already more dangerous than the one we knew. Survival is being safe, not sorry. Doesn’t matter either way. I’ve got my own problems. That means I’m not going anywhere with anyone for any reason.”

Despair moved into her eyes and across her face.

“My mother is in a retirement home in Quartz Hill. She’s dying. I need to see her one last time. What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to die, just like all the others who got stuck in the mindset of a victim when the shit hit the fan.”

“That’s crazy. We *are* victims.”

“No. We were victims when we got zapped. Now we’re survivors. Or can be if we don’t want to die.”

“I don’t want to die. Does that make me a survivor?”

“Nobody wants to die but everyone does. What makes you a survivor is saying ‘Not today!’ and doing whatever it takes to stay alive.”

Her eyes filled with that distant, faraway look people get when they know they’ve heard the truth.

“Forget your suitcase. You can’t drink or eat clothes. Go back up there on that freeway and start rummaging through cars and trucks for water, food and clothes, in that order, and whatever else you can find that people left behind. Try opening trunks. There’s always a cloth-like cover over the spare tire you can use as a blanket. Look for an 18 wheeler the driver has abandoned. You could stay in the sleeper behind the cab.”

Anger replaced the despair in her eyes and on her face.

“Then I’ll find my own food and water and kill anyone who tries to take it away from me. I have a gun. It’s in my glove box.”

She turned and marched back up the off-ramp, her feet striking the pavement hard and fast.

“You better hope somebody hasn’t already taken your weapon. Even if you get your clothes out of that trunk, what then?” Jack shouted after her.

She stopped and without turning to face him yelled back “I’ll deal with that later. Right now I want my clothes.”

They didn’t know it then but that was the beginning of their friendship. The turning point for Jack was knowing she had turned away from being a victim and toward being a survivor. Linda’s turning point would come later.

“If you’ll help me work on my Rover I’ll help you get your clothes and your gun.”

She turned and locked eyes with him. Jack watched the hard, angry look on her face fade to curiosity, then he saw the other thing that made her eyes

beautiful—the woman behind them.

“How could I help you? You’re obviously fit and prepared for anything. I’d just get in your way. You’re a Marine or a Green Beret or something like that, right?”

“Something like that. But your help would make it more likely I could make my repairs before the sun goes down, and if not, you could hold a flash light for me.”

She began walking slowly back to where he was standing.

“What changed your mind?”

“You got angry, but instead of aiming it at me you aimed it at doing something to survive.”

She smiled and Jack smiled back.

“I’m Jack and you are...”

“Linda.”

They shook hands. Fear and anger were not in her hand shake now.

“What can I do to help?”

“First, let’s get you into warmer clothes. There’s a pair of jeans behind the passenger’s seat and that green jacket will take the chill off your upper body.”

Jack pointed to the spare jacket hanging on the passenger’s seat.

She walked around to the passenger side, pulled the jeans from under the seat, then gave Jack an ‘Are-you-going-to-watch?’ look.

He smiled and turned away while she removed her shorts and put on the jeans and jacket.

“They fit but I need a belt.”

She was nearly as tall as Jack but slimmer in the waist so he made her a belt with 550 para cord, threading it through the loops on the pants. Her smell, not the artificial odor of perfume, brought back memories of his late wife.

“Thanks. I feel warmer already. What now?”

“I’m going to... damn, forgot something.” Jack pulled his Cobra CB out of the EMP hardened box he kept in his Rover and called Mike.

Big Mack. Got your ears on?

Ten four, Jack. What’s up?

Got a situation like the one you bumped into with Susan. Might be a while before I get to your 20.

No problem, Susan and me gonna be busy for awhile. You gettin’ lucky?

That’s not what’s holding me up big guy. Might be an hour or so. Look, I don’t want to hold you and Susan up. What are your plans?

Susan lives in Victorville. I’m gonna take her home, then who knows. Maybe she’ll ask me to stay. If not, home is my truck and an occasional motel. What are your plans?

Linda, the woman with me, needs to get Quartz Hill. I’m going to take her there then head north on US 395 to my place.

Hey, give me the address in case Susan tells me to hit the road.

My ranch is just a postal route on a country road. If your GPS still works I’ll give you the coordinates.

It does. Checked it a while ago to find the best route to Victorville. Like this CB I'm talking to you on, that... what'd you call it?

Skin effect. Your tractor was a Faraday cage that kept the HEMP from zapping all or most of the electronic gadgets in your cab.

Yeah, skin effect and that Faraday thing. Okay, my pencil is poised. Give me the coordinates to your place.

It's a few miles west of Bridgeport at N38.2 and W119.3. Keep in mind that if the remaining satellites go down between now and when you decide to head to my place, you'll need a topo map with lat long coordinates.

Not a problem, Jack. Most of my deliveries are a city and street address but my Thomas Guide for Truckers is lat long friendly.

Figured you'd have a handle on that, Mike. I hope you decide to join me at my place. You'd be a handy guy to have around, whether more shit hits the fan or not.

Might happen Jack but getting shit off a fan would be like putting toothpaste back in a tube or an evil genie back in a bottle. And what you said about the remaining satellites makes me think you're saying more shit will hit the fan. Like another HEMP but I thought the satellites were hardened against HEMPs.

I don't know about another HEMP, Mike, but GPS satellites are hardened against EMPs, which is why they have to be attacked individually, one at a time. What I do know is that someone, probably China, has disabled several of them because my GPS is giving me an accuracy of 75 feet instead of the usual 15.

How the hell they do that, Jack? Shoot 'em out of the sky with a friggin' missile?

No, China has developed several types of anti-satellite devices. One is a medium sized satellite capable of moving in and out of low and high earth orbits to disable geo-positioning and communication satellites, usually with a high powered laser. Another is a very small satellite called a parasite that attaches itself to the target satellite then waits for a signal to trigger an explosive charge. Bye, bye satellite.

God damn it, Mike! What next? World War Three? Puts a new spin on bad news, doesn't it? Looks like highway 18 is my best bet to get Susan home. Guess we part company. Good luck, man, and thanks for helping me get that trailer off my tractor.

Glad I could help and thanks for all that tuna. Don't know how things will work out with you and Susan but Victorville isn't a safe place to settle down. Too close to George Air Force Base and fallout from those bombs that might be coming.

Good advice, Jack. Maybe I can talk her into heading to your place. If not... well, you'll hear that air horn on my Big Mack as it pulls into your place. Might even call you on my CB. One thousand watts, man. One thousand watts!

Mike, please don't key that thing up when you get to my ranch. If my CB is on you'll fry the front end.

Ha! You're right good buddy. I'll just bang on your door.

Good, and if I'm not home, leave a note, then get over to the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. It's in Pinkerton. Your Thomas

Guide should help you find it. Ask the guard to let me know you're there. He's got a satellite phone and so do I.

The Marine Corps. Yeah, makes sense. Figured you were more than just a regular guy. You might see me someday Jack.

Hope it works out that way, Mike. You'd be a valuable asset. By the way, don't take highway 18 all the way to the 15 freeway. The shit has hit the fan there too so the Cajon Pass will be jammed with traffic. US 395 is likely to be a better option.

Ten four, good buddy. Over but not out.

Jack turned to Linda. "Sorry for the interruption. I've got to get under my hood and push this bundle of wires through that grommet right there."

Jack pointed to a small rubber-covered opening just below the glove box.

"Will this fix your Rover? I heard people up there on the freeway saying you can't fix what happened to our cars. Something about fuel injection and CDIs, whatever that is."

"Capacitive discharge ignition. It generates the high voltage for the spark plugs. Most cars and trucks are fuel injected so they have a computer to control the fuel mixture and ignition timing. The EMP fried most of those computers. My Rover doesn't have a computer, and I've done some other things to harden it against EMPs."

"So it's not broken? We could just drive away?" she asked, with excitement in her voice.

"We could, but there are some things I need to change before we drive out of here."

"These wires and switches we're installing?"

"Yes, to bypass anything not essential to starting the engine and charging the battery."

"CDI, EMP. This is all new to me." she said, shaking her head.

"Get used to it. The world we knew is gone. People think Darwin said survival goes to the fittest. He didn't say that. He said it's not the strongest nor the smartest who survive but those who best deal with change."

They worked together another hour or so, getting all the wires installed and the switches operating.

BALLS & BULLETS

Tuesday — January 13th — 1:15 PM

"What now?" asked Linda.

"We'll wait until nightfall to test everything. In the dark, nobody will be able to pinpoint where the sound of the engine is coming from. Even if they do, you and I will be gone before they can get here."

"So you're taking me with you?"

"I keep my promises. Said I'd help you if you helped me and you did. So let's get up there and rescue your clothes and your weapon."

Jack grabbed his Get Home Bag from the back seat, rolled up the windows and gave Linda a small utility pack.

"Put this on."

"What do I need this for?"

"I don't know. Better to have something and not need it than to need it and not have it."

She nodded. "I just hope somebody doesn't break into your Rover while we're gone and drive it away."

"They can't. The glass is riot proof and even if they could get in, they wouldn't know how to set the thumb wheel switch we hid under the glove box."

"The one with the numbers on it?"

"Yeah. All four digits have to match the code I designed into the switch before the engine will start. I'll give you the code when we get back."

"Okay, but something is bothering me. You said that thumb wheel means we don't need a key. How are you going to lock the doors and unlock them when we come back here?"

Jack walked to the back of his Rover and summoned Linda. "Take hold of the top of the license plate and pull it down, then push that little blue button."

She did, then Jack said, "Now it's locked. Push it again and the doors are unlocked."

"Where did you learn how to do all these things, Jack? You really are some kind of secret agent man, aren't you?"

"Hold still while I fill your pack with bottled water and energy bars."

"And you really do have all those things we talked about."

"Yeah, and here's one of them. I'll show you how to use it while we're walking to your car."

Jack slipped his extra pepper ball gun and holster over the waistband of her jeans and once again enjoyed the closeness and smell of this woman.

"What's that?"

"Something to make people mind their own business."

As they walked away, Jack looked back at his Rover, knowing how he'd feel if someone vandalized it. Then he glanced at the woman, knowing how she would feel if someone violated her. He had agreed to help her and part of his help would be to make sure that never happened. On the way up the

freeway to her car, he gave her the pepper ball gun and explained how to use it.

"This shoots balls of pepper, not bullets. Use it like a pistol. Point, pull, splat."

"Before I bought my gun, I carried MACE. My girl friend said it would disable anybody."

"MACE isn't as effective as pepper spray, especially if the guy is high on PCP or some other mind-numbing drug. I'd rather get a face full of MACE than OC."

"OC?"

"An acronym for the active ingredient in pepper spray. MACE uses the same stuff as tear gas but that's only an irritant. OC is inflammatory. Makes it difficult to breath and impossible to keep your eyes open. Guy falls down coughing and wheezing so you can get away or take a baseball bat to his head."

"Would you do that?"

"Yeah and you will too if it comes to that. You're a survivor, Linda, not a victim."

She nodded. It wasn't a nod to help her believe what he had said was true. It was a nod that said she no longer felt like a victim. "Yes, thanks to you, I am a survivor, so I'm glad you gave me this pistol."

She pulled it out of its holster and put it back in a few times, practicing its fit and feel.

"I'm glad you have it too but it's no match for someone pointing a gun at you."

"Pretty soon I'll have a gun too, and I've fired it."

"Yeah, and lead's more persuasive than pepper. But we don't know if your gun is still there so let's give you a little practice with pepper balls. That speed-limit sign on that pole over there is about six feet off the ground. Pretend it's somebody attacking you."

"Shouldn't I get closer?"

"No. That sign's about 20 feet away and that's as close as anyone should get. Yell 'Stop!' then aim a few inches above the '65 MPH' on the sign and pull the trigger."

Linda pulled the pistol out of its holster, yelled "Stop or I'll shoot!" and pulled the trigger.

The "65" on the sign disappeared in a splatter of red pepper paint.

"Wow! I nailed it."

"Yes you did. Good shot. If it had been some jerk coming at you, he'd be on the ground, cussing, coughing and writhing convulsively."

When they got to her car he realized why she couldn't get at her clothes and why her gun was probably still in her glove box. The lid on her trunk was caved in below the rim and her car was fifteen feet down a steep bank on the side of the freeway. Jack slipped and slid down the bank to the passenger side of her car and gave the door a hard yank. It didn't budge. His crowbar was more persuasive, easily popping the door open. He reached in and

opened the glove box. Her gun was a 38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver.

Good, he thought. Pretty much fail safe. Point. Pull. Boom. She was a good shot but firing lead at an attacker wasn't the same as firing pepper at a sign.

"Your gun is a revolver. You said you've fired it. How long's it been?"

"My girl friend and I went to an indoor range once a week. It's been a few months but I know how to shoot it."

"Just remember that paper targets and metal signs aren't moving at you and can't fire back."

"You don't have to remind me, Jack. My self-defense instructor told me that every session."

"So you've had some hand-to-hand training?"

Linda put her hands on her hips. "I could kick your ass with both hands tied behind my back."

She took a Kung Fu stance and gave Jack a little Hiyaaaah! and a big smile.

This woman was full of surprises. He liked that.

"OK. Let's see what you got."

Linda leaned back and kicked her leg at Jack. He grabbed her heel and lower leg so she didn't lose her balance. They locked eyes.

Linda raised her eyebrows. "You have fast reflexes."

"So do you but you telegraphed them by leaning back."

"You can let go of my leg now."

He did but wouldn't forget what a nice leg it was and how much he'd like to take hold of it again.

"Don't take this the wrong way but a kick-ass attitude won't do you much good in a gun fight."

"It will if I have a gun, and now I do."

"Yeah, and it's a better weapon than your kick or that pepper pistol so let's see if it'll fit that holster."

It did. Jack took the pepper pistol and stuck it in the pocket of her jacket. Linda slipped her S&W in and out of the holster a few times.

Watching that kick-ass confidence move into her face and her body language, Jack knew she'd use it, but hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Looks like somebody smashed into you. The lid is caved in below the rim."

"The car behind me hit me so hard it pushed mine off the freeway. I thought I was going to die and I'm sure the driver who hit me did. As my car was sliding down the bank I saw his flipping end for end. It's that blue one down there at the bottom of the hill. I never saw anyone get out."

"Yeah, unlikely anyone survived that."

They climbed around to the back of her car. It was tough going in the steep, soft dirt along the bank of the freeway. Jack's crowbar wasn't as persuasive as it had been on her car door.

"Stay here. I'm going back up there to the sign you shot and cut the pole off so we can use it as a lever."

"Cut it off? With what?"

"My hacksaw."

She looked at him like he was from Mission Impossible. He wasn't but did have a small hacksaw in his Get Home Bag.

"Jesus, you've thought of everything."

"Probably not. There's always a surprise waiting around the next corner. I'll be out of sight for a few minutes. Keep your eyes open for surprises, like somebody who needs to be convinced they'd be better off minding their own business."

"I'll yell if anybody comes near me."

"They might be curious about what you're doing down here but if they start down the bank, blow this whistle. And keep your hand on your S&W but under your jacket. That can be your little surprise."

She handed the whistle back to him. "I don't need your whistle. My scream can wake the dead."

"Okay, but shoot first then scream. If your scream brings them back from the dead, shoot 'em again."

It took a few minutes for Jack to cut the pole off and a few more to find something hard enough to flatten the end. He looked around and found the drive shaft of a car that had been sheared off during the crashes on the freeway. As he was beating on the end of the pole, Linda screamed.

"Shit!"

He dropped the drive shaft, grabbed the pole and ran to the edge of the freeway where her car had tumbled over. He saw two men. One at the rear of Linda's car with a pistol drawn but pointing down at the ground and the other with his pistol still in its holster moving toward Linda, who was retreating further down the hill. Her eyes darted left and right, looking for a place to hide.

The pole was in the air before Jack's brain knew what his body had done. It struck the guy standing behind her car in his back. He cried out then fell face down in the dirt. As his buddy turned to see what had happened, Linda, thinking he was about to shoot Jack, shot him in the back of the head.

Jack and Linda looked at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Her face reflected the same feelings he'd suffered the first time he'd had to kill another human being. He ran down the bank and checked the man behind her car. Dead. The pole had plunged into him like a javelin.

"Can I help you back up the hill?"

"No. I need a few moments to sort this out."

She was several yards below Jack but he could see the sorting out changing her face, drooping her shoulders, making the gun shake in her hand. He'd watched that all too often in Afghanistan, Iran, Vietnam, and other places where boys had become men. Now he was watching the girl in Linda become a woman with a gun.

When she started climbing back up the bank, Jack removed the pole from the guy's back, used dirt to wipe the blood off the end, and pushed him further under her car. Not a good time for her to see that.

It didn't take her long to reach the car. She was in better shape than most people half her age. Good, he thought. Hard times favor fit people who think

and act at their best.

When she reached Jack, she said, "Jesus, I've never killed anyone before."

Jack could see tears forming in her eyes. He put his hands on both sides of her face. "I'm sorry you had to kill that man but glad you did. He was about to kill me."

"Where's the man you hit with the pole?"

"Under your car."

"Is he—"

"Yes."

"That wasn't your first time, was it? When we met, I knew you were some kind of secret agent."

"On the way up the freeway this morning, I thought that was all behind me."

Linda shook her head. "My god, how do you deal with it? How do you make yourself forget? I'm going to have nightmares seeing that man's head explode over and over again."

"You can't make yourself forget but you can make the nightmares stop."

"How do I do that?"

"Keep telling yourself that you didn't do a bad thing. You did a good thing. You killed a bad man to save a good man... me."

She nodded and a smile replaced the grim look on her face.

Jack smiled back at her. "That smile says you're making progress already, and with any luck at all you won't have to kill anyone again."

"I hope you're right, Jack, but something tells me I will. When that man swung his gun around, I didn't stop to think. My arm just came up and my finger pulled the trigger. It was like I was watching myself in motion."

"That something is your natural instinct to survive."

Together they jammed the flattened end of the pole under the lid on the trunk. Jack climbed up the bank until he was higher than the other end. Seeing what he was about to do, Linda crouched down behind the right rear wheel. Jack jumped on the end of the pole sticking out of the trunk with both feet. The lid popped up so quickly he lost his balance and fell into the dirt behind her car.

"My suitcase. It's still there. I know it was hard for you to leave your Rover. Thanks."

"It's nice to see a smile on your face. It'll be a long haul up that bank and back to the Rover. You should—"

"You're right. I don't need everything and I can't eat or drink my clothes."

She gave him a look that said, "See, I can be a smart ass too."

As they walked back to the Rover, the sun slipped below the horizon.

STORY FIRE

Tuesday — January 13th — 5:20 PM

The Rover was just as they had left it. Jack told Linda to unlock the doors. She walked to the back of the Rover, swung the license plate out and pushed the small blue button. While Jack unloaded their packs, Linda went through the clothes they had rescued from her car.

"I don't have any jeans so I'm going to keep yours, okay?"

That was okay with him. She looked good in his jeans. But her running shoes fit better than the ones he had given her to replace the sandals she was wearing when they met.

"Let me show you how to set that thumb wheel switch. I set it to **0000** when we left to get your clothes. The number we need is **1608**."

She set the switch to 1608 then frowned.

"It didn't start."

"Not supposed to. Open the glove box, flip that switch up, then release it. She did and the engine came to life.

"It works! You're a genius."

"People lots smarter than me worked this all out years ago. I'm just a good copy cat."

Jack touched the throttle with his toe just enough to test the engine above an idle, then released it.

"OK, let's blow this joint."

She looked around. Jack knew what she was thinking. They'd never forget this place or what happened here.

"There's a secluded spot a few miles from here where we can start a small fire and warm our meal."

"Where are we going to sleep? In your Rover?"

"Yes but not there. It's safer to travel at night, then find a place to hide during daylight."

Jack put his Rover in gear, drove down the off ramp and turned right towards Soledad Canyon road. It was only a few miles from the freeway but was crisscrossed with dirt roads into the surrounding hills. His four-wheel drive would come in handy.

"How do you know there's a canyon over there? I didn't see you look at any map."

"My buddy and I raced through that canyon dozens of times. The long sweeping turns and tight, twisty ones make for some pretty exciting riding. He had a Norton and I had a Triumph. Sometimes he'd win and sometimes I'd lose."

"So you're a loser."

She flashed that smart-ass smile again. Jack nodded and returned her smile.

"Sometimes. I hope this isn't one of 'em. Not many people live back there and it always made me feel like I was in the Ozarks or Appalachia."

"I know what you mean. My girl friend and I drove through there when we

graduated from college. On the map it looked like a short cut from Alabama to Maryland. It's beautiful in there but every time we stopped for gas or a bathroom we got some unfriendly stares. We probably looked as odd to them as they did to us but it made me feel creepy."

"So you went to college in Alabama?"

"Yes, Oakridge College in Huntsville."

"I spent some time there at Redstone Arsenal."

"You were in the Army?"

"Not exactly."

"I'm glad I'm with you Jack, not somebody else, but I keep getting the feeling there's something you're not telling me."

"There is and if the time comes when you need to know, you will."

When they got into the tight turns of the canyon, Linda leaned forward and squinted through the windshield.

"You forgot to turn on your headlights."

"No, I remembered to leave them off."

"Of course. What was I thinking."

"You weren't. Well, you were but inside the box of the old world. It'll take you some time to get as paranoid as I am."

"Better safe than sorry." she echoed.

"Yeah, 'cause you're not paranoid if they really are out to get you."

Jack knew a stream flowed through the canyon on the north side of the road with large cotton wood trees along both banks. They'd be good cover but he couldn't remember any places where he could get the Rover down there. He did remember numerous dirt roads with old oaks that went into the hills south of the canyon.

After a mile or so he found one that didn't look heavily traveled, put the Rover in four-wheel and looked for a large enough oak to hide the vehicle and have a small fire.

The sun had dropped over the horizon, leaving a sky blue pink glowing in the east. They gathered enough dried branches and twigs to get a small fire going. Jack used his magnesium stick. No sense using up his matches this early in the game.

"We don't need a fire to warm our meal. I've got some butane tanks and an iron pot for that. But I think a small fire would be a fitting way to close out the day before we get back on the road."

She nodded. "Yes, something comforting about sitting around a flickering flame. Like when I was a girl scout. Were you in the scouts?"

"Yeah, only this time we're not going home to a friendly neighborhood, a familiar house and a warm bed. Where's home, Linda?"

"Alabama."

"You're a long way from home."

"Yes, in more ways than one."

"You can say that again. What are you doing in California?"

"My mother is dying. I wanted to see her one last time so I took a plane from Huntsville to Ontario and rented a car, then all this happened. She and

my father are in Quartz Hill. I think it's just up the freeway from here."

"I know the area. It's only—"

Jack pulled the Glock from its holster. The rustle he'd heard became a deer bouncing over the Manzanita bush on the south side of their campfire. Startled by the sudden appearance of two humans, it leaped into the dark and disappeared.

"Wild animals are at more risk than before. They'll be hunted to extinction."

"I hope not, Jack. My father was a veterinarian and wanted me to be one too. He loved animals, wild and tame. But I couldn't see myself cutting into somebody's pet and I was more interested in how animals behave, and why."

"So you have a degree in ethology."

"No. Anthropology. When I enrolled at Oakridge I met Dorothy, the girl friend I told you about. She helped me... I hope she's okay."

Linda reached forward and poked the fire then glanced up to watch lightning bugs dancing in the dark, their magic ignited.

"We got together once a week to help each other with our studies. Helping her made me realize I was more interested in how humans behave, and why. Until today, I thought I understood human nature. Now I'm not so sure. Will we return to our caves, cowering, giving undue power to thunder and lightning, apotheosizing stars and planets and imagining all sorts of silly, superstitious stuff?"

She reached forward and poked the fire again.

"Sorry. I slipped into my academic, white-paper mode."

"Okay with me. Your educated guess is better than anything I could come up with. I've read dozens of end-of-the-world novels and despite the similarities they all paint a different story of where people will take history without their gas, groceries and gadgets."

"You're not as dumb as you look, Jack."

It was too dark to see her face but Jack knew that smart aleck look was all over it so he blew her his best Bronx cheer. "Pfffttt!"

They laughed, louder than they should have, then Linda began crying. Softly at first then like she had walked onto thin ice and fallen through.

Jack leaned over and put his arm around her shoulders. She stopped crying and began laughing again, quietly this time. "If I've learned anything from studying cultures around the world, it's that we're terrified of questions we can't answer."

"And answers we can't fasten with a nail," added Jack. "Without black-or-white explanations and names for our monsters, we'd—"

"Do crazy shit," she interrupted. "There are savages lurking just below the thin veneer of civilized behavior."

"They've already raised their ugly heads," Jack agreed. "Like those guys who came after you this afternoon."

They sat there, together, with the tides ripping and roaring below the surface of their consciousness.

"The world is too much with us," said Jack.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"We're like salmon. Too busy swimming upstream to notice anything but the water in front of us."

"Yes, I see what you're saying. When I was a little girl my mother took me to visit my grandfather. One morning after breakfast he opened the closet by the back door, grabbed his fishing pole and led me down to the river that flowed through his small farm. As we waited for a fish to bite, he pointed to a nearby tree. 'See that old oak across the river? Don't pay any attention to those leaves, Linda. Focus on what is moving them to and fro, twisting them in the sunlight.'"

"Wish I had known your grandfather. Or somebody like him... like you."

Even in the dim, flickering light of their fire, Jack saw her turn to him and smile. She was like those women who braved the frontier on a wagon train in the 1800's. Tough yet resilient. Terrified but courageous. Forced to leave the world she had known and face a world she had never known.

"This world was too much with me," she said, "until yesterday when you helped me see how different it is from the one we knew. How different I am. One of the lucky few who had a Get Home Bag and didn't know it was you."

She turned her face to his and touched his lips with hers. He kissed her back, then pulled her into his arms.

"I want to be with you, Jack..."

He could hear the silent "but" as her voice trailed off.

Do I want to sleep with this man, she thought, because I like him and he likes me. Or because sex would be such an intense, satisfying way to offset the chaos and fear and death we've shared today. Death destroys life. Sex creates it, celebrates it.

Jack could see the hesitation in her eyes and knew she was working her way through something.

"Long time since I've been with a woman, Linda. No need to rush into it now."

He still had his arms around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. They watched their fire dwindle to embers and the first day of the new world follow the moon over the horizon.

MISTER E

Tuesday — January 13th — 9:05 AM

Bob Ewing ducked behind a large truck sitting along the freeway, opened his Camel Back and pulled out his satellite phone to call the colonel in charge of his training section.

Colonel Adams. Major Ewing. M16.

All messages to and from the satellite were to include a code that indicated the nature and purpose of the call. M16 meant the pilot had been shot down and was trying to make his way out of enemy territory. Bob knew the Colonel would interpret his message in the context of the HEMP and Bob's last known position.

While he waited for a reply, he ate one of the energy bars in his back pack. He finished the bar, and was stuffing the wrapper into his pocket when his satellite phone buzzed.

Ewing. Adams. M1

Bob turned off his sat phone and put it back in its holster. M1 was the code that meant the satellite is in danger of being targeted for destruction by rockets homing in on the transmitted signal. That was good news and bad. The good news was that the satellite hadn't been destroyed and wasn't being jammed, so he could transmit another message. The bad news was that the Colonel might not endanger the satellite by answering him.

How long would it take for a rocket to lock onto the signal from the satellite? And what message could he send that would improve his chances of getting back to the base without having to do it on foot? He had his code book so he flipped through the pages looking for a message he could send that would request a support vehicle.

"Ah..." he whispered to himself. "There it is... M5... and the code for sending the latitude and longitude of my position."

Bob pulled his GPS from his pack. He turned it on and watched it lock on to the satellites then noticed the accuracy was only 75 feet instead of the usual 15 feet. All 24 geo-positioning satellites were hardened against EMPs but the one detonated over north America might have been strong enough to cripple some of them. If so, that would explain the reduced accuracy. But he knew there were at least four still available because he could see his position on the GPS screen.

Bob had a topographical map, so he removed it from his pack and spread it out on the pavement to make sure the coordinates of his position on the GPS agreed with the coordinates of his location on the map. He tapped the map with his finger. "Yes, map and GPS agree. I'm right there."

He removed his sat phone from its holster and started to transmit his coordinates to the Colonel, then stopped, reminding himself that the Colonel might not endanger the satellite by answering him. Even if he did, and sent a helicopter or wheeled vehicle, they wouldn't be able to land or navigate the crowded freeway. He'd be better off waiting until he could get off the freeway and down to Soledad Canyon road to ask the Colonel for help.

He put the sat phone back in its holster and the map back in his pack,

then dug further into the pack and located his HF radio. He turned it on, tuned it to the MARS emergency network and heard the alert that power grids around the world had been disabled by HEMPs, high altitude EMPs. Nobody had claimed credit for the attacks, and since ISIS, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were notorious for doing that, military strategists were suggesting that it was a peremptory attack by China to weaken or prevent the ability of the United States and its allies to respond to an attack on Taiwan to bring it under the control of Beijing.

Some strategists disagreed with that analysis, saying China's focus on Taiwan couldn't explain why both friends and allies of the USA had been attacked. But they agreed that China was responsible since it was the only nation conspicuously absent for countries that had been hit with high altitude EMPs. Canada and the United States, all the major cities and ports in South America and western and eastern Europe, Russia, Korea, Japan, Israel. Reports of countries hit with high altitude EMPs were still coming in.

The doomsdayers had been right, thought Bob. The shit had hit the fan. The America he had known was toast. Or soon would be. He couldn't use the MARS net to patch him into the phone system so he could call his wife. The phone system would be down too. But his son was authorized to have an HF radio because Bob was a retired officer working at Edwards. So Bob moved the dial to the frequency they used to stay in touch and keyed the transmitter.

"Wing 36 calling Feather 18. Wing 36 calling Feather 18. Larry, Bob here. Get back to me, son."

Nothing. Where are you Larry? His son was still living at home, attending college, but the HEMP attack would have curtailed all the classes. Even if Larry was in a class when it struck, and couldn't use his car, he would be home in an hour or so. Like Bob, Larry was a runner.

I'll call him again, said Bob to himself. Every hour on the hour.

Bob put his HF radio back in the Camel Back, exchanged his suit and dress shoes for running pants and a pair of Nikes, slipped his Glock 23 into its shoulder holster and began running up the Antelope Valley freeway looking for a place to get through the hills down to Soledad Canyon road. This would be longer than any marathon he'd run. But he'd piled thousands of miles on his legs since his cross-country days in high school and college. He'd make it, one mile at a time. Cheryl would be waiting with Larry and Tina.

His students at Edwards Air Force Base called him Mister E, a double entendre for his name, Bob Ewing, and Mystery because he taught them things that weren't on the standard curriculum for flight-test pilots. But survival wasn't a mystery. It was the application of tools, training and mindset. Today would test his survival equipment, his survival skills and his survival mindset, things he had practiced himself and preached to his students. His Camel Back carried the equipment. Bob had the skills and the mindset.

His father had been an instructor too, in the Army. One of Bob's earliest

memories was sitting in the stands at the Proving Ground in Aberdeen, Maryland watching howitzers and tanks blow things up and Vulcan machine guns firing so rapidly they sounded more like "Vroooooosh!" than "Tat-tat-tat!"

These demonstrations were always on Armed Forces Day, the third Saturday in May. Bob grew to think of them as a patriotic excuse for the Army to flex its muscles, to bring Americans and their allies to their feet, cheering in approval, and their enemies to their knees, cowering in fear. Bob knew it was also America's reply to Russia's annual Victory Day Parade in Moscow's Red Square.

Bob's father had pressured him to join the Air Force, saying, "Face up to it, son. The Ewings have been military brats since the Civil War."

Birds had fascinated Bob from early childhood, not guns. He collected feathers on his long, solitary walks in the woods of east Maryland and studied them with awe and care. Feathered wings were engineering marvels.

Bob wanted to fly. So he joined the Air Force and became a fighter pilot. In the closing years of his career he became a test pilot. After retiring, his commander invited him to remain at Edwards and teach as a civilian instructor. Now would be a good time to be flying over this freeway instead of jogging on it, weaving around stalled vehicles and people shuffling along like Zombies. It looked like a funeral march and for some it would be.

Bob ran along the shoulder as much as possible. After running about six miles he saw people bunching up a quarter mile ahead and dozens of others climbing over the divider between the north and south bound sides of the freeway and running away.

He looked at his map. He was close to where Sierra Highway meets Red Rover Mine Road and the freeway. As he looked up from the map, a young man about his son's age came running back toward him and stopped.

"Hey mister, don't go up there. Three guys with guns are taking stuff from everyone."

Bob focused his binoculars on the crowd bunching up around the armed men. It looked like a check point or a road block but the men stopping everyone were not wearing uniforms. As he studied the situation, one of the men stepped forward and jammed the butt of an assault rifle into the chest of a man standing in the crowd. The man hit the ground. Another moved forward as if to threaten the guy with the assault rifle. Bob grimaced in anticipation of the man getting shot, but someone behind him pulled him back into the crowd.

Bob put his hand on the Glock, then thought better of it. His mission was to get home, not to put himself at risk trying to solve other people's problems. How many times had he taught his students that survival is often an every-man-for-himself scenario.

"Thanks for warning me. You're right. The men are armed and they're not law enforcement officers. Where you headed?"

"Lake Los Angeles. I'm trying to get home. What about you?"

"Rosamond. My family is in Rosamond."

"Got any ideas how to get around those men up there? If so I'd like to follow. I'm a runner too."

"I do and you can, but it's gonna be a long run. You feel up to it?"

"I do. Broke 3 hours in my last marathon."

"Under 7 minutes per mile. That's fast, but it's more than 40 miles to Lake Los Angeles and about the same to Rosamond so I'm planning on something more like 10-minute miles. You have any water?"

"Yeah, two bottles of Gatorade and some eFuel gel packs."

"Good. I'm Bob by the way."

"Timothy, but my friends call me Tim."

"Glad to meet you, Tim."

Tim didn't have one of those wimpy hand shakes. Bob liked that.

Tim followed Bob across the freeway, down the bank and on to Escondido Canyon Road. From there they could take Soledad Canyon into the Antelope Valley. It wasn't the most direct route to Lake Los Angeles or Rosamond, but it would get them away from the freeway where it was likely they'd encounter more idiots with an attitude and an appetite for violence. When they got to Soledad, Bob stopped and removed his HF radio from the Camel Back.

"Time to call my son."

"You have a phone that still works?" asked Tim.

"It's not a phone. It's an HF radio."

Bob turned his HF radio on and keyed the transmitter.

Wing 36 calling Feather 18. Wing 36 calling Feather 18.

Bob waited for what seemed like an eternity. "Come on Larry. Be home. Be at your rad—"

This is Feather 18. Dad, where are you?

Soledad Canyon. I met a man about your age who is also a runner. He lives in Lake Los Angeles so we're jogging towards the back roads east of Sierra highway where he can continue to his place and I can get to the base using the entrance we discussed in our family survival meetings. Everybody okay?

We are. I'm in the garage. Hang on. I'll get Mom and Tina.

Bob and his wife gave each other virtual hugs via the radio. He promised to leave his radio on and give them hourly updates of his position.

Larry. Get everything you, your mother and your sister can't bear to live without in the car, including the survival gear in the garage, and get over to the base. They'll put you in one of the bunkers. Don't forget your ID cards.

We're okay here Dad. Just a little edgy.

No, you're not okay. Not there in Rosamond. You're too close to the freeway, too close to Edwards and too close to Palmdale where they're building the B21 bomber. People who've abandoned their vehicles are already looking for food, water and a place to hang out. Some of them have guns, and the next attack on Edwards or Palmdale could be a nuclear bomb, not just a high altitude EMP. Get out of there now, Son.

Okay. Will do Dad. Over but not out.

As Bob was putting his HF radio back in the Camel Back, his shirt opened

slightly. He looked up and noticed that Tim had seen the Glock.

"Never know when you gotta persuade somebody to mind their own business."

"Yeah. You got a carry license? I mean... I don't mind if you don't. Just curious. Can't get one myself. Sheriff doesn't think dogs are a good enough reason. All I have is pepper spray."

"I'm not an escaped convict, Tim."

"Damn. I was hoping you were. Or a secret agent from one of those three-letter agencies like the CIA. Seems like this ought to be more fun than a dreary run back to Lake Los Angeles."

Bob enjoyed the young man's good-natured humor, and respected him for doing it in the face of what was likely the end of the world they had known.

"Well, what I do isn't exactly a secret but I do work for a three-letter agency. The AFB."

"AFB? Never heard that one. Then you're—"

"I teach test pilots at Edwards Air Force Base."

"Boy, I always wanted to fly but my Dad took me into his business so I became a bean counter."

"You're an accountant?"

"Yeah, but I really don't know how to count. Thank Bill Gates for computers."

Bob and his young friend continued jogging up Soledad as the sun went down behind them.

CORE OF FOUR

Tuesday — January 13th — 6:30 PM

Jack stood. "I'm gonna throw some dirt on our fire and get on the road again."

"We're gonna drive at night?"

"Yeah. Less likely to come across people who won't mind their own business."

"Here. I didn't drink all the water in this bottle."

"No, can't waste water when dirt will do."

They put the camping chairs and cooking equipment back in the Rover and Jack slipped his mini Mag Lite into the holder he'd made for it on the driver's side mirror.

"Would you like to drive? Might be a good time to get acquainted with my Rover."

"No, it's been years since I've driven a stick shift."

"Shifting a standard trans is like riding a bike. You don't forget. And it won't be dark. You'll have that flashlight on the mirror."

Jack reached over and flicked it on. Linda got behind the wheel and set the thumb wheel switches to 1608.

"It didn't... oh, that switch."

Jack got in the passenger seat and flipped the switch under the glove box up, then released it. The engine came to life, purring like a panther.

Linda put it in gear and drove back down the dirt road to the pavement at Soledad. She looked both ways, glanced at Jack, then turned right.

"Right. Right?"

"Yes ma'am. Your sense of direction works, even in the dark."

After a mile or so, she began straddling the white line in the center of the road.

"You've set that Mag Lite on the mirror so I can follow the white line on the road. You *have* thought of everything. Admit it."

"Pretty sure I haven't. There's always—"

"Jack, two men are running down the road in front of us. What should I do?"

"Yeah, I see 'em. Stop and turn the Mag Lite off. Wait... that's the guy who told me he works at Edwards. I recognize the Camel Back."

The two men gave no indication they had seen or heard them. Probably talking, thought Jack. He knew what that was like, especially on training runs or in marathons where the pace allowed it. As they got closer, the men turned suddenly, looked back at them, then ran down the bank on the side of the road and disappeared into the brush.

"Drive up there, stop and turn on the parking lights. It's that switch right there."

When Linda stopped, Jack jumped out, ran to where the two men had run into the brush. He hoped they weren't armed or wouldn't start shooting if they were.

"Are you the guy with the Mercedes?" yelled Jack. "We met earlier today near the off-ramp at Aqua Dulce. You said you lived in Rosamond and worked at Edwards."

Jack waited for ten seconds but they were either not answering or were long gone. As he turned to get back in the Rover, he heard a rustle in the brush below the road.

"I remember. What do you want?"

"Nothing. Recognized your Camel Back and thought we should stop. You need anything?"

The men stepped out of the brush below the road and moved cautiously toward Linda and Jack.

"We could use a ride. Your Rover's still running. You didn't mention that this morning."

"Yeah, didn't think it would be wise to let anyone know that."

The two men scrambled up the bank and the one who'd done all the talking reached forward to shake Jack's hand. As he did, Jack noticed the bulge under his shirt. He was armed. Jack made no attempt to hide the bulge under his shirt.

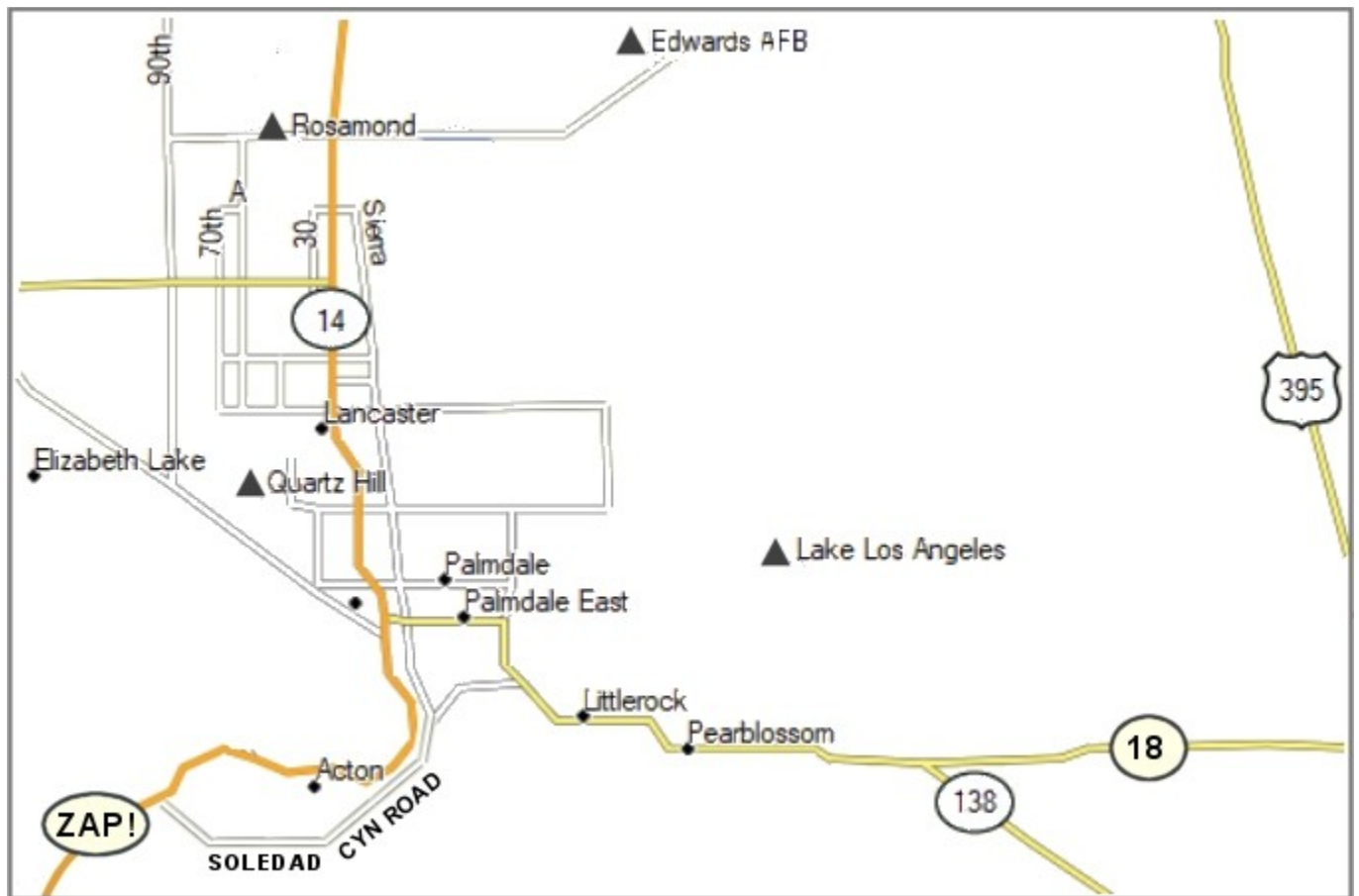
"I'm Bob and this is Tim. He lives in Lake Los Angeles."

"I'm Jack and this is Linda. She's trying to get to Quartz Hill. Her parents are in a retirement home there."

All four of them exchanged hand shakes. After a moment or two of silence, Linda turned to Jack. "We've got room, right?"

"We do but Lake Los Angeles, Quartz Hill and Rosamond are not in a straight line."

Jack walked away from the others to get his map from the glove box. When he got back, the others were standing around Bob. He had put his own map on the hood and was pointing a flashlight at Quartz Hill.



"You could get Linda to Quartz Hill on your way to my place in Rosamond. Lake Los Angeles is the only location significantly off that route."

Tim said, "Yeah, my place in Lake Los Angeles is just east of 170th Street. That's way off a line between Quartz Hill and Rosamond. But I planned on running home anyway. That's only 10 miles or so from here. If you could get me into Palmdale—"

"More like 20 miles," said Jack.

"I'm a marathoner. I'll make it."

Jack rubbed his chin and looked at Bob. "Actually, your place in Rosamond is the one that's off the way to my place. It's in northern California, so I was planning to take Linda to Quartz Hill, then get over to Hwy 18 so I could use US 395 to get home."

Bob nodded. "Makes sense, Jack. I teach the students in my survival classes to get home, stay put, and network."

Linda spread her hands. "We've got the beginning of a network right here."

"You're right, but my wife and our two children are waiting for me in Rosamond."

They all fell silent, contemplating their dilemma.

Bob raised his finger. "I'd like to offer a solution. I also teach my students that survival isn't always an every-man-for-himself scenario. Sometimes it's

aligning yourself with like-minded people and thinking of them as home, however temporary that might be."

"I like your thinking, but what's your solution?"

"I told my son to get himself, his mother and his sister over to the base so they can get into the bunkers before the next round of nuclear weapons. They've got IDs because of my status as an instructor. Then, after you get Linda to her parent's place in Quartz Hill, you can zig zag across the Antelope Valley to the southern access to the base. The entry is camouflaged and locked but I have the code to get in."

Bob returned to his map spread out on the hood of Jack's Rover and traced his proposed route. "That'll keep you off Sierra highway, which I'm sure is going to be everyone's choice to avoid the 14 freeway."

"Looks good. Back roads to your secret entry and then back roads to Tim's place. So you're an instructor at Edwards. Officer or civilian?"

"Officer until I retired. Then a civilian. I taught survival tactics to pilots in case they were shot down over enemy territory. When I retired, the Colonel in charge of the training section asked me to continue as a civil service employee. Today's been one hell of a test of whether the stuff I've been teaching will get me home to the people waiting for me. Who's waiting for you, Jack?"

"Well, two dogs, three cats, a dozen chickens, five goats, a retired Colonel and his wife, their son and daughter, and a thousand acres decorated with six varieties of conifer trees, seven meadows with a zillion species of wild grasses and flowers, and a year round stream that keeps two ponds ripe with rainbow and golden trout hungry for the hand tied fly at the end of the tapered, camouflaged line on my fishing pole."

"Sounds like heaven, Jack. Makes me wish I could join you once we get the shit off the fan."

"Maybe you will Bob. Lots of room up there for men like you. And their families too, of course."

Bob glanced at Tim. "Who's waiting for you Tim?"

Tim was standing in the middle of Soledad Canyon road staring east at the long stretch of pavement between him and home.

"Just a studio apartment. No dogs. No cats. Well, my Mother lives a few miles from my place. When Dad died she asked me to move in with her but I never did. I'll have to now. She's a tough, take-care-of-yourself lady but I'm sure she's worried. Hope she's okay."

They fell silent, each measuring the possibility that the four of them might be the only family they'd have for now.

Jack said, "We've all got good reasons to get somewhere besides here, but getting home won't get us back to business as usual."

"True enough," said Bob. "Life may never be the same again. According to MARS the power grids in America and in Europe were taken down by very powerful, high altitude EMPs."

"MARS? You don't mean the planet, right?" asked Linda.

"No," said Bob, "but you know how the military loves acronyms. M stands

for Military. The rest is Auxiliary Radio System. It's manned by amateur radio operators twenty four seven. It was originally developed to broadcast emergency information to military personnel. Still does, but the Air Force expanded the network so flight crews on military aircraft can patch messages to their family and friends. I do that myself sometimes, but couldn't do that today because although the MARS network is up, the phone system is down."

"So you're licensed to use the MARS network." said Jack. "One of the benefits of working at Edwards?"

"It is, but I'm also a retired test pilot, and teach test pilots how to, well, be test pilots. So I enjoy a number of benefits."

Tim turned to Bob. "You said the power grids in America and in Europe were taken down. Sounds like the whole world. Geez, where will it end?"

"Who knows?" said Jack. "It's like tossing a rock in a lake. It sends out ripples in every direction. The one that hit us was a big rock that's already rippled through our vehicles, the trucking industry, power grids, gas stations, communication devices, grocery stores and relationships. It's separated fathers and sons, husbands and wives and disconnected one group of people from another."

"And connected us," said Linda.

They stood there in the dark, kind of together and kind of apart but knowing Linda was right. Bob finally broke the silence.

"Edwards is hardened against all sorts of disasters, including a HEMP."

Jack nodded. "But people aren't hardened against any emergency, large or small. Most are just sleep-walking through life. Taking the status quo for granted."

"Except those like you." said Bob. "Your Rover, for example. Probably an early 80s Series Three?"

Jack nodded.

"My uncle was stationed in England." continued Bob, "In the early 80's he decided to come home with one. Yours have a carburetor or fuel injection?"

"Carburetor."

"Ah, so no EFI to get fried."

"Exactly, and I've got an EMP protection device between the battery and all the electronic and electrical devices. So even though my ignition is CDI, it didn't get fried either."

"When the HEMP hit us out there on the freeway, I didn't feel my throttle go slack, so I knew my EMP device had worked. If it hadn't, the HEMP might have fried some of the fuses and locked up some of the relays. Even then, I could have replaced the fuses and reset the relays."

"Locked up?" asked Tim.

"An EMP can latch a relay or an integrated circuit into one state or another. The circuit stops, like it's frozen in mid step. It's unlikely a latch-up would fry an electro-mechanical relay, and if it doesn't destroy the solid-state components, you can reset the circuit by momentarily disconnecting and reconnecting the battery."

"But the Series Three has the old Kettering system which ought to have survived even a large electro-magnetic pulse. So why did you harden it?"

"Yeah, a coil and a distributor might have survived but I wanted a CDI. Better spark and no points to wear down in a distributor. So I used heavier gage wire in the coil and replaced the solid-state components with a transistorized circuit. Transistors are less likely to get fried or locked up by an EMP. And to be even safer, I put copper-wire mesh under the hood."

"Good thinking," said Bob. "Did you consider swapping the gas engine for a diesel? Or using a generator instead of an alternator? Spark plugs need a circuit to generate a spark but glow plugs are only used to start a diesel. After that, it's a compression-ignition engine. And there's no diodes in a generator to get fried."

"I did, but glow plugs have to be heated before you can start a diesel, which means I would have had another circuit to protect. And a generator, well, it doesn't charge very well at or near idle, so I decided to carry a spare CDI and diodes for my alternator."

Linda tugged Jack's elbow. "If your Rover wasn't affected by the EMP, what did you have me help you do?"

"Well, I was pretty sure a more deadly nuclear device would be detonated in the next day or so. So I had you help me bypass the fuses and relays."

Linda shook her head. "My god, you've thought of everything." She looked at Tim, then Bob. "He designed this switch that—"

"Not really," interrupted Jack, unwilling for Bob and Tim to know what Linda knew about starting the Rover.

"I was going to install my bypass when I got home. The HEMP caught me napping. Won't happen again."

"I know the feeling," said Tim. "There are seven days in the week and Someday isn't one of them. But I didn't have any preparations to put off. If I hadn't met Bob..."

"But you did, Tim, and we were both lucky enough to meet Jack, who thought far enough ahead to design his bypass and carry it with him."

"You haven't been sleep-walking yourself, Bob. You've got some know how."

"You better believe he does," said Tim. "He's got a map and a—"

"He knows I'm armed, Tim, and knows that I know he's armed."

"Christ," said Tim, "I'm surrounded by survival dudes with guns and a vehicle that runs. How much better can it get? Cheer up everyone, things could be worse."

"The last time I heard that," joked Linda, "I cheered up and sure as hell things did get worse."

Bob laughed. "Yeah, like Murphy's Law. If anything *can* go wrong it *will*, and most natural and man-made disasters do get worse before they get better."

Jack nodded. "Yes, and if when they do it would be helpful to have a backup way to stay informed if the MARS network and our communication satellites go down. Here in the States, there's more than 70 private and commercial radio stations authorized to broadcast emergency information. It

takes a few hours after an EMP before the ionosphere settles down enough for radio reception. KFI is one of the clear channel radio stations, and it's been more than a few hours so we might be able to get that on my short wave radio. I keep it in a Faraday box under the floor boards."

Linda cocked her head and looked at Jack. "I listen to the John and Ken show on KFI but didn't know it was a clear channel station. What is that?"

"It's an AM radio station in North America that has little or no interference from other stations because no other stations can use that frequency to transmit their broadcasts. Makes it more likely you can listen to that station throughout the United States."

"Yes," said Bob. "The MARS network isn't hardened against EMPs so KFI would be a valuable backup station for news. In my survival classes, I stress the importance of knowing what your friends are doing to rescue you and what your enemies are doing to capture you."

"Wouldn't KFI be down with the grid?" asked Tim.

"Don't know how EMP hardened most radio stations are but most have backup generators. All we can do is give it a try. Linda, hold this Mag Lite for me."

Jack crawled into the back of his Rover, pulled the carpet back and unlocked the lid to his stash of food, water and survival gear. His satellite phone, short wave radio, two-meter hand held, walkie talkies and batteries were in a Haier microwave oven he used as a Faraday box. The Haier had electro-mechanical controls and his short wave radio was transistorized to make it less susceptible to an EMP. He still hadn't found an opportunity or a reason to use his satellite phone to contact the Marine Corps Training Center near Bridgeport. So he pulled his short wave radio out of the microwave oven and turned it on. It began hissing with static. The others gathered around him as he moved the tuning dial. When he got to KFI, the static faded.

...home, stay inside. If you are on the road, stay in your vehicle.

This is KFI, a FEMA approved Emergency Alert station broadcasting on 640 kilohertz. We will broadcast alerts and updates every hour on the hour.

High altitude nuclear devices have been detonated over the major cities of the world. All five power grids in the United States are down or severely damaged. If you are home, stay inside. If you are on the road, stay in your vehicle.

This is KFI, a FEMA approved Emergency Alert station broadcasting...

Jack turned the radio off to save the battery and looked at his wrist watch. A few minutes after eleven. He'd check for updates at midnight.

Bob said, "That's what I got off the MARS network this morning. One super HEMP for each country. The MARS alert also mentioned that nobody had taken credit for the attacks so it's not likely that ISIS, Al-Qaeda or the Taliban are responsible. We've all seen how eager they are to broadcast a video of chopping some Infidel's head off. Huge egos swimming in a sixth-century brain."

"If it wasn't Jihadist terrorists," asked Tim, "who the hell was it?"

"The MARS alert said strategists are pointing their fingers at China."

Linda gasped. "China! Why them?"

"China wants to force Taiwan to give up their sovereignty as a separate Chinese nation. Beijing wants one China, not two. The other reason is that one third of the world's shipping passes through the South China Sea, and there is supposedly vast oil and natural gas reserves beneath its seabed. It's also a source of fish crucial for millions in Southeast Asia. But the Chinese military strategists don't want interference from the US and its allies. And what better way to ensure that the US and its allies can't retaliate with conventional or nuclear weapons than to *shut* down our power grids and *shoot* down our satellites."

Tim pinched his eyebrows together. "*Shoot* our satellites? The grid is already down. Didn't the HEMP take our satellites down too?"

"No. Our satellites are hardened against all but the most powerful EMP and I know that's not just a mil-spec requirement in a classified document because my SAT phone and GPS still work.

Jack said, "Mine as well. GPS accuracy is not as good as usual but my SAT phone and Garmin eTrex are both operational."

"The accuracy on my GPS unit is also down a bit so we've lost more than a few of our geo-positioning satellites."

"No doubt about that," said Jack. "but we only need four to get a good fix on our position, and China, or whoever, has to target them individually, so it might be quite a while before we lose the use of our GPS units."

"I hope so. The Air Force has been tracking rocket-armed satellites launched by China for several years and a few weeks before the HEMP attack they noticed that all of them had begun tracking the signals from our communication and geo-positioning satellites. They also have very small parasitic satellites that can attach themselves to a satellite, then wait for a command to detonate. Those are a kind of space mine. We can detect rockets launched by China but it's unlikely we could detect small, parasitic satellites released from the rocket. Makes sense that either or both of those types of weapons are why we've lost enough of our GPS satellites to reduce the accuracy."

Linda cocked her head. "It makes sense that China, or any enemy of the United States, would want to disable our communication satellites, but why the geo-positioning satellites?"

"The Air Force, the Army, the Navy and the Marine Corps need to identify the location of friendly and unfriendly troops, ships, aircraft, buildings, installations... anything tactically significant to a mission. A few years ago I had something happen to me that highlighted the need for both geo-positioning and communication satellites. I was flying over Iraq when—"

"I thought Iraq was one of our enemies," said Linda.

"The US and Iraq are what I'd call strategic partners because we provide Iraq with millions of dollars of military aid and training every year and they provide us with military bases."

Linda nodded. "So what happened a few years ago?"

"My mission that night was just a routine surveillance flight. Fifteen

minutes after leaving the aircraft carrier, the geo-positioning equipment on my F-18 failed. I didn't immediately notice that the coordinates of my position on the instrument panel had gone blank. The F-18 is a Mach 2.3 fighter. That's over 1,700 miles per hour, so by the time I did notice the failure, I was flying over Iran, **not** Iraq, and I didn't know **that** until two Russian MiGs appeared in the sky behind me.

My F-18 can out run a MiG but not the rockets they fired at me. I knew immediately that they were active, not heat-seeking missiles because my Missile Locked On warning light came on. I knew—"

Tim cut in. "I've heard of heat-seeking missiles but what's an active missile?"

"Heat-seeking missiles track the exhaust on an aircraft so pilots can avoid them with sudden changes in direction and altitude. Once the heat-seeking rocket loses the heat, it can't recover a lock. Active missiles have a built-in tracking radar that pings the target, so it won't lose the lock no matter what the target does. The warning light meant active missiles were closing rapidly on my plane, so I knew I'd soon be toast. I pushed the eject button, the canopy blew off, and up I went. When the seat fell away I pulled the rip chord on my chute, thinking the worst was over. I would hit the ground, shed the chute and do what I could to avoid the ground troops that were undoubtedly scrambling to my location.

I was wrong. The worst was not over. As I floated toward the ground, I saw both MiGs swing around and head directly at me. I couldn't read the minds of those pilots but I knew their intentions. I was hanging in my chute, completely helpless, floating slowly, too damn slowly, toward the ground. It was going to be like shooting fish in a barrel and I was the fish. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth but the Tat! Tat! Tat! of their wing guns made me open them again. I released my main chute just before the bright path of the tracer bullets reached my position and began free falling to the ground below. It takes an emergency chute at least three or four hundred feet to open fully. When I thought I was about five hundred feet from the ground, I pulled the chord and braced myself for the impact.

Luckily for me, it was a moonless night and I had dropped into a thick forest on the southeastern shore of the Caspian Sea. I watched the MiG pilots circle a few times then race off into the sky. I hid my emergency chute, removed my GPS unit from my survival pack to get the coordinates of my location, then transmitted them in code to the aircraft carrier.

My survival kit included a map of Asia. Countries that had friendly relations with the United States were colored green and red if they didn't. We established diplomatic relations with Turkmenistan in 1992 following its independence from the Soviet Union. So I began hiking toward the border between Iran and Turkmenistan. I traveled at night and slept during the day. My map told me it was about 100 miles, so it took me three days to get across the border. Without my GPS and the map, I wouldn't have been able to find a route through the forests south and east of the Caspian Sea. Without my GPS *and* my SAT phone, I wouldn't have been able to call the

aircraft carrier *and* give them my position when I was in friendly territory.”



“What a horrific experience.” said Linda. “I’m so glad you survived.”

Tim glanced at Linda, then turned to Bob. “Yeah, no wonder you were tasked with teaching pilots how to survive if their plane gets shot down.”

Tim paused to rub his finger across his lips. “So China, not Islamic terrorists, is the prime suspect for taking our power grid down. And now we have rockets aimed at our satellites. The poop has hit the fan and you make it sound like there’s more to come.”

Jack said, “Hope for the best. Prepare for the worst.”

“Good motto.” said Bob. “And yes, Tim, the worst might be on the way. China has their own network of satellites, supersonic missiles mounted **on** trucks and **in** submarines, and the anti-satellite weapons I’ve mentioned to fry our satellites and disable the ability of our planes, aircraft carriers and battleships to communicate with each other and retaliate.”

Jack glanced at Bob. “Islamic terrorists wouldn’t need their own rocket if they could sneak a pound or two of enriched plutonium aboard a rocket someone else is using to put a satellite in orbit. Then they could trigger the bomb when it passed over the country they had targeted for a HEMP. But I agree. China is the bad guy in this scenario.”

Bob nodded. “Yeah, China. Right now, I can’t use my satellite phone because my commanding officer is worried that if he attempts to answer me, the enemy might be able to track the transmission to our satellite. But another benefit of being a retired Air Force officer is having a mil-spec, high frequency radio hardened against EMPs and other environmental abnormalities so I can keep in touch with my family if the phone system is down. It’s about time I gave them an update. Can I tell them you’re giving me a ride to Edwards?”

“Yes, barring any more abnormalities, environmental or otherwise, I’ll get all of you home. But most military HF radios operate on secure frequencies.

Somebody in your family has an HF radio?"

"My son. Another perk of being a retired officer who works at Edwards."

Bob removed his HF radio from his back pack and called his son to let him know where he was and that he had met some people with an operational vehicle. He might be home sooner than expected.

Linda leaned against the Rover and dropped her shoulders. "I wish I could call my Dad. My mother is on oxygen. Without power..."

"Maybe she's OK," said Jack. "Medical equipment is likely to have backup power of some kind."

"I hope you're right. My Dad would be lost without her. All their friends and relatives are dead or so wrapped up in their own lives they might as well be."

"Then we should get to Quartz Hill first," said Jack. "You and Tim okay with that?"

"Yes," said Bob. "Knowing my wife and kids are safe in the Edwards bunker took the edge off my need to hurry home."

Tim nodded. "I'm okay with that too. When my car died and I saw other cars sliding and swerving to a stop, I knew something big, bad and ugly had happened and wanted to get home in a hurry. My mother is by herself now. Then I met Bob and knew I wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. Like I said, no wife, no kids, no dog, no cats."

"And you met us," said Linda.

Bob had suggested that earlier, thought Jack. Now Linda was saying the same thing in a different way. Until today, he had never risked even the smallest decisions to anyone but himself. Now he was embracing the possibility that Bob and Linda were right. The EMP attack had separated people from their friends and families but had connected them with other people. They were becoming, perhaps had already become a Core of Four, a network of like-minded survivors.

Jack walked over to the Rover, got in the driver's seat and waited for the others to pile in. Linda sat down in the passenger seat and looked at him. He nodded. While Bob and Timothy were climbing into the back, she set the thumb wheel switches and flipped the starter switch. The engine came to life, purring like a panther. Jack put in gear and began driving toward Quartz Hill.

GUNS & DOTS

Tuesday — January 13th – 8:10 PM

The Rover didn't have seats in the back, so Bob and Tim sat with their backs to the sides.

"Where in Quarts Hill is this retirement home?" asked Jack.

"It's Fair Oaks something. I've got it..."

Linda began digging through her purse.

"Damn, I typed the address into the GPS in that rental car. God help me if I didn't keep the paper... ah, here it is. Fair Oaks Gardens, 6173 West Avenue L8."

"Bob, can you find that on your map?" asked Jack.

Bob already had his map out and was scanning it with a flashlight.



"Yeah, here it is. Just west of 60th Street. Maybe 20 miles from here using Sierra Highway and Elizabeth Lake road. Soledad merges with Sierra about 3 miles from where I estimate us to be now, but—"

"Yeah," interrupted Jack, "it gets pretty close to the freeway, but at this time of night we shouldn't attract any attention. Then what?"

"Then north on Golden Ranch to L12 and left to Fair Oaks Gardens."

"How did your mother and father get to California?" asked Jack.

"The doctor said she needed to get out of the hot, humid south or she was

going to die of emphysema. Her brother had retired in a place called Little Rock. It's apparently a small farming town in the Antelope Valley."

"It is. Tract homes here and there but mostly one-acre or larger parcels where people can have horses, cows, chickens and sell fruits and vegetables from their gardens."

"My father was born in Little Rock, Arkansas so he and my mother thought that was prophetic, a sign they should drive out to Little Rock, California and take a look. They liked it so much they bought a place and retired there. But a few years ago, her condition worsened, so my father moved her to Fair Oaks, sold their place in Little Rock, and moved there himself to be close to her."

"So this Fair Oaks is a nursing home?" asked Tim.

Linda turned to answer Tim but fell silent as they merged onto Sierra Highway and saw dozens of people walking the pavement in front of them. Jack slowed to 10 mph, readjusted the Mag Lite on his side mirror, and began weaving cautiously through the crowd. His left hand reached instinctively for the horn but he didn't honk it.

"Get your pepper pistol out, Linda, and roll your window down. There's a canister of pepper spray in the glove box. Hand it to Bob."

Bob and Linda were on the passenger side of the Rover, so Jack moved to the left shoulder of the road to make it easier for them to persuade people to move to the right of the Rover's path.

"If somebody refuses to move out of our way, well, use your own judgment."

Linda leaned out her window and hollered at the people shuffling along in the dark.

"We're coming through. Move to your right."

Some glanced back, moved over and kept walking. Most stopped and looked back at the Rover, wide-eyed and opened-mouthed, as if they had seen a ghost.

"Looks like a funeral march." said Bob. "I feel sorry for these people."

"Yeah." replied Tim. "Wonder how many of them are marching to their own funeral. Anything I can do, Jack?"

"Yeah. Should have thought of this earlier. See that shovel handle over the back window?"

"I do."

"Pull it off the clips holding it up there and keep an eye on the people we pass. Most look defeated and sullen but I wouldn't be surprised if somebody got it in their head to take their misfortune out on us."

Linda continued hollering a warning at the people ahead of them so Jack was able to get over 20 mph. When they got to the junction of Sierra and Pearblossom highways, the crowd thinned to a trickle so Jack kicked it up to 50 mph.

"Pearblossom is my turnoff from work." said Tim. "My job is... was in Canyon Country. My mother is a tough old gal, but I hope she's okay."

"I'm sure she is," said Linda, "and I appreciate you be willing to delay

your getting home to make sure she is okay so I can get to Fair Oaks to check on my mother.”

At 50 mph it took only 4 or 5 minutes to reach Palmdale Boulevard where they would take a left onto Elizabeth Lake road. The junction of those two roads was right in the middle of downtown Palmdale where it was more likely they’d encounter other vehicles, hoodlums roaming the streets and people looting stores. Jack ratcheted his awareness up a notch or two as they approached the intersection.

As he got closer to town he noticed fires here and there in the distance. The transformers in urban and industrial areas are connected to miles of wires that act like antennas to direct the EMP energy into the transformers. Overheated, they explode and set off fires.

As Jack made the left onto Elizabeth Lake road he realized he’d been holding his breath.

“So far so good, he said. Nobody but us on the road.”

“Better than that funeral march everybody else is on.” said Tim.

As they passed under the 14 freeway, Jack looked to his left at what was now the Palmdale Hotel. Ten years ago it had been a Ramada Inn where he and his late wife had celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. *Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be*, he thought.

“We’re being followed.” warned Bob. “As you passed that hotel on the left, a pickup truck came out of the parking lot, lights off, and pulled in behind us.”

Jack glanced at his rear view mirror. At some time in every assignment, he would remind himself that he wasn’t paranoid if they really were out to get him. It was always safer to assume they were, and this was one of those times.

“Good lord.” said Linda. “What do they want?”

“Who knows?” said Jack. “Kill us. Take our stuff. Some of the people we’re going to meet along the way are happy the world is going to hell. Anarchy is what they’ve always wanted and now they have it. Theft, rape, assault—crime without any consequences.”

“Looks like an older model.” said Bob. “Probably not fuel injected or parked under enough concrete to shield it from the HEMP.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve been on Elizabeth Lake road,” said Jack, “but if my memory serves me right, it gets into the country pretty soon.”

“It does.” replied Tim. “Ranches on both sides for a few miles, then plenty of dirt roads where you could ditch these guys.”

“Tim’s right.” said Bob. “I drive up here to run the Pacific Crest Trail but I doubt any of the dirt roads would keep them from following us, even if they don’t have four-wheel drive.”

“Yeah, a great place to run,” said Tim, “but I never thought of it as a place to run from this.”

“Let’s be safe, not sorry,” said Jack, “and assume they’re lowlifes with an attitude and an appetite for violence without consequences.”

“Then let’s give ’em consequences.” said Bob. “Lock and load folks. This

could be another shootout at the OK Corral and despite my attitude about guns I'm feeling like Doc Holiday."

Bob reached under his coat and pulled his Glock from its holster.

And I'm feeling like Wyatt Earp, thought Jack. But he knew this wasn't just another assignment in a foreign country. This was America and people besides himself were at risk, people he now cared about.

"I'm scared," said Linda. "I hoped I'd never have to kill anyone again."

"Again?" asked Bob.

"She has an S&W 357," said Jack. "She popped a guy who was, well, it was necessary and she's a damn good shot. Linda, give Tim that pepper pistol. It's accurate to 50 yards, Tim."

Jack told Bob to pull up the rug he and Tim were sitting on and open the lid on Jack's stash below the floor boards of the Rover. Bob and Tim squirmed this way and that until they got the rug up and the lid open.

"Whoa!" reacted Bob when he saw Jack's sniper rifle. 50 caliber?"

"Yeah, but we don't have time to assemble it and it's too dark for a scope. See that small black box at the passenger end of the container? It's a 200 milliwatt laser. You could—"

"I'm gonna end this before it begins." interrupted Bob.

He pulled the laser out of its box, opened the back window and pointed his Glock and the laser at the truck. Whoever was behind the wheel had turned on the headlights and was less than fifty feet behind, closing fast.

Jack took his foot off the pedal and looked into the rear view mirror, expecting to see the truck's windshield explode. Instead, he saw a red dot dancing on the glass. A moment later the truck swerved off the road and rolled over in a cloud of dust.

"Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday: one!" yelled Tim. "Clancy and his gang: zero!"

Couldn't have said it better myself, thought Jack and put his foot back on the pedal.

SHADES OF GRAY

Tuesday — January 13th – 9:45 PM

Lake Elizabeth Road became more twisty as they got further west into Leona Valley, so Jack turned on the lights using the 20-amp circuit he had included in his bypass wiring. No sense using the battery in the Mag Lite when the alternator was pumping juice into the battery.

Jack's eyes were on the road but he could feel Linda's eyes on him.

"Shouldn't our lights be off? I'm worried somebody like those guys in that truck will see them and come after us."

"Tossing a tail doesn't make it more or less likely we'll toss another tail." said Jack.

"What does flipping coins have to do with those men in that truck?" she asked.

"Those idiots don't make it more likely we'll run into anyone else like them."

"But your lights do. Cause and effect have nothing to do with chance, Jack."

"You're probably right, but the Mag Lite isn't bright or broad enough for this road."

"You've got an answer for everything, don't you?"

"Yes. Cause or chance, right or wrong, I need to fasten every answer with a nail."

"Or you'd do crazy shit?"

"Exactly. I could slow down and turn off the lights but your mother being on oxygen...well, sooner would be better than later."

"I'm worried about her too. I just don't want to..." she fell silent, not willing to think about her mother.

After a mile or so, Jack became uncomfortable with the silence. He liked this woman and wanted her to like him.

"Still glad you're here, not back there on the freeway?" he asked, hoping she'd know he was asking if she was still glad to be with him.

"Yes," she said, softly, as if she didn't want Bob and Tim to hear her. They were still talking about their shootout with the Clancy gang.

"But I need to know what you're not telling me."

Jack knew she'd seen his sniper rifle and was probably wondering how that figured into what she didn't know about him.

"I was a trouble shooter."

"Was?"

"I'm retired. I was on my way home from my last assignment when the EMP hit us out there on the freeway."

"So someone was trouble and you shot them?"

"When it came to that."

"And you did this for—"

"The good guys."

"The good guys?" she asked, skepticism riding in her voice. "The bad guys

don't wear black hats, Jack, and the good guys don't wear white ones. How did you know you were on the right side?"

"The Lone Ranger wore a mask and Hop-along Cassidy wore a black hat, but you always knew they were the good guys."

"Hollywood put both of them on white horses, Jack, so we'd all know they were the good guys."

"Those men in that truck and the man you shot. Were they wearing hats or riding horses?"

"Of course not," she admitted, "but—"

"Then how did you know they were up to no good?"

"They had guns and, well, like you said, they weren't minding their own business."

"Exactly. And that was my business. When somebody stuck their face in somebody else's business, with malice, my job was to stick my face in their business."

"So why did you retire?"

"It got more and more difficult to tell the good guys from the bad guys and to shoot the bad ones without malice."

"You like analogies. I can tell. Eye candy, salmon swimming upstream, ripples on a lake, flipping coins. We all do. They simplify things and sharpen our focus. But every analogy breaks down at some point and your horses-and-hats metaphor threw a shoe."

"Ha!" laughed Jack. "So your analogy works but mine doesn't? I was trying to lighten things up, Linda, but the analogy fits pretty well. In my business, there were two kinds of people: those fighting for power and those fighting for peace."

Bob reached forward and touched Jack's shoulder. "Life isn't that simple, Jack. Despite my career in the Air Force, fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity."

"Ha!" laughed Tim. "Another apt analogy. It's easy to start a war but damn difficult to stop it."

Jack looked up at the rear view mirror, realizing Bob and Tim had been listening to their conversation.

"You're right. All of you. For most people, life isn't simple. But mine was. It involved black-or-white decisions. No time to sort through seventy **shades of gray**. Don't know if what I did made the world safer or not. I was given an assignment and I carried it out."

Jack looked over at Linda, wondering if he had alienated her to the point of no return.

"My job changed me," continued Jack, "and I can't undo those changes in some artificial way, like talking myself into a different state of mind or by letting you or anybody else make me feel bad about what I did."

"But guns." said Linda. "Once you pull the trigger you can't take it back. I wish... well, you can't take words back either, or a punch in the face, but you still have some wiggle room after the damage is done."

"My assignments didn't give me much wiggle room, but I wasn't a robotic

killing machine. I worked things out in my head before every mission so my hands knew exactly what to do when I encountered the problem I was sent to solve. And I'd like you all to know I rarely had to shoot anyone."

"I can relate to what you're saying," said Tim. "My personal life is lots more complicated than my professional life. Probably because I tend to make it more complicated than it needs to be. But I'm an accountant, so my job is also black and white. Two plus two is four. Period. Reminds me of the joke about a Democrat who is walking along the avenue with his family when a guy jumps out and threatens them with a knife. The Democrat reaches for his gun but stops to consider the consequences. Should he have a license to carry? If he shoots the guy, how would that affect his children? And so forth."

"So what would a Republican do?" asked Linda.

"He'd empty his gun in the guy's face, then his daughter would ask if he'd used hollow point or full-metal jacket bullets."

They laughed, as much to express their reaction to the humor of Tim's story as to thank him for putting a lighter spin on what was threatening to become a heavier debate than any of them wanted to deal with.

FAIR OAKS

Tuesday — January 13th - 10:45 PM

When they arrived at the Fair Oaks retirement home, Jack saw light behind the curtains on some of the rooms. *Makes sense*, he thought. *Nursing homes would have generators for backup power.*

To make sure, Jack drove to the back of the building and found a generator sitting in an alcove under the building. Hearing nothing, he continued around to the front of the building to scan the roof line for solar panels and saw two rows of four panels each.

Jack knew that solar panels and the charge controllers and inverters associated with them use solid-state components and were therefore unlikely to have survived the EMP attack. He took another look at the rooms that were lit and this time noticed the lights were weak and wavering. *Candles.*

He parked the Rover and everyone got out. While Linda ran to the front door, Jack grabbed his short wave radio and put it in his jacket.

When Linda got to the front of the building, she yanked at the handles on the large glass doors but they were locked. A guard was sitting at a desk reading something by the light of what looked like a camping lantern. It flickered slightly so Jack assumed it was powered by fuel, probably butane, not batteries. The guard was losing the hair on his head and gaining a bulge on his belly.

"My parents live here!" she yelled.

The guard waved her off, but she banged on the heavy glass door and once again yelled at him that her parents lived there. He stood, placed his hand on the butt of his gun and walked cautiously toward the door.

"My parents live here." she repeated.

"Who are your parents?" asked the guard.

"David and Carolyn Hale. I'm Linda. I should be listed as one of the people to notify in case of emergency."

"That list is on the computer so I can't look you up but your father isn't here. He went to check on his wife just after the lights went out. She lives in the nursing home. This lobby is the center of Fair Oaks. The west wing is a retirement home and the east wing is a nursing home."

"My mother is on oxygen so I'm worried—"

"I'll take you over there. These people with you will have to stay in the lobby, but before I can let them in I need to know who they are."

"I met them after the EMP struck. This one saved my life." Linda pointed at Jack.

The guard looked at Jack, then at Bob and Tim and with a little nod of his head unlocked the door and held it as they all stepped inside. When they all were in the lobby, the guard faced the group and said, "I'm George."

George's face belied the hard, trained mind behind his soft exterior.

"I'm Jack and that's Bob and Tim. I'm surprised you're on duty. Figured everybody would be home with their families."

"Don't have a family to go home to and the folks in here need somebody

to protect them from the crazies out there. Sooner or later, the punks roaming the streets are going to run out of stuff to steal from stores in the city and homes in the suburbs and come here to take our stuff."

Everyone stood there nodding their heads, knowing Fair Oaks would have more food, water and supplies than a home in the suburbs. It would be easier to deal with one old guard snoozing in the lobby of a retirement home than two or three trained officers of the law guarding a grocery or department store.

"But you live somewhere." said Jack. How you gettin' back and forth?"

"I'm living here now. Dave, Linda's father, drove me over to my place this morning and helped me pack up all my stuff. It's only a few miles from here."

"Drove?" asked Bob.

"Yeah, he's got a 56 Nomad. It's been in the under ground parking lot so it didn't get zapped."

George led Linda to a set of double doors on the east side of the lobby at what Jack thought was a brisk pace for an old man. He opened the doors with his ring of keys and motioned Linda in.

"Thank you George. What room is my father in?"

"216. Second floor. Elevator doesn't work. The stairs are over there."

"You know his room number. You must have a good memory."

"Don't need a good memory for that. Dave and I play chess every night before my shift starts. Tell him George said hello."

When she got to her father's room, she saw a sign on the door.

LEAVE YOUR BULL SHIT AT THE DOOR

Linda smiled, then knocked on the door. After a minute or so she knocked again, this time harder.

"Who is it?" he asked, in a loud, gruff voice.

"It's me Dad, your daughter."

"Bull shit. My daughter's in Alabama. Get the hell away from my door or I'll blast you to smithereens!"

"Pop, it's really me. Open the door. Please."

He opened the door and quickly stepped back, his pistol pointing down but slightly forward.

Linda ran through the door, threw her arms around him, then turned and rushed to the bed where her mother was lying, eyes closed, struggling for air.

"Is she okay?"

"Barely." he answered, his voice soft compared to a few moments ago when he had challenged her at the door. "She was without oxygen for more than an hour. Those yahoos in maintenance couldn't button their pants with both hands."

"How are you keeping her oxygen going?"

"Inverters running off the batteries for the solar panels. The backup generators wouldn't start, and the panels got fried when the towel heads hit us, but it's sunny most of the year so the batteries were fully charged."

"How long will they last?"

"No idea."

They stood there thinking the same thing in their own way, Dave wondering and Linda worrying how he'd get from one day to the next without her mother. They had been together for forty years—more than half of his life. She was his life.

"I met three men after the disaster, Dad. Without them, I'd have never gotten here. They're waiting in the lobby. I should go down there and say goodbye."

"Where they headed?" asked her father.

"One lives in Lake Los Angeles, the other in Rosamond and another somewhere in northern California."

"How the hell they gonna get home? According to the radio, every vehicle in the country got toasted."

"One of them is some kind of Mission Impossible guy who knew how to make his Rover EMP proof. He's going to get the two other men home, then continue to his place in northern California. He saved my life, Dad."

"Saved your life? Then I'm going down there myself to shake his hand. Nothing I can do now for your mother but hope she comes out of this okay."

Dave leaned over the bed and kissed his wife on the forehead and Linda did the same. Dave opened the door and held it for her. She stepped through the doorway and looked back, worried she never see her alive again.

When they got to the lobby, they saw George playing chess with Tim.

"He's damn near as good at this game as you are, Dave. How's the wife?"

"Hanging in there, George."

"Dad, this is Bob, that's Tim and he's Jack. I met them just after the disaster."

"Which one of you saved my daughter's life?"

Jack looked at Linda. "It's pretty much the other way around, sir. She kept a man from blowing my head off."

Dave stepped forward and shook Jack's hand. As he did, his jacket swung open enough for Jack to see the revolver in Dave's waistband.

Looks like an S&W 38 Special, thought Jack, and he's got a strong, confident grip. Somebody I can count on. Like his daughter.

"I owe you one, Jack. Thanks."

Dave turned to Bob and Tim and shook their hands.

"Glad to meet you. Hell of a thing, ain't it. Damn towel heads. Turned our world upside down. Shoulda nuked the middle east years ago."

"Felt the same thing myself," said Jack, "until I met some of them and realized most are like us. Different but the same. Caught between loving their country and hating the men ruling it."

"And there's the rub," said Bob. "Like in Vietnam where we couldn't tell the good guys from the bad so we had to come up with new rules and a new vocabulary for our war games. Surgical strikes. Collateral damage. Friendly fire. Killing innocent bystanders and our own because we had to engage the enemy so close to our own troops."

"Yeah," said Dave. "Sorry about the outburst. Not right to bomb an entire village or send a whole nation up in radioactive smoke to waste a few butt

heads who are fouling things up. Most people are just common, everyday folks like ourselves. And I understand surgical. Cut out the cancer without injuring the good tissue."

The group looked at Dave, understanding his comment but not knowing the context.

"My father was a veterinarian." explained Linda.

The others nodded their heads and Jack remembered Linda telling him about her father's career and how much she'd learned from him. She and her father will be an asset to each other and the men and women here at Fair Oaks.

George said, "You've all had one hell of a day, and we've got plenty of empty rooms where you can get some shut eye. One of the women who lived here has a son who drove a city transit bus. He used it to come over here and take her home with him. His own car probably got zapped. Didn't take long for the news to spread. Dozens of residents have kids who live here in the Antelope Valley, so he ended up taking them home too. Some had friends who lived nearby, so they left to live with them. And as bizarre as it might sound, some of the residents just walked out of their rooms and through the lobby doors. Asked one of them where he was going. He told me anywhere but here."

Linda looked at her father, knowing they were both thinking about his wife, her mother, struggling for breath in the nursing area. "What about people on respirators," asked Linda, "and the ones dependent on insulin?"

"The head nurse told me that when the refrigerators get to room temperature, the insulin is good for about a month, and we switched those on respirators to the batteries connected to the solar panels because the backup generator didn't start. We haven't lost anyone yet, but losing power means losing people."

Jack nodded. "I'll check the generators in the morning."

Dave turned to Linda. "I'll be up and down all night checking on your mother. You can sleep in my bedroom. I'll sleep on the sofa."

Jack said, "I'll spend the night in my Rover. I'll be more prepared to deal with trouble out there than in here."

"You sleep with one eye open?" asked George.

"No, but my Rover is always awake. Proximity sensors."

"Wow, you got a smart vehicle Jack. Love to hear more about that in the morning."

George gave Linda a list of the empty rooms. "Here's where everyone can stay for the night. I've got to get back to the lobby. God only knows when those towel heads are gonna jump us."

"You've got to be tired yourself." said Jack. "When did you start your shift? This morning?"

"Yeah, I'm beat. Wake up every morning like sleeping is hard work. We had six guards. Three full-timers like myself working eight-hour shifts during the week and three part-timers for the weekend. Part-timers probably won't show up again, and Harvey, one of the full-timers, didn't come in this

morning. The other full-timer, Pete, said he'd relieve me at midnight. Has a bicycle and only lives a couple of miles from here but don't know if he'll show up either."

"If he doesn't show up, come out and knock on the windshield. I'll relieve you."

"Thanks, might take you up on that."

George followed Jack over to the front doors. As Jack was pushing his way through, Linda rushed over, kissed him on the cheek and said goodnight. Outside, he heard the lock on the doors snick home as George turned the key.

Jack knew those doors weren't enough to keep someone from crashing the party, but they'd have to get past him first. He turned and waved to George, then watched Linda and her father disappear through the doors separating the lobby from the nursing side of Fair Oaks. He knew he'd go to sleep thinking of that kiss and hoping it wouldn't be the last.

LIGHTS ON

Wednesday — January 14th - 6:15 AM

Jack got up with the sun and took a walk to loosen his muscles and clear his head. When he got back to his Rover, he removed his satellite phone from the EMP proof compartment and dialed the number for the Marine Corps Base near Bridgeport. When he heard the satellite ping back, he typed his ID and the ID of the person the message was for, and pressed send. Moments later he received the current message protocol for the satellite. His message and the base's reply were encrypted for transmission to the satellite, then unencrypted by Jack's and the base's phone for understanding.

A19737253

1CL5

The 1CL5 status meant he could only send 1 message and it had to be a voice message in the Choctaw or Celtic Language and limited it to 5 seconds. His father was Choctaw and his mother was Irish so Jack had grown up proficient in both languages. The message was for his father so he used Choctaw to say "Coming home with friends."

Polaka chukka ia li takla ikanas.

His father must have been close to his satellite phone because it took only a few seconds for Jack to hear "The door is open." in Choctaw.

Okhissa yvt tiwa.

Jack returned his Sat phone to the EMP proof compartment, walked to the front door of Fair Oaks and waved to George sitting in the lobby. George got up and waved back, unlocked the doors and held them as Jack walked inside.

"What happened to Pete?"

"He just left. Took the shift from midnight to six. Said it was a quiet night."

"Not exactly, George. I'll tell you about last night after I check the generator."

George raised his eyebrows. "Good news or bad?"

"A little of both. Nothing to worry about now."

Jack handed George one of his two-way radios. "If I get the generator going, I'll need everyone to pull the plugs on their lamps, refrigerators... anything with a cord on it, okay?"

"You got it. Good luck."

Jack walked to the alcove where he'd found the generator the night before. It was diesel, not natural gas. Jack smiled. People who switched from diesel to natural gas for their backup generators didn't consider the irony of depending on something that was likely to **not** be available in the pipes from the utility company during a power outage.

He walked back to the main power panel on the side of the building and checked the transfer switch with his volt ohm meter. As he suspected, it had been disabled by the HEMP. It took a few seconds for the HEMP to disable power from the utility grid but only a few milliseconds to disable the transfer switch, so it was inoperative before Fair Oaks lost power and therefore unable to detect the power outage and start the generator.

The transfer switch was mounted on the outside wall of the building and therefore more vulnerable to the HEMP. The generator, however, was in the low-ceiling, sound-insulated alcove under the building, which made it less susceptible to the HEMP. That also made it less susceptible to cold temperatures and therefore easier to start.

Both factors told Jack there was a good chance the generator would still be operational. If the battery still had a good charge, there would be enough juice to activate the glow plugs, then crank the engine with the starter motor.

The generator was in the Auto mode so the transfer switch could bring the generator on line if a power outage occurred. The transfer switch was dead, so Jack moved the Auto/Manual switch to Manual and turned the ignition key to the On position. Most glow plugs require up to 15 seconds to get hot enough to start the engine. When they reach temperature, the Wait to Start light comes on.

Jack counted down from 15. When he reached three, the Wait to Start light went out. He turned the ignition key to the Start position and heard the starter cranking the engine. He was about to move the ignition key back to the On position when the generator roared to life. He closed his fist and yanked his arm backwards in a silent YES, then called George on his two-way radio.

George, Jack here.

What's up, Jack?

Good news George. The generator is up and running. I'm not going to flip the main breaker until you tell me that everyone has pulled the plugs on their lamps, refrigerators... anything with a cord on it, okay?

Yahoo! Back in a few.

While he waited for George to get back to him, he bypassed the transfer switch by disconnecting the wiring from it to the main circuit breaker panel and connecting the wiring from the generator to the panel. Next, he opened the breaker on the main power panel so the generator power wasn't available to the building until the engine speed and electrical output had stabilized. Then he tripped the breakers for the air conditioner, water heater, clothes dryers and other equipment that didn't have plugs the residents could unplug. He leaned against the building next to the main panel and smiled. About time we had some good news, he thought.

Jack, everything is unplugged.

Jack reached over and flipped the main breaker on.

Good. Now get somebody to reconnect the plug for the refrigerator they use for people who've died and the freezers and refrigerators they use for food and perishables like insulin and medicines.

You got it, Jack. Damn, this is exciting.

Jack walked back to the generator to listen to the diesel engine. He wanted to hear it adjust to the load when the compressors on the refrigerators kicked in. A minute later, the RPM went down then back to normal, so Jack knew it was operating correctly.

As Jack walked into the kitchen from the back door, everyone began

clapping and slapping him on the back. George began singing, *For he's a jolly good fellow...* and everyone joined in. Jack didn't like being the center of attention but waited for the singing to end, then gave everyone a thumb up."

George said, "Good job, Jack. You are our Mission Impossible guy."

"No," said Linda, "he's our Mission **Possible** guy."

Carol said, "Semper Fi, Jack. Woody and I were getting close to tossing the meat in the refrigerators."

Jack looked at Carol with a question mark on his face.

George said, "Woody and his wife Carol are the cooks here at Fair Oaks. They met in the Marine Corps where they were trained to prepare meals in combat situations. Like all Marines, they were as good with weapons and hand-to-hand combat as they were at frying and baking with pots and pans. After several grueling tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, they decided to get married instead of re-enlisting."

"Semper Fi to both of you." said Jack.

"So we can we turn our lights on when it gets dark?" asked George.

"Yes," said Jack, "it's lights on 'til we get low on diesel fuel. If you need light to read, I suggest you get together in the same room and use one lamp instead of several."

Woody looked at Jack. "I hate to toss cold water on our celebration but the stoves and ovens in the kitchen are not electric. They're natural gas, so it's still gonna be cold cereal, cold sandwiches and canned food."

"You saying we don't have any natural gas?" asked Dave.

Woody nodded. "The gas went down with the grid. The rooms upstairs are wired for electric ranges but down here in the kitchen we use gas to prepare meals for residents who opted to have their meals served in the dining room."

"The natural gas grid," explained Jack, "uses electric pumps and compressors to keep the gas grid pressurized. No electricity, no gas. The reverse is also true. No gas, no electricity, because a large portion of the power grid uses natural gas for the generators. It's a vicious cycle."

"Two years ago," said Woody, "Fair Oaks switched to natural gas 'cause it's cheaper. Had to re-jet the ovens and heating systems but who knows what the plumbers did with the old jets. Probably threw them in the trash."

"I don't think so." said Carol. "There's a bag of parts for the ovens in the broom closet. Almost certain I saw a handful of jets in the bottom of the bag. Anyone know how to install them, and which jets go where?"

"I can do that." said Paul. "I was the plumber who switched the jets from propane to natural gas two years ago. Liked Fair Oaks so much Rose and I moved here when we retired. Bring me those jets and I'll have the stoves and ovens up in ten or fifteen minutes."

Carol got up to find the bag of parts. As she was leaving, Dave touched Linda's arm. "I'm going to check on your mother."

"Oh, good. Don't miss breakfast Dad. It'll be the first hot meal we've had since we lost power."

Carol and Woody came through with flying colors. Eggs, toast, bacon, hash browns and cinnamon rolls. When Dave returned to the dining room, Linda put her fork down and asked him how her mother was doing. Everyone could see the answer on Dave's face and in his body language.

"Oh god... Dad... tell me it isn't true."

"She's gone, love. Slipped away a few minutes ago. Told me she loved us both and for us to remember what Dr. Seuss said."

"Dr. Seuss?" asked Linda.

"Yeah, Seuss said we should be glad it happened, not sad it's over. I told her Dr. Seuss could stick his sad-glad advice where the sun don't shine. Said you and I were happy our lives with her had happened **and** sad it was over."

Linda fell into her father's arms and held on to him as if the ground had disappeared from beneath her feet. "I want to see her... say goodbye."

The group watched Linda and her father walk arm in arm through the doors separating the lobby from the nursing area.

"Hell of a thing," said George. "Dave doesn't have anybody but his wife."

"He's got his daughter," said Tim, "and my mother will have her son. Soon as I can get home."

They all sat in silence, imagining how many loved ones they would lose before this nightmare was over. One terrifying thought tortured their minds:

Would it ever be over?

BURN OR BURY

Wednesday — January 14th - 8:25 AM

After breakfast Jack said, "George, I don't see any new faces here at the table. Last night you said the head nurse told you the insulin would last a month or so without power. Let's get her down here so she can tell us the protocol for handling people who have died."

"She left yesterday in that transit bus that took the majority of people out of here. We have a supply of body bags and one large refrigerator to keep up to three bodies until the Coroner can move them to the county morgue. That's not gonna happen now, of course."

Dave sighed. "We'll have to deal with them ourselves. My wife..."

Dave paused to wipe his eyes. "Are there any bodies in the refrigerator now?"

"Just one. He died yesterday," said George, "and thanks to Jack, his... and your wife's remains... will last longer now that we have power."

Harold raised his hand. "Now that I've retired, my son owns my mortuary. He came here yesterday to check on me and offered to handle people who've died. The crematorium is controlled electronically but connected to a propane tank, not natural gas, so we can ignite the burners with matches and control the temperature by manually opening and closing the intake and exhaust vents. It takes more than a thousand degrees and at least two hours to fully incinerate a human body. I can't guarantee the process will be as complete doing it manually, but reverence for the dearly departed is in the hearts and minds of those who love them, not in their ashes."

Linda glanced at her father then looked at Harold. "Some people don't want their loved ones burned. Could we bury them at the cemetery?"

Dave looked at his daughter. "Like Harold said. Our memory of her will be in our hearts, not in the ground or in her ashes."

"Lot of digging to bury people," said Harold, "unless one of my backhoes didn't get fried. We keep them under a metal roof. If someone can drive me over there in the morning I'll check that out."

"I'll take you, Harold. Might be able to get your backhoes operating."

"Thanks Jack. If anyone can it'd be you."

"Roger that." said George. "We should make a list of those of us who are still alive, whether we want cremation or burial. The man who died yesterday... well, we can't ask his relatives but we do have his will. It's a requirement for residency but personal data is on the computer and it's toast."

Jack drove Harold to the *Sunset Hills Memorial Park*. Except for the name on the wrought iron gate, it didn't look like a cemetery. It looked more like a castle surrounded by a fastidiously manicured park. Once past the gate, it looked like a cemetery, transformed by the headstones into a tree-shaded, grass-covered place for the dearly departed.

Harold told Jack to follow the road around the west side of the main

building to the maintenance shed in back. Jack pulled up to the shed and stopped. The shed contrasted sharply with the organized, manicured look of the entrance to the cemetery. Trucks, mowing machines, shovels, rakes and tools Jack had never seen before were scattered haphazardly under the metal roof.

Two backhoes were parked along the far side of the shed. One was painted Cal Trans yellow, the other a John-Deere green. The clawed buckets hanging from the raised booms made the backhoes look like the huge mechanical scorpions he'd seen in a science fiction movie when he was a boy. He remembered sitting in that theater with goose bumps running up and down the back of his neck.

Harold got out and walked over to the one painted John-Deere green. He pulled himself into the seat, inserted the key, then looked at Jack.

"If you're a praying man, now would be a good time.

Jack wasn't, but he gave Harold a thumbs-up and smiled as divinely as possible. Puffs of black smoke belched out of the muffler as Harold cranked the starter. The engine finally caught, and the smoky sputtering was replaced by the healthy growl of a large diesel engine.

"That settles that," yelled Harold, his voice barely audible above the sound of the back hoe. He killed the engine and walked over to Jack, who was standing next to his Rover.

"Roars like an angry lion, but it'll dig a hole. And we've got plenty of diesel. We installed an underground tank a few years ago when the cost of fuel went up like a rocket. Pump is electric, but we've got a manual pump as well."

They got in the Rover and headed for the mortuary to setup the crematorium for manual operation.

The entrance to the *Sunset Hills Memorial Park* had looked like a castle in merry old England. The *Ferguson & Son Funeral Home* looked like a gate to heaven. The landscaping was subtle, muted. The grass wasn't as bright or deeply green as the lawn at the cemetery, and there were no trees. As Jack's eyes continued to scan the building and the landscaping leading to it, he suddenly knew why. Everything was designed to pull his eyes and his feet to the tall, oval doors at the front of the building. No gigantic, white pillars to distract his attention. Just pure gold frames around ivory-clean doors that said...

Come inside. Here you and your loved ones will find rest. This is the beginning and the end of your journey to another world.

They went inside. It **was** a different world. The room was filled with open caskets on display. At first glance, it appeared they were arranged haphazardly, like the work shed at the cemetery. But as Jack followed Harold through the reception area, it became obvious they were positioned to guide patrons through the more expensive, ornate caskets first. The plain, ordinary ones were along the wall at the back of the lobby. Despite the potentially morbid affect the caskets might have had on him, Jack could see how

comforting it could be for people to imagine their loved one lying peacefully in the deep, pillowed fabric of a coffin.

Harold walked to a door at the back of the lobby with a sign that read EMPLOYEES ONLY. He unlocked the door, pushed it open and flicked on his flashlight. The room was cold and the yellow, artificial light from Harold's Ever Ready made it feel even colder.

"This is the Cold Room, explained Harold, where we prepare the body for burial or cremation. If the family has chosen burial, we use that table for embalming the body and that table for cosmetic work. Our goal is not to disguise reality, but to reduce the paleness of death.

The two stainless steel tables were on rollers and stood near the center of the room. Jack knew those tables were the beginning of the differences and the end of the similarities between a coroner and a mortician. Looking around the room, he spotted the oven. If the mortuary was the gate to heaven, and the caskets were canoes for the journey, the oven was the door to hell. Whether dust to dust or ashes to ashes, you were dead.

Harold opened the door of the oven, inspected the inside, then explained to Jack that it had a propane-fired furnace. That it would have taken years for the lower cost of natural gas to offset the price of a new furnace, and since the old furnace required electricity to control the temperature, he had used the money he would have spent on a new oven to buy a backup generator in case he lost power while cremating a body.

"That's happened twice in the last three years. Both times because of lightning. Same pole both times. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Like that EMP that took the grid down. Rain, sleet and snow comes down on everybody. But lightning is god damned specific, like it had a target in mind."

Jack just nodded. He didn't know if Harold meant *god damned* in a literal way or not, but Jack was pretty certain lightning obeyed the laws of nature, not god.

"It's my prayer, continued Harold, that lightning never strikes that pole again. Embarrassing for us and stressful for the clients. The generator is outside in a maintenance shed behind the mortuary. Let's pray it still operates.

Jack followed Harold out a door at the back of the room and to the shed. Harold opened the door, walked inside and pushed the start button on the generator. The starter motor began turning over slowly, then stopped. Harold pushed the start button again, but all they heard was the *click-click* of the solenoid.

"Battery's gone. I'll bring the Rover back here and jump it."

"Good idea. You don't have to go back through the building. There's a gate on the west side. I'll meet you over there and unlock it."

When they got the Rover next to the maintenance shed, Jack connected the jumper cables, and Harold pushed the button. The motor spun, the engine caught and the shed shook. They had power.

"Hallelujah!" yelled Harold. "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Or helps those who help themselves, thought Jack.

"How do you switch between the generator and power coming from your pole? Not likely the grid will come up again anytime soon, but if it did, your generator will be fried. Might even cause a fire."

"Damn. Thanks for reminding me. The electrician tried to sell me a device that automatically switches between the generator and the main panel, but I told him that wasn't necessary. Didn't have anything that required power 24/7, so I had him install a switch so I could do it manually in a power outage."

Harold walked out of the shed and over to the main panel on the side of the building, pulled a large-handled lever to the down position, then went back inside the cold room to test the lights and startup the oven. The lights lit the Cold Room and the furnace began warming the oven. Everything was in place to bury or burn the two bodies in the freezer at Fair Oaks.

When Jack and Harold returned from the mortuary, George called everyone still living at Fair Oaks to a meeting in the lobby. Harold told everyone he and Jack had been successful at preparing the crematorium and the cemetery.

"Jack got the generators running," began Harold, "so it's not urgent that we get our dearly departed in the ground or in the oven. Meanwhile, let's make a list of those of us who want cremation or burial."

"My father and I want to bury my mother, and we'd like to do that as soon as possible."

Harold gave Linda a nod. "Your wishes shall be granted. And I suggest that we cremate the remains of the man who died yesterday. That will give me an opportunity to test the backhoe and the crematorium."

Harold's plan received unanimous approval.

NOW IS FOREVER

Wednesday — January 14th – 10:45 AM

They moved the two bodies from the freezer to Dave's Nomad. Harold operated the crematorium at the mortuary and his son operated the back hoe at the cemetery. When the holes had been dug and the ashes gathered, they held a memorial service for the dearly departed. Harold had never been a preacher, but he had a strong sense of reverence for the feelings of the living and the dignity of the dead.

"Death is a mystery..." he began, "a riddle that tortures our hearts and minds. How can we speak to someone, see them every day and then never again. Never is a long, long time. Longer than forever, which is only now. What I am saying, my friends, is that we do not have yesterday or tomorrow. We only have today. Now. These people are still with us. In this moment and in every here-and-now moment to follow. We can no longer see them in the flesh, but they will live on in our hearts. Just as we will always be connected with the dead, we must strive to remain connected with the living. The time to be connected is now. It's always now, so it's always time."

Harold turned from the group gathered around him and faced the caskets and urns waiting to be placed in the ground. He moved from casket to casket, urn to urn, touching each with a loving tap.

"We feel those who are not with us like an amputee feels a lost limb. At birth, we are given the breath of life. At death, we must give it back. Like birds, you have sung beautifully in this world, then become a pile of lifeless feathers. But there are other worlds to sing in. You have made the voyage through this life and come to the shore of the next. Step out of your vessel and into that new world. It is the home you have always longed for."

Harold turned back to the group of mourners. "Live fully and love well, my friends, then let go."

It wasn't a typical memorial service, but it was typical of the group's willingness and ability to face new situations with courage and inventiveness. Life might never be the same, but they all knew that what Harold had said about the dead was also true of the living — their connection with one another was grounded in the now of forever.

FALLOUT

Wednesday – January 14th – 12:20 PM

When everyone got back to Fair Oaks, Carol and Woody made tuna sandwiches from a dozen of the cans stowed on Jack's Rover and set them on the table in the main dining area. As everyone dug into the sandwiches, George looked at his wrist watch. "Might be a good time to check for updates."

Everyone stopped eating and fell silent as they waited for George to turn on his short wave radio and tune it to KFI. It was an old transistorized model and he had kept it inside his desk, so it had survived the EMP.

...alerts and updates as they become available every hour on the hour.

High altitude nuclear devices have been detonated over the major cities of the world. All five power grids in the United States are down or severely damaged.

There is no danger of a nuclear explosion as a result of the EMP attack. All reactors are safely housed in containment buildings. The danger is from the radioactive material that would be released into the atmosphere when the backup generators run out of fuel.

These generators prevent the pools where spent fuel is stored from overheating. If you live within 50 miles of a nuclear power plant and hear a two to three minute siren, evacuate your family upwind or off wind of the power plant. Those living outside this 50-mile radius but downwind of a nuclear power plant should also move to a safer location.

This is KFI, a FEMA approved Emergency Alert station broadcasting on 640 kilohertz. We will broadcast alerts and updates as they become available every hour on the hour. High altitude nuclear devices...

George turned the radio off.

"My god," cried Linda. "Aren't they going to tell us where the nuclear plants are? And how can people evacuate their family without a car?"

Bob turned to Linda. "The only active nuclear power plant in California is at Diablo Canyon in San Luis Obispo. That's directly west of us, but we're a good 100 miles from there."

"So we'll be okay?" asked Linda.

"Probably. Radioactive plumes disperse rapidly with distance, and we're not in the east where most of the nuclear reactors are located. Back there it would be damn difficult to identify safe and unsafe areas, upwind or off wind."

Carol looked at Bob. "You said probably. What else do we have to fear?"

"There are several decommissioned plants in California with spent fuel still on site. San Onofre is one of those. Some of the spent fuel has been stored in hard containers but there's still some in the cooling pools."

Carol said, "So that's what the KFI alert is about. Fallout from the cooling ponds when the effing generators crap out."

"I know what upwind means," said Linda, "but off wind? Which way is that?"

"The wind typically blows west to east all across the country," said Jack. "So off wind is typically north or south of a westerly wind."

"I can vouch for that," said Dave. "It blows here all the time. Right out of the west."

"And I can vouch for that," said Bob. "My family and I live in Rosamond. Never stops blowing and you can't get away from it. Twenty miles in any direction and you're still in the wind."

"But for point locations like Diablo Canyon," said Jack, "you can get upwind or off wind."

"Not upwind," countered Bob. "Diablo Canyon is on Avila Bay. Upwind would put you in the Pacific Ocean. I'd go north towards Morro Bay, not south towards Santa Barbara. Too many people in that direction."

"So where can we go?" asked Linda

Bob sighed. "My job with the Air Force required that I study this in great detail. I'll try to condense what I've learned."

First, stay at least 50 miles from all major cities, military bases, ports, power plants, railway hubs and airports. Global winds will push the fallout everywhere but the biggest threat to our survival will be the nuclear winter it creates. There could be three or more years before there's enough sunlight and air quality to grow anything. A large percentage of people and animals, domestic and wild, will die of starvation.

Second, anywhere within 20 degrees of the north and south pole are too cold. Countries within 20 degrees north and south of the equator are not strategic targets but their temperate climates and long growing seasons will attract millions of refugees and most are prone to anarchy or military rule."

"What about New Zealand?" asked Dave. "The government is stable, it has a temperate climate for growing crops and its location would make it less likely to be overwhelmed by refugees fleeing from other countries."

Bob shook his head. "New Zealand will get fallout from Australia because it's allied with the US and Europe, so our enemies are likely to bomb Australia to prevent its allies from rebuilding a government there. All things considered, the best location to survive the bombs, the fallout and the nuclear winter is somewhere in the mountains near fresh water, tillable land and away from refugees leaving the cities."

Tim looked at Bob. "So fallout is the first variable in our equation and people are the second. Like you said, we should go off wind... north to lessen the impact of both."

"Equation?" asked Linda.

Tim nodded. "I tend to think in terms of equations. But problems get more and more difficult to solve as you add variables. Which means you try to eliminate all but the two or three most significant factors. Choosing which ones to include and exclude can become another problem."

They all fell silent thinking about nuclear power plants and the people they would encounter due to the fallout of civilized behavior.

INFIDELS

"Tim's right," said Bob. "People are definitely a variable we should include in our, well, equation."

"I agree," said Linda. "I'm not an accountant or a mathematician, but my career as an anthropologist taught me a lot about people, and I've learned even more since the attack. Tim's second variable is certainly people. We've already experienced the fallout of civilized behavior."

Jack looked at Linda. "Yes, and the worst of those are the terrorists who were born into a savage, uncivilized world of religious fanaticism. When the EMP struck, I told myself it didn't matter who attacked us or why. My first priority was to get home and stay put. But getting there meant I'd run into more dangerous agendas than the motives of those guys in that truck back there on Lake Elizabeth Road."

"Terrorists?" challenged Tim. "They've already taken this country to its knees. How much more damage could they do?"

"Lots more," said Dave. "Even if they don't follow the EMP with a really serious nuclear weapon, they've got sleeper cells all over this country poised to kill everyone they think is an Infidel. Now they're in a position to do exactly that. I don't mind people coming here to become Americans. But most of them are here to setup their own country in the middle of ours. Some are here to kill us. *They* are the Infidels, not us."

Linda gave her father a smile, then shifted in her chair to face the others. "Most terrorists are male psychopaths looking for ways to punish the world for rejecting them. Terrorist groups give them a sense of purpose and a playing field for what one writer called their gleeful savagery."

"You sound more like a psychologist than an anthropologist," said Tim.

"How people behave on the outside," said Linda, "is a reflection of how they think on the inside. Dreams create art and culture. Needs build farms, cities and technology. Fears become laws and taboos. Beliefs influence politics. Motives bring war and peace."

The others looked at Linda with a new appreciation of what she knew about people in general and terrorists in particular, especially if they encountered any in the days to come.

"When I was in school," said George, "we were taught that America was a melting pot of people from all over the world. But like Dave said, hasn't been much melting in the last few decades. Too damn many people immigrating to America with no intention of... what's that word, Linda?"

"Assimilating."

"Yeah, they ain't assimilatin'. Some probably do want to mix in with the rest of us, but some come here to be down right anti-American. Can't think of anything more anti-American than blasting us with an EMP, then running around killing survivors. Who else but radical Muslims would do that?"

"Yeah, who else?" said Dave. "Islam is frequently identified as a religion with the political goal of destroying America and our democratic way of life. Our government restricts itself to being an **outward** influence on our behavior so we are free to express our religious beliefs as an **inward**

persuasion of our minds. It's all there in our Bill of Rights. Democracy rules America. But their government is Allah, and he is **not** a democratic ruler. We have the right to vote and to decide what laws govern our lives. We can even amend our Constitution. In the Islamic world, the Qur'an is the final word of Allah, so a Muslim would never dare to suggest an amendment. Comply or die."

"My father is right, of course. The Islamic religion gives Muslims the mindset that Church and State must not be separate, that religion must rule every facet of their lives—government, courts, schools, personal relationships. This makes Islam theologically incompatible with a democratic way of life. But I have a but, too, and my but is that most American Muslims believe there is no conflict between their faith and their citizenship. Most believe they can be fully American *and* devoutly Muslim."

"Yeah," said Jack, "and those Muslims are struggling with the effects of this EMP just as we are. I'm not worried about traditional Muslims—their politics or their religion. It's the radical Muslim who want to kill us, and not just because we are Infidels, but also because we're Americans."

A sober silence settled into everyone's hearts and minds. They had all watched the world grow increasingly Islam-o-phobic in the last few decades. But the devastating effects of the HEMP made it unlikely the Islamic conflict with democracy would be a problem. It was going to be a long time before America was once again an operational democracy. Right now, life in the United States was every man for himself.

"So radical Jihadists might be our immediate problem." continued Jack. "Like Dave said earlier, even if our enemies don't follow the EMP with a more devastating bomb, we might have to deal with armed terrorists before we can leave Fair Oaks. Tim mentioned variables. Some I could anticipate and prepare for, but every assignment involved a few surprises. Best way to minimize surprises is put yourself in the other guy's shoes before he blows you out of yours."

The others looked at Jack, knowing he had been a paid killer, that he had killed a man just yesterday. Bob remembered the drive along Lake Elizabeth Road where he had probably killed the men in the truck pursuing them. Linda shuddered as she relived shooting the man who had attacked her on the side of the freeway. They had all killed and might have to kill again.

"Assignments?" asked George. "You ex-military?"

"Retired. Until yesterday when the EMP put me back in the game of hunting killers."

"Ah, figured you've had to deal with some serious shit." said George."

Linda said, "You mentioned putting yourself in your enemies shoes. You're talking about role playing?"

"I am. If you were the leader of a jihadist cell group here in the Antelope Valley, where would you want to base your operations? How would you target your victims? Did you protect your vehicles, your equipment, your radios because you knew when the EMP was going to strike?"

"I'd case the joint." said Dave. "Cruise the neighborhood in a vehicle at

night and with a bicycle during the day.”

“Jesus!” said George. “Pete has a bicycle. Started working here just a few weeks before the EMP struck. Young and obviously Arab but I can’t imagine he’d—”

“Fair Oaks would be ideal.” interrupted Bob. “Rooms for every member of the cell, backup generator, big kitchen with large quantities of food and water, medical supplies and equipment.”

“Where do they get these crazy ideas?” asked Tim.

“Like my daughter said,” answered Dave, “they’re nucking futs, and their bible, the Quran, tells them to kill everyone who doesn’t follow Allah. Their leaders will tell you the Quran says no such thing, that the Islamic faith is a peaceful religion, but history says otherwise. Muhammad himself was a ruthless killer who slaughtered millions of so-called infidels. He and his followers spread Islam by the sword. Comply or die. And let me remind you of Hitler and his fascist lunatics. The Germans knew what was going on and did nothing to stop it. Same thing with the Islamic lunatics. The Muslims know what’s going on and are doing nothing to stop it. They’re as complicit as the Germans were in the crimes committed by the fanatics in their country and elsewhere in the world.”

“I’ve been a god-fearing man all my life,” said George, “and I know that my Bible has some passages that... well, God can be angry and down right vindictive as hell, but I don’t think he expects me to kill people just because they don’t believe what I believe.”

The group fell silent, each weighing the import of George’s comment. What did their god want them to do? Turn the other cheek? Let Allah’s followers blow them out of their shoes? Kill their friends, family, children?

“My understanding,” said Bob, “is that Muhammad couldn’t read or write, so he passed the word of Allah on to his followers orally, and they did the same. The Islamic faith, like most religions, is just hearsay. Most Muslims, like most Christians, don’t take their bible literally.”

“Don’t matter to me,” argued Dave, “if these idiots are misinterpreting their bible or if they’re just plain crazy. What matters is that there might be trained killers right here in the Antelope Valley roaming the streets looking for opportunities to kill us.”

Jack said, “Even if we can confirm that Jihadis cell groups are killing people here in the Antelope Valley, it’s no guarantee that the enemy isn’t planning to nuke Edwards. Muslim fanatics are eager to martyr themselves for Allah by killing Infidels.”

“Yes,” said Linda, “It’s controversial but most scholars interpret the Quran as promising Muslim men that if they die waging Jihad against the enemies of Islam they will enjoy the blissful ecstasy of seventy-two virgins in paradise. Muslim men grew up in a very sexually repressive culture, so that interpretation of the Quran encourages some men, especially young men, to seek martyrdom.”

Tim laughed. “Seventy two virgins. That’s ridiculous.”

“It is,” said Bob, “and another reason Fair Oaks would be an ideal place

for a large group of young Muslims to stage their war against us. If we can confirm that terrorists are casing Fair Oaks for that purpose, we'd have convincing evidence that a nuclear attack on Edwards is not in the near future."

Jack nodded. "Hmm, you're right. Hadn't thought about that." Jack turned to George. "You mentioned your suspicions about the other guard. What's his name?"

"Pete. Doesn't say much but when he does it's questions about the facilities here at Fair Oaks. Questions that don't have much to do with sitting in the lobby from midnight to dawn. I was a police officer for more than twenty years, but I don't have any experience profiling people. Maybe we should put a tail on him."

Jack nodded. "We should and I will, starting tonight. If I can confirm that he's a terrorist associated with a cell group, I'll take him and his buddies out. Can't promise things won't get ugly if a terrorist group decides to take Fair Oaks for their own purposes, but I've been stopping bad guys from doing bad things for quite a while now, so I can promise you they'll have to get past me to do it."

"They won't get past me either," said George, "without lead in their head."

Dave said, "We'll make 'em die for their god, George. I'm not ready to die for mine."

Linda glancing at her father. "I had hoped I'd never have to kill a man again, but this is my home now. I'll kill anyone who tries to take it away from me... us."

"My wife and kids are temporarily safe in a bunker at Edwards. So I can help you people defend this place. But you all know how likely it is for the base to be a target for more serious things than a jihadist attack, so I'd like to... well, we can deal with that problem after we deal with the terrorists."

"Only things I've ever killed were flies, spreadsheets and time." said Tim. "My Mom's probably worried sick over me but it would be wrong to ask you to spend time getting me home instead of asking me to help you defend yours. I'm in."

Woody stood. "We're all in, right?"

The room rocked with a chorus of "We're in!"

STAY OR BUG OUT

Wednesday – January 14th – Late Afternoon

“Okay,” said Jack, “let’s get down to business. We fixed the backup generator and gave the folks who are no longer with us a respectful good bye. There’s three more things we should take care of. One is Bob and Tim. If I were Bob’s family or Tim’s mother, I’d want my safety to trump a bunch of strangers in a retirement home. The second is the possibility that Edwards will be hit with a nuclear weapon. And the third is that a Jihadist cell group could be just down the street.”

“Ah,” said George. “Now you’re going to tell me why you disagreed with Pete telling me last night was quiet.”

“I am. The proximity sensors on my Rover woke me up about 2 in the morning. A crew cab truck was cruising our parking lot. It stopped next to my Rover. The passenger got out and tried the door on the driver’s side of my Rover. My windows are polarized and I was in the passenger seat to avoid the steering wheel for my nap so he couldn’t see me. But I could see him. I was about to slip out and send both of them back to Allah when he turned toward the lobby, yelled **Saqaf!** and made a hand gesture called the **uSbur** in Arabic. It’s similar to the Italian gesture where you point your fingers up, bunch them together, then move your hand up and down repeatedly. It means wait or be patient. I watched Pete stand up, bring the index fingers of both hands together and point them down. It was the Arabic **khosh bosh**. Means We’re family. I watched him mouth some silent message to his pal. Couldn’t read his lips but the look on his face suggested a cold smile in his voice.”

George stood up and pounded the desk with his fist. “Pete! That son of a bitch! He’s one of ‘em!”

Jack nodded. “Yes, and **Saqaf** is probably his Arabic name. Has several meanings. Clever, roof... probably a dozen others.”

“So you know Arabic. How’d you pick that up?”

“My assignments overseas. Had to know how to ask questions and understand the answers. Most Islamic extremists speak Arabic because it’s the language of the Quran, the sacred book of Islam and the religious language of all Muslims. But only a small percentage of Muslims speak Arabic in everyday conversations. Most speak Urdu, the official language and lingua franca of Pakistan. So I had to learn Arabic **and** Urdu and Farsi too because it’s the official language of Iran and parts of Afghanistan.”

Jack paused to finish his beer. “Did Pete ever give you his full name?”

George slapped his forehead. “Damn! He did and that cooks it. He said I could call him Pete but the name on his application was Sirae Saqaf.”

“Hmmm... Peter is Butros in Arabic. He probably pulled that one out of hat. Or knew somebody named Pete and decided to use that. No matter now. He’s one of them and last night is a preview of coming attractions. We need to get ready for an attack.”

Jack’s account of terrorists cruising the parking lot and Pete being one of

them put a real face on the group's imagined fears. Like the other events since the EMP attack, this wasn't a horror flick on TV you could turn off, or a movie in a theater you could walk out of, or a gripping novel by Stephen King you could close, take back to the library or throw in the trash. This was really happening.

Each of them silently weighed the consequences of facing armed terrorists or nuclear annihilation. It was becoming more and more obvious to each of them that they needed each other in ways they could never have imagined before the world they had known became the world they knew now.

Dave stood. "Okay. A few minutes ago you mentioned three things we should get done. Getting Bob and Tim home, Edwards getting nuked, and terrorists targeting Fair Oaks. Let's take 'em one at a time. Problem. How are we going to get Bob and Tim home? Solution. I've got a car and a motorcycle. Both in the underground parking area. A '56 Nomad and a '70 Triumph. I used the Chevy to get George's stuff over here yesterday. The Tiger probably runs, too. Lot of concrete between it and that EMP when it went off. Bob takes my Nomad to join his family at the base and Tim takes my Triumph to get to his mother. Or the other way around, depending on who can ride a bike."

"I've been riding since I was a kid." said Tim with excitement in his voice.

"You're a biker?" asked Dave.

"Yep. Delivered newspapers on a Vespa, rode a 750 Enfield to work, raced motocross on a Bultaco and desert events on a Yamaha. Those were two-strokes. Now I ride a four-stroke Husky in dual sport events. Got it parked on the bottom floor of a multi-level parking lot. Like your Triumph, might have been enough concrete to protect it from the EMP."

"Jack's a motorcyclist, too." said Linda, smiling at Jack. "Fast and crazy, like most bikers."

"Not sure how much gas I've got in my Nomad, said Dave, but the Triumph's good for 50 miles on a gallon."

"Must be a Tiger." said Jack. "The Bonneville never got that kind of mileage."

"Yep. Best bike they ever built. Larger tank and better mileage than the Bonny. And one carb made it run smoother and easier to start."

"Yeah, Tiger was better for commuting and fun rides. Mine was a Bonneville but the second carburetor and three-quarter racing cam didn't make much difference until you were over 90."

"Okay boys." scolded Linda. "That's enough talk about your toys."

Tim cocked his head at a comic angle and raised his voice to a falsetto... "Yes mommy."

When the laughter subsided, George gave Dave a thumb up. "That would make Bob and Tim happy but if we decide to leave Fair Oaks to avoid armed terrorists or a nuclear attack on Edwards, we'll need all the vehicles we have now and probably a few more."

"Yes." said Jack. "But finding cars and trucks to make our escape won't be

a problem. There are literally hundreds within a few miles of Fair Oaks that were abandoned because the owners didn't know the HEMP only temporarily disabled their vehicle."

"That's right," said George. "Your Rover is good to go and you knew how to fix the generator. Let's get out there and find some older models like my Nomad that can be fixed."

Dave stood. "I'm on board with that, George!"

Jack stood. "Hold on folks. You are certainly free to decide to stay put or bug out, but I encourage you to agree that staying is not an option. Even without a devastating exchange of nuclear weapons, your long-term survival at Fair Oaks or anywhere else in the Antelope Valley is as unlikely as an ice cream cone not melting in hell. Sooner or later, you'll have to leave for greener pastures."

Tim laughed. "Yeah, greener pastures, so let's make like a tree and leave. Like a banana and split. Like a drum and beat it. Like—"

"Nah," interrupted Woody, "we gotta make like tires and hit the road."

Carol tipped her head back and rolled her eyes. "Woody!"

Woody spread his arms, palms up. "Okay, leaving this place ain't funny but Tim gave us an excuse to take a break from all this serious stuff, and my belly says it's time for dinner. Who's up for chow?"

SAFE NOT SORRY

Wednesday – January 14th – Early Evening

After dinner they discussed how they should deal with this new threat to their survival—publicly answering questions they had privately asked themselves.

Should they fortify Fair Oaks? Or does the suicidal mindset of the terrorists make it impossible to determine whether a nuclear attack is or isn't imminent? If a terrorist attack on Fair Oaks imminent, how many residents would join the battle? How would they protect the people in the nursing areas? Where will they get the guns and ammunition?

Jack stood. He knew he had a great deal of influence with these people, and didn't hesitate to give them his opinion. "I told you to choose bugging out over staying put, but if Pete **is** casing Fair Oaks, his cell group might attack us **before** we get ourselves ready to bug out."

George stood. "I agree. Some of us could get the cars and supplies we need to hit the road and the others could fortify the building."

Tim stood. "You've hit the nail on the head, George. A division of labor."

Dave stood. "Where the hell could we go, Jack? If the terrorists don't get us, the bombs or the fallout will."

"My place in northern California is reasonably safe from bombs and fallout. I own a hundred acres next to a year-round supply of fresh water, more than 250 days of sunshine per year for solar energy, plenty of wild game and fish, and space to grow crops for dozens of people."

Woody stood, "Hell yeah. Carol and me are in with that."

"The limited number of operational vehicles is why I offered to get Bob to his family and Tim to his mother. Your precarious survival here at Fair Oaks is why I'll come back and help you prepare to leave."

George glanced at Dave. "No offense to you Dave, but I'd rather have Jack here if those hoodlums attack Fair Oaks, so I'm thumbs up for someone else taking Bob and Tim home."

"No offense taken, George. He'd be more valuable in a fire fight than me."

Linda stood. "Fire fight. God help us if it comes to that."

"Survival is never easy," said Jack, "and one of the rules is to be safe, not sorry. So we better come up with a good plan or we won't survive. There are two kinds of power. One is active. The other is passive. Active power is taking the initiative, blowing the other guy out of his shoes before he's even seen yours. Passive power is, well, you get the idea."

"So what's your plan?" asked George.

"We focus on prevention so we don't have to fix things after they're broke. **We** do the breaking. Four parts to my plan. **One**, we put a tail on Pete, the other guard. I'll do that tonight. If he leads me to a terrorist group, I'll send them back to Allah. **Two**, we take an inventory of our weapons, ammo, food, water and supplies. What we have, what we need and what we can afford to barter to get things we don't have. Might be a few gun shops nearby that haven't been broken into yet."

"There is, said George. Friend of mine owns a gun shop less than 15 minutes from here. I know I can barter some whiskey or bourbon for ammo. Got several cases stashed in my room. Not that fancy, award-winning crap from Japan. Nope. Bourbon from Kentucky and whiskey from Scotland.

"Barter, said Tim. Yeah, can't use a credit card with the grid down. And coins and paper might never again be what they once were."

"What can we barter? asked Linda.

"Things we *don't* need that will entice people to give up things they *do* need. Salt, sugar, chocolate, coffee and like George said, a few bottles of whiskey. Things they *do* need, too, like toilet paper, and bleach to disinfect water. But not things that could be used against us, like guns or ammo."

Woody raised his hand with two fingers in the air. "You said four things. What's next?"

"**Third**, we get sheets of plywood and hang them over the glass doors of the lobby on hinges so we can swing them up for protection and down for egress and ingress.

"All the resident rooms are upstairs on the second floor," said Dave, "so we shouldn't have to cover those windows."

"Probably not," agreed Jack. "Some terrorist groups have rocket propelled grenade launchers. What most people know as an RPG launcher. I don't have any plan to counter that type of weapon. Hence my primary focus on blasting their asses before they blast ours."

"**Four**," continued Jack, we recruit residents and staff who are willing to do something besides sit in their rooms shaking with fear and waiting to die."

"We're lucky," said George, pointing at Carol and Woody, "these two have guns. They've been going to the shooting range with me for more than a year. They met in the Marine Corps. Both can take the wings off a gnat at 100 yards."

"Sounds good," said Jack. "We're in this together or not at all. Mindset is everything. If you don't really want to survive, you probably won't. Like I told Linda a few days ago, everybody dies. Survival is saying **not today**."

Jack moved his gaze from person to person, saying with his eyes what he had just said with his voice. The others did the same and it was plain to each of them they really meant it. Jack had left no doubts in their minds that they were in this together and understood more clearly than ever what it was they were agreeing to do.

CORE OF MORE

Wednesday – January 14th – Evening

"I'll get the plywood, said Dave. Chandler Lumber is only a few miles away and I'm pretty sure I can get several sheets in my Nomad. Place sells hardware too and I know the owner. Probably isn't there now. I mean, why guard a pile of wood?

"I'll go with you, Dad. Couldn't bear to have you out of my sight. Not now. Not ever.

Anthropology had taught Linda that we feel loved ones who are not with us, dead or alive, like an amputee feels a lost limb. Until now, that had only been an academic understanding.

"You mentioned water," said Tim. "One of my friends has a horse trailer, and I know where I can get a dozen or so food-grade barrels. It's a feed store a few miles from my mother's place. I could kill two birds with one stone. Check on her and get the barrels."

"Where would you get the water to fill them?" asked Linda.

"Lake Palmdale or the aqueduct. Anybody got a pair of bolt cutters?"

Dave gave Tim a mischievous grin. "And I suppose, young man, you expect me to loan you my beautifully restored '56 Nomad to haul this trailer?"

Tim's laughter spread to the others like grass catching fire. But a friendly fire. Nothing like humor to quell fear, anger and a host of other diseases.

"Got plenty of water," said Woody. "There's a ten thousand gallon tank sitting in those Sycamores behind Fair Oaks. Administrators fought like hell against installing it, but we had no problem convincing them after the San Andreas shook our socks off last year."

"Yeah," said Bob. "That was a big one. Over 8 on the Richter scale. It'd been over 300 years since the southern part of the fault had slipped that much. We all thought it was the big one. Might have been. We had to stop operations at the base for more than a week to assess and repair the damage."

George said, "The administrators had the contractor paint it forest green so it'd blend with the trees. Back then it satisfied their need to hide it for aesthetic reasons. Now it'll satisfy our need to hide it from gangs of moochers and militants."

"Carol and I checked the flow from the tank Tuesday, a few hours after the water pressure in the kitchen dropped off. We've got about 5 gallons a minute."

"Glad to have you and Carol on board," said Jack. "You two are on top of things."

"Damn straight," said George. "They're both as good with a gun as they are with a skillet."

"Okay, so we've got water," said Tim. "Lots of it. That's good. What's the rule? Thirty days without food, three days without water and three minutes without air. Maybe we could barter a few gallons for—"

"No, not water." said Bob. "Can't let anyone know we have enough water to barter."

George gave Bob a thumb up. "Exactly, and we'll need to ration it ourselves for cooking and flushing the toilets. You've all heard the rule. If it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow."

"I'll check the level of the tank daily." said Woody. "If it gets low, we'll rig an out house or dig a P and P trench."

"What's that?" asked Linda.

"Pee and Poo ditch. We used them in Iraq and Afghanistan when we weren't going to deploy in one location for very long. When we were ready to move out, we covered it with a dozer. If we were going to stay in one spot for more than a week, we'd build an outhouse."

"I vote for an outhouse. I'm not squatting in a ditch!" said Rose.

The other women nodded their heads with enthusiastic agreement.

"If it comes to the point where we can't afford to use the water in the tank for toilets, we've got some 55 gallon barrels out back. When I was overseas, I built outhouses with a barrel under the seat. Every evening me and another Marine would pull the barrel out, move it a few yards away from the out house, pour gasoline in it and light it off. The smoke smelled like shit but we all knew why."

When the laughter died down, Tim said, "Damn Woody. I thought I was the standup comedian and you're not even standing up."

Woody stood. "Sorry Tim. If I have to build an outhouse, I'll let you pull the barrel out and set it on fire. Just give us all a ten minute warning. Okay?"

That drew another round of laughter.

Carol looked at Woody. "If you do build an outhouse, please pour some bleach in the damn thing before I have to go out there."

"You got it love."

Carol gave him a thumb up. "Let's move on to weapons. We've got, what, five or six pistols and revolvers between us?"

"I've got an S&W 357 revolver." said Dave. "Came close to shooting my own daughter last night."

Dave grinned at Linda and she made a face back at him.

"But I also have an M1911, a Remington 700, a 30 caliber Winchester carbine and a 16 gauge double-barrel shotgun. We can distribute them as necessary."

"Oow! I feel good!" yelled Tim. "I'm in the company of gun-totin' mamas and papas."

"Nice imitation of James Brown." joked George. "I'm surprised a youngster like you knows the lyrics. He recorded it back in '65."

"Good singing is timeless."

"Good singing?" teased George. "That dude sounded like a cat in heat and on fire all at the same time."

The group was relaxing. Focused on the business of fleshing out their plan but interacting with each other in a personal way, too.

"I carry a Sig Sauer in my shoulder holster." said Jack. "Nine millimeter."

Very accurate out to 50 yards, or more if you know what you're doing. I've got two more pistols and a shotgun in my Rover. We can pass them around, too. Plenty of ammo for all my stuff."

"You've got one bad ass sniper rifle too." said Tim.

Jack swung his gaze toward Tim like a gun on a turret. Tim saw the look and turned his away before Jack's eyes burned a hole in his face. Jack let out a sigh.

"Sorry Tim. Talking about guns has me on edge. Thought I'd put guns and terrorists behind me. Guess I'm not as retired as I thought I was. Probably won't use the sniper rifle. Too big and cumbersome and not tactically correct for the situation. I've got a pistol accurate to more than 100 yards, and it's much easier to carry and maneuver in a fire fight."

Woody dropped his jaw. "A hundred yards! What kind of pistol can do that?"

"Desert Eagle... 50 caliber with a 10-inch barrel. Damn near broke my arm until I learned how to fire it correctly."

"Don't like pistols." said George. "Mine is a Ruger LCR chambered for the 357 Magnum. No cocking, no locking and no jamming because the springs in the magazine are weak. Just point, pull and boom!"

"Good choice." said Bob. "Revolvers **are** more reliable than pistols but my 40-caliber Glock is standard issue for my job with the Air Force. I'm retired from active duty but the base hired me to teach pilots the ins and outs of flying jet fighters."

"He also teaches them how to survive if they get shot down." said Tim.

"He saved my life. I would have been shot down if he hadn't stepped in when he did."

Woody looked at George, then Bob. "I agree with you guys about revolvers but I'm more comfortable having one round in the chamber, a dozen more in the magazine, and two more fully loaded clips on my belt."

"All this talk about guns is making me tense." said Linda. "My father bought me an S&W 38 Special when I was a teenager and taught me how to shoot. But I never would have guessed then that I'd kill a man with it. My god, I shot him in the back of the head. Didn't mean to but he turned to shoot Jack so I..."

The facial expressions and body language of everyone in the group made it clear their conversation on guns was over. The group moved on to the remainder of Jack's plan, one step at a time, each person taking a role in its planning and execution.

"If terrorists have already scoped out Fair Oaks," said Bob, "they know there isn't much to stop them from walking in here, strafing the guard... sorry George... then wasting everybody else."

"No apology necessary, Bob."

Jack reached forward, gave George a high five, then looked at Bob.

"Everyone appreciates you and Tim offering to stay and get involved, but I agreed to take both of you home this morning."

George aimed his finger at Jack. "If those rag heads attack Fair Oaks and I suffer an overdose of lead, I'll be happier in hell or in heaven knowing you

had my back to the very end. I need you here, Jack. Okay? Let them take the Nomad and the Triumph."

Jack sighed. "Okay, I'll stay. But you know the owner of a gun shop, so you should get over there and round up ammo for all our weapons."

"I helped him move all his stock from the shop to his house the day after the EMP struck. He called me on his 2 meter HAM radio. Was worried that people would break into his store and carry everything away. I'll give him a call before I hit the sack and see if he's willing to give us some guns and ammo. Pretty sure he's got a dozen or more AR-15s. Wouldn't mind having one of those if a bunch of terrorists come after us."

"Someone should go with George," said Bob. "Two men working together are more likely to succeed than one working on his own, especially if they run into trouble."

Jack had been in more than one tough spot, wishing somebody had been there to back him up. This cooperative, team effort to reduce risks was new to him, and he liked it.

"I'll ride shotgun with George," said Carol. "I know the owner too. He's a straight shooter. In more ways than one. He'll sell or trade the ammo. I'm sure of it."

Jack said, "Okay, we're gonna be busy tomorrow. Let me—"

"Hell yeah," interrupted Tim. "Busier than nine cats with nine tails in a room full of rocking chairs."

Jack gave Tim an appreciative grin. "Yep, nine cats with nine lives. So let me add a few details, then let's get some sleep. George, when you and Carol get back from your gun shop owner, we'll install the plywood. Then we've got to get Bob and Tim home. Woody. You willing to do that? You can take my Rover."

"Yeah but that leaves you here by yourself. The two-man rule would be a better plan."

"Woody's right," said Dave, "and you might need the Rover. Let's have Bob and Tim take my Triumph."

"That'll work," said Bob. "Tim and I can ride double to Edwards. The south gate isn't that far from his place in Lake Los Angeles. You could drop me off, Tim, then get back to your place using Avenue J and 170th street. That'll leave you with the Triumph in case things get bad for you and your mother."

Tim gave Bob a thumb up. "I like that but I'm not going to wait for things to go belly up in Lake Los Angeles. I'm going to talk my mother into coming back here. There's a good chance her car is kaput because she parks it outside in the driveway. But there's a good chance my Husky survived the EMP because I keep it in the garage under one of those aluminum coated survival blankets. If it did, she'll ride it and I'll ride the Triumph."

"Your mother can ride a motorcycle?" asked Linda.

"Hell yeah. She was an expert at Enduros, a type of desert event where skill and strategy are more important than speed and daring."

Bob began turning his head from one person in the group to another. They could see him struggling with something he wanted to say.

"We started something with each other," he began, "that won't go away just because Tim and I leave. We have to go our separate ways... for now. But I want to stay in touch... somehow... then hook up again... somewhere. Until then, Edwards is my choice for a place to survive until things return to normal."

"Things may never return to normal," said Jack, shaking his head.

"Maybe not," said Bob, "but everyone at Edwards except the people needed above ground are underground in a bunker with a long-term supply of food, water, and supplies. The bunker is hardened against most if not all of the worst-case scenarios, including a nuclear attack up to several megatons. That's where my family is and I look forward to joining them."

Bob paused to weigh his thoughts. "The bunker at Edwards," he continued, "is connected by tunnels to underground bunkers at other military bases. We call them DUMBs... Deep Underground Military Bases. I wish all of you could ride this disaster out in that bunker but the chances of talking the officer in charge of security into that are nil and none."

Everyone in the lobby sat there looking at each other, searching their minds for answers to Bob's *somehow* and *somewhere*.

"My place up north," said Jack, "has a long-term supply of food and water and, with a little help from all of you, we could grow enough food and steward enough livestock to survive for years, whether things go back to normal or not. **How** we get there and **when** are things we should work out before Bob and Tim leave."

The nodding heads made it clear that everyone agreed with Bob's goal and Jack's offer to reunite at his place in northern California—some *how*, some *when*. The Core of Four had become a Core of More and they all knew it.

WHERE, WHEN & HOW

Thursday – January 15th – Morning

After breakfast, Jack said. “The trip to my place will be difficult and dangerous, and as much as I regret saying it, we can’t include everyone.”

George raised his hand. “Yeah, it’s a damn shame but an unavoidable fact. As you all know, Fair Oaks is a high-end retirement home, so we’ve never had more than 50 residents, and half of those have lived in the nursing area. We lost a dozen or so in the resident and nursing areas when the Covid virus went viral. The Coroner’s office took care of those bodies. The HEMP took six more and we were able to transport those bodies to the morgue before the Coroner closed the doors. Then a dozen left Fair Oaks when Jeff came over here with his city transit bus.”

Jack gave George a thumb up. “Thanks for the head count, George, and you told me that several residents walked out the front door without telling you where they were going.”

“They did. Like Zombies. I don’t know how many. I know there are only six left in the nursing area. Helen is the only nurse and I’ll ask her if she wants to join our Away Group, but I’m pretty sure she’ll tell me she’s staying here to care for them.”

Dave looked at Linda. “Helen is the reason your mother lived as long as she did.”

“I know Dad. I thanked her after we said goodbye to Mom.”

Linda paused to wipe the tears from her eyes, then swept her arm around the room. “There are eight of us. We’re the core group. The ones who’ve done the work of dealing with this disaster.” She turned to George. “How many are just sitting in their rooms?”

“Can’t be more than six or seven. I’ll roust them out of their stupor and get them down here so they can say yea or nay to joining our Away Group.”

“Yeah, probably six or seven left upstairs.” said Carol. “Looking back on the last few days, I’d say we’re down to a dozen or so total mouths to feed. Woody and I didn’t take a head count at every meal. We just kept frying eggs, making sandwiches, opening cans and cooking beans and rice and fish until everyone stopped asking for more.”

George nodded then left to go upstairs. The group was silent, waiting for George to return. Five minutes later, he came back with three people from upstairs. They found a chair and joined the others sitting in the dining room. George remained standing.

“Ten more still up there. Six told me they came to Fair Oaks to die and nobody could talk them into dying somewhere else. Four closed their doors on me. Tried to convince them an attack was a matter of when, not if, that these terrorists are real killers, not the hoodlums and criminals they’d spent their golden years watching on TV. They didn’t seem to get it. Senile I guess.”

Dave said, “Can’t convert everybody, George. Thanks for trying.”

George pointed to each of the three who had come downstairs with him.

"That's Margaret, Paul and Rose. I don't know much about you folks so you'll have to introduce yourselves."

Paul stood. "I'm a retired plumber and this is Rose, my wife. I've got an old pistol my father gave to me years ago. He was an officer in the second World War so I think it's a 45. I've never fired it and doubt I'd be any good trying to shoot a terrorist with it."

Rose looked at Paul and smiled. "Don't worry, my dear. When those terrorists start shooting at you, you'll find the gumption to shoot back." Rose turned to the group. "And I will too. I've got a compound bow and dozens of arrows, and I can put every one of them in a five inch bullseye at 50 yards."

George gave Rose a thumb up. "Bravo! That's the kind of gumption we're looking for. Nobody wants to bring a knife to a gun fight... but an arrow? That's a real asset. No noise, just a bad feeling in your chest, then lights out. And Paul. Jack here will get you squared away with that pistol. If your father was an officer, it's the small version of the M1911 and it is a 45."

The group gave Paul and Rose a round of applause, then Margaret stood. "I don't have a gun but I'm willing to learn how to use one. I was raised on a farm, so I know how to raise chickens, milk goats, plant and can fruits and vegetables, and... I'll do anything to stay alive long enough to take America back from these god damn infidels!"

Everyone stood and began clapping their hands. When the applause died down, Dave said, "You're on target, Margaret. Those Allah freaks are the Infidels, not us."

George said, "I'm glad you three came down here. We can use all the help we can get. Now let me introduce you to the rest of our group. Let's start with Jack, our Mission Possible guy. He can fix damn near anything and has dozens of secret agent gadgets and guns."

George pointed to Dave and Linda. "Dave is a retired veterinarian and that's Linda, his daughter. She's an anthropologist. Over there is Carol and Woody, our cooks. Both are as good with firearms as they are with skillet. That guy with even less hair than me is Harold. He owns the mortuary where we said goodbye to those who didn't survive the HEMP attack. Sitting to the right of Harold is Tim and Bob. They met on the freeway just after the HEMP hit us. Bob's a retired Air Force pilot who works at Edwards Air Force Base training pilots how to fly and how to survive when their plane can no longer fly. Tim's an accountant and our standup comedian."

George rubbed his chin. "Well, that's about it. We'll certainly learn more about each other in the days and weeks to follow. Jack, you got anything else?"

"Thanks George. Yes, I do." Jack turned to Margaret, Paul and Rose. "We're planning to leave Fair Oaks and head to my place in northern California but it's likely that a group of terrorists will attack us before we can complete our preparations to leave. If that happens, this is your invitation to join us in defending Fair Oaks... with your lives. Once we're over that hurdle, we need to find three more vehicles that are still running or that we can repair. At least one of them has to be an enclosed van to carry the food, water and

supplies we'll need for the trip. When we leave, we'll have to defend ourselves again because there's no **if** we encounter Muslim fanatics and hoodlums with an appetite for violence... it's *when*."

Jack paused to let what he had said sink in. The foreign and domestic gangs they had met in the Antelope Valley and would meet on the road to his place in northern California had the same mindset. Both reminded him of the western films he watched as a child. More often than not, a mob would form, usually outside the jail, to take the law into its own hands. The differences between the men disappeared as they slipped into the group think of the mob – that brainwashed, singled minded attitude that made them collectively dangerous. The hero of the film, usually the sheriff, would step out and begin speaking to each man, calling him by name, reminding him of his wife and children, asking each of them if their wife would approve of his participation in the mob. The sheriff would move his eyes and his words from one man to the next. Separated from the other men, each would slip out of the mob's group think.

"If you're in," continued Jack, "say so now. If not, nobody will hold it against you. Deal?"

Paul looked at Rose. She nodded and said, "We're in."

Margaret was silent for a moment or two then said, "Yes, I'll join your group. I have no reason to stay. My husband died of Covid a few months ago, and... well, I woke up one morning and decided it was time to stop feeling sorry for him and myself. I'm in."

Jack nodded. "Most of us have gone through the same painful process... some more than once."

Jack was confident that these people would face the days ahead with courage and determination. "So we've got a Baker's Dozen committed to keeping this place safe until we can get out of here. The coordinates to my place won't help you find it if we get separated because none of you have a topographical map or a GPS. Mine works but won't—"

"What's a GPS?" asked Margaret.

"A small, hand-held device that receives signals from geo-positioning satellites orbiting the earth to show you where you are. It's like having a map in your hand except the map is displayed on a screen like your cell phone. It needs to receive the signal from at last four geo-positioning satellites to calculate and display your position. Mine normally gives me an accuracy of 10 or 15 feet but I'm getting 75 feet so my guess is that the HEMP or China's anti-satellite weapons have disabled some of the geo-positioning satellites."

Bob nodded. "And if things escalate, an exchange of nuclear weapons could take everything and everybody down."

"Dave shook his head. "Yeah, dozens of power hungry dictators sitting in a bunker just chomping at the bit for an excuse to push their little red buttons."

George said, "I can see how a satellite could be taken out by a rocket but those satellites are miles above the earth. How would a nuclear explosion

down here destroy a satellite up there?”

Bob turned to George. “Nuclear detonations can cause a phenomena called Ion-pumping of the Van Allen belts. The HEMPs detonated around the world were apparently not large enough to do that. Our communications satellites are hardened against HEMPs, jamming and a host of other things, but not rockets armed with warheads or a nuclear bomb large enough to take out a city. Those satellites are vital to our ability to coordinate the various branches of the armed forces.”

Bob paused to rub his chin. “But I do have a few things that might make you all feel better about what has so far been nothing but bad news. First, if our GPS satellites are disabled or jammed the armed forces have been trained to use the Earth’s magnetic field to determine the position of planes, troops, ships. Second, you all know the military uses HF radios and a variety of... well, classified ways to communicate by voice, data, coordinates and other parameters. Third, and most importantly, we haven’t lost this battle yet and despite the Chinese catching us with our pants down, American ingenuity, resourcefulness and grit is gonna kick Beijing’s butt!”

Everyone stood clapping and high-fiving each other.

“Oh, and if that doesn’t cheer you up, the Air Force has a secret weapon that’s gonna make China regret they ever fucked with the US of A!”

Another round of applause and Oorahs! rocked the dining room.

When the celebration died down, Bob said, “I apologize for the **F** bomb but I’m madder than hell about what happened. America has survived a long list of catastrophic events. The Civil War, the Cold War, Vietnam, Nine Eleven, Afghanistan, and the illegal alien fiasco at the Mexican border are near the top of that list. But this is **not** just catastrophic. It’s embarrassing. Our government failed the citizens of this country and the men and women of the armed forces. Those idiots in Washington ignored the intelligence they were receiving almost daily that America was going to suffer more than an occasional terrorist bombing and economic problems with China.”

Jack said, “Thanks Bob. Your encouragement helps, and it was good to hear someone, you, put our frustrations into words.”

“Yes.” agreed Linda. “If I were on the board at Northwestern University, I’d nominate you for a Pulitzer Prize in Public Speaking. That’s not one of the categories but I’d insist they add it.”

George said, “And I’d second your nomination, Linda. Those Chinese commies put us in a dark tunnel but Bob just gave us some good reasons to see the light at the end of it.”

Dave gave George a thumb up. “Good metaphor, George. Reminds me of the pessimist who, upon seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, said... That sucks, we’re still in the damn tunnel.”

When the laughter died down, Jack stood. “Dave’s right. The difference between moving toward the light and sitting on your ass in the dark is your attitude, the mindset of a survivor. And we have another reason to be encouraged. We have a plan for what we’re going to do when we get to the end of the tunnel. My place in northern California.”

Jack and the others drifted into their own thoughts. Bob and Tim were leaving this morning, Bob to his place and Tim to his. Each of them knew this new world would eventually, for one reason or another, force them to go their separate ways too. And none of them could predict how temporary or permanent those separate ways might be. Each would face the challenge of working out, on their own, how and when they'd reunite.

After Lunch

Bob stood and faced the group. His body language told them he had something important to say. "As some of you know, I've been using my HF radio to stay in touch with Larry, my son. I talked with him again this morning. He and his mother and sister are fine but eager for me to join them in the bunker at Edwards."

"So you and your son are HAM operators?" asked Dave.

"No, the radios we use are military grade HF radios. He's authorized to have one because I'm a retired major in the Air Force and work at Edwards. He wants to follow my footsteps into the Air Force so he can be a jet aircraft pilot."

"Ah!" said Tim. "Like father like son. He's got the right stuff!"

"He does, but with this HEMP attack who knows what will happen."

Dave frowned. "HAMS and CBers all use the HF band. Isn't that going to be a problem with all the truckers and amateur radio operators using the same frequencies?"

"No." said Bob. "CB, HAM and military operators all use different frequencies in the HF band."

Woody said, "That's what we used in the Marine Corps. The HF band **is** prone to noise and interference from thunderstorms, sunspots, jamming and of course HEMPs, but it's a better option than relying on our satellites for tactical communications."

Jack gave Woody a nod. "You're right. Like Bob said, satellites used for military communications are hardened against all sorts of things but not rockets with warheads so I'll use my HF radio to keep in touch with him."

Jack turned to Bob. "God only knows *when* that'll be, Bob, but we've answered *where* we'll meet and *how* we'll stay in touch until we do."

Jack turned to the others and said, "Meanwhile we've got to prepare Fair Oaks in case the terrorists decide to take advantage of China's HEMP attack. Let's go over our assignments. Dave and Linda are taking his Chevy Nomad to get plywood. Carol and George are taking my Rover to get more guns and ammo. Tim is taking Dave's Triumph to get Bob back to the base and get himself to his mother's place in Lake Los Angeles. Woody and I are taking our weapons up on the roof to stand guard while you're all gone. Before everyone takes off, there's some things I need from the Rover. One of them is a pistol for Tim. You've got your Glock, Bob, but after Tim drops you off at the base he won't have anything but that pepper spray to protect himself. Tim, when you get the Triumph running, pull around to the parking lot in front."

Dave stood and turned to Linda. "I knew that Nomad of mine would be

good for something.” As they walked toward the back door of the kitchen Jack whispered to himself, *Bring her back in one piece, Dave.*

George turned to Carol and tapped a cardboard box at his feet. “This is a case of my best bourbon and whiskey. We’ll use it to convince my friend it’s worth a dozen guns and ammo.”

He got up to head for Jack’s Rover but Linda said, “Wait a minute. The Rover doesn’t start with a key, so you’ll have to—”

She paused to look at Jack. He nodded so she told them about the button behind the license plate that locked and unlocked the doors, then explained the location of the switches and how to set the thumbnails to start the engine.

George gave Linda a wide-eyed look. “You’re right about this guy. He **is** some kind of Mission Impossible expert.”

“Yes but I think of him as a Mission **Possible** agent... for me and the rest of us.”

Jack followed George and Carol to the Rover to get his Get Home Bag, sniper rifle, two-way radios and his other pistols—things he’d need if terrorists attacked Fair Oaks before George and Carol got back. As George was getting in the driver’s seat, Jack tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ve got a couple of walkie-talkies. If we have to deal with terrorists tonight, we’ll need more. Everyone should have one. Being able to coordinate our defense and counter attack could mean the difference between life and death. Mine are standard FRS radios. If you can find any, buy, barter or take as many as you can.”

“The owner of the gun shop sells more than guns. He’s got an extensive inventory of survival stuff. If he’s got any, I’ll bring them back with the ammo.”

Carol tapped the button behind the license plate on the Rover, then got in the passenger seat, set the thumbnails and flipped the start switch. As she and George drove out of the parking lot, Tim and Bob pulled up on the Triumph. Jack handed Tim his P95 Ruger, an extra clip, and a holster, then walked him through the steps to insert and extract the clip and to cock, lock and fire the pistol.

Tim took a deep breath and blew it out. “Hope I don’t have to use it.” While Tim and Bob were putting their helmets on, Jack handed Bob a note.

“The satellite the Marine Corps Training Center uses for communications is hardened against HEMPs and jamming but it’s disguised to look like one of the thousands of man-made, non-functional objects circling the Earth—spacecraft parts, abandoned launch vehicle stages and other orbital debris. So even if China continues to target satellites for destruction, it’s unlikely they’ll be able to identify it as a satellite.”

Bob laughed. “If I were an under-cover agent for the FBI, Jack, I’d have to arrest you for revealing a top secret.”

Jack laughed. “You’d be dead before you got your Glock out of its holster.”

They smiled and bumped knuckles then Bob said, “Seriously though, more than 70 percent of the debris is in a low-earth orbit, so having your satellite

hidden in there makes it more likely it'll smack into space junk."

"You're right," countered Jack, "but there are so many of them and they're so small it's less likely ours would be detected and targeted for destruction."

"Yeah," agreed Bob, "Compared to a high earth satellite, a low earth satellite **is** tiny. My training CO once told us that if an HEO sat were an eagle, an LEO sat would be a mosquito. And there **are** lots of LEO sats... more than 2,000."

"Strategists at the Marine Corps Training base discussed the possibility of putting our satellite in high earth orbit. One of the arguments **for** that option was that HEO satellites can't be attacked from the ground. They're too high in the sky... 20,000 miles compared to only 1,000 miles for low earth sats. So they can only be attacked from an enemy satellite in low earth orbit. The argument *against* putting our satellite in high earth orbit was the size, number and location of HEO satellites. An eagle is a much larger target than a mosquito, there are fewer in the sky, and they're geo-synchronous so they're not a moving target. Another argument **for** having our satellite in low earth orbit is that it has to be in the line of sight of the radiation from the HEMP to suffer any damage."

"You know your satellites, Jack, and when I get back to the base I'm going to tell my CO his eagle-mosquito metaphor has a few flaws. Eagles move around in the sky. HEO sats don't."

Jack threw his head back and laughed. "Hey, tell me how that works out."

Jack reached in his pocket and handed him a small piece of paper. "That's the uplink frequency and my access code. Gets around the country code and network prefix. Might be a backup way to stay in touch."

Bob looked at the note then handed it back. "Thanks Jack. I don't have an eidetic memory but I won't forget the parameters. One way or another we'll stay in touch."

Jack gave Bob and Tim a thumb up. "You two be safe, not sorry, okay? You'll be exposed on that Triumph. Nothing between you and lead coming your way."

WAITING & WATCHING

Thursday - January 15th - Afternoon

"Okay, Woody. It's you and me. You take the lobby. I'm going on the roof. What's the best way to get up there?"

"There's a ladder attached to the building just east of the generators. Be careful. Kinda wobbly. Been awhile since we tightened those lag bolts."

"Thanks for the heads up. Better view from the roof so I'll see trouble coming before you do. Take this walkie-talkie. If I see Pete on his bicycle, I'll say "Pete Plus Bike." If I see a car, or cars, coming toward Fair Oaks, I'll say "Vehicles Spotted." If the cars turn into our parking lot, I'll say "Pete Plus Pals." Next thing you'll hear is this Sig barking louder than a hound dog as I send 'em back to Allah.

Woody nodded but had a peculiar look on his face.

"Something I said isn't working for you?"

"No, it sounds okay except for a couple of things. Pete's scheduled to get here at midnight. But if Pete's a terrorist and he's coming over here with his pals to take Fair Oaks, he'd know George would be suspicious if he showed up at this time of day. But Pete might figure George would be less suspicious if he rides up on his bicycle."

"Good thinking, Woody. Pete could walk up to the lobby doors, knock and wave. George opens up, Pete and his pals rush in and Bam! Goodbye George and everyone else."

"Yep, but in this case, it's me, not George, and I won't open up. But if they shoot the doors off their hinges, well, not much protection in here except this desk."

"You'd rather be up there on the roof with me?"

"Yeah, I would. If some of Pete's pals drive around to the back..."

"You're right. I can't watch both sides of Fair Oaks. George said you were a smart fellow and damn good with a pistol."

"I am, especially in the dark. My eyes are fuckin' phenomenal. Twenty ten and twice the number of rods in both eyes. Those extra rods grab twice as much light as normal eyes. Wanted to be a sniper but they needed cooks. You know it goes. You're a GI, Government Issue. Don't have any say in what you do or where you go to do it. That was the main reason Carol and I didn't re-enlist."

Jack nodded. "I can't boil water without burning it, so even if they'd needed cooks they wouldn't have chosen me."

"So what did you do?"

"I was a sniper."

"Holy shit! I knew it. I just knew it. You got eyes like mine. You still got a sniper rifle?"

"I do but it's daylight now, so we won't be able to take advantage of our eyes or my rifle. If we have to deal with terrorists at night, you'll be a welcome asset. I'll tell you more when we get up there and take our positions. Same rules for the walkie talkies, Okay?"

"You got it."

Jack and Woody climbed the ladder to the roof. It was flat with a wall around the perimeter and holes near the bottom every six feet to drain the roof when it rained. The wall was like the parapet of a castle—high enough to protect Jack and Woody from anyone firing at them from below, but short enough for Jack and Woody to fire back. As Jack settled into his position overlooking the front parking area, he mentally went over his plan.

If Pete was part of a terrorist group, and his jihadist pals came with him, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. If Pete came here without them, he'd see the plywood covering the windows. George said he didn't have a key, so he'd leave and Jack would follow him. If Pete's home proved to be a cell house, and was a mile or more from Fair Oaks Gardens, Jack would find another location, preferably a roof high enough to give him a clear line of sight with his CheyTac sniper rifle.

The roof at the Ramada Inn popped into Jack's mind. The hotel where a truck had pulled out to follow them up Lake Elizabeth Road. Where he and his late wife had celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. Jack imagined sitting on the roof of the Ramada Inn celebrating tonight in an entirely different way.

He'd removed his CheyTac and fold-up bicycle from the Rover this morning and hid them behind the brooms and mops in the utility closet of the kitchen. If he had to follow Pete before the others returned, he'd need the bicycle. He wouldn't have much time to get off the roof and retrieve the bike and the rifle, but he'd manage. He always had. Except in Vienna when... it still stuck in his throat like broken glass. Sylvia. Pulled back by death... hers. Pushed forward by life... his.

Two Hours Before Dusk

When George and Carol returned, Jack went over every facet of his plan with Woody, then left him on the roof and went down to the lobby to help them sort out the ammo.

"We got the ammo, Jack. Plenty for every caliber we need. And I got a surprise. My friend gave us three AR-15s and enough ammo to blast those towel heads to kingdom come!"

"AR-15s. Damn George. You and Carol are one helluva team."

Jack stepped forward and gave George and Carol a knuckle bump. "How about two-ways? Any luck with those?"

"Yep. My friend didn't have any, but Walmart had them and they were on sale."

"Walmart was open and they took your money?" asked Jack, his eyes wide and brows up with surprise.

"No," grinned George, "but they were offering a five-finger discount."

"You broke in and stole 'em."

"I prefer to think of our negotiations with Walmart this morning as a free, thirty-day trial."

Jack, George and Carol exchanged grins, knowing it might be their last opportunity to jest about anything if terrorists attacked Fair Oaks.

Jack didn't like the idea or the reality of stealing anything from anyone. If this had been a short-term emergency, he would have considered George's Five-Finger Discount as stealing. But the EMP had global, long-term consequences. This wasn't stealing. It was scavenging for survival.

They began sorting the ammo and getting the walkie-talkies operational. Carol had the presence of mind to grab a pack of lithium batteries while they were in Walmart.

Later, as the sun was setting, Dave and Linda drove into the front parking area, backed the Nomad up to the front doors, and dropped the tail gate.

"One inch, seven ply, said George. They look larger than four-by-eight sheets. What are they?

"Five-by-ten." said Dave. "Made for pool and ping-pong tables. Tried to barter for them but the owner gave them to me for nothing. Gave me some heavy duty hinges, too, and several sizes of long bolts to mount them to the walls. We'll have to figure a way to drill holes through those walls. Thanks to Jack, we've got electricity but I don't have a drill motor."

"I brought all my tools here from my apartment," said George, "including a big Milwaukee drill motor but my extension cord is only 12 foot, so it might not be long enough to reach from the two outlets in the lobby to every spot along the wall where we want a hole for those bolts."

"No problem." said Woody. "I've got an 18 volt drill motor if your extension cord is too short."

"And I have an inverter in my Rover." said Jack. "It's good to 10 amps or so. Push comes to shove, I can pull the battery and hook it up."

"You really are from Mission Impossible, aren't you? asked Linda. Is there anything in that Rover you don't have?"

"Yeah, a howitzer, two apple pies and a gallon of vanilla ice cream. Everything else but you and me are in there."

Linda couldn't tell for sure but suspected there was a deeper message in his words. There certainly was in his eyes. The look on Jack's face didn't escape the others, either. They smiled, then began unloading the sheets of plywood and stacking them near the doors.

LIGHTS OUT

Thursday – January 15th – Evening

It took several hours to drill holes through the walls, install the hinges and mount the plywood over the glass doors. Woody had a two-inch hole saw, so they drilled several peep holes in the plywood so they could keep an eye on the parking lot.

Jack called Woody on the two-way to tell him that Carol was coming up to the roof to relieve him. It was dark, and Carol didn't have Woody's eyes, but they needed somebody on the roof to watch the streets around Fair Oaks while they ate dinner. They would bring her something to eat when Woody put dinner together.

After dinner, everyone except Carol gathered in the lobby to admire their work, to encourage one another and to sew another knot in their friendship.

"Not bad," said George. "You folks are one resourceful bunch of people. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you hanging around Fair Oaks."

"Glad we could help," said Jack. "You said Pete relieves you at midnight?"

"Yeah. I'm worried he'll show up with his bike, see the sheets of plywood on the doors, then ride back to rally his Jihadist friends for an attack."

"I'm not worried," said Woody. "Jack and me will be on the roof to deal with whatever happens. If he shows up with his bike, sees the plywood and leaves, Jack and I'll follow him back to his cell. If he shows up with his cell group, we'll waste 'em before they can say Allah Akbar."

Jack knew he hadn't said anything to Woody about joining him if he had to follow Pete. But he remembered how many times he'd wished he'd had somebody backing him up when shit had hit the fan. Like that time in Vienna. And Woody had those rod-rich eyes – the perfect asset for a sniper.

George gun-fingered Woody. "I like your attitude, Woody. If he shows on his bike, we could squeeze the truth out of him."

"I could stick him with truth serum," said Dave, "then tranquilize him."

"Sodium pentothal?" asked Bob. "The Air Force's research showed it's worse than useless. The person under its—"

"Their research is correct," said Dave. "Lots of problems with SP. The worst is you get too much information unless you focus your questions very carefully. The compound I developed is to relax animals, but I've long suspected it would work like a truth serum on humans. If Pete really is part of a Jihadist group, I'd welcome the chance to use him as a guinea pig. Kill two birds with one stone."

"Either way," said Woody, "it's damn likely terrorists will come, with or without Pete. So squeezing the truth out of him probably wouldn't do us any good."

"Right," said Jack, "and we all agreed to be safe, not sorry. So let's begin a strict **Lights Out** policy. George, go upstairs, knock on every door and tell them to turn off their lamps, snuff their candles, load their weapons and man their windows. Dave, do the same in the nursing area. No exceptions. When you and Dave get back, we go dark."

Dave and George left to make their rounds, and Woody used the two-way Jack had given him to tell Carol they were going dark. When Dave and George returned, Jack asked if anyone had a flashlight. George pulled his out of the drawer of his desk, and Dave said he had one in his room.

"Go get it." said Jack. "Better to have a flashlight and not need it than to not have one and need it."

While Dave was gone to get his flashlight, Linda found the penlight she kept in her purse and turned it on to check the batteries. It worked. Woody told Jack he and Carol always had a flashlight on their belts, a hangover from their Marine training but mostly because the walk-in freezer in the kitchen had been black as midnight until Jack fixed the generator.

When Dave got back with his flashlight, Jack told George to switch off the camping lantern on his desk. When the light from the lantern was gone, they sat in a silence of sight and sound, amazed by how distant the darkness made them feel from one another. Jack waited for his irises to open wider and his retinal chemistry to engage. The minutes ticked away, punctuated only by their heart beats and their breathing.

"I wish somebody would fart." said Tim.

And then they could hear nothing but each other snorting with laughter. When the laughter subsided, they saw a faint red light glowing on Jack's head.

"What the hell?" asked Dave.

"It's a head lamp, like the ones miners use. But it has a red lens to lessen the possibility someone will see it's on. I turned it on, not to break our Lights Out rule, but to get you all to focus on me and what I am about to say."

"Carol can't hear you up there on the roof." said Woody. "Maybe she should join us."

"She can Woody. I left her with two walkie-talkies. One set to channel 16 and the other set to channel 4. When George turned off his lantern, I keyed the one on channel 16 so Carol could hear us. If she needs to alert us, she'll key my alternate on channel 4."

Jack keyed his alternate two-way radio.

You hearing me Carol?

Loud and clear Jack and I heard that farting Tim. You are indeed our resident comedian!

They couldn't see each other in the dark of the lobby, but knew every face had a smile on it. There wasn't anything funny about the predicament they would face if terrorists had targeted Fair Oaks tonight. But they all took comfort in their ability to smile at each other, even in the dark.

"Our preparations," continued Jack, "make it more likely we can defend Fair Oaks against an attack, but I don't think they guarantee we'll all escape from getting shot. Or killed. I don't like scenarios with those odds. I like scenarios where all the good guys live and all the bad guys die."

"Oorah!" agreed George, then Woody, and Carol on the two-way, chimed in with their own hardy "Oorah!"

Despite everyone's gung-ho attitude, the group was sobered by what Jack

had said. Linda remembered him telling her that everybody dies. Survival is saying "Not today."

"Unknowns." continued Jack. "I don't like 'em. Pete **is** a member of a jihadist group. Pete is **not** a member of a Jihadist group. Pete shows up for his shift tonight. **With** his jihadist pals. **Without** his Jihadist pals. He does **not** show up. He knocks. He doesn't knock. George lets him in. George doesn't let him in."

"And if George lets him in," said Dave, "and Pete is a terrorist, Boom! Goodbye George."

Linda added that it might be goodbye to the rest of them if Pete's friends are hiding in the dark, then come in with him.

"Exactly. But as Woody explained, our plan is to deal with the variables using a safe-not-sorry approach. Prevention means *we* do the breaking before they break in. So Woody and I will be on the roof tonight where we can keep watch on both parking areas and everything we can see up and down the street. The rest of you will take shifts watching from your windows. I'll leave it to you to work out when you'll take turns."

"I'll take my post here in the lobby, said George, and I won't need anybody to take my shift. I'm used to staying awake and alert all night. Plenty of coffee in the kitchen.

"The lobby's not a good idea." countered Jack. "That plywood over the doors is only to make it more difficult for them to get inside. It won't stop them, and when they get into the lobby, you'll have nothing but that desk to keep them from filling you full of holes.

"Then my window it is." agreed George. "And it'll give me pleasure to see my friends here at Fair Oaks blowing those bastards out of their shoes from their windows. My LCR has a laser on it. If I can see the red dot, I can kill whatever it's touching."

"Be careful with that laser." said Woody. "If they can see that little red dot, they can see where it came from. Spot 'em, shoot 'em, switch it off."

A quivering little shudder rippled through Linda as she recalled the red dot bouncing on the windshield of the truck that had chased them up Lake Elizabeth Road.

"You've all heard the plan in one form or another, but let's go over it one more time."

Jack went over the plan in detail, explaining their approach for each of the anticipated variables. If he saw Pete ride in on his bicycle, they'd hear "Pete Plus Bike" on their two-way radios. If he saw a car or cars approaching Fair Oaks, they'd hear "Vehicles Spotted." If the cars turned into the parking lot, they'd hear "Pete Plus Pals." If he saw anything other than those three scenarios, he'd make his alert on their two-way as clear and brief as possible.

"If Pete shows up with his pals," continued Jack, "we'll send 'em back to Allah. Woody and I from the roof and each of you from a window. If he shows up without his friends, I'll follow him. When he gets to where he's going, I'll know if he's one of us or one of them. If home is a jihadist cell house, it'll be

goodbye for them."

"You'll need someone to back you up, Jack. I'll go with you."

"I'd like that, Woody, especially with those eyes of yours. Mine need a little help from my friend, Mister Infrared. I planned to use my fold-up bicycle to follow Pete if he showed up this afternoon. We'll take the Rover if we have to follow him tonight."

Carol's voice broke in on the alternate radio. Everyone tensed, thinking it was the alert none of them wanted to hear.

"Woody's and my room have a good view of the rear parking area. My eyes aren't as good as his, but I fired Expert every year I was in the Corps, day and night, moving or stationary. If I can see 'em, I can kill 'em."

"Then it's a green light for our plan. Woody and I will replace Carol on the roof. We'll take turns getting some shut eye. We'll leave through the kitchen door. Pull that iron bar over it when we leave."

"You got it," said George, "and good luck."

"I never expected luck to be a factor in my assignments but if luck shows up tonight, I hope she's a lady."

"Please be careful." said Linda.

TERRORISTS ATTACK

Thursday - January 17th - 11:50 PM

For Jack, shut-eye meant closing his eyes, not going to sleep. All his other senses were wide awake, including his sixth sense, which had saved his life more than once. Woody agreed to take the first two-hour shift. Jack closed his eyes and drifted into his twilight sleep.

A few minutes before midnight, he heard tires rolling across pavement. He raised his head over the edge of the roof and pulled his infrared goggles over his eyes. A car followed by a crew-cab truck were coming down the street toward Fair Oaks.

Vehicles spotted.

The car pulled into the parking lot and stopped. The same car that had cruised the parking lot the night before. The truck rolled into the parking lot and came to a stop next to the car.

Vehicles here.

Jack and Woody had taken positions at opposite ends of the roof to increase their field of view and to prevent both of them being hit with one burst of semi-automatic fire. As he released the PTT button on his radio, he sensed Woody at his side.

They watched four men get out of the car, and four more get out of the truck. One of them walked to back of the truck and pulled a bicycle out of the bed.

Jack keyed his two-way to put everyone on alert.

Pete plus pals.

Pete pushed his bike to the front of the building and swept the beam of his flashlight across the plywood-covered doors. He raised his hand like he was about to knock, then lowered it and began walking back toward the vehicles. When he got a few yards from the doors, he turned suddenly and wiggled his middle finger at the doors. Jack keyed his radio.

Pete just gave the door the international sign of contempt. He's not happy about the plywood covering the doors.

A man's face could tell Jack more than his words or his body language, and what he saw on Pete's face was a man enraged, insane and dangerous. Stereotypes are generally, not specifically true, but in Jack's business, the difference could get you killed."

Jack and Woody watched Pete push his bicycle back to the other men standing around the two vehicles. He leaned toward two of the men, whispered something in their ears, then stuck his arm in the air and made a series of little circles over his head. Jack and Woody knew what that meant. Their leader just put a green light on their attack.

Two coming around the back.

As Pete was moving toward the other side of the pickup truck, Woody began firing his 45, killing two of the terrorists leaning against the truck. As the others were scattering for cover behind the two vehicles, Jack dropped another terrorist with his Sig.

The sound of Woody's 45 and Jack's 357 barking bullets at the terrorists

was still ringing in their ears when suddenly, from the windows below Woody and Jack, bullets began ripping into the car and the truck. One of the terrorists jumped from behind the truck, fired a burst at the building, then began running towards the trees along the east side of the parking area. He never made it. Jack and Woody heard three shots, then watched the man plow head first into the asphalt, face down and dead.

George?

Yep, and Dave and Linda. Paul's in back with Carol.

Carol, those two coming around—

Jack was interrupted by more gun fire from the back of the building. A series of small caliber shots followed by several bursts from semi-automatic rifles, then two shots from a 44 Magnum. Two guys. Two shots. Woody was right. Carol doesn't miss. Moving or stationary.

Two down, Jack. How many up front?

Two hiding behind their vehicles. Find a window. This side. Go for the tires.

An eerie silence followed in the wake of the gunfire. As Carol ran out of her room, she heard Paul say he'd been hit. The bullet had only grazed his arm, but he wouldn't be any help until his wife got the bleeding stopped and the wound wrapped.

While Carol was running to a room on the front side of the building, one of the terrorists jumped into the truck. The starter whirled and the engine caught. As the truck leaped forward, the other terrorist grabbed the tailgate and began pulling himself into the bed. Jack shot the driver through the back window, then took aim at the other terrorist. Just as he fired, the man let go of the tailgate and fell to the pavement. The bullet from Jack's 357 Sig slammed into the tailgate, leaving a large hole in the **O** of **FORD**.

As the truck rolled to a stop, the remaining terrorist ran to the car and jumped into the driver's seat. The sound of its engine roaring to life was replaced by two shots from Carol's 44 Magnum. The driver stepped on the gas, and despite two flat tires on the same side of his vehicle, turned the car around and headed for the exit to the parking lot.

Jack had soft-nose rounds in his 357 Sig but jacketed rounds in his 50 caliber Eagle. It could penetrate the hood of any civilian vehicle like a hot knife through butter. As the car bounced out of the parking lot, Jack took aim at the center of the hood and fired.

"Shit!" yelled Woody. "I was sure those big, jacketed loads of yours would crack the block and waste a piston or two."

"Me too. It must've hit something solid enough to deflect it."

As Jack and Woody were running for the ladder, the car disappeared down the street.

PETER'S STRUGGLE

Friday – January 16th – 12:20 AM

Peter was barely able to hold the car on the road. Ahmad would not be pleased to hear their attack on Fair Oaks had failed. He wept as he struggled with the steering wheel, fighting the flat tires for control of the car and fighting with himself to understand why Allah had not told Ahmad the Infidels would be armed and waiting to slaughter them from the windows and the roof.

But Ahmad could not be angry with him. He had done what Ahmad had told him to do. Even if Ahmad had disobeyed the will of Allah or lost ears for the Most Holy, he, Jihad, had followed the will of Ahmad, his leader. Allah could not be angry with Jihad.

Deep in his heart, Peter knew that Ahmad's "*Allahu Akbar*" had nothing to do with Allah and everything to do with his own narcissistic, power hungry ego.

As he drove through the deserted streets, struggling to see through the tears in his eyes, he thought how coincidentally ironic it was that Infidels had slaughtered his companions from a roof. His mother had named him Jihad, which meant *struggle*, and his surname was Saqqaf, which meant *roof*.

No, he must not think like that. Allah will not be pleased. With Allah, there are no accidents. No coincidences. His mother told him Allah had spoken to her. She must name her first born Jihad. He was Pete to the Infidels, but Jihad to Allah and all true believers.

She had named him in memory of her father, who had suffered much for his name and for his struggles. Allah expected all Muslims to suffer. If Allah had wanted Jihad to suffer at the hands of a shooter on a roof, he would be in the arms of Allah now.

But Jihad was not dead. He was alive and still very much committed to suffering and dying if necessary, on a roof or anywhere else, to obey the will of Allah. Jihad would find a roof and kill the Infidels. At Fair Oaks and everywhere he found them. Allah would be with him.

When he got to the cell house, he jumped out of the car, ran to the front door and burst into the room. All eight of his brothers in Allah turned quickly and pointed their guns at him.

"You fucking fool!" said Ahmad. "We could have killed you. You had better have good news or we will."

"We failed, Ahmad. The Infidels were waiting with many guns. Our attack was not the will of Allah. Our brothers are dead."

"Don't give me that Will-of-Allah shit. *You* failed, not Allah."

Ahmad was a big man. Jihad was small. He grabbed Jihad by the shoulders and began shaking him like a rag doll.

"Allah has cursed you. I curse you. Your brothers curse you. Go to the kitchen, like a woman, and make our dinners."

The other terrorists began pacing up and down, cursing Jihad and cussing at one another.

Jihad walked to the kitchen, head bowed, tears streaming down his face. As he stood there feeling sorry for himself, he saw a stack of pizzas sitting on the table. He put nine in the oven and set the timer. When the timer dinged, he pulled them out and plopped them on plates. Ahmad would expect him to serve the men, like a woman, so he carried the pizza into the living room, then went back to the kitchen, sat down at the table and watched the other men eat.

When they had finished eating, Jihad walked back to the living room. He collected the plates, went back to the kitchen and stacked them on top of his in the sink. A few minutes later, he heard Ahmad say, "This is how we will kill the Infidels...

SNIPERS & SCOPES

Friday – January 16th – 12:20 AM

It was a moonless night, and the driver was struggling with two flat tires, so he had turned on his headlights. Without street lamps, store lights or headlamps from other vehicles, the driver was easy to spot.

Jack followed the lights of the car with his infrared goggles to get a general idea of where it was headed. The driver couldn't go over 20 miles per hour or so without the tires coming off their rims. If he went faster than that, they'd find him walking. If he went slower than that, they'd catch up to him sooner.

Jack climbed off the roof, retrieved his CheyTac sniper rifle from the kitchen closet and ran out to his Rover. Woody was right behind him.

"I hope that fucker *is* Pete." said Woody.

"Me too." agreed Jack. "If we'd had time to check the bodies, I'd know if the driver was or wasn't Pete. Got a good look at him as he rode his bicycle over to the lobby."

They hopped in the Rover and caught up with the driver only minutes after leaving Fair Oaks, then followed close enough to keep visual contact. The driver could have seen them if he had looked in his rear-view mirror, but he was too busy struggling with the steering wheel to keep the car on the road. Even if he had glanced at his rear view mirror, they were virtually invisible without a moon to light the night sky.

The driver led them to a house at the end of a cul de sac. When the driver turned in, Jack pulled over and he and Woody got out. They crept along the side of the street, then crouched down in some shrubs along the curb where they could see into the windows.

No doubt it was a cell house for some type of terrorists, jihadist or not. Jack and Woody could see armed men pacing back and forth, gesturing at one another and cursing in a foreign tongue. One of the men grabbed another and began shaking him and cursing in his face.

"That guy gettin' chewed out is Pete. I'm sure of it. Guess his leader don't like what he's hearing.

"Then let's stomp in there and give 'em all something they don't want to hear.

The house was less than a half mile from the Ramada Inn. Only hours before, Jack had imagined sitting on its roof.

"I've got a better idea.

"I'm all ears, Jack.

"I'd like to stomp in there and blow them all out of their socks, too, but why risk our lives for a bunch of lowlifes. Let's go over to the Ramada Inn and do it from there. It's probably less than a half mile from that cell house.

"From the roof?

"Yeah. My Sig 357 was the right weapon for the roof at Fair Oaks, but tonight I'll need my 408 CheyTac. I can put three rounds in a twelve-inch target over a mile away.

"I saw you toss it in the Rover when we left. Jack, no matter how this goes down, you gotta let me fire that puppy.

"You will, Woody. You will. Your eyes probably won't need the scope, but it has four inches of light-gathering power and enough magnification to see the wings on a fly at 1500 yards.

"And we'll be half that distance from up there. I'm close to wettin' my pants just thinkin' about firing your CheyTac."

They moved quietly back to the Rover and drove away. When they got to the Ramada, they used the fire ladders to get on the roof. While Jack assembled the CheyTac, Woody scanned the area, trying to locate the cell house.

"There it is. Just north of those cottonwoods.

"Jack put the CheyTac's scope to his eye and verified what Woody had seen with his naked eyes.

"Damn, Woody. Your eyes **are** phenomenal! You'd have made one helluva fine sniper with or without a scope. But let's leave the scope on the CheyTac so we can identify every weapon they've got over there. I'd like to send every last one of them to Allah from here, but the odds—

"Are against it," interrupted Woody, "so we need to know what we're facing when we go over there to finish the job."

"Yeah, so let's set things up here to give ourselves the best odds possible."

With the scope to his eye, Jack identified AK-47 semi-automatic rifles, 10-gauge shot guns and pistols of every caliber. Every time one of them walked past a window, Jack added the weapon to his mental inventory, then told Woody what he had seen.

"How we gonna kill 'em, Jack? They're hold up in their house."

"One of my fellow trainees asked that same question. The instructors said the same way you kill snakes. Set the brush on fire then whack 'em when they slither out."

Woody looked at Jack like he'd lost his mind. "You gonna set the house on fire?"

"It was just a story Woody, but we're going to sit here patiently waiting for one of those snakes to slither out."

Woody chuckled. "Good analogy, Jack. Something evil about snakes. Cold, empty eyes. Forked tongues and a toothless grin. Shit, they don't even walk. Just slither across the ground."

After several minutes of watching the window on the front door and the two windows on the west side of the house, Jack counted eight men. His CheyTac had a seven-round magazine, and he had one in the chamber. One for each of the terrorists. He took a position along the west wall of the roof, and setup the rifle for the first shot.

Patience is as practiced a skill as learning to ride a bicycle or shoot a gun. Jack had honed his to perfection. He'd sat in hot, steaming jungles, cold, freezing snow and every uncomfortable setting between those two extremes waiting for the right moment to line up his target, squeeze the trigger and

watch a bad guy disappear. Forever.

SHOTS FIRED

Friday – January 16th – 1:20 AM

When Ahmad had finished explaining his plan to the other terrorists, two of his men went out to the front porch for a smoke. Jack watched them light up. Neither was Pete. Jack put a bullet through each of their heads then heard Woody suck in a breath of air and let it out, slowly.

“Holy shit, Jack. I couldn’t have winked between those shots.”

Jack rarely used a silencer for shots beyond a mile, because only a bat could hear it at that distance. At this distance, the CheyTac could wake the dead, so he had installed the silencer. It made the CheyTac look even more menacing. Jack and Woody would hear a low snarl as the bullet cleared the barrel. The terrorists would hear nothing but the last beat of their hearts.

“Someone will eventually wonder what the hell is keeping those two. Takes only 5 minutes or so to smoke a cigarette. And when he comes outside to check on them, or light his own smoke, I’d like **you** to remind him that smoking is dangerous to your health.

Jack handed Woody the CheyTac. Woody stood there holding the CheyTac as if it were the most precious thing he had ever held in his arms. Except for Carol.

Woody took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. “Hope I don’t miss, Jack.”

“You wont. Just keep in mind that people make mistakes when they get in a hurry.”

Woody chambered a round, took position on the wall and put his eye to the scope.

Inside the house, Ahmad stood up. “What’s keeping Barak and Hussein? Doesn’t take ten minutes to smoke a cigarette. Mohammed. Get them back in here.”

Woody watched another terrorist come outside to check on the first two. He looked down at the two terrorists lying on the porch and yelled something at the others inside. Woody saw the terrorist’s mouth moving but was too far away to hear what he hollered. What the terrorists heard Mohammed scream was “Lama khoyas hal mayyit! Our brothers are dead!”

Everyone in the room jumped to their feet and began running to the front door.

“No!” yelled Ahmad. “Turn out the lights and take cover!”

Woody took a deep breath, held it, then lined the Mohammed up in his sights and fired.

“Three down.” said Woody.

Ahmad and his men waited for Mohammed to come in or to say something but heard nothing but the sound of their hearts pounding.

“They have killed Mohammed.” whispered one of the men. “What can we do?”

When Pete heard Mohammed scream, he ran out the back door and down the alley south of the house. He knew he would be safe in the alley. The shooter had to be north and west of the house to have a clear line of sight to

the front porch.

"From a roof!" he yelled to himself. "The Infidels have killed more of my brothers. From a roof!"

Jihad slowed to a walk, then stopped. He had been a coward to leave the house. He must go back and face the will of Allah. He began walking up the alley back to the house.

"Wait! I must praise Allah."

He was near the end of the alley, two or three hundred yards from the house. He stopped, got on his knees and began praying.

"La illaha illaha illalaho." he chanted. "There is no god but Allah. La illaha illaha illalaho." he chanted. "There is no god but Allah."

Jihad repeated the chant as the Quran instructed: one hundred times. His mother had taught him that five times a day is not too often to pray, and one hundred is not too many times to say his prayers. "The soul is more important than the body", she would say, "which we feed three times a day."

Jihad had obeyed his mother and the Quran, the word and will of Allah. He learned to starve his body but never his soul. When he finished his prayers, he walked up the alley to the house, through the back door and into the kitchen.

FLASH BANGS & FRAGS

Friday – January 16th – 1:45 AM

Woody waited for more terrorists to run outside or to do something equally stupid. They didn't, then somebody inside turned out the lights.

Jack and Woody climbed off the roof, jumped in the Rover and headed toward the cell house. Wouldn't take them but a few minutes to get there. Lights-out wouldn't protect them from him. His infrared goggles would light the place up as if the lights were on. While he drove, Jack went over the things he needed Woody to know before they got there.

"I like working with you, Woody. You're smart, determined and skilled with handguns and rifles. Best of all, everything we've done together today feels like we're on the same page. Let's make certain it stays that way when we approach that cell group."

"Thanks, Jack. Coming from you, that's one helluva compliment. Carol and I have been like that since we met in the Corps. Like two bodies and one brain. But your instincts trump mine."

"Okay, here's the plan. You've got your 45 and what, two clips on your belt?"

"Yeah, and a K-Bar on my ankle."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. I'm better at shooting than stabbing, and we're cocking but *not* locking, okay?"

"You got it."

"And we're on channel 16."

They took turns keying their two-ways to verify they could hear each other and reply.

"One other thing. I've got four flash bang grenades and four fragmentary grenades. Here's two of each. We start with a flash bang, then toss a fragmentary."

"You're the boss, Jack, but—"

"I know. Sounds odd. Flash bangs don't kill. Frags do. And our goal tonight is to kill, not just injure or arrest these bastards. But a flash bang will guarantee everyone in that house will be momentarily disabled, and a fragmentary won't guarantee everyone will be dead. Maybe seriously injured but not dead. So flash bangs first, then the frags."

"Clever," said Woody. "Watched too many movies where the good guy thinks the bad guy is dead, then he comes to and shoots the good guy's woman. She dies in his arms and the movie ends. Fuck that! Tonight all the bad guys die and all the good guys live. Then we go home to our women."

"That's how I see it, too, and here's how we do it. I go to the front door. You go to the back. When you're ready, give me a BACK DOOR on the two-way. When you hear my flash bang, kick the door open and toss yours. With your eyes, you'll see where a frag will do the most damage. Toss it."

"Then we go in with our pistols?"

"Yes."

"Gotta tell you, Jack. Never killed anyone 'til tonight. Shot the shit out of

targets but not people. I remember wondering if I could actually—”

“I watched you tonight, Woody. Your shooting skills are exceptional, your reactions lightning fast and you’ve got those eyes. But I like your instincts, too. They’re tuned to what’s right and wrong. I’ve had some sleepless nights remembering how damn difficult it was to tell the good guys from the bad.”

“Those fuckers in there are all bad, Jack. I’m just worried you’ll go back to Fair Oaks with bad news for Carol. Sitting on a roof is one thing. This is another.”

“If you’re not scared, Woody, you’re not brave, just crazy or stupid. Let’s not be crazy or stupid. We counted eight from the roof at the Ramada and took out three. That leaves five more. Unless our count is wrong. Surprises are part of every assignment and I’d like a ninth or tenth terrorist to **not** be one of them.”

“So we’re gonna anticipate maybe six or seven more guys in there?”

“Yes, and also because the Frags might not take out the five we think are in there. That means we give ourselves a wide margin for error so we can blow them out of their shoes before they even see ours. First. Don’t toss both frags. Save your second frag for any surprises we haven’t anticipated. Second. After you toss your first frag, wait ‘til you hear CLEAR on your two-way before you charge in the back door.”

“One mind, huh?”

Just before they got to cul de sac where the house was located, Jack pulled over and he and Woody got out. Woody didn’t need infrared goggles, but Jack did, so he pulled them over his face and moved toward the house. Like a fox. Low, focused and silently. Woody did the same.

When they got near the front door, Jack looked down at the three men he and Woody had shot. Two were staring at the moonless sky with blank faces. None of them were Pete. Jack used his boot to roll the third man over.

“None of them Pete.” he whispered, then motioned Woody around the back and waited for his call. The seconds ticked away...

“Back Door.”

Jack put his back on the wall next to the door, reached over and knocked on it backhanded with his knuckles. Seconds later, the door exploded as automatic rifles and shotgun blasts tore it to shreds and off its hinges. He tossed a flash-bang through the opening where the door had been and jumped inside, his Sig in one hand and a Frag in the other. He didn’t have to wait for the smoke to clear to see five men crouched on the floor screaming as if their ears had exploded. When Jack fired, their heads exploded. None of them looked like Pete either.

“Not clear.”

“Roger that.”

Jack hoped Woody would stay at the back door until he had checked the rest of the house. He didn’t want to go back to Fair Oaks with bad news for Carol. He cleared the bed and bath rooms, then moved across the living room, crouched, cocked and cautious when a shot rang out from the kitchen. Big caliber. Woody’s 45? He hoped so, and started running. When he got to

the kitchen, Woody was standing over a man lying on the floor holding his shoulder and groaning something in Arabic. It was Pete.

"Nine plates in the sink, Jack. Looks like they had pizza."

Woody wagged the barrel of his 45 at Pete. "Pete here is lucky I didn't bifurcate his head from his body, but thought he might give us some useful intel."

"Bifurcate? Damn Woody... that's a high dollar word for a Marine."

"Yeah, sometimes that dictionary in my head pops up unexpectedly. Should have said blow his fuckin' head off his shoulders."

"I'm glad you didn't, Woody. I saw three RPGs in the bedroom. With a little enhanced interrogation, Pete might help us locate other terrorist cells so we can blow... er, bifurcate their heads."

Jack removed a tranquilizer gun and nylon handcuffs from his cargo pants and handed them to Woody. "Shoot Pete with this, then hand cuff him with these while I collect the rocket propelled grenade launchers and the weapons scattered around the living room."

"You are one awesome dude, Jack. A mobile supply of damn near everything and most of it is in your pants!"

Woody marched Pete out of the kitchen and met Jack at the front door. "How soon's he gonna get woozy. Just as soon not have to drag his limp ass out of here."

"He'll start staggering in a few minutes but won't lose consciousness before we get to the Rover."

SAFE AT FAIR OAKS

Friday – January 16th – 2:15 AM

Jack pulled into Fair Oaks and stopped. He and Woody got out and walked to each of the terrorists scattered around the front parking area, giving each a good kick in the head.

"We'll have to dispose of these bodies, Woody. Got any ideas?"

"Yeah. Sure as hell ain't gonna waste any propane at the crematorium for these shit heads. Let's haul them back to their cell house in that crew cab truck of theirs and let 'em rot."

Jack nodded, then keyed his two-way.

George. Jack here. Woody and I are back. Got some good news.

How do I know it's you?

Because I called you George.

Lots of people know George is the guard here.

Would the code for the Rover satisfy you?

It would.

1608.

Well by god it is you. Good news everyone! Get down to the lobby. We're gonna celebrate!

Don't bother with the panels, George. We'll park in the back.

George ran to the kitchen to remove the bar from the door while everyone else hurried to the lobby. Jack had hand cuffed Pete and tranquilized him for the ride back to Fair Oaks. He left him in the Rover and headed for the back door. When he and Woody walked in, Linda hugged Jack and Carol threw her arms around Woody. The others watched the happy reunion. They too were glad to have them safe at Fair Oaks.

Linda kissed Jack, then stepped back with an ear to ear smile on her face.

"It was great to hear your voice on my two-way but that doesn't come close to seeing you in the flesh with my own eyes."

"And beautiful eyes they are, Linda."

"Jack, your stomach is growling at me."

"No, that's my tape worm saying... Feed me or I'll hurt you!"

Woody laughed. "Carol and I will satisfy that tape worm with a midnight snack but Jack and me gotta debrief you people. Carol, I'm tellin' you it was another episode of Mission Impossible but this time I was there. Jack let me fire his CheyTac."

Jack and Woody took turns describing what happened after they left to follow the terrorist who had escaped in the car. The group swung back and forth between cheering and holding their breaths. When they were finished, the group sat there shaking their heads in belief and disbelief.

Carol broke the silence. "That terrorist who lit out of here like his pants were on fire was Pete, wasn't it?"

"It was." said Jack. "We've got him handcuffed and tranquilized in the back of my Rover. When he comes to, Woody is gonna persuade him to volunteer information about the location of other cell groups in the Valley."

"Persuade? Fuck that. He'll tell me or back to Allah he goes."

"Cheese and crackers!" said George, shaking his head. "Never can tell,

can you? Guy down the street might seem like a loving father and a good husband, then you see his face plastered on the front page of your newspaper next to a headline that reads...

SERIAL RAPIST CAUGHT WITH PANTS DOWN

As serious as things were, the group couldn't hold back the laugh that began with a roar in their bellies and ended with tears in their eyes. Once again, they needed a lighter spin on what could have become bad news for all of them.

"You're an even better comedian than Tim," said Dave, "wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Course I am, Dave, 'cause I gave up fart jokes when I left junior high."

That brought another round of giggles. As the laughter subsided, Carol and Woody went to the kitchen to put some food together, then came back with cheese and ham sandwiches, a case of beer and bananas that looked like they had seen their best days three days ago.

Jack and Woody's debriefing had put a keen edge on their hunger. The group fell silent as they busied themselves with chewing sandwiches, peeling bananas and drinking beer.

"With most people," said Linda, "it's safe to assume that what you see is what you get. People like Pete, well, they might look sane from the outside, but inside they're a confused, unstable mix of hatred, jealousy and murder, a bomb waiting for an opportunity to explode. Thank God we're all safe."

Dave glanced at his daughter. "Thank Luck we're all safe. She was a lady tonight."

"This ain't the best time," said Woody, "sitting here feeding our faces, but we should dispose of those bodies out there in the parking lot and behind the building before they start drawin' flies. I suggest we take them back to that cell house where Jack and I killed the other terrorists and let 'em rot."

The group agreed with Woody's plan.

"Damn, said George, shaking his head. Hollywood doesn't show you all this nitty gritty stuff. Hero shoots a dozen bad guys with a six-shot revolver, shoots a dozen more without reloading, then rides off into the sunset on a white horse with the heroine. Nothing about the stuff ordinary people have to deal with, like burying bodies, earning a living and cooking a meal.

"Yeah," said Dave. "We're learning just how dependent we were on gasoline and groceries and the grid."

"Modern technology is a kind of magic," said Linda, "that we take for granted. The indigenous cultures I studied and visited live closer to the ground than people in industrialized nations. Some call it Clarke's Third Law.

"Clarke? asked George, moving to the edge of his chair.

As Linda began explaining the phenomena of Clarke's Third Law, the others leaned forward, some moving to the edge of their chairs, too.

"Clarke was a science fiction writer whose stories convinced readers that a global disaster, man-made or natural, wouldn't merely take us back to the 19th century. We'd go back to the dark ages, because most of us know very little about 19th century technology and have none of its tools. Who has a

horse and a plow? Seeds to plant and a well to water them? Who knows how or where to dig a well? Who has enough land to support a family with crops, cattle and chickens? Who has cows and chickens? How many know how to preserve food without a refrigerator? Most of us could survive without aspirin, she continued, but how many of us would die without our prescription medication? My father was a veterinarian, so he can set a bone or suture a wound, but I'm guessing he'd be challenged to deal with medical conditions using natural methods. Right Dad?"

"You're right, my love. There's quite a few medicines approved for use on animals that I could use to treat human illnesses, but I no longer have a supply of those drugs, and my knowledge of natural methods to treat medical conditions is somewhere between nil and none. One of my colleagues was a chiropractor who used herbs, acupuncture and several other, uh, questionable approaches in his practice. Never killed anyone as far as I know."

"So we'll slip and slide back to being hunters and gatherers?" asked Carol.

"Not those who get on the learning curve of survival," said Jack, "and we all have. When you get to my place I'll do my best to move all of you further up the curve."

"Lots of people out there already huntin' and gatherin'," said Woody. "We've got lots of water in that tank back there, but I should take an inventory of our food. The meat in the freezer won't last much longer."

George reminded everyone they'd all had one helluva night and ought to hit the sack for some shut eye. They all wondered how much sleep they'd get after tonight's brush with death at the hands of the terrorists. As everyone left the lobby and headed for the stairs, Woody went outside to get the key from the terrorists' truck, thinking how fitting it will be to use it as a hearse for their miserably dead bodies.

RADIOS & REUNION

Friday – January 16th – 8:15AM

The next morning, as everyone was sitting in the lobby eating cold cereal, someone began knocking on the lobby doors. The sound of guns being cocked and unlocked overpowered the knocking at the door.

"Who is it"? asked George, his voice full of authority and challenge.

"It's Bob. I've got the HF radios."

"You got the code?" asked George.

"What code?"

"How do you start the Rover?"

"Ah, the code. Of course. Sixteen zero eight, right?"

George swung the panel over one of the doors up and out of the way, unlocked the door and gave Bob a strong, friendly shake.

"Glad to see you're okay, Bob."

Everyone surrounded Bob, shaking his hand and patting him on the back, each of them basking in the comfort and security of belonging to a group of people who truly cared about one another.

"The officer in charge of the bunker let me take six HF radios. They're all set to the same frequency. Probably limited to thirty miles or so, depending on weather and location, but I feel better knowing our chances of staying in touch went up about a thousand percent."

"You got that right." said Woody. "Like Jack told me last night, better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."

"When I pulled into Fair Oaks, I saw the bodies lying out there in the parking lot. I didn't see bullet holes in the doors and all of you are okay. What happened?"

"We kicked their sorry asses." said Woody.

He then took great pleasure in running Bob and his son through their encounter with the terrorists, using his body and his voice to punctuate the details of how all the good guys lived and all the bad guys died, including his chance to fire Jack's sniper rifle.

"My god." said Bob. "Wish I'd been here but glad I wasn't."

The group sat silently for a few moments, privately reliving their role in the evening they had spent together and apart, worried for one another, frightened for themselves.

"I'd like to explain how to operate these radios then get back to Edwards. Okay to do that now?"

Jack slapped Bob on the back. "Hell yeah. You risked your life to get back here with these radios and you'll risk your life again getting back to Edwards. Could be other Jihadist groups out there. Even ordinary hoodlums and looters could be a problem."

"Thanks for your concern, Jack, but only people whose lives were at risk were those who tried to get in my way. I borrowed a Hum Vee from the base, the nickname for a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle. Took me a while to persuade the officer in charge of the motor pool, but being a former

Major has its benefits. It's armored and equipped with weapons more deadly than my Glock. If someone had attacked me on the way here or attacks me on the way back, they better have something more lethal than a pistol or a rifle."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Woody. "We had a Hum Vee in Iraq. Like a Hummer on steroids. Wish I had one myself."

"I'm glad I've got this one. Made the drive down here safer than the ride home with Tim on Dave's motorcycle. I'll feel better about my drive back too."

"Did you stop by Tim's place on the way over here?" asked Jack.

"I did. Gave him one of the radios. Offered to take him and his mother back here but his mother said no."

"That sucks." said George. "They'd be safer here than over there all by themselves."

"That's what I told them but Tim's mother was adamant about staying."

Bob set the six HF radios on the dinner table and pulled his from its holster. "There's a dozen of you and only six radios so I'll run through the steps for six of you then again for the remaining six."

Bob took everyone through the steps to turn on the radios and operate the PTT button to talk and listen. When he was satisfied everyone knew the basics, he had them take turns calling each other, then cautioned them that the range was limited to thirty or forty miles, and that they should use the radios sparingly to conserve the batteries.

"Unless an emergency arises, we'll make a conference call every Sunday at six in the evening. I'll manage it like a radio net. I'll key my radio promptly at six, identify myself and update everyone on my situation, then key down and wait for each of you to do the same. To save batteries, we should limit the call to ten minutes."

Bob sighed. "I think we all agree that staying at Fair Oaks isn't a long-term option. Not just because you'll eventually exhaust your supply of food and water but also because the Antelope Valley won't be a safe place to live if Edwards becomes a target for something more deadly than an EMP attack. These radios are no guarantee we can keep in touch after you leave, but they'll give us a better chance than having no radios at all."

Bob had put possibilities in their minds and radios in their hands. They all looked down at the radio he had given them, knowing it would be a poor but necessary substitute for the face-to-face friendship they were now enjoying. They couldn't remain at Fair Oaks forever.

George knew that without the help of these people, he couldn't protect the residents from looters, hoodlums or terrorists. Nor could he save the patients in the nursing home from disease and death. All he had was a pistol and a flash light. Someday soon, he'd put Fair Oaks behind him and make his way to Jack's place.

Woody and Carol had never planned to work at Fair Oaks for more than a few years. They were both good in the kitchen, but Carol was an artist and a poet. She wanted to draw and write. Woody was a designer and a builder. He

had planned to build a cabin for Carol in the aspens of Colorado. Now he'd transfer that dream to Jack's place in northern California.

Dave had never given a thought to living anywhere but here at Fair Oaks with his wife. With her gone, the only life he had was with his daughter, and he knew she wanted to be with Jack.

Linda struggled with her allegiance to her father and her affection for Jack. That conflict would haunt her until she found a way to resolve it. Lake View would be the perfect solution, but she'd have to convince her father and get them there safely.

Harold would have to ask his son if he would go with him to Jack's place.

Paul's and Rose's children were in Ohio with no way to reach them. The choice to go north with these people was a no brainer.

Linda got up and gave Bob a hug. "Thank you, Bob. When we meet on the net, I'll see your face in this radio and look forward to seeing you again in person."

"You're all very welcome," said Bob. "I hope to see you all again."

"Last night," continued Linda, "when Jack and Woody got back to Fair Oaks, we discussed several of our more immediate problems, such as saving the meat in our freezer and disposing of bodies. We also discussed less urgent problems, like when is the grid coming up again and when can we expect the National Guard to get their boots back on the ground to deal with looters and terrorists."

"Two years ago," said Bob, "after that 7.7 earthquake, a group of Air Force, Army and Navy specialists conducted a study of solar flares and discovered that CMEs, coronal mass ejections, are *when* not *if* scenarios and more likely to take our power grid down than a HEMP. That's a moot point now, of course, but *how* to get the power grid up and running again is more important than *what* took it down.

"I read something about that myself," said Dave. "Article in Time Magazine. Said the large transformers for each of the five power grids are manufactured in Europe and it would take two or three years to get one built. No spares sitting in a warehouse, and now, with the EMP taking cars, trains, trucks and ships out, how the hell would they get one here even if they could build it."

"Exactly," agreed Bob, "and that's why the military got involved. Unlike commercial ships and aircraft, military ships and aircraft are hardened against EMPs and those that are not hardened can and are being repaired because we have a large supply of spare parts."

"What's that have to do with getting the grid repaired?" asked George.

"We can fly or float the transformers back to the States," said Bob. "The consortium of military experts I mentioned earlier is already in touch with the manufacturers. They're struggling with the effects of the HEMPs too, but the Intel that came down the chain of command at Edwards sounds encouraging. Word is that two or three of the transformers were in the process of being built when the HEMPs struck."

"That surprises me," said Dave. "According to the newspaper articles I've

been reading for the last several years, the government has repeatedly refused to authorize any money to harden the grid or build backup transformers."

"Surprises me too," agreed George, "but coming from Bob, I'm encouraged to believe it might happen. Did your Intel explain how they're getting around Congress?"

"No, but the FBI, the CIA and all the other secret, three-letter operations get all sorts of things done without Congress knowing about it, especially now with the world turned upside down."

"Yeah." said George. "I can hear Tim singing *Secret agent man... Secret agent man...*"

Everyone laughed at George's willingness to give Tim, their comedian absentia, a vicarious performance.

"We miss him too, George, and I will miss all of you. Until Sunday."

As Bob left the lobby, everyone waved and wished him a safe journey back to Edwards.

BAD RIDDANCE

Friday – January 16th – 9:30 AM

After Bob and Larry left, Woody asked for volunteers to help him take the bodies of the terrorists back to the cell house, then looked at Dave.

"I know this is gonna be—"

"A dirty job," interrupted Dave, "but somebody's gotta do it. Let's go Woody."

They left the lobby, walked out to the terrorist's crew cab truck and got in. Woody knew there were two bodies behind Fair Oaks, so he started the engine and drove to the back parking area. When he got there, Jack and Harold were getting into the Rover. They got out and volunteered to help Woody and Dave load the bodies.

Harold leaned down and rolled the first Jihadist over, then stepped back with a surprised look on his face. "Bloody hell! Look at the arrow stuck in that one's chest."

Dave walked over and kicked the body. "Rose told us she could put a dozen arrows in the bull's eye. Looks like she did. Good riddance."

"No," said Woody, "that fucker's *bad* riddance."

"You're right and the bodies of our friends were *good* riddance. Could have made one trip to the funeral home if we'd had this truck but some of the Fair Oaks folks would have objected to transporting the bodies of people they loved with a truck that had belonged to people they hated."

"Most likely," agreed Harold, "but I believe they would have seen the ironic appropriateness of using it to rid themselves of the terrorists so they could say goodbye to their friends."

"Sounds right to me." said Jack. "But now it's gonna be a hearse for our enemies."

As Jack, Harold, George and Woody loaded the two bodies into the bed of the terrorists' crew cab truck, they noticed two gas cans strapped to the front wall of the truck's bed. Woody jumped into the bed of the truck and lifted both cans.

"One's full but the other is empty. I better check the fuel in this thing."

Jack walked over to the truck, reached into the cab and turned the key to the Accessory position.

"It's under a quarter of a tank. Enough to get you over to the cell house and back, but we might need this truck again."

"You're our resident Secret Agent Man," said Dave, "so I'm guessing you have a siphon hose. You got everything else in that Rover of yours."

"I do." He smiled at Dave, but wished he and everyone else would stop putting a Mission Impossible spin on his skills and resources. Survival was something you learned and did, not something you had or just pulled out of a hat like a rabbit.

"Should have mentioned my siphon hose when we were talkin' about how and when to get to my place. We'll definitely need to siphon gas from abandoned cars and trucks."

Jack crawled into the back of his Rover, removed his siphon hose from below the floor boards and handed it to Dave.

"I appreciate your confidence in me, Dave, but I don't have everything in that Rover, and one of them is a gas can. Hate to ask you two to risk getting shot at again, but you probably should swing by that Walmart and see if there are any left."

"I've got one in my parking space. Used it to fill the Triumph for Bob and Tim. It's empty now."

"Perfect." said Woody. "We can use it and Jack's hose to siphon gas for the crew cab. If there aren't enough cars in the parking lot here at Fair Oaks to fill its tank, we'll siphon gas from cars stalled along the streets in town. Looters might have siphoned a few dry, but the ratio of cars running to cars not running has to be a hundred to one, so the odds are with us."

Jack and Harold got back in the Rover and left for the mortuary. Dave got his gas can from the garage area, tossed it in the back of the crew cab, and Woody drove the truck back to the front parking lot.

The truck had a thirty-six gallon tank and was almost empty, so Dave and Woody had to siphon gas into each of the three cans twice to get enough to fill the truck. When they were finished, they filled the three cans up again, took them to Dave's storage area, then drove back to the front parking lot to load the other bodies into the truck. The smell of rotting flesh was threatening to overpower both of them. Flies circled the bodies like tiny buzzards.

"We otta pour gas on these fuckers and light 'em off." said Woody. "Take care of the bodies and the smell."

"We could do that." grinned Dave. "Take 'em over to the cell house, pile 'em on top of their pals and set the whole place afire. But that'd put the other homes in the neighborhood at risk."

"Yeah, I was just kidding." said Woody. "Probably cause the fire department to roll out there and try to put it out, too. I know some of their trucks are running because Jack and I watched 'em putting out fires from the roof at the Ramada. Jack said most were caused by transformers on power poles exploding when the EMP struck."

Dave and Woody drove back to the cell house and began unloading the bodies of the terrorists. As they dragged the last one inside, a man came out of a nearby house and pointed a gun at them.

"What the hell you two doing?" he yelled.

Dave let the leg he was holding fall to the ground, and Woody let go of the leg he was holding.

Dave said, "We're cleaning up your neighborhood."

"By dragging dead bodies into the house next door? Get the hell out of here or the cops'll be draggin' your bodies out of here."

Dave and Woody drew their pistols and pointed them at the man.

"Or we can add yours to the pile." said Woody. "Your choice, fella."

As they stood there defying one another, a woman ran out of the house

the man had come from.

"Franklin! Get back in this house! They'll kill you too!"

Woody lowered his gun and Dave and the man did likewise.

"This man," said Woody, "and the ones inside, were terrorists."

"Yeah, wife and I thought it was odd a dozen or more men were living in the same house. Then last night we heard gunfire and what sounded like a hand grenade. That you guys?"

"It was. We killed the ones who came to kill us, then came over here and killed the rest of 'em. We couldn't burn 'em 'or bury 'em, and we didn't want 'em stinkin' up our place."

"Well we don't want them stinking up our neighborhood either, dead or alive. You said you couldn't burn their bodies. Why not? That truck of yours has gas in it or you couldn't have driven it over here. You can siphon—"

"And waste gas on those fuckers?" interrupted Woody. "Not gonna happen."

"Besides," added Dave, "if you set fire to that house, you're likely to set fire to all the other houses. And there goes your neighborhood. Up in smoke. If it were my neighborhood, I'd take stink over smoke every time."

"You two see that area behind this cul de sac? Nothin' but dirt back there clear up to the aqueduct. I've got a five gallon can of gas I use for the lawn mower. Probably closer to full than empty. Not likely I'll be mowing my grass any time soon, if ever. Most of the men on this street are older than dirt, so —"

"You'll need our help." Interrupted Dave. "Won't have to drag 'em over there. That crew cab is four-wheel drive."

Dave, Woody and Franklin loaded the bodies into the truck, then Woody drove it between the cell house and the one west of it. When he got several hundred yards into the empty field, he stopped to make sure he was far enough from any of the houses along the cul de sac. He had a safe distance, so they unloaded the terrorists and covered their bodies with gasoline.

"This is your neighborhood." said Dave. "Probably best you strike the match."

"Thanks for the help. I'm Frank. My wife calls me Franklin to get my attention. It usually does."

"I'm Dave and that's Woody. Fire department has some fire trucks that still run. We've seen them fighting fires started by transformers that blew up when the EMP struck. Wind's blowing away from your houses, so they probably won't have anything to do but listen to the story you're gonna make up."

"Nah." said Frank. "I'm gonna light this fire then go back to my house and have a beer. Firemen can make up their own stories."

Dave and Woody wished Frank luck and got back in the truck. As they drove away, a column of dark, black smoke had begun to spiral higher and higher into the sky.

Dave looked at Woody and said, "That smoke is them terrorists gettin' their prayers answered. Up they go, back to Allah. Good riddance."

Woody shook his head. "Them terrorists is bad riddance, Dave, not good riddance. And you weren't gonna shoot Frank, were you?"

"No, and neither were you. All three of us were just bluffin' 'til a better idea came along."

"Then maybe we should thank Allah for sendin' us one."

"No fucking way. Frank came up with the better idea, not Allah."

Woody gave Dave a sideways look with sarcasm written all over it, turned out of the cul de sac and aimed the crew cab for Fair Oaks. A couple of blocks later, a fire truck passed them. Woody looked in the rear view mirror and watched it turn into the cul de sac, lights flashing, sirens off. He hoped Frank was enjoying that beer, or had put together a whopping good story.

JERKY & HIDE

Friday – January 16th – 12:00 Noon

When everyone got back to Fair Oaks, Carol went to the kitchen to prepare lunch and the group gathered around the dinner table.

Woody said, "Jerky would be a good thing to eat on our trip up north. We can make it from the beef in the freezer. Cut the beef into strips, then dry them in the ovens. We've got plenty of propane left in that tank back there."

Margaret nodded. "Good idea Woody. We could make jerky from the chicken too but we better eat all the fish before we hit the road because it spoils far more quickly than beef or chicken. "Fish can go bad very quickly. We made jerky on our farm in Minnesota from beef and chicken but we also canned it. We cut the beef and the poultry into small pieces, added potatoes and vegetables, then put 'em in Mason jars. My mother taught me everything she knew about canning fruit, meat and vegetables. I still have her pressure canner."

Margaret explained the difference between canning fruits, vegetables and meat. Bacteria doesn't grow as readily in high-acid foods like peaches and strawberries, but loves low-acid foods like beef and potatoes. The boiling point of water is high enough to kill bacteria that might be in fruit, but it's not high enough to kill bacteria that might be in meat or vegetables. The steam in a pressure canner takes the temperature well above the boiling point of water.

"So we use a standard canner to preserve fruit and a pressure canner for meat and vegetables. We can also preserve dry foods like rice, oats and barley. My mother called it oven canning. We bake the jars in the oven to kill any insects or eggs. As the jars cool, the lids seal. Lasts for years."

"I'm glad you know what you're doing." said Linda. "We've survived the EMP, hoodlums and terrorists. I'm glad we can add food poisoning to the list of ways we won't die."

"Me too." said an old man as he walked into the dining room tapping the floor with his cane. "Been through wars, earthquakes and now these damn terrorists and none of it scares me as much as just trying to cross the street with this bum leg."

"Max." said George. "Glad to see you up. How you doing?"

"I'm doin' without George. Not as good as I once was but I'd be as good once as I ever was."

The group gave Max a hearty laugh. They had only seen him twice before. His bad leg and the January cold kept him in his room most of the time. He was one of those who had chosen to stay at Fair Oaks and face whatever was coming their way – terrorists, bombs or starvation. Carol had been bringing his meals to his room since the HEMP attack. She gave Max a warm smile as he sat down at the table. Max smiled back, then gave Woody a mischievous look.

"If I was your age, young man, I'd steal that woman from you in a heart beat."

"If I was your age," countered Woody, "and she was **your** woman, I'd give it a shot anyway."

Laughter rippled around the room. Despite his cane and advanced years, Max hadn't lost his get up and go.

"Rose can help with the canning," said Paul. "She's been doing that since before we were married."

Carol nodded. "Woody and I will cut the meat in our refrigerators into strips for jerky and chunks for canning. Helen, would you see if you can find any jars we can use for canning?"

"Yes, and I have a dozen or more pint-sized Ball and Kerr jars in my room. Thought I might do some canning in my golden years, then got involved in the nursing area. I sterilized them before packing them in boxes."

George said, "Looks like we've got a handle on this stuff. I'm gonna get my radio and check KFI for updates. When George returned, they listened to the announcement.

...approved Emergency Alert station broadcasting on 640 kilohertz. We will broadcast alerts and updates every hour on the hour.

High altitude nuclear devices have been detonated over the major cities of the world. All five power grids in the United States are down or severely damaged. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Guard and the Red Cross are mobilizing aid in communities across the nation. You are instructed to cooperate with all federal, state and local authorities. Homeland Security has announced that due to the wide-spread damage caused by the HEMP, additional attacks on military or civilian sites are unlikely.

The main threat to US citizens is now thirst, hunger and disease. Sigma, the latest variant of the Covid virus, took millions of lives before the HEMP attack and will take more lives now that hospitals, doctors, medical supplies and equipment have been compromised by the power grid being down. The public is also warned to boil water for at least ten minutes and bury human waste at least three feet in the ground. Drinking contaminated water and not disposing of human waste properly can subject you to pathogens more deadly than the Covid virus.

This is KFI, a FEMA approved Emergency Alert station broadcasting on 640 kilohertz. We will broadcast alerts and updates every hour on the hour. High altitude nuclear devices...

"Unlikely?" said Jack. "I won't bet my life on it. Both official and unofficial estimates are that ninety percent of Americans will be dead in less than a year following a HEMP attack like the one that hit us last Tuesday. So the announcement is correct about the damage being widespread. But whoever attacked us sure as hell won't pass up the opportunity to make the death toll one hundred percent. With the grid down, they could pop a dirty bomb on Washington just for the fun of it. Or drop biological bombs on all the major cities. Osama Bin Laden frequently referred to nuclear attacks on US cities as an American Hiroshima."

"Yep." agreed George. "The HEMP is just the beginning of the end of the world we knew. And the FEMA alert should have added foreign and domestic

terrorists to thirst, hunger and disease.”

Max raised his cane and pointed it at George. “Yes, just the beginning of an end we don’t want. But the alert should also have mentioned history as a way to forge a beginning that will lead us toward an end we **do** want... for ourselves, our families, our friends, our country and Earth itself.”

Margaret got up and gave Max a hug. “That was something I needed to hear, Max. Thanks.”

Max blushed but recovered quickly. “Glad it hit the spot. When I taught history and politics, I made my students understand that you can’t separate them. They go together like a horse and carriage, love and marriage. But it took one of my students to make me understand that history isn’t just what happened in the past. The boy was an engineering student so he couldn’t understand why he was required to take history. He was young so he had more life ahead of him than behind. He was interested in today and tomorrow, not yesterday. I told him the college granted degrees to students who were well-rounded individuals, so a degree required several courses in the humanities. Later, I got to thinking about it and realized my approach to teaching history was incomplete and misleading. From that day forward, I taught the past as lessons for the future. You’ve probably heard Winston Churchill’s comment that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. And I would add that the root of all history is human nature, so we tend to make the same mistakes over and over again. And it’s not just nations that repeat history. Couples who don’t learn from their disagreements don’t stay married. People who don’t learn from their mistakes don’t mature.”

Bob stood and gave Max a thumb up. “Well done, Max. Reminds me of something my wife said. Can’t remember what triggered her comment but we were sitting at the dinner table when she that doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results is a kind of insanity.”

Max nodded. “We do the same thing at the ballot box. Vote the same idiots into office then complain that things don’t change. Presidents, congressmen, governors and mayors, even unelected bureaucrats, have failed over and over again to acknowledge what history has and is teaching us.”

“Yep,” agreed Bob. “At a briefing a few months ago, a three-star general of the Air Force made it clear that he and his staff were paying close attention to the past and how it might affect the present. What he said puts our present predicament into context. He told us that back in 1946 the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party called nuclear weapons a Paper Tiger. Then he brought that into the present by saying that today China considers Paper Tiger to mean that nuclear weapons are psychological weapons, a kind of nuclear blackmail to prevent the US and its allies from launching a conventional attack if China attacks Taiwan. The general warned everyone in the meeting that China might launch a HEMP attack to ensure we cannot respond militarily to that scenario. If that occurs, he said the US Air Force would put the B21 Raider into action without testing.”

"Wow!" said Linda. "That's the secret weapon you mentioned yesterday, isn't it?"

Bob smiled. "The B-21 is one of several, Linda, and although none of you have an official need to know, you all have an emotional need to know. And the FBI isn't monitoring our conversations so there's no danger that I would be arrested or lose my security clearance for revealing secrets."

Bob paused, then stuck both thumbs in the air. "But I would love to be the pilot!"

The room resounded with Oorahs!

Jack gave Bob a thumb down. "And I would hate to hear you got shot down over Beijing."

"Yes, that would be a problem. Beijing would be a radioactive wasteland. Even with potassium iodide tablets, I'd get radiation burns from ass to appetite."

"Potassium iodide?" asked Linda.

"It's a thyroid blocking medicine that lessens the effect of radiation. The tablets can be crushed and mixed in any liquid."

"You know what burns my ass, Bob?"

"No Tim, but I'm sure you're gonna tell us."

Tim put his hand on his butt. "Flames up to here!"

When the laughter subsided, George said, "Ah, I was wondering when we'd hear from our resident comedian."

Dave said, "Thanks Tim. Sometimes we need a breather from the serious stuff but let's get serious again. The FEMA announcement that a nuclear war is unlikely makes me feel better about leaving the others at Fair Oaks. But what Jack and Max and Bob said makes me want to get out of here sooner than later."

"Me too." said Jack. "Somewhere to avoid the bad ending that might be coming our way if we stay here. Like my place."

Max gently tapped his cane on the floor. "That's a go for me, Jack."

"I'll make sure you get there Max."

"Thanks. Won't be much help with this bum leg but I sure as hell don't want to stay here if China starts dropping bombs on the Antelope Valley."

"Your knowledge of history and politics might come in handy when we start trying to rebuild the world we want instead of the world we've got."

"Well," replied Max, "history isn't the key to avoiding the world we have now. Too late for that. But knowing why it happened could keep it from happening again. How we get the leaders of the world to apply the lessons of history is a mystery to me. But yes, that might help our little group of survivors build the world we want up there in your place. Might even inspire other survivors to do the same."

Rose stood and looked at Paul, her husband, then turned to Max. "Let's hope so, Max."

"Yes." said Margaret. Then she turned to Jack. "I know you're fond of saying hope for the best but prepare for the worst, and I agree with that approach, especially with dark days ahead, but let me remind you and

everyone else that hope springs eternal in the human heart.”

“Here, here!” said George. “Who was it that said hope is a feathered thing? Some poem I think.”

“Emily Dickinson.” said Margaret. “It’s a beautiful poem, and like most of her poetry, it’s replete with simple but uncommon wisdom. And I hasten to remind all of you that hope was the **only** good thing in Pandora’s Box.”

Linda turned to Margaret and smiled. “You are so literate! Dickinson rarely left her home but her poetry found a way out. But Pandora’s Box. Just a Greek myth but an amazingly believable story of how the bad things we see throughout history were released into the world... especially now with the world suffering from bad things and bad people.”

“I don’t have a literate bone in my body,” said Woody, “but I remember Pandora and her box. Those Greeks had some smarts. So on our left hand we got hope. But our right hand better do something about it. For starters, Carol and Helen told me we have enough food to feed everyone for more than six months. With federal and local aid coming, they might be able to stay at Fair Oaks indefinitely. But an imminent attack on Edwards would trump any decision to wait for help to arrive.”

“Where can we hide?” asked Linda. “Are there any fall out shelters in the Antelope Valley?”

“None that I know of.” said George. “City of Palmdale stopped maintaining fallout shelters several years ago. It’s public knowledge that during the Cuban crisis the military built a fallout shelter in the Borax Mine. Had enough water, food and medical services for more than fifteen thousand people.”

“I read that, too,” said Dave, “but it never got used. The Russians agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba if we’d remove ours from Turkey. Then the cold war cooled off.”

“Maybe we could hide there,” said Carol, “until we’re sure the bombs aren’t gonna fall. Is it still there?”

“Can’t imagine why not,” said Jack, “but my guess is that only military personnel would be allowed inside. I’ll get Bob on the HF radio. The MARS network will probably have the same info as KFI’s FEMA announcement, but he might have some insider knowledge.”

FOOTBALL & FALLOUT

Friday - January 16th - 1:20 PM

Jack told everyone to turn their HF radios on so they could hear Bob and respond if they wanted to. Jack kept his HF radio on 24/7 in case Bob gave him a call. He keyed the transmitter and identified himself. The group waited anxiously for a response. Bob had told them that except for emergencies, they would activate a radio net at six o'clock every Sunday. It was Friday but the chance of a nuclear attack on Edwards was certainly an emergency.

Jack. We weren't expecting to hear from you until Sunday. Everything okay?

Yeah, we're all okay but the latest FEMA announcement has us concerned an attack on Edwards isn't as unlikely as they say it is. We're preparing to leave Fair Oaks and head north to my place but we've still got a few days before we can get on the road. If an attack on Edwards is imminent we could be in trouble. You know anything about a fallout shelter in the Borax Mine? You told us that Edwards has DUMB tunnels to other bases. Does the tunnel connect you with the one at Borax?

Yes, it's part of the DUMB network of deep underground military bases. Not surprised you know about that. It's been there since the Cuban crisis, but only military and retired personnel and their families are allowed entry. Haven't heard anything yet, but if I do, I'll let you know ASAP to give you all a head start out of the area.

Bob. George here. Do you expect a large nuclear bomb like the ones that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or a small tactical weapon to disable the runways and the aircraft at Edwards to prevent retaliation?

Unlikely George, for several reasons. One, we've been told that the nuclear devices that triggered the HEMPs were in our own high-orbit satellites. So whoever is responsible knows we can't retaliate because we don't know who they are. Two, they know the HEMPs crippled our ability to retaliate even if we knew who was responsible. Third, the HEMPs caused more wide-spread, long-term damage to America than any conventional or nuclear weapon they could have dropped on us or might drop in the future.

Jack keyed his radio.

Sounds logical, Bob, but the men who did this may not be logical.

Max tapped his cane on the floor. "Hell no they're not logical! They're crazier than a hat full of hoot owls."

What was that?

That was Max, reminding us the terrorists are nucking futs, not logical.

Yes, but they're also clever. By the way, I haven't heard Tim chime in with his usual humor. He and his mother OK?

Jack here. I tried to call him for this emergency net but got no response. He probably won't turn on his radio until Sunday. My guess is that even if China has a large-scale plan to take out Edwards and other major air force bases, some of the terrorists in this country may not be aware of the big plan, or might decide to do their own thing, logical or not.

Your guess is as good as mine, Jack. No guarantee Jihadist cells or

ISIS groups are anything but loosely organized, if at all. Like you've said many times... better safe than sorry. So let's go over the worst case scenario: Edwards is attacked. Any aircraft which cannot properly identify itself will be met by fighter aircraft and ordered to land or be shot down. Anyone approaching the base in a vehicle or on foot who cannot properly identify themselves will be ordered to leave, arrested, or shot. Every person and every vehicle is thoroughly searched at the gate, no matter who they are or what they're driving. Every square inch of Edwards is under radar surveillance. We can see a scorpion crawling towards the base. Even if they somehow managed to explode a suitcase or a backpack bomb, it wouldn't be a threat to the civilian population in the Antelope Valley.

Dave keyed his radio.

Dave here, Bob. What if it's a dirty bomb? Wouldn't the fallout be a problem for people on the base and here in the Antelope Valley?

Linda reached over, took the radio from her father and keyed the transmitter.

What's a dirty bomb, Bob?

Dirty bombs use explosives like dynamite to scatter radioactive waste around the targeted area. Most are small enough to fit in a suitcase or a backpack, but fallout wouldn't be a problem, even if the bomb were big enough to fit in a van or small truck. The radioactive material isn't as dangerous as the fallout that comes from the fission of enriched plutonium when a nuclear bomb is exploded. And the fallout from a dirty bomb would dissipate in a few hours. Even fallout from a nuclear bomb dissipates in a few weeks.

Woody keyed his radio.

So maybe they will and maybe they won't nuke Edwards. But they might nuke a large city like LA or New York to demonstrate their hatred for Americans, or to take credit for taking us to our knees.

Dave gave Woody a thumb up, then pushed his PTT.

Or nuke the White House to kill the President. That would put a knot in our ability to retaliate, even if we knew who was to blame.

Thanks to the founding fathers, the chain of command in this country is never in doubt. At Edwards, we refer to it as COG, or Continuity of Government. We were told yesterday the President is on Air Force One. The engine and the electronics are hardened against EMPs, and like most military aircraft, it has several backup computers. If one is damaged, the others take over. It's like a committee. If one acts badly, they vote it out of operation.

George here, Bob. So the President is safer on Air Force One than in the White House or at Camp David?

That's right George, and he carries that suitcase around with him wherever he goes.

It's Woody again, Bob. I've read about that suitcase. They call it the *Football*, right? And if he decides to nuke somebody, he just pushes the red button.

There's no Red Button in the Football, Woody. It contains a menu of options the President uses to make a decision and a secure way to identify himself as the Commander in Chief to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They contact their commanders in the field who push a Red

Button.

Assuming we've got any military left to carry out his decision.

That you, Dave?

Roger.

Don't call me Roger, Dave.

Dave keyed his radio so Bob could hear the laughter rolling around the room.

Good to hear you folks can still laugh. Look, if retaliation becomes possible I can assure all of you that we will not be powerless to respond. Most military aircraft are immune to EMPS. The electronic, fly-by-wire connection between the pilot and the airplane's control surfaces has been hardened. And our jet and gas-turbine engines don't need a spark to keep the engine running. The fireball burns as long as fuel and air are delivered to the turbine. Even piston-driven propeller aircraft are immune to an EMP because they use magnetos to fire the spark plugs. Our fighters will fly and it won't be the friendly skies of United. It will be the fiery skies of Goodbye to Beijing, the Taliban, Al-Queda and any other group we can identify as parties to this disaster.

Jack didn't want to diminish Bob's confidence in the Air Force or in America's soldiers, but he was worried that retaliation might not be possible.

Jack here, Bob. Just a reminder that during the Cold War, we did very little to harden America against small terrorist attacks. Our enemies were the big guys. We based our survival on the assumption they wouldn't attack us if we maintained our ability to completely destroy them. Now it seems more likely our primary enemy is still the big guys, perhaps China, and the little guys, small terrorist groups with a post EMP strategy to take advantage of what the big guys have done so they can pursue their goal to kill Infidels. Us.

Paul began shaking his head with a scowl on his face.

Bob, this is Paul. You're saying we can't retaliate because we don't know for sure who did this to us. That sucks. I'd like to see those bastards blown to kingdom come. Now.

This is Carol, Bob. So what kind of future are we looking at? China has its way with Taiwan while we're stuck fighting one Jihadist terror group after another? That sucks.

It does, and Muslim fanatics are motivated to keep on killing Infidels because their leaders tell them that the next one thousand years belong to Islam.

Max tapped his cane on the floor again.

You're right, Bob, but everyone has underestimated Americans. The British when we declared independence. Japan and its war lords when they bombed Pearl Harbor. Hitler and his fascist fanatics when they invaded Poland. The Soviets when they built the wall between east and west Germany. Now Beijing and Mecca have underestimated us, and it wouldn't surprise me if Islam has underestimated their women, who will someday overthrow their chauvinist masters.

The group sat in the lobby looking at one another, hoping Max was right. Jack keyed his radio.

We've got some decisions to make, Bob. We'll talk this over then report back to you.

Roger that but do it soon Jack. The information I'm getting from my contacts at Edwards is that the situation could escalate into an all out war very soon.

THE SITUATION ROOM

Friday — January 16th — 6:15 AM

Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor, stood and brought the meeting to order. “Well, here we are again. This time to deal with an attack on our homeland. Each of you braved the chaos of a world turned upside down and the crowds surrounding the Capitol to get here. It’s a miracle you were able to get here at all, and as soon as you did. So let’s get down to business. I’m the chair of these meetings but I’ve asked Steven Miller, the Director of Central Intelligence, to present an overview of the situation. When he’s done with his summary, you’ll each have an opportunity to present your recommendations, then I will do my best to steer us to a solution we can all support, regardless of our differences. Stuart, the floor is yours.”

Stuart Williams, the Director of Central Intelligence, stood. “Millions have already died from the loss of medical care, prescription drugs, traffic accidents, and the competition for food and water. Millions more will die of thirst, and eventually hunger because farmers can’t harvest crops and the trucks and trains can’t get food to our supermarkets. Then disease will spread to pandemic levels because people can’t find fresh water or flush their toilets.”

Stuart paused to look at each person in the room. “But this is not the end of the world, and you are why it’s not. So your response to this world changing disaster is vital. Not only in how you respond but also in how quickly you respond.”

Stuart took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. All eyes were on him and several acknowledged him with a nod, so he continued.

“There are five parts to my overview but I’m sure we’ll cover more as we dig into the details of our plan. **First**, it’s not a coincidence that high altitude EMPs were detonated over America when our President, Daniel Woods, and our Vice President, Shirley Adams, were both out of the country. I’m sure you all remember a similar situation in 2013, when our President and Vice President were both out of the country. The Vice President was in Rome and the President was in the middle east. This time it was Woods in Beijing to negotiate a peaceful way to secure Taiwan’s sovereignty, and Adams in Mexico City to negotiate a peaceful way to end the illegal alien crisis on our southern border.”

Stuart paused, took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. The look on Stuart’s face and the tone in his voice made it clear that he was about to reveal more bad news. You could hear a pin drop in the Situation Room.

“As you all know,” he continued, “the Covert Air Force One backup plane is never parked at the same airport where Air Force One has landed. If Air Force One is disabled or attacked, or if the president can’t return to the airport where Air Force One is located, vehicles and helicopters are standing by to transport the President to the airport where the covert planes are waiting. When the President received news of the HEMP attacks, his team

hustled him towards Air Force One but as they approached the plane it exploded and caught fire. His secret service team attempted to get him to the helicopter but they were gunned down. We don't know if China and Mexico are in bed together, but our President is either dead or a hostage in Beijing, and our Vice President is stranded in Mexico City."

Shouts of disbelief, anger and insulting remarks aimed at China and Mexico rippled through the room. Tears formed in every eye. When the noise subsided, Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor, stood and made circles with his arm in the air.

"Like many of you, my mind slipped back to the assassination of President Kennedy. We have video confirmation of what Stuart just told us, but we do not have confirmation that the President has been killed. And whether he is dead or a hostage, we have work to do. Stuart, please continue with your summary."

"This tragic news brings me to my **second** point. The next in line for the presidency is Richard Davis, the Speaker of House. Despite having been vaccinated, however, he died of pneumonia caused by the Sigma variant of the Covid virus. Next in line is Henry Waters, the President Pro Tempore, but he was fishing with his son in the High Sierras when the HEMP struck, and we can't reach him because the microwave towers have been disabled. Knowing Henry, he and his son are at some remote lake where cell service isn't available even if the towers were still operational."

Stuart paused to look at Jennifer Edwards, the Secretary of State.

"So you, Ms. Edwards, are now the President of the United States. Do you have anything to say before I continue with my summary?"

Jennifer stood. "Yes, I'm surprised but honored to be in this position. As you can imagine, I'd have preferred that one of you were the president."

She motioned to each of the next three persons in line for the presidency. Paul Perkins, the Secretary of the Treasury. Michael Erickson, the Secretary of Defense. Dean Anderson, the Attorney General.

"But the buck stops here. I will... well, you all know the rest of the pledge and my reply is... I do."

She looked at Steve Miller, the Chair of the meetings, but said nothing.

Steve gave her a thumb up. "Good, we won't have to spend time with that formality. And yes, it is a grave responsibility, but you are not alone Jennifer... I mean Ms. President. Every available member of the Cabinet and the Joint Chiefs of Staff are here. When Stuart completes his summary, I can assure you they will provide all the information you need to make your decision on how we should proceed."

General Obrien, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, raised his hand. "Steve, I don't want to detour or delay Stuart's summary but I would like to say something to our new president."

Steve nodded.

"Ms. President. Several years ago, in Afghanistan, the Taliban caught us with our pants down. Two days ago, China did the same thing. But I assure you that we have discussed this at great length in the Tank and have several

sure fire ways to catch Beijing with *their* pants down.”

“Thank you General. That’s reassuring. Considering what happened with the President in Beijing, I think everyone here agrees with you that China is behind these HEMP attacks.”

“That’s an affirmative, Ms. President. China wants to force Taiwan to give up their sovereignty as a separate Chinese nation. Beijing wants one China, not two. The other reason is that one third of the world’s shipping passes through the South China Sea, and there is supposedly vast oil and natural gas reserves beneath its seabed. It’s also a source of fish crucial for millions in Southeast Asia. But the Chinese military strategists don’t want interference from the US and its allies. And what better way to ensure that the US and its allies can’t retaliate with conventional or nuclear weapons than to shut down our power grids and shoot down our satellites.”

Michael Erickson, the Secretary of Defense, stood. “Ms. President. As you know, the Tank is where the Joint Chiefs of Staff meet to discuss problems and propose solutions. As General Obrien mentioned, they are all here.”

Michael acknowledged each of the Generals with an upturned wave of his hand. “General Monday of the Army. Admiral Wayne of the Navy. General Eastwood of the Air Force. General North of the Marine Corps. General Kirk of Space Operations.”

Jennifer nodded. “I’m glad you are all here, Generals, and not in your Tank, and I assume we’ll all move to the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon to implement our plan.”

She looked at Michael, the Secretary of Defense, as if to ask him if that was correct.

“Yes, the Situation Room doesn’t have the equipment to communicate with commanders on the front line. So under normal circumstances, we’d move our deliberations to the National Military Command Center, the NMCC War Room at the Pentagon where Emergency Action Messages can be issued to bombers, submarines, land and carrier-based aircraft, ICBM missile silos and other elements of our armed forces.”

Michael paused to rub his chin. “But you’d all agree that what we are facing today is not normal, and neither this room nor the one at the Pentagon is safe from conventional or nuclear attacks, so we’ll move our words to war preparations to the alternate War Room at Raven Rock, Pennsylvania. It’s a DUCC, a deep underground control center. Some refer to it as the Doomsday Bunker because it’s hardened against nuclear weapons far more explosive than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

Jennifer said, “And the hotline to the leaders of other countries, friend and foe, is located there. So I’d like us to discuss who we contact and what we tell them before we implement our plan. Not now, of course, but soon.”

Michael nodded. “That would be wise. Our allies would be more likely to remain our friends if we include their support. Or at least their approval. Okay, let me wrap up my comments about the alternate War Room. As Secretary of Defense, I’m the Chair at both locations, but the Department of the Air Force is in charge of maintaining them, so General Eastwood, the Air

Force Chief of Staff, arranged for helicopters and armored vehicles to stand by outside the Capitol.”

Patricia Perkins, the Secretary of Treasury, cocked her head. “So the rumor that there’s a tunnel between the White House and Raven Rock is false?”

Michael shrugged. “Well, there **is** a tunnel but it’s under construction. Or was until the HEMP attack. When it’s complete, a system of subway trains will move critical personnel from the Capitol and the Pentagon to the DUCC. Probably take a few hours because it’s almost 100 miles between the two locations.”

General Eastwood glanced at Perkins, the Secretary of the Treasury. “It’s a short trip in a helicopter, Patricia.”

Michael turned to Stuart, the Director of Central Intelligence. “Probably a good time to continue your briefing.”

Michael sat down and Stuart stood up. “Thanks, Mike. You and the others are adding meat to the skeletal bones of my briefing. Most of our nuclear missiles are on submarines, so the need to respond quickly isn’t as critical as it would be if we only had access to land-based silos, which take longer to launch. But the HEMP attack has made us highly vulnerable to secondary attacks by conventional, nuclear and biological weapons. So it’s critical that we move to the DUCC at Raven Rock.”

The men and women grabbed their brief cases and headed for the door. Jennifer stopped at the door and looked back, hoping the next time she was in the Situation Room, it would be to deal with a much less frightening and critical situation. *I hope there is a next time.* She thought.

THE WAR ROOM

Friday — January 16th — 8:30 AM

The group boarded the helicopters waiting at the Capitol. The President, the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence and the Air Force Chief of Staff were in Marine One, the helicopter assigned to the President, and the others were in Marine Two. At almost 200 miles per hour, they arrived at the deep underground center in less than thirty minutes.

When everyone was seated in the War Room at the Deep Underground Control Center, Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor turned to the Secretary of Defense.

"I'm handing the reins over to you, Michael. This is your territory."

Michael nodded, then looked at the Director of Central Intelligence. "And I'm handing the reins over to you, Stuart. This is your briefing. Where were we?"

"My **third** point, Michael. And it meshes with Jennifer's advice to include our allies before we finalize our plan. We established alliances during the Cold War with friendly countries to defend America against unfriendly countries and to promote democracy, market economies, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Countries friendly and hostile to those goals have changed since then. One aspect of those changes is that Russia, India, France, Israel, Italy, the United Kingdom and China, like us, have offensive and defensive missile systems."

Stuart paused to take a drink from a plastic bottle of water.

"One aspect of those changes is how to get our allies to *cooperate* with our plan and how to prevent our enemies from *interfering* with our plan. A less important aspect of those changes is the rise of Islamic Jihadist groups in the Middle East. How to deal with our friends and enemies is best left until we get down to the details of our plan, but I'm going to give you a brief overview of the threat Islamic terrorists pose to our country.

There are dozens of small groups of Islamic terrorists scattered around the world but only three are sufficiently organized, armed and funded to pose a serious threat to our national security. Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, who we know as ISIS, and the Taliban, who refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or IEA.

Al-Qaeda was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghan War. Some of bin Laden's gang were Muslim fundamentalists who wanted a much stricter application of Islamic law. So they left Al-Qaeda and formed ISIS. Their tactics were so brutal that Al-Qaeda disowned them. The Taliban are mostly Pashtun tribesmen who banded together in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. They are frequently as brutal as ISIS. Despite these differences, they are all militant, Islamic, jihadists with a religious obsession to kill Infidels."

Stuart jabbed his chest with his thumb.

"That's us. But they do not have long range nuclear weapons. What they have is cell groups throughout America. As you all know, the CIA deals with threats *outside* the continental United States, and the FBI deals with threats *inside* the continental United States. The FBI is an agency under the Department of Justice, so the Director reports to the US Attorney General."

Stuart looked at Dean Anderson. "The FBI Director is not with us this morning. Can you give us an update on the situation here in the States?"

"Jim isn't here because I've been unable to reach him but my intelligence network tells me Jihadist maniacs are already taking advantage of the damage the HEMP did to our country. Mostly attacks on civilians using small arms. But I would not be surprised to receive reports in a day or two that terrorists have attacked one or more strategic targets with small bombs concealed in a suitcase or a backpack."

General Monday, the Army Chief of Staff, raised his hand and looked around the room. "A suitcase bomb, whether conventional or nuclear, is typically the equivalent of one kiloton of TNT. It can destroy a city block and kill and injure hundreds of people. A back pack bomb can have an explosive charge equivalent to as much five kilotons of TNT... enough to destroy everything and everyone within a half-mile radius of the Capitol in Washington, D.C."

General North, the Marine Corps Chief of Staff, raised his hand. "We're probably getting ahead of Stuart's overview with all these details but I think it's a good idea to bring them up as they occur."

He looked at the National Security Advisor, the Chair of their meeting. "Are you okay with that Steve?"

"I am but let's keep them as brief as possible so we have Stuart's overview in mind before we dig further into our situation."

"Okay, I'll limit my comments to the suitcase and back pack bombs mentioned by General Monday. First, plutonium and hydrogen enhanced uranium, the essential ingredients of nuclear bombs, do not exist in nature so it requires technical expertise, sophisticated equipment and complicated procedures to produce those materials in a laboratory. Second, all three Islamic organizations that Stuart mentioned have these capabilities. We know this because they have used them in the past to build small nuclear bombs using plutonium and hydrogen enhanced uranium smuggled into the US by illegal immigrants crossing our borders on foot or into a US harbor in a cargo container or on a small yacht."

"Yes," agreed Michael Erickson, the Secretary of Defense. "and delivered to a target by an Islamic Jihadist eager to sacrifice himself on behalf of Allah. But terrorists in this country should **not** be our first priority. China should be our first priority."

"Absolutely," said Stuart. "China first, then the Jihadists in America. Which brings me to my **fourth** point. As the Attorney General mentioned earlier, Islamic terrorists are taking advantage of the HEMP with attacks aimed at people and property. But China is likely to take advantage of the damage done by the HEMP with attacks aimed at major cities, ports, military bases

and other strategic targets to further weaken our ability to prevent their attack on Taiwan. Defense should take priority over retaliation. When we've removed the threat of China, we can deal with terrorists in our country.

Jennifer Edwards, the President, looked at Stuart. "You began your summary by saying it was no coincidence that the President was in Beijing when the HEMP attack occurred, so I assume you are taking it as fact that China is responsible... but... if we retaliate with military force—"

Jennifer cut herself off, knowing everyone in the room knew that attacking China, whether it was or wasn't responsible, could start a war that ended the world.

Stuart ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, if we're wrong, the result would be far worse than just being embarrassed or having to apologize for our mistake. But we're not wrong, and General Eastwood can tell us why."

Stuart sat down and General Eastwood, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, stood up.

"We keep track of all the satellites in high and low earth orbits. Two reasons. One, to detect any new satellites launched and placed into orbit. Two, to make positional adjustment to satellites endangered by orbital debris. One week before the HEMPs were detonated, tracking specialists detected a dozen new satellites in low earth orbit. One day before the HEMPs were detonated, tracking specialists watched those satellites descend to an orbit of about 300 miles. The launching site was just outside Beijing. The coincidence was too much to ignore. Those satellites contained nuclear devices that triggered the HEMPs around the globe. It required only an hour to bring the tracking equipment back on line after the power grid went down..."

General Eastwood paused to look around the room.

"And what do you suppose our tracking specialists found? All twelve of those satellites had vanished and we know why. What's left of them is space junk left by the explosions."

Jennifer looked at General Eastwood with a curious look on her face. General, you said around the globe. You're telling us that—

"Yes, Ms. President, and excuse me for interrupting you, but China deployed, then detonated HEMP armed satellites over every major city of the world. That makes it *less* likely that these attacks have anything to do with their attempt to bring Taiwan under their control and *more* likely that it has everything to do with their obsession to bring the entire world under their control. Those who were outside when the HEMPs struck America will never forget the intense, fiery flash in our eyes. My advisors and I see these attacks as the fiery light of a Chinese Empire shining in Beijing's eyes."

General Monday gave General Eastwood a thumb up. "Well said, General. Well said, and I'll add my two cents to your comments by saying that what you said makes it plain as the nose on my face that the friends and foes of America, including Moscow, will be more than willing to add their bombs to ours."

General Eastwood nodded. "Well said, Monday and I'd say that what you

said is worth lots more than two cents.”

General Eastwood sat down and Stuart stood up.

“Thank you Generals. And that brings me to my **fifth** and final point. We cannot implement a conventional or nuclear attack without the President’s or Vice President’s football and the codes on their Biscuits. The President and Vice President are not available.”

Stuart locked eyes with Michael, the Secretary of Defense. Is there any way around this problem?”

DROP KICK

Friday — January 16th — 9:45 AM

The Secretary of Defense stood. “When the President and Vice President are both unable to perform the duties of the presidency, a situation we face now, a backup football and alternate biscuit are kept at the White House. Most often, it’s an event that requires both the president and vice president to attend, like the presidential inauguration. When the President left for Beijing and the Vice President left for Mexico City, the third football and biscuit were given to a military aide who began following the Speaker of the House wherever she went. When she died of Covid, it was given to a military aide to accompany the Senate Pro Temp.”

Michael turned to Jennifer. “As Secretary of State, you were next in line for the presidency, so before the Pro Tem left on his fishing trip, the aide should have passed the backup football to an aide assigned to you. I don’t know why that didn’t happen, so on my way to our meeting in the Situation Room, I visited the basement of the White House where the backup is kept. As the Secretary of Defense, I have the security code to enter the room and the combination to open the safe where the briefcase is secured. To my great pleasure and enormous relief, there it was. And this is Major Booker, the military aide who I asked to accompany me through thick and thin to here and now.”

Michael saluted Major Booker. The Major returned the salute, stepped up and set the briefcase on the table.

“Aha! The football!” hollered General Monday. “Let’s *drop kick* it over Beijing and bring fire and brimstone down on those commie bastards!”

The Football had acquired its name from an early nuclear war plan named Dropkick. General Monday, the Army Chief of Staff, used that term to emphasize his preference for military rather than diplomatic solutions. He looked around the room, knowing his position wasn’t shared by everyone. He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are beyond diplomatic solutions. Our best defense is now an aggressive offense.”

The room fell silent, some nodding their heads, some shaking their heads. Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor, stood and cleared his throat.

“Stuart has given us a thorough briefing of our situation. In effect, he has asked us to answer five questions...

One, who attacked us with the HEMP? Our answer is China.

Two, who is the Commander and Chief of our armed forces? Our answer is Jennifer Edwards.

Three, who are our friends and how do we secure their cooperation? And who are our enemies and how do we discourage their interference? Our answer is that India, France, Israel, Italy, and the United Kingdom are our primary allies, and that China, Korea, the Taliban and Russia are our primary enemies. How to deal with our friends and enemies is best left until we get down to the details of our plan.

Four, when and how should we deal with Islamic terrorists in our homeland? Our answer is to wait until we have neutralized China.

Fifth, where is the Football and how do we use it? Our answer to both parts of that question is literally and figuratively on the table. I'm going to begin our answer to the second part of that question by explaining the security requirements of the football. With those procedures in mind, we can develop a plan to take back our country. Some people consider it a clique, but I'll remind myself and all of you that America is the land of the brave and the home of the free!"

The room exploded with applause.

THE TWO-MAN RULE

Friday — January 16th — 11:15 am

When the clapping and back slapping subsided, Steven continued.

“Okay, let’s begin with cyber warfare. Malware, spyware, worms, bugs, viruses, corrupted firmware, Trojan horses... these are among the reasons why security must be tight regarding decisions to launch nuclear weapons.”

Patricia Perkins, the Secretary of the Treasury, raised her hand. “You said decisions, not decision. Are there more than one?”

“Yes, the two-man rule applies to every level of the process. The President has the sole power to order the use of nuclear weapons, and although it’s not considered a two-man rule...” Steven paused to look at Jennifer, “you must communicate a valid launch code to Michael, the Secretary of Defense.”

“Yes, and even though I’m under no legal obligation to consult Congress or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I will not make any decision to launch weapons, conventional or nuclear, without the consensus of everyone in this room.”

Dean Anderson, the US District Attorney stood. “Let me remind everyone that Congress passed a law seven years ago that forbids a president from launching a first strike without Congress declaring war.”

Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor, shook his head. “This would not be a first strike, Dean, and on my way to this meeting I noticed that both chambers of Congress were conspicuously vacant.”

“Yes. God knows where they all are. Congress has discussed but never passed legislation to require the Vice President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Secretary of Defense to concur that the President has a valid reason to launch an attack. I wish they had.”

Jennifer locked eyes with the US Attorney General. “What would be a valid or invalid reason, Dean?”

“Invalid if the nuclear strike would violate international humanitarian laws, especially if conventional weapons could achieve the same goal. Or if civilians on either side of the conflict would be killed or severely injured. Nuclear weapons have no value but to deter the leaders of the world from Mutually Assured Destruction. The acronym for that is MAD, and it certainly is. Modern conventional weapons have made nuclear weapons obsolete because they can be employed to destroy every kind of military target *with* precision and therefore *without* civilian casualties.”

The men and women in the War Room began to realize that the US Attorney General was a dove, not a hawk, and would most likely be a stumbling block to a consensus on nuking China.

Steven slowly shook his head. “Valid or invalid, conventional or nuclear, bombing Beijing will kill and injure civilians, military personnel, children and adults, the rich and the poor. That’s what happened in ’48 when Truman saved the lives of at least a million American soldiers and sailors by dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

General Eastwood, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said, “Exactly. When President Truman said the buck stops here, Americans knew what he was

telling them. When he ordered the Air Force to drop the bomb, the Japanese knew what he was telling them. You Pearl Harbor'd us, we Nagasaki'd you!"

"Oh yeah!" said General Monday. "Harry's take charge decision is a convincing precedent and a powerful incentive to tell Beijing... You HEMP'd us, we HUMP'd you!"

General Monday looked at General Obrien and shrugged his shoulders. "Just agreeing with General Eastwood, sir, that we better terminate their miserable existence before they drop a bomb on us."

Obrien was the highest-ranking, most senior officer in the Armed Forces, so he was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At six feet four and two hundred and thirty pounds, he didn't need to stand to grab everyone's attention. He formed a steeple with his fingers, gave General Eastwood and General Monday a nod, then looked around the room. Obrien had the eyes of a man who never lost at poker, and the years he spent commanding a submarine in World War Two and the decades of dedicated military service since then were carved on his face.

"The world was a very different place when Harry made the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Back then, we were the only nation with a nuclear weapon, so there was minimal risk that Japan could retaliate. We had three or-else reasons. One, send a message to the Japanese. Surrender unconditionally... or else! Two, send a message to the other nations that America has a powerful new weapon. Don't tread on us... or else! Three, send a message to our enemies that we have the devastating power of nuclear weapons. Don't let us catch you developing nuclear bombs... or else!

Where to drop the bombs was another difficult decision. Hiroshima had factories, an army depot and was a port of embarkation, so it was a military target. We discussed the possibility of dropping the bomb on the emperor's palace in Tokyo, but the city itself had already suffered devastating damage due to allied bombing. So Truman chose two small cities instead of Tokyo.

Today, in this room, we face the same two questions. Are nuclear weapons the solution to our present situation? If so, what are the targets? To answer those questions, I suggest we carefully consider the tragic consequences of not humping them so thoroughly that we initiate World War Three."

General Eastwood and General Monday exchanged smiles, glad that General Obrien was on the same page as they were.

Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor, stood back up. "Thank you General Obrien. The consequences **are** the heart of our plan. Whatever we decide, it should be soon, or we will be the victims of our enemy's plan. And whatever that decision is, it will involve the President's football, so let's get back to the protocol. As I said earlier, it's a two-man rule from top to bottom. I've already mentioned how the two-man rule works with Jennifer, our President, and Michael, our Secretary of Defense. Once the commander of a missile silo, submarine, aircraft carrier receives a launch command from the President, the commander and his second in command must concur that the launch order is valid."

Steven turned to Dean. "In this case, valid has nothing to do with

humanitarian principals. Valid here concerns the Two-Man rule. The commander and his second in command must concur that the launch codes received match the codes on their menu of retaliatory options. If communications between the control center for missiles are interrupted, the missiles can be launched by ultra-high-frequency radio signals transmitted by special military aircraft. The ability to launch missiles by radio serves as a backup to the launch control centers. It can be exploited by cyberattack, so messages are highly encrypted and, once again, follow the Two-Man rule. The launch codes have *two* parts and nobody is allowed to know *both* parts."

Steven looked around the table. "That's it for the Two Man launch protocols. Anyone have anything to add?"

AMERICA'S BIG STICKS

Friday — January 16th — 12:45 PM

Admiral Wayne, the Navy Chief of Staff, stood up. "Yes, I have something to add. Previous administrations have dealt with China as a friend, not as a foe. And look where that got us. I prefer Teddy Roosevelt's Big Stick approach to foreign policy, a kind of diplomatic leverage that says *Speak softly but carry a big stick.*"

Michael, the Secretary of Defense said, "I agree, and so did my predecessor. He said our relationship with China would be *competitive* when it should be, *collaborative* when it can be, and *adversarial* when it must be. The HEMP they detonated over America is more than adversarial. It's a declaration of war. We can't declare war on China. Only the Congress can do that. But it's too late to assemble a quorum of senators and representatives. And why would we? All they can do is allocate federal funds to make bullets, bombs and battle ships. Even if we could get Congressional approval, it would be too late to counter an attack from China.

Jennifer shook her head and sighed. "My head agrees with what everyone is saying. China created an opportunity to whack us... and did. It would be foolish, irrational, perhaps suicidal to not whack them before they up their game."

"Exactly, and like General Obrien said, our whack better do more than just make them think twice before they up their game. Our whack must be an overwhelming military response that completely... and perhaps permanently... destroys their ability to up their game."

Jennifer glanced around the table. "So my question to all of you is how are we going to do that?"

Stuart said, "That's why we're here. To work out the details, and we should do it soon."

Jennifer watched every head in the room nodding slowly. She could almost hear the gears in their heads turning slowly, considering option after option. She could hear her gears spinning too but they sounded more like a gnat buzzing erratically than gears spinning smoothly. Something was bothering her but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. She heard Stuart saying something but whatever was troubling her made him sound as if he were far away.

She snapped out of the trance to hear him say... "So history is a grim record of how often people have set aside cherished beliefs, civilized principles and moral values to survive."

That's it... she thought. Survival. Everyone is depending upon me to get my head and my heart on the same page to get past this disaster.

"The tribe in the next valley," continued Stuart, "raids your tribe for goats and women so your tribe retaliates by killing every last one of them. Same thing happened over and over again when I was a school boy. Fights were never just an eye for an eye. It was always... 'You slapped my face so I broke your nose!' or 'You took my lunch money so I trashed your bike.' No thought

was given to whether retaliation would make the bully think twice before doing it again. It was almost always just violent, angry, knee-jerk revenge."

General Eastwood, the Air Force Chief of Staff locked eyes with Stuart. "Good point Stuart and this time the bully is China. Let's hit 'em where it hurts the most... Beijing, and we have a very Big Stick to do exactly that... the B-21 Raider."

Jennifer's head jerked up. "The B-21 bomber? I was told the Air Force is still working on three prototypes at the Northrup plant in Palmdale, California."

"No. The Raider was not built in Palmdale, it's no longer in the prototype stage, and there are seventeen fully tested and operational aircraft ready to rain fire on Beijing."

"Thumbs up to that!" said General Monday. "You HEMP'd us. We HUMP'd you."

Jesus, thought Jennifer, here it comes only this time it's the Armed Forces of the United States, not a school yard bully.

Dean Andersen, the Attorney General glanced at General Eastwood. "Where are these bombers?"

General Eastwood smiled at Dean. "In places where they can drop bombs on Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang and Kabul before they can say One Hung Low, Petrov über alles, Sesange and Allah Akbar."

Dean, the dove among the group, shook his head vigorously. "God damn it, Clete. That's not funny. Putin has a close, cooperative attitude with China. Put a B-21 over Beijing and Moscow and both countries would scramble every fighter they have, shoot the B-21s down, then launch their entire nuclear arsenal at us. World War Three... the end of the world as we know it."

Stuart, the CIA Director, shook his head vigorously. "I disagree with that scenario. My intelligence indicates that both Moscow and Beijing have embraced the understanding that any global exchange of nuclear weapons would be suicidal. They now favor surgical strikes using tactical nuclear weapons. A real world example is the HEMPs they detonated over every nation on Earth instead of nuking every nation on Earth."

General Eastwood gave Stuart a nod. "That's the Air Force's evaluation as well. Russia's greatest strategic vulnerability is its lack of an effective early-warning system. The Soviet Union had almost a dozen satellites in orbit that could detect a large-scale American attack. The system began to deteriorate in 1996 when an early-warning satellite had to be retired. Others soon fell out of orbit, and Russia's last functional early-warning satellite went out of service two years ago."

"That's good news for us and bad news for Russia." said General Kirk, the US Space Force Chief of Staff. "And I have some more good news for us but bad news for China. The sophistication of our missile defense system weakens the effectiveness of their nuclear arsenal. The sophistication of China's anti-satellite devices, however, weakens the effectiveness of our missile defense system. **But...** and this is a big but. The Space Force has three types of national security satellites circling Earth at random orbits and

altitudes. One to identify the location of an enemy's jamming signal, another to jam an enemy's early-warning satellites, and a third to identify and destroy ground or satellite launched attacks aimed at the other two. Our aircraft go up and their jammers go bye bye. Our rockets come down and the enemy goes bye bye. We win... they lose."

Admiral Wayne, the Navy's Chief of Staff, gave Kirk a nod. "That's good news, Kirk, so I hesitate to remind everyone that when the Navy increased its presence in the South China Sea to counter China's increased presence near Taiwan it failed to deter their escalation of troops and aircraft. We believe it was because Beijing knew that we couldn't get within striking distance of China's shores without putting our ships at risk of being hit by their hypersonic DF-17 and CM-401 missiles."

Admiral Wayne looked at General Eastwood, the Air Force's Chief of Staff. "Same thing happened when the Air Force began flying non-stealth surveillance aircraft over Beijing to make it obvious that we were watching them like a hawk circling a rabbit. But they knew our bombers couldn't get near Beijing without putting them at risk of being detected by their Russian supplied S-400 Super Radar."

General Eastwood opened his mouth to respond, but Stuart Williams, the Director of Central Intelligence, gun fingered General Wayne. "Yes, our undercover agents in Moscow tell us that the Russians claim it can detect any and all of our stealth bombers and fighter aircraft."

General Eastwood nodded. "Yes, the Air Force has intercepted claims like that too but they are badly mistaken. So here's some more good news for us and bad news for China. We recently ran a series of tests over Moscow with full-size stealth replicas of our B-21 bomber and not one of them was detected by their S-400 Super Radar. Even if China does detect a B-21 over Beijing, they would have to transfer the detection data to a missile capable of locking on to the B-21, and that missile would rely on a smaller and less sophisticated radar than the S-400. China won't see our deep penetration bomber coming."

"Kaboom!" yelled General Monday. "That's the good news I want to hear."

Stuart Williams, the Director of Central Intelligence gave Monday a thumb up. "You will General. We'll all hear it. And here's some more good news to guarantee we will. My intelligence network predicts that the majority of their long-range nuclear forces would be destroyed. Even if China attempts to retaliate with what's left of their arsenal, the US defense system would intercept most or all of their remaining ICBMs. China's air and naval forces are inferior to US so Beijing would have to rely primarily on its land-based conventional and nuclear arsenal. Most of them are mounted on trucks roaming its highways, but we've been tracking them for years. Yes, we'd have to deploy a missile for each target, not just one big bomb for Beijing, but we have short range missiles located throughout Europe armed and ready for that scenario."

General Wayne said, "They have a stealth submarine capable of launching conventional and nuclear weapons, but they have grossly underestimated

the sophistication of the Navy's omni and directional sonobuoy systems and attack submarines. We know exactly where it is... the South China Sea. It raises it's ugly head... Kaboom!"

Michael, the Secretary of Defense, leaned forward, put both hands on the table and slowly turned his head to look into the faces of each of the men and women in the War Room. "Beijing's attack on the world at large makes it imperative that we take whatever risks are necessary to put an end to China's imperial ambitions."

General Obrien gave Michael a nod. "Yes, imperial ambitions. We know from history that dictators and totalitarian governments with a passion for world domination are notoriously arrogant. The leaders of the Chinese communist party match that profiling perfectly. History also tells us that arrogance almost always leads to assumptions that prove to be wrong. Beijing's assumption is that the HEMPs have seriously weakened our ability to defend ourselves against a nuclear attack and retaliate effectively. Beijing caught us with our pants down. That was... is... bad news for us. But we are not as unprepared as Beijing thinks, and that's bad news for them."

Jennifer gave Obrien a smile. "Thanks for the history lesson, Bill. It plays perfectly with our situation today. Shakespeare's Macbeth comes to mind. Hubris, the tragic flaw of men in positions of power who are blinded by ambition and arrogance. Pride goeth before a fall. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Jennifer turned to the Director of Intelligence. "And you are right, Michael. Beijing's attack on the world . We've already agreed that every nation on Earth, except China of course, will be eager to add their bombs to ours. And now we have several Big Sticks to make that a reality. National security satellites. Super Bombers to blind their Super Radar. Eyes in the sky to locate and destroy their ICBMs. Omni and directional sonobuoys to locate their stealth submarine. Aircraft carriers and our own stealth submarines to blow that sub clean out of the water. A superior missile defense system and our own ICBMs to blow Beijing off the face of the Earth. Christ, have I missed anything?"

General North, the Marine Corps Chief of Staff, raised his hand. "The men and women of the United States Marine Corps. And every soldier, sailor, pilot and member of our Armed Forces."

North stood up. "Look, we have every reason to assume that China is on the verge of launching their nuclear arsenal at targets all over the world to take advantage of what they think is the weakened condition of every nation of the world. I say we hit them before they hit us. Like today."

Michael, the Secretary of Defense, said, "I agree but our discussions have gone far beyond an assumption. China attacked every nation, friend or foe, so we should get Moscow on the hotline as soon as we have consensus on a plan of action. The hotline has established more than a little trust between our countries. That trust has, at times, been a bit precarious but overall it has minimized the possibility of either side misinterpreting the other's intentions."

Steven Miller, the National Security Advisor said, "We're very close to agreeing on how to deal with China. But any cooperation we initiate with Moscow will change our plan. So let's quickly put bullet points on the plan we have now, then activate the hot line to begin working out a way to cooperate with Moscow."

Jennifer nodded. "That's good advice, Steve. Can you summarize what we all seem to agree on so far?"

Steve glanced at Stuart, the Director of Central Intelligence, then looked at George, the Secretary of Defense.

"Stuart? George? Either of you could give us a more precise outline of where we are now than I could."

George gun-fingered Stuart. "Your summary, Stuart, is the core of our plan to save America and perhaps the entire world from this... well, apocalyptic nightmare."

Stuart stood. "Thanks George. There were five major points to my summary. Some of them are relevant to a plan of action and some are not. What matters most is what we agreed on during those discussions, and that will reveal our plan of action. And you, Steven, when you condensed my summary down to questions we needed to answer, gave us what I think is the best look at what we agreed upon.

Who attacked us? China. Who is the Commander and Chief of our armed forces? Jennifer Edwards. When do we deal with Islamic terrorists in our homeland? After we take China down to its knees. Where is the Football? It's right here and we know how to use it. How do we secure the cooperation of our friends and discourage the interference of our enemies? We get on the hotline and remind them that China detonated nuclear devices over their nation too so they should be eager to add their bombs to ours."

Everyone in the room stood and gave Stuart a round of applause.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

Friday — January 16th — 1:45 pm

When the sound of hands coming together and shouts of Oorah! and Hear! Hear! subsided, Michael gun-fingered Stuart once again.

"You, my dear friend, have cocked the hammer on our plan. But we need a silver bullet in the chamber before Jennifer pulls the trigger, and I would like to detail the nature of that bullet. Ms. President, may I proceed?"

Jennifer gun-fingered Michael. "Yes, I'll pull the trigger on whatever plan we can all agree upon. Please continue with the details of your silver bullet."

"Thank you, Ms. President. Okay, our plan should be *specific* enough to completely destroy Beijing's attempts to retaliate and *general* enough to mesh with the plans of our friends and enemies, especially Petrov, the President of the Russian Federation.

The specifics of our plan will be conducted by the Armed Forces of the United States to destroy its communications, jamming and early warning satellites, its mobile, truck mounted missile sites, its submarines, its bombers and its battle ships. The Chiefs of Staff have already assured us that the soldiers, the sailors and the pilots – all the men and women under their command – have the grit and determination to make that happen."

The general part of our plan will be conducted by you, Ms. President, who must convince Petrov, and any other world leader who wants to join us, to initiate our coordinated efforts as *simultaneously* as possible. You've convinced all of us that you have the grit and determination to make that happen.

Michael sat down and saw every thumb in the room pointing at the ceiling.

Jennifer stood. "Looks like everyone loves your silver bullet, George. I think we're all locked and loaded. "Anyone opposed to calling Petrov on the red phone? Right now?"

Everyone in the room lowered their hands but some had what Jennifer thought was a silly grin on their faces.

"Yeah, I know it isn't a red phone and never was but I need a list and contact info for the leaders of other countries who might want to join our efforts to flush China down the toilet. We need their cooperation in place *before* I contact Moscow."

"I agree," said Michael. "and a complete list of friends and foes is at the computer terminal. I recommend, however, that we establish an agreement with **our** allies and let Moscow do the same with theirs."

Jennifer nodded, then followed the Secretary of Defense to the terminal where she could contact every ally of the United States and explained their plan to deal with China.

It took several hours to reach the leaders of each nation. The vast majority agreed to coordinate their armed forces with those of the United States. A few expressed their desire to remain neutral. When she was finished contacting their allies, she turned to Michael.

"Okay, time to contact Russia."

Michael said, "I'll activate the hot line to Petrov. You handled yourself well with our allies but Petrov... well, you know what you want to tell him?"

"Yes, I know exactly what I'm going to tell that commie son of..."

Jennifer paused to spread her hands and give everyone in the room a cheesy grin.

"Sorry, I was suddenly overcome by how tragic but laughable this whole thing has become. But I assure you that I have not been corrupted by the power you've given me to be the Commander in Chief of... our silver bullet."

General Obrien said, "You're right, Jennifer. Some things can be so tragic, so heart breaking that you want laugh and cry at the same time. But like the National Security Advisor said earlier today, you are not alone. We're here to help you slam that silver bullet down Beijing's throat. And we won't let you do anything that would bring shame to you, to us or to America."

Jennifer nodded. "Thank you, Bill." Her eyes were moist with the emotion of the moment and the weight of her responsibility. But she was as hardened as the men and women in the War Room and the Armed Forces she was about to unleash on China. She gathered herself, mentally and physically.

"Okay. The buck stops here. Let's do this but God help us if the hotline isn't secure."

George, the Secretary of Defense, gave Jennifer a thumb up. "It is. The messages exchanged over the hot line are a secure, highly encrypted form of email. Even if Beijing intercepts the transmission, it would take the most powerful computer on Earth more than a year to decode the messages."

He led Jennifer to the terminal. She sat down and George punched some keys. The screen suddenly came alive with a framed window for her message. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly and typed...

Mister President. This is Jennifer Edwards, the acting President of the United States. We have identified Beijing as the perpetrator of the nuclear attacks on Moscow, Washington and most of the major cities of the world. We have finalized our plan to retaliate and would like to discuss how we can coordinate our plan with yours.

NAHCHEENOT!

Friday — January 16th — 2:15 PM

You could hear a pin drop in the War Room as everyone waited for Moscow's reply. The silence was broken when Jennifer said, "Here it comes..."

Madam President, I am General Igor Sokolov, the Russian Minister of Defense. President Petrov has authorized me to cooperate with your plan. We are attempting to obtain the cooperation of our allies and assume you are doing the same with your allies. Our response to China's blatant disregard of world peace must be swift and devastatingly complete. Please respond with the details of your plan.

Jennifer looked around the table. "I told you the buck stops here... with me, but we've all played a role in deciding how to finish what China started, and I will not make any decision to launch weapons, conventional or nuclear, without the consensus of everyone in this room. My participation was minimal, but I've been taking notes during our discussions in the Situation Room and now in the War Room, and here's what I propose to tell Russia's Minister of Defense."

Jennifer read the summary she had extracted from her notes. When she finished, she saw everyone's thumb pointing at the ceiling. She smiled, walked to the MOLINK terminal and began typing...

General Sokolov. We are poised to destroy China's offensive and defensive satellites, their fixed and mobile ICBMs, their aircraft bases in Beijing and the Fujian Province, their hypersonic DF-17 and CM-401 missiles, their stealth submarine, and the city of Beijing itself. Our allies are poised to integrate their attacks with ours as simultaneously as possible. We agree with you that our response must be swift and complete. So we assume you will agree that we do not have time to assign each of these targets to the armed forces of a particular nation. This hotline was established to establish trust between Washington and Moscow, so we are ready to trust Russia and its allies and ask you to reciprocate by confirming your readiness to trust America and its allies.

Jennifer tapped the send button and waited anxiously for Sokolov's reply. Less than a minute later, she watched his message appear on the computer screen.

Madam President, the details of your plan are compatible with ours. We are in the process of contacting our allies. That may require a few hours. Meanwhile, we have hacked into China's Super Radar and disabled its key functions to make it difficult if not impossible for Beijing to detect your bombers and ours in their airspace. We recommend that you disable China's defensive satellites to make it difficult if not impossible for Beijing to detect missiles with flight paths aimed at their air bases, missile sites and troop locations near Taiwan. I will notify you as soon as we have identified which of our allies will and will not take action against China. Their compliance or lack of compliance will not change my decision to join your attack on China. I just need that information for... future consideration. Then I will await your signal to begin.

General Sokolov, your reply is greatly appreciated. We await

confirmation of the situation with your allies.

Jennifer turned to General Eastwood. "You're fluent in Russian, Clete. What is their word for Start or Begin?"

"Nahcheenot, pronounced NAH-CHEE-NOT with an emphasis on the first syllable, but General Sokolov is fluent in English. Just send him a GO."

Three Hours Later

General Kirk stood up suddenly. "Heads up everyone. I just received an alert from the Space Force comm center. The satellites that monitor the location of China's mobile arsenal of ICBM missiles just reported that all 128 trucks have begun to move. Something's up."

"I'm receiving alerts too," said General Monday. "Soldiers in the Fujian Province are advancing toward the South China Sea."

"Yes," said General Wayne. "Something's up. The stealth submarine is moving closer to the shore of Taiwan."

"And I just received notice," said General Eastwood, "that aircraft are taking off from the two air bases closest to Taiwan... Longtian and Huian in the Fujian Province."

"Makes sense," said Steven, the National Security Advisor. "Beijing figures the HEMPs have disabled America and its allies from interfering with their attack on Taiwan."

General Monday stood and slammed his hand on the table. "China didn't have to fuck the whole world to stop America and its allies from getting in Beijing's face over Taiwan. These alerts are just the beginning of their quest for world domination. Let's stop talking and send Sokolov a Go! He has the same intelligence we just received. Fuck his allies. He only wanted their go or no go to put them on a red or black list for the future."

Jennifer stood up, opened the briefcase, and asked Michael to help her identify the launch codes on the menu that matched each part of the plan she had identified in her talks with America's allies and the Russian Minister of Defense.

Michael located the launch code for dropping nuclear bombs on Beijing with B-21s. "The menu doesn't contain launch codes for every element of our plan but the Chiefs of Staff are here and ready to transmit orders to the field commanders who control the weapons for those elements of our plan that do not have a corresponding launch code on the menu."

Michael turned to General Obrien, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Those launch codes go through you, General. Let's do this."

General Obrien quickly gun fingered each of the five Chiefs of Staff. "Go!"

Jennifer ran back to the MOLINK terminal between Washington and Moscow and typed **Nahcheenot**.

It was 5:20 pm in the Raven Rock War Room. Minutes later, America, Russia and their allies put an end to China's imperialistic goals.

KABOOM... KAPUT!

2:20 pm at Fair Oaks

Unaware of the events taking place in the Pentagon's War Room at Raven Rock, Jack and his Fair Oaks friends spent the afternoon discussing their options. They decided to stay put until they could get Tim and his mother to Fair Oaks, then caravan to Jack's place in northern California.

After the discussion, Jack looked at his watch. A few minutes after four. Only two hours before dinner but he was hungry. He went out to his Rover and opened a can of the mercury free tuna Mike had helped him stash on the roof. He was opening the second can when his HF radio came alive with the sound of Bob's voice.

Jack, Bob here. Breaking news. You copy?

Loud and clear, Bob.

Beijing has armed its mobile ICBM missiles, activated its Supper Radar over Beijing and moved troops, battleships and aircraft into the Fujian Province adjacent to Taiwan. America and its allies are on the brink of responding with extreme prejudice and you know what that means.

Yeah, nuclear weapons. Tactical and otherwise.

Exactly, and our Commander has confirmed reports that Russia and its allies have joined the assault on China. I can't say things will get ugly here in the Antelope Valley but if they do I'm sorry I can't get you and the others in the bunker here at Edwards. You might want to get out. Now.

Thanks for the update, Bob. Damn, the shit hit the fan. Again. I'll get back to you soon as I can Over but not out. Here but not gone. Yet.

Jack jumped out of his Rover and ran to the front door to alert the others. George heard Jack banging on the door and let him in.

"What's up? You look like you seen a ghost."

"Bob just called me on my HF radio. We're at war with China and the whole damn world is adding their bombs to ours."

"The whole damn world?"

"Yep, America and its allies and Russia and its allies. China fucked up. Their obsession with dominating the world backfired on 'em. Get everybody down here ASAP so we can decide what to do."

George keyed his two way and gave the alert. When everyone was in the lobby, Jack explained the situation. The room fell silent as everyone exchanged glances. Then it came alive with *Oh my God! World war three! What are we going to do?* More than a few put their hands on their face with looks of surprise, fear and confusion.

Jack raised his hand. "Bob said it was unlikely China could retaliate with ICBMs aimed at America, but we should decide, right now, how to respond to the news. If China is able to launch missiles at America and one of them is aimed at the Edwards Air Force base, we won't have enough time to get far enough away from the blast and the fallout."

Heads began to nod as Jack's analysis sunk in.

"I agree with Jack." said Linda. "If I'm going to get blown to kingdom come, I'd rather it happen right here at Fair Oaks than out there on the highway to Jack's place."

"That's how I see it." said Dave. "And I say we get Tim and his mother over here so we can all watch the sky mushroom with fire and smoke."

"Dad! It's scary enough without that horrifying image."

It only took a few minutes for everyone to express their agreement to stay put, at least until they could get Tim and his mother to Fair Oaks. Jack said he'd drive over to Lake Los Angeles and bring them back. George volunteered to go with him.

"Let's take the Nomad." said George. "Seats for you, me, Tim and his mother. I'll top off the tank and meet you out front."

"Okay, but check your ammo. No tellin' what we might run into between here and there."

George ran into the kitchen and out the back door to fill the Nomad with gas. Jack ran into the lobby and out the front door to the parking area - locked, loaded and alert. The others felt their absence immediately, as an amputee feels a phantom limb. An hour later, Jack and George walked into the dining room with Tim and his mother Mary.

"Cheese and crackers!" yelled Dave. "You all made good time."

"We did. Got a mile or so east of Sierra Highway when we saw Tim on Dave's Triumph and Mary on Tim's Husky riding toward us."

Everyone gave Tim and his mother a group hug. Dave noticed how much Mary looked like his wife. Tim's mother thought how much Dave reminded her of her husband.

Tim looked around the room. "Geez, sure is great to be back here with you guys. Jack explained what's happening. Can you believe it? The world coming together to flush China down the toilet. Feels like we've slipped into the Twilight Zone or the Outer Limits."

Carol gave Tim a thumb up. "It does, Tim, and what a blessing it would be if this world unity lasted longer than either of those shows."

"Yeah," agreed Woody,. "Gonna be temporary. Then everything'll slip back to the status quo."

Max tapped his can lightly on the floor. "That's one of the grim lessons of history. We don't learn from the past or the present. Even a potentially world changing event like this one is unlikely to change anyone's world view. In America and in most democratic countries, the state exists to serve the people. In Russia and in most communist and totalitarian countries, the people exist to serve the state."

"And never the twain shall meet." said Mary, Tim's mother.

Dave smiled. Mary noticed.

Carol stood up. "Okay, we've taken this world-changing news as far as we can. It's almost six and I'm hungry. Woody, let's get in the kitchen and whip up a world-changing supper."

"To the magicians of the kitchen!" said George.

"Hear, hear!" said Dave.

Fifteen minutes later, Carol and Woody put dinner on the table.

"Sufferin' succotash!" said Tim. "This **is** a world-changing meal."

Everyone laughed, then dug into the Sauerkraut, black beans and salmon patties. As Jack reached for another serving, his radio suddenly came alive with Bob's voice.

Jack. Bob here. Tell everyone to turn their radios on. I have good news. Very good news.

"Turn your radios on, everyone. It's Bob with good news."

The dining room became a flurry of men and women pulling their radios out of their pockets and fumbling with the button to turn them on.

We're ready for your good news, Bob.

The base commander just announced that Beijing is a radioactive wasteland, their fixed and mobile missile sites have been obliterated, their submarines and battleships are on the bottom of the South China Sea and their downed aircraft and dead soldiers are scattered around the Fujian Peninsula. Nobody's left in Beijing to accept an unconditional surrender but it's a done deal. China is kaput.

Jack keyed his PTT button and held it up high so Bob could hear what Jack thought would be the room exploding with shouts of joy but everyone just sat there with stunned looks on their faces.

Jack started to unkey his radio but the silence was replaced with everyone jumping around and hugging each other while hollering Oorah! Thank God! and Whoopee!

I like the sound of that, Jack. Thanks for leaving your PTT pressed so I could hear it.

Thanks for including us in your good news, Bob.

You going to stay here in the valley or head north to your place?

Well...

Jack paused. When he retired from the CIA, there was no doubt in his mind that home was his place in northern California. Since getting involved with Linda and the men and women at Fair Oaks, the word home had become more about the people in his heart than a place on the map.

I'm heading back to my place but not until we establish who's going with me and who's staying here. Those who choose to stay instead of bugging out... well, I need to stay long enough to help them deal with the shortage of food, water, medicine, supplies... it's a long list. And we could use some help from you and the men and women at the base to reinforce the police's efforts to deal with the gangs and terrorists roaming the streets day and night.

Glad you brought that up Jack. The base commander just scheduled a meeting for tomorrow morning to discuss ways we can help survivors deal with everything you just mentioned. Now that China's crushed, the base can begin distributing food, water and supplies to the communities here in the valley. And I can guarantee you'll soon see tanks, Humvees, and armed soldiers searching for bad guys.

Sounds good, Bob. Bad boys, bad boys, what you gonna do when the good guys come for you?

Yes. The bad guys are stumbling blocks to everyone struggling to

restore law and order and pull America out of the hole it's in, but you know what? There are men and women all over this country that are willing to be stepping stones to get America back on its feet and you are one of them.

You too, Bob, you too. The group here at Fair Oaks have some ideas of how the people here in the valley can supplement the base's contribution to getting things back to normal. I'll give you a heads up when we have the details.

Roger that, Jack. Over but not out.

Jack put his radio back in his cargo pants and told everyone what Bob had said about the base providing food, water, supplies and armed patrols to protect the citizens against militants, moochers and terrorists.

"Oorah!" said Woody. "More good news."

The group finished dinner and Mary, Tim's mother, and Margaret helped Carol and Woody carry the dishes back to the kitchen. When they returned, Jack stood up.

"We agreed to stay here until the threat of war is over. Thanks to the united efforts of... well, damn near every nation on Earth, China is kaput. But - :

"And we won't have to watch Edwards go up in a mushroom cloud." interrupted Tim.

Linda leered at Tim. "If you or my Dad ever bring up that terrifying image again, I'm going to... get really angry."

"Yes maam. You'll never hear me mention that unmentionable again."

Tim smiled then looked at Jack as if to apologize for interrupting him.

"China is toast," continued Jack, "but gangs of militants, moochers and Muslim fanatics are still a threat to survivors across this country and to us here in the Antelope Valley. My place up north..."

Jack paused to steeple his hands under his chin.

"You folks have become my friends, a kind of home away from home. But without you, Fair Oaks is just a place. So I'd like all of you to think of my place in northern California as your home. My cabin only has two bedrooms and one bath, but there's plenty of acreage to build more cabins. I have enough windmills and solar panels to make my cabin independent of the grid but with your help we can create a totally self-sufficient homestead - a place we can call home."

George took a swig of his Kentucky bourbon. "I'm with you Jack. Not a damn thing I can do here at Fair Oaks 'cept wait for another group of hoodlums or terrorists to come at us."

Dave said, "You offered your place a few days ago, and doing it again makes it plain that you meant it then and mean it now."

"Carol and I are with you, too, Jack, and what Bob said about the base's plan to help survivors in the valley makes me confident that the people we're leavin' behind will have a better chance to survive than they would without us."

One by one, the men and women expressed their desire to leave Fair Oaks behind and start a new life at Jack's place. Then Max tapped his cane on the

floor, stood and began stabbing the air with it as he spoke. “You can bet your sweet ass I want to go, and I’ll do it with this cane if I have to, or die tryin’!

Max’s gritty determination to survive, whatever the cost, made everyone smile and reminded them of their own courage and inventiveness. They were not without resources. They’d proved that to themselves and to each other more than once. And they had each other. That was the most important resource of all.

PHOOEY ON FEMA

Friday — Jan 16th — 7:15 pm

After dinner, George said, “Okay, we’re on the same page about leaving Fair Oaks for greener pastures... Jack’s place up north. But we’ll need more vehicles, more gas and food and water for the trip.”

“And more ammo for our fire-breathing weapons!” added Woody. “Don’t forget those RPGs and assault rifles Jack and I confiscated from that cell house on Frank’s street.”

“We also agreed to help the men and women at the base and the police in town coordinate their efforts to help survivors before we leave. Anyone have an idea how we can help?”

Paul raised his hand. “The last FEMA announcement said the National Guard was coordinating aid with the Red Cross and local support groups.”

“Phooey on FEMA.” said Tim. “Those clowns were completely unprepared to help the victims of hurricane Katrina. Walmart did more to help those people than the federal government. Walmart had more experience moving food and water from one place to another, and they understood local conditions better.”

“That’s the problem with bureaucracies.” said Linda. “They’re too centralized and too handicapped by their own rules and regulations to respond quickly and effectively. Aid to victims of a disaster should be bottom-up, not top-down. That’s what we are talking about here. Taking action now rather than waiting for a government agency to bring aid.”

“Yep.” agreed Woody. “When it comes to the government, more is said than done. I heard FEMA tried to make victims of Hurricane Sandy give back the money they received to rebuild their homes. What kind of crap is that?”

“Bureaucratic crap.” said George. “Linda is right. Even the Red Cross and the National Guard have problems. And when they show up, they’ll be giving the orders. I’ve heard stories that FEMA confiscated food, water and supplies from people in disaster areas to centralize aid to victims. That’s robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

Paul laughed. “Yeah, and Peter tried to rob me of my life, and yours too, but it’s true. During Hurricane Katrina, FEMA stopped doctors from treating victims, turned away volunteer firefighters, prohibited volunteer boats from entering New Orleans, and prevented the Red Cross and Walmart from delivering food and water to victims. It’s likely to do the same thing here in the Antelope Valley using some excuse like establishing security.”

Everyone fell silent as each of them digested their conversation. They hadn’t waited for help from the government when the EMP had taken the grid down. They hadn’t sat on their hands when the terrorists attacked Fair Oaks. And they wouldn’t wait for FEMA, the Red Cross or the National Guard to pull their butts out of the fire. They’d do what had to be done locally, right there in the Antelope Valley.

“We’ve got food, water and supplies,” said Woody, “and vehicles that run. Fair Oaks could be a relief station, not only for the people who choose to stay

here, but for others who are looking for a safer place to ride out this disaster than their homes in the suburbs or an apartment in the city. With a little work on that underground parking structure back there, it might even be a decent fallout shelter. Let's get over to Walmart and see if they'd be willing to move food, water and supplies over here.

"Good idea." said Dave. "Thanks to the local police, most of their stock is still on the shelves."

"Yeah, except for those five-finger discounts." joked George. "Lucky I knew the officers stationed there that day."

"I agree." said Jack. "With Walmart's cooperation, Fair Oaks would be a good place for the people we leave behind to survive until this country gets back on its feet. Plus a hundred or so more. Plenty of rooms, cooking facilities, medical equipment, a backup generator and those propane and water tanks back there. In fact, any or all of the retirement homes in this valley would be better for long term survival than homes or apartments. Only thing a retirement home can't provide is protection against hoodlums, terrorists and suitcase bombs. But we did okay because we had guns and you were all willing to shoot people who were shooting at you."

Linda walked over to Jack and put her arm around his waist.

"And we had you, Jack. We had you."

"Hear! Hear!" agreed George. "And we had Woody and Carol and, well, I'm damn proud of all of you."

Rose threw her hand up. "Bob told us the base was going to have soldiers patrolling our streets but I doubt that would make it easier for the police to protect every house and apartment in the valley."

Margaret nodded. "I agree with you Rose, but it would be easier if they only had to guard people in a dozen or so retirement homes."

"That makes sense." said George. "Fewer places to guard, and more guards at each place if the police could muster three, maybe four men for each retirement home. Even better if the buildings were... what's that term, Jack?

"Hardened."

"Yeah." continued George. "Hardened. Like the plywood we installed on the lobby doors and windows."

Dave nodded. "And the willingness of residents to arm themselves and shoot back at terrorists - foreign and domestic."

"And guys like Woody, Carol and Jack." said George. "As you all know, I retired from the Lancaster police department. The chief was always willing to bend the rules to deal with unusual circumstances. The HEMP is about as unusual as it gets, so I'm pretty sure he'd be willing to train volunteer citizens to be guards. Might even supply the weapons and ammo."

"I've read estimates," said Dave, "that if an EMP took the power grid down, and it has, eighty percent of the people would die in the first year. Ten or fifteen percent right after the EMP struck from traffic accidents, getting trapped in an elevator, medical equipment failures, and so forth. Before the EMP hit us, the Antelope Valley had more than a half-million people. Even in

the worst case scenario, there's gotta be several hundred thousand people still alive, scrounging for food, water and... hell, toilet paper. This retirement home sounds good on paper, but I don't think there's more than a dozen or so retirement homes in the whole valley.

"I agree," said Woody, "and the other retirement homes may not be as prepared as we are to handle a whole lot of folks. How many have water tanks, generators and propane to prepare food?"

"And how would they decide who gets in and who doesn't?" asked Carol

"First come, first served." said Jack.

"But that could be a tough rule to enforce," said Linda, "if someone we know shows up."

"When survival's at stake," said Jack, "we tend to see others, even close friends, as outsiders. So it's the same scenario, whether it's hoodlums, terrorists, people we know or an angry father stomping up to the lobby to take our stuff so he can feed his family at the expense of ours. First come, first served, with the added requirement that they bring something other than just themselves, and that they don't try to force their way in."

"You got that right." said Tim. "In the apocalyptic novels I've read, small groups of survivors took refuge in a secluded area and didn't let anyone in unless they had a skill or a piece of equipment the group needed. A nurse, for example. Like you, Mary. Or a veterinarian like Dave."

"Or someone like Jack," said George, "or Woody and Carol, who can shoot the wings off a gnat at a hundred yards."

Linda glanced at Jack. "Or a place like Jack's up north where we're all going. So let's pass on making it our job to include other retirement homes in our plans. Let's tell the police what we're doing so they can beef up security here and invite other retirement homes to get involved... or not."

One by one, the others began nodding agreement. The EMP attack on America had created thousands of small groups isolated from each other by the need to survive. The family was the core unit and they were a new kind of family, a core of survivors drawn together and **hardened** by adversity.

WALMART HAS A HEART

Saturday — January 17th — 7:30 am

The police and fire departments had enough men, radios and vehicles to deal with the looting and fires that had been triggered by the HEMP. George had retired from the police force over five years ago but still had a good reputation with the officers on active duty. He told Jack and the others he would drive to Walmart and tell the officers stationed there he needed to talk to the manager. With any luck, he'd be in his office and respond positively to his proposal.

"Jack, I need a ride to Walmart. Can I use your Rover?"

"Two man rule, George. I'll go with you."

As they pulled into the Walmart parking lot, the two policemen stood up and put their hands on their pistols. When George got out of the Rover, one of them recognized him and told the other officer to relax.

"Long time no see, George. What's up?"

"Been a few years, Mark. How you and the wife doing?"

"Good, considering the circumstances. You still the guard at Fair Oaks?"

"I am. This is Jack. Bunch of Jihadist terrorists attacked Fair Oaks a few days ago. Without him, I'd be dead as a door nail."

"Good to meet you, Jack. This is my partner, Alex. Without him, I'd be pushin' up daisies myself. It was his idea to pile sand bags up here at the front door."

"Safe is always better than sorry, said Jack."

"I need to talk with the manager," said George. "You remember Hurricane Katrina? The Walmart down there saved thousands of lives, and I'm thinking the Walmart here could do the same. We're gonna transform Fair Oaks into a kind of safe house for as many people as we can pack in there, but we'll need more food and supplies to make it work. Walmart itself could be a place to get food, water and shelter, maybe setup a nursing station. Hell, just a place to get a good night's sleep, safe from hoodlums and terrorists."

Mark said, "Sounds like a good plan to me, George. Mr. Adams is in his office right now. We'll watch your vehicle while you're in there."

Adams was built like a fire plug. Short and stocky with a bulbous nose and a heavy brow but a friendly face and a firm handshake. He was already putting a plan together and pleased to find someone besides himself willing to get involved. He and George and Jack had a long talk about the likely consequences if FEMA, the Red Cross and the National Guard got involved in rescue operations in the Antelope Valley and about how to let people know they could count on Walmart.

"When somebody fucks with America," said George, "we get our boots on the ground, our planes in the air and our ships on the water. And we do it in one helluva hurry. The government, well, that's another story. Too much damn red tape. I mean, it's all well and good that in our country the

government is *by and for the people*, but when the shit has hit the fan? Can't say I agree that civilians should have the first or the final say in what the military does or doesn't do. Or what the police, firemen or volunteers are doing."

Adams nodded. "You won't get any argument from me, George. Walmart has gotten some bad press over the years, but when the shit hit the fan during Hurricane Katrina, we proved we're not a heartless, profit-oriented company. It was FEMA that took a heartless approach to dealing with the disaster. They were more like a stumbling block than a stepping stone. Despite FEMA's attempt to block our efforts to help the victims, Walmart made a difference, and I'd like to do the same here in the Antelope Valley."

Adams paused, shaking his head. "But this EMP... Jesus, we've got a tougher nut to crack than just a hurricane. No phones, no email, most of our trucks don't run. Don't need approval from the main office in Arkansas, but I do need to spread the word that we're open for business. Not regular business, of course, but the understanding that we've got the resources and the space to shelter people and save them from thirst and hunger."

George told Adams about the terrorist attack on Fair Oaks, the problems of dealing with people who needed medical care and the ones they had to bury. Adams was flabbergasted that Jihadist terrorists had been living next door to ordinary American citizens.

"We should coordinate our plan with the police," said Adams. "Lancaster and Palmdale have plans posted on their websites about how people should prepare for emergencies, but the Internet is gone, and even if people have a paper copy, there's nothing in those plans about aid stations and fallout shelters. I think the police should handle that."

"You're right," agreed George, "and we've been told by a former Air Force officer at Edwards that they're putting together plans to make food, water and supplies available to people here in the valley and soldiers patrolling the streets day and night."

"Hallelujah to that," said Adams. "I look forward to having them involved."

George gave Adams a high five. "That earthquake last year took the local radio stations down, so my friends in the police department had to drive through the city with loud speakers telling people the Red Cross and volunteers were using the high school and the fair grounds to distribute food, water and medical aid. I know they'd agree to spread the word that Walmart is, as you said, open for business. I'm not sure how they're doing it, but KFI has been broadcasting announcements since the EMP attack. If we could get the word to them, they might be willing to add Walmart to the list of places where people can get shelter and aid. Some of the other retirement homes might want to get involved, too.

"My guess, said Jack, is that KFI is monitoring the MARS network of Ham operators. Bob and Larry could contact KFI through MARS to let people know what Walmart is trying to do here in the Antelope Valley. The announcement will be national, so I assume other Walmart managers will be as eager to help as you are.

"No doubt in my mind, said Adams. Walmart is a good company and its

employees are good people.

"And only the military," added George, "knows more about moving men and materials than you do."

"Some of the local radio stations might still be on the air," said Adams. "Maybe they could get the word out, too."

"KAVL is mostly sports. I don't have my short wave with me. When I get back to Fair Oaks, I'll see if they're still broadcasting. If they are, I'll call the police on their tactical channel so they can drive over there and tell them about our plan."

"Okay. I'll round up as many of my employees as I can and begin rearranging the shelves to make room for chairs, cots and tables. Most of the items on the shelves are not what people need right now, so we can move them to the warehouse in the back. And I'll need a list of things you need at Fair Oaks."

"We'll get that list to you ASAP. Probably this afternoon."

"That your Toyota outside?" asked Jack.

"It is. Thank God it still runs. Which brings up another problem we'll have to solve. How to move people to the store and move food, water and supplies to Fair Oaks and to other retirement homes that want to make their facilities available to the people here in the valley. Like I said earlier, none of our trucks will run."

"No problem there, said George. One of our residents has a son who drove a city transit bus. He still has it, and we can get all the gas he'll need for as many trips as it takes."

"I might be able to get some of your trucks running again, said Jack. They back there behind the chain link fence?"

"You can do that?" asked Adams.

George jerked his thumb at Jack. "He can do damn near anything."

Adams handed the keys for the gate and the trucks to Jack, and George handed his HF radio to Adams.

"We've got more of these radios at Fair Oaks. We'll leave at least one of them on twenty-four-seven so you can get in touch with us. Leave yours on so we can let you know how many of your trucks are running. We'll leave the keys with the officers outside and let them know about our plan. They'll have some ideas of their own about how to make this all work."

As Jack and George got up to leave, Adams stood and shook their hands.

"Glad you guys came over here. As you can see, my office overlooks the parking lot. Every time a car or a truck pulls into it, I feel like I'm sitting in a raft in the middle of the ocean with sharks circling it. Even with those officers stationed outside."

"I know the feeling, said George. I can see the parking lot at Fair Oaks from my desk in the lobby. But the night those terrorists pulled in to it, we were the sharks."

Jack followed George out of Adam's office and outside to the officers guarding the entrance to Walmart.

GOONS & GUNS

Saturday — January 17th — 10:20 am

Mark, one of the officers guarding the entrance, said, "How'd it go, George? Adams think it was a good idea or not?"

"It's a go, Mark. Adams is a stand up guy. He already had a plan in mind. We just helped him work out some of the details. But I'd like to report a crime. My partner here stole a can of red spray paint as we were leaving the store."

George took hold of Jack's arm and raised it up so Mark and his partner Alex could see the can of paint. Alex raised his eyebrows. Mark grinned, then said, "George is just fuckin' with us, Alex. Been retired for five years now but still famous for his little jokes. I'd arrest him and his partner, but I'm bettin' they need the paint for somethin'. Right, George?"

"Still famous, huh? Well, a man's gotta leave somethin' behind for you young whipper snappers. Yeah, Adams gave us the keys to the gate and the trucks in the back so we can get them running. Jack is damn good at fixin' things. We'll spray the keys of the trucks he repairs red, then leave them with you.

"You got it, George. We'll get them back to Adams.

"Thanks, and let the rest of the department know about the plan. We're gonna get KFI to announce the plan for Walmart to be an aid station, and if KAVL is still on the air, it could broadcast an announcement too. Even if KAVL **can** broadcast alerts, you and your fellow officers might have to drive through the neighborhoods with a loud speaker. Some people may not have radios on or working.

"Yep, said Mark. Did that last year after the earthquake hit. Two eight-hour shifts of hollerin' through a bull horn. I couldn't speak for a week. Good luck with the trucks.

Jack managed to get all three of the trucks running by disconnecting, then reconnecting the batteries. They had been sitting under a large metal roof and not running when the EMP struck, so all it took to get the engines running again was a power reset. They painted all three keys red, then drove back to the front parking lot to give them to Mark and Alex.

As they came around the corner of the building, they saw three men with assault rifles standing behind a truck and Mark and Alex crouched behind the sand bags they had stacked at the front door.

One of the men stood and pointed his rifle at the Rover, but before he could fire, Jack hit the brake, threw it in reverse and backed it around the corner. As he and George were jumping out and yanking their pistols, they heard gunfire – a single shot from a large-caliber pistol followed by several three-shot bursts from automatic weapons.

Jack flattened his back against the building, took a quick look and saw the man who had pointed his rifle at them fall backwards. Mark or Alex had fired the shot that killed him. The others had returned fire. Jack could see dozens

of holes in the sandbags. They wouldn't last long against automatic weapons, so he took a prone firing position at the corner of the building. As the other men leaned down to check the dead man, one of them stood and fired another three-round burst at Mark and Alex.

"You mother fuckers are dead!" he yelled.

He opened his mouth to scream something else, but Jack shot him in the face. As he fell backward behind the truck, the other man ran to the driver's side and started to open the door. Mark and Alex stood and fired. Their bullets arrived simultaneously, one at the back of the man's head and the other between his shoulder blades. The combined impact slammed his forehead into the glass, breaking it, and his chest into the door, denting it. He bounced off the truck and fell to the ground, limp and lifeless.

Mark, Alex, George and Jack walked slowly toward the truck.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked George.

"They told us if we wanted to see our wives tonight, we better holster our weapons and back away from the door. They were comin' in. Alex told them that wasn't gonna happen, then put holes in both tires on this side of their truck with that 357 of his."

Alex smiled at Mark. "Then Mark shoved me down just before all three of them started filling our sand bags full of holes."

"Shit!" said George. "We shoulda heard gunfire, right Jack?"

"Maybe not, George. We were back there revving those diesel engines. Don't matter now. These hoodlums ain't gonna see **their** wives tonight."

"Probably don't have wives anyway," said Mark. "We were told to keep an eye out for three convicts who escaped from a road gang the day the EMP struck. These dirt bags could be them."

"What are we gonna do with their bodies?" asked Alex. "The days of calling an ambulance to haul their sorry asses to the morgue are gone."

"If we hadn't flattened two of the tires on this truck," said Mark, "we could take 'em back to the prison."

"We've got a truck," said George, "and a place where we can burn 'em to a crisp. One of our guys could come over here and take care of that."

Mark and Alex looked at George as if this were another of his jokes. George told them it wasn't and that if they asked him for the details he'd have to shoot both of them. They all had a good laugh, and not just because George was trying to be funny. Each of them had been in some pretty hairy situations, so it was always a relief to know you'd see your wife that night and the sunrise in the morning.

GAME OVER

Saturday — January 17th — 1:30 pm

When they got back to Fair Oaks, George called everyone into the lobby and told them about their agreement with the manager at Walmart, that he had already begun plans to prepare it to be an aid station, and that he would also transport food and supplies to Fair Oaks and to any other retirement homes that were willing to become part of a network of short-term aid stations or long-term survival groups.

When he told them about the men who had tried to break into Walmart, they collectively shook their heads, remembering how precarious life had become since HEMPs had changed the world. Everyone agreed they should not use the crematorium to dispose of the goons in the parking lot at Walmart. They also agreed that it would be wrong to burn the bodies next to the cell house in Frank's neighborhood. Dave and Woody volunteered to transport the bodies to the prison. Even if those dirt bags hadn't come from the prison, they belonged there and would be when Dave and Woody got done with them.

Jack said, "On our way back here, I called Bob on my HF radio so he can get the announcement about Walmart on KFI through the MARS network. Then George and I drove by the local station..."

Jack paused to glance at George. "What's the call letters?"

"KAVL. It's the Fox sports channel. We heard the generator running so we knew it might be on the air. Jack has an AM/FM radio in his Rover, so I tuned to 610 on the AM dial and heard nothing. Tuned it to their alternate frequency, 106.7 on the FM dial, and heard nothing. So I went inside and found Stan Whitfield eating lunch. I'm a Dodger fan so I knew Stan - best damn baseball announcer in the business. Like Chic Hearn was for the Lakers. I gave Stan the news about Walmart and the Air Force's plans to distribute food, water and supplies and put armed patrols on our streets, day and night. Then I discovered he didn't know we'd kicked China's butt. He was flabbergasted. Damn near choked on his ham sandwich. He asked me how I knew that and I told him about Bob, our contact with the Air Force's intelligence network. He said he normally receives FEMA updates at 2 o'clock but he'd broadcast the good news whether FEMA reported our victory or not and add the good news about Walmart and the Air Force pitching in to help people get back on their feet in the Antelope Valley."

George removed his AM/FM radio from his desk in the lobby, tuned it to AM 640 and looked at his watch. "Ten before two. Should hear Stan pretty soon."

While they waited for Stan to come on the air, Jack explained that radio stations authorized to broadcast FEMA alerts are required to have backup generators hardened against EMPs and other emergencies, enough gas or diesel to operate for 30 days and the capability of operating without station personnel being present.

The men and women at Fair Oaks were enjoying breakfast and the

satisfaction of helping Adams, the manager of the local Walmart, make food, water and shelter available to survivors in the Antelope Valley when George's AM radio came alive with an announcement from KAVL.

Good morning Vietnam!

There was a long pause, during which everyone in the lobby glanced at each other with stunned looks on their faces.

Sorry folks. That wasn't as funny as I intended it to be. But the good news I'm about to announce got the best of me. When I heard it, I jumped up and danced a jig and you will too. It was the bottom of the ninth ending, the bases were loaded, and the batter for our side had two strikes against him. He hadn't missed the first two pitches, just put the ball in the stands out of bounds. Some men are born on third base, so a home run is only a dash away. Our batter was born with a home run in his swing so the plate is only a jog away. The pitcher from out of town wound up, looked around the bases, then fired the ball at our batter like a rocket from hell. Everyone in the stadium stood up and held their breath. It was a screwball. Came in with smoke on it. Our batter swung. Time slowed down. The ball met the bat with a smack so loud I thought my ear drums would burst. The ball went up - higher and higher and higher...

The radio suddenly went silent.

"Cheese and crackers!" yelled George. We lost the damn signal." He leaned forward to adjust the dial when Stan came back with...

and disappeared in the sky above the bleachers. America and its allies and Russia and its allies teamed up to put China out of business. Nuclear bombs destroyed the city of Beijing and China's armed forces were completely demolished. Game over folks. We won. They lost. And now for more good news. The men and women at Edwards Air Force-

George turned the radio off. "That's Stan for you. Gotta make every game dramatic as hell. But he's right. Game over. We won. China lost."

The men and women in the lobby nodded but they all knew it had not been a game and it wasn't over. They still had to face a world they didn't want to forge a world they did want.

FAREWELL TO FAIROAKS

Saturday — January 17th — 6:30 pm

That evening, the men and women gathered in the dining room for another meal prepared by their resident magicians in the kitchen. Jack swallowed the last bite of his tuna, then stood.

"The people here at Fair Oaks who are not leaving with us and everyone else in the Antelope Valley are under the care and protection of the local police, Walmart and the men and women from Edwards. Only thing keeping us here is two more vehicles and enough gas to get to my place. Anyone opposed to spending tomorrow morning getting the vehicles, the gas, the food and water ready for the trip?"

George shook his head. "Not me. I saw a large van near the railroad tracks when we stopped at the KAVL station. Had a plumber's sign painted on the sides. Looked like an old one so it might not have electronic fuel injection. Might get it running by resetting the battery connections."

Tim said, "Me neither. I'm ready to get out of here, and if it's okay with Dave, I'd like to take his Triumph. We meet anyone out there with guns and a bad attitude, I'll be between that van and Dave's Nomad."

Mary gave Tim one of those stern, motherly looks. "You'll be a sitting duck on that bike."

"Not to worry Mom. If anyone shoots at me, I'll duck."

Mary tipped her head back and rolled her eyes up.

Dave laughed. "You won't have to duck, Tim. I have a rack for my Nomad to carry the Triumph. Just need a couple of strong men to get it up there and we're good to go."

Mary gave Dave an ear to ear smile. She hadn't forgotten how much he reminded her of her husband. "Thanks Dave. That solves that problem. Tim's Husky burns far less gas than a car. It might be cheap transportation when we get to Jack's place. Anyone have any ideas how we could transport it up there?"

Dave hadn't forgotten how much Mary reminded him of his wife. "Might be able to get it in that plumber's van. If we can get it started."

Woody raised his hand to get everyone's attention. "Carol and I have been going over how much food and water we need for the trip up north. It's less than 400 miles between here and there, so even with a few delays, we've got plenty of food and water for the trip."

Jack nodded. "I've got a hundred or so cans of tuna strapped to my Rover."

Linda laughed. "He does, and it's mercury free."

George said, "You all know I'm ready to beat feet out of here, and thanks to Jack, Woody and my friend who owns a gun shop, we've got the guns and ammo to deal with bad guys along the way."

Woody said, "Oorah to that George. I'm not hoping we run into any bad guys but if we do I won't hesitate to take them and their vehicles out with one of those RPGs."

Paul and Rose exchanged looks. Paul nodded. Rose said, "You have become our dearest friends. We'll follow you wherever you go."

Margaret said, "Me too."

Max lightly tapped the floor. Everyone knew what that meant.

Jack looked around this hardy group of survivors who had become his friends. "So except for gas and two more vehicles, we're ready to go."

Sunday - January 18th - 6:00 am

The next morning, Jack called Bob on his HF radio to let him know they were leaving Fair Oaks in a few hours.

Bob, Jack here.

He waited, hoping Bob had his HF radio on.

This is Larry, Jack. Hang on while I get my father.

A moment later...

What's up Jack?

Bob, good to hear your voice again. We'll be on the road to my place in a few hours. I prefer to travel at night but with so many people and vehicles in the caravan I decided it would be safer if I can keep a daylight eye on everyone at all times.

Good thinking Jack. China is no longer a threat but you're likely to encounter domestic or foreign threats out there on the highway.

If we do they'll discover we're a bigger threat to them than they are to us.

You're armed to the teeth.

We are. Flak jackets, AR-15s, RPGs, my Chey Tak rifle and a dozen men and women determined to kill anyone trying to kill them.

Roger that, Jack. I've met them and you're right. Survivors not victims. You know I'd like to join you but with China out of the picture...

Bob didn't finish what Jack knew he was about to say.

You can do more to help America get back on her feet by staying at Edwards than bugging out with us. You've got the contact info for my com sat. Keep in touch.

Will do Jack. Over but not out.

After breakfast, Jack and George drove the Rover to the railroad tracks, spotted the van and toggled the battery terminals. It started right up and the fuel gauge read three quarters full.

George high fived Jack. "Luck is a lady today! Let's get this baby back to Fair Oaks." When they returned, Woody, Dave and Tim were standing in the parking lot with three vehicles neither Jack nor George had seen before. Two were small pickups and the third was a four seat sedan.

Woody grinned. "Found these in the upper parking structure at that hotel in Palmdale. Full of gas and all three started right up. No battery toggle required. Must have been protected by the structure itself. Can't figure why they were still there but they belong to us now. Let's get the flock out of here."

They loaded the bottles of water, cans of tuna, beef jerky and non-perishable food Carol and Woody had gathered from the kitchen into the

vehicles. Tim's Husky fit in the bed of one of the pickup trucks, and Jack and Woody helped Dave get his Triumph on the rack behind his Nomad. Everyone had packed their suitcases and duffel bags full of clothes and personal items they just couldn't leave behind.

When everyone was settled into the cars and trucks, Jack raised both arms and yelled, "We all good to go?" He watched arms pop out of the vehicles, thumbs pointing at the sky. "Rawhide!" he hollered. "Move 'em out!"

Jack felt a bit silly hollering Rawhide but he had watched every episode of the show and knew that most of the men and women heading to his place up north had watched more than a few episodes themselves.

Linda was riding with him in the Rover. "I can't believe you hollered Rawhide. Just when I think I have you figured out, you do something like that. Who is the real Jack?"

Jack smiled but said nothing. He'd asked himself that same question since meeting Linda and the others at Fair Oaks.

Woody and Carol were leading the convoy in one of the two pickup trucks. Carol had a loaded RPG on her lap. Jack took up the rear of the convoy in his Rover. Linda had a loaded RPG in her lap. When Woody got to the street in front of Fair Oaks, he stopped, got out of the truck, came to attention, and saluted the building. Every head in the other vehicles, including Jack's and Linda's, took one last look at what had been home for what seemed like a zillion years. So much had happened in so little time.

Woody led the group east on highway 18. When they got to US 395, he stopped. Every vehicle had a two-way. Woody keyed his.

So far so good. Everyone okay?

Woody heard a chorus of *Roger that, Woody*. He turned left and continued north on US 395. When they got near Kramer's Junction, Woody saw four semi tractor trailer trucks at the intersection of highway 58 and US 395. Two on either side of US 395 and two on either side of high 58. Somebody was deliberately blocking north, south, east and west traffic.

He stopped and keyed his two-way radio.

Weapons unlocked and loaded, everyone. The first stumbling block to our forward progress just raised its ugly head.

Jack keyed his two-way.

Give me a minute to scan the area.

Jack reached behind his seat, grabbed his high power binoculars and scanned the junction at highway 58 and US 395.

Ah, there they are. Four men with assault rifles sitting behind sand bags on top of the trailers. Those sandbags won't keep me from taking all four of them out with my CheyTac. The men we don't see wouldn't hear a thing but we'd have to deal with them while we try get around the trailers. Not the best option, Woody.

Yeah, somebody might get hurt and that might be some of us.

Let me run you through another option. I take those men on the trailers out. I've installed a silencer so the men we can't see won't

hear it go off but one or more of them might see their buddies take the hit and come out in the open. If so, I pop them with my Chey Tac, then drive my Rover close enough to give the ones still hiding an offer they can't refuse. No way they wouldn't hear that. The cone shaped speaker on my PA is loud and highly directional.

What would you tell them?

Clear the highway or die, then back the threat up with that Russian RPG-16 sitting on Carol's lap.

Hell yeah. She could blow those tractor trailers clean off the highway. How close we gotta get to do that?

The RPG-16 has a claimed range of 800 meters, but the rocket it fires self destructs at 800 meters. Our position right now is right at the edge of that distance, so we'd have to get a bit closer to make sure it doesn't explode before it hits the target.

But we'd still have to deal with men we can and can't see.

Yeah, so here's how we make sure none of our people get hurt. After I take out the men on the trailers and anyone else who comes out to see what happened, you and I get close enough to deliver our ultimatum with my public address system, then Carol delivers our Or Else message. She'll have to exit your truck to fire the weapon but she won't be at risk of getting shot with those assault rifles. I'll scan the area with my binoculars. When I'm certain there isn't a sniper with a long range rifle hiding somewhere, I'll say FIRE & BRIMSTONE on my PA. Tell her to aim for the tractor on this side of highway 58, not the trailer. If we're lucky, the explosion caused by the war head in the rocket will set the diesel tanks on fire. Then she reloads the RPG and waits for me to tell them to come out waving a white flag or face another Or Else package delivered air mail express. With or without a white flag, we drive down there with our flak jackets on to evaluate the safety of our people continuing their journey. If anyone resists, we shoot them with extreme prejudice. If not, we guard our people with extreme prejudice.

I'm on board with that Jack.

The windshield on my Rover is bullet proof against anything but a caliber like the one I use in my Chey Tak, and I'm almost certain nobody down there has anything comparable. When I stop, park your pickup behind my Rover with just enough space for Carol to fire her RPG but still be protected by my Rover from incoming rounds.

She's nodding her head Jack. Let's do this.

The people in the other vehicles sat on pins and needles listening to Jack's conversation with Woody. They watched Jack pull around their convoy and stop diagonally to the road. Dave keyed his two way.

Cheese and crackers, Jack. Sounds like you plan to shoot four guys then maybe two or three more in one helluva hurry.

Woody keyed his two-way.

He can do it, Dave. I watched him put holes in the heads of three terrorists in less than two seconds from more than 800 meters.

Jack got out, rolled the window down, then used the frame to steady his CheyTac. He put his eye to telescopic sight, held his breath and slowed his heart, then shot all four men sitting on the trailers at Kramer's Junction.

He kept his eye on the telescopic sight. A minute passed without seeing

any more men appear. He got back in his Rover, drove closer to the junction, and stopped. Woody followed. Carol got out and positioned her RPG on the hood of Woody's truck.

Jack turned to Linda. "Woody and I are parked diagonally to the road to protect you and Carol from rounds coming from whoever is left down there. We're still too far away for assault weapons but better safe than sorry. When I get out to give those men our ultimatum, you get out and position your RPG on the hood of my Rover. Don't show anymore of yourself than is necessary to fire the weapon. Aim for the trailer, not the tractor but don't pull the trigger when I say FIRE & BRIMSTONE. That's Carol's signal. Yours will be SHOOT. We may not need your RPG. Depends on how the men down there react to Carol's rocket. But if I say SHOOT, pull the trigger, reload as quickly as possible, then put your sights on the building on the right side of the road and wait for me to say SHOOT again.

Jack turned on his PA system and got out of his Rover. When Linda was in position with her RPG, he put the microphone up to his face.

"Good morning Vietnam!"

Linda's eyebrows went up and her chin went down. *Jesus, when will this man ever stop surprising me.*

Two men came out of the building on the right, the one Linda had her sites on. One was carrying an assault rifle, probably an AR-15. The other had a pistol in his hand. A third man came out of the building on the left with a sawed off shotgun. He stopped, saw the other men across the street and ran to where they were standing. All three began glancing left and right trying to locate the source of Jack's voice.

"I'm south of you on 395. Listen carefully to what I'm about to say. Your lives depend on it.

The three men turned their heads toward Jack.

We've survived the HEMP, Jihadist terrorists, and gangs roaming the streets of our town. We're armed to the teeth and ready to deal with you too. Our demands are not negotiable. You have five minutes to move those tractor trailers out of our way or you will suffer fire and brimstone. Yes, I've read the Bible. The count starts now.

Jack watched the men turn their heads toward him, then back to each other. Jack couldn't hear what they said but when they raised their weapons, Jack shot the one with the assault rifle in the face. The other two ran back into the building. Jack grabbed his binoculars and scanned the area for snipers hiding, then yelled FIRE.

A small trail of smoke followed Carol's rocket into the tractor. The explosion tipped the tractor over and pivoted it diagonally to the road. The trailer followed, sliding away from the right side of the highway. A few seconds later, the tractor burst into flames. Jack counted down from ten, knowing the fuel tanks would soon explode. When he got to three, they did, and he watched pieces of the tractor and its trailer fly into the sky, then come down like fire and brimstone on both sides of the highway.

Jack turned to Linda. "SHOOT."

She did and they watched the building where the remaining two men had

sought refuge go up in a cloud of smoke and fire.

That's what I call extreme prejudice, Jack. Let's go down there and make sure there ain't no more bad guys hiding somewhere.

That's a roger, Woody. You and Carol get your vests on. Linda and I are doing the same.

They cleared all four corners of Kramers Junction. The only bodies they found in the building Linda had fired on were the two bad guys. They found a dozen or so people hiding at the Roundhouse restaurant on the northeast corner of the junction, ten people hunkered down at the gas station a quarter mile east on highway 58, and six men and women in the cafe across the railroad tracks on US 395 an eighth of a mile north of highway 58. Nobody knew who the men were but they all agreed on why they had blocked the highways. They'd all been relieved of their vehicles, their money, their food and water, their supplies and their prescription and over the counter drugs.

Jack keyed his two-way.

"We've cleared the area of bad guys. Come on down. We'll meet you at the cafe across the railroad tracks. The owner said he's putting everything on the house for saving their lives. Good time to let our nerves settle and enjoy cooked food.

Jack. Tim here. When I came out to the desert to ride my Husky through the rocks and cactus, I'd always stop at that cafe. It's called the Astro Burger and serves the best burgers and fries in the world. I hope they still make those thick, real ice cream shakes.

When the rest of their group pulled into the parking lot of the Astro Burger, everyone jumped out of their vehicles and began hugging each other and thanking Jack and Woody and Carol and Linda for saving them from the men at Kramers Junction. And Tim was right. The Astro Burger had the best hamburgers, fries and ice cream shakes in the world. Jack was chewing on his burger when he heard the CB in his Rover.

Running Bear. Big Mack here. Got your ears on?

Jack jumped up and ran out to his Rover.

Mike. What's your 20?

We're just south of highway 58 looking at what must have been one hell of a battle. Looks like a fuckin' bomb went off. What's your 20?

Across the railroad tracks about a quarter mile from you. Fast food place called Astro Burger. You said "We're just south" so I'm guessing Susan is with you.

You guessed right and I'm guessing you're why I'm looking at buildings on fire. Dead bodies. Tractor trailers blown up and scattered across the highway.

You guessed right but it wasn't just me. I've got a bad ass bunch of survivors with me. Get over here and join us. The Astro Burger serves the best burgers and fries in the world, and the shakes are made with real ice cream.

COLONEL KNOCK KNEE

Sunday — January 18th — 2:45 PM

When they got to Bridgeport, Jack stopped and keyed his two-way.

My instructor at the Marine Corps Training Base moved here when he retired and built himself a ranch in the hills west of town. I'm going to call him to let him know we're stopping by to say hello and spend the night. His ranch is five miles on dirt roads but the Colonel keeps them maintained with cinder.

Jack didn't reveal the truth about the Colonel, his ranch or the nature of his relationship with Jack. They'd find out soon enough.

He called the Colonel on his HF radio. The Colonel answered with "Halito su isonakni" then gave Jack the password to lower the Tiger Teeth barrier he had installed where the road squeezed between the huge boulders a quarter mile from the cabin.

Jack got back in his Rover, turned left and headed toward the Colonel's ranch. When he saw the Tiger Teeth sticking two feet above the road, he stopped, got out, put his mouth near the speaker on the STOP sign, and said "Lumanka" which meant "Secret, let me in." He heard a low, throaty growl as the huge spikes disappeared below the surface of the road.

He knew the Colonel had surveillance cameras all along the road leading to his ranch. He'd greet them with a Golden Eagle pistol in his left hand and most likely an AR-15 or ten gauge, double barrel shot gun in his other hand. Jack knew there'd be other eyes on him and his Fair Oaks friends but he'd never see them unless the Colonel called them out.

Jack steered his Rover around the circular drive in front of the house, and as he had predicted, the Colonel was standing on the porch armed to the teeth. Jack got out and saluted the big man.

"Semper Fi, Colonel."

The Colonel said. "Halito su isonakni." then leaned the shotgun against the cabin, walked briskly down the steps and gave Jack a bear hug. He might as well have been a bear. He was a big man. Like Jack. Tall, muscular build. Narrow at the hips and wide at the shoulders.

Linda was surprised to see the two men hugging. They were really good friends or... she wondered what else she was seeing... and what kind of greeting was Halito su isonakni? She wished Jack would stop surprising her with one mystery after another.

The Colonel stepped back and looked Jack up and down. "Well fry me in hog fat. When those chinks hit us with that HEMP, I knew you'd eventually get around to sending me a homeward bound message on the training center's satellite. Sorry it had to be an 1CL5 exchange. Wanted to hear more about where you were and when you'd get here."

"Yeah. 1CL5. One five second exchange. I chose Choctaw of course. Held my breath until you pinged back the door is open. Then I got busy as a nine tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs killing Muslim fanatics, domestic gangs and protecting these people on my way up here." Jack swung his arm toward his friends from Fair Oaks.

"Same here. No towel head fanatics. Just gangs bent on stealing stuff that didn't belong to them. They'd come up the road armed to the teeth. When they got to my Tiger Teeth and the STOP sign, and couldn't give me the password, I knew they weren't friends. I'd use that speaker on the STOP sign to tell them they had ten seconds to turn around and go home. If they didn't heed my warning, I'd use the flame throwers hidden in the boulders on both sides of the road to convince them that I meant what I said. If **that** didn't turn them around, we'd waste them and their vehicles with those bad boys."

Chet pointed to the two trailer mounted howitzers sitting fifty feet from either side of the cabin.

"Needless to say, most of our unwanted guests were terminated with extreme prejudice."

The big man slapped Jack's arm. "Glad you're here now Jack. You told your friends about our ranch?"

"No Sir. Thought it best to let you spring that on them."

"I will and cut the Sir crap. You're Jack. I'm Chet."

The Colonel turned to Linda. "And who is this young lady? Someone special if she's ridin' with you."

"This is Linda. Met her on the Antelope freeway just after the HEMP hit us. And she is special. Saved my life. Once for real and... well, a number of other ways."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat. She must be special to save your butt. How'd that happen? No, let her tell the tale. You'd embellish what really happened with all sorts of testosterone poisoned bees wax."

Jack glanced at Linda then rolled his hand toward the Colonel. "Linda, this is Colonel Nakni."

Linda stepped forward and offered the Colonel her hand "Glad to meet you Colonel. If your grip is like Jack's you better back it off a bit or I'll... well, get very angry."

The Colonel gave her a gentle squeeze, laughed, then gave her an ear to ear grin. "You're spunky. I like that. Probably why you saved this guy's life. I look forward to hearing all about that. And you can drop the Colonel Nakni. Just call me Chet."

The Colonel waved the others out of their vehicles. "Come on in. We're gonna celebrate our victory over those Beijing commies. Kicked their sorry asses."

Tim got out of Dave's Nomad and stood there with an amazed look on his face.

"Sufferin' succotash. This is the biggest log cabin I've ever seen. Larger than those in Big Valley and Bonanza but this one looks like a giant teepee with walls."

"Make a good place to—"

Woody stopped, reminding himself that this ranch belonged to the Colonel, not Jack.

The Colonel guessed what Woody had been about to say. He locked eyes with Woody.

"I'm not contrary to that possibility, young man. Gets a bit lonely now and then with just my wife and the cook and the maid and the ranch hands and the gardener and the chickens and the goats and every week or so I have to bury a gang of morons who think this place belongs to them. You headed for Jack's place, right?"

"We are Sir. It's gonna be home for all of us. Can't wait to get there."

"Might not be as long as you think."

The Colonel paused long enough to make Woody think he was about to explain how long it would be. Jack had told them his place was several hundred miles from Fair Oaks but had never told them exactly where it was.

"I'm Chet. What's your handle?"

"Woody, Sir, and this is my wife Carol."

Chet stepped forward and shook their hands.

"You both carry yourselves like soldiers. Army or Marine Corps?"

"We were both Marines, Sir. Eight years in Afghanistan keeping our soldiers full of beans and burgers, soup and slop and whatever else the Corps made available to me and our staff of cooks and potato peelers. Didn't have to kill anyone until I hooked up with Jack."

Jack trigger fingered Woody. "Woody would have been and an excellent sniper in the Marine Corps, and has been more than once since I met him. He's got those rod rich eyes and the hands and mind for it."

Chet nodded, then looked at Mike. "Makes sense a big guy like you be'd driving a big truck like that. What's that stuff stacked on the back of your tractor?"

"I'm Mike, sir. This is Susan and that's more than 500 cans of mercury free tuna."

"Mercury free? How the hell they do that?"

"Don't know sir, but they claim to check every fish."

"Probably false advertising but I'll be happy to eat their tuna, mercury or not. You're gonna give my cook a few cans for tonight's supper, right?"

"Yes sir. Twenty four cans in a box. I'll unload a box right now."

Chet knuckle bumped Mike, then waved everyone inside. On the way into the cabin, Linda leaned toward Jack and whispered, "Is the Colonel Russian? Nak... how do you say it?"

"It's pronounced Knock Knee but it's not Russian. He's..."

Jack paused. "The Colonel is fond of delivering informative briefings and painful debriefings. I'm sure he's prepared one or the other for us. Perhaps both."

Jack's reluctance to explain the Colonel's nationality made Linda even more eager to unravel the mystery of Colonel Knock Knee. And then another thought struck her like a bolt of lightning. *I don't know Jack's last name.*

She turned to follow Jack into the cabin. Tim was right, she thought. The Colonel's cabin is enormous.

When they got to the steps leading up to the porch, Jack stopped, turned around and saluted the American flag waved gently in the breeze at the top of a pole in the center of the circular driveway. The Marine Corps flag

fluttered below the Stars and Stripes and below that was another flag Linda didn't recognize. It was deep purple and in the center was an unstrung bow, three arrows, and a smoking pipe attached to what looked like a hatchet and the words *The Great Seal of the Choctaw Nation* around the figures in the center.

Linda suddenly knew the answer to the Colonel's ethnic background. He was an American Indian, a Choctaw. If Jack was—

Her thoughts were interrupted when he touched her arm. "Let's get inside Linda. You're going to like what you see."

She followed him inside the cabin and stopped. It was an enormous Great Room at the very center of the house. Her eyes followed the rafters up from the log walls to where they came together at a sky light high above the floor. Linda felt as if she were standing inside a cathedral. Despite the holy, humbling effect most cathedrals had on people, the Colonel's Great Room seemed to glow with a warm, friendly atmosphere.

Pictures of him with his wife and children at various stages of their lives were hung over the mantle on the largest fireplace she had ever seen. She was sure a grown man could walk into it without bending over.

She continued to scan the room and saw pictures of the Colonel and his fellow Marines in various combat situations scattered here and there on the cabin walls. Linda recognized Jack in several of the military photos and one of the boys in the family photos bore a strong resemblance to Jack. Another mystery waiting to be revealed? A possible solution came into her thoughts but she dismissed it as her imagination working overtime.

Jack led her to a teal colored sofa with a polished walnut coffee table in front of the sofa and tables with lamps on either side. There were a dozen or more sofas, chairs and recliners with the same configuration of tables and lamps. Her eyes moved from one sitting area to the next. The furniture in the Colonel's Great Room had been arranged in the shape of a large circle. Dozens of people could converse with each other without turning their heads more than a few degrees. Linda wondered where all these other people were, then remembered that she and her Fair Oaks friends were a dozen or so people.

While everyone was finding a place to sit, Mike walked in with a large box of tuna on his shoulder.

"Where do you want this, Colonel?"

"Sit it down right there young man and have a seat. Plenty of places for you and your lady friend to take a load off."

Mike and Susan found a small sofa and sat down. Then the Colonel, in his deep, in-charge voice, offered everyone drinks. "I got enough beer, wine and Kentucky bourbon to last me a hundred years. Considering that I'm more than 60 years away from my momma's womb, I might as well divvy up some of it for all of you."

Linda noticed that her father and Mary, Tim's mother, had chosen to sit together and that George and Margaret were also sitting together. Good, she thought. Everyone needs someone special, someone to love. She hadn't realized how important that was until she met Jack. How she had

unconsciously suffered without him.

The Colonel walked to the bar and began making drinks when a woman about his age came in the room and looked around. When she saw Jack, she ran to him and gave him what Linda thought was a loving, motherly hug. "Sushki."

Jack gave the woman the warmest smile Linda had ever seen on his face, kissed her on the forehead and said, "Sushki."

The woman cupped Jack's face in her hands. "We thank the Great Spirit for keeping you safe and bringing you home."

The woman walked back to Chet and kissed him on the lips. Chet's tough, in-charge, military demeanor melted into that of a loving, devoted husband. He turned to the men and women in the room. "This is Moreen, my wife, friend, lover, cook, maid and... well, every man, if he's honest with himself, knows he needs female supervision now and then, and I accept her role in that regard with all the humility I can muster because..."

Chet paused to look at Moreen. Every eye in the room followed his. She was a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman with long, bronze-red hair, emerald-green eyes and a smile to match her good looks.

"If I don't, those Irish eyes will set my hair on fire, then she'll bury me in verbal abuse like Mount Vesuvius buried Pompei in molten lava and smolderin' ash."

Moreen threw her head back with an exasperated look on her face, then turned to everyone sitting in the room. "Good grief. He exaggerates everything. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he'd spent thirty years in the Marine Corps."

When the laughter subsided, Moreen helped Chet serve the drinks. Chet raised his bourbon and said, "Here's to the US of A and all the survivors who said... you tell 'em Jack. It's your motto."

"Everyone dies. Survival is saying not today."

The room exploded with cheers, applause and a chorus of Oorahs. Chet hollered Semper Fi, then stood up with an ear to ear grin.

"Those fuckin' Commies..."

Chet paused to look at Moreen. "Sorry for the language dear. Sometimes I forget I'm not briefing or debriefing Marines. So, moving forward without the F word, those commies in Beijing brought hunger, thirst, disease, chaos, confusion, death and destruction to people all over the world. When the news came that we'd brought death and destruction to them, I celebrated our victory with Moreen and the others here at the ranch."

"He drank himself silly," said Moreen, then went to sleep with a smile on his face."

"I did, and now I'm celebrating our victory with all of you. Cheers everyone."

The sound of glasses and beer bottles clinking rippled around the room.

"And now I have some more good news. News that'll put a smile on your face even a plastic surgeon couldn't remove."

Dave turned to Tim. "Cheese and crackers Tim. You've just been replaced

as the resident comedian.”

“Sufferin’ succotash, Dave, you’re right.”

The room fell silent waiting for Chet to deliver more good news.

HOME IS HERE

Sunday — January 18th — 6:30 pm

"I know you're all eager to get back on the road to Jack's place. Well..."

Chet paused to give everyone an ear to ear grin.

"This is it. My place is Jack's place. Our home is your home."

Linda pivoted on the sofa to face Jack. Her eyebrows were up, her mouth was open and her chin was down. "Chet is your father. Moreen is your mother."

Jack nodded but said nothing.

Everyone but Jack looked at Chet and then each other with a surprised look on their faces. Woody stood up. "So that's what you meant when you told me it wouldn't be as long as I thought."

Chet gave Woody a nod, then said, "Everyone on your feet and to the bar. I'm a damn good bar tender but I ain't no cocktail waitress."

The room was suddenly filled with the sights and sounds of people shaking Chet's hand, slapping him on the back, and thanking him for his hospitality. Their journey home had ended in a surprising but exciting, wonderful way.

Chet filled his own glass with bourbon, then banged the polished bar top with what looked like a judge's gavel. "So we've got two reasons to celebrate. China is toast and you're all home but—"

"Three reasons." interrupted Moreen. "Our son is home and safe and sound with us."

"Damn straight, my love."

Chet looked at Jack. "Jack is my son and that's his mother sitting over there."

Several of Jack's Fair Oaks friends had not figured that out and expressed their surprise with whispered oohs and ahs.

Mike stood up. "Four reasons, sir. I can unload the rest of that tuna."

"You can, Mike, and I'm thinking that tractor of yours will come in handy when we need to haul lumber and supplies up here to the ranch."

"You got it, sir. Saw dozens of flat bed trailers abandoned along the highway on my way up here."

"Good and dump the Colonel and Sir. I'm Chet."

He paused to empty his glass of bourbon. "Okay, where was I?"

Jack raised his hand. "You were about to sober our good news with a but."

"Yeah, and there always is a b-u-t-t, isn't there. So here's mine. We've got a zillion things to do before we can see the light at the end of the tunnel and head for the sunshine. When I say we, I mean all of us here at the ranch and all the other survivors in America and around the world."

Jack nodded. "My father is an expert at briefing and debriefing Marines. You've just heard the briefest debriefing I've ever heard him deliver, and it wasn't nearly as painful as most of them."

"My son is correct. My briefings are famous and my debriefings are infamous. Most military operations begin with a briefing before I send my

men and women into battle and end with a debriefing after they've snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. In this case, the debriefing came first because the battle with China is over. But the battle against the results of Beijing's attack is *not* over. So tomorrow morning I'll brief you all on how I think we should face *that* enemy. I'll begin with how we can build cabins for all of you, then segue into things we can do to help ourselves and other survivors get America back on the road to peace and freedom."

Moreen said. "Chet, Jack and his friends must be starving. I've got dinner almost ready."

Chet got up and led everyone into the dining room. Like the Great Room, it was an enormous, circular shaped room with a circular shaped table in the center large enough to serve two dozen or more hungry mouths. After dinner, Chet invited everyone back to the Great Room and tended bar. When everyone was once again sitting in the giant oval of the room, Moreen said, "You've all heard the story of Chet and my life together and apart. I know you must be exhausted from the journey here, but I'd love to hear each of *your* stories."

Chet said, "I would too but we've got plenty of time to get to know one another in the days to come."

"What my father is saying," added Jack, "is put a short tail on your tales."

They did, then Moreen showed everyone where they could spend the night. Chet had built the cabin with ten bedrooms, each with a king sized bed, a master bath and a Murphy bed that folded out from the wall. Mike and Susa said they'd spend the night in the sleeper cab of his tractor. Jack told his father he'd take his turn at guard duty and sleep in his Rover in between shifts.

TOP DOWN

Monday — January 19th — 6 am

At sunrise, everyone woke up to the sound of a bugle playing reveille at the auditory threshold of pain, then Chet's voice announcing that, "Breakfast is on the table. Last one here is a rotten egg."

The men and women got up, dressed, then stumbled down to the dining room rubbing their eyes. Dave sat down and looked at George. "Reveille and bugles are why I didn't join the Marine Corps."

"Yeah," said George. "bugles and reveille are why I joined the police force. If I was a younger, bigger man, I'd walk over there and punch Chet in the mouth."

Jack laughed. "I tried that when I *was* younger and *almost* as big as him. Halfway to his mouth I watched my fist stop, then disappear in that bear sized paw of his. And I agree with both of you. Reveille is one of the two reasons I chose a life as a sniper. Sitting quietly somewhere out of sight waiting for my target to come in to sight."

"And the other reason?" asked Dave.

"To avoid having to navigate the agendas and egos of my superiors."

George and Dave nodded, then Chet stood. "You're probably wondering who these other people are sitting around the table with you. That's Carl, Cathy and their daughter Penny sitting there, and that's Butch, Beverly and their son John and his fiancé Shirley sitting over there."

Jack searched the faces of Butch and Carl and knew they were like Carol and Woody — carved from hardships and seasoned by trouble.

Butch gave the German shepherd sitting beside him an affectionate pat. "This is Buster, my canine hero. I adopted when both of us retired from the Marine Corps. I trained Buster to spot IEDs, improvised explosive devices buried a few inches below the dirt or debris on roads in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our job was to clear the roads so the troops behind us could reach their destination without having their vehicles blown up or their limbs blown off. I'd give Buster a fifty foot lead on his leash. When he saw or smelled something suspicious he'd stop, look down at the spot, stick his tail straight out behind him and wiggle his butt back and forth. I'd call him back, find cover for both of us, then fire a round into the damn thing. Buster's heroic attention to duty saved my life and the lives of dozens of soldiers more than once."

Woody gave Buster a thumb up. "Semper Fi, Buster. Combat dogs saved our lives too, every time Carol and I broke camp and hit the road to the next camp."

Chet raised his glass of orange juice. "Semper Fi to all our war heroes and Ahninchí to all of you here. You're heroes of a different sort but heroes just the same. That's Choctaw for honor, acknowledgment and respect."

Chet paused to drain his glass of orange juice.

"Now I'd like to introduce you to some of the heroes who are not here, the men and women at the top who flushed China down the toilet."

Jack leaned toward Linda. "Fasten your seat belt. Here comes my father's briefing."

"Two days before China detonated the HEMPs, our President was in Beijing to negotiate a peaceful solution to the conflict between China and Taiwan, and our Vice President was in Mexico City to discuss the fiasco at our southern borders with Mexico's president. The President was killed and the Vice President was kidnapped. The acting President - "

Chet was interrupted by a wave of gasps rippling through the people at the dinner table.

"It was no coincidence that these events took place just days before China HEMP'd the world. That was bad news. The good news is that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the acting President and her staff met in the Pentagon's War Room and terminated China's imperialistic goals. My sources have confirmed that our new President and her staff are taking steps to rebuild America from the *top* down. You and I, and all the other survivors in America, must take steps to rebuild America from the **bottom** up. Conflict will occur, of course, when the top meets the bottom, but I'm confident a solution can and will be found. Meanwhile, I'd like to suggest some things we can do to not only survive but to thrive here at our home."

Everyone raised their glasses and echoed Chet's "Ahninchi."

"My momma," continued Chet, "only raised **one** dumb boy... my older brother. He consistently bought high and sold low. I took the other road. With my investments and my Marine Corps income and retirement, I bought this ranch and turned it into a self-sustaining homestead for my family. My wife Moreen, our sons Cliff and Jack and our daughter Melinda. Damn near lost Cliff to the fiasco in Afghanistan and knew Jack was putting his life at risk every time the Marine Corps sent him to take out bad guys in Yemen, Iran and wherever else our enemies were scheming against America and our allies. Cliff and his wife and Melinda and her husband will join us soon. They've been in the DUMB bunker at Pickel Meadows since the HEMP."

George raised his hand. "Pickel Meadows. Where's that Colonel?"

"A few miles from here. It's the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center where I spent the last years of my career teaching soldiers how to survive in extreme weather and combat conditions."

Chet paused to glance at Jack. "Pinkerton is where Jack developed his sniper and hand-to-hand combat skills. He was a natural. Seemed to know instinctively that our brains notice speed and discontinuity, so you creep up on your target slowly, without starts and stops."

"I liked Pinkerton. Good place to end my career. Good place to hunt and fish too. So before I retired, I looked for somewhere to settle into life as a civilian. Found this location and built the ranch. Wasn't long before I realized it could be home for some of my friends too. My life on the reservation in Oklahoma kept popping up in everything I did. When I was a boy, the reservation was boring and stifled my plans to do something besides milking goats, tending crops and listening to the elders tell stories about the

Choctaw history of suffering and persecution by the white man.

So two days after my 18th birthday, I packed the things I didn't want to leave behind and joined the Marine Corps. Turned out to be the perfect career for a boy struggling to be a man and aching for adventure and something to conquer besides a goat or a mule trying to kick me in the pants."

Moreen said, "Tell them what your name means, Chet."

"Why would they be interested in that?"

"Because I want them to know more about the man I married, and why."

"Then you tell them. If I do it'll sound like I'm tootin' my own horn."

"Then I'll toot your horn for you. I went to the reservation to help Choctaws, adults and children, learn how to speak and write English. Chet was one of my students. I was just a teenager myself but I wanted to be an anthropologist, and my counselor thought it would be beneficial to expose myself to indigenous people here in my own country before I went to college. So she signed me up to spend my Summer vacation with the Choctaw Nation. I learned more from them than they learned from me."

"Chet was my best student. He quickly grasped the ins and outs of conjugation, grammar, syntax, sentence structure, gender-based pronouns... and, well, I guess that's when I began to fall in love with this big guy."

Moreen paused to give her bug guy a wink.

"Now let me explain how important names are to the Choctaw."

She paused to give Linda a knowing look. Linda translated Moreen's look as a hint that Jack was also Choctaw. She looked forward to hearing the story behind his name.

"Over the course of their lives," continued Moreen, "a Choctaw can have several names. At birth, they are given a name that symbolizes something that was seen or happened when they were born. Their next name is something they've overcome... an act of honor and courage or a great victory in battle. In Chet's case, it was receiving the Medal of Honor and Purple Heart for saving his men from an attack of fanatic terrorists in Afghanistan. Before that, his name was Nitushi, which means Young Bear because he was over 12 pounds at birth. After the battle with the terrorists his name became Chahta Nakni, which means Choctaw Warrior. An easy way to remember it is to say Chata Knock Knee."

"Ah," said Linda, "so Chet is a nickname for Chata."

Moreen nodded. "When Chet joined the Marine Corps I was devastated. I stopped volunteering to teach English at the reservation, graduated from high school, then enrolled in college with a major in anthropology and a minor in languages. We kept in touch and a year later he came home on leave and asked me to be his wife. His absence hadn't diminish my love... or his... so I said yes, but said no when he asked me to follow him back to where he was stationed."

"He knew how important college was to me, and I knew how important the Marine Corps was to him. We lived separate lives. Every time he called, wrote a letter or the six o'clock news had a story of Marines being killed or

injured in some god awful place, I'd fiddle with my engagement ring until my finger was raw."

Carol stood, walked over to Moreen and gave her a hug. "I can't imagine how difficult that must have been. Woody and I met in the Marine Corps and were never apart. We were both cooks so the Marine Corps stationed in the same places throughout our tour in Afghanistan."

"Thanks Carol. It was difficult. You know the saying that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it also makes the heart hurt. When did you and Woody marry?"

"In Afghanistan. Officers have the authority to put people together so we did. When did you and Chet marry? When he retired? God I hope not."

"No, he came home on leave in my senior year at the University of Tulsa. I was in a class on Indo European languages when the door to the classroom burst open and in walks Chet in his class A uniform. He removed his cap, walked over to me, knelt down on one knee and said..."

"Tell them what you said, Chet. If I tell them it might sound like I'm tooting my own horn."

Chet grinned. "I told her she was the smartest, sexiest, sweetest woman in the whole F'n world, and I ought to know because I'd been all over the world, and if she didn't get out of her chair and follow me to the Choctaw Nation to get married I'd sweep her off her feet and carry her there myself."

The dining room exploded with cheers, laughter, applause and Oorahs.

Tim said, "Sufferin' succotash. That's taking the bull by the horns Chet. Shoulda got another medal of honor for that battle."

"I did, Tim. The honor of winning her heart and sealing the deal with a piece of paper and a diamond ring. She agreed to a special ceremony at the Choctaw Nation. The elders bent the rules enough to mix our traditions with those of the Irish. Moreen won't like me saying this but the elders scratched our itch to get hitched."

Moreen threw her head back and rolled her eyes. "Chet will groan when I say this but we consummated our gettin' hitched that very night and that young man sitting over there is proof."

Chet groaned and Jack rubbed his hand through his hair. "These people don't need to know that Mom."

"Of course they don't but I like matching wits with your Dad."

Dave raised his hand to get Moreen's attention. "I'm Dave, Linda's father. "How did you and Chet manage your time apart? My wife, her mother, died a week ago and it's agonizing to be without her."

"I'm so sorry, Dave. It was agonizing for Chet and me too. The pain of being separated for months at a time was diminished by being so involved in our careers. Chet is a dynamic leader, as you have all seen, so he quickly went from a Lieutenant to Major and then to Colonel, with more and more responsibilities as his rank increased.

Linda said, "My career was similar to yours, Moreen. After graduating, the university offered me a position as a cultural anthropologist. I wasn't a tenured professor, of course, but I was required to spend my summers living

with the people I was researching, then teach what I had learned during the fall, winter and spring semesters. But I had nobody special in my life except my mother and father. Now that she's gone... well, I have Jack and all of you to soften her absence."

Moreen nodded sympathetically, then turned to Chet. "And now my dear, you may continue with your briefing."

"The first thing on my mind is to get to know one another so we can identify talents we've inherited, skills we've acquired and attitudes we've developed about everything from Agriculture to... oh, Zucchini.

My life on the Choctaw reservation and my career in the Marine Corps taught me that leaders allocate resources and assign tasks according to the skills and training of the men and women who look to him or her for direction. Leaders lead and followers follow. But here's another B-U-T-T. Followers don't exist to serve the leader. Leaders exist to serve the followers. The leader comes up with a strategically viable plan for them to successfully accomplish the mission. There's a direct relationship between a plan's success and its complexity. Simple and direct are always better, and neither the leaders nor the followers perform their assignments alone. You may have noticed that my cabin and the rooms in it are the shape of a semi-circle. Even -"

"Oh yes." interrupted Linda. "Even the furniture is arranged in a semi-circle and this morning I was pleased to see an enormous, semi-circular dining table. It's obvious you and Moreen want us all to see each other face to face. I really like that."

"I like that you recognize that, Linda. The circle, or anything close to it like this oval shaped room and the oval shaped table we're sitting at is a significant shape for the Choctaw. It reminds us that **together** we are **more**."

Tim said, "And I like that, Chet. The circle is my favorite shape. It's the smallest area you can have with a give perimeter."

George glanced at Tim, then Chet. "Tim is an accountant so he's good with figures but don't ask him to give you the details or we'll be here 'til sundown."

"Okay, George, I won't but Tim and Linda are correct. Circles put us close together, face to face. So let's dig into the eggs ben... who helped you with this, Moreen? You're a great cook but this reminds me of the meals Sergeant Brandon served during my fifth tour in Iraq. Said he was attending some famous culinary college when the war in the middle east broke out so he joined the Marine Corps. Said it was his patriotic duty."

"I asked Carol and Woody to get up before that damn bugle scared the hell out of everyone to help me in the kitchen. I remember Carol saying they were cooks in the Marine Corps."

Dave gave Moreen a thumb up. "Wise decision, Moreen. Those two are magicians in the kitchen."

"My wife is wise about a lot of things, Dave. One of them was marrying me."

Moreen spread her hands, palms up, the looked around the room. "Tooting his own horn is better than that god-forsaken bugle."

George gave Moreen a thumb up. "You got that right. I'd rather wake up to a dozen roosters crowing their lungs out than that friggin' bugle."

Chet gave George a smile. "I promise not to do that every morning unless absolutely necessary. So let's finish breakfast and retire to the living room so we can get down to business."

BOTTOM UP

Monday — January 19th — 9:30 pm

After breakfast, everyone moved to the spacious living room. They were in a good mood, encouraged and heartened by Chet's top down briefing. When Chet stood up, the smile on his face encouraged their light hearted mood. He lifted his arms and held them in the air as if he were about to begin the beguine.

"If I were a conductor you all would be the orchestra. But the music you made wouldn't be as harmonious as it could be if I didn't know how to bring the best out of each and every one of you, and if you didn't know how to blend your instrument with those around you. So I look forward to hearing your stories. They'll help us understand each other and be better able to forge a common path to where we're going by knowing where each of us has been. Meanwhile, let me tell you what I have in mind to maintain the status quo here at the ranch and take steps to restore the status quo of our country and perhaps the world as well."

Linda leaned close to Jack. "Fasten your seat belt. Here comes your father's bottom up briefing."

Jack chuckled. "You're right and despite his reputation for being a tough nut, he never invades a man's personal space to force him to agree with him just to avoid the discomfort of having a commanding officer's face up close and personal. He persuades you to comply, and not just because he's a superior officer but because you can't escape the cause and effect logic of his orders."

"I've noticed that about you, Jack."

Chet began outlining the things he wanted them to know about the ranch in general and about his approach to survival in particular.

"Our home, this ranch, is built to be self sustaining in everything but prescription drugs, gasoline, bananas... whatever we can't make or grow with the tools, equipment and supplies we have on site."

"Toilet paper." said Ruth. "I don't see any sycamore trees around here and I don't plan on wiping my behind with pine needles."

Moreen gave Ruth a chuckle. "When we began buying things for the ranch, I convinced Chet that I wanted enough toilet paper and other female necessities for me and the other women who might eventually live here to last until we were all a hundred years old. Chet, in his typical take - care - of - everything style, did not disappoint me in that regard."

Ruth reciprocated with her own chuckle. "That doesn't surprise me Moreen. I married a man like that. Paul takes care of damn near every contingency."

Chet gave Paul a thumb up. "Glad to have you onboard, Paul. So let me continue with the ranch itself. We own more than a thousand acres. It's surrounded by federal land but it might as well be a hundred thousand acres because the forest rangers sure as hell aren't going to interfere with us while the country struggles to get back on its feet. So we have access to the

timber, the streams, the edible plants and the wildlife as far as the eye can see or a jeep or a snow mobile can travel. I've even got a dozen or so snow shoes if we have to trudge through the snow on foot.

So the ranch and surrounding area is a natural resource. The **primary** unnatural resources are the solar panels and wind and water turbines we've installed at various locations around the ranch to keep the juice flowing in our electrical equipment and appliances. The **secondary** resources are the smoke house to preserve meat, a green house, a large supply of heirloom and open-pollinated, untreated seeds for vegetables, kerosene lamps, three rototillers with magneto ignition for planting crops, a wood stove to dry food for storage, four hand grinders to grind meat for canning and to grind seeds for bread. We can dig into them in more detail when they come up as a result of our everyday activities. For now, let's dig into those primary resources."

Chet gun fingered Butch, one of the men he'd introduced when they all sat down for breakfast.

"Butch retired from the Marine Corps a few years ago, then started a business selling and installing solar panels. He installed the solar panels here at the ranch. When the HEMP shut him and everybody else down, I invited him, his wife Beverly and their son John and his fiancé Shirley to move to the ranch. Butch, give these folks a brief introduction to solar panels, okay?"

Butch nodded. "Sure Chet. Well, the solar panels are covered with aluminum mesh as a barrier to EMP energy. They charge deep cycle batteries connected to inverters which transform the DC in the batteries to AC in the cabin. Automotive batteries, which are shallow cycle, can only be discharged ten or fifteen percent before the alternator has to kick in. So I use deep cycle batteries because they can be discharged as much as eighty percent before requiring a charge. They're constructed with more room below the plates for sulfate to build up and more room above the plates to allow for some electrolyte loss. The windmills are also connected to deep cycle batteries as a backup for days when the sun isn't shining but the wind is blowing. Carl's the expert on windmills. Carl?"

Carl nodded, then looked at Chet as if to ask permission to join the discussion. "Carl, his wife Cathy and their daughter Penny joined us a year ago just after he finished his third tour in Afghanistan."

Carl gave Chet a salute. "Cathy convinced me that being a **live** civilian would be better than being a **dead** Marine because some Taliban fanatic had shot me full of holes or I'd stepped on an IED. That's an improvised explosive device, a crude but effective way to kill and maim soldiers and disable vehicles. When an IED caused my buddy to lose his arm and damn near his life, I decided Cathy was right, so I chose an honorable discharge over reenlistment."

Cathy locked eyes with Carl. "The chances of you going back to the Corps are less than the chances of you being bit by a shark in a hot tub. Right dear?"

Carl laughed and glanced around the table. "Cathy always gives me the last two words." He turned to her and said, "Yes dear."

Cathy jumped up, put her thumbs in the air and did a little victory dance. That brought a round of applause from the women in the room. Most of the men just tipped their heads back and rolled their eyes up.

"Okay," continued Carl, "so here's what's up with our wind turbines. I'm also in charge of water turbines so I'll touch on that too. The principle is this simple little ditty. The wind blows, the turbine goes. Like Butch's solar panels, the wind turbines store the electrical energy in deep cycle batteries. Connections between the deep cycle batteries for our solar panels and wind turbines is transferred to the cabin and other places that require power in underground cables to prevent damage from the weather or... well, to protect us against bad guys trying to disable our ability to survive or to defend ourselves against attacks. I'm also building stationary bicycles hooked up to automotive alternators to power 12 volt devices such as short wave, HF and HAM radios."

Chet gave Carl a thumb up. "Good point, Carl. Our defensive and offensive weapons rely heavily on electrical power. An example is the Tiger Teeth gate blocking access to the cabin and other buildings up here."

Carl nodded. "We haven't lost power from the solar panels or the wind mills since I've been here. If that happens we'll activate the water turbines. They're also connected to deep cycle batteries and inverters but they won't power anything but small electronic devices... chargers for our cell phones, HF radios, satellite phones, our emergency AM/FM radios and that propane refrigerator Chet yanked out of an RV to keep his beer cold."

Carl gave Chet a smile. "I've only been here a year, Chet. How reliable are those streams?"

"Three or four small ones in the forest surrounding the ranch. Most of them seasonal but the one that runs through our ranch is larger and flows pretty much all year long."

Carl nodded. "America, like most countries, depends almost exclusively on the power derived from turbines installed near the bottom of dams like Hoover and Roosevelt. The turbines are at the bottom of the dam because head and flow makes the turbine go. The—"

"Sorry," interrupted Tim, "that's over my head, pun intended."

"Head and flow make the turbine go. The pressure and flow of water delivered to a turbine determine how much electricity we can generate. Head refers to the pressure of the water as it enters the turbine, and we get head by putting the turbine as far **below** the stream as possible. In other words, we don't put the turbine **in** the stream. We put a **pipe** in the stream that feeds the turbine located somewhere **downstream** to create a difference in elevation between the pipe and the turbine. Head is why you see water tanks sitting on a hill **above** the homes it serves."

Carl looked at Chet. "Good enough?"

"It is. You and Butch delivered excellent briefs. Thank you both. After lunch, I'm going to brief all of you on another resource. Something more mental than physical. Is there anything anyone would like add before we head for the dining room?"

Margaret raised her hand. "Yes, Carol, Rose and I are experienced in the kitchen and the garden, so we would like to give everyone a brief introduction to planting and cultivating crops, canning and dehydrating fruits and vegetables... anything and everything related to eating."

"Excellent comment Margaret. We'll schedule your brief as soon as possible. We've discussed—"

"Speaking of eating," interrupted Moreen, "it's getting close to noon. Margaret, Carol, Rose. Would you help me put something together for lunch?"

They nodded, got up and followed Moreen into the kitchen.

12:30 PM

After lunch, Chet got back to his brief. "We've gone over the primary and secondary resources here at the ranch... our determination to survive, our skills, our supplies, our inventiveness. Now I'm going to focus your attention, and mine, on a third resource. Something beyond you and I and our home here in the mountains."

Chet paused to sip his coffee.

"When I was a boy, the reservation made it obvious that my life was completely independent of the lives of other Americans. Geographically and ethnically of course, but in spiritual and practical ways too. That same feeling came over me again as I fell asleep last night. Our lives here on this ranch are almost completely cut off from other, like-minded survivors."

Chet paused again to look at the others in the room.

"But I woke up with an answer. We've established **independence** from the results of the disaster itself. If we establish the **inter-dependence** that can exist between our group and groups like us, we'll have a better chance to achieve our short term goal of surviving and thriving but also our long term goal of restoring America to the way things were."

Margaret raised her hand. "The shift from hunting and gathering to growing crops and domesticating animals gave us the ability to develop a modern, technological world. It was a radical change in our relationship with Mother Nature. We stepped into the driver's seat instead of just being along for the ride. But I was raised on a farm and my father drilled it into me early on that modern farming practices have brought as many problems to the world as solutions. The immunity we had as hunter-gathers couldn't cope with the diseases that came from domesticated farm animals. Advances in technology, medicine, and agricultural techniques overcame that problem, allowing people to live longer. But that resulted in an expanding population, which caused competition for territory and resources. The world became more urbanized, more crowded, more dependent on grocery stores and the trucking industry, more sedentary and less healthy."

Margaret paused to evaluate the effect of her comments on the others.

"A hundred years ago," she continued, "farm animals ate grass, not corn. Manure was used to enrich the soil, not chemicals. Blemished fruits and vegetables were eaten, not thrown out. And we didn't devote the majority of our acres to raising cattle for beef. Today, livestock takes up nearly 80

percent of the world's agricultural land yet produces less than 20 percent of the world's supply of calories. Any return to the way things were should include more focus on a vegetarian rather than a meat oriented life style."

Linda said, "Margaret, you surprised me. Your understanding of history goes far beyond just being a girl from the farm. Who wouldn't want the safety of a civilized society and the comfort and convenience of hot showers, telephones, cars and labor saving devices. Nobody likes to watch cattle being slaughtered but everyone loves the meat."

Jack nodded. "Yep, gas, groceries and gadgets. But the HEMPs have sent us back to the agricultural life Margaret just described. I used to watch *How Things Are Made* on the *Science Channel* and the process always boggled my mind. Every episode highlighted the inescapable fact that things are made because of the skills and inventiveness of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of men and women. No one person could do what they did without the participation of others. Might be damn difficult to return things to the way they were, even if we want to."

Dave said, "We've opened an agricultural and technological can of worms. My career as a veterinarian was similar. I couldn't do any of the things I did without the training I received from other vets at the University of Colorado. Then, when I opened my office, it was the instruments, the equipment and the medicines that other people developed that made it possible for me to heal the animals my customers brought in."

"Same here," said Butch, "the Marine Corps is the ultimate example of how the success of a mission depends on the cooperation of every soldier from the generals to the privates."

Carl gave Butch a casual salute. "Semper Fi, Butch. Working with turbines made me aware of how essential electric power is to modern life. Even if thousands of skilled, trained men and women have survived this disaster, we won't have the power to operate the machines and equipment to restore the stuff we took for granted before the HEMPs sent us back to the Dark Ages. And here's another grim aspect of that problem. If the power grids in this country are damaged beyond repair, it could be years before they're back on line. The heart of all five grids in this country are huge, expensive transformers, the most vulnerable component to EMP attacks. The factories that manufacture them are in Europe and the latest information I have is that it's still more than year before even one new transformer could be ready to ship to America."

Chet scratched his chin. "That is grim. With the world as it is now, even if a transformer **was** ready to go, it might be a long time before it could be shipped across the Atlantic and transported to a grid site."

Carl nodded. "Yep, that could be bad news for this country, and I suspect other countries are facing the same problem. There's some potentially bright spots on the horizon however, and it's the research being done into nuclear power. There are two ways to generate electricity with a nuclear reactor. Fission and fusion. Fission splits atoms and Fusion joins atoms. Both result in some leftover matter that gets converted to energy in accordance with

Einstein's famous formula $E = MC^2$. That energy is used to boil water to create steam to drive a turbine that rotates an alternator that converts mechanical power to electric power.

Fusion is cleaner and produces more energy but it's very difficult to produce the temperatures required to fuse the two atoms. That occurs naturally in stars. So our nuclear reactors are presently using fission to generate electricity. The downside of fission is that the process produces radioactive waste products that must be kept cool in large ponds next to the reactors. With the grid down, the equipment that keeps the ponds cool are being operated by generators using diesel fuel. When the generators run out of diesel fuel... well, that could be bad news for anyone within a hundred miles or so of the reactor or downwind from the fallout."

Tim began shaking his head. "Sufferin' succotash. That's more bad news. What are those bright spots you mentioned?"

"Three, all inherently safer than our current reactors because they could reduce or eliminate radioactive waste products. That's good news whether the grid is restored or not. One uses very strong magnetic fields to fuse Boron and Hydrogen. Another uses liquid fluoride thorium to produce fissile uranium. The third circulates helium instead of water through a bed of pebbles to cool the radioactive waste. The goal of all three is to decentralize power by manufacturing small fusion or fission units that will fit in a garage or shipping container to serve a few thousand homes."

"Wow," said Jack. "We could use something like those here at the ranch."

Chet nodded. "Damn straight son. Whether the grid or the world is restored to the way things were."

Max tapped his cane lightly on the floor. "Given human nature, I'm inclined to think that a return to the status quo of the way things were is **inevitable**. Homo sapiens, on their ascent to becoming the dominant species on Earth, have pushed through more than one Dark Age to this modern, technologically oriented world. I say **this** modern world because the physical infrastructure is still in place. The only missing piece in that puzzle is electricity. But the other side of human nature is that any return to a technological future will continue to be plagued by political, religious and territorial differences."

Chet nodded. "Well said, Max, and I'm inclined to agree with you. Which puts our life here on this ranch in a different context than I originally thought. I was going to suggest that we attempt to network with other like-minded survivors to join our efforts to get America back on her feet. But since it's likely to be a long time before we can do anything to cooperate with the government's efforts to rebuild the infrastructure, our best course of action is to keep on living our lives here as an independent, self governing, self sustaining group of survivors with the basic resources we need to survive until the power grid comes back on line. As such, we are independent of what other survivors do... at the top or the bottom of the world. My contacts in the Marine Corps tell me that our leaders are taking care of business at the top. Meanwhile, we'll continue to maintain our own status quo here at

the bottom."

Chet looked around the room. "Anyone agree? Disagree?"

Everyone but Jack nodded their heads. "Jack?"

"I agree, but when we **do** think it's possible to network with other survivors, we should keep in mind that the general public sees preppers as strange, paranoid, gun-toting people who never learned how to fit in with normal people. Now that the world as we knew it has ended, those who were not prepared are the strange ones who don't fit in with us, the new normal. So we should know the people we choose to include in our network very carefully. Are they likely to cooperate when agreement is essential? Would they be a victim or a survivor in an emergency? Are they conservative or liberal towards strangers? Would they shoot somebody who was shooting at them? Will their beliefs and values harmonize or conflict with ours? Would they abandon their religious, political and moral principles to survive?"

George said, "Those are good questions, Jack. I'd also want to know whether the people in these other groups would help us rebuild America from the bottom up, or wait for the government to fix it from the top down."

Chet nodded. "Spot on George. The Marine Corps works best with commands at the top moving down to the bottom, but networking with other survivors should begin at the bottom and work its way up to the top."

"Roger that," said Carl. "Top to bottom works best in the Marine Corps but with the world upside down, bottom to top may be the only way to get America back on its feet."

Cathy looked at Carl with a mischievous look on her face "My husband is absolutely right. In our house, before we get back on our feet, me on the bottom and him on top works really, really well."

The room erupted with laughter, then Linda gave Cathy an ear to ear grin.

"Thanks Cathy. I needed a laugh. I went to sleep last night without a care in the world. But listening to Chet's brief, I was beginning to worry that I wouldn't sleep a wink tonight worrying about all the serious stuff."

Chet looked at Jack with an ear to ear smile. "You brought **her** to my ranch? What the hell were you thinking?"

Tim began laughing. "I'd tell you what your son was thinking, and what most men think when they meet a woman like Linda, but—"

George laughed. "Give it up Tim. Chet is a better comedian than you'll ever be."

Carol gave George a dismissive wave with her hand. "Nope, Tim has put a humorous spin on a dozen or more grim situations. And I agree with Linda. I may never get to sleep tonight."

Chet gave Woody an ear to ear grin. "You brought **that** woman to my ranch? What the hell were you thinking?"

"Same thing Jack was thinking when he brought Linda to your ranch."

Chuckles rippled around the room.

Chet gave Woody a thumb up. "You're right Woody. Same thing I was thinking when I met Moreen."

Susan kissed Mike on his cheek. "Yes, same thing I was thinking when I

met Mike. I was terrified when the HEMP turned the freeway into a nightmare of smashed cars and injured people. Then Mike offered to take me to my apartment in Victorville and I felt better. But when we got there, I realized it was just a place so I agreed to hit the road with him. I was anxious about going to a place I'd never been with someone I'd just met to meet people I'd never met. But I knew I'd be safe with him, and now I know I'll be safe with all of you."

Moreen raised her glass and said, "Welcome home Susan. We've all shared thoughts and feelings like yours. Cheers, everyone. Our ranch is your home but my husband is going to work your tails off to pay for room and board."

The room was filled with the sounds of laughter and glasses chinking together.

"And I already know all of you well enough to believe you will work hard to make our lives here better than they were before you arrived."

"We will," said Linda. "and since I'm responsible for taking you all on a humorous side trip, allow me to put us back on the serious side of our discussion. My career in anthropology has taken me around the world studying cultures very different than our own. Despite those differences, it's become clear that groups survive and individuals die. But large groups tend to suffer personality conflicts, disagreements and rivalries; whereas small groups are more likely to agree and cooperate in life or death situations. So I agree that small groups like ours are more likely to cooperate with another for a common purpose than larger groups."

Max said, "Yes, and let me add that World War Two is a good example of how well people can cooperate with each other when the stores are open, the lights are on, and the enemy is on the radio, not in America. When the enemy has invaded our homeland, and it has, we tend to see others, even close friends, as outsiders. Grim evidence that the veneer of civilized behavior is only a few days thick.

Our efforts here at the bottom will be more likely to succeed if they mesh well with the efforts of people at the top. But therein lies another obstacle to restoring America to its former status quo, or some more desirable status quo. I'm referring to the ignorance of people at the top and the bottom. Very few leaders of a country, or the citizens thereof, regardless of their religious beliefs, political agendas or moral sensibilities, have an understanding of what history can teach us about today and tomorrow by studying what happened yesterday. The world has suffered horrible things because religious fanatics and totalitarian dictators have a mindset rooted in bad theology and bad politics.

Some of my students couldn't understand why they were required to study history **or** politics, certainly not **both**. They were interested in today and tomorrow, not yesterday. I told them history and politics go together like a horse and carriage or love and marriage because those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat the bad politics, secular or religious, that led to economic collapse, hunger, tyranny and war. Doing the same thing

over and over again but expecting different results is a kind of insanity.”

“Hell yeah,” said Paul, “we do that at the ballot box then complain that the guy back peddles on his campaign promises.”

“Yes,” continued Max, “most voters have short attention spans and even shorter memories, so they elect presidents, congressmen, governors and mayors who cause more bad things to happen because they too are not in touch with the lessons of history. Failing to pay attention to what happened in the past isn’t restricted to bad politics. It can have deleterious effects on our personal and professional lives. Scientists who don’t connect cause and effect don’t advance in their career. Couples who don’t learn from their disagreements don’t stay married. People who don’t learn from their mistakes don’t mature. We need people at the top and the bottom who’ve evaluated local and current issues in terms of global and timeless issues, and that’s what I see here today with all of you.”

Chet stood, raised his glass and gave Max two thumbs up. “Max, that was as powerful and elegant as any speech I’ve ever heard.”

He paused to give Max an ear to ear grin. “Not quite as powerful and elegant as any of my briefs of course.”

Max smiled and tapped the floor softly with his cane. “I’m blessed to be part of this group of survivors, Chet, and thankful we have a leader like you.”

Chet said, “So let me propose a toast to all of you good natured, hard working bottom up survivors.”

Everyone stood and joined Chet in a toast to the work they had done and would do in the coming days, weeks and months to thrive and possibly join the efforts of other survivors to restore America and perhaps the world to a new status quo of peace and prosperity for everyone, whoever they are and wherever they live.

9:45 PM

That evening, Chet gave everyone a handbook on survival that he had prepared for the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. When they had read it he’d prepare another brief on the handbook.

Everyone retired to their rooms and fell asleep but sleep didn’t come easily to Jack or Linda. Jack in his Rover waiting for his turn on guard duty and thinking of her. Linda in her room thinking of him. Jack looked out the window on his Rover. Even the moon had gone to sleep.

JACK & LINDA

Tuesday — January 20th — 8:20 am

After breakfast in the main cabin, Jack led Linda to his Rover.

"Where are we going?"

"I have another surprise for you."

"Jack, you've given me enough surprises to last me a lifetime. You're still a mystery to me."

"Nah, I'm an open book."

"Sometimes, but most of the pages are blank. I know you were a sniper in the Marine Corps. I know who your father and mother are. I know... damn it Jack, I don't even know your name."

"I'm Jack."

"You know what I mean. Is it Knock Knee?"

"My Choctaw name is Chilita Nakni, which translates to Brave Warrior but —"

"I can call you Chili!"

"You could but I'd have to cut your tongue off. Just call me Jack, okay?"

"Okay."

Jack started the Rover and drove into the forested area behind the main cabin. The road wound through the trees for a quarter mile or so then opened up to an enormous meadow with a stream running through it. Linda saw a cabin at the far edge of the meadow.

When they pulled up to the cabin, Linda said, "You tricked me into thinking your father's cabin was your place but *this* is your place. It's beautiful... tall conifers, a grassy meadow and wild flowers everywhere I look."

Jack opened the door and waved her inside. She had seen his soft, emotional side but expected the cabin to reflect his hard, pragmatic side. It wasn't a house filled with things from a catalog. It was a home decorated with pictures and memorabilia from his life. Warm, personal and inviting. Hundreds of books sat on a shelf along the west wall.

Jack put his arm around her. "Some things in a man's life are little and some are big. One of the big ones is when he leaves home. The other is when he goes back. I can't go back but I can go home and this is it... because you're here."

Linda smiled. She felt safe with Jack. She knew she could trust him to take her feelings and her needs into account when he made decisions that would affect both of them. Jack was inclusive, willing to widen the boundary between what was him and others.

"When I was young," she said, "I knew where I was going, and my friends and family helped me get there. I knew where I was going when the EMP struck, too, and you helped me get there. Now I'm not lost because I'm with you."

He gave her a tour of his place, inside and out, showing her the clever, innovative things he had done to prepare his place for life without the

conveniences of modern life. A manual can opener. A hand grinder to make flour from wheat and corn. A solar oven. Shelves filled with bags of heirloom seeds. A manual water pump on his well. Oil lamps with cotton wicks. Two-way radios in his office and garage. Solar chargers on the roof and solar lights in every room. Hand tools and a compost for his garden.

"How did you build this cabin and outfit it with all the equipment and supplies? Your father did it while you were in the middle east hunting terrorists and criminals, right?"

"No, the majority of my assignments were three months or so, then I'd take a MATS flight to Pinkerton, then requisition a jeep for the trip to my father's ranch."

"What is a MATS flight?"

"Military Air Transport Service. Military personnel can fly almost anywhere on military aircraft, free of charge of course."

"How did you learn to do all these things?" asked Linda. "Were they part of your training in the Marine Corps? Or stuff in the End-of-the-World books you told me you read?"

"The Marine Corps trained me to slip in to dangerous situations, take care of business and slip out without being noticed. I learned some things about survival from Shit Hit the Fan books, but the most important things I learned about life and survival are rooted in the time I spent growing up on the reservation in Oklahoma."

"Are you a full-blooded Choctaw?"

"No, but my father is and my mother is full blooded Irish."

Linda laughed. "So you're a half breed."

"Yes, biologically, but spiritually I'm one hundred percent Choctaw."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make fun of your ethnicity. I should know better. I'm an anthropologist with a deep respect for cultures different than my own. But I would like you to know that I'm one hundred percent Irish. Kissed the Blarney Stone when I was born."

"Ah, so you and my mother have something in common."

Linda leaned over and kissed Jack.

"Yes. You. Now tell me the rest of your story about living on the reservation."

"Well, my father, my mother and the other members of the tribe taught me how to turn trees into lumber, stones into walls, and bricks into buildings. How to get energy from wind, water and sun. I learned how to grow fruits and vegetables and raise livestock. We tanned leather, baked bread and made clothes. I learned how to dance and how to sing to the beat of the drums. Mostly they taught me how to think outside the box. How to get myself out of a tight spot. How to be a steward of my own life. How to be comfortable with the skin I was in."

Linda squeezed his arm. "Yes, liking yourself is so important."

"I remember watching my father and the other men raise a wall off the ground and fasten it to the other walls. My mother said they weren't just building a house, they were joining love and lumber to build a home."

"Lovely. I'm so glad I've met her... and your father."

"Irish blood flows in her veins but her heart and mind are filled with Choctaw spirit. When I turned 16, she explained the connection. I remember her words as if it were yesterday." Jack paused and raised his head as if his memory was somewhere in the sky above his cabin.

The only thing that separates the Choctaw from the Irish is the Atlantic ocean. We were both conquered and colonized by foreign powers. Our ancient tongues would have become extinct if not for the determination of our fore fathers to preserve our languages, our cultures and our traditions. Our friendship began in 1847 when the Choctaws were forced to leave Missouri and head west to what is now Oklahoma. It was called the Trail of Tears and Death. Many suffered and many died. Shortly after they arrived in Oklahoma, the tribe donated several thousand dollars to support the Irish during the Potato Famine.

"What a wonderful story, Jack. I've studied indigenous people all over the world but somehow missed that connection. Makes me feel kin to the Choctaw... in spirit if not in flesh and blood."

"I don't know much about the Irish but I know you, Linda, and you have the Choctaw spirit. Comfortable with their place in the world. Poor in things but rich in spirit. Can't remember how many times I've told myself I'd go back to Oklahoma when I retire and beg them to let me back in their world. But things have changed since then. When my father retired from the Marine Corps, he and my mother decided to build this ranch instead of returning to the Choctaw nation in Oklahoma. Their decision had a lot to do with the geography of this area and its proximity to the Marine base in Pinkerton where he taught me and others."

"So he invited you to make this your new home too."

Jack paused to shrug, then sigh. "Yes, and what he and my mother have built here goes beyond what you can see with your eyes. What you can't see but have already experienced is the spirit of the Choctaw nation. Being back here makes me not regret that I left my life with the Choctaw to pursue a life with the Marines. The Choctaw man in me doesn't miss what he doesn't have and doesn't need."

"Yes," said Linda, "most of us grow up lusting after things we don't really need. But once we indulge our appetites, we're hooked. This HEMP attack has been terrible, but it could be an opportunity to get back to basics. Not the cruel drudgery of barely making do but to a life with more natural harmony and less artificial stress. I've studied and met people all over the world like the Choctaw. Indigenous cultures rooted in the old ways. Angeles Arrien, one of my anthropology teachers, said the indigenous people she had studied and lived with taught her four simple rules. Show up. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning. Say what you know, not what you believe. Own the consequences. She was fond of adding that they weren't so afraid of dying that they failed to live."

Linda paused to sip her drink. "Have you ever been afraid of dying?"

"No, I'm always more focused on the here and now than on yesterday or tomorrow."

"You told me how you grew up on the reservation with your parents and

it's obvious they loved you and treated you well. But since then you've been a loner. Did somebody alienate you later? A friend? A lover? A wife?"

"Nah, I've just never been a people person. I'm more of a project, place-oriented guy. You're an anthropologist, so you understand the influence people can have on one another. Especially when the influence is the result of your participation in a peer group. People who have little or no self esteem or who haven't discovered themselves are insecure, afraid to be different, to be themselves, as if what's inside isn't enough, so they clone their peer group's hair styles, clothes, tatoos to get affirmation from outside themselves. Even their morals and beliefs become a melting pot of sameness. At school or in a club or an organization, the pressure to replace your world view with the party line, the status quo, is subtle. In a gang, the pressure is explicit and frequently violent. And the consequences of not going along with the group think of the mob can be devastating, especially when you are young and have not yet fastened your world view with a nail. If you stick to your guns, the mob is likely to censor your views, cancel your membership, excommunicate you as a heretic... ad nauseam. Even when I lived on the reservation, I avoided that kind of pressure like the plague. I'm me, not them."

"Geez, Jack, you'd have made an outstanding anthropologist, perhaps even a psychiatrist."

"No, shrinks are crazier than the people they treat, and you're forgetting that I'm not a people person."

"Your willingness to help the people at Fair Oaks makes me think that deep down you are. We're all social animals who know, deep down, that we need each other because we aren't self-sufficient. Our natural instinct is to live a collective life, and that requires a political system of rules, regulations and leadership to govern orderly behavior. That makes us political animals as well."

They spent the day wandering around Jack's place. That evening, they joined the others in the main cabin for dinner and drinks, then returned to Jack's cabin. He poured them both a glass of brandy on the rocks, then led her to the patio at the rear of his cabin. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and the night air was cool and scented with pine.

Linda looked at her drink. "Doesn't look like there's anything but brandy in my glass. You trying to get me inebriated so you can take advantage of me?"

"No, I'm trying to get myself snockered so you can take advantage of me. Either way, neat or on the rocks, fine liquor shouldn't be compromised by anything but ice."

It was dark but Jack knew she was smiling. He tossed some kindling into the campfire, then pulled a knife and a dull gray object from his cargo pants. He leaned over and began striking the object with his knife, sending sparks into the kindling."

"Wow, I've never seen anyone start a fire like that. What is that thing you're striking?"

"It's a block of magnesium on one side and ferrocerium on the other side. I shaved small pieces of magnesium on to my tinder, then turn the block over and strike the ferrocerium to shower the magnesium with sparks. Some guys use flint to create the sparks but ferrocerium, a synthetic material that works like flint, is more reliable."

Jack continued striking the ferrocerium with his knife until the kindling was burning brightly. He waited a moment or two, then gently placed a few larger pieces of wood over the kindling. When the kindling had set the logs on fire, he sat down next to Linda and clinked his glass of brandy against hers. "Here's to the conclusion of a day we'll never forget."

They clinked glasses. Linda sipped her drink, then looked up at the night sky. "This is amazing. The moon is still gibbous but I can see a zillion stars up there. They're so bright. Looks like I could reach up and touch them."

Jack watched her raise her arm and twitter her fingers, pretending to tickle the stars overhead. He did the same and Linda laughed.

"Time stops out here. Not so much when the Day Star is blazing away in the sky. But when the sun slips over the horizon, the past and the future just fade away. Out here, it's the here and now that occupies my thoughts, my feelings."

Linda saw a coyote suddenly trot into view, stop and look directly at them. The moon light made its shadow stretch out toward them. "Why is he looking at us? Will he attack?"

"No, he's just exercising his situational awareness. It's been almost a year since I've been here so he's putting us into his memory. Coyotes, like most wild animals, have a zillion ways of surviving and the most valuable skill is keeping track of what's going on around them. The primal instinct to survive has been dulled in humans. We have few natural enemies. We're the predators and pretty much everything else on the planet is prey. Our biggest threat is other humans."

"God yes. That has become terrifyingly obvious since the HEMP attack."

"Situational awareness. I noticed that about you when we had to deal with those men on the freeway. Like that coyote, you didn't panic or act paranoid when they threatened us."

"You're not paranoid, Linda, if they really *are* out to get you."

They laughed then fell silent, watching the coyote and its shadow trot into the night.

"When the moon is up, I sometimes imagine the shadows are people I knew when they were alive, not ghosts trying to frighten me. Friends asking me to remember them."

"Hmm... yes, if we forget the people we loved, it's like they've died again."

Jack swept his hand across the moonlit landscape. "Nothing calms me quite like the still, quiet peace of the forest."

Jack paused to sip his brandy "Especially at night when it comes alive with nocturnal creatures like that coyote you saw."

"When he stopped to look at us, the moon light made his shadow reach

out toward us. That frightened me until you explained that he was just adding us to his situational awareness. What other animals are out here at night? Bears? I hope not."

"No, but keep an eye out for Big Foot. He's—"

"Sorry, I'm not buying that. You're the only one out here with big feet."

Jack chuckled. "Okay, so maybe you'll buy the creatures that really are out here. I'll start with the nocturnal ones. One of my favorites are bats. Sometimes I turn on the mercury light up there on the gable end of my cabin. That attracts bugs and bats. Some evening I'll switch it on so we can watch the bats swoop in and eat the flying insects. Then there's lizards, snakes, rabbits, squirrels, mice, chipmunks, tarantulas, moths... the list is endless. There's even plants that sleep during the day but wake up when the sun goes down. The Sacred Datura, for example, opens its flowers at night to attract moths and bats to pollinate them. It has large, trumpet shaped flowers to entice bats and moths to wing in and take a sip."

Linda cocked her head. "Why is it called sacred?"

"The Shamans, medicine men of Indian tribes, used its hallucinogenic properties to help young warriors experience a Vision Quest during their induction into manhood."

"Ah, like magic mushrooms and psychedelic weeds like pot and peyote."

"Yeah. Mine was spending a week in the forest by myself. Enduring hunger, cold and loneliness taught me that nature isn't cruel, it's just indifferent to our suffering. I did a lot of growing up out there in the woods."

Sacred Datura is also called Jimson Weed because of what happened to the soldiers near Jamestown in the early 1600's. The soldiers made tea from the leaves but made it so strong some of them died. The rest spent two or three days thinking they were pigeons or monkeys and acting nuttier than a fruit cake."

"Oops!"

"Yeah, oops. Which is why it's also called Devil's Trumpet and Devil's Weed."

Jack finished his drink and asked Linda if she wanted another. She swallowed the last of hers and handed the glass to Jack. He went into the cabin and returned a few minutes later with two tall glasses. Linda sipped hers and said, "Rum and pineapple juice? You said fine liquor shouldn't be compromised by anything but ice."

"Yes, but I wanted you to taste my version of a Pina Colada. Rum and pineapple juice, of course, but instead of coconut milk I use coconut cream."

"Coconut cream. How do you do that?"

"It's a family secret."

"If you want to get lucky tonight, you better—"

"Tell you how I make coconut cream."

They laughed then fell silent, letting their thoughts drift into the moonlit night.

Jack set his drink down and put his arm around Linda. She smiled. He smiled back. "You think—"

"I do. It's in the cards."

"There you go again, reading my mind."

"I have to tap into your thoughts, Jack. It's too dark to see your eyes or the words scrolling across your forehead."

They shared a good laugh, then a sweet silence washed over them again, thinking how good it felt to be connecting with each other at a deeper level. That night, they went to the bedroom, turned out the light and slipped under the covers to connect on another level. Linda was eager to take part in the love making, not feel as if she had been taken. Jack didn't disappoint.

Later

"It's only been a week since China dropped their nightmare on the world but this evening, with you, has been a dream come true."

"Everything is always okay in the end, Linda. If things aren't okay, it's not the end."

"Things *are* okay, Jack, but this is the beginning, not the end. A new beginning for survivors."

EPILOGUE

In apocalyptic fiction, all the material and immaterial things that matter – art, science, family, friendships, medicine, manufacturing – are swept away or rendered difficult or impossible to restore. In [Lucifer's Hammer](#), an asteroid collides with earth. In [Earth Abides](#), a deadly pandemic sweeps the world. In [Alas Babylon](#), a world-wide exchange of atomic weapons brings death, destruction and nuclear winter. In **Zap**, nuclear explosions send the world back to the Dark Ages.

All four of these novels end with a small group of survivors struggling to stay alive without the resources of modern life. Each of these stories, however, end with different implications for the future. *Lucifer's Hammer* ends with survivors living a settled, agricultural life of growing crops and domesticating animals. *Earth Abides* ends with the survivors regressing to a nomadic life of hunting wild animals and gathering plants. *Alas Babylon* ends with survivors struggling to recover from the horrors of a nuclear catastrophe.

Zap ends with survivors focusing their lives on a deeper purpose than just restoring the technological and political status quo of the world they knew. They are optimistic that millions of survivors like them are gathering in small, self-sufficient groups and networking with other groups to build the harmony and trust required to transform the old world they knew into a new world where goods and services are exchanged for the global pursuit of peace and prosperity, not the tribal pursuit of power and property, or to exploit differences in race, religion, gender, class or political agendas.

If you think that conclusion is too idealistic to have any factual implications for the real world, keep in mind that fiction can be more valuable than just plain facts. Even stories that are just an entertaining way to *escape* reality have some temporary value. But stories that convey the dance of fact and fiction in emotionally valid and realistically believable ways have a more lasting value because they reveal something true about ourselves and the real world, and that empowers us to *change* reality. We become the young hero, the wise old woman, the transformed fool, the determined survivor.

So let me suggest something lasting and valuable that you can take away from this story » » prepare for the worst but hope for the best because hope is a powerful mindset for pursuing the practical results of preparation. Together they can diminish our fears and bolster our faith that if the future brings the end of the world as we know it, I will be better prepared because I wrote this story, and you will be better prepared because you read it. Better prepared to deal with it as survivors, not as victims. Better prepared to transform the savage chaos of disasters into the civilized order of society – for ourselves, our families, our country and Earth itself. For despite the hard times that would come from an apocalyptic disaster, this blue-green planet wandering among the stars is the only home we know.
