

## Conspicuous Consumption - Chapter 1

Carl Simpson shook his head at the sight of the big red Hummer pulling into the parking lot of the shooting range. The Hummer belonged to Tanner McAbee. Everything about Tanner was big. He stood six six and weighed, Carl guessed, two eighty or so. Tanner's personality was just as big as his physique. He wanted the biggest and the best. Of everything. And usually got it. For instance, he was at the range to fire his Smith & Wesson .500 Magnum, currently the holder of the title of the world's most powerful double action production handgun.

With a sigh, Carl walked over to the Hummer as Tanner parked it. "Hello, Mr. McAbee. I'm Carl Simpson. Edward told me you wanted to talk to me."

"That's right, Simpson. I hear you're the local survival expert around here."

Carl glanced around. There was no one near enough to hear them. "I prefer not to discuss that out in the open, sir."

The big man laughed. "Yeah! The guy told me you kept it low key. That's good. See me before I leave and we can set up an appointment to discuss..." McAbee lowered his voice and completed the sentence, "survival." He laughed loudly and headed toward the range office.

When he found out who told McAbee about his preparedness consulting... Carl shook his head again and headed for his non-descript 1993 Suburban. When he got into the cab, on the passenger side, he pulled the laptop computer from its storage position beside the seat and opened it up.

He was in a free WiFi area and connected to the internet after he'd logged into the machine. He did a couple of searches on Tanner McAbee, but didn't come up with much. One of his businesses did have a website... A very flashy website... but there really wasn't much about the man himself. That was good, Carl decided. There might be hope that the man could keep any preps Carl helped him with on the QT.

Carl went on to do a bit of work on the computer while he waited for McAbee. Even with the doors of the Suburban closed and the windows up against the chill of the morning, Carl could still hear the boom of the S&W .500 Magnum out on the range. The range required hearing protection and Carl hoped they were really enforcing the policy.

After several minutes without a big boom, Carl put away the computer and stepped out of the Suburban to wait for McAbee. It was only a couple minutes more before McAbee came out of the range office, a big smile on his face.

"You want to give it a try sometime?" McAbee asked as he walked up to Carl.

"Thanks for the offer, Mr. McAbee, but I've already had a chance to shoot one. Not my cup of tea."

“Well now, son, I’m not sure I like that attitude. What can I learn from someone that can’t handle a handgun. Powerful handgun, naturally, but still just a handgun.”

Carl found the look on McAbee’s face curious as the man waited for Carl to answer. “Didn’t say I couldn’t, sir. Just that I wasn’t an aficionado of the breed. I find I can do what I want with other weapons and leave the big magnum handguns to those that enjoy using them. Have to say the .500 would make a good gun to have handy in bear country.”

Apparently the answer satisfied McAbee, for he beamed, and said, “True. I may just take it bear hunting to try it out. Grizzly, of course.”

“That should be exciting. But back to business. Edward said you might be interested in my services as a consultant...”

“That’s right. Word is you are good at this...” He looked around conspiratorially, then grinned at Carl and whispered, “Survival stuff.”

Carl maintained his calm demeanor, but his brain was rapidly trying to find a way not to work for the man. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I pride myself on providing good service for my clients. Might I ask who recommended me to you?”

“Just a vague, random bit of information I picked up,” McAbee said, with a slight wave of his hand.

For some reason Carl didn’t believe him. But it didn’t matter at this point. He didn’t plan to work for McAbee. “I see. Well, I’m afraid I’m pretty booked at the moment...”

“Nonsense!” McAbee challenged. “It shouldn’t take more than a few hours of consultation. I’m a quick study. I plan on building a new house this year and I want to incorporate some of your ideas. Since it shouldn’t take you too long to give me what I need, I’ll up your regular rate by fifty percent. You can’t turn that down, in your line of work, can you?”

Carl managed not to lose his temper. McAbee was pushy and rather arrogant. But the man was right about one thing. Carl really couldn’t turn down time and a half for consulting. It was a sideline to his regular work, but it was what allowed him to prep himself.

“Well, you do drive a hard bargain...” Carl said slowly. “Time and a half is quite generous. But I’m not sure I could do you good service on a limited time frame. I believe I’d rather have my regular rate and put in the hours needed to give you what you want.”

“Nonsense. Time and a half it will be. I want the information quick and concise. And I can afford the higher rate.”

It seemed to be a matter of pride to McAbee, so Carl reluctantly agreed. All he could do was do his best, and that he would. Regular pay or time and a half. “I have time available tomorrow after 2:00 pm.”

“2:00 pm... Yes. I should be off the golf course by then. Come to my office at the dealership and we’ll get started.”

Carl nodded. He didn’t need to ask which dealership. McAbee had three, all located adjacent to each other. Hummer, Cadillac, and Mercedes-Benz. McAbee worked out of the Hummer dealership.

That evening Carl put together a package of information that he thought McAbee would want, since he was going to build a new home. Carl went to bed, after a light supper, feeling a bit ambivalent about the appointment the next day. McAbee was quite probably going to be difficult to work with, but the money would be good, and it was always exciting to begin a new prep project.

Carl wasn’t wrong. McAbee turned out to be difficult to work with. Carl was at the Hummer dealership, leather computer case in hand at a quarter of two. McAbee didn’t show up until almost three. Carl was patient and understood how time could get away from some people. So be it. He worked on the computer while waiting.

“Hello, Mr. McAbee,” Carl said, getting up from the chair where he’d been waiting, after putting the laptop back into the case.

“Simpson.” McAbee turned to the man that had walked in with him. “This is Buck Carmady. He’d like to join us in the meeting. I told him you wouldn’t mind.”

Carl clenched his teeth for a moment before speaking. “These things are pretty private, Mr. McAbee.”

“He’s an old and trusted friend,” McAbee said firmly. “And I am paying you more than your going rate.”

“As you wish,” Carl replied. He followed the two men into McAbee’s plush office in the back of the building.

“Now,” McAbee said as they all took chairs, McAbee behind the desk, “Let’s get the ball rolling. I want to know what to do to make my family safe if this administration goes the way I think it will and we have financial melt down in this country.”

“Is that your primary threat analysis, Mr. McAbee?” Carl asked as he took his computer from the case.

“Threat analysis? It’s what I’m worried about. That’s for sure. I have plenty of money and an excellent portfolio, but I’m wondering what I should do if the rest of the area starts to get hungry from lack of good financial planning.”

“I see. So physical security is part of what you are looking for. You said you were planning a new home?”

“Yes,” McAbee replied. “To both. Of course I want physical security. The laws, the way they are, won’t allow a person to take care of business the way it should be if someone is trying to take what’s yours by force. That means force in kind, in my book. But I have to at least have gone through the motions of a peaceable settlement first. And I am planning a new house. I want a fallout shelter, too. No point in not taking care of some of the other risks, if I can.”

Carl nodded. He looked over at Buck. Buck seemed to be listening intently, but had made no move to join the conversation. “I would like to take a look at the property and proposed plans as soon as possible. Many safety and security features can be built into almost every design if they are incorporated on paper well before the construction starts. How soon do you intend to start building?”

“We can go out there now. There is supposed to be a crew out there staking it out for preliminary landscaping.”

Carl frowned. McAbee saw it. “You don’t like the idea?”

“Landscaping can play a huge part in the defensibility of a home,” Carl said carefully.

“Oh,” McAbee said. “Of course. I can change it. My wife might complain, but I can keep her happy with some other things.”

“Mind if I tag along?” Carmady asked as McAbee and Carl got up from their chairs.

“Sure, Buck. The more the merrier.” Though Carl wasn’t aware of it, Carmady saw the quick, unhappy look Carl gave McAbee.

“Follow me,” McAbee said as he climbed into his Hummer. Carmady joined him and Carl hurried to his Suburban. McAbee was an aggressive driver, though few people tried to compete for the road with the Hummer. Carl maintained plenty of space between them. He’d asked for and received the address of the house lot, just in case McAbee got away from him.

A crew was, indeed, staking out the lot for landscaping. What they seemed to be planning was secondary compared to the basic situation of the lot. It was huge, which was good in Carl’s way of thinking. But it was also on the very peak of a ridge in the development, commanding a terrific view of not only the entire development, but much of the surrounding area, too. Which meant the house would be in full view from all those locations. Carl suspected that the house wasn’t going to be a small, unobtrusive tract house.

Carl confirmed that when McAbee took out a copy of the blueprints from the back of the Hummer and handed them to Carl. It was going to be a big, sprawling, two story house. It would fit McAbee’s personality to a tee, Carl decided. But that wasn’t good for security. Conspicuous consumption never was.

After a few minutes to allow Carl to look over the house plans, McAbee eagerly took him and Carmady around the lot, indicating what would go where.

“I take it you already own the lot and are committed to building here,” Carl said after the tour.

McAbee frowned. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I am. Look. If you can’t help me, just say so now and I’ll get someone that wants to help.”

“Mr. McAbee,” Carl said quietly, “I can help. It is just having a large, inviting looking place, in view of anyone and everyone passing, goes somewhat counter to the low profile approach that keeps interest low during a crisis.”

“I can see his point,” Carmady said. “But he did say he could help, anyway.”

“Yeah. Okay. You can stay.” McAbee was rather grudging in his statement. “But I don’t intend to live in some hovel, just so people don’t know I have money. I’ve earned every penny I have and don’t mind people knowing that.”

Carl almost told McAbee to shove it, but a job was a job. He’d still do the best he could. “Yes, Mr. McAbee. There is always something that can be done to enhance security, no matter the starting point. And your house does have good potential to make it very secure. In fact, the fact that it is a gated community is a very good start.”

The words seemed to appease McAbee and he was back to his jovial self. “Okay, then. Where should I start?”

“Let me get a copy of these plans and I’ll start working on them for physical security.”

“How about guns?” McAbee asked. “I have plenty, but would like you to take a look at them for suitability for survival.”

“There was that word again,” thought Carl. He said “Just about any gun can play a part in a person’s defense. I’ll be happy to go over the list with you and give you my recommendations.”

McAbee immediately began listing the various firearms he had. Most were high dollar sporting guns and/or collector arms.

“Wow!” Carmady said, obviously impressed.

Taking care not to denigrate any of the arms, Carl first complimented McAbee on his taste in weaponry. “It’s all good quality, if they are in good shape, and I’m sure you keep them that way. That Barrett is a choice that many people would make if they have the money. I envy you that one.”

McAbee beamed. “It’s a sweet shooter. I could command the entire area from the roof of the house with it.”

“You do have a point, Mr. McAbee,” Carl said. “The rest of your collection would take care of just about every conceivable hunting option in the area. You might want to consider some arms specifically for defense. Are your family members’ shooters, like yourself?”

“No. And don’t worry about them. I’m around to take care of them.” McAbee’s look brooked no negative response. He considered himself their one and only protector. Carl would just have to work with that.

“Let me get to work on these plans, and I’ll get back to you in three days with my recommendations.”

Magnanimously, McAbee agreed. “I can hold off on the landscaping work until I see your plans for the place. But remember, this is a house, not a fortress.”

“Yes, sir. That is a very good attitude.” With the plans rolled up and under one arm, Carl headed toward his Suburban, leaving McAbee and Carmady to their own discussion.

It took the entire three days for Carl to get the modified plans back to McAbee, working on them in the evening and during that weekend. Carl drove out to the site once to clarify a few things in his mind. When he took the plans down to the Hummer dealership to give to McAbee, he found Carmady there, too. “I hope you don’t mind,” Carmady said to Carl, “Tanner told me you were coming and I was curious about the plans...”

“It’s Mr. McAbee’s call,” Carl said carefully.

“But you’d rather I didn’t?” Carmady replied.

“I just generally recommend that preps such as Mr. McAbee is contemplating be kept very close to the vest. I have nothing against you...”

“That’s okay. You don’t know me. I understand. But since Tanner doesn’t mind, I would like to see the plans and hear your reasoning.”

“All up to Mr. McAbee,” Carl said.

“What’s up to me?” McAbee asked as he walked up to the two. “Let’s go back to my office.”

“My seeing the plans Carl has come up with.”

McAbee gave Carl a cautioning look. “Of course you can see them.” Again he gave Carl a hard look. “Buck is in the loop. I expect you to treat him as you would me.”

Carl nodded.

“Okay. Now what do you have for me?” McAbee asked. Carl gave him the rolled up blueprints and the copy he’d made on which he drew the changes he was recommending. The set of plans Carl had made weren’t fastened together. As he looked at each page, McAbee passed it to Carmady to look at.

Finally McAbee looked at Carl again. “There are a lot of changes here,” he said.

“Yes, sir. There are some, such as the projectile resistant lower walls, roof and wall sprinklers, pool plumbing, and the deeper basement and access tunnels that will add some cost to the structure. Many of the changes won’t add any cost, but improve the house for preparedness purposes.”

“There aren’t many changes in the external looks,” McAbee said. He sounded disappointed.

“No, sir. As you said, you didn’t want it to look like a fortress. The changes I’ve indicated help fortify the house against natural disasters and organized, small scale attacks. To gain more protection, there would be aspects of a fortress look. And you really don’t want that. It just tells someone you have something worth protecting.”

Carl was sure that McAbee had actually expected, and wanted, more of a fortress look. But McAbee wasn’t about to say so. At least not in front of Buck.

“I don’t know about this metal roof. My wife loves the look of wood shingles.”

“Even with treatment, they are a fire hazard,” Carl cautioned.

Carl answered each question, often couched as a challenge, that McAbee had. Carl noticed that Buck Carmady wasn’t saying anything, but was taking all the conversation in raptly.

By the time they were finished, McAbee had removed a good third of the physical changes to the house. Carl took it well. He’d pretty much expected that McAbee would make some changes, to show that he was in charge.

“Do we really need a separate vault room with the basement protected the way it is, and the master bedroom built as a safe room?” was McAbee’s last question.

“I believe you do, sir. But, as with all of this, it is your choice.”

“I suppose I can see the need, if things really got out of hand. I don’t expect them to, with the other precautions I’ll be incorporating into the house and grounds. I want to study these some more before I sign off on the new plans and give them to my general contractor.”

“You might want to have some of the work done by another contractor, before you bring in the main contractor for the house.”

“I don’t see the need for that,” McAbee said. I’d rather keep all this under one roof, so to speak.” He laughed at his own joke. Carl just nodded. All he could do was suggest. It was McAbee’s decision.

Carl took a packet of papers out of the computer case and handed them to McAbee. “These are my recommendations for equipment and supplies, based on two people per bedroom in the house.”

McAbee whistled when he saw the bottom line. “You’re pretty generous with other people’s money, old son. Especially considering it is only my wife and two children. We do like to have plenty of room.”

“These are my recommendations for the best possible outcome, in worst-case scenarios. As always, the final decisions are yours, sir.”

“Yeah. Well. I’ll think about this. It’s not the money, per se,” McAbee said, “More the principle of the things. I don’t really think the world is coming to an end. I just want to be better prepared than... than I am.”

Suddenly McAbee smiled. “I must say I do like the idea of a pool. Thought about it off and on for some time. I think it is justified, now.”

“I believe there are more advantages than disadvantages,” Carl said. He noticed that Carmady was going over the list of equipment and supplies quietly, but intently. McAbee had handed him the papers as soon as he’d glanced at them.

McAbee was leaning back in the desk chair, looking thoughtfully at the ceiling. “I tell you what, Simpson. Let me pay you off for what you’ve done and we’ll pick it up later if I need more advice.”

“As you wish, Mr. McAbee. I’ll send you an itemized statement.” It was about what Carl had expected from McAbee. He wasn’t one to spend more money than he had to. And he was sure he was right in just about everything, with only the slightest input from someone else.

“Do that. And don’t forget to charge the time and a half. I keep my agreements.”

“I will, sir. If you have any questions, feel free to call me.”

“I doubt I will. I think I’ve got a handle on it all. But thank you. Good-day.”

It was obviously a dismissal and Carl took it that way. He slipped the computer into the case, slung the case over his shoulder, and left the office, trying to remain relaxed. There was just something about McAbee that grated. Carl knew, and had worked for, quite a few people at McAbee’s financial level, and above, and he’d not felt this way. It wasn’t that the man had money. He liked to flaunt it. That wasn’t a good thing for someone interested in preparedness.

Out of curiosity, Carl checked on the construction of the house from time to time. If the red Hummer was there, he turned around and left. But he was there often enough to see that only some of what he had suggested to McAbee was being incorporated. There was an underground room poured and back filled before the garage slab was poured.

The basement was of ordinary construction, without the security features Carl had put in the plans. And unless McAbee decided to add an escape tunnel or two, later, which Carl doubted, the underground safe room had only the one entrance/exit into the basement.

McAbee did have the contractor incorporate the bullet resistant treatment for the lower walls, up to the level of the windows. That consisted of steel framing covered with ¾" T&G plywood on each side, filled with ¾" minus gravel. That section had an interior insulated wall.

The wall above the bottom of the window line was the full thickness of both the lower walls, and heavily insulated. The first floor windows and exterior doors had security shutters installed. Carl had suggested custom tempered steel shutters housed in a wall projection in the same style as the house itself.

The landscape features were left as the original plans called for. McAbee had not included the grounds security landscaping, except for adding a fancy wrought iron fence set back from the house, but encircling it, including the swimming pool.

Despite the reason Carl had suggested the swimming pool, Carl could find no signs of it being anything more than a well installed pool. No plumbing to make drawing water from it to fight fires easy. There was no sign of arrangements for a fire pump, nor water outlets in the house for fire fighting.

Much to his surprise, Carl was invited to a house warming the following spring when the house was completed. From the looks of it, most of the neighborhood was also invited, as well as some of McAbee's business associates and friends.

Even more of a surprise, and a great disappointment to Carl, came when McAbee began showing people the security aspects of the house, including the underground security room and his gun collection.

Carl made himself scarce after the first time McAbee introduced him as 'My survival expert.' Just as he was leaving, shortly after that introduction, Buck Carmady came up to him and re-introduced himself.

"Yes, Mr. Carmady. I remember you. Is there something I can do for you?"

Carmady handed Carl a business card. "When you have a chance, and perhaps get the bad taste out of your mouth Tanner's little show probably put in it, please give me a call. I'd like to talk to you about a project of my own."

Carl nodded and put the card in his pocket, a bit surprised at Carmady's candor. "I will, sir."

“And call me Buck. Mister makes me feel old.” He held out his hand to Carl and Carl shook it, a smile crossing his face.

“Be a couple of days, mist... Buck.”

“That’s fine. At your convenience.” Buck turned around and went looking for McAbee. Carl left the house, keeping his curiosity in check as to what Buck might want. He was going to be busy for the next two days and would have to wait to have his curiosity satisfied.

Carl called Buck Carmady the following Tuesday. Carmady only gave Carl an address at which to meet him in about an hour. Carl was at the address in less than the hour allotted, and began looking over the vacant land with an appreciative eye.

It was a new development, with several houses already going up. But the lots were large and heavily wooded. There would be neighbors, but they were somewhat isolated from one another by the trees. And the access road, a good all weather asphalt two lane county road, was only visible the last half mile or so before the development. And that meant the development wasn’t in view of idle passersby. Or someone looking for anything they could find, during a disaster.

Buck drove up a few minutes later and the two men shook hands after Buck exited his Cadillac. “What do you think?” Buck asked, turning to look at the property himself, hands on his hips. He turned his head to look at Carl and added, “Prep wise.”

Carl smiled. “Looks good on the surface. You want a detailed examination?”

Buck smiled back. “At your regular rates. I’m not as rich as Tanner.”

Both men laughed, and shook hands again. “I’ll get right on it. I’ll stop if I find something unsuitable. Have you already bought the property?”

Buck shook his head. “Wanted your opinion first. I want a safe place for my family to live, despite come what may.”

“There are reasons to evacuate,” Carl said. “Even the safest home might have to be abandoned, for a time, in some preparedness scenarios.”

“I understand. I’ve been reading a few things on the internet. Besides a nice home, I want a good retreat, for the worst that might come. Don’t have a place picked out for that, yet.”

“Well, I think you’ve made a good start here. I might have a few ideas on retreat property, when the time comes. Er... Not to be too intrusive, who all knows about this? I don’t want to say the wrong thing to the wrong person.”

“I doubt you would, anyway,” Buck said. “I saw how you were with Tanner, especially when he was showing off.

“My wife is in full support of getting a new, safe home. We’re already having some problems in the old neighborhood. And the kids come right home from school, due to the problems there. My wife wants to home school, starting next year.”

“I see. I think that is a good idea. Don’t have a wife and kids, yet, but that is what I plan for them.” Carl smiled. “Assuming my future wife agrees.”

Buck smiled again, too. “I’d find out first, if I was you. I’m lucky. My wife is a gem.”

“I plan to. I’m a big planner, if you haven’t already guessed.”

“I guessed. Now, I do have to get going. Do what you need and get back to me at your earliest convenience. Here are a couple of house plan books that Claire and I marked up with some of our own ideas. They are marked as to order of preference. We’re set on the goals I’ve asked you to help with. We’ll build the house best suited for the overall goal for Claire and me, and our children. Mark is thirteen and Suzan is sixteen.”

Carl took the plan books and thumbed through them. There were plenty of options to work with and he said so. Buck left, and Carl did a complete walk over of the property with compass and camera in hand. He was smiling when he drove away from the property.

The following day Carl talked to the development people. One of the first things he checked on was CC&R’s. Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions. Even the best property physically for preparedness would be untenable if the CC&R’s were too restrictive.

The development followed the national building codes, plus the local county code. The set back rules were reasonable, as were the building style restrictions. Basements were okay. So were greenhouses and decorative landscaping. There were no restrictions on building contractors, other than they had to be licensed in the state. There really wasn’t anything else in the one page CC&R document that would affect building the kind of home Buck wanted.

Due to problems in the past in the area, the county had outlawed private septic systems and home water wells. It would have been better without the restrictions, but Buck had said this wasn’t to be his retreat, but his full-time residence and the lack of those particular back up systems wasn’t a big issue.

Those issues settled, Carl fired up the computer and pulled up a map program and began to study the local area. He knew most of the rural prep friendly land in the area, but wanted to check for a good retreat site within a reasonable, three-quarter full fuel tank distance from the proposed home site. It needed to be a route with few obstacles to slow or stop an evacuation in an emergency.

The first two good areas Carl thought had travel routes too close to the city. The one that was on the same side of the city as the new house, and therefore a good option for evacuation,

was somewhat down the list of preferred property sites. There was rural land available there, but it was mostly private land, and therefore subject to future development. A property nearly surrounded by state or federal land would be better. The choice would be up to Buck.

When he got home Carl printed out the maps required to show Buck his options, and added them to the file that was growing almost hourly. He also made a few internet connections, ordering the standard set of books he almost always recommended to his clients that were contemplating a new house, renovating an old house, or acquiring a retreat site.

They included texts by Joel Skousen; James Wesley, Rawles; and Ragnar Benson, along with a few others. Carl drew heavily on some of the works, though his advice to his clients was definitely his own, from the study of those particular works, many other books and magazines, and personal experience.

Carl began working on the computer again, plugging in the specifics of Buck and his family, to get ballpark figures for the additional items Buck would need to acquire to make the home tenable for all but the worst scenarios. Again, with it in mind that there would be a good evacuation plan to a retreat in the very near future.

By the time the books had arrived, Carl had a written plan, the various lists similar to those he'd given Tanner, the maps, and several drawings to give to Buck, along with the books. When he called Buck to tell him the things were ready, Buck asked him to deliver the materials to the current home.

When Carl got there, he was glad he was in the Suburban and had his licensed handgun in the small-of-the-back holster. Buck had understated the degree of disintegration of the neighborhood. Even this once well-to-do community was suffering from the modern detriments of modern society.

Buck introduced Carl to his family, and then ushered the children off to do their homework. Claire joined the two men in the study.

Carl handed the stout canvas bag that held the books and papers to Buck, and then took his computer out of the case. "Mostly, on this trip, I want to familiarize you with the basics of what I've done, and get you started on the learning process."

"We'll get these back..." Claire started to say, but Carl cut her off politely. "No. Those are your permanent copies. It's part of the service."

"Oh. Well, thank you, then," Claire said, taking the items out of the bag one at a time and piling them on the desk. "There is much to go through, I see."

"I want my clients to make the best possible informed decision they can. It works better for the clients, and for me. I want my clients to be happy."

With a smile, Claire said, "Tanner McAbee certainly seems happy with what you've done for him."

Carl flinched and Buck chuckled. "Of course he is taking all the credit for it."

"That's actually good," Carl replied. "I'm proud of my work, but I prefer a low profile. The fewer people that know I am in the preparedness business, besides my clients, the better. Prepared people are often looked for to provide for those that haven't prepared."

Claire and Buck shared a look. Carl decided that there had been some discussion about the subject.

"We," Buck said, "plan on keeping everything very low profile. We've talked to the children about it a little. Both are more than happy not to have any of the locals know where they are going. That applies to many of their social friends, but not all. Claire and I plan on encouraging them to stay closed mouthed about things. And they won't be aware of many of the preparation features until well after we move into the house."

Carl nodded. The kids needed to be in the loop on this kind of decision, but Carl also believed they didn't need to know everything. At least not yet.

"I think everything you need at the moment is in the materials I brought. If you'll take a few days to read the books and go over the rest, and then give me a call, we can go into things in detail."

"The houses..." Claire asked, rather hesitatingly, "Which one should we build?"

"All of the ones you indicated you like are suitable. I've added my own notes and markings to each of the plans as to what would need to be done to make it the right home for safe living."

"Thank you," Claire replied, beaming. She obviously did have a favorite.

Buck showed Carl out and said, "We'll be in touch. Do you need a check now?"

Carl shook his head. "After this stage is complete."

Buck shook Carl's hand and nodded. "Thank you."

Carl was careful when he drove away from the house. The neighborhood really was deteriorating. A couple of the large houses showed the signs of being drug dens. The next street over from Buck's now bordered a roadside mall, and included a strip club. No wonder Buck wanted out.

Carl went about his normal schedule of work the following week, with a couple of minor prep consulting jobs thrown in. Buck called on Friday and asked to meet with Carl Saturday morning, at the site.

Claire was with Buck when Buck drove up and parked next to Carl's Suburban. The three went over the documents Carl had provided. By noon Carl was shaking Buck's hand after receiving a check for the preliminary work, and an advance on the rest of the project, including a long term retreat, and smaller, if all-else-fails, minimal retreat.

It would be two years before Buck's project was completed. It was none too soon.

## Conspicuous Consumption - Chapter 2

The world was not the same place it had been when Buck started Carl's and Claire's project. Things were not looking good at that time. The new administration had promised changes. There was no doubt about it. Changes were implemented.

They were not the kind of changes that negated the need for homes such as Buck's and Claire's new home, retreat, and back-up retreat. The housing mortgage bubble burst, banks failed, automobile companies went bankrupt. The stock market didn't crash and we weren't in a depression, according to the administration, but most people realized the truth.

Israel was again engaged in controlled warfare with her neighbors. Pakistan and India were talking war again. Russia was responding to US missiles in Poland aggressively. China said they would no longer buy US Treasury bills to keep the US government afloat.

Global warming... or was it the beginning of a new ice age... Experts on both sides of the discussion were adamant about their stand. The thing the average person knew was the heating bills were higher in the winter and the cooling costs were higher in the summer. Roads were deteriorating because of the extreme weather conditions all over the nation. Not only was the damage coming faster, the various jurisdictions didn't have the income to compensate.

Of course, the potential for natural disasters was a constant. Nothing the level of Katrina occurred and only minor earthquakes disrupted reminded people that 'The Big One' was simply a matter of time. That included Yellowstone caldera. A couple of swarms of earthquakes there had the locals on edge.

Carl watched with interest the trials and tribulation of Tanner McAbee. He was one of the few that managed to sell back to General Motors the Hummer dealership, lock, stock, and barrel. He wasn't as fortunate with the Cadillac dealership. GM wasn't buying back anything by the time they scaled back to only three lines of vehicles. Cadillac wasn't one of them.

While Mercedes was still solvent, very few people were buying new luxury cars. Used cars had always been a small part of McAbee's dealerships. They were now the prime source of income for him. And that wasn't much.

Carl had no idea what types of financial investments McAbee had, but he suspected that McAbee lost a bundle in the stock market when it fell. The lavish parties he often threw after moving into his new house had stopped abruptly. Tanner had not had a party in close to a year.

Buck, not one to betray a confidence, confirmed Carl's suspicions one day about McAbee. "I feel for the man," Buck said. "I tried to talk him into some of the same investments you pointed out to me. He wouldn't have anything to do with them. He's adamant about staying the course with his old investments."

Carl nodded but didn't say anything. Buck had thrown some other prep work his way during the two years Carl worked on Buck's projects and Carl now had his own preps much the

way he wanted them. One could never have too many, but Carl was now comfortable with what he had.

In addition, the two men had become friends. Though certainly not the ideal arrangement, they were a two family mutual aid group. Carl was even dating Claire's younger sister, Elizabeth. She had taken up residence with the family when her small business failed due to the economy and she took a job in Buck's company. She was fully on board with the idea of becoming prepared, as were both of the Carmady children.

Mark was fifteen now, and Suzan eighteen. Suzan was planning on living at home while going to the local college.

When the first balloon went up, Buck and his family, and Carl, were ready for it. Ammunition sales were limited as the first step in a new weapons ban, with only a one week notice. Prices skyrocketed, and then ammunition became almost impossible to find. There was a strict limit on the production of new ammunition, higher fees for manufacturers and dealers, and a hefty tax at the point of sale.

Buck, never one to take advice blindly, had asked Carl about the amounts of ammunition and reloading supplies Carl had suggested Buck get, early on in the process of becoming prepared.

Carl had explained the possibility of just such a law coming into being and Buck decided that a bit more ammunition than he'd planned on was okay. His respect of Carl, already high, went up even more when he realized that it would be doubtful he would be able to get any additional ammunition legally for a long time.

Hard on the heels of ammunition becoming hard to get, yet another balloon went up. This was the recall of all non-industrial precious metals bullion, bullion coins, and even the new hedge that was beginning to catch on, bullion jewelry. Those turning in the PMs would get a price per ounce set by the government. The prices were far below spot in the rest of the world.

Sales, even private sales, of numismatic precious metals coins were to be taxed at fifty percent of their free market value.

Not everyone holding gold that the government could trace took kindly to the situation. Armed resistance was encountered. And the third and fourth balloons went up quickly. Both gun and ammunition sales were restricted to official government agencies only.

When the resistance continued, a gun confiscation was put into effect, starting with traceable firearms, specific accessories, and ammunition. More resistance was encountered and significant rewards were offered by the BATFE for citizens to turn in their neighbors that had weapons, in an effort to ferret out the otherwise untraceable firearms.

It was joked that the sudden increase in the sale of shovels was due to the confiscation program. Small battles broke out all over the US, as gun owners banded together to fight the

confiscation officials. The administration, blaming the internet for allowing groups of resistance fighters to coordinate attacks, shut the system down.

Several governments followed suit as things deteriorated in their countries. The internet was no longer available.

It was during all the turmoil that China carried out their threat to stop buying US T-bills. There was now no question about a stock market crash and depression. More and more people became unemployed and were looking for any opportunity that could be found to feed themselves and their families.

The President began to recall troops from foreign assignments to supplement the federalized National Guard units that were being asked to help enforce the new laws. Many of the members of the armed forces were refusing to carry out the orders and were, in fact, joining the resistance.

With the US President on the verge of asking the UN to send in troops to restore order, many other countries, with the US occupied domestically, decided to take the opportunity to do a little mischief. The world's policeman wasn't around anymore, and the criminal countries of the world planned to take advantage of it.

The first event of many to follow was Russia's incursion into Belarus on the way to Poland. China was hard on Russia's heels in activities. Not waiting for a declaration of independence from Taiwan, Mainland China began to launch precision weapons at the island's major defenses.

The UN was lunging at the leash to get troops into the US and simply ignored everything else, with China and Russia both doing everything they could to keep it that way. Japan and Germany called upon the US to help with the problems occurring close to them. When the US officially refused, the two powers announced the presence of secret nuclear weapons in their respective arsenals and promised dire consequences if either of their homelands was dragged into any fighting.

Iran's leadership decided it was time. With recent secret agreements between Iran and most of the rest of the Arab and Muslim worlds, an all out campaign to destroy Israel was undertaken, with the threat of nukes if the Jewish population didn't leave Israel and allow the taking of the country by its enemies. Israel declined the invitation to save its population and dug in for nuclear war.

India and Pakistan didn't waste the opportunity, either. Border battles turned into full scale conventional warfare between the two countries.

What little news that was reaching the majority of the US population was bad. And it wasn't even a tenth of what was happening. Like the internet, open news coverage was to be a thing of the past.

Buck's family and Carl hunkered down in their respective homes as services began to fail, starting with trucking. With few trucks running, due to a variety of factors, grocery shelves began to become bare. Gun ownership rights weren't the only thing being fought over in the US now.

There was much speculation as to who pushed a button first. The President of the US denied releasing the nuclear arsenal until after incoming missile tracks were confirmed. It really didn't matter. Orders were given, keys were turned, and buttons were pushed, and the fear of billions of people for almost seventy years became justified. Nuclear weapons began to detonate all over the world.

There was no warning given to the American populace. Those in the inner circle of the administration headed for their secret bunkers when the President released the nukes, without informing others in top government positions. But their secret bunkers weren't so secret. Either the Russians or Chinese, some even speculated the French, knew about them and hit every one with a bunker buster nuke. Some of those in the US government left behind to die managed to survive. The government itself didn't.

As ready as they could be, Buck's family was at home, on high alert already, when the power suddenly went out and many electrical and electronic devices ceased to work. Having practiced for the event, the entire family had the house secured and were in the blast and fallout shelter built into the back yard in less than ten minutes.

Carl, on the other hand, was at Tanner McAbee's house. Tanner had called the previous day and asked, nearly begged, Carl to come by and give him some advice on how to handle the way things were going.

"Lousy power company!" Tanner growled when the lights went out in his study that he and Carl had just entered.

"I'm not so sure it's the power company," Carl said softly. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket and went over to a curtained window and opened the drapes a bit.

"What do you mean, not the power company?" Tanner demanded, angrily.

"Take a look..." Carl stepped back from the window and let Tanner look out. In the soft light of the LED flashlight, Carl saw the color drain from Tanner's face.

"There aren't any lights," Tanner said. "So? The power is out at the switching station. Just like the last time."

"Maybe you are right. But I suggest you gather your family and take cover in your shelter. I'm heading home. Right now."

“Wait a minute! I’m paying you for information. You will stay here until I have what I want! Especially if this is the real thing!”

“Sorry, Mr. McAbee. I’m leaving.”

“Go on. Run, you coward! It’s just a power outage. And don’t expect any recompense for the trip out here, either!”

“No, sir, I won’t.” Carl was almost at a run when he went through the front door of the house and got into his Suburban in the fading light. He closed his eyes, said a little prayer, and turned the key. The Suburban started right up.

Carl drove carefully to his home. There was little traffic. What there was, was stopped dead. Carl’s Suburban was the only vehicle moving. Several people tried to wave him down, but Carl ignored them. He had just backed into his garage when the sky flashed brightly for just a moment.

Carl stepped outside the garage and looked in the other direction. He couldn’t see the telltale mushroom cloud, but Carl was sure a nuclear warhead had just detonated in the city several miles west of him.

After running back inside the garage, he lowered the garage door. The EMP shielded automatic start generator had come on and he still had power. Then, like the Carmady’s, Carl secured his house and went into the basement, then through the short tunnel that linked the basement to his disaster shelter.

He shut down the generator and went to battery power in order to conserve fuel. Carl wondered about Elizabeth and the Carmady’s. Of all his clients, they were the best prepared. But anything could happen. Carl took the comfortable chair in front of the communications desk and checked the fallout meter. It wasn’t showing anything at the moment.

He wasn’t sure when he fell asleep, but something woke Carl during the night. He checked the fallout meter. Still nothing. But a few minutes later he felt a slight tremor in the shelter. “Someone is getting it,” he whispered.

It wasn’t until just after six the next morning that Carl saw the needle on the fallout meter lift off the peg. He noted the time, and the reading, and continued to check the meter as he prepared a light breakfast for himself.

The fallout radiation peaked two hours later. Carl blanched when he saw the reading. But an hour later the radiation was down to only 57 roentgen/hour. He quickly opened up the laptop computer he took from its faraday cage. Pulling up the Seven/Ten rule spreadsheet he’d obtained from the internet, he plugged in the numbers. The calculations showed that the radiation should be down below 0.100 r/hr in only ten days.

For the next few boring days, Carl checked the actual readings against those the spreadsheet was showing. They were very close. When the radiation was below 0.50 r/hr Carl

suiting up in his protective gear and went upstairs, ready to go outside to take a look around. But he looked out the small peep hole in the living room window shutter first. What he found stunned him. He went around to a shuttered window on each side of the house. It was the same.

Several of his neighbors were outside, mostly working on vehicles, two or three together.

Carl hesitated. If he went out wearing what he was, even with his weapons, and informed those outside that they were receiving deadly doses of radiation, he might very well be mobbed and his shelter taken over. Those working outside, if they'd already spent much time at all out in the open, even just in their houses, and not in a shelter, were already doomed. Carl double checked the doors and windows surreptitiously, making sure all the security shutters were still down, locked, and un-damaged. Then he went back down to the shelter, well aware that he wouldn't have many neighbors left in the matter of a few days. Some of them would probably be dead within hours.

All he could do was put those people out of his mind. Carl studied some, but mostly slept the days away until he could go out and stay out, having decided to wait the full safe time before he left the shelter and house.

Even with the meter needle of the fallout radiation meter barely registering, Carl suited up again when he was ready to go out. He wanted to go see about Elizabeth at the Carmady's place, but felt a responsibility to his neighbors. It was with sorrow that he found out he had been right thinking many of his neighbors wouldn't make it. He found several still outside, dead of radiation exposure.

He was a bit surprised that none in the area had died violently as he went from house to house. There were no survivors. His house was one of the few in the development that had a basement, much less a shelter. Even with the relatively low radiation levels, the constant exposure to them had resulted in fatal doses after the first few days. Many people were in bed, the signs of radiation sickness evident.

The children especially depressed Carl. There weren't many. It was a mature community, with mostly late middle aged workers and retirees. The bodies, all of them, needed burying. But Carl knew he couldn't do it alone. None of his radio calls the last few days had raised anyone. He still didn't know if there were any authorities around. It really worried him that Buck hadn't answered any of the prearranged calls the two had set up well before the attack.

Hesitating some time, Carl finally decided to leave most things alone in the houses. There wasn't much food anyway. There were signs of at least one person having taken canned and packaged food from some of the houses.

What Carl did take was firearms and ammunition. He didn't want them out there possibly endangering him during the very uncertain future. He didn't really find much, not surprisingly. Most of the people were of the type to have turned in their guns when the ban began.

Anxious to know how the Carmady's fared, Carl finally, after the three days exploring the neighborhood, fired up the Suburban and headed toward the Carmady place. On an impulse, Carl

diverted the route slightly and drove past the development that Tanner McAbee lived in. It was with great surprise that he took in the activity visible outside the house. He could see it from the road that went past the entrance to the development.

Suddenly uneasy, Carl drove on quickly, hoping he hadn't been spotted. Then, with great relief he drove up to the heavy gate at the end of the short driveway that led to the Carmady's house. The tall iron security fence was in perfect shape, as was the gate. He tried the intercom and was again surprised. It worked. A few minutes later he had Elizabeth in his arms and was shaking hands with Buck as Claire, Suzan, and Mark looked on.

"So you made it. I was worried when I couldn't get you on the radio," Carl said, setting Elizabeth down, but keeping her hand in one of his.

"I don't know, Carl," Buck said. Mark and I both tried it and there is something wrong. None of the radios work. Won't even light up. We had the antennas disconnected, just like you showed us."

"I'll take a look at it in a minute. I just want to be with people for a few minutes."

"Bad at your place?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not a single neighbor made it. I don't know what to do with the bodies..."

They all looked as ill as Carl did himself. "I'm hoping the National Guard or the local officials will be able to help before disease gets out of hand."

"Carl... I know he's not your favorite person... But I don't suppose you checked on Tanner on the way over, did you?"

"As a matter of fact, Buck, I stopped at the development entrance. As you know, his house is easily visible from there. There were several people out and about around the house. I couldn't tell what they were doing, but it made me nervous and I came on over here. If you want, we can go check on him."

"He's been a friend for a long time. I owe some of my wealth to him. And he introduced me to you. That's enough reason to go check on him."

"I understand. You want to suit up and we'll go over."

"Thanks, Carl. Give me a few minutes."

While Buck got ready, Carl and Elizabeth slipped away for a few minutes. Though they'd been dating for several months, it was only the forced separation that made them realize they wanted to be together from now on. "Don't worry. I'll find a ring and a minister, just as soon as I can," Carl was saying when Buck came back up from the basement.

Elizabeth, Claire, and Suzan were talking excitedly when Buck and Carl left, leaving a disappointed Mark behind.

Carl stopped the Suburban well before they came into sight of Tanner's estate. "I have a bad feeling about this," he said. "Let's stash the truck and continue on foot."

"I'm with you," Buck said. The two men exited the truck and Carl showed Buck how to reset the theft deterrents just in case something happened to Carl on the exploratory expedition.

Both were armed with Springfield M1A .308 rifles and Para-Ordinance P-14 .45 ACP handguns. The rifles they carried ready for use as they made their way toward Tanner's. One of the things that Carl had not liked about the location, among many others, was the fact that though the development was fenced and gated, the fence wasn't much of a deterrent.

Carl led the way along the outside the fence until he found a good spot and the two men crossed over. From that point on, they leap-frogged their way from house to house until they were at the edge of Tanner's huge lot.

"Do you recognize any of those people?" Carl whispered to Buck as the two men watched the activity going on in Tanner's front yard. Tanner himself was using a shovel, apparently digging a fighting position. There were several other men doing the same thing. Watching them were three men with weapons of one sort or another.

A woman came out of the house with a pitcher of water and a cup. It was Tanner's wife. From the looks of her face she'd been treated roughly. "Tanner wouldn't have done that to her," Buck whispered angrily. "Or stood by for it to happen. I think Tanner and his family are being held by the men with guns. I don't recognize any of them... Wait... Maybe... I think the big guy by the corner of the house is Dave Preston. He's a lawyer that Tanner uses some of the time."

"Was he at the open house?" Carl asked Buck.

"Yes. Yes he was. And if I remember, was very envious of Tanner."

"What do you think? We barge in to the rescue?" Carl sounded a bit uncertain, which surprised Buck.

"Don't you think we should?" Buck asked.

"I'm afraid without more surveillance that we'd be taking too large of a chance and endangering Tanner and his family, and the others that seem to be under guard. I think we should wait and watch, until just before dark."

"That is a better way," Buck said, relieved that Carl wasn't giving up on the situation.

Carl settled Buck in a safe spot where he could keep an eye on the rear of the property, and took up another place in front. Both men had FRS radios with headsets, but exchanged only a few words during the time they waited.

It was well they did wait. Carl was about to signal Buck to cover him while he began to move forward. But Tanner's Hummer roared up just then and two men got out, carrying shopping bags from a local liquor store. They began to hand them out to the guards, including Dave Preston. Carl noted that Preston seemed to be rather afraid of both of the new men.

"We wait a bit longer," Carl whispered into the microphone of the FRS radio and Buck clicked twice to acknowledge.

When Tanner asked to go to the bathroom and told to do it at the edge of the lawn, he was only a few feet from Carl. "Don't let on, Mr. McAbee," Carl whispered. "Buck and I are here. How many guys are holding you and your family?"

"The guards out here and four more in the house," the startled man replied, softly.

"When I give the word, create a diversion. We'll take out the outside guards and then rush the house."

"Be careful, man! My family is in there!"

"We will," Carl replied.

One of the guards yelled at Tanner and he zipped up and went back to work. Apparently the work was to continue until full dark. Carl didn't wait that long. He filled Buck in on the radio, and then signaled to Tanner.

Tanner immediately turned around and charged the closest guard, wrapping the man in a tight bear hug before the man could raise his weapon. Five shots rang out and the other guards went down.

Buck was headed to the back entrance of the house and Carl to the front. Tanner had the shotgun he'd liberated from the man whose neck he'd broken and was right on Carl's heels. Two more armed men burst out of the house and both the shotgun and rifle fired. The two went down and Carl and Tanner were inside the house.

Dave Preston was huddled behind Tanner's wife, and the remaining man that had come up in the Hummer held Tanner's daughter hostage. Tanner hesitated, but Carl knew that there could be only two outcomes to the situation. The two men would die and the two women would live, or all four would die.

Tanner was looking back and forth between the two sets of people, helpless. The shotgun in his hands was no weapon to use to liberate hostages held as shields. Carl cut a quick glance at Buck. Buck nodded and both men fired as one. The two women surged toward Tanner and he had them protected with his broad back as he forced them down to the floor as two more shots rang out.

But those shots were just finishing shots to make sure the two hostage takers were surely dead. Slowly Tanner looked around and then got up. "That's all of them," he said. He helped his wife and daughter up. "But some of the others were in on it."

The anger was coming back and Tanner picked up the shotgun and headed back outside. Carl followed as Buck looked after the family. Tanner was aiming down the driveway at two men running away. One of those that had been working beside Tanner earlier lay dead in the fighting position he'd been digging.

"Easy, Mr. McAbee. It's over."

The shotgun clicked. It was empty. "Yeah. I guess it is. I don't think those two will be coming back. And if they do, I'll be ready this time."

It took a few minutes to get things straightened out enough for Tanner to explain what had happened.

"You were right, Simpson. I should have been more discreet. I had people at my door, asking to be let in to the shelter right after you left. But Dave Preston got the drop on me and forced his way inside. The other guy. The one holding my daughter. He was Preston's client. Up on assault and battery charges. He took over after Dave got the drop on me and what I thought were my friends that were trying to get in, too.

"I thought they were going to put me out, and a couple of the other men, too. But Morrison... That's the assault and battery guy... decided to keep us as slaves for after we got out of the shelter.

"He kept telling me how big a fool I'd been building this place and not putting in defensive emplacements, or a getaway tunnel. Just like you suggested. Most of the food is gone. They were going to start raiding, after the defenses here were prepared. Don't know where..."

"Yes, you do, Tanner!" It was Luby, Tanner's wife. She had one arm over their daughter and one over their son. "That's why you were kept alive!"

She turned to look at Buck and Carl. "He told them he knew two places that had more food than they could eat and he could help them get a foot in the door if he left us alone."

"Shut up, Luby!" Tanner growled.

Carl found himself unsurprised. But Buck looked at Tanner, his face ashen. "Tanner?"

"It's not like she said. Not really. But I had to do something. I wouldn't have led them to you, Buck. I would have figured out something."

"Yeah. Take them to Carl, no doubt. Well, I tell you, Tanner... Our friendship is over. You're on your own, when it comes to just you. I'll help Luby and the kids, but that's it."

“I’ll take care of my family!” Tanner almost yelled.

“Can we go with you?” Luby asked Buck.

“You’ll stay here where you belong!” insisted Tanner.

“If you want,” Buck said, totally ignoring Tanner. “Get what you want to take with you and we’ll go.”

“I’ll not let...” Tanner was saying, his hands clenched. He looked around and took a step toward one of the dead men’s guns.

“Easy, Mr. McAbee,” Carl said, not quite bringing the M1A around to point it at Tanner. But it would only take a second for him to do so. Tanner knew it. And didn’t like it one little bit.

“Look, you!”

“No, Tanner, you look!” Buck said, no longer pale. “You like to throw your weight around. And you got by with it before all this. But this is a different world. You’re only chance is to change your ways and become part of the solution to our community’s problems. You keep trying to do things the way you used to, someone will put a bullet in you. When you feel like you’ve reformed, look me up and maybe your family will want to come home to you.”

Stony-faced, Tanner McAbee stood silent while his wife and children, blanket wrapped bundles in their arms, followed Buck down the driveway of the McAbee home. Carl almost had them wait until he gathered up the fallen guns, but decided it best to leave while Tanner was still under control. He might go ballistic and do something stupid, given more time to think about things.

Buck stopped in one of the few spots not visible from the Tanner house. “Carl... I hate to involve you in this... But could you go get the Suburban. Luby and the kids just aren’t up to walking that distance.”

“Sure. But you keep a good eye out. We left loaded weapons behind. He might do anything.”

Buck blanched. “I didn’t think! We should have taken all his guns...”

“He never would have allowed us to do that... Not peaceably. I’ll go get the Suburban.” Carl took off at a trot, unzipping the Tyvek suit for some ventilation. He was back within an hour and found all just as he’d left them.

It wasn’t until after Claire, Suzan, and Elizabeth took the rest of the McAbee family under their wings and got them settled into Buck’s place that Carl took Buck aside to talk to him.

“You know McAbee isn’t going to take this laying down, Buck. We need to decide just how we’re going to handle things if he decides to get violent with us.”

Buck sighed. "I don't know, Carl. I can't believe he'd do anything to hurt... Well... He just might try to take it out on you. You think you should move in here? At least for the duration."

Carl thought long and hard before he answered. He liked being in his own place. He had hopes that he and Elizabeth could live there and raise a family. And that still might be a possibility. But Tanner McAbee had to be dealt with, and so did everything else that a post apocalyptic world might through at them. And Buck's place did have quite a few things to recommend it for their long term survival.

"Okay, Buck. I'll move in, and follow your lead."

"Oh, I think I'll pass that lead position right back to you," Buck said with a small smile. "Yes, the place is mine and my families, but you're a part of that now, being with Elizabeth. Besides, you know far more about living through something like this than I ever will."

The two men shook hands silently.

### Conspicuous Consumption - Chapter 3

It took three days to move all of Carl's equipment and supplies from his house to the Carmady's. Another day was spent securing everything that couldn't be moved. A casual investigation would reveal nothing of the remaining preps.

Buck and Carl did a thorough search of Buck's neighborhood. Unlike Carl's area, the development Buck was in had many houses with basements, and there were survivors, though not many. And none were in very good shape.

Like Carl, Buck had laid in some additional supplies for just such a situation. With strong suggestions for them to band together for safety and efficiency for the hard work that was ahead, both handed out basic food stuffs. Buck showed them how to dig latrines and helped with the first couple.

He also made sure they knew how to use the hand pump he rigged to pull water from the one small stream that ran through the development. The water would need to be boiled for safety, and the pump was some distance from the set of houses the group was using.

But with a couple of food safe 55-gallon drums and several 6-gallon pails transported with three 'little red wagons' and a heavy duty 4-wheel garden cart, the group would have a safe, steady supply of water. A couple of his neighbors gardened and had enough tools to put in a large sized garden if everyone helped.

Making sure no one knew, Carl drew enough treated gasoline from his underground tank to fuel the rototillers for two seasons, if kept just for that. It was already a bit late to start a garden, so it was made a priority.

Buck and Carl both had a large supply of heirloom and open pollinated seeds, but Carl, always with two of Buck's male neighbor survivors, used the Suburban to seek out additional tools, equipment, and supplies, including hybrid seeds. They would be used until they were gone, before the heirloom seeds were used.

It was for two reasons. One, to stretch supplies. There was nothing wrong with the hybrid seeds. They just wouldn't reproduce true. And to avoid the danger of both types being used close to one another and the hybrids pollinating the heirloom strain and rendering it useless.

Like other supplies, Buck and Carl had a few extra radios. A pair of them were given to the other survivors, with a box of rechargeable batteries and a solar battery charger. The problem with Carl's radios was quickly diagnosed and a constant radio watch set up, with the three youngest taking turns, along with the adults.

Carl and Buck were helping in the survivors' garden when the subject of meat came up. Those of the other survivors that had taken leadership roles talked to Carl about it. He set out on another series of travels, looking for small stock, including rabbits, chickens, and goats.

Disappointed at the numbers of animals he found penned and dead, the team did manage to collect a larger number of animals than Carl thought would be possible. There were also many dead dogs and cats in the same area. But not all were dead. There were signs of depredation by feral dogs and cats on both humans and other dead animals that were in the open.

The situation would only get worse, so the order went out to kill any dog or cat that wasn't part of the survivors' group of animals. Twenty-twos were the preferred weapon, to conserve what little other ammunition the survivors had. Carl and Buck simply kept their true level of preps quiet, doling out what was an immediate need, that they could cover. For the present.

Besides the small stock, Carl went hunting in the nearby forest. But he had little luck. Signs of other surviving groups taking game were evident. So were the signs of many dead animals dead from radiation poisoning.

Carl kept his thoughts to himself about the probable die off of many survivors that winter and the subsequent return of more wildlife. He just put an encouraging look on his face when the subject came up.

For the first two weeks, a careful watch was kept, by Carl mostly. He didn't trust Tanner to leave them alone. And there was the chance of attack if the small enclave was discovered by less than helpful people.

Twice people did show up, but they were on their last legs. The little group took them in, and in the matter of a month, they were productive members of the community. That was about the same time that Tanner made his move.

He surprised Carl when he just walked up to Buck's house, carrying a large back pack, a rifle over one shoulder and a double barrel shotgun over the other. A cartridge belt carried the big S&W 500 on his hip.

"I want to see my wife and children. I don't want any trouble. But I intend to see them."

"It's up to Luby," Buck said, coming up behind Carl. He carried one of the M1A .308 rifles he'd included in his small armory. It was pointed down, but Buck looked ready to raise it and point it at Tanner without a second's hesitation.

Tanner didn't like it, and it showed on his face. But after a few moments of bravado, Tanner relaxed and nodded. "Yes. Yes, of course."

Buck turned around and went into the house. Carl stepped away from Tanner, but kept an eye on him.

Luby came out, followed by the children. The children ran to their father, but Luby stayed back, examining his face intently as he hugged them. "Luby?" Tanner asked, his voice low.

"Oh, Tanner! Why did you have to come? It was so easy without seeing you."

“I don’t want it to be easy. I want you and the children with me.”

Luby was shaking her head. “With all we had, you couldn’t defend us. The children are safe here. So am I.”

“I’ll take care of you. I promise. We’ll find a place...”

Luby, Buck, and Carl all looked at Tanner sharply. Luby asked, “Find a place? What about our house?”

Tanner looked down at the ground. “It’s... we can’t go back there. A bunch of people showed up when I was sleeping... They ran me off. But they did let me take what I have on me. They were some of our friends, Luby. And they chased me off. Said they’d kill me if I came back.”

Luby looked at Buck. So did Carl. He saw the uncertainty in Buck. But it was Buck’s call.

“Tanner... Do you think you could conform to a subordinate spot here? Carl is in overall charge. And we’re helping some of my neighbors that are just scraping by.”

Again that look on Tanner’s face that said more clearly than words that he didn’t like the idea. But it faded, as it had before, and Carl had hope that the man might actually be changing.

“I’ll do anything to be with my family,” Tanner said, looking at Luby. “I had no idea I loved them so much.”

“Oh, Tanner!” Luby stepped over to him and they shared a hug and a kiss.

“Carl?” asked Buck.

“If you say so, Buck. If you say so.” Then Carl looked at Tanner. “And if you give me your word that you’ll blend in and become part of this team. Cooperate and help where help is needed, no matter what it is.”

Tanner was already nodding. “Anything you say, Simpson. I’ve learned that you were right. I went about things all wrong and I’ve paid the price. I’ve always been a loner. But this experience has taught me that people need people...” Tanner turned red, but stood his ground.

“People do need people,” Buck said. He reslung the M1A and held out his hand.

“You have my word, uh... Carl,” Tanner said, reaching out his hand to him after the handshake with Buck.

“Good enough,” Carl said. “You might as well come in and take a load off. We have coffee, if you’re inclined.”

“Coffee? You still have coffee? Sure! I’d love a cup! I haven’t had coffee since... Well... That’s not important. And I promise. I will contribute for my keep. And my family’s.”

“You can start tomorrow,” Carl said. “Time to clean out the garage we’re using as a barn for some of our stock.”

Tanner looked a bit shocked, and a little green around the gills, but he suddenly laughed and said, “You betcha! It’ll be clean enough to eat off the floor by the time I’m done!”

The others laughed, too. “Well, we’ll see about a better distribution of resources. We have a place to eat. We just need it clean enough for the animals’ health. But I like the new attitude. Come on in and we’ll have that cup of coffee to celebrate you rejoining the good guys.”

End \*\*\*\*\*

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