

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Prolog

It was one little toggle switch that started it all. It was a heavy duty toggle switch, if it makes any difference to the historical record. When the toggle switch was toggled, all it did was trip a small, low voltage electronic relay. And that relay simply tripped a much heavier relay. And the current poured into the rest of the circuitry that made up a portion of the apparatus that had been built over the last several years.

The Communist government of China had paid dearly for the secret plans of the device. And spent vast sums to get it built quickly and quietly. But finally it was done, each element of the complex device tested separately. When the Chairman was informed of the device's readiness he gave a one word order to the General in charge of the project. The General himself flipped the toggle switch and the Chinese copy of the United States HAARP device activated.

"Let the Americans feel the wrath of Chinese technology! And they won't even know it is happening!" His laugh could only be described as evil. It sent chills down the back of the necks of all those in the control room. They had no idea just how appropriate the sensation was. They also didn't know that a test of the American HAARP system was being conducted at the very time they began their own. Nor did they know Russia started their own test the next day.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 1

“Mr. Lanigan,” asked Reggie, “Would you come and take a look at this?”

Brian Lanigan sauntered across the busy newsroom of the television station to see what his meteorologist wanted.

“Yeah, Reggie? What's up? We got a storm coming?”

“I don't think so. Not here. But look at this satellite image. There wasn't anything there this morning.”

“It's the weather. If you don't like the weather...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just wait fifteen minutes. I know the joke. But Mr. Lanigan, I don't think this is a joking matter. Stuff just doesn't suddenly appear like this.”

Reggie was a bit of a light weight when it came to meteorologists, but he did know the basics well enough. “Okay. Follow up on it with the National Weather Service. Might as well check the Weather Channel, too. See if they are saying anything about it. Could be a story in it.”

After going back to his office, Brian went over the stories they were planning for the day with his General Manager. He'd just had his lunch delivered when Reggie knocked on the door and came in.

“Something weird is going on,” he said, before Brian could say anything. “I was talking to a guy I know at the local NWS and he said he had noticed the anomaly, too. I heard somebody say something in the background on his end and he just hung up on me. And then, when I was watching the Weather Channel, almost the same thing happened.”

“What do you mean, almost the same thing?”

“The meteorologist was handed a sheet of paper while he was at the map and he started to read it. It was something about the same system. I'm sure of it. But the screen went black for a second and then a commercial came on. After about a dozen commercials the set was back on screen and they went to talking about some small storm system off the coast of Florida. No mention was made of the interruption or about the system they'd just been about to mention.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Strange, huh?”

“I think so. There may be something to this. Check with your other contacts and see what they are saying.”

Reggie nodded. “Will do.”

His lunch forgotten, Brian leaned back in his leather executive chair and tented his fingers over his chest, thinking. Finally he turned to his computer station and began to search the internet for anything on the event.

It was just before he was ready to give up when one of his searches turned up something. It seemed to be some sort of survivalist's site. Posts were popping up one after another about some strange weather phenomenon.

Brian opened another browser window and kept searching, checking on the first forum from time to time. He found another site where the forum members were discussing the event on their chat room.

Much like Reggie had said happened when he was talking to the NWS and watching the weather channel, Brian suddenly lost his internet connection. He tried several times to bring it up again, but with no success.

He called the station's electronic tech. "I've got a glitch. I just lost my internet."

Before he could say more, the tech said, "It's not you. The internet is down."

"We have a T1 line!" Brian exclaimed. "How can we not have internet?"

"It's the internet itself, Sir. It's crashed. There's nothing I can do on our end. It's up to the big boys controlling the switching network and key servers."

"Okay. Thanks." Brian hung up the telephone receiver slowly. "This is going to give the conspiracy nuts conniptions," he said softly. "But I wonder..."

Before he could follow up the thought, Reggie came through the open door of the office. "Weather satellite links are down."

"Oh, yeah. Definitely conspiracy time."

"What?" Reggie asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud. We're stymied at the moment. Go ahead and work on the local forecast."

"But Mr. Lanigan..."

Brian shook his head. "I'm working on it. You just make sure you do the best forecast possible without the usual information sources."

Reggie nodded, if somewhat dejectedly, and left the office. Brian picked up the telephone receiver again and began to make a few calls to fellow television station, radio station, and newspaper owners. Most hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, weather wise, but all said the same thing about the internet and several satellite links. Their links were down.

On his fifth call he got a slightly different response. Or rather, no response at all. The station owner wouldn't take his call. Neither would the next three. He was about to try another when the receptionist buzzed him and said, "You have a call on line three. They won't say who it is, but says it's important."

Brian pressed the button for line three. Before he could say anything a voice said, "You will not do any weather news, other than a local forecast, and there will be no speculations as to why. Violate this instruction and you will pay dearly." The line went dead. Brian never got the chance to get a word in.

After hanging up the telephone Brian just sat and thought for a little while. And then, very reluctantly, he picked up the telephone receiver and dialed a number he pulled up from his personal file on the computer.

"Hello? Sue?" he asked when he heard the receiver lifted on the other end.

"Why are you calling?" came a cold, hard edged voice, even through the electronics of the telephone. "You know I don't want you bothering me. We had a deal."

"I know. I know. I was just wondering if the Senator knew what might be happening..."

Apparently Sue knew something, since she started laughing. Cackling if you weren't a politically correct type. "Of course he knows! If you're ever in Acapulco, don't bother looking us up!" Suddenly her voice lowered to a conspiratorial level. "How would you like to get rid of me for good?"

Brian held his tongue. Sue was a tricky one.

"Brian? Brian, I asked if you wanted to get rid of me for good?"

Cautiously, Brian asked, "What do you mean?"

"A payoff. Give me a hundred thousand, in gold, and I'll let you off the hook for maintenance and child support forever."

Incredulously Brian asked, "A hundred thousand in gold? Are you nuts?"

Sue's voice was icy. She didn't like to be accused of being mentally ill. People had tried it before. "Careful what you say. I'll only make this offer once. Pay up and you'll be done with us for good."

Brian's mind raced backwards in time. Sue had tricked him into marrying him, claiming she was pregnant. She wasn't at the time. But she'd become pregnant, only it wasn't his. She'd cried and begged for him not to leave her. So he stayed.

And she did it again. A second child, also not his. And then the tricky divorce. Her lover had political pull. A lot of it. Brian got hit with maintenance as well as child support for the two children that weren't even his. Sue had claimed she couldn't work and wanted to be a stay-at-home mother, anyway. Of course that wasn't the situation, but the judge believed it. Or pretended to believe it. She got the awards.

He'd been paying for three years, with another fifteen to go, until the children reached twenty-one years of age. The amounts went up every year. And the kids were just like her. He was glad they weren't his.

"Put it in writing," Brian finally replied. "All nice and legal. Notarized. Everything to make it permanent."

"You're such a horse's behind. It's a deal. I want it by Friday." She hung up.

"Acapulco? Gold? What is going on?" Brian said aloud as he slowly put the receiver back on the cradle. Brian headed back up to the newsroom to find Reggie. "What do you have, Reggie?" he asked when he found him pouring over satellite images.

"None of my contacts are talking. At least not plainly. Some of them, in between the lines, intimated that something was going on. But they all sounded like they were afraid to say more."

"Yeah," mused Brian. "Same on my end. I've been warned off following up on this. Anonymously. But whoever it was talked in a way that makes me want to believe them. Well, with what you did get before everything went down, what is up? Can you make a prediction?"

"Not really. The only thing... If this was to continue very long, the northern hemisphere is going to get really cold for a while. Not just unseasonably, but really cold. Below freezing, all the way down into the States."

"This is June, for crying out loud! How can it get that cold?" Brian asked.

"Just look," Reggie replied. "See?" He pulled another satellite photo up on the computer screen. This was twelve hours ago." Another photo overlaid the first. "Six hours. And now four hours. And this last one..."

Brian cut him off. He could see the way the storm system had developed in the Arctic. From nothing to huge in just a few hours. And it was moving south-east, toward Canada. And on the track it was on, it would hit the US, if it didn't fade away. "How soon?" he asked.

"If it keeps at the same speed, twenty-four hours. But I think it will keep growing and moving faster."

"What makes you say that?"

"My gut feeling. Sorry, Boss. That's all I got to work on."

“Yeah. My gut feeling is telling me the same thing. You’re on the air in less than an hour. Cobble up the best local forecast you can. No mention of national weather. I’ll let Jim know you’ll be running short. We’ll come up with something to make it look like we had to cut you off.”

Jim Schneider was going over the stories they had for the evening news with his staff. “What’s up, Boss?” he asked. “A weather problem I should know about? You and Reggie been tense all morning.”

“Yes and no. For the moment, I just need you to cut Reggie short. Just the local forecast. You have something important enough to be a breaking news story you can cut to?”

“Well, there is the internet going down story.”

Something suddenly occurred to Brian. “Jim, I want you to check on gold sales and futures. See if there is anything there out of the ordinary. If there is, go with it for the breaking story.”

“You heard the man,” Jim said to his staff. “Get on it.”

“Thanks, Jim,” Brian said, putting his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “You always come through for me. See if you can round up Tony. I want to see him in my office as soon as possible.”

“He’s at home. Had a late night on the Toomey story.”

“Ask him to come in now, as a favor to me.”

“Consider it done. If he thinks there is a story in it, he’s liable to show up here naked, not wanting to take the time to dress.”

“Encourage him to dress first, please.” The two men laughed and Brian went back to his office.

With a sigh, Brian sat down again at his desk and leaned back in his chair. After several minutes of contemplation, he tried the internet again. Still nothing. His lunch a cold mess on the edge of his desk, he dumped it into the trash bin and headed down to the small cafeteria the professional building boasted.

He felt a bit better after a sandwich and iced tea. On his way to the elevators to go back up to the studio suite he ran into Tony. “Thanks for coming in, Tony. I really appreciate it, since you put in such a long day yesterday.”

“No prob, Chief. I smell a story. What’s up?”

“After we get to the office,” Brian said, reluctant to bring up what he was thinking with others in the elevator.

When they entered Brian’s office, Brian shut the door as Tony sat down. Tony looked at Brian expectantly as he walked around the desk and set down.

“Okay,” Brian said. “I need to know more about survivalism. You did that piece about a year ago...”

“Sure. Interesting. Not what I thought it would be when I started investigating. Something particular? The tape is in the vault.”

“No. It was only something you referred to on tape. It was something about gold and silver.”

“A bunch of them invest in gold and silver for the collapse they expect to happen.”

“That’s what I remember from the piece. Are there more details to that aspect of their preparations?”

“There is, Chief. But you know me. Once a story is done, it’s gone out of my head.”

“Oh.” Brian’s disappointment was obvious.

“But you also know I do an awful lot of research when I do a controversial story. I’ve got all of that. I scanned all my written notes into the computer and burned them to DVD’s, along with all the footage we shot that we didn’t use. Only take me an hour or so to go home, get them, and get back.”

“It would mean a lot to me if you would.”

Tony grinned. “I get the story?”

Brian smiled back at the station’s ace investigative reporter. “Of course. If there is one. I’m still trying to find out. Bring your stuff back and I’ll fill you in.”

Tony was gone without another word being said. Brian checked his watch and then turned on the broadcast monitor built into the wall. It was time for the five o’clock evening news. As he’d requested, the local weather forecast was the only weather shown. The rest of time normally devoted to regional and national weather was taken up by the story on gold and silver prices. And, indeed, there was a story. The price had reversed from a steady downward trend, to a rather sharp upward trend, in just a few hours. And the stock market was falling off.

The news signed off and the comedy scheduled after it began to air. Brian was watching a competing station that ran a 5:30 newscast. That weather report was about like Reggie’s. But they had a fluff piece for the rest of the weather time. Something that had probably been planned for a Sunday show.

Jim, and Ted Preston, the GM, came into Brian's office as Brian started to watch another station's 6:00 PM news. "How did you know?" Ted asked as the two men sat down in the chairs in front of the desk.

"That gold story is a breaking story. You had to know something to put us on it," Jim said, staring at Brian.

"A hunch. That's all."

"Good hunch. Up there in the same class as some of those Tony makes." Ted laughed and the other two men joined him.

The light mood didn't last long. The receptionist buzzed and said someone from the FCC was on line one. The three looked around at one another as Brian picked up the telephone handset. Ted and Jim saw Brian go white. Brian hung up the telephone. He was silent for several long moments as the two men waited for him to tell them something.

"Pull the plug. Right now," Brian said.

"What?" exclaimed Ted.

"Our license has been pulled, effectively immediately. If we're still on the air thirty minutes from now, I go to jail. And there is to be no announcement as to why. Just go black and power down."

Jim hurried out of the room, to carry out Brian's orders. Ted hesitated, looking at Brian. "Brian..."

Brian waved his hand. "I'm okay. Go help Jim. Assure the employees, before you go home, that they'll get paid through the end of next month, whether we power back up or not."

"This has got to be some kind of mix-up," protested Ted.

"I hope so. I plan to get legal right on it." Ted left and Brian did just as he said he would. He got on the telephone to get his lawyers involved. When he hung up the telephone Tony was coming into the office.

"What's going on?" Tony asked. "People are crying, leaving early. Someone said we're off the air."

"We are. FCC pulled our ticket. Take a seat."

Tony sat down and handed Brian a trio of DVD's. "Everything is on those three DVD's. It's all searchable dot PDF. You want me to find something for you?"

Brian shook his head. "No. I'm not a hundred percent sure what it is I'm looking for." Brian looked up at Tony and added, very seriously, "I think something is going on with the

weather. And the government knows it. If you are up to it, see what you can find out. But be careful. I think this could be dangerous.”

“Of course I’ll look into it. And I’m always careful.” Tony got up and hurried out of the office as Brian put the first of the DVD’s into his computer drive.

It was after midnight when Brian finally shut down the computer, feeling like his head was spinning. He picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. A very groggy voice asked, “Who the blazes is this? It’s almost one in the morning!”

“Charlie, it’s Brian Lanigan.”

“Brian! What on earth?”

“I need you to do something for me very first thing in the morning. And I mean early in the morning.”

“It’s already morning!”

“Yes, and if the markets were open I’d tell you to get on it right now.” Brian’s voice was firm. “I want you to liquidate me just as soon as the markets open. Everything. I want five million in cash sent to my office. Two million in mixed small bills and the rest in hundreds. No fifties. I don’t like fifties. And all the rest convert to gold and silver.”

Brian’s request for gold had peaked Charlie’s interest. “As a matter of fact, I’ve been looking at some gold stocks to put you in and...”

“Not stocks Charlie. Gold. Metal. Coins to be exact.”

“Well, numismatics are a very...”

“Current gold coins. The kind the US mint puts out. All denominations. And pre-1965 US junk silver dimes, quarters, halves, and post-1921 Morgan silver dollars or Peace silver dollars. And the one ounce Silver Eagles, too. Half gold and half silver. And I want it brought here to my office as well. After the first five million, start buying the gold and silver immediately. Don’t wait to get a better deal. I want it done by noon Thursday.”

“But tomorrow is already Tuesday!”

“I want it done. Take a loss if you have to. There’s a hundred thousand in it for you.”

“A hundred thousand! Okay! I’ll do everything I can!”

Brian hung up and decided there was nothing else he could do at this time of night. He headed for his apartment to get a bit of sleep.

Despite the little sleep he got, he was back in his office the next morning at eight o'clock. It was eerie walking through the silent studios. He'd never seen it empty. There was always someone in the control room, and someone working the news desk.

He went through the DVD's Tony had given him again, taking copious notes. He put down the pen when the telephone rang a little after ten. It was Charlie. He sounded out of breath.

"What is it, Charlie? Things going okay?"

"Brian, man! Gold took a turn up yesterday. And it started climbing again today. Up to seven hundred already today, from six thirty yesterday at close. And the stock and bond markets are getting soft. Some big time investors are moving a lot of money around. A lot of which is going into precious metals. We could pick up some real bargains in..."

"The cash, gold, and silver, Charlie. That's all." Brian hung up, hoping Charlie had the intestinal fortitude to do as Brian had asked.

Brian then called an old buddy. Jake was in the trucking business. He wasn't big time, but he did okay for himself. "Jake, how you doing?"

"Okay, buddy. How are you?"

"Worried," Brian replied.

"Worried? Why are you worried? You've got life by the tail."

"Some strange things are happening. I don't want to go into all of it, but because of it, I have a favor to ask."

"Sure. For an old friend such as yourself, anything. What do you need me to do?"

"Do you have a box trailer out in the Rockies somewhere?"

"Sure do. I have two working that area, plus me. Reefers, actually, but doing box duty."

"Can you take down some information now, or are you driving?"

"As a matter of fact, I am driving. Talk with Callie."

"Hello Brian. What should I write down?"

Brian slowly read a list of company names, with addresses and telephone numbers.

"Honey, South Carolina and Ohio are not in the Rocky Mountains."

He had to grin. "I know, Callie. I was going to ask Jake if he had a truck there or for the address in California."

“Nada. Not in South Carolina. There is a truck on the way to California. What is the name and number?”

Brian read off the last set of information.

“Jake says okay. Jake says... Oh, here’s Jake.”

“Brian, buddy, should I be worried for my family and my business?”

“I can’t say absolutely. But I believe you should be. Perhaps for a long time. But I wouldn’t mention it to very many people, if any.” Before Jake could reply, Brian continued. “And Jake... I’ll pay you double for the freight and spot you whatever you want to get when you get to the places.”

“Brian, buddy, I could not do that. ‘Taint right to take money for nothing.”

“Jake, if you can do this, anything you decide to spend, will be worth it to have you where I want you to go.”

“Buddy, I have to believe you, ‘cause I’ve never known you to lie. I will keep it in mind. Here. Tell Callie where we take the load.”

“Jake. You know where it is. The hunting camp. Down on Table Rock Lake?”

“Oh, yeah! Great fishing, too! I think I can find it again”

Another thought suddenly occurred to Brian. “Jake,” he asked, “Did you ever get a fuel tank trailer like you were talking about?”

“Did for a fact. A set of doubles. Want me to bring them, too?”

Brian laughed. “Can’t get a thing past you, can I?”

“No, buddy. We have been buddies too long for that.”

“Is the truck on a run right now?”

“It is. But it’ll be loose tomorrow, if it needs to be.”

“Have the driver have the plant manager where you want to get the fuel to call me for a credit card number. A tank apiece, diesel and premium unleaded gasoline.”

“Consider it done, buddy.”

“Thank you, Jake. I owe you one.”

“No, way. We will never be even. You count on me, Brian. You will have your goods.”

As soon as he hung up with Jake, Brian was dialing again, another page of notes on the desk in front of him. Fortunately Tony had included sample catalogs of several of the most popular survival supplies companies. Brian put in huge orders at a couple of them, smaller orders at the others.

All were paid for with Brian’s no limit platinum credit card. Brian got a call from the card company asking him about the purchases. He told them they were indeed his purchases and he hadn’t lost his card. He informed them that there would be additional purchases.

But he still needed a way to pick up the items coming from east of the Mississippi. Finally, Brian just upped the orders considerably and offered to pay for immediate shipment by hotshot truck. Both companies agreed, though somewhat reluctantly. Those tasks done, Brian left the office and headed for the gun store he’d used a time or two.

The owner was an older man, and ran the shop with the help of his two sons. Brian knew he wouldn’t be able to buy what he wanted, since he wanted to take the items by Friday. But he had another plan in the back of his mind.

Brian rang the bell, and the electric latch sounded a moment later. Brian went into the shop and headed right to the counter. One of George’s boys was at the counter. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Actually,” I wanted to talk to George about something.”

The young man stepped to the door that led to the back of the shop. “Pop! Man wants to talk to you.”

George came though the door a few moments later. “Ah! Mr. Lanigan, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. I’m surprised you remember me.”

“Sir, when a man buys a twenty-eight thousand dollar vierling through me, I remember.”

Brian and George both chuckled and shook hands. George’s son went down the counter to talk to another customer.

“George, if I remember correctly, when I picked up the vierling, you mentioned that you would probably be retiring soon. Is that still the case?”

“Surely is. But Greg is too young to take it over, and Jakey’s been in a little trouble. He’s out of the picture, now.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. What do you think the business is worth?”

“You looking to get into the business?” George’s question showed a bit of incredulity.

“So to speak.”

“I’d need to sit down and do some figuring,” George said slowly. “Figure the value of the property and building. Value of good will. Do an inventory...”

“Best guess,” Brian said.

“If I had to guess, I’d have to say a million three.”

“I’ll give you that today for the place.”

Mr. Lanigan, that was just a guess. I doubt if it’s less, but it could be quite a bit more.”

“A million six, cash,” Brian said softly. “We can go to the bank right now.”

George’s eyes bugged out slightly. “Cash?”

Brian nodded.

“You know you’d have to get your own FFL to operate the store?”

Again Brian nodded, and then said, “Not a problem. Can you have your personal belongings out by Friday?”

“Well, now, I suppose so... But this is mighty quick. I’m afraid to say yes, but I’m afraid to say no, too. I’ve been planning to retire for a long time, but just couldn’t find a buyer. This is just so quick.”

George’s eyes were staring down into one of the glass showcases vacantly. He startled Brian when he suddenly slapped his hand down on the glass firmly and said. “A million seven fifty and the store is yours!”

Brian had to smile at George’s dickering. But Brian wanted the contents of the store. He didn’t care about the location. He held out his right hand to George and George shook it. “Let’s go,” Brian said. “I’ll take you to my bank, and then to yours, and then bring you back here.”

“Greg,” George called to his son, “I’ll be out for a while. Don’t let no strangers in while I’m gone.” He came around the showcase and Greg buzzed them out of the store.

It took a little over two hours to complete the sale, most of it taken up by Brian’s bank representative trying to talk the two men out of it. George used a different bank. Plus, there were some financial reporting requirements involved.

Brian, after dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s, was finally handed a cashier’s check for the agreed upon amount. George got a piece of paper from the banker, wrote out a bill of sale for the business and one of the teller’s notarized it.

Before they left the bank, Brian wrote a check to cash and got eight thousand dollars from his checking account. They left Brian's bank with the banker looking forlornly after them. Brian knew the man might go into shock when the other transactions began taking place.

George's banker, on the other hand, was delighted to see the cashier's check. Brian didn't even have to take George back to the store. He and his banker were deep in a discussion about how to invest the money.

Brian started to take George aside and warn him about what might be coming, but held his tongue. Brian wasn't the one that was going to start a panic. And he very well could be wrong about the whole thing. He did note that it was a couple of degrees cooler now than that morning, according to the bank's time and temperature display.

Brian's next stop was at a vehicle dealership. A Hummer dealership, to be exact. When he found out that the original Hummer was no longer available he left the dealership, disappointed.

Next best, or maybe even better, according to much of what he'd read on the DVD's Tony had given him, was a Chevrolet Suburban. He found a Chevy dealer on auto row. They had a diesel four-wheel-drive Suburban and a diesel one-ton four-wheel-drive Silverado pickup.

After checking the sticker prices he offered to buy them both for a set amount, by check, which the dealer could take to the bank while the vehicles were being prepped. The sales manager came out of his office and after one attempt to dicker with Brian, gave in when Brian started walking toward the exit.

Brian went back to the office. He'd pick up the vehicles the next day. He stopped at the cafeteria on the ground floor of the building and picked up a sandwich and bottle of water before he went back up to his office.

Although confident of Charlie's ability to carry out the transactions Brian wanted, Brian decided to hedge his bets, so to speak. After his lunch, he headed out again, this time with a list of coin shops in the city in hand.

Brian hit all the shops that were remotely close. None of the shops had a great deal of gold or silver bullion coins. He bought all each one of them had. It was a bit hard to accept that the briefcase on the seat beside him, albeit heavy, contained one-hundred eighty thousand dollars of gold and silver coins.

After the second purchase of coins an agent with the credit card company called. This time they insisted on a large payment before accepting any more transactions on Brian's card. With a wry smile on his face, Brian went back to his main bank and did a wire transfer to the credit card company, for the total balance due on the card.

When he talked to the agent again, she was very apologetic and told Brian that there would be no more questions about his usage of the card. That taken care of, Brian finished his coin shopping, and headed back to the office.

Tony was waiting outside the station's main entrance, sitting on the floor of the hallway, his back against the wall.

"Hey, Chief!" Tony said, scrambling up before Brian could say anything. "I need to see those DVD's again."

"Sure, Tony," Brian replied, unlocking the door and opening it. "What's up? You look like you haven't slept."

"Haven't. I've been checking some things, but with the internet down, I'm having a hard time. I remembered one of the people I interviewed for that survivalist story and talked to him again. I'm sure there is more information on the DVD's. Stanley Whitiker was telling me about..."

Brian cut him off. The name had rung a bell. "HAARP!" he said.

"Exactly!" Tony replied. "HAARP. And more importantly, the Russian version of HAARP. Maybe even a Chinese version."

They weren't quite running, but they were moving quickly, as they went to Brian's office. Tony was shaking with anticipation as Brian loaded one of the DVD's once the computer was up. "Here," Brian said, getting out of the chair and standing clear so Tony could get to the computer. "You know what you are looking for."

Tony quickly scanned through the DVD and then switched it for another. "Here," he said. There was the scanned image of a page of Tony's notes. "Stanley is one of the people out to try and stop HAARP. He claims it is for weather modification and that the frequencies the system uses can cause direct harm to individuals."

Tony was running a finger along the line of script showing on the computer. "He also believes, as many do, that the Russians, and perhaps the Chinese, are also developing similar technology to control the weather.

"There have been some signs of success of the US experiments, though the government denies that HAARP has anything to do with weather." Tony leaned back and looked up at Brian. "What if one of the experiments went bad? Or they are working together..."

"I can't believe the US government would be cooperating on something like this. They wouldn't intentionally set up a weather pattern that could..."

"What if they didn't know one of the others was running an operation and started their own, and..." Brian's words trailed off after interrupting Tony. The two men looked at one another.

Tony spoke first. "And if they inadvertently started something they can't stop..."

Brian finished the thought. "Those in the know would want to get to someplace safe before the whole world finds out." He was staring off into space, but brought his attention back to Tony. "How long could this storm last?"

"Theoretically... for years." Tony's voice was soft. "It is speculated that if a storm were to reach a certain size, it would become self-perpetuating. Until some other force of nature disrupts it. If it begins in the tropics, years of hurricane weather around the equator. In the arctic or Antarctic..."

"An ice age?" Brian asked.

"So goes the speculation." After several moments of silence as each man contemplated the possibilities, Tony continued. "Chief... Ah... when I was doing the story, I made some pretty good connections. There is this woman... If the station is down... Like you said, those in the know..."

"I understand, Tony. I'm making arrangements myself. I promised everyone the rest of this month's salary and next month's. Brian opened the brief case.

When Tony saw the gleam of the gold he gasped. "You sure are making arrangements."

"What's your seven weeks salary worth in gold?"

"What's the price of gold now?" Tony asked in return.

"Approaching a thousand an ounce. But let's figure it at five-hundred to be fair."

Tony figured for a minute and then said, "Uh... fourteen and a half ounces of gold."

"How do you want it?" Brian asked, turning the case towards Tony.

"I guess... Uh... nine one ounce coins, two half ounce, eight quarter ounce, and twenty ten ounce. And can I get the other half ounce in silver?"

"Whatever you want. But make it a full ounce worth."

Tony looked at Brian in surprise.

"You've been a good employee. And I have more coming."

"What exchange rate?" Tony asked.

Brian shrugged his shoulders.

“There was this story... fiction... on one of the forums. They used thirty-six to one. That sounds a little high to me. How about...”

“Thirty six to one is fine. You want it all in the Silver Eagles or in small change?”

“Geez. I don’t know what the coins are worth. Just give me the Eagles. I think I’ll be able to break them later.”

Brian counted out the coins for Tony, and Tony scooped them up and put them in his jacket pocket. “You have enough cash?” Brian was reaching for his wallet.

“I’m good. I’ve been saving for a new car. I’m going down right now and get the cash out of the bank. With it and this, I’ll be okay.”

“Good luck,” Brian said and held out his hand.

Tony took it and said, “You, too, Sir.” Then he was off at almost a jog.

Brian closed the brief case and sat down. He’d been running on pure gut instinct since yesterday morning when Reggie first brought his attention to the matter. Not that the speculation was necessarily true, but something was sure going on. He might very well be giving half, or more, of his net worth away by making the preparations he was making. “So be it,” he thought to himself. He would continue with his plans.

With two calls he had the plans for the payroll payout up and running. The checks would be ready the following morning if the two accountants worked all night. And they had said they would when Brian offered them a nice bonus to do so.

His next call was to a man he didn’t like. Which was part of the reason he called him, and not someone else. “Herbert, It’s Brian Lanigan.”

“Yes, Brian, my secretary told me. What is it you want? You about to sell me that little station of yours? I understand the FCC pulled you off the air.” Herbert chuckled.

“As a matter of fact, Herbert, that is exactly why I called you. You finally wore me down, Herbert. I’m ready to sell. But it’s going to cost you.”

“That little station of yours? And in trouble with the FCC? Even if I still wanted it, I wouldn’t pay all that much for it.”

“Five million, lock stock and barrel. You deal with the FCC.” Brian heard Herbert catch his breath. The amount was less than Herbert had offered before to get an Independent station.

“Well now,” Herbert said after a short pause. “I’m willing to negotiate...”

“I’m not,” Brian replied, cutting Herbert off. I want your decision tomorrow before noon, and the cash, that’s C, A, S, H, by 6:00 PM tomorrow evening.”

“You’re out of your mind!” Herbert replied and then hung up.

Brian grinned. It was a long shot, but anything that upset Herbert was a good thing, in Brian’s opinion. He was about to call Charlie, but Brian’s cell phone rang. It was Charlie calling. He didn’t sound too good.

“Brian, Brian, Brian,” Charlie intoned. “This is killing me! Do you know how much money you’ve lost on these transactions? And you know gold can’t hold at this level for long. You’re going to lose even more! What is the matter with you? Let me buy some of these stocks that the bottom is falling out of. You could make millions when the markets turn.”

“I’ve got millions, Charlie,” Brian replied. “And I tell you now, that you should be doing what I’m doing. What’s the price of gold now?”

“It was nine-eighty-nine on the last purchase.”

“How much is there left to do?”

“I’ve been holding some blue chips, hoping you’d come to your senses...”

“Charlie,” Brian said rather harshly, “I’m not kidding. Sell everything and buy the gold and silver.”

“At least the blue chips have been holding. If you say so, I will sell them. But you really owe me that hundred large. This has been a nightmare.” Charlie hung up.

Brian sighed. He didn’t like putting Charlie through this, but he was Brian’s portfolio manager and it was his job. Brian had debated telling Charlie what was going on, but had decided against it. Charlie would never believe it.

Same with most of his employees. Tony had. Reggie would if he didn’t already. The rest... Well they would get their money as promised. And a bit more. Brian began to count out and stack the gold and silver coins on his desk.

When he was done with the task, he locked his office, checked on the accountant’s running the payroll program, and then went home to his apartment. He was restless, more than a little worried about his actions the last two days. He poured himself a shot of Jack Daniels Single Barrel and sipped on it as he watched the TV news, with special interest in the local forecast and the loss of the Internet story. There was no national forecast.

The local weather called for above seasonable temperatures. In the low eighties. There was no news about the Internet, other than the fact that those in charge were working on the problem.

He checked all three of the other stations in the area. All pretty much the same. Brian turned in at midnight and managed to sleep soundly, despite the uncertainty of the future.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 2

When he got up the next morning, he had a light breakfast in the apartment and then went straight to the office at the station. The checks were just being printed. When he had the checks in hand, he slipped a stack of the gold and silver coins into the envelopes, after he'd signed the check and put it in first.

Brian added the bonus money to the envelopes of the two payroll personnel out of his wallet, in addition to the coins, and handed them their checks. Both looked startled at the weight of the envelopes, but said nothing. "Thank you for doing this," Brian told them. Both left without another word. The rumors had started to spread around the employees that something big was wrong.

Brian called a courier service and sent out the rest of the checks for delivery. He leaned back in his chair for a few minutes. The telephone rang while Brian was thinking about the future. It was the same courier service. They had a package for him. The entrance of the station was locked.

It took only a few moments for Brian to go to the main entrance of the station and unlock it. Apparently, with no one else there, the two payroll clerks had locked it behind them. He signed for the package and went back to his office. When he opened the package it was the money that he'd asked Charlie to send to the office. All five-million of it. Brian shook his head. It was much more compact than silver and gold. Maybe he was making a mistake.

There were eight other deliveries that morning. Each of them was much heavier than the first. Charlie called shortly after the eighth delivery arrived. He confirmed there were eight gold dealers that were supposed to deliver the coins bought with the money from Brian's liquidated stock and bond portfolio.

"That's it, Brian," Charlie said. "Everything. Something over twenty-one million in gold and silver. Over twenty-five thousand ounces of gold and the same of silver. All mixed coins, like you asked."

"Thank you, Charlie. And way ahead of schedule."

"If I was going to do it, I had to do it quick. The markets were falling and gold was climbing. Unfortunately for you, that will reverse in the near future."

Brian had the feeling that if that was the case, Charlie probably wouldn't want to be his broker. "Come by the apartment tomorrow and I'll have a hundred thousand for you. In cash."

"Decidedly not! A check will be fine. In the mail."

Brian shook his head. "As you wish." Brian hung up. He didn't have the heart to tell Charlie he'd wanted equal dollar amounts of gold and silver, not equal quantities. "Of course," Brian muttered to himself, "it might be for the best." He hadn't really taken into account the actual weights of the precious metals. Troy ounce had just been a measurement to him. He

looked at the forty heavy bags that had been delivered. They held nearly a hundred pounds apiece. There was a ton and three-quarters of the metals.

He wrote the check for Charlie, put it in an envelope, added a stamp, and mailed it on his way out of the building. Before he left, however Brian stashed the bags all around the offices and studio in out of the way places. He wasn't worried about someone stealing the money or gold. No one knew it was here. But he didn't want to take any chances.

When he stepped outside he was surprised. The temperature certainly was not in eighties. No more than the high seventies. Brian felt a chill. And it wasn't from the temperature. He looked up at the sky. Still clear.

Just as he was getting into the car, his cell phone rang. It was the bulk plant where Jake's driver was going to pick up the load of fuel. Brian gave them his credit card number. For such an unusual transaction, the bulk plant manager had Brian stay on the line until the credit card cleared.

After closing the phone, Brian drove down to the Chevrolet dealer to check on the Suburban and pickup. The dealer accessories were still being installed. Brian was disappointed, but not upset. He still didn't have a way to transport the vehicles to the hunting camp. He checked the yellow pages and found a wrecking yard that had a three car auto-hauler available. Brian went to the wrecking yard and made a prepaid deal to deliver the two Chevrolet vehicles and his Mercedes-Benz R320, to be picked up first thing the next morning at the Chevy dealership. Both vehicles would be ready by then, he was assured.

Next, Brian found a Motorola radio dealer, and using the TV station's existing two-way radio license, bought four dozen CP 200 VHF 5 watt, 16 channel handheld radios with spare batteries and accessories, and twelve CM 300 mobile radios with antennas. The clerk, very pleased with the sale, loaded them all into the back of the R320.

After referring to his written notes again, Brian headed for an Amateur Radio dealer. Though he didn't have an Amateur license himself, he told the clerk he was buying the equipment to set up a network through the TV station. The owner of the shop thought about it for a few moments, but when Brian gave him a list of what he wanted, the man quickly told his clerk to take care of it for Brian.

Brian was running out of cash. He stopped by the bank and wrote a cash check for another eight thousand. With great reluctance on the part of the teller he got it and continued on his buying jag. But first he went to a truck rental place and rented their largest box truck and largest box trailer, along with handling equipment. He paid one of the clerks to drive it over the Chevrolet dealership, where he transferred everything from the R320 to the rental truck.

He locked the R320 and told the floor manager of the dealership that he had a truck coming for his three vehicles the next morning. Brian dropped the rental clerk off, and headed for his apartment building. It was almost 6:00 PM. After parking the truck and trailer out of the way, he went up to his apartment and waited for Herbert's call.

It wasn't long in coming. Herbert wasted no time. "Now see here, Lanigan, I don't like being pressured like this."

"Take it or leave it. Right now. I'm sure I can sell to Stevenson tomorrow if you don't want it today at that price."

There was a long silence. Herbert finally spoke. "Okay. Five million. I'll cut a check tomo..."

"No checks. I told you it had to be cash."

Herbert blustered, but finally agreed to meet Brian at Herbert's bank the following morning at 11:00 AM. Brian hung up with a smile on his face. This might all be for nothing, but Brian was getting a kick out of doing what he was doing. He went out for dinner and enjoyed a filet mignon and lobster tail, feeling better than he had in months.

Just before he turned in, Brian had another thought and wrote it down in his notes so he would not forget it in the morning.

He was up early, and went out for breakfast, driving the rental. He checked at the Chevy dealership. His vehicles were being loaded on the transport truck. Brian wrote out the directions of the hunting camp and gave it to the driver. "If I don't show up within an hour of your arrival, just unload the vehicles and take off."

"Mister, that could be dangerous. What if someone steals them?"

"There is a caretaker there. Just give him the keys. He'll watch after them. I tried to call him, to let him know, but long distance is down."

"Okay. The customer is always right."

Brian headed to Herbert's bank to make the deal. He carried in a small overnight bag he'd brought from the apartment. Herbert constantly groused at the situation, but signed the necessary papers. The assistant manager of the bank put the five million dollars in the bag himself and handed it to Brian with a grim smile. "Take care. That is a large sum of money."

Brian nodded, got up, and walked out of the bank jauntily. He set the bag in the floorboard on the passenger side of the rental truck, climbed in behind the wheel, and started up the truck. Back at the station he used the rental trolley to move the bags of gold and silver to the truck, putting them all well forward. He added the first bag of five million to the gold and silver, but left the one in the front of the truck.

Using a lock he'd purchased when he rented the truck, he locked up the back of the truck. Using a second lock he locked the trailer, though there was nothing in it yet. Brian contacted a temp service and arranged for three laborers for late the next morning. He gave the address but didn't give the name of the place.

Brian ate a late lunch at the cafeteria, before going up to the station one last time. He cleaned out his personal things and took them down to the rental. He spent the afternoon going from one big box store to the next, as well as the occasional specialty store, filling the rental trailer with his purchases. It was late when he finished and he went to bed tired, without supper.

He slept in late the next morning and took his time getting dressed and having breakfast. He cleaned out the refrigerator and threw everything in the trash dump chute. The rest of the food he boxed and took down to the rental trailer. Two more hours and he had everything he wanted from the apartment in the trailer.

He was almost ten minutes late getting to the gun store, but still had to wait on the laborers another fifteen minutes before they showed up. George was astonished when he handed over the keys to the store to see the rental truck and trailer. "I thought... I just thought you wanted to continue the business here."

Brian shook his head. "I'm moving things to... somewhere else."

George suddenly grinned. "I've got the money. No skin off my nose." He turned to the door to the back of the shop. "Let's go, boy. Time for the new owner to do his stuff."

With George and his son gone, Brian directed the laborers to start loading the inventory from the gun store to the rental truck. Brian had jackknifed the truck and trailer near the back door to make it easier to get to the back of the truck. Brian directed the loading, a holstered pistol in full evidence.

It was late in the afternoon when the task was done. Brian tipped the three men a few bucks and then called the temp agency to pay for their work with his credit card. He locked the gun store, pocketed the keys, and looked up at the sky. There were some high clouds. And it felt cooler than it had the day before. Brian climbed up into the cab of the truck and headed out of town.

He didn't take the direct route. He made a few stops, again, mostly big box stores. When he finally got on I-44 out of St. Louis the truck and trailer were both stuffed to the gills. He turned on the radio and found an all news station. Much to his surprise, they were talking about the anomalies in the weather pattern.

The temperature had been dropping steadily since Tuesday afternoon. This was Friday and the temperature at the St. Louis International airport was fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit and still slowly dropping. The next topic was the total breakdown of the weather satellite system, the Internet, satellite TV links, and long distance.

As he traveled, Brian tried several other all news stations. Rumors were running rampant. One rumor voiced was that many important people in Washington, D. C. were disappearing. To Brian, it just meant he was probably right about what was going on. He couldn't keep from smiling when he thought of the reaction Sue would have when she showed up to get her gold. She would be livid.

Brian took his time, driving carefully. He didn't want to get stopped for a traffic violation, much less have an accident. Despite there being plenty of other goods on top of the weapons and ammunition, and gold and silver, he didn't want anyone finding them. Too many questions to answer, despite, he thought, being within the law.

He stopped at a well lighted motel just off the Interstate shortly after dark and checked in, still using his credit card. But the clerk gave him a hand written receipt. There was a restaurant just down the street and Brian went there to have his supper. It was the same there. A hand written credit card receipt.

It seemed everyone was talking about the strange situations that were getting worse by the day. Brian's ears perked up when he heard one man say he'd come from Northern Wisconsin and they were getting snow as of the day before.

Brian went back to the motel after his meal and turned in. He kept the TV on for a while, but only the local channel was active. Just more speculation. He turned off the TV, turned on his side and went to sleep.

When Brian got up the next morning and went to the restaurant, they wouldn't take his credit card for breakfast. When he asked for an explanation, he was told, "Long distance has been down for over a day, now. We've been issuing handwritten receipts."

Brian nodded. "I got one last night. Why not this morning?"

The young woman looked a bit frightened. "The boss says he doesn't know when it might be back up. He could lose a bundle."

Both turned to watch as a man put up a hand written sign on the front door. Cash Only. "That's the boss," the woman whispered.

"What about checks?" Brian asked.

"We've been taking them just like always, but the boss said no more. He doesn't know when they might clear with the long distance down." She looked at Brian and asked, "Do they do that over the telephone?"

"I think computers, on the internet."

"Oh. It's down, too."

Brian paid with cash. When he got back to the room at the motel, he distributed more cash in several pockets. He put on a light windbreaker and added cash to each pocket. It had been downright chilly when he walked to the restaurant.

On the road again, Brian checked the radio stations again, being extra careful when he tuned the radio not to swerve. He still didn't want to be stopped or have an accident. He kept an easy pace, drinking only a bottle of water for his lunch. When he got to Springfield, Missouri he left I-44 and turned south, taking state and county roads, and then the track that was the final road to the hunting camp. It was getting dark, but the temperature was higher than it had been back up the road.

"Hi, Cap!" Brian called to the man standing in the open door of one of the hunting cabins. Brian saw his three vehicles parked neatly near the main cabin. As he walked over to Cap, he said, "I see the transporter made it."

"Sure did. Caught me all by surprise." Cap sounded a bit put out about that, Brian thought.

"Yeah. I'm sorry about that, Cap. By the time I decided to come, the long distance was out."

"Oh, yeah? It's not back on?"

Brian shook his head. "You can try, but unless it's come back up in the last couple of hours."

"Nah, not if you say so. I went ahead and got your regular cabin ready."

"Excellent. I knew I could count on you. I expect some more people. Tomorrow we'll need to open up all the smaller cabins, plus the main cabin."

"Whatever you say, Brian. But what's this all about? More people coming? This ain't deer season."

"I know. I'll fill you in first thing tomorrow morning. Right now I'm tired and hungry and want to go to bed."

"Got a pot of venison stew on. Thought you might be showing up, after the trucks did."

Brian smiled slight as he followed Cap into his cabin. Cap really was annoyed about the sudden visit. "Man, that smells good, Cap!"

"Same as ever. You know where everything is. Help yourself. I'll be a reading by the stove."

Brian lost no time in getting a plate and bowl down from the shelf and filling the bowl with stew, which was simmering on the kitchen woodstove. A spoon in his hand he sat down at the small kitchen table.

“There’s raised rolls in the warmer,” Brian heard from behind him. He got up and two of the rolls out of the warming oven on the side of the kitchen stove. Brian had resumed his seat when Cap said, “Milk in the cooler.”

Again Brian got up. This time to get a glass of milk from the evaporation cooler. He didn’t dare not, the mood Cap was in. When he was full, he washed up everything and went back to the main room of the cabin. “You know where the facilities are.”

Brian made his way out to the outhouse behind Cap’s cabin. Each cabin had one. Only the main cabin had indoor plumbing. When he returned to the cabin, Cap was still reading quietly. “Cap,” Brian said, “I’m going to my cabin. Thanks for putting up with me.”

“You are the boss. Got to.”

Brian shook his head as he walked to his cabin, stopping at the rental truck to get his suitcase. He lit one of the many bayberry candles in the main room of the cabin. One of Caps many hobbies was the making of the candles from the wax myrtle he’d transplanted from his native haunts on the east coast.

Brian undressed and crawled into bed, wondering what the next day would bring.

He found out fairly early. He was up before sunrise, enjoying a cup of coffee down by the lake when he heard the growl of a big truck in low gear, just as the sun began to rise. Brian hurried up the path from the lake to the camp. He waved when he saw Jake at the wheel of a semi rig. He was surprised when a second fifty-three foot trailer came into sight behind the first as Jake mad a loop in the open area of the camp, stopping with the rig headed back toward the track in to the camp.

“Jake!” Brian called, walking up to the rig. Jake climbed down out of the cab of the truck and stretched before reaching out to shake Brian’s hand enthusiastically. “You made it, I see.”

“Yep. Callie and I traded off, stopping only for fuel and food. She is still asleep in the sleeper.”

The two men walked away from the truck. “I didn’t know you were pulling doubles,” Brian said.

“No. Not before. But when I was in Montana after I talked to you, picking up your order at the food place, with what you said about bad times, and the weather suddenly getting cold, and no internet I decided to the same thing you were doing. Buy supplies for a long time for me and my family. So I stopped at the first trailer dealer I could find and bought a second reefer trailer.”

Jake fell silent for a moment, a disturbed look on his face. “Buddy you said this is very important. I told the rest of my family to come, too. I sure hope that is okay?”

“Of course, Jake. I meant for you to do that. I know how close your family is to one another. I’m sorry I didn’t make it clear.”

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Brian. And be sure, they’re bringing things, too. I told them what you told me. And gave them the directions to get here.” He looked around the camp. “We need a place to put trailers.”

“They aren’t in the way here,” Brian replied.

Jake grinned. “Don’t forget, there are more coming, buddy.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Brian saw Cap come out of the main cabin. “Hey, Cap!”

When Cap walked over, Brian asked him, “Where do you think we should park the trailers? Got a few more coming.”

“What you do, buy out Wal-Mart?”

“Something like that,” Brian said. “The trailers?”

“Well... About the only place is along the tree line down by the lake. Sure wouldn’t take doubles down there, though.”

“No problem,” Jake said. “Pretty easy to break down.”

“We need to unload, first?” Brian asked.

Cap was shaking his head. “Not even what the two of you have, if you’re both full up, is going to fit. Some things... Most things... are going to have to be stored in the trailers. Hope you don’t have a bunch of fresh stuff.”

“No. I don’t, anyway,” Brian said. He and Cap looked at Jake.

“Nope. The insulation in the trailers should help. Don’t want to run the reefers. Waste too much diesel. I know there isn’t much refrigeration. All I brought will keep if kept dry and not too hot.”

“I don’t think that is going to be a problem,” Brian said, rather sardonically.

They began to break down the doubles so Jake could move them one at a time. The activity woke Callie and Cap took her to the main cabin to freshen up. As he was walking back to join Brian and Jake as they were walking back from the shore of the lake, his cell phone rang.

He stopped and talked for a moment, then called out to Brian, “Brian! Got two deliveries in town. Should I give them directions to get out here?”

Brian thought about it, suddenly concerned about security of the camp. “No. Tell them we’ll have someone there in a couple of hours or less. We’ll pay waiting time.”

Cap spoke for a few moments more and then closed his phone. He joined Brian and Jake. “What do you want to do?”

“It has to be the items from east of the Mississippi. I’ll take the pickup in and get the stuff. See you guys in a while.”

Brian headed for the Chevy pickup, after getting the keys from Cap. When he got to town he was greeted by a less than happy hotshot truck driver at the small grocery store that was used as the contact point and physical address for the hunting camp.

In normal circumstances, Brian would not have given the man any sort of tip, but he felt bad about bringing the man so far from home. He gave him a hundred, despite the fact he wouldn’t help transfer the load from his trailer to the pickup. It calmed him down, slightly. At least he quit cussing. Brian was glad to see him leave.

It had been a couple of years since he’d had a chance to come down to hunt, so he went into the store and kibitzed for a few minutes with the owner, a long time acquaintance. He’d met Mr. Johnson when he’d first started scouting for property for the camp and they had become friends. Johnson used the camp without charge for acting as mail and delivery drop for the Brian.

“Brian, you’re in from the big city, and run a TV station, to boot. What’s going on?”

“Well, I don’t own or run the station anymore,” he told Johnson. “Sold it. And I think some bad things are going to happen real soon. I don’t know what to tell you, but watch yourself. I wouldn’t take anything but cash, gold, and silver for payment, if I was you.

“Gold and silver! What do you think is going to happen? A total economic failure?”

“Eventually. But I have no proof. Mr. Johnson, all I can really recommend is for you to just watch yourself and get ready for some hard times.”

“I will. Bet on it,” Johnson said. The two men shook hands and Brian left the store. As he turned onto the track that led from the county gravel road to the camp, Brian caught a glimpse of a semi behind him. He stopped and waited. Sure enough, it was one of Jake’s, for it turned onto the track, too.

As it made the turn, Brian could see that it was the double tankers with diesel and gasoline. Brian waved, put the pickup in gear and led the way to the camp. Jake was outside and guided the truck to a spot where the trailers could easily be broken down and moved one at a time near the others.

Jake introduced his driver to Brian and Cap. “This is my brother, Jeb.”

There were handshakes all around. When a woman came around the front of the truck from the passenger side, Jeb introduced her to Brian and Cap. "My girlfriend, Brenda." Jeb put his arm around her waist as she nodded at the two men.

"I'll take her in to the main cabin," Cap said, motioning with his head for her to follow.

"Main cabin?" asked Brenda as they approached the structure in the middle of the line of log structures. "Looks like a lodge. Small one, though, I guess. But a lot bigger than the others."

"Kinda what it is. We just call it the main cabin. Got a big kitchen and dining room. Big common room, too. Nine bedrooms. The regular cabins don't have bathrooms. Only outhouses. The main cabin has a large communal bathroom for the guys, and another one for the few ladies we get out here, like yourselves. Both with showers. There's even a clothes washer. Use a clothes line for drying. Have to run the genny for the washer. Lights, water pump, and such are on a PV system."

They reached the wrap around porch of the cabin and Callie met them at the door. Callie and Brenda shared a hug, and then Callie took Brenda inside to show her around, as Cap headed back outside. He had the sudden feeling he was no longer in charge when it came to the main cabin.

The four men had just come back into the camp clearing when another truck edged into it rather hesitatingly. "It's Gloria," Jake said. "I wasn't expecting her until later." They heard the sound of the air brakes as Gloria brought the rig to a stop. Both doors of the truck opened and a veritable parade of people began to emerge. Obviously, most had been in the sleeper.

Jake introduced them as they came out. There was Gloria, her husband Thomas, their ten year old daughter, Samantha, Thomas' sister Alexandra, and Alexandra's fourteen year old son, Anthony. The last one, or rather two, out of the truck were Jake's other sister, Helen and her babe in arms, Steven.

Cap had a rather sour look on his face. The main cabin was definitely no longer his jurisdiction. Not with this many women in the camp. Most there'd ever been before was three and he'd almost lost his authority then.

Callie and Brenda came out and there was quite the family reunion. Callie seemed to be the mother hen of the bunch and soon had the rest of the women and the children in the main cabin, and getting a breakfast prepared from the items Thomas brought in from the truck. Jake climbed up and moved the truck and trailer down with the others.

Cap headed for the garden patch, which was a short distance from the camp itself, in a clearing that had been cut in the heavy forest. The garden didn't really need the work, but Cap was at loose ends at the moment and needed something to do.

The chatter was pretty much normal as everyone, except Cap, sat around the dining table and had their breakfast. Just family that hadn't seen one another in a while catching up, and filling in an old friend of what had been going on since last seen.

It was only when the men were ushered out of the way that the talk turned to the current situation. “Fill us in, Jake,” said Thomas, as the men gathered around the large, rough hewn table and benches near one side of the clearing.

“Actually,” Jake said, “It’s Brian here that knows the most. Brian?”

“I don’t actually know that much. It’s just my meteorologist at the station found an anomalous weather system in the arctic that shouldn’t be there, or grow as fast as it is.”

“You got us all down here in a panic over a spring storm?” Thomas seemed extremely upset. “This is nuts. I’m getting Gloria and Samantha and we’re getting out of here. I spent every dime we had on the supplies Jake said to bring. How am I supposed to get my money back?”

“I told Jake I would foot the bill...”

“No, Brian,” Jake said. “Thomas! Cool down, will you? Brian isn’t one to act on a mere whim.”

“Well, Jake,” Brian said, as Thomas glared at him, “It’s not much more than that. But the Internet went down, and the weather satellite feeds were cut off to the station. Long distance is dead and it’s dependent on satellites too. Some one I know... that knows important people... basically said they were leaving the States. Permanently.

“Other things... The stock market. Gold going up rapidly. I received a threat telling me not to try to run national weather. The station got shut down by the FCC for no stated reason. But we had run a story on the gold situation.

“And the theories about HAARP and weather modification...”

Thomas cut Brian off when he mentioned HAARP. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those fruitcakes that think everything is a big conspiracy. I saw a documentary on it. It’s nonsense!”

Brian felt his back getting stiff. He was beginning not to like Thomas. Sure there were questions, but Thomas was making Brian out to be a fool. That didn’t sit well.

“Well, I told Jake I’d pay for what he brought. That goes for his family, too.” Brian took out his wallet and began counting out hundred dollar bills. He looked at Thomas. “A thousand? Two? Three?”

“Four, actually,” Thomas said coldly. “All our working capital.”

Brian handed the Thomas the four thousand dollars.

“Come on, Thomas,” Jake coaxed. “Don’t be like this! So what if we’re just take a short vacation in the woods? What’s the harm?”

“What’s the harm? I’ll tell you what the harm is! Lost revenue! We’re just starting to make it big and you want to shut down? On the word of some playboy millionaire? He can afford to do anything he wants. We can’t.”

“Thoma...”

Thomas cut Jake off. “You may be the head of this whole family, but you aren’t the head of **my** family. I’m getting them and we’re going.” Thomas stormed toward the main cabin. He came out a few moments later, literally dragging Gloria and Samantha by the arms. He was headed for the semi rig. Alexandra followed, with Anthony.

Gloria suddenly broke loose of his hold and when he turned to grab her again, she fought him off and managed to get Samantha loose, too. The other men were running up and Brian and Jake grabbed Thomas before he could do anything else as Jeb stepped between Gloria and Samantha and Thomas, ready to protect his sister and niece if need be.

“That’s it, Thomas,” Jake said, holding his brother-in-law’s right arm behind him. Brian had his other arm in a tight grasp. “I warned you before about manhandling Gloria and Samantha. Now, the truck is worth a lot more than what you invested in the company. Take it and go.”

Brian turned Thomas’ arm loose when Jake gave Thomas a slight shove and released his other arm.

Thomas took a couple of quick steps away from the group. “The trailer is detached.”

“You don’t get the trailer. Just the truck. You can always rent a trailer. You’ve got the money from Brian, so count things even.”

“Come on, Gloria,” Thomas said, staring at her, half hidden behind Jeb. “Bring Samantha and let’s get away from these loony toons. Come on, Alexandra. You and Anthony.”

Samantha was cowering behind her mother. “No, Thomas,” Gloria said. “We’re not going with you. I’m tired of your abuse. Get out and leave us alone.”

“Abuse?” Jake asked, a bit bewildered, as he looked at his sister. Suddenly he turned around and took a step toward Thomas. “You’d better get out of here before I take it in my head to teach you some respect.” His voice was low, and Thomas took the menace in Jake’s voice for exactly what it was. He mumbled something the others couldn’t hear, and then motioned for Alexandra and Anthony.

Both looked at Gloria, pleadingly. “You can stay,” Gloria said when Brian nodded. Thomas turned and stalked off to the semi truck.

Brian had to jump out of the way when Thomas gunned the engine of the truck and took off, straight for him. All turned and watched as he drove away. Suddenly Thomas was sounding the air horn on the truck as he met another semi pulling in to the camp.

“That should be our cousin Alvin. He was going to pick up that shipment for you after he dropped the load in Sacramento.”

Jeb took Gloria and Samantha back to the main cabin. The other women quickly hustled them inside and Jeb went back to join the other men.

This time three people got out of the cab of the semi. A man and two women. Jake introduced Alvin, and then Alvin introduced the two women. “This is my girlfriend, Suzy, and her sister, Bianca.”

Jeb and Jake exchanged a look when Alvin introduced Suzy. Brian decided there was some sort of story there. He’d find out later. Jake took Alvin and the two women to the main cabin. Jeb moved the truck and trailer. Brian noticed that the trailer was another reefer. The cooling unit wasn’t running and Brian noticed the inspection hatch was open in the rear doors. The trailer was being used as a dry box trailer, too. But the reefer capability might come in handy.

As Brian and Jeb walked back to the main cabin, Jake stepped out onto the porch and yelled to them, “Brian! Jeb! Come see this! The satellite TV is back on!”

Brian and Jeb ran inside and stood with the others watching the TV screen in one corner of the common room. The camp had a satellite dish, but the TV was seldom used. The news network anchor, looking somewhat the worse for wear, was speaking again after a commercial ended.

“We still have no official information as to what is going on, but since several important information systems have again become operational, we have discovered an Arctic weather system currently passing through Canada that is larger than anything in the record books.”

The picture cut to the networks weather information center. Everyone watched as the meteorologist described the system and showed satellite views of it. There were murmurs when the extent of the system became obvious.

“We expect the storm system to continue to grow and move to the south-east, into the United States. Expect extremely low temperatures in your area as the system moves through.”

The anchor was back on screen. There was some discussion with several different experts about the Internet, long distance, communications and weather satellites all coming back on line, after all going down one after the other.

The group watched the news for most of the day, but learned little. What seemed to have happened was word from ‘higher up’ had shut down the systems. Now the ‘higher ups’ seemed to all be missing and mid-level employees were anxious to do their jobs, in order to get paid, and brought everything back on-line. And none of the ‘higher ups’ seemed to be around anywhere.

Twice, Brian noticed, the idea of a self-sustaining super storm was mentioned, and then dismissed out of hand. Basically nothing definite was established, other than that the storm existed and was still growing and moving.

After watching all the networks over and over, the group finally broke up and the women began preparations for supper and the men went outside to discuss the situation. Anthony was left in charge of Samantha and the baby, with instructions to get an adult if anything changed on the news.

Cap joined the other men sitting around the picnic table. "So. What do we do, Brian?" Asked Jake.

"I think all we can do is get organized and wait to see what happens. Maybe get all the supplies we've bought sorted, inventoried, and repacked in the trailers to make getting out what we need, when we need it, easier."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Jeb said. "What about the cabins and sleeping arrangements?"

"Well, Cap and I have our own cabins," Brian said. "That leaves five cabins. There are nine bedrooms in the house. Not real big. You're all family. I think you guys should use the main cabin. Cap and I'll stay where we are."

Jake and Jeb both nodded. So did Cap.

Jake then said, "Callie and the other ladies will be glad to take over the cooking and things. Cap I know you normally do that for the camp..."

Cap shrugged. "Got other things to keep me busy."

"There are some things I don't want to keep in the trailers. Do any of you have any objections if I use one of the cabins for storage?" Brian asked.

"Hey, Brian, buddy," Jake said, putting a hand on Brian's shoulder. "This is your place. I think you can pretty much do what you want."

"Hey, guys. We're in this together. I might pull rank on some things, but mostly this needs to be a cooperative matter. That should probably include the women."

"Definitely," Jake said. "Callie... Well... Callie..."

"Is a forceful woman and knows her own mind," Cap said softly. "My Isabel was like that."

"Good way of putting it, Cap," Jake replied. "Yeah."

Brian looked at Jake and Jeb. “Should we be worried about Thomas coming back here in the night to get Gloria and the others?”

“I don’t think so,” Jeb said slowly. “He’s always been something of a prima donna. Let’s Gloria do most of the driving. Doesn’t help with Samantha, much, either. I don’t think he’s got the gumption to do anything.”

“I don’t know,” Jake said, thoughtfully. “He’s got a mean streak in him I’ve seen before. Good thing I didn’t know he’s been abusing Gloria. I can’t believe she hasn’t said or done something.”

“Common syndrome,” Brian said. “All you can do about it, I think, is let her know you support her and are there to help if she wants it.”

Callie called them in for supper then. Brian and Cap left as soon as they finished, to give Jake and his family the time and privacy to get settled in the main cabin.

Cap went to his cabin, and Brian walked down to the lake. Brian stood there for a long time, looking at the lake, but seeing nothing, as he thought about what the future might bring.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 3

“What did you do?” Cap asked Brian. “Buy out a gun store?” Brian and Cap were unloading the rental truck and trailer and had just got to the arms, ammunition, and accessories stacked near the front of the truck, after having unloaded package after package of toilet paper.

Jake, Jeb, and most of the rest of the family were emptying the semi trailers and inventorying everything in preparation of re-stacking it in the trailers in a useable order.

After Brian and Cap had moved the hardware into the cabin next to Brian's, they moved the heavy sacks. Cap didn't ask, and Brian didn't say what was in the sacks, but Cap gave Brian a knowing look as they stacked them in the cabin bedroom.

Brian didn't feel right about just keeping the rental, so he took it to Springfield, just as he'd indicated on the one-way contract. After they unloaded the pickup, Jake followed Brian in to pick him up.

Things looked normal in the city. Brian was ready to head back to the camp, but suddenly looked at Jake and said, “Why not?” as they approached a Wal-Mart shopping center. One thing that wasn't normal, was that none of the stores were taking credit cards or checks. Strictly cash.

But Brian still had plenty of cash on him, so he paid up, filling a few holes and shortages in the items already stocked at the camp. While there was still merchandise on the shelves, things seemed to be going fast this Saturday morning. They filled the bed of the pickup and the wide rear seat and returned to the camp.

Someone was always watching the television in the main cabin, to keep track of the storm and how the rest of the world was reacting to it. To gain additional information, the antenna tower that Brian had purchased was assembled and erected at the side of the main cabin, using the eve as a tie-off point.

The base station antennas were mounted, and the base station radios set up on a desk in the common room, with coax cables connecting them. It was the same table that held the camp's CB radio. It had its own antenna on a guyed pole already.

The shortwave broadcasts and Amateur Radio traffic from around the world told them more than the TV, except for the Weather Channel.

The huge low pressure system was still growing, dumping snow measuring in feet on Canada and the northern United States as it slowly drifted mostly eastward now. Temperatures in the snow areas were often below zero. South of the system itself, the temperatures were down to below freezing in a wide band. At the hunting camp, the temperatures dropped to the low forties.

Over the next few days, as the group settled into the routine of the scamp, the information coming in by radio and TV indicated that people were beginning to panic. The longer the storm

lasted, the worse the conditions became in the north, the more people that headed south from the affected areas.

The National Weather Service and the Weather Channel were not giving much hope to those watching and listening. With uncertainty and rumors running rampant, social structure began to break down. So did public utilities. Truckers refused to go into the affected areas with food and other necessities.

More people began to move southward. Those living in the southern states in the US at first took in and took care of the refugees. But supplies started becoming a problem, as more and more people went south. Many were forced to bypass communities and cities already strained to the breaking point.

The Mexican government closed the border, by force. Many of those in the know, early in the event, that had gone to Mexico to escape the storm were rounded up and shipped back to the States, under strong guard, minus the money and other wealth they had brought with them.

Many didn't fare well when they were unceremoniously dumped at the border crossing at El Paso, Texas and made to walk across the bridge. It was more than a little resented that so many of those in the government had fled the danger without issuing any kind of warning, not to mention the sudden rumors that information had actually been suppressed by these same people.

So far, the exodus to the south had not affected those at the hunting camp. When the internet came up again, Brian had tried to put more orders in for supplies at the same businesses he'd used before. They weren't taking any new orders. Brian and his group would have to get along with what they already had. And could produce for themselves locally.

But Brian didn't want to leave anything to chance. Despite being well off the main roads, especially any major routes to the south, US 65 wasn't all that far away. Brian discussed it with Jake and Jake agreed with Brian they should close the far end of the track in to the camp.

They didn't actually build the abatis at the junction with the county gravel road. Instead they formed one somewhat in from the junction, hoping most people would simply bypass the little used track anyway. They didn't want to draw attention to it by obviously blocking it off.

At a point not far around a sharp bend the track the abatis was formed from half a dozen trees felled with chainsaws. The camp had one saw, for clearing any timber felled across the track during storms, but a couple of Husky chainsaws were among the equipment Brian had brought with him. It didn't take long to fell the trees in an interlaced pattern to block the road. It would take major work with chainsaws to clear it.

When questioned about being able to leave in an emergency, Cap showed everyone the even less used track that connected with a seldom used fire road a mile behind the camp. It eased everyone's mind. A little. The back way in was blocked with one of the semi's.

Brian showed Jake, Jeb, and Cap a few techniques for setting up X-10 motion sensor perimeter alarms in some of the literature on Tony's DVD's, using his laptop. They took a day and set up alarms all through the forest right around the camp, on both tracks in and out, and the path to the lake. A separate set of alarms was set up around the supply trailers.

While, between them, Jake's family had a small assortment of arms, and there was a good selection of hunting rifles kept in a gun safe in the main cabin, Brian distributed a few weapons from his stockpile a bit more suited for defense.

Everyone checked out everything they weren't familiar with at the small range cut into forest behind the camp. Only Alexandra and the baby Steven were exempted. Alexandra was terrified of firearms and there was nothing any of them could do to persuade her. Samantha was considered too young to keep a gun, but she was allowed to shoot .22's. Anthony was checked out on a Ruger 10/22 and given one, with a dozen magazines and two five-hundred round bricks of hyper velocity .22 LR.

Though they didn't set up roving patrols, there was a rotating watch to listen for the alarm system, and monitor the TV and radios. Alexandra, Samantha, and Anthony became Cap's assistants maintaining and increasing the size of the garden.

With Callie in charge, Brenda, Gloria, Helen, Suzy, and Bianca did quite a bit of rearranging of the main cabin to suit permanent residency by women and children.

Jeb was handy at electronics, and after installing the base radio systems, he mounted the Motorola mobile radios in Brian's three vehicles. The CP200 handhelds batteries were charged, and the radios kept ready for everyone to use when they were outside.

Though the camp already had a relatively large supply of seasoned firewood on site in three wood sheds, it was decided to go ahead and start cutting more, just in case.

Cap guided the others for a while, until he thought they could use the chainsaws and axes both safely and effectively. Cap insisted they be selective of what they cut down. Dead standing timber was preferred, then diseased or damaged trees, all but one tree in a tight cluster, and finally deformed or misshapen trees. For every tree they cut down, three hickory nuts or acorns were planted for new growth in open areas.

Once he felt he could leave, Cap headed back to the compound. It was time to teach Samantha and Anthony more about the garden. Callie and Bianca both had garden experience and needed little supervision. Alexandra was watching Steven, and monitoring the TV. The rest of the women were doing laundry for the group.

Amanda froze in the act of reaching for her cup of tea on the coffee table, Steven napping beside her on the large leather sofa. One of the talking heads on a news channel was handed a sheet of paper. The man went white as he read it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have just received a report that the National Weather Service has announced a blizzard warning for all of the Great Lakes regions south to St. Louis, and east

to include the US New England states. We take you now to the offices of the National Weather Service.”

Amanda reached for the VHF handheld radio and called for Brian. Her hand was shaking as much as her voice. A few minutes later and the men came running in. Cap and the others working outside saw the commotion and also hurried into the main cabin. All gathered around the TV.

Then NWS had made their announcement, but the news station was replaying it and everyone was able to see the whole thing. There was silence for a while among the group after the news channel talking heads came back on.

“They aren’t saying anything about when it will end,” Jake said, looking over at Brian.

“That is what has me worried. There are some theories that a storm like this could just continue and grow bigger.”

“But for how long?” asked Brenda.

All eyes turned to Brian. “A very long time. Might even create another mini-Ice Age.”

There were murmurs for several moments, but something caught Brian’s attention on the television and he asked for quiet.

“As we noted, the announcement was made by mid-level management personnel at the National Weather Service. We are still unable to make contact with anyone at a high level in the Federal Government.

“We have noted that the Governors of New York and Illinois, as well as the Mayors of New York City and Chicago are unavailable for comment. The Governor of California was reached...” A video ran in the background. It showed what the commentator was saying. “but he would not take questions. He left via helicopter with no announced destination.

“Several state governments are calling special sessions of legislature to discuss this Super Storm.”

Suddenly another piece of paper was handed to the commentator. “We now have a connection with the senator from...”

Everyone in the main cabin listened in shock as the Senator told a tale of being informed of the situation and given the opportunity to go to one of several safe havens until more could be learned about the situation. Only he and his immediate family could go. When he refused there were threats to try and make him go. And when he still insisted on staying, was warned about speaking about the situation until the President made an official statement.

Only after he made sure his family was safe from retribution, did he come forward. He called for all remaining national legislators to come forward and meet to discuss the situation.

Both situations. The apparent abandonment of the American People by many of their nationally elected representatives, and the weather crisis now going on.

The commentators became talking heads again, with little to talk about but rehashing what had already been said, and lamenting the fact that they couldn't get any more information. Amanda turned down the sound slightly, leaving it just high enough to catch their attention if something important was said on the news.

Everyone was looking at Brian now. "Okay," he finally said. "This is why we're here. Although the NWS didn't say that the storm would die out relatively soon, it also didn't say that it wouldn't go on for a significant amount of time. Or turn into the start of a new Ice Age."

"You said that before, Mr. Lanigan," Bianca said. "How bad could it get? And for how long? There was that mini-Ice Age caused by a volcano... I remember reading about it in school..."

"All of you can call be Brian," Brian said first off. "This may turn out to be something like a one in a thousand years storm. But my instincts are telling me it isn't. I have no real scientific proof. And the theories I've read about have all been discounted by scientists."

"But the storm is happening," said Jake. "Like the theories say."

"But what started it?" asked Suzy.

Brian sighed. "Just more unsubstantiated theories. "Could be natural..." There were murmurs at that. "Or it could be intentional or unintentional weather modification. Maybe the Russians or Chinese... Or even the US, could have been doing something and it got out of hand."

"That's kind of far-fetched, don't you think?" asked Helen.

"Yes, I do," Brian responded. "But it is one possibility I'm considering."

"But the mechanics of how don't matter that much," Jake said. "What does matter is the reality of what is happening. The NWS said the storm would last at least several days. A blizzard for several days over all of Eastern Canada and the north eastern US is going to be a disaster bigger than Katrina.

"It is going to strain the authorities to the limit. That is, if they even do anything at all. It's a good thing I don't know where the slime is that jumped this ship. A lot of people are going to feel the same way. If... or when they come out of hiding, I have a feeling they are going to have a hard time trying to pick up where they left off."

"We'll deal with that when it happens," Cap said. He'd been silent up to that moment. Before, he'd just assumed the city people were just panicking. That included Brian. He'd changed his mind. This was a real disaster. Maybe even that TEOTWAWKI thing he'd seen referred to in the media about some crazy folks. Maybe they weren't crazy, after all.

“Right now,” Cap continued, “The main thing is to finish getting set up and plans ready for short, medium, and long range, in case this storm doesn’t blow itself out.”

The rest seemed to come to the same conclusion. Until now everything was just temporary. The preparations they had already done were a bit of a snap decision about something that probably wouldn’t happen, but could. Now it was at least probable. That made a difference.

“We are on the right track,” Brian said. “Let’s go about the business at hand that we were doing before the TV broadcast. We can make further plans beginning this evening.”

With that they large group broke up into the same small groups they’d been in when summoned.

After a good supper, with Samantha and Steven in bed and Anthony on TV watch, the adults all sat down around the big community dining table.

“Okay, I guess,” Brian said, opening the meeting. “We should get started.”

Everyone just looked around at each other for long moments.

Jake cleared his throat, partly out of nervousness, partly to get everyone’s attention. “I think we should thank Brian here for the heads up he gave us, and this place where we can stay until we know if this is long term or not.”

He turned to Brian and continued. “As head of the family, I want to express that to you, Brian. Thanks. You’ve probably saved all of us from some really hard, terrifying times.”

Suzy held up her hand tentatively.

“Go ahead, Suzy,” Brian said. “You don’t have to wait.”

“I want to say thanks, to,” she said. “I’m not really part of the family, yet, I guess. And I was wondering... What if some of us don’t agree with something? I know the property is technically yours...”

Jake cut her off. “You’re with Alvin, Suzy. You are part of this family. And since Bianca is your sister, she’s included, too. I don’t think we should be questioning Brian’s handling of things.”

“It was just a thought,” Suzy said smoothly. “I thought there might be some interest in setting up a democratic system here. One person, one vote. Not just one man making the decisions that affect all of us.”

Just about everyone was frowning, including Alvin and Suzy’s sister, Bianca.

“I think that with things so unsettled, one person should be in charge,” Gloria said. “And that should be Brian. He’s the reason we’re here and have what we need to take care of ourselves.”

There were agreeing murmurs. “With a small smile, Suzy said, “Sure. I’ll go along with the majority on that. It is kind of what I was talking about.” She turned to Brian and asked, “What do we do?”

Brian had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He remembered the looks that Jake and Jeb had given each other when Suzy got out of Alvin’s truck. “Well, it’s pretty simple for right now. Everyone just pitches in and helps where they can. We need someone monitoring the radios, TV, and early warning system twenty-four seven. I thought we could all rotate on that, along with the other chores we all need to do to keep the place up and ready for anything.”

Suzy was paying rapt attention. Brian had a feeling she was just gathering data for some future event.

Callie chipped in, her eyes leaving Suzy. She had seen the same look Brian had. “That’s fair enough, if you ask me. We’re all in this together.”

“We are,” Brian hurriedly added. “I own the property and most of the equipment and supplies, but I can’t take full advantage of them without some help. I really believe that as long as everyone contributes in the best way they can, we’ll be safe and secure here for a long time.”

The others nodded their agreement. Suzy just looked at Brian blandly.

As the days progressed, it got cooler and cooler. Everyone settled into a routine. No one had tried to get to the camp. At least as far as they could tell. Brian talked to Mr. Johnson on the CB every day, to keep a handle on what was happening in town. It wasn’t good, according to Johnson.

It was a small country store that Johnson ran. He probably kept proportionally larger than normal stocks of many things than most city stores. He still had some things on his shelves when the nearby city ran out four days after the trucks stopped running.

Trucking was just one of the parts of the infrastructure of the United States that began to fail. Much of the cause was the total failure of the Federal Government, despite the efforts of those in government that hadn’t abandoned the people.

When the government checks stopped, so did a lot of other things. And in the blizzard area, there was just no way to get anything done, anyway. Snowfalls of fifteen to twenty feet weren’t unusual, with winds gusting over a hundred miles an hour.

As each small piece of infrastructure failed, it cascaded to the next, and then the next, until wholesale failures were the norm in the north, and getting worse in the south. Brian

expected a migration to the south, and the camp was prepared for it. But he turned out to be wrong. There was a migration, but it was very small.

In the blizzard area, people couldn't even attempt to move, and those on the periphery seemed to think that since they weren't in the blizzard zone, they wouldn't be in the future. So they stayed, for the most part, many not believing the conjecture that it was going to get worse..

Most of those that did migrate headed for the southern states and Mexico. Mexico closed the border to all but her own citizens returning since the good days for them were fading fast. There were skirmishes on the border, but there were no attempts to force the matter and settle in Mexico Americans that wanted to leave the States.

Only twice during those first few weeks did anyone even try to get into the hunting camp. Anthony was on monitor duty and heard two alert signals go off, one right after another. He sounded the alarm and when several people showed up, Brian took Jeb, Alvin, and Brenda with him to see about the disturbance. All were armed and ready for trouble.

Brian led the way and Brenda brought up the rear, several paces back, just as they'd trained the previous week. When Brian motioned, the others all squatted down and Brian called out to the small group of people. "Hold it there! We're armed and will shoot if you make any aggressive move. You're on private land. State your business."

"Don't shoot mister." It was the eldest looking man of the group of five men, six women, and three children. "We're just headed for the lake to set up camp. There's an abandoned hunting camp up about..."

"It's not abandoned. It's mine. I suggest you head east and cut the lake in that direction."

"But how will we live?" the man asked, his voice anguished. "We need the cabins..."

"Looks like you have tents. How'd you get this far?" Brian asked.

"Well... Yeah... We have some camping gear..."

"Then I suggest you use it. Or better yet, look for housing elsewhere. Things are going to get worse."

"But we don't have much food!" cried one of the women.

"Stay where you are," Brian said. "We can spare some food for the children." He motioned to Alvin and whispered, "Get three of the children's humanitarian boxes, and three of the adult. Women's."

Alvin nodded and quietly made his way back to the camp. Brian called out to the group of people again. "Stay where you are. I'm coming into the clearing so I can talk to you better." His hand behind his back, Brian motioned for Jeb and Brenda to spread out and keep him covered.

The women and children huddled together closely when Brian stepped out into the clearing, his rifle very much in evidence. Brian noted that one of the men was holding some type of long arm down alongside his right leg, his left side to Brian. Brian let the muzzle of his rifle drift over toward the man. The man noticed and tensed up even more than he was before.

“We’re getting a few things to help you,” Brian said, addressing the oldest man again. “There are no strings, except you move on and tell no one about getting any help in this area.”

One of the other men began muttering under his breath, but Brian ignored it.

“How many of you are there?” asked a fourth man.

“Enough to take care of business,” Brian said coldly.

“Look, I was just making conversation,” replied the man, more than a little heat in his voice.

“Maybe so,” Brian said. “I’m not in the mood to talk. Feel free to tell me who you are and where you’re coming from.”

That man, too, began muttering just loud enough for Brian to hear, but not understand. After a brief moment, Brian thought the oldest man was going to start speaking, but a word from the fifth man silenced him.

Brian studied the fifth man out of the corners of his eyes. The man was tall, well built, and showed a remarkable lack of concern about what was going on. Brian kept his attention between the man with the gun and the fifth man. Brian would have given his last dime to bet the man was armed with a pistol of some kind. Probably a pretty capable knife, too.

Everyone was getting antsy, but Alvin showed up before anything got out of hand. Brian motioned him forward with a nod. “Everyone just stay where you are and this man will hand out the boxes.

Alvin mostly stayed out of Brian’s line of fire as he walked to the group, but Brian shifted quickly when Alvin got between him and the fifth man. Brian was sure the man had started to do something, but Brian’s move had stopped him.

Alvin handed the children their boxes and then set the other three down and stepped backwards to stand to one side of Brian.

“That’s all?” asked the man holding the long arm.

“Take it and leave,” Brian said.

Three of the men began cursing, until the oldest told them to be quiet. Three of the women picked up the boxes Jeb had set on the ground. The oldest man began to walk away, eastward. The others followed, the men very reluctantly.

“You think the women will get the stuff?” asked Brenda when Brian rejoined her and Jeb.

“I’m not even sure the kids will get theirs,” Brian said.

“You think they might cause more trouble?” Jeb asked.

“Maybe a couple of them,” Brian replied as he led the way back to the camp, keeping a sharp eye and ear tuned for activity to their east. “We just have to maintain our security.”

The others were all waiting on the front porch for Brian and his team to return. Brian was a bit disappointed that they weren’t armed and spread out in a defensive posture. There would need to be a lot more training.

“What happened?” Jake asked.

“Small group looking to take up residence in the camp. As you know, we gave them some humanitarian aid and sent them packing.”

“Alvin said there were children,” Suzy said.

“Three,” Brian replied.

“Why didn’t you ask them all to join us? We still have empty cabins. We have supplies. We could use the help. And for the children’s sake...”

Brian was shaking his head. “We can’t, and I won’t, try to save everyone we meet. Those people are responsible unto themselves. There wasn’t anything about them that would want me to let them stay.”

“You realize that the blood of those children is on your hands,” Suzy said and walked away.

Alvin and Bianca both looked downcast, upset with Suzy. There was some muttering from a couple of the other women, but Brian said, “Everyone is entitled to an opinion.” He walked up to Anthony, who was standing just inside the main door of the cabin, apparently to be able to keep watch and still see and hear what was going on.

“You did good, Anthony. Gave us plenty of warning to handle the situation. Well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome.”

After that episode, Brian asked that everyone have a weapon at hand, all the time. Suzy protested. “We haven’t been invaded. We aren’t at war. Why do we need to arm ourselves

against our fellow citizens? The weapons weren't needed that first time. Why should we think they will be in the future?"

"I hope they aren't, Suzy," Brian said. A couple of the others were watching. "I believe in the overall goodness of people in general. But there are people out there that might want to take what we have from us. I want to protect everyone from that."

"We have more than enough. We should be helping. Not hiding back here in the woods."

"I just learned about being prepared," Brian said. "It was a quick lesson, but one of the things I did learn, was that only the prepared are going to be in a position to help others, in the long term, in a worldwide disaster like this. If we give away everything we have, how are we to live on and help people in the future?"

"We should be doing that now," Suzy replied. "I won't carry a gun. This is still America and I'm free to do as I please."

"As you wish," Brian said after a short pause. "It was a request, anyway. Not an order. I just ask that you don't interfere when we have to go on alert again."

"You mean if, don't you?" Suzy replied very quietly.

"No. I mean when. It will happen."

And it did, less than a week after the first intrusion. Anthony was on watch again and responded as quickly as he had the first time. Jake was the first one to get to the house, other than Alexandra, who was already there, watching Steven for Helen.

Cap came running in from the garden, Samantha on his heels. Next in were Suzy and Callie. They'd been hanging up laundry to dry.

Jake hesitated, but knew it would be much better to meet the threat away from the house. The hesitation was mainly about Suzy. He knew Callie and Cap were more than capable of handling the situation and motioned to them and Suzy to follow him.

Though she had refused to go around armed, Suzy grabbed the Mini-14 that had been assigned to her from the gun rack by the front door of the main cabin on her way out.

As Brian ran up, he saw Suzy going with the others and almost called her back. But their training was for the first responders to scout the situation and report back if need be, while those coming in after were to set up a defense of the camp proper.

He had Alexandra take Steven and Samantha to the interior room designated as their shelter space during an attack. Brian started to tell Anthony to join them, but the boy was staying by the radio and had his Ruger 10-22 right there with him.

The others were taking their places, and Brian ran out to take up a defensive position at the edge of the trees. Jeb wasn't far behind him.

In the forest, another of the trip wires went off, not far from where Jake and his team were. Jake motioned for them to spread out and hunker down while he scouted further. Although Suzy stopped at first, she started creeping forward after Jake, despite Callie's insistent motions to stay where she was.

When she saw Jake crouched down, watching something in front of him intently, Suzy changed her course slightly and moved up some distance to his right. Finally she saw what Jake was looking at. It was another group of people. This group was all men, and they all appeared armed.

Jake stood up beside the large tree where he'd been crouched. "You're trespassing on private property," he said calmly, the rifle he carried pointing at a spot halfway between him and the group. All seven men turned toward Jake, lifting their guns slightly, but not up to sighting level.

"Just turn that way slightly and keep going."

Before any of the men could say anything Suzy stood up and called out. "We have food if you need it."

Jake couldn't believe it. One of the men finally spoke. "You have enough food to share?"

"We have plenty," replied Suzy. Her rifle was slung. "Why don't you come up to our camp."

"Suzy!" hissed Jake. "What are you doing?"

"Just being hospitable in these tough days. It is only right."

"She's right, you know," said another of the men. "You should be hospitable. You have food and we have none. How fair is that?"

"You're armed. Hunt," Jake said.

"She invited us up," said the first man, taking a step toward Jake and Suzy.

"I'm not," Jake said, his voice hard.

"I did," Suzy said then. "Come on," she added, waving her arm for the men to approach.

Two of the men in the group were whispering and suddenly began to edge away from the others, going opposite directions. That was when Cap called out from near one of them. "Don't try it. We've got you all covered."

“The little lady invited us up. We’re going up.” The leader of the group took another step toward them. “We want that food.”

“Just enough to get you on your way,” Suzy said. Her voice was sounding a bit unsure now.

“That would be all of it!” The leader of the group made a motion with his hand and dived to one side, bringing his rifle up to bear on Jake.

Cap didn’t hesitate. He opened fire. Callie did, as well, only a beat behind Cap. Jake took two rounds before he could lift his rifle and went down.

In a panic now, Suzy tried to bring her rifle into play from its slung position on her right shoulder. But her effort was too late and too little. As much as the men would have liked to have kept her for themselves, she was armed and therefore a target. She fell to the ground, dead, her body riddled with bullets before she ever felt the first one.

Jake managed to get off half a dozen rounds, taking out two of the men. Callie and Cap had done their share. The rest of the group were all down. Two of them were groaning loudly and one was screaming.

The man didn’t scream long. Cap put a bullet in his head. Seeing it, the other two men tried to stifle their moans and crawl away. Cap had moved away, into the forest again, to look for anyone that might not have been in the main group. Callie kept her eyes on the two wounded men, but made no move to help them as she moved over to Jake.

Callie called for help on her radio, and knelt down beside Jake. She checked for a pulse in his neck. There was a strong one. With Jake helping, Callie turned him over to check his wounds. One of the rounds had taken him high in the left shoulder, nicking the bone, but missing arteries and passing out the rear of his shoulder.

The wound in his right leg was worse. The bullet had gone in mid-thigh and was lodged, from Jake’s description of the pain, in the thigh bone. Brian and Jeb came running up, guns at the ready. Brenda was with them and had a first-aid kit in her hand. She went directly to Jake when Callie called to her.

Brenda quickly applied pressure bandages to all three wound points. Jake was trying to control the pain by concentrating on something else, but the occasional groan slipped out as Brenda worked on him. Tears were streaming down Callie’s face, but she continued to keep an eye on the two wounded attackers. One had fallen silent and quit crawling away. The other one was almost to the edge of the small clearing when Cap stepped into view.

He knelt down and checked the man. “Sorry, dude. You’re history no matter what I do.” Loudly Cap called out, “Fire in the hole!” before he put the wounded man out of his misery. He walked over to the other man and checked him. No coup de grace was required. The man had expired of his wounds.

Jeb was helping Brenda with Jake. Brian went around to the dead and began checking for information. He found little but driver's licenses and social security cards. There was some money, which Brian left in the wallets. All the men but two were locals. The other two were from the St. Louis area. Brian wondered absently if it was a group with knowledge of the hunting camps in the area looking for what they could find.

Not much the wiser about why, Brian went over to check on Jake. Cap calmly went around to the dead man and did a much more thorough search of their bodies. He stripped everything useful from them, primarily their weapons and the few supplies they had.

"How is he?" Brian asked.

"He's lost some blood, and has a bullet in his thigh that needs to come out," Brenda replied. She finished fastening the last bandage in place and stood up. "He needs a doctor. I might be able to get the bullet out, with the medical tools and supplies you brought, but it'd be sheer butchery."

Callie looked at Brian with pleading eyes.

"Let's get him back to the cabin and I'll call Mr. Johnson on the CB. See if he knows a doctor in the area."

Brenda unrolled the soft stretcher attached to the medical bag, and the four of them carefully lifted Jake and put him on the stretcher. With one of them at each corner of the stretcher, they headed back to the camp, Callie walking alongside the stretcher, holding Jake's hand.

The others were waiting anxiously at the main cabin and hurried out when they saw the group approaching. Suddenly Alvin stopped and looked closely. "Where's... Where's Suzy?"

Bianca looked toward the forest where the group had entered the clearing. "Suzy?" she called out softly.

"I'm sorry. Suzy was killed in the fight," Callie said. "She... She put up a fight..."

Cap gave a sharp look at Callie, but held his words. It was Callie's husband that had been shot, probably due to Suzy's actions. If Callie wanted to let the others believe Suzy had died a hero, then he saw no reason to ruin the deception.

"No!" Bianca cried and crumpled to the ground. Alvin stepped over to her, knelt down and took her in his arms. They were both crying.

Anthony, as he had before, stood in the door of the cabin, keeping an eye on the monitors. His face turned ashen. Samantha was standing behind him and she started to cry. Alexandra, Steven in her arms, moved over to Samantha. "Come on," she said softly. "Help me in the kitchen."

Gloria and Helen both gave Alexandra grateful looks. They wanted to stay with Jake. They got him inside the cabin and on one of the spacious sofas facing the fireplace.

“Come on, Anthony,” Brian said. “We need to try to get Mr. Johnson on the CB.”

“Yes, sir.” Anthony sat down at the desk before Brian could and very competently began calling for Mr. Johnson on the Cobra CB radio.

It took three tries before Johnson answered. “I have him, Brian.” Anthony hopped up and handed Brian the microphone.

“Mr. Johnson. We have a man down with gunshot wounds. Is there someone close with medical experience. A doctor? Even a vet. Someone that can take a bullet out of a leg.”

“There’s Doc Adams, but I don’t know if he’s in shape to help. He’s over eighty. Then there is Abby Sincars. She’s the local large animal vet.”

“Could you call her and ask her to meet us at her place? And I’ll need directions.”

It took a few minutes, but the arrangements were made. Brian stayed out of the way while Jake’s family got him ready to put into the back of the Suburban. Callie climbed into the front passenger seat and Brenda rode in back with Jake to keep an eye on him. Jeb moved the truck and trailer blocking the back road out of the way and Brian headed for town.

Brian took him aside for a moment. “The other bodies can wait a day or two. But Suzy needs to be taken care of immediately. Can you...”

“Don’t worry about it, Brian. We’ll take care of the arrangements. Just get Jake the help he needs.”

Brian went back to the Suburban and they took off, traveling slowly to avoid jarring Jake. It was almost an hour before they got to the vet’s small animal care facility, housed in a large single wide mobile home. Despite taking precautions to minimize shock, Jake was showing the signs of it when they carried him from the Suburban to the vet’s examination room.

“I don’t know about this,” Abby said as she began to exam Jake. “It’s against the law for me to practice on people.”

“There is no one else available,” Brian said. “I’m afraid it will take too long to try and get him to the city.”

“You could be right,” Abby said, all business now. “He’s going into shock. I’m going to need some help.”

“I have some training,” Brenda said. “My name is Brenda.”

“Okay. The rest of you out. Come on, Brenda. I’ll show you were to wash up.”

Brian and Callie waited in Abby's office, pacing at times. Other times just sitting, staring at nothing. It seemed to take forever. In actuality it was only two hours before Abby came out and told Callie she could see Jake.

"How's he doing? Will he be okay?" Brian asked as Callie hurried off to the exam room.

"I think so," Abby said. She looked exhausted from the strain. "I gave him antibiotics, based on a pig his size. And the bullet came out okay. It had just barely entered the thigh bone. I don't think it will affect his mobility, long term. He's going to have trouble for a while, though.

"I gave him a painkiller, but it won't last long. I... I'll give you enough for four days, but he's going to need something after that. I won't risk my license or a jail term giving you more. I'm at risk as it is."

"If we have to, we'll tell the authorities we held you at gunpoint."

Abby smiled slightly for a moment, and then said, "You're serious!"

Brian nodded.

Her head tilted inquisitively, Abby asked, "Would you have? Held me at gunpoint?"

"I don't know," Brian said softly. "Probably. We didn't have to. You were great. What do we owe you for this?"

"Nothing. I can't charge you. That would just compound my trouble if I did that."

"Well, if there's anything you ever need as things change, just let me know. Mr. Johnson can get ahold of me."

"You mean with the weather? You think this is going to get worse?"

"Much worse."

Abby looked thoughtful. "I'll... I'll keep it in mind. I need to talk to Brenda and fill her in on what she needs to watch for, just in case."

Brian waited with the others for Jake to come around. Abby checked him over again, and explained to Brenda and Callie what to do in various circumstances. Jake fell asleep while they were talking.

"Where can we find more antibiotics and painkillers?" Brian asked Abby.

"Any medical doctor can prescribe them and any pharmacy can fill the prescriptions. But any doctor is going to want to see Jake before they give any prescriptions."

Brian nodded. "That's what I figured. Okay. Thanks again."

Jake was still out when they carried him to the Suburban and headed back to the camp. He groaned a bit as they made the rough journey up the fire road and then the track in to the camp.

"What about more medicine?" Brenda asked after they got Jake settled in his and Callie's room in the main cabin of the camp.

"The only thing I know to do is take him in to a doctor in Branson. That's closest. Have to get the authorities involved. Gunshots have to be reported. We're going to have a hard time explaining everything."

"But Brian..."

"I know," Brian said softly. "Jake needs the medication. I'll take care of it."

They planned on letting Jake rest for another day, and then take him in to Branson to a doctor. They'd deal with whatever happened.

Cap and Jeb, with Gloria and Helen helping some, had dug a grave for Suzy at an out of the way corner of the open area around the cabins. All but Jake attended a small service. They all looked to Brian to say something over the grave since neither Alvin nor Bianca was up to it. It had been all Bianca could do to help get the body ready for burial.

Brian, not a particularly religious man, and aware of what had actually happened, since Cap had told him when the group had returned from Abby's, put together a few words, being as supportive of Alvin and Bianca as he could.

It was during that recuperation day that Anthony went to Brian and told him they'd lost the satellite TV stations.

"Must have lost the satellite. Are the cell phones back up, by chance?"

"I'm getting three bars," Anthony replied.

"Good," Brian said. It suddenly occurred to Brian that with the satellite system, a doctor could prescribe medications to the local branch of a national pharmacy chain, which could transfer the prescription to another local pharmacy.

Quickly Brian pulled his cellular phone from his belt. Sure enough, three bars of signal strength. He dialed his doctor's office in St. Louis. "This is Brian Lanigan. I need to speak with Doctor Hughes."

It took a couple of minutes, but the doctor finally came on the line. "Yes, Brian. What is it?"

“You don’t sound good, Doctor Hughes. Are you okay?”

“Lot of stress. Just as I’ve told you, stress can make everything else worse. Applies to doctors as much, if not more, than everyone else. Now what can I do for you?”

“It’s about this weather, Doctor. I...”

The doctor interrupted him. “Yes. The weather. Part of the stress. You’re in the news business, with your station. What can you tell me about it?”

“I’m not in the business anymore, Doctor. FCC shut me down. About what I was saying about the weather. It’s kind of why I called. I think we’re going to have what amounts to a new Ice Age. Coming on fast. I’ve left the city to get to a place I think will be safe. And...”

“We’ve got a pretty good working relationship, wouldn’t you say, Doctor? I’ve always done what you’ve told me.”

“Yes... You are a good patient... What is it you wanted?”

“One of the people here... A very good friend... has been hurt. There was some trouble, and... well... he got shot. Twice. Local vet patched him up, but she was reluctant to give us more than a couple days worth of medications. I was hoping you...”

“That is highly illegal, Brian,” the doctor said sternly.

“I know. And I wouldn’t ask. But no doctor here locally is going to fill large prescriptions, like I’m hoping you will do, based on just my word they are needed and will be taken properly and not sold.”

“I see. Large prescriptions, you said. And didn’t say lots of them.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I could loose my license.”

“I know.”

“I doubt if you know it, but I have an interest in emergency preparedness.”

“No, Doctor, I didn’t,” replied Brian, his surprise obvious in his voice. “I just developed an interest in it myself.”

“Where you are... Would you have room for two more?”

“We would. Two and half a dozen more, actually. But it’s really out in the boondocks. Backwoods Missouri Ozarks. Hunting and fishing. Of course there is Branson, for as long as it lasts.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you, Brian?”

“I am, Doctor.”

“I’m due for a vacation,” Doctor Hughes said. “Already spread my patient load to the others in the practice. What say I come down with my wife for a few days, just in case you’re right? It’s snowing here, by the way. I’ll see that some prescriptions are called in to the pharmacy of your choice.”

“Good deal,” Brian replied. After telling the doctor which pharmacy he wanted to use, he gave the Doctor instructions on how to get to Mr. Johnson’s. Brian would go in and guide the doctor out. He went to tell Callie and Brenda the good news.

During the time they were waiting on Dr. Hughes; Brian, Cap, Jeb, and Alvin loaded up the bodies of the attackers into the back of Brian’s pickup and took them to a site Cap knew about and dumped them in a rocky ravine. It didn’t take much to lever over more than enough rocks to cover the bodies. The likelihood of the bodies being found, with everything going on the way it was, was very slim.

But not slim enough to completely avoid an investigation. This time it was Helen on monitor duty when the approach warning sounded. Brian and Cap, with Anthony’s help, were stacking some of the wood that had been freshly cut. “Anthony,” Brian said, “House. Take over the monitoring. Cap and I’ll check it out.”

Brian could tell the young man wanted to go with Cap and him, but hurried off to follow Brian’s instructions. Brian and Cap had barely entered the forest when Anthony was telling them, by FRS radio, “Whoever it is went around the abatis and is back on the road.”

“Thanks, Anthony,” Brian whispered. He and Cap, armed with their rifles and a pistol or two each, shifted direction and began working their way alongside the road.

A very put out looking county deputy walked into view in just a few minutes. Brian stepped out of the forest, well in front of the deputy, keeping his rifle slung. “Can I help you, Deputy?”

“I hope so,” said the man. When he got closer, Brian could read the Deputy’s name tag. Swanson. “What’s with the barricaded road? I’m not so sure that’s legal.”

“Private property, from the county road, all the way up to the lake, much of this side of it. Got a hunting camp, with plenty of land to hunt on. You can ask Mr. Johnson, at the store. He’ll vouch for me.”

“Yeah... Well... I’ll be checking on that.”

“What is it you wanted?” Brian asked. “Surely not the road? Haven’t had anyone come up here to complain. You want to come up to the camp and get a cup of coffee? We usually have a pot on the stove.”

“No. I need to get back on patrol. We’re having some problems...” The Deputy left it at that and Brian didn’t ask. “I’m just checking on some local guys that have gone missing. Word is they came out this way. Scouting for the hunting season.”

The population of the campground had agreed on a story, just in case this situation came up. Brian gave it. “Could have been the guys that came by a couple or three days ago. Ran in to them when we were cutting wood. I don’t think they were scouting, either. Looked to me like they were all armed.

“Got a little tense, actually,” Brian continued. “It didn’t come to blows, or anything, but I was pretty hot when they left. They were really hot. Except for a couple of them. They at least were trying to talk the others down.”

Brian lifted the rifle sling where it rested on his shoulder. “We started carrying, just in case they came back wanting to start something.”

“Let me tell you something,” Deputy Swanson said, his voice firm, almost threatening, “You leave the law enforcement to us. Now, I can’t tell you not to carry on your own property, but with a gun like you’ve got, I’d say you were maybe looking for trouble rather than avoiding it.”

“If one of the guys with us cutting wood hadn’t been armed, I’m not sure what would have happened,” Brian said, letting a little heat show in his voice. “Like I said, I don’t think they were scouting. I think they were planning to do a little poaching and might not have wanted any witnesses. Normally no one would have been at the camp, except the caretaker, and he doesn’t get out much in the summer.”

The Deputy took his hat off and ran his fingers through his short hair. Returning the hat to his head, Deputy Swanson asked, “Just what are you doing up here now, anyway? You maybe poaching yourself? Season’s a long ways off. And I’ll ask again, why the blocked road?”

“Simple,” Brian said. “You know what’s going on. With the way the weather is going, I wanted out of the city before the situation turns into a real disaster.” Brian weighed carefully his next words before he spoke them. “There are several of us, and we have supplies for a month if we’re careful. We’re hoping that’ll be enough to get us by until the government does something about the situation. We’re not looking for visitors. The road is blocked to keep people like those poachers from coming up on us unawares.

“By the way,” Brian continued, before the Deputy could say anything, “we’ve got a CB we talk to Mr. Johnson with. If you need us, he can contact us, or you can get us on Channel 3 yourself. We’ll be glad to come down and talk to you so you don’t have to walk up. I guess it was just lucky I was out for a stroll.”

“Yeah. I’m sure.” It was obvious Deputy Swanson wasn’t totally happy with the situation, but he didn’t do anything about it. “I’ll be on my way. If you see some guys you let us know through Johnson. I don’t want you taking the law into your own hands. And expect Fish and Game to be out to check on you.”

“Yes, Deputy. It’s not a problem. We aren’t the ones poaching.”

Deputy Swanson hoisted his equipment belt into a slightly more comfortable position and started walking down the road. Brian headed back to the camp. It was quite a while later that Cap showed up at the camp.

“He left,” Cap told Brian, his voice low. Then, with a smile, he added, “Don’t know if I’ll ever be able to trust you again, old son. You told that tale with nary a bobble.”

Brian had to smile back. “Not real sure I should include that ability in my resume.”

Brian filled everyone in on what had happened. There were some relieved looks when Brian said the Deputy had left, not showing any suspicion of what had actually happened.

The one bedroom left in the main cabin was prepared for the doctor and his wife. Everyone went about their daily work, with someone always on the monitors. Brian went into Branson and got the prescriptions Dr. Hughes had written for him. Brian was thankful that the long distance phone lines were up for a second time, for the pharmacist refused to fill the prescriptions without talking to Dr. Hughes first.

But she got through and Dr. Hughes ok’d the prescriptions. There were several, each for a year’s worth of medication or in some cases, several cycles of the medication if it was of a type where a cycle was given. Even with the phone lines up, the pharmacy refused to take a credit card or honor any insurance. Cash on the barrel head. Brian paid it.

Brenda began giving Jake the medications that Dr. Hughes had suggested to Brian when Brian asked for the prescriptions.

The Amateur Radio and Shortwave radio bands were abuzz with speculation and reports of facilities and services in the directly affected areas going down without warning. Long distance telephone failed, again, and a day later their cell service.

Brian talked to Johnson regularly on the CB and he was reporting the same thing in the small towns in the area, and in Branson. Communication came down to word of mouth of people still able to travel, and shortwave information, with two-way communication via the Amateur Radios and CB. The last official word they heard was that the first storm was crossing the Atlantic, picking up speed and intensity, and a second storm had started in the Arctic, as big as, if not bigger than the first.

Brian would always remember the day that Dr. Hughes showed up. It was a month to the day he'd arrived himself. It was easy to remember. When Mr. Johnson contacted the camp on the CB and reported that Dr. Hughes had arrived at the store. That was all he said.

When Brian got to the store he noticed several vehicles parked on the store parking lot. He recognized Dr. Hughes right off. He was standing beside a Newell custom Class-A diesel pusher motorhome. There was a wagon style four axle eight-horse trailer hooked to the rear of Newell. The trailer had portable corral panels hung all around it, and more were on top.

"Doc?" Brian asked, walking up to him.

"Sure is, Brian." Dr. Hughes was smiling. He shook Brian's hand. "I hope you don't mind. When you invited me down here you did mention you had room for six more besides my wife and me. I didn't bring six more. I did bring five." He turned toward the vehicles parked behind the Newell and horse trailer.

The first one was a diesel Ford F-350 crew cab dually pickup with a three axle fifth-wheel gooseneck trailer loaded, or more likely, overloaded, with hay. There was a second, tandem axle box trailer behind the hay trailer. Brian would have put money on the fact that it probably contained horse feed. A man and a woman got out and Dr. Hughes motioned them over.

The next rig in line was another Ford F-350 crew cab dually pickup with a fifth-wheel trailer. This trailer was a three axle box trailer. One man got out of the truck and joined Brian and the others.

A woman got out of the next rig. It was yet another Ford F-350 crew cab dually pickup, but this one had a bed cap and was pulling a three axle box trailer.

Brian decided that Dr. Hughes had been understating his interest in preparedness. This was undoubtedly a MAG. A mutual aid group, like he'd read about in Tony's research, with common vehicles and probably a lot more.

The last vehicle was a clone of the other Ford pickups. It had a fifth-wheel gooseneck trailer. There were several tanks securely fastened to the trailer. Brian suspected at least one would be full of diesel fuel. Like the rig with hay, the last one had a second trailer. Another tandem wheel box trailer. Another man got out of the truck and joined the rest of them.

Dr. Hughes made the introductions, except for his wife. "Julie," Dr. Hughes said, "is in the Newell, sleeping. She stood the early guard shift this morning." Then, in turn, he made the introductions.

"This is my son and his wife, Frank and June. My good friend Dr. Eric Johanson. My daughter, Caroline. And Caroline's husband, Bruce. Bruce is Eric's son."

Brian shook hands with everyone, in a bit of a daze. "I have to say, this is more than I was expecting. Much more. We have the room. Food..."

“Don’t worry about that,” Dr. Hughes said. “We came prepared.”

Bruce laughed. “He always says it like that.”

The others smiled and Dr. Hughes continued. “We have our own supplies. Had you not been able to take us in, we would have found a spot. Our intended bug-out point was to our small retreat on Lake Michigan. Obviously that was out. We were already thinking of heading here to the Missouri Ozarks when you called.”

“I see. Well, you’re all definitely welcome. Having a doctor in residence is a major advantage in what may be coming our way.”

“Oh, besides having our own supplies, and me being a doctor, we have other skills I think you will like having around. I take it you got the prescriptions after the pharmacist talked to me.”

Brian nodded.

“Well, we have not only a pharmacist in our little family, but an herbalist, as well. What one doesn’t know, the other one does. Between them we should be covered for whatever Dr. Johanson and I might need to treat with medications. Caroline is the pharmacist and Bruce the herbalist.

“Julie was a nurse and can still perform when needed. And June is an experienced nurse. Besides being an herbalist, Bruce is an all around jack of all trades. Actually a master of some. If it is outdoor related, he knows a whole bunch about it. But he owns and runs a huge landscape business to make a buck.

“Frank is another jack of all trades, master of a few. Auto mechanic, machinist, house construction, including HVAC, electrical, and plumbing work. He’s into electronics and is an Amateur Radio operator. He works for a living as an aeronautical engineer.”

Brian whistled. “Wow! Makes me feel useless.”

“Hey, you got the place to stay, and apparently were able to get stocked up despite not being one of us. Us being preparedness minded people,” Dr. Hughes said.

“Yeah. Well. Let me talk to Mr. Johnson for a minute and we’ll get going.” Brian went into the store as the others went back to their vehicles.

“Quite the entourage you have there,” Johnson said when Brian walked over to him. Brian noticed the shelves were getting very bare.

“True, I guess. But Dr. Hughes has been my doctor for a lot of years. He’s good people. How is it going here?”

“Okay. As you can see, I’m about ready to close up shop.” He swung one arm out to encompass the nearly empty shelves.

“Speaking of which, how are you going to manage?”

“Not as dumb as I look,” Johnson said with a grin. “I emptied some of those shelves myself. Things will settle down. There are a lot of good people around here. Capable. When things settle down people are going to need a place to trade, just like the old days. I plan on being here to help that along that situation.”

“Good. Like you say, life will continue. But remember, if you do need something, call us on the CB.”

Johnson nodded and shook Brian’s hand.

Brian went out and talked to Dr. Hughes through the open driver’s door of the Newell. “We’re going to be taking a different route to get to the camp than I intended. The direct way in is blocked. We’ll be going in the back way. But instead of hitting the nearest fire road that will take us there, we’ll take the long way around and come in the back side of the back side. Won’t leave as much easily spotted telltale sign that way.”

Dr. Hughes laughed. “Good thinking. We’ll have you a real prepper in no time.”

Brian got into the Suburban and the rather long convoy headed out. Though it was rough when they left the county road and got onto the fire road, all the rigs were making it okay. When they came to the faint track into the camp from the fire road they started to have some trouble.

But Dr. Hughes’ family MAG was ready for it. The main problem was the length of the rigs. It took quite a while to break the units down so the Newell could go on without the horse trailer, and the other rigs pull only one trailer going in. They turned around and picked up the dropped trailers and by the end of the day everything was parked.

It had been amusing to watch Jake’s extended family’s expressions as people and vehicles just kept coming into the camp. But those that could pitched in to help.

The corral was up, and the horses settled in with a full water trough and a bail of hay. The Newell was parked at one of the three RV spots the camp boasted. No electricity, but running water and sewer hookups. The trailers were moved to where the others were and the perimeter alarm around them adjusted to the increased size of the area being protected.

A break down dog run was set up with three of the igloo style doghouses attached to it for the five Airedales Caroline unloaded from the back of the pickup she was driving.

Brian had radioed in that there were more people than expected coming and Callie and the other women had a large enough feast prepared for everyone when the initial moving in process was completed. They’d also prepared three of the cabins for occupancy, too.

As it was, with Dr. Hughes and his wife opting to stay in the Newell, they didn't need to use the last bedroom in the main cabin or the last unoccupied cabin. Besides the one cabin, one bedroom, there were two RV slots still available. Brian went to sleep wondering if they'd be filled before he knew it, too.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 4

Dr. Hughes checked Jake straight away. He had nice things to say about Abby's medical expertise and Brenda's nursing skill. June took Brenda under her wing and began to teach her more nurse skills, with Jake as training dummy.

Bruce got with Cap and they went over the garden plans, now to include plants useful for medical needs. Bruce had brought growing potted plants and starter seed, besides the dried herbals he had. Cap took him around the local area so he could learn what was available locally.

While Bruce worked with Cap, Frank was doing the same thing with Jeb, in terms of the camps communication systems and electronic security. Also discussed were the physical limitations of the camp as it was currently set up.

Julie got with the women in Jake's family and offered her services as an experienced and avid home canner and dehydrater user.

Dr. Hughes family was offered help in rearranging their vehicles, primarily the trailers, for easier use, but Brian and the others found out that the Dr. Hughes family MAG already had everything arranged for easy use.

Brian saw the hesitation in Dr. Hughes when he was asked for a basic inventory of what they had brought with them. But the hesitation was only there for a moment, as Brian had given the doctor a copy of the existing inventory of the camp. Brian was pretty sure that his comment about it being the common inventory, made the difference. The doctor would provide an inventory of likewise common inventory. Neither group would know completely what the others had.

Dr. Hughes expressed extreme surprise at how well stocked the camp already was, with none of the original residents having been preppers before the weather events had occurred. Brian told him about Tony's research and how he'd spent hours of time going through it before he began buying supplies and equipment.

After two days of getting acquainted and adjusted to the new situation, Brian called a group meeting. Anthony was on monitor duty and Samantha was keeping an eye on baby Steven, while working on the schoolwork Gloria had given her. All the rest sat or stood around the large common room for the meeting. Jake had been moved to one of the large sofas.

Brian was standing and just started talking when everyone was gathered. "Okay. I thought we needed this meeting to get everyone's opinion on how we're set up and what we should do, if we can, to improve things. Even if we need to stay here or not."

Four people started speaking at once, but three fell silent, to let Cap speak. "Boss, I intended to bring it up anyway, but with the number of people we have now, we're going to need a lot more garden than I was planning on. Bruce and I were talking and decided that root crops should still do well as long as we don't get too awful cold here, but other things are going to be

difficult to grow enough using manual methods. If there is any way to get a couple of good sized green houses, it would be good.”

“He’s right,” Bruce said immediately. “Greenhouses should be high priority.”

“Okay,” said Brian. “What else?”

Callie spoke up next. “Any way we can get more indoor plumbing? The main cabin is overloaded with this many people, even with some using the outhouses.”

“I’m concerned about that, too,” Frank said. “I’ve checked some things out with Cap. The septic system was designed for some pretty heavy usage, but only for short periods of time. A second system should be considered. Probably with a couple new bathroom/shower rooms in a new structure.”

“Could we add another washer to that?” asked Helen. “Maybe a dryer, too. It’s going to be rough drying clothes in the winter on a clothesline.”

Before Brian could reply, Dr. Hughes spoke up. “Our little washer/dryer unit in the motor home can be made available. I don’t know how much help it would be.”

Next Jake brought up the subject of security. “The X-10 motion sensors are working pretty good, but are there ways to improve our security?”

“We might be able to help there,” Dr. Hughes said. “Frank has some things in his toy box that might help.”

“Yeah,” Jeb said. “We were talking and I think we can do a few more things to make it harder to get to us without our knowledge, and be able to make a better response if someone does get close.”

There were several long moments of silence. The newcomers had been told about Suzy’s death by intruders, though without many details.

“A lot of it is electrical and/or electronic,” Frank said. “With the other things being planned, we need to be able to generate more electrical power than we are now.”

Brian nodded. “What else?”

“The horses are going to need a long term food supply,” Julie said. “Are there farmers or ranchers around here we can trade with for hay and grain? If we had more pasture area it wouldn’t be much of a problem, but...”

“We’ll have to check,” Brian replied. “Abby, the vet that worked on Jake, might know. We’ll contact her about that.”

"I'm assuming we can hunt some to supplement stored food," Alvin said, speaking up for the first time. "We have a good landing dock on the lake, but I didn't see anything but an old sunken wooden canoe. Fishing could be important, but shore fishing will never bring in enough for the effort expended."

"What about a source of fuel for when the diesel and gasoline run out?" asked Dr. Johanson.

Brian let out a long breath. "I don't know. I've read something about bio-diesel... But that requires either used oil or oil crops..."

"Could maybe do a barter or trade if one of the locals can set up a bio-diesel operation," Frank said.

"Speaking of barter and trade," Callie said, "What are we going to have to barter? We don't have much money in reserve. And Brian thinks that it might not be worth much pretty soon."

Everyone looked around at everyone else. Brian wasn't prepared to say he had plenty of cash and precious metals. He suspected Dr. Hughes was in the same boat. "Okay," Brian said after a moment, "Lets think about some of these things that have been brought up at this meeting. We'll meet again in a few days and see what everyone has come up with. Is that okay?"

There were nods and voiced yeses and the group began to break up, people regrouping to talk. Brian motioned to Dr. Hughes and joined him outside on the porch. "I have quite a bit of cash stashed," Brian said quietly. "I think we should use it up while we have the chance. Assuming we still have a chance."

"I think we will, if we go south for our sources. And I, too, have cash available for improvement to the camp. But we should act quickly."

"With communications down it means we pretty much have to scout everything out. Could be pretty fuel intensive," Brian mused.

"We'll have Frank see what he can find out on the Amateur bands first. Might save us quite a bit of fuel."

"Didn't think of that. Good idea." With that, Brian went to his cabin and Dr. Hughes went to the Newell.

Three days later, when they held another meeting, everyone that had brought up wants and needs at the previous meeting had lists of solutions. Brian and Dr. Hughes read them in turn as the others sat or stood quietly.

When it was obvious that the two men had finished reading Frank spoke up. "I've got a pretty good set of ham contacts all around us, including Branson, Springfield, and Joplin in

Missouri, Fayetteville in Arkansas, and Tulsa in Oklahoma. They're all willing to do phonebook research for us if we want it."

"Another good idea," Brian said. "Okay. Dr. Hughes, if it's okay with you we'll put Frank on the radio and see what he can find of this wish list before we sent out anyone."

Dr. Hughes nodded.

"I guess that's all for the moment, until Frank does the research for us," Brian said. "Anyone have anything else?"

No one said anything and the meeting broke up, several people going to Frank to elaborate somewhat on the lists they'd submitted.

Frank was good as his word. After another three days had passed, he told Brian he had the information requested. Brian called another meeting.

"Okay, Frank. What do you have?" Brian asked as soon as everyone was ready.

"Well, I've found multiple potential sources for everything on the lists. But bear in mind it's just telephone book address listings. Well, except for a couple, fortunately. One of the guys lives not too far from a nursery in Springfield. They sell greenhouses. He goes out every once and a while. There seems to be someone there during the day. Probably watering the plants, the guy said. They still have water pressure.

"There are a lot of listings in Springfield, besides that one. But they're just the address and phone number. Now, the other good information has to do with the bio-diesel. A guy in Fayetteville has a small scale set up. He was using deep fryer oil to make fuel, but he can't get any now. My contact said he's desperate to get some supplies for the winter. He won't take cash. He wants food."

"I really hate to give up any of our stored food," Dr. Hughes said.

"I agree," Brian said. "Frank," Brian asked, "were you getting any feel about food availability?"

"North of St. Louis there isn't any. People still there are desperate, unless they're preppers. The further south you go, the better the situation is. The trucks are still running and some food imports are getting through from all three coasts. But it's getting worse every day. Prices going up as availability goes down.

"One of the hams said there'd been cases of truck drivers in her area just selling the food out of the back of the trailer, instead of taking it to the store."

"What do you think, Doc?" Brian asked Dr. Hughes.

"If we're going to get the things we want, we'd better do it now. For a variety of reasons."

Brian nodded. "I concur. We'd better start planning. Leave in two days?"

"I think we can," Dr. Hughes said.

The others drifted off as Brian and Dr. Hughes huddled with Frank and his lists of wants and ham contacts and began to plan the trips.

They weren't able to leave in two days. It took three to get everything coordinated. But on the morning of the fourth day a small convoy left the hunting camp by the back way. Jeb and Brenda were taking one of the semi tractor trailer rigs and heading southwest to Tulsa to pick up what food they could. Jeb whistled when Brian gave him a bank bag stuffed to the gills with twenty and hundred dollar bills. Mostly hundreds.

"Use your own judgment. Get as much as you can with that."

Jeb and Brenda headed out, with Bruce following in one of the one-ton Fords. Besides the extra 98-gallon auto flow tank in the pickup bed to extend the range of the pickup, there were several barrels of diesel tied down in the bed to supply the semi if they couldn't get fuel on the road

Jeb and Brenda were well armed, as was Bruce. They were to take the food they could get in Tulsa and go to Fayetteville to get the bio-diesel equipment and supplies.

The hay from the gooseneck trailer had been unloaded, laboriously. Frank and Dr. Hughes would be taking the trailer with one of the Fords to Springfield to do a deal for one or more greenhouses, as well as looking for the materials to build a set of bathrooms, shower rooms, and laundry.

Alvin would be backing them up in Brian's Chevy Silverado. It too had barrels of extra diesel for the two trucks. All were armed. They left moments after the first team.

Brian brought up the rear in the R320. He would be checking with Abby about animal feed, and Mr. Johnson about boats that might be for sale in the area. He hadn't wanted to discuss it on the CB.

Once on the state road, the three parties went their own ways. Brian headed to Abby's vet clinic. He found her, by herself in a chair behind the reception counter of the clinic, crying.

"What's the matter, Abby? Are you all right?" Brian asked.

Abby managed to control her tears, and wiped her eyes before stepping up to the counter. "How's Jake?" she asked.

"He's going to be fine. We have a doctor in residence now. He said you did a wonderful job working on Jake."

A small smile curved Abby's lips. "Just did what I could."

"It was enough, and more. So... Why the tears?"

Abby's face fell. "I just had to put down three animals. People are leaving the area and can't take their animals. A lot of them are just turning the animals loose, but some are bringing them in to be destroyed."

"Oh," Brian said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Better than letting them run loose," Abby said. She seemed to be under full control now. "How can I help you? You said Jake was under a doctor's care, so it probably isn't that."

"No. Actually, I'm looking for a source of animal feed. Namely for horses and dogs. They came with the doctor."

Abby's eyes perked up. "Really? Do you need me to take a look at them?"

"No. they're fine. It was the feed I was interested in. I figured you could put me on to someone that raises hay, and maybe corn or oats or something, for their own animals and might have some to sell."

"What about the feed store?"

"I'm looking for a long term supply. I'm afraid the feed store might not be in business much longer."

Abby frowned. "The weather thing?"

Brian nodded.

"Well, there's a good chance it will be around for a while, as long as there are customers. Sally is a friend of mine. Of course she sells commercial feed, but she has deals with some of the locals for just what you asked about. Hay and straw, corn, oats, sunflowers... several other things."

"I see. I'll stop by there then. Assuming you can give me directions."

"Sure. It's just on the other side of town. You can't really miss it, if you're looking."

"Okay. Thanks." Brian started to turn away. After a moment's hesitation he turned back to Abby. "Are you going to be okay? With the weather and all..."

"I don't know. I guess so. I have to stay to take care of the animals. People depend on me."

To Brian she didn't look all that certain. "What about food? Do you even still have power?"

Abby bit her lower lip and shook her head. "Mr. Johnson still has a little left. I may have to go to Branson. I just have to get by. Some how."

"Well... Like I said the other day, if you need something, contact Mr. Johnson... Or, do you have a CB?"

"In my truck. My ex-husband used to talk on it all the time. I don't turn it on much."

"You can contact us directly on Channel 3," Brian told her.

"I will."

Brian left, still worried about Abby. He found the Feed Store without trouble and talked to Sally about becoming a customer.

"I hate to say this, but I might just shut down. I tried to get another order of commercial feed in and they doubled the cost. One of my local suppliers said they would only take gold in payment now. Where am I going to get gold?"

"I can pay in gold," Brian said.

Sally's eyes widened. "You can?"

Brian nodded.

"Well, then... I guess if I can get product, I'll sell it to you for gold. We'd have to reach an agreed upon price."

"See what your suppliers are will to take for the goods. I'm sure we can come to some equitable arrangement."

"I'll give it a shot. Do you want something now?"

Brian shook his head. "Not at the moment. But I'll be in touch. You can reach me if you want, on Channel 3 on the CB if you have one."

"Ok." Sally stuck out her hand and Brian shook it.

His next stop was at Mr. Johnson's store. Brian was surprised when he walked in. Though most of the canned food shelves were empty, the meat and produce aisles were stocked and appeared to be busy.

"You seem to be doing okay," Brian told Johnson when he had a moment between checking out customers.

“Yeah. Made some deals around the area for fresh food, including some meat.”

“So I see. You think people around here are going to stay?”

“Some,” Johnson said, sadly. “I think most will eventually leave if it gets worse than the last news that was available said. The weather experts were talking highs in the fifties in the summer around here, with the winter lows down below zero regularly and probably a lot of snow.”

“That was what I’d heard, too, before everything went down. And I doubt electricity will be back up. Don’t know about fuels like diesel, gasoline, heating oil, natural gas, and propane. Won’t be a tree left if everyone starts cutting down trees willy nilly for firewood, if there aren’t other fuel choices.”

“I’m lucky there,” Johnson said. “Got a three thousand gallon propane tank here for the store and a thousand gallon one at home. Happened to fill both of them just before all this weather stuff came up. I’m good for at least a year, both places.”

“What are you doing about your meat? Do you have some sort of alternative cooling system?”

“Not yet. Thinking about an ice house for next summer. I’m just not sure if all this fuss will be going on next year or not.”

“I think it will. An ice house would be a good idea. What are you doing right now?”

“Pressuring customers to take more than they can really afford so it won’t go bad.”

“I tell you what, we’ll take anything that you can’t sell before it goes bad. Well before. We’ll keep half, and can half of it for you to resell. The jars and rings would have a refund value so we can get them back. Most of them, anyway. We’ll eventually run out of lids, but I guess that’s just the way it is.”

“That sounds like a good deal! Okay.” Johnson shook Brian’s hand to seal the deal.

“What are you doing about payment for what you sell? Brian asked.

“Mostly trading stuff back and forth and trying to keep the prices down. Still taking cash, though I’m about to quit that. Can’t get ahold of my bank in Branson. Don’t know if cash money is going to be good any more. I like your idea of gold, but no one seems to have any.”

“What business we do with you will be in gold or trade goods, your choice.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m taking in quite a bit in trade. I think I’d like to get some gold.”

“Let me look around and see what we might be able to use out at the camp,” Brian said. He began going down the rows of shelves. Many were empty. There were still plenty of non-food items on their shelves, except for toilet paper. There wasn’t any on the shelf.

One of the things that caught Brian’s eyes was several cases of canning jars. There were still plenty of boxes of lids and rings, too, which surprised Brian. He waited until Johnson was free again and asked him about the jars.

“I’m a little surprised myself,” Johnson said with a shrug. “You in the market?”

“Yeah. I’ll take them all. Pay in gold. How much.”

“Lord, Brian, I don’t know what they’re worth in gold!”

“I paid one of my employees off in gold at \$500.00 per ounce and silver at \$13.89. That’s a 36 to 1 ratio between the metals. Makes the silver coins come out in round number values. If that sounds okay, figure what the stuff is worth and I’ll pay you in gold and silver.”

Johnson went to get a handheld calculator and began to figure out the sale while Brian continued to look around the store for possibilities. Other than the canning supplies, Brian made it a point not to take all of the stock of any one item. He didn’t want to be considered a hoarder. He bought quite a few non-food items that he knew the camp could use eventually. Or they could be used for barter.

After Brian had loaded everything in the R320, he went back inside the store to talk to Johnson again. “The main reason I came in, Mr. Johnson, was to ask you about boats on the lake. You know anyone already wanting to sell before this happened?”

“A couple. And a couple looking to get out of here, but don’t want to just abandon their boat. And then there is one of mine.”

“You have a boat you’d sell me? What kind?”

“Small run about. Had it for fun fishing and some skiing. Only has a fifty horse on it, but it does okay on the lake.”

“How much?”

Johnson pulled out his calculator again and began pushing buttons. A bit reluctantly he asked Brian, “Would you give seven ounces of gold and thirty-six ounces of silver? That’s based on four thousand for the boat, motor, trailer and the miscellaneous gear that goes with it.”

“I figure I can trust you. Okay.” Brian counted out the coins, giving Johnson a mix of denominations without being asked. Johnson would need the different values if he was going to start trading in gold and silver.

Brian also got the names and addresses for the other boat owners that Johnson knew that wanted to sell. He made a couple more deals, both in cash, for another runabout, a sixteen foot jon boat, and two canoes and a kayak.

The runabout was on a trailer, which he hooked to the R320. The man that sold him the jon boat, canoes, and kayak helped him load the jon boat on the runabout, along with the outboard motor; and the two canoes and kayak on a roof rack that he threw in on the sale.

Brian took it easy going back to the campground. The roof rack didn't fit the R320 that well and he kept expecting the canoes to fall off. But he made it with everything intact.

It was still early enough to take the boats down to the lake shore and get them in the water. Cap went with Brian. So did an eager Anthony. Jake was well enough to take a turn at the communications center, leaving Anthony free to help Cap in the garden. When Cap went, Anthony asked to go along and Brian said okay.

By the time they'd got them all in the water, the engines tested, and then tied up securely at the dock it was time for supper. Both of the groups that had left checked in by radio that evening before everyone went to bed, excluding the one that had monitoring duty. Both had found suitable commercial places to stay the night. Both motels took cash. Each team kept a rotating watch during the night, just in case.

With Jake eager to be doing something, even if it was just monitoring the radios, Anthony went with Brian and Cap to get the boat Johnson had sold Brian the next afternoon. Like Cap and Brian, Anthony had his rifle with him.

Johnson met them at the small marina on the lake. He was pulling the trailer. Brian looked at the trailer and then the boat. “I don't see any point in loading her up here and then unloading her at the camp. I'll just run her over to the camp on the water. Cap can take trailer back.

Anthony was looking eager again, Brian noticed. Brian hadn't said how Anthony was going back to the camp. With a slight smile, Brian asked, “You want to go back with me and lend a hand, Anthony?”

“Yes, sir!”

Brian and Anthony, with Johnson's input and help, got the boat ready to go. Cap switched the trailer from Johnson's pickup to the R320. He stayed at the landing until Brian had the outboard going smoothly and Johnson got off. With a wave, Cap headed back to the hunting camp. Brian had never operated boats much and drove the small runabout quite conservatively.

Much to Anthony's glee, Brian let him handle the boat for a little while on the way to the camp. They were following the shoreline, and Brian took over the controls again when he saw something on shore he wanted to check out.

There was a large houseboat tied up at a nice dock. Up shore from the dock was an elegant looking log home with what had been a nicely tended lawn leading down to the shore and the dock. The grass was long, and there were weeds starting to show here and there.

The rear of the houseboat had what looked like a sheet tied across it. On the sheet was painted '4 SALE' in bright orange paint.

"What do you say, Anthony? Want to check it out?"

"Sure! That's a big boat!"

Brian idled the runabout up against the dock opposite the houseboat and killed the engine while Anthony secured a line from the bow of the boat to a dock cleat. As soon as he was on the dock, Brian began to call out, not wanting to take a chance on being taken for a thief.

He almost came out of his skin when a man stepped out onto the deck of the houseboat from within it.

"No need to yell. I'm right here."

Brian noted the man had a revolver holstered on his hip. "I'm Brian Lanigan," Brian said. "I saw the for sale sign on the houseboat."

"You interested or just here to waste my time?" the man asked. He didn't offer his name.

"If it's really for sale, and in good shape, I am interested," Brian replied, his voice even.

"In perfect shape. I keep it that way. Wouldn't be selling but my wife insists we go south to her mother's in Florida. She's already there and the house is sold. I'm just hanging around to sell the houseboat. But I tell you, I'm not going to accept some lowball price because I'm wanting to sell."

"How much?" Brian asked.

When the man told him Brian's expression didn't change, but Anthony's face had a look of astonishment on it.

"Show us around?" Brian said in reply.

The man showed off the features of the houseboat proudly, going from stem to stern, inside and out. When they were done, Brian calmly said, "I'll give you a fourth what you asked."

The man looked ready to do bodily harm to Brian. But then Brian added, “in gold, based on five-hundred dollars an ounce.”

The look on the man’s face turned into one of greed. “Gold! You kidding?”

“Nope,” Brian said.

“How much is that in gold?” the man had to ask.

“One hundred ounces,” Anthony immediately said.

The man looked at Brian for confirmation. “That’s right,” said Brian.

“When can I get it?” asked the man.

“I want a ride first, just to be sure,” Brian said.

“Sure, sure!” The man had the engines started in no time and Brian untied them from the dock.

“Anthony, stay with the runabout,” Brian told the young man.

He was very disappointed, but did as he was told. He waited quietly for the fifteen minutes that the houseboat was away from the dock. When it returned, he moved to tie it up, but Brian called to him. Don’t tie it up. Get me the gray bag and rifle, and then untie the runabout.”

“Hey! What’s going on?” asked the man when he came out onto the front deck of the houseboat.

“Just getting your money. You have anything else you want to take off the boat?”

The man’s hand went to the revolver holstered on his hip. “You try to rip me off and I’ll kill you!” he growled.

“Not going to cheat you. I just don’t trust you.” Brian glanced at Anthony, who still held the gray bag. “There’s a packet of gold coins in the end pouch. Take it out and give it to the gentleman.”

Anthony hurried to do so, and quickly stepped back so the man couldn’t try to grab him.

“You can count it, but I assure you it’s all there. And real.”

The man looked startled. It hadn’t occurred to him the gold might not be gold. “It better be,” he said, his voice even lower and more menacing. The look turned to greed as the gold coins, even in the approaching darkness, gleamed brightly as he counted them.

“Anthony. In the runabout and take it out in the lake a good ways,” Brian kept his eyes on the man.

Anthony jumped to obey.

“Off,” Brian told the man when Anthony was well away from the dock. “Up off the dock.”

Brian’s gun wasn’t pointed at the man, but a slight shift was all it would take to bring it into line. The man stepped off the deck of the houseboat to the dock and began to back away. When he was nearly to the house, Brian turned and hurried inside the houseboat. The engines started right up and Brian dropped the propellers into reverse.

He saw the man draw his revolver and raise it to fire a shot. Brian ducked down, but kept the houseboat backing up at high speed. The man didn’t fire and Brian finally stood back up, slowed the engines and turned the houseboat around.

Anthony was sitting well out on the lake and Brian headed the houseboat toward him. It was the matter of only a few moments to get Anthony aboard the houseboat and the runabout tied off so it could be towed.

“Wow!” Anthony said. He was standing by Brian at the helm of the houseboat. “That was something!”

“I didn’t like doing that way, but I don’t trust that guy. I’m not a hundred percent sure the boat actually belongs to him.”

“Why did you buy it, then?”

“Because I thought it was a good deal. This will add to our possibilities for the camp.”

“That was an awful lot of gold. It was amazing, when he started counting it.”

“Gold is pretty cool, I guess. I think it is going to make a comeback as currency, along with silver. That’s why I converted some of my stocks and bonds when I had the chance.”

“That was smart. I sure am glad you asked my family to come here. The things I’ve been hearing on the ham radio are scary. Kind of like what just happened. People are fighting over food and stuff.”

“I’m afraid it might get worse. That’s why we go armed. Just in case.”

Brian’s VHF handheld radio broke squelch and Jake’s voice was calling him.

“Calling Brian. Calling Brian. Come back, please.”

“This is Brian,” Brian said, bringing the walky-talky up to his lips.

“Where are you guys? We’re getting worried.”

“We had a slight delay,” Brian said. “but everything is okay. If you would, have someone go down to the dock and shine a light out. It’ll be dark by the time we get there.”

“Will do,” Jake answered.

It was another twenty minutes before Brian and Anthony spotted the light shining out from the shore. Brian headed the houseboat in and ran it slowly up to the sandy shore. There was no room at the dock.

Anthony jumped off the front, the painter in his hand. He tied the houseboat off to a tree and started back to get his rifle. “Mom!” he cried when Alexandra grabbed him up in a bear hug.

Half the camp was there watching.

“I was worried about you!” she said, slowly releasing him.

“I was with Mr. Lanigan!”

“I know. But mothers worry.”

“I need to get my rifle,” he said, finally able to step away from his mother.

“He did quite well today,” Brian told Alexandra. “He’s turning into a fine young man.”

Cap finally spoke up. “When I left you, you were in a runabout. Care to explain the houseboat?”

Brian grinned. “It followed us home?”

“It was amazing!” Anthony said, coming up to the small group, the Ruger 10/22 slung over one shoulder. “He just up and bought it! Just like that!”

Brian noted that Anthony didn’t go into details, after glancing at his mother, and then Brian.

“Saw a bargain and bought it,” Brian said, winking at Anthony. “No big deal.”

“Right,” Anthony said. “No big deal, I guess.”

“Well, come on. Both of you. Supper is getting cold,” Alexandra said. She, Anthony, and Brian joined Cap and the others standing on the dock, and then they all headed back to the camp.

“Did the teams check in?” Brian asked Jake as soon as they were in the main cabin.

“Yeah. The Doc and them are camping out. Jeb’s team got another motel.”

“Any success?”

“I think so. They were both kind of closed mouthed about things.”

“We’ll just have to see when they get back. They may not want to say too much, in case people listening in zero in on them.”

“Good point, Brian. So what’s new? You and Anthony are late.”

“Bought a houseboat for the camp to use,” Brian replied.

“Just like that?” Jake asked.

Anthony was grinning. “Just like that,” he said. “It’s a cool boat. So is the new runabout.” He started to announce that he’d driven it by himself, but decided that might be better kept between Brian and himself. Instead he asked, “Anything happen while we were gone?” He put his rifle in the gun rack by the front door.

Jake laughed. “No. You didn’t miss anything too important.”

“But there was something?” Brian asked.

Jake sighed. “Well, yeah. Things are getting worse all over. Especially up north. And Europe is going crazy. The first storm is still going apparently and crossing Europe. People are heading south there, just like they are here. North Africa is in the same boat as Mexico. More refugees than they want to handle.

“And if I’m judging correctly from the ham reports I’m getting, the second storm has dropped south into Washington and Oregon and turned southeast. It may track further south than the first one. Hard to tell just from the various radio reports, but that’s the best I have.”

Brian nodded. “Going to get worse before it gets better. No doubt in my mind.”

“Will we be okay here, Mr. Lanigan?” Anthony asked, his former exuberance now changed to worry.

“Well, even in the previous big Ice Ages that lasted for hundreds of thousands of years, the ice didn’t come down this far. I think we’ll be okay. If push comes to shove we can head south ourselves. I just think it will be safer here than with the teaming hordes of refugees.”

“Anthony,” his mother said, “Come get your supper and get ready for bed. You’ve had a long, and I suspect stressful, day.”

He started to protest, but realized that would make him sound like a boy. “Yes, Mother,” he replied instead.

A pleased Alexandra led the way to the table, with Brian right behind and Jake hobbling along on the crutches that Caroline had brought as part of her pharmacy supplies. Helen, with baby Steven in one arm sat down at the communications desk and took over the monitoring duties.

Brian was up early the next morning, intending to check out the houseboat in greater detail. He'd stopped at the main cabin to get a cup of coffee, knowing at least one of the women would be up to start the preliminaries for breakfast and would have coffee available. He met Bianca coming out of the main cabin just as he was going up the steps.

"Brian!" Bianca called out. "Hurry! I was just coming to get you. There's trouble in town!"

Brian followed Bianca inside. Gloria was at the radio. It had been her turn to start the coffee and Bianca had asked her to watch the radios while she got Brian.

"What is it?" Brian asked, taking the chair that Gloria vacated.

"It's your Mr. Johnson," Bianca said. "He called in just a couple of minutes ago, asking for you." She looked at Gloria. "Anything else when I was out?"

Gloria shook her head.

Brian picked up the microphone for the CB and called for Johnson.

Johnson replied immediately. "Brian! You guys need to look out. There's a couple hundred refugees that might be headed your way. They're like locusts. Taking everything not tied down. Held me at gunpoint to empty out what they wanted in the store. Have a couple big trucks running, plus several horses."

Johnson paused for a moment, but then spoke again, his voice low. "I'm worried about Abby and Sally. Both are on their own. There's bunches of women and kids with the refugees, but there are some independent men I think could be real trouble for women on their own."

"I'll be in as soon as I can," Brian said. He saw Anthony come in. "Anthony. Get Cap. Tell him we're going to town into some trouble."

"Yes sir!" Breakfast forgotten, Anthony hurried outside.

Brian grabbed a couple of the VHF handhelds from their charging rack and went outside himself. As he hit the door he told Bianca, "Let me know anything that comes in."

"I will, Brian."

"I'll go," Anthony said as he ran up with Cap.

“Not this time, Anthony. I want you here with Jake, Dr. Johanson, and the women. Just in case. Keep your rifle with you, and plenty of magazines, just in case.”

“Yes, Sir!” Anthony was off like a shot to get his rifle from just inside the main cabin door. Normally he put a couple of extended magazines for the Ruger 10/22 into his pockets, but this time he took the fishing vest his mother had modified for him. It held ten of the extended magazines.

Cap was headed for the R320, looking like he was loaded for bear. Brian came out of his cabin equipped likewise. After watching the SUV leave, Anthony went inside. People were milling around and Jake was back at the radios. Bianca was filling him in.

“Cap has shown me were all the motion detectors are,” Anthony told Jake. “I’m going to go check them all.”

“But Anthony!” Alexandra said, intending to stop him.

Jake cut her off. “Let him go, Alex. He’s almost a man now and needs to feel he’s pulling his weight.” Jake looked over at Anthony. “Even though he already is.” He spoke directly to Anthony then. “Take a radio and be careful. Tell me each time you intend to test a sensor.”

“Yes, sir, Uncle Jake.” Anthony was off, not running, but at a hurried pace.

“Oh, Jake! I don’t know...” Alexandra said, stepping over to the door to watch her son.

“He’ll be fine, Alex,” Jake reassured his sister-in-law.

“I hope so,” she said, and headed for the kitchen. She needed something to do. As they came in to the common rooms from the bedrooms, the women and Dr. Johanson all checked their weapons in the rack by the front door.

Brian was taking it fairly easy, as he didn’t want to mark up the road too much, but he was hurrying. “Sometimes I think we cut the main road too soon,” he said absently.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Cap replied.

They didn’t see anyone around as they drove up to Johnson’s store. Cap waited outside, his rifle at the ready, while Brian cautiously went into the store. “Mr. Johnson! It’s Brian. You in here?”

“Yeah, Brian,” Johnson replied, stepping out from behind the register counter, a single action revolver in his hand.

“You’re hurt!” Brian said when he saw the cut on the right side of Johnson’s face.

“I was just about to bandage it when you drove up. I dropped behind the register. Wasn’t going to take another pistol whipping.” He hefted the old Colt Peacemaker .38.

“Put it down for the moment and let me look at that cut.”

As Brian cleaned and dressed the wound using the supplies that Johnson had already gathered up and put on the register counter, Johnson began to explain what had happened to him.

“They all showed up at once. I heard someone say they’d camped just outside of town to let those on foot catch up and rest some before they came into town. It was just a swarm. One of the leaders, though I don’t think he’s the number one boss, came up to me and stuck the barrel of an automatic in my belly and told me to keep quiet and I wouldn’t get hurt.

“The rest just started taking things out to one of their trucks. I got a bit mouthy with the guy guarding me and he whacked me across the face with that automatic pistol. They took what they wanted and left.

“As they were leaving, one of them said they needed to find the feed store for the horses and a vet to look at one that had come up lame. I called as soon as they were gone, and got out my gun from the office. Bunch of low life Yankees!”

Brian put the final strip of tape on the bandage on Johnson’s face. It had been no mere feat to bandage him while he’d been talking.

“Okay. If you’re okay here, we’ll go check on Sally and Abby. Or do you want to come with us, in case some of them come back?”

Johnson shook the old Colt. “Let’em come! I’m ready for them now.”

Brian would have preferred Johnson come with them, for his own safety, but he understood and respected Johnson’s need to protect what was his. Brian filled Cap in on what Johnson had told him while he drove to the Feed Store.

The group had been there and left. Sally was nowhere to be found. The store itself was as much of a mess as Johnson’s. Brian headed for Abby’s clinic. When he saw a large group on the street ahead of them Brian quickly whipped into a side street, hopefully before any of the refugees had seen them.

Turning onto a street parallel to the one they’d left, Brian goosed the R320. He made a sliding turn onto another side street to get back on the main road to the clinic. Brian picked up as much speed as he dared when he was back on the main road.

He checked the mirrors. He couldn’t tell if the refugee mob had speeded up or not. The tires squalled a bit when he hit the brakes when he turned into the clinic parking lot. Out of the SUV, Brian stepped back onto the road and looked toward town. No sign of the refugees at the slight turn in the road they’d come around.

“Keep an eye out!” Brian told Cap, and then ran to the front door of the clinic. It was locked. He banged on it a couple of times. “Abby! Abby! It’s Brian Lanigan! Open up!”

Brian stepped back when he heard the door locks being turned. As soon as the door was open Brian grabbed Abby’s arm. “Come on! We have to go. There’s a mob of refugees on the way.”

“I know!” Abby said.

Brian saw Sally step into view. She was carrying a double barrel shotgun. “You got away. Good. We were worried that... Well... You know. Both of you. Come on.”

They didn’t waste any time, except that Abby used to lock up the clinic office again. When they came out of the building Cap was leveling his rifle over the hood of the R320. The leading elements of the refugee mob were less than a quarter mile away. Everyone climbed into the SUV and Brian took off again, away from the mob.

He circled well around the town and took the back back way in to the camp. Sally was shaking when Brian helped her out of the SUV. Brian handed Cap the shotgun. She was barely capable of holding it up at the moment.

Callie led both women into the main cabin. Both were frightened and near to going into shock. Dr. Johanson began to examine them as soon as Callie had them in the cabin.

Anthony joined Cap and Brian where they continued to stand by the R320, talking. He went with them when they went in to talk to Jake.

Brian asked Jake to get Mr. Johnson on the radio if he could. Johnson answered almost immediately and Brian took the microphone when Jake handed it to him. “We found Sally. She was at Abby’s. The Feed store was trashed kind of like your place. Haven’t had a chance to find out what they took, if Sally even knows.

“She was with Abby when we got there. We got them both out before the mob got there. Just. How are you doing? You want us to come in and pick you up?”

“No, but thanks, Brian. I’m okay now. I think they’re done with me. But I won’t be taking any chances. I’m locking up the rest of what I have and lying low for a couple of days. Give those two my best.”

“Will do, Mr. Johnson.” Brian handed the microphone back to Jake.

“Anthony went to check all the perimeter sensors. We’re in pretty good shape for early warning.”

“That’s good work, Anthony. Thanks.”

“I just want to help,” replied the teen. Brian smiled. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“No. I was out watching and listening for anyone.”

“Well get yourself some lunch. Tell whoever is working that I’ll be in after a little while to get a sandwich or something.”

“Yes, sir. I’m starving.”

“Boy has a good head on his shoulders,” Brian told Jake. “Your family can be proud of him.”

“I agree.”

“Well, I’m going to get something to eat. I want to see how Sally and Abby are doing, anyway. Let me know if something comes up.”

“You know I will.”

Brian went into the kitchen to see if there was anything left from lunch. He found Anthony eating a sandwich.”

“Here you go,” Callie said, handing Brian a small plate with a sandwich on it. “Thanks. How are Sally and Abby?”

“Dr. Johanson said both were close to going into shock from the fear. They had a bite to eat and are laying down now.”

Brian continued to stand as he absently ate the sandwich, thinking. Suddenly he asked Anthony, “Where’s your mother?”

“Hanging wet laundry, I think,” he replied, eagerly taking the second sandwich Callie handed him.

Brian set the plate down, still with a quarter of a sandwich on it. He headed out the back door of the cabin. Sure enough, there was Alexandra hanging up wet laundry on the clothesline, along with Gloria and Helen.

“Alexandra, can I talk to you a moment?”

“Sure, Brian. What is it?”

“I need Anthony to do a special job. It shouldn’t be too dangerous, but he will be on his own for fairly long periods of time.”

“Oh, Brian! He’s still just a boy!” There were long moments of silence. “He’s all I have...”

Brian nodded and started to turn away.

Alexandra put her hand on Brian's arm to stop him. "What... What is it you want him to do?"

"You know we have sensors out for perimeter alerts."

Alexandra nodded.

"Well... They are good, but don't give us as much warning as I would like if a large party is involved. There is a point where the county road goes right down by the lake before it gets to us from the direction of town.

"I'd like to put Anthony in one of the runabouts to do some fishing and keep an eye on that stretch of the road. It's the most likely approach for that group of refugees to take to get to us if they find out about the camp."

"Oh, my! In a boat? By himself? How would that group find out about us, anyway?" Alexandra looked scared. For Anthony, Brian was sure.

"There are people in town that know about the camp. We've been pretty secretive, but still, someone might say something. They might even find us by sheer luck. There is a good chance they'll be taking the county road south, anyway and could happen onto our entrance."

Alexandra hung her head. "He's so young... But he would dearly love to be helping more. He likes being on the radios, but with Jake..." She looked up into Brian's face. "If you think he'll be safe..."

"I can't guarantee it, Alexandra. But I do think the risk is minimal or I wouldn't suggest it."

"Okay then. Just make sure he knows just to warn us if he sees something."

Brian nodded. "I most certainly will. If he doesn't want to do it that way, I won't let him out there."

"Okay," Alexandra said softly and went back to hanging up clothes.

Brian went back into the kitchen and Callie directed him to the radio desk. "He wanted to give me a break," Jake said, "but I'm fine for now. He said he was going out to the gardens to see if Cap needed him.

When Brian got out to the newest of the garden plots, he found Anthony. Cap had him hoeing weeds. "Sorry, Cap. I need Anthony. He has a new duty."

"Hate to lose a good worker like him. Came out on his own to help."

“I know. Jake told me where to find him. You going to be okay without him?”

Cap nodded toward Samantha. She was hoeing near Anthony, though not as quickly or expertly. “Sam is good. Just young. Going to be a bit lonely for her if Anthony isn’t going to be helping with the garden anymore.”

“I’d planned on that, but I think you’re right. It will only be part of the time. The rest of us can pull the duty from time to time.”

“Anthony!” called Brian.

Anthony turned around and waved, and then hurried toward Brian when Brian made a ‘come here’ motion.

“I’ve got another duty to add to your chores.”

“Yes, Sir,” Anthony replied without a flinch.

“Leave your hoe and come along.” Brian said, heading toward the lake through the forest. He noticed that Samantha gave a rather forlorn look at them as they left.

“Now,” Brian said, “This should be fairly easy, but it will be boring. I need you to take a shift out on the lake fishing and watching that stretch of the road that is visible from the lake out there a little ways.” Brian pointed in the direction he meant.

“Yes, Sir!” Anthony replied, his eagerness evident. His face fell for a moment when Brian insisted he wear a life jacket whenever he was out on the runabout.

“I didn’t last night,” Anthony protested, but quickly added a ‘Yes, sir’ when Brian insisted.

Johnson had thrown in quite a bit of fishing gear when he’d sold his runabout to Brian. Brian and Anthony went through it and then Brian went out on the lake in the boat to show Anthony where he wanted him to be, and for him to get some practice running the boat.

Anthony was a quick study, and had shown himself to be trustworthy. Brian was sure he would do just fine on his own. They went back into shore and Brian helped Anthony change the portable fuel tanks and refill the empty ones from the fuel tanks.

“I’ll get my rifle and a radio and be right back,” Anthony said when the boat was ready again for use.

Brian smiled. The boy thought things through. When he came back down to the dock, Brian told him, “Check in every hour on the hour. We’ll come looking if you miss a radio check.”

Again the polite, “Yes, sir,” and Anthony was taking up position at the steering wheel of the runabout. He cranked the engine and Brian stood and watched from the dock as Anthony carefully edged away and then headed out onto the lake at slightly more than an idle. He understood the need to conserve fuel.

When Brian went back up into the camp he saw Alexandra looking toward the lake, though she couldn't see the lake itself through the trees. She turned and went back to her work as Brian headed in the cabin to tell Jake he'd be on the houseboat checking it out.

Barring an attacking force having a navy of their own, the houseboat would provide a good quick getaway if the camp was overrun. The big twin 250 horsepower Mercury outboards would drink the gas if they used it much at high speed, but the boat would have some uses, as would the runabouts and jon boat. The canoes and kayak less so, but better to have them than not.

Though everyone had their own set of weapons, Brian took a few from his stash in his supply cabin down to the houseboat, along with several cans of ammunition for them, just in case.

As a matter of course, whoever was on monitor watch tried the various lines of communications that had gone down, since they had in the past gone up and down. Jake called Brian into the main cabin that afternoon to tell him that one of the news networks was up again.

Brian hurried in and joined the others that were watching the news cast. The news reader looked haggard. There was none of the background activity usually visible behind the person on the news desk. There was only the one man and the camera didn't change at all during the broadcast.

“For anyone that can hear or see this broadcast I must warn you I don't know how long we can stay on. We're on backup power at the moment and are nearly out of fuel. Here is the news as we have it.”

The man looked down at the papers in his hands. “There is now a series of blizzard like storms around the entire northern hemisphere. The temperature around the globe is dropping in both the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere. Though the devastating storms that have hit the northern hemisphere do not seem to be developing in the southern hemisphere, our meteorologists and climatologists are saying that if this continues, the southern hemisphere will eventually be affected in the same way.

“There is heavy snow cover in the United States approximately north of the I-70 corridor across the country. Though that is not hard and firm, it seems prudent that anyone north of the I-70 line take measures to survive where they are, or move southward.

“Mexico and the United States are in a state of war over United States citizens taking refuge in Mexico. There is steady fighting along the border and south as US troops push the Mexican authorities back toward Mexico City. Much of the surviving military of the United States, apparently acting without orders, is setting up huge refugee camps in northern Mexico.

“We still don’t have any word from any government official except for the seemingly random elected official that did not go to ground when this situation first started. What word we are getting is that everyone must make do the best they can under the circumstances.

“Widespread martial law has not been declared. There seems no one is there to declare it. Local instances of martial law have been reported, with many cases of combat between the self appointed martial law authorities and the general population in those areas.

“Initial reports that we had that indicated some relief attempts originating in South America, Southern Africa, and Australia have not proved to be true. Attempts to communicate with authorities in those several nations have been in vain. There seems to be no help available for those in the worst affected areas. We can only hope that help will be forthcoming from nearby areas outside the worst of it. People must help people or...”

The man spoke a few more words, but the microphone had cut out. The screen went black a couple of seconds later, and then the white of no signal. Jake continued to try other communications links, but the only things still active seemed to be the network of Amateur Radio Operators that had developed as the events themselves developed.

“That’s it for now, I guess,” Jake said, turning to look at the hopeful faces. “We’ll just have to keep trying.”

“Okay,” said Brian. He ran his hands over his face and then back over his lengthening hair. “It seems more and more likely we’re going to be on our own for the foreseeable future, if not permanently.”

“What about moving south. Like a lot of the others are doing?” asked Bianca.

“We can discuss that,” Brian said, “But we need everyone here in a meeting when we do.” He turned back to Jake. The out teams reported in?”

“Not yet.” Jake looked at his watch. “Should be in another few minutes.”

It was coming up on supper time and the women whose turn it was to prepare it left the group to start the preparations. Everyone else stayed in the common room to wait for the contact from their loved ones.

It wasn’t long. Jeb called in first. He sounded cheerful. “We have had success,” he said, after the communication was established. “We should be home tomorrow, late.” He said nothing else except to sign off after Jake had acknowledged his words.

Dr. Hughes call in shortly thereafter. “We’ve had some trouble, but everyone is okay. Will be at the camp by tomorrow afternoon.”

There were murmurs amongst those listening, but all had been told that there would be very little information transmitted over the radio in fear of someone being able to locate the out teams or the camp.

Brian went out and waited for Anthony after the communications. He came in right on time, just as darkness was falling. Brian tied up the runabout and Anthony slung his rifle over his left shoulder and picked up a string of fish with his right hand. Brian took the stringer and Anthony stepped onto the dock. He was smiling.

“Nice string of fish,” Brian told Anthony, and meant it. There were seven nice fish, of several species.

“I just kept whatever I caught, unless it was too small. I thought we’d need all the fish later we could get.”

“Good thought,” Brian said. “We’ll make that standard.” Brian filled Anthony in on the recent communications as they walked toward the camp.

“I hope no one got hurt,” Anthony replied.

“Me, too,” Brian said. “Me, too.”

Everyone did their work the next day, but often cast glances at the point the back trail entered the camp. It was three in the afternoon when Dr. Hughes pulled into the hunting camp. The gooseneck trailer was loaded to overflowing. Brian noted with surprise the trailer Alvin was pulling with the Chevy. It was a three axle fifth-wheel flat bed. And on it were a mid-size Bobcat skid-steer loader and some attachments. Every other inch of space was filled with boxes, as were the beds of the trucks that were clear of the fifth-wheel trailer hitches.

Dr. Hughes stretched and walked over to join Brian. “You said there was trouble?” Brian asked.

“Take a look at your truck.”

Brian did so, walking over as Alvin exited it. “Jeez! That looks like bullet holes!” He looked at Alvin. “You okay?”

“Missed me clean. Don’t know how. Missed the engine, tires, and fuel tank, too. Took one in the radiator but I pinched it off after things settled down.”

“They came out of nowhere,” Frank said as he joined them.

“Let’s wait and let everyone hear at a meeting after supper,” Brian said.

It was fine with the men. Dr. Hughes and Frank went to their wives. Brian noted that Alvin went over to Bianca and they shared a hug. They seemed to be getting close since Suzy’s death.

Before anyone could do anything else, the semi truck and trailer Jeb and Brenda were in came slowly up the track, followed by Bruce in one of the Ford one-tons. The load in the back of the Ford was higher than the cab, but was tarped down and Brian couldn't tell what it was.

The three in the group left their vehicles and went over to where the others were congregated. All three were smiling. Until they saw the Chevy pickup. "What happened?" Bruce asked. Is everyone okay?"

After assurance that all were well, the three began explaining all at once their trip. Brian shook his head. So much for waiting for the meeting. As soon as the first few words were out, Dr. Hughes, Frank, and Alvin all joined in, telling their stories. The talking continued as they all went inside. Brian pieced it all out in his head over the next few days.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 5

Jeb stopped the truck to let Brenda out to move the barricade truck blocking the back track into the hunting camp. As Jeb waited for Brenda to put the truck back into place after he and Bruce had pulled past, he took a good look at the track. It was beginning to show signs of use. He looked for, but couldn't see the motion sensor that he knew was close to the track. He'd put it there himself and still couldn't spot it.

With Brenda back in the truck Jeb headed for the fire road and then the county road. He headed southwest, using the back roads he'd marked on the Trucker's Road Guide, headed for Tulsa. After the fifth time he asked Brenda to check the moneybag sitting on the sleep mattress, Brenda picked it up and put it on the dashboard. "Here. You can keep looking at it whenever you want."

"Are you nuts? Put that thing out of sight! There's I don't know how many thousands of dollars in there!"

"Oh, Jeb! Don't be such a scaredy cat. Nothing is going to happen to the money. We've had that much money aboard before. For cargos."

"Yeah. Yeah I guess you're right. It's just before, it was our money. This is Brian's. And it's really important to get the stuff we're going after."

"You're right about that. This is important. If Brian is right, long term survival is going to be dependent on preparations. And sheer luck. Just not being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Jeb looked over at his wife. "Do you think we should go south? Like some of the others we hear about on the ham bands?"

Brenda shook her head. "No. I don't think so. It's like Brian has said a couple of times. The likelihood of glaciers coming this far south are very, very, low. But people are not going to want to be this far north for fear of them. The southern states are going to be mobbed and over run with desperate people. Mexico, too. Assuming we can survive at the camp, it sounds like it'll be the safest place."

"I was thinking the same thing. I just wanted to be sure you agreed."

They were silent after that, except for the regular radio checks with Bruce in the Ford one-ton following them. The plan had been to pick up I-44 West when they were well away from the hunting camp area. But when they came close the Interstate was filled to overflowing. Both East and West bound lanes were carrying west bound traffic. And it was moving slowly.

After brief consultation with Bruce, Jeb turned the vehicle and began heading for Tulsa on state and county roads. Even those routes were heavy with southbound and westbound traffic. There were law enforcement authorities here and there, but they seemed to only be responding to the worst of the accidents and incidents of violence.

The trio saw plenty of signs of people carrying weapons, like themselves, but had no incidents of their own, on the way to Tulsa. It took an extra day to get there, and two days to find and acquire what they wanted. It surprised Jeb that people took no more cash than they did for the food. Though it was ten times the regular rate, it still seemed remarkable to Jeb. He gladly paid what he had to, and with the money left the three decided on buying several more items as they found them available. Finally the three turned back, this time heading toward Fayetteville Arkansas.

They decided to stay on the back roads. The traffic they met was mostly headed south. All sorts of vehicles, most with trailers or car top racks filled to overflowing with personal goods. Knowing they had precious cargo, Jeb, Brenda, and Bruce were careful not to bring any undue attention to themselves. As it was, they got lots of long, questioning looks. Twice vehicles turned around and followed them for short times, but no effort was made to stop them.

With sighs of relief all around they finally got to the farm of the man with the bio-diesel equipment not far outside Fayetteville. The place was obviously still occupied. There was a tractor working one of the fields when Brenda stopped the semi on the driveway up to the farm house.

The driver of the tractor lifted the implement he was using on the field and headed for the driveway. When he got down off the tractor he picked up a shotgun and slung it over his shoulder.

“You guys the ones for the bio-diesel equipment?” he asked, walking up to them.

Jeb nodded and held out his hand. “How’d you know?”

“Why else would a rig be showing up here, after I made a deal to trade it for food? Fred Tanner.” He shook Jeb’s hand. “Am I right?”

“You are,” Bruce said, joining the three after doing a quick survey of the area. Just in case.

“You got the food?”

Jeb nodded.

“Enough?” Fred asked, rather coldly.

“I think so,” Jeb said, now more reserved, now suddenly thankful he’d followed Bruce’s advice about how to load the truck. They walked around to the back of the trailer and Jeb opened the lock that secured the double doors, opened one of them, and then the other.

“This enough?” Brenda asked as the all looked inside the truck. The back third of the trailer was stacked with cartons and cases of food to waist height.

“You have the refrigeration unit running,” Fred stated.

“Some of it’s fresh food. But only a portion. It’s all we could get,” Jeb said.

“Most of it is packaged foods. Bought it off another trucker who was supposed to deliver to Minnesota. Needed money for fuel to get to Mexico. Sold us enough to get fuel. Got the rest out of a distribution warehouse. The employees were doing the same thing as the trucker. Selling what they could to go further south.”

“What’s the rest of the load?” asked Fred.

“Other things we need to keep our place going during this,” Jeb replied. “Tools and such.” He noticed that Fred looked at the rest of the items speculatively.

After that long look at the load, Fred finally turned around and said, “Bring it up closer to the house. I’ll go get a couple sets of hand trucks from the shed. Jeb and Bruce both had uneasy feelings as they helped unload the food.

It was only when Fred had snapped the lock on the shed not full of packaged food, the perishables having been taken inside the farm house to the refrigerator and freezer, that Fred turned around and said. “It’s not enough. I want to see what else you got in that trailer.”

Fred’s shotgun pointed ominously at a spot near the three’s feet. Fred had his trigger finger outside the trigger guard, but he was ready to use it.

“Okay,” Jeb said, after quick looks at Brenda and Bruce. “But you’re going to be disappointed. Is there any food available around here?”

“Yeah, but it is sky high. Move.” With a motion of the shotgun, Fred directed the three out to the open doors of the trailer. “I figure you got something to hide. No need to tarp a load in a closed trailer.”

“Wanted to keep the moisture off the rest of the load,” Jeb said immediately. “Using the reefer unit condenses moisture on everything.”

“You just climb right up in there and undo that tarp.” Fred continued to keep the shotgun trained toward Bruce and Brenda as Jeb did as he was told. A minute or so later Fred asked, “What the blazes is that?”

“Sewing machine. A serger. Bundles of cloth. Pins, needles... sewing stuff. To make clothes in the future.” Jeb decided to give a little more information in hopes that Fred wouldn’t investigate further. He tugged the tarp back a little more, apparently with little success. “Got a high efficiency washing machine and a hand washer so we can do laundry, and...”

“That’s enough. Don’t need any of that stuff. You are going to have to come up with more food if you want that bio-diesel equipment.”

“You said food was available locally, just high,” Jeb said. “I know you didn’t want cash, but we’ve got almost eight thousand dollars left from the trip. How about we give you that and you buy locally?”

“Eight grand, huh?”

The three could see the greed in the man’s eyes. “Fork it over,” Fred said.

“How do we know you want just take it and say the same thing?” Bruce asked.

“Don’t, I guess... Except... Here.” Much to Jeb’s, Brenda’s, and Bruce’s surprise, Fred handed Jeb the shotgun.

“Wouldn’t try anything,” Fred said. “You won’t find the stuff if I don’t show you where it is. Hand over the money.”

Jeb took the money bag from beneath his shirt at the small of his back and counted out seven thousand, nine hundred, eighty-nine dollars. “Close enough,” Fred said, taking the money eagerly.

“Bring your truck. The stuff is out in the field, under the hay.”

It took four hours of hard work to uncover the equipment, moving hay bales by hand. At least the equipment was broken down into pieces that could be handled by two men working together. Fred took no part in the work, standing silently aside, just watching. It took two more hours of hard work to get everything loaded, including the buckets of the chemicals needed to make the bio-diesel.

Fortunately there was just enough room in the truck so they didn’t have to rearrange the load. That would have exposed the front third of the truck, which was filled five feet high with additional packaged food.

When they were finished, and the trailer doors closed and locked, Jeb unloaded the shotgun and handed it back to Fred. Brenda was in the cab of the truck and the engine was running when Jeb asked Fred, “Why are you getting rid of it? Seems like you’d want it for yourself.”

Fred shrugged. “Me and another guy were both doing it. He’s going to give me fuel for the oil crops I’m putting in for him, plus food. He’s got a big truck farm, but didn’t want to do the oil crops. Wants the food for trade.”

Jeb climbed into the passenger seat of the truck, and Brenda put it in gear. They were trusting Bruce to keep Fred covered to prevent him from trying to stop them until they were far enough away to make it impossible. As soon as the semi was going down the farm driveway, Bruce took his hand off the pistol sitting on the seat of the big Ford pickup, and sped away, to join Brenda and Jeb.

Two more days and they were back at the hunting camp, cargo intact, there having been no further problems.

As Dr. Hughes, Frank, and Alvin went north toward Springfield, they met a slow, but steady stream of heavily loaded vehicles going south. It was slow going. There were several instances of people going the wrong way in their lane. But they made Springfield that evening.

They had a list of addresses and telephone numbers, but neither the landlines or cell phone systems were working. After a few minutes of consultation, the three decided to camp out in a nearby KOA that was still open. It was essentially already full, but the owners were letting people double and triple up in single slots, to get the money.

The next morning, after breakfast, the team began investigating the leads that the Springfield Amateurs had given the camp. The first stop was the nursery. Sure enough, it was open, with one person checking the automatic systems and hand watering everything else. It was the owner, Dr. Hughes found out.

Though he hadn't been selling anything the last two weeks, he was keeping everything up. After being shown the various models of greenhouses that the nursery used, and the kits that were in stock, Dr. Hughes decided to take the three largest kits, as well as the two smaller ones for specialty plants. It cleaned out the inventory of greenhouse kits in stock.

The nursery owner loaded everything up on the fifth-wheel trailer with the Bobcat skid steer loader mounted with a set of forks. After talking to Frank and Alvin, Dr. Hughes made a deal with the nursery owner to buy the Bobcat and all the attachments the man had that he used in his yard service. The man needed money, since he wasn't getting any calls for service and all his regular customers had cancelled their contracts with him.

The sale included a trailer for the Bobcat. It also included all the nursery products the man was willing to sell, while keeping some for his own use. Dr. Hughes also bought many starter plants and even some fruit trees and nut trees ready for planting. "A word to the wise," Dr. Hughes told the man as they were about to leave. "I'd suggest you forget flowers and concentrate on fruits and vegetables. People are going to need food."

The man, a sad look on his face, nodded. "I think you're right. Practicality before beauty. Good-bye." He shook Dr. Hughes hand and turned to go into one of the nursery greenhouses.

"I don't think he's going to make it," Frank said as he got behind the steering wheel of the Ford one-ton pulling the fifth-wheel trailer with the greenhouse equipment.

"I doubt it," Dr. Hughes replied. "His heart just isn't in it. He loves the beauty of plants more than their productivity. I had a hard time making him take more than his standard retail prices for everything. I don't want to give away money, but he's one that is going to need it."

Alvin followed behind Dr. Hughes and Frank in the Chevy one-ton, pulling the fifth-wheel trailer hauling the Bobcat and attachments. They set up camp again, this time in an out of the way city park with only a few other campers using it.

Having met their primary goal, and having plenty of cash left available, they took their time over the next several days, picking and choosing deals to acquire more equipment and supplies to improve the hunting camp. They began to keep an even closer watch than normal, after noticing three people that kept showing up in the distance everywhere the team went in the city.

Both trailers and trucks were loaded beyond their weight limits when the three conferred one night in another camp. "We're full up," Dr. Hughes said. "Have some cash left, but I'm getting a bad feeling about that group following us. We head back in the morning." Frank and Alvin agreed.

As agreed, the next morning, without waiting to make breakfast, with Frank driving the Ford, Dr. Hughes beside him, and Alvin in Brian's Chevy, they headed out of town. They took a northern route at first, to try to throw off the group they thought was following them, before swinging wide and heading south.

The ploy worked fairly well. But not entirely. They'd just left the city proper when a pickup and a Jeep began to gain on them from behind. Alvin warned Frank and the two increased their speed. With the heavy loads they were pulling, despite the big diesel engines the trucks were equipped with, the lightly loaded vehicles quickly gained on them.

The group following them were apparently weren't any too smart. They began firing from well out of range. But it made it plain to Dr. Hughes and his team that it was a life and death situation. Dr. Hughes had Frank pull off the road at the first good point where they would have room for both vehicles.

As soon as they were stopped all three men exited the vehicles, weapons in hand, and began firing at the rapidly approaching vehicles. With slow, aimed shots, Dr. Hughes, Frank, and Alvin tried to stop the vehicles before they could get close enough to be effective. All three were using 7.62mm x 51mm caliber rifles.

The pickup approaching them suddenly veered off the highway, flipped and began to tumble, rolling over at least four times before coming to rest. The men in the Jeep didn't slow. It was obvious that they weren't going to stop and do battle, but would try to get ahead of the team.

It was a foolish mistake. The closer they got, the more rounds the Jeep and its occupants took. It flew past the stopped vehicles, fire continuing to come from it. Like the pickup, the Jeep soon went off the road at high speed, rolling several times before coming to rest well away from the highway.

Dr. Hughes and his team lost no time. They returned to their vehicles and left the area as quickly as they could. Fortunately there'd been no traffic during the short battle, but vehicles behind them began stopping at the scene of the battle.

Alvin noticed the engine temperature was beginning to climb and radioed those in the Ford that he needed to pull over. After finding another good spot, both rigs pulled off the road and the men got out.

Frank whistled and Alvin turned white when they saw the several bullet holes puncturing the sheet metal of the Chevy. The reason the engine was beginning to overheat was obvious. A plume of steam drifted from the grill.

With Frank and Dr. Hughes keeping a lookout, weapons at the ready, Alvin popped the hood of the Chevy and opened it. It took several minutes of hot work with a Leatherman Surge to pinch closed the tube in the radiator that a bullet fired from the Jeep had nicked. Alvin got premixed antifreeze from behind the rear seat of truck and refilled the radiator. He added a can of Stop-Leak, and put the radiator cap back on.

The team got back on the highway, moving slowly until Alvin was sure the radiator fix was holding. As the engine temperature came down rapidly, Alvin radioed ahead and they sped up, heading for the hunting camp

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Chapter 6

When Brian filled Dr. Hughes in on what had happened in town, and the group of refugees in the area, he immediately suggested putting a live guard at the abatis, accompanied by one of the Airedales for both companionship and extra early warning. The horses could be used for travel back and forth. "I'm afraid the motion sensor just won't give us enough warning to get people in a position to deal with a large group."

"Will the dogs cooperate?" Brian asked.

Dr. Hughes had to smile. Brian obviously didn't know much about Airedales. "With just a bit of training, any of the dogs will do the job. Caroline can train each in turn. Then they can rotate off the same way as us. The horses the same. All are pretty gentle and will take new riders without much of a problem. A little work with Bruce and everyone should be able to ride any of the horses."

"It's a shame Jeb's camera idea wouldn't work," Brian said. "Just too far for the low power transmitters he had."

"I think I would still want someone down there," Dr. Hughes replied. The two men were walking down the well worn path to the lake. "It'll be a pain, but a group as large as you say, with some bad elements in it, could overrun us before we could react without more warning than the motion sensors give us. Even with a camera, the chance of missing something is pretty high. A person on the site, and especially a dog, should give us enough warning."

"I think you are right. We should set that up right now, I think," Brian said. "As long as Caroline is willing."

"I'm sure she will be. All of us are familiar with working with the dogs. We can take the first several night watches. I think it best that the first trainees be Jake's family, you, and Cap, doing day watches."

"I agree," Brian replied. Both men had turned around and were walking back toward the camp. Showing Dr. Hughes the houseboat could wait.

It took several minutes to get everyone needed for the first training sessions and watch together, but by noontime Brian was on his way to the abatis aboard one of the horses, with Lion, the Alpha male of the Airedale pack, trotting alongside. Caroline was on another of the horses. She'd work with Brian and Lion at the abatis, to teach Lion where the line was he was to guard, and giving Brian tips on how to work with the dog.

Even Samantha got in on the act. She wouldn't be standing any watches, at least not yet, but she'd taken to the animals as soon as they arrived and they reacted well to her. She'd already offered and been allowed to help take care of them, as long as it didn't interfere with her chores.

Actually riding the horses and working with the dogs was a break from her chores that her mother, Gloria, was a bit reluctant to allow, but seeing the pleasure it brought to the girl, finally gave in.

Brian checked in with Johnson just about every day by radio. There was no new news about the refugees. Brian, with Jake's and Dr. Hughes input, decided to keep up the extra watches. Sally and Abby, over the initial shock, both wanted to get back to town to carry on with their work.

"Okay," Brian told them after Frank relieved him at the end of his four hour watch period. "I'll take you in, but I'd like you to keep in touch through Mr. Johnson. Don't take any chances. You know how long it takes us to get into town if something happens."

Both women agreed, and accepted a revolver each, with belt, holster, and speed loaders to enhance their ability to protect themselves enough to get to some help. Sally was comfortable with her shotgun, but Brian gave Abby one of the AR-15's from his stock, with several magazines and a bandoleer in which to carry them. A couple of hours at the range behind the camp and Brian took the women back to their homes, using the R320.

They stopped at Johnson's store and each of the women made deals with him to get a few supplies in return for some labor help later on. He dropped Sally off first, and then Abby.

Brian went for a slow drive through the town. He wasn't that familiar with it, but it looked to him like some of the refugees had taken up residence, apparently in houses abandoned by locals that went south. Brian didn't like the feel in the small town and went back to each woman's house and told them so. Both insisted they wanted to stay.

Knowing he had no right to insist, he let it go, but the safety of the two women was a constant thought in the back of his mind. It started snowing as he drove back to the hunting camp. Fortunately it didn't last long.

For two more days all went well in the camp, with everyone getting used to the new guard duties. There was little leisure time for anyone in the camp. When not doing regular work to keep the camp going, everyone pitched in to help put up the greenhouses and get them in operation. The other things the two teams had brought back were stored away, or, in the case one of the sewing machines, put into immediate use.

The Bobcat became a valued piece of equipment, and often used. Not only did it unload the greenhouse components, but also the three pre-built sheds that were turned into a men's bathroom and shower facility, women's bathroom and shower facility, and wash house.

The backhoe attachment dug the septic system and helped place the new septic tank. It was also used to dig the trenches for the plumbing and electrical line and dig out the stumps in the area cleared for more garden space. The bucket filled the holes. The tree spade dug the holes and set the new fruit and nut trees in place. The chipper ground up all the limbs of the cut down trees too small to be cut up for fire-wood into mulch for the garden.

Everyone was so occupied, with Alexandra on the radios and Jeb at the abatis when Anthony called in from his runabout out on the lake. “Bunch of people and some cars and trucks on the road!” came the quiet, but excited voice from the speaker. Brian heard the call on his walky-talky and dropped what he was doing to run into the main cabin.

Alexandra moved aside and Brian sat down at the communications desk. “Can you tell how many?” Brian asked, keeping his voice calm. He sounded the alarm to bring everyone else running.

“No sir. Just that there are more than fifteen. Some women. Don’t see any kids.”

“Okay. Anthony, I want you back on shore and in your lookout position in the trees by the lake.”

“Yes sir!”

Jake had hobbled over and was listening as Brian contacted Jeb. “You hear that, Jeb?”

“Loud and clear,” replied Jeb over the radio. “No signs here, yet.”

“Cap and I’ll be down to reinforce you. The rest of the camp is going on alert.”

Brian got up and Alexandra sat back down. Her worry about her son was visible, but she maintained her presence of mind, keeping it on the radios.

Jake had gone to the gun rack by the front door and picked up his rifle and took one of the walky-talkies from the charging stand. No one even tried to stop him as he used his crutches to head for one of the fighting holes in the edge of the trees near the main entrance track.

Brian grabbed Cap as soon as he showed up, already armed. “A couple of horses, Cap.” Cap hurried to help Caroline get two horses saddled. Everyone else was doing as they’d trained, getting armed and heading for defensive positions around the camp.

Though they’d had a couple of fighting positions dug out by hand, the Bobcat had been of great value in getting several more dug, despite the roots of the trees making it difficult. Samantha was getting Baby Steven ready to go into the safe room where she and the baby were assigned to be during any sort of trouble. Gloria and Helen took up positions in the house to protect the children and Alexandria.

The two horses were saddled when Brian joined Caroline and Cap at the corral. Both men mounted and headed for the abatis, following the track. Just before they came to the abatis they took to the trees, dismounted, and worked their way forward, one man on each side of the track.

“We’re here,” Brian whispered into his walky-talky. “One on each flank.”

“Nothing yet,” Jeb replied. “No. Wait a minute. Duke is reacting to something.”

The young Airedale was standing now, eyes on the curve of the track that led to the county road. Its ears were up at alert. He turned his head to look at Jeb, then quickly turned his head back toward the track and growled, very low. The dog crouched much the same as Jeb did, taking up a position behind a tree next to the stump of one of the trees that formed the abatis.

“Good boy,” Jeb whispered, stroking the back of the dogs head for a moment. Duke kept his attention on the track ahead of them.

It wasn't long before three men came around the bend in the track and into view of Brian, Cap, and Jeb. All three of the men were moving rather casually. Though armed, their rifles were slung. However, when they saw the abatis across the road they quickly entered the edge of the forest.

Though out off Cap's sight, Jeb and Brian could still see the men. They were conferring. One raised a walky-talky to his face and spoke into it. Apparently someone responded for the men conferred again. Two stepped back a bit deeper into the forest and the third man stepped out onto the track and boldly walked toward the abatis.

When he was a few feet from the obstruction, Jeb stood up. So did Duke. “What do you want?” he called out to the man.

The man, to his credit, didn't start. He calmly turned toward Jeb. “Looking to pass through. Maybe take a deer or a few squirrels.” The man lifted the rifle by the sling just slightly to punctuate his words.

“No pass through. This road ends in a hunting camp. It's all private land around here. Hunting only for the owners.” Jeb stood his ground, his rifle cradled in his arms.

“Come on,” cajoled the man. “Just one man. Wouldn't take more than one deer or half a dozen squirrels.”

“What about the other two guys and the group down at the road?”

The man turned red enough for Jeb to be able to see it.

“Just being cautious. No body travels alone anymore. Not safe.”

“And the group?”

“Well...” was the only reply to the second question. “If you say it's private, we'll just make ourselves welcome elsewhere.” He turned around and walked off, stiffly.

“What do you think?” Jeb asked Brian on the radio after the one man had joined the other two and all three headed back around the curve in the track.

“I don't like it,” Brian replied. “I'm going to work my way down and take a look at the group. See if it looks like they might be getting ready to attack.”

Brian was no master woodsman, but neither were any of the several guards posted around the group milling around on the county road, at the turnoff to the hunting camp. Brian saw three men, well armed, as he tried to work closer to the main group. He gave up, for fear of being discovered by a guard he might miss.

He watched from where he was. There was a major argument going on amongst several men in the center of the large group. The argument ended, and one man began waving people over. All well armed men. Another motion and more armed men appeared out of the forest in several different places. That included the three on guard he'd seen.

They huddled around the man that had pulled them in for a couple of minutes. All then turned and started up the track toward the curve. Brian warned Jeb and Cap, as well as the camp. He told Cap and Jeb to fade into the forest and let the group pass them up. He asked Dr. Hughes to be ready to speak to the leader of the group, from a position of cover. To give them an ultimatum. Leave peacefully or die.

One or two of the men might have had some military training, but Brian was doubtful. The men stayed in a group as they went around the abatis, not even trying to flush Jeb out. Jeb followed them from directly behind, with Brian and Cap taking up positions on the group's flanks, to prevent them from spreading out too much.

It wasn't a problem until they came around the last turn of the track and saw the camp. The men began to spread out, but stopped before Brian or Cap had to stop them. The leader drew up in the middle of the road and hailed the camp.

"Listen up!" he said. "We just want a few supplies to get us on down the road. Cooperate and there won't be any trouble!"

Brian had to give Dr. Hughes credit. He kept his response short and simple. "Leave or die!" was all he said.

"I'm telling you," the man called out again, edging toward the supposed protection of the forest, "There doesn't have to be any trouble! But if you resist..." He dived behind a tree. It must have been the signal for the group, for each one of the other men in the forest opened fire.

The leader of the group almost landed on Jake. Jake calmly shot him in the head before he could react to the sudden confrontation. From the camouflaged fighting holes the hunting camp residents opened up on the unsuspecting attackers.

Brian, Cap, and Jeb moved in from behind and took out those under cover from the camp itself, but totally open to attack from the rear. Even Duke got into the act, charging one man that began to run back toward the county road. Duke had him on the ground and helpless in a few moments. Duke stood over him, growling, until Jeb came up and took the man's gun from him. Even with that, Duke stood in a guard position after Jeb made the guard motion. He hurried forward, looking for more targets.

It was over in only seconds. Those attackers that weren't dead, Cap, Jeb, and Brian rounded up. There were only three of them, including the one Duke had taken down. All were injured to one degree or another. Dr. Hughes did a quick check of the men as everyone else maintained a ready stance, in case more of the group tried to attack after hearing the gun battle.

He didn't treat them, but just made sure they could be walked back down to the county road. Two could. The third would have to be helped by the other two. While everyone went back to their defense positions, Cap, Brian, and Jeb hustled the three wounded down the track.

Cap and Brian faded into the forest just before they got to the abatis, leaving Jeb to finish getting the men to it. Cap and Brian didn't find anyone in the forest around the area, but there were several people milling around right at the abatis, including several women.

"Come get the ones that made it," Jeb called loudly, backing away from the three men. They immediately sat down, exhausted from their wounds.

"Where are the others?" cried out one of the women.

"Dead. All dead," Jeb called back. There were screams of anguish and screams of anger. One of the screaming women was armed with a rifle and she raised it to her shoulder.

Brian hesitated for a fraction of a second. Cap didn't. He shot the woman dead as soon as she started to raise the rifle toward Jeb. There were more screams and people began to run away. Only two came around the abatis to help the three wounded. Only one person stood their ground where they were.

Brian recognized him as the one that had been arguing with the leader of the men that had attacked. "What do you want?" Brian asked, moving up to the very edge of the track.

"Our dead? What about our dead?"

"If you want them, you can have them. Otherwise they'll be buried in an unmarked common grave deep in the forest."

"Please," the man begged. "Let us give them decent burials."

"Make sure your people stay where they are and we'll bring the bodies down shortly." Brian nodded at Jeb and Jeb headed back to the camp, taking one of the horses that had been tied out of the way at the very first.

The man wanted to talk. "Please, let me explain..." he started saying.

Iron in his voice, Brian cut him off. "The explanation is you had, and still probably have, killers among you that prefer to kill and take rather than ask and trade. I'll have nothing to do with people such as yourself that allow and condone what has happened. I know about what your group did in town, and now this."

“But we need food and shelter and...”

“I said I don’t want to hear it. You chose the path of anarchy and killing and theft.”

The man hung his head and fell silent. Brian saw a couple more people from the group edge their way up to him cautiously. Brian couldn’t hear what was said, but the two, and then three more, stayed with him until Jeb got back with the Chevy one-ton pickup. The dead were piled in the bed of the truck.

It was a slow, gruesome process getting the bodies around the abatis and into the vehicles of the group that had been brought up for them. “Where is their stuff?” asked one of the men helping carry the bodies. Everything but their clothing had been stripped from the bodies.

“Spoils of war,” Brian said coldly.

The man looked ready to take up the battle again, but one of his companions hustled him away from Brian and they took another body around the abatis to the waiting vehicles. Finally the task was done.

As the leader of the group started to get into the last vehicle Brian called out, “Try coming back and it will be worse. We’ll destroy not just those that attack, but those that support the attack.” The man said nothing, but climbed into the old school bus in silence.

Those at the hunting camp kept double watches for a week after the attack, but nothing further was seen of any of them. Everyone relaxed slightly when a group so similarly outfitted to the one that had attacked, that there was no question that it was they an Amateur Radio operator reported being seen camped out on the Arkansas side of the Missouri border.

Brian, Jake, and Dr. Hughes all agreed to maintain strict security, but went back to single watches.

If You Don't Like The Weather... - Epilog

The initial improvements to the camp were completed before true winter hit, though the temperatures were fall-like by August and wintery by Thanksgiving. But the greenhouses were producing well, and would be able to produce even during the extreme winters sure to come, with the wood-fired heaters attached to them.

Enough photo-voltaic panels and controllers were acquired and installed to provide enough AC electricity to run the heavier loads demanded by other improvements.

All the buildings had extra insulation, thanks to another buying trip in Springfield, the population of which was rapidly shrinking. The buildings were also bermed up the walls several feet to reduce heat loss even further.

Deals were cut locally with other die-hard, like minded people. The bio-diesel equipment was traded to a farmer willing to grow the appropriate crops, press the oil, and convert it to fuel for the camp, for half of the fuel left after the amount required for the farming and operating the process.

Despite the effective shutdown of the US government, and the loss of much of the infrastructure, there was still some trade and commerce going on. Not much fuel was coming north from the Gulf Coast refineries that were still operating. The production was being used locally to support that infrastructure that existed across the southern states and Mexico.

To all intents and purposes, everything north of a line from San Francisco, California, to Norfolk, Virginia, was a no-mans-land, with no organized support from the south. People north of that line were on their own.

The line actually dipped much lower in some areas, primarily rural areas, like the Ozarks of Northern Arkansas and Southern Missouri. Many areas North of I-70 had a snow accumulation of over five feet before the traditional start of winter. Very few people doubted that the snow would stay year round, and probably continue to accumulate if the weather pattern persisted.

By the end of the year, there were no more refugees still trying to get south of that San Francisco – Norfolk line. Those that had started early enough, that hadn't run into problems on the way, had made it. The rest, that started too late, didn't make it. The hunting camp had a snow accumulation of three feet, with nighttime temperatures below zero on a regular basis. But at least the snow was melting down somewhat during the milder periods of the winter. Not so up north. The snow just kept piling up.

Mr. Johnson gave up the battle with the weather, and with getting supplies to sell in his store. He sold out the remaining inventory to Brian, and went south to stay with his daughter in southern Florida.

Sally was determined to stay. With the agreements she had with some of the local farmers, she probably would have been able to make it. She froze to death during a five-day

blizzard in the area, when temperatures were twenty below and the winds above 50mph. She ran out of firewood.

Abby made it through that blizzard, but asked for, and received permission move out to the hunting camp. Brian and the others were able to tow her mobile home veterinary clinic to the camp. She moved her personal belongings to the last unused cabin.

When it became obvious that civilization would continue, Jake and his family got back in the trucking business. They were one of the few outfits that would brave the no-mans-land right up and into the permanent snow line. The main cargos were fresh food shipments, but even those were limited. The areas least affected by the weather change were barely keeping themselves fed, with the massive population growth. Fuel transport made up the other major portion of their business coming up from the south.

Due to the harshness of the life, and the difficulty in traveling much of the area, crime wasn't much of a problem after the initial stages. That could not be said about the warmer areas of the world. With the overpopulation and reduced food production, crime was rampant. Jake's people never went anywhere alone or unarmed. Weapons ownership and open carry were a fact of life in the weather affected zones.

Nature took back much of that no-mans-land. Again, for those that would brave the elements, wild game became a marketable commodity. The farmers that stayed were able to gather up large herds of domesticated animals, from those farms where they had been abandoned. Meat, wool, and leather became big business in no-man's-land.

With their gold coin holdings, Brian and Dr. Hughes were able to organize and operate most of the meat production activity between the Mississippi River and the Rockies. Jake's family got the southbound cargoes, taking precious meat to the multitudes.

Life was hard, everywhere, as most of the world slid slowly back into a New Dark Ages. Too much of the manufacturing capacity was buried under the snow to continue the always fragile cycle of production from raw material to finished product on a store shelf.

The close confines in the high population areas relieved some of the pressure for food and other goods. Pandemics swept through those massive populations, thinning them down closer to the levels that local resources could provide for. Communities isolated themselves, except for the necessary exceptions of the traders from the north.

Brian's enclave became the jumping off point to the north central section of the US many years later when the snow line began to recede, much more slowly than it had come south.

End *****

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