

An Old Man And His Tractor - Chapter 1

Tom DeMassey was sixty-seven years old when he decided one day he might as well retire and sell off the farm. His children had no interest in running it. He'd had them young, with his wife Mary. They were up there in years themselves, and had successful careers. Each would be able to retire shortly after their fiftieth birthday.

Poor Mary was long ago dead, a victim of breast cancer at thirty-five. He'd never remarried. Mary had been his high-school sweetheart, and the only woman he knew he could ever love.

So with two experienced farm hands and a housekeeper for the kids, he'd gone along with his life to this point. Tom took the farm pickup work truck into town. It didn't take long to list the farm with a real estate broker. He'd sell all but fifteen acres, on which he intended to live out the rest of his life. The house, machine shed and shop, and all the modern farm equipment would be included.

Tom celebrated by driving on down to the city, to have a shrimp cocktail, filet mignon and lobster tail, a glass of champagne, and Strawberries Romanoff for desert. He drove home feeling half his age. Change could be good. He hadn't had a major change in his life since the last of his three children left home to go to college.

After his shower, Tom went to bed and slept better than he had in years. The next morning it didn't take him long to stake out the fifteen acres he intended to keep. It was the highest corner of the three-hundred-twenty acre half section of land that had been in the family for three generations, plus it was where the well established fruit and nut tree orchard was located, along with very productive grape vines.

Tom felt no qualms about selling the farm off. His grandfather had bought it in the depression for a song. It was a working investment, nothing more. Up until right now, it had been better to work the acreage than sell it. But it was time to sell and Tom knew it.

Whistling softly to himself, Tom hammered in a few more stakes, marking out various pieces of the acreage for the uses he intended for them. Tom wasn't quite as quick on his feet as he had been, but his mind was as sharp as ever and he quickly decided just what he was going to do.

It took a while to move the 1929 Pontiac pickup, 1925 Mack 5-ton flatbed, and the 1929 John Deere GP-Tricycle tractor. All three were kept in a ready-to-use state. They'd been on the property when his grandfather bought the place and none of the DeMasseys since had seen fit to get rid of them. After all, why sell something that still works just fine, with the help of a good machine shop and a blacksmith.

Besides, they were a real curiosity when Tom and his farm hands drove them in various parades during the year. All three had been converted by his grandfather to wood-gas operation during World War II, when fuel was hard to get. The government had made plans available and Dwayne DeMassey had taken advantage of them. When fuel became available again after the war the vehicles were stored, and in the sixties cleaned up and began their tours of duty at parades.

The three vehicles were the only three known operational wood-gas vehicles in the state and had been written up several times in various mechanic magazines and even a couple of “Green” publications.

It took a bit of time to get the wood fires burning to the point it was producing gas, but once done, the vehicles would run until you let the fire go out. In the back of his mind, Tom felt they might just come in handy one day.

Going back to the farm house, Tom got on the computer and did a bit of research. Though he liked a lot of old things, as demonstrated by his keeping and use of the wood-gas fire vehicles, he was something of a fanatic for the technological advances made since World War II, the main one being the modern computer and internet.

It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for. He’d become quite adept at browsing for information. Tom printed off a few pages from different websites and then took it easy the rest of the day, continuing to plan things in his head.

Sunday was much like Saturday. More thinking and more research on the internet. Monday morning found Tom at the diner, as usual, a cup of coffee in hand, talking to the other farmers during their traditional morning coffee klatch. The main topic of conversation, after the weather and crop prices, was Tom’s decision to sell the farm, which he announced calmly when he had the chance.

There were many eager eyes, looking at Tom, and around at what was suddenly the competition. Tom and his farm were well known in the area, and somewhat envied. There would be no lack of potential buyers for it.

His grandfather, and then his father, had done two things that made the farm so profitable for its size. Extensive crop storage, and then seed and fertilizer storage, and finally fuel storage had been added to the farm in the early days. Later on, several irrigation wells had been drilled and irrigation equipment obtained.

The storage allowed Tom to buy his seed, fertilizer, chemicals, fuel and all the other working consumables in the off season, when prices were low. And the product storage allowed Tom to do his harvest, and then hold the products until the glut on the market was over, with its low buying prices, and then sell in the off season when the markets were highest.

And with the irrigation systems, Tom never had a “dry” year. To a slightly lesser extent, the grading of all the crop fields done under Tom’s stint as owner, kept “wet” year problems to a minimum because the fields would drain and dry to the proper moisture level for maximum germination of the seed quickly.

Dwayne DeMassey, nor his son, Tom’s father, Frank, had ever been a keep up with the Jones type of person. They did what they wanted, without much concern over what other people thought. Just like keeping the old vehicles around, what new equipment that was bought was purchased with economy and longevity in mind, not just trying to have the newest and the fanciest.

Also like his father and grandfather, Tom operated the farm on a cash basis. He didn't need the massive loans every year to get a crop in and then harvested that many farmers took. With the farm set up the way it was, and the family's economic savvy, Tom had no trouble buying what he needed, usually when the prices were at their lowest, and pay for it by writing a check on the farm account, or pulling money from the savings account set up to pay for future equipment purchases and farm improvements.

Whoever got the DeMassey Farm was going to get a bargain, no matter how high the price was. When the coffee klatch broke up, earlier than usual, the other farmers scattered, some headed for the real estate office, and some for their bank, to inquire about funding to buy the farm.

Whistling softly, Tom went out to the farm truck and headed back home. His hands already had things up and going, ready to cultivate the row crops. Tom handed over the coffee and donuts he brought and they took a break to discuss what was to be done that day, besides the scheduled cultivation.

Tom also told the two men about his decision to sell. Neither man felt a qualm. They were two of the best hired farm hands in the country and knew the operation and equipment inside and out. They wouldn't have any problem getting work, even if the new owner let them go.

With the day planned out, Tom went into the house and got on the telephone, calling several of the places he'd researched on the internet that weekend. By noon, major operations were in the early stages of implementation. Tom didn't have to wait for the sale of the farm to start his new life on the fifteen acres. He'd pay as he went with what he had and replenish the funds with the money from the sale, when it finalized.

He was interrupted three times by other farmers wanting to talk to him about buying the farm. He referred them all to the real estate agent. He was going to handle the sale. Tom didn't want the hassles of friends wanting special breaks. He'd set the price he wanted, and whoever paid it, got the farm. No special deals and no favors given.

Tom was glad he set it up the way he did, for John Stevenson called the next day and told him that he needed to raise the price dramatically. Four people had already offered more than Tom was asking. "Okay, John. Get what the market will bear, and caveat emptor."

A month later the money went into escrow, and Phil Phillips took over the farm when the sale closed. "Aren't you going to take the things from the house?" Phil asked Tom when Tom met him and handed over the keys to the place.

"Got what I want moved and stored until I get my new place. In the mean time I'll be living in that." Tom pointed to the Class A motor home just pulling into the driveway. It was towing a small SUV.

"Thanks for the sale, Phil. You should do good here. I know we did." With that, Tom walked over to and entered the motor home. The man driving pulled around the circle drive and went back onto the county road, with Tom in the front passenger seat.

Phil shook his head and then turned to the two hired hands. "Okay. Let's get to work."

Tom directed the delivery driver where to turn. The county had put in, over several objections, a pair of culverts in the deep drainage ditch that ran alongside the short side of the fifteen acres.

"Here?" asked the driver. "You sure? There ain't nuten' here."

"I'm sure," Tom replied with a smile. That emptiness would soon change, though not by as much as one might think, considering Tom's plans. Always comfortable with money, both hanging on to it and spending it when he wanted, Tom's spending plan, though large, was well thought out and would result in another showcase place. Not a farm, but still a showcase.

The driver pulled around and parked where Tom indicated. He reached down and picked up the microphone of the Cobra 148 GTL CB radio. It took a moment, but he finally contacted his return ride. They'd lost her twenty miles back, but had been in contact the entire time. She was only fifteen minutes behind.

The driver helped Tom unhitch the SUV from the motor home. It wasn't termed that when it was built in 1986. The GMC Jimmy fired right up and Tom reached down and pulled the cable control on first the rear driveline disconnect and then on the front one. He drove around a bit to make sure everything was working as it should. Tom had asked for the driveline disconnects to be installed on the Jimmy when he bought it over the internet, so it could be towed at speed by the motor home.

The return vehicle, huge one-ton Dodge dually pickup that made the Jimmy look like a toy pulled in beside the motor home and the delivery driver got in. Tom waved as the woman drove away, with the delivery driver in the passenger seat.

Tom went into the refurbished GMC 26' motor home and looked it over in detail. When he was investigating motor homes on the internet he'd run across the several GMC motor home sites and decided that new wasn't necessarily better. And he remembered seeing them so many years ago. A bit of nostalgia convinced him to look for one, despite the age.

It had taken a while, but Tom lucked onto just what he was looking for. It was a 1973 deluxe model, basically. The engine, drive train, and body were rebuilt to original standards and a custom interior installed, with a custom exterior paint scheme.

What sold Tom on the particular machine was that it was for sale, and it was set up for one person, long road trips. It would do nicely for his retirement, Tom decided, both as temporary residence while his new house was built, and for the occasional trip when the house was finished.

"Might even go see the kids," Tom thought as he stepped back outside. Looking at the Jimmy, and then the motor home again, Tom suddenly realized a factor that he hadn't thought about consciously, but had probably entered into his decision to buy older models. They were non-electronic engines. Not the most powerful, nor the most efficient, compared to new computer controlled systems, but they could be kept running no matter what. Even an EMP.

EMP was something new to him. He'd run across it once while just randomly browsing the internet. That led him to several survival and prep sites. He'd read avidly at the time, and now realized that much of that prep information was part of his natural life style, and was part of the reasons he was making the choices he was making. He smiled suddenly. So be it. He was a prepper whether he wanted to be or not.

The refurbishing of the GMC motor home included state of the art electronics for everything except the drive engine and the generator engine and their controls. The GMC was wired for high speed WiFi internet access, plus had a dual purpose small dish satellite system for both TV and high speed internet.

After a trip to town in the Jimmy to his rental storage room, Tom got on his laptop after deploying the satellite antenna and making a couple of telephone calls on his cellular phone. He had internet. With preps in mind, Tom began to review the decisions he'd made. "Well. That's good, then," he said after a while. Everything he'd already decided upon was practically suited for a new to the term prepper. He'd only need to add a few things. He wouldn't really need to change anything of the basic plan.

He showed up in the Jimmy for the coffee klatch the next morning, drawing some long looks. "Hey, Tom, did you take a low ball offer?" It was Mace Jenkins. He'd wanted the farm in the worst way and his had been one of the early offers.

"Nope. Got my full price," Tom replied.

"Then what's with the old Jimmy. I know you didn't get a new rig every year, but you usually had something from the same century. Well, except for your parade stuff."

Tom smiled again. "I'm old. I like old things."

There was some discussion, but everyone took Tom at his word. It wasn't like he hadn't done similar things in the past.

Tom continued to attend the morning meetings for a while, until the work started on his fifteen acres. When a Tom plan comes together, it comes together with a vengeance. Seven different contractors showed up one Monday, with their respective equipment. There was more than a bit of confusion, not to mention a touch of heated discussion among what were often competitors for the same work.

"If you contacted us all just to get one of us out here..." said one of the contractors.

It was the beginning of a threat of some kind, Tom knew, but he cut the man off. "Of course not. Each of your companies has a distinct job to do. I want it done fast, so there will be several projects going on at once.

Tom took all of the foremen with him around the property and pointed out what he wanted each one to do, and explained what each of the others would be doing at the same time. Everyone cooled down and the crews were soon at work. Just before noon, a chemical toilet company showed up and dropped off three porta-potties for the crews to use.

As the first of two wells was being drilled, the foundation was being dug for the earth sheltered concrete dome home that would be installed. At the same time, a large pond was being excavated, the earth removed to be used to shelter the dome and other buildings. The pond would be kept full with one of the wells, and well stocked with fish.

Another contractor was installing a large conventional septic system, while another was installing a smaller one not too far away. A small time contractor was preparing the ground for the three outbuildings Tom wanted. They too would be earth sheltered domes, but would not have basements like the house would.

Portions of fences were going up, leaving working space for the other projects. The rest of the fences would be installed at a later stage, but Tom wanted everything done as quickly as possible. His newly realized prepper standing, and subsequent perusal of news other than just farm related news, and the headlines on the major networks, had put an urgency even greater than his natural one on getting the project completed.

The fifteen acres, excluding the existing orchard portion, was abuzz with activity for over three months. But before Thanksgiving rolled around, the final touches were put on the final projects and Tom has his new prep homestead. The rental generator that provided power for the construction phase was shut down and the rental company truck towed it to the city. Tom flipped a switch and smiled. The solar PV system and the wind powered generator had the batteries charged and he had his off grid power system going.

The property was at the back end of the farm, completely surrounded by other farms. The county road did go past it, but the gravel road saw very little traffic, serving only the surrounding farms for the most part.

That suited Tom just fine. Had even been part of the decision. Only a small handful of people had seen the construction going on, though many knew about it. With various contractors doing different portions of the work, no one single person knew everything about what was done, except for Tom himself.

One of the people that had a bit more information than the rest was the young farmer and his wife that had eighty acres on the opposite side of the road, down a quarter of a mile from Tom. Glen Masterson made extra money doing custom cabinetry. Tom had hired him to do the cabinets in the house and the storage units in the other buildings.

He'd known Glen from the coffee klatch, and other farming related gatherings and knew he needed the work. When Glen showed him a few examples, Tom agreed to hire him. He trusted him enough to build the major portions of a few things that Tom said he'd finish himself.

Glen was an astute young man and offered up a couple of suggestions for hidden latches and such, surprising Tom no end. He thought he'd been very clever not letting on what he was doing with some of the wood work and cabinetry.

"So you figured it out," Tom said.

"Kinda of obvious, to me, anyway. I doubt anyone else would ever figure them out, without having done the work I did. And you needn't worry. I've build a few hidden

compartments for other people that wanted a safe place to store something they didn't want on public display. I don't discuss them, and I won't discuss yours."

"Very well. Go ahead and finish up the process."

Glen nodded and said, "Thank you. I really need the work. Things are tough right now."

Tom knew it intellectually, but since he'd been insulated from much of those tough times by his personal economic policies, he hadn't really had it hit home. But he took a good look at Glen. The young man had lost weight. And he wasn't that big of a man to start with.

As Glen began to work again, Tom leaned against a door frame and began to talk farming. Glen seemed to be trying his best, but he admitted that things just weren't working for him. Besides his own cabinetry business, his wife, Elaine, was trying to get all the house cleaning jobs she could.

Glen suddenly looked over at Tom. "I wasn't... I'm not... trying to drum up business. I shouldn't be talking like this, anyway."

"Don't worry about it. I don't hire anyone I don't want to. I'm a believer that people are responsible for their own actions and should suffer the consequences of them."

Glen turned red, but went back to work without responding. When the job was finished a few days later, Tom, as casually as he was able, inquired about Elaine's prices for house cleaning.

"Tom, you don't have to. I shouldn't have said anything," Glen protested.

"I had a cleaning lady at the farm. She's too busy to take on this place. I need someone I can trust. And I've come to trust you."

"Oh. Well. I'll bring her around and let her take a look. I don't have any idea how she prices the work."

"You do that."

With the much smaller accommodations of the new dome home, versus the old rambling farm house, Tom knew he could take care of it himself. He just suddenly didn't want to. Better to have it done, and lend a hand to someone that deserved it.

It wouldn't have mattered much to Tom what the rate was, he would have hired Elaine anyway. But it was a good price, Tom knew. That was when he added a few things to what he might want done. Such as help with picking and canning fruit from the orchard and the new berry patches he'd put in, as well from the garden he would be growing the next year, plus what the four greenhouses would produce. He'd need some help in the green houses, too, he decided.

"Oh, my, Mr. DeMassey! I'm not sure I could do all that by myself! Especially now that I'm pregnant."

“I see. Why don’t you talk it over with Glen and see what he says. Maybe he’d want to help. Or you could hire a helper for the heavy work. Someone we could both trust. I really don’t want to overdo it. I’m going to need the help. And call me Tom.”

“Well... Tom...” Elaine was looking at him thoughtfully. “We could sure use the work... I’ll talk to Glen and see what he says.”

“Good.” With that, Tom showed Elaine out, and watched her get into the old car she drove. Unlike Tom’s vintage vehicles, the car was not in that great of shape. Neither was the Dodge pickup that Glen used, Tom remembered.

Two days later Glen called and asked if he and Elaine could meet with Tom. Tom agreed, feeling the undertone of urgency in Glen’s voice. When they showed up, Tom immediately saw that Elaine was not feeling well. She was pale as a ghost and hung onto Glen’s arm for support.

“Mr. DeMassey... Tom,” Glen said, helping Elaine to a chair in the small living room of the dome home. “I’m afraid that Elaine isn’t going to be able to do the work for you. I’ll be glad to lend a hand whenever you need something done you don’t want to do yourself.”

“What’s wrong? Are you all right, Elaine?” Tom asked.

She nodded. “Just a bit of trouble with the baby.”

Tom looked at Glen sternly. “Has she been in to see the doctor?”

“We just can’t afford it. I’ll take her to the clinic if things...”

“Get worse?” Tom asked. “I think they just did.”

Elaine had bent over in pain. Glen jumped up. “I have to get her to the clinic...”

“Stay calm,” Tom said. He was already dialing 911. “The ambulance crew is top notch,” he said to the couple. “They’ll be here before we can get you to the clinic. Or emergency room.”

Glen paled slightly at the mention of the emergency room. Where was the money going to come from? But he didn’t protest. He couldn’t stand to see Elaine in pain. And it was risking the baby they’d been trying for since they’d married three years before.

Tom was right about the ambulance crew. They made it there quick and they were good. Two worked on Elaine, now lying on the floor, while the third talked to Glen. When insurance was mentioned, Tom spoke up before Glen could.

“My insurance will cover it. She works for me as cleaning lady and kitchen help.”

“But...” was all Glen got out of his mouth before a sharp look from Tom shut him up. He watched as Tom gave the paramedic the insurance information. Glen was pretty sure that the insurance wouldn’t cover Elaine, but he wasn’t going to argue. Elaine needed help, now, and Tom was making that possible.

Glen rode in the ambulance with Elaine and Tom followed in the Jimmy. Elaine was immediately checked into the hospital from the emergency room. Tom made a beeline to the admissions desk to forestall any problems about money for the treatment.

“Sir, your insurance will not cover...”

“I know. I know. I just wanted her in here as quickly as possible. They don’t have medical insurance and Elaine will be working for me when she can. I’ll guarantee the payment. Do everything you can to let them think the insurance is covering it.”

The clerk didn’t like it, but Tom pulled out his debit card and handed it to her. “Put the initial charges on this. I think you’ll find it adequate.”

“Very well. This is irregular, but as long as you make payment, we’ll be happy.”

“Don’t worry. I’m good for it,” Tom said and then hurried back to be with Glen. He was beside himself. Elaine had not even been taken to a room. She’d gone immediately into surgery.

“What am I going to do? This is all my fault. I just couldn’t provide...”

“Take it easy, Glen. She and the baby will be all right. I can feel it,” Tom said gently. He went to get Glen some coffee and found him talking to a doctor when he returned.

Glen began to smile. He turned to Tom eagerly and said, “It’s minor, after all that. But it could have been serious if we hadn’t brought her in. Thank you, Tom.”

“It’s okay. Can’t have my new hired hands marking time in a hospital.”

“Hired hands?” Glen asked. “We can’t...”

“Sure you can. We’ll work out the details later. You just go see about Elaine and don’t worry about finances right now.”

“But...”

“Go!”

Glen nodded and followed the doctor down the hall.

Three days later Elaine and Glen were again at Tom’s place. Elaine and Glen both looked much better than they had that afternoon at the hospital. “Tom,” Glen said, with Elaine holding his arm, “We don’t know how to thank you. Or repay you.”

Tom shrugged. “You can both work for me, for a fair wage, when I need help. That’s all I ask in return for lending a hand when you need it.”

“Elaine can’t do much right now, and I’m still trying to get the soybeans out. My old combine isn’t working right now and I don’t have the money to fix it or hire the beans harvested.”

“Sit down. I have a proposition for you,” Tom said.

“We can’t take any more charity,” Elaine said quickly.

“It’s not charity. Don’t believe in it. Lending a hand, that gets passed on down the line or even returned in kind is what I believe in. Now, I’ve got this place much like I want it. But I’m a crop farmer. Don’t know anything about raising cattle, pigs, or even chickens. Glen, you mentioned your degree was in animal husbandry. Yet you don’t raise any stock.”

“Again, reality raises its ugly head. It’s a lack of money. I’d like to turn the farm into a stock farm, growing my own feed, rather than raising commercial crops. But everything is so expensive... I’m barely keeping our heads above water doing what I’m doing.”

“Well, for a guaranteed return in fresh meat and dairy products, I’m willing to lend a hand, if the two of you would consider converting to stock, the way you want to.”

“You can buy all the meat and dairy you want,” Glen said. “Why would you want to go to all the trouble of helping start a stock farm, right after you’ve retired?”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Tom said, dropping his voice a bit and leaning forward conspiratorially.

The two looked at him curiously as he continued. “I think that commercial sources of food are going to be very difficult to get in the near future. Just watch the news. Not just main stream media, but alternative news sources, too.

“Farmers are running into trouble already getting the supplies they need, at a price they can afford...”

“Tell me about it,” Glen snorted. Elaine hushed him.

“There are too many farms that are literally running on a shoestring, despite being huge operations. My small farm was very profitable, but that’s because decisions were made a long time ago about how it would be run. And when it came my turn to operate it, I based my operation on the same sound principles.

“But between weather, legislated restrictions, bad decisions, and a variety of other reasons, food production in this country is going to be way behind the curve on what is needed. I’m old and getting lazy. I don’t want to worry about where my next meal comes from. Not because I can’t afford it, I surely can, but that is if it is available. I want to be sure quality protein is available to me, and a few others, no matter what happens in the coming years.

“I’m willing to invest in you in return for that guaranteed return in food I mentioned.”

“Sounds too simple to be doable,” Glen said.

“What is the main caveat of buying and selling?” Tom asked.

“Well... You mean, buy low and sell high?” Glen asked.

“Exactly. Where are prices right now?”

Glen’s eyes widened. Though he couldn’t afford any, he kept up on stock prices, as well as crop prices. “They’re very low right now.”

“And with the crops just come in and still coming, what are stock feed prices like?”

“They’re low, too, with the short term surpluses,” Glen said, his eyes sparkling now.

“So, when would be the time to buy?”

“Now,” Glen said. He looked over at Elaine. “Do you see what he’s offering us?”

“Yes, Glen, but it sure smacks of indentured servitude,” Elaine replied. Then she looked at Tom. “Sorry if I seem difficult, but one of my ancestors was an indentured servant and poorly treated.”

“I understand. If you think you can trust me not to do that to you, the two of you talk it over and let me know if you want the deal. I will be making it with someone, now that I’ve cleared up the rough idea in my mind.”

The couple left, and Tom went about his daily routine. He decided that Glen and Elaine had decided to turn down the offer when Glen called and asked for another meeting. From the sound of his voice, Tom was going to hear what he wanted to hear.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later Glen and Elaine were shaking hands with Tom. They would convert to a stock farm, with Tom’s help, and he had a portion of the products for life, if the venture was successful. But it would be on a strict accounting, with the money spent tracked and just compensation made for work done by any of the three, that related to the farm.

“Sure thing. Does that mean you can be my cleaning lady? Things are really piling up,” Tom asked Elaine.

Elaine looked around. The place was spotless. “Sure,” she said. “Wouldn’t want you to trip over a dust mite.”

Tom grinned. The deal was set. The rest of the afternoon was spent making plans. Plans that nearly overwhelmed Elaine and Glen. As usual, Tom had decided to do things up right. Glen Masterson’s stock farm, though much smaller, and operated to raise beef, dairy, swine, and chickens, for food, and horses for riding, would be equipped and operated on the same principles as Tom’s family farm had.

When Glen asked about the financing, Tom calmly told him what his part of this year’s crop from the farm he’d sold would be. Both Glen and Elaine gasped. “It’s a onetime thing,”

Tom explained. "Since three quarters of the work was done while I still owned the farm, I get that part of the profits for the year."

"You really did well on that farm, didn't you?" Elaine asked.

Tom just grinned.

Under Tom's expert tutelage, significant amount of sweat equity, Glen's long hard hours put in, and the expert work of a field mechanic, the team was able to get the rest of Glen's crops out of the fields and sold. It was enough to see the family through the winter and birth of their first child.

Tom insisted on tilling the soil and planting cover crops, paying for all of it himself, to keep the fields in good condition until the final decision was made as to what animal feed crops would be planted and how they would be rotated.

That kept all three busy through spring. Elaine took the paid maternity leave that Tom insisted she take, keeping the Masterson's income up enough to live on without using any of Tom's money for personal expenses.

Much as Tom's place had been mobbed by contractors the previous summer and fall, the Masterson's farm was mobbed beginning early in the spring. The simple house was remodeled, a moderate barn complex built, fences installed, storage for what was needed to grow feed and storage for the feed after it was harvested built. So were processing and storage sheds for meat and dairy that didn't sell immediately.

A new well and septic system were installed for the farm house, and two irrigation wells drilled to provide water for the fields. Since the land wasn't graded and drained, center pivot irrigation systems were installed. They could handle the slight variations in the lay of the fields.

Some of Glen's equipment was refurbished, but most of it was sold, primarily for scrap, and equipment needed for the feed crops and to handle the stock was acquired. Not a single piece of the equipment was new. Tom and the internet saw to that. But everything that was purchased, no matter how old, was put into perfect running shape.

As hay became available, it was purchased and stored. The same with grain. The farm wouldn't be producing any of either the first year of production and Tom wanted everything ready to bring animals in when the prices dropped again.

Disenchanted with Phil Phillips, both of Tom's old hands signed on eagerly with Glen. Neither was too experienced with stock operations, but between Glen's experience as a youth, and his education, he could train them to do everything needed doing that they didn't already know how to do. Tom quit doing the hands on work, beginning to really feel close to his age.

A year and a half after the initial agreement was made, the first of the grain and hay crops were sowed, and the small herds and flocks of cattle, swine, chickens, and horses began to birth the next generation.

Milking soon began on the freshened dairy cows, and the laying chickens were producing eggs. Keeping just enough for their own needs, the surplus was sold to the local stores. And Elaine was pregnant again. Thanksgiving that year was a happy one. Tom hosted it for the Mastersons and their hands, and the hands' families. Tom's family declined to come.

Christmas, on the other hand was a somber one. Just as Tom had suggested, the state of the economy was terrible. People were walking away from mortgages, millions were lost in the stock market. The masses were beginning to have trouble obtaining food, no matter what they offered to pay for it. Food was scarce. Farms were going out of business right and left.

Glen and Elaine tried to explain how grateful they were that Tom had taken an interest in them and prevented them from joining the ranks of the unemployed, homeless, and starving.

The new president was sworn in and the "stimulus" package was passed in congress. Life went on as normal at the farm and on Tom's acreage. Daylight savings time started again, St. Patrick's Day came and went, and spring officially started.

Then came March 30, 2009. People showed up at their banks on the east coast and couldn't get in. As the panic spread, it was finally announced that the President had declared a bank holiday of undetermined length. Ditto the stock market.

With those announcements came another. Precious metals were being recalled from private ownership. That included bullion coins and bullion jewelry with purchase dates after 1973. If there was no proof of purchase date the metals were assumed to have been purchased since then and were required to be turned in. The compensation would be approximately one-tenth of the spot price of Friday, March 27.

Only industrial users were allowed to keep a small working stockpile. Not only gold, but silver, platinum, palladium, and rhodium bullion were included in the recall.

It was the same day that North Korea tested an ICBM capable of hitting Hawai'i or Alaska. The South Koreans, the Japanese, and the US all tried to shoot it down. All three failed miserably. The conventional warhead exploded as it hit the water two-hundred miles off the coast of Alaska.

The US protested vehemently in the UN, and called for sanctions. China vetoed them and announced that she would back North Korea to the limit if any retaliatory actions took place. And to illustrate their resolution, all US debt owned by China was dumped on the world markets. There were no takers.

Two days later, with the banks and the US markets still closed, and the turn in of bullion not going well at all, with armed resistance to confiscation attempts of known gold holders, martial law was declared across the US, and gun and ammunition sales stopped.

By the weekend the gun and ammunition sales order had been amended to allow for confiscation of all weapons on the 1994 AWB, with several additions, plus any weapons in the hands of anyone resisting the precious metals recall.

Three states declared their secession from the Republic on the 6th of April. Texas, Oklahoma, and Nevada. They were the first. A dozen more began to vote on the legislation.

The President called for UN troops, and under prior agreements with Canada, asked for military assistance to control order and stop the violence that was breaking out all over the United States.

Well, it just made too good of a target to pass up for those bearing a grudge against the US. US troops were already fighting other US troops on US soil. China launched ICBM's first. The first detonation was Washington, D. C., at just after 3:00 AM, April 9th. Then Russia fired on China, the US, and Europe.

Iran's three nukes were launched at Israel. Israel launched their bombers with the intention of settling the mid-east problems forever. They were nearly successful.

Indian and Pakistani troops were battling one another face to face in the fallout from their exchange of nukes.

Great Britain and France retaliated against Russia. So did Germany, much to Russia's surprise, as well as to the surprise of the French, who Germany also hit with their small, previously unknown nuclear arsenal.

Another unknown nuclear power, Japan, tried for the elimination of any threats from China, Russia, and Korea, and wound up with seven nukes from Russia and China on their soil for their trouble.

The President unleashed the US nuclear arsenal. Quite a few of the nuclear devices went to entirely new targets that had never been on the target list the US kept updated. The President had made sure the target changes were made shortly after he took office.

It was total global thermonuclear warfare. Even South America, Africa, and Australia took a few nukes, mostly French and Chinese, each with an eye on future colonization. There were more than a few US nukes that hit South America and Africa.

Millions of US citizens woke up late, due to the fact that their electric clocks had stopped working during the early morning hours. Of course, Millions didn't wake up, having died in the first few seconds of the Chinese attack, followed my millions more as more missile warheads detonated.

Power was off, telephone lines were dead, the internet was no more. HEMP devices and the EMP from other air and ground bursts had done irreparable damage. Only reconstruction would bring the utilities back.

With no power in most places, there was no water, no sewer, no heat, and no air conditioning.

Tom slept through the attack on the United States. He woke at his usual time of 5:00 AM and didn't notice anything wrong until he tried the TV. Dead. The computer would work, but he

couldn't access the internet. He tried his cellular phone. Out. Even though he'd been watching the news carefully the last few days, it simply didn't register at first what must have happened.

When he did realize the probable truth, Tom decided against breakfast. He grabbed his jacket and hat and went to the garage. His power system was still working and the garage door in front of the Jimmy rose almost silently. The Jimmy started and Tom was on his way to the Masterson farm.

His banging on the front door brought Glen to it in his jockey shorts, baseball bat in hand. "Tom! What's going on? You look like you've seen a ghost. Hey. The power must be off."

"Exactly!" Tom said, edging past Glen into the house. "We've been nuked. I'm sure of it. Get Elaine and the girls up. Then we have to tend to the stock."

"What? Nukes?"

"Honey, what is going on down there?" came Elaine's voice from upstairs.

"Tom says we've been nuked. The US, that is."

Both men heard a little scream, and then Elaine's loud cry, "The babies!"

"There's no fallout, yet," Tom began to explain to Glen. "Depending on when the attack occurred, and how wide spread it is and what was hit, we might have more than enough time to get the animals under shelter, and then ourselves. But Elaine and the girls come first."

"Okay. Okay." Glen said absently. He was obviously thinking. "I'll get dressed and we'll get started."

Both men looked outside when a car horn sounded loud and long. It was Crandall Crane and his family in Crandall's old Suburban. The Suburban was towing Pete Stevens' minivan, with Pete and his family inside.

Crandall jumped out of the Suburban as soon as he had it stopped. "Can we take shelter in the barn?" he yelled up to the house. "We've been nuked!"

"We know," Tom yelled back. "We need you two to help with the animals and then I'll take you to my place. I have a better shelter than the barn here."

Having learned to trust Tom, and not too surprised at his answer, both of the men spoke to their wives and children and then took off for the barn complex. Tom headed that way, too, as Glen called for the two families to come up to the house. He ran upstairs to get dressed, and fill Elaine in on what was happening.

Tom, with Glen's help on what the animals needed normally, had designed the barns for just such a possibility. The four connected earth sheltered domes would hold all the animals on the farm without undue crowding. The hands made sure that there was enough feed available to them for at least a month. The automatic waterers, fed from a roof tank kept full, would provide enough water for the same time frame.

Glen showed up a few minutes later and began to help. "I always wondered why you wanted the water tank on the roof," he told Tom. "You never really said."

"Yeah. Well, the thought that something like this might happen did cross my mind at the time. Without a power system like mine, water for the animals would have been difficult proposition here. Is Elaine up? And the babies?"

Glen nodded. "She's helping with the families. Trying to calm them down. She was nearly hysterical until I told her about your fallout shelter."

"You figured that out, too, hunh?"

"Yep. And I'm so glad you did it."

"Yeah. Okay. The animals are set for at least a month," Tom said as Crandall and Pete ran up, breathing hard.

Glen was the last one out of the barn and he closed and fastened the doors, thankful for Tom's foresight. If they got fallout, without the barn being earth sheltered, all the animals would surely die.

Elaine, the two girls in travel seats being tended by Crandall's oldest daughter, was helping the other two women carry things from the house to the driveway. Glen hurried to his truck. It was far from new, but it did have a computer. It wouldn't start. He turned stricken eyes on Tom.

"The Jimmy. Load up in the Jimmy."

Glen nodded and everyone pitched in to put everything in the back of the SUV. It was full up, with the babies strapped in the rear seats. Elaine sat on Gene's lap as Tom headed back to his place, Crandall following, towing Pete's family in the minivan.

The sun was just coming up. It was a very ugly sunrise and Tom decided that there was no mistake. Nuclear devices had been detonated and put tons of particulate matter into the atmosphere. And some of it was headed their way, unless he was totally wrong.

The cloud was nearing them when Tom led the way onto his property. By the time they had everyone and everything unloaded and moved into the house, the fallout had started. Tom ushered everyone into the basement, the entirety of which was a PF 10,000 shelter.

Moving over to the remote reading radiation survey meter Tom took a look. The needle was just coming off the peg on the lowest scale, but there was no doubt about it. They were getting radioactive fallout.

Tom helped the other men bring down the items each of the families had brought with them. He shook his head. It was a good thing he had the shelter well stocked. The eclectic collection of things he was looking at would help very little in the shelter stay. At least they'd all brought some clothing with them.

It took a while to get everyone straightened out and familiarized with the shelter and its features. It took a while to convince a couple of them that they were, in fact, safe in the basement, despite it looking like any other ordinary basement they'd been in.

The three grown women set about making breakfast, using up some of the fresh food that all three had brought from their home refrigerators and freezers, the rest going into the shelter's large refrigerator and freezer. The three teens kept an eye on the five smaller ones, including the two babies.

Tom kept himself busy checking all the shelter systems to see that they were working properly. Crandall interrupted him when he asked, "How come you have power when no one else does?"

"My off-grid power system survived the EMP. At least the solar part of it did. Won't know about the generators for a little while. Don't want to start them up while there is still the possibility of more attacks."

"You think there might be more than what we already got?" Pete asked.

"Don't know what we have been hit with. Only that there was a huge EMP, probably a HEMP device, plus enough ground bursts to our west to cause the fallout we're getting. Many people think it will all be over in one exchange. I'm not so sure about that."

"I sure hope there aren't any more," Pete whispered.

"Yeah," added Crandall.

Life for Tom's newly extended family became boringly routine over the next month. Tom, with the thought that just perhaps his family might someday become closer, had made provisions for entertainment for all ages. The stay was the hardest on the three teens, especially Ricky, Pete and Sharon's fifteen year old. The two girls pitched in and helped with the cooking, cleaning, and babysitting, ushering Ricky out whenever he tried to offer to help.

Tom found in the boy a kindred spirit, assigning him several important duties that he might have reserved to Glen, Pete, or Crandall. It perked Ricky up and he was very careful to follow Tom's instructions exactly.

Finally, worry about the animals on the farm had Tom getting ready to go out to check on them. Glen insisted on going, as well. Crandall and Pete would go, but showed no great liking of the idea. Ricky was eager to go, but Pete and Tom wouldn't hear of it.

Tom took Glen aside on the day they were going to go to the farm. Tom showed Glen the protective gear he had stored for such time and led Glen through the donning and using of the respirator.

Then he opened the vault door that was in an out of the way corner of the shelter. It opened into a small concrete walled room. "Guns? You think we'll need guns?" Glen asked softly, glancing over at Elaine. "Elaine is kind of anti-gun."

"Well, she'll have to accept our taking them, even if she decides not to have one of her own."

Glen nodded. Tom had done too much for him and his family for Glen to make an issue of it.

"What do you want to take?" Tom asked then and Glen looked over the collection in Tom's gun safe.

"Wow! You have a bunch!"

"Kind of a hobby, even though I haven't shot much lately. If you aren't much of a shooter we'd better keep it something simple, light, and low recoil."

"That would probably be best," Glen replied. "All I've ever shot was a twenty-two."

"Well, this is a .223. Good cartridge, for shooting varmints. Didn't like it in the M-16 I carried my second tour in Viet Nam. Wanted something to shoot it with, since there should be plenty of ammunition out there for it, though. This is a MSAR STG-556 clone of the Steyr AUG. Don't really need all the details. Just that it is a bull-pup, the magazine goes here, the safety is here, and the bullet comes out here."

Glen smiled slightly and took the weapon. It was lighter than he expected. "Got an FMCO eight-magazine vest for it in the accoutrements section. The vest and belt combination will have everything you need. We'll check you out on it after we go topside."

Glen nodded. His curiosity aroused, he asked, "What are the others you have here?"

With more than a bit of pride of possession, Tom described the other arms in the vault. "Well, as you can see, three more of the MSARs." Tom looked at Glen. "I like redundancy."

"So I see."

"Okay. Over here we have .30-'06 M1 Garands. My dad carried one in World War II and bought one when they became available after the war. I picked up another so I'd have two. And these four beauties are Springfield Armory M1As.

"I told you I didn't like the M-16 I carried in my second tour in Viet Nam. Well, on my first tour I carried the M-14 and fell in love with it. The M1As are semi-auto only, but that's okay. The one drawback of the M-14 was that it was very difficult to control in full-auto, without a special stock. To me it ruined the lines of the rifle. So when I was able I bought four of the Springfield Armory models not long after they began making them. I have a standard M-6 bayonet for each one.

“Just like having the AUG clones to use 5.56x45mm, I wanted something that would take the 7.62x39 Russian round. So I picked up these six SKS carbines, and the four AK-47s you see.

“Now here we have the modern equivalent of what my grandfather carried in World War I. He used a Winchester Model 1897 pump with the M1917 bayonet. I don’t care for pumps, and since the reliability factor has gone way up on semi-autos, I decided to set up trench guns using Remington 11-87 12-gauge 26” barrel models. The 26” is the shortest barrel that Remington makes with the pressure compensating gas system. Plus it is threaded for interchangeable choke tubes.

“But the longer length has some advantages. These all have 4-round magazine extension tubes, providing for nine rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. The screw-in Poly-Choke gives from 2x open to 2x full, with the twist of a wrist. I can use just about any regular round in these, except for the very lightest target loads and they will cycle the action.

“Now, on these two, I have a couple of one-off dealer sample 11” bayonets I lucked into on the internet. The other two have Marine OKC-3S bayonets. The bayonet adapters I got on the internet, too. The nose on the magazine extensions were crafted by my gunsmith to take the ring of the bayonets.

“Each one carries an 8-round sidesaddle, has 4 more shells in the Speed-feed butt stock, and 6 rounds in the elastic carrier on the butt. I was a bit leery of the Speed-feed stock holding the shells. The cuff makes sure they don’t come out until I want them.

“There are two of the same model 11-87s without the extras, except for the Poly-Choke. They are my primary shotgun hunting guns.

“A couple of early import HK-91s and two recent PTR-91s that take the same magazines and accessories. I like them almost as much as the M1As, but not quite. I managed to acquire a large supply of the 20-round alloy magazines for them. All four have port buffers and polymer recoil buffers. As you can see, the two HKs have their standard bipod, and the standard receiver sight, while the PTR-91s have picatinny rails with aftermarket bipods and combination green laser, white light, and conventional scope assemblies on the QD top mounts. I have one third generation night vision scope for this PTR-91 on its own mount. It’s the best shooter of the four.

“A really expensive night scope goes on this. Which, as you can see, I only have one of. It’s a Vigilance VR-1 .338 Lapua semi-auto sniper rifle. I have a Leupold Mark 4 8.5-25 scope with BORS ballistic computer on it for daylight shooting. It’s my 500 yard plus shooter. That’s a sound suppressor on the end of the barrel. Cost me the tax stamp, and had to get investigated by the feds and the locals, but I was able to get it.

“The .30-’06 and .308 rifles are excellent to about there, and will actually shoot to a thousand yards, but the .338 Lapua has a much bigger punch at the further ranges. I have been planning on getting a Barrett M-82A1 .50 BMG semi-auto rifle, but just never got around to it. Guess I’ve lost my chance, now.

“Then we have the odds and ends. My poor man’s sniper rifle, for moderate range daylight use. An H&R/NEF single shot Handi-rifle in .30-’06. It’s also my main hunting rifle. The scope cost almost as much as the rifle, but the combination is exemplary. It’ll shoot anything

from .32 ACPs in chamber adapters, to 55 grain .30-'06 Accelerators all the way up to 220 grain full power rounds.

“There’s a set of H&R/NEF Partner single shot shotguns in 10-gauge 3½” Magnum, 12-gauge 3½” Magnum, and 20-gauge 3” magnum. Have a set of Gauge-Mate adapters in 10-gauge to 16-gauge, 12-gauge to 24-gauge, 12-gauge to 28-gauge, 20-gauge to 32-gauge, and 20-gauge to .410 bore. That set of three guns and five adapters will allow me to shoot any modern conventional shotshell currently loaded.

“Another set of H&R/NEF shotguns. There are two each of the Condor Supreme over-and-under shotguns in 12-gauge and 20-gauge. They have single selective triggers and can take these insert barrels to make a combo gun out of them.

“I have pairs of .30-30, .45-70, and .22 Hornet insert barrels so I can have two of a combo, or a double rifle in any of the three calibers.

“On to the handguns. My Grandfather’s Colt 1911A1, my Dad’s Colt 1911A1, and my pair of Colt 1911A1s. All kept pretty much standard military issue, except with 10-round magazines to supplement the 7-rounders.

“A pair of Para-Ordnance P-14 1911 style high capacity .45 ACPs, a P-12, and a P-10 Warthog. The two more compact guns will take the P-14 14-round magazines in addition to their own 12-round or 10-round magazines.

“Six Glock Model 21SF .45ACP pistols, four Glock Model 31’s in .357 Sig and four Glock Model 17s in 9mm.

“Six model CZ52 7.62x25mm mil-surp pistols that I got a great deal on one time.

“A variety of other smaller caliber handguns that I like to shoot from time to time for fun.

“Four Ruger 10/22 .22 rim fire rifles with plenty of factory 10-round magazines and 25-round aftermarket magazines.

“Six different models of the Ruger Mark series of .22 rim fire pistols.

“And my very expensive custom Jeff Cooper inspired Scout rifle. Doesn’t follow his recommendations exactly, for it is a bit longer and just a bit heavier than he recommended, but the concept is the same. A compact, hard hitting gun able to take down a human or large game animal at muzzle range to at least 300 yards.

“Most scout rifles are in .308. I chose the .350 Remington Magnum for a number of reasons you probably aren’t interested in. The gun is based on the Browning BLR lever action, with elements of the Savage 99 rotary magazine, and the Johnson 1941 rifle magazine and magazine charging system.

“This beauty holds ten .350 Remington Magnum cartridges, fed by 5-round stripper clip. Since the loading and ejection are both to the right side I was able to mount the Leupold Mark 4 1-3x14 CQ/T close quarter/tactical riflescope on the receiver on tip over mounts, rather than a

long eye relief scope mounted forward. This is another trade off with Cooper's recommendations. He liked the idea of the long eye relief scope because it allows better peripheral vision for most people. It was a tradeoff I decided on because I'm right handed and left eye dominate. I can't shoot with both eyes open, anyway. With the scope tipped to the left side the ghost ring peep sight is usable.

"And, like the VR-1, the Scout Rifle is suppressed. But the suppressor is integral with the barrel, thus the fat look. And of course, the 10-round rotary magazine gives the gun a pregnant looking belly. Another investigation and more tax stamps, but the smith was able to incorporate the suppressor legally."

"Whew!" Gene said when Tom stopped talking, "You sure know your guns."

"Yep. But they aren't any good without ammunition. And clips and magazines where required." Tom pointed at can after can and box after box of ammunition stacked waist high along one wall of the vault. "Loaded stripper clips, en-bloc clips, and magazines there, and boxed ammunition beside them.

"And here are the various load bearing equipments. Mostly FMCO CVS-M10 vests tailored for each gun and magazine, en-bloc clip, stripper clip, or single round loading system. A quick release/attachment small back pack is included that will hold a hydration pouch. Each vest has a pistol belt attached with canteens, handgun holster, handgun magazine pouches, first-aid kit, dump-pouch, survival kit, and butt pack. I keep one set for each type or configuration of gun set up for myself with Cold Steel Oda field knives, stainless steel canteens, pistol holster, hydration bladder, poncho and liner and some food and other things. The rest use GI plastic canteens, but most of the rest items must be pulled from my supply shelves, there.

"They are mostly for local use and short exploratory patrols. If we have to go any distance on foot I have a variety of Kifaru military back packs set up for that. Plus there are eight Cabela's Super Mag Game carts with dual wheels that can carry seven hundred pounds of gear for cases where it might be needed. Also eight Kifaru pulk sleds for the same reason if it is winter with snow on the ground.

"Now, you have two choices for the MSAR AUG clone. Either eight 42-round magazines, plus one in the carbine, or four Beta C-Mag 100-round dual drum magazines, with one in the gun. For what we're doing the 42-rounders are the choice. I have the Beta drums for close in, high firepower situations. The same with the 100-round drums for the M1As.

"I'll be taking the Scout Rifle with ten rounds in it and 200 in the vest in four pouches, each with ten 5-round stripper clips, and a Para-Ordnance P-14. Until we get you checked out on a pistol, I think you'd be better off with just the carbine. I can run you through the workings once we get outside.

"Take a look at the shelves there and pick out what you want to take with you on the vest and we'll get the molle pouches attached to the pistol belt and loaded up."

It took a few minutes more of Glen mostly asking questions and Tom making suggestions, but finally Glen had a set of LBE for the STG-556 with enough other gear and supplies to stay out for three days.

“We won’t be out nearly that long unless something happens,” Tom told Glen. “The radiation level is still too high. But if we were to have to stay at the barns for some reason we have enough to get us through until we can make it back.”

Glen nodded. He followed Tom out of the vault and Tom closed it and spun the combination lock. Glen saw Elaine staring at him. “It’s something I need to do. We can discuss it later,” he said quietly, after going over to speak to her privately.

Elaine didn’t say anything and Glen turned away, to follow Tom out of the basement shelter, up into the dome home. They did a quick survey of the place. It had not been disturbed in any way in the month they’d been in the shelter. It was the same around the rest of the property.

Both men wore dosimeters so they would have a record of how much radiation they received, and Tom carried a CDV-715 survey meter to check for hot spots. The readings were high enough for Tom not to waste any time.

He had Glen wait outside while he went into the garage and started the Jimmy and opened the garage door. When he pulled out and closed the garage door, Glen got into the Jimmy in the passenger seat, keeping the muzzle of the STG-556 pointed out the window.

There was nothing to see except the bare fields. Only a few had been prepared for planting before the attack. There were no other vehicles in sight, nor people or animals. Both men were silent during the short drive to the farm. Tom was cautious again, stopping the Jimmy at the driveway.

“Get behind the wheel, Glen,” he said. “I’m going to do a preliminary survey. If I come running, you get ready to get us out of here.”

Glen nodded and went around to get back into the Jimmy after Tom exited. Glen watched Tom as Tom approached the house. He was crouched ever so slightly, and Glen thought his head looked like it was on a well lubed swivel. Tom’s head and eyes never stopped moving as he went around the back of the house.

Glen sat up straight, worried a bit with Tom out of sight. But Tom showed up again on the other corner of the house. Then he disappeared inside. When Tom came out a few minutes later, he waved for Glen to bring the Jimmy up.

“Everything is okay,” Tom said. “Let’s check the barns.”

Glen covered Tom, who went into the big barn first. Though they couldn’t tell, with the respirators in place, the barn stank from the accumulation of waste on the floor. The animals shied a bit at the appearance of the two men, but quickly quieted down when Glen began to add feed to what was left of the grain and hay they had put out when they closed the animals in.

The animals wanted out when the doors were opened for light and ventilation. The two men kept any from getting out as they shoveled out the waste from the floor of the barns.

Sadly, they had to take a dead calf and two small pigs outside that had died, probably from being trampled or just starved, being as small as they were, unable to get their fair share of food. Half a dozen chickens were dead, pecked to bloody bits by the other chickens. Tom took them outside, too, as Glen cleaned the waterers and then checked the water tank on the roof. It was still a quarter full.

“Let’s go ahead and fire up the jenny,” Tom said. “Might as well fill the tank. We might not come back for another month.”

Glen nodded and went to the compartment that housed the barn generator. It fired right up and a couple minutes later the barn well pump was putting water into the tank again. Once the tank was full, the men added a bit more feed to the ready supplies and went back outside.

“Uh... Elaine asked me to get some things from the house...” Glen said rather hesitatingly.

“Sure. No problem. But don’t waste any time. Doesn’t matter too much for me to get a dangerous dose of radiation. I’ll probably be dead before any cancer can set in. But you’ve got a long life ahead of you. I don’t want you risking your health more than necessary.”

Glen wanted to argue, but Tom walked away, going to the Jimmy. With a frown, Glen went into the house. He came out several minutes later carrying two laundry baskets, stacked one on top of the other, filled with clothing.

“That’s it,” Glen said.

Both men entered the Jimmy and Tom headed back to his property. The radios they were carrying sounded and Glen answered his wife’s call about where they were.

“We’re about back,” Glen said. “Just a few more minutes. And I got the things you wanted.”

“Okay. I was just worried... The guns and all...”

“No problems at all, Elaine. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

They thoroughly decontaminated each other, for both radiation reasons and from having handled the dead animals and the waste from the barns. Glen carried the baskets downstairs. Elaine met him and he almost dropped them when she tried to hug him. Her eyes were full of tears.

“It’s all right, Elaine,” Glen said as he tried to sooth her fears. “Not a thing happened. We only lost a handful of animals. The rest are in good shape. We cleaned the barns and added more feed and water. They’ll be fine for another month.”

“I wasn’t worried about the animals,” Elaine said softly. “It’s the guns. Guns bring trouble.”

Glen handed Tom the STG-556 and the LBE and took Elaine aside to talk to her privately. Ricky was right there and Tom handed him Glen's weapons and accoutrement. He had been busy when the vault door was open before, but this time he got a look inside. Ricky gasped and said, "Man! You got enough guns for an Army!"

"Let's hope we don't need them," Tom said, putting everything away as Ricky looked around, fascinated.

"Can I shoot some of them sometime?" Ricky asked finally, as Tom locked the vault again. "I shoot my dad's twenty-two and the twenty-gauge bird gun."

"That'll be up to your parents," Tom replied. It seemed to satisfy Pete and Sharon, who had noticed Ricky's interest. Much lower, Tom added, "I'll see what I can do."

A happy Ricky went back to monitoring the radio and the CDV-717 radiation meter. They'd heard a few things on various radio bands, but nothing local. And nothing at all that indicated an intact US Government, much less any infrastructure. But they all kept hoping.

An Old Man And His Tractor - Chapter 2

The radiation was soon low enough to spread out into Tom's entire earth sheltered dome home, after the four men went outside and decontaminated the surface and the entire yard with fire hoses supplied by the diesel engine fire pump located at the pond.

The adults were allowed outside for a few minutes a day after that, with the teens allowed the same privilege a month later. Tom, Glen, and the two hired hands went to the farm and decontaminated the outside of the house, the yard, and the driveway before starting on the outsides of the barns. It was harder work, and took longer than at Tom's, because of the eighty acres that had to be decontaminated, too.

They had no other good choice except to scrape the surface of the fields and bury the top three inches of soil in one corner of the property to get rid of most of the contamination. Glen, Crandall, and Pete all marveled at the fact that they merely had to turn the keys on all of the equipment to get it started. Not a single piece of powered equipment had any electronics that EMP might have damaged.

One thing they didn't have was a scraper. But Tom knew where one was. At the site of his old farm house. Phillips had torn down the house to add a few more square feet of crop land to his holdings. All the trees that had been around the house and yard had been cut down and the stumps dug out for the same reason. So had all the carefully grown windbreaks that had been planted during the dust bowl to protect the fields from the wind and sand storms. Anything for a few more square feet of crop land.

Tom knew the only reason the fuel tanks, storage bins and barns, and equipment shed had not also been razed were the fact that Phil just hadn't had the money to do it. The crane was sitting there, un-used, ready for that fall when Phil would collect on the harvest. That didn't look like it was going to happen.

There wasn't anyone around when he drove the Jimmy onto the property for the first time since he'd left it. Ricky was riding with him, and Pete and Crandall were following on Glen's two tractors.

Sure enough, the pair of scrapers were still parked by the equipment shed. Phil had not gotten around to doing the last bit of contouring of the where the house and yard had been. Phil used massive equipment and had tractors big enough to pull up the tandem scrapers. Glen's tractors would only pull one each, and couldn't use them to full effectiveness. It took a few hours to separate the two scrapers and get them hooked up to the tractors.

When the job was about done, Tom walked over to the fuel tanks. One of the ten-thousand-gallon diesel tanks was empty. The other still over half full. The two-thousand-gallon gasoline tank was down to a third. Tom checked the storage shed. It didn't look like Phil had touched any of the Pri-D or Pri-G that Tom had religiously used to keep his fuel stocks fresh.

Tom debated with himself for a bit, but then called for Ricky to back the Jimmy over to the shed. Ricky was glad to comply. Tom treated him more like the man he knew he was now than his own parents did.

“Help me load up these cartons in the back of the Jimmy.” When Ricky looked a little reluctant Tom told him, “I’m leaving a note. I’ll pay Phil for the products, if he’s still alive.”

“Oh. Okay. We were just borrowing the scrapers. This...”

“I know. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, Ricky. Always think things through. There is usually an answer that will come to you.”

“Yeah. My dad says something like that, too.” The two moved the cases of one-gallon jugs of Pri-D and Pri-G to the Jimmy, after folding down the rear seats. It was squatting some when they finished. Tom was glad now he hadn’t bought the products in drums the way he’d thought about at one time. The gallon jugs were more expensive, but they were so much easier to handle.

Tom and Ricky followed the two tractors pulling the scrapers back to the Masterson Farm. Crandall and Pete went right to work scraping out a hole to hold the material from the field closest to the barns. The surface was set aside, to be put in the pit later. The good dirt was stockpiled to be put on the fields in low spots.

That first field cleaned would be seeded immediately to get some pasture going for the animals to supplement the stocks of hay and grain the farm had.

With things well in hand, Tom announced that he was going into town to look things over and try to find Phil Phillips to tell him about the borrowing of the scrapers and the “purchase” of the PRI products.

Everyone old enough objected to him going in alone, but the only real option was Ricky, and despite his willingness, Sharon said, “Absolutely not!” So Tom geared up again in his personal protective equipment, armed himself, and got into the Jimmy.

It turned out to be an interesting trip. There were far more vehicles out and about than he expected. But few of them were conventional cars and trucks. The predominate vehicles were older model tractors, with ATVs a close second. There were a few cars and trucks, however, all were old models, like Tom’s Jimmy.

People, the few that there were, were out and about, mostly armed, but rather friendly. Jimmy stopped at the diner. There was nothing on the menu, but it was being used as the local contact point. Peggy, the owner, filled Tom in on what had been going on in town the last few weeks. She looked pale and had a bandana over what was left of her hair.

“Bunch of us sheltered in the City Hall basement. We stripped the diner here of food. Tried to get more at the Piggly Wiggly, but old Hiram was shooting at anyone that came near. He never unlocked the store that morning. Been selling his stock a few cans or packages at a time. For outrageous sums of money. Don’t know what he’s going to do with it. Nobody has much of anything to sell. Those that do aren’t taking the old cash. They want other goods. A couple will even take gold and silver, but not too many seem to have any.”

“You seen anything of Phil Phillips?” Tom edged the question in.

“Phil? Yeah. Rather, no. According to Billy and Ray, who went out on a scouting expedition pretty early on reported that the whole Phillips family was massacred. Bunch of druggies. One of them knew Ruth took morphine for her back pain. They were all dying when Billy and Ray found them. The boys put them all out of their misery.

“They found a few more people around, but only people with basements. At that, most everyone has radiation poisoning to one degree or another.”

“I’d like to talk to Billy and Ray. Find out who else made it and who didn’t.”

Peggy was shaking her head before Tom finished the statement. “Can’t, Tom. Both of them are dead. They went out way too early, looking to help people. Billy died a month ago. Ray two weeks or so.”

“That’s too bad,” Tom said. “They were good boys.”

“Yeah. Helped a lot of people get by before they died.”

“What about the pharmacy? If individuals were getting targeted for drugs...”

“Yep. Must have been twenty of them, all locals. Three days into it, apparently, they all ran out of their drug of choice, or just realized that they would, and decided on the same thing. Loot the pharmacy. Big bloody shootout. Craig and Brandy were at the City Hall with us. Discovered it when Billy and Ray went on their first scout. The shelves had been stripped of narcotics and a few other things, but most of the stuff was still okay. Craig gathered it all up and took it to the clinic.

“You know it can be defended better than the pharmacy. Between that, and the fact that it is a clinic, which everyone seems to need now, it’s a main hub, like the diner here, and the City Hall.”

“Aren’t you worried that someone will think you have food and come in and...”

“Totally illegal, but Chief Bannon made it for me and said it was okay.” Peggy set the sawed off double barrel shotgun on the counter. “If you’d even tried to threaten me, I’d of put both barrels through the counter into your belly.” She said it very matter-of-factly. Tom believed her. She set the gun back down under the counter. “Nothing personal, of course.”

Tom grinned. “Nothing personal. Well, I think I’ll check in at the clinic and the City Hall. See what I might be able to do to help.”

“You’re old and you’re retired, Tom. Let the young bucks have at it.”

Tom sighed. “That may be, but I’ve got to try. I’ve lived a good life here in the community. I can give a little back when they need it.”

“Well, the best thing you can do is hunt up some food. People are getting really scared. Eyeing each other, holding guns ready...”

“I might be able to do something about that, with my partner’s help.”

“Partner?” Peggy asked, surprised. “You’re retired and sold the farm to Phillips. Oh. Guess you could just take it over again. No one to complain, but... that’s not what you’re talking about, is it?”

“Nope. Made a deal with young Glen Masterson. Been giving them a helping hand the last couple years. For something to do.”

“I heard they hired Crandall and Pete after they told Phil to shove it.”

“Yeah. They made it through, too. Look. Is there anything you are in desperate need of?”

“Just like everyone else. More food.” Peggy reddened slightly. “Like a lot of the women that made it, I could use some female supplies. Don’t expect you to have much of those, being the bachelor you’ve been all these years.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll see what I can do.” With that, Tom turned around and left the diner. A couple more people were coming in and Tom saw Peggy’s right hand go under the counter. But she relaxed when she recognized the two people and began chatting with them.

Tom’s next stop was the clinic. When he got out of the Jimmy three people were pointing rifles at him. “No guns in the clinic,” one of the men said. Tom didn’t know him.

“Could you ask someone in charge to come out and talk to me? I might be able to help.”

“Why don’t you disarm and go in?” asked another man. This one Tom knew. It was Henry Samualson.

“Same reason you won’t. I’m not giving up my guns to anybody.”

“Well, don’t seem right,” Henry said. “We’ll give them back.”

“Probably so. But I’m not taking a chance this early in the game. You want my help, get someone out here.”

The third man stepped inside the clinic without saying anything. A minute or so later he came out, followed by Dr. Janice Higgins.

“Dr. Higgins? What are you doing here?”

“Was visiting my sister when it happened. We went down to the City Hall. I’m here, for lacking a better place to go. The city took a hit. Nothing for me there now.”

“I see. Well, I thought you might need some help with something.”

“Of course we do. Medicines. Nurses. More doctors. An ambulance that will run for the ambulance crew. I could use a mobile hospital, if you must know. It would be easier to go to the patients than have them come to us here, the way things are now.”

Tom just nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"You do that. Oh, Tom. I'm sorry. It's just that I've lost so many that I couldn't save. I don't mean to sound so unappreciative."

"It's okay, Doc. I know how you feel. I'll think on some of the things you mentioned."

The glimmer of a plan in the back of his mind, Tom's next stop wasn't the City Hall that he'd initially planned. Instead, he went to see if anyone was at Clay Norman's machine shop. The gates to the property on the outskirts of town were locked, but Tom honked anyway. A minute later Clay stuck his head out the door.

"What do you want? I ain't got no food!"

"Clay! It's old Tom DeMassey! Might have a project for you. I'll pay in food."

"You got a gun?"

"Of course I got a gun," Tom called back.

"Okay. You try to use it and I'll blow a hole in you." Clay walked out to the gates, a huge revolver in his right hand. He tucked it under his left arm as he unlocked the gates and opened them. He closed and locked the gates behind the Jimmy.

"Now, what'ch want? And how much food?"

"Keep you in rice and beans and some fresh meat for a month," Tom replied.

Clay's eyes lit up. "Really? Okay. What you need done?"

"You know those wood-gas generators on my old equipment?"

"Sure. Sweet equipment. Hey! Those will be great for this situation. Gonna run out of fuel pretty soon. Them old things'll run on wood."

"Exactly. I need you to build me a couple more."

"What for? You've already got three." Clay sounded a bit petulant.

"Yeah. Well, I've got this old GMC motor home. And the clinic needs an ambulance. Thought we could convert it to wood-gas, gut the inside, and equip it as an ambulance, pulling gear out of the ones that won't run. You'd have to come out to my place to do the work. I don't want anyone knowing about it until I know it'll work."

"If I make it, it will work." Clay said it very matter-of-factly.

"Of course," said Tom. He knew enough to agree.

"I'll supply you fuel for transportation to and from, and for the welder. A little extra fuel, and that food I mentioned for doing the work. You have enough fuel stashed for your old welding truck to get out there?"

"Yeah. Got a drum I keep for just because. You better not try to screw me on this deal or I'll have to hurt you."

"Understood. See you... Two days?"

"Two days. Fine."

Clay let Tom out of the machine shop yard. Tom turned back toward the center of town. The City Hall was his next stop.

"Why, you old reprobate!" Chief Bannon exclaimed when he saw Tom. You made it through. I figured you was dead. Should have known better. What's on your mind?"

"We made it okay out at my place. We'll have meat pretty soon, and veggies not long after. Need your help to see to it that we aren't hassled while we're doing it."

"Well, shoot! The town will just take over the farm and..."

"No, that's not what I had in mind. And it's Glen Masterson's farm, not mine. I sold mine, you remember."

"Oh yeah. Masterson... Don't know him, I guess."

"Good kid. Wife and two baby girls. They and the two hands that used to work for me and their families are holed up out at his place and mine. We have the means to feed a lot of people, if we get just a bit of cooperation, and a total lack of interference."

"You can't go off and just do anything you want, you know," the Chief said. His voice carried a solid warning.

"No, nothing like that. It's just, when it is found out where we stand, there are going to be a lot of people not willing to wait for their turn in the soup line, if you get my drift."

Chief Bannon rubbed the whiskers on his chin. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days and the stubble on his chin sounded scratchily when his rawboned hand went over them.

"You could have a point. I can't honestly say I can protect you. Only one other officer survived, and he's not in good shape. You'd have plenty of gun hands if you gave the operation over to the town."

"Not going to happen, Chief. Not without a fight. You know I ran a good operation when I had my farm. I'm helping Glen run the place the same way. You put a bunch of amateurs out there, especially hungry, desperate amateurs, and there won't be enough food to feed ten people, much less most of the rest of the town."

“You have a point there, of course. Wouldn’t know what to do, myself, if I was to come out there. Okay. I’ll keep the peace here in town. Try to keep anything from spilling over to you. But you’ll have to make your own arrangements about protecting the property. If a group, not affiliated with the town, was to try something, there isn’t anything I can do about it.”

“I understand, Chief. That’s all I’m asking. That and assurance that if I do some salvaging in the area I won’t get shot as a looter.”

Firmly Chief Bannon said, “We’ve got salvage teams working the area. Billy and Ray started it up, and died from radiation poisoning. But it was a good idea and the rest of us kept it up when it was safe again. Everything within ten miles of us is the town’s, the way we see it, if there isn’t an owner there to prove it is theirs.”

“Ten miles, hunh?” Tom said, visualizing a map in his head. “Our place is within that range, including my old farm. You exempt my old farm and let me manage it and I’ll guarantee enough food for everyone for a year.”

“Guarantee? How you going to follow through on a guarantee if you don’t come through?”

“I’ll sign over my place to the town, including my old farm. They can do what they want to with it, then.”

“Well, it’s not just my call. I’ll take it up with the board. Don’t see why they wouldn’t go for it. We’re not taking anything from anyone still around, but with Phillips dead we could take what’s there. ‘Course, about all there is now is scrap iron, I understand.”

“Just about,” Tom said. He didn’t mention the fuel or other stored items.

“Okay. I’ll send someone out to let you know what the board says in a couple of days. In the meantime, assume it’s a done deal. The board will listen to me.”

Satisfied that he’d made some progress, Tom decided to stop at the Piggly-Wiggly and scope out the situation himself. When he pulled into the vacant parking lot, he saw an armed man standing in front of the boarded up front entrance to the store.

Tom parked well away from the entrance, carefully locked up the Jimmy, and with the Scout Rifle slung over his shoulder, approached the man.

“Open for business?” Tom asked.

“Cash on the barrelhead,” said the man. Tom didn’t know him. He was big and looked more than ready to take a head off a body without the aid of the gun or three knives he had on him. “Limit to ten cans or boxes, total.”

“How about if I talk to Hiram and see what he says.”

The goon shrugged his shoulders. “Sure thing. He’s inside. But he’s the one that set the rules. Unload, but you can keep your guns. Load them up inside and the other guard or Mr.

Hiram will kill you dead.” The man grinned like a predator. “Already had a couple try it. Feel free.”

“Ah, don’t worry. I won’t reload until I come back out. No trouble out of me,” Tom said. The guard looked disappointed.

Tom went inside when the guard opened the door after Tom pulled the magazine from the P-14, and the cartridges from the Scout Rifle, and put them in the dump pouch on his thigh. He had to stop and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. Only a little light filtered through the boarded up doors and windows of the store.

“Hiram? Hiram, it’s Tom DeMassey. Might have a deal for you.”

“Deal? What kind of deal? You get ten cans and or boxes and that’s it. Cash. Twenty dollars a can or box.”

“You still taking cash?” Tom asked, moving over to where Hiram sat near an open cash register. Hiram was at least as old as Tom was.

“Cash. Of course. Only cash.”

“You been able to spend any of it?” Tom asked then. He saw the frown on Hiram’s face at the question.

“Well... No. If you must know. But I’m not taking junk for my stuff. Cash will come back.”

Carefully Tom pulled the wad of cash out of his pocket he’d prepared before getting out of the Jimmy. “What if I want more than just ten cans?”

“Got to keep some for the others. Everybody wants what I have.”

“I understand. But I wonder if you’ll be able to get anything you want with all that cash.”

Hiram gripped the shotgun he held more tightly. “You better not try anything.”

“I’m not going to. But think about this...” Tom put the currency away and reached into his other pocket. Out came a handful of one-tenth ounce gold coins and silver pre-1965 silver quarters. “Real gold and silver,” he said softly. “Just like people have used for over six thousand years.”

“That’s real? What if you’re lying to me?”

Tom straightened slightly and warned Hiram. “Careful what you say there, Hiram. You know me. I don’t take kindly to being called a liar.” Tom saw Hiram blanch.

“I’m not! I’m not calling you a liar! It was just a question. That’s really gold?” Hiram got up and moved closer to Tom.

“Sure is. One-tenth ounce gold coins and silver quarters from back when they were 90% silver. I think people might take them for goods and services. People that won’t take cash any more, if ever.”

Hiram turned stark white. “Not take cash! But they have to! It says so right on it. Legal tender for all debts, public and private.”

“Makes no difference. I won’t take it for anything. But I will take goods or services. Or gold and silver.”

“What are you selling?” Hiram asked.

“Nothing at the moment. But I will have fresh foods in a short while. How’s your supply of fresh meat?”

“Fresh meat! Are you crazy? People are eating other people’s pet dogs and cats. Or so I hear.” The last was added quickly.

Hiram looked at Tom for a long time. “You really have fresh meat soon? Beef? Chicken? Any Pork?”

Tom was nodding. “And milk and eggs and probably cheese real soon.”

“How much for how much?”

“Don’t know yet,” Tom said. “But it will be small amounts and it won’t be for worthless cash. It’ll be for gold, silver, other goods, or services you can do for me.”

“I don’t have any gold or silver,” Hiram whined.

“You would if you took some now for what I want to buy.”

Hiram perked up. “What do you want?”

Tom rattled off a list. Hiram gasped. “You want all of that? What do you want the women’s things for? You ain’t married. Are you?”

“Nope. But I know some women that need them.”

“How much gold will you give me for all that?”

Tom told him, doing something he almost never did. He low-balled the amount, knowing that Hiram was almost certainly going to complain and ask for more. Which he did.

“Not enough. I want double.”

Tom laughed easily and turned toward the door. “Okay, okay! Ten percent more,” Hiram said.

Tom turned around immediately and said, "Done!" He reached out and Hiram automatically took Tom's hand in a firm handshake. "Can your other guard lend me a hand? I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Sure, sure," Hiram's eyes were gleaming almost as much as the gold and silver that went from Tom's hand to his. "Cody! Help Tom here get what he wants."

Ignoring Tom completely, Hiram began stacking the small gold coins and larger diameter silver quarters up, mesmerized.

Tom left with everything Hiram had agreed to. He could have taken much more, since Cody didn't have a clue, but he held to his bargain with Hiram. Stopping at the diner and then at the clinic again, Tom dropped off some of the women's products he'd bought from Hiram at each place. The rest went with him to the farm for the women there.

The next day, Tom, with their parent's permission, tasked the three teens, Ricky, Susan, and Tania with keeping a sharp lookout from the copula that was the very highest point of Tom's earth sheltered house. One could see literally for miles from up there, with only the occasional highway overpass or tree line blocking vision. They covered the twelve hours from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM.

Tom, a light sleeper, needing only a few hours now a night at his age, got up and checked around the horizon a couple or three times a night, using the one set of night vision binoculars he had.

It had been three days since his trip in to town when Susan radioed down that a four-wheeler ATV looked like it was headed their way. Tom quickly went to the vault and pulled out an M1A and LBE for it, then ran for the copula. Susan got down and let Tom get up for a look.

"Okay. I think it is Chief Bannon himself. Keep your eyes open all around, just in case."

"Yes, sir, Mr. DeMassey."

"Good work, Susan."

Tom was leaning against the fence when the Chief drove up. He was on a huge Kawasaki four-wheel-drive ATV. A shotgun was strapped on the handlebars, and he carried his service pistol in a holster on his hip.

"Thought I'd come out and give you the good news myself. Maybe get a sample of what you have available."

"Oh, since it is lunch time, I suppose that would be doable," Tom said drolly. "Come on in."

The Chief ate his share and more of what Sharon put on the table. Everyone was still sleeping in the shelter, so, except for Glen, Crandall, Pete, and occasionally Ricky, they were all at Tom's most days. The three wives traded off cooking duties and babysitting.

"I got to tell you, Tom. Some of the townspeople aren't real happy with the deal the board agreed too. I really had to sell it to them. Some want to just take over the place by force, just like I said might happen."

"I see. And there isn't much you can do about it, is there?"

"Not really. Technically you are out of my jurisdiction. You're in county hands."

"Any word from the Sheriff?"

"Uh. No. Nor State. Nor the feds. I guess we're on our own for a while more. This sure is good. Is there any dessert?"

Sharon looked at Tom and Tom nodded. She went to the kitchen and returned with a slice of apple pie made from some of the home canned apples from Tom's orchard. They normally only ate a dessert with the evening meal.

Tom stayed silent as the Chief ate the pie. Then, choosing his words carefully, Tom said, "Let it get around that we're able to take care of ourselves. And won't hesitate to take retaliatory action if attacked."

Chief Bannon's eyes widened slightly and he stared at Tom for several long seconds. "I'll spread the word."

Tom walked him out to the ATV. The Chief hadn't bothered to thank Sharon or Tom for the meal. He rode out of gate at high speed, turning the ATV toward town.

The next day Tom broached the subject of the defense of his place and of the farm. "I think the farm is far more at risk, and the best defensive plan is to keep everyone here at night. We can wire the farm with warning devices and be there in just a few minutes. Come up on the attackers from behind, assuming they don't attack both places.

"I don't think they will. At least not the first time. After they figure out what we're doing, they may attack both places at once. Now during the day... I want everyone willing to start going armed, and keep a weapon at hand at all times, even when they're out on a tractor or in the barn."

"No, Tom! Please? No guns?" It was Elaine.

"I know you don't like guns, Elaine, but I can't let that prevent me from arming the ones that want to be effectively armed against a possible attack." Tom's voice was soft. He looked around at the other adults. He'd included the teens, too.

"I'm willing," Ricky said immediately.

Tom nodded, but said, "Up to your folks." He looked at Pete and then Crandall. Both men nodded. Then Sharon spoke up. "I'm in, too. I'm not very good with heavy recoil, but I can hold my own with something like a .243. I've shot one of those a few times.

"I guess I should, too," said Crandall's wife, Mary Jean. She didn't look particularly enthusiastic, just determined.

When Tom began to equip everyone, the two teen girls, Susan, aged thirteen, and Penny, fourteen, both asked to learn to shoot. Parent's discussed things privately, and then agreed. The girls would get their own Ruger 10/22 and a Ruger .22 rim fire handgun. Each would have a vest system, too.

To Ricky's great delight, he was allowed to shoot one of the STG-566 AUG clones and then keep it for his own.

Glen, after a little practice with each, chose one of the M1As. Since Pete and Crandall could handle any of the weapons, they chose M1As, too. Tom would use one around the farm, too, so all four men would have the same magazines. The same with the Glock 21SF .45ACPs. Only Tom kept his favored P-14.

Elaine refused any gun at all. Sharon and Mary Jean chose the STG-556s like Ricky's. They both shot the CZ-52s and liked them well enough to decide to carry them. Ricky picked a CZ-52 with the understanding he could use one of the .45 ACPs when he became more proficient.

A shotgun was placed in the barn at the farm, and one in the garage at Tom's, along with a vest each with 40 rounds of 00-buckshot and 8 rounds of 1-ounce slugs in addition to what was carried on and in the shotguns.

When trying to rig an alarm system on the farm that would announce a presence to those at Tom's, it was decided it wasn't going to be feasible. One of the men would sleep at the farm every night. They didn't have to stay up, but react to the regular alarm system if it went off and alert those at Tom's by radio.

Nothing happened until after Tom made the first delivery of meat, milk, eggs, and the cheese the farm was making to use up the additional milk they couldn't use or keep. Some green house vegetables were included.

He sold a bit to Hiram, getting a bit of his gold and silver back, and then traded off everything else at the diner. He was asking for canning jars and especially jar lids, but took almost everything of value that could be used at a farming operation. That was the same day that Clay drove the gutted GMC motor home into town, using the wood-gas burner mounted on the rear bumper to provide the engine with fuel. The generator was also supplied from the burner so the ambulance had power for all the medical instruments.

Dr. Higgins was beside herself with the acquisition. Tom simply asked for healthcare for the group at his place and the farm. There was no shortage of hands to move the equipment from the three useless ambulances to the GMC. Some other equipment came out of the clinic and went into it, too.

The trailer the GMC was pulling was piled high with wood and Tom assured Dr. Higgins the farm would keep the new ambulance supplied with wood as their part of the deal for otherwise free medical care.

Tom took Clay back out to pick up his welding truck and paid him off handsomely for the work that he'd done.

Things were still quiet for a couple of days, but the now sure knowledge that the Masterson Farm had food, was temptation enough to send seven men out that way to take what they wanted.

Ricky was in the copula at Tom's house and saw the men coming. Two to an ATV, plus one on a dirt bike. He keyed the radio and alerted everyone of the situation. Pete, Glen, and Crandall were all at the farm and quickly stopped what they were doing and took up defensive positions.

The women at Tom's took the girls and the children down to the shelter and locked themselves in. Tom joined Ricky in the copula. "Aren't we going to go help?" Ricky asked when Tom showed up carrying not an M1A, but the VR-1. The vest Tom wore hung heavily with 5-round magazines of the large .338 Lapua cartridges.

"I think we'll be able to lend a hand from here. You just keep a lookout all around, in case there are more."

Ricky nodded, still disappointed, but he lifted the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the horizon. It was all he could do not to turn around and look toward the farm when the faint sounds of gunshots sounded.

He jumped just slightly a few minutes later when Tom fired the VR-1. The suppressor was very effective, but there was some noise, much of it from the action cycling. Ricky did look then. He had to bring the binoculars to his eyes to see what Tom had shot at. Ricky saw the off-road bike wheels still spinning, but the rider was all sprawled out on the dirt, obviously dead.

Tom fired again and Ricky saw one of the men behind an ATV firing at the barn slump down. He didn't move again. "Wow," he said softly and then quickly turned back to scan the area in the other direction. He heard Tom fire twice more and then get up from the chair where he'd been sitting, the VR-1 aimed out through the openings in the copula made for sniping.

"Keep an eye out," Tom admonished the boy and went down the hatch to the attic of the house and then down into the house. He grabbed his M1A and ran out to the Jimmy. When he drove up, Glen, looking sick; Crandall; and Pete were standing around one of the attackers.

"The others dead?" Tom asked when he got out of the Jimmy.

"Five dead. The other one is in bad shape." Pete pointed at the man propped up again an ATV a few paces away. The man cowering at their feet appeared unhurt.

"What do we do with the living ones?" Pete asked.

“Ought to just put them out of their useless minds. Attacking the only sure food supply for the whole town.” Crandall shook his head and hefted the Glock in his hand.

“No, please! I’m sorry! We just thought... We wanted a little more.”

“And you came after it with a gun,” Tom said coldly, “instead of coming out to offer to work for some extra food. We really should just shoot you.”

Tom saw Glen start to protest. Glen still looked pale. Before he could speak, Tom did again.

“Well, as I’m senior here, I’m going to make the call. Put them both on that ATV and send them on their way, sans weapons and everything else they have we might use. Let them keep their clothes and boots. Wouldn’t want to shock the town sending in naked men.”

The man actually look relieved. The other one was barely conscious. The heavy .338 Lapua had done great damage to his entire right hip. He screamed in pain when Pete and Crandall sat him on the ATV behind the other one.

Tom stepped up to the man at the controls of the ATV. “Don’t care who you are, or what your situation is, you come out here again for any reason and I’ll put a bullet in your head and bury you in the nuke dirt pile. Spread the word. Mess with us and you end up in a nuclear waste pile.

The four men had some doubts the passenger on the ATV would make it to town, alive or dead. They heard later that he had indeed made it in alive, but had succumbed to his injuries. The other man disappeared completely. But the word did spread. There were no more attacks, but Tom insisted they keep up security as if the next one was right around the corner.

The farm actually prospered, and the town reaped many of the benefits of its bounty. Tom had hired a couple of men from town, not wanting to take the hands from the farm work, and went firewood hunting. They worked the nearby river bottoms inside the levies, taking only downed and standing dead wood. And they took a lot of it while they could. It was good they did. Winter came early and fiercely.

For an area that normally gets a couple of inches of snow every five or six years, the three feet of snow they got over the winter was a killer. It wasn’t just the snow. It got cold. Temperatures dropped below zero for days at a time. People already weak from radiation sickness and a marginal diet died quietly in their sleep for the most part, when their houses cooled down to near ambient temperatures for the lack of power or fuel for heat.

The town board had done a masterful job of securing every available gallon of fuel from the area, including propane. There just simply was not enough to go around. And with the limited transportation, getting wood, even if one had a means to burn it safely, was problematical.

Many people died from carbon monoxide poisoning, their houses sealed up as tightly as possible against the harsh winds, burning anything that would burn in poorly rigged burners inside their homes.

A few died when their houses burned with them in it, or died a few hours later from exposure if they got out in time, but had no other protection available.

Tom agonized over how to try and help people. His place and the farm were now in daily radio contact with City Hall, and were getting all the reports when they came in. His suggestion that vacant houses with fireplaces or wood stoves be occupied and other houses without the means to effectively heated be torn down and the materials burned for heat probably saved several lives, as people did just that.

Tom and Glen gave the limited wintertime production freely, with only promises to work off the cost for it at some point in the future. When spring finally rolled around, the area population was half of what it had been after the deaths from the war and radiation poisoning cases.

On Tom's first trip into town after the weather broke, he suddenly realized why there were only a half a dozen vehicles operating. Liquid fuels like gasoline and diesel that had been salvaged had been burned for heat during the winter. There was hardly any fuel left in town. He dropped off the load of food at the City Hall for distribution and went back to his place, stopping at the old farm to check the tanks.

They'd been using the farm equipment the last summer nearly non-stop to get everything done and had run through everything at the old farm. The Masterson farm tanks were still pretty full, but there was no telling when there might be more commercial fuel, or even biodiesel. No one that Tom knew had been making it before the war. Clay could probably make what they needed to process oil crops to make the fuel, but they didn't have the other chemicals in any quantity to produce it.

Tom parked the Jimmy in the equipment shed and cleaned it out. He moved everything to the 1929 Pontiac truck and fired up the wood-gas burner to check it out thoroughly. It worked like it had when it was new. The Pontiac was now Tom's main vehicle.

After Tom talked it over with Glen, it was decided to go ahead and use the liquid fuel farm equipment that year. It would probably deplete the farm's supply, but they needed maximum production in the shortest period of time that year, or more people would die that might not have to. Clay would be contracted to build more wood-gas burners for some of the farm equipment that would be easy to convert.

After the fuel ran low, or out, it would be just the wood-gas fired equipment that would be used. Glen and the hands, which now included Ricky as a full adult male required to do his share, set about getting the fields ready for planting. When the Masterson Farm was ready, the equipment was moved to the Phillips farm and one-hundred-sixty acres prepared. The remaining farming supplies at the old farm would be used for the planting, with enough seed brought from the other farm to complete the planting.

Tom talked to Chief Bannon and then the entire town board about longer range salvage operations. The town didn't have the means. Tom got the okay to do pretty much what he wanted, as long as the town got a share for providing men to help.

The old 1925 Mack 5-ton truck came into its own. It was about the only regular vehicle on the roads, besides Tom's Pontiac pick-up. With four men helping, Tom used the two vehicles to begin salvage operations from those places whose owners had died or vanished during the winter.

Little food was found. Also little fuel. What was collected of those two commodities, much to the town member's surprise, was the town's. Tom was after hay and grain from outlying farms.

Tom collected quite a few guns, keeping those he wanted and letting the town have the rest. There wasn't much ammunition for any of them. Again Tom kept what he could use and the town got the rest.

The old Mack wasn't very fast, but 5-tons is 5-tons, moving fast or slow. Tom doubled the amount of hay the farm had at the end of the winter, and tripled the feed grains. Another group of items Tom was looking for was old style farming equipment that could be used with the 1929 John Deere with the wood-gas burner. There were a few antique tractor and farming collectors in the area and Tom was able to salvage some and buy more, including a couple of more old tractors that were easier to convert to wood-gas than newer ones were.

Tom took every type of air, oil, and fuel filter he could find, and all the lubricants. They were precious commodities. Wood was renewable, but until they got some oil crops planted, harvested, and pressed for oil, the commercial oil was all there was.

Having salvaged everything he could find that was worth taking or buying, Tom began farming 80-acres of the old farm on his own, using the John Deere and the new acquired equipment.

He made several new friends, and got all the labor help he needed, when he offered to trade garden preparation with the old tractor in exchange for labor. He left the running of the Masterson Farm to Glen and the hands, plus the additional labor they hired for the larger operation.

Tom simply took his portion of food, ate what he wanted, stored some of it, and sold or traded away the rest to those that needed it the worst. Fall came, and the harvest was finished. It had been an excellent harvest, due mostly to the moisture the ground had received during the winter. They had not had to try to run the irrigation pumps. Clay was just now getting around to converting them to wood burners.

Tom set out on another long term firewood gathering mission. The precious supply of gasoline, treated with Pri-G was allocated to chainsaw use. With a dozen people working, three-hundred cords of firewood was collected, split, stacked, and covered for future use by the Farm and by Tom. The town got enough gasoline to run the chainsaws to get their own supply of fuel for the winter. It included quite a few abandoned houses cut up for their wood content.

After collecting the chainsaws and tuning them back up, Tom stored them away for the next wood cutting season. With the farm hands now living at the Farm, in heavily insulated manufactured housing, with wood heat, cooking, and hot water, Tom was alone on his retirement property.

Ricky checked on him every couple of days during the winter, a near duplicate of the previous one. Tom didn't mind. Ricky was a good young man and didn't mind listening to Tom's collection of oldies rock and roll music while they played backgammon and drank hot chocolate from Tom's long term storage food bunker.

Against everyone's wishes, Tom was back on his John Deere the next spring, getting gardens ready for planting. He did the townies gardens first, and then his own. Ricky found him one day, slumped over on the seat of the John Deere, stopped in the middle of the garden. Tom was dead of a heart attack.

Tom DeMassey was remembered for generations by those in the area as the old man and his tractor, that led the community through the aftermath of nuclear war.

End *****

Copyright 2009
Jerry D Young