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Keys To The Kingdom

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Keys To The Kingdom - Prolog

Kevin Crain was tired. He'd lived a long, healthy, productive life. Part of Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation", he'd done his part in World War II, and then again in Korea. He matured during the Cold War. He'd seen a couple of the atomic bomb tests first hand and knew the destruction that would come with all out war. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was a dedicated Survivalist, before the term became known, well before it became a dirty word.

Too old for Viet Nam, Kevin used the power of his vote to make changes he thought needed for the US to continue as the leader of the free world.

And kept an eye on the changing world situation. Several times he went on personal alert, ready to take his family into the extensive blast and fallout shelter in the back yard, just as he had when Kennedy backed Khrushchev down. The Cold War seemed to have ended without a nuclear exchange. But Kevin knew his history. And his motto was "It's a matter of when, not if," when it came to being prepared.

As his children grew up, the small town where he'd lived since his birth did, too. It became part of a metropolis. With all the negative aspects that went with it. At least during the late seventies.

Survivalism was becoming widespread, and taking on the dirty definition of a militant, pro-religion, cultist, anti-government force to be shunned and destroyed in any way possible.

Never one to speak of his extensive plans that predated the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kevin made his move to the Missouri Ozarks as a simple retirement move, so he could do a little hunting, boating, fish the local lakes and rivers, and do a little talking on the ham bands, during his 'declining' years.

He considered himself lucky when it came to his financial security. But he'd been just as observant in the late forties and early fifties as he was now. He got on four bandwagons in a big way. They more than made up for his poorer decisions made during the same time period.

IBM, GM, and AT&T stocks early on. Not to buy and sell. To buy and hold. For years. The dividend income was enough to take him from helping his father in his plumbing business, to the presidency of his own company. A plastics manufacturing company. In on the ground floor. He held onto it and ran it until he could no longer stand the obscene offers he was getting for the company. He sold it in the seventies and got into the rapidly rising business of computers.

A long time Amateur Radio Operator, Kevin had spent many an hour in hobbyist electronics stores and bought a Radio Shack dealership specifically to sell the new, home computers. But one to spread the risk, and despite an overwhelming fondness of Radio Shack, and then Tandy, proprietary computers, Kevin invested in Intel and Microsoft, simply to hedge his bets. It paid off big time.

But there were new dangers in the world, even after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. Besides, Kevin didn't trust the Russians, even after the break up. He didn't even trust the Germans or Japanese or Chinese, having fought all of them in his two hitches in the service. And the stock market was growing faster than some people could count their money.

He looked at his family fondly one Christmas at the Ozark Homestead. All three of his children had done well for themselves, under his tutelage. His seven grandkids had grown up the same way. They were book smart, but they were also savvy, with a lot of good common 'horse' sense.

Kevin decided that he would give his great-grandkids the best gift he could, before his death. He decided to become a farmer slash rancher. One of what would be termed 'Green' several years later. Farmers that

gave back to the land as much as they took from it, and provided the best food at the best prices possible in the modern world of the fast approaching new Millennium.

At least, he was a farmer and rancher in name. The actuality of it was he had hired experienced people in traditional farming and some youngsters just out of college that had all the new 'green' techniques down pat. Between them, Kevin would have the operation he wanted.

That first year of getting things set up was a bit of a trial, but Kevin was pleased at the end of it. Christmas was about as storybook as one could ask for. But then January came, and with it came personal disaster upon personal disaster. First, his wife for forty-two years died of sudden onset cancer.

On the way home from the funeral, a hit and run driver demolished the shuttle bus taking the rest of the family from the hotel to the airport. The only survivors were Kevin's three great grandchildren. They'd been in the rear seat of the shuttle, which had fared the best, though the damage it sustained was terrible, too. The semi truck and its driver were never found, despite the large reward Kevin offered.

Two months later, only Kevin and his namesake were still alive. The other two great-grandchildren had succumbed to the injuries they received in the accident.

Little Kevin, twelve years old, went into his great-grandfather's study in the house at the homestead one summer evening and found him clutching his chest.

"Give me a hug, boy, and call 911."

It was a quick hug and an even quicker call. When little Kevin set the phone receiver down on the desk, leaving the line open, he turned and

started to help Kevin to the floor so he could start CPR.

“No, Kevin,” said the senior to the junior, gasping once at the pain. “Way too late. Got something for you here...” Kevin opened the top center desk drawer and took out a small key ring with five keys on it.

“Keys to the Kingdom, Kevin. Make me proud.”

Tears in his eyes, little Kevin took the keys and thrust them into his pocket without a thought. Despite his great-grandfather’s statement about it being too late, Kevin began CPR after his grandfather quit breathing and he was able to get him to the floor. He was still going when the paramedics showed up.

“Let us have it, son,” said the senior technician.

Polly, the housekeeper for the last several years, was standing in the doorway and took Kevin from the room. He fought, but gently, not wanting to hurt the woman, but she had him in a vice-like grip.

Kevin was dry-eyed when they finally took his great-grandfather’s body away. Polly got him to go to bed, but the boy didn’t sleep much that night. Nor for the next several nights. Not until after his beloved great-grandfather was in the grave beside his great-grandmother.

Polly had been carrying for Kevin during those first few days, but the senior Kevin’s long time attorney and friend took custody, per the will that had been re-written so many times in the last few months.

Trevor McQuirer was a bachelor. Had been all his life. He lived quietly, his work and one hobby of collecting stamps occupying him almost fully. Kevin fell into Trevor’s lifestyle easily. They had breakfast together and sometimes dinners. Trevor often worked late and Kevin was religious about doing his homework, eating a simple meal he prepared himself, and then going to bed to get plenty of sleep.

The situation worked well until Kevin's eighteenth birthday. Kevin added the key to the new Jeep that Trevor gave him for his birthday and graduation from high school to those his great-grandfather had given him so many years ago. Kevin still had no idea what the keys were for. It didn't matter. They were his great-grandfather's, and he had given them to Kevin for safe keeping. He would do that until he died.

With the Jeep and a small trailer loaded to the limit, Kevin headed for Rolla, Missouri, to get an engineering degree. Trevor continued to manage the estate affairs, seeing that Kevin got his monthly check regularly. Trevor had been slightly surprised, and quite pleased, at the amount that Kevin had asked for monthly. It was easily adequate for school needs, but that was all it was used for. Kevin preferred to work for his pocket money.

Six years later, at twenty-four, Kevin took over the reigns of the estate. He could have done so three years earlier, at twenty-one, but had been content to continue his education, living a rather frugal life for someone that had inherited the amount of wealth the estate represented on the surface.

Keys To The Kingdom

"May I help you?"

It startled Kevin. He'd just stepped up onto the first step up to the porch of the Ozark Homestead house, with key in hand. The woman's voice came through the screen door, but Kevin couldn't make out any features. It wasn't Polly.

"I think I should be asking that question," Kevin said evenly, coming the rest of the way up the steps onto the wide porch. "Just who are you, and what are you doing in my house? Where's Polly?"

“Mr. Crain? I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were coming. Polly, my aunt, is ill. I’ve been taking care of her and the house. I’m Samantha Bouvier. Come in, please.”

Samantha opened the screen door and stepped aside. Kevin went inside the house for the first time since those confusing days just after his great-grandfather’s death. It looked and smelled the same. Almost. There was a trace of scent in the air... Kevin’s eyes cut to Samantha and then away.

“What’s wrong with Polly?” Kevin asked, going into the kitchen. It was just as spotless as he remembered. He turned around and looked at Samantha.

“She took a bad fall during the winter and broke her left hip. She lay on the cold ground for hours before someone came by. Wound up with pneumonia. She won’t stay in the hospital. She’s decided she’s on her death bed.”

Kevin had to smile slightly at that. Polly had been a bit of a hypochondriac, if Kevin remembered correctly. “Is it actually serious?”

“You know she tends toward hypochondria?”

Kevin nodded.

“She is in poor condition, but with bed rest, good food, and her medications, the doctor said she’d be fine in a few weeks. That’s why I’m here. She has no where else to go, or anyone to care for her. We can’t afford a boarding home. So... With you not here, if I kept up with the work, I thought...”

“Slow down,” Kevin said. Samantha’s words had begun to run together. “It’s okay. I’m not going to evict her... or you... because she can’t work

at the moment. Is it all right if I go up and say hello?”

Samantha nodded. “Let me warn her first.”

As the two started up the main stairs, Samantha first, Kevin hurriedly took an extra quick step up to raise his eyes a bit higher than the level of the nicely filled jeans Samantha was wearing.

A few minutes later Kevin greeted Polly. She was propped up in her bed, covers up to her neck. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kevin! I just get so sick sometimes...” There were tears in her eyes.

“Now, Polly, you just calm down,” Kevin said gently. “Everything is fine. You made a good choice to bring someone in to help you. It’s not a problem. I want you to get your rest and get well. No matter how long it takes.”

“Yes, Mr. Kevin,” Polly replied, her stiff posture softening slightly at Kevin’s words. “Samantha will take good care of you. She’s a good girl and knows how to work, just like me.”

“So I’ve seen already,” said Kevin. “Everything looks just fine. Now, I’m going to leave you to get your rest.”

When Kevin and Samantha left Polly’s room, Samantha said, “Thank you Mr. Crain for being so understanding.”

“Please, it’s Kevin. I can’t get Polly to break the ‘Mr. Kevin’, but there is no need for you to be so formal. You’re more Polly’s guest than employee. But, speaking of that, I’ll put you on the payroll for the work you’re doing and have done, back to the time that you came to help Polly.”

“Mr... Uh... Kevin! That’s not necessary. You’re still paying Aunt Polly. I’ve been eating your food for some time. Payment isn’t

necessary.”

“You work, you get paid. Or I hire someone to fill in until Polly is well enough to work again. And no arguments about her staying here and staying on the payroll, either. She’s been a loyal employee of the family for years. She deserves the best I can provide for her.”

Samantha obviously didn’t like it, but she held her tongue and simply nodded. Aunt Polly had said all the members of the family were headstrong.

“I’m going to take a stroll around the property,” Kevin told Samantha when they were back in the kitchen.

“I’m about to prepare lunch, Mr... Er... Kevin. What would you like?”

“Just whatever you were going to make for you and Polly will be fine.” Kevin went out the back door and stood on the back porch for a moment, just looking over the back yard. Everything looked just the same. It even had the same feel.

Kevin walked out to the outdoor garden and checked a few of the plants. Polly was a great gardener, and apparently her niece was, as well. Going out further, Kevin checked the orchard. The fruit trees were looking just as good as the garden. So did the nut trees and bushes. His great-grandfather had hired an arborist to care for the orchard, and the firm was still doing a good job.

The nearby chicken coop and rabbit hutches were empty, but in excellent shape. The small group of beehives were active, however, with bees coming and going regularly.

Keeping an eye out for the copperheads that they’d not been able to eliminate in the blackberry brambles, Kevin walked around the perimeter of the back yard. It was delineated by the brambles all the way

around the yard, garden, orchard, and blueberry and strawberry patches. He walked between the rows of grape vines on their supporting structures. The vines were in good shape, too. So were the kiwis, grown on similar support structures next to the small vineyard.

Going to the opening in the blackberry brambles at the furthest point of the back yard, Kevin walked into the twenty acres of coppicing woodlot that supplied the homestead with firewood on a continuing basis. Each section of the woodlot, from the area cut the previous summer to the one ready for harvesting this summer were all showing the same signs of care the arborist showed the fruit and nut trees.

Next, going back into the back yard, Kevin checked the Homestead's work barn. The Unimog U500 looked ready to tackle anything. So did the Bobcat 5600T Toolcat utility vehicle, with its large selection of attachments lined up neatly beside those for the Unimog. The three-wheel hydraulic cherry picker unit used in the orchard was off to one side, parked next to the ROKON two-wheel-drive motorbike and the trailer used with it.

Leaving the barn, Kevin went to the large greenhouse where salad vegetables were grown year round, along with exotics that wouldn't grow outside even in the summer. Only about half of the space was in use at the moment. Half of what was in use was salad makings, with the other half growing miniature citrus fruits; oranges, lemons, and limes; plus bananas, all in containers.

The woodsheds were filled to capacity with split firewood, most of it already well aged. The garden shed was in pristine shape. Moving to the front yard, along one side, Kevin inspected the wild roses. Grown as much for their rosehips as for decoration, the thorny plants, like the blackberries, were a perimeter barrier.

Though most of the nut trees were in the orchard, the four huge old Black Walnut trees and the other six at various heights, Kevin had

noticed driving up. They too were in good shape. So was the Kentucky bluegrass of the front yard. It was one of the few grasses tolerant of the Black Walnut's allelopathic effects that prevented many other types of plants from growing near the trees.

Already feeling at home, Kevin went back inside the house, and into the kitchen. Samantha, wearing a simple apron over her blouse and jeans, was just preparing a tray to take up to Polly. "I'll get yours ready as soon as I get back down," Samantha told Kevin."

"That's okay. I can serve myself."

Samantha frowned, but nodded and headed out of the kitchen. Kevin hadn't noticed the frown. He prepared himself a sandwich from the bowl of chicken salad on the counter, and dipped up a bowl of chicken noodle soup. It didn't look like canned soup. Nor taste like it when he tried it at the kitchen table.

Samantha came down a few minutes later and began to fuss around in the kitchen. "Aren't you going to eat something?" Kevin finally asked.

"When you're finished," she replied.

"Don't be silly. Grab a sandwich and bowl of soup and sit down and enjoy them. This is very good, by the way."

"Just soup and sandwich," Samantha said, hesitating where she was. But after that moment of hesitation, she prepared her own lunch and sat down across the table from Kevin.

"The place looks great," Kevin said between bites. "You've been doing a great job in the garden and greenhouse."

"It comes naturally," Samantha said. "My mother and Aunt Polly grew up on a farm. Mother passed the skill on to me, and Aunt Polly gives me

advice.”

“Ah.” Kevin asked. “From the looks of things, the others have been doing their jobs just as well as they did before Great Gramps died.”

“Aunt Polly made sure of it, with the help of Mr. McQuirer. He made sure there was always money in the Homestead account, and Aunt Polly paid the bills every month. I’ve been doing the same. How is Mr. McQuirer?”

“Not well, I’m afraid,” Kevin replied, his face showing his concern. “He’s very frail now. About all he does now is work on his stamp collection, eat, sleep, and watch the financial and political news. I wish he’d stop watching the news. It upsets him as often as not.”

“It upsets me, too. I think it does many people.”

“I suppose so. I’m not too political. And with the way Great-Gramps set things up, I’m not too worried about financial matters.”

“I suppose not,” Samantha replied.

Kevin sensed a bit of disapproval in Samantha. “Going to have to be now, though,” he continued. “Uncle Mac doesn’t need the hassle of even this one account to deal with.” Kevin was pleased to see that the disapproval in Samantha disappeared.

“That’s good,” she said. “A person should be in charge of their own fates and finances.”

“Can’t argue that. Well. This was very good, Samantha. I’ll leave you to clean up. I want to unpack the Jeep and trailer and get settled in.”

“I’ll freshen the master bedroom suite for you,” Samantha said, getting up without finishing her lunch.

“That’s okay. It’ll wait a bit. Finish your lunch. I’ll just get things moved to the porch.”

Samantha sat back down. There had been a note of command in Kevin’s voice. He meant what he said.

Kevin was whistling when Samantha came out twenty minutes later. He was just setting down a large tote on the porch. “I’ll start taking things up to your room,” Samantha said, squatting down to pick up the tote.

She grunted and Kevin said, “I’ll get the totes. They’re pretty heavy.”

Silently Samantha agreed. Her opinion of Kevin jumped slightly. Despite his light, rangy looking frame, he was strong. He was handling the totes easily. She was pretty strong herself, but gladly let Kevin handle them while she carried the lighter items.

Another twenty minutes and everything was moved upstairs to the master suite, or in the case of most of the totes, the basement. “I can put things away for you,” Samantha offered, setting down the last suitcase.

She got the answer she expected. “That’s okay. I can manage.” Kevin was already in the process of opening up a garment bag. Samantha left silently. Kevin turned to catch a last glimpse of her as she went out the door.

Kevin, the unpacking in the bedroom done, looked out the window, toward the lake. He could see a lone sail in the part of the lake visible from the bedroom. Memories of easy days with his great-grandfather out on the lake in the run about came back to him and he smiled slightly.

“Samantha,” Kevin called when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

She stepped out of the kitchen and looked at him. “I’m going to check

out the boat house. See if the runabout is still there.”

Samantha simply nodded. She didn't know there was a boathouse with the Homestead. Polly had never mentioned it.

Kevin strolled down the path to the boathouse. It was somewhat grown over, mostly with tall grass, but there were a few saplings getting their start, too. “Need to get this cleared,” mumbled Kevin. Then he resumed whistling softly as he walked. A few minutes later and he was at the lake shore.

The boathouse looked much the worse for wear. Some storm in the past few years had stripped most of the roofing off, and peeled some of the same corrugated metal off the sides. It took a couple of heavy heaves to get the shore side door open and Kevin walked inside very gently. The deck boards were not in very good shape, either.

The wide garage door at the far end of the building was half off its tracks, twisted beyond repair. And there, under the water, Kevin saw the small runabout. It would be a total loss when it was raised. Kevin looked up. Years of rain coming through the holes in the roof had undoubtedly sunk the boat.

“Have to do something about this,” Kevin said softly. “Can't live on a lake and not have a boat.”

Just as gingerly as he'd entered the boathouse, he left, not bothering to try and shut the door he'd had to force open. Kevin was thinking when he entered the house and didn't notice Samantha watching him. He went into the study and disappeared from her view, so she turned back to the kitchen once again, wondering about what the future would bring with a master of the house once again in residence.

She'd been spending summers here with Polly before she came to stay and help her aunt. This place was more home now than not. She'd even

given up the apartment she'd had during college when she came to stay with Polly during her injury and illness.

She had her degree, but in this economy, who was going to hire someone with a Bachelors degree in History, and no real work experience, other than taking care of a house for someone. Her several scholarships had paid her way through college, so she hadn't had to work to make it. She'd spent her time studying.

She sighed and wondered if it would even matter, the way things were going in the modern world. Samantha longed for the times she'd learned about from grade school on through college. She'd never heard the phrase, 'Be careful what you wish for.'

Kevin first spend a few minutes with his memories of the study, where he'd learned so much during summers here as a youngster. He sighed at the memory of his great-grandfather's death. But Kevin shook his head, getting rid of the bad memories, and set about looking for boat dealers in the area, using the phone directory.

He made a few telephone calls and made an appointment to look at a new boat the next day. Cheerfully, whistling again, Kevin left the study and went into the kitchen. "What's for supper?" he asked.

Samantha was in the same apron, working at the sink. "Pot roast. Polly said that was your favorite."

"Polly is right. What do you want me to do to help?"

"Leave," Samantha said before thinking. She was used to working alone in the kitchen. She didn't like people looking over her shoulder.

Kevin chuckled and said, "One of those, huh?"

Samantha knew the back of her neck was as red as her face probably was. She couldn't think of anything to say after her comment.

Still chuckling, Kevin went out the back door onto the porch, and then to the detached garage. Having seen the condition of the runabout, he'd decided he'd better check the Homestead's vehicle collection.

He was surprised, but pleased, to find his great-grandfather's small collection of vehicles not only intact and in good condition, but up on blocks, the batteries removed. The old, but still pristine, 1946 Dodge four-wheel-drive Power Wagon that had been the senior Kevin's personal vehicle since right after World War II, and the Homestead's work truck since the Homestead's initial days. It was now regulated to collector status, one of the first, equally rugged, U500 Unimogs imported taking the Power Wagon's place for use around the Homestead.

Great-grandmother Elizabeth's pride and joy, too, was on blocks, needing only the battery installed and the fuel tank filled to be ready to carry four people in luxury. The 1976 Cadillac Fleetwood Talisman, like the Power Wagon, had been kept up religiously over the years of use. It looked like it had just come off the showroom floor.

Great-grandfather's Suzuki GS 850 GL shaft drive motorcycle was up on a stand, too. It had been ridden only a few times by his Great-grandfather, at Great-grandmother's insistence. Never one to get rid of quality goods that still had life in them, Great-grandfather Kevin had parked the bike, rather than sell it.

The heavily customized Suburban that Great-grandfather Kevin had commissioned not long before his death was on blocks, and had the batteries on trickle chargers like the other vehicles.

Checking the work bay of the garage, Kevin noted the spotless toolboxes and cabinets, the four heavy-duty mobile lift posts for lifting a vehicle so

it could be worked on underneath while standing, and all the other equipment Great-grandfather Kevin had insisted on having in the garage workshop.

A quick tour of the other, general workshop, proved to be in as good of a condition as the automotive shop. The equipment in the ammunition reloading room was all covered for protection, the cabinets for powder and primers locked up for safety. The magazine just outside the reloading room held more powder, including several cans of black powder and black powder substitutes.

Stepping outside to the shooting bench, which was under the cover of a low roof, Kevin saw that the firing range lanes were overgrown, like the path to the lake. He'd take care of that in the next few days.

Kevin went into the kitchen after his tour, going through the house's attached four car garage. The Homestead's primary vehicle, a GMC Sonoma Highrider compact four-wheel-drive, three door pick up, was there and showed signs of recent use. "Why not?" Kevin asked himself, shrugging. "It is the Homestead's main vehicle."

There was a lime green Volkswagen New Beetle several years old, and a Jeep very similar to Kevin's. "Dollars to donuts the Beetle is Polly's and the Jeep Samantha's," thought Kevin.

Samantha was setting the dining room table when Kevin went back inside. He started to protest. To tell Samantha he had just as soon eat in the kitchen as the dining room, but she pretty much had everything arranged, so Kevin kept silent. He noted the fact that only one place was set.

"I'll go wash up," Kevin said when Samantha turned around.

"About twenty minutes," she said, and headed back to the kitchen.

After using the bathroom, Kevin went into the family room and turned on the TV. It took him a few minutes to figure out the old C-band satellite system, and he decided then and there to get a new small dish system. He was watching the news when Samantha told him that his dinner was ready.

“You know,” he said, taking his seat, “I’m perfectly happy eating in the kitchen. Seems silly to use the dining room for just me.”

“I’ll remember,” Samantha said. “I’ll check in a little while to see when you are ready for dessert.”

Kevin decided just to nod. He could clear the table and come get the dessert. But Samantha wanted to do it her way. “Why not?” Kevin thought again. He slowed his usual eating pace down, enjoying the excellent meal. As a bachelor, he’d picked up the habit of eating his meals quickly. But the home cooked food was too good to just bolt down as a necessary part of staying alive. He was about finished with the main meal and wondering about what might be for dessert when Samantha entered the dining room.

Pushing the plate back a bit to signify he was finished, Kevin just sat there. Samantha cleared the place setting without a word, either, and went into the kitchen. When she returned she was carrying a large slice of pie ala’ mode. Apple he saw when she moved the plate from the tray to the table. She set the pot of tea, and a cup and saucer on the table as well.

“Let me know when you are finished,” Samantha said.

“Polly must have filled you in. All my favorite dishes right off the bat. Thank you.”

A small smile appeared on Samantha’s face and she nodded before returning to the kitchen. Kevin was more than satisfied a few minutes

later when he had finished the pie, ice cream, and tea. He carried the dishes into the kitchen.

“You should have let me...” Samantha said when she saw Kevin with the dishes, but let the protest die away upon seeing the slight glint in Kevin’s eyes. Instead, she finished with a quick, “Thank you,” bringing a smile to Kevin’s face. A rather nice smile, Samantha admitted to herself.

“It’s been a long few days,” Kevin said. “I’m going to go up, get a shower, and go to bed. What time do things get going around here?”

“Whatever time you say... Kevin.”

Kevin just looked at her.

“Well... I’m usually up by five-thirty or so and have Polly’s breakfast up to her at six-thirty. If that’s too early for you, it’s no problem at all to make...”

“That’s fine. I’m a fairly early riser. Definitely no need to make two breakfasts, even if I happen to sleep in late.”

“Yes, si... Er... Okay Kevin.”

“Good night, then. I’ll see you around five-thirty tomorrow morning.”

“Good night,” Samantha said.

Kevin was up at his normal time of five o’clock. He quietly dressed in running shorts and shoes and left the house for a morning run. Down to the gate at the end of the driveway and back, twice. When he returned to the house he entered quietly, but Samantha was up and saw him. She was startled, but covered it with a quick “Good morning.”

“Mornin’ I’m going to take a shower and get dressed. I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Breakfast will be ready,” replied Samantha.

“Take care of Polly first,” Kevin said.

Irked slightly, Samantha just nodded.

Kevin took his time. When he entered the kitchen the table was set for two. He poured himself a glass of juice from the pitcher on the table and sat down. Kevin shook his head. There was bacon and eggs, obviously homemade biscuits, three different jellies, plus honey.

When Samantha entered the kitchen a few minutes later she took her seat opposite Kevin and began to serve herself.

“This is a great breakfast,” Kevin said after wiping his mouth with the cloth napkin and leaning back in his chair. “I don’t expect a feed like this every day. I’m okay with cereal and juice most of the time.”

Samantha nodded. “I’ll remember. You have a favorite? I’m going in for the weekly grocery run today. I’ll pick some up.”

“A good granola with pecans and dates,” replied Kevin. He stood up and started to clear his dishes, but the look on Samantha’s face stopped him. “I’m going to fire up the Toolcat and play with it a bit. It’s new since I was here last. Figure out how to hook up and use the mower I saw in the barn.”

“It’s easy,” Samantha said. “It’s a good machine. But I just mowed the other day.”

“I’m going to mow the path to the lake, and the firing range.”

“Firing range?” Samantha asked.

“That open lane at extends from the detached garage into the forest.”

“Oh. I wondered what that that path was for. It just dead ends at... That tall berm would be the backstop, I take it.”

“Yes. You shoot?” Kevin asked.

“Some. I’m not too experienced. Or very good.”

“Be glad to help you practice. I need some myself. It’s been a while since I did anything but dry-fire my carry pistol.”

“Dry fire?”

“Using dummy ammunition to practice with. It has a rubber-like or spring loaded primer so you don’t damage the firing pin.”

Samantha nodded. “You said your carry pistol?”

“You should probably know. I carry whenever where I’m going isn’t restricted.” Kevin pulled up his left pants leg to show Samantha the Glock 30 in a DeSantis Apache ankle holster. He lifted his right pants leg to show the double magazine carrier on that ankle.

“I see,” Samantha said after a moment.

Her voice was rather neutral and Kevin wasn’t sure if she approved or disapproved. It didn’t matter. He would carry whether she liked it or not. That’s just the way it would be.

“Let me know when you’re ready to leave,” Kevin said, so I can come in and be available if Polly needs anything.”

“Okay.”

A bit disappointed, Kevin left the kitchen and went into the study. It took only a couple of minutes to find the manual for the Toolcat. He read it through, as well as the manual for the mower attachment. Satisfied he could safely operate the equipment, Kevin headed for the barn in the back yard.

Another few minutes and Kevin had the mower attached to the Toolcat and drove out of the barn, headed for the path to the lake. It took three passes to mow the full width of the path. Samantha was waiting for him when he came out of the woods on the last pass.

“I’m ready to go. You really don’t need to stay in the house. Polly has an FRS radio she uses to call me if I’m outside.” She handed one of the small radios to Kevin. “It’s all charged up and ready to go.”

“Oh. That’s great!” Kevin looked up from the radio to Samantha. “You plan well.”

Samantha just shrugged. “It is the way I was raised.” She turned and went to the Sonoma, already out of the garage.

Kevin watched her walk away and get into the truck. “Sure is easy to look at,” he thought to himself. Then, putting Samantha firmly out of his mind, he began to whistle as he drove the Toolcat toward the firing range. Two passes on the three-hundred-meter range had it ready to use.

After removing the mower and parking the Toolcat, Kevin spent an hour with the U500, reading its manual and the attachment manuals, and then taking it out for a spin to get the feel for how it handled.

Next, Kevin went to the detached garage and worked on getting the Suzuki GS 850 GL ready to ride. He was just coming out of the garage,

beginning to worry about Samantha's long absence, when she drove up.

Kevin walked over and took two of the canvas shopping bags that Samantha reluctantly handed him after she opened the third door of the truck. "I can get these, if you have something you're doing."

"Nah. Just finished up getting the bike ready for a ride."

Silently the two went inside, making a second trip each for the rest of the groceries. "You get this much every week?" Kevin asked.

"No. I thought I should stock up on a few more things, now that you're here. Aunt Polly likes to keep a good pantry, anyway. Something that your Great-grandfather insisted on."

"It's a good practice," Kevin replied, setting the last two bags on the kitchen table.

He started to take things out, but again Samantha had that look on her face and he desisted, allowing her to continue putting things away on her own. "Okay. I'm going to go try out the bike. I'll be back within an hour, I'm sure."

"I'll have lunch ready."

Kevin nodded and left.

Almost two hours later, feeling exhilarated from the ride on the powerful bike, Kevin went into the house whistling.

"You said an hour," Samantha said, coming from the kitchen. "I was worried to death with you on that bike when you didn't return."

Kevin realized she was about to cry, even as obviously angry as she was.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t...”

“My brother left on a motorcycle and didn’t come back when he said he would. He was killed in an accident on his bike. I hate the things.”

“I’m sorry,” Kevin repeated. “I’ll make sure I’m on time, the next time.”

Samantha hurriedly turned around and went back into the kitchen, but Kevin saw the motion. She was wiping tears from her eyes.

“Well...” Kevin thought. “That’s interesting.” He was quiet when he followed her inside. Neither said anything for several minutes as they ate the lunch Samantha had prepared while Kevin was gone on the bike.

Finally, as Samantha cleared the table while Kevin finished his glass of iced tea, he asked, “What’s on the agenda for this afternoon? Anything I need to help with?”

“Got it covered,” Samantha replied, putting dishes in the dishwasher.

“In that case, I’m running in to talk to a couple of boat dealers. See what I can find to replace the runabout. Oh. Who would you recommend to take down the old boat house and get rid of it, then build a new one?”

“The Parker Brothers are pretty good. That’s who Polly has come out to do the odd jobs we can’t do ourselves or when a couple of the guys from the farm aren’t available.”

“Okay. Would you call and make arrangements for them to come out and see about the boathouse? I won’t know what to put back in until I decide on the boat I’m going to get.”

“I’ll take care of it as soon as I finish here.”

“I should be home before supper time. If I’m not going to be able to make it, I’ll call,” Kevin said then.

“You’re taking the Suzuki again?” Samantha asked. There was the tiniest quiver in her voice.

“No. The Jeep. Might want to pick up some other stuff. And remember, meals don’t have to be quite as lavish, unless there is a special occasion.”

“As you wish, Kevin.”

“At least the ‘Kevin’ came a little easier to her,” Kevin thought as he headed outside.

He wound up going to three lake side boat dealers before he found what he wanted. It wasn’t what he went looking for, but it caught his eye in the third dealership and asked, “What is that?”

“Oh. That’s a custom Munson Landing Craft. The Lake Commission ordered it, but decided it was too much money and are sending it back. I just haven’t made the arrangements with Munson yet. The rumor is, the Chairman of the Commission did the ordering himself and added a bunch of amenities that weren’t needed for the work they planned to do with it. The Chairman apparently had plans to use it as his personal craft.”

“How much?” Kevin asked, walking over to where the boat sat on a transport trailer.

“You said you wanted a small to medium size fishing boat,” said Mike Hampton, the owner of the boat yard. “That thing is a work boat.”

“Yeah, but look at the size of those water jets. That thing is packing some horsepower to drive them.”

“I... Uh... Don’t know the specs,” Mike said. “It was a direct deal between the Lake Commission and Munson. I’m just handling the transport.”

“Who would I contact to find out about it?”

“I guess Munson. The Commission has officially refused delivery. I can give you Munson’s telephone number. It’s in the office.”

“If you’ll go get it, I want to look her over.” Kevin was already clambering aboard the boat. It didn’t take long for Kevin to lose the tiny doubt he had about the boat. A few minutes aboard and he knew he wanted her, as long as the price wasn’t outrageous.

Seeing Mike heading back, Kevin left the boat and met him on the ground.

“Give me a minute, will you?” Kevin asked, after taking the slip of paper with the phone number. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed it. After a few minutes of conversation with the Munson rep, and another few with the local bank the Homestead used, then a few more with Munson, Kevin handed the cell phone to Mike.

All Kevin heard was three ‘yeses’ and “I’ll take care of it.”

“I guess you own yourself a boat!” Mike said, handing Kevin the cell phone.

“Yep. If you’ll service her and get her ready to go, I’ll go get it registered.”

“Okay. The papers are in the office.”

An hour and a half later, Kevin was driving the Jeep onto the downed

ramp of the Landing Craft. He lifted the ramp up, went to the cabin of the boat and, after Mike freed the boat from the shore, backed the boat up and turned it.

He waited until he was on the open lake before he opened her up, looking at the speedometer occasionally. When he had it topped out, he was doing forty-two miles an hour and was quickly approaching the landing beside the decrepit boathouse.

Easing back the throttles, Kevin ran the bow of the boat onto the old boat ramp on shore, shut down the engines and took a painter line and tied the boat to a tree. He lowered the loading ramp and drove the Jeep up to the house along the path.

Samantha was hanging out laundry in back yard and saw him coming. Her mouth dropped open, dropping the clothespins she'd been holding there. She just stared as Kevin drove up to the house garage and parked.

He was grinning when he walked around to join Samantha.

"I bought a boat," he said.

"I wondered... thought for a moment that the Jeep was amphibious or something. But what kind of lake boat can haul a Jeep?"

"Come on down and I'll show you. You have the walky-talky?"

Samantha dropped the towel she was about to hang back into the basket, and pulled the radio from the pocket of her apron. "Aunt Polly?"

There was an immediate response. "Yes, Samantha?"

"I'm going down to the lake with Kevin to look at his new boat."

Much to Samantha's surprise, Polly's only comment was 'Okay'.

Samantha had to grin at Kevin's attempt to not run all the way back to the lake. She quickened her stride and kept up with him. "Holy cow!" she said when the boat came into view. "That's as big as one of the luxury houseboats on the lake. And looks like half of one."

Samantha was referring to the enclosed rear section of the boat. "And," she added, "You could get both our Jeeps in the front of it."

"Or the Unimog. Loaded." Kevin was standing on the beach, hands on his hips, admiring the forest green boat. Then he began rattling off some of the specifications.

"Fifty-two feet long, sixteen feet wide, twin Cat 660hp engines with Hamilton 364 water jets. Had her up to over forty miles an hour, even with the Jeep. That's tops. But it can turn on almost a dime. Stop on one, too. Just about all the options. Heater, air conditioning, head, small galley, work boom, side door deck access, whole bunch of other stuff I haven't tried out yet."

"And this is going to be your fishing boat?" Samantha asked. "I was expecting something like the Suzuki, only for water."

"Might pick up a couple of PWCs, if you think you might want to ride one?"

"No thanks. My preference is to be inside something on the water, not dragging my feet in behind it."

Kevin chuckled. "I'll probably get something... sportier... too. Though this thing is fast. I was thinking of it more for transport between the farm and here. Five mile trip on the water versus the twenty-five mile land route."

"Wow," Samantha replied, looking at Kevin's face. "That's actually a

good idea. You can actually leave it here and go get them and bring them back more quickly and easier than they can travel by road. Especially in the winter.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Kevin said. “Guess we’d better get back to the house.”

“I guess so,” Samantha said, feeling a bit of disappointment when Kevin didn’t ask her if she wanted to take a ride in the boat. The two walked side by side, Kevin cutting off to go unload the things he had in the Jeep, and Samantha back to the clothesline to finish hanging the wash.

When Kevin came down from his bedroom after stowing the gear, he found Samantha in his Great-grandmother’s hobby room. She was at a sewing machine. Not his Great-grandmother’s electric sewing machine, but a very modern looking treadle machine, in an old fashioned stand.

“Something wrong with Nanna’s sewing machine?” Kevin asked from the door.

Samantha looked up and just barely turned red. “No. I guess not. I just like using my Janome 712T treadle machine. Doesn’t have as many stitches as some of the electronic machines, but it does all the basic stuff. And that’s all I do, anyway.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. Hanging clothes out, sewing on a treadle machine. You take your history seriously, don’t you?”

It was an insight that Samantha hadn’t expected from Kevin. It was just one more thing that was different than she expected from the Lord of the Manor. Someone with the kind of inheritance he had... well... he just wasn’t what she expected.

“Yes. I do actually. I do quite a few things in old fashioned ways. Much of it involves modern equivalents, like my Janome over an original

single stitch Singer treadle machine.

Kevin was leaning against the door jamb, his arms crossed. “You make most of your own clothes, don’t you?”

Samantha smiled. “Yes. I do. I’ve made several things for Polly since I’ve been here, too.”

“Cool.” With that, Kevin turned around and headed for the study. He was ready to start swearing when he tried for two hours to get online and do some research. Between the old computer and the state of the telephone line, it just wasn’t happening.

He went to the kitchen in time for supper. “How do you cope with that antiquated computer and no internet?” Kevin groused.

“I use one of the terminals in the library in town when I really need to do something,” replied Samantha.

“Well, as of tomorrow, I plan to have high speed internet, and quality TV.”

Her back to him, Samantha smiled. She wasn’t about to admit it, but she longed for easy internet access and satellite TV. The old C-band system worked, but there weren’t as many broadcast stations still using it, and it was one show only at a time. Her subtle hints to Polly to get a satellite system had fallen on deaf ears. Polly was a reader. Which worked fairly well, since Samantha went in twice a month to the library to get new books for Polly. That gave her a chance at using the internet.

It seemed that now, with Kevin here, that situation would change. Oh, she’d still get Polly’s books, but if Kevin allowed it, and she was sure he would, her laptop would once again be browsing cyberspace.

Between her good cheer about the soon to change internet and TV issue,

and Kevin's about the boat, it was a light, pleasant meal, with the conversation on those three subjects.

Satellite TV and internet access were not the only projects Kevin took upon himself to do over the next few weeks. Several of them were prompted by the news he was seeing on the TV and internet.

Having grown up under his Great-grandfather's influence, Kevin was all ready predisposed to preparing for the worst that Mother Nature or other human beings could throw at him. So, while the Homestead had a small solar PV system and battery bank with inverter and a portable generator, Kevin decided to increase the off-grid capability of the place, in addition to the satellite TV and Internet service.

With said Internet service now, Kevin was on-line most of two days looking for suitable suppliers for what he wanted, after doing the research, also on-line.

Less than two months after his arrival, the Homestead was capable of going for months without outside power sources. A large PV array; new, higher capacity batteries; 240 volt inverter; and a pair of 21kw diesel fueled generators provided power.

Though he wanted a ten-thousand gallon diesel fuel tank, it was impractical to bring one in without cutting down trees to widen the driveway. Kevin didn't want to do that. Instead, he put in a two-thousand gallon diesel fuel tank, relying on the Farm's bio-diesel production to keep the tank filled after the first filling with commercial fuel.

While there were only a few portable devices at the Homestead that used propane, Kevin had a one-thousand gallon propane tank installed. It had a wet leg so Kevin could fill the smaller tanks.

The Parker Brothers came out and tore down the old boathouse, raising

and taking away the sunken runabout. The basic plan they had developed based on Samantha's first contact with them was scrapped when Kevin began to describe what he wanted in the way of a new boathouse.

It turned into a seventy by seventy-foot square floating structure, with two twenty-four foot garage doors giving access from the water. One bay was taken up by the Munson, with the other bay capable of taking up to four smaller boats. Aware of how many lakes were losing water, or even going dry, the boathouse was anchored well away from the bank, with a long floating walkway going out to it.

The graveled access ramp next to the boathouse was improved, getting a poured, rough texture concrete slab going well out into the lake, and well up the shore, to provide good access to load and unload vehicles from the Munson. Another two-thousand gallon diesel fuel tank was installed, well above the storm wave line of the lake and a fueling dispenser was plumbed and wired out on another long floating walkway not too far from the boathouse, but far enough to minimize any chance of fire spreading from one to the other.

After those projects were done, Kevin made his first visit to the Farm. Great-grandfather Kevin's initial truck farm had prospered under the leadership of the Manager he'd hired, and the other hands, all of which agreed with the methodology of growing organic foods and impacting the environment as little as possible. As new technology and ways of doing things came along, the Farm incorporated them, with the approval of Trevor McQuirer.

Wanting to see the approaches to the Farm, Kevin took the Jeep. He noted the security features the Farm had on the approach. There was a heavy gate at the entrance to the long driveway into the property. Kevin suspected that some of the rather tall humps of ground here and there weren't natural. They would be excellent firing emplacements in case of trouble.

Kevin suddenly wondered why he was thinking about such things. The news lately was relatively positive.

Kevin was impressed with the operation. It was a nearly self-sufficient operation, providing organically grown products to the local communities. As he'd done recently for the Homestead, the Farm was completely off-grid, with high capacity solar panels and batteries for the main buildings, and a four generator set up to power the rest of the Farm needs.

All the generators were three-phase. One of them would provide 100% of the normal power usage, with a second kicking in when additional power was needed. The third generator cycled in when one of the other two was down for service. The fourth unit was a spare, to be put into the rotation when it was time to tear down and rebuild one of the others.

The Farm provided year-round production of some items from the six commercial greenhouses, in addition to the regular fields, orchards, vineyard, and berry patches. There was controlled temperature and humidity storage for all the products, where they were kept until sold.

The Farm produced all the diesel fuel it needed, the process running at only 65% of capacity. The few vehicles and items of equipment that ran on gasoline were capable of running on E85 blend of 85% alcohol to 15% gasoline. The Farm produced the alcohol, buying only the minimal amount of gasoline needed to get by.

The Farm raised beef cattle, hogs, chickens, and had a small dairy operation to produce milk. The milk processing building could turn the milk into cheese, cottage cheese, skim milk, cream, and butter, though, at the moment, all the milk that wasn't consumed at the Farm or Homestead went to market, as did most of the eggs produced by the laying chickens.

The Farm produced all the feed for the animals, with enough storage for a five-year dry spell. Much of the stock, including the chickens, was allowed to free range on the well fenced property.

Great-grandfather Kevin had also insisted on having provisions to process the beef, hogs, and chickens. A full fledged meat processing and storage building, like the milk processing building, was shut down and mothballed, ready for use at any time.

Though not a large part of the operation, the Farm bred and raised both riding and draft horses for sale in the area. The Farm also owned all the honeybee colonies on the property. Having never used chemicals on the bees, and the bees mostly gathering pollen from chemical free plants, the hives had not been subject to CCD, colony collapse disorder, and were thriving.

Having picked up additional property, again, with Trevor's agreement, the Farm was also doing commercial crops. There was storage available for two years worth of crops, so the Farm could sell only when the prices were at their highest, in their seasonal swings.

Kevin, while he was at the Farm, arranged for a better ramp to be installed at the Farm's lake access point. In the future, most of the contact between the Homestead and the Farm would be by boat.

The purchase of a second Munson was discussed. Not only was it a shorter route between the Homestead and the Farm by water, it would also be a much shorter route between the Farm and town, than going by the roads.

Kevin called Munson while he was at the Farm and made arrangements to get another fifty-two footer, this one with a small cabin for maximum deck space. It would easily carry two of the six U500 Unimogs the Farm used, fully loaded with products to be delivered to the area stores.

The Parker Brothers duplicated Kevin's boathouse at the Farm, along with an approach ramp. Munson was as good as their word, and expedited the construction of the Landing Craft. It was delivered right on the time agreed upon.

That was early fall. About the time Polly was finally up and around to a limited extent. Just in time to supervise the canning of the early crops. Against both Samantha's and Polly's wishes, Kevin helped. That is, he did until he got a call from a St. Louis hospital. Trevor was ill.

Kevin quickly packed a bag and left in his Jeep. The nurse had said to hurry. It was well he did. Trevor was on his deathbed. But Kevin made it in time to have a long talk with his former guardian and mentor, and say good-bye.

He learned something he hadn't known about his Great-grandfather. He'd been too young to understand fully his Great-grandfather's actions when it came to preparing for various calamities. Trevor told him about his great-grandfathers philosophy. "Beef, Beans, Bullets, Bullion, Bunker. Not necessarily in that order."

"And let me tell you, Kevin. I didn't really believe in the idea the way he did. I've come to see the light recently. My hobby of stamp collecting seems very futile now."

"But you love collecting stamps, Uncle Trevor!" Kevin replied.

"I did... I do... But I know now they won't keep you fed if something happens. The collection will be yours, along with the rest of my modest estate. I suggest you do what the senior Kevin did. Buy Beef, Beans, Bullets, Bullion, and a Bunker."

Trevor was tired and it showed. Kevin remained silent for a long time, thinking that Trevor had fallen asleep. Thinking of his Great-Gramps, Kevin took out his keys, shining up the five keys that he'd kept for so

long without any idea what they were for. “I wonder if these have anything to do with his Beef, Beans, Bullion, Bullets, and a Bunker philosophy?”

Kevin didn’t realize he’d spoken aloud until Trevor spoke. “I suspect so, Kevin. He kept those keys with him all the time. One time he told me they were the keys to a better way of life. I always thought he meant after some type of Armageddon.”

“He told me that when he gave me the keys,” Kevin said. “He said they were the Keys To The Kingdom. I’ve never understood what he meant.”

The way things are going, Kevin, I’d look for the locks that those keys fit. They very well could be the difference between life and death in the not so distant future.”

“But Uncle Trevor...” Kevin’s voice trailed away as one of the monitors connected to Trevor went flat line and an alarm sounded. A nurse hustled him out of the way as a crash cart team began to work on Trevor.

When a nurse came out of the room a few minutes later, she found Kevin leaning against the wall in the hallway. “I’m sorry,” she said. “We couldn’t do anything else for him.”

Kevin nodded. “He knew he was near death. He was ready to go. I’ll be back with the arrangements.”

Kevin went to Trevor’s brownstone where he’d lived his teen years and entered Trevor’s study and office. It didn’t take long to find the papers he was looking for. They were sitting on top of Trevor’s desk, just waiting for Kevin to read them.

Read them, Kevin did, and began following his mentor’s instructions. A simple service and wake, cremation, and have his ashes thrown to the four winds from some, any, high point in the area.

The estate wasn't modest, Kevin decided, despite what Trevor had said. Over the next few days, as Kevin liquidated Trevor's holdings, he discovered just how well Trevor had done over the years. Not only had he made a great deal of money, he'd kept most of it. Of course, most of that most was in the extensive stamp collection. He had it appraised and gasped at the value it represented. It was of a quality to go to Christies to be auctioned off.

Kevin was told, since he didn't attend, that the bidding had been ferocious, the collection bringing in almost double the appraised value. Finally, with only the brownstone left to sell, which the broker he had listed it with said wouldn't be long, Kevin headed back to what was now, more than ever, his home, the Homestead.

"Are you all right, Kevin?" Samantha asked when he came into the house. "You don't look too good."

"Just the stress. My Uncle... Guardian and I were pretty close. His death hit me harder than I expected. Plus I found out something about Great-gramps I wasn't fully aware of. Something to do with these keys." Kevin jangled the keys in his hand.

"Those Mr. Crain's special keys?" Polly asked, having come into the kitchen right after Kevin.

"Yes. Yes, they are." Kevin handed the key ring to Polly and asked, "Do you recognize any of these?"

Polly took a long look at them. "Well... This one might be to the secret lockbox in the safe in his study." She looked down at the floor. "I'm not supposed to know about it, I guess, but I walked into the study once when he had the safe open. There was a lockbox on the desk. I don't know what's in it."

“It’s all right, Polly,” Kevin said. “I think I’ll go check it out.”

Kevin could tell both women desperately wanted to follow him to the study, but neither one did. It took only a minute to find the safe, hidden as it was in the classic position behind a large painting.

Kevin wondered how he was going to get into it, without bringing out a locksmith to pull the locking mechanism. Then he decided to try the obvious. His Great-grandmother’s birth date. It wasn’t a very good combination to use, for security purposes. But it was the one the senior Kevin had used on the safe.

Also, somewhat typically, there was a handgun sitting in the safe, on top of a stack of manila envelopes. Kevin whistled. Two spare magazines for the 1911A1 Colt .45 ACP pistol were holding down a very large stack of currency. And there was the lock box that Polly mentioned, sitting to one side of the large safe.

Kevin took every thing out of the safe and put it on the desk, checking the pistol first for safety. It had a full magazine of seven rounds, but there was none in the chamber and the hammer was down. Setting it aside, Kevin went through the papers first.

The normal stuff. Birth certificates. Death certificates. Ownership records for the Homestead and the Farm. Family pictures. Kevin had to wipe his eyes several times as he looked through the paperwork. Finally he set them aside and picked up the lock box and set it in front of him on the desk.

It took only one try to find the right key. It was pretty obvious once Kevin saw the lock on the box. He opened it, not knowing what to expect. There wasn’t much. Just a small leather bound book. Kevin assumed it was a journal or diary, but when he opened it up, he found it to be more of a tally book than journal.

It seemed to be a list of supplies of some type. Flipping through the book, he found pages with serial numbers of guns. A whole lot of guns. Kevin put the tally book down on the desk and leaned back in his chair, thinking.

He knew his family were fond of the shooting sports before their deaths. The reloading room attested to that. But the large gun case in there in the study held only a few guns. He had doubts that his great-grandfather would have sold off any of the families' guns after the accident. It just didn't sound like him. But where was the stuff? Kevin held up the keys and looked at them. Now he was really interested in finding the locks they fit.

Leaving the tally book out, Kevin put everything else back into the safe, including the cash, after he counted it. Another whistle. Ten thousand dollars in hundreds and twenties. Kevin closed and locked the safe, re-hanging the picture to conceal it.

Both Polly and Samantha looked at him expectantly when he went into the kitchen. "Still a mystery. The one key did open the lockbox, but there were only some personal things in it. No clue as to where the rest of the locks are located." That was all he was willing to say at the moment. It seemed to satisfy the two women.

Kevin wondered about the guns quite a bit the next few days, mainly due to the news. The world news wasn't good. Russia was rattling her sabers, talking about spheres of influence, and getting back hers. Putting nuclear capable bombers in Cuba. China was staying quiet, but holding war games and testing new offensive weapons.

Kevin also happened to see a post on one of the preparedness forums he'd started reading lately. There was to be a remake of "Red Dawn", the movie about a Soviet supported invasion of the US using mostly Cuban assets. The specter of nuclear war, or the unlikely, but possible

invasion of the continental US, weighed heavily on Kevin's mind.

Samantha found him in the basement one morning, just looking around. "What's up, Kevin?" she asked, now quite comfortable with first names.

"Just thinking about something... A fallout shelter, actually."

"Besides the one already here?" Samantha asked.

Kevin looked at her blankly. "Aunt Polly said there was a shelter down here," she told him.

"Well, I guess the whole basement qualifies, from what I've learned on line. I was thinking more protection than what the basement provides."

"Aunt Polly made it sound like something separate. I must admit, I was curious at first, but we haven't had any tornado alerts or anything and I forgot all about it. Let me get Aunt Polly."

Samantha left the basement, but came back a few minutes later with Polly. Polly took the stairs carefully, still somewhat on the weak side.

"Samantha said you were asking about the tornado shelter, Mr. Kevin?" Polly asked.

"Oh. I was thinking fallout shelter," he replied, suddenly disappointed.

"I don't like to refer to it like that," Polly said, her hand going to the cross that hung from a gold chain. "The Senior Mr. Crain called it that, but I just don't like what it means."

"Is it just the entire basement?" Kevin asked. "It would qualify, according to the research I've done."

"Oh, no. The basement is just the entrance to the real shelter," Polly

said, her voice dropping conspiratorially. “The door is hidden behind the fireplace support pillars.” Polly walked over to where what looked like the solid concrete support of the fireplace in the first floor living room.

You would never see the door unless you were looking for it behind that support. Polly tried the door. It wouldn’t open. “I’ve never been inside,” Polly said. “I’m afraid of getting trapped underground. I didn’t know the door was locked.

Polly and Samantha both looked at Kevin as he pulled the key ring out. The second key he tried unlocked the door.

With no such fear as Polly admitted to, Kevin went through the door, but only for a few steps. There was another door. But it wasn’t the simple steel-clad door that was the initial entrance. This was a vault door, with a combination lock.

Samantha was right behind him when he tried his Great-grandmother’s birthday as the combination. It didn’t work. He tried his Great-grandfather’s birthday. The tumblers clicked and Kevin spun the wheel. He tried to pull the door open, but quickly realized it opened inward, instead.

The vault door open, Kevin automatically felt for a light switch. There was one on the left side of the door. Kevin flipped it and bright fluorescent tubes lighted after a barely noticeable moment. Samantha was right at Kevin’s back. She gasped when the lights came on. “It’s as big as the basement!” she said.

Kevin looked back at her and she paled slightly. “Perhaps you want to do this alone...” she said.

“No. That’s okay. I was just going to tell you that I thought the same thing. At least fifty by eighty feet. Let’s see what’s down here.”

“I’m going back upstairs,” Polly said. “I don’t even like being in the basement.”

Samantha and Kevin didn’t respond to Polly’s statement. They were too enamored with the fallout shelter. Everything was spotless, even having been closed up for years. The air was okay, but just a bit stale.

“Right out of the late Cold War fallout shelter style book,” Kevin said. He’d been reading up on shelters and recognized the look. “Great-Gramps must have put this in when he built the house.

“Kitchen,” Samantha said, trailing her hand over the stainless steel counter top. “No water at the faucets, though.”

“Here’s the bathroom,” Kevin said, opening a normal interior room door. “All the amenities. Looks like everything drains to a sump and is pumped up to the regular septic system, just like the unit in the basement bathroom. Twin pumps, with battery back up.” He tried the washbasin faucet. “No water here, either.” He opened a door near the first. “Another, identical bathroom,” he said.

“The refrigerator and freezer are plugged in but they aren’t running,” Samantha said, having just checked the matching stainless steel appliances.

“Hm...” Kevin walked over to join Samantha. “These switches in the wall...” Kevin looked up and around. “Don’t see what they would be for, unless...” He flipped the four switches. The refrigerator and freezer both started to hum.

Kevin checked the trash compactor installed under the counter by the sink. It too worked. So did the dishwasher, except no water

“Water must be turned off. And just the lights were left active. I wonder where the power and water comes from,” Kevin mused as the two

looked around the rest of the shelter. There were a total of four bunkrooms, each with four sets of triple bunks, with a large gym locker for each bunk. Plus, there were two small bedrooms with queen beds.

Exploring further, they found another door, steel, that opened to a short hallway with yet another steel door. When Kevin opened it and turned on the lights, Samantha and Kevin were looking at the utility room for the shelter. "Great minds think alike," Kevin muttered upon seeing the twin generators. They were connected to piping to provide both engine air and cooling air, diesel fuel, and exhaust, though massive mufflers. They weren't running and Kevin checked the transfer switch. The shelter apparently had primary power from the house electrical system, with the generators as back up.

A pair of matching Ruth-Berry pump-in-tank pressure water pumps were plumbed to a well that came up through the floor of the room. A hand pump was plumbed into the well, too, with both a check valve and gate valve to prevent air leaks into the system when the electrical pumps were running. Two additional pipes the same size came up through the floor, but were capped off.

The pumps were set up on blocks, inside a drip pan. Both were three-quarter-horsepower pumps in the forty-two gallon tanks. From the looks of it, the two large pre-charged tanks had been plumbed in at some later date for increased pressure water capacity.

Seeing what had to be the ventilation unit, Kevin walked over and, after studying the control panel a moment, flipped a switch. Cool, clean air came through the vents and the stale air was gone in minutes. Kevin noted that there were manual air pumps in case of power failure.

There was a work bench, tool cabinets, and supply cabinets. Everything needed to service and repair the generators, water pumps, sewer pumps, and HVAC system.

It suddenly struck Kevin how things had been brought into the shelter. It was possible that most of the items had been installed before the roof was put on and back filled, but from the looks of some things, large items had been added to the shelter after it was built.

Kevin looked around. There was another door. Actually, a set of wide double doors. He opened one of them, and saw steps leading up to a steel hatch. "Must be covered over or I would have seen it," Kevin thought.

Going back into the main room of the shelter, Kevin tried another door. It opened into a storeroom. Other than a clearing in front of a large gun safe, and a smaller safe, the room was stacked from floor to almost head high with plastic pails and cardboard cartons, all setting on plastic pallets to keep them off the floor.

Kevin and Samantha checked a few of the cases and buckets. All contained food of one kind or another. From basic wheat to the best that Mountain House had to offer. Every box and pail was dated. Some showed dates as early as 1976.

Great-grandmother's birthday opened the gun vault. Kevin whistled. There was quite a selection, including multiples of several of the weapons. Ammunition cans were stacked on the floor of the gun case. When he squatted down and opened the smaller safe, he didn't know what to expect. It wasn't the gold and silver coins he found in plastic coin tubes inside the twelve heavy cloth bags the safe contained.

"That's real gold?" Samantha asked. She was standing beside Kevin as he opened one of the tubes and poured twenty large gold coins into his other hand.

"I'm sure it is. And silver coins. A whole lot of both," Kevin replied. "Keys to the Kingdom is right! Criminey." He turned around and looked up at Samantha. "I'd prefer this information not get spread around."

“No. Of course not. I doubt if anyone would believe me, anyway.”

“There is that,” Kevin said, putting the coins away and closing the safe and locking it. “What else is there, I wonder?”

He went back into the main part of the shelter and looked around.

“Didn’t see that before,” he said, nodding toward what looked to be the water tight door out of a submarine or ship.

After spinning the locking wheel, Kevin opened the door. He and Samantha found themselves looking down a tunnel. It was constructed of five-foot diameter concrete culvert sections. “Must be sealed well,” Kevin said. “Not a trace of moisture.”

Samantha flipped a switch next to the door. A string of white Christmas tree lights came on, illuminating the tunnel. At the far end was a similar door. “You game?” Kevin asked Samantha.

She grinned. “Are you kidding? But... Seriously... This is your family’s business. Are you sure you want me knowing more than I already do?”

“I trust you,” Kevin said simply and stepped into the tunnel over the threshold of the door. Samantha was right on his heels. Both had to move in a crouch in the tunnel. Kevin crossed his fingers. He spun the locking wheel and pushed. The door opened. He had feared it might be locked from the other side.

Kevin felt around the doorway, but the only switch he found turned off the tunnel lights, causing Samantha to gasp in surprise when they went off. Flipping the switch on again, Kevin pulled the Mini-Maglight he carried in a sheath on his belt with his Leatherman Surge and Survivor Swiss Army Knife.

He twisted the bezel and with the light shining ahead of him, stepped

over the threshold into a very large room. Shining the light all around, all he could see were thick columns that supported the ceiling. There was another of the water tight doors at one end of the room. Beside it was an old wall mounted air blower.

Seeing another large pipe coming into the room with a cap on it, he removed the cap and cranked the blower. Fresh air entered the room, clearing the dry, dusty smell it contained.

“I’m all turned around,” Samantha said. “Where exactly are we?”

“I think we’re under the detached garage,” Kevin replied, going over a set of metal clad double doors like the ones in the utility room of the shelter. He opened one of the doors and they saw a set of wide steps going up to a pair of basement access doors.

“There aren’t any basement doors at the garage,” Samantha said.

“Have to be buried. And wait. Look,” Kevin said, shining the light toward the other end of the room. There’s a ladder on the wall down there.

The two walked to the ladder and Kevin climbed it, after handing the flashlight to Samantha. He climbed up, his feet disappearing up the shaft. Then Samantha saw light coming down the shaft.

“In the garage, all right,” Kevin called down to Samantha. The shaft has an opening behind one of the shop cabinets.”

Kevin climbed down and Samantha went up to see for herself. “Wow,” she said when she came back down.

“Let’s see where the other tunnel goes,” Kevin said, walking back to the other end of the room. He opened the hatch and stepped into another of the tunnels. It too was lighted with a string of Christmas tree lights. It

was much longer than the tunnel connecting the shelter and the garage basement.

“Where are we going?” Samantha asked. “This leads away from the garage along the path of the firing range.”

The two suddenly looked at each other. Kevin said, “The firing range berm. I always kind of wondered why it was so big, especially how long it was.”

“You think there’s a room in the berm?”

“We’ll know shortly,” Kevin replied. He was opening the hatch at the end of the tunnel. It opened to a set of narrow steps. At the top of the steps there was another of the standard steel clad entry doors. Samantha handed him the flashlight and he stepped through.

Feeling for a switch at the side of the door, Kevin found one this time and flipped it. Fluorescent tubes lighted and Kevin and Samantha both gasped.

“It’s a full scale armory, for crying out loud!” Kevin said, looking around at the racks of weapons and stacks of ammunition cans. There were boxes of Load Bearing Equipment and accoutrements.

At the far end of the room was another set of the double steel doors. Kevin tried them, but they were locked. Taking the key ring out again, he tried the remaining keys on the doors. Sure enough, one unlocked them. They opened inward and Kevin eased one open carefully, expecting what he saw. Heavy plastic with earth against it.

“There are digging tools here,” Samantha said, pointing at the pick and three shovels leaning against the wall by the doors.

“Can’t be more than a couple of feet of earth at the top of the doors,

maybe eight or nine at the bottom. Be easy to get out if needed.”

Samantha nodded. Both turned around and just looked at the collection of weapons. Far from an expert on firearms, Kevin could still see the generational line up. M1 Garands and what he found out later were BM-59's from after the Korean war.

Then several AR-15's from the post Vietnam era. M1As after they were privately produced in the late seventies. Also from that time were racks of HK-91's and semi-auto FN FALs. The pistols and revolvers showed the same type of timeline.

“These are huge!” Samantha said, touching the massive muzzle break of one of the six guns in a rack nearest the outside entrance.

“Barrett M82A1's, unless I miss my guess. Great Gramps must have got them not long after they became available.”

Fighting weapons weren't the only things available. There were a multitude of hunting rifles and shotguns, too. Kevin edged down a narrow lane between ammunition cans stacked chest high in long rows. “Korean War surplus .30-'06,” he told Samantha. He checked more of the ammunition cans. They too counted up to the time of the Senior Kevin's death in 1996.

“We'd better get back,” Samantha suddenly said. “Polly may already be frantic.”

“I guess so.” As they headed back to the basement, back tracking the way they'd come in, with Samantha leading, Kevin looked around, noting several things he'd missed in the excitement of discovery on the incoming trip. He made a mental note to do some more exploring.

They met a very nervous Polly standing at the entrance to the shelter from the basement. “Are you two all right? I was getting worried.”

Samantha looked at Kevin and he nodded.

“We’ve been exploring. There are tunnels connecting a basement under the detached garage, and a room in the berm of the backstop of the shooting range,” Samantha told Polly.

“Really?” Polly asked, her eyes wide. Samantha and Kevin both nodded.

“Not for public information,” Samantha cautioned her aunt. “This is strictly Crain family business.”

“Of course!” Polly declared, a bit put out at the unnecessary warning.

Kevin closed and locked the basement entrance of the shelter and the three went back upstairs. During their journey of discovery, Polly had prepared lunch.

Kevin was silent through the light lunch. He’d discovered what three of the keys were for and been very surprised. Now, more than ever, he wanted to know what secrets the other two keys held.

Over the next month, tally book in hand, Kevin took an inventory of everything in the shelter system. He also found two more tunnels. One entered from the basement behind a built-in wall cabinet that led to the working, but mostly decorative, dug well in the front yard.

Another tunnel led from the garage basement out into the forest. Kevin had to go get Samantha and show her where it came up. “Look at that! Straight out of “Hogan’s Heros.”

Samantha looked blank. Kevin explained a little about the TV show and Samantha nodded. “And that applies how?” she asked.

“Look at that stump,” Kevin said, pointing at a large, jagged top stump.

“Dead tree. Lightening probably. Must have cut up the rest for... Wait a minute...” Samantha went to one knee and began to touch the stump and dirt around it. “This is fake... No, not fake, but real things, glued or fastened together some how.”

Kevin grinned and nodded. He ran his fingers under a root exposed on the surface. With a heave, he lifted the edge of the stump assembly to expose the tunnel beneath. Lowering it again, he brushed some debris around the edges and it was again nearly indiscernible from any other tree stump in the forest.

Samantha looked over at Kevin and grinned, too. “Wow! Real life escape tunnel.”

“Yep.”

The tunnel to the well and the escape tunnel weren't the only things that Kevin found during that time. Very curious how all the ventilation, power, water, and sewer were incorporated without being immediately visible, Kevin traced the lines.

The massive air intake needed for the cooling and combustion air for the shelter generators came from extra vents in the house roof overhang, multiple pipes running down from the vents to combine at the ductwork to the generators.

The smaller intakes were just as cleverly camouflaged, one of them drawing air through a rock decorative fixture in the back yard. Also in the back yard, a bird bath concealed a ventilation line, as did a gazing ball on a stand near the garden.

Kevin located the fuel tank that supplied the shelter generators. It was nearly empty. Kevin had the old fuel pumped out, a new load of diesel laced with Pri-D pumped in, and the small amount of old fuel added

back to the tank. The proportion of fresh to old, and the addition of the Pri-D seemed to do the trick. The generators fired right up and ran without a problem when Kevin tested them.

Kevin also found the huge cistern that the roofs of the house and detached garage fed into through a filter system. One of the water supply lines that came into the shelter came from the cistern.

During the investigations, Kevin found a heavy rubber insulated cable going from the shelter down to the lake and into it. Inside the shelter was a sound powered telephone. Kevin could only assume that it went to a shelter at the Farm.

With that thought in mind, Kevin went there in the Munson and talked to the Farm Manager. “All the buildings have shelters, or are shelters, like the barns. But I don’t remember ever seeing a sound powered telephone.”

“Are the shelters connected with tunnels?”

Claude Green grinned and shook his head. “Fraid not.”

“Any locks around here that you’ve never found a key for?” Kevin asked.

Again Claude Green shook his head. “What’s this all about, if I may ask?”

“It’s just that I found some rather surprising things at the Homestead and I wondered if there was anything like it here.”

“Having to do with shelters?”

Kevin nodded.

“You worried about the world political situation?” Claude asked Kevin.

“Yes. I am. I’m thinking that we are closer to nuclear war than we have been since the Cold War.”

“I’m of the same mind. We have safety drills regularly, but I think, with your permission, we may do a bit more on the national disaster level. There’s always the New Madrid Seismic Zone that could go. Even Yellowstone Caldera.”

Kevin looked at Claude with some surprise. Claude looked a bit sheepish. “I... uh... watch the Weather Channel, Discovery, and the History Channel. Seen some of those mega disaster programs.”

“That’s good. With things like that in mind, think about what things we can do here to increase the level of survivability and ability to recovery after a major event. That includes shelter space for all the employees and their families.”

“Wow. Could get expensive,” Claude cautioned Kevin.

With a slight smile Kevin said, “Just set up a plan, with a budget, and I’ll see what I can do to find the money for it.”

“Will do.” The two men shook hands and Kevin went back to the Homestead.

He found Polly and Samantha in the middle of what appeared to be an argument. Both women fell silent when Kevin came into the kitchen.

“Am I interrupting something?” Kevin asked, looking at one and then the other.

“Tell her she doesn’t have to leave, Mr. Kevin!”

“Of course she doesn’t,” Kevin said, turning concerned eyes on the woman he had been thinking about as far more than just an employee.

“Look. I just feel like I’m taking your money under false pretenses. I don’t mind staying, to lend Aunt Polly a hand, but I don’t feel right taking money for just helping out my Aunt. And I don’t think you’ll let me do that without paying me.”

“You’re both right,” Kevin said, thinking fast. He did not want Samantha to leave. “You don’t have to leave, Samantha. And I’ll stop paying you for the housework. But I need an... executive assistant kind of person to help me with Great-Gramps estate.”

“No you don’t,” Samantha said.

“Samantha! That’s no way to talk to Mr. Kevin.”

“Okay. Perhaps I don’t. And if you really insist on it, I’ll stop paying you. But Polly still needs help occasionally. If you stay, you’ll just get room and board.”

“I still need to get to a position to make a real living,” Samantha said.

Kevin and Polly both could tell she was weakening. She really didn’t want to leave.

“What about the Library?” Kevin suddenly asked. “Didn’t you say they were looking for a new assistant librarian?”

Samantha perked up. “Yes, I did. You know, I might just check that out.” She turned her eyes to Kevin. “Give me a few days to decide?”

“Absolutely. Take as long as you need to work something out.”

Polly and Samantha were both smiling when Kevin headed for the study.

When he got there he pulled the tally book out of his breast pocket and opened it. There were now tiny pencil marks next to many of the entries.

Kevin had confirmed his suspicion that his Great-grandfather had bought in stages. Either simply as the mood struck him, or new opportunities came up he wanted to take advantage of. And he seemed to have a real knack on timing. And understanding the rules and how to play them to his advantage.

As to the gold and silver coins, with regular gold coinage and bullion illegal for American citizens to hold, the senior Kevin used one of the few loopholes and collected legal tender numismatic foreign gold coins. Particularly British Gold Sovereigns and Mexican Gold Pesos of varying denominations.

When gold became legal again for American Citizens to own, Kevin jumped right in and converted all his legal tender foreign coins to Krugerrands. A lot of Krugerrands when the price dropped after the first surge of availability. He bought many of the coins when the price was between one-hundred dollars and two-hundred dollars per ounce. He quit buying as the price skyrocketed in the late '70's. But when it dropped again to under four-hundred dollars an ounce he bought more, and continued to do so whenever the price was below four-hundred.

When American Gold Eagle coins came onto the market he once again converted. From the Krugerrands to the US minted coins, in all four denominations, and stayed with them until his death.

His silver coins didn't cost him anything. At least not in the sense of a premium over their silver content. When the rumors first came out that the US mints were going to stop producing silver coins he took a significant amount of paper money and bought roll after roll of silver dimes, quarters, and half dollars, all at face value. It was his one and only purchase of silver.

According to the tally book, he should have thirty bags of the silver coins. What he'd found in the shelter accounted for only three of them. It was the same situation with the gold. The one-hundred-ounce bags of gold coins numbered twenty-four. Six of them were in the small safe in the shelter.

When it came to the guns and ammunition and accoutrements the situation was the same. There were at least three times the number items somewhere, as there were in the arms bunker. Even more important, in Kevin's eyes, was the fact that the tally book showed several times the amount of long term storage food was stashed away somewhere, too

Kevin held up the two keys that still lacked locks to use them in and looked at them for long moments before putting them away.

He turned on the computer and pulled up the Internet. He had a plan to make it easy for Samantha to take the library position. He looked at Munson boats again, but he really couldn't justify another of the landing craft style boats. He needed something as fast, and utilitarian, but something that didn't look utilitarian, like the landing craft boats. After some searching, he found the Nautica International website and immediately liked their line of rigid inflatable boats.

These weren't tiny oval rubber boats of yesteryear. Nautica had ocean going models. Though he didn't really need the ocean going features, Kevin decided on one that was capable of it. An RIB 41 Cabin model.

Fast, it could carry up to thirty-five people, though not that many in the fiberglass cabin. It had a galley, head, twin beds, and other amenities suitable for overnight stays on the lake. And it would take Samantha back and forth from the Homestead to town leaving only a short drive in a vehicle to get from the marina to the library and back.

Which meant, since the Nautica couldn't carry a vehicle, a vehicle would need to be kept at the marina for their use when going to town in

one of the boats. Smiling, Kevin put in the order for the Nautica RIB 41 Cabin model, with options and four complete sets of spare inflatable tubes, and then pulled up automobile possibilities for a shuttle to be kept at the marina.

He did think about the Power Wagon, and then the Suburban, but decided he wanted those kept at the Homestead. Though blizzards were rare, some snow wasn't unusual, and ice storms were a rather common occurrence during winter. That meant something with four-wheel drive. A Jeep, even a four-door version, would be too small for some of the things Kevin envisioned the vehicle to be used for, besides as Samantha's taxi.

Finally, after a couple days of research, Kevin settled on a Chevy one ton van, converted to four-wheel drive, non-electronic diesel engine, and set up for hard off-road use in case it needed to make a trip on the road from town to the Farm or to the Homestead in bad weather. And just because. He ordered the van the same day Samantha told him she would take the job.

He'd barely hung up the telephone when it rang. It was Claude, the Farm Manager. "I think I might have found a lock for one of your keys."

Kevin lost no time going down to the lake and taking the first Munson over to the Farm. Claude met him at the boat ramp. "We were doing a little work in the big barn and moved some things around. Found a set of steel double doors facing into the hill the barn is built into. Only two guys and I know about it. I thought you might want it kept quiet, depending on what it is."

"I do. Thanks," Kevin said. When they got to the barn it was deserted and Kevin followed Claude to the now exposed hidden door. The first of the last two keys opened the lock and Kevin pulled one door open. He found the light switch he expected and the florescent tubes came to life.

Behind him, Claude let out a sigh. “Just a bunch of boxes and stuff,” he said.

Kevin opened the door wider.

“Oh. Not just boxes and stuff,” Claude said. “Jiminy Cricket! That’s more firepower than my platoon had in the sand box!”

“Only you won’t find any full auto or destructive devices,” Kevin said, going into the room. It was a cross between the armory and shelter at the house. Boxes and pails of food, racks of weapons, stacked cans of ammunition, and boxes of other assorted items. Kevin took out the tally book and started a quick inventory.

Kevin looked around at Claude when he squatted down in front of the safe that sat against one wall, partially hidden by boxes.

“Uh... I’ll give you a little privacy,” Claude said and left the room. Another Great-grandmother birthday combination and Kevin was looking at some of the missing gold and silver. But not all of it. Just like the arms and food, of which there was still some unaccounted for.

“Okay,” Kevin said. “Let’s lock this back up and return the cabinet to its position. I’m afraid you’ll have to change your plans for the improvements on the barn.”

“No problem. Man. Your great-grandfather was a collector in a big way, wasn’t he?”

“You have no idea,” Kevin muttered. “Keep this quiet. But... Look. If anything ever happens and you need what is in there, and I’m not available, cut the lock. Use everything in there, except the contents of the safe, as you see fit.”

Claude nodded.

Kevin went back to the Homestead and arrived just in time for supper.

Kevin had made no mention of the new boat or the van to Polly or Samantha. Samantha had been driving to town every weekday since she started as assistant librarian when Kevin asked to ride in with her one morning when the weather looked threatening.

“You going to stay in town until I get off?” Samantha asked, sounding somewhat doubtful.

“Nope. Got plans to get back on my own.”

“Okay. But I hope it’s a good one. We may get a real gully washer before the day is over.”

“Got it covered. So to speak.”

Samantha gave Kevin a quick look, but he was looking out the passenger window. She couldn’t see his grin.

He asked to be dropped off at the marina, and Samantha did so, her curiosity aroused. But Kevin still didn’t say anything. Samantha headed for the library and Kevin looked up the marina manager. It didn’t take long to make the arrangements to unload the Nautica RIB 41 Cabin model boat and get it into the water of the lake.

Kevin spent most of the morning getting the boat ready for use, familiarizing himself with the various manuals that had come with the boat. Finally, with the tanks full, Kevin took it for a spin on the lake. He drew a lot of surprised looks from other boaters. There wasn’t anything else on the lake like it. It was much the same reaction he’d had on the two Munson Landing Crafts’ first voyages.

Satisfied with everything, Kevin ran the boat into the marina, backed it into the slot he'd made long term arrangements to have available for daily use, and tied the boat up. He locked the cabin and headed for the marina office.

"Kevin," said Frank Whitaker, the marina manager said, "There's a guy waiting for you out in the parking lot. Didn't look too happy when you weren't here to meet him."

"Really?" Kevin asked. He hurried out to the parking lot. There was the one-ton Chevy window van, perched on its new four-wheel drive train.

"Sorry I'm late, guys," Kevin said when he walked up.

"They told us noon. It's almost one," groused the taller of the two men.

It annoyed Kevin, but he held his peace. "Maybe this will make up for it," he did say, pulling a couple of twenty dollar bills from the money clip he took from his pocket.

Both men's eyes lit up and they were suddenly eager to serve. "Keys. Papers. More keys. The sticker is good for another fifteen days. You'll need to get it registered pretty quick. Tank is full, just as requested."

"Okay, guys. Thanks," Kevin replied, taking the packet of papers and all seven sets of keys for the van.

The two guys high-fived one another and walked over to the pickup truck that they would take back home. After checking his watch, Kevin checked the van out. Deciding he had time, he headed for the county seat to get the van registered and licensed. When he returned to the marina he parked the van in the slot he'd reserved for the van, just as he had the slip for the boat.

Kevin was whistling when he left the marina in the Nautica again. He

stopped at the Farm and dropped off two sets of the keys for the van, explaining to Claude it would be available some of the time for Farm use if the trip was made in the Farm's Munson.

"Good deal," Claude said. He was looking over the Nautica. "You have your own fleet now." He laughed and Kevin followed suit. Back aboard, Kevin took the boat to the Homestead and backed it into the second bay of the boathouse. There was still room for two small boats on that side.

All that evening Polly and Samantha tried to figure out why Kevin wouldn't quit smiling. The only time he did was when they were watching the evening news. It wasn't good.

It wasn't until the next morning when Kevin insisted that Samantha go with him down to the marina before she left for the library that she figured out why he'd been smiling the evening before. He showed her the boat, gave her a set of keys for it and the van, and said, "Have a good day."

She looked more annoyed than pleased, but Samantha, as Kevin had the day before, checked out the boat before starting up the twin diesels and easing it out of the boathouse. Kevin had to grin when Samantha got well away from the shore and hit the throttles, the Nautica going up on plane almost immediately.

Kevin explained to Polly what he'd done when he got back to the house and she asked why Samantha's jeep was still parked.

"Good. She's been hinting at moving to town now, because of the job. She wants to stay in the area because of me, but that drive every day, mostly on back roads, is wearing her down. This should make it much better. If she doesn't just get mad and move to spite you."

"She won't do that," Kevin said.

Polly noted his confidence in the statement. She had a feeling that Kevin probably meant that he wouldn't let her. He'd find some way to get her to stay if the library didn't. Her personal hope was that Kevin would get off his duff and officially start courting Samantha.

Having decided to quit worrying about the fifth key and the things he'd yet to find, Kevin went on a buying spree of his own. It had been twelve years since the senior Kevin's last prep purchases. Kevin wanted to sort of 'top off' the supplies already in place, and get newer versions of some of them. But, like his great-grandfather, Kevin doubted he would get rid of any of the things already in storage.

And though he'd located the outside access points to all the elements of the shelter system, Kevin decided to leave them covered, except for the garage basement entrance. He needed easy access to that empty room to store the things he was purchasing.

With a dozen orders out, Kevin turned to helping Polly and Samantha do the last of the harvesting at the Homestead, canning, freezing, pickling, dehydrating, and putting into the root cellar everything they couldn't consume immediately.

Thanksgiving was spent at the Farm, with many people that didn't work full time there invited along with their families. Things were hard and quite a few people attended. Kevin had his first chance to meet many of the specialists that did some of the work at the Farm and at the Homestead, like the arborist that made sure the productive trees and bushes stayed that way. The vet that cared for the animals at the Farm was there with his family, too. The Parker Brothers were there as well.

Polly had invited the doctor that had cared for her during her illnesses, and she showed up with two friends that worked with her.

Kevin was a bit puzzled at Samantha's rather standoffish reaction to Dr. Holloway, but put it off to her presence being a reminder of Polly's

injury and long illness. He found the doctor quite charming, and her friends as well. Both were nurses, with quite a bit of experience, considering their ages.

The only disconcerting thing during the holiday was the news. Kevin wasn't the only person that wondered if things were going to get worse before they got better, though none of them said anything about it. The exception was Kevin and Claude. They had a private conversation during the half-time show of the football game.

"Claude, I'm more worried than ever. I'd like you to give private invitations to everyone you think could be an asset to the Farm if the worst happens to come here. You know how much shelter space you have, and with the supplies Great-Gramps laid in, and those I'm buying, we can support a pretty substantial population."

"I've had the same thought," Claude replied. We have a good workforce living here or commuting. But the specialists... They'd be invaluable in a future where we had to be totally self-sufficient."

"Exactly. Be cautious. We can't have everyone and their brother showing up. But we might as well make full use of the space we have available."

Kevin, Samantha, and Polly went back to the Homestead in the Nautica. The wind was harsh. Cold and gusty. But the three were cozy in the warm cabin of the boat and the storm held off long enough for them to get the boat parked and make it to the house before the freezing rain started.

Commercial power went out only a little while later, and then the land line telephone went dead. The Homestead was completely off-grid. The cell phones continued to work, as did the satellite TV and Internet. The primary generator kicked in and things were fine. The storm lasted for three days, the last day bringing snow on top of the ice.

Monday morning, with the sun shining brightly, Kevin walked down to the boathouse with Samantha, both of them slipping and sliding slightly on the ice and snow. She insisted in going in to the library. "I'm certainly glad you got the Nautica. I wouldn't even think about going in on the road."

"Don't forget you have a short drive in the van. You want me to come with you?"

"Don't be silly," Samantha replied. "And don't worry. I'll be fine."

Kevin stayed and watched until the Nautica disappeared from sight, then made his way back to the house. Polly had a worried look on her face when Kevin went into the kitchen to get a cup of hot tea to chase away the chill from being out in the sunny, but very cold air.

"Don't worry, Polly. She'll be fine. She's a smart woman."

"I know. Still... I worry."

"What is on the agenda for today?" Kevin asked then, hiding his own slight nervousness caused by Samantha being out in the after effects of the storm. "Need me to help with anything?"

"No, Mr. Kevin. Just the normal day. I promised Samantha I would take it easy, after being out on Thanksgiving. I'm afraid I don't recover from illness very well."

"Well, you just take it easy today then. If you need something, just buzz me."

"Yes, Mr. Kevin."

Kevin headed for the study to get on the computer and check the prep

forums he was now a member of. There were all kinds of rumors of what might be happening around the world. The TV news networks weren't any more help. Speculation, for the most part.

Samantha was a smart woman. She made it to and from the library safely that day and the next several days, as well.

Kevin's time was spent moving the truck load deliveries of the items he'd ordered previously from where he'd arranged them to be unloaded in town, moved to the Munson, and then moved one Unimog U500 load at a time to the garage basement. The garage basement soon took on the look of the other shelter components.

Christmas, unlike Thanksgiving, was a simple home affair at the Homestead. Only a small, pre-decorated tree was put up, with less than a dozen presents on the table or leaning against it. At the Homestead, most of the attention was on the news reports of serious trouble in Europe and Asia.

To top off the dangers looming politically, winter was turning into one of the worst in years, despite of, or perhaps because of, global warming. Suddenly, out of the blue, Kevin asked Samantha, "Have you ever thought about switching your Jeep to a diesel engine?"

"No. Not really. Why?"

"Well... Look what's going on. Gasoline is over six bucks a gallon, and the supplier I use said he can't guarantee delivery on short notice any more. He's not getting as much fuel as he used to. Going diesel would allow us to use our Jeeps even if gasoline is unavailable."

"To be honest," Samantha said, "My library job doesn't pay enough to do something like that, I'm sure."

"That's okay. I'll pay for the conversion."

“You know I’m not going to allow...”

“You can pay me back over the next several months, a little at a time. Whatever you can afford.”

Samantha frowned. She didn’t like owing money. But she’d come to believe in making reasonable preparations for what might come. With the availability of biodiesel from the Farm, it made sense.

“Okay,” she said finally. “I guess it’ll be okay. Who does engine swaps like that?”

“There’s a place in St. Louis that I found that will put a Cummins 4BT four-cylinder diesel engine in Jeeps.”

“How would we get my Jeep up there? I can’t take off from work,” Samantha explained.

“Not a problem. It would take less than a week to do both Jeeps. I’ll put a tow bar on mine, and drive yours up there with mine in tow. You can use the Sonoma or Suburban if you need to while I’m gone.”

Her mind already made up, Samantha nodded. “Okay. But I do pay you back, a little at a time.”

Kevin nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll plan on leaving in two days. There is supposed to be a break in the weather then.”

It actually took two weeks, and the break in the weather was long gone when Kevin was able to head back to the Homestead. He was wondering just what Samantha might do when she saw her vehicle. If she recognized it. About the only thing the same on it when he’d headed for St. Louis was the paint job. It was now equipped for heavy-duty off-road

use, just like his, in addition to now being diesel powered.

“Uh...” Kevin said when Samantha and Polly came out onto the porch after Kevin went into the house after parking the rigs on the house garage apron. “I can take the stuff off, if you don’t want it...”

“Oh, Kevin! You just had to, didn’t you? It’ll take me forever to pay you off for all that work.”

“Not really. I got a deal.”

“Yeah. I bet. Well, it’d cost as much to take the things off as it will to keep them, so I guess they stay.” Despite the light snowfall, Kevin led Samantha over to the Jeeps. Polly went back inside. Kevin went over the changes to Samantha’s Jeep in detail.

After Kevin unhooked and parked his Jeep out of the way, Samantha got into her Jeep and took off before Kevin could attempt to get into the vehicle with her. Kevin was sitting on the porch watching the snow fall when Samantha returned a few minutes later.

“Well?” he asked, standing up and opening the front door to let her in the house.

“It’ll do. I’ll have you your first check as soon as I get paid again.”

Kevin wanted to argue and tell Samantha she didn’t have to pay him, but came to his senses in time. She’d never go for it.

All thoughts of the situation vanished when Polly came rushing from the kitchen. “It’s happening! It’s happening?”

Samantha had started up the stairs to the second floor, and Kevin was on his way to the study. Both turned and headed for her in alarm. She was pale and both Kevin and Samantha first thought she was having an

attack of some kind.

There was an attack, all right, but not a medical one. An attack on a US Carrier Strike Group near Taiwan. Polly was headed for the family room and the new big screen TV connected to the satellite receiver. Samantha and Kevin followed.

“I saw it on the little TV in the kitchen,” Polly was saying as she tuned the TV to the news channel they usually watched.

“Oh my Lord!” Samantha said, her right hand going to her mouth. Kevin stood watching the destruction and deaths of hundreds of US Naval personnel, his fists clenched at his sides.

It was hard to tell exactly what was happening, other than that ships were on fire, emitting huge volumes of smoke. There were suddenly more missile tracks, these outbound from the US ships still able to respond.

The screen went blank suddenly, and then the talking heads were back on. Before they were able to speculate on the situation the image cut to the Presidential Seal on the podium at the White House briefing room. There was pandemonium that only got worse when the President walked on camera and stepped behind the podium. Finally the President raised one hand and the roar was reduced to a murmur.

“My fellow citizens. I come before you to report that an unjustified sneak attack on one of our Naval Fleets has taken place. I... We... are trying to contact Communist Chinese authorities at this moment to prevent escalation of the incident. There will be further news later. I suggest everyone seeing and hearing this broadcast prepare for the worst.”

Samantha and Kevin looked at one another. Polly was watching the talking heads again. Kevin said, “Samantha move the fresh food to the shelter and get it ready. We might not have much time, later. Polly, I want you to monitor the TV in the kitchen and let us know if something else happens. I’m going to disconnect the major electronics in the house in case of a HEMP.”

Polly didn’t ask what a ‘HEMP’ was, but hurried off to the kitchen with Samantha. Kevin headed for the utility room off the garage where the electrical panels were. He switched from commercial power to the generator, and then disconnected the telephone line.

Suddenly his cell phone rang. It was Claude, at the Farm. “Some of the hands want to go in and get their families and bring them out here. What do you want me to do?”

“Forget the roads out here. Have everyone that wants to go to the Farm meet us at the Marina. We’ll ferry them to the Farm with the boats.”

“Yes, sir. I’m on it!”

Kevin ran back to the kitchen. “Samantha. Change in plans. Leave the food for now. I want you to get in the Nautica and head for the marina. I’ll be taking the Munson. Polly, call everyone you can think of that might need shelter. We can handle up to forty. Have them meet us at the marina.”

“You sure about this?” Samantha asked. She was already getting her coat from the rack by the back door.

“I’m sure. I have the means to save people. I have to try.”

“But what if you get caught out and the bombs fall?” Polly asked, barely keeping the terror out of her voice.

“Won’t be bombs. Be missile warheads,” Kevin replied. “But we’re not likely to have one close enough to us to be in immediate danger. Even if they hit Springfield, we would have several hours before we get fallout.” Kevin turned to look at Samantha. “You ready?”

She looked scared, but game. Samantha handed Kevin his heavy coat and the two headed for the boathouse in what was shaping up to be another of the ice storms the area was prone to.

Both pushed their respective boat to the limit, headed for the marina in town. When they arrived, the Farm’s Munson was already there, taking people and their possessions on. When that boat was full to a dangerous level, Harold Gould, the senior hand at the Farm, closed the ramp of the Munson and eased it back from the boat ramp.

Kevin ran his Munson up into place and started loading people, shouting out, “Anyone going to the Homestead, wait for the other boat!” Samantha was backing it into a slip so people could board since there was no front ramp on the Nautica the way there was on the Munsons.

Taking a moment to run to the parking lot, Kevin opened it up, pulled the hood release, and turned the battery disconnect switch to off. He reached further back under the HVAC blower and flipped a small switch he found by feel. It shut off the fuel line to the engine, even if someone found the battery switch, which wasn’t likely. After locking the van by hand, he ran back down to the Munson.

More people were coming, despite the weather conditions and Kevin loaded up as many as he could take. Samantha would have to take the rest. He waited until the last person in sight was loaded and then backed away from the ramp and turned the boat toward the end of the lake where the Farm was. Harold dropped into line behind him, and Samantha followed, third in line.

Kevin didn’t see it, but there were several people getting into private

boats and following. It was only when the three boats stopped at the Farm boat ramp did Kevin turn around and see the flotilla of small boats. “Criminey!” He saw Claude helping people up the slick ramp and called out to him. “How many can you take?”

Claude looked up and saw the other boats approaching, too. “We’ll just have to shoehorn them in!”

Kevin nodded. Four families were still on his Munson. “Polly said we were going to the Homestead.” Kevin nodded. Looking over at the Nautica, he saw a few people disembarking, but most were staying on the boat. Leaving Claude to handle the Farm, Kevin backed the boat up and headed for the Homestead, Samantha right behind him in the Nautica.

When they’d backed the two boats in the boathouse, Kevin did a head count as people climbed up onto the walkways. He was glad he’d told Polly to limit it to forty people. There were forty-two.

He led the way up to the house, helping where he could as the nearly panicked people struggled with babes in arms and suitcases. Kevin got a shock when they got close to the house. There were three strange vehicles parked in front of the house garage.

Prepared to pull the Glock 30 from the ankle holster, Kevin went up on the porch. Polly was just inside the open door, talking to someone. He relaxed when she said, “I’m so glad you were able to come. I worry about getting sick in all this.”

Kevin went inside, the rest following. It was Dr. Holloway and her two nurse friends. Dr. Holloway was speaking when she saw Kevin. “I brought a family that needs help. She’s eight months pregnant and they don’t have any type of preparations.”

Kevin wasn’t going to refuse them, but the shelter was going to be at

maximum capacity. “Down here,” he said, going to the basement stairs. He missed the look on Samantha’s face when she saw Dr. Holloway. Dr. Holloway didn’t.

“Everyone just make yourself comfortable here in the basement. No need to go into the shelter until and unless there is an attack and we get fallout.”

Kevin noticed one of the men shake his cell phone and dial it again. The man closed the phone and asked, “Any one loan me a cell phone for a minute. Mine’s not working.”

Someone said, “Try it outside the basement. Mine’s not working, either.”

“Won’t do any good,” Kevin said, checking his phone. It, too, wasn’t getting a signal. The cell tower wasn’t that far away. The cell phones had always worked in the basement, though not in the shelter.

“We probably got hit with a HEMP,” Kevin explained. Those that knew what he was talking about explained to the others when Kevin didn’t. He headed up the stairs and found Polly in an animated discussion with Samantha.

“What’s up?” Kevin asked, seeing the hurt look on Polly’s face.

“Nothing,” Samantha said, “Just a family disagreement. Now. They’re here. What do we do with them?”

Dr. Holloway stepped out of the stairway. “Is there anything I can do to help get things organized?”

It was Samantha that answered, a bit sharply Kevin thought. “No. We have it all under control.”

“As you wish,” replied Dr. Holloway, turning and going back down the stairs.

Kevin looked at Samantha a moment, but the look on her face stopped Kevin from saying anything about the short verbal exchange.

“Well,” Kevin finally said, “We need to know who all is here, and what they brought with them. Show everyone the bathrooms and get a crew together to fix some supper for everyone. Polly I don’t want you waiting on these people. They aren’t guests. They can, and will, help wherever they can.”

“He’s right, Aunt Polly,” Samantha said, her hand going to Polly’s arm. “This is going to be hard on all of us, but it is something we have to do. But you’re still a bit under the weather and I won’t have you straining yourself to take care of people more than able to take care of themselves, given the opportunity they have been given by Kevin’s generosity.”

“I know, Samantha. That’s why I invited her. So we’ll have a doctor here.”

Samantha’s eyes cut to Kevin, but quickly away when he looked puzzled. “That’s not important now,” she said to Polly. “For the moment...” Samantha turned to look at Kevin and asked, “We are safe for the moment, right? Polly can go to her room and lie down for a while?”

“Of course. There is a chance... slim... that we won’t even have to use the shelter except for sleeping and the two extra bathrooms. It all depends on whether or not we get fallout.”

“How will we know?” Polly asked. “Can you see it? I didn’t think you could see it.”

“I have a couple of remote reading radiation survey meters in the shelter

that will tell us if there is any radioactivity coming down. We should be able to see the fallout, but not the radiation.”

“Okay. I trust you, Mr. Kevin. I think I’ll do as Samantha suggested. Take a lie down for a while.”

Polly headed upstairs and Kevin turned to Samantha. “I’m beginning to get the feeling you don’t like Dr. Holloway.”

“I guess not,” Samantha said. But she turned around and headed down to the basement before Kevin could continue the discussion. “Now probably isn’t the time to discuss it, anyway,” Kevin thought to himself.

Following Samantha down into the basement, he found her with a notepad in hand, going from one person to another, making notes. Kevin took another pad from a cabinet and began doing the same thing, starting at the other end of the room.

Kevin took the lists to study. Samantha began to bring a family at a time into the shelter to show them where the bathrooms were, and where they would be sleeping. Kevin was more than a little disappointed at the amount of whining and complaints he was hearing. It was almost to the point that he was going to tell people they were free to go home if they didn’t like the facilities.

But one of the CD V-717’s made a clicking sound, and then the second did, too. They were getting fallout. There was no way Kevin was going to send people out into it. With the needle barely registering, Kevin waited until everyone had finished the meal that had been prepared while he was in the shelter before coming out and suggesting people make their way inside. “We’ve just begun to get fallout. Probably from Springfield. It’s really low reading right now, but I won’t take chances. Everybody in. Samantha, you’d better get Polly.”

Samantha nodded and trotted up the stairs. Kevin saw Dr. Holloway

helping the pregnant woman and wondered for a moment about the problem between her and Samantha. But the needs of the shelterees took precedence and Kevin began to tend to them.

It was midnight before everyone except Kevin and Samantha was in a bed or bunk and the shelter quiet. Samantha sat down beside Kevin and he looked over at her. "Want to tell me what's going on now? Between you and Dr. Holloway."

"It's nothing. Really. Something I realize I've blown way out of proportion. It isn't a problem now, and won't be in the future."

"I'd still like to hear it."

Samantha sighed. "Okay. I was at the clinic with Polly one time and overheard Dr. Holloway talking to one of the other female doctors. They were discussing the chances of 'landing' you, now that you were back here. It was just sort of cold, to me."

Kevin laughed. "Well, thank you for looking out for my virtue. But you really don't need to. I'm not interested in a relationship now. And considering things, maybe never."

"Oh," Samantha replied. She hid well the fact that it was a very disappointing answer to her. "But now you know," she said, rising from her chair. "No harm, no foul. Okay?"

Kevin smiled and nodded. "No harm, no foul."

"Okay. I'm going to put on a pot of tea. I suspect you'll be up most of the night. You said you needed to keep an eye on the radiation until it peaked and one hour later."

"Yes. With those numbers I can calculate shelter stay time. If we're lucky, it won't be more than a couple of weeks."

Samantha looked over at the wall with the bunkroom and bedroom doors. “Let us hope,” she said softly.

It was a long two weeks, but it was only two weeks that everyone had to stay in the shelter. But Kevin did finally discover the facts about the sound powered telephone. It was connected to one of the shelters at the Farm. And it worked just fine.

After the two weeks were up, the oldest were allowed into the basement for most of the day, though everyone slept in the shelter.

When Kevin finally picked four people to go outside with him to take a survey of the area nearly everyone was clamoring to get out. Things weren’t as bad as Kevin had feared they might be. The fallout was cleared from around the buildings, and people allowed up into the house, with, again, the oldest, allowed to go outside and help in the greenhouse. The children, despite their pleas, weren’t allowed outside for over a month, when the radiation on the Homestead grounds was down to a safe level. At least as safe as it would be for a long time.

The same schedule was kept at the Farm. With considerably more room, they fared slightly better, emotional wise, than those in the Homestead shelter. Kevin had locked the hatch to the garage basement. Kevin did not want those in the shelter to know how many supplies he had available. Some people were already discussing staying on after they got out. Without consultation with Kevin.

When he overheard two of them talking, he put a stop to the idea. No one he didn’t invite to stay afterward was welcome. When it was safe to leave the shelter for good, everyone would get a week’s worth of supplies, and a ride back to town, but that was it.

Emotions were raw when that day came. Some took Samantha aside and begged to be allowed to stay. She referred all of them to Kevin. “His

house, his rules,” she told them. She wanted none of the emotional strain that Kevin was being put under.

“You want me to take them in?” Samantha asked Kevin, her voice low as the first group heading to town gathered their things up in preparation to going down to the boathouse.

“No,” Kevin replied. He was now wearing a gun belt and holster, with one of the M1 Garand’s slung over his shoulder. “I don’t want you in harm’s way.”

“You think it’ll be any safer here, with you gone?” Samantha asked.

She had to smile slightly at the sudden look of panic in his eyes. “I didn’t think about that. But... You can trust the Parker Brothers. Get them to lend a hand if need be. And give them their guns back now. Do you have yours on you?”

Samantha nodded and lifted the edge of her jacket to show him the pistol she had selected out of all the possibilities that the Senior Kevin and the current Kevin had provided. It was a classic. A Browning Hi-Power 9mmP.

“Use it if you have to, understand?”

“I understand. There is too much to lose, for too many people, for this place or the Farm to fall into... less capable hands.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said, his eyes now on the group he was taking to who knew what home situation. He led the way down to the boathouse.

Samantha worried the entire time he was gone. She gave the Parker Brothers back the weapons they’d brought with them but Kevin hadn’t allowed in the shelter. “Kevin said I could count on you if there is trouble in the ranks with him gone.”

“Yes, you may, Miss,” Paul replied. He was the older brother. Pete was two years his junior, though, at thirty-two and thirty, they looked like twins. Samantha was glad they were there.

She eagerly sought Kevin out when he came back that afternoon.
“How’d it go?”

“Better than I expected. The van was still there. Someone broke a window to get in, but the cutoffs did their job and they couldn’t start it.

“There were only a few people around. The death toll is high. But, as bad as that is, it leaves some resources for those that survived. At least for a while. I was asked privately by every head of household if they could come back for more food when the week’s worth ran out. I told them arrangements could be made, but there would be either work, silver coins, gold coins, or trade goods involved. A couple of them didn’t like the answer very much.”

“I bet. Okay. Everything here is okay. There were some questions about why the Parker Brothers had been given their weapons when no one else had. I told those people asking that the Parker Brothers were your deputies.”

“Deputies?” asked Kevin, his surprise evident.

“Yep. I had to think of something and ‘enforcers’ sounded a bit harsh.”

Kevin smiled slightly. “Harsh is right.”

Samantha was serious when she said, “You have the Keys to the Kingdom, remember? All the things your Great-grandfather and you have stored? A working farm, able to pickup and continue, even after a nuclear war. The ability to make a better life for everyone willing to cooperate. You have a responsibility...” Samantha looked down at the

floor. “At least, that’s the way I see it.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Kevin said softly. “Keys to the Kingdom. It always just meant my monetary legacy. With the way Great-Gramps arranged things... I think he might have had exactly what you said in mind.

“Though the Homestead shelter was designed for just family, the facilities at the Farm were designed for far more people than live and work there.”

“You’ve done exactly like your Great-grandfather would have done, I’m sure. He’d be proud of you.” Samantha’s right hand went to Kevin’s arm. “I’m proud of you. What you’ve done. And allowed me to do, as well.”

Kevin was looking at her and didn’t see Dr. Holloway come up to them. He started when she said, “Am I interrupting something? I need to speak with you, Kevin.”

Her stiffness showing her feelings, Samantha walked away.

Kevin turned to Dr. Holloway. “Yes, Dr. Holloway?”

“Please,” she said, smiling, “Why can’t I get you to call me Michelle?”

“Well... Michelle, what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

“I need to go in with the next group that goes to town. None of the cars we brought start. I want to get the clinic up and running. There are going to be some survivors that received too much radiation for good health. I need to do what I can. It is clear that you have an extensive supply of emergency supplies. I’m hoping you can let me have some to take with me, in case the clinic and pharmacy has been looted.”

“Of course. But they aren’t going to be free,” Kevin said.

Michelle’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I want you to care for the family here, and those that work at the Farm without compensation. I’ll provide the means for that, and what supplies I can for you for treating others as you see fit.”

“I guess you have a deal.”

Before Michelle could say anything else, Kevin continued. “I’ll keep you and your staff fed adequately, too, so you won’t have to worry about that. Just taking care of people.”

Michelle’s rather hard looked softened and she smiled. “Thank you. I knew you’d come through for the community.”

“Yeah. The community. Make a list of what you’d like to have, and I’ll see if I can produce it. I’ll take you and your friends in tomorrow and we can check out the clinic and the pharmacy. Salvage what we can.”

“Okay. Thank you, Kevin.”

“Sure... Uh... Michelle.”

Kevin went to the study to find the list of medical supplies located at the Homestead. He knew there were more at the Farm, but intended them to stay there, to meet the needs of those staying there.

The next morning, Michelle gave Kevin her list of wants and Kevin put together a kit out of the supplies he had.

Again Kevin left Samantha in charge, with the Parker Brothers there to see that things stayed peaceful. There were some of the temporary residents that really did not want to leave. They would be the last ones to

leave. But they would leave, Kevin had told Samantha.

When they reached town in the Munson it was cold and wet, the sky still showing the signs of dust in the very highest levels of the atmosphere. This time Kevin took someone in he could trust to stay with the Munson while he fired up the Van, which was still in its parking spot, with no further damage.

It took a while at the pharmacy. Though it had been ransacked and all narcotics taken, there were plenty of things to salvage. They basically took everything in the pharmacy except the knick-knacks and loaded them into the van.

The clinic was basically intact, with the drug cabinet it contained forced open and narcotics taken. Again, those after the things they could use to replace their street drugs left behind very valuable other drugs.

Kevin radioed the Homestead and told Polly that he wouldn't be back for a while. He was staying in town to get the clinic fixed up for use, and get living quarters set up in it for Michelle and the nurses. He had offered weapons to the three women, and all had refused. Hopefully, the three were valuable enough to be kept safe by the people in town.

He parked and disabled the van again, and went down to the Munson. "Any problems, Greg?"

"No, sir, Mr. Crain. Some curious people, wondering if we had brought in supplies. I told them no."

"Okay. Let's head back. I want to stop at the Farm before we go to the Homestead."

After talking things over with Claude, it was decided that most of those now at the Farm would be going to their homes soon. With the winter well upon them, there wasn't that much to do that the regular Farm

employees couldn't handle on their own. "You have what you need to see that everyone goes home?" Kevin asked as they walked down to the Lake in a freezing drizzle.

"Yeah," Claude said softly. "I do. Mean's there are going to be some unhappy people. And you realize that, with the way the winter is shaping up, there might be some of these people we're sending home won't make it?"

"I know," Kevin replied. "And I intend to do everything I can to prevent that from happening. But it has to be done so as not to endanger the majority. There are only so many meals that are going to be available over a given time span, even if we maximize our production. Which is going to be difficult if the weather doesn't change seasons like it should. If we wind up with a severe nuclear winter, we might be down to just saving ourselves."

"Well, I'm glad it is you that will be making the calls and not me. Now that I know you, I have to say, you are much like your Great-grandfather. That's a major compliment from me."

Kevin nodded and the two men shook hands.

Kevin and Greg hurried up to the house from the boathouse as the freezing rain turned to snow.

Kevin couldn't bring himself to sent Jenna Floyd home with her new baby. Tony Floyd was a good guy, and a hard worker, but not a planner. Their home, though small, would be almost impossible to convert to wood heat, and there would be no running water. They were far from the lake and couldn't easily transport water with their vehicle out of commission due to the HEMP burst. Tony agreed to work for Kevin in return for room and board for himself, wife, and new baby.

There were a few similar cases at the Farm, and Kevin gave the okay for

Claude to make the same arrangements to allow the real hardship families to stay.

Polly, despite the situation, was in seventh heaven having a baby to help care for. And Jenna and Tony both pitched in and helped every way they could, Jenna in the kitchen and greenhouse, and Tony around the Homestead.

The Parker brothers stayed at the Homestead, as well, at Kevin's invitation. Both were bachelors and had military experience. Kevin expressed his concern about future attacks on the Homestead and they agreed to maintain security and help with the other work that Kevin didn't have time to do because of his frequent trips to town in the Munson. He took limited amounts of supplies and helped where he could to get people set up for the hard times ahead.

Greg Vane was the other person staying at the Homestead, with his family of wife and two daughters. They were in much the same situation as the Floyds, but through no real fault of their own. When they had gone in, with the last load of Townies, they found their house looted and burned almost to the ground. Though there were other homes that they could have taken, Kevin preferred the family stay at the Homestead. All four were hard workers, despite the girls' ages of only eleven and thirteen.

Greg was great with the boats, and Nancy could and did work outside with the men, and then helped in the kitchen and greenhouse when she wasn't. And she and Greg both had combat experience, giving Kevin even more confidence that the Homestead would be in safe hands even when he and Greg were in town. Everyone was armed with the weapons of their choice from the Armory, though no one except Samantha knew from where the guns seemingly materialized.

But that was the limit to the bedrooms in the house at the Homestead. If anyone else stayed permanently they would either have to live in the

shelter, which Kevin was adamantly not going to allow, or living quarters would have to be brought in.

When the changes at the Farm finalized, with the additional housing he had available, had Henry Jenkins, the arborist that cared for the trees on the both properties, and Samuel Lufkin, the local large animal vet, and their families in residence. Then there were the three families like the Floyds. Young couples with babies or small children, or a baby on the way. Until arrangements could be made for adequate housing in town, they would stay at the Farm.

Claude had been right in two of his thoughts that day Kevin had stopped and talked to him in the freezing rain. Some people didn't make it through the winter, and others were less than happy with the way Kevin was sharing his wealth.

Kevin did his best to guide people to make the changes necessary to convert their existing house to wood heat, and arrange for proper sanitation, which meant outhouses, and water, which meant carrying it from the lake and boiling it for safety.

Most did their best, but it was not a large community. There were other preppers in the area, but they were staying close to home. Kevin knew where three separate compounds were, and talked to them regularly on the Amateur Radio, but they offered no help with the local situation.

Things came to a head in May. Even at that late date, winter was still the norm, with there having been only a few days of spring like weather. Kevin and Greg had stopped at the Farm and picked up some fresh meat and greenhouse vegetables, to add to the smaller quantity of greenhouse produce from the Homestead.

Kevin usually let Abner Cousins know ahead of time when he was bringing food in. Abner ran the service station with mini-mart before the

war and was doing essentially the same thing now, with Kevin his only supplier.

Abner sold or traded the products Kevin brought, and Kevin gave him a portion of the proceeds. Abner was at the marina, as expected, but so was a crowd of at least twenty people, mostly men. Kevin recognized some of them as Townies, but there were some that not only did he not recognize, but didn't like the look of very much.

He eased the Munson to the boat ramp, wondering if he was making a mistake. Suddenly a couple of men had Abner by the arms. He wasn't going anywhere. Clarence Dowdy stepped toward the Munson and said, "Kevin, we here to take this load. We've decided that the Farm is part of the town and should be run by our new town council. We'll be out tomorrow to put our own people in place."

Greg was ready to fight, Kevin knew. But Kevin had no wish to die at the moment, and he would if a fight started. There were guns already in the hands of half the group facing him. "Take the load and go," Kevin said coldly.

"Just like that?" Clarence asked.

"Just like that," replied Kevin, drawing disappointed looks from Greg and Abner. "Drop the ramp, Greg."

Greg did so, reluctantly, and stepped back. Those of the group without guns hurriedly moved forward and began carrying the crates of produce and meat from the Munson to the top of the boat ramp.

As soon as the man with the last crate stepped off the bow ramp, Kevin slipped the water jets into reverse and backed away from the boat ramp without waiting for Greg to lift the ramp. He continued backwards until he was well away from shore before slowing. He had Greg up the ramp and then Kevin set out for the farm at high speed.

Greg saw the look on Kevin's face and shivered slightly, thinking, "I'm glad I'm on his side and not with that bunch back there."

Kevin left it to Greg to secure the boat when they made landing at the Farm. He jumped over the bow ramp and strode toward the Farm office building.

"Didn't expect you back," Claude said. Then, noticing the look on Kevin's face, asked, "What's wrong?"

"Got hijacked. A bunch of the Townies took the load when we landed. They plan on coming out and taking over the Farm."

"How do you know that?" Claude asked.

"They said so. Right out. Get everyone together. I want to talk to them."

Claude stuck his head out the door and called to his foreman. "Jake! Get everyone together. Emergency safety meeting."

"Right, Boss," Jake said and headed out the front door of the small office building immediately.

Claude stayed silent as Kevin paced, looking ready to explode. When Jake came back and said, "Everyone is in the meeting room," Kevin still said nothing and just headed for the room.

"Okay," Kevin said when he got to the front of the room. "We have a problem. Serious problem. There is a group of Townies that has declared that the Farm is now part of the town and will be run by the town council. They have stated that they will come out tomorrow and take the place over.

"I intend to fight. Anyone here that wants to leave before the fight starts,

get your stuff and I'll take you to any place on the lake you want. Those willing to fight, stay, and we'll go over a strategy."

There was much murmuring, and two people suddenly got up and left the meeting room. After several long moments of silence, Kevin spoke again. "There are preparations already in place that will make the defense of the Farm much safer and easier than you might think. Some of you may have noticed the earth berms pushed up here and there on the Farm, especially on the access road.

"Those berms are fighting positions, arranged to provide protective fire for each other. I suspect that an assault will also be made by boat. With a little preparation, our own boats will take on that attack if it occurs.

"All those that aren't satisfied with the weapons you have, stay and talk to Claude. We have effective weapons available for everyone that wants one. Another chance for anyone to leave with no hard feelings."

A lot of looking around took place, but no one else got up and left.

"Give Claude and me a few minutes and then you can get together with him about the weapons and the plan of defense."

The Farm employees and dependants made their way out of the meeting room quietly. Kevin turned to Claude. "You know what we have available here. There are some Barrett M82A1 sniper rifles at the Homestead. We'll run four of them over here. Pick out your best shooters and plan on three of the Barrett's supporting the approaches by land, and one to watch the water approach."

"Will do, Kevin. Unless they bring a couple of squads of trained troops, they don't have a chance against us. You think they even suspect that?"

"No. I don't. But I want this one battle to be the last battle we have to fight. Things are tough enough now without this kind of thing going on. We need people that are willing to cooperate with us, not take over. This

is my property and so is the Homestead. My Great-grandfather set them up, I believe, to be a center of positive influence and help for the local community in times of trouble. I just don't think that a town council can run the Farm any better than you can, or be any more fair in distributing our goods than we are doing. The expectation of something in return for enough food to eat isn't unreasonable in my opinion. And as egotistical as that it is, my opinion is the one that counts as long as I control the Homestead and the Farm."

"I'm with you, Kevin," Claude said. "Most of the group here is too. I think any dissenters will change their mind when they see what the have-nots will do in their attempt to take from the haves."

"Okay. Get everyone ready. It could be as early as dawn when the attack comes, though I doubt it. But I want everything ready by then. I'll send the Barrett's over as soon as I get back to the Homestead."

"You can count on me," Claude said. The two men shook hands and Kevin headed back down to the Munson.

When Greg saw Kevin striding down the road toward him he quickly untied the Munson and had it ready to go when Kevin stepped past a small group of people waiting and boarded the boat. He went into the wheelhouse. "Get them on here and find out where they want to go."

"Yes, Boss."

Kevin stood stonily in place behind the wheel until the group was loaded and sitting down in the Munson's cabin, their gear stacked outside. He looked over at Greg.

"Town. All of them," Greg said."

Kevin nodded and backed the Munson from the boat ramp. "Hang on, Greg. We have a lot to do and a short time in which to do it."

A light rain started on the way back to town, but it wasn't a freezing rain. Just cold. It rather fit with Kevin's mood.

"Mr. Crain," said one of the men that was getting ready to get off the boat at a point just outside of town. Kevin had refused to take them to the marina. "I hope you understand..." He looked over at his wife and their six year old son. "They're all I have... I can't risk..."

Kevin's look softened. "I know, Howard. I know. You have to do what you think best."

"Thank you. And if you have a radio I can use, I'll give you as much information as I can on what is going on without jeopardizing my family."

Kevin looked at Howard for a moment and then reached under the console of the wheelhouse and picked up a marine band handy-talky. "Don't risk yourself or your family," Kevin said, handing the radio to Howard. He named a channel and Howard nodded.

Howard was the last off the Munson and looked back. Kevin thought he might just change his mind, but when Howard looked at his wife and child he didn't turn back to the boat. He headed for the road that led to town.

The rain began to come down harder as Kevin headed the Munson toward the Homestead. He radioed ahead to have everyone assemble so he could talk to them when he got there.

He gave essentially the same speech as he had at the Farm. No one indicated in any way that they wanted to leave. The Parker brothers and Greg all immediately volunteered to go to the Farm and lend a hand there, but Kevin shook his head.

“We’ll be in the Munsons in case some of them come by boat. With the fuel situation the way it is, I think that will be the primary avenue of attack, though I didn’t tell Claude that. I want the Farm concentrating on land defense and let us worry about the Lake. I want the Homestead battened down for an attack. Now, I don’t think they’ll try anything here, but I want a watch kept and everyone armed that can use a gun. Samantha, can you lend me a hand?”

Samantha nodded and the others left to take care of the preparations for a possible attack. She followed Kevin outside. After stopping in the workshop for shovels, they went to the far end of the firing range berm and dug out the outside doors to the armory.

When Kevin radioed for Paul and Pete Parker to come out there both whistled at the sight of the six Barrett scoped rifles and cans of ammunition that Kevin and Samantha had removed from the armory. Both men’s eyes went to the just uncovered entrance of the armory, but they said nothing about it.

“Four of these go to the Farm, with two cans of ammunition each. The other two stay here.”

It took two trips to get everything situated. Samantha volunteered to take the weapons to the Farm in the Nautica. Kevin almost said no, but she had the determined look on her face he’d come to recognize. He sent her off with a wave, and worried the entire time she was gone.

While he was waiting anxiously for Samantha to get back, Kevin familiarized Nancy, Jenna, and the Parker brothers of the prepared defenses of the Homestead. He let Paul take it from there.

He and Greg began to load the Homestead’s Munson with guns and ammunition. Then everyone lent a hand to fill sandbags that were stacked into a fighting position in the cargo area of the Munson. Enough bags were filled to do the same for the Farm’s Munson.

“You’re Great-grandfather really covered the bases, didn’t he?” Paul asked, nodding toward the stack of sandbags that Kevin had shown up with.

“Just about,” Kevin said. “I hope it’s enough.”

Kevin said a short prayer of relief when Samantha backed the Nautica into the boathouse. She was perfectly fine and began to help with the sandbags. “They’re really working at getting ready,” she told Kevin. “And the Barrett’s are really appreciated. One of the guys used one in the service and is going to give the other gunners a crash course in their use and care.”

Kevin nodded. “Okay. Good. Now, you’re familiar with the defenses, but Paul is experienced. I think...”

“I’m driving one of the boats,” Samantha said evenly.

“No. I...”

“I’m driving one of the boats,” Samantha repeated. “Don’t even waste your time.”

The others carefully minded their own business for a few minutes as Kevin tried everything he knew to change Samantha’s mind.

It didn’t change. She was at the helm of the Homestead Munson at three the next morning. Kevin, Greg, and Tony were aboard. Greg would be at the helm of the Farm Munson, with Tony in the fighting station. Kevin would be in the fighting station of the Homestead Munson.

It was still dark when Greg and Tony transferred to the other Munson. Claude had a team ready to help move and stack the sandbags. He and Kevin conferred for a few moments, but it was interrupted when

Samantha called for Kevin. “It’s Howard on the radio.”

“Yes, Howard?” Kevin asked, having joined Samantha.

“They’re leaving. Three cars and trucks. But they’re full of guys. And from what I can see, a whole bunch of boats are getting ready. But I don’t think they’ll leave until the vehicles can get there.”

“Thanks, Howard,” Kevin said. He hung up the mike to the radio and stepped out of the wheelhouse. “Finish it up. There is a fleet waiting for us to take care of.”

The last few sandbags were hurriedly placed, and Tony climbed into center of them. He was handed two rifles and a heavy bag of magazines.

Kevin did likewise. When the two men were in place, Kevin said, “Let’s go take it to them. No need to wait until they’re ready.”

Both Munsons were soon on plane, headed for town at their highest speed in the dark, a slight rain misting the windshield of the helm station. Kevin had Samantha slow down when he saw lights and activity at the marina. Greg followed suit.

Kevin and Tony each emptied an eight-round en-bloc clip from an M-1 Garand before those at the marina located the sound of the shots and saw the muzzle flashes as the two men reloaded the Garand’s and kept firing.

With the slight motion of the Munsons, and the distance of four-hundred yards, it wasn’t sniper grade shooting. But people were falling, holes were appearing in inanimate objects, and the sound of bullets passing those on the marina gave many of them pause in their actions.

But the hard core of the group rallied the rest and they took to the boats they’d been loading. Engines fired up, a total of twelve boats headed directly into the teeth of Kevin’s and Tony’s shooting. Several on the

boats began firing, but with the boats moving as fast as they were, they hit little.

Kevin had Samantha fire up the engines again and head for the Farm at a moderate speed. Greg quickly followed suit. The firing from the boats was getting more accurate as they gained on the Munsons. Both boats began to take rounds that went through the aluminum.

Kevin blanched when the windshield of the wheelhouse starred almost in line with Samantha's head. The bullet had traveled all the way through the back of the cabin and out the front. One of the Townies had something more powerful than the rest, and whoever it was had the range.

Motioning Samantha to stay down and start a zig-zag course, Kevin reloaded the Garand but set it aside and picked up an HK-91 with a 20-round magazine. He climbed out of the protection of the sandbags and moved to the rear of the boat. Trying to time the shots with the motion of the boat, he emptied the magazine. One boat suddenly slowed and changed course. One of the others was too close and ran into the first one at high speed, both boats going dead in the water.

Several of the other boats slowed for a moment, but the five in the lead stayed on course at high speed. Kevin stuck his head in the wheelhouse and told Samantha, "Stay down and as soon as I'm back in the sandbags, turn and head right toward them at high speed."

Samantha's eyes were wide, and fear showed on her face, but she nodded gamely and gripped the steering wheel tightly.

Greg was making his moves based on the other boat and he turned when Samantha turned. Kevin and Tony were both using the HK-91s now firing rapidly and reloading from the bags of magazines beside them.

Kevin winced when he head rounds going through the aluminum of the

boat. Then one round hit a sandbag next to his face and he flinched. It took a moment for him to clear his stinging eyes. When he could see again, the two small fleets were almost on one another. Kevin could see and hear Tony firing. Taking aim again, Kevin opened up. The man in the bow of the lead boat tumbled into the water and the boat began to turn away.

Kevin was impressed with Samantha when she skillfully turned the boat, causing their wake to slam into yet another boat. It came to a stop, several people in the water. Then Tony got a lucky shot and one of the boats went up in flames when its fuel tank was hit and blew.

Greg had turned the opposite way from Samantha and two boats went after him, pumping round after round into the back of the Munson. But when Greg suddenly brought the boat about in a breathtaking turn and dead stop Tony did his thing and managed to hit the helmsmen in two of the boats, and take out a shooter, as well.

Kevin had the range then and hit at least one shooter in the early dawn light. Then the helmsman in that boat. It went into a high speed, uncontrolled turn and Samantha swung wide to avoid it.

The other attacking boats began to turn tail and run. Kevin intended to make the lesson a hard one. He yelled at Samantha to give chase. He was surprised that Greg didn't, too, but shots were still coming from the other boat. Kevin could tell when Tony switched to the Garand again, as the range increased.

One of the boats was well in the lead, but Kevin peppered the other three that were left. He really hated destroying equipment that would run, so he tried to avoid hitting the engines. But despite his care, he holed the engine of the closest boat and it began to slow. Samantha went past it and Kevin emptied the magazine into the boat. It was no longer a danger.

The other two craft spread and took off in different directions. Kevin motioned to Samantha to continue after the lead boat. She had the throttles against the stops and the speed generated wind whistled through the holes in the boat.

Kevin switched to the Garand the way Tony had, and began arching bullets toward the boat. It was approaching the marina boat ramp at high speed and Kevin suddenly wondered if there was anyone at the wheel.

There must have been, for the boat nosedived suddenly when the prop was thrown into reverse. "Stop! Stop!" Kevin yelled and Samantha brought the Munson to a fast stop. Kevin waited for the three stern waves to pass before he sighted carefully on the other boat, which was now partially up the ramp.

He was aiming at where the helmsman should be inside the cabin, but a figure burst out of the cabin and Kevin switched aim. The figure went down, laying half in and half out of the boat. Another man came out of the cabin, holding up one arm and hand. The other arm lay limply by his side.

Samantha, at Kevin's hand motion, steered the Munson up next to the other boat. Kevin didn't recognize the other man as he motioned him to the rear of his boat. Kevin was in the act of climbing out of the ring of sandbags when a shot rang out. And then another and another.

Falling the rest of the way out of the gun emplacement, Kevin managed to hold onto the HK-91 and brought it around. But Samantha had handled the situation handsomely. Not only was the man with the supposedly injured arm face down on the deck, the third man that had been on the boat and came out of the cabin shooting was crumpled right in the cabin door.

Kevin dropped the ramp of the Munson and checked the three men. All were dead. He turned around when the other Munson idled up to the

boat ramp.

Tony stuck his head out of the wheelhouse and yelled, “Greg is hit. It’s bad!”

“I’m going after the doctor,” Kevin yelled back and sprinted to the van. Kevin was amazed that it was still there. He figured someone would have figured out what was keeping it from starting. But all they’d done was break out all the windows and bust the headlights and taillights.

After de-activating the kill switches, Kevin raced toward the clinic. There was a light on and Kevin came to a sliding stop and jumped out of the van. He ran into the clinic. Dr. Michelle Holloway was there, dressed, with her bag ready. Both the nurses were also there. They wore medical backpacks.

“You knew?” Kevin asked.

Dr. Holloway nodded. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. I’m only concerned at the moment with one of my men on the boat.”

“Let’s go, then.” Michelle said, stepping toward the door of the clinic.

Kevin got them to the marina and the three began to work on Greg right there on the boat. Two hours later Michelle stood up and said, “It’s up to him and God now. We’ve done all we can with what we have. Bed rest and plenty of good food and no stress may pull him through. Or it might not.” She tossed Kevin a bottle. “One a day until he doesn’t need them anymore.”

Kevin nodded and put the bottle in his pocket. The two nurses were checking the men in the other boat. They simply confirmed what Kevin already knew. It was then that he turned and saw Samantha. Her face

was white, and at first Kevin thought it was just the sight of the dead. But then he noticed she was holding her left arm in her right hand. There was a streak of blood on her coat from just below her armpit to the waist.

“Samantha! Why didn’t you say something?” Kevin cried and ran over to her. “Michelle! Michelle!”

Dr. Holloway turned around and saw the two. She hurried over and moved Kevin out of the way as she called for the nurses. They shielded Samantha from Kevin’s sight as they worked on her.

It was only fifteen minutes before Michelle stood up and told Kevin, “It’s not too bad. Classic flesh wound. Grazed the left breast, went under the skin and grooved a rib. Went out the back without any more damage.”

She stepped out of the way when Kevin went to Samantha, her coat wrapped around her again. “I thought I’d lost you! Why didn’t you say something? You could have bled to death!”

“I knew it wasn’t bad. Greg... Greg was much more important.”

“Don’t ever say that,” Kevin said, almost angrily. “Greg is important of course. But you’re the most important thing in my life. I couldn’t bear to lose you now.”

Tony, Michelle, and the nurses made themselves scarce.

“You mean that, Kevin?”

“Yes, I mean it.” His voice was still harsh. “I love you. I didn’t really realize it until I saw you hurt. I love you.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you finally realized. I’ve been head over heels in love with you for a very long time.”

Careful of her side, Kevin took her gently in his arms and kissed her.

“I need to check on others for injuries,” Michelle said after the third kiss. “People could be dying.”

“Yes. Yes. Of course,” Kevin said. “Tony. Take Samantha and Greg back to the Homestead. I’ll take the Ladies on their rounds.”

Samantha started to protest, but fell silent when she saw Kevin’s look. Docilely she sat down on one of the fallen sandbags and watched Greg while Tony fired up the boat and head for the Homestead at moderate speed.

“How many?” Michelle asked as they headed for one of the drifting boats.

“Don’t know and don’t really care as long as this finished it. Too many people are going to die because of the conditions to waste a life on warfare.”

“I’m a little amazed that you feel that way, as mercilessly as you seemed to have conducted this campaign. You knew they were coming and just met them head on. Couldn’t you have tried to negotiate?”

Michelle was checking one of the men in the first boat they came to. “Another dead one. This one bled to death.”

Kevin’s stony face told her he didn’t care, as he answered. “They threatened Abner and said they were coming to take over the Farm. Just like that. So, just like that, I responded. It is my property and I intend to defend it. Too many people depend on it for it to fall into anyone’s hands that won’t see to it that everything is done that can be done, for this area to survive what is to come.”

“So you see yourself as a savior?” Kevin was maneuvering close to one of the boats just barely afloat. There was one man clinging to it.

“Bring him aboard and tie him up,” Kevin ordered. “There are blankets in the cabin.”

“You aren’t just going to shoot him?” Michelle asked, seeming surprised when Kevin didn’t.

“No, I’m not going to shoot him. It’s Mike Blount. He has a family to take care of. They need him. It’s his pure luck that he didn’t die. He agrees to leave us alone from now on, he’ll be able to buy food and fuel from us, just like before.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Michelle said as the two nurses took care of the man. A hard look from Kevin and one of them tied Mike’s hands and then covered him with the blanket.

“Question?” Kevin asked, steering for the next floating body.

“Do you see yourself as a savior?” Michelle repeated.

A small smile curved Kevin’s lips. “Savior? Certainly not. I just one man protecting what is mine, and doing the best I can to help those that both need it and deserve it.”

“But you have no right to decide who deserves it,”

The two nurses pulled another half-alive attacker up the lowered ramp and onto the cargo deck of the Munson. Michelle turned to treat him as Kevin replied, “I might not have the right, but I do have the resources, and I intend to remain in control of what is left.”

Michelle looked back at Kevin. “What is left?”

“I don’t have an unending supply, Michelle. This community, other than what it can produce on its own, is dependent on what my group can produce in the greenhouses for this year. Possibly next. I don’t think we are going to have a full blown nuclear winter. But it is fact that this summer we aren’t going to be able to grow field crops. If summer is as delayed next year as much as it was this year, we’re all in big trouble.”

“And if that happens, you’ll just circle the wagons on your little kingdom and let the rest of us starve.”

“Don’t put words into my mouth,” Kevin replied, his voice harsh. “Yes. It is my little kingdom, since you put it that way, and I’ll destroy, if I can, anyone that tries to take it from me.”

“I see. So, I should refer to you now as ‘Your Majesty?’”

Kevin was getting fed up with the conversation. He was eager to know how things had gone at the Farm. If there were any more injuries. Or, and he shivered, deaths, of his employees and others under his care.

“If you wish. Kevin is fine with me. You just do your job, as agreed, and you’ll be okay.”

Michelle frowned and again focused on the injured man. He was from one of the boats that had burned. One arm was burned badly, and he had almost drowned.

Despite his itch to leave those that had attacked to their own devices and go see about the Farm, Kevin continued to ease the Munson up to each body floating in the water, and to the boats, checking for those that were still alive. The dead Kevin insisted be left for pickup later. The living took precedence.

He continued to insist that those even remotely possible of starting trouble be tied up after they were treated. After what seemed an

interminable time, Kevin finally nosed the Munson up against the boat ramp. They were met by Claude and several of the Farm hands, all still armed.

“We lose anyone?” Kevin called, standing beside the cabin of the Munson to keep an eye on his captives.

“Negative!” Claude called back. “Couple of minor wounds, but nothing serious. It was a massacre. They didn’t know what hit them.”

“Any survivors?” Kevin asked then as he lowered the ramp so Michelle and the nurses could get off the boat.

“None,” Claude replied, stepping aboard the boat. He looked at the seven captives lying on the cargo deck. “I see you had a few.”

“Yeah,” Kevin replied. “How did it go down?”

“They must have thought they were totally undetected. They left the vehicles down at the gate and came marching up the driveway. They weren’t using lights, so they stayed on the road. We had people behind every berm. Waited until the group was well past the first berm and then we let loose. They all went down in the first volley.”

“How many?”

“Sixteen. Fourteen men and two women.”

Kevin shook his head. “What a waste. Don’t know for sure, but we killed at least twelve.”

“What do we do with these?” Claude asked, nodding at the captives. “Execute them?”

There were cries of fear and a lot of begging for mercy.

“No. No. We’ll just let them go. They know, if any of them try anything else, the penalty will be death, if they aren’t killed in a new attack.”

The captives all relaxed slightly.

“Find someone to go back with me and I’ll unload this bunch. When Tony brings the other Munson back, load up their dead, and pick up the bodies from the lake that you can find. Take one of the Toolcats with you to dig a grave wherever the survivors want it and bury the bodies.”

Kevin went back to the wheelhouse of the Munson and tried the radio. Samantha answered immediately.

“You all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Kevin replied. “Just a bit sick to my stomach at the carnage I’ve caused.” When he looked forward again, he saw Michelle watching him. He didn’t know if she’d hear him though the busted windshield, and didn’t really care either way.

“Did anything happen there?” he asked Samantha.

“Yes. Two people with dynamite bombs tried to sneak in and set them... Don’t know where they planned on, but neither one made it. We have a big hole in the driveway, now, plus six sticks of dynamite.”

“Send Tony to the Farm, with the bodies, or what’s left of them. I’m taking the survivors from the lake back to town to turn them loose.”

“You think that wise?” Samantha asked.

“I’m not going to execute them. Nor keep them as slave labor, which is about the only other choice.”

“Okay. I’ll get Tony on the way. Greg seems to be doing okay. He’s conscious and asking what happened.”

Kevin breathed a sigh of relief. It was a very good sign. “Excellent! I’ll be home in a few hours. Keep a watch in the meantime, just in case there was someone else.”

Kevin hung up the microphone and started the engines of the Munson. He raised the ramp and headed for the Marina. Michelle tried to start up another conversation with him, but Kevin brushed her off. She went back out onto the deck and began to talk to some of the survivors.

Just before Kevin was ready to leave the marina, with the survivors on shore with Michelle and the nurses, a large group of town residents showed up. Kevin tensed slightly when he saw that several were armed, but none of them made any hostile moves toward the Munson.

There were sudden cries and several of the group ran to the captives, whom the nurses were now untying. One woman walked toward the Munson and quietly asked, “Is that all of the ones that lived?”

“Yes,” Kevin said. “The bodies will be here in a while.”

The woman turned and walked away without another word. Several people followed her when she bypassed the crowd and kept walking.

Kevin started the Munson and headed for the Homestead. Samantha was waiting for him in the boathouse.

Keys To The Kingdom – Epilog

It took two days to locate all the bodies in the water and get them to the town and buried. Kevin grated at using the fuel, but decided it best to give everyone in town that had lost someone some kind of closure. The

working vehicles that the land contingent used were returned to the town and left at the Town Hall.

It took two weeks to patch all the holes in the two Munsons, and over a month to find suitable glass with which to replace that shot out during the battle.

All during that time a close watch was kept, but no one else from the town tried to get any type of revenge. June third saw the first full day of sunshine, with a temperature in the seventies. Kevin and several of the others that understood the dire possibilities sighed in relief. The change in the weather was a good sign that the nuclear war's influence on the weather would be short-lived.

Those that had drawn weapons from Kevin were allowed to keep them, and encouraged to carry them any time they were away from the Homestead or the Farm. Every trip to town with one of the Munsons with a food delivery now was comprised of at least six people, all armed.

From time to time, Kevin would look at the lone key he now wore on a chain around his neck and wondered about the fifth lock. Where it was. What removing the lock would reveal. Forty-seven years later his eldest son wondered the same thing when Kevin gave him the key.

The equipment and supplies sat in cool, dark, dry, silence waiting for the day a key would turn in a lock, and a set of doors would open, revealing more of the senior Kevin's preparations for emergencies.

End *****

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The Fifth Key

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The Fifth Key – Chapter 1

Sam, short for Samantha, Crain unconsciously tugged at the key suspended from her neck on its rawhide keeper. She often did so when in deep thought. And she was in deep thought now. Thoughts about how she and her charges were going to make it through another year.

Eighty years had passed since her ancestors, and the ancestors of those she felt responsible for, had survived a nuclear war. All the stories and legends put it down to her Great Grandfather's foresight and abilities. The stories also said that Kevin had always maintained that it was his Great Grandfather, and a set of keys that had included the one around her neck, that had allowed those on the Homestead, the Farm, and in the Town to prosper during those tough years of just surviving.

But survive the three groups had, with Kevin's hand at the helm. More than just survived. They managed to prosper while those outside the group, even with the group's help, died off, one or two here and there, a family gone, then another. Admittedly, a few of those people had opted for warmer climes when the weather changed after the Great Yellowstone Eruption sixty-two years ago, just as real recovery from the nuke war had begun.

The population stayed fairly constant, with births matching deaths almost uncannily. A few people joined the group over the years, adding variety to the bloodlines.

The reins of authority had passed from father to son, and then, with no male heirs, to Samantha, at the ripe old age of 21 after her parents were killed in an encounter with some of the growing groups of animals that were the offspring of zoo, private zoo, and private preserve animals released during the war. Though some in the area wondered about her ability to lead the group, considering the severity of this newest threat to their existence, most believed in the Crain family almost devoutly. .

Sam had a doubt or two herself, but quickly put them out of her mind. She had the lineage, and the training, to handle things. Just as her ancestors had. First the radiation, then the ash fall, and then cooling temperatures blamed on the eruption. But most had expected simply another “Year Without a Summer” as had happened after previous volcanic eruptions on the other side of the globe.

And it seemed to be the case. Though the temperatures were lower for three years, they did start to climb again. At least where they were located. Amateur radio reports indicated that not everywhere was warming up.

The complex had adjusted, finding several more greenhouses to continue to grow enough plant foods to supplement their large herds of stock animals. But when the temperatures started to drop again, and didn’t stop, each winter more severe, and each summer with a shorter growing season, the additional greenhouses simply weren’t enough for the supplemental foods. And now the Farm Manager had come to Sam and told her that the farm was at the limit of producing feed for the current level of the herds and flocks. And bio-diesel production was way down, as well, for lack of oil producing crops.

Deciding a ride would clear her mind, Sam saddled her favorite horse, Queenly, one of the Spanish Barbs the Farm had decided to concentrate on breeding for riding and light draying work. With the horse saddled and ready, tied to one of the hitching posts now in place along the front of the Homestead main house, Sam called, “Jackson!” as she went inside.

“Yes, Miss?” asked the elderly man. He’d been the houseman since long before Sam was born. But he was still more than capable of taking care of the needs of the Homestead, with the small staff he had under him.

“I’m going for a ride.”

“Yes, Miss. Should I pack a lunch?”

“I’ll get something at the Ranch,” replied Sam, taking a small pack from the closet by the open front door and slinging it over one shoulder. “Got my emergency kit in the bag, if I get caught out.”

“Very well, Miss. Any instructions in your absence?”

“Just like always. Take care of things.” Sam, already wearing a gun belt with pistol, knife, and a variety of pouches, grabbed one of the rifles from the gun case and slung it over her other shoulder.

It was only a few minutes and Sam was down by the lake, headed toward the Farm along the shoreline. It was a lot quicker than the road that went around, but much longer than the trans-water route. But the small flotilla of power boats the community boasted was kept for emergencies. The sailing rigs were used for fishing, but none of them were really useable for transport of anything but a few fish, the way the Munson Landing Craft and the even the Nautica International 41’ cabin RIB.

Sam kept a weather eye out. Storms could blow up in the matter of a few minutes, and when it stormed now, it really stormed. But she kept checking the edge of the forest, as well. There were rumors that the wild animal population was growing. Both predator and prey. And it wasn’t just a few cougar and black bear and wolves.

All had made a comeback, but the biggest risks were the descendents from the zoo animals released during and after the nuke war. Many had died from radiation poisoning early on, and a few more were taken down by survivors, but with the human population dropping rapidly to only ten percent of the pre-war level, the animals had plenty of open space to reproduce and spread out from their original zoo locations. The ash fall had only slowed things, not stopped them.

It had been a small herd of elephants that her parents had encountered on

one of their long range salvaging operations that had been the death of them. A big bull had charged the three vehicle convoy and demolished the vehicle Anna and Hiram Crain were in, killing them almost instantly. And there were rumors that the zoo animals were on the move to the south, because of the cooling weather.

So Sam monitored the forest for anything that might be a danger to her, Queenly, or the community. What she wasn't expecting was a soft whistle emanating from the forest, slightly ahead of her. She felt a flash of eagerness, but quickly frowned and called out, "Is that you, Henry?"

"Surely is, Miss Sam." A man stepped from the forest and put his hand out to give Queenly a slice of apple when Sam drew her up.

"Don't 'Miss Sam' me! You know I hate that."

Henry grinned. "Oh, yeah. I forgot?" he replied, making the final statement a question.

"You don't forget anything. What are you doing out here?"

"Doing what I do. Exploring. Scouting. Getting out of real work."

Sam had to smile at Henry's candor. But her smile faded when she recalled some of the incidents during their training years. Even though Sam was three years older than Henry, he matched her, and just bettered her a little bit, in almost every class they took together while growing up. Henry could even modify and mend clothing with a hand needle and thread or with a treadle sewing machine a bit better than she could. And could he run!

Her only match to him was in cooking. She had a real knack for it. Henry could make a meal of just about anything, but couldn't match her culinary talents. A minor thorn in her side from day one, she still always got a little rush when she saw him.

Henry claimed never to have had a haircut and most believed him. His hair, when he let it down completely, came down to his thighs. It was a deep, smooth brown, with red highlights in it when he was in the sun. And he wasn't wearing a hat.

He was seldom without his hat. Or his rifle. Or pistols. Or knives. Or... Sam forced herself to quit thinking about Henry and find out what he was doing.

"Why are you scouting around here? You know this area like the back of your hand." Sam found she didn't like the implied control Henry had over her since he now held Queenly's bridle as she looked for another slice of apple. He controlled the horse at the moment. Not her.

She quickly swung down off the horse and took the bridle from his hand. "You spoil her. You spoil all horses," she said.

Henry shrugged. "I just like keeping them happy. And there are reports of a big tiger out here somewhere. I'm going to see if I can find it and drive it away."

"Not just kill it?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"You really think there is a tiger in the area?"

"With the other animals that have been drifting through over the years, I think probably so. Found some sign, but it was inconclusive. But it did indicate a tiger, if not a complete track."

They began walking along the shore, toward the Farm as silence fell for a moment. Then, surprising Sam slightly, Henry asked, "What do you know about this tract of forest?"

“The forest. I’m not sure. Why?”

Just curious. There is something about it. It’s different than the rest of the land around the lake.”

“I guess I could look in the family files and see what I can find out. I doubt I’ll find anything. The family never owned it. How’s it different?”

“It’s relatively uniform. And there isn’t as wide of a variety of plant life, especially trees. I don’t know. Just something about it.”

“If you’ll come by this evening I’ll have the files out.”

“Thank you,” Henry said. And then he was gone into the forest where a finger of it stretched out closer to the lake.

Sam shook her head and climbed back up on Queenly. She put her into an easy lope, still keeping her eyes peeled. If Henry thought there might be a tiger, there was probably a tiger. She had her rifle, but still...

She spent most of the day with Hadley Brand, the current Farm Manager, going over the situation with the farm.

Sam was tired and ready for supper when she made her way back to the Homestead along the lake. She had Queenly going at a ground eating lope almost the entire way. Sam unsaddled, brushed down, stabled, and fed Queenly before she went inside the house.

“Jackson! I’m home! I’ll be down in a few minutes.” Sam hurried upstairs and took a quick shower. She changed into a pair of old, comfortable jeans and chambray shirt and put the woolen pants and shirt she’d worn during the day into the hamper to be cleaned.

Jackson met her in the dining room with a bowl of stew and freshly baked bread. "I'm starving," Sam said, digging into the food as soon as it was placed before her. "Never did get around to eating lunch at the Farm. Oh. Before I forget, Henry Mueller is stopping by in a little while."

"Yes, Miss."

Seeing the twinkle in Jackson's eyes Sam blushed and quickly added. "It's not a date! He's... We're checking on something about the property between us and the Farm."

"Of course, Miss. Never entered my mind." With that, Jackson turned and went back to the kitchen.

"Yeah. Right. You and my parents been trying to get me married off since I was sixteen," she muttered. "Until they died, anyway." Lost in thought, Sam finished her meal and Jackson placed a piece of apple pie before her, with the one glass of sweet iced tea she allowed herself per day. The tea was a precious commodity and she wasn't one to take more than her share.

"Thank you, Jackson. I'll be in the study when Henry gets here."

"Yes, Miss. About a half an hour for your dinner to settle?"

"Not that he would know, but sure, if it works out that way would be perfect. It would give me time to dig out the old records."

"Very good, Miss. I'll bring him in at that time."

"You act like you know exactly when he'll get here."

"Yes, Miss. He's here now, out helping in the greenhouse. He insisted, since I insisted he have a bite of dinner while he was here."

“Well, gee willikers! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Your time is valuable, Miss. You must use it effectively. Even your quiet times.”

It was a speech she’d heard before. Usually when she was wasting time in some way. “Yes. Well. Have him brought to me as soon as possible. I’m tired and want to get this over with.”

“Yes, Miss. It will be done.”

“Jackson... Wait. I didn’t mean that quite the way it sounded.”

“Of course, Miss. I read nothing into the request.”

Sam sighed and left the dining room, going into the study down the hall. She left the door open and went to series of file cabinets that now adorned one wall of the room. Sam was down on one knee, checking a set of files when a slight cough sounded behind her.

“Henry! Good. You’re here. I’m not sure what we might find in here. The family has never owned the property. Seems a little strange, actually, that we haven’t just taken it over the way we did the property between the Farm and Town.”

“I’ve wondered about that, too,” Henry replied, going to one knee beside Sam. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know. Just start on the on the other cabinet. These two have all the oldest records.”

It was quiet in the study for a long time. Jackson smiled each time he did a silent check on the situation. It was close to midnight when Henry, a packet of papers in his hand, said, “Here’s something that might be

relevant.”

Handing the papers to Sam, he stood and moved to the windows beside the fireplace and looked out. “It’s getting late. I believe I’d best be going. If it’s okay, we can go over those tomorrow. Or at your convenience, of course.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s only…” Sam looked at the grandfather clock. “Uh… It’s later than I thought. But it will just take a few minutes to look these over.”

“Okay. Good. I was hoping you would say that.”

Sam sat down behind the large desk and Henry took a seat in front of it. As she scanned each page, she slid it over to Henry to look at. There was obvious disappointment initially, but Henry looked up from the page he was reading and asked Sam, “Did you see this about the harvest?”

“Yeah. Someone cut some trees down.”

“But why would your family have this record if they didn’t own the property? And from what I read here, it wasn’t some trees. It was a clear cut.” Henry moved around the desk and leaned down to read the paper in Sam’s hands.

“Yeah. See here. Clear cut. With replant of the total acreage with these specified species.” Eagerly, Henry went on to the next receipt. “And here. A bunch of earth movement. A whole bunch!”

“Let me think,” Sam said, very aware of Henry’s presence so close beside her. “The dam. When they raised the main dam there were a few inlets that they didn’t want to flood. They built a whole series of earthen dams to protect them from the rising lake. I remember that from history class.”

Henry had gone back to his seat. “That’s right! I should have thought of that. And with the way the land is contoured, it would act as a spillway to get rid of water if there was a potential flood. That land is under constant danger of being flooded by the lake if the level gets too high!”

“No wonder it was never really used. That was a time when there were a lot of floods going on all over the Midwest,” Sam said, leaning back in the desk chair. “Again, if I remember history correctly. We had good references, but still, there are gaps in our knowledge, no longer than it has been.”

“I know. It’s frustrating sometimes. But that explains about the property. Those particular trees are perfect for coppicing firewood. They’ve never been harvested. I guess they just weren’t needed. And without knowing for sure, in the early days, that your predecessors owned it... It’s just been allowed to grow up naturally.”

“Henry, that long stretch of concrete along the lake edge... Would that have something to do with the spillway aspect of the land?”

“Yes! Of course! You’re brilliant! They would have poured concrete to protect at least the lake edge of the earth dam so it wouldn’t wash away during an overflow.”

The two looked at each other, pleased. Then Henry rose and said, “Thank you. This has been bothering me for some time. It’s good to know for sure what is going on.”

Sam smiled. “Sure thing. I know how it is to not know something you feel you should.”

“The cloak of authority weighing heavily on your shoulders?”

The smile turned wan. “Something like that. Yes.”

“If there is anything I can do to make it easier on you, let me know. I’d better get on my way. I want to be out early tomorrow. I saw more signs of that tiger today.”

“Yeah. You can make it easier for me. Find the lock this key fits.” Sam held up the key. Before Sam could decide on whether to ask Henry to stay in the house, since it was so late, Jackson was at the door. “I have a room set up for Mr. Mueller.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go on home...”

“Nonsense,” replied Jackson. “Come along. I’ll show you to your room. Good night, Miss.”

“Good night, Jackson. Good night, Henry. And you might as well give in. Jackson is almost impossible to dissuade.”

Henry smiled. “Okay. I was taught not to argue with my elders.”

Sam frowned and Jackson hid his smile. Henry saw neither as he headed for the staircase to the second story bedrooms.

The next morning, Sam found herself feeling a bit eager at the thought of having breakfast with Henry. Even though she hurried slightly, when she reached the dining room no one was there.

Jackson, as always seeming to sense her presence nearby, came into the dining room carrying a serving tray.

“Henry isn’t down yet?” Sam asked, pleased with the idea that she was up before him.

“Oh, yes, Miss. Henry had breakfast and left over an hour ago.”

“Oh,” Sam said, ignoring the slight feeling of disappointment. Quickly she added, “What’s for breakfast this morning?”

“I thought a pair of fresh eggs from our chickens and a bit of pork sausage from the Farm. You’ve been denying yourself many things since the weather changed and production is down.”

“It just that so many are beginning to struggle again. Just like we were told in our history classes how things were right after the war.”

“Still, you must maintain your strength for the days ahead.”

“What? You know something?” Sam asked, placing the napkin across her lap.

“Only that things will change, as they always do after a time period.”

“That’s true, I suppose.” Sam dug into the meal and Jackson went back to the kitchen.

She spent most of the day going over inventories and projected production numbers that were part of her weekly routine. Already on a visible down swing when she inherited the responsibility, the numbers were looking worse almost every week.

After lunch she checked in with the radio monitor that was on duty at the Ranch. A radio watch was kept almost continuously, largely for the safety of the local population, but also a long range watch to try and keep abreast of what was going on in the rest of the country and the world.

“Nothing much going on the last few days,” Jeanie said, looking over the reception log that was kept of each contact. “Especially from the north. We haven’t had any contact north of us in several days. You saw the report that a whole town was picking up stakes and moving to the

gulf, I suppose.”

“I did, Jeanie. I did. Keep up the good work.”

That very same subject had come up in the last full community meeting. Taking what they could and moving south, at least into northeastern Texas, if not all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Sam hated the thought of it. They would be giving up so much if they made the move. But if the weather continued the cooling trend, it might be a necessity. And if that was the case, the sooner it was done, the less disruption and pressure to get it done there would be.

“I need to talk to someone with experience. At least, historical experience,” she said aloud, looking out the window in the study toward the forest between the Homestead and the Farm. Henry’s family had come to the area several years after the war. They’d done a massive move, though not on the order that moving the Town, Farm, and Homestead would be.

She found Jackson and told him she was going out to look for Henry in the forest. “I need to discuss something with him.”

“Best if you leave word in town and let him come here. He intimated that a tiger was prowling the area.”

“He said possibly. He’s not one-hundred percent sure. Besides, I’ll have my rifle.”

“I think young Henry would much prefer you not go out there without an escort.”

“Phooey on Henry,” Sam said. “I’m 21 and as good... almost as good a shot as Henry. I don’t need him protecting me!”

“Yes, Miss. As you wish. I do wish we had portable radios, though.”

“You know almost all batteries for stuff like that are long dead. Even ones that didn’t get used slowly lost their charge over the past eighty years.”

“Yes, Miss. Well, be sure you have your signal whistle with you.”

Muttering under her breath, “Be sure you have your whistle with you... Jackson worries too much.” However, the thought didn’t prevent her from making sure she had one of the whistles most people kept handy while out and about away from the Farm, Town, or the Homestead.

Likewise, she made sure her pistol and rifle were both loaded before she went to saddle Queenly. She’d no more than reached the lake and turned along the shore when there was that soft whistle again. Not one of the shrill whistles. Henry was a good whistler. He could mimic many different kinds of birds. But this whistle was just to let her know he was there. Just like the last time.

Sam shook her head when Queenly nuzzled Henry’s hand for the bit of apple he had there. No point in protesting. He’d do it anyway. Well, unless she made a real case of it. And there was no good reason to do that. She swung down from the saddle and adjusted the hang of the rifle slung over her shoulder.

“I was looking for you, actually. I thought I’d have a hard time.”

Henry knew it was a question about why he was there. “Yeah. Usually is. But I’ve been tracking that tiger... And it is a tiger. Big male marking his territory. Must have just moved into the area. From the north, I’m thinking.”

Sam looked around the area, but saw only forest and lake. “We’d better warn everyone at the next group meeting. Until you run it off, it is a

danger.”

“I know. But with it staking territory, I have a feeling I won’t be able to get it to follow me out of the area and set up a new territory. I wanted to do that before he set up his perimeters here.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean follow you out of the area? Why would it just follow you away from here?”

Henry shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, just get close enough to get its attention as a predator stalking prey. It would have followed me far enough away for it to probably set up a new territory when it ran across other game.”

Sam’s jaw had dropped. “You mean make yourself a target and let it try to catch you? No! I forbid it!”

Sam saw the way Henry’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Well...” he said, slowly, “It’s a moot point. Don’t think it would work now. So. Why were you looking for me?”

“Oh. That. I was hoping you and perhaps your father would have some insights into a big group move, since your family did something similar a few years after the war.”

“Sure. Pop knows a lot more than me, though I’ve heard the stories. Several times. Pop is kind of sentimental and reads the old journals family members kept back then.”

“What can you tell me?”

Subtly, Henry had begun to move Queenly and Sam along the lake, keeping close to the water line. His eyes went to the forest often as he began to speak.

“Like your family, we had a Patriarch that was worried about how things would go given a nuclear war or major natural disaster like a meteorite impact or the eruption of a super volcano. He had his family well prepped. But much further north. When Yellowstone blew, and things began to get really bad, the family decided to come this way to get out of the worst of the ash and bad weather.”

Sam nodded. “That was Heinrich, right?” Some of the Muëller story was part of the local history she’d learned in school. But she needed details.

“Yes. He died on the trip. He spent too much time out in the ash fall and it cut his lungs to pieces.”

“That’s so sad.” Sam put her hand on Henry’s shoulder for a moment.

“Yeah. He was a great man. Like your Great, Great and Great, Great, Great, Great grand fathers were. Men that didn’t shirk from the truth and met challenges head on.”

Henry was silent for a moment and Sam waited for him to continue. “So. Anyway, Grandpa Heinrich packed up lock, stock, and barrel, almost literally, and headed south. There were over fifty semi’s, with different kinds of trailers. You know. Those that are parked outside of town all this time?”

Sam nodded. “I know.”

“Well, since Heinrich was a metal worker... and I mean from processing ore all the way through to producing finished metal products... he wanted to be able to continue to do that, especially as an aid to the recovery of the nation, most particularly, wherever they would settle.

“He brought a small production foundry, blacksmith shop, machine shop, and assembly shop. Plus the shop he loved to work in. The gun shop. They could build any kind of gun you wanted from scratch. As

long as it used standard ammunition. And of course, they did regular gunsmithing

The word is he tried to get a brass extrusion plant, but it just was too big of an operation and really wasn't available, anyway. It would have involved making gun powder, too, and he didn't really want to do that."

Henry unslung the rifle he carried. "This was one of the guns Heinrich and Minor built just before the war. A custom 'Scout' Rifle' it's called. Uses the .350 Remington Magnum round. Lever action operating a rotary bolt. Integral suppressed barrel. Single round & stripper clip loading. 10-round rotary magazine. Leupold Model 4 CQ/T 1-3 x 14 scope on receiver mounted QD see-through mount. Peep sight. In stock recoil reducers. Sling. Custom 12" OKC-3S style bayonet. Five .380 ACP to .350 Remington Magnum chamber adapters for small game hunting."

"You have a bayonet?"

Henry slung the rifle and pulled the knife she'd seen many times before. "Yes. But it's a Randal R-1 pattern blade, so it does double duty. It just has the bayonet attachment mechanism."

"I didn't know."

"No big deal. Neither is the pistol I carry that my Grandfather made. When the salvage teams found a large amount of .50GI ammunition and reloading components, he built this."

Sam took the pistol from Henry and checked the chamber. It was loaded. She handed it back.

"It's basically a Para-Ordnance P-14 frame with the slide, barrel, and magazines made for the .50GI round. I inherited them both, another of the full size ones, a compact model, and four derringers that he made.

Father is real big on the production of spare parts for the area's equipment. He never had the interest in the gun operation, so I got all of Grandfather's weapons, knives, and tools.

"I didn't know you were still making firearms. Not with ammunition so hard to find, now."

"Oh, I dabble. I can make just about anything. But since we have just about all the working guns we'll ever need, I only make the occasional fancy gun. You know. Carved fancy wood. Engraved and inlaid metal work."

"Who does that for you?"

"Well... Actually... I do."

"Oh. Sorry. I had no idea you were artistic. Oh, wow! That gun Tom Matheson is always showing off! Is that one of yours?"

Henry smiled a bit shyly and nodded.

"That thing is beautiful. I'm surprised he uses it."

"All the Mueller made weapons are first and foremost working tools. The fact that they can be beautiful objects is secondary. But important when someone wants one."

"I see. That's good. Could you tell me more about the move?"

Henry smiled. "Sure. Well... Along with the equipment, they brought all the raw materials they had, and all they could collect along the way. That included a trainload of coal that is used in the foundry and forges. By the time that was done and they quit, for the winter, the trucks were just about wore out. They've been parked since."

“Okay,” Sam said. “What about how the move went?”

“According to Heinrich’s journal, talk about trials and tribulations! There were problems galore. But he had a firm hand and was a very smart man. He made sure they were all taken care of, and the fewest number of people left or were hurt.”

“People left? Went out on their own?”

“Sure did, Sam. Some thought it was a bad decision. I expect all of those changed their minds a few years later when things got worse for a while.”

“Hum...”

“There were a lot of vacant houses here. I guess that is where the group settled?”

“Yes. All over the area. You know, of course, that Heinrich bought the old shoe factory for his use.”

“I remember that from history class. Paid gold coins, and a whole bunch of food.”

“Even that far into the situation, we had plenty of food. Heinrich had seen to that in the early stages of the move. He wanted to be able to make a place in whatever community they settled and decided buying in was better than trying to just slip in.”

“Been hard to slip in that big of a group!” Sam said and laughed.

Henry swallowed hard at the sound of the Sam’s laugh. It was a glorious sound.

“Henry, what do you think of picking up stakes and moving?”

“Be hard. Harder than we Muëller’s had it back in the day. The equipment was still in good shape. We had the gold and the food to buy our way into a working community. And the majority of people were in favor of the move and willing to help out to see it went well.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah. All the gold the Crain’s had is still in the community, but I don’t know if people would contribute much to a buy in if we find a place. And we sure don’t have the food. And the equipment... Could it be fixed?”

“Sure. Salvage half and fix half with it. But this community is much larger than what Heinrich started with. His was just the group that wanted to come. I have a feeling you’d want everyone to go.”

“Well, sure! We’re all in this together!”

“Sam, I have to tell you... We’re not. There’s been talk about this. There are a lot that want to go, but many want to stay. Many of them, until the rest of us get situated, and they can move into a going proposition.”

Sam frowned. “Are you sure? I haven’t heard anything like that. Just some reluctance...”

Seeing the look on Sam’s face hurt Henry when he shook his head. “I’m sorry. But there are several groups, each with a different agenda.”

Sam bit her lower lip for a moment, sighed, and then said, “I guess I’d better call a meeting and discuss this situation.

“I’ll talk to Dad. See which way he’s leaning. We really haven’t talked about it.”

“Thanks, Henry. I guess I’d better go back and start lining up some ducks.”

Henry nodded and held Queenly's bridle until Sam was aboard. When she turned the horse around and headed back to the estate, Henry followed along slowly, silently, his eyes on the forest most of the time. When Sam was safely back on the Homestead property, he turned around and jogged back toward where the concrete spillway began.

He moved among the trees on the back slope that led away from the lake. The spot that had intrigued him since he'd first seen it. Ever on the watch for the tiger, or any other dangers, Henry began looking at the ground. If anyone were to see him, it would appear that he was looking for something specific. Twice he spun around, going into a crouch, lifting the Scout Rifle to his right shoulder. After scanning the forest and seeing nothing, he turned back to his task. "Come on, you. I know you're here somewhere."

It was nearly dark when he found something. While keeping watch for the tiger, Henry began to notice a pattern in the trees closest to the lake, in the runoff area. He stopped and studied the trees toward the lake and then turned around to study those further down the slope.

"Why would they space the trees near the lake so sparsely, and those down slope so much more heavily? The spacing down there is nearly perfect for coppicing." He walked the area, letting his subconscious mind take and tally the information his conscious mind was acquiring. He stepped past one more tree just like all the other trees and saw it.

Henry stopped and looked to his right, down toward where the road would be, and to his left, toward the lake. The trees planted just after the clear cut harvested the timber back in the elder Kevin Crain's time left a sort of corridor, with gentle turns here and there. It was filled with natural growth over the years, with much smaller trees that had grown up naturally when the plantings became old enough to reproduce.

Following back toward the lake he became convinced that the way the

trees were planted was a deliberate attempt to leave a useable road from the lake to the road that ran along the far side of the property.

When he stopped again, he was looking up the face of the dam, faced with concrete, that prevented the lake from intruding any further into the low area behind it. There was no real reason for the dam that Henry could see. The low area only extended a short ways further and then the land began to rise again.

Henry realized that this back face of the dam was a bit steeper than he'd really realized. Someone had gone to a lot of work for no reason that he could see. "Unless..." Excited, Henry headed home. It was dark by the time he got there. He ate the supper his mother always left out for him when he disappeared for a while, and then went to bed. It was hours before he went to sleep, but he woke the next morning early and headed back around the lake. In addition to the items he normally carried, Henry had a long handled shovel, the blade of which had been repaired several times.

With a diminishing hope, Henry dug exploratory holes, some quite deep, along the back face of the dam, for three weeks. He didn't see Sam once during that time. His attitude changed abruptly when the ground gave way under him while he was digging on the Homestead side of the dam, up close to the top. He hadn't dug many holes along the upper area, thinking there simply wouldn't be anything there.

Henry landed rather awkwardly, the shovel handle knocking the wind out of him. As soon as he got a breath he checked the Scout Rifle. It was fine. Taking the crank-up LED flashlight from his pack, Henry cranked it and looked around. It was a small room, with three log walls, floor, and roof. The fourth wall was concrete.

Most of the logs were still in good shape, but some were rotted almost completely away. Such was the case with the ones in the roof where he'd fallen through. The heavy steel door in the concrete wall was very

evident in the light from the LED flashlight. And, sure enough, there was a heavy brass American Lock brand lock. Henry touched it with more than a little awe.

Finally satisfied that he'd found what he was looking for, Henry looked around the room with an eye out for a door to the surface. There wasn't one. Henry decided the intent was to just break into the room from the outside. It was only an access to the real door.

A few minutes of work and Henry had dug enough dirt from behind some of the rotted logs to build a platform so he could reach up through the hole in the roof. Ever wary of the tiger in the area, Henry was cautious coming out of the hole, looking all around before climbing out, when he would be the most vulnerable.

He could barely contain himself. Henry fell into his distance eating lope, headed toward the Homestead. When he came up to the house, he found Sam sitting on the steps of the front porch. Henry was sure she wiped away some tears before rising to meet him.

"You okay? You look like you've been crying," Henry said, the thought of the fifth cache taking second place to Sam's needs.

"Of course not!" Sam insisted. "But you were right. There is no consensus on staying, going, when to go if we go, anything! I thought... I thought you'd be at the meeting..."

"I intended to, but I fell asleep," Henry said sheepishly. His absence at the meeting, he suddenly realized, had hurt Sam. "I'm really sorry, Sam." Then he smiled. "But I think I can make up for it. Get your gear. I want to show you something."

"Now isn't really a good time, Henry," Sam replied.

"It will be worth it. I promise."

“Might as well. Don’t have anything better to do. They said I’m not part of the decision making process any more. I’m just another citizen.”

“What! What are you talking about?” Even Henry’s surprise faded from thought when Sam’s tears began again.

“At the meeting... Michael Norton made a motion to remove me from a position of power. He nominated Hadley Brand and Victor Moore to share leadership duties.”

“But Hadley is your Farm General Manager!” Henry exclaimed.

“Not any more. It no longer belongs to the Crain family. It’s a community asset.”

“It always has been. Under your family’s guidance.”

Angrily, Sam wiped away the tears again. “Yeah. Well, they LET me keep the Homestead for my own use. Including the boats. They got a good laugh out of that.”

“Come on, Sam,” Henry said. “I think I have something that will cheer you up.”

“Just about anything would, the way I feel. Let me tell Jackson I’m leaving for a while.”

Henry had Queenly saddled when Sam came back out of the house with her gear in place. Even feeling bad didn’t mean she wasn’t still aware of the dangers of the times.

Henry took off, going right into a lope, and Sam urged Queenly to follow. When they reached the dam, Henry stopped and Sam brought Queenly to a halt, sliding off the saddle smoothly to stand beside Henry.

“Okay. You’ve mentioned this place. What did you find?”

Sam started to tie Queenly to a nearby sapling, but Henry stopped her. “We might be a while. She’ll stand ground tied, won’t she?”

“Of course. Henry, you’re starting to worry me. Just what do you have in mind?”

“You’ll like it.”

“I’ll like it, huh? Henry, I like you, but if you think...”

Henry blushed. “Well, at least it brought some color back to your face,” he told Sam, seeing her going red, more from anger, though, than embarrassment.

“Just trust me for a few minutes. I’m serious about Queenly. That tiger is around. She needs to be able to run if it shows up.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You really think she’s in danger? Well? What about us?”

“It’s a minimal, but real, risk. And I don’t think the tiger will follow where we’re going.”

“Going? What do you mean? Will you please get on with it?”

“Follow me. And watch your step.” Henry led her to the hole in the ground and dropped through.

“You found a cave?” Sam asked, looking down into the hole.

“Come on down. I’ll help you.”

“Yeah. You just watch where you put your hands...”

“Absolutely.” Henry helped Sam down into the small room, and then put his hands on her shoulders. He turned her toward the steel door in one wall of the enclosure. He turned on the LED flashlight and pointed it at the door.

Sam gasped. “The fifth key!” she said softly. She scrambled to get the rawhide keeper over her head. Her hands were shaking. They were still shaking when she tried to slip the key into the lock.

“Oh, no! It’s not...” she nearly cried when she couldn’t get the key to go into the lock.

“Here. Let me try,” Henry said, handing her the flashlight and taking the key from her shaking hands.

He had the lock off in just moments. It took a couple of hard shoves to get the door to open into the open space behind it. Henry waved his right hand toward the open door, ushering Sam to go inside first. The flashlight held before her, Sam entered the cavernous room, broken by several thick columns.

“It’s huge!” Sam said, her voice low. “I can’t even see the other side!”

“I think the whole dam structure is just a dirt covered warehouse.”

“But how’d they get things in? And, more importantly, how do we get them out?”

“I’m sure your ancestor had a plan. Let’s look for some paperwork. Didn’t the one that did all this always have an inventory?”

“There was, but there was nothing about what was in the cache the fifth key fit. The only thing on that inventory that wasn’t found was some gold and silver coins.”

“Shine the light over by the door. Just maybe...”

Sam did so, and the light reflected off plastic. Henry stepped over and took the old zip-lock bag off a nail pounded into the concrete wall. Despite the age, the plastic was intact, including the seal. There were three layers of the one gallon bags, one inside the other. Henry took out the papers inside the inner bag, handed them to Sam and took the flashlight from her.

He stood close to her, holding the light so she could read the first page of the thick sheath of papers.

‘Well, son? What do you think? About what I’m sure I’ll explain to you when you’re a little older than you are as I write this. Thought I ought to leave a record of things, for posterity. Ha Ha.

‘This is the first of several caches I plan. I’m going to include a map of the other locations I’ve picked out. This one, of course will only be word of mouth, since it is the most important one.

‘I’ve given this a lot of thought over the years as the world situation continues to worsen.

‘Hm. Not sure why I’m putting all this down. I’ll have told you all about it by the time you need to use the items cached here. Still...

‘Anyway... I wanted this first cache to be capable of dealing with just about anything that might come up. But I wanted it nearly impossible to find without having been told it even existed.

‘So I came up with the plan to throw up the dam. People thought I was a little nuts, to protect such a small area. Ha, Ha, on them!

‘I used several different contractors to put this place in after the lumber was harvested, so they could get in. Built the warehouse and then the dam around it. Wanted the lake side protected, thus the concrete, which will explain to anyone asking about why I needed so much concrete. I hope.

‘So, the floor was poured, the sides and columns built, and then the roof pour was done, and let me tell you, that was a real pain. I brought in everything, and then poured the fourth wall and finished up the burial and tree replant. Left just the one hidden entrance to get inside.

‘Going to take some work to dig out the rear face of the slope and knock out the one section of that warehouse wall that is unreinforced block construction. It’s just big enough, and the internal columns are set just so, that you should be able to take the mobile equipment off the blocks and just drive them out, though it will be a tight turn on a couple of them.

‘There are supplies and equipment to keep things running at the Homestead and Farm for a few years, until things settle down and you can grow crops again. That’s assuming it’s nuclear war, which is what I expect.

‘But those same supplies will carry you through a move if you have to abandon the area due to a nearby warhead or the climate changes, or the meteor will hit close to here, or any other reason to leave what I think is one of the best places to weather what may come in mine or your lifetime.

‘When you have to use what is here, I’d keep the other caches secret unless you really need them. They are a back up to this one.

‘You know my propensity for lists (Ha Ha) so the rest of this packet is mostly lists so you can figure out what you have and the best way and time to use them.

‘Oh, by the way... I got really lucky when I first started planning things after Y2K and managed to acquire quite a collection of gold and silver coins. Some I’m keeping out for the other caches, but most of them are here. Don’t spend it all in one place. Ha Ha.

‘Son, I really hope you never read this and everything here is found hundreds of years in the future and the legend of a crazy old Prepper Kevin Crain will begin.’

“Wow!” Henry said, finishing up the last line just after Sam. “Sure didn’t work out the way he intended. What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, deep in thought. “Must have been when one of my Great, Greats passed on before passing on to his children that this was here. I do know that Great, Great Grandfather died suddenly and left the keys to his grandson, with no explanation except they were the keys to the kingdom. He found and used the other four caches, but never found this one, obviously.”

“I see. What’s all is here?” Henry asked as Sam shuffled the papers.

“Let’s wait until we get back to the Homestead to look at them,” Sam said. “I want to let people know as soon as possible about the find!”

Sam didn’t see the look of caution that crossed Henry’s face. “Well... Okay. Let’s just take a quick look around.”

Together the two walked through the stacks of equipment and supplies, ending up on the far side of the warehouse where several semi-trucks with trailers were up on blocks, their tires wrapped in shrink wrap plastic. “The tires look okay,” Henry said, taking a close look at one.

“But only airing them up will tell the tale.” He looked around. “I don’t think I’d better be the one to move these out. See that column, and over there the concrete block wall we have to remove?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sam replied. “I bet Jackson can do it. He drove a truck when we were still using them occasionally.”

“That’s good. I guess we’d better go. It’ll be getting dark soon. The tiger will be on the prowl soon if it isn’t already.”

Sam wasted no time locking up the door after Henry finally got it shut. He went up through the hole first, breathing a sigh of relief to see Queenly calmly munching grass a few feet away.

He lifted Sam out of the hole, and Sam had to marvel at his strength. He didn’t look that strong, and he was barely eighteen, but appearances can be deceiving, she decided.

It was full dark when they returned to the Homestead and stabled Queenly. Jackson greeted them and announced that a supper was available whenever they wanted it. Too excited to eat, Sam showed Henry into the study and they began to go through the rest of the papers in detail.

Without asking, Jackson brought in a tray for each of them at eleven. Both ate, without really knowing what they were eating, pushed the trays out of the way, and went back to the papers.

“This couldn’t come at a better time!” Sam finally said, sitting back in her chair. “It’ll make the move so much easier. I think people will rally around when they find out I’ve found... You found... the Fifth Key Cache.”

When Henry didn’t react immediately she looked over at him. “What?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just not sure announcing the find now, without investigating it more, would be a good idea. The rest may have decided you aren’t in charge of anything but the Homestead, but you have a responsibility to do what’s best for everyone. Including yourself. I simply don’t believe the various groups that have been formed would handle the use or distribution of the things in the warehouse in a way that is best for everyone. I believe you can. And will. When the time comes.”

“But everyone so wants this cache to be found!”

“So they can have what’s in it. This community has had it pretty easy for eighty years, all things considered, thanks to your family. But things are getting tough again. Very similar to things before the Nuke War. Different factions wanting different things. Many of them thinking they are owed this or that, simply because someone has produced it and they don’t have one.”

Sam sighed. “You could be right. It just doesn’t feel right to keep this from people.”

“It’s been kept from them for decades. A few weeks or months more isn’t going to be anything different. It’ll allow you to develop your power base again, so you can do things the way you think they should be done. Just like your Great, Greats. And your parents. Everyone followed them without a thought. It’s just because you’re inexperienced that people doubt you. That and the fact that they just want things to be different than they are with no effort on their part.”

“Okay. I’ll sleep on it and decide in the morning. I’m beat. I don’t know how to thank you for finding this for me,” Sam said, a gesture taking in the papers.

“I’m a good follower. Have no interest in being a leader. Helping leaders

is my goal in life.”

A small smile curved Sam’s lips. “I see. Back room politician, huh?”

“Not quite.” Henry smiled. “But close, from what I’ve read. Okay. I’ll head on back home.”

“Of course not. Jackson will have a room ready for you.”

“I sure don’t want to ruin your reputation. This is twice in a short time I’ve spent the night here. People will talk.”

“Let them talk. I’m not too happy with some of them, anyway.”

When the two left the study, Jackson was waiting for them. “Mr. Mueller’s room is ready.”

“Thank you, Jackson,” Sam said. She headed up the stairs. Henry was gathering his gear from where he’d left it outside the study door. But it didn’t keep his eyes from traveling up the stairs to watch Sam.

“She’s a beautiful young woman, wouldn’t you say?” Jackson asked.

“She is that,” Henry said, and then added, “But she’s much more than just that.”

It pleased Jackson no end to hear the comment. “Yes. Yes she is. I’ll have breakfast ready at five.” He started to turn away, but Henry protested.

“You don’t have to...”

“Breakfast at five,” Jackson said firmly.

“Okay. Breakfast at five.”

The Fifth Key – Chapter 2

The next morning Sam hurried downstairs well before six and entered the kitchen. “He’s already gone, isn’t he?” she asked Jackson, obviously disappointed.

“Yes, Miss. Breakfast at five and out the door at five ten. That is one intense young man. Takes life seriously. But still has a sense of humor.”

“Haven’t noticed his sense of humor yet,” Sam said, sitting down at the kitchen table. Jackson began to serve her breakfast. “Do you know, he was planning on letting the tiger track him as prey, to lead it out of the area so he wouldn’t have to kill it?”

“Remarkable,” Jackson replied, putting a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Sam.

“Just like that. Going to risk his live to save a tiger. Remarkable my left foot! It was foolish! And I told him so.”

“Oh? And did he agree?”

“Well, he said the tiger has already taken game here and marked the territory. It probably wouldn’t leave just to follow him, anyway.”

“I see. And what is on the agenda for the household today, Miss?” Jackson asked.

“Same ol’, same ol’. I’ve got some thinking to do so I should be here all day.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Sam went to the study, sat down at the desk, and picked up the papers from the newly found cache and began to go over them again, making notes as she did so. At one point she shook her head, in awe of what she was reading. Her ancestor had tried to cover every need for an isolated community to survive and prosper any survivable event.

The inventory lists were long and detailed. She really needed to talk to Henry’s father. He had stayed silent during the meeting the other day, not commenting on or committing to anything. But not today. She was exhausted and decided that, since they didn’t want her input, she’d take a little time for herself and let the rest manage things as they wanted. Let her mind mull over possibilities.

Sam had a sudden thought and left the study, a smile on her face. She might not be in charge, but she could certainly still go to town, to enjoy some of the services it provided. And she’d go in style. With what she knew, she decided to ‘waste’ some fuel. Biodiesel was not going to be the problem it was becoming, at least for her. Items on the inventory list of the cache included a biodiesel production unit and literally tons of the chemicals needed to process raw vegetable oil into fuel.

“Jackson,” she said, going into the kitchen.

“Yes, Miss?”

“I’m going into town tonight for some fun, so don’t worry about supper for me.”

“Very good, Miss. It will do you good to have a nice night out.”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m thinking. Oh. I’ll be taking the Nautica.” She left the kitchen and went upstairs to take a shower, and get dressed in something a bit more ‘nice night out’ ish.

When she came down an hour later, Jackson was just coming out of the kitchen. One eyebrow lifted slightly. “You look extremely nice, Miss.”

“Thanks Jackson. Haven’t worn a dress in a long time. Wasn’t sure any that I had would still fit.”

“You maintain your weight and figure very well. Your entire family has been the same.”

“Thank you. Again. Should have waited until I got the Nautica ready before I changed. I’ll have to be extra...”

“No need, Miss. The Nautica is ready for you. Would you like me to go along to watch the boat while you are in town?”

Sam looked over at her firearms and then down at the dress she wore.

“Yeah. Maybe you should. Being a little girly tonight, I have to say the gun belt and rifle don’t really go with the outfit.”

Her laugh was shy, and Jackson simply nodded and said, “Yes, Miss. I’m ready whenever you are.”

Sam realized that Jackson had planned on going, whether she wanted him to or not. He would have come up with a way. With jacket from the hanging rack in hand, Sam went out the front door, Jackson right behind her, after he grabbed her weapons.

It was already getting dark, and the air was cool, but Sam was too excited to notice. She took the helm of the Nautica, inside the cabin, and pressed the engine start buttons. Both engines started right up, Jackson had seen to that. She eased the 41’ Cabin RIB out of the boat house, swung it around and headed for town.

Sam eased the throttles forward slowly, until they were just skimming

the water. It didn't take long to get to the town's marina. She brought the boat to a stop among the many canoes and other small boats, and Jackson quickly secured it.

"I'll stay with the boat, Miss," Jackson said.

"Nonsense," Sam replied. "Just deactivate the engines and come with me. You're entitled to a fun night out, yourself."

"Very well, Miss."

A few moments later, the two were walking up the walkway. Despite the dim light, Sam noticed the decay of the entire marina. Things were going to pot in ways she hadn't noticed before.

The marina had been some distance from town at the time of the war, but the town had slowly migrated closer to it when it became a major supplier of food and lane of transport. Sam was headed for one of the few structures that looked up to pre-war standards.

Jackson opened the door to Jazzies' and Sam walked in ahead of him. It had been a long time since she'd been there. She looked around. Everything seemed the same. Jazzies' was one of the few establishments that still boasted twenty-four hour electricity. Quinton Harleson had inherited the large number of deep discharge batteries that his family had collected over the years.

While many places had working solar panels and the electronics to go with them, good batteries were nearly impossible to come by. Even with the electrical power, Quinton didn't squander the battery capacity. There were a few electric lights, but the multitude of candles around the room provided most of the low light that was present.

Sam quickly looked over at the small stage as Quinton hurried over, having spotted the door opening immediately.

“Samantha! Welcome! You are a lovely sight tonight. What can I get for you?”

Sam turned around to ask Jackson what he wanted, but Jackson had already faded into the background. Not surprised, she turned around again and told Quinton, “Some of your best Root Beer. Jackson is around somewhere. See what he wants, too. And we’ll need menus at some point.”

“Of course, Samantha. One Root Beer coming right up. I’ll have Allie come out in just a few minutes.”

As Quinton turned to go behind the bar, Sam quickly asked, “Is the karaoke machine still working?”

Quinton grinned. “Perfectly. Found a couple more TV’s so I’m good to go for a while, barring other trouble.”

Sam smiled in reply and made her way to a table at the edge of the dance floor and stage. It was still early, and Sam was the only customer in the main room. She couldn’t see Jackson anywhere.

Though she knew the song selection by heart, she got up and retrieved one of the old, rather ragged looking karaoke song books and thumbed through it. The page protectors were yellowing, and small cracks marred some of them. But, if she held the book just right, the light from the nearest electric bulb provided enough light for her to read. She double checked some song numbers and then put the book back in the rack.

Allie showed up, with the Root Beer. “No paper menus anymore,” she told Sam. We have to conserve what paper we have left. But Quinton came up with these old school slates and chalk from somewhere.” She handed the slate board to Sam.

Sam had a hard time reading it. Not from the lack of light, but the handwriting, printing, actually, was atrocious. Some personal skills were not being taught very well by some families.

“I guess the buffalo burger with cheese. And a baked potato.”

“Good choice. No salad stuff today. Slaw all right?”

“Of course. Thanks, Allie. How’s little Gwen?”

“Better, Samantha. But she still has us worried.”

“She’ll get better. I’m sure of it,” Sam said encouragingly.

“I hope so, too,” Allie replied. Then, rather eagerly, she asked Sam, “You’re going to sing, aren’t you?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Please do, Samantha. You’re great! Back before the war, I bet you’d be a professional.”

Sam blushed slightly, but it went unnoticed in the faint light. “Many regulars coming in?”

“A few. Word gets around you’re here, there’ll be a bunch. Would you... Would you do a duet with me? I’m afraid to sing by myself.”

“Still? Well, if I do sing, I’ll do the duet with you.”

Allie went back to the kitchen, rather eagerly, Sam thought. Since it would be at least a while before she sang, Sam went over to the CD jukebox at one side of the room. It, too, still worked, though the bubbler and most of the lights were out.

After fishing some coins from her pocket, she dropped a silver Eagle into the machine and made ten selections. They were all quiet numbers, suitable for a pleasant meal. She took a long draught of the Root Beer when she sat down again, wiping the foam from her lips with the cloth napkin.

She heard the front door open and turned around to see who it was. A frown turned her lips down when she saw Hadley Brand come in and go to the bar. Quinton made not only the Root Beer, but regular beer, wine, and hard liquor, too. Sam knew Hadley drank. But it surprised her when he ordered a double with a beer chaser.

Hadley had essentially inherited the manager's position at the Farm, rather than having been independently selected by her father. He did a decent job, but that was it. He was beginning to have a hard time getting hired hands, because of his harsh ways with the workers. There had been a time that many women worked as laborers at the farm in return for food. That had changed shortly after Hadley took over.

Sam turned away, deciding nothing was going to ruin her evening out. She was in tune with the music, swaying slightly, lost in thought, when Allie returned with her burger, potato, and slaw.

"Thanks. Put whatever Jackson is having on my tab, will you?"

"Sure, Samantha. We'd feed him anyway, for free. He's in the kitchen, helping Quinton with his books."

"Figures," Sam muttered as Allie left. She took a bite of the buffalo burger, and sighed in appreciation. It was a nice change from the regular beef they had most of the time. Buffalo were making a big comeback, according to radio reports around the country, but they were still scarce in this area.

Sam noticed peripherally that the front door was getting a lot of use

while she ate. She even nodded to a few people as the tables in front of the stage began to fill up. Still, it was a surprise when she finished her meal and looked around the room. It was as full as she'd ever seen it.

Sam returned many waves and greetings. But there were some less than enchanted looks cast her way, as well, mostly from one section of the room. Sam decided she'd just ignore them, wondering why so many people were showing up. It wasn't the normal karaoke night, which did draw a good crowd for Quinton. Entertainment was scarce in the area.

Quinton's movie night drew crowds, as did karaoke night. There might not be any professional entertainers in the area, but there were many good amateurs and karaoke brought them out to enjoy themselves, while providing entertainment others. Quinton didn't charge for using the karaoke machine. It was free to use, he made his money on the volume of drinks and meals he sold.

Movie night was different. There was a token charge, with children free, as long as some type of other service was purchased.

Still wondering about the crowd, Sam looked around when she heard a hearty voice greet Quinton behind the bar. "Quinton! Been a while. The best for me and my family. We're celebrating!"

"Sure, Mr. Mueller! Allie will be right over to get your orders. Sit anywhere."

"That I will," Hank Mueller said, mostly under his breath. "That I will."

Sam was more than a little surprised when Hank ignored Hadley and walked toward her table. "Would you mind, Miss Crain? There aren't many tables available," he said when he stopped, the rest of the family behind him.

"Of course!" Sam said, starting to get up. "I'll move to one..."

“No, no, Miss Crain! We’d like to join you. If you wouldn’t mind.”

Sam’s glance went to Henry, trailing the rest of the family, one of the clan’s babies in his arms. She smiled, relaxed, and nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

In the matter of a few seconds and three tables were rearranged and the Muëller family joined Sam. She suddenly had a baby in her lap as part of the group headed for the bathrooms. Henry was grinning at her from across the table. “Should of said ‘No’,” he mouthed to her.

Sam lifted her eyebrows and let them fall, trying not to drop the squirming baby. It disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared, one of the teen girls taking over the duty. “So,” she asked Hank when he sat down, “What’s the celebration?”

A deep chuckle rumbled from Hank. “You, Miss Crain. You. Word has spread like wildfire that you are singing tonight. You have quite the fan club.”

Sam was truly and completely shocked. “Me! You must be mistaken! I sing a little, sure, and I’m not terrible, but...”

“You’re better than you think,” Henry said from across the table.

The last song selection on the juke box finished and only a low murmur could be heard. Quinton himself took the stage and fired up the karaoke equipment. There was already a line to submit selections. Many of those attending were there to see Sam, but that wasn’t going to prevent others from participating.

Sam sat back and enjoyed the first rotation of singers. The dance floor had been full during every song. As the last one was finishing Sam went up and told Quinton which song she wanted to sing.

“Okay, Samantha, you’re up.”

Sam felt the silence when she stepped up and took the microphone. She’d never felt nervous singing karaoke before, but she certainly was now. But the music started, and she began to sing automatically.

The other singers had received polite, even enthusiastic applause. The response to Sam’s performance was several orders of magnitude greater. Applause and compliments followed her back to her chair.

But when Henry and Hank both suddenly turned to look toward the back of the area, Sam did as well. It was the small group that had avoided her. They weren’t applauding or complimenting. There were soft boos and negative comments.

They were quickly shushed by those nearby. A bit disconcerted, Sam stumbled slightly as she took her seat and Hank put a hand out to steady her. “Ignore them, Miss Crain.”

“Part of karaoke. Most people appreciate the fact that one gets up to sing when they are terrified by the idea. But there’s usually one drunk that has to voice a complaint about everything.”

Sam sat down, and when Allie stopped at the table she put in an order for another Root Beer. She sipped the drink when it was served and enjoyed the singers in the rotation until it was her turn again.

“Quit wasting our time. Let someone that can sing, sing.”

The words stopped Sam short and she turned to look at Hadley. “You’re talents are very overrated.”

Like the group, there were immediate calls for Hadley to shut up. Sam hesitated, but with grim determination she went onto the stage and began

to sing when the music started. She had to keep her eyes away from the bar area. Hadley was glaring at her venomously.

Again she ignored the few taunts she received and just concentrated on the applause when she finished the song and went back to sit down. “I think I’d better go,” said, draining the last of the Root Beer from the mug.

“Why don’t you,” said Hadley. He was right behind her.

“Take your comments elsewhere, Brand,” Hank said calmly, but firmly. Sam noticed that Henry no longer had a baby on his lap. He looked ready to leap like the tiger he’d been tracking.

“It’s okay. There are a lot of people that want to sing besides me,” Sam said, beginning to rise.

“You’d better remember which side your bread is buttered on, Mueller,” Hadley told Hank. “You’re dependent on the Farm for your food. And we’re your best customer. It would pay for you to side with me on this. Crain has no authority or power anymore. Taking her side will cost you dearly.”

Sam couldn’t move. There was such vehemence in Hadley’s voice. He apparently hated her. As startling as Hadley’s remarks had been, Hank’s reply to Hadley was just as shocking.

“I’m behind Samantha Crain one-hundred-percent. She is still the leader of this community as far as I am concerned. What she decides to do, I will back her. My entire family will back her.”

“I’m with you, too, Samantha,” said Quinton, pushing through the crowd that was now growing around the table. “Me, too,” called one, then half a dozen more people, several of them movers and shakers in the community.

“I’m warning you people!” Hadley called out. “Side with her and you’re cut off from the Farm! It’s my way or the highway!”

It was then that Tim Mohegan came running inside. He slid to a stop, looking at the crowd, not sure what was going on. But his news was too important not to share it. “Hey! Everyone! It’s started snowing. I talked to the I-70 group just a little while ago. It’s snowing heavily there and they still have snow on the ground from last winter!” Silence fell. The last snow from the year before had only melted away less than a month previously here.

A plan suddenly coalesced in Sam’s mind and she stood up, to face the crowd, not Hadley. “Okay. Here is my plan. I am moving the Homestead south, to a yet to be decided upon location in two years. Anyone that wants to go with me on that time table is welcome.”

“Two years!” Hadley exclaimed, putting his right hand on Sam’s shoulder to turn her to face him. “That’s crazy! We have to move now! Just take what we need. Hook up with a place already going. Take it over, if we have to!”

Sam saw Henry and Hank both beginning to move toward Hadley. They had not liked his putting his hand on Sam. But Quinton spoke and they stopped where they were.

“Get out of here, Brand,” Quinton said. “You’re patronage is no longer wanted. Look at the sign. ‘We reserve the right to refuse to serve anyone for any reason’. You’re barred. Guys.”

With that simple word, the two men and one woman that was Quinton’s security team stepped forward and surrounded Hadley. “Easy or hard. You choice, guy,” said the woman.

It seemed to infuriate Hadley and he tried to swing on her. But the three

were a team and it showed as they controlled Hadley and took him outside without further ado.

“I’m sorry, Samantha,” Quinton said. “I didn’t know he was like that.” Before Sam could reply, a scuffle started between those that had been jeering Sam and her fans. Quinton headed that way.

“Don’t worry, Miss Crain,” Hank said. “We’re behind you, just like I said.” He looked over at Henry. “My boy says it’s the right thing to do, and I agree with him. Your family has the uncanny knack of coming through when things are tough. I hope you can do it again.”

Sam looked over at Henry smiled and winked. Sam found herself blushing. “I just hope I’m not making a mistake.”

“You’re not,” Henry said. “I trust you.” He had a baby in his arms again and Sam had to laugh at the young man as he struggled to keep squirming tot in his arms.

From behind her, to one side, came Jackson’s voice. “Ready for departure, Miss?”

Sam sighed. “Yes. I think so. Let me take care of the bill and...”

“All taken care of, Miss,” Jackson replied. “Mr. Harleson picked up the tab, because of the business you brought in this evening.”

“He can’t afford to do...”

“Yes I can. And I, like Hank, am behind you in whatever you decide. Just let me know as plans progress so I have time to get my things ready.”

“Okay, Quinton. Thank you.” Sam led the way outside, Jackson just behind her, and the Mueller’s behind him. She looked up and shivered as

the snowflakes melted on her cheeks, wondering if she had just made a huge mistake.

The Mueller family disappeared into the darkness, except for Henry. He walked with Sam and Jackson until it was just the three of them. "You'll need someone to scout out a place..." Henry said.

"You willing to be gone from your family for that long?" Sam asked, feeling like the fate of the world was in her hands if Henry said no.

"Sure I am. I'm with my father on this. What you say goes. I'll be ready in two days. You just have a list of what you want me to look for and I'll start looking."

"I'm going with you," Sam said, her eyes steady on Henry.

"I don't think that would be a very good idea. I know you ride well. And probably have all the skills needed. But..."

"What will people think?" Sam finished for him.

"Well... Yes... There is that. But mostly, to put it bluntly, you'll slow me down. I am very good out in the world. Lots of experience since I was little. You'd do fine, but at a much slower pace."

"Because I'm female."

"No. Because you don't have the experience. We... You... need a place to head for as quickly as it can be found. Me, traveling alone will provide it. I promise."

Sam sighed. Henry had a point. "But it's not safe, one person traveling alone."

"Not in my case. I can take care of myself out there better than anyone

in the community, if I do say so myself.”

Sam sighed and dropped her head for a moment. When she lifted it, Henry knew she had given up on the idea of going with him. “Okay. But you’d better be careful. Not only do we need the information you’ll be gathering... well... Just be careful.”

“You know I will. I’ll be over in three days, ready to go.”

“Very well,” Sam said. She reached up and took the key from around her neck. “I want you to look over things in the cache. See if there is anything that will help you in your quest.”

“You sure you trust me with this?”

“I trust you with my life.”

Both Sam and Henry blushed in the darkness. “Uh... Okay. I’ll bring the key back when I come over to leave. No one will know.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in three days. I’ll have something ready for you... Not sure what... But there will be something.”

With that, Henry turned and was suddenly lost in the snowy darkness. Sam felt the jacket that Jackson removed from his shoulders and draped around her. “We’d best be getting back. The others will worry, Miss.”

Sam nodded and the two walked down to the dock where the Nautica 41 Cabin RIB waited for them.

Her thoughts were racing as she readied for bed. “Why did I shoot off my mouth like that?” she wondered. Suddenly her mind went to Henry. He had not hesitated. He would leave, on his own, to look for the location that could be the Homestead’s salvation. She fell asleep still thinking of Henry.

The two days passed and then it was the morning of the third. Arms crossed, Sam stood on the porch waiting for Henry. It was still dark and there was a light breeze, accompanied by a light, very fine, dry snow. Sure enough, Henry appeared out of the darkness well before six. He was riding a horse and had two as pack horses.

“You’re up,” Henry said. “I was just going to wait until six to knock.”

“No need,” Sam said. “Come on in.”

She waited for Henry to tie the horses to the hitching posts and followed him into the house after opening the door for him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Sam asked, looking up into Henry’s light brown eyes for any doubt.

“I’m sure.” Henry was all business. “Here’s a list of the things I took from the cache. I’ll keep an accounting of the gold and silver. I have my own money for regular purchases, but I thought there might be a need for some persuasive coin to change hands.” Henry smiled.

“Of course. It’s not a problem. I trust you.” Sam finally sat down behind the desk in the study and Henry sat down in front of it.

For something to do, Sam looked at the neatly handwritten list of items from the cache. Her eyes lifted. “The food was still good?”

“The freeze dried, dehydrated, and naturally long term stable things seemed to be from what I checked. The MREs didn’t fare so well. There might be some good ones, but of the four meals I checked out of four cases, not a one was still edible. I took some of the Mountain House freeze dried, vacuum packed campers meals as emergency rations.”

“What are MREs?” Sam asked.

Henry explained MREs and then Sam asked, “All that food isn’t any good?”

“I don’t think so. But they were a very small part of the provisions. You know the trailers we saw, hooked to the semi trucks, plus the ones parked?”

Sam nodded.

“Those are all loaded. Many of them with buckets of long term storage foods. I checked a couple that were stored in the cache, but not in a trailer. They were good. So were the dry pack cans of freeze dried, dehydrated, and naturally long term stable items. I took some items for the trip.”

“Sure. Anything you need. That’s why I gave you the key.”

“Oh. You’ll need that back.” Henry reached into a pocket and pulled out the key and rawhide keeper. “I wasn’t sure when you’d go back in so I covered up the access hole and camouflaged it. I don’t think anyone will stumble into it.”

“Henry,” Sam finally asked, “Are you really sure this is the right thing to do?”

“I do. It is my opinion you’ll be helping more people doing things the way you announced than simply distributing the things in the cache. Everything is yours and your future family. It came from your forebears. Yes, they intended to help others, but under their rules. May seem a bit selfish, but I don’t see it that way. I guess I should be going. The longest journey starts with but a single step.”

“Yes. I guess so. Henry... Be careful. Please?”

“I will, to the best of my ability that doesn’t interfere with getting the job done.”

It was not what Sam wanted to hear, but she knew it was the best she was going to get. She followed silently as Henry went back outside, untied the horses and mounted the saddled one. He rode away without a look back. Sam wished he’d waved or something. It seemed so permanent, him just disappearing into the snowfall.

“He’s a savvy young man, Miss,” Jackson said, coming up behind Sam. “He’ll do fine.”

Sam jumped slightly. She was used to how quietly Jackson moved, but her attention had all been on Henry and she had not had a clue Jackson was even about.

“I know. But I worry. Probably more than I have a right to.”

“Oh, I think you’re entitled. Now come on inside and I’ll get you a hearty breakfast. You’ve a lot to do over the next several months. Have to keep your strength up.”

Sam just sighed and preceded Jackson inside the house. After breakfast, she and Jackson did a complete inventory of equipment and supplies. Hadley Brand had made it clear the Homestead wouldn’t be getting anything from the Farm while he was still there. There would be some following his lead and wouldn’t sell or trade with her either. But the Homestead was nearly self-sufficient.

She went over the inventory from the cache time and again, catching an item she’d missed the first few times each time she went over it. Preliminary plans kept her busy for a week. Then came the radio call from the Town. Hadley and group were leaving the following morning.

Sam and Jackson were at the Farm’s lake landing early. The Farm was a

beehive of activity. It was several minutes before they saw the smoke coming from the main house. Sam started to run toward it, but there was Hadley, gun in hand. Sam was well armed, as usual, and she knew Jackson would be, too. But when Hadley said, "I'll shoot your lap dog first, and then you, if you try to interfere," Sam stepped back and just glared at Hadley. Soon the smoke and then the visible flames took her attention.

She wasn't aware of it, but there were angry tears dripping down her cheeks. The group of vehicles was suddenly a convoy, and Hadley began to walk backward toward the lead vehicle. One of the Farm's Unimogs.

When he reached the Unimog he quickly climbed into the cab and the driver put it in gear. The convoy slowly began to move. Directly behind the Unimog was a 14-wheel tank truck pulling a pup tank, obviously full of fuel.

As soon as they could, Sam, Jackson, and several other spectators that had shown up by boat, horseback, and on foot, dodged between the vehicles and ran up to the house. It was the last time that those that planned to stay behind cooperated with Sam's group that would be leaving in two years.

But as much as they worked side-by-side, the main Farm house was beyond saving. One of the wooden barns was a total loss, as well. But several other small fires were extinguished. Blackened and bruised, Sam finally stopped and surveyed the damage.

"Wait a minute? Where is all the stock? The convoy only had three stock trailers." Sam ran over to one of the earth sheltered barns, fearful of what she might find. But their barn was intact and empty.

"He's scattered what stock he didn't take with him, Miss," Jackson said, coming up to her just as she turned around. "And look..." Jackson nodded toward the tank farm that now held only bio-diesel and alcohol.

“He broke through the protective berm, drained the tanks and tried to set them afire, too. Someone didn’t know what they were doing, fortunately.

“The greenhouses have been run into with the trucks, breaking some of the panels and bending some of the frames, and they are essentially unusable the way they are.

“Why, Jackson? Why? Why did he try to destroy everything he couldn’t take with him that might make things easier for the rest?”

“Just what you said, Miss. It would make things easier for others. I suspect Mr. Brand wants things easy for him and hard for everyone else.”

The two began to go over the Farm and take a mental inventory. Sam had gone from wondering ‘why’ to a deep burning anger at the destruction Hadley had wrought. To top it off, Randy Stanton came up, hand on the gun in a holster on his right hip and said, “Leave! This is part of the town, now! What’s here is ours. We need it to get through the next few years until the weather changes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Randy! We’re going to need to cooperate. I’m confident you’ll come around and go with us when the majority leaves.” It was a real strain, but Sam had kept her voice level and calm, and had not touched her own pistol.

“Not going to happen, girl. Now you two get in your fancy boat and get out of here.”

Still calm, Sam asked, “Can we at least take some of the things that you can’t use? We might be able to get them going with our resources.”

Randy laughed. “Your resources? You’ve got a dozen people at the Homestead. There are fifty of us.”

“How about it? You can’t use those old semi’s and trailers. None of the Unimogs are useable now. Hadley apparently took every diesel powered vehicle that they could salvage parts for and repair. He even tried to burn the bone yard to destroy the remains of the other vehicles and equipment stored there.”

Looking thoughtful, Randy thought for a moment. “It cost you. I’ll get with Jake and Ben and we’ll decide how much it will cost.” Suddenly Randy looked eager. “You probably still have gold, don’t you?”

“We managed to hang onto a little. But you know most of the gold and silver my family had is circulating around here as currency.”

“Yeah. And we need more to circulate. I’ll talk to the other two, but you can expect we’ll want a big chunk of the gold you have left from the old days.” Like Hadley, Randy walked backward away from Sam and Jackson, his hand always on the gun on his hip. When he was at his horse, he climbed aboard and shouted to the two, “Now, get off my property!”

Teeth clenched, Sam turned around and strode stiffly toward the Nautica 41 Cabin RIB. Jackson stayed right with her, keeping his body between hers and Randy. Sam calmed herself down before heading the boat toward the Homestead.

With the boat in the boat house, Sam and Jackson walked up to the house. Several of the people that worked at the Homestead were milling around. “We saw smoke! Is everything all right?” asked one of them.

Jackson began to fill them in as Sam went into the house, more determined than ever to make the move in two years a success for those that stood by her. After calming down more, and she began to think of things that needed to be done immediately. She went to find Jackson.

“Jackson, do you think we could round up some of the stock Hadley ran

off from the Farm?”

“Good thinking, Miss. I’ll see to it.”

“I don’t want you doing it yourself, Jackson. Get some of the hands. Maybe some of the Townies that are planning to go with us.”

“Yes, Miss, of course.”

“Jackson, I didn’t mean...”

“That I was too old and feeble?” Jackson asked with a laugh.

Sam smiled slightly. She sure didn’t want to alienate Jackson with a careless word. “Yes. Do it however you think best.”

“I will. Now, why don’t you lie down until lunchtime? Let that fertile mind of yours work on some of these problems we now face.”

“I think I will. I wonder how Henry is doing?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine.”

Sam walked up the stairs, her brain already working on the problems Jackson mentioned. When she came down for supper she heard cattle lowing and pigs squealing. The sound of chickens was a normal one, since the Homestead already raised them.

“There is plenty of grass for the cattle, and the swine can make do for a few days, but they’ll need some feed as the weather gets worse,” Jackson told her.

“I see. How are we going to keep them here without installing fences?”

“I think, with the available food, and a rotating crew to keep an eye on

them they'll be fine for some time. If need be we'll clear out a couple of the out buildings and pen up any trouble makers."

"Good. How many did you get?"

Sam was surprised with his answer. "According to one of the men that came from the Farm that wants a place here, we captured probably half. The rest will go wild and we'll hunt them rather than butcher the herd."

"Oh? Someone came over from the Farm? Not a spy, do you think?"

"No, Miss. It's Pete Peters and his family. Plus Barbara Dean, and Charlie Hunt and his family. They were the ones that notified the radio operator in Town that the move was starting. They didn't want any part of it."

"Okay. But keep an eye open. I'd like to keep things we do quiet for the most part."

"Yes, Miss."

Her first order of business the next morning was to get out the gold in the safe in the study. "No way," she muttered. She poured a third of the coins out into her hand. There was a mix of Gold Eagles in 1/10 ounce, 1/4 ounce, 1/2 ounce, and 1 ounce.

She put the bag away in the safe and counted out the coins on the desk. A total of seven and three-quarters of an ounce. She put the 1 ounce eagles in one pocket of her pants, and the fractional ounces in another. Half an hour later she was on the way to the Town, riding Queenly. She had a couple more stops to make away from the lake, so she didn't take one of the boats.

It turned out that Randy, Jake, and Ben did indeed represent those that

were planning on staying on in the area. Also that they were greedy. Greedy for gold, rather than many other things Sam would have been willing to trade to them to make their life easier, rather than gold.

Sam met with the three men representing the Town, and now the Farm, at the Farm. She handed Randy the list of items she wanted to remove from the Farm. He immediately handed it to Ben. Sam realized that Randy was probably illiterate.

Ben read off the list emotionlessly. Randy's face went through several shades of color. Jake listened intently, nodding occasionally. When Ben finished, Randy asked, "What do you want all that junk for? None of it is usable."

"I think we can salvage some of the trucks. And reassemble the greenhouses when we get to where we're going. You say it's junk. You must not want much for it."

Randy turned beet red. "I didn't mean it that way. You'll pay, and you'll pay well for everything you want. Let see the gold. Don't even need to bring out any silver. Gold only. US coins. None of that foreign stuff."

Sam reached into her right pants pocket and pulled out the four 1 ounce gold Eagles. Immediately Randy said, "Not enough! And we want some small coins, too. It's too hard to break a 1 ounce Eagle sometimes."

"How much do you want, Randy?" Sam asked. "Remember, it's been eighty years since this gold was accumulated. You know we can't have much left from that original amount."

"Six more ounces," Randy said immediately.

"Can't do it. One more, all fractional coins."

Randy was getting angry. "Six more ounces or no deal," he said.

“Wait a minute, Randy,” Ben said. “We have a say in this, too.” He looked over at Sam. “What’s your best offer. None of this used car salesman back and forth stuff.”

Sam pulled the other coins out of her left pocket. There were many 1/10 ounce coins, with a few 1/4 and 1/2 ounce coins rounding out the three and three-quarter ounces. “It’s all I’m willing to give. I won’t say it’s all I have, but you can imagine how much was spent over the years. And Randy said it. The things I want are junk and of no use to you, the Town, or the Farm, now.”

“We could rebuild the greenhouses ourselves,” Jake said.

“No deal,” Sam said. “Hand me back the gold.”

Randy looked panicked. He really did not want to give up the gold. He took a step back. “Okay! Okay! The stuff is yours. I don’t want to see you here again. Send someone else to get the things. And your people will have to handle everything. No help from any of us or our people. If they want a drink of water you’d better have sent it with your crews.”

“If that’s the way you want it,” Sam said. She swung her leg up and over Queenly, reined her over and started away. “I’ll have a crew here tomorrow to get started. You give them trouble and you’ll regret it.” With that she snickered to Queenly and the horse broke into a trot.

Sam’s next stop was at the Mueller compound in Town. “Have you had any word from Henry?” she asked as one of the teen children took Queenly’s reins.

“Come on in, Samantha,” Hank said. “We haven’t heard anything. With no batteries for radios, he’ll only be able to contact us if he runs into people with a base station with power.”

“I know. I’m just worried about him.”

“Don’t be. I taught him well, if I do say so. He can handle just about anything.”

Sam nodded. “The main reason I stopped by was to see if you could arrange for a couple of work teams to salvage things from the Farm. I paid for them, in gold.”

“Shouldn’t have had to do that,” Hank said. “This has been a team effort for many years. It is not good that the team is broken up.”

“I agree. But reality is reality. This is just another situation we’ll have to deal with. Our families have been doing it for generations.”

“True. I’ve been feeling out people recently, to see which way their intentions lean. Over half of those here plan to stay. Take over everything that is abandoned. They honestly think they can outlast the coming weather.”

“That is their choice.”

“Yes, it is. How many people do you need? And to do what?”

“Well, since I’ve been barred from the Farm, there will need to be someone in charge, plus at least one person that can drive a big truck. And a different one that can handle a Unimog with forks and other implements, and one to drive an A300 skid steer with different attachments. The rest will be physical labor.”

“I’ll round up a couple of teams. I’m sure my brother will take the responsibility of seeing that the work is done properly and on a timely basis.”

Sam smiled. “Good. Henry said I could count on you and your family.”

“Henry was right. He said much the same about you. What do we have to do to get that initial equipment running? I was told that there wasn’t anything left that was usable or even repairable.”

“We put up most of our mechanical equipment on blocks. The tires are the main weakness. Eighty years is a long time for tires to last, even if they aren’t being run much anymore.”

“Very true. But you obviously have a plan or you wouldn’t be asking for the rolling equipment at the Farm.”

Sam smiled again. “I do. Please trust me on this.”

“Absolutely. Just give me a list of what you want, and in what order, and I’ll get people on it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mueller.” She held out a hand and Hank shook it firmly.

“Oh. What about fuel? Didn’t that lunatic drain all the tanks?”

“He did, but we have enough to get started at the Homestead. And I’m on my way to see about getting more.”

“Okay then. Anything else I can help with?”

“That’s it. It’s more than enough. Now, I need to be on my way.”

Hank opened the front door and whistled. Queenly and her handler showed up immediately from the side of the house. Sam thanked the girl and climbed aboard. “I’ll be in touch,” she called over her shoulder as she headed toward the old part of town.

The Town was well behind her an hour later when she turned off the

disintegrating pavement and headed Queenly up a well tended gravel driveway. She was met at the top of the drive by two men, both well armed, though they made no move toward their weapons.

“Mr. Taggart? I’m Samantha Crain. I’d...”

“Know who you are. What do you want? You’ve already cost me my best customer.”

“You mean the Farm?” Sam asked, staying aboard Queenly.

“Yes. The Farm. That Brand was a hard man to deal with, but he bought my rapeseed oil and a few other things and always paid in decent food and finished biodiesel.”

“I’ll do the same, Mr. Taggart. I want to buy your raw oil to make biodiesel until we move away. Also some grains.”

“I thought the Farm was the only place that could make biodiesel,” Taggart replied, looking surprised.

“No. I have the equipment and supplies other than the oil.”

“How about food? You going to be able to grow enough in the Homestead garden and greenhouse to supply us with food?”

“Yes. Even meat. We rounded up much of the stock Hadley ran off before he left.”

“Okay. Depending on quantity and quality, you’ve got a deal. You’ll have to pick up the oil and drop off the other things. We don’t get away from this place very often.”

“That’s not a problem. In a few days I’ll send over a tanker rig to pick up the first load of oil. They’ll be bringing some beef, pork, chicken, and

raw vegetables. You have a way to preserve the food?”

“We’ll process all of it. Rather get the whole animals, if you don’t mind. Butcher it ourselves when we need it.”

“That’s even better for us, Mr. Taggart. Thank you.”

“If that food isn’t up to snuff, there’ll be no oil or grain.”

“Understood.” Sam turned Queenly and headed back down the driveway. She was tired and it was dark when she got home to the Homestead. But the process was started.

As the days passed, one piece of equipment after another was moved from the Farm to the Homestead, using the Homestead’s Unimog, semi-tractor, equipment trailer, and A300 skid steer that were operable.

None of the equipment that was moved had decent tires. Some of the engines in the equipment wouldn’t run, but all of it was brought to the Farm. The Homestead mechanic and one from town went through all of them, planning on salvaging what they could from other equipment to get some of the Farm items running.

But Sam passed word to them to just analyze the problems and make lists of what was needed in terms of parts and labor. There were a few people becoming a bit leery of what Sam was doing. It seemed she was just shuffling unusable equipment from one place to another. Only one semi truck was brought to life, and it took all the tires that had any life left in them to equip the truck and a trailer so they could be used in the move.

It was only after one more tire failed that Sam decided to go ahead and get into the cache. At least on a small scale. Deciding she needed a bit of help, she told Jackson about the cache. “Yes, Miss. I suspected you and young Henry had found it. How can I help?”

“I want to dig out a small access point, without opening the entire wall. I’ll be doing it with the A300 with backhoe attachment. If I don’t tell you about it before hand, you would probably have a search team out looking for me.”

Jackson smiled slightly. “Yes, Miss. Probably so.”

Sam grinned. “I’ll leave it to you to keep the others in the dark about the entire thing.”

“Of course, Miss.”

With most of those that stayed at the Homestead gone most days to the Farm, getting the items ready to be moved, Sam was able to take the Bobcat Toolcat 5600T with a backhoe mounted down to the cache point without being noticed.

Getting an opening into the cache so she could bring a few things out was the easy part. Actually getting the things out was the difficulty. As the trucks and trailers all had shrink wrapped tires mounted on them, though they were on blocks, a relatively large area was taken up by individually shrink wrapped tires of several sizes, about half of each size already on rims.

The truck tires were heavier than Sam had imagined. She could barely handle them from where they were stored to a point where she could use the Toolcat to take them outside, and from there to a point where they could be loaded onto one of the Unimogs or semi trailers.

She left them there for several days, partly to rest up for the next step, but also to wait for the next snow storm that was bound to come through. So when the snow came, and the work at the Farm stopped, Sam had the trailer used to haul the Bobcats hooked up to the Unimog. She said she’d be gone for a couple of days and not to worry about her.

Several of the residents were surprised that Jackson didn't stop her, or even caution her. Sam enjoyed her time away, though she only went a few miles, after stopping and loading the tires she'd placed where she could get to them with the Unimog.

She mostly just went over the nearly endless inventory sheets, and let her mind wander, as plan after plan came to her and was discarded. After three days of camping out, and the snow stopping, Sam fired up the Unimog and went back to the Homestead.

There were immediate questions about the tires. Not much of one to out and out lie, Sam told everyone that Henry had found them. All but Jackson assumed she meant that he'd found them on the trip he was on. Neither Jackson nor Sam corrected the mistaken idea.

After replacing the nearly bald tires on the one Unimog, two of the semi truck and trailer combinations had theirs replaced. Her next mission, coinciding with the next big snow storm, was to recover the biodiesel plant in the cache, along with enough chemicals to make all the fuel they'd need during the next few months and during the trip.

The Fifth Key – Chapter 3

Again she stayed away for several days, and she got some very curious looks when she returned with the equipment and supplies, plus more tires. The snow was covering her tracks adequately, but Sam knew that soon she would not be able to keep the secret. But after two more undiscovered trips to the cache with the Toolcat, moving things from the cache to the road where she left the Unimog, Sam changed her tactics. On her last trip Sam covered up the access to the cache, after building a door for the area she had opened up in the wall of the cache.

Though quite a bit of firewood had been cut during the summer, Sam used the excuse of at least this winter and the next being very severe, and the time to cut wood being limited as they got close to the time to leave for whatever place Henry found, to start a wood harvesting program.

With another A300 working, its hydraulics ran the chain saws the men used to fell and trim the trunks. Though the tiger in the area was seen a few times initially, after the first week there was no further sign.

The location was just below where the cache was. Sam ordered clear cutting, with the trees cut to allow good coppicing to take place. The initial cutting opened a road into the rest of the tract. The trees were trimmed, and topped at the sixty foot mark, if the tree was that long or longer.

Skidded to one area, a bottom layer of logs was put down and the rest carefully stacked on the platform to keep them out of the mud they were creating working in the snow. The plan, as all but Sam and Jackson knew, was that the logs would be pulled a few at a time when firewood was needed.

Sam had told Jackson that they would transport all of the logs they possibly could to wherever they were going. One of the items in the cache was a portable lumber mill, and a mobile firewood processor. If they needed lumber to build structures at the new site, they'd have the means and the raw material, without cutting down too much of the local forest when they got there.

The days passed, as did, weeks, and then months. Randy had raged when he saw the new tires on some of the equipment now being used to recover the rest of what Sam wanted from the Farm. He demanded more gold and Sam flatly refused. The work teams, though composed of armed individuals, now had a security team to watch over them while on the Farm.

Randy also found out that Sam was getting oil for biodiesel for the equipment, and grain for the stock they'd rounded up. He threatened the Taggart's and was chased off their property at gun point.

Still no one said anything about the possibility that Sam had found the cache, even if one or two suspected.

And then the snows came again to the Town, Farm, and the Homestead. Earlier than the year before, while there was still snow on the ground in protected north facing areas. The group that lived north of them was no longer in contact.

At least, that is, until they showed up on the Town's doorstep. They were on the move, heading generally south, with no destination in mind. They didn't have a single mechanized vehicle. There were a few vehicles converted to horse or ox drawn, mostly pickup trucks.

Sam went in and talked to their leader, one Tim Matson. "Why did you wait so late to come south?" she asked.

"We just didn't think it would get worse," he replied. Matson looked as haggard as Sam felt sometimes. Leadership was a difficult proposition, any way you looked at it. There was two feet of snow left from last year when the first blizzard hit this year and we made the decision to move. We're short on resources. Any chance you can give us something to get us through to next summer?"

Before Sam could mention trade, Tim added, "We don't have anything to spare to trade. We'll need everything we have and more to get us through."

Had Matson offered some trade in the future, when their group got settled, she would have been a bit more generous. But she had a group that needed supplies, too. Three beef cattle, five hogs, and a dozen

chickens were driven or carried to the nearest point the new group would pass on their way around the lake.

“Is that all?” asked Tim of Sam.

“Make sure you let us know where you settle. We’ll make sure and give you plenty of room when we head that way.”

“That was uncalled for,” Tim protested, looking like his feelings were hurt.

Sam suspected it was all an act. She flicked the reins and turned Queenly away from the group. “Let’s go!” she called to the herding team. They too turned their horses around and began to ride away with Sam.

Several of Tim’s group had to scramble to keep the stock from following Sam and her riders. At least the chickens had been handed to someone. There were pig squeals and cattle lowing sounds audible for some time as Sam and the others went back to the Homestead.

Sam didn’t realize they were there for a few moments. She was just sitting on Queenly, her unseeing gaze just out toward the forest. Only when Jackson touched her leg and said, “Miss?” did she come out of her daze.

“Oh. We’re here! I was just... Well... I was thinking about Henry. How he’s doing and if he’s found anything suitable.”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Jackson said.

It was only then that Sam noticed the additional horses in the corral. She turned in the saddle and almost fell off in her haste to dismount. She let Jackson take Queenly’s reins and ran to a rather different looking Henry.

Before she knew it she was in his arms, in a bear hug. One she gladly

returned. After a few moments, each released the other and looked around. Everyone except Jackson had made themselves scarce.

“Uh... How was the trip?” Sam finally got out, her eyes roving over Henry. She’d considered him a man at eighteen. Now, just turned twenty, he was definitely a man. Though not the hardened look of an old timer, Henry’s journey had matured him to a degree that amazed Sam.

“Educational, to say the least,” Henry replied. Even his voice was different. Slightly deeper, even more assured than before. “Jackson filled me in on what’s been going on. Are you okay?”

Sam nodded quickly, trying not to tear up. “Now that you’re back, better,” she managed to get out. She turned hurriedly and added, “Come on into the house and tell me everything.”

When she sat down in the study desk chair she was fully under control again. Henry took the seat opposite her and sighed. “Good to be back.” He reached into one pocket and withdrew a leather pouch. “Here’s what I didn’t use. Glad I took what I did. Came in handy a couple of times.”

Sam couldn’t look at him enough. She was silent for a long time, and then started. “Oh. Yes. Of course.”

“If you’ll put out the maps I’ll show you the spot I found.”

Her thoughts now on the destination and the trip that would be undertaken to get there, Sam became all business.

With the old Rand McNally road atlas on the desk, Henry began to trace a route from where they were, south and slightly westward, and then almost due south. His finger stopped in the faded blue of a lake. Toledo Bend Reservoir on the east border of Texas and west Louisiana.

“I went all the way around the lake. The dam still looks to be in

excellent shape, with no real fear of it failing soon and losing the advantages of being on a lake. There are several good spots, so this one I picked out isn't necessarily the one we'll ultimately use. But I do think this is the best general location. There are other people on the lake, but very small scale. Not particularly friendly, but not at all aggressive. Live and let live kind of thing. I made it clear we'd be bringing resources to the area. That helped."

"Excellent!" Sam said. She was almost quivering with suppressed excitement. "And the journey? The route? What is it going to be like?"

"That's what took me so long," Henry said with a sigh. Lots of rivers to cross between here and there. Not a lot of bridges. The landing craft would work for the smaller vehicles, but there's no way we can transfer the semi trailers. The Munsons we have just aren't long enough. Means taking some round about trips, to hit bridges that are still standing."

"How long, do you think, for each trip?" Sam asked.

"Two months for the pioneer trip. Anything we do right now will have a slim chance of lasting the winter and spring. You're timetable is right on. We leave early next spring, and the pioneer team can have a route open in two months. After the route is opened, three weeks per trip for the rest. I'm assuming it will take more than one trip, though Jackson did say you've managed to get quite a few of the original vehicles going. Will we have enough biodiesel?"

"I'll take you on a tour after lunch, but for the most part yes and yes. It will take several trips with the semis to move everything I want to move. And we're stockpiling biodiesel in semi trailers as quickly as we make it. I don't think it will be a problem. How's the cropland situation?"

"About like it was here five years ago. It is all going to depend on how far the permanent snow pack line comes south. If you want, I can go and look for something on the Gulf Coast."

Sam could tell he was sincere. He was obviously tired of travelling, but he would go. She shook her head. "If you think this is a good place, this is the place we're going." Sam was adamant. She saw Henry relax slightly.

Jackson knocked and entered, to announce lunch. Sam watched Henry eat. He thoroughly enjoyed the meal, eating slowly and savoring every bite. He'd lived off the land for the most part during the trip, and was very good at obtaining what he needed, and had taken plenty of the basics, and topped off his supplies every chance he had. But a good home cooked meal was something to be appreciated.

After the meal, Sam was as good as her word and took Henry around the Homestead to show him some of the things they had accomplished in his absence. "Your Great Great really knew what to cache," Henry said at one point.

"Just think if we didn't have this. It would make the move so much harder. But think about it. This was supposed to be the first cache opened. How lucky are we that it wasn't found during the last eighty years? I'm sure the equipment would be in nearly as unusable shape as ours is now, if it had been in use all these years."

"True. And even the fact that much of the equipment was bought used and refurbished to nearly new condition before it went into the cache didn't affect how well it held up."

"You knew some of the equipment is used? I didn't figure that out until just recently."

Henry grinned. "Ill spent youth. I loved the mechanical stuff when I was a kid. Searched out and read every piece of paper that had anything about vehicles on it. Plus the pictures and some of the videos.

“The two big semis with the equipment trailers are really old AutoCars. I mean really old. They were probably thirty years old when they went into the cache.”

“Wow!” Sam said. “I had no idea. I just thought used, as in a couple of years. I think working around so much of what is new is affecting my thought processes.”

Henry laughed and Sam shivered inside. To take her mind off it, Sam asked Henry, “Any sign of Hadley Brand and his group?”

“They cut a wide swath up on this end of the trail, but they went much further east than what we will. Did some trading, I learned, but had a bad habit of just taking what they wanted from an area. A few places we’ll be going through had bad experiences with them. That puts us at a disadvantage, but as long as we’re civil and contribute a bit to the given area, I don’t think we’ll have any real problems. Not with humans, anyway.”

“Humans?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. The wild animal population has skyrocketed since the ash settled and things started growing again. It is hard to imagine, but there are huge herds of herbivores out there, including animals from all around the world, from zoos and such. And where there are herbivores, there are predators. Lots of them.

“Every time we camp, we’ll have to maintain a watch for some of them. Shouldn’t be too much of a problem as long as we’re cautious, but believe me when I tell you that lions and tigers are out there with the native wolves, cougars, and bears. Also dangerous herbivores like rhinoceros and elephants.”

Sam paled at the mention of elephants, remembering when Jackson had come to her room one afternoon and told her of her parents’ deaths by

rampaging elephants.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned them,” Henry said, tuning in to her feeling as soon as she had it.

“No, Henry. It’s all right. I needed to know ahead of time so I can be prepared.”

“Okay. So what is left in the cache? I take it everyone knows about it now. You keeping a guard?”

“Slow down!” Sam said with a laugh, her tension gone. “We’ve barely touched anything other than the equipment and supplies to get our old equipment going. Whoever thought of putting those tires in the cache was a genius. The biodiesel equipment and supplies to make it, too.

Almost all the food is still there. We haven’t touched anything already packed in the trailers, just some of the boxed, canned, and bucketed items.

As far as who knows about it, it is kind of an open secret. Only myself, Jackson, your dad and his brother, and a couple more have been to it. I’m sure most of our group knows, but is keeping it quiet so those planning to stay behind don’t try to take it over.”

“Trouble with those staying?” Henry asked. “Jackson didn’t mention that.”

Sam sighed and said, “Yes. Barely on speaking terms. Randy Stanton has taken over the Farm for his and the Town’s use, though I suspect that the Town is paying dearly for everything they get from the Farm. Quite a few people have started to pull windows out of abandoned houses and make green houses. And your father says the demand for ammunition is great. He’s selling it steep, and limiting the amounts any one gets so it isn’t likely to be used against us. We all go armed almost

all the time.”

“Too bad. I had hoped those that didn’t leave would come around to your way of thinking while I was gone.”

“So did I, Henry.”

Now standing down by the lake, Henry stretched and said, “I’d better get home. My parents are going to hear I’m here and didn’t stop there first.”

“You probably should have,” Sam said.

“Wanted to fill you in first,” Henry said and turned back toward the barn so he could get his horses. “The lake is down quite a bit.”

“Been falling steadily. I think the evaporation is all going into snow, and the drain rate is now higher than the river can supply. Don’t think it will dry up, but it sure won’t be the same in a few years if the weather stays the same.”

“You made a good choice.” Henry’s pack string had grown while he was on his quest. He’d started with three horses, all three capable of taking a rider or a pack rig. He now had two horses under saddle and four packhorses, moderately loaded.

Sam looked at him questioningly. “I’ll tell all of you some time. It was an adventure.” Henry snicked at the horse he was on and the string of horses headed down to the lake to take the shore route to Town.

The Fifth Key – Chapter 4

Henry fell into stride, working with Sam on getting things ready for the move the following spring. He paid particular attention to getting the Unimogs ship shape, along with the attachments they’d moved from the Farm plus the ones already at the Homestead. That gave them a total of

seven highly capable Unimogs, with the four repaired ones from the Farm, the one from the Homestead, and the two in the cache.

Likewise, the five Bobcat Toolcat 5600Ts utility vehicles and six Bobcat A300 skid steers were readied, with their collection of implements.

Henry used one of the Unimogs with a backhoe attachment to bring down the rest of the large opening into the cache. And just as Sam predicted, Jackson got the first AutoCar fired up and eased it and its trailer gently out of the cache, barely scraping one spot on the trailer, but without any real damage.

The second AutoCar and trailer Henry drove out of the cache, hard on Jackson's heels. Both low heavy equipment beds had tarped loads. The tarps were a bit crumbly, but held together enough for at least one more use.

Sam had gone over the inventories several times, trying to figure out what was on the trailers. She'd even tried to peak under the tarp but had not been able to make anything out. When the tarps came off she grinned and slapped Henry on the back. "Great job! More greenhouses!"

"Wonder why they weren't on the inventory?" Henry asked.

"Who knows?" Sam replied. "I'm just glad they put them in. There was a lot of damage to the greenhouses at the Farm, thanks to Hadley Brand. This will give us a leg up on getting fresh vegetables as soon as possible after we get there."

Since the two AutoCars had rear deck winches and the equipment trailers, the green house components were unloaded and stacked out of the way, to give room for four of the Bobcat units, some of their implements, and several of the Unimog attachments that were critical for use to pioneer in roads where there were none, or fix those that were in good enough shape to make it practical. The eighty years of neglect on

top of the ash fall had done much damage to many of them.

The other trucks with trailers were moved out of the cache, the items in the trailers checked against the inventory. One semi was used to maneuver the tightly parked individual trailers so they could be opened and inventoried.

Each find of useful items eased Sam's mind a little bit more. About the only thing that they couldn't use were the MREs and the occasional package of other food. There were sixteen total trailers, with the four semi trucks. With what they'd recovered from the Farm and outside of town and put back into service, the Homestead had a total of forty-eight trailers of various types and twelve working semi trucks to pull them.

It was only when the last trailer was moved from the back of the cache did Sam and Henry discover the other vehicles parked there. Four ROKON two-wheel-drive off-road motor bikes with replacement diesel engines, a selection of implements for them, and a Suburban.

According to the paperwork with the Suburban the body was a stretched $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton version on a Chevy 1-ton 167" pickup truck chassis, reinforced and gusseted for strength. There was a long list of customization items. The rear cargo area, as long as a conventional suburban with the rear seats down, even with the front seats and second row seats up, was loaded to physical capacity of Hardigg shipping crates. There was an inventory in the Suburban for what it contained.

"Your Great Great sure wasn't very consistent in his inventories. Some of them are very complete, but others don't list everything." Henry shook his head.

"I know. Even with the inventories we do have, I'm not too surprised when we find something not listed."

Henry had been looking over the Suburban. "Think we found our

command vehicle.”

“Boys and their toys,” Sam said, laughing at the look that crossed Henry’s face.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Doesn’t make it any less useful,” Henry replied, grinning in turn. I’ll give you first crack at it.”

Sam took a step back. “Uh... no. I’ve never driven a vehicle, except equipment...”

“Very well,” Henry said, “If I just have to, I’ll take it outside.” Henry checked the batteries in the Suburban. Like those in the other equipment, the batteries were brand new, but without acid. Taking enough for the batteries in the Suburban from the shelf along one wall of the cache, Henry filled the batteries just like he or someone else had on every piece of equipment using a battery.

The grin on his face was even larger when he climbed down out of the Suburban after he parked it than it was when he got into it.

Henry and Sam both jumped when a brilliant light flashed several feet away, striking one of the many stumps of the harvested trees. Thunder sounded and the two looked up. The approaching weather front looked like a solid wall of snow coming toward them.

“I’ve got a feeling we may be finished for the winter, except for some small stuff,” Henry said.

“But we have so much more to do!” Sam said. She was standing beside Henry, her arm linked with his. She had no idea how she’d wound up there. Quickly she released him and stepped to the Suburban, wondering if he’d noticed. “Let’s get up to the house.”

“Okay,” Henry said. He got back into the driver’s seat of the Suburban

and Sam climbed into the front passenger seat.

“Holy cow! Look at all of this radio equipment! And what’s this?” Sam touched a joystick control and the rear of the Suburban jerked to the left. “Sorry!” she exclaimed and put her hands in her lap.

“Has a four wheel steer system, I guess,” Henry replied, as the joystick centered itself. Henry slowed down to a crawl when he knew he was getting close to the house. Visibility was almost nil.

When the house was in sight, Henry parked it and the two ran for the house as another lightning bolt flashed. The thunder and lightning didn’t last long. The snow did. Four feet deep before it ended three days later.

A team using Unimogs and A300s with snow blowers attached cleared the immediate area around the Homestead and a path to the cache, so some work could continue inside the three-quarter empty space.

And the work continued, better than Henry or Sam thought possible. Those that were going south with them in the spring were now quite convinced it was the right thing to do. The Homestead even picked up a few recruits that winter, due to the harshness of the weather.

There were some fears that the weather wouldn’t moderate that spring, but it did, only slightly later than usual. With the equipment they were running it was a relatively easy task to clear up the areas where they needed to finish off the work in preparation to the pioneer team leaving to make sure those following would have a road to follow when they headed south.

Sam thought long and hard on whether or not she should go on this first trip or stay behind to see things through on the Homestead end. Finally, the others talked her into going. Hank Mueller would be in charge of the operation while she was gone.

With snow still on the ground, Henry led the pioneer convoy away from the Homestead. He was driving the Suburban, with Sam as passenger. The other rigs fell into line. The initial day went fine, with only a few shake down adjustments being needed when they stopped that evening to set up camp.

The same could not be said for the following days. The route Henry had scouted out was better than the alternatives, but after eighty years of neglect the highway and bridge system was in serious disrepair. But with the equipment they had, making the road passable was relatively easy.

Not so the stream and river crossings. Some bridges were intact and useable after a careful inspection. Others looked all right but upon the inspection the decision was made to avoid them and make another crossing. And some bridges were destroyed, with only remnants in view.

Henry's route avoided much of the worst of the blockages, but with several truckloads of the long logs brought along for the purpose, temporary bridges were erected over narrow streams, some as low water bridges where they were laid down on the bottom of the stream for traction. Others were full bridges, but there was a strict limit that Henry and Sam enforced. They weren't bridge builders and limited themselves to simple spans supported from beneath.

It was a grueling task, even with the equipment. Progress was slow, but steady. Everyone on the pioneer team was glad when they reached the final destination. The fuel they'd brought with them was almost gone. With the last bit of the journey on a decent road, Henry and Sam went ahead in the Suburban. When Henry stopped the rig and got out, he was nervous as a long tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs.

But he relaxed moments later when Sam turned to him and said, "You did good, Henry. Might not be perfect, but it sure looks like it to me. Thank you." Before she knew it, she was giving Henry a happy hug, which he readily returned. He finally made himself release her.

He stepped back and said, “Over here is where I thought the orchards and vineyard would be. The housing units over there. Barns further back. There are open areas in the woods still that can be tilled and planted while we are in the process of clearing more land in a bit closer.”

Sam watched and nodded as he pointed out the features of the property. When he pointed out the location he planned for the boat house, Sam asked, “What about our lake neighbors?”

“Five groups, all seem fairly stable, except for one, but I doubt they’ll be a problem for us once we’re settled.”

“Okay. Good. Here come the rest!” Sam waved at the truck in the lead.

Henry motioned to the spot he wanted it to stop, the others all stopping in turn. Henry and Sam had to stare as more trucks than they’d started with showed up a few minutes later. “Boy, timed that right,” Henry said. The first of the follow up convoys had left a month after the pioneer column. They had managed to keep up a much faster pace and caught up with the others just minutes after Henry and Sam had gone ahead.

The next week was hectic. There were projects going on all over the place. The youngest orchard trees that were already of bearing age had been moved from the orchards with one of the Unimogs with a tree spade and loaded into a semi rear dump trailer. That Unimog was kept busy moving the trees from where the dump truck spotted them to the designated orchard.

The portable lumber mill that had been in the fifth key cache was set up and a team began turning the rest of the logs left after bridge building into timbers. Another team began using one of the Bobcat A300 to cut down and skid the logs from the trees that needed to be cleared from the immediate area. They, too, went into the lumber mill.

At Henry's urging, and based on the few sightings they'd had of predators roaming almost the entire route, a trench was dug and logs emplaced vertically to form a tall palisade. All the housing would be inside the palisade, at least for the foreseeable future. The barns would be inside another walled enclosure. Having seen as many of the predators that they had, meant there were many more out there. There were native species as well as many descendants of zoo and preserve animals released during the war.

It went double or triple for the prey of the predators. The pioneer team had begun to see huge numbers of all sorts of herd animals once they were well south of the old Homestead. American bison grazed alongside water buffalo. Pronghorn antelope shared the open spaces with gazelles. Even without the cattle and swine that would be brought down later, there was plenty of meat to be had by hunting.

Another convoy showed up two weeks later and things really began to happen. When the rigs that were going to be taken back for more loads were unloaded, a long convoy headed back to the old Homestead. Again Sam wavered about going or staying. Not a small part of her decision was based on the fact that Henry was going back. But Sam decided her place was at the new Homestead, seeing that things were accomplished.

While the chickens and swine were trucked down, the herd of cattle at the old Homestead was moved in an old style cattle drive. A pasture area was fenced and the cattle turned into it for time being until a barn was built and permanent pasture areas delineated. A constant guard had to be kept on all the animals due to the roving predators.

The next convoy to arrive included every working semi truck with a trailer. The attempt to double up the trailers on some of the trucks had not been successful. The marginal bridges simply couldn't support the loads. No one was hurt, and they didn't lose any loads, but it was a near thing until the second trailers were dropped.

When it was down to the last trip back to the old Homestead, Sam rode along. She wanted to be there when it was closed down. A heavy snow was falling when they pulled in, the first of the coming winter. Protected spots still had snow from the previous year. The permanent snow line was definitely moving southward.

Because of it, three additional families decided to go with the Homestead people. Apparently it sent Randy Stanton into a screaming rage. All three families were highly productive residents of the Town and would be sorely missed by those remaining.

Hank Mueller and the rest of Henry's family were travelling with them on the final trip. As his ancestors had brought to the original homestead, including the steam fired electrical generators, acetylene generator, oxygen accumulators, other equipment, and all the remaining coal from the first move, was moved again. The amount of coal was almost half of the original. Again, every semi in the fleet was in use.

Henry waited at the Suburban while Sam took a last long tour of the Homestead main house, shedding more than a few tears. Despite everything, she'd had a good life growing up here.

But, with a last tear wiped away, Sam joined Henry at the Suburban. After she buckled in and looked up she was tempted to get back out, gun in hand. Randy, with a group of at least fifteen people, was standing at the edge of the compound.

She sighed and swallowed, and said, "I'm ready. Let's get out of here before I lose my temper."

Henry nodded and put the Suburban in gear. He checked the rearview mirror several times. With most of the convoy rolling, he saw Randy and the group storm into the house and out buildings. He didn't mention it to Sam.

Many resources had gone into preparing the road for the convoys. Sam decided to delay at each point some of those resources could be recovered, primarily the logs. They would all be needed for the construction at the new place.

The snow followed them south as they travelled. But it was only a very light dusting coming down when they reached the new Homestead. Sam was amazed at how much had been accomplished.

“You think we’ll be all right here?” Sam asked Henry.

“I think so. Can’t promise anything for the future, but I believe in my heart that the snow pack will stop well north of us.” There was a long pause, and then Henry asked, “How do you feel about children?”

Sam looked at Henry with a suddenly shy smile. “I’d like to have two or three. How about you?”

“If they are ours, I’d say that would be great. Should I ask Jackson if I can ask you to marry me?”

“Can if you want. But it doesn’t matter. I think I already had plans on asking you if you didn’t ask me pretty soon.” The two leaned over the center console and shared a kiss.

“Yep,” Henry said after the kiss. “This is going to be a fine place to bring up kids. I intend to see to that.”

Sam was smiling broadly when she got out of the Suburban and surveyed the new Homestead. She clutched the Fifth Key, still on the keeper around her neck, and said a little prayer to bless the new Kingdom that would arise because of it.

End *****

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