

When A Plan Comes Together – Prolog

Kathy looked at Jay a bit forlornly. “Do you have to go on this trip?” she asked.

“You know I do, Kath,” replied her husband. “I don’t like it either, but it is part of the job I was hired to do. And it means a nice bonus.”

With a sigh, Kathy nodded. They’d talked it over before Jay took the job and she had agreed with him that it could lead to more opportunities.

“Look, I’ve got a couple of hours... You sure you won’t go over the emergency plan with me?”

“Oh, Jay! You know how I feel about your survivalism activities.”

“Preps, Honey. Preps. Please don’t refer to them as survivalists’ activities.”

“Whatever.” It was a conversation stopper. “Call me every night. I love you.”

It was Jay’s turn to sigh. “I love you, too. Give the kids a hug and a kiss for me when they get home.”

“You know I will. There’s the cab.” Kathy gave Jay a hard hug and then stepped back and watched Jay walk to the street to get into the cab.

She watched until the cab was out of sight before she turned around and went back inside the modest home she and Jay had lived in since they had married. There had been some improvements made as the children, Rex, now fourteen, and Roxie, sixteen, came along.

It hadn’t been an easy life, but they had done all right for themselves, Kathy thought. When she went to make up the bed in the master bedroom she saw one of the five binders that Jay kept his ‘prep’ information in sitting on his bedside table. She frowned. He’d been reading it the night before, trying to get her interested in some of the plans, since he was leaving for a month.

She had never begrudged Jay his hobby, as she thought of it, since he was more than supportive of hers. Where the ‘preps’ were pretty much his only hobby, Kathy had several things she did. Her membership in the gym where she worked out three times a week. Her collection of Elvis memorabilia, the baby and doll clothes she made, and mostly just gave away. And he never said a word when she bought a new pair of shoes.

They had a good life together with the children. Why did Jay keep bringing up things that could go wrong? “We’ve managed quite nicely the things that have come up,” she said. It simply didn’t occur to her that the reason they’d come through the things that had happened so smoothly was because of Jay’s preps.

Kathy put the binder back in the bookshelf along one wall of the bedroom and finished her housework. Just in time to greet Rex and Roxie when they came home from separate sleep overs.

After hugs all around, both children asked about lunch. Kathy smiled and started the water boiling to make hot dogs with mac and cheese on the side.

“I guess Dad got off okay this morning,” Rex said.

“He did,” Kathy replied.

“He’s never been gone this long before,” Roxie said. “What if something happens while he’s gone? Like when Rex broke the toilet.”

Kathy managed not to frown. “Oh, I think we’ll manage just fine. I can call the plumber just as easily as your father.”

“Don’t worry, Roxie,” Rex said. “I don’t climb up on things like that any more. Besides, Dad showed me how to turn off the water.”

Kathy was tempted to pursue the matter. Tell the pair that she could manage just as well as their father could. But she let it go, hiding her annoyance as they ate.

The first stirrings of doubt hit her about her capabilities that evening when the news showed the bank the family used. It was in trouble. She wondered, but only for a moment, about making the car payment that was due in three days.

But suddenly she breathed a sigh of relief, as she remembered Jay’s insistence on keeping accounts open in two different banks, owned by different parent corporations. She’d have to find the other checkbook, but she knew it was in the house.

Kathy couldn’t wait. She looked the first place she thought of. The fire box they kept in the bottom drawer of the file cabinet in Jay’s study. Sure enough, there it was. With a packet of cash, hers and the children’s passports, the insurance and ownership papers for the house.

Taking the checkbook out, she took it with her back to the living room and put it in her purse in the entry closet.

“Mom!” called Roxie. “Mom! You need to see this!”

Kathy strode back to the sofa and sat down. There was a commercial on. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“They were talking about North and South Korea maybe starting a war,” Roxie said softly. “How we... the US... might get involved in another war. Maybe nuclear.”

Kathy reassured both children, and then watched the news with them when it came back on. It wasn't long and Kathy was just as worried as Roxie. Kathy's brother had missed the Mid-East wars. But if something happened in Korea, he'd be right in the middle of it.

All three were more than a little uneasy when they went to bed that night. Kathy's last memory was of looking at Jay's Prep Binders in the bookcase, just before she fell asleep.

Jay called the next night, but he and Kathy were only able to exchange quick hellos and statements that everything was fine before the line went dead. Jay had said that there might be problems with the telephones.

Kathy quickly turned on the computer in the study. She sent a short e-mail message to Jay's account and hoped he could and would check it soon.

She felt uneasy the entire week, doing her best to hide it from the children. Even a trip to the gym, dusting her Elvis collection off, and making a full set of Barbie® clothes didn't calm her.

Fortunately, both children were staying occupied with school and after school activities, and weren't showing any stress over the growing situation in Korea.

Dealing with the bank and the FDIC weren't helping Kathy's stress level. It was going to be some time before they could get the money out of the bank that had failed. And it would come in installments, rather than all at once, when it did come.

To top it off that week, she was laid off on Friday. It was sudden. There had been no warning signs. And though she had been with the company the longest of any of the employees, she was one of the ones that got the axe. The company was 'downsizing' and keeping only the lowest paid employees in each section of the company.

She managed to tell the children about it without breaking down and crying, but it was a near thing. Kathy put her last paycheck, and the small severance pay she received, in their second bank, which was now the primary one. The 401(k) payout would come soon, minus the penalty, if she didn't find another job and roll it over into that company's plan.

It had been a long time since Kathy had needed to look for a job. She thought about it for a week, and then signed up with a temp service to try to get at least some work while she looked for a permanent job.

After eight days without hearing from Jay, she finally got word from him. A total stranger called and said she had a message for Kathy from a Jay Jones, via amateur radio.

"Is he all right?" Kathy suddenly asked, imagining all sorts of dire happenings, in light of the world situation, especially the North Korea, South Korea one.

“He is okay, he said,” replied the woman, who said her name was Ruth. “He asked me to tell you his stay has been extended indefinitely, and that he would keep trying to get into touch with you through regular channels. I can give you my number if you want me to contact him.”

Kathy wrote the telephone number down with a shaky hand. “Thank you, Ruth. You’ve been very kind.”

“Part of being a ham,” said Ruth. “We help whenever we can.”

Hanging up the telephone slowly, it came to Kathy that not only was her brother at risk because of the Koreans, Jay probably was, too. His job with the oil company had him in Japan. If something happened over there, Japan would undoubtedly be involved.

It was still on her mind when she went to bed that evening. She’d told Rex and Roxie about their father’s lengthened stay and both mentioned the dangers he might face if the Koreans went to war. Kathy tried to make light of the dangers, but was hard pressed to do so. The children had thought up even more possibilities than she had herself.

Still without work, Kathy spent the next week busying herself with house work, time at the gym, and making doll clothes. She was going to get some additional supplies, but realized that there wasn’t enough money in the second account to get much. She thought of the emergency cash in the fire box, but immediately wiped the thought of using it for her hobby out of her brain. Her needing something to keep her hands busy wasn’t an emergency of any sort.

Kathy still didn’t get the doll clothes making supplies when Jay’s pay was deposited two days later. Though they had only the regular car payment, utilities, and food bills each month, and Jay’s salary covered them with some left over, there wasn’t much left over. Kathy’s earnings had been their main discretionary funds. Jay’s regular bonuses had financed his preps.

They certainly weren’t going to starve, but the little luxuries were now out of the question. Reluctantly, Kathy cancelled her membership in the gym. When Jay got back, and had that promised bonus, she’d join again. But for the moment that money was a cushion she didn’t want to do without.

Jay finally got through on the telephone, but it was another very short call. “How you holding up, Kath?” he asked after they exchanged hellos.

“I’m okay.” She started to tell Jay about everything that had happened, but decided to not worry him with the information. They talked mostly about how the kids were doing in school and sports. By the time Kathy decided Jay deserved to know the true situation they lost the connection.

Kathy found out why that evening when it was reported on the news that several satellites had been damaged by a burst of solar radiation. It startled her when Rex, sounding much like his father sometimes did, said, “I think they’re covering up something. A burst of radiation would have done more than just what they said. I think the Chinese destroyed specific satellites to cut communications within that specific area.”

To her amazement, Roxie added, "Dr. Thompson, at school, says the Korea thing is just cover for a move by the Chinese to start a campaign to take over Indonesia and Australia."

"Surely not," Kathy said. "Why would he say that?"

"He's like Dad," Roxie replied. "Keeps track of a lot of details from sources other than the regular news networks."

Kathy frowned. "You two seemed so sure of this."

"You just have to read between the lines, like Dad said," Rex replied. Seeing his mother's distress at his words, he hurriedly added, "But I don't think we have to worry for a while. Dad will know what to do when he gets back. I don't think anything will happen before he does. It's only a second month, you said."

"Yes. That's right. I don't want you children worrying about war. I may contact the PTA and say something about instructors scaring the students."

"Don't, Mom," Roxie said. "Some of the other parents don't like him, either, but he's a good teacher. I really like him. Always makes us think about things in history. Including what he calls 'Future History'."

"Yeah, Mom," Rex added. "He's a good basketball coach, too. If nothing happens, we might even go to State this year."

Kathy shook her head. "I don't know. I don't like this war talk."

Rex and Roxie both knew their mother well. The discussion was over. Best to bring up something more pleasant. Rex asked Roxie how her project in science was going, and that did the trick. Everyone was smiling at the end of dinner.

They weren't when they watched the news afterward. Kathy looked at her children with new respect. Even the regular news was speculating about the role China might have had in the disruption of communications in the western Pacific area of the world.

During the next few days, for want of something better to do, Kathy threw herself into house cleaning. She kept a beautiful house, anyway. Jay, Rex, and Roxie all did their part, mainly by keeping their specific areas of responsibility tidied up and helping with the heavy cleaning. But there was always something that needed a little extra touch.

Kathy did a spring cleaning version of cleaning, carefully moving furniture herself. It took her a week of hard work. Rex and Roxie both offered to help her if she waited until they got home from school, but Kathy was determined to do it on her own. Working alone, she did almost everything the family did in spring cleaning in a week. With all of them working over a long weekend, it usually took just three days. But that included the basement, attic, and garage, things

that Jay and Rex took care of, along with moving the furniture, while she and Roxie did the other cleaning.

Still at a loss of what to do with herself, without a job and doing her exercises at home rather than at home, she decided to go ahead and do the attic, basement, and garage.

She started in the attic. She hadn't been up there in a long time. Jay and Rex usually handled anything like taking out and putting away the various holiday decorations stored in the attic. The first thing she saw was a neat stack of toilet paper. Kathy didn't count them, but there were many of the sixteen-count packages. She looked around. There was a smaller stack of paper towels, also in large packages.

Frowning slightly, she dusted what little dust had accumulated, taking note of several other boxes and packages that weren't part of what she knew was stored up here. She took a break when she went down to the living space and closed the access hatch to the attic. Sipping a cup of hot tea, she wondered when Jay had picked up all the things in the attic. With no way of knowing until he got back, Kathy went back to work, leaving half her cup of tea behind.

She went out to the garage, carrying her bucket of cleaning materials. She half expected to see what she did when she started checking the deeper shelves as she cleaned them. More of Jay's preps. Where the things in the attic could take heat or cold, the things in the garage, Kathy realized, could take the spread of temperatures the garage went through during the year. It was fully insulated. They never let it freeze, and it was well ventilated to keep the temperature no higher than eighty in the summer.

She couldn't understand why discovering the things Jay had been buying with his hobby money bothered her so much. The garage, neat and tidy when she started, was just as neat and tidy when she finished up, minus what little dust had blown in taking the cars in and out.

Kathy started to go downstairs to the basement, but was pretty sure she would be more upset when she did, so she decided to check the greenhouse and yard shed. Though she and Jay had done a small garden when the children were small, they'd both drifted away from it when their work became more demanding. They began using the greenhouse for storage.

Actually, Jay had, insisting that Kathy's things took precedence for indoor storage. The door was locked and she had to go into the kitchen and get the key for it and the shed, suspecting that it was probably locked, too.

Sure enough, after she looked at the boxes, bins, and totes, she went to the yard shed. It was indeed locked. The first thing she noticed was that, though everything was neatly put away, almost every square inch of space was taken up, just like in the green house, with the yard tools only accounting for a fourth of it, if that.

The shed and greenhouse both had power to them for convenience. Though, really, the power in the shed was more than just convenience. Though they didn't use it any more, the pump on the well for irrigating the garden and greenhouse was electric. Jay hadn't wanted it to freeze in the winter. He didn't want the things like touch-up paint and other things freeze, either, so the

shed had a small HVAC unit to keep it temperature controlled, to about the same degree as the garage. Just above freezing to just under eighty degrees in the summer.

She didn't bother cleaning in the shed. Jay was in it often and it was spic and span. She headed back for the house after locking the doors to the shed and then the greenhouse. She'd start on the basement after a bite of lunch. As she passed one of Jay's projects, she didn't even pay attention. The old truck he worked on from time to time was up on blocks and covered with a canvas cover he'd had an awning maker sew up for him. Even the tires were covered with protective covers.

Kathy hesitated after cleaning the small family room, spare bedroom, and bath. All were in the finished portion of the basement and part of her responsibility. The unfinished section was Jay's to do with as he wished.

She opened the door and went into the second section of the basement. She tried to remember when she'd last been in this section. It was before Jay had finished it. Not quite to the expert level her part of the basement was, but very nice. It was a bit hard to see some of the finish work, as there were boxes stacked chest high along the wall in heavy duty shelving.

There were more shelves suspended from the full height basement ceiling, creating a floor to ceiling shelving system. He'd told her he was putting in shelving, in case she needed the room, but she had all she needed in the big closets every room had, plus the one dedicated storeroom Jay had insisted the house had when they approved the plans, a few weeks before their marriage.

She'd been finishing up her schooling at the time the house was built and had only been there a few times to look things over. Jay had handled most of the construction, with her input, and she'd decorated it, buying quality items as time passed and both began to make better salaries.

Kathy noticed one of the shelving units was lightly loaded, where all the others were fully loaded, but didn't think too much about it. She went upstairs thoughtfully. She knew in her heart that Jay had never lied to her or misled her about his preps. She'd simply shown no interest in them in all the years they'd been married. She was disappointed in herself. Even if she hadn't been an enthusiastic participant, she should have given Jay more support in his activities.

Her thoughts turned to the children. They both spent time with their father when Kathy was at work and doing her hobbies. When she would ask about what they'd done when she got back, she got the normal answers for children their ages. "Aw, nothing. Just hanging around with Dad."

Both pretty much gave Jay the same answer when they spent time with her when Jay was occupied. She and Jay had even laughed about it a couple of times. They didn't get away with those answers when they were asked about hanging out with friends at and after school. They both made a point to know what their children were doing, and with whom. But neither gave a second thought to question about what they did when they were with the other parent. Especially Kathy.

After warming up her tea, Kathy went into the living room and turned on the television to check the weather. Rex had football practice and Roxie was staying at school to help set up for school sponsored activity. She'd go get them if the weather looked bad.

She never really checked the weather. Instead, she got involved in watching one program after another about many of the things the world was going through now. And had gone through in the past. Kathy suddenly wondered what the kid's Dr. Thompson would say was likely to become 'Future History.'

Roxie and Rex showed up at the same time and startled Kathy. She was engrossed in another program that was just finishing up.

"Hi, Mom," Rex said, setting his backpack out of the way. "What's for supper?"

"I'm starving," Roxie said, dropping her pack on top of Rex's. "Something good, I hope."

"Aw! Mom's stuff is always good," Rex said.

"Suck up," replied Roxie good naturedly.

"I didn't realize it was this late!" Kathy said, lifting her arm to look at her watch.

"What were you watching?" Roxie asked. "I know you don't watch the soap operas."

"No. It was... The Learning Channel and the History Channel. Let me check and see what I can whip up in a hurry."

"How about we go out for pizza?" Rex asked. Then he looked a bit chagrined. "Oh. Never mind, Mom. I forgot for a minute you're not working. Cereal is okay for me."

"Me, too, Mom," Roxie quickly added.

Kathy almost cried. When she could speak, she said, firmly, "We can still afford a pizza from time to time. Let me get my purse and jacket."

Rather than eating the pizza at the restaurant, as they usually did, Rex asked if they could take it home. He wanted to watch the news. He was doing an extra credit report, he told his mother, about China. "I want to see what's happened today."

To Kathy's surprise, Roxie said almost the same thing. "I want some more ammunition for tomorrow, too. Some of the other kids are giving Dr. Thompson a hard time over his views. I'm only one of three people that agree with him."

Halfway through one of the special reports on a news channel, Rex said. "I wish Dad was coming back sooner."

"Yeah. Me, too," whispered Roxie.

Kathy, already having seen some of the reports, was sort of wishing the same thing. She couldn't quite see it the way the children, and apparently Dr. Thompson did. Things were tense, but she just couldn't picture a war breaking out. Certainly not soon. Surely not.

Rex and Roxie went to their rooms to do their homework after watching the early news. Kathy stayed where she was and found another program going over the world situation. She watched late into the night, long after the children had gone to bed. When she went to bed herself, she felt shivers go up and down her back when her eyes went to Jay's prep manuals.

When A Plan Comes Together

Kathy had the news on while she was preparing breakfast three days later. Her hand stilled, the pancake batter forgotten as the kitchen TV screen showing a commercial cut back to the newsroom before the commercial was over. The ashen looking news anchor's hand were shaking the piece of paper he held in one hand. Kathy could hear the crackle of the paper he was shaking so hard.

Rex and Roxie came into the kitchen and saw Kathy motionless, staring at the TV.

"Mom?" asked Rex.

"Something is wrong, children. Come here."

Both moved around to stand beside her as she put down the bowl and wooden spoon. She put an arm around each of them and the three watched the news anchor finally start reading the statement.

"This just came in from the White House. 'Communist China has declared war on Australia and warned the United States and the United Nations to not interfere in any way. They will retaliate with nuclear HEMP... that is high altitude electromagnetic pulse... weapons if any attempt is made to interfere with the invasion. They will be detonated high up over the United States shortly after any indication that the US intends to aid Australia.'"

The anchor looked up, still ashen faced, and then looked back down at the paper. "The statement continues: 'All American's should...'" The screen went blank.

"Uh-oh," Rex said. "They really did it."

"Did what, Rex?" Kathy was trying the on off switch on the TV. The picture tube stayed blank.

"A HEMP attack. Electromagnetic devices that blows out electrical and electronic stuff. I'm surprised the power is still on."

"You jinxed us," Roxie said as the overhead light in the kitchen flared brightly and then the light faded away to darkness.

Rex reached for the light switch panel and flipped the switch for the overhead light a couple of times. Nothing. "I don't think we should activate the PV system until danger of more EMP is over. At least less."

"The PV system?" Kathy asked.

"Photo voltaic panels? That you and Dad had put on the roof when you re-shingled a couple years ago. Dad said we'd only use it if things got bad. He wanted to save the battery life for something important."

“Yes... Of course,” Kathy said. She was trying to remember but her mind was an utter blank.

Suddenly there were tears in her eyes. “Children? Do you know what to do? I’m sorry! I don’t know what to do!”

“Dad said he wrote a manual for if he wasn’t home. But I don’t know where it is,” Rex said. “I don’t think we need to shelter if it’s just the high altitude stuff.”

“I don’t know where it is, either. It’s got plans for all sorts of disasters,” Roxie said. Roxie was still holding one of her mother’s hands when she spoke.

“The bedroom!” Kathy almost shouted. She pulled her hand from Roxie’s and ran toward the master bedroom. The children followed.

“That’s them!” Rex yelled when he saw Kathy reaching for the large blue binders he’d once shown the children, several years previously.

Kathy had one open and was turning page after page. Rex and Roxie each grabbed one of the binders and began to do the same thing. None of the three stopped to look for the Table of Contents each of the binders contained.

But Roxie stumbled onto the instructions for EMP in the fourth binder after having gone through the third.

“Here! Here it is! EMP!” She handed the binder to Kathy.

Kathy was reading quickly, her eyes darting back and forth across the pages. “It says to take shelter in case there is a nuclear attack with the EMP attack.” Kathy’s face was as ashen as the newscaster’s had been. Where in the world could they shelter from a nuclear war? Jay had said the basement wasn’t adequate if they hit the base thirty miles upwind of the house.

“I think we’re okay,” Rex said. “But let’s take the books down to the basement shelter and figure out what to do.”

Kathy looked at Rex with incredulous eyes. He was hugging two of the binders to his chest. Roxie was doing the same. “Your father said the basement wasn’t good enough shelter!”

“The shelter, Mom! Don’t you know about the fallout shelter?” Roxie asked.

All Kathy could do was shake her head and follow the children. Rex was taking the time to check all the doors, making sure they were locked. Roxie led the way down to the basement, and then into Jay’s section.

She went directly to the shelving unit Kathy had noticed before. The one that was lightly loaded. Kathy watched, in somewhat of a daze, as Roxie set the binders she was carrying on one

of the shelves, and then did something to one of the rear uprights and swung the unit away from the wall. It exposed a vault style door.

Rex handed Roxie the binders he was carrying, worked the combination lock and then spun the locking wheel. He leaned against the door and it slowly opened inward. When it was open, Roxie handed back two of the binders, picked up her two, and followed Rex inside.

Kathy followed, awe struck. Rex had already put down the binders he carried and was closing the heavy door. He spun the locking wheel on the inside of the door and then turned around to face his sister and mother.

Kathy's mouth was hanging open. "When did... How did... You knew about this?" she finally asked.

"Didn't you, Mom?" Roxie asked. "Rex and I just assumed you knew about it and didn't say anything the way Dad taught us to keep quiet about our preps."

"You didn't know, did you?" Rex asked. "So you probably don't know the combination to get in. It's your birthday month, Roxie's birthday day, and my birth year. Right, Left, Right."

Kathy could only nod. She was staring around, taking in the features of the fallout shelter. She'd helped design the house but had not been there during much of the construction. Obviously Jay had made a few additions he hadn't mentioned.

"Mom," Rex said, touching her shoulder, "We need to check out what to do about the EMP. The binder you have..."

"Oh. Yes. Of course. The binders." Kathy handed it to Rex and he opened it to the page number Roxie told him. Roxie read over Rex's shoulder as he quickly read Jay's basic plan to deal with EMP.

"Okay," Rex said after what seemed an interminable time to Kathy, "We need to check the electrical panel. It says here there is an EMP protection device on the power line coming into the house. It should have protected the house wiring against the EMP, since all the wiring is in grounded metal conduit."

"I remember something about that," Kathy said suddenly, her eyes finally focusing on Rex. "It was more expensive to use metal conduit instead of plastic, where it was required. Jay insisted on all the wiring be in metal conduit, even if it didn't have to be in plastic."

"I'll go check..." Rex was saying, but Kathy cut him off.

"No. Let me read a little more. Wait a bit to see if anything else goes wrong," Kathy said. She went over to the small table in the kitchen area of the shelter and sat down. With the binder on the table in front of her, she began to read, asking for the other binders when she ran into a cross reference to another section of the manual.

While their mother was far from being a moody person, there were times when the children knew not to bother her. This was one of them. "Let's check the shelter systems," Rex whispered to his sister.

She nodded and the two began to check the various systems their father had shown them over the last couple of years. "The outside radiation meter isn't showing anything, but we should probably put on dosimeters," Rex told Roxie.

Again Roxie nodded and opened a drawer in what, if Kathy had been looking, would have identified as the communications desk. Both children knew how to zero the dosimeters and did so. Roxie zeroed a third dosimeter for Kathy, though she just set it aside for later. Rex and Roxie clipped theirs to their clothing the way Jay had taught them.

It took only a few more moments to check and see that everything in the shelter was as it should be. They talked quietly after finishing the short tour, waiting for Kathy to look up from the binders.

"You think Dad is okay?" Rex asked Roxie.

Roxie had a worried look on her face that she was trying to hide. But her fourteen year old brother knew her like a book.

"I hope so. I think he probably is. You know, if anyone can cope with this, he can."

"But he's so far away. What if he can't get back?"

Roxie sighed. "I don't know, Rex. But he taught us some stuff, and we have the binders. And Mom."

"I'm kind of worried about her, too," Rex told his sister.

"Yeah." Roxie spoke softly as she looked at her mother's furrowed brow. "I can't believe she didn't know about the shelter. I knew she didn't help Dad with much of the stuff, but I thought she knew about it."

Before Rex could reply to Roxie's words, Kathy spoke and the two looked over at her. "Children. We have several things we should be doing. I don't know how much you know. We'll follow the plan your father has left us, plus what you know. I'm sorry. I don't know anything about how to handle this situation. I'll need your help."

"That's okay, Mom," Roxie said quickly. "Dad taught us a lot, and with the instructions in the Preparedness Manual, we'll be all right."

"Yeah, Mom," Rex said. "So far, if it's just EMP, even HEMP, we're okay."

"I hope so," Kathy said, and then more softly, "I really hope so."

“You want me to check the electrical supply panel?” Rex asked, taking a step toward the shelter entrance.

“I need to know, too. I’ll go with you,” Kathy replied. She looked over at Roxie.

“I’m a big girl, Mom,” Roxie assured Kathy. She wasn’t going to be left out of the operation. The thought crossed her mind that she should be able to get a really good paper out of what was happening for school. “I should go with you. And here. Clip this dosimeter to your blouse. Just in case.

Kathy hesitated. She wished she knew what to do the way the children did. Perhaps she did need both of them to help her. “Okay. But you both come right back down here if something else happens.”

Between what Rex and Roxie already knew, and Kathy had gleaned from her hasty reading of a few sections of Jay’s manual, the trio began checking several things in and around the house.

First they took a quick look in every room of the house, and then the outside, looking for fires that the EMP might have started. There were none. They tried the telephone and TV. Both dead. Next was the electrical panel in the garage. Everything looked okay, including the EMP protective device fastened to the panel. Rex gingerly threw the main breaker from on to off, separating the house from the power grid.

“Won’t know if it fried any of the stuff in the house until we try the PV system. There weren’t any fires or electronics that popped so we might be okay. Keep your fingers crossed.” Rex stepped to the end of one of the large shelving units along one outside wall of the garage.

“Can I see the binder, Mom?” Rex asked, after opening another electrical cabinet and taking a look inside. “The one with the stuff about the off-grid power system.”

Roxie had it and opened it up to the right page for Rex and held it up for him to read as he looked from binder to the interior of the electrical box. “The meters show okay. I’m going to put battery power to the house circuit through the transfer switch.”

Kathy watched as Rex flipped two heavy switches. Nothing happened. “We need to check a couple of the emergency circuits to see if they have power,” Roxie said, handing the binder to Kathy. “I’ll check the kitchen.”

She was back in only moments, a smile on her face. “We have juice!” she said.

“Your father, in the manual,” Kathy said, reading for a moment, “says we should black out the house if we use internal power and the neighbors are out of power so they don’t know.” She looked up from manual and asked, a puzzled look on her face. “Why should we do that?”

“Mom,” Rex said, “People might not like us having power when they don’t.”

“He’s right, Mom,” Roxie added. “Dad talked to me and Rex about keeping our preps a secret. People do strange things when they’re under extreme stress. We’ll have to feel out the neighbors before we let them know we’re not in quite the same situation as they are.”

Kathy frowned. It just didn’t sit well with her, but she decided to go along. “Turn it back off, Rex.”

Rex did so. “What now, Mom?” he asked. “Turn off the water, too, in case the public water systems shuts down?”

Kathy flipped through the book. “Yes. All the utilities. Until we find out how bad things are.”

“I’ll shut off the propane tank,” Roxie said and ran out of the garage.

“I’ve got the water,” Rex said. He went to one corner of the garage and got out a T-handle tool and went toward the street.

She didn’t see the need, but Kathy read in the manual that the cablevision and telephone lines should be disconnected and she went outside to where they entered the house. Roxie came over as Kathy was studying the two connection boxes, a couple of feet from one another.

“It’s easy, Mom,” Roxie said. “Just unscrew that cable connection. I’ll unplug the phone lines.”

“Won’t we need the telephone?” Kathy asked. She undid the cablevision line and closed the door of the box.

“It’s dead, anyway,” Roxie said. “Remember? And if there’s another pulse, we don’t want to risk anything carrying it into the house with the PV system running.”

Kathy could only nod. It made perfect sense.

“Water’s off,” Rex said when he joined them.

They went back into the garage and checked the binder. “There is a cut off for the sewer line,” Kathy said. “But it says not to shut it off unless the sewer starts to back up. But if it does, turn it off quick. If we shut it off, we’ll be using chemical toilets, it says.”

“I know where it is,” Rex said. “It’s easy. Just move the big fake rock in the front of the house by the porch. There’s a T-handle in a piece of pipe. You just push it down to close the line. Dad said this section of the city has all gravity sewer lines and should work for a few days. Longer if the water is off and people can’t flush.”

“Won’t we have to use the chemical toilets anyway?” Kathy asked, “With the water off the flush toilets won’t work.”

“The PV system feeds the well pump in the yard shed,” Rex replied. “I turned valves on to feed water to the house from the pump and tank. It’s going to taste a little funny, but Dad said he had it tested and it’s okay.”

“I see.” There were so many things that Jay talked to the children about, that she’d shown no interest in learning, she realized, thinking back on his occasional attempt to get her involved.

“I think we should try to find out what’s going on,” Roxie said.

“How?” asked Kathy, at a loss. No TV, no telephone... She tried her cell. No cell phone. How were they going to find out anything?

Seeing the look on his mother’s face Rex spoke up. “We can try the regular radio, and then the NOAA radio, and if we still aren’t getting anything, we can try the shortwave radio.”

“We have one of those?” Kathy asked. “A shortwave radio?”

Roxie and Rex both nodded. “I’ll go get one of the crank ups out of the basement,” Rex said. “Reception will be better out here than inside.”

Kathy took a moment to look around the neighborhood. At first it looked like an ordinary day. There was Dave Monroe, mowing the large expanse of yard on his corner lot. He saw Kathy and waved.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” she whispered to Roxie.

“I don’t think so. But look down here...” Roxie turned her mother to look down the street the other way. Two families were hurriedly loading up vehicles, children still in pajamas standing around, crying. Both families were new to the street and Kathy didn’t know either of them.

Dave Monroe suddenly noticed the differences in activity for a Friday morning. There hadn’t been a car pass since just after he’d started mowing. He saw the two families packing their cars. Then, like Roxie and Kathy, noticed old man Humphrey standing outside in his bathrobe, looking at the sky with binoculars. Dave shut off the lawn mower and walked over to join Kathy and Roxie. Rex joined them just as Dave did.

“What’s going on?” Dave asked.

Rex gave him a quick look, but decided he’d better not say what he was thinking. Fortunately Kathy spoke up. “There’s been some sort of attack, we think. Something called EMP.”

“Like the nuclear EMP?” Dave asked.

Kathy let Roxie answer. “Yes, sir, Mr. Monroe.”

“I don’t see any mushroom cloud,” he replied, looking around again. “Or hear anything. And my lawn mower was running. Doesn’t EMP shut down engines?”

“Some,” Rex said as he wound up the radio and light combination. “Not everything. Too many factors to know before hand. Something will either work or it won’t.”

“You won’t get anything on that radio, then,” Dave said. “I’ve read about EMP. Zaps all radios.”

“Not necessarily,” Rex replied. He turned on the radio and began turning the dial. “Radios not hooked to the electrical system and with short antennas aren’t affected too bad. YES!”

His last bold statement came when he found a radio station on the air. Rex held the radio up so all could hear. Mr. Humphrey was walking toward them. Rex happened to look down the street and felt a shiver go down his back. The two families packing up their cars had a couple guys standing around with shotguns.

He kept his eye on that group as he listened to the radio with the others. All they found out was the confirmation of a nationwide loss of power, due to high altitude electromagnetic pulse devices detonated several places in the upper atmosphere over the US.

Rex was as sure as he could be that the people loading the cars hadn’t tried to start them before loading up. He saw men get out from behind the wheel of each car and open the hood of their vehicle. There was some yelling, and then one of the shotgun wielding men headed toward Rex and the small group listening to the radio.

“Trouble,” he whispered to his mother, and nodded toward the man.

She turned and started slightly at the sight. The man was headed straight toward them.

“Do any of your cars work?” he asked harshly, bringing the shotgun down from on his shoulder to hold it in two hands.

The group exchanged looks, and Dave looked like he was about to protest about the gun. “Haven’t tried,” Mr. Humphrey said. “And what’s it to you, anyway?”

“I’m taking any car that runs. Let’s go. All of you. Who’s closest?”

There was silence for a moment and the man growled, “I will shoot you down in cold blood if you don’t answer!”

“We are!” Kathy said quickly, realizing the man wasn’t bluffing.

The man motioned with the shotgun for all of the group to go over to Kathy’s hybrid. “Start it.”

Luckily, Kathy had the keys in her jeans. She unlocked the car and put the key in. When she turned it, there was a low growl, but that was all. A second try didn't even produce a growl.

"Okay. It's toast too. You, old man, let's see what you've got."

All of the others could see Mr. Humphrey was going to protest. "Please, Mr. Humphrey," Kathy pleaded. "Do what he says. I don't want my children hurt."

Whether he would have done something or not if the children had not been present he never said. He turned toward his house and marched, head erect, straight to his Dodge pickup truck. "I don't have the keys on me," he said when he reached the side of the truck. "They're just inside the door."

"Inside. All of you."

Another minute and Mr. Humphrey was trying his truck. He had almost the same result as Kathy. The truck engine would turn over all right, but would not start.

Just then, an old minivan came around the corner of the street and the man pushed the others away and ran toward it. He got in the street and raised the shotgun. The minivan slid to a stop and the man with the shotgun dragged the driver out from behind the wheel. Jumping in, he drove down to join the others of his group that were standing around watching.

One of the men started moving the small trailer coupled to one of the cars to the minivan ball hitch.

The driver of the minivan picked herself up from where the man had pushed her down onto the pavement of the street. "My van! I need my van!" She began running down the street toward the group now moving their gear from the cars to the minivan.

She didn't get very far. One of the men with a shotgun turned and fired before the woman got close.

Kathy and the others whirled around when another shot came. This one from close to them. Mr. Humphrey had disappeared into his house and come back out with a handgun. He was firing at the other group.

"You'll hit one of the kids!" yelled Kathy and Rex at the same time.

"I'm a better shot than that," Mr. Humphrey called back. He took aim again and fired. One of the shotgun toting men went to the ground, but was back up immediately. Both of the shotguns boomed and Mr. Humphrey slumped to the pavement of his driveway.

Dave headed for his house at a run. Kathy and Roxie did the same. When Kathy looked around, Rex was kneeling beside Mr. Humphrey. "Get over here, Rex!" Kathy yelled as she slid to a stop.

Standing and then running a zig-zag course, Rex joined his mother and they both continued running to the house. Roxie had the front door open and the two ran inside the house. It was only when Rex put the pistol and spare magazine he was holding down, did she realize he had it.

“What in the world is wrong with you?” Kathy demanded.

“I wanted to check Mr. Humphrey, in case he was just wounded... He wasn’t.” Rex’s face was pale. “And I didn’t want some kid to find the gun and shoot himself. Or for the gun to fall into someone’s hands that might use it against us.”

“Well... Don’t do that again! You could have been killed like that woman and Mr. Humphrey.”

“That woman was Mrs. MacGrady,” Roxie said, tears streaming down her face.

Kathy whirled around to look at her daughter.

“But...”

“I recognized her,” Roxie said softly. “And the van. I was at the mall the other day and saw Ginny. She was complaining about how old the used minivan they bought was.”

Kathy sat down heavily in one of the living room chairs. “My Lord! What is happening?” She was close to tears herself. “The binders. I want to see what we should do next.”

It took a moment to gather the binders up. In the process all three in the family checked to make sure the front door was locked.

Rex looked out the front window occasionally to check for anyone approaching the house as Kathy went through the binders hurriedly. She vowed to herself to read through them thoroughly as soon as she had the chance.

But for the moment, she wanted to know what to do about being attacked. To her great surprise, she learned that one of the features of the house was its bullet resistance. Between the brick façade and the interior wooden stud wall was a six inch thick steel stud framed wall faced on each side with three-quarter inch plywood, filled with minus three-quarter inch gravel. It would stop most projectiles that might be fired at the house.

She felt a bit more at ease when she read that the doors and shutters were high tensile steel laminated with plywood. They wouldn’t stop everything, but would stop or slow most regular bullets.

“Close the shutters!”

“Aw, man!” exclaimed Rex. “I should have thought of that!” They’d only used the shutters once before, when Rex was small. He ran to the door and used the manual closer to close

the door security shutter. As it slid home, he moved to the controls for the front window shutter and began cranking it closed.

Roxie had run to the kitchen and was closing the shutters for those windows and outside door. When she came back to the living room and saw that Rex was also closing the blackout curtains that hung between the sheers and regular curtains on the windows, she went back and did the same thing.

Kathy was taking care of the windows in the bedrooms. Rex moved to the study and closed those. The house got very dark. Turning on the flashlight of the windup combo, Rex said, "I'll get some more lights."

He went to down into the basement and brought up two more of the windup flashlight/radios. He handed one to his mother and the other to Roxie. "I still don't think we should start the back-up power system until we know more."

"You're probably right. One of the things I saw in the documentation your father has done was the lack of information on whether or not the solar power system was EMP proof."

"Well, it survived the direct attack," Rex mused, "But if there are nukes close, it's still iffy."

"Please don't say that," Roxie pleaded with her brother. "I don't want anything more to happen! Mrs. McGrady is dead! She sat us for years. What's Ginny going to do without a mother?"

Rex gave his mother a sharp look when she said, "As soon as I can, I'll contact Mr. McGrady and tell him what happened. Right now we should be contacting the police to tell them what happened."

"The phones are dead, Mom. Remember?"

"Oh, that's right! What am I thinking?" Kathy shook her head. "I'm not thinking. Kids, give me a moment to compose myself, will you?"

Rex and Roxie looked at one another and then went into the kitchen to give Kathy some privacy. Rex continued into the garage and came back a few moments later with one of the family's camping stoves. He fired it up and Roxie moved the skillet from the regular stove to the camping stove and the two set about fixing a late breakfast.

Kathy came in a few minutes later and the three had a quiet breakfast, no mention of the current situation made during the meal, despite it being cooked on a camp stove and the room lighted by crank up flashlights.

None of the three ate much. When Kathy got up and began to gather the dishes, Rex said, "I'll go get a container of water and the camp wash basin."

A few minutes later, the dishes done, dried, and put away, the wash water down the drain, the family sat back down at the kitchen table, the binders stacked in the center. "I think we're safe for the moment," Kathy said.

"What should we do about Mrs. McGrady and Mr. Humphrey?" Rex asked. "We can't just leave them out there."

"I don't know," Kathy said. "I've been thinking about that, too. We really should notify the authorities. But I don't know how, with the phones out."

"I've got an idea, Mom. But you aren't going to like it."

"Let's hear it first and then I'll decide if I like it or not."

"I think I should go down to the police station on my bike and let them know what happened. See if they have any other word about what's going on."

"No! Absolutely not! You aren't leaving this house while... what ever is really going on is going on."

Rex didn't say anything.

Kathy thought for a moment, and then said, "But you may have a point... Perhaps I should go and..."

"No, Mom," both children said immediately.

"Mom, to put it bluntly, you're a woman. Women are going to be at big risk in the coming days as law enforcement breaks down. You need to be here with Roxie. I can get there and be back in less than an hour, if there aren't problems."

"Now, see here, Rex. I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"But if something happens to you..." Roxie said, "With Dad not here... What will we do? What will I do?"

Kathy hesitated. Roxie continued. "I don't usually admit it, but Runt here is smart and capable. I really think he could get there and back faster, with fewer problems and less risk than you could, Mom. He's right about women being at risk in disasters. That was pointed out in one of the history books we had in school."

"But he's only fourteen!" lamented Kathy.

"Almost fifteen, Mom," Rex said.

"Still... Why can't we just wait for more information and for the police to come around? They always drive by here once or twice a day."

“They’re going to have their hands full, Mom. This kind of thing is probably going on all over the city.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Rex!” Kathy said softly. “Surely this was an isolated situation.”

“Mom, what happened occurred in the heart of middle class suburbia,” Rex said. “If it happened here, it’s happening everywhere.”

“All the more reason for you not to go,” Kathy replied quickly.

Rex had his reply ready. “But it’s going to get worse. Better to get done what needs to be done now, before it does get worse.”

Roxie and Rex could tell Kathy was wavering. “I’ll take one of Dad’s radios and check in regularly so you won’t worry.”

“You should take a gun, too,” Roxie said.

“No!” Kathy said again, forcefully. “You don’t know anything about guns! You’d be more likely to shoot yourself than protect yourself with one.”

Rex sounded hurt when he responded. “Give me some credit, Mom. I wouldn’t take something I didn’t know how to use. Dad trained me on his guns. How to use them safely. And effectively.”

Kathy knew Jay had taken the children target shooting occasionally over the past few years. She’d been asked to go along, but had always declined. She didn’t even know how many or what kind of guns Jay had.

She felt bad about just leaving Mrs. McGrady and Mr. Humphrey where they were, and letting the two men with shotguns get away. Very reluctantly she nodded. “Okay, Rex. You can go. But you have to promise me you’ll be extra careful and come back immediately if you run into trouble.”

“I will, Mom. I promise.”

“Got get the radios and the gun you plan on taking, before I change my mind.”

Rex hopped up and ran for the basement steps. He was back a few minutes later. And, in truth, Kathy was about to changer her mind. But when she saw Rex, and the determination on his face, she decided she needed to let him do this. He was feeling the pressure to be the man of the house and, like her, needed to be doing something.

He certainly looked capable of carrying out the mission he’d set for himself. He had a small backpack, his bike helmet, and there, around his waist, a belt hung with a holstered gun, and several pouches containing what, she had no idea.

He handed his mother one of the radios. Rex didn't deny Kathy the motherly hug she gave him before he went to the garage to get his bike out.

Roxie hugged him too and whispered, "Be careful, huh? I don't want to lose you."

"I will, Sis," Rex whispered back. "And thanks for helping."

"Sure. Don't expect it again."

Rex smiled and went into the garage. He checked his bike in the light from the crank-up flashlight and then opened the security shutter over the personnel door outside and took the bike through. He closed the door. The shutter door was already closing. Either Kathy, or more likely, Roxie, was closing it from inside.

After surveying the street for dangers, Rex got on the bike and pedaled away. He swerved toward the dogs sniffing around Mr. Humphrey and chased them off. He did the same for the animals around Mrs. McGrady, swallowing the bile that tried to rise in his throat at the sight of all the blood.

He rode past the two abandoned vehicles, with their doors open and boxes and bundles strewn about that hadn't fit into the minivan and trailer. Rex noted the splatters of blood here and there. "Good for you, Mr. Humphrey," Rex said softly. Apparently he had managed to hit one of the shotgun wielders with a shot from his pistol.

There were people out and about, here and there, as Rex made his way in the most direct path to the police station. It was a good twenty minute ride normally. With trying to keep his head on a swivel, and avoiding anything that looked the least bit dangerous, it took Rex a full thirty minutes to get to the station.

He'd been right. The incident on his street wasn't the only one. He saw other signs of battles. He'd talked to his mother twice, checking in with her every ten minutes or so. Seeing the looks of some of the people standing around the entrance to the police station, Rex carefully locked up his bike before he went inside.

"Hey! You can't bring a gun in here!" said someone from behind him.

"You gonna stop him, Sport?" came another voice. "Everybody and his brother with a gun is carrying it now."

"I need to report a gun battle on Silver Street," Rex said, ignoring the conversation going on behind him.

"How old are you, boy?" asked the Sergeant behind the information desk. "Is that gun registered? Where you involved in the gun battle?"

“No. I’m a witness. It’s my Dad’s gun. He’s out of town and I’m trying to protect my mother and my sister. I’ve had handgun training. At the range.”

“If you weren’t involved in the gunfight, what are you doing here?” There was an altercation down the hall, further inside the station.

“There are two dead people. Both shot by two guys that jacked the minivan from the woman. The names are...”

“Don’t know, don’t care, at the moment,” the Sergeant said. “I’ve got problems with the living.”

“But we can’t just leave the bodies out on the street,” Rex protested.

“Put them in a car. It won’t be going anywhere. “Or back in their house. Do what ever you want. Just don’t cause any problems.”

The altercation got louder and there was a gunshot from deep in the station. The Sergeant stood and ran that way. Rex shook his head and went outside. “Hey!” he yelled when he saw someone trying to get the lock off his bike. “That’s my bike!”

“Oh, yeah! Not if I can get it loose, it ain’t.” Suddenly there was a knife in the man’s hand and he continued. “So you just give me the combination to this lock and I’ll be on my way.”

Without thinking about it, Rex’s right hand was on the grips of the pistol in his holster. “I don’t think so.”

The man finally saw the gun, still holstered, and backed away, hands up at chest height, the knife still in one. “No problem here. It’s all yours. He finally turned and ran off.

“Why didn’t one of you try to stop him?” Rex asked, barely keeping his anger in check. There were fully fifteen or more people standing around.

“He’s a mean one. He’d of cut you with that knife of his if you didn’t have a gun,” some one said.

Another added, “Ain’t none of my business. Things have changed. It’s every man for himself now. No rules.”

“Just the rule of the gun,” said another. “You any good with that gun of yours?”

“Good enough,” Rex said carefully as he unlocked the bike from the post it was locked to. “Does anyone know anything about what’s going on?” he asked when he was astride the bike, prepared to take off if the slowly encroaching group made a move for him. “We saw the announcement about the Commies threatening to use an EMP device and then the lights and TV went dead. Anyone know anything else?”

“That’s why I’m here. Cops aren’t talking.” This came from a man standing off a ways from the others. “Don’t know if they don’t know, or just aren’t telling. You’d better go, buddy, before this group becomes a mob.”

“Thanks,” Rex said and stepped down hard on the left pedal of the bike. As he rode away the group shifted to where he’d been, almost as if they were filling up the vacuum his departure created.

Keying the mike on the radio held up to his lips, Rex told his mother he was on the way back, and the information he’d picked up. Essentially none, except people were already acting like there was no law any more.

“Be careful, Rex. Just get back here in one piece. I love you, son.”

“I love you, too, Mom.” Rex was keeping his speed up, wanting to get home before something else happened. Twice he was chased by people apparently wanting his bike, and probably the gun, too.

Rex was enveloped in a hug from his mother, and then one from Roxie, when he got home and had the bike in the garage.

“Sorry I didn’t find out any more. I think the safest course is to just keep trying the radio. Eventually someone will have some information.” He looked over at his mother. “What should we do about the bodies?”

“The police really told you to just stash the bodies?” Roxie asked.

“Yeah. There was a shooting inside the police station while I was there. I think they have their hands full with things right there at the station. There was a group out front, slowly turning into a mob, I think.”

Kathy paled. “But you’re all right? Didn’t have any problems?”

Rex knew better than to try to lie to his mother. She could read him like a book. “Well,” he said slowly, “I had to put my hand on my pistol once, when someone was trying to get the bike unlocked. And I got chased a couple of times by people wanting the bike.”

“Oh, Rex!” exclaimed Kathy.

“If I hadn’t had the gun, the guy with the knife would have made me unlock the bike for him and I would have lost it.”

“A knife? He had a knife? You didn’t say he had a knife!”

“Nothing came of it, Mom. Really. No problem. About the bodies, Mom? We have to do something. The dogs and cats are already sniffing around them.”

Kathy and Roxie both looked a bit green around the gills. "I guess... he said put them in a car or their house?" Kathy asked.

Rex nodded. With a sigh, Kathy said, "I guess we should do that, then. Out of respect."

Reluctantly, Kathy and Roxie followed Rex outside. Rex still wore the gun belt. Kathy started to ask him to take it off, but saw people out in their yards. Several were armed, too. She decided to let Rex keep the gun handy until they were back inside. If Jay taught him how to use it, she could trust Rex to use it appropriately.

It took all three of them to maneuver Mrs. McGrady's body into one of the abandoned cars that still stood with the doors open. They closed the doors after they had her on the back seat and went to get Mr. Humphrey.

They decided to take Mr. Humphrey into his house. They didn't want to put him in the truck, since the shotgun blasts that had killed him had also taken out a side window. All three were covered in blood by the time they got Mr. Humphrey on the sofa in the living room, and looked ill.

"I think we can risk the PV system to get cleaned up," Rex said, seeing the expressions on his mother's and his sister's faces as they looked at one another. "I'll get it ready."

"Thank you, Rex," Kathy said.

"Yeah. Thanks, Brother."

With the PV system on-line in the bright sunlight, there was enough power to run the water pump, even with the batteries still uncharged. Rex went ahead and turned on the propane and lit the water heater, too, so the showers would be with warm water, rather than the cold water directly from the well. The solar pre-heater would have provided a couple of really short showers, but all three wanted long, hot showers to get the blood off.

They kept the power on long enough to do a load of laundry. The bloody clothes were laundered, and then Rex, with Roxie's help, set up the clothes line they kept stored in the yard shed and normally put up just for spring cleaning.

Bathed, with the laundry flapping in the slight breeze, the three went back inside the house. Picking up one of the windup radio flashlight combos, Rex said, "I'll leave the electrical system on to go ahead and charge the batteries so we'll have some electricity for tonight. I'm going to sit outside and listen on the radio for more information. Don't get good reception in here, especially with the shutters closed."

"Be careful and keep an eye out," Kathy told him. "Call us if you get something."

"Okay, Mom."

Kathy started to say something when Rex picked up and put on the gun belt he'd hung up in the entry closet when he went to take his shower. Remembering what had happened that she'd seen, and what Rex had told her, she stayed silent. He seemed comfortable with having the gun.

Roxie was still in her room. Kathy sat down at the kitchen table with the binders before her. The light over the table was one of those on the emergency circuits, so she had light to read by. Opening the first binder, Kathy began to read through it slowly and thoroughly. She didn't hear Roxie come from her bedroom, still brushing dry her long red hair, and into the kitchen. Seeing the various emotions flashing across her mother's face, Roxie put down the hair brush and put on a tea kettle of water for her mother's favorite tea.

When the water was ready, Roxie added a tea bag to the tea pot, and carried it and a cup to the kitchen.

"Oh! Thank you!" Kathy said when Roxie set the two items down on the table.

"Mom... Do you think Dad is okay?"

"I don't know, honey. Where he is... As far as we know there was no attack there. He should be fine. I expect he's on his way home right this minute."

"I hope so," Roxie replied. She went back to the kitchen and fixed herself a hot chocolate. She carried it outside to sit beside Rex on the front porch steps. "You want a sip?" she asked.

"No, thanks, Sis."

Roxie nodded and took a sip herself and then asked, "Any luck?"

"There are a few stations on, but none locally. Of course this windup radio isn't the best. But if there are any local stations, I should be able to get them with it. I'm tempted to get one of the Amateur radios out of the shelter, but I'm afraid of more EMP. It's almost on the hour. I'm going to try the Weather Radio Channel for this area. They're supposed to disseminate the official word, if there is one, in national emergencies."

Rex fiddled with the radio for a moment, and finally got a buzz. A bit more tuning and he was locked on the Weather Radio frequency active in the area. Sure enough, right on the hour the voice of the announcer came out of the speaker.

"This is an official US Government announcement. All military and reserves are to report to the military base nearest their current location whether it is the same branch of service or not. Use any form of transportation you can arrange.

"All those listening to this broadcast please inform anyone within your sphere of influence that doesn't have a radio capable of picking these transmissions up of this announcement and that subsequent announcements will come on the hour.

“Other than military personnel, everyone should remain where they are until further announcement. Cooperate with one another and help those that can’t help themselves. Follow your local authorities’ instructions.

“There will be a repeat of this announcement in fifty-five minutes.”

He continued with a brief forecast of the weather and then the signal went dead. “Let’s tell Mom. She’ll want to listen to the next one herself, I’m sure,” Rex said.

Kathy was a bit put out they hadn’t called her outside for the broadcast, but understood that it was short, and over before either thought of it.

All three listened to the next several broadcasts. There was no real news. Just the reiterated requests for people to stay home, help others, and follow orders of local authorities.

As the sun started to go down, Rex shut down the PV system and isolated the panels from the controllers and battery banks. They’d still have power, but it would be drawing down the batteries.

When asked by his mother, Rex checked all the blackout curtains again. She’d just read that Jay considered keeping their preps a closely held secret, and that included letting anyone know they had power by seeing unexpected light from a window.

“Roxie, get some of the candles out and have them ready... You know... Just in case...”

“Okay, Mom,” replied Roxie, and went out to the garage to look for the tote that held backup lighting supplies. She grabbed several candles and holders, and a couple of small boxes of strike anywhere matches.

It was rather eerie as the light faded while the family sat outside to listen to yet another word-for-word announcement. Normally the area street lights would be on, and there would be light pouring from just about every window in the houses along the quiet residential street.

Now, only the occasional window showed light, and several of those had the flickering effect of candle light. Rex, upon thinking about it, decided that the bright, steady light was probably from camp lanterns, and the steady, softer light was produced by flashlights.

There was some movement up the street and Rex’s hand went to the pistol on his hip. He could tell Roxie and his mother tensed up. But it was only Dave Monroe. He called out before he got very close.

“That you, Kathy? And the kids?”

“It is, Dave. Come on up.”

“This is bad, isn’t it?” he asked, putting one foot on the bottom step of the stairs up to the porch and leaned forward slightly.

“Yes. How bad, we don’t know. The radio announcement...”

“Announcements? What announcement?” Dave asked, obviously surprised. “I didn’t think any radios would work.”

“It’s the NOAA weather and alert radio systems,” Rex explained. They are somewhat protected from EMP and some of the transmitters survived the attack. The small size of the antenna on the radios didn’t pick up enough EMP to fry them.”

“I don’t suppose you have a spare?” Dave asked. “And some candles... And matches...”

Rex and Roxie both looked at their mother.

“Get Mr. Monroe six candles and one of the boxes of matches. Rex, get the other windup radio flashlight.” Both teens got up to do as their mother asked. And then it came out automatically, without her thinking it consciously. “We don’t have much to spare, Dave.” The idea of keeping what they had quiet was already an unconscious thing.

“I understand. I sure appreciate you loaning me these things. I’ll replace them as soon as things get back to normal. At least I have a little food in the house. I tried my car after... what happened... happened, and it won’t start either. That van is the only thing I’ve seen that runs.”

“Thank you,” Dave told Roxie and Rex when they handed him the items they gone to get out of the house.

“They’re broadcasting on the hour,” Rex said. “But the one just past is the last for the night. They’ll broadcast again at nine, eastern time, tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be listening. Thanks again.” Dave fumbled with the flashlight radio, but finally got the light to come on. He walked back to his house by the light shed from the crank-up device.

“Let’s go in,” Kathy said. She could see several people looking toward Dave, back lighted by the beam of the flashlight.

The three went inside and Rex closed and locked the doors, and then used the remote control to close the shutter. The shutters were some of the few items on the emergency circuits powered by the off-grid power system.

It was a somber evening meal, each of the three lost in their own thoughts. They did the dishes together and then went off to bed, two hours earlier than usual. Kathy took the binders with her and read in bed until she fell asleep.

She was groggy the next morning and it took her a few seconds to figure out why the binders were on the bed and it was so dark for the time the battery operated clock showed. She

sucked in her breath in dismay when the memories of what had transpired the day before came back to her.

She got up and did her morning routine, thanking Jay silently for his forethought of preparing. The off-grid power system allowed them to maintain a relative normal life at home for the meantime. Kathy wasn't sure how long that would last, but she planned on enjoying it for as long as she could.

Rex and Roxie were both at the kitchen table, eating cold cereal and milk for breakfast. "Morning, Mom," each said.

"Good morning," Kathy replied, sitting down at the place the kids had set up for her. She added cereal and then milk to the bowl sitting there.

"This is all real, isn't it, Mom?" Roxie asked. "Not just a bad dream?"

"I'm afraid it is real," Kathy replied. "I wish it was just a dream. But we can cope with what is happening. Thanks to your father. He had the foresight to try and prepare the family for this. I'm just sorry I didn't try to help. I hope you will forgive me some day for letting you both down this way."

"It's okay, Mom," Roxie said. "I didn't do as much as I could, when Dad offered us the training to learn how to be prepared for things like this." She looked over at Rex. "Thankfully, Rex found it interesting. He knows ten times what I do."

"Don't know nearly as much as Dad," Rex said.

"Well, before this is over, we'll all know a great deal more than we do now," Kathy said firmly. "The plan contained in those binders of your father's will get us through. Just like he intended."

Suddenly there was a knock on the shutter covering the front door. It made all three of them jump. Rex grabbed his gun belt from the closet and put it on as Kathy opened the door, and then slid aside the steel plate covering the peephole in the shutter.

It was Dave Monroe again. "Hey, it's me. I was wondering... Do you have any water? I finished the last bottle I had, and thought you might have some."

Roxie looked at her mother, and Kathy nodded, holding up one finger. Roxie headed for the garage and returned in moments with a six-pack of water bottles.

Rex operated the door shutter manually, Kathy took one bottle of water from the six-pack and handed the other five back to Roxie. Roxie set them out of sight.

"Some set up you have here," Dave said as the shutter slid clear. "Is that bullet proof?"

Dave's eyes went to Rex when Rex said, "It's intruder resistant."

Then Dave saw the holster and pistol. His eyes narrowed. "Is that really necessary?" he asked, nodding at the gun.

"We hope not," Kathy said. "But after what happened yesterday, we're not taking any chances. Don't worry. Rex has had professional training on how and when to shoot."

"Really?" It was obvious that Dave didn't really like the fact that Rex had the gun. "Didn't do Humphrey any good. He had a gun and he died. The other guys had bigger guns."

"Here's a bottle of water, Dave," Kathy said, not liking the way the conversation was going. "You should probably try to make it last. I've only got five more in the six-pack for us."

Dave had a definite sour look on his face when he nodded. He started to turn away, but hesitated. "Look. I know Jay is gone, and probably won't make it back. If you need a man around the house for protection, just let me know."

"Rex is doing just fine," Roxie said immediately.

"Yes, he is, Dave. But thanks for the offer. If we run into something Rex or I can't handle, we may call on you. It was nice of you to offer."

Dave cut a glance at Rex. He was standing stiffly, lips even, not frowning, just looking at Dave coolly. Dave noticed the glint of steely determination in Rex's eyes and turned away from the look. He walked slowly back to his house, looking around from time to time. Rex stood in the doorway until Dave was in his own house.

"Mom," Roxie said, "You aren't going to let him in here, are you? I'm... I'm a little scared of him. He creeps me out."

"What? Has he done something?" Kathy asked. Rex was closing the shutter again.

"No, not really. I just don't like the way he looks at me."

"I see," Kathy replied slowly. She had never told Jay she felt the same way about Dave. He seemed a nice enough guy, but she could feel his eyes on her whenever she was out and about in a skirt and blouse, dress, or shorts and a top. Like Roxie, his looks crept her out, too.

The three went back to finish breakfast. Rex hesitated, but decided to put the gun back in the closet. He would wear it whenever he went outside, but they were quite secure inside the house, and could retreat to the shelter if needed.

It was time for the next broadcast and Rex gave the handle of the radio a few turns to charge up the battery. He turned it on and got the carrier frequency that always preceded the actual broadcast. "I think it will be loud enough," Rex said. "I think we should stay inside for a while."

“As long as we can hear the broadcast,” Kathy said. She took one of the living room chairs by the sofa, as Rex and Roxie sat down on it. Rex held the radio in his lap. Finally a voice came from the speaker. It was simply another reiteration of past announcements.

“Aren’t they going to do anything?” Roxie lamented.

“I bet they are,” Rex said. But they sure aren’t talking about it.”

The three spend the rest of the day inside, keeping themselves and each other busy, stopping to listen to the NOAA radio every hour. It was not until almost nine that evening when there was a change in the broadcast.

“The next voice you hear will be the President of the United States.”

There was silence for another moment, only the slight hum of an un-modulated carrier wave. Then the easily recognizable voice began.

“My fellow Americans and Citizens of the World that may be listening. It is with great sadness and pain that I must inform you that I, as President of the United States, and Commander-in-Chief of this nation’s armed forces, have ordered the intervention of our forces in the dastardly attack Communist China has made upon Australia. This action brings great risk to all of us here in the United States, and around the world. China has made grave threats, that should they be carried out, will be the biggest disaster in human existence.

“I urge you to prepare yourselves for the worst. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will be distributing the most current, effective, plans we have available for expedient fallout shelters, for those that must stay where they are during this time of crisis.

“For the areas most in danger, beginning the morning of the day after tomorrow, massive evacuations will be conducted, removing citizens at greatest risk to areas where they can be provided for the most efficiently. Please continue to give what aid you can to your friends and neighbors and cooperate with local authorities as these measures take place.

“It is my greatest hope that the leadership of China will re-evaluate their plans and withdraw fully from the course they are now on. Thank you and...”

The radio fell silent. Rex hurriedly cranked it, but there simply was no sound. Not even of the transmitter carrier. “That’s not good,” Rex said slowly. He ran the bands of the simple radio. Nothing on any of them.

The three family members looked at one another in alarm. “I’ll try outside,” Rex said, getting up from the sofa. Roxie and Kathy followed him to the front door, but Rex hesitated. “Might be better in back of the house. In case someone is watching.”

They all headed that way. Roxie opened the back door shutter and Kathy opened the regular door. Rex stepped outside and ran the bands again. Still nothing, except louder static. Rex shook his head and started to turn around to go back inside when the sky lighted up brighter than daytime for long fractions of seconds.

All three stood there frozen until the brightness turned an ugly purplish orange. Suddenly Rex pushed his mother and sister inside, following right behind them. "A nuke! There will be a blast wave any second. Get down to the shelter!"

The two women ran. Rex stayed behind to close the door and shutter, but followed the two as soon as the task was completed. He was on the third from the bottom of the stairs when the basement began to shake.

The movement threw him off stride and he fell into the basement, landing awkwardly. Roxie and Kathy were waiting for him at the door separating the two sections of the basement. Grabbing an arm apiece, they helped Rex up, and then into the shelter.

Roxie released Rex and stepped back out into the unfinished section of the basement. It was a struggle, but she carried all five of Jay's binders into the shelter from where they'd been dropped after she and Kathy scooped them up on the way to the shelter. Roxie set the binders down and shut the vault door.

Several loud clicks sounded, and all three looked around, unsure what was causing the sound, or even where it was coming from. Rex hopped on one foot over to one of the chairs at the table near the kitchen area of the shelter.

"Did you break your ankle?" Kathy asked, kneeling down to examine Rex's leg and foot.

"No. Just turned it, I think," Rex said through clenched teeth.

The shelter shook again, and again the clicking sounds were heard a couple of minutes later.

"I think I know what those sounds are. The blast valves on the airlines and stuff," Rex said.

"You mean... from a nuke?" Roxie asked softly.

"Yeah. I think two went off near enough to us to shake the foundation by ground shock, and surface overpressure high enough to trigger the blast valves."

"It's okay, Mom," Rex said. Kathy had the hiking boot off and was manipulating his foot this way and that. Not without some pain. "Ow!"

"Well, it isn't broken, thank goodness," Kathy said after standing up. "We'll need to ice it for a while, and then wrap it for support."

“First, I need to go out and check for fires around the place,” Rex said. He leaned over and pulled his boot back on and laced it up.

“No. Roxie and I will do that. You just sit here until we get back and I will ice your ankle.”

It was a mother’s tone of voice that children didn’t argue with. “Okay. But be careful. Here,” he said. Rex unfastened his gun belt and gave it to Roxie.

Kathy looked at her two children for a moment, but didn’t protest when Roxie fastened the belt around her waist.

“I’m ready, Mom,” Roxie said and moved toward the shelter door.

“Roxie,” her mother said, “We just look for any fires and deal with them if we have to. Do you have your dosimeter on?”

Roxie showed Kathy the dosimeter clipped in the pocket of her blouse. Kathy touched hers, aware now, after reading the manual, the importance of keep track of radiation. “Okay. Let’s go.”

It was an anxious five minutes for Rex, and a whirlwind five minutes for Roxie and Kathy. There were no fires around the house. In fact, there were no signs of any damage at all to their house. The same couldn’t be said for many of the other houses on the street. Including one at the far end of the street that was already a blazing inferno.

“Mom?” Roxie asked.

Kathy hesitated. Normally she would be right there helping. But she had her children to think of, especially with Jay away. “No,” she said softly. “The plan calls for battening down the hatches, as your father put it. Since there is a fire nearby we’ll turn on the sprinklers and then get back in the shelter.”

The elaborate sprinkler controls were in the basement where the water line from the well entered. All the controls were labeled. Usually, all one had to do was turn on one valve to feed the automatic underground yard sprinkler system. But Kathy had discovered there were sprinkler systems for the roof and all the outside walls.

It took only a minute to read the labels and figure out what needed to be turned on. “I’ll go check to make sure it’s working,” Kathy said.

“But Mom...”

“Stay here!” Kathy went back up the stairs. She was back in less than a minute. “They’re working. Hopefully the batteries will last long enough to prevent the house from catching fire if the fire spreads from the one burning now.”

The two went back into the shelter. Rex was standing by the door and closed it as soon as the two were inside. “We’re okay,” Roxie said. “The Hamilton house is burning, but we turned on the house sprinklers along with the yard sprinklers.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about those,” Rex said. “Good thinking, you guys.”

“You should be off your feet, Rex,” Kathy said, going into Mom mode automatically, despite the events unfolding.

“Okay, Mom,” Rex said, knowing there wasn’t any choice but to do it. He went to one of the four bunks and laid down on one of the lower bunks. Kathy pulled the pillows from two others and propped his foot up on it.

Roxie was going through the huge medical bag that was part of the shelter supplies. “We’ve got cold packs, Mom,” she said. “But should we save them and go out and get ice from the freezer in the basement?”

Rex said, “The ice in the freezer.”

His mother countermanded him. “No. We’re safe in here. We’re staying in here until we know it’s safe outside. If we start going out for every little thing it will become a habit. Jay’s plan calls for only going outside if the shelter is compromised. And then we will use the emergency exit. Speaking of which, where is it? Do either of you know?”

Rex started to get up, but his mother shot him a warning look and he eased back down. “I do, Mom,” Roxie said. She handed Kathy one of the ice packs from the first-aid kit and went over to where the air filter system was installed.

She pointed to a panel beside the large pipe that fed fresh air to the shelter. There were two ladder steps below it, and a handrail from waist height to the panel.

“Just remove this and crawl along the culvert. There’s a chamber at the far end you can stand up in and work to drop the top cover and then push through the grass to get out. We never used it because Dad wanted it left completely undisturbed so it would be secret.”

“I went down it once just to check it out,” Rex said. “It’s easy. Hard on the knees, though.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to use it,” Kathy said.

“With the shutters closed and the external house sprinklers going, there shouldn’t be much danger,” Rex said.

Kathy had reached for one of the binders and was reading quickly while Rex spoke. “I think... Yes, we should start checking the radiation, and log in the peak reading so we can calculate the time we need to stay in the shelter.”

“On the communications desk, Mom,” Rex said.

Roxie joined her mother and the two studied the CD-717 radiation survey meter. The pickup probe was outside the house. “We need to put a battery in, according to the plan,” Kathy said.

“In the drawer,” Rex instructed.

A few moments later and the remote reading CD-717 was ready for use. Kathy put it on the lowest setting. There was no reading. “I’ll log it,” Roxie said, picking up the clipboard that held a simple form to record the radiation data.

“When we know that the fallout is beginning to fade, we’ll plug the numbers into a program on the laptop that’s here in the shelter. The program will give the time we have to stay in here,” Kathy said. “Your father makes very good plans.”

“Yeah,” Rex said softly, wishing the same thing as his sister and mother. That Jay was here with them.

Jay’s plan included things in the shelter to keep the family occupied. Books to read, games to play, videos to watch. The three exercised every day. Rex gingerly got his ankle back into shape. At the end of the six-week stay in the shelter and basement, it was a bit tender, but he kept his hiking boots laced tight and all was fine.

One of the things accomplished in the six weeks before the family ventured out was Kathy’s introduction to firearms. Of course, there was no live fire practice, but Roxie and Rex coached her through hour after hour of handling and dry-firing all the weapons in the small armory Jay had locked away in a gun safe in the shelter.

Rex had ventured to the basement and then garage after two weeks in the shelter to turn off the sprinklers and reconnect the solar panels to the controller and battery bank.

The irrigation pump running to use the sprinklers had drained the batteries to the point the controller disconnected them. Though it was still quite dark outside, even during the day, Rex and Kathy decided that any battery charging the panels could do, would be worth it in the next few weeks. The separate battery bank in the shelter was getting low by the time they went outside.

After five weeks in the shelter, they began spending some time in the basement. All checked their dosimeters they constantly wore, but the shielding in the basement was adequate to keep the doses down with the radiation at the level it was after the five weeks.

All three were armed with handguns, and Rex had a slung rifle when they left the basement to take a look around at the end of the six weeks. Roxie carried a CD-715 survey meter to check the radiation levels inside the house.

The reading inside was barely registering. Venturing outside cautiously, Roxie confirmed the reading they'd been getting on the CD-717 remote reading meter. It was the same. The radiation had dropped faster than the computer program had estimated, and they found out why when Roxie ventured toward the street. The survey meter began clicking. Roxie hurriedly backed up and the reading dropped again.

She called Rex and Kathy over and showed them the readings. Working carefully the three went around the edges of the property. Every where there was indication that the water flow from the sprinklers had been heavy, the radiation level was low.

Not only had the sprinkler systems protected them from fire, it had gradually washed away the fallout contamination almost as quickly as it had fallen on and around the house. They were in an island of low, relatively safe, radiation level.

“Dad sure knew what he was doing, didn't he?” Roxie said.

“Yeah. But I don't think we should stay outside much anyway, for a while,” Rex said, looking up at the sky. It was blue, but very pale. The fine fallout the nukes had produced was still high in the atmosphere, and would be for months, if not years. But they were getting enough sunlight for the PV panels to keep the batteries charged, despite using those items connected to the circuits the system powered.

The decision was made to stay inside, but all felt the need for some outside presence, so the window shutters in the living room and kitchen were opened during the day to get some natural light.

It turned out to be a dangerous move. The third day they had them open, they had visitors. There was banging on the front door shutter during the noon meal. It startled them. All scrambled to get their weapons, and then Kathy went to the door.

“Who is it? What do you want?”

“We're other survivors! Let us in. We need food and water.”

“How many of you are there?” Kathy asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rex saw something at the living room window. It was a man, rather bedraggled looking, peering inside. The barrel of a shotgun was visible over his shoulder.

“Doesn't matter. Let us in. We want food. If you don't let us in and share, we'll come in and take it!”

“Mom!” Rex yelled. The man at the window was point the shotgun at him through the window. Rex dove for the shutter switch and activated it. The shotgun boomed and the living room window shook with the blast. A few individual pellets made it through the thick lexan of the window, and there were serious crack running here and there from each of the holes, but the lexan didn't shatter and fall out.

Rex didn't consciously think to draw his weapon, but it was in his hand when he came up from the roll he'd done after hitting the shutter switch. The man with the shotgun was slow in wracking the slide of the shotgun and didn't get off another shot before the shutters snapped closed.

Rex ran for the kitchen to close that shutter. Roxie and Kathy, now with pistols in their hands, backed away and moved sideways as bullets and shot hit the front door shutter. Shots hammered the other shutters, and then, when there was no effect, the group began to fire at the walls in essentially random fashion.

Kathy, Rex, and Roxie stood silently in the living room as the sound of the shots and their impacts nearly deafened them. "What do we do?" Roxie asked.

"Wait it out. Down in the basement. In the shelter. They can't get to us there." Kathy said. She gripped the Glock 17 tightly in her right hand. "They can't get in, and we're not going out."

"Mom, we need to do something to dissuade them," Rex said. "No telling how long they might keep this up. If they find the gasoline in the yard shed..."

"He's right, Mom," Roxie said. "I'm scared. There's no telling what they'll do to us if they get in."

"The shelter is safe. You both said so!"

"They know we're here. They will just keep it up. Get tools... They would get in eventually."

"Okay, but what?" Kathy was thinking furiously.

"I've got an idea," Rex said suddenly. He ran for the basement and Roxie and Kathy followed him. "You two get in the shelter and lock the door. Don't open it unless I say... Santa Barbara."

"Santa Barbara?" Roxie asked.

"Yes. Santa Barbara."

"No, Rex. If you're going to do something I'm going to help."

"Mom," Rex said quietly, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I'm going to hurt those people. Maybe kill them. I don't think you want to be part of that."

Kathy turned pale. "But Rex..."

"Go on, Mom. Let me handle this."

“Come on, Mom,” Roxie said, tugging on Kathy’s arm. “Let Rex do whatever it is. I’m really scared.”

“Be careful, son,” Kathy said, and then turned to follow Roxie.

“He’ll be okay, Mom,” Roxie tried to reassure Kathy after she closed the shelter door.

Kathy stood by the door, ready to open it as soon as she heard Rex say ‘Santa Barbara’ over the door intercom.

Rex holstered his pistol and ran to the sprinkler control panel. Something his dad had told him one time had come to him during the crisis. He checked the sprinkler control system and traced out the piping. Sure enough, one pipe led from a tee fitting in the propane gas line to a tee in the sprinkler line.

Saying a prayer, to ask forgiveness for what he was about to do, Rex turned the valve on the gas line and the one on the sprinkler water feed. He activated the yard sprinkler valves and waited, hoping he’d understood what his father had been musing about that day. He turned the valve on the sprinklers on the house, putting water to them.

It took longer than Rex expected, and he was reaching to turn off the valve when he felt, more than heard, the explosion outside the house. He continued the motion he was making and turned off the valves.

Running upstairs, he stopped and listened for a moment. There was no more sounds of shooting. Very carefully Rex went to the front door and opened it. He slid open the view port and looked out. What he saw made him more than a little ill. There were burned and twisted bodies lying on the ground. The grass was burned to ash around the sprinkler heads. He checked each side of the house, though the view ports in the shutters. He didn’t see anyone alive.

Hesitating for a moment, Rex almost went to get his mother and sister to back him up in checking out the outside of the house. “No,” he whispered, “They stay safe. I can handle this.”

He went out the back door, checking carefully both directions as he eased his way outside, the Glock 17 firm in his hand. The smell was almost overwhelming. Burned flesh smelled worse than he’d read about. And there was a lot of it. Thirteen men and five women. All had firearms laying beside their bodies.

Only four of the corpses weren’t burned. Rex decided they’d noticed the propane cloud forming on the ground and tried to run to safety. They hadn’t gone far enough. The concussion of the explosion had scrambled their insides, just as it had those that also were burned.

Once sure of the defeat of the attackers, Rex turned his attention to the outside of the house. It showed scorch marks here and there, but the water from the house sprinklers had minimized the damage and prevented any fires starting on the very fire resistant building, anyway.

The yard shed was a bit the worse for wear, but it, too, had survived the explosion. That had been Rex's biggest fear. That the explosion would detonate the gasoline stored in the shed. But it hadn't.

The other thing Rex had feared didn't come to pass, either. The need for performing the coup de grâce on anyone that might have survived the explosion. He knew his mother would be frantic until his return, so he quickly made his way to the basement and to the door of the shelter.

"Santa Barbara, Mom. Santa Barbara!"

The door opened a moment later and Kathy had Rex in a bear hug.

"Should I close the door?" Roxie asked, her hand already on it to push it closed.

"No," Rex said, stepping back from his mother's embrace. "They're dead. All of them."

Roxie and Kathy both looked much like Rex felt. Sick. "I'll do something with the bodies..." Rex said.

"I'll help," Kathy said. "You can't do it all alone."

"But Mom... It's not a very pleasant sight or smell."

"What has to be done, has to be done."

Roxie swallowed the bile trying to rise in her throat, but managed to get out, "I'll help, too."

Both Rex and Kathy objected.

"Look, it's a different world now. We're all going to have to do things we would rather not. Might as well get used to it."

That seemed to settle it. It was Roxie that remembered the respirators Jay had stocked for them. Though meant to protect against biological and chemical attacks, they would also filter out the terrible smells they were exposed to while handling the bodies.

It was a disgusting, arduous task that took the three of them two hard days to finish. It was made somewhat easier by the use of the garden rototiller to pulverize the earth in the long trench they made in the side yard of the house next to them. It had been vacant for some months and they had no compunction about digging the grave on that property instead of their own.

Thinking of the future, the family gathered up everything that might prove useful or have value in the future that the group had. It was stored in the garage.

During that time, they saw no one else, but continued to keep themselves armed. Along with the pistol each wore, there was a long arm handy for use. Two 5.56mm carbines and a 20-gauge semi-auto shotgun.

They continued to keep the house locked up at night, though they slept in their own bedrooms, since the radiation was low enough in and around the house. The level was dropping a little every day outside their property, but they stayed close to home, anyway.

The day finally came that they decided to go exploring. Just on their street, but exploring, none the less. The first day they just checked the house on the other side of them from the one with the new grave.

It was with some trepidation that they went inside. They'd not seen any sign of their neighbors and didn't know what to expect. It was the last time they went inside a house without their respirators. The smell was overwhelming from the five bodies.

The deaths of those that had attacked his house had worn heavily on him. Until he saw the condition of the neighbors. All had been shot to death and left where they lay. Mr. and Mrs. Dominic, and their three kids. The youngest was just a baby.

The house was ransacked and left in a shambles. All the food was gone. The three couldn't tell what else might be missing. "It was those animals that tried to get us," Rex said, his jaws working in anger.

It took another day to get a trench dug in the Dominic side yard and the bodies buried. As they continued to investigate the street, they found more bodies. Some had died natural deaths due to the fallout radiation. Some had died of dehydration, totally clueless on where to get water in their own home.

Others, like the Dominics, had died during violent confrontations. The circumstances were similar in some, and Rex felt less and less stress about having eliminated the one group as a threat. But there had been other scenarios, too. Fights among families. Fights between local families. Most had died early on after the attack.

The gang that had come through later had salvaged what they wanted. It was part of what the Jones family had recovered from the gang members after their deaths. And it explained the two garden carts and three children's wagons full of items that had been in the street at the time of the attack on the Jones' house.

When they got to Dave's house, they found the door standing open. There were signs of a hasty departure, and subsequent scavenging efforts. There was no sign of Dave.

With the fresh, canned, and frozen foods used up, Kathy, Rex, and Roxie opened up the containers of long term storage foods Jay had stocked. The plan in the binders referenced several books that contained recipes for using the basic foods. Kathy had read them while she was in the shelter.

Rex and Roxie kept a supply of flour ground up for use from one of the six-gallon super-pails stored in the unfinished section of the basement. The freeze-dried and dehydrated foods were used sparingly to enhance and supplement the beans and grains that were the bulk of the family's protein intake.

The plan called for starting a garden as soon as possible, but with fall already in the air, the outside garden was put on hold. But the greenhouse was cleaned out and set up for use to grow whatever they could to supplement the stored foods.

Roxie had a green thumb, and took the lead in the greenhouse work, with Kathy and Rex following her lead. Despite the slight haze that continued to reduce sunlight, the plants produced from the LTS canned seeds did all right, if progressing slowly.

With the entire small development where they lived finally surveyed for survivors, and useful items, the family simply stayed at home and concentrated on maintaining their situation. They'd found no survivors, but had managed to collect quite a bit of salvage that they would use themselves, or, hopefully, be able to trade away, if they ever contacted other survivors.

Rex had held off hooking up the communications gear to the outside antennas, fearful of another EMP or nuke attack, instead using one of the windup combo units to listen for other survivors. Finally, still having heard nothing on that radio, not even on the NOAA frequencies, he decided to try the amateur radio set up Jay had put together. None of the family was licensed, not even Jay, but Rex decided that the lack of a license was unimportant.

He spent the time he wasn't working, sleeping, or eating scanning the bands on the radio. He was ecstatic at hearing the occasional voice, but he was unable to contact any of those he heard. At least initially.

As fall passed into early winter, he made contact with an amateur that had survived in Upstate New York. Then three in the Ozark Plateau region. Slowly, day-by-day, week-by-week, a small radio network was organized, with regularly scheduled contact times and frequencies.

Always in the back of Rex's mind was the possibility of hearing from his father, since Jay had already used the resources of Amateur Radio Operators to get a message to the family. But as the months passed and the long winter turned finally to spring, there was still no word.

It was at that time that Dave Monroe showed up on the family's doorstep. Rex was using the garden tiller on the front yard, creating more garden space. Not only were they going to need the food themselves, they wanted a surplus for trade. There was a farmer not too far out of town that finally found the Amateur Radio Network and offered meat in trade for root vegetables, like potatoes, carrots, onions, and turnips. Soup and stew vegetables that would store well. Also corn and soup beans of several varieties. The Jones would get rabbit, chicken, and goat in return.

Rex's hand went to the pistol on his hip when he looked up and saw a man walking up the street toward them. His clothes were torn and dirty, but the rifle he carried over one shoulder looked clean and ready for use. Rex noted the signs of Dave having suffered through a serious

bout of radiation poisoning. His former head of carefully coiffed hair was gone almost completely. Only a few long strands remained.

“Rex! My boy! You did make it through!”

“Yes, Mr. Monroe. I see you did, too.”

“Where is your lovely mother and equally lovely sister?”

“I’m right here,” Kathy said. She lifted the barrel of the rifle up as she came out of the house. It had been trained on Dave from the time he’d first spoken, before she recognized him.

“You look fit. Everyone been getting plenty to eat?” Dave asked, walking past Rex and up to the front porch of the house, where Kathy stood.

“We’re doing okay,” Kathy replied. She made no move to set the gun down or invite Dave inside.

“Wish I could say the same. I came back to make sure you and the kids were okay, and take care you, since Jay is out of the picture.”

“Jay isn’t out of the picture,” Kathy said coldly. Remembering Roxie telling her how she felt when Dave looked at her, and the way she felt herself, Kathy had no intention of letting Dave become part of the family.

“We’re doing okay for ourselves until Dad gets home.” Roxie spoke from behind her mother.

“Why don’t we discuss it over lunch?” Dave said, looking at his watch. “I’m sure you can spare a bite for an old friend. One that has your best interests at heart.” He took one step up toward the porch, but Kathy stood where she was. She noted the watch on Dave’s wrist. She’d looked for watches once as a present for Jay and recognized the expensive Rolex. Dave didn’t have that kind of money.

“We don’t need to discuss anything,” Kathy said. Over her shoulder she told Roxie. “Fix Mr. Monroe a sack lunch.” Looking back at Dave, she continued. “I’m sure you want to see how your house has fared. Pick up a few things for your journey.”

Dave’s eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t planning on continuing. I’ve come back home to stay. Why are you treating me like this? I’ve come to take care of you. A woman alone, with two children, needs a man around to take care of them.”

“We’ve managed,” Kathy said. And we will continue to manage. Without your help or interference. You don’t look well. I suggest you join one of the groups over near the state line. They are crying for farm laborers.”

Kathy saw the angry flash in Dave's eyes, quickly hidden. He hadn't liked Kathy's dismissal, or suggestion he work as a laborer. He went up another step. "Far enough, Dave," Kathy said, lifting the barrel of the rifle slightly.

"You'd shoot me?" Dave asked. He barked a laugh. "You don't have it in you. You're probably dying to get a man back in your bed. But I understand you have to put up a front for the two brats."

Kathy's eyes flared in anger. Dave was becoming unhinged. "What happened to you, Dave?" she asked. "You wouldn't have dared speak to me like this before the attack."

Dave took another step up as he replied. "I've been through the wringer, woman! I stayed in my basement and got sick as a dog. You obviously had a real shelter, from the looks of the three of you. You could have invited me in. But you didn't. I couldn't take it after two weeks. I tried to get in here, but your security is too good.

"I went down to the city hall and they took me in, but we got a lousy cup of soup a day. I won't live like that. I deserve better. When the gang came through... Well, let's just say I found a way to survive."

"You told them to come here!" Rex almost yelled. He'd moved closer to the house, his hand still on his pistol grip.

"And it made no difference. None of them came back with the food and... well... I was to be well rewarded for guiding them to a successful score." He took the final step up onto the porch and grabbed for Kathy's gun.

He didn't get a hand on it. Kathy was ready for the move and stepped back smoothly. She probably would have shot him, except Rex had leapt up the stairs and tackled Dave around the knees. Dave went down hard, face first onto floor of the porch.

He screamed in rage and struggled to get up. But Rex had his arms in a tight hold. Kathy stepped forward, stooped down, and removed both the rifle from where it had fallen, and the pistol that was riding behind his belt in the middle of his back.

Roxie was standing in the doorway now, with a paper sack in one hand and her Glock in the other.

"You'll regret this!" Dave screamed as Rex stepped back and let Dave up. Roxie tossed the bag of food to him and Dave caught it automatically. It was either catch it or have it hit him in the face.

"You're lucky I don't just shoot you!" Rex said. He had his pistol out now, too. "Just for what you were thinking you'd do to my mother and sister."

"Why you little..." Dave growled and took a step toward Rex. But all three guns on him lifted and he knew he was a finger twitch from dying. Rather than dying where he stood, Dave

whirled around and tromped down the steps. His long strides took him away from the house quickly.

Kathy, Roxie, and Rex kept his back in their sights until he suddenly turned and ran between two houses well down the street.

“This is a problem,” Kathy said softly. “He’ll probably be back.”

“I won’t hesitate next time,” Rex said. “I should have just killed him.”

“No, sweetheart,” Kathy said. “I should have handled the situation better and not let it get out of hand. Now... We need to keep working on the garden. But no one works outside without someone watching their back. And we go back to locking up tight at night. Roxie, stay out of sight, but keep an eye on the street while Rex gets back to tilling the front yard garden. I’m going to lock the house down, except for the front door so you two can get in quickly. And don’t hesitate. I’d rather you come inside a hundred times for no good reason, as not come in when it counts.”

“Okay, Mom. Let me get my carbine,” Roxie replied. She was gone for just an instant, and came back carrying her favorite firearm, the bull-pup semi-auto action MSAR STG-556 .223 carbine. She handed Rex the rifle he usually carried. A short M1A in .308. He slung it over his shoulder.

“I got your back, Rex,” Roxie said, fading into the darkness of the living room.

“Thanks, Sis.” Rex went back to the tiller and started it up. He kept a watchful eye out, too, but trusted his sister to see anything he might miss.

Nothing happened the rest of that day or evening. The three Jones’ went to bed, a little tic of worry making it hard to fall asleep.

For three days nothing happened. But everyone stayed alert. It was well they did. Dave came back the fourth day and he came back shooting. From behind the corner of a house across the street, two houses down, he triggered three shots from the twenty-two caliber rifle he’d managed to find going from house to house in the rest of the neighborhood.

Rex, planting seeds one by one in a short row, yelped in surprise and grabbed the back of his left hip. Roxie, two rows over, also planting, looked up and saw Dave advancing. She started to take her carbine from where it was slung over her back, but Dave screamed out, “Don’t do it, girl! I’ll kill him where he lays.

Roxie’s eyes cut to her brother. He was holding one hand against his hip, laying on his side. His hand was bloody and more blood was oozing between his fingers. She looked around and felt a sense of relief when she saw her mother, her own carbine raised to her shoulder. She had Dave in her sights.

“Put down the gun, Dave!”

“No! You put yours down! I’ve got the boy’s head right in my sights. I’ll pop it like a watermelon if you don’t lay down your guns and come out into the street.

“Don’t do it, Mom!” Rex said through clenched teeth. “You know what it means. I don’t think he can shoot fast enough to get me. Shoot him.”

“Shut up, boy!” screamed Dave. “I’ll put a shot in your guts first, if they don’t lay down their guns and come out into the street.

There was the sudden sound of a gunshot and everyone jumped in surprise. Kathy pulled the trigger of her carbine when the barrel of Dave’s rifle lowered slightly. Roxie moved quickly, grabbing Rex by the belt and helped him up to run for the house.

Kathy was suddenly puzzled. Dave dropped the rifle and turned around, his back fully exposed to her. There was another loud boom and Dave went down. Kathy shifted her sights when another man came into view from around the corner of the house Dave had been using as partial cover.

“Don’t shoot!” he yelled, holding up a large revolver over his head with his right hand. To Kathy, it looked like the man only had the one arm. His left shirt sleeve was rolled up close to his shoulder and there was no arm extending from it.

When he started walking, limping actually, toward the house, Kathy turned to tend to Rex. “Help me get Rex inside,” she told Roxie.

“But the guy...”

“It’s okay,” Kathy said, looking back once at the man. “It’s your father. Now help me with Rex.”

Her eyes cut to the man. He was hurrying forward, but Rex was groaning and Roxie leaned down and help Kathy get Rex to his feet and inside to the sofa. She ran to get the first-aid kit and gave it to her mother.

Jay came through the door and went right to the three. No words were exchanged for a long time, as Kathy, with Roxie’s help, and what help Jay could give with his one hand, tended to Rex. The twenty-two round had gone in deep and back out, but the blood was dark red and oozing, not bright red and spurting. No arteries had been hit.

With that now apparent, Jay spoke again. “There’s someone with me that can help. I’ll be right back.”

Jay climbed to his feet awkwardly from the kneeling position he’d been in, and moved to the door. He waved his right arm and called out toward the street. “It’s okay! Come on up! Hurry! My son has been shot.”

Roxie had moved to the door and couldn't hold back any longer. Her arms went around Jay and she said, "I'm so glad you're back, Dad. I knew you'd make it."

His one arm around her back, Jay held his daughter tightly for a few moments. But then three people ran up and Jay stepped back, taking Roxie with him.

"Kath, let Dr. Tanner take a look."

Kathy hesitated, but when she saw the black bag the man approaching was carrying, she stood up and moved back. A woman followed the doctor and the two went to work on Rex. Kathy moved over and joined Jay and Roxie. Jay's arm went around Kathy and he held her gently as she concentrated on Rex.

The third person, a young man in his late teens or early twenties stood quietly, his back mostly to the room as his eyes scanned the area outside, a rifle in his hands. Roxie eyed him, and the man, feeling the gaze, glanced around. He nodded and Roxie nodded back.

After a few tense minutes Dr. Tanner turned around and said, "He'll be fine. The bullet did little damage going in, hit the hip bone, I think, and then, distorted, exited the back of his hip. It's going to be painful for a while, but he should regain full use of his leg."

"Thank you," Kathy whispered and went over to Rex. His eyes were open and he smiled slightly, despite the pain. "Boy, Dad sure knows how to make an entrance, huh? Dad?"

"Yes, son?" Jay stepped over to join Kathy.

"I'm glad you're back. What happened to your left arm?"

"Long, boring story, Rex. I might tell it some time, but not now. Let me introduce you to Dr. Marcus Tanner, and his wife and nurse, Sue. The stalwart young man at the door is Antonio Santiago. The three of them have made it possible to get back home."

"Don't let him fool you, Dr. Tanner said. "Jay saved all three of us. None of us would be here, but for his heroic actions."

"Now, Doc. Don't be blowing things out of proportion. Now, seeing the carbine over your shoulder, Roxie, would you stand guard and let Antonio lend a hand with Rex."

"Sure, Dad," Roxie said, un-slinging the carbine and taking Antonio's place at the door.

The group disappeared down the hall, with Rex being carried to his bedroom. Jay and the new people came back to the living room. Jay told Roxie, "Your mother is helping Rex get settled. Any chance you could put together a lunch for us? We've not been eating very well lately."

"Of course, Dad. Let me lock up and I have something ready in just a few minutes."

Antonio watched with interest as Roxie worked the control to close the shutter for the front door, the only one open, due to the past danger of Dave. "With Mr. Monroe out of the picture we should be okay, but the plan in the manual you left, Dad, always stressed not taking chances."

"So you followed the plan, huh?" Jay asked with a smile.

"We all read through everything, especially Mom. She refers to it all the time." Roxie went into the kitchen and Jay showed the three newcomers the hall bathroom. A chemical toilet was set up.

"All the luxuries. Finally," Sue said and shut the door.

The three men smiled and moved back to the living room to wait their turn. They talked quietly until Kathy joined them, and they moved the conversation to the kitchen so Roxie could join in.

The talk turned to what had taken place locally, the gentle efforts by Kathy and Roxie to learn what had transpired with Jay diverted. Someday Jay might talk about it, but not now. Not even that night when Jay cuddled with his wife in their bed in the master suite.

Dr. Tanner and Sue got the bedroom in the basement, and Antonio took the sofa. He said he preferred it to being down in the basement.

The next day, with Rex in a chair in the back yard, Roxie and Kathy showed Jay and the others what they'd done in the time after the attack. That afternoon, Antonio dug another grave in the side yard of the house next door and Dave was buried un-ceremoniously.

When A Plan Comes Together – Epilog

Less than a month later Rex was walking, with a limp, and back to light duty work. The garden was going well. Dr. Tanner and Sue were in great demand in the area for their medical expertise, and Jay, with Antonio's willing help, uncovered Jay's project pickup.

After a few preliminary tasks, Antonio turned the key, and the old truck fired right up. It smoked a bit for a minute, but then began to run smoothly. "Good work, Antonio," Jay said, slapping the young man on the back. "And you're sure you can switch out the gasoline engine for a diesel?"

"Yes, sir. That crate engine we found in that shop before we got here will fit. But what about fuel?"

"I can answer that," Kathy said, coming up to them to announce that lunch was ready. "One of the people Rex talks to on the radio regularly makes biodiesel. You said that would work, right, Jay?"

Jay nodded. "That's what I always planned. But I never got around to switching engines. I want to save the gasoline for the tiller and things like that. We'll just use the truck for emergencies until we get the diesel engine back here and Antonio can get it installed and we can get some of that biodiesel.

"Dr. Tanner and Sue will have primary use of it. Seems like that now that it is known there is a doctor able to work, he and Sue will be busy. Tell me something, Kath. Why haven't you had the truck out and been using it?"

"We didn't need it for what we were doing. The few trades we set up, the other party had means of transportation."

Jay nodded in understanding. His eyes drifted to Antonio. Roxie was talking to him. "I think we many need to start making a few more plans..." Jay said.

Kathy laughed. "Of course. You just aren't happy unless you've got a plan in the works."

"Nah," Jay said. "I'm only happy when a plan comes together."

End *****

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