



Lights Out

By Halffast

Chapter 1 – The Burst

“Damn it!”, he exclaimed.

Mark Turner didn’t curse often, but he was pissed. It wasn’t the fact that the lights went out that upset him. They did that three or four times a year in this older industrial section of town. What bothered him was the fact that the UPS unit hadn’t kept his computer running this time and he had lost over an hour’s worth of work. He picked up the phone to call computer support to bring him a new UPS and dialed their number with the help of the dim glow of the emergency lights. Nothing. He hung the phone up and then picked it up again, putting it up to his ear this time. No dial tone could be heard.

“Crap!”, he thought, “What ever happened took the phone system down too.”

Mark stepped out into the hall and some of the other accountants were already there.

“Hey, Mark.”

“Hey yourself, Jim.”

Jim Davis was Mark’s closest friend at work. No one could have guessed it by looking at them . They were complete opposites. Jim was six foot three, 215 pounds and had super jock written all over him. Mark was barely five foot nine, 185 pounds, and starting to go bald. Despite holding a black belt in karate and being a pretty good runner, he looked like a computer nerd. The two of them had spent countless weekends together hunting and fishing much to the chagrin of their wives.

“What’s the matter?”, Jim asked.

“Oh, it’s just that my UPS went bad and I lost a bunch of work.”, Mark answered.

“That’s strange, my UPS went down too. Maybe they bought a bad lot of them. Well, hopefully we’ll get to go home early with the power out and we can worry about it tomorrow.”

“Now, Jim.” Mark said looking over the top of his reading glasses with a sadistic smile. “You know that company policy says that we have to wait 30 minutes before we leave to see if the power comes back on, and you know that it will in 29 and a half minutes.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

After five or ten minutes of discussing the upcoming football season, the guys were interrupted by Suzy Smith, the office worry wart.

“Something is really wrong!”, she said.

“No joke.” Jim replied. “The power went out again.”

“No.”, she answered, oblivious to the sarcasm, “It’s more than that. I went out to my car to listen to the news to see what happened. The radio won’t work and the car won’t start either. So, I pulled out my cell phone to call my husband and it’s dead too.”

“Probably your car battery is dead and the power outage knocked out all the close cell sights.” Jim said.

“I don’t think so. The car will turn over...it just won’t start, and my cell phone is D,E,A,D, dead and I charged it up last night.”

“Let’s go take a look at your car.” Mark suggested.

When they got outside Mark noticed that there wasn’t a cloud in the sky and it was already starting to get warm outside.

“Man”, said Mark, “It’s not even 10 o’clock yet and it’s already hot.”

“Yeah”, Jim replied with a big smile, “That’s what I like about South Texas... you never have to wonder what the weather is going to be like in August.”

When they got to Suzy’s late model Mustang, Mark asked her to pop the hood.

“Now, try and start it.”

Suzy turned the key and the motor turned over but would not catch.

“See what I mean?” Suzy said mostly to Jim.

Mark reached down and pulled a plug wire loose and held it close to the engine block.

“Try it one more time, Suzy.”

Suzy engaged the starter again.

“OK, Suzy, that’s enough.”

“What’s wrong with it?”, she asked.

“Well, I don’t know exactly why, but you don’t have any fire.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see, you only need two things for an engine to run...fuel and fire. Gas and an electrical spark to ignite it, in other words. And, you don’t have any spark.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, Suze, I’m just an accountant.”

“Look at that!”, Jim shouted pointing to the north.

There were four distinct columns of smoke rising into the air. Three were in the direction of the airport and one was further to the east. One of the columns, the one that looked closest to the airport, was significantly bigger than the other three.

“I’m thinking that Suzy is right. Something IS really wrong!”, Jim exclaimed. He looked at Mark, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“E M P?”

Jim nodded his head.

“What’s E M P?”, Suzy asked.

“It stands for Electromagnetic Pulse.”, Jim told her, “It is a byproduct of a nuclear explosion and it knocks out electronics in the blast area.”

“You, you, you mean we’ve been nuked?”, Suzy stammered.

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions.”, Mark advised, “We obviously haven’t taken a direct nuclear hit or we wouldn’t be standing here. Jim, go try your car and I’ll try mine.”

As Jim walked toward his car, Suzy followed Mark to his Jeep.

“Well, if it’s not EMP, what else could it be? Oh, God, this is bad. I have to get home. What if we were nuked and we just don’t know it yet? What if...”

“Suze! Calm down. We don’t know enough to even guess what going on and panicking is not going to help no matter what.”

Jim tried the Jeep, but just like Suzy’s car it would turn over but not start. Jim had hoped that since it was a 1978 model and didn’t have a computer that it would be okay.

“My truck won’t start either.” Jim said as he walked up.

“What do we do now?” Suzy asked.

“Let’s go back to my office and see if my portable radio will work.” Mark answered.

When they got to Mark’s office he opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a small radio. He turned it on and all they heard was static.

“Well at least it comes on.” Jim stated.

“Why wouldn’t my car radio work?” Suzy whispered.

“If we got hit by EMP it probably burned out your car radio, but this one may have been protected some by the building and by Mark’s metal desk. Try 1200, Mark.”

Mark rolled the dial to 1200.

.....is the Emergency Alert System. Please tune to 640 AM for further instructions...This is 1200 AM, broadcasting on reduced backup power...This is the Emergency Alert System. Please tune to 640 AM for further instructions...This is 1200 AM, broadcast....

Mark spun the dial to 640.

...five minutes. This is the Emergency Alert System. Please stand by for an important announcement in five minutes. This is the Emergency Al.....

Mark turned the volume down.

“I guess we’ll know what’s going on in five minutes.”, he said.

As word got around that Mark had a working radio, his office began to fill up with people asking all kinds of questions and telling everyone what they thought was going on. When his office could hold no one else, Mark suggested that they all go to the break room. People kept pouring into the break room. After five minutes, Mark turned the radio up.

.....Ladies and Gentlemen, the Vice-president of the United States.

My fellow Americans, as you know, 27 minutes ago the power went out. Also affected were most of the communication and transportation systems in the continental United States, most of Canada, and parts of Mexico. This seems to be the effect of a large EMP burst. We are not sure at this time of the source of the burst and we do not know if it was accidental, an act of God, or a malicious attack. We do know that the burst is NOT the result of a nuclear attack. I repeat, we have NOT been attacked with nuclear weapons. As many of you know, the President and most of his cabinet were in route to his ranch in Texas on Air Force One. Since the burst, we have not had any contact with them.

“Oh my God....the President is dead!” Someone in the room cried.

“SHHHHHHH!!!” Many replied.

I am assuming command until we can contact the President. I am activating all of the reserve units of the military until we can determine the cause and source of the EMP burst. I am asking all of the state Governors to call up the National Guard to help local authorities until we can get the power back on. All off-duty police, fire, and emergency personnel should report for duty as soon as possible. I am asking all other Americans to remain calm and to try to get to your homes. Most of your vehicles will not run until the electronics have been replaced. If you have a running vehicle, please help your friends and neighbors to get to their families. FEMA will be setting up shelters in the major cities for those of you that can not get home. You can get information on these shelters here on these EAS stations, as it becomes available.

Our first priority is to get the power, communications, and transportation systems back on line as quickly as possible. However it may take a day or two to get the power back in the major cities and the rural areas may take a little longer than that. Please stay in your homes and follow the instructions of your local authorities. I am imposing a curfew for all Americans effective at dark.

This is an emergency that we Americans have not had to face before. I know that if we all pull together just as we did on September 11th, we will emerge from this stronger and wiser as a nation. We will keep you as updated as possible. Thank you for your cooperation and God bless.

This is 640 AM. We will be back in a moment with a list of FEMA shelters for the city.

Mark turned the radio off.

“What are we going to do now?”, someone yelled.

“Everybody just simmer down, now.”, Todd Rosenberg, the company CEO, instructed as he stepped up on a chair so everyone could hear him, “I would like to meet with all the department heads in the conference room in five minutes. Is Tom Baskins here?”

“Right here, Todd.”

“Good, Tom will you go see how many of the delivery trucks will run and then come to the conference room?”

“On my way.”

“OK...everybody else, please go out and see if your car will start. If it will, come back and give your name and where you live to Mark Turner here. If it won't, don't panic, we'll find a way to get you home. Come back to the break room or go wait in your office and just relax...everything is going to be okay.”

Almost every one made a mass exit toward the parking lot.

“Mark, can you get a pad and write down where everyone lives whose car will run?”

“Sure thing.”

“And do think you can dig up a map of the city?”

“I have one in the Jeep.”

“Great. Just try to keep everyone calm, okay?”

“Okay, Todd. Just one question.”

“Yes.”

“Who’s supposed to keep me calm?”

Todd smiled at the joke and then turned and walked toward the conference room.

Chapter 2 – The Exodus

Mark was worried about his family. As he walked to his Jeep to get the map he thought about how he was going to get them home. Jessica, his wife, and David, his 13-year-old were at the junior high. He knew that there was no way that Jess's brand new SUV was going to start. Samantha was at the high school where she was a junior. The junior high was only about four miles from the house, but the high school was a lot further than that. Mark wasn't really sure, but he figured it was between 12 and 15 miles...a long way to walk. Not nearly as long as the 32 miles he might have to walk just to get home. It was comforting to him to know that they should be safe at the schools until he could get there. As he was walking back into the building he heard a car start. It was Joe Babcock's old Volkswagen Rabbit. He walked over to the car.

“Hey, Joe. Looks like you're going to be Mr. Popular.”

“Yeah. Lucky me! I bought this Diesel Rabbit for the gas mileage, not because it was EMP proof. Look, Mark, I have got to get home. I think I'm just going to bug out right now.”

“Joe, I don't know how smart that would be. Everyone is going to hate you if you just leave and they won't forget it when the power comes back on either. Why don't you stay long enough to hear what Mr. Rosenberg and the department heads come up with. Probably they just want you to give a ride to the people that live closest to you. If not and you don't like the plan, you can leave then.”

“I guess you're right. This whole thing is just kind of freaking me out. I'm sorry”

“Don't worry about it. We all feel the same way and if my Jeep would start I would think about leaving too. Now, what part of town do you live in?”

When Mark got back to the break room, there were three people waiting for him. Two had diesel pickups and one had a diesel Cadillac. Mark was encouraged that perhaps the old diesel pickup that he had at home would run. He unfolded the map on one of the tables and started marking where the diesel owners lived. As he finished, Todd and the department heads came into the room.

“What have you got, Mark?” Todd asked.

“We have four running cars and trucks, all diesels by the way. Two live on the north side, one out just west of town, and the last one lives about 25 miles south of town, close to Poteet. What did you all come up with?”

“Well, best count we have 168 people to get home. Two of the bobtails will run, the older ones, the new one won't start, and the oldest semi tractor will run too. They're all diesels, too. Tom thinks that he can get the old gasoline flatbed truck that maintenance uses to run if he can get a new coil and points and something else, I can't remember what he called it.”

“Condenser?”

“Yeah, that’s it, since it doesn’t have a computer he thinks that that is all it will take. Anyway, maintenance is going to build some benches to put in the back of the bobtails and we’ll use them like busses, they can hold about 40 people each. While they work on one, Tom is going to take the other to see if he can find the parts for the flatbed. The semi is kind of worthless though because all the trailers we own have metal floors and there is no way to secure any benches down. Anyway, we are going to get everyone out into the parking lot and figure out where they need to go.”

“Todd, my old Jeep probably just needs the same parts that the flatbed does. Do you think that Tom could pick them up for me while he’s out?”

“That’s a good idea. We’ll see if anyone else has an older car that he thinks we can get started as well. You seem to know a little about cars, maybe you can help him?”

“Well, I was kind of a gear head back in high school, but that was all older stuff. I don’t know much about these new cars.”

“It’s not the new ones we’re worried about though, is it?”

“I guess you’re right.”

The two men walked out into the parking lot. While they were waiting for everyone to arrive, they listened to Mark’s radio again. The station was restating what the Vice President had said and giving the locations of the FEMA shelters. Mark thought to himself that things would have to be really bad for him to go to one of those shelters. When it looked like most everyone was there, Todd stepped up into the bed of his brand new pickup. It struck Mark as strange that just the week before he had been envious of the truck. Now it was serving the most useful purpose that it could...as a platform. Just as he was beginning to speak, Billy Newman, the head of maintenance, ran up and whispered something to Todd, then ran back off toward the maintenance building.

“OK, this is where we’re at. We have two bobtails that will run and maintenance is going to build some benches for the back and we can get you all home in them. It won’t be comfortable, but it’s better than walking. Tom and Mark are going to try to get some of the older vehicles fixed. If your car doesn’t have a computer, come see one of them and they will try to help you. We have four personal vehicles that will run and we’re asking them to carpool some of you home that live close to them. We have several hundred gallons each of gas and diesel for our trucks, and anyone that helps take people home is welcome to some if they need it. Billy just told me that the gasoline generator is working and that he can get the bobtails ready pretty quickly now that they can use the power tools. Tom was going to take one of the bobtails to get parts for the cars, but now that Billy can work on both of them quickly, would one of you that has a running car be willing to take Tom and Mark to the auto parts place?”

“I can take them.” One of the men with a diesel pickup said.

“Thanks, that will help a lot. OK, Mark has a map of the city and Billy should be bringing us a board to tack it up on in a minute. Suzy has got some pushpins and I would like everyone to come up in an orderly fashion and put a pushpin where you live. If you don’t live in town then put a pin on the edge in the direction that you live. I know that you are all nervous to get home, and we are going to try to

work it out so that we can get the most people home the quickest. If you live close and want to walk, that is fine. Human Resources has list of everyone and if you decide to walk, please let them know so that we make sure we don't lose anyone. Make sure you drink plenty of water before you leave. It's going to be really hot today. I wish we had some canteens or something so you could carry some with you."

"Excuse me, Todd." It was James Houseman from marketing. "We have some of those promotional sports bottles left over from year before last."

"Really? How many?"

"At least a couple of hundred, I would guess."

"That's great. OK, if you're going to walk home see James and get a sports bottle for water before you leave." Todd paused. "Here comes Billy with the board for the map. So, if you have an older car, see Tom and Mark. If you want to walk home see James and Mary from HR. Everyone else get a pushpin from Suzy and put it on the map. As soon as we get the bobtails ready we'll get started. Any questions?"

A woman in the back raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"My mother lives with me and she is on an electric oxygen pump. She can't go more than an hour or two without it, so I really need to get home to check on her."

"Good point. Does anyone else need to get home quick?"

About 40 hands went up.

"OK, I know we are all anxious, but does anyone else have a life or death situation?"

No one said anything.

"Where do you live, Sarah?"

Mark was always impressed by Todd's ability to remember everyone's name.

"Over close to the medical center."

"Mark, do any of the running car owners live close to there?"

"No." Mark answered thinking fast, "But I bet that Joe Babcock would be willing to take her."

"How about it Joe?" Todd asked.

“Sure thing!” Joe responded giving Mark a grateful look. “Cindy and Bill live close to me and I can take them too.”

“OK, then you guys check out with HR and get going. Joe, do you need any gas?”

“You mean diesel. But, no I don’t need any. I filled up last night.”

“OK, everyone else knows what to do, right?”

About 30 people came over to where Tom and Mark were standing.

Mark asked the first one, “What kind of car do you have?”

“An ’88 Taurus.”

“OK, everyone listen.” Tom began. “If you have a car with fuel injection we can’t help you. Everything since about ’85 has fuel injection and that means they have a computer. If you’re not sure we can go look and tell for sure.”

Almost two thirds of the group left with a dejected look. After looking at several of the other cars and eliminating them for having a computer they were left with four cars plus the Jeep and flatbed that they thought might be easily salvageable. Dave Thomson, the man that volunteered to take Tom and Mark, started up his truck and they all loaded up. On the way, Mark thought about his family and hoped they were OK. A look at the other men told him that they were thinking similar thoughts. It was hard for Mark to think that it was only about an hour ago that the lights had gone off. They listened to the radio and heard mostly the same news as before, except that the mayor had come on and asked all the police and fire personnel to report for duty. He said that the new city busses that were propane powered to reduce pollution were not working, but that about 20% of the fleet were still the old diesel engine busses and that they were still working. He said that they were working on a revised route schedule and would be passing it on as soon as it was ready.

When they got to the parts store, it was an independent store much to Mark’s amazement. He thought that they had all been run out of business by the big chain stores. Tom knew the owner and they had no problem getting the parts they needed and charging it to the company. Mark noticed that he had 9-volt batteries for his little radio and bought some. Dave figured it would be good idea to get a new serpentine belt for his truck and he when he didn’t have quite enough cash the owner just put it on an invoice and said that Dave could come back and pay for it when the lights came back on. On the way back, Tom commented on how he could have saved the company a little money by buying at one of the big chains, but that he and Todd thought it was a good idea to support local businesses when they could.

“It sure paid off for us right now.” He added. “Just try getting a favor like that from Manny, Moe, and Jack! If the computer is down those people don’t even know how to make change.”

When they got back to work, they decided that the flatbed was the priority and in less than fifteen minutes they had it running. There was a cheer from a group of onlookers that had come over to watch. Mark really wanted to work on the Jeep next, but he knew that everyone else was just as anxious

as he was. He told Tom that he could wait until last and Tom thanked him and ask him to drive the flatbed over to Billy. After he delivered the truck he walked over to Todd and the map.

“Hey, Mark. How’d it go?”

“We got the flatbed running and Billy is working on the benches for it right now. He said it should be done in about 20 minutes and it will hold about 18 or 20 people. How’s it going over here?”

“Good, so far we had 34 people leave on foot, 21 left in the 3 private vehicles and we have 77 out in the bobtails. That leaves us with 36 to still get home. As soon as the flat bed is ready we have a group of 17 to take to the northeast side. How about the Jeep, is it running?”

“Not yet, I told Tom that we could work on the others first. How are you going to get home?”

“Well, three others and I don’t live that far from Dave so I’m going to ask him to take us as soon as every one else is gone.”

“That’s good. Well, I better get back to helping Tom.”

“OK, but make sure you come see me before you go home.”

“Sure thing.” Mark answered wondering what Todd might want.

As he was walking over to where Tom was working on the next car, Jim caught up with him.

“Hey, old bestest buddy in the whole wild world, if you get the Jeep running will you give me ride home?”

“Well of course, under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“If we don’t get it running, you help ME push it home.” Mark said with a sadistic smile.

“OK, deal, smartass!”

“Well since it’s my Jeep, I think it’s ‘Mr. Smartass’ to you.”

Mark and Jim went over and helped Tom with the older cars. As they got them running, the owners would thank them and then drive over to see Todd, pick up some passengers and head out. Tom couldn’t get the third car to start even with the new parts. They worked on it for a while but finally had to give up. The dejected owner went to see Todd about getting a ride with someone else. When they got the new parts installed in the Jeep, Mark was nervous as he turned the key. When the CJ caught and fired his apprehension faded away. The three men climbed into the Jeep and headed over to see Todd.

“Good you got it running. You wouldn’t want to trade even for a brand new truck would you?”

“Todd, last week I would said have yes in a New York minute, but today I think I’ll just stick with my old rust bucket.”

“I don’t blame you. Do you need some gas?”

“Well, I don’t really NEED it, but I would like to top off the tank, if that’s OK.”

“Sure, why don’t you let Jim and Tom do that while we talk for a minute.”

Tom nodded at Todd and he and Jim drove the Jeep over to the fuel storage tanks.

“Mark, I want you to come to a meeting here at the office in the morning.”

“What is the meeting about, Todd?” Mark asked wondering what could be so important to meet about when the power would probably still be off.

“You’ll see in the morning, say 7:30. And, bring Jim with you.”

“OK, Todd. Whatever you say. Hey, where’s Dave? Isn’t he supposed to take you home?”

“I sent him on with the others. They were getting pretty antsy. Tom is going to take the flatbed and drop me off before he goes home.”

About then Jim drove back up in the Jeep. He got out and headed around to the passenger side.

“All gassed up and ready to go.”, he told Mark.

“OK.” Todd said before Mark could reply. “You guys get going and I’ll see you both in the morning.”

“OK, Bye.” The two friends replied in unison.

They climbed into the Jeep, Mark put it in gear and they headed out the gate.

Chapter 3 – The Trip Home

Mark glanced at his watch. It said 1:52. It had been almost four and a half hours since the burst. The first hour had drug by, but the last three and a half had gone pretty quickly.

“What do you think the meeting is going to be about?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe about how much the power is going to affect the bottom line? But, if it’s that, I don’t know why it couldn’t wait until the power comes back on. I just can’t imagine what could be so important.” Mark answered.

“Hey, does the radio work?”

Mark reached over and turned on the Jeep’s radio. He spun the dial, but there was nothing.

“Looks like it’s fried.” He informed Jim. “Turn on the portable.”

...confirmation that Air Force One has been found in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. There is no word yet on survivors. Rescue crews are in route and we will update you as soon as we have any more information.

It appears that most commercial airliners were disabled by the burst and there are hundreds of crashes being reported. One plane inbound to Las Vegas was able to crash land on a highway in the desert. The passengers and crew sustained mostly minor injuries, but all are expected to recover fully. Most of the aircraft that were airborne at the time of the burst were not so lucky. The dead, both from the air and on the ground, are expected to number in the tens of thousands. The devastation around the airports of major cities is indescribable.

The city of Cincinnati is awash in riots. The local police have been overwhelmed and deaths are reported to be upwards of 600 and rising. Between the fires from the jet crashes and those set by the rioters, the Cincinnati Fire Department has said that they can only hope to keep the fires from spreading to other parts of the city. The Governor of Ohio has called up the National Guard to put down the rioters and to protect the firefighters with ‘whatever means necessary.’ Riots have also been reported in Detroit and Seattle.

The Vice President has scheduled a press conference for 6 PM eastern time.

This is the CBS radio network. We now return you to your local programming.

This is KSTX in San Antonio, Texas. News 640 AM.

The six airliner crashes inside the city limits are pushing the San Antonio Fire Department to their limits. The three on the airport property are being allowed to burn and all effort is being put into the fires in residential areas. The drop in water pressure caused by the loss of electricity is seriously hampering their efforts. The Fire Marshall is asking that all municipal and volunteer fire departments

from area communities that have tanker trucks that they could send to help to please do so. Please report to the temporary fire command center at the corner of Broadway and Loop 410.

City Power and Light has stated that it may take several days to restore power throughout the city. A spokesperson stated that the first priority is medical centers and nursing homes that have no back up power generators.

All local hospitals are closed to non-life threatening injuries and illnesses. They have been inundated by the burns and injuries sustained by victims of the airliner crashes.

FEMA shelters are now open at most area high schools. Generators are being delivered to Judson, Madison, and South San high schools. Only the infirm and elderly who are at risk from the sever summer heat are being admitted at these locations.

The sunset curfew put into place by the Vice President will go into effect in the San Antonio area at 8:11 PM. SAPD has stated that anyone found on the streets after that time without a legitimate emergency will be arrested.

This is KSTX, 640 AM. We'll be right back after this break.

Do you suffer from the embarrassing effects of dandruff? If so, then we invite you try our new and improved...

Jim turned off the radio.

“Damn! It’s like the end of the world and they’re playing commercials?” Jim stated.

Mark ignored the rhetorical question. “Jim, if we had rioting here, like they are in Cincinnati, what would you do?”

“Well right now I would just get behind you. After all, you’re a bona fide Billy Bob bad ass black belt. Plus you have your concealed handgun license, and I know you have at least one hand cannon in this Jeep.” Jim said with a big evil grin.

“No, I’m serious. What would you do?”

“Well, if we could get out of town, we would go stay with Lisa’s parents in Uvalde. If not, then I would batten down the hatches and hope for the best.”

“Wouldn’t you be scared?”

“Yes and no.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, ‘yes’ because I would be scared for Lisa and the girls if things went really bad. And ‘no’ because have you forgotten who lives next door?”

“You mean Gunny?”

“Yeah, before a mob could even get to me they would have to get past Gunny and that old Garand of his and he loves the girls like they were his own grandchildren.” Jim paused. “The other thing I might do is to stay at your place. I doubt that rioters would get that far out.”

“I agree. Why don’t you guys come out and stay until this blows over? Besides, it would save me from having to come pick you up in the morning.”

“When we get to the house, I’ll ask Lisa.”

When the guys pulled into Jim’s driveway Gunnery Sergeant Marcus T. Pickwell, USMC (Retired) was in his front yard nailing a piece of plywood over a window.

“Hey, Gunny, what are you doing?” Jim called.

Gunny limped over to where Jim and Mark were standing as fast as his one artificial and other soon to be replaced knees would allow.

“I don’t trust these worthless sumbitches ‘round here to not go riotin’ like they’re doing in Cinci.” Gunny began. “I’m boardin’ up the winders on the front of my place in case they come by and start some shit. ‘Course I’m leaving a slot big enough at the bottom for Buhla. If’n I was you Jimbo, I’d do the same.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that, Gunny. Do you remember my friend Mark, from work?”

“The karate man, right?” Gunny said as he stuck out his hand. “That’s a pretty nice horseless carriage you got there, Karate Man. Use to drive one kinda like it in Korea. How’d you get it to run? My old piece of shit truck won’t start.”

“We replaced all the ignition parts.” Mark told him. “That’s probably all yours needs too.”

“Well, we better get in and check on the girls, Gunny.” Jim stated.

“I been keepin’ an eye on ‘em for ya, Jimbo.”

“Thanks, Gunny, I knew you would and it made me feel better knowing that you were next door.”

“What’s neighbors fer?” Gunny replied as Jim and Mark went in through the garage door.

“Who’s Buhla?” Mark asked.

“That’s Gunny’s 12 gauge riot gun. You wouldn’t want to get into an argument with her!” Jim informed him. “Man he sure likes your Jeep. The only thing of mine that he ever admired that much, except for the girls, is my M1A.”

When Jim’s girls saw him they both ran up and each hugged a leg. Lindsey and Lacy were 8 year old twins. Lisa was right behind them and grabbed Jim around the waist. She was almost as tall as Mark, thin with long blond hair and probably could have been a model if she hadn’t have married her college’s star tight end. Before the twins were born she had worked as an operating room RN. When their first child turned out to be two, she and Jim decided that she should stay at home to take care of them. Now she was home schooling them as well.

“Oh, Honey.” She said. “I was so worried about you. I’m so glad you’re home. Nothing’s working in the house and even my car won’t start. It’s so hot in the house, but I was afraid to leave the front door open. Gunny told me that the President is dead and that all the planes crashed and that they were already rioting in some of the big cities and ...”

“It’s OK, baby.” Jim said soothingly. “I’m here now and nothing bad is going to happen to us.”

“I know, but it’s just that this is the worst thing I have ever heard of...Oh, hi Mark.

“Hi, Lisa.”

“Baby, Mark wanted to know if we would like to go spend a night or two at his place?”

“I don’t know...I mean I’m sure that he and Jessica have enough to worry about without having guests, and I don’t know if it’s a good idea to leave the house.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Mark told her. “It’s probably too hot to sleep in our house too. How about we pull your pop-up camper over to our place and you can set it up in the back. We are probably going to spend the night in our camper too. If the generator still works we can use it to run the AC long enough to cool off the campers like we did at Big Bend. At least every body will get some sleep that way.”

Well, if you’re sure it’s no trouble. I know I would probably feel better out in the country than in town.”

“OK, here’s the plan then. You guys pack all the stuff you want to bring over. Put the most important stuff in the camper. I have got to run pick up my crew from their schools and then I’ll be back. If I can get the truck started, I’ll bring that and you’ll have room for a lot of stuff. If not, I’ll bring the Jeep back and what you get in the camper will be about all there’s room for. It’s almost 2:30 now. I’ll be back by, let’s say, 4:00.”

“That sounds great, Mark.” Lisa said. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem. After all...what’s neighbors fer?” Mark said as he winked at Jim.

On his way home, Mark figured he should probably stop by the house to see if Jess or the kids had perhaps gotten a ride home. As he was driving through one of the poorer sections of town, he noticed a lot of people eyeing the Jeep. He reached under the seat, unzipped a case, and put his Colt Lightweight Commander under his thigh. If someone wanted to car jack him, he figured the .45 was way better than the little .32 he always carried in his back pocket. As he drove he thought about what they might need. They had their own well and could run the pump with the gasoline generator. Mark was pretty sure that it would work since it was similar to the one that Billy had been using at work. He could fill up the camper tanks, and he had a couple of plastic 55 gallon barrels that he hauled water down to the deer lease in. That would take care of water. Food might be a problem. Jess was notoriously bad about waiting until there was nothing to eat before she went to the store. He knew that the camper had some food in it, but he wasn't sure how much was there or how old it might be. There was most of the deer he had killed last year still in the freezer. They would have to do something with that anyway with the power out. Before he knew it, he was turning into his subdivision. It was just over the Wilson county line and consisted of about 60 one to five acre lots, about 50 of which had homes on them. Silver Hills was surrounded by mostly medium size farms. Mark's four acres were toward the back, and when he pulled into the driveway, David was shooting a basketball at the goal over the garage.

“Hey, Dad!” David shouted as he ran toward the Jeep.

“How did you get home?” Mark asked.

“Mom and I walked. It only took us about an hour.”

“What about your sister?”

“The school bus brought her.”

“That's great!” Mark said as he headed toward the front door.

As he walked through the door, he noticed how hot the house was. It wasn't as hot as Jim's had been since all the doors and windows were open.

“God, I'm glad you're home.” Jess said as she came around the corner. She was 5'3” with red hair and green eyes and was just starting to get the tiniest bit plump. Mark remembered that the first time he saw her he thought she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. She was still pretty, and had an Irish temper that Mark had learned to avoid when possible. She had studied to become a marine biologist, but when there was no work in her field to be had, she had gone back to school to get her teaching certificate and now taught 8th grade biology and 7th grade earth science.

“I'm so glad you're all home. I figured I would have to pick you all up.”

“No. David and I walked home before it got too hot, and Samantha got a ride home on the bus.”

“Are all of the school busses running?”

“No. Only about half. Just the old ones. Remember that school bond that got voted down last year and how mad I was about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, some of that money was going to replace the old busses. Now I’m kind of glad it didn’t pass.”

“Do you know everything that’s going on?”

“Pretty much I think. We heard some at school and when I got home I went out to your shed and got your short-wave radio. I had to get batteries out of some of the flashlights to get it to work, but I’ve been listening off and on for the last two hours.”

“The short-wave works?” Mark asked surprised.

“Well, duh...It was in a metal cabinet in a metal building.”

“Good maybe everything in the shed was protected.”

“Maybe. But we don’t have any water. We only flushed a couple of times and washed our hands and then the pressure dropped to nothing.”

“Well, duh, Miss Science Wiz, the pressure tank is only seven gallons.”

“That’s stupid. It should be a lot bigger.”

“Well it’s not. But I think I can use the generator to run the pump.”

“Good. Can you do it now.”

“No. I have to go pick up Jim and Lisa and I want to see if the truck will run. We are going to bring their camper over and I figured that we could stay in ours until the lights come back on too. By the way, when was the last time you went to the store?”

“Day before yesterday, but I didn’t buy that much.”

“Is there enough to get us by for three or four days.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“OK, I’m going out to check the truck and the camper out.”

“Oh, before you go, Jon Olsen, you know that ex-marine that runs by the house early every morning, came over earlier and said that he and some of the other men were going to have a meeting at

his house after the Vice President's speech. He said they were going to talk about putting some kind of guard at the entrance of the subdivision. He said he really wanted you to come."

"Not another meeting!" Mark explained to Jess that he and Jim had to go into work tomorrow for a meeting. He agreed with her that it seemed silly, but since his boss insisted, what could he do. "Besides," he added, "I've kind of gotten used to eating on a regular basis, and having a paycheck insures that I can keep doing it."

"Well, I guess you got me on that one mister. What do you think about what Mr. Olsen wants to do?"

"I think that all of these old Marines are just a little more gung-ho than I like and they need to cool their jets just a little bit."

"I agree."

With that, Mark saluted his commander, smartly turned around and headed out the back door. He walked along the side of the shed and climbed up into the 1991 Ford F-350. He turned the key on and the 'Wait to Start' light came on. Mark waited...and waited...and waited. When it wouldn't go off he figured that the glow plug controller must have gone bad. He started to crank the truck and after several minutes of cranking it started and ran rough until the engine warmed up. He figured that if it was that hard to start when it was almost 100 degrees out side, it would be next to impossible at 75 or less. He let the truck run and went back to the camper that sat in its bed. The Lance slide in truck camper, or cabover camper as they were sometimes called, had served the Turner crew very well for a lot of years. He checked the water pump, the hot water heater, the propane refrigerator, and the built in stereo. Everything seemed to work. Probably the fact that the camper was sided with aluminum had helped to protect the components. When he tried to fire the built in propane powered generator, it wouldn't even turn over. Mark was disappointed, but he still had the old gasoline generator in the shed and he was pretty sure that it would work. It was noisier than the Onan in the camper, but it had a 220-volt outlet that he would need for the well. The camper was equipped with four electric jacks to lift it off of the truck. However, when Mark tried them, only the two that were closest to the shed would work.

"Damn." He said to himself. That was the second time he had cursed that day. That meant that he owed his 'bad word box' two dollars. He couldn't remember the last time he had a two dollar day.

Mark put the two working jacks down and then retrieved the emergency hand crank for the other two. After cranking for about 20 minutes, and now dripping with sweat he had the two broken jacks lowered to the ground. He loosened the turnbuckles that attached the camper to the truck and with several turns of the jacks on one side and just a push of the buttons on the other he was able to drive the truck out from under the camper. The camper would need to be lowered closer to the ground for them to stay in it, but that could be done later. He would have to hurry if he was to get back to Jim's house by four. He put the tailgate back on the truck and drove it up next to the house. He turned the truck off as it was thoroughly warmed up now and should start easy for the next half-hour or so. He ran into the house changed into a clean shirt and headed back outside. He got his .45 out of the Jeep and put it into the truck. 3:22 is what his watch said. He would get to Jim's a little before 4:00, he figured, but since

he had the truck there would be a lot to load, knowing Lisa, and he could help Jim so that they could get back to the house before the VP's speech.

When he got to Jim and Lisa's, Jim already had the pop-up pulled out of the garage and loaded. Lisa had the things she wanted to bring stacked up in the garage where the camper had been. There wasn't as much as Mark had expected. Mark backed up to the camper and he and Jim hooked it up. Then they loaded up the back of the truck.

"Do you think I should bring some of my guns?" Jim asked.

"If it makes you feel better." Mark said, think it was unnecessary.

"I'm just going to bring the Python and a shotgun for just in case."

"That sounds pretty good, I guess."

Jim went over to his gun safe that Lisa had made him put in the garage because it was too ugly to go in the house. He opened it and withdrew the .357 and the 12 gauge. He took out a holster for the revolver and some ammo and put everything except the shotgun into a small duffel bag. The shotgun he put in a soft case and then he placed all of this behind the back seat of the four-door pick-up.

About that time Gunny came hobbling over. "Gonna get the hell out of Dodge, huh?"

"We're going out to stay with Mark until the power comes back on." Jim explained.

"Gonna be gone a while, then. I'll keep an eye on your place."

"Thanks, Gunny. But we should just be gone a day or two and then the power will be back on."

"You really believe what you hear on the radio? Them slimy sumbiches in Washington are lying through their teeth. No way the lights are coming back on in less than a month, or maybe forever!" Gunny protested.

"Well, I hope you're wrong this time, Gunny. But thanks for watching the house. If you need anything, you know where the key is. We got to get going. Mark wants to be back home for the Vice President's press conference."

Mark pulled the truck and camper into the street, then he helped Jim push Lisa's car into the garage. Jim locked the house then they all loaded up into the truck and took off with the girls waving at Gunny standing out in his front yard. Jim drove a different route home this time. It was a little further this way, but it missed the bad section that he had driven through before. When they got back to the house, Jim set up his camper and Mark lowered his with some help from David. They almost had the campers ready when it was 5:00 and time for the press conference. They headed up to the deck where Jess had a cold pitcher of lemonade and Mark turned on the radio and sank into one of the lawn chairs.

Chapter 4 – The First Night

When the Vice President came on he really had no news to report. He confirmed that Air Force One had been found, but there was still no definite word on the President. Condolences were offered to those who had lost loved ones and promises of help were made to those who had lost their homes. He reported that the experts were still working on the source of the burst. He encouraged everyone to work with FEMA and their local authorities and he rebuked those who would start riots and make a bad situation worse. He assured everyone that most of the power would be back on in two or three days at the most. He promised that he would be speaking to the nation every day at this time until the situation was back to normal. Afterwards, one of the network's 'talking heads' came on to micro-analyze what the VP had said.

"I guess we don't need to listen to this." Mark said as he turned off the radio. "Jim, would you walk down to this meeting with me? Maybe your experiences in dealing with Gunny will come in handy."

The two men walked down the road and discussed what they had to get done before dark. Finishing setting up the campers was the first priority and then pumping some water was next. The women could fix dinner as soon as the campers were set up. Mark wanted to plug the deep freeze into the generator for a while too. Everything else could wait until tomorrow. When they got to Jon Olsen's house there were 15 or 20 men already there. Mark knew some of them and he introduced Jim to them. They were all cordial but none were very friendly. By the time Jon called the meeting to order, 5 or 6 more had shown up.

"I think the first thing we need to do is to put a 24 hour guard at the entrance to the subdivision. I think it should be two men at a time for four hour shifts." Jon began. "That means we need twelve men each day. If we have 24 volunteers then everyone will just have to do one shift every other day. We can alternate the shifts every week between day and night. That way nobody gets stuck on a bad shift forever."

Mark was watching most of the other men nodding their heads. "Excuse me, Jon, but even if we needed guards, why would we need them for weeks? The power is going to be back on in two or three days, or maybe a little longer than that out here, but it isn't going to be weeks."

"I know that's what they are saying, Mark, but we don't think it's true. Tell them Scott."

"OK." He said to Jon, and then turned to face everyone. "My name is Scott Simmons. Most of you don't know me, but those that do, know that I work for City Power and Light. I do repair work and today we were not too far from our office when the burst hit. We walked back to the office and they told us to get home however we could and that they would announce on the radio when they needed us to come back in."

"I don't see what that proves." Mark stated flatly.

“Let me finish. You see we heard that they also set home the crews from the two coal powered generating plants. Supposedly the whole plants and most of the spare parts were fried by the burst. Some of those parts have a six month lead time when things are normal. The factory that makes our control circuits supplies almost all of them for most of North America. The factory runs on electricity which they don't have. Even if they get it running on backup power, no telling how long it is going to take to make replacements for all of the generating stations in just the major cities. It's kind of funny if you think about it...They can't make electricity without the circuit boards and they can't make the circuit boards without electricity.”

“The good news is that our auxiliary LP powered generators were not online that early in the day. They only kick them in during the peak demand which is usually between 3 and 6 in the afternoon when it's the hottest. They said that they might be able to get them running again in a few days, BUT...they can only supply about 10 to 15 percent of the city's normal power demand, AND they run on propane that has to be pumped by, you guessed it...electric pumps. Then there is the job of replacing every transformer in town. I work for CPL and I don't even know how many there are, but they have to number in the tens of thousands. We have crews to replace 150 to maybe 200 in a 24 hour period. The worst thunder storm we have had in the last ten years took out just over 300 transformers. Think about it, sometimes after a bad storm some areas don't have power for two days and that's just to replace 200 or 300 transformers. Now we have to replace maybe one hundred thousand? All of the spares we had were on the ground outside behind the offices. One of the engineers told me that the EMP cooked them even though they weren't connected to the grid. You see the burst charged them and they grounded out through the ground. Now I don't know how long it is going to take the transformer companies to produce enough transformers to replace every one in America, but you can bet your sweet ass that it's going to take more than three days!”

“Did the engineers tell you all of that?” Mark asked.

“Parts of it. The rest is just common sense.” Scott replied defensively.

“OK, lets assume that Scott is right and it's going to be months or maybe even years before we have power again. What do you think that placing two guards at the entry is going to accomplish?” Mark argued.

“They can make sure that nobody gets in here if they don't live here or have business here.” someone in the group answered.

“How are they going to do that...shoot anybody they don't know?”

“They could shoot out their tires.”, a man Mark didn't recognize said and by doing so walked right into his trap.

“Well first of all, about 99% of the cars aren't running and even if some kids did come out here in a running car what are you going to do after you shoot out their tires? Now they're stuck here. Who's going to put them up and feed them? Or were you going to reinstitute the firing squad?”

No one answered for a long moment.

“Well, some of us would just feel better having a couple of guys with rifles at the entrance just to, if nothing else, discourage the riff-raff.” Jon said.

“Is it even legal for us to put armed guards on the road?”, Ted Petrie, a professor at San Antonio College, asked?

“It’s a private road. We can do whatever we damn well please!”, the tire shooter said with a smug look.

“If they were having riots in San Antonio, then I might agree to the guards. But until then, I think it’s silly.” Mark really wanted to use the word ‘stupid’, but thought better of it. He looked around and only saw three or four people nodding in agreement with him.

“Let’s take a vote. I think that only subdivision homeowners should vote though.” Jon said looking at Jim. “Anyone disagree?” No one said anything.

“All those that think we should post some guards and would be willing to volunteer, raise your hand.

Almost all the hands went up. “Looks like the ayes have it. If it’s OK with you guys I’ll make the schedule for the first week?”

Everyone who voted yes nodded their head.

“OK, then, I think that’s enough for now. If there’s nothing else?”

“Jon, can I say one more thing?”, Mark asked.

“Who could stop you?” Jon said, rolling his eyes.

Mark ignored the sarcasm. “I may disagree about the guards, but we are still all neighbors. Jim and I are going home and hooking up a gasoline generator to my well. If any of you needs water, just bring down something to put it in. Heck, if you don’t have anything to put it in, just come down and we’ll figure out how to get it back to your place.”

All of the men that had scowled so hard at him just a moment ago now looked at him like he was their best friend.

“Thanks, Mark.” Jon said. “I know we all appreciate that.”

The two friends had hardly gotten home when Scott showed up with a red wagon that had two five gallon buckets on it. He also had some electrical tools and offered to help wire up the pump. Scott said that they could pull the 220-volt receptacle off of the generator and wire it direct to the pump, but Mark told him that he wanted to be able to easily move the generator around. Scott asked him if he had any 220 plugs around. Mark didn’t and the only one he knew of was on the clothes dryer. After making

him promise 15 times to buy a new plug as soon as possible, Jess reluctantly agree to let them cut the plug off of the dryer. Ten minutes later the plug was spliced onto the pump and when Mark pulled the starter cord the second time the generator roared to life. They let it warm up for a moment and then plugged in the pump. The pressure gauge began to rise, and Mark felt the same way he had when the Jeep started. By this time there were almost 35 people at Marks house with everything from empty 2 liter coke bottles to a huge wheelbarrow with a visqueen liner in it. Everyone thanked Mark profusely and some even offered to pay. Mark thanked them for the offer, but declined saying that it was only the neighborly thing to do. After a while, when some were showing up for their third or fourth trip and others who had just gotten the word were showing up for the first time, Mark put Samantha and David in charge of the hose with strict orders not to accept any money. Then he went to the back to finish setting the camper up.

When he got to the back, Jim's pop-up was all set up, and Jim was standing next to Mark's charcoal barbeque pit cooking burgers.

"Man, that smells good." Mark stated, realizing he had not eaten anything since breakfast.

"They do, don't they." Jim said. "Listen, on the water, Jess and Lisa filled up both bathtubs, I estimated they hold at least 100 gallons each, and I filled your two 55 gallon drums and those three 5 gallon water jugs you have. I also filled up my camper tank, it holds 25 gallons, and I got the keys from Jess and filled your fresh water tank too. I figured your tank was at least as big as mine and that should give us at least 375 gallons."

"That sounds like a lot, but I bet it won't last long. Thankfully it won't have to since we can pump as much as we need.", Mark stated as he stared at the fire. He then leveled the camper, opened all the windows and vents, and turned on the refrigerator and the hot water heater. The camper ready, he helped Jim finish the burgers.

When the burgers were done, all of the water borrowers had gotten what they needed, and the two families sat down at the picnic table on the deck to eat. Mark said grace, and asked for the Lord to protect them and give them wisdom in the midst of this crisis. Jess had only bought one package of buns, which was usually more than enough for four, so anyone who ate a second burger had to eat it on plain white bread. When Mark and Jim were on their second burger, and David was on his third, a small older lady came around the corner of the house with an empty half-gallon milk jug in her hand.

"Excuse me, but are you the ones giving away the water?"

"Yes ma'am.", Mark said as he stood up.

"Could I bother you for some?"

"It's no bother. But don't you need more than just a half of a gallon?"

"I could use more, but this was the only clean container I had.", She explained.

Mark walked over to the woman. "Hi, my name is Mark Turner."

“Hello, I’m Abigail Petersen.” She said as she extended her hand to Mark.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Mark said as he shook her hand. “I have several 5 gallon jugs that are already full. Would you like to borrow one?”

“I would never be able to carry that much.” The woman who looked to be around 70 answered.

“Mrs. Petersen, that is why God put teenagers on the earth, just so we adults don’t have to carry the heavy stuff.”

“David!” Mark called.

“Yes, Dad.” David answered with his mouth half full of hamburger.

“Go to the shed and get the water jug with the spigot on it and take it over to Mrs. Petersen’s house.”

“Yes sir!” The boy answered swallowing the last bite of his burger and running toward the shed.

“He doesn’t have to do that.” Mrs. Petersen objected.

“Mrs. Petersen, the boy just ate about a half of a cow. You’re doing him a favor by letting him get some exercise.”

A moment later David appeared with a wagon with the water jug in it. Mrs. Petersen thanked Mark and she and David started out to her house. In just a few minutes David was back with a ‘Risk’ board game in the wagon.

“Where did you get that?” His mother asked.

“Mrs. Petersen gave it to me. She said that she used to play it with her grandchildren, but that they were all grown up now.” David said.

“I thought I told you not to take anything for the water.” Mark chastised.

“You said not to take any money.”

“Is that what I said?”

“It is, Dad.” Samantha came to the defense of her brother, which was something that did not happen often.

“Well, OK then, but I think you should consider it a loan, not a gift.”

“OK, Dad. Man, you should have seen the den in her house. It was full of animal heads. Most were from Africa, but she had some of the biggest whitetail deer that you have ever seen. She told me that her husband was a big time hunter, but he died about two years ago. Her house was so cool.”

“I’m glad you like it, because you are probably going to be hauling water over there on a regular basis until the power comes back on.” Mark told his son.

Mark looked at his watch and it said 8:07. The curfew took effect in four minutes. Mark and Jim moved the generator to where they could plug both campers into it. It was a 4000 watt model that was pretty quiet. They cranked it up, turned on the A/C units in the RV’s, and then ran a 100’ extension cord from it to the deep freeze. On their summer trips to Big Bend National Park they had discovered that if you ran the A/C for about two hours once the sun went down to cool off the inside of the camper, it would not be miserably hot when you went to sleep. Mark also figured that two or three hours for the deep freeze would keep everything frozen for a while. Jess, with Lisa’s help, moved as much of the contents of the refrigerator in the house to the ones in the campers, but there were some things that would not fit. Mark got his 100 quart Igloo ice chest and put 4 of his ‘ice bottles’ in it. He had found that if he took a 3 liter plastic coke bottle and filled it full of water and then put it in the freezer that it would freeze at colder than 32 degrees. The pressure caused by the expanding water would lower the freezing point. He wasn’t sure how cold they actually got, but he had found on his fishing trips to the coast that they would last a long time. He then placed the remainder of the food from the refrigerator in the ice chest.

With all of the work that had to be done finished and all of the children occupied, the four adults sat down at the picnic table and discussed the events of the day. They spoke mostly of what Scott Simmons had told the men. Jess and Lisa felt that, although Scott was nice fellow, he was just a repairman at the power company and he didn’t know what he was talking about. After all, why would the Vice President lie about how long it was going to take to restore the power? They wondered what the meeting with Todd was about for a while and then the discussion drifted to how it must have been to have lived before there was electricity. After what seemed like a short while, Mark looked at his watch again. It now read 10:33. Mark announced that he was going to take a quick shower in the camper and go to bed. Jim stated that he was going to do the same. The women decided to talk a while longer and said that they would round up the kids and come to bed in a little while and that they would shut off the generator before they did. Before he headed to the camper, Mark went into his bedroom and with a flashlight found the black box on his dresser. He pulled two dollar bills out of his wallet and put them in the box. After his shower, Mark wound up and set the alarm clock that stayed in the camper and climbed up into the bed. The last thing he remembered thinking was that so much had happened in the last fourteen hours.

Chapter 5 – The Big Meeting

When the alarm went off at 6:00 it startled Mark out of a deep sleep. He reached for the alarm, but could not find it. It took him a moment to remember that he was in the camper. He found the alarm clock, turned it off, and looked at his watch. He was calculating if he could get a few more minutes of sleep when Jess rolled over.

“What time is it?” She asked.

“Six o’clock, go back to sleep.”

“OK.” She rolled back over and pulled the sheet up around her neck.

Mark remembered that last night he had figured that he better get up at 6 if he was to make Todd’s meeting at 7:30. He usually gave himself 45 minutes to make the normally 35 minute trip to work, but with all of the stalled cars it might take an hour to get there. Most of the cars had been pushed to the side of the road, but there were a few that were still in the roads. He pulled on a clean pair of jeans and a polo shirt, put on his socks and shoes, then headed over to Jim’s camper to see if his friend was awake yet. There was a light on in the camper.

“Jim.” Mark whispered.

“Be right out.” He heard Jim whisper back. A moment later the door opened and Jim stepped out of the pop-up. He was dressed much the same way that Mark was.

“Which vehicle are we going to take?” He asked.

“Let’s try to get the truck started, I would rather take it, but if it won’t start pretty quick we’ll take the Jeep.” Mark answered.

They walked over to the truck and Mark cranked on it for five minutes or so with no luck. He was ready to give up when Jim asked if he had any starting fluid. Jim remembered hearing an old truck driver talking about using ether to start semis before they had glow plugs. Mark found an old can of starting fluid in the shed and gave it to Jim. When he engaged the starter, Jim sprayed the fluid into the air cleaner intake. The truck started almost immediately, but ran roughly for the first couple of minutes. While they were waiting for the engine to warm up, Mark got two metal and three plastic jerry cans out of the shed and put them in the back of the truck. He hoped that Todd would let him borrow some gas for the generator. When the idle smoothed out, both men climbed in and Mark eased the truck into gear and slowly let his foot off of the clutch. When they approached the entrance to Silver Hills, it was just getting light enough to make out the two armed guards. Mark stopped the truck and Manuel Hernandez stepped up to the window. Mark didn’t know the other man, but he recognized him from the meeting at Jon’s house and from the water line. Manuel was holding an old Winchester .30-30 and it looked like the other man had a short barreled Mossberg shotgun.

“Good morning, Manny.” Mark said. “Everything go OK last night?”

“Good morning to you, gentlemen.” Manny replied. “No problems so far. Where are you fellows off to so early?”

“Our boss told us to come in to work today.” Mark paused. “Hey, will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t know how long we are going to be gone, but will you tell the guards to expect us back. I wouldn’t want to get MY tires shot out.” He said with a wink.

“No problem. We’ll keep an eye out for you.” Manny promised. “Listen.” He was whispering now. “The chickens have been laying pretty good. I usually give the extra eggs away at work, but since I won’t be going in for a while, Rosa and I want you all to have them.”

“Thanks, Manny. We’ll come get them when we get home. That is very kind of you.”

“It was very kind of you to give all of us water, especially when you disagreed with us.”

“It was the right thing to do and you would have done the same.” Mark said humbly.

“Maybe. But I don’t think that some people would have.”

“Perhaps not.” Mark patted Manny on the hand as he eased the truck forward and onto the road.

The two men again discussed what could be so important that Todd would have them come in for. They came to the conclusion that Todd probably wanted to know how much money the company could spare to help its employees since they would be missing at least three or four days work. The company was always very generous to its workers, especially during hard times.

They didn’t see another car until they were well into town. Even then it was only a couple of cars and a few of the city busses. At least on the major roads, someone must have moved all of the cars that had not been pushed to the side. They were making better time than they thought they would. Jim commented that they were lucky that the burst had not come at the peak traffic time.

“Think about the west coast.” He told Mark. “The burst hit them at about 7:30. The way their highway system is always packed, they will never be able to get all the cars to the side.”

When they pulled up to the gate at work, Tom was there and opened it. Mark pulled the truck through and Tom closed and locked the gate. He then climbed into the bed of the big Ford and patted on the roof to signal that he was ready to go. Mark parked in front of the main office building and the three men got out of the truck and headed to the conference room. Todd was already in there and they all took seats, Jim and Mark on one side and Todd and Tom across from them.

“Good morning. You both have probably been wondering why I wanted you here today.” Todd started.

Both Jim and Mark nodded their heads.

“First off, how are you and your families doing so far?”

“Pretty good.” Jim answered first. “Mark pulled my pop-up camper over to his place and Lisa and the girls and I stayed over there last night.”

“You’re not on city water are you, Mark?”

Mark shook his head.

“What was it like with no power and no water?”

The two friends looked at each other and grinned sheepishly.

“What, did I miss something?”

“I have a gasoline generator that we use for camping and at the deer lease. One of the neighbors helped us wire up the pump on my well, so we could plug it in to the generator. Almost the whole neighborhood came over and got water last night. Then we plugged our campers up and ran the A/C’s long enough so that we could sleep comfortably.”

Todd and Tom looked at each other. Mark couldn’t tell if the look they were giving each other was one of amazement or humor; or, perhaps it was a little of both.

“Tell me guys,” Todd turned his attention back to across the table. “What would you do if the power was off for several months to a year?”

“Why are you asking that?” Mark questioned. “You’re the third person in 24 hours to suggest to us that the lights aren’t going to be back on in a few days. Do you really know something or are you just speculating?”

“For now let’s just play ‘what if’, OK.”

“OK.” It was Jim who spoke this time. “The first things to worry about would be water, food, and shelter.”

“That’s a good start. Let’s take those one at a time.” Todd said. “It looks like you guys have water covered as long as you have gas for the generator. What about food?”

“We probably only have enough at our house for the eight of us for another week at most. We would need to buy some. And, if you were talking about closer to the year, I would try to put in a garden and raise some livestock like chickens and goats, I guess.” Mark stated.

“Probably we have enough food at my house for another two weeks or maybe three.” Jim added. “Since Lisa doesn’t work she buys a lot of stuff in bulk to save money and if something goes on sale she buys a lot of it. We would have to haul it over to Mark’s, though. Lisa knows quite a bit about gardening and small livestock since she grew up in the country.”

“Then for shelter.” Mark took back over. “We obviously have our houses. But they are not meant to be lived in without power. Even with all the doors and windows open it was really hot in our house yesterday afternoon. If you had an old house that was built before they had central air and heat, you could get by pretty well. We would probably stay in our RV’s. At least we would until it cooled off enough to stay in the house.”

“That all sounds pretty good.” Todd noted. “What else would you be concerned about?”

Mark answered first. “The next thing I would be worried about would be medical care and then the education of my children and our personal safety.”

“I would be worried about our families and friends.” Jim added. “Lisa is already worried about her parents...What is the point to all of these questions, Todd?”

“What do you all know about the founder and chairman of the board of our company?” Todd asked.

“You mean Mr. Davis?”

Todd nodded his head.

“They say he’s crazy as a loon. Kind of a modern day Howard Hughes.” Jim answered.

“Crazy like a fox, maybe. That would be closer to the truth.” Tom spoke for the first time since the meeting started.

“You see, Mr. Davis has been concerned for some time that something might happen to disrupt our way of life. He bought a big ranch down where they built Choke Canyon Reservoir.” Todd explained. “He has about 2500 acres right on the upper portion of the lake. It is good farm land and is game rich. The lake is one of the better fishing lakes in the state.”

“We have fished and duck hunted on Choke. In fact our deer lease is not too far from there.” Jim offered.

“We know.” Tom continued. “We have a group of people, 19 families right now, that have been hand selected to move down there in case of, shall we say, a worst case scenario. We have very reliable information that the power can not be totally restored in less than 18 to 24 months. In that amount of time who knows what is going to happen. We know for sure that there will be more riots like they have had up north. It would be silly to think that when people can’t get food and water they won’t go

ballistic. We expect full scale rioting in every major city in the United States in the next two to three weeks.”

“So you are a group of those crazy survivalist?” Tact had never been one of Jim’s strong suits.

“Well, I don’t think we’re crazy, especially if what we think is going to happen comes to pass. But, yes. I guess you could say that we are survivalist.”

“Even if you’re right about the power, what does that have to do with us?” Mark asked.

“I think in a few days we’ll all know if I’m right or not.” Todd started. “But to answer your question, we have been watching the two of you for quite some time. You both have qualities and skills that we are looking for. We probably would have been talking to you anyway in the next 6 to 8 months and trying to slowly incorporate you both into the group, but the lights going out has forced us to accelerate our plans.”

“What do you mean you’ve been watching us?” Mark was slightly indignant.

“Exactly what it sounds like.” Todd explained not the least bit apologetic. “We know a lot about you and your wives. We are very selective about who we bring into the group. We don’t want any surprises, so we research our prospective members thoroughly.”

“I don’t like the fact that you have been spying on us, but what is it that makes you think you want us in your ‘group’?”

“You both have outdoors skills. You know how to hunt and fish and we don’t have anyone that has real skills in those areas. Mark, we were impressed by the fact that you’re a black belt and teach a karate class. We want the whole group to learn karate for both fitness and defense. Your wife is a school teacher and we have a lot of children who are going to need educating. Jim, we know that you are an accomplished marksman. You shoot long range rifle matches and you almost always come in first, second, or third in those pistol matches you go to...what do you call them?” Todd asked Tom.

“IDPA.” Tom informed him.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Todd continued. “We want someone who can teach our people to shoot. Plus your wife is a real treasure trove of skills. She has skill with livestock, knows how to home school, and is an RN. We have a doctor in the group, but we could really use a nurse, especially one who has experience in the operating room. We know you both go to protestant churches regularly, and that you are both fairly conservative politically. Your family values fit in with our philosophy and you would be welcomed members to our group.”

“So why would WE want to join your group?” Jim inquired.

“Well we are totally set up logistically. We have enough food stored for everyone for three full years. Plus we have a tractor and seed to plant and grow our own food. We have cattle, chickens, and rabbits. We have a good well and a diesel generator for the pump with enough fuel to last 10 years. We

have running vehicles and gas. We not only have a doctor, but we have medical supplies and a good supply of medicine. Each family has their own cabin to live in that is set up for no or little power like you were talking about, Mark. The location is very remote and secure. Just in case, we have weapons and security measures for the possibility of someone attacking us. We have the means to make it through almost any crisis. Your families would be fed, sheltered, and protected with us. It is an ideal situation to be in if 'the shit hits the fan'."

"It sounds like you've thought of everything." Jim said.

"We've tried to." Todd responded. "And Mr. Davis has spared no expense to make sure that we have everything we might need."

"You mentioned that we fit in with your philosophy. Can you tell us exactly what your philosophy is?" Mark asked.

"We are conservative and believe in the constitution. We want to protect and maintain the ideas that created this great nation. That is the belief in God, hard work, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I'm starting to sound a little corny. Basically, we are all protestant, we...."

"Excuse me Todd, you're protestant?" Mark asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

"I always thought you were Jewish."

"The Rosenberg threw you, huh?" Todd smiled. "My great-grandfather was a Jew from Russia. He came to America in 1896 and converted to Christianity. I go to a Baptist church. In fact that is where I first met Mr. Davis."

"I'm sorry, I just assumed...." Mark started to apologize.

"That's OK, you're not the first to make that assumption, and you probably won't be the last. Anyway, back to our philosophy. We believe that charity is the churches job, not the governments. We believe that if a man wants to eat, he has to work. That the destruction of the family unit has become the downfall of our nation. Mr. Davis feels that a national tragedy just might bring our country back to our core values and morality."

"Well, I think that Mark and I agree with all of that, right buddy?" Jim stated.

"Yes, I agree. So what is next?"

"We want you and your families to come out and see the ranch whenever you would like. It's best if you can stay two or three days. Here is a map of how to get there. We think that once you see it, it will be easy to decide. But, no matter what you decide, we want you and your families to be OK. With the power out, the ATM's won't work, and no one is going to take a check or credit card. Cash is king, at least until everyone figures out that it's worthless. We are advancing each of you your next

\$10,000 of salary in cash. Also we are going to give you your Christmas bonus now. It is \$2,000 face value in pre '65 silver coin. Yesterday morning it was worth about \$7,000. Today, who knows? Use the cash until people won't take it any more, then use the silver."

"I don't know what to say, Todd." Mark said with his mouth half open.

"Me either. I'm speechless." Stammered Jim.

"Just say 'thank you'." Todd said with a big smile as he handed each man a briefcase.

"Thank you." They both said in unison.

"Is there anything else that we could do for you?" Todd asked.

"I was wondering if I could fill up my truck with diesel and take some gasoline for my generator?" Mark asked back.

"Take all you need. Tom and I are moving our families down to the ranch this afternoon and we are not coming back until this all blows over."

"Shoot! I was hoping to try and fix my truck and get it out of here in the next day or two." Jim said.

"Here, take my keys to the gate and to the fuel tanks." Tom offered. "That way you can get your truck whenever you want and get fuel whenever you need it. At least until the riots start. I wouldn't get caught in town once that happens."

"Thanks."

"Anything else?" Todd asked.

"I don't think so. I don't know how to thank you guys."

"Well, we hope you do it by joining us at the ranch, but if not, you can thank us by making it through this mess." Tom answered.

"Just two more things." Todd was talking this time as everyone was shaking hands. "First, when you come out to visit, tie this yellow bandana on the antenna of your truck. That way, we'll know it's you. Second, and this maybe the tough one, the offer to join with us and stay at the ranch is only for you and your wives and children. No relatives or friends. We just don't have the resources to take in everyone."

"We understand. We'll talk it over with the girls and then I'm sure we'll be out to visit." Mark promised.

Chapter 6 – Favors

The two men were still in shock as they walked back to the truck.

“What do we do now?” Mark asked Jim.

“Let’s talk about it while we’re getting the fuel.” Jim suggested.

Mark drove the truck over to the fuel tanks and he filled up the truck while Jim worked on the jerry cans. They thanked Todd and Tom again when the pair stopped in the flatbed to say goodbye and remind the friends to lock the gate. Jim really wanted to see if he could get his truck fixed so they decided to go back to the auto parts store to try to get the parts. Mark was a little uncomfortable with having over \$30,000 dollars in the truck. He pulled the Colt out from under the seat, pulled out his shirttail and put the .45 in an inside the waist band holster on his right hip. He also snapped a double magazine holder onto his belt on his left side. They each took \$500 out of their briefcases and then placed them behind the back seat of the truck where they couldn’t be seen. After they locked the gate, Mark drove to the parts store that he had gone to yesterday with Tom. They noticed that most of the small Mom and Pop stores were open and that most of the big chain stores were closed. When they got to the auto parts, Mark thought it best for him to stay in the truck with the money. He gave Jim a list of parts he wanted for the truck and the Jeep. Jim was in the store for 20 or 25 minutes. When he came out the shop owner was helping him carry out some bags. The owner shook Mark’s hand and then handed him a small box.

“This is the glow plug controller for you truck. But, I don’t know if the burst got to it or not. If you’ll just sign this invoice for it, you can pay me later or bring it back if it’s no good.” He told Mark.

“Let me pay for it.” Mark argued. “I don’t like to owe people.”

“No. I insist.” The parts man said. “I owe Tom and your company so much. If it wasn’t for you all, I might not still be in business. Your friend paid me for everything else, but I won’t take money for a part that might not be good.”

“OK. Thank you.” Mark said as he signed the invoice.

“No problem. You fellas just come back if you need anything else.”

Jim climbed back into the truck and thanked the parts man one more time. They backed out of the parking lot and headed back to Jim’s truck. Jim explained to Mark that the parts store owner had told him that the computer on the ‘91 Chevy only controlled the spark advance and the fuel mixture for the throttle body. He said that Chevrolet had been making basically the same small block motor since 1955 and that lots of the parts were interchangeable over most of those years. He sold Jim an aftermarket performance intake manifold and carburetor, and a vacuum advanced distributor with everything he needed to convert his truck. He told Jim how to install the parts and told him that it should only take two or three hours. Jim figured that the money for the new parts was wasted if the lights came back on, but if they didn’t it was a good investment. It was a worth the gamble to make sure

he had transportation, he figured. When they got back to work, they pushed Jim's truck into the shade, pulled the toolbox out of Mark's truck, and started to work.

"Do you think that Todd is right about the power?" Mark asked.

"I don't know. Like you said, he's the third one to say it. Gunny is kind of a conspiracy theorist, so I take everything he tells me about that kind of stuff with a big grain of salt. But, sometimes, he is right. I thought that Scott was a complete nut job at first, but he seemed pretty normal when he came over and helped us last night. And, now Todd tells us the same thing. We know he is intelligent, and I have never known him to lie. Heck, I can't ever remember him being wrong since I've known him." Jim rambled.

"What do you think so far about joining their group?"

"Well, Lisa is not going to like it if we can't have her parents out. But we have to at least go see the ranch."

"I agree...Hand me that 9/16 inch socket...The way I see it, we have three ways to go. First, if Todd is wrong, then we just go back to the way things were. But, if he's right, then we could go to the ranch or we could stay right where we are. You and Lisa are welcome to stay with us as long as you like, and it wouldn't be a problem for her parents to stay either. Heck, if we have to start raising our own food, I'd kill to have her dad's expertise."

"Thanks, Mark, if the power stays off I don't think we would want to be in town. I agree with Todd and Tom on that at least. If things go back to normal or if we go stay at the ranch we don't really need anything. But if things go bad and we stay at your place what do we need?"

"Man, a ton of stuff. Fuel, gardening stuff, canned food, building materials, fencing, animals, ammo, medical supplies...I can't even imagine what all we might need."

"When we get back to your house we can sit down with the girls and make a list. They're about twice as smart as we are anyway." Jim grinned.

"They're not that smart!" Mark retorted. "After all, they married us!"

After about two and a half hours, Jim tried the starter. The Chevy Z71 seemed like it wanted to start, but just wouldn't quite fire. Mark got a wrench and loosened the new distributor. He turned it counter clockwise about 20 degrees.

"Try it now Jim."

Jim hit the starter and the engine roared to life.

"Hot damn! It runs. What did you do?"

“I just retarded the timing a little. It sounds like the idle circuit on the carb needs adjusting. Hand me a regular screwdriver.”

Mark made a few adjustments to the Holly carburetor and the new distributor, then he replaced the air cleaner. Jim pulled the truck over to the gas storage tank and they topped off his tank. Mark was glad that they had gotten Jim’s truck running. It was lifted and had 35 inch tires on it. It would go almost anywhere the Jeep would, but unlike the Jeep had the capacity to carry a decent load. It had a winch on the front that was useful for many chores. It would make their lives easier to have two running trucks.

“What now?” Mark asked.

“Feel like working on another truck? I bought the parts for Gunny’s truck. Plus, I think I want to get the rest of my guns and clean out our cupboard.”

“OK. His should be easy to fix next to this one. While I’m working on it, you can get what you want out of the house.”

Jim led the way, and he went through the bad neighborhood. Mark wished that he had gone the long way. He wondered if Jim remembered how much money he had in the truck. He reached down and made sure the Colt was in a position where he could get to it with the seat belt on. Mark noticed that there were more people out and in larger groups than the last time he drove through here. He was nervous, but no one tried anything, although they received a hard look from more than one of the groups. When they got to Jim’s house, Jim backed his truck up into the driveway and then Mark backed in right beside him. He figured that Jim might have more than he could put into his truck. About the time that Mark got out of his truck, Gunny came limping out of his house.

“Hey, Jimbo!” He called. “You got that sissy wagon running, huh?”

“Yeah, Gunny.” Jim answered. “Mark helped me fix it.”

“Ah, Karate man. You good with a wrench too?”

“You better hope so, Gunny. I bought some parts for your old truck and Mark is going to try to fix it for you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Gunny.” Mark said as he pulled his toolbox out of the bed of his truck. “Should we get started before it gets too hot?”

“What ever you say, Karate Man.”

Mark worked on the old Dodge while Gunny paced and fretted like an expectant father. He wasn’t as fast as Tom, but it was still only 30 minutes before the engine was resurrected. Then Mark took one of the Jerry cans and topped off Gunny’s tank. Gunny was so happy he shook Mark’s hand

until Mark was sure his shoulder joint was worn out. Then Mark went to see how far along Jim was. When he got into the house, Jim just about had all of the canned and dry food in boxes. Mark started carrying them out to the trucks. When all of the food was loaded, Jim opened his safe and put all of his long guns in cases and placed them in the extended cab of his truck. Then he got all of the pistols and revolvers, they were already in cases or boxes, and stacked them on top of the rifles and shotguns. His ammunition was all in metal GI ammo cans that were clearly labeled as to what was in them. These he placed in the bed of Mark's truck as the back of his was quite full. When they were getting into the trucks, Gunny came out of his house with a box of his own.

“Here are some books that you guys might find useful.” Gunny offered.

Mark looked down in the box and saw a series of books called “Foxfire” and a large book named “Back to Basics”. Mark didn't really want to take the books, but his Grandfather had taught him many years ago that people don't offer anything that they don't want you to take. “So,” His Grandpa used to say. “if they offer, you take it and say ‘Thank you’.”

“Thank you, Gunny.” Mark said as he took the box. “Listen, yesterday you said that the lights won't be back on for quite a while. Why do you think that?”

“That EMP is some bad shit.” Gunny started. “We studied it in the Marines. It cooks everything electrical unless it's protected. All of our trucks and radios and stuff had special parts that were supposed to be EMP proof...I just don't see how there's any way they can fix all of the damage that the burst did in two or three days. It'll take months, at least.

“But, the Vice President is saying that they can do it.” Jim argued.

“Jimbo, you have a tendency to hear what you want to hear. You remember the President that said “Read my lips...”? I believed that President, but that didn't make what he said true, now did it? Well this guy we got now used to work for that President. I don't blame him though, and he's a damn sight better than the donkey boys we almost ended up with if that mess in Florida had gone the other way. You see, he has to say they can fix everything. Otherwise the whole shebang will come crashing down. When people figure out that the power isn't coming back on, they're going to go feral and do what ever they have to do to get by. Most of the people around here think that bread, milk, and eggs come from the grocery store. They have no idea how to or the means to provide for themselves. When the grocery store shelves are empty and the faucets won't run the shit is really gonna hit the fan. The VP is just trying to postpone the inevitable, I suppose. Now you boys get going, you hear.”

“Gunny, here's a map to my house. If things get bad, you come on out, OK.”

Gunny took the map, looked at it, and then handed it back to Mark.

“I appreciate that, Karate Man. But you boys don't need a broken down old geezer like me to worry about. Now scoot before I put a boot up your ass.” With that he turned and walked back into his house.

Chapter 7 – Dilemmas

The two men just stared at the door that slammed behind Gunny.

“That’s the closest I’ve ever seen him get to being emotional.” Jim said in disbelief. “Oh well, first time for a lot of things in the last two days. What do you want to do now, Bud?”

“I need to run by the hardware store and I wouldn’t mind getting a little more ammo from the gun store, but with all this stuff in the trucks, I’m as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Let’s go home. I’ll feel a lot better when all this money is in the safe.”

“Hey, do you think we should move my safe over to your house?”

“If the power isn’t back in a couple of days, then that is probably a good idea. We’ll need a couple of more guys to help put that heavy bastard in the truck though.” There goes another dollar, Mark thought.

Mark had started putting money in his ‘bad word box’ when he became a brown belt. It was part of his training to become a black belt. His instructor required him to put a quarter in the box for every curse word. It had really made a difference in his language. When he got his black belt, he was no longer required to do it, but he did and even decided to up the charge to a dollar. After all, Mark believed, being a black belt is about discipline and self control. And, anyone with a black belt should be able to control his own mouth.

The two men got into their trucks and slowly worked their way out of the subdivision. When the two trucks approached the entrance to ‘Silver Hills’ it was almost 2:00. Mark slowed his truck way down and stuck his hand out of the window to wave at the guards. They waved back and he made the turn into the subdivision. Jon and Scott were on duty.

“Hey, Jon, Scott.”

Jon was holding a pre-ban Colt AR-15 and Scott had a scoped bolt-action hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. Jon also had a Beretta pistol in a military holster on his side.

“Hey, Mark.” Jon returned. “Are you going to pump water again today?”

“I can. What time do you think is good for everyone?”

“We are going to get together at my house after the Vice President’s speech again today, just to discuss what’s going on. How about right after that, just like last night?” Jon suggested.

“Sounds good.”

Mark and Jim drove to the back of the subdivision and parked their trucks behind the house. The girls were on the deck, under the awning. Lisa was going over some math with the twins, and Jess was reading a book. Samantha and David were nowhere to be seen.

“Jim, you got your truck running?” Lisa shouted as he got out.

“Yes, ma’am.” He answered.

“How did the meeting go?” Jess asked as the men stepped onto the deck with the brief cases.

“Pretty good.” Mark said with a big smile. “Wouldn’t you say that it went pretty good, Jim?”

“As a matter of fact, I would.” Jim grinned.

“You guys look like the cat that just swallowed the canary.” Lisa accused. “What’s up?”

“Oh, just this!” Jim stated as both men set the briefcases down and opened them for the women to see.

Both of the women’s jaws fell open.

“Where did you get that?” Jess stammered.

“Todd gave it to us.” Mark answered as Jess reach out to touch the money, like she wanted to make sure it was real. “It is an advance on our salaries and an early Christmas bonus.”

“How much is it?” Lisa inquired.

“It’s \$10,000 in cash.” Jim answered.

“What’s with the rolls of coins?” Jess wanted to know.

“That’s the Christmas bonus.” Mark responded to even more quizzical looks on the girls’ faces. “You see these are all pre ’65 dimes, quarters, and half dollars. That means that they are 90% silver. They have real value and will be worth something if and when the paper money is not.”

“But, I don’t understand. Why would Todd give you all of this when you’ll be back at work next week?”

“He doesn’t think we will be back at work anytime soon.” Mark said.

Lisa shooed the twins away to go play and the adults all sat down at the picnic table. Mark and Jim explained to the women what they had been told at the meeting and about the offer to stay at the ranch with the group. Jess was a little skeptical, but Lisa didn’t like it at all. The four of them debated the pros and cons of Todd’s offer. After discussing it for a while, they agreed that they owed it to themselves to at least go look at the group’s setup at the ranch. But, the women wanted to wait and see if the power would come back on first. They decided that if the lights weren’t back on in the city by day after tomorrow at noon, they would make their visit. They also discussed what to do with the money in

case they decided to stay where they were. Lisa suggested that they each work on a list independently and then that they compare them later.

“After all, it’s not like we need to spend it if the lights come on.” She said.

Every one agreed that this was a reasonable course of action. The men carried the cases into the den and Mark opened his large gun safe. They put the cases on the top shelf of the safe and then carried in Jim’s guns. The handguns all fit easily but there wasn’t room for all of the long guns. The men decided to remove some of the less expensive .22’s and shotguns and place them in a locking closet. They then carried all of the food into the house and put all of Jim’s ammo in the shed next to Marks. Mark put Gunny’s box of books in a cabinet in the shed. While they were doing that, Jess was warming up some soup and making grilled cheese sandwiches for the men. The gas stove would at least work until the propane ran out. While Mark and Jim were eating, the women sat down with them, and they all discussed what might happen if the power didn’t come back on pretty soon. They all agreed that things could get quite bad. When it came to food, most people could get by for a week or maybe two without having to buy much. Some couldn’t but even they could probably borrow enough for a while. And then there was water. As soon as there wasn’t enough water pressure in town for drinking and flushing people would panic. None of them knew how or for how long the City Water Board could keep pressure if the lights didn’t come back on. The women thought that maybe it would be a good idea to go ahead and buy some food if the grocery store was open. After all, they needed to eat whether they had lights or not. So, the food wouldn’t go to waste. And, it might be too late if they waited.

While they were talking about groceries, Mark remembered that Manny had promised him some eggs. He asked where David was so that he could send him over to the Hernandez house, but was told that he was over at his friend’s house. Samantha, he learned, was in the camper listening to her CD’s on a walkman and generally feeling sorry for herself. Mark called her out of the camper to see what was wrong. It seemed that no one could be expected to live without a telephone, especially a 16-year-old. Mark instructed her that people had lived for centuries without telephones and that they walked to other people’s houses to visit. Just so that she could see how it was done, she could walk over to the Hernandez’s and get the eggs that Manny had offered.

“But, Dad. Do I hafta?” She whined.

“Yes. You hafta!” Mark whined back in a sarcastic voice. “Now get going and just be glad he’s not giving us a side of beef.”

Samantha rolled her eyes at her father as her mother handed her an empty egg carton. She turned and walked off, slightly stomping her feet, knowing exactly how far she could push it and not get into trouble.

“That girl,” Mark thought to himself, “Why does she always have to be so moody. Jess isn’t like that...I wonder where she gets it from. If I had told David to go get the eggs, he would have just said ‘Yes, Sir’ and been back in less time than I spent arguing with her.”

Mark sat back down at the picnic table with the rest of the adults and they listened to the news on the radio.

The city of Cincinnati has been almost totally burned to the ground. Fire crews were unable to successfully battle the hundreds of fires that were set by the rioters. The National Guard was not able to squash the riots in time to save the city. Most of the citizens were able to evacuate, many just on foot as most of the streets in the city were blocked by burning cars. However, it is estimated that fifty to sixty thousand were trapped by the fires and unable to escape.

The situation in Detroit is much the same. Over half of the city has been lost. Fire crews are gallantly trying to save the area where most of the automotive plants are located. The Mayor of Detroit ask the Governor of Michigan to send National Guard troops in to put down the rioters, and to seize fire fighting equipment from other cities to help fight the fires in his city. The Governor has called up the National Guard, but as of now, there is no word from the capitol on seizing the property of other municipalities.

The riots in Seattle were quieted quickly once the Mayor of that city ordered police to shoot arsonist on sight. Police report over 400 arrests connected with the riots and twelve deaths. Fire crews in Seattle were helped by the rain that has been falling there since yesterday.

Sources inside the Pentagon have hinted that the burst was the result of a nuclear explosion in space. Our CBS experts have theorized that such an explosion would pose little or no risk of radioactive fallout to the United States, but would cause the kind of wide spread system disruptions we have seen. There was no word on who may have caused the explosion or how.

It is rumored that in his speech to the nation tonight, the Vice President will confirm that the body of the President has been recovered and identified.

In State news, the Texas Governor has called up all of the National Guard troops in the state. The Governor is quoted as saying "we need them ready, just in case."

In Houston, the once proud Enron Building was burned to the ground today. Fire crews in Houston, still busy fighting fires in residential areas could spare only enough manpower to ensure that the fire did not spread to other buildings in the downtown area.

Locally, the San Antonio Police Department is reporting a city record 23 murders last night. Most appear to be drug or gang related. However, a spokesman for the department said, with the communication interruptions there may be more that we don't know about yet. The Mayor has asked for all residents to stay in their homes after dark. The sunset curfew goes into effect at 8:10 PM today.

Now for the weather. It will be hot and dry today with highs reaching near one hundred degrees. The low tonight will be in the mid-seventies with a slight chance of rain after dark. For tomorrow, you can expect more of the same.

This is KSTX, 640 AM. We'll be back after this break.

Mark turned off the radio.

“Thank God we don’t live in Cincinnati!” Lisa exclaimed.

“You can say that again.” Jess agreed as the men nodded their heads.

Mark looked at Jim. “You want to help me with that glow plug controller on my truck?”

“Sure thing, buddy.”

“Yes, you boys go play while Lisa and I work on a grocery list.” Jess dictated.

“Yes Ma’am!”

Jim and Mark started working on the Ford diesel. Mark notice that Sam had come back and given the eggs to her mother and then returned to the camper and probably her sulking. They had just removed the old controller when Jim noticed that it was time for the Vice Presidents speech. Mark called Lisa and Jess to bring the radio over to the truck so that they could keep working. They all stood around the engine as Mark turned wrenches and the VP spoke. The news was right that they had found the Presidents body. The VP asked for all Americans to pray for our country during these troubling times. He indicated that he would be taking the oath of office after the President’s funeral and would be submitting his nominee for Vice President to the congress as his first order of business as President. He indicated that they were very close to restoring limited power to some of the major cities on the East Coast. He encouraged everyone to help and watch out for his or her neighbors. He assured the country, and the world, that the United States would emerge from this crisis stronger and more resilient. He warned those who would try to take advantage of this situation, both domestic and foreign, that punishment would be swift and sure. He once again asked Americans to pray, but this time it was so that God would give him wisdom.

When the VP was done, Jess turned off the radio. No one said anything for a while.

“Let’s all go down to Jon’s and see what’s going on.” Mark suggested somberly.

“Good idea.” Jess agreed. “I’ll get Sam to watch the girls for you Lisa.”

The four of them walked to the corner where Jon’s house was. Many of the men had brought their wives this afternoon. Everyone milled around and met the neighbors that they did not know. The main subjects of interest were the President’s death, and whether or not the VP was telling the truth about the power. Opinions were split. Generally, the women believed the Vice President and the men did not, there were exceptions of course, but not many. Mark and Jim talked it over and agreed that they should help stand watch at the gate. They spoke to Jon about taking a shift.

“What made you change your mind about needing guards?” Jon asked.

“Oh, we still don’t think it’s needed, but we want to do our fair share.” Mark explained.

“I see.” said Jon, “Listen, I already have the schedule made up and posted for the next week. Could I use you two for alternates until I make the new schedule, and then I’ll work you in to the rotation.”

“That would be fine with us, Jon.”

Before he left, Mark announced that he would be running the pump for about an hour starting as soon as he got home. He and Jim moved the generator and plugged in the pump. Mark put Sam and David in charge from the start today. He and Jim went back to the truck. They finished hooking up the new controller and Mark climbed into the truck to start it. The engine had cooled completely off, so this would be a good test. He turned the key on and the ‘Wait to Start’ light came on. After about 15 seconds, it went off and Mark engaged the starter. The big diesel turned over, caught, and idled like a sewing machine. He turned the truck off, whispering a prayer of thanks.

When everyone had gotten water, Mark and Jim moved the generator back by the campers. Mrs. Petersen had brought back the 5-gallon container and David had refilled it and carried it back to her house. Mark plugged in the campers and the deep freeze. They wouldn’t be able to waste the gas to run the A/C’s everyday if the power didn’t come back on. But Mark thought it was best to acclimate everyone slowly, so they could do it for a week or so. He checked the freezer and it wasn’t as cold as he thought it should be. He may need to run the generator for a while each morning to keep everything frozen, at least until the weather cooled off some. He took out four fresh ice bottles and replaced the four in the cooler. The food in the cooler was still cool. Then he put the four from last night back in the freezer. The bottles that he took out of the ice chest were still frozen in the very center. It wouldn’t take too long to freeze them back solid.

Mark heard Jess calling him. We walked back to the deck and saw the kids playing the Risk game that Mrs. Petersen had given them on the picnic table. He noticed that Jess had brought the card table and chairs out onto the deck. On top of the table was a rack of dominos and a score pad. The adults sat and played 42 until almost eleven o’clock. It was the boys against the girls. Mark was an excellent player; however, tonight he couldn’t seem to focus on the game. The girls beat them three games to two.

When they were done, Mark went into the house and put a dollar in the box. Then he turned off the generator and went to the camper to go to bed. He tried to go to sleep, but his mind was racing. It was a long time before he finally dozed off.

Chapter 8 –Showdown at the Kroger Corral.

When the alarm went off at 6:30, Mark was already awake. He had just slept on and off last night. He lay in bed and looked through the vent in the roof of the camper for a moment. The sky was just starting to turn pink. What day was it? The burst hit on Tuesday, so today was Thursday. It was hard to believe how much had transpired in less than 48 hours. He got out of bed pulled on his jeans and went into the house. He found a pair of running shorts, a t-shirt, and his running shoes with the help of a flashlight. He put these on and headed out the door. He stretched his back and then his calves. Then he began running. He started off at a moderate pace, about a ten minute mile, he figured. Running was something that he used to hate. Once he passed his brown belt test, he was required to run five days a week. He did it only because he had to if he wanted his black belt. However, over the course of the 18 months that he was required to run, he began to enjoy it. It was a strange type of enjoyment, though. He didn't look forward to it, like hunting or fishing. It was more that he missed it if he didn't do it. Everything was clearer when he ran, and it made his whole day more productive. When he started running, it was all he could do to break a 13 minute mile. By the time he took his black belt test, he was flirting with 7 flat. Not bad for a fat boy with short legs, his instructor once told him. He ran to the corner and turned toward the entrance of the subdivision.

He began thinking about what they would need if they decided not to go stay at the ranch. There was so much. He couldn't see any choice but to join the group. Even with Jim and his family they didn't have enough resources or manpower to provide for themselves. He really wanted to believe that the power would be back on. That would make everything OK. But, there was something that the VP had said last night that Mark knew was a lie. He didn't know what it was, but somehow he knew inside that the power wouldn't be back on. Maybe he was just getting paranoid. What was that someone had once told him that paranoia was...the rational reaction to the realization of reality? Something like that.

His karate class was supposed to have been last night. Of course they couldn't have it. The lights were out and the school was locked up. Mark missed it. The best part of the martial arts to him was teaching. Seeing a kid who thought he couldn't suddenly begin to think 'I can'. It was the same kind of transformation that he had seen in himself. The self doubt that he always kept bottled up inside himself and tried to never let anyone see was suddenly gone. Passing the five day black belt test had been the hardest thing he had ever done. Jess joked with him that it still wasn't as hard as having a baby. But he now believed that he could do anything if he worked at it hard enough.

How had his thoughts gotten so far off from where he started? He was approaching the half mile mark and if he wanted to just run his usual mile he would turn around and run back home. But, he thought, I don't have to go to work, just a little further. A tenth of a mile further he was at the entrance to Silver Hills.

“Good morning, Adam.” He said to one of the guards.

“Good morning, Mark. Nice morning for a run, huh?”

“I think so.” He had met the other guard last night, but couldn’t remember his name. “How’s it going for you this morning?”

“Pretty good.” The guard answered.

Mark wondered whether to turn east or west for about a half a second. He turned east to be able to see the sun rise. Too bad they didn’t have some solar panels. With them and a battery bank, they could at least have some light in the house. Maybe run some twelve volt ceiling fans. Oh well. What was he thinking about? Oh yeah, how could they not go to the ranch. There just wasn’t anyway to get all the stuff they needed. Even if they could find it, there just wasn’t enough money. But how would he convince the women? Wait, he didn’t have to, the lists would. They would see that it was hopeless to stay here. Wouldn’t they? By the time he knew it he must have been over 2 miles from the house. Even on his long runs he didn’t usually go over 3 miles. And he had missed the sunrise. He was sure he had seen it, but he couldn’t remember. He turned around and started running back. What was he going to do about Sam? David seemed to be taking it all in stride. But he could care less about going to school and most of his friends lived in the subdivision. Sam was a social animal. She had lots of friends and they lived all over. He needed to get her involved in something, but what? He would talk to Jess about it. What of the rest of his family? His parents and brother and sister and their families lived in Waco. Would they be OK where they were? What about Jess’s sister in California? What about Lisa’s folks? And Jim’s Mom? And his brother? What was the matter? Running was supposed to make things more clear for him. This time he ended up with more questions than answers. Why couldn’t he see the answer?

Mark could just make out the sign that said Silver Hills ahead. He quickened his pace a little. When he turned into the subdivision he waved at the guards as he passed. It was slightly uphill to his house from here. His calves were burning, but he put his head down and picked up his pace a little more. Perhaps the answers could be found in pushing himself harder. When he turned the corner, he broke into a sprint. “Harder.”, he thought. But no answers came to him. When he reached the front of the house, he looked at his watch. 7:34, it said. He walked to the corner and back to cool down. He must have run close to 5 miles. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel that tired. He stretched some more to cool down.

Mark got some clean clothes out of the house and then went back out to the camper to shower. When he got out Jess was frying up the eggs that Manny had given them. Jim and Lisa were up, but all of the kids except for Sam were still asleep. They all sat down at the picnic table to eat breakfast. Mark noticed that the yolks on these eggs were much darker than the eggs they bought at Kroger. They also tasted better. As they ate they talked about what they each wanted to get accomplished for the day. Jess wanted to start working on a curriculum for Sam and David. She said that they would need it whether they stayed here or went to the ranch. Lisa wanted to get to the grocery store with the list that she and Jess had made the night before. Sam asked if she could go with Lisa and Lisa said she would be glad to have the company. Lisa asked Jim if he would work with the twins on their math this morning. She told the others that Jim always had more success with the girls on math than she did. She said it was because their brains worked the same way. Mark wanted to go pay for the glow plug controller, go to the hardware store for the plug to the dryer, and maybe run by the gun store for some ammo. It was decided that Mark, Lisa, and Sam would go to town, and Jim and Jess would ‘hold down the fort’.

The three shoppers loaded up in Mark's truck and headed to town. They first stopped at the Helping Hand Hardware store. It was a small independently owned hardware store that had been run by the same family for almost 60 years. The store hadn't changed much in those 60 years. Mark found the plug he needed to replace the one he had stolen from the dryer. The girls had wandered off and were looking through the store. Sam found Mark and pulled him over to where Lisa was looking at some kerosene lamps.

"Look, Mark." She said. "They have kerosene lamps and lanterns. They also have big tubs and wash boards. If the power doesn't come back on and we stay at your place, we are going to have to come back here."

"Boy, I hope it doesn't come down to washing our clothes with wash boards." Samantha said. "That would be cruel and unusual punishment, and the Constitution prohibits that, doesn't it? Besides, we have the generator that will run the washer, right Dad?"

"Yes, it will. But, I don't think we will be able to spare the gas to wash clothes for very long." Mark explained, hoping that everyone would start to realize that they would need to save all the gas for the generator just for pumping water if this went on as long as some were saying it could.

Mark paid for the plug, and they headed to the gun store. When they got there, Mark was a little surprised that it was closed. The Drew family ran the store and it was not like them to close. The Mom and Dad had started the business in the early 60's. Both of their sons now worked at the store, Jerry ran the front and Dale was an excellent gunsmith. He had been taught by his father and now ran the back of the store. Perhaps Mark would run by Jerry's house later and see if everything was OK.

When they got to the Kroger, there was a line to get into the store. All three in the truck wondered what was going on. Mark parked the truck out in the parking lot a ways, as was his custom. It could be very difficult to get the 168 inch wheel base truck out of a parking space if people parked too close. They got out and walked up to the entrance. When they got to the entrance there was a table with one of the managers sitting behind it. Standing next to him was a San Antonio police officer. The manager explained that they had a run on the store when the lights went out and that since they didn't know when they would be resupplied, they were limiting each family to \$50 worth of groceries for now. He told them that the store was only accepting cash or public assistance cards. He asked for one of their ID's. Mark handed the man his driver's license. The manager looked at it and opened a notebook to the T's. He looked for Turner and at each one he found he compared the address to the one on Mark's Driver license. When he didn't find a match, he wrote Mark's name and address down in the book. He gave Mark a number and told him that when his number was called a sales associate would take them through the store with a flashlight and add up their items on a calculator. Mark informed the manager that he had just brought Lisa to the store and she had her own family. He checked and recorded Lisa's license and gave her a number too. Then they went and stood in line. Lisa pulled out the list and started numbering the items on it by importance. When she got to the point where she knew she was over \$100, she got a piece of paper out of her purse and wrote some of the items on a new list. She then scratched them off of the original list. She gave the new list to Mark and told him to get as far down it as he could. It took almost 45 minutes before their numbers were called. Mark went with his assigned associate and Sam elected to wait and go with Lisa. It didn't take Mark too long to finish his list. He got 25 pounds of rice, 50 pounds of pinto beans, 10 pounds of spaghetti, some canned pasta sauces, and

most of the canned fruits and vegetables that finished off his list. The associate took him to the front of the store and he paid in cash as they bagged his groceries. It was only a minute or two until Lisa and Sam were done paying for their food. They put all the bags into one basket and pushed it toward the truck. When they got to the truck, Mark opened the back door and they started stacking the groceries in the floorboard of the back seat. As they were unloading the basket, Mark noticed three scruffy looking guys walking past the truck toward the store. His radar went up a little. Once the men passed the truck, Mark felt better. He realized that he too probably looked a little scruffy. After all, it had been two days since he had shaved. Once all the groceries were loaded, the girls got into the truck and Mark pushed the basket over to the cart corral. When he turned to go back, the three men were between the truck and him. Mark's senses went into overdrive. He looked at the truck. The girls had the doors closed and, he hoped, locked. He looked side to side, but there was no one else this far out in the parking lot. He felt trapped with the corral right behind him, so he stepped to the left enough so that he could back up if he needed to. He looked at the three men. The one on the left was tall and muscular. The middle one was average height and skinny. The one to the right was moderately overweight.

The middle one spoke to Mark. "Hey, mister, what's the deal with the long line to get into the store?"

Mark tried to answer in a natural voice. "They're only letting everyone have \$50 worth of groceries. The employees take you through the store with flashli...." Mark saw the knife. Skinny had it. Mark took half a step back. They were too close for him to get his .32 out without getting stabbed. He figured that his best option if he had to fight was to use his hands and try to create enough space to bring his gun to bear.

When Skinny saw that Mark had seen the knife, he extended it toward Mark's midsection. "Listen up, asshole, give us the keys to the truck and no one gets hurt." Tubby stuck his hand out toward Mark for the keys.

Mark thought that the truck and the groceries were not worth getting killed for. But he also knew that if these guys had a gun, they would be using it. He had no intention of providing them with one by letting them have his Colt that was in the truck. More importantly, what might these criminals do to Lisa and Sam?

Mark reached into his left front pocket and pulled out his office keys. He figured that if he dropped them, Tubby might bend over to pick them up and he could kick him into Knife boy. Mark reached his hand out toward the car jackers, praying that they wouldn't notice that the keys weren't car keys. He dropped the keys right in front of the man with the knife. At that instant, everything seemed to go to slow motion.

The man's eyes got wide with anger and he lunged at Mark's stomach with the knife. "You motherfu..." He started to scream, but was not able to finish. When he lunged, Mark thrust his hands forward and grabbed the man's knife hand around the wrist. At the same time he pulled his hips back to get his midsection as far away as possible from the knife. Mark stepped to his left and jerked the man's arm past him. The knife wielder, with his weight going forward from his own thrust, went flying by with the assistance of Mark pulling him and he landed face first onto the asphalt. The big man to Mark's left stepped in and badly telegraphed a right handed punch. Mark stepped to the left and brought his

right arm up in a circular motion and chopped his right hand into the puncher's forearm. Mark then slid his right hand down to the man's wrist and grabbed. The palm heel of his left hand slammed into the back of the attacker's elbow. It was odd in this situation, but in a way it was somehow comical to see his arm bent back the wrong way. Mark then side kicked to the man's knee. With the adrenaline pumping he kicked too high. The kick landed in the man's thigh and knocked him down. Mark looked back and Knife boy was still down on all fours groaning. He changed his focus to the last man. Tubby was standing wide eyed and frozen. When Mark looked at him, a dark stain appeared in the crotch of his jeans. Mark backed up toward the truck and pulled the Kel-Tec out of his pocket and pointed it in the direction of the three men. Tubby, seeing this, took off running at a pace that could have set a world record. The other two looked at Tubby and then seeing why he was running did their best to catch up with him.

Mark was still pointing the pistol at the men even after they were well out of range. Even though he had been in karate for six years and had his Concealed Handgun License for almost four, this was the first time he had ever had to defend himself. He stood there shaking from the adrenaline dump. Sam rolled down the window of the truck.

“Dad...Dad...DAD!”

“Yes?” Mark finally answered. Time sped back up to a normal pace.

“Are you OK?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Dad, you were so awesome. I was so scared, but you kicked butt. I know we practice that stuff in karate, but seeing you go full speed, I never thought that it would be that effective.”

“Honey, I never thought it would be either, but thank God it is.”

“Let me check you to make sure you're not injured.” Lisa insisted. She looked Mark over and could not find any cuts or even bruises for that matter. “Did you even get hit?” She asked.

“I don't think so.”

“What do we do now?” Lisa asked.

“I guess I should go make a report with that policeman at the entrance.” Mark said as he put the .32 back into his pocket.

The trio got into the truck and Mark drove up to the entrance. He pulled the truck up to the curb and got out.

“Hey buddy, you can't park there.” The policeman admonished.

“I was just attacked out in the parking lot.” Mark informed him.

“Are you OK? What did they get?”

“Yes, I’m alright and they didn’t get anything.” Mark finished telling the policeman what had happened.

“Did you shoot them?” The police man asked.

“No. I didn’t even fire a shot, but I dislocated one of their elbows, and the other guy could have fallen on his knife.”

“Can I see your CHL?” The officer requested.

Mark started to reach for his wallet in his left hip pocket. “I’m just getting my wallet.” He wanted to make sure the policeman was at ease.

“I understand. Just do it real slow.”

The policeman took out a little notebook from his breast pocket and wrote down Mark’s name and CHL number. He then gave Mark back his license.

“OK, I wrote down your name and address in case we have any questions.”

“Aren’t you going to take a formal report?”

“Mr. Turner, if these were normal times, yes, I would take a formal report. Under the circumstances though, I won’t. The PD is swamped. You didn’t get hurt, nothing was stolen, and the three guys that tried to attack you only got what was coming to them. You should be thanking God and your training that things went so well for you. I have your information if anything comes up. Go home and next time, watch your six better!”

“Thank you, Officer, I will.” With that Mark got back into his truck. His hands were shaking so bad that he could barely find first gear.

Chapter 9 – Fallout

Mark drove back over to the cart corral. He asked Sam if she would pick up the keys that were still on the ground. She hopped out and picked up the keys. When she got back in, Mark eased out on the clutch and turned the truck toward home.

“I thought you wanted to go by Jerry Drew’s house, Dad.” Sam said.

“Not now, Honey, I just want to go home.”

“Mark, would you like me to drive?” Lisa asked noticing that his hands were not very steady.

“Maybe. I think I’ll be OK. I’ll let you know in a couple of minutes.” Mark answered.

The ride home was quiet and uneventful. When Mark parked the truck, they carried the groceries in. Sam was talking a mile a minute, relating the Kroger parking lot incident. Jess was shocked. Jim was impressed. And, David just said it was ‘COOL’.

Mark snapped at him. “It was not cool!” He was almost yelling. “Someone could have gotten killed. Maybe even me, or your sister, or Mrs. Davis. Would you still think it’s ‘COOL’ then?”

Mark saw the hurt in his son’s eyes the same time that Jess put her hand on his arm. It was her way of letting him know that he had gone too far.

“I’m sorry, Dave. I didn’t mean to yell at you. I’m not mad at you; it’s just that I’m still kind of freaked out by what happened. Will you forgive me?”

David nodded his head. Mark pulled him and hugged him. That was something that David rarely let him do in front of other people. When they released the embrace, David had tears in his eyes.

“I am going out to the shed to check the freezer.” Mark announced just wanting to get away from everybody for a minute.

When Mark walked outside, Jim followed him. Jim could see that his friend was still shaking, even though it had been almost an hour since the incident.

“Wanna talk?” Jim asked.

“NO... Yes...I don’t know.”

“Are you upset that you hurt those guys?”

“Hell no. They got off lucky as far as I am concerned. Once I got my gun out I would have shot them in a heartbeat if they had kept attacking. It’s just that I was scared shitless.” There went a dollar. “If I didn’t know how to defend myself, or if I hadn’t had my .32, no telling what might have happened.

I was scared the most of what those assholes would have done to Lisa and Sam given half a chance.” Two dollars. “I can tell you this. That .32 probably saved my life, but it felt like a pea shooter in my hand. I was cursing myself for not having the .45. I will never leave the house to go anywhere without it and a couple of extra magazines on my hip from now on. The .32 is good for a backup, but I can tell you that if you really need a gun you want the biggest f*****g gun that you can hold.” There was a word Mark almost never used. Well, if he was going to owe three dollars in less than a minute, he might as well get his moneys worth. “I think that my FAL would have felt like a BB gun.”

“You learned something from this then. Maybe it wasn’t totally a bad thing.” Jim rationalized.

“Yeah, I learned how vulnerable we all are...I’m careful Jim, but if those guys had a brain between them, they would have killed me. If all three would have attacked at the same time, I would be dead right now. And, things are only going to get worse if the power doesn’t come back on. We’re not safe here. We have to go stay at the ranch. It’s the only way to be sure that nothing will happen to the girls and the kids. Besides, there is no way that we can buy everything we would need to live here. There is just too much that we need to make it if the power is off more than a month or two. I know that the girls don’t really like the idea of moving out there, but hopefully with what happened today and when we look at the lists of what we need, they will see that there is no choice.”

“Mark, I think you might be overreacting a little bit. We might all agree to move to the ranch with Todd, I mean we still need to go look it over, but I don’t think you should let one incident influence you so much.”

“Well, I can see how you might think I’m overreacting,” Mark snapped. “But when it’s you in that moment, knowing that all that stands between your daughter and best friend’s wife getting assaulted and maybe killed is just you, you might think differently.”

“Maybe so. But when you start ranting, there’s no sense in arguing with you. If you want to talk instead of squabble come get me.” And with that Jim left.

Mark checked the freezer. It was still pretty cold. He poked at a big piece of venison that was wrapped in butcher paper. It was still as hard as a rock. He had run the generator longer last night, maybe that was enough, he thought. He was glad that Jim had come out with him, but was glad that he had left too. Mark was exhausted. The adrenaline had done its job and turned him into a mama grizzly defending her cubs, but now that it had worn off, he was as tired as he could ever remember being.

He went back into the house. When he walked in, everyone got real quiet so Mark knew that they had been talking about him. He didn’t care. He told Jess that he was going to go rest in the camper for a while. When he got into the camper, taking his shoes off seemed to take all of the energy he had. He climbed up onto the bed and just lay down on top of the blanket.

When Mark woke up, he felt like he had slept for days. Was it dusk or dawn, he couldn’t tell. He looked at his watch. It was almost curfew. Mark got up and put on his shoes. He walked out of the camper and could see everyone else up on the deck with the Coleman lantern burning close enough to light the Monopoly game that they were playing. He stepped up onto the deck and Jess was the first one to see him.

“Hey, Stranger, how was your nap?”

“I don’t remember.” He said as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Man, you were really out of it.” Jess informed him. “I tried to get you up to help Jim with the generator, but you were dead to the world.”

“You mean you guys ran the generator?”

Everyone nodded their heads.

“I got Jon to help me.” Jim said.

“Wow...I never heard it. Listen, I want to apologize to everyone for how I acted. Especially to David and Jim.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jim replied.

“It’s OK, Dad. You must have been pretty stressed.” David responded.

“That is no excuse for the way I acted. I’m really sorry.” Mark then changed the subject. “Did you guys listen to the news and the Vice President?”

“Yes, we did.” Jim told him. “It was pretty much the same old news. Rioting in a few more cities. Baltimore and Chicago, I think. The VP said that they were not moving quite as fast as they thought on the power, but that it should only be another day or two before the lights would be back on in some cities.”

“Hmmm.” Was all Mark had to say.

“Then we all went down to Jon’s.” Lisa continued to fill him in. “There were a lot more people there tonight. Everyone was talking about one of three things. The third most popular topic of conversation was the power. Less people believe that the power is going to be back on in a couple of days. Now there is a group in the middle that believes it may be several weeks to a month or two before the power is restored...The second favorite topic was the \$50 limit at Kroger. And the most talked about item at the Silver Hills community meeting for today was..., drum roll, please.” Jim beat his hands on the picnic table. “...the amazing Kung-fu feats of one Mister Mark Turner!”

“You didn’t.” Mark protested.

“It seems that your son told one of his friends,” Jess explained, “and by the time the meeting rolled around you were the neighborhood hero.”

“Of course, the rumor mill had upped the opponents to 8 and they all had knives. But that was OK, because you just jump into a phone booth and came out with tights, a cape, and a big red ‘S’ on your chest.” Lisa kidded.

Mark groaned.

“Seriously though, some people came up and ask me if you might be willing to teach a self defense course for the neighborhood.” Jim told him.

“Well, I might would, if we were going to stay here.” Mark informed them.

“Don’t we all get a say in that?” Jess inquired.

“Of course you do, but I think you’ll come to the same conclusion that I have. There just isn’t any other choice. We don’t have what we need to live here for an extended period, and even if we did, it’s not safe.”

“What do you mean ‘it’s not safe’? You don’t even think that Jon’s guards are necessary.” Jess chided him.

“My thinking has changed some since this morning. The guards may be able to stop a carload of teenagers from TPing someone’s house, but there is no way they’re going to stop a hungry and determined bunch of rioters and looters.”

“We could beef up the guards if it looks like that is a possibility.” Jim told him.

“So you think we shouldn’t go, too?” Mark accused.

“I didn’t say that. I’m still leaning toward staying at the ranch, but I haven’t made my mind up yet. I think we have to see it first, and then weigh all of our options.” Jim retorted.

“You all just can’t see that we have no options. You are clinging to the fantasy that civilization still exists. I got a hard lesson today in reality, and I can see what’s coming. I thought that it would be obvious to all of you as well. I guess it doesn’t matter though, when we sit down with our lists, it’s going to be obvious that we have to go.” Mark ranted.

“That may be true, Mark.” Jess shot back. “But we need to see the ranch and review our lists first. I won’t be forced into making a decision based on one isolated incident. I know it must have been scary. I was scared just hearing about it. But we can’t let our fears start dictating what we do. I know how you get when you make your mind up about something. But, this is too important a decision to not look at everything and everyone involved.”

“Well, we leave for the ranch at noon tomorrow. In the mean time, I’m going to work on my list.” Mark wheeled around and marched off much the same as Sam had the day before.

“When you’re ready, we have our lists done.” Jess called after him.

* * *

Mark woke up at 6:30 again. When he climbed out of bed he noticed that he was a little stiff. He went into the house to find his running clothes and got dressed. He spent some extra time this morning stretching. When he started running, he could really feel the 5 miles he did yesterday. He set a pace that was a little slower than usual and figured that a mile and a half or two would work out the soreness. He started thinking about the ranch and how he hoped the others would see how obvious it was that they go. When he passed the guards, they razed him.

“There he is.” Said the first. “The famous Silver Hill’s kung-fu master, himself. Be careful, one look from him will make you wet your pants.”

“I heard he could catch a bullet in his teeth.” The second guard teased.

“You guys go back to sleep.” Mark waved them off. “Besides, everybody knows that real kung-fu masters don’t have any teeth.”

As Mark turned east the sun was just peeking over the horizon. He made a conscious effort to watch it come up this morning. When he was about a mile from his house he turned around and picked up his pace just a tad. His legs were beginning to feel better. When he got back to the house, he walked to the end of the street and back to cool down. Then he spent several minutes stretching again. When he was done with that, he did 100 pushups and 100 sit-ups. Then he found some clean clothes and showered in the camper. When he got out, Jess was just getting up.

“Would you like some breakfast?” She asked.

“That would be great.” Mark answered.

“Pancakes or biscuits and gravy?”

“Either would be fine.”

“Are you doing anything this morning, or are we just getting ready to go to the ranch?” Jess asked.

“I still need to pay for the truck part and I want to go see Jerry Drew to see if they need anything and try and get some ammo, but I guess that can wait until we get back. Let’s eat and then go over our lists. Then we can get ready and head out to visit the ranch.”

Jess and Mark cooked breakfast together. There was still tension about the disagreement from the day before, so they both steered clear of that subject. Just before the pancakes were ready, Mark woke everyone up. They all ate and then the adults got their lists and went through them. Mark had more on his than anyone else did. They discussed them for a couple of hours but were making only a

little progress. Jim finally suggested that they table the discussion until they got back from the ranch. After they had loaded their trucks to go on their visit, Mark walked down to ask Jon to keep an eye on their place and to pump water for the neighbors until they got back. He asked Jon to please remember to take water to Mrs. Petersen and to plug up his freezer for three or four hours each day. When Mark got back to the house, they decided to go ahead and leave even though it wasn't quite noon yet. When the two trucks pulled out of the subdivision, Jim was in the lead. Mark looked in his rearview mirror and saw the Silver Hills sign. He then moved his eyes back to the road in front of him. He reached his hand down and felt the Colt Commander on his hip. They should be at the ranch in a little over an hour. He said a little prayer that the visit would go good enough to convince the others that he was right.

Chapter 10 – The Ranch

They were almost halfway to the ranch when Mark's watch said 12:00 noon. They were taking their time, and Jim was slowing down every time they topped a hill as there were still a few cars stalled on the highway. Mark asked Jess to turn on the portable radio.

This is KSTX, 640 AM. It's 93 degrees with sunny skies at strait up 12 o'clock. Now for the news.

The President' funeral is scheduled at 3 PM eastern time. The Vice President will take the presidential oath of office immediately following. Both proceedings will be carried live on this CBS radio station.

The European and Pacific Rim markets were down for the third straight day. The Nikkei is now down over 20% since the burst and other world markets are not far behind. Japanese officials are talking about suspending trading until the New York Markets are back online. It is expected that all of the markets will follow the Japanese lead.

The riots in Chicago have been halted by the Illinois National Guard. Before they could be brought in, however, the Mayors house was burned to the ground. The rioters in Baltimore are still marching through the streets destroying everything in their path. Even though the Governor has dispatched the Maryland National Guard, they have been unable to contain the lawlessness. There is an unconfirmed report that less than half of the state's guardsmen have reported for duty. The city of Cincinnati is now considered to be a total loss. Damage estimates are in the billions. The Detroit Fire Department was able to save almost a quarter of the cities automotive production facilities. The Mayor of Detroit has squared off against the Governor for not acting to save his city. So far there has been no response from the Michigan capitol.

In local news, gunfire tore through a low income housing development last night in apparent gang warfare. Eleven people were killed and twenty-three were wounded. Many of the victims were reported to be innocent bystanders, including several children.

Kroger stores have instituted a fifty dollar limit per family on groceries. This has worked well throughout most of the city. However, a large number of people were arrested at the store at 281 and Thousand Oaks. An unidentified man, insisting that he should be allowed to buy as much as he wanted, incited a crowd to riot. There are also several reports of people being mugged for their groceries.

The City Water Board is asking all residents to be very conservative with their water usage. A spokesman reported those backup generators are unable to keep up with the current demand for water pressure. He assured us that with strict conservation, there is plenty of water for everyone. He asked that citizens not fill up their bathtubs or other containers, and for those who have to please use that water up before running their faucets.

City Power and Light is reporting that they should have power to medical facilities that do not have their own backup power by the end of the weekend, or Monday morning at the latest. When asked

about restoration of power to the whole city, the spokesman would not give a definite answer but said that it should not be too much longer.

Now, for the weather. Today's high will be in the mid....

Jess turned the radio off. "Nothing but more bad news. Looks more and more like Todd and Scott are right about the power."

Mark didn't say anything.

When Jim turned off of the county road to go through the first gate to the ranch he tied the yellow bandana to his antenna. They had to pass through several ranches and gates to get to the groups ranch. When they were going through the last ranch before they reached their destination, Mark noticed that the power lines that had followed the road they were on stopped. At the gate they were met by two men in a camouflage pattern that Mark did not recognize who were carrying pre-ban AR-15's. Mark noted that the gate was made of heavy pipe. It had long heavy spikes extending from it. If someone tried to crash through it with a pickup or SUV they would at least ruin their radiator. The gate was hung on huge 12 inch pipe fence posts that were cemented into the ground. In addition to the no-climb fencing, called that because the wire mesh was too closed to get a foothold in, and three strands of barb wire across the top of the eight foot high fence, a heavy cable ran from metal fence post to metal fence post about 24 inches above the ground back into the brush as far as Mark could see. There would be no way for anything less than a tank to make an unfriendly entrance to the ranch. Mark felt that if the rest of the ranch security was anywhere close to as good as the gate and fence, they would be very safe here.

The two guards spoke into a radio and then opened the gate. They told the families to follow the road they were on until they reached the main complex. The nicely graded road wound through the mesquite trees and scrub bush. When they reached the complex there was an eight foot tall chain link fence around it. However, the gate was open this time. Todd was standing just inside it. He pointed to where they should park. When they got out of the trucks, Todd shook everyone's hand.

"It's so good to see you all. Welcome to the New Age Ranch. Let me show you to your quarters, then I'll give you the nickel tour."

Todd showed each family to their cabin. They were actual log cabins with three bedrooms and a large bath. Down stairs there was a large living area with a big fireplace and the master bedroom and bathroom. The ceiling in the living area was vaulted and over twenty feet high in the center. The upstairs loft, which only covered the area of the master bedroom and the bath, was divided into two smaller bedrooms. All three bedrooms had a small wood burning stove in them as well as a small propane heater. The furniture was modest but of high quality. Jess asked why there was no kitchen and Todd told her that the group always ate together in the community dining room. Todd showed the families that each cabin had a bank of batteries to run the twelve-volt lights and ceiling fans in each room. There were solar panels on the roof to keep the batteries charged. The bathrooms had running water supplied by a twelve-volt pump and a small propane hot water heater. There was no air conditioning, but the cabins were designed to stay tolerable without it. It was mid afternoon in the middle of August and must have been in the mid-90s outside; however, it was very comfortable in the cabin with the ceiling fan on. It felt like it was about 78 or 80 degrees. Todd said that one reason they

did all the cooking in one place was to keep from heating up the cabins. When both of the families had carried their clothes into their cabins and got settled in a bit, they met Todd at the community dining and meeting room. Todd showed them the huge kitchen and the food storage area. He told them that they had enough canned food to last 100 people for 3 years without adding anything by farming, ranching, hunting, or fishing. There were enough of some staples like flour, sugar, and salt, for ten years if they were careful. They had a large room just for skinning and quartering game or livestock with a large walk in cooler attached. In the dining room, there were about 30 tables. Todd told them that not only did they eat in here, but also used the room for meetings and daily prayer services. He asked Mark if it was big enough for a karate class and Mark told him that they could probably train 25 or 30 people at a time if they moved the tables to one side. Todd mentioned that they also used it for entertainment. They had a piano for music, many board, card, and domino games to play, and a big screen TV with a DVD player and lots of movies that had been protected from the surge.

Todd then took them outside to the garden. It was at least as big as Mark's four acres, he figured. Only a small portion of it was planted and Todd told them that they would be planting all of it with fall crops as soon as it cooled off just a little. They had chickens, rabbits, and two milk cows in the barn. There was a lot of hay and a medium sized John Deere tractor stored in the barn as well. Todd told them that they had about 50 head of beef cattle on the ranch too. He explained that their goal was to produce everything they needed and not have to deplete their stored food. He explained that everyone had several jobs assigned to them. Most everyone had one primary job and then helped out in two or three other areas. He told them that even the small children had to help with some things like feeding the livestock, gathering eggs, and milking the cows. Mark noticed that Sam really wrinkled her nose at the last one. Todd took them by the clinic where they met Dr. Smith. He was Suzy the Worrywart's husband. Lisa was very impressed with how well equipped and stocked the clinic was. Next they went by the laundry. There were several big commercial washers and gas dryers. Jim asked how they were powered and Todd told them that they had several generators. The biggest was a diesel powered 12000-watt model. They also had a couple of smaller generators, one diesel and one propane. They had lots of diesel stored in an underground tank and there were separate buried 1000-gallon propane tanks for each of the cabins and more for the kitchen and laundry. They figured that there was enough fuel for three years without any resupply. He told them that each family was assigned one of the washers one day a week and that they hung the clothes to dry unless the weather wouldn't permit it. The next building that they visited was the combination library and school. There were several small class rooms and a modest library. Todd told them that they had schoolbooks for all grades and subjects and that they would start teaching school in a few days. Now they were giving everyone a chance to settle in. They already had two teachers, one was an English major and the other was a math major. He told Jess that they were really looking forward to having her for the science classes. The last building in the complex was a combination garage and armory. The garage was huge and they had a couple of new jeeps and about a dozen Polaris ATV's inside. David was very taken with the ATV's. Todd said that they would take some out to look over the ranch, but since it was so close to dinner time they would have to wait until tomorrow morning. There were tools, both mechanic and carpentry, air compressors, welders, and much more in the shop. On one end there were stacks of lumber that reached almost to the ceiling. One wall had parts bins along it that were full of almost everything you could find at a hardware or auto supply store. The other end of the building held the armory. Todd told the men that everyone stored most of their personal weapons in the armory. They also had a number of battle rifles that Mr. Davis had bought in the event that they needed to defend the ranch. As they walked into the room, Mark could see that every family had a small section for their own weapons. They mostly consisted of deer rifles and bird

guns with an occasional battle rifle thrown in. When he saw the weapons that Mr. Davis had bought, he was impressed. There were 10 or 12 each of pre-ban AR-15's, H&K 91's, Mossberg 590's, and there were two Barrett M82A1's. Mark whistled when he saw the Barretts. He had always wanted a .50 BMG rifle, but just couldn't justify it.

"You like the big boy toys?" Todd asked him.

"Man. Those are sweet, Todd."

"We also have a complete reloading room over there. We can reload most of the major calibers in handgun and rifle and we have 12 and 20 gauge shotgun reloaders."

Todd pointed to a door and the men looked at the reloading equipment. Mark had never reloaded, but Jim did, and Mark had looked at some of the catalogs that were on Jim's reloading bench. He noticed that the presses were all high dollar Dillons. When they finished looking the armory over, Todd asked the women and children if they would like to go back to their cabins and get cleaned up for dinner while he took the men to meet Mr. Davis. They agreed, although Jess and Lisa didn't seem to like being dismissed.

When everyone else left, the three men started walking toward Mr. Davis's cabin.

"Hey, Mark, I bet one of those .50's wouldn't have felt like a pea shooter when those three dirtbags attacked you." Jim observed.

"You're right about that."

"What are you talking about?" Todd asked.

The two friends filled Todd in about Mark's encounter at the grocery store. Mark gave the bare facts and Jim filled in the more juicy parts as Mark was way too modest. Todd was very impressed by the story. When they got to the cabin, Mark noticed that it was significantly bigger than the others. Todd knocked on the door and it was answered by an older woman.

"Yes, Todd." She said.

"Hi, Millie. I have Mark Turner and Jim Davis here. He wanted to meet them."

"Of course. Please follow me."

The three men followed the woman into a large sitting room. She then disappeared.

"Is that Mrs. Davis?" Mark asked.

Todd chuckled. "No, Mr. Davis is not married. That is his assistant, Millie."

A moment later a man came into the room. He was about five foot seven or eight, trim, and bald. He held out his hand to Jim and introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you...Reginald Davis.” He said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Davis. I’m Jim Davis.”

“You have any relatives from Pennsylvania?”

“No. As far back as I know, we’re all from Texas.”

“Then I guess we’re not related. Good thing if you knew my family.” The gentleman said with a smile.

“I was just thinking the same thing about my relatives.” Jim returned.

The man turned his attention to Mark and reached his hand out.

“You must be Mark Turner.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Davis.” Mark said while shaking his hand. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Please, gentlemen, have a seat. I assume that Todd has shown you around.”

“I showed them around the complex. We are going to look over the ranch in the morning.”

“Good. I know that Todd has probably told you quite a bit about what we are trying to do here, but let me tell you a little about why we are doing this. We believe that America has been on the wrong path for quite some time now. The hard workers such as yourselves are no longer rewarded for your efforts, but instead are punished with high taxes and restrictions on your God given rights. Instead, the lazy are rewarded by a system that becomes more and more socialistic every year. Entitlement programs, funny name...somehow people who refuse to work are entitled to food, housing, education...everything that you work so hard to provide for your families. Anyway, entitlement programs are bankrupting this country both financially and morally. Our government had become the problem instead of the solution. We knew that sooner or later something would happen that would throw this country into turmoil. We want to make sure that people come out on the other side that can put America back on the right track. People that share the philosophy that a man who doesn’t work shouldn’t eat. People that feel like government should serve the people, not the other way around.”

“I agree with you, Mr. Davis, but do you think that 20 or 25 families will be enough to turn the tide?” Mark asked.

“No. Twenty to twenty-five families are not enough. But what if you had over 100 locations with 20 to 100 families in each location? People who after a crisis have the knowledge and desire to reshape America into the nation that she was meant to be. People who are leaders, teachers, and hard

working professionals who want America to hold a future for their children. People who are not afraid to make some hard choices to insure that this once great nation becomes what the founding fathers intended it to be.”

“Depending on how bad the crisis was, that number of people could make a huge impact.” Mark answered. “Do you really have that many locations?”

“No, I only have this location. But, we are part of a network of many groups. I don’t even know where all the groups are or even how many there are for sure, but I can assure you that there are well over 100. Some have been in existence for over twenty years. Some are newer, like us. But we all share the same goals.”

“Are the groups under the control of a central headquarters or something?” Jim asked.

“No. Each group is independent and autonomous. There is no central command. We just have an alliance with the other groups.” Mr. Davis explained. “Any other questions?”

Mark had lots of questions, but something in Mr. Davis’s tone told him that ‘Any other questions?’ meant ‘That’s all for now.’ Jim must have gotten the same message because he was just shaking his head and saying no. Mark copied his friend.

“OK, then. It’s almost dinnertime. You’ll excuse me if I don’t join you tonight, but I have a lot of work to do. We hope that you will decide to stay with us. We really need hardworking team players to make our goals into reality. I believe that both of you would be assets to the group. I can see why Todd speaks so highly of you. Have a good dinner, and after you look over the ranch in the morning, come back to see me and we’ll chat again.” Mr. Davis instructed.

The men stood up and shook hands. Todd led them outside and advised them to go back to their cabins and clean up a little if they wanted to. Dinner would be at 5 sharp, he informed them. Mark looked at his watch. He had about 15 minutes. When he walked into their cabin, Jess was waiting for him.

“How did it go? What is he like?” She asked.

“He’s not at all what I expected, but I guess it went OK.”

“So what’s the drill? How does all of this work?” She fired in rapid succession.

“We have to meet with him tomorrow after we tour the ranch. I’m sure he’ll tell us more then. However, he said that there were over 100 different groups like this one throughout the country. They are all run separately, but have common goals.”

“What are the goals?”

“To put America back like it is supposed to be.”

“How is it supposed to be?”

Mark explained to her exactly what Mr. Davis had said.

“I see.” She said. “And who gets to decide what the ‘hard choices’ are?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out tomorrow.” He answered. He tried to use the same tone that Mr. Davis had used when he didn’t want to answer any more questions.

Jess must have gotten his point. He went into the bathroom and washed his face and hands. Then he combed his hair. When he came out, Jess and the kids were ready to go. They stepped outside, met Jim and his family and headed to the dining room. When they got into the room everyone was chatting. Todd asked for everyone’s attention and then he introduced the families to everyone. Todd asked Dr. Smith to say grace, and then they all lined up to eat. The food was served cafeteria style. That night they had meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, and green beans. The Davises and Turners were invited to go through the line first with Todd’s family. Then they sat down at a long table to eat. Todd, Jim, and Mark sat at one end and their wives sat at the other with the kids in the middle.

“So, what did you think about the meeting with Mr. Davis?” Todd asked the men.

“He wasn’t what I was expecting.” Mark answered.

“Me, either.” Jim agreed. “But, I agree with everything he was saying.”

The men talked more about what Mr. Davis had said and then conversation turned to security around the ranch.

“We have the two guards at the entrance, two more are on patrol on the four wheelers mostly around the fence line, and at night we have two on duty inside the complex. Guard shifts are 6 hours long and we use FRS radios for communications.” Todd informed them.

“What kind of camouflage was it that the guards were wearing?” Mark asked.

“It’s called ‘Pear Flat’. It’s supposed to blend in to this environment better than anything else does. Mr. Davis bought a bunch of it for the men to wear on guard duty.” Todd told him.

Mark looked down to the other end of the table and saw that Jess and Lisa were talking with Todd’s wife, Andrea. Mark thought that they were probably gossiping about who had the nicest cabin. The men’s talk drifted to the ranch’s water supply. Todd explained that there were several wells already on the ranch when Mr. Davis bought it. They were all just for the cattle and were pumped by windmill. The closest one to the camp had been fitted with a solar jack pump that used solar panels and a DC current pump. The brighter the sun shone, the more water it would pump. It filled a 3000 gallon tank that gravity fed an identical tank in the complex. Each cabin was hooked into that tank and had a 12 volt RV pressure pump that was hooked into that cabin’s batteries to provide running water. When both 3000 gallon tanks were full, the overflow was piped to a freshwater tank on the ranch. Mark and Jim both thought that it was an ingenious system.

When dinner was over, the women that had been serving cleared the tables. Some of the children got board games and played quietly on one side of the room. Most of the children went outside to play and a couple of the mothers went out to watch them. The rest of the adults and some of the teenagers gathered to listen to the new President's speech.

The President didn't have a lot to say. He said that he hoped he could do as good a job as his predecessor did and asked the country to pray for and support him. He said that some power should be on any time now, but that it may take a little while to totally restore power. He assured the world that the US would get the power back on to Wall Street as soon as possible and that they should remain bullish on America. He ended by saying what a great loss the country had already endured and that everyone needed to concentrate their efforts to rebuilding America, not rioting and looting.

After the speech, every talked about it much like the talk that happened at Jon's house every night. The big difference that Mark noticed was that everyone here pretty much agreed on what they heard. They all believed that the President was covering up the truth. The only difference of opinion here was to the degree he was lying.

After a while some of the adults excused themselves to do some of the chores that needed to be finished before dark. Others started getting games out and playing. Many of the women were playing Scrabble. Jess and Lisa joined them. Some of the men were dominoes. Todd asked Jim and Mark if they knew how to play 42. When they said yes, he asked if they would like to play him and Tom. When Mark and Jim had won three games in a row, Todd commented good naturedly that he should have known better than to challenge two number crunchers. By that time, it was about 8:30 and dark. Everyone started drifting off to their cabins. Jim decided that it was time to do the same and said good night to everyone. Mark and his family were right behind them. Before they left, Todd told them that breakfast was at 7:00 AM and that they would tour the rest of the ranch right after.

When they got back to their cabin, Mark asked everyone what they thought so far. David thought that it would be great to live here. Sam said that she hated it, which was no big surprise. Jess told Mark that she thought it was a great setup, but that she was holding her opinion until she saw a little more. Mark was pleased that she was being so open-minded. Perhaps there was a chance that she would see the logic of moving here. Everyone took their turn at the shower, and then they went to bed.

Mark woke up a little after 6:00. It had been the best night's sleep he had since the burst. The cabin was pretty comfortable with the ceiling fan and the fact that the complex had security didn't hurt either. He got out of bed and thought about running. Since he didn't know exactly what the security routine was he decided to take the day off from running. Instead, he did some stretching and some pushups and sit-ups. After that, he got dressed and woke everyone up. A few minutes before 7:00, they headed over to the dining room. Todd was already there talking with a few of the men about some things that they needed to get accomplished. A couple of minutes later, Jim and his family came in. For breakfast they were served scrambled eggs with biscuits and gravy. When they were done eating, Todd invited both families to go on the tour. He said that he would drive the women in a Jeep and the guys could ride the ATV's. Jess, Lisa, and Sam asked if it would be OK for them to just hang around the complex. Todd told them that was fine and the three men with David in tow headed to the garage. The ATV's were all new Polaris four stokes. Todd asked David if he had ever ridden one, and David told

him that one of his friends had one and that he rode it all the time. The men climbed on the four that were closest to the door and took off. When they left the complex, they headed toward the lake single file.

At the lake they stopped the ATV's and got off. Todd showed them the boats that they had. There were two 16-foot Jon boats with Mercury 25 HP four stroke engines. There was a 17-foot canoe and an 18-foot Carolina Skiff with a center console and a Honda 90 horse motor. All were tied to a floating dock with a walkway out to it from the bank, except the canoe was turned upside down on the dock.

"Nice boats." David said.

"Do you think these are what we need?" Todd asked the men.

Jim answered. "The Jon boats are great for duck hunting and running trot lines. The skiff will be nice to fish out of. I don't know how much you'll use the canoe, unless you run out of gas for the motors."

Mark smiled. "I don't know how comfortable I would be in a canoe with the size of some of the gators I've seen in this lake."

"What's the biggest you've seen?" Todd inquired.

"Maybe fourteen feet long. But, I didn't put a tape measure on him if you know what I mean." Mark winked.

"I guess I see what you mean."

The men climbed back onto the four wheelers and road around the perimeter of the ranch. They saw deer, turkeys, and signs of feral hogs. The ranch was loaded with rabbits, and had lots of dove and some quail. When they rode up to the freshwater tank that the solar jack pump overflowed into, they scared 10 or 12 bluewing teal off.

"It looks like there is lots of game." Mark observed. "You just need to manage it a little and it should supplement the food supply nicely."

"That's one of the things that we want you guys for." Todd stated. "What do you say we head back and have some lunch. Then we can talk to Mr. Davis again."

They made the short trip back to the complex just in time for lunch. Todd excused himself to report to Mr. Davis. He told the men that he would come get them when lunch was over. Mark and Jim found their wives and they headed over to eat lunch. Lunch was a simple meal of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. The couples sat together and the men told the women about what they had seen on the tour. When they were done filling in the women, Jess and Lisa had some things to fill the guys in on.

“We visited with a lot of the women here while you were on the tour.” Jess began. “And they are not treated as equals here. They have little say in what goes on and how the work is split up. In fact, Mr. Davis makes the work assignments and he makes it clear that it’s his way or the highway.”

“That’s not all we noticed.” Lisa continued. “What percentage of the population of South Texas would you say that Hispanics represent?”

“Probably 60 to 70 percent, I would guess.” Jim answered as Mark nodded his head in agreement.

“Well, I don’t know the exact number, but you’re probably close. However there is not a Hispanic family or a Black family here.”

“That’s interesting.” Jim said.

“None of that means anything necessarily.” Mark stated. “The women are just not used to having to work under crisis conditions and maybe they just haven’t found any Mexican families that fit into what they need yet.”

“Mark Turner, where there’s smoke there’s probably fire. You need look at this whole thing objectively.”

“You just can’t see that I am the only one here who is looking at things objectively.” Mark whispered rather than raised his voice and caused a scene. “Maybe things aren’t perfect here, but they don’t look that bad to me. At least here we know that we’ll be fed and protected. That’s something that we don’t have any assurances of at home.”

“Well, I’m not real comfortable discussing this here. Why don’t you go have your meeting with Mr. Davis and then let’s go home so we can make a decision with no outside pressure.” Jess suggested.

“I want to stay another day.” Mark blurted.

“I don’t.” Jess shot back. “Let’s take a vote.”

“I’m with Jess on this one.” Lisa said meekly.

“I think I am too, Mark.” Jim told him.

“I thought you were my friend?” Mark said sarcastically.

“I am your friend, even when it’s hard to be your friend like right now.” Jim told him. “Look, we’ve seen what we need to see. Let’s see what Mr. Davis has to say and then let’s go home and make a decision.”

“Damn you all!” Mark was so mad he saw red. “I think you’re conspiring against me sometimes. But since I’m ‘outvoted’, I guess we’ll just f*****g go home this afternoon.” He got up and walked outside.

Why did he get so mad so fast lately, he wondered to himself? He should be able to control his temper better than that. But the others would not look at the reality of how serious this could be. What was more important, equal and civil rights or survival? He would just have to find a way to convince them. He had to stay cool and logical if he was going to do it.

A few minutes later he walked back into the dining room and sat down.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper. I still disagree with you all, but that was no reason to lose my temper.” He said.

“That’s OK, buddy.” Jim squeezed his shoulder and shook him a little.

About that time Todd came in and asked the men if they were ready. They walked over to Mr. Davis’s cabin and knocked on the door. Millie showed to the same room as last night and Mr. Davis was already there.

“So what did you think of the ranch?” He asked.

“It’s beautiful.” Jim answered.

Mr. Davis beamed. “We think we have a good setup here, and everything we need to weather this thing through. The biggest challenge is getting the right people to make it work. We believe that you two and your families are the right people. But there are some things that we want to go over with you. First, we can only take in the eight of you. No extended family or friends. We just don’t have the resources to feed or house a lot more people.”

“Todd made that clear to us before.” Jim told the older man.

“Good. The second thing is that this is not a democracy. We will listen to input from everyone, but in the end, there can only be one leader. Right now, that leader is me. If something were to happen to me, then Todd would take over.”

“We understand.” Mark said.

“Lastly, once you come, there will be a verbal contract between us. If you decide to leave, or in the unlikely event that we ask you to leave, you will never be allowed back.”

“What would cause you to ask someone to leave?” Jim asked.

“Not pulling their weight, refusing to follow orders, stealing, or some major infraction. We haven’t had to do that and we don’t expect to ever have to. But it’s best if everyone knows all the rules up front.”

“That only sounds reasonable.” Mark affirmed.

“OK, now that we have that out of the way, I want to tell you what we want you and your wives to be responsible for. Both of you will be in charge of supplementing our stored food by hunting and fishing. We will assign men to help you as you need them and as their schedules permit. Mark, we want you to be in charge of the groups physical fitness and to start a martial arts and self defense class. Let us know how many times per week you think that people should train and we will work it into everyone’s schedule. Jim, you will be responsible to teach the men and the boys to shoot. We were thinking about a comprehensive course for everyone and then regular refreshers, but it will be up to you to present us with what you think we should do. Both of you will also have to pull some guard duty. Jim, Lisa will be assigned to the clinic. And Mark, Jessica will be in charge of teaching science at the school. And the women will have to help in the kitchen on a regular basis. The children will be given responsibilities in line with their age and ability. Everyone will be expected to help with the gardening and with the animals from time to time. That is what we want from you. In return you will be full members of the group with all the benefits that living here provides...food, shelter, security, and a sense of community. Plus a chance to be a real force in the rebuilding of this country when we get through this thing.”

“That sounds really good to me.” Mark said.

“But we need to talk it over with our wives and make sure that we are doing the best thing for our families.” Jim interjected.

“Of course.” Mr. Davis said. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish or if you want to go home to make up your mind, that is fine. We will expect your answer in within a week.”

“The women want to go home to talk about it, so we will be leaving this afternoon. But, we will have an answer in a week.” Mark explained.

“That’s fine.” Todd spoke for the first time.

“I have a couple of questions.” Jim stated.

“OK.” Mr. Davis looked at Jim.

“I noticed that the men and the women don’t often share the same responsibilities. Some might consider that the women are not seen as equal to the men on the ranch.” Jim was being unusually tactful and Mark wondered if Lisa had coached him on what to say.

Mr. Davis thought for a moment. “Equal and the same are two different things. The women are treated equally, but they do not always do the same jobs that the men do. Everyone is expected to help out where they are the most useful. It would do us little good to put you in the clinic to help Dr. Smith, right?”

“I see your point.” Jim answered. “I also noticed that there were no minority families here. Is there a reason for that?”

“We are not prejudiced if that is what you are asking.” Mr. Davis answered flatly. “We have a certain profile that we look for in prospective members. They must be hard working, conservative in their politics, have family values and be moral. We also require them to be of a Protestant religion. And, most of all, they must bring skills that we need to the table. Most Hispanics are Catholic. And the majority of Blacks were raised in urban areas and they have no skills that would be useful to the group. If we could have found someone who was a minority that fit the profile, I’m sure we would have made them the same offer we are making you.”

“I figured it was something like that.” Mark said looking at Jim.

“Gentlemen, if there is nothing else I must excuse myself. I look forward to hearing from you in the next week.” Mr. Davis shook each man’s hand and then walked out of the room.

Todd, Jim, and Mark walked outside. Todd shook the hands of the two guests and then explained that he had to go check on some work to make sure that it was getting done. He told the two friends how much they would be appreciated at the ranch and expressed his hope that they would decide to move here. He told them to use the yellow bandana again when they came back. Jim and Mark thanked him for the group’s hospitality and told him that they would see him in about a week.

When the men got back to the cabins, the women and children had already loaded the trucks. The families loaded up and headed for home. Mark wondered if they would ever be back.